

Fall 12-7-2016

Short Works: Things Gone By, Novel: Creatives

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Recommended Citation

Visscher, Elizabeth B., "Short Works: Things Gone By, Novel: Creatives" (2016). *Master of Arts in Professional Writing Capstones*. 18.
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[Short Works: Things Gone By, Novel: Creatives]

By

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
Professional Writing in the Department of English

In the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of Kennesaw State University

Kennesaw, Georgia

[2014 – 2016]

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Less Permanent Than Dirt

It was attached. But only because that's all it knew. The puffed, dime-sized skin was paler in contrast to the rest of Grace's thumb. She worked to knead the raised lump out, pushing and stretching the skin with her pointer finger. Each touch produced a nerve-fizzling sting—shocking for a spot so small. But the skin remained. Though it was dead.

“Don't pull it off! It'll bother you worse than it is right now,” said Idella.

“You mean bother me more than the fact that I'm out here pulling ivy for the millionth time?” Grace paired the comment with an overly pronounced head roll, as she closed her eyes and cupped the back of her neck with her hands. “By the way, I'm going to miss next Sunday.”

“Miss next Sunday?” Idella said. She sat back on her legs and plopped her hands down in her lap with full theatricality. “Grace.”

Keeping her eyes closed, Grace said, “Mom, I know we don't get a lot of time to see each other, but you're going to have to learn to do things by yourself at some point.” With her sight obscured and silence filling the space between them, the smell of upheaved soil from the fecund garden filled her nose with the pervading scent.

“I know I can do things on my own. I know...but having you here...”

Grace opened her eyes to look at her mother. She had spoken the words to herself, hiding behind closed eyes, but her new vision forced her to see the person on whom the sentence had fallen.

Idella nodded little nods, her eyes down and lips pursed. “Besides”—her tone shifted—“it's never been a problem before.”

Grace began picking her thumb again, hoping the pain of the blister might distract from that other feeling in her gut, which seemed to be spreading.

“Owe! Damn it!” Grace snapped.

Reaching out to her daughter, Idella softened. “Just put gloves on, sweetheart. Or before you know it, you’ll have hands like a man.” Idella promptly removed her pink gloves, decorated with repeating lemon slices, and extended them to Grace, waving them anxiously as if batting away flies. “Have mine.”

Grace reached down and clutched the short-handled hoe, its face buried in the ground like an ostrich.

“You and your dad sure got the same stubborn gene—though you’re not nearly as bad as him.” Idella raised her hoe and slammed it in the dry dirt with quick, repetitive swings. She worked fast but did little. “Before we bought this house, he fought me tooth-and-nail to get a place with a big yard, and I warned him, ‘George, big yards mean big work.’ You have to be attentive; you have to *care* for it.” She ran her fingers through the tendrils, combing them as if they were the locks of a young child. Grabbing the tips, she pulled them taut. Then, altogether, the vines were severed. “But Steven wasn’t like that—”

“Let’s not talk about Steven, please.”

“*Ohhh*, is *that* who we’re seeing next Sunday?” Her mother’s green irises glinted, as she looked at her daughter out the corners of her eyes.

Grace chewed nervously on the inside of her cheek.

“Mom, I don’t do dinner with exes.”

“Well, maybe you should start. You go through them fast.”

“Mom.” Grace let the word drop heavily into the ground, establishing the boundary.

Idella’s eyes opened wide, and she bit her lower lip, as if she had sampled one of the lemon wedges on the gloves. She watched her daughter work.

Grace abandoned her tool and sunk her fingertips into the ground, yanking and ripping, but each unearthed vine revealed another; each root was connected to another web of roots that was impossibly tangled, as if God had used the plant to sew on the earth's surface.

“Good grief,” Idella said, as she watched her daughter. “I knew we should have done this last weekend after we had all that rain. Rain makes this so much easier.”

“I can't come every weekend. I can't come *this* weekend—shouldn't I be watching out for poison ivy or sumac or something?”

Idella paused and sat back on her legs. Grace turned to her mother when she heard the hacking stop and the sound of a soft breeze rustle the fallen green leaves around them.

“You can never quite tell...the difference between poison ivy and regular ivy because—depending on the time of year or the area or what have you—the leaves and stems look different,” she said. After a long pause, “You think you know what you have, but you never really know till later. When it's gone. And all that's left is a rash. And pain...”

Idella's words seemed to fall on Grace's back, pressing her body lower into the ground, into the ivy.

Her mother continued, “He showed me a picture the other day—on his phone... She's about six inches taller than him and drives a Harley,” Idella said, forcing a little laugh. “We were in Panera...and George just pulled it out...and then they called my name for my half-salad, half-sandwich...And the strange thing about it,” she continued, “was when I saw it, I thought to myself, ‘I *know* that face...I've seen that face. That's Palmer, Palmer Rodgers.”

Her mother made a hard effort to continue, as if going back to the memory was as difficult as stopping a speeding locomotive and asking it to reverse.

“...worst yard in the whole neighborhood...”

Grace looked to Idella.

“You can never really tell. Yes, till the pain comes. Till after.”

The mud collected in the creases of her mother’s downcast eyes. Sweat pressed her hair against the folded skin on her forehead. Her braided hair showcased a gradient of color along the interlaced locks, from streaked silver roots to deep, copper-colored tips. As her mother bowed low into the ground, and her braid brushed the mud, Grace chose to believe the clay was stealing the color away into itself. The earth was easier to blame for aging her mother than admitting that these moments were a lot less permanent than the dirt her mother worked.

Yanking her head away from her mom, Grace removed her hands abruptly from the spot. She reassigned herself to the side of the house to pick the ascending vines off the brick façade. The contumacious vines had attached their hair-like fibers into the brick, creeping all the way up to the windowsill. Grace leaned back from the wall and imagined the vines were a Brobdingnagian squid, scaling the hull of a voyagers’ ship, slowly sucking it into the dark waters, as the sailors slept, blissfully unaware. But, though the plant’s quiet nature allowed for its wicked ways, it was not the real adversary; the true enemy had been time.

Grace grabbed the hoe again and swung hard at the base of the vine, separating it from its roots.

“You can’t do it like that,” said Idella.

But Grace kept swinging. The sharp clang of the hoe on the adamantine surface compelled Idella to raise her voice.

“It will just grow back.”

Grace relented. Both women stood facing one another, worn from work.

“We’ll just get what we can today and worry about the rest next Sunday,” Idella said in between breaths.

Grace let the hoe slip through her fingers and dropped her eyes to the ground, as if watching the tool make its descent.

“Mom, I told you I can’t come next Sunday.”

“Just for a few hours? Why? What are you doing next Sunday? It’s not like I’m asking you to come on a Saturday.”

“I have plans.”

“With whom?”

“*Mom.*”

“Why can’t you just tell me who—”

“Dad!” Grace said. The name hung in the air between them. “And Palmer...” she added softly.

Grace let her arms hang heavily at her sides. Her palms turned outward towards her mother, the dirt on them showing evidence of her battle; bullet-hole-sized pink circles marked her hands, taking the place of the dead skin on her fingers, which had been shorn during her struggle with the wall. She looked up at her mother.

“Mom, he’s still my dad. I’m just trying to stay neutral.”

Idella held her daughter captive before breaking their tacit conversation, as she dropped her gaze to the ground.

“*Neutral?*” Idella’s brows pushed together, multiplying the wrinkles around her eyes, extending and deepening the lines. “I don’t want you to be neutral; I want you to understand what your father did! What it feels like to—”

“Mom. I get it. I *get* it.” Grace paused. “But I can’t...I can’t...keep coming Sundays.”

Idella looked at Grace the way her daughter had looked at her, and she too, saw lines, yet they were unlike the ones that marked Idella’s face; they were made from muted tears, which wiped away the dirt, revealing the unblemished, youthful skin underneath.

Idella lowered her body and reached into the heart of the earth, scooping a handful of dark soil and fallen, star-shaped leaves, a galaxy in her hand.

“I know,” she said. She released the particles from her palm and watched them fall. “I know you and Stephen are over. But I always really liked him.” She looked up to Grace with a soft smile. “So you should invite him.” She bent into the ground, burying her body in the ivy, returning to her toil. “Yes, you should definitely invite him. When you go next Sunday.”

Totem Pole

The outside air scribbled down my back, signing sweat's signature on my spine. I wanted to rid myself of the heat, but I didn't move. The inside air was far more loathsome. The cool air deluded me, gave me feigned relief. And even before I took one step from concrete to carpet, the smell stopped me: *that* smell, the smell of stale air and hand sanitizer. The odor was germane to all buildings for the dead or dying; even the funeral home smelled the same. My theory was when you die, your last breath released the sins of your life. Fear, anger, sadness, with no place in heaven, are all exhaled, left like ghosts to roam the hallways.

Not wanting to suck in the souls, I held my breath and stepped inside the hospice center.

Iris, the head nurse, had personally called me to come in, explaining that my grandmother had a bad reaction to the Haldol. "She was just very... feisty last night, but it's nothing to worry about. These setbacks are just a part of figuring out the correct cocktail."

She continued to explain that my older sister had flown in on her broomstick at the moment of my grandmother's episode, demanding that future decisions concerning medication be run by her, but as I was appointed power of attorney, Iris had insisted she take the matter up with me, a discussion I desperately wished to avoid.

Avoidance had been my state of mind for the past four months, as the cancer in my grandmother's uterus had spread like armyworms in freshly laid sod. When discussing my inability to cope, Iris replied simply, "You are afraid of being the top of the totem pole." As I let my head bob to the side, confused, she explained the image of the mythical sculpture: The carved cedar heads of animals were traditionally stacked, ascending upwards to honor family lineage. With my mother—my grandmother's only child—gone, grandfather passed, and my grandmother set to leave me soon, I would take the top placement on the pole. My dreams had

been consumed by the image of my caricatured features: my lips bulging out, pulled like putty into a grimace, my chin chiseled into a point, my nose whittled down, and my eyes reflecting nothing but hollowed wood.

Every time I began picturing my face as the grotesque totem, Iris would remind me that the sooner I embraced my new placement, the sooner I would be at peace with letting her go.

“Our loved ones have a funny way of knowing when a family member is still holding on to them. A sort of bizarre thing happens. Whether it’s their will or what, I don’t know, but they keep chugging until the moment their family lets them go,” Iris said.

She topped off her motherly advice with a quip about the top totem getting the best view...I didn’t find it that funny.

As I approached the check-in desk, my brother, Temperance, bobbed in behind me, stopping briefly to pop the air from my puffed cheeks (still blown up from holding my breath) with his finger. The corners of Temp’s mouth crinkled up in a mischievous grin, collecting his freckles in the folds of his face. I admonished him with my eyes—as was my practice.

The security guard greeted us in his usual fashion. “Sign your name, Sir. You too, miss—if you don’t mind.”

Temp signed and sped off, walking in a Gumby-like fashion; his bottom half was already halfway down the hallway before his hands finished writing.

“And a nametag. You know that,” the guard continued. “This is the zillionth time I’ve told ya.”

“Zillionth?” Temp said sarcastically.

“Sir.”

“I don’t care if you don’t see the point or if ya been in here a zillion times”—yes, “zillionth” again—“You have to wear a nametag. It’s a safety precaution.”

“Safety? So if you know my name, that will stop me from running into rooms and braiding patients’ IVs?”

“*Sir!*”

Temp’s eyeballs rolled in his skull. He hinged at his hip, dropping to the desk to scratch his name on a nametag. After a peel and stick, he flounced off. I followed.

As we traveled down the hallway, Temp turned to me, pointing to his nametag. The freckles collected again. “*Hello*, I’m Theodore, and who might you be? Annabelle, is it?”

Temp embodied the, apparently, British persona of Theodore, as we scooted down the hall, engaging in a theatrical exchange, nudging me after each joke, pushing me a little too hard into the walls. A couple of picture frames were left crooked.

