



REBIRTH

The Writer's Den  
Spring 2024 Publication



***Editor's Note:***

*Rebirth* is the seventh Writer's Den publication I have had the honor of compiling, and the final publication of my college career. This quarter's theme is an ode to the dedication of our incredible writers, who have poured love and passion into every prompt, theme, and submission. It is a spin on the theme of our first publication, *Transition*, that looks forward towards growth, new life, **and endings that beget new beginnings.**

Thank you for four years of love, and for the space to be reborn.

–Mackenzie Van Valkenburgh

## Short Stories

through another's eyes

The anxiety fills my body as I fill my backpack for all the first day of school essentials. As I used my favorite red pen to place a checkmark next to each item on the school supply list, I excitedly and nervously filled my bag with the items. Notebooks, binder, pencil pouch... everything I need in order to succeed this school year, or at least that's what the list implies.

The beginning of 6th grade, I should be so excited. But, with all the craziness going on with my family, I had to change schools this year. We moved an hour and a half away from everything I knew: all my friends, all my teachers, and the school I had been attending my whole life. Now, I am expected to adapt at this school, where all the students have been classmates for years. I'm afraid that I won't fit in, and that everyone will already have their established group of friends, yet I know I have no choice but to give it a chance.

I place the final items in my backpack and set it on my desk to grab in the morning. I rub my eyes and look at the clock, 12:47 AM. I have been up far too long. I look at myself in the mirror, taking a deep breath as I process this new beginning. It has felt particularly difficult to process things in my lifetime, as I just always felt out of place. I haven't been able to accurately describe the feeling, and even my closest friends would try to understand but I know they don't fully understand. It's almost like I have spent this life, albeit short life, with a void in which I haven't been able to fill. I feel like I have always felt out of place with the people in my life in particular, unable to understand why I never felt a connection with everyone I met. No matter how close I was to my friends, and even my parents, I felt that there was something missing, that I didn't have the same connection with them that other people had. My friends always had closer friends and it seemed my parents were also closer to my siblings than they were with me. Hell, I didn't even have the same relationship with my siblings that they have with each other. While I have tried my best to justify it in the fact that I have yet to experience so much, I knew that wasn't particularly what I was looking for. I have been trying to be patient, but it has been much harder lately. I have always felt that I needed something, but *I didn't know what it was yet.*

– Morning –

I woke up to the blaring sound of my alarm. I turned it off disgruntled, as I had little sleep last night. All the first day of school jitters had me tossing and turning all night, and I felt a lot of uncertainty. I jump out of bed and meet my parents downstairs for breakfast. I ate up my breakfast and then went away to shower and get ready for school. I got ready quicker than I usually did, due to the adrenaline running through my bones. My parents got me to school early so I could acclimate.

I spent most of the morning finding my classes and making sure I knew how to get there. I found all the landmarks of the school, making sure I was familiar with the front office, the nurse, and all the nearest bathrooms to my classes. By the time I was done looking around the school, I had 10 minutes before class was starting, so I made my way to my 1st period and tested the knob to see if it was unlocked. Luckily for me, it was, and I allowed myself into the empty classroom.

I felt fortunate to have the opportunity to study the classroom and get comfortable before people came in. I let the people filter in and made quick glances, trying to familiarize myself with seemingly friendly faces. I tried to pay attention to who came in with a friend group and who came in alone, to gauge who would potentially be open to being friends with the new girl in town. We got on with all the first day of school business: introducing ourselves, making name tags and playing icebreaker games. I noticed very quickly that the boy in the seat on my left, whose name was Dennis, was very talkative and engaging. Something felt different about him, as I hadn't paid much mind to him until he said his name. I wasn't sure why but I had experienced a feeling of *déjà vu*. I looked over at him and I didn't recognize the kid. I hadn't had any friends named Dennis in the past, and I couldn't think of any uncles or cousins with the name. Something about it just felt so familiar to me, and it was eating at me the whole school day.

After a quite tiring day of getting to know people and adjusting to my new environment, I went home that day and asked my parents if I ever had a relative named Dennis, just to cover all my bases. I wasn't sure why it was taking up so much of my mind, but my parents confirmed my suspicion that I had no Dennies's in my life. I finally allowed myself to let go of the issue and then get myself some rest. I slept all day and only woke up to join my family for the last part of dinner. They could tell I had a long day and let me continue to rest until I was ready to emerge from my bed. Before I knew it, the day was pretty much over and I found myself getting my backpack ready for the following day. Regardless of the restful day I have already had, I was able to fall asleep that evening.

I woke up the next day, feeling restful, and got myself ready for the day. I quickly ate breakfast and got myself to school. In first period, we began to work on some curriculum, and I found myself just lost in the work, adapting well and starting to understand the dynamic of the classroom. Without a doubt, I could tell Dennis was a class clown. At every given moment, he was making someone laugh. Whether it be the teacher, other students, or myself, I found him to be a very comforting energy to have in the classroom, especially one to start my day with. I had even started making friends in my classes, as the teachers made sure to incorporate activities where I would be able to meet people. Very quickly, I found myself getting used to my routines and schedules. My parents seemed happy to see me adjust accordingly, because they knew change was always difficult for me. I could tell they had been concerned about how the move was affecting me, but after only two days of school, they had faith I was going to be okay, which definitely made me feel better about everything too.

After a few more weeks of school, I wanted to get back into old habits I had. There were hobbies I had put down for a while to get used to everything around me, but I found myself missing them after a few weeks. I wanted to kickstart this by finding local parks for me to shoot some hoops at, as it was always a way that cleared my mind and kept me active. Whether it was alone or with friends, I was at the park several times a week before the move and I had missed it a lot. I told my parents that I was heading out and grabbed my basketball on the way out. I looked up a few local parks on my phone, they were all super close to me, so I decided to pay them all a visit to see where I would feel the most comfortable. With the first two locations, I

was out of luck. There were no basketball courts, and the park structures themselves were quite small, seemingly built for younger kids.

I was running out of hope for the last one, wondering if my parents happened to choose the one city with no basketball courts, which would be devastating. But, I turned on my navigation and headed that way just to be sure. I perked up when I heard the sound of a basketball smacking the ground, the sweet noise of dribbling, I had to be close. I followed the sound, and my eyes lit up when I saw a net. I finally analyzed the court and was surprised at the sight. The one and only, Dennis, was dribbling his ball, as I watched him approach the basket to make a layup. It was an oddly comforting moment, and I smiled as I approached the court. I just watched for a moment, unsure of what to say. He finally turned around and saw me.

“Demi, hi!” he says excitedly, maintaining the high energy he always carried in class. I greeted him back, and he asked what I was around for.

