



ECHO
ISSUE 7

Echo
A Journal of Creative Nonfiction

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Echo

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About Echo

A heart echo test, or an echocardiograph, is a painless test that examines the structure and function of the heart, according to the National Institution of Health. This test may involve the injection of saline or a specific dye into the patient's veins to showcase the heart.

We chose the name Echo because we expect the work we publish to come from the heart. In our monthly issues, we want to publish the greatest creative nonfiction we can find.

We accept creative nonfiction submissions year round, and we would love to read your work!



The Shekinah

Korbin Jones

The Shekinah is an English translation of the Hebrew word **שְׁכִינָה**, which means “dwelling” or “settling,” referring to a plan in which the divine presence of God resides. In Kabbalah, it is associated with the feminine divine. In Christianity, it can be understood as presence of the Holy Spirit within the believer, going so far as to be a source of prophecy.



The palm reader pulled up in a red Lamborghini. We’d been waiting about thirty minutes outside her shop. Its neon signs buzzed bright in the mid-day light. We’d passed the shop on the drive in to Branson, Missouri, having to wait until the second-to-last day for an opening large enough in our schedule to accommodate us. When we pulled up that afternoon, though, the shop was closed down. Rebecca called the number that was embossed in large, Ouija-board font across the shop window. “She’s at lunch,” Rebecca said, hanging up the phone, “but she’ll be here soon.” When the palm reader stepped out of her car, she looked anything but fresh from lunch. Her skin was a deep ochre, and she was wrapped up in a yellow dress that caught the wind. A small gold hoop hugged her right nostril, and as she slid her bug-eye sunglasses up, securing them atop her head, I caught her glance: dark brown, deep with, what I assumed, was knowing. I’d envisioned her older, bent by age, perhaps leaning on a cane made from the wood of some holy tree. A headscarf or wrap would’ve been a given, too. I thought that Hollywood had taught me well, but this woman looked nothing like a psychic at all. This woman, though, defied our expectations, but we weren’t deterred. Hillary volunteered to go first, having fished a ten-dollar bill out of her jean shorts before the palm reader had even said a word. The rest of us shuffled back over to the wooden staircase that clung to the side of the neighboring building, a boot shop, and waited.

Quiet excitement buzzed through our small group -- our class advisor, Mrs. Bennett, included. She was the school librarian

and her auburn hair had been bobbed since I was in sixth grade. Since I was older, I could always count on catching her call something “bullshit” in a hushed tone just when it was needed. She stayed quiet, though.

After fifteen minutes or so, Hillary shuffled out of the shop, mouth agape, eyes wide. “She said I was going to be a nurse.” Something we all knew she wanted to be. Hillary had gone to Vo-Tech with half of the other seniors that year. While the rest of us attended regular classes in the morning, the Vo-Tech kids would spend time off-site studying welding, cooking, or nursing—Hillary, of course, studied the latter. “She said I’d have the opportunity to have four kids,” she counted with each finger. But then her excitement shifted to something more somber. “She also said Kaden and I probably won’t marry each other.” Kaden was her then-boyfriend, a college freshman she’d started dating a year earlier, back when he still went to our school. I wasn’t that close to Hillary, but the way she said this made it seem like it validated a hunch curled in the back of her mind.

Despite the sad note of the last prediction, we were all excited by what seemed to be a confirmation of the palm reader’s abilities. Kelsie went next, rushing into the shop. Another fifteen minutes passed and Kelsie came back out, the bell ringing her exit. She chattered about her own reading, pointing to various lines on her right palm that didn’t mean much to any of us, but still added something, some sort of authenticity to the palm reader’s claims. She wasn’t pulling facts out of thin air; she was reading us, our bodies, and that somehow made it realer.

A few more classmates passed in and out of the shop, reacting the same as Hillary and Kelsie, but some of us grew tired of waiting. Rebecca and a couple of others decided to walk across the street and have an old-time, Western-style photo taken. Time was running out. We had a show to catch later, and though it took place in a bar, most of the girls wanted a chance to go back to the resort so they could shower and get dressed up. When it was my turn to see the palm reader, there was barely enough time for my own session, but I dashed in there before Mrs. Bennett could reason with me.

The entire front of the shop was a reading room: white chairs, a glass table with a suede cloth draped over it, various figurines and statuettes, and burning incense. She sat with her back to the wall, not acknowledging my presence as her eyes were stuck to her phone screen, hurriedly drafting a text or tweet, I assumed, between sessions. She'd been at it for nearly an hour and we'd hardly given her enough time for a break. Upon my sitting down, she didn't put away her phone; if anything, she typed slower. "One minute," she said. I told her it was fine, and when she finally gave her full attention to me, I was a knotwork of nerves. She asked for my dominant hand, and when I presented my right one, she took it with both of her hands and began to trace its creases with a long, well-manicured nail.

"I see you living a long life," she said. Even though I believed in psychic abilities, I figured that was a rather dull way to start. After all, who would open up a reading by telling a client they would die young? Not one of my classmates had been told they'd die young or painfully or poor, so while I was excited, I remained skeptical. I was at a crossroads. Raised a fundamentalist Christian. A recent practitioner of tarot reading. A half-believing psychic-medium myself. I was treading water, unsure which direction to swim in, which way led to a solid shore.

She continued: "Here, I see you getting married once. I see you having the opportunity to raise three children—two biological, one adopted. I also see you . . . being good at working with your hands." That's where she lost me. I would've never gotten a ribbon at the county fair or a 4-H convention with my own woodworking; my dad, a construction worker, helped me. In my junior high FACs class, I was accused of cheating when my quilt looked "too professional." Sure, I'd had my grandmother's help, but the rows were crooked and the batting was coming out. Being good with my hands? Hardly. "I also see you working with paper and numbers. Eventually, you'll start your own business, and later in life, you'll travel across the ocean to help people."

When I didn't look all that impressed, she asked what it is I wanted to do.

“I like film, so I guess I want to be a director.”

“I see. You’ll get a call to California soon, and you should take it.”

“Okay, and what about . . .”

“What?”

“I’m just trying to think of how to phrase it.” She waited, turning her hands into a steeple. Her caked-on eye-liner made her gaze all the more intense, like an Egyptian priestess staring at me from across the eons. “I guess . . . I have some psychics in my family—my mom’s sisters, and I was wondering if you could tell me if I am, too.”

She seemed blindsided, unaccustomed to such questions during a palm reading session. Love. Money. Sex. Those are the things clients ask about. Stumbling over her words a bit, she said, “Well, these sorts of things definitely spread in families. If you ever read cards, be careful not to put your own emotions into them.” It felt like she was throwing bits of advice at me and hoping something would stick, but when she mentioned cards, my eye caught the decks on the shelf behind her.

“Can you give me a reading with one of those?”

“It’s twenty-five dollars.”

I’d used my last ten dollars on her, and our advisors wouldn’t hand out more money until the piano bar, so I rushed outside and asked my classmates to loan me some money. Although I wasn’t sold on her, not quite yet, I’d always wanted my cards read, but Mrs. Bennett intervened. “The bus is almost here. There isn’t enough time.” As if on cue, the dusty yellow school bus pulled up to the curb and flashed its hazards. I didn’t get to say goodbye or apologize for running out.

That night, while on the bus back from the show, I mentioned to Rebecca that I thought I was psychic.

She scoffed. “You? How? Prove it.” Hillary chimed in, as did many of my classmates, brushing off my claims after so many of them had just been thoroughly convinced by a stranger.

I looked out the window and let them return to their previous conversations, my eyes stuck on the bundles of city lights nestled amongst the trees and hills. I wondered where the palm reader

was. Where she'd parked her Lamborghini that night. If she was using the money she'd earned that day to pay for shots or a new tarot deck. I wondered if our futures really were cut into our palms and if, somehow, I'd go to California one day to start that vague business. When I expressed my skepticism to Hillary later at the resort, stating that "papers and numbers" sounded a lot like accounting work, nothing creative, she offered a different perspective: "Maybe she means, like, TV scripts. You like to write. Maybe that's what she meant. Scripts are made of paper and have numbers on them."

Maybe so, I thought.



When confronting a demon in one's home, it's important to remember if you own a dog. I would've been saved heart palpitations had I known this. I was standing in my mom's hair salon, staring at the closed door that separated the salon from my house. My friend Bri and I had both heard it: a deep, low growl that rumbled through the wood. Earlier that week while folding laundry in the living room, I'd seen a figure from a horror movie—a human-like body topped with a ram's head. Inky with fuzzy borders. When I told my pagan friends about it, they insisted we all check it out, but only Bri, partner of a coven leader, ended up coming inside with me. I reached for the handle and slowly opened the door, soon finding that my dog was waiting on the other side, not the beast I was expecting.

