

long exposure

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Abstract

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A young woman journeys through her life experiences with four men: Bobby Gene, Cassius, Ray, and Edgar Allan Poe. Together, they find struggles, success, and human kindness. Tied together with old, worn photos, this narrative discusses what it means to remain kind through the wear and tear of life and showcases that the relationship between an older man and a young woman can be something other than taboo.

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Lastly, I want to express my sincere gratitude to my cohort for sticking together through a global pandemic. We were once told our program would be “cohesion through crisis.” Little did we know the crisis would be more than academic.

This project has been full of first-times, from quarantine to my opening the gold-wrapped box of photos. Thank you to everyone who has made this journey possible. It was more than I bargained for, but I’m glad for the adventure.

Dedication

“Be in that solitude,
Which is not loneliness – for then
The spirits of the dead, who stood
In life before thee, are again
In death around thee...”
– E.A. Poe, “Spirits of the Dead,” (1827)

the head and the heart



THE BOX

In an attempt to preserve a fading family history, I asked my parents for any photos they had of their relatives. With them having been photographers, I expected bins of pictures from the last thirty years or so. What I received instead was different – older. An old shoebox, wrapped in torn gold foil paper, with a picture of a kid on a toilet taped to the top. I found out later that kid was my dad, and the box of photos was likely curated by my grandmother. She's not a sentimental person. Family heirlooms, especially photos, don't seem to mean much to her. The only people in the family who cared enough to keep them were my parents.

Some of the photos are ones I'd seen before, photocopied into an album somewhere in some other relative's house. But the rest were new to me. Many of the images were taken around seventy years ago, but some were as old as the very early 1900s. Almost all of the photos were of people. And of those people, I'd only ever met three of them: my father, my uncle, and my grandmother. Every other person was a stranger. A blood-related stranger, but a stranger nonetheless.

The curator of the photos, whether my grandmother or not, only labeled a few of the images. Worse, there are approximately eight Roberts in my family. There are only so many ways you can nickname a Robert before there's a duplicate. My father, a Robert, has a middle name that's the same as the last name of another Robert in the family. My paternal grandfather, also a Robert, went by Bob as an

adult, but was called Bobby Gene as a child. No one except his mother and her close friends knew he was called Bobby Gene as a kid, and the handwriting on the backs of the photos of him when he was young isn't my grandmother's.

The more I looked through the box of photographs, the more unsure I became of who the people were. The only people I could immediately identify were Bobby Gene and Cassius. Everyone directly related to Bobby Gene had wide ears that stuck way out, and those related to Cassius had a stern nose. I picked out photos that I knew were them, and I tried to piece together who they were.

Old photographs are terrible judges of character. Because of the limitations of photography equipment of the time, subjects were often posed. Long exposure on cameras required the subject to stay still for several seconds. Any movement was caught in the light and imprinted onto film, and so stillness was imperative for in-focus photos. All of that said, the photographs of my family are posed, erasing the movement of a live person. Unfortunately, those who may have once known them are long gone.

All that's left are stories. In September 2019, I took a genealogical trip to Missouri, during which I spoke to several older relatives, all in their nineties. Each one told the same stories, but during retellings and among different households, the stories shifted a bit. I tried to jot down the most important points. These were the

mannerisms and interests of the people within the stories. Looking at the photos, these stories brought them back to life.

I wanted to retell the stories of long-lost relatives, but my notes held little in the way of plots. Instead, I had notes such as, “*clocks were an outlet, blue-collar engineer, dedication to the craft down to his marrow.*” Other notes were related more to the photos, including, “*crinkle by the left side of his mouth, glasses pushed up high, always in a suit, sad eyes, slight smile as though he wants to reassure you.*”

In my rereading of these notes, I discovered that I fixated on mannerisms and small physical traits. I did have a few character notes, mainly about their work ethic and interpersonal relationships, but I focused more on tiny movements. An eyebrow lifting, a lip not stretching evenly over a smile, a hand repeatedly turning a screw a tiny bit. I discovered, in the end, that the people I’d been staring at in photographs were hardened from their lives but still remained kind. I realized how much this meant to me, as someone who knew so little about where they came from. Kindness flows in my veins, from generation to generation, all the way to the heart that pumps my blood through my body. I can’t let go of that. I can’t let kind people be dead forever.

RETELLINGS

I've never been able to tell a story the same way twice, not that I'd want to. It's more interesting if it changes. But retellings can be more than just changing a few small details. Angela Carter's work is a great example of this. In her collection of retold fairytales, entitled *The Old Wives' Fairy Tale Book*, she discusses how these retellings are formed. "When we hear a story, we bring all our own experience to that story" (Carter, xix). Much of my own experience with family history comes from a limited number of photographs, a small genealogical book, and my own imagination. Many of the stories I'd been told of my ancestors couldn't be corroborated, and those who may have known more have long passed. These tales were "...stories without known originators that can be remade again and again by every person who tells them..." (Carter, ix). They were once an oral tradition. Now, I'll likely be the last person to have heard all of them. I'll be the last person to retell them, too.

My memory does not always serve me well, and it sometimes mixes up the stories, blending two timelines and distinct moments into one. Originally, I was quite distraught over this. I'd be losing the stories I fought so hard to preserve. Now, I don't feel quite the same amount of frustration. Those who would appreciate the "true" story, or rather, the more accurate stories, are those who lived to see them happen. I am the last child in my family. Soon, no one will be able to distinguish an "accurate" story from an "augmented" one. And that's just fine. Some

stories were given to me; others I created. The people were real – are, in some respects, still real – and I'm keeping them in my creations so that they may continue living on.

POE

As a young adult, I latched onto the darker stories I'd read, finding comfort in how they delved into what were once taboo topics while being a safe place to vent my nearly-teenage angst. Edgar Allan Poe was a familiar name for me, but I mostly remembered him for his poem "El Dorado," which I considered a child's bedtime story. When it came time to read more of Poe's work, I skipped his section. I wasn't a child anymore and didn't want to read any stories that always had happy endings. After reading Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery* and a host of other dark tales, I returned to Poe. I was a voracious reader as a child, and I finished almost every book in my school's small library. All I had left was Poe's section of a short story anthology: "The Raven" and "The Tell-Tale Heart." I started with "The Tell-Tale Heart" and was immediately gripped by a sense of exhilaration. I could feel the narrator's panic, and I wanted to write characters just as Poe had done. I wrote a few very short stories, but I needed more. I turned to "The Raven." The imagery was thick within the poem, and I loved every word, whether I knew the meaning or not. I wrote my own version of the poem, entitled "The Crow," and continued my corvid obsession by collecting crow, raven, and jay feathers whenever I played outside.

My writing went through a massive overhaul, including the incorporation of more complex vocabulary and metaphors. I started to use different rhyme schemes in my poetry and focus on different themes altogether. I love an unhappy ending, especially when paired with a tumultuous middle and frightening beginning. I was

drawn to the dark imagery so prevalent in many works from the 1800s and onward. I love the repetition and the similes and the anthropomorphism of common creatures and items. I used this personification of items with photographs and drawings I found, including one of Poe himself.

I started being homeschooled in sixth grade, and I made most of my friends in the books I read, which included Poe. He was my non-imaginary imaginary friend who would help me write and express myself. He gave unsolicited advice, and I often didn't heed it. What I really needed from him was his ghostly presence, haunting my writing process. To this day, he hovers, although with reduced looming. From Poe, I received the gift of melancholic language and vivid description. As a mentor, he taught me to think about my own work more formulaically. He taught me process: Start with what is written down first, and everything else after that falls precisely where it needs to. Even in his own descriptions of composing "The Raven," in an essay entitled "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe states that he began simply with the word "Nevermore" and wrote a poem to satisfy his need to use it in writing. "Nevermore" was "...the most delicious because of the most intolerable sorrow," he wrote (Poe, 1085). This is a familiar feeling for me – the emotion of a word can be so strong that I will construct writing around it simply to share that emotion. Poe had another idea beyond "Nevermore": the Raven, repeatedly crowing the word. In his process of writing, yet one more idea latched itself to his mind: "a lover lamenting his deceased mistress"

(Poe, 1084). The rabbit trail of ideas eventually led to the conception of the poem “The Raven,” which has a special place in my journey to becoming my own writer. Similarly to Poe, I tend to have ideas snowball as I attempt to combine many smaller ideas into a larger one. Part of the process of writing this piece has been the difficult task of learning what to omit – something I’ve struggled with since I began learning to revise.

RESURRECTING THE DEAD

Throughout writing my thesis, I found myself thinking back to my work in translating historical documents – such as homemaking books and personal journals – from older English into more modern, easily digestible texts. For example, I would read through journals of 1820-60s housewives to find recipes and household tricks. Then, I wrote translated versions that could be used to teach skills and food history to others. While this kind of work isn't featured in my thesis, it constantly reminds me of how author Kaia Solveig Preus read through hundreds of letters in order to create her work, *The War Requiem*. Through historical documents, her own imagination, and a dedication to her project, she brought soldier-poet Wilfred Owen and composer Benjamin Britten to life on the page. At one point, she directly addresses this: "...in this space I've created, where I read and write about him [Owen], he is still alive" (Preus, 102). These men, long dead, are alive in her writing, and they live in her mind, constantly there as she works. "The men exist so vividly in my imagination now...Spinning scenes out of nothing becomes easier the more I read and write. I feel as though I've seen their lives in my dreams" (Preus, 74-75). As I review my own notes, this particular thought echoes in my head, this idea of knowing the lives of those I've never met. In my mind, they are real, constantly evolving as more and more information about them surfaces.

FATHERLY

When I was a kid, my dad and I used to watch one episode of *Star Trek* every night before I went to bed until we'd seen every single one. Then it was *Stargate* and an array of short science fiction movies. We both read Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*, and he particularly wanted me to read Ray Bradbury's short story "Frost and Fire." It wasn't until recently that I decided to pick up one of Bradbury's older science fiction collections, *R is for Rocket*, and I regret not doing so sooner. Many of his short stories are only a few pages long, some only focusing on one scene and giving the reader plot through dialogue or context cues. I immediately fell in love with the writing and the author. In a letter on an unmarked page of *R is for Rocket*, Bradbury penned a letter to his readers – a letter I felt could have been directed at me and me alone. In my research journal, I photocopied the page and gave it its own dedicated section. But the final line of the letter is what had the most impact on me, both as a person and a writer: "The stars are yours, if you have the head, the hands, and the heart for them" (Bradbury, unmarked). This line, these sixteen words, made a profound mark on my personal view of myself as a writer. I write because of who I am and what I want to see in the world, whether it be something as grand as social change or as cliché as a fantastical escape from reality. While I started with *R is for Rocket* per my father's request, it's not the only Bradbury work I've read. *S is for Space*, while not as memorable for me as *R is for Rocket*, had a similarly resonant introduction.

“Jules Verne was my father. H.G. Wells was my wise uncle. Edgar Allan Poe was the batwinged cousin we kept high in the back attic room. Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers were my brothers and friends. There you have my ancestry. Adding, of course, the fact that in all probability Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, author of *Frankenstein*, was my mother. With a family like that, how else could I have turned out than as I did: a writer of fantasy and most curious tales of science fiction” (Bradbury, 7).

