

Tidbits: One-Page Stories

*****on the theme of wishes*****

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Editor's Note

For the inaugural issue of *Tidbits: One Page Stories*, we chose the theme of wishes. Stories range from somber to silly; grand societal wishes to personal satisfactions; wishful thinking to wish fulfillment; real life to the fantastical; the ordinary to the extreme; having wishes of one's own to fulfilling other people's wishes; and the banal to the dangerous. We had international submissions and are incredibly pleased to present our final collection. A world of thanks to our wonderful contributors - this anthology wouldn't exist without you.

Of particular note are:

Levi Noe's **The Shelf of Shattered Dreams**, a whimsical, poetic take on not letting your wishes die.

Christina Ladd's **The Snowmaiden in Four Seasons**, a remixed version of the snow maiden fairy tale, is a breathtaking tale of family, love, and chilliness.

Abigail Swanson's **Summer Grief**, an eloquent, devastating depiction of grief and loss.

Belle Perkins' **Happy Endings**, a brilliant metatextual re-envisioning of the little mermaid tale that questions the author's role in story-telling.

Sam Muller's **The Anti-Wish**, an ironic and hilarious repurposing of the sleeping beauty story that show that sometimes a curse can actually be a blessing.

and Max Girard's **Goodbye, Peace and Quiet**, a funny, adorable story about how wonderful the bond is between man and dog.

Thank you for reading!

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Fairy Tales Remixed

The Snow Maiden in Four Seasons

Christina Ladd

Once upon a time, a lonely couple fashioned a daughter from a wish and the first snow, and their love had brought her to life. The maiden had loved them too, in her cold, gentle way, and though princes had courted her, she had chosen never to marry.

Eventually her parents died, one after another. She made them cairns of ice deep in the mountains where nothing ever melted. Sometimes she would go to the graves and stand over them, and snowflakes would drift from her eyes.

In the summers, the snow maiden became weak and thin. She would lie down in the still-cold rivers and sink to the bottom, where she could pretend the currents were her mother's songs, and the stones her father's dark eyes.

When autumn came, she gathered the brightest red leaves and put them in the fireplace, and pretended there was a fire crackling. She turned the two chairs toward it and sat far away, just as she had done when it was real. Eventually, the fiction wore threadbare, and she would sit in her mother's chair, or her father's. Sometimes she would even hold out her hands as they had done, bathing her fingers in color instead of heat.

One winter, watching the last of the golden leaves turn brown in the fireplace, she stood and went out. She stood in the wind and night, and let the starlight kiss her face. The house felt less empty from outside.

Eventually, it began to snow. The snow maiden wished she could carve open her white breast and let the snow fill her up. But she knew that if she cut, a weak blue trickle would come out, and scab into ice. She had already had a heart. It rang like crystal, very softly and without pause. Like all hearts, it did not sound like it was broken.

The snow maiden kicked the snow. Then she began kicking it into place. She pushed and packed, patted and shaped, until a figure stood before her. Her heart shimmered. But she did not look back on her work. Quickly, she made a new figure, similar to the first but a bit shorter and more curved. Her breath was quick and made no clouds in the frigid air.

When she was done, she stepped back. The moon was a sickle in the air, very close. The stars hovered all around.

"Hello, sweetheart," said the first figure, the snow father. And the snow mother came to her and held her in a cold embrace.

The snow maiden still went to visit the graves. And in springtime, she still put flowers in the fireplace. But now they were not just orange and gold. Now she chose lilac and thistle, and delicate little violets that reminded her of the deep ice. And she chose snowdrops, every day. They would sit, all three together, and hold out their hands to bask in the radiant cold.

Happy Endings

Belle Perkins

Hans was on holiday to the Danish seaside when he met the mermaid. The trip had drained the last of his funds, a final plea to the muses before he would be forced to abandon hope of a writing career and beg back his job at the tailor's. No sooner had he seated himself on the shore to write than his old pen snapped in two, worn out with a hundred stories no one wanted to buy.

The shards he tossed into the sea. As they sank, a girl's face emerged from the waves. She fixed her eyes on Hans as on the last star blazing at midnight.

He caught himself staring back. Where she should have had legs, scales glittered like mother-of-peal. Surely, an illusion of water and light...

"Are you a writer?" the mermaid asked.

Good manners prevailed at last. "I am, Miss. How might I help you?"

In salty soprano the mermaid sang of her sorrow: of a sea and a statue, a city and a celebration, a sovereign and a savior. And love, desperate and driving as a gale.

"The sea witch told me a writer could change my tale." She held up a new pen. Its body was a cone shell, barnacle nib black with squid's ink. "Please. Make me a story and give me a happy ending"

Hans considered the request. "You know this will cost you your voice," he said at last. "Your words become mine to write, your steps mine to direct, painful as they may be. I can give you legs, and a chance to win your prince. But the decisions, the control--you would give all that up, for a chance?"

The mermaid nodded. "A chance at everything I ever wanted. I believe I would do anything at all."

"You're certain?"

"Absolutely. Wouldn't you do the same?"

Hans took the pen, and the mermaid was gone. The next week, he sent an unfinished draft to his editor in Copenhagen.

Promising, came the response. See our suggestions, attached.

Hans turned his back to the sea and began the next chapter.

The week after that, the once-mermaid showed up on his doorstep, feet bloody and ring finger naked. Before Hans could stop her, she pushed passed him and seized the annotated manuscript, tearing through pages to find the conclusion.

“It’s the publisher’s idea,” he insisted as she wept pearly tears. “All I’ve ever wanted was to be a real author.” The mermaid said nothing. “This is my happy ending. You would do the same.”

The story ended that night. *Anything at all, for a happy ending*, Hans told himself when the ink from the pen turned red. When it was done, he seated himself again on the shore to watch as a wedding-ship set sail. By morning, the tide rose over the beach, and everything else was lost in sea foam.

The Anti-wish

Sam Muller

Once Upon a Time, there was a (yet another) dyslexic royal couple who forgot to invite the most malignantly inclined fairy in their world to the naming ceremony of their baby daughter.

Fairy Ingeniosa Noir made every other evil fairy seem like your average bad-tempered aunt. All royal parents lived in dread of her; yet an amazing number of them misremembered her name when they compiled the guest list for their little baby's naming ceremony.

So one more naming ceremony was held, in yet another Pink Ballroom. The good fairies fluttered round, showering the princess with vacuous compliments. Guests of the more solid sort ate and drank. The courtiers busied themselves, mostly doing nothing. The King and the Queen sat on their thrones preening.

Everything happened the way everything always happens. The baby was named Allegra. Gifts were given and wishes made. A second after the last fairy made her wish, the heavy doors of the ballroom burst opened. Ingeniosa entered, a vision in yards of black organza and live moth trim. All sounds and movements ceased. Guards became stoned with terror. Guests turned into living statues. Their majesties stopped preening.

Ingeniosa came up to the cradle and peered, giving Allegra her special stare. That stare would have shriveled a giant; it once made a dragon cry. But Allegra stared back, eyes filled with interest. So much matte black had never figured in her little world before.

Ingeniosa froze. In a distinguished career spanning five centuries, she had never seen a royal baby with even an iota of intelligence. Until now.

Intelligence was the rarest quality in families royal, rarer than two heads or four arms. Allegra was born bearing the burden of intelligence.

For a royal lady expected to do nothing more arduous than sew uselessly, eat daintily, dance industriously and gossip discreetly, a brain wasn't just a superfluity. It was an impediment to her progress in life.

Curses were to even fate's lopsided scales somewhat. One did not curse those born into misfortune.

If she could have, Ingeniosa would have glared all around and vanished in a puff of malodorous smoke. But that would have done irreparable damage to her reputation. From royal palaces to tumbledown hovels it would be said that Fairy Ingeniosa had lost her touch. They would titter and pity. They might even remember to invite her to all the naming ceremonies.

So Ingeniosa did what was expected of her. She cackled, sending a shiver down every spine. She held up her umbrella and said in a suitably ominous voice, "This princess will run away when

she is sixteen and roam the world searching for herself. She will find herself only when she loses herself.”

Then she vanished, leaving chaos behind.

That evening, Ingeniosa sat in her library, sipping her marshmallow-topped hot chocolate, planning the outline of her new book on how a curse could be a wish-in-disguise (and vice versa), depending on circumstances.

Perhaps she'd dedicate that book to Allegra.

Perhaps.

Wish Granter

Sara Chohan

Once upon a time in a land far away but this story doesn't start right from there.

It was an old, broken well, with ivy creeping by its side, it felt that no one has set foot in this place for a long time. The boy came closer and peered inside, he had almost thought no water was inside, but it was filled with dirty water, with something writhing inside.

And he heard it softly whisper, the well want some of his blood, in return, the well would grant him whatever he wants.

He didn't believe it of course, but would it hurt to try? He didn't need to cut himself because he was already bleeding from his wounds. He pressed the gash at his forearm, he made a simple wish. He mixed it with contempt, his vengeance, and his pain and he heard his blood blend with the water below.

The well has granted his wish. And now it was time to make a deal.

And he didn't waste any time on it. He made a deal with anyone who would give him a dime.

And that was a long time ago he remembered, and he made many deals that he couldn't even remember. And for every wish that he ruined, he felt his power expanded. He didn't live in that village long and soon started to wander. And he made himself a castle, where kings would come to him, it was even more fun when their crowns would fall because of him.

And decades had past maybe even centuries until he came across a girl who was more desperate than him.

Of course, he considered himself a gentleman and he immediately went to her rescue, he presented her with a deal and she gleefully accepted.

He left her feeling triumph, he will see her again after some time.

A year had past and he came to claim what was his, but she begged and cried, and he felt like he could take more than already was his. He gave her time of three days, and he knew so sure that she would fail.

The first day past and it yielded her no luck.

The second day was the same as the first.

On the second night, he couldn't contain himself. He sang and danced for he always liked to defeat royal blood.

Then on the third day, he went to claim what was his.

Rumpelstiltskin, she said with triumph, and he felt his blood began to boil, his lungs filled with a roar, it slipped his lips in a horrible croak. His right foot on its own accord drove so far into the ground, that it created a chasm on the floor. Before it pulled him in he saw the bottom of well.

For the well had given him a warning, that he had forgotten; “that if you failed Rumpelstiltskin, you will lose what was begotten.”

The Prince's Wish

Matt Claus

The Prince told the woman about his deepest fears and frustrations. He revealed his insecurities about his lack of success in managing palace affairs, his suspicions that subordinates did not always respect him, and his failures in relationships and friendships. He divulged it all because he felt safe with her. Also, he liked to refer to life's challenges as his "dragons," and the idea of slaying the dragons in his life thrilled the Prince.

"Being with you will help me slay these dragons," he said.

When he finished, the woman smiled and thanked him for sharing so much about himself. She kissed him and placed a hand on his head. "That was really vulnerable of you," she whispered.

The Prince, of course, felt worse than before. Being told he was vulnerable became a new frustration he had to reveal to someone else. This was a complicated matter because a prince, as everyone knows, cannot see a therapist. Any self-respecting kingdom possesses understood limits on vulnerability.

That night, the Prince stood at the edge of the stone terrace outside his palace bedroom and looked out over the kingdom he would inherit. Above the horizon, one bright star seemed to twinkle just for him. He closed his eyes and made a wish that he would find a princess who was able to see him just the way she should.

So the next day, the Prince rejected the woman for a new woman, and then eventually another after that, and another after that. It probably took about 5, 6, or 7 women. He revealed his insecurities to them all, until the 7th woman or so, or maybe the 8th woman--a prince cannot be expected to keep track of such things--finally said, "You're strong for telling me about this, and you were right along, and I admire you for slaying those dragons."

Then the Prince told her the story of his wish, but she already knew about it because every prince has the same wish. She just smiled at the Prince.

And the Prince lived with her, happily, for many years, and she lived with him.

Swan Song

Thai Lynne

She cannot remember how long she has been here.

Through the trees, thundering footfalls and a racing heart to mirror her own. Who could have discovered her quiet refuge, and who had the courage to brave the wild surrounding wood, with all its dangers? Boots pounding down the forest floor, frightened creatures dart out of sight and harm's way; the urgency cares not for tiny, inconsequential lives. Her neck is long and she cranes to see through the foliage. As the noise of crashing branches draws nearer, she begins to tremble and wish her cage were not so exposed. Surely, she would have been safer in the treetops, rather than this rocky bluff. Her wings fold protectively around her.

“Who goes there?” she demands.

“I am the Prince,” he says cautiously.

“Why are you running?”

“I run from those who want to kill me and take my crown.”

“Is your hold on it so tenuous?”

“My father is dead and my brothers do not want me for a ruler.”

“Well,” she hears no deception in his voice and decides to trust him. “Perhaps we can help each other. You are a fugitive, I am a prisoner. Help me escape and I’ll help you.”

“Who trapped you here?”

The swan spreads her wings, as much as she can within the confines that surround her. She cannot remember. Her muscles ache for want of movement, and she has not been able to truly breathe for more years than she can count. And here he is, a shining opportunity.

“Sweet Prince,” she purrs, and off in the distance the trampling foliage, the scattering of birds, as danger approaches.

“If they catch me, they will throw me from these cliffs.” Panic shadows his face.

“Free me from this prison, and we can fly away from here, to safety for both of us.” From deep within her feathers, she pulls a tarnished brass key and tosses it through the bars. A moment of pause, in which the prince wonders if the swan had the key, why she remains a prisoner, but the leaves are crashing in tandem with the waves and he must hurry. He stoops to collect the key and fits it into the large, ancient deadbolt.

She bursts from the cage, wings outspread, launching herself into the sky. Adrenaline rushes through her, her limbs thrilled and singing. She circles, feeling the ocean breeze, billowing up beneath her. She trumpets with joy. She has been wishing so long for escape from this confinement; she could kiss him with gratitude.

The swan lands before the prince, the door of the cage hanging open, empty.

“Thank you,” she says, “truly. You’ve no idea how long I’ve suffered.”

