THE SCARAB
POETRY. PROSE. ART.
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Dear Reader,

I don't often feel satisfied by my own work, but I could not be more excited for what this anthology of literature has become and what it offers to you.

Let your tongue dance across tart words of love and pain and heartbreak. Step into our small private art gallery of dazzling color and expressive lines before you pay a visit to the town of Atere and chant with its villagers, *the mill is turning*.

I truly hope that you enjoy the work that we have compiled from so many talented writers and artists, as I have. Immerse yourself, reader.

Editor-in-Chief,
Madelyn Parker
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poetry
APPLAUSE

sophia babb

I heard the trees crack and creak as I walked up the driveway,
it sounded just like applause
the pear tree blossoms petaled and flew around me in a pirouette
if I could have taken flight, I would have gone with them.
They placed a laurel of blessings and well wishes on my eaves
and cranium, and I thanked them honestly
The whole outdoors said to me
Congratulations, congratulations!
I had passed their beds for many winters,
a barren stare and closed hands.
I was finally in season, after the long wait
My leaves were outstretched and they could feel my living again,
even before I could feel it myself.
BREATHING PRACTICE

sophia babb

The stomach is full
Of light
And ease
Tucked down in its frame
I rest my hands on a belly
That extends when I breathe
How could I not love the body
That will birth me
Into its own peace?
HIGHLY FLAMMABLE

v.a. clark

He’s worse when he’s sober,
Has me sipping gasoline
With drops from tear-stained cheeks
But he calls me pretty—
Sure, clung to adjectives
But I halt with the former—
Let it inch down my throat
While blasting the radio.
It doesn’t get easier,
Has me throwing myself off bridges,
Always forgetting to forget how to swim,
Waiting for the concept of oxygen to kick in.
I know about the whispers—
They call me a volatile substance.
But if I had known he was going to set me on fire,
I wouldn’t have showered before I came.
IT'S DEPRESSING AS HELL
v.a. clark

I miss the quality of a person
Because my mind is moving too much.
Chocolate will never be chocolate again -
It resembles the grime of a long day
Washed off a soul that dirties itself every tomorrow.
I put pen to paper to feel something,
But not better.
Each resting curve is a warm body in December,
Drinking hot chocolate to the lull of carols.
Meanwhile, I burn books instead of firewood
And curse the god that made me
So broken and cold.
My body tells me the darkness I swallow has a personality disorder
Because sometimes it feels like sunshine.
Nobody says a word because it’s depressing as hell -
But it’s the loveliest depressing I’ve ever felt.
GOOD MORNING

callie dewees

the sun used to pull me out of my bed
but one day I got too heavy for her
so the moon kept me company
while I hid from my once dear friend
What are you thinking?

That the sky grows heavier and heavier every day. Have you noticed? Last week it was bearable. It’s bearable today but less so. My shoulders, my head, my legs are all being forced down by the weight of the sky. I never thought that’s what the sky did. I thought it was so light that things could float into it. Instead it’s pressing down on me, and I don’t think I’ll ever fly again.

It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it?
GARDEN

e.l.l.h.

I imagine you like a garden.  
You have life  
light  
flowers that smell like home  
and enough love  
maybe even for me,  
the dirt  
that is a home to you  
and all your dreams and needs.  
even though you hardly notice  
I am here.
ME
e.l.l.h.

Escaping you requires escaping myself
And without the pills,
There’s no escaping me.
AN INSIGNIFICANT LOVE POEM
natalie gregg

when we are apart
i miss you
Ardently, Achingly, and Actively
which is not easy for me
because
i'd rather these feelings
become a part of the Background
Humming
but i disturb the universe
small as i am
small as you are
and unwillingly will myself into
some form of cosmic existence
which is inherently different from
something foolish like
destiny or fate or
whatever they're calling it
CLARITY

natalie gregg

In the midst of moonbeams
Beneath her glow
The lady of nightfall.
It is then that I know

In the silence of midnight
When stars are abreast
Darling, that is when
I love you best
THE YOKE I BEAR

hannah helbig

hey! I don’t
wanna whisper in the wind and leave the wine outside
the window in the whirring summer rain
hey! I don’t
needa never-ending nest of no’s and Night Night Night
no-nonsense-
now it nicks me in the heel when I fi-na-llly get up
and go
hey! I don’t
have a Little Lamp of Love to give you when the Night
is Nigh,
every candle that I lit you blew it out
hey! I don’t
Wanna Fight Fight Fight and kick myself for not explaining
everything-
gotta re-fer-ence a graph or lexicon
you didn’t see where I was coming from
   grab a glop of
Get-Em-Up and
Go-Get-Em and
God Help Us now
to keep it all afloat
hey!
Gotta re-fer-ence a graph
Or a little lexicon
Just so you can see
Where the pain is coming from
COME

erika b. march

Come to hear the world in which you live.
To where the fog creeps in on white footstep
and soothes a too harsh plane,
pulling you through the thicket of bunchgrasses and then seaward.
Where the ocean scrapes and scrapes against the sand,
where the sea grass whistles its own sad refrain.

Come, and let go.
Let the thick of city smoke leave your frazzled skin.
Drop your fears and baggage and let the sea drag them away,
let the fog wipe the carbon sweat from off your brow
and embrace you as a long forgotten friend.
Let the damp flood your lungs and the wind box your ears
‘til you hear nothing but the earth breathing back a hushéd vow.
Come and just be.
Then may we meet again on even ground,
ice plants at our feet and tall Muirs at our backs.
And we can whisper to the fog, alone
where the ghosts of our past watch the sea forever.
We will sit in quiet darkness all the while
as the ships pass too and fro, bleating out into the dark their solemn tones.
TO THE GODDESS
erika b. march

O Goddess,
Give me a sign of what your earthen beds need.
If the rain,
a deluge I’ll pour to quiet every sight and sound
in the wrap of a heavy white-noise blanket.
If the desert,
I will crack the earth with red heat and move on,
holding in my rain to storm in other places.
But I cannot stand this humidity we live in now,
this wet hot air that sticks to your skin
and clogs your throat. An air too thick
with the impatient unsettlement of stormy weather
but no break of cloud or snap of lightning.
And if, Goddess, you cannot, it is I who must go.
BASKETBALL SHORTS
alex newman

Thank God for basketball shorts
comfortable and functional they never let me down
I felt so disillusioned - mom told me I can’t wear sweatpants in public
yahoosh and distasteful: it just isn’t done
with its elastic waistband
breathable warmth
best pants ever
No one looks askance at basketball shorts.

Other than some fumbling attempts in middle school
and free NBA2K16 on PSPlus
I have no experience with basketball
I know the players bounce the basketball in the basket
On the basketball court
And they wear basketball shoes
And they wear basketball shorts.
I go to my beloved shopping mall
I eat in the food court and the elastic of my shorts stretches over my belly
I pass by empty stores and feel worry
Dying malls are a thing, you know.
I go to Champs
Basketball shorts are buy one get one free
As I leave I pass by a grown man with his family
An upright man
Wearing basketball shorts

Thank God for basketball shorts
I would give everything I have for the ink of your last pen
To swing like a pendulum,
For the feeling of your heart against mine.

It comes to me in waves

Blood on the sheets and fluid filling your lungs
A fan droning on with gasps of air
Moans stab through my chest
The air leaving our lips.

A seed planted in my stomach
That has just started to grow

If you say it again promise to talk real slow
ELEMENTAL MIRROR
rachel weisbart

I am not one for swimming
But the ocean has whispered my name
Has crashed waves in the shape of my body
on shores in the shape of my heart
Has built homes in my depths
for fantastical fish
And has carried my tides in her pocket

I am not one for climbing
But the mountains have painted themselves
on my canvas
Have kept my best secrets
hidden in peaks
And have sent my best truths
down the river to irrigate valleys
I am not one for flying
But air has lifted my soul
And taught me to breathe
Has entered me silent
and left me as music
Has made me weightless
And set me as free as the wind
LONGING
rachel weisbart

Oh, to be trapped in a heart built from longing!
How brightly love’s lingering flame seems to burn
And the question I ask
I repeat
and repeat it
Will this impossible loneliness cease habitation?
I haven’t room for such unruly company
Melodies in me refuse to sound
for the breath they must live in is gone
replaced by the sorrowful sighs of remembrance
that bittersweet mistress
whose tongue flicks my face
thirsty for tears I have already cried
I turn her away, empty-handed
and yet she remains
intent on revealing you just as you were
though shrouded in time’s weary shadow
I view you through clouds
of the years since our hearts made their music
and images blur but the tune carries on
Whimsies waltzed
Dreams dances
And our lips learned to glide
in time
one, two three
one, two three
one, two three
one, two three
one
two
three
That’s how quickly you left
and my heart could not stomach such distance
She built herself walls out of longing
and there she remains
drowned by the rains
that cannot escape her enclosure
And yet
She looks up at the moon
Great goddess of Love
Silver sliver of hope
and her longing is for something greater
is for something tangible
yet more ethereal
than our corporeal folly
In moonlight she bathes her sweet sorrows
and after such cleansing
she still begs the question:
  When?
Oh, when?
art &
photography
Untitled
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Alice Wolf
Archer's Pose
Alice Wolf
prose
In days long past there was a town in the countryside whose residents called it Atere. Like many small, countryside villages of its time, its populace was of a genial nature, always welcoming to guests. They were simple people, merchants and farming folk who worked long days before retiring to warm homes or the town tavern for a drink and a long night’s rest. Many of the farmers lived half a day’s travel from the village proper, preferring the respite provided by solitude to the constant bustle in the town itself, but be not mistaken, for these farmers frequented the town center as much as Atere’s other citizens, usually once a fortnight to trade and sell goods. The townspeople would spend this day meandering between provisional stalls, bartering with what small coinage they owned and whatever artisanal goods they had crafted, be it food, tools, clothing, or something more unique such as jewelry.

Any visitors to Atere would have been shown the area’s famous landmark, the Great Windmill. This behemoth of a structure stood thrice as tall as any ordinary windmill (the ordinary of the time and place 50 feet high on average). “Its blades have long ceased turning,” said the townspeople, “and the great millstone within remains unmoved with
the blades above.” This structure rested in a clearing in the midst of a far-reaching expanse of trees. One could hardly deem the path to this clearing as well-trodden, but there were folded blades of long grass and a thin dirt path marking the way from the center of town.

“See the beautiful red soil,” the townspeople would say to guests and visitors. “Indeed, the geologists found this site a wonder for its richness in iron, and the uniquely white sedimentary pebbles laying about are apparently an oddity to the region. Many an article has been written about the land under this mill,” the villagers would brag, ushering their guests back to town for an evening of pleasant conversation and mild inebriation.

