

TRANS/  
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The Writer's Den  
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POETRY

“a hopeful transmission”  
alex bravo

I.

The pilot of this plane is an enigma to me  
yet to depend on them so much is a mystery.

I believe, thus, something akin to love  
can exist—must exist—between strangers.

Below,  
the light scatters in the atmosphere just before dawn  
like oil on water, where wooden sheds and boys in the reeds are  
bathed in deep blue. I can't help but feel you  
right there and I'm just short of living—  
hold me with heat,  
for the highway lights float like pulsars in the sky  
and they're promising beatific redemption,  
diffuse in the residual night air.

II.

Legend of a cyclone on the light-up floor tonight;  
I can't tell the origins  
but you're there, the eye of the storm—  
it must be symbiosis.  
To think! Standing in the nexus  
with garlands of iridescence draped over your limbs—  
deifying, it must be. I can't help but gaze from the corner  
together with all the nervous wrecks,  
longing to hold light in their hands,  
looking out at crowds of crossing stars  
cutting across wrinkles in time under a pitch-black sky.  
I'm new here, if you can't tell.  
There's a bartender watching the people sprout confidence  
with a face that knows all too well.

Could I trust you if you took me there, into the center?  
If only touch didn't burn like frostbite, but  
you get that with young bodies. You look beautiful tonight  
and every night; I wish I could see you more often.

I know I'm not the only one with this problem.

III.

In the fog I feel you drifting,  
the universe keeps expanding  
with space-time displacing stars further from ours.

Love without destination sweeps down below like searchlights  
from the eyes of a fool alone-in-faith on the rooftops of the city,  
estranged yearnings stuck within islands of concrete—  
pinpoint me a place in this vast expanse  
where gentleness, by principle, flourishes;  
these hills, carved by erosion.

The center cannot hold like this.

#### IV.

Seaside town in Japan:  
old feelings settled in the reservoirs—  
young love not quite realized or said,  
backroad confessions and escape routes,  
a teapot not quite dry yet, fern shade in the hideout—  
eclipse the bright sun of present skies.

*The sacrifices I'm willing to make outline the path I take;*  
I'm on the edge of the cliff  
imagining myself disfigured if I take the leap.

Will we be strangers? Thomas Mann was right  
in saying *the one who loves more is the one who suffers;*  
I'm standing in the rain,  
a cold draft of air where you once were,  
now drifting into the future.  
It's a coming of age  
and we're both just short of living.

A star exploded in white light  
filling the corners of my bedroom that evening.

#### V.

Pieces of shrapnel glide across the night sharp  
like ice skates. I'm on the open road where I first  
outlined my suffering surreal and the hills sinusoidal in theses  
and I will write about something different this time!

This hurt is distancing, my blur is protecting,  
the drum beats on. Eyes wide! I want the ambition of an open heart!  
I want to breathe clean air!  
Take this dirt and refine it, deify it, reconciliation-pure white;  
King Lear once said *I do still try—*  
tongues of fire ripping the night a new one  
with dry, dark leafless trees in a grove,  
just out of town, in the fields,  
a beam shot up into the sky  
and *I want to go home.*

*It's a direction,  
not a clear destination.*

We've got to try something!  
Transcendence defies evidence.

## VI.

Here's my offer:  
If I'm not caught up in the cyclone  
I'll be the truck and the driver  
finding you somewhere safe to rest, I know  
you need the destruction to feel new again  
so I'll let you die and be reborn every night you can  
and I'll be here to stroke your back and  
hold you when you're raining tears,  
like a storm is wont to do.  
Don't let my reticence make you think I'm not here for you;  
I'm still learning to breathe easy.

There's that soft wisp of hair peeking out again  
from under your hood and in that moment  
I believe we are protagonists,  
we have something to protect.

## VII.

What is the lesson of the Voyager?  
*We must be good, because we are moving,  
and if we are moving, we must be changing,  
and if we are changing, there is a chance  
we are changing for the better.*  
And if my love be alone, so be it:  
still love, pain only from its imbalance;  
and even if I should bear the weight of it  
I shall love, I shall love, I shall love.  
The city lights make a glorious grid  
and to think we can share its view from above—  
I shall love,  
I shall love,  
Inshallah, I shall love.

## **Processing...**

*Haiku: how you hear  
Drifting syllables in ether,  
Now I steal away thee*

## **Dreams**

I dream of blue skies  
and emerald fields, with a bee  
who buzzes overhead

I dream of silver  
of those mercury valleys,  
polished perfection

I dream of echoing  
caves which hold a secret free  
amidst great crystal

I dream of azure  
seas, which grasp forgotten land  
long since swallowed

I dream of jungle  
vines dangling off great trees  
In a florid shade

I dream of flowers  
and clear skies, with a mouse  
who rustles underfoot

## **What is Heard**

I hear water flowing,  
cerulean, through fields of  
Amber-throated wheat

I hear fireflies churn  
the sky with milky glow, now  
Poured in dark batter

I hear birds mourn Fall,

leaves passing now in earnest  
Beneath their nests

I hear old men speak  
of times past, then drink and toast  
The oncoming specter

I hear the sun dust  
rosy trees, with its smile  
Each day it fades

I hear the rustle  
of leaves under young feet  
Playing with brown eyes

**I mourn.**

I mourn the dead but  
Not quite dying, who are lost,  
But still remain.

I mourn the kind man  
Who sat me on his lap *there*  
And smiled grandfatherly.

I mourn the smell of  
Home and innocence, now sour,  
Devil's sweet misery

I mourn the passed  
Who I will never know to grieve  
Or touch their ghost

I mourn pedantics  
Could's now should's, and would's  
Lost with tears to fate.

I mourn the mourning  
In agony and wondering  
But who still remains.

### **Ambrosia**

I taste moonlight in  
The starry air, fine perfume  
For the good night sky

I taste baby melon  
Homegrown in the shade of suns  
Concentrated divinity

I taste mountaintops  
Whose bite steals your breath,  
And climb ungodly high

I taste the laughter  
Solvent in a room of friends  
Bubbling drinks of joy

I taste still moments  
Frozen memories, ice cream fluff,  
Crystalline and eternal

I taste now fine wine  
Grown from good grapes and soil  
For Dionyses' feast

### **Home Garden**

I smell mom's cookies  
Warm and gooey chocolate  
Happily made with love.

I smell good mulch  
With fresh rain and flower buds  
Poking up under it

I smell warm thunder  
With a hint of warning rain  
In soon burning air

I smell roses on  
the Vine. White, pink flowers



In her earthly hair.

I smell far clouds  
Blowing in, wet and distant  
Like past cried tears

I smell dad's casserole  
Hot veggies bound together with  
Meat and warm hugs

yield

their fingers point at me  
a sore thumb  
amongst the crowd of those who are american  
a crowd of  
fairer skin tones than my own  
and  
the ones who Yielded

their eyes tell me to Yield  
like ones who follow the crowd  
with a skin tone that's not as fair as theirs  
Yield the odd food that we have discover  
for the grain of rice you bring repulsively smells  
Yield the language that sounds foreign  
for perhaps the words you speak insult us

to blend amongst the crowd  
to be truly american  
Yielding is the only way to survive

hide your scent of fermented spice  
speak your language when we aren't there  
but greet us with a grin and perfect English  
wear the fifty dollar shirts your family can't afford  
and don't wear the flower skirts your parents can afford

they claim  
the rolls that were gross will become slightly more ours  
by reforming them as american sushi  
the language we despised will be the ones we want to learn  
since your dramas and music became trendy

their gazes now seek me  
yet it is too late  
the act of yielding has become a habit  
For not learning my culture  
to be judged as partially American  
was the only choice I had  
i have yielded.

inheritance

here lies child  
with gleam in its eyes  
it inherited  
its mother's stubbornness  
its father's steadiness

but it also inherited the stillness of nothing  
but silent whispers  
whispers that should not be heard from its own kind  
much less its family

these are whispers  
inherited pain and brutality  
passed from one generation to the next

yet when the child asks  
its mother or father  
grandmother or grandfather  
if they can hear the pain they once spoke of  
they hear nothing

their heads turn the other way  
oh mother father  
can you not hear your own words  
your own words  
that inflicted such  
deep  
deep  
pain

their denial only sprinkles salt  
on a crimson wound  
forget the pain  
forgive them  
don't be them  
the salt says

it cuts fresh  
fresh agony  
ripe and messy  
forgiveness is not a lesson  
to heal and learn

built on no memory but my own

my own forgiveness will save me  
without their realization

so

i become the child

with a shadow

in their eyes

the inherited will be cut with me

the inheritance will be no more

here lies the child with the end of all ties to all future

isolation

the sky sees another day  
the buildings above do not

once hustled with people with the air full of warmth of sweet sugar and various people  
the concrete below remains blank  
ceased to exist are the  
waving hues of the blinking signs  
the hustle of trucks rushing to meet the demand of food  
the flickering lights of ads

instead  
lay on the streets are people  
with not much to spare  
newspapers cover the floor and their bodies  
huddled in anticipation for another cold winter

perhaps once  
their fingers were in charge of making the scents of the streets  
with food and plates between their fingers  
introducing the culture to visitors  
or  
handing food to regulars

nevertheless  
the street remains silent  
and  
the buildings sigh as the emptiness continues  
for it's only an another day of hoping  
for a day when the silence is broken

