

AFTER HAPPY HOUR

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND ART



ISSUE 18 | FALL/WINTER 2022

AFTER
HAPPY
HOUR
ISSUE 18

FALL/WINTER 2022 EDITORS AND READERS

ELIZABETH ABELING
NATHAN KUKULSKI
SHAWN MADDEY
DANIEL PARME
JASON PECK
JESS SIMMS

After Happy Hour Review is produced and published in Pittsburgh, PA.
ISSN 2831-879X

COVER ART BY MARIE-JULIE LAFRANCE

LAYOUT AND DESIGN BY JESS SIMMS

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FOREWORD

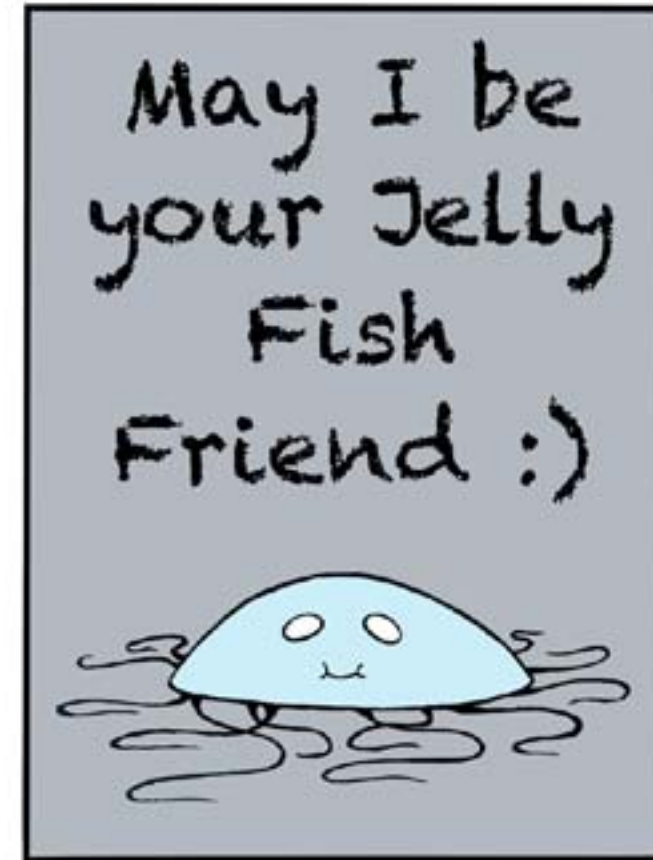
The strange synergy of our team is always remarkable to me, and, more than that, the diversity and quality of the writing we get to feature in our publications never ceases to astound me. Every issue seems to have an accidental common thread, and I always try to figure out what it is sewing this tapestry, what drives us to tie these things together. Despite our desire to just accept the best work we receive, there is always something that connects, that doesn't seem to arise until the whole thing is visible.

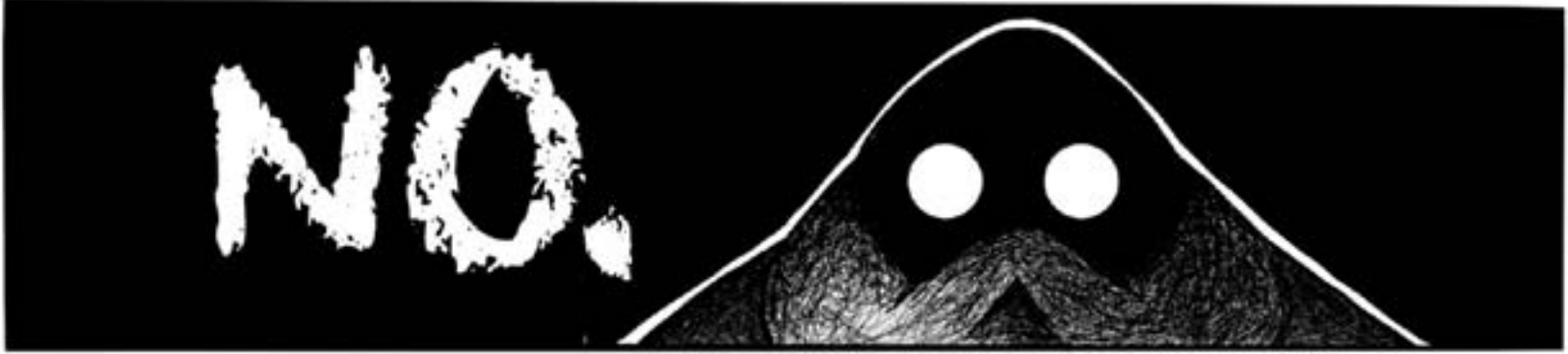
This isn't the most lighthearted iteration of After Happy Hour, even if some of the works might seem so. Every piece, in some way, explores uncertainty and fear, whether it is the squashed hope of offering yourself up as a friend, disappearing from space into the Earth's atmosphere, the anxiety of how a journey may end, the trepidation of a journey beginning, the helplessness of being unable to even save a plant or a fish. There are things that are uncertain. There are things out of our control, even when we do our best to help, to influence the course of fate, to have a happy ending, to feel secure and safe.

For the first time in two years many people are opening their doors again, breathing air without masks again, unsure if we should still be afraid. We are stepping out into a changed world, from a "new normal" to a different, newer normal, full of questions, doubts, risks, losses and fresh scars. Maybe that's the writing we harnessed in this issue: the writing of exhaustion and uncertainty. That uncertainty might be frightening, but it doesn't have to be. It can be hopeful, and it can be exciting. The future – hell, even the present – is sometimes scary, because who knows what it holds or what will come of it. But we have no choice but to take that leap, put one foot in front of the other, and to do our best to challenge the future, come what may. To stand at the edge of where the questions begin and write.



FUTURE FOCUS PHOTOGRAPHY





Why We Love Fish

BY ESSIE MARTIN

Where were you, when the basking shark
Washed up on our beach. Her body bloated,
Rough skin, smooth gills all piled on the sand.
I reached down my throat last week,
And my finger came out covered in blue. Answering
At last, what lies underneath.
Long ago, I stopped asking where the fish were
And accepted that sometimes
My hook would be full, and sometimes empty.
This is how I know
Our blue becomes us, and I am fine with that,
My father follows me around the house with a wet
Rag as I drip on the doorstep, up the stairs, and
Into the bathtub, circling in the trappings we call home.
As a kid, I tried to bring periwinkles to the house, and
Convince them of domestication, before they dried
On the stoop and their tangled spirals crisped in the sun.
The blue that has carried in us since days when the ocean
Was breath and food and shelter all at once, is bigger
In some than others. I carry it with me in a bottle labeled ____
And pour it over the basking shark. I try and I try,
But I can't push her back to sea.



YOON PARK

Delivery

BY BRUCE BARROW

I found the old rope-necked canvas bag by the tracks right where they always were. And like always, whatever was in this one was loose and bony and easy to lift. I'd been picking these bags up for a while and this was just the way they came. My brother never told me who left them here.

The thing in it thrashed around a bit and whimpered once or twice, which they do sometimes, so no big deal. I could have opened the bag to check but didn't. In fact, I'd never peeked inside a single one of these bags. I wanted to look, thought about looking every time I picked one up, maybe four or five times a year, but I always talked myself out of it. Probably I was a coward, something I preferred not to admit. That from the very beginning Jerry made me promise not to open them was the only fact I could muster in my defense.

With the bag over my shoulder the thing inside got still and quiet, turned into a big lump that bounced against my back as I carried it over to my new Subaru—a great car, even if the loan was a stretch. A click of the key opened the hatch like a charm and I landed the bag with a thump. Maybe a little harder than I'd meant to.

The grunt that came from inside wasn't quite human and it wasn't quite animal, but something in between. Screechy. Angry or frightened. Probably both. It was an ugly sound I tried to ignore. I closed the hatch with a gentle push, hoping the click of the lock would hide me from my guilt.

An hour later I pulled up in front of Jerry's barn. The thing in the bag had been quiet for the whole drive, even though the last couple of miles were unpaved. Of all the possible reasons for its silence I told myself it was just acceptance.

I gave a couple of beeps on the horn then climbed out of my car. Jerry pushed the barn door open wide enough to slip through, closed it behind him and walked over. He was wearing his usual dirty overalls and had his ballcap on backwards. The light over the barn door flickered a couple of times then steadied, making him look like a skinny shadow.

"Jimbo," he greeted me. "Quiet drive?"

"Same, same. Not a peep."

We moved around to the back of the car and I thumbed the key to open the hatch. When we looked in, though, the bag was empty. Just a pile of loose canvas and a rope that looked like something had gnawed through it.

I didn't say anything. I stared at the bag and my insides went cold.

"Shit!" Jerry slammed the hatch down and raised his hand for silence. He was holding his anger in, ready to explode, but he didn't look at me. He was focused on the car, taking shallow breaths. "Lock it," he whispered.

"What?"

"Now! Lock the damn car!"

I pressed the key and the lights flashed and the locks clicked. "It's not my fault," I whispered. "It was tied like always."

"At least he's in there," Jerry said.

"*He?*" I whispered. I always thought it was an *it*. Like this mattered.

Jerry gave me a furious look then moved along the side of the car, trying to peer inside without getting too close, even though the windows were tinted and almost impossible to see through. "Dammit!" he whispered to himself. When he got up to the windshield where the glass was clear he paused, like he was suddenly afraid to look in. Or maybe to be seen. "You didn't hear anything?" he asked. "You checked the rope?"

"No and yes," I said. "What the hell's in there? I just bought this car."

"Shut up for a minute." Like this was my fault, which was bullshit.

One of these things getting out was never part of the deal. And Jerry not having an answer for me wouldn't work this time. "It's not going to tear it up, is it? It's not going to leave some stink that'll never come out? You know you're going to pay for anything it breaks."

"It's a fucking Subaru, Jimmy. And *it's a he.*" The look on Jerry's face was

complicated when he turned to me. Anger. Frustration. Then desperation sneaking in from the sides. “I’ve got to think,” he said. “You’re lucky you made it. And that he let you out of the car. He’s got a plan in there. The little fuckers are smart.”

I stared at my brother. The night was hot and muggy but I was shivering. I was supposed to be on my way home by now. My wife, Cassie, was going to be getting up for work in a couple of hours. I had to take Riley to school. It was a long drive home and I needed my car. My new car, with my music on good speakers, so I could forget about this mess. “What’s the plan, Jer? It better not be to stand around all night.”

“Take my truck,” he said. “It’s low on gas but the Arco’s open.” He took his keys from his pocket and tossed them to me.

“Low on gas? Are you kidding me?”

Jerry held his hands out and shrugged, like I was being stupid. Like always.

Then glass broke. My windshield. A sound like a shot and long cracks of yellow and blue catching the light from over the barn door.

The face behind the cracks, peering out at us from inside the car, was pale and had a mustache. It was the face from an old photograph, with eyes a little too narrow, nose a little too long, lips just barely lips, and a forehead that was wide and blank. But it was a small face on a small head, pivoting on a neck that seemed jointed with rubber. Snapping back and forth between my brother and me.

The two of us stood frozen as we looked back at this face. We looked at it and looked at it but it must have been only for a moment. There was an odd calm coming from Jerry. A slow release of tension, like he’d come up against something he’d worried about for a long time and now he could let it go.

The little man behind my broken windshield struggled with emotions I couldn’t read. First, he *was* a little man. He was maybe two feet tall and naked, with little arms, little legs, little hands, and a penis that seemed about right. Where he would find clothes, or if he even wore them, I had no idea. In this long second I recognized the absurdity of the question. Of

clothes. Clothes were the least of it. It was anger on the little man’s face, anger mixed with things I’d never experienced, but were things I knew enough to be afraid of. Next to me Jerry seemed taller now, poised for whatever might come next.

The little man leaned his head back on his rubber neck and slammed it into the windshield, which exploded in a spray of glass. Stunned, he shook his head and squeezed his narrow eyes shut as if to collect his wits. A second later he launched himself at Jerry, who braced to catch him. But the power of his leap knocked Jerry to the ground and a swipe of his hand left four quick slices across Jerry’s cheek. Then the little man, standing naked to his full height of twenty some inches on Jerry’s chest, and with a bleeding gash on his pale forehead, eyed me with a slow lipless smile full of straight little teeth. I was ready to run.

But he just clicked those teeth a few times and then he was gone, sprinting for the woods with a rubbery stride that gravity didn’t bother to slow.

On the ground, Jerry groaned and lifted himself to his knees. He put a bandana to his bloody face then got to his feet and steadied himself against my car.

“We’re fucked,” he said. “Totally fucked.”

There were too many questions going through my head to find words for any of them. The peace I’d tried to make with my part in this crumbled, like I always knew someday it would, the way everything with Jerry did.

He took his phone from his pocket, thumbed up a number and hit dial. Then he handed it to me. “Tell Raze exactly what happened. Then do whatever he says.” Jerry was already leaning into his truck. He put a hand on the Winchester, changed his mind and took the shotgun from the gun rack instead. He grabbed a flashlight from under the dash.

“Jer, what’s up?” came a voice over the phone.

“It’s Jim,” I said.

Jerry gave me a nod, then headed into the woods, going after the little man.

On the phone Raze said he’d get here as fast as he could. “Don’t go anywhere, wait for me right where you are.”

“Sure. Right.” I hung up, then threw Jerry’s phone into my car, right through the hole that used to be my windshield.

Jerry’s truck was parked there beside me, a Dodge Ram jacked high with knobby tires, a padlocked tool chest snug against the cab, and our dad’s old Winchester sitting by itself now in the gun rack. The Ram cost Jerry twice as much as I paid for my Subaru, and he didn’t have to take a loan.

