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A Bag of Marbles

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

“A Bag of Marbles”

written by

Cora Saddler

and submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for completion of
the Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

Dr. Johnny Wink, Thesis Director

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Date

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The Ocularium

“We’re not interested.”

“I understand. Thank you for your time.”

Ava sat in her studio and gazed at the formidable sculpture in front of her, an abstract self-portrait made of paint, plaster, and an assortment of important knick-knacks from her early childhood—at least, that’s what she had envisioned.

The first couple years of rejection didn’t bother her much. Only after fifteen years of trying to form her passion into a career had she begun to feel a certain fear creep into her bones. It ate away at her body and left her gaunt and anxious looking most days, but she somehow managed to grab her tools anyway and lose herself in the frenzy of creation.

She wasn’t where she wanted to be. She would turn forty in three months, and she felt as though her chances of success had waxed and waned over the course of her life without her even realizing. She told herself that plenty of successful artists began their careers late, and that if the art she made could stand the test of time, it’d find a home for itself somewhere and someplace in the future.

“Did the guys at ATLA ever respond?” Ava turned on her stool as her husband entered the studio, dinner cradled under his arm and two foam to-go cups in his hands. Ava watched as he navigated the space between them, making sure his briefcase and overnight bag didn’t catch on any of her work. She walked over, taking the two drinks and to-go bag before he dropped them, and made some room on one of her tables.

They had been married for twelve years but had known each other since high school. He had been the one to approach her and ask if she remembered him. She hadn’t, but he didn’t seem to mind. He didn’t seem to mind a lot of things nowadays—like how her art career went any direction but up and how she had moved into her studio semi-permanently last year so she could

focus on her art. She would always give him a sheepish, apologetic smile every time he caught her sneaking back into their apartment to grab something she had forgotten or drop something off. He'd wave her off with his own little smile and watch her until she was completely out the door.

"It's almost like we're dating again," he had once said as she shoved another rejected canvas into their storage closet. She couldn't stand being surrounded by all her rejects, but at the same time, she couldn't bear to get rid of any.

"What do you mean?"

"You know. You've got your studio now and that's where you spend most of your time. And I've got this apartment all to myself. It's the same setup as when we were dating, except that we've got a marriage license to prove we're not."

"Are you trying to get at something?" Ava asked, huffing as she closed the door to the storage closet. She had always been the more volatile of the two.

"Not at all. Not at all. I was just trying to make conversation." He squeezed her arm a bit before pulling her into a hug. She couldn't remember the last time they were this close.

"I just miss you. I wish you'd stay here just a little bit more." When she looked up at his face, she could see tears spilling from his eyes. She'd always tease him and say that, if she ever made it big, she'd name a color after those eyes. Together, they had come up with button-up blue, a shade that existed somewhere between powder blue and cornflower.

"No. I'm sorry. This whole thing has got me worked up. I know it's been affecting you too, but I feel like I'm not ready to give it up just yet." Ava said, burrowed into chest. "I miss you though. If you want, maybe you could come over to the studio. There's only a pull-out couch, but I think it's big enough to share."

"How about I come over tonight?"

“Sounds good.” Andrew squeezed her tightly, his arms constricting around her. She could hardly take a breath before he released.

“Ava. There’s only a couple of months left.” He mumbled into her hair. She nodded silently. They had made that deal ten years ago, but the clock kept ticking away. A couple months till she turned forty. A couple months till the clock struck midnight and she’d become just plain, unassuming Ava again.

“ATLA, did they ever get back to you?” Andrew asked again, unpacking the dinner. Ava came out of her daze.

“Yeah. They said they liked it, but it wouldn’t really fit with the rest of their installation.”

“That’s a real shame, but hey—at least they liked it.” As of late, Andrew was careful with his tone. It was moments like these that Ava could feel the giddiness behind his comforting demeanor, see the spark light up in his eyes as they hurdled one step closer, arm in arm, to the end of their arrangement.

“Do you have another meeting next week?”

“No. That was the last one I had scheduled.”

“What are you going to do then?” No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t seem to mask that excited tremor in his voice.

“I’m not sure. I’ll probably see if I can schedule another.”

“I’m sure you will. You still have a little time left.”

“I’m aware.”

Ava stared into his button-up blue eyes, first thing she had ever noticed about him. When they had first been dating, she’d once dreamed that the rain was the color of his eyes. She climbed out the window and sat on her fire escape, watching as the water continued to rise and the city was flooded. She would’ve stayed there watching all day until the water gently swept her

away and she left washed up like shoreline treasure at the spot of their first date. When the water finally receded and the last of it spilled down the storm drains, the whole world was washed in that beautiful button-up blue.

“Are you okay?” For the first time in years, she was meeting up with a close friend from college. They had both been art majors, though Piper had always been the more successful of the two. She managed to land her first professional exhibit right out college and had sold a fair number of pieces to various stores across the country. Her current obsession was handcrafting miniature abstract sculptures randomly painted by a machine. They sold like hot-cakes, and Piper had even sent her some for her birthday: currently, she had a frog-like clump in black and white, an earless elephant in teal and yellow polka dots, and something even Ava couldn’t describe in a dingy brown. Ava wasn’t quite sure what to make of them, but she enjoyed looking at them from time to time anyway.

“I just don’t know what to do. I feel like I’ve done everything I’m supposed to, but nothing sells, and nothing gets shown.”

“I’m sure it’s just a matter of time. You’ll make it if you stick with what you’re doing now.” Piper was the one who suggested and found a studio for Ava to rent out.

“I can’t. I’ve only got three months left. Then I have to call it quits. That’s the deal.”

“I still can’t believe you agreed to it. If John ever asked me to do that—”

“It’s fine. I can still work on my own projects afterwards. I just won’t have the studio or the whole day to work on them.”

“Well, I still don’t like it. A woman needs a room of her own after all. Is he suddenly going to give up his office space when this is over?”

“We haven’t really talked about it.”

“Well, I think he should let you have it. He doesn’t need a whole room to be able to type on his computer, does he?”

“I don’t really think it’s a matter of space, Piper,” Ava snapped. Lately, she’d been doing that a lot. Her nerves were on fire. “It’s just me. Honestly. I’m what’s wrong, and there’s no amount of space or money that can fix it.”

Piper looked away quickly and started to grab her bag.

“Please don’t leave. I’m really sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me these days.” Ava mumbled the last bit, but Piper waved her off.

“I’m not leaving. I’m giving you something.” She fished for something in her bag before pulling out a crumpled business card. In shaky handwriting, it read *Looking for a change of perspective. Visit The Ocularium.*

“The Ocularium?” Ava raised her eyebrows.

“I honestly rather not get too much into it. Let’s just say it’s a place that can help you sort out any issues you may be having.” Piper couldn’t meet her eyes.

“Have you used it before?”

“Me? Of course not. I’ve never been that desperate, and I don’t think you are either. I just wanted to give you the option.”

“And you can’t tell me anything else about this place?”

“Nope. And I’m not giving this to you lightly either. Consider this your last-ditch effort.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank me after this is all over. I’ll feel better knowing you made it out okay.”

Ava followed the directions into a dingy back alley smushed between two apartment buildings on a busy street. It smelled unbearably sour, and she gripped her bag tightly as she headed towards what must be the entrance.

It was a black wooden door with the word *Ocularium* printed in the same shaky handwriting as the card. She jiggled the handle to open the door, but it wouldn't budge. She jiggled it again and tried to open the door in the other direction, but it remained shut. She checked the business card. It was supposed to be open. Just as Ava was about to turn away, she heard the door click, and spotted a frail, older man with golden horned-rim glasses that fell to the bridge of his nose. He peered at her through the crack in the door, the deadbolt still attached.

"Ticket?"

"What?"

"Do you have a ticket?"

"I—no?"

"No. Anything else?"

"What about this business card? Does this count for anything?" Ava held the card closer to the door, desperate in her attempt to get in.

"You new? Should have just said so. Hold on one moment." The old man closed the door, and she heard the deadbolt unlock. As she began handing him the ticket, he waved her away and made room for her to enter.

"Keep it." Ava shoved it back into her purse.

As Ava entered the *Ocularium*, her eyes roamed space, and her heart sank deep into the pit of her stomach. Jars of all shapes and sizes lined the shelves, each filled with a unique set of eyes. Some blinked and others rolled around in the viscous liquid, tossing and turning like fish. Hanging nets filled with hands, feet, arms, and legs lined the walls and threatened to overflow. Some the fingers were tightly clutched around the netting while others were satisfied to merely wiggle around. Another section housed a neatly stacked pyramid of beating hearts.

“I think I need to go.” Ava said, making her way to the door. The man shut it before she could exit.

“Hold on now. Even if you don’t buy anything, entering this space means you’re agreed to a certain set of rules. All you gotta do is sign a contract stating you’ll uphold your end of the bargain and then you’re free to leave. Got it.” Ava nodded and watched as the man walked behind his counter. Bending down, he retrieved a thick stack of paper and a fountain pen.

“You can read this if you’d like, but for the purpose of leaving all you gotta know is not to tell a soul what you saw here. Feel free to pass the card along though. Business isn’t very good when you’re trying to keep everything a secret.” He flipped a few pages before pointing to a dotted line.

“I don’t understand.” Ava couldn’t keep her voice from shaking. “What is this place? Some kind of organ black market?” Her head was spinning.

“Well, that’s a very grim way of describing it. No. What I do here is much more ethical than the black market. We operate on a donation system. All these parts and organs you’re looking at now were willingly given to me.” Ava wasn’t sure if that was supposed to comfort her.

“But I still don’t understand what this place is.”

“Think of it like a reverse pawn shop. I need money to live, so I loan you something you want at a reasonable price with a little collateral thrown in for my own safety.”

“You’re saying people actually pay for this stuff?” Ava gestured to the quasi-living hoard around her.

“Yes. Is that so strange. We have very good merchandise, and there’s a big market for this kind of stuff. You came looking for this place after all.”

“But what does a change of perspective have to do with all this?”

“Follow me.” The man motioned for her to follow, idly whistling as they walked.

“What are you? A singer? Musician? Definitely not an athlete,” he sneered.

“I’m a painter.”

“Then you’re in luck. I happen to specialize in that department.” As they walked, she realized they were heading towards the shelves of eyes. They stopped towards the center of the aisle. He pointed to a jar with only one brown eye in it.

“This is an eye from Joan Miró. Ever heard of him? Pretty good painter I suppose. I almost got the eyes of Monet instead, but that little venture didn’t turn out too well for me. Cataracts got his eyes before I could. Nasty little fellow though.” Ava took a closer look at the jar. In front of it was a little name plate with the words *Joan Miró: \$800-\$400 Buy/\$400 \$200 Rent* scribbled on it.

“What happened to the other eye?”

“Long story for another time, perhaps? Anyway, we’re got a good collection of eyes here—both old and new, famous and lesser-known. Look around for a bit and let me know.” The old man padded off.

“Wait. I still don’t understand. What am I supposed to do with a pair of eyes?”

“Paint with them of course.”

After looking through nearly all the eyes on display, Ava returned to the counter.

“Find a pair you’re interested in?” Ava nodded and handed him a jar of a lesser-known artist from the abstract section: Ester Louisa Dormer. She thought she recognized the name, and that was good enough for her. The price of the eyes didn’t hurt either.

“Now that you’ve got yourself something you want, I’ll go ahead and tell you how this all works. Just in case you want to back out again.” He pushed the contract closer to her, using the pen as a pointer.

“Basically, depending on what you want to do, you’ll either be buying or renting. Since this is your first time here, you’ll probably want to rent. It’s gonna be a big adjustment after all. The rental period is for one month, so you’ll need to return them beforehand. As for collateral, I’m gonna need to take your eyes.” Ava froze.

“What?”

“That’s right. Unless you want to buy them, I’m gonna need something for collateral. Just in case you decide to skip town or stare at the sun too long. Don’t worry though. I’ll keep them safe, and you’ll have them back as long as you give me mine back.”

“What happens if I don’t return them in time?”

“Then I’ll keep them and put them on sale.”

“Don’t you have some kind of grace period?”

“Your grace period is however long they’re collecting dust. Given your success, I’d say you’ve got a pretty long one.”

“Will it hurt?”

“It’s fairly painless, though it might require a bit of mental fortitude. Have you ever had contacts? It’s kind of like that.”

“Do I take them out?”

“Gosh no. If you could do it anytime you wanted, I’d be out of business. I’ve got a special machine in the back that’ll take care of it. You’ll have to put them in when you get home though.

“Why can’t the machine put them in?”

“Because you can’t just switch perspectives on a dime. You’ll need to give your brain a little down time before then. Think of it like you’re taking a nap, except when you wake up, everything will look a bit different.”

“Then how will I get home?”

“I’ve got a driver. Nice guy. Doesn’t talk much, but he’ll get you home safe.” The old man leaned over the counter to get closer to Ava before continuing. “But more importantly, he’ll get you home without any unwanted attention. Would you be interested in a pair of complementary sunglasses? It’d look awfully strange walking about with no eyes.”

“Sure.”

“Great. Then here’s your ticket. Hold onto it. You’ll need it to get your eyes back.” He tore off the piece of paper and handed it to Ava. She stuck it in her wallet next to the still crumpled business card.

“Now, if you have a change of heart—” he let out a slight cackle before continuing—“you come right back here and let me know.”

When Ava got back home, she scrambled to the bathroom and locked the door. Sliding down to the floor, she let out a groan, ripped the pair of cheap sunglasses off her face, and grabbed at her sunken eye sockets. She touched empty space where her eyes should’ve been and screamed loud enough for the neighbors to hear. Nothing about this could be real. Nothing. And yet, the small jar protruding out of her coat pocket was very real and very frightening.

Cradling the jar in her hands, she tried to remember the instructions. Overall, it was a pretty simple task. All she had to do reach in the jar and put them in her sockets. It didn’t matter which one went in which. As long as they went in, they’d adjust.

Ava took a deep breath before unscrewing the jar and fished around for the eyes. She wanted to get it over with as fast as possible. In her haste, the jar tipped over and spilled whatever liquid was contained inside all over her pants. She cursed before seating the jar on the floor. She rolled around the slimy ball in her palm before peeling back her eyelid and inserting the first one. Her head began to pound, and she could feel sweat forming on her brow. She felt

the eye roll around a bit before settling into place, and before she knew it, she already had the second one in. Steadying her nerves, she grabbed the edge of the bathroom sink and pulled herself up, hands and arms trembling.

“Come on, Ava. Get it together.”

When she opened her eyes, everything seemed completely and utterly normal, as though everything she had gone through never happened. Had she been duped? What difference did these eyes make?

She studied them in the mirror, watching as they flit across her face. She’d always wanted green eyes, and now she had them. Beautiful dark green eyes with specks of brown. She studied her face a little more. She had always thought she was an average-looking woman, but now that she saw herself, she felt—for once in her life—genuinely pretty. She wouldn’t be on the cover of a magazine any time soon, but she could appreciate the shape of her jaw and the arch of her brow, two things she had disliked about herself before. Is this how Dormer would have seen her? She wondered if this was part of the change, and how this change would affect her art.

Ava spent the rest of the day painting. Despite a bit of irritation in her eyes, she felt a new, invigorated sense of purpose behind each brush stroke, and created three miniature portraits of herself from three different angles before dinner.

“Sorry I’m late. I had to pick up something from the apartment and traffic was a disaster,” Andrew said, opening and closing the door. Ava didn’t even turn around. Approaching her, he saw the miniature portraits leaning against the wall and the bigger painting she was working on now.

“You’ve been busy today. Are these all yours?” He picked up the middle portrait gingerly and studied it at arm’s length. Ava hummed in response.

“These look good. Really good. They look more like you than some of your older ones did. Are you using a new technique?”

Ava set her brush down and turned to look at Andrew. When he saw her, he stared in surprise before moving closer to her face. Gently, he cupped her cheeks and tilted her head back to get a better look.

“What happened to your eyes?” Ava jerked her head away and spun on her stool before leaping off it. She considered whether she should tell him the truth, but the contract forbade her—though in truth, she just didn’t want to admit what she’d done.

“Nothing. I just got some colored contacts. I wanted to try something different for a change,” Ava said, turning away from him.

“What was wrong with brown eyes? I thought you always had the loveliest brown eyes.” Andrew tried to face her, but Ava kept turning away.

“Why do you keep dodging me. You’re going to have to look at me eventually.”

“It’s like I said, it’s nothing. Let’s just eat dinner, okay.”

At the end of the night, Ava crawled under the covers and turned on the side facing away from Andrew. Still, she could feel his gaze lingering on the back of her head.

“Are you going to tell me what all this is about?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You know, for someone with colored contacts, you sure don’t have any of the things that go along with them. What happened to the case and solution?” Ava stiffened.

“I just got them today. I wasn’t thinking. I’ll pick up the stuff tomorrow.” Andrew let out a deep sigh before she felt the couch shift under his weight. He had turned over and scooted as far away from her as he could. Suddenly, she wished they weren’t crammed together like sardines on the pull-out.

“Listen. You don’t have to tell me anything. Just let me know one thing though: are you okay?” Ava let out a soft whimper.

It wasn’t her eyes that Ava didn’t want him seeing. Rather, she didn’t want to see his eyes. Trading eyes had changed much more than her perspective. She could hardly see anything the same anymore, and that included the color of Andrew’s eyes. Those button-up blue eyes that she once dreamed about, the ones she talked to all her friends and family about, were now just another shade of light blue. It was the kind of blue you could easily find in a pack of colored pencils or pick out in the paint department, the kind of blue that you look at and forgot. Whatever had previously been there before had vanished without a trace, and she felt as though that prized color had been lost among all the other shades permanently.

“Yes. I think I am. At least, I will be,” Ava finally replied. She wasn’t sure if she was lying or telling the truth.

“No. This is great. This is exactly what we’re looking for. Did you bring any more pieces with you today?” The curator stepped away from Ava’s painting to get a better angle before tilting her head.

“No. This is the only one I have right now.”

“Shame. Let me know when you make more, and we can exhibit them all together as a collection. Do you think you could finish at least nine more pieces by the end of next month? I know it’s short notice, but we’re exhibiting other up-and-coming artists around that same time. I think you’re work will compliment theirs.”

“I can certainly try.”

“No worries if you can’t. I understand these things can’t be rushed. Let me know if you can’t though. We can always aim for a different time.”

“If I waited, when do you think my work would be shown?”

“Probably early next year. And that’s at the earliest.” Ava thought that’d be too late.

“I think I’ll try to get it done now.”

“Great.”

As the curator handed her the final paperwork, she looked at the picture again.

“Say, does the name Ester Louisa Dormer ring a bell to you?” Ava felt her pulse quicken.

“I briefly studied her work a long time ago.”

“Well, you should look into her again. I see a bit of her in your work. In a good way, of course. Something about the shapes and colors. They really have that Dormer flair. I think she would have really liked your worked.”

From thereon, Ava spent the majority of her time cooped up in her studio, working through different paintings, trying to pull together a small, cohesive collection. Everything seemed a lot simpler since the change. Any doubts she had about her work had vanished now that she was guaranteed a space for her art, and she felt a newfound sense of ease at the way the paint seemed to naturally fit on the canvas. It was almost like her work painted itself.

And yet, that ease was interrupted by thoughts of Andrew. The morning after their fight, he had already left. He hadn’t come back since the incident, but he did manage to text her that he would be sleeping in the apartment till she was ready to talk about it.

Ava wasn’t quite sure when or if she would ever be ready to talk about it. She was bound by contract, and yet she was sure that old man wouldn’t really know if she told Andrew. Still, the thought of telling him made her stomach churn, so she brushed away all thoughts of Andrew. She’d figure out how to fix everything after the she finished the exhibition.

Two days before the rental period ended, Ava settled on the title “Nostalgic Perspectives” for her collection. She had reinvented her older work by painting over them and had completed

four paintings in total. With only five more left and a little over a month to complete them, Ava was felt that she was in good place—that is, until she fell while painting on a ladder.

Hitting the floor, she landed on her left hand and watched as the ladder clattered to the floor. She felt lucky that the ladder hadn't fall on top of her, but the searing pain in her left hand disagreed. She tried to shake out the pain, hoping her fingers were merely sprained, but the way two of her fingers were splayed backwards told her they weren't. She looked up at the painting and saw that a huge streak of red paint had been smeared on the canvas, running in a long arch from top to bottom. She was sure she could salvage it later, but with her dominant hand out of commission, she wasn't sure there was anything she could do about it now.

Picking herself off the floor, she headed towards the fridge and managed to make a cold compress as she thought through what do to next. She could go straight to the hospital, but she knew she couldn't paint in a cast. Her eyes glanced at her purse, and she pulled out the card and her ticket. She could get a new hand. That'd be the easiest thing to do. She could probably start painting a couple hours after the change. It would be like nothing had happened, and she could deal with her broken hand afterwards.

She pushed the thought away, tossing the ticket and the card weakly away from her. She must've been insane for thinking of it. Absolutely insane. The eyes were enough. A hand was going too far. She'd end up like Frankenstein's monster if she wasn't careful. She glanced at the ruined painting, trying to think of any other solution. Nothing came to her.

"Andrew." She tried to balance the phone between with her shoulder as she held down the compress. She briefly thought about explaining everything on the car ride over. He could see for himself everything she'd been involved in over the last couple weeks. She doubted he'd like what he saw, but at least he'd know the truth. Isn't that what he wanted?

“Come on. Please pick up.” After a few rings, the phone went to voicemail. After three more tries, she changed her mind. She couldn’t tell him. She tossed her phone in her bag and called a taxi instead.

The ride over was unbearably painful. Andrew had called back, but she ignored him by turning her phone off. She would deal with the consequences later. She shifted uncomfortably around in the backseat and adjusted her sleeve. She had worn an overcoat to hide her hand from the eyes of the taxi driver, and once she arrived at the Ocularium, she tossed the money at him before running to the front door. She banged on it till it opened. After an eternity, the old man peered out before unlocking the deadbolt and ushering her inside.

“Are you here to give back those eyes?” He asked, studying her as she headed straight towards the net of dangling hand.

“No. I need a hand right now. Preferably one that can paint. And I’ll need to extend my rental time on the eyes. One more month should do it.” Ava began picking through the hands, looking at the labels tied around the thumb of each one. When one wrapped its fingers around her wrist, she shook it off, and it bounced on the floor before trying to crawl away. The old man picked it up and nestled it back into the pile.

“If you would be so kind as to tell me what you’re looking for, I’m sure I can find it without all this... mess.”

“Sorry. I’m not looking for any names. I just need a left hand that can paint.”

The old man grumbled as he reached his hand in the pile, and as if he were clairvoyant, he pulled out a rather large hand with deep callouses on the ends of its fingers.

“Just the left?” He asked, trying to pry the right hand from it.

