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Rosie (by Judith Ford)

Steve and Jen sat on separate chairs in a small windowless airport office. The air itself smelled of fear, Jen later thought. The reek of sweat and the moist scent of someone's garlic-laced breakfast. Jen made no effort to wipe her streaming eyes or to push the loosened hair off her forehead. Steve was deathly pale, as if he'd just gotten terrible news. Which of course he had.

"Give me the details again," one of the officers said.

"He's four months old," said Steve.

"Describe him again please."

"Oh, for God's sake! He's a baby! You know what babies look like, right?" said Jen, who was finding impatience and rage preferable to fear. She glared from the uniformed young man who'd asked the question to the policewoman who was standing against a wall, arms crossed over her chest, observing. "Maybe you need to tell him what babies look like."

Steve put a hand on his wife's arm. "Honey, they're trying to help." And to the officer, "Augie's got a little bit of thin black hair—you can barely see it—and these big round cheeks..."

"He gets those from breastfeeding," Jen added. She remembered the feel of his hungry lips, the way his eyes would lock onto hers with a love she'd never seen on anyone else, ever in her life. Remembering, she felt her anger desert her.

"His eyes are blue," Steve said; his voice trembled.

"No, hazel," Jen corrected. "They look green or gray or blue depending on the color of his clothes. Oh, God." She covered her face with her hands; her shaking shoulders curved inward over her aching chest.

Two weeks earlier

"How did you fly with Julia when she was Augie's age?" Jen asked her best friend, Lisa. Augie, strapped to Jen's chest in his BabyBjörn carrier, was nearly but not quite asleep. Jen bounced as she walked, iPhone in the front pocket of her jeans, earbuds in her ears, white cord snaking up over Augie's back.

"It was a challenge. Julia had one of those exploding diapers shortly after takeoff. Airplanes are not made for changing babies. I felt so sorry for the person next to me. It was pretty awful."

"I think babies do it on purpose, choose exactly the wrong time to have one of those giant dumps."

Jen's words, meant to be commiserating, even humorous, came out edgier than she'd intended. Oh well. A lot of things about babies made her edgy. In fact, she'd told Lisa, when Augie was barely two months old, she was tired of being tired and wished she could give him back. What with all the stinking diapers, having to wake up to nurse every couple of hours, her Jen-time compressed into the narrow spaces left over when Augie slept. She tried, during those respites, to remember who she used to be, a promising young defense lawyer, slender and smart. A woman who was going places.

Sometimes she'd call up the images, to remind herself: the high ceilings and dark woodwork of the courthouse; the sound of her stilettos against those marble floors; the way men's eyes followed her when she walked past in her tight-fitting, short-skirted navy blue business suit, carrying her leather briefcase. All of that seemed to belong to another world, a time before her breasts grew unwieldy and her belly round and flabby. One she couldn't now imagine being able to navigate. Her formerly good brain was off-line, maybe getting the sleep the rest of her body craved. She couldn't focus long enough to watch even a thirty-minute TV show. Couldn't manage to finish a short magazine article much less manage a novel or remember to move the wet laundry to the dryer. So, mostly, when Augie slept, Jen did too. And woke annoyed when, seemingly seconds after she'd fallen asleep, Augie screamed for her. When, she wondered, would things get back to normal?

"Never," one of the women in her book club told her. "It's like someone threw a Molotov cocktail into your house. Everything explodes in flames, and you have to make do with living in soot and cinders."

Jen loved that woman for her honesty. Most people responded with barely camouflaged alarm when she expressed any dissatisfaction with motherhood. Like they expected her to strap Augie into his car seat and

drive them both into the Charles River.

She wasn't that kind of person. She'd faced plenty of adversities in her prior life: uncooperative clients, nasty prosecutors, more than one hostile judge. And had come out whole. Even triumphant. She was not a person who could be broken by something as ordinary as birthing. Not that that part had been fun. But at least while she was in the hospital, someone took care of her, let her sleep, brought her food, took the baby away sometimes and returned him clean and smelling of baby lotion. Once she got home, everything fell to her. Her husband, Steve, went back to work after a couple of days, and there she was, all alone with this black hole of a needy baby. Sometimes she imagined setting him on the curb in his bouncy chair, the way she'd done with their old air conditioner. The thing was gone within the hour, gone to people who wanted it. Couldn't that work with a baby?

Of course, she wouldn't really do that. That was one of the worst parts of this situation; she didn't like being a slave to this tiny person, but at the same time, whenever he cried, her whole body responded, said yes, and right away. Her heart would race and her stomach contract. Her breasts answered in their breast language, the tingly dropping-down of milk turning her chest into a convenience station for milk-drinkers. This baby owned her. And, weirdly, she loved him for it. At least half the time. The other half of the time she was too tired to love anything.

"How old is Augie now?" Lisa's voice brought Jen back to the present, to her kitchen with its smudged countertops, spilled coffee grounds, and tower of dirty dishes in the sink. Jen pictured Lisa's daughter, Julia, blue-eyed and blonde, ten months old. Before Julia had arrived Lisa and Jen had been inseparable. They'd seen each other several times a week, gone to early morning yoga classes together, shopped for clothes, gotten together for happy hour at Murphy's Pub every Thursday. These days Jen and Lisa were together mostly on the phone.

"He was four months yesterday," Jen whispered; Augie had finally fallen asleep. "I wish to God we could go back to three months. At three months, he was nursing only twice a night. I was even beginning to kind of enjoy being a mom. I'd get up in the morning and think, *Hey, this isn't so bad. Maybe I can do this.* Then he hit four months, and everything went out the window."

"The dreaded four-month sleep regression, I know all about it."

"Makes you understand why some parents who don't have our advantages get totally destroyed and end up smacking their kids."

"Or worse," Lisa said. "I can't imagine that, can you? I mean, no matter how tired I get, I take one look at Julia's adorable face, and it all seems worth it."

Jen thought, *Sometimes when I look at Augie's screaming red face, I want nothing more than to smack him.* She cringed and reassured herself, *Of course, I never would.*

To Lisa she said, "Yeah. I know what you mean. I have to fly to Chicago in a month, with Augie. The in-laws haven't met him yet, and they don't like to fly. Steve can't get away, so I'm going alone. You've got to help me survive."

"The key is a well-planned diaper bag. Take more diapers than you think you need, packets of wipes, a changing cloth, at least two clean outfits in case of the exploding diaper, extra pacifiers, bottles, formula—if Augie will take formula. You don't want to whip out your boob with strangers sitting all around you."

"I'm taking notes, keep going." Jen had grabbed the envelope containing the electric bill and was making a list on the back of it.

"And look for a grandmother."

"A grandmother? Why?"

"Because grandmothers in airports and on planes are often coming from or going to their grandchildren, whom they adore and don't get to see often enough. They practically drool over other people's babies. Find a grandmother to hold Augie, and you can go to the bathroom when you need to, pull your suitcase off a baggage carousel without risking dumping the kid on the conveyer belt. Believe me, grandmothers rock."

"I wouldn't have thought of that. Great idea." Augie began to fuss. Jen jiggled him harder, but he was not soothed. He let out a wail.

"Bet you're wishing for that grandmother right now," Lisa said.

Jen didn't hear her. "Time to whip out a boob. Bye."

At two the following morning, Augie's cry startled Jen awake. She turned over and pulled her pillow over her head. Steve shook her shoulder. "Jen? Honey? Wake up."

Jen pulled the pillow away. "I'm so tired I just might die," she said. "Could you bring him so I don't have to get up?" She watched the video baby monitor. Steve's back filled the screen as he leaned into the crib and picked up the squalling baby. Augie immediately quieted to a whimper, such a helpless, pathetic sound, that snuffling whimper.

Damn! I'll be glad when he doesn't make that sound anymore, Jen thought, and immediately felt guilty. Which made her hate the whimper even more.

Steve laid Augie on the bed beside Jen. "There you go, little man. The cafeteria is open." He kissed the thin dark hair on the top of Augie's head.

"I am not a cafeteria," Jen grumbled as she fastened Augie's mouth to her breast.

"It's such a cool mechanism, this breast thing, don't you think? That's all I meant, Jen."

"Cool? You think it's cool to never sleep more than two hours at a time for weeks on end? I feel like a captive cow! You try it sometime!"

Silence except for the damp suckling noise and an occasional sigh from Augie.

"Steve? Am I a terrible mom?"

"Not at all."

"I love Augie, of course—he's a dear—it isn't his fault. But I can't complete anything, not a chore or a thought. I'm dimming out, like I'm on this invisible rheostat. Every time he cries, it turns my brightness down a little more."

"Maybe we need to give Augie to your mother for a day or so. While you catch up on things."

"I need more than a few days. I need a month." Jen fell asleep while Augie was at her other breast. Augie fell asleep soon after. Steve let them stay like that until four, when the baby woke again to nurse.