I stared at the monkeys on the carpet, making a point to step directly on their overly animate faces, as we passed the cafeteria and then the family room, which continued the tropical theme of the hallway. Two sofas were centered in the middle, and imposter, plastic plants collected dust on the faux palms. Bamboo chairs were arranged around a table with a chessboard on top. Frequently, Temp and I engaged in intense tournaments. Occasionally, our games were interrupted by the passing of a gurney. Temp’s head would pop up. “Checkmate!” he’d say, then giggle at his own joke.

“Do you think snapping turtles like donuts?”

The question stole my attention away from my feet. “Why?”

I watched as he fumbled to remove a tiny, spikey-shelled creature from his right jacket pocket and an opened package of Little Debby donuts from his left. “Thought the twins might

think he's neat. Found him outside the center," he said, as he popped a powdered donut half in his mouth and smiled. The crescent-shaped pastry bulged his lips out, exaggerating his mischief-plus grin, and the confectioners sugar painted his face like a circus clown.

"Temperance?" I began but was cut short.

My sister's voice traveled down the hall to greet us with a slap in the face. I stopped and listened—better to do at a safe distance—to decipher her complaints. Broken words registered like beeps of Morse code: "absurd," "unqualified," "will," "lawyers."

I massaged my temples and rubbed the four hours of sleep from my red eyes, covering them. Then I placed my hands over my ears, blocking out the beeps.

"Ha! I get it. See no evil, hear no evil...monkeys," Temp finished the motion, cupping his hand around his mouth, donuts in hand. He removed it to say, "I wish Leigh would be the third monkey."

His humor didn't take.

I walked past each room, a sentenced criminal, passing every prisoner's cell before reaching the electric chair. I arrived at room 17.

My sister's voice found me before her eyes, as the pitch grew out of the small space. I looked through the threshold to see my grandmother, snipping a strand of yarn with knitting shears and carefully securing the loose end back to the bound bulb. Her eyes didn't look to my sister, who towered at the end of the bed, hands on hips, neck extended, mouth open wide, torso jutting forward to punctuate each attack—a coo coo bird, crowing at the top of twelve. Between the two, stood Iris. Her hands were pressed together over her stomach, and her head tilted slightly left, the saint overseeing the sinner. In the corner, Leigh's husband sat, eyes unblinking,

as he stared at his phone, while my two nephews held on to their father's legs, begging for a ride on his bouncing knees.

"Well, if you're going to play Russian roulette with her meds, then you don't leave a child in charge of loading the pistol," Leigh shouted.

"Your sister has done well by your grandmother, Mrs. Revlloc. But as you know, we don't make it our business here to interfere with family affairs. Our job is just to make your grandmother as comfortable as we—"

"*Comfortable?*" Leigh shot back, "You shouldn't just make her comfortable. You should get rid of the pain altogether."

Iris responded by looking in my direction, alerting my sister to my presence.

Her eyes seemed to widen even more as she took me in.

"And where the hell have you been? This what you call managing the situation?"

Temp tore in after me.

"She's doing her best, Leigh—"

"*Exactly*, Temperance. But her 'best' isn't good enough. Gamma needs someone who's more capable of handling these things."

"Ju's cuz you're the oldest, doesn't mean you're the most qualified. Besides, we have to do what the will says."

My brother-in-law let out a bothered grunt but added nothing to the conversation. He crossed one leg over the other, knocking one child off his knee. The child fell back, confused, and burst into sobs, which of course catalyzed cries from the second.

“The will is a piece of paper”—Leigh turned to redirect her words to my grandmother—
“and you don’t make someone the executer because they visit you a lot. There’s a chain of
command.”

“Leigh, she never asked to be in this position,” Temp said, as he passed to the whaling
child and lifted him into his arms.

He was right. The chain that Leigh mentioned had many missing links: deceased
relatives, a missing father, empty placeholders, an already broken family.

Distracted by Temp’s nametag, the child’s screams lessened, as he worked to peel off the
tag and adhere it to his tear-stained cheek. His brother inched to Temp’s side and began digging
in his right jacket pocket for whatever was making the fabric move.

Ignoring Temp, Leigh demanded, “She needs her morphine upped. Period. End of
discussion.”

“No, not end of discussion. Annabelle says if we do that, she’ll just sleep all the time, and
she’ll be totally out of it until—”

“And Anna knows this because of all her caretaking knowledge?”

I stood motionless, as words were flung around me, hitting and rushing past me like river
water around an immovable rock.

She persisted. “Was Anna the one that took care of you when mom passed? Did she take
you to get your driver’s license, scrub grass stains off your soccer cleats, help write your papers
for AP English? No. I had to be ‘the mom.’ Nobody asked me if I wanted that job either. But I
took it. I was Mom.”

“Leigh.” I pronounced her name carefully, trying my best to maintain her. “All of us had
to...be people that we weren’t ready to be. I’m sorry, for that.”

The flecks of gold circling her wide brown eyes seemed to glow more faintly, as if the fire that raged within her had withdrawn into tamed black coals, only to be ignited once more by Temperance.

“It’s still up to Annabelle,” he continued, as he placed the child on the ground. “Whether you like that or not.”

The amber rings returned to her eyes, and I felt the ever-so-subtle tremors, radiating from her tensing body before she combusted.

“Right! Because that’s what ‘the will says’—Paul! Would you be a part of this?” Leigh demanded.

Paul stood up, expanded his chest, and crossed his arms like a carved bear statue outside a flea market. The children ran between his legs, tossing the discovered turtle to and fro.

“Yeah, let’s bring in your bodyguard. I’m out of this.” Temp jerked around to leave the room but balked in the face of the security guard, who had entered from behind him. “S’cuse me,” he said respectfully.

But the guard didn’t move.

“You ain’t excused *nowhere*,” he replied, one finger poking Temp in the chest, right where his nametag should have been stuck.

“Man, you saw me put it on.”

“That’s it. I have told you repeatedly—”

Leigh butted in, “Officer, we are trying to have a family discussion—”

“And you’re having it with the whole hallway, ma’am. These patients deserve some quiet and some *safety*, given their condition.”

The statement was followed by a piecing scream that would have revived the poor souls who had passed in that moment.

I looked to see the youngest twin. On the end of his finger, the tormented turtle dangled, snapping down on the child's bone. The screams rang out. The turtle remained, as the heaving child stretched out his crunched finger in my grandmother's direction.

"Todd!" Leigh whaled.

His parents rushed to his side but stood with their hands flailing in the air, not knowing what to do to remove the stubborn reptile. Temp moved to detach the turtle but was yanked back by the guard.

"Can we not right now!" Temp said.

The child continued to scream.

"How the hell did a turtle get in here?"

Leigh began to cry as well.

Iris attempted to push through to reach Todd, but it was too late.

With one quick motion, my grandmother reached beside her and seized her knitting scissors. Sticking her fingers through the rings, she separated the blades, placed the tiny turtle's neck between the shears, and with both hands around the handle, closed her fingers into a fist, cutting through the cold-blooded critter till the head was severed from the turtle's body. The shell thudded to the ground and the head fell on top of a carpet monkey's grinning face.

My grandmother returned the scissors to her side and continued knitting.

Her silence was, at once, matched by every horror-stricken soul in the room. The children's cries broke through the quietness, but the others didn't move to comfort them.

"When something is troublesome, you cut it off," she said.

As I looked to my grandmother in all her quietude, I knew she spoke to me.

I began to see my face change in my mind, my features take shape.

My sister turned to confront me, to demand something more of me. Adopting my grandmother's brevity, I met my sister's force, stopping her approach, saying simply,

“No more.” And the fullness of my expression fell upon her, as she lowered to my grandmother's bed.

As I held her gaze, I, again, saw my face, completely transformed and fixed to the top of the totem pole. I released her momentarily to look to the floor where the shorn head had fallen.

And I knew what creature I had become.

Best Sold By

A lot could be told by looking in someone's shopping cart. Early Evans was the particular someone that strolled through the aisle that Monday at one o'clock. He grunted as he ambled down the magazine aisle, his feet beginning to ache and his compression socks and orthotic insoles doing little to help. At the end of the lane, Early stumbled slightly, grabbing out onto the shelf for balance.

"Marce!" The name was summoned as instinctively as his diaphragm raised, lungs deflated, and vocal cords shook to expel the sound into the empty aisle.

A grouping of magazines and books tumbled down onto the hard tiles, a wad of half-dressed women and flashy Helvetica fonts. Early looked to his feet. His toes gave coverage to the scantily clad woman on the cover of a novel beneath his foot. He pulled back his big toe to reveal a dramatic damsel, draped over her rescuer's bicep and pressing her loosely bound breasts against his capable form, as the two clung tight to avoid falling to a sea of lava. Early felt moisture collect on the folded and bunched skin under his cheeks—or was it the skin from under his drooping eyes? One might wonder if someone were to stare at him the way Marce had. Early told himself he ought to be offended by the sight, but he simply stared at the woman in need of saving. Early reached out for her. His knees cracked as he bent down, and his right hand shook the cart's will as he used it to keep from toppling. The right front wheel inched the cart forward dangerously—it had suddenly decided to take the straight-and-narrow path. Early struggled against his rusted bones and gasped for air. She was out of reach.

But the best that can be done, he thought, if she's beyond saving, is to do her some decency.

Early had demanded the funeral not be catered, demanded that Marceline be given the respect of a wood coffin, (the kind they give to navy men) a proper hymn sung, and a hand-picked, honey-baked ham and a cake that was the exact shade of yellow.

“Not *yellow*,” he said, emphasizing the last syllable to the baker, so she might take the matter more seriously. “Not like a damn circus, yellow. A tasteful yellow.”

But the shade of the yellow that he saw in his mind, as he stared down at the woman on the cover, was suddenly replaced by another hue of greater intensity.

Abruptly interrupting Early’s concentration, a flash of red streaked past him, shaking the cart in its wake. Early shot out his other hand into the shelf for balance, removing it from its original task. A small breeze tickled the sweat stuck in Early’s nose hairs, as the red blur circled and flew past him again in the opposite direction. Early felt as the desperate couple might, tormented by the relentless flames, but unlike them, he had nothing more to hold on to. The cursed wheel gave, and so did Early; his body began to fold upon itself like the pages beneath him. The woman faded from his vision, replaced by nothingness. Until Early felt two spindly arms stop him from reaching the tiles.

“Hey man, you okay. Want me to, like, go get somebody or something?”

Early opened his eyes. The flame was around him, consuming him. He jerked back from it, grunting nonsense and swatting at the air. He confronted his uninvited rescuer, a rangy teen, dressed simply in bathing-suit trunks and an alizarin t-shirt. The boy stared at Early, assessing him like he would the gibberish on the back of a Twinkie’s nutrition label. After the stare off became unbearable, the boy dropped to the floor and snatched up the magazine mess and novel on the floor in one quick motion.

“You like reading this stuff?” he asked, holding the novel from him like a disease-ridden rat. “I mean my mom does—she doesn’t think we know she does—but I think it’s kinda ratchet.”

Ignoring the boy, Early picked up the back end of the cart, redirecting the vehicle around to the next aisle with sheer force, and dropped it down on the other side.

With a gravelly grunt, Early wrangled a burdensome box of detergent in his buggy, pressing the three bundles of bananas he had loaded violently against the steel of the cart. But maybe then, the green things might hurry themselves along to brown, as that was the way Early preferred them: their skin to match the umber and wrinkle of his own, speckled with dug up cancer spots.

He could have spared them had he not chosen to go through the store backwards, starting with the produce first. But the impractical route matched the previous layout of the grocery store before it was renovated *incorrectly*. The bananas’ bellies began to split and ooze underneath the weight of the detergent container, decorated with lavender flowers—fitting, though, for flowers to be above the buried.

“Hey man, I just saved your life. You haven’t even thanked me—”

Early wobbled back to his cart, shoving it away from the boy, the novel still clutched in his shaking hand. But the boy took one step and caught up with Early. He hung his head easily over Early’s shoulder.

