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NEW VOICES

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*Thank
you!*

**To our wonderful students, faculty,
staff, and EFL Department that
made this year's issue possible!**

Awards:

Congratulations to

Rebekah Smith

Winner of the 2022 Creative Writing Award

Julia Anhalt

Winner of the 2022 Dessie Dean Pitts Award

Rida Hirani

High School Special Recognition

And



Carlie Beth Wilson

whose artwork *Jupiter* was selected
for this issue's cover





Julia Anhalt

Communication and Identity in *The Crying of Lot 49*

The Crying Lot of 49 by Thomas Pynchon is a bewildering satire that follows the character development of Oedipa Maas after she learns that she has been named the executor of her ex-lover's estate. The legal duties she must perform take her on a mysterious adventure as she becomes entangled with the perplexing history of the Tristero empire. Alone and cut off, Oedipa's discoveries about the postal system and its rivalries help her uncover her changing sense of self. Through various means of communication between characters and their relationship to Oedipa, readers see how her identity shifts across the narrative.

Throughout the novel, Oedipa struggles with a formidable feeling of isolation. This is made abundantly clear through the first few scenes of the novel as she travels from place to place without feeling or much purpose besides the intent to check off the responsibilities she must fulfill every day as a housewife. In this part of the novel her feelings are explained as a "sense of buffering, insulation," along with a noticeable "absence of intensity, as if watching a movie, just perceptibly out of focus, that the projectionist refused to fix" (10). The word "buffering" and phrase "absence of intensity" reflect the mundane and boring life she has trapped herself in, resulting in stagnation and an inability to locate her sense of self. The imagery of a projector indicates to readers Pynchon's belief that mass media is the primary wedge between human interactions. Media not only shapes American culture by coloring one's perception of reality, but it also occupies one's attention. In this way, the consumption of media prevents individuals from making meaningful connections to one another. Therefore, the advance of mass media leads to a collapse in interpersonal communication, making it difficult for people to form significant, relevant relationships in their lives.

This is seen through the various forms of failed communication in her life. When Oedipa does attempt to converse with others, the results are empty messages which only magnify her sense of separation. For instance, when Oedipa travels to San Narciso, she sends and receives letters from Mucho Maas, her husband, “which had nothing much to say, [and] had come in response to one of her dutiful, more or less rambling, twice-a-week notes to him” (32). The lack of interest between the two characters in their letter writing demonstrates the omission of a true connection. The purpose of sending letters is merely to fulfil the perception that society has created of what is expected in a marriage. The idea of performing to carry out a task rather than undertaking it because of real interest is also portrayed in the Yoyodyne internal postal system. Mike Fallopian introduces Oedipa and Metzger to this system when he tells them that most members only write meaningless messages to avoid being fined. The lack of proper communication parallels Oedipa’s inability to recognize certain truths about herself; because she lacks the capacity to be honest with herself, she cannot communicate effectively with others. The unspoken words between Oedipa and Mucho—such as Oedipa’s affair with Metzger, whom she does not mention because “she felt, somehow, [that] he would know” (32)—prove to be more important than the senseless words they do trade. This highlights the fact that the more advanced technology which accompanies the rise of media does not always improve communication.

Throughout the novel, Oedipa attempts to form a salient attachment with someone who will give her life motivation and purpose. When Oedipa first meets Metzger, the two have a feeble conversation before opting to watch the hotel television instead while they satisfy their sexual needs. Metzger takes her hand “as if to shake on the bet and kissing the palm instead, sending the dry end of his tongue to graze briefly among her fate’s furrows, the changeless salt hatchings of her identity” (23). The concept of Oedipa’s identity can be interpreted to represent the development in her character that is starting to take place.

Her “fate’s furrows,” which are “changeless,” imply that her individuality was set into stone when she was born. However, the word “hatchings” when compared to her stagnation as a character seems to indicate that Oedipa has yet to uncover who she is at her core. It is through touch—physical connection—that this notion is engaged. The thought that connection or feeling can be established through communication is echoed through the discovery of the Inamorati Anonymous group who believe that love is “the worst addiction of all” (91). They recognize the power communication plays in love; when one bares their soul to another it makes them vulnerable, which allows people to engage and build trust. To prevent this, the Inamorati Anonymous group limits and regulates the amount of contact allowed between members: “nobody knows anybody else’s name; just the [phone] number in case it gets so bad you can’t handle it alone. We’re isolates . . . Meetings would destroy the whole point of it” (91). The group is designed to segregate its members and cut off all communication so that there are no bonds formed and they can live painless lives. Yet their phone number sounds like that of a suicide hotline, suggesting that isolation is the equivalent of death.

In the beginning of the novel, Oedipa compares herself to Rapunzel. She says that she is “such a captive maiden, having plenty of time to think, [who] soon realizes that her tower, its height and architecture, are like her ego only incidental: that what really keeps her where she is is magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all” (12). This, of course, represents the fact that she is waiting for something or someone to save her from the tedious life she was trapped in. She seizes the opportunity to be Pierce’s executor in the hopes that this will bring stimulation to her life. What she realizes is that there is no man she knows who can rescue her because they all fail to communicate properly. Much like an epic novel, the would-be “heroes” of Oedipa’s story pay the price for their fatal flaws either by dying or disappearing.

In contrast, the last sentence of the novel, “Oedipa settled back, to await the crying of lot 49, ” relays how comfortable she has become in her thirst for knowledge, illustrating how far she has come in her journey of self-discovery (152). She has used her “female cunning to examine this formless magic” (12) and learnt that her power and identity come from the fact that she is not dependent on men or on the way that they shape her role in society.

The different forms of communication found in *The Crying of Lot 49* highlight Oedipa’s inability to relate to the men in the novel through engaging, meaningful communication. This inability to communicate creates a disconnect not only between people but also in relating to one’s sense of self. The forms of media in the novel (primarily television and radio) ironically only further serve to stunt human understanding, interaction, and communication. To escape this situation, Oedipa must become her own “hero” by learning to overcome her feelings of isolation and, ultimately, learning to be honest with herself.

Works Cited

Pynchon, Thomas. *The Crying of Lot 49*. Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006.

Rebekah Smith

Ode to the West End of Marlboro Way



I

On the West End of Marlboro Way, there's a house that was once a home.
For two years,
Seven months,
Five days,
Nine hours,
And twenty three minutes.

Daddy'd moved us there to disciple the bible-kissing bigots.
Cake-powdered faces pittering into pews on Sunday morning to smile and sing
And leave in time to be first in line at the only diner that tolerated
A town who tipped in prayers.

It was once a pretty place. Marlboro Way, on the West end,
Held the retirees who never made it to the beach;
Who stopped here, at the smell of salt,
And decided to stay.

The East end held those born here,
Who'd live here,
And die here,
And sweat until the puddle was big enough to cool the former's feet.
Heat takes a lot out of people, you know?

I've always hated sand.

But that's all there was to be had. Overgrown thistles and grit baking under the noonday sun

In a cicada summer daze.

It was a quiet place, with our backyard oasis of a tree once strong enough to hold a swing,

And a pond that kept killing birds.

I'd fished out at least two that drowned, and watched a hawk nip off another.

The tree exploded with a thump of feathers, carrying away a carcass as well as

The whistling songs from seconds before. It was silent.

But they'd eventually come back.

They always did.

II

We had a flower bed that someone planted long ago. It still had the bones of a pretty face

Till you decided to christen it as your toilet.

It didn't matter what we did, I'd still wake in the morning to catch the last cool air of the day

Only to see tendrils of steam curling between mortified little leaves.

I collected rocks, when I was little. I don't really know why.

I had one from every home, and house, every place we'd lived, and left.

They bounced down the road with me to the next place we'd try to settle,

And sat in a box under my bed, till we moved again.

And, one day, we did. And we'll never go back.

And I never got the chance to apologize to the house's new tenants

For the state of that flower bed,

The mess you'd left it in.

Silly you,
Stubborn, stupid, and senile.
How I ached to snatch a fistful of dirt from the sinking mound you now
called home.
To bring you with me.

To hold you tight like a baby's grip on her mother's hair,
no care for the hurt it'd cause.
I couldn't, though.
I didn't dare.

To disturb you was unthinkable. I feared that I'd somehow wake you but,
when you tried to fill your lungs with air, you'd only be met with a never-
ending ceiling of salt and sand, drowning you. Filling your nose and eyes and
ears like an hourglass til you lay there in the dark, panicked, pained, and
stuffed as a turkey,
full of the stinking ground this town had the audacity to call a home.

I feared the dirt, I feared opening my hand afterwards, if I had been brave
enough,
Strong enough,
Selfish enough.
I feared that I'd find, lying there, not sand, but clumps
Of flesh, bones, and fur.

I never saw you dead, and I didn't know how deep Daddy'd buried you.

What if you were only inches, centimeters out of sight?
What if my fistful of sand ripped away your ears? Your eyes? Your nose?
The stub you called a tail?
I couldn't do that to you, I wouldn't. So I didn't.

I took the rock instead.

It had your name etched on it with an old sharpie that had long since muddled the letters.

I took it from the head of that sinking pile of sand, and I ran,
Leaving you there, alone,
Without so much as a grave marker to your name.

You're at the mercy of new tenants now.
They might restore the flowerbed,
Flattening the lump that sleeps within,
But it won't be by my hand.

They might expand the pool that kills birds,
and sink a shovel into your body,
and hear the cracking thunk of bone,
but I won't.

I didn't grab that fistful of sand, like I'd taken everything else you had to your name.

I took my box of rocks, and I left you there to rot.
Nothing more than a bag of bones,
lost in the backyard of a house in a town that I'll never again call home.

Rebekah Smith

In Defense of Abstraction

Do you not see?
I'm doing it. Making a rhyme.
With rhythm, and pacing,
And order and time.

I'm painting a portrait
With words on a line.
I'm making it pretty
I follow design.

Do you deny it?
Did you make it this far?
I've made a pretty poem, wrapped in a bow, and it's sickening.

Don't deny it.

An old proverb states that the obstacle is the path.
And we chose to follow it, the pen and the paint brush.

Stripped of the literal, the physical, the sublime,
Striving to find the implications of
what it means to be
Human.

By dropping the protection of preciousness,
We allow glorious entropy- the beloved ugly.
What else could better define
what it means to be
Human?

Do not hide behind a pretty portrait
When the human face has wrinkles,
Pimples, pock marks, crooked teeth, sagging cheeks, and a balding head.
Do not tell me that the Human Condition is conditional.

I speak with intention, does that make this poetry? Maybe. Maybe not. I've chosen the length of this line, and followed it tenderly to its bitter end. I've allowed the pattern to unravel, and reveal. That's all we're doing. Revealing what's already there. Removing the obstacles that once made it difficult to see the sin that's filled the swollen bellies of perfection.

It is the greatest abomination of mankind to glorify the comfortable over the correct.
These green-colored lenses beautifying the denial of truth to oneself.

What does it mean to be
Human?

It's certainly not perfection.

