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Remembering Elsewhere

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Remembering Elsewhere

*Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College*

by

Amelia Walsh

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2017

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It should also be noted that inspiration for one scene in “Marco’s Purgatory,” in which a baby visits the hut of the protagonist, is inspired by the opening of Unica Zurn’s book, “The Trumpets of Jericho.” In addition, the protagonist in “Silvio’s Dwelling” is drawn from Flann O’Brien’s character, Sitric, from “The Poor Mouth: A Bad Story about the Hard Life.”

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Daisy's Feelings

Moomoo sat on the edge of the bed and stared at Daisy with his dark beady eyes.

“Oh Moomoo,” said Daisy, as she stroked the stuffed cow’s head in a hard, slow, repetitive manner. “One day I will marry someone else. You will be terribly jealous and sad. And I am so sorry that it will have to be that way. The divorce stage is very, very sad, Moomoo. Very sad. Unfortunately for you I will be the one who leaves. We will both cry and you might even hit me.”

Moomoo’s face was unchanged, but Daisy detected a fresh sadness in the marble gleam of the creature’s obsidian eyes. She said “Well, I’m off to school now. Please behave yourself and understand that at this point, we are still married. If you see somebody else when I am away it will absolutely break my fucking heart.” Daisy blushed to herself for cursing, then hid Moomoo under her covers to ensure his fidelity. She threw her nightgown on the ground and told Moomoo, whose eyes were covered by the comforter anyways, and who furthermore did not possess functional eyes or consciousness, “don’t look; don’t be a jerk.” She then slipped into a particularly beautiful gown that her mother had bought her for her birthday last week. The dress was a robust wine red, the tulle skirt was layered and tastefully sprinkled in an opalescent glitter. The top resembled a velvet leotard in the same hue of burgundy. A little macrame rose was stitched to the center of the dress’s neckline. It was there delicately, and Daisy admired the fragility and elegance of her item. She looked in the mirror, put a hand on one hip and glared at her reflection. What a lucky girl she was. How cool, how powerful.

The morning light flooded her wooden bedroom and drew lines across its surfaces. One of her eyeballs gleamed its complicated muddy depths while the other remained subdued in the shade of her structure.

Daisy's mother, Margarite, had toasted two frozen waffles and left them on a plate for her in the dining room. It was chilly in the house, and Daisy quivered on her metal seat. She spread nutella meticulously across the waffles, filling each divot. She proceeded to place a blueberry on top of each chocolatey pocket, forming a grid, and then ate the breakfast row by row of waffle, making disturbing machine-like sounds. This punctilious aspect of Daisy's personality only recently emerged. Earlier on she had shovelled her food down with little thought or organization.

Daisy's mother packed a lunch and handed it to Daisy's father, David, in a silence so stark Daisy felt compelled to chop her hand through the still air, making a subtle swishing sound. He grabbed the vinyl lunchbox and told Daisy to get in the car. Driving in the car, Daisy said: "Daddy, sometimes I prefer not to buckle my seatbelt." She looked down and grinned. David glanced at his daughter through the rear-view mirror and joined her in smiling. He tuned in to his favorite rock station and they bobbed their heads without saying another word.

Daisy kissed her dad on the cheek and skipped into the school building. At the threshold she turned back and signalled a heart to her dad. She pounded her fist on her chest and made a peace sign and kissed it. Her dad mimicked the motions and drove off.

As the lunch bell rang, Daisy felt overcome with a sweeping wind of melancholy. As the kids all gathered round the picnic tables, Daisy realized she had left the key to her lunchbox in her father's car. She made this mistake often, and always felt ashamed. It made her feel foolish

and immature to forget such simple things, and she knew she would not mention the mistake to her parents upon returning home from school that day. She never did.

She had caused quite a scene at the store where she got the lunchbox. Daisy remembered pulling on her mother's arm and fake crying, exclaiming that she would simply die if she could not have the green and orange-flower-decorated-tin lunch box that came with a lock and key for maximum protection. Her mother had snapped at her, saying "Daisy you're being a spoiled brat." At that, Daisy burst into tears and Margerite had purchased the lunch box to avoid further public humiliation. Now, she sat by the other kids with her sustenance trapped inside her beloved metal box. She saw that a boy next to her, Miles, had one of the processed pre-packaged lunches that her parents forbade. He had already started his work assembling what the package claimed was a mini pizza. Miles held a round salted yellow cracker in his left hand and applied a tomato paste to it using his right index finger. He sprinkled some grated mozzarella on top, and topped off the disk with an oily slice of salami. Daisy had been told that staring was rude, but Daisy had also noticed a tendency of getting what she wanted simply through the discomfort caused in another by a casual stare, so she stared at the faux-pizza shamelessly.

She had exhibited this tactic at ice cream parlors, flower shops, and birthday parties. Most commonly she used it for a turn on the swings. If someone was swinging she would ask for the next turn, and announce to the swinger: "I'll wait." She would then stand beside the swingset and give her stare, and it was always only a matter of minutes before they were hers to enjoy. Perhaps it is this type of behavior which causes some adults to fear children.

"Where's your lunch, Daisy?"

"Oh, I forgot my key again." Daisy blushed. Though her plan was working, acknowledgment from the opposite sex made her feel like she was under examination, as if she

had to watch her every word and act exactly as she was supposed to. The tricky thing was that she was never told directly, explicitly, how she was meant to behave. It was a matter of trial and error, and she only had seven years of experience under her belt.

“I’ll give you one pizza, but you’ll owe me. Next lunch you bring I get to pick whatever I want.” Miles gestured to an open spot next to him on the wooden picnic table. Daisy agreed, knowing full well that a lunch of hers would never contain something as good as what Miles’ parents gave him. She was trading up. She took a seat beside Miles and constructed her cracker with great delicacy, spreading the tomato paste thinly and evenly, leaving only enough bare cracker around the surface to perfectly resemble the crust of a pizza to scale. She molded the shredded mozzarella in her hand to an exact circle, which she then pressed into the paste, using it as a sort of glue. She nibbled into her salami slice to make little round pieces, and dispersed them atop the cheese. Miles had already consumed three more of his before she was ready for her first bite.

“You’re just going to eat it anyways, so just eat it already, okay.”

“Yeah, okay.” She ate the cracker quickly and felt unappreciated, but deviously successful due to the delicious taste of forbidden GMOs. She scraped the remaining orts from the table, cracker dust and a single shred of cheese quickly becoming one with the wood chips. Daisy’s friends approached and she quickly stood up, thanked Miles, and distanced herself from him.

Her friends smiled at her and asked what she wanted to play today. “Powerpuff girls? Baby bats?” The melancholia she had been experiencing lately rushed in; she couldn’t even fake a smile. She turned and told them “I won’t be playing today.” Her friends asked if she was alright, and she assured them it was nothing. Then Daisy proceeded to sit on the edge of the

playground, placing her head between her knees. She felt the breeze sink onto her hair and inhaled deeply, savoring the smell of wood chips. Only in this private room, created from her own body, did Daisy feel her face forming a smile. She shut her eyes as hard as she could until small red orbs appeared in the self-imposed darkness. She blinked rapidly, hoping to cry, or even just form one single tear. Goats wailed in the background (the school had a small farm out front) and eventually a friend or colleague came to her aid to ask “What’s wrong, Daisy?” Daisy recognized Priscilla’s voice, and felt an awkward sort of pat on the top of her head - temporarily blocking the breeze and giving her the extra sentimentality she needed to finally pull a tear from her mind to her eye, letting it surface in a perfect drop before lifting her head. “Nothing’s wrong,” Daisy shuttered a little dramatically and plopped her head back down into the darkness of her lap. “Okay,” said Priscilla, who then walked away.

A flutter of panic and fear tore through Daisy’s fragile heart when she perceived a lack of care from her classmate. She glanced up to see if anyone was looking at her. Much to her pleasure, she saw Priscilla conversing with classmates and gesturing in her direction. Daisy concealed herself once more as she felt a group of kids approaching her small and crumbled body. She teetered on the edge of the playground. Her heart began to race and she slowed it down with deep breaths. A child’s voice emerged from the quiet winds: “Hey Daisy, are you okay?” There’s a genuine quality to the voice of a six year old that cannot be replicated by any adult, no matter how true they’ve remained. The gentleness of this first question was followed by a cacophony of voices that had not yet dropped or found their defining tones. The children asked after Daisy, some politely, some only because it was socially expected of them, and others asked with clear disdain and annoyance. Daisy let her breath grow heavy and squeezed out another tear from her eyeball. Though she was a relatively shy girl, who was confident but kept to herself,

Daisy found it easy to perform her sadness in front of others so long as she had the safety of being buried in herself and did not have to see the faces of her concerned peers. She lifted her head once more and announced to them with a red face: “I’m fine.” She looked up with small, cold eyes filled with dignity. Daisy wanted people to pry, but they dispersed again after this statement. She wanted it to be known that something was torturing her, even if she smiled to herself and only faked tears under concealed quarters.

When Daisy’s parents’ fought with one another and discussed permanent familial rearrangements in wrongly assumed privacy, she did not know how to feel what she was feeling. Daisy began to perform her supposed emotions, inwardly delighted to have been wronged. Masochistic and tantalized by the idea of depression, she milked her deserved sadness in her school community. A stunt like this was performed on a monthly basis at the height of her parents’ fighting.

The next night, Daisy’s school hosted their annual auction fundraiser. As soon as her parents parked the car, Daisy ran up the school’s steps, leaned over the balustrade to glance back at her mom and dad, who gestured that she could continue on, and darted into the event, under the banner which read “Silent Auction” and toward the food table to survey the offerings. A group of perfectly dressed and visibly anxious women also gathered around the food table, occasionally stress-eating a stick of celery and monitoring the intake of the kids. “Too many cheese cubes, dear,” one of the women said to Daisy. Daisy did not look up to see if the expression of the woman matched her tone (the absence of warmth). Instead, she turned red as a

tomato and walked away from all of the cheese she had been looking forward to eating in her meticulous manner.

Miles' mother Alicia exclaimed "Oh, it's Danny! Oh I'm sorry - Daisy. I'm so sorry, Daisy, I get so mixed up with the names. How are you, sweetie? Are your parents here?" She touched Daisy's head and handed her a cracker with some cheese on it. Daisy smiled. Alicia was very beautiful and always smelled like flowers and rain. She said it was the special oil she used for her hair. Daisy pointed out her parents and thanked Alicia for the snack.

"Okay I'm going to go talk to your daddy, you should go say hi to Miles; he's over with the other kids in the book nook." Alicia and Daisy's father were good friends, but Daisy never saw Alicia speaking to her mother.

Daisy walked over to Miles and said "Hey, your mom said she wanted me to say hi to you, so... hi." There was something about these special nights at school, after hours and out of a routine, that allowed the little students to break from their usual barriers. Daisy experienced the same thing when her parents forgot to pick her up and she had to spend time in after-care. Suddenly she would be making friendship bracelets with kids with whom she would never regularly associate. This same energy was evident in Miles' eyes as he did not shy away, or retort with any remark signifying that he was loyal to his gender and would not like to associate with her kind. Instead, he stuck his hands in his khaki pockets and furled his eyebrows under a carefully combed head of hair. "Have you ever been in love, Daisy?"

Daisy spent a lot of her spare time thinking about love. She was surprised by the question and told Miles that the classroom was too crowded and stuffy and that she would never discuss such a delicate topic as love in a room full of strangers. Miles suggested they sit in the hallway,

by the lunch cubbies. Daisy agreed and prepared an assortment of food for them in a napkin, which she then bundled up into a little pod for easy transportation to the hallway.