I breathed a sigh of relief but still felt uneasy, as if something were staring at me from far beyond the darkened living room. It was three o'clock in the morning. My parents were asleep. I snuck up to my bedroom, collected my phone charger and anxiety medication, and hurried back down to the salon where Bri was petting my dog, waiting for me. I was too afraid to sleep there that night. I swore that I'd felt it move behind me, the demonic entity, breathing down my neck as its invisible eyes seared my skin. I couldn't stay another night. Bri's partner, the only one I trusted to do anything about it, was busy working at the corrections facility some twenty miles away. They wouldn't be off until morning, so

Bri offered me her place. On the ride there, I sent a quick e-mail to my professor, whose class I would surely miss the next day, stating I'd had a panic attack and that my medicine might prevent me from waking up on time.

When her partner, Kai, walked into the bedroom, Bri and I were both passed out. "It's a good thing I know you're gay, Korbin," they said, "because if I'd found another man in bed with my girlfriend, I would've castrated him." Bri explained the situation, that there was a demon in my house, and I asked if there was anything they could do. They sighed. "How the fuck do you get yourself in these situations?"

Honestly, I didn't know. Lessons from my Christian upbringing echoed in my head. Even if I didn't identify as one, I was a witch by biblical standards. I read tarot cards. I spoke to spirits. I hung out with a group of self-identified pagans, some of which who claimed to be the children of demons, others who just enjoyed burning sage and studying crystals. The coven lacked any real cohesion other than our otherness, and most of us met through the university's queer-ally coalition, so we had that going for us, too—which, in turn, made me wonder just how compounded my damnation would surely be. I still felt Christian, still believed in the Abrahamic God and that Jesus sacrificed himself. From a young age, I was told that we Christians would be spiritually attacked. Was I under attack for being a believer, or was I under attack for being wickedly witchy and queer?

We stole some willow branches from a nearby pond and spread them around the yard that morning, my mom's clients glancing out between conversations. Bri's partner commanded that the spirit leave, pointed a sword toward the sky, and then it was over. There was no gust of wind to blow the evil out, not thunder cracking in the sky, no ghostly flames keeping from the eaves. It worked, though. After see off Bri and her partner, I took a nap on the couch and felt at peace. No unseen eyes. Not hot breath.

A few weeks later it began to rain, and a few of us from the coven wanted to hang out, specifically at a bridge that crossed a deep ditch on the north end of campus. There, we listened to the drops crash against the metal roof and watched as leaves and

blooms swayed when struck. It was as if the world were dancing before us, so we decided to dance, too. We took off our shoes and dashed out into the rain, laughing, spreading our arms out, drinking in the energy of the universe. Summer, who believed herself to be a princess of Hell, asked if I felt anything.

I closed my eyes and focused, calling out to whatever forces might've be around me. Summer's condescending nature, though aggravating, made me want to prove myself, and when nothing came, I think my mind conjured something in its place.

"My ancestors," I finally said. "My kin."

Some believe that their souls are wrought from more than just human energy. Some from angels. Some from demons. Some from fey. What stood before me in my mind was shimmering and metallic, its skin supple but marked by an overlapping series of scales. I spat out the first word that came to my mind: Merfolk.

"You're a fucking fish," Summer laughed, but without her usual harsh edge. She approved—I could tell. When I didn't say anything else, she laughed again and threw her head back toward the sky. "The spirits!"

For once, I didn't care or question if she were delusional, if we all were. Instead, I focused on the feeling of the rain falling against my skin, the chill of the earth beneath my feet, the sensation of something lifting me up, as if gravity were slowly turning off, as if we were all magical enough to float into the sky.



Two months into my study abroad program in South America, my boyfriend's family threatened to kick me out. It was a risky arrangement to begin with, and they weren't even my planned host family. I was supposed to stay with our friend, Vale, who lived about twenty minutes away, but her brother needed the guest room during my first week there, so Camilo's mom offered to let me live with them. Just until Vale's brother flew back to Florida. The night before I was supposed to move out, though, Camilo's mom asked if I wanted to stay. I immediately said yes. She pointed at me with a shiny pink nail and said, "You get one chance. Any mistakes, and you're out."

“his, of course, was said in Spanish, but Camilo’s sister, Ani, translated it for me.

“Te prometo,” I said.

The agreement was sealed with a tight hug and a plan to move Camilo’s toys out of his dresser so that I’d have a place to put my clothes. We made it two months with this arrangement. Camilo and I would wait until around two or three o’clock in the morning to have sex, finishing quickly. It was an adrenaline rush every time because everyone lived on the second floor with only a small common room between us, and the bathroom was right next to his parents’ bedroom. But we’d gotten cocky, sloppy. Eli Roth’s movie *The Clown* was playing loudly to cover up the noise we were making in his bedroom. I was lying on my side, the front of my shorts pulled down, getting head with my back to the door when she came in shouting, “¡Sali de acá!” I quickly and strategically rolled over to pull my pants up—obscured by the comforter, trying my best to act just as surprised as her, albeit a little more confused.

She asked us a hundred times what we were doing, eventually coming to the decision that I had to be out by morning, despite my boyfriend swearing that we’d been doing nothing, that I was just his friend, nothing more. But her anger soon turned to shame as I had to ask Vale’s mom if I could finish out my last few weeks of studying at their house. Hours after the arrangements had been made, Camilo came into my room, not needing to knock as his mother required that all doors be open from then on. “She’s going to talk to Doña Ramonita in the morning and ask if we’ve done anything.”

“And if she says we have?”

He didn’t need to answer. I didn’t even need to ask.

Doña Ramonita was a well-respected name in the Navarro household. She was known for her ability to speak with the Virgin Mary, her ear pressed close to Heaven’s mouth. Like most Latin America countries, Paraguay is deeply Catholic and superstitious, so what Doña Ramonita said would be believed. After all, it came from the mouth of the Virgin Herself. I later learned that the only reason I’d been allowed to stay the first week -- other than the fact that I was, as my boyfriend put it, very *carismático* --

was because Doña Ramonita told Camilo's mom that I was a good person.

She'd had her reservations ever since seeing a post I'd made in the U.S. with Camilo, a picture of us posing in front of the Equality House in Topeka, Kansas. Our relationship had been kept a secret since its conception, but even posing in front of a pro-LGBT building was dangerous, open to analysis. I had to take down the photo, but there was no way to delete the evidence of what Camilo and I had done. My fate rested in the hands of a woman I'd never met, one who had a near-direct connection to God.

Surprisingly, though, the threat of being kicked out faded away, and his mom never again mentioned the incident. I wasn't sure if she really did meet with Doña Ramonita. While still had to keep the doors of the bedrooms wide open, even during the nights when the mosquitos threatened to suck us dry in our sleep, the old dynamics came back. We joked together again, cupping our hands above our heads, making them into ass's ears. Laughing. Treating our fists as hooves and tapping them together. It was something she'd taught me the night I arrived, and I was sure to keep it up, to act natural—pretend I wasn't afraid she was seconds away from uprooting me.

Even after I left, she would ask when I planned on returning, reminding me that I would have a free place to stay. If she had talked to Doña Ramonita after the incident, what did that mean? Did Doña Ramonita lie to her? Did the Virgin Mary lie to Doña Ramonita? Was Doña Ramonita even psychic? If one of them had lied for me, I reasoned that converting from Protestantism to Catholicism would be a respectful "thank you." When I returned home, I strung up a rosary around my car's rearview mirror, something every Paraguayan did, and I kissed it at the end of every road trip.



The generic testing company 23andMe told me in a report that I have an increased risk of developing celiac disease. I'm predisposed to

having an average weight and unlikely to develop a bald spot, which is a relief because my dad's bald spot is prominent. Out of the eighty-six reports, though, not one told me if I was predisposed to addiction—not that I need one to. In my twenties, my mom told me that she almost left my dad when I was an infant due to his alcoholism, an addiction he overcame and then fell back into the grips of during my senior year of college. When I was medicated for my ADHD, my brother would often steal my pills; whether he took them, sold them, or did both is debatable and dependent upon who you ask: him or my parents. He was on his own prescription at the time, but when he started carving away at the wooden doorframes of our house, complaining of worms in his phone case, we knew something else was inside him.

These are strong indicators of an inherently addictive personality among those in my immediate family, but the strongest, in my opinion, are my mom's two sisters: Kristie and Kymm. Perhaps there were early signs of this genetic predisposition in the family, long before I had graduated from the D.A.R.E. program at school and learned what a controlled substance was. I remember one summer night, when I was nine or ten, looking out at my grandma's lawn. It was summer on the East Coast and the ocean breeze tinged the air with salt. Cicadas sang in humming choruses that swelled and diminished in unison. Out on the deck, I was flanked by my two aunts, and I asked them what they were whispering about.

