

The background of the cover is a photograph of a large, multi-colored dome structure, likely a hot air balloon or a large tent, with segments in shades of blue, yellow, pink, and purple. Several people are silhouetted against the structure, appearing to be looking at it or interacting with it. The overall scene is set against a dark sky.

V13
6TH DIGITAL EDITION

Bloodroot Literary Magazine

Bloodroot

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Bloodroot Literary Magazine

Bloodroot is a nonprofit literary magazine dedicated to publishing diverse voices through the adventure of poetry, short fiction, and creative nonfiction. Our aim is to provide a platform for the free-spirited emerging and established writer.

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“Do” Roberts and Deloris Netzband

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Bloodroot Literary Magazine

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The cover contains a photograph taken by James Napoli. We thank him for his permission to use this image.

Note on Type

This book is set in 12 point ET Bembo, a modern face designed for the web and print by Edward Tufte and based on the Bembo family of typeface. ET Bembo is a freely available open-source font. The text was typeset using xelatex, an updated \LaTeX typesetting package, along with several other free packages, including poemscol.

Introductory Remarks

This past year has been a year of loss and grief—for Bloodroot and the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has touched almost all of our lives and many of us have lost family members, friends, and community members. In addition, two cherished members of our community passed since our last volume. We mourn the loss of Deloris Harrison Netzband, who co-founded and co-edited this magazine for many years. We remember her for her intense and brilliant literary work, her commitment to the community and the way she embraced friendship. Around here, everyone knew Deloris Harrison Netzband and Do Roberts as a pair of best friends. They were known as Do and Do and arm-in-arm, they created space for the literary arts by founding this magazine and creating countless events and opportunities for writers in their community and beyond.

Deloris Harrison Netzband was both a gifted writer and a shining light. She will be sorely missed in the Upper Valley literary community. A full obituary can be accessed here: <https://www.vnews.com/deloris-netzband-obit-vn-050420-34184089>

We also lost local poet, teacher, and mentor Gary Lenhart this year. Gary was the author of several volumes of poetry and literary criticism. He taught writing for over twenty years at Dartmouth College and is remembered by his many students for his courses on Modern American Poetry and his poetry workshops.

A wonderful profile of Gary Lenhart, written by Bloodroot contributor James Washington, Jr is available here:

<https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1079&context=clamantis>

We can't describe our dear friend better than Jim has in this profile, but we grieve for him and urge you to revisit the work he published in *Bloodroot* Volume 10:

<https://www.bloodrootlit.org/bloodroot-vol-10-our-third-digital-edition/>

Getting this issue of *Bloodroot* ready to go out into the world has been uniquely challenging and has lacked much of the spirit and *joie de vivre* with which we have been accustomed to launching a new volume. This is the second issue we're launching in which we can't invite the community to gather in person to celebrate, read, drink, snack and connect. Community building is at the heart of Bloodroot and as soon as we can meet safely, we will invite everyone to do so. In the meantime, please enjoy this work we've curated from the Upper Valley and well beyond.

Sincerely,

RENA J. MOSTEIRIN & JAMES E. DOBSON

This issue is dedicated to the memory of Deloris Harrison Netzband and Gary Lenhart.

Festivities

The new year is hot on our tails.
It is no splendid dragon
of grandeur and conquest. It is a small
mud dweller barely formed, nervous
to find its place, to separate into days
and weeks and months and false promises.

We're on the roof, lighting fires, sliding wine
down our crumpled throats. No one's brought
a plan so it's do or die under a skim of stars.
The countdown is gruesome but everyone
sucks it up. Happy this or that with
feigned enthusiasm. The earth doesn't care,
too busy licking its wounds and contemplating
what fresh hell we'll bring forth as soon
as we sober up.

We'll wake with sour breath and glitter
in our hair and regrets and rickety resolutions
and a terrible thirst. Once we thought
we'd be Sally Bowles and damn it all
for a good time. But the cabaret is now a sports bar
and the Nazis are making a comeback.
Even the sweet suburban mamas flaunt
green fingernails. We search for solid ground
but 48 hours after the ball drops, so will
the drone strikes. More gin perhaps or haul out
the *No War* t-shirts and hit the streets,
or curl up listening to the stream of pundits
parsing, apologizing, rationalizing, pretending.

It must have been the Cuban missile crisis.
I remember lying in my bed, listening to
the late news from the downstairs TV.
Unidentified fighter jets were on their way
and I thought, this is it, the end, likely reciting
a couple of Hail Marys or maybe an entire rosary
so that I might be in a state of grace
when the final flash lit up the sky.

MERCEDES LAWRY

Improvisation

When I woke today
I conjured
my mom in her kitchen,
my mom taking her dogs
down the gentle path of morning

Her seventieth
no Paris
just pandemic
the earth barely notices

My palm lifted
to block the sun
illuminated glowing pink

A red-tailed hawk rests
on the lowest branch
of a highway pine

Last week a woman with schizophrenia
told me I was changing
and I believed her

This week my Hail Mary
was making hash browns
Waffle House style
What else to do
with just two potatoes
and an onion?

I want to tell you
how to surprise the sun
how to advance anyway
into its deep red glare

Instead I salute the morning
cautiously
Deliver greetings
to the wind and hope
they arrive to you
untattered

SHARI ALTMAN

Inheritance

When I put on your shoes,
they feel—I feel—different.
Blue like *Blue Eyes Cryin' In the Rain* blue,
the one song that brings
you to me.
Blue like Russian vase blue,
yours again, the vase I put marigolds in
each fall. The vase I left behind at an event,
badgered the venue until I could
have it in my hands again. The vase I broke,
collected the pieces for a shadow box
that I don't know how to make.

When I brought your shoes home,
I left them in the dark.
Could not bring myself to soil them.
Did not want your power diminished.
Now when I miss you, I sit down
and gently slide my foot in,
take my time tying the laces.
Bring you with me
out into the day.

SHARI ALTMAN

Sora, I see you

in this ink drawing,
 bundled in quilted cotton
 for the cold, leading a pony
 on which the master, Bashō,
 sits. Your footwear: socks
 with sandals, wooden *geta*
 improbable for hiking,
 let alone wading through snow.
 How cheerfully, like all
 side-kicks, you offer
 as needed straight lines
 or ripostes; and with
 what kindness the master
 adds your verse to his.
Purple clover pokes through dry grass
the children trample
with happy cries.
 It's plain you want
 to clown even more
 than admire the moon,
 and that your poems
 stick out at the elbows.
 Bashō is the genius:
This road without travelers
leads only
to autumn's end.
 You are worn thin, a servant-
 shadow, and yet you do not
 complain. Sturdy you bear him
 on his last road, as
 archivist, almost as widow.

APRIL BERNARD

You can sing it

–I tell students, that Hopkins poem,
 to the tune of the Doxology,
 “old one hundredth” in the hymn book.
 In the choir at St. Raphael’s,
 “Praise God from whom all bles-sings
 flow” flowed in our treble tremble
 all the way to “Praise Fa-ther, Son,
 and Ho-ly Ghost. A-men.” We sang
 it swooped from the rafters,
 breathing down over the backs
 of the churchgoers, in thrall
 to Dr. Ducharme. Unwilling to be
 mediocre, he rehearsed us
 several nights a week, a scraggle
 of twelve girls coaxed and bullied
 into making real music. His hands
 and feet paddled at the organ
 as he conducted with jutted
 chin and wild brows. Almost too
 pure was our “Re-joice, Re-
 joice, E-ma-a-an-u-el,” all the dusky
 days of Advent. When, years later,
 I wandered alone into the Matisse
 Chapel in Provence, I sang those
 hymns to hear an ice-water tone
 the chalk cave gave.

And now,
 reading Hopkins, puzzling out
 his odd-ball meters, I hear how
 the poet heard his sprung feet
 as measures of music, with
 the strong accent a long “whole”
 note, assorted less-heavy beats
 a cherubic array of fleeting fourths
 and eighths. Here’s “Pied
 Beauty,” which begins “Glo-ry

be to God for dap-pled things,”
 another Doxology, and drops
 the after-thought “Praise him,” an
 “A-men.” You have to speed the tongue
 through “What-ev-er is fick-le, freck-led
 (who knows how?)/ With swift, slow; sweet
 sour; a-daz-zle, dim....”

I tell students,
 you can sing it, and we do; his words
 match exactly that old hundredth, lilting
 creation’s errors and accidents
 to mottle a vista that leads,
 in variable measures, to the world
 behind the world, where raggedy
 becomes pattern and a staggered
 amen in dappling laps whole.

APRIL BERNARD

Cloud Ekphrastics

Mash-Up: Italian Fresco + Mughal Fresco

Tiepolo rock-candy mountains and flossy
 sugar-spun clouds bubble beneath cherubim
 delineating a cosmos we can bear to inhabit. Or
 visit the Jodhpur Palace, where elephants
 carry armored monkeys into battle, while
 at the eastern edge of the panorama other monkeys
 swim away in the thick-limned tresses of a golden stream.
 Above, more clouds: black and gold and curled into paisley,
 swirling into the fresco, a multiple heaven
 of stories and salvation, suitable for bedtime.

Shaker Village Brick Dwelling

Demented lollipop
 spirit-drawings made
 by Mother Ann's
 timid creatures,
 bushes and trees with tidy
 symmetrical spokes
 shrieking from the dreams
 of wool-and-pine-board
 bed-shackled bodies
 denied the wet curl
 of erotic relief: Only
 stern children, chastened,
 build houses straight
 as these, where hoods
 and swathes of dead thistle
 hang dry as wrung-out clouds
 on prim pegs.

Child's Drawing

Behold a figure chalked on thick gray paper,
perhaps a snowman: He moves
lopsided as a pet ghost or a grounded cloud
into blue snow, and owns his own blue distance.

APRIL BERNARD

Ghazal of Excoriating Love

I was around eight years old when I started chewing fingers.
 Eleven years later and people always ask what happened to these shocking fingers.

I have lost myself many times in the moment past dusk
 when the water still reflects back
 the cerulean of “blue hour” behind the jet black
 silhouette of my talking fingers.

