

# Bloodroot Literary Magazine

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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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## 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 and open-source packages, including poemscol.

## Introductory Remarks

The Upper Valley recently bore witness to a solar eclipse. While our region did not experience the full 100% totality, we came very, very close. When the sun was partially blocked, the warm day turned chilly. As the moon pushed through the path of the sun, the quality of light changed dramatically. Shadows became more pronounced. Everyone looked up. On the Green in Hanover, New Hampshire, the heart of Dartmouth College, students, faculty, staff, community members, and visitors gathered to share the experience. Students threw frisbees, small children ran around laughing, others were eating and drinking, groups of friends set up blankets, while others played music and still more people strolled leisurely by. Since the pandemic, there haven't been many large, spontaneous gatherings. The urge to share something with a crowd of people hasn't gone away, but fear of contagion has blocked our path.

We like to imagine putting Bloodroot together as a way of gathering, imagine reading each other's work as a way of being in community with each other. In these pages you'll encounter reflections on the war in Ukraine in the poetry of Lada Kolomiyets, walk in the woods with Jane McKinley, go hunting with T.J. Riley, peer into a closet with Annabelle Cone, meet a haunting stranger in Rachel Lyon's striking prose, and more. The cover image was made from a photograph taken by James E. Dobson of Post Pond in Lyme, New Hampshire. We frequently visit this spot in the summer and early fall for swimming and boating and especially enjoy the light at dusk. Like the momentary darkening experienced during the eclipse, such twilight moments can register and release our shared feelings. We invite you to read this issue as a way of connecting. Here we are, gathered on the page.

RENA J. MOSTEIRIN & JAMES E. DOBSON





## Near Szczepieszyn

What is [the smokebush] called? I ask Stasia, pointing,  
and she with my grandmother's diminutive says, *sunset*.  
And earlier when I asked for wetlands, or maybe marsh,

I got *reed—trzcina*—on which beetles hum in a tongue  
twister beginning with this woman's hometown.  
I sh-ch-bzh-esh-ih like a near relative, and the cat,

we both agree, is very nice, though the accident  
left him odd, off, not unlike her husband,  
my father's second-to-last drinking buddy,

who toddles a tour of the house, never mind  
this country, with its Holocaust memorials

and few Jewish burial grounds, and the candles!  
in the Catholic cemeteries! for miles! I understood  
even that last bit, which she said through her eyes,

shine of cinnamon fit to desiccate dissent; my father  
hangs his head, and she nods hard when I name  
the historian. In so many words, she says

*reviled*. The wreath of peppers on the wall is hers,  
I can tell: the white string that threads through  
each small orange and red fruit hangs down.

KRYSIA WAZNY MCCLAIN

## Nuns of the Tatra Mountains

Blue wimples pinned  
to their hair, straight and tied,

habits glide over hard stone, descending  
the flower-speckled mountains.

From those peaks, they observe  
the seasons, so many of them cold

and quiet, but for the hush of a stream  
under ice or a shiver between thin trunks

that proves, with snort and paw, the world is vast  
and uneasy.

Their tongues taste the sacred blood  
of fall leaves, the body of an hour

and grow old with repeated phrases. Voices thick  
with poppyseed jam, they whisper

prayers for the brothers below. Once NKVD,  
Gestapo met in this valley's

shadows, voiced a final solution  
for the first time. These women's lives

are the last thing I want for myself,  
and still.

## Hunting the Old Woods

My eyes are the old  
woods road I've chosen

as I swagger this  
long-dozed-lane

armed and clad in  
checkered regalia

half-believing by my will alone  
the proud buck shall rise.

T.J. RILEY

## Old Mine

Nothing left to do but pan for some last vein  
of our union, grasp for some worth to hold.

Some old man once told me that long-loving is  
like mining: messy, dark, deep. Fueled only  
by simple faith that there's treasure to be had.

Our mine long ago abandoned - all boarded up.

I thought I was loving you and you always let me,  
then realized I was unearthing all alone. And still,

I know not where to put these unearthing tools.

TJ. RILEY

## March

You died that spring timed right,  
winter out of the ground,  
but grass not yet growing,  
so the grave sod cut out easy.

I recall the peepers singing by the pond,  
that rich refrain of nature in crescendo,  
their sweet verse overcame the night  
and for a moment, my grief.

I played taps at your resting place,  
if only because I'd promised to but  
gave no elegy for you, just stood with  
guilted relief over your drunkards death.

Many years have passed since  
the old family tree shed you,  
a long time since your life  
bled out on a cold concrete floor.

I tell myself I'm okay with this finishing, with  
you, now placed with the other sons of heaven,  
and that a sun cannot set more than it rises:  
that once I was young and loved, and you sober.

This morning, rain marks time on this metal roof,  
a million drummers on patina'd tin,  
I see you've come to march awhile  
and once, father, once you really sang.

T.J. RILEY

### Beech Sapling in a Wood

March rain. Noon. So dark it seems  
the night's about to fall, oak trunks  
wet black like old macadam,  
beech leaves dangling, dead feathers  
or a hundred souls in effigy—

as if this sapling had been spawned  
by a Byzantine reliquary:  
a wooden frame with relics wrapped in silk,  
small bundles of essence suspended  
in air like sun-shriveled fruit.

Since November the leaves have faded  
from bronze to chamois to dried-out  
bone. Now, leached of color,  
translucent, they hold on, guardians  
of what's unseen, keepers of light.

JANE MCKINLEY

## Becoming

White wood asters greet me  
like old friends: too polite  
to ask where I've been, happy  
to see me, nonetheless.  
Or is that going too far?

Even the weeds look tired  
of summer, scrappy  
encroachments on the path,  
littered now with hickory nuts  
in their thick, brown husks.

I love the way they open,  
splitting apart at the seams:  
four nearly identical pieces,  
parts of a puzzle that defy me  
to put them together again,

as if they had changed  
in coming apart so their edges  
no longer match up, the way  
you might change when going  
to pieces, sloughing off

lives like old winter coats,  
thick layers you once hid  
behind, curled in a shell  
of your own design, not  
knowing it could open.

JANE MCKINLEY

## Toadstone Harvest Protocol

*Sweet are the uses of adversity;  
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,  
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head.*  
—Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

### I. Clinical Background

Numerous toads across the continents possess poison glands: A brush with their skin may prove fatal. Happily, these creatures also carry an antidote within. A precious gem within their skull, perfect soft pebble, earth brown, pond green, foam white. This, the toadstone, is known not only to counteract a toad's toxicity but also proven to cure epilepsy, kidney failure, and generalized discontentment with the world.

### II. Removal Procedure

Optimal outcomes depend upon live resection. The toadstone must be cut from the animal's waking brain. To harvest the gem, seize the creature with gloved hands after light rain in the wood behind your candlelit cottage. Place it in your satchel. Proceed confidently home. In your kitchen, place the toad upon a scarlet cloth. Steady its neck with your left hand, grip your sharpest paring knife with right. Cut quick to the top and center, parting the cartilage. The stone will emerge, coated with the creature's humors. Wash it with care.

### III. Directions for Use

The ideal approach to treatment: set the gem within a sterling silver ring, ready to leap to action should misfortune strike (an amulet around the neck is also suitable). Seek out the finest jeweler in your hamlet. Be fit with a hefty silver piece and wear it day and night, preferably against the skin. Should you or a loved one encounter poison toads, apply the gem to the sickened section and beseech the sky for sanctuary from cruel death. And in general, avoid contact with toads.

JONATHAN EVERITT



## Word Games

the jut of a word, thrust and parry  
the sentence hurries by, becomes two  
three, then lingers, sighs, full stop  
a paragraph, long-necked and gawky  
surveys the territory  
as the adjective, so brash and arrogant  
absorbs the humble verb, nouns piled one  
atop another, a tower, tipping down  
to clever syllables, that assemble, hopscotching  
into story, say once upon, forever after  
the howl of vowels,  
the consonants that lumber  
the consonants that click

MERCEDES LAWRY

## Plot

My small plot of peas, beans, lettuce,  
one tomatillo and chard, browning  
at the edges. Rabbits nibble, slugs  
turn leaves to lattice. Crows  
plant peanuts in the loose dirt.  
Wrens hop among fennel, searching  
for bugs. Microscopic moment,  
as the great earth heaves, tilts  
toward what ruin,  
what strange new hunger.

