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My Mom is Never Late

by Jesus Herrera

My alarm goes off but I don't feel like going to school again because what's the point? What's the point if nobody can even focus and I'm just worried about mom and dad all day, like everyone else at school. I only get a couple of minutes before my mom knocks, and walks in saying, "Andale Mijo, time for school. "Yeah, I know, I know." I tell her, slowly moving out of bed, as she walks back out of my room. I don't know how she can be in a good mood with everything that's going on right now.

After I get ready I head downstairs and see my abuelita watching T.V. in the living room. I give her a kiss on the cheek, after she greets me "buenos dias mijo". I wish she was watching the news, but she's just watching one of those feel-good morning shows. That's why I wish my parents would get me an iPhone already. I would even be ok with an Android, with everything that's going on right now. Breakfast is starting to smell delicious, so I head to the kitchen.

I don't see dad's truck outside so he probably left for work already - another reason I need a phone. My mom is fixing me a plate while I pour myself some orange juice. She brings the plate over to me and says, "Hurry up Salito, we only have 15 minutes, and we gotta go." I hate when my family calls me "Salito". I'm too old for that nickname! My name is SAL! But she made my favorite fluffy pancakes with crispy bacon, and it smells so good. I feel happy eating my food as fast as I can before putting my dishes in the sink. My mom says it's time to go and heads outside towards the car. I grab my backpack and kiss my grandma goodbye. "Bye abuelita, I'm going to school, see you later." "Bye, mijo, te quiero mucho". Grandma always says "I love you" when she says goodbye. I know she does, but lately it makes me a little sad.

I'm already in sixth grade but my parents still make me sit in the backseat. Some of my friends get to sit in the front seat so I wish they would let me sit in the front at least for school. I decide to take a chance and say "shotgun!" and go to the passenger side door but my mom

gives me the look, and says “Salito you know the rule, come on mijo don’t start I dont want to be late.”

“Ok fine”, I say getting in the backseat, “but can you at least stop calling me Salito, please?” I say, annoyed.

“Ok Salvador, then, put your seatbelt on.”

“Sal is fine”, I say back. “Oh, can I go on YouTube on the way?” I ask.

My mom thinks about it, then says, “Okay, but not tomorrow, and I want the sound on loud enough so I can hear the video”. She hands me her phone.

YESSSS! I start the Mark Rober video I was watching on Friday. The car starts to slow down then we come to a stop because there is a lot of traffic. My mom looks a little nervous and I see there’s a lot of people on the sidewalk with those signs again. I put the phone down because I feel a little worried. There’s so many people on the street, I think maybe they’re blocking the cars.

I see some guys who look like police officers but are wearing facemasks and sunglasses with uniforms that say “Police”. Two of them go to my moms window and one of them is at my window. These have to be the “ICE guys”, they just have to be. My stomach really hurts now.

One of the men tells my mom to put the window down and she does. He asks her for her license and she gets her wallet and I can see her hands are shaking. The man’s voice is pretty loud and rude and asks her where she was born. My mom says she’s a U.S. citizen. I’m worried because my mom was born in Mexico. He asks her who I am and she tells him I’m her son and a U.S. citizen. He asks her if I have i.d. Oh man, I forgot my school i.d.

“He doesn’t have i.d., he’s only 10 but he’s a U.S. citizen, please I’m taking him to school.” She sounds like she’s gonna cry. The man tells her to open the door. What is going on? Is this what everyone is talking about at school? I feel my heart pounding. Some people in the car next to us start yelling and the three men rush over to that car. One of them breaks a car window and the people inside are screaming as the ICE police try to get the car doors open.

The man who is driving looks Mexican like my dad but maybe a little older. They pull him out first and it takes three of them pull him to the ground so now I can't see what's going on. Then the three that were at our car pull the woman out who looks brown too. They tackle her to the ground so hard. My mom screams and tells me not to look but I can't stop. They threw her so hard. One of them had his knees on her back, and I could hear her crying.

"Give me the phone!" She says to me, so I quickly pass it to her.

Suddenly a bunch of the people that were protesting started running over with their phones, recording and yelling at the ICE cops. My mom tells me to put my seat belt on, and we start to drive away slowly. We drive for a little bit, then we stop in a Target parking lot. My mom calls my dad and he answers on speaker.

"Are you ok?!" she asks my dad. "Yes, is everything ok? You sound scared." he asks.

"I'm ok now. Salito and I got stopped by ICE, but we got away. I'm going to drop him off at school, but I'm going to talk to my manager about getting the day off. I'll tell you the rest later." She looks a little calmer now. "I love you honey, call me back when you get to work." my dad says. "Ok. I love you too, bye." then they hang up.

She tells me she's going to take me to school where it will be safe, and not to go home with any friends after school. "Ok, ma." She gives me a hug and a kiss on the cheek and says "te quiero mucho." The pain in my stomach is gone.

When she drops me off at school, I don't have time to hang because the bell rings as soon as I get out of the car. I have to hurry to class so I won't be late again. When I get to class, I see some of the kids that have phones are using them, which is odd. I can see they are watching videos of ICE because they have been causing problems in our city. Mr. Goldberg tells us to please put our phones away and everyone does. The rest of class goes by quickly because all I can think about is the couple that got arrested. At the end of class, he tells us that he has information packets about ICE in English and Spanish if any of us want to take them

home for our families. I see nobody takes a packet but I decide to get one from Mr. Goldberg. "Do your parents read in Spanish?" He asks. I tell him, "English".

Second period is kind of the same thing, except now I'm worried about my mom. Did she get to work ok? What if she got pulled over again? How many ICE cops were stopping people? Is my mom really a U.S. citizen, and what about my dad? The teachers keep saying that the school is safe, but I've seen protestors come to the school. Why are they here, and what do they know? This would be a good time for me to have my own phone. I'm going to see if I can find my friend before third period and ask if I can use their phones to call my mom.

I head over to the locker area and I see my friends. Most of the kids seem to be standing around looking at their phones, not heading to third period. My friend Mike says there are videos on YouTube of ICE shooting a woman in the head. "What!?, What woman?" I ask as my stomach starts to hurt again. Ricky says they say it was an innocent mom. Suddenly my chest starts to hurt; but some people say she's a protestor. "Dude can I please use your phone, I have to call my mom?" I ask Ricky.

"Why? We have class in like 5 minutes." He asks me, looking confused.

"We got pulled over by ICE before school, and they were gonna arrest my mom, but then a fight broke out and we left." I try not to cry.

"Oh sorry dude, here." Ricky hands me his phone.

I dial quickly and she answers her phone. My chest feels better right away. She tells me she is fine and everything is going to be okay, and she will pick me up right after school. We hang up and I gave Ricky his phone back.

We all give each other a look and head to class. Later after lunch there is an announcement about an assembly for all students in the gym. All the students and teachers are there, and everyone is spreading rumors about what they know or think they heard. Principal Amada tells us that we should stop watching videos of the death today and wait to talk about it with our parents. He tells us that starting tomorrow all schools in Minneapolis are closing for the

rest of the week. Some kids look happy or are smiling, but this makes me more scared. Is ICE coming to our school?

We stay in the gym until school is over. Some parents arrive early, and little by little the gym becomes more empty. It is finally 2:30 pm, and I know my mom will be here any minute so I walk outside to look for our car. Fifteen minutes go by and she still hasn't arrived. My mom is never late but it does look like there's more traffic than usual. After another fifteen minutes, I decide to go to the office and call her. I am praying that she will answer. My stomach starts to hurt again, because my mom is never late.

Ashes to Ashes

by River Bennu

The first time I tried EMDR therapy, I laughed.

Not a polite laugh. The kind that comes out when your nervous system realizes you've been running on fumes for so long that actual healing feels absurd. The kind that makes therapists raise their eyebrows and say, "What's coming up for you right now?"

"I'm just—" I gestured vaguely at the light bar Dr. Santos had placed on the desk between us, the one that would supposedly help heal my trauma. "I'm moving my eyes back and forth while thinking about my divorce and this is going to...what? Fix me?"

"Not fix," Dr. Santos said, her voice steady in that way that made me want to both trust her completely and run screaming from the room. "Reprocess. Your brain already knows how to heal. EMDR just helps it do what it's been trying to do all along—file the memories somewhere they don't hurt you anymore."

I found Dr. Santos three months after moving out. Three months after leaving the home I built over the course of a fifteen year relationship. Three months of sleeping on an air mattress in a studio apartment, three months of my kids asking when things would go "back to normal," three months of waking up at 3 AM with my heart racing and no idea why.

"Divorce is a trauma," Dr. Santos explained in our first session. "Even necessary ones. *Especiall*y necessary ones. Your whole identity gets reorganized. Everything you thought was permanent becomes temporary. Your nervous system goes into overdrive trying to figure out what's safe anymore."

I cried then, the way you cry when someone finally names the thing you've been living with but couldn't see. I spent months researching EMDR before making the appointment. I read it was particularly effective for people in major life transitions, such as divorce, coming out, grief. As she spoke, I realized the process would be more like emotional archaeology, digging through layers of survival responses to find what was actually true underneath.

"The eye movements mimic REM sleep, when your brain processes and consolidates memories." Dr. Santos said. "We're essentially helping your brain do its filing system work while you're awake and with support."

I was skeptical. But I was also desperate. And desperate people try things that sound like science fiction.

During that first session, following the light with my eyes while holding the image of my ex-husband's face when I'd told him I was finally leaving—something shifted. Not fixed. Shifted. Like a bone that had been set wrong finally clicking into place.

"Holy *shit*, how is this real?" I whispered.

"Yeah," Dr. Santos said, nodding her head in agreement. "It's weird. Keep going."

A few months later, after weeks of processing the divorce, the coming out, the childhood stuff that had bubbled up in the wake of everything falling apart, Dr. Santos had a different question during our session.

“Tell me about the rescue work.”

I had been a dog trainer for a decade during my marriage. Not the kind who taught rich people’s poodles to sit pretty. The kind who rehabilitated the ones everyone else had given up on—the biters, the fearful ones, the dogs who’d learned that humans were dangerous and the world was hostile.

“I worked with the fearful ones mostly,” I said slowly, remembering the kennel I managed. “The ones in the small runs who needed constant monitoring. Separation anxiety, resource guarding, fear-based aggression. They required so much intervention just to stay stable.”

“And the ones who got adopted? The success stories?”

“Those dogs—once they were in the right environment, with the right family, with enough space, they mostly just thrived. The behaviors that seemed so severe in the shelter just...resolved. They didn’t need me managing them every second.”

Dr. Santos did that thing where she didn’t say anything, just waited with her eyebrows slightly raised, and I felt my brain rearranging itself in real time.

“Oh, *fuck*. That’s exactly what I’ve been doing, micromanaging every single aspect of myself just to survive my own life! For years!”

“There it is,” Dr. Santos said, not unkindly.

“How did I get here?” I mused quietly, tears welling in my eyes.

“That’s what we’re going to figure out,” Dr. Santos replied, pulling up her calendar to schedule our next session.

The thing about coming out as queer at forty, after thirteen years of marriage and three kids, is that everyone has opinions.

My mother: “You’re just confused. Are you sure your therapist isn’t brainwashing you? I’ve heard that can happen.”

My ex-husband: “You’re being selfish. Why do you want to throw your family away?”

My former best friend, who decided being friends was “too stressful” after the divorce: “It’s a lot to expect people to just change how they’ve always known you.”

But my yoga teacher, Dani—a tall, muscular woman who could hold warrior three for three minutes straight and had a tattoo of the goddess Kali on her shoulder—said something different after class one night, when I had stayed late, crying in child’s pose.

“The only person who gets to name you is you,” Dani said, settling down beside me on the mat. “Everyone else is just projecting their own fear on your body.”

I looked up, my face streaked with tears and sweat. “I don’t even know what to call myself yet.”

“That’s okay. You don’t have to know everything right now. You just have to tell the truth about what you do know.”

I wrote that down on a sticky note when I got home and put it on the bathroom mirror in the studio apartment. Right next to the note that said: *You don’t live there anymore.*

I signed up for an online Gender Studies course through the community college. The assigned reading was *The Will to Change* by bell hooks.

“Patriarchy,” our teacher said during the Zoom call, “doesn’t just harm women and gender non-conforming folks. It harms everyone. It’s a predator that feeds on emotional honesty, vulnerability, authentic selfhood. And we’re all walking around bleeding from it, wondering why we feel so tired.”

That night, I dreamed I was back in high school with my best friend Keisha—someone I hadn’t talked to in fifteen years—and we were throwing bricks through windows, chasing a man who we knew was a predator, and who kept insisting we were the criminals. “Someone should call the cops on you two!” he yelled.

I woke up sweating, heart racing, and immediately texted my best friend Imani: *I think I just threw a brick at the patriarchy in my sleep and it BLED.*

Imani, bless her, texted back at 3 AM: *GOOD. Throw another one.*

“Tell me about the new dream,” Dr. Santos said the next session.

I described it: the high school setting, Keisha, the predator, the bricks, the glass.

“And how did you feel when you threw the brick?” Dr. Santos asked.

“Powerful. Terrified. Like I was doing something wrong but also...necessary?”

“What was he saying? The man you were chasing?”

“That I was the problem. That I should be arrested. That I was violent and dangerous and...” I stopped, recognition flooding through me. “He was gaslighting me. Even while he was bleeding from what we’d done, he was trying to make us think we were the bad guys.”

