# Helicom 2021-2022

Helicon

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# 2022

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#### Editor's Note

As I'm sure many of us have, I've gone looking for poetry in diverse places—on the side of the interstate in Arizona, in a grandmother's advice, and even under the kitchen sink. Shortly after gathering the poems and stories for this issue of *Helicon*, I found it where you'd expect poetry on the fifth floor of the ULM library but stored away in the back of Special Collections. During that delve into the *Helicon* archive, I kept thinking about *community*, specifically this university's writing community. Over time, the writing styles have changed, probably the writing workshops and their culture too. Something that hasn't changed is writers' desires to artistically record the world they're living in and our desires to *commune* with that record, to read, to listen, to linger there.

On the cover of *Helicon's* 1998 issue, the phrases "broken pots" and "swelling bellies" border a black and white photograph of a smirking woman in a habit poised over a gravestone. What did this image, these words illustrate to the community that composed and compiled that edition of *Helicon?* Did they imagine me 24 years later looking for poetry and finding it there?

I hope this issue of *Helicon* honorably continues ULM's legacy of a writing *community*.

Bailey Lambeth

#### Please

Anyone in their right mind knows how much their wrong mind sparkles. In aluminum foil that's tough to puncture I wrap mine & then

make a wish. Now it's clear that the shape of myself was not left behind in clouds I passed through in a flash for twenty rock solid years.

Like the ball of space between magnets I hold just to feel them repel, things I have forgotten along the way move in every direction at once,

I'm sure. Asking my arms, which are both left arms extended before me, to reach around the world, I hesitate like always. Just to tap me on

the back of my right shoulder, they make it all the way around. The two things I'd bet the rest of my dreams on are conjoined: 1/2 of reality &

the other half—reality wobbling like a clarinet's blue note played underwater. As if composing an outward spiral, thinking and not thinking of

stopping, I exist, and because I exist, an orange tornado of flashbacks rises from ninety percent of flames burning at this moment, the other ten

percent of flames are what you see if you close your eyes. And because I exist, I've got no idea what any of this means. What am I to do then, but arrive at the only possible conclusion: that it's my mouth continuing to open until I'm gone swallowed whole—that causes my mouth to close

so I'm whole again. On & on like this, even after I witness the colorful zeroes that trail a body as it drops headfirst from music—a requisite learning

experience for my mouth to stop this behavior, it must be. At peak speed of lightning, a body drops through its name, then forever through the follow-

ing sentence. While experiencing shock after shock, trauma after trauma, you must memorize why one spine isn't equal to

one but to millions. Millions of black and white photographs, when sliding against the idea of creation being unable to escape creation,

have nothing to say. The zebra, yes, the fucking zebra, of my zigs and fucking zags, leads a huge parade of scratch marks through our small city,

where dirt flashes like it's gone crazy, where the minute hand of an increasingly small, but-neverto-fully-disappear clock generates dirt's flashing.

So, I'm asking you, you being someone out there, anyone at all, how could I not assume history to be the incorrect quotient of every shade of pure

black divided by the number of people we lost? When am I going to hear from you is what I am thinking, what I'm doing is sipping a tunnel I just

exited through a glimmering, dark straw.

#### Frustrated with Parallel Lines

After a lot of thought spent on how, with the right amount of wind involved, love evolves from orange to a darker orange, I can now say my favorite thing in the world is how that's all love leaves me to say about it. What does not ignite at the sounds I make alone, at a point so low it twinkles, ignites at the echo of those same sounds-sounds like police sirens that were buried, but still you can hear them, if you press your ear against your reflection's ear, which is the actual ground. Earth is old. What startles me is I'm starting to like flowers a lot, and by this I mean whatever flowers mean. Up this hill I roll a pinkish stone and a working brain. If one of them grows wings, the other will grow them at the exact same time. Neither, I will learn, possess this ability. My point is not to fall and keep falling, but there comes a point when the alphabets I created by grieving begin to spin not in circles, but in hexagons. And just north of those alphabets, a door remains closed for once, and then opens to a desert of hot mirrors you have only vague recollections of seeing as a child, small mirrors that project the very image that always comes to mind first when you picture killing yourself. Just say, for the sake of anything at all, there is no point in killing yourself, you'll feel the same. You could spend

all your money to go to the beach, draw an hourglass in the sand and wipe it away. The colors of the rainbow collapse but the rainbow doesn't.

#### restart

pages turn transparent, and beneath them, water masks itself as floaters in my vision. maybe it's all the same. my toes the size of these turtles, my left thumb the same size as you, and you, the only thing not transparent, the same size of this dog next to me who keeps wagging his tail in time with the windshield wipers. above the water, clouds the shape of ceiling tiles rotate until they become a tree. I don't know what kind of tree it is. picture a tree. it looks like that one, or it doesn't. I start every day by running a red light. this isn't true, of course, but if it was, I would do it every morning until I ran out of gas in the middle of the intersection. my mother told me she saw four ducks synchronized in the water, plotting a graph of the time it takes a spider to connect its web to me. she says it only takes three minutes, but I know it's five.

#### Views from the Practice Room

From the second story of this building, I watch you raise your right hand above your head and wave, trying to catch

the attention of some girl coming to meet you. Blinds bounce against the window in triplets, mimicking a faint metronome down the hall.

I press my head against the glass, trying to ignore dissonances only resolving into more dissonances, but my ears are stapled to my forehead now and

the trumpet in the room next to me won't stop. Your backpack tilts backward, trying to make the two-foot drop to the ground. It falls,

and the A-flats turn into A-naturals.

### Two Turtles Are Having Sex in the Roundabout

A bright orange LOW FUEL glows off my dashboard I think, well that's fine But there are two turtles having sex in the roundabout Traffic's held up for a mile Folks furthest back honk because they don't see the holdup The holdup's here, I say to them Stacked on top of each other in the throes of reptilian passion No one's parked to get out and move them Really, they do look like the snapping kind Though most creatures probably are When you interrupt something like that

Boss said last week I had one more chance to be late or I'm fired I was stuck behind a school bus My car wouldn't start The road under construction But something tells me he'll cut me a slice off the glazed ham of grace Because there are two turtles having sex in the roundabout Any lip, and I'll ask him: you want to play God, sir? What if you and the Mrs. are knockin' your respective boots together And a train runs through your bedroom The conductor shrugs it off and says: Well, I did only have one more chance to be late

On the radio, the news reports placidly— Somebody's died someway no one could ever imagine Something awful's happened somewhere The good news is we've all got about a solid year to put up with it Before the earth blows up or whatever But right now, there are two turtles having sex in the roundabout And I figure they'll be finishing up any second now Then we can all move on with our lives I wish the news reported on something important Like how long turtle sex lasts

A giant metal freak that likely pulled tanks along in the last war Comes screeching 'round the 'bout on two wheels Hooking a left like he'd accidentally passed his destiny on the way up Then suddenly there aren't two turtles having sex in the roundabout Just a radio playing static-eaten gospel music A choir of honking Honda Civics And two lights on my dashboard— One that says I'm fifteen minutes late for my last chance And one that says I'm going to have to stop for gas if I want to get there at all

#### My Mother Taught Me This Trick

I have never felt so light on my feet. A feeling that pushed me around like dancing. The moment you called me precious I started falling. Instead of looking over my eyes you looked into them. Deep brown laced in gold that only those who look closely find. You did. I was hooked.

My mother taught me this trick. If you repeat something over and over again it becomes meaningless.

Thank you Thank you Thank you

If you watch the sunset too many times it loses its beauty. If you repeat a mistake over and over it becomes a decision. You wake up, wake up and forget why.

I love you I love you I love you

My mother taught me this trick. If you repeat something over and over again it becomes meaningless.

Goodbye Goodbye Goodbye

I told the doctor about the house across my road, dismantled by a bulldozer. I watched them drag out every piece and knock down every wall. For years I watched faces come and go from this house, filled with joy by its potential. But soon they found it was too much and abandoned what they loved. Separation Separation Separation

My mother taught me this trick. Words are like an opening, holding the power to hurt.

I told the therapist: my thoughts leave scars on my tongue. Somehow, I gather enough breath to set them free. I just want to be enough, enough, enough! The words sliced through my throat. She leaned in and said, "Worthlessness is just a feeling. *You* give words their meaning. Do you understand?" I did not understand.

Help me Help me Help me

I walked outside when my thoughts wouldn't let me rest. My bare feet gripped the ground below me. The blue midnight light covered the streets. Dry wind wrapped itself around me and heat lightning gathered in the clouds. Maybe I was in danger, but the strike was too beautiful to miss,

the way it comes so wickedly.

I stayed just to see you. You were too beautiful to miss. My feet were no longer light. My hands gripped the ground until they bled. My dancing was just you pushing me around. I lost my balance. You stopped looking into my eyes. You never looked at me at all.

It's fine It's fine It's fine

I pushed it down.

I love you I love you I love you

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My mother taught me this trick. Close your eyes. Tell me about your breaking point. Seventeen days; that's how long it took for the doctors to decide you wouldn't wake up. The machine that breathed into your lungs was not enough. I held your hand. It was cold. I was cold. You did not feel it, so you don't understand. Go back with me again; feel it this time. Seventeen days; that's how long it took for the doctors to decide you wouldn't wake up. You would never laugh at my jokes, ask me to make coffee, or help me with my words. The machine that breathed into your lungs was not enough to fight the cancer in your cells. I held your hand. It was cold. I was cold.

Don't leave Don't leave Don't leave

If you repeat something over and over again, it loses its meaning. Time moves forward and forces you with it. People move forward and choose whether to take you with them.

I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry

Choose what to write next until you can't. The storm will deceive you into love.

Wake up Wake up

And never forget why.

#### REAGAN SMITH

#### The Cello

fingertips glide against abandoned strings taut— Reverberations echo my knees: grasp the instrument trail up thighs weaken when they reach (tuck-in elbow) —glued to the sharp side of sunset redwood. next notes bellow out of a hollow belly.

The cello—my brother's blinked brilliance (Practice-fail, practice-succeed, practice-nowhere)

Trebles of his success draw me along a rosined bow gliding against ribbed strings.

#### He

builds (reach in my tendons and pluck them out) One at a time the thumb the middle the small metacarpal (chicken feathers drift after a ringing neck)

#### Ι

build—until my breath catches in my throat struggle, my esophagus claws inside black-tipped

bow

vibrating drawn.

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I tense perfect form back straight—a wire Tug my spine up towards

He holds his cello.

#### ABBY THOMAS

#### From the Kitchen

Val wears a pink pink shirt to match her pink blush and nose from the heat, or cold.

She kneels in front of the oven in her blue-black jeans, and touches her nose to its glass.

She's not good at baking burns the cake, biscuits, and bread, but she says the oven sings when what's inside is ready.

Val cried when the oven burned her cake, biscuits, and bread. So her pink blush and nose, which matched her pink pink shirt, were no longer just pink from the heat, or cold.

#### Sticky Fingers

In third grade, Katrina took everything but a pair of baby shoes and a Hello Kitty doll I couldn't touch because my mom didn't trust the water that moved it.

In fourth grade, my mom found a plastic tree on clearance, so my brother and I picked pinecones after school. I chose the ones that stuck to my fingers if I squeezed too hard.

The next day, my brother and I walked to Dollar General with twenty dollars I found in my mom's jean pocket. We walked home with wire, beads, glitter glue, Sour Skittles, and a blue Powerade with \$8.27 in change.

That night, my brother and I showed our mom the collection of pinecones and how they stuck to our fingers, even after we covered its spikes with sparkled glue.

It's been 15 years, but every year my brother and I decorate our tree with glitter pinecones and rainbow candy canes, squeezing to see if they still stick to our fingers.

#### #5. Remembering:

My uncle is afraid of gumballs. He sees little legs, climbing over one another in abandon, attempting consumption, to turn his life into theirs. What do sweetgums do with a soul? They taught us in kindergarten trees grow on sunlight and water and soil, but to my uncle they desire a sweeter ingredient.