I found a stick and knocked out the last bits of broken glass from my windshield. Some of it went on the seat, some scattered on the ground with all the other bits of wood and rusted hardware from the work Jerry was doing on his barn. Whatever he was fixing or building in there, he wouldn’t tell me.

Fifteen minutes later Raze pulled up and jumped from his cab. “What the fuck?” he shouted. He was tall and thick, in surfer shorts and boots, and his arms chopped the air. “Where’s Jerry? It got away? How’d you fuck this up?”

I felt like laughing. Both at my own relief and at Raze’s freakout. As big an asshole as Raze was, at least I never had to guess at what he was thinking.

“Raze,” I said. “Chill.”

He just looked at me. He took a deep breath but the anger stayed in his eyes. “What the fuck happened, Jim? Can you tell me, please?”

I told him.

“Fuck,” he said.

“Now you gonna tell me what you and Jer are doing here? Where these little guys come from?” I wasn’t sure I wanted to know but I had to ask. I had other questions, too, but these were the big ones. They were a start.

“We have to find Jerry,” he said. “And the little guy. The other shit we can talk about later.”

I stood where I was. No way was I going anywhere with him.

“It’s money, Jimbo,” Raze said. “Real fucking money.” He went to Jerry’s truck, pulled open the door and grabbed the Winchester from the gun rack. He threw it at me hard so I had to catch it. “It’s loaded,” he said. Then he

went to his truck and grabbed his own shotgun and a flashlight. He paused to give me some stink-eye. “Now.”

I let the barrel of the Winchester dip to the ground. The little man had come up behind Raze, stood just a short distance back. He was still naked and now wet, his hair plastered flat over his ears and forehead, his mustache catching glimmers of light. Who knew why he was wet, or where he’d been. His eyes were dark holes.

“Behind you,” I said softly. I was scared, and I could tell Raze was too, that he understood I wasn’t kidding.

“Right,” he said. He chambered a round and slowly turned.

The little man was there facing him. He pushed a hand through his wet hair so it stood in a damp spike. His forehead somehow looked fine, the cut healed. He dropped his arms to his sides and lowered himself into a muscled squat, like he was ready to launch.

“Shit,” Raze said. He pulled the trigger and the little man exploded. Blood, bone, guts, and hair, spread across the yard along with the rusty hardware and bits of glass from my windshield.

“Jesus Christ!” I shouted. I couldn’t move. The blast from the shotgun rang in my head. “Why’d you do that?”

“The fuckers can jump. That was my shot and I took it.”

I wasn’t sure I heard him. The gore was awful. A wet shiny mess. A little man versus a load of buckshot at close range. My belly churned and I thought I’d puke but I choked it down. Growing up out here I’d seen lots of blood and plenty of dead things but this wasn’t the same.

“You know Jerry’s dead,” Raze said.

“What are you talking about? Jerry’s not dead.”

“You see him around here anywhere?”

“He’s out in the woods. He would’ve heard your shot. He’ll be back.”

Raze chambered a fresh round. He shook his head like I was a fool.

“You got this then?” I said. “Because I’m done.” I just wanted to leave the night behind. Go to work in the morning and meet my obligations. I didn’t believe Jerry was dead for a second. He’d show up soon enough, and then we’d argue about all this until I got some answers.

Raze took a deep breath, looked up at the stars then turned around. “You’re not going anywhere until we get this shit fixed.”

“I’m going home, Raze.”

“Jimbo,” he said, “you’re not.”

I walked into the trees to dig a little grave while Raze went off to look for Jerry.

The ground was soft and it only took a few minutes. Then I tied my bandana around my nose and shoveled what was left of the little man into the canvas bag. I wished I had some safety glasses, in case of squirts or spills, but I wasn’t going to go looking through Jerry’s things to find a pair. I was careful and got what was left of him into the bag without getting anything on me. I hated this. Hated myself. I dragged the bag to the hole and covered it up. If there was a God involved in any of this I didn’t want to know Him.

I tossed the shovel into the back of Jerry’s truck and then I looked at the barn. The barn was the canvas bag only 10,000 times bigger. And like all the bags I’d carried, I’d never looked inside of it.

The only thing I could figure was that there were people with a lot of money who would pay to have a little man, and Jerry and Raze were plugged into the supply. So presumably there was something about having one of them that people liked, and liked a lot. Whatever that might be was beyond the reach of my imagination. Pets, maybe. Weird little servants. Some crazy health thing. Or sex aliens from the Tenth Dimension. I could come up with explanations all day long and never get it right. And if Jerry had ever been to the Tenth Dimension that was something he would have bragged about every damn time I saw him.

He didn’t know where they came from any more than I did, he just knew how to find them.

“Jerry, you son of a bitch,” I said to the empty night.

I pulled the door open, stepped into the barn and closed it behind me.

Inside was dark, a deep emptiness that felt huge. Beneath my boots the floor was smooth concrete, the only thing I could make out. There had to

be lights but I didn’t want to touch something I shouldn’t while looking for the switch. I’d closed the door behind me not because I wanted to—I didn’t—but in case there was something in here that wanted out.

I looked into the darkness but I couldn’t even see my hand in front of me. There was something strange about this place, a feeling of lightness coming over me. The air, maybe. It had a sweetness to it. A flavor that tasted happy was the only way to describe it.

I got out my phone, thumbed on the flashlight and sent the beam into the darkness. The light from it showed dozens of clear glass panels, each one fronting a separate tiny cubicle. They went side by side all around the barn, and there was someone looking back at me from nearly every one of them. As I moved the light from one little face pressed against the glass to the next, too many faces to count, I wished I’d stayed outside, waiting for Raze and my chance to go home without seeing this. There was no way I could have brought this many of them here by myself. There had to be other drivers doing the same.

Each face was sad or angry or exhausted in its own particular way. In some cubicles they sat on little wooden chairs looking at nothing, in others they squirmed alone on little beds without sheets, sleeping, maybe dreaming. But in most of the cubicles their faces pressed hard against the glass, their narrow, old-fashioned noses made wide, their foreheads spread into something like damp plaster. Their eyes reflected a silverish glow when my light caught them, a glow filled with hate.

“Fuck,” I said to the universe.

They wore identical clothes, little cotton sweatpants and little cotton hoodies, all light gray. On their feet were little slip-on sneakers, which were white. I wanted to stop looking but I couldn’t. And I couldn’t look at just one, couldn’t pick one out to study it the way I felt I needed to, because how could I be so rude? How could I take their eyes?

But what were they? Not cute, not by a hundred miles, but incredible. With an aura that made me think there could be answers and satisfaction and understanding for all the things I worried about, the things that could hurt me. Or maybe that was just the air. Its sweetness.

But what if I let them go? That was the obvious thing, right? It took me a while to get there, but I did, and vaguely congratulated myself for it. But of course no way in hell was I going to let them go. Not right then, anyway. Not before I could talk to Jerry.

I had to get out of there, but I also had to pan my light across the cubicles one last time.

She had straight blond hair parted in the middle that she pushed behind her ears. She touched her nose to the glass with the gentlest pressure, so that just the tip of her nose flattened. It was cute. Kittenish. The glow in her eyes was warm, charming, somehow. Friendly. Nothing like the hate coming at me from every other pair of eyes. The air was sugar and it calmed me. She could have been anybody, except that she was so small, so easy to approach.

“Where are you from?” I asked. “What’s your name?”

She moved back from the glass slightly and tilted her head to the side, as if considering my questions. I felt a smile, but I didn’t see one. Her smile was inside of me, came into me without words. I was being seduced. I got that. I’m not an idiot. But what’s wrong with being seduced? What’s wrong with giving in? With pleasing someone?

She turned her head and I understood that I should follow her gaze. There on the metal frame between cubicles was a small pressure plate, and I wondered what would happen if I pushed it.

The little woman was unbelievably light when I lifted her into Jerry’s truck. Through her cotton hoodie I could feel the gentle curve of her waist, the width of her ribs, my clumsy hands.

She was so small that I wondered if she should be in a child’s seat. When we headed down the dirt road she sat comfortably beside me, bouncing really high whenever we hit a bump. She was too small for the seatbelt but had buckled it behind her so it wouldn’t beep. I had no idea how she knew to do that, or what else she might know how to do, which might be anything.

As we drove she gazed out the window into the trees and the darkness.

She seemed calm, even happy.

Cassie and Riley would be thrilled when I introduced them. They’d do everything they could to make her feel at home. We had an extra bedroom and plenty of space, not that she’d take up much space, or likely eat much, either.

When Raze called I turned off my phone. I’d give Jerry a call in a day or so, when I felt more like talking. Right then I just wanted to drive. On the highway the little woman pivoted her head to look up at me. In the dark cab there was a soft, beautiful glow in her eyes, and she pushed her golden hair behind her ear. We were content. We were free. That was the thought that came to me then. We were free. The world was wide open to us, and I blew past the exit to my house without thinking about it. I hoped when we ran out of gas she wouldn’t run.



the rain

BY LAURA BRUN

i can only love you in my overwhelming way
said the rain as it rolled in, seeped into
my shoes, as it stayed for weeks tapping
at my window while i tried to sleep, ran
its cold fingers down the side of my neck
where hood and collar had forgotten
to cling tight. *i wish we were closer*
the rain said as it plastered my hair across
my cheek, as it roared over the beat of
my footsteps, as it blew the neighbor's
trees until they pounded against
my window with it. *come out, please* it said
as i hid in my house, ran after work to my
car with an arm thrown over my head.
why don't you it said as it fought my grasp
why won't you just as it shook at the handle, *why*
don't you want me back it said as it bent and broke
every umbrella i owned, as i ventured out, as
i headed out, as i went always out, again,
into sidewalk puddles and uphill gusts,
as i fed myself to the rain, cried into
the rain but the rain didn't notice just said
why do you always shiver like that, why
do you always go at the end of the night,
why the puddles, why your lungs,
why the spaces between us.
i can fill those
for you.

Horror Vacui

BY GIUSEPPE GETTO

However you have lived
in a room—afraid of its corners,
gerrymandering your covers
around another body
or the space left by one—
the case can be made
familiar walls weigh
heaviest on the mind.
There is nothing new
to them, no texture or resonance
a painting or photo
can hide. They call
for decoration but resist
every motif in the same way
a blizzard can be deadly
or a state of grace depending
on who's caught in it.
In 1888 during a freak storm
in the mountains
an entire herd of cattle froze
about three hours from where
I lie violently awake.

Imagine the surprise dawning
in minds so tiny
they couldn't realize their world
was ending. Imagine
the cost of learning
you are nothing
to the world.



Lashed

BY SHEREE SHATSKY

TOM

Tom, the future comedian, is gaga for Julie. Julie Spider Eyes. She coats her eyelashes sticky thick with Maybelline Great Lash. Her school locker next to his is the reason he keeps vodka in his locker. In a Jimi Hendrix thermos. He says the booze is strictly medicinal, to ease the dry mouth he gets watching Julie reapply the black magic between classes; her stroke of the wand from the inside corner lash and the sweep across the fringe, her mouth in a perfect "O". Once, she caught him looking and he barked. Not intentionally, he meant to say *Hi Julie*. Instead his tongue stuck fast and he came across sounding like a real dog.

JULIE

Julie flips her compact closed and eyes Tom through her thick stiff spider eyelashes. "Down boy," she says. He drops to his knees and she scratches behind his ears. She names him Tourette. He performs dog impressions for Julie whenever they meet up at the locker, she busy with her eyes, a swig of vodka loosening him up. "Tourette, do the border collie, it's my top dog," she commands. Later, she'll snap her fingers for a lab, specifically a yellow lab.

THE ENGLISH TEACHER

A yellow lab bit Miss Brown as a child and she'd been petrified of dogs ever since. She never let anyone know and taught Old Yeller as a way to cover her fears. She'd show the movie after the class read the book and passed out tissues at the sad part, but secretly, she was glad the dog got put down in the story, even if Old Yeller was a hero defending the family from the rabid wolf. The dog who bit Miss Brown bit and ran and was never tracked down. She screamed through fourteen days of fourteen rabies shots injected in her stomach with a needle nearly as long as the shotgun Travis used to kill Old Yeller.

The day she heard a lab bark out in the hallway, her legs went out from under her as quick as Old Yeller's four.

GO BOY GO

Tom was born spotted. The doctors diagnosed newborn vitiligo. His mother called him her little Dalmatian.

She taught her new pup tricks. Sit pretty. Roll over. Beg for food. Play fetch with his pacifier. She tossed his binky long and yelled go boy go and off he'd crawl crawl crawl fast fast fast reaching reaching reaching for his magical marvelous slippery sucking sucker and she'd snatch away all that soothed him and throw it in the opposite direction.

Tom laughed and laughed and crawled and crawled until his knees rubbed raw and he cried cried cried. His mother spanked his bottom and said, "Mama's not the bitch your daddy says she is."

His spots faded by his second birthday, all but one at the hollow of his throat, the size of a dog rabies tag. She swaddled Tom tight for a nap and pressed her finger on the spot hard until he barked Mama. "That's a good boy," she said and spider kissed his belly with her stiff fake eyelashes.

ANNIE

Annie loves dogs more than Tom, even though he'd acted like a dog since second grade, pawing around on all fours, sniffing her desk on the hunt for Fruit Roll-Ups. She'd love him more if he loved her, but he'd never know and she'd never tell.