"Dad's out there," said Aunt Kristie, pointing to a bundle of tall grass.

Their dad had been dead for years, ever since I was two—throat cancer.

Aunt Kymm shuddered. "He's beautiful, like an angel. He's watching us." Their blue eyes shone with awe. Mine were scrunched in confusion. I saw nothing out in the pitch-black mouth of night, though I could imagine him: bathed in white-yellow light, clothed in some sort of cliché robe, wings nestled against his back, a face I only knew from videos and photos hanging up at home. The conversation then quickly switched to how well my grandma's watermelons were coming in, how Kristie's corn was growing well.

In my twenties, my mom told me that is wasn't corn, but pot.

The next day, we went crabbing . We used chicken meat in traps and attached to ropes to draw out the crustaceans. We took our catch to Aunt Kristie's house where her husband, Greg, set about boiling the brown-blue creatures until they were red. The high hiss that came from the pot was them screaming, he said, and he screamed with them, cackling. Later, Aunt Kristie showed us around the place, pointing out different paintings she'd done. Roosters. Flowers. More abstract pieces we couldn't quite make out, which we joked must've been done while she was drunk. When my mom left for the bathroom, Aunt Kristie turned to me and said, "You know, the spirits in the attic, I just listen to them and let them move the brush." She paused, a grim look covering her face. "I've gotta be careful though, or they'll take over all of me. I can't listen to them all the time because they tell me to do bad things."

Exposure to my mom's side of the family was limited, as Kristie and my grandma lived in Delaware and Kymm in Arizona. My family had opted to stay behind in Missouri. We'd either drive or fly out to see them each summer when I was younger, but soon the visits became less frequent and more rushed. I grew older, and the drug habits of my aunts became more noticeable, though less so than those of Kristie's eldest child, Kristopher. By the time I was old enough to know what cocaine was, I'd already seen him snort it out of a Ziploc bag in my grandma's driveway before peeling out in her work truck, nearly hitting a passing car in the process. My brother and I stayed up late that night, checking to see if Kristopher could break in using a credit card to unlock the doors, our flashlights shining into the wet dark.

My mom often credits these later summers as the turning point for my brother, Kolby. He told that he'd started drinking alcohol at the age of fifteen and had smoked his first cigarette soon after at some house party; but it was in Delaware where we felt brave enough to smoke pot. Kristopher had offered him a joint, standing in our grandma's backyard, stoking a fire he'd started by the koi pond. We stopped going out to see my mom's side of the family after that. The hushed conversations of my aunts' drug problems soon turned to common topics worthy of a laugh or

eyeroll. Aunt Kymm was hooked on pain pills, probably because of her abusive ex-husband, and Aunt Kristie was on God-knows-what for the umpteenth time. Instead of horrors, they were disappointments.

A few months before graduating from college, I called to ask my grandma if she would be coming to see me walk across the stage.

“I don’t know, baby,” she said. “I’ve got these problems with my knees and it’s just so expensive.” Like most of our conversations, my grandma then launched into all of her recent expenditures: how Aunt Kristie needed money for radiation treatment, how Aunt Kymm needed a cell phone to look for a job, how Kristopher needed bail money because he’d just had a child with his addict girlfriend. The list of expenses grew so large, I wondered how she was able to afford any of it with an aging cosmetologist’s income.

She made it though, somehow, and so did my Aunt Kristie, who had volunteered herself to accompany my grandma on the trip. It took all of five minutes for Kristie to start ranting to me about conspiracy theories at the house. “The government is watching us through street cameras and tracking us.” I played it off as Aunt Kristie’s characteristically enigmatic behavior. My mom assured me that she had improved, unlike Kymm, based off the few conversations they’d had since she saw them last, and yet—

Each morning, Aunt Kristie would walk up to my dad and ask, “Hey, Kyle, can I get just a little snort of something?” After the first day, he learned that this meant a shot of vodka to “help” her throat. When we caught her with white powder on her nose, she said it was her migraine medication, which had to be snorted. She was erratic, going on and on about things that had never happened, like how she graduated from college, too, or how she invented a way to keep horses’ hooves from foundering. “I called up my dentist and the vet,” she said through a cigarette, “and I told them, ‘Look, just fill in the soft parts like you do cavities. It’ll work.’ They took it right to the University of Pennsylvania.” I only half-listened, busy reading a tarot spread for one of my clients via e-mail. She asked me if I remembered her

house, the ghosts in the attic.

A night or two later, right after I'd left to celebrate my college graduation at a bar with friends, she collapsed in the kitchen: her eyes wide, mouth open, hands up and clawed in a defensive position. She didn't move or speak for a whole thirty seconds. My mom thought she'd died. My sister-in-law, Bailey, had her phone ready to call 911. Then, all of a sudden, Aunt Kristie got up and swore she was fine. "I thought I was in bed," she shrugged before shuffling off to the master bedroom.

Understandably, my mom was a nervous wreck after that, and was relieved as soon as she dropped her sister and mom off at the airport a few days later. "I wish Mom could've stayed, but I felt like I was going crazy with Kristie in the house. I didn't realize how bad she was." She walked over to the bar we have in the house and was surprised to find the bottle of cherry vodka set out and completely empty. "Didn't Bailey get this for you on graduation day?" She had, and I'd only had a shot of it in a dirty Shirley Temple. She held up her personal bottle of Crown Royal. "What the fuck? This is empty, too." Even with a resident alcoholic, we knew it was Kristie. Like always, we rolled our eyes.

I was brushing my teeth that night when I saw my orange bottle of cough syrup infused with oxycodone sitting out. It'd been prescribed to me by the ER doctor for bronchitis earlier that month. I had taken it sparingly, just like the pain pills after my knee surgery, because I carried the weight and fear of my family's predisposition to addiction in the back of my mind. My mom had urged me to lock it up somewhere and not to leave it in plain sight. I said I was better and didn't need it. I wasn't worried. Disposing of it properly had slipped my mind until that night, and again I put it off, ignoring the bottle for a few more days until my mom pulled me into the bathroom.

he picked up the bottle and said, "Last night, I was coughing so bad I thought I was going to choke to death. I went to my medicine cabinet and didn't find any cold medicine. Your dad must've used the last of it, so I came in here. I saw the bottle and thought I'd just take a swig, but it wasn't as thick as I thought it would be. It was like water and got all over me. I was half-asleep.

Maybe I imagined it, but is this water?" Sure enough, it was. The viscous syrup had turned to water.

"Aunt Kristie," I said.

"Maybe it was your brother."

"Kolby isn't stupid enough to steal my cough syrup and replace it with water. It's not even the right amount." When my brother stole my ADHD medicine, he'd often leave two or three pills behind, even if the bottle had been full. He wouldn't down an entire bottle of cough syrup and replace it with water; he would've left some behind just in case I needed it.



We'd known each other only for a few days, but I had already confessed to him that he was my soulmate. We both agreed that it felt true, realistic, unquestionable. He'd come to my fiction reading earlier that week in Cincinnati, both of us attending the same conference, and I'd noticed him the moment he walked in, far in the back of the room, almost capable of being missed. A man, presumably around my age, presumably Hispanic. Dark hair, styled and fashionable. Beard.

God damn, I thought. That beard.

He sat down in the back-left corner of the room, situated perfectly within a window created by other attendees. I don't think he ever turned his head toward the front once, never noticed that I was only focusing on two points: the paper I was reading from, and him. While scrolling through the conference app, searching, my friend had found him: Eric.

Each card I pulled, each spread I laid out, they all said the same thing. He gave too much of himself to others. Didn't focus enough on himself, was selfless to a fault. He nodded along all throughout, and when the subject of love came up, he mentioned his boyfriend. The cards mentioned a necessary break-up. I didn't say this, though, at least not at first. I collected the cards. Reshuffled. Redistributed them. Similar message. Repeat. Still, same message, so I told him right there, in the middle of the hotel lobby, that his long-time boyfriend wasn't good for him. I wondered if I had

somehow manipulated the cards, if I had some psychic power to pnyly pull the heartbreak cards, the cards that urge the querent to walk away, to find greener pastures and more giving soil.

Eric agreed with the spread.

He then asked if I'd heard of a nearby bar, one with robots that serve you alcohol. Twenty minutes and a few outfit changes later, we were squeezing through throngs of bodies, people at varying levels of drunkenness, a forty-year-old woman's birthday posse, hotter and thinner gay men who either eyed us suspiciously or ignored us completely. Eric opened a tab, said the first round was on him, and ordered me a sour apple cider. It felt surreal, like I'd been dropped into some sort of movie. Step here. Sip here. Say the right words, and this taken man can be yours.