Show me the beauty of a rhyme being broken,
And I offer the stretch-marks revealed in a painting,
Labored with love.

I paint with intention. Does that make it a painting? Maybe. Maybe not.
I do not know much, but I can tell you this-

The abstract reveals what realism cannot: the real.

You told me that rules were made to be broken, so I broke them
And you have the audacity to call it ugly?

Rebekah Smith

Granny

She'd offer them up to the front door every time it opened,
Shaking it back and forth, but the ensuing sound came from
the rasp of her paper thin skin, not the pot.

A sticky pool of peppermint and plastic
That'd long since melded into one massive block.
We'd dutifully stick hands down the pot's outstretched mouth
And pick at the wrapper tips
Before retreating, empty-handed,
And saying "thank you" with a smile.

And she'd nod, satisfied, and settle back into her chair,
Returning to the bony, wrinkled pile of clothes she had been
Before the sound of the door.

Rida Hirani

My Dear, My Native Soil!



"Pakistan?" exclaimed the man next to me, his expression betraying his confusion. "Yes, Pakistan," I replied, verifying that Pakistan was where I had spent most of my life and that it still holds a dear place in my heart. My companion was surprised, and to some extent offended: how could I call Pakistan the most wonderful place in the world over Edinburgh, Paris, or Melbourne's elegance? If I had responded, I might have stated that there was beauty in the seemingly chaotic situation- an observation that taught me the value of learning by experience rather than relying on what others have said.

This feeling, in my opinion, is best expressed in the Pakistani cuisine Seekh Boti. Thin slices of chicken acquired from unknown sources are marinated in a variety of spices before being cooked at rickety kiosks alongside filthy streets over a makeshift fire. Few people would take a chance on this culinary excursion. Seekh Boti, on the other hand, is a prime example of superb cuisine in my opinion. It is unlike anything I've ever experienced, with a sprinkle of lemon juice and a tidal wave of spiciness. Pakistan, like Seekh Boti, becomes a rich medley of flavor and color if you are prepared to set your fear aside and put your curiosity first, as I have learned.

The finest spot to find such a riot of color is Empress Market. The Empress had it all: handcrafted duck sets in orange and red linen, as well as tall, slim statues of our troops in basic yellowish uniforms. Empress, which dates back to the British Raj era, was known for selling culture rather than luxury. The traditional clothing, our famous spices, and a plethora of cultural art all over the market reminded me that life was more than Netflix, more than the easily accessible luxuries we grow used to.

It also served as a reminder that we are all connected. Behind every merchant's face, I could see a family in need, children waiting for food. With 200 rupees, a youngster may be fed for a day. It's also possible that it'll get me an extra pizza slice at lunch. I didn't have to know these kids to comprehend that buying a slice of pizza instead of a piece of craftwork from their parents might result in a hungry child. These individuals demonstrated to me that the repercussions of our decisions, no matter how personal they may appear to be, are never entirely our own.

Above all, though, it was the people of Pakistan who I admired the most. Femi, our driver, used to carry me around on his shoulders like I was his own child when I was younger. I was aware that he had a difficult life, but he was gracious to me. I went to a private school, whereas his kids were lucky if they got to go to school at all. Femi didn't despise me; in fact, he adored me. My parents and I realized how difficult it was to be welcomed into a new culture as we had traveled all over the world, and strangely, we were most greeted in the country with which we had the least in common. It became evident that the Pakistanis I met possessed a spirit of community and mutual concern that I have not often encountered; we could learn a lot from them. Clearly, there is truth to be learned everywhere if we can retain an open mind, which is a lesson I try to remember.

It may appear strange to be proud of a country located in the far reaches of the globe, but I am. My time in Pakistan drove me to question these beliefs, and as a result, I learned the importance of independent thinking, perseverance, optimism, passion, and having "a touch of craic." I wouldn't trade my upbringing for anything in the world. Fortunately, my time in Pakistan caused me to reconsider these ideas, and as a result, I will never stop questioning my own and others' perspectives.

Amber Ballenger

Rabbit's Fur

My brother Bingwen and I had covered our ears right before the first scream erupted. In childlike anticipation for the sporadic bursts of festival fireworks, we laughed and muffled our ears with hands and fingers still grubby from unloading the rabbits into the street pen. There was hesitation and the crowd giddily chanted *now, now!* The sky opened up in bright red star flakes, a thunderous boom ripping through the ant-like onlookers below. Trails of beautiful light etched their way across our vision, leaving glittering specks burning across the night sky.

There was talk amongst the crowd of the fireworks' grand finale, a momentous ending to the festival that had everyone on an eager edge, only more excited from seeing the preview. It was common for a Chinese village such as ours to pull all the works for the Mid-Autumn Festival and everyone was happily anticipating a great show after an evening of eating scrumptious sweet potatoes from the street market, making offerings, and casting wishes on the lucky rabbits our family bred each year for the event.

Sometimes, the people in the village felt so strongly about wishing on the rabbits that they'd pay just to take them home. I'm sure they believed that bringing a lucky rabbit into the household would bring luck for the whole year, but I wasn't too sure if I thought the same. After all, my family and I got to see them grow up from little runts, nosing around in the feces-ridden hay. I even brought my favorite rabbit from the litter, a beautiful white bunny with black spots.

His coat was the softest of the bunch and he looked like walking, breathing calligraphy with the way his black spots flowed across him like brush strokes. I wanted to keep him, but I knew the rules all too well: each rabbit will bring its own share of luck and they must all be brought to the festival, no exceptions! However, it was worth the sadness to see the other villagers smile and rub their hands together at the sight of the rabbits each year; it made me happy to think that we were bringing such fortune and jubilation to everyone.

Ma and Pa had given us just enough coins to get some sweets, a reward for the grueling work of pulling carts full of rabbits into town from the countryside. After browsing around the street vendors, carefully eyeing rows of pork, shellfish, and pidan, we discovered we only had enough money to buy a single treat. Sticking my tongue out at Bingwen, I flipped a coin to decide who could pick the snack. The test of sheer luck ended with a very sour Bingwen and a soaring feeling in my chest.

An elderly lady sat near a hut with a small bamboo basket, her aching voice calling, "Mooncakes! Fresh mooncakes!" I dropped the coins into her drawstring bag and held out my hand, eager to feel the soft, cakey texture of the mooncake. She stopped me and presented two cakes, one for me and one for Bingwen. A wrinkled eyelid winked at us and the voice continued its call, "Mooncakes! Fresh mooncakes!" We gobbled them down with eager tongues, struggling to keep them from spilling out of our smiling mouths.

We returned to our spot near the rabbit pen, watching the villagers stroke their beautiful coats and rub their furry feet affectionately. We were all a bit superstitious: rubbing a rabbit's foot was supposedly good luck, even more so when someone rubbed the foot of a rabbit approved by the Emperor himself. Our family had always provided the Mid-Autumn festival with the rabbits; one of our ancestors was close to the emperor many dynasties ago and gifted him with a lucky rabbit, which supposedly brought an end to the war. Ever since then, our family had been entrusted with the role of breeding lucky rabbits in honor of this legacy and the legend of the Jade Rabbit, the one that inspired the creation of the festival. Our family was the only one that could be entrusted with such a task; after all, if our ancestor could produce such fortuitous rabbits, who were we to stop the tradition?

This year, we were able to raise almost twice the amount of rabbits we usually bring, an achievement only made possible by the tedious dedication of my parents. It was to be a grand payday tomorrow after such a great success. We would visit the Emperor personally to receive the money, likely to be even more than usual.

My mouth greedily watered at the idea; we would be able to afford so much of the food we desperately needed, perhaps even new garments. My clothes had long since turned deep brown in some spots— places where mud and rabbit feces had soaked into the cloth from working with my parents. The idea of one day having silk rest against my skin made me feel luxurious yet envious; I could not wait for the day I could buy us all silk clothing, to make us feel regal and noticed.

Excited shouts around me and the eager tug of Bingwen’s hand snapped me back— the firework finale was about to start! We scampered to the edge of the crowd, trying to crane our necks upward. The countdown began. Bingwen and I covered our ears and leaned into each other, eyes looking feverishly for the first spark.

3, the rumble of a drum nearby echoed across the filled streets.

2, the eager clapping and chants began pouring around us, waiting, begging.

1, the small sizzle shot into the sky with hushed force and burst with the sound of mountains moving, unleashing a kaleidoscope of color across the black fabric of the sky.

And then someone screamed.

Bodies jumbled around us quickly; my brother and I were almost trampled by the swarm moving this way and that. He disappeared among the sea of torsos and flailing arms. Some people crooked their necks, trying to peer above the crowd to see what was happening, only to be shoved back down into the mass of moving bodies. Voices yelled in terror in a dizzying blur, drowned out by the fireworks’ bursts of light and sound.

“Bingwen! Where are you?” I called as loud as my vocal cords could. My voice was suffocated by the blur of garments shoving past me, cotton and silk, cotton and silk. The cries of rabbits caught my ears just in time for me to see sandalled feet trampling their small bodies, bones crunching and tufts of fur sticking splayed out from their forms.

It was then that I saw them, their massive forms storming the village beneath the embers of the glowing street lanterns.

Large bodies and thick armor, their weapons reflected the lights from the now distasteful show in the sky and they flooded the congested streets. The Mongols were attacking, using the Mid-Autumn Festival as a distraction for their pillage— and it had worked. Their sabres and spears glistened as they cut down the villagers, blood splattering across the dirt. Children even younger than Bingwen were the ones at the front of the crowd, positioned there by their families so they could get the best view of the fireworks. They ran away as quickly as they could with clumsy feet but were slashed down, hot blood spilling as they cried out for their parents.

From the corner of my eye, I could see the Mooncake Lady trying to limp away from her market spot; she was knocked onto the ground by the screaming crowd pooling around her and her aching voice called out in pain. Her wrinkled hands dug into the ground as she pulled her body across the street, dragging herself on her belly like a withered inchworm. A Mongol was fast approaching her from behind, her position obscuring her view of his sneaking form. My mouth went dry and my throat was layered with sandpaper; I tried to call out to her but no sound came. The Mongol's spear stabbed right through her back, digging its way through her stomach until it popped out of the other side, burying in the dirt. Her face contorted disgustingly and blood poured from her mouth in a gurgling display. She laid there impaled, unmoving, as other Mongols trampled over her body. Their feet stomped across her without mercy.

My heart felt as if it were stuffed into my throat. I could hear Bingwen desperately calling for me, his childish wails urging me into a panic. His voice seemed to come from all directions at once, screaming, "Zhan! Zhan!" No matter where I looked, I could only see the blankets of red soaked earth and the scrambling forms of the fleeing villagers, their feet tripping over bodies and limbs.

I raced to our pen and scooped up any of the rabbits that were alive, or at least still warm. Only a few were left among the scattered debris of dead rabbits; I was relieved to see that my favorite bunny had survived with only an injured paw.