The authors he mentions are all ones I've read before, and each brought their own style of imagination to meet the realities of our world. Along with Poe, I felt as though I were a cousin to Bradbury, or perhaps a daughter, listening to her father tell tales of wonder and the vast possibilities of the unexplored. I remembered, then, how my grandfather was a scientist with a love of new technology and exploration. He'd gone so far as to buy a color television for the moon landing, which was, to his dismay, broadcast in black and white. He seemed to want Bradbury's works to be reality – technologies to excite the curious nature of humanity. My grandfather wanted rocket ships and geodesic housing and humans on planets telescopes could barely reach. This was the man who raised my father, and my father is an equally curious person, although perhaps less detail-oriented. And together, we are all curious and love the mystery as much as we love the answers.

THE STARS ARE MINE

Reflecting on my own work, I realize how my own history and relationship with mentors and storytelling brought me to indulge in flawed yet kind characters who accompany a narrator through their life. There is a *softness* I've written that I too seldom see exhibited in the relationship between girls and male familial or mentor figures. Part of this is my own selfish desire to write my own ancestry. How could I not want strange yet kind forefathers? They are full of stories, accurate and imagined. But another part of writing kind relationships in this way is due to how I have physically viewed the original people on whom I based my characters. Their photographs are soft and warm, full of sepia tones and grainy edges. The long exposure of the camera technology during their time greatly contributes to a fuzziness that may not be typically captured on a digital camera taking the same photos. However, these photos and their age are what helped bring them to life in my mind. My curiosity grew too out of hand to not imagine the people in my box of photos. Who were they? What did they do? Why have they been confined to this box and separated from other boxes of photos? My curiosity is only partly sated by factual answers.

It's the quirks of the people in the photos that make them real, whether that be glasses askew or a one-sided smile. More than that, when I can connect stories I've heard to the photos I've seen, they become more alive in my mind. The man with the glasses askew was an orderly person. Something to infer from this: His

glasses are askew because something happened. This is a family photo, so it's likely something good. Another story is connected to the image, and I realize he's excited to have purchased his own shop after struggling through the Great Depression. I feel like an archaeologist beginning to understand how unburied bones start to form an entire skeleton.

Now stitching together the final gaps in this iteration of my work, I feel at peace with the people I've brought back into this world. At night, I sleep with *The Unabridged Edgar Allan Poe* by my head as though it were a church lady's Bible, bookmarks sticking out every few pages, notes shoved in on separate leaves of paper. His works have been with me since I was a child, and for that, he is a part of my history, just as much as the men in the photographs from the box.

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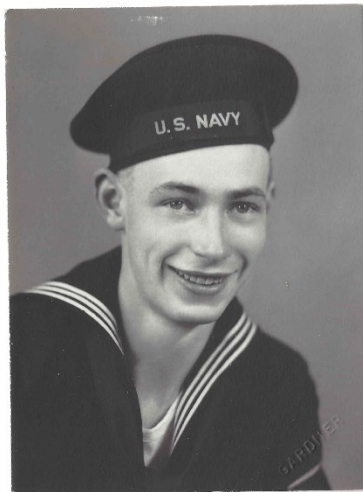
long exposure



Standing on the edge of a pier, I stare out at the Alaskan waters. My parents are photographing from a short way away, trusting me to safely run along the wooden walkway. Instead of working out my restless energy as they most likely hoped, I decide to watch the sunset. It's not as glorious as some of the ones I've seen in other states, but I remember my father saying that the sun never quite sets during an Alaskan summer.

I put my feet up on the guard rail and lean over, looking down into the blue waters. The earth below is dark, but the clearness of the ocean makes it seem much brighter. I can see a small fish picking algae off the pier supports. I look back up at the sunset and wonder when it will be over. It's still bright enough for me to see.

A tall man rests his places one foot on the forward. I watch him pull pocket of his uniform. I've before. I can read the front of his jacket, but his for me to decipher from a



arms on the guard rail. He lower rung and leans a cigarette out from the never met a real soldier word "U.S. NAVY" on the name is printed too small few feet away.

He places the cigarette between his lips and draws out a gold lighter. It's one of the ones I like: a tiny metal box that opens when the lid is flipped. I know I'll never smoke – I hate the smell – but I love lighters. Setting stuff on fire is fun.

I'm happy that the breeze is blowing toward the man, sending his smoke away from me. I try not to stare. I pull my hair in front of my face like a veil, hoping

he won't notice I'm still looking at him. There's something weird about him. He's a bit faded.

"Let's get going!" my father calls. He starts walking toward me. He doesn't seem to notice the man.

The man puts out his cigarette on the guard rail and tosses it into the air. It turns to dust, and the wind whisks it away. He pulls out a small flask. There's something etched on it, but his hand is obstructing it.

"What are you staring at?" my father asks me. He stands by my side and looks over to the man.

I look up at my father. He has the same nose as the man. I don't want to point that out. My parents taught me not to stare at strangers, and I don't want my father to think I've been rude. "I'm just zoning out," I tell him.

He taps my shoulder and we begin to walk away from the end of the pier. My shadow is long in front of me, the sun hugging the horizon. I follow its length to the bench where my mother is sitting.

"My parents used to live in this area," my father says. "After his stint in the Navy, my dad loved working by the ocean. Haven't been back here in ages." He looks at me. "What do you think of Alaska?"

I think for a moment. "I like it," I tell him. "It's cold and has cool animals. Also lots of ice. Plus, you got me this cool yo-yo." I hold my wooden yo-yo up, the string haphazardly wrapped around it.

My father smiles gently. He doesn't have that many expressions. Or, rather, he doesn't have that many expressions I can decipher from under his beard. I'm not sure what the smile means, but the skin around his eyes crinkles a bit, which means he's actually happy.

I glance over my shoulder to see if the man is still there on the pier. He's gone. I look back over to my father. "Do you have any good stories about your dad?"



A man stares at me from the pages of my book. His eyes are gaunt, and his neck scarf is tied tightly around his throat. Is he suffocating?

His writing is shades of gray – nighttime, death, sorrow, loneliness. I am drawn to this macabre style. I, too, feel like a melancholic Victorian artist seeking out my long-lost love, with no one to understand my internal machinations. He is, in some ways, a friend of mine. He's with me everywhere I go now, tucked away in the folds of my young brain.

I return my battered book to the shelf, the pages fighting against the binding as I attempt to keep them within the cover. This man – this suffering artist long absent from this world –is like me.

Edgar Allan Poe, like me, also has a double last name that isn't hyphenated.



A breeze dances through the trees, shaking loose leaves free from their branches. Some fall to the forest floor, and I watch as one lands on a stump. I'm walking slowly, paying less attention to following the trail and more on the woods around me. It's early morning, and I'm by myself. I can hear rain falling, but I feel nothing on my skin. I hold out my hand and look up, but still I feel nothing.

The rain sound intensifies. I stop walking. There's a strange sensation in my feet. From the corner of my eye, I see movement. Antlers, multiple sets, begin to move closer to the trail. Then heads and bodies appear. The elk don't seem to notice me. Their hooves meet rocks and downed branches, creating the auditory illusion of falling rain. I watch the herd meander across the trail and further into the forest.

Even after they are out of sight, I wait. Soon, the rising sun beams bright light through the trees and directly into my eyes, signaling for me to return to my cabin. I need to help my parents prepare breakfast. Squinting, I turn around and begin jogging back to camp. Grey clouds start to block out the sunlight as I round the final corner of the trail, and I can feel drops of rain on my scalp. I stop just before I hit the tarp over our picnic table and look up. A raindrop hits me squarely between the eyes, and I flinch. I duck under cover.

My father, sitting in a folding chair, looks up from his book for a moment to acknowledge my return from the woods. In a swift movement, he sets down his reading and heads into the tiny cabin to grab breakfast makings. I survey the edge of the forest, looking for elk. For a split second, I think I can see a completely white elk, soaked from the rain, wearing a brown saddle. It blinks at me and then

disappears into the trees. Braving the downpour, I try to run after it, but by the time I get to the trail, it's gone.

“A shame,” Cassius says, “Your father would've liked to see that beast.”



Poe has been visiting more frequently than usual. He doesn't often say much, but he likes to hover. Part of me is grateful for his calm presence. The other part of me hates being observed at every moment of every day.

"I'm trying to write this story," I tell him. "It doesn't help when all you do is stare at me."

Poe just sighs.

"That was your cue to leave," I explain.

"I wish I could write as mysterious as a cat," he says.

I roll my eyes. "Cats can't write." I return to my work, sitting at a picnic table just outside my family's trailer and continually scratching out my own writing. The Grand Canyon is beautiful from the outside. There's an alluring danger to standing right on the edge and looking down, however many hundreds of feet it is to the bottom. I thought it would be a great place to write – a grand place, I might say – but all I seem to be doing is getting hung up on one specific sentence. There's a word I don't know. I know I need the word, but I can't figure out what it is. I know there are a lot of words I've never heard, but I like to think I'm a well-rounded person with a larger vocabulary than most. I like to think this when I know what to write.

Today is not a day where I think that I have a large vocabulary.

Poe leans in, slowly getting closer and closer to my notebook.

"I'll poke your eyes out with this pencil if you don't back up," I warn him.

He leans away and says, "I thought I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow."

I growl at him, words failing me again. “N-no,” I stutter, “I’m just frustrated I can’t remember this word I don’t know.”

Poe frowns, but says nothing.

I can’t seem to remember the words I need when I need them. My own brain is failing me.

That’s my whole issue with memory – it doesn’t work well. I seem to remember all the wrong things. I can recite the Pledge of Allegiance but struggle memorizing one stanza of Robert Frost.

Poe, for the first time in several years, places a hand on my shoulder.



I can hear Christmas carols playing in another room. The school term is almost over, and exams are looming. I want to feel the holiday cheer, but I keep returning to my books. I'm secluded in my room while visitors chat with my parents. I can hear laughter and glasses of wine clinking. I stare at the pages of my book, the words beginning to melt into one another. I try to force myself to annotate, to write down *something*. I feel like I'm going crazy with all of these words to remember. I can't seem to distill my thoughts down from the ocean trapped in my brain.

Poe says, "That which you mistake for madness is but an overacuteness of the senses."

I close my eyes and plug my ears. I can't deal with him now. "I'm reading," I tell him. I wait a few moments before opening my eyes and ears again. I turn in my desk chair.

Poe is standing behind me.

I sigh. "What do you want?"

He shows me his empty hands and shrugs.

My shoulders fall. Poe is more of a hindrance than a help in these situations. He's here to spout Victorian English nonsense and hover.

I don't remember when he first showed up. But suddenly, many years ago, he became a part of my life. More recently, there's clearly something he's trying to tell me. He just doesn't appear to know how. Instead, he sighs and shrugs before leaving the room.



I tap my pencil on the edge of the desk. My teacher asked me to fill out a form about my education, but I don't really want to do it. There's always the same question: What do you want to do in the future? I want a PhD, just like my grandfather. I never remember the story correctly, but someone told him he wasn't that good at school, so my grandfather got a PhD. He eventually became a scientist during the Cold War. My grandmother almost got a PhD as well, but she had my father instead. One semester short of being a doctor to become a mother. I think my father is grateful. Whenever he tells me about his mother's education, I feel like there's something unspoken.