MERCEDES LAWRY

## My son is playing the “Bad Piggies”

my son is playing the “Bad Piggies”  
theme on the accordion;  
its frolic energy leaves an  
ineffaceable signature  
of optimism on his little soul,  
and it evokes the minor scale

in mine; my son is not quick  
on the uptake, or chummy,  
or cheerful, though he seems  
so joyous playing this tune,  
his long and thin fingers  
move like blades of

grass with a flailing force;  
i wonder if he remembers  
his grandpa who died  
late august last year, and  
how would he remember me?  
he is innocent and forgetful,

and not as audacious as  
those mischievous piggies;  
humming the melody,  
he dreams of adventure  
and makes the ineffable  
speak in me.

LADA KOLOMIYETS

## Reflections on Life on the Demarcation Line in Donbas

1.

Last week, late March 2018,  
a 19-year-old sniper girl,  
successfully reached her goal,  
once again, which happened  
to be a 19-year-old boy, who  
was a Ukrainian army  
volunteer soldier, and who  
just returned to the boundary  
line after rotation. He must  
have taken his time getting there,  
must have been too hasty  
to see his combatant friends.  
His adolescent imprudence  
hastened him to death, and  
an intrepid joy of being a  
defender of Ukrainian state.  
His outspoken merits would be  
articulated in his obituary.  
But *she* – she remains calm,  
and patient, and lonely, having  
nothing to be proud of except  
her sniper rifle...  
A native to the Donbass,  
which is a Soviet-time  
portmanteau name for  
a depressive coal mining  
region in eastern Ukraine,  
she was glad to get a job.

2.

Three and a half years ago,  
before the war for Donbas,  
in fact, for Ukraine, began,  
they could have met in a summer  
camp, or at the Asov seashore,

taken by their mothers  
 to a cheap resort,  
 or even at some school event in Kiev.  
 They both turned 15 or 16 by then,  
 and both were too young  
 to start a family...  
 Both romantic-looking,  
*he* in his posthumous  
 newspaper picture.  
 They could have met  
 after the war started.  
 Both loving and passionate  
 by nature, but too preoccupied  
 with the fightings lately,  
 not having time to date.  
*She* has been seizing the day:  
 a lioness in the prairies,  
 or *still* an unloved child and  
 uneducated about the future.

3.  
 Ceasefire is the war of snipers –  
 young perfectionists and  
 workaholics, mostly volunteers  
 playing out the role of  
 mercenaries.  
 At undeclared wars  
 they rarely succeed  
 to outlive their battle enemies.  
 Women appear to be the best  
 in this occupation, especially,  
 women from the  
 extractive zones,  
 whose alcohol-addict  
 fathers die young.  
 Result oriented, goal driven,  
 adept at establishing contacts,  
 they believe in the pursuit of  
 excellence; and if they could,  
 they would have written

this in their perfect resumes.  
They believe they know  
how to take care of  
themselves and outsmart  
the men at this war,  
how to turn them into  
a streak and flashback  
of their sniper rifle,  
into a mass of guts,  
and sperm, and blood.

LADA KOLOMIYETS

## Clean Slate

I can't very well just walk up to the man and tell him,  
I like to watch you work from my bedroom window.

I can't say watching him rake up layers of dry dead leaves  
and scoop them into bags with a giant plastic shovel gives me hope

on a morning where it seems like we've pried free our country  
from the fetid purple clutches of a wax-skinned tortoise.

I watch this man remove great rakefuls of rot  
and decay from the empty park across the street,

pulling back autumn's soiled linens to expose  
the soft dark earth of winter's possibility underneath.

I can't tell him the black barren dirt he's revealing  
makes me see green and reminds me of spring.

Daydreaming of flowers and budding shrubs to come,  
it's still too soon for any of that, but a clean slate is a start.

BENJAMIN WATTS

## Diary Entry Aug 10 Modified

Leonora's friend Maeve is back from France where she used to spend half the year. Maeve has decided to remain permanently in the US, and as a result, on her ultimate return from a long stay in France, she came back with six suitcases full of clothes. Because the clothes that Maeve kept in France were mainly winter clothes, they easily filled up six suitcases. She also didn't want to part quite yet with the French side of her life, which some of these clothes, the ones that were French, embodied.

They have tried to set a date for Leonora to go to Maeve's house and help triage. Leonora has no stake in this, she is just curious to see her friend's French wardrobe.

### Imaginary Wedding Outfit #1

Maeve tells Leonora about the fancy wedding she attended in France. She also attended a christening. She needed three different outfits for the wedding and yet another outfit for the christening. She showed Leonora photos of all the outfits she wore. This made Leonora think about what she would wear were she invited to a fancy wedding and a christening.

Back at her house, inside her closet, Leonora searches for an outfit that would be suitable to wear to an imaginary fancy wedding. She never gets invited to fancy weddings. She hardly gets invited to any weddings at all – once a decade seems to be her average. But if she were, would she be ready or would she need to go out and buy yet another new outfit? She owns a silk mint green suit with a lovely tie closure that came from a local vintage store. She bought it when she was looking for a Halloween costume – she dressed up as Greta Garbo, with a felt hat, faux fur scarf and sunglasses. It seems a bit subversive to have a Halloween outfit double as a fancy wedding outfit, but, on the other hand, it's easy to imagine bridesmaids and prom dresses doing double duty as a costume. In French, a costume means both the make-believe outfit and a man's suit.

Leonora continues planning for an imaginary fancy wedding. Her footwear would consist of the black slingback pointy toed pumps that she has owned for decades, and which she hardly ever wears but keeps in her closet for those rare fancy occasions.



### Imaginary Wedding Outfits #2 and #3

A black satin tunic printed with large white botanical motifs. She wore it once to an art opening in the provincial town where she lives. It might have been a little too fancy given the number of people who took notice of it. Leonora thinks that she has correctly chosen the outfit to suit the event when nobody remarks on it.

In her closet she finds dresses that she has never worn. Why did she buy them? There is the dress to wear to a summer funeral, no black; the dress to wear to a summer funeral, black. A long black skirt with a little bit of color in the “v” shaped pattern at the bottom that pairs well with a lavender cashmere cardigan, both bought second hand, awaiting a winter funeral. For funerals she also has two black blazers and a grey one that she can throw over black pants and a lavender woolen tee-shirt. She thinks lavender is a good color for mourning.

Why does she have so many funeral outfits? She wants to be prepared, having learned her lesson a few years back, sadly, when a colleague passed away and she had to find something to wear to the service. The dress she wore had static cling, which was a problem whenever she had to stand up during the service. She remembers tugging at the dress each and every time, hoping not to be a distraction to the people in the pew behind her.

This had not been the first time that she had been unprepared for the saddest of occasions. When she had attended her grandfather’s burial in Paris years ago, she had one purse with her because she was in the middle of traveling. It wasn’t really a purse but a red backpack. Once at the cemetery her brother took her red backpack and placed it behind a door because of its color which her brother had deemed inappropriate for a burial. This had not occurred to Leonora. Fearing that somebody might steal her bag, Leonora became extremely anxious about it. But she was also ashamed to have walked into a cemetery with a bright red backpack. Fortunately, nothing happened to it as it was exactly where they had left it when she left the cemetery.

The inappropriateness of funeral attire reminded Leonora of the opening scene in the French movie “La Bûche” which also takes place in the Montparnasse cemetery. Three sisters are burying their stepfather. The third sister, the youngest, played by Charlotte Gainsbourg, is the last one to show up. She arrives on a motorcycle, wearing a very short black leather skirt.

Leonora has come to understand that the occasion dresses you, not the other way around. Which is why she has funeral wear waiting in her closet.

She knows that she is not the only one who feels insecure about what they wear on certain occasions – famously Virginia Woolf felt like an outsider when it came to fancy dress parties. When it came time for Leonora’s father’s memorial service two years ago, she was anxious about what to wear. She must have overthought the entire ordeal, first ordering a pair of silk pants only to decide that they would be too casual. She also ordered a tan leather purse because, even though she already had a brand-new black purse, she thought that it would be too black for summer. Then she ordered a dress, and after it arrived in the mail, she had to sew up the back slit because the opening went too high up her legs. She wore it to a family dinner the night before the memorial service, and her brother, the same brother who had taken away her red backpack at the Paris cemetery, approved of the dress. That was a relief. After the event in the cemetery, where she wore the dress again, she knew that she would never wear it again after that. The stress of receiving her brother’s approval had been too great. As soon as she got home, she threw the dress away.