She's old, she's dark, contains a smell unknown to man. Not putrid, almost sweet, Poppa guides her down the home highways as fast as she'll go without her rattling. Her name is Brownie, like Dad's Suzie, who was red and slimbodied, like my grandmother.

Motion is the nature of violence. Bend the knee, extend the arm, lean back, extend the leg, retract the arm, lean forward. The arc is key. Reach upward unto heaven and one day fall down.

Waxy, imaginary, textured like popcorn, floss to keep them out of your teeth. They are ghosts that bite children, with hook legs and split backs and the scent of years.

#### Rainy Days

I like the transitional seasons like fall when things die and I get to crunch dry leaves under my shoes. It's shedding old skin or turning meat into mushrooms that will let you meet god. Oranges, leaves, and flower petals pressed between book pages so they won't forget their own colors or mine, long walks on a dry road to a pond that you used to see from the porch. For all my love of reanimation it's the leaving I hate, the drowning in a lighthouse you built yourself mortared with spite and loneliness and you told yourself you built the light to warn others of death on wet rocks when all you really wanted was someone to follow it home. But you drown, and you see yourself drowning, and you can't bear to watch because you can't recognize your own reflection and it doesn't respond when you demand to know its name. Eventually the water leaves too, and your mouth dries in the sun-sand and after so long of vaults instead of eyes you catch yourself when laughing or reading because there's salt water where it has never been before. I learned to swim in a crooked way. One day I will concede my treading and sink below light but today I am teaching a blonde boy what water feels like on his ankles and I haven't found my sea legs yet. I like the rainy autumn days, I love the storms that feel like punishment and

mud in your shoes. I want to go to the beach, but I'd put a pin in the tide so that maybe it wouldn't pull away.

#### GREGG SANDAHL

#### Bullseye

I cut my finger pointing at the sky bombs drop down rain down pointlessly because you ordered your men bred your men bled by violence minding you to open the hatches for a sixth sense derangement of power in power after power moving through the sky falling

then I cut from the newspaper a picture of you grinning at your defenses

your hand pinpointing each pressure point on a map before I threw a dart threw all twelve of them hit you right between the eyes every single time your face appearing to fall like strips

of confetti

#### Lunch Box Love Letters

Dragging a limp and two hooked fingers, he makes alchemy from caramel sunspots and lunch box love letters.

Bill asks why won't he retire, and he answers the same each time *What else would I do?* 

He fell into the family tradition of factories and climbing hierarchies.

Big Poppa left a worn-leather throne, and a spot in the work fridge. *Good enough.* 

Someone used to love me, he thinks, whittling the callouses on his thumb.

She sliced the crust from his pimento sandwiches, watched his cigarette intake. He's lost the words besides what she's written here:

> Have a good day at work, I'll record Law & Order if they keep you overtime. Love you, Z.

On days her chest unclenched, she scrawled National Geographic in green ink,

> Did you know that if you feed a canary a red pepper, they start glowing red? Sounds like you. Signed Z, ribboned with a heart.

He tried making her chili, sometimes calling her name, pleading to guide his hands with the cumin and tomatoes.

The dog looks with her eyes, and whines with Z's pained groan.

He wants to remember her as she was, but how? The sticky sweetness of illness still lingers here and there.

He returns home,

to that sour powdered candy, which oozed from her skin, haunts his room, demands to nestle in the fold of his clothes.

#### We Buried the Horses

We buried the horses on candlelight, Ramirez sang his mother's hymn with a blown-out, veteran's jaw.

Then Robert, brave enough to pilot tin box contraptions, took his shovel

from the airplane shed to dig a hole in the middle of town. We buried the horses beneath

flooded wisteria, offering hay for the coming winter and rotting peaches, seeds pregnant

with maggots and young fruit. We buried the horses, Old Jackman and Suzy.

So revered, we buried them with names too sacred to speak.

Some man, aching yellow stitches, surrendered them. Erin painted over their branding with crushed aloe,

Declaring they belonged to no one anymore. Ramirez called to the podium, told us how she fed them apples from the market.

Ema, the town historian, remembered train tracks, and Erin's barn till it topped to Ida. Irma's old coffee shop sign, half-blown bulbs, white and cracking. We marked their graves like a roadside attraction.

The village gathered in knots of arms and necks while Irma dug in her satchel for vinyl letters.

She placed lonely initials onto the blinking headstone. *Amen's* all she could say.

#### The Wake

We found a grey finch twitching red in snow. Made a grave with our mittened-hands, offering last spring's dogwood flowers and two pennies for his eyes.

Three shots through brother's bedroom, chipped pebbles retrieved from the driveway as bullets. Maybe it's not a warning,

but a courtesy. My dreams are forgettable, but the bird's always there, wearing an executioner hood,

shaking frost off his feathers. The coyote skull and the pile of feathers, a childhood left south past the parish line.

A quiet, burning house, destroyed by a sleeping cigar. Wait for the snow to melt, this is what hell tastes like.

Crushed leaves make an X and welcomes us, don't jump.

#### MICHAEL HAMMERLE

#### Fortune Aground

Born in Lithuania, Dela Palonis collected Trail of Tears ceramic figures and dream catchers. She wouldn't talk past-anythings that weren't American. 1920, an 8-year-old child, on Ellis Island. In her 30s, she married Grandpa Guy of West Virginia. Dela, the second wife, bore his second children. John, her father, an only child, while Dela came from a family of six, it was important she collected. Something about surrounding herself that was American. Lining the shelves in her room with knickknacks so many possibilities lost to her dream-catcher. The barge cable broke and took the life of Grandpa Guy. Something about surviving tragedies that's American. Something in inventing uses and personifying animals that's Lithuanian. World Wars, the river, a daughter's husband struck by lightning, collected stories to pass from child to child. The first time a family story is heard guaranteed new like a child. Curiosity like hearing Dela talk about the Ojibwe and dream catchers. She would tell us that the Native American had endured pogroms and how they were collected. She never talked about the Baltics and the massacres that happened. Nana felt safe in West Virginia's mountains with Grandpa Guy. Something in leaving her past omitted that is Lithuanian. Something in leaving her past omitted that is American. Dela was a Transfiguration-church-confessing American. The Hull Avenue Parish burned down when she was a child.

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Straight-to-Long-Island-City, leaving-years-later-on-the-arm-of-a-soldier Lithuanian. Shelves and birdcages circled her room in Florida. So many parakeets that she never talked about West Virginia or Grandpa Guy. The birds had their own stories every one she collected. My Nana's children, two daughters, inventoried her collection because listing is a form of grieving. Then the daughters, and daughters' daughters, fought for belongings as a show of caring was so American it was English and derived from Grandpa Guy. Stories to pass from child to child a number enough for each to take one dream catcher. Native American culture to display and remember Lithuania. Dela, and her dream catchers, our American beginning couldn't care to remember Grandpa Guy or Lithuania.

#### I Used to Draw

I'd clean the eraser end of my pencil dragging it on any carpeted floor or my jeans.

I'd draw murals on the light-gray ceramic desktops, or wood, anywhere that took a line: the white space of my shoes, my forearms, but never on a bathroom wall. The desk art, I'd refuse to clean.

I can turn anything into a metal cage because of the time I found that hole in the fence at the high school. I'd leave alone, but find someone with the same idea. The delinquents knew of a hidden pond we could hang at a little beach. Crouched along the cemetery wall, careful about our sleeves and graffiti, and crossed the street.

Leave at lunch and get a head start.

When I don't graduate on time I am the coolest guy in summer school. Self-commissioned Iron Maiden cover on my desk and Mr. Long expelled me. The Violent Femmes waiting

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in a junk-green SUV.It went lights downin a culvert somewhere.I climbed out of the back seatand hung on the bumperso the truants could flee the vehicle.They were screaming my name.My first instinct was to leave them too.

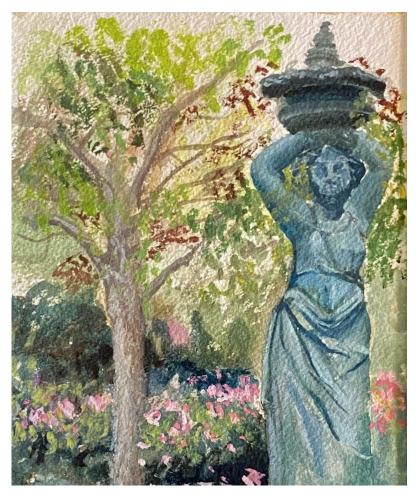
## DAIJA ESSIEN

# Butterfly Effect



Watercolor 13" x 14"

## Emy-Lou's Garden



Watercolor and gouache 12<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" x 15"

# Black Pheasant



Watercolor and ink 16" x 13"

### Ten Hours

Clarabell the cat was twenty-one when she passed. She, the most celebrated member of the family, lived to see three children graduate high school, two moves into new houses, and two dogs die. Her passing signaled the end of an era.

Suzanne cradled Clarabell's fragile white body as one would a piece of precious porcelain against her black pantsuit. The pet owners in the brown-paneled waiting room glanced uncomfortably at her from their red plastic chairs. A man with a sizeable scarlet macaw got up from his seat and offered it to Suzanne, who pinched her lips into a hopefully grateful-looking smile. Clarabell's ribcage rippled lightly under Suzanne's hand, her fingers shaking as she tried to give her room to breathe. A dog barked, startling her into a full sob. Clarabell blinked gently up at her once, yellow eyes dimmed and clouded over.

The doctor told her that the sedative probably stopped her heart before he even injected the euthanasia drug.

The vet wrapped Clarabell in a towel and presented her to Suzanne, reminding her of a flag one would receive at a military funeral. White fur clung to her in patches, giving her suit a speckled gray look across her torso. She took the bundle and clutched it to her as she left, all eyes in the waiting room downcast as she passed. A man wearing a denim jacket with cut-off sleeves and a "Don't Tread on Me" hat hugged his schnauzer to his chest.

When she got to the car, Suzanne screamed for five minutes. A panhandler approaching her car turned on his heel and walked away. Suzanne watched him through a blur of tears streaking through her foundation. She wiped her eyes and smashed her fists against the steering wheel, grinding her teeth to try to calm down. "I wonder what he'll tell the other panhandlers," she asked the towel-wrapped bundle. She chuckled to herself until her smile contorted back into sobs.

She walked, slow and straight, to the backyard when she arrived home. In his gray suit and navy tie, her husband stood over a small grave dug along the back fence, his brown loafers dusty and scratched from the digging. Suzanne made eye contact just long enough for him to nod sympathetically. She gently unswaddled the still form of Clarabell and sobbed as she placed the cat into the small hole. She couldn't stop shaking.

"I'll plant white flowers when spring arrives," he wrapped his arms around Suzanne. She could smell the dirt on his hands as they pressed into her shoulders.

"I have to tell the kids," she sniffled, then drew back. Her husband picked up the discarded shovel and began gently pulling dirt over the small body. She stared at the hole as more and more brown earth obscured the white until only a mesh of dirt and displaced grass remained. "Did I wait too long to put her down?"

Her husband paused for a moment. She heard a gentle plinking of metal and looked up to see him gently shifting his hands over the shovel handle. "I can't say," he finally replied, pulling the last of the backyard back into place, "I'll buy a white azalea bush. Plant it right here. We'll have white flowers every spring for her."

Suzanne sat in the iron patio rocker. Her legs gave out under her. She took off her work heels on the porch. "I still have to tell the kids."

"They're adults; they'll be ok."

Two prior pet deaths told her that was only partially true if at all. Her eldest, Rebecca, came home for a visit to find their poodle, Helicon 38 Snickerdoodle, desperately trying to get out of the house through the refrigerator door. When she bent down to pick her up, the dog seized in her arms before going limp. When Suzanne found her, Rebecca began yelling, "I thought you were going to take her in! You told me she was in pain two months ago! You told me you were going to get her looked at!" Suzanne still sometimes woke up in a cold sweat, her ears echoing with her daughter's sobs.

They didn't speak for weeks. Suzanne just wanted all the kids to have a chance to say goodbye.