Spreading her wings again she rears up, thrusting her chest forward and knocking the prince backward into the cage. Feathers burst through his skin painfully and he howls in pain and surprise. Crimson plumage covers him, his clothing falling away as he is transformed into a majestic phoenix. The door is shut and she uses her human hands to lock it against him. Her black cloak, the colour of her breast feathers when she was a swan, clings to her frail, naked form. She turns and disappears into the woods, leaving him in her place.

Geppetto

Isaac Myers

Geppetto stands and lays Pinocchio back down in the rocking chair. He goes to the side table and pours out two thumbs of apple brandy.

The clock strikes 6am. When he saw Gerry and Simone's post last night -- the photo of the splayed, helpless newborn framed by confetti with little pastel storks and smiling cacti -- he knew he wouldn't be able to sleep.

Over six years already since Marsha left him. The only good thing about hitting rock bottom is that there's no more room for disappointment--

The blue fairy appears in a flash. Geppetto drops his tumbler, which shatters into a puddle of glass and apple brandy on the wooden floor.

"I'm here to grant you one wish," the fairy says.

Geppetto knew this day would come eventually.

"I want Pinocchio to be a real boy," he blurts. How many times has he spoken these words in his heart!

"Why?" the blue fairy asks.

"Why? Well because... because then I'll be happy. I'll be complete."

"So your wish is for a boy whose purpose is to make you less lonely?"

"What? No, no. That's not what I meant. I mean, he'll be a happy child and a successful man too."

The blue fairy merely raises one eyebrow. Her blue lips are curled in what Geppetto notices looks an awful lot like disdain.

"Wait, I feel like I'm not doing a good job of explaining myself."

"A child won't solve your problems, you know. You've probably just fixated on an impossible desire to rationalize your own misery. Did that even occur to you? Psychologically, you're still years away from being capable of responsible child rearing, I'm afraid."

Geppetto sees that most of the apple brandy has already seeped in between the floorboards. That's exactly what Dr. Foulfellow had said.

“But I’m 44 years old! The average life expectancy in this town is 61. At this rate, I won’t even live to see which college he gets into--”

“You know, it’s OK to be a failure in life.”

Geppetto stares at the fairy. “I feel like you’re mocking me.”

“Not at all. Well, what’s done is done. I’d better go.”

The blue fairy disappears in a thick cloud of smoke.

A shrill, fire alarm-like sound fills the room. Geppetto wades through the smoke toward the rocking chair. There, on the chair, lies what looks like a newborn baby. He tries to pick it up, but his hands are shaking and the body feels flimsy and formless. Pinocchio, his life’s work, is gone. He remembers the broken tumbler and goes to get the broom and dustpan.

Kingdom's Most Wanted

Audrey Blue

Cinderella pressed her face against the window. Down below her stepmother and stepsisters took off in their carriage. She slid to the floor and dried her eyes. Now she'd never get to the ball on time. One of the mice scurried out of its hole and crawled onto her lap. Her best friend. She cried harder. Her social life was garbage.

The door flew open and a strange woman stood in the room. A stained handbag swung at her side. She stumbled around and smelled strongly of alcohol.

“Who are you?”

The woman opened up a pack of cigarettes. “I’m a fairy godmother. Got a lighter?”

Cinderella handed her a match. The fairy godmother blew a puff of smoke. She took out a notepad and read it over. “So you want to get to that ball, right?”

“I do! They never let me out of the house, and I think this would be a great opportunity to-”

“That’s great kid. Look, I’m on a tight schedule. Bring the rat, we’re going outside.”

They went into the garden. The fairy godmother selected a warty yellow squash and had Cinderella set the mouse down in front.

“Stand back.” The fairy godmother whipped out a crooked wand held together with tape. She waved it. The wand sparked for a split second before fizzling out. “I swear it usually works.” She smacked it against her leg. The tip lit up. Another wave sent a shower of white sparkles twisting around the mouse and squash. The squash grew into a carriage, but retained its warped shape. Hitched up to it was the mouse which had only turned into a bigger mouse.

“Good enough.” The fairy godmother forced the door open. “Hop in.”

“I can’t go to the ball like this.” Cinderella motioned down at herself. She still wore the filthy rags she did everyday.

“Shit I almost forgot.” The fairy godmother coughed and put out her cigarette on the carriage wheel. “Close your eyes and don’t move.”

She smacked her wand a few times and waved it over Cinderella’s head. Her dress billowed out and sparkled with magic. Her boots turned to glass heels.

“Thank you so much!” Cinderella threw her arms around the fairy godmother.

“Hands off! I don’t do that.” The fairy godmother pried the girl’s arms off her. “I did this for you, now you have to do a little something for me on the way to the ball.”

“Anything!” No price was too small for one night of happiness.

....

The fairy godmother dove into the carriage with a sack in each hand. Gold poured from her handbag. “Drive kid!

“When I said anything, this wasn’t what I had in mind.” Cinderella cracked her whip. The mouse took off down the road. The fairy godmother shot her wand at the knights behind them. They tumbled to the ground.

“That was some sleep spell.” Cinderella called back.

“Keep telling yourself that. We’ve got a ball to crash and the law to avoid.”

Witches and Genies

Wasted

Erin Hallowell- Gartlan

‘Nothing?’ Disbelief echoed off the dusty shelves, low and sibilant. Ava shrugged. It had offered her riches, beauty, fame, true love. All the classics. She’d read enough folktales to know a trickster when she saw one. It probably fed on her desires. She tried to stay aloof.

‘Maybe the perfect quote for my essay?’ That was what she’d come here for after all, before it had appeared, the thing that almost looked human.

‘Pah!’ spat the creature. It slithered along the stacks, flickering between realities. It was like looking at an old TV set when the tuning was out, the image rolling up and down, sometimes two or three at once, sometimes just static. Ava squinted. Her mind struggled to pick up the frequency.

‘World peace?’ proffered the thing. It purred the word on not-really lips smeared across a too-deep maw. ‘You all want something. World peace. That’s a big one.’ It was bargaining now. Did genies have quotas?

She shrugged. ‘And where has wishing for that got us? Take a look at the news. You’ve been bottled for too long.’

The creature huffed, slumped against the wall like a telescope collapsing into itself. A tendril of smoke escaped its lips and wafted toward the ceiling, trailing heady incense.

‘The question you should be asking is what do *you* want? How can you fill your own cup?’ She beamed her quiet benevolence. The future flashed before her. She had only come looking for the perfect obscure reference but here she was about to free an actual mythical being from servitude.

Flame stirred behind glassy eyes that were all pupil. The telescope unfurled. Ava had the impression of many arms or legs shifting beneath the human form. It was excited. ‘I have waited a long time for this.’

Ava knew what to do. ‘I wish you free!’ She was as earnest as a child on Christmas morning but the thing shook its head. Or many heads. You couldn’t quite tell.

‘There are laws. My service isn’t in question.’ It never needed to ask people their desires, it could read them written into their souls. And yet. There was something about a spoken desire that made it all the sweeter. Words have power, after all.

Ava frowned, picked up the book whose yellowed pages had released this thing in the first place. She rubbed her palm quickly up and down the spine, over the covers. She felt the crackle of magic. ‘I wish for whatever *you* want to come true!’ Triumph flashed across her face. Another poor soul helped. Bingo.

The creature nodded. Or did it bow?

The thing in the shadows flew at her. She thought it was going to kiss her. 'You're welcome,' she started to say. Instead that giant maw gaped open, unhinged like a snake's and enveloped her, words and soul and all. As always, the creature got what it wanted. Nothing as satisfying as a fulfilled, wasted wish.

Red Path Forest

By N.B. Brito

I met the witch of Red Path once.

Ms. Lehan caught me reading *The Neverending Story* under my desk that day. Angry, she took it, forbidding me from going home until I finished my work.

I was terrified; I didn't want to stay late and then walk home alone. Everyone knew there was something strange about Red Path Forest, and it was never wise to walk there by yourself. I cursed my parents' horrendous choice of housing location.

Teeth gritted, I sized up the forest, figuring out my course of action. It would be best to walk as quickly and silently as possible; running would only alert the witch.

"Everything okay?"

I jumped, whirling around to see a young woman, her dark eyes curious. She was stylish, with her long black coat, and perfectly styled hair. I had never seen anyone who looked like her before, and yet, she seemed familiar.

Normally I'm shy around strangers, but this air of familiarity gave me confidence.

"I'm trying to get home," I explained.

"Are you lost?" Her brow furrowed, concerned.

"No! I just...wish my friends were with me," I muttered.

She looked at me longer, then glanced at the forest. Understanding seemed to come to her, and she turned back to me. "Pretty creepy forest, isn't it? Would you like some company on your way home?"

I nodded, happy to take her up on her offer, and we began walking through the dark shadows.

On the way, I told her about the witch. She laughed, "I had forgotten those stories."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I grew up here, years ago. The stories aren't real, you know."

I looked at her, annoyed. "Grown-ups always say that. How do you know?"

She sighed, and looked away, wistful. "Maybe only kids can see her."

We were approaching the edge of the forest, nearing my house. The walk had been far quicker than I thought.

“It’s not my imagination,” I said crossly, as I walked away from her.

“I’m sorry,” she called after me. I turned back, looking into her dark eyes, the same shade of brown as my own. “You mustn’t mind me. I used to come here often. It’s not the same. Please, remember your witch for as long as you can.”

She held out her hand. “It was nice to meet you...what’s your name?”

“Sarah,” I said, reaching to shake her hand.

A curious look crossed her face, “So am I-“ she began. In the brief second we touched, I felt a force so powerful, so incomprehensible that nothing in the world made sense. Images flitted through my mind, my memories, her memories, our memories?

I pulled my hand away, falling to the ground. Opening my eyes, I found myself alone. No sign that she had even been here. And yet, something in me said she was and always would be.

I met the witch of Red Path, and I hope one day I’ll find her again.

Number Three

Templeton Moss

“Get away from me!” I roared. I was madder than I’d ever been in my life. But there he stood. Grinning at me. He was enjoying it.

“I cannot leave you, Master,” he said in his smooth, elegant voice. “I am still bound to you.”

“Yeah, well, I’m unbinding you, okay? You’re off the hook. Now go away!”

“That is not your decision to make, Master.”

“Then stop calling me ‘Master!’ If I were anybody’s master, I’d be able to tell you to piss off!” I looked at the table where the bottle stood. The seemingly empty bottle which had started all this. It had almost got me thrown in prison. I picked it up, stalked to the window and threw it.

I waited until I heard it smash on the street below. Then I turned around and looked back at the table.

The bottle was still there.

“As I said, Effendi,” said the Genie, “you have one more wish. Until that wish is made, I cannot leave you.”

I didn’t want another wish. I doubted I could survive another wish.

When I had found the Genie I had, naturally, thought I was set for life. No more waiting tables during the day and driving for that rideshare app at night. No more begging for tips or positive reviews from people who treated me like dirt.

I wished for what just about anyone would wish for: A million dollars. The Genie gave me what I asked for. But it never occurred to me to ask where he had gotten the money.

Next thing I know, I’m watching the news. A million dollars was stolen from a bank and the police had no leads. But they’d know as soon as the money was spent, because they had the serial numbers of the stolen cash.

My second wish was wasted unwishing my first wish. And, through it all, the Genie just laughed. Like a little boy with a magnifying glass would laugh at an ant. It was all just a sick game to him.

“I make my third wish,” I said, as calmly as I could, “and you get the hell out of my life? Forever?”

“Indeed, Master.”

I thought carefully. I couldn't let him trick me again. My third wish had to be watertight so there'd be no chance of his misinterpreting it.

"I wish," I said at last, "That I could have room and board for the rest of my life without ever having to work again."

I thought I had the better of him. I thought it was pretty obvious what I wanted. But he was still grinning, and I knew I had blown it.

"Your wish is my command," he said.

The next thing I remember was a loud creaking sound, followed by the roof collapsing on my head. Then darkness. Complete and utter darkness. I couldn't see where I was, but I heard a few words like "hospital" and "irreversible" and "coma."

I got my wish.

Blessing the Wind

F.J. Bergmann

“You *asked* for it?” His fists slowly clenched and unclenched.

“Yeah!” She stood with her feet apart, braced. Her eyes glittered. “What I’ve been wishing for ... for months and months. Wishing on candles. Wishing on first stars and all that crap.

“*Why*, Barrett? You could have looked it up; petitioned one of the Libraries, or asked someone. You didn’t even use a mirror!”

“*You* told me the mirrors were no protection.” Her tone was venomous. “And I *did* ask someone.”

“You asked one of *them*.” His voice flattened.

Wisps of hair wafted to either side of her neck in the air currents from the enormous, dark-patterned wings slowly opening and closing behind her, bright deltas netted with tributaries of shadow.

“You’re just jealous!” The hard glitter in her eyes had become brimming tears. “You and all the other *adults* ...” Her face became a caricature of maternal solicitude. “Barr-ee, don’t look for Blessings—you might find one. Barr-ee, don’t talk about the Blesséd, or they might come.” Her eyes narrowed. “But they never came for any of *you*, did they?”

“No one *wanted* them to come! Barrett, you heard the stories.... How could you—anyone—want such a thing?”

She was openly sobbing now. “Then why do you call them Blesséd?”

He was silent for a moment. “It’s because people were afraid, Barry. Don’t you understand? It’s just superstition. They thought it was a sort of protection. Like they used to call fairies ‘Good Folk’; or the Furies, the ‘Kindly Ones.’”

The wings hesitated, just for a moment, then resumed their slow stroke. “Are you afraid of *me*?”

“You have to go, Barrett.”

“Are. You. Afraid. Of me. *Say* it!” Her voice rose into a shriek.

“Not for me. For the other children.” The droop in his shoulders, as if weighted down by an invisible, inescapable burden, seemed to drag down the corners of his mouth.

“I— I’ll cut them off!” She looked around behind her wildly from side to side, as if trying to read directions or authorization in a language imprinted on the mottled feathers. But her nails were already starting to lengthen, taking on a metallic darkness.

Far overhead, so high that they were only pinpricks of despair distorting in and out of visibility, a squadron of them was waiting for her, lazily spiraling in the gyre of winds.

One Wish

Amarantha Harrison

“You only get one wish,” said the old woman stooped under her black shaw. “Better make it a good one. And hurry up, I haven’t got all day.” And she stamped on the dusty road with the end of her gnarled walking stick.