Woo In Kim

perfection

her words repeat  
except slicing more flesh than skin  
his veins bulge  
from his short temper  
one thing remains the same  
their determination  
to stay

what a perfect family

however  
their determination  
does not stop the house from rumbling  
with words  
sharper than knives  
with violence  
deeper than scars  
and  
behind the doors  
lie the children  
listening but not listening

what a perfect family

with wounds deeper than scars  
each parent explain  
others will not understand  
so  
shush shush

their explanations do not  
quell their wounds  
instead  
embraces more secrecy  
in a

perfect family

full of secrets  
costing a lifetime of  
lies built on lies

“Now”

Life is full of many things  
Memories in the past  
The future is a gaping hole  
Worrisome and vast

While most of us are dwelling there  
Wondering why and how  
The answer to these questions  
Is we can live right now

“No Title”

There is beauty in unknown  
Questions unanswered is how the world works  
But I don't understand  
If I knew the answers  
At least one or two  
Maybe the pain would go  
And I could just dance

“Selfish or Tortured”

I nearly lost my life  
On that road behind my back  
The bridge echoes my strife  
The past makes present crack

Two paths and a man with foul breath  
he asks me if i'd like to know  
Which is safety and certain death  
Unfalterd I say no

If I knew it'd be harder to choose.

“Man against the Sea”

Love and money

Gold and silver

Common sense

Held at bay

The best align with the best

Invest in the apocalypse

The shadow knows

This isn't science fiction

Portrayal of loyalty

A responsible answer

The shadow knows

All power has limits

Days of their lives

Time takes a toll

The rocket to carry human's past

Counts down to a new era

Closing in on the king

You light the fire

Ride with the sky

Unexpected beauty

Leaves behind madness

Welcome to the future

A future less frozen

Where the art of distortion

Has no business

Where the road ends

The end of the world

Rethinking heaven

The sounds of change

Man against the sea



“Growing Up”

Some say it gets easier

Some say it gets sadder

Some say it gets old

Climbing up the same ladder

But time to time you look down

And see all that you've done

That life is no test

And that you've already won

I don't know how to say this but I think that something's wrong.

I can feel it when I'm standing in the bedroom. It comes when the blinds are drawn and the lights are off, and I think that the lights are broken because they never turn on. I think the blinds are broken because they never open.

When I go to the window I can see something outside.

I can't make it out but I can see the shapes. Shapes of people, six of them standing across from each other. I think they are looking at me and I think that's wrong.

I don't know why.

This room is not what it used to be. It's dark and dust is hurting my lungs. The floorboards creak and they groan as if they're unhappy to see me. The bed looks unkempt, like you haven't been sleeping in it lately. I can still see the impressions where we would lie and stare at the ceiling and wonder where we were going.

The last thing I'd see is your chest rising and falling before I fall asleep. And then a car will pass outside, its lights snaking through the blinds and setting my eyes on fire. It passes but the pain won't go with it.

Why won't it go?

I think this house is changing. I think this house is haunted.

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I think that something's wrong.

I can feel it when I'm standing in the living room.

The ash of something is burning in the fireplace. The smell is awful and it hurts to breathe. I thought you only lit it up when I wasn't home.

I think there's something wrong with this room.

I can feel it as I stand by the coffee table, the one we picked out from so many others at the IKEA we joked that we would get lost in. I remember you swearing as you tried again and again to put it together, before you had to get your dad to come and help.

We were so proud when it was finally done.

I think there's something wrong with it.

It's piled high with dirty plates and styrofoam boxes. Crumpled up napkins and tissues scatter the carpet around it. It reminds me of the rocks that jut out of the sea that we saw at the beach.

I think there's something in this room.

It's too dark to tell for sure, but I can hear things moving around. Whispering quietly. Lurking. I don't know what they want.

Where are you?

Why aren't you here?

I think there's something by the couch. I think there's something in the hall. I think there's something next to the table.

I think this house is haunted.

I think they are saying my name. I think I see their eyes glowing like tiny stars in space, but they are not warm and they are not friendly and they are not the ones we counted while laying on the grass at the park, and they burn me.

They breathe together and every time they do this house grows colder.

It's cold. I'm cold.

They're moving together and they're looking at me, a crowd of people that shouldn't be able to fit in this room. They crash against me again and again like waves determined to obliterate the shore.

I can't do this anymore.

I think I'm changing into something else. I think this house is haunted.

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I think there's something in the kitchen.

It's sitting in your seat, slumped over and unmoving. A car passes outside, and in the brief seconds its headlights burn through the window I swear that it looks just like you.

Then it passes and I'm not sure again.

There's one way to know for sure.

I don't want to do it. But I think I have to.

I think there's something wrong. I think this house is haunted.

The tile is cold against my feet. It doesn't make a sound as I walk across it, step after step. But the house doesn't like it. I can feel it shaking, groaning and bucking and swaying with every step I take.

I think the house is breathing.

I've been walking forever but you're still so far away. The cars keep flashing past the window, faster and faster, the noise of their engines is practically non-stop now. It's like a freight train roaring right behind me.

I think there's something in the bedroom.

My breath begins to cloud in front of me, even though my body feels like it's been set on fire. My limbs start to ache and my head starts to spin, as I keep moving but only get farther and farther away.

I think there's something in the living room.

I want to call your name, but it leaves my mouth as barely a whisper. A car has parked outside, its headlights pushing straight through the window, beating against the glass until it shatters into a million pieces.

I think there's something in the kitchen.

I look up to see the headlights burning into my skin, tearing into my eyes and taking my sight. I can feel the cold wind against my skin as I try to move, to lift my arm and raise it towards the sky. My voice is gone, reduced to nothing but a wheeze and a cloud in the frigid winter air. The tile becomes asphalt and I fall onto it, as visions of bodies and forms swirl around me. Turning, I can see something at the kitchen table. But it's not you.

It's me.

I think this house is haunted I think this house is haunted I think this house is

### **Normal girl**

Having decided that I must be Normal I  
will endeavor to do the things that Normal girls must do: I will  
— wake up and  
— brush my teeth and  
— find a quiet place to scream into the palm of my hands.

I will not • cry on the steps or  
• sob in the showers or  
• print a silent cry of help, then rip it up, then  
Repeat.

I will Sleep (sometimes)  
not enough that I miss the sun, but  
close enough that if I squint sometimes I may  
have blocked out the light entirely;  
and I will Eat (sometimes)—rarer  
than sleeping, but enough to get use of my  
grocery money.

I will call my parents and grandmother  
and occasionally miss my dog,  
though not as often as I should;  
And I will quite exquisitely Slip away into  
the guise of a much older Woman, my  
soul turning gray and powdery in preparation for  
my hair catching up.

As I am Normal now I do not think of the passage  
of Time  
nor do I lament that I am young only once as I feel my youth Surpassing me and  
transferring into a body that can  
properly hold it.

I wish that I was Brave or Honest or  
Happy, perhaps,  
but as I am none of those things I must  
settle myself to be Normal and  
Calm and Cool for as  
long and as Truly  
as my mind will  
Let me be.

**dust internal**

during the Zoom years:

hand elbows ; hands  
okay?

& I can't give them context.

low tones— ohmygod — rustle rustle wind  
slips but I deserts movement, straining into

Absolutely ; reading something  
makes it real :

read to him reading (to) me

sure (it ends) I hope

/they're closer than my hands have been/

Catch only  
people wanders by

the overlap:

& I can't give them context.

**feel like a ghost**

feel like a ghost in my  
own damn bones:

crinkle of sunshine snowballs  
against a wall,  
snapdragons purring  
in windowsills,  
acid glitter  
in the water supply,

& what is left



**Babel Falls**

I re(a)d of shine and cursèd moonlight weak,  
Which glimmers on the ledge out of their reach,  
That dials kill their makers, fires squeak  
Apart until they're tamed by dregs of speech;

I watched pastoral lights be snuffed inside,  
The taker iridescent once again—  
His feet he then confuses, all tongue-tied,  
For serpents red: he stammers, cries, "Amen!"

I felt the velvet simmer all around  
(Allowed myself, a moth, unvarnished cries);  
leaned back into its hateful, magic sound  
And swum into the sunset's glassed Lethe eyes;

Consider this, my many-tonguèd friend:  
So many-verses cave when they distend.

## SHORT STORIES

falling out of love.