In Norway or Finland or one of those northwestern European countries, those who earn a doctorate get a sword and a top hat. I already have a sword and a top hat, but I don't have the cool robes.

"Did you ever graduate college?" I ask Poe.

He shrugs.

I turn back to my assignment. I haven't written anything yet. "Did you like going to school?"

"I remained too much inside my head and ended up losing my mind," he tells me.

My pencil rolls across my desk. I push it from one side to the other, stopping it just before it falls off either edge. "Maybe if you'd made better friends you wouldn't have been so lonely and depressed," I say.

Poe sighs.

He always sighs when I've said something that annoys him. "But am I wrong?" I ask. "All I ever see about them is how much of a bad influence they were. My parents would be so mad if they'd found out I had friends who were drinking and doing drugs and gambling."

"Men have called me mad; but the question is not yet settled, whether madness is or is not the loftiest intelligence," he says.

I frown. "I mean, I guess," I reply. "I do like most of your writing. Not everyone can write as well as you."

Poe watches me with his hollow eyes. He takes a few steps toward me, just far enough that I can't reach out to touch him, but close enough for him to peer over my shoulder at my work.

The page was still blank.

My father knocks on my bedroom door. "Who are you talking to?" he asks through the wood.

I turn in my chair to call back, "Poe!"

"Well, it's dinner time," he says. "Five minutes, and I need butts in seats."

"Is there a chair for Poe?" I ask.

My father cracks open the door and peers in. He glances around the room. His eyebrows twitch, but I can't tell what his face is trying to say. "Yeah, sure," he tells me.





“A short story must have a single mood and every sentence must build toward it,”

Poe tells me.

I lean back in my chair and try to balance a pencil between my nose and upper lip. It smells like the bottom of my bag: old wood and smudged graphite. I focus on it, slowly removing my fingers until it stays by itself.

Poe takes a deep breath.

The pencil falls.

“I already know how to write a short story. I’m just not very good at it,” I say. “Besides, I’m not even writing a short story right now.” I contort myself to grab the pencil, which has rolled under my chair. I grunt and struggle, my balance being challenged. After nearly falling over, I right myself and try to calm my mind. It wants to focus on everything else except writing.

There’s a clock on the wall that ticks every second. Rain is falling softly outside. The neighbor’s chicken is crowing. My mother is washing dishes in the kitchen. Poe is leafing through a notebook and continually sighing. None of these things are my writing.

“What’s a good way to write a poem?” I ask Poe. “I’m trying to enter into a local competition and the deadline is tomorrow.”

He closes his notebook, and it vanishes. “Every poem should remind the reader that they are going to die.”

I frown. “This is the Strawberry Festival poetry competition. The poem is supposed to be about strawberry shortcake.”

Poe wrings his hands together.

“Not everything has to be about death, dying, and insanity,” I tell him. “There are happy things too, sometimes.”

He shakes his head and turns away from me.

Ignoring his moodiness, I tap my pencil against my paper, hoping a poem will spring from it.



My feet dangle over the edge of the bulkhead, my toes barely dipping into the dark water below. I know it's not deep, but I can't see the bottom. I glance over to Poe, who refuses to take off his shoes.

"The leather is going to be ruined by the salt," I warn him.

He stares at me, unblinking. "What are you looking for?"

I never expect a sensible answer from him and won't validate such a ridiculous reply with a reply of my own.

Poe looks down at his soaked shoes. The water travels up his sock and onto his pants.

"Who was Annabel Lee?" I ask him.

He lets the waves completely cover his feet.

I repeat my question.

"The death of a beautiful woman, is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world."

I watch the water pull the dirt out from under my toenails.

Poe returns to staring at me. "I have no faith in human perfectibility," he says. "I think that human exertion will have no effect upon humanity."

"Perfectibility doesn't sound like a real word," I say, but I understand what he means. No matter what I do now – no matter how many questions I ask or how much research I do – it will all mean nothing in the end.

We are both quiet for a moment, the water rushing in and out in its fervor. Poe's pants are soaked up to his knees, and the cold wind whips along the surface of

the dark water, pushing the waves faster and faster into shore. The waves slam against the bulkhead, but it holds strong.

“Was Annabel Lee a real person?”

Poe says nothing.

Salty water sprays my face as waves crash against the concrete barrier between the land and sea.

“Was she real to you?” Poe asked.



NAME	REMARKS	BORN	DIED
Robert Eugene [REDACTED]	Son of Eugene [REDACTED]	Aug 24 1934	

I never know what to say when people ask if I believe in ghosts of the dead. I'm more concerned about the ghosts of the dead believing in me. A hundred years ago, my ancestors were farming and mining. I don't think I've ever done a hard day's work.

Staring at my grandfather's notes, I wonder if he knows how I'm doing. He probably isn't happy with my criticisms of his writing. He was, as far as I understand, a man of science and efficiency. One mistake while writing on his typewriter was no issue so long as his point was clear. It would've been too much work to redo the whole section for one typographical error. It still bugs me though.

That one extra letter

a misspelling

the lack of a space.

Oscar

He spent many years trying to chart our family history. It's too bad he never got to finish it. As I paw through his binders, I can't tell what he's gathered and what he's made. Notes on notes on charts on notes scramble most of the names and dates. I recognize so little of the information. But what I wanted from this genealogical dive was images. I don't even know what my grandfather looked like.

I hear footsteps behind me, and I look over my shoulder. The back door is slowly moving in the breeze. I stand up to close it, peering out to check if someone was going in or out. A little way away, in the street, a man with shortly-shorn hair and a bushy beard is walking away. A car is speeding towards him. I call to him, and he glances to me. I wave my hands in the air and dart barefoot out into the lawn, trying to get his attention.

He winks at me before turning back around and continuing on his way.

I watch as the car plows into him. My breath catches in my throat. I can't scream. The car drives off and I rush into the street to help the man, but all I can find is his brown jacket, wadded up in a pile on the road.



Crawling on my stomach under the bramble, I grasp at loosened roots. I drag myself across the damp dirt, and I can feel small barbs gouge tiny cuts into my skin. Just out of reach is the *thing*. Orange, not the fruit, not round, not meant to be in the bushes. I let my body go limp for a moment, in the underbrush. The smell of the tall grasses and dry trees seeps into my pores. The *thing* is just out of reach. I think about leaving it, but I've gotten so far. I've endured three feet of sliding on uneven ground through a sharp thicket to get to this *thing*. I can hear other kids down by the lake splashing in the water. One of the older boys was throwing the little kids into the deeper parts earlier, and he must have started up again after taking a break. I want to be thrown into the deep end, but I want to grab this *thing* first. I tense up and start to wiggle forward. I stretch out my fingers as far as they can go, and finally, after one more solid push, I can feel the unnatural texture on the tip of my middle finger. I try to drag it closer. I dig my nail into it, and it slowly moves toward me until I can grasp it in my palm. It's oval, foam, with a little chain through a punched-out hole.

I squirm my way out of the tunnel I'd made into the bramble. I carefully return to my feet and turn toward the lake. Bobby Gene is standing right in front of me, arms crossed. "And what made you think this was a good idea, little lady?" he asks me.

I shrug. "Picking up trash or treasures," I tell him. "Mom says plastic isn't good for the fish." I turn the *thing* in my hands before holding it up to Bobby Gene. "What'd you think this is?"

He pulls his square glasses out from his front pocket. He slides them up his nose and scrunches his face. “Key fob bob, looks like.”

“What’s it for?” I ask him.

Bobby Gene folds his glasses and carefully tucks them back into his shirt pocket. “Keeps your keys afloat. The orange thing is a floatie. So if you put your keys on that chain, they won’t sink if they fall in the water.”

I nod.

Bobby Gene nods.

“You shouldn’t just play up there by yourself! Come have fun!” my mother calls from the lakeshore.



“What are you doing here?” I ask Poe.

He sits on the top of my dresser, his head tilted to the side to accommodate the lower ceilings. He doesn't reply.

“There has to be some grand reason you and the others keep visiting,” I say. “Are you my guardian angels? Divine mentorship? What?”

“Your world is changing,” Poe says.

I slam my desk drawer shut.

“The scariest monsters are the ones that lurk within our souls,” he says.

The clock on my desk ticks. I watch the second hand move, waiting for my study hour to be over.

Poe shifts on the dresser behind me. “It is best to face new journeys with others.”

I ignore him and keep pretending to do work. The second hand of the clock isn't moving fast enough. I just want to go outside and practice my archery.

Giving up on watching the clock, I stare back at my blank page.

“Why can't you visit at more convenient times?” I ask. I don't look at Poe, but I can still feel him watching me.

“We visit when we are needed most,” he replies. “When that is relies wholly on you.”

I try to write my first line of an essay, but the pen won't put ink on the page. I open my desk drawer and pull out a new pen. When I finally think of something to say to Poe, and I turn to face him, he's gone.

“Typical,” I say.

My alarm rings, and study hour is over.



I'm sitting on the floor of the local used bookstore, flipping through worn pages of unwanted books. I'm always drawn to the classics section. The leather bindings and gold-edged pages smell right. Not plastic, but earthy. I remember my elementary school librarian telling me they smelled of fading mercury and arsenic. They smell like history. Tobacco pipes and candlelit nights, some man with a beard and just enough money to buy a new suit every year, a woman in a flowing gown drinking tea in the parlor.

I like this little bookstore because the shopkeepers encourage reading on the floor. They'll just step over you or go around if you're in the way. Sometimes, they even bring out a chair.

Poe seems to like this bookstore, too. Unlike usual, he drifts away from me a bit. Not so much that he can no longer see me, but enough that I don't feel his sometimes-overbearing presence. I can see him peering over the railing of the second floor to watch me. He turns back around and runs his hands along the shelves until he's out of sight again. I look back down at my book.

Ars longa, vita brevis. – Hippocrates

The chapter begins with a Latin quote. Latin feels like magic. People say demons can be summoned with it, since it's a dead language and demons are technically dead too. I don't believe in demons, but I believe in magic. Or, at least,

certain kinds. Latin feels like a spell. A universal key. I can learn languages much easier if I could only master it.

Art is long, life is short.

I always think I have so much time left, but then I hear about someone I know who's dead. No amount of Latin can bring them back.



I'm standing where my father's grandfather once stood. I don't know much about him. I know he liked building and repairing old clocks. I know he sometimes went fishing with a relative whose name I've forgotten. I know he was a handsome man who had a nice smile. I know he died trying to fix a car. I know he died slowly.

He stood here, once. He sat on this screened-in porch, watching lightning bugs in the humid night air. I listen to the cicadas as my grandmother's cousin tells stories from an old rocking chair.

And he built that one too, from the fourteenth century. My husband and he did. Has little cherubs on it. Can't tell the time too good, though. It sat in that there garage near ten years before they dug it out. Kept saying somethin' 'bout not havin' the right screwdriver, but I think they just didn't wanna admit that once the clock was done they'd have no more projects together.

I can see a wild turkey waddle across the yard and jump into the bird bath. There are plenty more of them in the distance, huddled along the edge of the lawn.

Scott used to go shoot those darned birds, but they keep comin' back for more. Might pick one off before the holidays though. Hard to beat a well-fed wild bird for Thanksgiving. Can't right remember when they started appearin'. Bothersome fowl.