“Yes.”

“I believe this one belonged to a cartoonist once. That’s the closest thing I have to a painter right now. You should know this one belonged to a man too. It won’t exactly match your other hand.”

“I don’t care. I don’t plan to keep it forever.” She said as they headed towards the counter.

“Before we go through with the exchange, you’ll need to pay for it.” Ava nodded as she got out her wallet.

“Is there something wrong with your left hand?” Ava moved her hand out from under the jacket. The fingers—her middle and pointer—were splayed at an unnatural angle. She noticed they had already swollen to twice the size of her other fingers and deep, purple bruise marks marred the once fair skin.

“I broke it. That’s why I need a new hand. It’s vital that I get my work done as fast as I can.”

“Are you sure you want to do this? There’s a possibility your hand won’t heal properly when you get it back, even if you go straight to the hospital. That’s quite a risk given your profession.” Ava thought about it for a moment before deciding to go through with it. She couldn’t afford to wait.

“I think it’ll be fine. It’s worth the risk.” The man looked at her once before shrugging his shoulders.

“You said you wanted to extend the rental on the eyes?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have your ticket?” Ava opened her bag, but the ticket was gone. She tried to think where she might have left it before realizing she’d probably run out of the house without it.

“No. I’m sorry. I left it at home. I wasn’t really thinking about anything else but my hand. Can I bring it tomorrow?”

“Sure. Now, you’ll want to close your eyes for this part. It’s not as pleasant as the eyes.”

Ava rubbed her wrist as she headed to her studio. The man had given her a medical cream to help with the soreness, but besides feeling hot, everything about the hand seemed to work fine.

As Ava stuck her keys in the door, she realized it was already unlocked. At first, she thought that, in her rush, she might have forgotten to lock it, but as she stepped through the doorway, she noticed Andrew gazing up at her drawing.

“Andrew. You scared me. I thought someone may have broken in.” She put her bags down on the kitchen counter and looked for the ticket. It wasn’t there.

“Nope. Just me. I saw you called. I rushed over here, because I thought you were hurt. Did you fall?” He took a glance at the ladder before finally turning to face her. His eyes were red and his face blotchy.

“Yeah. I took a little tumble, but I got everything sorted out.”

“I’m glad to hear that. You know, I noticed that your paintings have changed a bit.” He took another look at the piece on the wall. His hand rose up to trace the bottom half of the red smear. When he removed it, his hand came back red and angry.

“Andrew. What are you doing? It’s still drying.” Ava tried to pull him away from the painting. When he looked down, she quickly withdrew her hand and held it close to her side. If he had noticed anything, he didn’t say it.

“The painting. It’s great, but it’s not quite you. I know you don’t think I pay any attention to your art, but I’ve always tried my best to appreciate it.” He reached out and placed his palm directly on the canvas, leaving behind a patchy handprint in place of a series of smooth brushstrokes. Ava wanted to pull him away, but she didn’t want to expose her change.

“Stop. You’re going to ruin it.”

“I haven’t ruined it any more than you have already. Where’s the button-up blue? You always used to prime your paintings in that color, but no matter how hard I scratch, I can’t find it.” As soon as the words registered, Ava turned to see that her finished paintings bore deep scrape marks all throughout the dried paint. While some sustained deep puncture wounds where someone had applied too much pressure, other had been scraped hard enough to reveal the old painting underneath. The oddity of the old peering out from under the new distressed her.

“What have you done? I was supposed to use those pieces for an exhibit.”

“Ava. Were you really so desperate as to plagiarize someone else’s work?”

“What?”

“It reeks of Ester Louisa Dormer in here. I was just trying to let the paint breathe a little.”

At once, Eva realized that Andrew must’ve read the ticket. He probably still had it.

“I didn’t plagiarize anyone. I’m just paraphrasing a little. I was going to give her credit.”

“How? Were you going to tell the whole world that you stole her eyes?”

“I didn’t steal them. I bought them. Besides, she left them for someone else to have. She wanted her work to go on. I’m not doing anything Dormer wouldn’t have allowed herself.”

“You’re not some Dormer reincarnation. You don’t need her to paint like yourself.”

“But I do need her to become more than myself. This is the first time in years I’ve felt a modicum of success. I don’t want to go back to the way it was before.” Andrew tried to step closer to Ava, but for every step he took forward, she took one back.

“Ava. You won’t be doing this as yourself. That art isn’t yours.”

“To be honest, I’m glad it’s not as me. Ava didn’t have what it took to be a real artist. But Dormer, Dormer was born with these.” She pointed to her eyes. “All she had to do was open her eyes and everything she needed to succeed was already there.” Ava took another step back

before catching her foot on one of her worktables. She landed on the ground with a thump as stray paintbrushes and a cup of dirty water filled with soap suds spilled all around her. She flailed on the floor as Andrew tried to calm her down.

“It’s not fair. It’s not fair. Why couldn’t I have been born with these eyes.” Andrew managed to grab her left hand and hold it tightly.

“What did you do to your hand?” He whispered. He held it up so he could see it clearly in the light. Ava sobbed in response. She now realized her wedding ring was gone, still wrapped around the hand she’d left behind. It wouldn’t have fit on her new finger anyway.

“Well fix this. We’ll fix everything.” Andrew only held the new hand tighter, and she felt the paint from his own hand begin to cover up her mistake.

“Where’s the ticket. What did you do with it?”

“You mean your receipt. It’s gone. I threw it out.”

Ava felt her eyes shake as she fixated on the large, red smear of her painting glaring back at her. She shakily followed the line downwards with her eyes until it trailed off into nothingness.

“Ava, I’m glad you could make it. I’m so sorry to hear about the accident. How’s your hand?” The curator looked down at the white cast that extended all the way to her elbow. When the doctors finally saw her hand, they weren’t sure if it’d heal properly. When she asked if she’d be able to use her fingers again, they said full mobility depended on how well therapy went.

“It feels better.” Andrew had been the one to drive her back to the Ocularium. Though he had obviously been horrified, he didn’t make a single comment about the place. Instead, he had them switch back her hand and took her to the doctor straight after.

“Good. You know, even though you didn’t finish all of them, I’m glad we decided to showcase what you had. It’s an interesting collection. Something about the rawness of the

brushstrokes. There's a real sense of turmoil tied up in each scrape." The curator said, gazing at the corner of the exhibit dedicated to her pieces. Each work had been left untouched by Ava, delivered to the museum exactly as they had been after Andrew's assault on the canvases. She had retitled her collection "Marital Affairs," naming the smaller pieces "Hand," "Eyes," and "Andrew." She named the bigger piece—the one with the red smear sloping downwards with a visible handprint in the center—"Ester."

"Well, I've got to go find my husband. We wanted to walk through the rest of the exhibit together."

"I see. Have a good evening then."

Ava wandered through the space, heels echoing on the hard wood floor. She took a brief glance out the window as she heard the low rolling of thunder begin and a flash of lightning light up the night sky. As soon as the lightning vanished, she saw herself staring back. She turned away quickly. She couldn't look at the eyes anymore, even if they were officially hers now. Andrew had tried to bargain with the old man, but no ticket meant they'd have to wait till the he put her original eyes on sale. By the time Andrew returned for her eyes, someone had already made off with them.

She tried to leave what happened in the past. She really did, but she accepted that nobody heals in two months. The memories of the Ocularium followed her around like ghosts, trampling over every happy moment as if they were mere daises in a field. Her regrets only fueled their spectral destruction further, and every new memory she made felt like the tinder for the raging wildfire of her mind, burning away at her old self bit by bit. She only hoped that the ghosts would one day hide away before they consumed her and dragged her so far back that she'd never be able to return to normalcy again. She desperately wished she could be Ava again without

everything else in the way. She took another glance outside the window as lightning struck again, this time closer to where they were. She wished the rain would pour already.

After bobbing and weaving around the crowd, she finally found Andrew in a secluded corner of the museum. His gaze was glued to an oil painting in one single shade of light blue. In fact, the whole collection was this single shade of blue. The only difference between each piece was the mediums used and the size of the canvases. She touched Andrew's back lightly, and he jumped.

"There you are. You snuck up on me." He grabbed her good hand, and without a word, started leading her towards a different artist.

"Hey wait. I didn't get to see this one yet."

"There's really not much to see. It's all just the same thing. You're not missing out on much. Honest."

"Maybe not to you. Let me look at it a bit." She pulled him closer to the paintings. Together, they stared into the canvas hand in hand. The color was so pigmented that she could clearly see herself reflected in the paint, as though the whole world was washed in this simple, lovely blue. She felt like she would drown at any moment. Without turning her head, she looked at Andrew through the painting. His eyes had a glossy sort of look. She couldn't tell where his eyes stopped and the painting began.

"What is it called?" Her voice shook. She could almost hear the echoes of the name on his lips.

"Morning Blue."

Afterword: What is an Ocularium?

I thought of this story the summer my freshman year of college but abandoned it quickly when the words wouldn't come. Since then, it had been collecting dust in a little writer's vault of mine that I stick random sentences and images that pop into my head. I usually pride myself on being organized. It's a rather messy space. I wouldn't recommend trying to go through it unless you want to get lost in a sea of half-conceived ideas and orphan sentences that have no home. Part of writing these afterwords lets me organize my thoughts and see how the whole process of the stories (good or bad) came together in the end.

I'm notorious for not finishing my stories. A poor habit really. I'm always thinking of the next idea before I can finish the one I'm working on now. That's why I choose short stories as my medium. I thought that, if I can't concentrate on a large body of work, surely I could finish a ten-ish page story before hopping to the next. Of course, that didn't quite work out the way I planned it, and I'm afraid my discipline as a student only goes so far into my writing habits. I tend to feel my way through my writing. If something doesn't feel right, I simply can't force myself to continue until it does. For the most part, I don't know where my stories are headed. This means lots of rewriting and lots of rethinking dialogue. A style I've come to like as of now is a flowing of memories into one another to create a story in the past. This story is more regular I think. Certainly a different style than some of the others in this collection (perhaps because it ended up so long). Nevertheless, the story changed over four years. This is an excerpt from the very original draft, all the way back from when the story first came into conception.

It was the most peculiar store of its time. Built between the rusted brick facade of two crumbling apartments, the Oculenman stood proud and sterile against the much older, and much dirtier buildings of 143 Pemberton Street. The Oculenman was a startup business that popped up in the most busy and unhappy areas of the city. Licensed by the government but shunned by the public, the business was on a trial run, and, as a result,

the Pemberton pedestrians were both intrigued and disgusted by the disruption of their perfectly normal, perfectly monotonous life.

Still, no passersby could resist the temptation. The storefront stole their gaze, memorized and ensnared them, dared them to peruse the new and dangerous shelves. If the store could speak, it would taunt them, flaunt its wares, and exploit their curiosity. It would call out to them in a demure voice, low and seductive until the soft ring of bells echoed through the store.

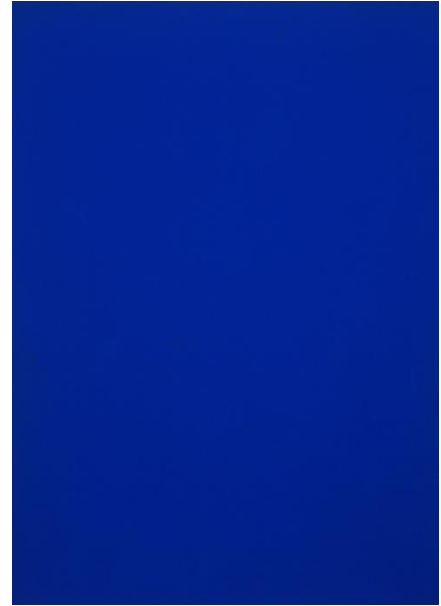
The store was owned and run by a former psychic, real name undisclosed, called Madame Moon. She waltzed about the floor with taffeta curtains draped around her arms, gold spangles jingling from her bony wrists, and wore shoes only when walking down the street. Her light hair was sleek and fell to her waist, and time, her only hairdresser, had streaked her golden locks with gray. Though she moved with carelessness and spoke like a ditz, her eyes were sharp with intellect, and her head was filled with unconventional wisdom.

Her first customer was a man called Jameson Jameson, an unfortunate name for an even more unfortunate man. He grew up in the countryside, far away from the unhappiness that plagued and polluted the city like smog. His parents were quite loving but partial to his older brother and younger sister, both of whom studied in Easton, a private academy dedicated to the death of childhood and the birth of adulthood, though the stages are near inseparable and the separation of these are near impossible.

I'm only slightly embarrassed rereading it for the first time in years. Stylistically, it's a little a bit more descriptive than what the finished product came out to be. I think the plot took precedence in the story, a necessary sacrifice to get it done per se, but part of me regrets not making the writing a little more beautiful. In my opinion, the finished version is a little dry but not every line could be as long-winded and tragically verbose as I'd like (deadline permitting). Regardless, it's interesting to see how things shift and change, and how one moment can give you exactly what you need to finish a story.

That's what happened last summer. I was in New York strolling through the MET, admiring the art but more likely trying to get away from big crowds. I entered this room, partially full (just the way I like to enjoy art), when I came across a huge canvas painted in this

single blue color (pictured beside). The name of the painting is *Blue Monochrome* by Yves Klein in 1961. I'm usually not a huge fan of painting like these. I'm drawn to lines, shapes, and colors. This has no lines, no shape, and one color, and yet, I was intrigued. There was a glass frame covering the painting. Something about preserving the pigments, I think. At the time, I was so lost in the intensity of the blue that I wanted to take a picture to remember it by. Of course, glass spoils all pictures, and my awkward body was reflected out on the sea of blue. I deleted the picture, mainly because it didn't capture what I wanted, and I moved on with my day.



Little did I know the impact that the blue painting would have on my story or how my experience with the glass frame would somehow come into play in the reflection of Andrew's eyes back on the painting. I'm not sure how I connected two and two. I guess that's just the beauty of the brain and how memories come together to form something meaningful and unique. If I had never seen this painting, would my brain have pieced together the original idea of a bodily pawn shop and a starving artist, or would the story have stayed in my mental vault for another decade or so?

I go back and forth between liking this story. It's what I wanted but not in the way I wanted, and yet, here it is, like the middle child you only sometimes pay attention to. Lots of the feelings tied up in the story are my own—the feeling that success is both out of reach for everyone but you unless you take extreme measures and the feeling that success is somehow on a time limit. For the most part, I would say these are pretty normal thoughts that normal people have, not about others, but about themselves: the feeling of being an imposter when things go right; the thought that true talent only belongs to a certain echelon of people that isn't quite you.

No. This story isn't quite what I'd like it to be. I don't know how many drafts it would take to get there. It's got this young, junior quality to it. The relationship between Ava and Andrew is wonky at some points. My understanding of how art museums actually work is quite limited (and probably rather telling). That's how I see my work, plus a few thousand flaws more. I could pick at it all day, but I won't.

I don't mean to write this to sound critical of myself or self-conscious (of course, I am being both). Part of me writes this as a justification of sorts, a way to protect myself if you don't like it. "Ah yes, I know abc doesn't work for you, but don't worry, it doesn't work for me either. Now, would you like to bond over our mutual distaste for my story?"

At the same time, I'm trying to make a point. Just as Ava doesn't like her art, part of me doesn't either. Let's say it's in the inner critic and perfectionist in me. But Andrew likes her work, liked it before it became something grotesquely not her. I guess I'm looking for an Andrew type, a person who can read the story for what it is and like it the way it is. I know it won't be everyone's cup of tea. It doesn't even have to be your favorite. Just know that what you're reading is a piece of me in a sense, a piece of me that I've left a little unedited, a little less put together. It's not as lovely or as academic as I want it to appear, but it's still me through and through. Maybe that's why I fell so in love with *Blue Monochrome* and put it in the story. In a sense, its art stripped down to its bear components. It's utterly raw and without decoration. When I saw myself reflected in the glass, maybe I saw a bit of that in me too. A simple girl stripped down to her bear components, drifting in a sea so blue she forgot what it was like to be any other color.

Hot and Sour Soup

Hot and sour soup dripped from the sky as if God had knocked over his bowl of spicy, savory broth while watching over the world. It wasn't an occurrence that happened often, so Cloe did what any normal person would do in her situation: she grabbed her favorite soup bowl and headed outside. Running through the streets with her head tilted back and mouth wide open, she let the murky droplets slide down her forehead and run into her eyes. She didn't mind the stinging too much as long as there was enough soup pooling inside her mouth. She hadn't had hot and sour soup in over a year.

As soon as her bowl began to overflow with the salty, soupy mess, she sat crossed legged on the side of the street and sipped straight from the sidewalk like a rabid dog, hungry and crazed. The soup kept pouring down in a constant shower, and Cloe watched as it pooled in the streets, creating dark, sticky puddles and clogging storm drains as tiny rivulets of soup, egg, and crumbled tofu continued to fall from the sky.

While at first lukewarm, the longer Cloe stayed outside, the hotter the soup got. A fat droplet splattered on her arm, hotter than the rest, and she tried to seek shelter under a tree. She heard the sound of sharp, sizzling, splatters hitting the paved road as more soup fell, and watched as heavy, dark brown clouds rolled in. The rain and wind intensified, sending a flurry of egg and loose tofu chunks whipping about the street. A stray egg strands slapped her face, and a loud siren went off in the distance. She ditched her bowl and tried to head indoors—the tree too sparse to shield her from the ensuing onslaught—but she could hardly see past her hands in the raging soup storm. Her eyes burned from the heat, and the soup became indistinguishable from the snot and tears leaking from her face. The soup only continued to get hotter as it reached a boiling point. Two burning, bulbous shapes floated in the sky, a descending double sun that continued to heat the ensuing downpour. She watched as they started to meld together, increasing their

intensity as they hurtled towards the street. She felt her body sweat and her clothes droop towards the floor, heavily saturated in the sticky, brown broth. She watched as a stray cat floated past her, clinging to a large chunk of tofu. She felt so tired of hot and sour soup.

...

“That was a strange dream.” Her mother stirred her morning coffee and handed her a slice of toast, plain and deeply charred. Cloe was a picky eater who couldn’t tolerate most foods on most days, especially not before lunchtime. Still, she tried to be adventurous when she could. She’d try almost anything once. A second time was debatable.

“I could stop by the Chinese place after work and pick you up some if you’d like.” Her mother watched her reaction carefully, trying to read the subtle signs of her face. For a split second, her mouth stretched out in a thin line and her eyebrows creased in frustration before resuming the stoic expression she used whenever she had to bite her tongue.

“No thanks. After that dream, I don’t want anything to do with hot and sour soup. Ever.” She made sure to put an emphasis on the last word. There would be no talk of hot and sour soup for the rest of the day. It was an unspoken and unbreakable rule that had lasted over a year. She didn’t want it to let up any time soon.

To get to school, Cloe took the long way around and drove an extra ten minutes through town when she could’ve just headed straight there. The direct route saved her ten minutes but added one minute of unpleasantness to her daily commute. She tried to avoid it at all costs.

At lunch, she ate a turkey sandwich—plain—with no cheese and the bread smooshed all the way down so she could tear it apart easier. She had packed a mixed fruit cup, a bag of half-eaten pretzels, and one of those easy-peel oranges she’d end up trading for half of Drew’s cheese crackers (she could never convince him to give her the full pack).

Drew and Cloe often found themselves tucked away in the school's music room during lunch. Most of the non-lunchbox kids ate in the cafeteria or didn't eat at all, and the rest scattered around the staircases or camped out by the amphitheater. They used to eat in the hall, legs stretched out over the hard and dusty linoleum till the music teacher got tired of seeing them eat on the ground. He asked that they not tell the other kids that he'd keep the door unlocked for them during lunchtimes, and thus their secret lunch spot was born. The only rules were to keep the room clean, keep the door open, and throw away all lunches outside the classroom. (This last rule became necessary only after the remnants of a pungent balsamic salad became so unbearable that it gave their teacher a migraine in the middle of class).

It was nice to have a space for themselves. With so many kids, and so few spaces, finding a bit of quiet amongst the thunderstorm of papers and crowded hallways felt like an underserved blessing. It was quiet and isolated, a haven to protect themselves from perils of teenagedom—at least, for a measly thirty minute a day before they had to return to reality.

“Morning class.” Their teacher gave them their customary salute to start the afternoon before gesturing to someone behind him. A moment later, a very small girl shuffled through the doorway, practically hiding in his shadow. She was wearing a plain, oversized, white button down with dark green sweats and scuffed-up tennis shoes that curled up at an unnatural ninety-degree angle. Her skin was slightly tanned, and she wore her hair neatly tied back in a ponytail.

“We have a new student today. Treat her kindly. Would you like to introduce yourself?” The girl nodded, head bobbing up and down in a stiff, strict motion. She cleared her throat before she began, but Cloe could tell that the words had gotten stuck on her tongue.

“Hello. I am Xiao Hong, but you can call me Hana. I'm from China, and it's very nice to meet you all.” Her voice was heavily accented and slow, but the words came out clear and deliberate. One person in the back asked what her real name was again, and she responded

gracefully before reminding him to call her Hana. A few more people asked her questions about where she was from before she bowed slightly and headed towards one of the empty chairs in the middle of the room.

As she passed beside Cloe, she made eye contact and smiled brightly. Cloe smiled back in a friendly manner, trying not to make her disinterest completely obvious. She didn't need to talk to her to know she wasn't what Hana was looking for because it always played out the same. Hana was the like the Siberian tiger they brought overseas, the one who explored jungle after jungle and retained the memories of some far, away distant land. Cloe was the one born in captivity, with nothing but stimulated memories that always tried to be the captured but always fell short of showing just what it was that made tigers truly tigers. To outsiders, they might look the same, but Cloe would know once they spoke. Jungle tigers could tell the difference, though they were tigers all the same.

...

"Excuse me. Are you Chinese?" A tall, lanky girl with long, feathery black hair and burnt caramel skin cornered Cloe between two rows of desks after class. She had on bright orange pants with a forest green sweater and shiny, black boots. Her left ear was pierced at the top and she had on a small, silver cuff on her right ear.

"Yes." Cloe had already anticipated the next question.

"Do you speak Chinese?" She tried to imagine what her response would be when she answered. Would she still want to be friends or was there just too much in the way for them to understand each other in the end?

"No."

"I don't mean to be rude, but does that mean you were adopted?"

"Yes."

“Great! So am I.” She pointed two fingers back at herself and grinned broadly, as if she’d finally found what she was looking for. It was a new, strange feeling being looked at in such a way. Cloe could tell they were going to be good friends.

...

“Excuse me. Are you Chinese too?” Cloe turned around to see Hana had followed her down the halls.

“I am,” She said cautiously. She didn’t want her to get the wrong idea.

“Oh!” She broke out into a smile and stepped a little closer. Cloe took a small step back.

