

Violet Margin

a literary journal



2026

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Friend

By Bex Luna Hespera

Some friends leave
But you stay
Even when I grieve
Even when I try to make you go away
You are a true friend
You will always be by my side
Our friendship will never end
My moral guide



They Come Back Taller

By Beverly Hymel

They come back taller than my kitchen doorframe remembers,

shoulders where there used to be only elbows and the impatient flit of knees. Their voices have dropped into the registers of others' houses, and still, when they speak, I hear the milk-tooth lisp ghosting behind the consonants.

In the living room mirror they pause, not to check their hair, but to see what I've become without their small hands anchoring me to usefulness.

I want to tell them: I was once a bright appliance, a reliable hum. I could toast a day evenly, set it down on a plate.

Instead I was the simmering pan left too long, the smoke alarm's thin scream, the evening when the sauce broke and I stood there staring at the curdled ruin, as if I could will it to be good.

They look at the sink's hard water stains, at the bills folded like bad news to be hidden, at the way my laughter trips, a foot catching on the threshold of some old fear, and something in their eyes sharpens. Judgment is a kind of clean cloth. They hold it up and ask why the world is not wiped down. Why I have not erased the ring left by the glass of my own shortcomings. Their faces have the smooth assurance



of people who have not yet misplaced
an entire year in grief,
who have not learned how a body can carry winter
under the skin long after the trees leaf out.
They remember me as a story without a hero.
They do not remember the unpaid hours:
the cramped thumb pressing coins into a jar,
the late-night arithmetic under the stove light,
the way I swallowed words so they could have sentences
without my bitterness in them.
Sometimes one of them says,
with soft bile in their voice, as if speaking to a defective animal,
You should have done better.
As if better is a door I failed to open,
a key I left on a hook and walked away from.
I stand in the doorway they once measured themselves against.
I watch how they occupy space now,
how they have learned to look outward
instead of up.
I want to set my failures on the table
like a bowl of bruised summer peaches,
still sweet if you cut around the brown,
and ask them to taste what I tasted:
the metallic bite of panic,
the stale coffee of too many mornings,
the grit in my eye
when I smiled through it.
But I say nothing.
I let their judgment move through me
like wind through laundry on a line,
snapping, honest, making everything visible.
And in the quiet after their visits,
I walk the rooms they outgrew,
touch the marks on the wall where their handprints were left
in dirt and hope. I press my palm to the drywall,

as if I could feel, through layers of paint,
the exact day my patience cracked,
the exact night I held my own shame
and did not drop it.

Perfection is a glass kept in a cabinet
no one opens. It stays clean
because it is never used.

I was used.

I was the cup in their hands,
chipped, rinsed, refilled,
the one that met their mouths
again and again.

If they could look without the hard polish of untested age,
they might see what I see:

how I kept them drinking.

How I learned to leak slowly,

so they would not notice

until they were already grown,

already standing in their own doorways,

deciding what to forgive.



Still Life of a Shoe

By Xiomara Lopez

Mud Stains lace the edges,
Salt from last winter still crusted.

Yet the shoes wait in silence,
Holding the shape of a journey
They never chose.

Every errand, every hurry,
Up all day and night
Bearing weight without complaint,
Slowly worn to smoothness,
To skin left unprotected.

Taken when needed, abandoned in dark,
Left where they don't belong.
Their worth overlooked,
Their labor endless

Creased with quiet patience,
I am the one being worn down



Preschoolers in tutus tell me what to believe

By Natalie Mazey

where are you flying / today / you are magic /
tell me / the color of your wings / I see you /
shimmer / bend your knees / jump until you fly
/ then press your toes / into the earth / reach
your hands / into the sun / hear the music /
become you / as you become / the music /
arms swimming / through sticky molasses
/ finding rhythms / only you / can see / so
throw / scarves in the air / coat this world / in
hues of pink and gold / because you / hold the
paintbrush / because you / remake the world

It cannot be God,


so let it be this: that sweet

magic, becoming.



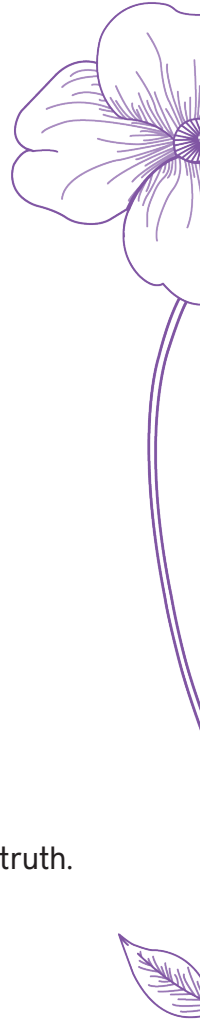
Portrait of a Boogeyman

By Caleb Miller



They paint a paradise,
amber fields and gleaming gates,
Warm and welcoming,
Yet it is whitewashed
The brushstrokes lie,
But reality doesn't matter.
They fiercely refuse facts,
Redesign the truth,
Nurture their narrow narrative,
Proudly display their distortions,
Because reality doesn't matter.
They gaze at their painting,
"Remember this utopia?"
Chant their nostalgia like a hymn,
They praise their sensational saccharine showpiece,
Because reality doesn't matter.
The painted perfection begins to marr:
Children starve,
Storms flood,
Jobs vanish-
But who holds the brush?
Accept responsibility?
Don't make me laugh!
They find a villain,
Sketch a threat,
Smeared in shadow,
Reality doesn't matter.
They draw a boogeyman with burning eyes,
Design a monster with clawed hands and sharp teeth-
Make the people scared,
They sketch a scapegoat,

Paint a puppet as the problem-
Make the people angry,
Reality doesn't matter.
They hurl accusations,
Sling slogans like slurs,
"They're eating the dogs;
They're eating the cats,"
"Caravans of criminals,"
"They're coming to murder your children,"
"They're here to steal your elections,"
Reality doesn't matter.
This strategy works for now,
But we've been to this gallery,
Many times,
And we've seen this technique before,
Over and over,
Rome had the Christians,
The Nazis had the Jews,
The Hutus had the Tutsis,
The Serbs had the Bosniaks,
On and on,
The fearful always find a face to fit their frame,
So we know how this ends.
Paint lines can't lie forever,
The canvas will begin to rot,
The image fades in the light,
And history shows us that people eventually remember the truth.
So win your elections for now,
Cast your villain,
Paint your boogeyman,
But the canvas isn't dry,
Bullies don't win,
And reality does matter.