It's still warm despite the sun going down. I'm holding onto an old pair of glasses. Whoever once owned them was farsighted, the lenses pulling the world closer to me. They were small, too. Round glass in wire frames older than anyone I've ever met.

1820s, I think. Irish tin miner turned farmer. That's, uhm, their farm you visited. What's her name again? Starts with a V... Nevermind that. Them glasses are older than I am! Been in the family a long, long time.

She keeps telling stories and I keep listening. My father and his cousin are sitting in the dining room in creaky chairs talking about hay bales. Hay baled too tightly might combust. I hear them discuss possible solutions to an ancient problem that already had plenty of solutions. Don't bale the hay too tightly.

The sun is setting fast and my father, grandmother, and I get ready to leave. I'm standing on the porch again, waiting for the goodbyes to cease and the car to be unlocked. I hear something metal hit the steel frame of one of the benches. I glance over, and see the outline of a man fidgeting with a screwdriver. He holds out his hand. I bend over and reach for the dropped piece, but as I go to grasp it, it fades away. Standing back up, I can the man slowly disappear, adjusting his fedora as he scratches his head.

My father calls to me from beside the car. It's time to leave.





“Were you really murdered?” I ask Poe.

He’s standing over me, hands behind his back. He looks over to the hole in my wall. He tilts his head and then motions to the hole.

I roll my eyes. “It’s just a hole,” I tell him. “I put my foot through the wall on accident.” I look down at my feet. One of my toes is bandaged from the incident. Having outgrown all but one pair of shoes, the swelling doesn’t help me fit into the remaining pair. I begin to get distracted and think about going shoe shopping before realizing what Poe has done. I look back up at Poe. “Were you murdered?” I ask again.

Poe takes a deep breath and avoids eye contact. He rocks back and forth on the balls of his feet.

I watch as he weighs his words. I’ve never seen him so reluctant. I know I ask too many questions. I talk too much, and he talks too little, but if I give him space to speak, he’s silent. Sometimes, if he doesn’t want to answer a question, he just leaves. I cross my fingers and pray he stays this time.

Poe sighs. “There are some secrets which do not permit themselves to be told,” he says.

I groan and push myself farther back into my desk chair. “You never answer any of the good questions!”

Poe shrugs.

“Why are you even here?” I ask him. “What do you want?”

His face grows soft. “You still need me.”



Poe decided to take the day off from watching me himself, and so he left Bobby Gene to stare at me instead. I don't mind it too much. I'm used to the feeling of eyes on me at all times. But these are newer eyes, less piercing eyes.

Bobby Gene is standing next to me. His hair is sticking out in all directions, and his beard could use a good combing too. He looks like he's pretending to not notice my untied shoe, but he keeps glancing back to it.

I bend down and tie my laces.

He looks away.

I know I might have to high-tail it out of here if any faculty come along, but I wanted to bring Bobby Gene back home. He used to work here, I think. His badge says he did. The facility has been completely refurbished, the longstanding goliath computing machines replaced with sleek new desktops, the other equipment slimmed down and diversified from the bulky tools of old. There were scientific instruments Bobby Gene probably couldn't even have imagined would ever exist.

He follows me over to a machine on a table facing the only window of the lab.

"What do you think it is?" I ask him.

Bobby Gene tilts his head at it before answering. "Dark matter catcher," he says.

I scoff. "How do you know that?"

"It says so on the note on the front."

I can feel myself turn red.

The note reads: “Dark Matter Catcher: Assistants, techs, and idiots, do NOT touch! – Dr. Lin.”

The drum of the machine spins slowly, and it reminds me of the rock tumbler my father bought many years ago. It hums with the other equipment in the room, and I can still hear the buzzing as Bobby Gene and I leave.

“Did you work there?” I ask him.

He shrugs. “Not that lab. The lab before it. When things were printed on paper.”

“But you worked in the physics lab here, right?”

“Among many places, sure,” he replies.

We walk up the trail from the physics building to the main library. I march up the spiral marble staircase to the second floor. I can smell old books and the café in the basement wafting up as I enter a study hall.

“Now, this is what’s great about the library,” Bobby Gene says. He stuffs his hands into the pockets of his dark brown pants and leans back, taking in the room. I scrunch my face at him as I unload my materials onto the oak table in front of me. “It’s been fifty years and nothing’s changed,” he explains. “It was like this for me, for your father, for you.”

I open my astronomy textbook. “Be quiet, this is a library.”

Bobby Gene takes a seat next to me. He glances at my book and sighs contentedly. “Astronomical physics, eh?”

I grit my teeth, “Sir, this is a library. Keep your voice down,” I whisper. “This would be a good time for Poe to come back,” I add under my breath. At least Poe said so little that he never disturbs a silence, as natural or unnatural as it may be. I put my head into my right hand as I highlight the textbook with my left.

Bobby Gene is too quiet, I think, so I look back over to him.

Poe calmly sits in Bobby Gene’s chair. He’s wearing his usual: white button-down shirt, white cravat, and black everything else. But his hair is more disheveled than usual, his eyes with darker circles.

“Where’d he go?” I ask Poe quietly.

“Away,” Poe replies. He crosses one leg over the other and places both hands on his upper knee.

I stare at him and he stares back. His eyes seem deeper set than before, but I don’t mention it.

We sit in silence.



I'm staring at the dirty dishes in the sink. There's no way to know how long they've been there except to know what food makes what stench after being left out for some time. The smell of rot forces its way into my throat, and I can feel it begin to work its way to my stomach. I watch water go down the drain as I dump out an old mixing bowl that had been left to soak. The stench is slowly being washed away. I tell myself that this is what it's like to live as an adult – to stick my fingers into gross things out of obligation and not curiosity. In my business of doing *things* I'd forgotten to live. To do the *things* that matter. The joys of washing dishes by hand disappeared a few months ago, and instead, I stand here, staring into the overly-full sink and wishing I'd taken more responsibility for my own actions.

After a while, I can feel my consciousness taking a break, my body physically absorbed in the act of scrubbing and rinsing, letting water and soap warp my fingerprints to some amphibious state. I watch my hands move as I think of other places, my body swaying from side to side as it processes the dishes from sink to drainer. I've built a world in my head to visit when I don't want to be here anymore. Not in the dark sense of leaving forever, but a portable vacation that follows me everywhere I go. Some green place by dark water with an oddly-shaped cottage just for me. I look outside the window and see my old friend Poe sitting on a stool and drinking gin straight from the bottle. He notices me and nods. I feel myself being pulled back into my body as I slice my finger on a knife.

Blood drips into the sink, and I stare blankly at the flap of skin. I look back out the window, and Poe is gone. It's been a while since he's visited. I wash my cut

and wrap it in a paper towel before walking to the bathroom for a bandage. While struggling to force the adhesive to stick to my damp skin, I hear Poe speak behind me.

“Science has not yet taught us if madness is or is not the sublimity of the intelligence,” he says.

I jump, yanking on the bandage. “You’re back,” I say. I don’t expect an answer. “Are you here to tell me I’m crazy?” I turn to face him. All that greets me is the bathroom wall.



I don't recognize the person staring back at me from the mirror.

The dark circles under her eyes, the unkempt long hair, the cracked lips. I lift up my hand and touch the glass, and she does too.

"Who are you?" I ask her.

She blinks in time with me. She has my freckle, the odd-shaped one that I used to think was a liver spot until I learned better, just under her left eye. She bites a chunk of dry skin off her lips, and I taste blood. A few drops gather on her chin. I drop my hand and touch my chin. The blood is damp on my fingertips. She brushes the blood off her own chin.

I rinse my hand in the sink, the water pink for a moment as the blood fades. More of it wells on her lips. She ignores it.

I run my hands through my hair just as she does, the loose curls ruffling around our faces. She looks like she hasn't brushed her hair in weeks. I scoff. How could she be so careless?

Leaving the bathroom, I sit down at my computer to work again. I have a thousand words to put on pages and hand to someone who likely won't read all of them. I'm typing so quickly my keyboard is all I can hear. The plastic clacks against metal and more plastic, my fingers moving so quickly I can't see where I've bitten the nails off and torn the skin. I stretch out my legs beneath my desk and hit the electrical outlet. My screen goes black.

I swear.

The person from the mirror is staring at me though the darkened computer screen. Her brows are furrowed, her eyes glistening with tears of frustration. I'm too upset to acknowledge her again. She ducks out of frame as I begin to bend down and plug in my computer again.

She's gone when I achily sit back up, the screen flickering blue and then white as the power surges through it. My document hadn't been saved. I throw a nearby notebook at the bed, the weak paper bending and bouncing off onto the floor.

"I remained too much inside my head and ended up losing my mind," Poe says.

I can feel my muscles clenching and unclenching as I try to retype my work. "Now isn't a good time," I tell him. My teeth are gritted, and my back is hunched over the desk like a downhill skier trying to go just a little faster. If I can get this done, get these words written, I'll have something to prove I was here today.

Poe hops up onto my bed and crosses his legs. I glance over at him, his shoes still on, dark slacks creasing, curly hair tamed down with oil. He's holding the notebook I threw: my idea book.

"Stop going through my stuff!" I snap. I'm attempting to write again, but I can feel Poe's eyes on my work. "Don't you have something better to do?"

"There is an eloquence in true enthusiasm," Poe says. He keeps flipping through pages, scanning the scratchy handwriting and nearly illegible sketches.

I slam my hands on the desk and swivel in my chair to face him. I put my elbows on my knees and let my head drop in defeat. "I don't know what that

means,” I say. I lift my head just enough to see Poe watching me carefully, as he always does.

He closes my notebook. “You will be fine,” he says. “Have faith, not in any God, but in your own intellectual ability to discern truth, fiction, and your place among them.”

A laugh bubbles up from my stomach. It feels putrid in my mouth, shameful. “Intellectual ability?” I reply. “I don’t even recognize myself anymore. How am I supposed to trust myself to do anything if I can’t get a grip?” I stand abruptly, the anger coursing through my nerves, triggering the tendons to contract and send my body to attention.

Poe just keeps watching me. He tilts his head and squints his eyes, his bushy eyebrows inching closer to one another. “And yet your mind sees the separation of self and body and so acknowledges it to the extent to which you still can assess the difference between the two.”

“Simpler, please,” I say. My anger is pushed aside as I attempt to understand Poe.

He shakes his head.

I storm off to the entryway, snatching a coat from a pile of clothes on the floor. If Poe wasn’t going to answer me, then I was going to walk away. That was my only form of defense – abandoning thoughts where they lie. I glance in the mirror by the door as I go to leave, but Poe is standing there, blocking it.

“Try again,” he says.

I shut my eyes, squeezing my lids as tightly as possible before opening them again. Poe is gone. The person in the mirror is staring at me with bloodshot eyes and scabs on her lips. I nod at her. She nods at me.

“How’s it going?” I ask her.

“How do you think?” she replies.





I steady my gaze on the center of the log round, my focus directed at the center of the many rings. I stand, feet together, until I'm ready to move. I let my body flow, left arm rising as the left leg begins to stride. My entire left side moves in synchronicity, a fluid throwing motion bringing the body forward to the target.

The tomahawk sinks into the ancient wood, the top of the blade digging the deepest. I nod to myself. A perfect *stick*, it's called. The handle of the tomahawk hovers parallel to the ground, making it nearly impossible for another thrower to split my handle with their own blade.