“Well, I’m new to the town, and I was looking around for places to play,” I explained and pointed to the basketball in my arms. He graciously offered to me to join him, so I put my ball down and we started a long, long session of 1v1. It seemed that every time one of us would lose, we would get too defensive to leave on that note, yet time didn’t seem to exist. After our long session, I finally took in my surroundings and realized the sun had gone down. “Holy! What time is it?” I asked, he checked his watch and it was well near 10 pm. We had been playing for 5 hours. We both gathered our things and agreed to a rematch soon, and then we headed home. I apologized to my parents, who were already in bed, and just let them know that I had run into a friend and we got caught up in the game. They just informed me to communicate next time I will be home so late so they didn’t have to worry, and I agreed, apologizing once more.

This starts to become a routine for us, as months later, we are still meeting at least 3 times a week to play. Honestly, the competitive side of us has made us much better players throughout the months, in comparison to how we started. Every time we played with other people at the park, we realized we were starting to outcompete them, regardless of the fact that we were usually younger or shorter than them. We had started creating a bond that seemed unbreakable, and we complemented each other very well. Even at school, we played basketball together during lunches and got reprimanded constantly for talking over the teacher too much. He would even buy me lunch some days when I would forget to pack mine, and I just appreciated him for being someone I could lean on. He was my best friend. We were a duo that was inseparable, and I still wondered why he felt so familiar and comfortable for me, but at this point, it didn’t matter.

At some point, my parents even got to meet him, and he became well introduced to my family over the months. My parents were incredibly shocked for me to have found comfort in someone so quickly, as it took years for me to open up to people in our old town. I was so closed off from everyone that my parents were eager to meet the person who has made me feel so welcome in this new town. They seemed very grateful for him as I started to update them on my school and social life, and they invited him over for dinner on more than one occasion. Just the same as me, they found him to be a ray of sunshine, someone who can make the whole house laugh in unison. Even all my siblings have taken a strong liking to him, treating him like he’s one

of the siblings every time he comes over. It's not a frequent occurrence for him to come over per se, as we like to spend most of our time at the park, but he fits in very well with my family when he does come over. After meeting him, my parents sat me down and discussed what a special bond I have with him, stating that it seemed closer than most friendships I have had before. They mentioned that he seems to understand me better than any of my old friends, and that I should cherish this friendship with him. I agreed with them completely and thanked them for making him feel so welcome with the family.

The next school day, I head over to Dennis's locker where I usually meet him before lunch so we can play. I planned on sneaking up behind him as he was putting his books away in his locker, but I noticed a birthmark on the back of his neck that I had never noticed before. It distracts me before I am able to fulfill my plans. This birthmark takes me back and I feel a wave of emotion take over my whole body. My head starts to hurt and I shut my eyes tightly, as my vision starts to turn white. Old memories start flooding into my head... ones that seem distant, yet so real and emotional for me.

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I felt my hands shaking and I didn't understand why. I looked down at my hands to confirm, just to notice what I was wearing. I was in a dobok, a taekwondo uniform. I wasn't sure why as I don't recall ever taking taekwondo. But this moment felt very familiar to me. I look up and notice a man standing in front of me, he looks familiar. Could it be? It looks like Dennis, but he's older. He seems to be in his 40s or 50s. He is staring at me with fury in his eyes, and when I process what's happening, I realize he is screaming at me.

"Third place? You have to be kidding me. You didn't train for third place. We have practiced your sparring techniques for months to get you comfortable, and you still couldn't even place second," the man yells in my face, shaking his head in disappointment at me. I looked down again, realizing I had a bronze medal around my neck, and I felt a tear fall from my eyes.

"I tried my best, I'm sorry," I softly squeaked, before my vision turned white again.

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"How can you be so irresponsible? It's really not that hard! Why can't you figure it out like your brother does?" the same man yells in my face. I feel tears fall from my eyes again, and I feel that my head is hot. My mouth opens before I can catch it, as I relive this memory that feels foreign, yet familiar. This is me, definitely, but these memories, this life. It isn't the one I live in now.

"You always compare me to him! I'm sick and tired of being compared to my brother! If he's your favorite child, why did you even have me!" I yell at the top of my lungs. I'm crying uncontrollably now, and I feel my feet run to a room, my bedroom. I find refuge in my bed, crying my eyes out. I cried and cried, the minutes went by, as my vision turned white once more.

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I stare at this same man on the small screen on my phone. I look around a bit and notice I am in a new bed. I seemed to be in a college dorm, as I had a roommate next to me, also a face that felt vaguely familiar to me. The man's face appeared angry once more.



“That much? Are you serious right now? I am not paying that much for tuition. Your mom needs to help with the payments and I don’t want to pay for this forever, so you need to graduate quickly,” he spits before hanging up the phone. I am not even surprised this time when I feel the tears fall from my eyes.

In this life, it seemed that this was a feeling I often encountered, and I had started putting my phone down when my vision turned white again.

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“-don’t want her in my life! She is not my mom and she never will be!” my mouth pours. It seems I was the one speaking when this memory began. I stare at this man before me again, as he has a stern look on his face.

“Don’t you want me to be happy? You want me to be alone forever, is that what you want? You want your own father to be alone for the rest of his life?” He spits in my face before storming out of the room. My vision turns white one last time.

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This time, when I open my eyes, I find myself in the present. I am overwhelmed by the memories that overtook me, and my hands instinctively find the lockers, pressing my back to them and sliding down them, feeling the locks scrape and scratch at my back on my way down. Tears had been falling down my eyes throughout all the memories. Dennis whips around quickly, at the sound of my back smacking the lockers. He checks on me immediately.

“Demi? Are you okay? What happened?” He asks, frantically.

“You were... you were my father... in an old life. I don’t– I don’t know how to explain it,” I say, unsure of how he will react to the news. He could call me crazy and then never be friends with me again. I look up at him and he’s gone pale. He takes a step back, and he’s looking at me like I have grown a 3rd eye. I give him a moment, to see how he will react, and soon enough, the color returns to his face. He grabs me by my forearms, forcing me up on my feet to take me into a huge embrace. He holds me tight and I realize what it was I was looking for this whole time. In my old life, I fought extensively with my father. This rebirth of us, becoming peers instead of father and daughter, was to show me how much I can appreciate him. My father may have been overbearing at times, but he loved me and he was a good person. He was passionate, he cared about the people around him, and he had a likable energy about him. I’m not sure that was a conclusion I was able to make in my past life, but I see now that I was given this opportunity to understand him, to be his best friend, and to appreciate him as a person. I was able to take him out of his paternal role and see him as a person, which has been the most fulfilling part of this life, undoubtedly. He wasn’t just my father, he was a person who had an upbringing, who had hobbies, who had people who loved him. I took him for granted as his daughter, but life gave me the option to make it up to him, and to show him I love him in the ways I know how. And with this newfound discovery, I plan on using up the time I have here to show him how much I appreciate him.