The second was worse. Her son's bulldog, Luca Brasi, showed no signs of slowing down, not even after her son, Daniel, left for college. Suzanne came home to Luca laying on the couch, drooling on the upholstery. She called to the dog, whose snaggle-toothed grin always made her laugh, and he leaped up and ran at her, only to suddenly stop halfway to her and fall over. His heart gave out. She thought it would be best to wait until Daniel came home to break the news. Two days later, he came home with a load of laundry, only to storm out without putting his bag down. The ten-dollar withdrawals on his account told her that the dorm washing machines still took quarters. At least he returned her texts.

And now Clarabell was dead, completing the dead pet trilogy. Suzanne rubbed her head and glanced up at her husband, busy at work rearranging his pot garden. The Pink Princess Philodendron was apparently being overshadowed by the multiple pots of begonias and an overeager banana pepper plant. He stomped somehow daintily about his pots in his gray suit, like an over-protective elephant trying not to crush a daisy. He eventually settled on moving the Princess to the metal bench by the mums and a peace lily, lifting it above the others to a royal seat. Suzanne glanced at her watch: 11:30. Why were dead pets such a staple of coming-of-age novels? *Old Yeller, Where the Red Fern Grows, Love that Dog...*even adult novels like *Flowers for Algernon* insisted on having an animal die to build character.

Suzanne didn't feel any character growth from her children. She felt their anger and their grief, and, yes, they did move on, but they certainly hadn't gained any significant life lessons from it. Maybe it was because they were adults. Maybe if they had been twelve when the pets were keeling over, they would have experienced some great insight into life untouched before.

Her husband brushed off his pants. "I'll have to go back to the office soon...are you going to call the kids?" *You tell the kids. They hate me when I tell them,* she wanted to say.

"I'll call them," she sighed as she slipped her black pumps back on.

"When will you tell Margaret?" he brushed the dirt off his hands.

Suzanne's sweet middle child. Margaret had just turned one when they adopted Clarabell. They had, quite literally, grown up together. Margaret had named her after her favorite character from *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse*. Rebecca had thought it was a stupid name. Suzanne had thought Snickerdoodle was a stupid name for a black poodle, but held her tongue on that count and scolded the five-yearold for being mean to her little sister. They had been inseparable to the point of their relationship being hazardous. She had come into Margaret's room once to find Clarabell sleeping directly on her head, unconcerned that she could potentially suffocate her favorite human. Despite her cries of concern and pushing the cat off of Margaret, Suzanne could not halt that behavior. She'd find Clarabell on Margaret's head until Margaret left for college. Clarabell continued to Helicon 40 sleep on her pillow, curled up in the indentation left by Margaret's absence.

*Well, shit.* Suzanne walked slowly into the house. "I'll call her last. I want to see how the other two react first..."

"If you think that's best."

"If you think something different would be better, you call her."

Her husband said nothing and turned to rotate a pot of Knock-Out roses. *That's what I thought.* 

Not a minute after they entered the house, there was a knock at the front door.

"What now?" Suzanne stopped for a second to look in the dining room mirror. She smoothed her hair and thanked the gods that she skipped mascara this morning. She almost didn't look like she'd been crying.

She turned the knob and flung the door open much quicker than she'd planned to. On the other side stood a young man with brown hair and glasses, dressed in a blue suit jacket and khaki pants. It was Rebecca's boyfriend, Thomas. Sudden surprise broke out over Suzanne's face.

"I'm sorry for the sudden intrusion, Mrs. Martin. 'Becca told me about when you are both home usually for lunch, and I didn't want to miss you." He held up a takeout order from a local favorite of hers, "I brought you and Mr. Martin some lunch...I hope that's ok." He swallowed nervously.

Suzanne raised an eyebrow. "No-thank you, Thomas," she stared at him, "please come in."

Suzanne could see that the collar of his shirt was damp with sweat. Her husband emerged from the bedroom wearing a black tweed suit, briskly tightening a maroon tie, and aside from a light sun-kissed Helicon 41 look to his ears, you never would have known he had been outside digging a grave.

"Thomas," he walked up to the young man, shaking his hand, "good to see you. How's work?"

"It's fine," Suzanne saw Thomas go a shade whiter as Mr. Martin wiped his hand on his pants, "I brought you both some lunch."

"Well, thank you, Thomas," Mr. Martin clapped a hand on his shoulder and the poor kid winced at the sudden impact.

"T'll take that," Suzanne suddenly had an inkling about Thomas' surprise visit. She walked the food to the kitchen and pulled down some blue Dixie paper plates with white flowers printed on the rim. She glanced out of the kitchen window overlooking the backyard. Aside from the out-of-place shovel and the recently moved plants, the backyard looked almost normal. There were no clear signs of the morning's burial. She looked down at her suit as she lifted the Styrofoam containers out of the bag. White fur still clung sadly to it, and she felt the tears welling up again. Almost an hour and a half had passed since they buried Clarabell, and she still hadn't called the kids. She plated the food as elegantly as possible and walked back into the other room, balancing three plates on her arms.

Mr. Martin and Thomas appeared deep in conversation; between them sat a small white box, which Thomas kept touching as if to emphasize a point. *Dammit...when do I tell Rebecca now?* Suzanne had planned to call Rebecca first, but there's nothing like a proposal and a pet death overlapping to take the wind out of one or the other. Maybe it was stupid to think so much about this, but Suzanne had messed up two pet deaths, and she wasn't about to somehow screw up the third. New son-in-law be damned. She set the plates down and put on her best comedy mask. "So, when are you popping the question?" she paused and glanced at her husband, "I assume you said yes?"

"Of course, of course. We were just discussing," Mr. Martin smiled gently.

"I haven't decided yet...I'm going out of town tomorrow, so it might not be until I get back." Thank God...she could break the news and keep the events separate. Rebecca, then Daniel, then Margaret once she got off of work.

"I'm thrilled for you both," she set the plates down on the table and walked away, leaving Thomas and Mr. Martin looking somewhat bewildered, "Go ahead and eat without me...I'm just...too excited to eat."

She waited in the bedroom, phone in hand, and snuck peeks out the window until she saw her husband walk Thomas to his car, giving him an uncomfortable side-hug and a pat on the back. She dialed Rebecca.

It was almost two. Clarabell had been in the ground for over three hours. Mr. Martin had stuck his head in the bedroom, saw her sitting there, and promptly turned tail and gone back to work. She heard his car hum to life as he pulled out of the driveway. The ringing felt like an eternity. Then a beep, "Mom?"

"Becca, sweetie, how are you doing?"

"Fine, Mom. Trying to increase my billable hours for the day." A brief pause followed. Suzanne could hear her daughter getting chastised by a salesman. She heard Rebecca sigh. "What's up?"

Suzanne braced herself, "It's Clarabell..."

Silence on the other end.

"We put her down this morning."

Suzanne heard a deep intake of breath punctuated by the sounds of the angry salesman harassing her daughter, "Shit, Mom." The salesman grew louder in the background, "I've...I've gotta go, Mom. Have you told Margaret?"

"Not yet."

"MOM. One sec—SHUT UP FOR ONE DAMN SECOND, LEE. I'M DEALING WITH A FAMILY CRISIS," a door slammed on the line, "You have got to tell her. That cat was her dang life."

"I know," Suzanne got up and went to the liquor cabinet outside the bedroom. It was an old writing desk with intricately carved vines on the outside. They'd redone the inside so that instead of papers, it now held wine and bourbon. She pulled a bottle of red, "but what if I screw it up?"

"Mom, quite honestly, you've probably screwed it up already. Did you know you were putting the cat down today?"

Suzanne filled a glass to the brim. "I did..."

"Mom, you should have told her. She's only two hours away! She would have wanted to be there!"

Suzanne tilted the contents down her throat. "I'll call her next," she lied. She could hear Rebecca sighing again, or maybe static, "You think I'm a bad mom."

A deeper sigh rung through the phone, "No, what? Mom, you're just bad at this. The pets get sick and you seize up instead of just tearing the band aid off."

"I just wanted everyone to have a chance to say their goodbyes to Snickerdoodle," Suzanne knew Rebecca wasn't talking about the "pets."

"Did you, Mom? How'd you decide that? Did you talk to Dad about it?"

### Helicon 44

Suzanne watched a single drop of red wine slide evenly around the outside of the glass, wrapping around the stem before settling at the base, "We've always felt it's better if only one of us handles things like this."

"Are you sure about that, Mom? Because so far, this seems like it's worked terribly," Suzanne felt like she could hear Rebecca twirling her hair, an old nervous habit she'd had from childhood. "This is a chance to do right by the cat. And Margaret. This is the last chance."

Silence flooded the conversation. Suzanne looked at her phone. If the call time hadn't kept ticking up, she would have assumed Rebecca had hung up. "I'll call her."

"Do that. I have to go," the call ended unceremoniously.

One down, two to go. Suzanne poured another glass of wine and texted Daniel. "Are you free right now?"

"Yeah, Mom."

And with that, she called him, "Hey, Danny Boy, how's college treating you?"

"It's good, Mom, studying for a big test tomorrow," she heard a microwave beep.

"Are you eating alright?"

"Yes, Mom-damn, that's hot. What's up?"

She paused before trying the blunt approach, "The cat's dead."

"Aw shit, mom. Do I need to call Margaret? Is she ok?"

Suzanne downed the wine glass.

"You did tell her..."

She poured another.

"Suzanne, Mom, why?"

Suzanne put a hand across her forehead. She rubbed her red painted nails over her temples as she thought of her response. "Because I don't know how to tell her. I haven't known how to tell any of you."

Daniel's long pause was satisfying. Somehow knowing she had made her youngest actually stop for a minute gave her some satisfaction. "I don't know, Mom. I get the 'don't shoot the messenger' thing, but why do you wait to tell the person it will upset the most? Why didn't you call me as soon as Luca died?"

"I didn't want to upset you; you had exams. I knew you'd be home soon."

She could hear her son thinking through the phone. "I dunno. But this isn't about Luca right now. That cat was here before the dogs and was here after the dogs. You have got to call Margaret."

"Why? Why do I have to?" Suzanne broke a little.

"Because...I guess because you're our mom?"

"Does your father bear the same weight because he's 'your dad'?"

"Mom, Dad never got the whole pet thing. You did. You do," Daniel paused to chew something, "You need to call Margaret before she figures it out."

"I will. Please, just don't contact her. I will tell her," Suzanne's head was hurting from the wine.

"Today, Mom."

"I will; go back to studying. I'll take care of her."

Suzanne felt less like a parent and more like a bitter Human Resource department head. She'd already ruined it. She looked at the clock. It was almost four. Every minute was another minute she wasn't putting her adult child through the twisted trial of a bildungsroman. She was too inebriated to call anyway. Her head ached and swam as Helicon 46 her conversation with Daniel progressed. She walked slowly into the dark master bedroom, crawled into bed, and let her shoes hit the floor. Suzanne let her hands run over the pieces of fur on her suit. She imagined Clarabell purring gently as she passed out.

She woke up two hours later when the door slammed. "Suzanne? Suzanne, are you ready?"

Ready? Ready for what? Is my child divorcing me? Her wine headache sloshed about her skull, making her stomach queasy and her thoughts hazy. Her husband ambled into the room and stared at her, "You didn't get my text, did you?"

"No, no I did not," she covered her eyes as he turned on the lights.

"Our godson got a promotion this afternoon. I offered to take him out for dinner. Rebecca and Thomas will be there too. I figured we'd have a 'secret' celebration for them as well." He chuckled to himself as he hung his suit jacket in the closet and swapped his work shirt for a more casual plaid.

Suzanne gently sat up. "This couldn't have waited until tomorrow? Or this weekend? Or any other day?"

Her husband stared at her, moon-calf eyes searching for what he did wrong, "I just thought we might need a night out."

"Maybe you need one," Suzanne rolled to the side.

"It's been a long day," he was by the bed, resting a hand on her arm, "I know you need a break."

She gently tugged away from him. It was impossible not to be annoved, but she did love him. "What time are we going?"