The Blueprint

By Caleb Miller



I sat down to write the blueprint for my life-
Edges crisped,
Lines clear,
Goals precise,
Success inked in defined strokes of a pen,
Measured dreams and calculated outcomes in ink,
No room for complications,
No time for mess,
but life had other plans:
the ink spilled,
not a blot- a flood.
edges did not just crumble-
they curled, burned, disintegrated.
lines weren't simply erased-
they vanished,
washed away in a silent tsunami.
the blueprint itself - trashed,
ripped from its binding with no warning.
the plans - gone,
the goals - missing.
success- out of reach.
silence.
months of parentheses pass.
machines beep,
punctuating where dreams had once been,
despair
I existed,
floating between commas,
and in the blank space,
the pages began to fill with thoughts of hopelessness
why keep struggling?

why fight when the future is a mere meaningless
memory of what could have been?
then-
a voice,
quiet but resolute,
a challenge to those thoughts:
“You still have a future; it’s just...
Different.
Embrace that uncertainty.”
And in that moment, I saw the truth:
Life can’t be blueprinted,
Its edges crinkle and fold,
It refuses to follow straight lines,
It doesn’t adhere to precise goals written in ink,
To succeed, sometimes you need a pencil,
So I picked one up,
Not to redraw the old design,
But something new,
Because I learned that sometimes you have to erase,
Improvise,
Reclaim your future in soft graphite,
Adapt,
Scribble outside the margins,
Do not be afraid to revise and edit,
Because life certainly is not,
It will make changes for you,
In those moments, become your own author,
Navigate your own path,
Be resilient,
Unafraid of reinvention.
Do not long for what life was or could be,
Take the author’s seat,
Compose,
Pencil in hand,
Have the courage to keep writing



You're a Threat

By Cithara Patra



You're a threat when you lend a hand
to someone begging for help
You're a threat heading off to school
with your wide eyes and innocence caught on film
Phones mistaken for guns
Kindness mistaken for rage
You're a threat for being in the way
The old man's goons feed his fools more lies
Darkening what's left of their souls
Clouding all logic and empathy
Turning happiness to looming fears
You're a threat to a freedom
that was never threatened to begin with
You're a threat for spreading the truth
about their ulterior motives
You're a threat for de-escalating tension
they chose to throw in your town
You bleed the same blood
You breathe in the same air
yet you're the one they claim to fear
You're the threat to their democracy
which they had no hand in creating
You're a threat wherever you go
You're a threat with every word from your mouth
You're a threat to them for you have more
than remnants of a soul

October Memories

By Benjamin L. Roth

The mule kicked dust up
into the hazy October sky.

I lost track of what was
earth and what was smoke,
watching its frenzied dance
of joy and agitation.

I could feel the burn of sweat in
the nicks on the back of my hands,
even though they were
her memories, not mine.



Ignorant Bliss

By Jaci Scibelli

There is bliss written into the ignorance of childhood dreams.

Longing yet again for a state of being that exists between peace and being all-knowing.

I no longer wish to be an omniscient being of eternal knowledge.

I wish instead for the quiet calm that accompanies not knowing, not thinking, and not being.

The weight of infinite choices and the heaviness of the thoughts that follow the drought of being completely aware and cognitive in this society.

Those choices that feel like drowning in hate, hopelessness, and repeated traumas woven with resentment.

Oh, sweet child, remember there is bliss in ignorance.

Do not go chasing after the demons of this world,

Lest you wish to find yourself stranded in an ocean.

Swallowing down gallons of salty bigotry and harsh truths that burn your throat raw until you can't remember what it felt like to just breathe.

So please, hold onto those innocent parts of yourself.

Take them out with delicate hands and surround them with bubble wrap and Styrofoam.

And should you ever find a moment of silence and solitude, unwrap that bubble wrap with the gentleness of a feather touching the ground.

Allow yourself those moments of uninhibited innocence.

Go out and dance in the rain.

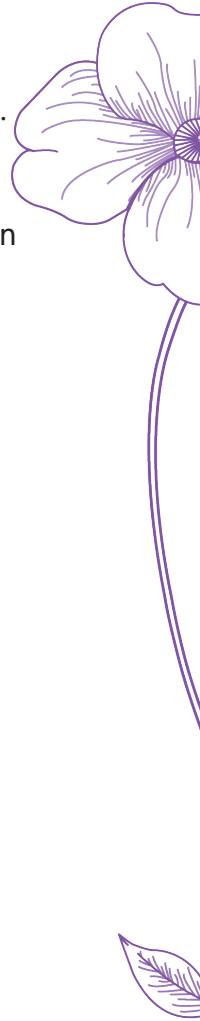
Because when everything harsh and overwhelming creeps in,
those moments are a bubble.

Moments are a shield from a society that induces suffocation.

Bliss is not constant, but please seek it out when you can.

Curl up in that warm blanket of uncertainty and take a nap in
that field of whispered dreams.

Bask in that ignorance.



Words to My Assaulter

By Jaci Scibelli



I've spent many nights curled up in the bathtub.

Images replaying in my head like you personally
scratched them into my amygdala.

Maybe, if I scrub enough, even my bones will
forget that touch.

Not touch, the force of your hands.

I often wonder now if I had been someone else at
another time of your life, would it have been
any different.

Afraid that your actions will implant so far into me,
That even he will be able to tell that I'm not unused.

You sit at my side late into the night.

Venom in words that aren't really there.

It's hard to tell the difference between reality and
the images that flash through my head.

Some days you consume my thoughts so much, I
wish to pluck the hair out of my head one by one.

They say that hair holds memories, so maybe they
will follow with each strand lost.

Every word and every action,

Action.

Sometimes I still hold my breath when I see
someone dressed in that stupid operational
camouflage, as if your malice somehow got
programmed into them too.

Sometimes I remind myself that it was not your
body to take, and rage consumes me.

Some days I still think somehow your actions
were excusable,

My head screaming that maybe I deserved it.

As if anyone who loved me would ever actually
do that.

I wish you could see the flinch that follows the
noise of arguments.

Their words sending me back to those flashes of
the past.

Maybe it wasn't your fault,

Correction: it was all your fault.

I was 18,

I'm 21 now and your fingers still ghost my skin.

Where does my body begin and end,

I thought it was with you.

