

AFTER HAPPY HOUR

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AFTER
HAPPY
HOUR
ISSUE 24

FALL/WINTER 2024 EDITORS AND READERS

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FOREWORD

Dear reader,

It's officially been 5 full years since the current editor crew took the helm. When the team was talking a few months ago, we realized we've let a few other (arguably more significant) milestones fly by, too. Our 20th issue in summer 2023, for instance, or the journal's 10th birthday in the spring of 2024. That definitely feels like a streak worth celebrating, considering how many online journals flame out well before the decade mark.

After Happy Hour has evolved significantly since that first issue came out. Most of the work published in the first issue came from the workshop; today, everything we publish comes in through Submittable and our contributors live all over the world. The vibe of the journal has shifted, too, and while we've always had a penchant for the bizarre, it's been nice to see a wider variety of genres, forms, and voices represented as the issue count rises.

Which dovetails nicely into talking about Issue 24, which just might be—pound for pound—our weirdest issue yet. In these pages, you'll meet an incorporeal alien, a misunderstood monster, and a family with a plan to reach heaven; you'll explore the delirium of sickness, the release of forgiveness and the inaccuracy of population counts. Across the board, even the pieces that live in the same territory each bring their own slant view of the world into focus.

I also realized, reading through it, that this is one of our bleaker volumes. It's difficult to say whether that's a reflection of the current collective mindset or just the random chance of what was sent our way this reading period. But it does feel fitting for a winter issue—and, to be fair, it's not all doom and gloom. It wouldn't be *After Happy Hour* if we didn't slip in something silly, and even the darkest pieces in the bunch have moments of hope and beauty that will give you a reason to smile.

Cheers, and happy reading,

Jess Simms
After Happy Hour Managing Editor

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My Little Tokyo

BY ANGELINA CARRERA

after Assia Bennani. *Are you dreaming or hiding?* Acrylic on canvas.

I am slashing my skin with the baby blue eyes again,
peeling off my mother's kimono as the moon turns red,
bloodletting without staining a single Buddhist pine,
shifting into shadow paler than anti-aging cream;
and, like the Akihabara electronics
which light up this side of paradise
when the café maids decorate the street-night,
I have dyed my hair teal so that you shall
confuse me with twilight
and dream my pupils into stars,
dilating until they become a galaxy,
dreaming you back down to Shibuya Sky.

A hundred million city lights
battle a civil war for attention.

All Told

BY TIM CONLEY

THIS STORY IS intended for children. But not your children, nor any children that you know.

It is meant for the children referred to on the welcome sign of a small town, which reads *Watch out for our children*. As I passed the sign, I wondered: why? Are they dangerous, feral, liable to attack? Or, instead of a warning, is it an advertisement: our children are reasonably priced, or adorable, or quite tasty?

These are the children for whom this story is told: highly ambiguous children, children you have to watch out for.

THERE IS A line-up in a bank. Banks are not places where children are typically found, for the simple reason that children seldom do any banking. That there are no children in this line-up is therefore not a surprise.

In order, from first in line for the next available teller to the last in line, the line-up is composed of a pastry chef, a bird-watcher, a carpenter, and a deep sea diver. They are all readily identifiable by their distinctive costumes and equipment and what matter they leave on the carpet: respectively, flour, feathers, sawdust, and water.

There are two tellers on duty. They are called tellers because the word *tell* can mean *to count*, as in one, two tellers, one, two, three, four customers waiting in line, and one, two customers giving their custom to or being told by the tellers.

One of the tellers is obsessed with the prospect of the bank being robbed. She is terrified that the next customer she faces is going to slip her a note with instructions to fill a satchel with money while pointing a gun at her. When she was a child, she was repeatedly told that she had a lively imagination.

WHEN I WAS in high school, so not exactly a child but not exactly a grown-up either, we were made to write aptitude tests by a visitor in a yellow tie. With the smoothest of voices he explained that a special computer would assess our answers and in a week our school would be sent a list of careers for which each student was best suited.

I have no memory of what my result was. My best friend in high school was advised to become a beekeeper. None of the questions on the aptitude test had inquired whether he might be mortally allergic to bee stings, which he was.

Was anybody given the answer *bank teller*, I wonder.

THE SECOND TELLER, the one who has never given much thought to the possibility of the bank being robbed except when her co-worker insists on talking about it, is telling the customer in front of her, a farmer with flakes of hay at his feet, how much money he has in his account. The farmer does not believe her and asks her to recount it and that is taking some time.

Fortunately it does not take as much time as it used to, before there were computers, and the computers the tellers use are more advanced than the computer that years ago advised my friend to become a beekeeper. She simply has to ask the computer: how much money is in the farmer's account? And after it checks, it will tell her.

So the tellers aren't really doing the telling. They are being told, just like everybody else.

AT THE REAR of the bank is the vault, watched over by a uniformed guard who at this moment is sitting in a chair, trying not to show how tired he is. He has been having trouble sleeping for the past week, partly because he unwisely eats right before his bedtime and partly because he is feeling dissatisfied with his career choice. He sometimes makes a thick sandwich that he eats alone in the kitchen at midnight or even later and then goes to bed not long afterwards but the sandwich keeps him from sleeping. If it's not a sandwich, it's a bowl of ice cream or a slice of pie.

Back when he was in high school, a computer had advised him to become an astronaut. That result had impressed his family and friends. For a few years after that he told anyone who asked that he was going to be an astronaut.

Now and then, when he's in the vault all by himself, he tries to imagine that he's actually in a space station. The Earth's authorities have decided that the most secure place to keep people's life savings is in outer space, where robberies are not possible, and it's his job, as bank guard astronaut, to protect all that money in orbit.

Right now, though, he is just tired and has a bit of tummy trouble.

CHILDREN OUGHT TO be paid to go to high school. That's what I think, in case you wanted to know. They're forced to go there, day after day, assigned meaningless work.

High school says: *you're not children anymore*. Then why not pay them? There would be all the more reason for them not to drop out, or even to really study, if there were some incentive.

BUT WHAT IS upsetting the customer in front of the other teller, the teller who is fearful of having a gun pointed at her and told to fill a satchel with cash? Always when she pictures it and talks about it, it is a *satchel*, never a *bag* or a *sack* or anything else.

The problem is that this customer is distressed to hear that her application for a loan from the bank has not been approved. At first glance it seems apparent that she is an architect, as the pencil behind her ear and the blueprints under her arm and at her feet suggest. Upon closer examination (as demonstrated by the birdwatcher this moment, using his little binoculars) pills can be seen among the fallen blueprints. For this customer is not an architect but a drug addict posing as an architect; a drug addict who wants a loan from the bank to buy more drugs.

Although the teller is using her gentlest manner to suggest that the customer might have had better luck claiming that the loan was in order to finance a new observatory or something like that, the drug addict is starting to choke on her sobbing.

IN HIS OFFICE, the bank manager can hear the sobbing. He often thinks that he is an excessively observant person for this line of work. He too wanted to be an astronaut when he was younger, but he also wanted to be a lifeguard, an acrobat, a horticulturist, a detective, and an escape artist.

And some other things. Never a beekeeper, though. Nor a drug addict.

THIS BUILDING HAS always been a bank. It was built to be a bank nearly a century ago, and though the name of the bank has, over the years, occasionally changed, as have the owners, and new furnishings brought in to replace old ones and new security devices to replace outdated ones, the building has always retained the same purpose, as a bank. Perhaps one day it will be something else, but right now it remains a bank.

People and buildings are different in this small way. Buildings are designed for a purpose. Does anyone walk into a bank, take a good look around and think: this must be a hospital, or a foundry? But a child is born without identifiable purpose and has to spend years figuring out

what future his or her aptitudes point to.

Things might be so much easier if people were buildings, but of course they are not.