I maneuvered him into my arms among the other bodies, some limp, some weakly writhing and spotted my brother huddled further down the street. He was balled up in a fetal position near our festival bags, the ones Ma and Pa packed for us before our journey into town. His wet-filled eyes met mine and he lunged for me, clinging onto my blouse with balled up fists. Oh, how tiny those fingers looked among the sea of my blouse's stained, grimy fabric.

Looking down at our worn bags now mud covered from the scramble of the villagers, I was reminded in the moment of just what care they put into us both. They worked so hard for this day, the day we presented the rabbits at the festival, the one day a year we get paid by the Emperor. Despite the long work hours and the tireless nights leading up to the festival, Ma and Pa still took the time to carefully pack our bags— filled with paper wrappings of dried fruit, small bags of feed for the rabbits, and handcrafted pendants Ma carved to bring us good luck and safety on our trip to town. This was the one night a year that they got to rest, placing the responsibility of the rabbits into our eager hands. They would be resting peacefully at home, storing up the strength to start the year long process all over again tomorrow after we brought home our heaping pay. This invasion on a night we prepared for all year was devastating; I could not bear to bring the news back to them.

I could imagine their faces of horror and grief, how their eyes would cry when they saw us arrive home, empty handed and afraid. Both Bingwen and I were well aware of what this meant for us. All of their hard work had been destroyed and squashed away under each running foot, under each Mongol's murderous gaze.

I pointed down an alley and we both sprinted, sandals smacking the dirt with half-dead rabbits jostling in my arms. A Mongol rode through an adjacent street on a snarling horse, gripping one of our rabbits by the ears. The bag on his saddle was overflowing with mooncakes, bits of meat, anything he could grab from the remains of the crushed market booths.

How had it come to this?

We ran and ran until our legs were burning, the shouts and cries from the village growing farther and farther away. The darkness of the night blinded us, but still we ran. When our small hut came into view, we doubled over in heavy breaths and sweat-laden faces, the rabbits dropping from my weak arms to the ground. Ma and Pa emerged, startled from their sleep. From the look on their faces, we all knew trouble was coming. The only thing we could do was try to save the remaining rabbits and pray to the ancestors for mercy and protection for the future.

The next morning, we were awoken by the sound of horse hooves and the voices of men. The Emperor had sent his servants to fetch and command us back to the palace; it was not for a glorious payday, but rather for a hearing. The journey would take a few hours and give us plenty of time to think about our misfortune. There would be no coins to rub between our fingers that night, no extra rations of rice and meat to buy for our own feast. The servants took all of the remaining rabbits from our hut before we left and rode on their horses ahead to the palace, leaving us to walk pitifully on our own. We would get there sometime in the evening, long after the servants arrived. I occupied myself during the trek by thinking about the remaining rabbits they took with them; I hoped they would find good homes after all of the destruction that happened last night. Perhaps they could bring hope to those affected by the events of the attack, a way to push through having to rebuild their lives.

All of my thoughts disappeared when we finally arrived at the home of the Emperor, as if wiped clean from my mind. The palace was more beautiful than anything I could have imagined. The floor was made of marble and every ornate decoration was inlaid with brilliant jade; silk tapestries with intricate calligraphy on them hung from the doorways, waving lightly as we passed through them into the throne room.

That's when I saw her. I did not know that a Chinese woman could look so beautiful until I saw her, the Emperor's concubine. Her hair was silk spun from the delicate fibers of midnight and her skin pale as the fullest moon I had ever seen, the one that did not peek bashfully from behind clouds but loudly made its presence known in the night sky above town.

As a concubine, she was most likely a woman of few words, but if I imagined her voice in my head, I was certain that it would sound like the beautiful bells the people shook at the festival. Even the way she walked spoke of great superiority, the hem of her dress wispig across the palace floor, flirtatiously threatening to reveal a peek of her milk white ankles.

Those who served the emperor stood orderly around the throne, scanning us with guarded eyes and tight-lipped grimaces. An advisor bowed before the emperor and gestured between us and him as he spoke.

“Your presence here speaks of ill will. It is a disgrace, an outrage, that the festival was decimated. Emperor, I find it only right that these pigs be executed immediately. There is no place for such disappointments under your great rule,” the scrawny man demanded. His oiled up hair laid flat against his head like a skunk and his knobby finger pointed accusingly at my family and me, beady eyes dark and brooding. I could not fathom why anyone would want to execute us; the festival was ruined and our rabbits were killed, but what was the big deal? No one could have predicted the Mongols would attack last night. We couldn’t be blamed for this big mess... could we?

The concubine lightly flapped her fan in front of her face and gazed back at me; I could not tell what emotion she held for me in her moonlight eyes, but I hoped it was curiosity. If I were honest, I wouldn’t have minded if she looked at me even with pity, just as long as I held her interest. I wanted to be as beautiful and mysterious as her, but the blackened dirt underneath my fingernails and feces stains on my sleeves told me to not think too hard about it.

She draped herself languidly over the edge of the throne’s gilded armrest to whisper in the Emperor’s ear, cutting eyes at me as she sent unintelligible noises from behind a silken fan. I couldn’t help from noticing the ruby red tint of her nails, the ones that were tiny and perfect the way a baby’s fingernails are. Whatever she said made the Emperor furrow his brows and look at me hard. My stomach felt full of rocks. The royal advisor was tapping his feet anxiously; he acted as if he was a wild dog that wanted to rip us apart in his little teeth.

The Emperor beckoned the advisor to come closer and made quick words to him as if he was bothered. Those beady eyes glared back at me in disdain and he paused to regain his composure, his face scrunching up the way a blouse wrinkles if left damp for too long.

With a deep sigh, he heaved, “His great and mighty Emperor has humbly offered the girl a pardon for her insolence in return for her service as his royal concubine.” My mother let out a wail in response and my father quickly covered her mouth and pushed her head back down into our painstaking position of bowing.

“What about the other three?” the advisor whispered, side-eyeing my mother, father, and brother. We all trembled, waiting to hear the fate of our family come from the lips of a mere messenger. The Emperor waved his hand as if he were shooing off flies from the dung of an animal, looking rather fearsome.

Then, as if with little interest, he spoke.

“I am a benevolent ruler; I have offered to spare your daughter’s life, despite the treacherous circumstances. I have no sympathy for this family’s disgrace, so you will be punished rightly for your crimes. Your family is highly esteemed for the production of the festival’s rabbits each year to honor the gift of your ancestor and the great fortune the dynasties receive each year from the rabbits’ luck. But this year? Lucky rabbits? Bah, the only logical reasoning is that they had been cursed to make this all happen. There must be someone to blame for this mess, yes?”

He smiled in such a way that childish dimples tugged at his cheeks, but I could see the waves of malevolence lapping at the edges of his facade. The concubine blinked her lashes at me idly and the immediate fear chilled my veins, threatening to break me apart.

The advisor scratched up under his nails to remove the specks of dirt underneath, sniding, “You see, what would the people think if this despicable Mongol attack was left unpunished by the Great Emperor?” He glared up at us for emphasis and continued.

"There would be a momentous uprising that could destroy the dynasty even further; we would all be killed like filthy animals despite how *lovingly* we care for our people. We were able to get our soldiers to assess the damage of the attack and it seems the Mongols intended to gather resources and cause a ruckus for us, but we must only use our best judgment of caution. Despite your village being relatively small and useless, it would only take a small area rebelling to set off the rest of the country. There must be someone to take the fall, such as you all, for your cursed rabbits that caused this. You would, of course, do this without complaint in honor of our noble and wise Emperor, yes?"

Tiny little knives sliced away at my heart; my family was going to be killed and there was nothing I could do about it. Once the Emperor made a decision, there was no one able to change it. He was going to make us an example for the people, a scapegoat to blame the invasion on so he didn't seem like a bad leader. I could see right through his facade, yet remained powerless to do anything important about it. I didn't want to lose my family over this and I didn't want to be someone's prostitute either. I wanted to go back home and feed the rabbits, to curl under the covers with my parents and Bingwen to keep warm, to sit outside our hut making straw dolls, to watch the fireworks light up the sky again.

"My daughter Zhan will gladly accept your gracious offer, my Emperor. Your kindness bestills even those with the evilest hearts; we are eternally grateful for your benevolence and mercy," my father lamented with mother sobbing into his shoulder. My brother turned his head away, but I could see his small chest heave in quiet sobs; his dirty hands balled into bone-white fists. He no longer looked like the smiling child that devoured mooncakes with me, the one that held my hand and rubbed a small thumb on the palm in a secret way to say, "I love you." Bingwen was broken, scared, *traumatized*. Despite his young age, he was quick as a whip and easily caught onto what this whole charade was about.

"But Father—" I cried, knowing the pained look in his eyes meant that he truly did love me and was doing this to save me.

Hot tears streamed down my face and the sobs building in my chest felt like deerskin drums pounding deep within my ribs. Mother stared at me with empty, tear-filled eyes. The devastated frown on her face looked back at me, the lines beside her mouth becoming small troughs for her tears.

The Emperor pulled another smile with stuffed, round cheeks and he motioned over a servant that brought forth a burlap bag. Reaching in, the Emperor grinned and withdrew the item inside the bag, tossing it onto the floor in front of me. Shakingly, my eyes looked up and saw that it was none other than a rabbit pelt. I recognized the markings on the fur, white with smooth black spots, and had the sick realization that this is how the bought rabbits ended up; they were not just sources of luck— they were disposable resources to eat, to strip, to use however the buyer saw fit. And here, inches away from my face, the Emperor had thrown down the pelt of my favorite rabbit, the one I had seen pulled out from my home only a few hours ago, with a wide, knowing smile.

I could not stop the bile simmering in my throat. I wretched onto the cool marble floor to the sound of the concubine's tittering little laugh. With a wave of his hand, palace staff rushed to clean up the mess, shooting nasty glares at me as they pushed now-soaked cloths hastily this way and that. Then, they collected the soiled fabrics and scurried away, hopeful to escape another tantrum of my stomach.

My father placed a cool hand on my head and forced it down to the floor, my forehead touching the marble in a forced bow. He dug his fingernails into my scalp that said, Do as you know and show your respect. This is the only chance of survival you get. Sucking up a gagging breath, I forced the words to come out.

“Your Highness, I am but a worthless girl. If you so would have me as your royal concubine, it would be the utmost honor. I am at your humble and gracious command.”

The words were bitter tasting; they felt oddly placed in my mouth and it almost would have felt right if I could laugh at what a situation we were in.

My family was set to be hung for all to see, gawk at even, and I was to become a concubine over an invasion we had nothing to do with, over our “cursed” rabbits.

I thought back to the limp bodies of the rabbits I carried the day before, how cold their fur felt, how easy it would have been to abandon them there to be crushed beneath frantic feet. I could only wish to be like one of those rabbits; my dreams were about to come true with luxury galore, but it was in the worst way possible.

Even if this new life was presented as an exquisite favor for me, a life of only regal silk robes and the finest feasts that would fill the stomach to the edge of bursting, I could not help but feel that death was a far better luck than this.