People she's loved don't love her back. Dogs though, dogs love love love no matter if dinner is food scraped off the breakfast dishes or you stay filthy dirty for a week because the water bill didn't get paid or instead of mad and embarrassed, your parents are proud you bit the hand of dad's drunk boss after he wandered away from the house party and tried to feel up sound asleep you. Bit it to the bone, they'd tell their friends. Twenty-five stitches.

Besides, Tom has the hots dogged hard for Julie Spider Eyes.

ANNIE AND MISS BROWN

Annie caught Miss Brown the day she fainted at school. Reflexes she supposed. She asked for a bathroom pass and the teacher keeled over reaching for her pen. When her parents pass out drunk Annie leaves them where they drop and reads *The Big Book* from Alcoholics Anonymous she bought for cheap at a thrift shop.

Miss Brown writes Annie a bathroom pass now anytime she asks. *It's the least I can do*, she tells Annie. On the way back to class, sometimes Annie slides AA pamphlets through the vents of Tom's locker. It's the least she can do for her best dawg.

Once, her boss asked her to train a new guy hired to work the Arachnids department, so she asked for a pass and skipped out early. Miss Brown never turned her in, but popped in her bark-blocking earplugs and stopped by the pet store after school. She bought not one cat, but two with dark long lux lashes she named Brothers and Grimm.

TED

Julie taps the terrarium. The tarantula scurries over and gives her a look, a dad look, the *Don't you have something else better to do?* look.

The pet store guy points to a sign. No Tapping the Glass. Mascara tears spill her cheeks. The spi-der reminds me of my dead father, she tells him. Hairy with a thick middle and out of proportion arms and legs.

Ted knows the girl from school. Julie with the dark long lux lashes, exotic like the actresses in the silent films his dead mom loved to watch. He reaches inside the terrarium. The spider slips along his sleeve and tap tap dances its way to her.

DOG GONE

Great Danes. Corgis. Pit Bulls. Dalmatians. Golden Retrievers. Poodles. Yorkies. Jack Russell Terriers. Tom woofs Julie an impressive canine repertoire. He wears a spiked dog collar; she wears her father's dog tags. She blows him a kiss goodbye, he sits pretty and begs for more. He laps up her attention and she keeps him on a short leash.

Play dead, she tells him the day she moves her stuff to share a locker with Ted and his tarantula Harold. Tom friends the vodka Jimi thermos with a whiskey Scooby-Doo and ruh-roh, soon finds himself assigned to adult ed for being drunk at school.

Years later, Tom and his canine impressions hit it big on Saturday Night Live.

LASH BACK

After the New Year's Eve show, Tom finds a bucket of dog treats delivered to his dressing room, a hot green and pink Great Lash mascara taped to the unsigned card.

Three bourbons down, he sends a photo to Annie. *Ruh roh*, she texts and emojis a black spider and a pair of eyes. He scrolls his phone for his favorite gif. Old Yeller, a bullet caught full stop between the dog's teeth. She texts back, *good boy*.

Three dots dance his screen. A selfie of Annie and her three rescued yorkies puppy-kissing at midnight. "Screw it," he says and drops his phone in his drink. He unscrews the mascara and lacquers his lashes dark long lux.



R MAC JONES

Silences

BY MARK JACKLEY

Richmond, VA, 1985

After I laid him off, I drove him home. His molten anger soon sputtering into silence, hardening into fear of telling his wife when she returned.

Their tiny mortgaged kitchen. The knick-knacks on the shelves, the breakfast dishes crusty, piled up in the sink. His white hands on the table, folded as if in prayer, his small words in the long part of the afternoon. He needed that job, I knew. His unbearably swollen heart. He loved his wife. He did. My dry cardboard words. How later I took the long way home to a different kind of silence, to a woman I haven't spoken to now in over 30 years.

Morning in Havana

BY GUNILLA KESTER

Streets too narrow for cars. Potholes gleaming like wine in deep glasses, bags of cement cracking in corners leaking gray tears in the cluttered gutters. Blaring beats wave from one window to the next, chanting with wet shirts and panties, the scent of tobacco—voice rising in pitch, a ladder of sound.

We didn't hold onto each other or anything coming up to that old holy place from behind, the man with the accordion smiled at us even before we put a coin in his hat. The famous American writer already drunk in his house with the thousand trees, his pools, the red-breasted trogon, the red-necked

bulging trody on the fence, a basket of shiny gold alepidomos mixed with the crafty eels for dinner escorted by a round-eyed kinkagon. The door to the synagogue wide open. Smell of rum and salt. A few Jewbans dancing on that polished floor a mirror glancing at them expecting a bigger crowd.



DELTA NA

The Warpgate on Upsilon IX

BY CHARLES BEERS

Upsilon IX Warpgate Reconstruction Project (WRP) Discovery Session 1

Date: July 5, 2062

Location: Upsilon IX Station – Horizon Conference Room

Attendees:

1. Anjali Acharya, Upsilon IX Station WRP Manager
2. Evelyn Bainbridge, Upsilon IX Station Supervisor
3. Matthew Blackburn, Obsidian Design Lead
4. Qianfan Chen, Upsilon IX Station Chief Warpgate Operator (via holographic projection)
5. Samantha Woods, Obsidian Design Analyst

Facilitator: Matthew Blackburn

Scribe: Samantha Woods

I. Introductions

- Matthew kicked off the meeting by asking if all participants from the Upsilon IX team were in attendance. Anjali confirmed she, Evelyn, and Qianfan were present.
- Anjali asked Qianfan to turn on his camera; he said a glitch in the Virtumeet software prevented him from turning on his camera.
- Matthew asked if he could record the meeting; Anjali denied his request.
- Evelyn told Anjali to activate the Dreamvue windows because she was tired of staring at “the crushing void of space.” Anjali asked which background

she preferred. Evelyn said anything from Earth. Anjali configured the Dreamvues to a panorama of the Empire State Building at sunset.

[MB] – It was actually the Chrysler Building. Please fix, but also in case you were curious.

- Matthew thanked everyone for coming and recapped the agenda:
 - Discuss the Upsilon IX Warpgate malfunction
 - Identify any and all technical issues with the Upsilon IX Warpgate
 - Gather design requirements for the new Upsilon IX Warpgate
- Anjali stressed all project material must remain confidential. Matthew assured her that all Obsidian employees were briefed and signed NDAs. Evelyn assured him anything that left the room constituted a breach of contract. She said she would “rain legal hell upon everyone.”

[MB] – Cut the last line.

II. Discussion

- Matthew asked when Upsilon IX management was first made aware of the Warpgate failure. Anjali said that on June 24 she received a priority alert from Qianfan and ordered an immediate station lockdown.
- Matthew asked what time she received the priority alert. Anjali checked her datapad and confirmed Qianfan’s initial message arrived at 3:36 PM. Matthew noted that Relay Team Omega’s scheduled departure time was 1:12 PM. He asked Qianfan to explain the two-hour gap. Qianfan asked how Matthew knew the Warpgate schedule. Matthew reminded Qianfan that the schedule was provided with the project’s onboarding materials.

[MB] – As expected. You saw how jumpy he got, right?

- Evelyn refused to call the voyage a failure. She mentioned there were ongoing investigations to locate Relay Team Omega at all sister Warpgate locations and no interstellar government had declared the voyagers dead.
- Matthew asked if the investigations unearthed anything new. Evelyn said that was not his concern.
- Matthew asked for the voyagers’ travel logs and personal effects to help identify the root cause of the malfunction. Anjali denied his request. She recommended leaving the investigations to the authorities. Evelyn

agreed, citing the “space taxes she paid for the space cops.”

[MB] – Cut.

- Matthew asked Qianfan to describe the morning of the incident.
 - Qianfan said there were no signs the Warpgate would malfunction. Every morning he conducted routine safety checks: Warpgate integrity, radar sensitivity, teleportation latency.
 - Sam asked for an example of a teleportation latency test.
- Anjali reminded the group that Upsilon IX procedures were not the subject of the meeting.
- Matthew asked Qianfan if the Warpgate connection had ever failed. Qianfan said he once threw a baseball into the portal and a football came back out. Qianfan clarified this was a joke.

[MB] – They’ll redact all of this. But leave it.

- Matthew asked Qianfan to describe the incident.
 - Qianfan said thirteen voyagers from Relay Team Omega gathered in the Gateway Terminal. They always entered the Warpgate in a line, arm in arm. The portal glowed a steady blue as the voyagers disembarked. Thirteen blips appeared on the radar. Midway between the Upsilon IX and Gemini Stations, they vanished.
 - Matthew asked Qianfan if he had compared notes with Gemini Station. Qianfan confirmed the voyagers never appeared on Gemini’s scanners. Gemini Station kept their Warpgate open for two days straight in case Relay Team Omega resurfaced on Earth.
 - Matthew asked if the voyage had been unusual in any way. Qianfan confirmed the voyage was Relay Team Omega’s routine monthly

journey to and from Earth. Qianfan added Matthew should have known this since he already had a copy of the Warpgate schedule.

[MB] – I know you're new to this, but not everything has to end up in the minutes. Scrap the last line.

- o Matthew questioned the purpose of the monthly voyages. Qianfan said Relay Team Omega was exempt from standard security checks and their purpose was not listed in official logs. He added it was not his job to ask.
- o Sam asked why Relay Team Omega received special treatment.
- o Anjali reiterated that the team was losing focus.
- o Evelyn said Obsidian employees, of all people, shouldn't talk about special treatment.
- Matthew asked if Relay Team Omega always consisted of thirteen people. Qianfan said yes.
- Matthew asked if there had been any prior Warpgate incidents. Qianfan said there were no reported malfunctions or system outages since the Warpgates became publicly available in 2056.
[MB] – "Reported."
- Matthew asked if the Warpgate had undergone maintenance in the last month.
- Evelyn said this was clearly covered in the onboarding materials and asked if Obsidian had even read them when they signed onto the reconstruction project. Matthew confirmed he was just being thorough.
[MB] – You try reading 700 pages of terms and conditions over a holiday weekend.
- Evelyn said they didn't have time to be thorough. Without a functioning Warpgate, Upsilon IX was cut off from the rest of the galaxy and they lacked the resources to evacuate ten million people.
- Evelyn asked if Matthew wanted to stay trapped on the Moon. Matthew confirmed he did not want to stay trapped on the Moon.
- Qianfan's Virtumeet feed cut out. The team waited for his return.
- Matthew asked when everyone last visited Earth. Anjali said she planned to see her grandkids in Orlando once the Warpgate was fixed. She said

she watched this year's fireworks from her office.

- Sam said she had never visited Earth.
- Evelyn said nothing.
[MB] – None of this is relevant. Cut.
- Anjali said Qianfan was experiencing technical difficulties and could not rejoin the meeting.
- Matthew asked if anyone in the station could qualify as a subject matter expert on Warpgates. Evelyn said she had a PhD in aerodynamics from Columbia, "not that anyone gave a damn." Matthew said he also got his degree in aerodynamics. Evelyn did not confirm if she gave a damn.
[MB] – Good one, Sam. Cut please.
- Anjali suggested rescheduling the discovery session. Matthew requested that an Obsidian engineer run diagnostics on the Warpgate and Control Room dashboards during the next meeting. Evelyn said Obsidian was not cleared to inspect Upsilon IX machines.
- Matthew took an action item to obtain the necessary clearance.
- Anjali agreed, once Obsidian received clearance, to a limited tour of the Gateway Terminal.
- The meeting ended a half-hour early. Qianfan never returned.

Upsilon IX Warpgate Reconstruction Project (WRP)

Discovery Session 2

Date: July 11, 2062

Location: Upsilon IX Station – Gateway Terminal – Control Room

Attendees:

1. Anjali Acharya, Upsilon IX Station WRP Manager
2. Evelyn Bainbridge, Upsilon IX Station Supervisor
3. Matthew Blackburn, Obsidian Design Lead
4. Keith Dunlop, Upsilon IX Station Assistant Warpgate Operator
5. Santiago Perez, Obsidian Development Lead
6. Samantha Woods, Obsidian Design Analyst

Facilitator: Matthew Blackburn

Scribe: Samantha Woods

I. Introductions

- Matthew kicked off the meeting by asking if all key approvers from the Upsilon IX team were in attendance. Anjali said Qianfan had scheduled PTO for the next two weeks; we would need to continue without him.
- Matthew reiterated that we needed a subject matter expert on Warp gates. Anjali said Keith would represent the Warp gate Operations Unit in Qianfan's absence and the meeting could proceed as planned.
- Evelyn asked who Santi was and why he was needed. Matthew explained Santi would lead Obsidian's development efforts and run Warp gate diagnostics during the discussion.
- Evelyn demanded that clearance files from all Obsidian employees be sent to the Upsilon IX legal team. Matthew instead produced the files on his datapad. He reiterated their paperwork came from official channels but Evelyn said, "there are no official channels when you're floating in goddamn outer space."

[MB] – I'll ask project management about sterilizing the direct quotes.

- Matthew started to recap the agenda before Evelyn cut him off and said move on.

[MB] – "Stressed." Not cut off. Stay impartial.

II. Discussion

- Matthew asked Keith what he knew about the Upsilon IX Warp gate. Keith clarified he never actually operated the Warp gate. He explained that he was hired straight from Avalon University two months prior. He stressed he graduated summa cum laude.

[MB] – OK, you know what, forget the "stressed" comment.

- Matthew suggested postponing the meeting until Qianfan returned. Anjali said we were already a week behind schedule and Keith was more than qualified. Keith agreed.
- Matthew asked Keith to summarize his duties as an Assistant Warp gate

Operator. Keith said most days he just watched Qianfan press buttons when the Control Room received the signal that a voyage was inbound. They didn't even need to be in the Control Room for outbound voyages.