“But how can you grant me a wish?” A perplexed young woman stared down at her. “Isn’t that magic?”

“Of course it’s magic, I’m a witch. Now what do you want?”

“One wish, you said? Why’s it only one?”

“Because that’s the rules! I didn’t make them,” the witch snapped.

“But if you’re a witch can’t you do whatever you want?” The young woman’s eyes widened questioningly.

“That’s not the rules. Now make your wish or I’ll make one for you!”

“Oh, would you do that for me?” The young woman clapped her hands together eagerly. “I’m terrible with decisions, especially important ones. I bet you’re good at it, you must here wishes all the time and know which are the best.”

The witch’s impatience faded from her, and she even leaned a little lighter on her stick.

“Well when you put it like that.” And she smiled a pleased smile beneath her dark shaw. “If you’re sure-.”

“Yes, of course,” the woman said before the witch could finish.

The witch nodded gravely. “Than in accordance with the laws of the Witches’ Cauldron, in lieu of the wish I granted you, Ms....”

“Esmeralda Squeakgrass,” the woman supplied excitedly.

“Ms. Esmeralda Squeakgrass, I, Beratholga Von Wichester wish to confer upon you all my powers-.”

Ms. Squeakgrass let out a squeak of delight.

“And henceforth you must abide on this road and grant wishes to whoever speaks to you.”

Esmeralda’s eyes grew wide and confused again. “Abide on this road?” Her voice trembled.

Bertholga thrust her walking stick into the girl's hand, and cast her ragged shawl into the ditch.

“So long, sucker,” she called over her shoulder as she hobble-raced away.

Power

Kalin Nenov

“It is the standard pact. Infinite power in exchange for your soul.”

Takes the marker. Signs. (In blood-red.)

“Which power would it be, then?”

A split second of hesitation. “The power of healing.”

The Enemy raises a crooked eyebrow, then disappears with an impressive implosion and a muffled “So be it...”.

.....

“Your time is up. Mine,” (Pause. Meaning-laden.) “has come.”

“Already ...” The vaguest hint of disappointment. “Well, so be it. But”—the Enemy freezes in mid-step—“before you take my soul—before you take my power—let me do something for you.”

The cackle freezes, too.

“That foot”—gestures toward the limping hoof—“it hurts, yes?” Wraps around it. Examines the source of the pain.

“Nnnnnoooooooooooo-oooo-ooo-o-o—o——o!!!” (The archetype of pain, this. Can’t help a shiver.) “Keep back, you earthly—”

Now the Enemy is completely frozen. The recognition has warped his features into an even more gruesome mask. (Who would have thought?)

“You. Have. Become. True—”

Implosion. Impotent.

Stands still. (Smiles?) Shakes head. Knocks at the gate behind which another ailing soul waits.

Rub the Lamp

Jake Blandford

I wish... I wish for a world without fear. The ability to wake up confident and secure that you're safe from disaster, from apocalypse, from nuclear fire. I wish we weren't so afraid of imminent destruction, the end of our way of life, the end of our progress as a race. After all, we were *so close*. Reagan promised us hope, strength; Gorbachev seems trustworthy and earnest (or at least, as trustworthy and earnest as a Commie can be) and Thatcher... well she proved a woman can hold her own and shoulder the same responsibility as the men.

I'm too smart; burdened by brilliance and this is why I'm the right candidate for the job. I'm the embodiment of reason and rationality. I've an obligation to guide the world, to grant its wishes. There's a genie in my mind, a compassionate logician, making the right choices from a place of warmth and love. Together, we will cure the world of fear.

The chair's stiff and my bra's digging in and the air conditioning doesn't really make that much of a difference, not this deep below ground. I read once that a throne shouldn't be comfortable and that much applies here. So I take the basic chair and the standard issue underwire (good for morale, allegedly) with good grace - this is a throne that *definitely* shouldn't be comfortable. That being said, a fix in the air conditioning would be nice - the capacity for fresh air this far underground is somewhat restricted, makes it hard think.

I consider my plan and its necessary evils. How should I target? Ethnically? Economically? Politically? Numerically? Maybe both ends of the spectrum - the ultra-poor and the ultra-rich? Leave a global middle class that knows the dangers of both high and low? The console glows in front of me, the green screen showing a wire outline of the planet. I know the codes, I know the procedures and for a brief moment I consider that maybe the screening for nuclear warhead security should be more through.

And then I rub the lamp and together we push the button.

Wishes with a Twist

The Meeting

Melissa Struzzi

Deep down in the recesses of his being, he knew it was wrong. This clandestine meeting in the middle of the woods. But Bill couldn't help himself. His feet crunched on the frozen ground as he navigated his way through the tall trees, their trunks glowing in the moonlight.

Bill pulled his jacket tighter across his chest. It didn't quite meet enough for him to zipper it. He'd gained a few pounds this year. Hopefully, that wouldn't matter to her.

He shivered. It wasn't from the cold, he knew. Nothing good could come from the hiding. But it was what she wanted. Demanded. Bill had dreamt of this meeting for so long he wasn't about to argue. Since he was a kid, he'd hoped a beautiful creature like her would pay attention to him, choose him out of every other comic book geek at the library. He'd always believed it was impossible. A wish wasted on the unattainable. And yet, for some inexplicable reason, she had picked him.

As he got closer to the meeting point, guilt nagged at him. Lois. Bill tried to shake it off. They shared everything, but he couldn't share this with her. Not yet. This encounter was his alone to savor. Surely Lois would understand. She had to. This sort of thing had to be on a "Free List" of some kind.

Bill stopped when he reached at the clearing, breathing in the cool night air. The full moon illuminated the clearing like a yellow spotlight.

"Hello. Are you here?" He called, his voice shaky.

The leaves rustled behind him. He turned, faster than he meant to. Bill didn't want her to know how anxious he was.

The moonlight glistened on her bare skin as she stepped into the clearing. Bill thought he was going to faint. The full sight of her made him shake with desire. She stepped closer to him then stopped, her blue eyes so bright it took his breath away.

"You came. You really came."

She snorted as if she were irritated by his doubt. Puffs of steam floated into the night air.

Bill giggled. He couldn't help himself. The pounding of his heart echoed in his head.

"Can I touch you?"

She nodded, lowering her head toward him.

His hand shook. Once he made contact, he let it linger on her skin. It was drier than he expected. More snake than lizard. Trailing his fingers slowly down her neck, he shuddered with pleasure. This was so much better than he could have imagined.

She didn't move when he snuggled up against her. Heat radiated through him, all the way down to his toes. When he felt her shudder, he knew his wish had come true. Her wings folded around him, blocking out the night.

The sun had just begun its climb when Lois entered the clearing. She picked up the charred remains of Bill's coat, clutching it to her chest. As a tear ran down her cheek, she smiled.

Stolen Wishes

Rachel L. Carazo

I've been running for a long time, but they just can't catch me. The cops who are chasing me are out of breath, out of shape, and clearly astounded by my flight from the memorial fountain.

They yell often while they run, but do I care? No, I do not.

Instead, I weave expertly through the streets and alleyways, and I head directly for the waterfront.

The canvas bag in my hand feels heavier and heavier as the weight of the treasure inside seems to grow with my number of steps. As a result, the sweaty handles often try to slip through my fingers.

I'm not used to running this fast for so long, but I *am* still ahead of them. And this fact pleases me.

I know that I'll beat them there. I just will.

So, in order to save time, I start to separate the bag's handles while I run.

I want to be ready.

At last, I reach the beach. I struggle at first to find traction in the sand, but I'm soon steady and racing up the main slope.

Moments later, I'm speeding downward.

Dark waves stretch out before me.

With one fluid motion, I reach into the bag, grab a handful of coins, wind up my arm, and fling them into the sea.

Now, I've won! Yet I can win more than once, so I repeat the process; I grab and fling, grab again, and fling again.

I'm so ecstatic about my success that I don't remember the exact moment when they tackle me.

But I'm down. Down...*and laughing.*

"What's wrong with you, Man?" one of the cops asks breathlessly.

"You steal from a famous fountain and then toss the money into the sea?" asks the other.

“All those wishes lost, and never counting now,” the first laments.

I, however, just shake my head.

“I didn’t *steal* any wishes!” I inform them gaily.

“No?” they ask simultaneously.

“No, I just *helped* them!” I exclaim. “Their wishes will get more attention in the sea! The people who threw them in that fountain were dreaming, *but just not big enough!*”

At this revelation, both of the policemen look stunned and step away from me.

And, there in the sand, under the starry expanse, I revel in my victory.

At the Well of the Wish-Giver

Lauren Meyer

Fully round and luminous, the traitor moon shows the girl her reflection in the black waters of the Well. It is not a sight she would wish to see.

She is plainer than mud, and less useful: whereas seeds may sprout in muddy soil - like the dandelions she gathers to wish upon, so greedily that the hills lie barren in her wake - life will never take hold within her flesh. For any hope of that, the men of the village would first have to look at her. At her eyes, with all the liveliness of stagnant pools; at her face, lumpen and bland as half-risen dough. To touch her skin, faded as overwashed linen, with the desperation that drives her to this blighted place beginning to show through where its exigencies have worn her threadbare.

Now comes the *yelir*, the Wish-Giver, to drink of the blood she has spilt in offering, blooming scarlet upon the depthless mirror beneath which he dwells.

His face dispels her reflection in ripples with an aspect as hideous as she is plain. Gray, crested skull, lidless yellow eyes, lipless mouth stretched wide in a smile, a gleaming white blade to cut to the heart of her.

“You are quite ugly.” he says, his voice a gurgling stream clogged with rotted leaves. The girl weeps.

“I shall grant your wish.” says the *yelir*. “You will be beautiful. Come the morning, you shall rise in radiance with the sun.”

Heart bird-fluttering, as light now as wishes whispered upon dandelion seeds, she leaves.

She can almost pretend not to hear the clotted chuckling at her back.

The flush of daybreak does not reach her cheeks, pale and unlovely as ever. She has been deceived.

The sun climbs in the sky as the girl climbs to the Well. The *yelir* is waiting for her.

“Liar!” she dares scream at him. His face beneath the water contorts in rage, and she shrinks back, afraid. His face, too, grows fearful. When she leans closer, his features mirror her bewilderment.

“Why do you mock me?” she cries.

Now he smiles, the blade of his grin keener even than the night before, sharpened on the whetstone of her anguish. He has two faces in the water's rippling mirror: one, a horror struck echo of her own; the other, grinning beneath the first. He passes through himself, banishing one

face with the other, and rises, crested head and spiny shoulders, from the Well. She can see the truth of her reflection in his yellow eyes, lidless mirrors that neither blink, nor ripple.

“You were supposed to make me beautiful.” she whispers, through lips that have thinned to reptilian phantoms of themselves.

The *yelir*'s tongue snakes out to lick at his own lipless grin. He reaches out one clawed, webbed hand with reverent hunger, and strokes the membranous crest that has sprouted from the girl's cheek, pale and doughy no more.

“My darling.” says the *yelir*. “I did.”

Wish Upon A Star

Gary McKay

At 11:05pm on her 28th birthday, Laura King stood atop a cliff and gazed at the night sky. There'd been clouds earlier, but they'd lifted to reveal a full moon. Laura didn't think there was anything more beautiful - some of her happiest memories were of lying outside with her mother, watching the universe. Sadly, there didn't seem to be any shooting stars, but she'd prepared for that. From her rucksack, Laura removed a bulky gold star costume and began to change into it, relieved no one was around to see her in this get-up. Not for the first time, she reflected on the strangeness of another year being gone, just like that. But no more. She'd spent several years researching everything she could about magic and wishes, and today that research would finally bear fruit - she'd forever be free of the ravages of aging.

Once she'd changed, Laura glanced at her watch: 11:10pm. It was almost time. A run, a jump and it'd be done. She'd be immortal and her mind would forever be hers. She glanced to the side at the waves below and felt her chest tighten and her breathing quicken. It was an awfully long way to fall and no one knew she was up here. This would be a very stupid way to die. She took a few deep breaths and tried to steady herself, ignoring the rising bile at the base of her throat. She could do this. She had to. '

11:11pm. Now or never. Laura closed her eyes and thought of her last visit to her mother's nursing home. Those beautiful eyes, the twins of Laura's, dulled decades too soon. She'd even forgotten Laura's name. With tears in her eyes, Laura ran forward and leapt from the cliff. Looking to the moon, she made her wish.

A shooting star at 11:11pm on her birthday beneath a full moon. It had to be enough. It had to be.

It-

Chekov's Unicorn

Eliza Master

Flurries fell on the pebbled concrete of the New York sidewalk. The city was slow and quiet. Anna passed a shop she had not seen before. In the window was a photo of old Leningrad, next to portraits of famous Russian writers. Anna loved literature from the Soviet Union. Her breath fogged the glass as she peered inside.

The shop door was old and damaged. Anna fantasized that it led upstairs to a one room apartment. Inside was steamy and disheveled. Vladivostok was covered in Russian frost. She imagined a worn mattress on a metal cot in the corner. By the window was a lonely table. On top was a bottle of vodka and a half-eaten sausage.

The door groaned as Anna pushed her way in to the shop. A man at the desk made eye contact but left her to browse the merchandise. The shelf to her left displayed a new edition of a Nabokov's Lolita. A creepy feeling formed in her navel and she turned away.

On a display case were different releases of Dostoyevsky. Anna ran her finger over a hard spine, while imagining his time in Omsk. He had spent four years inside prison walls. There, the voices of stories erected. He had penetrated into the darkest recesses of Anna's being. She flushed. But she had spent too much time communing with him. She needed something else.

Outside snow was collecting. The city was bathed in a white glow.

There were lots of TolsToys in the shop. Sometimes he kept her awake all night. Somewhere between happiness and suffering. Anna missed that, but no.

"Can I help you?" The man from the desk appeared at her side.

"Umm," said Anna uncomfortably.

"I think I might have something you haven't seen before," suggested the man. He got a box from a mantle behind the desk. "It's Chekov's Unicorn. Spanking new and the perfect shape," said the man as he opened the box.