The never-worn silk navy-blue speckled dress that has been hanging in her closet for years also has an origin story that has to do with inappropriate sartorial choices. She had been the plus one at a fancy dinner that was attended by big donors to the college where she was teaching. As she walked into the private dining room that had been set aside for the meal, she noticed that the big donor, a small woman from New Jersey, was really dressed up. She felt immediately insecure about her own outfit. Hence the silk dress awaits the next big donor event. She also now has that other dress, imaginary wedding outfit #2, the one that was too dressy for a provincial art gallery opening, that would also be very suitable for a big donor event.

As for imaginary wedding outfit #3 and the imaginary christening, she is sure that tucked away in bins in her closet waiting to be unpacked, unfolded, ironed and put on display there are dresses, skirts and jackets that are perfectly appropriate.

Leonora also knows that many of the events for which she dresses up will remain imaginary. This means that she can continue to channel people like Greta Garbo. She is not Maeve. She is Leonora.

ANNABELLE CONE

## Blue Boy

A little boy can be responsible  
for some long blue shadows. They follow him  
late afternoons, like best friends.

So much time spent on his back under the sky  
has turned his eyes blue.

Looking up, he sees more blue  
than his parents can by looking down at him.

They miss many rainbows, clouds.

In his head he carries songs—blues songs—  
that never get written. A few  
he learned from bluebirds,  
a few he taught the birds. His teachers have  
no idea how closely he listens.

He likes pink little girls but doesn't love them,  
intends never to marry one.

He need not worry about how to pass  
those blue eyes on. As long  
as there is sky, some boys will have them.

RUSSELL ROWLAND

## when a fox flies out of the whole

i will not write  
a list of 3  
examples, to illustrate what i see

of the world, so instead i will  
call the eagle and order her take out    eat out my  
eyes, feed them to our young

baby, we cannot see so listen  
for a lullaby each time the dark  
appears to swallow us

hold out our tongues and    sniff  
her wroughting eggs and milk, to  
hear the air we may need to be humming

so our hands  
spin in to wings

MELISSA MACDONALD

## Tycoons

The summer before high school began, my best friend Rachel and I played endless games of *Life* splayed across Rachel's bed, nail polish bottles clustered around us like stands of trees. Through a cardboard landscape that spanned time and topography ran a serpentine track from birth to death, or not death exactly, but retirement, where the winner of the game was whoever had the most money. The track was long—so was life we were given to believe—staggered by hundreds of boxes containing flashes of information about what might happen to us: Med school. Law school. First homes. Second homes. Floods. Marriage. Kids. Illness. Divorce. Inheritance. Lawsuits. All the booms and busts that flesh and spirit are heir to.

We sorted the money—all the seven-and-a-half million of it—and then chose our vehicles, or the color of our vehicles, by which we would be identified for the rest of our lives. Rachel and I, along with everyone we knew and loved, were reduced to blue and pink pegs in boxy cars. Plastic was the new mud from which life was made. On this earth no one walked, only drove.

We knew something of how difficult it could be to get from place to another because thirty miles separated us from anything that was remotely relevant to our current or future lives, and because our parents' fortunes seemed to rise and fall on the condition of their vehicles, which were always falling apart. "Lemons," my mother called these cars. "Pieces of shit," my father corrected her. Nevertheless, my parents usually managed to eek out more than two hundred thousand miles from each vehicle they owned, replacing all its major organs and vital parts—spark plugs, radiators, batteries, engines, breaks—several times along the way. By the time one of their cars died for good, it had earned its death.

On the radio Q106 out of Concord, New Hampshire was taking requests. A girl named Jennifer called in to dedicate "Right Here Waiting" to Damian. "Where's Damian at?" Rachel asked, placing the white plastic mansion in its white plastic mansion slot, at the end of the board. If you've succeeded in the life-long journey of upward ability, this mansion is where you should end up, surrounded by a verdant landscape but in proximity to a major metropolitan area, with a transparent cordless phone in every room. We both paused to drink a glass of water because we had read in *Seventeen* that hydration is essential for luminous skin and that we should imbibe ten glasses a day, "at minimum."

Damian was in the United States Army and about to leave for the Persian Gulf, "where the towelheads lived," according to Rachel's father Greg, who was outside battling the blackberry bushes, one of his many enemies. Others included the Democrats and the Chinese. "You know, they're not just making an egg rolls," was one of his refrains. Reagan and Bush, on the other hand, might as well have been beloved uncles, Greg spoke about them

with such frequency and intimacy. Moe, the family dog, observed Greg's labors dolefully, resigned to the chain and the clothesline to which he was attached. That evening, when I returned to my house, a mile away through the woods from Rachel's, I heard Greg's screams directed first at Rachel, then at her mother and eventually at Rachel's younger brother, echoing through the forest, along with Moe's howls. I can still hear them now.

When we weren't sprawled across her bed, we were striding through a town whose population peaked at eight-hundred people. We walked first along Cherry Hill, then Prescott and finally Williams Hill and Slab City roads, all gravel, with no shoulders, returning along the old railroad tracks that ran parallel with the Smith River, stopping at the rec field, the general store, and the post office, making conversation with the local gentry, men dressed in paint-spattered flannels and denims, their skin leathered and lined from years of physical labor, smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee from thermoses. Here there were no theaters or restaurants or schools or streetlights or industry. It was hard to find even two houses within earshot of each other. Instead, there were ruins: the ruins of a fire station, the ruins of a school, the ruins of a quarry, ruins of ruins. The cemeteries were the most densely populated part of the place.

First spin of the teetotum: At the very beginning, *Life* offers a choice. One path sends you straight to "Work," otherwise demarcated, and the other first to university and then to a specific but generic career such as Journalism, Law, Or Medicine. On the second path you lost time studying for exams, writing papers, making friends, and going on spring break, and yet you mysteriously always ended up with more money in the end. But how did you save enough money to attend college in the first place? The game provided no answers other than the luck of a spin and a split-second choice between getting an immediate job or further education. Our fathers took the first track, going straight from high school to the trades, and nothing in our subsequent lives recommended it, but models of the other path were impossible to find except in our own teachers, most of whom were capable, but hard and hardened. Their fatigue scared us. Perhaps at a subconscious level we registered the immense energy it would take a public-school teacher like Krista McAuliffe to simply escape the forcefield of a normal workday, let alone Earth's gravity.

The choice between going to school or going to work is one of the only moments in *Life* where a player has any real control. Otherwise, the game proceeds entirely by chance, your future determined by the numbers you spin. This aspect of the match, which eschews stratagem and merit, is the most insightful facet of a contest that easily reduces everything to its monetary value. By the second or third spin, your outcome in *Life*, as in real life, is largely determined.

One evening in mid-July, I returned from Rachel's after dark, strung out on water and nail polish fumes. I found my parents sitting quietly in the living room, as they often were. My father had finished building our house only a year before and the air still smelled like fresh lumber. My brother Ian, eleven years younger than me, was asleep upstairs, and my mother was sipping from the now perpetual bottle of Perrier at her side. That night my

father put down the newspaper momentarily to tell me that I should find a sport because I needed to appear well-rounded for boarding school, which I would soon be applying to.

I stared blankly at him, nervously picking at the American flag I had painted on my fingernails to celebrate the 4th of July a few weeks ago with Rachel. My idea of boarding school came from books like *Catcher in the Rye* and *A Separate Peace* that public school kids are perversely forced to read. It never went well when someone like me landed in a place like Pensey or Devon.

“The only sport I could possibly do is running.” The sport for outcasts I added to myself, because in public school you were alien if you didn’t mediate your existence with a ball or puck.

“Good,” my father said. “You should probably start to run this summer before joining the cross-country team.”

“Ok,” I said, matching his pragmatism.

He explained that we were poor enough and that I was smart enough to qualify for need and merit-based financial aid but that I would need to work hard, really hard, to distinguish myself in every way I could. Since we didn’t have money, I could only rely on myself to get ahead.

“I don’t want you to be like me,” my mother said. “Do you understand?”