This is how things were in Atere. The people went about their daily businesses, smiling at each other, greeting one another pleasantly. They lived in a state of harmony, of unity. There was rarely town gossip, let alone town news. When a member of the town passed on from their life, the others would carry them gracefully to the village’s graveyard and lay them to final rest. There was never much mourning in Atere; the people lived in celebration of the life that was, not the sad contemplation of the life that would no longer be. Even if one were to visit the town on one of these days, one would still find pleasantries, though it would be somewhat melancholic. Any other day life would be usual, simple, content.
You could visit the town on a day such as this, delighting in the cheery, rustic atmosphere of the place and its people, perhaps even bartering two copper coins for a chicken before returning to your room at the inn. The innkeeper would smile and nod her head in your direction. The bed would be tempting, but the sunlight streaming through the clear window would provide too much argument to the contrary, and you would quickly leave. As you walked through the village, you would see men and women chopping lumber, sewing, forging. You would notice the young children running about, playing delightful games of their own invention, caught in their own beautiful world of innocence. Perhaps you would hear the whistle or flute-playing of a passing worker, enjoying a brief respite from their daily labor. Maybe you would even pause to exchange pleasantries with an elderly individual, the village’s wisest, as they sat rocking in a chair on the porch of their house.

You would hear the whisper from someone around you.

“The Mill is turning.”

You would hear it behind you, or out of the corner of your vision perhaps. You would notice the paces of those around you change, quickly pivoting from casual to restrainedly frantic. The whisper would grow louder.

“The Mill is turning.”
Workers would set aside their projects, making haste to meet one another, spreading the word further, faster. The children would sprint past, yelling the truth as they had heard it. The elder would stare out placidly, stating with the weight of years of clarity this single fact.

“The Mill is turning.”

You would quickly return to the inn, to the innkeeper, and ask her what the meaning of this was. She would look at you, relaxed smile contorting into something crooked, a grimace.

“The Mill is turning.”

You would start outside again and witness a great gathering of the kindly townspeople, engaging in a somewhat hurried but reasonable discussion with each other. Amidst this reason, the discussion of who had heard the news and who had not, your name may have been mentioned briefly before being lost again in the din of voices, in that echoing truth.

“The Mill is turning!”

You would hear a battle of names issuing from the crowd: names being mentioned, repeated, and dying away soon after. With seeming wantonness a name would be selected. Perhaps it was the first name mentioned, perhaps the last. The villagers would nod at each other in agreement. As you advanced upon the group they would start away. Fearing yourself at some sort of fault, you would hasten after them,
making as if to apologize for any action which may have caused them harm. You would quickly realize this effort was in vain, and you were not the cause of their movement. It was a mere correlation, and that great causal thing bounced off your ears still.

“The Mill is turning!”

You would then follow this mob of working people to the house of a farmer, one of the closer ones, mere minutes from the village proper. They would knock on the door, pronouncing their newfound knowledge with great vigor.

“The Mill is turning!”

You would witness the inception of smaller groups, each of them tracing paths into the woods, presumably to spread this word to the other farmers of the town to rally them. You would follow the original group to one house, then another. At the fourth you would witness several groups returning from the woods. The air of pleasantry would still be maintained, and these new folks would smile at you, teeth glinting in the evening sun. You would hear a pounding on the door of this home.

“The Mill is turning...”

The door would open and someone would step into the dying light of day from the warm glow within. You would not get a good look at him, her, or them. You would only know that they stepped out. The
mob would then quickly turn back to town, beginning to sweat in the windless air. You would look at the grinning faces, each seemingly straining against itself, its own efforts. The mob would begin pushing its way down the lush path toward the Great Mill to witness this monumental event, that final someone who had joined you being dragged in tow, somewhere in the center, surrounded by the grins of the villagers. The mob would become more frenzied the closer you grew to the Mill, whipping itself into excitement.

“The Mill is turning!”

This someone you had witnessed would walk steadfastly as the villagers jumped around them, hollering. Should this person ever stray to the outside, the mob would reach out and give a gentle prod in the proper direction, correcting the mistake of this individual. You would arrive at the foot of the Mill, that behemoth, and witness with your own eyes.

“The Mill is turning!”

You would peer into the dark of the structure, able to discern very little in the dying light quickly fading into the thick forest surrounding you. The great Grindstone was indeed turning. You would see the mob quickly pull that someone from wherever they stood among the ranks. They would be yanked; they would utter a yell. This yell would not travel far, drowned out by the ultimate, triumphant
cries.

“THE MILL IS TURNING!”

The mob would take this person, hoist them, kicking, fighting, screaming, above their heads, and enter the Mill. This person would be placed upon the path of the great Grindstone, legs first. The great Grindstone would pulverize these, preventing any escape. Shards of bone would fly outside, landing in the newly blood-soaked ground. The maw of the beast would gape at you, its single tooth devouring the meal it had been freely given by the people of Atere. Its belly was a coal-black room, a void of slow, endless suffering; its jaw was a great door, welcoming in the light of day. The sun would set completely, and the torches would be lit. The business would continue until the industry was done, until the Grind had ended. The villagers would cheer and cackle, sadistic smiles glinting out of the dark as they hurled themselves about the clearing, engaging in an arcane dance macabre. Flinging their limbs violently to and fro, they would leap, uttering noises guttural and elegant. Instruments would appear as if by magic, a steady tattoo being beaten on a large drum, a heavy rhythm. The villagers would bask in the glory of the crimson soil at their feet, at the unstoppable inertia of the great Grind, at its unquenchable movement until its task was completed.

You would witness all this, and when the hollering finally faded
away, the villagers would compose themselves, return to order any article of clothing that had gone awry in the great frenzy of moments ago, wipe the red from their feet and shoes upon the long blades of grass, and each would walk back to their home or the tavern for a drink and a long night’s rest.
The beans were thriving. Their coiled tendrils twined up the stakes that Pol had pounded into the bed weeks ago, and their green pods hung thickly under the broad heart-shaped leaves. Pol picked one and ate it raw. He would have a few meals from the young beans, but planned to let most of them mature so that he could store them, dry, to eat next winter.

He trudged through the bright heat with the double yoke weighing on his shoulders through the threadbare linen of his shirt. The crank on the well was sticking again. He filled the buckets and, walking carefully so as not to spill any of the precious water, went back to tend to the carrots and tomatoes, peppers and herbs. The patch of corn was already taller than his head and had set most of its ears. The good green smell of it reassured him of an ample harvest. Pol pulled a piece of last night’s corn pone from his pocket and chewed on its slightly dry crust as he finished watering the garden patch.

“Scratch!” When there was no immediate response, he whistled.

A rustle in the tall yellow grass beyond the garden was followed by the dog himself, pink tongue lolling in a wide toothy canine grin.
“Find any rabbits today?” Pol asked, and roughed up Scratch’s black-and-tan fur. The rabbits could be a real nuisance in the garden, and Pol was thankful that Scratch kept their numbers down. He gave the dog the last crumbs of his corn bread and went to fetch the hoe from the shed. Weeds had to be kept ahead of or they’d suck all the goodness from the soil and leave nothing for the vegetables.

Pol squinted at the sky, hoping to see the heavy clouds that might presage rain, but there were only a few white tufts scattered across the light blue, and the sun was brassy even this early in the morning. Well, as his father had been used to say, every day was a day closer to rain, and all he could do was wait. Once people had been able to predict the weather, Pol knew, but no one alive could remember that.

With the watering and weeding done, he thought about what to do with the rest of the day. He could split and haul wood. Last winter’s ice storms had brought down a number of trees, and Pol had already chopped up several into firewood size and stacked them. He would want more before the cold weather returned, but there was no rush. It was only mid-summer now.

The stream a couple of miles off tempted him too. It would be cooler in the dappled shade of the willows that fringed its banks. Midday was no time for fishing, though, and the mosquitoes were bad along the water.
Today, Pol decided, he would go scavenging.
Scavenging could be a risky business. The Big Dump was
treacherous, full of sinkholes where refuse had long since rotted away,
and surfaces that seemed solid could collapse suddenly underfoot. Still,
the risks were worth it. A lot of things were damaged, of course, or
they wouldn’t have been discarded in the first place, but a surprising
number were not. Pol had found tables and chairs with hardly a mark
on them, cups and plates and bowls without a crack or even a chip, and
all sorts of items whose use was obscure to him.

Even broken things could be valuable, especially metal and glass.
The semi-permanent trading camp beyond the Big Dump, down by the
river, also boasted several craftsmen, including a blacksmith, a
glassblower, and a whole family of potters who dug clay from the
riverbank. The smith and glassblower traded for their raw materials so
they wouldn’t have to take time out to find what they needed
themselves. Pol had built himself a couple of hidden caches at the
edges of the Big Dump where he stored the glass and metal he found,
and when there was enough, he brought his pull-wagon to haul it off to
trade.

All kinds of things could be traded for at the river camp: tools,
furnishings, food, clothing, and more. Mostly it was local folk who
traded there, but some came from farther off, on horses or with ox-
drawn wagons or even on boats. Some of them spoke funny, Pol thought, but after a little while he could usually understand them.

There were a few who came through rarely, but regularly, just once or twice a year or perhaps every two years. Last fall when Pol had gone to the river camp to trade, he’d talked with the woman who led one of those groups, and that was why he was going scavenging today—but not at the Big Dump.

He stopped in the house, first, to pick up a couple of carry sacks and his magnet to test any metal he found to see if it was iron. He left the pull-wagon behind. If he located any good material, he could mark its location and collect it another time.

Pol had decided to go today to the ruins of the city that had once existed only a few miles in the other direction from the river and the Big Dump. It would take him a couple of hours’ walk in each direction, but at this time of year the days were long and he’d have plenty of light to get home by. He had searched a few of the nearer buildings before but today he wanted to try those deeper in the ruins. Fear of plague had kept people away from the city for a generation, and later, fear of the dangers of the collapsing buildings, not to mention the animals that had moved in and made the area their home. Rabbits and possums and deer were no problem, but many of the predators that followed them didn’t hesitate to attack a lone human if he intruded on
their territory, and Pol had no wish to be dinner for a coyote or wildcat or wolf. He figured that Scratch would give him warning and he’d be careful to make sure he always had an escape route if needed.

The walk was hot. Pol adjusted the scarf tied around his head to soak up the sweat that threatened to drip, salty-stinging, into his eyes. When he figured he was about halfway there, he stopped to rest for a few minutes under a convenient cottonwood and took a big swig of water from his dented canteen, offering some to Scratch, who lapped it up eagerly.

“Come on, boy,” Pol said, and swung back into a loping pace.

Once there had been paved roads leading to the city, but now the crumbled asphalt and concrete were more of a hazard than a convenience. Pol had to pay close attention to where he stepped so that he wouldn’t twist an ankle. He was glad that he hadn’t brought the pull-wagon. If he came again he would have to scout out a smoother route or he wouldn’t be able to haul anything back with him.

He had reached the outskirts of the ruins. Some of the shells of houses were intact, while others had collapsed into heaps of rubble. Blackened beams and stones attested to the cause of destruction for more than a few. Those weren’t worth exploring, not for what Pol was after today. They might have metal, but that was of secondary importance at the moment. What he was looking for now was books.
None of the other local scavengers, as far as Pol knew, was much interested in dealing in books, but the woman trader had asked Pol if he would be willing to do so.

