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A Common Place, Volume 3, Spring 2024

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A painting of a woman's face, rendered in a style that combines realism with surrealism. The woman has dark hair and is looking upwards and to the left. Her skin is a warm, orange-brown hue. On her forehead, there is a third eye, depicted with a dark iris and a white sclera. The background is a dark, textured grey. The overall mood is contemplative and mysterious.

SPRING 2024

A
COMMON
PLACE

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3

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A COMMON PLACE

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From the Editor

In only four years, *A Common Place* has grown from just an idea to an integral part of Longwood's literary community. I am endlessly proud of the dedication of the staff and students who are and have been part of this journal.

There are too many people to possibly thank on this page, but I would like to express particular gratitude to a few: Dr. David Magill, Mrs. Heather Milne, and Professor Brandon Haffner. All have shown the journal incredible support, and *A Common Place* keeps growing thanks to their contributions.

During my time at Longwood, several professors have asked me the same question: What is literature? The trick is that there's never a concrete answer. Many people believe that "literature" is a category unattainable by the average person. Too often, we assign arbitrary rules to what is worthy of that title, and this distinction can be deeply discouraging. What makes something real art is not how well it conforms to constantly changing standards, but the soul of the artist that creates it. If given the exact same story, no two people would write it the same way. That is something to be celebrated, not compared.

So I ask the artists in this issue, and those of you reading it, to believe in your work. Be confident in your own abilities. Take the spark of something that matters to you, and build it into a fire—and if you've put your heart into it, then others will feel the warmth.

EMILY STEFFENHAGEN

F
FICTION
C
T
I
O
N

Widowmaker

It was 1974 when a tree took his wife's life. In 1992, the county stopped dragging its feet and cut down a great white oak situated beyond a bend in the road and below a hill—Widowmaker, they called it.

Twenty-eight cars had hit that tree going too fast or too recklessly down the hill it sat beneath, tucked out of sight. The county didn't have an exact number, but they estimated that between thirty and forty people had been killed hitting the old oak in the nearly 70 years since the first automobile had come to Cobleskill, New York. Widowmaker was a good name for a tree like that one.

Bernard Moore's wife, Beth, drove a 1968 Chevy C10, and things were made sturdy back in those days. Someone had clipped it pretty hard in the Price Chopper parking lot not three months earlier, and there hadn't been so much as a scratch in the sky-blue paint.

They picked parts of sky blue Chevy C10 out of Widowmaker until 1975. The truck had crumpled like a piece of paper against its trunk, and Beth had too.

When they finally cut it down, Bernard telephoned Ron down in the city about the news. He told it to the answering machine.

That had been months ago, though. In April of 1993, Bernard Moore sat and ate a sandwich with burnt bacon and a layer of mayonnaise so thick it gushed out in repulsive, overpowering bursts with every bite. Bernard eyed the highest shelf in the kitchen where the whisky used to be and drank his coffee.

"I never did learn to cook," he told the portrait sitting across the table from him. "I sat down to read the paper this time, forgot about the stove until I smelled it. Lucky you didn't start a fire—that's what you'd say. A fire would be the last thing I need, eh?"

Bethany Moore did not respond but smiled demurely back at him. Her wedding dress had begun to fray again and her eyes bulged grotesquely.

Bernard finished his sandwich with a grimace and glanced at Beth again as he brought his dishes to the sink. The decay was taking hold, definitely. She was still only bloating, but it would go further

than that soon enough. He thought back to when he'd seen the squirrel rotting in his backyard as a child—how he'd watched it day by day as it withered away to nothing under the sweltering August sun. He recalled the color, the stench, the squirming maggots making a supper of its stomach when it burst in a rainbow of red and pink and yellow and black putridity. Yes, it was time to feed Beth.

I'll have to find a squirrel, he thought. It was only ever squirrels. Bernard picked up his rifle from where it sat propped beside his front door and went outside. It was spring, but where small game used to swarm the tall trees in his backyard, he spotted only one animal today. The shots of days past must've scared the others off, the abundance of acorns not worth the threat of death. Still, he was practiced with squirrels now, and it was no great struggle to take aim and kill it. He carried it by the tail to the porch where his bucket hung on a small hook, slit the thing open from throat to stomach, and turned away as it bled. Bernard tossed the corpse over the rail of the porch. He'd feed Beth first and then bury the body before dark.

The bucket was light as he brought it inside; squirrels didn't have much blood, but Beth didn't need any more than they had to offer. He set the bucket on the table and looked at her. The lace on her veil was nearly in tatters, and her cheeks were plump with bloat. He would have to work quickly. Bernard dipped his hand into the bucket and began to slather the squirrel's blood onto the picture frame.

It was the frame that caused the rot, he knew. Even before she died, Beth's wedding picture had hung on the wall of their home. It stayed there in the twenty years after her accident, had watched judgingly as Bernard grieved and raged. It was only in the past several months that he moved her to the frame made from Widowmaker, a petty vengeance against the tree.

Bernard remembered it still, the day when they cut down Widowmaker. They took the tree down during the day and left it overnight before the haul truck came the next morning. He didn't know if anyone noticed the chunk of stolen wood when it was taken away, but there was never a knock at his door demanding it back.

It had been a night of feverish, maddening work; he hadn't left his workshop until the sun came up. Sometimes Bernard still did a double take at the sight of his own hands, half convinced he would find them covered again in fine white dust from hours of sanding.

The wood was the pale taupe typical of a white oak, and it had looked too bright that night, even in the dull light of his workshop. Bernard hated its brightness with a violence he'd never known before, and it distracted him to error; he cut his hand on one of the last remaining sharp edges. In his frantic state, there had been no pain, but he'd noticed when a thin red line opened up on his palm. Before he could seal the cut, a drop of blood fell onto the frame. Bernard had been about to throw the half-finished (now ruined) project at the wall when he'd seen that there was no stain after all. The wood drank his blood up like it was quenching a thirst. A tree with blood on its hands sat pale and pristine on his workbench.

When Bernard finished the frame, he put Beth's portrait behind the glass... and it wasn't even a week after that before she began to rot. Widowmaker. Even now the tree brought him nothing but pain.

The frame remained unblemished, even as he smeared the squirrel's blood across and it soaked into the wood as if it was never there. And, before his eyes, Beth reverted back to better days. Her cheeks sank into place, her hair regained its shine, her veil mended itself. When she drank her fill, her eyes seemed to glisten with satisfaction. Perhaps death really did change people: Beth had never liked drinking before, but now she partook as frequently as he had when she was alive.

Bernard smiled at the photograph. "Liked that, did you?" he asked. Beth didn't answer. "I'll bet. It was fresh, y'know. Can you tell the difference?"

Bernard brought the bucket to the sink to rinse it out. She'd had a lot; normally there was some left in the bottom, but today she cleaned the bucket out. She was getting worse lately, rotting faster and drinking more. Bernard worried. The squirrels were growing wise to him, and soon he'd have to hunt them somewhere else. Either he'd have to get a freezer to store the blood so it didn't go bad on his porch, or he would be forced to begin bleeding himself.

The prospect of the choice didn't bother him: his own blood would do just fine. He'd made her bleed enough back in his younger days—it was all he could do in return. Satisfied with that conclusion, Bernard set the bucket to dry beside the sink and went out front to bury the squirrel before he could forget and it too rotted. He watched

the news for the rest of the day and called Ron before dinner, asked the answering machine when his son and granddaughter would come up and visit. Not even Ron's roommate picked up this time. He went to bed and managed to sleep.

•

Bernard dreamed of the squirrel. It alternated most nights; it was either Beth crying in the dark, watching him drink and pressing frozen peas to her blackened eye, or it was the squirrel... and tonight it was the squirrel. Both dreams were more memories than anything imagined, and he despised them for different reasons.

The squirrel one went like this: Bernard was seven years old and lived in his childhood home with his mother and father. One afternoon he went out to play in his backyard. There he found a fat squirrel.

The squirrel was hurt or sick—he hadn't known which then, and in his dreams, it never mattered. The thing panted like nothing he'd ever seen before, its tiny chest heaving before its eyes fluttered and it died. Bernard watched the whole thing with an innocent, child-like curiosity and, when it was over, he went back to playing.

Then the dream skipped and it was the next day. Bernard ran out to play again and remembered the squirrel that died the day before. It was still there, untouched and looking much the same. Its eyes were very wide.

The dream skipped again and again, more time passing in the blink of an eye. The squirrel swelled up for days, and then it burst, skin peeling back and glistening as bugs swarmed over it. In the dream, seven-year-old Bernard thought the maggots would eat for weeks. Eventually, he noticed something inside the stomach, something pale and almost translucent. In the dream, he never knew what it was.