Message History  
Jack Arndt-Schreiber

5:19 PM

The Boys:

*Marcus sent an image.*

5:22

The Boys:

*Jake reacted to an image.*

Jake: Bro wtf

That's foul

5:22

The Boys:

Marcus: lol

5:49

Mom: Are you spending the night at Vincent's again? Mara and I are going to get dinner. Let me know if you want anything.

6:07

Nels: Hey. Talk?

6:35

Mom: There's leftovers in the fridge if you want any. Tell Vincent's mom I say hello.

7:28

Nels: Worried abt you. Text me back when you can.

8:11

The Boys:

Marcus: Drew what time's the party tomorrow

also is Aimee gonna be there

asking for a friend ;)

8:31

*Missed call from Vince*

8:31

Vince: Please pick up.

8:32

*Missed call from Vince*

8:33

*Missed call from Vince*

8:36

Vince: Drew I understand if you don't want to talk to me but I just want to apologize for what happened today  
Please call me

8:41

Mara: Vincent just called. I know he's been a complete ass but he seemed really shaken up.  
Maybe you should talk to him?

9:20

The Boys:  
Jake: Drew  
?

10:01

*Missed call from Nels*

10:02

Nels: Please just let me know you're ok

11:12

*Missed call from Vince*

12:00 AM

Nels: Happy birthday

12:00

Mara: May your years be many and bright

12:00

Vince: Happy birthday  
Hope to hear from you soon  
Love you

12:01

Eric: Happy birthday! Looking forward to seeing you tomorrow!  
Or later today I guess lol

12:05

The Boys:  
Jake: Happy birthday Drew!  
This year you'll get some bitches for sure

12:19

The Boys:  
Marcus: shit happy birthday!

3:17  
Vincent: I can't sleep  
I know I fucked up really bad today  
Take as much time as you need  
I love you so much

6:05  
Grandma S: Happy Birthday Drew! So sorry I won't be able to come down this year, but know that you, Eric, and Mara are always in my thoughts and prayers.  
Love, Gma

7:45  
Aunt Mary and Uncle Haden:  
Uncle Haden: Happy Birthday Drew!

7:46  
Aunt Mary and Uncle Haden:  
*Aunt Mary sent an image.*  
Aunt Mary: I still remember when you were this small! Love you lots!  
PS your card should be arriving today

8:57  
*Missed call from mom*

8:58  
Mom: Drew?

9:00  
Eric: Heading over now. See you soon!

9:03  
*Missed call from Mara*

9:04  
Mara: I think mom's getting worried. Where are you?

9:12  
Nels: If I don't hear from you in the next 20 minutes I'm going to your house

9:27  
Vince: Sorry about yesterday. I should've just given you space  
I love you

9:30

*Missed call from Nels*

9:33

Tracy: Happy birthday!

9:44

*Missed call from mom*

*Missed call from mom*

*Missed call from mom*

9:45

Mom: Drew please answer the phone

*Missed call from mom*

*Missed call from mom*

9:46

*Missed call from mom*

*Missed call from Mara*

9:47

Mom: Drew I need you to answer to your phone

Please

9:48

Nels: Driving to Vincenet

Mara is with me

9:51

Aimee: Happy Birthday!

9:53

Jake: Drew are you good?

I heard what happened with Vince yesterday

He's a dick

Like a huge fucking dick

I hope you're doing okay

Here if you need to talk

9:58

*Missed call from Vince*

*Missed call from Vince*

*Missed call from Vince*

9:59

*Missed call from Vince*

*Missed call from Vince*

9:59

Nels: Vincent thinks he might know where you are. Don't worry he's not coming

9:59

*Missed call from Vince*

*Missed call from Vince*

10:00

Vince: Drew please answer

*Missed call from Vince*

*Missed call from Vince*

10:01

*Missed call from Vince*

10:10

Dad: Happy birthday Drew! Looking forward to seeing you soon!

10:12

*Missed call from Eric*

10:13

Eric: Where are you?

10:21

Mason: Happy birthday Drew

!

10:30

Toby: Happy Birthday!

How old are you now? lol

10:47

Matt: happy birthday! =D

Nels pulled up to the dusty lot. Drew's battered car sat abandoned in the corner, a dozen feet away from the twisted steel trestle. The wind howled up from the ravine's bowels.

"Drew! Drew!"

No one could hear them. They could barely hear each other.

It was quiet inside Drew's car. On the tattered leather seat, his phone buzzed. Illuminated pictures, names and faces, flashed in and out like a dreamer struggling to stay awake.

# A DYING LEGACY

By Caroline Ives

The Blackhurst Manor was in a state of disrepair. The once neatly trimmed bushes lining the front entrance were jagged and overgrown. Thorny weeds crawled up the stone walls, which had become cracked and stained for lack of upkeep. And the proud wrought iron gate that once stood watch over the grounds was too violently bent to lock at all. An unaware passerby might look at the dilapidation and fear that behind the door lay some supernatural horror, a ghastly yet extraordinary presence lurking in the manor's steep shadows.

Of course, I knew that that was not the case, and had not been for many years now.

Still, as I knocked on the front door, I patted my front coat pocket to reassure myself that the glass bottle I had brought was still there. After a few moments and a few grunts of awkward shuffling, the pale face of a spooked young man appeared in the doorway. It was Daniel Blackhurst, the Manor's only inhabitant and the last of the Blackhurst line. He'd lived in the Manor his entire life and had been charged with its upkeep since his parents' timely passing, and so different was Daniel from them that most in our town had often forgotten anyone still lived in the place.

"Oh, I—" Daniel started. "Hello. Sir."

I smiled. "Oh, you flatter me! 'Sir' won't be necessary. May I come in?" Daniel led me into a room with high ceilings, two chandeliers, and a long table around which sat three chairs, two of which were painted with a coat of dust. Daniel scurried off to another room, muttering apologies.

"I don't usually have company here," he explained, bringing back yet another chair. I sat down, withholding a remark about the state of things. My eyes trailed to the massive oil painting hanging above Daniel's seat. It depicted a man identical to Daniel in every surface respect. But the portrait was commanding, and exuded dominance from every painted inch. Ironically, it was Daniel who looked like a poor imitation.