It was the scariest thing I had ever gone through, really. Scary, in a nonphysical sense, I mean. It wasn't scary in the 'getting on a rollercoaster' kinda way, or in the 'walking through a haunted house' kinda way, or even in the 'finding a spider in the shower' kinda way either. It was one of those moments where the future was something but a dark void.. where you knew exactly what you wanted, yet the feeling of uncertainty was starting to cloud those images, those goals that you had in mind. There are times where change can come gradually, where you can find the energy within yourself to adjust to the changes occurring. But, this was the kind of change where the singular flip of a switch had me questioning everything I had known to be true.

Falling out of love with someone you had once wanted to spend the rest of your life with is a tough pill to swallow. There's a level of maturity one has to achieve in order to go about this process without withdrawal, with lack of a better term. In a way, it is the best term to describe the unresolved feelings immediately following the sudden feeling of loss. There's no handbook that describes to a person what to do after a breakup. How does one deal with the ache of bereavement, when the person you have lost is not actually gone? They have not passed, they are not sick, none of that. They continue to walk on this earth, they are the same person that you fell in love with. They have the same smile on their face and their voice remains unchanged, they're still pursuing their same passion. They are everything you yearned for. The only difference? They are not yours anymore. You don't get to be proud for them or brag about them to your friends. You don't get to touch their face or kiss their lips, you don't get to mess up their hair or wake up to them by your side. You start to lose yourself and forget that you are also the same person. You still have the same smile on your face and your voice remains unchanged. You're still pursuing your same passion. The reason you lose track of this, is because there is a difference in you too. All those memories you had with that person don't go away, and you spend the first few months in this cycle of *withdrawal*. Symptoms of withdrawal from substances include anxiety, fatigue, sweating, vomiting, depression, among others. Stepping away from a loved one also induces these reactions. That feeling of wanting to give in, to revisit old habits that weren't good for you and stunted your growth. There's no better way to describe it than withdrawal. You're constantly shaking, you're sweating, you can't get out of bed, you feel sick to your stomach, you can't think about the future. It all feels the same. And in this sense, the physical and the emotional almost have no clear boundary to distinguish between the two.

Of course it was a difficult process for me too. I'm no exception to these feelings of uncertainty and pain. You almost start to wish that you were experiencing withdrawals from substances, rather than love. But that's how it goes right? You always want to feel the physical pain in an attempt to suppress the emotional. It was a brutal process. I, myself, was grieving not only someone I was in love with, but someone I was able to call my best friend. I remember the day we met like it was yesterday. We had mutual friends, and he had just so happened to be present at a small kickback. It was small, intimate, and there were plenty of opportunities to get to know everyone around. We had some of the same close friends. We were acquaintances at best, but on this random day four years ago, I had finally gotten to meet him. I

got to introduce myself to him and share my first conversation with him. The conversation was one of those that could be described as never-ending. There was so much to learn about each other, and dare I say, the moment felt familiar. It felt familiar in a sense that although I was speaking to a stranger, every moment I spent with him felt safe. It wasn't often that meeting people didn't cause a nervous pit in my stomach. But meeting him... It felt like home. It was a moment that I could relive over and over again. The usual anxiety in my stomach had been replaced with butterflies fluttering around gracefully. These butterflies weren't stressed, they weren't frantic. They were almost floating, knowing that they could relax, and the rest would be taken care of for them, but they were present nonetheless. Three hours of back and forth banter had passed before one of our friends had nudged us back into the group. The time didn't feel accurate at all, it felt like 20 minutes had gone by since the beginning of our conversation. It was so natural for us, words kept rolling slickly off our tongues, and the other always knew exactly what to say to keep the energy and flow going. I thought nothing of it at the time, but little did I know this moment would be my own personal experience of the butterfly effect, as I hadn't known this simple moment in time would create history for me.

The rest seemed to happen so fast. To our friends, there was no doubt we would get along. But I truly don't think any of them, nor ourselves, had anticipated just how well we would. He had gotten my phone number from one of our friends not long after that day. We started to talk all the time, and I still thought nothing of it. He was someone I felt no shame around. I could tell him about my day, about good moments and bad. He always knew what to say. Communication was never an issue with us, as it was always a learning experience with each other, and we always were open to the other's emotions and thoughts. We became an extension of each other, and it was a beautiful bond that we were able to experience and that our friends and families were able to witness.

Moving into a relationship with him was seamless. We spent so much time together, we were always smiling when we texted each other, we were comfortable with each other's families. Personally, I didn't even think we could do anything to make our bond closer. The first time we touched had ignited a spark in my body that I had never experienced prior to that moment. We were hanging out after our classes, laying in his bed together just chatting. There was a brief pause after hours of talking, and he took this moment, without any hesitation, to wrap his arm around me. We were quiet for a few seconds, it felt like someone had sucked the air out of the room. We took a moment to ourselves to process, and for myself, I was processing how a simple action could make me feel so much relief. I closed my eyes for a moment, before opening them back up and picking the conversation back up to where it was. Following this moment, our comfortability with each other had passed a barrier and we were a lot more comfortable with each other physically than we were previously. Every time he put his arm around me, held my hand, or caressed my shoulder, the same spark would ignite inside me. It was a beautiful thing, but I guess my opinion is a little biased. To touch him was an experience, the relief that took over me had made me feel like I had been deprived of touch, even though this wasn't the case. I was naturally a touchy person, my family was big on hugs and my friends and I could cuddle and it

would never be awkward. I was never deprived of touch, as I was always surrounded by an abundance of it. But touching him made every other moment of touch seem insignificant in comparison.

Our first date was no let down, either. At the time of our first date, we had already been best friends for months and were showing clear signs of interest in each other. He asked me while we were hanging out if I would go on a date with him, and of course I said yes. Since he was my best friend, he knew just the things he needed to do to make it special. He showed up to my door with a bouquet of my favorite flowers, daisies. I touched up the last bit of my makeup and made my way to him. He was the same gentleman he always was and opened every door for me as we made our way to the movie theater. He knew about a movie I was dying to see, so we didn't care to waste time on a dinner date to get to know each other, as it seemed futile. He bought the tickets, got us popcorn, drinks, and all my favorite candy, and he wouldn't let me pay once. Though he knew it bothered me to not contribute to any of the funds he spent for the date, he shut me down saying it was his duty since he asked me on the date. The movie was everything I hoped for, cuddling with him, feeding each other popcorn and candy, sharing a large Coca-Cola together. We followed up the movie by going to a viewpoint at the top of a hill, where we gazed upon the city lights. There was a beautiful mix of lights, from the stars and moon to the city that was wide awake. He brought a blanket for us to sit in the warm grass and an extra blanket to keep us warm. He held my body close to his and we talked about life as we usually did, and it felt right. There was a moment of acceptance during this moment of our first date, acceptance of the fact that there were feelings between us that we were finally beginning to act on. It was easy being with him without discussing the feelings and acting on it, as we had a mutual understanding that we weren't seeing anybody else. But now, we were accepting that we wanted to be together, though putting a label on my relationship with him was the least of my worries.

Months after our first date and after we had gone on many more, he had finally asked me to be his girlfriend. It was the easiest 'yes' I had ever spoken. Our relationship was full of firsts. He was my first *real* boyfriend. We had experienced our first kiss, our first argument, our first *i love you* as a couple, our first holidays together, our first time traveling together, our first time falling in love. He had made all of these firsts so easy. I couldn't have had a more respectful human be my first love. Fights were resolved within hours. Communication was never an issue. He respected me, supported me, showed me off, reassured me. He presented me with every love language to make sure that I felt secure in our relationship.

Our breakup seemed like a mystery. Everything seemed to be perfect, our dynamic seemed to be healthy and loving, and I couldn't agree more. Though I've never experienced what it was like to go through an ugly breakup, somehow in my heart, I knew our breakup hurt ten times more. We knew we were exiting a relationship where love still remained, where we were separating from our best friend. He had to move away, with a job opportunity which took him across the country. I was ecstatic for him. He was my best friend first and foremost, so I hadn't even thought about what it would do to our relationship. I was sad that he was going to be separated from me, but I truly hadn't expected anything to change between us.

It was after this announcement that I noticed the changes. He was starting to pull away from me. He was texting me less, wasn't as eager to see me in person, and was quieter than usual when he did. It didn't take long at all for him to do what he felt was right. Though he was moving in three months, it took him two weeks to sit me down for the hardest conversation of our relationship, as well as one of the hardest conversations of my life. He invited me over and I thought nothing of it. When I got to his home, his puppy was excited to see me, as she usually was. When I looked up at him though, the look on his face revealed to me that he was about to break some news to me. My heart sank as he asked me to sit down and talk, and I kept my gaze to the floor. I knew he didn't wanna hurt me, he kept his hand on mine the entire time, caressing the back of my hand with his thumb to comfort me. I knew this was the last thing he wanted to do, as tears rolled down his face as he spoke and his voice was shaky and hoarse the entire time. I didn't have much to say to him, so I let him go on and on. With each syllable that left his lips, his voice got shakier. In the moment, I didn't care. I wanted nothing more than to spend this day with him the same way we spent all the others. I wanted to pretend it wasn't happening and it wasn't true. But, I couldn't. I couldn't avoid the fact that he was doing this because he cared about me. We both knew long distance wasn't going to work out, but this moment is what brought me to my senses. As angry as I felt, I knew he was protecting my emotions from a worse outcome that could later arise. He would never make a selfish decision, and I knew he had good intentions, so I couldn't even be mad. I couldn't be angry, and yell and scream like I wanted to. All I could be was sad. I was in a state of shock for the whole conversation, I was quiet, I couldn't speak. I couldn't even cry. All I could do was take it in.