It was never with you



Stormchaser

By Rebecca Thomas



I was born in the land of bruised skies,
where grain settled on the windowsills,
on our homes and in our hearts.

Mama would coo and stroke my hair,
saying it was only Mother Earth
knocking on our door to check on us,
to uncover the unwanted,
to ravage the sinful,
to purify the unclean.

As the sirens pierced through the dusty wind,
she would hum louder and clearer.

I pressed my sullen hands into the dirt;
the grain pricks my skin in stippling patterns.
Mother Earth was breathing above us.
Each gust was her generous warning.
Each silence was our symbol of devotion.

I would step out of the cellar,
grasping Mama's hand tightly.

My feet bare
and my toes curled in dust.

I would look up to the skies –
stitches held each fragment together
as if nothing had come undone at all.

Years passed and I felt the calling
to chase Mother Earth's chaos for myself.
To go past the strict bounds
that Mama once set as safety.
To document the silver spines that graced
my homeland with fervor.

My last moments were spent in this chase.
She got closer and closer and closer still.
The winds were vehement
as they folded barns like paper
and yanked cows from their pastures.

When I was in the center of it all,
I felt a pure and utter silence.
Mother Nature called my name,
as she often does.
So I answered.



Trans Infographic Outside

By Lilith Bing



Antler

By Tiama Elfgen



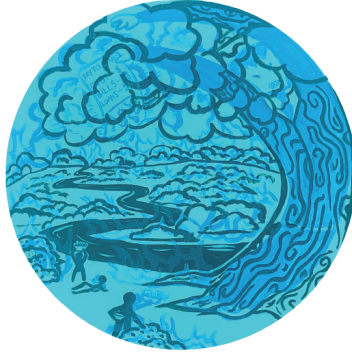
The Towering

By Anna Lance



Two Hues To Every Story: Greed

By Cheyenne Meneghetti



Quiet Horizons

By Devanshika Sapra



Robin Rhodes is Dead

By *Corynn Casey*

Robin Rhodes is dead. This entry is the first, in what I expect to be a long series detailing the aftermath of her untimely death. I can't stop it, the screams, replaying over and over in my ears, of the one I wish that I could take with me.

September 10, 2024

The day is grey, the fog is set, and I cannot see. Clasp my journal shut, I sat up straight and sighed, a cool fall wind began to drift through the window of the parked sedan. My hand, shaking, slowly rose to my necklace, clutching it tightly, tracing the crescent shaped pendant. Glancing over my shoulder, I spotted Julie, Robin's mother, leaning over the steering wheel while she muttered something under her breath about it being the last day I could see Robin. Without responding, I took a deep breath in a feigned attempt to calm myself, before climbing out of the car and walking towards the mortuary. As I neared the entrance, my view gradually became obscured by a veil of slow falling tears.

Opening the door, I passed the check-in counter, making my way to Robin's Room. The room was filled with people, mingling about, mostly her family, with some other people who I didn't know. My eyes soon focused on the head of the room, onto an





open casket. I felt a hand rest on my shoulder.

“Go see your **friend**.” Julie whispered in my ear. Nodding, I glided over to the front of the room, reaching out to hold Robin’s hand. Peering down at her, I could swear that I could see her sly, knowing, smile once again.

“Hey Robin,” I croaked, my throat dry, my voice dipping into a whisper “I came to see ya! Like I promised,” I paused, “So hey, after you get better, we should totally go to the observatory before it gets too cold. You know how I always liked stargazing with you.”

“I know,” she laughed. I smiled, relieved to hear her voice, I began to speak louder.

“I knew it, so you were just sleeping! I have so much to tell you... your whole family thinks you're dead dude.” I laughed, she smiled, and part of myself died, realizing that it happened again. I turned away, my ears ringing as I gasped for air, making eye contact with Robin's mom as she approached.

“Breathe, Laurie, breathe.” She said smoothly while reaching out to embrace me.

But... She's here.”

“I know. She is, but she’s gone, Laurie”

“No... She just... Never mind,” I grumbled.

“I think it may be best if we leave. Your dad texted me that you were about to be heading north soon. I’m glad you got to see your **friend** one last time before you're big move.”

“Yeah,” I murmured, wiping my eyes turning back to Robin, “Me too.”

I see red. Red leaves falling from the trees, the marking of the seasons changing, of life moving on. First snow falls today, yet as it falls, I still see it. Red, I see red. Blood creeping from her neck, climbing out of her mouth as she chokes, her arm outreached clutching onto my shirt. I see red. Red leaves falling from the trees, the marking of the seasons changing, of life moving on. First snow falls today, yet as it falls, I still see it. Red, I see red. Blood creeping from her neck, climbing out of her mouth as she chokes, her arm outreached clutching onto my shirt. Robin Rhodes is dead and I can still see her. I have documented every interaction, every moment; this is entry ninety-three

- December 11, 2024

The sounds of the class diminished as I exited the room into the hallway, walking towards the bathroom. It's been a couple months now since I started at this school. Since the move, a lot feels like it has changed yet deep down; I still feel that pit in my stomach. The absence. The familiar sound of my boots squeaked against the polished floor as I quickened my pace, my hand steadying myself against the wall when I heard her voice again.

“What’s the matter, Laurie?” Robin murmured, as if trailing behind me. I paused to respond but decided to keep my mouth shut while I quickened





my pace. My head swirled with emotion. I began to race toward bathrooms now, Robin increasing her pace. "Look at me," she cried, "why don't you look at me anymore."

"I can't" I screamed, stopping in place, turning to face her. "It hurts too much to see you like this." I whimpered, tears streaming down my face.

"It hurts me too," she responded, glancing down at her shoes, before pulling a note from her pocket. "Remember this?"

"I do, it's..." I hesitated

"My letter. To you." she ran up to me, placing it in my hand, "I know you read it every night, but I want you to read it again."

Gritting my teeth, I began to read the note but could only get through the words 'I love you, Laurie' before I crumpled to knees in defeat. I looked up to see her smile underneath tears as both the note and her disappeared.

I need help Robin," I muttered to myself, "I can't do this alone anymore."