“We have a great many,” she explained, “but we’re always looking for more new ones, books we don’t already have, or have only fragmentary copies of.”

“How would I know which those are?” Pol asked her.

The woman chewed on her lip. “I do have a list of what we have, but only the one copy. I’ll tell you what. If you collect all the books you can find, next time we come through here, probably next autumn, we’ll pay you a little for each one, whether we have it or not, and more for any we don’t already own. How does that sound?”

It had sounded fair to Pol, so he agreed. He could pick up any books he happened across while searching for other tradeable items, and store them in one of his caches until that group of traders came back. If they didn’t—and sometimes it happened that those traveling groups never returned—it wouldn’t have cost Pol much extra effort.

Sometimes he read the books himself. Before she died when Pol was ten or so, his mother had taught him how to read. It wasn’t a skill very many people had any more; it wasn’t considered especially useful compared with the ability to farm or work metal or carve wood. Even Pol’s father had thought it unnecessary, although he could spell his
way through a piece of writing if he wanted. Pol’s mother, though, had loved to read, and had instilled her feeling into her son.

Pol knew that not everything he read was true. His mother had explained that some books were about real things that had happened, and some were just made-up stories, but she hadn’t ever told him how to tell for sure which was which. Perhaps, Pol thought, she hadn’t known either. Sometimes the book itself made it clear, but not always. It didn’t really matter, he supposed, since even the ones that told about true things didn’t much apply anymore anyhow. He wasn’t entirely clear what a stock market had been, except that it had nothing to do with trading cows and horses, and whatever it was, it wasn’t real any longer.

The traders didn’t seem to care what kind of books he found for them, though, so today that was his goal. Pol hoped that he would find some intact. That was one of the difficulties; rodents liked to chew up paper, and so did some bugs, and if water had gotten to the books then they were often so damaged as to be unreadable.

The first house he tried going into was a complete washout, empty except for a very large padded bench with a back and arms, whose rusty red cover was almost hidden by dust. Pol didn’t see any trace of any books at all, nor were there even any shelves of the sort that might have held them. Scratch found plenty of mouse-trails to keep him
entertained, however, and was reluctant to come when Pol called him.

As soon as Pol entered the next house, he smelled a strong odor of canine, and backed out quickly. Scratch whimpered. Clearly the building was used as a den by wild dogs, or perhaps coyotes or even wolves. Whichever it was, it was no place Pol wanted to be close to. Any animal would defend its lair. He backed warily away a few hundred yards, then turned and ran, Scratch dashing before him, until he had put the better part of a mile between him and that house.

He had better luck with the next several places he tried, at least inasmuch as there were no predators using the buildings as their dens. The floor of one sank spongily under his feet as he tried to cross the first large room, and Pol quickly decided not to bother further. If he fell through there would be no one to help him out. Another seemed more promising but when Pol tried opening the few books he found, they crumbled and fell to pieces in his hands. A third house had little of interest in the main building, but the collapsing shed behind it held some good iron that he planned to collect another day for local trade.

Pol was about to enter another house when he noticed the faded sign nailed to the rotting wood of the doorframe: a barbed trefoil, once black on a yellow background, now a dim gray against a dirty pale cream. Quarantine. He shuddered, despite knowing that there could be no one alive in there, not for a century or more, no one to spread the
dread disease that had felled more than Pol could even imagine. Taking a deep breath, he moved away, almost stumbling down the crumbled cement of the steps. Knowing that there could be no plague there didn’t mean he wanted to enter. He whistled for Scratch, who had been nosing around the corner of the house.

“Shall we head back?” he asked, fondling the dog’s ears. “It’s getting on for sunset. Or maybe just one more tonight.”

Scratch stretched, arching his back and digging his clawed toes into the ground. He looked up at Pol, then trotted off toward a large building that was mostly intact, except where an oak tree had grown up close to one of the walls and its roots had undermined the area, breaking a narrow gap in the structure.

Pol squeezed through that crack, stepping onto a pile of blown dirt and dead leaves and acorn shells that trailed off gradually as he moved further inside. As his eyes adjusted to the dimmer light—there were few windows, and those tall and narrow, made of heavy glass blocks instead of sheets of glass, so they remained intact although filthy—he inhaled sharply. Books, everywhere, shelves upon shelves of them, more books than he could ever hope to carry away to trade, even over the course of years, unless he did nothing else.

He would have to bargain with the traders over this, offer to show them the way here rather than trying to haul all the books miles and
and miles to the river market. He could take a few with him, though, to substantiate his claim, and he could read any he wanted for himself—if they were still in good enough condition. He pulled a few at random from different shelves. The pages were thick with years of damp, and dust and the litter of a thousand generations of insects crusted their top edges, but there was little mildew or mold marring the print. Yes, these would be well worth bargaining with.

But which to bring home with him today? Pol gazed around. He supposed that they had been put in some kind of order, once, since each book had a white square on its spine and he could make out faded numbers and letters on many of them. They were in order by number but he didn’t know what the numbers meant, to help him choose. He moved along to the end of the shelf and saw another room opening out from the one he stood in, with yet more shelves ranged in row upon row, each laden with books.

In the end he simply chose, arbitrarily, to take one book from each long row, figuring that that would give him a variety to show to the traders. He slipped them into one of his carry sacks and hoisted it a little awkwardly onto his shoulder as he scrambled back over the pile of dirt and outside, Scratch following at his heels.

The sun was further down than he’d thought, and Pol hurried home, carefully detouring around the house where the canines denned.
then picking up his own trail. About two-thirds of the way back he
passed a field where Scratch startled a group of rabbits feeding in the
twilight. The dog managed to seize one that, trying to avoid Pol, ran a
little too close to Scratch instead, and he shook it fiercely until its neck
broke.

“Good dog,” Pol praised him, and took the still-warm corpse away.
Quickly he slit its throat to let it bleed out, gutted it, and gave Scratch
the offal. He tucked it into his other sack. Rabbit stew would be
excellent over the last of yesterday’s corn pone for his supper.

It was full dark under a half moon when they finally got back
home, and the first thing Pol did was to kindle a fire and start water
heating while he skinned and cut up the rabbit. An onion, chopped,
and some carrots and herbs went into the pot as well. While his supper
cooked, Pol decided to waste some precious oil and lighted the lamp to
examine his finds of the afternoon more closely.

He leafed rapidly through several of the volumes, careful not to
tear the brittle yellowed pages. One had pictures in a separate section
in the middle, on a different kind of paper, slicker than the pages with
words. They were a little faded but even by lamplight Pol could see
that the people wore clothes of a completely unfamiliar style, and that
the buildings, too, were like nothing he had ever seen. He squinted to
make out the words written beneath one of the pictures. “Zhu Di, the
Yongle Emperor, 1402-1424,” he read. “Emperor” he understood as meaning something like a president, and he guessed that the numbers were years, so this must be a book about the past, a time long before everything fell apart. Pol had heard folk in the river market cursing the “twenty-firsties,” the people of the era of the collapse, and knew vaguely that the term referred to the century it had happened, so the picture of this man must be from hundreds of years earlier.

The delicious smell of cooked rabbit brought him back to the present. He blew out the lamp to save oil and ate heartily by the fading firelight, giving the bones to Scratch when he’d gnawed most of the meat from them. It was far too warm to want to keep the cook-fire going all night although the smoke did help with the mosquitoes. Pol stripped off his clothes and crawled into bed, Scratch at his feet, the sound of the dog’s even breathing lulling him to sleep.
Heat. That’s what I remember best about those days; heat that sucked all hope from us, so that the crowd was eerily silent, only murmurs running along the lines, whispered rumors of what to expect.

They had rigged up awnings so that the sun didn’t burn us. In my memory they are of some light silky material, billowing white in the erratic breeze, but mostly hanging limp and if anything holding in the heat. Strung ropes kept us in order, clumped in family groups with a few singletons here and there. Now and then a water cart would trundle past, the person pushing it twisting through the crowd, the monotonous drone of “one cup each, please, drink up, put the cup back when you’re done,” punctuated by an occasional curse as they tried to avoid running into any of the bodies pressing close.

The water cups were pressed metal, perhaps tin, handleless so they could be stacked. The cart would continue until all the clean cups had been used, all the water from the giant barrels drunk, and then return to the building that squatted gray and forbidding ahead of us, our goal, our dream.

The building tantalized us. We were allowed up to it one by one—
or in twos, if like me you were young enough that they said you needed a parent’s supervision. At five, I thought I was perfectly capable of using the toilet on my own, but it wasn’t allowed. The stalls were tiny and smelly but they offered a break from the misery of endless uninformed waiting.

Twice a day the water carts were supplemented by ration carts with platters of sandwiches—I remember mostly cheese on buttered brown bread or peanut butter and grape jelly on white—and of apples cut and cored, mealy and browning at the edges, along with celery sticks and carrot sticks and sometimes, not every day, those hard dry chocolate chip cookies that used to come in the bags with elves on them. Like the cups, the plates were tin and had to be returned to the cart as soon as you were finished eating. Some people grumbled about that and wondered why they couldn’t have given us bottled water and sandwiches neatly encased, each in its own triangular plastic container. I didn’t care, as long as they were willing to give me an extra sandwich for Lula when I asked.

Being small, I had the job of bringing my parents’ cups and plates back to the carts each time when they were finished, since I could worm my way through more easily than they. Lula came with me, and after I handed back the cups, we would go on to one of the places set aside for dogs and cats. There was a big waste bin at each of them, and
funny shovels we had to use to clean up after our own pets. The heat made it smelly there. That was something that I heard people complain about too, but I noticed it was only people who didn’t have a dog or cat themselves, and not all of those.

The heat and the sameness of each day made it easy to lose count of how many days we had been there, waiting, the lines snaking back and forth so that we came close to the building and then far away again. At the time it seemed like forever. My memories of our life before faded, became confused with images from television and the once-upon-a-time stories my mother told me.

At night, we unrolled our blankets and lay on them, still dressed except for our shoes, which went under the blanket as a pretend pillow. I faced my parents on their own blanket, our few possessions piled between us, with Lula curled against my back, keeping me safe. She weighed almost as much as I did, and had much sharper teeth. I knew no one would dare bother us when she was there.

From time to time there was trouble. The very first day, a man from the family eight ahead of us in line had tried to take more than his allotment of food the second time the ration cart came around. I heard the commotion and evaded my father’s grasp to make my way through the forest of legs to where I could see.

“Sir, each person is allowed one sandwich,” the woman behind the
cart was saying.

The man holding a plate with three sandwiches gave her a grin that even I could tell was meant to mock her. He tilted back the red baseball cap from his forehead. “What do you plan to do about it, bitch? I’m hungry and I’m taking more.”

She shook her head and said to the rest of his family, “Do you agree with him?”