Many times I have lost myself in the moments past dusk.
 But during the daytime I can’t stop my teeth from going to town
 on my decaying fingers.

And at dawn, I wake next to you, *mi cielito*, and my soul falls back into this
 broken bag of bones.
 I long for the freedom found *en el reino del ensueño* without my
 seven throbbing fingers.

When they’re cracked and bleeding for the wretched of the earth, you pull me back
 with your understanding hands protecting me from gnawing at my tingling fingers.

As the moon rises, the uneasy spirit trapped inside me
 begs for freedom through the skin that locks her away behind my itching fingers.

Helplessness, shame, and embarrassment flood my soul
 as I stare at the ugliness of my picking fingers.

My teeth polish and fix the imperfections.
 And you’re the only one who can stop the urge to destroy these fingers.

I have lost myself many times in the moments past dusk.
 When you’re the buffer between my angry teeth and the release of soothing fingers.

Caleb says he’ll never feel at home in this culture of selfishness, all alone.
 So he asks that you simply hold his hand with your loving fingers.

CALEB SABATKA

Instar

Given the evening yellow blends with the shore.
Given bighead sedge that rusts along its spines.
Given a soft bellow of an unseen freighter.
Given that we climb through a fence.
Given the eye of an eagle drops like an axe.
Given the bright bones of a porpoise corpse.
Given that we sink with every step.
Given two sundogs adorned by illusions.
Given that memory rides along our hatbrims.
Given the moan of one tree leaning against another.
Given thistles, sand verbena, lomatium, fescue.
Given the humble.
Given flights of green dust.
Given we are on our knees.
Given that darkness presses a far island like a fallen skyscraper.
Given a single worm that is all.
Given lines of broken shells that lead into the current.
Given what takes us away.

JAYNE MAREK

the shape of this

the grey sky folds a turkey
 vulture from a cloud imagine
 that swift uplifting above the river
 valley far below a woman in the shape of
 the day is a cutout in the wind we are still

baking sourdough loaves
 to save our lives our sanity we
 reach tenderly through wires we say
 we don't believe in magic but what else can
 this be the way the wind plays through the leaves

carrying the scent of last year's
 lavender remember the purple rows
 stretched on the Somerset hill we became
 blossoms in the shape of bees humans in the
 shape of lust we sipped and slipped in the sunlight's

nectar now the shape of the day
 is this waiting and wanting the vulture's
 path divides the sky between now and never
 beyond the clouds a comet's icy tail plumes a trail
 behind her burning ice if we want magic all we need

to do is see how the evening's
 fragile light lingers its fingers over the
 mountains and changes now minute by minute
 how the hot relentless day is cooling and in spite of our
 better judgement we find the will to imagine tomorrow

REBECCA SIEGEL

Pickling day

August comes and the days shorten
into the sticky thickness of summer

humidity hugs the air and weighs us
we walk through the days like slow

motion astronauts watching the past
shimmer behind us in a hazy heat mirage

in the kitchen she's got cucumbers
scrubbed and soaking in the sink, green

humpback whales submerged in their
tiny stainless steel ocean those boundaries

the hemming in clean jars assembled like
fresh soldiers, the sunlight through the softly

curtained window diffuse, illuminating
the scene as if for a vain classic film star

making everything rarely beautiful and
remote—we are helping we are factory

workers in our assembly line awarding
each jar their medals of honor: one sprig

of dill, two garlic cloves, one red pepper
we pack the cucumbers in, upright, proud,

free, green shoulder to green shoulder—
pour in the brine, more dill our little hands

just fit then seal the jars and put in the
cellar, packed this summer away. it will

come back with a bite in the bright
winter, will come back vinegary sour

it will come back decades from then on
a dark autumn night when the world is

on fire—we sealed the jars I just opened
decades away the house is gone

the October wind perfumed with brine.
Not all is lost.

REBECCA SIEGEL

Tell Me What You Want

Here we are on the endless
flat highway of southern Ontario

Teddy Thompson on the radio
humming hung like wires between

hydro towers this far from
Jackson this far from Toronto

impelled by our own intent
on the asphalt miles between

living and dying the cities of
our hearts that hold the people

who made us—You're asleep in
the passenger seat and our girl

deep in her own childhood in
the quiet planet of the back seat

and I—

I've got my foot on the pedal
a reckless heart beneath my ribs

that Canadian summer sun like
candy on my nostalgic tongue

*Tell me what you want
I'll do anything you want*

This sweet highway this
tender moment we're

becalmed between before
and after I'll carry it home

and give it to you tonight.
We can't have forever, but

this

we can have this.

REBECCA SIEGEL

Rainbow

Driving home
from the brickyard
to a beer and another
through dump-bucket
rain, speaker backbeats
way too loud for a father
of little three, I turned
a corner, into the woods.
The road angled
uphill—steep under
more slats of rain,
and a suddenness
of bloated sun
that stayed with me
the rest of the way
to my wife, children
and my restless loyalty.

JAMES WASHINGTON JR.

What Faith Is

A phone call from the nursing home
connects me with a matter of fact
administrator: my mother
isn't taking food or oral medication.
I should scramble with urgency
to finally make the tough decision.
Instead, I scramble into every possible
cross-town red light. The humor
in getting stuck behind a funeral
procession over the last half-mile
is at least half a decade away.

But finally, there is my mother.
Age has eclipsed her weight.
I hug her still warm mocha bones
never doubting she is still inside.
And so, she throws off familiar
hymns, each perfectly pitched
in full deafness and blindness.

JAMES WASHINGTON JR.

The One Thing

for SB

Don't even think for a minute that I want to make anything beautiful out of my own suffering. It's bad enough that art is so often violent—the way the rack reveals the long, roped lines of our agony. It's not that I don't value the problem of pain: there are always jagged ontologies. But this one is different. To reach for an image seems specious (bicycle grease on an ankle) and now that I've done so, begs the question. This is not suffering. (your eyes, the sharp cut of hesitation.) Still, there is something to be said for sublimation. I read a scientific article once. It was about fractals. How their complexity causes pleasure. Go figure.

It was like this when I lived in Sydney. (Under a corrugated tin roof. There was a verandah.) Those are grape vines, he said to the group. *Notice me*, he was saying. I did. He looked familiar. So we had lunch. He told me about his orchard. And that those purple trees were called jacarandas. *Jacarandas*, I repeated. The name fit. Because I wanted it to. I still want it to. Later, he crossed the city with a bag of lemons. The dense hot melee of Paramatta Road. Then, the white Harbour. He must have daydreamed on the ferry. I wasn't glad to see him. Every autumn, the jacarandas blaze lilac over Sydney. I heard all he didn't say. I remember (always) the fragrance of the lemons.

But I was trying to sublimate. The boy with the wild hair, making me laugh on my bed. "A Draconian moralist, like the Elder Cato, in a fetching red halter." How phallic that turtle looked as it crawled under my truck. A princess, a pea, and the exquisite, sexual bruise of my sensitivities. In bodies there are such textures: A slick cut of yellow silk. Skin—slim, but not taut, jade-beaded, or pearl. Limbs bent just so. Or just so. Touch. Like vellum maybe. Or fine-weave sheets. Creamy. Like tongue. A hushed word here. No there. Not for text. For texture. Here, too, it is about color. My finger in his mouth, wine-colored. The rich brown of his beard against my skin.

But there is still the ankle (long, roped lines of tendon). The lemon. A New Critic would "dissect their meaning." But there is too much subtext. We know we cannot know. We know we are inaudible.

And yet we lust. We are animals for that one thing. And then we fail.
 Yet for some reason we abide. There was that day when my friend
 was suicidal. I guess my pain has the same “statistical self-similarity.”
 (Fractals come in two kinds.) But I want to say she was skinned alive.
 I begin to wonder why it is that we put pain in a dream as lost teeth
 and call it Jungian. Or psychosis. Or ankle. Or lemon. Or chaos.
 Or “a frog, trapped in a heating vent.” Is it that we are so inaudible?

We tell our stories and lose what it is we wanted to find in them.
 Last year I found a frog trapped in a heating vent.
 He was instantly enigmatic. He had yellow stripes down the long
 length of his thighs. They were garish. Startling. He was a dandy.
 It was the delicacy of his skin. And how his belly
 quivered. Kiss him. Kiss him. The children were squealing at me.
 No. Not squealing. An interruption, yes, but not that ugly. They know
 about wild things. How to hold them, palms flat, their breath
 held back. See his legs? They gently eased him over. Look at his belly.
 It was fragile and eye-colored. He’s not afraid, they said. But he was.

How it must have been for him. The lawn, green-smelling. The sun.
 Then: hands, breath, air. The vent. It must have been vertigo.
 (It was like that in Sydney. The tin roof looked wrong. The sun shone
 from the north.) Look at his eyes, one of them said
 in a hushed tone. I didn’t dare. It was the yellow stripes that got me.
 Like when my breath catches on something you’ve said. Or didn’t say.
 Like the time you touched my hair. The memory of it. Tender.
 But shot through with yellow stripes. I don’t know. I don’t know
 anything about frogs. Kiss him. Kiss him. They kept saying it.
 I finally did. Nothing happened. Then it was time to let him go.

COURTNEY COOK

Every Small Breeze

Pie-top shapes rest on walls I pass; porch-chair shadows
cast by latticed metalwork in morning's sun

As air conditioners whirr, mimicking sounds of Ocean,
they're missing a rhythm of the waves

As tree-tops breathe in floating clouds and little birds
sing, nestled, sheltered by feathered leaves

As mother and daughter pick blueberries
in the distance, across a lime-green field

As Milkweed, Bindweed, and tall grasses mingling
host a butterfly, who decorates in flits and flutters

As Wild Carrot flowers spangle with blossom-galaxies
waving atop tall stems, and vine leaves burst into pinwheels of green

As a long-fallen log rests, glistening its bright
mottled-white birchbark, peeling in the sun

As I mop beading sweat from hat-brimmed brow
before it can trickle a salty stream to my eyes

As every small breeze becomes sacred
and each breath a gift, I walk in steps

As I will do tomorrow and tomorrow,
as long as I am able.