“And is that familiar? That voice?”

I thought about all the times I had tried to set boundaries in my marriage and been told I was “too demanding.” All the times I had named my needs and been called “selfish.” All the times I wanted to take up space and been told I was “too much.”

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “That’s the voice that’s been running my life.”

“So what does it mean that you wounded this voice in the dream? That it bled?”

I looked up, something fierce stirring in my chest. “That it’s vulnerable. That I can hurt it. That my anger—my real anger, not the nice kind—is actually dangerous to it.”

“Good,” Dr. Santos said. “Remember that.”

Dani’s yoga class was held in a community center on Thursday evenings, and I was always the youngest person there by at least thirty years.

The other students were all retired—Mildred with her replaced hip, Jerry with his heart condition, Sylvia who’d had a stroke last year and was slowly regaining mobility. They moved through poses with careful intention, and Dani adapted everything, offering props and modifications with the same patience she’d used when I first showed up, barely able to breathe through anxiety.

That had been a year ago, right before I came out. Right before everything fell apart and then, slowly, started coming together again.

“We’re working with the second chakra today,” Dani said, her voice filling the small room with warmth. “The sacral chakra. Creativity, pleasure, emotional connection. The place we hold our right to feel, to create, to experience joy.”

I felt something twist in my chest.

After class, as I was rolling up my mat, Dani approached.

“You okay? You looked like you were processing something heavy today.”

I laughed weakly. “Is it that obvious?”

“Only to someone who’s been there.” Dani smiled. “Walk with me?”

We ended up sitting in Dani’s car in the parking lot, because it was raining and neither of us wanted to leave yet.

“I’ve had the most intense dreams this month,” I started. “I feel like I’m unlocking parts of myself I didn’t know existed. Last night I dreamed about finding this strange, scraggly dog at the

shelter...way in the back, hidden away in a forgotten corner. One I didn't remember we had. It was bright orange and so alien looking. It was alive, but starving. Looking for food—eating trash that had blown into the kennel.”

“Orange,” Dani said thoughtfully. “Sacral chakra color.”

“I know. I googled it. It seems I'm experiencing some sort of spiritual awakening?” I said, only partly joking.

Dani laughed—a full, rich sound that made me feel less alone. “And what do you think it means? This alien dog you forgot about?”

“I think...” I took a breath. “I think it's the part of me that wanted to create things. That wanted pleasure. That wanted to be...” I stopped, the word catching.

“Queer?” Dani offered gently.

“Yeah. And non-binary. And...you know...myself. Whatever *that* means.”

“When did you forget about that dog?”

I thought back. “I don't know, exactly. Maybe after Zora was born? I was so busy all the time—between work and school, my mom being sick and my grandmother passing, I just didn't have the passion to create. I stopped writing for fun. I stopped...I don't know. Being playful? Being curious? I became this efficient, useful machine who could work and go to school and handle single parent life. My priority was to make everyone else comfortable.”

“And that orange dog? It's been locked in a hidden kennel this whole time?”

“Starving,” I whispered.

Dani was quiet for a moment. Then: “You know what I love about you?”

“What?”

“You're starting to feed it again. That's why you're here. That's why you're in school. That's why you came out even though it cost you everything. You're remembering that dog exists.”

Hot tears slid down my face. I closed my eyes. “I'm scared I waited too long. That it might be too late.”

“Robin.” Dani's voice was firm now. “Dogs are resilient as hell. You know that better than anyone. Give it food, give it space, give it time. It'll come back.”

I was laying on my bedroom floor listening to a guided meditation when the vision came. It was so vivid that I sat up gasping.

I was back in my grandmother's house—the one where I lived as a teenager, where my mother's instability had reached its peak, where my stepfather had existed like a storm system you just had to weather.

I could see myself as a young woman, setting up my room there. Not the small room I'd actually had, but the big center room with a fireplace, the largest bedroom. I had set up my desk, my camera and art supplies, my books. I had hung photos of myself and my daughter on the wall.

But when I came home, my stepfather had taken over. Moved my things. Messed up my carefully arranged space. Worst of all, he'd taken down the photos of me and my daughter. Replaced them with pictures of himself and his son.

He had taken over the whole room.

I called Dr. Santos before my regular session time.

"I need to talk about the vision that came during meditation," I said when she answered.

"Okay. Tell me."

I told her every detail I could remember about the dream—the center room, the displacement, the photos being replaced.

"What was that room in the actual house?" Dr. Santos asked.

"My grandmother's bedroom. Before she moved to the smaller house on the property to make space for us."

"So even in real life, a woman gave up her home to accommodate others?" she asked gently, leaving space for my awareness to catch up.

I felt something click. "Oh my god. I never even thought about that. Yes, she did."

"And in the vision, you'd claimed it. Made it yours. Put your identity—your motherhood, your daughter—on the walls."

"Yes, and then he took it over. Erased me and put himself there instead." I said, my mind reeling.

"Robin," Dr. Santos said carefully, "I want you to think about something. What does the center bedroom represent in this work we're doing together?"

"My...body?" I paused and took a breath, choosing my next words carefully. "My own center...like, my right to take up space?"

"Yes. And who taught you that your center could be invaded? That your space wasn't really yours? That male authority could take over your identity whenever it wanted?"

I thought about being a child in that house. About the ways my stepfather's presence had made me feel like a guest in my own life. About the abuse I had endured at the hands of family members. About the survival strategies I had developed—be helpful, be useful, take care of everyone, stay quiet, don't take up too much room.

“He did...all the men around me did, even my mom,” I whispered. “And then I...I literally married someone who reinforced that same pattern.”

“You learned early that your body wasn’t safe. That it could be taken over at any time. So you never really claimed it. You’ve been taking up as little space as possible. Perhaps a part of you is still waiting for someone to take over again?”

“So how do I...” my voice cracked. “How do I kick him out? Not the actual man—I mean, I haven’t seen him in years—but the pattern. The belief that I don’t get to keep my safe space.”

“The same way you wounded the predator in the other dream,” Dr. Santos said. “You fight back. You throw bricks. You reclaim what’s yours, even if it feels dangerous, even if that voice says you’re wrong for wanting it.”

The thing about being non-binary is that you come out over and over and over.

I had come out as queer—as a lesbian—two years ago. That had been earthquake-level. Marriage ending, kids confused, family members sending concerned messages about my mental health.

But the gender thing...that was trickier. It took a bit longer to get to those layers.

“I think I might not be...just a woman,” I said to Dani after class one night, a few months into my first year of college.

We were sitting in the community center parking lot again, because apparently that’s where all of my revelations happened now.

“Okay,” Dani said, easy as anything. “Tell me more.”

“Like...I’m not a man. I don’t think. But woman feels...incomplete? Like I’m wearing clothes that mostly fit but are slightly the wrong size? And sometimes I want to be ‘she’ and sometimes I want to be ‘they’ and I don’t know if that’s allowed or if I’m just...”

“Robin.” Dani turned to face me fully. “You’re allowed. You don’t need permission. You get to try on words and see what fits.”

“What if people think I’m doing it for attention?”

“Then those people can fuck right off.”

I laughed, surprised. “You’re very wise.”

“I’m very gay and very tired of people policing gender. Use whatever pronouns feel right. Change them if they stop feeling right. The only person who has to understand your gender is you.”

I sat with that for a moment. “I think...I think I want to use she and they. Interchangeably. Not like, pick one depending on the day, but just...both. Because I’m both. Or neither. Or....”

“You don’t have to explain it,” Dani said gently. “You just have to live it.”

I tested it first with Imani, who said, “Cool, got it,” and immediately started mixing pronouns like she’d been doing it her whole life.

Then with Dr. Santos, who updated her notes and said, “Thank you for telling me.”

Then, shakily, with my kids.

My daughter, twenty-four and thoughtful: “Does this mean we call you something different?”

“No, still Mom. Or Robin, if that feels better sometimes. I’m still me. Just...more accurately named.”

My eldest son - almost fourteen now and deeply invested in being cool - said: “Yeah, I figured. You’ve been giving off enby vibes for like a year.”

I blinked. “I have?”

“Mom. You literally have a pronoun pin collection you haven’t worn yet. It’s not subtle.”

My youngest, now eight: “Can I still tell people I have a mom?”

“Of course, baby.”

“Okay. Cool. Can we have pizza for dinner?”

And that was that.

Not everyone made it easy...some family members “forgot,” some friends stopped calling. But the people who mattered got it right, or tried to, and that was enough.

I started journaling around the time I started therapy. A few years in, I knew the writing was becoming something more, but I was struggling to stay on track. I realized that writing a novel based on my life was like excavating every lost memory of trauma I experienced as a child. I was determined to keep going, so I dug deeper than I ever had before, knowing there was gold within the ruins, just waiting to be uncovered.

One night, I called Imani, crying.

“What if I can’t do this?” I said. “What if I’m not brave enough to actually finish this book, to actually rebuild this foundation, to actually...”

“Robin,” Imani interrupted. “Do you remember when you trained that German Shepherd? The one who’d bitten three people?”

“Luna.”

“Yeah, Luna. Everyone said she was too aggressive, too damaged, that she should be put down. And you worked with her for six months. And you know what happened?”

“She got adopted by that family with kids.”

“She got adopted by that family with kids,” Imani repeated, “because you believed she could be rehabilitated. You gave her structure, and space, and time, and you didn’t give up on her even when she bit you.”

“She bit me twice, actually.”

“My point,” Imani said, “is that you’ve spent your whole life rehabilitating everyone else. Rehabbing the traumatized dogs, managing the unstable family members, making everyone else comfortable. You know how to do this work. You’ve just never done it for yourself.”

I was quiet.

“So do it now,” Imani continued. “Treat yourself like something worth saving.”

“I love you so much,” I said, still crying.

“I know. Now finish the damn book.”

My novel was published two years later.

At the launch party, surrounded by friends and chosen family, I read the dedication out loud:

*For everyone who’s ever had to kick the patriarchy out of their psyche.
For everyone who’s been a rescue project in their own life.
For everyone who’s learning, slowly and imperfectly, to reclaim their soul.*

*May you find the right environment.
May you fill it with what’s actually yours.
And may you never, ever go back to the accepting scraps.*

My kids were there. Dani was there. Dr. Santos had sent flowers. Imani was crying (happy crying, she insisted). And I—standing in the center of the room, in my body, in my name, in my life—felt something I hadn’t felt in a very long time.

Home.

Not the kind you inherit.

Not the kind someone else builds for you.

But the kind you claim, brick by brick, word by word, truth by truth.

The house was mine now. And I was never giving it up again.



Ashes to Ashes (the center room), 3.5x5 inches, Watercolor, 2026

Dust Country, 1935

by Luke Griffin

Pa shot the old bitch this morning. Didn't say nothing as he did it, neither.

Maybe I'll sugarcoat that a bit when I write to Johnny out in California, but he probably deserves to know flat-out. She was his, after all.

It was just about dinnertime, judging by the sun high up above in the indefinite, cloudless sky. I was sitting on the porch, chewing my toothpick, and looking out over the flat, beige shrublands of Prowers County. The rough wall scraped against my back as I shifted a bit. Our house – more of a shack, really – used to be white, but now only little bits of paint still clung to the wood here and there. Our barn used to be painted too. The lofty building had been a vivid, cardinal red with bright white trim, but the wind and the dust stripped that paint away too after a few years. Johnny and I were going to repaint a year or two ago but then he left for California and Pa and I never got around to doing it.

There were lots of thing around the farm like the painting that never got done. When Ma and Pa and Johnny and I were all here we had so many projects, and enough hands to do them. Now it was just me and Pa.

That morning, after making a meager breakfast for Pa and myself, I'd gotten to sweeping the floors and lining the windows with new oiled up rags. The storm the night before hadn't been too bad, but enough dust had gotten in that we'd woken up coughing. A layer of reddish silt lay on all the surfaces in the house and drifted easy through the sunbeams falling in the East-facing windows. When the dust got kicked up, it stung my eyes, caught in my throat, and clawed at my lungs. Least I didn't have a beard like Pa that would catch and collect the fine particles blowing through the air.

Anyhow, there where I was, sitting on the porch, when Pa came back from the fields. I figured he'd tell me to get back to work and say I was shirking, but he didn't say nothing at all. His boots didn't make much noise on the ridges of brick-colored dust that had piled up on the steps. Inside though, I heard him clomp across the freshly swept floor of the rickety shack, then the rattle of a drawer opening. When Pa came back out, he had his smooth-worn Smith and Wesson Model 10 – the one he'd taught Johnny and I to shoot with – tucked into the back waistband of his dirty gray jeans, overalls straps swaying at by thighs. He didn't even look at me. Guess he'd decided it was time.

Cassie was lying by a crooked fencepost at the edge of the yard. She hadn't moved much since she started having seizures a week or so ago. I reckon it was from all the dust in the air. When the storms roll in over the empty prairie, Pa and I tie up our handkerchiefs around our faces and stick some Vaseline up our noses to keep the dust out. Can't do the same for the dog. The poor old girl just breathed it all in, chuffing and vomiting.

I'll tell Johnny it was the dust that got into her lungs, and that we did it quick, before she suffered too much.