I did understand. My mother had never gone to college, had barely graduated high school, hadn’t gotten her license until she was forty, and had no money of her own. From my earliest sentient moments, I learned to fear that or any kind of dependence. For the rest of the summer, I set out every morning from my house in the woods, running until Cherry Hill intersected with Route-4, the main artery that connected our town with the larger world. I hugged the narrow shoulder beside the pavement, passing the Liberty Rock General Store, the bed and breakfast that never had any customers, the signs for the “World Famous” Ruggles’ Mine and Polar Ice Caves. Within a few miles I was running through farmland whose peak fecundity passed around the Second World War and had since been reclaimed by the forest. When I competed in my first race the following autumn, I beat every other girl by two minutes and finished ahead of half the boys.

That fall I toured schools like Exeter, Andover, Choate, and Deerfield, institutions composed of Georgian buildings, rolling fields, and meandering rivers whose histories were coterminous with America’s and similarly characterized by misogyny, racism, and classism. Having existed for hundreds of years, these schools were de facto haunted, continuously inhabited by four-year micro generations, all with their own dramas and traumas, passing through at a metronome’s regular tempo. At Deerfield Academy, whose mascot was not an animal but a stately door, the sixteen-year-old tour guide dressed in a Brooks Brothers’ suit plucked a cat hair from my mother’s coat when we visited: “Oh dear,” he said, “You’re covered.” I watched my mother blush and pull her coat closer to her body. This is the school I chose to attend.

To prepare for matriculation, I undertook a draconian self-improvement plan over the

summer, eating nothing but carrots and milk and running ten miles a day. I looked lovingly at the hollows beneath my collarbones, but when I arrived on campus my slenderness felt inauthentic, the product of one summer rather than an entire lifetime of disciplined eating. My aunt Nora sent me a cashmere sweater with a note containing invaluable advice: “Rich people care about fine fabrics.”

Many of my classmates were people with names like Hadley and Harrison. They glowed with hygienic beauty or offhand slovenliness, losing diamond earrings and Armani ties while attending each other’s debutante balls, wearing chambray shirts, rollneck sweaters, and boat shoes to fulfill dress code while hanging out in the Common Room. They went skiing in Aspen during winter break and sunbathed in Turks and Caicos during spring break, each coming back with a single braid of hair to mark what had marked them. They said “break” as opposed to “vacation.” They played field hockey, squash, and lacrosse, were fluent in French and thought of Colgate as a safety school. They preferred Nirvana to Pearl Jam, Liz Phair to Alanis Morissette. They slipped out of their dorm room windows at night, drank by the river, and had sex in the fields contained by a town in western Massachusetts that existed in a dreamlike, historic state of preservation.

One evening at a school-sanctioned screening of *Basic Instinct* a few weeks after school started, a group of boys from the water polo team masturbated over the side of the balcony in the main auditorium onto the students sitting below. Like so many guys at Deerfield, these ones were glabrous, blonde, and radiantly white. They were neat but they weren’t clean. They were adolescent Tom Buchanan’s with already rather hard mouths and supercilious manners. They were the kind of boys who would go into finance and grow up to have paunches, ruddy complexions, and receding hair lines by their mid-thirties, the kind of men I learned to steer clear of. But at this moment in time, they were kings. I was terrified of them, but I also wanted them to want me.

Although the school treated this as an anomalous event, calling in scores of specialists to orchestrate discussions about sexism and misogyny, sexism and misogyny were in the air we breathed on that campus, no easier to eliminate than the scent of the freshly mown grass that suffused the atmosphere every afternoon and would now be marketed in a candle as “boarding school scent.” It had only recently gone coed, five years before, and the campus still felt designed for the imperious eyes of young men surveying their kingdom, deciding the equivalent of Waterloo on the playing fields.

Without smart phones or the Internet, which wouldn’t reach us for another few years, we were profoundly cut off from the rest of the world, as was the intention. Most of us spoke with our parents once a week, taking turns using the one phone that hung on the wall in the hallway near the bathroom. Otherwise, there were letters and packages. That’s why, when the Rodney King verdict came in, finding the officers innocent, setting Los Angeles on fire, we barely acknowledged it. When a bomb detonated in the basement of the World Trade Center building in Oklahoma, it didn’t cause a ripple in our lives. We only mentioned the Waco Standoff when it was over, after fifty-one days had passed and



seventy-five people had died.

In this hierarchical vacuum, the English classroom was a sanctuary. In my first year away, I sat in the book-lined room on the second floor of the Humanities building and listened to Mr. Buxton, our handsome, twenty-three-year-old teacher from North Carolina, a shock of dirty-blonde hair falling into his eyes, his speech lightly drawled, asking us to consider a nuance in Lorene Cary's *Black Ice*, a memoir about a Black female teenager's experience attending St. Pauls.

"How does Lorene cope with being one of St. Pauls' few Black students?" asked Mr. Buxton.

While we wrote, he leaned casually against the blackboard, wearing cowboy boots and a worn corduroy blazer, watching us. He carried a copy of the Gettysburg address in his jacket pocket because he liked to "keep greatness close to his heart," and he'd recently dismissed us after five minutes because we weren't well-enough prepared to discuss Shelley's "Ozymandias" with as much respect as it deserved.

"Come back when you're ready," he said, closing the door firmly behind him. Most of my classmates thought he was too extreme, but I loved the intensity he brought to the classroom. It would be one of the only pedagogical tools I brought to my own classroom when I started teaching after I graduated from college. In front of Mr. Buxton's intelligent gaze. I tilted my head, as if to let the thoughts slide from one end of my mind to the other.

"She affirms her Black identity," I answered. "She doesn't try to become white to fit in."

"Yes, that's true," Mr. Buxton said. "And why does this effort become vital to her existence?" he continued.

I answered immediately, without looking to see if anyone else had a response.

"Because to not do it would mean she was erasing herself."

Though white, I identified with Cary's feeling of being an alien in a world that was obviously so comfortable for many of my peers. But instead of trying to preserve my outsider status, I attempted to assimilate as quickly as possible. At the time I could see what I was doing, but not the costs. My friends felt more like business partners than confidantes.

I spent most of my three years at Deerfield studying in the Caswell Library, sitting beside a reliable beam of light, looking at the portraits of the many dour, jowly men who had been headmasters of this school. In the library I worked my way through a list I found in a magazine of one hundred canonical books one needed to read to be well-read. I didn't really know what the canon was, but I dutifully struggled through texts like *Gullivers' Travels* and *St. Joan*, taking notes so that I might someday be able to identify allusions to them. I held on to this list until it was yellow and tattered as one might hold a crucifix up to a vampire. At the time, Bill Clinton was touting education as the single best way to advance, and the college admissions process was just beginning to resemble what it would become: a Hunger Games competition for a few coveted spots at a handful schools. Education was the cathedral at which I worshipped, the single most efficient and effective path to transcendence

available to me.

I never remember feeling relaxed at Deerfield. I was constantly striving, always aware that I was there on scholarship and that the scholarship could be taken away. That's why I can remember my first drink with as much clarity as I can remember my first kiss, which happened a few months later, alone in my dorm room: it was two shots of Absolut vodka siphoned to me from a friend's that I sipped from a translucent Nalgene bottle with my door locked, staring out the window at the cemetery behind the dorm. Within the first two sips, which I imagined charting an electric course through my body, I felt like a lake perceptibly beginning to thaw, my icy surface cracking, large chunks dislodging, revealing a silky black darkness beneath. Before drinking I hadn't even known I was frozen.

In the meantime, Rachel attended our local high school and started singing in her father's band, a side hustle he maintained alongside his primary job as a carpenter. They called themselves Generations and took gigs in bars and hotel lobbies all over northern New England. For the next twelve years, until she married, Rachel gave most of her weekends to these concerts. I attended her performances when I was home on breaks, and we even played nostalgic games of Life together while our nails dried, replacing the water with liquor stolen from her father's supply, but since I'd gone away, an inevitable distance had opened between us.

I understood that I was trying to distance myself from my origins to make my transformation into the American upper class complete. I had been taught to believe that not only was such a metamorphosis possible, but that completing it was of utmost spiritual import and value. I never thought about whether I wanted to recast myself in this way; it just seemed given. Thus, while Rachel grew more grounded and stable throughout the years, becoming clearer about what she wanted her adult life to look like, and whom she wanted to be in it, I became more and more of a seeker, looking for both immediate and existential forms of escape, unable to find contentment with who or where I was.