“She hot or what? No wonder you reading that thing. I’m Ayontunde, by the way—it’s Nigerian,” he said proudly. “Just call me Ayo if you can’t say it right—I bet you’d need two hands just to hold one of that chick’s ti—”

Early reeled back and bopped Ayotunde on the head with the book. “I didn’t ask for your name, and I didn’t ask for your opinion. Quit following me.”

“Yeah, I-know, I-know. But Mrs. E told me to reintroduce myself when I meet ya places—like now. She told me you’re a cranky dude, but I should be your friend anyways because you don’t have any.”

“My wife never said anything of the sort. I don’t know you, and I don’t want to.”

Reaching his hand into the cart, Early plucked a cherry from an unzipped bag, a consolation prize for overcoming his obstacle. The instant his dentures hit the succulent bulb, his face contorted and his nostrils flared. Early yanked the plastic zip bag from his cart and shoved it on the shelf beside him, undoing the perfect cavalry of canned dog food. The same fate had been given to the too-salty, “simply salted” jar of cashews and a case of Arnold Palmer (which Early wanted, as he admired the famous golfer) that had falsely posed as a half-off item but was, in actuality, buy-one-get-one-free. Early decided he never really liked Arnold that much.

The seed rolled around in Early’s mouth, and he winced as he refused to rid himself of it, the same way the seed clung to the cherry’s flesh, as it was husked from the body of the berry. The temptation to spit the seed burned in his brain, but Early refused to relent to it.

Ayotunde jumped in front of the buggy. “She said you’d say that too.”

Early huffed. “Must think you knew my wife well. Come back in 62 years, and we’ll talk—”

“You don’t got to be like that. I was just, ya know, being helpful. You’re not going to tell nobody about what happened, are you?”

“You want to help? You can explain why you people insist on naming kids things that don’t make any sense.”

Ayotunde took to the side of the cart in one quick step and reached his outstretched fingers down into Early’s selections, an arcade claw, seeking out a child’s treasure. Early bopped

the boy again with the book, but Ayotunde's arms put a great distance between him and his attacker.

"It do make sense in Nigeria—"

"Well, I don't speak Nigerian!"

Ayotunde threw up his hands in surrender, a small bag of Cheetos still clutched in his left fist.

"I don't either. But my dad did. And he was some kind a chief or something."

"That so?" Early said dubiously.

"Yeah so, I'm like trying to learn more stuff about the culture, and I'm thinking that if he was the chief, then maybe that makes me a *prince*—I don't know. I'm just talkin' shit, but that's gotta get me some street cred somewhere. Then they might sponsor me to go South Africa!"

"West Africa."

"Oh yeah, yeah, west. Listen..." Ayotunde crossed his arms around his chest and scratched his chin with his thumb. "You wouldn't want to sponsor a kid to go to Africa would you? Mrs. E was helping me for a while by letting me do you guys' yard—"

"Our yard?" Early met the boy's bright white eyes for the first time. His own tawny eyes questioned the teen, though Ayotunde read little through the thick, glassy disks that shielded Early's irises.

"*Yeah*," Ayotunde said with his mouth hung slightly open, "every Sunday, after mass..."

Ayotunde opened the Cheetos and began crunching on the neon-orange snacks. He finished the bag before Early could reply.

Early's expression didn't change. The disks didn't dissolve, didn't remove the barriers and improve his sight.

He simply cast his questions to the ground. "Marceline wouldn't spend money to have grass done every week? Grass doesn't *need* to be done every week..." he said, as he tried to inch his buggy forward.

Again, Ayotunde positioned himself at the helm of the cart. Diving in for another dig in the contents, he said, "Think Mrs. E just liked to think ahead. You know? Like she'd be ready case there was lots of rain one weekend, and I couldn't come cut grass, and it'd get all tall. Guess that's why she didn't tell nobody. She was the only one who knew the forecast." Ayotunde laughed at himself.

Early watched the boy rummage through his groceries but said nothing. From his pocket, he removed a money clip and folded back the neatly pressed bills to count them. He looked up to see the boy had stopped his search.

Ayotunde's eyes lit up. "Retirement money's got to go for something, right?"

Early quickly folded the bills back down and put the clip away. "Yes. I have a ham to get. Thank you for reminding me. Step to the side, young man."

"Come on man," Ayotunde pleaded. "Why not help a kid, who's lost somebody? Now that Mrs. E is...not here, don't you wish you could get 'er back?"

Early's lips turned into an upside-down U. He fingered the book in his hand. The cover was bent from using it as a weapon. His knobby-knuckled fingers shakily traced the face of the woman. He stopped, either from the pain of his arthritis or from something else.

"You lose people. That's life. Going to some God-forsaken country to meet the locals won't bring anybody back from the grave, son."

“Back from the... Oh, no. No, my dad id’nt dead—I don’t think. He left when I was little, and I’m just thinking maybe he went back to Africa, and if I go—”

“Left?”

“Yeah, when I was like two.”

Early breathed in the word and let it out again—“Left”—so slowly and pronounced that it transformed the word into the last breath of a passing soul.

“Left...and lost...are not the same.”

Early pushed the cherry seed between his upper and lower molars and chomped down, bearing his gums, a bit in the mouth of an electroshock victim. But the words slipped through his plastic teeth and found the boy again.

“Left and lost are *not* the same.”

Early glowered at him, and the two dough-like mounds, making up Early’s brows, pushed together, creating deep ridges on his face. Ayotunde simply stared back vacantly. It seemed, to Early, as though he could look straight through Ayotunde’s gray eyes to the gray matter of the boy’s brain: to see neurons shooting blanks across synapses that barely fizzled, instead of fired—to see most connections not even formed—to see nerve endings as disconnected cords to an out-of-service switchboard, to see a mass of wadded tissue, meant to be the brain, bobbing in a bath of cerebral fluid and soda pop—to see everything that made the boy unable to see.

For a moment, the only sound was the soft, steady hum of the freezer section on the next aisle over, and the only movement was a large, colorful poster, swaying back and forth above their heads, advertising a sale on all deli meats and chef’s cheeses.

Ayotunde considered the seething old man, but after a short time, reluctantly turned and left Early alone on the aisle.

Early watched the boy walk away, then returned to his cart and jerked it forward. But for all the boy couldn't see, Early was, himself, blind. He didn't see the boy pause on the next aisle over. He didn't see him turn back around. He didn't see the oozed-out insides of the banana, dripping out of the bottom of the buggy and collecting on the slick, speckled tile. He didn't see what lay ahead.

His foot slid, and the aisle rotated abruptly backward. His legs twisted under him, and his arms folded inward, as if his body were a discarded piece of aluminum foil being crumbled and thrown down.

After it was done, Early opened his eyes. The cart stood just in front of him, and Early could see the lavender flowers poking through the spaces in the cart. A strange warmth, typically absent in the air-conditioned store, came over him. Early looked up, past the cart, to see the poster still floating carelessly above him. And a strange peace overcame him. Today, his honey-baked ham would be half off.

Becoming a Brown Bear

Shep traced his hands over the carved, oak surface. Each ragged edge slid under his little hands, sending splinters into his skin and doubts into his mind; he wondered if his craftsmanship would ever improve. Turning the wood block, Shep studied the face of the figurine, which he had worked in vain to fashion into a bear using the small knife his mother had given him as a birthday present. He had failed to give it eyes. He had failed to make the raw wood become something more.

Looking up from the bear with no eyes, Shep looked toward Sutton, whose two perfectly shaped, charcoal orbs stood out against her brown face like the nail heads holding down the buckling planks beneath Shep's backside. Sutton studied him, sharing silent wisdom the way only a dog can do. Shep set the bear in front of Sutton, hoping the animals might converse, that Sutton might convince the bear to realize its shape. But Sutton simply nudged the block with her nose, inhaling the scent of Shep's mother, which still lingered. Despite the oak's evolution, a trace of his mother remained deeply rooted in the wood fibers. Sutton knocked the block over as if it were a defeated king on a chessboard. The rattle of the block echoed in the cavity underneath the kitchen table.

Shep's father threw the tablecloth back before the bobbling bear came to rest.

"Bears 'suppose to hibernate in caves. Not youngens like you. You're supposed to be helping set lunch, aren't ya?" Pa said, as he squatted down to Shep's level, so low that the leather of his boots might have creaked, if the shoes had had the blessing of laces to tie them tight.

"It ain't a bear. It ain't nothing," Shep came back. "Pa, please let me get some 'crylics to paint him. *Please*. Paint'll help cover up all the wrong cuts."

Shep couldn't stare at Pa when he asked the question. Instead, he looked to Sutton. Her silent condemnation seemed to suggest that even she knew the boundaries of begging.

"Sheppard. A real man don't cover up his mistakes with paint. He confronts 'em. Would you feel right 'bout taking fat out of your sister's tummy to purchase paint?"

"No. It isn't just about that. It needs to be bear colored. It don't have no color at all!"

Shep saw Sutton lower her head between her paws, as if she was covering her ears, not wanting to hear Shep's far-reached excuses.

"A bear is his color already; the wood is his color. Brownish just like him."

Shep's head hung low. "Bears aren't the same color as woods." His meek voice trailed off, lost between the legs of the table.

Shep watched his Pa struggle to slide under the table, his broad back bumping the underside and rattling the plates above. As he settled by Shep, he let the tablecloth drop, shrouding them in darkness. He spoke.

"These mountains got creatures that even God didn't make, and sometimes the magic in 'em turns things into other things." His voice filled the void, commanding Shep's attention with a force equal to God's as He spoke to Moses from the flame-stricken shrub. "That's what happened with our not-so-good friend the brown bear. Folks say that there use'ta be no such thing as a brown bear, only blacks."

Shep reached forward blindly for the bear figurine, but couldn't grasp it. He pictured the bear's once-black fur, so dark it matched the pitch of the shadows around him, and wasn't surprised, in that moment, that the bear eluded his reach.

"Story goes, black bears got so lost in the forest that they started turnin' into the earth and the mountains, so much so that it turned all of 'em a thick, wooly brown the color of the trees.

Just like this block ya got here. You just got to beat the bear, same way I did when I won over yer ma.”

Shep felt Pa place the wood piece into his palms. He closed his hands around the block and pressed it forcibly into his chest, hoping the magic might pass from the bear to him, willing the bear to change him, as it had changed. He held it tighter and tighter until his concentration was broken by a reverberating scream.

At once the comforting presence of his father abandoned the space, and the mid-day light invaded the fortress. Shep squinted from the blinding light and shrill sound of the ceaseless cries of his sister, Scarlet.

Emerging from under the table after Pa, Shep beheld the scene. Scarlet stood in the center of the kitchen. She gripped her thigh, lifting her leg slightly off the ground.

“It’s on fire! My bottom’s on fire, Pa!” Scarlet declared between sobs.

Pa went to her, picked her up, and set her carefully on the counter, as Shep flanked him.

Shep watched as Pa began examining Scarlet’s hip. His large hands delicately pulled back the hem of Scarlet’s dress with unusual tenderness for a man who was practiced in separating rock from dirt.

“Darlin’, it ain’t fire but a wasp you’ve battled,” Pa said.

Scarlet let out a low sob, more scared of the word, “wasp,” than the wound. Her screams brought more unwanted company, as Shep’s brothers, Dovie and Grady, flew in the kitchen, bumping into each other, chickens trying to get into the henhouse at the same time.

Catching the tail end of Pa’s words, Dovie shouted, “Le’me see the stinger!”

Shep tried his best to keep Scarlet from Dovie’s invading stares. “Don’t cry, Scar. Pa’ll get it out.”

Pa gingerly swabbed the pink, swollen spot with a water and honey mixture Grady had already begun making up for him when he entered. Pa kept the dress up so Scarlet could oversee the healing process.

Pa corrected, "Bees leave behind their stingers, not wasps."

Pa reached over to pluck a salted strip of fatback directly from the greased, cast-iron skillet, which Dovie had brought in from the outside fire pit.

Still concerned, Shep questioned his father's good judgment. "So, she'll be okay, though, since the stinger can't keep stinging her?"

"Yes, but we best keep a sharp eye on her till we know."

"Know what, Pa...Pa?"