Cassie's tail thumped weakly, and she picked her head up as Pa approached, sending a little cloud of dust into the still, dry air. The fine, red dirt under the silver-muzzled bitch was wet where she'd pissed without bothering to move. Pa picked the old, spotted gray collie mutt up and carried her behind the sagging barn. I'd dug the hole a few feet down in the hard, red earth back there the yesterday before I realized I couldn't go through with it.

Pa had wanted me to do it, but I couldn't. I couldn't bear the thought of her looking up at me with those big brown eyes, not understanding what was about to happen.

One shot rang through the late morning, and that was that.

It was probably best to stay out of Pa's way for a little while. I think he was always more fond of the mutt than he let on. I figured I could start that letter to Johnny, but what would I write?

I would tell him about Cassie, 'course. He'd raised her from just a pup. But after that? It had been OK the past few weeks and Prowers County looked just about the same as it always did. Nothing changed. Dust storms rolled in regularly, killing whatever we'd planted. Pa was convinced that we could stay here and eke something out, just like we always had. I wished we could go see my older brother out in California, but Pa got angry whenever I mentioned Johnny, even though he'd gone to try to make some money to help us.

Maybe I'd ask Johnny about the ocean. If he'd smelled the salt air and felt the breeze roll in. That's what I'd ask him. Maybe I could go join him and he'd teach me to swim. It would be a great adventure.

I was interrupted from my California daydreams by a small cloud gathering in the distance. I squinted out over the brown, arid tract of Southeast Colorado, trying to make out what was kicking up all that dust. Didn't look like the wall of a storm. A dark shape cut across the prairie about a mile or two out, spilling hazy billows out behind it into the slate blue sky.

"Car coming, Pa!" I shouted.

"See what they want, why don't you!" he shouted back from behind the barn.

Eventually, a long, sleek black automobile pulled up at our fence line in front of the house, tires crunching on the gravel road. The dirt it had kicked up drifted lazily past as the driver got out. He was a cleanshaven man about Pa's height with sharp, beady eyes under the brim of his hat. The man wore a dark suit with the tie cinched all the way up. His polished, black shoes were spotless.

"Howdy, sir! What can I do you for?" I asked, standing to lean against one of the support poles for the porch roof.

"I'm hoping to speak to the owner of the property here. Mr...uhh..." He fumbled inside his jacket for some papers.

"Hanson," I finished.

“Yes, yes, of course.” He glanced over our slouched house and barn, out past the twisted dead tree to the barren fields behind it. “Nice bit of land you got here. How many acres is it?” He had a squished, nasally accent.

“Three-hundred twenty acres, although most of fields don’t grow nothing no more owing to the dust and the prices these days. But again, how can I help you, sir?”

“Can you let Mr. Hanson know that my name is Mr. Ordell and I’m here as a representative of the Resettlement Administration. He your father?”

“Already did, sir. He’s just behind the barn, he should be here in a moment.”

“Alright, thank you very much, young man. What’s your name?” he asked as he took off his suit jacket that must’ve been cooking him like a hot potato. He draped the coat over the open driver’s window. His cheeks looked beet red even under the shade of the brim of his dark hat.

“William, sir. I go by Willy, though.”

He nodded, trying to come up with any other small talk pleasantries to fill the time, loosening his tie. “And how old are you, Willy.”

“Fifteen, sir, almost sixteen.”

Before Mr. Ordell had time to come up with any more questions for me, Pa walked out from behind the barn. He set the shovel by the barn door and wiped his hands on the front of his half-buttoned blue work shirt.

“Nice automobile you got there,” Pa said to the government man.

The man gave Pa a grin and gestured to the car. “Thank you, sir! 1934 Buick Series 40, top of the line. Eight-cylinder engine runs like a dream. You a car sort of man?” he asked, then continued without waiting for a response. “Bit warm today, isn’t it?”

“Most days are,” said Pa, standing about ten feet away from him on our side of the fence line. He stared at the man in the suit, waiting. Pa’s gun was tucked into the back of his jeans.

“I was just telling your son Willy, here, that my name is Mr. Ordell and I’m here with the Resettlement Administration. It’s a new agency created by President Roosevelt as part of the New Deal to —”

“I head of you,” said Pa.

“Wonderful! Then you’ll know why I’m here?”

“Maybe,” said Pa, waiting again.

Mr. Ordell blinked a couple times, then continued. “See, we’ve been partnering with the WPA – the Works Progress Administration, that is – to build greenbelt settlements around the country with the goal of relocating farmers from here in the Great Plains where you’ve have been struggling with drought and dust storms.”

"I know what we been struggling with. So you're here to, what... to 'relocate' me and my boy here?"

"Precisely, Mr. Hanson. We, the RA, would help you resettle to our site at Clear Sky Farms out in California. You'd have workable land where you can support yourself, and —"

"We've been supporting ourselves just fine here for twenty-two years. The past five ain't been easy but we've gotten through it."

"Yes, sir, I understand that this decision is difficult, but you really must consider —"

"To be frank with you Mr. Ordell, I really don't think I will." The government man furrowed his brow as Pa continued. "I built a life here. I don't plan on letting some socialist in a suit who's never seen a dust storm and doesn't know what life is like out here come and tell me to just pack it up." Pa spit on the ground.

"Firstly, sir, we're doing this to help you. And we're not socialists I may add. The RA is a true, American program designed for helping the American people." Mr. Ordell rubbed his jaw, surveying our property. "These dust storms are only going to get worse before they get better. I want to make sure that you've got workable land on which you can grow crops and have something to give to your son when he's able to take over."

"And how do you reckon them dust storms'll only get worse?" asked Pa.

"Because lots of folks aren't using their land. It's just dead dirt waiting to be picked up by the wind and tossed around. Until the New Deal greenbelts are finished in a couple years here, they'll keep coming. Too many people persisting in their stubborn right to do nothing." Mr. Ordell's eyes flickered toward our own barren fields.

Even from the porch, I could see the muscle in Pa's jaw clench. "You saying that it's our fault out here for not using our fields? All of you people with your shiny shoes and fancy cars in them cities brought down our grain prices. We can't grow anything if we can't buy any seeds."

"Respectfully, sir, and I know this may be hard to hear, I don't think this land will recover. Even with seeds it's doubtful it'll grow again. The future for you is West, in California. You'll be able to grow at good prices. Do it for your son. You've got three hundred and twenty acres of dead land here." He lowered his voice. "I don't know how much longer you can have a life out here."

Pa inhaled deep through his nose like he did when he was angry. Not belt angry, but that cold, calm angry that always scared Johnny and me when we were kids.

"You know, I buried a farm dog this morning. Shot it, too. You ever shot a dog, Mr. Ordell?"

Mr. Ordell shook his head no.

"Judging by your shoes I would've guessed not," Pa continued. "Buried my wife out behind the house, where that tree is," Pa said, nodding his head backward toward the house and the limbs of the dead tree rising above it. "When I go, I plan on being buried right next to her."

“Sir, I’m sorry to hear about your wife and I understand that leaving a home is difficult. One of the hardest things out there. But isn’t the future, having a life for your son, more important than thinking about where you’ll be buried? Please, just think –”

“You ever think about where you’ll be buried, Mr. Odell?” Pa asked, smoothly moving the gun into the front of his jeans in full view of the government man. “I think it’s best time you leave and stop telling folk how they can or can’t live their lives. Willy will have a future out here perfectly fine.”

Mr. Ordell blanched and stiffened up. “There’s no need for that, sir. Keep in mind you’re speaking to an official government employee. If you reconsider at all, which I believe to be in you and your son’s best interests, please don’t hesitate to –”

“Leave,” said Pa, in a low growl, scowling at the agent.

Shaking his head, Mr. Ordell started the automobile with a roar, gravel spinning out under the wheels as he peeled away.

Pa stood still as a rock until the dust cloud from the car settled and Mr. Ordell was gone. He walked back to the house, shaking his head. “Damn socialists don’t know a thing about this country,” he muttered.

I listened to him stomp back across the house and thunk the gun back in the dresser drawer before I spoke up. “How long do you think we got until the dust is too much, Pa?”

“We got plenty of time,” he said, walking back out the door and leaning against the other support pole, gazing out over the expanse before us. “All the time in the world. Hell, I think we’ll have a couple years of rain, and this’ll all be behind us. We can start growing some crops again, cheap, and we’ll be the ones laughing. All the idiots who moved will be stuck living in cramped shantytowns and cities and we’ll be living the dream out here with all the land we could want.”

“So you think we’ll be fine?”

“Course. We always are.”

I took a deep breath before speaking again. “He mentioned that those farms were out in California... Wouldn’t it be nice to be close to Johnny? He says –”

“I don’t give a damn what he says, alright?” Pa looked at me, his stern blue eyes hard beneath his permanently creased brow. “Your brother left us when we needed him on the farm to go on some fool ‘adventure’ out West.”

“But he says that it’s good out there! That you can make some good money!”

“Does he also tell you we’d be treated like shit? Does he tell you how he probably lives in a shack with six other people and gets called a dirty ‘Okie’ wherever he goes like some refugee? Nah, bet he doesn’t. Just wants to get you away from me here.” He glanced around the farm. “He never saw it out here like we do, Willy. This is a real life. A good life out here on the land, Willy. That’s all I want for you.”

“I’m just worried there ain’t gonna be no land for me to farm, Pa. With all this dust...”

"Listen, I told you before. It'll all go away by itself. Just keep on keeping on and we'll be alright. I don't see any reason why we've got to change on account of some rich city folks thinking that they know how we should live our lives." He paused. "We been out here a long time. And we'll stay out here."

"What if it gets in my lungs? And I get pneumonia or something? Like Cassie."

Pa was clearly done with this conversation. "You ain't a dog. You'll be fine," he said, before leaning forward and squinting. Across the big flatland, a wall of dust was forming on the eastern horizon. "Looks like we'll be getting another one this afternoon," Pa observed.

"Damn, I still need to get the rags in the windows," I said.

"Language."

"Sorry, Pa. I'll get on that right now."

"You also need to bring in all the cattle grazing on whatever weeds they found in the pasture. Bring 'em round to the barn for now," said Pa. He sat down on the porch with his arms crossed and rested his hat over his eyes.

"You ain't gonna help me with all this?" I asked, glancing over to the roiling rust-colored wall that was growing slowly larger.

"Nah, dog and that government man gave me a headache. You're sixteen, you'll be fine."

"Pa, I don't know if I can do all that by myself before it gets here," I said.

The dust storm on the gray horizon rolled closer across that desolate prairie.

"We got enough time if you get a hop on it now," he said. My old man just sat there, waiting for me to go prepare our farm for the storm. "We got time."

The Shoe I Kept

by Dustin Prestridge

I still have the shoe.

The laces are tied.

The wall of Cabbage Patch Kids went floor to ceiling in the store. Bright fluorescent lights. Clear plastic windows. Faces staring out. Some labeled boys, some girls, skin tones from pale to dark.

I looked carefully, then reached for one without hesitation. He had Black skin, no hair at all. He didn't look like me.

He felt like mine.

Tucked inside the box were his adoption papers, visible through the plastic. His name was printed there. Oliver.

Grandma paused.

She asked if I was sure. She reminded me that I was a boy who wanted a doll, and asked again if this was really the one I wanted. Then, more quietly, if I understood I was choosing a Black doll.

I insisted. She bought him.

At home, my father looked at Oliver and said nothing.

I carried Oliver everywhere.

I talked to him, told him about my day, answered for him.

It was sticky hot. My father straightened my cap. He handed me the seatbelt and waited until it clicked secure. Oliver, happy in my lap.

While we drove, I rolled down the window and held him out into the wind, laughing as the air rushed past his round, bald head.

My father warned me not to do that. He checked the mirror, his face red. He gripped the wheel tight. The truck went faster.

I did not understand.

I said okay. I probably meant it. But a while later, without much thought, I did it again.

That last time, he reached over without warning, grabbed Oliver out of my hands, and threw him out the window.

The truck did not stop.

I twisted around in my seat and watched Oliver hit the freeway. His body bounced once, then again, against the gray blur of pavement. Cars rushed past. A tire struck him. Then another.

He disappeared into the movement and noise while we kept driving.

All that was left in my hands was one small blue and white shoe. I kept looking from the road to the shoe. Oliver was gone.

The window stayed open. Cigarette smoke drifted out. Classic rock played. Neither of us listened.

No one mentioned Oliver again.

The shoe is still small. Still blue and white.

I have never untied it.

Debate of Minute Maid

by Peri Olcer

After glancing over my shoulders, making sure no employees were watching me, I slid my desert-tan Owala under the sticky spout of the soft drink dispenser at Chipotle and, as slick as possible, hinged my bottle downward until Minute Maid Lemonade started flowing in. This was naturally after I helped myself to that delicious, crunchy-soft nugget ice. I had twenty minutes left in my lunch period with nothing to do but sip on both my ethics and my stolen lemonade.