Anna lifted out the device. The horn was pale pink silicone. G-spot was written on the unicorn's mane. She pressed the On button. The toy vibrated with a soft purr.

"Perfect," said Anna, handing over her credit card.

Anna pounded home through the snow. She couldn't wait to please herself.

Catch Me

Tabitha Freeman

Last year, my brother was murdered. I knew it would happen a long time before it did because I'm what the dictionary calls a 'clairvoyant'. But like normal people, I take my brain with a grain of salt. Things can always change. They often do.

Nothing changed for my brother, Luke. He was stabbed to death, just as I'd seen years before. I never told him, never told anybody, what I knew. Never tried to prevent it. Hell, we were in a stupid sibling squabble over my mom's birthday party plans when I got the news that Luke was dead.

It's like one of those things where someone falls and you think they will catch themselves, so you don't reach out to help. Except, they don't catch themselves and there you stand, empty arms outstretched, having the ability all along to prevent the mess, but you didn't.

I didn't catch Luke.

But I'm gonna catch who did this to him.

I'm standing outside the door of the murderer's apartment in the dark. I'm waiting, chef knife in my grip. I'm going to kill him. Everyone has to come outside eventually. Everyone does.

I'm going to slit his throat. I'm not squeamish. The things I've seen in my foreshadowings are the worst kind of things you could imagine. Who knew I was actually made for this vigilante thing?

Luke used to beg me to do something about my visions.

"You can't live like this, Libby," he'd always say. "It's killing you. Always helping other people out, never worrying what it's doing to you. Never able to let fate just take its course. It's eating you alive, sis."

"I can't just toss away my gift," I'd said. "I don't think that's how it works, Luke."

"Gift'," he'd scoffed. "You're not tossing any 'gift', Libby. You're freeing yourself of a curse."

He wasn't wrong. So, I'm going to grant his wish. Once I kill Luke's murderer, then I'll go far away from everything, from everyone. Visions can't hurt as much when you're alone, with no one left to love. And I'll figure out how to unchain myself from my curse. I will.

It's nearing sunup when the door finally unlocks from the inside and opens slowly.

It happens quicker than I expect. Easier than I expect. The assassin is a crumpled heap on the doorway threshold in under twenty seconds. He makes a weird gargle sound, clutching at his

throat, which has become an Old Faithful of blood, staring up wide-eyed at me. I lean over him, breathing in every one of his last breaths.

The police wouldn't catch me. I could see it. I was seeing a lot of new things now.

Okay, Luke. You got your wish. I'm getting rid of the curse. And I'm turning it into something all my own.

A gift.

My cheeks hurt from the immovable smile on my face as I walk away from the dead man. Justice for you, Luke. Who knew the smell of blood was so intoxicating?

Turns out it's okay that I didn't catch you, Luke. You're the one that caught me.

This vigilante thing. I was made for this.

Eternal Happiness

Henry Gasko

Jason held the lamp at eye level. Classic bronze, still shiny even though it had probably been buried in the ravine for years.

“Read that last bit again,” he said to Sally. “The bit after “Rub me.”

Sally read from the manual they had found inside the lamp. “But beware’,” she intoned. “It is a beautiful and terrible thing, and should therefore be treated with great caution.’ A bit stilted,” she said.

“Probably translated. Looks Middle Eastern. And old.” He was a philosophy Ph.D. heading for a career in a call centre. Why not try it? Nothing to lose but a few more brain cells.

“Okay. Here goes.” He rubbed the lamp with his sleeve. They stood speechless as smoke poured out. Slowly the form of a classical genie appeared: pantaloons, pointy shoes, a silly hat. The works.

“Shit!” said Jason.

“Your wish, O Master.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously,” said the genie.

“I ... I don’t know,” stammered Jason, wondering where Sally had gotten the weed they’d smoked.

“Come on,” said the genie.

Sally jumped to his defense. “Let him think,” she said. “He’s never done anything like this before,” she added, rather needlessly.

“Just one wish?” asked Jason.

“Just one,” said the genie.

“With no strings?”

“Of course there are strings,” said the genie. “A life without strings would soon unravel.”

That seemed to make perfect sense to Jason. Perhaps he shouldn’t have smoked that last joint.

“So no wishing for a thousand more wishes?”

“You’ve got it.”

Jason thought deeply.

“Don’t ask for money,” interjected Sally.

“I know,” he said. Any philosophy graduate knew that money couldn’t buy happiness. But what could? Maybe eternal life? So that he could live forever, growing increasingly decrepit, unable to die, while his distant ancestors fed him gruel with a baby spoon?

The genie tapped his foot impatiently. "What's it going to be?"

“Eternal Happiness!” Jason said impulsively.

“You’re sure.”

“Absolutely.” *What could go wrong?*

The genie motioned with his hands and shouted, “ETERNAL HAPPINESS!”

Jason waited. Then he waited a bit longer.

“How do you feel?” asked Sally.

“Nothing,” said Jason. “Nothing at all.”

“No sense of abiding peace and harmony with the world?” asked the genie.

“Maybe a bit,” said Jason.

“That feeling will grow,” said the genie confidently. “In time you will you will come to appreciate whatever fate lays before you. You will even accept the fact that you will grow old and die, as every man must grow old and die.”

“You mean ...?” said Jason.

“Yes,” said the genie. “You are now a Stoic. You will be eternally happy with your lot in life, whatever it may be.”

“No! I don’t want to be happy with *my* life,” moaned Jason. “I want a *different* life, a *better* life.”

“So long, sucker!”

You bastard, Jason wanted to shout. But the words wouldn’t come. Instead he felt himself overwhelmed by an ocean of equanimity, struggling against a tide of acceptance, sinking ever deeper into a quagmire of eternal happiness.

Mira Wishes

Jackie Hostetler

“The woman across the bar is revolting.” Mira thinks.

She has a terrible face. It's the kind of face that Mira and her husband joke about; “trash face”. Weak chin, dull skin, thin lips, framed by limp, Lady Clairol frost. The Kool hanging flaccidly from her mouth compliments the graceless visage.

“I wish she would do something with that disgusting hair.” Mira thinks.

A single fragment of afternoon sun has found it's way into the dim room. The diagonal shard of sunlight cuts across the woman's trash features, further illuminating her physical flaws.

“I wish she would wipe that ignorant look off of her ugly face.” Mira thinks.

The woman across the bar drinks a lot, always cheap wine. Mira is aggravated by the manner in which she drinks. Fancy, pretending it's not \$2.75 for a 12 ounce pour from a box.

“I wish she would stop sipping her shitty wine that way.” Mira thinks.

The alcohol doesn't help the woman's disposition. The way she interacts with men is desperate. Drunk eyes size up potential suitors. They have no use for her, beyond six raunchy minutes in the stinking men's room. It happened once – that Mira knows of. Maybe more. Mira couldn't say for sure.

“I wish she could see how pathetic she is.” Mira thinks.

Her breasts are full and low. Several inches of cleavage trail from the neck of her novelty t-shirt, green and threadbare. The words “Kiss Me, I'm Irish” have all but disappeared, either from the strain of covering her girth, or from one too many tumbles in the machines at the “Soap and Suds.” It's December.

“I wish she'd buy a damn shirt that fits.” Mira thinks.

The woman's voice burns Mira's ears, loud and grating. Her words sound like lies. Her laugh is abrasive.

“I wish she would just shut her fucking mouth.” Mira thinks.

Mira despises this woman. It's a combination of things. The wine. The shirt. The hair. The laugh. Other things. She mentally reviews the list frequently. It makes her feel better. Human nature, Mira supposes.

Mira's continued scrutiny breeds a litany of additional hostility; fury, revulsion, contempt. Something else. Sadness. A pain so vast it almost swallows the other emotions. Almost.

The smallest part of Mira wishes to love the woman. She wishes to crawl over the bar and hold her. Stroke her hair. Kiss her forehead. Comfort her, as one would comfort a child. She never will. She hates her too much.

Tears well in Mira's eyes. They roll down her cheeks, dampening the paper napkin beneath her own glass of Chardonnay. She looks to the woman behind the bar, tears streaming down her trash face, too. Mira clumsily dabs at herself with the napkin. The woman behind the bar imitates the movements precisely.

Mira has been here too long. Her husband is probably wondering. Or probably not. She gathers her things. Slipping her coat over her threadbare, green t-shirt, she heads into the late afternoon sun, wishing.

The Color of Sunshine

Angela Teagardner

Cans rattled inside her backpack as Beatriz hefted it more securely across one narrow shoulder. It was early yet, but the station would be busy soon. That was the risk she ran – part of the thrill.

When the doors slid open, Beatriz was the only one to step inside. Just as she'd hoped, the car was nearly deserted. An old African-American lady in a floral dress sat near the front, holding a grandma-sized handbag in her lap. She didn't look up.

The rest of the car was empty, which was perfect. As the train lurched forward, Beatriz pulled out the first can. She shook it vigorously – the base coat was crucial, and it had to be well-mixed. She unfolded her sketched plans and studied the space before her as the bead in the can rattled.

"I sure hope you aren't planning on painting something rude," the old lady said, startling Bea. No one talked on the New York City subway – it was practically law.

"What do you care? You don't own the train."

"No, I do not," the old lady agreed. "But this whole city's covered in the same message: F-this, F-that. I think people would appreciate looking at something uplifting for a change."

"Uplifting," Bea echoed, skeptical.

The lady adjusted the bag in her lap. "If someone's gotta holler 'cross the street at you, wouldn't it be nice if they yelled 'you're doing great!' instead?"

Bea blinked. This lady – looking like someone's god-fearing grandma – was actually cool with her painting up that subway car? So long as it was *nice*?

She looked at her sketch and then back at the lady. Okay. She could do nice. She tucked the paper into her pocket. "What's your favorite color?" Beatriz asked, rooting through her bag.

The woman cackled. "I'm blind," she explained. "Never seen a color in my life, but you know what I wish? I wish there was a color for the way the morning sun feels on my face, just as it's comin' up."

Beatriz closed her eyes, imagined the kiss of dawn on her skin.

She translated it into pigment, covering wall and window. She used four shades of yellow, two blues, and a soft pink she'd bought on an impulse. The subway wasn't her favorite canvas, but it was what she had. In her neighborhood, walls were for gang tags, and being a Dominican girl with a bag of spray cans made her a target for cops and gangbangers alike. "But I'm a wall artist," she found herself explaining. "I gotta paint someplace!"

“Of course you do,” her companion agreed.

Mixing balls clacked. Nozzles hissed. Color became art.

Bea thought about all the things she wished for – a safe neighborhood and steady work for her mami. A place to paint whatever she wanted. She thought about how even a blind lady could appreciate art.

“What’ya think?” she asked when the fumes settled.

The old lady turned unseeing eyes to the painting. She smiled. “Sunshine on my face.”

Still Waiting

Ellen Roteman

The waiting room swarms with humanity. I ease the door open, just enough to squeeze inside. "Watch it!" a man grumbles through a menacing scowl, as I jostle him. "Sorry," I mumble, intimidated. Always intimidated, can't stand up for myself. My hand grazes my stomach, where the bruise blossoms dark purple. I wince at my own touch--and the memory of his booze-scented blow.

I shuffle through the crowd--"S'cuse me... S'cuse me..."--as I make my way to the front. An elderly lady smiles at me beatifically, her wrinkled, round face topped by wispy bluish-gray hair. She's hunched over, leaning heavily on her walker.

I bristle. Why is no one getting up to offer her a seat? Like...him. I glare at the scruffy teen sprawled across his chair with one leg over the armrest. Our eyes meet, and he elbow-jabs his buddy with filthy-looking dreadlocks. Two sets of hungry eyes size me up. "Dude," mutters the sprawler, and they snicker and leer.

I arrive at the check-in window. No one there, just people bustling around in the back. Passing papers, clicking on keyboards.

"Not much longer, sweetie." A young mother bounces a toddler on her knee, smoothing his soft brown curls with nervous fingers. Patting, stroking, hopping to the next lock of hair.

"It's worth the wait," a short, stocky man says to the lady beside him. "I've heard he does *amazing* things."

"Can I help you?" Her voice is gruff, her question punctuated by a huff as she drops into her chair behind the window.

"I have an appointment--"

"Take a number." She points to a dispenser on the counter. Off to the side a pretty teenager brandishes her tattooed hand holding a numbered slip, a satisfied-look on her face.

"But I have--"

"Doesn't matter," the woman rasps. "Look around you." She tilts her head toward the blue-haired woman. "She can barely stand." Tilts toward the mom and toddler. "He's got a lung disease." Tilts toward a bedraggled couple. "That hurricane destroyed their home, and--"

"Alright! I get it." I pull a number.

There's nowhere to stand here, up front. I *'scuse* myself to the back wall, near the door. I spot the Women's Shelter poster and read. And wait.

The blue-haired lady nods and smiles. The grubby teens leer. The mother bounces her child. And we wait.

Eventually the receptionist comes out. Clears her throat. "I'm afraid I have bad news." Groans. Exasperated sighs. "He's been called away. He won't be coming today."

"But I've been waiting all day...," from somewhere in the crowd.

"I've been here *every* day...," from somewhere else.

"I'm sorry." She runs back, behind the window. In case someone should get physical.

Being near the exit, I make a quick escape. But not before memorizing the Shelter number. I don't look back, except to see the bold lettering on the outside of the office door: MESSIAH.

I'll just have to wait. Like everyone else.

Wishes Gone Wrong

You Wish

Veronike Mikec

Seeing how others had their deepest wishes fulfilled, the children were eager to blow out the candles on their eighth birthday. Supposedly, it was on that day that a person's desires were at their most honest, pure, and innocent. Now, while most asked the Universe for fairly trivial wants, such as a brand-new bike or the perfect consistency of ice cream whenever they bought some, others wished to finally be able to breathe underwater, or even have their mother be free of cancer.

There were, of course, disorderly children whose wishes did not coincide with the expectations of the authorities. For this reason, governments across the globe had instilled new sets of rules, ensuring the younglings would not overstep any boundaries the world leaders deemed unacceptable. Pseudonymising them as basic guidelines, the administration kindly invited the soon-to-be eighth-year-olds to dream inside the realm of possibilities, where their wishes could be kept regulated. To warrant the seriousness of the new policies, punishments on account of disobedience were also introduced.