"Till we know if she's 'llegic like Ma," Grady chimed in. "Ma got stung real good right before she had you, Scar. Took her weeks to get rat."

"That's why I call you my little blessing, Scar. You came just in time to make yer mama better."

Shep closed his eyes tight, struggling to piece together an image of his mother from long ago. His mind tried to sharpen the picture in his head, to bring back the time when his mother was ill from the sting. But his memory failed him, so his imagination filled in the gaps. He could remember the blurred, oval shape of her face, but his imagination painted it with a pained expression and dabbed beads of sweat on his mother's brow. He could remember the dark of that night, but his imagination filled in the shadows with watchful spirits. He could remember a low moan slipping from her lips, but his imagination molded meaning from the sound, and the words, *I'm sick*, lingered still.

"Bet bears don't like wasps either," Shep whispered to himself.

Pa wiped the last crocodile tear from Scarlet's flushed cheek. "See, you just got to beat the bear till he puts his paws down."

Pa's words drew Shep from the pit of his memory, and a less distant recollection took over his thoughts; Shep remembered Pa's words from earlier.

"Pa, what'd you mean...by 'the bear?' You said you won Ma over by beating the bear," asked Shep.

Pa paused, and an unfamiliar silence hung over the space. Shep could sense his father waiting but for what, he didn't know.

"That's how I got yer Ma to up and marry a broke farmer. By killing a bear."

The children spoke at once, colliding questions.

Shep watched Pa pull out the footstool from the side of the room and sit, relocating Scarlet to his knee. She took her new position gratefully and listened to her Pa with the obedient gaze of a child, convincing Saint Nicolas of her good behavior in the hopes of getting an orange in her stocking.

Pa spoke low and slow. "Know them darkies—the ones that saw shiplap for Mr. Carson, run-out sharecroppers that come from the Congo and jungles and...strange places?"

Pa signaled to Shep to fetch him something to clear the gruffness in his throat. Shep kept his eyes trained on his father while ladling out cooled coffee into a dented, tin cup. A splatter of liquid signaled him to stop pouring.

"Well, over there in the jungles, a colored boy's gotta kill a bear to prove he's man 'nough to protect the tribe. Sacred righta passage. The ingens, ones passing through here to Florida, got a similar thought, 'cept they cut out a buffalo's heart."

Shep felt the gravity of his father's story and pulled in closer to him, as his father took a gulp from the tin cup. Shep could smell the bitterness of the rich, burnt liquid on Pa's breath as his father released a deep sigh.

"So I figured, what proves I'm man 'nough for a gal more than serving up a bear hide in exchange for her hand?"

Pa lifted the wooden bear from Shep's hands and placed it in Scarlet's lap. She reacted immediately, tenderly stroking the little piece.

"No father could sell off his daughter for less," he said, as he stared at Scarlet.

Shep watched his sister cradle the creature, loving the object he scorned, adoring each imperfection.

"Pa," Shep thought aloud, "if we get another bear...you think we can bring Ma back?"

Pa's eyes focused in on Scarlet, and Shep immediately felt betrayed by his father's silence. The afternoon light left the kitchen momentarily, and the room fell into shade. Pa took another sip of coffee and said,

"We best see if we can scout out that wasp, so he don't come around lookin' for the other buttock."

He picked Scarlet up off his knee.

"You huntin' a brown bear?" Grady mocked, "That's the funniest dern thing I ever heard. Bet you don't even know how to track a buck, let alone track a bear."

"I *will*. And once I do, you'll feel dumber than a woodpecker peckin' on bricks till its beak goes back'erds."

"She ought to learn how to defend *herself* case something comes creepin' round like they did at Shuler's place."

“Mr. Raybon!” Scarlet corrected.

“Betcha one of the other goats—that one with the crooked left horn—ate that lil’ one.

Goats start learning that if you cain’t lick a can without sawing yer tongue off or hop a rock with the rest of the smelly whites, then you’re good as dead in goat world,” Dovie added.

“Goats don’t eat each other ya idiot,” Grady said.

“Well, maybe crazy-man Sloane took the goat.” Dovie continued. “Maybe he eats ‘em. Way his eyes pop outta his head, makes him look like he’s a searching for something to snatch, and after the Haddlers’ kids went—”

Pa cut back in, “Dovie, we don’t speak an evil ‘gainst another man, especially one with as kind a soul as Mr. Sloane. And, Shep, I recon you not test them bears. Now, we’ve wasted ‘nough of the mornin’ talking nonsense. Mr. Muller takes his java and cigarette ‘round eleven, so you boys and gal need to get your bootstraps up and scuttle to town with those chestnuts. See if you can get at least a dime for ‘em—don’t let Mr. Muller give you no less than an honest sum.”

The moisture on Pa and Shep’s skin didn’t come from labor alone but from the valley, which cradled the cruel climate; the mid-summer wind was lazy and hot and did little to whisk the sweat off Shep and Pa’s brows, as they loaded the crates of chestnuts into a humble, wooden wagon. As they kept busy, Scarlet flitted around the wagon, making a game of catching the runaway nuts that escaped the captivity of the crates. She bobbed after one in particular that tumbled down the hill, stopping at the feet of a man. Scarlet stopped short, looking up from feet to knees and knees to the hips, shoulders, and finally the face, before daring to reach for the nut, all the while watching for any sudden movement. But the ashen-faced stranger bent down

towards Scarlet and let a modest smile crack across his face, revealing one tooth—or the spot where a tooth ought to be.

“Mr. Sloane, how’s your day been?” Pa asked.

Mr. Sloane simply nodded and straightened up best he could, but the hunch on his left side kept him bent like one of Scarlet’s collapsing finger-push puppets. He walked in a loosely-held-together fashion. A drag mark instead of a footprint from his right leg was left in the dirt as he moved towards Pa. A burlap bag was slung over his shoulder.

Shep stared at the man while scratching his skeeter bites, half expecting to reach the bone before relieving the itch of both bite and curiosity.

“Got some of that miracle fertilizer for me? Ain’t going to lie, I believe in that there magic shit—”

“Penny, Pa!” said Scarlet excitedly.

“—But miracle or not, I don’t see how you is going to get enough to cover the lot of the south orchard with one bag? I mean I heard the story of God feedin’ all those hungry chirpers with nothing but some kid’s lunch, but I’d swear a beer ‘gainst the man that’d say He’d do the same with a bag of fertilizer.” Pa reached out and shook Mr. Sloane’s hand.

“Mimms, no ‘mount of fertiler’s gunna snatch out them boll weevils. Least you ain’t grown cotton. The Elliots won’t get more than five-and-a-half cents a pound for their crop. Bout time every farmin’ man switched to soybeans.” Mr. Sloane looked to Pa for some sign of agreement but found none. “Rest’s down the drive in the buggy.”

“Well, damn, I thought we’d get to witness somethin’ amazing today.”

“Pen-ny!”

Mr. Sloane turned back to Scarlet and pulled out a crimson bandana from his overalls. Unfolding the cloth, he revealed an unblemished coin and held it out to her.

“You can have all the shiny coppers you want, little dilly, but first, you got to give me a smile.” Mr. Sloane waited as Scarlet shyly responded with a grin; a felicitous response for a man whom she believed she had fooled with a simple trick. “That’s just fine. Look there, you got some of them baby teeth wigglin’ loose. Better get your Pa here to tie a fishing hook around ‘em, attach ‘em to the door and start slammin’. Then you can collect from that fairy, get all the pennies you want and maybe—if you’re a good, good little girl—a peppermint stick.”

“I don’t wanna slam my teeth, mister! Pa, I don’t wanna lose ‘em. They’re mine.”

Scarlet buried her face in Shep’s shirt, her tiny hands clapped over her quivering lips. “Shh, darlin’, now don’t fret yourself none,” Mr. Sloane said gently. “Be brave.” Mr. Sloane produced another penny, and Scarlet hushed instantly.

“She’s had quite the morning. Worrying about jerkin’ teeth, and earlier a wasp found her.” Pa explained.

“Wasp? Where there’s a wasp, there’s another nearby. They’ll circle back ‘round for another go, sure as the day is long. Better find that nest, Stokes. I got something special for that, soak the nest in it, but it’s risky stuff.”

“I’d ‘ppreciate anything you got, Meryl.”

Mr. Sloane nodded to Pa, then started back down the drive, as Dovie and Grady exited the house. The children loaded up and followed in the same direction towards Mr. Muller’s shop.

“Well, I still think crazy-man Sloane took the goat—” Dovie said, as he picked up a chestnut and hurled it down the road by the shops. The nut clattered in the carriage wheels of passerby but didn’t crack, nature’s firm defense against man’s machines.

“What the hell woulda gardener want with a goat? Roses drink goat’s milk?” Grady asked. “Sides, it don’t matter. Anyone that tries to steal from the Stokes is going to have’ta deal with me. I’m the man of the house—”

“Nah uh!” Scarlet cut in, “Pa is.” Scarlet stuck her tongue out, a sign of victory.

“Well it’s Pa, then it’s me. If it was up to you, we’d all be dead.” Grady grabbed Scarlet’s tongue and yanked.

Shep pushed Grady, forcing him to release his sister. “Scarlet *can* defend herself. She fought off that poison ivy in a couple days—”

“Oh yeah, and some weed is the same as pullin’ a knife or shootin’ a shotgun?”

“What say you, Scar?” Dovie laughed. “Sheppy wants you to be the next Annie Oakley, swinging ‘round pistols and shotguns and dropping criminals at the bat of an eyelash.

“Shut up, guys! She dudn’t have to shoot it; I’ll look after her.”

“You can’t even keep up with yer damn jacks till Pa finds one with his foot five days later.”

“I can look after Scar. Pa lets me clean his thirty-eight, and he even let me shoot it too. All I need’s practice, that’s all.”

“We don’t need you swinging around a damn gun. You’d be more likely to shoot bullets into an anthill, thinkin’ it was an invadin’ army, than put it to good use.”

Dovie reeled back with laughter.

“I can do it! I swear. Mama use’ta swore I learned my ‘rithmetic tables faster than *you two*, said I was bright—”

“Well, Ma’s opinion don’t hold no count anymore, do it?”

“Hey, Shep! Quick, there’s a coyote trying to chew off the cows’ spots. Tell us what forty-eight divided by six is, so we can save ‘em!” Dovie acted out holding a gun in one hand and counting his fingers with his other hand.

“Here’s some math for ya: If you got nine bullets, then Sheppy has a nine outta a hundred percent chance of shooting *anything*.”

“I’m jus’ as much a man as you, Grady! I can shoot. I can shoot!”

Shep lunged for Grady, grabbing on to the front pocket of his brother’s overalls. Shep pulled hard to knock his brother down, but Grady remained unmoved. The seams in Grady’s pocket gave, and the threads tore from the garment as Dovie jumped in and shoved Shep violently backwards. Shep felt the emptiness in his gut as gravity forced him down, but before his unbalanced body hit, a pair of soft arms wrapped around him, stopping his fall. Shep looked up to behold the upside-down image of a woman’s face. Her features were lovely and soft but her expression was sullen.

Shep jerked up from her and moved back into the fortress of his brothers.

The woman stood across from him, a mirror to his own motionlessness. The red ribbon adorning her straw hat was juxtaposed with a canary-colored sundress. Shep noticed how the ribbon tormented her when it brushed against her powdered cheek, as she was forced to break her stillness to flick the fabric from her. A picnic basket rested in the crook of her arm.

“Your smallness id’nt what makes you fall, sweet boy, sometimes your feet...just decide to move on without bothering to warn the rest of what’s attached. Just running after the clouds as they pass, I s’ppose. They fly so fast...the clouds.”

Shep steadied himself.

“I’m nodda boy...Leora.”

The two stared at one another. The others looked on. Leora dropped her gaze to Shep’s feet. She lifted her eyes back up to his.

“Did Grady tell you to call me that?” she asked, her tone steady and somber.

Shep stood silent. Leora quickly played another key:

“Shep, tell me about your—how is—how are the trees?”