MARJORIE MOORHEAD

Floored

Black Panther Lego set, half built
 37 Crayola markers, 3 sans caps, 1 dried out
 Anastasia Diamond, Cabbage Patch Kid
 NASA astronaut helmet
 Candyland
 Uno cards
 Monopoly board
 Red-yellow-and-blue stethoscope, it really works
 Spiderman, face down, arm up in surrender
 Dr. Seuss board books, ABCs, Hop on Pop
 Half full sippy cup, room temp apple juice
 Rainbow assortment of magnetic tiles
 Kindle, abandoned, Wild Kratts still playing
 PJ Masks puzzle pieces
 Binoculars
 Microscope
 Magnifying glass
 Yahtzee dice
 Fake cash, real coins
 Millennium Falcon, cockpit missing
 Peppa Pig, Mummy Pig figurines, dancing
 52 stuffed animals, check that, stuffies, in plain sight
 Elsa, missing a shoe
 Abacus
 K'Nex
 Nintendo Switch, cracked screen
 Snap Circuits, alit
 Lego landmines
 Mr. Potato Head, no eyes
 Firefighter costume
 Fingerprint handprints on dislodged couch cushions
 Balled up socks
 Bird ID guide, partially ripped
 Blue guitar, busted string
 Simon, still beeping
 Heap of blankets and pillows, a toddler twister aftermath

Elephant and Piggie, open to page 6
Dominoes in march formation, a failed Rube Goldberg
Dad's Nike sneaker
Mom's knitting needle
Knotted earbuds
Backpacks
Snack packs
Racetracks
Jolly Roger pirate hat
Pinecones
Acorns
Goldfish crackers, cheddar and pretzel
Thomas, Percy, Emily, Rosie, and Diesel
Hungry, Hungry Hippos, starved for attention
Wooden pots, petrified mac n' cheese
Beads
Balls
Bongos
Bingo
Hot Wheels race cars, one without wheels
Granola bar wrapper, melted chocolate residue
Darth Vader, breathing slowly
Mylar Toy Story birthday balloon, deflated
Melissa and Doug broom, clearly not in use
Golden retriever, panting, flashing guilty eyes
Kids, asleep, within the rubble
Parents, flooded

JON HOROWITZ

Utensils

when i am gone they will simply dump the drawers
into the bin. who would want the spatula
with the melted handle, shape of the burner coil
burnt in, the plastic ladle, the pizza cutter
with a little dent in the arc, like a mouse nibble?
you have to roll it twice. and the egg slicer
with a metal string missing, and the nutcracker
with a loose bolt? the electric can-opener that only
works if you are shoving the plug into the outlet
while you hold the can? the crumbling wine corks
from long gone bottles? the greasy thermometer?
the set of measuring spoons with the teaspoon gone?
and why don't i replace them all now,
so that those who follow with alien groping hands
will think, what beautiful, well-kept utensils,
the woman who lived here and set them all in rows
must have had an orderly and dignified mind.

JANET MCCANN

Someday Soon

I never knew my grandmother, but from what my sister Emmy says, maybe that's a good thing. Emmy says when she was little she used to get packed off to grandma's house on Ridgeway, at first so Mom and Dad could have romantic times, then later on so they could argue and throw things in peace. I think she's being sarcastic about that last thing, but even though they were already split up for as long as I can remember, I know their last days weren't all wine and roses.

Emmy says it was super boring there, and that she had to play in the basement so she wouldn't make a mess even though all the furniture upstairs was covered in plastic, so what was the problem anyway? She says there was a ping pong table in the basement, but she was always alone, so fat lot of good it did her, and the toys were all old and weird. The candy was bad, too, ribbon candy that sat on a table in the living room in a fancy bowl. Candy ribbons sound nice to me, but Emmy says that when she stole a piece, because it was supposed to be for company, it was all dusty and soft, and she had to sneak into the kitchen and shove it way down into the garbage so grandma wouldn't know that 1) she'd stolen it, and 2) she'd wasted it.

After I was born, Emmy stopped having to go because one time grandma told Mom she'd made her own bed to lie in and that she had raised up her own damn babies, thank you very much. She says Mom told grandma that maybe if she'd done a better job of it, they wouldn't be in this mess, and then that was that for having to stay at grandma's. Emmy and I call her grandma, even though I've only ever heard Mom call her "your grandmother" or, once, Marilyn. She said it like Marilyn's the dumbest name in the world, but I think it's kind of pretty, so I secretly named a stuffed fox I got at the fall fair Marilyn. I'd only say her name out loud when Mom wasn't around, but then Marilyn got a hole in her neck after only a couple weeks and started leaking little white balls of styrofoam, and when I asked Emmy to fix her, she said it wasn't worth it, the fox was too cheap. The little balls kept leaking out and sticking to things, and Marilyn got flatter and flatter, so I gave her a Viking funeral by putting her in a takeout container in the creek and setting her on fire. It was pretty cool watching the bits of cloth and ash poof up into the air, and when she went over the little falls I secretly prayed she'd be welcomed into the halls of Valhalla, even though I know they don't really exist.

I've heard Mom say "your grandmother" twice, the first time when she brought home a dish she got at Sally's—that's what we call the Salvation Army—and Emmy said, "Grandma has dishes just like that," and Mom said "I always loved those dishes," and then she looked

kind of happy and crumbly all at the same time, so I saw my chance and asked her how come we never went to grandma's— that's what I said, grandma's—and Mom said, "your grandmother isn't very happy with me." I was going to ask her how come, but her happy look went away and the crumbly part got more crumbly so I didn't say anything else. Then she looked at the dish and blew a long breath out like an "O" and put it in the high cupboard next to the crock pot that we only ever use for barbecue meatballs.

The time I heard her call grandma Marilyn, she was on the phone to my uncle Brody. He's in the jail in Guelph for stealing something and selling it to the wrong person. No one will tell me what and who to, but Emmy says Brody got into trouble long before he went to jail, which was partly what Mom meant when she told grandma she could have done a better job raising up her babies, and that's why things went from zero to nuclear.

Mom calls Brody every Sunday, and sometimes she goes to see him, but not too much because it takes all day to get there and back. I don't get to go even though I really miss Uncle Brody. One time Mom got really mad when I kept asking her why not. She yelled "enough!" at me, then went into her bedroom and slammed the door, and Emmy shook her head at me and said "you just don't know when to leave well enough alone, do you?" But I do know, so I stopped bringing it up after that.

She lets me say hi to him on the phone, though, and he always says, "what's the news Monkey Bars?" because before he went to jail he'd always let me play skin the cat, when he'd grab my hands and I'd walk up his legs and flip over. I'd probably be too big for it now, but he still calls me Monkey Bars, which is fine because I like it. I try to learn a lot of jokes so when he asks what's the news, I can tell him one. Our favorite so far is what did the snail say when it was riding the turtle's back? Weeeee! He laughed a lot when I told him and said it tickled his funny bone, and when Mom got back on the phone he must have said something about me, because Mom looked over and said, "she definitely keeps us on our toes," but she was smiling so it must have been something good. That wasn't the time she called grandma Marilyn, though, and she definitely wasn't smiling when she said it.

Then, one day I was in the kitchen making a peanut butter and banana sandwich when Mom's phone started buzzing on the kitchen counter. I watched it kind of slide around while it buzzed, like it was really excited to say something. I yelled to Mom that her phone was buzzing, but she was just in the next room, and when she came in she said, "can you ever say anything a normal tone of voice," which I thought wasn't fair, because I say lots of things in a normal tone of voice, although sometimes Miss Ingebretsen does have to remind me to "modulate your tones, please."

Mom looked at her phone and said, "oh crap, Sharon." Sharon is Mom's cousin. We see her and Uncle Bruce at Christmas. They live in the coolest house that has a whole room just for the TV, and Sharon has a closet that's as big as mine and Emmy's bedroom and it has a lot of mirrors and shoes, and Sharon lets me play in there so long as I ask her before I put anything on. One time when I was little I asked Sharon if her necklace was made out of peppermint gumballs, and she laughed and said no, they were pearls, and then she took it

off and showed it to me. They were super pretty, so when we went home I painted a string of Mardi Gras beads I got at the fall fair with white-glimmer nail polish. It looked really good.

One time right after Christmas, Mom's friend Peg was over and she asked Mom how the day was with the queen and they looked at each other like, "I told you so." Then Mom said she shouldn't be so bad, because Sharon was fine and that if she'd married a Bruce instead of a Dick, she'd have a big house, too. And then they laughed really hard, but I didn't get it, because my dad's name is Dave.

So, Mom picked up the phone and said "Hey, Sharon" in a voice that was happy and not annoyed, but then Mom stood straight up and put her hand out to grab the back of a chair, and she closed her eyes and nodded. Then she said, "when," and "uh huh" a bunch of times and then she squinched up her eyes and told Sharon she was going to have to call her back. She said, "I know, hon, thanks," and put the phone back down on the counter.

And then she looked around like she was only just remembering she was in the kitchen and then she looked at me, and then she came over to where I was and hugged me. At first, it was really nice because I love hugs. I'm a hugger. But then she kept holding on to me, and she didn't say anything but it was almost like I could feel it wasn't really a happy hug. And then I was just there in that unhappy hug and I was wondering when it would be over, so I was relieved when Emmy came into the kitchen. She was singing "Cardigan," but when she saw us, she stopped. I couldn't really see her because of the hug, but I heard her stop singing, and then she said, "what's wrong," like she knew something was wrong. And then Mom gave my back a little pat, and she finally let me go and I looked up into her face and it was really white, and she said "your grandmother has died." And that was the second time I heard her call grandma "your grandmother."

That Saturday, Mom came into the den and told Emmy and me to turn off the TV and get dressed, and when I asked how come, she said, "we're going to Ridgeway," and turned around and left. And I looked at Emmy and I must have looked really excited because Emmy said "you know this isn't going to be fun, right?" I said "I know," but I felt a little like I'd gotten yelled at even though Emmy modulated her tones, so I didn't say anything about how now there was going to be two people to play ping pong.