In my peripheral vision, I can see Ray shaking his head.

Irritated, I ask him, "What?"

He folds his arms across his chest. "Such a dangerous hobby, especially for a little girl," he says.

Mimicking him, I fold my arms across my own chest. "I'm not a little girl."

"Perhaps I'll concede that, but it's still a dangerous hobby," Ray replies.

I try to frown so deeply my eyebrows touch, but my face isn't strong enough. "Can't you just be proud of me for sticking it?" I ask him.

Ray sighs and lets his arms fall to his sides, softening his stance. "Yes, it's very impressive," he says. "Still dangerous, though."

"Just let me have this one thing without complaining about safety, okay?"

Ray doesn't say anything. He can't deny himself of his nature.



“Would colloquy be of benefit?” Poe asks.

I look up from the book I’m pretending to read. My eyes are staring at the words, but my mind is wandering. It takes me a moment to register what Poe’s just said. “Just a discussion is fine, I guess.”

“Yes. Colloquy,” Poe repeats.

I wait for him to begin the conversation, but he says nothing.

“So, Bobby Gene. You seem to know each other,” I pry.

Poe considers my words for a moment. “Robert Eugene. Yes. I am familiar with him.”

After a few moments of silence, I motion for him to continue.

“De mortuis nil nisi bonum,” he says.

“I have no idea what that means.”

“It’s Latin.”

“It’s something I don’t even know how to spell.” I wait for Poe to say more, to translate or explain, but he doesn’t. I rub my fingers over the edges of my book’s hard cover. We’re both silent for a bit until I can’t stand it anymore. “What about Cassius? Or Ray? How do you know them?”

Poe, sitting atop my dresser, crosses one leg over the other and straightens his back until he hits the ceiling. His head is tilted, hair falling to the side, the dark curls still framing his face. He doesn’t look comfortable, but he doesn’t complain.

“What do *you* know of them?” he asks me.

“You’re just turning my question on me to avoid answering it,” I reply. I pivot back and forth in my desk chair, unable to sit still. There’s an itch in my brain that can only be scratched with answers, but Poe so often denies me that satisfaction.

“Please, humor me,” he says.

I think for a moment. “Cassius was a mechanic who got crushed by a car. Ray was a safety engineer or something. He did war stuff, but that could mean anything.” I pause, seeing if Poe will interject at all. He doesn’t, so I continue, “They both lived in Colorado at some point, I think – near Denver or something. Cassius was a quiet man and Ray didn’t like his splotchy skin, that’s why he always wore those long-sleeved shirts with the crispy collars.”

“Starched collars,” Poe corrects.

“Fine – starched collars,” I say. “I don’t really know anything else, I guess. And I don’t know how you know them.”

Poe blinks slowly. “If you’re searching for elucidation on this matter, I cannot deliver it. But consider this: You are cognizant of us. Is that not enough?”

“No. It’s not a good enough explanation as to how you know these people and why they – and you – like to follow me around.”

“To seek the sooth is a noble prospect,” Poe says.

“Well, you can soothe me with the sooth anytime now,” I tell him. “I just don’t understand why you can’t answer my questions. Every time I talk to you, they become these hydra questions. I ask one and two more take its place. But for some

stupid reason, I just keep asking you like something's going to magically change, and answers will appear."

Poe's face softens a bit. "Perhaps these are ineffable answers," he says. He lets his shoulders drop some as he uncrosses his legs. "Or perhaps you ought not think of more questions, but rather of how to transform those questions into answers."

I spin in my chair to face my desk again. It's always the same, at this desk, writing and reading and pretending to think of useful things. "I'm not smart enough to do that," I tell Poe.

"With time comes perspective," he says.

I turn back around to lecture him on how age doesn't always amount to more wisdom, but he's gone again. I open my book and stare at the pages, the words I see never making it into consciousness.





I'm switching randomly between tabs on my browser, never staying on one for too long. I want to close them all, but I can't. There's work to do. I'm not sure where to start. I feel like I'm racing against some invisible creature, and every time I stumble, it grabs my ankles and pulls, trying to make me fall.

I click the tabs faster. I can feel my breaths grow shorter, my heartbeat speeding up. My eyes are unfocusing and refocusing on the screen. The creature reaches its claws out toward my ankles, hands open, hovering around my Achilles –

“You ever see a polar bear in the wild?” Bobby Gene asks me. “Terrifying bastards.”

I jump in my seat, coming to attention. “W-what? When did you get here?”

Bobby Gene slides his lighter back into his pocket and sucks in a deep breath from his pipe. The first cloud of smoke comes billowing out of his mouth as he answers me. “Not sure why the when matters so much as the why,” he says.

“Okay, then why are you here right now?” I reply.

He looks at the floor and nods, thinking. He draws another breath through his pipe, this time holding it in his lungs for a few moments before releasing it. “I was needed,” he says.

“What I needed was peace and quiet to finish this work,” I reply. I point to my screen.

Bobby Gene assesses the webpage that's open. “It was quiet when I got here,” he says, his voice low, “but it most certainly wasn't peaceful.” He puffs out another breath of smoke, this time in the shape of a circle. It floats above his head like a

halo and hovers for a moment before dissipating. “Calendar like that oughta kill any sane man.” His voice is scratchy from the tobacco.

“I was doing fine,” I tell him. Pride begins to grip at my chest. “And I’m no man.” I turn back to my computer, looking at the multicolored calendar events and overabundance of notes.

He laughs softly. “And you’re not sane, either.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I face him again, trying to get an actual answer, but he’s already left.



The plane's engines kick into high gear as it starts down the runway. My heart drops and soars and stops before centering back in my chest. My stomach seizes. I force myself to look out the window. Poe is sitting on the wing of the plane, unphased as we pick up speed. I peripherally register his existence, too focused on the many ways I could meet my demise.

A *puddle jumper* my mother calls it. A small aircraft that holds a tiny crew and a few passengers. When I was younger, I used to dream of going on a little plane like this. The intimacy and danger of 100 feet of metal and plastic soaring through the air. But I've been forced to watch one too many 9/11 documentaries to feel joy about flying anymore. What scared me wasn't the hijackers. It wasn't the crashing. It was the helplessness as people watched themselves die, knowing they would die, and that there was nothing to do but sacrifice it all. I'm a coward.

The wheels distance themselves from the tarmac and the nose of the plane soars upward. My body is pushed backwards, and I close my eyes. I grip the arms of the seat, my knuckles white. I glance out the window and see Poe reading – trying to read – as pages of his book are ripped from their bindings. They fly behind us, the rain saturating them. The pages fall to earth, wet spitballs from the sky to whomever is below. My brain isn't registering anymore. I can see lightning in the clouds around us. Air is struggling to flow in and out from my lungs.

"It'll be fine," the woman next to me says.

I turn my head to her, my eyes wide, skin pale. "Yeah?" I ask. My voice is hoarse.

The lady peers over her glasses. Her short grey hair is rustled by the air vent above her head. I try to focus on her. "Let me tell you something," she says. "I've flown all over the world in worse rust buckets than this." Her British accent makes a rust bucket sound appealing, but I know that's not the point of what she's trying to tell me. I steady my somewhat blurry vision on the reflection of a crossword in her glasses. 23-Down is eyeglasses and sight, a spectacle.

The lady closes her crossword book. "You're going to be fine," she reiterates. "I was a nurse with the Royal Air Force for nearly thirty years. I was in Desert Storm as a flight nurse, backup. And I learned something important there: If you're not getting shot at, you'll be fine." She opens her crossword book again and starts on the next word.

I blink before turning back to the window. "We're not getting shot at," I say. "We're not getting shot at." I keep repeating this in a barely audible whisper for the whole hour and a half of flight. "We're not getting shot at," I say again.

The lady looks at me curiously. "Do you expect to be?"

I gaze out the window at the thunderstorm now high above us. "No," I say.

"I retired to be a crime author," the woman tells me. "And what I've learned from that is this: You really shouldn't trust strangers." She tucks her crossword book into her purse. "But, sometimes, it's nice to be lied to." The woman stands up and proceeds down the narrow aisle of the plane.

I sit for a moment, her words slowly sinking in. I slide over into her seat, waiting for an opportunity to slip into the stream of disembarking passengers.

“A kind woman,” Poe says from my seat.

I ignore him and focus on the task at hand. Get out. Touch land. Kiss this Irish tarmac for all the luck in the world. I’m still breathing.

Poe keeps talking anyway. “Pity you never got her name. Might’ve made this a better story to tell.”



“You’re going to catch cold standing out in that rain,” Ray calls to me. “Or worse, get struck by lightning!”

I ignore him and continue standing in the downpour, staring up at the flashing sky. With less than a one-thousandth of a percent chance of getting hit by lightning, the storm doesn’t bother me.

Ray worries too much. It doesn’t help that he seems to know the worst possible outcome for everything. “Would you please come back up on the veranda?” he begs.

I continue to ignore him. The rain washes the soot of an earlier campfire off my face, and I can feel the rivulets carry the dirt down into the fabric of my light blue shirt. I turn my head down, the downpour now too heavy to breath properly when looking up to the dark clouds. The darkness is compounded by the nighttime, the stars and moon obfuscated by the storm. Even the lone street lamp is struggling to light the area.



A flash of light hits the lamp and the bulb shatters. I whip my head toward the sound, trying to figure out what just happened. Just as I look up to the street lamp, the thunder rolls in, vibrating through the heavy air. My body and the planks on the veranda vibrate from the impact. I scurry up onto the covered porch, emotionally shocked.

“I told you to get up here,” Ray scolds. His voice is still gentle despite the shortness of his words.

I frown at him. I don't like an *I told you so* moment.

Ray's hands are on his hips. He's not much taller than I am, but he's so thin he feels longer than he really is, almost like a cat stretching out in a hallway. Unlike usual, his sleeves are rolled up, exposing his mottled skin and slender forearms. He drops his right shoulder and leans into it, tilting his head. “Are you okay?” he asks.

I nod, still at a loss for words. I've never seen lightning come so close that I couldn't count the seconds between the flash and the rumble. I turn around and look at my sleeping mat, an old camping pad and a pile of blankets and pillows. Wrapping myself in an old army blanket, I curl up in my nest of fabric, my soaked clothes dampening everything they touch. I'm tired, suddenly. Panic can do that to a person, or so I've heard. Fear is draining.

I look up at Ray, who's watching me like a hawk, concern painting his face. “Will you be here when I wake up?” I ask him.

He sighs and gives a gentle smile before kneeling down next to me. “That’s entirely up to you,” he replies. “But I’ll be here to watch over you while you sleep. How’s that?”

My eyelids are heavy and my blinks are long. I nod slowly. “That’d be nice,” I tell him.

Ray sits all the way down and crosses his legs.

I close my eyes and let them rest for a moment before opening them again. Ray has his binder of pressure vessel explosions in his lap, and he’s flipping through the pages and shaking his head. He notices me staring and closes it. He pulls the blankets up closer to my chin and brushes the stray hairs out of my face.

“Goodnight, kiddo,” he whispers.



Every year, I spend a few nights on the veranda. It's a group event, but I sleep alone. I go to bed early, but not to get rest. I like lying there, staring at the old wooden eaves and listening to the other campers bustle about their nighttime activities until they're too tired or the alcohol runs out.