"I remember your father," I said. Daniel, who had been bringing back a platter from the kitchen, startled and looked nervously back at the painting. "The impossible, mystical power he held at the tips of his finger. The way the people scurried on the rare occasions he came to town, whispering his name in fear...in awe." I stopped, looking from the painting back to Daniel, who was shifting nervously. "May he rest in peace and all."

“...Right,” it was clear in Daniel’s tone and face that he wanted to move the subject away from his father, but I had no intention of doing so. I turned my attention back to the painting.

“I was a child, then, you know. When your father was at his peak.”

Daniel looked surprised. “You were?”

I smiled in a friendly fashion, though Daniel looked no more at ease. “The stress of the job has aged me,” I said, which was a lie. I may have appeared older than Daniel, despite our similar age, but it was not due to stress. The essential difference between Daniel and myself was the way we carried ourselves. I carried myself as an established individual, as that’s what I was, whilst he carried himself like a lamb before the butcher.

“It’s just...” Daniel trailed off. “I wouldn’t think the town would follow someone so young.”

“Well, while your father was around the government got used to cowardice,” I explained. “And after he was gone the town needed a fresh mind to take over. Young men like us, it’s our job to...breathe life back into things. Isn’t it?” Daniel’s eyes went so wide that had I not been trying to keep a professional demeanor; I would have laughed.

Daniel looked down and seemed to finally remember the platter in his hands. He fumbled it onto the table, and I leaned forward to grab one of the porcelain cups. “Why are you here?” he asked.

“You haven’t been to town in a long time, Daniel,” I said. It was an understatement. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d spotted Daniel Blackhurst in town, and spotting outsiders in town was my job description. “We don’t want you to become a hermit.”

“Thank you for your concern,” Daniel said slowly. “But I’m fine.”

I shook my head. “No, no. It’s important to keep up on the local happenings. For instance,” I brought the drink to my lips and sipped. “Did you know Mr. Hogget’s sheep are missing?”

I held Daniel’s gaze over the rim of the cup.

“I had not heard about that,” he said.

“Hm.” I set the cup down. “Mind if I look around?”

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I exited the dining room and examined the Manor's main hall. It was tall, wide, and lined with massive stained-glass windows. Cold, regal, and untouchable...until, of course, you came across the biggest window in the hall's center, which was smashed open. Daniel trailed behind me as we explored. He did a laughably poor job of hiding his nerves; constantly fiddling his hands and glancing over his shoulder like he expected angry townspeople to climb out of the walls.

We came upon an open door, and I allowed myself inside. Three large, pristine chairs facing an unlit fireplace. Hanging above the fireplace was a painting nearly identical to the one in the kitchen, but this one depicted Lady Blackhurst at her husband's side, equally fierce and frightening as he.

I brushed my finger along the mantle, and it came away with an ungodly amount of dust. "Have you thought about hiring help, Daniel?"

Daniel shifted. "It's difficult to find someone willing," he murmured.

"That's another concern," I said. "Your solitude. It's no good for one to be so isolated, it does funny things to the mind. And I'd imagined that's even more true in a place with a history so..." I stared up at the great iron chandelier swinging slowly between us "...cursed."

"I manage," Daniel protested. "It's just hard to get the cleaning done, is all."

I nodded, then lowered my head. "Yes, I'd imagine." I reached out and touched the nearest chair. My palm came back entirely clean, which I showed to Daniel. "But I see you find the time for some things."

Daniel's eyes widened. He opened his mouth to say something, but I cut him off. "Of course, I am not here to discuss housework. Come, let's move on."

I continued my search, peering in room after room, yet none held anything of note. I explored until the end of the hall, where lay the room that would have belonged to Lord and Lady Blackhurst when they were still alive. Daniel was visibly hesitant to allow me entry---thankfully, his allowance was not something I required.

It was instantly clear to me that Daniel had not entered his parents' room in many years. Not only because the room was dark and coated with a thick layer of dust, but because the tables and chairs were scattered, the chest of drawers was ransacked, and the bed's satin canopy had a massive tear down its middle. The entire scene was a shrine to the moment the Blackhurst's were slain. It was disturbing, and very telling, that Daniel had left the room untouched.

I allowed the bedroom door to close, and turned to see that Daniel's eyes were fixed on the ground. "Are we done here, sir?" He whispered. "This is the end of the hall."

"Yes, it is," I noted, and Daniel began to relax. "But we missed a room, didn't we? The one down there." I pointed back down the hallway from which we had come, to a set of doors I had earlier noticed Daniel tensing beside.

I pointed to a set of predictably imposing large doors. Daniel looked between my hand and the doors for a moment, then gradually moved over and opened them. I noted with interest the way his hands were shaking.

The set of doors opened to reveal a multi-story library, which was similar to the rest of the house in that it was clearly once impressive but had fallen under the weight of a single caretaker. I explored the shelves, most of which were half filled or less. I picked them up and read their spines in succession: history books, classic novels, and encyclopedias. Dull, predictable things.

"Is this everything?" I ask finally, frowning down at one book.

Daniel swallowed. "A lot of it's been...lost, of course."

"Ah," I said, placing the book back on the shelf. "Yes. I remember that. The flames were visible for miles."

I saw something interesting in the corner of my eye and brushed past Daniel. In the back of the room was a third painting, this one showing the whole family in all their glory: An imposing wife and husband dressed all in black, and a young Daniel perched on the wife's lap. He did not appear intimidating then, either, although he was considerably more relaxed.

"I'd like to keep exploring on my own, if you don't mind," I said, staring up at the portrait "What?!"

You can't-" Daniel protested.

I looked back at him.

Daniel stumbled back. "Sorry. Sir."

"No need for that right now," I said. "This is an informal visit, of course."

"Of course," Daniel echoed quietly. Slowly, he shuffled out of the room, letting the heavy doors close behind him. I watched him leave, and the instant he did, I put my hands on the edge of the picture frame and pulled.

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“Nothing to see there,” I told Daniel when I left the room. “Let’s go back to our tea, shall we?” Daniel blinked at me, then his face brightened up and his shoulders relaxed.

“Yes, right, of course!” He said, as he chattered the whole way back to the dining hall. When he wasn’t looking, I pushed back one of the curtains facing the backyard. If I squinted my eyes and looked at the far-left edge of the property, I thought I could make out two holes in the distance, six feet deep. I shuddered, but let the curtain fall back before Daniel could see me.

When we were back in our seats, Daniel was picking up the platter and moving it, when I knocked into him. He dropped the entire thing, and everything shattered with a loud crash.

“Oh,” he said. “Here, I’ll go get more from the kitchen, I think there’s some left—”

“I can do it,” I said, immediately. Daniel froze halfway out of his chair, staring at me. I repeated myself.