“Were you born there?”

“Yes.” It wasn’t a lie.

“Where were you born?” Cloe gave the rehearsed answer she’d gotten from her mom.

“Somewhere in the Henan province.” As the word came out, she silently cursed her pronunciation. She wondered if Hana noticed, but she just kept smiling. Cloe was about to explain the rest, but Hana cut her off.

“I’ve been to Henan once with my family. It was a nice place—lots of good food. We live in Shanghai now.” Despite her height, Hana walked quickly and kept in perfect step with Cloe the entire time.

“Your English is very good. No accent,” she said. Cloe stopped in the middle of the hall and moved them closer to the wall. She had to tell her before it went too far.

“Actually, I was adopted, so I don’t know that much about China. I can’t speak the language either.” She almost added a “sorry” at the end, but she stopped herself.

Cloe looked into her dark eyes, small and round with long lashes. There it was: the slight disappointment. It was brief like lightning, and it vanished in an instance, but it was there all the same, staring back at her. The feeling of disappointment lingered in both of them for a few more

seconds as they stood in silence, and Cloe felt their initial connection, everything that might have tied them together, memories and stories that they might have shared, being cut like thread.

...

“Sometimes I feel like a false advertisement, you know?” Allie’s black boots squeaked on the slick floors of the Dragon Buffet. She’d almost fallen twice.

“What do you mean?” Cloe handed her a small, white bowl and plate with matching gold dragons swirling around the outside.

“I mean that people just walk around and assume things about us just because we look a certain way.” Cloe nodded hesitantly as she loaded her plate with lo mien, fried rice, and an assortment of chicken and pork. Allie followed suit.

“I’m pretty sure that happens to everyone.” Cloe reached over her to grab a handful of eggrolls.

“I know, but it’s different with us. Most people assume we’re from Asian communities—even Asian people. I feel like a total imposter every time they try to talk to me, like I’m trying to pull the wool over their eyes by looking the way I do.” Cloe nodded her head, trying to keep up with Allie’s ramblings. “At first, they’re so excited there’s finally another Asian person to talk to, but because I don’t know Chinese or didn’t grow up in an Asian household, I can’t relate to their experience at all.” She let out a small huff before balancing a tower of shrimp on the very top of her plate. “I feel like a disappointment. I’m just a white kid in an Asian body, except I’m not exactly white either. I can’t be completely either side of me, but sometimes I wish I could just be one or the other.”

“Do you want some hot and sour soup?” Cloe poured some in her own bowl and offered Allie the ladle.

“That’s it! You’re the hot and sour soup!”

“I am?”

“You’re the hot and sour soup! You’re also the shrimp and the lo mein and the fried rice. You’re everything.” Cloe raised her brow inquisitively.

“We might look Chinese on the outside, but we’re all American on the inside, kind of like this food. We’re inauthentic.” Cloe paused. She wasn’t sure how she felt being compared to a Chinese Buffet. She looked down at her bowl of hot and sour soup and saw her reflection shimmering in the dark, glassy, broth. Maybe she had a point.

...

A week later, Cloe dreamed of hot and sour soup again. Everything was the same as last time except the cat was missing and the soup was rising, flooding the streets with that smooth, tangy broth. She tried to cover her eyes to drown out the blaring warning sirens. Why was she still outside? Trying to avoid boiling alive, she managed to grab onto a floating tire in the debris and prop herself inside of it like an inflatable. The tire spun and floated down the lazy soup river. She spotted her house as she went gently down the stream, waving at her parents staring at her through the window. She passed her neighbor’s house and then floated out of her cul-de-sac, taking a right before spinning down the empty street and down through a long-curved road. She passed a house with a red roof and then a yellow. The bowling alley was next, followed by a bank and a dentist office nobody ever went to. After a while, she stopped paying attention to the building and squinted up at the blazing double suns, hot like an oven bulb. It was further away this time but still just as glaring. Eventually, the soup waned, and the tire came to a slow halt directly in front of the Dragon Buffet. She felt a bubble of panic rising inside of her. It flipped her stomach and clogged her throat. She tried to move the tire back into the river, but the stream was one-way, and it wouldn’t take her back.

...

“Oh.” Cloe stopped in the entrance of the music room and felt a knot twist in her stomach. Drew sat there as usual, lunch spread out over the tan and grey speckled desks, munching away at his PB&J his mom always packed for him. Next to him was Hana. She had a small container of white rice with charred pork slices on top. Next to that was another container with fresh veggies and a marbled tea egg with long, glassy brown veins running all through it. She held a pair of chopsticks between her slender fingers.

“Hey, is it okay if Hana eats with us from now on?” Drew asked. Cloe placed her stuff in her usual spot next to Drew and started unpacking her own lunch.

“Sure.” She didn’t really think she had another option. She felt Hana watching her as she pulled out her smashed turkey sandwich.

“Great. Hana was just telling me about China. She’s been to the Great Wall eight times. Isn’t that cool?”

“Really? What was it like?” Cloe asked. Hana smiled, and Cloe could see her floating far away, back to her home of spices and silk.

“It’s like walking beside a very old friend.”

...

“We’ve got to go here.” Allie pointed to a little red dot that represented Beijing. She’d circled it with a black marker and then drew a few dashes down to Henan, connecting the two places of their births. “And then here.” Cloe took a sip of hot and sour soup and watched as her friend circled the whole area.

“Can you imagine? The first things we’d do is walk the Great Wall. I’m thinking we get there early enough to watch the sunrise.” Allie had been planning their dream vacation since the beginning of the school year. She even joined the track team so she could build up her stamina.

Her goal was to walk all 5,5000 miles. Cloe told her she'd walk the first twenty, that is, if she could manage that.

“I wonder what it's like, walking on the Great Wall? I've only ever seen pictures, so I can't really imagine anything else.”

“Do you think it's as exciting as everyone makes it out to be?” Cloe asked.

“I bet it is. Tons of people visit it every day, so there must be something there that brings people back time and time again.”

“I guess so. Do you think that we'll ever actually get there?”

“I don't see why not. If you make it a priority, you'll get there some day.”

“Then, do you think going to China will actually work?”

“What do you mean?”

“Will going to China actually fix us? Will it make us more... ourselves?”

“I don't see why it can't. Anytime someone goes anywhere, they find out something about themselves, something they didn't know before. I think when we go, we'll get to see a part of ourselves that was inside us all along. It's not exactly so much a discovery as it is a reclamation. A reidentification if you will.” Allie handed Cloe her marker and turned the map over. “Do you know your Chinese name?”

“I think so.” She motioned for Cloe to write it on the back of the tiny, see-through map she had gotten printed off the internet. Cloe tried her best to spell it out, but the name always looked wrong. She wondered briefly if it'd look better in the Chinese characters. *Xiaohui*. Allie wrote hers right below it. *Xifeng*.

“These are the girls we're going to find in China. One lives in Beijing, and the other lives in Henan. I don't know if we'll be friends. I don't even know if we'll like them, but what I do know is that I want to meet them. And I think they want to meet us as well.”

...

“Woah. What is that? It looks good.” Hana pulled out a steamed bun from her lunch box. The bread was smooth and silky but thin like damp paper. It smelled faintly sweet.

“It’s a red bean bun. My auntie makes them. Would you like to try?” She tore the bun in half and the middle was filled with a thick, chunky marron paste.

“Sure. You want some of my cheese crackers?” He held out the package to Hana, and the two switched. Cloe looked down at her uneaten orange. So much for trading.

“Would you like some too?” Hana offered the other half to Cloe.

“But what about you?”

“Don’t worry. I have plenty at home. I can bring more tomorrow too, so please eat.”

“Then take my orange,” Cloe said, slightly ashamed at her feeble offering. “I’ll feel bad otherwise.”

Hana smiled and held the orange in her palm. For a moment, she looked like she was about to say something, then changed her mind and started peeling away at the bumpy orange fruit. Cloe took the over half of the bun and bit into the middle. It was sweet and savory with a starchy flavor, the bun pillowy and chewy. It was like eating the earth and sky in one easy bite, and it made Cloe feel a little closer to home.

...

“I get really homesick sometimes.” Hana squeezed one of her pillows and looked out her bedroom window. It was a dreary, raining day, and Hana said it reminded her of the rainy days in her apartment back in Shanghai, where the streets would become mirrors and reflect the sparkling, city lights and she and her friends would pretend the world was upside down. Of course, she said that was a silly thing to say. After all, it rains everywhere.

Her room was spartan; she said it was originally a storage room, but her aunt sold off all the junk and moved a bed and desk in to accommodate her long-term stay. The bed consisted of two twin mattresses stacked on top of one another with no bedframe. She had light pink sheets and a matching light-weight comforter that didn't quite fit right. Though sparse, everything about the room was cozy. Maybe it was because it was so small.

Hana got off the bed and walked to the wall. There was only one thing on the wall, and that was an elaborate map of China with a thousand thin red lines dancing all across it. It made Cloe dizzy just looking at it. Hana traced her finger down one of the lines, and then pressed down on a little black dot. Cloe wouldn't have even seen it if Hana didn't point it out.

"You said you were born in the Henan province." Cloe nodded and joined her at the map. "This is where you were born." She used her finger to circle the entire landlocked area. Then she pointed back to the little black dot, resting a little higher than the center of Henan. "And this is Zhengzhou. It is the capital."

Trailing her finger southeast, she landed on Shanghai. "This is where I am from. My parents and sisters live here. My brother came here two years before me. He lives in Georgia, but I don't know where that is." Georgia was about five states over.

"Did you tell your parents you were homesick?"

"Yes but they rather me be here than there. I want to my friends again though. I have lots of friends back home. I was very popular." Hana looked back out the window. "Not so much here though. Would you like to see my friends?"

Cloe nodded, and she pulled out a small shoebox out of her closet. Inside were an assortment of knickknacks, colorful snack wrappers with nothing inside, and a thick pile of photos. She skimmed through the pile and pulled out her favorite.

“That’s An, and Yu, and Mei. This is Xue, and those two are both Donghai. And this is me.” They were all dressed in matching dark green sweats.

“Do you stay in touch with them much?”

“It’s very hard with the time difference. They went to the water park together. They tried to video chat with me, but it was 2:00 a.m. here. Plus, most of them are busy studying for the entrance exam anyway. I don’t want to bother them right now.”

“What about your brother. Does he visit?”

“No. My brother is busy. He’s very smart. I think he is starting his own company now. He works in tech.” Hana pulled out another picture.

“This is my mom and dad. And these are my grandparents. These are my two sisters and my older brother.” They were all dressed in blouses and blazers. Her parents didn’t smile. “I’m the cutest though,” she said after a moment. Cloe laughed and Hana joined in, and for a moment, Cloe thought that she’d forgotten about being lonely.

...

“I can’t believe this. I really can’t believe this is happening.” Allie slapped her cheeks till they turned light pink and stared out the window. Cloe imagined that she wasn’t looking at the parking lot of the Dragon Buffet or the dingy street with old cars weaving around potholes. She was looking beyond that. She was looking at the crowded streets of Beijing and warm summer nights Hong Kong. She left her bowl of hot and sour soup untouched. Soon, she’d have the real stuff.

“I can’t believe I’m actually going to China. I mean, I always knew I’d get there, but I didn’t realize I’d be getting there so soon.” Her father had received an offer to work with a company overseas. That company just happened to be in China. They’d spend almost a whole year there, maybe more. Allie would be homeschooled her senior year, and her mother planned

to take her all across China while her dad worked. They would visit everything from historical museums to national monuments to the country's best natural sceneries and temples. She even planned to take Chinese lessons while she was there.

"I'll call you every day. I'll send you postcards and little gifts too." She didn't say whether she'd come back. From the sound of it, even if she did come back to the states, she'd probably never step foot in this sleepy town again. It seemed like everything she'd ever dreamed about would soon become a reality. Cloe felt like the only one still sleeping.

...

The dreams got more intense. It rained hot and sour soup every night in increasingly disturbing amounts of soup. If it was a storm before, it was a tsunami now, and every warning siren begged people to seek shelter from the onslaught of broth and noodles. Wave after wave of dark soup crashed into houses and uprooted signs and trees. Cloe climbed the water tower and prayed it wouldn't be swept away. The cat from before had scampered onto her shoulder and cowered around her neck like a wet towel, all drenched in soup. Cloe could see the whole town from up there, washed away and submerged. She saw the pieces of her own house floating helplessly above the foundation and the houses with the red and yellow roofs slowly coming apart like soggy paper.

The water kept rising, and she saw another wave about to crash into the water tower. She gripped the metal railing as tightly as she could, knuckles turning whiter than the tofu flying past her, and she braced herself for the wave to crash into her. Her hand eventually slipped from the railing, and she was washed away with the tide. When she opened her eyes, there was nothing but hot and sour soup. Fish-shaped tofu chunks floated through the broth and seaweed like egg noodles danced in long, tangled strands from the street. Cloe tried to swim to the top, but the soup was never-ending. She eventually managed to see the double sun shining above and

focused her gaze on that, willing herself to keep swimming towards the light. She tried to grasp it with her outstretched hand, gasping as she began to run out of air. A small stream of bubbles trailed up and out of her mouth. She never did reach the double sun.

Cloe woke up in the middle of the night, completely out of breath. Allie's cat, an overweight white and brown ragdoll rescue, was sleeping on her face and hissed when Cloe pushed her off.

"Do you miss Allie too?" she asked, stroking her back. Tofu refused to face her.

"I'll take that as a yes." Even after a year, Tofu refused all forms of affection besides treats. She sometimes escaped out the door and found her way back to Allie's old house. Cloe had become quite familiar with the couple who lived there now.

Cloe laid back down and closed her eyes. Tofu curled back up around her head, and together, they drifted off and dreamed of an endless supply of hot and sour soup.

...

"My auntie is making hot pot this weekend. Do you want to come?"

"How do I say a thousand times yes in Chinese?" Drew asked.

"You can say hǎo a." Hana laughed.

"Hǎo a!" Drew yelled with enthusiasm.

"Hǎo a." Cloe repeated awkwardly. "Did I say it right?"

"It was perfect."

Cloe arrived at Hana's house with Drew in tow. He knocked on the door of the small, brick house and Hana opened it a second later and pulled them inside. The smell of garlic and something hot wafted through the house. Steam rolled out of a large, simmering pot of reddish broth. There were little mismatched bowls all around the table full of sauces and a variety of plates with meats, fish, and vegetables in an assortment of colors and shapes. Cloe imagined that

this is what a Chinese marketplace would look like, or at least, the closest thing she would come to seeing one.

“Hello there.” A tall, slender woman turned around from the kitchen counter. She didn’t look too much like Hana, but when she smiled, the resemblance was uncanny.

“This is my auntie.” Hana’s aunt carried another plate of veggies to the table. Cloe couldn’t even begin to say what everything was.

“Are you two hungry?”

“Starving,” Drew said, putting his hands on his stomach for emphasis.

“Good. I prepared lots of food for tonight, so please eat it all. It isn’t often we get guests.”

“You don’t have to worry about that ma’am!”

Drew and Cloe both watched as Hana held a piece of thinly sliced raw meat between her chopsticks and held it in the broth for a couple of seconds. Any pink coloring the meat had turned a brownish grey and Cloe watched as she dipped it in sauce and ate the long, thin strip. Her aunt took a piece of tofu and did the same. Cloe reached for her own pair of chopsticks but felt them rolling and crossing in her hands. She clumsily took a piece of meat and hoped that Hana’s aunt hadn’t been watching.

“So we just cook it in the broth?” Drew asked, holding a piece of tofu up to his face. It split in half and fell in his lap. “Sorry. I don’t think I got any on the floor.”

“It’s alright. Try not to hold it so tight next time.”

“Yes. You just put it in the broth. That’s why it’s cut so thin. About ten to thirty seconds for meat. A minute for tofu, but you’ll see when it’s done. There’s really no wrong way to do it.”

Drew and Cloe hesitantly dropped their food into the spicy broth and watched as it simmered and cooked. When she took it out, it was slightly brown and dripping with the tomato based broth.

“This is good,” Drew said between bites. Cloe echoed the thought.

“Good,” Hana sighed. “I was worried you wouldn’t like it. We tried to make it the same way we do at home, but we couldn’t find the right ingredients and had to use something else.”

Cloe thought back to the earlier that morning. She’d been so excited to eat hot pot with Hana. The thought of eating an authentic meal with people who had grown up in a country that felt so far away from her had left her feeling a little closer to that secret, untapped version of herself that was hiding just across the world. Then she had felt nervous. What if she ate it wrong? Could they tell she didn’t grow up using chopsticks or that she still couldn’t get used to the feeling of two wooden sticks in her hands when she’d been using metal forks her entire life. Could they see that she had no imprint of heritage stamped within her hand or in her stomach or on her tongue. The very idea that Hana would be nervous too, nervous to share something meaningful to her and her culture, had never crossed Cloe’s mind. It had never crossed her mind that Hana felt the fear of being rejected as strongly as she did, a dual fear that they’d both be rejected for something they couldn’t change or reproduce perfectly.

Cloe wanted to tell her that it was alright, that she didn’t have to worry, and that she understood, in her own way, what she was feeling—that she didn’t have to speak perfect English or have authentic ingredients for her to be who she was. Cloe wanted Hana to tell her the same thing, that she was just as whole as Hana and as whole as Drew—that she didn’t need a culture or a language to feel complete. She wanted to tell her this and more. To ask about her life and if she ever felt the same fear that Cloe did, of being misplaced and mismatched, of straddling two separate identities that both just happen to be her and yet not her. She wanted to tell her this and everything, but she didn’t know how to express any of it.

“Sometimes it’s a lot to get used to at first. I don’t always like everything on this table myself, but I’m glad you’re enjoying it at least.”

“Don’t worry Hana. It’s perfect,” Cloe said instead, and for that moment, it was enough.

...

“Do you want to get hot and sour soup tonight?” Allie asked over the phone. They were already packed and ready to leave tomorrow morning. They had sold off or shipped most of their belongings already and would need to bring Tofu to them in the morning.

“I don’t know. I’m not feeling well.” Cloe looked up at the ceiling and tried to make patterns out of nothing.

“Oh...” There was a long stretch of silence before she spoke again. “I don’t mean to be rude, but this is my last day here. Are you sure you don’t want to get some hot and sour soup tonight?”

“I’m just really tired. I don’t know if I can make the drive. I feel like I might fall asleep on the way over.”

“What if I bring some over instead? I’d really like to see you one last time before I leave.” Another long stretch of silence passed before Cloe answered.

“Sure. I guess that’d be fine, but you probably shouldn’t stay over too long. With your flight and everything.”

“Oh yeah. Sure. How’s 7:00?” Cloe could hear her parents speaking in the background. She murmured a few words to them before she heard a door click shut.

“Cloe. Are you actually happy for me?” Cloe didn’t think she’d actually ask the question.

“Of course I am. I’m glad you get to go.”

“But you’re just upset that you can’t?” Cloe sat up straight.

“What do you want me to say?”

“I want you to say that you’re happy for me.”

“I am. I already said it. Truly.” She took a deep breath before she spoke next. “I’m happy that you get to go.”

“Ok. I’ll see you later I guess.”

“I guess.” The phone call ended, and 7:00 rolled around quiet and undisturbed.

...

“Have you seen Tofu?” Cloe flipped over the tablecloth to get a better look at the floor. The only thing underneath were the legs of the chair. Hana checked under the couch but shook her head.

“No. I thought she was in your room.” Her mom checked the hamper and the laundry machine. Tofu always had a way of getting into trouble.

“No. I looked all over for her, but I don’t think she’s in here.”

“Do you think she went back to Allie’s house?”

“Probably. Is it ok if we look?” Hana nodded.

“Be careful. It’s supposed to storm soon.” Cloe looked out the window. Grey clouds were beginning to roll in.

“We’ll be fine. I’ll take the car.”

“Hana buckled her seatbelt and threw the umbrellas in the beat seat. Cloe gave Hana one of her raincoats and a small metal flashlight just in case the search for Tofu took a turn for the worst.

“Sorry. You really don’t have to do this if you don’t want to,” Cloe said, backing out of the garage.

“No. I don’t mind. I wanted to meet your cat anyway.” Cloe turned on the radio and pulled out of the driveway.

“By the way, who’s Allie?”

...

Pass the Dragon Buffet, the dentist, bank, and bowling alley—somewhere after the house with the red roof and then the yellow roof, there's a steep curve known for causing problems. On any other occasion, there wouldn't have been an issue. But that night, Allie was using her grandfather's car that had a faulty engine. Her dad had sent it to the shop to fix it in time for their flight, and the mechanic assured them it was in driving condition. Her dad thought otherwise. The only reason they let Allie drive the car that night was because she'd been to the Dragon Buffet so many times before. She could practically drive there in her sleep.

She had two plastic containers of hot and sour soup in her passenger side. As she approached the curve, she noticed the hood starting to smoke and pulled over before it could combust. Allie knew a bit about cars—enough to jump one if the engine stalled or change the tires if one went flat. She took a look at the hood but decided to call her dad instead. While waiting for the call to pick up, another car was speeding down the road. Its occupant was looking at his phone.

“Hey. The car just stopped working. I'm on the backroad right after you pass by the bowling alley. There is a couple of houses after it. I would call the tow-truck, but I was trying to have dinner with Cloe.” Allie got back in the car and tried turning it on and off. It sputtered a little before giving out.

“I know, but I really think I need to have this dinner with Cloe before I leave. It's really important.” The other car was hurdling closer to the curve.

“I guess I can call her.” Both driver's phone slipped from their hands and clattered to the floorboard. Allie picked hers up and said goodbye to her dad.

“Ok, bye. Love you too.” Allie stared at her phone. She only needed to press one button to call Cloe, but the blinding light of two, glowing headlights caused her to look up.

One of her tires rolled to the other side of the road and landed in a ditch. That night, it rained hot and sour soup for a split second on earth.

...

The two girls rode in silence for the majority of the trip.

“Great,” Cloe murmured as drops of rain hit the windshield. She turned her wipers on and watched as more and more drops began to splatter onto the car. “How are we going to find Tofu in this weather?”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine. Cats know how to stay dry.”

“I sure hope this one does.”

“Hey, what’s that?” Hana asked, pointing to something stuck on one of the wipers. Cloe peered closer to find a piece of tofu skewered to the end of it, dangling wildly on the tip of the wiper. When it went back up, murky water streaked down the windshield.

“It’s probably nothing. Just a freak thing.” Cloe shifted uncomfortable in her seat.

“I don’t know. I think more is coming down,” Hana said as she tried to look up at the sky. With a thud, more pieces of tofu dropped down. Some egg noodles fell as well, clogging the wipers. The rain kept getting darker and darker.