Entry One-Seventy-four. Trial and error. That's what the doctors say. I've been to two psychiatrists and have tried out four therapists in the past few months. None of them seem to get me, none of them understand. I feel lost, empty. Sure, I have met some new people along this journey. Some that I would even call friends. Yet I still feel this perpetual emptiness inside. I

*just want it all to end. Maybe then I can get some
reprieve and finally have things the way they
once were. The meds stop me from seeing you
as much now, but I want you to know that I still
miss you*

- Sunday, March 2, 2025

I'm up in the clouds and I can't come down, I need a better remedy, so, I begin to climb up the hill. Focused on the top, I noticed that today is a little bit windy, cool in the shade but warm in the sun, and the perfect day to give up. Wiping the sweat off my brow, I stopped in my tracks clenching my hand into a fist, my eyes darting away, jaw clenching.

"Now is not the time Rhodes." I shouted up the hill.

What are you talking about," an unfamiliar voice replied. I looked back up, seeing that I was mistaken. This is someone else.

"I thought you were my ex." I grimaced, relaxing my jaw.

"My name is Finch," they smiled. "Want to talk for a bit, could use the company."

My head tilted, curious, as I replied with a simple "Yeah..." unsure how else to respond to this person who may have just snapped me out of what I was planning. I walked up to them and sat down, introducing myself.

"That's a nice necklace," they pointed out, as I was making myself comfortable on the grass.





"Yeah, it was a gift."

"From who, if you don't mind me asking?"

"My ex, Robin, she gave me this necklace for our second-year anniversary, only a few days before she died." I responded, tracing the crescent-shaped pendant with my fingers.

"I'm so sorry to hear that, how long ago did she..."
Finch began to stammer.

"One-hundred and seventy-seven days ago."

"It's been a little bit, huh." They noted

"A bit." I hesitated, scratching the back of my neck, "Can I ask why you're up here?"

"Can I ask the same?"

I didn't respond.

"I'll go first. There is a cliff. At the top of this hill. So, I sit here on the weekends to stop people from jumping off the edge." They paused, looking at me. "I lost someone too, right on this hill five years ago. You don't even know how many times I wanted to join him. But I don't."

"How?"

"I sit here and wait. Never giving into the desire, because people like me come here often, so I wait and make new friends. Ending the cycle for myself and for others if I can."

"That's very kind," I began to cry, "I can't believe that I was..."

"It's ok," they whispered, patting me on the back.

"I find that people just need someone to talk to. How about you tell me more about Robin?"

"I would like that," I smiled, for what felt like the first time in forever.

It's like a ball with sharp spikes at its end. Poking, jabbing, and cutting up my insides. I find that the more I process things, the less it hurts, the duller the ball gets. I know I will always carry it with me, but hopefully, it'll soon have no spikes. Thanks to Finch, I finally found a good therapist and psychiatrist. I'm starting to feel better. I think today may just be a good day.

- September 7, 2025

"Thank you," I croaked. Breaking the pause of conversation.

"For what?" Finch asked, their eyes focused on the road ahead, their hand on the steering wheel as they looked over at me briefly.

"Stopping me that day" I smiled, turning to them.

"I like to think that I helped a little, and hey, look at you now," they beamed, turning down the music in the car. "You're going to see her."

"After all this time, I'm more ready than ever. I



haven't had a hallucination of her since starting on this new medication."

"That's great!" They paused, "so that leaves me wondering if you are going to leave it?" They said, pointing at the notebook in my hands.

"I think so," I responded as the car slowly came to a halt, outside the cemetery. Finch, reaching over, opened my door, giving me a nod.

I stepped out, breathing in the fresh air, letting it fill my lungs as I walked up to Robins' resting place.

"Hey Robin. It's me, I don't have much time to visit, so I wanted to leave you something."

No response, I smiled.

"Thank you for being you, I'll come back next year," I smiled, leaning down to hug the gravestone before finally placing my journal down, I wiped away a tear, before finally walking away.



For I Have Sinned

By Fitz

"Is there something you don't forgive yourself for?"

I chuckle awkwardly. I know where this is going and I loathe the fact that I do.

"What are you, a priest? Have you converted since we last spoke?"

"No. I'm not pulling that forgive me Father bullshit. But I feel like it's a good gauge of a person."

"You don't know me well enough?"

Jay's deft fingers maintain their fluidity even while high. He twiddles with the joint in his hand, internally engaging in intense debate over whether or not he wants another hit. He relents, or maybe he sees me eyeing it, most likely the latter. I'm sure I look desperate enough, like a dog with its tongue lolling from its mouth, spittle-slick. I've been told I exaggerate myself when I'm high—a captivating performance for folks of other dispositions who want to sit and watch and fall, slipping into the satin and seams to become one with the furniture. I become the entertainment with my enthusiastic ramblings, drawing the focus from whatever fatuous movie we have on.

"Not as well as I'd like to," he counters, placing the joint delicately in between my fingers. "It's been a minute."





Our backs are soaked—from the sweat of exerting ourselves on the playground we’re about fifteen feet from, pushing our bodies to the limit to overcome our mental sluggishness, and then having it catch up with us enough to stumble into the dampened grass and plummet onto the dirt, laughing all the while. It was a nice reminder, but the longer I let myself bask in the memories, how familiar it all feels, the more the weight of the present makes itself apparent too. I ignore the leaden load upon my chest and even my breathing, forcing myself to enjoy the moment. I stare at what stars I can make out from squinting through the holes between the branches in the canopy, the leaves as much of a blanket as the smog.

“A lot of minutes.” I start, my mouth moving faster than my mind, words spilling from it like tar, laggardly and almost viscous. “But nothing in particular, I guess. I’ve sort of just felt this guilt my entire life. It could have been anxiety, probably is, cause, I’m not religious, but... there’s just this general sense that... I’ve done something so horrible, so wrong, that I can’t be forgiven for it. If it’s Karmic debt breaking through the threads of reincarnation, all I’m learning is I must’ve been homicidal. And people make mistakes, have lapses, no one is perfect, but I haven’t done anything to be like this, I don’t think. Guess I’m just high strung. Want the strings to loosen, you know?”

He hums in acknowledgment.

“I get that,” he says.

He doesn’t.

I don't spin the question back around on him. The fleeting memories are evoked once more, though tragically so are the more recent ones. He's no longer the lanky, freckled boy I'd trek into the woods with, the one who'd help me up when I'd inevitably trip on my own pigeon-toed gait. No, Jay is the Econ major who distanced himself when the word fag became synonymous with my name, who didn't even realize I attended his college too—or maybe he did, but he was too much of a prick to reach out. Nevertheless, I'm by his side, hands ghosting over each other's like I had dreamed of so many years ago, and I still find myself pathetically grasping onto the little spark I feel from that. The old flame feels like a rusted up lighter still igniting against all odds. I can practically hear the grating sound of the dilapidated wheel striking the flint.