Every dream-day, Bernard went back and watched as it turned to nothing. When the squirrel was a shell of gray fur draped over bones, his mother went outside and saw it. She screamed for Bernard's father, and he covered it with dirt. Bernard never saw the squirrel after that.

Then time always leapt forward again, and Bernard was sitting at the top of dream steps, listening as his parents talked.

"Jesus," his mother whispered. "Jesus, Ralph, the poor thing

was pregnant.”

The Beth dream was always in black and white, as cold and isolating as it had felt when she ran from him and his bottles in a sky-blue Chevy. The squirrel dream, though—that one was in color, defined by its heat; Bernard was confronted with red and pink and yellow and black, all of it swirling in front of him under a blistering August sun until the sheets were soaked with sweat and he burned himself awake.

•

When he jolted up, Bernard could smell decay. Sickly sweet with a tinge of bitterness, overpowering and maddening. His first thought was that the squirrel had escaped from his dream and lay dead and bursting at the foot of his bed. For a moment, Bernard didn't open his eyes, terrified of what he would find when he did.

He didn't know how long he lay there, paralyzed by the scent. Slowly, though, he made himself look. There was no squirrel, but still he could smell it—that sickly sweetness. He checked under his bed, tore off the sheets, rifled through the drawers of his bedside tables and wardrobe... nothing. No squirrel, no rot—but the stench remained.

Bernard was hungry, but there was no time to eat yet. He left his room and tore through the rest of the top floor. Ron's room was next, then the bathroom and study. Downstairs, he ripped the cushions from the couches, opened the VHS cases, and checked inside every bowl.

The mess didn't bother him; something similar had happened once before, when Beth had run from him. She'd been so scared, had said she was getting Ron from his sleepover and then they were leaving—for good. Only it was storming out, and there were broken bottles on the floor, and one of her eyes was all swollen up and tear tracks were running down her face.

When Beth left, protectively cradling her steadily growing stomach, Bernard had gone into a rage. He tore the house apart—when the police came the next day to tell him about Beth, they looked questioningly at the mess but didn't ask after it. By the time Bernard brought Ron home from his sleepover, the house was clean and his mother was dead.

Bernard had cleaned the mess of his house then, and he would clean it again, just as soon as he found what rotted.

The dining room was next. After he found the source of the stench, he would feed Beth and go about his day like normal. Bernard first peered behind the pictures of Ron on the shelf—nothing. He turned to check under the table and saw Beth’s portrait was already festering.

But she had eaten only yesterday, Bernard recalled. He’d shot the only squirrel in the tree and drained it and she drank deeply. Still, her face was worse than he’d ever seen it. Chunks of mangy hair were missing from her head, and her face sagged and swelled all at once. Patches of flesh had dissolved, and Bernard knew that if the photograph had been in color, they would be red and pink and yellow and black, glistening like under a hot August sun. He could almost smell her.

And then, all of a sudden, he knew. *I’ve been smelling her the whole morning.* The decay. Somewhere in this house his wife lay rotting—he knew that with certainty.

How has she moved? he wondered. There had been little enough left of her to bury, but bury her they had. He and Ron stood beside the grave each weekend, his son drifting further away with every passing year until he was gone. When Ron was old enough to realize why she had driven away, he blamed Bernard for it, and that was a wound that never fully healed. After he found the old ultrasound pictures from a few months before the crash, he moved out. Ron was a good boy, though—a good son and a good father to his own daughter, despite how he left Bernard.

Ron. Ron would help him find her. Bernard had kept the magic of the picture frame from him, but surely he would be glad to hear that some part of his mother remained. Maybe if Ron helped him find her and bury her, the portrait would stop festering and he could sleep again. Bernard longed to sleep without dreams of squirrels or the isolating blackness of Beth’s weeping, two dreams that both ended with his mother’s horrified whisper: *The thing was pregnant.*

With shaking hands, Bernard dialed the phone. It rang four times, and the sweet smell came back to him, along with the fear. This was one thing he could not say to the answering machine.

There was a click. “Hello? Moore residence, who’s speaking?”

The roommate. “I need to speak to my son,” Bernard rasped. He could hardly breathe through the bitter rank.

“Bernard? Is that you? Listen, uh, Ron’s out right now, but I’ll let him know you called.”

Bernard was about to hang up, to find Beth on his own, when he heard shuffling on the other end. “Is that my dad?” came Ron’s voice.

“Yeah, he doesn’t sound great. Listen, honey, I know you said you didn’t want to—”

The line grew muffled for a moment. When a voice came back, it was Ron’s.

“Dad? You still there?”

Bernard breathed through his mouth to keep the rancid sweetness from his nose. “Ron,” he gasped, “I need you to come help me, please. There’s something in my house. I’m, I’m...”

Bernard bent over and retched onto the floor. When he brought the phone back to his ear, he could hear commotion on the other side of the line.

“Dad? Dad? Are you okay? What’s going on, what’s wrong?” The line went muffled for a moment and he heard Ron speak to Neil. “I think he’s sick. I’m gonna go down. Can you throw some stuff in a bag for me and let Gail know where I am when you pick her up?”

“I can’t breathe,” Bernard gasped, and it was true. He clutched his chest, panting like the squirrel that August. He wasn’t dying, though, wasn’t decomposing day after day. But Beth was, and the stench of her death sank deep into his lungs.

Ron spoke again, urgent. “Call 911, okay? Can you do that? I can be there in two hours.”

“Alright,” Bernard wheezed, “Alright, I’ll call.” He wouldn’t call. He couldn’t leave the house now—not with Beth like this.

“I’ll meet you at the hospital. Stay... stay safe, Dad. I’ll see you soon.”

Ron hung up. Bernard put the phone back on the cradle, accidentally slamming it down too hard. *There’s too much*, he thought, *too much all at once*. The smell, the ringing in his ears, the buzzing sensation of a head rush. The colors in the room grew brighter and duller at once, and he sank to the floor. Everything receded, and there was only the sweet stench for a very long time.

•

“Dad?”

Bernard blinked twice. Ron was crouched in front of him, shaking his shoulder.

“Dad? Can you hear me?”

“Ron?” croaked Bernard.

“Yeah, it’s me. I tried the hospital, you weren’t there. Why didn’t you call 911?”

Bernard shook his head, clearing the fog. “I didn’t want to,” he said. “They wouldn’t do anything. I’m not sick, just worried.”

“Worried? You looked like you were having a panic attack! That kind of thing isn’t healthy at your age. What’s going on?”

“There’s something rotting,” Bernard mumbled. “There’s something rotting and I can’t find it.”

Something, he said, not *Beth*. Ron would understand when he found her.

Ron’s brow creased. “Rotting? Oh, Jesus, not this again. Look, I know you’re freaked out about dead stuff, but if something’s rotting that you can’t clean up yourself, you need to call a neighbor, not make me drive two hours thinking you’re about to die.”

“I don’t have neighbors!”

“Yes you do! You just don’t talk to them because you stay in this *goddamn house* all day, thinking about Mom and feeling guilty over shit that happened twenty years ago instead of making a change in your life *now!*” Ron took a deep breath, scrubbing a hand over his face. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. But listen, I... I cannot have left home for this. Gail was still at school when I left. I didn’t get to tell her goodbye, and you know I don’t like to do that to my kid after Mom. Neil’s gonna pick her up, so it’s fine, but he has to miss work to get her. You’ve gotta understand that dragging me out here over something like this isn’t fair to my family.”

Bernard heard nothing but excuses. “*I am your family!*” he roared. “*I’m your family*, and something is fucking *rotting* in my house! But you’re worried about Gail, even though you’re still letting that... that *man* around her. You don’t care about me or her, just your goddamn self!”

The trembling started again, first in his hands and then traveling up his arms until Bernard shook uncontrollably.

“Okay, I’m not staying here for this,” Ron announced. “Let’s

get one thing straight: you do not get to call me here over some ridiculous phobia and then insinuate my boyfriend shouldn't be allowed around my daughter. Times have changed, Dad, we're allowed around children now. Rotting, Christ... I'm sorry Mom isn't still here to deal with the binges after you pass roadkill, but I'm leaving. Don't call me unless... don't call me for a while."

"No!" Bernard lunged for his leg and grabbed on. "It's there, can't you smell it?"

Ron pinched the bridge of his nose and took a breath. "Yeah, I smelled it when I walked in. Might be the cellar. I'll find whatever it is—but then I'm leaving. And *just this once*, you hear me?"

Bernard didn't answer, just watched as Ron stormed off. Beth was down there. The sweetness came back in full force, cloying and heavy as soon as the door to the cellar opened. Bernard could only sit there, frozen, as his son searched downstairs. Frantic energy clung to him like static as he held his breath and waited.