- Matthew asked Keith to clarify that last point. Keith explained that the Warp gate could open and close on its own so long as there was a pre-programmed departure time.
- Matthew asked Keith if Qianfan ever left his post. Evelyn told Matthew to stop auditing her employees.
- Matthew repeated his question. Keith said Qianfan would leave the Control Room to take smoke breaks.
- Matthew asked how often Qianfan snuck away for smoke breaks. Keith said upwards of ten times a day depending on the number of inbound voyages. Those were the only times he needed to be in the Control Room "pressing his magic buttons."

[MB] – Cut "magic."

- Anjali asked Matthew to kindly disregard Upsilon IX employee habits.
- Evelyn argued that almost everyone on the station took smoke breaks. She asked if that was a crime.
- Matthew clarified that smoking was legal but leaving a Warp gate unattended was, without question, a felony.
- Evelyn told us to show her the law they were breaking. I read Article IV of the Intergalactic Travel Manual (ITM): "Warp gate operators who leave the Gateway Terminal during active voyages will be subject to disciplinary action." I added that no one seemed to give a damn. Evelyn told me to "watch my filthy mouth."

[MB] – Which is why you should just keep quiet. For now, attach the ITM for reference.

- Matthew asked Keith if Qianfan left for a smoke break at the time of the incident. Evelyn told Keith he didn't need to answer that. Keith said Qianfan did leave, but it didn't make any difference; the Warp gates were so self-sufficient that Upsilon IX should just automate their jobs. Evelyn implied that the thought had crossed her mind.

[MB] – Unfortunately we can't publish implication. Cut.

- Matthew asked Anjali why we should trust Qianfan’s testimony from the previous meeting.
- Evelyn told Matthew to “stop acting like a space lawyer” and “do the damn job they paid for.”
[MB] – In space, no one can hear the irony.
- Anjali suggested revisiting this discussion upon completion of the Warpgate Reconstruction Project.
- Keith asked why Santi kept “fondling the machines.” Santi explained he was checking the Control Room dashboards for damage or tampering. Evelyn told him to stop.
- Santi completed his diagnostic scan; he found no structural integrity issues or evidence of sabotage. The Warpgate was in good condition and all Control Room dashboards passed user acceptance testing.
- Santi summarized: Upsilon IX equipment did not kill anyone.
- Matthew asked Santi to run more tests. Santi said there were no more tests to run. The results were, in his estimation, “pretty darn conclusive.”
- Evelyn started laughing. She said she “dodged a billion-dollar scam.”
- She asked Anjali why they needed to redesign a Warpgate that wasn’t broken.
- Matthew reminded her that Upsilon IX asked for Obsidian’s assistance by offering the contract.
- I chimed in that a dozen travelers were still dead.
[MB] – Thirteen according to the chain smokers.
- Anjali agreed that no one could use the Warpgate until we identified the root cause of the incident.
- Evelyn said they shouldn’t completely overhaul their system because of “a one-in-a-million fluke.” She added that the money from Obsidian’s contract could buy ten new Warpgates built by better engineers.
- Matthew said that Upsilon IX could not back out of the contract at this stage.
[MB] – Truthfully, I made that up. Everyone gets a freebie.
- Evelyn said, “Fuck the contract.”
- Keith asked if he could leave. So did Santi.

- Matthew asked for a meeting with Gemini Station to verify if the root cause came from Earth. Anjali agreed to schedule a call with Gemini Station’s Chief Warpgate Operator.
- Evelyn said she looked forward to “yeeting our contract out the airlock.”
- Matthew thanked everyone for their time and took an action item to investigate the Upsilon-Gemini Warpgate connection for anomalies.
- Anjali took an action item to schedule the next meeting.
- Evelyn took an action item to buy a celebratory cigar.
[MB] – Don’t add this to the action items tracker.
- The meeting ended an hour early.

Upsilon IX Warpgate Reconstruction Project (WRP)

Discovery Session 3

Date: July 16, 2062

Location: Upsilon IX Station – Gateway Terminal – Control Room

Attendees:

1. Anjali Acharya, Upsilon IX Station WRP Manager
2. Evelyn Bainbridge, Upsilon IX Station Supervisor
3. Matthew Blackburn, Obsidian Design Lead
4. Santiago Perez, Obsidian Development Lead
5. Grant Robinson, Gemini Station Chief Warpgate Operator
6. Samantha Woods, Obsidian Design Analyst

Facilitator: Matthew Blackburn

Scribe: Samantha Woods

I. Introductions

- Matthew kicked off the meeting by asking if all key participants from the Upsilon IX and Gemini teams were in attendance. Anjali confirmed Keith would not be joining the discussion. She also confirmed Qianfan had extended his PTO an extra month.
- Grant participated holographically, representing Gemini Station. He

expressed condolences for the lost voyagers. He said “the Warp gates had worked too well for too long.”

- Anjali thanked Grant for making time on such short notice.
- Evelyn asked what the weather was like on Earth. Grant said he didn't know; his team worked in an underground bunker. Evelyn suggested he take an action item to get some fresh air.
- Anjali reminded Grant that the meeting should remain confidential. Grant reminded Anjali that he worked in an underground bunker.
- Santi activated the Upsilon IX Warp gate at the start of the meeting in order to stress-test the portal. Evelyn told him to ask for approval before touching their machines.

II. Discussion

- Matthew asked Grant what he knew about the Upsilon-Gemini Warp gate connection. Grant said everything he knew came from a textbook: since the first successful warp occurred in 2051, millions of voyagers have relied on the Warp gates for interstellar journeys. He confirmed there had never been a reported incident until last month.
- Matthew asked if there was any significance to the word “reported” in that last statement. Anjali clarified that Grant didn't need to answer that. He didn't.
- Matthew asked if Gemini Warp gate ever malfunctioned. Grant said no.
- Matthew asked if Relay Team Omega ever appeared on Gemini Station's radar. Grant said no.
- Matthew asked for Grant's account of the incident.
 - Grant said he performed his daily Warp gate integrity checks the morning of the incident. The connection to Upsilon IX was exceptionally strong. The teleportation delay was consistently below two minutes.
 - I asked if Qianfan was throwing curveballs or sliders that morning. Grant confirmed Qianfan preferred a two-seam fastball. Matthew told me to knock it off.
 - Grant said he received the signal for the inbound voyage right on cue. He waited for the voyagers to appear on his radar but they never

did. Radio silence.

- Matthew asked if Grant thought to contact Upsilon IX or the authorities. Grant said Qianfan never answered him. He assumed the voyage had been cancelled but left the Gemini Station Warp gate open as a precaution.
- Matthew asked if Grant was in the Control Room at the time of the incident. Grant confirmed he never left until his shift ended.
- Matthew asked if Grant knew that Qianfan frequently left his post. Anjali clarified that Grant didn't need to answer that. He didn't.
- Grant said it was lucky that only ***eighteen*** voyagers went missing and not the five thousand they average per warp.
- Matthew asked him to repeat that. He did.
- Matthew asked if he was sure there were eighteen voyagers. He was positive.
- Grant said Relay Team Omega always came through the Warp gate arm in arm. He could recognize all their faces in a crowd.
- Matthew asked me to bold, italicize, and underline “eighteen.” I told him that would look awful in the minutes but did it anyway.
- Matthew counted to eighteen with his fingers.
- Evelyn told him to “show some goddamn respect for the dead.”
- Anjali said no one had been confirmed dead and everyone should stop referring to the voyagers as dead.
- Matthew corrected her. That morning, the government declared the thirteen missing voyagers dead.
- Matthew counted to thirteen with his fingers.
- Evelyn said something I don't want to write here.
- Anjali told everyone to take a breath. She said we were not having a productive conversation.
- Matthew asked how the conversation could be productive if the two stations couldn't even agree on a body count.
- Evelyn suggested the whole incident was staged. Grant denied her accusation.
- Matthew reminded everyone that neither station found evidence of

- damage or tampering, so one of them must have lied. Grant, Anjali, and Evelyn all denied the accusation with varying degrees of professionalism.
- Anjali suggested that Santi run more diagnostics on Gemini Station's machinery.
 - Grant said he would not submit to an investigation without a warrant. He said it was our problem to fix.
 - Matthew asked Evelyn for permission to test the Warpgate.
 - Evelyn said absolutely, as long as he jumped straight in and never came back.
 - I snapped. I said some things that, on any other day, would have killed my career.
 - Matthew gave Evelyn an action item to go fuck herself.
 - Evelyn stood with difficulty. She told him to speak up.
 - Matthew clarified that Evelyn should "stick her decomposing ass up to the Warpgate" and "get fucked across the goddamn solar system."
 - Grant asked if he could disconnect from the call. Anjali said yes; Matthew said no.
 - Anjali promised to terminate Obsidian's contract after the meeting.
 - Matthew asked Grant if he remembered a voyager with strawberry blonde hair and a scar above her eyebrow.
 - Evelyn demanded that Matthew "get the fuck out of the Control Room."
 - Matthew asked Evelyn if she could name any of the thirteen or eighteen voyagers.
 - Evelyn stressed that Matthew needed to "get the fuck out of the Control Room."
 - Matthew said he could name one dead voyager: Alice Goodman.
 - Matthew clarified that Alice was his sister.
 - Evelyn said, "Good goddamn riddance if she was anything like her shithead brother."
 - Matthew asked Grant to activate the Gemini Warpgate. Grant refused.
 - Anjali said she would call security. Evelyn said she'd "beat his ass herself."
 - Matthew ran outside the Control Room into the Gateway Terminal. He ran towards the Upsilon IX Warpgate.

- Anjali called security. Evelyn hobbled after him.
- Grant warned Matthew that he would not open the Gemini Warpgate. There would be no Warpgate in the galaxy to receive him. But Matthew was already sprinting towards the portal.
- Anjali ordered Santi to deactivate the Warpgate before Matthew jumped through. Santi reminded her that our contract had just been terminated.
- Matthew stopped at the edge of the portal, turned back, and thanked me and Santi. I still don't know what for.
- Neither of us could think of a single thing to say.
- Matthew took an action item to buy us a beer back on Earth.
- Then he jumped through the Warpgate.
- Anjali ordered Grant to open the Gemini Warpgate. Grant disconnected from the call.
- Evelyn stood in front of the portal. She looked mesmerized by the swirling blue.
- The rest of us watched Matthew's blip glide across the galaxy radar.
- Anjali said Grant had blocked her calls. Santi said it was already too late.
- We waited for Matthew to reappear on the other side. On Earth.
- He never did.

Upsilon IX Warpgate Reconstruction Project (WRP) Demonstration

Date: July 30, 2062

Location: Upsilon IX Station – Gateway Terminal – Control Room

Attendees:

1. Anjali Acharya, Upsilon IX Station WRP Manager
2. Evelyn Bainbridge, Upsilon IX Station Supervisor
3. Santiago Perez, Obsidian Development Lead
4. Samantha Woods, Obsidian Interim Design Lead

Facilitator: Samantha Woods

Scribe: Santiago Perez

[SW] – Thanks for filling in Santi.

I. Introductions

- Sam asked if we had everybody and Anjali said yep and asked why an engineer (me) was taking minutes, so Sam told her that the team had shrunk in the last week which wasn't a complete lie.

[SW] – Whoa there. Rein in the run-on sentences. Periods won't kill you.

- Evelyn asked if there had been any news on Matthew and Sam told everyone that she hadn't heard anything but if nothing changed by EOD then the government planned on declaring him dead.
- Sam thanked Anjali for not cutting our contract and letting me build the new Warpgate for them, but Anjali just did some nervous nods. I guess they didn't trust me.

[SW] – Stick to what they said and did. Stay impartial.

- Sam asked if we were ready to get the demo going and Anjali said yes. Evelyn said she was ready to be blown away. She smelled like a hookah bar and her hands twitched the whole meeting.

[SW] – Cut.

- Sam said we hoped Upsilon IX would approve the new Warpgate at the end of the meeting. I prayed to Space Jesus that the Warpgate wouldn't kill anyone else.

[SW] – :/

II. Demonstration

- Sam showed off the new Warpgate and explained that it would function identically to the original.
- Evelyn asked what they had just spent all their money on.
- Sam reminded her that they didn't ask for any new features during the discovery sessions.
- Evelyn reminded her that they didn't find anything wrong with the original either.
- Sam asked if she could continue with the demo and no one said anything so she did.
- She explained that even though the new Warpgate was a one-to-one replica of the original, there was less risk of hacking or system failure. We

followed industry best practices when developing the machines. Evelyn whistled and said, "Gee whiz, inDuSTry bEst PracTices."

[SW] – I love you but please cut.

- Sam said the improvements were clear: better security, modern equipment, no more deaths.
- Anjali asked me not to include the part about the deaths. I decided to include the part about the deaths.

[SW] – Good.

- Evelyn asked how we could prove that the new Warpgate worked any better than the old one considering we hadn't even figured out what shit the bed the first time.

[SW] – Quotes here. And wherever else she curses.

- Sam said something about our team having the best engineers in the galaxy. Before I could point out that I was the only engineer left on the team Evelyn laughed so hard that you could see her gross neck veins. It was pretty cringe but what else could Sam say?

[SW] – I really don't know.

- Anjali said at the very least they should make sure the new Warpgate activated properly before trying the connection with Earth. Grant still wasn't returning her calls.
- Sam agreed and pressed the buttons I taught her to press and the Warpgate turned on.
- The portal appeared green instead of blue but otherwise looked fine.
- Evelyn said they just spent a billion dollars on a color change, what a return on investment.
- While she said that a flurry of garbage cubes floated past the Control Room windows and I thought to myself how easy it would have been to eject her too.