They're singing the *Ranger Song* again, too drunk to remember they've sung it once or twice already. I can't quite understand the lyrics anymore, and I'm too tired to recall what they were earlier in the night. Every year I tell myself that I'll write them down, and every year I forget. I suppose it'll have to stay an oral tradition. No recordings exist, and none likely ever will.

"Gruesome song," Bobby Gene whispers.

I roll over and pull my army blanket over my face.

"Rape the women and daughters? Spill blood in the name of England? What kind of music is this?" Bobby Gene lays down next to me on the veranda. I learned, years ago, to lay perpendicular to the planking. It's the best back support. But with another person laying next to me, the planks shift uncomfortably.

"It's a Scottish drinking song," I mumble. I grunt as I check the time on my phone, the light too bright for my tired eyes. 1:11 AM. A lucky time, according to pagan beliefs. Something about manifesting what you need and angel numbers, but I can't quite remember.

Bobby Gene adjusts himself on the planks. "A godawful drinking song. So grotesque. Why not sing that Old Maid song?"

I sigh, seeing I'm not going to be able to get out of this conversation. "They sang that four times already. *The Old Maid in Garret*. Can't forget the name with how many times I heard it." I tell him.

"There's this movie that has a great drinking song in it," Bobby Gene says. "Great cinematography too."

"What movie?" I ask.

"*Just Imagine*," he replies.

"Can you just tell me?" I ask back. "I'm too tired to imagine the movie."

Bobby Gene laughs. "You're a funny kid," he says.

I roll over so he could see me glare, but all that's there is the old wooden bench I sit on when the days get too hot. Sighing, I pull the blanket back over my face and quickly fall asleep.





The rocks below my feet are unfamiliar, rougher, colder. I can feel the foreignness of my actions through my skin. I run until the cliffs below me turn to chilled air, and I hold my breath as though it would somehow lessen the impact. My feet, not as stiff and straight as they should be, hit the water first. This is the feeling I know – icy water on warm skin, the saltiness rushing into my pores.

I'm deeper underwater than I expected.

I open my eyes, risking the burn of the salt. The water isn't my water. My eyes don't sting. I flail upward as the air in my lungs runs short. I barely breach the surface, gasping and gulping. My hair is stuck to my face, and I can't see. I struggle to push it aside.

Once I regain my bearings, I survey the landscape. No matter how much I want to be home, I'm not. I spin in place a bit, looking to the tall, rocky cliffs and green countryside atop them. There's a little white house with a red door facing the ocean. I turn to look out at its view – the shore disappearing into open water – but come face to face with Poe.

He's soaked head to toe, his curly hair partially straightened by the weight of the saturation. He blinks slowly as he treads water. "Today is not a very good day to drown," he tells me.

I start to reply, but swallow a bit of water. I cough it up, struggling to breathe again. I respond in a hoarse voice. "And why's that?"

"It's a very nice day," Poe says. "It would rather be a shame to ruin such a wonderful evening, especially for the people who live in the house."

“How do you know it’s not abandoned?” I ask him.

He blinks a few large drops of water from his eyes. “The house is quite beautifully white and the door so vibrantly red. Surely that cannot remain through the beatings of winter storms.”

I look back to the house and wonder who lives there, out here on the edge of the world, alone.

“You must acknowledge the corn,” Poe says, “and come to terms with it.”

I turn back to him. “Corn?”

“If there are kernels of truth there are cobs from which it originates,” he tells me.

I sigh and try to ignore him.

The words of his time are not the words of mine.

I note the sun sinking into the ocean, and I start to feel a harsh chill in my unprotected fingers and toes. I’m not far from shore, but I still feel a sense of urgency to vacate the water. I swim over to the nearest cliff and begin climbing, slowly, until I reach the grassy top. I look at the endless horizon and think about what brought me here, half a globe away from my home – what brought me to jump from some unknown cliff into unknown water in an unknown country full of unknown people. And even as I think, I’m not entirely sure of the reason except a restlessness to escape.

Poe heaves himself onto the cliffside. He wrings out his scarf before returning it to its rightful place taut around his neck. “Shall we head back?” he asks me.

I don't look at him. "In a minute," I say. "It's too nice of an evening to let it turn to night all alone."

Poe places a gentle hand on my shoulder and squeezes for a moment before letting go. "Indeed."



I want to live in a house that looks like someone who cares lives there. A cottage, but a bit bigger, with ancient wooden walls and a carefully-lain brick floor. I want to be near the water – a river, a lake, the ocean – and near woods. It's hallowed ground, that meeting place. I want a garden with a life of its own, that isn't confined to rectangular or circular shapes, but rather, is a chaotic kind of organized where the planting beds follow the curves of the earth below.

I want to walk barefoot on that land, in that house, through that water. I want to see every sunrise and sunset and chart the stars from the roof of my home. I want moss to grow instead of a lawn, flowers instead of a picket fence, mushrooms instead of sprinkler heads. The outdoors is a wonderful place to live and die, or so I've heard. There's so much beauty in being unrefined, unbound, wild.

I take a deep breath and sigh. I want the future to be now, where I'm in a space of my own that belongs to no one else but Mother Nature.

"We must suffer before we are at peace," Poe tells me.

"I know. I just – I don't know – I just want to be happy already." My voice cracks.

Poe slowly lowers himself onto the bulkhead with me.

We're quiet for a bit, my feet and his leather shoes dipping into the saltwater. The mountains glow a honey yellow, illuminated by the rising sun. Birds flit about and sing their morning hymns, praising the Earth for completing a lap around its partnering star once more. The water is cold, but the warm air helps me ignore my freezing feet.

“Those who dream by day are cognizant of the many things which escape those who dream only by night,” Poe says. His voice is barely louder than the waves lapping at the concrete bulkhead.

It’s my turn to not reply. I’m not sure what to say. I remember most of my dreams, anyways. A small fish bumps into my leg, and I take that as a signal to get up. The numbness in my legs is immediately offset by the sharpness of the shards of seashells in the sand. I hobble over onto the grass and start picking out the bits of sun-bleached oyster. Once I remove the pieces and carefully walk to the house, I look back at Poe, who’s still sitting on the bulkhead.

His arms suggest his hands are clasped together in front of him, and his head is tilted downward.

“Are you praying?” I call to him.

Poe lifts his head and twists to face me. “I am a sublunary man with desires only fulfilled by the unearthly.”

I frown and check my watch. It’s time to get to work on my writing. A seraphic light, as Poe had once called it, finally emerges from behind the mountains to shine directly in my eyes. I place an angled hand over my face and notice that Poe has left for the morning.



I watch the sky change colors, and I so deeply want to paint with those vibrant hues. Something in my bones yearns for those colors. The clouds turn into ink spills, soaking up the color, diffusing it to their silvery edges. Twilight, a liminal space reserved for thought and reflection, proves that I'm alive – that time is passing, and I am passing with it.

I can see the grays seep into the mix, muddying the vibrancy. The light fades until I can no longer see the creases in my hands. I know it's too dark to stay out here anymore, but I don't want to go in.

"Does your soul ache?" Poe asks me.

Shoving my hands in my pockets, I begin to walk back to the house. "I guess," I reply. "Why do you ask?"

Poe doesn't answer me, but still follows my trail back down the hill to the front door.

I didn't really expect a response. He never seems to justify his actions, which, although it would be nice, he doesn't need to. I kick my shoes off on the front porch and enter the dimly-lit house. Poe follows, but leaves his shoes on.

Flicking on a few lights, I scan the rooms for my cats, making sure they're still soundly sleeping. The dog is curled up in his bed, watching me as curiously as he always does when I do my rounds in the house. There's a nervous energy about being here, but also a surreal calm of being so isolated. Woods on one side and water on the other, the isolation forces me to depend on myself more than I ever have.

Being alone in nature rips a person down to their core, revealing their strengths and weaknesses. I choose to become a hardened axe, strong enough to defeat a foe but utilitarian enough to still be found as a homebody.

But I'm usually not completely alone. Despite their unwillingness to help, Poe, Bobby Gene, Cassius, and Ray keep me company and keep me sane. They're good to talk to, even if they don't always reply.

"Did you have sunsets like this when you were young?" I ask Poe.

He hops up on the kitchen counter and crosses one lean leg over the other. He thinks for a moment, watching me as I brew a fresh pot of mint tea. "There have always been sunsets," he says. "The question lies in how long this shall continue to be true, and the answer is bemystifying so much as science cannot give exact predictions on masses of uncertainties."

I sigh. "I don't know what that means, but I'm sure you're not going to explain it." The kettle whistles, and I turn away from Poe to pour the boiling water over the tea bag. When I look back, he's gone, as usual.





Walking along the train tracks, I can see why the station fell out of use. Moss covers the wooden supports, slowly eating at the infrastructure. It's only been a few years since they shut down the train service here, but already, everything is falling apart. That's how nature is, I guess. It so aggressively grips onto everything around it. I once read that it would only take a decade of letting nature run its course on human structures for them to be completely reclaimed.

I carefully step on the slick wood, the moss making it difficult to keep traction. The tracks don't run naturally through this forest. Someone had to carve a shelf into a cliff for a flat space to lay the beams, and looking over the edge, I can't imagine speeding along this path any faster than I can walk. How the damp stones upheld the weight of an engine and many train cars, I don't know.

My precarious footing isn't helping my nerves. I wanted to come this way both as a scenic trail and also to take a less steep path through the forest. What I didn't predict, however, was just how dangerous the train tracks are. I lose my balance for a moment, and I can feel my heart temporarily stop. I dig my boots into the moss and decaying wood and brace against the steel tracks.

"This was a marvel of engineering, once," Ray informs me. He's trying to be conversational, but I can hear the worry in the cracks of his voice.

"It's the front of a postcard now," I reply. I look ahead to where the land falls out from under the tracks. The bridge isn't long, but it's in the same condition as the rest of the tracks.

Ray grabs me by the shoulder and grips firmly. He turns me toward him, his face slightly above mine and twisted with fear. “You are not going to cross that bridge, young lady,” he says. “You can’t trust it.” He doesn’t loosen his grip.

I glance back at the bridge before making eye contact with him again. “I can’t go back now. I’ve committed to this.”

“There are alternate solutions,” he tells me. He looks over my shoulders and examines the bridge. “W-what about going down the little valley and back up? Or climbing up this ledge and taking the high ground across?”

“You want me to climb the cliff instead of go across this ten-foot bridge?”

Ray drops his hands to his side and clenches them into fists. “The bridge isn’t safe.”

I sigh. I can easily see that climbing up is too much for me, but climbing down the valley and back up the other side might work. There’s just enough incline to make it doable. The little trees gripping on for dear life might make good footholds. “We’re going down and up,” I tell Ray.

He unclenches his fists and stuffs his hands in his pockets.

Halfway down the first side, I slip and slide to the bottom. The moss is soft, but the trees and rocks it covers are not. While the valley isn’t too deep, the fall was still fatter than I would’ve liked. I rest on the forest floor for a bit, staring up at the tree canopy and listening to the birds. Ray is hunched over, next to me, whimpering in concern. “I’ll be fine,” I tell him. “I didn’t hit my head; I’m just taking a break.”

He stops whimpering, but the concern is still plastered across his face.