He explained to me that he loved me and he always would, but as long as we were thousands of miles away, we wouldn't be able to continue. There was that moment of "right person, wrong time" where he explained that maybe we will find our way back to each other in the future. But everything felt so empty as he spoke. I let myself out soon after he was done speaking, and I headed home. It was hard, we stopped texting, we returned all our stuff, and I had lost a best friend. He assured me we could always keep in touch, but that didn't feel like it was enough for me. I loved him more than life itself, so healing wasn't the easiest thing I could do.

The journey of healing from a relationship is an unconventional one, to say the least. You don't know you're healing. There's no physical wound you can take a look at and judge how fresh it is or how close it is to healing. That's the weird part though, right? You can't see this wound, but it's still there, and you can still pick at it. You can still encounter situations that make this wound burn, make it feel alive and as fresh as the day you got it. You don't realize the day you wake up and don't think about them for the first time. You go about your day and there are many hours that may pass before they cross your mind again. The moment you break the routine of thinking about them every second of every day is a huge breakthrough in the journey of falling out of love with someone, and falling back in love with yourself.

*Out of sight, out of mind*, they say. And it feels to be the furthest from the truth for a while, because while they are not physically within your line of vision, you can't seem to shake the image of them from your head. You start to imagine them in every scenario. You could be

walking through your favorite store, and all you can think about is being in that store with them. You could be doing your least favorite workout at the gym, and all you can think about is how they would encourage you and cheer you on. They don't always have to be in your sight to be on your mind. But the consistency of not seeing them all the time is definitely a factor that aids anyone in their path of finding themselves again, the path to *self discovery* if you will. When you begin to expose yourself to the things that make you happy again, it is such a rewarding moment. You start to congratulate yourself for every smile you shine and for every laugh you bellow out into the world. You start appreciating the people around you more and finding new things that make life feel worth living. You pick up new hobbies and make new friends, and before you know it, you have set new routines in your life that don't adapt to another person. You start to do things to better yourself and it is so satisfying watching you achieve your own goals without the foundation of someone else believing in you.

And of course, throughout the healing process, there's not a moment that goes by where I don't feel grateful for him. Thinking back to our relationship, there's not a moment where I can say he did the wrong thing or moved in a selfish way. He was a perfect partner and I could never regret my time with him. We catch up occasionally, and I get to see his life with his new girlfriend. He let me know when he was starting to see someone else and never executed actions without considering my feelings, though it still shattered me to see pictures of them for the first time. He was thriving with his new job, and he had recently gotten a promotion. As for me, I was not in a relationship, I was attending graduate school and working more. I hadn't really thought of dating since we had broken up, though there have been a few to show interest in me. I've been focusing on myself, as it was something I failed to do throughout the entirety of our relationship. I was getting my grades up and I was working more hours to save up money. It's been one year and three months since we separated and I was finally starting to feel happy for myself. I was happy for him, extremely happy, and I understood why he did what he did. I could never condemn him for breaking up with me, as it allowed me to branch out and do things out of my comfort zone. He never prevented me from doing any of those things, but I had no motivation to grow as a person while being in that relationship. He knew he would have been a stunt in my personal growth if I pursued a long distance relationship, and I knew he had my best interest at heart. And while I will always love him, now I understand that I am no longer *in* love with him.

The transition of falling out of love with someone is the scariest thing I have ever gone through. When I would go longer increments of time without thinking about him, I would feel like I was betraying him and our potential future together. But it took a long time for me to understand that I needed to stop dwelling and to start getting my life together, because that was the only way I was going to start seeing personal improvements. Though falling out of love with him was a scary journey, it was also one I could describe as renewing. And just because we weren't together doesn't mean our time wouldn't come later. I just couldn't sit and wait for it because nothing would come to me if I did. So that was my story of being *meant to be*, *just not meant to last*. At the end of the day, scary journeys aside, life will not throw anything at you that you can't handle, so buckle up and enjoy the ride the best you can.

It was everything to not want to bleed.

The mere feel of his blood under Xie Sili's skin intoxicated him. He had no respite from breaking rocks in the mines anymore—rest was merely an invitation to notice his heightened pulse, to feel his heart pound, to know blood's flow through his wrist, neck, head, and hair. And then the sharp edge of his pick would gleam yearningly for his flesh.

It would be so easy, the pick whispered loud and clear in the underground's cacophony. Take me in your hand, rend open your skin, and let your blood pour forth. Remember its sweet smell that takes you adrift to the stars, how it flows like a soothing shower over your tongue, how it washes away your pains and lets you forget you have been Defiled.

Oh, how he wished to listen, wished to taste again the sweetness of his blood. But he must not. His hemophilia—not the ancient affliction that merely forced the body to love to bleed, but the Fleshshapers' design that made the mind love as well—it was his curse, his burden, and if he could bear it in silence, then perhaps he would no longer be Defiled. The Evaluators would see his strength, his temperance, and grant him Ascendance. He would be Purified.

If only he could hold out another week. It had been a year since Xie had taken on the curse, for falling short of his quota of iron ore for the fourth week in a row. Four was death, and so was death inflicted upon Xie Sili. His inability to acquire iron noted, the Fleshshapers laid upon him an appropriate curse and boon. He was granted supreme sensitivity to the taste and smell of iron, a powerful boon in the dark tunnels of the iron mines—but with it a terrible desire to taste his own iron-based hemoglobin, so powerful that the slightest nick had led other men to suck themselves dry.

For all others, hemophilia had been a sentence of death, especially in the mines, where sharp edges and jagged rocks were omnipresent. But Xie had adapted. He had scavenged plastic, cloth and foil from wherever he could find them, and took with him into the mines sealing bandages to suppress bleeding from any cut he might suffer. He carved molds, melted down plastic to form noseplugs to stop him from whiffing the scent of his blood.

But none of that could stay the Fleshshapers' cruelest curse. From the very beginning, even before Xie had ever experienced the divine nectar that now flowed in his veins, he had been granted the circuitry of addiction, and cursed to experience withdrawal every moment he did not submit to his screams and chew on his own lips, suck free that pure happiness, leave this cruel, miserable world behind for the ecstasy of death.

Xie Sili stared his curse in the face every day and held firm. He did not bite into his tongue each meal, no matter how much he desired to slather his blood over his bread like a sauce. He did not cut the hair that a previous punishment had left enervated and veined, twisted them instead into a ponytail that constantly stung from the strain. He did not let himself be drawn to the death proffered by the other Defiled, no matter how much they tried to convince him that it would be a mercy.

For there would be no mercy in death. His body discarded, his soul would remain Defiled, and would be placed in another appropriately agonizing vessel in due time. So turned



the Noble Cycle of life, death, and rebirth, the divine sorting of the worthy from the unworthy. Great souls rebelled against miserable bodies; wretched souls piloted grand bodies to ruin. Everyone ended up where they deserved.

Xie Sili did not know where he deserved to be. If he proved unworthy, if he succumbed to the allure of his blood, so be it. He would be cast down again and he would deserve it. But his failure would not be for lack of trying. He would not choose to be weak.

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The Halfling foreman trudged down the row of Defiled miners, glancing at each in turn, dismissing those who had met their quotas and rewarding those that had not with a swift lash. Xie Sili had not missed a quota since he had been cursed, of course. Lashes could draw blood.

The foreman stopped when he reached Xie, and blinked at him, somehow still surprised to see him there, despite the evidence of the last twelve months. The Halfling's eyes fell to Xie's cart, filled to the brim with iron, and grunted, smoothing down the paper on his clipboard and giving it a scribble.

“Surpassing your quota again, Mr. Xie,” the Halfling said. “You continue to impress me.”

The sarcasm no longer bit at Xie. He was familiar with it. At first his resilience had invited ridicule, then it had invited wonder, for a brief time it had demanded respect, but now it enkindled resentment. If Xie succeeded, if he survived this blood curse, he would Ascend far higher than a mere Halfling, one who was freed from corruption of the body but still sullied by forced association with the Defiled. No, Xie would be Purified—his body not only given proper human form, but granted divine power, and privileged to live in proximity to the Chosen of Galaxia himself, they who could ask Him to alter reality and receive an answer in the affirmative.

Such a transition from Defiled to Purified was not unheard of by any means, but no Defiled liked a living reminder of that possibility in their midst. Xie's success threatened them, reminded them that their miserable state was their fault, reminded them that they suffered because they were not as strong as Xie. It was a miserable truth to have to experience, and so they all secretly hoped that Xie would fail, so when they finally gave up, like most Defiled did, they could do so with hearts blinded to the fact that they might have done better.