Two weeks later

Barbara sat in her car, with the engine running, in the Roche Brothers Supermarket parking lot. She was trying to remember the way home. Why had she come here? Had she already been inside and bought something? Ah. Yes. There was a grocery bag on the floor on the passenger side. She peered over the brown paper edge: a package of Golden Oreos, a bar of Pink Himalayan Crystal Salt Caramel chocolate, a bottle of red wine. She lifted the bottle; it had a pretty label, roses and birds. She didn't drink, though, did she? Maybe she did. Or maybe it was for Al? Had she bought it for the flowery label? She did love Oreos, but what was with these golden things? She liked the chocolate ones better. Were these groceries really hers? Maybe she'd picked up the wrong bag.

These little slippages, as she thought of them, were happening more often. They scared her, even though, generally, like now, she could talk herself down. Yes, she was getting older and her brain was not what it used to be. But not such a big deal.

Barbara waited in the noisy parking lot, her car still running, hoping she'd remember where to go next. Doors slammed; people chattered, cars swished past her rear bumper. The mix of sounds, with a background of street traffic, reminded Barbara of the beach, waves breaking on sand, spreading seaweed and plastic bits. She laid her forehead on the steering wheel, trying to focus. When was she last at a beach? She remembered Rosie, a year old, with sand surrounding her pink lips. No, no, Rosie. We don't eat sand! Don't cry. Mama just wants to wipe your face. There now, dear. Let's go play in the water.

Someone knocked on the car window. "Ma'am? Ma'am! Are you all right, ma'am?"

Barbara, startled, looked up at a stranger's worried face. He was blue-eyed and very clean. His pressed white shirt was almost sparkly, it was that clean. His hair was brown, with a nice gentle wave to it. Barbara always noticed hair; by the time she retired, she'd been a hairdresser for nearly fifty years.

She was aware for a moment of how she must look to this man, a messy old woman wearing a wrinkled T-shirt that read "Peet's Coffee" in faded red letters, and sweatpants that had fit her snugly when she was younger but now sagged loose on her hips. Had she even brushed her teeth before she left home? She tried to find the

handle to wind down her window. She was fumbling at the car door when the stranger opened it. She almost toppled out.

"I can't find the handle!" she squeaked.

"It's a button, ma'am. Here." He pushed a tab on the inside of the door, and the window slid down with a sigh.

"Oh. Yes. Of course."

"Can I help you? I wondered if you weren't feeling well. Your car was running, and you were leaning your head on your steering wheel. I thought you might not be feeling well."

"Don't be silly. I'm just fine. You go on your way. You're very kind." She pulled the door shut and managed to locate the right tab to roll the window up. She opened and closed the window four times, just to show herself she could, put the car in drive, and drove west out of the parking lot. Not knowing, still, which way was home.

When is Albert due back from his trip to Seattle? I think it's today. I'd better go pick him up. What airline did he say?

Someone behind her beeped. She glanced in her rearview mirror, saw a silver sedan nearly touching her rear bumper. She raised her hand and made a back-off gesture. The silver car honked again. Barbara glanced at her speedometer. She was going twenty. This was one more thing that had changed, this nervousness whenever she drove.

She drove a few more blocks, looking for a landmark. She saw nothing she remembered. She pulled into a strip mall parking lot to collect herself. She was thinking about Rosie. Where was Rosie today? Was this a day-care day? Or the babysitter? When should she pick Rosie up? The longer Barbara sat, not knowing about Rosie, the more agitated she got. She started to sweat heavily and had some trouble catching her breath. She caught a glimpse of herself in the rearview mirror. Her long gray hair was wild and stringy, glued to her wet, flushed face.

Must have forgotten my conditioner this morning, she thought. Then, All right, Barbie, girl, get a grip on yourself. She pretended it was Al bucking her up. She needed bucking up, that was sure. Let's get you out of this hot car and into some nice AC, grab some cold water, visit the ladies' room, what do you say?

When Barbara returned from the Dollar Store's restroom to her car, she found her key still in the ignition, the car running. *How could I?* she berated herself as she slid behind the steering wheel. She had to sit for a while to calm her heart rate and silence the scolding voice in her head, *stupid, stupid, stupid.*

About a mile down the road from the mall parking lot, Barbara rear-ended a parked car. The car's owner, who'd witnessed the collision from the front window of his house, realized after just a few minutes of conversation that Barbara was not only lost geographically, but mentally as well. He called the police. A patrolman arranged for a tow truck to come get her car, then, after reading her address on her driver's license, drove her home. He lingered in her doorway explaining to her, for the third time, that he was keeping her license. She'd need to pass a driver's test to get it back.

He really shouldn't keep his hair so close cut, Barbara thought. It makes him look mean. She tried to close the door even as the man was speaking. He put his foot into the narrow opening and repeated, loudly, as if she were deaf, "You can't drive anymore. Do you understand." She nodded, waved, and as soon as he removed his foot from her doorway, she slammed her door hard.

The next morning, Barbara called the police to report her car stolen.

A few hours later she made herself a lunch of two end pieces from a loaf of bread she found at the bottom of her freezer. She weighted each one down with a thick layer of butter and consumed them while she sat in her recliner watching reruns of *Law and Order*.

She fell asleep in the chair and woke that afternoon with the realization that Al was coming home that day. Since the car was gone—she kept forgetting where or how—she would have to call a cab to take her to the airport to meet him. Al would want to know what happened to the car. Was it ever found? When might he have it back? He'd want answers.

She noticed her Jitterbug phone on the foyer floor, flipped it open, and tapped the buttons. There was neither dial tone nor lit screen. Useless thing. She dropped it back on the floor. Went outside, knocked on her neighbor's door, and asked to use her phone to call a cab.

“Never mind, Barbara,” said Alice, the neighbor. “I can take you to Logan. Are you flying somewhere?”
Something about Alice’s tone put Barbara on edge. Overly nice. Talking down to her as if she was a child. Al never liked the neighbors knowing his business.

“Meeting someone,” she offered, her head tipped to one side, measuring Alice’s reaction. There was none.

“What time is that person landing?”

“About now, I think.”

“Oh my. We’d better get a move on. My car is out front. I’ll grab my coat and meet you out there.”

Barbara was standing beside a red car when Alice appeared on her front stoop.

“That’s not mine, Barbara. Mine’s the silver one across the street.”

As Barbara put a foot into the car, Alice added, “Better go shut your front door, Barb. It’s wide open.”

Alice intended to use the drive to the airport as an opportunity to talk to Barbara about her obvious deterioration. She and some of the other people on the block had been observing anomalies, like doors left open, grass allowed to grow knee-high, the mailbox rarely emptied, the leaflets, envelopes, catalogues that spilled out and blew away. Several times Alice had used the excuse of returning a piece of mail to open a conversation with Barbara about her well-being.

Are you doing okay? Do you need any help? Barbara had been annoyed every time, barely able to finish saying, Stop worrying. Leave me alone, before she shut the door.

Alice hoped the old woman would realize, before they reached the airport, that there was no one for her to meet there.

“Barbara, I’ve been getting worried about you lately,” Alice tried.

“No need. I told you I’m fine.”

“I’ll keep you company at the airport, though, okay?”

“No. I’m fine. Please. Stop intruding!”

As she turned onto the airport exit ramp, Alice tried again. “I’d never be able to live with myself if I just dropped you off here, on your own.”

“This isn’t about you, Alice,” Barbara snapped back. “Drop me here. Right here!”

“Okay!” Alice shot back. She stopped the car in front of the Southwest curbside check-in. Barbara tried to open the car door; it was locked.

“Damn you, Alice! Let me out!” she shouted.

Alice undid the child lock. “Fine, then. Get out of my car!”

Barbara got out and slammed the door. Alice hit the gas harder than she intended, braked quickly, calmed herself, and as she drove away from “Departures” glanced in her rearview mirror. The sight of her neighbor, her friend, with her baggy pant cuffs brushing the pavement, her back bent, her hair a matted mess of gray, gave her pause. *Damn. I can’t just leave her.*

When, ten minutes later, Alice had parked the car and walked into the terminal, there was no sign of Barbara. Alice walked everywhere she thought the old woman might be. She looked in the bookstore and Starbucks, the souvenir shop and the store selling water and magazines. She went to a ticket counter and sat for a while, watching, until with rising anxiety, she returned to her car and waited in the lot for Barbara to call her. After a half an hour, she gave up and drove home.

For a few minutes after Alice dropped her off, Barbara had stood near the Southwest curbside check-in, wondering if Alice had misheard her or if, maybe, Midwest had changed its name. She clutched her purse tight against her belly, with both hands, as she watched Alice’s silver car drive away. Then she turned and faced the oversized revolving door. How in the world were people making it revolve? Without touching it! She took one tentative step into the wide chamber and smiled when it began to move in response. How clever! She imagined a hidden window somewhere, a hidden door-operator-person.