I paid for a bowl, of course; that would be pretty hard to steal. Chicken and rice with extra sour cream. I did tip the short and kind woman who silently smacked the rice and meat into my bowl. But when she asked me, “would you like a drink with that?” while tapping loudly on the till, I said no. Chipotle is a something-billion-dollar company, how much of an impact could my three dollar lemonade-heist have made? My ex-band director Mr. Mahaffey, the kind of guy who’s tall but would have you think is short based off his demeanor, probably would have asked, “what if everyone did what you’re doing? There would be no more lemonade!” But, that never made sense to me. If everybody did what I did, the chances are that not much would have changed. Maybe Chipotle stock would have gone down a small amount, but nothing catastrophic. My mom probably would have asserted that it’s not the cost of the lemonade that matters, but the karma that follows the immorality of stealing lemonade. I probably would’ve told her that three dollars worth of karma doesn’t sound too bad, and she’d reply with, “that’s not what I meant.” I think I knew what she meant, but I couldn’t get on board with her philosophy.

I have never seen my mom drive faster than 65 miles per hour. At 61, I see her getting anxious. She renewed her tabs 3 months before they expired and drags me and my sister to our appointments at least 15 minutes early. I think she even likes paying taxes. Or maybe she has such a deeply rooted faith in the social contract that she feels lucky to have the opportunity to pay taxes. I sometimes tell her that you probably need your taxes more than the government does; she usually just shrugs or says, “you’ll get it one day.”

All of that is fine. I only speed a little, I try to be timely, and I imagine I don’t have much of a choice not to pay taxes. But her absolute moral stubbornness against pouring herself a free glass of lemonade was bizarre to me, because in my view, it was almost my moral obligation to help myself to that glass.

When I was younger, my dad would do everything in his power to get me excited about science. We went to planetariums and watched space documentaries, one of them being *Cosmos*—the Neil DeGrasse Tyson version, of course. So, at 7 years old, my motto became “question everything.” Growing up, I tried my best to stick to it, but as my consciousness of the world and the way it works slowly came to be, piece by piece, like a losing Tetris board, the motto morphed from “question everything” to “question authority.” The world is run by people. How can we trust that they know what they’re doing?

The scientific conclusions that I’ve been raised to criticize and question are created by people or groups of people that hold a significant authority over me, academic or otherwise. But beyond that, the taxes I’m expected to pay are put into place by people who have some authority over me. The school I go to is run by people with authority and the places I eat at are run by people with authority. The transition from questioning the world to questioning the people who run the world seemed natural. So maybe my lemonade-and-run crime was a subtle jab at that authority, but I think it was more a check of my ability to uphold and a personal validation of my motto to question authority.

I do this often. In elementary school, teachers gave out “colonial dollars” which they would take away if we were misbehaving. Naturally, I led a lunchtime protest about the taxation of our class money. In middle school, we weren’t allowed to bring our backpacks into class. I remember the rule making no sense to me, so I made it a point to bring my backpack to all my classes, even if it was ultimately more of an inconvenience to me.

I find it important to “question authority.” I think it makes me a more present and involved person, and I think it’s important to be critical of the environment you live in and the things you’re expected to do. That’s how we can learn and gain a deeper understanding of the world. But even though I find that trait to be integral to my identity, I realize that sometimes I do it solely for the point, not to change anything, but to prove to myself that I could. My middle school backpack policy didn’t change because of my actions, and our colonial dollars kept getting taxed. Still, it was satisfying knowing I made my point known and thoughts heard. And in sipping on my ethics, I found that periodic push-backs on authority can be healthy. But I also realized that, just like how quantum particle movement seemingly defies the laws of physics, or how my immigrant mom defied the odds by finding happiness in an American Dream suburbia through hard work, the most powerful acts of rebellion often come enveloped in compliance. The real power comes not from the stolen lemonade itself, but the strength it takes to pay for lemonade when the bowl already feels overpriced.

Doxycycline

by Vera McLaughlin

I am sweat stains and perfect pussy
I am dancing in the rain and drenched in the downpour
I do not know what my face looks like,
but I know something about being alive
I know about heartbreak and the desire to fuck it away
I know my name was once six syllables
and now it's still six syllables,
though the letters have all been scrambled

I get up in the morning to pick my scabs
An open wound yawning
I am gooey, sobbing, tender
I am weepy, painful, hot
I think I have an infection again

Doxycycline

7 days

I cycle from bedroom floor to bathroom floor to kitchen floor
I puke. I vomit. I hurl.

I am always ill
Achy on my best days
Cat curled up after biting hand – unaware of the consequences

I am clammy feet and perky tits
I am humming in the shower and crying down the drain
I do not understand my own gender,
but I understand I am seen as woman
I know about misogyny and the desire to fuck it away
I know my name once belonged to a man who did not see me as a person
and now it belongs to me
I sometimes lend it to others,
but it is mine

I sometimes lend myself to others,
but I am mine

I get up in the morning to look at my chest in the mirror
A fucked up prank
I am heavy, thick, soft
I am angry, anguished, desired
I pluck a hair from my chin
Not because I care it's there,
but for the ritual punishment of existing
I cycle from bed, toilet, couch
I stab. I pierce. I jab.

I have made a habit of hacking away at myself
It started when I was around two
They wheeled me into a hospital room
They slashed out my tonsils
This is when I learned my own body could make me sick
This is when I learned I could do something about it

I am all stretched out
Gurney
I am forgotten and misunderstood
If I carve my breasts like ham, then will I remember my own face?
Will I still be wanted enough to fuck it away?
Does it really matter?

I am mine. I am mine. I am mine.
I change my name
I take the doxy
I fight the infection
I chop and chip
and sculpt myself anew

A Letter from Home

by Holly Victor

When I was fifteen, my parents started making me eat dinner in the kitchen with the dog.
His bowl rang while he ate.
My stomach hurt every time.
I quietly paced the kitchen while I ate, stretching legs that weren't often used.
At least I was out of the room.
I chanced glances out of the doorway sometimes
And my mom was always laughing
Watching TV with her boyfriend.
I hadn't seen her that happy before.
One time he caught me looking
And stopped time, stopped the air
What the fuck was I looking at anyway
I should just eat my fucking food
And go back to my room.
I threw one of their glass plates away that day
Hid it in the garbage can
Laid it flat
So when they pushed the trash back

It would crack.

Like a trap I had set
Maybe it would even cut their hand.
I tucked it under greasy paper towels.
My hands shook the whole time.
I think they shook all the time in those days.
They didn't feed me breakfast or lunch
And the room didn't have a light, or heat
So maybe it was that.
It's better than admitting that I was afraid
Even when I was pushing back.
Writhing against the dead skin left behind
Stages I never grew past
Truth untold, secrets caged
I was afraid.

QUALMS

by Bill Rice

We will come to know the silent remorse
Of falling ash and grey cinders covering porch steps
Of masked agents, of work camps, of waiting white ovens
The quiet of our qualms, as brooms sweep away soot
Regrets reflected in downcast eyes and desolate faces
Fearing the mindless minotaur hidden in our homes
Whose hatred has curdled to dull despair
Frozen with indecision; morose, chagrined
The time when we could have prevented this,
We instead chose complacency and cowardice
We watched the agitators shot dead in the street
For blowing a whistle or taking a picture
And said that fate was not for us
Our only choice: to be a martyr or a mouse
But not whether to be the broom or the ash

Introduced Species

by Walden Marcus

Nose-deep in Chuckanut Bay,

Tangled hair gone bioluminescent

I match my eyeline to the tide.

I try to know the ocean by its taste,

And the way it clings to my tongue

When I accidentally inhale a wave.

I sputter on the distance:

Somewhere, far beyond the Salish Sea

And far before my time,

My ancestors sent an offering to the water

And taught the salt my shape.

To the ocean, keeper of life

Even in the most unknown places,

They whispered,

“Here is the son of pomarine skuas who flew to new homes,

“Whose migration brought generations of change,

“Upon weary wings of resilience.”

Days like this

Choking on a briny mouthful of cultural lifeblood

I feel like an introduced species in an unknown habitat.

But when I regain my breath

I take another step out to sea

And dive in all over again

To feel the warm embrace of mothers and mothers and mothers before me

Reaching through the midsummer currents.

Reassembling the Fragments I Left Behind

by Olivia Long

I think I died when I was five.
Five... maybe...four?
My height was under 4ft
the first time he suffocated me.

Sentence came after him.
My first memory:
the smell of Camel 99's,
and thin, dry lips baring a smile of fucked up teeth.

What kind of little girl was I?
Did I hum a tune in every room like I do now?
Did I favor pink before I found comfort in black?
Did my mother notice me fading into silence?

I try to talk to her at times
when my bones fill with lead
and my lungs refuse to budge.

I imagine pulling her into my arms,
cradling her the way I wish our mother had me.
Tears race down my cheeks,
stinging my chewed-up lips.

Her body is rigid. Frozen.
Tiny face blank.
Eyes glazed over, refusing to meet mine.

It's okay if you don't trust me.
I take a step back.
Relief expands her lungs.

I am so sorry, little me.
Tears wet our cheeks.
You deserve safety.
Breathe...please.

She doesn't dare move an inch,
I can feel her fear.
I'm scared too.

I love you.

I fall to my knees; my lower lip shivers.
A whimper escapes her.

I love you.

I shudder as sobs rack my body.
She falls next to me.

I love you.

I want to believe.

She does too.

We sit still.

She no longer stares blankly,
her dark and familiar eyes now focused on mine.
Relief expands my lungs.
I resist pulling her back into my arms.

Maybe I was wrong.
Maybe I am alive.
Maybe I am hiding.
Anticipating safety.

THOUGHTS AND PRAYERS - EXCERPT

By Emil Pierce

(Lights up on the courtyard of a church cemetery, noon, present day. CHARLIE, a man in a suit, sets some flowers—daffodils—down on top of the coffin, which is center stage, upstage from a bench, which is off to one side. Then, he sits down on the bench and starts hastily going through three papers: a guest list, a will, and a speech. Suddenly, the coffin swings open, and THEO climbs out. CHARLIE screams.)

THEO

Charlie! *Charlie!* Oh my God, get it together!

CHARLIE

(stops screaming, then takes a long look at THEO) You're not real, are you?

THEO

I mean, sort of.

(THEO grabs the arm of his dead body from the coffin and lifts it, sort of demonstrating or showing it off. He drops it back down.)

CHARLIE

Theo, this is *serious*.

THEO

Okay, but you're the one imagining it. CHARLIE
Only because it's something you'd do.

THEO

(teasing) That means you miss me.

CHARLIE

(beat) I just wish you were here.

THEO

At my own funeral? Pass.

(THEO sits down close to CHARLIE on the bench, then starts going through the papers.)

THEO

(joking around) What's this? No, don't tell me... you annotated the guest list?

CHARLIE

I'm preparing.

THEO

You know, once you actually meet them you'll realize it's gonna be a lot easier to give them a piece of your mind than you—

CHARLIE

Yeah, I know. Jesus, I know it's your funeral, but did you ever once think about me when you were planning it? And I mean really think about me? Because this is for me, too. (*Beat, after realizing he's snapped at his "husband..." or some kind of figment of him.*) Sorry, it's just... you dying was one thing, and this is just... the icing on the cake, you know? I know you had your issues with them, but I just wish I could've met them at some point. With you. Worked out whatever your problems were over Thanksgiving dinner. Because now, it's just up to me. And it's not like you left me with a lot to work with, is it?

THEO

Did what I could.

CHARLIE

I know. (*Beat.*) I'm not being fair.

THEO

Nothing about this is fair.

CHARLIE

No.

THEO

Cancer isn't fair.

CHARLIE

No.

THEO

Just a whole year of not a damn thing being fair. Look... I don't care how you tell them anything. I don't care if you pull up text threads, or Facebook block lists, or hell, even the will. Anything to let them know I was Theo Lawrence, not Theo Pepper.

CHARLIE

Never did get a chance to thank you enough for taking my last name.

THEO

What, you mean you didn't wanna go by Dr. Pepper? You gave up a one in a million chance.

CHARLIE

Nurse Practitioner Pepper?

(They laugh for a bit, then the laughter dies down. Beat.)

THEO

I want them to remember me right, even if they think that means I was a complete jerk.

CHARLIE

So for me it's a "don't shoot the messenger" kind of thing?

THEO

Sure.

CHARLIE

But I'm not just the messenger. I'm me, and I don't feel like getting shot right now. Look, we deserve something normal. You deserve something normal.

THEO

Normal families get normal funerals, and nothing about this is normal, especially not them. And I don't think pretending it is is gonna make it that way. I mean, just look at her.

(MORGAN enters, swaggering briskly across the stage. She is wearing sunglasses and an elaborate, bright fashion statement—not funeral attire. CHARLIE stuffs the papers in his pocket, walks over to greet her, and holds out his hand to shake. She passes him completely.)

CHARLIE

(rapidly) Oh, good morning—and my condolences. I'm Charlie, we haven't met before, but...

(MORGAN exits. JOSEPHINE enters, angry, frantic, and seemingly chasing after MORGAN, but stumbling a bit over her heels. She is dressed properly. THEO crosses his arms and tries to ignore her.)

JOSEPHINE

(furious) Morgan! You get back here right this instant! I raised an adult woman, not a child playing dress-up!

CHARLIE

Is everything okay?

JOSEPHINE

Oh, obviously not, it's always going to hell... *(Beat. She regards CHARLIE.)* I don't think we've met before, have we? I'm Josephine, or Mrs. Pepper, or Josie, or "Mama Bear." *(She laughs, she's the only one who finds the name funny.)* A pleasure.

(JOSEPHINE and CHARLIE shake hands, somewhat awkwardly. THEO leans back, judging.)