Jay answers the unspoken anyway.

"I don't forgive myself for what I did to you."

I pause. I think I've hallucinated what was said. I let the silence linger; I'm in utter disbelief, and simultaneously unsure about my current state of mind. I'm bold enough to question it.

"Did you just say something?"

"Yeah."

"Sorry. Ears were ringing," I say, giving him an out, but he's foolhardy enough to refuse.

"I don't forgive myself, Dalton."

"Don't do this," I beg.



"I can't not," he says solemnly.

"You can. Let me live in blissful ignorance, you asshole."

Jay's on his side at this point, gazing at me with this beseeching grimace and furrowed brow, as if his face is entirely made of lines. I see this in my periphery, though, I can't bring myself to look at him.

"It's not ignorance if you see it and choose to ignore it. You're just shoving it away and letting it nag at the back of your skull."

"And I'm happy to leave it there. Let me. Please. Things can be normal. I'm willing to let it go."

"I'm not. I fucked up. All I want is for you to know that I fucked up. I'm sorry. I just want to say that."

All I wanted was a quick smoke walk. I grit my teeth hard enough that I feel like they're about to shatter onto my tongue. What's been a decade of amalgamating ire, resentment, sorrow, befuddlement, a load more of other descriptive words that have built themselves up over time are suddenly brought to the surface, wrought from every pore that kept the score.

"Eat shit," I eventually muster up after what feels like hours, the noise coming out weak and broken rather than harsh.

"That's fair."

"No," I say, sitting up, entangling my fingers within the grass to steady myself. "It's not fair. You're not being fucking fair. You want to get this off your chest so you can leave me with the



burden of not forgiving you. Now it's on me. Now I'm the asshole for not accepting your apology."

"What? You don't have to accept it."

"But now your conscience is clear. Mine isn't. So fuck you for that."

He's righted himself now too and is staring at me remorsefully. I avert my gaze once more to hide the tears that threaten to spill from my waterline.

"I'm sorr--"

"No," I say forcefully. "Just shut up. Shut up."

Another minute passes.

"I was scared," he adds with a meekness I'd never thought I'd see from him.

Incredulity finally gets me to turn to him, my face surely a splotchy red mess.

"You think I wasn't?" I ask. "I had to take the punches. You just watched. I was the one that had to transfer."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not good enough. It won't be. I fucking wish it was."

I gasp in pain as I realize the joint has burnt itself down to my fingertips, though it's quickly extinguished by the wet ground. I'm practically vibrating, abuzz with frenetic energy that's let itself simmer inside me for God knows how long, a vehement weight on my shoulders finally shifted, not entirely dissipated, just different. Jay attempted to lift it and instead crumbled it,



leaving me to pick up the pieces once again.

“I hate you,” I whisper under my breath.

“You should.”

I’m trembling violently as tears cascade down my face. The unbridled emotion, especially in this state of mind, proves itself too much for me. My ears do ring and the world seems to turn on its head for a moment. My breathing finds itself at a tempo far faster than the orchestra of my body can keep up with. I’m panting labored, uneven breaths between sobs.

“Dalton. Dalton?”

Jay grabs my shoulders and forces my eyes on his. Everything’s a blur of sensation and heartache. He attempts to lead me in some breathing exercises, giving straightforward directions that I can’t find the will to listen to. I want nothing from him, yet I can’t bring myself to pull away either. Seeing his aid is in vain, he embraces me. The bastard holds me tightly in his arms like I wished he would have for so long.

The subtle tepidity of his body warms me and soothes an ache so ever-present I thought it to be intrinsic. He pets my head, shushing me and cooing at me with a tenderness that makes me weep and blubber more. I’m unsure if I’m still panicking or simply lamenting, though doing both concurrently is the most likely option. Derelict dreams clutch onto my heart despite the way it jackrabbits in my chest.

“You’re okay, man. You’re okay,” he assures me.



“You’re high, I shouldn’t have shoved that onto you. You don’t want to hear it, but I am sorry. I’m sorry that I did this to you, but I’m not going to leave you this time, alright? I’m shitty, I’m not that shitty. I’m here.”

He’s here, and regardless of all logic, that’s all my impassioned and weed-addled brain needs. I detest the fact that I forgive him, as I’ve held onto my indignation as tightly as he now holds me.

He holds me.



Clockwork Heart

By Malsoma

You try to sleep off the jet lag but are thwarted by the cacophony of vile scents invading your cabin.

You desperately wrap your Oxford scarf around your nose, hoping the smell of carefully placed cow excrement every ten meters would not pervade the thick British winter fabric. Shit, from a holy animal or not, doesn't care if you're a Rhodes scholar.

Certainly not its smell. And so sleep heads north while you continue south. You look at your two giant luggage bags. One filled with memorabilia from your time in Oxford—a gold medal for the Hertford Essay Prize, two silver medals for the annual intercollegiate rowing competition, and tucked inside a small bronze box is the lesser-known Becker Finn prize you won for chugging the most beer down at the Alchemist during your freshman initiation. The other contains hastily-bought souvenirs for your family—a Jo Malone perfume for your appa, a Harry Potter robe and wand set for your little brother, and a box of Christmas candy canes for all the kids in the neighbourhood.

Also wrapped neatly in velvet sheets is the wine-coloured saree with golden borders you picked up for ammachi in Madras, for which you are now having second thoughts. "You've broken not one, but two commandments," you hear ammachi whisper. "Thou shall not buy anything for me," and the former, "Thou shall book a flight, not train, back home."

In a few hours, you would see her standing at the Ernakulam Junction in front of platform number 3.

She would not wave, but wait for you to.




As you run to her, she would throw her arms open and embrace you, because that's what loving mothers do. You wonder what she would say after all these years. Your mind drifts from branch to branch along the jackfruit trees, rusty bars, and the tropical dance of palm trees. The air grows saltier. You count the number of Bengali migrants who get off at the Katpadi Junction and finally drift to sleep.

When you wake, it's 3 in the morning. The early bird still hasn't risen, and the worms still have a few moon slices left to enjoy the pitter-patter of the rain. You take your notebook and rehearse the lines in your head, "Greetings, amma." "How have father and brother been?" Just then, ammachi sneaks up in your mind, whispering, "They've been good. But where is your husband, makal?"