She sat next to him and surprised herself when she spoke with confidence. “Love is very complicated, Miles. It is not a thing for immature little boys. I have been in love; I am in love, actually, or at least I think I am.” She let out a long sigh before getting into the intricacies of her relationship with Moomoo. “Sometimes, when we’re apart, I’ll spend the whole day thinking about him - but not in a way where I simply miss him. It’s not a love like that. Instead I find myself wondering, in the middle of swinging on the swings for example, whether or not he has everything he needs. I’ll worry that he’s grown tired and there’s no one there to tuck him in. I’ll worry about his opinions and...” Daisy trailed off a bit, unsure of how to finish her thought. Thinking hard, she regained her confidence and continued speaking: “I get insecure comparing myself to him, and don’t know if I am always deserving of his love. Lately, my mood around him has mostly been one of frustration. Is it love or just some obsession of mine? Why do I need him if I can’t stand him? It’s exhausting. We used to like all the same things, but lately his interests are different from mine. When I want to draw, he’s glued to the TV, and when I want to go on a walk, he wants to pretend that my bed is a ship and the floor is made of lava.”

Daisy rested her head between her palms and scrunched her eyebrows together. Miles ate fistfuls of grapes and little tea sandwiches (the fundraiser had a Victorian theme) as he listened to Daisy lament over her situation. Without responding to anything she had said, Miles leaned forward and kissed Daisy on the cheek. His own cheeks then burned red and he ran back into the classroom. Daisy’s jaw dropped with disgust, but an inward pride swelled up in her. She returned to the event and saw Miles whispering in his mother’s ear across the room. Alicia bent down and put her hand on his shoulder and nodded, as his somewhat composed embarrassment rapidly

turned to a loud sob, and the four heavy salted words “she don’t need me” bubbled out of him between gasps for air; they made their exit.

Daisy walked to the gym to find her parents and see what prizes were being raffled off. The items mostly included things that did not pertain to her: a tour and tasting at a vineyard, a free day at a spa, four tickets to a baseball game. However, the air of competition and the bundling of packages peaked her interest, and she made mental notes in order to advise her mother when their paths crossed again. Daisy narrowed her gaze and began to jolt her head around, mimicking the mannerisms of a brush bird.

A friend of hers, Heather, approached and asked “What’s up with the head motions? What’re ya doing Daisy you crazy, Daisy the crazy girl, who’s head makes a swirl, and hair has no curl?” Daisy and Heather had both just begun to show interest in rhyming; it was a subject they bonded over during the class’ focus on Shel Silverstein earlier in the school year. Daisy explained that she was looking to see things differently, that she wanted to explore the space not as herself, that it was more fun this way. Heather, who often readily followed along with her peers’ ideas, decided to join Daisy, and they both began to walk funny, squinting their eyes and swaying a little. It was only a matter of time before they ended up under one of the table cloths, spying on the unsuspecting parents and giving their own opinions on each passer-by.

There were a few works of art up for auction - a photograph of an old ship, depicted in shades of navy, and three paintings, one was an oil portrait of Albert Einstein, and two were abstract acrylic assemblages. “My dad told me that the success of a work of art is half dependant on finding the right frame,” said Daisy. “I don’t like any of these frames much,” said Heather, who expressed confusion at the painting of an old man, and boredom at the ship photograph. She did, however, appreciate the more colorful and abstract paintings, which contained glitter, saying

“They’re quite pretty, but what are they? I kind of see a flower, but if it’s a flower then it’s not a very well done one.” Daisy agreed that the artwork was dull, and the frames were even worse.

“Why are they just rectangles like that? It’s not that hard, you know, to make something better... just the other day, I was in aftercare, and I made a frame for one of my drawings. I used a hot glue gun and attached a little plastic lizard to the side of the frame. It looked like the lizard was crawling up the side. And I don’t mean to brag, you know, but it looked good. And Heather, literally, literally Heather, it took like five seconds to make.” “You’re always bragging, Daisy,” said Heather as she lifted the tablecloth, revealing them both, and skipped away from the table and out of the room.

Daisy made a mental note to write about Heather in her diary that night. She would write about mixed emotions, appreciated aspects of her personality and contrasting them with some clear drawbacks, and then she would read her conclusions to Moomoo, who probably wouldn’t listen anyways, but sometimes you just need someone there. Reentering the present moment, Daisy pinched her gaze, until the world sprawled out before her distorted once more. She used her mind to fill this vague space with gaping palm fronds and darting lizards, which she imagined would crawl in packs of six or ten around the perimeter of each perfectly wrapped parcel and each hanging work of art.

Margarite came to retrieve Daisy from her fantasy, and they left the event together. Her mom and dad began to snap at each other about who they’d spoken with and how. David claimed that Margarite chose the most horrible women to befriend, Silvia’s mother and Heather’s mother, “absolute bitches” he declared. Internally, Daisy agreed that those women always seemed anxious and angry, if only due to their own insecurities. But Margarite was like this too, and the three women were kind and sympathetic toward each other, so it was a little complicated, she

decided. What really came as a shock to Daisy, however, as she sat in her booster seat and counted the cars on each block they drove by, was that her mother had a problem with her father being friends with Alicia—a wonderful seeming woman.

Daisy tuned out, hating them both for their bad attitudes, and began to envision bombs exploding high up in the trees or beside bus stops—all over the city. She accompanied these thoughts with little growling sounds, which Margarite commanded her to stop, and when she didn't, David turned on the radio, and everyone looked out their respective window, beside Margarite, who was forced to look straight ahead and navigate on behalf of the others.

Before the divorce was finalized, Daisy's parents attempted to keep up appearances. Socialites in the San Francisco art world, they threw dinner parties with the best cheeses, the best wines, the most bitter olives. She would wander around these parties and take orders for drawings. In a tutu and leather jacket, with velcro light-up dinosaur sneakers, Daisy would bat her eyelashes and say: "Can I interest you in an idget? They're a species of my own creation and fit right in a wallet, completely customizable, and only four dollars." Everyone was wealthy at these parties in the early two thousands. Hope was more common just a decade ago, and people cared about supporting young artists, the youngest artists. She would take order after order: "Eye shape? Okay. Emotion? Got it. And the name of your idget will be..?" Daisy ran upstairs to complete an order, and cut out the creatures with the precision only a child's hand can produce. Exhausted from this hustle, Daisy stepped into her backyard for some air. Weaving between the wine-entranced adults, she found herself confronting her father and another woman kissing there on the patio. Red-faced, Daisy returned to her room. "Moomoo, I take it back." she wailed. And

through tears: “never, will I ever, ever forget what you mean to me. I hate them. I really hate them. Please love me.”

It was the weekend and Daisy’s parents were both to attend a meeting, the nature of which was kept secret. Daisy did not pry, as both of the adults were in sour moods, and she did not care much, either. This meeting meant that Daisy would be going to her babysitter’s house for a couple of hours, and she was both nervous and ecstatic.

Sarolta’s apartment was dimly lit and filled with plant life. A parakeet named Stan fluttered about the Victorian livingroom. Daisy was perplexed, enchanted, and a little afraid. She knew to some extent that Sarolta existed outside of certain societal norms. Daisy loved Sarolta. Sarolta laughed at her jokes, helped her feed the birds, engaged in lofty conversations with Moomoo - in general, she came off as a wholly delightful human. Sarolta liked to experiment with different hormone pills. Some days she’d come to babysit and have a luscious moustache and tracings of a beard. On other occasions, she would show up with a barrette in her long dyed-blond hair, with no stubble in sight. Whatever her look, Daisy found her to be an absolutely sufficient companion, who helped to fill the time with meaning and creativity.

This was the first time Daisy was going to Sarolta’s house. Typically, Daisy was babysat in the premises of her own home, an environment in which she experienced a higher degree of power, where she could tell Sarolta things like: “That’s not how we do it here.” and “You are not my mother. Daisy was somewhat terrified to be occupying this foreign territory. Most interactions in other dwellings have been whilst visiting friends, classmates, and the friends of her parents. Daisy, who idealized teenagers and those in their twenties over any other denomination of people, was extremely nervous to enter the space of such a person. Daisy felt

more at home once meeting Stan, though she had never interacted with a parakeet before; she had always considered herself to be an animal whisperer of sorts. The parakeet pecked at Daisy's hair.

Sarolta's housemate Skyler came home, and Daisy met him as she was exiting the bathroom; he smiled and said hello, explaining his relation to the house and Sarolta so as not to frighten her. She was embarrassed by the presence of an older male and quickly dashed back into Sarolta's room, claiming that some freak had frightened her. Skyler heard this remark from the hallway and poked his head into Sarolta's room, greeting her warmly and complementing the sideburns she had been cultivating.

"Now Daisy, you will meet many strangers in your life. We were all brought here for one reason or another or no reason at all, so it's best to try to get along when we're inhabiting the same places." Daisy grew quiet and turned to face the wall.

Sarolta intervened, thanking Skyler for his words but telling him she could handle it. He didn't leave though, and instead continued philosophizing at the little girl who didn't even know half of the words he was using. "There is no permanence in this universe. You'd be best off enjoying your time. Sometimes suffering is essential to character. Sometimes it's what we need in order to respect the good times." Daisy feared adults mainly out of some form of respect. Amongst her peers she was confident in her superior intelligence, and more so every day in her elevated life experiences and growingly complicated emotions. She felt violated by these foreign words, and terrified of this adult with no children, with no relation to her. Skyler left the room and Daisy unfroze her body, turned back to her familiar babysitter, and ignored the meaningless advice of Skyler, asking, "Why did you name your birdy Stan? I prefer names such as Felicity, for example, or Tiffany. For a boy I like Oliver, but that's just me personally of course."

“Stan is named after a filmmaker I really like. You might actually like his collection. I’m going to make you a PB&J, but if you behave well, I can show you the VHS tape afterword.

Sarolta knew just how to play Daisy. All of a sudden, there was nothing the girl wanted more than to behave her very best in order to prove herself worthy of the ‘art films,’ whatever that might entail. Daisy loved making art herself; she spent most of her free time drawing and painting.

After some polite rapport, and the consumption of two sandwiches, one with apricot jam, which made Daisy feel sophisticated, and the one with a strawberry preserve that made her feel nostalgic, Sarolta put a tape into the player. The two of them directed their attention to the monitor, which sat between an empty fish tank and a potted fern. Sarolta clocked through the menu and selected a film called the Dante Quartet. Dante was the name of Mile’s older brother, and she took this as some kind of sign. Quartet was a fancy word associated with boring music that her grandmother liked to listen to live concerts of on the television.

In a cursive script, which Daisy had just recently begun to read and use to excess, the words “Hell Itself” danced across the screen. Daisy bit her lip with anticipation. Such words were forbidden and she felt welcomed into Sarolta’s adult world, which is all she really wanted. Images filled the screen and Daisy was hit with an immense and sudden wave of disappointment. This was the art film? Colors thrown together in disarray, images which resembled the finger paintings she made when she was younger, and had since demanded they be thrown away due to the sheer embarrassment they brought her. Just as Daisy was about to part her lips and unleash her critiques, the film switched gears slightly, transitioning to the second part of the total four sections. Now the lens was cropped to a smaller rectangle with rounded corners, and a more hellish composition unravelled before their four collective eyeballs. Daisy thought she hated it,

but also became captivated in a way which suppressed her wish to speak. She would let the film play through to the finish before making up her mind entirely. Abstract images which passed too quickly for clear recognition, but hit Daisy with swells of familiarity, made their way into the mix of colors and shapes. Daisy would prefer a cartoon, would prefer this to be over already, but also would prefer more than anything to understand what meaning such a thing could hold for adults. It was not good, objectively. Bad art, clearly, she thought. This art would receive a poor grade in my art class. This art does not seem to stand for what adults stand for, she thought. Where is the order? Where are the rules, the approvals and disappointments and displays of power and love? Where is the complexity? No room for misunderstandings!