Everyone was real quiet in the car, which wasn't much different than the last couple days after Sharon first called. Mom talked to Sharon on the phone a lot after that, but she always told me to go to into the other room when she did. When she called Uncle Brody, she went into her bedroom and shut the door and didn't come out for a long time. Mom didn't give me the phone to say hi to him, either, and I didn't ask even though I have a new joke for him. How do you catch a unique rabbit? Unique up on it. But other than that, Mom didn't talk much, and two nights in a row, she gave Emmy money for dinner and we went to Pizza Hut one night and Home Taste the second. Usually she only does that when she

goes out with Peg. Emmy said she wanted us out of her hair, but she wasn't ever doing anything when we got back.

So, I was glad when we got to grandma's house, but I couldn't believe it, either, because it wasn't even so far, and I almost said "she was this close the whole time?" but I thought I probably shouldn't, so we just sat there in the driveway not talking for what seemed like forever before Mom finally did that thing where she blows her breath out in an "O" and said, "well, here goes nothing." When we walked in the door, Emmy said, "whoa," and she and Mom looked at each other like "I told you so," and Emmy said, "it's exactly the same," which secretly made me glad because Emmy and I would have the same memories now. It was just like she said, too. There was a couch and two big chairs and they were all covered in clear plastic, and there was a big stripe of plastic across the carpet, which was light blue and really fluffy. There was a lot of gold and royal blue, which is one of my favorite colors, and it looked very fancy, but it looked weird, too, and I didn't like it even though I like fancy stuff.

Mom blew out another "O." She had that crumbly look, but also the face she gets when it's time to clean the house and we're about to get our chores assigned. And it was kind of like that, because she told Emmy to scope out the kitchen, she was going to the bedroom. Emmy started to go, then she stopped and said "are you o.k.?" And Mom said "I'm o.k.," and I felt kind of bad because maybe I should have asked her that, too, but she smiled at Emmy, and Emmy went away. Then Mom turned to me, but she didn't give me a chore, she just looked at me like I was doing something funny, but I was just standing there.

"You keep out of trouble," she said, and I said I would, and then she walked off, and I was alone in the living room. That was my chance, so I walked on the stripe of plastic over to a table that had a fancy glass bowl on it, and there was candy in it, just like Emmy said. But it wasn't ribbons, it was Skittles. I was a little disappointed because I wanted to see what candy ribbons were like, but I was glad, too, because I love Skittles. I had to reach really carefully so I wouldn't step on the carpet, but I got one and put it in my mouth, and then I was bummed out because Emmy was right about the dusty and stale part. I couldn't go into the kitchen to throw it out because then Emmy would know, so I just swallowed it, and I actually almost ate another one, but I exercised some self control. And then I stood there and looked around the room. It felt weird, because it was really quiet. Not just quiet like no one else was in the living room, but quiet like no one ever lived there at all, and the room was lonely. It was like the time Miss Ingebretsen took us to the history museum and there was an old-time street with a hat shop and a blacksmith's and mannequins dressed up in the same kind of clothes they wore back then, which was cool because you could see how they lived in olden times and the dresses were really pretty, but it was a little scary, too, because it felt like the mannequins were really old souls trapped forever in a hat shop and that they watched you when your back was turned and yearned for you to set them free.

Even though I know it wasn't really true, that's still what it felt like. So, I didn't want to stay in the living room anymore.

I found Emmy in the kitchen, and I was disappointed and relieved all at the same time because the kitchen was just a normal kitchen, and there were even happy-looking chickens on the wallpaper. Emmy was sitting at the table going through a big pile of mail and making two piles and one was just the coupon fliers that Mom calls "the scourge of the western world." Emmy said she almost tore the mailbox off the wall, the mail was jammed into it so tight. I told her there were Skittles in the bowl, but she just looked at me and said, "what?," so I said never mind. But then I said "I don't like it here," and I thought Emmy would agree with me, but she looked a little worried, like I'd said something bad. She said, "listen, don't say that to Mom," and I asked why not, and then she looked at me like she was trying to decide something and all of a sudden I felt kind of nervous but I didn't know why, and that made me even more nervous. I said, "what," like, "tell me." And then Emmy said, "we're moving here."

And all of a sudden it felt like the floor was pulling at me really hard, like it wanted me to sit down, and I said "you're lying," even though part of me knew she wasn't.

"It's all paid up," Emmy said, "Mom won't have to pay rent, and there's room for Uncle Brody when he gets out of jail." And I didn't even care that Uncle Brody would live with us, I was just really scared because I didn't want to live in grandma's house. I felt like I wanted to slap Emmy, but instead I just yelled "Mom!" And Emmy got mad and put her finger to her lips and went "ssshhhh!" really hard, but I yelled "Mom!" again and went out of the kitchen to the hallway. I was really scared because I didn't want to live in a house with plastic on the furniture and ghosts that hid in the quiet, and I even believed a little in ghosts right then. My heart was beating really fast and I looked into three doors before I found Mom in the last room on the hallway and I started to yell "Mom" again, but it stopped just before it left my mouth because when Mom looked up from where she was sitting on the bed, she was crying.

The only other time I saw Mom cry was when she came home from Uncle Brody's trial. Peg was watching us because Emmy was still too young to babysit then, and Mom came home and she was in her blue suit, and she walked into the den where we were watching TV and Peg said "how did it go" and Mom shook her head and then she put her face in her hands and started crying. Peg got up and brought her over to the couch and then she looked at Emmy and me sitting on the floor and said "go to your room, girls." We stayed there until Mom called us for dinner. She looked like maybe she'd washed her face too hard, but she was pretty normal and I was glad because I remember I didn't know what to do when she was crying. It was terrible.

And now she was crying again, and when she looked up and saw me she had a funny expression like she didn't recognize me, her own daughter. I felt weird, like maybe I had

turned into one of the ghosts in the living room and it really scared me and it was terrible to see Mom crying and I wished grandma had never existed so then I started crying, too.

It was almost like me crying woke Mom up, because all of a sudden she saw me again like I was me and not a ghost, and she said “come here,” and reached out and hugged me really tight, but this was a real hug and she said “ssssh, sssh,” really soft. I tried to stop crying but it was really hard and I was kind of hiccupping, and I said the only thing I could think of, which was “I don’t understand what’s happening.” Then Mom let go of me a little, and she looked at me and tucked my hair behind my ears, which is something she’s done ever since I was little. And then she said, “I know you don’t Sweet Pea. But you will.”

HAZEL-DAWN DUMPERT

:the milkmaid:

Tell a young girl she is pretty
and she will carry the burden of beauty
on her shoulders
as does a milkmaid
balance a yoke with an uneven load
She will work tirelessly
to fill solely her left bucket
Its contents splashing over the brim
overflowing with insecurities, expectations,
and self-depreciation
Her world tricked her into believing
that her only responsibility
is to fill that bucket with
superficial substances
She neglects to harvest enough
to fill her right basin
to balance the weight necessary
for the arduous journey
across the plains of her lifetime
Nevertheless, her tenacity guides her-
head raised and back straight
Ignoring the pain
with each step askew
Along the way she will be generous
to thirsty men who eagerly
help themselves
and eventually drain the contents
of her only full vessel
When she runs dry
and has nothing left to offer
what is left is either
emptiness
where there was some
or balance
where there was none

EMILY MCLAUGHRY

Lilly

My grandmother is a poet. I am not. I have always leaned towards essays and prose, my core belief that poetry is too raw, too personal, too dramatic, and I am not comfortable with that.

I spent a few days—not enough—transcribing some of my grandmother’s poems. Eventually, they would become a part of her self-published collection, *The Pebbled Path*. I arrived at her house on the lake that day cautiously excited at what I might find. I was living in New York City at the time, post-undergrad. I worked in retail, but I missed the time I spent as an editor on my college’s newspaper.

To me, essays and articles were partially completed jigsaw puzzles. My writers brought them to me, 30-70% complete, and I would take the pieces apart, sort them meticulously, then piece them back together. Sometimes, I think, I got it right. I assembled the pieces into a white mid-century house on a lake with a horseshoe driveway and sculptures in the garden. But other times, when a person presented me with a picture that I only thought was a puzzle, I may not catch it. I might have ripped it into 1000 pieces with no way of putting it back together.

And so this was the approach I took when my grandmother invited me over to type up some of her poetry. My grandmother’s poems needed fixing and clarifying and maybe some grammatical edits, and I felt sure I was up to the task. It would be a project and we would work together to publish her book.

—

My grandmother opened the door and kissed me on the cheek. When I was a kid, I never liked it when she kissed me. I didn’t like the feel of her lips, sticky with her rosy lipstick, against my face. In fact, I didn’t allow most relatives to kiss me. I asked for hugs instead. Now that I was older, she kissed me and she hugged me. When she pulled me in close, my hair got stuck in the hinge of her glasses. It always did.

With her soft, wrinkled hand, she pulled me to the den. She opened a cabinet the size of a double-door refrigerator and pulled out three sturdy banker’s boxes, each one filled with single-leaf pages of her writing. Some dated back to the eighties and nineties, and others had no date on them; the only clues we had of their origin were the degree of yellowing, the medium (hand-written, typewriter, computer, hand-written with shaky lines), and the position relative to other dated work in the boxes.

She paused to read me poems as she unearthed her opus. A flighty verse about her dance with Baryshnikov, a children’s lyric, an angry nonsensical rant. My grandmother scattered wordplay throughout her poetry, sometimes like confetti, other times like shrapnel, and sometimes simply dust.