On my graduation day from Deerfield, I wore a white dress and carried a yellow rose. My hair was cut in a perfect 1950s bob, and I looked prepared to marry any of the clean-cut, well-dressed young men I was standing among, or that I would soon be standing among at Yale, where I had been accepted with a scholarship and decided to attend the following year. After the ceremony, I left with some friends for a series of senior parties held at the homes of some of our wealthiest classmates whose parents supplied open bars. Even though I'd gone to school with these people, I hardly knew most of them, though I'd risen in their estimation because I'd been admitted to Yale. The first party was in Greenwich, hosted by a prominent auctioneer for Sotheby's whose daughter was also attending Yale. The house was composed of sharp angles, sheer white walls, and windows as big as sails. It's what I imagined the mental hospital the narrator of *The Bell Jar* finds herself in might look like.

I drank so much so fast that my clearest memory of that evening is walking straight into a glass door, trying to reach the beautiful, dusk-laden garden outside. The following day, hungover for the first time in my life, I drove with friends to the next party, this one on the grounds of a former plantation in Virginia. Again, I was so nervous that, despite still

feeling sick from the night before, I drank several glasses of wine in quick succession. The next thing I remember is waking up naked in a tent with a classmate named William. All I knew about him is that he'd been recruited to play lacrosse at a small liberal arts college that looked exactly like Deerfield. It was morning, the Virginia sun shining brightly through the tent's canvas walls. William was gone and I was covered by a sleeping bag.

At the end of *Life*, in a last-ditch effort at escaping poverty or perhaps seizing life, you can try becoming Millionaire Tycoons at the risk of losing everything, forced to live off the largesse of the State. For those whose lives had gone well, the gamble is only marginally less attractive than for those whose lives have gone off the rails—childlessness, foreclosure, poverty, divorce. Otherwise, you can cash in your stock options and collect on your children; you can enjoy a fat retirement, summering where it's cool and wintering where it's warm, tending to your disintegrating body.

What else of life? What of the doldrums of a Thursday evening with nothing to do but sit in the halo of the black and white light of a small television playing reruns of sitcoms and *The Thornbirds*? What of walking along a dirt road in autumn watching the forest unravel, become completely undone around you, knowing it was in better shape than anyone you knew? What of childhood, which Bradley's game elides entirely, as if you become an adult by immaculate conception? What of parents who spent their evenings drinking themselves to sleep, fast-forwarding yourself into their shoes twenty years in the future? What of rushing home beneath a sky split open with stars before the night and eventually your own desires made you lose track of your body? What of the way Rachel and I calmly watched each other fall apart, so that we could have the honor of putting each other back together again? In the original version of *Life* Rachel and I played as kids, Milton Bradley included a square for suicide the manufacturers eventually eliminated.

Outside the sliding glass door of Rachel's bedroom the summer we played *Life*, real life stood in abeyance, but it wouldn't for much longer. It was growing in strength, like the wind that picked up and moved through the trees, turning the forest into an ocean, turning life into something with tidal force that we would try to control and ultimately be controlled by. We could hear Moe running up and down the length of the clothesline, barking at shadows and sounds, trying to warn us.

ARIANA KELLY

## Ali, Alley, Allison

Her therapist made her promise she'd go. Otherwise Ali never would have been found hanging around the steps of an old church at five on a freezing Thursday. This time, most days, she was settling in for happy hour at one of three spots near her parents' house, in the small seacoast town where she'd grown up, and where she was living again, for the third nonconsecutive time in her nearly three-decade life.

There was the Gin Closet, a cocktail bar so new it still smelled like sawdust and sealant, which in addition to drinks offered fashionable small plates for outrageous prices: melba toasts, shishito peppers, a golf ball-sized Chipwich. There was Man's Best Friend—known by the locals as MBF—a pub where she'd been going since high school. People knew her there. She'd dated—well, slept with—a few of the bartenders. And there was the Ruddy Duck, a sour-smelling dive frequented mostly by men fifty years her senior. The Ruddy hosted a rowdy live-band karaoke night, Sundays—two-for-one shots—which was infamous for having ended once in a gunfight. At the Ruddy, she knew no one, and probably never would.

Happily, at five after five tonight, the church door was still locked. In the small cemetery a plastic bag floated witless among the old gravestones. Well, she'd tried! She hurried down the stairs, debating whether to go to the Closet or to MBF. She was halfway past the church's wrought-iron fence when she noticed someone standing at the side entrance. They were underdressed for the cold, in tight black jeans, black boots, and a backpack, with a hoodie pulled over their head, their hands deep in their pockets. They spotted Ali and waved her down like a cab: You here for the meeting?

The voice was deep, hoarse, and mocking.

Ali stopped. She wanted to say no, but it was pretty obvious, so she said: Doesn't really seem like the meeting is happening?

The person advanced on the stone path through the cemetery, saying, When I was here a few months ago attendance was pretty low. Maybe it was cancelled for good.

I don't know, Ali said. I've never been here before.

Close up, she could see the person better. It was a woman no older than Ali. Below the rim of a black beanie, thick lashes lined her big, blue-green eyes, but her cheeks were pocked and her chin was zitty. Dry makeup clung to her delicate skin.

First time?

Ali shrugged. How could it be her first time if it wasn't happening? It wasn't a time at all. It didn't count.

Come to Starbucks with me, the stranger commanded.

Ali thought of the cocktails at the Gin Closet—the sprigs of rosemary, the twists of blood orange—and said, in an ambiguously joking tone, I'd rather go get a drink!

The girl laughed wheezily. No shit, she said, and lit a cigarette, and started walking up the freezing, windy street, apparently assuming Ali would come along.

She walked quickly. Ali had to walk quickly to keep up. She skidded on her heel on a patch of ice and almost wiped out. Either Bones was too preoccupied by her own thoughts to notice, or she was pretending, out of kindness. Ali hoped it was the former.

I'm Ali, she said when they reached a curb.

No shit, the girl repeated. How do you spell it?

Ali spelled it.

I'm A-L-L-E-Y. But most people just call me Bones.

Ali laughed. Why?

My last name's too fucking Polish for most idiots to pronounce.

In the blast of warmth at the entrance Bones pulled off her hood and hat and a cascade of damaged hair tumbled out, so black it was almost blue. This Starbucks was laid out differently from the one Ali usually went to, but it smelled exactly the same, like sour pastries and scalded milk. She ordered a nitro with sweet cream, which reminded her of Guinness. Bones got a small coffee, black, and held it in both hands. Her slim fingers were tattooed and laden with rings. When they sat down at a table in the window, Bones' things seemed to be everywhere, her hat on the windowsill, her bag open on the floor, her beat-up paperback on the table between them (*Detective Meowpants #16: An Andalusian Execution*). Ali wondered what a passerby might think, seeing them together. She couldn't tell whether she thought Bones was cool or a loser or irritating or what.

Fuck, said Bones. I'm exhausted. Sleeping sober's a skill I have to relearn every time.

Ali nodded.

How long do you have? Bones said.

Until . . . ?

How long have you gone without a drink?

Like, ever? said Ali, and then she understood. Oh. Since last night. No, since lunch. I had a beer with lunch. So, like, four hours.

Bones raised her eyebrows.

The only reason I came today was my therapist said if I didn't, she wouldn't see me anymore.

As an afterthought, Ali laughed, and quickly attempted to make her statement seem less alarming.

She's the worst, Ali said. I don't know why I keep seeing her. She's like, every girl I ever hated in high school. She's like, so put-together? She's like, every hair is in place. The craziest night she's ever had is probably, like, half a bottle of white wine at her sorority sister's bachelorette. Plus she's expensive. I'm, like, tragically underemployed right now. I can barely afford her.

What do you do? Bones asked, leaning forward with sudden, intense curiosity.

I help high schoolers write college application essays.

Bones rolled her eyes. Fuck therapy, she said companionably—if irrelevantly, Ali felt. I hate being psychoanalyzed. It's like, the assumption is, like, everyone's a fucking prisoner of their past. It's like, do you not think I've thought of that? Do you not think I'm aware of my shit? Do I not have free will?

Ali nodded. Right, she said. Right.

Anyway I'm six days sober, Bones went on, and I'm so fucking bored I'm crawling out of my skin. I think about using every six minutes. Like, I want to be sober. Like, in theory.