“Mr. Muller says they lost their spirit. But Pa said we just waitin’ for ‘em to legalize shine again, so we can go down to a spirits store and pick us up some more to give to the trees.” Shep laughed at the thought but stopped himself abruptly after seeing Leora’s face. Shep hesitated but managed, “Pa still believes in the trees. He ain’t gone give up the fight.”

Leora looked away from Shep, but he couldn’t tell what new sight her eyes beheld.

“No, I suppose he never will. But these hard times ain’t going to go away easily—”

“As easily as yer damn clouds?” Grady shouted back at her.

Leora shuttered at the pitch, but remained unwavering.

“Penny!”

Leora turned abruptly to see Scarlet, her pale-blue, patched dress sullied from play. Leora’s breath seemed to catch in her throat. Her head made quick, involuntary jerks backwards, the instincts of a bridled mare, spooked by its own shadow—eyes wide, nostrils flared. She

ripped her gaze from the girl, focusing desperately on smoothing out a wrinkle from her skirt. She pulled the fabric beyond its will, persuading the material into place.

“My Scar,” she choked out.

“Hello. I almost have thirty cents in penny money. I like your dress.” Scarlet laced her hands around her back and swung back and forth like a little ballerina on a music box, twirling to an unsung tune. “What’s in the basket?”

Leora looked to her hand, as if she’d forgotten she had the basket, but remained unable to speak.

“Whatever it is, can I have it? I’m hungry—”

“Can’t eat with your fingers all full dirt, ya toad,” Dovie said.

“Mama, tell Dovie I ain’t no toad. I’m a reg’lar lady that goes churchin’, and I tuck my skirt under my knees like Pa showed me when I jump rope, and I’m hungry—”

Shep watched as Leora bent down to Scarlet, her petticoat collecting around her, and he imagined her as a dandelion seed floating down from the sky. One finger on Leora’s gloved hand pressed carefully to Scarlet’s lips. Pulling at the fabric at the tips of her fingers, Leora removed her milk-white glove. Without touching her, she cautiously guided the glove on to Scarlet’s tiny hand, covering up the red clay. She took her hand and wrapped it around the shrouded hand, squeezing it tightly.

“There. Now there’s no dirt to remember.”

“Now Scarlet is jus’ like you,” Shep said sweetly.

Leora kept her eyes trained on Scarlet.

“Not yet, Sheppard. Don’t trouble such a thing.”

“That’s what Pa said to Shep about killing that bear dead!” Dovie tattled.

“Bear?”

“I don’t wanna talk ‘bout none of it. Is *my* business,” Shep said.

“That way Shep can stick it to Dovie and Grady sum’pin good, and we can use the bear’s hide to sit on for our picnic.”

“Shep?” Leora’s voice was burdened with concern. “You are such a brave man. You know I know that, right? But sweetheart, that load’s not for you yet. Wait to go on that adventure. Jus’ wait.” A sweet smile appeared on her face.

Suddenly, the bell on Mr. Muller’s shop door complained, as a tall, slick man exited the store. Shep saw the man, whose neck was festooned with an ebony tie that looked like a black snake had found his throat and was squeezing tight what had been mistaken for a rat. The man turned toward the shop windows, adjusting the choking creature. The shoulders and sleeves of his pinstriped zoot suit pointed up and out—the wings of a crow about to take flight—as he smoothed down the hair at the back of his neck. His reflection spoke back to him.

“I’m not surprised about this shack being ill stocked. My kidneys have suffered a blow today.”

“Yer kiddeys? “ Scarlet questioned.

“My k-i-d-n-e-y-s, child.” The man wheeled around to correct Scarlet. “Local pharmacies usually have gin pills to help keep my kidneys superbly healthy, because we all know what happens when we lose one.”

“We jus’ll use the other one?” Dovie asked.

The crow’s nose twitched. He crossed to Leora, lifted her right hand, and placed it in the inside of his jacket pocket, close to his heart. Leora’s cheeks deepened to a rosy hue.

“Oh, *yes*, yes, of course. Now, why didn’t *I* think of that?” he said.

“Because yer kiddeys are sick without their pills?” answered Scarlet.

The man jerked his head down, as if spotting a wiggling worm from high up on a clothesline. “What an odd little girl. Didn’t your mother ever tell you that you’re suppose to wait till you’ve been addressed before inserting yourself?”

“What’s in the basket?”

“A rich red that’s older than you and your brothers combined, some tarty cheese, salami, mustard, crackerjacks, and rhubarb jam—none of which are fitting for a squirt your size—”

Scarlet didn’t wait for him to finish. She jumped to the basket, making Leora drop it. The contents littered the sidewalk. But instead of the soft clicks of escaping chestnuts, Shep heard the sound of shattering glass, as the jam jar fractured on the wood planks.

“Pa! Pa!” Scarlet screamed, as she saw the jar hemorrhaging. “It’s Pa’s! Pa *made* that jam!”

Scarlet hurriedly bent to pick up the broken jar, cutting her little fingers on the glass. Jam and blood mixed together.

“Scarlet!” Shep leaped to her side.

Leora stood above Scarlet, unmoving. But the man bent down, wiping the jam from his shoes with a handkerchief. He licked his pinky.

The crow replied, “Then you can blame him for your manners, and for the sour jam. The rhubarb is unpleasant at best.”

Scarlet sobbed, then in a sudden burst, “I’m a reg’lar lady that-that goes churchin’, ‘n’ I tuck my skirt under my knees, and and I say no sir, and I call you—”

“Hush, child,” Leora said.

Scarlet stopped instantly. She sat silently, her knees in the jam, while Shep removed the glass from around his sister. Dewy pearls rolled down her cheeks.

“Hush,” Leora repeated softer.

The man stepped over the mess, pulling Leora with him. The pair walked past the children, leaving them in silence.

Shep looked to his sister. The pain he tried so hard to protect her from was there in her eyes. As his brothers moved in to lift Scarlet up, Shep tried to help, but Grady held him back.

“Ain’t nothing more *you* can do.”

Shep sat back on his heels, waiting, searching himself, pushing past the sharp pain that seemed to pour through his whole being.

He knew Grady hadn’t spoken the truth; he knew one thing that could be done—that *had* to be done.

Shep huddled in the hollow of a fallen pine trunk. Silhouetted by the dwindling afternoon light, the individual leaves bled together, like ink from a dripping quill, until darkness collected them into amorphous, blue-black shapes. Sediment collected in every crack, itching.

Everywhere. The scent of rotting wood was a smell to which the nose could never adapt; thick and slightly sweet, the air hung like milk fat suspended in a resting jar. The worms, which had been tickling Shep’s elbows, and the beetles, which had sashayed up his pant leg, had gone, tucked into the soil for sleep. Cool greenish-yellow firefly lights, went in and out, silent, floating companions, disguised as stars. Shep dared not nab them like he used to for fear of losing his only company in the forest—at least, the only company he could see. He continued to wait.

He reclined on his stomach, his chin on his forearms. A strange coolness against Shep's belly made him jump, bumping his head against the log's roof. He felt around till he found his father's revolver. He didn't know which to be scared of more: being alone with the bear, unarmed, or a lashing from his father for stealing the gun.

Seizing the revolver, Shep clicked open the barrel and checked—as he had many times—that the solitary round was aligned properly. As he clicked it back into place, he heard a sound unfamiliar to the forest. The unrecognizable noise made his shoulders shake. His breathing became wild. Shep fumbled with the weapon, having to use both his little hands to prime the hammer. The barrel reluctantly rolled into place, and he extended his arm. When Shep heard the sound again, horror surged inside his empty belly. A sound from behind.

Shep dug his fingernails in the earth, savagely crawling out of the trunk as fast as his little body could move. He squirmed and kicked against the trunk. A small cry escaped from his lips. But as Shep began to wiggle free and stand to his feet, he felt the sharp puncture of claws in his shoulder, ripping him backward. In a moment of impulse, Shep pulled hard on the trigger. The shot tore through the blackness, and the percussion vibrated in his ears. Losing his balance, Shep collapsed, his back producing a thud as he smacked into the ground. His breath knocked out of his body. Shep sucked in but felt nothing fill his lungs. He watched helplessly as a single greenish-yellow glow vanished into the ebony of night.

Where the little light once was, a towering shadow emerged, darker than the pitch around it. The creature loomed above him, as if standing on its hind legs. With his single shot fired and tremulous fear paralyzing his body, Shep anticipated the teeth to come next, to sink into his neck, for the beast to gnaw on his skull as if it were a jawbreaker from Mr. Muller's shop. A warm sensation soaked through his overalls.

“There’s a phrase ‘bout shootin’ in the dark... Think in plain terms it mean you better not take the risk.”

Shep recognized Mr. Sloane’s voice long before he could bring himself to confront it.

“Didn’t mean to scratch ya, little mister,” Mr. Sloane said.

An unseen force pulled Shep to his feet.

“But I didn’t want whoever it was running on into the night alone.”

“How’d you know it was me—why you here?” Shep half yelled at the man.

“Could ask you same.” Mr. Sloane waited for a confession, but when none came, he answered, “Jus’ came from the Gabble’s place. Womans want more flowers than they put down in a cemet’ry”—a pause in the darkness—“And you?”

Shep sucked back the snot in his nose and wiped the tears from his cheeks with his unbuttoned sleeve.

“I was. I was trying to kill the bear—Pa’s bear.”

Mr. Sloane answered calmly and without question. “And did you... get ‘em?”

“Well,” Shep thought aloud, the sinking realization of failure creeping into his mind.

“Yeah, I uh, I think I got him good. I fired my last round jus’ as you yanked me. But I think I heard him jus’ now”—Mr. Sloane stayed quite—“Heard it dying. Moanin’ and such.”

“*Moanin’* you say?”

Shep stared up into what he thought might be the shadow’s face, though he couldn’t tell.

“I never known a bear to *moan*—ah, what I nice rhyme we jus’ made... What I mean is, you best make sure something’s dead before your pa tucks you in at night—”

Shep suddenly remembered his other foe, the one that would meet him when he returned.

“That why you’re here, Mr. Sloane, to take me back?”

“Afraid not, Shep.”

Shep stared at the unmoving shadow.

“I don’t understand.”

“That’s alright, Shep. Everything’s alright.”

Mr. Sloane’s face burst out of the dark, all at once illuminated by lantern light. His scorched lips pressing together to blow the match’s flame to evanescent smoke. He was covered head-to-toe in dirt, his pale skin completely vanished underneath a heavy coat of dried brown mud. Dropping to his knees, Mr. Sloane collected from the ground a tri-pronged trowel he had dropped from the bag slung over his back, the burlap sack giving his back a large humped appearance, doubling his size. His hand gripped tight the pronged, steel tool, the ends sharp and curled, poked out from between his knuckles.

Shep took him in. They stared at each other for a long moment, until a small tickle on Shep’s arm began to prick his skin. A wasp had landed and was searching the boy, measuring him in its own way.

“You know, Shep, bears, they’re just like wasps,” he said, watching the insect on the boy’s arm. “They hide—wait. And if you don’t take care to wipe the ground of their seed, they’ll keep on comin’ back...back for another bite, another sting...”

Shep jumped with a start, slapping his arm and releasing a howl.

A moment passed. A wave of nausea swept through Shep, and not one mark but many began to cover the boy.

“I’ll be, you must be the same. The same as yer ma... Yes, I’m quite sure.”

Shep saw Sloane’s face twist and change, as the poison spread. And the lantern light swung above him, as if fixed to the cabin frame of a tossing ship. The light’s hypnotic power

went much deeper than the mind; it sunk in Shep's muscles, swelling his throat, shutting his eyes. But before they closed, he saw the faint, glowing lights twinkle out of existence, stolen away to wake again with another night.

“Yes. You're the same. Allergic, once stung.”

Creatives - Chapter 6

A few minutes ago—or was it an hour—Rin’s voice had assured me of my safety, which had been in desperate need of assurance after he had uttered the word “falling” when clarifying what he meant by “taking me there”—the transition from consciousness to my subconscious.