There were robots, but they were reserved for the private party rooms. The bartender would place a drink inside and send it off, the robot following wires that spanned the ceiling, eventually drifting away into the dark beyond, dropping into one of the private rooms. The DJ announced that he was taking requests, and Eric asked what music I listened to.

"I want to get you to dance!" he laughed.

"I don't dance!"

"Everyone dances with the right music."

On the walk in, I mentioned that I loved Carly Rae Jepsen, and when the next song to play was "Runaway with Me," I accused him of sneaking behind my back and making a request. Playful anger.

"Me? No, never." He winked.

Later on the streets of Cincinnati, the snow falling slowly and directly from cloud to pavement, no wind to blow the flakes about, Eric casually mentioned that he could handle a break-up with his boyfriend. "I wouldn't be sad," he said. "I mean, it's easy to go on, you know?"

"People in love don't say that."

"Maybe."

He wanted to take me to his favorite pizza place, which he had discovered earlier for lunch, but it was closed. We checked our phones. It was nearly two in the morning. We meandered back to

to the hotel. I stole what glances I could along the way back, admiring the white snowflakes that nestled themselves silently against his hair, his sand-colored skin, proud nose, full lips, and soft eyes. He rode the elevator with me to my floor, and when we stepped out into the hallway, I wondered for a moment if we would kiss. Pulling his left hand from his coat pocket, he gestured at the window, the river that sparkled against the snow-covered banks. After a few moments, he thanked me for the night and retreated to the elevator, his smile and wave eventually stolen by the closing doors, and I was left alone in the hallway.

The next day, the last of the conference, I followed him around the hotel, attended his reading, took pictures, got pizza with him for dinner. We both agreed that it felt oddly natural, and later that night in his hotel room, between helping him pack his bags and discussing poetry, I told him the truth.

“Your grandma is here, and she wants me to tell you something.”

He looked at me blankly as I described her. Dancing to traditional Mexican music in a floral dress, complaining that he doesn’t eat enough, mentioning something about parrots or birds. I was afraid I was drawing on my imagination, and that it in turn was drawing on stereotypes, but he eventually nodded. I hummed part of the song I was hearing in my head, and tears collected in the corners of his almond eyes, threatening themselves against the creases. He recognized it, said it was a song about loving someone across lifetimes, so that’s when I said it:“

I think . . . you’re my soulmate. I’ve seen it. Well, sort of. I don’t want to look deeper, but I know it deep down inside. It’s fucking crazy. I sound crazy.”

I felt his hand softly grasp my shoulder. I hadn’t realized that I’d been looking down and away, anywhere but his face, but he drew my chin up with a finger. We locked gazes, and it felt like I’d seen those eyes all my life—hose same eyes despite different shades and shapes and ages. My mind conjured up two figures that morphed with their surroundings. A man and woman, draped in furs, crossing through the snow. An older man briefly glancing at a young girl passing through a dusty marketplace, the sun hot and

younger than it is now. Two men, friends, hunting in a hot jungle. An older woman delivering a baby that too soon takes its last breath. In all those faces I saw my own and his, the same yet so very different. It all moved so fast. It blurred. It created a chaotic flurry in my mind.

Despite feeling insane, I let it all roll through me—like an anxiety attack, like a fever. I stopped questioning what I saw and relayed it all to him. When the images stopped coming coherently, he asked me one question:

“Which one of us was the old woman?”

I thought for a moment. “Me. It was me. You were the baby.”

A smile bloomed. “You let me die as a fucking baby? I’ll never forgive you for that!”

The ensuing laughter kept me warm despite the February chill that seeped into my hotel room, into the van I rode to the airport later that night, leaving Eric and Cincinnati with only a hug and a conference name tag.



The client’s mother came in almost clearly to me, like a remembered movie scene whose actors I had forgotten, famous faces meshing and melding in an incoherent mess. It was my fifth call that week, most of which had been mediumship sessions, too. The client wanted to make contact with her mother, and her mother seemed to be coming through. The woman in my mind was interpolated with flashes of churches and nun’s habits. Then, a pipe organ. Religious chanting and choral swells.

“Was your mom particularly religious?” I asked.

“Incredibly.” I ask my clients to keep responses short and non-descript, at least at first so I can assure I’ve made contact with a proper spirit and not fill in gaps with my imagination.

“Probably pretty common in Alabama, huh?” I joke with my clients about my vagueness. It’s a self-awareness that -- I think -- helps foster honesty and transparency within sessions. I dug deeper within myself, within the metaphysical connection with the spirit.

“But she doesn’t feel, like, super fundamentalist, y’know? Maybe judgy.” I scoffed, the spirit’s tone of voice echoing in my head like a whisper. “Very judgy, but she wouldn’t force her views on others, not necessarily.”

I paced around my apartment, eyes closed per usual to help with concentration, but I ended up stubbing my little toe against the coffee table. “Shit!” I inhaled sharply. “Sorry. Sorry. I just stubbed my toe.” The client laughed, which helped cut the tension. “Anyway, does that sound like her? Is that close? Remember: don’t make the shoe fit if it doesn’t.”

She laughed. “No, that’s definitely her. What’s she look like?”

I hate that question.

“Um, maybe blonde hair? I can’t quite tell.”

“She was definitely a red head.”

“Yeah, I’ll take the L on that one.”

“What’s she doing? Is she saying anything?”

I concentrated harder, pushing a stack of ungraded student papers away from the edge of the table. “I don’t really know how to say this. It’s not coming through like a voice. More like an idea. Something about a missing child.” I paused, a thought sparking. “Did you have a miscarriage?” After a short silence, I said, “No, an abortion. Did you have an abortion after she died?”

The silence was broken by quiet weeping that echoed out of the phone.

“Yes. Yes, I did. How did she know?”

I saw it more clearly. A red-headed woman sitting beside a younger version of the client. They were in a generic waiting room with fluorescent lights and old magazines. “She was there,” I said. “She was with you. Not during the procedure, you know, because she wouldn’t really . . . you know, approve, but she was there for you, holding your hand in the waiting room.” I wasn’t sure if I was lying, but I felt like it was the truth, so I kept going, not wanting to lose the connection I’d spent fifteen minutes searching for. “She says she doesn’t blame you, that she still loves you.”

And then, suddenly, a yellow butterfly.

“What is it?” she asked, noting my sudden silence.

“It’s just . . . I don’t know. It could be nothing. It’s probably nothing. But I see a yellow butterfly, if that means anything to you.”

She grew quiet, then: “I have a yellow butterfly tattoo on my shoulder. To remember her, I mean. She loved them and I always see them.” There was a brief pause. “Is the . . . is she with the baby?”

Everything collapsed into darkness. No more mom. No more butterflies. “I . . . I don’t really know what happens in that kind of situation. I mean, I don’t see anything, but that doesn’t mean she’s not.”

The rest of the session ran smoothly. There wasn’t much else to say. *Your mother is waiting for you. She loves you. She’s with you. Just talk to her if you ever need her. Remember the yellow butterfly.* It felt cold and rehearsed because it sort of was, but I was filled with a warmth, a soothing compression of sorts, as if I really had been connected to something else, to someone else, and I really hoped that I had been.

Jameson Canyon Road

Sue Granzella

“Come on, Mom! We’re going to see Anita and Eleanor.” I grabbed a Diet Coke out of her mini-fridge. My stomach was churning as I paced through Mom’s small apartment, hunting for details I may have forgotten. It was ridiculous to be drinking soda at nine o’clock on a winter morning. But I was nervous, and it helped to hold something in my hand.

“I’m ready! But why are we going?” My eighty-three-year-old mother pushed herself up from the corduroy recliner, one of the few items remaining in her living room. Mom seemed serenely oblivious to my anxiety. She looked the same as ever – white, hair-sprayed bouffant, carefully applied lipstick, and a bold floral blouse matching her fuchsia-colored polyester pants. Her large brown eyes were calm, her forehead smooth and relaxed as she smiled brightly at me.

I took a deep breath and blew it out through a little “o” in my lips.

In September, my three out-of-town siblings and I had gathered to figure out what we’d do when Mom’s worsening dementia would eventually necessitate a move from Napa’s Redwoods, the independent-living community she’d moved into two years prior. Suddenly, in December, it was time to enact our plan. We’d arranged to have someone with Mom around the clock for the past three days, ever since she’d begun wandering away. Twice over the chilly weekend she had taken off, roaming the streets for hours, telling me later that she’d been looking for her church. So on this Wednesday morning, after having driven up to Napa the evening before, I was moving my mother into Creekside, an assisted-living place near to my sister’s home in Elk Grove. Creekside was two hours from Napa, and had an excellent reputation and a “memory care unit” for the time when Mom’s dementia would progress even more. She would get quality care at Creekside and see her grandsons nearly every day. It was the right decision.