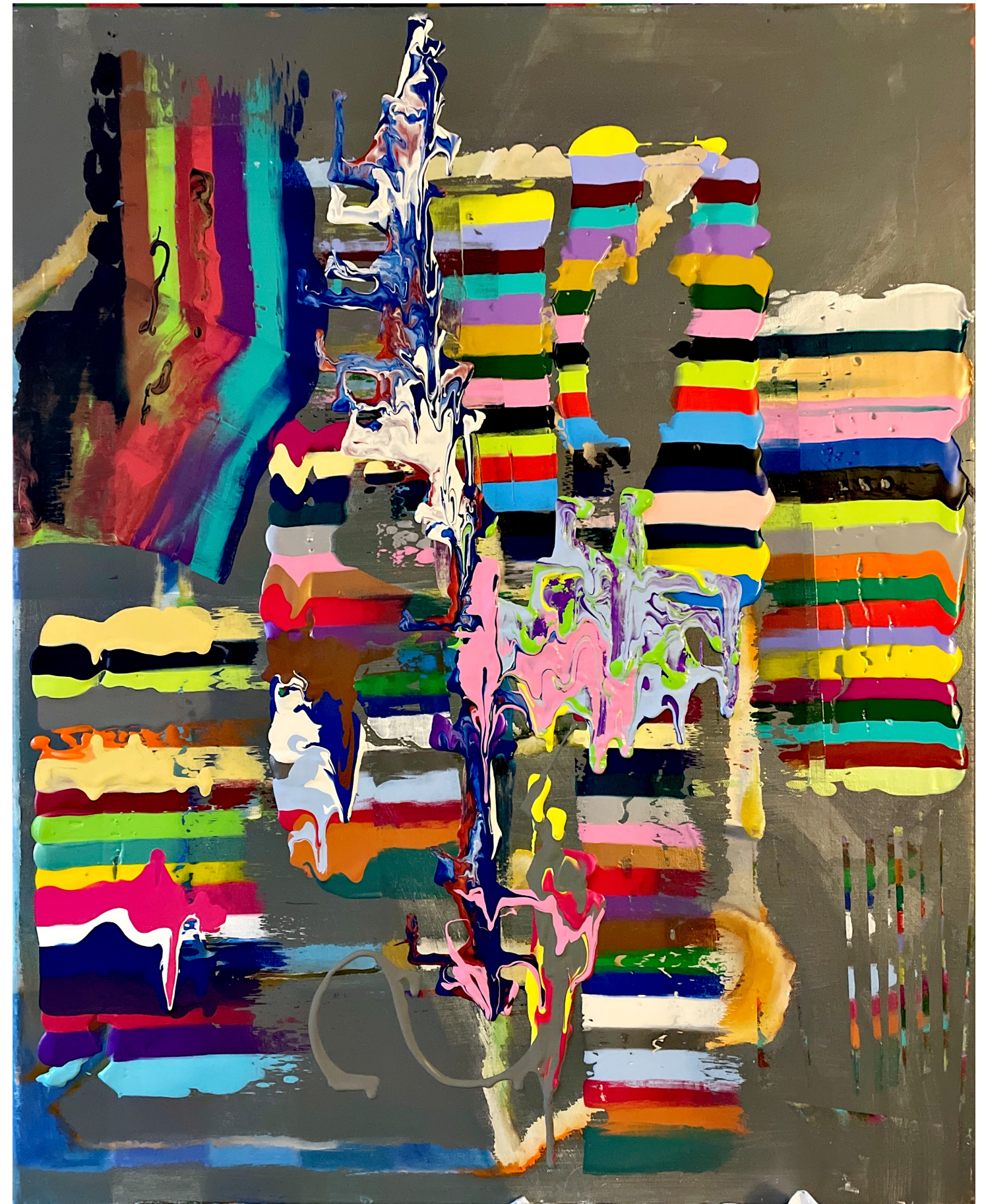
THE FARMER IS telling the less anxious of the two tellers that he has a lot of children: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven. He has even more children than there are customers in the bank, until another customer walks in at just that moment, at which point the number of the farmer's children is precisely the same as the number of customers in the bank.

From the stethoscope around her neck and the prescription notes fluttering in her wake, anyone can see that this new customer, now the fifth in the line-up, is a doctor. This is excellent luck because one of the customers speaking to a teller has just fallen to her knees, unable to breathe, and what is needed in this situation is a doctor.

Unfortunately, the doctor cannot see past the gigantic helmet of the deep sea diver standing in front of her, so she does not immediately notice the choking, sobbing customer.

THE THING ABOUT those population numbers on welcome signs is that they cannot possibly be accurate. People are born every day, people die every day, people move into town, people move out of town. The numbers on these signs are rounded estimates. If these signs were hooked up to a special computer, which could keep tabs on all the comings and goings and births and deaths, even though that would allow the numbers to keep changing, I wonder whether even that would ensure that the signs were correct at any given moment.

Welcome, these signs are saying. We don't know for certain how many people are here.



ROBB KUNZ

Conditional Absolution

BY TIMOTHY NOLAN

It's time I forgive the LAPD officer who took my detailed report over the phone nearly 30 years ago. I was shoeless and bruising up around the torso in the tiny apartment on Lake View we rented from a meticulous costumer who'd moved out from someplace like Iowa to work on tv and movie sets. Outside a mockingbird yammered at the dawn as I tried to report my friend missing, said we were all dragged from his hatchback to indignant cries of *maricónes!* Detective (whose name I thought I'd never forget) must've tuned out at "bashing," because when I called Rampart station the next day I got: "Him? He's on vacation, there's no record of a report here."

I guess I'll forgive them too, the boys back in Echo Park, just kids in our corner of the City of Angels. Territorial claims have been torn up, sold and bulldozed around here for decades, but this place was once known as "Red Hill," a mecca for pinkos in the 20s and 30s. Surely there were more than a few red-tie-wearing commies in the mix before McCarthy hauled them in to face his committee and the State Department declared homosexuals security risks, but at 3 A.M. all the boys saw was red when a carful of faggots

turned off Sunset and onto their patch of asphalt up behind *Los Globos*. That scrawny kid we were dropping off didn't stand a chance, same guys had probably beat the shit out of him each of his 20-or-so years on playground after playground.

And okay, I'll forgive the friend/co-worker who'd moved from Florida but was way cooler and smarter than me, subversion slithering up and down his sleeve as he read Dennis Cooper's "Frisk," who, after getting the news he tested positive, wrote letters to the new First Lady pleading for health insurance, a cure, sent his screeds to the shared office printer, the ultimate risk for uninsured 46th-floor temps like us—

It was his idea to go to Woody's after the party on Angus, and he was the one who met the three "pretty young things," all Latin and local like his boyfriend, Gilbert. They wanted a ride to an after-hours club and I was too drunk to argue. Sure, why not, let's go. I survived at least one night at "Save the Robots" in Alphabet City back in '85. I can be subversive too, dammit!

And since I'm assuming the priestly powers of absolution granting, I guess I'll grant myself a measure for going to the party directly after hanging up with my father, who'd just told me, from 3000 miles away,

that his backache was from the fluid accumulating in the lining of his lungs, an aggressive form of cancer. Of course, he never described it that way, but I'd only see him conscious one more time, at Christmas two months later, when he was doing well after his first and only round of chemo, or at least putting on a good show of it, once we extinguished the roaring yule log that sent him into a coughing jag.

That cop probably retired and moved to Idaho like his buddies. And the boys got priced out of the hood long before "Circus of Books" became a high-end dispensary. ("From Porn to Pot" read the headline.) Last I heard my co-worker lived long enough to get on the protease inhibitor train.

And two hills over to the east, I wake to a mockingbird up in the pecan tree that's older than any house on the block. He clocked-in well before daybreak with an endless string of calls he's spent a lifetime perfecting, but for being my muse in these restless hours, I guess I'll forgive him too.

What Is It Like to Be a Mothman?

BY D.M. DUNN

1.

I AM NOT a harbinger. To know the future is not to usher in pain or destruction, though you would like it to be so.

To know the future is a gift, and gifts are meant to be given.

2.

The child had to die. When I told you, voice crackling down an unconnected phone line, you hung up on me. I can see the entire patchwork of existence and you slammed the phone down on me as though I wanted something from you.

You called me a demon.

That night, you held your son tight to your chest. I stood in a corner and watched. I am certain you knew I was there—you see more than most. But you would not look me in the eyes. Red is not just for danger, you know. It also means stop.

You kept your gaze above me.

Toward God?

I was there the whole time.

Toward an angel?

He was in your lap.

“Hush, little baby...” you sang to all of us.

What a gift I have given you.

3.

You brought the pastor over the next day. You do not know that he is an unbeliever, that his faith went away when his girlfriend became his wife. At the birth of his first child, he would lose it forever. Eleanor, how is that possible? I know it is a lot to ask of you, this one question, since you have so many for me, but it is the closest I have ever come to needing something.

I scream at him sometimes. In the shadows. His daughter will resent him for his actions, and I want him to know because not all tragedies are large.