“I think we should pull over,” Hana said. It was almost impossible to see out of the car. “Please! Pull over!” Hana shouted, and Cloe slammed on the breaks, skidding for a bit as the car lost traction on the road. They came to a rolling stop somewhere with a small thud.

“Sorry. I’m sorry. I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“It’s alright. I just thought it was dangerous. Does this kind of stuff normally happen here?”

Cloe laughed, “No. Never.”

Her phone buzzed twice, and she picked it up. “Hello?”

“Cloe. Where are you? I don’t know what’s happening, but it doesn’t look good. Can you make it back safely?” Cloe pulled up her hood and stuck her head out of the car.

“No. I don’t think we can make it back. We’re just going to sit and wait till it passes.”

“Where are you? I’ll head that way.”

“What? No. The roads are too slick. You’ll get stuck too.”

“Just stay in the car ok. I’ll check the weather. If it starts to get too bad out there, you need to make it something safe. Is there a building nearby?” Hana shrugged her shoulders.

“I’m sure there is.”

“Well, you need to look. I’ll call you back.”

“Bye.”

“Bye. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

The sirens went off a little later. Hana had just been on the phone with her aunt, and the hot and sour soup rain had not let up in the slightest.

“What did you say?”

“I told her that we should cook dinner together when I get home.”

“Oh.”

“She said we could make braised pork belly.”

“Is it good?”

“Yes. It’s my favorite. The secret is to add enough sauce.”

Hana and Cloe scrambled out of the car, umbrellas and flashlights at the ready. Heavy chunks of tofu bounced off their umbrellas.

“I think we should go into that school.” Cloe pointed to her old elementary school and ran towards the fence. She grabbed onto the top of it and hoisted herself up. Hana held her

umbrella. Straddling the fence, Cloe motioned for Hana to follow, but she wasn't looking at her at all.

"Hana. We need to get under that awning."

"Is that your cat?" Hana pointed towards the road. Sure enough, Tofu was sitting under the car, drench in broth and playing with a stray piece of tofu.

"Will you go to the driver's side and stand behind it just in case she tries to run?" Hana nodded and jogged carefully over to the car.

"Here Tofu. Come out." It seemed pointless to try and use treats to bait the cat when it was raining food all around them. "That's a girl. Come on. Come on." Cloe tried to coax her, but she took off and dashed away. Hana and Cloe followed after.

"Tofu!" They took turns calling her name in the hot and sour soup rain trailing her as she ran into the woods.

"Are you okay with following her in?" Cloe asked.

"I think the trees will protect us from the soup."

"Agreed."

They kept an eye out for Tofu, heading straight into the dense woods.

"Where do you think this rain is coming from?" Hana asked. They saw a stray tail wrap around one of the trees, but by the time they got there, Tofu had already sprinted ahead.

"No clue. Maybe we're dreaming."

"Maybe. Do you think it will rain miso soup next?"

"Something tells me it probably won't," Cloe said with a soft smile. She spotted Tofu again, and raced forwards. She had almost grabbed Tofu by the tail, but she managed to escape.

"Cloe. Wait up."

“I’m going to run ahead. I almost go her,” Cloe called back. She keeps running and running, watching the soup mix with the soil, and for a second, she forget where she was and what she was doing. All she knew was that it felt good to run a little without knowing where she was going.

Eventually, she managed to catch up to Tofu who’d stopped running completely. She stared back at her cheekily from the comfort of a rock before scampering away into a small clearing. It had stopped raining. Cloe ran to catch up with her when she suddenly came to a halt. Tofu purred as Allie patted her dampened fur.

“Allie…” She looked and smiled at Cloe.

“Oh hey. I’m glad you finally made it.” Cloe stumbled to her knees, and Allie kneeled beside her. Tofu got between them and pawed Allie’s hand.

“Hey, just because I’m not your owner anymore doesn’t mean you can do whatever you like.” She pulled Tofu into her arms and cradled her close to her chest.

“I don’t—I don’t even… How?” Cloe stammered.

“You own me some hot and sour soup, remember?” Allie laughed and pulled Cloe into a hug. She felt real and warm and alive. The hot and sour soup dripping from her hair suddenly tasted a lot saltier. Cloe spotted a small table in the middle of the clearing. There were three bowls of hot and sour soup laid out.

“By the way, I hope you don’t mind if your new friend sits with us. Is she really from China?” Cloe heard the heavy footsteps of someone running and turned around to see Hana, out of breath and gasping for air.

“You must be Hana. I’ve heard a lot about you. I’m Allie.” Allie reached out her hand for Hana to shake, and she took it eagerly, eyes and mouth wide open.

“I’ve got a seat here for you too. I thought we could talk about some things while we’re here. All three of us.”

Cloe nodded, and Allie took her hand. Cloe took Hana’s and together with the cat, they walked towards the clearing and the bowls of freshly made hot and sour soup. Cloe thought she saw the sun peering through the clouds.

...

“That was seriously crazy,” Drew said, passing the soy sauce to Hana.

“Do you think they’ll believe us?” Hana asked.

“They have to right? The evidence was all over town,” Cloe added, throwing a packet of duck sauce at Drew. He caught it before it landed in his noodles.

“Yeah, but things like this happen all the time and no one notices. What about the time fish fell from the sky in Mexico or the meat in Kentucky? Compared to those things, hot and sour soup is nothing. Besides, most of the animals ate all the evidence anyway.”

“Well, I suspect we’ll probably become one of those urban legends in a couple of years.” Cloe’s mom chimed in, sitting down at the crowded table. Hana’s aunt was there too, along with Drew’s mom and his three younger siblings. They all mumbled in agreement.

Cloe took a sip of her hot and sour soup and savored the taste. It always tasted good, but today, the slight acidity and bitter notes were reduced, and a slight sweetness came through to the top. It was a different taste than what she was used to but familiar nonetheless. As she looked at her family and friends, she began to understand why. Who knew hot and sour soup could taste like so many different things.

Afterword: Why I'm Always Hungry

While I was in New York, I had a minor addiction to this contemporary, homestyle Chinese place. I had about eight meals there (I was only there for two weeks), and I only knew about it because I saw a young asian guy walking down the street with a bright green bag label “Junzi” in bright and bolded white letters. I thought to myself, “here’s a guy who probably knows the area. I’ve gotta try it out.” And that, my friend, is walking advertisement at its finest.

Needless to say, the food in New York is a little different than the food in Arkansas, especially when it comes to Asian restaurants and options. *Authentic* seems to be the buzz word. When I was young, my family would eat at the China Buffet all the time. It was the only place nearby—our town didn’t have a big Asian population, and we’ve never been the type of family to travel. Still, I was a kid, and I knew I was Chinese. The red, cracked, vinyl booths. The beautiful white dishes with blue watercolor streaks running along the edges. I thought the plates must’ve been porcelain at the time and that all Chinese people had dishes like these. Then there were the ornate motifs that were plastered on every booth and door. There might as well have been neon signs saying “this is a Chinese restaurant” in bright red lights. Actually, I think it had one of those too.

To a kid that was Chinese—but also... not—that was my first taste of China. Well, not quite. I had a couple of dolls from China actually. And a lumpy stuffed rabbit with rainbow feet. I had dresses and shirts and beads from there too. I still have a couple jade earrings (purple and green) and bracelets too. There’s also this kids’ book that teaches you words in Mandarin. It looks quite innocent as you flip through pages filled with dogs, cats, and beach balls, but you soon realize that something’s wrong when you get to the page with a gun and then a few pages later, a military tank. That’s a little beside the point though.

I loved that Chinese restaurant growing up, but the older I got, the more the word *authentic* seemed to diminish that love. My friends would say that it wasn't *real* Chinese food, that it was an American invention that specialized in overly greasy, unappetizing, mass-produced mush that didn't honor the culture. If I took them there to eat, they'd pick over their food like it had offended them in some kind of way. They wouldn't say it, but I could see the disgust in their eyes, as though they knew better, knew what kind of food they should've been eating instead even if they had never had it.

Flash forward, and I forgot about the China Buffet. My mom would offer to get me something from there or my dad would suggest we go out to eat there again. I would always pass. Sushi, hibachi, and pho became the new norm, and the search for authenticity in my food, an authenticity I thought would bring me closer to my heritage, began.

I made a small group of friends in high school who grew up in Asian households (Chinese, Cambodian, Filipino, Vietnamese, Korean). I listened to their stories about growing up, how their parents treated them and shaped them and how they all seemed to carry this longing for home inside of them. For the purposes of privacy, I'll call this girl Hana. Hana was from Vietnam. Very sweet and had the loveliest handwriting I'd ever seen, almost more perfect than print. She told me about the streets of Vietnam and how she had skidded across the pavement in a motorbike accident. At the time, she had a huge bandage wrapped around her leg. She said she was staying with her aunt and uncle and that she missed her sister who looked like she'd come right off the cover of a magazine. She told me it was all fake and that she was the prettier one without makeup.

At the time, there weren't that many Asian kids at my school, maybe twelve in total. Keep in mind that this was a school of about 2,200 people. Hana had befriended some of the other Asians kids and introduced me to a boy from China. He asked me where I was from, and I

told him what my mother had always told me: the Henan province. In retrospect, it must've been a little strange. That's like saying you come from the West Gulf Coastal Plains when someone really wants to know you're from Arkadelphia. The truth is, I can never remember where I'm from. The word always slips my mind. Maybe it starts with an S, maybe it starts with a X. It's always been important information to me, and yet something about it never sticks. He was nice enough to tell me that he loved Henan and that the food there was great. He asked me more questions, but when I told him I couldn't speak Chinese or didn't actually know anything about China, the excitement and exuberance that had first saturated our conversation died just a little. Though I can't speak for him, part of me felt like he no longer saw me as a girl he could talk to and relate to. In his eyes, I didn't feel Chinese at all.

I think a part of me has always been looking for the authentic because at times, I feel so inauthentic. I didn't put the pieces together until later that I *was* hot and sour soup, and that maybe by rejecting the China Buffet, a part of me was rejecting what I saw as my own failure to be authentic. I think that's when this story idea really started taking place. I had just come back from NY, back from a place that had foods I never even imagined trying, authentic food I didn't know existed but was so ingrained into a culture I both belong to and didn't. I still think it's crazy how food can convey so much. Sometimes, I'm still scared to go into Chinese restaurants that I've deemed authentic. Part of me feel like they can sense I'm not one of them. I always wonder if I'll ever truly be comfortable with it, but the other part of me, the part that wins out every time, needs to try everything she can, so she goes to restaurants and orders food she's never had in words she'll never know how to pronounce.

Trying to find my heritage, whatever my heritage really is, has made me an adventurous eater. It has also made me a thoughtful eater. I can't help but think of a home I've never been to when I eat red bean buns or ox skin and hand pulled noodles in a tomato-based sauce. Going

back home, where none of that exists anymore, was a little isolating. I was always craving the taste of China Town and the unknown spices and smells of places that felt like me. That when I developed a hot and sour soup craving. I think part of me thought it was ok to eat hot and sour soup after my trip. It passed the authenticity radar but just barely, and it had to be from this snazzy little upscale restaurant down in Chenal. I drove forty-five minutes front and back for a container of hot and sour soup because I thought it would make me feel better.

Driving has never been my strong suit. I get distracted easily and can't seem to settle on any one music choice. I had my container of hot and sour in the passenger seat and couldn't help but wonder what would happen if I suddenly crashed. I'll admit I'm a little morbid at times, but the thought of hot and sour soup flying everywhere intrigued me. I could picture it in my head. It was raining hot and sour soup.

From there, everything seemed to fit together naturally. All my experiences, the people I had met, the many different identities I was juggling—everything just seemed to work together to create this. Part of me will always think this story won't measure up to what I wanted it to be. Maybe I'm too hard on myself, but the writing is very simple and plain, and the dialogue can be a bit dry at times. Still, I don't think that at this point, I could've written it any other way. I'm prone to making sentences a little more verbose than they need to be. For most of this story, I felt I just didn't have the words to express my feelings. The story was originally first person. I changed it to third person after some tensing problems. I think it worked out for the best. The first-person version was a little too close to me, and I'm glad to have had that version all to myself.

There's lots of stories and background I didn't cover here. I couldn't possible keep going though, least this afterword turns into an even larger maze of disconnected thoughts and memories (though at least it would have had a cohesive theme). Just know that this story, for all

its flaws and imperfect, is the closest I can come to writing about me and the best I can do for my friends who've felt the same way. We are hot and sour soup. It's something I've finally come to embrace.

A Bed of Flowers

Their cottage rested on the edge of a crumbling seaside cliff high enough to see the clouds but not touch them. The old man, younger then but just as poor, had bought the house for his wife at discounted price, sure that the eternal sea-salt breeze and seagull choir would enchant their youth and sooth their old bones till the very end. It wasn't till three years later, when the walls of the house started to shake and the cliff tilted ever so slightly towards the tumultuous water below, that the couple understood how they were able to afford such a seaside luxury.

“Did you get what I asked for yet?” cried the old woman, scrubbing the scum off the dishes that seemed to magically pile up overnight; in truth, it was not magic but her husband's penchant for late night meals. Through her crooked kitchen window that never quite shut the right way, she could see the top of her husband's head bobbing up and down like a buoy as he tended to his withering flower beds just below. He had been trying to grow pink camellias ever since they shoved all their belongings through the inch-too-small doorframe, but his gentle disposition seemed to wilt every flower he touched.

Altogether, there were about twelve attempted garden patches strewn throughout their yard, each one an abandoned graveyard full of failed projects and pointless dreams. But what he really wanted, more than anything, was to have the butterflies visit them. As a child, he had been shoveling imaginary dirt into a very real bucket when his mother told him that a garden wasn't complete without those tiny, delicately winged creatures of mirth and merriment and that any house that had such creatures nearby would be filled with that same jovial spirit that butterflies always seem to carry with them. When their wings stopped fluttering and they shriveled to dust and debris, the butterfly remains sprinkled between petals and leaves and under freshly till soil, his mother used to bag them up to make a fine batch of potpourri which she would christen with a ribbon and sell to the ladies down the street.

She would stuff them in his drawers as well, and for the longest time, his very being permeated with the scent of cheerful nostalgia and long summer evenings passed in reckless abandon. He had been grateful for the scent. That was what first attracted his wife to him. He had been helping his mother deliver potpourri, the ingredients of which were kept a secret, when a sporty young woman on a cherry-red bike peddled beside him.

“Hey, you smell pretty nice. What kind of perfume you wearing?”

“Oh, it’s not me,” he said, pointing to the basket.

“It’s the potpourri, best in town and made fresh this morning” he remarked politely, albeit shyly, remembering to add a little bit of advertising at the end. His mother would’ve been proud.

It wasn’t often that women approach him. It was even rarer that a certain woman on a cherry-red bike had smelled the potpourri from miles away and had followed the scent for twenty minutes until she found a nervous looking young man in a stiff suit sweating on the sidewalks of Camellia Street.

They would later marry in the local chapel under the soft mosaic lights of a stained-glass window, adorned with alternating lavender, lilac, and periwinkle roses. For the main event, the young bride wore a dress made of live butterfly, a feat that took several months to assemble, courtesy of the bride’s new mother-in-law, her gift for attracting those lovely creatures, and lots of nectar to boot. At the end of the ceremony, when all the nectar had been siphoned away, the butterflies departed, leaving the bride in a plain but charming white gown that attested to the timeless simplicity of love underneath all the embellishments. When later asked what she thought the wedding smelled like—it apparently smelled different to everyone—she said she it was the kind of scent that is indescribable yet utterly familiarly, as if she had smelled it all her life but had just now recognized it for what it was. In short, she didn’t know.

Not that it mattered anyway. After the house shook and the cliff began its leisurely descent, that indescribable scent that she had cherished in him, the one that made cold days warmer and warmer days bearable, had vanished completely from their life.

“I said, did you get the food!” the old woman hissed, hitting the windowsill with a sippy ladle. Small bubbles kissed his forehead before they splattered into oblivion, leaving behind tear-like splotches of stinky residue on his face. The man shook his head. He had been too busy working on his garden to remember the groceries they were so desperately in need of.

“Well go get them then,” the old woman said sternly, shaking her ladle at him with all the authority she could muster. She had played the ill-tempered housewife and he had played the indifferent husband so many times that it seemed to come naturally to them now. He rose carefully to his knees that creaked louder than the bolts on their front door and headed down the cliffside on their shared bike, now rusted and peeling.

When he returned, they ate what meager food the old man had found at the market—most of the unbruised and ripe produce having been taken already—which had been cooked by the woman in such a slapdashed way that all the feeling that made good food taste great was boiled out of it and sliced to bits. The peas had all but turned into a tragic paste, and any conversation that could have disguised the tasteless meal had instead turned to silence and left a bitter taste in their mouths.

After dinner, they retired to their separate beds. They would have slept in different rooms if the house had an extra bedroom, but even so short a distance remained an impassable gulf between them. The man said goodnight before turning out the light, but his message never quite reached the other side.

When the woman woke up, a pair of translucent, stained-glass wings blocked her vision. When she swatted the butterfly away, she discovered a kaleidoscope of winged creatures

flooding every inch of space, burrowing themselves in the cracks and crevices of the wall and flooding the room with that strange, indecipherable scent that she hadn't smelled in years. When her bare foot met the floor, the butterflies instinctively made room for her, and as she made her way across the gulf that separated their beds, she found her husband lying peacefully and perfectly deceased, as though he had never been anything else but dead.

It was no wonder that the room was covered in butterflies. Her husband, though dead, was still breathing, perhaps a habit of the body after all those years of being alive. Stranger still was the fact that he had accomplished in death what he could not in life. Flowers of all kinds bloomed out of his not-so-dead-dead body: out of his ears grew the infantile buds of hydrangeas, astilbes sprouted like wildfire from his head and intertwined with his hair, a star-shaped chrysanthemum decorated his open mouth, and wildflowers of all kinds grew from his exposed ribcage. When his body inhaled, the flowers seemed to breathe with him, and everything sighed like a dream.

When the old woman came out of her stupor, she immediately cursed her husband for growing flowers when he could have grown something more useful instead.

“Why couldn't you have been a vegetable patch? At least I could've worked with that.”

Days past and the old woman got used to the path of the butterflies, who migrated from the bedroom to the kitchen at noon and then back to the bedroom sometime after six. Each night, the flower infestation got worse. Vines and flowers now grew out of his feet and wrist and wrapped around the headframe and up the walls. They crawled up the door and escaped through the window, engulfing the whole house and surrounding area in a dense forest of unbridled garden vegetation. Even the twelve neglected flower beds he had once tended to blossomed with unrivaled vibrancy and vivacity. Not even his mother could have produced such lovely flowers.

What might have been a miracle to him if he were alive was a waking nightmare to the woman. No item in the house was left untouched, and it was a wonder she didn't get lost in her own house. Every night she pruned the walls and trimmed the flowers off her husband whose chest still rose up and down like clockwork. It drove her crazy.

Tired of it all, she grabbed her shears and started cutting like a mad woman. Snipping away at every vine and beheading any poor flower she could find, she cut her husband from his bed and dragged him out the door. Fortunately, his body was weightless, as if death had hollowed him out. She didn't stop at the door though. She continued towards the edge of the cliff till she could almost taste the salty-sweet spray and see the rocky shoreline and crashing waves from below. She finished the job by pushing his helpless body off the top. When she heard the whispered thump of his body meeting the ground, she dared herself to look over the edge, but found that his body laid as peacefully on the sand as it did in his bed. Even from this distance, she could tell that he was still breathing. The waves softly crashed over him.

"Hopefully the water will take care of him," she said, taking one last guilty look at the body below. It wasn't really him, she thought.

Unfortunately, the waves didn't take him out to sea like she'd planned but instead pushed him farther in-land, his unmarred body a permanent fixture amongst the rocks and shells. To make matters worse, the flowers began to grow more vigorously than before, aided by the sea, and a rather large vine began growing out of his chest and up against the cliffside, seemingly clinging on for dear life. The vine, the old woman observed, grew stronger and taller each day, until the cliffside itself, that had for so long threatened to collapse under the weight of the house and old age, was righted and steadied.

"Don't you know when to quit," the old woman murmured down to her husband below.

She began the long descent down to the shore, navigating through the rocks and newly formed greenery that seemed to grow haphazardly all around. Butterflies flew around the space and rested on the water. She noted that the indescribable scent that she knew so well had mingled with the shore and the sea, a smell so fragrant it almost made her dizzy.

“You always have to cause trouble don’t you,” she said, doing her best to cut him from the vine that had grown so deeply into the earth overtime.

When she finally detached him, the sun was setting, and she dumped his body over the seat of the rusty old bicycle that had only taken them so far. The trek up was as strenuous, but by the time the sky turned purple and the stars had peppered the darkness, she had finished tucking him back into his bed where he lied covered in flowers, chest still rising but slower now.

“Now that’s enough. I expect you to rest after all the trouble you’ve caused” the woman scolded as she returned to her own bed. As though her message got across, the old man’s chest took one final gulp of air before remaining still and stayed like that till the very end.

Two young men hiked up the cliff to see what all the fuss was about. A meadow of untamed wildflowers and a dilapidated house was all they found. Inside the home, the kitchen walls were adorned with vines of all kinds, stretching out over the chipped wall like wayward veins. Daisies filled the corroded sink and tulips hid themselves behind unhinged cabinet doors. Rosemary peeked out and raided kitchen drawers while lavender haunted the broken fridge. Soft, dusty, and translucent powder coated the floor, as well as bigger pieces of butterfly wings hidden beneath. The whole room reeked of the past memories, smelled of forgotten dream, and was pervaded with the undeniable and inexplicable aroma of some lost nostalgia and unspoken tenderness. Traversing further into the house, the two men came across an equally shabby bedroom, overflowing still with an excess of greenery. On the left and right, there lied two tarnished beds of pink camellias, and attached to their bedframes was a blossoming vine,

beautifully and desperately twisted around each other, growing from one frame to the other. The two hikers thought it was the perfect testament to the timeless simplicity of love amongst the wildness of life.

Afterword: Why Everything Turns to Flowers

When I was younger, we lived in the countryside. My dad was a big gardener, so he planted a variety of things—flowers, fruits, and vegetables included. I remember blackberries and raspberries growing from barbed wire fences and tomatoes, squash, green beans, carrots, cabbages, and more taking up rows and rows of dirt patches. Every summer, we used to spend hours harvesting the fresh veggies and my mom would incorporate them into dishes of all kinds. Even now, I think we all miss the taste of fresh tomatoes, not because they taste better than the ones they grow at the store but because they tasted a little like happy summer afternoons when the world was quiet and peppered with fireflies and dragonflies.

There was always fresh watermelon and cantaloupe at my fingertips. There was also a small crab apple tree right beside our front porch. It died before it produced any fruit, and for a while, it was just a small, broken stump until one season, it flourished and produced these awfully bitter green apples that my mom made into sweet and lumpy applesauce. There were also flowers of all kinds too.