After a moment his wife said, “Nate, honey, there’s lots of people here. You can get by on one sandwich for now. Take some of the carrots, you like carrots.”

The man—Nate—casually backhanded her across the face. She staggered but didn’t fall.

The cart woman’s mouth tightened. “And the rest of you?”

I counted four children, one about my own age, the rest older, staiристepping up to a boy as tall as his mother. I could only see the face of the youngest; he looked too frightened to speak. One of the other boys and the girl stayed silent as well. The oldest boy blustered, “Yeah, if he’s hungry, he should get more.”

Suddenly there was a big man in a white coat standing next to Nate, gripping his upper arm. I saw the needle go in, saw Nate sag. The same was happening to his son. Within a few minutes, another cart had arrived, empty. Jesús and Terrell laid the limp bodies on it and they
were taken away.

They never came back.

Before we knew that, though, I went back to my parents and told them what I had seen. They looked at each other and my mother shrugged.

“They have to keep order somehow. No one was hurt this way.”

Three days later I heard the whispers, that Nate’s wife had asked the cart woman what had happened to her husband and son, and been told, “They lost their chance.”

Rumor said that they had been sent back home, back to the plague and the fear. Even before we were allowed to come into the camp, we’d been tested: a quick swab on the inside of the cheek, a date and another number stamped on the upper arm in purple ink that wore off slowly, taking a week or more to disappear even if you scrubbed at it with the gritty powdered soap from the communal shower.

That was the third kind of cart, the testing cart, which came only every other day. Silence surrounded it. Everyone knew that if your test came out positive, you were gone. That happened only a few times, less often than the number of times that someone like Nate was taken away. No one missed those who were greedy, or violent, or who coped with their fears by blaming others. I did miss the boy from the family two back from mine, who was almost exactly my own age. It was too hot and
crowded to play much, but we told each other stories and played Let’s Pretend until the day that Eziah was taken away, and his family went too.

For the next week my father’s whole body stiffened each time the testing cart came, and my mother murmured under her breath, words I could not understand. I knew they were afraid that I had caught the plague from Eziah, that I would be taken away, that they would either lose me or lose their chance for help or both.

We were lucky. I remained healthy and slowly, slowly, we crept nearer to the end of the line, to the hulk of the processing building that shimmered in the heat, a mirage of hope. Going inside the building proper, not just the lavatories that, due to the number of people passing in and out, remained almost as warm as outside, was like drinking a glassful of juice slush so quickly that it froze you inside and out all at once. I shivered and held tight to Lula, following my parents who were following a stern-faced woman with tightly curled gray hair and bright blue glasses.

She took us into a small room and gave us each a cup of water, which we drank gratefully. When I had finished two-thirds of mine I sat cross-legged on the floor and held the cup still so that Lula could lap up the rest. She lay with her head resting on my knee and I stroked her russet fur as I listened to the grown-ups talk.
“I’m Sylvie Booker—please call me Sylvie—and I’ll be processing your application for The Refuge.”
She stressed the last two words, or so I remember now.
“Application?” My father’s voice sounded confused. “We thought this was…”
“...a government camp?” Sylvie finished. “It is, mostly, but there’s more to it than that. I work for a private foundation that is recruiting for a long-term project. I have the papers that you filled out when you got here; from those and from talking to you I can get a sense of whether or not you’re suitable candidates. If so, you’ll learn more about it. If not, it doesn’t count against you. Either way you still qualify as officially Displaced Persons and will receive assistance.”
That’s more or less what she said, I think. At the time it didn’t seem very important. I hadn’t paid attention to the papers my parents had filled out, the first days of waiting, but now Sylvie opened a thick folder and began going through them, verifying information and asking more questions. Names, dates of birth, identification numbers, residence before arriving at the camp, education, religious beliefs, past employment, other skills, hobbies, interests... it went on and on. I understood now why the line outside had moved so slowly, if every family had an interview as long as this one.
“Excuse me?” The gray-haired woman’s voice broke into my
near-trance; I had dozed off, leaning against my mother’s chair.

“Sylvie wants to ask you a question, honey.” My mother brushed my hair back from my face.

“Your dog’s name is Lula, is that right? Why did you bring Lula with you here?”

“I couldn’t leave her outside by herself, she’d get lost with all those people,” I said scornfully. What kind of a silly question was that? Sylvie laughed a little. “I understand, but why did you bring her here to the camp in the first place?”

Another silly question, I thought, but I tried to answer. “She’s part of the family. You don’t leave family behind!”

“No, you don’t.” Sylvie nodded, her expression satisfied. “You don’t."

The talking continued, but I only heard bits of it. Sometime during all the talk the door from the hallway opened and a man came in with sandwiches—not cheese or peanut butter, here, but a choice of turkey or tuna—and bananas and oranges to eat with them, and a big pitcher of water. The fresh orange made my mouth tingle. I was going to share my sandwich with Lula, since I had forgotten to ask for one for her, but Sylvie stopped me.

“Here.” She pulled a bowl out of her desk. It was half-filled with dry dog kibble. “Give her this. You can have your whole sandwich.”
Lula crunched away contentedly. When she had finished it all, I poured some water into the bowl for her and she drank that down too before she started nosing my leg and moving back and forth between me and the door.

"Ms. Sylvie?" I raised my hand.
"Just Sylvie is fine. What is it?"
"Lula needs to go outside. You know."
"Oh, of course." She picked up her phone and pressed some buttons. "Finn? Sylvie. I have a little girl here who needs to take her dog out. Yes. Yes. I think they will. Five minutes then."

"Finn will be right here to show you where to take her," she said, hanging up. "Your dad and mom and I have a little more to talk about, so he'll bring you back here afterward."

Finn had the widest, whitest smile I had ever seen, set in a dark face with surprising green eyes. "Follow me, sweetheart."

He led us through a maze of corridors, not back to one of the places where Lula and I had been going all those long hot weeks, but into a courtyard that had a few trees with benches underneath them, and stone paths making an X from door to door. Lula made a beeline for one corner and sniffed around with great interest before she squatted.

"Bags there," said Finn, pointing to a garbage bin with a roll of
bags hanging from one side. “We get more dogs through this center than I’d have ever expected, so we have to be prepared.”

Careful to pick up every piece, I dropped the knotted bag into the bin and we went back inside.

“Do you need to make a stop too?” Finn asked, and I nodded. He showed me where and waited with Lula while I went in. There was a woman in there already, washing her hands; I recognized her as one of the women who had brought the water carts along the line outside. She smiled at me and I smiled back.

“Need any help, dear?”

I shook my head and went into a stall, latching it shut. When I’d finished, I washed my hands as I’d seen the woman doing. I was just tall enough to reach the faucets on tiptoe but I couldn’t reach the towel in its roller, so I dried my hands on the tail of my shirt where it was least dusty.

Finn led us back to Sylvie’s office.

“Pending the final medical check, then, you’re accepted to The Refuge,” she was telling my parents as I opened the door. “With, of course, this young lady, and Lula.”

My mother brushed her knuckles over her eyes. They came away wet. “Thank you. Thank you so very much.”
“Thank you,” echoed my father, putting his arm around my mother’s waist and reaching to take my hand.

I smiled uncertainly at Sylvie. She came around her desk and knelt beside me. “You are our hope,” she said. “Remember that we are all—all!—family. Lula too.”

“Of course Lula,” I asserted. She was far too heavy for me to lift, but I squatted next to her and stroked her ears. “She’s nicer than lots of people.”

“So she is.” Sylvie stood up and shook my father’s hand, then my mother’s, then mine. “I’ll see you at The Refuge.”
An older man steps off his porch in the early morning and begins to water his garden. In the morning hours just before warm sunrise, all the flower buds are still closed in sleep. He brushes a few buds with a callused fingertip as he waters them. There are roughly seventy types of plants in his lush garden that hugs his home in a warm embrace. They range from creeping vines to vibrant lilies of all colors.

He does the same routine every morning, starting at the far-left garden moving to the right slowly. Each type of plant gets a different amount of water. He doesn’t even have to count out the seconds as the water flows into the soil. He shouldn’t have to, he’s been doing it for over twenty years now. After the main garden gets watered he moves to the circular garden in the middle of his yard that surrounds his pride and joy. A Japanese maple tree. The tree is not very old, three years to be exact, but it is one of the healthiest Japanese maples he has ever seen. Red-orange leaves cluster together on every inch. The rising sun shines lightly through each cluster making the whole tree dance, as if on fire. After watering every plant, he grabs his coffee and sits on the little
bench beside his favorite tree. This normalcy of the early morning allows him to reconnect and prepare himself for his day. He couldn’t imagine starting a day without watching the sunrise from beneath this beautiful tree.

Arthur was successful in almost anything he put his hands on. As a young man in the early 70’s it was mostly bar fights. Fortunately, he was also good at putting things back together, so he worked at a little mechanics shop in Newport, Virginia. Arthur’s father was a businessman and taught him how to manage money. He started investing in stocks when he was 17, even though he never expected to get anything out of it other than approval from his father. He started making some money here and there, which was nice. It meant he wouldn’t have to pick up a second job to pay for college, another thing he did to please his father.

Arthur met the love of his life when he was twenty-three. They met at one of his favorite old college bars. She was everything he wanted, and nothing he had expected. Her name was Elaine and she had the most stunning red hair. The type that was equal parts red and orange. Red heads had never been his thing. He preferred blondes. Honestly who didn’t? But, the girl with the hair of a late October sky captivated him. She had a dimple on her left cheek that was only visible when she sneaked the shyest of smiles, and when she was on the
verge of tears.

She introduced him to things he didn’t know he would enjoy, like new blends of coffee and types of music. More importantly, she introduced him to gardening. Elaine loved plants, and loved to take care of them. She had over twenty potted plants in her apartment as well as a small garden in her side lot. Everything thrived under her care. Vines with thick purple leaves crawled their way to the top of the building’s red brick wall, and attached themselves to cracks spanning out across the wall like a handprint. They spent many hours together caring for these plants, and he grew to love them as much as her.

Before they knew it, Arthur and Elaine were raising three kids, a girl and two boys. Arthur had inherited his father’s business, and was making a successful living selling stocks, just as his father had done. He didn’t love the work, but it allowed him to spend plenty of time with his family. Family was what Arthur cared about most of all.

The kids weren’t very old when Elaine was in the accident. Maddie was fourteen, and her brothers were both twelve. Elaine had gone out to get groceries. It was almost dusk, and the sun was slowly dipping out of sight. The kids were outside playing, and Arthur watched her get into her car. Her orange-red hair shone softly as she drove around the corner. It reminded him of the first time he had told her he loved her. She was getting in her car to head home after a date
night and Arthur was worried about her driving home in the dark.

“Hey,” he said quietly bending down to look through her window. “I love you, get home safely, and I will see you soon.”

“I love you too, and I’ll see you soon,” she replied with a flash of her dimple.

It was only after Arthur watched her turn the corner in the fading sunlight that he realized that it was the first time he had said that. He smiled softly to himself as he headed back into the house.