I slowly get back on my feet and proceed to the other side of the valley. Going up is slightly less nerve-wracking, as it's easier to get a good foothold on the small trees and jutting rocks. It does, however, take much longer than the plummet down. I keep glancing over to the bridge and glaring at it, cursing its rotten beams.

Once I'm back on the train tracks, I stare out at the walk ahead of me. No longer on a cliffside, the path is even and straight through the woods. Squinting, I can see where the trees open up to the field near my house.

Ray is calm again. "Thank you for humoring me," he whispers.

I look over to him and smile tiredly. "No problem," I reply. I keep walking out of the woods on the mossy train tracks, and glancing back, I can see Ray waving to me as I leave the final trees behind and step into the field.





“It’s scientific discovery!” Bobby Gene exclaims. “Water on Mars! Imagine the possibilities!” He pushes himself farther back on my desk and leans over me as I write. He’s giddy in a way I’ve never him seen before, a smile eerily like my father’s when he tells a corny joke.

“I’m not sure I’d want to live on Mars,” I tell him. “Space is terrifying.”

Bobby Gene hits his fist on the desk. “You live on a planet with unplumbed depths! Space is at least look-at-able. That’s what we’ve got all those telescopes and rovers for!”

I flip my notebook over to the next page. I’m supposed to be working on writing my opinion of an article the teacher made the class read. *President George W. Bush Promises Colonies on Mars by 2025* or something like that. I doubt it. Adults like to make promises they can’t keep so that other adults give them money. “Didn’t you get to see people walk on the moon for the first time?” I ask Bobby Gene.

He laughs a bit. “Yeah I did. Bought my first color television just for the occasion.”

“That must’ve been pretty cool, to see it in color and all.”

Bobby Gene sighs. “Well, it would’ve been gorgeous if they’d broadcasted it in color.”

I erase a few words to fix my handwriting. A man sitting on my desk and moving a bunch didn’t make it easy to write even lines.

“That’s just it though,” he says, “People had been talking about men in space since I was a kid. There were even popular authors who’d been speculating on it for decades.”

“Like Jules Verne,” I say.

Bobby Gene nods. “He was before my time, but he is a very famous science fiction author. I was thinking more of Ray Bradbury or Robert A. Heinlein.”

“I don’t know who those are,” I tell him. I’m not really listening to him, but Bobby Gene continues to explain.

“Well, Heinlein wrote some popular military science fiction. Can’t remember the name of it though. Bradbury did more speculation on the logistics of space travel,” he tells me. “Plus, Bradbury lived to see the first man on the moon. He wrote that space travel was for the wealthy, and he wasn’t too far off. The schooling those astronauts must’ve gone through...”

I lean back in my chair and frown at the paper. I haven’t written enough. “I can’t pay to live on Mars,” I grumble.

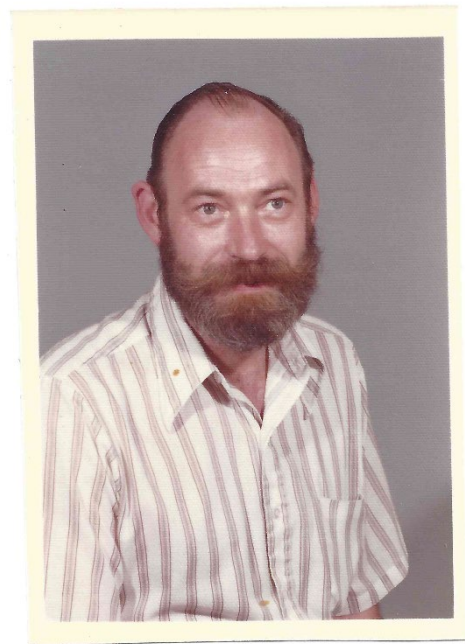
“That’s what Bradbury was saying!” Bobby Gene fidgets with his hands, clearly lost in thought.

“In conclusion,” I say aloud as I write, “I don’t think President George W. Bush is correct that we will have colonies on Mars in 2025. It’s too expensive. It is a promise that is too difficult to keep. He shouldn’t lie to people like that.”

Bobby Gene looks down at me, realizing that I’ve been focusing on my homework. “You’re a good kid, you know that?” he asks.

I meet his gaze. "I haven't been listening," I say.

He smiles softly. "I know."





I run along the shoreline, the sand squishing between my toes. I glance over my shoulder to see my footprints, deep with the weight of my strong strides. My long hair flows behind me, being pulled both by my own movement and the oncoming ocean breeze. My skirt billows as well, and I pull the front of it up to my thighs to keep from tripping. *This is what it's like to be princess*, I think. *To be so free that I no longer need to worry about where I am – who I am.* The water approaches the cliffs before me in a turn along the shore, and I can see that I'm cut off from progressing further. I stop and stare out at the water. Closing my eyes and lifting my arms up into the air, I let the wind push me as it wills, and I drink in the fresh salt scent.

Poe brushes the sand off his leather shoes. He stands beside me, and I can hear him cross his arms.

I open my eyes and look at him. He looks grayer than usual, wearier. He stares out at the ocean, the powerful waves crashing into the shore and dragging sand and stones out to sea. He sighs.

I've learned enough from him to know that sometimes, saying nothing is better than filling the gap. I allow the silence. I can tolerate it now. Turning toward my footsteps, I start following them back to where I dropped my bag on the ground some quarter mile away. Poe trails along behind me, although his steps are not as straight as my own.

Reaching my bag, I sling it over my shoulder and stare out at the ocean one last time, letting my soul say its farewells to the water. Poe walks up beside me,

and I let there be stillness between us. The ocean may speak for me in its soothing tones, lapping waves, and clinking of seashells against rocks as the water ebbs and flows.

I leave Poe staring at the ocean, no doubt saying goodbye to Annabel Lee and the other women who were washed away from his life.

In a kingdom by the sea, there lived a maiden named Annabel Lee, and the angels in heaven above and demons below in the sea could ever dissever my soul from the soul of my beautiful Annabel Lee, I recite to myself. It's not quite right, but it's enough.



Unlike in the city, I can see the Milky Way here. There are no street lamps to dull its brightness, no police sirens to cut the stillness, no smog to block out the sky. I don't miss the city anymore. I lie on my back in the lawn, counting the uncountable stars. Bobby Gene's head is next to mine, and he lets out a deep sigh.

"You okay?" I ask him.

He chuckles a bit. "It's a beautiful world out here."

"And just think of the people looking down on us from the ISS. They must think it's beautiful too."

Bobby Gene turns his head toward me for a moment before looking back at the sky. "Once upon a time, I thought humans would invent these new technologies and go to space with them."

"What? They did. We've been to space. There are literally scientists on the ISS right now." I pull a few blades of grass out of the lawn and shred them as I think.

"Well, yes, but also no. None of the technology is new. Trust me, I saw Apollo 11. Going into space, yes. New technology, no."

"What was in the Apollo 11?"

"Ford truck seats, airplane parts, rivets pioneered for the Manhattan Project. Nothing new. I was wildly disappointed when I first saw it. I wanted Ray Bradbury and I received Jane Austen," he says.

"Jane Austen?"

“Something old-fashioned. Used and reused,” he clarifies. “I wanted something new and exciting to put humanity into space. Something I could only dream about and that I knew nothing of its construction. Instead, I got recycled parts from the automotive and aeronautics industries.”

I digest his words, watching satellites fly across the sky above me, reflecting their light down at just the right angle so I can see them. Hundreds of thousands of years of engineering so some rich guy in a fancy car can hear satellite radio when driving down the freeway. “So, what about after you first saw it? Are you still disappointed?”

Bobby Gene is quiet for a moment. “Not really. It would’ve been incredible to see my science-fiction dreams come to life, but they don’t pay NASA to make pretty things. They pay them to make things that work. That’s an engineer’s job,” he says. “I think, now that I’ve stepped back from my disappointment, that I’m impressed.”

“You’re impressed they just reused old parts?”

“Sure. I never thought of doing that. They sent people into space and brought them back. Men landed on the moon and returned to tell the tale. I was so blinded by the idea of flashy new technology that I didn’t even consider how untested it might be. That’s why they pay NASA engineers so much money – to think inside, outside, and around the box in any way they can.”

We’re both quiet for a while, watching the stars.

“If I wasn’t so afraid of dying, I’d go to space,” I tell Bobby Gene.

“We’re in space all the time,” he tells me, “on a rock hurtling through the galaxy around a star near a black hole that will eventually kill every living thing in the system. But you won’t live to see that, so it’s fine.”

I groan. “That does *not* make me feel better.”

“Whoops,” he says. “My bad.”

I pull my scratchy wool blanket up to my chin to keep the mosquitos off me. The warm summer night begins to lull me to sleep, but my father steps out onto the deck.

“Let’s get you ready for bed,” he calls.

I sigh and slowly stand up, pulling my blanket with me. I look back at Bobby Gene. He’s staring up into the night sky, and I leave him there, lying in the lawn, thinking about being among the stars.



“Invisible things are the only realities,” Poe tells me.

Sighing, I turn to face him. The train ride is going to be long, so I might as well listen to whatever Poe decides to bring me today. “And?” I try to prompt him.

He’s staring straight ahead down the length of the train car, watching the ticket taker slowly approach.

I let his silence get to me. “Are you suggesting that only invisible things like emotions and memories are real?” I ask.

Poe continues staring at the ticket taker.

The ticket taker is a lean man, almost as tall as the interior of the train car. He’s wearing the uniform I’ve seen so many times now – dark blue pants, dark blue vest, and white shirt. His train worker hat is squarely on top of his head, and he tips it every time he checks a ticket. “Ticket please,” he tells the passengers. They show him theirs and he follows up with, “And g’day to ye.” His accent suggests he’s not from London. Probably somewhere up north.

“Ticket please,” he says.

I fumble a bit, pulling it out of my coat pocket. It’s a bit crinkled, but he scans it and tips his hat.

“And g’day to ye,” he follows up.

“You too,” I wearily reply. I’ve been on this train for nearly eight hours. After getting stuck in York due to an engine overheating in the unprecedentedly hot summer sun, I’m exhausted. There are only so many hours I can sit and wait for something to happen. I just want to be in Edinburgh. There’s still an hour left in the

ride, and after that, I need to drag my clunky suitcase up the hill to the Royal Mile and down more to Candlemaker Lane. In the daytime, this would be a beautiful trek, although frustrating with the four flights of stairs I tend to take as a “shortcut” from the train station to the main road. Now that it’s dark out, I dread the hike. The roads all look so different at night, and I can’t read any of the street signs.

“It will be fine,” Poe says.

“You’re just saying that so I won’t notice that he didn’t scan your ticket.”

“I’m no traveler,” he replies. “I have no bags.”

I say nothing and instead turn to stare out the window. Mostly everything is obscured by the darkness, but every so often, I can see a farmhouse in the green countryside lit up by warm lights or a car driving down a cobbled road. The little scenes are picturesque in the night. For all I know, I could be staring into a screen playing scenic clips occasionally, but I don’t care. They soothe my mind. I know I’m tired and hungry and sore. I know when the train pulls into the station and the trek to my new flat must begin, Poe will be gone, and I will make the long walk alone.



“Cassius?” I call out.

He doesn’t reply.

I take a deep breath and try again. “Cassius? Are you there?”

“How may I be of assistance?” he asks.