CHARLIE

Nice to meet you, and my condolences. I'm Charlie. Look, Theo was—

JOSEPHINE

Oh, he really was something.

(JOSEPHINE takes several baby photos out of her purse, and starts showing them to CHARLIE. THEO is embarrassed, and tries to block CHARLIE from seeing them, in some way.)

THEO

Oh, God, no, wait... Charlie, you do not need to see these. I'm actually begging you.

JOSEPHINE

Here he was at two... at a few weeks... at his first middle school basketball match... isn't that something? My baby boy... *(She starts welling up. Beat. Then she is almost crying. Another beat.)* No, no... I don't want to ruin my makeup just yet. I'm sorry, it's all a lot...

CHARLIE

No, no, don't worry.

JOSEPHINE

You know, you're very sweet. I'm glad that Theo had someone like you in his last days... So, how did you know my boy?

(Beat.)

CHARLIE

(cautious) We lived together.

THEO

That's putting it lightly.

JOSEPHINE

Oh, yes, when I saw you on the list I figured you were some kind of roommate.../

CHARLIE

/Well, no, not exactly, I mean...

JOSEPHINE

/...and I thought, "I'm so glad that he had friends that cared about him so much." You know, he was always a little... difficult when he was a kid, but aren't they all? You must know how they are, you have that air about you. We had them a bit younger in my day, but you seem like a good father. Speaking of which, where is that man? RICHARD!

CHARLIE

Thank you, but uh... I'm not, actually. Not sure it will happen, at least not for a while, (rushing to get to the point) but Mrs. Pepper, is it okay if I ask you something kind of... sensitive?

(Beat.)

JOSEPHINE

...What is it?

CHARLIE

First of all, I'm really, really sorry...

JOSEPHINE

Oh, for what, dear? I promise you, I've heard worse.

CHARLIE

When was the last time Theo called you?

JOSEPHINE

(slightly offended, but mostly nervous) Ten years ago.

CHARLIE

(awkward) Oh. That's alright. Look, Theo told me to tell you that—

JOSEPHINE

(suddenly, rambling) Well, what wouldn't be alright about it? About not calling for ten years? See, I tried. I left voicemails, and letters, and postcards. No, I'm alright.../

CHARLIE

/No, no, wait, sorry, I didn't mean that you weren't alright...

THEO

/Oh, Jesus...

JOSEPHINE

/...I was alright the whole time. I was alright as long as he was alright, and I know I gave him everything he needed to be alright. So is Morgan. My family is all very alright. So was he alright without me for ten years? Tell me. Tell me that.

Oh, I was very alright.

(Beat.)

(to JOSEPHINE, gently) I... can't say that.

THEO

CHARLIE

(Beat. JOSEPHINE begins to well up again, sniffing, and sits down on the bench next to THEO. He moves over, sort of in disgust, rolling his eyes.)

JOSEPHINE

Oh dear... I'm making a scene, aren't I?

(CHARLIE sits on the other side of her, and, hesitantly and awkwardly, puts his arm around her to calm the beast. He looks straight ahead, scared of eye contact.)

JOSEPHINE

Jesus, Lord, it's just... it's all a lot. It's all too much. *(Beat. She recollects herself and stands up.)* Well... I should be talking to the undertaker now, see that everything is going smoothly. There are still a few minutes until the ceremony, I'm sure we can do something about all... this.

CHARLIE

About what?

JOSEPHINE

(taking the flowers away from the coffin) The decor. The flowers. All of it. It's quite terrible, really. Not proper at all, I can do much better than whatever they've gotten up to. I need a word with them.

(JOSEPHINE exits.)

THIS TIME

by Jervon Andrews

There was a time I went for a job interview and
it didn't go the way I expected,
What left me dejected
was not from being rejected It
all started and ended when I
handed desperate Control over
how to spend my hope and
essence
And it gambled all I had left
Leaving success to chance
instead of investing in a sure thing, me.
I had just started to think recently how
rich I'd be if
I could get back all the time I misspent If
only I could trade
all the minutes turned days
I spent buying into fashion trends from
normality
I could exchange it for
custom one size fits me
only self esteem
So many days turn years I
lived in regret
Time now I would spend on a pen then
I'd be able to write off
the decade of debt that doubt put me in
Glutton on seconds, of guessing myself So
afraid to not be
Which got me,
nothing anyways?
No return policy when it comes to
one's presence
Time spending, time spent and
time left to spend

How can you trade what is,
for what was, or what has never been.
Still makes more sense than
all the time I loss
On those too broke to pay me attention all
of the time I invested
Yet still didn't have enough sense to afford
An understanding of what I am worth.
Such a wealth of time
I spent so poorly
I could fill a classroom
with all the degrees
Time would have bought, if only I had
I spent a fraction of the time
disciplining my mind
That instead, I threw away
Chasing after compliments from blind men
As if, they could help me to see my own beauty
Foolishly, I allowed their opinion
To weigh in on how I used to think,
so heavily I believed depression to be,
just another day of the week
I spent time wastefully, and then had the audacity
To steal from those with far less than me
I could fit their entire existence
in the palm of my hand
I struggle not to quit
I struggle not to forget
What I've learned, where I've been
Life is a choice
I choose to live content
The present is a gift I fight to accept
I don't know, can't control what comes next
But I can and I will make the most of
This time I have left

THE EPITOME OF IDIOCY

by Marcus Staudenraus

The epitome of idiocy

I don't think you can see

You're blinder than me

It's the hypocrisy

The lack of consensus

The disregard for all your senses

Your senseless

Tensed this

One little word

That describes a fascist rise in the world

Disappearing

I see your gleam at that word

Ignoring the atrocity of people being intentionally lost

Disappearing

That's what it is

But you disagree

Cause you disregard

It's too hard

For you to have empathy or rage

Unless it's to distract away

Your senseless

And the epitome of idiocy

At least you're not a centrist

Or are you

Well the centrists are the breeding ground for authoritarians to come around

But you're the moderate that. (Lets it grow and) doesn't care to look anywhere but the ground

You gouge your eyes on the side

Cut your ears just a slit

Grate your hands so you might

Not feel

Not see

Not hear about anything or one

Your so up tight

Kept up all night cause you're a snotty snob

A wretched clog

Violence isn't the answer

Says the privileged white with a tan

The one that always complains

But likes to butt in and complain about when others do the same

The one that never uses their brain

Smart ain't you

You reek

Of idiocy

Your epitome

I pity thee

Without any empathy

No care for the careless

No breath spent on the airless

I think I'm gonna shave this

Lay you bald headed for what you are

A coward

Who would never be there an hour

Of need

The epitome of idiocy
You carry yourself with a sense of superiority
A delusion that's causing the fusing of you to a thoughtless thought
A blob
No individuality
No vigor or passion
Just a uptight white, ready to give lashin
Keeping order for the disorder
Clinging to a false sense of law and order
The cause of the rot that poisons our air
That deafens our ears to the last bit of truth that is aired
That callouses our hands to be feeling less for underpaid hours
So they can sit in their ivory towers.
You wretched cowards
Where is your rage
Is all you do thoughts and prayers
Or care for a supremacist when their death is aired?
Condemning violence while sitting on the side in line
Subservient
Obedient
You ready for your beating yet?
Take this take that
The traits a fascist curates
A wretched moderate base with odorous disgrace
Reeking of hypocrisy
To change this democracy to a Reich run autocracy.
THE EPITOME OF IDIOCY
AND I'M NOT GONNA LET IT TAKE MY DEMOCRACY

My Jim Thorpes

By Okakiina Spotted Bear

*"I never was content unless I was trying
my skill...or testing my endurance."*

-Jim Thorpe

The cool, Pacific brisk of the morning breeze glides through my hair. The satisfying sensation burns in my knees, one sprint after the other. Disconnected from the physical body, my mind travels about the external environment in the heavily forested area.

The three point one mile route consisted of two laps starting from the Daybreak Star Powwow grounds, with a terrain that made up of the perfect blend of asphalt and loose gravel pathways laid out within the abundance of trees.

After the estimated thirty-five attendees and I departed the powwow grounds, running alongside my friend Ku, making our way down Texas Way and eventually turning onto Bernie Whitebear way, I notice the sound squeak... squeak... squeak occurring every time my right foot touches the ground.

"You're squeaking," Ku says.

The shoes. It was the fucking shoes!

Later dubbed my Jim Thorpes. The Nike Vapor Max, originally designed with running in mind, proved less effective for running than for fashion and comfort for everyday use with the groundbreaking air pockets built into the soles to provide cushions. In my case, the heel of the right shoe had a hole in it causing one of the pockets to release air producing the squeaking sound.

The shoes were gifted to me from my cousin Daniel in 2021 after moving to Seattle from Browning, Montana to recover from a serious methamphetamine and opioid addiction on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. After a lifelong miserable run with a traumatic come up, I had finally taken it upon myself to flee my bad spirits after the numerous attempts of my cousin Daniel offering me a place to stay with him in the city.

After arriving in Seattle by train, the last thing on my mind was recreationally running. I was utterly exhausted from the chaotic meth frenzy, bereft of any logical thinking. Making my way to the International District on that breezy spring afternoon, culturally shocked by the bustling city, I was left in bewilderment by the boarded up buildings during the post-Covid era.

What the fuck happened? This ain't the Seattle I heard of growing up.

I wandered my way around the International District in search of a charger for my dead electronic devices. All I had packed with me were the clothes on my back, my tribal I.D, two shoeboxes of personal documents, a phone, my laptop, a microphone, and a mic stand with the hopes of becoming an aspiring rap artist one day. This unknown territory didn't even come close to the rez.

Eventually finding a Shell's gas station and purchasing a phone charger, I made my way back to a Starbucks close to the King Street train station. After letting my phone charge with enough juice to power on, I proceeded to hook up to their Wi-Fi and contacted my cousin Daniel. He instructed me to use the GPS on my phone to locate the Chief Seattle Club in Pioneer Square where I would link up with him.

The Chief Seattle Club was where Daniel worked at the time. It operated as a day shelter during normal business hours, later expanding into permanent housing properties specifically for the homeless native population around the greater Seattle area. After getting me signed up as a member of the Chief Seattle Club to utilize their services, he drove me to his apartment and invited me to sleep on the couch. He handed me the Jim Thorpes, and I awaited my bed date for in-patient treatment.

"Run, for fun? What the hell kind of fun is that?"

-Back to the Future part III

Run without fear of judgment. Run with purpose. Run for prayer. Run for our ancestors who fought hard for us to be here today. It may have been a bit odd for a late-night run, but Sky Daddy sure knew I needed it.

After getting sober, it was nothing new for me to hold on to a pair of hand-me-down shoes for years and barely wear them. But the Jim Thorpes were the closest thing I had to running shoes at the time, until I squeaked my way through my first community 5K run.

The New Balance dad shoes that replaced them were hot on the asphalt towards Seward Park on the beautiful, warm spring night as I navigated my way through unknown parts of the city. I was entertaining the idea of running onto this playfield in Genesee Park and inviting myself to the intense game of soccer being played amongst the many athletes on the field.

They would probably kick my ass.

My mind shifts as the park trail ends, and I ascend my way up 47th toward Seward, where I began to recall the Slim Shady era of 1999. My mom, my two older siblings, and I were living in a yellow duplex on the rez at the time. My mom was a drunk; a functioning one as she worked a full-time job to keep food on the table and pay bills. Let's just say my dad, who really wasn't my dad, wasn't around.

Being around strangers became the norm as my mom had a lot of guests over for parties, most of which would result in violence, sexual misconduct, and involvement of law enforcement.

During that time, my older siblings would usually be at the Blackfeet Boarding Dormitory; a residential facility that houses Native American students, grades 1-12, offering academic support and providing cultural activities. Historically, the Blackfeet Boarding Dorm was formerly known as the Cut Bank Boarding School. Much like other residential schools, they implemented U.S Government assimilation policies aimed to strip us of our language, cultural identities, and traditions by conducting harsh punishments such as starvation, physical abuse, sexual assault, and even death. It was turned over to the Blackfeet Nation in 1966 and has since become a much safer environment aimed at supporting Native American students attending school. The historical trauma has found its way into a lot of households in both urban, and rural tribal settings today.

I clearly remember one night while my siblings were at the Boarding Dorm, and I was with my mom in the one bedroom of the apartment. I was laying on the bed trying to fall asleep that night while my mom was passed-out drunk on the floor beside me. A much older Native man with braids walked in the room and then started to take advantage of my mother, sexually, while she was passed out. Clueless and unaware of what was happening at such a young age, I didn't think anything of it at the time, so I drifted off to sleep.

I woke up to several police officers in the room hovering over my mom as she sat on the ground crying. They were making a report on what happened. They tried their best to get me to explain in detail what I had seen. I told them my exact memory of the man and what he had done. I vividly remember one of the police officers suggesting that I should hug my mother as she sat on the ground sobbing. **It wasn't until later in life I discovered my mother had been raped.**

At 47th and Orcas, my mind snapped back into the present moment. I circle back to Genesee Park, re-entering the same park trail. The adrenaline courses through my body at such a high velocity that I have no control of my movements. Shifting into a mad dash, the blood vessels in my legs dilate, my blood flow increases. My calves begin to throb. My quadriceps begin to burn. At this moment, the pain means nothing. I am flying. I am home now.

"Running is ceremony. Health is resistance."