Sure, Ali said, me too. In theory. Who doesn't?

Most people don't, said Bones.

Through the window Ali glanced at the crowd growing, talking and laughing, at a corny Irish pub across the street. It was true. Even middle-aged bores wanted to get blitzed.

Do you mind if I qualify? Bones asked.

If you what?

Tell my story. The whole reason I showed up today is I have some shit I need to get off my chest. And honestly it helps that you're a stranger.

Sure, Ali said unconvincingly. She checked the time on her phone. It was quarter to six. Happy hour at Man's Best Friend ended at seven.

Bones didn't need any encouragement. She started in on the story of her life, at once salacious, tragic, and banal. It began with her being repeatedly molested by her stepfather. According to Bones, her mother knew it was happening and said nothing, so Bones ran away and, at the age of thirteen, moved in with her grandmother, a lovable bipolar pill-popper. But her grandmother's boyfriend got violent after Bones stayed out late one too many nights in a row—the old fucker beat her with a curtain rod—so Bones dropped out of high school and took a bus to Buffalo, where a friend of a friend had started a record label. Bones was sixteen, writing and singing her own songs, and thought this could turn into her lucky break. The record label turned out to be less than established, nothing more than a dream of a dream, but the guy seemed nice enough and offered Bones a place to stay while she figured shit out.

As she talked, Bones fiddled with her rings, twisting them and taking them off, rubbing her fingers, and replacing them. You'd think by this point I'd be able to spot a dick, she went on, but no. It became clear that I am an idiot with no dickdar.

The guy seduced her into what became an abusive, years-long relationship. When her mom called one dark snowy night to say that her stepfather had left, Bones got the hell out of Buffalo. But her mother didn't like that she was using, so she kicked her out and sent her to rehab. That last part had happened repeatedly, like the sing-along coda to a familiar song. Now she was back at the same old sober living house, not a penny to her name.

I went to a meeting yesterday, she said. The reading was all about self-pity. How the antidote to self-pity is gratitude. Classic recovery shit. The people there were all over the map. Somebody's whining about his home renovation, how it's taking forever, thousands of dollars, whatever. Somebody else has been sleeping in his car. In this cold. Rich and poor,

you know: addiction, the great fucking equalizer. Then they're like: but I'm so *grateful* to be here. God has a fucking *plan*. I'm like, are you fucking kidding me? Am I grateful? I'm fucking *vengeful*. Does *my* God have a plan?

She stopped abruptly. Her gaze was magnetic, consuming, and one of her silver rings lay on the table beside her worn paperback, like a small cursed object in a fairy tale. The sky was dark and the street was dim and, across the street, the warm light in Conover's was hospitable. Ali wanted nothing more than to get rid of this hot mess of a girl, go to MBF, and get loaded. When she could get a word in, she told Alley Bones this had been so great, but she actually had somewhere to be.

Scared you away, did I? Bones' blue-green eyes narrowed to slits. She picked at a zit on her chin.

No, Ali assured her. Not at all!

Bones stood up and started gathering her things. Ali stood too, explaining.

Now's just, she said, not a good time for me. This was a mistake. I'm not ready to go to a meeting. I'm not—I'm actually—fine? I'm, like, really truly *fine*. But, uh, it was really good to meet you. Good, uh, good luck.

Whatever.

Bones seemed determined to be the one to leave first. She tugged her hat on, hard, and pulled up her hood, and hurried out into the cold, leaving behind her book and ring.

It was a cheap-looking thing but it was pretty: a silver Celtic knot with a stone in the middle the same blue-green as Bones' eyes. It slipped easily onto Ali's index finger. The metal was still warm.

Man's Best Friend was a quarter mile away. A cold wet wind was blowing in off the ocean, bringing flurries with it. Ali put her head down and watched her feet hurry over the sidewalks. In her mind she was preparing a story to tell Caleb, who, it being Thursday, was bartending. By the time she arrived her lips were numb, her nose dripping. When she pushed open the door Caleb yelled, *There she is!* and threw wide his hairy arms and sang along to the pop music that was playing over the sound system: *I knew you were trouble when you walked in!*

Oh my god, Cay, she said, I'm so glad to see you. I just had the weirdest time. She settled onto a barstool and said hi to the regulars.

I was starting to think you weren't coming, he said. You're usually here right at five. He got her a beer and a shot. She downed them both fast and got another round, and told him all about Alley Bones, skimming lightly over the way they had met and focusing instead on how crazy she was:

It was like every time she said something awful and horrifying, there was something *more* awful, *more* horrifying, right after. After a while I just got numb to it. I just glazed over. Like, I get it, you've had a horrible life, everything sucks for you, can I go now?

Welcome to being a bartender, Caleb said. Except the answer is, no, you can't go, not until two in the morning. And you have to listen to every sob story eleven times because these assholes all forget they already told you.

Not me, though, right? said Ali sweetly.

You kidding? You're the worst of all of them. You know how many times you've told me about your parents *depriving* you of their real estate?

The small rental condo he was referring to was on the ground floor of their split-level. It had become vacant two months ago but they insisted that Ali could not afford it, and they were too greedy, in her opinion, to give her a break on the rent.

I told you about that *one time*, Ali exclaimed. You make me sound like such a brat.

In fact, Caleb went on, today's probably the first time in weeks that you've had a new story.

The rental's still vacant, Ali told him. Did I tell you that?

Here we go again, he said, laughing.

This is *new* information, she said: They gave me a key! They want *me* to meet the prospective renter and show her around. Isn't that just insult to injury?

They can't do it themselves?

They're going out of town. God, it's like waving candy in a baby's face, and then snatching it away!

Oh, Caleb said. So the *apartment* is the *candy*, right?

Yes, yes, she said.

Which makes *you* a big old *baby*.

Whatever, Ali said, I don't even care. Can I have another round before happy hour ends? And then I should probably go.

Sure, you should.

Caleb left another beer and a short whiskey, neat, on the bar before her. She ran her finger through the condensation on the beer glass, took the shot, and sipped. She was feeling good again, like her funny, awful, old self. Caleb worked the early shift, Thursdays. He'd be done at nine tonight. She thought of his black sheets and narrow bed, the stacks of books against his wall, thought about hanging onto his cheap wooden bedframe as he slammed into her from behind.

You're a real high-quality man, Cay, she said, next time he came around. She resisted the temptation to wink, even ironically.

Thanks, buddy, he said, but when he looked up at her his smile was sad. Where did you say you met that girl? he asked. The girl with the sob story?

Ali said, I don't know, I just kind of ran into her at the Starbucks and out of nowhere she started talking to me. Why?

Huh, Caleb said. Yeah. I don't know. She sounds like someone I know.

By nine Ali was drunk enough that she slipped off the barstool. Caleb helped her up and escorted her back to her parents' house. The cold drew tears from her eyes. Wellp, he said



at the door. Here we are.

She lowered her voice in a way she hoped was sexy. Can't I just come back to your place?

Sorry, honey, Caleb said. My brother's staying with me. Sleeping on the floor.

I'll be up and out before he even wakes up. Promise. I can't go back in this house. You can, Caleb told her. Come on, where are your keys?

Oh, no, she said, I forgot them.

Look in your purse.

I forgot them, she insisted, eyes wide.

You didn't even look.

She glanced down into her bag. Nope! They're gone.

So ring the bell, he said. It's only nine thirty.

She began to cry. I can't, she said, *I can't*. Just take me back to your place, please, Cay?

You know what? Caleb said, without malice. This is not my drama. You are not my problem. See you later, Ali, okay?

He turned away. She watched him recede. She dug in her purse and unlocked the door without incident. Her parents were sitting in front of the television, curled up like a couple of frail Bichon Frises. Hey, honey, they said, without looking up. There's a serving of chicken and broccoli for you in the fridge! She grunted and made her way up the stairs to her childhood bedroom, where she cried herself to sleep.

In the queasy, too-bright morning, her parents moved around the cluttered kitchen in a semi-arthritic dance, so used to one another's daily patterns they barely had to make eye contact to step out of one another's way en route to the fridge or the coffee maker. They chit-chatted about their upcoming long weekend Ali's aunt's house in Northampton, and what to get from the market, and the prospective tenant.

Let me live in it, Ali suggested for the zillionth time, pouring herself the last of the grapefruit juice.

You can't afford it, they told her.

Maybe *you* set the price too high.