Xie gave the foreman a curt nod. Two more days. He had survived three more nicks—three times his blood had greeted the air, three times he had to exert the full force of his will. Now that the end was near, it was easier than ever before. It seemed almost foolish now to desire mere taste pleasure when salvation was so close at hand.

The Halfling foreman stared at Xie for several more moments. Then, with a sigh, he waved him away.

Xie squeezed a rock in his gloved hand to distract from his heartbeat as he stepped into the lift out of the mines. The third-last time he would take this ride from the swelteringly hot tunnels to the gloom of the slum. After that, where he would go, he knew not. But he knew wherever he went, it would be where he belonged.

It was a comfortable lie, and so he knew it.

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Xie Sili stepped gingerly through the midnight smog. His aching body yearned for his bed, rickety and thin-sheeted as it was. Sleep was the only luxury in this hell, his only escape from his neverending pulse, and he intended to indulge in it as much as possible.

But others had their own intentions. From the alleyways between the crumbling tenements, skulked the Defiled. Indistinct shapes they were in the smog, almost gliding on the cracked pavement, converging on Xie, denying him egress. He stopped, despising the pounding of his heart.

“Xie Sili,” came the ravaged voice of the stranger before him. “You seek to Ascend.”

“I seek nothing,” Xie said. “I live. I have not broken. That is all.”

“You are a fool,” the stranger said. “You really think yourself superior, don’t you?”

“I think nothing,” Xie said.

Chuckles came, despite the choking smog. “For once, you speak truth,” the stranger said. “You are not superior, Xie Sili. You believe you have defeated the blood curse, that you have escaped its embrace? That you are more than the thousands who had fallen before you?”

“Perhaps,” Xie said. “Two more days, then we’ll know, won’t we?”

“We know already,” the stranger said. “You are part of a fraud, my friend.”

Xie flushed and had to force down a wave of thirst. “My curse is no fraud. Even now, the thirst grows within me.”

“That, I do not deny,” the stranger said. “You have suffered much under the curse. That is what makes the fraud so effective, you see. The best lies are told by those who believe them to be true.”

“What are you getting at?” Xie said. He despised the way the stranger’s words made his head pulse. Two more days... his bed. If only this man would leave him alone.

“Your arms,” the stranger said. “They bear bandages, do they not? Scavenged and sewed by naught but your sweat, I understand. And in your pocket—nose plugs, I believe. Melted down and cast, most ingeniously. They are why you still live. They are why you have not succumbed.”

“Yes,” Xie said. “I adapted. I overcame.”

“Do you think the others did not adapt? You think the others did not try to overcome? Why did you succeed where they failed? Think, Xie. What is so special about you?”

“I have no idea,” Xie said. “I leave such questions to the Revelators. I just live my life.”

“Yes. That is what makes you their pawn,” the stranger said. “You live to show us all that we should accept our lives. You live so we may know that we can ascend, if only we can bear our curses without complaint. You live, with a mild curse, to trick those with terrible curses into believing themselves weak.”

Xie stared, utterly still. He did not hear his pulse now. “My curse—mild? Hemophilia is—”

“I know what hemophilia is, child,” the stranger spat. “I watched it take half my family. It is not a curse that can be managed with some crude bandages and two lumps of plastic. Once blood is spilled, nothing but the timely intervention of others could stop them from destroying themselves. It is not a question of will, or strength. The desire supersedes all rationality, all emotion. It cannot be resisted.”

“I have,” Xie said. “I know I have. You are wrong.”

The stranger shook his head. “Your curse can be resisted, because they meant for it to be resisted. They chose you to succeed, Xie. They found you, a barren man, without friends or family, gave you a curse, designed most cleverly, so that you would always be just able to resist it. They will let you ascend, proclaim to all your truth, your proof that individual strength can triumph over any adversity. And they convince us Defiled to keep our heads down and bear our individual agonies, so that one day we can ascend just like you did, so that one day we can finally love ourselves, think ourselves worthy of happiness because we finally proved how well we can feel pain.”

The stranger spat on the ground. “Drivel. All drivel. We’ve seen it a thousand times.” He stepped forward. “And we will not let it happen again.”

“I don’t understand anything you’re saying,” Xie said, trembling.

“Do you know who we are, Xie Sili?” the stranger spoke. “We are those they call heretics, the deniers of the Noble Truth, the indolent, the lazy, the weak, the cowardly. They are wrong, and quite intentionally so. You see, it is they who are lazy, they who are weak, they who lack the imagination to make of the universe anything but the miserable state it started from. They say the natural is noble, knowing that their thrall over nature is anything but. They say that pain is necessary, that struggle is truth, when they live without either. At best they think their past suffering demands others suffer as they do. At worst they are the cowards they claim us to be. They say that because beasts tear each other to pieces, men should too, but when the beasts come to them, they deny them and fill them with lead. They know the universe can be more. They know they could stop the suffering at any time. But they do not.”

The stranger extended a hand. “You don’t have to be their pawn, Xie. Don’t abandon your brethren for their hollow ascension. Join us. Tear down the system that makes us suffer and calls it noble. Expose the lie for which they made you suffer. Avenge your meaningless pain.”

“Meaningless... my pain was meaningless?”

“Yes, my friend. But it doesn’t have to be any longer. Join us and--

“No.” Xie clenched his fist and stepped forward, his body suddenly blazing hot. “No! My pain wasn’t meaningless. My pain was noble! My pain was strength! You will not call it meaningless. You will not deny my suffering. You will not have my pain!”

The stranger stared, then sighed. “Shame. You are irretrievably poisoned.” He stepped forward again, hand falling to his side. “If you will not join us... then you must die.”

Xie stepped back, and his heart leapt into his throat as arms wrapped around him from behind. “What are you doing?” he cried. “What are you—” A hand clasped over his mouth.

“Goodbye, Xie Sili. I apologize that we must act like them to defeat them. It is their greatest outrage, to teach that violence is wicked when theirs is a monopoly on violence. But even so, it is regrettable. If nothing else, your curse will grant you a pleasant death.”

The stranger removed a crude knife from his pocket, brought it to Xie’s neck. Xie’s blood pulsed in his neck. Two days. Xie closed his eyes. Two more days...

The stranger screamed.

Xie opened his eyes to see him alight in golden flame. Hands released him, shouts of fear filled the smog, feet pounded pavement. It was all in naught. They all burned.

And descending from the heavens, parting the smog by her very presence, an Ascendant of Galaxia, beautiful beyond compare. In her presence, colors burst forth with greater radiance, stoked to greater beauty by her proximity. Her robes were brilliant white, almost blinding before the tenements’ gloom. In her hands she held curved swords, and from her back sprouted wings of light. Xie Sili fell to his knees as the Ascendant landed, gentle as a leaf come to rest.

“Peace, child,” she spoke, her very voice filling Xie with warmth. “You have no more to fear from those murderers. Galaxia has judged them for their crimes.”

Xie nodded numbly.

“You will not be safe here,” she said. “Come. Your year of penance is over. You will now ascend, Xie Sili.”

“I... I will ascend?” Xie said. His pulse was silent.

“You will,” the Ascendant said. “Although, I warn you. The transition will be painful.”

Xie Sili smiled.

“As it should be.”

## **“Being a Prince for Former Frogs: A Guide”**

**by Chris Honoré**

Becoming a prince when you were once a frog is no simple matter. It is a complicated process, one that is wrought with difficulty and seems never-ending.

One must first come to realize that they are not, in fact, a frog. When you have slimy skin, a diet of flies, and the constant urge to *ribbit*, it is easy to assume you are a frog. It is also all anybody else will ever see you as. Yet while other frogs seem to be content in their froggishness, being a frog has always felt wrong on you. Other frogs may try to reassure you that it is perfectly fine to be a frog; and it is! The other frogs are wonderful! But they are not you, and you do not feel like a frog. You must be a pretty bad frog to not even feel like one. But you act just like the other frogs! So what could the problem be?

The next step is the realization that being not-a-frog is, in fact, possible. In fact, you hear whispers of other not-frogs who are kissed by kind princesses and become princes. A prince! That sounds wonderful! No slime! But are you *sure* a prince is right? Maybe you're still just a bad frog, after all. But after looking at your reflection in the pond water and calling yourself “Your Highness” many, many times, you find you like the feeling you get upon hearing it. Yes! You are a prince! But what now?

Now, you find people who can help you. A most perilous task indeed, because many frogs do not like the idea of you becoming a prince. “You’re not a prince,” they may say. “It’s not possible for a frog to be a prince!”

“You just need to love yourself! There’s nothing wrong with being a frog!” But you *do* love yourself, and there is nothing wrong with frogs! You are just not a frog!

The other frogs blame the princes and princesses, saying you must’ve been tricked into thinking you were a prince. Yet you knew you weren’t a frog long before you even knew not-frogs could be princes! So that can’t be correct.