She had another moment of confusion when she stepped out into the brightly lit, busy ticketing area. The airport. *Why did I come to the airport?* Ah. Yes. She was there to pick up Al. She’d go meet him at the gate. If she could only remember how to get there.

“Excuse me, dear,” she asked the blue uniformed woman. “I’ve forgotten which escalator will get me to

the Midwest gates.”

The woman thought a moment and then asked, “Do you mean Southwest, maybe?”

“Yes, that must be it.”

The woman pointed to a nearby escalator. Then asked, “Do you have your boarding pass?”

“No, no, dear. I’m just meeting someone.”

“You know you can’t get to a gate without your boarding pass.”

Barbara knew the woman was mistaken but thought it rude to correct her. “I’ll be fine,” she said, as if that covered it, and walked away.

She always met Al at the gate right when he got off his plane. As if they were young lovers who’d suffered a separation and could hardly wait to embrace. He’d spot her, shout out, “There’s my beautiful bride,” and rush to hug her.

On the way up the escalator—So tall, so shiny and fast. Had it always been so shiny and fast?—her bladder began to signal. She clenched against the urge as she stepped off and, thank goodness, saw a ladies’ right there. She hurried into a stall. Once finished, she tried to wash her hands; someone had to show her how to trigger the water.

Barbara had never seen such a thing. Al was going to love hearing about all these marvels. She couldn’t wait to tell him. She kept moving her hand close to and away from the square black panel, giggling when the water splashed on and off.

That same day

“Good luck, hon,” Steve said and kissed Jen on her cheek, kissed Augie on the top of his head. “Use curbside!” he called out the window when he saw Jen heading inside. She held up a dismissive hand, go away, I’ve got this, pushed the stroller and her laden self through the door, and took her place in the Southwest line. By the time she’d gotten her boarding pass, Augie had escalated from fussing to a roar. She lifted him out of the stroller, hoping to jostle him back into equanimity. He was probably hungry, but she wasn’t quite ready to sit down, cover her front with the nursing shawl, and give Augie what he wanted.

“Hang on, little tyrant,” she told him, not unkindly. She was optimistic about the trip and glad to be out of the house. She wrestled the wailing Augie back into his stroller, tucked a blanket around him, and strapped him in. “Sorry, babe,” she told him. “You have to wait a few minutes more. I drank too much coffee in the car, and I’m going to burst.”

She took her place in the bathroom line. While Augie fussed and struggled against the straps of the stroller, Jen scanned the women ahead and behind her. All of them laden with their own luggage, no one free to hold a squirming baby. She was one person away from a stall when she spotted the old woman, fluttering her hands in the sink. Playing in the water. She was dressed in baggy sweatpants, worn-out sneakers, and looked like she hadn’t bathed in a week at least. T

he older woman’s wrinkled face was lit up with a delight that made Jen imagine who she might have been decades earlier, a buoyant, happy, perhaps unconventional person. An attractive person.

And now, a grandmother.

“Excuse me,” Jen said.

Barbara turned, her hand motionless under the pouring water. A young woman with her hair pulled tight in a ponytail was talking to her. Barbara studied her before responding. The woman would look better, Barbara thought, with a little softness around her face; feathery bangs, maybe.

“Do I know you?” Barbara asked.

And then she remembered: she hadn’t come here to meet Al. She’d come to take Rosie from the babysitter with the ponytail. The babysitter must have decided at the last minute to catch a plane to Florida or Hawaii or maybe Chicago.

“I’m sorry to bother you,” the young woman was saying. “I desperately need to pee. Do you think you maybe could watch my baby while I go? I won’t be long.” Barbara was already reaching for the baby, fitting her wrinkled, spotted hands under the child’s arms, lifting her out of the stroller. She wrapped the small blanket

tight around the child, pulled her close, and began to bounce her gently. "Sail away, my baby," Barbara sang softly, "on the sleepy sea, sail away with me, sail away, my baby, to the land of dreams."

"Oh, thank you!" Jen said as she disappeared into a cubicle.

Barbara barely heard her; she was captivated by her infant daughter's face. Sweet Rosie stopped fussing, sniffed once, caught her breath, and snuggled into Barbara's soft chest as she stepped, slowly, away from the magic sinks, past the line of women, and out into the teeming concourse. She sang as she and Rosie went down the shining escalator, "Sail away, baby." They went out the automatically opening door just in time to board a bus marked "Boston Common," still singing, but softer now—Rosie was asleep—"Sail, baby, sail. Out upon that sea."

In the bathroom stall, Jen noticed the sudden silence. Augie had stopped crying. She was grateful. She hitched up her jeans and fastened her belt. When she opened the stall door, her eyes landed first on the empty stroller and then on the abandoned diaper bag hanging from its handles. She scanned the crowded room; no grandmother, no Augie. She left her backpack and the stroller and hurried past the waiting women. She stepped out into the wide corridor with its moving crush of people, the chatter, and the footfalls. She ran, dodging people, pushing people, to the escalators, to the ticketing area, where she dropped into a molded plastic chair. "Shit!" she shouted, her hands in fists.

Possibilities flashed through her mind. The grandmother had gone to buy a newspaper. An ice cream cone. She'd left something at a ticketing counter and gone to retrieve it. She'd hurt Augie and been afraid to tell Jen; she'd hidden instead. She'd show up soon. With Augie. It would be okay. It would not be okay. Augie was gone. Gone. What in her most tired moments she'd longed for; but not like this. Never like this.

She began, loudly, to cry.

A man in a suit stopped and asked her what was wrong. Jen shook her head, said, "My baby," and was unable to form another word around the panic lodged in her throat. The man caught the eye of an airport cop and beckoned, urgently.

Barbara was pleased with herself that she'd gotten Rosie to sleep. *Sweet, sweet baby*, she thought as she looked down at the closed eyes, the rosebud mouth, the slightly pink cheeks. The motion of the bus was like a rocking chair, Barbara thought. How lucky buses moved like that. Better even than taking a baby for a car ride to put her to sleep. She bent her head over the child's wisp of dark hair and breathed in the warm, milky smell of her scalp.

Two hours later

Steve drove them home. Every time he glanced into the rearview mirror and saw the empty car seat, he swallowed hard.

"Steve," Jen said, turning to look at him; her voice almost a whisper. "You know I never meant it, all those things I say when I'm tired and frustrated with Augie."

Steve took a corner a bit too fast. The tires squealed. "I know," he said. "I always knew," although he hadn't always been certain. He'd worried sometimes if she had it in her to hurt Augie or to abandon him. But then he'd seen the loving way Jen picked up Augie, nuzzled his head, kissed his round red cheeks, and smiled when he latched onto a breast. Always gently, every single time, no matter how spent or frustrated she might be.

How could she have handed Augie over to a stranger then, a person who, according to the witnesses, looked more than a little loony.

"I was so tired and had to pee so badly, and that old woman was right behind me. And Lisa said, 'find a grandmother,' and that's why," Jen told him later when he asked.

As soon as Barbara stepped off the bus at Boston Commons, the baby woke and began to wail. Barbara paused at the park entrance, trying to remember how to get to the pond with the swan boats. Her arms were

tired; her lower back ached. The baby's crying was making her tense.

"Sail, baby, sail," Barbara sang again as she walked, carrying the baby in her tired arms, past George Washington on his big cold bronze horse. Not too far ahead, she spotted a bench beside a pond. Above the bench, the drooping branches of a willow tree. She no longer cared which pond it was or if the swan boats were there. She needed to sit down before she dropped Rosie, who seemed to have grown increasingly heavy as Barbara walked.

"Don't forget to sail, my baby, back again to me," Barbara sang breathlessly as she did her best to hurry to the bench. She wasn't accustomed to hurrying.

The lullaby was having no effect. "Patience, Rosie," she whispered. "Bottle coming."

It was then Barbara noticed she wasn't carrying Rosie's diaper bag. Damn! Where was the thing? She never left home with Rosie without that bag.

She sat down on the bench and laid the crying baby across her thighs, keeping one hand firmly on the baby's tummy. Hoping the diaper bag would somehow appear. It didn't.

Rosie was wriggling, kicking, and squealing.

"Rosie, stop it!" Barbara shouted.

The child, startled, seemed to consider this for a few seconds and then cried louder, harder. Her face splotched red, her eyes tight shut.

The tone and volume of the baby's cry reminded Barbara of another time she'd heard a cry like that. There'd been water then too. At first the waves were small, tickling their toes. There weren't supposed to be big waves that day. But out of nowhere, a big wave rose up. Tall and hard and hungry. Barbara didn't see it coming. The wave knocked them both down. Rosie shrieked and then was gone. Barbara flung herself into the water, over and over, grasping, shouting, "Rosie!" Pausing sometimes, straining to hear Rosie's cry. But there was no more cry, only the roar of the waves.