My dad lined our driveway with small birch trees and made brick planter boxes filled with tulips. There were rose bushes lining the porch and a small willow tree in the backyard. I remember pink and red roses, but I remember the single, yellow rose bush most of all. It was my mom's favorite. I think it was mine too.

This is all to say that I think a part of that garden is always with me, so if I write about butterflies or flowers and stars all too often, it's only because they've become a part of me. When we left the countryside, I think a piece of me was buried with those yellow roses as well.

Ten years later, I found myself driving back to that old house. I've never been good with directions, but somehow, I just knew the way back, as though years of tending the dirt and plucking flowers and running through the grass had mapped out the path on my hands, feet, and heart. When I arrived at my old house, I felt a bitter sense of indignation. The trees had been cut down and the flowers had died. The garden had disappeared, and the porch had been stained a new color. There were these mammoth, ugly wooden storage boxes in the middle of the yard where there used to be open land. I found the whole experience rather distressing and mourned for the sweet summer house that I grew up in, the place where I chased after butterflies and rode and crashed my bike almost every day. It felt like all those happy memories had been taken from me.



The three pictures included here are proof that those memories are still alive and blossoming as long as I take care of them. There are no pictures of the garden, but the pictures above are proof that I've always been a gardener, a planter, and caretaker of not just flowers but of words and stories too. Perhaps that's too much to say, but I develop stories like I garden: with lots of sunlight and a little too much water and not enough pruning (you can obviously see the overgrowth here). Still, the story above is an homage to the garden I used to prance around and get lost in, and to my parents who are no longer gardeners but still planting little seeds of love and hope all around me.

A House Full of Flies

They told her that it was a good thing, miraculous even. What spectacularly good luck she must have had. Marie didn't feel lucky though. She felt cursed every time she walked through her cedar trimmed door, cursed every time she wiped her mud-smeared rain boots on the dingy and worn welcome mat, and especially cursed every time a tiny black fly landed on her nose as if she were some kind of landing strip.

Her friends assuaged her anxieties. They were only flies after all. It could have been much worse. For instance, her friend Selene had a house full of fishy fumes, and her cellar was flooded with the murky, sea-salted water of the ocean. Tiny fish slapped the surface haphazardly and repeatedly.

"The water was three steps from the top, three steps!" In truth, it was seven steps from the top of the staircase, but no one was counting.

"What did you do about it?" Johanna asked, gripping her favorite porcelain teacup, the one painted like some ethereal botanical garden.

"What didn't I do." Selene set down her own cup, exasperated, and continued. On the recommendation of a distant cousin, she had bought a fishing pole, a lawn chair and a bucket.

The fish bit, she reeled, and soon the bucket was filled to the brim with slick, tin colored fish with wing like fins. FISH FOR SALE was written on a cheap, plastic sign outside her door, and the hungry flocked to her house, showering her with precious paper and silver coins.

All was well until Selene's next door neighbor found his house filled with cows, and the hungry soon flocked to his house instead, forgetting all about the fish that once sustained them.

"Oh, how awful!" Johanna remarked, pouring herself more sugar with a side of tea.

"But that's not even the worst part," Selene went on.

Taking what meager money she had earned from her fish sales, she returned to her pond and contemplated what she would do with so many fish. It seemed that for every fish she took out three more had come to replace it. In her distress, Selene called her grandmother and asked for her advice; Selene's grandmother had experienced a problem similar to this when she was younger.

"There should be a drain somewhere. I suggest you pull the plug before more arrive."

Throwing on her bright yellow bathing suit, she adjusted her matching goggles, snapped on her swim cap, gripped her flashlight, and stepped into the chill water.

Her cellar had been transformed into an underwater cavern. Her retired couch was soaked to the core, her wooden boxes were barnacle ridden, and her beloved keepsakes made a wonderful coral reef. As she swam through the school of fish, she spotted the drain, and with a simple tug, the plug came undone.

As the water receded, so did the fish. In a frenzy, they swarmed Selene and pushed her farther and farther away from the staircase. When the last drop went down the drain, Selene found herself compressed under a mound of fish. Three days later her husband noticed she was missing and finally helped pull her out.

"But what happened to all the fish?" Johanna asked, eyelashes fluttering in confusion.

"Oh, they're still there. I can't do anything about them," Selene fanned her ruddy cheeks with her hand and stuffed another pastry into her mouth.

"Maybe I can get John to help, he's really rather good at these kinds of things." Johanna blushed as she straightened out her white frilled frock.

"Oh no, I couldn't let you do that for me. You have your own problems to take care of. I mean, just look at this place." Selene gestured to the parlor room around them.

Johanna had been gracious enough to invite both Marie and Selene over for an indulgent afternoon of tea and confections, baked by Johanna herself. All three women sat on decorous, floral chairs rimmed with rich mahogany and leaned against daintily crocheted pillows, also made by Johanna. Her home contained no fishy smell either. There were no cows grazing about, and there were certainly no flies to be seen. Instead, a mural of pixie-like butterflies congregated on her ceiling, perfectly picturesque, perfectly at peace.

A fairy blue butterfly with long, trailing wings landed on Johanna's shoulder and nestled into her puffed sleeve, a beautiful brooch on her dress.

"Butterflies everywhere. Last time we talked, you told me John was going to spray them with poison, or something of that sort." Selene held her chin out indignantly and flicked an oncoming butterfly away.

"Yes. I did say that, didn't I. It's just that John and I really enjoy watching them migrate from one room to another. They're rather lovely, don't you think?" Johanna sheepishly held the rejected butterfly in her palms.

"Rather lovely, but practically useless. You can't eat butterflies when you're hungry," Selene grabbed the biscuits and jam. Johanna turned to Marie.

"You're lucky Marie. I bet flies are very useful," Johanna passed Selene a butter knife.

"And they don't take up much room," Selene echoed through stuffed cheeks.

"I'd trade butterflies for houseflies any day"

"Or fish, you can have all of mine,"

That night, Marie lay in bed and made a mental list of everything she hated about the flies. She hated how they landed on her toes and cheeks, stole her food, buzzed all night, and whispered in her ears. She hated the way the fat ones would ram themselves into her mirror, or how the small ones would leave their dirty footprints on her glass, and how none of them helped

her pay the rent. She especially hated how they were not cows, or fish, or butterflies. Even so, she repeated her nightly mantra over and over until her eyelids sealed shut, and all the flies seemed to fly far, far away. A house full of flies is a lucky thing indeed. Maybe one day that would sink in.

Afterword: A House Full of Stories

I originally wrote this story my senior year of high school. I was in dire need of scholarship money, and my mother found one that would put my writing skills to use, plus get me all the money I would need to actually attend Ouachita. It was a \$4000 scholarship from the Thea Foundation—that is, if you could write a compelling enough story to win 1st place.

At the time, my mom was my proofreader for everything—thus this story went through her before it went through the website—and as far as sharing my creative writing work, it'd had always just been a hobby of mine that I never shared with anyone. I wasn't so enthused about writing it. I'm horribly competitive, and thus I try to stay away from competitions entirely. I ended up writing about four different stories, all under the 1,000 word limit, and somehow “A House Full of Flies” was conceived. It was actually the first of the four stories I wrote. I came up with the idea after a bad fruit fly infestation plagued our kitchen for months. No matter what we did, they didn't seem to go away and would appear in the oddest of places. I remember staring at one that had just landed on the bathroom mirror and watched as the fat little speck rammed itself into the window. At the same time, I was also thinking about the story of the old lady that lived in a shoe. I don't have any good reason for thinking of that story, but I guess it was a godsend.

I'm a pretty visual person. Most of my stories start with a single image, and the single image of this story was of an old woman that lived in a house and ate too many flies till she popped open and flew away—only somewhat like the original I think. From there, I knew there just had to be a house full of flies, but of course, why stop there? Why not a house full of fish and butterflies as well? They could be neighbors, or perhaps a whole neighborhood full of whatever the heck came to mind, and then they could compare their burdens and try to outdo each other, as some people are apt to do.

This was my thought process going into it. It took me half a day to write, and by the end of it, with some minor revisions and cuts, I brought it to my proofreader with great pride only for it to be rejected completely.

“Cora. You cannot submit this. What does it mean?”

“I don’t know. It’s whatever *you* think it means. The story is what it is.”

“How about you write another one. You still have a week left.”

And thus I wrote three more short stories, none of which I was proud of, but my mom found those more tolerable. Still, something about the flies kept aggravating me, so I let my dad read it for a second opinion.

“I don’t get it. What does it mean?”

“I don’t know...” Of course, I knew what it meant to me. I just wanted to hear what they thought it meant. Apparently, nothing.

I ended up submitting the “House Full of Flies” story despite my parent’s advice. Of course, I told my parents after I had uploaded it that this was the one I had chosen. I think they were only mildly horrified. You see, I don’t have the best track record when it comes to my gut, but I can only say there was something in this story that drew me in and kept me there. In a way, it felt like my first successful rendering of an idea. It’s not perfect, and I don’t mean to brag. I only mean to stress the deep connection I have to this story, a story that led to my interest into the surreal, and as a result, to this thesis, to my honors grant trip, to the rest of these stories. There’s an innate quality somewhere in this story that is irrevocably me. I don’t what it is. I don’t want you to figure it out either. I’m content to just let it be a feeling exist and somehow exist in others for the brief five minutes it takes to read it. That’s all I ask of this story: to be me in a way I can’t always express or communicate.

The Spiders

She took one last sip of water before placing it back on the nightstand along with her crumpled magazine and collected the book resting on her husband's chest. He'd had fallen asleep before her, per usual, and he would not be woken up until the sweet smell of morning breakfast wafted through the bedroom door. The woman, now ready to tuck in, turned off the last light in the room. Click. The light from the streetlamp outside flooded the room, leaving it bathed in a soft, green, and fuzzy light. The woman closed her eyes and wished for sleep to overtake her, but sleep did not come, nor would it come for the next 6 nights.

A soft tapping noise filled the room. Click. The woman turned the light back on. The room was flooded with lamplight, now warm and sharply in focus. Nothing: she must be imagining things. Click. The tapping sound resumed. Click. The tapping sound stopped. Click. Click. Click. Each time the sound would start and stop just as abruptly as the light turned on and off. The husband, whose snores almost masked the sound, didn't seem to notice (not that he would be much help awake anyway). She would have to call the exterminator first thing tomorrow.

The hot oil let out a sharp sizzle as the woman placed three strips of bacon in the pan while trying to keep the phone balanced between her shoulder and head, phone cord twisted around the kitchen like a maze. The husband held part of it up while he ate; phone cord and scrambled eggs didn't exactly mix.

"And can you describe this tapping sound further?" The man on the other line asked. He himself was in the middle of breakfast and could care less about these supposed midnight tapping sounds.

"Describe further? How else do you describe a tapping sound?" The woman knocked her knuckles on the table in derision.

“Honey,” her husband half-warned: a quiet, calming breakfast was all he ever asked for. She turned away so he couldn’t see her eyes shoot to the back of her head.

“Might be spiders. Mrs. Evers had spiders last month. Mrs. Wilsons had spiders last week. If you ask me, there seems to be an outbreak.”

Her husband motioned for the butter on the table to which the woman slid two more inches over so he could reach it without stretching.

“Do these spiders make tapping noises?” The woman asked, quieter this time. Her husband gave her an approving glance over his newspaper.

“They might. Just depends on your spiders. The ones at Mrs. Evers liked to cough, the ones at Mrs. Wilsons liked to cry. Just depends on your spiders.”

“If they are spiders, how do I get rid of them?”

“That’s really up to the spiders. I’d say give it a couple of nights. They’ll leave when they want to, won’t if they don’t.”

“Well, that’s certainly helpful.” The woman’s lip curled.

“Why don’t you ask Mrs. Wilson. She’ll probably know,” The exterminator added before hanging up, now glad to get back to his morning news, undisturbed.

“Dear...” Her husband raised an eyebrow as the woman started dialing a new number.

“Yes?” The woman didn’t turn around.

“The bacon...”

“What about the bacon?” Her eyes went wide as she dropped the phone.

“It’s burning...” The husband added as the phone cord fell into his eggs. He only asked for a quiet morning.

That night the husband was sound asleep, dreaming, no doubt, of unburnt bacon and quiet mornings without phone cords. The woman looked over his grotesque features, animated by the

lamp's shadow, and wonder why she ever married such a crooked nosed, big-eared creature. His mouth fell open as he snored. A part of her wished the spiders would crawl in it to shut him up. A hesitant hand reached out to turn off the lights, but she thought better of it.

Her call to Mrs. Wilson was of no help. She had simply suggested to leave bottles of milk out for the spiders. Of course, that was all well and good if her spiders cried, but since that didn't seem to be the case, she had dialed Mrs. Evers who was even less helpful than Mrs. Wilson.

"Lay out some cough drops, but make sure they're the good kind. Tried to buy some knock-off ones, and they refused to take them. Oh, and they seemed to like the lemon flavor the best."

"And if your spiders don't cough? Mine tap all over the wall. Tap, tap, tap all night long. I care hardly sleep!"

"Oh, how adorable. I wish my spiders had tap-danced..."

That was the end of that conversation, as far as the woman was concerned. Instead, she had settled on her own plan: squash the spider with her spider-swatter (far different than a fly-swatter, or at least, that's what the exterminator had told her). Flashlight in one hand, swatter in the other, she made sure her whole body was covered from head to toe. Click. The tapping sound began to her left. She shined the flashlight in that direction, only to jump back as a dark figure scuttled away from the light. She shined her flashlight to the right when the sound resumed. Once again, the dark figure quickly escaped but not before the woman caught a glimpse of something that sent her careening on top of her bed. Click.

This night, she felt more prepared. Swapping the swatter for a broom, she held it tightly to her chest. Her husband, who was now passed out, had given her a disapproving look before turning over and muttering something about soggy eggs. Click. As per usual, the tapping noises began, and the woman swung her flashlight around with such ferocity that the batteries

threatened to spill out. This time, the tapping noise had tripled in volume. Under her bed, to her left, and to her right the tapping sound began to close in on her. Quickly swinging the light up, she froze in horror as she caught the dog-sized spider right in its track, the light beam scorching the creature till it burned like hot, sizzling bacon. She shoved the broom up, stabbing at its human torso with the prickly straw hairs and let out a scream as it fell off the ceiling, all eight human legs curling in on themselves as it dropped. With a soft thump, it landed on the bed and, flashing her light, she watched as its two companions slowly dragged their companion the rest of the way off, a head of grey hair trailing behind. Click.

She threw the broom away the next morning. She didn't bother to cook bacon either, so her husband didn't bother to get up. She wondered just how he could sleep through all the noise, but he always seemed to amaze her in the worst ways. When he finally did awaken, he made his way to the kitchen table, slippers scuffling on the freshly mopped linoleum.

"You've got dark circles under your eyes," he commented, reaching for his morning paper. When it wasn't there, his brows raised instinctively.

"Dear, where is the paper?"

"The what?"

"The newspaper."

"It's out on the lawn." The woman snapped, twirling the phone cord around her finger. Her husband looked at her incredulously before scuffling off in his robe and slippers to grab the newspaper.

"Perhaps you should try sleeping more. You seem a bit tired." He added before he walked out of the door. Where were the quiet mornings of yesteryears?

Click. The fourth night, she almost had them. Since the last night, they had added two more spiders to their ranks, and when she swung the broom at them, she swung it with vicious

intent. The fifth night, she was sure she would get them. With the added protection of her red gingham oven mitts and shower cap, she leaped around her bed like a ballet dancer as she swatted at the ever-growing number of humanoid spiders tap tap tapping their way up and down the walls—careful to not step on her sleeping husband. On the sixth night, she wasn't careful, frequently using her husband as a stepping stool to better angle her shots, flashlight now taped to the top of her shower cap for maximum efficiency. Even that wasn't enough to stop the now ridiculous number of spiders crawling on the walls. Click.

On the seventh night, the woman gave up and snapped on her winter ear muffs to drown out the sound, which had only increased. She sat up straight in bed and watched as the shadowy outline of spiders roamed as they pleased. One ran in circles on the ceiling, three ran randomly up and down the wall, another hid under the bed, and the rest contented themselves to crawl all over her legs and her husbands. With one hovering directly over him, the woman turned, makeshift shower cap flashlight still on, and caught a glimpse of the spider's face before it retreated into the darkness. In horror, the woman reached up to feel her own face, now covered in a cold sweat. She wondered if she really looked that terrifying. Click.

The man woke up to the smell of bacon wafting in from the kitchen. When he entered, he saw his wife scraping thick chunks of meat off the skillet, her grey hair like a wild thorn bush. As he sat down, she didn't say anything to him, only peered at him occasionally as she took sips of her morning coffee. At least she'd bought the paper in.

"This a different brand?" The man asked, chewing on the slightly charred piece of meat. She nodded in reply, left eye twitching as she took a sip of coffee.

"It's good," he replied. She grunted in response before scraping more bacon onto his plate. Must be the lack of sleep. Probably from all those magazines she reads.

Tucked into bed all nice and cozy, the man's wife fell asleep with her magazine in her lap. He gently picked it up and placed it on her nightstand before he laid his own book on top. Tapping his fingers absentmindedly, he turned off his lamp and stared into the darkness. Tap tap tap. His fingers danced on his leg before moving to the nightstand where the sound seemed to fill the silence. It would be a long time until the man finally went to sleep.

Afterword: What Keeps Me Up at Night

If you know me, you know I have remarkably vivid dreams. Do I remember all of them? No. But the ones I do remember are about as crazy as they come. They include strange combinations of food, whales that teach ballet, go-kart rides through the jungle, intergalactic purple princess alligators, giant Swedish fish heads playing rock, paper, scissors shoot, and of course, Walmart.

I think I've always had vivid dreams, but I didn't start remembering them till early high school. My best tip for remembering is walking through your dreams backward, pulling one single moment you remember and pulling on that scene till you've untangled the rest of the threads attached with it. My dreams don't stop at the visual though. I've had auditory dreams before as strange as it sounds—dreams that are just sound: disjointed symphonies, old country western soundtracks, lots of drums, and an occasional lullaby. These are very rare, but they happen, as does a strange series of what I like to call *after dreams* in which the dream has finished but I'm still sleeping, speaking to myself about what just happened. It's all very surreal I might add, but I didn't just want to talk about dreams.

This story was inspired by an intense bout of nightmares where sleep was hard to find. I'd stare up at my ceiling wide awake, wondering if I would have another nightmare or stay awake till four in the morning again. I'd trace the lines of my ceiling and plot out different stories in my head. That's where this story began, on a sleepless night where I envisioned strange creatures crawling around my bedroom with multiple arms, all with my face, and clicking all around me. I'm not crazy. Just a fan of horror. Needless to say, this was the result.

A Single Drop of Life

It had not rained in sixty years, but Marcus could only account for twenty-four of them. His father, who was already sixty-three and had never seen a single drop of water fall from the sky, claimed that the number must have been higher. Marcus tried to reason with his father; it was impossible that the number was any higher.

His grandfather had told him tales, ones that took place when his father was still young and forgetful. He described the jagged, mosaic-like earth being kissed by a million watery beads till all the little cracks became ravines and the rough patches of dirt softened to a malleable, muddy clay. In the following month, the desert was gone, replaced by the daydream of all men, women, and children.

Life had come back to their small-town bearing gifts too plentiful and gracious to keep. She turned the mud into a soil so dark and decadent the children mistook it for a chocolate dessert, and she transformed the harsh, arid ground into a home for flowering sprouts and meadow grass. He said she hand-dyed each petal herself using every hue in the rainbow as her palette and whispered for all the insects, animals, and birds to journey to this new land where sadness and hardship were distant relics of the past.

His grandfather painted her in such vivid detail that there was no possibility that she was just a figment of the imagination, a mere daydream gone wild. He described Life as the most magnificent woman he had ever seen, glowing and vivacious. He described her power over the land, how she filled each crevice of the town with mysticism, and how she filled the people's heart with a substance so wonderfully intoxicating that they couldn't help but weep with happiness. All this was told to Marcus who could feel the remnants of a past happiness pouring over him like a perfect rainstorm.

The tale always ended the same. The people, thankful for all the gifts Life had bestowed on them, erected a stone statue in her honor and weaved heavy flower garlands from the meadow to drape around her image. They repeated this ritual daily, and at night they would feast upon her basket of fruit and labor. All was well until Life had to leave, unexplained and unexpected, like a thief in the night. The news settled over the town like a dark, rainless cloud, and fear trickled into their hearts. Months went by, and her abundance of gifts seemed to evaporate. The animals left as quickly as they could now that the land was barren and brittle. The rivers morphed into gaping fissures. The flowers shriveled to dust and blew away in the wind, and the last drop of water touched the ground and disappeared with a sharp sizzle.

It was almost as if Life had never stepped foot in their town, or even glanced in their direction. The only proof that she had visited was a dilapidated statue in the square, a crumbling mess of stone rubble that had been vandalized and forgotten. It could have been a statue of anything. Otherwise, the tale seemed more like a mirage, a deceptive oasis in a vast desert, a dubious piece of hope. Even so, Marcus held onto it like a life preserver, tenacious and resolute. She would return, it would rain again, and the story would live on.

As Marcus grew older, his father became more and more adamant that Marcus wash his mind of these childish delusions. He claimed that Marcus was too old to believe in stories of water and rain. Marcus responded that he could not wash his mind of it if he didn't have any water and continued to believe in the tale.

Marcus couldn't understand his father's skepticism. His grandfather's friends, who had passed away long before Marcus was born, had lived through the event. His own father, infantile as he was, had lived through it too, but there was always doubt in his father's heart. Marcus knew the truth though. Life must have come, and rain must have fallen even if his father couldn't remember it.

Now that his grandfather was fading away, like a distant ship being swept off the horizon, Marcus and his father raced to his house to do what they could and bid him a final farewell before he departed.

His grandfather's house was a small, two-storied, cream-colored abode wedged between a row of buildings that lined a busy street downtown. From his balcony, one could see the statue of Life, hideously in disrepair and cracked, but his grandfather's eyesight was so poor that he couldn't even see the statue's outline. For days, his grandfather cried. He was a feeble man, and his nurse, Marie, insisted he stay inside. He pleaded with her, but she was relentless. If he couldn't watch over Life, as she had done for him many years ago, then who would? Who would look up at Life and remember her glory? Who would remember her tale when she faded to rubble and dust?

In response, Marcus had made his grandfather his own statue. It wasn't a replica of the one in the square, something ruined and unrecognizable but was modeled after his grandfather's tales, stories so vivid that Marcus knew her face and hands and arms. When Marcus had given it to him, his grandfather cradled it in his arms and wept.