Elaine had been gone far too long and Arthur was starting to worry, when suddenly someone was pounding on the door. Arthur went to answer it hoping Elaine’s hands were just too full to open the door. Instead his friend Joe was there, out of breath. Joe started talking as soon as Arthur opened the door.

“Arthur it’s bad.” Joe puffed, “I was driving home and saw your car all smashed up on the side of the road. It’s a real big scene. Man, I was hoping you were driving. I was hoping it was you.”

Hot tears sprang into Arthur’s eyes. “Maddie watch your brothers, I’ll be right back!” he shouted on his way out the door.

Joe was right. It was bad. They passed the accident on the way to the hospital. Cops and firefighters swarmed the scene. He didn’t even recognize his own car. That’s how twisted the metal frame was. His ears were ringing as he raced into the hospital. He was greeted by a tall.
young doctor. His eyes were all red, like he had bad allergies, and his short hair was tousled and stuck out at odd angles.

“Where’s my wife? She is here, isn’t she? It’s the only hospital for miles,” Arthur said quickly. The room had started to spin, and he was feeling nauseous.

The doctor looked at Arthur and sighed. “Yes, it pains me to tell you this, but your wife has been in a very bad car acci—”

“No shit,” Arthur snapped, “I drove by it on my way here. Where is my wife?”

The doctor’s eyes fell to the floor, avoiding Arthurs gaze. “Your wife didn’t make it. We did everything we could. The other car ran a stop sign, and smashed into her door. She had a hematoma in her brain and we couldn’t save her. I’m so sorry.”

“That can’t be.” Arthur mumbled to himself. The spinning got faster. His legs buckled, and the room went dark.

Arthur didn’t know what to do with himself after Elaine died. He was a single father of a family that didn’t know how to handle the loss. He always tried his best to put his kids first, and to be there when they needed him most. Maddie took it the hardest. It’s hard growing up without a mother, especially for a little girl who knew what it was like to have one in the first place.

“I miss Mommy. I miss her hair and how soft she was,” Maddie
would whisper to Arthur as he laid in her bed stroking her deep brown hair in hopes of soothing her to sleep.

“I know, I miss Mommy too,” he said quietly holding back hot tears, “She was wonderful, and she loved you very much, just as much as I do. I will always be here for you. I’m not going anywhere.”

Arthur wanted more time with his kids. He was stuck in a job that became torturous without having his wife to come home to at the end of the day. Luckily, the stocks that his company worked with did well. One day, their prices went through the roof. He got a flood of calls from other businesses wanting to partner with his company. Arthur soon found that he had more money than he ever cared to have. He decided to sell his father’s company and most of his personal stocks, and was left with a small fortune. He finished paying off the mortgage on his house, and retired at the age of forty.

His children grew into strong, kind hearted adults. Arthur did a better job at raising them then he would ever realize. They were all old enough to remember the love of their mother, and Arthur worked hard to cultivate these memories. They were kind and compassionate, and understood what the loss of their mother had done to their dad. Somehow, it made them love him more.

As his kids got older, they started making families of their own. Arthur started a new business, finally doing what he truly loved,
landscaping. He was damn good at it if he said so himself. He got to work at his own pace, and create beautiful works of art for people's yards. His clients were always amazed by his attention to detail. He was able to do exactly what they wanted without them telling him.

Shortly after Arthur retired, his first granddaughter was born. Her name was Leah, and she had a dimple on her left cheek. Arthur noticed it the very first time he saw her cry. She was doing the type of scream-crying babies do when they are hungry, and he had never heard a sound as beautiful.

Leah loved no one more than her grandfather. At the age of five she followed him everywhere, her long orange hair trailing behind her. Her mother, Maddie, was a teacher at the middle school, but Leah never attended the school's daycare program. She much preferred to stay with grandpa and water the plants. From an early age she loved any plant with leaves or flowers that were orange. She would turn to Arthur and exclaim,

“Look Papa! It has hair like mine.”

When they went to jobs together, she would often look up at Arthur with her big blue eyes and ask,

“We are going to do this forever, right Papa?”

“Of course, sweetheart. As long as you never get too old to come to
jobs with grampa.”

Arthur taught Leah everything he knew about plants and landscaping. Arranging the plants was an art form. You had to know what plants thrived together, which ones did well in certain temperatures, how much water they needed, and what type of soil they grew best in. This was all second nature to Leah. She could create designs that Arthur had never thought of, and it made his heart happy when she wanted to work with him.

Leah was fascinated with trees. She knew what trees thrived in Vermont, and loved the ones that didn’t. She was going to college to become an environmental specialist. She always told Arthur she wanted to make an impact, even if it was a small one. One day during her freshman year of college she came to Arthur with an idea.

“Papa,” she said with a grin that exposed her dimple, “let’s plant a Japanese maple at the next job we work together. I know it would be hard, but I really think we could do it.”

Arthur smiled at her. “Are you calling me old Leah?” He was almost sixty now, but he was still in great shape for an older man. He could handle planting a little tree.

“No Papa! Of course not.” Leah exclaimed with a half-smile, “I just know they like warmer climates. So, it would be a big deal to plant one in Vermont.”
“That’s an understatement, sweetheart. Vermont is much too cold for Japanese maples. Even if it survived the first winter, it wouldn’t be long before it succumbed to the elements. We would just be wasting the client’s money, and then they won’t ask us back.” He hated saying no to her, but it would be nearly impossible.

“I know it would be difficult Papa, but if anyone could it would be us.” Leah said, “We could even try it in your garden first, just to see how it goes.”

“I’m not saying we will never try Leah, but just not right now. Especially with winter coming.”

Leah made sure to remind Arthur of the half promise he had made her that day any time she got a chance. College kept her away more than Arthur wanted, but he knew in his heart it was best for her. She still came down as often as she could to go on jobs with her papa.

One day during summer break Leah and Arthur were heading to a new client’s house for a consult. Leah rolled all the windows down and was dancing in the passenger seat to some pop song that Arthur didn’t understand the lyrics of. Her red-orange hair was whipping around her face as she sang the song. Arthur was enjoying the moment, glad to have her home. Suddenly, there was a deafening noise and the car went spinning. When it finally stopped, Arthur looked over to find Leah unconscious.
“No, Leah, no!” he sobbed. “This can’t be happening again!”
Leah’s eyes fluttered open.
“Damn, what was that?” she muttered.
Finding that Leah was okay, Arthur got out of the car. The other driver had gotten out already, and seemed shaken but relatively unharmed. The young man had run the stop sign and clipped the back end of Arthur’s car, sending them into a tailspin. Suddenly, Arthur was livid.
“I called the cops already, they are on the way,” the young man called to Arthur, running a hand through his blond hair.
“You could have killed my granddaughter, you dumbass. I ought to punch your lights out.”
“I’m sorry,” stammered the boy, “I just looked away for a second. I didn’t see the stop sign I swear!”
“Whatever,” Arthur mumbled as he walked around to the passenger side of his car. Leah was still awake and seemed to be okay. He grabbed her hand.
“It’s gonna be okay. The ambulance is on its way, I can hear it. Try not to move until they get here to check you out.”
“I’m okay Papa, I promise. You should be the one sitting down. Your forehead is bleeding.”
At the hospital Arthur waited with Maddie while Leah got
evaluated. His cut had been caused by a small fragment of glass that embedded itself in the soft fold of his forehead. After a quick evaluation he had been discharged, and was waiting in the lobby for Leah. Maddie was so anxious that she practically jumped out of her chair when the tall young doctor entered the room.

“The good news is that Leah only has a minor concussion, which is what caused her to momentarily pass out after the accident,” the doctor said. Arthur realized he had been holding his breath as if he expected to receive the same news he did almost thirty years ago. He exhaled sharply.

“Great so, where is she?” Arthur asked glancing over the doctor’s shoulder.

“Well, some of her tests came back abnormal. It is probably nothing, but she is going to have to spend the night. The tests will be back in the morning. You should go home and get some rest. You’ve had a long day,” the doctor said with a smile as he turned and left the room.

“Dad, you know it’s not your fault, right?” Maddie said as she turned to her dad, “Leah loves going to work with you. You didn’t do anything wrong. You weren’t the one who ran the stop sign.” Maddie’s eyes were wet, and Arthur knew she was thinking of her mother.

“Yes sweetheart, I just hate that she got hurt.”
“She will be okay, dad. She’s tough. She learned it from both of us. You go home tonight, and I’ll stay with her. You can’t go throwing your back out on one of these hospital cots.” Maddie said as she smiled and kissed his cheek. Then she turned, leaving to find Leah’s room.

Arthur returned to the hospital the next morning with everyone’s favorite cup of coffee. He met Maddie outside, and handed her a cup. He could tell that she didn’t sleep well on the couch in Leah’s room. Leah was still asleep. Her bed was in the corner of the room by a big bay window. Soft light poured in making her hair glow. Leah liked her coffee strong and very hot. Arthur caught a whiff of its strong earthy smell it as he set it down on the table beside her bed. The tall doctor from the day before came in and cleared his throat. Upon seeing that Leah was still asleep he motioned for Maddie and Arthur to join him in the hall.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning,” Arthur and Maddie responded in unison.

“We have run some pretty extensive tests on Leah and it seems that her white blood cell count is much higher than it should be,” the doctor said glancing from Maddie to Arthur as he spoke.

“What does that mean?” Arthur asked, looking to Maddie whose face had lost its color.

“Well, we believe she may have T-cell-prolymphocytic leukemia.
It is a very aggressive type of leukemia, and it affects almost every part of the body. We will have to run a few more tests to be sure, but that is where we are as of right now. I’m going to give your family time to process this and think about the possible treatment options. Would you like me to tell Leah, or would you want to do that yourselves?”

Arthur’s ears started to ring. Leukemia? That’s a form of cancer. How can a twenty-three-year-old have cancer? He stood there in silence.

“We would like to be the ones to tell her,” Maddie whispered, reentering Leah’s room before anyone could say anything more.
Leah was awake and smiled as they entered the room.
“What’s the matter mom? Why are you crying?” Maddie sat on Leah’s bed stroking her hair.
“Leah have you felt okay lately?”
“I’ve been tired, and my back has been hurting, but I figured it was just the stress of college.”
“Sweetheart, the doctor thinks you might have leukemia.”
Suddenly, Leah and Maddie were holding each other and crying. Arthur was standing at the foot of the bed watching two of the people he loved the most hurt.
“They aren’t sure of anything yet girls. It could be a false alarm.” He whispered just loud enough to be heard over their soft crying. “It's
going to be okay. It has to be.”

“I haven’t done any good yet,” Leah sobbed through her tears, “I haven’t even finished school yet.”

The doctor came back in later that day and confirmed what they had all been afraid of. Leah had leukemia. Not only did Leah have it, but its progressed to the point that there were no safe treatment methods available. She would die from the treatment before the cancer would, so they sent her home. Maddie and Arthur were a mess and spent an hour in the main lobby quietly sobbing before telling Leah. Leah was quiet and didn’t shed a single tear, almost as if she had expected the news.