"Uh, hey, I found your problem!" called Ron. The ringing in Bernard's ears stopped for just a moment. He had found her? "It's not that bad."

To see Beth again... The stairs were steep and awkwardly angled with age. Each step he took felt like falling forward, tumbling down. Finally, he stood beside Ron and looked. Red and pink and yellow and black, glistening in the flickering lights of the cellar.

"See? It was just a squirrel. I don't know how it got down here, though. Let me get a bag for... *Dad?*"

Bernard fell to his knees. No, no, it couldn't be that. No, if it was a squirrel, where was Beth? Would her picture still rot? He stumbled to his feet, half tripping as he scrambled up the stairs. He could hear Ron following, shouting after him, but it didn't matter. He would see her decay and understand. The bittersweet stench was thick, and climbing the steps strained his lungs.

At last he saw her. It was worse than before; chunks of gore trickled down her neck, and her veil was matted with blackened blood.

"What the hell is that?" Ron asked softly from behind him.

"It's alright," Bernard scrambled to explain, "I just need to feed her and the rot will go away, she'll go back to normal. The frame sucks up the blood and keeps her healthy. I made it from the tree after they cut it down—that's why she always rots."

Ron took a small step forward, stared at her. “It... rots? Oh Jesus, Dad. The picture isn’t rotting. What have you done to the frame? What’s that crusted on it?”

“Crusted?” Bernard questioned. The wood was clean as ever—pale as freshly bared bone.

“Blood? Fuck, did you say *blood*? Whose blood is this? Is it... tell me that’s not yours.”

“No, no... it’s just from squirrels. They all ran off, it’s why she’s like this now. I haven’t been able to feed her since yesterday.”

“Feed her? What is this, some sick shrine to Mom? Do you finally feel guilty about what you did to her? *To me*? No, I’m out of here. I’m calling elder services—you’re leaving this house tonight. This isn’t safe.”

Bernard watched as blackness dripped down Beth’s swollen cheek like tears. He’d never seen it move before; the rot was progressing quicker than he thought. To leave her again... She would fester away if he left. Her cheeks would burst and she would wither until she was just gray skin draped over bones. She... no, the frame was *hungry*. The tree hadn’t been satisfied with taking from him the first time; it wanted more still.

“... see her rotting? How long has this been going on? Forget elder services—I’m taking you to the hospital now. Dad? Dad, get off... *Dad!*”

When Ron was out cold, Bernard went to get a knife and the bucket from the hook on the porch. It was done all too soon. *I am alone now*, he thought distantly. Widowmaker drank deeply, sucking down the blood until it was as if there had never been a stain at all. *Beth is here, and Ron, but I’m still alone.*

The fix was only temporary. Beth was better now, restored to the days before he had taken a hand or a bottle to her. But even this wouldn’t be enough. Soon Ron’s blood would run out and he would fester alongside his mother like the translucent sac of the squirrel’s womb all those years ago: a child slated to die by its mother’s fate. The rot had taken his wife and son both in the end.

But as the blistering August sun beat down on him, as colors swirled in a maelstrom of red and pink and yellow and black, Bernard knew that he had rotted long before either of them.



Lips
Judson Atkins

Waning Eve

June 23, 1509

Last month, my aunt called me back to her desk.

I remember being curled up in the corner armchair, having sunk myself into its moth-eaten cushions as I waited for coherency to return to me. I had just finished a translation of *The Solarian Episcopal*, a deceptively long and soul-numbing religious text on the appropriate observances of solar flares. As I was already not a fan of the Sun god, it is needless to say that his latest jargon to cross my desk had left me with a blistering headache. And, having noted her reading my manuscript earlier with grunts of discontentment, it seemed my aunt shared this negativity. I shook the numbness from my limbs before reluctantly pulling myself away from the comfort of the armchair, wincing as I lugged my tired form across the room.

However, her desk did not don the dying form of my 107-page manuscript, scored with slashes of red ink and the near-illegible scrawl of my aunt, nor was my aunt seeming to simmer towards a rant on the intricacies of Ancient Elvish vernacular. Instead, the mahogany surface was strangely bare, missing even her usual haphazard stacks of loose parchment. There was only my aunt, her strangely calm countenance, and, in her withering hands, a leather-bound journal. I was cautious as I sat down across from her, yet she greeted me with a faint smile.

“Iadora.” She regarded me with her usual firmness, as if speaking to a lecture hall of spectral students rather than her meek little niece in our cramped little cottage. “Do you still have that journal I gave you last winter?”

The journal she spoke of was last year’s birthday present—the same one I write in now. Each book she binds is a near replica of the last, the same plain brown leather cradling pages of goat skin. Yet, unlike the blank covers of her own books, my present was gifted a wobbly crescent moon carved precariously into its corner. It was clear she had put quite a bit of effort into making it, which is why, at the time, my journal was guiltily laying on my bedside table, empty as the day it was given. Of course, this new journal cradled in her crooked fingers had the very same symbol.

I swallowed and replied, “Yes, I have it.”

“And you’ve been using it?”

“... Yes?”

She groaned at this. “Iadora,” she lamented. “You could hardly tell a lie if the chancellor was hanging me along the gallows.” My aunt laid this new book on the mahogany, fingers dancing along the side of its pages. I fidgeted with a loose thread on my skirt, suddenly the most interesting aspect of this encounter. She let us sit in silence for a moment—a usual charade of hers, yet it got me every time. Had she been waiting for my response, or simply observing her spectral student body as I stood center stage, their gazes crushing my lungs? Finally, it seemed she had had enough of my muteness, for her deadpan expression broke into a titter as she deftly flipped the journal open.

“Well, go get it then. We are going to write together.”

That day, she gave me a rather detailed lesson on journal writing. Potential topics to journal on, how detailed a particular account could get, and all of the intricacies of formatting that she was doubtless I would have some questions about. Then, since a blank journal can be quite intimidating to blemish, she gave me my first task: write a detailed account of the few spells I knew, so at least I had some practical purpose to return to it. She was right, of course—she never could be wrong.

It was when we had sat there for a while, her swirling ink through yet another journal page, and me slowly scratching down the components for a light spell, that I worked up the courage to ask her why she was having me do this. She glanced at me through her spectacles, squinting slightly as she always did when she was trying to bring my face into focus. Her quill was so large that it practically obstructed her face, and she had managed to smear ink onto her nose, yet somehow, she still made me feel childlike under her owlish gaze. She responded: “Too often are the evils of the world the ones to catalogue themselves. And too often we have to analyze them, too, given our line of work. Who’s to say us good and ordinary folk don’t deserve to be remembered? Plus,” she winked, gesturing back at her long shelf of journals she’d filled, “it will be good for you when you’re an old hag like me. Memories are not forever, you know.”

I would have told her that my life is not extraordinary enough to remember, but that would make her life not extraordinary, either. I won’t let that be true, so I suppose I must fill this journal with some-

thing to make her life seem worth living, too.

•
June 24, 1509

I woke up this morning to an empty house.

When I first opened my eyes at daybreak, I could almost believe the world was normal. When I let my eyes graze over the grain of the wooden ceiling, focused on the cry of the songbirds outside of my window, and cocooned myself deep within the recesses of my linen comforter, it was easy to imagine the sound of the kettle bubbling in the kitchen or the pattering of swollen feet over the threadbare carpet of the living room. But then the familiar sounds were too familiar, and I could hear the holes in the ambient noise gaping like a wound left open for too long. So I stopped trying to shove linen in my ears and slipped back into reality, letting my bare feet dangle from the still-too-tall bed before falling to the floor with the faintest thump. It still seemed too loud.

My aunt and I have had a routine that we've followed since I came here, five years old and freshly orphaned. The Moon only knows if she has followed that routine from the day that I was born—or, more accurately, from the day my parents were born. We wake up at dawn, make a cup of tea (I prefer white, her jasmine), light the fireplace when necessary, and absorb ourselves in a world of linguistics and prose. My aunt has served as a dual translator and transcriber for the Karlon All-Faiths Abbey for the past forty-seven years, and I as her apprentice for the past fifteen, so we have long grown used to shutting ourselves away until the next mass of documents is ready to be received.

Thus, I lifted the curtain dividing my room from the rest of the house, slinked my way beneath it, and tiptoed across the gnarled floorboards, as if the spectral student body of this house would be disturbed by my presence. Two steps and the noise of my feet is absorbed by the threadbare living room carpet, once red but paced across just enough to grow dingy and grey. Four steps and I have to slip myself around the edge of my aunt's polished desk to not end up with a nasty bruise plaguing my side. Seven steps and I am in the kitchen, and I stare at it now as I write from my armchair, as though its pots with rusty bottoms and novelty casserole dishes will bring some value to the pointless charade that my writing is reduced to.