It is seven thirty-five in the morning when you arrive at the station. You see ammachi in her green polka-dot saree she wears everyday to work, and you apologize on behalf of the train for being five minutes late as she embraces you. Because that's what loving mothers do. She drives you home before heading to work. "You've gained weight," she finally mutters after ten minutes. You try to gauge her expression from the corner of your eye, but the raccoon living under them swats them away. "I know, amma. I'm sorry," you say. As the traffic comes to a halt, you apologize again on behalf of the Kochi highway department or transport minister or whoever the heck is to blame.

As she swerves into Palarivattom, the metro shakes the car gently, and though you aren't sure if you were to blame, you apologize anyway. "Why are you wearing that scarf in this heat?", she finally speaks again, an oasis of words in the wet Kochi desert.





“Amma,” you reply, “Heathrow was so cold I had to wear the scarf, and I simply forgot to take it off.” She laughs—the Nile after a day’s journey through the Sahara. You tell her of your trip to Southampton where you saw a seagull snatching a chocolate bar from a toddler by the wharf, and how your cousin Ninan got food poisoning from oysters and had to be hospitalized for three days. “You should be careful, mol,” she says, “I heard they could give you hepatitis.” Five minutes after passing old Mukhilan’s diner she asks you if you are hungry and you say no.

She stops at the zebra crossing near Changampuzha Park, where two menakas clad in colorful mudstained sarees are selling unripe bananas to the cars, monkeys following them along the balconies. Ammachi grabs her crucifix and veils her mouth with her saree. “Vermin of the earth,” you hear her whisper though you can’t see her mouth. “Shiva smite them.” You shudder at her words. Sometimes you don’t know what god she prays to at night.

As you roll up the gateway, Velu, the security guard greets you and you notice he has amassed maybe fifty strands of new grey hair. He seems to come towards you to hug you, but refrains when ammachi gets out of the car. “Only loving mothers may embrace their children,” the ghost whispers. Ammachi quickly gestures to you to follow her and you hurry—remember, your train was five minutes late. She shows you to your room upstairs which has been polished clean and repainted viridian green—which ammachi thinks is your favourite color. “I think it goes with the palm trees,” she says. Velu drops the last of your bags with a thump. She goes down to the kitchen and makes up for the five minutes she lost by quickly frying you up an egg to go with the toast

even though you tell her for the second time that you're not hungry. She asks you if you are dieting and you say no, but she tells you you should. "I know, amma, I'm sorry," you reply. She tells you how your cousin Susan had the evil eye because she couldn't stop eating sweets, and once she stopped she became happy and found a good husband. "Maybe that's what's keeping us from finding a suitor for you, ah?" "I know, amma, I'm sorry."

You finish your toast and get up to do the dishes while ammachi walks back to the car and gets in. She looks at you through the kitchen window. "Mol, I'll be arranging a few visits to some friends of your father's. Go get your hair fixed, and do not invite your friends over for some time." You watch her roll down the driveway backwards as she always does.

You go up to your room and check the time. It is now ten minutes past eleven, and you make a wish for The Beatles to reunite one more time. It eats you alive, so you search for the bloodied broom ammachi had used on you and your brother, two streaks of abrasion scars highlighted in dark lines across both your left bums. Yours for running away at the age of sixteen, two days before your Pennu Kaanal and his for keeping quiet. Stupid, you thought, that the murderer and the accomplice get equal punishments. Whoever god she prays to, she needs a lesson in triage. You do not find the broom, only the scar on your bum.

When ammachi comes back in the evening, she calls your name. You run downstairs to make her tea. At least that much you can manage, with your Oxford education—just the way she likes it, twelve dips of the bag when the water just starts to boil, and then





add two grounded cardamom seeds and a splash of honey. You bring it to her in her study as she sips and motions you to sit. "Two things I need you to do tonight. We will have Dr. Kurian and his son over for dinner, and I cannot have you looking like this," she tugs at your hair and snips several strands of your curly shriveled hair. "One, I need you to go to the salon today like I had asked you and get your hair straightened out. No wonder the amount of evil eyes on our family; they are all hiding in your hair." She is reading a book by Tolstoy but you cannot see the title. "And secondly, do me a favour and form a thought to know when to speak. Oxford would be doing no good if one doesn't know one's turn to speak."

You remain standing waiting for her to finish the tea. When she does, you bow gently and take the cup and rinse it under the warm water till the flakes rise and fall over. You return to your room and put on your boots. You realise you haven't showered since you came home. You tell yourself that it can wait. Anything can wait, even time if you ask politely. You take one last look at Ammachi before you leave, and then close the door. You picture her smiling in the evening when the guests would come and they would gawk at you like shoppers in a fishmarket. You unlock your old bicycle from the garage and head down the winding road. Cruising, you suddenly realise the jetlag is gone and that you are home.

Where The Tiny Mushrooms Grow

By Makenna Miller

I set out for a trek twelve miles away from my home before the sun had rose on the day. By foot, I hiked alongside the highway until I took a turn onto the unpacked gravel. I'd been in these dead woods a million times before, but I had never left the trail. Each time the trees seemed to swallow me whole, as I got caught up in the pattern that the branches left upon the sky. Eventually, after enough hills and cracked leaves had passed, the trees would spit me back out, but not this time. This time, I bore a stocking cap, heavy clothing, and thick boots that left gashes in the mud. All I packed was a fire starter and a tent. My food would have to come from the land, for I had no money that the squirrels would accept.

Once my ears strained to hear the highway, and my breath became louder than my steps, it was my time to exit the trail, to get lost in the trees. With my arm extended, I outlined the arch of a doorway with my hand. Then I turned the knob and stepped through the imaginary door away from the chaos of the commercial world.

Off the beaten path, sticks cracked and soggy leaves squished into the mud beneath my feet. Deeper into the forest filled with only dead trees and the will of my Thoreau-ian quest. Once I could no longer see the path, I began to gather sticks, and once my arms were full of sticks, I set up camp. Just after I had solidified my shelter, the sky graced me with water. To me, this was a sign



of my safety, and I opened my mouth and drank
from the clouds.

After the rain subsided to just a sprinkle, I brought my fire to life. I had not eaten, yet I felt no hunger. As I settled into my new home and stared out into the vast wilderness before me, shadows began to dance with the light of the flame. Before my journey, this is where I imagined that fear might strike me, but it never came. Night was coming fast, but any noises that might have put me on edge had been silenced by the cold. All that stirred was the fire in front of me, and its crackle beckoned me to sleep.