“Ellie, I’m sure it was just someone playing a prank,” he says to you. They always do. Those who lack imagination.

I do not understand why you trust him, but I know that you do. So I will speak to his daughter.

4.

She screams because she can see all of me.

5.

“Mommy, am I going to die?” Thomas asks you one night.

“Of course not, baby. Why would you say that?”

“Mary Baker said that a monster told her that we couldn’t be friends anymore because I was going to die. She said another kid from the woods was going to kill me.”

“Well you tell Mary Baker that she needs to listen to her daddy and pray a little more. Little girls shouldn’t be talking to monsters.” Your son accepts your logic. He trusts the way you do.

6.

You have decided you cannot tell your husband. This will be another in the long line of secrets women share, but you are the last and you will keep it close. I admire your bravery. I wonder if I would be as brave as you. God came down and made himself into a man.

If I were to do the same, who would I choose to be? You or the child born unto you?

I am not sure.

7.

I give you three days.

It is shorter than most and longer than some. The thing you must understand is that it is calculated.

I come to you in a dream so that you will not ignore me.

“In three days, your son will be dead.”

“Why are you doing this to me?”

As much as I admire you, you still miss the point.

8.

The next morning, you call the school and tell them your son will not be in that day. It’s a Friday, and you convince yourself that one day is not an admission. You tell them he is sick.

You wonder if you can keep him away from the woods now that you have kept him away from the kids.

9.

The first day you watch all of his favorite movies and make all of his favorite desserts. He is in heaven.

Your husband comes home from his job with the county to find the house covered in food coloring and flour, and in his mind he thinks you have both gone mad. But when he sees your smile, he falls for you all over again.

He is certain he will never love anything as much as he loves the two people in that room. He has never seen a more beautiful mess.

I will not be there for this. I will not ruin it.

10.

On the second day, you rest. Sugar and merriment have placed a blanket over the house. You decide to read your son pieces from all your favorite novels while he sleeps.

There is no time to finish any, and you pray to God that you stop feeling the need to start new ones, but the compulsion burns inside you and you cannot stop. You will start nineteen.

11.

On the last day, you go to church.

The service is nice. The unbelieving pastor preaches on the power of faith. He has you turn to Matthew 21:22: "If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer." You think that you could stay in the pew all day, casting protective words over your family.

But it is time to go.

Thomas asks if he can have ice cream, the after-church tradition. You want to go home and wrap him in your arms, but your husband says, "Of course, sport," before you can protest. And would you really want to say no anyway? Your son loves mint chocolate chip.

On the way to town, you see me swoop down low from the trees. It is fated, but it is the one thing I wish I could change because you will forever believe I caused the crash.

Your husband swerves to miss the creature running from the woods and hits a tree. It is obvious he tried to make himself take the brunt of the force. He will have lacerations on his scalp and they will scar. A reminder. Your scars will not be visible.

Thomas's eyes will stare out into the forest, landing near the fawn that caused his father to swerve.

But he cannot see it.

Pantoum for a Long Winter

BY THOMAS RILEY

AURA OF CREATING

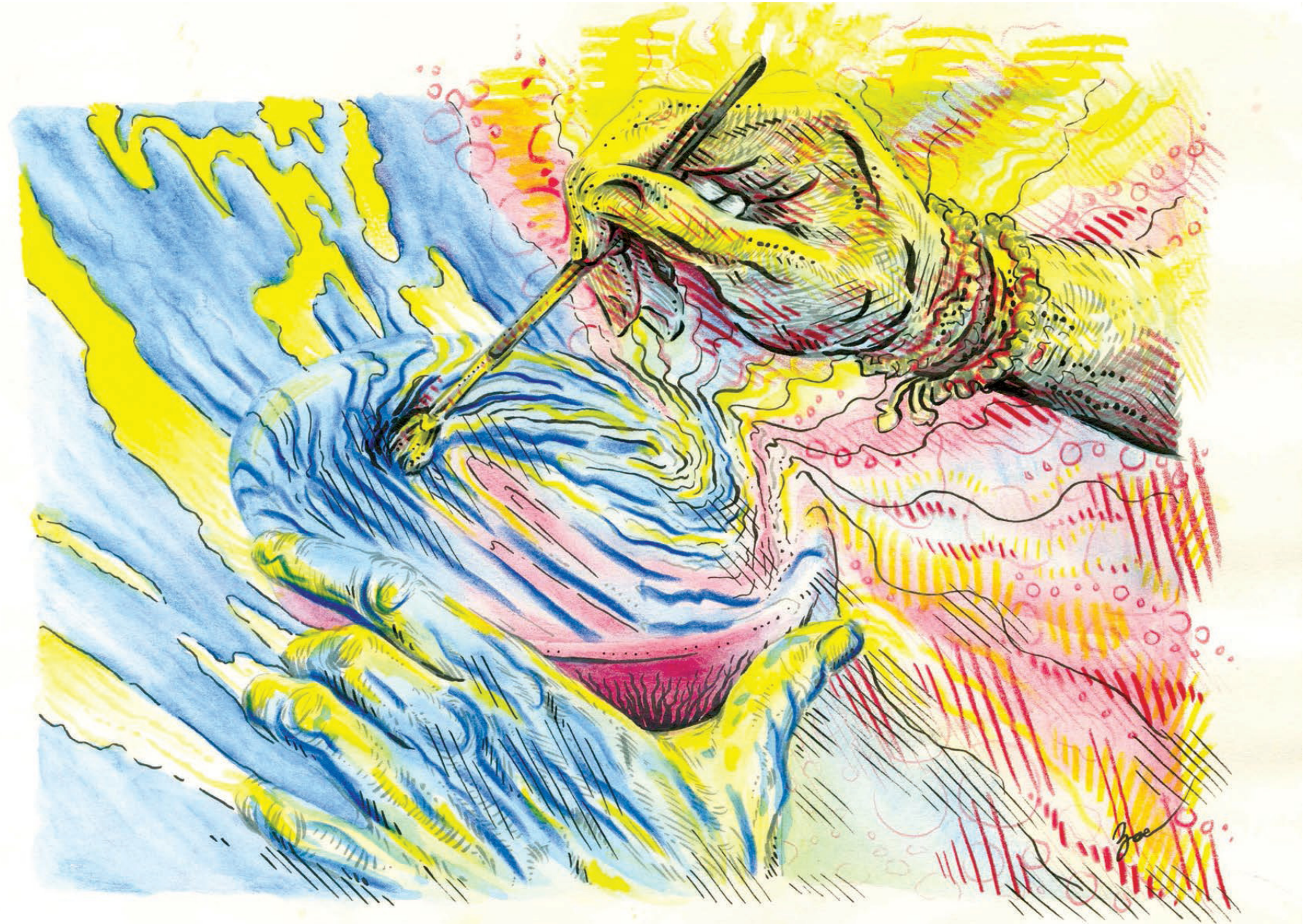
It's February; it's dry blood in your nose.
A month repeating beats of
biting dry bread and biting dry lips,
and pulling coins off your eyes in the morning.

A month repeating beats of
skipping rocks and skipping meals
and pulling coins off your eyes in the morning.
You've been sick an awful long time now.

Skipping rocks and skipping meals,
a scarecrow packed with short straws,
you've been sick an awful long time now.
Maybe someone will notice one of these days.

A scarecrow packed with short straws,
you're throwing yourself on anyone with a heart.
Someone will notice one of these days,
though they use their fists to love you back.

You're throwing yourself on anyone with a heart,
biting dry bread and biting dry lips,
even when they use their fists to love you back.
It's February; it's dry blood in your nose.



ZOE MAE HUOT-LINK

Norm Is Invisible

BY ISADORA RICHTER

NORM IS INVISIBLE.

Norm cannot create meaningful sounds by vibrating the air.

Norm does not possess the ability to interact with organic matter.

Which is why Norm has Rivka.

Rivka is a carbon-based entity referred to as a human. In an overall sense, she is descended from a group of lifeforms called hominids and has a great deal in common with apes, another type of mid-sized mammal. In a personal sense, she is descended from Elena and Orlando Simmons. She has little in common with them.

At least that is what she says.

Norm cannot be certain since Rivka insists it would be inappropriate to collect genetic samples.

It is one of our many disagreements.

“No.”

“WHY NOT?” Norm says.

Norm’s words are not words, but electric pulses sent through very specific parts of Rivka’s neocortex.

Rivka releases a gush of air through her nose.