“Okay squirrel girl, what did you think of that? Pretty wild stuff, huh?” Sarolta had begun calling Daisy ‘squirrel girl’ when she told Sarolta about her interest in rhyming. Daisy pretended to violently hate the nickname, as it was fun for her to take strong stances and have something to yell about, especially when it brought attention to her small being. “So, um... hmmm.. What did you think? Did you... like it?” Daisy wanted something to go off of, any insight toward Sarolta’s feelings would help her. For once, she did not feel like making a scene, or like she knew the right answer. She had her opinions, yes, but was a reserved enough child to hold them in when it seemed socially beneficial. This is something she learned by watching her parents, and then other adults, interact, and it always achieved the desired effect.

Sarolta described to Daisy what Mr. Brakhage’s goals were in making the film, and what he believed the essence of film to be as what she called an “avant-garde” artist. A lot of what she said went over Daisy’s head, most puzzling of all was the fact that this Stan guy wanted to become a child again. He wanted to make indescribable pictures, to substitute stories with pictures. It all seemed backwards. Babies were not intelligent. The older you grew, the more you

learned, and the more accountable your words and thoughts became. Everybody knew this. Every parent told their children this regularly. So why would anyone want to be dumb? Why would anybody want to unknow, unlearn, digress?

Daisy had been searching for the opposite. She wanted to mature, she wanted control and order. Even her more complicated emotions, which drove her in all directions and moods, were reserved for time alone, either with her journal or with Moomoo. Sure, she wanted to display inward complexities, as was demonstrated by her schoolyard stunts. But when confronted about her evident sadness, nothing gave Daisy greater joy than to prove her vast emotional maturity and ability to be brave, tough, and cool. She told everyone she was fine, because it was all an act. It was pretend behavior. Diligence, aesthetics, superiority—these were her true characteristics, she thought to herself. She thought: “I’m wild when I choose to be, as a part of a game. I am silly when it’s useful to me, sad when it attracts attention to me. I am not a sloppy eater, or dresser, or thinker. I have control over my situation. My parents will listen to me when I respectfully lay out to them what has to happen, that they must stay together. They will listen to me because I will write it in the most beautiful cursive, far superior to that of Stan’s. They will listen because they’ve been paying attention to me, they see how often I am right, they praise my organizational skills, and my high marks in the classroom. I’ve learned their social games, diligently watched and listened and now...” Daisy began to cry and Sarolta took her in her lap and began to rock back and forth.

Once the tears calmed, Sarolta suggested a walk in the park. Daisy took her hand and they walked the two blocks to a man-made lake, where Daisy had come once for a birthday party. She fondly recalled the pink popcorn and paddle-boating. She wanted to have a moment

alone with the water, and asked Sarolta to please just wait for her by the path while she thought about some things. Charmed by the request, Sarolta pulled out her iPod and sat under a tree.

Daisy stepped toward the lake in slow, unsure movements. A pigeon leapt from her left foot. It feigned terror before returning to a mindless pecking motion just a meter away. She looked out at the lake, then over her shoulder to Sarolta, who smiled and waved before looking down again. The bird reclustered with some others identical to it a little ways down the hill which led to the water. Daisy thought about eggs. Daisy thought about her birth. She pecked at the air, imitating the iridescent rock doves. She superimposed the Brakhage film over the reflecting ripples, making use of her squinting technique. She thought about Moomoo and time. She dipped her hand in the water, shook it off, and then threw the entirety of her existence into the unknown depths of the adult-made lagoon.

Jane the Terrible

Mom liked to pretend I didn't exist whenever she was cooking. I would watch what she did and, naturally, have some questions. I knew that eating was essential for human beings, and did not understand what part of wanting to know how to prepare food deserved scolding. Last night, I was frustrated that she would not address my questions, and began to tug at her arm. By complete mistake, and I think anyone would agree that the blame should not fall entirely on me, I caused one of the pans to flip. Scolding oily leeks were flung through our dim yellow kitchen, followed by a thick trail of steam, a result of the heat and the heavy, dewy air of that night. The charred vegetables splattered across mom's feet and she yelped. She cursed at me and ran to her bedroom, instructing that I cook my own damn dinner.

I ate a banana and sat in my bedroom, listening to my mother, her incessant sobs completely audible through her closed bedroom door. Even when my dad lived here, half-of-my-life ago, she cried like this.

In my science class today we each made a customized goop. Ms. Laurence passed out cornstarch and food coloring, and instructed us each to use the dyes to our liking before running some tap water over the concoction. She then continued to talk about molecules bonding together and something to do with the application of force. I tried to listen because I always try to listen, but eventually became distracted by the substance before me, like all of my peers had. I've colored my goop neon green. I pressed my pink nail down firmly on the substance to find that it was met with an equally firm surface. The colors made me crave watermelon. Thinking about

my empty stomach, I stopped pressing so forcefully, and instead just rested my finger on the goop. To my surprise and amazement, my finger began to slip under the neon surface.

A classmate of mine, Daniel, attempted to make a rainbow-colored goop by mixing every color of dye. I was appalled by his stupidity. We had been over this in art class. He claimed that the color was intentional. He wanted his to look like shit because the class was shit, he explained. I hate liars, and I hate that he was insulting the fun exercise, and truly I just hate Daniel. I turned to him and said: “Daniel. Everyone heard you say you wanted to make rainbow goop. Don’t pretend like the experiment is dumb just because you suck at it. You should feel pretty stupid, what you made looks disgusting.” He retorted by saying that my goop looked like snot, so I threatened to slap him. I am against violence, and would not ever act on that threat, and only said that because I felt pushed to my limits, and quite frankly I was just lost in the heat of the moment.

As it goes, Felicity told on me, and I was sentenced to a time out, followed by a conflict-resolution session with Daniel, in which I was forced to apologize. I thought it went well overall, no harm no foul.

Mom was late to pick me up from school, and she seemed in a bad mood. A bad mood, or a sad mood, something annoying but relatable. I guess it had been a difficult day for us both. “You’re going to stay with your grandmother for a little while; she’s not feeling so well and maybe she can teach you some manners, as I don’t seem to be capable of such a thing.” She did not ask me about how my day was; she had stopped doing that at some point last year. I ignored her words, and focussed on making a loud clicking sound by hitting my tongue against the roof of my mouth.

I had been experimenting with the acoustics of my mouth all day, ever since one of my classmates, Cassidy, had set forth the challenge to her group of friends. The challenge was to produce two sounds at once, using only one's mouth. The winner was to receive an additional party favor at Cassidy's sleepover birthday party the following Friday night. I had overheard Cassidy explain these guidelines, though I myself had not been invited to the party. I had not, in fact, ever been invited to a birthday party. I used to ask my mother to call the parents of my classmates and request playdates, but she always explained to me that friendships could not be forced, and trying to mandate unwanted time with other kids would only make me less popular.

As I snapped my tongue repetitively, my mother asked me to please shut the fuck up. I felt hurt, and showed it in my eyes before averting my gaze out the window, and beginning to smack my lips spastically again, while producing a high-pitch cluck from the back of my throat.

"PLEASE. SHUT. THE. FUCK. UP. JANE." The words poured from mom's mouth like a storm that had been hiding in her cheeks for years, just waiting to taste a rainy subject. She pulled over to the side of the road and looked at me with the dead eyes of a woman who had lost all purpose. She maintained appearances when necessary. Only she and I knew the truth—that she did not eat, that she locked herself away in her bedroom, that she was no longer capable of having positive feelings. "Get out, sweetie, and go find your grandmother. You know where she lives, and she needs you." I asked my mother for a ride, because I was only ten years old, and not quite sure how to navigate the city. Furthermore, I hadn't seen my grandmother in two years, even though we lived in the same city, and I was unsure I'd be able to recognize the old woman.

"Get out or I'll make you get out, Jane. Enough of this." I found this to be unfair, and punched the dashboard with the side of my fist, a special punching technique my friend Rodrigo had taught me one day during recess. The impact was harder than expected and I hurt myself

slightly, just enough to elevate the emotionally stressful moment, causing me to burst into tears. “Jesus,” my mom muttered under her breath, and then “alright, forget it, let’s just go home and I’ll take you to your grandmother’s tomorrow.” Enraged, I swung open the car door and exited dramatically, shrieking “I hate you!” I ran to the end of the block. I turned around to walk back to the car, realizing my mistake, my short temper failing me once again, only to find that my mom had already driven off.

Alone and a little afraid, I thought I ought to mimic the normal behaviors of people out and about in the city. I reached in my pocket and felt for the quarters I kept there in case of an emergency. I had one dollar and thirty three cents, five quarters, one nickel, and three pennies. Maybe a CapriSun or a Reese’s bar would help calm my nerves. Maybe this was a good thing, a chance for adventure.

I walked around the corner and into a liquor store. The aisles were packed tightly together and the whole place smelled of musky old man perfume. I saw some juices, still in their cardboard boxes, unrefrigerated, at the end of a narrow passage. A black kitty was sleeping on top of the CapriSuns, making them disturbingly warm to the touch. At the front of the store, I heard someone walk in and begin to yell at the man behind the counter. I felt frightened and quivered in the corner, careful to stay out of sight.

Their voices escalated and they used words I did not understand. Afraid for my life, I grabbed two CapriSuns and a box of Twizzlers and ran full speed ahead out the front of the store. A little bell dinged to signify my exit. The two men looked at me briefly before continuing to yell at one another. After getting away safely, and with my booty, I felt proud. Of course, I did judge myself a little. Stealing is a bad thing to do. I know this.

I once stole a bag of Swedish Fish from the grocery store. My mother caught me eating them in secret. She brought me back to the market and had me return the candy and apologize to everyone there. Never have I felt so much shame. This current scenario felt a little different, for some reason I could not yet hash out.

Lately I've felt that the whole world is against me, and I don't really know why. My other disappointment in myself came from my choice in candy. I panicked and grabbed the Twizzlers because they were nearest to me. In hindsight, seeing how easy it was to run out of there, I should have been more selective. What a trash product.

I wandered over to a bus stop and sat down to have my drink. I stabbed the yellow straw into the CapriSun and widened the opening by whirling it around. I then opened the regrettable red straws and used one to sip on my drink. The waxy formula softened slightly, and by the time I finished sipping, it was bearable to eat.

A middle aged woman came to sit beside me at the bus stop, and after staring rudely for a minute, she asked whether or not I was alright. I am too smart to answer to a stranger, so instead I hung my head low and avoided eye contact. The woman asked again if I was lost or needed help, and pulled out her cell phone. She called me sweetie. But just as she began to show certain concern, her bus arrived, and she boarded it without looking back.

I stood up and tried to think about where my grandmother lived. I decided on a direction, and began to walk. I would do this until something looked familiar. San Francisco was a small enough city. As I walked, I repeated out loud: "I despise my mother." Despise was a word I learned from a Bionicles movie I watched last week, and I took to it immediately.

I walked and walked until her my little legs grew tired. Eventually, I came across a PetSmart, where I remembered getting my pet chameleon last year. Unfortunately, the reptile

died of a disease called “depression,” a topic on which my mother had not given me the specifics. The chameleon, which I had named Slowpro, began to dwell solely in the bottom left corner of his cage. He refused to eat the crickets we’d buy him, and eventually stopped opening his eyes. I don’t know how long he sat there before dying, and only realized he had passed away when an unfamiliar and terrible aroma filled the living room where we kept him. I remember my mother giving him a proper burial in our backyard, and how her sudden respect for the creature, which was absent while it was alive, confused me.

I felt proud of myself for making it to this landmark, and made a bold left turn, certain that this was the way to grandmother’s house.

Night began to fall and I found myself thinking again about contact, about materials and molecules. In class earlier, how could I press my finger up against a substance and manipulate it without becoming one with it? What force was sustaining the barriers between me and my surroundings? I thought about the many numbers of steps I had taken that day, and how my entire body weight had been pressed into the pavement repeatedly. If I stood still, could I sink in slowly? I envisioned my shoes becoming one with the pavement, and under the darkening sky, borders in my vision did begin to blur. It was only then that I remembered what this darkness meant.