This morning, I made jasmine tea. I attempted a spell to light

the wood stove, but the wave of my pointer finger summoned a cloud of smoke and ash rather than the wisp of fire it was meant to deliver. I used a match instead.

While my tea was simmering, I glanced outside. Should the fireplace be lit in weather like this? The moment I saw the haze of summer blurring the distant trees, I should have had my answer. But my aunt has been cold lately, and I am not affected much by the weather. I am always cold—the edges of my fingers hold the pallor of icicles—but I suppose I've grown used to ice coating my veins, for I hardly feel it much. Still, I lit another match.

Now, I sit with my tea. I am almost out of documents to transcribe, and the jasmine feels like needles down my throat.

What about this is worth documenting?

•

June 27, 1509

The first Wednesday of every month, my aunt has come home from the Karlon All-Faiths Abbey with a venerable mass of documents needing some sort of care; some need translation for the masses to understand in their congregations, others are manuscripts so brittle that the parchment practically crumbles in one's hands, and still more simply suffer from the poor handwriting of their previous transcribers. Anything and everything has been collected, set into a wooden barrow desperate for a new right wheel, and teetered along the stone path from the abbey to her tiny cottage. At first, the home she returned to was an empty one, simply her and her hole of ancient linguistics and religious theory. Then I was guided to her doorstep, and that home became ours.

I have watched my aunt tug her barrow along the drive since then, nestled in the moth-eaten armchair by the front window as I awaited her return. My offers to assist her on the errand, more frequent as the years have gone by, were largely dismissed. Time weathered her down, pulling her spine into a curve and etching grooves into her skin, yet she has always taken that trek as exuberantly as the day I moved in. Stubborn as she is, I always let her.

Three weeks ago, I watched her silhouette crest over the hill, barely the height of the tall grass surrounding her. Her grey hair swamped her face in the wind, but as I got up from my chair to assist her, she immediately shook her head, waving her hands in the air as

her mouth outlined some unknowable proclamations. So I settled for opening the window as she hauled the overflowing cart to our burgundy front door, cursing in Halfling at each stone-induced bump.

By the time the door squeaked open, I had already hastened to greet her, pulling the cart in as she hobbled into the entryway.

“Oh, get back. I can handle it!” she huffed at my efforts, sweat ladled above her brow. “You are far too delicate to tend to that, dear. Fetch me some water, would you?”

I nodded as I scurried into the kitchen. She had often been tasking me recently with summoning water, weaving requests into our everyday life as poorly concealed excuses to let me practice my craft. She had done so with fire incantations as well, for a while, but soon grew tired of cleaning ash off the walls.

Tankard in hand, I murmured a blessing to the Moon while tracing its form above the cup, feeling the magic waterfall from my fingertips. Meanwhile, my aunt remained by the cart in the entryway.

“Well,” she stated, engaging the manuscripts in a staring contest, “this is far too much for today, don’t you think?”

I peeked over at her from the kitchen as the sigil overflowed with water. “It doesn’t look to be greater than our normal workload.”

“Oh no no no, it’s far too much! And I am quite tired from pulling the cart around.”

“I told you I could—”

“Say,” she clapped her hands together, “why don’t we take a break today? We might find value in embracing the outdoors at this auspicious time.”

“Um...” My eyes darted to the still-open window as the wind made the curtains dance. “Do we really have time for that? The weather is quite daunting today.”

Her spectacles slid down her nose as the essence of a smirk twinkled in her eyes. “A newly discovered chapter of *The Solarian Episcopal* is within that pile.”

I had no rebuttal.

“That settles it!” And suddenly she was at my side, pulling tins of tea from the cupboard and tossing matches in my direction.

I have never been the type to frequent the outdoors. My aunt never approved of me lingering there either, discouraging me from tending to errands as if the breath of a fellow townsperson would

transform me into a toad. Yet, soon, I was carrying two teetering tea saucers and a plate of oat biscuits as my aunt guided me out the back-door. The wind-filled grass whistled at our arrival.

Our back garden is not much, carrying the corpses of a few failed horticulture attempts and a rusty metal table with cobweb-covered chairs. She had me hold back, clearing out the arthropod invasion with her walking stick. “No magic in sight for me, unfortunately!” she would often laugh at menial tasks like this, not letting me touch the task myself.

As we sat down at the table, a newly pressed cloth billowing in the wind and the scent of jasmine overwhelming my nostrils, my aunt spoke up: “Iadora, what do you want to be?”

“Pardon?” I had just begun lifting my cup from its saucer, ignoring the numbness in my fingers as they shook.

“Well, you’re near twenty years of age, and you can hardly stay with me forever. Where will you go after this?”

I can only imagine I looked like a cornered deer, my eyes as wide as the rim of the teacup I was peering over. I had never thought about life after this—this home, this town, this person. My aunt and I were intertwined, eternally turning the same pages as we made our little impact on the world. She knew me better than I knew myself, and perhaps it was that knowledge that allowed her to read me like the manuscripts she engulfed herself in.

“Journal that next, would you?” She smiled at me weakly.

I opened my mouth to respond. Suddenly, the wind overcame my shaky fingers, sending a wave of tea onto my lap.

“Iadora!” my aunt exclaimed. I started in surprise at the intrusion, but I barely felt the heat of the liquid as I patted at the newly developing stain on my skirt. The sogginess of my sleeve exposed my discolored veins.

By the time I glanced up at my aunt, she was looking at me as if I were a snowflake waiting to melt.

I often used to dwell on what my aunt would do if I died. It has never felt like I was dying, only that I was slightly weaker than others. But the way she would lock her eyes on me when I didn’t flinch against the touch of a hot stove, or when my ruffled sleeve slipped to reveal protruding black veins, made me feel that I was made of the thinnest glass. It was like she was trying to memorize me in those mo-

ments—yet she also gazed through me, as if she couldn't quite acknowledge what I was or what I might become.

And what will I become? Even now, I exist as though I am teetering over the edge, healthy in all except every part of my body that insists I am not. Halflings may be dainty like the wind, with wrists made of paper and feet flightier than dandelion puffs, but I am simply fragile.

And then my aunt began hacking into her sleeve, and I was just her meek little niece again. Maybe I should have been paying more attention, shouldn't have gotten lost in my own head at the way her cloudy eyes held me like an infant. Maybe I should have met her gaze more closely.

•

July 2, 1509

Today is the first Wednesday of the month. My aunt should be here, trudging over the hill again and cursing at every stone that entered her path.

For the first time within my memory, though, there is no cart edging up the drive this Wednesday. This month's order of manuscripts has been cancelled.

I spent this morning triple-checking June's manuscripts for grammatical errors, reorganizing my aunt's extensive book collection, and giving the attic a well-overdue spring cleaning. My aunt often called this my "frenzy"—where a lack of predetermined tasks leaves me scrounging anywhere and everywhere for more to do. Even as my veins pulsed from exertion and my limbs began going numb, I couldn't help but scrub at the floor even harder, or arrange one more magical tome just so. But I already deep-cleaned downstairs yesterday, endeavored to master a new spell the day before that, and combed back through my aunt's favorite textbook the day before that. Thus, at only half past two, I was curled up in my armchair, staring out the window in some facsimile of my monthly routine. Maybe some part of me believed that, if I continued looking towards the path long enough, my aunt might come teetering up the walkway and surprise me out of my reverie.

Then a figure appeared.

I jumped out of the armchair, sinking below the window and taking a heavy breath. Though our house remains reasonably close to

the rest of town, visitors are hardly common; my aunt has few friends, and I seemingly inherited her solitary habits.

Peeking over the window ledge, my eyes darted over the area. The figure was gone. I felt the tension release from my muscles, and my clenched hands released the windowsill as I sank into my petticoat with a sigh. Before I could question precisely what I saw, though, a knocking echoed through the door. Tension reclaimed me, chewing at my muscles like a ravenous hound, and I remained frozen on the floor. Why here? Why now? After a moment, the knocking began again. I took a shaky breath, gripped my petticoat in my hands, and lifted myself away from the floor, moving mechanically towards the front entryway.

Opening the door revealed to me a man in all black. He towered over me, nearly double my height—human, I realized, as I noted the gentle slope of his ears. His hair was greying at the temples, boney fingers crinkling a rather expensive-looking piece of parchment in his hands. I did not know his name, but his face held some regard in my mind, and a small pendant on his lapel confirmed his religious association. He turned his head at my arrival, staring above me for a moment before registering my smaller stature.

“Miss Leafglow?” he questioned hesitantly.

“Iadora, yes,” I stuttered. I attempted to reach out my hand to shake, but it remained clinging to my dress.