Past the anger, and the hate, and the fear, you will find those who know how to help. Other not-frogs, perhaps, or friendly frogs. One may even tell you where to find a nice princess! And when you find the princess, and she agrees to give you a kiss, you may feel your journey has come to a close. Finally, the perfect prince you were meant to be!

Things are hardly ever so simple for princes, however.

Your froggy legs are replaced with long prince legs, but they still make you want to leap. Your green skin is replaced with smooth prince skin, but it sometimes feels slimy. Your croaky froggy voice now has the deep timbre of a prince, but there is the occasional ribbit. You look to the other princes around you; they do not have these frog-like traits, and they do not do frog-like things. Some princes may look at you oddly; what a strange prince, that acts so much like a frog! How embarrassing it must be.

How agonizing it must be, as well, to finally be a prince and still feel like a frog. How horrible, indeed, to continue to be mistaken for a frog. A frog-like prince? A princely frog? Even some of the other not-frogs look more prince-like than you. Are you somehow different than them? Less of a prince? But no! You’ve already accepted that you are a prince! You’re just different from the other princes. Many of the princes don’t like different. Perhaps you are a bad prince? But a prince nonetheless. These thoughts can be quite bothersome. If only there were someone who could understand what you feel.

Perhaps, one day as these troublesome frog-thoughts torment you, you find yourself wandering across kingdoms. Perhaps, as you do so, you run into someone. This person is small

and green, round and slimy, and wears a golden crown atop their head. They are perhaps the most frog-like individual you have ever seen!

“Hello,” this stranger may greet you. “Welcome to my kingdom!”

“Your kingdom?” you ask. “But you are—“

“A prince!” the small, green prince interrupts. “I am the prince of this kingdom!”

You are utterly confused. This prince doesn’t appear to have gotten a princess’s kiss at all! He still looks exactly like a frog. But the crown on his head and the kingdom around you clearly show that he is, in fact, a prince.

“You don’t look like the other princes,” you may tell the tiny prince.

“Well,” starts the other prince, “I look like me, and I am a prince. Therefore, I look like a prince!”

If you happen to meet a prince like this one, you will learn one of the most valuable lessons for a not-frog who wants to be a prince. Princes, as it turns out, are all quite different from each other. Even princes that are a bit more frog-like than others are just as real of a prince!

The beautiful thing about becoming a prince when you were once a frog is that it is quite a simple matter. As soon as you realize you are a prince, and that you always have been a prince, the process is over. Whatever comes next, whether it is a kiss from a princess or hopping straight onto the throne, is up to you.

A Girl Called Wonder  
By Tucker Park

I should have known from a young age that I could never hold her. Should have known, from the very start, that she was never mine to keep.

She always wanted more, more, more, and it was obvious from the very beginning that nothing this world could give her would ever be enough. She asked for new books, new clothes, and I ran myself dry for them. She asked for new friends, and of course I complied. And when she wanted the universe, I put myself to work, I learned the planets and the constellations just to please her. But it was never enough; she wanted to climb the stars like ladder rungs, to live in a land of her own creation. When they told her it was impossible, their words tumbled off her like water droplets off the feathers of a bird, graceful and glistening as she left them all behind.

From the very beginning, she was brighter than anyone else, moonlight blossoming everywhere she stepped. She melted across my tongue like sour candy, painted the world in colors so sharp they took my breath away. By the time she disappeared, she was blinding, so brilliant she hurt to look at, tears springing to my eyes when she neared.

She guided my hand and everything I did. I ignored calls and skipped classes, spent every day hard at work creating one frivolity after another, just to please her. Sometimes, I think that's all she was: *creation*, pure and simple. She lived in my head and in my hurried scrawl across the page, her presence was as pure energy, high-strung and electric, wound so tight you barely dared to breathe.

*Why me?* I always asked. *Why did you choose me*, but she'd only laugh, that bubbling sound spilling out from between her lips like a river. I still don't know the answer, and sometimes I fear I never will. But in the end, I think it must be this: because I saw her. Because I loved her enough to draw her close but respected her enough to know that we would never be equal. I think she liked the fact that she was more than me, that she was the sky and all its planets and I could only ever be human; I could never surpass her.

She was fleeting and ephemeral, and I should have known from the very beginning that she was not destined for this world, that one day she would fade and I would be all that was left. Should have known that one day she would be gone, off to better adventures and bigger worlds, because I was right all along: I would never be enough for her.

The day she disappeared uprooted my entire reality. At first I could scarce believe it, because I could still see her everywhere: the toss of her hair in a crowd, a glimpse of her reflection in a window, the sky crackling with energy where she had once been. At night, I would lie on my back and listen to her song drift through the open window, picking pieces of her whirlwind out of my skin and watching them bleed. Although it hurt, I traced my fingers over the raw divots to remind me of where she once was, and lamented the day that those scars would fade, because that would mean that she was truly gone.

And I know I should let her go, but I'm writing this story for her, as if maybe if I finally answer that question – *why me* – she'll come back. If I can prove to her that I'm enough, maybe she'd float back into my head and fly back into my arms, and we'd embrace like lovers and stay intertwined forever: her, the sun, and me, caught in her infinite orbit.

So I give her a home. I give her a face, and although she never wanted one, I give her a name. Despite her absence, I write. I imagine her here with me. She is my curse, my salvation, and I know with the same faith I have in gravity, in the timely rise and fall of the sun, that she will be back.



## Driving Claire Renoe

“Do you smell something?”

One hand on the dashboard and the other on the steering wheel, Veronica worriedly examines the thermometer gauge. Not knowing much about cars, I respond, “Like what?”

“Like a burning rubber smell. Is it our car or someone else’s?” she says.

“I don’t smell anything... oh wait, I think I do. What is that?”

“Dunno,” she replies, “but I’m really not trying to have us break down on the Grapevine.”

Bad smells usually aren’t good for cars-- that much even I know. Veronica knows more than me, but this car is her first project, her ‘baby’ (which is funny because of her deep abhorrence for children). Could her worries be irrational, car-girl paranoia? Maybe. But we’re ten minutes out from the Grapevine, the longest stretch in our drive without any stops for gas. It’s the last forty miles of desolation in the mountains before L.A. where if you break down... man, you’re in for a long day. Who knows how long we’d be waiting for a tow to rescue us from the blazing sun and 95° heat on the side of Interstate 5.

Veronica’s 1999 BMW E36 is beautiful, and it has made it from San Francisco to Los Angeles and back a couple times before. We miss our friend Isabel, the third leg of our trio, so much that we visit her at her college apartment in SoCal as much as we possibly can. Maybe this would be the trip where her car finally broke down.

I lean against the window, pressing my cheek into the hot glass and focusing on every building and sign as it whizzes by. Petro Diner, surrounded by trucks parked in rows. I imagine the drivers sleeping in the capsules above the tiny space where they spend almost every hour of their day. I wonder what it would be like to travel so far but to only see highways. Do they learn to appreciate the beauty that I catch glimpses of traveling for miles down this stretch of concrete, or simply cease to experience it?

Gas station, Motel 6, fruit vendor, another gas station, neatly leading the way to the mountains growing in the distance. A moment ago they looked like model mountains-- the ones from my sixth grade science project about earthquakes. Now they loom, dry and foreboding above us, miniature cars ascending and being swallowed by two punishing peaks.

I look over at Veronica. Her shaggy, wild hair blows in the wind from the slightly open window, the sleeves of her Juicy Couture tracksuit rolled up at the elbows in the dry heat-- there’s no AC in this car. She squints unwaveringly ahead, foot pushing the gas until the speedometer reads 85. The sun reflects bright and blinding off of her chunky black sunglasses, and she looks beautiful. Anticipating, we cruise.

The weird smell persists. It doesn’t get any stronger, but it doesn’t go away either. *It smells like gas*, I think to myself. *Like a hot gassy kind of smell, colliding with the wind and the parched air*. I wonder if that means the car will explode, that we will burn out epically in a flash of fire and flying metal, screeching to a halt on this well-traveled pavement like you’d see in a Mission Impossible movie. Isabel would be waiting for us, air-mattress inflated in the living room of her tiny apartment, until she read the headline: ACCIDENT KILLS TWO YOUNG WOMEN, CAUSES MULTI-CAR PILEUP ON I-5.

I shake my head, to dismiss this gruesome image I have conjured and focus my attention once more out the window.

“You know, maybe we should pull into the next gas station and pop the hood just to see if anything’s up,” Veronica thinks aloud, finally breaking me from my trance.

“Mhmm,” I respond. “Good idea.”

Just as the words escape my lips, a sign flashes by my window.

<p>Grapevine Last fuel for 38 miles</p>
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“Veronica! Right there!” I point. “The exit’s in half a mile!”

She sees it now too. Gripping the wheel and switching on the turn signal, she glances over her shoulder into the right lane and steps hard on the gas.

I gasp- “Woah woah woah! Truck!”