You will not physically fall as you would in this dimension because falling requires a force acting on an object, a starting and ending point. Rin had instructed me to remove a strip of paper from the trash. *If consciousness is representative of one side of the paper, then the subconscious is represented as the other side of the paper, its coequal. But when the doorway is opened, the boundaries blur.* Next, Rin had instructed me to take one end of the strip in one hand and the other end in the other hand, and twist my hands in opposite directions, then staple the two ends of the paper strip together. *Your conscious reality and subconscious become a non-orientable boundary, a Möbius loop,* he explained, as I stared at what looked to be a failed origami project. *If you were to walk the loop’s surface, you would traverse both realities without ever knowing where one begins and the other ends, one never-ending path. Each world you travel through in the subconscious is another twist, another knot in the loop*

Out of the whole explanation, I had become enlightened to two facts: that Möbius loops might make great paper decorations for Lyle’s birthday and that I was beginning to feel those twists and knots that Rin had mentioned, and they were uncomfortably situating in my stomach.

At that point, Rin decided to walk me through the process rather than attempt to explain the ordeal:

“Place a clean canvas on your easel, load up your brushes, and take a seat—”

“Why?” I moved to my workstation but fumbled around directionless; how could I prepare my supplies without knowing my subject? “I don’t know how to—”

“Knowing is the problem, isn’t it? You believed, up until this point, that you knew everything. So we will make you un-know what you’ve been taught.”

The words were déjà vu, rewinding and replaying in my head. Professor Whitt’s instructions from the day before sat in the base of my brain: *The problem now is that you all are painting too much like you were taught.*

“I thought you said my professor was limiting me? This seems kinda familiar...” I scoffed.

“It’s the method that we aim to immedate, not the result. You must go back to that place of complete abandonment to your craft.”

I set a clean canvas on my easel and slid my hand across the surface with great care to stir any particles that clung to the surface. The faintly grainy surface was slightly elastic to the touch, resisting my hand exactly the way it should. I repeated the motion, imagining myself as the evil stepmother removing dust from the magical mirror’s face to gaze and ask who was fairest.

“Why?”

“Because that’s how you will create the door.”

I stuck a tube of cad red in my mouth, situating the cap in between my back molars like a vice, and twisted the tube. The sound of the dried oils softly cracking as the cap unwound and opened was familiarly pleasant.

I waited for Rin to elaborate; I knew he would.

“To create a door. A Creative’s art—whatever that may be—is the doorway into the mind, a vehicle into the subconscious. Earlier, I spoke about a subconscious convergence. Think of this place as the penthouse at the top of a tall skyscraper. The skyscraper is your mind—the top floor, the converging point. Your art is the revolving door that allows you into the building.”

I sat very still, halting my preparation. I felt as though I was visiting a science-fiction convention, listening to some guy with an aluminum hat tell me about his UFO abduction. Or possibly I was preparing to create an end-of-the-world prophecy like a Neanderthal, painting on a cave wall in hopes that the gods would be a little less moody when deciding his fate.

With each squeeze of a new hue, I felt a sense of dread elbow me in my back: good paint—expensive paint—wasted on painting my own personal crop circles, so I could unlock my fourth chakra. The whole endeavor felt absurd, yet I kept going, pressing the oils to the palette, keeping them an exact distance apart.

“Stop,” Rin said. “Colors are made to be mixed, so mix them. Let them decide what they want to be—”

“I’m just getting them on the stupid board—”

“You are controlling the situation,” Rin spat.

I jammed the cap on the tube in my hand and half threw it onto the lip of my easel, knocking the loaded brushes onto the floor. Letting a labored sigh slip my lips, I dropped to my knees and collected the brushes. I pressed the bent, soft-tipped bristles of one between my fingers, smoothing the fibers back into a straight cone shape.

“Allow the paint to become autonomous...let go.”

My other hand coiled into a fist, and I punched down into the wood floor.

“I can’t do anything with you in my head. I can’t ‘let go’ when you keep telling me to let go!”

Rin quieted. I held the bent brushes in my right hand, fighting the compulsion to reshape the others. Beneath my other hand, I felt a cool, slippery substance. I lifted it and saw the colors lining my knuckles like blood on a boxer’s glove. Assessing each hand, I looked slowly from one

to the other. I closed my eyes tightly, keeping the swirl of colors in my mind, painting the scene as best my memory could replicate it. Releasing the brushes, I let them fall but never heard the sound of them hitting the cruel ground. With my left hand, I pressed the back of my palm to the wood floor, feeling the paint ooze out to escape the pressure. I listened now to the rain's constant drum. I inhaled slowly and with an exhale, slid my hand forward on the floor, expanding the color, stretching it in my mind, but never daring to look, to care about the mess, or about making something with meaning.

The floor was happy to take the color, allowing my hand to slide seamlessly over the connected shiplap. When my arm found its limit, I drew it back, considering only the weight of my hand and the texture of the viscous paint, neither liquid nor quite solid; the paint could be what it wanted, or it could be neither. It could be the floor beneath me or the lake from my dream. The chill was not much different, the surface not unlike the lake, still and indifferent. I let touch take me to that place. I walked forward in my mind. Even when I reached it, I kept walking till footprints became ripples on mirrored glass, and I vacantly watched as colorless fish glided beneath my feet, Escher's *Three Worlds*, spilling into one. I understood, in a moment, how I could stand atop it: I was without gravity. The weight of my hand, which I had held in my mind, had dissolved in the lake. Or perhaps I was becoming the lake... But the feeling of not being whole, of being neither here nor there seemed to undo me. I watched my feet slip into the shadows of the bottomless water. As my eyes began to sink below the surface, the space around me darkened. I knew what was about to happen to me. But I couldn't stop it. I couldn't rip myself from what invaded around me. I couldn't do anything but fall.

The pain in my ribs woke me—or at least I *believe* that's what woke me. The experience felt akin to being put under for surgery. *Count backwards from ten*. I couldn't recall when I had slipped out of consciousness or when I had woken—if I was even awake or if I was continuing to fall. But I guess that's the nature of traveling to somewhere without time.

I curled up to release the tension, and realized, suddenly that I was *moving*. Wherever I was, I had control over my body, and more importantly, I had a body! Yet, it felt odd to me, as if I needed to instruct my muscles how to contract, tell my bones how to hold my weight, instead of my mind doing so automatically. My bones were the gears of a bike left out in the rain.

I pushed against the ground, lifting my torso. The pain in my right ribs made breathing a burdensome task, and I became, in that instant, grateful for the protection my ribcage had offered me against the unforgiving ground. I kept my eyes closed, patting the surface: cool, slick, and slightly smooth rocks. My fingertips told me that the rocks were held together with cement; the rough texture between them was distinctly different. Daring to reach out further, my hand bumped against a rigid, imperfect bar. I wrapped my fingers around it, bracing myself.

Opening my eyes one at a time, I quickly became confused by what I saw. The vast expanse could be likened to a great Dutch landscape: an abundance of blue burdened the subordinate trees, forcing my head to bow to view the lowly line of the horizon and pay respect to the seraphic clouds with swollen bellies, as they dawdled and mocked all beneath them. I couldn't discern whether it was the force of the wind, as it searched every inch of me, or the foudroyant scene that caused my eyes to water. As I took in the view—or, rather, as it took me in—I felt small.

My smallness reminded me that most glorious things that command veneration are usually preceded by something a little less delightful, fear. Yet somehow I'd skipped that step, so

I looked around, suddenly distrustful of my surroundings. More specifically, I looked down, and I found the missing step. I was sitting on it, a staircase, steeper and more treacherous than that of an ancient Mayan step-pyramid. The staircase contoured something—some type of mountainside—but I was too afraid to reposition myself to see more, too afraid to move. Yes, I had found my fear, but I had been too busy peering through the bars of the cast-iron railing to notice that there was nothing on the other side of the steps. Nothing.

I gasped, trying to gulp in the air that whipped my face, but my lungs didn't fill. I gripped the bars to secure my quivering body, but they shook in rhythm with my bones. I tried to tell myself to stop shaking, but I'm sure my body could not make out the half-broken sentences that fell through my chattering teeth. Sweat slid down my arms and dripped off my bent elbows, making my hold on the railing increasingly unstable.

I contemplated my course. Remaining fixed to the side of the mountain, like a baroque gargoyle, was an impossibility. The stairs implied a direction; I had to simply choose which: up or down. My eyes followed the stairs, as they zigzagged down, down, further and further, until they disappeared under the carpet of trees. As I looked right, I was relieved to see the top of the mountain. A stone wall with arches indicated the top, and tightly packed, variegated, plaster homes lined the peak, like a crown, sitting on a king's head. The friendly colors and quaint, winking windows contrasted the brooding wall, welcoming yet watchful.

Placing my hands on the stone steps, I walked my body around, positioning myself to make the journey up. I crawled forward on all fours. My will was divided. Two overwhelming instincts screamed in each ear: take another step and remain still. Pain in my lower back interrupted my mental tug-a-war to make me aware of how far I had traveled. Inching over to the

wall, I clung to the mountainside and stood up, wincing as the pain grew along my spine. I continued, gripping the wall as I ascended.

My pace increased, and soon, the last stair came into sight. My calves burned and my lungs craved air, as I took on the last step. I fell into the cobbled wall, embracing the rocks, grateful for the protection they offered. A faint noise overcame my desperate gasps and the wind's call. A cacophony of voices, music, and ambient noise rang out through the archway.

I peered around the façade, looking down the tunnel to see a whirl of motion and color. *Humanity*. My heartbeat settled slightly.

I started down the tunnel, my destination in sight. My eagerness to be wrapped up by civilization swelled, as I reached the other side. The light burst through the shaded tunnel, and the noise bounced off the walls, attacking me from every direction.

Before me was a thronged village market, chockablock with hurried inhabitants, swarming the square in a chaotic, yet practiced pattern; like bees departing one hive to colonize another, the customers buzzed from table to table, feeding on the artisans' goods. Tables punctuated the space and overflowed with splendid items of varying sorts: Sitting on one table, hand-thrown, glazed vases reflected the amber light of the honey-filled jars, resting on the table across it; golden, woven challah bread imitated the weaved pattern of the baskets, displayed on another; and long, dyed cloths created colored spider webs, as they draped from one table to the next.

I lifted my eyes to the sky, pulling my mind out of the commotion to summon my guide: *Rin, are you there?* But no answer was given, or if it was I couldn't make out anything above the shouts of the shoppers. The crowd conversed as one; every mouth spoke, but not a single word was distinguishable.

I dared to take a step into the square, focusing on locating Rin, but as I left the archway, I was instantly swept up in the wave of shoppers and knocked around like the metal ball in Lyle's favorite pinball game—hitting lights, flaring tempers, making noise, scoring points for not falling...yet. No apology was offered for the elbow that hit me square in the nose or the hip that thrust me into the personal space of a man twice my size, carrying a caged chicken that was even more panicked than me—if that was possible. I choked and puffed out feathers, as I yelled for Rin, straining my vocal cords to scream above the noise. The shoppers closed in around me, and I began to bump around in circles, as their motion churned me. The colored buildings that towered above the square began to blend into a prism of dizzying hues, until direction lost all meaning; I had misplaced my beginning and didn't know my end.

“Rin! Rin! Please, Rin!” I screamed.

I jerked my vision around, until my eyes landed on a middle-aged man, sitting at a table, his gaze fixed on me, a strange calmness in his eyes.

The man gave a warm smile and motioned me over.

With new determination I pushed through the crowd, which seemed to part more easily than before.

I approached his table, which contained a plethora of hand-carved clocks with little *dirndl*-dressed girls and *lederhosen*-clad boys fixed to the faces. The man's eyes concentrated hard on his work, as if he was winding up *his* face, rather than the clock's. But when I reached him, his expression softened once more.

Wearily I asked, “Rin? Are you Rin? Do you know where Rin is?”

The voice I had heard before belonged to a boy, yet Rin had warned me that the same rules didn't apply here.

The man grinned, an almost unspoken ascent.

“You’re interested then? I have such a collection. Something for everybody. You just tell me what fits your fancy,” he asked, extending the clock towards me.