Karey Boland

Panama Oysters

Crystal blue water
crashes across my bare feet,
toes crunch
in the sand.

Hot sunrays beam
on my shoulders-
skin soaking up
the rays, turning it
two shades darker.

Sunset
A Jazz beat
sways on the sound waves.

Succulent oysters
sizzling southern style.
Six dozen I can eat.
Smooth frozen
Bahama Mamas with
salted rings.

Seashell wind-chimes
blow in the breeze-
Panama is heaven
no place
I'd rather be.

Kailey Bright

The King of 2 AM

I am the King of 2 AM,
but that wasn't much of a competition
was it?
The air is relatively silent,
save for the soft snores of the sleeping student,
who resides across the room.
Awake and alone, I am alert,
to the occasional sounds that go bump in the night,
in the haunted halls that can only be heard at this hour.
I glance again at my agenda,
ready to tell tall tales that the task is almost complete,
but progress on the list hasn't changed.
My body begins to bend, slouch,
as my focus drifts from the computer screen;
my fingers cease to create concrete words.
The weight of my faux crown,
of the prevalent pressure to produce a pivotal project,
sways my thoughts between rest and resilience.
I move much like a metronome,
meticulously counting the seconds as time passes,
and I watch the world wobble and whirl into a blur.

Hannah Cooper

The Depths

My throat burns of fire, as I try to catch my breath
My eyes sting from tears
I can't feel the bottom, I'm out too deep
You call out to me, but all I hear are the waves
They pull me further out, push me further down
The waves have complete control.
I let them have complete control.

My throat burns of fire, as my lungs fill with water
My eyes sting from the salt
I can't find the light, I can't break the surface
My lungs have given out, my body feels empty
They push me further in, pull me further down
I have lost complete control.
I have lost myself completely.

A.J. Davidson

Winston Churchill's Imperialist Mindset

Winston Churchill lived during of the height of the British Empire and was most keen on continuing the existence of the empire. From the start of his political career around 1897 to the very end in 1955, while his leanings and opinions may have evolved over time, Churchill consistently supported imperialism. His imperialism was a belief system not just about conquering lands for power, but rather he truly believed that British imperialism was a genuinely nurturing system for every person in the British Empire. Though Churchill was a man who believed in imperialism, his beliefs and actions imply a degree of complexity behind these ideals. These beliefs can be seen in the influences that formed his ideals, the way those ideals showed themselves in action during WW2 with the instance of intervention in Greece, and especially with his attitude towards India and its place in the British Empire.

Winston Churchill is generally regarded as having supported imperialism vigorously throughout his life. He saw it as a system that could spread good throughout the world, with the more civilized nations taking care of the less civilized ones. Churchill was also a man who considered history to be a major part of his life and as an ongoing process in which he would consult history to see how he should respond to present day events.

The influence and legacy of Randolph Churchill, Winston Churchill's father, affected Churchill in ways that may not at first seem directly tied with imperialism but nonetheless help to inform his overall worldview about how the British Empire should be run. It was his father's decision, "seeing little promise in Winston," to organize a position for him in the army. His father died in January 1915, and Churchill learned that his regiment would be stationed in India. At this point, Churchill already was planning a political career and was able to act as a war correspondent to gain as much publicity as he could.

This shows that Churchill was acting and learning vigorously already. Another important point is that this early in Churchill's career he had a major and physical involvement with imperialism in India. Later in his career, he would passionately defend the need to keep India within the British Empire and to not give it independence.

Another influence on Churchill's imperialist worldview would be many books that he read. While stationed in India, Churchill passed the time reading to supplement his education and learning. He spent some time seeking "guidance on more recent affairs Churchill soaked himself in the speeches of his father, Lord Randolph." These influences would go on to show themselves in his actions with his historical and imperial mindset. In this period, he was soaking up historical information to gain new knowledge and prepare himself for his later political career. The way that the policies of the British Empire had been conducted in the past would clearly go on to influence much of his decisions.

This can ultimately be seen in a speech when he was twenty-two and on leave from India. The speech largely discusses the political situation and his position as a Tory, but the final paragraph is most telling for his understanding of the British Empire at that time. After referencing the idea that the empire was in decline, he stated that "our Sovereign supported by the love of our subjects, then shall we continue... our mission of bearing peace, civilization, and good government to the uttermost ends of the earth." From this one can already see Churchill's overall optimism for the power of the British Empire, as well as his understanding that imperialism was more than just one nation dominating another nation. He truly saw it as a way to help other peoples by spreading "peace, civilization, and good government," and this would definitely inform his later actions and thoughts in which he sought to continue the influence and size of the British Empire as a growing and stable empire.

Another element of Churchill's imperialist mindset was how much history informed his understanding the current world. He considered himself to be "a child of the Victorian era."

An incident which seems to illustrate this was when Churchill was discussing the invasion of the U.K. by Germans in 1940. Instead of just discussing the problem that was directly occurring, Churchill also referenced William the Conqueror's invasion of the Anglo-Saxons in 1066. This shows that he did not just focus on what was happening in the present, he intentionally viewed events through a lens in which he would see the present as a natural result of what had been occurring in the past and what was continuing to happen.

If this is true, then understanding how Churchill thought about these historical processes would seem to further illuminate what Churchill's worldview was like and how it developed. One person who had a clear influence on Churchill was Winwood Reade, the author of a book of history and philosophy titled *The Martyrdom of Man*. Churchill described himself as being greatly affected by its stance towards Christianity and that "for a time he passed through a violently anti-Christian phase." This book was clearly one that Churchill considered when developing his worldview. What appears significant is the outlook on history that Winwood Reade was advocating. Reade combined optimism for social progress with the laws of evolution. Even though empires competed with each other, he saw society as a whole working towards more enlightened doctrines. Given what he had seen occurring in wars at the time, such as slaves being freed in the Civil War, Reade argued that "in the future Europeans would . . . emancipate Asia through conquest." What seems significant about this is how Churchill saw the British Empire as clearly being a part of this larger European influence that could help aid in the development of other countries and peoples.

By seeing some societies as naturally stronger than others, it becomes more natural, and even almost inevitable, for situations to occur like the small island of the U.K. controlling the much larger area of India. This helped provide Churchill with not just a justification, but a driving force for why he would go on to fight so hard for British influence. He saw it as a natural and good thing that wasn't just for the economic benefit of the British but truly something that was for the development of every society involved in the empire.

However, this belief in progress was tempered in Churchill's reaction to the Russian Revolution of 1918. He was always a staunch imperialist, but his reaction to this moment shows how his views became more focused and pessimistic. To him, the Soviet Union "further signified the collapse of centuries-old institutions and values which were at the very centre of Churchill's faith and existence." While he was still looking at the world as a place of progress, he did not see the Soviet Union's communism as a representation of this progress. Based on Reade's influence on Churchill, it seems evident that Churchill wanted institutions to improve and change but in a more steady fashion. This seems to further influence his views when he would see certain imperial actions as almost inevitable when dealing with other nations.

The fate of Greece as WW2 came to a close around 1944-5, illustrated Churchill's mindset. He would go on to act as prime minister to ensure that George II was restored as king of Greece in part to "safeguard imperial interests in the eastern Mediterranean." Churchill also gave his support for monarchy at a time when other militant groups were being supported by the majority of the Greek people that were against the monarchy and more communist leaning. This shows not only his desire for order and support for regimes that were amiable to the British empire, but would also seem to further show that Churchill wanted to continue to uphold power systems that had historical elements to them.

Churchill supported aggressive and even military actions to uphold the monarchical government of Greece. In 1944, he gave the following instructions: "Do not however hesitate to act as if you were in a conquered city where a local rebellion is in progress ... we have to hold and dominate Athens." And this seems indicative of just how truly important it was to Churchill that Greece kept up its old regime and did not turn communist. Churchill was against communism and appeared to be so vigorous in this endeavor because of how much he saw communism as a threat to the older way of doing things. Communism was a threat not just in Greece, but a threat to many other societies as well and could possibly threaten how things were done in the British Empire.

There would go on to be battles between the communist-leaning forces and the British supported the forces that were fighting for the monarchy. The ELAS, the left-wing organization, had successes at first but eventually was beaten back and a government was set up. At first it was set up under the Republican general Nikolaos Plastiras, who continued the fight against the left-wing groups while he was in charge. Churchill's efforts would go on to provoke strife in Greece as the Greeks did not agree with continuing the older regime, although George II was ultimately restored to the throne in 1946.

In 1945, Churchill also gave a speech calling for unity in Athens. Though he did not specifically mention the king of Greece's old system, his words still seem significant within the context of his actions and mindset. He took pride in "protecting this great and immortal city against violence and anarchy." He emphasized keeping order and doing so throughout the British empire. In calling Athens an "immortal" city and rhetorically calling upon Greece's antiquity, Churchill further sees it as important to maintain order against the threat of changes like communism. He seems to view Greece as important not just because it is valuable as an ally but because it is older and has a monarchical system. This is shown when he states, "Our two countries have for long marched together along hard dusty roads in friendship and loyalty." His listeners may have been thinking about the memories they would have had of WW2 at the time, but Churchill seems to be pointing to a significantly longer alliance between the British empire and Greece. This idea will be important in other situations in which Churchill sees the power and might of the British empire as something that has existed and will exist and thus seems simply inevitable.

Churchill's interactions with India started early in his career in the 1890's before he was even a notable politician. At this time, Churchill was working for the British army as a correspondent. A notable article by Richard Toye Churchill's views about British expansion at the frontier of India and Churchill's rhetoric.

Toye argues that while Churchill openly expressed uncertainty and some negative ideas about the consequences of British expansion, Churchill ultimately agreed with and argued for British expansion in India. Another part of Churchill's rhetoric which appears significant is how Churchill often framed his understanding of imperialist expansion in India as something that was inevitable. This seems important because it shows a larger part of how Churchill viewed the British Empire's role over other nations. Toye looks at a book Churchill published in 1898 about the subject, titled *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*. The article quotes the book in part that "The 'inevitable' path, he claimed, was 'the present system, a system which the war has interrupted, but to which we must return at its close; a system of gradual advance, of political intrigue among the tribes, of subsidies and small expeditions.'"

Churchill's beliefs about India can be seen in a speech that he gave in 1931 on March 18th. With this speech, Churchill was showing that he was strongly against India being able to govern itself. He also made statement about Gandhi's activism for India. He stated that he was "against this surrender to Gandhi." This seems to be a microcosm of how intensely Churchill is framing the discourse about self-government in India. By using the word "surrender," he is not framing it as a discourse of compromise but as a situation in which one side will lose completely. This speech expresses his view that British imperialism is not just something gained by force of arms but something benevolent in nature and necessary for India's peace. This can also be seen when Churchill addresses the overall idea of Indian self-government later in the speech. He does not appear to be opposed to the idea of Indian self-government in the future but believes that British imperialism is necessary to provide a stable situation in which India can become capable of self-government. He states, "Indians should be given ample opportunities to try their hand at giving capable government in the provinces; and meanwhile the central Imperial executive, which is the sole guarantee of impartiality... should preserve its sovereign power intact."