Her words were sharpest in person, when we fought. On our last family vacation, we argued about whether it was safe to eat sushi. While the rest of family, all adults, donned Minnie Mouse ears and headed to Disneyland, I stayed behind with my grandmother. I didn't feel like driving two hours to wait in line for kids' attractions, and so I was designated the day's Grandmom sitter. My dad returned early, and we made plans to go to a highly ranked sushi bar in a strip mall. My grandmother feared for our safety. To her, food outside of potato chips, cooked salmon, and raw vegetables was scary. To me, some food was scary, but sushi was my indulgence, my way of connecting with other diners and food service professionals, and especially my way of bonding with my dad, who gave me my first piece of bite-sized maguro when I was in elementary school. But where I saw connection and sensuousness, she saw mercury poisoning and unchecked bacterial growth. Nevertheless, we invited my grandmother to join us, and I asked her, respectfully I thought, not to verbalize her food fears while my dad and I ate. I hoped she could be with us and enjoy our company, if she couldn't enjoy the food. She stopped in her tracks, gutted. My ask was a critique of her behavior, a betrayal, a dagger to her heart, she told me.

In her last days, her words got light, like in her poetry for younger readers. One day, her caretaker helped her make a call to me, and we talked a bit about my bookstore, about the fact that I had begun to write again, and she strung together one-syllable words. It reminded me of her last text to me: "Pop hi hi cry cry." One of the last times we talked, she said a sentence to me that, at surface level, amounted to: "You're a good boy." But in those words, I heard her synapses firing, making connections between not just meanings, but sounds, grappling to translate her feelings into the right words, and coming up with something sparkling and amusing and nonsensical instead.

Her boxes, however, were full of dust-words. They required cleaning up, sorting, culling. There was brilliance there, I thought. But there were also many thousands of pages—a jigsaw puzzle with too many pieces. I had the urge to sort, discard, re-sort, and build.

We sat down for lunch—bagel, cream cheese, and pastrami for me, a tomato sliced up with salt and a side of potato chips for her. Over our meal, I asked her, "What do you want to show in this book? What is the theme? Are there symbols you'd like to make sure come through clearly?" She looked at me like I had three heads.

After she cleared the table, she began to do the dishes as I sat down with her laptop. I ran into my first obstacle on the second line. I could not read her handwriting. I scanned the page, and realized it was littered with illegible scribbles. I called her over and she scrutinized it, then recited several lines for me, theatrically.

Looking back, I wonder if maybe she didn't want me to be able to read it. I wonder if she couldn't read it herself. My grandmother was brimming with anxiety and emotion, and she often overflowed. When she did—usually as a result of intense worry that something would happen to one of her children or grandchildren—my family would look down and realize we were flooded up to the waist with her feelings. This release of the dams took many forms—arguing, speed-walking ahead of the group, vomiting, shouting, wailing, blank silence. I

imagine that it often took the form of poetry, too, her scrawls a literal outpouring. To sooth her anxiety, my grandmother craved connection and release. Poetry, and reading poetry to her family, was both.

The transcribing was slow going. It wore on my patience and I was relieved when it was time to drive home. Ultimately, I didn't finish transcribing her work. I moved to Colorado and back to New York twice over the next five years, opening up windows of job searching. And each time I found myself unemployed, my grandmother offered the opportunity to move in with her and type up her poetry. In fact, she sometimes offered this even when I was gainfully employed. In her request, I now hear, "Be with me. Connect with me. Know my writing and know me." But at the time, I heard, "I don't know you, your life, or your ambitions and I want you to leave whatever it is you have going on and tend to me instead." My response ranged from patient to dismissive to frustrated. I wish I heard her then as I do now. And I wish I had responded, "Read me a poem, Grandmom."

In my stead, a revolving door of assistants (equal in size to the small army of caretakers she worked her way through), came to her home and typed up what they could. My oldest sister and my uncle then took the files and turned them into a book. It is an attractive volume, if a bit stodgy. Green cloth over board, with *The Pebbled Path* written in gold foil in my grandmother's handwriting on the cover.

It has no dustjacket, no ISBN, and no barcode, but my grandmother did a couple of readings from her book—one at the local library in the town I grew up, one at the assisted living facility she eventually moved into. Meanwhile, I began working at a bookstore, where I formulated distinctions and value judgments between self-published, "good" self-published, and traditionally published works. The good self-published books were marketable and sellable. Their design held to standards set by publishers. My grandmother's books did not, and when I moved from Denver to New York for the last time, I placed it in a Little Free Library. In a Kondo-inspired frenzy, I had decided that this book did not spark joy, and I hoped it would find its way to a reader with a heavy-duty dust rag. As I placed it in the miniature library, a small voice questioned how many years it would be until I understood the callousness of this act. I ignored it.

A couple of years later, I began working on building a bookstore of my own. At this point, my grandmother had developed a brain tumor, though I didn't know it at the time. She had spent years wondering if there was something wrong with her brain, while the family assured her she was fine. The denial strikes me. We didn't say to her, "Yes, there is both something wrong with your brain and you are aging." We said to her, "There is nothing wrong with your brain, you are just aging."

As more details began to fade away, my grandmother created a fiction for me. I had moved to New Hampshire, but she could still talk on the phone at that point. She called me sometimes, and I answered occasionally—partly because I was busy but mostly because the hurt and frustration of our many fights had not dissipated. When I answered, she would ask me where I was. I would tell her, and she would ask if I was at school (my sixth interstate

move had brought me back to my college town, so I can't blame her for the confusion). I explained to her that I had finished school and I was working. "That's right," she said, "how is your book coming?"

When I was a student, my grandmother saw me as a writer. When I was an editor, she saw me as a writer. When I sold shoes, taught rock climbing, scooped ice cream, marketed books, and finally settled on opening a bookstore, she knew I was a writer. My grandmother was many things. She was a teacher, a dancer, a social worker, a mother, a grandmother—something for every letter of the alphabet, it seems at times. But through it all, she was a writer. She saw me as something I didn't see in myself but had always suspected might be lingering somewhere in there.

I am not with her on her deathbed. I can't be, because there is a pandemic and because I opened my bookstore three months before the statewide closure, and life goes on even in death. But I asked my dad to hold his phone up to her ear. I told her I loved her. I told her I am writing. I told her that she inspired me to start writing, and I will have that forever, and so she will be with me forever.

I've always believed that writing needs a point, an audience, or preferably both. I don't know what the point is, and I don't have an audience, so I usually don't write. My grandmother knew there doesn't need to be a point and decided to create her own audience, and so she wrote.

One of my happiest memories of my grandmother is when I was young—late elementary school, if I had to guess. We were in her driveway. It was hot—mid-summer, no school—and the flowers in her planter had begun to wilt. I told her the flowers were dead. "No," she said, "they're wilted," as drops sprinkled from the head of her watering can. Sure enough, when we came back outside a few hours later, they were standing upright, their pink blossoms returned to their horizontal position.

I wonder if that's what's going to happen to her now. We will water her, with morphine, and she will perk back up. She will dance again, champagne drunk, after dinner at my uncle's house and fall down a step and be okay in the morning. I know that's not the case, and so I write.

ALLIE LEVY

Fire vs Water: Today's Lesson in Chinese Characters

Fire-Setting

灶 /zao/: an *oven* is built by setting a fire beside a pile of earth
 灿 /can/: *splendid* is the view of a fire sweeping over a mountain
 烟 /yan/: *smoke* originates as a cause flickering like a spark
 烦 /fan/: *frustration* occurs when a fire burns a page
 烧 /shao/: to *burn* something is to set a fire high on it
 炒 /chao/: to *fry* is to use little fire
 烙 /lao/: to *iron* is to burn each and every spot
 炉 /lu/: a *stove* is the fire burning in a household
 炮 /pao/: a *cannon* is a fire wrapped tight

Water-Filled

沙 /sha/: *sand* is something holding little water
 河 /he/: a *river* has water allowing everything possible
 洗 /xi/: to *wash* is to put something into water first
 波 /bo/: *waves* surge when water flows like skin
 注 /zhu/: to *focus* is to be the master of water
 源 /yuan/: a *wellspring* is the original water
 泪 /lei/: *tears* are water seeping from the eyes
 洒 /sa/: to *spread* is to throw water into the west
 演 /yan/: a *performance* is a show in respect for water
 酒 /jiu/: *wine* is water fully matured

YUAN CHANGMING

Directory of Destines: A Wuxing Poem (五行诗)

1 金 Metal (born in a year ending in 0 or 1)
-helps water but hinders wood; helped by earth but hindered by fire
 he used to be totally dull-colored
 because he came from the earth's inside
 now he has become a super-conductor
 for cold words, hot pictures and light itself
 all being transmitted through his throat

2 水 Water (born in a year ending in 2 or 3)
-helps wood but hinders fire; helped by metal but hindered by earth
 with her transparent tenderness
 coded with colorless violence
 she is always ready to support
 or sink the powerful boat
 sailing south

3 木 Wood (born in a year ending 4 or 5)
-helps fire but hinders earth; helped by water but hindered by metal
 rings in rings have been opened or broken
 like echoes that roll from home to home
 each containing fragments of green
 trying to tell their tales
 from the forest's depths

4 火 Fire (born in a year ending 6 or 7)
-helps earth but hinders metal; helped by wood but hindered by water
 your soft power bursting from your ribcage
 as enthusiastic as a phoenix is supposed to be
 when you fly your lipless kisses
 you reach out your hearts
 until they are all broken

5 土 Earth (born in a year ending in 8 or 9)
-helps metal but hinders water; helped by fire but hindered by wood
 i think not; therefore, I am not
 what I am, but I have a color
 the skin my heart wears inside out
 tattooed intricately
 with footprints of history

Yes, but.

The thing on the screen looked like an alien or roadkill, a bloody dead thing. The doctor said “ectopic,” and Mikayla thought of an ecto-skeleton, the way cockroaches wore armor on their backs, and they were practically indestructible. They learned in bio that cockroaches could survive a nuclear blast, that they had outlived the dinosaurs. Maybe armor wasn’t such a bad idea. Although, of course, armor doesn’t prevent something from killing you from the inside.

She’d taken health class freshman year but didn’t remember much from it. She was pretty sure Mrs. Peters had talked about ectopic pregnancies, which is, she learns, when an embryo attaches somewhere outside the uterus, but Mikayla couldn’t have told anyone a thing about them until today. She did, however, remember her prefixes from Latin because the words sounded so good coming from Mr. Gunderson’s mouth. Ecto- came from the prefix ex-/ect-, meaning *out*. As in *outcast*, *outsider*, or a creature clawing its way *out* of her body.