A massive semi-truck appears out of nowhere, directly in our path. Veronica swerves back into the left lane and to safety not a moment too soon. It’s one of the ones that look like two trucks strapped together, like a freight train of a truck, and our exit is gone.

The road begins to slope upward. Behind us, straight and steady, it seems to go on forever, like an arrow pointing home. Ahead, the road winds and all is swallowed by mountains. As the two peaks approach, we become a miniature car and the model mountains turn very real.

The mountain continues to rise, tricking us into thinking we have reached the peak... only to break the illusion with more highway leading into the sky. The car groans, as if the ascension might just be too much for its old engine to take, and the smell persists. We sit in silence, moving but stuck in space and time for a little while before I decide to turn on the radio. Veronica always sets it to the throwback channel, though there aren’t many choices on this stretch of the highway. Snoop Dogg’s voice escapes from the speaker and blows through the open windows as we speed forward-- higher and higher. Veronica sings along; she seems to know every word of every song on this station. I wonder if she’s as concerned as I am about the subtle smell that seems to linger in a cloud around us.

Finally, we’ve reached the highest point between the two peaks and I almost hear the car give a sigh of relief in unison with our own as we begin to descend. The flat world of gas stations and motels is gone now, and we are completely surrounded by golden, windswept mountains. This is the final point of transition before we descend the final mountain into the sprawling metropolis of Los Angeles. It strikes me how dry it is here. I wonder if it’s always been this way, or if LA sucked up all the water from the surrounding nature and left it a barren wasteland. It dawns on me that we are contributing to this, thoughtlessly using the highway built through this once beautiful ecosystem to reach our destination, the city that enabled such destruction. It’s a troubling thought, but maybe another made-up scenario existing only within the confines of my mind. Maybe there’s always been a desert here.

I realize we’ve been sitting in silence except for the radio for almost twenty minutes. “Are you tired? Sorry I didn’t offer to take over driving,” I say.

“Oh no, I’m good.” Veronica replies, though I see her eyebrows furrow under her sunglasses. “Just still a little worried but I feel like if nothing bad’s happened yet the odds are it won’t, right?”

“Totally.” I reassure her, trying to convince myself at the same time.

The road has momentarily flattened out, and we are surrounded by a ring of mountains. We drive along in a crowd, but there are no people to be seen-- only cars and trucks moving mechanically onwards.

I turn around in my seat to gaze out the back window at the retreating mountain, hoping to see how far we've come without mishap. We're probably almost a quarter of the way through the grapevine already!

What I see instead shocks me. Small puddles of shiny liquid trail behind us as we drive. Stunned, my mind races. I reorient myself to check if the liquid is coming from a car ahead of us, but to my dismay the road ahead is clean. We're leaking gas.

My heart pauses mid-palpitation. I glance at the gas gauge. We're almost empty. How could we be this stupid?! If I know anything about cars, it's that we're a ticking time bomb. Losing gas at this rate, we'll be stranded with an empty tank in a few minutes if we don't spontaneously combust first. If these are our last couple minutes to live, I don't want them to be in a panic... but maybe I'm overreacting again. I reach over to turn off the radio, and the comforting timbre of Amy Winehouse's voice is replaced by silent reality.

"Veronica? I think we might want to pull over." If possible, our little capsule seems to become even quieter.

"Huh? Why?" She grips the wheel, long acrylic nails pressing into the black leather.

"We're leaking gas."

"You're kidding me." She knows I'm not kidding. Clearly she does, as she quickly merges into the right lane and scans the horizon for a pullout. The next one we see, she pulls over and turns off the ignition. We sit there for a moment, breathing.

After recuperating, sitting silent in the car and almost feeling the gasoline slowly draining from below us, I suggest that maybe we should call AAA. I thank my good luck that my AAA card is in my wallet and that I have one free tow left for this year. When I take out my phone to dial, however, no bars pop up on the top right corner of the screen. No service. Damn.

"Could you try calling them? I have no bars up here," I ask Veronica.

She unzips her miniature leather handbag and removes her phone before replying, "I have one bar... that should be enough to make a call. What's the number?"

I recite the eleven digits to her and she dials them in, before placing the phone to her ear and tapping her nails on the dashboard, waiting. I hear a faint ringing, and then someone picks up.

"Hi," Veronica addresses the voice on the other end of the line. "We're broken down on Highway 5 by the Lake of the Woods regional park, and I think my friend has a free tow we'd like to cash in on?" Silence, and then to me, "What's the number on your card?"

I read it off one digit at the time, and Veronica recites it into the phone. After she does, she listens for a long time, only interjecting with information about our location, her car, and our destination. The longer I stare out the window and listen, the more I can feel the In-N-Out Burger Animal Fries from earlier that day churn in my stomach. *I hope we can get a tow soon.* The mountains look dry and dead, and are making me thirsty.

Finally, I hear Veronica sigh and say, "Okay, I'll call back in the morning then. Thanks so much for your help." She hangs up with a beep.

"The morning?" I choke, hoping she doesn't notice somehow that my heart has plummeted into my stomach.

"Apparently the winds are so bad this time of day in October that they're worried about sending a tow truck out... they said it would be safer if we could wait so I agreed."

"Okay, that's probably a good idea," I reply.

"They said that this is the worst possible place to break down. Pretty messed up, huh?"

I manage to force a chuckle before saying, "I guess we'll sleep in the car then, right? We'll be okay."

"Yeah, we'll be okay."

Now the sun is setting over the mountains to our right, and the growing darkness is pierced only by the headlights speeding by. The sky is red and orange, swirled like an ice cream cone. The evening stretches long and empty before us, so Veronica suggests we take a walk up the grassy hill to our right. *Leaving the car on the side of the highway probably isn't a great idea*, I think, but we've taken so many risks today that one more seems insignificant. Besides, we can lock the car and keep an eye on it from above.

Decision made, we turn our backs to I-5 and begin trudging up the grassy slope. It's windier than I expected, and the sweat from the sweltering drive quickly turns cold on my bare arms. Veronica's hair is blowing in the wind again. She looks like a rockstar-- like this is her album cover. As we climb, the top of the hill seems to recede farther into the distance. We're stuck in space and time for a little while, breathing heavily. Eventually, I look over my shoulder and see below us the trail of cars, or what I know are cars but are really only red and white lights in two lines snaking through the valley. I stare for a moment, tracing the snake with my eyes. Veronica stops and looks as well.

"Those cars look tiny, huh?" She breathes.

"Yeah. There are so many of them down there. Isn't it weird how we're actually the tiny ones?"

"I know."

We stand there, breathing the dry evening air into our lungs and thinking.

"It's kind of scary," I say. "How we can't really control anything. How we just go around in our own little worlds and none of the people down there even know we exist, they wouldn't even know if we..."

"Do you ever think about death?" Veronica sharply cuts me off. She keeps staring down at the tiny cars below us.

After a moment, I respond "Of course I do. I think it's normal to. It's terrifying..." I take a breath into my suddenly fragile-feeling lungs and exhale. "But if you think about it, it's happened to everyone who's ever lived. Or will happen. It doesn't make it any better but it's true."

"That's the thing that's weird about it. After that, nothing matters anymore."

"That's why we have to do things like this, things that make us feel and think and experience the world. And that's why we have to love our life as much as we can."

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

"I know," Veronica replies, and I truly believe she does. She looks at me, gray eyes wide and wild. She grabs my hand and squeezes it hard... with fear or anticipation, I wonder. We start to make our way back down the mountain.

Dream  
By Alex Shih

Jason awoke to an electric shock on his side. It was morning. Time to get ready for work. He pushed aside the electric wire he was using as an alarm and got up from the cold wooden floor. As soon as Jason sat upright, he felt a dull pain through his entire back. He really needed to get a bed soon.

Jason glanced at the savings he had placed on the floor next to him for good luck. Three dollars. Maybe he could finally buy an alarm clock soon. Then he wouldn't have to rely on those damn generators starting up in the morning. Or maybe he would buy a bed.

Jason's studio apartment was clean but almost completely unadorned, with no furniture except a single wooden chair. The only decorations were pictures of him and his mother hastily taped to the beige walls. As Jason glanced at them, he briefly reminisced on what things were like back then. Mom was still around, he didn't have to worry about making money, and his future was still full of promise. Thankfully his mother wouldn't have to witness his pathetic current situation. And his father... his father had much to answer for, whoever he was.

Once Jason had gotten dressed, he glanced at the clock. Thirty minutes before the beginning of his shift. He sighed and took his usual train to work.

Twelve hours later, Jason finished work. Sleep pulled at his eyes as he rode the train home, but he managed to stay awake by repeatedly pinching himself in the arm. By the time Jason got home he was much less sleepy, but his arm was beet red. Jason microwaved some leftovers, sat down in his only chair, and ate. The plate was hot and the food cold, but it did the job.