But “right” did not equal “easy” for me. Since I’d arrived

he day before, every move, glance, and sight had shouted at me, torturing me. As the two of us entered the breakfast room arm-in-arm that morning, enveloped by the tinkling of dishware and the scent of French toast, all I could hear was, *“This is the last time you’ll ever walk into this dining room with Mom.”* When we grabbed the keys from her puppy-dog key-holder by the front door and went downstairs to the mailbox, the refrain was, *“This is the last time she’ll ever be in this elevator.”* I couldn’t silence the voice; it was too loud in my head.

Each “last time” hit me like a mallet, the truth reverberating inside. My mother had lived in Napa for fifty-two years, and that time was suddenly over. We wouldn’t be bringing her back for a visit; she couldn’t remember her dozens of friends once they stopped being part of her daily routine. I knew that Mom wouldn’t be in Napa again until we returned to bury her in Tulocay Cemetery.

This eerie awareness consumed me, making insignificant tasks momentous. Stopping for Diet Coke at the 7-Eleven next door made me think of all the times I’d also grabbed a couple of mini-Reese’s for Mom. Folding her clothes and piling them on her bed while Mom watched “Wheel of Fortune” reminded me of boxing up Dad’s clothes after he’d died. Picking up her mail reminded me that she’d never again have a Napa mailing address, and I’d never again have a parent living in Napa. Every move I made was a reminder of change and of loss. I wasn’t ready for my tie to Napa to be severed. And when the thought pushed its way into me that my mother would soon be gone not just from Napa but forever, I felt a tightness swelling in my chest. It was hard to take in enough air to breathe over it and push it down.

I pulled open her apartment door, Mom placed her hand in the crook of my elbow, and together we walked down the lengthy hallway toward the elevator, my longer stride slowed to accommodate hers. We passed the paintings that hung above vacant upholstered chairs, scenes of soothing landscapes devoid of people. The fabric and paintings blanketed us in warm shades of burgundy and gold. Our steps padding on the carpet made the only sound in the hallway, other than the soft instrumental music floating down from

hidden speakers.

We reached Eleanor's room first. I knocked hard on the door, knowing it would take her a while to answer. Eleanor always moved slowly, laboring to push her walker and oxygen tank. The door swung open, and she smiled at us in sunny surprise.

"So nice to see you two!" Her feet clad in slippers, she moved aside and motioned for us to enter her small studio. She had on a light blue cardigan and dark blue sweatpants, and wore her thick white hair in soft curls around her face. Eleanor's cheeks were pink, and she was a bit out of breath. It occurred to me that she was usually sitting when I saw her.

Once inside, I could hear the faint hiss from the oxygen tubing. I noticed how bland the apartment seemed after the rich colors of the hallway. White pillows and a beige blanket on the bed, bare cream-colored walls, tan carpet, and light filtering through the filmy sheers across the single window. The clinical scent of Comet cleanser wafted over from the kitchenette. The starkness of the room was in contrast to the friendly warmth Eleanor exuded, the light in her eyes, the way she leaned toward us when she spoke.

Eleanor was ninety-two, and never complained about her diabetes or the clear nasal tubes of oxygen that she couldn't live without. She had a ready wit, a sharp mind, and a kind spirit. Whenever I stayed for dinner with Mom, I noticed Eleanor's gentle responses to my mother's superficial comments, and her patience with Mom's lack of understanding. I wondered if my mother made for a lonely dinner companion for someone of Eleanor's intelligence. Yet she always treated Mom with such warmth. I loved her for it.

It felt too intimate to sit on her bed and I couldn't take the only chair, so I remained standing. Mom sat in the chair, and Eleanor sat near he looked at Mom as she said it, and then her gaze found me. Eleanor's expression was calm as she met my eyes directly. She nodded, and smiled slightly. She looked peaceful. It hit me that, by age ninety-two, she'd likely said goodbye to many, many friends. I felt a gripping sensation inside my chest, something being squeezed tight. "Thank you!" Mom said brightly. After some moments of hand-patting and murmured wishes for good health,

he looked at Mom as she said it, and then her gaze found me. Eleanor's expression was calm as she met my eyes directly. She nodded, and smiled slightly. She looked peaceful. It hit me that, by age ninety-two, she'd likely said goodbye to many, many friends. I felt a gripping sensation inside my chest, something being squeezed tight.

"Thank you!" Mom said brightly.

After some moments of hand-patting and murmured wishes for good health, I indicated to Mom that we should go. I urged Eleanor not to get up, and pressed my cheek against her cushiony shoulder, trying not to pinch off the snaking oxygen tubes. Up close to her, I caught a familiar whiff of White Shoulders bath powder. The softness of her was comforting, motherly, and then the back of my throat felt all wobbly and I swallowed hard against it, afraid to let my resolve crack. I blubbered out a few words, blending "Thank you" and "You've been so good to my mother" before I shepherded Mom to the door.

When we turned for a final wave, Eleanor said simply, "I love you, Marie."

Mom's face shone as she called back, "I love you, too!"

*

From Eleanor's apartment, Mom and I took the stairs down. Many of the residents had placed plastic holiday wreaths or jingly Christmas ornaments on their front doors. As I rapped on Anita's door, Mom pointed out the leggy elf hanging from a hook.

"Just a minute!" We heard the metallic scraping of a recliner footrest being lowered, and then muffled sounds of wheels squeaking as Anita pushed her walker to the door.

"I'm here with Marie!" I called. The door opened to the sound of a blaring TV and there she was, pleased, waving us in.

"I'm taking it easy this morning," she said, gesturing toward her slippers and nondescript loose cotton housedress. Anita's dark eyes crinkled tightly when her big grin dissolved into laughter. Her eyes were so bright with enthusiasm that it was hard to remember she was nearly blind. Her wiry grey hair was cut short, framing her face in thick spears that refused to lie flat. Anita's sturdy build

elied her eighty-four years, and her energetic hug gripped me tightly. I held on to her for an extra second this morning, pressing my hands against the giving flesh of her back.

Anita's one-bedroom apartment was homey, bubbling with life. Lush plants twisted along a trellis visible just outside her large window. Beyond the patio you could see the wide expanse of lawn at the front of Redwoods, bordered by bushes of pink baby roses. It was toasty in her living room, and as I caught a whiff of cinnamon, I remembered Anita telling me that she liked to bake apples.

She grabbed the remote to turn down the TV while I scoped out the seating situation. Besides Anita's recliner, there was one easy chair in the room. It had a forest-green towel spread over it, upon which lay one of the largest cats I had ever seen. Its excessive flesh poured across the seat in a puddle of brownish fur, motionless except for its alert eyes which surveyed us impassively. Anita made no move to shoo the regal feline into the other room, so I pulled out a couple of the dining-table chairs for Mom and me.

Anita had been a friend of our family for thirty-five years. The fact that she would be a familiar face once Mom moved into the building had given my dad some peace before he died. But we'd had no idea how much of a lifeline Anita would be. She was Mom's daily meal companion and her personal "activities coordinator," prodding her to go to music performances and exercise classes. Anita arranged for my mother a weekly ride to Mass, and she called us whenever she noticed something unusual in Mom's behavior. Most importantly, she talked with Mom every day, keeping my mother's mind active, filling it with news of neighbors and family.

Theirs was a sweet duet; Anita reminded my mom of scheduled outings, and Mom read the menu to Anita at every meal. I can't know what it meant to my mother to be able to contribute something tangible to their unequal partnership. I like to believe that it helped her to feel normal, knowing that her reading assistance was just part of friendship's give-and-take.

Anita knew that today was moving day. Her dark eyes were magnified by thick glasses, and as she looked from my mom's face to mine, I knew she'd figured out why we were there. I decided not

to put it into words.

“Oh! Marie, I have something to give you!” Anita pushed herself up to her feet again and started rummaging in her purse. “I know it’s here somewhere....”

As Anita continued digging, she passed on some Redwoods gossip. “Jane told me that Esther has so many clothes she has to hang them in the bathroom!” We chatted about the latest lunch trip on Bob’s bus, and about which of Anita’s daughters would be home for the holidays. The enormous tabby blinked at us from her throne.

Finally, thrusting something toward me, Anita said, “I think this is it. What does it say right there?”

I looked at the object she’d placed into my hand – a painted wooden Christmas ornament, the size of a roll of quarters. It was a cat, wearing a green and red stocking cap. I squinted to make out the gold lettering.

“It says ‘Anita’.” I swallowed hard, and handed it back to her. Anita lit up.