-Haley Jane Running Crane

Running shoes are magic, believed to disperse a ripple effect. They spread good energy throughout the surrounding environment, affecting the plants, animals, and people within range. The eagle hunting fish decided to take a break and landed on the treetop of a gorgeous red cedar as I passed by in Seward Park. Out yet again, I venture farther with the hopes of setting a new personal record of a half marathon.

Thinking back to the early spring of 1999, as a six-year-old lost child, where I kicked it with my full-grown adult neighbor playing video games on a Nintendo 64 while mom, for whatever reason, was out for the night. Our neighbor was a slim, mostly bald-headed, Native man in his mid-twenties named Tyler. Tyler was usually hired to look after my siblings and me while my mom was either at work or out of town.

During one particular evening, Tyler and I decided to take a walk to the video store just down the street from the yellow duplex I lived in to pick up some movies to watch. My mom wasn't expected to return for the next couple of days, and again, my siblings were at the boarding dorm.

I had such a fascination for horror films at that time. Halloween, Friday the 13th, and Nightmare on Elm Street, just to name a few cliché masterpiece franchises that piqued my interest. On the other hand, Tyler had different genres in mind that consisted of pornographic content and mondo films such as Faces of Death and Banned in America.

Tyler exposing my siblings and me to this kind of graphic media at such a young age was quite common. It got to a point where it was normalized. So, the first time I was sexually assaulted, I thought nothing of it.

The first man to ever sexually assault me was a shorter, stocky, more light-complected individual who my mom saw fit to babysit me. He had to be in his early to mid-twenties. For whatever reason, Tyler wasn't available that night. To this day I couldn't tell you the man's name or even identify him, as it was such a long time ago. All I could remember was it being bedtime, trying to fall asleep, and the man entering the bedroom. Using grooming tactics through conversation, the man then convinced me to consent to committing sexual acts on me by making it seem like we were "practicing" on each other.

I remember stopping at some point midway and asking him, "Isn't this considered gay?"

"Yeah, that's why we don't tell anyone," he responded.

It wouldn't be until later that year that Tyler would perpetrate a sexual act on me using the same grooming methods, further explaining the use of disturbing media to corrupt my mind into thinking it was completely normal.

I feel a shooting pain in my Achilles tendon, snapping me back to the present moment. Not knowing where I am, I looked down at my phone's running tracker app to check my current distance. 11.03 miles, so close to reaching my goal. I just can't bring my body to do it. My legs are screaming in pain. I am physically exhausted and dehydrated. The constant sun beats down on me. I had to end my run in Leschi alongside Lake Washington.

Still, it's a new personal record.

"It's good to be young, because it's hard to grow old"

-Katie Croff

They say that there's always light at the other end of the tunnel; in this case, there obviously was on the other end of the Mt. Baker pedestrian tunnel that takes you out along the I-90 trail going east towards

Mercer Island. Of course, the only thing distracting me during this warm, Sunday morning jog was the giant dick that was sprayed painted on the walls of the tunnel.

"Fucking amateurs!"

The dick spray-painted on the wall was about twenty feet in length and was the least bit impressive compared to my favorite mural, Wetlands, which was designed by Paige Pettibon and painted by some students in 2021 at North Seattle College, where I'm currently enrolled as a student.

After making it past the giant intimidating dick, and out the other end of the tunnel, my pupils immediately shrunk as the sun's rays beat down. I gave them some time to adjust as I ran along the short stretch of the I-90 trail before approaching the I-90 floating bridge crossing Lake Washington.

My mind began to drift to the steady sound of waves splashing against the bridge despite the immense heavy traffic. I was about three miles into yet another arduous attempt at a half marathon run with really no direction or route in mind. Regardless of the amount of stress I was already putting into my legs, none of that really mattered as I was in shock and awe at the massive body of water surrounding me between the two giant patches of land.

Before approaching Mercer Island, something prompted my spirit to sing my grandmother's song, "The Katie Croff song," the song that was gifted to me through my uncle Jesse Desrosier back in 2022 after returning back home on the rez to visit for a ceremony. Composed by my great-great-great-great-grandmother Katie Croff generations before my time and has remained a family song throughout its existence. Aside from being Blackfeet, I am also part Gros Ventre through my grandmother Katie Croff on my dad's side of the family, hence the lyrics of the Katie Croff song being sung in the Gros Ventre language, which translate to, "It's good to be young, because it's hard to grow old."

Those lyrics always meant so much to me since I was basically stripped of a childhood by growing up in a poverty-stricken household and traumatized at a young age. I am at a point in my life where, in order to heal is to also nurture my inner child spirit by providing that inner child what my parents never had to offer. When I run, I allow my inner child to roam free and explore new things that they never got to experience. That's what makes that song so special for me; it's a song that's helped carry me through some of the most challenging times in my recovery.

After singing the Katie Croff song and getting across the I-90 floating bridge, I let out a loud, crisp war-hoop as I gained a second wind helping me push through an extra mile and a half onto Mercer Island through Aubrey Davis Park where I then looped back around and started making my way back to the Floating bridge towards Seattle.

About eight miles in and a third of the bridge conquered, I began to reminisce on how I found myself in this situation to begin with. Despite being in recovery, seeing a therapist, going to 12-step meetings, and attending my cultural ceremonies back home on top of many other things to be grateful for, I still struggled with major depression. Sometime back in August of 2024 about a year prior to this exact moment I had found

myself in the closet of my apartment with my belt around my neck and the other end of the belt attached to the hanging rod in the closet.

My feet had still been touching the ground allowing me to apply pressure by bending my knees causing the belt to tighten around my neck. I can't say it was my intention to go through with it completely in that exact moment, but the idea of just seeing what it felt like intrigued me. It was right then and there that I had realized that what I was doing was wrong. There was obviously a mental error, and I knew I had to reach out for help.

The last thing I wanted to do was to trauma dump a loved one in that situation, so I took it upon myself to remove the belt from around my neck and call 988 instead. After picking up the phone and dialing the number, I was then greeted by an automated voice prompt that walked me through the many menu options with "4" being the Native and Strong Lifeline. Without hesitation, I dialed "4" where I was then directed to a young lady from Tulalip named Erin.

Erin greeted me as any other crisis counselor would; her warming approach and calm demeanor in how she conducted the call was handled professionally. Upon asking me what was the matter, I immediately broke down in tears as I explained the situation. She reminded me that I wasn't alone, that it was okay to feel the way I was feeling, and that I had much more in this life to live for. On top of the many other beautiful discussions we had that night before ending the phone call, she walked me through writing down a care plan, god forbid I ever found myself in this situation again.

In the months following the 988 call and working with my therapist, a psychiatrist, and trying various antidepressant medications, I decided the medications were not for me. After leaving my psychiatrist with no other options, she finally suggested exercise as a part of my treatment plan for the depression. Now, I am by no means a doctor in any way. You should always talk to a doctor or a medical professional for any medical advice, but exercise for me was probably the closest thing that can come to a magic bullet for depression.

Despite the many minor injuries learning calisthenics and basic weightlifting, I finally got in the habit of going to the gym regularly. The last thing on my mind during that time was running or any kind of cardio; I was more focused on bulking out. Because I was so motivated to get in the best shape of my life, I quit smoking cigarettes. When the cravings hit, I would find myself on the treadmill.

My first time on that treadmill lasted only five minutes. I was going at an average pace of about nine minutes per mile before I found myself out of breath and unable to continue. Regardless of my performance at that time, I had come to find a new addiction so to speak. The feeling I would get from being on that treadmill would free me from any worry I had in the world.

All those painful memories as a child in the midst of running help me to process the trauma and push me to go further, with each mile providing me a dopamine hit that a cigarette couldn't compare to. When I finally reached my goal of three miles on the treadmill, I finally felt the confidence to take my new found hobby outdoors, where a little over two months later, I would find myself where I am today.

Finally making my way back across the I-90 floating bridge, ascending into Seattle, I decided to alter my path. I avoided the Mt. Baker pedestrian tunnel with the giant dick spray painted on the walls and instead took another trail leading my way up above and over the tunnel and heading East towards Seward Park. At this point, I knew exactly where I was, making my way alongside Lake Washington where I would see a Bald Eagle diving for its prey and swooping a fish out of the water.

Just before approaching Seward Park, I decided to head West up Genesee taking me back to Columbia City toward my apartment. Something unexplainable occurred. I began to feel emotional. It's as if my ancestors came to lift me up in that very moment to help carry me to the finish line. After finally crossing Rainier Avenue South and having to change direction because of a stop light, I concluded my run. I trudged my way down back onto MLK Way, and finally reached the corner of Alaska street where my apartment is located. I then looked down at my phone with the running tracker app opened to check my current distance. 13.38 Miles, my new personal record.

I let out one last celebratory war hoop. Pedestrians in the surrounding area shot me an awkward look. I made my way back inside my apartment building to hydrate and take a cold shower. Letting the door shut behind me, and locking it, I began my post-half-marathon recovery by taking off my New Balance sneakers and gently placing them next to my Jim Thorpes.

Blissful Ignorance

by Cameron Lewis

The outside of my grandmother's squat one-story home breathed with a subtle air of sadness. The walkway to the front door was overgrown with dandelions, their bright yellow hues contrasting with the wilted flowers and faded "Welcome" mat that sat on the front porch. The door that had once been bleach-white was streaked with colors of brown and gray from the elements, and the porch light had been smashed, replaced with a flickering bare lightbulb that was on, despite being midday.

The inside was much worse.

"Thanks again for coming to help out," Andrew, my grandmother's partner, murmured to my father and I, "I don't know how I would have dealt with all this shit without your help."

My father's eyes had a matte finish to them as he replied, "Yeah, well, she's my mother. What else is family for? Right, Cam?" He glanced down at me.

I opened my mouth to speak, but no words came out, so I just nodded before going back to cleaning out old cans of food from my grandmother's closet.

The inside of the house was a hoarder's dream. The faded couch and chairs were all piled high with old clothes and dilapidated cardboard boxes, containing everything from dried-out oil paints to old photo albums of people I didn't recognize.

I pulled a dented can of beans out of the closet and looked at the expiration date; June 1983. Grimacing, I tossed the can into the ever-growing pile of trash that had taken over the center of the living room.

My sister emerged from my grandmother's room. She had been cleaning out my grandmother's dressers that were overflowing with clothes that had not seen sunlight in twenty years.

"Nana's wanting her meds," my sister called, "Is it time yet?"

Andrew looked at his watch.

"It's a bit early, but if she wants 'em, she wants 'em," he shrugged as he got up from the kitchen counter and navigated through the sea of clutter to my grandmother's room. My father watched him go, his shoulders tight.

My older sister came into the room with me and my father. The corners of her mouth were turned down slightly, like she had been holding back tears.

We locked eyes and I asked her a silent question, but she looked away.

"Is mom back yet?" My sister turned to our father, "She's been gone awhile."

At that moment, the front door swung open and my mother pushed into the house, carrying three overflowing grocery bags.

"I got everything I could from your list, Andrew..." my mother stopped and looked around, "Where'd he go?"

"He's giving mom her meds," my father said blankly, and a look of understanding passed over my mother's face.

"Oh," was all she said before she plopped the grocery bags on the counter and began to unpack them.

My mother came over to me and looked at the closet I had been cleaning out. "Nice, Cam, that's looking great!" She told me with an air of forced positivity.

"Thanks," I murmured before turning my attention back to the shelves.

Andrew emerged back into the living room.

"Hey, welcome back," he greeted my mother, "Everything go okay?"

My mother nodded as she loaded up the fridge, "Yeah, I got almost everything you asked for, but I couldn't find the specific brand of pasta sauce you wanted so I picked out this one instead," she held up a jar of sauce behind her head for Andrew to see.

"Oh, that's fine," Andrew replied. He paused for a second before turning to me, "Hey, Cam!" He said to me with a smile that didn't reach his eyes, "How about you go talk to your grandma for a bit? I can take over cleaning out this closet."

"You don't have to if you don't want to," my father said a little too quickly.

Andrew shot him a look I couldn't decipher, and turned back to me.

"Well?" He asked me.

"Yeah... yeah, I'll go hang out with her for a bit," I said, hoping to defuse the tension in the room.

Andrew ruffled my hair, "You're a good kid."

I set down the can of salsa I had been holding and turned towards the hallway that led to my grandmother's room. Without much natural light from outside, the hallway looked like the throat of a giant, leading into the darkness of my grandmother's room.

I plodded down the hall, feeling my father's eyes on my back, until I reached the doorway to the room with my grandmother in it.

I knocked gently on the doorframe.

"Hey, grandma," I greeted the shape that was laid out on my grandmother's bed. It shifted as my grandmother turned over and her gaunt face looked towards me.

"Ohhh, Carson!" She greeted, slightly mumbling, "It's so lovely to see you, dear."

I tried to relax my tensed shoulder blades as I went to stand at her bedside. I ignored the fact she called me by my cousin's name.

"How are you doing, grandma?" I asked.

Her fractured eyes looked up into mine and she held up a bony hand for me to hold. I grasped her hand gently, her skin felt like old tissue paper. Her fingers were cold.

"Oh, I'm doing very well, dear," My grandmother mumbled to me, "Did you just get here?"

"No, grandma, we got here yesterday."