[SW] – As if we need more lawsuits. Cut.

- Sam said at the end of the day the new Warpgate would save lives and that was the whole point of this project. Anjali agreed and thanked us for our work.
- But then Evelyn asked for more proof.

- Sam said once preliminary tests were complete we would need to wait for volunteers to confirm the Warpgate worked on human travelers.
- Evelyn said she would not send any voyagers from her team.
- Sam said Qianfan should bring his baseball glove when he returned from PTO.
- Evelyn said the whole thing was our mess and if anyone had to test the Warpgate, it should be one of us.
- Sam looked at me and I shrugged because I sure as hell didn't think we were contractually obligated to kill ourselves.
- Anjali said the Warpgate activation was enough for the demo and that she would find another relay team.
- Evelyn said there was no point in risking lives on something that was still broken. She told Anjali to hold Grant's cowardly bunker ass to the fire and test the Warpgate connection that very minute. She said she was tired of empty promises and broken shit.
- No one said anything for what felt like forever.
- Then just as Anjali was about to end the meeting, Evelyn told me to step aside and that she was the only person on the entire station who had a pair.
- Anjali said she was being ridiculous: she didn't have the right equipment, the Warpgate had not been tested, and no one on Earth would help them.
- I summarized: it would be Warpgate suicide.
- Anjali then said that Upsilon IX would not be liable for medical expenses and some other desperate legal horseshit. But all Evelyn had to say was that if a trust fund baby in a sweater vest could do it, she could too.
[SW] – Just call him Matthew.
- Anjali threatened to call security again but Evelyn was already booking it towards the portal. She ran like a giraffe with a hernia but made surprisingly good time.
- Sam told Anjali to call Grant one more time to open the Warpgate on Earth but Anjali said that Gemini Station was offline and none of her messages were delivered.
- Evelyn kept racing across the Gateway Terminal. She laughed like a fiend.

- Anjali told Sam to shut the Warpgate down.
- Sam tried her best but the buttons were unresponsive.
[SW] – You don't need to lie for me.
- Evelyn jumped headfirst through the Warpgate.
- Anjali told us to track her on the radar while she sent an SOS to Gemini.
- Sam scared me when she slumped onto the floor shaking with her head in her hands.
- Anjali watched her SOS land unread in Grant's inbox.
- I watched Evelyn's blip fly across the radar.
- Sam watched us both.
- We were all watching, as if that changed things.
- Sam said it wasn't her fault (true).
- Sam said she only ever tried her best (also true).
[SW] – Thank you.
- Evelyn's blip reached Earth's atmosphere.
- She plummeted towards the surface.
- She paused on a cloud, hovered over a New York skyscraper, like she was taking in the view.
[SW] – The Chrysler Building.
- And vanished.





R MAC JONES

There Will Always Be the Laundry

A SUITE BY ELIZABETH MASON

THERE WILL ALWAYS BE THE LAUNDRY

Normal Cycle, Deep Clean, Bedding, Speed Wash, Antibacterial, Speed Dry, Towels, Steam Fresh. Even if I finished all of our laundry in one day: darks, whites, towels, bedding, our son's clothes, sheets from the guest bed—there'd be our current outfits.

I imagine stripping down to nothing, walking around this house, the three of us, stark as the borders of a country drawn on a two-dimensional map. Your legs in summer as pale as paper, my excisional biopsy scars like a cartographic key: *No cancer was found here.*

No. We couldn't walk around this house without covering up. We'd always be hiding from each other. Embassies would threaten to relocate. And anyway, there'd be bath mats to wash, and the blankets we snuggle up in reading and watching TV, pillows to be sanitized, all sorts of small

messes to pick up and try to set right. Best to keep our clothes on, our laundry baskets piled high. Even when our son goes to college, there will be my husband's clothes and mine and the towels, sheets, bath mats, blankets, the washer always hungry, lid open, unhinged, just begging to be stuffed.

PERMANENT PRESS

There is an art to bending
fabric into perfect squares.
It's origami. It's precision:
sleeves tucked into angles,

sheets conjured into corners.
It's a magic trick, a covert
operation, a riddle to solve.
My mom knows the secret,

the witchcraft of charming
a humble t-shirt into a small
envelope of cotton, but never
offered to teach me. Instead,

she told me to read. Told me
to try harder at calculus,
at Latin, at being quiet. I did
not learn, from her, to fold

clothes. Instead, I learned to fold
into myself. I learned to contort
and bend and to come up short.
My mom can be hard. Often,

she is right. There is so much
between us. And there will always
be the laundry. You don't believe
me? Open my drawers. Go on.

Tell me that I didn't teach myself
something useful. Go on: marvel
at all of those t-shirts. Just look
at all of those perfect squares.

AIR DRY

There's a lady selling paintings of the present.
I walk up to her just as she's selling a picture of today
to the woman in front of me.
I ask for one too.
She says, *I'm sorry; I just sold my last one.*
I can sell you the one I made yesterday.
I say, *But, I wanted to remember today.*

She tells me that I could come back tomorrow.
I ask, *How can you be sure*
that you'll still have a new painting tomorrow?
She says, *These days,*
who can be sure of anything?

But, if I show up tomorrow, I say, and there's no new painting,
where does that leave me?
I can sell you the picture of two days ago,
she says, pointing to yesterday.
I'm an artist.
I can't predict the future.
I may not paint anything.
Do you know what you're doing tomorrow?

I stare at her.
Well, yes, I say.
There will always be the laundry.
So, she asks if it will last all day,

if I'll always have enough for everyone.
I want to quibble.
Yes, I start to roll my eyes,
There's an endless supply.

But, then I remember the feel of clothes straight from the dryer,
the way the warmth hugs you back,
and how it won't last.
Gone by the time I hang clothes in a closet,
tuck them in a drawer.
How I'm the lucky one who gets to feel the present
as I fold. How my whole family walks around,
stuck, wearing yesterday's clothes.

BEDDING (WASH CYCLE)

I know you've thrown up the second I open the door to your room. I smell it before I see it: sour. I shake you awake and your dad and I begin the clean-up dance we've been rehearsing at least once a week for about a year. Your doctor says that you've got a sensitive gag reflex; now that you're not throwing up during the day, you're throwing up at night. Some nights, we know before we go to sleep and I wake you up, strip the bed, undo your dirty clothes and tie everything into a giant knot. Your dad gives you a shower and though we've scooped you out of your dreams, you don't even cry. You just stare at us, confused, studying the mess on your arms. We're confused too. How does this end? I make up your bed, kiss your clean hair and help you dress. Daddy reads you a story and meets me in the laundry room, where I'm spraying down your sheets, pjs, pillowcases, comforter, sometimes stuffed animals, sometimes whole pillows. The doctor says that this is a *laundry problem, not a health problem*. I know that there will always be the laundry, but all this mess is becoming a problem, a mental health crisis for me. Five years is a long time to love someone who throws up almost every day. Sometimes, you open the door to our bedroom in the morning, say, *Mommy, I throwed up*. Some mornings, we ask you

if you remember throwing up and you don't. We point out the different sheets and pillowcases, we tell you that you're lucky you're so cute. We pull you into our arms, snuggle you tight, and wonder if your room will always smell, wonder what we're doing wrong, wonder if we'll ever get it right. We do love you, but we also wonder if the sheets came clean.

BEDDING (DRY CYCLE)

One night when we crawled in,
you mentioned how nice it is to tuck
into a made bed. I've straightened our bed
every day since. I love that feeling too.
The way the sheets are cold at first, protected
by all those blankets, the way everything is set
right, the way all the layers come down hard
at first. It's like being smothered in the best way,
weighted, held. A momentary comfort before drifting off.
It is one of the many certainties of our marriage.

I will always make the bed.
Even if you say nothing, you will always
appreciate the feel of entering the cocoon
in which the two of us become, together,
something beautiful. Surprising.
On a Sunday morning, there will always be
the laundry and when it's done, I will make
up our bed with fresh sheets, pull the blankets
into precise corners, fluff the pillows,
line everything up just so.

You will know that it is an invitation.
You will know that I am asking you
to reach for me after the initial comfort
of falling into bed wears thin.
You will know that my arms will reach
for you too. In a marriage, so many things
are predictable. It doesn't mean they're boring.
Clean towels. Clean sheets. They are love letters.
Promises. We leave everything from the outside
world when it's just the two of us, here.
I feel young when you touch me.

SPEED WASH

The to-do list is starting to pile up like dirty laundry. If I crammed all of the things I need to do into a laundry basket, they wouldn't fit. Plus, there are the dishes, the breakfasts to make, the lunches to pack, the dinners to coax together after exhausting days. I start wondering if I can do things faster, multitask, be in two places at once. I've been eating my breakfasts in the car on my way to work, lunches in the car on the way home. If I leave the door unlocked, a snack on the kitchen counter, is it ok if I'm not there to greet my son when he gets off the bus so that I'm free to be on a Zoom with the search committee? I bargain with myself: I'll call references from the road. I'll start recommendation letters while students are journaling. I'll grade essays with dinner on the stove, grade journals as I listen in to Faculty Assembly. I can put off the laundry until the weekend or try the Speed Wash cycle, see if that cuts back on the time it takes to keep order. After all, there will always be the laundry. I can cry while I'm walking on the treadmill, the TV blaring in the basement so that no one sees

or hears me and I know that they don't hear me, because if they did, they would know I need to put something down. They would see that I can't keep rushing at this speed. They would understand that I do laundry, because every week, it gets done, the baskets filling up again, but rarely spilling over. It's too much. I am racing. The weeks and days, minutes click by too fast. There's never enough time. Never enough of me to go around. I need baskets to hold all of the other tasks, to keep them self-contained, organized by color. I need a basket I can climb into when I am overflowing, a basin to hide in when I cannot hear, *Hey, Mom* one more time. I imagine my own body as laundry. I climb in to the washer. Close the lid and my eyes. I turn my body into laundry. Cover my ears. The water rushes over me, hot and loud. I turn my body into laundry. Steam rises as the basin spins and speeds. I turn my body into laundry. finally drown out the list of things I simply do not have the patience or the will to still do.



KELLY EDEN

Forgotten

BY SHIRLEY DEES

The hospital bracelet is still wrapped around my wrist, the hair on my arm rubbed off from glue and tape to keep an assortment of IVs jabbed into my skin. Sharon, my younger sister and the only family I have left, is driving me to her home in Guttenberg, Iowa, where I will continue my recovery from “the accident.”

“How long was I out again?” I ask for the hundredth time. A couple of weeks ago, I woke up staring into a pair of fluorescent lights in a small hospital room and was told it wasn’t the year 2009 anymore. A flood of information has been drowning me ever since. Sharon’s been throwing out buoys, guiding me through the muddling waters and answering my dizzying questions. It’s hard to stay afloat when you’re time traveling.

Sharon waves her jeweled hand, pushing her shoulder-length blonde hair behind her ears, but doesn’t look at me. She’s concentrating on the road.

“Just a couple of days,” she says. The stitches in my scalp start to itch. There’s only six. *Laceration*. That’s the word they use to describe my head wound. My brain scans are clean, but yet I can’t remember the last seven years. I suspect the stitches are remnants of the memories yanked from my head. I caress the tops of my fingers, searching for the wedding ring I have no memory of giving up.

“I want to see Mark,” I say. My husband was the first person I asked for when I woke up at the hospital, but he wasn’t there. This question sparked a fury of confusion. Nurses pushed call buttons. Doctors came in and out, asking my name, the date, and where I lived. Almost everything I said was incorrect. Eventually, Sharon came into my hospital room followed by

specialists from the neurology department. She sat in the chair next to my bed and took my hand dressed in tubes.

“Emily,” she began. “You and Mark divorced four years ago.”

I crashed my car and fell asleep and woke up in a world of wrong.

Sharon grips the steering wheel. “Middle of December and no snow yet,” she says. I appreciate her for trying to comment on a phenomenon that would have elicited much more surprise from any regular Midwest farmer’s daughter, but I couldn’t be that person. I don’t blame her for not understanding what it’s like to go to bed a fresh 29-year-old woman only to wake up six years deep into your thirties. They don’t make an eye cream strong enough for this travesty. I look at my hands again. There’s not even a tan-line from where my wedding ring used to be.

“I want to see Mark,” I say again. Sharon doesn’t even respond this time.

The road we’re on is curvy and covered with trees, but there’s still enough light coming through the windshield that I can see the thoughts in Sharon’s eyes. It’s different from what I remember about her. Even when we were kids our personalities were worlds apart. We didn’t get along, and brain damage or not, these memories are strewn across her face. I scan her hands, but the hodgepodge of jewelry stacked one on top of the other on her fingers is making me carsick. I lean back in the passenger seat and stare out the window as the hills of northeastern Iowa zip past. A car crash could never make me forget this place. Iowa never fucking changes.

“Was my 30th birthday fun, at least?” I’d been popping off random questions for days because everything after my 29th year is a dark space in my memories. Sharon is a champion. She takes them all in stride.

“I don’t know.” She is gentle in this reply, and pauses before turning into the driveway of her home. “I wasn’t there.”

Of course, she wouldn’t have been there. Sharon and I floated away from each other when I left home for the University of Iowa. In those days, I cared about my family’s whereabouts as much as I cared about abandoned pennies on a sidewalk. But Sharon was persistent. My annoyance with her reached critical mass on my 21st birthday when I had one too many Jäger-bombs and accused her of being a know-nothing lesbian when she tried to

tell me Mark was screwing other women behind my back. The night ended with me crying on the steps of my sorority house and Sharon driving off in a screeching Honda Civic. I never heard or saw much of her after that. I only knew about her current affairs from the fleeting phone conversations my mother forced on me twice a month, but after mom died and dad followed a year later, I made Sharon absent in all matters of my life.