“Because it’s my body.”

“Which Norm is using as a conduit.”

“Without permission.”

“Permission?” The concept floats through Norm, inaccessible. “What

is permission?”

She stumbles to a large book spread out on what she calls the kitchen table even though it is not in the same space as the food-related appliances. Flicks through a handful of pages.

Points, after two failed attempts, to a three-syllable word.

“Permission,” she reads. “The act of giving approval, formal consent, or authorization.”

“And Norm needs this in order to use Rivka as a conduit?”

“It would seem not.”

“Then what is its purpose?”

Her hand hovers over the book for a few seconds, then falls to her side as she walks unsteadily toward the kitchen.

“Okay, forget about the permission thing for now. What I’m trying to say is that since – thank fucking god – you can’t actually control me, if there’s something you want me to do, you need to ask, not demand.”

“Ask?”

She pauses, hand on a cabinet handle. “You remember ask, don’t you?”

Norm hesitates. The word is familiar, the definition known. Yet her meaning still lingers somewhere outside Norm’s grasp.

“To say something in order to obtain an answer, information, or response.”

She nods.

“So.” The pulses move slowly, deliberately. “If Norm asks, Rivka will stop consuming substances that impair sensory processing, coordination, and synaptic response times?”

Rivka pulls a glass from the cabinet. Frowns when she notices a half empty one already on the counter. She drains it in a single swallow.

“No.”

Norm tingles briefly. It is not the first time she has incorrectly assured Norm an action would obtain a specific result.

“But Rivka said Norm should ask if there is something Norm wants.”

“True.” She grabs a tall black bottle indistinguishable from the two on the counter beside it. “But I did not say that asking would automatically get you what you wanted, did I?”

It is an accurate statement. Accurate and illogical.

“Why should Norm ask for things if Rivka will not provide them? It is a waste of energy.”

She pushes more air from her nose. “I swear, sometimes you’re worse than my fucking mom.”

“Why does Rivka do that?”

“Do what? Compare you to the most controlling and self-absorbed person in a three-hundred-mile radius?”

“No, expel air unrelated to breathing.”

“You mean the sigh?” She fills both glasses with maroon liquid. “I’ve already told you. It’s an expression of emotion.”

“Yes. Specifically, sadness, relief, frustration, or tiredness.”

Norm recalls the way she counted her fingers as she recited the explanation.

“What Norm wants to know is what triggered it on this occasion.”

“Oh.” She reaches for a glass. Manages, instead, to send it crashing to the floor. “It was because you were being an extreme pain in the ass.”

Norm compares the newfound tingling sensation to the definition she has provided for this phrase.

“Then could Rivka sigh for Norm?”

RIVKA DOES NOT always refuse Norm’s requests.

If Norm uses the word “please,” the chances of acquiescence increase by forty-six percent. If Norm asks after eleven in the morning, the odds increase another fifteen percent. The best chances, however, occur when Norm’s requests align with behaviors and tendencies Rivka has already demonstrated an affinity for.

This remains true whether she is aware of the affinity or not.

RIVKA LIES ON her side, blanket pulled up to her chin.

“Could Rivka take Norm to the kitchen?” Norm says.

She doesn’t answer.

“Please.”

Her body remains still, her eyes closed. Like the time she consumed white powder with fermented vegetable juice and didn’t wake up for almost twenty-six hours.

“Please,” Norm repeats. “Norm has asked.”

There is a word for this, a peculiar one that Rivka likes to slide around her tongue.

“Nicely.”

Still she does not respond, which makes it a record for the number of times in a row Norm has been ignored. It also violates the Respect One Another Agreement.

“Rivka is in error,” Norm says. “Rivka promised to always listen to and consider Norm’s needs.”

At last, her eyes open. They are gritty and wet.

“Your needs,” she says. “It’s always Norm needs this or Norm wants that. Well, what about my fucking needs, Norm? What am I supposed to do about those?”

There is an unusual pressure in her chest, a tightness unrelated to the chemicals circulating in her bloodstream.

“Today’s her birthday,” Rivka says softly. “She would have been thirty.”

Norm does not need to ask who. But the question Norm does need to ask is one that is strictly forbidden.

“But instead, she’s gone and it’s…”

She exhales a long breath.

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised, really. Fucking up is all I’ve ever been good at.”

“That is false,” Norm says. “Rivka is good at many things.”

She snorts.

“Then why do I wind up losing every single thing that is important to

me? Why do I always wind up alone?"

A low, insistent buzz seems to swallow Norm.

"Rivka is not alone."

"Really? You see someone else here?"

"No, but Rivka has people. Rivka's parents—"

"Would rather I was the one with the memorial plaque."

"There is also Chun from work. Mr. Coranado in 4F. The woman who always smiles when Rivka orders coffee and asks about her dog. And."

The buzz grows louder, like Rivka's heartbeat.

"And Rivka has Norm."

She tenses and Norm realizes this might be one of those "rhetorical question" situations. Braces for a lecture Rivka has given dozens of times.

But Rivka only sighs.

"I'm sorry."

Norm knows the words. Has heard them, on average, thirteen times a week. But this is the first time they have been directed toward Norm.

"Why?"

Rivka rolls onto her back and stares at the ceiling.

"Because I know you've spent a lot of time alone too."

She is correct, though Norm would not have described it that way at the time. Norm would not have described it at all. Before Rivka, Norm had no words.

"How long were you out there, anyway? Before you met me?"

Norm takes a moment to consider. All of Rivka's previous questions have been about the literal: Is Norm really unable to define Norm's point of origin? How does Norm store memories? Why can Norm interact with magnetic fields, but not electric ones? This question is different. Concrete, yet also vague.

"Norm has two periods of existence," Norm says. "Before Rivka and after Rivka."

"Yes, but how much time was that first part? Years? Decades?"

"Years and decades are human measurements."

She rolls her eyes.

"In general terms, then. A little while. A long while. What did it feel like?"

"Feeling is another human quantification," Norm says. "It did not feel like anything. Norm wasn't. Then Norm was. Electrons were exchanged. Fields developed, expanded. Decayed. Norm continued to be Norm."

"Wait."

Rivka sits up, frowning.

"Are you talking about another of your kind?"

There is a different tension in her movements. Something Norm thinks Norm is supposed to recognize, but doesn't.

"There are no others of my kind. There is only Norm."

She glances at the blanket pooled around her waist.

"I'm sorry."

"For what? Rivka has already apologized for being forgetful."

"No, I just. I didn't mean to make it sound like you being here doesn't mean anything."

Norm is silent. Comparing, evaluating, trying to determine the structure beneath her words.

"Norm?"

"Does that mean Rivka will take Norm to the kitchen?"

She laughs as she wipes her eyes.

"You really are obsessed with the kitchen today."

Norm contemplates explaining that obsession is, per decades of their own research, a uniquely mammalian behavior. Decides against it.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because Norm wants Rivka to eat ice cream."

"But I thought you hate it when I eat ice cream because of the difference in temperature it creates between my core and my extremities."

"That is correct."

“Then why do you want me to eat it?”

“Because eating it increases Rivka’s endorphin levels and raises the chances of a positive mood by fifty-three percent, especially when Rivka is experiencing severe emotional distress.”

Her brow furrows.

“So, let me get this straight. You want me to eat ice cream because you think it will make me feel better about my sister being dead?”

“There is empirical precedent. Eating ice cream improved Rivka’s psychological state after Rivka broke up with Alex. And when Rivka didn’t get that promotion. And when the stray cat Rivka found escaped through the window.”

She laughs. “I guess you’ve done your research.”

“Eating ice cream also makes Rivka seventeen-percent less likely to consume fermented vegetable juice which, in turn, increases the chances of a positive mood an additional nine percent. And, because Rivka has never experienced violent digestive upset, cognitive impairment, or unintentional cessation of locomotion as a result of eating ice cream, it has the potential to decrease the odds of a negative mood by fourteen, ten, and eight percent, respectively.”

“Okay, okay.” She holds up a hand. “I get it. Now do you mind if I say something?”

“Rivka is already talking.”

She laughs harder, shaking her head.

“Norm.”

“Yes.”

“You’re a fucking idiot.”

Norm tingles in the way that has become inextricably linked with their interactions. Norm is not an idiot. Norm is simply enumerating facts. It is not Norm’s fault that Rivka cannot see their inherent value.

Rivka throws the comforter aside and slides out of bed.