Now, years later, it sat on grandfather's bedside table covered with miniature paper flowers, for there were no living flowers left, and his grandfather, whose mind moved between fantasy and reality, gazed at it with tender adoration and curiosity. Marcus sat to his grandfather's right, in the same chair he used to listen to stories in, while his father and the nurse stood behind him, all watching and waiting for the next moment to arrive.

His grandfather, now conscious, smiled at Marcus and reached for his hand. Marcus grasped his bony fingers and held on. He feared that if he let go, his grandfather would sail away and become lost in a dark and endless sea. After a moment, his grandfather sat up a little straighter, still smiling absentmindedly, and looked around the room with dreamy eyes, unaware

and unconcerned. Another moment passed, and Marcus asked him to tell the story one last time. He wanted to savor the tale, remember every miniscule detail, and be a wonderstruck child once again. Marcus was stupefied when his grandfather said he could no longer recall the story. In a panic, Marcus grabbed the statue and pointed. He asked who she was; his grandfather replied that he could not remember who she was, but he was sure that Marcus remembered. Marcus slumped down in his chair as his father comforted the old man with real stories about bike riding in the dust and camping out under the dimly lit stars.

When they were done, his father blew out the candle on the bedside table and Marcus grabbed the statue, heavy and strange in his hands. On their way out, Marcus handed the statue to a group of kids playing on the street. He asked them if they remembered who she was, but they stared at it blankly. He asked the next person he saw the same question and then the next. They all responded with the same vacant stare. The last person he asked was his father, who said that maybe she wasn't anybody at all, and Marcus, who had received no other answer, was inclined to agree. Then his father, looking at the desert landscape around them, commented that a single drop of rain had never touched the ground here, and Marcus, who had never seen a single drop of rain in his life, responded that he was probably right.

Afterword: A Single Short Story

I wrote this after I'd had fallen in love with Gabriel García Márquez; specifically, his "A Very Old Man with Enormous Black Wings." It was my first taste of magical realism and from there, I could never truly go back. I don't know what it is exactly about magical realism that's enraptured me. I've always boiled it down to this phrase when anyone asks me: I love how magical things become mundane and mundane things become magic. I don't know how many times I've said that, but I'll say it as many times as I can. Still, there was something specific about that single story that changed my life.

I don't mean to be dramatic, but it's true. It's not something I can really explain. I just know it in my bones that something clicked after I read it, like invisible doors suddenly unlocking before me. Things just seemed to make sense after reading it. That's the power of literature, I think. They're keys to unlocking something within us. They're the keys, and maybe we're the doors? I'm not too sure. I always thought the idea of passwords were funny, using words to lock something away, but if you can find the right one, it could open different doors and portals to new realms. How can a single word or combination of words unlock actual doors and screens, much less invisible ones? Still, Márquez's story seemed to unlock something within me. I began seeing things in new light, wondering whether or not the world I lived in before Márquez was the same world I lived in now. It gave me a new way of seeing things and a new way of writing. I've always had lots of ideas, but nothing like the avalanche of thoughts that poured out of me after reading his short story (writing and finishing them, of course, is another matter entirely).

It seems ideas are always popping into my head these days. This particular one came pretty soon after reading his. I wrote it in one sitting, straight down. I find that some of my favorite stories happen that way, as if by accident. I wanted this to conjure up the same kind of

magic his own stories cast on me. The way his stories seem to capture the sentiment of whole lifetimes. Time flows differently when reading Márquez, so I wanted to capture that long, cyclical flow of time that seems both long and short at the same time but always uncertain.

The Nighttime Fisherman

On that warm night, when a light breeze coasted through the sleepy island of Rosando, the sea seemed more alive than it had in years. The brilliantly black waves pulsed along the coastline and rippled out from the horizon, dancing in time with the wind. The palm trees joined their dance, and a great symphony arose from the rustling of leaves and the scuttling of the crabs as they tangoed on the brown sugar sand.

Had one stood on the beach that night, felt the sand caress their toes and the salt kiss their lips, they would have witnessed the death of the old fisherman. But surely, if someone had been there to call out to him at that precise moment, he would have happily waved at them from his small, wooden boat and vanished amongst the blinking stars.

Alas, nobody was there to do either of those things, and by morning, when the sun had climbed to the highest point in the sky, his boat was found washed ashore. All that remained of him were his tattered clothing, a pair of wine-colored rubber boots, and a net full of his life's sole treasure.

The morning before his departure, this fisherman began going through the motions of his daily routine even though he could feel that this day was anything but normal. Getting dressed, he threw on his cleanest shirt stained with old age, his worn-out jeans, and his rubber boots. He brushed his teeth like normal. He combed his hair to the right, then changed his mind, brushed it to the left for a change, and finally, deciding he'd better not make any drastic changes to his life, he brushed it back to the right. When he got out of the bathroom, Marietta was sitting at the table, newspaper in one hand and greased spatula in the other. On the plate lay two overcooked and under-seasoned fish for what seemed like the fortieth time in a row. Beside them was a small dish of fish jam, with old fish crumbs floating on the surface from the last dinner.

Marietta acknowledged him with a simple nod. As they had been married for more than 60 years, nothing more seemed necessary.

“Fish prices have gone up. Should be good for you, if you can catch ‘em.” Marietta turned the page.

“Weather forecast for today is sunny. Don’t have any more excuses, huh?”

“My boat isn’t fixed from last night. There’s still a hole in the floorboard. I don’t think I’ll be able to fix it in time for today’s catch,” the old man said, sipping on a glass of murky, grayish water. Marietta didn’t bat an eye.

“No, I fixed it earlier this morning. Speaking of which, we can’t take baths anymore till you get it properly fixed. Had to use the plug from the tub on your boat.”

Sighing, the man swallowed his breakfast whole, grabbed his tattered coat from the rack, and put on his small fishing cap.

“Don’t forget your fishing rod!” Marietta called from the splintered steps of their little rundown beach bungalow. The fisherman grabbed his pole and headed towards the small pier where his boat was docked. Looking down, Marietta had done exactly as she said; a familiar-looking plug had been shoved haphazardly in the small hole and stuffed with thin rags.

The day dragged on as the sun beat down on the back of the fisherman’s neck, speckling his skin with even more dark patches. It was a slow day for this fisherman who waved politely at the others as they passed by his boat.

A hardy fisherman named Otis passed by, sweltering under the burning sun. “Glad you’re finally joining us this morning.” His boat was already filled to the brim with baskets of fish.

“Oh, you’re here? I thought you only came out at night. What was it you were catching again?” Another fisherman, this one thin and gaunt, asked. His boat was filled with to the brim with oysters big and small.

“Ah, don’t bother him with yer questions,” Otis said, motioning for the gaunt man to move along. Shakily, he did, his boat of oysters heading precariously back to the dock.

“Don’t mind him, he’s just mad because the oyster market went down today. Did ya read the news? Great day to catch some fish.” Then, in a hushed voice, Otis leaned over the side of his boat.

“Don’t be too hard on yerself. It’s a noble thing yer doing, really. If I’m honest, most people are scared to do what ye do. But ye don’t always have to make a profit to do what ye like, do ya?” With that, Otis paddled away, out to catch more fish. The fisherman looked down at his own boat. He had only caught one.

“I fix your boat when it’s broken, I take care of the house, and I make sure you’re fed and dressed by the time morning rolls around. What else can I do to convince you? What can we do with this? It’s profitless!” Marietta shook the jar filled with dimming stars at him.

“Every night you catch these worthless creatures and keep them stored away like their some wonderous prize! We need fish, not stars, or else we’ll all go hungry!” Marietta threw the jar down roughly on the kitchen shelve, along with the rest of the jars that lined almost every inch of their house.

“You don’t always have to make a profit to do what you like.” The fisherman repeated the strangely comforting words he had heard today.

“Where did you hear that rubbish? Of course you need to make a profit to do the things you like. How else can you afford for the poles, the boats, the jars, the nets?”

That night, the fisherman took his boat out onto the velvety smooth water and watched as the twinkling stars’ reflection wavered in the deep, black sea. Out there, in the middle of the water, he felt truly alone. There was no one to tell him he was wrong; there was no one to tell

him he was right. All he knew was that he was right where he wanted to be, safely tucked away from the rest of the world.

In his younger years, he had once tried to catch the moon, but no fishing pole was strong enough and no net was big enough to catch that elusive, glowing orb whose reflection glistened at the bottom of the ocean, waiting to be caught. Instead, he stuck to stars.

Tossing his net into the black water, he gently trapped the stars in his net and tugged a couple of twinkling lights from the sea; with a blink, the stars he caught disappeared from the night sky. Emerging like burning black coals, red hot and fuming from the salty water, they froze like arctic ice the moment he grasped them. Now dimming, the fisherman placed them gently in his jar and continued on, catching stars with a great tenderness that only comes from years of dreaming, until he took his last, labored breath. That same night, one brightly burning star was added to the night sky for all to see.

Afterword: A Sky Full of Stars

I've got a terrible fascination with stars—I'll admit it—but stars have always given me a great sense of comfort. When I was a kid, I was afraid of the dark, so much so that I slept with the lights on every night. I can't remember the finer details now, but I was given those sticky, sickly looking glow-in-the-dark stars that you could plaster to your ceiling. My parents helped me stick them to the ceiling of my bedroom, and for a little while, I wasn't so afraid of the dark anymore. I would lie in bed and look up at the ceiling, pretending that I knew which stars were which and tracing secret patterns that weren't there: a small house made of stars, a lion and its cub, a million flowers petals scattered across the sky. They were always leading me somewhere, these stars.

At one point in my life, I remember my dad bought a telescope. We lived out in the country at the time, so the sky was always bright and lovely and full of stars so clear I thought I could touch them. I don't think we looked at the stars through the telescope too much. I always thought they were prettier from afar, like little pin pricks that pierced the nighttime veil. I was once told that every star represented someone who had once been here but was now gone. I appreciate the sentiment now, but I didn't quite buy that as a kid. To me, the stars were holes in the sky, and if we could just reach the other side, we'd be in the land of enteral light and sunshine.

The stars eventually peeled off the ceiling or went out complete and once we moved into the suburbs, and the stars dimmed. I think a part of me always longs to be bathed in starlight, misses that breathless feeling of seeing the universe a little clearer. It always amazes me how the sun lets us see the beauty of earth up close, but the night lets us see the beauty of the universe from far away. Or maybe it lets the universe see us a little more clearly. I haven't decided yet.

I came up with this story a while ago after seeing an article on bioluminescent plankton that covered the shoreside somewhere in Latin America. There were blues waves, illuminated on a sea of black, and the shore was lit up like stars had fallen into the ocean and were weathered by waves and turned to dust by the time they reached the sand. That one picture sent me into a complete spiral. I pictured an old man out at sea who had caught stars all his life, a dreamer type who didn't make much money but couldn't do anything else with himself knowing that stars were always there waiting got him to catch. I pictured his life after too. I saw how he had waved goodbye to the world and the future of his legacy. This is the paragraph, the beginning of a longer story, that never made it into the final version:

Alas, nobody was there to do either of those things, and by morning, when the sun worked hardest, his boat was found washed ashore, and all that remained of him was his tattered clothing, some wine-colored rubber boots, and a net full of stars. Of these possessions, the boat went to his eldest son, Lewis, to whom he had promise to give it to. The articles of clothing were given to his wife, Marietta, who threw them into the dumpster along with his other belongings. Subsequently, the clothes made a nice addition to the closet of the local hermit who lived much too close to her house for comfort. His final possession went to his youngest son, Eugene, who the fisherman had not seen or heard from for twenty years. Though much time had passed between then, Eugene's hatred for his father burned brighter even in death, and he force the net of stars upon his wife's nephew named Christopher, a thoughtful, precocious boy whom Eugene also despised for his youth and imagination.

The story, had it been longer, if it ever becomes longer, would've follow the shifting island life of Rosando, starting with the patriarch Christopher, as it goes from sleepy, provincial town to modern day metropolis. Christopher would've have taken his grandfather's net and caught stars along the shoreline, soon discovering the latent potential of stardust as a magical balm of sorts. Think electricity but stardust in its place. In quite a literal sense then, the industrialization of the town would steal all the stars from the sea (therefore sky), building ladders to pluck them out like

apples. The ending, as I had in mind, would feature a cataclysmic Pompei-reminiscent meteor shower of the greatest irony.

Of course, that is hardly the story I wrote. I think sometimes I get carried away in imagining everything that I don't take the time to materialize it. Sometimes, my favorite stories are never planned. I tend to write as I go. I don't know the ending any more than the reader (or perhaps the reader may be more perceptive than I am). I find that too much planning stifles me in a way, puts me on a set course I can't seem to jump off.

I still like this story. I think the ending has a tenderness to it. I've never been a fan of happy endings. I'm more of a bittersweet girl if we're talking about personal preferences, but I think this ending is happy for the most part. The fisherman escaped into the night sky, and there he'll lie, immortalized for the rest of his fictional existence. I could think of no other way to make him happy, and no better way to make me happy either now that I can search the stars for a character that touched my heart.

To the Sun They Went

The year was 1953 when the sun was turned off like a light switch, and a little town with no name was covered in a dull gloominess that, like a heavy layer of ceaseless fog, seeped into every home and heart till all traces of light seemed to have vanished from that place, save for the flickering stars that remained to comfort them in their time of darkness. And though this cursed gloominess seeped ever deeper into the lives of the old and weary, it could not extinguish the last streak of sunlight that had concealed itself in the heart of a lonely and grieving mother. This sorrowful woman, whose face was once painted in a great variety of vibrant creams and rosy pinks which had now faded into a palette of bleak and dingy grey, had watched as her only son boarded a sun-bound ship in a long line of other sons and daughters. It was their duty to turn the sun back on, and they had pledged not to return until it was done.

That had been over six decades ago. By now, most of the mothers and fathers of that town had given up hope and lived with a regret that constantly gnawed at their hearts: their children would not return, and it was they who had sent them out on that impossible mission. Still, the old woman, who went by the name Ms. Poppy, held on tightly to her hope.

Having lost track of time, she walked down the frigid street, a thin candle held up in her trembling hands to light the way. Coat clasped tightly around her, the flame of the candle whipped wildly in the violent storm; light snow and dust mingled together. A mini blizzard decorated the sky.

When Ms. Poppy finally reached the observatory, she pulled on the small handles to find that the doors were firmly shut.

“Afraid the doors are frozen tonight. Won’t be getting inside till the storm passes, if it ever does.” An old man was leaning on the wall, coat collar pulled up to his ears.

“Peter, how long have you been here?” Ms. Poppy wrapped her own hood tightly around her face, so chapped by the cold that it almost felt like a desert.

“Not long. Are you here for the same reason I’m here?” He asked, wiping the flurries from his brow.

“That depends. Are you here to see if they’re somewhere out there?”

“Something like that. Were you not looking at the sky an hour ago?” Mr. Peter suddenly began to dig through his heavy coat. “No, did you see something?” Ms. Poppy’s heart began to flutter. Could it be what she thought it was?

“Actually, yes. A little dot of light flared up in the sky. It was only for a split second, but it was something. You can still see it, though not with your own eyes. Here,” Finally grabbing the object from his coat, he handed Ms. Poppy a thin telescope and urged her to look up at the sky. When she did, she saw nothing but a black expanse, speckled with a million tiny, dimming stars.

“Move it to your right, now stop. You’ve gone too far, turn it more to the left, left, left—there, do you see it.” In fact, Ms. Poppy did see it. It was a tiny dot that shined more brightly than the rest of the stars, a tiny dot that shook with hopeful anticipation.

“You don’t think that... It couldn’t be, could it?” Ms. Poppy’s heart skipped a little beat, but she tried to diminish any excitement that was spreading through her.

This wouldn’t be the first time someone claimed to have seen something odd twinkling in the sky. In fact, this would be the fifteenth. She refused to be duped for a sixteenth. Still, the idea rekindled that small piece of hope she had left and her imagination took off.

“I don’t know, but that’s why we need to get into the observatory. If we could look at it closer, we could see what it actually is.” Mr. Peter took back his telescope and look at the door.

“I’m afraid the only thing left to do is wait.”

The following days, the storm did not let up, but the little dot that Mr. Peter had found seemed to grow brighter and bigger as the days passed by. Some of the other members of the town noticed it too, but they simply said it was nothing. They couldn't put their hope in nothing.

Mr. Peter frequently stopped by to check up on Ms. Poppy, sharing his small telescope with her as they looked out upon the dark sky from the roof of her house. It was a particularly dark night when Mr. Peter put down the telescope.

"Tell me about your son." Startled by his forwardness, Ms. Poppy began to wring her gloved hands. It had been decades since she had talked about her son, since the town had openly spoken about their missing children. Thinking of him, she found nothing but an attic full of dusty memories, tucked away and lost in thousands of unmarked boxes.

"I can't remember. All I know is that I still love him." Mr. Peter nodded solemnly. Ms. Poppy asked about his daughter, and he responded that he couldn't quite remember either. His memories seemed like a faraway dream, and whenever he tried to conjure her up in his mind to see her face, her image would always turn to smoke.

"I think it's this darkness that's clouding our memories. It's been here far too long." Mr. Peter scratched his chin and pulled his hat a little further down his head. That was the last time he asked about sons or daughters.

The approaching dot continued to grow, and as it did, the townspeople began to whisper about the possibilities that were approaching as well.

"If only the observatory would thaw," Mr. Peter said gloomily, looking out unto the sky above.

In recent news, the observatory was still frozen shut, though the town had desperately tried to pry the doors open, and in their frenzy to see this shining light better, Mr. Peter's telescope had been dropped and trampled. Now only their imaginations could fill in the blanks.

“What do you think it is?” Ms. Poppy asked for the fortieth time.

“Not our children,” Mr. Peter answered, for the fortieth time.

“Maybe you’re wrong.”

“Maybe you’re wrong.” Mr. Peter replied, and the cycle continued.

Ms. Poppy had just fallen asleep when she was awakened up by a frantic knocking on her front door. When she answered, Mr. Peter was standing there, breathless.

“You have to see this!” Mr. Peter grabbed onto her doorframe to steady himself and then ran as fast as he could back to the street, slipping and sliding on the iced-over road.

“Is it the children?” Ms. Poppy called after him, whipping on her jacket and hat before exiting the house, not even bothering to close the door. Slippers sinking into the hardened snow, Ms. Poppy followed until she herself was out on the street, surrounded by hopeful mothers and fathers.

Eyes up towards the sky, she looked frantically for any sign of a spaceship, any sign of her approaching child. Then she stopped. There in the sky, the giant ball of light had separated, and wayward pieces of light had begun to diverge from the central path. There must have been a hundred burning lights in the sky, and as they approached, Ms. Poppy finally understood. Shooting stars were raining down from the sky, passing them by like a blurred lightshow.

Ms. Poppy looked around. The world around her was softly lit up, the sky a multitude of soft blues and pink. It was the closest thing to a sunrise that she could remember. Along with Mr. Peter, the town was frozen in awe, tears streaming down their faces. Ms. Poppy felt her face, only to discover wet tears coated her cheek. She turned her head to the sky, and her own eyes froze upon the vastness before her. Never before had she seen anything quite like this, and for the first time in decades, she felt warm inside and out. Then she heard a tiny voice whisper in her

ear, like a faint echo of the past. She wasn't sure if it was real, but in this moment, it mattered little.

“Make a wish,” it said softly.

Afterword: Make a Wish

“Hey, can you turn off the sun?” My friend had asked me one afternoon while we were crowded in a small dorm room in the middle of summer. The sun was shining through the small, box-sized window that looked as if it hadn’t been open for centuries. This was the conception of the idea.

My friend obviously meant the light switch, but the words had gotten tumbled in her head, all twisted in her tongue. I have a great appreciation for slips like these. I never like to call them mistakes; that’s too harsh, I think. Maybe they’re perfect accidents waiting for the right person to hear them at the right moment. I’m glad I was there for this one.

I wrote this for mother days (my mother was born in 1953). I think that’s why the story is about a mother. There were so many ways this story could’ve gone, but I knew I wanted a piece of my mom in this. I know my mother missed me when I went to college. Going to college is a lot like going to turn the sun back off in a way, headed towards a hopefully bright future and unsure when you will return next. I probably should’ve gone home more towards the end, called my mom a little more often just because, no reason attached. This story was, in my own way, an apology perhaps, for going MIA so many times and for not always picking up the phone when it rang. I hope, though, that the ending provides a bit of consolation in the form of constellations (or more accurately, shooting stars).

Pillow Talk

My old friend had a rather large extended family whose occupations all dealt with that of a strange and sometime occult nature. In particular, she had a distant cousin who she saw around the holidays and heard stories about through the grapevine. His name was Robert.

Robert worked as a pillow salesman even though he wanted to be an accountant, but his after his father's passing, he committed himself to selling off all the extra pillows piling up in their house. When Robert's father was alive, he invented what he patented as talking pillows. They looked and felt like normal pillows—the fluffy, packed kind that one could sink into (he had rallied all his life against pillows that were stiff or limp). His selling point was, of course, that they whispered in your ear while you slept, guaranteeing a good night's sleep or some sort of wild dream or nightmare while you slept. Of course, it was up to the customer to remember what that dream was.

His invention took place during a time when no one dreamed at all, and all conversational exchanges centered around the waking world. Robert's father, who had been insomniac for most of his life, believed it was his pillow that agitated him and disrupted his circadian rhyme. Having exhausted all pillow options in his area, he decided the only solution was to create his own. It just so happened that his pillows could talk.

Robert remembered the countless times he'd walk by his father's makeshift workshop to see him hard at work, sleeping on his less-than-twin-sized mattress with no bedframe. A pillow was always neatly tucked under his head, and his hands were clasped delicately over his protruding stomach.

“How did it go?” his mother would ask. His father's self-assigned work hours lasted from 10:00 at night to 6:00 in the morning.

“The new pillow’s a little shy this time around. Won’t talk to me like the last one. I think if I introduce it to A145, it’ll come out of its pillowcase just a little. I could probably package them together and sell them as a set.”

The act of breeding and training pillows for specific purposes was an art form that only Robert’s father could and would master. It was a delicate job really. Some pillows were unruly and spiteful: they would often whisper the nastiest, most vile thoughts that came to mind. It was pillows like these that often resulted in nightmares, though there was a surprisingly big market for pillows of that nature. Other pillows were sweeter, and some had obsessions with very specific topics.

One pillow had a particular fixation with frogs. That whole week, his father dreamed nonstop of frogs. On Monday, he had dinner with a group of tree frogs; the menu was caviar style larva. Tuesday and Wednesday, he rode a giant toad through a muddy racetrack but was trampled by a wild herd of horned bullfrogs. Thursday night, a ground of adolescent poison dart frogs dissected him, and on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, he married a tiger-striped leaf frog and started a small family of hybrid human-frog children.