Sharon throws her car in park and cuts the engine, but she doesn’t get out. Her eyes pierce through the driver’s side window and follow the path up to the front steps. She sighs before turning to me.

“Are you okay?” She asks. Vertigo and confusion are causing my stomach to flutter. The past is a salve my brain craves.

“No,” I say. My fingers touch my stitches again. Permanently scarred. Permanently changed. I wonder if I’ll ever be okay.

Sharon helps me out of the car. My pants are loose and drag on the asphalt and my sagging skin is sliced by the winter air. Sharon places her hand on my back and helps me up the steps onto the porch. I am weaker and skinnier than I remember. My bones are as unfamiliar to me as the foundation of the house I am about to enter. I’ve been reverted to a blank and frigid reality.

As soon as I set my foot inside the back door, my senses are insulted. The living room is filled by small couches stitched in vibrant colors so bright they give me a headache, accompanied by the aromas of essential oils and apple blossom candles. I walk in and sit on the Technicolor couch.

“I think I’m going to need a minute,” I say, a little embarrassed.

“Of course,” Sharon is allowed to be confident and continues into the kitchen. It must be nice to live in a world where your memories belong.

Sharon is putting something on the stove. Probably that godforsaken tea she was always making when we were teenagers, but I won’t complain. She’s trying to be helpful. She won’t let me refuse it anyway and we’ll re-enact a scene from our childhood. I’ll say no and she’ll give me some earthy, bullshit reason it’s the best thing for me in this exact second. I’ll deny it, and we’ll jump into a series of back-and-forth arguments that circle around for minutes until I agree to drink the stupid tea. Secretly though,

today I'm hoping she'll infuse it with some of her herbs that no amount of explanation or labeling will ever convince my eyes and nose are anything but marijuana, and maybe they'll help me to remember again. Remember where I live, where my husband went, and then I can pack my shit and leave.

There are pictures all around me. On the mantle above the fireplace, on the cubbies surrounding the television, pasted to the wall. Pictures of people I recognize—my parents and Sharon—and then pictures of someone I don't—a woman. I wonder if I have the strength to ask who she is. Sharon walks in later with a tray of tiny sandwiches, a saucer of white pills, and sure enough, tea.

"The doctors said your appetite will lag, but you should eat small amounts here and there." She puts everything on the glass coffee table and sits across from me in a love seat that looks like it's been covered in vomit sponsored by Crayola. I grab a sandwich, picking at the crust. Turkey. Do I like turkey in my new future?

"Your furniture is...interesting," I am not really sure what I'm trying to say.

Sharon flashes a half smile. "Believe it or not, you helped pick it out."

I gag on the sandwich. "I did not!"

"I inherited mom's rusty brown couches, and they worked for a while, but it was your idea to start fresh and get the most non-mom looking furniture ever to be manufactured."

I sip on the tea. It's actually really good. "That sounds nothing like me." My Chicago apartment is a replica of Pottery Barn and Pier 1 catalogs, all shaded in hues of grays and whites.

Sharon doesn't know how to respond to this. "I thought about moving them when they gave me your discharge date. You know, temporarily. I was told it was important you take things slow, and I worried the furniture would be too much, but I realized I can't hide everything, and you'll never know what it was like before...." And she lets the end of that sentence fall off the face of the earth.

I finish my sandwich. "You don't have a Christmas tree?"

"We usually wait until the middle of December."

"We?"

"You and me."

A weight begins to build on my head. My eyebrows curl. Some pieces are falling together, and I can see the way Sharon is looking at me. We are friends now, in the future.

"I live here." This is not a question and it pours out of me like sludge. Sharon nods. So much for my Chicago apartment. "For how long?"

"The past four years." Sharon is running a finger around the lip of her tea mug. "After you left Mark." The weight on my head has transformed into an anvil and the stitches in my scalp start to burn. I glance at the white pills on the tray and pick them up in a swift movement and gobble them down like candy. I long for sleep. Real sleep. Sharon understands. She stands up, ready to chaperone the journey to my bedroom. She follows me and watches as I climb the stairs, change my clothes, and climb into bed.

"I know you're eager to remember," she says, hovering in my doorway. "Just know I love you." The door closes with a click.

I bury my face in the pillows, sheets, and comforter, inhaling their scents, trying to jar a memory. I've lived here for four years and I don't recognize a thing. Not of the room. Not of my clothes. Not of myself.

I left Mark. It was my decision, Sharon explained, though none of it made sense because she wouldn't tell me the reason why. She only said my motives were valid. I couldn't believe this. Not every marriage is perfect, sure, and Mark and I had our issues, but we were happy. His absence at the hospital was a gaping hole I couldn't fill. Was he not concerned about my accident? Does he even know? What justification did I have four years ago to leave the man I love?

I was eighteen when we got together. Mark was a year older, wiser, and damn good looking. He broke my cherry in the dark of my childhood bedroom, my parents asleep and unaware in their room downstairs. I followed him to college and thus began Sharon's disapproval of not only my lifestyle choices, but my taste in men and the final dagger in our increasingly opposing relationship. Two years after graduation, I followed

him to Chicago where we both landed big-time jobs. We made buckets of money and rented an expensive loft in downtown. We eloped and celebrated our one-year wedding anniversary on the roof of our apartment building.

Then all of the lights went out, and I woke up lying in a hospital bed in Guttenberg, Iowa all alone.

The next morning, I open my fluffy eyes. The down comforter is like a cloud resting on my body, matching the foggy feeling in my head. The pills worked and the pain is subtle.

My door is cracked open. Sharon must have checked in on me sometime during the night. I push away the blanket of clouds and creep into the hallway, turning toward the bedroom at the end. Sharon's voice carries upstairs in whispers. "The doctors seem pretty convinced it'll come back eventually, and I'm scared, Ally. What am I supposed to do if...when she—"

My hand hits the doorknob and I give it a twist, but I am denied.

Locked.

"Sharon?" I call downstairs when I realize her voice is coming from the kitchen.

Her feet pound on the stairs and the phone beeps as her thumb hammers the off button. Her face is white and panicked. "Emily, good morning. Did you sleep all right? Did the medicine help?"

"Why's this room locked?"

"Oh," she says, looking at the door. She wraps her arms around her chest and squeezes tightly with her hands. "Just a room full of stuff." She says this like it's supposed to answer all of my questions. "Come on, let's get some coffee and breakfast." She reaches out a hand, ready to lead me to the kitchen like the delicate angel I am. I follow, because what else can I do? I am an alien in my own universe.

"Who is Ally?" We make a stop in my room and Sharon pulls out a robe from the closet. I don't recognize it, but I put it on anyway.

"Um...Allyson. She is...well, she's my wife."

I wonder if I am to be surprised by this information like I was supposed to be when she said it hadn't snowed yet. I can't feign a reaction. I don't

have the energy.

"Wait, do you remember her?" she asks. I shake my head. "Sorry, I didn't mean to pressure you or anything, you just seemed—"

"You dabbled in same-sex relationships before I stopped remembering." I realize my tone comes off as offensive. "Wait, that's not—" I have an urge to apologize but everything jumbles like a jigsaw puzzle crashing to the floor.

"Don't," Sharon interrupts, holding up a hand. We are walking again. "That's pretty accurate for your timeline. *Dabble* is probably the best word for it."

I remember being ugly to my sister about her sexuality and believing I was right in my opinion, but I have no memory of the moment when those feelings turned into what I feel now. It's weird to have remorse and not remember why.

"I don't think that way anymore." I say this with certainty. It's the most confident I've felt since the hospital and I want Sharon to believe this, to understand the ways I've changed even though I don't know how or when.

"I know, Emily," she says, pausing outside the kitchen entrance. She gives me a small smile. "This was something we dealt with years ago. No need to re-hash it, but I know."

A tremendous quiver of relief sweeps across me before frustration sneaks its way back in. I am happy these seemingly tough moments of our life don't have to be wrestled with for a second time, saving time and energy, but I am jealous of my sister's ability to know everything about the seven years that seem to be the most important of my life, and me nothing.

"I don't remember you having steady relationships before, men or women," I say.

"Ally is different," she says. I want to scream at the mention of that word. Everything is *different*.

"So, I live here, with you and Allyson...your wife." Sharon brings me a cup of hot coffee before I can sit down at the table. I take a sip. Oh, hell yes, I remember coffee. "Do I like her?"

She smiles. "Actually, you two are pretty much best friends." She tells

me how they met, how Allyson changed her life and got her to settle down. How nothing ever really made sense before. The love in her heart drips on her words.

I was in their wedding. I made a toast in place of our parents. Allyson and I go shopping a lot. She thought the couches were an amazing idea. She cooks. She plays music. She is supportive and brought me in with open arms four years ago when I left Mark. It was Allyson who tied me and my sister back together.

“Honestly, sometimes I think she may be in love with you more than me,” Sharon quips, ending a story about some light trouble Allyson and I got into a year back.

“Not possible. Not with the way you talk about her,” I say. Sharon smiles, and I think a part of my new personality pokes through and this has made her happy. “Where is she right now?” Sharon’s smile fades. She moves her eyes off me and clears her throat, hesitating.

“At her mother’s. When you woke up at the hospital and it was obvious Ally’s place in your memory was part of the stuff that went missing, she thought it’d be easier for your return home if she ducked out for a while. You know, to ease you back into things.”

I nod and sip more of my coffee. Returning to normal won’t be easy. That’s what all of the doctors warned me about at the hospital as I prepared to leave. No shit it wouldn’t be easy. In fact, it was downright exhausting. I couldn’t turn on the TV in my hospital room without being sent into a panic about all that had changed. Psychiatrists frequented my bedside. I asked hundreds of questions, pointed out scars, cried. How did the accident happen? Was anyone else hurt? The doctors kept on with their maddening, vague answers. My car was the only one involved. I swerved to avoid a deer, crashing my Kia Sportage into a ditch and totaling it. Sharon and the doctors held conferences outside my door. They treated me like I couldn’t be trusted with my own memories. My body, my marriage, my family. Nothing looked the same and it was painful to accept. No Hollywood movie ever made time travel out to be the bitch it really is.

Sharon and I greet silence in the kitchen like a welcomed friend. She

dices fruit on a plate and my nose wrinkles. Without spotting my disdain, she wordlessly pulls out a bowl and fills it with oatmeal that was pre-cooked on the stove. Before she places it in front of me, she hits it with a touch of brown sugar. She eats the fruit and makes tea for one. She knows me better than I know myself.

“Is there anything you’d like to do today?” She asks, interrupting the hush of our dizzying, awkward reality.

“Well,” I say, swirling the spoon in the oatmeal. I move my eyes into the living room. “If it really is the middle of December, then I guess we should get a Christmas tree, maybe? If that’s what we do.”

“We don’t have to, if you don’t want.” She is eager to protect me.

“I think I should get back to the way things were before the accident. Maybe it’ll help me remember.” Life needs one of those highlight reels they show before drama television series.

Sharon is running her fingers around her mug again. “I don’t know, Em. The doctors don’t want you to push yourself too fast. And to be frank, I don’t want you to, either. Your body and mind went through a lot in the crash.”

“I hate being confused all the time, Sharon. You have no idea what this is like. I don’t recognize anything. You don’t even recognize me.”

“That’s not all true. I do recognize you... it’s just... sometimes the older version of you pokes through.”

“You hated that version.”

“You grew to hate it, too.”

“What if I can only remember the old me?”

Sharon’s finger stops on the rim of the mug, and she looks down into her lukewarm beverage for a second before lifting it to her lips and draining the rest of her tea. “You won’t,” and her voice is somber. “Come on,” she is sighing now. “Let’s go see about a tree.”

Sharon drives to the nursery as I’m not allowed. I don’t know why. They could cut out half my brain and I still don’t think I’d forget how to drive. *Protocol*. Another hospital word I married into. My life was filled with new rules and people and places. Their residency status was a lingering

question. I wanted to trade out the temporary for the permanent, but others, especially Sharon, didn't seem as eager for this shift. All of this only made me dig deeper and long harder for a return to my normal self. To my memories.

We pick out a noble fir. Sharon says making the switch from an artificial, pre-lit Christmas tree to a real one was all my idea about two years ago. I bought all the lights and ornaments and then Sharon, Allyson, and myself decorated the tree from top to bottom until there weren't any naked boughs left, all while sipping on hot cocoa and listening to Nat King Cole and Bing Crosby. We enjoyed it so much it became a tradition.

"Will Allyson be upset we're doing this without her?" I ask.

"She has her mother's tree to decorate. She'll be fine," Sharon answers, failing to hide the lie. I want to tell her that I'm okay, that Allyson can come over, but then I remember that she wouldn't be a visitor. She lives here. It's her home. She and my sister have their own routines. They share a bed. They have an entire life I'm told I'm a part of, but I only feel like an intrusion. The only life I know and want doesn't exist anymore.

We decorate. Sharon insists she be the only one to retrieve the boxes of ornaments and lights from the basement. She doesn't want me to do any lifting. I turn on the radio and try to find Bing Crosby's voice out of obligation. After minutes of searching, Sharon hands me an object she assures me is the new Apple iPhone and a portable speaker that will play music from an app she has installed on the phone. Instrumental versions of "Carol of the Bells", "Adeste Fideles", and "O Holy Night" fill the room after she gets everything connected. The strings on the violins are smooth and the piano keys are like bells, hitting my ears in soft tones. Sharon makes cocoa. I want whipped cream on mine instead of marshmallows. It's warm and sweet. The steam hits my nose and eases the ache in my head. Lights are plugged in and the entire room is illuminated in the glowing amber of the holiday. My insides are quiet, my confusion calm. I am laughing at my sister as she tells a funny story. I don't have to keep repeating to myself that all of this is real.