“What flavor?”

“Idiots come in flavors?”

“Not idiots, ice cream. What flavor do you want me to eat?”

“It has to be equal parts chocolate and strawberry.”

“Why? Does that combination offer the best emotional boost?”

Norm hesitates long enough for them to reach the hall.

“Yes.”

NORM’S DECISIONS ARE based on careful study, examination, and testing.

Rivka’s decisions are based on something she calls “gut instinct.”

The description makes as little sense as the practice. Even if the human digestive tract were capable of analytical thought – which it unequivocally is not – there would be no way for it to engage the parts of the body responsible for action.

Rivka knows this.

Because Norm has told her. One hundred and seventy-two times.

Yet she persists in this illogical behavior, citing that, when the matter is truly important, the approach has always produced the correct result.

Two out of two thousand is hardly a successful ratio.

THE MALE HUMAN across the table from Rivka adjusts his glasses. They are red, like his hair.

“Unacceptable,” Norm says.

“How can you know that?” Rivka says. “We’ve spoken for all of ten minutes.”

Her voice is like Norm’s, delivered as electrical impulses inside her skull. It’s something she will only do in the presence of others.

“The name is a problem,” Norm says. “A gauge is an instrument for measuring magnitude, not a sentient entity.”

“There is no rule saying it can’t be both. Not to mention that he spells it differently. As you already know.”

“There is also the matter of hair.”

She glances at the crimson tufts atop his head, and he smiles at her from behind his menu.

“What’s wrong with it?”

“It is unruly. It sticks out at strange and asymmetric angles.”

She suppresses her laugh, but her chest still tightens momentarily.

“You mean it’s curly.”

“Norm means that it demonstrates that Gage is unable to control a crucial aspect of Gage’s person.”

“Crucial aspect? Shit, Norm, I didn’t know you were so fixated on looks.”

Norm hesitates. Rivka has commented on this before. But why is it so inappropriate to expect an organism to maintain certain standards of appearance?

“Besides,” she says, giving Gage a gentle smile. “I like it. It shows that he isn’t afraid to accept himself for who he is.”

“But how can Rivka know if this self-acceptance is desirable? What if Gage is actually a psychopath in a questionably snug black shirt?”

Her chest shakes again.

“I can find out by talking to him. Now shut up and let me have dinner.”

Norm does and they order.

Gage gets vegetable risotto. Rivka gets penne with a spicy sausage she knows will burn her tongue in a way Norm finds unpleasant.

The food arrives.

They eat.

Talk until long after their plates are empty.

Gage is a musician, a pianist. He plays classical and jazz. He works part-time as an assistant at a veterinary clinic. He owns a dog, a cat, two guinea pigs, and a hedgehog even though he has a studio apartment. He likes something called “grade b” science fiction. He’s allergic to coconut. He tried rock climbing because heights scare him.

Norm finds him to be no more remarkable than Evan with the golden tie or the men at the mating event the previous month. But Rivka does. Norm can feel it in her posture, the sharp nature of her breathing.

“So,” Gage says, fingers on his empty glass. “You want to go get some drinks?”

Ah.

A mistake has been made. Rivka does not have many rules, but one of them pertains to first dates. If someone asks her to join them in a secondary activity, she always declines regardless of how well things are going.

It gives, she says, both her and the other person time to figure out if they are truly interested or if they were merely caught up in the moment. She also has not consumed alcohol for 2,738 days.

So Norm waits for the inevitable rejection. Calculates the trajectory of Gage’s disappointed eyebrows.

“Sorry,” Rivka says. “I don’t drink.”

Gage tries to cover his frown with a smile. “Sure, sorry. I understand.”

“Want to go to a movie instead?”

IF COMPLETING AN action triggers the result Norm seeks, Norm will perform this action every time Norm desires that result.

It is a simple, logical, and efficient process.

Perform A in B circumstance, achieve C.

Humans do this as well.

Most of the time.

Occasionally, a human will abandon an effective method for achieving a goal for no apparent reason.

For example, say a human wants to maintain a stable and pleasant living environment. They have employed a specific set of methods for doing so over the course of multiple years. They are satisfied with their achievement. They do not complain – at least not in relation to this issue – about the state of their existence.

Yet, on a statistically average Tuesday, after a night of statistically average sleep, the human wakes up and suggests a radical diversion from every single method they have employed in the past.

And then is somehow surprised when Norm does not approve of the proposal.

RIVKA APPLIES STRAWBERRY jam to a burnt piece of toast.

“Please, Norm, at least hear me out.”

“Norm has heard Rivka and Norm has rejected Rivka’s request. As, Norm points out, is permitted by the Respect One Another Agreement.”

“Yes, I know. And I never want you to do anything you’re not comfortable with.”

“Rivka’s actions indicate otherwise.”

She sighs, sets the toast on a plate, and carries it to the couch.

“Stop,” Norm says. “Crumbly material is not permitted on fabric seating.”

“Yeah, well, today is an exception. I don’t feel like clearing off the table.”

“An exception.” Norm’s entire being vibrates. “Like telling Gage about Norm even though keeping Norm a secret is the first rule of the Keeping Everyone Safe Contract?”

“Gage is important to me.”

“Norm is aware. Norm assumes this is why Rivka has been married to Gage for ten years, four months, and sixteen days.”

She frowns, toast halfway to her mouth. “Please tell me you aren’t still angry about that.”

“Norm is not angry. Only irrational, inefficient humans who constantly break their own rules get angry.”

Her face takes on an expression Norm has seen thousands of times before. It is soft and gentle and almost always appears when Rivka thinks Norm has done something “adorable.”

“You don’t need to be jealous. What Gage and I have can never replace our relationship. You’re very special to me.”

Rivka is telling the truth. Her heart rate, breathing patterns, and eye movements are nothing like when she lies. But that is why Norm cannot answer her.

Not even when she threatens to eat an eight-ounce jar of hot sauce.

It is only when she is in the bathroom at work, brushing her teeth

after lunch, that Norm is able to find the correct words.

“Norm is special to Rivka,” Norm says.

Her brush moves with swift, controlled strokes.

“Incredibly special.”

“Then why does Rivka want to give Norm to someone else?”

“What?”

“Rivka wants Norm to be with Gage.”

The brush falters. “You think I want you to leave me and connect with Gage?”

“Yes.”

“For fuck’s sake, Norm. I would never want that. Not ever.”

“But Rivka said Rivka wanted to share Norm with Gage. Share, as in use, occupy, or enjoy something with others.”

She sighs, spraying the mirror with tiny orbs of toothpaste. “Yes, I did – stupidly – use that word. But what I really meant was that I wanted to introduce the two of you. I wanted you to get to know one another.”

Norm does not know how to respond. Norm had been prepared to illustrate Norm’s usefulness. To have Rivka create spreadsheets and charts and interactive pivot tables showing how beneficial Norm has been in improving key metrics, like tidiness.

Now all Norm has is trillions of unnecessary statistics.

“Why?” Norm says finally.

Rivka resumes brushing. “Because you are the two most important people in my life.”

Again, Norm is not sure what to say. “Is this because Rivka wants Norm to stop referring to Gage as the Red Plague?”

“Well, that would be nice.” She spits, fills her mouth with water from a mug sitting on the counter, rinses. “But really, I just want us all to be able to communicate better. And I think it would be good for you to learn how to interact with other people.”

“But.”

She holds up the toothbrush. “Carefully chosen and screened people.”

An unfamiliar sensation seizes Norm, a strange numbness that suggests Norm's electrons are about to disassociate.

"Norm knew it. Rivka is tired of Norm. Rivka wants to send Norm away."

"No, Norm. Calm down. I'm just worried because I'm not always going to be around and I don't want you to—"

"Norm will stop asking for so many chocolate doughnuts. Norm will be quiet when Rivka watches that pointless show about fake aliens. Norm will even talk to Gage. So please, don't ask Norm to leave."

Rivka takes another sip of water, swirls it in her mouth.

"Do you remember what I was like when you found me?" she says, gaze on the mirror.

"Rivka was functioning at minimal, sub-conscious capacity."

"And lying in an alley next to a bar I'd been kicked out of for starting a fight with another customer."

"Norm was not there, so Norm can neither confirm nor refute Rivka's description of events."

"Well, it happened, trust me. And it wasn't the first time. Or the fifth. There was a while where that happened a few times a week."