This quote expresses that not only is Churchill interested in imperialism for the sake of the British economy, but that he believes that imperialism is genuinely good for Indians that lived under British rule at that time.

Churchill's views were also expressed in his articulation of what should be done with India after World War 2. His plans not only called for British rule over India to be maintained but went further in designing a way to restructure Indian society. An article discussing his plans further explains that Churchill "believed that a major takeover of native society, involving the termination of the babu [upper] class and its replacement by a British ruling elite was necessary in order to extend British rule over India." The fact that he had these plans for India shows just how far he was willing to go when it came to British rule over India. He believed that changing India in that way would truly benefit Indian society and ensure the best possible government. Something that seems noticeable is that Churchill was willing to go through with espousing these ideas even at a time when they were not very popular anymore. That he was still willing to express these ideals even though they may have damaged his position in politics shows just how dedicated he was to the cause of the British empire and for British rule over its subjects. When he gave that 1931 speech defending British rule in India, he was already going against the Conservative party that he was a part of. In that speech, he said, "One would have thought that if there was one cause in the world which the Conservative party would have hastened to defend, it would be the cause of the British empire in India." He laments the fact that the Conservative party is willing to work with India as far as working towards self-government. This shows just how consistently dedicated he was to the cause of the British empire from the beginning of his career until the end.

To return to the post war period, an article clarified his plans for India: "The British people, who by and large were weary of imperialism, would no doubt have viewed with disfavor such measures... undertaken in their name—especially after having fought a war to defend freedom."

This shows how Churchill was willing to back actions and ideas even when he was mostly alone in doing so, furthering the cause of the Greek king even against the general will of the Greek populace. This would appear to show just how much Churchill believed in the importance of his imperialist worldviews even at such a time.

Churchill was a man that in his political career was able to make decisions involving many nations and peoples. It seems clear that while doing so he was influenced by his worldview that the British empire was not only a good thing but a nurturing force for the conquered peoples under the empire. This worldview can be seen throughout his actions and mindset in WW2 as well as his attitude towards India.

This essay has been adapted to fit the publication. Footnotes have been removed.

Megan Scot Higginbotham

King Among Rats

William Parker hated the rain. He hated the boisterous rapping against the rotting wood of the bar. He hated the way his hair matted to his sticky wet forehead and the way his soaked uniform stuck to his shivering body. He hated the muddy pebbles that lodged themselves between the damp grooves of his boots as he walked home for the night. He especially hated the smell. Moist. Mildewy. It reminded him of his Daddy's laundry. It would sit in the wash for days before ever seeing the line, collecting mold that ate holes through good clothes like the rats, digging and digesting the waste round the Shack. Not even the rats would touch the laundry though, not unless they were looking for something sick. Will bought a dryer before he'd even bought the casket.

He fingered the outline of the cigarette box in his pocket. There were two types of smoke left in it, and he'd been saving them for when he was ready to quit. One was for a low and the other for a high.

The rain began to slow down to a drizzle; the light drops still hitting his tired cheeks and crooked nose. The truck was in the shop, hence the walking, and he had quite some time before he'd even come close to the Shack. This seemed like enough for the low, at least.

Will's hands shook as he brought the tobacco to his lips and held the flame of the lighter a little longer than usual for a false sense of warmth. The smell of the smoke combined with the rain, another grossly nostalgic scent. He inhaled and continued walking.

Lowry had driven him to work but Will had walked to the bar himself. He figured if he could remember his steps from there, he'd be able to scrounge up something from his usual drive but sober solutions seldom stuck. As the drinks and hours rose, the sun sank below the muck and directions were hardly a thing to ask for in such an environment. He thought of calling Lowry—of bothering her again at yet another ungodly hour—but his phone was likely sitting at the bar or stowed away in a pocket other than his own.

Hell knows whether she would have actually come through. She didn't have to stay the whole weekend so as far as Will knew, she could've long been gone back to campus by now. She was studying up to be somebody—a big shot New York writer trapped in the body of a North Carolina college student. She'd decided that Boone was better than Bedrudge and he couldn't blame her. The proud mountains versus the flat muck; the winding rivers versus the town's sorry sewer excuse of a lake—it was in no way a competition. While the rest of their class had gone straight into their parents' businesses in town, Lowry had been left a heaping sum after her Grandfather died and she used it to hightail it out of the southern backwater as soon as their high school graduation caps went flying. She stopped by to say hi to her folks and Will some weekends, but she was better than here. Better than him.

No, Will knew she would come through if he needed her to. She was good like that.

A good person.

He'd gone through the cigarette fast enough to decide he deserved the other smoke. By now, he'd made it to the bridge that went up over the lake.

There were two ways to cross Lake Bedrudge. First there was the bridge—the common route and preferred napping place of Officer Fred Vank—Lowry's uncle, who talked more about the law than enforcing it. Then there was the “Under.”

The Under was the foundation of the bridge, a collection of beams that kept it and most everyone on it from falling to their deaths. Each little comb of metal, essential to the structural integrity. To Will, Lowry, and the other “Lake Rats,” as Vank referred to the group in their youth, the Under was a kingdom of mischief. They'd share joints, drinks, and trade old ghost stories and legend of “rat kings.” Monsters to make something out of their boring small town's old folklore. It was closer to home than the Shack had ever been.

He looked out onto the shaded entrance.

“Parker, toss the roach in the lake. For Keelee,” Will remembered Lowry saying in a somber tone.

They had all agreed that it was the right thing to do and so Will obliged, sinking the remainder of their cheap weed down into the belly of the lake. Keelee had died the summer before graduation. The plump, jolly bastard. An amazing, good friend. He’d driven off the side of the bridge trying to make it home after a couple of loose drinks that they were far too young to have been processing. He was supposed to spend the night at Will’s, they were at a dock not far from the shack but none of them had ever seen it and after a couple of drinks, shame had gotten the best of him. Vank said he’d seen him swerve off “like he’d seen a ghost he was trying to dodge” but that “there weren’t nothing on that bridge but a surprise storm and the spirits in his system.” Things were different after Keelee. The clouds started to model his wild curls; their friends started seeing his laugh in each others’ smiles. It was almost too much. Aside from Lowry, he wondered where the rest of the Lake Rats, himself included, would have scampered off to had their youth not been ripped from them.

Will lit the blunt and decided tonight was as good a night as any to reminisce. Better than walking in the rain and better getting stopped by Vank and getting caught with all sorts of illegal on his person.

One deep inhale for courage, one small step unto the Under.

When they were younger, there was discussion in town about putting up a catwalk.

“We just tryin to make sure the kids ah safe,” Jonesy’s mom would say in a thick Italian accent that stood out from the rest of the town’s trademarked twang.

Will remembered the nights he would spend at Jonesy’s. They were never planned, just a casual hangout after school kind of thing. Whenever dinner time rolled around, she insisted that Will stay, always seeming to have an exact amount of extra.

When they finished, Jonesy would look at his mom and she’d look right on back at him before saying, “Well ya already heah, might as well stay!”

She always smelled like garlic bread and so did Jonesy.

“Well then we start by discouraging ‘em from hanging out under the bridge at all,” Vank would bark back, “I mean Jesus, what’s the point of calling it safety if we’re just saying ‘gwan down and risk your ass’ anyway?”

At the time, Will thought the idea of a catwalk was dumb. It would just mean more people in their space, and it would take forever to construct, so why bother? Now, he was beginning to understand the logistics of having a standardized walkway. While the Under was the strongest web in town, it never dawned on Will just how hard it was to navigate in the dark. Every wet step on the solid beam felt like walking on ice—impossible to tell which step would send you plummeting to a frozen death.

Grasping for any amount of light, Will held his spliff between his teeth and reached for his lighter. It didn’t provide much, but in the flick, he saw them. Rats on rats on rats, scurrying along the beams like roaches behind a stove. Will stumbled back, his heel failing from under him as he began to slip. Out from the dark, Will felt a tight grip on his arm pulling him up, and as he reached out to take hold of whatever savior he had just discovered. He abandoned the flame for this shadow, the splash of the lighter too small to be heard by the human ear.

“Careful, Parker, real easy to slip down here.” Will could recognize the voice, sweet and thick. It sounded older, not in age but in time—like one he’d known before but not one he knew now.

“Lowry?” The figure took the joint from Will’s mouth, the faint ember burned brighter. “I thought you’d be back to campus by no-” The girl before him was not the Lowry who had dropped him off earlier. That Lowry had a neat bob. This Lowry had long, wild hair, blowing into around those sweet dimples, over and covering her deep green eyes. That Lowry had traded in the worn-out tees for dress shirts and blazers. This Lowry was wearing a shirt of his own that he hadn’t seen in years. That Lowry smiled. This Lowry sported an oddly familiar grin as she kept her eyes low, focused on the water and the flame.

“It’s a shame they decided against that catwalk, huh? Keep idiots like you from hitting the water.” She laughed as she turned and walked effortlessly along the beam.

“I’ll say. How many times’ve you almost taken a swim, huh Willy?” Will turned his head. Seated, feet dangling and taking a toke, was Jonesy in his old signature jean jacket and aviators, with a cigarette behind his ear.

Will’s breathing began to labor, and his chest tightened.

They should not be here.

“Why are you here?”

“Sames, as you Willy? Sunset’s supposed to be gnarly today!” Jonesy nodded his head towards the edge of the bridge.

Will looked out to see that the sky was clear and that the sun was in fact setting, reflecting onto the lake and painting the normally murky green water fiery shades of pink and orange, dancing around each other and blending with the mirrored horizon. The tightness in his chest loosened and warmed.

“Damn, how did I get here later than Will?” A laugh from behind, deep and warm.

Will felt a pang as he turned. There he was. Just as he’d seen him last. A mountain of a young man, too tall and too soft for the world that should have been ahead of him. The breeze threw his hair in his eyes but that smile...

Will shut his eyes and reached forward to embrace his friend.

“Kee! Oh god, why did you-” Will’s arms only felt air. When he opened his eyes, the sky was dark once more. The rain, that disgusting rain was back and just as it had happened the first time, Keelee had been washed away with it.

“Keelee?” He turned to his friends, “where did-”

“Take a load off, Parker!” Lowry’s hair was up now, her cheeks sunken in and pale, her eyes, black like a rodent. Will began to walk back; his sight was beginning to blur as the haze was really starting to kick in.

“Where ya goin, Willy?” Jonesy’s body, turned upside down, propelled from the beam above him. As he swung, his shades came flying down, revealing yet another set of big beady eyes. “You never hang around anymore!” Jonesy blew his cigarette smoke into Will’s face.

Cough.

Step.

Cough.

Slip.

Will felt arms around him, a cold, firm grasp. He looked up. Keelee’s auburn curls were now twisted knots of wiry worms. No, not worms, tails. Rat tails. Tied together and swarming, climbing up and moving out of the way to reveal one last set of void where hazel should have been.