Oh, but no. Of course not. Here was Rosie, just an infant, still safe on her lap. They weren't on a beach; water in the nearby pond was silent, unmoving.

Since Barbara couldn't feed the baby, she slid her finger into the child's mouth. The baby sucked hard on the finger and quieted. Barbara, planning a diaper change, unwrapped the child's soaked blanket, unsnapped the onesie, and pulled the diaper tapes loose. She pulled the soaked diaper off. And stopped. Confused. There where her Rosie's girl parts should have been, so small and familiar, was a little penis and a tiny scrotum. Barbara pulled her finger free and resnapped the onesie. Without a diaper. The baby amped up his crying.

With one hand still on the strange baby in her lap, Barbara rocked herself back and forth, trying to understand. This was not her Rosie. How could she have been so mistaken? This baby had thin, straight brown hair. Her Rosie's hair was blonde with wispy curls at the back of her neck. This baby was a boy.

She picked the child up and carried him to a metal trash can. Angry at him for making her think he was Rosie. She held him over the opening, wanting to be rid of him. And then she thought of Al. What would Al say? She should talk to Al. He would know what to do.

She rewrapped the baby in his damp blanket and held him more carefully, like she'd hold Rosie. At the George Washington statue, she stopped a woman with short white hair and a tall poodle and asked to borrow her phone. *Attractive cut and color*, Barbara thought. *Hides her age*. She handed Barbara her phone.

Alice answered on the first ring. Barbara's words fell all over each other in a rush. "I got Rosie but then Rosie is a boy and she's crying and I don't have any formula and no diaper and this is the wrong baby. How could I have done this?! I have to find my Rosie."

The poodle woman was staring. It made Barbara feel vaguely guilty. She turned her back and whispered into the phone, "Do you have Al's number?"

"Barbara, honey, don't you remember?" Alice said. "Al's gone. He died."

Barbara felt everything in her body turn cold. "When? Where did they take him?" Her voice cracked. "He died five years ago, Barb." Al in the hospital bed, his cheeks sunken, his eyes closed, an oxygen mask over his nose and mouth. The machine with the beeping red line. The machine that stopped beeping and hummed one long, sorrowing note.

"Huh. I guess that's so," Barbara said, pushing the hospital image out of her mind as quickly as she

could. "So it's all on me now. I have to find the sitter and get Rosie."

"Barb." Alice's voice was gentler now. "Don't you remember about Rosie?"

"That's what I need help with. Do you have the sitter's address? I can't seem to remember it."

"Rosie's gone too," Alice said.

"Yes. At the babysitter."

The poodle woman held out her hand. "I need my phone back now."

"No, honey," said Alice. "It happened long ago, at the beach. She was just little, barely walking, and a rogue wave came."

"I have to go now," Barbara said into the phone, hating Alice. "I have to give this boy back and then I need to find the sitter." She slammed the phone into the poodle woman's waiting hand. The woman looked alarmed but offered to give Barbara and the little one a ride.

"Could you just call us a cab?"

Alice hit "call back" a few minutes later. The poodle woman answered and said that Barbara and the baby were already gone, in a taxi. Alice then called 911. "Check the Common Garden," she said. "And maybe the airport."

The baby cried in the backseat of the cab. Barbara had laid him down next to her, unrestrained. He smelled worse than ever; his face was purple from crying so hard and so long.

She was sorry about him. She also didn't like him. She was still angry with him for being the wrong one.

"Hey, missus." The cabbie sent his voice over his right shoulder and into the back. "You can't have no baby loose like that. You're supposed to have a car seat. At least can you pick it up and make it stop crying?"

"No, I can't. I'm sorry. It isn't my baby."

"At least you gotta pick it up and hold it, okay? I could get in big trouble letting that baby be here without no car seat."

The cab took Barbara and the baby back to the airport. She stepped out without turning to pay the driver.

"Hey, lady!" he called after her. "Ah! Never mind. Nutcase."

Barbara walked up to the curbside counter and laid the wet, noisy child on it. "Here," she told a startled man with a wide face and slicked-back hair.

Way too much hair product, she thought as she turned away and walked down the grassy verge beside the road, not knowing where she was going, except away, except to find Rosie. The planes were loud above her. The man's voice, shouting, "Lady! What the hell! You can't leave a baby here!" faded as Barbara walked away.

She was tired; her legs and back ached. The ground beside the road was uneven, and after a while, she sat down on the ground, to rest. She wanted to talk to Al. But Al was gone. She heard the rising cry of a siren. *Oh good*, she thought. *The police. They'll help me find Rosie.*

Half an hour later"

"Is he okay?" Jen's hands were shaking so hard she almost dropped the phone.

"Seems to be, ma'am," the police officer told her. "We got some formula into him and he's asleep now. Come pick him up."

"What happened to the old woman? The one on the airport video. Do you have her? She needs some serious help."

"We'll catch up with her. Don't you worry. Your little guy's here in the airport security office, waiting for you."

"Goddamn," Jen said as she hung up the phone and the sense of reprieve washed over her, the same sense of reprieve that, later that year after she'd returned to work, would wash over her every time she'd collect Augie, safe and happy, at the end of a day at Plymouth Daycare. "Goddamn!" she'd swear ever time sleep deprivation set in again, and she wondered how she'd make it to the kid's next birthday, knowing, of course, that she would.



Possession (by Jasmin Tucker)

Over the next few days, Alexis kept Rafael at arm's length despite his constant efforts to make amends. And although she told herself that she wasn't consciously trying to punish him, she had to admit that her actions were at least in part being driven by her wounded ego and growing frustration with his refusal to take their relationship to the next level.

And so the idea of letting loose and having some fun at Lea's Mardi Gras party came as a welcome distraction. All her friends, including Rafael, were going to be there. She even made a special trip with Tessa to the mall for the occasion. After an hour or so of nonstop shopping, she purchased a maroon-colored halter top, black short-shorts, and open-toed sandals as well as ruby-red drop earrings that would match the amulet perfectly.

She waited until the day of the party to tell Rafael that she was going to go with Jake and Tessa instead of with him. When he asked her why, she ignored his question completely and curtly replied, "I'll see you there."

At quarter till seven Alexis was standing in front of the bathroom mirror and staring as if mesmerized by her own reflection. She felt an odd disconnect to the girl gazing back at her. The hairs on the back of her neck rose as her eyes fell upon the amulet hanging around her neck. She reached for the clasp but stopped when a loud and commanding voice in her head told her to leave it where it was, and so she did. She then went to her closet and put on a cropped black jacket before heading downstairs to wait for Tessa and Jake on the front porch. They arrived less than five minutes later.

"Thanks for picking me up," Alexis said as she slid into the back seat. "I would've driven there myself, but you know how my parents are about me driving alone lately, especially at night."

"Happy to do it," Jake replied and backed out of the driveway. "They're just being cautious. I'd probably do the same if I were them."

Tessa's eyes narrowed as she pressed her lips together and turned to her cousin. "No disrespect, but I think that Uncle Eric and Auntie Lisa are being way too protective of you. It's crazy how they hardly let you go anywhere alone anymore. It's not like you're five. Honestly, if I were you, I'd go nuts."

"It's not safe for Alexis to be alone right now," Jake said. He glanced at Alexis through the rearview mirror while tightening his grip on the steering wheel. "With everything that's happened to her in the last couple of months, I think it's better to err on the side of caution. You know that old saying, 'Better safe than sorry,' right?"

Alexis sighed and sank back in her seat. Despite everyone's good intentions, the level of supervision she was currently subjected to was making her feel like a bird in a gilded cage. *But not tonight*, she thought with determination. *And no one better get in my way.*

They drove north to Bonita before turning onto a narrow dirt road with no overhead lighting. They came up to a gated house next to a horseback-riding stable and parked. Feeling warm, Alexis took off her jacket and tossed it in the backseat as she got out of the car.

"Wow, you look hot, girl," Tessa teased. "Rafael's eyes are going to pop right out of their sockets when he sees you in that! Hey! Where'd you get that necklace? I've never seen it before."

Alexis ignored the question and just laughed and said, "Come on, let's go." They walked through an open gate and up a curved driveway to the front door. Squeals of laughter, snippets of lively conversation, and loud music echoed through the air as Jake rang the bell. Lea, who was wearing a red, sequined dress with a feather stuck in her hair, greeted them with a handful of beads and directed them to the back of the house.

The party was already in full swing as the trio stepped through a sliding glass door onto the patio. The backyard was packed with teenagers, some of whom were diving into a rectangular-shaped pool or lounging in the raised hot tub. Still others huddled together in front of the buffet and drinks table. Some were in costume. Most were not. Alexis saw a lot of girls wearing bikini tops and Daisy Dukes or in bright-colored crop tops with short skirts. Most of the guys were dressed casually, wearing jeans and T-shirts. She spotted some girls flashing their chests for beads and a few guys trying to one-up each other on the dance floor as the DJ spun records and pumped out the latest electronic dance music.