I was exhausted from school and the fight with my mother, and I had nowhere to sleep. Just as fear began to creep into my mind, I saw Golden Gate Park up ahead of me. I’ve always seen cool looking kids camping out in this park, wearing nice colorful prints, and often cuddling up with cute puppies. I did not want to talk to strangers, but I figured it would be worth it if it meant I could find a place to sleep.

But before I could even enter the park, an old woman called to me. She was sitting on the sidewalk curb dressed in a long green toga. Her eyelids were painted a purplish pewter, which I thought complimented her hazel eyes, which shone with a tint similar to my own. I would not have broken my rule to talk to her if she had not looked me dead in the eye and said, “Mary Jane?” I was surprised but also relieved. “Grandma?”

The old woman shuddered and nodded. “Yes, girly, call me grandma. Hey, you’re a little too young to be here alone. Are you lost?”

“Not anymore! I was looking for you! Mom told me you were sick.” Examining my grandmother a little more closely, I could see that her eyes were sunken in, and portions of her exposed arms were bruised. Little cuts and scratches covered her frail frame. Poor grandmother. What was she doing out here? “It’s getting late grandma, we should probably go to your house.” She looked distracted and then agreed. “Yes, yes, I think you’re going to quite like it there. We have to catch a bus.”

I had never ridden on a bus before, and became very excited. Oh, how things were looking up! Already I could tell that my grandmother was nothing like my mother. She showed no signs of hating me. She took my hand in her clammy wrinkled palm and walked me to the bus stop, which arrived only a split second after we did. We boarded together, up a short staircase, and situated ourselves in two of the luxurious carpeted seats near the front.

The driver raised his voice without turning his head toward us and said “HEY,” and all the while facing forward... “You forgot to pay your fare. Can’t let you ride the bus if you can’t pay your fare.” I looked at my grandmother and hoped that she would settle the fare, as I did not want to waste my dollar and thirty three cents on something so lame. When my grandmother made no moves to pay the man, I grew frustrated and harshly whispered, “Well, grandma, aren’t

you going to pay the man?” I blushed a little, realizing my rudeness. I would try to address the conflict and come to a resolution once the matter was settled. She whispered back in an equally shrewd hush, “Silence, girl. Do not speak. Do not acknowledge that driver. You think he really gives a damn if we ride for free?” I was impressed by her trickery, and thought this deviance to be further proof of our blood relation.

Sure enough, the driver started up the vehicle a minute later without further mention of our fare. It was over the course of the ride that I noticed my grandmother had some horrible tics. Her leg spasmed every ten minutes or so and her left eyelid fell shut from time to time as if it were subscribed to a different gravitational pull than the rest of her body. I pictured little planets circling her limbs and dome, causing each of the individual twitches with their contrasting cycles.

She fell asleep right away, and would utter little phrases in her sleep, things like: “it’s a steal... two dollars for three chances...” and “...pay you on... please...” followed by a brutish grunt. I didn’t understand much of what she was saying, and supposed it was the nonsense of dreams. I stopped being afraid of dreams once I learned they had no basis in reality. One thing she uttered from her dreamscape, however, caught my ear, and I repeated the words to myself several times as I looked out the window. I was amazed to see that we were travelling over the Bay Bridge, leaving San Francisco altogether. Though I was very young when I last saw her, and still am young, I could have stubbornly sworn that she resided in San Francisco. I then remembered that people are capable of moving. They simply pick up what they have, in cars or boxes or on their backs, and travel to a new sector of the earth, declaring it “home” frivolously. Humans remind me of hermit crabs in this way. This is what my father did, and this is why I do not know him. The line of sleeptalk that parted my grandmother’s lips and stuck like sap to my

mind was “right on your face girl... a victim... of the sullen mother, clear as day...” I did not know this word, ‘sullen,’ but she said it with a certain sadness that formed a familiar feeling in my heart.

As we travelled by bus in the lucid night, my thoughts kept travelling back across the bridge, back to my mother. She was a horrible mother, I thought with guilt. And she had been a horrible wife, I declared inwardly to myself. It was her fault my dad had left. The way she acted seemed to weigh him down. I was not sure if I was remembering or writing a fiction in my head to pass the time.

Our bus pulled in some sort of desolate fairground, an exciting destination after such a strange transportation experience. Though my grandmother frightened me on the ride, I could see now that she was indeed a fun woman. Who lives at a fairground! I was proud of myself for making it to where I was meant to go, and thought my mother would also be impressed. I had felt so abandoned by her initially, but now I understood that her confidence in my safety was well warranted, and she would be proud of me when I called her from my grandmother’s phone.

“Welcome home, Janey,” said my grandmother with a cackle which was not uncommon for an older woman, but nothing short of frightening in the desolate fairgrounds. She instructed me to wait for her while she grabbed something and disappeared into one of the tents. I wandered over to a carousel. I had always loved this ride, not because it was particularly eventful, but because of the great detail in each animal. The variety of options was stimulating, and making a choice granted satisfaction in some deep level of my being.

I first came eye to eye with a dark green toad. The ride had stopped in just the right place so that it’s inanimate eyes aligned perfectly with mine. “Hello, Mr. Toad.” I had never been one for make-believe games or talking to myself, but the mood of the night called for it, logically.

What an adventure I had been on. I could not wait to tell my classmates, who might finally give me some credit for my capabilities rather than always resenting them. The toad, or maybe it was a bullfrog? —my mind tried in vain to reach back to our science class where we learned about amphibians—was wearing a black top hat and had a monocle on a chain permanently affixed to its left eyeball. Its enamel warts reflected the moonlight.

I began to walk around the ring, past a hippopotamus, a kangaroo, a donkey, a unicorn, a tiger, and a St Bernard. Each was adorned with a unique saddle, trimmed with gold leaf, and mystified me, as if I were occupying a dream. There was one distinct winner in my eyes, and it was clear to me the second I saw it: towering over the other animals, a stationary ostrich stood with its head held high. The feathers on the bird were painted with great detail and its lavender eyes gleamed with pride. Its entire beak had been painted gold, and its saddle was a brilliant turquoise. I spent some minutes getting my small body up and into the saddle, slipping slightly due to the condensation which had accumulated on the cold statue. I leaned forward with heavy eyelids and wrapped my arms around the neck of the bird. With my head cocked, I surveyed the fairgrounds. My grandmother had been gone for a while now, and I was tired.

Her figure appeared in the distance, emerging from the tent, and I saw her old face flick around, her motions subdued and jolty. I called her over to the carousel and she approached in a zigzag. I was reminded again of my friend Rodrigo, who I became close with because we were often both sentenced to time out. In the corner of the classroom we would mouth words to one another, to avoid catching our teacher's attention. It was through these silent conversations, accompanied by hand motions, that he had taught me how to punch without breaking my hand. He had also taught me how to run away from a shooter if anyone ever confronted me with a gun. He said that you had to run in a zigzag formation in order to keep from being a steady target.

Because the situation did not seem like something I'd ever have to confront, this information amused me rather than instilling fear. I liked the way Rodrigo talked to me, and the things he taught me. His knowledge made me feel edgy and independent, prepared for the worst.

As my grandmother drew closer, I could see fresh scratches on her arm, one of them trickling blood. She really was unwell. "I'm tired grandma, where's your house? Is there a bed for me?"

Her eyes looked sunken like two black holes. The hazel irises had become completely immersed in pupil. She croaked a laugh that made it sound like she was underwater. "What awfully pretty hair you have, my dear." She reached out and stroked my head, her yellow nails catching on a snarl. I was often in trouble for not brushing my hair.

My grandmother climbed up onto the carousel and positioned herself in one of the carriage seats, shaped like a big mother goose. I smiled because we had both chosen birds. To my utter horror, she proceeded to unravel her draped green garb and exposed herself fully to me. I had never seen such an old unclothed body, and felt sick to my stomach. The only other woman I had seen naked was my mother, and she had a lovely figure. Despite her evil tendencies, I always felt lucky that she was at least amongst the most beautiful people I had seen. This stark contrast with her mother startled me. Luckily, my grandmother covered herself again, curling up and using the cloth as a blanket. I shivered as she fell asleep. Was there no blanket for me? I did not want to risk crawling under her cover and touching her decrepit body. I wanted to yell at her, threaten to slap her, but I was too weary; having only consumed sugar, my body was crashing, shutting down fast. I leaned my head against the head of the ostrich and, with my eye pressed against its own, shed a tear which ran down the bird's cold neck, before promptly losing consciousness.

I stretched out my arms and tucked back my knees, awkwardly spooning the giant lifeless bird, which was frozen mid-sprint. In my position, I felt as if I were reaching for something that was constantly just beyond my grasp. My grandmother rested without movement, the blood on her arm crystallizing into a dusted U-shape.

I woke with the sun, to the sounds of a thousand birds chirping. I looked over at my sick grandmother and sleepily dismounted the regal ostrich. I felt a pang of hunger in my belly and went to wake my mother's mother to demand she feed me. All of last night's fog had cleared, and I saw the fairgrounds in the crisp light. The scenery was no longer scary, but instead emanated a fun and magical energy.

A young man in a red uniform and yellow cap came through the gate which we had entered last night.

I approached my grandmother's body, proven to be more horrific than I had realized when exposed in the broad light of the morning. I tapped her arm gently at first, but could not rouse her from her deep sleep with such a small gesture. I shook her shoulders more aggressively and she woke. She looked at me with the eyes of a small, lost child. She surveyed her surroundings and then hissed "Get the fuck away from me; I don't know you. Who are you; where am I?" She began to cry and in my shocked state I acted intuitively and defensively. I bunched up my small fist, with my thumb remaining outside of my other fingers' grasp, and punched her square in the jaw with all of my strength.

My grandmother had not yet risen, as I would not have been able to hit her face if she had been standing, and upon contact with my fist, she fell back down in the carriage. She fell and did not move. A sad sack of bones. The rounded parade of exotic animals looked on with unchanged

emotions, none of them casting any judgement. I fled from the carousel, thinking that perhaps everyone had been right about me. Perhaps I really was a terrible girl.

My mood shifted, however, as I took cover in one of the nearby tents. Filled with scrap metal and retired parts, I found myself amongst things forgotten and uncared for. I thought that I would cry here, but instead I came face to face with a giant pile of ticket stubs, twice my height. I began to fold them rhythmically, meticulously, feeling the guilt and terror leaving my body with each motion. I stuffed ticket after ticket into my pants pockets and left the tent.

The fair had opened to the public. In front of me lights flashed, employees yelled into bullhorns, dizzying rides played anonymous southern tunes, and the grounds were flooded with people, already beginning to show signs of faint sunburns on their many foreheads.

I was enchanted to find that one of the fair games offered Chinese fighting fish as a prize. It was incredible to me—that you could win a life for just some tickets and a good throw. I felt foolish for not having worked harder on my coordination prior to this moment, for not having been prepared for this possibility. The fishes were glistening in all rainbow shades, but dull in comparison to the neon plushies hanging above them. Their eyes were all sunk in, and some had tumorous brains forming their soft exteriors. I thought that if I could hold one in a plastic bag, I would be ever so careful. I would take it with me wherever I went. I wanted to be optimistic about my new independence, and I felt a confidence rising within me that made me feel invincible.

I fantasized about leaving the fair with the bagged life, stroking the plastic bag and opening it briefly to kiss the water's top. With this image in mind, I presented the master of the game with three tickets, and received five lightweight orange balls in exchange. I was instructed

to stand a certain distance from the elevated fishbowls, which was distinguished by a strip of duct tape adhered to the pavement.