Jason then turned to the only source of joy in his life: writing. The commission deadline for his latest story was fast approaching, but due to sheer exhaustion Jason had not written a single word. He put some old yellow paper onto his kitchen countertop and was just about to begin when a thought occurred to him: if he couldn't finish this story, he wouldn't be able to make next month's rent. Either that or he would have to start skipping meals. Again. Jason's stomach growled as if in protest.

*Forget about that for now*, he told himself. *Just focus on the task at hand, and you can worry about that later.* But no word or sentence he could come up with was any good. The same thoughts kept on intruding:

*This has already been written before, Jason.*

*You're a fraud.*

*This isn't good enough for publication.*

*Really? They're giving you fifty dollars for this garbage?*

Jason tried and tried, but an hour later he was still stuck. *How am I going to become a great writer now?* he thought. *I can't produce any story worth a damn.* Physically and emotionally exhausted, Jason gave up. He put away his paper and pencils, turned off the lights, placed the electric wire on his side, and lay down on the floor as he closed his eyes.

Jason awoke in a place he had never seen before. He seemed to be in a palace of some kind, made of polished, pearly white stone that gleamed with light. The ceiling was like that of the Sistine Chapel, composed of ornate classical paintings that seemed to pop out of the stone they were painted on. Through the windows he could see a vast mist that seemed to take solid form in the corner of his eye but turned back into mist when he looked directly at it. As he took

in his surroundings, Jason saw something that made him jump. Someone was standing in front of him: a pale, rake-thin man with dark, spiky hair and eyes that shone like distant stars.

“Who are you?” the man asked. For such a thin man, his voice was surprisingly deep. “It is rare for mortals to reach the heart of the Dreaming.”

“I’m Jason.” Jason replied, his voice quivering a little. “I’m a writer. Who are *you*? What is this place? How did I get here?”

The man’s eyes shone a little brighter. “I am Dream.” he replied. “This is the Dreaming. I am the master of this place, and it responds to my will. Writers, artists, and other dreamers are among my favorite mortals. The Dreaming must have sensed your distress and brought you here.”

“I’m not distressed.”

Dream crossed his arms. “Even for a mortal, you are a bad liar.”

He waved his hand, and two comfortable-looking leather armchairs appeared, facing each other. Dream sat in one of the chairs and gestured for Jason to join him. “What is on your mind?” he asked. Though Dream’s expression was neutral, his tone was kind and gentle.

Jason sat down and sighed. “The story I’m working on is going nowhere. I can’t get any of it to work. The plot, characters, themes,... nothing I come up with is any good.”

Dream studied Jason’s expression. “And why must it be good at this time? Your ideas have not come of age. You have not even given them a chance to fulfill their potential.”

“I understand that. But this next story needs to be excellent. I can’t afford to write something mediocre, or I’ll be living off the streets.” Jason’s lips started to quiver. “Without my writing, I don’t have anything.” His voice broke as he buried his face in his hands and began to cry.

Dream seemed deep in thought. “Hmm. It pains me to see a writer in such distress. Your kind has done me a great service.” he said. There were a few minutes of uncomfortable silence as Jason continued to cry.

Suddenly Dream stood up, his expression unreadable. His face streaked with tears, Jason looked up into Dream’s shimmering eyes.

“I sense much inhibition in you, Jason. Much fear.” Dream said. “So I will give you a dream. Consider it repayment for your service.” He waved his hand, and everything went black.

Jason awoke to another electric shock on his side. *That was one weird dream*, he thought as he got up and began changing into different clothes. *Maybe it’ll give me some ideas for my story*. But by the time he finished changing, he had already forgotten it.

Jason was just about to leave when he remembered that he had to tell his mother he was leaving. Mom always got angry when he left unannounced.

“Mom, I’m leaving now! Bye!” Jason yelled as he left his apartment. There was no answer. Jason walked in a straight line away from his apartment until he reached the nearby elementary school. From the nearest intersection he could see a playground, soccer fields, and eucalyptus trees that he recognized. When he arrived at the school, a short, bearded man in uniform was standing in the middle of the playground. As Jason approached, the man eyed him warily.

“Does your kid go here?” the man asked.

“What?” Jason replied.

“Does your kid go here?” the man repeated.

“I’m not a parent. I’m a student here. You know me.” The bearded man raised an eyebrow quizzically and pulled out a two-way radio.

“Suspicious person. Probably homeless, but he doesn’t look like it.” he blurted into it. “I’ll search him and make sure he doesn’t have any weapons or explosives.” The security guard put away his radio and turned to Jason. “Put your arms above your head.” he commanded. Jason did as he was told. *This is weird*, he thought as the man gave him a firm pat down. *I’ve never had to do this before going to class. Something is not right.*

“You can put your hands down. What’s your name?” the man asked.

“Jason.”

“Jason, I’m gonna need you to leave.”

“What?! Why?”

“You’re not a student here.”

“Yes, I am. Just yesterday I came here for school and everything was fine. I don’t know what’s going on, but if you don’t let me go to class I’m gonna call my mom.”

The security guard burst into laughter. “What are you, seven? What’s your mom gonna do?”

“Fine, I’ll just call her now. You’re in big trouble.” Jason snapped. He took out his cell phone from his pocket and dialed his mother’s number. One tone rang. A second tone. A third tone. Eventually, Jason reached the answering machine beep. “Mom, are you there? Mom?” There was no answer from the other end. By this point the security guard was laughing so hard that he was gasping for breath. As his laughter echoed through the area, people nearby began to look in their direction, watching the strange man calling for a mother who would never answer. As they realized what was happening, the bystanders also began to laugh uncontrollably. It was the strangest thing Jason had ever seen. *These people are crazy*, Jason thought as he hung up. *What’s happened to my school? Am I still dreaming?*

As Jason walked to his classroom, the laughter grew fainter and fainter. Possibly from sheer amusement, the security guard did not try to stop him. Eventually, Jason arrived in front of a short beige building and opened the door.

Immediately, thirty pairs of eyes turned to look at him. The classroom was neat and spacious, with multiple blackboards, whiteboards, and bookshelves short enough for elementary school students to reach. The desks were arranged in orderly rows, with students occupying almost every open seat. As Jason walked in, he could feel the eyes of both the teacher and her students looking at him in shock. He sat down in the nearest available seat and tried to scoot in, but his legs kept hitting the top of the short desk.

“Sorry I’m late, Mrs. Maudie. Some weird stuff happened.” Jason mumbled.

The classroom was dead silent.

“Who are you? Why are you here?” the teacher asked.

“I’m one of your students. Don’t you remember me?”

“You’re not one of my students. I think someone forgot to put you on the class roster. Why don’t you give me a few minutes to sort this out?”

“OK.”

Mrs. Maudie frantically ran to the nearest restroom in the building. Once inside, she took out her phone and began a call.

“Hector, there’s a homeless man in my classroom who thinks he’s one of my students. He must’ve somehow snuck past you. You need to come immediately to escort him out.”

“Aw, that guy? He didn’t sneak past me. I let him go.”

“You *what?*”

“I did a full search. He doesn’t have any weapons and doesn’t seem dangerous. I can’t think of any situation where he would be able to hurt the kids. But keep an eye on him at all times. I’ll come over and watch just in case.”

“Hector, you’re crazy. If he does anything bad, we’re going to be sued. You know that?”

A few minutes later, Mrs. Maudie returned to her classroom with the bearded man in tow.

“Alright class, today we’re going to focus on writing stories. Open house is coming up. Make sure to show off your best stories to your parents!” she said. *What happened this morning was pretty weird*, Jason thought. *Hmm. Maybe I can write about that.*

Within an hour, he had finished a story inspired by the events of the past morning. *The people acted strangely because they were imposters*, his story had said. *They were actually an alien race slated to take over the world by blocking out the sun, thereby destroying every food chain on the planet.* Mrs. Maudie came up to Jason’s desk and examined his story.

“Hmm. Very creative.” she said as her eyes moved across the page. “Now you just need to write another one, and you’ll be done!” she said. Jason thought for a moment.

“I’m writing about playing basketball with my friends.” a boy next to him said. “They always beat me, but in this story I beat *them!*” The boy grinned at Jason. “You should make your second story about basketball!”

A girl next to him started giggling. “Make it about a talking basketball!” she said. *Hmm.* Jason thought. *Why not?*

By the end of the day, he had penned a comedic story about a talking basketball that travels to North Korea to smack Kim Jong-Un in the face. The boy and girl that gave him the idea were giggling non-stop after reading it.

Jason spent the rest of the school day collaborating with the students on another story. Each person wrote down a sentence, passed the paper to the next person who would write another sentence, and so on. Though a few of the kids exchanged strange looks after glancing at Jason, none of them said anything about him.

Jason continued the story by himself as parents began to pick up their kids. There were cries of “who’s *that?*” and “behave your age, dude!” and “stay away from that man, sweetie! You don’t know where he’s been!”

But Jason didn’t care. That night, as he sat down on his only chair, he entered that unique state of creative bliss, his mind whisked beyond the earthly plane, his senses attuned to the Dreaming. Jason began to write.