"Is it like this, every year?" I ask. I am on the couch, staring at our

beautiful noble fir.

"Is what?"

"The way this feels. Or is this new?"

Sharon is looking at the tree with me. "It's not all new." She is still careful in the way she answers me. "But, parts of it are," she says, and turns away from me. I think it's probably because Allyson is missing.

"She should be here, too," I say. Sharon whips her head toward me. "Allyson," I continue, "she can come back. I don't think it would be too much. She's your wife. She should be home. Clearly you miss her to death."

"Oh," Sharon lets out a breath and turns back toward the tree. "She'll come back eventually."

"Yes, but she doesn't have to wait," I argue, but Sharon doesn't respond. "Just...wanted to let you know." My confusion is creeping back in, my head returning to a throb.

"Thanks."

And that was the end of that. I gobble more pills. I fall asleep confused, once again.

Sharon and I find a routine over the next two days. We eat breakfast (as I now remember the way I like to make my own oatmeal), run an errand or two, watch a holiday movie on the Hallmark Channel (Sharon says I enjoy them), eat a light lunch, run more errands, eat dinner, drink cocoa and listen to Christmas music, and then guzzle white pills and fall asleep. Despite my bringing it up numerous times, Allyson doesn't come home. Sharon won't give me a reason why, other than she doesn't want to move too fast. That's fine, she has her secrets, and I have mine. Every afternoon, I work on my memory, and I've started to figure some things out.

They aren't major things, and since I'm not talking to Sharon about it, I have no way of knowing if any of them are actual memories or just make-believe. But there's a certain comfort and relief I experience when I think of them that assures me they aren't fake. First, I go back to my last vivid moment: on the roof with Mark in Chicago, champagne bottle two-thirds empty, glasses tipped over on the table. We're screwing around, a steel pole

jammed into the door so no one else in the high-rise will ruin our night. I didn't always remember how much champagne we'd drunk, or the steel pole against the door, but I do now. I try to move my mind like a movie camera, forcing it to pan to the next scene. It's not as smooth as I'd like it to be, but it's working in its own way. I've received flashes of new moments mixed in with old ones. It's very strange to decipher which memories are old that I've always remembered, and which are new that I used to remember.

These bursts of information aren't enough for me to get any real answers; Mark and I cooking in the Chicago apartment, Mark and I yelling, Mark and I making love on the couch. I see Chicago lights and Iowa cornfields, hear Sharon laughing, myself crying. Each time I remember something new, I tear off tiny pieces of bread and leave them all over the damn place like a modern-day Hansel and Gretel so I don't get lost again.

One morning, I wake and find Sharon still hasn't hung the stockings on the mantle. She probably just forgot in this crazy, maddening new world we've been living in. But, it's approaching late December. Stockings are pretty much mandatory at this point. I walk down into the kitchen to have breakfast to ask if we can bring them out, but Sharon is running around in an irate state.

"Hey, what's the deal?" I ask.

"Of all the stupid days!" She is flustered and has already made a pot of coffee and drank half its contents. I scratch my chin. Sharon doesn't drink coffee.

"Everything all right?"

She hears me for the first time and turns to me. "Emily, Jesus Christ. I'm so sorry. It's a work thing. Worst timing it could be all year, but go figure. Christmas Eve and shit hits the fan." A few strands of her blonde hair fall from the bun she wrestled it into. "They need me to come in. I tried telling them off. I don't want to leave you alone."

"Don't be ridiculous, Sharon." It's my turn to wave my hands at her. "I'm a twenty—I mean thirty-six-year-old woman. I can manage on my own."

Sharon studies my face. I do my best to look confident. "Emily, no...I'm not sure."

"I am," I say, and pour myself the remaining drips of coffee from the steaming pot. "Really, my head is fine. I have no plans to go anywhere. I'll watch Hallmark movies. It's okay."

Sharon drums her fingers against the face of her cell phone. She checks the time. "One hour. Two, tops. Would that be okay?"

"Of course. You have a job, and clearly there are fires to put out. Go do your thing."

"You'll call me if you don't feel well?"

"On that slab of glass you call a phone?"

"I mean it. I'm frazzled this morning but you're a priority to me."

These words freeze me in place. The letters, vowels, and consonants sprinkle over my heart and I want to cry, because I realize I feel the same way about her.

"Just one thing," I say, refusing to acknowledge the pivotal moment in my emotional memory out loud. Sharon steps forward. She'd give me the entire world in that minute if she had it to offer. "Show me where the rest of the coffee is."

I chase her through the back door with dozens of *I'll-be-fines*. She leaves me plenty of numbers I can reach her at "in case of an emergency." I want to believe this is the way we always are. Amnesia or not, I'll never get used to seeing my younger sister in a business outfit running off to work. The world flipped on its axis in my lost seven years. Our roles in this universe reversed. She the busy working woman, married and happy, and me the stay-at-home hippie who buys furniture that doubles as aircraft homing beacons.

I make a pot of fresh coffee and relax on the colorful love seat before remembering my goal for the day. Stockings. Sharon pulled the Christmas decorations from the basement the other night, so the stockings must be kept there. And, since it's only two bits of cotton, I don't have to worry about violating Sharon's prohibition on lifting. I place my mug on the coffee table, tie the robe around my waist, and head for the basement.

Sharon and Allyson purchased a home with an old-fashioned cellar, made from bricks and piles of concrete. The damp, wiry walls would have

been enough reason for a family to demolish and renovate, but not Sharon or Allyson, or perhaps even me. I ponder if this entire home with all of its character was my idea. If I decided on the rainbow-looking couches, then anything is possible. The musty scents of cardboard and trickling water on the concrete floor greet me at the bottom of the steps. Stray bottles of wine lie gently on a metal rack in the corner. The memory of red wine kisses my lips. I scan the bottles and pick out one with the fanciest label. My mind doesn't remember wine, but my mouth does. I clutch the bottle and move straight over to the pile of opened boxes that I guess are the remaining decorations. Spare bulb ornaments missing their hooks and spiny old garland are all that remain, too sentimental to throw away. I dig through the bits and find the fireplace mantle hangers for the stockings, but I'm stuck, counting them by hand, because for the life of me, even the seven years I forgot, I can't figure out why there are four in a set.

Two makes sense, three is reasonable with Allyson...but four? A bubble of unease grows in the pit of my stomach. I force it down as much as I can. My fingers are tingly. My heart moves into my throat. I place the full bottle of wine on the cold concrete floor and move to the next box. Saliva is now filling the spaces underneath my tongue. I move bits of tattered newspaper out of the way; my palms poke a broken ornament. I am bleeding. Breath is leaving my lungs with force. I find the stockings and pull them out. One... two...three....

Four.

My thumb traces the names stitched on their fronts. Allyson's is on top, followed by Sharon's tucked underneath. Mine is third in line, and then the fourth. My headache is now a dull roar. My eyes run across each letter in the name and pain like a knife slowly inserting itself into my back crawls up my spine.

Madeline.

The bubble in my stomach bursts. Bile runs up my esophagus and the room spins. The felt in my hand has turned to fire. I drop every stocking except for the one I don't understand, the one my brain won't make sense of. The one I don't want to make sense of. I am lead. I am Jell-O. I am

everything. Flashes of bodies are running through my brain and my heart wants to claw its way from my chest.

I fly up the stairs. The camera is panning faster than I was ever able to direct it on my own. There are ghosts running the show now. I crash down the hallway into the locked bedroom door, throwing my body against the wooden frame, wishing for my bones to crack, for the pain in my head and in my soul to swallow me whole, but it only acts as a battering ram. Over and over, I strike against the shield barring me from what Sharon has been protecting me from.

The door opens.

"Madeline," my whimper is carried into her room. No one can hear me. Not the stuffed animals placed neatly on her little bed, or the dolls tucked gently into the blankets in the rocking chair.

My daughter, Madeline.

I am crying now, because I have come undone.

The life Mark never wanted. The life he asked me to end. The life I chose over my husband.

All this time, from the moment I woke in the hospital, I was keeping myself from living in the hell Mike put me through more than four years ago. It is pink. It is flames. It is shrieks and sobs.

My daughter, Madeline.

My stitches are on fire. I fall to the floor, yearning to melt into the carpet and disappear. Mark's face appears in my memories along with the vitriol in his voice and the wrinkle of his eyes as his temper flared. The brunt of his hands each time he shoved me to the ground, slapped my face, or wrapped them around my neck returns to me in force and my anger begins to burn with the added power of a thousand suns. A judge and a gavel. Court proceedings and documents.

I didn't leave Mark four years ago. I ran.

I crawl to the cell phone and dial Sharon. She answers.

"Em? What is it? Everything okay?" she says on the other end. I am silent. Sunlight streams through the house but fails to thaw the numbness in my soul. "Emily..."

I bring the stocking to my chest and cradle the plush cotton, allowing it to wrap around my heart.

“I remember.”

Curse words and the sound of Sharon’s phone rolling around on the floorboard of her car reply back to my confession. A few seconds later, Sharon turns off her car and picks up her phone.

“Where is he?” I ask.

Sharon calculates her reply. “He’s in jail.”

“For what he did to me?”

“Embezzlement.”

I swallow, hard. Sharon’s pulse booms in the phone’s mic. “You’re safe, Em. He’s been there three years now and he’s not getting out for a long time.”

I hear the crash and Madeline’s face pairs with my screams. I am terrified to ask if she endured what took away seven years of memories and left nothing but a scar on my head. I wait, searching for words, because maybe if I don’t say the word ‘dead’ and manifest her beating heart, control of the universe, the past, remains a possibility.

“Where is she?” I ask.

“She’s with Ally.” Something unbelievable escapes from me, sounds I never knew I could make. I can’t even begin to process the who, what, where, and why. I only know one thing: my daughter’s survival has dumped a level of relief over my entire self that is impossible to explain. “When you woke up, you didn’t remember her. She was with the doctors—she’s fine,” Sharon quickly adds. “A couple bumps and bruises, but she’s fine. She wanted to see you, but you were asking for Mark and when we finally realized how much you’d forgotten, we didn’t want to traumatize Maddy, or you. So, the doctors and I came up with a plan. We wanted to wait until you were ready, Em.”

And so it was, all that had elapsed over the past seven years, the suffering and the hurt, the growth and the joy, returned to me. The assuredness of my wants shifted. “I’m ready,” I say. “I want my daughter home, with me.”

Sharon takes a deep breath, the air of solace blowing into our phone call.

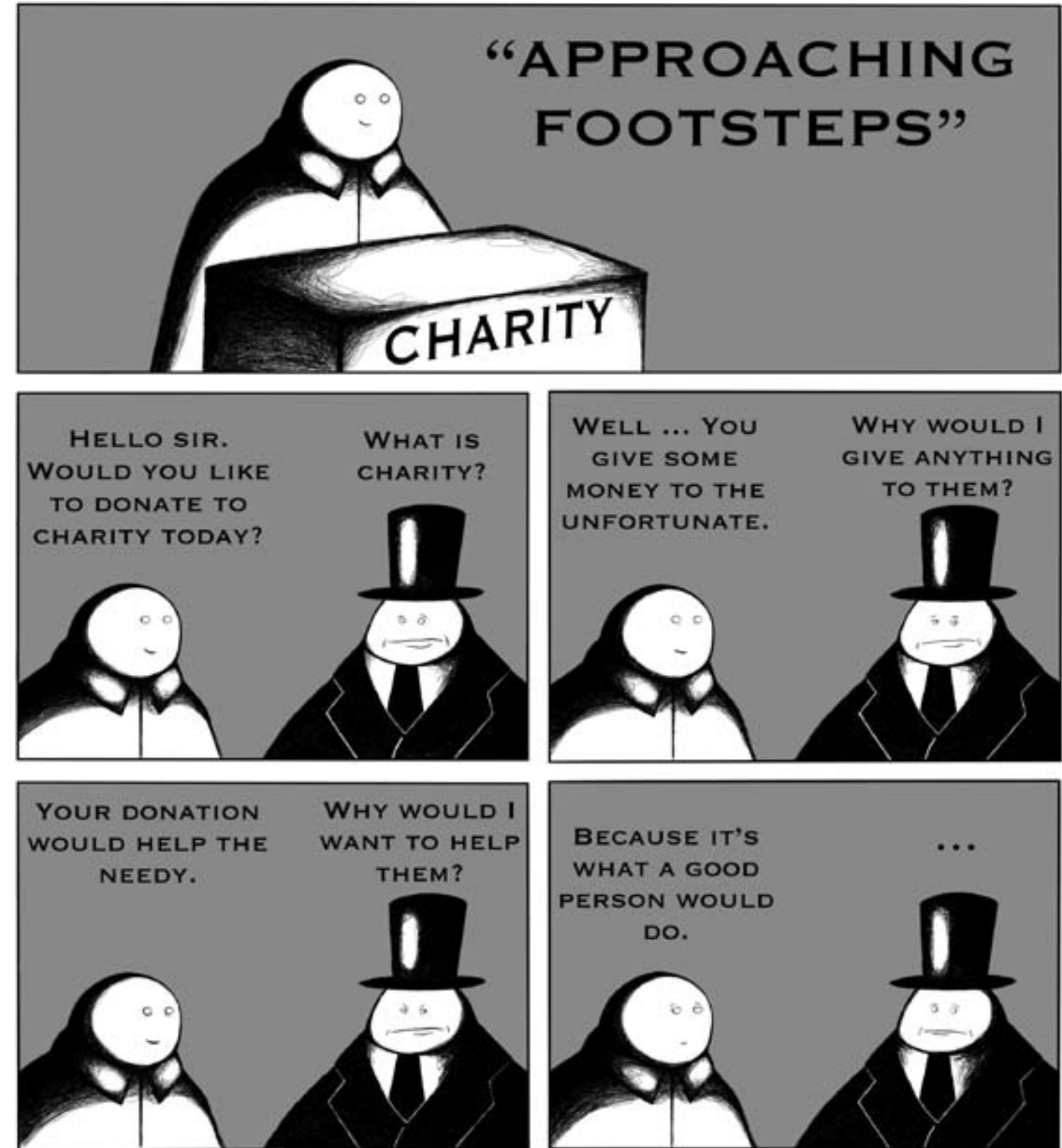
“Are you sure?” she questions, because the doctors probably asked her to if this moment ever came, but also because she is Sharon, my ever-protective sister.