There was no one to drive her to the hospital. She couldn’t ask her mother to borrow the car; they only had the one now. She definitely couldn’t ask her dad to pick her up. Besides, he’d be too busy at work. She’d asked Mel what she was doing first period, but she’d said she had a big exam to take. There was no one else she could ask, so Mikayla walked the mile and a half to the hospital herself. She had thought she was just going in for an ultrasound. Now, feeling dazed after all the examinations, the way home was going to take much longer. When the receptionist had asked if she had anyone to drive her home, she’d lied and said yes. Strange that that was the thing that made her cry as she left the hospital; that there was no one to call.

It’s late mud season and the entire town smells like dead things. Melting ice and snow has turned the dirt roads soggy. Fallen trees rot. Fields soak up the snowmelt like sponges. Mikayla emerges from the hospital’s artificial glow into the overcast spring day. The sky is a bright white light. She wishes she’d remembered sunglasses.

Mikayla has been dizzy for days. All the blood she lost, the doctor explained. The nausea was what made her think she was pregnant in the first place, despite the heavy bleeding for the past week. She is on her way to get pills, ones to end it and ones to relieve her pain. She’ll have to call in sick to school tomorrow.

She spent the past week feeling like she had to vomit. That tinny taste filled her mouth all week. The signs were right: nausea, lack of appetite, soreness. The test confirmed it. Two lines equaled yes, one equaled no. It didn’t occur to her, or, apparently, the e.p.t. people, that there was a third option: Yes, but. As unprepared as she’d been to deal with a pregnancy, she was even less prepared for an unviable one. How do you mourn something you didn’t want?

She couldn't tell her mother. Maybe she would have before, back when they used to talk about things like crushes and birth control, when it was all hypothetical. But not now. Over the past year, her mother had confided in her in ways Mikayla wished she hadn't. She didn't want to hear about how oblivious and cruel her father could be. Her mom assumed Mikayla would take her side, but Mikayla just wished there were no sides. She wished she could have stayed with her dad, stayed in their house with the Sharpie notches marking her height in the kitchen. The only home she'd ever lived in, now two miles away and too big with just her father in it.

Her mother couldn't afford the mortgage on her own and let him buy her out. He got the house, she got the good car and enough for an apartment and the kid. Although at eighteen, Mikayla was hardly a kid anymore. She would graduate in a few months. She still hadn't declared if she'd be going to Amherst or Colby, but wherever she went, she'd be grateful not to be a possession for them to barter with anymore. Her dad had already started holding the fact that he'd be paying her tuition over her mom's head.

She'd gone to the doctor after a long, painful period and two positive home pregnancy tests. All they'd determined in that visit was that she had tested positive, definitively, but, the doctor warned her, the bleeding wasn't good. They had to take an ultrasound to determine if the fetus was viable. At first the receptionist told her they were scheduling a month out, but Mikayla burst into tears at the thought of not knowing what was in her body for a whole month, and they called her three days later to tell her they could sneak her in first thing in the morning. There wasn't really a chance of good news. Either it was and would soon not be, or already wasn't. She didn't want it anyway, so she didn't expect to feel so sad. She hadn't known she'd leave feeling so empty and lost, with "a ticking time bomb" in her, as the doctor had called the thing in her right fallopian tube.

The pharmacy's fluorescent lighting and neon yellow sale signs are nearly as offensive as the bright beating pulse of the hospital. She feels like throwing up again. Ashley Martinez is working the counter. Ashley isn't the kind of person you want knowing your secrets. Everyone knew that Laura Eldridge had an abortion last year. How did that become public knowledge? If not from Ashley herself, from other Ashleys. Mikayla passes her the scrip without making eye contact.

"Oooh, Vikes," Ashley reads the prescription, smacking her gum. "Have fun."

Ashley goes back to typing and raises an eyebrow as Mikayla steps aside to wait by the condoms.

"Mikayla?" She turns to see Glory McInnis, her now-former neighbor whose kids she sometimes watches. Glory always looks like she came straight out of the pages of a *Soft Surroundings* catalogue. "I'm so glad I ran into you, I've been meaning to call. Can you babysit this Saturday? There's this thing we have to go to, kind of last minute, and..."

Glory is talking too fast. Mikayla feels like she is in slow motion and everything around her is moving with the speed of a hummingbird. She nods along, and suddenly Glory is gone and she vaguely recalls having agreed to something. Then Ashley calls her name,

looks around to make sure no one is in earshot and whispers to her, “If you’re looking to unload a few, I know someone who would be happy to take ‘em off your hands for a good price.”

Mikayla twirls the beads on her bracelet. “Um. No, thanks.” She stuffs the bag with the pills into her backpack and continues towards home. It’s about a quarter mile faster to go through downtown, but she cuts through the park just a few blocks from her old house. On an overcast April morning the only people in the park are nannies and their charges and a few guys playing basketball. She has to stop in the park restroom to throw up and kneels, her bare knees on the cold cement floor. As she retches, a small child in the stall next to her asks her mother what that sound was. The woman shushes the girl and leads her out of the bathroom, away from the echoes of Mikayla’s sickness. There are no paper towels in the dispenser, so she wipes her mouth with toilet paper and straightens her skirt. As she leaves the bathroom, she sees him at the water fountain. She tries to turn the other way before he notices her, but he calls her name and there’s nowhere to go.

He plants his hand against the wall above her, closing the space between them, like he used to lean against her locker before he graduated. He says it’s been a while with that half-smile that makes her feel noticed. But being seen is the last thing she wants right now. He asks why she’s not in school and she shrugs. What is she supposed to say? She wants to tell him that it’s all his fault, that he’s the reason she has to bear this pain on her own. But what’s the point? It won’t make it hurt any less. She can’t seem to bring herself to say the words out loud, to make it real.

He tells her she looks a little pale and she’s embarrassed that he noticed, that she is showing her pain on the outside. She used to like the way he looked at her in the bleachers at basketball games, the way he didn’t care if anyone saw him looking. Now she feels exposed, ugly, disgusting. She wishes she could disappear.

“You haven’t been answering my texts,” he says. The smile has faded from his face.

“I know,” she starts, but doesn’t know how to finish the thought. She hasn’t written back since the day she took the pregnancy tests. Nothing she could say seemed adequate. “I’m sorry,” she says, though she’s not sure exactly what she’s sorry for. For not telling him, or maybe for letting him touch her in the first place, for everything.

“I see how it is,” he says, accusation in his voice. “You didn’t even feel the need to break it off, huh? Just ghost me like I’m nothing.” She wants to tell him that it isn’t about him, that she doesn’t have the words for the broken parts in her.

The tears come on suddenly, before she has time to walk away. She chokes on her sobs and he looks back at his friends waiting on the basketball court.

“Look, I didn’t mean to... Can we try this again?” he asks.

“I don’t know,” she manages to get out through the tears, “I don’t know how...” he puts one of his long, sturdy arms around her and she leans into his chest, letting the tears come. He pats her back and tells her it will be OK, that he forgives her. She knows she’ll never tell him.

When she and her mother moved out last month, they tried to bring Mr. Mistoffelees with them, but the latch on his kitty carrier broke and he bolted for the woods. Mikayla ran after him, slipped in a muddy patch, and tore her jeans. She came back to the rented U-Haul empty-handed. She hadn't wanted to leave him and convinced her mother to look for him for the better part of an hour, but finally, her mother insisted they go. They had a lot of unpacking to do.

"Cats are extremely territorial," her mother told her on the way to the new apartment. "They don't like to be uprooted."

"Clearly," was all Mikayla had said, staring out the window, watching for Mr. Mistoffelees. Her parents had given him to her for her ninth birthday, shortly after they'd seen *Cats* on Broadway ("*Oh! Well, I never was there ever a cat so clever as Magical Mr. Mistoffelees!*"). She'd come back every weekend to look for him with no luck. She imagined his fluffy orange body being ripped apart by fisher cats, coyotes, ermine. Weasels were known for taking the heads off chickens and leaving the bodies, just for fun.

Mikayla made LOST posters with a picture of Mr. Mistoffelees stretching on his back, showing off his substantial pink belly, tufts of orange fur sticking out from everywhere. The photo made him seem unthreatening. It didn't show his claws or how he always bit her hands when she went to scratch his belly. His eyes were closed in ecstasy; you could tell he was purring.

One day, Glory McInnis had called to say that she had found a decapitated bird on her back porch and did they think it might be from their missing cat? She hadn't called the number on the posters, their new landline, but the old number she had, so Mikayla's dad had to relay the message. He promised Mikayla he'd put out milk in the mornings and would look for Mistoffelees every day after work. He always forgot the *Mr.*, which was the whole point. Her dad had been finding dead things on their front steps and back porch: a mutilated squirrel, a family of moles, half a mouse, but no other signs of the cat.

Ectopic pregnancies are common, the doctor had assured her, as if this fact would offer her some comfort, assuage the guilt she felt at creating a life and destroying it, not being capable of nurturing even this tiny thing. If she thought about it, it was the same thing as an abortion, technically speaking. The pills the doctor prescribed her would take only a few hours, she told her, and then it would be gone. She would be alone in her body again. She was almost sure that's what she would have done, anyway. Given the choice, which she wasn't. She wondered if anyone else at school had ever had an alien burrowing its way through her fallopian tubes.

Her mother had told her the story of how Mikayla had almost killed her a thousand times. How Mikayla had been breached and was being strangled by the umbilical cord, how the doctors had to perform an emergency C-section, how Mikayla's tiny writhing body had been pulled from her. The blood loss, the pain tearing her body apart, Mikayla's ten perfectly round bloody toes. She wasn't complaining when she told it. She was sharing what they'd gone through together, how they were rooted to each other through pain. And

yet, this pain she could not share with her mother. She would not tell her mother that she knew how it felt to be ripped apart.