“That’s it!” She turned to press it into Mom’s hand and said, “Now you can remember me, Marie. You can just see that little cat and read my name and think of me.”

This is the last time Mom will ever see Anita.

The day Dad had found out he had only days left to live, I’d followed his wishes and reserved an apartment for Mom upstairs from Anita. Now, in saying goodbye to her, it felt like Dad’s last wish had been completely fulfilled. It was as if I were saying goodbye to him all over again, while also getting ready to say goodbye to Mom. All this finality – the swelling inside of my chest pressed tighter and tighter, too big for my body to contain.

Anita turned to me and said in an undertone, “Let me know how she does, okay?” There were more hugs and goodbyes and then we walked away, a very big step closer to really being gone.

There were only a few bags left in the apartment, which Mom and I easily carried out in one trip. I was glad I had parked by the rarely used back door; it didn’t seem so final to walk out along that less familiar route. I pulled my jacket closed against the

December morning chill, and we followed the path past the barren Japanese maples. Once the seat belt was snapped across her, I eased my jam-packed Nissan onto Redwood Road.

There was one last stop to make before driving my mother away from my hometown. We went south on Highway 29 and exited on Lincoln, towards the old part of town. When we reached Jefferson Street, I pulled up alongside the pink-and-white-striped building, and instructed Mom firmly to stay in the car. Then I locked the doors, and dashed inside.

Butter Cream Bakery was a flurry of activity. In the diner area on the right, waitresses hurried past with plates of eggs and toast balanced on extended arms. The sugary aromas from the ovens on the bakery side swirled together with the sizzling bacon and sausage smells from the diner's griddle, the combined effect intoxicating. The clinking of coffee cups and dishes being stacked in bus trays made it tough to hear the young woman as she called out numbers for service at the bakery counter.

This bakery had a long history in my family. When I was a child, my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins used to stop there every time they drove up from the Bay Area to visit us. They'd plop the big pink square cardboard box down on our kitchen table, we children would pull the flaps open, and the fragrance that floated out was almost as sweet as the taste of the fried pastries. There were frosted balls of golden dough oozing sticky red jelly, braided logs with shiny maple icing, and cake donuts dipped in chocolate frosting and rainbow sprinkles. The delicacies from Butter Cream Bakery were entwined with the warm sweetness of my family's togetherness in our Napa home, braided in my childhood memory like the strips of dough in the maple twists.

My sister, had recently started a new doughnut tradition with Mom. They had been in line at Starbucks, and Nan had noticed some old-fashioned doughnuts behind the glass, both plain and chocolate-frosted.

Nan had asked, "Mom how about a doughnut? Would you rather have plain, or chocolate?"

Perplexed, Mom frowned, tipping her head to the side and looking at Nan in genuine puzzlement. "But -- isn't *everything* better

with chocolate?” Why was her daughter asking her a trick question?

When Nan and the guy ahead of her in line had stopped laughing, she'd bought Mom the chocolate one, which Mom relished as much as Nan had ever seen her enjoy any food. After that day, Nan and I brought Mom a chocolate-frosted, old-fashioned doughnut whenever we went to see her. I always grabbed one at the Starbucks near Mom's. But on this, her last day in Napa, I felt a powerful need to get Mom a real doughnut from Butter Cream Bakery.

I strode to the red plastic wheel and tore off my number. Then I inspected the trays of cookies, pastries, and brownies in their tidy rows behind the glass windows. There they were – two chocolate-frosted, old-fashioned doughnuts which had survived the morning rush.

Resisting the urge to run outside and make sure Mom was still in the car, I stepped up to the counter. Within a minute, my number was called, the doughnuts were bagged, and I was hustling back to the car. I'd been with Mom constantly since the evening before; I figured she was aware enough of my presence that she wouldn't bolt while I was inside. Still, I was relieved when I saw her perched on the front seat, her shoulder belt still buckled.

“What'd you get?” Mom's eyes sparked with interest.

“I got us each a doughnut, the kind you like.”

“Ooh!” Mom squealed. “Can I have it now?”

“How about we wait until we're out of town?”

It wasn't that I couldn't yet hold food in my hand. It was that I felt so full and sick and sad and afraid that to put one more thing inside just didn't feel possible. I had no strength left in me to patiently listen to Mom sing along with radio commercials, or get excited about a doughnut. *She will never again go to Butter Cream. She'll never again be on Jefferson Street. She'll never be on Highway 29. She'll never be in Napa. She's leaving Napa forever. This is forever.*

My heart pounded as I drove, tears silently coursing down my cheeks. Hoping that Mom was gazing out her window and not at me, I tried to concentrate on taking deep breaths and thinking of a mantra that would make me feel better. But all I heard was:

This is forever.

By now we were in Jameson Canyon, on the ribbon of road curling over the gentle hills that separate Highway 29 from Interstate 80. The six-mile stretch was peaceful and pretty, the last bit of quiet before the traffic-congested freeway lined with shopping malls and auto dealerships. Jameson Canyon Road was the final stretch that looked and felt like Napa.

As my hometown was fading away behind us, I glanced at Mom, wondering what I would see in her face at this monumental turning point. Surely her expression would reveal some of the sadness and enormity of this day. I was scared to look at her and maybe feel even worse. But I had to know. So I stole a peek.

And what I saw was this: my mother's face, alight with interest and pleasure.

Her forehead was smooth, and her lips held a little half-smile as she gazed at the green fields, the crooked wooden fenceposts, and the stately oaks. She looked serene. She looked happy. *She* was the one who was leaving forever, and she was simply – happy.

The idea floated in that I might feel some relief if I could look at the day the way Mom was seeing it. I didn't really believe I could do it, but I decided to try. I glanced toward my eighty-three-year-old mother, my mother who sometimes forgot that her husband of fifty years had died, my mother who had several times told me that *I* was *her* mother.

“So, Mom, how are you feeling about moving out of Napa?”

“I feel great!” She turned toward me and smiled. “It's sure a nice day!”

The sky was bluish-grey at best, with lots of clouds. Not the puffy, snow-white, pillowy kind. Just thin streaks of grey.

“Look at all the trees!”

We were passing vineyards. Mom had lived in Napa for fifty-two years, and she'd forgotten what grapevines were called.

She laughed, gesturing toward the pasture on the left. “All those *animals!*”

I spotted a few horses in the field. Horses, cows, or goats --

– to Mom, now simply “animals.”

Tears stung my eyes again, but these were different. My mom felt no sense of grief, endings, or momentous milestones. She was sitting next to one of her four children, on a drive, looking out the window at interesting things. She was happy. And that was without even knowing that she was also about to eat a doughnut.

It occurred to me that when I was focused on just being with Mom in the car, I didn’t feel so much loss. I was just out for a drive with my mother. Looking around at what she was seeing had quieted me inside, at least for these minutes.

“Hey, Mom, we haven’t eaten our doughnuts yet. Are you ready for yours?” I grabbed the waxy bag.

“Sure!” She eagerly took it from me. I heard crumply noises.

“Remember, you only get one! The other one’s for me!” I teased, and she laughed.

I held out my hand for the bag, reached in, and pulled off a chunk of sticky, cakey goodness. My teeth broke through the crispy outside into the soft, nutmeg-flavored cake. I licked melted chocolate icing off the roof of my mouth. Perfect. I forced myself to turn away from the thought that this was *the last time Mom will ever have an old-fashioned doughnut from Butter Cream Bakery*. I tried to focus on enjoying every bite. I licked my fingers when I was done.

“What kind are these?” Mom asked. “They’re so *delicious!*”

I wondered if she was thinking that it was the best thing she’d ever eaten. I thought about all the times my husband and I had driven Mom up Mount Saint Helena to the Twin Pines Casino, about the lunches we’d had at the little coffee shop that resembled an old bowling alley snack bar. With the slot machines ding-dinging all around us, we always urged Mom to get the tater tots, assuring her that she loved them. Each time, when she popped the first crispy bit into her mouth, the shining surprise and delight on her face were brand-new. Every single time.

*

I think it rained later that day. I believe it poured. I think that

when my brother-in-law and nephew met me to help unload the car, we'd barely finished before the skies opened up. The strange thing is that when I remember the drive out of Napa, the two of us winding over Jameson Canyon Road, I see the sun shining brilliantly, the sky bright blue. I know that it wasn't that way, because I also remember being struck that Mom saw it as a nice day when the sky was mostly grey.

But what I see in my mind when I remember? I see brightness, and light, and calm, and green, and hope. I just know the sun was shining on us as I drove my mother out of Napa, heading east.

A Love Letter to My HRT

Raine Grayson

To my HRT,

Hi.

It's been awhile.