“I’m sure,” I say. We allow a moment of quietude to settle between us, for the peace to land and take root before the next harrowing steps in this fucked up journey have to begin.

Crabs Migrate West

BY D.S MAOLALAI

the evening. the squealing
of seagulls like skidding
car tires outside of our
window. I look out – I ponder
the peace of their passage
floating over the liffey and up
toward clontarf and the docks.
it's low-tide – crabs migrate
in west to eat garbage
this time every day around now.
and the seagulls eat
crabs – we get to see nature
adapting to how change
makes things happen.
walking toward temple bar
from our place south of smithfield
you step on their legs
and their shells. like a chinese
food sideplate tipped onto
the tile, or twigs in a forest
in thunderstorms. and bicycles show
up. wet rocks out of rockpools.
hung with brown pondweed;
a natural shelter and reef.



CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

Bruce Barrow is a filmmaker and writer. He lives in Portland, Oregon.

Charles Beers is a technology consultant living on Long Island, New York. He graduated from Bucknell University with a double major in computer science and creative writing.

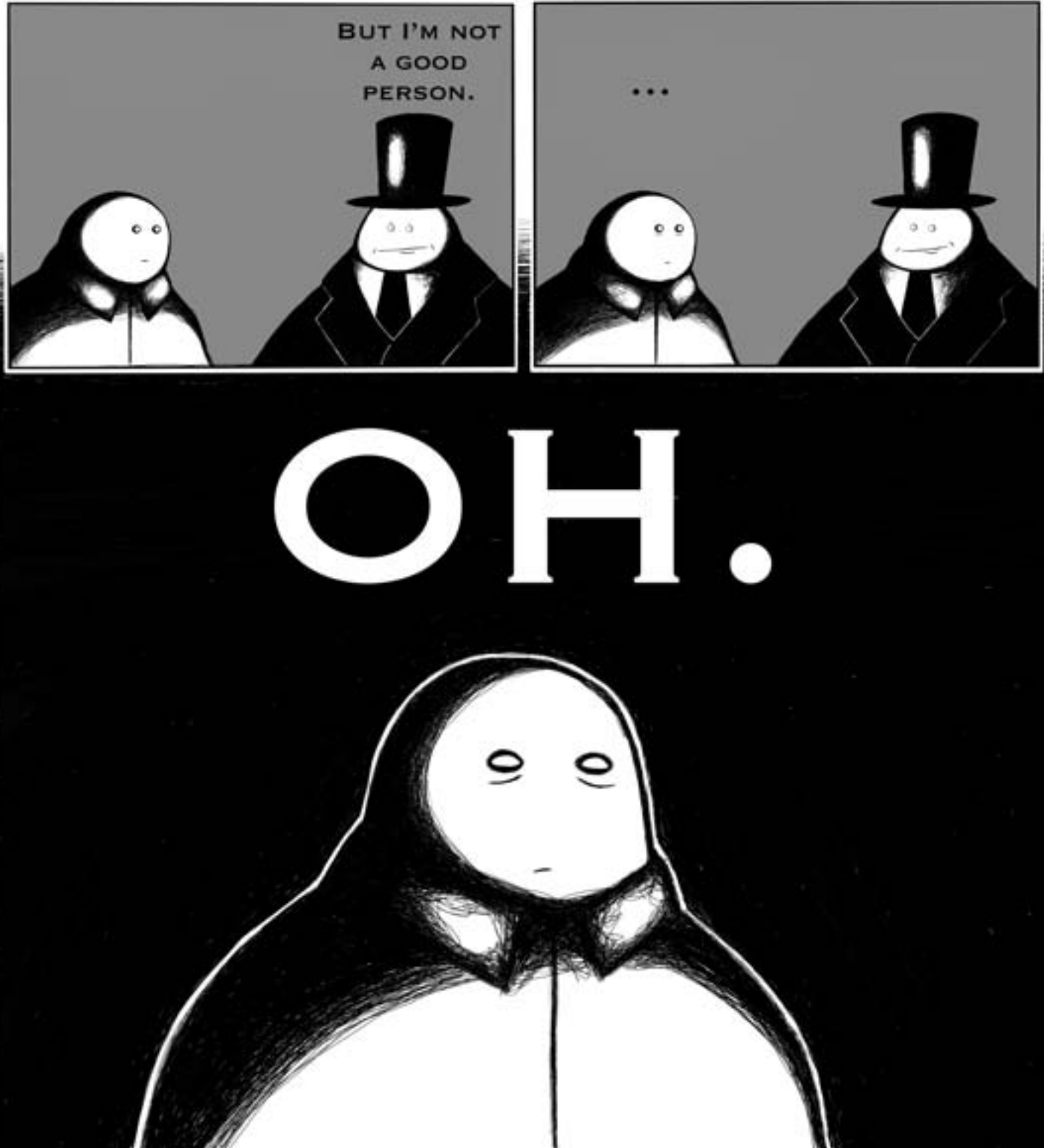
Laura Brun is a poet from small-town Kentucky who lives and writes in Pittsburgh. She received her BA from USC and her MFA from the University of Pittsburgh. Her first chapbook, *It's Alright to Be Seen*, is available from Dancing Girl Press. Her poems are most recently found or forthcoming in *Prairie Schooner*, *Permafrost Magazine*, and *The Seneca Review*. You can find out more about her at laurabrun.com.

Shirley Dees earned her MFA from the Naslund-Mann Graduate School of Writing in May 2021. When not writing, Shirley is busy parenting, reading underneath centuries old live oak trees, and sampling craft brews. She lives in south central Texas with her husband and daughter.

Paired in art and life, **Delta N.A.** work simultaneously on each artwork with a shared language that reveals deep meanings and speaks directly to the heart. Timeless stories develop in each artwork, where figures and forms are placed in a subtle and ethereal space halfway between dream and reality and where the soft flow of emotions and intuitions collects the sense of a free and introspective existence. Delta N.A. spent years travelling to discover the world and their identity, and this experience in foreign countries has deeply marked their technical development and their artistic expression that now combines poetry and strength in a constant search for harmony, portraying the infinite dream of a total and exhaustive well-being. The artworks signed by the duo are present in numerous public and private collections and have been exhibited in solo and group shows across Europe, U.S.A. and Asia.

Kelly Eden has lived a life worthy of the kind of art that she seeks to make: dramatic, layered, vibrant, and unexpectedly meaningful. She fell in love with oil paints at the age of 17, when she enrolled in the Denver School of the Arts. She was there only briefly before graduating and heading to the Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design. There, she honed her skills both as a painter and, in a way, as a painting: she modeled for her fellow artists and designed a very effective social-media presence for herself. As an alternative model, she graced magazine covers and generated a lot of interest in the “tattoo pastel” aesthetic that she represented at the time. Multiple magazine spreads featured an interesting double feature: Kelly’s paintings, alongside photographs of Kelly herself. She was able to parlay her artistic fame into an “influencer” role and a successful YouTube channel. After nearly ten years of that life, though... the constant stress, self-doubt, and online abuse coming Kelly’s way absolutely forced her to leave it behind. Eventually, with a new appreciation for therapy, she began to rediscover her partially neglected

DONALD PATTEN



first love: painting. Now, she uses paint to give form to the ideas—both good and bad—that have filled her life with self-compelling significance.

Future Focus Photography is an imaginative and experimental sci-fi fine art by replacing humans with robots.

Guiseppe Getto is a Zen Buddhist, a poet, and an Associate Professor of Technical Communication at Mercer University. His first chapbook is *Familiar History* with Finishing Line Press. His individual poems can be found in journals such as *Sugarhouse Review*, *Reed*, *Eclectica*, and *Harpur Palate*, among many others. Visit him online at: <http://guiseppegetto.com/poetry>.

Jezzelle H R Kellam (b 1999) is a graphite artist from Kent, based in the Northeast of England. In her work, she represents the body, By making conscious decisions in removing heads and parts of a body this is where her practice has led her. She has used this compositional decision as a vehicle for her ongoing oeuvre that articulates her way of thinking. “By breaking down the form to how I see it, I attempt to encapsulate the physical, psychological, and physiological properties of what it is like to inhabit a form, a human body. By bridging a gap between the body and mind. My art and life are inextricably enmeshed.”

DS Maolalai has received ten nominations for Best of the Net and seven for the Pushcart Prize. His poetry has been released in three collections, *Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden* (Encircle Press, 2016), *Sad Havoc Among the Birds* (Turas Press, 2019) and *Noble Rot* (Turas Press, 2022).

Larissa Monique Hauck is a queer visual artist who graduated from the Alberta University of the Arts in 2014, where she received a BFA with Distinction. Her artwork has been featured in multiple regional and national group exhibitions as well as a growing number of international exhibitions. She has been selected for inclusion in events such as Nextfest 2018 (Edmonton, AB), Nuit Rose 2016 (Toronto, ON), and the 9th Annual New York City Poetry Festival 2019 (New York, US). Her drawings and paintings have also been featured in publications such as *Creative Quarterly* (US), *Wotisant Magazine* (UK), *Minerva Rising* (US), and various others. She currently lives and works in Calgary, AB.

Ian Hill is an adventure athlete who found a camera. Professionally, he’s cofounder of a medtech startup but whenever the opportunity presents itself, he’s climbing, mountain biking, snowboarding, or just somewhere in the middle-of-nowhere shooting photos and videos.

Mark Jackley is a poet living in northwestern Virginia. His poems have appeared in *Fifth Wednesday*, *Sugar House Review*, *Natural Bridge*, and other journals.

Swedish-born **Gunilla Theander Kester** is an award-winning poet and the author of *If I Were More Like Myself* (The Writer’s Den, 2015). Her two poetry chapbooks, *Mysteries I-XXIII* (2011) and *Time of Sand and Teeth* (2009), were published by Finishing Line Press. She was co-editor with Gary Earl Ross of *The Still Empty Chair: More Writings Inspired by Flight 3407* (2011) and

The Empty Chair: Love and Loss in the Wake of Flight 3407 (2010). Dr. Kester has published many poems in Swedish anthologies and magazines, including *Bonniers Litterära Magasin*, Sweden’s most prestigious literary magazine. A Fulbright scholar, she authored a scholarly study entitled *Writing the Subject: Bildung and the African American Text* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995, 2nd ed. 1997), and published many articles in academic journals and anthologies. She lives near Buffalo, NY where she teaches classical guitar. She has poems recently published or forthcoming in *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Pendemics*, *Slipstream*, *Trampoline*, *Great Lakes Review*, *San Pedro Review*, *Cider Press Review*, and *I-70*.

Marie-Julie Lafrance is a Canadian/Métis illustrator. Diagnosed as a Highly Sensitive Person (HSP), she is highly detail-oriented. Some of her work has been published in *Éclair Magazine*, *Passengers Journal*, *Artells*, *Marika*, and many more. She has worked (as an illustrator) with *Leading Edge Magazine*, *Flash Frog Magazine*, and other magazines and publishers. Marie-Julie is currently working as a children’s book illustrator for Make a way for Books. Online Portfolio: <https://mariejuliestudio.wordpress.com/>

R. Mac Jones’s poetry and pictures have recently appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Right Hand Pointing*, *Refractions*, *Liminality*, and *Penumbria*, among other places.

Essie Martin is from Maine. She finds herself most at home near (or in) the ocean, where she works as an aquaculture researcher and scuba diver. Esther is a scientist by training, but a poet by nature. She is humbled by new publications, and looks forward to continued exploration of the world through poetry.

Elizabeth Taryn Mason is an Associate Professor in English at Mount St. Joseph University in Cincinnati, OH, where she teaches everything from composition to upper-division courses in literature, creative writing and liberal arts. When she isn’t grading, writing, or reading, you can often find her at a baseball game with her husband and little boy, or in the laundry room, doing what she does best.

Yoon Park is a 9th grader attending Seoul Academy in Seoul, South Korea. When she is not busy writing and creating visual art, she loves to play the piano.

Donald Patten is a cartoonist from Belfast, Maine. He is currently a senior in the Bachelor of Fine Arts program at the University of Maine. As a cartoonist, he produces graphic novels and oil paintings. Artworks of his have been exhibited in galleries across the Midcoast region of Maine.

Sheree Shatsky writes wild words. Her work has appeared in a variety of journals and her novella in flash “Summer 1969” is forthcoming at *Ad Hoc Fiction*. Sheree calls Florida home and is a Tom Petty fan. Read more of her writing at shereeshatsky.com and find her on Twitter @talktomememe.