Mikayla doesn't have to pass the house, her dad's house now, on her way home, could have avoided it, and yet, she stands in front of it as if she were a guest waiting for someone to invite her in. You don't really notice a place when you live in it, she thinks. Now she registers its flaws from the outside: the broken living room window that birds were often flying into (her mother had finally put up painter's tape to deter them, so it was now a broken window with blue tape running across it like veins), the peeling gray paint, a sagging porch step. Her dad hasn't put out the patio furniture or the hammock yet, too early in the season still, so the porch looks empty and uninviting, not the place she used to sit and read, do homework, sketch, watch birds.

She feels a sudden desperate need to fall into her old bed. Her dad probably hasn't changed her sheets yet. The room probably still smells like her, despite the absence of all her things. She left her old posters up, the bulletin boards with concert and movie ticket stubs and magazine cut-outs that said things like *Dance like no one is watching* and her favorite Toni Morrison quote, "It is always now." She could curl up and be a kid again, pretend her parents were watching TV together downstairs. She was supposed to visit her dad on weekends, but so far, she hadn't stayed over. It felt too strange, like living in a memory, a place that didn't belong to her anymore.

She sticks her key in but realizes the door is unlocked. Strange for the middle of the day. She feels like a trespasser tip-toeing through the mudroom. Her dad hasn't changed much but the house feels foreign somehow, without her and her mother's things. It smells different. There are dishes next to the sink, mail scattered across the kitchen table, not her mother's usual order. The house she grew up in doesn't belong to her anymore. As she heads up the stairs, she can hear voices coming from her parents' bedroom, her dad's now. A woman laughing. Her father is home in the middle of the day and he's not alone. Mikayla pauses, the stairs creak, and the voices mumble through the door. Through a crack she can see bodies in motion, the pink of their flesh pressed together. She gasps and hears the woman ask "What was that?" Mikayla holds her breath and tries not to move. She is crouched behind the door when it swings open and slams into her forehead. She stumbles back and hits the wall.

She hears "Mikayla? Oh my God!"

She blinks and her father comes into focus, in his boxers standing above her.

"What are *you* doing here? Why aren't you in school?"

“What are you doing here?” she fires back, clutching the spot the door hit. She gets up and runs down the stairs, three at a time, before he has a chance to respond. She runs out the door and leaves him standing at the top of the stairs, half-naked. She makes it outside and, as she runs, she notices tufts of orange fur on a bloody thing in the street but doesn’t stop long enough to examine it. She keeps moving, away from the roadkill, away from her father, away from the SUV in the driveway that she recognizes as Glory McInnis’, away from her childhood, away from the pain.

ERIKA NICHOLS-FRAZER

Many Games Played at Once

Some of the children were ghosts. It was, of course, all in jest. They drifted wordlessly down vacant hallways and loomed in unpeopled corners. Others played at being alive. They went to school and ate broccoli and had bedtimes to obey. Some children were nurses and tended the sick and some were the patients. Some prophesied, some told others their dreams. Some of the children pretended to live in another time. They used words like thou and thence and bowed at the hips. Some felt their hair falling out, some the top of their heads coming off, some were bamboozled. Some pretended they were good. They got on their knees and said three prayers each: one for themselves, one for their friends, and one for their enemies. A few organized an old-fashioned brawl. They stuffed cotton into their shorts and lunged at the other girls' knees. Some tried being mothers or little fathers, but no one liked that sort of jest. Some mimicked the aunts. Some were frenzied and dashed through the rooms and over the grounds. Some gathered the dolls and threw them into a pit. Some suffered recalling the moments of all their pitiful lives. On top of these games, they pretended they knew many dangerous things. They opened strongboxes or ate purloined apples. They shuffled through gardens that may have once belonged to them. They were everywhere, doing everything. Balls were thrown, cans kicked, hoops driven forward with a stick. The tea had gone cold, but the soup was ready to boil. The children exchanged clothes and pretended to be one another. No one noticed a difference.

REBECCA CROSS

Signs Off

The neon Budweiser sign in the window of the dive bar has turned off. I don't know why I always check for that sign. It's not like I drink or have any desire to hang out with the fishing fleet that live in the harbor across the street.

It's Friday and the sign should be on, but humans have been naughty and earth has sent us to our rooms. If only my writing career were as successful as the coronavirus.

I veer right through the roundabout, past the bar and the harbor. Home to the endless sameness. Cotton floats by like bubbles; I think its pollen has burrowed itself in my lungs. I measure my breath like steps on a Fitbit. In Eastern medicine, they believe that grief settles in the lungs, and I wonder if some of that got stuck in there, too.

Last fall my grandmother passed away. A month ago, my husband's father followed. Then a respiratory disease shut down the world. *Could I be next?* I wonder. After three recent hospitalizations due to asthma, you start to imagine how your obituary might sound.

At home, the kids check on the butterflies that hatched in our butterfly garden. One was born with a broken wing; they named it Bendy. The next day we found it lying face up. It's best not to name things that will likely die soon.

The other butterflies with wings colors of an autumnal bouquet flutter to the top of the net, longing to be free.

"When can we let them go?" my daughter asks.

"When it stops raining," I say.

"Don't let them die."

We fill their habitat with nectar, fresh oranges and watermelon, pink blossoms from young blueberry branches, and bachelor buttons from the garden. The butterflies land on the fruit chunks and suck the sweet juice through their proboscis.

Rain patters and draws streaks on the outside of the windows. "God tears," my daughter calls them. Through the tears on the windows she watches the neighbors play across the street. Children that used to invite my kids over to play on their trampoline, that used to come to our house for sleepovers. Now they play on their trampoline with other children.

"Why can't we go play with them?" my daughter asks. She doesn't understand why she is not in their approved "quaranteam".

I feel like I'm watching myself as a child again, except now the cliques are sanctioned by grown adults. I swallow the memories, but they lodge in my throat like rocks.

My daughter sketches pictures in the steam forming on the glass. She also licks windows and dusts furniture with her fingers because she likes how "smooth" they feel. "Mommy could die if you don't stop touching everything," I tell her. In the last month she's gone from wearing pink to black and gray. Sometimes she wears my clothes and resembles a little Billie Eilish. At night she sobs, "I don't want you to die!" She often dreams of death.

Since the pandemic sent us all into time-out, I am home full-time with my five- and eight-year-old. I'm also "working from home," which means figuring out how to teach Spanish to middle school students over Zoom while learning how to teach my children #allthethings. We're hunched over screens for much of the day, in our pajamas. I throw a blazer on for the Zooms; business on top, party on the bottom.

Then my administrators instruct me to start entering zeroes. I follow their instructions, even as the voice inside my head asks *how can you fail a kid during a pandemic?* My phone fills up with emails. They all say the same thing: Help.

While doing damage control over the computer, my children beat each other up in the living room. In putting out fires over emails, I let my own house burn.

"That's it!" I scream as my five-year-old cries, because her older brother slugged her in the stomach, because she kicked him, because someone called someone stupid, because getting mad is easier than crying, because they listen to me when I use angry voice.

"We're going to the beach!" I pack up my kids and herd them in the car. My chest feels like a pangolin's sitting on it.

No one knows where we're going, but it doesn't matter. The fight in the car like they always do, until I let them pick out a song. Chainsaws sawing concrete for him, Frozen 2 for her. I let off the gas, and the car slows down. The slower I drive, the bigger a breath I can get. In my mind I play a game to see just how slowly I can drive. My lungs fill up with oxygen. In a world that is changing every minute, I still try for calm.

We drive past the cottonwood trees and the fertile pollen, through the roundabout where a thin man with a long beard holds up a sign that screams THE END IS NEAR and REPENT OR GO TO HELL. Someone is dressed as The Dude in a bathrobe, another like Mad Max in steampunk goggles and purple hair. We pass the dive bar across the harbor and the darkened neon beer sign, down Glacier Highway where eagles perch on lampposts to dry their wings.

There is so much traffic—apparently, everyone else had the same idea. Cars that pass us seem like fellow cast members in an improv play that we are making up as we go along. Everyone puzzling along this colossal experiment without headlights or street signs. No elders or "best practices" to guide our way.

We park where a trail jogs through a forest of hemlock and spruce trees, past nubs of young skunk cabbage still smelling like orchids. Baby eaglets test out their voices in nests above. An invisible spider web clutches my hat and I pause at a flooded beaver dam pool. It's hard to tell where the dying tree in the water ends and its watery reflection begins, like the little girl at my legs who says *I don't want you to die*.

Minutes later, the beach greets us with heart-shaped broken tile and boat skeletons bedazzled in toothy barnacles. Old mine parts gape like smiles. We build forts out of driftwood and put our heads to the ground to see if it's true that the earth is vibrating at a slower frequency. We listen to each other's pulses. My daughter's marches like a 2/4 time signature, mine's more syncopated. My son keeps the time.

We stay at the beach until the wind stops blowing cold from the north and redirects from the balmy south, and the tide changes and drowns out the boat graveyard. Sunshine awkwardly bright appears against robin's blue sky, strangely spacious for a rainforest.

"Let's pretend we're in California," the kids say. I haven't thought about breathing for at least three hours.

As I watch my children stack rocks, I consider the possibility of swapping homeschool for nature school. No fighting, no messes, no migraines, no screens. Just birds and weather and waves. To relinquish control and let the wilderness be the teacher. Sit on a beach all day and build cairns. Balance, right?

My son's class is celebrating the last day of second grade over Zoom. I don't think anyone else noticed when he closed the computer fifteen minutes early. I follow him outside into the garden. He picks dandelions, then scatters them over the fire ring.

The thin white fabric covering the garden bed has collapsed from the wind. I lift the veil from the vegetables. It floats like breath, quiet as prayer. Under the dome of PVC pipes, baby kale snuggles into the soil. It looks comfortable under its cloudy cover. I remember when I, too, was young and green, hopeful among certainty, blooming towards what ifs and maybes. But lately my dreams are of losing my hair.