Leah transferred to a community college closer to home. When the semester started up the month after she was diagnosed, she enrolled as if nothing was wrong. She maintained her 4.0 GPA while living at home, and spent off days with Arthur planting gardens. Her doctors said it was not safe for her to be around germs, but she didn’t care. Giving up gardening would have been worse than dealing with her diagnosis, and she’d be damned if being sick was going to keep her from spending time with her Papa. Arthur couldn’t handle Leah being sick. He couldn’t wrap his head around it all. She was far too young to have to be dealing with something like this. Most of all, Arthur didn’t understand why he couldn’t fix it.
It took a while for Leah to start to look sick, but Arthur was the first one to notice. They were planting new vines in the left flowerbed of his garden when he noticed how thin Leah was. Her favorite grey t-shirt hung off her thin frame, exposing harsh collar bones. Her red-orange hair was pulled back into a braid, but the strands that fell into her face were dry and brittle. Arthur was watching his pride and joy slowly fade away, and he couldn’t do anything to save her. Leah met his gaze and smiled,

“We are going to do this forever, right Papa?”

“Of course, my dear,” Arthur replied as his eyes grew misty.

“Don’t let them bury me Grampa. It scares me. Have them cremate me, and then plant a new garden with some of my ashes.” Leah was grinning, her dimple was much more noticeable on her thin face. “I know it’s kind of strange, but maybe I’ll be able to do some good that way.

“Okay Leah, whatever you want. I don’t think that’s going to be an issue any time soon,” he said with a hopeful wink.

They held Leah’s funeral service three months later. Her mother agreed to cremation, just as Leah had asked. Arthur was given the urn that held ashes. It was a small metal cylinder with flowers etched into the side. Maddie didn’t like the thought of keeping parts of her daughter’s body. It was bad enough she had lost her. She didn’t need a
tiny box to serve as a reminder.

For the last three years since, Arthur has started his day off the same way. He waters the plants from left to right. Paying close attention to the growth of the purple vines that reach towards his window. His lush patches of exotic grass dance in the early morning breeze. Purple butterfly bushes line the path to his circular garden which is one of Leah’s designs. It overflows with marigolds that are twice the size of normal ones. Their golden petals sprinkle the grass outside the circle of sparkling rocks that enclose them. Arthur sits on cherry colored wooden bench with an earthy cup of coffee, under the most beautiful Japanese Maple. He goes over his plans for the day, laying everything out like a map in his mind. Each morning is more spectacular to watch unfold than the last. He can’t help but think back to the good memories he holds of the ones he has lost. He smiles as the sunrise slowly shines through its ruby colored branches.

“Look Leah, it’s got red hair just like you.”
From the day he turned fifteen-and-a-half until his sixteenth birthday, Joe Beller was made the captive audience of his grandmother’s stories. “Captive” because, not yet old enough for a drivers’ license, he needed an adult in the passenger’s seat. Both of his parents worked late - and he knew that if he rode with them, he’d never want to drive again in his life - so when he needed to drive somewhere, he would take Ida, who had been living in their house since her cancer came back for the second time six years earlier. Of all the possible options, this was the best, since Nana never shouted, or cursed, or yanked on the steering wheel, or jumped out the passengers’ side door in an attempt to escape, or did any of the things Joe thought his mom or dad would do within their first week of riding with him. As a matter of fact, Ida never even looked at the road. But she did talk.

Their routine went something like this: whenever Joe needed to go somewhere, he would go into Ida’s room and rouse her out of her big recliner, where she slept in the afternoons in front of a TV so inundated with old movies that its being a color TV was incidental. Ida, having seen enough of life not to care so much about the opinions of others, would
rarely bother to change out of her pajamas and house shoes, but would always nestle a book of word searches under her arm as she waddled out to Joe’s theoretically-white late-90s Nissan that his dad had found in a junkyard and fixed to semi-working order. And as she scanned the pages, intermittently crossing out words in a font so small even Joe could barely read them, she would talk.

It’s accurate to say “she,” and not “they,” talked, since Joe didn’t typically respond with more than one or two words at a time. As for what she talked about, it encapsulated every corner of the human spirit that could be contained in a ten-minute drive to get a two-liter of Pepsi from a convenience store (Joe didn’t get out much, since that would imply a wealth of places to get out to). Ida had enough stories to tell the history of Oklahoma twice over, and she spoke with the poetic gravity of a redneck Homer – or, to compact that analogy, like Woody Guthrie or Will Rogers. And like them, she had tied her life to This Land since the day of her birth, which, according to her, happened right in the middle of a dust storm. And as her eight sisters and one brother spread as far as the wind would carry them – mostly as far as north Texas – she kept her feet planted here long after Route 66 had died and taken the dream of a prosperous Oklahoma with it. She had grown up, married (twice), loved (once), and lost (more times than she could count) in a place nowadays known mainly for its idiot governor.
and constant deluge of generic, pressed-suit country music. And here, in this place that bore only a caricaturist’s resemblance to the world she was born into, Ida Runnells intended to die.

If Joe had been listening on any of their rides, he would have learned all this. But he hadn’t been and he wasn’t. Now only dimly aware of how damn lucky he was to have a grandmother at all, an awareness that would become more acute as he got older, Joe allowed Ida’s stories to bounce off him, only nodding or giving an occasional “yeah” or “huh” that was more of a reflex than a sign of his attentiveness. Nearly all of Ida’s oral history was forgotten as soon as it came to his ear.

But in those six months, there was one story he didn’t forget. One day, as they were halfway to the school to pick up some homework Joe had forgotten to take with him on the bus, Ida stared at her word-search with mute conviction. Joe knew something was different today. After all, “mute” is not a word anyone would have used to describe Ida most of the time. Ironically, she held his attention better when she didn’t say anything, since this difference from their usual routine worried him. After crossing out the word “Defenestration,” she spoke for the first time all afternoon. And for the first time in months, Joe listened.

“Have I ever told you about your grandfather’s Knot?”
“I don’t know.”
“If I had told you, you’d know.”
“Then I guess you haven’t.”

Ida let out a long sigh. And in another unprecedented moment, one that would never happen again, she laid her word-search down by her feet and looked out the windshield.

“We’d been married – oh, Hell, I don’t know how many years. But I remember your mother was learning to walk. And we had that Mercedes, and that old black-and-white TV, so I think we were living in Granite. Yeah, that’s right, it must have been Granite, because Bill was working at the prison. And he used to joke that he’d take me up to the top of the Arbuckle Mountains, but when we got there, I’d better put out.

“Bill,’ I told him, ‘we have a daughter. I’ve already put out.’

“Not that I wouldn’t have done it again. Your grandfather was a beautiful man. Like... you won’t know who this is, but like Ernest Tubb.”

Later, Joe would look up a picture of Ernest Tubb, and wonder why exactly Ida found him to be the epitome of male beauty.

“Anyway, like everyone else in Granite, he drank. Heck, I drank. I smoked, too. Unfiltered Lucky Strike. By the way, Joe, if you ever decide to smoke, I will find you - don’t matter how old you are, or how
dead I am - and I will kick. Your. Ass. Have I made myself clear?

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Good. Anyway, he drank more than most people. And I figured it was just because he hated working at the prison. He never told me what it was like, but I could only imagine. It must have felt like every evil person in the world was inside that building. Of course, if that were really true, you’d have to put all of Oklahoma’s politicians in there, too. Did you know the mayor of Oklahoma City used to be in the Klan? Anyway, eventually, I figured out what it really was. But when I did, nobody had come up with a word for it.

“Bill had his own way of saying it. One day, as I was knelt over trying to put my glasses back together, he got on his knees so his face was level with mine, held my face in his hands, and started to cry. And as he cried, he said, ‘Ida, I’ve got a Knot in me. It lives in my stomach, and every day, it tells me to drink. And if I don’t listen, it gets louder, and louder, and louder, and louder, until I can’t hear anything else. And I wish I could pull it out, even if it killed me, even if it took everything inside me out with it, because I don’t want to hurt anybody anymore. But I can’t. It’s there. And it makes me hurt people. People I love more than anything in the world.”’

“What did you say?” Joe asked.

“I said, ‘Get your f—ing hands off me and let me pick up
my glasses.”
“What?”
“Yup. And he did”
“Why would you say that to him? He was asking for help.”
“Why do you think my glasses were in pieces on the floor?”
“Oh, my God.”

Ordinarily, Ida would tell Joe not to use the Lord’s name in vain. This time, there was just silence, until Joe retrieved his Algebra textbook from his locker and they started on the way back home. After a few minutes, Joe got up the courage to ask:
“What happened after that?”
“He left.”
“He just left and never came back?”
“Joe, if he did that, how would we have pictures of him holding you as a baby? He didn’t leave forever. But he left, and I left, and neither of us ever really came back, and... Goddamn it, what the Hell am I saying? I’m not making any sense. Anyway, let’s get back inside.”
“...Okay.”

This was one of their last rides together. Joe would turn sixteen in a few weeks, and would earn the right to drive by himself. And as much as Ida sometimes missed their one-sided conversations, she never asked to ride with him again, consigning herself to the familiar rhythm
of old movies and a room at the end of the house that no one came into unless she fell or shit her pants. She felt she had said all that could be said. She was right.

It would be convenient to say that Joe always wondered why Ida had decided to tell him that story. But that would be disingenuous on account of one word: “always.” Because something happened one day that made Joe abruptly stop wondering. And on a day as unremarkable as that drive with Ida some years ago, when he felt the dull throb of that ancestral ulcer work its way into his gut, he found himself locked in fearful communion with a man he neither loved nor understood. And he knew that, like his grandfather, he would fight his Knot for the rest of his life.

He did. And not once did he ever break a woman’s glasses.
editors' submissions
We all look to momma in this picture. She’s the one that took it. It’s 1999 or it’s 2000 or it’s 2001. I couldn’t tell you. “Momma” is a southwestern saying I use that I never knew made me southwestern. Momma is the least southwestern person that I know. Daddy too. He hasn’t picked up that backcountry Oklahoman slang yet, even though he’s lived here since he was seven years old. Ten years will pass by and wear him down.

Momma is the real subject of the picture. She’s the sparkle in my and daddy’s gazes. Kate’s reaches out for her—or rather, for the lens’s attention. But dad and I, we’re looking at Momma. I tell her with my eyes, *look how much fun we’re having*. Dad’s eyes tell her, *look how silly they are*. We understand each other here in this place. Daddy is a child like my sister and me.

I’ll crawl into Momma’s lap soon after this and tell her stories with the small amount of words I have a full grasp of. My chirping voice would only whisper in church then (it certainly never whispered at home) and will ask her question after question. I’ll jump from the couch
to the chair to the VHS cabinet, and then probably ask Daddy if we can walk on his feet again.

The church is a body. My father has said that in several of his sermons before, has said that the body cannot function without an arm, without a leg, without the eyes.