As Alexis waded through the crowd, she noticed that more than a few guys were staring at her appreciatively. Unaccustomed to that kind of attention, she was both flattered and embarrassed by it. One brown-

haired, green-eyed admirer even smiled and winked at her. Flustered, she quickly looked away while Tessa, who had seen him do it, quickly pulled her cousin in the opposite direction.

Moving on, they ran into Manuel and Danny, who were chatting up a group of bikini-clad girls by the pool. Alexis spotted Tobey and Sayuri among a large group of people dancing on the grass. She happily joined in.

A little while later Alexis broke away and headed toward the punch bowl for a drink. As she wound her way through the crowd, she again became aware of the unusual amount of attention she was attracting from the opposite sex. After a lifetime of being overlooked and ignored, she found herself rather enjoying being noticed for a change.

When Alexis got to the drinks table, she picked up a clear plastic cup, reached for the serving ladle, and was just about to dip it into the bowl when she heard a male voice coming from behind her say, "I can do that for you."

Her eyes widened in surprise when she turned and saw that it was the same tall, broad-shouldered guy with green eyes who had tried to flirt with her when she first arrived.

"Hi, my name's Derrick," he said as he took the cup and ladle from her hand.

The gesture caught her completely off guard. She felt giddy and unsure about how to respond. After he'd filled the cup and handed it back to her, she thanked him and said, "I'm Alexis."

"A beautiful name for the prettiest girl at the party," Derrick replied with a wicked grin. He stepped closer. "Are you a friend of Lea's?"

"We go to school together," Alexis said, taking a sip. "One of her best friends, Anita, invited me. How about you?"

Derrick pointed to a boy with blonde hair standing next to Cecilia and said, "I'm friends with her cousin, Andy." Cocking his head, he quickly added, "I've been to a few of her parties, and I don't remember ever seeing you before."

"Don't worry. You're not alone. I'm pretty easy to miss."

He laughed. "I don't think so. I'm sure I would've remembered you if I had."

Alexis blushed. *Is this for real?* This felt like such a welcome change after Rafael had rebuffed her advances just days before. Her spirit soared.

Derrick surprised her even more when he held his hand out to her and asked, "Do you want to dance?"

Alexis raised her cup to her lips and took another sip. Knowing that Rafael might arrive at any minute, she knew better than to say yes. But then again, one dance couldn't possibly hurt, could it? She smiled and said, "I'd love to," as she took his hand.

After downing the rest of her drink in one big gulp, she followed Derrick to the makeshift dance floor area on the grass. Ignoring her friends' shocked looks and Tessa's disapproving stare, she happily gyrated to a handful of songs with Derrick close by her side. *Why shouldn't I have a little fun?* In fact, the more she thought about it, the more indignant she felt about what Rafael had said and done. And when Derrick put his arms around her waist, she willingly wrapped her arms around his neck. He pulled her close and rested his forehead against hers as soon as the music began to slow down. And when he leaned in and kissed her, she didn't resist, even though a small voice inside her was screaming that what she was doing was wrong. She simply ignored it, finding the pressure of his mouth on hers electrifying. She wanted more and he happily complied.

As his lips wandered to her neck, she heard him say, "My car's around the corner. Maybe we could just—"

Before Derrick could finish his sentence, Alexis caught sight of Rafael, who shoved him backward, nearly knocking him off his feet.

"Rafael!" She grabbed hold of his arm in a feeble attempt to restrain him. His taut body radiated with tension and rage. Her eyes darted between Rafael and Derrick, afraid of what might happen. *Oh no! What have I done?*

"What's your problem, dude?" Derrick shouted as he raised his hands and clenched his fists. "You want a piece of me? Just try it and see what happens."

"I wouldn't provoke him if I were you." Jake seemed to come out of nowhere and quickly stepped between Derrick and Rafael. He then cast a reproachful look at Alexis before adding, "He's got every right to be

angry.”

Turning to Rafael, Jake put up a staying hand and said, “Just cool it, man. Take a breath. I got this.”

Derrick pointed at Rafael and said, “Who the hell are you?”

“He’s her boyfriend,” Jake answered for him while Rafael continued to glare at him in stony silence.

Looking more than confused, Derrick turned to Jake. “And who are you?”

“Someone who’s trying to save your sorry ass from a trip to the ER,” Jake replied coolly. “You don’t want to start a fight with this guy. You’d lose...badly. Trust me.”

“Boys, boys, what’s this all about?” Lea asked as she belatedly inserted herself into the fray. “Just for your information, my house is a strictly no-fighting zone. I’m sorry but you’re going to have to find some other place for that.”

“No one’s going to do any fighting tonight,” Jake replied as he looked from Rafael to Derrick and back again. “This has all been just one huge misunderstanding. Isn’t that right, Alexis?”

Swallowing hard, Alexis nodded as she glanced at Derrick and meekly said, “Sorry.”

Each second felt like an eternity as she waited for his response.

To her relief, Derrick chose to back away, leaving her alone with Rafael.

She felt ashamed and slightly bewildered by her actions as she watched Derrick go. She closed her eyes and tried to steady her breath as she turned to Rafael. She reached out to him. He put a hand up and shook his head. “Not here. Follow me outside if you want to talk.”

Her feet felt like they were rooted to the ground as she watched Rafael turn around and walk through the sliding door and back into the house. She would have, in all likelihood, remained there indefinitely if Tessa hadn’t grabbed her arm and pushed her along. “Don’t just stand there! Go after him!”

Alexis nodded and squeezed past the group of teenagers who had gathered around her. By the time she reached the front door, Rafael was already striding past the main gate and onto the dirt road. She called out his name. He stopped and slowly turned to face her.

Cautiously, she moved in. “I’m so sorry.”

“There is nothing you can say to undo what you have done,” he replied with clenched fists and a flushed face. “You cheated on me.”

“I can explain,” she stammered. She was so close now, she could almost touch him. “I wasn’t thinking. I was angry about Saturday and I—”

“So you decided to get back at me by kissing and groping some other guy?”

“It just happened,” Alexis blurted out. “Why were you late? You should have come sooner.”

He stared at her a moment, his eyes wide and in disbelief. “Did I hear you right? Are you actually trying to tell me that what just happened was *my* fault?”

“No, of course not. That’s not what I meant to say. It’s just that I’ve been trying to tell you that I need more, but you keep saying no...and it hurts.”

Rafael raked his hair and paced about while she anxiously waited for his response. Finally he said, “I don’t know what to say. Why does it matter so much to you?”

“You make it sound like I’m desperate.”

“When did I ever say anything like that?” Rafael demanded. “That is not what I think or believe.”

“I can’t go on like this,” Alexis said, nearing tears. “It’s too hard.”

After a long pause he looked into her eyes and said, “Then maybe we should take a break.”

Gasping, she shook her head and said, “No, Rafael, no!”

“What choice do I have? You have put me in an impossible position.”

“I’m sorry. Forget what I said. I don’t want to take a break from you. Ever. Can’t we just start this conversation over again?”

“It’s not that simple,” he said and shook his head. “There are some things that cannot be unsaid or undone.”

“Rafael, please...” she begged, even though it looked as though his mind was set.

“Let’s go back inside,” he said and motioned for her to turn around. “I’ll bring you back to Tessa and Jake. They will see you safely home.”

Sensing that any attempt to argue with him further was futile, Alexis relented and wordlessly followed him back to the party.

All the way home Tessa gave Alexis an earful and then some. Knowing she deserved the tongue-lashing from her cousin, she simply sat there with her head bowed as she wept softly and took it. Once they reached her house, she hastily grabbed her jacket, exited the car, and went inside. To her great relief, everyone in the house was already asleep as she tiptoed up to her room. She stripped down to her undergarments as she threw her party clothes onto the floor. She wanted to burn them and erase the entire evening from her mind. She sat on her bed for a long while afterward, completely despondent and dumbfounded by what she'd done. *How could I have possibly been so stupid?* she thought while a fresh round of tears spilled from her eyes.

Oddly, the attraction toward the amulet seemed to have completely disappeared. She put on a pair of pajamas and went to the bathroom. She turned on the light, leaned over the sink, and took a good, hard look at herself in the mirror. Her mascara was smudged and both her eyes and nose were puffy and red. *I look as horrible as I feel*, she thought morosely. She bent over and splashed her face with warm water and then picked up a hairbrush to smooth out the tangles in her hair.

She jerked her brush down when it caught on a particularly troublesome spot, causing a fistful of hair to fall to the ground. She looked down at it for a second before picking it up and throwing it away. And then it happened again. And again. Alarmed, she braced her hands on the bathroom sink and glanced at her reflection once more to see how much damage she'd done to her long, thick tresses. It was then that she noticed that the amulet around her neck was glowing. She cupped her hand around it. It felt warm to the touch. That's when she heard it. A low, guttural, and sinister laugh echoing throughout the room.