“What? No—no, I’m just...should I be? I mean. Do we need the clock to find Charlotte?”

“You aren’t going to buy the clock?”

“*Should* I be buying the clock? I can’t exactly buy the clock without—”

“You aren’t going to buy a clock,” the man said sharply, jumping to his feet. “Then keep up your step. Gawkers get their tongues cut out, drooling over stuff they can’t afford.”

The man hit my shoulder with the clock, pushing me backward, back into the crowd.

I watched him return to his seat, feeling both the ache in my shoulder and disappointment from wrongly assuming he could help. But disappointment was replaced by a stronger feeling: the sudden realization that the man wasn’t real or in so much as he was only real in my subconscious. My mind had betrayed me, thoroughly convinced me that I didn’t know that man, yet the only way he existed must be *because* of my mind. How could I know and not know my own reality, my own thoughts?

I had to escape. I wanted out. Now.

I turned and began shuffling through the shoppers once more.

Garments of every hue spilled out from all ends of a table a couple yards down from the one I fled. Customers twisted the cloth in their hands and leaned their heads back in satisfaction, as if the feel of the fabric sunk deeper than the tips of their fingers. I looked sheepishly down at my own clothes: the exact outfit I had on before coming here, a ratty pair of plain, gray pajama pants and a white cotton t-shirt with a stormtrooper’s helmet printed on the front. I stared back

into the eyes that watched me like vultures, as they waited for the fashionably wounded to lie down and give up.

With my attention distracted, I failed to watch my feet. I rammed into something, stumbling over myself and futilely grappling with the air to stop my fall. Face to stone, I looked up dazed to find my obstacle. In front of me stood a pixie of a girl. Her body was lanky like a marionette, and her dress matched accordingly. Her rufous hair framed her round face. Her tomboy appearance mimicked her mischief-plus grin, which extended from ear to ear.

“S-sorry, didn’t see you there.” I didn’t quite know why I was apologizing. After all, I was the one on the ground.

She said nothing. Instead her imaginary strings lifted one leg and one arm in the air for a brief second before whisking her away as quickly as she came.

The eyes of the voracious hunters were back on me, but they had multiplied, and the intensity of their stares had changed from impatient disdain to joyful avidity. Nervously, I looked around to find Rin. The little marionette’s disappearing act had captured my time long enough to make me a target.

A greasy man with chocolate skin popped up as if from the ground. He was decorated with a yellow sash draped down his bare chest, which matched the lines of the gems that lined his black leather shoes. I looked past him at his booth to see what he was selling. The booth was stacked high with ceramics filled with assorted gems and coins. Greek-looking statues of figurines were seated comfortably behind the vases, filled with glimmering marbles, like wizards and witches stirring their caldrons of colored rocks.

“From the paleness of your skin and the gray color of your irises, I would guess you are an air element. You are unsteady in life and often seek change and new states of being,” the salesman said politely.

That was easy; he had just witnessed me nosedive into the floor. I went from the state of being upright to the state of *not* being upright. Without taking his eyes off me, he removed a gem from a vase behind him. In his palm sat a milky stone with tiny specs of color.

“If you buy this stone, your balance will return to your life. It is the hardest stone in *this* world other than a diamond. You need earth to settle you, keep you in one place, to keep you from venturing forward to places where you will surely lose yourself. Keep this stone with you, and remain still, not questioning that which you don’t know.”

“Thank you for...that. The rock you can keep, but I could use a hand instead,” I said reaching toward him for aid. He quickly retracted both his hand and the stone.

“Silly girls fall when they spin with their heads in the clouds, never looking at their feet.”

I helped myself up as he continued to taunt me.

“Silly girl, silly girl.”

In that moment, a young boy shoved past the salesman.

“Hurry, before it starts rhyming,” he said, as he struggled against his small frame, his arms barely long enough to wrap around my waist, to pull me from in front of the salesman.

The man twirled toward the boy, “Ew! A water sign. How rare. Very much the problem solver aren’t we. Always weaving your way out of situations. You like stargazing and—”

“And very silent people. Come, Jack.”

My name.

The boy appeared about 13- or 14-years-old, so odd for his commanding presence. His hair was the color of a starless night, which made sense, for the stars had collected instead on his ivory skin, shimmering with moon dew. The boy's expression was fearsome, as his eyes stared deep into me, through me, to a place of knowing.

"Rin," I said with full faith.

The boy didn't answer.

I followed anyway.

"Fine, fine, but before you go, may I read you? Or are you too afraid what I might find?"

The salesman cracked a crooked smile.

Rin tossed a halting glare in his direction but kept moving.

I leapt to keep up with him. As I walked behind him, I questioned my blind obedience. I had been deceived so easily before, and now, I trailed behind the boy like a lost duckling, as he weaved us through the hoards of people. Rin stopped abruptly after a moment, and I collided with him.

"Pay attention," Rin demanded.

"Pay attention to what?"

"To your feet and your task."

"Which is?"

Rin rolled his eyes, his cabochon irises rising and falling like the orbit of the moon.

"Only you will know."

"Can we please just stop talking in riddles, Yoda? Where are we?"

I stopped firmly to confront Rin, demanding answers before taking another step.

Rin's eyes took in his surrounding, and I followed his gaze to see that our little conversation had picked up some eavesdroppers. Rin simply looked at me and began cautiously backing up into the space between two plaster buildings. I followed him. The buildings' shadows settled on my skin, a cool caress, and the walls muffled the tiresome sounds of the streets.

Rin waited, constructing his answer carefully in his mind before explaining.

"I spoke of the subconscious as if it were a building. Do you remember?"

He didn't wait for an answer.

"Each floor is a piece of your subconscious, a part of your identity, that manifests as its own world and is inhabited by... an owner, an incarnation of you—well, of a quality or trait you possess."

I glanced up at the houses above me, peering into the windows and imagining little copies of myself, scuttling here and there in the colored homes, baking cookies and sitting for self-portraits of one another.

"We cannot find Charlotte until we visit each world in your subconscious, identify the owner, and assimilate him or her. Without doing so, your psyche will be unable to connect with Charlotte's."

"Assimilate?" The word hung on the tip of my tongue like a bad after taste.

"*Convince them* to come along with us, to accept that they are a part of you after you complete whatever task they require."

"Task?"

"A test created by the owner to measure your worth. After all, no one likes to be plucked from their world and thrown into another—"

“Well, I was sure ‘plucked’ from mine! Dragged out by my hair and chunked in this place.”

“I see your...sense of humor wasn’t lost in the process...The sooner you find the owner, the sooner we can leave.”

“But, Rin, I don’t know how to find the owner. I don’t even know this place—”

“Your conscious self doesn’t, but that’s simply the cruelty of your body’s genetic incompetence,” he rebutted.

“In-co-what?”

“The medial temporal lobe.”

“English,” I said, allowing my tone to reveal my frustration.

Rin paused, collected himself, and began again.

“Our anatomical parts share a symbiotic relationship, the same way the owners function to create a unified self. The creation of self is both physical and metaphysical, and both require each interdependent part to function. Because these parts are dependent, damage to one means damage to another.”

“So...you’re saying my brain is damaged?”

Through the sliver of space between the walls, the shoppers feasted on a tomato stand. Buyers nabbed up each fruit, their nails puncturing the plump flesh, as they examined for imperfections like a jeweler assessing a diamond. One rejected tomato slipped from the stand and plummeted to the cobblestone street, bruised and abused. My brain was the tomato: a damaged good.

Rin pushed past me, to place himself back in my line of vision. He tripped as he walked the treacherous stone path back out from the houses and over to a corner booth. His ankles

wobbled dangerously without any shoes to keep them steady. *It must be frustrating for him to have a body that doesn't match the maturity of his mind*, I thought.

I followed reluctantly. I couldn't quite interpret his expression, but I knew *he* knew I was crestfallen, confused. Instead of chastise me—as was his usual reaction—I saw him search me, diagnosing me like an unknown organism, pressed between two plates of glass.

I let myself get distracted by a booth with hanging, bamboo birdcages. A creamy white dove fluttered about in one cage. Picking up a small corn kernel from the street, I fed the creature and watched it in the same trained manner Rin watched me.

He said softly, “Not all, just a part of your brain. The part that makes memories—the stories your mind collects to create the self. Emotional trauma handicaps the brain's ability to remember, and physical trauma rips holes in our recollection, adding and subtracting ticks on our personal timelines as if it were playing tic-tac-toe with a blind opponent. The experiences, the people, the places can all be stolen by the very neurons that make and store these memories.”

As Rin continued to explain, he acted out the very occurrence he narrated. He stopped with his back to the bird booth, moving me out of the way. With his hands behind him, he swiftly unlocked and stole the dove from its cage and turned to reveal the creature to me. A clever magic trick or a criminal offense, I wasn't sure. The animal wiggled in Rin's elfin hands, as he held the bird to him.

I felt guilt sink low in my stomach, but I was more concerned with what Rin was implying about my memories. Still, I kept a curious eye on the creature and one on the shopkeeper.

“When you experience a traumatic event, your body produces higher levels of cortisol, a chemical reaction to the body coming under extreme stress, an answer to the body's need to

survive.” Rin stroked the bird, as it continued to fight his hold. “This chemical helps preserve this traumatic event in your mind, so vivid a memory, they seem to linger, to defy time and haunt you indefinitely. But this preservation has a cost...” Rin closed his hands tighter around the bird’s fragile body. The dove’s feet twitched and kicked, and its neck swiveled violently, as if it might break from the torso.

My heart began to beat faster, as I watched the bird squirm. *Stop, Rin. You’re hurting it.*

“The memories that encase that one memory, that lead up to it and follow it—and even the traumatic memory, itself—may become distorted, altered into a reality that is twisted by our imagination, and in the worst instances, lost completely, at least to our conscious mind. But not to the subconscious...”

I struggled to understand, in the hopes that reaching this point might make Rin release the helpless animal. “So. So you’re saying this place is some kind of some kind of lost memory?”

Rin squeezed tighter.

“I’m *saying* that this place has some connection to you whether you remember it or not. Even the worlds’ owners—your identities—may be a reflection of the world they inhabit and often resemble some aspect of their host. The subconscious has a funny way of remembering things the conscious mind often overlooks or tries to forget. If you find these connections, you might figure out what you have to do to assimilate the owner.”

“And if I don’t?”

Rin didn’t respond. Didn’t stop.

“Rin. If I don’t?” I yelled.

From behind us a noise started to grow, like the roar of a waterfall as you approach a surging river.

I looked back to see the topic of conversation between the shoppers had escalated, changing from clishmaclaver to a heated debate. The owner of the dove flung the cage to the ground, snapping the bamboo bars, as another buyer shoved him backwards.

I jerked back to Rin. His eyes were focused and his countenance, self-possessed.

“Rin! Stop it! Let go!”

Rin peered up at me through long, black lashes, and a small smirk etched out in his cheeks. He turned slowly in the direction of the commotion, his eyes on me till his head was forced to follow his body. Bursting up, the dove exploded into the sky, free from its captor, and took flight, the creature’s outstretched wings reflecting the mid-day sunlight. The flash of brilliant white stole the attention of the bickering owner, as he caught sight of his property fleeing the square.

Rin remained fixed in front of the owner. I couldn’t see his face; but I did see the feather dance, as Rin spun the horny shaft between his fingers. Rin’s wrist rotated slowly, and he released the feather, letting it flutter about till it landed at the feet of the shopkeeper.

The color of the shopkeeper’s face deepened, as if a candle maker had dripped hot, crimson wax on the man’s cheeks. We stood about four yards from him, yet I could still make out the visible shake of his body, irregular and uncontrollable, from where I stood. The man extended a finger to point directly at us.

“Run,” Rin said calmly. He turned around to me when I didn’t move. “*Run*, Jack.”

My body couldn’t react, couldn’t process the sight of the man charging toward us. Rin pushed me hard in my side, and I lurched to the left, shoving between two conversing gentleman.

The hard cobblestones tripped me, and I fell hard into the shoppers.