“But…” He whispered. Then looked down and sat back. He clearly understood my intentions, but he wasn’t going to fight it. Not that he could have.

In the kitchen, I removed from my pocket what I had discovered behind the picture frame: an ancient tome. It had been among a stash of other wicked texts, texts our mob must have missed the first time, and the one I had taken was seated on top. There was a red satin bookmark marking one of the yellowing pages, a page titled “Spell of Resurrection”. That was more than enough proof for me, but the final nail in the coffin of Daniel Blackhurst was the very first ingredient on the page, which had been recently crossed out: “Heart of Sheep”.

I put the tome back in my pocket and took out my glass bottle, uncapping it and pouring the contents into Daniel’s cup. There had been some townspeople who thought I should have “resolved the issue” at my soonest opportunity, but I had wanted to know. But now that I had what I needed, there was no good reason to keep Daniel alive.

As I left Blackhurst Manor, I pondered the tragedy of the ending. Not Daniel’s—he should have considered himself lucky—but his line. It was strange when the mighty fell with a whimper. But it had taken years for the town to overcome the Blackhursts. It was unlikely we would have been able to do it a second time.

When I returned to town, I was embraced with gratitude and admiration. Now that the Blackhursts were officially

vanquished, the people could finally relax. And if I ended up keeping the tome, hidden inside my personal cabinet just in case, that was not for them to know.

Breaking Bloody Bonds, Cutting Knots, Severing Ties

It was refreshing to see a graveyard that was in complete disrepair. Though it was heartwarming to know that people cared enough for their dead to make sure that the fields were maintained and the buildings still stood, it made it a lot more difficult to plant a false tombstone. But the cemetery on the outskirts of town was perfect. The carved rocks within staggered across uneven dirt hills, and the wired fence surrounding the perimeter was wrought with holes.

“Easier for me to break in and enter, haha-!” I dropped the marble slab on the dirt and listened to it crack on the pavement. As I let warm relief seep through my muscles, though, an indignant cry rang out.

<-Wha- Why’d you do that? You just spent the past four hours carrying it!->

I made eye contact with the specter who floated by my side all this time. Vera’s face was twisted in a mix of disbelief, worry, and frustration. By the way her mouth kept twitching, she clearly had something she wanted to say. Many things, actually. But before she could make up her mind, I waved my hand through her. “It’s fine. It needs to look broken down, remember? Sure, that’s a few days of my life wasted but... It’s all part of the plan!”

Even though I doubted she bought that, she sighed and floated through the chain link fence. With a reproachful glance she pointed inward to the field. <-Okay. Well, you better hurry and get in here. The darkness is about to fall.-> Her scolding voice put an icy blade of guilt directly to my soul; Or it would’ve, if she had actually been speaking at all.

No matter who said them, though, the words were true. Once more I was weighed down by the headstone and I scaled up the fence. When I tossed it over the side, neither of us made a comment on the crashing noise it made. Though that’s because my fingers slipped from the cold steel wires and I toppled over the other side too.

<-Gah- Are you okay?->

The split seconds I was falling, I felt a cold air rush through me. My spectral friend must’ve tried to catch me, against all logical thought. Of course, I ended up on the ground, my backside numb, and looked up at her. “Hah... Not really. But I don’t want to sit here like an idiot. We’re almost there, after all.”

I pulled myself up as she kept watching through a thinly concerned stare. We started down the hills to find an empty clearing free from any bodies. It was difficult to pick out a spot from the gray blobs over brown waves, but the burial ground was clearly not at full capacity. We just needed a spot that wouldn’t disrupt any other poor soul who had to rest alongside me.

It’d be a pain if it caused them to revive as a zombie, you see. Or if parking my fake death stone would anger the ghosts who still clung to their real ones in the area.

I might’ve cared about giving the dead their proper respect too. Who could say.

Once we had found an area that was more clear than other places, I let go of the bag holding the stone one last time. This time, its sound was barely worth noting, a solid thud. Like it was ready to rest at home after a long day of work. Best of luck to it, then. This would be its home for a while. I and a rusty shovel would keep it company until we parted.

I knelt down, tried not to recoil at the soggy soil on my bare knees, and heaved the tombstone into place. Since my partner was incapable of speech and prepping the site left me winded, we spent an hour in silence. Moving dirt, anchoring the tombstone, and pouring in concrete would’ve taken a group of people several hours, and my limited magic could only reduce that time by so much. But I could work through the simple procedure with mechanical persistence. It just gave me time to really grapple with the burden of what I was doing.

*This was it. Even though I didn't think this is where the past few years would have led me, I wanted to keep going. All that time in the ministry, honing my mind and skills to solve the problems the world presented... I was going to turn away from all of that. And by sunrise I'd be far, far away from here. Now I was really going to sever my ties.*

When the enchanted stone settled and the memorial was complete, I wallowed in the wet dirt for a few minutes. The night lacking the chirps of birds or bugs was therapeutic. I just wanted to stare at my handiwork until something stirred me awake.

*Saffron: 20xx-20xx  
Thoughtful, helpful, and devout.  
May their spirit rest in peace.*

It was a nice sentiment. When my family came to visit I'm sure they'd be pleased by how their child was remembered. A pity that I couldn't fit that mold at all, though. This sweet testimonial was completely unreflected by reality.

Vera had joined my side, assuredly ruminating on my plans as well. Her consideration was weighed against her incredulity of what I was doing, and so she kept staring daggers at me. I coughed and prepared to voice her thoughts, like I always did. <-You didn't need to go this far. You're just causing your family unneeded stress. Aren't you ashamed of yourself?->

She had nodded alongside what I said until that last sentence, where flits of exasperation ran across her face. I sighed and ran my fingers through my hair. "Look, even if you don't say it- You can't say it, in fact- I know you're thinking it. And yeah... I'm a bit ashamed. But we both need to escape. Because I'm going to become a witch."

Her expression hardened. Hearing the words aloud was always nerve wracking. Speech carried ideas that floated and stuck with us even after the sounds faded; Every time I spoke about my dreams the more they felt scarily real.

As I analyzed her face, a stony expression like she was trying to avoid smiling and panicking at the same time, I continued my attempts to read her thoughts. <-You've spent the past few years at the ministry, and you've even enjoyed working there. All those people you've met, every favor you were given, each second you toiled to become someone useful... Yet you still dream of becoming a witch?->

It was right on the mark again. As she averted her gaze, I put my finger to my lips. "...What am I supposed to do? Am I supposed to stop dreaming?" My eyes darted away from her to latch onto... Anything else. "Well... Heh. Even though I say that, I know that'd be the smartest choice to make. Giving up on my dreams and staying in the ministry's the best way for me to change things for the better. And it's what I'm *supposed* to do."