“Shouldn’t have sent him home, Parker.” Lowry’s voice from one of the rats as the figure grew larger, more of them swarming his body.

“Shack ain’t good enough for you?” His father’s voice now. The rats began to wrap his neck and the rain began to pick up as the wind gave clearance to the Under.

“Please stay, please stay.” Jonesy, but there was only the smell of rot. And sewage. And rain. So much Goddamn rain.

His vision was almost completely covered by rats. They were in his ears, his mouth, clawing at his face, his eyes.

“Where did you go, Will?” Keelee’s voice was gurgled, like lungs filled with water. “Where did you go after the lake? We were so close and you were just gone. Why did I? Why did you-”

Will felt the icy lake take his lungs before he’d realized he’d even fallen.

Angelina Vita

Pink Carnations

Billy always believed she had chosen to eat lunch with Hunter that afternoon out of simple kindness. He had been doing things out of kindness for his brother since the first day Hunter had come home from the hospital. Now, over twenty years later, Billy was accustomed to being kind to Hunter and accustomed to everyone around him being kind as well.

She seemed like a woman who would do kind things for no particular reason. She seemed like she didn't have many particular reasons for anything she did, and so Billy never thought much about her. That is, he never thought about her until the night Hunter told him they were engaged.

She had appeared in their lives one morning years ago, when Billy did things and Hunter did them with him. They were still working at the carwash then, still selling tickets and vacuuming insides and watching the machines do their jobs. She was sitting in the line to enter the carwash and had Simon and Garfunkel playing loud enough to hear inside the office. She had her windows down and was putting on her makeup using the rearview mirror. When it was her turn to drive into the carwash, she didn't remember to put her windows up so the water poured in on her and soaked the entire inside of her car.

Hunter didn't notice; in fact, Hunter would never have noticed her if Billy hadn't pointed out the ridiculous situation to his brother. Billy remembered that now. Billy remembered everything.

When she drove out of the carwash, her mascara had dripped down her face and onto her neck. It made black rings around her skin and was dyeing her pink blouse.

"How do I dry out the inside now?" she asked.

"Hair dryer." Billy started to laugh. She was holding up the line.

She looked at Hunter then, as if seeing him for the first time, and gave an exaggerated wink. "I bet you'll remember me now."

Billy sobered instantly. He took in the droplets of water sparkling across the leather car interior, the delicate golden watch on one of her wrists. Manicured nails. Money.

Hunter looked at the wet grass beneath his sneakers as she drove off in a sudden roar of overtaxed engine, Simon and Garfunkel trailing in her wake.

“Do you know her?” Billy asked.

“No.”

She returned the next day. And then the next, and the next after that. Billy thought Hunter hadn't noticed, but one night he commented that 'the woman' would wash the paint off her car if she kept cleaning it every day. She started making it a point to speak to Hunter, always just out of Billy's earshot, always just long enough to confuse Hunter into silence. Billy continued to believe she was just being kind to Hunter. It wasn't a difficult stretch to come to this conclusion. Hunter looked like somebody you'd be kind to just for the sake of it. His brown eyes were wide and droopy, the eyes of a soulless dairy cow, and when you looked into them you thought he was too gentle to have ever inconvenienced a fly, let alone a person. It was the eyes that had caught Billy's attention that first day.

Hunter had been carried into the house by a nun in a gray dress. He was wearing a too big cap and was wrapped in a too big blanket. He was too small, too sickly, and the nuns told the priests they did not think he would live.

When Hunter came home that first day, the nun put him down on Billy's bed, directly on top of a pile of green army men and then took their father outside and spoke to him for several minutes. Billy stood in his room's doorway and watched the big, empty brown eyes circle the room. Hunter's face was pasty white then, and his lips were pinched up tight as if he was a grave old man disapproving of the entire world. He was a very disapproving baby.

No one moved Hunter from Billy's bed. The nun fed him once and then left the house. When it was time for bed, Billy climbed in next to the baby and went to sleep. It was never a question of whether Hunter belonged in that bed, or whether Billy was supposed to make room for him. Hunter simply existed, unceasingly. Billy got used to sleeping around a newborn, and then a toddler, and then a kid who kicked in his sleep. Neither of them thought this was abnormal until the day their father stopped paying the fees to send them to the private school run by the church. The nuns considered Hunter a miracle baby and they were sorry to see them go, but not sorry enough to fight the inevitable. Suddenly, the two boys were in the city funded schools which no respectful Catholic children ever attended. Billy was a freshman and, unlike the private school, had to attend on a different campus far removed from Hunter's. Hunter was smart enough they moved him ahead two grades and suddenly he was the tiny kid in a world of big kids. He started getting into fights that he never started and never finished. His nose was broken twice; state insurance paid to have it fixed once.

The principle graciously pretended to believe Billy's phone call came from their father, but he less graciously explained the kids "thought Hunter's weird" and that he'd seen this behavior before.

"In children with FAS," the principle said. Then he threatened to call DSS, so Billy hung up the phone.

He spent the night at the public library researching Fetal Alcohol Syndrome until Hunter called to ask why there was no dinner ready. So, then he went home and made dinner and told their dad that they had to go back to Catholic school. Two months later and the change still hadn't happened. Hunter constantly got off the bus with a white face and bloody mouth and none of the teachers ever saw what was happening. Billy learned the ringleader's name was Tristan and found out that the kid was disturbingly friendly and kind to everyone. Everyone, that is, except Hunter.

One morning the teachers found Hunter trying to hang himself in the boy's bathroom on the second floor.

The news terrified the school and terrified Billy who again begged for them to be transferred back to the private Catholic school. It still didn't happen so Billy did what had to be done and failed his finals and got held back a grade and repeated junior year with Hunter. Ever since the nun had laid Hunter on the bed in the middle of the green army men and stuffed animals, Billy had done what had to be done. That's just how it was.

Billy got Hunter a dog that Christmas, a sickly, tiny puppy that had been left in the library parking-lot. Hunter named her White because her coat was completely black. It made no sense to Billy but plenty of sense to Hunter and White. The dog went to school in Hunter's backpack and stayed there, curled up and silent, all day long. Onetime Tristan kicked the backpack while it was lying beneath Hunter's desk. The kick broke White's leg, but she never made a sound. Billy appreciated her attention to the things that mattered.

Two weeks later Tristan was convicted for the murder by manual strangulation of his girlfriend. She had been killed in her bathtub. Photos of the scene circulated online, and the school forgot about Hunter. Everyone did.

In the sudden peace, White healed as best she could. She had a permanent limp, but she didn't complain about it and Billy appreciated that too.

Then came graduation and suddenly they were grown and navigating a world that included a woman who drove through carwashes with her windows down.

One morning while Hunter was sitting in the office, cleaning up a pile of destroyed receipts, she had driven up and parked outside the small building. Billy was sitting in the back room and could see half of her body as she entered the office and stood waiting, swaying slightly as if listening to her own music.

"Whatcha doing, Mr. Carwash Man?"

When she spoke so close, Hunter jumped and dropped the small pile of torn receipts.

They fluttered around them, drifting to the floor, and Billy turned his back to the cracked door and pretended he hadn't seen anything.

"Remember me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Cool. That's good. Where's your friend?"

No answer. Billy could feel the discomfort in the office; it felt thick and heavy like a blanket that had been left out in the rain all night.

"Do you get a lunch break?"

Billy glanced out the crack one second, just long enough to see Hunter tiredly collecting the receipt pieces and the woman leaning over him and sticking one foot out beneath his vision, her toenails painted black and her strappy sandals offsetting the boniness of her feet.

"Hey. Can't you tell when a girl likes you?"

And that was that. Hunter was now dating a girl who drove through carwashes with her windows down.

Billy had no idea what to do and so he did nothing. He was comfortable with doing nothing. He'd been doing nothing since the beginning. He wanted to dislike her, he wanted to put up red flags and warn Hunter away from a girl who would go on a first date with someone she didn't even know the name of, but words never stuck to her. Dislike never did either.

Billy played third wheel constantly and she rolled with it. She rolled with everything. She seemed to find them a curiosity and took special delight in introducing them to her Old Faithfuls. They went to New York over spring break and saw Hamilton on stage. After the fees, there wasn't enough to cover rooms, so they slept in the car until a cop tapped on the window and made them leave. They went shopping with her constantly, always to clothing stores or obscure foreign food depots. They became heavily invested in her clothing choices and then started spending evenings at her apartment, eating foods with unpronounceable names and drinking things you couldn't find at the gas station.

She was like an open door to a new world, and they lived standing in the entrance, just looking.

It went on like this; for two years it went on. Hunter quit working at the carwash and took a position as an administration assistant for a law firm downtown. She knew the senior partner and made sure to drop by unannounced for visits. Hunter's position in the firm was permanent within a month. Billy wanted to warn him against taking a job that hinged off a relationship with a girl who would go out on a first date with someone she didn't even know the name of, but he couldn't think of a good reason not to take such a position and so he said nothing.

He grew comfortable with saying nothing. He stopped doing what had to be done and started thinking outside of the world he'd built around Hunter. He began to try things Hunter had never tried, things she told him he might like, and he did like them. Then she knew someone at a university a state away and she put a good word in for him and suddenly Billy was going back to school on the word of a girl who would go out on a first date with someone she didn't even know the name of, but he couldn't think of a good reason to not take such a position and so he said nothing.

He was six years behind his peers, but he kept his head down and spoke only when spoken to and did his work early. When he was offered a position working in the university's TRiO program as a peer mentor, he took it as a sign that he was meant to be there. He began to focus solely on helping the students placed in his care. They were different from Hunter, less smart, less cold, less quick to think, but they needed help and Billy would always help.

He continued visiting Hunter every weekend, driving up Friday night and then leaving early Monday morning. Hunter hung on every word for the duration of each visit, and she was proud of him too. She printed every paper he wrote and hung them in a hall of the apartment she'd bought for them. It was a nice place, and overlooked downtown Boston, and Billy started to forget ever having not had a home with his framed essays in the hallway.

She called him every Wednesday night. They talked while he studied and she cooked, and when Hunter got home, the three of them had dinner together a hundred miles apart. By the end of Billy's sophomore year, he had earned a note of distinction from the university president and was known by name by every professor on campus. She printed a copy of the award and hung that, too.

White was happy too. She stopped eating regular dog food and lived on deli meat which made her fat. So, then she got on a vegetarian diet which made her skinny. So, then Hunter fed her donuts when no one was around to see. Billy knew but he had never believed in vegetarian diets for dogs, so he said nothing.

They spent that summer kayaking in the mountains near where she grew up. Billy brought a couple of friends who fit into their world of drinking drinks not sold at gas stations and listening to opera in the middle of the woods when it was so dark even the wild animals had stopped moving.

It was the last night camping that Hunter told him he'd proposed, and Billy realized how far they'd come from the two boys sleeping in a bed covered with green army soldiers.

Then they went home, and Billy drove back to campus with his friends and started working as the university president's student assistant and then two weeks later got a call from a psychiatrist saying Hunter had tried to kill himself and needed his emergency contact to sign off on medications.