For now, it's only enough to plant vegetable starts and pull weeds. To mend PVC pipes in the garden bed, wash dirt and mud from a veil of garden fabric. Just enough to let some light in.

SUMMER KOESTER

Send an SOS out into space

Send an SOS out into space:
there might be intelligent life
out there in this vast universe.

Please, come save us, you aliens,
please save our worthwhile creations,
our Mona Lisa and Hamlet,
Bach's sublime solo cello suites,
our scant scientific knowledge—
which, no doubt, just pales beside yours.

Alien friends, have pity on us
miserable human beings,
this fallible living species
that has destroyed its planet.

Please, come save us, you aliens!

GEZA TATRALLYAY

To Find the Open

Uncompress
where there is space
to spread—a place with bluffs
on the horizon, sagebrush
the only inhabitant,
where you can stand tall
& stretch to become more—
the way babies
just out of the womb
can't stop swimming
their arms and legs,
amazed with the grace
they now have
beyond the cramped room,
the way a bud finally
has the freedom to unfold
far from the tiny seed
below, moving up
through a thin green
stem & a line of leaves
to breathe & release
the perfect petals
that have always
been there.

SARAH SNYDER

A Dream of Joy

In the fourth month of her pregnancy, the fortuneteller told Sirisha, it would be a boy. Everyone—her mother-in-law, Pandu—her husband, two visiting widowed aunts, an elderly cousin, the neighbors—everyone decided, it must be a boy. This was the first grandchild in the family and the first one was always a son.

So Sirisha listened to all this and went through the remaining months, doing her work on the farm and in the house, thankful that she did not have to be worrying about that question. She was very calm and sure when she went into labor; she had a great tolerance for pain, and without any screams or too much torment, she gave birth to her child. It was a girl.

The baby was big, about 3.9 kilograms, moist and firm, smooth like marble. She didn't look like she had just been born, she was so well finished with plenty of hair and nails, perfect eyebrows, her eyes steady and focused. Pandu, the father, adored her immediately. But Pandu's mother was silent, aghast that their expectation had been so wrong. Being a practical woman, she said, "This has never happened before. Never before the first child was a girl. Of course, it is Goddess Lakshmi, she will bring wealth and prosperity," and she loved the child and gave her carefully to Sirisha without saying anything about it being a girl. She only said, "Sirisha, here is your beautiful, shining child."

Sirisha took the child with pride, her face rich and soft with her new motherhood. Her first action was to remove the swaddling clothes and look at her naked. She stared in complete confusion at the sex of the child. Her body shivered, she licked her lips and bit on them. Then she turned the baby over, as if she expected to see the penis, probably misplaced somewhere else on that body. The baby had started to cry, but still Sirisha searched and examined her. Then she put the clothes back and looked at her mother-in-law. "Why are you bringing this to me?" she said. "Whose is this? Bring me my son."

The mother-in-law saw the madness in Sirisha's eyes and despair filled her heart. She tried to reason with her, but Sirisha was very clear. She accused everyone of stealing her child; or maybe they had been negligent and he had died and they were giving her this replacement. She wanted the truth and if they did not tell her the truth, she would show them just how angry she could get. She ignored all their arguments and refused to hold, or tend, or feed her daughter.

Soon, after that first day, Sirisha would not speak to anyone. Her baby seemed to know this, she cried through the hours without a stop and the whole household was filled with a frenzy of trying to stop her. They got fresh cow's milk, they found a wet nurse, they got all sorts of jingling toys. A man was sent to the nearest city, Kakinada, to get formula milk. But the child would not be appeased; Sirisha's mother-in-law was frightened that the child would just die, crying like this. She began to pray as much as she could.

Exhausted with her crying, the child finally fell asleep. The mother-in-law knew there was just a short time in which she must decide what to do.

Early next morning, Girija, the servant who cleaned the hen house and plucked the hen feathers once a week, came and when she listened to what was going on in the house, she said, there is only one answer, at the edge of the village, there is a mystic, his name is Koji, he is visiting for a short time, he has proved himself with eighteen miraculous events and he is kind and full of tenderness for all living things. If they told him their situation, he would definitely help them.

The village was very small, the edge of it within half an hour of walking from their house. Sirisha's mother-in-law and Girija reached there before noon. They carried fruits and a bag of rice to give to Koji, the mystic. He was sitting on a stone under a grand old neem tree, a thin man, very dark-skinned, his hair long and tied into a loose pony tail. Two or three men sat with him and he smoked a large long cigar. When the mother-in-law and Girija came near, the men moved away and Koji put the cigar in a little wooden tray beside him and looked at them with his dark face, his eyes, tired and sad.

The mother-in-law started her story from the very beginning and after he listened to everything, Koji said, "We have to give her a dream of joy. Do you know how to do that?"

The mother-in-law shook her head and he laughed at her confusion.

By now, half the cigar had burned leaving a little line of ash on the tray. Koji took a pinch of that ash. "Put this on her head and a dream of joy will come to her," he said and closed his eyes.

The mother-in-law felt very insulted. Cigar ash, indeed. Just because they were so helpless, he was obviously making fun of them, what could she have expected, the gods were really cruel to test them like this. But Girija was very satisfied with this solution, she made a packet of the ash with great devotion and they went home to Sirisha, who lay in a stupor of emptiness and hunger. Her eyes moved wildly when they tried to sprinkle the ash on her. She cursed them, her voice hoarse and ugly. "Now that you have taken away my son, you are trying to destroy me too, are you?" she shouted and shook out her hair.

Two days went by. There was no improvement. The child grew thin and lost all her lustre. She became wrinkled and lost weight rapidly. Somehow they managed to feed her a little fresh cow's milk mixed with water. But Sirisha hardly ate anything. The whole house was ready for mourning.

The mother-in-law wondered whether she should stop eating meat on all Tuesdays for the rest of her life to appease the gods. As she stood in the open air kitchen watching the rice boil over the wood stove, there was a noise of a diesel vehicle that raised the dust on the mud road and mangled the silence around the countryside.

The mother-in-law wiped her sweating face with the end of her sari and went to the front of the house to see what this was all about.

In the front room, a slim, young woman was standing talking to Pandu's father. She was a very modern young woman in a blue silk sari with a pink border and a sleeveless blouse.

Her hair was short and she wore a small thin gold chain. She said she was Sirisha's classmate, Alamelu; she had returned from studying abroad in New York, and she had gone to Sirisha's village to find her, they had told her Sirisha was married and was in her husband's house. So she was here to see Sirisha; they had been such close friends until the eighth grade and then they had lost touch as Alamelu's family had moved to the city.

Pandu's father listened respectfully to this smart young woman and made her sit in the cushioned chair in the front room; he sent the errand boy, who hovered outside, for some tender coconuts. The mother-in-law went inside to the room where Sirisha was lying. She stood at the doorway and said, "Someone has come to see you. She says, she is your friend. She says she studied with you in your school." There was no sign that Sirisha heard any of these words. "She is saying her name is Alamelu," the mother-in-law said and when she heard the name Alamelu, Sirisha got up from the bed, her legs weak and unsteady. She looked in the mirror at her face and shook her head. Then she combed out her tangled hair and braided it. She searched in the shelf for her favorite blue chiffon sari, into which she wrapped herself. She allowed her mother-in-law to make the pleats for her. Then, supported by her mother-in-law, she walked through the courtyard slowly and reached the front of the house.

It was more than eight years since they had parted, but as Sirisha and Alamelu looked at each other, they were children again, adoring each other, trying to account for all the changes in their faces, in their bodies, in their behaviors. They held each other and Sirisha wept, as if she wanted to wash away the years. They began every sentence eagerly with "Do you remember...?"

Alamelu said, "Every time I was alone and sad in New York, I used to think of you, how much we played together. How we stole mangoes, and stoned the tamarind trees to get the unripe tamarind pods. How silly that we did not keep in touch. I always said to myself then, that when I come back, I should come and find you. Do you remember this?" and Alamelu took out a faded black and white picture from her handbag. They were standing together in front of their thatched schoolroom. The schoolmaster had bought a new camera that day and had taken that picture. Sirisha held the picture tenderly and again tears started from her.

"Stop crying like this, Sirisha," Alamelu said with much affection. "What has happened to you? How you were a laughing girl, getting into trouble just for laughing and giggling. And now, see, look at you like this. What is it, have you been sick, what is the matter, what is your pain?"

The mother-in-law came forward, as if to answer Alamelu, but Sirisha shook her head and the mother-in-law stepped back.

"There is nothing to tell about me," Sirisha said. She looked again at the old photograph, how they stood with their arms around each other, two confident girls, their heads bold and high as if nothing could defeat them.

Alamelu said, "Wait, there is something else. If you see what else I have brought for you,

you are not going to believe it. I have kept her so carefully all these years.” She pulled out an old doll from inside her bag. “Now, do you remember her, our dear Miss Dotamma?”

Sirisha stared, a slow surge of wonder spreading across her face. She reached out her hand as if time and reality had fallen away from her. She touched the doll, expecting her fingers not to find anything, as if she was reaching her fingers into a dream. But the doll was really there, it was solid, she felt the smooth limbs. She took it from Alamelu. She smoothed the dark hair. That hair was once gold, she remembered how they had inked it strand by strand. The eyes were still blue. They had named her Dotamma, after Little Dot from the American comic book that Alamelu’s uncle had got for them. It was he who had given Alamelu that doll for her eighth birthday. How they had loved it. They had stitched dresses and made little ornaments for her, helped her with her homework, cooked for her and even had a wedding for her.

Sirisha touched the tiny white bead necklace around Dotamma’s neck; she stroked the little green skirt. She remembered one more thing and turned the doll upside down. It still had the tiny hole they had made so that she could pee.

Sirisha looked up at Alamelu watching her. Alamelu nodded and then they both began to laugh. When they stopped, Sirisha looked around the room, as if she had just woken up. A look of peace settled upon her face. She stood up, light and deft on her feet. She ran into the house and returned with her own baby girl, holding her carefully, her face saturated with motherliness.

The mother-in-law leaned weak and boneless, against the doorway.

PADMA PRASAD