With a sigh, I stood up and picked off some of the mud from my robes. The damp muck felt awful as it stuck to me, but working had put me in a trancelike state that let me ignore it. Maybe I should keep myself busy to stave off that feeling more. As my mind went on a different tangent, I finished up my statement. "...But I know it's not what *I* want to do. I want to become a witch."

I met Vera's gaze again, and we both tried to do a telepathic exchange again. <-...I suppose it's not wrong to want to dream, Saffron.->

The moment I voiced her thought, I shook my head. "The thing is, I can't just let it be a dream. Those brief moments during my time at the ministry, where I breached the magical barrier... I want more of that feeling. It makes me feel alive like nothing else."

<-With your skill at magic? You're not going to get anywhere like that.->

She sulked. Looks like I had guessed wrong. "What you wanted to say was something along those lines, right? That my magical prowess is nowhere near adequate, and that I'm just going to drown instead. Uh... Yeah, that is an issue. I'll have to bow my head to the ministry to get more power. I'm not completely abandoning that reality, after all. I'll just let that be my battery."

Her face fell, but she didn't attempt to speak yet. Whatever was on her mind, it was taking her a long time to formulate. Eventually, she sighed and signed some letters at me.

*B-L-O-O-D-D-E-B-T??????*

"...Ah." I glanced back at the entrance of the cemetery. For no real reason, just to avoid looking her in the eyes. "Is that what you're worried about?"

She rolled her eyes and nodded. <-Obviously.->

I snickered as the word left my mouth. "It's a real pain in the ass, that's for sure... But I'll handle it somehow. My blood, sweat, and tears are already property of my dreams anyways. Can't let some blood debt take up that valuable material."

It seemed she couldn't argue anymore. Not in that she no longer had reservations, but that we both knew nothing she said would be of use. As she floated out of the pit I had made, I crawled out as well. Silence deafened our minds again as I finished up putting the dirt in for my fake grave. No thoughts, no words, just the sounds of a rusty shovel scraping sludge.

<-...Are you ready to leave yet?->

I snorted when that question appeared on her face. "Duh. I'm covered in grime and it's gross. But before we head back to my place..."

With the tips of my boots, I flung the rusty shovel into the air. My reliable tool spun in the darkness as it transformed, decayed metal morphed to dirty straw, until it stopped morphing. I caught the firm wooden handle of my trusty broomstick and grinned.

"Let's go out for a spin, shall we?"

---

The world always looked so small from the clouds. Sure, the lack of oxygen constantly left black spots at the corners of my vision. My cold, clammy hands gripped the shaft of my vehicle from the freezing nighttime atmosphere. And the unpolished broom dug into my body like it was a woven rod of thorns.

But none of that mattered when I saw the world like this.

Rows of houses, all packed together, were dotted with lights. Though some of their inhabitants were sound asleep, others quivered with life, even visible from all the way up here. Paved roads stretched alongside them as they climbed up rocky mountains in the distance. Skyscrapers stuck up from the ground as if to challenge the sierra's superiority. There were even some unscathed pastures of green spread through the horizon.

However, I didn't have to worry about any of that.

I pulled out a small powder from my pocket and scattered it behind me. The small particles faded into the night to be lost to time... Until they burst into flame with a snap of my fingers. A brilliantly colorful conflagration surged through the clouds, snaked through the air like it was an aurora, and fizzled back into the darkness. Even though it had no real substance whatsoever, it was a way to prove that I was really here.

"It's pretty, right? Wish I could match that. Unfortunately it's just a light show. Barely scratches the surface of what magic can really accomplish. But I'm getting there eventually. Just you wait."

Vera silently watched the rainbow dissolve with a smile on her face. Just as expected. She reached out her hand and swirled the embers into a smaller light, but one that persisted in her hand. <-Do you think they can see us from down there?->

“I don’t think anyone can see us clearly... But people know someone’s here. That’s good enough for me. To just be a spark in people’s minds. I’ll be brighter one day, no doubt about it. And I’ll keep chasing the most radiant thing in the sky.”

<-Like the sun? Are you planning on outshining that?->

My mouth hung open as I struggled to respond. “...Maybe not that much. It’s too presumptuous of me. I think it’d be enough to burn myself into a few people’s hearts.”

<-You better get going then.->

She smirked at me, and I responded in kind.

I didn’t have a lot of time left until the sun rose. Then I’d have to deal with the fallout of everything I’ve done as of late. But I was at ease. Right now, with my broom in my hands, I was unrestrained. Every direction was open to me, and I wanted to race alongside them as much as I could.

Even as ties are forcefully severed, it doesn’t mean that they’ve lost their meaning. Encapsulated in every person, place, and event was their special feeling they brought to me. Though they would slip away from my fingers, or I’d end up taking a different path, they still gleamed with the memories and lessons I took.

Goals were just the constellations that guided me through the night. I could master magic, I could capture the hearts of those around me, I could even get Vera a voice. Even if I had to land every once in a while, I wanted to stay staring at the sky.

“Come on, let’s go on another adventure!”

With those thoughts as my fuel source, I soared through the air and zoomed off into the distance.



# The Demon Lord's Dilemma

James

Rowley

“Well, your Vileness,” the goblin commander said, “what is your next order?”

The Demon Lord sat upon his throne, wondering what to do. Well, they all called him that, but Dave didn't really feel like one. It was never his intention to become the “Prince of Eternal Darkness” or be referred to as “your Dreadfulness.” All he wanted to do was good, but apparently it got him here. Who knew the little monster he saved back then, the one he met after he first fell through that portal inside a Walgreens, was the previous Dark Lord?

Now Dave was covered head to toe in black armor, living in a large castle on the top of a mountain. It was always cloudy here, perpetually dim. Gray ash covered every surface. The only real light was the fires of the torches that blazed on the walls, and what little light the sun managed to pierce through the clouds.

In the throne room, a squadron of monsters awaited his command. Everything from goblins to orcs, lizardmen and harpies, minotaurs, hell-hounds, the list goes on. The goblin commander was awaiting the Demon King's answer.

“Well, uh...” Dave began, “What if we just, uh, didn't do anything today.”

The goblin's head cocked to the side. “What?”

“You know,” Dave tapped on the arm of the throne with his gauntlet. “We could just chill out.”

The monsters murmured in confusion. *Chill out? Not do anything?* They had no idea what these things meant, and were too afraid to ask the Ruler of the Black Wastes.