Norm had noticed certain anomalies. Incongruous physical impairments. Behaviors inconsistent with apparent human standards. But asking about them only made Rivka angry.

"Why?"

"Because I was depressed and angry and didn't know how to deal with it except by lashing out. And do you know why I'm not like that anymore?"

Finally, a question Norm can answer. "Because of the double letter meetings."

She shakes her head. "Because of Norm. You were always there, helping me, listening when I wanted to talk, making me laugh when I needed to, but was too stubborn."

Her eyes are wet, and Norm can feel the tears slide down her cheeks.

"Norm is the best little brother anyone could ask for."

It takes Norm a full minute to answer.

"Big brother," Norm says. "Norm is older than Rivka. And statistically larger."

Rivka laughs.

Is still laughing when a woman with neat braids enters and stares, wide-eyed, at the tears, toothpaste, and saliva streaming down her face.

NORM IS NOT always right.

Norm realizes this.

Norm accepts it.

But Rivka can be wrong too.

When Gage meets Norm, Gage doesn't speak for two days.

After that, he argues, almost continuously, with Rivka and Norm.

Gage accuses Norm of manipulating Rivka. Rivka accuses Gage of being paranoid and closed minded. Gage accuses Rivka of using him. Rivka accuses Gage of loving only a perfect, idealized version of her.

Gage leaves.

Returns five days later with a dog that shreds Norm's favorite shoelaces.

Apologizes for calling Norm a parasite. Tells Rivka he appreciates how hard it must have been to share this with him.

But Gage's skull still feels wrong, his body too cold even in summer.

And Norm finds it no easier to look at Rivka's weak, wrinkled body through Gage's eyes than through hers.

PHOSPHORESCENT OCEAN



JUDITH SKILLMAN

From: Etc.

BY ANN PEDONE

I

The hotel you put me up in is shabby. The woman who checked me in monochromatic. There's an alcove in the back bedroom filled with someone else's dirty laundry. And through the glass windows, the city, the capital, from which all the small-eared rabbits have run away.

I pull out the small notebook I've started carrying with me everywhere and write the story of Heinrich Schliemann, the German businessman who discovered the ancient city of Troy. They say that the day after he

Started digging, all the she-goats came down from the mountain and announced that they would never again allow themselves to be inseminated.

The tap water here is oracular.

It's a Monday.

The fifth or sixth one of the month.

I knew a man once who spent three years planning on how to propose to his wife, and then refused to eat any of the jumbo shrimp at the reception.

I make a list of all the prepositional phrases the woman downstairs had used during check-in, the fifth etymology of "cicada" I've come across since the plane touched down. A few telephone numbers. I study the photos you texted of your

Mother's house and notice that there's a worn strip of carpet leading from the first bathroom to the second. Sometimes the erotic is like that. Endlessly polite, but insufferable.

II

Blackened kitchen grout, the small bits of wallpaper that have come loose in the dining room, the boxes of plates stacked up downstairs. The ones the Nazis used during Occupation. A false expectation, now just barely detectable. Drawers full of plastic wrap, unused bottles of shampoo. Minds that for centuries have been filled with expensive talcum powder and tissue. An empty female cavity. Three bronze horses. Desire, and its opposite. Scaly skin, nomenclature, diplomas and uncertainty leaking from the radiators, milestones met, a shadow play of sex and a grammar that's neither ancient nor modern. Migrants and formica. Acid rain and meaningful modes of transportation. You're on the phone. I'm trying to turn on the stove. The gas flame is easy as cold weather. Obscene as the one or two words Homer always insisted on leaving in the past tense.

III

I looked up the ferry schedule and bought two tickets. We sat in hard plastic seats by the side of the ship. A man in the row in front of us had two toddlers who wouldn't sit still until he took off one of his shoes and pretended to throw

It over board. Then they ran to the front of the ship. He took out his laptop and finished reconstructing Proto Indo-European. They had only been married for a little more than a year but a few times a week his wife would wait until the

Kids were in bed and then demand that he duct tape both of her wrists to either side of the fridge.

This is the part of the story I had originally planned on calling "Hoarfrost."

IV

After we had finished fucking, I cracked the window just enough so that I was able to hear the woman in the apartment next door say, "If I'm reading this correctly, and I think I am, then the deal fell through because the curator couldn't remember anything about what it had been like to make a pay phone call in Paris."

Some women are like that. They marginalize the source material so they can make the grandiose their own. And then your mother texted you and said something particularly vicious about the neighbor's dog. Which was

Then followed by a story about a movie she saw in either '61 or '62 in which a man is running down a crowded city street and is in such a rush that he doesn't notice when all the non-dairy creamer containers he had been carrying in his front pocket fell out and scattered up and down the street. Who can honestly say they've never been manipulated by a man like that?

MAN WITH A STRAW HAT STANDING BY THE SIDE OF A NARROW DIRT ROAD WITH A WOMAN WHO MIGHT BE HIS FIRST OR SECOND WIFE: No, that's completely wrong. Let me tell you. "Psychic" comes from ψυχικός. The opposite of which is σωματικός. Psyche was the lover of Eros. Which is somehow or other always followed by something slightly "prematurely turned orange" from the New Testament involving a goat and dear Saint Paul.

WIFE: Last night in bed, did you hear it? A kind of metallic hum. Maybe from the small refrigerator. The one plugged in over by the sofa.

MAN: The psychological sense of "mind" doesn't appear until 1910.

WIFE: Whatever it was, it kept me up all night.

MAN: And then we get "libido" which comes into English, untranslated, of course, from Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*. In 1909 it was used in Brill's translation of Freud's "Selected Papers on Hysteria."

WIFE: The strawberries are just ripe enough for it. Some winters, yes, they do. They come at you out of nowhere. Like a stutter.

Grapes, lawyers, something galloping in the distance, broken funnels, Styrofoam coffee cups, a small group of shepherds who haven't eaten in twelve years, the feast day of St. George, ten sets of bleary eyes, midsummer, a ritual held only in the grasses, three am, four am, six am, the last Delta flight to Rome, the soft lobes of a liver, the speaker's voice, the speaker's claim to a voice, everything Homer ever said about wounds, loose-leaf notebook paper stuffed into a desk drawer, fire hydrants no one has ever thought to use, the walls of your childhood bedroom stripped naked, the walls of the hallway blooming with daisies, nomads, Greek nomads, barley sold only in bulk, the small brown cat in the yard next door, the one they say has a broken tongue, a fire that never lights, when I was a child, all of my cousins used to say that I was the one who was always greediest for fish eggs. It's been ages. Ages and ages of burnt toast, fresh semen, and the plums someone brought home from the market and dared to freeze.

On a Theme from Camus' Journals

BY MARK J. MITCHELL

For Rhoda

Illness is a convent which has its rule, its austerity, its silences and its inspirations.

—Albert Camus, *Notebooks, 1942-1951*

Illness is a convent with fast, binding rules.
Your body obeys. It is being trained
to desire God's warmth by leaving you cold.
Your shudders make each day a kind of same
that won't be canceled. You can never rule
the cloister. Sickness orders. It wraps you
in lying arms. Closing you in a mold
that will shape pain solid and new.

When sleep skips like a stone across a dream
of prayer and walks the convent's twisting hall,
you wonder where the chapel is hiding.
Someone in white lifts you. You want to fall,
but rules forbid that. The dark laws that dreams
lay down, you know. Look aslant, a long seam
runs down your body. Someone's here, lying
about penance and what all the sounds mean.

Your bones have been a rosary too long.
They feel like stones rounded by hard water.
Childhood prayers rise out of memory.
The white woman, someone's merciful daughter,
tells you not to remember much or long.
Rules must be enforced. Open your eyes. See
the shrine above. Pray pain until it's gone.

Local Group Galaxy

BY ANGELA TOWNSEND

WHEN I AM sick, I need to believe everyone is a sweetheart.

Lungs of magma are a time machine. Given a sufficient viral load, my forty-two rewinds to seven. When you are seven, you assume that all the fathers at the bus stop were drawn in the same pastels as your Daddy. He cuts strawberries to fit the compartments of your microwave waffles. He sings “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” and stomps his feet like kick drums on the linoleum.

When I am sick, I am an imaginary-friend factory. I need to believe the mail carrier slips sunbeams between my sewer bills. I cannot get warm, but I can nickname him “Butterbean” and watch him lope the sidewalk. I convene the full Senate of my sentiments for a vote. We are unanimous. Butterbean seems as kind as Tom Hanks multiplied by Mister Rogers. He whispers prayers for people whose addresses are tattooed in the whorls of his fingertips. He sees how many cards my mother sends me, and it makes him happy. Butterbean is happy for every occurrence of happy.