“My word!” they hissed.

I didn't look around to see if Rin was following me, didn't look anywhere but ahead. The sound of the shopkeeper's thunderous voice rose from behind me. A flash of images invaded my mind: his hands around my throat, my body tossed out of the village and off the side of the mountain.

I grabbed onto the sleeves of jackets, ripped at hems, to yank the shoppers out of my way. I stumbled into a break in the crowd, and Rin followed quickly behind me. As soon as he reached me, the two of us bolted through the street together, weaving down a flight of steps, through an ally, in between groups of shopper. As we swung around a corner, I caught Rin by his arm. Through heavy pants, I questioned him:

“Why. Why. Why'd you do that?”

“You asked me to release the bird,” he said caustically.

I fell into the ally wall, knocking my head against it. Concentrating on my pounding heartbeat, I tried to slow my breaths, so I could form a sentence—a response to the absurdity.

“Yeah, your right”—breath—“This is all *my* fault.”

“It *is* your fault.” Rin's voice squeaked. “You're not doing your job to find the owner—”

“I don't know how to do that! There're so many freaking people.”

Rin glared up at me, a trace of irritation in his eyes. “There are *too many* people. It's a diversion, a way to disguise the true owner.”

As if on cue, the light, slipping through the ally way, was blocked out by bodies, hoards of frantic shoppers, dashing towards us in crazed confusion.

“We need to get back to the square. We have to find the owner,” Rin instructed.

Instinctively, Rin and I began running as fast as our bodies could move. We ran together down the long passage, looking left to right at every intersection, trying desperately to find our way back.

“How’ll we be able to tell?” I screamed out through pants.

“Look for the one person not running.”

The streets were mimetic of one another; the paths were endlessly changing, connected in a maze of cobbled stone and blindingly colored houses. The place I fought to escape earlier was now impossible to reach. I trained my ears to listen for the apex of the noise, the origin of the mob, but the echoes of the shouts were ping ponged, drawn in and shot back out, unwanted by the ally walls. At each new opening, I craned my neck around before passing, as one might when approaching a stop sign on a traffic-clogged street. My ankles throbbed from bending unnaturally to stabilize my sprinting legs.

As Rin and I tore through yet another side street, I stopped abruptly at the sight of a steep staircase to my left. Without bothering to notify Rin of my impulsive decision, I ascended the stairs. Tripping and hitting my chin on the edge of one, I realized much too late that the stairs couldn’t be taken two-at-a-time; the impossibly steep and uneven stairwell was a daunting challenge even if climbed slowly. The coppery taste of blood filled my mouth, and as I swallowed it, I could feel my stomach’s dissatisfaction when realizing it wasn’t water. The sensation made me dizzy, as I reached the top and bent over myself, my hands on my kneecaps. I didn’t turn around to see Rin. I was too terrified of gazing upon the treacherous stairs again. I continued forward, hobbling onto the balcony of the building.

Looking out among the rooftops, I spotted the square easily.

Rin came to my side, his body heaving from exhaustion.

“There—that direction,” I said. But as we turned to make our way back down, I saw the sea of people falling over each other, as they conquered the stairs.

Rin ripped my attention away from the stairwell with a loud crash of glass. I turned to see half of a broken, terracotta pot in his hands and a pool of stained-glass shards on the concrete floor. Using a drapery hanging from the canopy, Rin pushed out the remaining glass around the frame and turned to me.

“After you,” he said, neither politely nor patiently.

My mind was still deceiving me as I slid through the sill. *This is someone’s home, someone’s property.* But I had no time for guilt.

We darted through the house without a care to damage done: toppling a side table, slamming stained-glass doors so hard the glass gave, devastating decorations of perfectly placed tile ornaments. Groaning legs of chairs pushed out of the way, whirls of walls, an invasion of something so intimate to some poor soul. We dashed from one room to the next. I didn’t have time to count the thresholds we passed through, didn’t have time to admire the space, didn’t have time to set furniture back upright.

Locating the front of the house, we hurtled into the street and flew in the direction of the square.

“Why are they all chasing us? Why are they chasing *me*?” I cried.

Rin didn’t reply or was unable.

We ran until our lungs felt as if they might burst, then ran some more.

As I approached the square for the second time that day, I saw an unsettling shift: The already agitated shoppers were whizzing about in every direction, forgoing their practiced pattern from before. Engaged in quarrels and flinging fingers in each other’s faces, the scene

appeared as an over-dramatized Shakespearian comedy but without the humor. Every person was so occupied by his or her disagreement, that Rin and my presence went unnoticed, but I didn't care to wait around till that changed.

Rin and I sifted through the hoards, carefully searching for the standout. But as we furiously scoured the group, the crowd seemed to close in on us, separating Rin from me and locking me in place.

“Rin!” I yelled out.

I struggled through the quicksand that pulled at me from all directions, sucking me into the ground. Something pushed against the backs of my knees, and I hit hard against the pavement. I lifted my face from the rocks to see the face of a child, the little marionette girl from earlier. She was standing right in front of me, holding out her tiny hand, smiling innocently, and—most importantly—not running.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Elizabeth Visscher

July 2016

GENERAL INFORMATION

4025 Jordan Lake Drive

Marietta, GA 30062

404 542 4208

elizabethvisscher@gmail.comwww.elizabethvisscher.com**EDUCATION**

- 2014 - Present Master of Arts in Professional Writing, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA, Primary Concentration - Creative Writing, Secondary Concentration - Composition and Rhetoric
- 2008 - 14 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA, Concentration - Drawing and Painting, Minor - Professional Writing

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

- 2014 – Present Graduate Teaching Assistant, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA
Responsible for shadowing a FYW instructor (one semester), taking coursework in composition and rhetoric, and teaching two sections of ENGL 1101 and ENGL 1102.
- 2014 - 5 Writing Assistant, KSU Writing Center, Kennesaw, GA
Responsible for providing one-on-one writing assistance to students, presenting composition workshops, and visiting classrooms to make students aware of help available to them in the Writing Center (two semesters).

INTERNSHIPS

- 2013 Intern, *Burnaway Magazine*, Atlanta, GA, An Atlanta-based non-profit organization that provides an online forum for art criticism and introduction to new media and talents. This (summer) internship involved practical training in non-profit, administrative practices as well as the opportunity to write art reviews and criticism. Supervised by Susannah Darrow, Atlanta, GA.

MEMBERSHIP IN PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

National Council of Teachers of English
The Playwrights Center
Visions/KSU Student Art Society

AWARDS AND HONORS

Presidents List, 2008-13, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA.
 Collegiate Scholars, 2010-12, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

COURSES TAUGHT AT KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY

1. ENGL 1101/COMP I, Graduate Teaching Assistant, taught two sections/fall 2015.
2. ENGL 1102/COMP II, Graduate Teaching Assistant, taught two sections/spring 2016.

RESEARCH AND CREATIVE ACTIVITY/ PROFESSIONAL SERVICE

PUBLISHED WORKS

Art Reviews

- Visscher, E. "A Guide to the Dirty South Atlanta," Rev. of *A Guide to the Dirty South Atlanta*, by Georgia Tech School of Architecture. *Burnaway*. Burnaway Mag., ed. Rachel Reese, 23 June 2013: n. pag. Web.
- . "Athicards," Rev. of *Athicards Exhibition*, by ATHICA. *Burnaway*. Burnaway Mag., ed. Rachel Reese, 18 June 2013: n. pag. Web.
- . "[From the Editor's Desk: Revisiting Sideways Atlanta & Hambidge's Fables Exhibition Catalog](#)," Rev. of *Sideways Atlanta*, by Suzanne Winterberger and Bill Tomey. *Burnaway*. Burnaway Mag., ed. Rachel Reese, 3 July 2013: n. pag. Web.

Magazine Publications

- Visscher, E. "Thanksgiving." Poetry submission. *Share Art and Literary Mag.*, 2013 – 4: 31. Print.
- . "The Sky." Poetry submission. *Share Art and Literary Mag.*, 2013 – 4: 13. Print.
- . "Conflicted." Art submission. *Share Art and Literary Mag.*, 2013 – 4: 37. Print.
- . "Up." Art submission. *Share Art and Literary Mag.*, 2012 – 3: 46. Print.

Research/Art Interpretation

- Visscher, E. "Arthur C. Goodwin: Boston Fountain." *The Modern and Contemporary Art Permanent Collection at Kennesaw State University*, ed. Diana McClintock, 2010: 32. Print.

EXHIBITIONS

- Depiction*, Artevaggio, Duluth, GA, 2014, Samantha Meeker, Group
- Fresh Blood Show*, Mason Murer Fine Art Gallery, Atlanta, GA, 2014, Mark Mason, Juried
- Off-the-Wall Pin-Up Show*, The Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, Membership Event, Atlanta, GA, 2013, Annette Cone-Skelton, Member Group
- College Night*, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA, 2013, Smithsonian Institution, Juried
- Visions Annual Student Show*, Joe Mac Wilson Building, Kennesaw, GA, 2013, Dr. Don Robinson, Juried
- Northside Decorating Gallery Show*, Northside Decorating, Alpharetta, GA, 2008 – 2013, Kathleen Toner, Invitational-Rotational Group
- Off-the-Wall Pin-Up Show*, The Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, Membership Event, Atlanta, GA, 2012, Annette Cone-Skelton, Member/Group

Art4Charity, Business Department at Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA, 2011, Group/Online Donation
National Cartoonist Exhibition, ARC Gallery and Educational Foundation, IL, 2011, National Member
CJX 2011 Show, The Art Place, Mountain View Arts Alliance, Marietta, GA, 2011, Juried
Visions Annual Student Show, Joe Mac Wilson Building, Kennesaw, GA, 2009, Dr. Don Robinson, Juried
Artifacts, Kocaeli University, Turkey, Golcuk, 2009, Dr. Linda Hightower, Invitational Group
Artifacts, Golcuk Arts and Cultural Center, Turkey, Golcuk, 2009, Dr. Linda Hightower, Invitational Group

PRESENTATIONS

“Writing the Artist Statement,” KSU Writing Center, Kennesaw, GA, (Fall 2014 - Spring 2015), Writing/Instructional Workshop (created and led this one-hour workshop)

ART ACQUISITIONS/ COLLECTIONS

2013, Dr. Joe Thomas, Art Historian, *This is About Cotton #1*
 2013, Hugh Wilburn and Michael Rogan, *This is About Cotton #2*

COMMUNITY SERVICE

Zumba® Glow Party, 2016, Responsible for leading, along with other instructors, a two-hour Zumba® class to raise money for the YMCA’s annual support campaign, which gives donations to various community outreach programs.

Life, 2015, Produced by Johnson Ferry Baptist Church, I, along with Jennifer Ferris and Liz Leventhal, helped jury the group show, *Life*, sponsored by JFCreative, the creative arts ministry at JFBC. Bobby Smith, Marietta, GA

Zumba® Instructor Mash-up, 2015, Responsible for leading, along with other instructors, an hour-and-a-half Zumba® class to raise money for the YMCA’s annual support campaign, which gives donations to various community outreach programs.

Patrons for Provisions, 2014, “Patrons for Provisions strives to connect artists to non-profit organizations to commission the creation of artwork inspired by a cause. The proceeds go to aid the cause and encourage support for up-and-coming artists.” I created a painting in an effort to raise money for a young woman in need. Juried by Matt Friesch, Dunwoody, GA

Hambidge Art Auction and Performance Gala, 2014, Co-produced by the Goat Farm Art Center, Hambidge, a creative residency program, located at the base of the Blue Ridge Mountains, dedicated to providing a natural environment for artist and scientists to develop their skill set. One of my paintings was donated to the auction to support the program. Juried by Ben Goldman, Atlanta, GA

Georgia Lawyers for the Arts (GLA), 2014, A non-profit organization with a network of over 500 volunteer attorneys that provide pro bono legal assistance and educational programming to limited-income artists and non-profit arts organizations in Georgia. I donated my work, titled *Highland Hills*, to the organization. Juried by Robert Sherer, Atlanta, GA