Fixating on the idea of controlling a life, I worked assiduously to master the game. Handing the young man ticket after ticket in sets of three, I became machine-like with my intentions. I grew more and more frustrated as each and every ball bounced from rim to rim over the bowls, always landing eventually on the surrounding floor. I took note of how the balls ricocheted, and tried to adjust my throws accordingly. Some people behind me complained that they wanted a turn, while a few more gathered around to watch me struggle, some amused and a few impressed. Just as I began to suspect the game was not just challenging, but out-right rigged, all of the many sounds at the fair seemed to fall silent as the long-awaited *splush* filled my ears. I leaned forward to see what small creature had come into my life. It was a timid fish, hurtling itself against the walls of its tiny tank, shocked by the intrusion of my spherical accomplice. Some of its gray scales had flaked off and floated dramatically to the bottom of the enclosure. Though its sheen was subdued, certain light illuminated green and purple flashes, hinting at a beauty like a well-kept secret. I too had secret beauty, secret strength. I too was alone in my fishtank. I could have cried, looking down at my new companion.

I was handed my reward in a transparent baggie. I admired the way the water stood suspended in air, like a pocket of an alternate reality. Just then, a tall and handsome man approached me, cautiously, saying, "Jane?" When I looked up at his face, he appeared to be in a state of utter panic - almost as if he were afraid of me, a child. There was a light in his eyes, too, however, which signified recognition. "Jane. It is you." He looked around cautiously, as if he suspected some demon to be lurking, and then: "Is Laura here? I mean, is your mother here? If so

please tell her to stop calling me... I just... Well, it's not important. What are you doing here?
Look, ah... there's so much to say.

His eyes began to water as I tightened my grip on the plastic bag and walked around the man without looking up. Certainly you recognize me? Jane, it's me, your father." The last time some freak had pretended to be my family member ended poorly. Very poorly. Not enough time had passed for me to repeat this mistake. I was learning! Growing!

"Where are you going? Listen, I'm sorry I had to leave the way I did, it's all very complicated beyond your understanding. Look, sweetie, I want you to come meet some people. Well, uh, they're your step-siblings, and your stepmother—they'd love to meet you. We'll all get chocolate bananas."

I sprinted away from the man with my bobbing bag of water and new friend, who I'd named Rodriga, assuming its gender to be female. All that stuck with me from my interaction with my father (whether or not he was actually my father I decidedly did not care), was the mention of a chocolate banana. I located a vendor and asked the price. "sixty cents a piece," said the acne-riddled young man who I had originally seen open the fairgrounds that morning. I reached into my pocket and fished out a dollar and twenty cents. I had learned to do this kind of addition just a couple weeks prior to this journey, and was happy to have the knowledge for what felt like the beginning of the rest of my life. If I was not mistaken, thirteen cents remained in my pocket. I felt proud of my saving capabilities. I ate my banana, and carefully compartmentalized the other one, dropping it in small pieces for Rodriga to enjoy. I felt like the best mother in the world, completely free and capable.

Sabina's Waiting Rooms

My husband fought in a war, and I did not. I am reminded of this every day. Ten years back, he felt suffocated by my presence, like I emanated a guilty feeling merely by existing in the same space as him. His solution was to move me into the gardening shed in our backyard.

We met at the park when I was seventeen years old. Coming from a broken household, I felt comforted by Billy's strength and assured nature. He stated things as facts, speaking simply in plain truths. Though his views were not the most optimistic, he had seen things, really lived, seen life given and taken away. I remember the light on the afternoon we met. It glowed a burnt orange and illuminated his face in such a way that his stories glistened with heightened importance. We talked until the sun set, and when the blue clouds chilled our figures, mine nubile, his robust, he took my hand and told me that he would like to kiss me. I asked for his address and found that he was living in a home for traumatized vets.

I visited him every weekend of my senior year of high school, and on my eighteenth birthday, I allowed him to kiss me.

We married later that year. Shortly after, my uncle, another military vet, passed away, leaving us his old house. It is hard to recall these early years of our relationship, and even more difficult to think of my time on earth before meeting Billy. I don't remember much. Though my parents are Czech, I am a first generation *American*, and the notion that this is a privilege has been repeated and ingrained into me since birth. They were happy when I married Billy, who could support me with his veteran disability compensations.

I, too, was happy. Billy was the first man to called me beautiful. He held my hand and made a ritual out of selecting flowers for me for each of our visits. He filled my life with

importance by trusting me with his stories. His approval made me feel special. My heart swelled with empathy as I tried to imagine his life experiences as they were described to me—becoming numb to suffering, living amongst death, watching those he trusted take pleasure in murder, watching them take advantage of strangers, never feeling assured of his safety, of a warmth, of another day. His recounted memories grew more and more detailed, more personal, over the years. One day, he broke down in tears. After this, he stopped talking to me about his past. I had met his memories at the point of their repression.

We never had any children, as Billy is paralyzed from the hips down. He and I scrape by, using the money he gets from the government for having been injured while fighting for the nation. I rake in a small income myself, working as an assistant in the assisted living home where I first met Billy.

We've been married for twenty-two years. It was seventeen years ago that I began to fear Billy, and ten years ago that I surrendered my existence to him entirely—finally cutting off all friendships and personal practices, and taking up residence in the dilapidated shack. I was still allowed to use the basic facilities in the home, and I was allowed to go to work, of course. I was most definitely allowed and encouraged to give Billy massages and cook his meals. The rest of the time, however, it was Billy's preference that I not linger, casting bad feelings into him through means of my existence. Billy's needs and wishes were all I knew. And for some part of me, having this space of my own was an absolute thrill. Isolation suited me, suited what I had become. I remember three years ago, when a plumber came to our house to fix our broken toilet. I was so surprised to have a visitor that I dropped my bag upon entering the house and hearing footsteps. Billy did not produce footsteps. I had immediately grabbed a steak from near the fireplace to use in self defense. The plumber thought I was a madwoman, and left without

charging us, much to Billy's delight. I, however, was deeply saddened by this event, and resigned myself to being the madwoman—suspicious and frightening—that I had been molded into over the course of my marriage.

I used to record my strange thoughts as a means of releasing them, so that they would leave me alone and I could go about my daily business: grocery shopping, assisting in the Veteran's home, cooking, cleaning, moving Billy through his daily stretches, sorting his medicines and vitamins, holding him as he cried and relived traumas.

I once left a poem, written on the back of an old Cost-Plus receipt, on the breakfast table. Billy prefers to move about in the shade; he claims it fits his mood, and is the proper setting for a man sentenced to think all day. The shutters of our wood house are always pulled closed, and in the morning precise streaks of light flood between the wooden panels, mapping the angles of the house's rooms like some futuristic plane. My poem sat on our linoleum tabletop, beside a vase containing a single wilted Gerbera daisy (an anniversary gift from Billy a few years back), and glowed in the rare light, which had crept in despite Billy's best efforts to keep it out. More disdained than the light, however, was the content of that receipt.

Billy was unaware of my occasional scrawlings, and was outraged when he read:

Today's coffee will remain unsipped

As today's light feigns untouched

And my neck is rolled over

To empty out of cares

Like the pickled flower you preserved me

Before I grew my feathers

I myself was unaware of the exact meaning of the words, and never cared to analyze what poured out of me. My concern was to rid my mind of the nonsensical language; my concern was to perform my role as wife and care-taker. I remember Billy calling me to the table, sliding the receipt's edge against my arm at such a particular angle so as to draw blood. He told me to stop dreaming. I wasn't sure the words reflected a dream.

After his outburst, I began to hide my poetic disease externally. When the words snuck up and filled me, like screaming strangers, I did my best to rid my figure of them immediately. I would innocently exit my house, only to be hit with a sky so blue that I'd have to question whether or not I'd seen the color before. Frustrated, I'd sneeze under the sun, choke on the language, whisper the words under my breath until they were finished, gone, and I could relax.

Eventually, the poetry stopped invading me, and I became riddled with a private illness of a different sort. The more time I spent in my shack, the more frequently the phenomenon occurred. I was being visited by internal spaces. My mind would be working normally one minute, composing lists of a given day's tasks, and be completely surrendered to a hallucination the next. They were not thoughts filling my mind, but rather spaces. Different rooms would grow and expand in my head until I became them, momentarily, before returning to my "self." I stole away little timeframes to describe these spaces which occupied me, feeling that their absolute purposelessness was somehow the only important thing about me, or at that point in my life, possibly the only thing about me at all. Everything else has been dedicated to Billy. I sat in the shed—my shed, as I was sentenced to do. Hunching in the moss green interior, I perched in a beige wicker chair, my only furniture aside from the cot, which stood against the wall opposite where I sat. There, I would write on a legal pad, which I took from my desk at work.

Usually one visits a room, but lately they've been visiting me. Last night between sitting and bread chewing, a rectangular space filled the organic walls of my mind and hardened to stucco. A dolphin warrior motif patterned the off-white walls of the eggshell textured chamber. The small eyes of the repeated dolphin image were glaring beads. They were moist and cold as if they had never shed a sea-tear. The dolphin bore its fangs. The dolphin wore a helmet. The dolphin stood upright and bent, and waved with the imperfections of its surface. The ground was fur, or was it salt? The room in me was empty. Empty but for a single marble, which begged a mouth.

I would scrawl freely, knowing that Billy would not come to find me in there. Why has my mind become this series of empty rooms? Waiting spaces in which I touch and smell—do all but think. I almost disappear in them completely, emerging only when I am needed by Billy, only when there's a presence required of me. I don't know what these rooms are waiting to be filled with. Anything but my thoughts, anything but my language. I've begun to feel as if I am losing all my humanity, giving so much importance to these spaces, as if I hadn't evolved with the rest of my species to obsess over filling them.

This room came to me in a dream, so it's hard to tell whether or not it's a part of my body, my mind, or just some separate astral occurrence. I know it to be a room, but it is not a usual room, more like a short film that never shows a room, but rather the sum of its parts leaves one with the sense of an internal chamber. It's like this: There is darkness in every direction. Four white rectangles appear before me. They create the illusion of looking through bars: the accumulation of all light barring me from the total lack of light. A flicker on the peripheral right suggests the night sky. I turn my head and there is nothing but darkness. A dancing oblong soulless creature of white light appears on my left. The freedom of my odd neighbor calls forth

my hand. Grasp the form and encounter a timeless fluidity. Still the dancer and seize the strength. Like a mime building a box of illusions, my hand stops before reaching any light. The illumination crosses my face, and grows a floor beneath me like grass.

I began to love my waiting rooms. I made an unusual habit of seeking them out. I pretended to take on an extra shift at work; I began walking into doctor and dentist offices, and sitting, flipping through magazines until I was asked to leave. When this happened, I would return to my home, cook up some sausage links and frozen hash browns for Billy, and return to my wicker chair. Billy noticed a new pep in my step, and commented that it was giving him anxiety. I apologized and said I would spend even more time in the garden shelter, acting as if I were performing an act of martyrdom, when in fact there was nothing I wanted more.

For the first time a room appears in the walls of my chest. It's a living room. Large and wooden with painted flourishes and banners. Linoleum houndstooth floors turned yellow with time. The comfort of my wicker chair, contrasting with my cold hard interior. It's expanding and I fear the walls will hit my ribs soon. I close my eyes and brace my body.

I choked on a realization. I had not formed a thought of my own, been a person of my own, since I was a teenager. It was with great terror that I realized that my only escape, the adventures which began to clutter my insides, were not symbolic of freedom at all. No, these rooms were just another enclosure—not even my fighting subconscious was capable of forming something personal. I feel comfortable in these waiting rooms, and only grow afraid when I venture one step further. I grow afraid when I began to question what it is I am waiting for, or how I am to be used as a waiting space for others. What will they wait for in my empty vessel of a body?

Teahouse of the Dead

In my lifetime, I was given all sorts of theories as to what would happen when I died. In a good mood, my grandmother used to put me to sleep with stories of baby angels coming down to look after me as I dreamed about sweet things. She would often give me suggestions for my dreams, asking me if I had ever seen a newborn calf, recalling images from her pastoral childhood in what was then Germany, but now technically Poland. The thought of such a creature would bring tears to her eyes as she'd continue to reminisce in her scattered manner. She would tangentially tell me about her father and her uncle's hunting habits, and how she cried to no end when she learned that they killed animals. In this way, she would accidentally fill my mind with dark scenes as she tried to coax me into a cheerful slumber.