The next morning, I awoke to complete silence.

The fire had died down and only a few embers resided deep within the logs. The world was misty, and the sky was full of clouds, so I could not tell the time of day. All I knew was that it was no longer night. The peace I had felt was replaced with hunger. My stomach felt like it was losing its structural integrity, and it could cave in on itself any moment.

I knew that berries grew in these woods, but I searched for awhile with no luck, and the emptiness of the forest began to feel heavier and heavier as the moments passed. Right then, I struck gold. A vein of mushrooms lay just ahead of me. I dropped to my knees and popped a handful of mushrooms out of the ground and into my mouth. They tasted like dirt and iron, and they crumbled like dried out clay in my mouth, but I felt triumphant.



After I gathered the rest of the mushrooms, I placed my hand onto the muddy ground to help myself up. When I did so, my fingertips felt something hard. Out of curiosity, I bent down and attempted to wipe away the mud. As soon as I could get a grasp, I dug my fingers into the ground and pulled out a skull.

I examined its eye sockets and looked up the bridge of its snout and determined that it was once the head of a dog. I wondered how it came to be here. Did the furry friend have a family that took him out into the middle of the woods to rest, or was he like me? Did he come here to live all alone and appreciate all that nature could give?

That was when I decided that this was the perfect place to be. I set the skull back down where I had found it, and I threw my bag into the trees. I unlaced my shoes and unzipped my coat and set them neatly on the forest floor. Then I balled up my socks and stuck them into the opening of one of my shoes. On the ground, my feet sunk and the mud snaked in between my toes before I once again got on the ground and laid down on my back.

I looked over at the skull which was a few feet from my head and then I looked up at the branches that scraped the sky. Once again it began to rain. As the rain grew stronger, the mud sucked me deeper within its grasp. That was where I stayed, for there was no better place to be.



No Men Walking

By Yousuf Rizvi

Last week, the library sent a letter saying you checked out a book that is now 20 years overdue.

You were 5 then, I guess. I don't remember what book. I think it's an Eric Carle one. I'm thinking I'll mail them a letter to let them know that you...can't return it. I wouldn't want you to get in trouble, you know.

Grandpa's sick. He was put in the hospital a few nights ago, and as far as I know, he's still there.

I don't think he'll make it. I saw him the night before they sent him off. His eyes were closing, and he was sweating there in his bed, doing nothing. He didn't know who I was. I guess that's something I've been meaning to tell you, too. It's been horrible. I miss him so bad.

We used to talk about how horrible we'd feel when they die. How old would they be? Who would go first? I think this is about it, now. Seventy-nine. And you, well, you're as old as anyone, I guess.

There's something I've never told you. And this isn't something I ever tried to hide from you; it just never came around, I guess. It's about grandpa.

We used to go to their house all the time. You remember that. We'd go every Friday, and we'd stay the night there, and in the morning, grandma would be up fixing hashbrowns, and grandpa would sit in his big armchair with the newspaper.

But there was one time you weren't there. I think



you were sick, I'm not sure. That Friday, I went to their house alone, and I can't tell you how lonely I felt.

I walked inside and, just like usual, grandpa was in the armchair and grandma in the kitchen. She was listening to an audiobook on her radio. I remember sitting down by grandpa once I threw my stuff on the floor, and grandma had gone downstairs to look for some ingredients in the freezer. I talked to grandpa for a little bit, and then, without warning, he said, "Go open the patio closet and give me the shoebox on the floor."

So I did that. It was a white-and-black Adidas shoebox, and it was a little heavy. I handed grandpa the box, and he opened it. Inside the box was a beige, linen hardcover book with little death-looking people on the cover dancing with scythes. along the bottom, words in gilded letters read, "No Men Walking."

I sat there staring as he pulled the book out of the box, and I ask:

"Why's it in the shoebox?"

And so grandpa leaned over to me, and said quietly:

"This is a magic book. When I open it, the room will shake."

I believed him, but I was curious, and I instinctively tried to open the book myself. Grandpa stopped me and said,

"You have to let me do it."

So I scooted back, held myself from blinking,



and he opened it.

And as soon as he opened it, the lights in the room flickered. The couches shook, the pictures were vibrating, and my shoes were almost tap-dancing. Then grandpa, seeing me get a little scared (but mostly mystified), closed the book and put a hand on my shoulder. And he asked,

“Now, isn’t that neat? Let’s put this away so grandma doesn’t find out.”

I remember at dinner that night, I almost brought up the book so many times. I remember thinking that I’d be a terrible spy, because I’d want to talk about everything all the time. But I thought I couldn’t let grandma know, and so I didn’t. I think that, for a while, that’s why I never told you, either.

But that night, I couldn’t sleep. I was missing you, Mary, and I couldn’t help but think about that book. I had never seen a book able to shake a building like that. I mean, no one has. I felt curious again, and before I could talk myself out of it, I had gotten out of bed, I snuck up to the patio, and I dug out the shoebox from the closet.

I took it back to my bed, opened the shoebox, and looked down at the cover. Those death-things looked a little scarier than they had when the house had its lights on, and the words “No Men Walking” looked a little more threatening. But I was too far to go back. So I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and opened up the book to the middle.

Nothing happened. The walls didn’t shake, the mirror next to the bed didn’t move, nothing.



I couldn't believe it. So I started going through the book to try and read it, if nothing was going to happen to me, but the text was so tiny. All I could really figure out was that it talked a lot about car parts and engines, so I thought it was a manual or something. I have no idea why it had that cover, though. But I realized, when I was done with the book, that I had to put it back. I couldn't tell anyone I'd pulled it out to try and look at it; I could've torn the house apart. So I snuck back out and set it down, and after that I went to sleep just fine.

Every time we went to their house after that day, I would check that closet and just look down at the shoebox and smile. I figured if grandpa ever showed you, you would tell me, so I kept from telling you. Maybe he did, and you thought you couldn't tell me. I guess that's possible. But I would look every time, and it made me so happy. Sometimes grandpa would catch me looking for it, and he'd make some sort of face at me.

When I went to visit their house this last time, I wasn't really thinking about the book. It must've been the first time in years I had been over, and all I could think about was grandpa's health. I saw the closet and even held the doorknob to keep my balance when I took my shoes off, but I forgot about the book. I have to say that I forgot about it.