The whole drive back Billy wondered why he was the emergency contact.

Hunter was kept heavily sedated for several days. Billy signed on the dotted line repeatedly, answered hundreds of questions, and called her every hour on the hour. She answered two days later. She was devastated to find out what had happened and returned from a mountain retreat with her friends on the quickest flight.

Billy picked her up at two in the morning. She had forgotten her luggage at the retreat and was wearing slippers and a sleeveless dress, so Billy gave her his jacket and drove to the hospital. She talked the whole way, telling him how sorry she was and that she'd had no reception, and that Hunter had been "fine when I left him this weekend," and how hard she'd had to cry in the airport to get a flight back so quickly. An old businessman had given up his seat for her. It was an economy ticket and she had spent the ten-hour flight between two women who read 50 Shades of Grey out loud to each other.

When they arrived at the hospital, she went to the bathroom and vomited. Billy heard her, so he went inside and cleaned her up and was surprised that the women's restroom had bouquets of flowers on the sink. They were pink carnations. She said they were her favorites. He thought about those flowers for months.

She cried the whole walk up to Hunter's room, a soft, nervous little sniffle that kept time with their steps. Billy tried to pretend he didn't know that she was drunk, but she smelled like a bar.

When she got inside the room, she crawled onto the bed next to Hunter and put her arms around him. Hunter didn't open his eyes and Billy left the room quietly, sick over the thoughts he'd considered harboring against her.

The last time he'd seen Hunter out of the hospital bed had been earlier that week when he was leaving for school after another weekend visit. Billy was carrying an overloaded bookbag and trying to leave quietly to keep from waking her, but Hunter had slipped down the stairs to say goodbye and finish the conversation they'd gone to bed over the night before.

"My problem with circuses is the tigers they use for that one act," Hunter had said, standing in the front door of the apartment, "When they get on those things. Like all in a row. They always look angry. Like they want to come out and eat me."

“Why would they pick you to eat out of everybody else in the crowd?”

“I don’t know. They just would.”

“Well, we can do something else then. Circuses are boring anyways.”

“That’s why the tigers would come out. To eat. So, we’re not bored anymore.”

“Do you have to go in to work today?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. I’ll text you when I get in.”

“If I was to be eaten by a tiger, he would swallow my phone too and then he’d go around ringing all the time. Like Peter Pan’s crocodile.”

“Go back to bed, Hunter.”

Hunter smiled and it was that smile that Billy remembered as he pulled into the parking lot of her apartment complex. The conversation was stupid, another useless five minutes spent bothering each other, but suddenly the context had changed, and Billy started realizing the tiger could have been symbolic for whatever horrifying depression had caused Hunter to take the methadone. Then he realized how insane that realization sounded.

When Billy got into the elevator, the neighbor who had found Hunter was standing in the back corner, his shoulders hunched. He was a gentle old man with thick, leather hands twisted by hard work outside and a daughter who had forced him to sue the state when he was injured on the job and another daughter who had set the funds up to pay for the apartment with a day maid and a third daughter who was studying at Cambridge in the UK and never called home. He had a habit of purchasing large bags of French bread loaves and gifting them to his neighbors every Monday night. He was the only neighbor Billy knew by name.

“Hello, Henry,” Billy said, and smiled over the loaves.

Henry nodded once, his eyes downcast. He had an armful of loaves tucked in his arms, the ends sticking up and rubbing against the brim of his hat so that when his head moved, the loaves moved, too.

When they stopped at Billy’s floor, Henry handed him two loaves.

“My brother’s coming along fine,” Billy said, tucking the loaves under his arm.

Henry nodded again, the loaves nodded with him, and then the elevator doors slid shut between them. Billy was alone in the hall with the bread.

He went inside the apartment and put the bread on the counter and the apartment keys in the ‘important things’ drawer beneath the microwave where she kept extra pairs of socks, authentic two dollar bills she bought on eBay, flyers for various musicals, and asthma inhalers. No one in the house had asthma but she was always prepared, and Billy liked that about her. It was one of the reasons why he didn’t say anything to Hunter about proposing to a girl who would go out on a first date with someone she didn’t even know the name of.

He was feeling better now. Everything inside the hospital felt shaky and cold, like coming in after a long swim after not eating all day. Things were more concrete out here, more alive and solid like they were supposed to be.

He looked for White, but the house was empty and silent. He assumed a neighbor had taken her. Hunter would need White’s comfort; he’d have to find out where she’d gone and bring her to the hospital when the nurses changed shifts.

When he got to the bathroom there were pills scattered across the marble countertop and dove gray tiled floor. There was blood on the drawer handles, too, blood left from where Hunter had fallen and struck his head against the brass knobs. The fall must have been what had alerted Henry that all was not right in the apartment.

Billy tried to be thankful for the knobs as he wiped them clean with disinfectant spray, but he couldn’t make sense of why she would have so much methadone in the apartment. There were at least three empty bottles on the counter and every pill littered across the bathroom was marked with an M. That was a lot of methadone.

“You’re overthinking this,” he said out loud to himself, but he couldn’t stop thinking about the fact that Hunter hadn’t even left a note to say goodbye.

If Henry hadn't been there to call 911, Hunter would've died with "Like Peter Pan's crocodile" as his last words to Billy. What a horrific ending.

When Billy had finished cleaning the bathroom, he went to the kitchen, warmed the bread in the oven, and then ate an entire loaf while standing in the windows overlooking downtown. When he had finished eating the bread, he took a shower in the other bathroom and dressed in fresh clothes. When he had finished dressing, he threw away the rotting food in the refrigerator, delivered the trash to the box outside the building, dissolved the methadone and poured it down the sink drain, and then collected a bag of clothes for her. There were no bras left in her dresser, which struck him as odd, so he chose several oversized sweatshirts for her. She had said that she'd left her luggage at the resort, so he assumed she would eventually need new bras. He made a note in his phone to ask her what size she needed.

Then, feeling refreshed, he locked the apartment again and returned to the hospital.

The weeks progressed with slow, plodding control over their lives. Billy called in a few favors and was able to continue his classes online. The doctor explained that Hunter had been drinking at the time of his attempted suicide, and that he had probably lost track of what he was thinking versus what the drink was thinking.

"Just like your mother," she said when she and Billy talked about it in the hall outside Hunter's room. Billy felt disgusted by the implication that Hunter was anything like their mother and more disgusted by the fact that he'd already thought it before her, so he went away without saying anything and bought her the clothing she had requested. Then he went to the public library and researched Fetal Alcohol Syndrome until it was dark. Again.

After a few days, they all settled into a mind-numbing routine. She kept watch during early morning hours and into the afternoon while Billy slept or caught up on homework at the apartment, and then during evening hours and the night, Billy kept watch while she slept.

Every night was the same. Billy would sit in a chair at the corner of the foot of the hospital bed, zip his leather jacket up to his neck to hide half of his face, and then unload his backpack on the floor at his feet. He would read to Hunter every night, always working in the same order for specific allotments of time. First, he'd go through the readings he'd been assigned that day— dry boring readings from textbooks that were ripping his backpack with the strain of zipping around them. Then, after carefully working through the readings, there would be about a two-hour silence during which Billy took notes, wrote papers, or completed quizzes.

At the end of the two hours, the laptop would be put away, the papers stacked into folders and stored with the books in the long-suffering backpack, and then Billy would open a novel and work his way through exactly five chapters. After the last page, Billy would shut the wall light off and sit in darkness, expecting Hunter to sleep.

The routine was comforting to them both and Hunter did eventually begin to sleep. After a couple weeks of this routine, Hunter started speaking again. Then he started looking like he'd made a full recovery. His eyes were always watching things now, too, and when he started interrupting Billy's work to discuss the perceived rudeness or niceness of the various nurses on duty, Billy felt it was nearly time to go back to campus. A month later, he packed everything up and drove the 100 miles south with his windows down the whole way to wash the scent of the hospital off his body. He never asked Hunter why he hadn't thought to leave a note.

When Billy returned the next weekend for a visit, Hunter was asleep in his room. He was also alone. Billy put his bag away safely in the room and went to find her.

She was in the restaurant next to the hospital, sitting in a thin, black strapless dress at the bar. She was hunched over a glass and had her hair down with the look of someone who hadn't meant to have hair at all.

"What'll you have?" the bartender asked.

“What’s she having?”

“Vodka. Straight.”

Billy paused. That was a lot of drink for a little person.

She grinned at him, a hint of the devil in her flushed cheeks. “Too much, choir boy?”

“What are you doing down here?”

“What’s it look like?”

The bartender leaned forward. “Sir?”

“Nothing.” Billy slid onto the stool next to her. “How many have you had?”

“You ever get tired of doing that?”

“Doing what?”

She didn’t answer. Billy glanced over his shoulder at the bar behind him. It was empty still, caught in between being too early for the regulars but too late for the visitors.

“How’s he been?” he asked.

“They’re sending him home tomorrow.”

“Thank God.”

“Yeah.”

“Has he said anything to you?”

“About?”

“About why?”

She took a long drink, eyeing him over the rim. “I wasn’t expecting you to be asking me that.” The comment struck him as wrong considering the situation, so he stood to go.

She caught his arm, pulling him back almost playfully although her shadow ringed eyes had no smile in them. “Has he ever done this before?”

“No,” Billy lied, and he took her hand off his arm and left the restaurant. It was none of her business. But he thought of Tristan all the same, Tristan and death row and Hunter trying to kill himself weeks before the girl’s murder.

When Billy returned to his room, Hunter had woken up and was clearly tired of the hospital's atmosphere. They talked about Billy's campus and the nursing major who had spilled coffee in the library three days in a row. They talked about the snow the forecasters kept hoping for and talked about the traffic downtown which had grown much worse since Hunter had last seen it. They didn't talk about Hunter's approaching release. They didn't talk about why she was in the restaurant drinking vodka. Straight.

Hunter was released at 6:00 am the next morning. He looked transparent in the sunlight, so Billy gave him the same jacket he'd given her when she'd arrived at the airport. She had left a handful of hair-ties in the pocket and Hunter took them out with a puzzled look on his face but said nothing. Billy thought he should explain how they'd gotten there, but then he thought it didn't matter anyways. She left her things in the way constantly.

Hunter settled in at home fine. That night they stayed in and watched a movie into the early hours of the morning. Hunter fell asleep immediately, the day's events having worn out what little reserves of energy he had left. She put a blanket on him and then left to shower. Then it was just Billy watching the movie, except he had already seen it and instead watched Hunter sleep. He still slept like a child, both hands resting beneath his face and his cheeks strangely flushed in the darkness. He looked peaceful and safe. He looked like he had when they'd slept in the middle of the green army men.

Billy got up and went to the kitchen and warmed the final loaf of bread from Henry. She smelled the bread and came out, quietly, her barefeet whispering against the wooden floors she'd had installed two weeks after purchasing the apartment. He didn't know she was there until she'd put a hand on his back, and then it was too uncomfortable to act like he'd not known. She had been crying, again, and Billy felt that she had yet to learn how to live with Hunter. He felt kinder towards her, and began to talk, animatedly, distracting her from the troubles and offering her Henry's bread, bread which the entire apartment block loved on principle.