“Yes, yes,” he replied, pulling at his collar. He stared at the side of my neck, clearly tracing the ugly vein snaking up to my jaw. A bead of sweat trickled down his temple. “Miss Iadora. I am Mr. Thomas Herald, and I am here on behalf of the Karlon All-Faiths Abbey. You are familiar with us, yes?”

I stared at him. He awkwardly chuckled and answered himself.

“Yes, of course you are. Your aunt—that is why I am here, actually. You see,” he turned back to his parchment now, “your aunt has accrued quite a bit of debt under the abbey.”

“What?” I stammered. “What do you mean? My aunt was employed by the abbey. They paid her.”

“That would be true,” he replied speedily, “if your aunt had not taken out a sizable loan for her place of settlement.” He gestured towards the doorway, nearly hitting his hand against it in his fervor. “And because of that, well, it is in need of settlement.”

“Was forty-seven years not enough to pay off that loan?” I replied incredulously, the tension that had previously gripped my bones shedding, replaced by indignation.

“Hardly! This is a sizable house.” Even as he said those words, I could tell that he did not believe them. The sweat was pouring down his neck now, further darkening the black linen of his tunic. Despite his clear reluctance, though, I could not have prepared myself for the words rushing out of his mouth next: “Therefore, the debt will need to be repaid. Otherwise, the house will be repossessed.”

I felt a stone drop through my windpipe. I could feel the specters steal the wind from my throat and chew on my vocal cords, barely letting a sound escape. The man just stood there, as if the weight eased off of his shoulders was not just transferred onto mine.

Finally, a word clawed out of my throat.

“No.”

And I stopped again. A string of words bubbled behind my lips, insistent to at least attempt a protest at this man’s claims. My jaw remained closed as they pressed against my mouth before finally water-falling from my lips.

“No, that can’t be true. I—” I paused again for breath, my lungs insistent that I had no oxygen left, “I am still a transcriber for the abbey. Surely I can make up the loan.”

“Unfortunately, we cannot find any record of you being officially on our staff. Yes, yes, and local laws are very stringent about illegal labor, you see. I do not wish to be the bearer of such bad news, but the law is the law.” He had been avoiding my gaze before, but he suddenly searched for it again, bearing the grin of a dubious peddler. “It is not all bad news, though! You have ten days to pay off the settlement, and the house is yours. The amount is included here.”

He smoothed out the parchment in his hands before holding it out, just barely within my reach. Finally, my hand unclenched the fabric it had been glued to as I felt myself retrieve it. The parchment was covered in sweat.

He opened his mouth again. I slammed the door.

I’m too tired to write more today.

•

July 3, 1509

Nine more days.

Waning Eve

The Moon came out tonight. I prayed to her. The Sun mocked me from the edge of the horizon.

July 4, 1509

Eight more days.

I dug through the couch cushions for spare change. I found two copper pieces.

July 5

Seven more days.

The last sack of oats has gone moldy. There is no more food in the pantry, but I have not been hungry.

July 6

Six days.

Surely there is something I can do.

Five.

Surely there is someone who can help me.

Four.

Three.

Two.

One.

July 12, 1509

You've always told me that the gods reward the virtuous. That no matter how desolate our circumstances may seem, no matter how vile those we encounter may treat us, no matter how pointless individual action looks compared to the vastness of our universe—eventually, inevitably, those who do good things and have good thoughts and act like good people are seen and acknowledged by something greater. "If you want a good future, look no further than the goodness you foster in the present," you said! But who can be good in this tiny town full of ugly people who weave hurtful fantasies for their own amusement,

who expect all the world and more from us yet leave nothing in return, who would rather take the merits of a dead woman than leave even a fragment of her legacy?

The house is gone, Aunt Eve. The walls I once splattered with your most expensive ink, the desk where I struggled to write my first words while you hung disparagingly over my shoulder, the lumpy old mattress that you slept on for years so that I could use your own, claiming it was only until we purchased a new bed for me but knowing you could never afford it! Your collection of casserole dishes is gone and your anthology of Elven literature is gone and your moth-eaten armchair and your stacks of parchment and your shelf of journals are all gone! Everything is gone and everything feels pointless and I don't know what to do without you! If good things happen to good people, then why are you dead? If your life deserves to be remembered, then why did they take away anything I could remember you by? Where is your funeral? Where are your flowers? Where did you go, and why did you have to leave me?

Maybe your world is better now without the terrible people and horrible wars and dinners barely scraped together, but where does that leave me? Was I not good enough for you to stay? If the Moon had to take you, then why could I not go too? My world is nothing without you, Aunt Eve; I have nothing, I believe in nothing, and even the busiest streets feel empty without you by my side. Am I not good? Do I not deserve good things? If the world rewards good people, then who does that make me?

•

July 16, 1509

Twenty-five days ago, I held my aunt's hand. Her spindly fingers felt too long for a halfling, too feeble. As I caressed her sharp knuckles with the pads of my fingers, I realized her hand was colder than mine. And, as if a film had been removed from my eyes, her firmly set jaw was suddenly feeble and quivering, and her confident aura wilted into the bedcovers. She had been waning for years, but the Moon wanes as well, vanishing amongst the night sky before erupting again above us. I should have realized she was not like the goddess. Her waning form would instead be filled with maggots.

•

September 12, 1509

Tonight, I am leaving Karlon.

I have the clothes on my person, a worn knapsack, a few slivers of pork, and this journal. They do not know that I took it, desperate as they were to claim any writings associated with my aunt. And I let them. I tried to stay here, but how could I when their eyes catch me like hungry vultures? How could I let this town take anything else from me?

The Moon waxes above me, so I am not alone.

I am not alone.



Discarded Cigarettes
Nyla McEachin

Smoker's Diner

Smoker's Diner? Yeah, I know the way to Smoker's Diner. Alright, first you get on the highway, now you're gonna have to keep on driving until it gets dark out. Your belly should be growling at this point, and so should anyone you're driving with. It's highly suggested you go with someone else, a close friend, a brother or sister, a lover, doesn't matter; someone you trust and love and care for is best. Now it may snow, it may rain, fog and cold are expected, and if it's summer, it's the most blistering heat you've ever experienced, and that's okay—all in all, be careful and look for the smell. The smell of cigarette smoke and maple syrup should be the key.

It's not hard to miss at this point, the restaurant; the sounds of joyous laughter from Santa Claus types should be heard over the sound of wind and engines that the highway makes. Look to your right and you should see the most appetizing restaurant ever: that's Smoker's. The kind of place truckers who haven't been off the road for months see their friends, the type of place where college students work on their thesis papers and final drafts. It's a mom-and-pop shop, where no matter how old you are, everyone's still there and everything's still the same. I swear, it's the only unchangeable constant in a forever changing world like ours.

Bare metal and neon red and white with checkered floors, two big metal doors that keep any weather on the outside at bay, and windows all around allowing you to watch the highway lights flow by. The only entertainment is whatever rock song is on the radio and whoever's by your side at the counter. The waiter or waitress behind the counter already knows your name, and they know your usual too, and even though it's two o'clock at night, the blueberry pancakes are still served fresh with a pot of coffee—or maybe you want a fresh greasy burger, topped with American, tomato, lettuce, onions, pickles if you wish, mustard and ketchup in that order, and a strawberry milkshake to wash it down. It feels like you've been there for hours, and even though you're finished with the food, no one's rushing you out. The only thing stopping you from not paying would be your guilt and shame, and yet you'll find yourself tipping more than twenty percent here because you want to, not because you have to.

Papa Smoker is the owner of the place—he gets that name from the cigars he smokes, but no one minds it, and neither do you. The only person who minds is Mama, who’s the heart of the operation, who takes care of her customers as family even when they can’t afford it, ‘cause “family eats when they need to and pays when they can!” Their sons and daughters work as waiters and cooks, and so do their sons and daughters, and so on and so forth. Not because they have to, but ‘cause they want to. Each sibling is unique, each with their own dreams, hopes, and aspirations, with their own personalities and quirks making them so different but so loving. Sally Belle is the granddaughter who everyone has a crush on, but she can hold her own when needed. The most loved and feared woman in the county right next to Mama herself, Belle wants to become a professional mechanic, working on auto body and opening her own shop with her ass boss. John Jackson is a great-grandson and yet is the toughest cook in the kitchen, able to throw oxen around when needed, and he’ll teach any patron where the door is when their hands start to wander to places they don’t belong. All the while, he just wishes to grow old on an orchard with kids and a wife, picking apples for a living and spending his mornings working and his afternoons napping.