But despite the harsh policies, most of the youth remained hopeful and carefree. Their natural dream-like mentality often caused them to override the newly established rules, causing their parents to suffer detainment for short periods of time, as the authorities blamed poor parenting for the children's waywardness. It seemed strange, the kids thought to themselves – weren't wishes meant to be free of all restraint?

In the months to follow, tension grew as wishes became more and more limited with each new law. Chaos ensued, causing a rise in the levels of anxiety the children experienced. Fear became a permanent invitee at every birthday party, even when one had already passed their eighth year. All had become controlled. The mayhem reached its climax when girls began wishing to grow up as presidents, and when a boy from Yangsan wished to become a girl.

Havoc was sure to ensue when a previously unknown emotion awoke in the hearts of the youths. Their veins stopped the blood flow, and instead filled with resentment. Anger. Frustration. These feelings lasted for generations to come, growing stronger with every passing day. And with them, so did the children, whose minds are no longer as pure as they were on the day they turned eighth. They are coming back with the face of vengeance, and a wish to take back the freedom that was taken from them.

And should you think this is all just a story—you wish.

The Replacement

Maria Carvalho

Margo clutched her head as she shuffled, zombie-like, into her cramped kitchen. Why the *fuck* had she done so many tequila shots last night? Midway through her first gulp of terrifyingly strong coffee, she noticed the Darth Vader cookie jar sitting on the countertop and nearly did a spit-take. She clearly remembered that when she'd come home from her birthday celebration last night, she'd flung her purse onto the counter and accidentally pegged off the ceramic jar, sending Vader pieces flying. Creative swearing had ensued and she'd gone to bed, leaving cleanup for morning. Yet now the jar stood there, undamaged. *What the hell was going on?*

A vague memory tugged at the edge of her foggy brain. Something else had happened after she'd broken the jar...what was it? As she pondered this, Margo looked around her tiny pad filled with tag sale and thrift shop finds—treasures whose unique charm she loved, in spite of their less-than-pristine condition. *That was it!* The memory came rushing back: she'd lamented that she couldn't afford to replace the Vader jar or anything else, and had fervently wished that all the damaged things in her apartment would be supplanted by new versions. Just then, she'd noticed *11:11* glowing in blue on the microwave clock, notable given that the date—her birthday—was also 11/11. She recalled a superstitious boyfriend telling her that double-eleven was a lucky number and the best time to make a wish. Now she wondered: had the serendipitous timing actually made her wish come true?

Margo shook her aching head. *Ridiculous.* Everything else in her place still looked as beaten-up as ever. She'd probably dreamed the whole thing in her drunken delirium and not even broken the damn jar in the first place.

She forgot all about it until the next day, when she grabbed her favorite jacket—a red Gucci flea market purchase that was stained and patched, but still *Gucci*. She stared at it, disbelieving. The stains and patches were gone.

“Oh my *god!* My wish really *did* come true!” Margo yelled gleefully, dancing around the living room with the now-flawless jacket. When she'd worn it last night, it had still been ratty. Maybe one damaged item in her apartment was being replaced every day? The cookie jar happened the day after she'd made the wish, and now today, the jacket. *Incredible!*

In the ensuing days, as soon as Margo woke up, she tried to guess what the new and improved item du jour would be. The first time she got it right (the cracked hallway mirror), she felt giddy, like she'd just won a game show.

Two weeks later, Margo didn't play the guessing game when she awoke. She walked haltingly down the hallway, stopping in front of the mirror. The long, thin scar that had run beneath her bottom lip—the product of a childhood biking accident—was gone.

Margo stared blankly at her reflection, her brand-new mind wiped clean of any memories.

A Victorian Secret

J. T. Seate

Harold Bartholomew's Victorian parlor was aglow with a soft light reflecting off tree ornaments. Gold and silver presents gleamed, but Elizabeth was the most splendid jewel of all. She stood waiting with strands of tinsel in her hair, as requested. "Merry Christmas, darling," he said.

His housekeeper had left early. It would be only he and Elizabeth, and her sweet smile. As Harold gazed into her eyes, his pulse quickened. Prayerfully, he whispered, "You have given me such sweet memories. Tonight, I am yours and you are mine."

Harold carried Elizabeth to the Persian rug in front of the glowing fireplace Josephine had tended until she departed. "Do you remember the night," Harold said, "in the carriage? How distracted I was from overindulgence. We rushed home to make love. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Yesss," he thought she sighed.

Elizabeth made musical sounds like the air blown through the mouthpiece of a fipple-flute. In each others arms, there existed a delusion of safety from the world beyond this cozy parlor.

"Let's continue to begin every Christmas this way," Harold breathed. "Just like this, till the end of time."

On Christmas Day, Josephine let herself into her employer's home with her passkey. Her eyebrows rose at the sight of Mr. Bartholomew on the floor in front of a cold hearth, the second Christmas she had found him in such a state. She blushed at his nakedness, but could not deny a certain thrill. An empty decanter of whiskey lay nearby.

"Didn't eat a thing. Just drank your dinner, I'll wager. But who could blame you, you pathetic man, considering the terrible carriage accident. Two years ago last night it was." *If it could only be me next to you instead of those two-year-old, unopened packages...and this creature.*

Josephine chastised herself for her lascivious feelings, but it *was* Christmas. She noticed a sprig of mistletoe clutched in Bartholomew's fist. *Had I been under the mistletoe, might he have given me a kiss?*

"When I come next week, I'm going to wear a bright frock instead of these old cleaning rags and maybe you'll come out of your fantasies and take notice of me."

Josephine picked up the humanlike, mechanical doll with the lifelike face her employer had created. The clockwork mechanism activating her music box had long since run down, but the eyes opened slowly, the counterbalanced lids of a doll's eyes, which caused Josephine to shiver.

The heart oftentimes rules the head, a recipe for either joy or disaster. Josephine placed the copy of Harold's dead wife, an affront to all that was decent she believed, back in the closet and slipped out of the house leaving her employer with his dreams and liquor-induced slumber.

The parlor was quiet now. Harold could feel the memory of Elizabeth's touch engraved on his skin. He heard carolers singing, *God Rest ye Merry Gentlemen*. His lips moved slowly. "Thank you, Elizabeth. Until next Christmas Eve, my darling. Happy New Year."

Pesticide

Tom Barlow

Lettie stood by the graveside, burying her husband Patrick. Again. The minister was praying for his soul, but sounded a bit uncertain, after the first time. The undertaker stood across from her, looking miffed that the corpse had refused to remain dead.

Patrick had always been a stubborn, conceited man, so Lettie hadn't been taken completely by surprise when he reappeared a week after his first funeral, his good suit smeared with the clay soil of the church cemetery. She was a simple woman for whom miracles would seem as unremarkable as a five-legged goat, which they'd had twice in their herd. She made a pot of coffee, handed him a cup, and took a seat across the kitchen table, waiting for him to speak.

"The toilet," he began, spitting out a wad of dirt before resuming, "the feed line tends to leak. Got to keep on top of it before it ruins the floor."

"Yeah, I know that."

"Larry Evans is the guy to call to drain the septic tank." He took a handkerchief and blew clay boogers into it.

"Yeah, I know that."

"The Chevy needs a tune-up."

"Got that done Tuesday."

"I borrowed Stu Paine's chainsaw. That should be returned."

"He's stopping by for it this afternoon."

Patrick dug into an ear. "The barn could use a new roof. Call AAAA Roofing, ask for Dan." "I'm selling the farm, moving into Waterbury." She finished her coffee, spun the cup between her palms. "Just why did you come back, anyway?"

"Unfinished business," he said, with the arrogance that had come with age, that set her teeth on edge. "You still need me. There's so much you don't know."

"Maybe the first forty years. Now, not so much."

"But I came back from the dead for this." He seemed hurt by her independence.

She noticed he didn't breathe, except when he needed air to talk. "You watch enough television, you get to thinking that everybody's story wraps up neatly, right on the hour. But yours ended more like a power failure in the middle of a commercial for Depends. Coming back won't improve that."

"But I must be here for some reason."

"I haven't the vaguest idea what that might be. You never were a good sleeper, though."

"You try peeing every two hours and see how you sleep."

"You drank too much coffee. Speaking of which, this blend does a good job of masking the flavor of the poison, don't you think? It worked perfectly the first time, and I'm pretty sure there's no crime in killing a dead man."

"You've murdered me? Twice?" She'd never seen such incredulity on Patrick's face.

"Your cousin Stanley has done well in the bug control business, but I never realized until a year ago what fun he could be. Remember how you told me he could solve any pest problem I might have? You were right."

She paid a premium this time to bury him extra, extra deep.

Fairy Dust
Rainie Zenith

They say childhood passes in the blink of an eye, wide-eyed children morphing into jaded adults in a matter of nanoseconds. Adam was certainly getting older by the day. Today he was turning seven.

“Happy birthday Adam! Blow out the candles and make a wish,” his mother encouraged.

Adam glanced sideways at the brass urn on the mantelpiece, squeezed his eyes shut and whispered.

“I wish Nanna was still alive.”

The fairy perched on the rim of his glass winked and tossed a tiny fistful of glimmering dust into the air.

Adam had been seeing the fairy ever since the doctors had killed Nanna, almost a year ago. Assisted dying, they called it. It was what Nanna had wanted, his parents said. But it was nothing short of murder in Adam’s youthful eyes, and all he knew was he missed his Nanna.

His parents didn’t approve of him talking about the fairy, so he tried not to mention her anymore. Every time he slipped up they would sternly remind him that fairies didn’t exist, and by now he knew better than to argue.

“Now wait here while we fetch your birthday present,” Adam’s father said, the pair of them scuttling off to their top secret hiding place which Adam knew was the back of the wardrobe. He peeped forlornly back at Nanna’s urn and did a double take.

The mantel was bare.

But the urn had been there just seconds ago. What in the world?

“Adam.”

The voice was raspy as a rusted up hacksaw but it was unmistakably Nanna’s. Any joy Adam felt at the first sounds of her voice, however, quickly melted into horror as she emitted an agonised groan.

He eyeballed the skeletal frame slumped torturously in the olive armchair and felt his bones freeze.

It was Nanna, but Nanna so ravaged by another year of cancer that she was corpse-like; Nanna still alive but so pain-struck she may as well have been the living dead.

“Adam. So much pain. Adam, help me.”

She moaned a tortured cry from hell.

Adam shrieked and turned on the fairy.

“I take it back! Make it stop! I wish Nanna was still dead!”

There was a flash of gold, and then his parents were there, holding him, stroking him, asking him the matter.

“Nanna!” he wailed. “Nanna!”

“Is Nanna’s urn upsetting you darling?” fussed his mother. “Take it down, Peter.”

Adam looked up from his sobbing and yes, the urn was back on the mantel, being hastily retrieved by his father.

Adam checked the armchair. Nanna was gone.

“Nanna was here!” he sobbed. “The fairy threw some dust and brought her back.”

“Oh Adam, I wish you would grow up and stop damn well seeing fairies!” his mother barked.

The fairy released a fistful of glittering gold.

Adam’s parents gaped uncomprehendingly at the man standing where Adam had just been.

Adam tugged at his new beard and wondered when the world had got so dull.

Almost as Good

Karen Sarita Ingram

The door opened slowly to the sound of moving gears, disappearing into the wall. The two men stepped into the room. It was the size of a walk-in closet. A single bed took up most of the space, touching three of the walls. The second man could already tell the bed would not be long enough for him to lie down on his back without his feet hitting the wall.

"There's no toilet," the second man observed.

"It's here," the first man said, lifting the bed. It folded neatly into the wall and a stainless steel toilet raised up from the floor underneath. A small sink rested on top of the tank, so that water used to wash hands could be recycled. The first man pulled the bed back down and gestured to his companion. The second man turned around in the narrow well and sat on the bed, facing the door. He could now see a screen next to the door.

"What sort of view would you like for your window?" The first man asked him.

The second man thought for a moment. "A city."

"Are you sure? Most people ask for mountains or meadows."

"A city," the man repeated, looking up from the stiff bed. "A big one."

"Alright," the first man shrugged and typed something into the tablet he kept nestled in the crook of his left arm. "But you're going to miss the trees, and it takes a while to process a request to change it."

The screen flickered and transformed into a window. Gossamer fabric curtains hung neatly at its sides. Through the glass, tall buildings stretched for miles. The first man demonstrated how to "open" the window with a wave of his hand. The man who sat on the bed heard the sounds of distant traffic and closed his eyes for a moment, longingly. He could even feel the faintest breeze on his skin. He opened his eyes again and saw the curtains move. Could it be...? He reached for the fabric and his hand passed through the illusion. Disappointed, he let his hand drop to his lap.

"Pretty good, huh?" The first man said. "Almost as good as the real thing."

The second man just looked at him until he cleared his throat uncomfortably and offered his tablet to him.

"Prisoner number 1138-3282, please sign here to indicate that your cell's features have been explained to you."

The second man pressed his thumb to the lit square on the tablet's screen and it chirped happily.

"Dinner is at six, lights out at nine," the first man said, smoothing the front of his uniform.
"Exercise is on a rotating schedule. Your block will be tomorrow at two. Any questions, just yell.
The walls are soundproofed, but you're always under observation."

"Thanks," the second man said.

Tomorrow Is Outlawed

Meredith Moody

A woman is sitting alone. Her husband is at work, employed by the Department of Hypothetical Thinking. He has never brought any of his work home. It is only behind a government-sanctioned desk that people can speak of the future, can speculate, can dream. Anya sits at home and thinks that she barely recognises her husband these days; he is the only one of the four not bound to the present.

She clutches a secret, a relic of her past. Before the ban, Anya was a teller of myths and legends and histories. She wrote of what might have been and her works were incinerated because of it. After all, it is hard to regulate speech, but it is easy to burn books.

Her hands cradle one last copy of her masterpiece, *The Aeneid: Reimagined*. Reimagined. The word alone had been enough to damn her. A tear drips from her eye, unwanted and unbidden. Anya wipes it away and wraps the book up in dirty rags, stuffing it beneath a pried-up floorboard.