We’re all different parts of the body.

We—my father, sister and I—walk together like we’re one colossal body. I am no leg or arm. I am the eyes, my mouth is pacified. My eyelids are wide open as I let my father walk me around the room. My sister holds my arms up with him, a secondary binding brace.

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I’m twenty years old and there isn’t any room under the heavy bend of my father’s spine. When the organs outgrow the body, are they aware if the body continues to function?

—

Momma carries the kind of beauty that a person holds in their hands; a woman whose kindness further radiates it. Momma is no leg or arm, she is the skeleton. The tiny pink flowers that sprout on her lilac dress wave gently even when there is no breeze. They sing for her bright eyes.

She doesn’t have that dress anymore, which is a pity, because I would’ve asked her for it. She’s kept a lot of things in her closet that
are older than me, and my sister—the hands—takes them all the time without posting notice. Maybe when I ask it’s not for permission. Maybe it’s because courtesy was a habit, or because I just wanted another reason to ask Momma something. My sister wants to shatter the world and always has. Her springy lifestyle used to be a skin that encased me. Before anyone could see through it, I was known as the girl who asked a lot of questions.

Momma’s a hoarder. She’ll call herself one with the scoff of a scholarly analyst. It’s the kind of laugh that people in the church don’t hear. She laughs at Kate McKinnon impersonating Hillary Rodham Clinton or Jeff Sessions. She laughs at Baptist pastors that promise the unconditional love and grace of Jesus Christ as a preface to a sermon about avoiding hell.

Church members are cells festering with malignity, they try to kill the host as they kill themselves—quickly or slowly—and then liver, lung, and heart is replaced. Momma lives underneath the skin like I do. She lives beneath the hands, she encases the heart. She is roots for the legs, balance in the feet. I, the eyes who can see and be seen into, don’t really feel the body the way that she does. She doesn't do the dishes all that often, forgets about the fabric that she’s bought, and only has room in her arms to carry the worries of everyone else. That, and that good hearty laugh at a good political joke.
She doesn’t like my self-deprecating humor, but she laughs harder at my jokes than anyone I know. The difference between us is that I am fueled with an all-consuming anxiety.

On the night that I decided to go to the Wesley Center’s worship service, I drowned. Seventeens and twenty-somethings sang praises, pledged themselves to self-serving piousness. The worship leaders would call out each line before it was sung.

“Your love is truly amazing!”

The girl on the keyboard and I pretended that we agreed on who we were talking about. The voices of the congregation were weak and uncertain. Their throats were occupied, fervently drinking a blind understanding of self worth. Bread was pushed into my mouth and I gagged.

*Love God above all others.* Love a God who called your father to the ministry, but then his mind locked him into hell.

They poured incense and oil down my throat, and I began to suffocate.

At times, my throat is so frightened by me that it hides beneath tables, shrunken to half of its normal size. It’ll throttle my lungs in a wild, defensive anger. They often choose to fight instead of pausing to ask why the throat is afraid. Perhaps the throat doesn’t know. My heart lacks social decorum, she is abrupt and usually demands information
about this chaos, so that she might be soothed by knowledge. My fingers dance in circles like my mind. The two have expressed before that they would like to dance together, but they’re always separated by the skull.

My mother was worried when I told her about the anxiety attack. She was furious for me. She let me cry on on the phone.

“I’m not ever going back”

“You don’t have to put up a front for them,” she told me.

—

Sentinel. Momma sits stoically on my father’s desk, false gold and green marble frame her. She is the balm in Gilead.
Nathan sat alone in a brown leather chair at the back corner of his favorite coffee shop. Its doppelganger to his right remained empty, except for the deep coffee stain on its left arm. A warm light formed a prism around him while he gazed at the brick walls in between sips of the brisk, black brew that rolled flavors of peanuts and rich dark chocolates across his tongue. A welcome feeling of tranquility trickled its way through Nathan's body.

It was around six 'o'clock on a crisp November evening. The leaves were embracing their seasonal demise as they took their final dances in the streets. A light breeze cooled the burning orange of the setting sun, and the sign above the door of Breathe Coffee House teetered back and forth to the rhythm of the dancing leaves.

There was a line of five flannel-furnished college students looking for their next caffeine fix from the old man behind the counter. He took their orders with a smile, one that quickly faded as he mechanically fulfilled their orders and measured the rest of his life in coffee spoons. Nathan wondered how each of those individuals came to this corner of time and space, pondering how each of them in the shop had now
crossed their threads of life forever, but will never know a thing about each other. Such matters frequently occupied Nathan’s mind, even though he knew that he would never fully understand the tapestry of existence. So, he decided to take another drink and sigh his way to other thoughts.

Bells chimed as the front door opened. The outline of a girl interrupted the hazy light in the space between the doorframe, wearing dark blue jeans and a faded Tom Petty t-shirt underneath a coral fleece. Light darted from behind her to the corners of the room as the sun reflected off her golden curls. Nathan immediately recognized Claire Walden and he smiled at her as she found his gaze. Claire quickly returned a smile and made her way over to him.

"Hey." Claire let out an exaggerated sigh. “Getting to see you is just what I need."

The warmth of her smile added to the safety within the prism of that softly lighted corner.

"Well I'm glad you could make it." Nathan replied. "I made sure nobody took your favorite chair."

"With as many times that I've spilled coffee on it, they might as well just make it official and give it to me," she said as she placed her fleece over the back of the chair. "I'm going to go order something real quick. Would you like some more?"
"Sure." Nathan began fishing for his wallet.

"No-no-no, I got it. You paid last time." She blessed the room with another smile and made her way to the weathered barista at the counter.

Nathan and Claire had been friends for five years, ever since they met in a Philosophy class their freshman year of college. Claire had chosen to sit by Nathan on the first day of class, when she tripped over a backpack and spilled her grande Americano from Starbucks all over Nathan, who said he would only forgive her if she would allow him to buy her another one later that day. Claire agreed, and they ended up having an extended conversation over Plato's "Allegory of the Cave." They had been integral pieces of each other's lives ever since.

Claire returned with two cups of steam-belching coffee. They both looked at each other, ritualistically taking their first sips in synch. A bout of silence followed as they both allowed the hot liquid to settle.

“So,” Claire began, “Anything interesting happen the past few weeks?”

Nathan shook his head as he finished another sip of his drink, “Not really—lately I feel like I’ve just been going through the motions.”

“I feel the same way. It feels like I’m trapped.”

“Trapped is a great way to put it,” agreed Nathan. “As time gets blurrier and the seasons change, the more I realize that my life hasn’t.”
“Change makes me uneasy—the uncertainty of what it could do.”
“I know what you mean.”

The two fell back into the arms of silence for another extended moment, taking time to appreciate the soft notes of the guitar strings and piano keys being played through the speakers. The ethereal music nearly captured them in a trance as their oppressive comfort began to putrefy the light shining down upon them.

Claire finally interrupted the silence, "I drove by where your old house used to be the other day." Nathan noticed that Claire was digging the nail of her thumb into the side of her index finger.

"Is there a new house there yet?" Nathan asked.

"No, there's still debris stacked on top of the foundation."

“It’s been over two years already. You’d think they would have finished cleaning it up by now.”

The side of Claire’s index finger was turning raw and red while the rest of her skin slowly faded into pale ice.

“I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it since.” she said under her breath as she lifted her cup to her mouth.

“My old house?”

“The storm.”

“Oh—,” Nathan responded with a puzzled look. “What about it?”
“Were you scared then?”
"Yes, very."
"Of what?"
"Losing you."

"I don't remember being scared," she replied. "I knew that if we were to die, we would die together." She was staring deeply into the black chasm that filled the cup in her hands. Then she turned her gaze towards the door as another wave of plaid and checkered husks came to receive their dose of the invigorating ichor.

"Is something wrong?"

"I don't know." Claire took another drink of her coffee.

Nathan was perplexed by Claire’s question, unsure of what it was she wanted to say, or if there was something else he was supposed to say.

He took a moment to think back to the night of that storm. Claire had come over to his house to get some advice for a paper she had due in a few days. It was raining when she arrived, but there had been no warnings of anything severe. The evening was filled with the sound of shuffling papers and the clicking of computer keys. A screaming siren suddenly announced a tornado’s presence while Nathan was in the kitchen getting Claire something to drink. Wind and hail started to thrash the walls of the house. Nathan did not have a basement, so the
two frantically made their way to the bathroom where they held each other to wait out the storm. He was terrified, but he remembered looking into Claire’s eyes which were unpossessed by fear, even as the house became increasingly unstable. Suddenly, the shattering glass and the quaking walls seemed irrelevant to Nathan as he stared into those pools of jade and held her soft cotton skin close to his, and then—

"Let's get out of here," Claire said suddenly. "I'm not in the mood for coffee."

Claire jumped out of her chair, threw her fleece over her shoulder, and held out her hand to Nathan, overwhelmed with unrest. He saw waves building in her eyes, held back only by the smile she laboriously kept on her face. Nathan set down his coffee, took her hand, and they fled the safety of that prism of light, their cups still erupting steam that joined as one in the space between the two chairs.

—

"So where exactly are we going?" Nathan asked.

"I'm not sure yet." Claire tuned the radio until it settled upon the song "Pompeii" by Bastille.

They were in Claire's light blue 2013 Chevy Malibu that hadn't been washed for a couple of months. A layer of Kansas dust coated the outside of the car as they headed West on I-70 out of Hays. In the back seat laid scattered t-shirts and paper cups, and a silver chain with a
dove dangled from the rearview mirror.

The sun had completely set now. The only lights on the horizon were the haloed headlights of the vehicles heading the other direction. Nathan asked, "Are you going to tell me what's bothering you?"

"Yes." She clutched the steering wheel harder and began digging her finger with her thumb again.

"Does it have something to do with the tornado?"

"No . . . yes—I'm not sure."

"Hey," Nathan began in a reassuring voice. "We're still here, and it's very unlikely we will have to go through that kind of thing again. There's no need to worry about that."

"No, that's not it. I just—need to collect my thoughts about it first."

"Okay. Do you want to pull over and switch places?"

"No, I'm okay to drive."

"I'm always here for you."

"I know."

Claire exited off the interstate and passed a sign that said Scenic Overlook - 5 miles South. Nathan reached over and offered his hand to Claire. She accepted his warm grasp and they quickly exchanged glances through the glow of the digital radio display. A sparkling tear slid down Claire's face as the storm in her eyes continued to brew.
Nathan took his other hand and softly wiped her cheek after she returned her eyes to the road. Then he turned up the radio, and they sang the lyrics together:

\[\text{And the walls kept tumbling down} \]
\[\text{In the city that we love} \]
\[\text{Gray clouds roll over the hills} \]
\[\text{Bringing darkness from above} \]

\[\text{But if you close your eyes} \]
\[\text{Does it almost feel like} \]
\[\text{Nothing changed at all?} \]
\[\text{And if you close your eyes} \]
\[\text{Does it almost feel like} \]
\[\text{You've been here before?} \]

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The Southbound road led to the top of a plateau with a large clearing of pale rocks and chalky dirt. Claire pulled the car over, turned off the engine, and they both sat there hesitantly in the dark. Just as it seemed the silence would consume them, Claire opened her door. The door-chime was not unlike the bells at the coffee shop, but
Claire did not exhibit a similar radiance of energy and light as she did before. Nathan unbuckled his seatbelt and followed her out.