Her favorite dream, which she recounted to me often, was simple in its nature: she was simply spreading butter, softened from a day in the sun, into a fluffy piece of freshly baked bread. She would then bite into her humble sandwich. That was the entirety of the dream, and it was her favorite she had ever had. She said her uncle would tease her, asking if she'd like any bread to accompany the vast amounts of butter she'd consume. This memory was always followed by a comment regarding what a fine figure she used to have, and how unbelievably beautiful she was, despite always eating to her heart's content. My Omi would say the men were like animals, but then always take back such a comment, correcting herself, in that animals had always treated her far more kindly and with more respect than any man had.

If she was feeling less sentimental I would get a different set of stories. She would set out porcelain dolls of trolls and small girls, creating a ring around the guest room's victorian twin size bed. She would tell me that if I woke up in the night, the dolls would come to life and punish

me. She told me that if I sucked my thumb, the devil would crawl out from under my bed and cut it off. She told me that little girls who could not fall asleep at a proper time were visited by the sandman—a fluid demon who threw sand in the eyes of bad children, scratching into their corneas till blindness overcame them.

I spent my nights there in absolute terror. Even the images which were meant to be nice resonated horribly in my fearful mind—fat angels laughing at me and stabbing me with arrows, baby cows being shot dead, their small tongues hanging limp from an oversized mouth, blood and milk curdling into night terrors. The eyes of the trolls would illuminate as cars passed by outside of her house. I feared the nights my parents went out of town and left me with my Omi. When I turned eight, I was permitted to stay at friends' homes instead, and slowly these fears escaped my body.

Through overcoming my evening frights, I began to question all of her tales, even the good ones. Her belief in a God and the devil, and all the angels and saints had to be as fantastic as the sandman. I came to the conclusion that there was no God, that there was no heaven and no hell either for that matter. I thought a lot about my body turning to dirt. I thought about how I would not care that I was dead because I would not be there to care. I decided that I, in every sense of myself, would be gone forever when my time came.

With this decided, I grew a little restless wondering why I should live all these days, only to be gone on one of them. I cried some and then, writing in a note what I had realized to be true, I rode my bike down the steepest hill I could find, and coasted into traffic. Impact, blood, pavement, a sharp sting, a resounding overness, and then the darkness—I left sight and body. My spirit travelled like sap from bark into the uncertain.

There were no pearly gates or pits of fire, but there was no nothingness, either. I found my body, shallow and translucent, an illusory representation of the self I had known. Below me was a fleecy soil. Though it appeared fertile, there was not a plant in sight—and sight reached far as death.

The fuliginous surface took my steps with grace, and where fear would have once occupied me—in the side of brain, the tips of my fingers, and at the soft space behind my knees—I felt only an extraordinary lightness. I was surprised to be occupying a space, and one so similar to the earth I thought I'd left for good. A calmness swept over my ethereal presence and I became a tear. The wet salt of me pooled on the dirt and I got my first glimpse of the space above me. White-washed cavities that resembled a salt park I had visited in California as an infant. Were these physical formations; were they tangible to my now liquid state? The gleaming twists appeared solid, yet they suspended themselves lighter than the already weightless atmosphere. I laid there and seeped slightly into the warm ground below me, for it really was radiating an excessive comfort.

I saw from every cell that I occupied, and allowed my widened gaze to lose focus in the saline sky cluster. It was with great lack of focus that I began to notice the slight movements in the surface; they swayed in a nearly stationary manner far more subtle than a cloud passes. Life was such a blur, such a rush. I rushed to this place willingly, after nine brief rotations on my previous planet. My lining began to crystalize as I transfixed my gaping vision above, and I would have been content to remain in that spot, to fertilize the confused and seedless unsewn turf. As my form shifted into a sharp crystal, my sight enhanced to the point that I felt I was observing through a microscopic lens.

Alas, the mysterious above revealed itself to me: trillions of pure white tick-like creatures fit together like an elaborate tilescape flittered their legs and shook in place, rippling ever so gently in their hyperbolic cosmic configuration. In life I saw a centipede and threw up. My friend Josh ate an ant and told me it tasted like an ember. My father once bought me a praying mantis pod, and through a fine net I watched the little insects emerge from their flaky orb and begin to eat one another until only a few grew large enough to set free in our backyard.

I raised my nonentity from the dirt, some of which had become me, and resumed my ghostly shape, now slightly muddied and less translucent. Something I hadn't noticed before now beckoned to me from some hundred miles away. To my bewilderment, I traversed the land with great ease, and neared the structure with no conception of time passed. As I sunk toward what was now revealing itself to be a cabin, the unusual waxen mites sometimes fell atop my head, specks which resembled dandruff, or the first snow of a tempered winter.

I began to notice small plant forms emerging from the brown beneath me. With my vision still slightly enhanced, my form still slightly crunchy, I watched a tiny sky spider bury itself into the arm of my nonentity, and from the tiny tunnel it dug sprung a white geometric stem, topped with a pointed blossom which withered and disintegrated with the same experience as its appearance. I thought maybe this made me smile.

Sight had remained, improved even, and now I was struck with another sense, hearing a low-pitched frequency emanating from the simple cabin. The structure seemed to yawn not like the maw of a beast, and not in a fretful manner either, but in a smooth unraveling baritone which painted the entirety of death with a soulful stroke. The provincial law seemed to demand I enter the building. Why should there be law in death? Was this a siren's call? Had I landed on hell's dirt floor?

I opened the metal latch, which glowed chrome and appeared untouched. My hand left no sweat on the cold metal as I entered the otherwise rugged cabin. I was surprised, as the subjects of stories often are, to have found what I found within. A Japanese tea ceremony led by ghosts, or forms which resembled mine. They were older than me, but ranged in age, the youngest looking around 30 and the oldest, the master of the ceremony, looking near one hundred. He gestured for me to join them. I sat on an available cushion and tried to mimic their behavior, wanting to blend in. Strange sweets were being offered, little chalky pastel orbs. I tried to chew as quietly as possible, tasting the candy, which had a new flavor but most closely resembled an elderflower bean paste, for as long as possible.

Two, three hours we've been sitting here. I feel that I am chewing too loudly.

I am ashamed and make my mouth movements smaller. Can the ghosts tell that I'm new to death? I try to be fluid in my seat. I want to sway a little bit; I wish to become completely transparent. It was gone yesterday (it being my life). I try to force this information into a feeling, into any meaning. I should be having profound realizations, I should be having a range of emotions. What had happened? What was the journey to this place? I had watched elements of my body dissipate into the surrounding air molecules on Geary street.

The master of the ceremony not only appears to be the oldest, but it is the least detailed of the ghosts. Calm and affable, the spirit appears remarkably similar to a child's halloween costume made of an old bed sheet, unlike some of the others in the room, which appear more human, my figure the most intact of them all. The ghost sitting cross legged on a cushion beside me must be more recently deceased. He still has his gender, evidenced by a glowing white hot beard and eyebrows like I've only seen on great poets and emperor penguins. I would have

guessed the leader of the event to be female, though truly there was no indication other than the gentleness and wisdom with which it moved.

One of the ghosts near the back of the room, one row before me, rises from her cushion and begins to assist in preparing the tea. White flowers resembling the one which had grown from my arm are removed from a wooden chest and eased into a pulp with a mortar and pestle. The room is eerily silent as the angular blossoms become a supple dust. I do not have to worry about interrupting, because I do not seem to have a voice of any sort. Beyond this, I have absolutely nothing to say. No memories of my life before seem within reach. I hold my ending in a loose way. I have the pavement, though it is abstracted. Bicycle... an unknown image which remains only as a distant essence, like somebody else's memory which floats feet from my form, rather than circling around within.

The master of the ceremony finishes preparing the tea and begins to pour small portions of the shimmering beverage into small white saucers in a performative manner. The motions are slow and hypnotic, with equal time, if such a thing should exist here, given to each action. Two ghosts near the front help to pass the dishes out around the room in an organized and disciplined dance, until tea has been placed before each of the cushions.

I lower my head to the saucer of tea on the floor before me and begin to lap at the opalescent liquid, following the lead of the others. A sharp image is brought forth in my mind, and I can almost taste the colors as they arrange themselves into place. I see a small feathered chest, rising and falling in the palm of a pale, fleshy hand. The red and black of the baby bird are soft, and grow more delicate as the palpitations slow. Beneath the hand—and I realize now that it was once my hand—I see a collapsed nest, glues of spit and twine being tormented out of their nurturing shape and into a sad stack of twigs. One of the beady black eyes blinks in an almost

suggestive way. In fact, the small movement was suggesting only death, and the bird's heart beat its last beat before the hand, experiencing an overwhelming confrontation, jolted to the right, causing the miniature corpse to fall on top of the destroyed nest beneath it. I open my eyes and revel in the image, which sticks now to every surface of my "self." In with the dirt, little black and red feathers mix to give more form to my figure. A part of me which has not fully disengaged with life wishes to analyze what I've been shown, but I can go no farther with my thoughts than a dog chained to a post. I am absolutely certain that this was a memory. My small hands, my small figure, dead at nine years old, had, in life, come across a dying red winged blackbird. I had dropped the body. There are no birds here in death. There is just that empty dirt, those white spiders of the sky, this curious tea house.

I do not know if I can be seen. An empty saucer now sits before each cushion in the tea house, but I can only see some fifteen spirits. The saucers which had been placed in front of seemingly unoccupied seats have somehow been done away with. I shudder. I continue to shudder. I begin to vibrate at a high frequency and, together with the other spirits, produce a very low and steady sound, which resonates like a gong.

I watch as the entire process restarts from my point of entry. Again, treats are served, and the tea is made. I choose to stay, wanting desperately another memory, though the bird is already slipping from my mind, leaving only a melancholic mist.

Again I bend forward, my dish replenished. I sip the tea, and pay closer attention to my amorphous blob this time, noticing a very faint and all-encompassing sensation. Sipping the tea resembles the feeling of flesh falling asleep, stinging in a pleasant manner with sharp, transparent needles.

My vision spans almost as far as it did in death. The bold orange of dreams traces itself perfectly across the real sky. It was the type of sunset seen in life that makes one think they will come across ripening berries and neon tubed grass. Earlier that day, perhaps, there had been berries. The tubes smashing under bare feet were a projection of emotion. The sky that night was the first real thing I had seen on my trip to Las Vegas, at the age of seven. At first I had been mesmerized by the city, with its high heels, fountains, and lights. Its fake cities which were more in tune with my size at the time. The exhaustion of it all only hit that night, when I laid eyes on the sky, as if seeing its true colors for the first time in my life. Did I giggle to myself or shed a tear? It's hard to recall, I know I was alone... parents at the casino or somewhere.

Feathers. Orange glow. Tea. Again.

I'm sitting in the ballroom; I survey my grandmother's table and picture my family members as individual slices of wonderbread, propped upright in their gold-rimmed chairs, getting lightly toasted in the candlelight. My aunt is a civic attorney; she's just defended an officer in a case of police brutality. My uncle is a member of the NRA. I sit at the kid's table. I don't know what they're saying. I watch them toast. I'm afraid they'll burn if the wine keeps getting poured and we don't break for dessert. What was it? A structural meal. Relatives. Four of them birthed from the same canal, two of them married in, two of them divorced. An old German woman, my Omi, at the head of the table, slapping butter onto her third dinner roll, laughing over a mouthfull. I am reminded by my mother to keep my hands above the table, and my elbows off to the side. In different times, this was a measure of politeness, meant to display to your dining companion that you were not carrying arms. Then, in the dining room, it was simply a rule my mother pretended to uphold in the presence of her mother. Mother.

The warmth of a slowing heart. The warmth of an ember sky. Of mother. Of the tea.

So death is like this. Sipping into a temporary recollection or losing whatever self had already been stripped upon dying.