"Everyone is coming over here around 7:30," he replied. "Okay." She heard him pause at the door, "I ordered the azalea bush this afternoon. We can pick it up next week." He walked out of the bedroom and left her to her thoughts.

Her godson would wonder where the cat was. Rebecca had probably already told Thomas. She wondered how uncomfortable that had made him. Suzanne sat up and took an aspirin by the bed before going to the bathroom and washing her face, then caking layers of makeup back on to hide the swelling from her crying. It's just a cat.

By the time she walked out, everyone was there. Rebecca gave her a questioning look, and Thomas looked sympathetic and embarrassed. They piled into the car and drove to an old drive-in that had been converted into an upscale family restaurant. The restaurant was packed and playing reruns of *Mystery Science Theater 3000* on the old movie screen. Her husband ordered two pitchers of beer for the table, and as she filled her glass, she realized the cat had been dead for almost ten hours, and Margaret still didn't know. And no one at this table knew she didn't know. Suzanne took a sip of her beer and smiled at her family. There was no judgment at that table, for no one knew there was anything to judge. *Tomorrow, they cast their stones,* she thought.

She leaned over and hugged her godson, telling him just how proud she was of him. She put on her comedy mask and filled Rebecca and Thomas' glasses, winking discreetly at Thomas. If they all drank enough, no one would care that the damn cat was dead. Maybe they'd all forget. Maybe even Suzanne would forget, and it wouldn't matter anymore. Suzanne stared down into the foamy head of her beer, then glanced at her cell phone. An unread text message from Margaret sat bright and green on the lock screen. She slid the phone deep into an inner pocket of her purse, took a long sip of beer, and smiled around the table. It's just a cat.

# Nine Years of an Epiphany

Antonio ambled beside me as the sun hid behind section eight houses and scraggly trees, turning the evening sky from molten pink and mauve into a blanket of twilight blue. Straggling clouds floated after the sun. The chirps of cicadas nearly obscured all other sound crickets, frogs, and barking, shackled dogs.

The mid-summer humidity made our skin clammy and turned our brains into mush, and we trudged through the dense air like waisthigh water. A thin layer of perspiration made our brown skin shine like greased up cars. Our thoughts only went as far as the stop sign at the end of our street.

"See you tomorrow!" I hollered from under my car porch, waving and imagining another day of running around like bandits. Antonio dissipated in the direction of his house and I stood in the dark for a few minutes, looking after him, wondering if we had even been friends in the first place.

Inside, the smell of bleach and Pine-Sol assaulted me as I tiptoed across the beige tile floors, still slick and streaky. Not because I didn't want to slip and fall but in case someone was waiting to bombard me for marking the clean floors. No one came. A soothing quiet settled over the house. The only thing audible was the soft whirling of the ceiling fan in the living room and some televisions echoing on the same channel. I settled onto the couch.

### BOOM!

I sprung to my feet, my heart a fluttering hummingbird. The adults in the house started a fuss in tired voices as they, one by one,

came from their designated corners. As creeping jennies do, they crawled along the hallway wall towards my cousin's closed door. I peered around the corner with the intention of investigating but shrunk away when my uncle spoke.

"Hey man, everything alright in there?" His voice bellowed, prompting my cousin to come out of his room and groan in his face. We were in the presence of a mutated caveman who'd somehow managed to stay preserved.

My grandma stood a few feet away near me, shaking her head on cue, as she'd done time and time again. "Junior, I done told you to stay your ass off them drugs!" She cried out, but her anger counted for nothing, nor did her opinions, or kindness.

In everyone else's opinion she should have booted the manchild ages ago, but this adult man had "nowhere else to go;" the singsong catchphrase resonated within me because none of us did.

My uncle, Greg, always sat in a rocking chair swaying in his own wind. His face was tight and bunched together with tangible dismay. He was a bald and brown man that wore a scowl as routinely as his glasses. He was resolute until he wasn't, skin as hard as the earth's mantle. Always silently frowning directly into everyone's face until he got tired of looking. He cussed up a storm too when angered, which he spat quietly to himself as he rocked.

My grandmother was a short, round woman with a new pair of Walmart glasses every week and a homemade cookie for each of your troubles. Permanently freckled with dark open pores and tiny red moles, constellations dotted her beige skin. Her strawberry brown hair was straight and neck-length and her eyes were imbued with a kindness that sometimes appeared trampled.

My mother was a miniature version of my grandmother except for the inky mane that cascaded down her back in a glossy, pin-Helicon 50 straight waterfall. I attempted to mirror their behaviors and act sad or greatly affected, but no emotions ever surfaced. We all lived with my grandmother, whose home was a zoo for those who'd either gotten lost or given up.

"I saw the devil in my mirror!" My cousin screeched.

Just because we didn't see it didn't mean it hadn't happened. But even in the presence of a bad trip, I was skeptical about the devil having the courage to reveal himself to anyone. Regardless, fear stalked across my skin in goosebumps and the wisps of hair along my arm bristled.

"Please help me! Please y'all please, he tryna get me," Junior begged, almost in tears.

Uneasiness pitted in my stomach and multiplied like mold. A pair of endearing hands grabbed my sides and a familiar voice told me not to look at the mess. Told me that I'm too young to bear the burden of living with my cousin. The noise from earlier had been Junior toppling over his bureau in defense against the devil.

I shrugged my mother off and turned away from her. "How can I ignore it? I live here." I couldn't blame her for caring but it frustrated me all the same. The only devil I saw around was my cousin lurching over everyone, zombified. A devil of rancor and all the flammable carnage of human despair. In these moments, Junior was a man whose soul had been vacuumed out.

"I'm dying, call the ambulance, please!" He melted into the ground and winced by our feet, clutching his chest and squirming like a worm—a creature that we had no means of resuscitating. "My heart hurts so bad."

"Get up boy, you're just fine!" A stormy rage brewed in my grandmother's voice as an interlude to the foreboding concern.

"Help me, Ms. Maggie!" A guttural groan heaved from Junior's closed mouth, which oozed spittle and foam like milky suds at the corner of his lips.

My grandmother ignored his pleas and continued lecturing him. Sadness dripped from her voice, ignored like our leaking faucets. Everything started fast-forwarding before my eyes. I didn't want to see a man die in front of me. I'd been exposed to death before; I knew the final breath would come all too easily, like the body was built to anticipate it. I wasn't ready to see my cousin die.

"Oh my god, call 911," my grandmother said, grasping for my mother's arm. I stared blankly at the man below us and knew he needed help. It was clear in the sleepless bruising under his lolling, blood-shot eyes. I wondered about the patience of God. He had to run out of forgiveness; redemption couldn't be passed out like food stamps. We were all trying to get through to him, but time and time again we faced death in the debris of car crashes, ammunition, police, and drugs.

Sweat from panic and paranoia drenched Junior's white tshirt, now only a transparent film clinging wetly to his bloated torso. Anguish stretched his mouth into a pained, ghostly oval. Once we'd all had enough of loitering around his writhing form like the cult of *mishing sobriety*, we went to the living room and sat on the couches. At that point, my mother was just getting off the phone with 911, and my cousin slowly composed himself like nothing happened. He lethargically stood on shaky legs and sat on the couch with us.

"Never mind!" My mother stuttered as the dispatcher hung up. But my grandmother convinced her that they probably needed to come anyways. "My mother's greatest wish was for him to get clean before she passed on away from here." My grandmother thought aloud, pressing her lips firmly together as if my cousin wasn't present.

Everything that I'd ever felt over Junior became muted and opaque. I suppressed these *things* so far into the disposable depths of myself that I could no longer express in words how I felt about him. I could splay my greatest sadness across the page but a mural of changing color would have been better—as sometimes language gets in the way.

"Well, what now?" I looked around for guidance, but no one seemed to have heard me.

All at once, Junior regressed into some heathen before our eyes. And it sounded like a painful adjustment. My uncle sprung towards him to snap him out of it, but Junior kept hollering like he'd been doused with hot grease. His father swaggered onto the scene with his hands in his pockets, a cool lean, and his brows pinched together as if being here with us, with his son, inconvenienced him. He went over and all four hands attempted to hold Junior down. I scurried into my grandmother's room and tucked my small form in between her bed and window. I hid in this dark corner all night until the blue and red lights of an ambulance splotched the brown curtains.

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The next morning the smell and sizzling of bacon woke me up. My grandma requested we be ready for church early, to ensure a nice seat. Everyone leered at my cousin who sat and ate his food nonchalantly.

"What?" He asked, prepared to deny, deny, deny, and play the victim.

"You realize what you did last night was wrong, right? You can't stay here acting like that." Only my grandma spoke but everyone's expressions mirrored her words.

He buried his face deeper into his plate. He angrily ripped into the bacon with his teeth and chewed it down slowly. His arms made a circle around the plate as if protecting it.

"What are you talking about, Ms. Maggie?" He addressed my grandmother but gave a dirty glower to the rest of us. "Y'all always got something to say. It's always Junior doing this or that."

I listened to his petulant drawl until I could no longer enjoy my food and walked away from the table to get dressed. As did everyone else, getting up without another word to him.

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The sweet southern heat licked at my skin as we all piled out of the car and into the church, which was just as cramped and uncomfortable. People greeted my grandmother like family, hugging her with one arm and giving her posh cheek smooches. They complimented my four, fluffy, neatly plaited braids, accentuated with a large pink bow, twin-beads, and butterfly barrettes dangling from the ends. My old-fashioned dress had round, frilly shoulders and a bow tied at my waist. The skirt was girlish, and had a crinkly fringe finished at the bottom.

I looked to my right at a woman gyrating like she was trying to jig her soul from her body. The pews rocked under her erratic movement. Everyone was around her chanting and fanning.

"What's wrong with her?" I mumbled.

My mother smiled at me and whispered, "She's caught the holy ghost."

### Helicon 54

"Wheeew!! You go lady!" I cheered and applauded her since it seemed like a very brave thing to do, catch the spirit before it got to one of the other members of the church. My mother looked at me and pulled me back down into my seat.

Once the preacher noticed, he screamed through the microphone and the band's enthusiasm accelerated. "Look to your neighbor, say—say thank you neighbor! Ooooohhhuugg!"

I glanced at my neighbor who had her hand extended.

"Thanks," I said reluctantly but refused to take her hand. Her yellow umbrella hat kept getting caught on strands of my hair every time she jumped or bounced for joy. I smiled a little with clenched teeth to keep my frustration abated.

Everything moved too fast, and lasted too long. My head spinning, eyes rolling, hands clapping, and feet stomping until I was no longer myself. I looked around the dizzying room. Brittle, black tourmaline bodies sweated, chipping and twinkling in their own dewy lather. They moved with a jaunty angularity and convulsed together in praise and hope like a hive of high honey bees, raving and celebrating until the music died. Compassion seemed slippery; secretly, they all hoped for a better life than their neighbors. Soon it would be time to go home.

The stained glass above the tapestry of Christ winked at me. I looked up towards Christ, wishing he would save me from his people already. Or at least tell me I didn't have to come to his house every Sunday.

"It's time to go," my grandmother told to her brood. The family made a circle around the church, greeting people one last time. I sidled behind them, uncomfortable.

"Thank you, God." I whispered with resolve.

The sun was in the middle of a perfect, unmarked sky by the time we walked out of church.

"I wonder what true freedom is," I blurted. Everyone paused to give me a look.

"Your ancestors have given you...." my mother drones like white noise. My uncle interrupted to agree and start a tangent of his own. I thought of my cousin, proclaiming his death by my feet. The church couldn't save Junior, we couldn't save Junior, I didn't even know if God could save Junior—but He kept him alive.

I wasn't sad for him anymore because being sad is the greatest disservice I could do. I no longer wanted to see him staggering into our house at night like an apparition. But even worse, I would rather have him here, doing these reckless things, than to watch him die.

I held my mother's hand as we crossed the street. "Would you rather have an addiction or die?" I asked.

She stopped and tugged me back by our laced fingers. She didn't have the courage to answer me seriously, so she laughed and licked her lips.