When I am sick, I am covered in eyes. My lashes are sandy, but I am seraph-sighted. Since I cannot sleep, I watch the cherub Jimmy Fallon interview luminaries. By the power of my virus, I see Keith Richards unveiled. I never knew the long-fingered man was a lamb in scamp’s clothing. Keith’s shag is telling jokes, and the brim of his fedora can’t stop curling. He bounces in his chair, preferring helium to reverence. This man has nothing left to prove or purchase. He unpacks memories

like salamanders at Show-and-Tell. He still loves everyone he ever loved. I believe he would cut my strawberries with care.

When I am sick, I am still uncertain about Mick Jagger, the cherub's next guest. This man will someday have to answer to his mother for the lyric, "I was raised by a toothless, bearded hag." I believe Keith tried to talk him out of that line.

When I am sick, I experience side effects. The makers of Mucinex do not inform you that their product may replace your irises with rose-colored lenses. I am too infectious to report for work, but I have never felt this close to my colleagues. Shonda asks how I am doing, and I text her three paragraphs of thanks. Dana offers to pick me up Cherry Zero, and I ask the Vatican to consider the first canonization of a living person. Cheryl sends me twelve identical pictures of the office geraniums, and I nominate her for both the Nobel Peace Prize and the Supreme Court. I am not overreacting. They all cried "whoa" over their galloping day. They remembered that I exist and acted on the knowledge. This is the gravity of love.

When I am sick, I enter social media unchaperoned. I cannot taste anything, but I can choose not to take a grain of salt. I am two posts down the scroll before I take off my shoes. I wonder how everyone misses the burning bushes. The boy with whom I did not go to prom is taking selfies with his mother and calling her a legend. Hildegard is offering to pray for anyone who needs it, because it is her 90th birthday. The supermarket is running a special on Swiss cheese so that "no one gets the Cordon Bleus." A retired professor of microeconomics is asking, "Why do we refer to excrement as 'poop' when we have access to the word 'doody'? Is not life a tragedy of missed opportunities?" Cheryl has posted twenty-six indistinguishable pictures of her cat lolling like a mighty walrus. I join Keith Richards' fan page. I am so flooded with love for every one of these people, I could turn the Sahara into a rainforest.

When I am sick, I forgive. I am feverish and the color of a mollusk,

but there is bread in the toaster, if I will take it. The friend who forgot my birthday has overnighted me socks covered in tacos. The boss who ignores my email is sending me songs by an individual named Captain Beefheart, although he does not answer when I ask in which branch of the military this officer served. The uncle I thought doesn't think much of me has mailed me a get-well card covered in My Little Ponies. I send God a thank-you card, followed by an I'm Sorry card for ever taking them all for granted. This also applies to the cousin who says "for granite" and "Valentine's Day," but who texted me forty consecutive orange hearts.

When I am sick, I need to be forgiven. I have sea cucumbers launching an insurgency in my sinuses, but I have never felt closer to the Captain. I have a mother who will not rest until I either dab Vicks Vapo-Rub into the dibbit under my nose or permit her to drive two hours to do the dabbing for me. I have a best friend who sketched an unsolicited portrait of me as a Nordic warrior queen. I have ten Boston Cream Pie yogurts in my refrigerator. I have a cat maintaining unbroken communication with the divine while snoring in my lap. I have it on good authority that Paris, meerkats, and Jimmy Fallon exist. I have a God who is still on speaking terms with me.

When I am sick, I am large enough to be seven years old. This window will close by the time my lungs open. I must not forget. I must tell the others. We are not black holes with folded arms. We are sweethearts sent to look into others' eyes. We are what the astronomers call a local group galaxy. I am getting the back band together before I get well, before I turn eight.



The Audition

BY GAHL LIBERZON

THE MAN IN the suit sat in a back booth and waited for the young man to walk up, even though the bar was closed. *Alright*, he said. *Let's see what we're working with.*

The young man unbuttoned his shirt. In his stomach were two glass doors that opened to a small town where everything was engulfed in flame—cobblestone streets and colonial houses, children playing stick and ball in the yards with little hound dogs running to and fro between them, all glowing orange under the tongues of fire shooting out from their backs. *I see*, said the man in the suit. *But what about the burning?*

You can get used to all sorts of things, the young man replied.

The young man opened the glass doors so the man in the suit could hear. From each boy's mouth came only the plunk of pizzicato harps, a celestial music box. *Good*, said the man in the suit. *And how do I change the tune? Something more upbeat?*

The young man took out a bag of black powder, withdrew a pinch and sprinkled it on the fire inside. A slight breeze picked up as the flames grew higher and turned green. The children began to dance the maypole, hounds in tow, while the harps were joined by bowed violins.

Excellent, said the man in the suit. *Again!* The young man put another pinch in and the breeze became a gust as the flames grew higher, blue now, and the children took to coursing hares with their hounds and stickball bats as the harps and violins were joined by coronets.

Fantastic! A little more now! said the man in the suit, as he grabbed the bag and threw in a handful. The gust became a gale, the fires turned bright pink and hot, snaking up out of the fireplace and bubbling the skin around the glass. Inside, the children took their bats to their hounds and each other in a rage and even with trumpets added the sound of wood on bones and pained whimpers emerged from the young man's abdomen undisguised.

No. No. No. said the man in the suit. *This is unacceptable.* He ran to the kitchen and came back with a pitcher of water and tossed it into the young man's stomach. The flames died instantly, and the water sloshed once and poured out of the smoking hole. The gale, still as strong, reversed and pushed the smoke back into the young man's abdomen and out of his eyes and ears and nose and mouth like a chimney.

The man in the suit peered into the town as the last of the smoke cleared. The cobblestone streets were blackened with soot, the colonial houses half sunk-in with debris from collapsed roofs. Clots of glass and timber littered the streets, and here and there tatters of cloth fluttered from under the rubble.

Where did they all go? asked the man in the suit, but all that came out of the young man was the rasp of the little scraps of fabric against the stone. They shushed in the wind.

Spot of Moonlight

BY BRIAN BUILTA

I can't go anywhere without destruction,
which lives in me like a junkyard cat, soft-footed and dark.
Like now, in this restaurant I can't pronounce,
the frites come and I eat them without utensils.
The waiter pours a skosh of wine for my approval
and I smash the delicate glass
with my pocket hammer.
That will do, I say.
The main course arrives and I take it in my teeth
and leap through an open window.
It somehow tastes better in the alley
in a spot of moonlight.

A Long Way Down from Heaven

BY DESIREE REMICK

FATHER SAYS WE live alone so we can better hear the voice of God, but He never speaks to me. Only to Father, and Hester sometimes. Mother hears angels singing. I can tell when she's listening because her eyes roll up, jumping like crickets, and she falls. She listens with her whole body.

In our kitchen is 1 table surrounded by 4 chairs. 5 if you count Adeline's, which I don't.

When the sun goes to bed, Father comes in. *I finished the Tower*, he says. *We start climbing after supper.*

Thank God, says Mother.

11 small potatoes, peeled and mashed. 62 peas from the long pods. 1 contrary hen, whose name was Crabby.

Adeline's chair is really a sling, suspended on four strong legs, specially made to hold her. I plant her in it like a carrot: her curly hair the leaves, her lower half fused into a knotted root. It is for her sake that Father built the Tower. God said it was the only way to save her.

4 knives. 4 forks. 4 glasses of water, tinted brown. The mud settles, forms a thin layer of sediment. I save 1 pea from my plate and bury it at the bottom of the glass, because that's how the story continues. Grow a new plant from a pea, hatch a new chicken from an egg. Someday, Mother says, Hester and I will make babies of our own, like she made us.

What about Adeline? I ask.

Mother looks sad. *No, she says, Adeline won't make any babies.*

0 babies. I imagine making one, my belly swelling like a peach. When it's ripe, perhaps I will spit it out like a pit, the little baby. Or perhaps I will split right open like Mother did when Adeline was born. I've seen the place where the doctor sewed her up again. A dark red centipede sunk into her skin, legs splayed. Centipedes are supposed to have 100 legs, but Mother's only has 32.