Finally, the goblin commander asked, “But your Nastiness, what of the war with the humans?”

The monsters murmured with agreement. They were at war with the humans, they should be ready to defend against them! Dave began to stand up, and everyone went silent with fear as to what he was to do next.

“I'm just kinda tired, you know?” The King of Death spoke, stretching out. “We don't really need to fight *every* day. We could take a vacation sometimes.”

The monsters were confused once more.

“Alright, just follow me.”

And so Dave began to walk through the castle, followed by the squadron. Little imps with wings were flitting about the castle, spreading the Emperor of Misery's (confusing) commands. Soon all the monsters of the castle were following him, wondering at what Dave was going to do. Ogres walking alongside chimeras, kobolds riding atop dire wolves, zombies falling behind and ghosts pulling ahead. The entirety of the Vile Conqueror's subjects within the

Obsidian Fortress walked, marching without a clue until they walked right outside the castle walls. There on the mountain Dave sat down and looked out into the wastes.

“Look, let’s just all sit down for a minute. Lounge about. It’ll do you all some good.”

The monsters followed his order and sat down on the mountain, lounging. Ash was kicked up into the air. It was relatively peaceful there on the mountain, despite the erupting volcanoes in the distance and the cracks of lighting from the clouds above.

“This is pretty nice, right guys?” Dave said.

Suddenly, they all saw something in the distance. There, far across the wastes was the whole of the human army, beginning their slow march toward the Dark Lord’s castle.

“You’re a genius, your Ugliness!” The goblin commander jumped up and shouted, “You brought us out here so that we’d be prepared for the human army’s advance! Now, let’s set a trap, ambush them, and be rid of them for good! It’s time for battle, everyone!”

The monsters rejoiced, and set about with their preparations, howling with bloodlust. Dave sighed. *One day*, he thought. *One day*.

Poetry

Lavender

Lavender sprouts from underneath the ground.  
On the paths that feet do plow.  
Parading purple to take flight  
On this warm mid-spring night.

Aging ever so gracefully.  
Reflected in the moonlit trees.  
The lavender speaks so calmly.  
*Your youth is what preceded me.*

Thus, lavender, please don't go.  
One would follow you into the snow.  
To stop the time from the undertoad  
To be reborn as cold as winter snow.

## Blue curtains

I love writing blue curtains. I won't tell you why. The act of not telling you why is enough to tell you why.

I love writing blue curtains. I won't tell you why. Whatever reason you think as to why I love writing blue curtains is enough reason for me.

I love writing blue curtains. They're just blue. Shut up.

*Oscar Wilde and Yukio Mishima both wrote about masks and truth.  
One was a fascist, and the other, arrested.*

I love writing blue curtains. This poem has already been written by Maggie Nelson and I know that.

I love writing blue curtains. I want you to see them but I'm in love with opacity. (Curtains are also in love with opacity.)

The best way, I learned as part of my tutelage, to get people to listen to you, is not to be sentimental. Don't say why the curtains are blue. Don't tell me how to feel. Shut up.

When we die, there is no more explaining to do.

I love writing blue curtains but I hate being overly fanciful. I can't afford a subscription to Poetry Foundation but I do think about Poetry Foundation.

There was a poem I showed some colleagues I still speak to. I wrote it one summer night in a fit of heat over someone no longer there (all I had were blue curtains) and they looked at it, and walked away.

I love writing blue curtains. I want for them the rumble of an avalanche. (The avalanche is already there. It's in my journal, an iceberg.)

I sometimes write poems that ask a lot of labor from the reader. I realize since a certain whenever I have been writing poems that almost resist being read. There is power here, cold steel.

I am not above writing bibliographies of feeling.

*Perfume Genius, "Queen." "No family is safe  
when I sashay."*

I love writing blue curtains, I revel inviting from my podium, but a podium is a line. When I get home, both sides of my bed are cold.

People used to travel the world for blue. I am not a librarian named Chelsea: I want to wear the right-fitting mask. They're all masks, I know.

Sometimes in Japanese, "blue" is what we might call "green." I am running through fields of *blue*. The *blue* of plants is necessary in space to reduce astronaut stress. I am so young I can't breathe I am *blue*.

It's bright out today, I want to write about the sky. I want to fight "sad" blue. I mean, it can mean sad. But that flattens it. I wouldn't call warehouse lighting *sad* even if it's still a warehouse and we will be arrested.

I love writing blue curtains: they're the blue of haloes of holy women in the medieval period. They billow darkly in waves until at an angle the light glints it and then they turn white and then—only then—does the phenomena make sense to me.

I love writing blue curtains: they're an ugly shade without context, the soft of a bruise, the blood rushing to meet the bruise, too fast, too fast.

It's fine. At night I sometimes come home really tired and both sides of the bed are cold and I think of giving up, I think of explaining myself.

When we die, there is no more explaining to do.

*Joseph's older brother is dead. "It makes it less scary, knowing that he's—done it. 'Cause all the big things I ever had to do, he did 'em first."*

When my father gets up from his seat, my mother keeps her eyes on the table. Then, they lower to the grit in her tea, colliding into a picture of waves.

**Sonnet 1: A Corpse Reborn**

1. O glorious physique and form of Man!
2. In Eden, God had made you good and whole,
3. A flawless vessel for a holy soul,
4. According to his pure and perfect plan.
5. For you were fashioned for eternal span,
6. Partaking in the fruits till you were full,
7. Submissive to the Lord's divine control—
8. But soon your time as cursed corpse began.
9. O wretched body sick with sin and death,
10. You crave for carnal pleasures of the flesh,
11. And wage your wars against my living mind!
12. With you, I feud until my final breath,
13. To crucify your Being and rise afresh,
14. Remade, reborn, restored, and realigned.

~ Nathaniel Joel Cuaresma

**Why I burn books**

The library of Alexandria deserved to burn.  
Knowledge is not meant to be preserved in empty pages,  
it's meant to be passed from mind to mind,  
like some clay sculpture each person molds.

A stallion in the fields between neurons  
Need not be bound in books.  
Let it run free and let it fly where it wills.  
The soul is lost in translation and every book's an empty corpse.

I urge you, find the ideas where they were sown, now  
Grown and with healthy roots when you pluck them from the ground  
And transplant them into your perspective garden.  
Do not learn them from decayed pressings in some dusty book.

You can learn 99.9% from books, just as you can kill 99.9% of germs with a soap.  
The leftover is the difference between average and absolute. -  
And so these books will burn.  
Until you learn the rest.