"What? Where is all of this talk coming from?" Her brows were furrowed but she smiled like she knew exactly what I meant. She thumbed at my eyebrow, waiting on a response, but I couldn't explain how I felt.

# The Passing-Throughs

The pastor stared at me expectantly, nestling a Bible under one arm and shielding his eyes from the rain with the other. The sodden crowd continued to look at me like I was the one going soilside-down. He said something to me. What did he say?

"Arty, do you want to say anything?" he repeated, trying to soften his thunderous voice.

I figured I better answer quick. I shook my head.

"You don't want to say anything?" he reiterated in surprise, "to your parents?"

I wanted to get mad, ask him exactly what good he thought that would do now, but Jedidiah's rumbling voice itched my brain like an engine turning over. Listening to it almost convinced me I'd never left, if it weren't for the lines that now cradled his mouth and the shine of silver on his temples.

At my side, a hulking figure stood with his head hung low and his shoulders shaking. The balding top of his head leaned against me like a weary old dog's might. I knew he didn't have any clue who lay in those pits, or why we all stood gathered around them, but I lay rhythmic, comforting pats on his back either way. Beaux always got sad when I got sad. I didn't really think twenty-five years would have changed that.

At the other end of the graves, Jed prayed like he delivered the last lines of *Hamlet*. "...Lord, give Arty strength as he passes through this time of suffering..."

*Arty.* Arthur was my big-city name. Arty sounded like the name of someone I hadn't heard a word of in twenty-five years. Someone I owed money to. Someone I'd duck into the nearest doorway to avoid if I spotted him on the street.

In the two pits stretched out before me, my parents lay separated by about three feet of solid earth, which didn't seem much different from their marriage in life. My mother, a woman I remembered as rather plain but put-together for the most part, occupied the left. And beside her, my father, a straight-faced and completely forgettable man, occupied the right. Two nobodies from nowhere, with nothing to show for it.

If Jed kept praying, I didn't hear it. Beyond the cemetery sprawled Corbell, Louisiana, a paper mill town with a mill that packed up and left for greener pastures in the heat of the Depression. It left a population of three-hundred mill workers and their families with two options: either starve where you are, or starve across the bridge in Tumey. The people who gathered around the graves were the children of families that refused to die—generations of mold that lived in dark cracks until it became safe to spread. That safety came nearly ten years later, when a highway rolled right through Corbell, making it the hot spot for the passing-throughs to stop for a night. The people of Corbell got just enough to keep doing what they'd always done, never asking for more.

Two generations of men that Beaux looked just like took to raising cows. The pale shadow of a barn stood in the mist like a commemorative statue to the mill. Hooves sloshed around in anklehigh mud and flat teeth picked out sparse chunks of grass. From the left of the fence, two moon-shaped eyes stared at me vacuously, glittering like brown lake water. Jed closed up his soaked Bible and everyone headed for the road. Beaux pulled away from me with wide, swimming eyes, and a world of creases between his brows. It felt so familiar it almost made me shiver. The same face, just older, and no wiser.

His expression a meadow of honesty, he sniffled, "You're sad you're home?"

I shook my head slowly, watching the able-bodied folk gather shovels from a nearby truck bed. "No, Beaux. I'm not sad."

> He brightened up a little. "And you ain't going nowhere?" "No, Beaux. I'll stay awhile."

"I like that you're home, Arty." He said it like *Ar-dee*. It made my hair stand up.

"I like it too, Beaux."

It never felt good to lie to Beaux, but it was always easy. The way his face lit up when I told him, *Sure, fireflies could be little stars*, or, *Beaux, I think that lizard'll come back to life if you ask Jesus real nice*. It never felt good to lie to him, but it always felt better to make him happy. It surprised me how easily I could do it now, with him towering over me the way his father used to.

"Why don't we take Arty to the house, Beaux?" Jed asked, passing off his shovel to a face in the crowd. "I'll drive us up."

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Dripping wet in the passenger's seat of Jed's prehistoric Ford, I tried not to look at him like a stranger. I remembered an articulate, sober-minded boy—so sober I thought he'd never find it in himself to take his father's place at the church. But here he sat, gripping a wet Bible between his knees and wearing a tie. When he preached at the graveside, I could have sworn I heard his father give the same sermon three decades earlier.

"So'd they ever figure out who..." he paused, realizing the sound of his question too late. I wished he'd just say it.

"Yeah, someone passing through. Northbound. Hit them head-on and had enough juice to speed off. Some big truck; Ma's hatchback didn't stand a chance. But they saw the license plate on the security camera at Skitter's—"

"It's his son Wyatt's store now. Skitter died of a heart attack eight years ago."

"Oh."

"But the fella that did it, he's-"

"He's put away, yeah."

Jed nodded, then solemnly said, "It's always the Northwards that cause trouble. We ought to close the right half of the highway and make a detour around town. People going South never stop."

I knew what he said just stood in as a placeholder for the inevitable "sorry for your loss" that would make me foam at the mouth to hear again. But I couldn't stop myself from thinking, *It's because people going Northward are racing to get their piece of life, and the Southwards are just trying to get home.* 

In the backseat, Beaux thumbed a smiley-face on the foggedup window. He spoke to it, telling it about itself, halfway humming and halfway mumbling.

In a low voice, I asked, "Listen, Jed, has he been ...?"

"He's been just fine, Arty. His father takes good care of him. I make sure he has what he needs."

I nodded, trying not to ask for every detail of the last twentyfive years. "And you're...?"

He smiled wanly. "I'm right where you left me." Helicon 60 I nodded again, falling silent as we rolled up to the ranch house. After parking, he paused a second before turning to me and asking, "Where *have* you been, pal?"

New York. Chicago. London. Hong Kong. Everywhere. Everywhere. Everywhere. I wanted him to beg me to tell him, just so I could refuse. But when I didn't answer, he didn't seem surprised. Beaux followed us out of the truck. He walked a little pigeon-toed and I guess he always would, if it still hadn't straightened out. It wore the sides of his shoes out, and I could see his sock rubbing through his work boots.

"Can't anybody take you for new shoes, Beaux?"

"They ain't got no big size at the store, Arty. Don't be mad, they just don't."

"So, you and Jed go to Tumey, get you a new pair."

"Don't never get out to Tumey," Beaux mused to himself. He didn't sound abundantly clear on the issue.

"They're expensive, Arty," Jed said quietly.

The rain suddenly felt colder than before. "Well, then I'll get you a new pair."

Beaux let us into the house, and the sound of the rain faded. I had been staying here for two nights, including the one I rode into town on. The prospect of sleeping alone in my childhood home sent the room to spinning. It felt like getting locked in a museum afterhours, and bedding down in King Tut's sarcophagus for the night. Beaux needed no convincing to let me stay.

As far as Corbell went, the house could hold its own. The ceilings reached high and the walls were wood-paneled, decorated with the occasional crooked pair of antlers or right-side-up horseshoe. The worn couch and armchair were the only flat surfaces free from the clutter of hunting jackets, mud-caked tools, and threadbare work gloves. Not trash, just clutter, and layers of it fossilizing on every table. Helicon 61 I fell back on the couch that had made up my bed for the last two nights, pretending not to feel Jed staring a hole through my head. I wish he'd just say it. Say whatever ate him up so bad.

"You're okay," he finally told me, coming near just long enough to touch my shoulder and walk off. He said it like there wasn't any other option. "Right?"

"Arty, look, I got—" Beaux said suddenly, "Hold on, I'll show you. I got bedsheets with little horseshoes on them. Hold on, Arty, I'll show you."

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All night, I dreamt I followed the dashed yellow lines of a highway with a car's chrome grill on my heels. He woke me up at six in the morning to show me the sheets. Again, he disappeared down the hall to his bedroom.

From the side of the house, I heard the sound of a door opening and closing quietly. Around the corner, a bald-headed, bigshouldered old man peeked into the room, and when we spotted him, he cautiously walked in. A reddish-brown slime decorated his arms, lap, and chest. Streaks of red smeared his cheeks. Lines creased his face, deepened with stress. Twenty-five years ago, he looked just like Beaux does now.

"Hey, Clyde," I greeted. He gave me a curt nod. If I hadn't been fresh from a funeral, he likely wouldn't have bothered.

"Beaux in here?" he urgently asked, but quietly, like he was keeping a secret.

Jed shook his head. "He just went out, but..." His eyes suddenly went wide. "Don't tell me."

He nodded grimly. "She had it. Just now." Helicon 62 Before I could ask what that meant, Clyde urged, "I need y'all's help. She can't get up, now. There's something, I don't know...with her hips, I guess."

"But Beaux—" I started, motioning to the hallway.

"I don't want him to see her like that—he's already going to have a fit that he missed the birth, Lord have mercy. He's been asking me about that damn calf for months now."

If I thought about it, I remembered him mentioning a baby. I never thought too much about it. The program of my parent's twistedup bodies only now started to static, letting in other thoughts and sounds. He might have mentioned a baby. Never a calf.

We followed Clyde out to the barn, the rain falling down on us in sheets. In the broadest expanse of the dirt floor, a cow lay on its fat belly amongst the hay, her back rising and falling in deep, heavy breaths. A wet, shriveled calf lay on its side near her, twitching in the daybreak of its existence. She gently licked at the top of its head.

"We got to try to get her up. She ought to be up by now," Clyde muttered, crouching behind her and laying a hand on her hip. "Y'all get on that side. Do what I tell you."

For maybe five minutes, we pushed and pulled on her as gently as we could, trying to urge her up. But she just lay there, breathing laboriously and licking her calf. It seemed to start livening, lifting its head up and kicking its hooves.

"Come on, Peggy-girl," Clyde reasoned, looking ready to promise her anything if she would just get up. "Come on, girl."

I hated the way she lay there silent. I wished she would struggle to stand, like her calf. But her dark eyes blinked slowly, as if to say, *Right here will do just fine*.

From the barn door, a slat of sunshine stretched across the dirt. "I been looking for you guys! What y'all doing?"

We all tensed like we'd been caught doing something we shouldn't have been doing. By the time I turned, Beaux's eyes had frozen solid. His mouth hung barely open. In his hands, a horseshoepatterned bed sheet crumpled between his fingers. His eyes deliriously searched the scene. Finally, he croaked: "Peggy had her baby?"

> "Now, you listen, Beaux. Don't you get upset," Clyde warned. His frozen eyes began to melt down his face. "I ain't. I ain't." "Beaux, don't."

"I ain't." Tears flowed down his red cheeks, but his expression didn't change. "Why isn't she up?"

"She's hurting," he replied with faux-neutrality.

I stepped backwards when Beaux came close to Peggy, but Jed and Clyde didn't move. We all just dumbly watched him kneel next to her, beside the calf, and speak as quietly as he could into her ear.

"Hey Peggy? Stand up, please, Peggy. Peggy. Peggy."

She just twitched her ear benignly in response, but didn't stop her licking. Beaux reached to touch the calf, but his father beckoned him not to. Sitting back a moment, he looked at her empty, brown eyes in bewilderment and fear. He covered her back with the bedsheet, then fell on his rear, bursting into tears.

Jed's thunderous voice turned low and soft. He said some quiet things, sitting next to him on the dirt. Clyde crouched down too, looking on with a straight, yet gentle expression. I didn't move.

Something about it ate me up. I hated the way he went so easily to the ground, like he didn't mind being there, right next to the cow. *Get up*, I thought, *just get up*. I stood rigid, then walked towards the door, and then turned around again and came back. Cold sweat broke out on my back. My face felt hot like I was boiling from the inside out. The words crawled out of my throat on spider's legs.

#### Helicon 64

"She's not dead, Beaux," I said firmly. Jed looked up at me uncertainly. Beaux hadn't heard. "She's alive. You shouldn't cry 'til she's dead, at least."

Now he looked up at me, scrubbing at one of his eyes with his fist. "I know, Arty."

"Then why are you crying?"

He looked down at the ground, his face burning red. It made my heart sink, but I couldn't stop. My hands shook, and I plunged them deep into my pockets. I felt like a flame, racing down a wick. "Cow's not even dead yet," I sharply reiterated, "and you're crying. That's not how it works. That's not how the real world works."