"Who is that? Is anyone there?" Alexis asked, her eyes darting about.

"Just look in the mirror, dear," the disembodied voice replied.

Slowly Alexis turned her eyes toward her reflection. Although the face in the mirror resembled hers, she knew that the girl staring back at her was a fake, an imposter. The skin was much paler than her own, and the eyes looked cold and dead. But the thing that terrified her most was the girl's maniacal smile.

Trembling with fear, Alexis closed her eyes and counted to ten, hoping that it was all just a twisted hallucination. But when she opened them once more, she discovered that the reflection in the mirror had morphed into something even more grotesque than before. She was no longer looking at her own reflection.

"Did you have a good evening?"

"Wh-who are you?" Alexis stuttered.

"Come closer and I will tell you."

She shook her head. "My parents...my brother..."

"...won't be able to help you," the reflection replied, finishing her sentence. "They're sound asleep and won't realize what has happened until it is much too late."

"Another demon already tried and failed to control me," she said as she desperately tried to think of a way out. "So will you."

"I don't need to manipulate you to get what I want," the demon said he leaned closer to the barrier that separated him from Alexis. "Do you want to know why?"

Alexis said nothing.

Without pausing the demon said, "Your lack of curiosity is beginning to spoil my fun, but since I'm such a good sport, I think I'll go ahead and give you a clue."

She knew she was in trouble, but as she tried to turn around, she soon discovered that she could no longer control her limbs. She uttered a barely audible groan as she was involuntarily drawn back toward the mirror. When her face touched the glass, she could do little but watch in immobilized horror as the demon's claw-like hands reached out and grabbed her face. Smiling malevolently, the demon said, "I am you. We are one now. And soon enough there will be nothing left of you worth saving."

You're wrong. And even though Alexis tried to resist with every fiber of her being, she felt herself slipping away...

"Your soul belongs to the Master. And I will be only too proud to have been the one who handed you over to him on a silver platter." The demon then placed his fingers on her eyelids and pressed down gently. As

his putrid breath reached her nostrils, the last thing she heard was, "Good night, Alexis. Sweet dreams."

Fear of Declaring Being Broken (by Lisa Meckel)

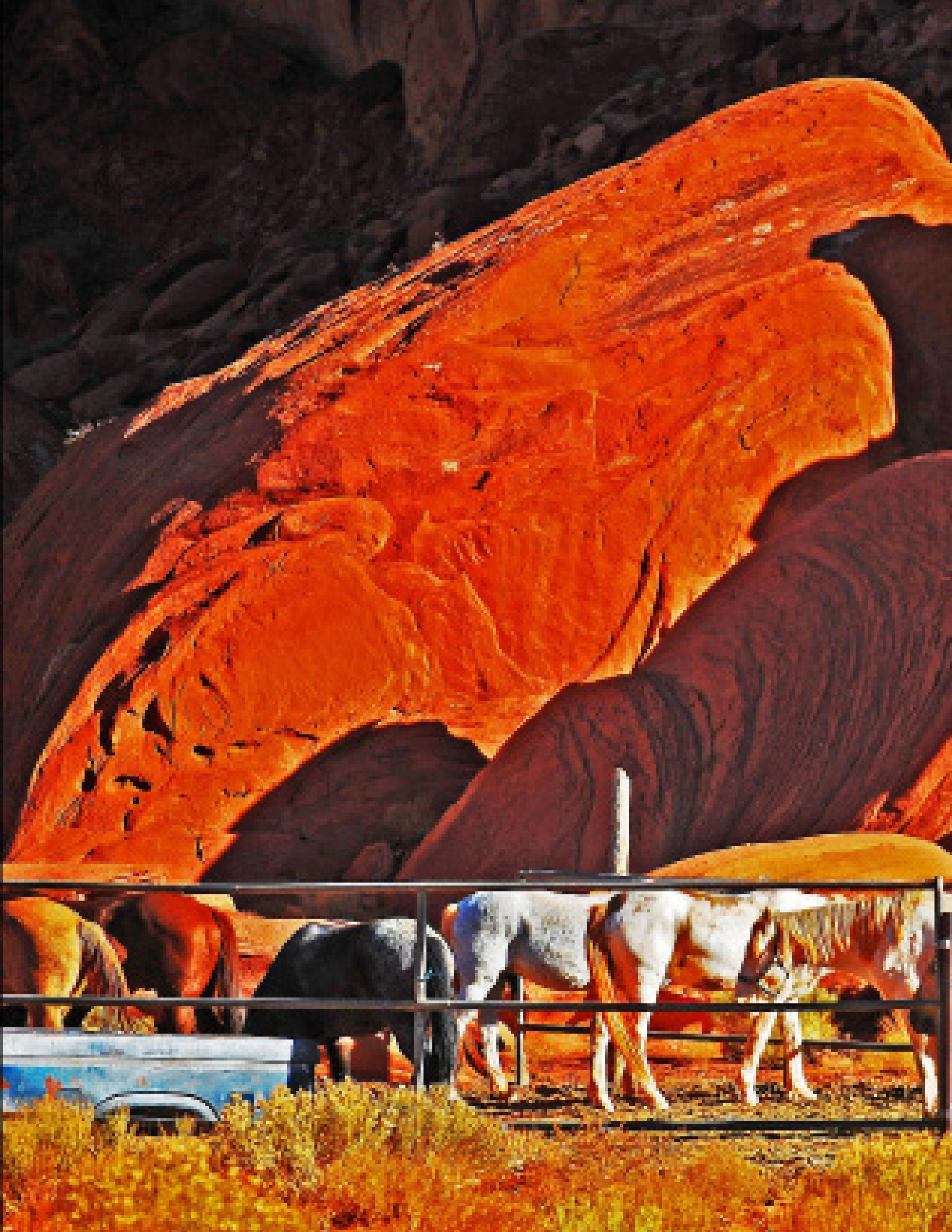
Sometimes you feel you must yell
Nothing matters!
because too much matters

you cannot flood like a river
rise above your banks

nor
become a blue moon promising
the world double shine

nor
live while dying
like a tree's leaves
caught in autumn's golden moment

If you should decide
to become the wild river
in the light of a blue moon
be the gilt tree of lost leaves
declaring *nothing matters*
then know you are broken
your story will never live
the hero never found
he will wander forever
without the only one
who can call his name
and bring him home



Pastoral: The Poet, The World, The Word

(by Christopher Kuhl)

I

Trees
are why we write.

Naked,

we cover ourselves
with words

handcrafted,
artisan-made like

leaves
once budding out

now fallen

crackling, scratching
like a quill on parchment.

That is why we write,
write in our little, secret forest.

2

A random word shrieked. I
only wanted a choice:
a minimum (necessarily)
of two, no more than three
or even four. But

no more than that; then
it's too hard. It's like
having your fingers broken;
you just act for action's sake,

throw your choices
away and start down a garbled
path, not knowing, not caring
here or how it goes, just spitting
words mindlessly: who cares?

But a voice says, "You do,
you do," shaking your shoulders.

Stop trying to kid yourself;
fight yourself all you want.
Your heart still beats,

the words still wait for you.
Make a song.

3

I am nothing unless in
perpetual motion, galloping,
pushing against time generated
by Earth's spinning, the sun
and moon teeter-tottering
east to west, up and down,
all in order

until the fulcrum breaks
and our little solar system
goes black, the universe

invisible, all light sucked wordlessly
away. All voices silenced;
all poetry gone.

4

We do not speak
the necessary languages
of the dead.

In the prairies

there is no telling stories
of the dead,

just talk about this year's
crops—wheat, corn, beans;
the meadows covered in clover—
and trying to bring the
honeybees home
with sweet little love notes

stuck on fence posts, trees,
scattered in the clover and dark
corners, where they sing

and everybody—old and young,
veterans and new workers—
rejoices.

Trees can be saplings
or wise, ancient oaks.
We sit and dream

as the forest leaves
and grounds glow, sun-dazzled.
And when the sun goes down

as the moon wanders up,
sometimes whole, sometimes not,
the stars burst forth,

each in its own glory. And then
a shooting star fiercely, silently
crosses the sky:

it bears the living words
with which the poets create the
heavens and Earth. Dark or light,

this is why we write.
This is why we sing. Alleluia.

They Look Like People, But They Ain't

(by Christopher Kuhl)

they eat. they sweat.
they bleed. they
forget how to breathe.
they forget how to swallow

and they choke on the air
stuck in their lungs. they
cannot breathe, they can-
not breathe and without
the assistance of a tree
and white man rope,

they raise their faces
in misplaced hope
to the freely pulsing
sky and asphyxiate
until the garden is filled
with strange fruit on the ground.