For pillows like these, he would try to expand their limited lexicon by reading a wide variety of works from his library or force-fed them the daily news. The pillows would have sold like crazy had there been someone to sell them to at the right place and the right time. Unfortunately, Robert’s father never managed to think past the testing and design phase, so when he died, he left Robert the majority of his pillows and a bulging notebook full of half-scribbled notes and drawings.

Robert made a tidy profit from his father’s work. It was nothing like it could have been had his father sold them during his prime, but he made a pretty penny nevertheless. Perhaps the driving force behind the pillow’s mediocre success was Robert’s own lack of interest in the

product. He neither believed in nor tested any of the products. He simply sold what his father had labeled for full price and sold the unlabeled pillows at a discount. In short, he was a skeptic with a hoard of talking pillows stuffed in his closet, under his beds, and in his cabinets.

He was apparently still in need of customers, so my friend had asked me if I or anyone I knew was interested in buying his pillows. A skeptic myself, I told her no, and she never bothered me about it again. I briefly wondered why she had told me the story in the first place. It was interesting but odd, and sometimes the image of Robert selling dusty pillows in a used suit would suddenly appear in my mind. I assume she was somehow commenting on my own struggles to find satisfaction in my job, but while our stories were similar, they were not comparable. Robert sounded like he had no passion. I, on the other hand, had dreams and goals that constantly eluded me. I refused to believe we were in the same situation, and I felt slightly insulted she would compare his feelings to mine.

We eventually fell out of touch. I can't say if it was because she had told me about Robert, but sometimes people come and go out of your life without any reason at all. Sometimes you can only hope that the memories you take away from them are good ones. I still carry the story she told me wherever I go. It lingers at the back of my mind, just waiting for an opportunity to make itself known. I can't say it's a fond memory, but sometimes, it feels like it the only thing I have left of her. I've been having trouble sleeping lately anyway. I think I'll call Robert tomorrow after all.

Afterword: Pillow Intervention

The inclusion of this story in the final version was a toss-up. I liked the idea, but I didn't like the execution, and yet, I couldn't resist putting it in either. In a sense, maybe there's something to be said for including work that didn't quite get there; to show the major successes alongside the mediocre. Still, there's a certain surreal charm to it I think, and perhaps that's my only aim. Part of this story, I think, was a personal exercise in how sometimes, long lost memories pop up out of nowhere with no explanation, how we sometimes impart intimate and wildly random pieces of ourselves to other people, and how, even if people we know are long gone, their memories somehow stay with us, now ours to change and cherish, now ours to carry like tiny slips of paper ripped out from some larger narrative.

Everyone leaves a mark one way or another. I somehow find myself thinking of people I've only met once and will never meet again or conversations that happened in the past that have no connection to anything happening in the present. It all seems a bit surreal if I think too hard about it. Sometimes I wonder if these people even exist, still exist, and why I even encountered them. I don't really think it means anything to meet someone on the side of the street and exchange greetings, but I also don't think it's meaningless. The older I get, the stranger things seem to become and the smaller the world feels, insignificant memories seem to suddenly take on new and larger shapes. A stranger once told me she didn't believe in coincidences and that we were fated to meet, even if only for a single hour of a day. I'm inclined to believe her. I think I'll even give her an email after all this time.

The Lily and the Lion

There was something foul in the garden. Janny smelled it before she saw it, and it reeked of faded dreams—dreams that had been ripped from the earth so many times their roots had crumbled to pieces, now unsalvageable and in decay—and bitter memories whose metallic aftertaste never quite left her tongue, coating the insides of her cheeks with the taste of warm summer afternoons and chill winter evenings left to sour and rot under time’s wicked chariot.

Her hands were smeared with the dark brown crumble of loose soil and fertilizer that had lodged its way into the tiny cracks of her skin and had crept under her nails in a way that disfigured her hands and made them monstrous. It was only a temporary transformation though, and she would return to the kitchen to scrub the monstrous away under the cool, rejuvenating stream of water to reveal the human lying underneath.

She had buried her sister in her favorite flower bed, scattering in her wake the valued tokens of her lost youth like simple garden decorations, her mortal beauty left for only the worms and subterranean scavengers to adore and devour. She patted the mound of soil tenderly before wiping her hands on her dress and headed towards the house, walking through the wide French doors scored with crude little flower sketches from the past.

“There. I’d say you’ve grown another two inches or so.” Janny held the penknife above her sister’s head, the edge of the knife driven into the deep, wooden grooves of the white doorframe. Janny had distinguished her own horizontal marks from her sister’s by drawing a little flower sketch on the end so that the crooked line became the stem, and another lovely flower was added to the rising garden tide. She set the knife on the table and patted her sister on the head, fingers and palms running over the soft, rubbery ridges of her petal face.

“Not too hard,” their mother said, and Janny let her hand fall quickly to her side, cheeks flushed with shame, scared she’d tear a petal from her sister’s fragile head once again.

Lily had been born in that garden, a peculiar flower that grew even more peculiar over time, the blossom having never bloomed but had never wilted either and the bud heavy with some mysterious weight that kept it draped over the ground, stem folded over itself. After nine months, the bud had opened, and a pair of tiny feet sprouted out where the anther should've been. Janny's mother had cut it and placed it in a vase where it drooped over the lip, and Janny had often poked the soles with the end of a pencil to watch the little toes curl and retreat further into the petals for protection. A couple months later, a pair of slender, white legs could be seen, and the rest of the body would soon follow. No longer able to stay in the vase, Janny's mom let it run free and watched with amusement as the doll-sized body with a flower head ran haphazardly into wall after wall. Eventually, Janny's mom cut the stem off the top of the petal after a scare with a cabinet handle and wayward nail.

Her parents, so charmed by this strange creature, purchased clothes from the toy shop and ordered a pair of custom black penny loafers from a local artisan who specialized in miniatures. The shoes had cost more than the stuffed bear Janny had seen as they wandered through the maze-like aisles of toys that would never belong to her.

"This place isn't so bad, really." Janny slapped away the small, delicate hand that so desperately grasped for something to hold onto, and Lily, who had grown almost as tall as Janny in the span of two years, fell forward on the slippery rocks, arms flailing wildly in fear and flower head quivering in the cold wind.

"Just hold still." She roughly grabbed Lily's shoulder and loosen the leash she had wrapped around her neck. Janny found it much more effective than guiding her gently though the woods, hand in hand. She had planned to leave her where she belonged, surrounded by the trees, wildflowers, and bees that would make far better company for a lonely creature such as she. The stream ensured that she would never run out of water either, and Janny had built a spartan little

shelter out of twigs and leaves for her to sleep under and hide from birds. It would've worked too, save for the fact that Leopold—whose last name Janny could never pronounce—had followed them through the dense undergrowth and over the rippling stream.

Janny liked Leopold as much as she liked Lily—that is, very little. Leopold, their neighbor from across the sea, had fallen madly in love with Lily ever since she sprouted legs long enough to keep up with the even longer limbed boy. Janny thought she understood the fascination. Leopold was a frail German boy with a thick and curly lion's mane who didn't speak any English. He didn't speak any German either, but that wasn't entirely his fault. They were alike in that way. Lily had the head of a flower; he had the head of a lion. If anyone should be together, it should've been them, but Janny had always hated the thought as soon as it entered her mind. She couldn't stand to see the way Leopold's predatory orange eyes would soften into a dusty gold as he held her tiny hands between his hairy ones as he guided her across the river simply because she had no eyes to see with.

When Janny turned fourteen, the age when certain lion-eyed boys should've turned their heads and fallen on all fours at her feet, Lily blossomed into an incomparable beauty. It had happened suddenly and without warning. Janny hadn't meant to hurt Lily. They'd been playing childhood games they should've outgrown when Janny had suddenly found—as though by mystery—the soft white petals of Lily's head crumpled tightly in her fists, hitting and yanking with the kind of childhood voracity that delightfully demolishes everything in its reach. Her father had to rip her away, knobby knees kicking the air in a fit of wild screams and laughter. It'd been the only time she'd lost her temper, and only the first of two times she'd hurt her sister.

Janny had been sent to bed with no dinner that night, imprisoned in her room of toys and fine dresses and ribbons whose silken fabrics dulled against her blotchy, tanned skin and wispy brown hair. She'd never considered the defects of her face and skin that had rendered her

unbearably plain and simple before, but after the next morning, the feeling had carved itself permanently into each feature of her face, a map of ugly bitterness and dissatisfaction that only got worse with time.

Sometime during that peaceful sliver of night, when bits of magic trickle into the world and stick to windowsills and cling to blades of grass like morning dew, the flower head, which Lily had donned since her conception, had fallen off completely. In the morning, they found her more perfect than ever, the flower bud resting on her head like a little white hat, revealing her delicate, alabaster skin and daintily upturned nose. Her lips were a soft petal pink and her hair a cascade of curly white silk. Even the whiteness of the crumpled sheets and soft, feather pillow looked stained in comparison, and they let her sleep and dream of better days and nights to come before that dreadful winter storm settled in a decade later.

The years passed by, and Lily's beauty was only magnified by the seasons—the heat of summer quelled by the coolness of her gaze, every envious spring dressed in its best finery of blossoms and greenery, the quietness of fall silently in awe of a never diminishing beauty, and the icy winter kept at bay, longing to brush its snowflakes against her cheeks but hating itself for its cruel and deadening caress. Pursued by every eligible and not-so-eligible suitor in town, Janny was forgotten in the blur of bouquets, ribbons, and boxes, and Leopold was left in the shadow of taller, wealthier men who possessed that great advantage of having a human head and speaking English. Janny almost felt bad for him if it weren't for his soul-crushing adoration for the now girl-like creature that hardly had time for him, let alone anyone else. Leopold watched her from her window nightly, trying to nurse his silent torment with glimpses of her milky white skin and hair.

Leopold had followed in his parents' footsteps, working in the family shop as a farsighted tailor who stitched and sewed in comfortable darkness of his studio. For months, Leopold had

toiled over the design and fit of every dress she wore, embroidering his unrequited affection into each lovely stitch. He hoped that by some transitive property, her love for the dress would somehow bleed over into an overflowing love for him. At the very least, perhaps he would be able to stay on as her personal tailor. For him, loving her from afar was better than loving anybody else, and if for some terrible reason he was separated from her, he hoped that death would cure that painful ache in his chest that kept him up at night and made him prowling in secret in his kitchen for innocent mice to eat whole. Janny thought he could use some self-respect.

“Af-af... awwwfter.”

“Noon. Afternoon.” Janny filled in the empty gaps of Leopold’s quasi-speech that sounded more like tumbling gravel than actual sound. She had done much worse than tutor a lion in English though, but this particular task proved so thankless she’d almost given up. Much groveling and letter writing had taken place till she finally relented and took him on as a full time student.

“Afternoon.” Janny tried to punctuate each syllable. “You’ll get it eventually.”

They were currently working on multi-use phrases designed to expand his conversation skills. So far, the only word he could accurately pronounce every time without fail was Lily.

Janny stabbed at the earth with her spade, turning the soil over for her new patch of roses, hydrangeas, and tulips. Anything but lilies. Winter was coming, but it always seemed to last a day before another warm summer breeze melted all the cold away, and so Janny planted on. Leopold sat in an iron chair beside her, lounging in the warmth of the sun, glancing occasionally from his heavy dictionary to watch her toil in the garden. Gardening was the one hobby that Janny had taken on, and the one activity that Lily avoided at all costs. Janny only assumed she wanted to shed her past entirely. She had already discarded her little flower head for an oversized sun hat.

Leopold held out a note for Janny to read as she dusted the dirt off her knees. It was their only effective form of communication, little notes meant to bridge the gap words could not. Janny kept them all in a little box and sometimes reread them in the privacy of her bedroom, eyes scanning and rescanning the curve of his m's and the way all his letters slanted to the right, as though someone had tried to shake them off the page. She'd spent many nights unfolding her favorites, tracing the carefully crafted black swoops and curves with her finger as though she could somehow coax each letter to reveal his deepest secrets.

"Who?" Lily had asked Janny months before their language lessons in the garden, weeks before he had become her tailor. Leopold stood abashedly amongst a row of petunias, peering nervously out from a curtain of silver-tipped willow leaves.

"Do you not remember him? He has such distinctive features."

"Have we met?" Lily asked, gazing at him for the first time with eyes that had never recognized the touch of his hands, the ruffling of his fur in the wind, the long whiskers that framed his mouth, or the toothy smile he had showed her thousands of times before. He shook his head in affirmation and ran his fingers through his wild, golden coat. Lily met him under the willow tree, pulling the green curtain to the side so she could see him better. She spoke softly and sweetly, words too delicate to hear from afar, and when she returned, she had an unopened letter in hand. She handed it to Janny.

"What does it say?" Lily had never learned to read, only recently learning how to speak. Janny read through the letter quickly, with an air of artificial disinterest, skimming here and there parts too long winded and translating words far beyond Lily's lexicon. She added her own interpretation here and there for the sake of comprehension.

"I don't think I understand." Lily, who glided through the world with shy smiles and endearingly absent gazes, could hardly hold a conversation, let alone understand the complexities

of unrequited infatuation and obsessive attachment. Janny told her it was all good things in the letter and that she was very lucky to have had someone that devoted to her for so long.

“If we were friends once, I don’t think I want to be anymore. It would be very hard to talk to someone that cannot speak.”

This will never work. Leopold looked away in disgust. Janny pocketed the tiny slip of paper and sat in the iron chair across from him as he bitterly snapped the dictionary shut, locking away all the honeyed words he would never be able to articulate.

“If it’s so difficult, why don’t you get her to learn Lion instead? Or you could both learn sign-language. It’d be a lot less of a hassle.”

Leopold had taken her suggestion in strides, and before the fall was over, Leopold had learned the beautiful, speechless language by heart. Lily, on the other hand, had not the interest or the time to learn sign-language, and all of Leopold’s efforts shriveled up like the flowers in Janny’s garden as the first devastating winter of the season settled in unexpectedly and without care.

“You look so lovely.” Their mother said as Lily stared at herself in the mirror, face as white as the veil which rested on her head. The dress Leopold had made her was almost as lovely as she was—soft, ivory shade with a petal-like skirt and tulle butterfly sleeves that fluttered in the breeze. From his own garden, he had grown and plucked over a hundred lilies and had sewn them onto the dress one by one, and by some feat of tailoring mastery, he had charmed the lilies into singing to the fireflies—a soft siren song that resembled the twinkling of windchimes. It was only natural, then, that Lily would waltz down the aisle covered in the very same flowers she was born from, even if those enchanted lilies couldn’t compare in beauty or song, her laughter brighter than the glimmering halo of fireflies surrounding her and more pleasant to the ear than the soft piano melody that would soon echo through the house.

She had been charmed by a duke who collected jewels for a living: rubies from the east, sapphires from the west, and pearls from the sea. He had shown her his chests of treasure, treasures that he kept locked inside in dimly lit chambers and hid under floorboards and behind walls. But he had taken them out for her, let her gaze at them momentarily before he sealed them away again, too delicate and dear to lose. His crowning jewel was a star he had plucked from the sky, a lumpy piece of rock that he had forged into a glittering gem and then later made into the ring that now rested on Lily's thin, wrinkling finger.

Their mother brushed the loosening white curls of her hair gently, stopping only when a curl or two fell out and drifted to the floor, piling like straw in the middle of the parlor. A bright spot of white scalp was visible, and their mother quickly excused herself from the room, grabbing the shameful evidence to hide away. Janny lifted herself off the sofa and grabbed a brush from the vanity, swirling it in the powdered rouge, and painted her cheeks an even deeper shade of pink.

"Am I still lovely?" She searched Janny's eyes for any sign of adoration, but Janny's eyes, eyes that had always been inhospitable to her sister's blossoming beauty, were as unadoring as the day they had met.

"Perhaps if you make it through winter..."

It was as though winter could no longer resist the temptation and the first winter storm blew up from the south, bringing with it a flurry of snow and ice that Janny hadn't seen since she was young. Lily spent her evenings huddled by the fireplace, blankets wrapped tightly around her frail body, absorbing what meager warmth she could find. Still, the frigid breeze kissed her lips and ravaged her face and body. She was wilting and wilting fast. Her soft skin had wrinkled and withered, and the once bright pigment of her skin had waned and left her sullen and ashen looking, a shriveled imitation of beauty perished.

Janny cradled the freshly fallen snow in her bare palms, letting the icy crystals sting her hands till they went numb with the joys of dreary winter evenings and even darker, glacial nights. Leopold visited frequently, wheeling Lily around the halls, stopping to let her peer out each frost-coated window, her gloomy eyes overcast and sunken in as she took in desolate garden around her. She had gone out only once, but the snow had made her white skin look grey, and she refused to go outside again.

The wedding had been postponed to the spring, but winter seemed eternal, enamored by what little beauty she had retained and resolved to siphon what little there was left. By the end of it, when the snow had receded into the ground and spring crowned the trees with new blooming buds and budding blossoms, Lily remained the same, envious that spring had left her out of her yearly festivities.

“Make sure the veil is secured. We wouldn’t want it coming off during the wedding.” Janny’s mother handed her another strip of masking tape, and she smoothed it onto her hairless head, reminding Janny of the days when her head was little more than thick, ivory petals.

They had bought her long, silky gloves to match her dress to hide the deep creases and folds of her crinkled skin. She wore the twinkling ring over it and tried to look happy as they concealed her under the richness of worn fabric and splendor of rusted jewels.

All the mirrors in the house had been covered up, save for the one Janny uncovered nightly as she danced around the parlor, bare feet waltzing on wood, Lily’s wedding dress clinging tightly to her figure and long veil obscuring the plainness of her features. She had tried to pilfer the ring from Lily’s hand as she slept, but she kept her fingers tightly clutched to her chest as she dreamed of rooms filled to the brim with glittering jewels, stories the duke had told her through monthly telephone calls and occasional memos tenderly written on his behalf by those who worked for him. She had briefly picked up reading, if only to understand bits and

pieces of what he sent her, but soon ceased her studies when she realized he wrote of nothing but his sojourns to exotic places to find even more exotic gems to have and to hold, to cherish as long as he had the money to squander.

Leopold had to take in her dress four sizes, and Janny's midnight masquerade came to a halt after she'd ripped the bodice trying to pull it on. Leopold had been nice enough not to ask for details when she brought it to him the next morning, fabric frayed at the edges and hem soiled with the dust and dirt of duple-time dances across the parlor floor and out the door and into the gardens.

On the day of her wedding, Lily began to smell like week-old carrion and the odor pervaded through the halls and out into the garden where the duke and the preacher stood under the willow, fanning themselves and wondering whether the other was not the source of the smell. There were no other guests, save for the immediate family of both and Leopold, who kneeled at her feet, now twisted and curled in on themselves like shriveled, dried leaves. Her little white wedding shoes remained unopened and never worn, the ribbon still perfectly tied around the box.

"Am I still lovely?" Even Leopold could not deny the fact that she was no longer that little flower child he had fallen for—had not been that flower girl for a long time. But even as he shook his head, she could see the adoration still glimmering in those dusky, sunset eyes and the day became a little warmer in the steadfast sunlight of his ever-shining affection.

Their mother made sure to wrap her up tightly, no part of her visible or bare. She was drowning in a sea of tulle, lace, satins, and silks. She felt like a mummy going to her tomb, soon to be preserved in the duke's ornate bridal chamber. They tried to mask the scent with citrus scents and lavender oils, but the smell was only augmented by the addition. Thus, she had no choice but to teeter down the little stone path to meet the fidgeting duke, hand grasped tightly around her father's arm as he tried to carry most of her weight while she tried to muster up what

dying dignity she had left, her muscles having atrophied after long periods of inactivity and despair. If the duke noticed anything odd, he was polite enough not to say it but not polite enough to ease that look of repugnance into, at the very least, sophisticated indifference.

“Speak now or forever hold your peace.” Leopold held his peace—knowing that even if he did have anything to say, the law wouldn’t recognize a language it didn’t speak—and so the ceremony and reception continued as usual, masked, as requested by the bride and her family. The duke carried her away after in a wonderful little automobile afterwards, a smooth little black Rolls Royce that reminded Janny of a dignified snout.

A week later, a black box was shipped to their house wrapped in white satin ribbon, the box almost as long as a guitar case. When her mom unraveled the ribbon and took the lid off, she found a large but shriveled up lily inside, its white flesh turned to soft and mushy flower stems the color of bruises and a scattered pile of decayed petals rested at the bottom of the box. Leopold’s dress and matching veil and gloves rested on top. The ring made from stars was nowhere in sight. Janny’s mother thought it might have gotten lost in transit.

Janny took the box and hand washed the dress and veil in her bathroom sink. It had been stained brown and streaked green and yellow, and she wondered whether her sister’s mark would ever come out of it even if she managed to bleach it. It was a nice dress Leopold had made, and it was a shame all the lilies had withered away.

She scraped the rest of the contents of the box into her garden, mixing the soft, mildewed remains up with new soil. She had no need to water it. Leopold’s tears were enough as he hunched over the newly formed sprouts, blocking the harsh springtime sunshine from piercing the new white petals that began to form. Weeks passed and Leopold had maintained the same posture, muscles now atrophied and stiff as stone. His soft mane had gone hard, and he all but turned to stone. After months of trying to break his stillness, Janny eventually moved him to the

middle of her garden and thought he looked ruggedly handsome amongst all the flowers. She liked the new edition so much that she scattered the garden with other small objects to decorate her flower beds: white shoes that had never been worn, old gloves that had stopped reeking of death, small clothes that could only fit a doll, scattered letters that were never open, and books that were hardly read. She placed these all in her little flower bed, and it gave her a great sense of comfort to see how beautifully everything had come together in the end.

At the beginning of summer, Janny noticed little feet popping out of some of the flower heads, so she took her shears and clipped them off or sprayed them with pesticide. She thought she saw Leopold, who was more statue than lion now, shed a tear, but it seemed a wayward droplet of water from the hose had created that sorrowful illusion. Janny felt better knowing that he was not actually shedding any tears.

“There. I’d say you’ve grown an inch or so,” Janny said, nuzzling one of the petals with the tip of her finger. Her favorite lily was bright ivory and spotless, save for the tiny imprint of a face hiding behind one of the petals. With her thumb, she scratched it till the petal was disfigured and let the summer breeze do as it like to her little lily garden. She smelled the faint whiff of decayed dreams floating on the wind, but whose dreams did they belong to, she didn’t know.

Afterword: Lilies, Lions, and Janny Oh My!

The first iteration of this idea happened when I was twelve. I had made a small coloring book for my mom about these little sprout people, the Seedlings I called them, whose hair looked like flowers and who hibernated in the spring, resting like bats (but right-side up like little carrots or beets) in the soil.