**ACCENTS, ARSON, AND ARTICULATION**

Accents articulate like literary arsonists above a pyre,  
Opal beauty lifted from the burning of oak, sap, and sweat.  
Warm familiarity a dark cloak that foreshadows misunderstanding.

How funny that, like the million different species of grass,  
A thousand lingual subforms sprout from Earth's varied soil.  
And we, like wayward rabbits, carry them as burrs upon our fur.



May Spring Come

By: Roxanne Ha

the winter is already ending  
I can see it in the way the afternoon sky hangs onto the evening  
the times are quickly changing  
and in a whirlwind, this will all soon be a memory  
I know hope is all too fleeting and free  
but I want to relish in its company  
and for love, I can't help but still be naive  
but the best lessons are learned unexpectedly  
and for once  
I can't wait for spring to come

the deluge cried in solidarity with me  
solitude brought me to a heavenly peace  
all the times I kept trying in those trying times paved the way  
to letters flooding through my dusty window panes  
one foot in each door, but not through yet completely  
but when they say my name and smile, it's worth everything  
now looking back at all the work I've done  
coming undone, then coming back into one  
for once  
I can't wait to see what will come

my colors bled into the autumn sunset  
my spirit left, along with my phantom visions  
but as I laid on the ground, chest thumping, disillusioned  
my world shifted on its axis, revealing a tapestry of my constellations  
because there are so many parts of me that are unique  
and I knew I'd come back around eventually  
there's still so much to be written in my story  
the end of an age but it's only just beginning  
and for once  
my heart isn't frozen numb  
for once  
the anticipation fills up my lungs  
for once  
I'm not afraid to fall if I take a jump  
and for once  
I can't wait to see who I will become

erica huang

butterfly hands

I had always believed that hands and faces were separate  
that strong soulful hands  
held sunken faces  
and many a beautiful face  
hid twisted hands;

at least that was until  
i met the girl with the pretty hands  
glorious graceless hands,  
beautiful even.  
and when i looked up to her face  
i saw the sun in its stead  
and the halo of its glow  
became my darkness.

rebirth: i found it in west hollywood

---

but i was never really sure i'd find you here, watching the wasp nest from our driveway. like we weren't kissing other people (and i didn't fear god) on new year's day. but if things were different, and i could embrace when things were simple, we'd be picking coriander and pine back on ophir dr. teasing hands like the honey on your lips. sticky, like we would never tell the difference between rigid fate and the tension in your cheek.

and maybe i was never really sure of anything. i don't love you any less. i find god in the gay bars. in the synthesizer and the melodrama and the things that happen here. but i held her in my arms last night and the messiness was sacred here. like feeling it all isn't forever, and i could give up the little things.

as the wasps eat the apricots outside our window. sweet and supple, ready for the spring.

this is enough.

## Featherheart

by Mackenzie Van Valkenburgh

In my dream it's raining and I drive to your house because it's the only place I know.  
I drive to your house and I stand on your porch and I'm shivering, sopping wet when you open the door.

You ask why I'm there and I tell you I'm cold and you let me in and bring me a towel.

I'm shivering on your couch and you're sitting caddy-corner from me on that cushion that sticks out a bit

and our knees are touching

and you don't pull yours away even though my jeans are soaked

and I know you hate the winter.

You ask me why I'm here and I tell you the truth, I tell you

*I just don't want to be lonely anymore,*

I tell you about begging for love while your mom makes something hot for me on the stove.

And you ask *How can I help you?*

And I tell you that you can give me a hug, that you can crush me like a tin, that you can throw

me around the room like a rag doll so long as it means I get to touch you and

you go silent for a while, so I get to drying off.

Your mom brings me soup and your dad

slips me a beer.

He always liked me more than you, always liked me more

than his own son. You're still very quiet, but you've started to hum.

You only talk when he leaves. You say

*Will I hurt you if I touch you?*

and I say *No.*

You say *Will I hurt you if I sit too close?*

and I say *No.*

You say *Will I break you if I give you my coat?*

and I say *Yes, but that's what I'm begging you to do,*

so you touch me on the neck and you touch me on the lips and then you give me your favorite

coat.

We're knee deep in the breaking on the long part of your couch.

I tell you *You're my best friend* as you wrap your mouth around my throat. You say

*I know.*

I tell you *I love you* as you curl your hand through my hair and you pull your teeth away just to

say *I know.*

I laugh because you're making that reference again and I know you'll say it back when it's time for me to go.

So I keep saying it to you, and you just keep saying  
*I know. I know. I know.*

When we've finished with our breaking you put your fingers in my palm. You say  
*If I ask you to stay will you stay?*

and I answer *No*,  
*but if you ask me to leave I'll never go.*

You stand up and you ask me to leave and I oblige.

You grab me a blanket.

I'm asleep on the couch by the time you come back, so you wrap the warm thing over my shoulders

then you wrap yourself around me, just for good measure.

I leave in the morning when the sun is out.

You say *Don't go*. You say *You promised me you'd stay* and I say  
*I know, honey, I know, but I make your dad miserable.*

You laugh and we hug.

You hold me to your chest while I cry like a baby.

I say *How will I ever pay back all these debts to you?* and you say *You won't*,  
and I smile because I don't mind doing the owing.

Then you're inside before I've left the doorway and I wave at your back from the car  
and I drive home still wearing your coat.

In the dream I have I drive to your house again the next time it rains.

There's a towel waiting for me on the front porch, clean and dry,  
and a sign in your chicken scratch that says

*Stay or Leave or Go but take your shoes off at the door first,*

so I take off my shoes and I take off your coat and  
you never let me go again.

## **The Fifth Dimension of the Closet Floor**

*by Mackenzie Van Valkenburgh*

Tell me again about time as the fourth dimension,  
    about the invisible lines,  
the direction we can only move in as one,  
    the upward spiral, the infinite climb.  
Tell me again how the whole of the Earth moves to meet me as I fall,  
    All for me, yes, and for everyone,  
Tell me how the Earth can handle us all jumping off our cliffs  
    all at once  
and try to convince me this is not magical.

Planes curve in the air but fly in a straight line  
And the accelerating electron appears to be standing still—  
Tell me again how this black hole warps space-time,  
    how everything around it must spin with its spin:  
How everything that crosses my horizon disappears  
    And oblivion is not created by darkness.  
Antimatter, my other self,  
The girl I am destined to destroy—  
Tell me I do not have to erase her simply by existing.  
    Tell me somewhere out there is a place for us.

Tell me that what happens next is the same as before.  
The big crunch at the end of the universe is only the Big Bang's first breath.  
    If: before I was born it was peaceful  
    Then: when I am gone there will be peace.  
Promise me that life after death will be warm.  
Promise me that one day I'll see.