"Arty," Jed called in his preacher voice.

"You think you can cry over a cow that isn't even dead yet, and make it out there? You think that's going to get you anywhere north of here? You think *any* of those Northbound passing-throughs cry over a damn *living* cow? You think that?" I couldn't stop myself from shouting. I didn't realize I started until I stopped.

"Arty, I think that's enough." Effortlessly, Jed's voice shook the walls of the barn like the inside of a chapel. He stood, assessing me with eyes that sized me up like a yardstick. "Let's go outside."

The rain had lightened up to a drizzle. About ten feet from the barn, we climbed up on the edge of the wooden fence and sat there, staring out into the field of wandering, aimless cows. It reminded me of summer evenings that went on forever, until they didn't.

After a while, he asked me frankly, "Why didn't you ever visit, huh?"

For a second, I thought about it. I had a million reasons throughout the years, mostly on Christmas, or Mother's Day, or Beaux's birthday, or any given day where I reminisced too much. "Why didn't *you?*" I knew it wasn't fair for me to ask that. But I hated the way he looked at me like someone with blood on their hands.

He blinked and looked down at his shoes. I could see the words he held back. "You don't have to tell me," he said. "You made it out. We're proud of you, Arty. Don't forget that. I guess we all just wished we could have told you in person."

"Well, you're telling me now. Don't feel so sorry for yourself."

He looked at me with eyes that were for another person. The faint smile on his mouth was for a black-and-white photograph of someone who had never been deader. I sat in his place.

"I don't. I always knew you were going to get out." He nudged me with his elbow. "You're A-Plus Arty, remember?"

I chuckled. "A-Plus Arty. Yeah, it rings a bell." It rang a cathedral. My nails dug into the fence, leaving little crescent-shaped dents in the soft wood.

"I guess I wish I'd told my parents."

"About what?"

"Any of it." I shrugged, "Just to make sure they didn't think I'd turned into some kind of loser."

Jed just laughed and shook his head. "Oh, they didn't think that, Arty. You're too much like your father."

I smiled at him to hide that his words had just driven a railroad spike between my eyes. My spine became a pike and my head was the anonymous skull that topped it. The paint on the walls inside me started peeling.

"Let's go," I said, creaking like a rocking chair.

Inside, the calf tottered around on new, trembling legs. Peggy watched it pensively. Beaux smiled now, though his face burned red with tear-tracks. Clyde held the bedsheet under one arm, not looking away from him once as we entered. His expression looked grim.

"Look, Arty," Beaux exclaimed, crouching down, "The baby's walking around!"

If he said more, I didn't reply. I thought I heard it start thundering again.

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I dreamt I ran as fast as I could up the dashed lines of a highway, running after a car that accelerated just out of my reach. No matter how fast I ran, I would never reach it. I would never reach it.

The blanket over me clung to my sweat-soaked skin as I flinched awake. I expected to see Beaux an inch from my face, shaking my shoulder, half-talking, half-whispering, *Arty, are you awake?* But the living room was silent and bright, the sun high in the sky. The wallclock read ten in the morning. I couldn't believe Clyde let me sleep on the couch this long. Maybe he didn't care. I knew they would have been out in the fields since the sun rose, toiling and sweating just like they did the day before, and the day before that.

I folded the blanket and laid it on the couch. For a few minutes, I sat there and waited for something to happen—I really would have taken anything. When the room remained silent, I stood and collected the few belongings I had brought inside. Most of it remained crammed in the trunk of my car. I slipped on my shoes, still caked with cemetery mud. In front of the house, my car crouched patiently where I left it, idle, waiting—it seemed to mock me. I hated the way it seemed to know I would be back.

So far, no sight of Beaux or Clyde. Just a field full of milling cows, standing stupidly and picking grass. As I rushed to throw my few bags into the backseat, the ground rumbled with the movement of an approaching car. In the distance, Jed's truck expanded into view like a pinpoint of light, growing bigger and louder. I stood there and watched as he parked beside me, never once looking away from me as he cracked open the door and got out, with an expression blank other than a single line between his brows. His gaze suggested he might have known every second of my entire life.

"Arty," he greeted.

"Jed," I replied.

A long, tense silence passed. If he wanted to talk, then he just should. I already knew what he wanted to say. I wished he'd just say it. Why didn't he ever just *say* things?

"You aren't coming back, are you?"

I thought about lying. But instead I shook my head. "No, Jed."

He nodded like, somehow, he expected it. His expression didn't change, but his tone shifted. "What about—?"

"I'll take care of my parent's house. I know a crew I can send to clean it out. I'll hire a realtor. It'll all be taken care of, Jed. Don't worry."

"You know that's not what I'm worried about."

A long, horrible silence hung in the air like we were waiting for a train to pass by. "Don't tell him you saw me go. Please."

The preacher didn't say anything, just stretched out his hands and then dropped them at his sides. I fished out my wallet and passed him my card. He looked at it like I handed him a knife blade-forward, and took it with the same caution.

"Call me sometime, Jed. Whenever. I'll pick up. I swear. Just call me, okay?" He blinked at me, looking like he decided he wouldn't say anything more to me. But when I turned for my car, I heard: Helicon 68 "Good luck, Arthur," he said like he meant it, "with it all." I nodded and tried to smile. He headed for the house, and I headed for the road.

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Turning out of Beaux Ranch, I passed the cemetery where I could see the rectangular dirt on top of my parents' graves still brown and fresh. Beyond them, standing at the fence just before the cemetery, the calf stood motionlessly, watching me go with its palpably vacuous eyes. In the distance, from behind the barn, I heard a loud, echoing gunshot. The calf didn't startle.

I headed north.

# Virtual Particles

The Nobel presentation ceremony was two days after Oliver's funeral. Their taxi was already halfway to the airport when Clara nudged Rosalie and asked if she wanted to go home.

Rosalie shifted farther away in her seat, sweatpants dragging over the mottled leather of the upholstery. They weren't moving, stuck in bumper-to-bumper lunch rush traffic.

"I can't."

"Sure, we can. Just call the institute and tell them you can't make it. They'll understand."

For Rosalie, the taxi was already halfway to the airport, but Clara would have said it was *only* halfway to the airport. Still, it was nice of Clara to accompany her to the ceremony, however grudgingly. She took a few days off from work and left her husband and kids to go with Rosalie to Norway so she wouldn't have to go by herself. Maybe she'd only offered expecting Rosalie to back out eventually. But as the taxi rolled inexorably forward, inch by inch, that hope was draining.

"I'm going to see this through."

Clara shrugged. "Ok, Rosie." Rosalie frowned, irritated at the nickname, but not enough to fill the ensuing silence.

The cab rolled forward another few inches. It was a blustery day; the shriek of the wind around the skyscrapers could be heard even over the blare of traffic horns. Rosalie absently calculated how fast the gusts raced by and how much faster they would need to be to wear down the buildings, partly because it was interesting and partly to avoid thinking about anything else. The driver ignored his passengers. He had lazy, liquid brown eyes like a cow, which were fixed stubbornly on the blue Chevy in front of them. Passively in denial of the women disagreeing in his car, he hadn't said a word the entire time, except an apathetic "ma'ams" when he picked them up from Clara's house.

As always, Clara spoke again first. "Rosie...I know you feel like you have to do this. But it's ok to step away. It's ok to let yourself miss him." Her voice softened with what might have been genuine sympathy.

Rosalie bit down a noise of frustration at the interruption, throwing her off mid-calculation. "Drop it, Clara."

The rest of the trip, another half hour before arriving at LaGuardia, passed in silence. For the past several years, the sisters had maintained only an amicable civility. They spent every holiday swapping who hosted their families for dinner and didn't see each other much beyond that. Clara was a pediatrician with her own practice, alongside her husband Steven, who stayed home with their three kids most of the time. Rosalie and Oliver, childless and ambitious, were theoretical physicists at Columbia. Their experiment last year at CERN, proving the transient existence of virtual particles, had secured them the Nobel prize.

A robber at the convenience store down the block from their apartment gunned down Oliver while he was picking up toothpaste for the trip to Oslo. Rosalie had spent the last week cancelling their planned vacation in Norway and organizing a hurried funeral for her husband. The Nobel wasn't awarded posthumously, but since he'd earned it before death, and there was still a surviving recipient, the institute's plans were unchanged.

Oliver would have been in the cab beside her, his long body folded ungracefully into the cramped backseat. She would sleep on his Helicon 71 shoulder on the plane, they'd have had champagne in the hotel room and enjoyed a week-long vacation in Norway after the ceremony. Instead, she got Clara—petite, snippy, and resentfully separated from her own family.

Rosalie paid the driver while Clara unloaded the luggage, and then there was the familiar mad scramble of racing across the terminals to reach the correct gate. Rosalie was used to lagging in the wake of Oliver's long stride and teasing laugh; it was hard not to be angry at Clara's short legs and labored panting.

"Hurry up, will you?"

"I'm carrying more than you."

"I'm not the one who packed half my closet."

There was something about airports that always made Rosalie feel rushed, overstimulation buzzing behind her eyes, but they still made it through security and arrived at the gate in plenty of time. Clara collapsed into one of the greasy chairs, luggage strewn around her. Their chosen seats were always right by the big windows where they could watch the tarmac, as far away from other people as possible.

Clara slumped in her seat, closing her eyes and blocking out the world. Rosalie's gaze became fixed on a dandelion that had sprung up in a crack on the tarmac, far below them. She wasn't a botanist, but she'd always thought it was funny how that happened.

She almost wasn't paying attention when the loudspeaker came on and announced that their flight had been delayed. The words only really sunk in when Clara sat bolt upright beside her, making her jump. "What?"

As if actually answering her, the system said again, in a flat female voice, that flight 630 to Oslo was delayed.

Clara stood, agitated, trying to gather her things. "Ok, no, this can't happen, I'm gonna talk to the guy." Helicon 72 "He's not controlling the weather," Rosalie said.

Clara shot her a look of deep frustration. "I thought you cared about this."

Rosalie shrugged. "I do. There's just no point getting upset over what you can't change."

Clara's slight frame picked her way through the crowded gate towards the kiosk, reminding Rosalie of a gangly heron wading through a scum-filled ditch. She closed her eyes, smirking. But after a moment, it became clear that Clara was causing a bit of a scene.

"Listen," Clara wheedled to the youngish guy behind the desk. "My sister is a Nobel laureate. The ceremony is tomorrow. Isn't there anything you can do?" Rosalie had heard her sister talking to five-yearolds about getting a flu shot in her office in the exact same tone. She always slipped into her doctor voice when she was impatient and trying not to show it.

"It's the wind. It's just not safe right now. These things happen," the man said patiently. "I'm sorry, ma'am."

Rosalie nudged her sister, drawing her away from the kiosk. "You can't bargain with chance, hun."

Clara patted her hand, relenting. "I know. Go sit back down. I'll see if there's another flight in the meantime. You shouldn't have left our stuff alone anyway."

Their seats were far from the kiosk, but as she sat back down, she heard Clara's voice distinctly. Rosalie had always possessed good hearing, when she bothered to listen.

"Look," Clara said quietly, more apologetic, "her husband just died. This is really important to her. Can you at least tell me how long you think it'll take?"

Through half-closed eyes, Rosalie watched the attendant's face soften. "Let me see what I can find out."

"Thank you," Clara said in her most motherly voice.

Rosalie leaned her head back all the way and let her eyes slide shut, thinking of virtual particles popping randomly in and out of existence, generating electromagnetism. A windstorm robbing her of recognition for their life's work. A robber murdering Oliver on his way back from a convenience store—to get toothpaste, of all things.

As Clara made her way back, Rosalie stood, feeling the desk worker's eyes on her. She already felt stiff, and they weren't even on the 11-hour flight yet. "I'm going to the bathroom."

"I'll come with you."

"I thought we shouldn't leave our stuff alone."

Clara gestured nonchalantly to the guy at the kiosk. "He can watch our seats."