When our plates are scraped clean, we dress in our warmest clothes, layers on layers. 2 hats, 1 scarf, 1 pair of gloves, 2 wool socks, 2 boots laced up to the top. 1 pair of wool leggings. 1 dress, 1 vest, 2 coats. Underneath the dress, against my bare skin, I tuck the lucky pillow Grandmother made when I was born, full of lavender for purity, sage for virtue, and rose petals to show her love.

Father carries Adeline in her sling. I'm supposed to bear the lantern and lead the way. Mother fixes it to my belt, where it bounces off my hip with every step, throwing its light in stretched-out circles across the trail. Things appear and disappear: the wheelbarrow, a fencepost, a sleepy chicken stranded outside the coop. I stop, intending to pick her up and move her to safety, but she scoots away from me. Mother touches my shoulder as I start to give chase. She shakes her head.

No time. Keep going.

13 chickens. Soon to be 12.

The night is cold, frost stalking our home on sharp little feet, waiting for the right moment to settle on the pumpkin vines. Hester shivers uncontrollably.

God told me it's warm in Heaven, she says.

You're not going to Heaven, Father replies. Only Adeline.

Hester pouts. *Why can't I go too?*

Mother grabs her arm and pulls her along. Passing through the gate, I take the left path, up the hill to the place where Father has constructed the Tower. It's made of the bones of trees, thousands of them all lashed together with wire. On the side nearest the house, Father has nailed

short crossbars in an ascending row. A fish-rib ladder, worn smooth by the frequency of his passage. He has climbed up and down this structure for 192 days. Since Adeline was born. Since the doctor told us she would die. Since God called on us to bring her to Heaven.

Once, I asked Mother why God couldn't come down to get her Himself. It would be so easy for Him. Why wouldn't He want to help us out a little?

Mother replied, *When you were learning to tie your shoes, did you struggle?*

I nodded. Yes, it was hard.

I could have done it easily, right? But if I did, you would never have learned. You would always have been depending on me to tie your shoes.

That made sense to me, but not as an answer to my question. Why did God want us to learn how to build our own Tower?

I asked Hester. She said, *We're all going to die someday. Like Grandmother did. But she's not in Heaven, she's in the cemetery. If we want to live in Heaven, we need the Tower.*

1 grave, with Grandmother in it.

My palms sweat inside my gloves as I grip the bottom rung and pull my body upwards. The light rises with me, shimmering and bright. When I reach the top, I will resemble a star.

At first, the climb is not too strenuous. My body is small but strong from carrying water and weeding the garden and chasing chickens all summer long. I move quickly, but Hester is hot at my heels, her eager hands seizing the next bar before my foot has even left it. Sometimes she grabs my ankle by mistake. She was angry when Father said I would be our beacon. She thinks it should be her, because she hears God speaking and I don't.

The wind is colder up here. It bites through my clothes and sinks frigid teeth into my flesh. My face, exposed to the sky, feels like a mask of ice. I stop for a moment and look down at the line of my family below me: sharp-nosed Hester blinking impatiently, Mother with her long hair like a tattered black sail, the outline of Father bulging with Adeline.

We just passed the quarter marker, he says.

Hester waves at me, demanding that I keep going. When I still hesitate, she leaves the ladder and maneuvers around me, swinging herself up like the monkey we saw on our trip to the city, years ago. The monkey was in a cage, and she spent all day climbing up and down the bars. Hester, only two at the time, was delighted by this and gave her a grape every time she passed by us. Her long, slim fingers, eerily similar to our own, reached out to take each juicy jewel. Her round black eyes stabbed into us as she ate.

As Hester passes me, I try to catch hold of some part of her, but she's too quick. In seconds, she melts into the darkness and is lost to view. Mother closes the gap between us and says, *Don't worry, she'll be waiting at the top.*

My progress is slower now without the force of my sister behind me. My muscles are beginning to tire; my fingers ache from the clench and pull.

Mother is weakening, too. The next time I glance down, she's no longer moving. She clings to the Tower like the tendril of a pea plant.

Just a little further, Father says. I'm right behind you.

Mother turns her face up to me, her cricket eyes finding mine. The lids twitch and flutter.

She lets go.

Father lunges for her, but the angle is wrong. She is falling out, away from the Tower, her arms spread like wings. The night gulps her up, sighs in satisfaction. The night is hungry, like the fox that kills our chickens and leaves their bloody feathers scattered in the grass.

My hands are frozen to the rung, my body locked up tight. Father pushes gently at my heel. Tears crowd his eyes, but the wind steals them before they can fall.

Keep going, he says.

What about Mother? I ask. We need to go back and find her. She might be hurt.

We can't go back, says Father. He adjusts his coat around the sling to shield Adeline from the thieving wind.

I reach for the next rung and haul myself up. It isn't easy. My grief weighs a thousand pounds. I wonder if Hester, unburdened, has already reached the top.

1 sister. I can't count Adeline, because she never belonged to us. She was God's from the beginning, on loan.

The lantern is running low on fuel, its light growing dim. Like a star at the end of its life, but Mother told me that dead stars continue to throw their light out across the universe for billions of years. Or rather, the star is so distant that it takes billions of years for the light to arrive on Earth. It seems sad to me, receiving messages from burnt-out stars.

Father snags the hem of my dress, tugs to get my attention. I look down. His face in the failing light is a terrible shade of grey.

Take the baby, he says. I need to rest a bit.

I have never seen Father give up. His strength is infinite. Yet his hands tremble as he unties the knots of Adeline's sling and secures it around my shoulders. She wakes at the disturbance, her dark eyes popping open. I press kisses to the nub of her nose.

Will you follow us? I ask Father.

He says, *Yes, when I'm able, but don't wait for me. Keep climbing until you reach the top. It's not far now.*

As I continue upwards, he shrinks behind me. A child, a toy. The night swallows him, too. Adeline fidgets, the indiscriminate lump of her foot digging into my ribs.

I remember something else about the monkey in the zoo: she had a baby. It rode on her back, string-bean limbs wrapped around her neck and sides. After that trip, Hester and I would cling to Mother as she walked around the house, until we grew too big. Then she told us we couldn't play that game anymore, but Hester still tries sometimes, leaping on her unexpectedly when her back is turned.

The lantern goes out.

I thought it would be pitch black, like our root cellar when the door is shut, but the moon steps in to show me the way. It hangs over us like a luminous pearl in the great oyster of the night. I feel almost warm in its hoary glow.

1 moon, three quarters full. The top of the Tower is framed against it, and new strength surges through my aching limbs. I climb faster, hands flying over the wood. The rungs are rougher up here, not worn with use like the lower ones. Father must have set these just this morning.

At last, I pull myself up from the final rung and onto the Tower top, which is covered by 5 evenly spaced boards, gaps in between the width of my hand. There is no sign of Hester. Perhaps she too fell victim to the ravenous dark. Or perhaps, growing antsy, she preceded us into Heaven.

I sit for a while, rocking Adeline and waiting for some instructions. Father told us the Tower was finished, but I don't see the gates of Heaven. Or even the back door. I wonder if God might compromise, since we made it this far, and come down to meet us halfway. But time passes, and God does not appear. Nor does Father. Adeline and I are alone in this tiny world of wood and wind.

Above us, the sky teems with stars, a great whip of them coiling through the dark. I notice other lights as well, far below. Isolated pinpricks, small clusters, and one large mass that blazes like a bonfire. I realize they are the lights of houses and towns and the city where the monkey climbs around the edges of her cage.

68 homesteads. 14 villages. 1 metropolis like a fiery scab on the land.

I'm feeling dizzy now, light-headed, and I recall that air thins at high elevations. Gravity too, Mother told me. The force binding us to Earth doesn't exist in space. If there's no gravity in Heaven, maybe that's how angels fly.

Without gravity, direction loses all meaning. Suddenly the lights reorient themselves, and I am dangling upside down from the tip of the Tower, gazing at a glowing river. The sky is filled with vast patches of nothing where the stars have died.

With my new understanding, I know how Adeline will get to Heaven. I need to let her fall toward that river of lights where God lives. Where He will be waiting to catch her. Carefully, I take her out from her sling and kiss her round face, her downy curls. Then I let go. She drifts away from me slowly, wiggling like the tadpoles that appear in our pond in the spring. I watch until I can no longer see the shape of her.

The air is thin, and now that I have stopped moving, the cold seeps in, corroding my bones, settling in my joints like rust. I know I should start back up the Tower and look for Father. I know I should go home.

Instead, I stay and count the lights of Heaven.

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