I'm sorry we haven't seen each other since October of 2018. I know you've been waiting for me and I didn't mean to keep you in suspense for so long.

I feel like I owe you an explanation.

Long story short – I moved. Long story long – I moved to a place where the reception was really bad. **It's not that I haven't wanted to see you – it's just that any channel I tried to reach you through was static.** I don't know what you did to piss off a whole bunch of old red state doctors, therapists, nurse practitioners, and endocrinologists, but they really, really don't know what to do when I bring up your name. Every day they cut another line and the frequency got a little fuzzier between you and I until finally there was just silence.

Some of them didn't think you were safe for me. Can you believe that? I tried to tell them that I've never felt more secure than when wrapped in your arms, but I guess they thought I was looking at you through rose-colored glasses. There's only so many times I can tell someone their colorblind and that I'm just wearing the same glasses that have always allowed me to see clearly – glasses *one of their colleagues* subscribed – before I have to give up.

Other people needed an itemized history of everything you've done to me, no matter how intimate. They wanted to touch every part of my body that you've touched to make sure it wasn't bruised even though their fingers marred me. They kept me locked in a

room for hours and quizzed me on whether or not you were *really* right for me, citing my childhood. They might have opened up a line and let me talk to you, but you and I know better than to play puppet. I knew you were going to be disappointed if I let him reduce me to begging for you. I wasn't going to tell this man you weren't important to me and I wasn't going to let him decide who I was in order to fabricate a demented fairytale about what you and I have. I might have cried...a lot...but you'd be proud of how brave I was. I learned from you that we are worth more – that I am worth more. **You taught me that no matter how much the world screams to me that there is only one answer to the equation, there's always another way to solve it.** I knew I could call you on another frequency that wouldn't burn my skin the way this man's promises seared and sizzled.

Other people simply didn't listen, even when it was their job to. I would tell them how much I missed you and would be met with a blank stare. No matter how many times I asserted that I just needed the phone to pick up and call you, the line remained closed.

It was really quiet without you.

And in the silence, I realized how important you are to me.

You complete me.

I know it always sounds cliché to say that after a break – and I know it's cliché to say “they're called clichés for a reason” – but sometimes one must use the words that are already laid out before them so they can make a rope out of the metaphors and journey safely to the truth.

We had been together for so long I forgot how integral you were to my everyday happiness. **It's easy to take what's in front of you for granted.** By the time the silence had descended on us, I no longer looked forward to our Wednesday rituals. I had forgotten what it was like to count the hours until we could be together.

In the beginning, like any relationship, we were giddy. Every shot of you sent sparks of excitement through my bloodstream. I checked in daily to see how we were doing and celebrated all of our firsts. Foolishly, I thought we had plateaued on our journey together. I'll be honest, right before the silence I had begun to resent you. I was angry you didn't give me what I saw you giving others. I wanted you to cover my face in prickly flowers and to hide my shame from others behind the masc. I got angry every time you stung me and put off seeing you until late in the night. You were a chore because you weren't perfect. I wanted you to be a knight in shining armor when you were really the horse I was supposed to ride in on. **You were my support, not my savior – I had to still do some of the work.**

I'm sorry I took you for granted all the times you were right in front of me. I'll never skip out on you again.

I'm excited to reconnect with my love for you and relearn gratitude as I once again explore the world in a body kissed by you.

I missed your touch.

I missed the roughness you put in my voice as you nestle yourself between my vocal cords.

I missed the faint lines you traced across my upper lip and jaw.

I missed the swell you put in my belly to love and appreciate others.

Every time you touched me it became easier for me to touch someone else. I miss the strength you rooted in me.

I cried a lot in your absence.

Like, a lot.

I forgot how much of my weight you carried on your back. With you, my baggage feels less like baggage and more like weightlifting...if that makes sense. Too macho? Sorry – hey, you're the one you got me going to the gym. I miss the way you held my hand in public and reminded others of who I was. I missed the way you made me smile. I missed the way you stopped the bleeding. The way you stoppered up the parts of me that made me feel wrong and reminded me that my body was right. **That my body was my right to have.**

All this to say, I hope you're not mad and it's so great to be with you again.

I promise I won't let you go this time around. I've got someone whose got really good reception and always lets me borrow his phone. I watched as his eyes lit up the first time I talked about how much I loved you. He said he recognized the type of connection you and I had – he had seen it many times and knew how important finding that special someone can be.

And damnit, if we ever get separated again, know I will climb as many latex-covered, stethoscope-wielding, invalidating mountains to reach you again.

Besides, no one's got *chemistry* like you and I.

Get it?

Yours truly,

Body

Brain

Self

Truth

In the Morning I Dressed in Black

Mercury Marvin Sunderland

February 3, 2019

In the morning I dressed in black. I looked out my college dorm window and it was snowing. It never snows in Olympia, Washington. We just get rain all year. The same thing happened one year minus seventeen days ago. Last year I'd gotten out of my community college class to discover it was snowing. It never snows in Seattle. We just get rain all year.

For breakfast I had Cinnamon Toast Crunch and a mocha and a green apple and two sugar cookies and one brownie. Not the healthiest breakfast, but those were all foods I associate with you under six years of childhood memories.

I tried to take a walk. My school is concrete buildings in the smack dab middle of miles and miles of evergreen forest. I was listening to grieving songs. My wireless earbuds died. I went to my dorm. I did my laundry. I did my homework. I wrote. I read my book about the history of video games. Video games have been a heavy symbol of grief since I was twelve.

My friend who is grieving the death of their two sisters and my friend who is grieving the death of her girlfriend met up with me. We ordered Dominos for dinner and played video games. We were all quieter than usual. We're all grieving. We all said how relieved we were to grieve together as friends.

When we were done, I took another walk. It started snowing more. The same thing happened one year minus seventeen days ago. I bumped into friends who said they wished there wouldn't be class tomorrow. I said I did too. It'd be nice to have another grief day.

One year ago today my childhood friend killed himself. We'd met when we were six. We'd see each other at least twice a week until we were twelve. We always thought we'd see each other again. It never snows in Seattle. We just get rain all year.

Daft Punk

Mercy Marvin Sunderland

Put on the helmet that hides you,
Lights dance and play a song,
It's always gonna be Harder Better Faster Stronger than this,
There's Something About Us and we're a Voyager living the High
Life Within,
As the night goes on,
We're a faceless wonder and I hope that goes to stay.

Put on the helmet that hides you,
I'll always be right by you,
Light tricks, disco beats, a Robot Rock Beyond any Technologic,
Suited up, future style, Lose Yourself to Dance to Da Funk,
It's Revolution 909 and we're Burnin' On/Off it all One More
Time,
Speak the voices that only the music hears.

Put on the helmet that hides you,
Without a music mask we're not seen,
An Aerodynamic Discovery Around the World,
A Tron Legacy too Alive to be a Short Circuit,
France is a home of the future landing in the nineties and coming
to stay.

Put on the helmet that hides you,
You're an Instant Crush too soon to be a Digital Love,
A Giorgio by Moroder too difficult to understand,
Those that fear Earth will not hurt you,
The desert is a land of pain and we won't speak but there will be
tears tonight.

Put on the helmet that hides you,
This is the Game of Love and you're Human After All,
I promise that when we awoke to the sound of guitars that we
didn't just Get Lucky.

Put on the helmet that hides you,
We've been through a ride through,
Derezzed past Daftrentick that hits On the Line,
We're Face to Face and a Nightvision goes to Give Life Back to
Music,
I promise that as life goes better than Crescendolls hits like a Ve-
ridis Quo through the Touch of Make Love,
You're still not yet at the Prime Time of Your Life.

Put on the helmet that hides you,
Homework and Teachers and Superheroes,
Blasting farther than a Phoenix Funk Ad Wdpk. 83.7 FM at High
Fidelity,
The New Wave that comes Rollin' and Scratchin' to Contact your
Motherboard with
The Brainwasher won't make your Random Access Memories just
Fragments of Time.

Put on the helmet that hides you,
Oh Yeah, it's never going to be Too Long because we're Doin' it
Right,
Television Rules the Nation as a Steam Machine we live by,
As the last lights play out at the End of the Line of the Indo Silver
Club and the last Fresh Rockn' Roll note plays,
Take off the helmet that hides you,
Calm Emotion, close your eyes and be at peace,
The Game Has Changed but the Musique never will.

How to Enter the Men's Bathroom

Mercury Marvin Sunderland

1. First, take a breath. This is hard. You wonder yet again, perhaps what is now the umpteenth-billionth time, if you will be scorned at. That's your worst fear. Well, not really. But it's definitely one of your biggest fears of everyday, and it is your biggest fear about going into the bathroom. You are a weed and the world is the next cisgender person's garden; you're a dandelion to be pulled up by the roots and left stranded by the sidewalk, nothing important; but something to get rid of.