It's consistent with the market.

Her dad was lingering by the toaster oven, crowding the English muffins. Rents are going up all over the Boston area, he said. Good news for us, bad news for you.

This isn't *even* the Boston area, Ali complained.

Why don't you move back to the city? said her mother. You loved it there. You know you're welcome here as long as you need a place to stay, her father said, but we do want you to find your footing, honey pie. We want you to be a productive member of society.

The toaster oven offered a halfhearted ding as punctuation. Ali's mother started in with the jam.

Don't be like Harmony Fleischman, she warned, waving her butter knife. Classic case of failure-to-launch. Poor Harmony. Janine is so worried.

Her parents never disagreed. They never argued. They always presented a unified front. With their thin brown-gray hair and narrow shoulders, fleece vests, and sensible walking shoes, they even looked alike. Ali, broad and big-breasted, felt like an ogre beside them. Making a pass for the cereal, she knocked into her dad; he dropped his mug, spilling hot coffee down the front of his shirt.

*Wow!* he exclaimed.

Oh my god, Dad, you okay?

He stood stunned with his arms slightly outstretched, his palms out, as if pleading with her. His mouth was a trembling line, an echocardiograph of a heart murmur. Her mother jumped up and pushed past her to unbutton his top and check for burns—melodramatic, Ali thought, but since it was her own fault, she said nothing. Retrieving, instead, the dustpan and broom, to clean up the broken ceramic, Ali paused in the doorway to watch her mother tending to her father, and listen to them muttering:

She used to be so *sweet*.

So sweet.

What went wrong? When did she go bad?

It was an accident.

If she'd take better care.

She wants *us* to take care of her.

What else can we do?

I know it. I know. There's only so much we can do.

She'll be taking care of us soon enough.

If she can.

Ali left the broom and dustpan tactfully on the floor and retreated to her room. She had forty-eight essays to edit and offer feedback on before Monday.

A city kid expounded on the values of hard work and responsibility vis-à-vis his rooftop beekeeping operation. A country kid waxed poetic about a life-changing trip to the Louvre. A high school basketball forward offered philosophical observations about leadership and teamwork.

The vigor of these kids, their hope, their ambition. Exhausting.

I don't think I need therapy anymore, she told Doctor Allison the next day.

Oh no? said Doctor Allison.

Ali sipped her Starbucks. Yeah, I think I'm fine, actually? I'm actually fine.

I'm glad to hear you're feeling better.

I'm not feeling better, said Ali, I'm feeling exactly the same. But, you know, I went to that meeting you told me to go to. I talked to this girl for a while, and you know what? I

think she really put things into perspective for me. I don't think I have a problem. I don't think I have any problems at all.

Perspective can be a valuable thing, Doctor Allison said. I'm so glad you went. How did it feel to be in a meeting?

Fine, Ali said breezily. I mean, everyone was nice and everything. Like I said, it put things into perspective. I really don't think I have a problem. I mean if I have a problem at all it's probably just a like biochemical thing? I'm sure it could be helped with the right combination of drugs.

You feel you might have some kind of mood disorder?

Yeah, I mean, I cry a lot. I cry myself to sleep every night.

And how much are you drinking?

I really don't think that's relevant.

Right.

Doctor Allison's hands were in her lap, fidgeting. With her right hand she was twisting the diamond ring, on her left. Around and around it went, sparkling.

Hey, Ali said, have you ever considered that maybe your whole, uh, your whole *look* might be alienating your clients?

Doctor Allison's eyebrows came together, creating a pretty wrinkle above her nose. Excuse me?

I've kind of been feeling like, you know, you being so put-together, no offense, introduces all kinds of extra issues into our therapist-client relationship.

Extra issues?

You know: intimidation, alienation, loathing . . .

Well, I'm not sure what to say, Doctor Allison said. I'm sorry you feel that way. It's not your fault, Ali replied automatically, and then amended it: Or, actually, I guess it is your fault. Maybe you could consider looking a little less good, especially for your female clients. Just saying. Just a little *constructive feedback*.

I'd love to talk a little more about all those feelings you named, said Doctor Allison. What was it, alienation? Self-loathing?

Just regular old loathing. I mean, to be honest, and I'm being honest, I don't really *want* to be honest with a woman who looks like you.

And why's that? Doctor Allison tilted her head at Ali in an irritating, performative, kindly way.

Because I don't like you, Ali said. I don't trust you. A get-up like that, a face like yours, I feel like it's concealing something. You're probably concealing a lot of disdain for someone like me.

Doctor Allison leaned forward. And what does that mean, *someone like you*?

I don't know, I don't know. A *problem child*? Ali wielded an index finger at Doctor Allison: I *know* what you're doing.

I love how honest you're being right now, Doctor Allison said earnestly. This kind of vulnerability, I've seen it so rarely from you. It is beautiful. Beautiful! I feel like we're really getting somewhere.

Oh, said Ali, her voice dripping with sarcasm. Is that all you've wanted, this whole time? Is all you've wanted a *compliment*? Well, okay, how about this. I'll give you a compliment; you give me a referral to a psychiatrist who can give me some drugs.

I'm sorry, Doctor Allison said with infuriating sympathy. Given your ongoing substance use, I just don't feel comfortable making a referral. If you want to seek the opinion of a psychiatrist, I can give you a name, but you'd need to sign a release allowing me to be in communication with them. Ali, I just don't think we've seen sufficient evidence that your emotional swings are unrelated to your drinking.

Ali started to cry. Doctor Allison watched her, nodding.

I'm just, Ali said, through her tears. I'm just in so much pain.

Yes, said Doctor Allison. Stay with the pain.

I don't *want* to stay with the pain.

I hear you.

I want relief from the pain—and I just don't see—I don't see why you won't do that for me—

The sound of her own snot-logged whining made Ali want to crawl under the couch and hide there forever. Her sobs took on a new, hysterical rhythm. Doctor Allison handed her the tissue box. She sees this sort of thing all the time, Ali thought wildly. If I want to get drugs I need to lay it on thicker.

With thrilling recklessness Ali sat up straight, tossed the tissue box aside, and channeled a high-pitched, keening voice: Doctor *Allison*, oh my *god*, how do you get your *brows* so perfect? How does your *lipstick* never rub off? Tell me! *Tell me everything* about your beauty routine! And you're so *fit*! And so very *engaged*! Who's the lucky ma-an? Don't I *wish* I were you! God *damn*, how the *hell* did you end up in such an *unglamorous industry*? Doctor *Allison*, has anyone ever told you you should be on *tee-vee*?

Doctor Allison's smile had faded. She regarded Ali coldly, analytically.

At last, she spoke: Regular old loathing, indeed.

Ali swallowed the bile of embarrassment that rose in her throat after her scenery-chewing performance. She let her voice settle back into its familiar register. In a tired tone she said, I just want some fucking Xanax, and maybe some Adderall, and then I'll get out of your life.

Doctor Allison closed her eyes, breathed, and opened them again. Absolutely not, she said.

All right, then.

Ali stood up and gathered her coat, coffee, and phone. Surprising herself with a phrase of her parents', she said, I think we're done here. Surprising herself with a childhood phrase of her own, she added, Bye forever. She swallowed the bile and blinked back the heat in her

eyes. With her belongings in her arms she stood and left, slamming the door shut behind her.

The sun went down earlier and earlier every afternoon, until it looked like eight PM at four. New tenants moved into her parents' rental apartment, then moved out when they found a better deal in Revere. Ali gained weight. Her face developed seasonal ambivalence: her skin was both oily and flaky, like a croissant. When she went to the Closet she no longer felt sophisticated. The lights were too bright there, the champagne coupes too small, the shishitos shriveled and impotent. When she went to MBF, Caleb treated her with the same professional geniality as the other bartenders did. She wanted to be heartbroken, but she was only humiliated. She stopped frequenting either place and started going exclusively to the Ruddy Duck. She'd hole up there in a back booth, nestled deep in her winter coat, nursing a meal of onion rings and straight Jameson, and read books by the flashlight on her phone until the battery died. She'd read the book Bones left behind at the Starbucks and gotten hooked on the series. It was nominally for adults, but it was about a detective who was also a housecat. *He* solved all the mysteries; meanwhile it was his owner, a bumbling London constable, who got all the fame and glory.