I let out a sigh of relief. He’s picky about showing up when I call. “I think I’m going to start a business to help fund my education. A PhD is more expensive than I thought it would be,” I pause, “How do I start a business?”

He crosses his arms. “A business?” he parrots. “Discipline. Integrity. A sense of passion and dedication. Why?”

“I want to succeed,” I tell him.

Cassius’s stern face softens for a split second. “You’ve already been successful, you just don’t know it yet.”

“What? How can I not know that I’m successful?”

“Well, if you plant a seed, do you immediately know if it will grow?” he asks me.

I frown. “I guess not. Not every seed will germinate. But I can just start over if it doesn’t sprout.”

Cassius smiles. “Precisely. You are going to be very successful.”

He pats me on the shoulder and walks out the door. I hurry after him, but he’s already gone.





The Jell-O on my plate wiggles as I tap it with my spoon. It's cherry red, which isn't my favorite flavor, but it takes my mind off of the medical staff bustling through the cafeteria. I'm rarely in the hospital for other people.

I keep tapping my Jell-O, unsure of what I'm supposed to do after I eat it. I've been here for eleven hours, and thirty minutes ago, my father left me to go check in on my mother. "Stay here for a minute, okay?" he'd asked. I agreed. I had Jell-O, after all.

Nurses and doctors and people waiting for patients all mingle in the cafeteria. Silverware clinks against dishes, heavy shoes squeak on freshly-mopped floors, soft music plays on the overhead speakers. I dig my spoon into the Jell-O and scoop out a perfect spoonful. It dyes my mouth red as I try to chew it, the plastic cherry sinking into my tastebuds. I can feel it swish around, smooth on the tongue until it melts away. It's gone after ten spoonfuls. I stare at the empty dish. My father told me to stay here, but I hate having a dirty dish sitting in front of me.

Looking around the cafeteria, I can see people dropping off their trays of used plates and bowls and cups. There's a conveyor belt that takes the dishes into a void, and I wonder how they get clean. I plan out my route. Don't step on the cracks, dodge the medical staff, hop fifteen feet to the conveyor belt. I carefully lay my dishes on it and watch as they're slowly sent behind a cream-colored wall. I try to peer around it, but I can't see anything beyond the end of the conveyor belt.

"A feat of modern engineering," Ray says.

I look up at his lined face. “You didn’t have these when you were a kid?” I ask.

“We didn’t even have seatbelts in cars when I was your age. And when you mother was a kid, I had to go out and install them myself. Blinkers too.”

I frown, not believing him. I start to ask another question when I notice the medical staff moving quickly through the cafeteria, little black boxes on their sides beeping and flashing a little red light. They jump up from their tables in their scrubs and white coats, and they run off in different directions. When the beeping stops, only a few medical staff members are left.

I look back over to Ray, and he motions for me to walk back to my table. Without stepping on any cracks between the cream tiles, I make my way back to my seat. I sit back down on the cold metal chair, taking only a few moments of pretending to be patient before I start kicking my feet against the chair’s rungs.

Ray takes a seat next to me, joining me in what feels like an eternal wait. We sit together in silence until my father returns.



Driving down the unlit highway, my mind wanders. It builds a little house in the woods and paints it umber. This little house has a nice kitchen with a wood stove and a deep sink. The floor is made of fir, shiny from a recent polish. There's a pot of tea on a small table, and two cups sit ready for drinkers. My mind places a bowl of sugar cubes next to them.

I slow the car as I round a sharp turn, the apex of the curve littered with crosses and other memorabilia.

On the straightaway, my mind decides to find somewhere else to visit. It settles on an ocean-faring ship, large enough to hold a hundred sailors. They hoist the sails, heaving the thick ropes and tying them to cleats. The sea swells, and the ship sways back and forth, slightly more than comfortable. Water begins to wash over the sides, no amount of bailing enough to stop the angry flow.

“Watch the road!” Cassius shouts.

I swerve the car back onto the road, but in that correction, I don't notice the raccoon run into the road. The thump brings a lump to my throat. I slam on the brakes, and Cassius grips the car door so tightly his knuckles are white and no longer leathery. After a momentary breath, I pull over. I get out of the car with a small flashlight and start walking back toward the raccoon.

Cassius follows me hurriedly. “What are you doing? You need to make sure the car is okay!”

I don't listen to him. The lump in my throat is nearly suffocating me, but I walk faster. I need to check on the raccoon.

"It's dead!" Cassius tries to reason with me, but my emotions swell, and my heartbeat in my ears blocks out anything else he says.

The raccoon is dead.

I can't help but cry for it. The road is on its land – bifurcating its home into north and south, leaving a swath of death through the middle. I'd killed it.

Cassius steps up behind me and places a hand on my shoulder. "C'mon," he whispers. "Let's go home."

As we make our way back to the car, I glance over my shoulder at the raccoon, its dark, limp body left in a ditch on the side of the highway.

Sitting in the driver's seat, I look over to Cassius.

"Sometimes, we can't coexist peacefully," he says. "Sometimes, we have to live with the consequences of being people, and while it hurts sometimes, there's not much else we can do."

I throw the car into drive and start down the road.

Cassius folds his arms across his chest. "The world hasn't ended," he says. "*Your* world hasn't ended. Let's head home."



I can tell a boy is weird when he spends his summer evenings standing on his roof singing Beatles hits. His rooftop friends are cheering him on from their beach towels, the colorful fabric covering the dark shingles.

“That doesn’t seem terribly safe,” Ray says.

“I guess.” I keep coloring my chalk drawing of a rainbow, trying to get each section the same width. Somehow, every time I run my chalk over its corresponding color, I make the section too broad. The lines are uneven. I frown.

“Do your neighbor’s parents know he’s up there?” Ray asks.

My chalk is too small for my fingers, and I scrape the skin off the tip of my thumb. Holding my wounded finger, I look up at Ray. “His parents said you have to be older than eleven to be on the roof, so they probably know.”

I stand up, critiquing my uneven rainbow.

The boys were drawing earlier, but they left when I showed up. I see other rainbows that are far more even than mine. There are some other drawings too, like a skateboard and a poorly-disguised penis.

Ray rests his hands on his hips and surveys all of the street art. “I think your rainbow looks the best.”

“You’re just saying that because you have to.”

“Why do you think I’d lie to you? Your rainbow is clearly the best. Even if it wasn’t, I’d tell you the truth.” Ray’s tone is firm, but kind.

I pick at the scab forming on my finger. "Thanks," I mumble.

A drop of water hits my head, and I look up. The summer rains are here.





Every American freeway exit feels the same to me. It's the same liminal space where no one ever sleeps, yet few ever seem to really be awake. Everything and everyone is constantly moving, from the cars to the people to the neon in the brightly-lit signs.

I'm looking for a place to get a quick bite to eat, but I can't decide on anything. They're all going to serve the same food as the versions of them back home, and I can't help but imagine these fast food restaurants being tiny portals to their own worlds. When someone walks through their doors, they're in a new fast-food-themed realm.

"You missed the turn for Denny's," Bobby Gene says.

I keep driving. "Who says I want to go to Denny's?"

Bobby Gene laughs. "You're going to look at all of these restaurants, hum and haw about them, and then decide on Denny's. So just go to Denny's and be done with it."

Irritated, I do a U-turn and head back. I pull into a parking spot, hop out of the car, lock the doors, and head toward the restaurant. "Are you gonna eat anything?" I ask Bobby Gene.

He shakes his head.

The server sits us at a small booth in the back of the room, near the kitchen. I like this spot; I can survey the whole floor from here.

“What can I get you?” the server asks.

Before I can say that I need more time, Bobby Gene whispers, “Grand Slam, sausage, poached eggs, extra syrup. You’ll decide that’s what you want after going over the menu more, so just order that.”

I order it.

Grand Slam

Sausage

Poached Eggs

Extra Syrup

It's the same thing I've been eating at Denny's since I was a kid. I always think I'll try something new but never do. It's always the Grand Slam, and if they ask if I want whipped cream, I say yes. This place is eerily familiar despite my having never been here before.

Bobby Gene drums his fingers on the table, acting as impatient as I feel. I haven't eaten in almost fifteen hours, and my stomach is in knots. As soon as the plate of food hits the table, I'm cutting into the pancakes. I shovel food into my mouth as though I'm a feral child, getting syrup on my shirt. I don't care. I can wash it later.

When I finish my food, I stare out the windows. It's three in the morning, but nature's darkness is offset by the overbearing neon lights. I see a gas station across the street, the same kind as back home. It hits me then how far away I really am. A thousand miles between my home and me, and the streets look the same. I can almost trick myself into not being homesick.

I pay for my meal, tip generously, and get back in my car.

Bobby Gene hops into the passenger's seat and sighs. "What do we have left? Ten more hours?"

My head hits the top of the steering wheel as I lean forward in defeat. "Something like that. I'm glad I napped earlier."

"We'll get there eventually," Bobby Gene says. "And if not, at least we tried."



I'm not ready to say goodbye. I don't think I'll ever be ready. Endings have never been my strong suit, and I cling to the *what ifs* and *why didn't I's*. But the worst part isn't even the ending itself. It's the feeling of impending doom as the end approaches, my mind rehearsing the goodbyes as though the perfect one at the right time would somehow give me better closure.

Even interim endings, the ones that grip onto one side of the deafening silence before I reach the hello again, are tortuous. The loneliness that comes from isolation while knowing there are people out there that you can't touch or see grates at my chest and stomach. Alone, in my room, I hear nothing but the hum of a fan and my own breathing. No Poe or Bobby Gene or Ray or Cassius. Just me, alone.

Poe's never been gone this long before.

I've never had to spend this much consecutive time with myself, either. After a week by myself, I drew Poe's face on the whiteboard next to my desk, the eyes aimed directly at me so I can feel his judgmental gaze as I work. It helps, but it's not the same. There's no soft breathing, no sickly-sweet smoke, no sound of pages flipping.

Sitting on the floor of my living room, staring at the wall, I wonder if I'll ever see Poe or Bobby Gene or Ray or Cassius again. Their pictures still hang in assorted places throughout the house, despite being faded or creased. Even if no one else knows who they are, I always will. I wonder if other people feel the same way about

me as I feel about these four men – if they can feel the loss when others aren't around.

I lie down, face up, on the floor and write my own eulogy in my head. I already know what song I want played at my funeral. I know how and where I want to be buried, what color flowers to place on my grave, the shape of my headstone. But I don't have a eulogy yet. That's the ultimate goodbye – a final, public nod to a life that ceases to continue.

The first thing I know about my eulogy is that it has to be funny. I want people to laugh through the tears. I love laughter – the sound the body makes when it can't contain its joy any longer, and it bubbles up from the depths of the soul to be shared with the world.

The second thing I know about my eulogy is that it needs to be short. People have things to do, and I'll want to just rest, I think. I want to be at rest.

The last thing I know about my eulogy is that it won't really matter. There's no way to sum up a life into five minutes of someone talking from a podium at the front of a church. It's just a nice thought, I suppose, to have written my own eulogy. I'll have to say goodbye to myself at some point, when my mind gives out and soul breaks free of the body.

I get up off the floor and hobble to my writing desk, one leg tingling from prolonged immobility. I pull out a notebook and old ink pen, scribbling down the first line of my eulogy over and over again.

Thank you all for gathering here today.