"What if he leaves?" Rosalie said, just for the sake of being argumentative. She wasn't sure why. She just felt like being a pain.

"Do you have to go or not?"

"Going, going."

That expedition, however, turned into a dismal failure. The closest ladies' room, which had never been that nice anyway, was flooded with water. A pipe had burst, and maintenance wouldn't be finished for another hour.

A discarded paper towel drifted forlornly by on the puddle. Rosalie sighed. "Well, that's depressing." She didn't like public restrooms anyway, but she'd wanted somewhere to get away from the desk attendant's pitying stare.

"Rosie, do you really have to go?"

"No."

"Uh-huh. Well, I do. Go back to our stuff. I'll look for another restroom."

#### Helicon 74

She paused. "Will you be ok by yourself?" Clara spoke very gently, as if to a skittish cat.

"Mm-hm."

Clara blinked at her, an expression Rosalie was unnerved to recognize as dismay crossing her face. What did Clara want from her?

Oliver always knew she was okay by herself. For a moment, the longing for his intuitive understanding seized her so viscerally that her eyes grew wet. She hadn't really shed a tear for her husband yet. Maybe that made her unnatural, but she found she didn't really care about that label.

No one had touched their luggage since they'd been gone, which worked out for everybody because a thief wouldn't have found anything important inside anyway, unless they wanted Clara's makeup.

Rosalie sat down, crowds of busy people bustling past her. When they'd waited on flights before, she did crossword puzzles with her left hand while Oliver held her right and buried his nose in a book.

He was a giant of a man, with square-rimmed glasses, hair the color of dirty hay, and a booming laugh that he used often. Theirs had mostly been a marriage of pragmatism rather than romance. They wed in a courthouse with only Clara in attendance, and she said their small apartment looked more like a laboratory than a home. They researched the same topic, and each of their intelligences complemented the other's nicely. They started dating when they worked on their doctoral theses together, and got married so as to go on researching more conveniently. They could discuss quarks and variations in the quantum field in bed and while he cooked, instead of having to wait until the start of the next workday.

"I want to spend the rest of my life with you," he said over dinner one evening when they were dating. The lights from the candles reflected off his glasses so that she couldn't see his eyes; he looked like some blind, burrowing creature.

"Then let's do it," Rosalie replied, and that was it.

But over the years, Rosalie realized her husband was actually in love with her. There was no other rational explanation for why he surprised her with flowers and gave her his undivided attention even if she'd interrupted his work.

If she loved him, it wasn't the intense emotional longing she heard described. Sometimes, she couldn't tell if she missed him or just the surety of being loved and understood by somebody, and that uncertainty made her feel pretty damn awful.

He was easy to get along with, and he knew when she wanted to be alone. He wasn't too loud, and even though he was nearly twice her height, she never felt overshadowed. Rosalie held his hand at conferences, his thumb rubbing soothingly over her thin wrist. In a room full of strangers, he provided an anchor to focus on to escape overstimulation. She disassociated sometimes in public, and her wandering thoughts always turned to Oliver.

Dr. Rosalie Day, Nobel laureate, sat stuck in an airport gate and sort of needed to piss, but not enough to get up and do it. And a week after her husband was randomly murdered, she thought that maybe she'd spaced out so much not because she didn't care for her surroundings, but just because she wanted to think about him.

She wanted to think about him, and now that he was gone, she wanted him back. Maybe that was the best love she could give.

"You've got that look on your face again." Rosalie hadn't even noticed Clara's return.

"What look?"

"Your zoning-out look. I've missed it."

"I always look like that." Helicon 76 "Not recently. You've just looked sad."

Self-recognition through the other, Rosalie thought. Or self-validation. Whatever. She wasn't a psychologist.

"Freud hates women," she said aloud.

"I'm not even gonna ask what made you think that." Clara pushed aside the suitcase she'd borrowed from Steven and sat down. "I texted Steve and told him the flight got delayed. I'm gonna call him."

Rosalie filtered out her sister's conversation with her husband and started counting the decorative lights hanging from the ceiling. Airports always seemed to have those, as if décor would make them any less irksome.

She startled out of her musing when Clara nudged her. "Here. Lils wants to talk to you."

"Oh, ok."

She crossed her legs and tossed her hair back out of the way as Clara handed over the phone, forcing a smile for her niece even though Lily couldn't see her. "Hi, sweetie."

"Hey, Aunt Rosie."

Rosalie liked both of her nieces and her nephew; they were sweet kids and pretty smart. They got loud when excited, like most kids did, but they were still tolerable to be around. Lily was hyperactive, but good at rolling with the punches, and she acted like a little mom to her brother and sister. She'd adored Oliver, and they would talk for hours about dinosaurs and whatever else she was into at the time. He'd liked kids, even though he'd never had any of his own.

"Are you gonna make it to your party in time?"

Rosalie smiled to herself, not bothering to correct the kid. "I don't know, honey. It's ok if I don't. They'll just present it to me privately. You having fun with your dad?"

Helicon 77

"Yeah. We're going to the park later." Lily went quiet after that, and Rosalie almost said goodbye and handed the phone back to Clara before a small voice added, "I miss Uncle Ollie."

"Me too, sweetheart," Rosalie said, and it felt like making a confession in court.

"I don't understand why he died."

Rosalie tugged a piece of dead skin from her lip with her teeth, working it free. "Well, Lily...sometimes there's never a reason. Sometimes things just happen."

"Mom says he's in heaven now."

Clara shot her a sideways glance.

"Well, if that's what your mom says..."

Rosalie had been raised Anglican, and still had comforting memories of long pews and vaulted ceilings and stained-glass windows that held her attention during the liturgy. She wasn't an atheist. She just didn't see the point in investigating something that couldn't be proven. But she wasn't going to tell someone else not to, especially a kid. After all, fifty years ago, no one thought virtual particles could be proven. *Everything has a reason*, her own mother told her after her father died, and held her close during the funeral service.

Lily sniffed. "How did you win your prize?"

A transparent way of changing the subject, but it said a lot about the kid's empathy.

"We proved virtual particles."

"What's that?" She sounded genuinely curious.

"Variations in the quantum field. They come in to reality out of nowhere, and then blink out again. People used to think they were just mathematical constructs, the missing variable in equations. But we proved them."

"How?" Helicon 78 "It's impossible to pinpoint them long enough for study, because of the uncertainty principle. But your uncle and I detected traces of them, effects on real particles that could only be from virtual. That counted as proof."

She could practically see Lily's frown over the phone. "Where do they come from?"

"Well...we don't know. That's the uncertainty principle. It just happens."

"That doesn't sound very science-y."

"It wouldn't be in other fields. But this is theoretical physics."

"I still don't get it," Lily announced matter-of-factly. "But I know you still deserve the prize." Her voice held the warm, unthinking acceptance of a child.

Rosalie's smile this time was more genuine. "Thanks, sweet girl. Want to talk to your mom again?"

*Everything has a reason*, her mother had said. Rosalie had dismissed it at the time; if there was a reason for her father's death, for Oliver's, she didn't understand it. But a peculiar thought occurred to her as she replayed Lily's words in her head; maybe certainty—trust, if she called it what it really was—didn't always require understanding.

It was another three hours before the plane arrived, and the sun started setting. Clara, shoved in the middle seat, checked her watch. "Well, we'll be cutting it a little close, but we should still have enough time."

Rosalie, tucked in the window seat under a blanket, had a perfect view of the orange sky. "Clara?"

### "Mm?"

The blanket warmed her after the chilliness of the airport, and the sunset dazzled across her vision, and Rosalie felt fonder of her sister than she'd been in many years. "Thanks for coming with me." Helicon 79

## Emptyhanded

The route to the cemetery was too new to Flint for him to know how to get there from Emily's school, so he filched a map sticking out of some lady's unattended purse.

He'd lived in the city his whole life; he should know his way around by now. But one nice thing about New York was the everpresent tourists even more lost than he could ever be, such as the unlucky soul who'd been foolish enough to leave her stuff alone.

He sat on a bench outside Emily's school, waiting for the flood of kids with the dismissal bell, reading the map. If they walked to the cemetery, they'd pass the duck pond in the park. Emily would like that.

He looked up at the unmistakable shrieks and chatter of kids released into the wild. Emily spotted him and skipped towards him, blonde hair bouncing, and he hurriedly stuffed the map into a pocket.

"Hey honey. Good day at school?"

"Yep. Marc brought cupcakes for me and the class sang 'Happy Birthday.""

Flint put a hand on her shoulder and steered her down the streets until they emerged from the crowd. A cop across the street had been looking at him. "Oh, is Marc someone I need to have the dad talk with?"

"No, Dad." She rolled her eyes in the way only a ten-year-old girl could. "He's just my friend."

"I know you wanted to come with me to the cemetery, so I thought we'd stop by the pond and then go to that little café you like

on the way there. And then I'll drop you off to your mom around six. How's that?"

"Sounds good." Emily looked up at him, eyes shining, and Flint knew she expected him to produce her birthday present somewhere in that interim time. She'd never say so out loud; she was a sweet kid, never too demanding. But he didn't really have anything for her; his next paycheck had yet to arrive, and all the money he had at the moment would go towards their tea at the café this afternoon.

He'd ended up robbing a convenience store about a week ago in an attempt to get the money he needed for Emily's birthday present. He'd wanted it to be something grand, like a week at that expensive horse camp she was always talking about. In hindsight, attempted robbery had been a monumentally stupid move, and one Flint never would have made if he hadn't been high at the time. Brock had recommended the new substance in the throes of Flint's frustration, and then lent him a gun. Normally, Flint would never do anything that risky for something so inconsequential. Emily's birthday mattered, of course, but not enough to risk Flint getting arrested again, or even worth some guy's life.

Some poor schmuck got in his way during the high, and Flint shot him. Flint had been just lucid enough to realize that he needed to get the hell out of Dodge before the cops showed up, so in the end, he didn't even get the cash. All in all, not his most successful venture to date.

So he'd been lying low since then, until he knew for sure that the cops didn't have a positive ID on him. He was probably safe for now. Flint didn't feel too bad about it; there was nothing else he could have done, and he'd been high off his ass. Still, it was a damn shame. Flint had ascertained the guy's identity on the news, and then read the obituary to get the burial info. He thought it would be a nice gesture to visit the man's grave at least once.

Not that Emily knew the real reason behind their outing. For all she knew, they were visiting her grandmother's grave.

The cool green shade around the pond provided a welcome reprieve after the hot, crowded sidewalks. Flint settled against a tree, right up to the water. He squirmed around for a minute trying to find a comfortable position, and resisted the temptation to close his eyes. He knew he'd probably fall asleep if he did.

A small flock – was that the right word? – of ducks made their way rapidly across the water towards them, clearly having been trained by park-goers to expect food when they saw people.

"Sorry," Flint apologized. "I got nothing for you. Maybe next time."

They babbled expectantly for a while longer, then put together in their simple brains that he didn't have anything and contented themselves with foraging along the bank.

Emily skipped stones for a while, until Flint checked his watch and got to his feet with a groan. "Time to go, kiddo."

"One more?"

"One more."

As she threw the pebble, she lost her grip for a second, and it skewed sideways and hit one of the ducks.

The rock wasn't big enough or thrown with enough force to really hurt the thing, but the bird still hissed indignantly, quacking up a storm, and flew away beating up a wave with its wings. It only took a split second for the rest of the flock to follow suit.

Emily, who'd always been a sensitive kid, promptly burst into tears.

"Hey hey hey, beat it!" Flint yelled after the stupid birds, even though they were already retreating. "It's ok, sweetheart. You didn't hurt it or anything."

"But now they hate me!" she sobbed.

"They're just animals, hun. They're completely indifferent." Flint had almost thrown out his back the last time he tried to pick her up, but he thought her tears demanded that he try again now. "Come on, baby. Let's go eat."

The café had some kitschy little theme: Alice in Wonderland, or something. It had toadstool seats and decorations like a dancing teapot and a grinning Cheshire cat, and a thin layer of grease hung over all the red vinyl tables. Emily loved it, for whatever reason. She wiped her tears on her sleeves, and even though grime still streaked her face, she happily kicked her feet back and forth looking over the bright yellow menus.