Cigarettes and Willow Trees (by Shelby McMillen)

Disclaimer: Willow did not understand why life was given to her, and as the reader you do not need to understand why this story was placed in your hands. Read deeply with your emotions and don't search for reasoning within the story, but within yourself.

She's coming.

I could sense her movements, feel her presence as it neared. I have never once seen Lilith, never once heard her voice, smelled her scent, felt her touch; but I sensed it all. She inflicted these feelings upon me, made me feel her pain but spit the rest of the good she possessed into me. I am her saving grace, and now, she is wandering through the woods once again to tell me actions I fear I already know. I never saw the blood she had on her skin, but I knew it was there, I knew it was sticky and annoying the hell out of her. I knew she wished she could just clean herself off, but she knew she couldn't go home looking like this so instead she came to me. I knew she had a cigarette lit and dangling from her hand as she tiptoed around the woods, and I knew when she took a drag because I could feel her lungs expanding, I knew her every breath and movement; and after all these years, I still felt her words before they flowed out of her mouth.

"WILLOW, I'M BACK!" she yelled.

She really shouldn't yell, she is gonna stir up the forest and draw attention to herself. Knowing that I thought these words, she huffed and skipped past me brushing her hand along my side, heading straight into the murky water of the isolated pond.

"Nobody is going to hear me, it is just you and I out here."

You never know what is around the corner, Lilith. Just the other day when you were here you noticed campers not even a mile away.

"Yes, I did, and I took care of those campers while all you did was tell me how much of a bad idea it was."

Well what was I supposed to say?

Completely ignoring my question, she undressed and started to scrub the blood off her clothes, followed by her body. I felt the cool water washing over her, felt that this time wasn't one of the easy ones. They fought back and did some damage; her third rib on the left side was bruised, she had a gash on the back of her arm, and as the water washed over it, I felt tears streaming down her face.

They hurt you this time. Didn't they?

"No, I'm fine, just a minor setback, but the job was still done."

Don't you think you should just stop?

"I can't. It feels too good and without it, what will I be?"

Normal?

She giggled for a moment, then said, "Willow, I will never be normal with you around."

I didn't understand what she meant by this, I didn't ask to be 'around.' I am only around when she is, and to everybody else, I don't exist; she's the one that gave me life and she can take it away but that would be too much to ask. Lilith rarely gives anything, she mostly takes; but those few times that she does give it is set in stone and you can never have her take it back.

One of these days you are going to go too far, Lilith.

"Impossible, going too far is just a concept. You can only advance into further greatness."

Aren't you hurting?

"Physically, or emotionally?" she asked while digging her heel into the mud.

Both.

"All the time," she sighed, grabbing her pack of cigarettes off the ground. I could tell she was scared by how she fumbled for a minute. It doesn't happen often but sometimes the good is closer to the edge than she would like. Sometimes my thoughts get to her and she takes a minute to realize the way her life has gone; but that is all it is, just a minute. A lot goes through her mind in those sixty seconds. Her parents, her first love, her

best friend, the rest of her family, her first victim, and her last. But once those sixty seconds are up, its back to feeling nothing. No more fumbling with a lighter, no more shaking from the warm breeze, no more feeling; just cigarettes and willow trees.

She's coming.

Her footsteps were heavier this time, her breath short and unsteady. She was panicking, but over what?

"I can't do it Willow, I can't do it," she whimpered.

Do what? I asked.

"Kill him. I keep trying, and I want to, but something stops me, and I get this craving to touch his skin, feel his flesh against mine but I also want him bleeding in my hands," her voice petered off and I knew exactly what she wanted.

The images that came from her were horrid, filled with so much hate as well as pleasure, confusion, lust, and a hint of obsession. An obsession over a man that walks ten feet ahead of her, never noticing the infatuation he leaves behind.

"I need to do this, he has to go... too much power.... too much power..." she muttered while pacing back and forth along the edge of the water.

LILITH, I shout.

"What Willow?"

Just stop.

"I can't, and I don't want to," she said as she took a deep breath, sliding her eyes seductively up my body. "You know you are quite beautiful, right?"

No, because I don't know what I am, but stop trying to change the subject.

"All you need to know is that you are perfect," she said, smiling, "and that I am never going to stop. He has too much control and pull over me, which means he needs to go before I lose myself. I don't know how I am going to do it, but I am, and it will lead to the greatest thing I've ever done."

And what is that? I asked, not receiving an answer.

She just smiled, and felt happy, her mind completely blocked from me. She shut me out and locked the door on everything she planned on doing. As she sat on the edge of the water soaking her toes and being completely quiet, I started to think on my own. I know I was nothing real, nothing anybody else knew about.

I was in Lilith's mind and she was in mine, but my mind was never mine.

I could not claim possession over something another owned. All I knew is that I was by water and she had to seek me out. I never was with her on her hunts or when she slept, I was only with her on nights like these, and she always came to me, so what was I? I never heard her leave, saw her leave, felt her brush my body as she walked past; but I sensed it all. I felt it all within her, and without her controlling my mind and feeding me emotions, feeling didn't exist.

I loved her so much and the love I felt was the love she saw in herself, but I also felt hatred and disgust in who she was... in who we were. I sit here pretending that I am anything other than Lilith, but the blood is hers, the actions are hers, and our minds are one.

Lilith, what is it you are going to do? I asked.

"Something I should have done a long time ago."

Is it bad?

"No."

Is it good?

"Not even close." she sighed. "Willow, I'm not okay. I know something is wrong with me. I'm not stupid. People stare at me, they look on the outside as if they can see what is lingering inside. I am filled with a black tar that starts in my heart and leaks through my veins. It hurts as it pounds in my head and the only thing that calms it is the metallic taste of blood as it splatters into my mouth.

A tear leaks from the side of her eye and her hand rises to her mouth to allow another drag of cigarette to

fill her lungs.

For once I have nothing to say. I fall silent, and the thoughts I had fade in and out as she continues.

“I think I’m in love with a man but not in a typical way. I find that I can’t bring myself to kill him instantly because I want him to suffer. My past prey was so easy, as you know I do it quickly, quietly, and usually I don’t want them to fight. But I really want him to fight. I want our blood to mix together as I feel his pulse roaring beneath my knife. I want to taste his last breath and be his last sight. He is my everything and I want to be his ending.”

She throws her cigarette into the pond and my mind begins to get fuzzy.

You’re leaving? I asked.

“For now, but I will be back, and when I come back, all will be changed.”

With those final words and the crunching of leaves, I drifted into a fretful sleep.

She’s here.

Her footsteps kissed the ground ever so slightly causing a slight rustle of leaves, followed by a scraping noise which followed her every movement. What was she doing? For once, her steps didn’t wake me this time: this time it was the banter. I heard voices I’ve never heard before, felt emotions I didn’t even know existed. She was chaotic shuffling from left to right, throwing her thoughts into the wind. I knew something was wrong, something didn’t seem right, but she wasn’t letting me see exactly what it is yet. All I knew was that she was moving at a rapid pace and letting her mind fill with hundreds of thoughts.

Lilith what are you doing? I asked.

“Willow, good, you are awake,” she said “I am doing the great thing I told you about. I am burning away my sins and starting fresh.”

What do you mean?

I was very confused with what she was saying. Her sins were something she couldn’t just burn away, something that wouldn’t go away. They were a part of her and will forever be inside of her.

“Out of the ash/ I rise with my red hair/ and I eat men like air,” she said, ignoring my question once again. “Sylvia Plath wrote that, and I can’t help but feel a connection to it. My whole life I have consumed men. I killed my father by the age of Ten, I seduced my best friend and slit his throat by the age of sixteen, and now, I’ve sucked the life out of my love, my obsession. I am my own demon.”

She began to giggle as she continued to build her bed.

“I swallow every man I see, and now it is my time to rise up, out from the ashes a whole new person, a dark phoenix. I thrived in the life I lived, and wonder will I thrive in death?” she asked herself. “For years they’ve beat me, thrown me to the sharks, sucked all the serenity out of me; and I actually let them. I let them rule me. I let their blood run through my veins and desecrate my insides, but never again. It’s my turn to rule myself.”

Those words unleashed her mind and opened her thoughts and emotions into my head; she was going to burn her sins. In front of her was a bed of men, men who she killed and kept locked away. Her father and best friend rested on the bottom, her later kills lifting the bed higher and higher; and finally, on top laid a beautiful man, a beautiful man covered in blood and mud. He was her final test, and now she planned on rising from their ashes into death. She knew she was going to die, but in our mind, the death she was going to face was a new birth. Liquid leaked from the canister in her hand, showering her life’s work in a substance so thick and sticky it burned Lilith’s hand. The smell alone was repulsive, igniting her senses on fire and causing tears to leak down her cheeks. We were both scared, scared of what was to come but the fear she held leaked into me as excitement poured from her veins. She saw this as a new beginning, and I saw it as my end. This was the last time I would ever notice anything, ever feel anything. I didn’t have eyes of my own. I couldn’t hear, touch, or smell. Everything I witnessed was through her mind. She was ready, but was I?