Grandpa was in bed when I visited. Grandma wasn't in the kitchen; she was out in the garden digging up roots. And of course, I went without you, so nothing felt normal at all.

Grandpa had just woken up from a nap, but he





didn't want to get up, so I let him lie down. I pulled up a chair so I could talk to him. He was so tired. He looked labored and breathed deeply; as if he stood up, he'd be too exhausted and would lie right back down. I noticed his arms were skinnier than I'd remembered, and so was his neck.

I wanted to tell you the little pellucida dove you gave them is still wrapped around their bedframe. I saw that.

I was looking around their room as he was resting, and I noticed that the closet inside his bedroom was open, and sticking out from the closet was the same white and black shoebox that the book had been in. I froze up, and I turned to grandpa quickly, and I asked,

"Why is the shoebox in here now?"

He opened his eyes a little more and tried to look, but I don't know if he saw it or not. He asked,

"A shoebox?"

So I got up and picked up the shoebox, using a bit of weight because I knew the book was heavy, but this time the box was light. I opened it, and the book was gone. So I walked out of his room and over to the patio, and I looked in that closet. The shoebox wasn't there.

I ran back into his room and asked him

"What happened to the book that was in this shoebox?"

He didn't answer me. I don't think he understood what I was asking. But as I was standing over him,

I saw, peeking out from the far side of his pillow, the book, “No Men Walking” from all those nights ago. He was laying his head right on top of it.

I shouldn’t have done this, but I had him lift his head for a moment so I could look at it again. So I could hold it. He did lift his head, but he groaned, and he breathed harder like the movement of his neck was too strenuous to bear.

The book felt lighter in my arms than it used to, and it didn’t look as big as I remembered. The death-folk were still dancing on the cover, but their colors had faded into the linen. I opened the book with grandpa there, and again the room didn’t shake at all. The words weren’t too little for me to read anymore.

The book was actually a Ford Bronco manual from 1989. Its chapters were named things like “Cooling System” and “Ignition System.” It felt strange that I could read it, so I stopped, shut the pages, and took grandpa’s hand. I tried to get him to see the book, to understand what I was showing him.

I think he knew for a moment. For one moment. It wasn’t long at all, but I saw his eyebrows raise. It lasted three seconds at most, and then he was back to groaning. I asked him,

“You showed me this book when I was little.

The room shook all over the place. How did it happen?”

He didn’t answer me. He was looking somewhere beyond me. I remembered he didn’t even





He didn't answer me. He was looking somewhere beyond me. I remembered he didn't even know who I was, and I felt foolish that he could remember the book if he didn't know me.

But suddenly, he raised his arms and took the book from me, gingerly, and with his shaking hands, said,

"I never told them. This is my book. I made the house shake."

I wasn't sure I'd heard him right, so I asked him to repeat himself. He said,

"I made them think it shook the house." And he started laughing a little. He told me, "This book isn't magic. I did it."

So I asked him,

"You made the house shake yourself?" And he smiled. So I asked, "How'd you do it? How'd you shake the house?"

He stopped laughing, and he looked at the book, and then handed it to me. And he said, feebly,

"Oh, I... I just don't know."

I sat there with him, took his hand, and I asked him again. He kept wondering about grandma, but he didn't know how to address her. He kept asking,

"Where is that person who's always here?"

Where is she?"

On the bedside table to his left was that picture

frame of him and grandma on their wedding day,
55 years ago.

I couldn't take it. I went home. I made sure
grandma came in, and that he saw her, and then I
left. I did say goodbye, but not loud enough for him
to hear me. I accidentally left the book on the table.
I hope he doesn't mind. I wish I could keep it.

I miss you, and I miss him, and someday I want
to see you both again. I want to be there with the
book. I want him to make the walls shake, and I
want to hear you laugh.

And at night, I want us both to sneak out and grab
the book ourselves, and make up stories on what
it's really about.

I know we will someday. I just know it.



What the Night Showed Me

By Xiomara Lopez

I used to think my mom was exaggerating when she looked at the moon. She would stop, admire, and take pictures every single time. Every time we were outside or driving, she would point it out. I would roll my eyes or give a glance and think, "It's just the moon...why take pictures every time if it's always the same?" I thought it was pretty silly the way she would admire the moon and the stars.

However, something changed recently.

I started working late-night shifts, the kind that leave you outside long after most people are home in their cozy beds. At first, I was focused on getting to my townhouse as quickly as possible to sleep. I had things to do the very next day.

Then, one day, I looked up without thinking. The night was so quiet. Maybe it was just exhaustion, but the sky was so clear and full of stars.

I got to the other side of the University, and there it was. A full bright moon. The stars were scattered around like tiny pieces of silver. I stood longer and took a good look at everything: the sky, the trees, and the buildings. It's so quiet at this hour. Barely any cars outside, and everyone is asleep. The night sky I had ignored my whole life, I now found myself admiring. It didn't feel silly; it felt comforting.

I took the same route each time I worked a late-night shift: I would stop a while to see the night sky, stars, and the moon. Even on nights when I was frustrated,



stressed, and tired, it was comforting to see the sky because it's so calming. It became a habit for me because I didn't realize how beautiful the night sky was. I never paid attention until now.

I understand my mom now.

She wasn't admiring the stars because they were pretty; she admired them because they made life feel a little bigger and softer. No matter how stressful or rough her day was, there was always something to look forward to, and that was seeing the night sky.

I put on my headphones and listen to music while I'm walking, seeing the night sky became relaxing. Back in Chicago, you can barely see the stars, but here you can see the stars more clearly. Once I'm back home, I won't be able to see them as I see them here. The sky is clear, and the full moon is very bright.

In noticing the sky, I started noticing a new part of myself, too. I realized I actually crave moments of quiet, not because I'm avoiding anything, but because those moments help me see myself more clearly.

The college girl who rushes through the day, pushing through shifts, responsibilities, and expectations; that's me. But so is the girl who stands still at midnight, staring at the moon and stars, feeling something settle inside her.

The night sky taught me I'm more reflective, more emotional, and more connected to small beauty than I ever thought I was. It showed me I'm capable of slowing down, even when life tells me to speed up. It made me feel closer to my mom in a way I didn't expect.



For years, I didn't understand her. Now walking out after a long desk shift and looking at the same moon, I do. We're under the same night sky, we all are; knowing that my mom is probably staring at the moon too, made me feel closer to her.



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