Years later, I had a dream in which I fell in love with a very Edwardian dressed Russian prince with tassels and medallions on his jacket and a lion head. We were on a boat, dancing from one end of the deck to the other until we eventually jumped off and skated across the icy water, hopping from pier to pier.

Originally, the story was just going to be about Janny, Lily, and the Duke but something was always missing. With the introduction of Leopold, the story seemed to pull itself together and the dynamics between Lily and Leopold intrigued me. The simple fact that these two very seemingly separate characters seemed to come together naturally is one of my favorite parts of surrealism, the way the oddest characters and situations can complement each other despite their differences.

I often find life much stranger than any of the stories I write, even stories about flowers running wild and half-lion men turning to stone. On my thesis trip to NY, I was wandering around the Brooklyn Botanic Garden when I came across these beautiful creamy pink flowers the texture of wrinkled, damp paper. They were called Lion Roses. I think that moment solidified Leopold's role in the story. I would have never imagined him in the garden next to Lily if I hadn't walked past a version of him in real life. A little further down the path, the garden began to reek, of what, I've no clue, but the smell was sour and sweet, like rotting meat and sugary perfume. Thus, the first line of the story was formed.

I think I'll always find it strange how stories come together, and how much of reality is contained inside of mine. I've always prided myself on my vibrant imagination, but I think my own creative expertise looks quite dull when compared to the vibrancy of the world around me and how much creativity can be contained within a single rose on a bush, much less the whole garden.

Glass Beach

On Glass Beach, there was no treasure hiding under the ocean floor, mixed and mingled in sandy dunes or snagged on colorful branches of gangly coral. No treasure riding on rippling waves, reappearing on the timeless shore that no longer carried the same footprints in the sand. There was no treasure at all anymore—only secrets and the seashells that carried them.

Ruthie collected these seashells in a plastic, yellow pail that she used to make sandcastles with. Her grandfather was the one who taught her—showed her how to turn sticks into chisels, driftwood into drawbridges, and sand into castles so tall she'd have to climb on his back to graze her fingers against the fragile, turreted tops.

In those days, the magic of Glass Beach just made sense. It was a place where time seemed to slip through the sand, always slip slip slipping further down into some invisible drain, and the days never ended as long as the two of them remained there, sunkissed and dusted in the glittering grains of some eternal, summer dream.

“Take this one. What do you hear?” Ruthie’s grandfather handed her a shiny, black shell he had washed off in the salty water. Small droplets ran down her palm as she held it up to her ear.

Waves. Her grandfather had once told her that all people used to be part of the ocean before some were washed too far ashore and never returned home. It was those people—the landlocked castaways, their oceanic ancestors—that survived on land only by mimicking the sound of the waves. It was the last thing the ocean taught them: the gift of breathing. Inhale. Exhale. Slow and unwavering. An overwhelming sound that washed over everything, flooded the senses and drowned out everything else before going completely and utterly still. A silence that only lasted an instant before the cycle repeated again.

So much of breathing, he had said, was dependent on the sound of the sea and the pulse that ran through it, that still runs through them. The ocean was alive, and it lived inside of everyone, always pulsing, always pushing and pulling them back towards the water, beckoning them back to the sea where they belonged. The proof was in their palms: the unmistakable scars that ran through them, broken rivers that had run dry.

“I hear the waves,” Ruthie said, handing the seashell back. Her grandfather folded her hand over it and urged her to try again.

“Then you’re not listening. Not really.” Her grandfather said she could develop the gift if she worked hard enough. It was a language they had all been born with, an indecipherable tattoo so deeply etched into their tongues that they had forgotten the words thrashing inside the ocean roar, the laughter bubbled up in seafoam, the whispers hiding within the whirls and twirls of dancing ripples. They had evolved and gone deaf in the process.

His own mother had taught him how to recognize the sounds when he was a kid, how to unearth the secrets before age muddled up the prose in its tides and crests and the poetry in its swells and surges. Seashells were the only way to hear the ocean’s secrets, a way to amplify the sound and preserve those ancient, drifting memories that washed up on Glass Beach.

“What’s it saying?” Ruthie rested her head on her grandfather’s, the pearlescent conch held up between them, his hearing aids shoved in his shirt pocket. It was like listening to gargled voices from another room, murky murmurs mingled with the static of faraway telephone calls. Ruthie never could make it any clearer.

“It says never wear green on Tuesdays.”

Ruth should’ve listened. She met George on a Tuesday afternoon in a slouchy, knit pullover the color of evergreen with a cream-colored asterisk motif embroidered across the neckline. He had told her it was nice seeing something green amidst all the sand, sea, and sky.

George grew up in a landlocked mountain town in the middle of nowhere and had never seen the ocean up close until he had driven recklessly over fractured asphalt and gravel to escape the insidious, nightly suffocation that sometimes clawed at his throat and made his tongue dry and heavy like a dead fish. The whole affair always left him in a state of insomniac panic and thirst. By the time he had tossed his eighth bottle of water into the backseat of his car, he finally saw his first glimpse of the sea from atop a narrow, two-lane bridge held up by thick, concrete towers and thin, steel suspenders that he knew wouldn't crumble or snap, and yet, the fear of falling into that dark, blue abyss had a way of seeping into his mind regardless.

He had parked his car somewhere, it didn't really matter where, and crawled down a long slope whose bottom opened up to the sand and sea below. He threw off his shoes and shirt and waded into the inky blue ripples that engulfed him in a familiar, all-encompassing embrace that left him feeling weightless—both like nothing and everything all at once. He was twenty then, and he let himself fade into the sea until he heard a voice calling out to him, at first a mumble and then all at once clear till he was awakened from his trance by the bright, strobe of a flashlight as a cop dragged him out of the water for trespassing.

It would be a long time till George went back to the beach and an even longer time till he stepped foot in the water and heard the dreaded voice of the sea as clear as day, but occasionally, that overwhelming thirst would force him back to the coast where he sat on the shore and drank in the salty air from a distance.

That was how he met Ruth: on an urge to go back to the very shores that haunted him. He had spent the night watching each wave replace the next as they disappeared slowly and rhythmically into nothingness—a sort of headlong dive into their sad, frothy fate over and over. Every time he watched the sea, he got the distinct feeling that he was looking at something old, something that both changed and didn't, something time couldn't touch. He wondered if this sea

was the same sea that others had seen a thousand years before him, wondered that, if the water could flow backward, would he still be able to recognize it? He felt the sea looking back at him, and he felt ashamed at how much things had changed on land.

He took all of it in from the window of a small bed and breakfast, and the next morning, he had sat among the long, stiff patches of wheat-colored grass to listen closely, but not too closely, to the sound the ocean made. That's where he spotted Ruth with her knit jumper the color of densely wooded forests, of creeping moss, of real, actual grass that didn't feel or look half-dead. She had a small, yellow pail of seashell in her hands when he asked her for the time.

"I'm not sure. I try not to keep time when I'm down here. I don't want to know how much of it I've let slip away."

George was content to spend the rest of the day with the girl who listened to seashells in her spare hours. It was an old pastime she couldn't seem to shake, she said, a myth that never came true even after all these years of listening for voices that had been so clear for her grandfather but never for her. Everything had always sounded so far away—like dim murmurs on the horizon she could never meet. The older she got, the further away the sound seemed until it all became waves. Together, they spent the rest of the day slumped in the sand and took turns plucking shells out of the bucket and held them up to their ears, listening for the elusive secrets of bygone summer afternoons, searching for the distorted memory of some small child who had ceased being small.

"Would you like to hear what this one says?" George said smartly, holding a chipped, black shell lazily between his two fingers like a playing card. Ruth tried to snatch it from his hand, but the force was too much for its fragile frame which snapped and shattered like glass between them.

“Oh well, I guess we’ll never know,” he joked, and they tossed the remaining shells in the sea and watched them recede with the tide.

George had always preferred the mountains. Even in the most tucked-away of hideaways, the air was always teeming with life. There was a vibrancy and vivacity to the mountains that he couldn’t quite find at the beach. Without people, the beach felt empty and still. Ruth’s grandfather had once told her it wasn’t the ocean’s fault that it was so lonely, not their fault that an unlucky gust of wind had separated them from the ocean’s embrace. Even on sunny weekends, the crowd of beachgoers—with their colorful umbrellas and stiff, aluminum chairs—could only fill the emptiness so much, only went so far out into the ocean before wading back to the comfort of the warm, steady sand. No one could live in the ocean forever, and if they did, it was only temporary.

“I’ll never be able to hear it, will I?” Ruth had once asked her grandfather.

“Some rivers never reach the sea,” he said, patting her shoulder gently. His face had grown speckled over the years, his hair as white and wild as seafoam stopped in time.

“I have something for you—really, it’s a gift from the sea. Something to remember us by when you miss the sound of the waves.” He handed her a conch shell the color of flesh, shiny and smooth like glass without a single crack or chip. It was a family heirloom, the crown jewel of their collection, a primordial shell that had been washed ashore and picked up by Ruth’s great grandmother so many years ago. It was the shell that had first told her the secrets of their past: how the womb was only a mimicry of the sea, and that the child she was carrying then had only known the feeling of water in its lungs, had only known the embrace of water before his own mother arms, had never needed to breathe, only float and be.

Years later, Ruth studied her own swelling stomach, the roundness of her belly and the steady, gentle pulse that ran through it. She wondered what it must be like, what it must’ve been

like, to remember the ocean. Her fingers brushed against the sides of the tub and skated over the soapy bubbles that threatened to spill over the side. The bathwater reminded her of the ocean, of her grandfather, of home. She reached out for the shell her grandfather had given her and held it up to her ear. She couldn't hear anything but the sound of endless waves, so she plunged herself under the water, willing herself to hear, to remember.

Hours seemed to pass before George got worried and saw his wife completely submerged in the tub, eyes closed and peacefully asleep. When he pulled her out, she took a deep breath and stared straight through him as though he were glass, mind still engulfed by the sea.

“What a wonderful dream,” she said as he wrapped a towel around her shoulders. “Or was it a memory?”

“What was it about?” His hands shook violently as he toweled off her hair.

“I can't remember.”

Ellie had been born with her father's solemn face and her mother's flushed cheeks. She had knowing, squinty eyes that reminded Ruth of windy sailboat rides across the bay and George of pearlescent moonlight dancing across quivering waves. She had been born small and silent, and the doctors had to take her away to siphon the rest of the water from her lungs. Six months later, when the doctor snapped his fingers near her ears, the doctor told them she was deaf and recommended contacting an audiologist in the children's wing.

George found Ellie's hearing aids buried in the backyard under a mound of fresh dirt and mud. This was the third time that month that George had found her hearing aids hiding in places they shouldn't have been: submerged in half-full glasses of water or stowed under large stones in the woods—anywhere really but her ears.

“Ellie.” He found her in the living room with Ruth's shell nestled to her ear. The color was so similar to her skin that it could've been an extension of her head, and even from across

the room, George could hear fragments of the fragile and furtive whispers spilling out from the shell-like some malignant, oceanic incantation.

“What did I tell you about these?” He waved her mud-soaked hearing aids in front of her.

Ella set the shell down before signing back. “Don’t need them.”

“Yes. You do.”

“They don’t work. I can’t hear with them on.”

George felt like he was losing ground to the sea. Even surrounded by dense forests and fortified by mountains, its siren song still managed to trickle down the slopes and into the cracks of his home. It flooded his ears every time the faucet ran or percussive raindrops would beat against the rooftop. He heard it emanating from the bathroom door when Ruth would take long naps in the bathtub with the door lock or when he would find Ellie in the forest babbling to brooks in a language no one ever had to teach her—a language that sometimes felt easier than breathing. George felt himself slip slip slipping, but to where, he had no clue.

“Cochlear implants?”

“They’ve very safe nowadays. Lots of kids are getting them.”

“And you want us to do the same?”

“Why not? The hearing aids don’t seem to be helping.” George held up the charred remains of her newest pair, stuck in the oven and cooked at three hundred and fifty degrees with the salmon.

George had been asleep when an unquenchable thirst seized his throat and shook him awake. All he could taste was salt and sand, and he ran to the bathroom only to find it locked with Ruth on the other side, his cherished bathtub Ophelia floating down the drain with nothing but loose seashells clasped in her hands. He put his head under the kitchen faucet and let the cool

water splash on his face and dribble down his neck and shirt, but the thirst remained, all twisted and tangled within him, gnawing and nibbling away at his resolve.

At dawn, George found himself lying on the shoreline, disorientated and flannel pajamas drenched in water with a mouth crammed full of sand. He spat it out and hunted down a small crab that had been dragging his car keys further and further out to the beach.

It wasn't hard to find his car. He had driven it straight through a fence and onto a steep, grassy dune. When he finally managed to get back on the road, he felt his fingers tremble against the steering wheel and the overwhelming sound of the ocean still ringing in his ears. The water that clung to his pajamas, the small beads of ocean whose trails mapped out a series of tiny rivers down his skin, still whispered the secret that had been revealed to him the first night he flung himself into the water and so many nights thereafter: *a flood is coming to take away the sea.*

That was the big secret, the impending prophecy of the water that had haunted him for so long, but the flood hadn't come for twenty years. George wasn't sure it would ever come, that is, until he found water spilling out from under the front door. Water covered every inch of the floor inside. Small carpets and shoes floated near his knees. Dressers and chairs had lost their footing and bobbed back and forth like colorful buoys. A row of seashells floated past him like prophets, whispering with ferocity the oncoming flood.

But hasn't it already arrived? George waded through the water to find that Ruth had left the bathtub running. He turned off the faucet and watched as the water calmed and rippled out. He reached for a towel, had only grazed the cabinet handle, when he was assaulted by a spray of seashells spilling out in an assortment of pinks, whites, and oranges. It was absurd really, the calamitous amount of seashells that had been shoved in the cabinet, packed away in drawers, hidden away in bags, shoes and vents. As the water began to recede, George found more shells hiding in the kitchen, the fridge, spilling out from bookshelves and vases as though by magic,

and when all the water receded, his house had become a seashell graveyard, their ghoulish voices in chorus, singing of the impending flood. George shoved his ears with cotton balls and found himself sweeping what little seashells he could out the front door and off the porch. They jingled like spare change every time he'd add to the pile accumulating in the bed of his truck. He found that the mountains and trees outside seemed to deaden their sound, so he took eight trips back and forth to deposit the shells in the middle of the woods near a little stream where some quickly slipped away.

George found the seashell Ruth's grandfather had given her buried under a mound of smaller, younger shells. Its voice was low and resonant. An air of electricity filled the air when he picked it up and held it to his ear, and he let the vibrations flood his ears and skate across his skin. Over and over, again and again, like the passage of waves, it repeated its secret: *a flood is coming to take away the sea.*

But where is the sea? What about the sea? George lamented. Even the primordial shell could not answer his question. And where was Ruth? Ellie? Had they all come and gone without him? He sunk on the damp couch, exhausted, and watched as the remaining seashells pooled around him, covered him gently like a blanket, and coaxed him with the lullabies of cascading waves over twinkling rocks. He felt himself slipping away, slipping backward, slipping back to a dream. Or was it a memory? *One shell, two shell, three shell, four...*

"George?" Ruth stood over him, eyeing him with seagull-like eyes, beady and searching—always searching, but for what, George couldn't be sure. George found himself lying on the couch, dry, without a seashell in sight.

"How long was I gone?"

“Long enough to miss the surgery.” She held emptied-eyed Ellie in her arms, her lungs still drowned in anesthesia, and showed him the bandage wrapped around her head and both ears. He held her cheeks tenderly in his hands. He could hardly see her through all the gauze.

“Can she hear anything?”

“Not yet. We’ll go back in two weeks. For now, just let her be.” George tried to smooth down the wispy baby hairs that stuck out of the bandages, but he only seemed to pull more out in the process. There was no putting them back in place. The sandy strands floated up and out like pampas grass rocking in the breeze. *Yes. Just like pampas. Just like grass and nothing more.* He wondered just how much of the sea would be left after the flood.

The appointment couldn’t arrive soon enough. George and Ruth sat on either side of Ellie as the doctor prepared them for activation. He’d turn on the device, and they’d test a few sounds here and there—some loud, some soft. They’d start off slow and build up to different frequencies. An overflow of sound could be overwhelming after all. A torrent of noise, garbled and static at first, the ebb and flow of noise as it came in and out of focus: the sensations alone could make one feel like they were drowning in a world swelled with sound.

A leashed dog barked as his owner pulled him across the street. A taxi driver slammed his horn, a quick burst of high-pitched, staccato notes. The whooshing and rolling of wheels swirled past them as a cart was dragged along the pavement. Shoes shuffled on the sidewalk like sandpaper. Scraps of conversations rose and fell. The roar of the city rushed by, crashing like waves and bouncing from building to building. There was laughter woven into crinkling tissue paper shoved in shopping bags, crumpled cans, and clinking bottles that had seen better nights, and there were whispers held within of the leaves of rustling trees and blades of grass, stitch on the fluttering wings of bird and butterflies as their feathers rippled in the wind. Ellie was flooded in a sea of sound so loud that anything she had thought she had heard before were only echoes in

her memory, only silence that had slipped off into the distant, hushed horizon, buried under the seafloor. It seemed there was no treasure at all that could be heard anymore. No treasure at all.

Afterword: Back to Beaches

*Where the sea meets the moon-blached land,
 Listen! you hear the grating roar
 Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
 At their return, up the high strand,
 Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
 With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
 The eternal note of sadness in.*

— Matthew Arnold

There's a lot to say about this story, not all of it super relevant, but I've always enjoyed the process of mapping out my memories in each story I write. I like to see how they've metamorphosed into memories that no longer belong to me but the characters on the page. Lots of this story borrows from parts of my memories, memories that have been tossed and tumbled over in my head till they're something new, like weathered sea glass finally washed ashore.

I've only been to the beach three times in my life, all separated by the span of about 10 years. When I was three or four, I remember collecting seashells with my aunt and hoping over colorless jellyfish that had deflated on the sand. I was about twelve when I returned in winter, and the lively, summer beach I



had known became rather empty and cold. (I don't suggest going to the beach when it's freezing

unless you're looking for a solitary place to reminisce about warmer days or you have your own sandcastle equipment. Otherwise, you might be stuck with a gardening pot and spade to build the castle of your dream—though in hindsight, it does do the trick if you're into a more spartan look.) The last time I went was when I was twenty-one in the summer. The picture above was taken from the shores of Coney Island where I also captured an audio and video recording for inspiration. I listened to that audio recording a lot actually. Since then, I've tried to take more audio recordings of different places: city sidewalks, gardens, fountains, lakes, bike rides. There's something magical about preserving just the sound of a memory, and I guess sound plays a pretty crucial role in the story as a result. But maybe that's all getting a bit too tangential. Back to beaches!

I don't care for the beach as a whole. There's always been something not quite right about it, but of course, that's just me. Maybe the water's too deep and dark. Or maybe it's how you never quite know how deep the sand goes or what's lying underneath it. It's a very relaxing and tranquil experience if you can find the right spot, but there's always this underlying feeling like I'm being lured into a very unsettling abyss. Maybe it's the sheer expansiveness of beaches that make me uncomfortable or the way the beach doesn't try to hide just how infinite it can seem. And maybe that's why I find it so lonely at times, especially when it's just you sitting in the sand, all alone, contemplating exactly why people are so drawn there. Without other people, I'm not sure how happy beaches would actually be.

Of course, I don't think I would write "Glass Beach" if I wasn't impacted by some part of the beach-going experience. I'd like to think of the story as my attempted, uncertain love letter to the sea, the beach, and seashells. In many ways, it did start out as a love letter of sorts, a very long and involved, eye roll-inducing letter with seashell imagery at its core. That eventually progressed into a pretty bittersweet story in which a girl, Ruthie, thinks of all the secrets she

would've shared had things been different with Geroge, but with no one left to tell them to, she'd whisper her secrets to the seashells and toss them into the ocean where they'd wash up on shore again years later for someone else to hear.

Obviously, the story shifted a lot since then, but the idea of seashells carrying secrets always pulled me back. At one point, one of our bathrooms went through its beloved beach phase and seashells were an absolute must. Back then, I thought that, even if the shells weren't anywhere near the sea, they still carried the sound of the sea with them wherever they went. That's just what it meant to be a seashell, to have the sound of waves and seagulls always inside of you. I'm sure lots of kids had the same mindset when it came to listening to seashells, but the idea still struck me as something unique and sentimental when I was first fleshing out the story.

The idea of Ellie mainly came from my own experiences in and out of the audiology department. I have a slight hearing loss that I've adapted to better over the years. High pitched frequencies go over my head (not that hard if you consider my height), and low sounds go under the radar for the most part. When I was a kid, I didn't realize that fall leaves made sounds, so when I got my hearing aids, I spent a day shaking down trees and brutally stomping leaves into the ground. While Ellie's experience is not my own, it comes from experiences of my own and evolved from there. The introduction of hearing aids and cochlear implants weren't originally part of the story, and for me, it still seems a little out of place at times. How does a story that begins with seashells and the sea end with hearing aids and sound, and then there's the whole nautical origin story and the contrasting mountains as well? I'm still not entirely sure how it all fits together, but it felt like a natural progression to me at the time. For the most part, if something feels right to me, then I try to stick with it. This story felt right in many ways even if it there's a lot of moving parts. I like to think of it like the ocean in a sense. You never really know

what's going to wash ashore. I sure didn't. Still, ocean treasure, even if it's all just broken shells and sea glass, have a special place in my heart. I hope it does for you too.

Afterword: A Note To End

I always like seeing how stories come together. Author interviews and afternotes, any supplementary material that could give me insight into the author's life or mindset while writing a piece has always intrigued me. The addition of afterwords to this small collection was a last-minute decision, but one I'm happy with. My hope is that it will contain relevant and sometimes not relevant insight into me and my stories, but it's mainly just a way to ramble about a project I enjoyed and share some pictures and memories from the past. Part of me finds the addition a little pretentious—an amateur writer pouring out the *secret sauce* behind lackluster stories, but I promise my intention is anything but. I hope these afterwords serve as a more conversational way to digest some of the stories you may be interested in. I don't wish to take any of the magic out of the stories by revealing the reality behind it but rather enhance what's already there. My hope is to stay away from analysis and dwell on the core memories that have jumbled together to form stories like these. It's possible I'll talk about what these stories were and how they changed. I don't expect anyone to actually read all of this if they're not interested. Read what you want. Don't read what you don't. I've always had a strong urge to try to explain myself to others, so think of these as just that—a long winded and monotonous way of explaining myself and getting more pages on my already long thesis. With that being said, I'd like to thank my thesis director and second readers for bearing with me through this process. I'm sure you don't want to read it all, especially not more than once, but thank you for your feedback and advice. I'll see you back at the top.