She reciprocated and they passed the evening in the kitchen, eating and talking like they'd done every Wednesday night for years now. Hunter slept through the whole thing and when it was time to go to bed, Billy put a pillow under his head and then they left him. An hour later, once he was sure she was asleep in the master bedroom, Billy went downstairs and took up his post besides Hunter and stayed there through the night just like he'd been doing at the hospital. Nothing went wrong when he was there, nothing ever did.

He decided then that it was time to ask where White had been all this time.

"Don't you know?" she asked. "We gave her to some friends. She had diabetes and was going to the bathroom in the house."

It sounded convincing. After all, Hunter fed the dog donuts every night. But she avoided looking at him when she said it and suddenly it wasn't convincing.

Billy thought he was going to be sick, so he told her he was tired and wanted to go to sleep. He went upstairs to his room and stood in the open window, smelling the city and remembering the bully in high school and Hunter's first suicide attempt the next morning. Now the dog was gone.

Billy was disgusted by the fact that he could think such things about his own brother, so he closed the window and sat on his bed until she turned the lights out in the master bedroom and seemed to have gone to sleep. Then he went downstairs and took up his post besides Hunter and stayed there through the night. Nothing went wrong when he was there. Nothing ever did.

The next morning Hunter woke up starving, so they ordered Chinese take-out at seven o'clock in the morning. When they'd finished eating, Billy loaded his bags and books into his car, made sure Hunter said something nicer to him than "Like Peter Pan's crocodile" just in case, and then drove back to campus. He called that night and Hunter informed him that Henry had dropped off more bread. She wasn't home and Billy eventually fell asleep with Hunter on the phone. They didn't talk about where she'd gone, and they didn't talk about White.

The next weekend came slowly, each day passing at a crawl until it was Friday afternoon. Billy collected his books and bags and loaded his car and drove the hundred miles to the apartment. He saw Henry in the elevator again, this time with no bread, and he talked to him for a few minutes in the hallway, discussing mundane things like the coming blizzard that might halt his trip back to campus and the proposed rebuilding of the west wing of the apartment block that might cause them all to move out, depending on the future noise.

Then he said goodnight to Henry and unlocked the apartment door and walked into a completely dark, completely quiet house. He put his things down on the dining room table and went through the foyer, calling out for them. The house echoed back, as if speaking to him, and he went upstairs to check the rooms. When he passed the bathroom, he'd found the methadone tablets inside of, he saw Hunter sitting on the side of the bathtub, staring down inside.

Billy felt a sudden relief at seeing him safe, a strange relief that made his hands feel cold and shaky, and he leaned into the bathroom, trying to act calm. "There you are."

Hunter looked at him, his eyes wide and too soft.

"What's going on?" Billy asked.

Hunter held his hands out like a child, lifting the palms up as if asking to be picked up and carried away, and Billy stopped breathing. He took a step into the bathroom, the tub looming closer, and he could see her head on the edge now. Her long brown hair was pooling around her face in the water, the curls looping across her bare shoulders. Another step and he could see her eyes staring straight up at the ceiling, a tinge of blue circling the lids. Her mouth was open and filled with water and there were little burst blood vessels all over her face. Billy had one clear thought as he stared at her body, one clear understanding.

She would be buried, she would need flowers on her grave, and he remembered the pink carnations in the women's bathroom at the hospital.

When he did what had to be done and called the police, he informed them that his brother had had a psychotic relapse and had just strangled his girlfriend in their bathtub. He said nothing about Tristan's girlfriend. The woman on the phone requested that he leave the apartment and get to a safe location. Billy felt like laughing at her, but he knew in the back of his mind that she wouldn't find it funny, so he shut his phone off and went back upstairs. He wiped Hunter's hands clean with a towel, which he left on the bathroom counter for evidence, and then took Hunter out of the bathroom. He was shaking uncontrollably. Billy put a blanket around his shoulders, and then left him sitting on the bed in the master bedroom. Billy checked the bathroom again, carefully, so as not to disturb anything, and respectfully placed a towel over the bathtub to cover her.

Then he opened the medicine cabinet and studied the eight fresh bottles of methadone pills. She had replaced every single bottle Hunter had swallowed and every single bottle Billy had dissolved. The pickup dates marked the bottles as having been collected only this morning. Standing between the body and the cabinet, Billy suddenly realized that he had known there would be methadone inside the cabinet the second he'd walked in, just as he had known Hunter had killed her the second he'd raised his hands for help. These weren't things you prepared to know, not things you could read in a book on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, but they were things Billy had known all the same.

He closed the cabinet and then shut the light off in the bathroom and closed the door. He went back to the master bedroom and laid down besides Hunter like he'd done almost thirty years ago when the green army men had filled the space between them.

Hunter turned his head entirely to look at him. "Is she okay?"

"She's fine." Billy heard the sirens now, pulling onto their street and slowing for the gated entrance, and he smiled at his brother. "She prefers pink carnations. Did you know that?"

"No."

Rebekah Marcengill

Ant Behavior

Little fellow, exploring on my hand,
He doesn't know this land.
He touches my hand with antennae,
wipes them with his front legs
and moves on, silently,
(I can't even feel him pad
across my hand, tap tap),
exploring quietly, looking for his needs,
feeling, touching. He doesn't see
his end so close, yet I pause.
I wonder what he thinks
as he wanders.
Does he fear Death?
Does he fear being Forgotten
by his fellow tiny ants?
Ants carry their dead to be buried,
but they'll never find his body,
lost in the vast ocean of items
that is my Room, my Memories.
What might it be like
To see everything so Large and Tall?
Tap tap tapping across the floor,
I think of the world so large,
and I hope to experience things
as the ant does, exploring with wonder,
Feeling and Touching
Searching for the trails
Of fellow forgotten people.

Lauren Talley

The Forest

Empty but filled with trees
Eerie with a hint of calm
Its lightness weighs heavy on my heart
Though the forest does not speak to me.

I feel somebody following me
I've felt it since late May
I can almost hear the whispers, saying,
"It's your time."
My guardian angel, my demise.

I cannot recall when I left my room
Though I suppose the beaten path has room for two
I did not even think to bring my shoes
I must know I won't be out for long.

The forest feels so vast
Though my thoughts have no room to pass
I set my focus on the barricade of trees
I have a purpose at last

With Death on my heels, I ran
Before He could capture me like He did my friends
He's closer now than He ever was before
I think He knows that
It will not take much more

It has become a game of hide and seek
Except I keep myself half visible—
I have not yet made up my mind.

Solitarily standing in the name of loss
I cannot say I do not feel alone
When I turn to greet Death with a lukewarm embrace, my justification
stands—
To myself, I am false-hearted when it comes to craving company





Elizabeth Cooper
Lost Temple



Elizabeth Cooper
Warm & Cool



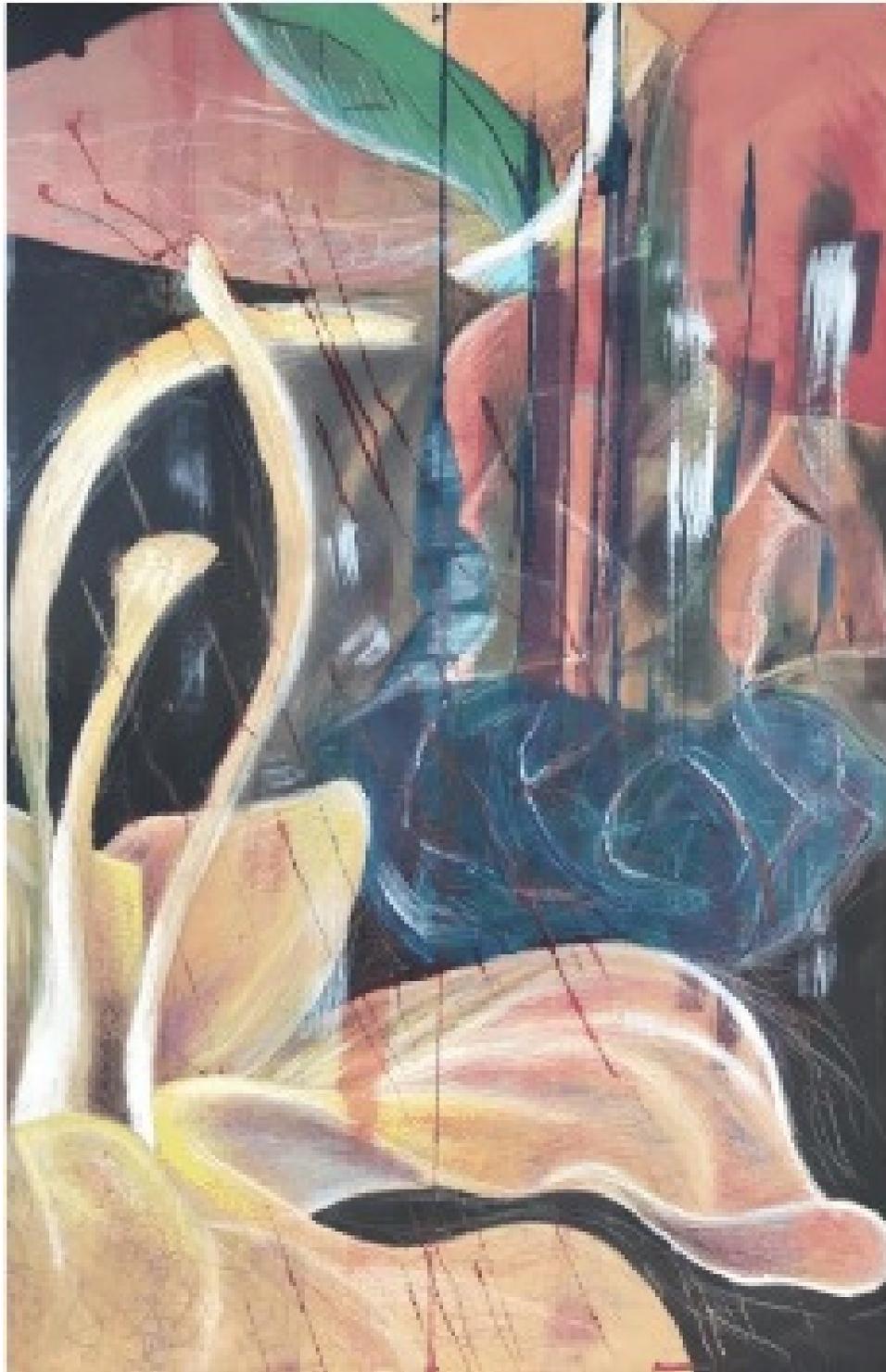
Allison Devore
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Alyssa Glazer
Gala Blue



Roxie Harris
Mother and Child



Jericho Lincoln
Color Koi



Audrey Poltorak
The Light of Hera



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