I can go down the entire family tree from Mama and Papa, to Big Ben and Little Lillie, Rooster and Hawk, and sweet ol’ Uncle Ken and crazy Aunt Bobby-Jane, to even the twin youngins Lacey and Casey, and their pet dogs Buck, Branco, Bison, and the orange tabby cat, Garfield, named after the family’s favorite actor, Andrew Garfield. The diner is where they call home, and so does any minivan and semi-truck that needs a break from its running wheels. An oasis for hippies and blue collar workers, students and tourists, any stray cats to any stray person who needs a break from the weather outside. If heaven was a place, you’ve found it, and it smells like cigars, gasoline, and omelets served just right, with fresh eggs and orange juice and some bacon inside.

It’s not uncommon to hear a man’s life story there, too, how someone almost made it big or when they made the final touchdown back in high school. It’s not sad either, quite the opposite—the good times and the bad are told here, and sometimes they’re made here. The couple in the corner reliving the first date they had in that same booth, and those two friends outside sharing a cigarette with each

other as they reminisce on their childhood pranks on the local pastor. Young people come in and out, and each day they grow older and older until they're the old people they saw as kids when their parents brought them there, and then they start bringing their kids there, and so the circle goes on and on, new to old then old makes new. And when you leave Smoker's Diner, you almost want to cry. You know you'll come back, either in a day, or month, or year, but you don't wish to leave. Everyone leaves eventually—that's how life works. Life goes on, and then one day you'll pick up a cup of coffee and remember the smell, the noises around you. You'll remember the night you spent at Smoker's Diner, then someone from out of town will ask you about a good place to eat and how they heard about this place called Smoker's Diner. They'll ask if you've heard of it and, if so, how they'd get there, and you'll say Smoker's Diner? Yeah, I know the way to Smoker's Diner.

The Rusty Scabbard

Note to self: Never accept jobs from goblins.

Varien was so tired. His whole body ached. He could barely keep his eyes open as he steered the horse and cart through the wooded path. With every bump and jolt, Varien bit his lip, swallowing whimpers.

It had been over five weeks since Varien and his party of adventuring misfits had left their hometown of Stillview to deliver a strange-smelling package across the continent to a friend of the commissioner, who failed to mention his friend was an ogre with a temper problem and angry guard dogs.

“How much longer?” Ezra whined in Varien’s pointed ear. The fairy had decided to make himself comfortable on Varien’s shoulder. “I thought we would have been back home by now.”

“Well we could have been if *someone* hadn’t insisted on taking the ‘shortcut’ through the forest,” Varien gestured to the back of the cart.

A head popped up and glared at them, its blond hair sprinkled with hay. Juniper righted herself and scooted over towards the two. “Hey!” Juniper said. “I’ve taken this path dozens of times from the coast and made it to Stillview in two weeks.” She plucked a piece of hay from her wild mane and flicked at Varien. “You’re just slow.”

“Now friends,” said another figure in the back. Leon didn’t look up from his book, gingerly held in his clawed hands. “I think we are all in need of a short rest before we continue home. I believe we are close to the city of Varitau. Perhaps we could stop to relax for a bit and gather supplies.”

“Varitau?” Juniper practically shouted the name. “As in the capital city?”

“Correct.” Leon flipped a page.

Ezra’s orange wings fluttered. “As in the biggest trading spot on the continent, full of con artists and chumps with fat wallets?” His eyes gleamed. “Let’s go!”

“But—” Varien caught himself. Even though Leon sounded calm, Varien noticed his scaly tail twitch in annoyance and smoke curling out of his nostrils. The dragon-man was just as annoyed and

tired as they were. "Alright then. Juniper, since you complained, you take the reins."

With a roll of her eyes, Juniper swapped with Varien. "Alright, grandpa. Go take your nap."

Varien chuckled softly and lay down in the back of the cart. He stared up through the canopy as it passed overhead, thinking of how good it would be to be home.

•

It wasn't the first time Varien had had this dream. Everything was dark. It was raining. Each drop felt like an icy pin sticking to his face. He wasn't sure where he was, but he knew it wasn't home. Trudging through the inky black, Varien could hear voices in the distance.

Behind him, he could hear angry whispers telling him he had to leave and never come back, but with every step, his legs felt heavier. Then, far in front of him, he saw a light and heard the sound of joyful laughter. A spark of warmth lit inside of Varien, and his legs felt lighter. He took off towards the light.

•

Varien woke up before he could reach his goal. The canopy of branches was now replaced with a blue sky, dotted with clouds.

He rubbed the corners of his eyes, wiping away the beginnings of tears that had formed in his sleep. Even though Varien hadn't seen what was at the end of the darkness in his dream, he knew what was there: The Rusty Scabbard.

When Varien wandered into the little town of Stillview, he was at his lowest. He had just been cast out of his ranger guild for breaking the sacred elven rules, even though it was for the sake of a friend. He was never allowed to return to the desert or make contact with the guild. The only things they left him were the clothes on his back, a small pouch of silver, and his bow. So of course, the first thing he'd do in his exile was go find a place to drink.

The Rusty Scabbard was the only tavern for miles. Despite its name, the place seemed rather quaint, with its clean-cut wood posts and fresh white paint. Varien pushed open the front door, sopping wet. He was surprised to see only three patrons: an elegantly dressed man with the head and tail of a dragon, a human polishing a bat-

tle-axe half her size, and a fairy doodling sketches on parchment. It was an unusual sight seeing them individually, but the three were seated together, chatting and laughing.

As the door closed behind Varien, the three turned to him. “Woah, man,” said the fairy. “You look like garbage.” The human girl flicked his head and then turned to Varien. “Care to join us? Leon here is buying.” She gestured to the golden dragon-man, who smiled kindly.

Varien was too tired and cold to argue.

That evening, Varien learned that he wasn’t the only outcast in the group. Leon had been a magic student, but he craved knowledge so much that he snuck into the academia’s library after hours to learn forbidden magic and ended up expelled. The girl, Juniper, ran away from her oppressive noble parents to live her life on her terms, and the fairy, Ezra, was a struggling craftsman hoping to make a name for himself by traveling the world selling his handcrafted dice.

The group instantly connected. They all had dreams, something to prove. They decided they would stick together, accepting odd jobs from the townsfolk and any travelers passing through Stillview, just until they had enough to pursue their own ends. It had been nearly five years now, but none of them mentioned splitting up.



They had only been in the capital for six hours and they were already wanted by the local guard. It was a new record for them. Varien could feel eyes following him as he pushed his way through the city square. It could have simply been the overwhelming number of people making him anxious, or maybe it was the piercing glare of the statue of Apelle, the goddess of the sun and truth, that towered over them. He pulled his cowl tighter over his pointed ears. Leon had convinced everyone that the busy square would be the best place for the team to meet up after they were done gathering supplies, as they would be hiding in plain sight among all the visitors from out of town. So far, Varien hadn’t seen any signs of trouble, but that could change in an instant.

When they arrived in Varitau, the party was seen as tourists, just traveling through and looking to enjoy the sights, but their rest was cut short when Juniper started a brawl with a man who called Ezra

a bug—a rather harsh insult to fairies. Now, they had to be constantly on edge, watching out for the city guards.

Varien took in his surroundings as he pretended to look interested in a booth selling jewelry and art from the East. The pristine white buildings of the capital were almost blinding in the noon-day sun and were now accented by red and gold banners, the colors of Apelle. Children dragged their parents to the visiting booths, eager to see what foreign goodies they had brought. Smells from all over the continent floated through the air, though one in particular stood out to Varien. A few booths down was a vendor boasting spices from the Grenalla Desert, Varien's homeland. The savory scent struck him with a pang of homesickness—not for the desert, but for Stillview and The Rusty Scabbard.

He recalled a memory from a few years ago. Upon returning from a mission, defeated and bruised, the townsfolk of Stillview surprised the party with a feast fit for royalty. They had even cooked a Grenallan soup, one his mother used to make for him. Even though it tasted almost entirely different than the one from his childhood, it was still the best thing he had ever eaten. By the end of the night, the group had almost forgotten their troubles and were enjoying the moment, surrounded by their friends from the tavern and the rest of the town.

Varien turned from the stand and moved on to find his companions.

He found Leon pursuing the wares of a book vendor with a hungry look in his eyes. Knowledge was Leon's form of treasure, and those books were potential jewels for his hoard. Varien tapped Leon's shoulder to break him out of his trance.

"Where are the others?"

Leon blinked. "Oh! They left to find a spot for a drink."

"What?" Varien hissed.

"Relax, my friend, they are here." Leon pulled a small piece of paper out from one of the books he had tucked under his arm and handed it to him. The paper read *The Queen's Goblet* along with a hastily scribbled address.

"Agh, we don't have time for this." Varien shoved the paper in his pocket and stomped off in the direction of the tavern, Leon sauntering close behind him.