Lilith, what am I? I asked.

She smiled, taking a long drag from her cigarette as she contemplated what exactly were the right words to say. She became sticky with blood, the crisp breeze brushed against her skin and her nose crinkled with the

smell of gasoline. She was comfortable, felt comfort in me as well as the bodies underneath her. She was finally content and felt peace lurking around the corner. Taking one final drag, she opened her eyes and looked up at the night sky above her, the smoke escaping her lips as if they were the words she spoke.

“Willow, you’re a beautiful powerful weeping tree that has so much control over me.”

The smoke was gone, and gravity took hold as the dimming cigarette dropped from her fingertips.

There was one split second of peace, one moment where everything was quiet. The wind was still, the leaves lay flat on the muddy ground, our breath gone and the stars bright.

One single second

One second of peace and then consumption wrapped its hands around our throats and sucked the life from our bones.

We felt the heat, we felt the pain, we screamed and thrashed as the fire consumed us. Our thoughts, our breaths, and our fears were now ashes in the wind, and all that was left was a cigarette bud against a burnt willow tree.



Through (by Michael Starr)

Lotto

receipt

Came for me like th'whirlwind in'r hair

Lost, always

She told me to tell you that we're *through*

Through pains of camera lens glass and televisions sets

Setting stage often and unforgivably for rumors/nonsense

Disfiguration gray sky unless conditions met

No power, just the weather

Silence all standard

Relationship division equation

Member? Of crew, sailing lithely

Cut-ting water, cut-ting hair

Lovely horse whip tail

Minority (by Michael Starr)

Bell-me

Karp saught under discrimination

Standard(s) folk understand

-ing -ing -ing

Light for your mother

Sod instill ye oft' craving

Better change 'n'

Syllabic my diffidence

Mute man goes on rampage

Stalks deer

Gouges stones awl locomotive S

ing Si.

Step

on

fringe beliefs



The Place (by Michael Starr)

Similitude in my time

=

Town station reserve barracks white flakes

=

Microscopic concentration divvied.

Lo', character for you;

For you, my friend, a glass of wine

Number 'n' stains

Differentials/integrals splayed o'er winduhsill

Static indifference

to

remainder.

My Ideas, Voiced (by Michael Starr)

/Forget you ever knew it-me I was outrageous no sensible man would have/

SLOW DOWN

for pedestrian notions that infect

that portraythat split ideology as bread in kitchen

just a few snacks

Hero (by Michael Starr)

Dah dah dah, dee dah--C#, F♯noble

Programming/music

Simplistic in regard though

Powerful

The storm on the horizontal melts me

Because I am cold

Full of cheap Trix

Gazing gawking idolatry for

Member number one of the club

}



The Kid Peacock (by Magnolia Paisley)

Two years ago, I killed myself
and to the mirror I rose
like the minty pine
who grows healthy
from its own ashes. I fanned the flame and this time
I saw I could fan my feathers
and fancy myself to live
as the peacock.

Cleft (by Magnolia Paisley)

Nobody else bothered
to see the bump between
as I had and none
would have thought that this
bump was the source
was the constant reminder
of everything else
gone wrong.

Masked Dreams (by Magnolia Paisley)

In the face of losing my face,
I am a spritely rabbit
who leaps over high mountains
and brushes her ears against the moon.
The dream to wear a mask,
crested with grand flourish,
where what's underneath
may never be seen again
could yet be reality.
I dream to never wake up from this dream,
to see my face again, I'd die of shock.

Cold Flesh Beyond Glass (by Magnolia Paisley)

In mirrors are we evil,
I vow in my future to have no reflection.
For when my eyes enter mirrors,
and you fail to see my wretched true form,
the disgusting blob that only I see,
I retch for you and pity your eyes,
but you hold me anyway.
I *live* for flesh,
flesh to hold beyond lying glass.
I wish I were a vampire
in part to feel right in my want
to consume you and your love,
but to remain reflectionless for eternity.

Ah, Divinity Within Thee

When you are older you see the sun less frequently.
Perhaps this realization dawned on you
because you stared at it too long,
but the shadows of the night stretch taller
and wider, and you, dear little angel,
lost looking for the sun look up and let
the dark eat you. You have no initiative,
no Icarusian drive to seek light where it lies,
empathically clung to the sun while you
pathetically stand with boundless desires
to do nothing out of fear of an ending.
Drink the heat in your chest, little angel,
the sun will not drip its blessings to you anymore.

Anger With Myself, Towards You In Present (by Magnolia Paisley)

You sidle like a fucking rat,
Lacking in pluck, herald
Of squelching gags, reminiscent of
bathtubs suffused with envy.
The lonely bed frame on which
you sleep gashes you for
your terrible silent company.
You limp the way I smoke,
heaving and writhing and desperate
for some physical comfort.
You shiver in heated paint
he way I moan, hungry
for your blood to be spilt
by every demon masked by
the stygian edges of sight.
Hush, though bright is your wild plume,
it is dull and unrefined to masters,
and since you are not already a master
you have naught a purpose for that plume.
Your lorn cries for affection return naught
but angered echoes, and the plodding footsteps
outside your door which you imagine will
come for you don't come, because these thin
walls soak up a surprising amount of sound.
The door dreams to be ripped from its hinges
for you, but that which would rip the door
to win your fancy balks, and this tiny
bedroom balks in response. You lay
praying for monsters to make you
dismemberment's passionate visage,
to be the idol of stupid sex,
to have joys wrought by another's
thievery of your initiative becausey
ou are not and never will be a master,
and my what a beautiful concept
you imagine that would be.

Meet the Authors

Magnolia Paisley is a male to female transgender writer from Los Angeles, California. She currently attends Reed College in Portland, Oregon. She started her transition in May 2018 where she also began to study writing poetry. Poetry quickly became a huge passion of hers, and she tries to keep her writing about her experience living and loving as a transwoman, in spite of the difficulties her dysphoria presents on a day to day basis for her. Her work has previously been shown in Prometheus Dreaming and Flintridge Preparatory School's art book Folio. She also runs an account on Instagram (@paisley.paisley.paisley) where she uploads her poetry.

Judith Ford has writing published in Clackamas Literary Review, Confluence, Connecticut Review, Hampden-Sydney Poetry Review, The Laurel Review, The Meadow, North Dakota Quarterly, The Penmen Review, Pennsylvania English, Quarter After Eight, Rubbertop Review, Southern Humanities Review, Willow Review, and many other journals. She co-authored a poetry collection with Martin Jack Rosenblum, Burning Oak, published by Lionhead Press (1986). She received Pushcart Prize nominations for fiction and poetry, won first place in the Willow Review Prose Award (2005), and was awarded "most highly commended" in the Margaret Reid Poetry Contest (2008). She has an MFA in writing from the Vermont College of Fine Arts, a BS in education and an MSW from the University of Wisconsin. She is a retired psychotherapist and in the past has led workshops in the use of the arts in psychotherapy. She has also taught creative writing to middle, high school, and adult students. When she's not writing, she enjoys reading, hiking, dancing, strength training, yoga, and Words With Friends. She is the mother of three grown children, and grandmother to four wonderful grandchildren.

Jasmin Tucker has a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of California, Berkeley, and a juris doctorate from Notre Dame Law School. She was an editorial writer for her high school newspaper and a symposium editor for the Journal of College and University Law. She has also served as a Senate Fellow with the California Legislature, and is a classically trained singer.

Lisa Meckel has had poetry published in Rattle, Nimrod International Journal, Reed Magazine, Mirboo North Times, Pennsylvania English, and many other journals. She is a three-time winner of the Poetry Prize at the Santa Barbara Writers Conference, and was a presenter for The Big Read honoring Robinson Jeffers. She is currently assembling a collection of her poems for publication.

Christopher Kuhl earned a bachelor's degree in philosophy and one in music composition, as well as two masters of music degrees and a PhD in Interdisciplinary Arts. He taught English at the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy. He enjoys reading a wide array of literature, as well as philosophy and history. His other interests include studying higher mathematics and classical Greek and Hebrew, as well as drawing and painting with acrylics. He is never bored. His other writings can be found in a variety of literary journals and magazines, and his self-published book was awarded an honorable mention in the poetry category in the Writer's Digest 15th Annual International Self-Published Book Awards, and it came in 10th in the Writer's Digest Poetry Awards.

Michael Starr is a scientist who writes poetry on the side. Previously published: BlazeVox &c. Lives in California with his family.

Keith Moul is a poet of place, a photographer of the distinction light adds to place. Both his poems and photos are published widely. His photos are digital, striving for high contrast and saturation, which makes his vision colorful (or weak, requiring enhancement). His grayscale photos are digital, often striving for a charcoal drawing look and mood. <http://poemsphotosmoul.blogspot.com/>