Her children have never read *The Aeneid*, reimagined or otherwise. Anya is glad of this. She thinks that it has kept them safe.

A girl is sitting in her friend's basement, her eyes alight with the kind of thrill that only seventeen year olds chase. The fearlessness of someone young enough to realise that the world is opening up around them and not old enough to be wary of its bite.

“Ready?”

Savi nods. The home-sterilised needle punctures her flesh and ink blooms beneath her skin. Her friend – a boy with wild eyes and wilder hair – tattoos her ribcage. Savi grits her teeth and bears the stabbing pain.

“It's done.”

The boy puts down the needle and examines his work. It's a shooting star, black as night and twice as dangerous.

“Better make a wish.”

Parliament outlawed wishes ten years ago, a subsection of the blanket ban on hypothetical communication. The word sends a shiver of pleasure down Savi's spine.

They kiss. Two weeks later she is screaming in another dingy room as they burn it off, the stench of seared flesh in the air.

A boy is running, papers spilling from his hands. He is a Runner for the back-alley fiction dealers and in this moment he proves his worth, twisting between people and slipping into side alleys. Feet pound behind him and Rex is afraid, panicking. Moonlight glints off the barrel of a gun and he dives, rolls, and keeps running.

He is fifteen and he has a dream that he is not prepared to die for. It doesn't matter. By morning there is nothing but blood staining the cobbles for street urchins to clean.

A man is at work, thinking in hypotheticals. This is permitted, because he is on the clock. He thinks of his wife and two children, safe and sound. He watches the seconds tick by, wishing that it is five already. He is looking forward to going home.

Just Another Day in Paradise

Prachi Shah

Tammy walked up to Sabarjit, as they saw Miranda Summers, Head of the Wishes Organization storm into their bosses' Samara Parker's cabin.

Before she could say anything he said, "This request is legit Tammy."

Tammy gave a dry chuckle, which he'd learned to ignore.

He had been dead only a month and it had just been a fortnight since he'd begun working as the Earth Review Officer in the Wishes Organization in Heaven. And this was already the third time he'd filed a 'revisit' request, which required the Head to personally review the grants in question. He'd noticed discrepancies in the final selection of wishes for grants yet again. He was just doing his job.

Inside the office, Miranda was irked. "This is the third time this week, Samara."

"I'm so sorry...the new guy..." Samara stammered.

Miranda gave a dismissive wave. "I am on a tight schedule here. Just fill me in. Quickly."

"Okay." Samara said. "The request is to transfer the wish grants from Daniel, Zoya and Ashley to Reece, Mukta and Jacob. Reece has wished for a donation for the orphanage he supports---"

"Yeah, yeah." Miranda said, cutting her off. "Just tell me about the ones granted."

"Well, Daniel wins the lottery---" Samara began.

"Completely," Samara replied.

"Good," Miranda said. "Let the report show I came in for the 'review'."

With that, Miranda was gone.

"I don't get it." Sabarjit asked Tammy, who had sauntered over to his table.

"Samara!" Miranda hissed. "I. Don't. Care. Just tell me, are they in line with our Director's preferences?"

Outside, Sabarjit's shoulders dropped as he read Samara's email - "Request of transfer denied."

She sighed. "Look, I will explain it just this once because, honestly, I can't stand the sight of your puppy dog face." Tammy peered into his laptop. "Let's take Reece vs. Daniel. Daniel wins the favor because Reece is a borderline atheist while Daniel is religious."

“Seriously? How’s that even relevant?”

“It’s relevant because our current Director finds the concept of religion amusing. And the humans’ deep belief in it even more so.” Tammy laughed at Sabarjit’s confusion. “Look, it’s all about the Director in power, okay? Daniel’s beliefs are hilarious to the Director, so he gets preference. Mr. Goody-two-shoes Reece, is just plain boring. These are like invisible requisites...that keep changing with directors.”

“That’s just - *wrong*. I mean...these are living beings.”

“So are guinea pigs on Earth, my friend. In Heaven Valley, humans are like them. Some love them, some find them cute, but a majority just don’t care, you know?”

Sabarjit nodded.

“Miranda,” Tammy said, lowering her voice, “has to keep the Director happy if she wishes to get to the top. And *you* need to keep *your* boss happy if you want to move on to better planets. Got it?”

“So...the boss’ amusement takes precedence over the people – even though many lives depend on these grants?”

“Now you’re getting it!” Tammy said, slapping his back. “Welcome to paradise!”

Sorrow, Sadness, and Loss

Summer Grief

Abigail Swanson

If I don't look at her, she isn't there. If I glance at shifting colors in the prairie grasses or birds in the Midwestern skies, but don't really look at her shadow, she isn't there, no matter what she wants me to think.

In the tall corn stalks growing thick as an enchanted forest, I don't hear the silks passing along her name if I don't listen. When the weather vane squeaks in the wind and mama's calico curtains swish against the scent of blackberry pies in the sill, it's not her turning on her heel or swishing her skirt, not if I don't want it to be.

That is, until mid-summer, when she drips like honey into every crevice of my world, sticky, slow, suffocating. When I snatch sheets from the clothesline, she pulls at the corners, teasing me to leave the chores and come splash in the creek. As if ma weren't calling me to wash for supper, as if we weren't too old for those games. As if she hadn't left a place she wasn't supposed to come back from.

I wish she hadn't come back.

Even when ma's eyes are the color of a tornado looming in the horizon. Even when ma sets four places, me, herself, pa, and *her*. Even when pa's hands tremble at the sound of my coughing, which I reckon sounds like what she had. I promise I try to hide it. Even when mama wrings the laundry too hard, squeezing out the grief dampening her soul, washing out her memory.

Even when I lie awake at night put my hand out to her bed to feel the hills and valleys made by her arms and legs in the quilt, only to remember her bed ain't even there anymore.

Ma and pa can't see her, not like me.

I wish I didn't know about her place by the lower left corner of the field, wish I could still pass through there, cross the fallen log to the creek instead of taking the long way around the fields. I wish the berries by the path didn't grow plump with her tartness, or that twisters didn't howl with her tantrums.

She could come back for ma and pa, too. Ma cracks the windows at night in the summer. In the mornings, Pa scans the horizon for storms or Lord knows what. I kneel in the empty space by my bed, making wishes and prayers and everything in between.

But I know something else. She'll wither away like a sun-faded dress before the crows begin to pick the decaying clothes from the scarecrow. I'll release jar after jar of stolen fireflies, say a thousand and one prayers. With the close of summer, the grief will change colors with her leaving. As winter settles around our too empty house and I can't hear her so much as whimper, I know I will wish for her to come back again.

On a Train

Pepper Hume

His sad/sweet eyes stared at nothing as he stood,
waiting for the swaying train to gather speed.
I love you, I wanted to say it out loud.
More than you dream, I wanted to say.
More than anyone else ever will.
I wanted his eyes to glow for me.
Yet I must not say these things.
I must not kiss his fine long fingers.
I must not touch his silken cheek.
There are other things to be said while I can.
I know you can never marry me.
That I could live with, to have only your love.
But you must marry. Someone who is not me.
The train gathered speed, its rhythm smoothing.
Someone of royal blood, who can sit proud beside you at state functions.
Her children will be your heirs, celebrated in public.
My children will be secret shadows, hidden by their father.
I may share your bed, she will share your throne, your name, your life.
This I cannot bear. I must say a terrible thing.
When this train reaches Bombay, I will disappear from your life.
How can I bear to look upon that dear face?
How do I tear my eyes from my only love?
His sad/sweet eyes finally looked at me. My heart stopped. He spoke.
Next stop, Evanston. Ticket please.

Wonder Woman

John Jeffire

Her favorite sleeping mask is adorned in leopard print. Jungle huntress. Sleek, powerful, unconquerable. Independent. Morning sunlight causes her head pain to spike but, medical bills still mounting, we can't afford blackout shades. While restful sleep is near impossible, she enjoys the stylish touch of leopard print. I am sitting across from her gurney we have set up in our bedroom next to the bed we used to share. She asks me if I've seen the eye mask. I find it on the floor between the beds.

"Here you go."

Her pain meds begin to kick in. Fentanyl, dilaudid, diazepam, whatever Hospice can provide. Her eyelids grow drunk heavy. Her speech slurs, exacerbated by the neckbrace she must wear, which restricts movement of her jaw. The fifth—and we know final—brain surgery has shown no positive results. I try to stretch the eye mask over her head but she reaches up, takes it from me. She struggles the eye mask on.

"Need my mask. Gonna be flying around."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. Wonder Woman needs a mask."

"So where you flying to?"

"Everywhere. Gonna get the bad guys. Fly up over top them, swoop down. Kick ass and take names."

I take her hand. Thin. Pale. A papery sliver of light. She is a wonder. My wonder woman. My leopard queen. No primetime family friendly network time slot. No magic bracelets. No shield. No invisible plane, but she is taking flight, soaring off somewhere, eyes set on the infinite beyond. I am here on Earth, sitting on the bed we shared next to the gurney we brought in to give her some comfort, and I watch her drift off to sleep.

What can I say about her?

I want her here.

What would I say *to* her, if she were awake, not taking to the clouds, soaring over everything, prowling through the high grass, fighting monsters and the malignant powers that forced her onto this gurney?

I cover her hand in both of mine.

I listen to her breathe.

Woman, I want you here.

I want you here.

I want you here.

What They Must Have Said

Ronald Pelias

1.

This place is no longer a good place of us, little one. There are too many bad people around us. We are not safe here. Tomorrow we will start a long journey. It will be hard, but when we get to where we are going, all will be good. Every day you will smile and have plenty to eat. You will go to school. Learn to read and write. You will make me so proud. Now I want you decide what you want to take with you. You can bring only one thing from here, but you will have to carry it, carry it the whole way all by yourself. After you to decide, get a good night's sleep. Tomorrow night, and many nights after, we will sleep under the stars. Our journey will be long. You will be my big helper, little one. You will be my big man. We will start with the morning sun.

2.

I know you are tired, but we must keep going. The others will leave us behind if we stop for you to rest. Here is a little bite of your supper for tonight. It will give you a little energy. If you weren't always kicking and chasing after your ball, you wouldn't be so tired. Come now. We must go. Get up. Put one foot in front of another. I know your shoe has a hole and your foot is sore. We will look for some paper that we can fold and put inside your shoe where the hole is. Come, let's watch for some paper. Come, little one. We can sing your favorite song while we walk.

3.

Tomorrow we will meet a man who will take us across the river to the end of our travels. Once there, we will tell what they did to your father. I know you miss him. I do too. But tomorrow, they will give us a safe place to sleep and food to eat. We will learn to speak like the people who live there do. We will cross that river and you will be in your new country where you will have a new life. You will be free, little one. You will be safe. We will get you a new ball, one you can kick all day long.

4.

Where have you taken my little one? He is only five-years-old. He does not understand what is happening. You said you would be back with him right away. Why are you saying I broke the law? I came here to be safe. I had to come. When we saw you, we didn't run. We told you our story. I don't understand. Where is he? You can't take him away from me. Don't walk away leaving me in here. I have to get to my son. Tell me where he is.

You'll Go Through It, Too

Allyson Lawhon

My nineteenth birthday was a thief. A kitchen table where I saw my dad cry for the first time, instead of filled with balloons and a Polaroid and chocolate cake. I filled my parents in on my thoughts.

My back against the wall on a bar stool, already regretting the sadness that would leave my lips. Facing the fighting inside of me for the past year. The one thing I couldn't name.

From crying in the car and screaming at God, to walking through the front door, to sitting on the bar stool. We held a family meeting that should've been a birthday party.

"I want to die," I told my mom. This was all I could mutter. My dad cried, and my mom asked me when I stopped having curly hair and running circles around the house and happy-go-lucky.

"We have a good life," she said.

"I know."

We still cried. When my dad left the room because he had to, I asked my mom why.

"Well, he went through some depression in high school. He knows about it."

This was news to me.

"And think about Grandma. Do you really think she's ever been happy?"

My grandma. Tight curls and thin lipstick and a life of accommodations for my grandpa. She turned her cheek to endless hunting trips and ran the church choir.

I witnessed the weekends she stayed home alone, and the longing for acceptance after a meal, and how we never had a word for what we saw.

Now, we have a name. More than a name, we have an answer to generations.

I wanted to cry more. Because no one had told me.

I felt alone in this agony, and I was blind to the blood before me.

I now thought of my memories in a new way. I saw my dad as a lanky teenager, in need of braces, walking himself to his basketball games. A crowd of neighbors to cheer him on, but no family. I once found a letter of apology in the attic, addressed from mother to son. She was absent from her family. At nineteen, I felt absent from my entire life.

And then there was my aunt, the baby of the family.

Immune to the relational brokenness and unsaid words around her. Off to the side. Spoiled. But filled with worldly things and not words of affirmation or encouragement.

I thought about my role in it all.

What no one told me was that we would all turn out okay. One day I might have a husband who goes on too many vacations. And my own little sister will always be in need.

I will take pills and take pictures and put them in photo albums for the grandkids one day. They will look at me in aprons and as the only parent at the birthday party. Of course, I will be smiling.

I wish someone had told me that people go through this. I wish someone had told me that grandmothers go through it, too.

More than Wishing

Martia Reed

Margareta was curled up in her armchair before the crackling little fire while the snow softly fell outside the darkened window. The little fire crackled and popped, dancing and swaying merrily, but the only thing Margareta saw were the words which danced before her eyes, like ghosts haunting the corridors of her mind. *June D'Aulaire, Loving Wife and Mother.*

All around Margareta, the silence was ringing in her ears and the emptiness filled the room. She wondered if it was possible to be crushed by still air, or suffocated by nothing. Tears would have been a relief. Thought would have been too, only, she couldn't think. She couldn't laugh, she couldn't cry, she couldn't remember, she couldn't forget. She was numb, frozen, capable of nothing. Nothing, that is, but wishing.

Then and there she wished her mother had never died, she wished she wasn't alone, she wished she hadn't quarreled with Jeremy and pushed away her friends. She wished and wished and wished, but inside she knew she couldn't wish the pain away. So her wishes curdled and soured, hardening into unreasonable resentment. Why had her mother insisted on going on that car trip? If she hadn't, there would have been no fatal car accident. Why had Jeremy kept pushing her to open up? If he hadn't, she wouldn't have snapped at him and let all those bitter, hurtful words slip past her lips. On and on the vicious circle went until suddenly, it broke.