Like *The Rusty Scabbard*, the ambience of *The Queen's Goblet's* didn't match its name. However, that was where their similarities ended. Unlike the kind patrons in *Stillview*, the customers here were unpleasant, to say the least. At the bar sat a group of what appeared to be mercenary gnomes playing *Five Finger Fillet* with a rusty butter knife. The barmaid provided them with a steak knife when they accidentally dropped the butter knife under the counter. In the back of the tavern was a group of about six orcs playing some sort of dice game. Every other roll, they let out a series of groans or howls of delight. Other shady characters filled the tavern, drinking and scheming.

Leon and Varien chose to sit at the table with the least number of blade and teeth marks. It was also the table closest to the exit.

"I don't like this," Varien said to Leon as he plucked his bowstring. "Where are they?" It was thirty-seven minutes after the agreed meeting time. He'd counted.

Leon looked up briefly from his new spellbook. "Perhaps they got sidetracked by one of the vendors in town. Lots of brilliant stalls here this year." His golden scales shimmered as he gingerly turned a page.

Varien couldn't believe how calm he was. Between the clear health code violations of the tavern staff and the fact that they could all be arrested at any moment, he was practically bouncing out of his seat. What if Juniper and Ezra had been caught? What if they got in another fight? He had to stop. Varien pulled an arrow out of his pack and started sharpening its head.

"You're doing it again," a cheery voice said.

Juniper stood outside the booth holding three tankards of what vaguely resembled ale. She plopped the drinks on the table and sat down next to Varien. Her blonde curls were wilder than usual, framing her tan face.

"There's not going to be anything left of that if you keep it up," she said.

"What happened to you?"

"This?" Juniper gestured to her hair. "Some idiots thought the drinks were my way of saying 'I'm here for a good time' and that they were invited to the party. Heartbreaker and I showed 'em though, didn't we, girl?" She lovingly patted her battle-axe that now guarded the end of the table. Juniper reminded Varien of the statues of *Apella*

that he had seen earlier—charming and graceful, but if you pushed them around enough, they would flatten you.

“Juniper,” Leon said as he glowered at his tankard. “I thought we had discussed keeping a low profile on this outing.”

“Try telling that to Ez,” she said as she attempted to tame her hair.

A roar erupted from the table of orcs in the corner. Varien and Leon shared a concerned look, then the three of them bolted over to the commotion.

Through the muscular arms of the group, Varien could see Ezra doing a victory dance in the center of the table, completely oblivious to the ugly, snarling orc faces glaring at him. The biggest of the mob slammed her green fist on the table, knocking Ezra off his feet.

“How are you doing that?” she demanded.

Ezra ran a hand through his indigo hair. “Beginner’s luck, I suppose?” He stood and brushed off his overalls. “I’ll tell ya, I’d heard about how fun Houses and Humans was, but I had no idea you could actually play for real stakes.”

That was a lie. Ezra had played before, and he’d lost his commission payments to it more than once. His victory could only mean one thing. Varien looked over at Juniper, whose face had gone pale. Her knuckles were the same color with her hands wrapped tightly around Heartbreaker.

Ezra made his way over to a stack of gold pieces and leaned on it, a smug expression on his face. “How about we go another round? Double or nothing?”

The orc woman jolted up from her stool, knocking it over. Varien reflexively reached for his bow.

“Now listen here, you little—”

“Uh, Boss?” A short, gray orc piped up, holding something in his hands.

“What?” The leader snapped.

The small orc raised the object for her to see: a twenty-sided die. *Shit.*

“His die’s got three extra twenties on it.” *Shit.*

“Lemme see that!” Ezra zipped over and snatched the die. He inspected it for a moment, turning it over in his hands. “Well, would you look at that,” he chuckled, “I could’ve sworn I carved five twenties

into this one!"

The woman orc's hand moved so fast that no one in the group had time to react. She had Ezra in her grasp, nearly crushing him.

"You've got some balls trying to con the leader of the Bloodrose clan, kid. Unfortunately for you, I'm in a bad mood." She turned to her group. "Anyone have any ideas to brighten my day?"

"What if we played a game of fairy darts?" asked an orc covered from head to toe in tattoos.

An orc with an eyepatch chimed in, "Or make fairy pies."

The short orc from before joined in. "Oh, I've got it! What if we took him and—" he was cut off by a thwap to the back of the head.

As he crumpled to the ground, the orcs turned to look at Juniper gripping Heartbreaker, her face red, eyes wild. "Who's next?"

That's when all hell broke loose. The orcs grabbed anything they could get their hands on and attacked the party.

Leon was the first to react, casting a slowing spell on the three closest orcs. Juniper took the opportunity to knock them out. This led the other customers to join in on the brawl, fighting each other as well as the newcomers. The gnome mercenaries made the mistake of leaping toward Juniper, who was in full rage mode. She sent them flying.

Varien was in the middle of fighting off the tattooed orc when one of them sailed into him, knocking the wind out of his lungs. Varien stumbled to the ground. The gnome, however, recovered immediately and turned toward the orc, slashing his steak knife around wildly. He chased his much larger opponent out the tavern door, laughing in a way that sounded more like a feral animal than a person.

Varien shivered, then quickly sprang to his feet, ready for his next opponent.

He tensed as he felt a cold blade against his neck.

"Hey, morons!" said a gruff female voice. "You didn't forget about your little buddy, did you?"

The fighting paused, all eyes on the Bloodrose boss.

She walked around to face Varien, her dagger never leaving his throat. She still had Ezra tight in her grasp. "I think it's time to teach you out-of-towners a lesson." There was a hungry look in her eyes, a look that Varien had seen in the eyes of the dozens of monsters they'd faced.

It was the look the monsters all had right before the party had

slain them.

Click-click. Varien smirked as the hungry look on the orc's face turned to fear, then anger. Standing behind her, Leon was aiming his pistol at the base of her skull. Varien could count the number of times he'd seen Leon pull the beautiful but deadly weapon out of its holster. Ezra let out a relieved laugh.

"I suggest you let my companions go free," Leon said.

"You can't kill a clan leader," the orc spat. "Do you know what would happen to you if—"

BANG!

Leon let off a round, sending the bullet within an inch of her ear.

"I would gladly die if it meant my friends would live," Leon snapped. "Now release them! I won't ask a third time."

The defeated leader lowered her dagger and uncurled her fist, releasing Ezra.

Varien lunged and caught him before he fell to the ground. The fairy patted Varien's hand as he tried to catch his breath. Juniper rushed over to them through what was left of the tavern. Heartbreaker had a few more knicks in her than before, and Juniper's lip was split and bloody, but she still smiled at her friends.

The orc boss, along with her gang—who were now more black and blue than green—made her way to the exit. She paused for a moment before leaving, glaring at the group. "You have no idea what you just started."

It took a lot of gold, but somehow, Leon convinced the barkeep to not call the guards—though it was just a matter of time before news of the brawl reached them. Once again, the group hid in the crowd of customers and merchants, all the while laughing and joking together, heading home with another adventure under their belts.

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JORDAN MCPHERSON

Portrait of My Father

My dad is a sweet man. He has salt-and-pepper hair trimmed down to just a centimeter and keeps lens wipes in his car for his prescription sunglasses. As the youngest (and shortest) of three siblings, he has always been the butt of the joke. He takes it in stride, but he's sensitive. Now that I'm older, he talks to me about his anxieties. I understand him.

My dad cries with puffy eyes, a stuffy nose, and furrowed brows. You can tell by looking at the way his mouth curls down at the edges, like a frown that's not quite ready to be a frown, or a small arch bridge made of concrete. But the eyebrows are what give it away. They are thick and long and add to his face the wildness of wolves or bears. But in his eyes, blue like creek water on a cloudless day, there is only the spirit of hunted creatures. Like scared bunnies and runaway squirrels, or a mouse with a broken tail.

•

I was in high school while my grandparents started to die. They were my dad's parents before they were ever my grandparents, and he was losing them. For over a year, my mom and dad, and aunts and uncles, took shifts taking my grandparents to doctors' appointments, picking up prescriptions and organizing stacks of pill bottles and miscellaneous medications, moving them out of their house and into a very small apartment in a retirement community, sorting through finances and medical bills, and watching them fade away. There wasn't much room in the apartment for extra people to loiter around, but I wanted to go with my dad whenever I could. I hated being there and seeing my grandparents with swollen ankles, sticky coughs, and shaky limbs. But my dad needed me, although he never said so. I followed my dad around their apartment, giving out hugs and smiles whenever possible, and trying to avoid knocking over oxygen machines and walkers and tables covered with years of memorabilia.