2. Adjust your baseball cap. It has a certain flag with meaning to you painted on it. Stripes of baby blue and pink and white and pink and baby blue again. You can never tell what people mean when they tell you, "I like your hat." Like, yeah, it could just mean that, but you can never tell if it's because they like the colors or if it's because they like the meaning of it or both. Are your pronoun pins tidy? You never know if they'll betray or save you again. They've done both so many times. Pull your navy blue sweatshirt hood over your head. Make sure your sweatshirt has become your cocoon again, like how it has so many times before. You've become a blue butterfly so many times before. But now is a time to hide your gigantic wings.

3. Of course, they cannot fit through the door. And it is ridiculously difficult to hide them under your clothes. You can literally count on your fingers the amount of cisgender strangers who have gendered you correctly. You certainly "look" trans, but the problem is, most people don't even know what trans even is, or, what it, per se, "looks" like, even though the idea of "looking" trans is also pretty problematic. They either only think they do, or legitimately don't.

4. Take your first step. Look down. **DOWN.** *Down*, you fool, *down*. If you don't look at anyone, they won't look at you. Isn't that right? Isn't that how it goes? You're pretty sure that's how it goes. The

floor is your new best friend and you would rather observe the crummy tiles than the mockery sure to come from being noticed. Remember what those people told you, that one time? “If you just act like you know what you’re doing, no one will question your presence in the men’s bathroom.” And you do know what you’re doing. You’ve done it for nearly two years now. It’s second nature for you to use the men’s bathroom. But it’s also second nature to be terrified to do it.

5. It seems that the only way that you’ve managed these years using the men’s bathroom when you very clearly aren’t a cisgender man is by going by the rules this list states. You pray for the day you finally go on testosterone. You want to walk in stride in the men’s bathroom without any doubt. “Passing” is such a toxic ideology about trans people, but yet you still so badly want to partake in it anyway. Because, for some trans people, that’s how it is. And for others, that’s how it isn’t.

6. Continue staring at the floor. Go as fast as you can. Avoid eye contact. Avoid faces. Of course, you’re already used to doing that, because, being an autistic, you cannot fucking stand eye contact. And faces usually mean eye contact. You’re used to the way that people all your life have scolded you for not looking at them as you spoke to them. You’re used to being scolded for a lot of things that you shouldn’t be scolded over. The entire reason why you’re behaving the way you are is because you don’t want to be scolded for your existence as a transgender man in the men’s bathroom.

7. If the bathroom is nearly empty, you will sigh some relief. However, if it’s crowded, a whole lot more people are present to notice the dyed-haired one with a hard focus of looking at the floor. You’re someone who likes to dress to stick out. You like to dye your hair eccentric colors and wear golden wings on your sneakers and wear a necktie that looks like a salmon and wear rainbow suspenders and dress shirts. Over sixteen years of repressed rage at not being able to express your own gender display themselves over your wardrobe, and that’s the way you like it and dress everyday. But

right now, it is betraying you. It always betrays you whenever you go into the bathroom.

8. If the bathroom is empty, throw a party. Hang streamers by the rafters and -- no, you fool. Be happy, though, but don't let your guard down. Keep your downward gaze, and enter the stall as quickly as possible. You think being stuck in a crowd would be bad? Imagine being stuck in the bathroom with god forbid whoever comes in next.

9. It's a common misconception that trans women want to assault cis women in women's restrooms. But that just isn't true. There haven't actually been any cases of trans people using bathrooms for that crime.

10. But there have been many, many, many cases of cis people using bathrooms to harass and assault trans people.

11. Hope that no one can hear the fact that you pee sitting down. You didn't know until less than half a year ago that actually a lot of cis men pee sitting down. But you still feel terrified every time.

12. Okay, not meaning to be gross or anything, but it honestly feels like cis men learn their manners from Satan himself. Like, speaking as someone who went from one bathroom or another, you have a to say your common mantra of, "I'M SORRY, I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU GUYS ARE DOING IN THERE, BUT WHATEVER IT IS, IT IS *NASTY*." Seriously. Women's restrooms are nice and clean. You used to go there to keep yourself from having a panic attack, but now, the bathroom gives you a panic attack. But no way in hell are you ever going back to the women's restroom.

13. Remember that time when you were in fourth grade and all your cis guy friends came screaming with laughter out of the boy's bathroom because someone had taken off a pair of boxers, taken a shit on them, and then just left them on the floor? That story

spread so far, you recalled it in high school and people who went to elementary schools across the city told you they'd heard about it at that age.

14. Remember Nova, before they moved buildings after your sophomore year? Remember how there were a gazillion problems with the boy's bathroom there, and even though you never entered that bathroom, you heard all the legends of boys pissing into potted plants in the bathroom and taking literal shits on the floor? *LIKE, JESUS CHRIST, WHERE DO CIS MEN LEARN THEIR MANNERS?!*

15. Nova made all the bathrooms gender-neutral once they switched buildings. Now it's just the bathroom that has the urinal and the bathroom that doesn't. God you wish that for everywhere else.

16. Where do cis men learn their manners? They're the only group of gender that has never faced the societal expectation to mature faster than everyone else. The group of gender always held the least accountable for bad behavior.

17. You guess that's why they've always been the scariest. And why oh oh oh god you are overjoyed once you get past washing your hands and running. You run out of the bathroom like you have just completed the world's first look-down-at-the-ground-as-you-run-hurling-towards-doom marathon. You can just imagine the way that the ribbon breaks and how the confetti falls. The cheering of a million trans people is heard nowhere. This is reality and there is no ribbon nor confetti.

18. This is reality. There is no ribbon nor confetti.

Korbin Jones received his Bachelor of Arts in Spanish and his Bachelor of Arts in Writing: Creative Writing and Publishing from Northwest Missouri State University. He is currently a candidate for a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing: Poetry at the University of Kansas. His poetry and translations have been published by Indolent Books, Obra/Artifact, The Oakland Review, and Sheila-Na-Gig, among others. His translation of Pablo Luque Pinilla's poetry collection "SFO: Photos and Poetry about San Francisco" is forthcoming from Tolsun Books (April 2019). His debut collection of poetry, "songs for the long night.", is forthcoming from Queer-Mojo (April 2019). When not writing, he is the Editor-in-Chief of Fearsome Critters: A Millennial Arts Journal and the Assistant Design Editor of LandLocked.

Sue Granzella has been named Notable in Best American Essays. She has won the Naomi Rodden Essay Award and a Memoirs Ink contest, as well as numerous prizes in the Soul-Making Keats Literary Competition, a contest for which she is now a judge. Her writing has been published in Masters Review, Full Grown People, Gravel, Ascent, Citron Review, Hippocampus, Lowestoft Chronicle, and Crunchable, among many others. Sue teaches third grade at a public elementary school. She loves baseball, stand-up comedy, hiking, road trips, and reading the writing of 8- and 9-year-olds. More of her writing can be found at www.suegranzella.com.

Raine Grayson is a writer whose primary focus is playwrighting, though they have put their experiences and activism into words however they can to help uplift other trans people and strengthen and nuance the public's understanding of trans experiences. You can see a resume and list of other accomplishments, shows, publications, and projects at rainegrayson.com.

Mercury Marvin Sunderland is a 2013, 2014, 2015 winner of ACT Theater's Young Playwright's Program, a 2015, 2016 selected playwright for ACT Theater's 14:48 HS, a 2016 winner of the Jack Straw Young Writer's Program, a 2016 selected participant for the Seattle Talent Show hosted by Rainier Beach High School, and

hired as a paid representative of Youth Speaks Seattle in 2016. In 2017 alone, he was selected for and won the 2017 Youth Speaks Seattle Grand Slam, and went off as one of the top five youth slam poets representing Seattle at Brave New Voices 2017, an international slam poetry tournament treated as America's national tournament, and was selected to perform slam poetry alongside former Seattle mayor candidate Nikkita Oliver at the University of Washington. In 2018 his illustrations were selected for While Supplies Last, an art show hosted by Anthony White, a Cornish College of the Arts graduate. In 2019 his artwork was featured by the Ugly-Dolls company -- and he received his first literary journal acceptance from Northwest Missouri State University's Fearsome Critics Literary Magazine Volume Two, his second from the February 2019 issue of Arcadia University's Marathon Literary Review, his third and fourth from Across & Through Literary Magazine, his fifth from The Dollhouse Literary Magazine, his sixth from University of California Riverside's Santa Ana River Review, and his seventh from The Paragon Press Journal. He was also selected as a 2019 Editor's Pick for the Brian Mill Press Poetry Month Contest.