She was deep in some expository backstory about an infamous jewel thief in *Detective Meowpants #7: Slain in Bahrain* when she noticed a crowd of men gathering at the bar. In the midst of them, half-concealed, a singular woman was delivering an impassioned monologue. When Ali got up for a refill, she stood a few feet away and listened. She recognized the voice. When the crowd shifted, she got a good look at her old acquaintance, Alley Bones.

Even up close, she found it difficult to understand what Bones was going on and on about. She caught a snippet of jumbled takedown of some local politician and the lack of affordable real estate in their town. She was all about that, but then the monologue took a left turn, transitioning into a series of vaguely related conspiracy theories about campaign finance and corporate greed, money and politics, and the literal end of the earth. We will all be dead in a few years, anyway, Bones declared: drowned in flood, scorched in heat, or brought down by unprecedented pandemics after the ice sheets melt, reawakening long-dormant bacteria and with it the baroque diseases of our forbears. You think cancer's bad? she challenged her audience of opaque, heavily-breathing men. Just wait until the permafrost melts. You'll all get the plague!

Ali realized she'd been staring when Bones caught her eye and halted in her tracks.

Oh, hey, *Ali*, she said. She was pale and bloodless as winter.

Hey, Bones, said our girl.

A spell seemed lifted. The men who, a moment before, had been transfixed by Bones, now unlatched their gazes, lost interest, and regrouped elsewhere, like cattle.

Whatcha drinking? Bones asked.

Jameson, said Ali.

Two double Jamesons, Bones demanded of the bartender. If that's what you're calling this watered-down crap.

He was a dull blank man, tall and heavy, whose features seemed to bleed into one another, as on wet paper. While he obliged, Ali lowered her hands so they were obscured by a barstool and twisted the ring on her index finger so its blue-green stone faced her palm, and only the plain silver band faced out.

Cheers, said Bones, and lifted her shot glass and clinked it against Ali's. Ali mirrored Bones. They both downed their doubles and slammed the empty glasses on the bar.

Two more, Bones called, and the bartender obeyed again.

They drank. They looked at each other. They laughed. Ali told Bones what she'd been reading. They laughed. They drank. Bones grabbed Ali's hand and they ran to the bathroom. They knelt on the tile floor and did lines off the toilet seat. They shouted at the bartender to turn it up, and they danced. Ali's face was hot, her pits stank. Bones was shiftily and two-dimensional as a reflection in double-paned glass. *Self-destruction is an essentially feminist act!* Bones shouted over the music. *The patriarchy will destroy us if we don't destroy ourselves first!* More shots, more lines. Lines until the baggie was out. More dancing. The bartender gave them a cigarette and told them to get the fuck out. They ran outside without their coats and shared it like shivering fiends. They shouted at the bouncer who wouldn't let them back in, who threw their belongings on the sidewalk like trash. They ran, breath steaming, boots skidding, up the ice-slick street. It was closing time and Ali's pulse was quick, her thoughts bouncing like rubber balls down the steep incline of her mind. The idea of her parents' house filled her with the usual dread. *We can't we can't we can't*, she said, where will we go where will we go? Bones opened her backpack to reveal a half bottle of well whiskey, its plastic pour-spout still stuck on.

Ali's teeth were chattering so hard she thought she might bite her tongue off, but she managed to say, I have an idea I have an idea. She reached into her own bag and pulled out a key and waved it in front of her new friend. Shivering but gleeful she led Alley Bones to her parents' rental apartment, vacant again.

The apartment had its own entrance, right next to her parents' door. They snuck in like kids, whisper-laughing. It was beautiful and serene, the counters marble, the appliances stainless, the hardwood floors gleaming clean. A big window looked out on a tree and, behind it, a streetlamp. Together the two objects, spotlight and shadow puppet, cast eerie silhouettes on the clean walls.

The toilet flushed and Bones emerged. There's no TP, she announced.

There's no anything.

Still in her coat, Ali lay down on the floor. Bones sat down cross-legged, and they passed the bottle between them, and watched the tree's plotless puppet show.

So you're rich, said Bones.

Ali coughed and raised herself up on an elbow. No, she said, no. All their finances are tied up in real estate. They have no, what's-the-word, liquid . . . .

They, said Bones.

My parents, said Ali.

This is your parents' place? Where are they?

She caught a whiff of something wicked in Bones' tone of voice.

Bones must have noticed an expression float past on Ali's own face, because she let out a husky laugh and lay down, too.

Oh, please. I'm a lot of things but I'm not a fucking thief.

Sorry. Ali lay back. I don't have a lot of friends.

What are *friends*? Bones said darkly.

A wave of bonhomie came over Ali, of tenderness, even, for the young woman beside her who'd been through so much. She propped herself up on her elbow again and looked up at Bones, who had closed her eyes. Bones' eye makeup had crumbled below her powerful green eyes. Her spotty skin pulled tight over her cheekbones and jaw. The zits and clumsy makeup only made her more otherworldly. Ali wanted to hold her, to talk to her forever, to invite her in. But she sensed she should not touch Bones—that would not go over well—and suddenly she found herself tongue-tied. As for inviting Bones in, apparently she already had. She announced that she had to pee, struggled up, and went to the bathroom. When she came back out, Bones was asleep, her black hood pulled over her eyes, her breathing labored, her mouth twitching, like some skinny, feral animal.

When Ali woke it was bright and cold. She had a crick in her neck so bad she could barely move her head. A small puddle of drool had collected on the floor below her mouth. Thickly she attempted to piece together her whereabouts, the time of year, her identity. She could hold in her mind only a few dusty relics from the night before, and those required deep excavation in the archaeological dig of her mind. Then she became aware of the sound that had woken her: her parents' voices at the door. She struggled up to a seated position, and her winter coat slipped onto the floor. Bones was gone. Ali fled to the bathroom. She listened to the front door unlatch, her parents' voices nattering on with evangelical cheer and determination:

We've just had it renovated.

There's a washer-dryer in the basement.

No basement access from this apartment, unfortunately, but you're welcome to use our washer-dryer.

As long as we're home, we're *happy* to open the door for you.

Utilities are included, so you can do all the laundry your heart desires. *Mi* washer-dryer *es su* washer-dryer.

Who's coat is this?

Is that Ali's?

What's Ali's coat doing up here?

Ali rested her hot forehead against the smooth door. She heard their prattle pause as they put together the lone winter coat out there on the big clean floor. She turned the door handle. In the bathroom doorway she lingered. Her spindly parents were standing with a petite person in a ponytail and running shoes: three small figures—a couple of gnomes and a sporty pixie—kissed all over by winter sunlight. Ali felt gloomy, guilty, and unreal, standing apart from them as she was, like a wrong note in somebody else's song. In this story it was the pretty young woman who was these two good-natured people's adult daughter, not Ali herself. Ali was apparently cast in the part of intruder, of vagrant.

*Ali*, her parents said simultaneously.

What are you doing up here?

Honey, are you okay?

In part because they were backlit, their faces obscured by shadow, and in part because her mental functions were sluggish and laborious, it took a long beat for Ali to recognize the young woman, who smiled in a bright, forced way and said, Hello!

You two know each other?

In comparison with Doctor Allison's crisp intonation, Ali's parents' voices sounded far-off and undefined, like a chorus in a play performed a mile away.

Oh, said Doctor Allison, apparently remembering her client confidentiality. No, no. I mean—she looked at Ali with a slight sort of shrug—I don't know. Do we?

Ali was focused on Doctor Allison's hands: small, pale, and bare. Zero diamonds. And here she was, trying to rent a studio. In the pale, truth-giving light of morning, Ali saw Doctor Allison's complexion was pale, her lips dry. Shadowy circles were etched under her un-made-up eyes.

She knows me, Ali said, and she felt herself beginning to cry—though not, for once, out of self-pity. No, she was crying for them. For the heartbreak of a young woman dead set on perfection. For poor raging Bones, who struggled so in the present, but saw in the future only a medieval frieze of disaster and death. For the fear that kept two aging people together, for her half-erased father and myopic mother, who'd loved her so hard, all these years, and who surely had never expected her sweet baby girl to grow up into this—this wraith, this grotesque mess. For the exquisite pity of hope, she cried, for the paradoxical burden of consciousness, for the world and its infinite tragedy. The bare floor gleamed. Her tears and snot splat upon it.

Oh, honey, they said. What's wrong? *What's wrong?*

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