The waitress was pretty hot. Some college-age redhead with freckles, hips swaying to the private beat from her earbuds.

"Two Earl Greys for me and uh, the little lady here," Flint ordered, trying to catch her eye.

"Got it."

Not too talkative, ok. He could deal with that.

"Em, uh, listen," Flint started when their orders came. His daughter looked up from contemplating the steaming, discolored liquid. "I...don't have your present yet. It just hasn't come in. But I'll get it to you eventually."

"Oh. That's ok." She shrugged, unbothered, and Flint almost thought he'd dodged the bullet – terrible metaphor, in hindsight – when she added, "What is it?"

"It's a surprise," he lied. He'd better make it something good, at this rate.

When they finished, Flint let Emily call "check, please," her very serious tone slightly undermined by the excited giggle at the end.

The waitress came over, now smacking gum in addition to the earbuds separating her from the world. Flint dug around in his coat pockets, pulling out the crumpled map he'd forgotten about. It was the only object there; his wallet was gone. The money he'd set aside for this had either been forgotten, pickpocketed, dropped, whatever. Case in point, he didn't have it.

"Ah, shit."

Emily frowned. "It's ok, Dad." She began rummaging in her fluffy pink purse, and finally produced a crumpled \$20. "I got it."

Flint groaned, cheeks burning. How pathetic must he appear to the waitress, with his ten-year-old daughter needing to pay for his tea? He didn't dare look at her face, to see if she appeared amused or pitying or just plain disdainful.

"My little lady," he joked, trying to make light of the situation. He leaned back in his chair and spread his arms wide. "You're so grown up. I'll pay you back, sweetheart."

"It's my birthday. This is my treat to me," she reasoned.

"That's my girl." The praise sounded hollow even to him.

Emily held his hand as they exited and started the walk to the cemetery, a gesture he thought she'd outgrown. She didn't say another word.

When they arrived, Emily peeled off to follow the familiar route to her grandmother's grave. Flint shoved his hands in his empty pockets and started wandering, realizing a little belatedly he didn't actually know where the guy was buried. At least it was a nice day out, with a crisp breeze and falling leaves.

After a few minutes of fruitless rambling, he found the right spot, pretty much by accident. A woman already stood by Oliver Day's Helicon 84 grave, hands folded primly behind her back. She didn't have flowers or anything, but she looked sad.

She was also incredibly sexy, with wavy brown hair and a slim, athletic build. He would have tried to pick her up, but he figured that might be kind of inappropriate in a graveyard.

> "Ma'am?" "...What?" "Am I bothering you?" "No." "I'm Flint." "Hm."

She did not offer a handshake. She didn't even really look at him, her gaze flicking up quickly to his face and then returning to the grave.

Ok, so she was a little weird, but still attractive.

Flint nodded at the stone. "You knew him?"

"My husband."

Well, shit.

Any other words immediately dried up on his tongue; what the hell could he say to Day's widow? I'm sorry? I'm sure there was a reason?

"He never mentioned *you*," she continued.

"Well, we, uh, didn't know each other that well." The high muddled most of his memory of the night; all he really remembered was Day's height, mostly because Flint didn't meet many people as tall as himself. The cheap fluorescent lights in the store had obscured Day's eyes behind his glasses; had he been shocked? Scared? Had he even known what was happening? "I just figured I'd pay my respects."

The intensity of Mrs. Day's green eyes pinned him in place like a bug under a magnifying glass. "With what?" He didn't have a gift for his daughter or money for her tea. He didn't have anything he could say to the woman whose life he'd inadvertently ruined. Hell, he didn't even have food for a flock of stupid ducks.

All he could do was pay his respects to a dead guy, and the absurdity of the endeavor hit him all at once. Oliver Day didn't care. He was dead. He couldn't bestow forgiveness or understanding.

Mrs. Day sniffed at his answering silence. "I can't see that little girl that was with you anymore. You might want to go find her."

Flint nodded with a weak smile, feeling vaguely like she'd kicked the stuffing out of him. "Thanks. Ma'am."

He found Emily seated cross-legged by her grandmother's grave. She'd woven a little wreath of yellow flowers together to decorate the stone, making a gift from the flora around her.

Flint glanced up, squinting at the setting sun. He reached for Emily's hand and swallowed. "Come on, hun. I'll take you home."

## Amma

To ascend the mountain, we must cross the field of golden reeds, then pass through the white cherry trees at the mountain base. From there I must climb with my Amma wrapped around my back. I must carry her to the snow-covered peak where our family agreed to leave her to die.

My grandmother Amma, has been sick for a long time. It's as if her spirit left but her body remained. She no longer speaks or moves. Her eyes only show a faint glimmer. She sits still, collecting sores. My younger sisters gladly take time out of working the wheat fields to care for her. Every morning, they would bathe her, the youngest washed her soiled sheets, while the other two cleaned her body with rags. Afterward, the oldest would brush her silver hair and the others dressed their Amma. I would carry her to the front steps of the house where she sat in her chair facing East towards the fields. There, she remained with periodic visits from our mother, bringing stew and water. After another bath, I'd move Amma to the dinner table, where our family rationed the stale bread and stew for the fifth night.

We ate in silence.

Our harvest of wheat had steadily declined each year, and our dinner table grew sparser with food. It grew harder to feed eight mouths and so the regrettable decision was born. I was to carry my sweet Amma to the top of the mountain where I was instructed to leave her in the cold hands of the mountain and return. This decision did not come lightly. For months Mother and Father fought over Amma's fate but in the face of starvation, mother tearfully conceded. She did not speak for weeks after the decision was made. The task was supposed to be given to the eldest son, but my brother injured his foot trying to save one of our cows from a mud pit. The cow didn't make it.

It had fallen onto my shoulders to make the journey. On the day, everyone said their last goodbyes through tears and hugs. Amma never broke from her distant trance. One of my sisters wished to give her back the orange coat Amma made for her out of sheep wool, but our father refused. It would keep her warm and he didn't want her to suffer any longer. I wrapped her around my back in blue linen, like mother did carrying her youngest as she cut the wheat from its roots.

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Carrying Amma through the golden fields feels pleasant. The hairy bristles tickle my legs and brush Amma's feet. I wait for her to giggle or have any reaction, but none arise. Her face, still as stone looks over my shoulder. My mind stays distracted, watching the rolling clouds of midday, creating pockets of shade moving in herds along the golden sea. The breeze gives the reeds the motion of water. Anymore distracted and I might think to try and swim like a lost buoy. Dusk paints the sky with pinks and purples as we make it to the white cherry trees. The white petals glow in the moonlight and brush my face in the wind. The moonlight warms the petals like shards of faint sunlight kissing my cheek. The petals stick to Amma's long silver hair turning her into a bright white flame lighting the way through the thin trees. The light casts her sunken eyes into a deep shadow, making her face more like a skull.

Coming upon the base of the mountain, I realize not a word has been spoken. I do not know what to say so I stay silent. My Helicon 88 sisters used to talk to her about the different constellations they made with the stars every night. While bathing her, one would describe a porcupine to the east, the other, an eagle to the north. Amma used to tell them all about the stars and fill their heads with infinite wonder. She'd tell me and my brother about the sea and its vastness. It made us feel small like grains of sand along the beach.

I place Amma on some soft dirt and use the branches from the cherry trees to make a small flame. I don't have the imaginations of my sisters when it comes to the stars. I sit and eat a small cup of stale rice. Father made sure to pack just enough to feed me and no more. He was right to think I might share with my Amma. He gave me just enough to keep my strength for the journey. Amma stares off into the distance behind me as I look up at the night sky. I think about the people before me who lived in caves. What did they think of the stars? Maybe they thought all the stars were little campfires like theirs and it reminded them that they weren't alone, that other people were making their own campfires in the distance. I unfold a light brown blanket under Amma and lay her down. I sleep watching the little campfires in the sky.

I feel the chill of the mountain top roll down and brush my face, waking me up. The subtle bite in the air kisses my nose. I cover the smolders with loose dirt and wrap Amma around my back. I dreamt of a hurricane stirring a coastline. The winds shaped the ground and the trees like clay. The storm shifted the ground with brute hands disfiguring the coast.

Only now do I think about the faces of my family when I return. What will they think of me? What will they say? My only worry is that they will say nothing. That they will greet me with the same silence that plagues me.

I tie my Amma tightly to my back to keep her from shifting as I ascend the base of the mountain. There is a narrow path leading to the south face of the mountain where the climb is less steep. The grass quickly gives way to loose gravel and the occasional large rock face. Some of them have been painted in faded reds and whites for landmarks along the trail. The cold air stings my lungs as I navigate through the worn trail. Halfway up, the terrain turns to a lighter shade of grey, and a thick frosted fog masks the sky. The vibrant colors of the earth give way to the mountain. The color of my tanned skin becomes absorbed by the chilled mist. Amma's hair acts as a camouflage and the wind directs it to wrap around us. Like a frog's back reflects brown and green to match the pond's surface, Amma's hair allows us to fade into the air.

Without the sky, time doesn't seem to exist. The trail, now marked by thin wooden poles with little worn flags blowing in the wind, now forks into two paths. Father said to take the path to the right which leads to the peak. There, I would lay Amma at the top of a snow-covered cliff as father intended. I choose the left path which leads around the mountain to a small spring. I feel it too cruel to leave Amma in such an unremarkable place. People sometimes come to the spring because they believe the chill of the clear water can heal. I don't believe it can heal Amma, but I wish to perform one last ritual with her.

The trail leads to a small flattened surface of smooth rock, no bigger than the base of a small hut. Towards the back, sits a small spring of clear water, only ankle deep, surrounded by stacks of flat rock only a few inches above the ground. The mist clears a little and I sit Amma down by the spring. I unwrap the dark blue linen and undress Amma. She sits naked on the flat rocks with a faint shiver. I remove my sandals and place them in the spring. The chilled water Helicon 90 shoots up through my toes like lightning and then I proceed to wash my Amma's feet. I scrub her thin feet which look a white pale color except for the black spider veins that spread atop the foot. The knuckles of her toes naturally bend crooked in slightly different directions. As I scrub the callused bottom of her feet, I look up to see Amma holding her hands up and cupping them. The position of her hands forms a recognizable image. That's how she held her umbrella when she walked along the coastline to the village.

Amma used to take her blue umbrella with her when she walked along the dirt road, towards the village. She'd even take it with her during the dry season for shade. My sisters always accompanied her along the way. Mother insisted Amma needed someone to accompany her in case she fell, and my sisters happily did because they treasured any chance to leave the home. They enjoyed browsing the markets for necklaces and charms even though they couldn't afford anything. Amma liked to visit with old friends in the market where they chattered about anything.

A vivid memory floods into me as I washed Amma's body. Once during the August rain season, Mother and Father didn't let Amma leave the village because the skies warned of a heavy storm. As we worked to seal the windows and huddle the animals inside their huts, she slipped away. The realization brought all of us to give chase as the rain pelted the ground with voracious anger. Amma held her umbrella with unusual strength as the wind tried to rip it away from her hands. We ran down the road as the rain turned the dirt into clay, ripping our shoes and sandals away from our feet.

"Amma!" we all screamed, picking ourselves up every time the rain and red clay tripped us. She kept moving forward like an arrow cutting through the wind. The rain wouldn't let our screams carry. The trees danced with the wind and their dead leaves shot at us like paper daggers.

"Amma!" The umbrella contorted with the wind, and the cloth folded up to the sky, but she kept moving.

I wash her soiled clothes and dress her. Her hands are still held up. I brush the few petals that remain in her silver hair. I place her on some softer dirt while flakes of snow start to fall. I still have no words to say, so I kiss her forehead and leave. Following the trail back down the mountain, my eyes burn and my lungs feel full. My muscles ache more than ever, and my breathing quivers as I descend the mountain.

# POETRY AND PROSE BY THE STUDENTS OF UNIVERSITY OF LOUISIANA MONROE