The ancient ghost, the master of the ceremony, turns to face me, hums in vibrations a message, which I receive through its resounding impact on my figure.

I let the words caress through me, but I possess no sure personality with which to discern their impact. I try to gesture back at the master, and watch as the figure to my left acts out my motion, a simple shrug. I reach forward for more tea, only to find an empty saucer. Rather than waiting, I inhabit a different form, at the front of the room, and find myself steeping the flowers.

Marco's Purgatory

Marco sleeps on a cot in his open-air shelter. He wakes up, and slips his feet into slippers made of berry husk before even opening his eyes. Down the hall he walks, counting the tiles which unravel before him. This is a morning routine. There are two thousand eighty seven tiles. There are two thousand eighty seven tiles every day. Some days he hopes there will be an even number of tiles; that one will have been added or one removed, but alas, that seemingly endless courtyard holds two thousand eighty seven, without exception.

We all fill our time here with such habits. After enough time passes, the meaning or significance of our actions is no longer taken into consideration. The more obscene and useless one can make their routines, the better adjusted they are for the island. Marco, of course, takes the cake—it being *his* island and all.

Marco meets the sunlight at the end of the hall, places one hand on his malnourished stomach, one on top of his head, and says a thanks for not having gotten anyone pregnant in his nineteen years of life. He pulls a penny from his nightgown pocket and licks it; this is where he gets his high.

With the copper rush to his palette, he travels down the sandy nothingness, heading toward the water's edge. There is a thin and constant storm along the island's perimeter, which drips coconut. Marco tightens his grip on his penny as he ventures through the storm and continues into the sea, which is salt-filled and shallow for miles. He walks for two hours before the water reaches his shoulders, and then continues onward.

Personally, I've been dead since Sunday. How many Sundays ago, I could not tell you. Every day on Marco's island I wake up at six in the morning, smoke the fog, exhale on my small potted plants, ask the trees to dance, accept their polite refusals.

I met Marco on the shore, briefly after appearing here. I did not believe him, initially, when he claimed to be a god. Even his body language felt arbitrary. But after breathing—inhalating and exhaling—a mere twenty breathes in this purgatory, all became obviously true. Who would I be to argue, anyway, when my feet caressed the sand and my motions became obscure and meaningless.

I wake up too early, ambivalently drawing my gaze to the many spiders, three at each corner of my bed mat. I think about my time being alive, and half awake; I utter the sentence: “You were made a wolf the second you breathed money into your life.” I would have said it into the mirror if there were mirrors here. I would have said it into the mirror if I still had any concrete form.

I dwell in a dune hut not too far from the shore. My hut is unfurnished aside from my bed mat and my empty chair. I have five more empty chairs, which sit immediately outside the structure, reserving spots for ghost-guests, though they never show.

I spend my days here making sand cakes. I try to be stern—practical and business-oriented. It's not for fun. The air here pulls from each of us a drive, a mandatory workday, an explicitly dry and useless need to work tirelessly. The tropical paradise serves as a backdrop for these countless routines.

There's a back and forth that must take place, when constructing the cakes, from water to land to water. Shells are used for garnish. They are collected by my Scorpio side—which is the fiercest side of me, as it's driven to do well by competitive demons. It's the side of me

which was born with the umbilical cord around my neck. It's the side of me that sees the beauty in broken crab shells, almost forces it, through rhetoric. The rest of what I find is through the lens of my dreamy Virgo side, who happens upon green glass every once and awhile.

I collect my sand from directly beneath the coconut drip, wanting the aroma of my creations to resemble an edible memory. I carry the damp sand from the bank up to a drier portion of the shore, where I allow the thick substance to drip between my fingers, piling into an organic spire. I adorn my cakes according to my whims, allowing patterns to generate mechanically. I then spend more time than time carrying out the happenstance rules of my motif. I take breaks only to fuel my false sense of achievement, laying on the sand, motionless.

Sometimes I close my eyes and make believe that I am Marco as an old man, clutching a cane, sagging in my corduroys, frantically wipping my sticky tongue on my orange and flaking penny, eyes bugging out with a mellow pupil, counting tiles, walking in and out of the water at a slow, old-man pace.

Other times I imagine myself if I had lived longer and grown old. I'd be withered like a raisin and alone, not in an assisted living home, but in a vacant and haunted hotel. In the daytime I would read, knit, eat chocolate, drink tea, make phone calls. In the evening I would take my sorted pills, close my eyes, and begin to move about the place as a ghost who had never even heard Marco's name, exploring deserted chambers of my mind, finding the only thing my memory has ever been good for—love. Or was it work?

Marco appears and shakes me from my hiatus. With every exhale he releases a work ethic into the air, and us ghosts inhale this thick fog with renewed determination to carry out our purposeless self-assigned tasks. I walk back to gather more sand, and resume my position

funnelling the muck. We do not speak, but I feel the heightened pressure, and hope to Marco that my sand cakes are to his liking. Whenever Marco appears in my routine, I can expect to be visited by some strange sign in the following days.

Shortly after, a baby appears at the door of my hut. He has been outside for many hours now. He needs me, he says, or he will die. I think if he is here he must already be dead. “I’m a loser,” he cries, but through the distorted wood block it’s “I’m a loafer” I hear. My scabs are too close; I jump off my chair time and time again. The hole in my roof tells me I am one thousand feet high. The tiles on the floor say there is no gentle death. I had never noticed it before, but my chair is engraved “where baby must lie.” It’s gold and blue and delicate, but with it I am rough. I push it against the wall, stand on it, jump off. Looking for the soft death, the falling-from-chair type. The oven type of death cannot exist in this chamber. The truth was a formality I constructed in life so you could love me easy. I did that when I was alive, when I was younger, when I didn’t mind the grass allergies. I used to roam out there with the babies. Now I’m safe in my cellar tower thinking about the sweet thing.

I used to wear loafers and kiss on the boat docks. I used to bike in the ghetto and drink cherry sodas. Now I am dead. Now I am regal. My chair is the utmost and my tiles are slimy. Nothing could have saved me—thank god, thank Marco. I wish to release everything with the thud after the leap. In life I wished to kill the child growing within me. In death I wish to banish the infant from my hut’s mat. I climb up my chair and jump from the top of it. I lie on my tiles and tickle my wrists. I cling to the legs, both mine and the chair’s. You may not join me, you may not join me. If I were smarter, if I were stronger, I’d stack up my chair. I’d climb to the hole-top and grow out my hair. I could really jump then, fall hard enough to leave, or at least scare the infant, who’s incessantly wailing out there.

The baby's gone and I am left to my nothingness on the island. I carve into the dry walls of my hut. I try to write a poem which affirms my non-actions in death.

It goes:

Trying to proceed thus not falling
 In with the trees
 But i could rest here for another minute
 Anywhere
 Truly
 I could rest and keep on resting
 I could have things delivered to me or i could rot i could freeze here i could burn just resting in
 plain air
 A drum kit loop could whimper to the caterpillar who would tell me so
 The one who would spin me silk and shut my eyes
 I could rest away from the accents and breezes and your own chosen movements
 Void of activity, the robot where my heart should be
 Rusts on the non-beach
 What a restful rust
 A penny-licking keeper
 I wouldn't trade it
 For all the silk or friends in the world

On the island the concept of a ghost works in reverse. We are the dead ones; we don't interact with one another. Ghosts here are an absence. They're the subjects of our empty chairs.

Now it's winter on the island and each of my ghost chairs is cushioned with an organic pillow of the cold white stars which fall from the sky in these darker months. The space behind my hut expands, and I envision the ivory abyss to be a portalway, an uphill path toward the heaven I was taught in school. I feel my heart guilt me into a prayer: Hey Jesus, hi, oh Jesus, it would be nice to be with you. It would be great to work toward salvation. I'm just afraid I might turn on you up there, overthrow you and what you have going on. I wish I believed in you. I really do with all my heart tonight—a family of deer grazes through the snow bank, shattering the mirage escalator to a different eternal sentence—Do I say amen? I say amen. Marco would not mind the betrayal. There's no need for punishment and no possibility of further exile.

I go back into my hut and discover a fluorescent silkworm there. I bask in its pink glow, and put on a record about a young boy with spinal meningitis. It really hurts, mama, he says. I stare coldly into the glow. Days don't exist on Marco's island. The water here speaks to me for the first time since my death. The voice crawls from the shore and into my hut and tells me the time for prayer has passed, that I should rest now so I can make my sand cakes in the morning.

The flatness satisfies when you are dead.

Silvio's Dwelling

These days, trips to town are for the sole purpose of acquiring booze. When I was a little younger, but by no means a young man, I would sometimes stop by Conor's cottage. We would sit and talk for hours. I would humbly take a stab at imparting whatever small wisdoms I had acquired, all the while handing him miniature glasses of brandy under the table against his mother's permission. My lessons were expressed through grunts, hand gestures, and occasional tears. Perhaps it was because he was a child, or perhaps we were born under the same moon, however many years apart, but Conor was the only other human I encountered who seemed to follow along with my thoughts. Others had never attempted, or if they had, they always failed miserably and ultimately exploded into anger, always directing that anger at my humble sack of guts.

I did not scare, I don't think, when God stopped talking to me. I did not fret when the humans stopped bothering, either. I know I did not care because I did not remember any of it. If a scar had formed, it had formed on some internal organ, in a place where I should never be bothered by its hideous nature or even recognize its presence at all. Vaguely, I recalled some sort of acknowledgement by others as being an outcast—a time when the people of my village, who are not particularly kind, would try to shame me. Even then it didn't bother me too much, the way they looked at me when I would come down the main roads. Besides, my vocabulary had grown so slim, I hardly recognized the words they threw my way, and had to go more off of tone. “Oh there's Silvio, what a sad creature.” “There he goes, more drunk than he is illiterate.” “No, it's the other way around.”

I existed to the extent of this reputation. I was known as the drunken monster who occasionally terrorizes the town with my smells and misunderstood moods. Now when I wander around, nobody says a word. Though my habits have not changed, I have been shifted, it would seem, into the category of “myth.” These Irish peasants who look down on me are not so damn bright themselves; they can’t even recognize a living, breathing thing as more than a memory of some story their parents used to tell them.

One man in particular, by the name of Sean, hated my bumbling about. I suppose my presence disturbed some deep philosophies he had come to between beating his family, tending his crops, and his own drinking problem. Whenever he and I cross paths, I can expect one of these rude comments, without fail.

So, understandably, it’s always a relief to return to my dwelling. Often I hear people passing my home—on their way to the river to catch fish, or at night to canoodle in romantic discourse. People reference an old legend, of a demon who lives underground, and digs his way up through the dirt at night to howl with the earth’s beastly creatures and corrupt the youth—turning them on to their wild side and encouraging uncivilized behavior. I know that the kids in town are superstitious of me, that they believe me to be this beast. This is okay with me. I feel as immune to their judgements and distant from their sentiments as a black cat minding its own business. What coterminous towns and regions may exist beyond my home is an absolute mystery to me, and I would guess the same is true for most members of the town. Nobody knows what else is out there, and that’s why some obsess over and shape the stories they’ve encountered in their so-small existences, musing bullshit out from under their drabbet robes.

Approaching my dwelling goes as such: First, there is the smell. It hits you about thirty paces away from my actual enclosure. Fishy would be the most simple scent description. I spend

a great deal of time with the harbor seals, who, unlike the humans I've encountered, always seem happy to be in my company. They rejoice, clapping their flippers and challenging me in diving competitions. Language has never been of interest to me, and the seals feel similarly. Rather, we let out playful squeals and barks until the sun goes down. The only thing that pains me in life is not the disdainful treatment I receive from human beings, no, the thing that pains me most in life is that I cannot live permanently with those seals. This is no large complaint, however, as I am quite comfortable in my hollow.