"Ah, that's right," she murmured before a glaze came over her eyes and she fell silent. I looked down at her, slightly scared at first, then a wave of shame rolled over me for being scared.

I jumped slightly when I heard a knock on the door behind me.

"Hey, buddy," my father spoke gently as he leaned his head into the room.

"Hey," I responded, still holding my grandmother's hand.

"Ohhh, David!" My grandmother squawked when she saw my father.

I saw my father's face twitch slightly. No one ever called him by his full name, only Dave.

"Hey, mom," he spoke quietly. He turned his attention back to me, "Hey, your mom needs some help unpacking groceries, how about you go help her?"

I nodded, a mix of relief and guilt swirling through my head.

I walked back to the living room, where I saw my mother had already unpacked all the groceries. My sister sat cross-legged on an open patch of floor, flicking through a cracked photo album. Andrew was hunched over in the closet I had been cleaning out.

"Dad said you needed help?" I asked my mother. My mother turned to look at me, and the same look of understanding from earlier flitted across her face.

"Thanks, honey, I got this covered," she told me, "There's a box of art supplies on the front porch that you can go through. I think you can take anything you want from it, right, Andrew?"

"Oh, yeah, of course," Andrew replied absent-mindedly as he continued rifling through old cans of food.

"Okay," I nodded, "Thank you."

"Course," Andrew set a can down beside him, "You'll get better use out of all that stuff anyway."

I walked to the front door and pushed it open. Outside, the California sun felt like a slap in the face after being inside the cool, dark house.

Right by the front door was a cardboard box that was stained with splotches of paint and several crossed-out labels written on it in permanent marker.

I sat down on the porch and started to go through the box. I found a pack of all-black pencils that I set to the side, starting a pile of the things I wanted. I was testing some pens to see if they still had ink in them when my father emerged from the house behind me.

I looked up at him as he plastered a manufactured smile onto his face. In his left hand he tightly gripped the top of a very full trash bag.

“Wow, it’s gorgeous out here, huh?” He asked me in the tone of a waiter trying to get a good tip. I nodded.

“Find anything cool?” He glanced down at my pile of stuff.

“Yeah,” I grinned, trying to match the energy of my father’s voice, “These pencils are rad, and check this out!” I held up a nice fineliner pen, “It even works!”

“Oh, hell yeah,” he smiled before pausing and staring straight in front of him, as if he were trying to stare at something a million miles away.

“What’s in the bag?” I asked him after a couple moments of silence.

That seemed to shake my father out of his stupor, “Oh... just some old craft supplies,” he told me. “Gluesticks and so on...” His voice trailed off.

“Anything cool?” I asked, partially curious as to why my father was acting strange, partially trying to get him to crack a smile again.

My father said nothing for a few moments. “Nah, buddy, not in this bag,” he responded with a sad smile on his face. Then he walked around to the side of the house and threw the bag into a dumpster. I heard the bag clatter as it was tossed into the garbage.

As my father walked back to the front door, he said to me, “Hey, we’re thinking we’ll work on this stuff for about fifteen more minutes, then take off and come back tomorrow. Got any ideas for dinner?”

“Anything but beans,” I replied, which got a snort out of my father.

“Fair enough, buddy.” He opened the front door and disappeared back inside.

I sat on the porch for a moment, before glancing towards the side of the house with the dumpster on it.

Standing up, my knees popped and I brushed the dirt off my pants. I started creeping towards the dumpster while my mind replayed the interaction I had with my father. I could tell there was something in that bag he didn’t want me to see, which only made me more curious.

I approached the dumpster and opened the lid slightly before peeking in. I couldn’t see anything through the outside of the bag so I opened the dumpster a bit more. The lid swung past its tipping point and crashed into the back of the dumpster, causing a loud BANG!

I winced and looked back to the front of the house, but no one came out. I exhaled a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding in and reached my hand for the knot that tightly held the trash bag shut.

After some finagling, I managed to get the bag open and get my first look at what my father had thrown out.

Inside the bag were what looked like thousands of little orange tubes like you'd get from a pharmacy. I pulled out one of the bottles to take a better look.

The first line on the label was my grandmother's name. The line below read, Oxycodone, 50mg.

The bottle was dated from the current year and I dropped it back into the bag before reaching for another bottle as a chilling thought entered my mind. The next bottle I pulled out had the same label, the only difference being the date was from slightly earlier in the year.

I kept pulling out bottles. Most read Oxycodone, 50mg, but there were other names as well. Hydrocodone, Tramadol, Fentanyl. Almost all of them were dated from the past twelve months.

As the words on the bottles invaded my head I suddenly felt cold, despite it being a hundred degrees outside.

I dropped the bag into the trash and ran back to the front of the house just in time for my father to come back out the front door.

"Hey, buddy," he greeted, his tone measured as he gestured to the box of art supplies I had been looking through.

"Looks like there's nothing else in that box you want, huh?" His voice sounded like it was coming through several layers of bubble wrap.

I nodded, knowing that I wouldn't be able to keep my voice steady if I spoke.

"We're gonna say goodbye to Nana and Andrew, then we'll leave for today," my father stated.

"Are you ready to go?" He asked, the manufactured smile returning to his face.

"Yeah, Dad," my voice shook a bit, "Yeah, let's go."

Blue Ink

by Hawraa Carana

The house had rules that didn't need saying.

Shoes by the door. Voices lowered after dark. Walls kept clean.

As children of our community, the mothers gossiped while their golden bangles clinked against their occupied fists. Rice measured once. A pot rinsed twice. The lid set down without a sound.

We'd hear our fathers celebrate loudly. That familiar teasing arrived whole and filled the room when predators find their prey. Most men were now at that age, contradicting many of their own jokes now.

Far from the center, the wall I chose was cool when I touched it. Not cold—just dull. The paint had been rolled on unevenly; I could feel the soft ridges underneath my fingers. I had to reach higher than was comfortable. My arm shook a little. Whatever I was holding smelled sharp and familiar, the way classrooms do before anyone arrives. The first line surprised me at five years old. The wall was marked dark blue: my mom's favorite color. The Expo ink soaked into off-white paint that wasn't meant to hold it. I followed it. Curves first. Then a closing-in. I live in the pause where I lifted my hand, unsure where the next line should go, and the strange relief when it returned exactly where it needed to.

My feet stepped back without being told to from the wall. Something about it asked to be seen from a distance. I watched as though something was forming from the water, the boy quietly bubbled to the surface. No one recognized who it was. No one could claim in good conscience you're an artist or you're going to be a big sister! Those words might spell what a five-year-old daughter could want from the future. I looked at it again.

It was a baby. Or a fetus. I called it a 'him' having really, really wanted a little brother.

That surface returned to itself under my father's uneven paint layers, faintly damp, as if nothing had happened there at all. Life continued. The family moved on as years do—forward, without collecting evidence.

In the kitchen, steam lifted from a pot and fogged the window. Words exchanged in the same way that money does. Practical and a little greedy. The kind that sounds like humor, so they don't bruise.

I heard her say it plainly—almost casually. "If any of your kids want to become artists, tell them good luck begging on the streets!" My aunt barked a joke with undefeatable wit, already alluding to how the next jab will be even better. My mother laughed, reeling the way hyenas do, and answered back in Cham, oh—to live in boxes.

Her humor carried absurdity and an aftertaste of guilt.

Growing up poor in Châu Đốc earns you one thing: the instinct to stay afloat in Vietnamese waters. These women kept the axis of the world turning in their palms, knowing their means of livelihood was vending fried egg rolls, dried cow intestines, and Thai tea at night markets.

Little do they know, there is a secret in a nearby room; a young bride's journal lay closed. Her pages retained the pressure of blue ink even after the pen died. If you ran your fingers across the lines, you could feel where a woman once insisted on life in the form of birds and flowers. The pen that made those marks rested somewhere unseen.

"My art is not any good" her voice might have echoed to the baby curled in her womb, I'm not any good.

My mother—who once had a childhood—drew too.

I inherited the hidden parts of me from her; full lips, tanned skin, and an inclination for dark blue pens, pressed hard into the core of childhood. Her lines layered beautifully, curvy and romantic in the way young women draw when they're thinking more than they're watching. The birds and flowers in her journal still bloom, faintly indented, even where the ink ran out. At some point, the pen is never picked up again. The journal closed. There were better things to embody or attain.

Like paychecks,
or true love,
and more children.

"Praise God, it's a boy!" Abee exclaims, announcing his newest prayer has come true.

In 2013, my little brother is born into our family as a mere accident. In early May, the hospital smelled of sweat and sterile air. Six-o'clock stretched across the floor in thin, pale ribbons. A tiny cry, sharp and fragile, cut through it, echoing off walls that had already learned how to hold sound. His skin was red and glistening, trembling beneath the weight of blankets that weren't quite dry, and the small movements of his hands were already attempting something impossible: to reach for the world before knowing it existed. The blankets shifted with him, a subtle rhythm, and the air filled with the mingled scents of soap, awe, and the faint tang of beginnings. Each of his breaths arrived with its own insistence, each devoid blink a small claim of life, and the room, quiet and busy, seemed to adjust without anyone saying a word.

Only much later did the wall return to me—not as an image, but as a feeling. The reach. The smell in the air. The way my hand moved without knowing anything either. The way the line appeared where there had been nothing a moment before. Time does that, folding and stacking the moments until they press against one another, until the space between them disappears and they hum together in a quiet, private rhythm, a harmony that some call synchronicity. Each instant stretches backward and forward at once, and the memory of it is a picture, a temperature, a smell pressing lightly against the skin of my mind.

That little girl with the blue Expo marker will grow into the hands her mother left behind, tracing finer blue lines now on a flat, glowing surface. The medium is a flatscreen, unyielding beneath my stylus. The tools are heavier now, loaded with pressure curves and sliders, but the motion of my pen, the way lines find one another, has not changed. They drift and join, leaving me in anticipation of what could be. I move across the screen as the sun traces the earth in its orbit, both ephemeral and exact, where life can remain intact.

The universe did not announce itself as flawless or unending when its eyes first exploded open upon the great silence of non-existence. The human animal did not evolve to be satisfied with life; its soul was already formed, with depths just waiting to go farther. Art lives despite death, folding over itself quietly, one color leaning into the next, each movement responding to the last. What was once separate feels connected, and the hand that has paused, can feel it too. Any dark indigo line still breathes with the same potential, and the empty air between our human fingers will too.

Far before anyone knew what it was becoming, it began from an accident.

A temporary, and monumental accident.

Its trace lingers under one girl's skin, her memory of motion echoing quietly in the next line, the next reach, the next miracle.

The Lives They Lived: Northern State Memoirs

by Sierra Rose Crowe

The sky is still, fog climbs up and curls around one of the massive willow trees in the distance. The Spanish Colonial style buildings that make up the 1,200 acre institution of Northern State Insane Asylum loom over me. Many of the buildings have sat abandoned since 1973, yet there's no denying the presence of life that seeps from within.

When I'm here, I feel as though I'm witnessing the walls vibrate with memories of the past, the wind sends whispers of voices long forgotten throughout the empty, echoing wards. The air that escapes out of the broken panes of the rusted steel sash windows is frigid, smelling of a strange blend of rot and reverence. Barred windows full of broken panes, once designed to keep people from breaking out, now act as a deterrent from people breaking in. Inside remains a remarkably undisturbed interior, peeling paint weeping down the walls, and dust-kissed hardwood and tile floors that haven't seen a footprint in years. Nature slowly slithers and winds its way through the windows and into the nooks and crannies, reclaiming the land as its own. The memories of the patients who lived and died within these walls have left a permanent stain on these grounds.

The feeling here is not eerie, it begs to be understood. It's not the ghost stories or the vague rumors that have kept me coming back. It was always the injustice, and the feeling of loneliness I imagine so many felt within these grounds. It is easy to turn a blind eye to the mistakes of our past. But it's imperative we give a voice to those who can no longer speak for themselves. I feel an overwhelming grief for those who spent much of their lives here, tucked away, all too often blissfully forgotten by family, friends, and society. Their lives like a book left unfinished, pages full of words, then suddenly nothing but blank pages. Although the campus sits silent, frozen in time, I hear the voices of those that remain. They cry out, *"I'm still here, I matter, and I always did"*.

Strip away the sensationalized tales of this hospital and what remains are the personal truths of the patients, far more compelling than the tall tales that have drowned them out. Thousands of people once paced these halls endlessly, tilled the soil to feed themselves and fellow patients, and stared longingly out the barred windows at the world that continued on without them.

I try to put myself in the position of the four women you'll come to know throughout this book. Women who are over a century my seniors, women I had no connection to before I immersed myself into the rich history of this hospital, and yet women I've come to feel I understand. Despite the distance of time, I've built a quiet kinship with each of them. Each woman arrived at Northern State through different trials and tribulations, but one thing they share is that, for a time, this hospital was their home. In an unexpected twist of fate, their stays at Northern State overlapped, leaving me to wonder if, and how, their paths crossed. Despite the grim reality of their circumstances, each of these women left behind a voice, through their thoughts, ideologies, and memories that should not and cannot be lost to time.

Among these women was Bertha Lynn Cameron-Tooker, once a beloved wife and local schoolteacher. After her husband had her committed, she found herself stripped of everything she had spent thirty-seven years becoming. Her life slipped quietly into the folds of the institution, her identity reduced to a number. Yet the words she left behind allow me to trace a life that did not stop being meaningful the day she was committed.