Sometimes I would sit on one of the couches or chairs stuffed into the living room and watch my grandmother stare off into the distance. She sat there with a thick white blanket covering her legs and tucked in tight to her waist. Her hair used to be short, black, and

curly, but here she wore a beige hat (with a flower, for femininity's sake) to keep warm. The veil between life and death was thin in that room, and though I could feel the clock of absolute time dangling over the space, I couldn't see it the way she could. Sometimes her eyes would drift in my direction, but she couldn't see me sitting there. What she did see was a cake on her lap that was not there. A symptom of the medications, or of dying. I remember my dad trying to tell her that nothing was there, but it didn't work. She would tell us what she saw, even if we didn't want to hear it.

"What is he doing over there?" she spoke softly into the air. She was looking at me. No, not at me, but above my right shoulder. Who was he? What did he want?

•

The place my grandparents died, as I have said, is a retirement community. It is called the Chamberlin Hotel, located in America's oldest military base, Fort Monroe, right outside of Hampton, Virginia. My grandmother used to volunteer at the Casemate Museum there, where Jefferson Davis was held prisoner after the war. The first hotel was built in 1820 and called The Hygeia after the Greek Goddess of health. It's ironic, really, since most of its current residents are rarely in the best of health. But The Hygeia was long gone before investors decided to transform the building into the luxurious retirement community where my grandparents spent their final months. It served as a hospital during the Civil War and was torn down soon after to make room for the grand Chamberlin Hotel. Of course, like many other historic sites, the first Chamberlin Hotel burned to the ground in 1920. Another was built on its ashes. With such a rich history, it really is no surprise that guests often report hearing children running and laughing through the halls, only to look out and see nothing at all.

•

"He must be married to that woman. They have the same smile," she said, now pointing.

"That's Jordan, Ma," said my dad. His lips were quivering.

I couldn't be there anymore. I didn't want to see this, to bear witness to my grandmother crossing realms. My feet moved before I knew where I was going. I was in the elevator, I was moving through the hall, through the doors, onto the roof.

The Chamberlain Hotel's best feature was its view. From the

Portrait of my Father

roof, you could look down and see Fort Monroe to your left, with its lighthouse and moat and historical brilliance. On all sides beyond the ground was the Chesapeake Bay, where large cargo ships would cross and seagulls would swoop. It was summer, and the sun had just gone under the horizon. Without a single cloud, a magnificent blue stretched along the sky. A deep orange settled at the Earth's edge, spreading yellow into blue as if it was reaching to drag the stars into position. The universe is glorious.

My dad came to join me on the roof. I told him I was scared. He said he was too. We basked in the warm air and watched the sun go down, and I held onto him as he tried not to cry. He can't fool me.



Open Space and Safety
Bradley Pugh

P

POETRY

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Angel Girl

Angel girl, you called me,
praying you would become one before me;
A parent should never bury a child,
but what of the child afraid to bury a mother?

Snatched from life without a goodbye,
leaving your Angel Girl to wander
the plains of agony and mortality, abandoned
with a hunger no angel can ever truly satiate.

Your memory comes in the catch of a breath,
a misty morning's cold piercing my lungs.
Other times it is the twisting blade of a dagger
in my ribs, shredding the lonely air I breathe—

A memory that whispers of your wrinkled hands
folded over the pure white of a veiled statue,
with your head bowed in prayer so deep
I never dared to disturb you.

Did the Virginal hands you held on to
so tightly lead you to your paradise?

You were always a force alive,
but dead I am the only one who quakes
at night when there is no savior to watch over me
alone—not even your ghost to hover above.

There must not be a drop of Angel in me—
I wish the gates you prayed for were locked,
that you would have no choice but to cling to me still
like a phantom forever searching for its companion.

Grace (Asher) Beverly

Selfless and virtuous, but I am neither.
An Angel Girl would never eagerly hang herself by halo
or snip her wings and let the flames lick her spine
just to see you one last time.

If I came to you in your Elysium
with a corona of light choking my neck
and white wings stained with the red of sin,
would I still be your Angel Girl?



Conte Crayon Self-Portrait
Shaylise Jones

Sons of Actaeon

In the shadows you lurk—
smiling dreadfully as hounds pant at your feet.
What sort of misery do you intend to grant me?

To lay your smoldering eyes upon me
as I bathe in water that was once clean—
Are your dogs aware of their slobbering master?

Our meeting is a familiar one,
a tango of doe and hunter.
Yet you demand from me a kiss?

Heavy hands and harried heart
defined as a man—
Why do I only smell mongrel?

The dogs at your feet understand
the unjust punishment you intend for me.
For what is a woman if not a fellow beast to beat?

Growling low as their yellow eyes
meet that of man's sickened nature,
and I watch as mongrel turns on master.

Your hounds now pant at my feet
as I the hunter lead you, now the stag—
Are you so foolish as to mock me still?

You have made me afraid
of my dark forest, my untouched home.
Do you know what grows in its mossy depths?

Narcissus tears through the intestines of stags,
so next time your decaying breath burns my throat,
shall I offer you a bite instead?

Sons of Actaeon

I will smear nightshade on my lips
and finally offer you that kiss.
Will that please the mouth of a beast?

Good Soil

“Dad, can we plant a garden?”
My six-year-old
likes the gardening channel.
She held the seeds gently
and we planted them
that spring day you left us.

Tomatoes.
Bright red bulbs
pulsing with your guilt
from leaving a daughter
and your fiancé
for your real true love.

Peppers.
Sharp with the tang
of your words
before you slammed the door:
“You don’t understand
the power of addiction.”

Peppermint.
Your favorite tea,
an old pregnancy craving,
your comfort drink—
before you ran back to
the warm embrace of booze.

Beets.
Staining the plates at dinner
like your addiction stains
everything you touch.
Your efforts to get clean,
the first time you quit
back in college—

all efforts were for nothing.
You'll never scrub out addiction.

Daisies.

What we picked when we fell in love.
Little white flowers glistening in the grass
like the engagement ring
you threw in the dirt.
That meaningless lie
to a commitment
you never intended to make.
Now I make mortgage payments
while you're free to cut ties.

Rosebushes.

With thorns that drew blood
when you started shutting me out.
Heavy clouds settled over your mind,
the bottle corrupted your bloom.
You feared motherhood,
afraid you'd disappoint your child.
By leaving, you proved yourself right.

Forget-Me-Nots.

Though I know you will.
Our cross-country road trip,
dancing in the Tennessee rain,
your early mornings to make me coffee,
my knee on your porch,
you'll forget it all.
Vodka is your only romance.
Vodka has stolen your heart from me.

It's been a year.
I tend the garden
and watch the sprouting life
alongside my blossoming daughter—
who you only see as Unplanned.

I think of you wilting somewhere,
cut off from nutrients,
hiding underground
with the fermenting potatoes
that source your idol.
And I know that without you,
we're in good soil,
because inevitably
you'll always choose
your parasite
over me.



Untitled 2363
Judson Atkins

Celestial

Oh how the
darkened feathers float down as
thunderous birds flutter above,
still air filling the void around me,
speckled orbs dance across my vision—

A nightly embrace.

For will I return to the mother?

To the earth, nature herself?

Her hands shield my eyes,

for if I were to see, I

shall feel

sensations elude

running from

a promise once lost,

lain to rest in fields

full of sorrow,

a final goodbye.

The Hill

And I'll burn my fingers on the coffee cup so you can use the
handle,
and I'll tell my secrets to the winds
though they'll never know the answer.

And I want to feel like myself
while I'm dancing in the rain,
so I'll see if I can make it here again.

Lament is tangled in the willow tree, and they didn't love me the
way I needed to be. Just a shadow with no sunlight;
left alone without a reason.

Maybe I dare to look at myself today
without wanting to live like this halfway. Too many times I've felt
the knot begin to form. The drunken feeling of my heart quickly
being torn,

and I know I'm just like Sisyphus,
bound to end up here again.

Hierba Mala Nunca Muere

I hear the murmur of what once was in the wood. It comes up behind me as the wind whispers; it tickles, pouring its secrets into my lifeless hands.

And I choke it down with love, like the kind you never gave me, and I store it behind my heart and bones, the kind that keeps me alone, the kind I never deserved. I had to learn to down the stones.

Like the truth all the sinners mourn, it passes by without a second thought, persisting its way through life, like energy, never created, only passed on.

And it's true that Life need not envy;
La hierba mala nunca muere.

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HANNAH RICE

Nonfiction by

JORDAN MCPHERSON

Poetry by

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About

Founded in 2021, *A Common Place* is a literary magazine publishing both online and print. Run by undergraduate scholars, it features fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama, and art. We seek to elevate emerging writers by offering them the experience of publication and to create a strong literary community at Longwood.

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