Claire made her way to the edge of the cliff. The plateau overlooked the city of Hays to the East. The city lights made an entrancing reflection of the stars in the sky, presided over by the waning moon. Claire gently kicked a rock off the edge as the autumn breeze lifted a few heaven-bound leaves across her face—and the dam in her eyes finally burst. She fell to her knees and struggled to expand her flaming lungs while wet hands covered her drowning face. Nathan appeared beside her on the ground and embraced her from the side. Claire's face rested against his chest as they huddled together through the storm.

"I want things—to be different." She paused to take a desperate gulp of the chilling air. "But, I don't want things to change, and they already have."

"I'll never leave you. That won't change." Tears began to swell in Nathan's eyes and his lungs began to be pierced by hot stings.

“How do we know that? There’s no guarantee that won’t change too. We could end up on opposite sides of the universe.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Nathan.

"We never left your bathroom after that tornado," Claire managed to say. "Everything's been different. You've felt it too?"
"Yes."
Nathan joined in with the wailing whirlwind as their thoughts connected and they admitted the truth, and the two clutched each other with adamantine arms and hoped the storm would pass and cause them no harm.

Their tempest raged for several minutes until a calming silence flooded over them and the world became still. They began to feel the heat radiating between their bodies. The citrus cologne on Nathan's chest married with the warm vanilla perfume rising from the nape of Claire's neck. They finally managed to pull themselves up, and they took turns wiping the tears from each other's face. Claire and Nathan turned to the East and watched the flickering lights from the brink of the bluff.

"We could take it together." Nathan suggested.
"Take what?"
"A leap of faith."
"But I don't know what's going to happen," the remaining threads of Claire’s hesitation clung to her mind and heart.
"I don’t know what will happen either," assured Nathan. “There’s only one way to know for sure.”
"I'm scared,” she lowered her head as a couple rogue tears escaped the corners of her eyes.
"Of what?"
"Losing you."
"I'll never leave you. I've never left you."
"I know."

"Don't be afraid." Nathan turned and extended both of his arms towards Claire as starlight glowed from his outstretched hands that still shone from the downpour. "We can do this together. As long as we do it together, I'm not afraid."

"Okay," Claire spoke softly as a smile began to give life to the dead leaves on the ground. "Together."

They joined hands as they looked above to the celestial canopy, just in time to witness two meteors crossing paths in the heavens. Some of the stars began to fade from the frigid vacuum while others intensified to warm the icy sky. Nathan and Claire continued to look towards the ends of the universe in unified wonder. Until suddenly the sky collapsed on them like a house of cards—and they flew away together as doves in the wind.
Caucasian. Your mom tells you to check it for testing purposes. You probably look more white than Asian anyway and you take a lot more after your dad’s side of the family. Plus, you don’t really have enough “culture” in you to check Asian. You’re not really sure what “culture” means, you’re barely nine. “Asian” encompasses all of Asia, including India and Malaysia, so you’re technically partially Asian. However, that’s not what anyone would picture if you told them so. It’s way too broad. Checking “Other” or “does not wish to respond” feels like chickening out, so when asked to “pick one” you pick “Caucasian.”

A few years later, it gets even better. You’re given the same choices but the instructions at the top tell you to pick “All that apply.” What a luxury. This is supposed to give you more options and make it clearer to the test-taking gods just what breed of child is taking this math test. It doesn’t, but you laugh to yourself when you think of the word “breed” to describe it. It’s like when people see a dog and ask the owner what kind it is. You’re not like a German Shepherd or a Dachshund like nearly all the rest of the kids testing with you. You’re more of a goldendoodle, and that’s about the extent of understanding you have about race.
That was me as a homeschooled child entering the public school world. Before the fourth grade, what color I was on the outside never seemed to come up in conversation. That color was a very light beige that appeared just a little off-white and got tanner in appearance as the weather became warmer. That color was and still is nothing like my parents’ skin tones. My mom’s skin is a medium chocolate brown. She really likes chocolate, so up until I was about seven years old I was pretty sure that was the reason. My dad looks more like a Viking. He’s six foot five with freckled pale skin and a red beard. When I was little, I knew that my mother was Malaysian Indian and my Father was just some white guy from Texas. That didn’t really seem to matter until I stepped out of my little world of neighborhood friends and church companions.

“What are you?” I’d get asked.

I’ve noticed that people often treat you according to what ethnicity you are. It took me a while to understand this, but as I got older more and more people, even strangers, would ask me that burning question upon meeting. Knowing my ethnic background seems not only to satisfy curiosity, it changes how someone looks at me. It’s as if people want to figure out some cultural explanation for how I think, act, speak, and look. Occasionally, someone might even use what they think of as a compliment to make it seem less odd that a complete
stranger is going to walk up to me and randomly ask me about my lineage.

“Wow, you look so exotic! Where are your parents from?”

Due to the circumstances of when I am asked, I often reply with “That’ll be seven dollars and fifty cents! Here is your receipt. Thank you and have a nice day.”

I get asked about “what I am” in public, in restaurants, at work, in class, at the grocery store, and really anywhere people with curious eyes and brazen voices exist. I understand that oftentimes I am asked about my ethnicity simply because people are curious and trying to be friendly. That doesn’t bother me. What does bother me is how important it is to some people that I reveal what group I identify with in order for them to categorize me in their brains.

Identity. That is something I’ve never really found within race. This doesn’t mean I don’t appreciate my background and enjoy both American and Indian culture. However, I don’t really walk around extremely conscious of the fact that I’m half Indian and half “white bread.” I also don’t truly identify with any specific group of people, because I haven’t actually met my specific group of people. More often than not, much like that first test I took as a child, people want me to “choose one.” I can’t because I am not just “one.” I can’t completely identify with a group of people because there aren’t a lot of olive
skinned “Gindians” (half ginger Indians) just walking around in Oklahoma, and if there were I bet I couldn’t spot them. For all I know I’ve encountered hundreds of people with backgrounds similar to mine, but we all know better than to open with “Hi, what are you?” upon meeting each other.

That isn’t to say I don’t get extremely excited when I find out someone is “like me.” I was tickled when I found out that Nora Jones, the famous singer, is half white and half Indian. It’s not as if I look up to her because of that. She’s a beautiful, talented, and successful woman. Her ethnicity doesn’t really affect how I feel about her, it’s just nice to know.

Growing up, my mom and her parents were brown. My dad and his parents were all very white. My dad’s best friend was Chinese. My aunt’s husband was Mexican, and to me that just meant he was brown. My church friends were a mix of white, black, and brown. I didn’t really think about any of that until I got older and everyone around me seemed to come from extremely monotonous backgrounds. I remember when someone in high school saw me and my mother and asked me if I was adopted. It just didn’t make sense that I wasn’t the same color as her.

The reason for that is probably because people seem to put such an emphasis on race. In the United States, even though we rebuke racism,
to some degree race still determines so much about how we speak to each other, how we are educated, who will hire us, what friends we have, and who we will marry. The perk of being ethnically ambiguous is that I more or less can determine that on my own. It’s kind of hard to racially discriminate someone when you’re not exactly certain about what you’re even discriminating against.

More often than I’d like, people are so eager to assign me a label that they project one onto me and stick with it until further notice. They can’t stomach the ambiguity. Not knowing seems to make them uncomfortable so they fill in the blanks themselves. They make up in their minds what I am and what I’m not before given any indication of what my actual heritage is. I know that they do this, because if they weren’t spending precious brainpower on the question of my race, they wouldn’t make an obvious point of mentioning it to me.

“Ah yes, Latina girls like you always have such a fire in them.”
“Well, I mean, you’re like Persian or something.”
“I consider you white even if you may not be. All my friends are white anyway.”
“So, you’re Mexican.”

That last line was someone’s opener after they asked me to coffee. We sat down, greeted each other, and his starting conversation line was “so, you’re Mexican.” The look on his face when I said “No, actually,”
told me everything about just how unprepared he was to be wrong about that. One might think I took the opportunity to get up and ditch out on that hurricane of awkward. Actually, I stayed and continued the conversation and we had a really nice time. There are two reasons for this. One is that I’m used to people opening conversations with me in that fashion and I’m fairly capable of moving on. The second is that it really doesn’t matter to me that much. I really don’t care what ethnicity people think I am anymore because I don’t find it affects me much at all.

Race doesn’t really factor into my life the way it might for others. I don’t really attach my ethnicity to anything I do or any choice I make. If anything, I use my diverse background without even thinking. It affects how I see the world, because I find that I don’t really “fit in” anywhere. I just go with the flow until I find my place. I’ve actually grown to prefer it this way. I’d rather someone not know my ethnicity and treat me the way they naturally want to rather than to have them know it and alter their behavior around me.

More often than not, I can feel a difference in how someone acts around me depending on whether or not they understand my background. I once sat in a classroom in which I overheard some idiot make a joke about a girl there needing to “go back to India.” I spoke up for her but it didn’t really change the situation. First of all, she’s
Pakistani. Second of all, it made me wonder if my classmates growing up would have treated me differently if they all knew exactly what my ethnic background was. I don’t think I’d have been bullied because of it, but I know that some people would have changed the way they spoke around me.

When I was a junior in high school, an American woman of Indian heritage won Miss America. For some reason that sparked controversy on the internet and an article about it was going viral. To my shock, one of the main points was a tweet that said “this is Miss America, not Miss India.” I wasn’t shocked about the tweet itself, but that a senior on my Pom squad had made it. Everyone was talking about it, and the next day a couple of the other Pom girls came to me to tell me that “she didn’t know” and to not hold it against her for the sake of the team. I wasn’t exactly enraged. I didn’t really hold her in high regard in the first place and that kind of behavior didn’t surprise me. Some people are just extremely ignorant. She is one of those people and unfortunately they exist everywhere.

Ideally, we all learn to treat each other as if everyone was racially ambiguous and what they look like on the outside doesn’t matter. Because of the way I grew up and how people have treated me over the course of my young adult life, I’ve learned that someone’s ethnic background can actually mean very little when it comes to who they
are as a person. Culture can definitely change the way someone lives, but the way I see it, it’s better to learn that about a person gradually than to instantly assume what they’re like based on the color of their skin. A person’s ethnicity reveals very little about who they are, and I would hope that someday we all view race with much less importance. Race seems to captivate the minds of the people around me. It shapes their identities and gives them a sense of belonging. I’m a little too Indian to be white and way too white to be Indian so I’ve never really had that entire sense of identity and belonging. I’m happy that way.