A gust of fresh air swept through the room and, though she felt it across her face, the fire kept up its steady crackling and not a shudder went through it. Margareta heard her name being called, distant and far-off, and she looked up. She was still alone in the room, as far as the eye could see, but she heard it again. "Margareta?"

Margareta's lips parted, but no sound came forth. The voice spoke again, so sweet and gentle. "Margareta, don't you know me?"

"Mother?" Margareta's voice cracked.

She felt the familiar soft arms enfold her in their old embrace and the low, smooth voice murmur, "Be careful of wishing, dear."

The tears came then. The sobs were wrenched from somewhere deep within her and the tears stung her eyes and blurred her vision. The soft voice repeated, "Be careful of wishing, dear. You cannot let them turn to mere thoughts, lost second chances and regrets. Take heart, dear, and remember: Learn to make your wishes come true."

The next moment, Margareta was alone. She looked around her, and everything was just the same as it had been moments before. She still felt her mother's arms around her and heard her whisper, "I love you."

Margareta settled back in her chair. The pain was still there, but it wouldn't always be there. A knock sounded on her front door, and when she opened the door, standing there in the small circle of light cast by the small bulb on the front porch was Jeremy.

Wish Upon a Raindrop

Cozette Brown

She jumped in the puddle. Her blue mud-splashed raincoat with the yellow daisies added sunshine to the gloom of a rainy afternoon. The matching hat, a halo of sky about her little girl head, hid her face from view as I peered from under my polka dotted black umbrella. I waited for the bus and willed the driver to let his foot off the gas so I could watch the entertaining display a bit longer. She studied the sidewalk clearly searching for a prime piece of puddly real estate. I could no more look away than stop this unrelenting drizzle. Thankful for the dark umbrella that hid my stare, a familiar sting burned the backs of my eyelids. I blinked it away. Her mother, I assume she was her mother, stood a few steps away attempting to escape the wet beneath a soggy newspaper meant to be an umbrella. In spite of her damp blond hair and soaked shoes, she smiled as she watched her free spirit twirl.

A baby-soft trill sailed through the mist. “Mommy?” “Yes?”
“Make a wish. Like teacher says.”
“Make a wish? You mean like on a star?”

The girl nodded as she stomped another puddle into oblivion. “But there’s no stars, sweetie,” said her mother.
“Make a wish on a raindrop then.”

My heart skipped a beat and the cold stab of loss constricted my chest. I dared not breathe. Breath would melt the moment. It could have been the delightful dreaminess of a child’s voice so like my daughter’s once upon a time. It could have been the cherubic face with little rosy cheeks puffed into a smile that stole my breath away. No, I knew what it was.

Make the wish. One mother’s heart willing another’s to hear, to see the flash of eternity in a single raindrop. *Please. Oh please, make the wish.*

The squeal of compressed air releasing as the bus pulled to a stop cracked the moment like broken glass. The woman took her child by the hand and steered her toward the bus. I watched as a mother watched her daughter struggle to climb the steps “like a big girl.” The driver waited, a silent invitation to board. I couldn’t move. Instead, I searched the windows for one more glimpse of the girl in a blue hat. The door creaked shut against me and the exhaust belched a final farewell. As the bus lurched forward onto Broad Street, I stood alone surrounded by thousands of silent watery wishes.

Dreaming of Trees

Sandra Kumamoto Stanley

She had died over a week ago, and we were tasked with going through her piles of stuff. I use the word stuff loosely, for she was a hoarder. When she had first gotten ill we had urged her to hire someone to clean her house and she reluctantly did so. We imagined that her treasured mounds of possessions were consuming her from without as her cancer was eating her from within. Into the bin went great mounds of rotting newspaper (she had intended to read them), old decaying food containers (long since expired), and moth eaten clothes. Accidentally, the cleaners threw away withered photos (bits and pieces of her precious memory); molding letters (cherished communion); and jewelry hidden away in pockets of frayed clothing (mementos of love gone). How could they recognize these treasures? She mourned for all her objects.

She was born on a tea plantation to British parents in India when the dream of Empire was still sustainable. She flew to the U.S. as a young woman impatient for a new adventure in the old colonies, when the dream of renewal was still possible. She had red hair and pale skin, like a Pre-Raphaelite vision of the Lady of Shallot—ah--“she has a lovely face.” But each year, woven into her life--things weighed down her dreams.

So we, like gleaners, winnowed through her remaining possessions—her grain we regarded as chaff. How could we recognize her treasures? We found uncashed tax returns, jewelry, and cash—these we set aside for her heirs—but the rest—bits and pieces of a life--now destined for a Salvation Army without the power of redemption.

She did not believe in God—even when the cancer had beaten her—but she did believe in trees. She had told us of her passion for trees, but never explained why. Perhaps, she thought we all saw the wonderment of trees—with their roots gripping the earth and their leaves grasping the heavens. So we made sure that her gravesite was surrounded by trees. In all her possessions, we never found a tree—not as a knick-knack or a piece of jewelry or as a painting. So around her now, bearing her up and over the odds and ends of life, the trees carry her beyond—fantastical and majestic in their possibilities, unbounded by the weight of belongings and longings. Gripping down into our hoarded lives, she also carries us, dreaming of trees.

Blue

Christopher Woods

I just saw Dr. Mason. Now I know. It's all too fast.

Just two weeks ago, I finished training for our town's Volunteer Fire Department. That's when we got a call. My first. A house on fire. Neighbors said there were still people in there. We went in as best we could through the smoke and pulled out a family. Father, mother, two kids. Then we went to work.

I got the little girl. Maybe five. Blue lips. I thought she was dead, but the Captain said to try to bring her back.

Such a small thing. I laid her out on the grass. She didn't move. All limp. Like a doll. I started mouth to mouth. My first time. Her lips...so cold. So, so cold. I could see her face turning blue. I was so close to her. But I kept on, like they taught us.

After twenty minutes, the Captain put his hand on my shoulder. It's okay, boy, he said. She's gone.

I couldn't stop. I kept trying, mouth to mouth. Finally the Captain and another guy pulled me away. I stood there, shaking, trying not to cry.

Had I done something wrong? If I had done a better job, would that little girl still be alive?

I went home that night, but I couldn't sleep. In the morning, the Captain called. The fire was arson. I asked him, who would burn down a house on purpose? Then the Captain said something that scared the hell out of me. He wanted me to go see Dr. Mason. I'm fine, I said. Just do it, he said.

So I did. I went to see Dr. Mason. I've known him forever. He delivered me if you want to know. That's when I learned about the fire. How the family had set it. How they were sick with that new disease. You know, the one with the long name? They knew they had it, and they didn't want it to spread. So they decided to die together.

How were we supposed to know?

It's late now. My fever has started. I'm feeling sick. Weak. When Dr. Mason told me I had it too, he had a tear in his eye. He put his hand on my shoulder. Said he was sorry.

I don't have much time left. It's crazy. All I wanted was to help. All that family wanted was to keep the disease from spreading. We all tried, didn't we? I think so. Wouldn't you have done the same thing?

Forgiven

Jackie Kierulf

I thought about coming many times and now find myself shivering in the bleakness. But I stand here at the door waiting and hoping she will answer. The wind bites at my neck, and I pull down hard at the beanie I'm wearing, needing more warmth than it gives.

I grasp the bunch of blooms. My hands are already dry and chaffed, and I'm regretting leaving my gloves at home. The tighter I grasp the cellophane wrap, the more my skin feels like cardboard. I don't think she will open the door.

If I was in her place, what would I do? When she last saw me, I was dragging a large duffle bag with whatever I could stuff into it. What had happened to the things that remained? Did she find a storage locker to stash my belongings? Or maybe she didn't feel betrayed and kept the room exactly as I'd left it.

None of this matters now as I compose myself to face her. The wind picked up with fierce intent and I braced myself against it. It didn't seem like months, but more like a lifetime of many regrets. There was no choice to be made then. I had to go.

I want to knock again. I know she's here. She wouldn't leave this early, and her car hasn't been brushed off.

It was almost dawn when I left that day. The pain on her face was in my heart. I cannot change that now. I chose to move forward and hope.

I balance the flowers to knock with the same hand. The sound is an empty echo. While the jagged snowflakes continue to cover me, I wrap my hand around the bundle in my other arm.

I remember how the door used to stick when the cold weather came, but he didn't fix it. The frame now shook, and with a pause, the door opened suddenly. She stood facing me as the wind rushed inside. I studied her face, not knowing what to expect.

Back then, she knew I had to leave. It couldn't have been easy for her to accept that. He is gone now and the very reason I stand here now. Her battle wounds have gone. There are no more beatings now and I am relieved.

Somehow I felt the flowers would ease things. I picked her favorites and hoped she would soften when she saw them. But I didn't need them - not really.

I searched her eyes for a sign that it was okay to be here. "I couldn't do it, Mom," I confessed. She nodded her head, hugged me tightly, and held out her arms to hold my daughter.

Perseids

Amanda Campbell

As the light fades, and the air cools, Stella ponders the twinkling bits that will soon spread across the sky. Unknowingly, the fingers on her left-hand pluck and pull at the blankets frayed edges. Her thoughts are consumed by a single purpose. So consumed in fact, the blood thirsty mosquitoes cease to exist even as they dive bomb the flesh of her pale arms.

August had finally come! For Stella, that meant one thing: *hope*. Carrying on her tradition of the past ten years, Stella waited. Patiently, anxiously, she sat on her scratchy, worn, checkered blanket, anticipating nightfall.

The crisp breeze blows through this tiny meadow and right through her auburn hair. It's always that way out here. In the noiseless wash of the whispering winds she sees what she's been counting on—the shower of sparks streaking the sky!

Stella slammed her eyelids shut as quickly as she could. She launched herself to her feet.

“Oh vibrant star, splitting the sky, grant me this, or let me die!”

From the kitchen window, JD had a clear view. Watching was *his* tradition. He wondered why Stella sat like that. Every summer she drags that heavy wool blanket out to the middle of the yard. She parks it in the giant patch of dandelion. Within moments her legs are swept up into that childish pose—crisscross applesauce they used to say—she lifts her chin and stares at the twilight sky. For the life of him, he couldn't figure why.

JD knew the next steps. After smoothing the wrinkles, Stella would lay back, seemingly exhausted, on her tattered blanket. She would stay that way for another hour.

Stella knows he's watching. She's used to it by now. Still, she postpones heading in until he's left the kitchen.

Eventually, Stella made her way back to the porch, the yearly cry rattling inside her head. It was all she could do to remember to lock the door. JD would be livid if she forgot—again. Stella calmed the mental noise long enough to hook the chain, twist the knob and listen for the *thunk thunk* as both dead bolts landed in place. Then down the twelve steps to her bedroom she walked.

Every August for a decade, JD watched this ritual of Stella's. Each time it was over he listened for the sound of her feet on the steps below; that's how he knew it was over. That's how he knew they'd be back to status quo by dawn. JD always felt safe by this fact and drifted off to sleep.

Stella awoke to a cacophony of what must've been splintering wood, boots above, and calls demanding JD come out from, well, wherever he was.

Stella wasn't worried.

Liberation never sounded so sweet.

The Natural World

Orion's Wings

Mercy Godwins

Not one amiss, not one flawed, it's a
boundless promise all night long. I know,
'cause I could never count them all.
The night sky with stars gave the vision of
tree lights. It twinkled like fire flies, much
more beautiful when you held them in
your hands and watched them glow. I do
think a wish to such creatures might
be granted, something so beautiful must
have magic in it, however small.

I laid on the soft beach ground, loving the
coolness of the night as I gazed at the
stars.
Hoping in my heart, that this would be the
night where my dreams found me.
I reasoned that the sea must know my thoughts,
it's been my companion every night on the
Island, since I heard the story of Orion- a
magical star that fulfilled the
wish of wings to those who want to go
from here and see the world.

The night grand Pa told her
story was interesting. He told us how
Orion was once a curious little girl
whose only wish was to see the world, to
travel round it like a bird with no place
beyond it's reach. Papa said Orion
woke up every morning and ran outside,
stretching her hands and flapping it
towards the sky, hoping she could fly. He
said she did that every night as well,
before she went to bed, until the night her
wings came and Orion's wish was granted.
She flew around the world, traveling till
she went up to the sky and made it her
home. When I had asked grand Pa if that
story was true, he simply said that
everything depended on what I believed.

The only sounds around me were birds

chirping near by and the intimidating roar of the sea. There was calmness to it, the perfect word for the scene was solitude. Each night I came here praying for Orion's wings, I stayed past midnight. A times I dozed off, waking at dawn.

There were times when I found it hard to believe that I have spent all my life on this Island, that truly there was life beyond it. When was I finally going to see with my eyes all I had heard of people outside here. I've been told that for entertainment, they watched life in a box called a 'television', that they travelled in flying objects called 'airplanes' and that when they were sick they have machines that could see inside their body, to find out the problem. Papa said those things were called Scanners.

I looked at the time and it was passed one in the morning, Mama must be worried again. I got off the ground and dusted my skirt giving out a loud yawn. Perhaps I should wait a little longer and stretch out my arms once again. I did with all my might, willing myself to fly but nothing happened so I bowed my head and went home. Tomorrow is another day.

We'd All Cast Nets

Keith Frady

The fisherman woke before dusk. He made a pot of coffee, and strolled outside with a steaming cup to survey the sky. Clear and calm, the ocean lapping at the base of the cliff below. The sun took its time heading west, its rays spreading across the firmament with the luxury of a cat stretching after a nap. The fisherman went back inside the lighthouse for breakfast, and emerged with a thermos holding the last of the coffee.

He sang as he walked down the cliff's makeshift stairs to the salt-worn pier at the base, a soft, whiskey bass rolling from the sea foam tumble of his beard. He sat at the pier's edge, feet dangling. The sun yawned, one last burst of orange and red, then made room for the night and her stars.