Her story begins on May 20th 1892 in Pembina, North Dakota. The eldest daughter in a family of proud and successful Democratic farmers. Her adolescence was, by all accounts, idyllic. She graduated from Valley City High School with dreams of becoming a teacher. Shortly after graduation Bertha and her family packed up and moved west, eager for fresh opportunities. Settling into Monroe, a modest but bustling railroad town tucked into Washington's Snohomish River Valley. There, Bertha wove herself into Monroe's public schooling system. By 1914, she had become a first grade teacher at the elementary school.

Unbeknownst to Bertha, the life she had built for herself in Monroe would lead her into the arms of a man named Herbert Tooker. A relationship that would set her up for a life spent institutionalized. Herbert was an influential man in town, a principal, a paper editor, and most importantly an entrepreneur. Always chasing the next venture but missing the financial stability to see them through. Twenty-one year old Bertha met forty-three year old Herbert in 1911, at a commerce event just outside of Monroe. Despite the twenty-two year age gap, she would eventually become his wife, for better or worse.

They were married on August 14th 1917, less than a year after her father passed and left his massive farm estate to her in his will, an inheritance valued at well over one million dollars in today's market. Their wedding was a private affair, only close family members were in attendance. The house dressed in sweet peas and pink roses, '*O Promise Me*' playing softly on the piano as Bertha entered the room. She wore a traveling blue French serge suit, a white hat, and a corsage bouquet of brides roses gently resting on her coat. After they were married Berthas home became their home, and soon it would become only his.

Marrying an important and charming man like Herbert came with a change in how she was perceived by others, elevating her status in town. They were featured separately countless times in the towns newspaper for their contributions at various social events. Bertha was applauded for hosting the first children's storybook hour at city hall on Christmas Eve in 1925, starting a new tradition for the town. All of that was about to change, as rapidly as her name had risen on the towns lips, it would vanish, swallowed whole by silence.

Bertha disappeared from the public eye in 1928. she was no longer teaching, no longer active within the community. No explanation given. Then, on September 26th 1928, at just thirty-six years old, her husband had her committed to Northern State Insane Asylum. I was left with countless questions that could only be answered by uncovering the reason behind her commitment. I turned to the Olympia Archives, where I held in my hand the original oversized leather bound book, containing patient admission records. I went through meticulously, line by line, until I saw the name I had been searching for, 'Bertha C Tooker'. My eyes followed the line across to the section labeled "reason for admission". A moment I had been anticipating for months.

Printed in lyrical cursive was the word 'Melancholia', an outdated term used to describe what we now know as depression.

Bertha did not admit herself to Northern State Insane Asylum. Her husband, Herbert, fought, and ultimately succeeded in having her committed. This leads to a dark but plausible theory, that Herbert had her institutionalized simply because he wanted her gone, but didn't want to risk losing the financial assets she brought into the marriage by pursuing a divorce. Not an uncommon fate for women at the time. A husband or head of household could have a wife or daughter committed without justification. It allowed men to retain full control of finances, property, and children without the complications or stigma of divorce.

Bertha spent an initial two and a half years at Northern State before the hospital declared her cured and released her. But this outcome didn't serve Herbert's interests. Less than a month after her release, he had her recommitted, this time permanently. She would never see her home or her belongings again. While the walls of her life were cracking and crumbling around her, Herbert was in court, fighting to have Bertha declared legally insane so that he could become her legal guardian. Once successful, Bertha lost all autonomy, over her life, her body, and her property. It's no coincidence that as soon as he was declared her guardian, Herbert listed all of Bertha's land and belongings up for public auction, everything went to the highest bidder. He used the proceeds to open a golf course which became wildly successful for him. Though it was Bertha's money that made it possible, Herbert never spoke of her publicly again, or visited her, seemingly erasing her from his life and starting over.

Bertha was brought into Northern State unsure of what to expect, experiencing a complete one-eighty from her married life she had grown accustomed to. Gone were the days spent primping and prepping herself; in their place was a rough bath and a delousing administered upon arrival by a head nurse. She was then given an ill-fitting oversized dress with no undergarments and placed in a shared dormitory with unfamiliar women, dressed identically and sharing much of the same fear she felt.

Occupational therapy began immediately for Bertha. Northern State heavily relied on it, both for the benefit of the patients and the practical needs of the institution. For Bertha and other women like her, this often meant activities such as sewing, cleaning, weaving, gardening, and flower picking. A far cry from the educator she had once prided herself on being.

While Northern State held a reputation as the most humane insane asylum in Washington, that didn't stop the often life-altering and sometimes detrimental treatments administered to thousands of patients. Many doctors and nurses who were employed there genuinely believed they were helping and curing patients, but we cannot ignore the damage these treatments caused. Women especially were at risk, as many of these treatments targeted emotional or hormonal "problems" which were the leading cause of female admission. Over time, as medical knowledge advanced, so did the treatments. Often turning innocent patients into subjects of experimental procedures.

Bertha was subjected to various "miracle treatment" advancements over the years. She likely started with hydrotherapy, a treatment that you might recognize, as a variation of it is still used today. Though in

1928, hydrotherapy was far from relaxing. It involved being restrained and wrapped in wet sheets for hours or days on end, prolonged immersion in frigidly cold or uncomfortably hot baths, or baths lasting hours or days.

By 1937, insulin therapy was introduced at Northern State. Large doses of insulin were administered in the morning to induce a coma, which would be terminated by noon with a sugar solution. Afterward, the patient would return to their normal daily activities. This would happen six days a week for as long as the doctor saw necessary. Doctors believed insulin induced comas could “reset” the brain and calm emotional states.

By 1940 electroshock therapy (ECT) was used alongside or as a replacement for insulin therapy. Patients were strapped down tightly and given no anesthesia. A rubber bite block was placed in the patients mouth to prevent tongue biting, while electrodes were placed on the patients head bilaterally. An electrical current sent through the brain would induce a seizure lasting roughly thirty to sixty seconds. ECT was often administered two to three times per week. Similar to insulin therapy, doctors believed at the time that this was a way to “reset” and cure emotional “up’s and down’s”.

In the late 1940’s transorbital lobotomies became quite popular at Northern State, with twenty-one patients undergoing the procedure between 1948 and 1950. The operation involved inserting an instrument resembling an ice pick through the eye socket, just above the eyeball. A mallet was used to drive it into the brain, and the tool was swept side to side to sever connections in the prefrontal cortex. Mostly preformed without anesthesia, although ECT was sometimes preformed beforehand to help “subdue” the patient. It was believed that the transorbital lobotomy could give patients a balanced emotional state, unfortunately it often only deepened their suffering and made them numb to all emotions.

Although patient files are sealed, it’s reasonable to assume that, given the length of Berthas stay and the nature of her condition, she underwent hydrotherapy, insulin therapy, and electroshock therapy. Patients diagnosed with depression or mood disorders were the most likely candidates for all three treatments. Women in particular were disproportionately subjected to ECT and lobotomies, as these procedures were designed to dull emotional responses. Whether Bertha was ever subjected to a lobotomy remains unknown, I can only hope she wasn’t.

Bertha wasn’t violent or deemed a threat, so she spent most of her years living in Ward J, located in the Barclay building, a shared women’s ward. Patients were assigned to Ward J if they were coherent, able to participate in daily jobs or activities, and did not suffer from delusions or severe cognitive impairments. Meaning, aside from undergoing harsh treatments, she was given more freedom than a lot of the patients there. Freedom at Northern State was limited, but it was still more forgiving than that of many other asylums of the time.

For years, Berthas occupational therapy consisted of gardening and flower picking. By far one of the more sought after jobs among the women. Suggesting she was well behaved, followed rules, and was well-liked by staff. On days she wasn’t receiving a treatment, much of her time was spent sitting and daydreaming in one of the octagonal sunrooms, lined with windows on all sides. Chairs were scattered throughout, giving

patients a place to soak in the rare sunshine that gloomy Washington occasionally provided. Cards were stocked in the sunrooms, patients who requested materials to write were allowed that luxury. Bertha being an educator and a deep thinker, spent plenty of time writing and reflecting on her life before the hospital.

Her writing first appeared in the Northern State Newspaper. A weekly publication written by the patients themselves. She kept herself anonymous for quite awhile, signing off her short stories as *'Anonymous Writer from Ward J'*. A few months into reading through the 1932 issues, I came across an article that revealed the anonymous authors identity. Her short stories had become popular amongst both patients and staff, leading to an investigation to reveal the author was none other than Bertha C Tooker.

The article reads, and I quote, *"The "party" was found to be a member of the fair sex and answers to the name of Bertha Tooker of Ward J. We like your articles very much as they are of both local interest and well written, and we hope to get more along the same line. We always had an idea that the women of this institution could out-write the men, and this goes to confirm our suspicions"*.

Bertha responded in the following week's edition *"Please And Thank You"*. She paints the picture of how she was in the ward when a girl came bursting in, confronting her with the news that she was on the front page of the newspaper. Bertha, caught off guard and wide-eyed, managed only a wobbly *"Wha-a-t?"*. She admits how she preferred the safety behind anonymity. Still, she expresses her appreciation for the people who wrote the articles kind words and for all of the readers that find solace in her *"little paragraphs"*.

She writes and I quote, *"I write them for the keen joy of doing it. They are spontaneous and I rarely change a word after it is written. And it is so much nicer to send forth these little products of my brain untagged. So again I express my appreciation to you for the surprise article in last week's paper. Thank you again, but please forget the writer and let me draw back into my shell"*.

She signs off not with her name, but again as *"The Person Who Writes From Ward J"*.

I want to highlight a few phrases from two of her short stories, which I believe are imperative to understanding her emotional state. One story, titled *"Out of the Fog"*, begins by describing her morning, waking up to find a heavy fog settled outside the window. She compares it to a calendar of nature, signaling to those of us who live in the Pacific Northwest that fall is creeping in. The story shifts into a memory from before her commitment. Bertha and some friends driving in a thick fog, narrowly escaping an accident. They escape, just barely. She draws a parallel to unknowingness of the fog and the human experiences in life.

She writes, and I quote, *"Yes; isn't it so? Life's fog closes down around us at times. But this problem comes clear. This experience straightens out. Then something else. And something else. Till, lo! Life's sun shines bright again-Out of the fog"*.

Another short story, titled *"Rainbow"*, was published just a few weeks later. In it, Bertha shares how she looked ridiculous, wearing a uniform dress twelve sizes too big with an obnoxious red raincoat. She looked so out of place a fellow patient, who rarely ever spoke, stopped her ask if she was alright or if she had finally

lost it. She trudged along winding paths through the hospital gardens, gathering all sorts of flowers. Even losing a rain boot to the quicksand like mud doesn't deter her.

She ends the story with, *"The sun was shining brightly now. I was clump-clumping back' and I truly had a rainbow in my arms and a portion of Nature's Peace in my soul'.*

Here was a woman serving a life sentence for a diagnosis of depression, ripped away from her life and stripped from her freedom. Still able to write short stories so simple and raw, managing to instill a hope in others. A hope that Herbert had fought so hard to convince the world she didn't have. She was seen as unfit to function in the outside world, yet inside Northern State, she worked her job daily, caused no trouble, and was vulnerable enough to remind others that this too will pass. While some patients here were genuinely struggling with mental illness, depression was commonly used as a blanket term, a convenient label to commit women who had no justifiable reason to be institutionalized. Even if Bertha was struggling with depressive episodes she was not someone who needed to spend thirty-nine years of her life at Northern State. The life she managed to live inside of Northern State is proof of that. She was a woman who had hope for the future, found solace in nature's beauty, and never gave up even when everyone gave up on her.

Bertha spent thirty-nine years behind asylum walls. Despite never divorcing her, Herbert never visited her. I did the math, he had 1,617 chances to come see her at Northern State, yet he never found the time. How abandoned she must have felt, realizing the man she married was never coming back. How lonely it must have been, watching from a distance, as he sold off the land and belongings her later father had left to her with care. At Northern State, she had even begun going by "Miss" instead of "Mrs". Perhaps her only form of rebellion, a quiet act of defiance against the man who had discarded her, and the life he had stolen.

Herbert lived to be eighty-nine. He lived a long, comfortable life, maintaining an incredibly respected role within the community. He was remembered fondly and memorialized by the city. He was laid to rest inside a grandiose cemetery, his place in local history secure.

Bertha died ten years later at seventy-five. She was buried far away from him, in a separate cemetery, a decision made by her family. Perhaps even in death, they hoped to give her the distance and silent freedom she was never allowed in life.

I went to visit her gravesite with flowers, to get as close to what remains of her. I wanted to speak to her and ask her permission to tell her powerful story, she wasn't forgotten. I remembered her and I would make sure others did too. A cemetery employee and I spent a long time searching for her burial site. When we finally found it, I was shocked by what I saw.

There was no headstone.

No marker.

Nothing.

The only person buried there without one.

I shed a tear for her silently, thinking about how she had spent so much of her life feeling forgotten by the very people she once trusted and loved. Only to be buried and forgotten again.

She wasn't a hero.

She wasn't a martyr.

She didn't pave the way for some great societal advancement.

But that doesn't mean she didn't deserve to be treated with dignity both in life and death. She mattered simply because she lived. And that is reason enough.