Closely following the smell is the sight, though you would not know you were seeing it until you were directly upon the opening. This is because my door is not so much a door, but more of a loose dirt patch, which I dig out of the way with my favorite of my two tools, my hands. My other tool is my knife, which I always leave beside the entrance to my home for two reasons: 1. For easy access if I should see some tasty critter or bird perched near my dwelling and 2. To serve as a marker for me on my most blindingly drunk nights.

I eat mostly fish, dirt and leaves, drink mostly salt water and booze. I try on a regular basis to hunt for meat, but the critters are much faster than my sloppy knife throws, and I do not believe in hunting through deceit. What I mean by this is that often, and I mean extraordinarily frequently, let's say at least five times a day, some critter will mistake me for a piece of land, and try digging into my side or taking a nap on my chest. When these animals approach me with no knowledge of my potential danger to them, it feels wrong to take advantage of that. I want a fair fight. And even under these personal restraints I am able to eat a bird nearly twice a month. Such a diet should not be sustainable for a human, but seeing as it works perfectly for me I often find myself conspiring that I have transcended that species altogether.

I do not require much in terms of my possessions. A bed? I have never needed one. I prefer to sleep in the most contorted and unrefined positions I can conjure up. I am insulted by comfort and the bourgeois side-sleepers of my old town. I drink to get to sleep. My dreams are wild excursions, unrestricted blends of colors and times. I can see a figure at all moments in time simultaneously; I can drink an entire waterfall and never quench my thirst. I can kill, rampage, tear babies limb from limb in the safety of my disillusioned slumber. I do not, of course, choose these dreams. However, there is a certain satisfaction in the action of these sequences. My heart races as I toss in my cave and I am free of judgement. In daytime, in my waking time, it can be assured that I am quite peaceful, as evidenced by my kindness toward the critters with whom I cohabitate.

The people of the village: they eat from the dirt as I do, they cover their bodies in water daily as I do. I am not ashamed of my fuzzy kelp exterior. I welcome the insects who take refuge in my naval. When I was shown more recognition, people would groan upon seeing my body; I would ask them “what body?” I stopped being a man when I moved into the mud wall. I became my hands when I handed over my flesh.

I walk to the waterfront with a stolen bottle of whiskey and groan. My friends have not yet arrived. I sit down on my rock and begin to file my nails against its base: a small, incessant gesture, displaying an indefatigable effort to perfect each ridge. There is already a long indentation from this repetitive motion, which I perform whenever I have the misfortune of missing the seals. Next to the brute mark created by my incessant scratching is a softer and more unsure imprint, where Conor used to file his nails. This was one of the first things I taught him: always have clean and kempt nails. Needless to say, physical appearances have never been at the forefront of my mind.

The vessel which carries my drunken soul is as much mine as the tree near my hollow is mine, the water on this shore is mine, the bodies of those who despise me are mine. I take no claim over my skin or bones; my guts rarely prove present and my blood is mostly alcohol. Hands, however, serve as tools. The aesthetics of their curves and knuckles have never impressed me, even when assembled in the most delicate manner they are, to be frank, odd looking at best. It is out of respect for their capabilities that I keep my digits in tip top shape. I rely on my hands to bring bottle to lip, to hunt for my food, and to cover my eyes when tears should grace my cheeks—it has been so many years now since I last saw Conor.

I hear a bark and shortly after glimpse a spherical leathery head bobbing in a wave not far from my perch. More seals join their friend, and likewise, I join them all in the water: my friends. I am infinite in my unification with nature. I race one of the older seals, but lose due to my bad shape. I submerge myself in the salted pool as they circle around my torso, and upon resurfacing we all bark joyfully.

I never learned to swim, rather it happened upon my body in an instance of necessity. One night, I admit, I had spoiled myself with chocolate schnapps stolen from the market's liquor tent. The tender had brought it from somewhere south, or east, or something of the sort. The only goods that anyone bothers to import here are substances which alter one's psyche. Other than that they stick to the harvest of potatoes, carrots, onions, and salt gleaned from the sea. Even the most uppity of the community's bitches can be reduced to potatoes and local game. I've always found it curious that my alcoholism should be so chastised when every soul in the village seems to be drowning themselves in the good stuff at night. I guess their problem with me is my daytime consumption. I guess their problem with me is the degree to which I've submitted to these repulsive actions. In my defense, I would say that liquor intake is perhaps my sole

shameful act, while the others I've seen have a long list of disgusting duties they go about performing from their pedestals before indulging in drink.

Anyhow, I was astonishingly shaky due to the schnapps, and I took a night walk down to the waterfront. I often stood in the shallow water and looked out, not in contemplation, but sheer wonder at the beauty before me. On this night, a seal had overslept on the shore. It woke up and realized the sun had set, and that it had most likely been abandoned by its harem. Without seeing my figure, the heavy set water mammal proceeded to hurl its fat body in a barrel roll toward the ocean, knocking me down and into the water with it. I was amazed as I watched the creature transform from such a sluggish state to a being of great elegance.

Perplexed, I watched for a half second before remembering that I could not swim—that I was drowning. An intuitive reaction, combined with my brief intake of the seal's gestures, allowed my life to be spared. I began flailing about until my body stayed up. Cupping my hands, I mimicked the seal's flippers to the best of my ability and realized once again, the great love I had for my hands. I spent all night playing with my new friend and mastering my technique, taking small hiatuses in the shallow areas. When the morning light hit, I saw the rest of the herd return for their lost member, and from then on I made a habit of spending time in the water with them, where I felt both accepted and free. The sublimity of that state, for me, is beyond words.

On this particular day, as on every day past, I was quite enjoying myself in the water. I took a moment's rest to float on my back and see where my thoughts may fall. Not an uncommon occurrence—they fell on alcohol. Specifically, the bottle of whiskey I had been nursing in anticipation of the swim. I thought about the process of making liquor, and to whom I owed thanks for figuring it out. Everything comes from the earth, and so I floated there and said my thanks, once again, to the natural world. I wanted another taste of the liquor, so I swam back

to shore, where I was surprised to see Sean. I did not acknowledge him as I did not care for him, or to ruin the beautiful day I was having.

He approached me with a scroll covered in a frantic script which I could not read. I side-stepped him and reached for my bottle, which he swiftly tore from my grip and smashed against the rock where I had been sitting peacefully a mere hour before. I heard each individual break in the glass bottle, which shattered into a thousand tiny shards, as did my heart. How dare he. I contemplated what to do next. Such a physical invasion of my life had not taken place in any day I could recall. In town I could expect to be teased and verbally harassed—but on my own shore, on such a beautiful day, to have my drink violently torn from me? This was a new cruelty for me to suffer. As I decided whether or not to throw a punch or just waver into the water until he left me alone, Sean began to yell, gesturing at the paper. He was summoning me to a town meeting, alerting me that I had been charged with a crime. I could not read, and his words did not reach me, stunned as I was by the violence of his tone. I figured they had finally caught on to my excessive thievery.

We walked together to the town hall—or rather, I stumbled several paces behind him, with my head hung, outraged by my own compliance.

I turned my head to the left and to the right, and in each direction my vision was met with the gaze of little lizard eyeballs, which burned an unquenchable yellow. They covered the entire wooden frame of the town hall. Sitting, darting, blinking. My friends. I felt suddenly defeated, and stepped into the cold structure. It was my first time “indoors,” as far as my working memory was concerned.

Sean closed the door behind me, an absent gleam in his eye. My starched and scorched skin trembled slightly and I felt my stomach flip. The trial consisted of different townspeople

speaking in stern voices, which sometimes quivered and heightened. Sean's daughter sat near the front of the hall, shaking and crying intermittently. People took turns speaking to her gently, gesturing to me, and then resuming their violent tones. The girl shook her head, slowly, but this was ignored. I could not comprehend the jargon. I could tell that the girl had been hurt, though it was not physically visible. She sat with a disposition that struck me as familiar. Even though she was amongst those who hated me, even though I had heard her refer to me as a monster in the past, a pang of sympathy swelled within my decrepit body. I was too obliterated by alcohol, however, to fully understand any truths of the event. I felt that I was frightened of Sean.

The meeting came to some sort of conclusion, without my saying a word. I simply stood and swayed and did my best to keep my eyes open. A chant amassed amongst the town people as they led me back to the shore, shoving and hollering at me as if I were cattle.

Without turning to face them, I was stabbed through back. I looked down to see a familiar metal point peering out from my stomach. They had used my knife. I felt the sting of whiskey as it was released from my belly. Someone cast my body out into the water to swell with water until all life had left me.

There's air which passes my exterior with a cold sound. I am moving through it, but feel it moving simultaneously through my freshly punctured body. I hit the water's top with an unexpected elegance, and assume a fetal position upon impact. Delicately, lightly, I begin to slip down and under, sinking until my near-corpse hits some equilibrium.

Blood and liquor leave my body as a newfound clarity begins to take over my mind. Finally, the waves have collected enough words inside of me for proper expression.

I see ripples of light at the water's surface slowing into a mirror. Looking up at the newly still glass-like border, a muddled face begins to form. As a calm begins to overwhelm my body and the body of water in which I am submerged, I feel the ocean's vast knowledge seeping into my every pore. A mercurial creature the size of my pinky nail floats through my cloud of vision, and I recognize the mass to be a copepod, classified as *bonnierilla armata*. I have a comprehensive knowledge of the organism's breeding habits and lifespan. I have the words necessary to form the thoughts. As the knowledge of the sea engulfing me floods into my being, I am granted the power to reflect. Disregarding the near-microscopic pod and refocusing my attention on the plane where water meets air, I begin to discern the figure looking down at me. It is Conor. I can not believe it. And as I sink slowly into the wet, gears in my head turn further, understanding, remembering, finding connections which should have been lost forever. Conor Silvio was my name at birth.

My heart is operating at a sluggish rate. Years of alcoholism wash out of my algaeic body, and I close my eyes only to see myself as a young boy. It was my seventh birthday and I had stolen a sweet onion and some berries from a wealthier member of the village. I had built a small fire pit in the corner of our garden, and planned on making myself a jam to celebrate another year passed. I guess I was naughty like this, but why such behavior should be frowned upon I still do not understand. It seems even then I was destined to crave some forbidden high. I remember my mother coming out to the yard and I quickly shifted my motions, pretending to pull weeds. She yelled in her course accent, telling me to act like a man, to stop dallying in the garden. "You bring only shame to this family," she had said. She was scolding me for something, but what was it? Someone had seen me stealing something; they had reported this information back to her. Only shame.

I recall now a sense of terror that swept over my being whenever that woman, that mother who birthed me into this crooked world, looked my way. I remember her lisp, the way the tones of her vocal cords struck my eardrums in all the wrong places, like a soured grain, like a bitter carrot. One would expect comfort and tender nourishment where there only seemed to be nails and malcontent. My heartrate further depressed. My mind reached back to a place that I could hardly associate with myself. I was crying. My face was constructed of liquid as I lay crumpled in the pantry.

I peered through the wooden shutter to see my mother in a frenzy. I looked down to see my body covered in bruises, my innocence stripped. I remember reaching for that golden liquid my mother always resorted to. It was the product of my fear, a clear source of the pain inflicted on me, and it was only in that moment of absolute defeat that I succumbed to that smelly juice which had painted itself to be a demon in my mind. I poured myself a shot of whiskey with hands so small they could hardly lift the bottle.

Every cell in my body went flat. I opened my eyes only to find them pouring. Salt water mixed with salt water as my blurred gaze cast itself down at my swollen flesh. The copepods had begun to dig themselves under my soft exterior, creating little highways and tunnels, like a plump meaty circuit board. I was struck with a final sense of comfort when I realized I need not fear, that I had been dead for decades, that I was a spirit and full of spirits and perfectly meaningless, already having returned to the earth, already having detached nearly in full from my humanity. With my final mortal moments, I am pulling these words, my brief and unimportant story, from the great divine natural forces. Just before entering the black, I watched in dismay as a seal swam overhead without casting its gaze down at me.