The fisherman rubbed his beard, still humming his wordless song, squinting one by one at the vibrating stars. Finally, satisfied with his selection, he reached up and grabbed a thread of starlight, then wove it into a shimmering net. He took a sip of coffee, its aroma mingling with sharp sea salt.

Lights began to swim into view, darting just beneath the waves. They sprinted and hovered and circled and flew through the sea, and a susurrus, as if a thousand secrets were being whispered into the night, bubbled from their luminescence to the surface. The fisherman grunted at the good haul, and with a river-smooth motion, cast the net into the sea at the edge of the world.

The fisherman hauled. A single wish was caught in the net, and the fisherman untangled it with his weathered hands. He brought the firefly wisp to his ear, frowning in concentration.

When the wish relayed its message, a laugh boomed from the very depths of the fisherman. Done early tonight, he climbed back up to the lighthouse with his thermos in one hand, the wish clasped gently in the other. At the top of the lighthouse, he opened first the lantern, then his hand. The spark leapt in.

Countries and oceans away, the morning sun's eye lazily peeked over the horizon. Little Frank woke up to discover a goldfish, exactly as he'd described the night before down to the ragged fin that'd been injured when it'd battled a giant squid to save the sunken mermaid kingdom, floating contentedly in a bowl that had not been on the nightstand when Frank had gone to sleep.

Delighted, Frank leapt over to his new friend and began to tell him about the dream he'd had, a dream about a lighthouse and a fisherman with a net that sparkled like stars.

So Much More

Carolyn Brucks

In a secluded forest, a new sapling sprouted. He peered at the lofty trees encircling him. Each day, winds carried whispers, legends of the Great Trees.

Before the sapling's first branches spread, he knew. He knew of Albert the Cedar, who became the mast of a magnificent ship. He knew of Richard the Green, fashioned into a pillar in a king's hall. He knew of Charlotte the Sugar Maple, whose limbs fueled fires that ignited a revolution. He listened to these legacies so profusely, he knew them by heart. And this little tree began to dream.

"Perhaps," he whispered, "when I am grown, I'll be cut into the boards of a mighty ship! Or maybe, I'll become a footstool for a prince. Or even better!" he exclaimed. "What if I were fashioned into a king's throne?"

Hope kindled within the sapling's heart, and he flourished.

Years passed. Peers left the forest, fulfilling grand destinies. Even older trees were hewn for significant purposes. And the once-sapling-now-youngling struggled with doubt.

"Will I ever be chosen? What if I am deserted here? Or what if . . . what if nothing really happens when you're cut down? The elder trees wouldn't lie to me. But do they really know?"

"Perhaps they're right, and great trees truly became ships and pillars and revival fires – but were they aware? What if death is no more than that . . . death?"

These questions gnawed at the youngling for years. Gradually, his doubts faded. He inched higher. Soon he could view miles of glorious landscape. Beauty greeted him each morning, and the hope he once harbored so dearly dwindled, until it was a long-forgotten spark tucked away. Ships, fires, thrones . . . these were fairytales of the past.

But suddenly, everything changed.

In the midst of a sparkling sunrise, while the oldling observed the world, he heard unnatural noises. Strange contraptions appeared, and before he knew what was happening, sharp pain pierced his trunk. Panicking, he tried to sway away, but it did no good. Hit after hit racked his body, and with a final chop, he crashed down to the ground. All went dark.

Voices tickled the tree's ears – but they felt foreign, unreal. He glanced around. He appeared to be on a dusty ledge, and he felt incredibly short. Something grabbed his spine, pulling him away. He found himself staring into a round face with electric eyes, a soft mouth, poking-out ears, and a slender nose. "Could this be a . . . human?" the tree wondered.

He felt himself being opened. Wind brushed his tips. A light pinch held a piece of him still. A

proclaiming voice spoke: "Once upon a time . . ."

And the once-oldling-now-book sighed content. For there was life after death; and he nestled into the hand that held him, listening to the story written on the pages of his life. It was a story of ships, thrones, even revolutions – but there was so much more.

The Wish Rescuers

Quentin Norris

While his classmates ran to the river once the bell rang, so they could hunt for frogs, Ramsey went straight to the forest behind his house. He weaved through the trees, he turned over rocks, and crawled through bushes, keeping an eye out for Wishes wherever he went.

They were curious little creatures, long, thin, and wormy, with hundreds of feathery little legs like a centipede. They were almost impossible to see with the naked eye, but if a ray of sunlight hit them at just the right angle, Ramsey could find their wispy, silvery bodies, glittering

in the sparkling light, squirming around in the dirt, or twisting and floating through the air in front of his face.

They came from human minds, at least that's what his grandmother told him. They wriggled out of the ears of people all over the world, every night, and would try their hardest to ascend into the heavens. According to his grandmother, the ones that made it up, out of the atmosphere, were the ones who came true. "Not all wishes make it," she told him sadly, "some get lost along the way, but that's why when we find them, we must help them get back on track, otherwise, they'll dry up and turn into nothing."

His grandmother had told him all about Wishes because she had caught him crushing them between his fingers. He didn't know what they were at the time. He just loved pinching their bodies between thumb and forefinger and watching globs of silvery goop pop out of their heads like toothpaste from a tube. He was standing at the edge of their forest when she caught him in the act, running up and slapping him across the back of the head. "You stupid child," she screamed, "do you know what you've done?!" She made Ramsey put his fingers, covered in goop, up to his ear. He heard the faintest voice, whispering softly:

"I really hope I get this job. If I'm still unemployed by the end of the week, I'm toast."

"You've just ruined someone's chance at employment" scolded his Grandmother. Ramsey was deeply ashamed and began to cry. Grandmother comforted him, telling him it was alright, but he still felt guilty as he fell asleep that night.

After that day, Grandmother taught him how to care for wishes, how to gently grab them and toss them back into the air right when a gust of air blew so they could be carried back into the skies. When Ramsey watched his grandmother throw wishes up into the air, he wondered how many of her wishes had wriggled out of her head, or his. Had they made it to the sky, or were they crushed by a stranger? He tried not to think about the wishes he'd crushed. They were in the past. Instead, he kept his eyes fixed to the sky, watching wishes disappear into the sun.

A Dead Tree's Life

Brandon McWilliams

On the corner of 15th and Thompson, hidden behind the ramshackle gables of decayed houses, there grows a tree. There are two notable things about this tree: one, it grows in reverse, and two, it is covered in wishes.

It began its life as a rather sickly dogwood which had gamely made an attempt at life in the poor soil of a curb cutout. No one planted it there; it seeded itself, life springing unbidden in the wasteland. It might have been a moving and poetic symbol for the many people that scurried by it on their way to and from whatever errands occupied their time. It might have inspired a budding poet or unawakened artist, or simply lifted the spirits of the people who passed under its leaves. Unfortunately, however, five years after its first green shoot rose from the ground, it died.

The leaves browned and shriveled, blowing off in the wind until all that was left of the tree was a barren skeleton whose branches reached imploringly towards the sky. Because no one had planted it, no one felt responsible for removing its carcass, so the people got used to seeing it as they passed.

One morning, thirteen months after the tree had died, a man was hurrying past. His head was up but his eyes were vacant, mind already wandering to other places even before he started his shift driving a backhoe downtown. Yet his dreams of sunny islands and cold drinks were interrupted as he scuttled past by a flicker of movement. A single leaf fluttered on a low branch of the dead tree. He stopped, curious despite himself. With clumsy fingers, he grasped the small green oblong. It was paper, tied to the branch with a piece of white string. Written on one side in neat black pen were the words "I wish for life." The backhoe operator stared at the wishful leaf for a long minute, his mind turning over and over. Another flutter of movement caught his attention, and he noticed the small stack of green paper leaves and strings pinned under a rock. He reached down slowly for the little papers and, using the pen tucked into his front pocket, wrote "I wish for a rest." A small quirk of a smile lifted his lips as he tied the little leaf onto the branch next to the first. With this small act completed, the man hurried on.

In the months following the first wish, the tree flourished. Once more, its branches were full of leaves which whispered in the breeze and shaded those walking by. Sometimes, the rain or the wind would take some of its leaves, scattering them across the city or driving them into the ground, but they were always replaced by more wishes. And thus, the tree grew out of the whispered dreams of the community. It still stands today, in fact, as a monument to hope, resplendent and green.

The Ritual

Charlie Noble

When the titan children are let out into the fields to play, there is no way of running or hiding. It is a ritual killing; unavoidable. Me and the others are resigned to it now. We hear the gate open, the thunder of their clumsy feet and let the daily, soft ripples of terror spread between us.

They have strange gods; the God of New Bikes, the God of Ice Cream for Breakfast, the God of seeing Daddy at Christmas. We have never seen these gods, and the same prayers come day-in, day-out with no answers. But still, we're sacrificed.

It is called the Wishing. My neighbours have all died and I'm alone in a bare patch of field. This means that I've had to see it many times as I've grown old. It is always the same. We are torn from our homes by fat, greedy fingers, tossed up into the sky and then- and this is the worst part- the giant will open its sticky mouth and blow, opening wide our follicles and offering our silver hair to the wind.

Adorable Wishes

Share a Wish Well

Charlotte Allen

It is important to be cautious with a wishing well. Many of them are just as keen to steal your wishes, as they are to grant them. You should also be certain that your well will not share your wish. The bottom of a well is flooded with hopes and dreams, but they do not all understand the importance of what they have been trusted with.

For example, the well down at Manor Farm is a bitter old gossip. When we talked, she was far too keen to share the secrets that she held. I have been told that an echo is a sign of a good well, but I have not always found this to be true. Of course, it is not good to judge the actions of the majority by those of a few. But she was so eager to repeat my wish back to me, I cannot trust her not repeat it to anyone else. Your wish is sacred, and it is best to ensure that it is safe.

I personally recommend choosing a well which you know already holds a lot of wishes. There is a handsome old well, next to the church. He has been trusted for far longer than I have been around, and has a firm understanding of the importance of his secrets. He is a kind fellow and does not normally seek compensation for his services. Many of my wishes have been left in his care.

It is not fair to assume though that your well will work for free. You do not need to spoil it and tip in your fortune. In fact, I would advise against this. But dropping in a coin not only shows the well that you appreciate their services, but it also shows your wish that you have placed value in it.

Keep an eye on the other people who use the well before you trust it with your wish. Selfish wishes will turn a well sour. If you see people using the well frequently, to ask for fame or the misfortune of another, then this is a well to avoid. This is a shame, as it is not the wells fault. Over time though, as it becomes filled with foul fantasies, it will no longer appreciate a

pure and heartfelt wish. The water will poison your wish and that can only lead to unhappiness.

Although I have advised caution, I truly believe that a well is the safest place to keep your wish. Your heart is, of course, the closest place for them to reside. But these can be so easily damaged that they are not safe in the long term. Shooting stars are fleeting. They are unlikely to pay any attention, and your wish can become lost. A new moon is too eager to give bad luck for me to trust her with something so important.

Learn your well. If she is sweet, then I cannot think of a safer place to share your wish.

Goodbye, Peace and Quiet

Max Girard

“That stupid squirrel is back, Charlie! He’s looking right at me. I see you! Yeah, you! You’d better run!” Four thuds against the window echoed in quick succession.

Dear god, what I wouldn’t give to rappel down that well and sift my quarter back out of the muddy water. Sure, the wish sounded great in theory. I mean, who wouldn’t want to communicate with their pets? No one takes into consideration the four a.m. whining for an early breakfast, or the frantic shouting every time a stray cat so much as sauntered through the neighbour’s garden.

“We’ve been over this,” I sighed, getting to my feet. “Other animals exist in the neighbourhood. You’re going to have to get over it.”

My chocolate lab protested as I shut the curtain, blocking his mortal enemy from sight. “He’s gonna get away! Let me out there!” he yelled as his nails skimmed across the hardwood floor, darting for the front door.

“Boone!” I called after him. “You have a hundred toys here, why don’t you play with one of those instead?”

He flopped over with a grunt, pawing at the door stopper. *Bbbbbbrrrrruuuuuungggggg*. *Bbbbbbrrrrruuuuuunnnnnnngggggg*. “So bored.”

“Give me twenty minutes and we’ll go for a walk. I just have to finish this paper,” I dropped back onto my desk chair.

Brrrrunngggg.

Bbrrrruuuuunnnnnnngggg.

“Boone.”

“I can’t go on like this.”

I glanced at the clock. “It’s been less than two minutes.”

“Might as well be forever.”

A few more moments ticked by, punctuated with more of the rumbling vibrations. “Nothing to do.” *Brrruuunnnnnnngggg*. “No one to play with.” *Brrruuunnnnnnngggggg*. “You won’t even give me dinner yet.” *Bbbbbbrrrrruuuuuunnnnnnngggggg*.

“Alright!” I shot up from my desk, storming to the closet for his leash. “Let’s go for a walk.”

“About time!” Boone’s tail would propel him into the air if it moved any faster. “I’ve been waiting all day.”

“Ten minutes,” I grumbled.

The chatter was incessant. *Martin peed here! That tree over there is mine. Oh man, I lost my ball in that bush.* We circled the block three times; each time having to stop once more so he could mark territory he’d missed the first time around. By the time we got home, I learned more about the neighbourhood dogs than I knew of their owners. Boone was still rambling on, though his speech was slower with a hint of drowsiness.

The couch had never been so comfortable as I let myself relax. Work could wait for now. My eyes had barely closed when the cushion dipped with the added weight of Boone climbing onto my legs. “Pardon me,” he apologized, scooting until his body was stretched along mine and his head rested on my shoulder. “Love you, Charlie,” he breathed as he dozed off.

Maybe being able to hear him wasn’t all that bad.

My Best Friend

Vivian Li

He had a special power. I knew it from the moment I saw him—he had a peculiar look in his eyes, light blue-gray: a pistil with infinite fractals. He cocked his head to the side, curious and open. Then he smiled, and it reminded me of the time I smiled like that, in front of a mirror. I could've moved for hours in the coolness of that lake, eyes simmering and always wandering.

He grinned at me now. “Do you want to know a secret?” he asked.

We were standing in the middle of a large field, the grass breathing by our heels. The world hadn't woken up yet. Everything had a sombre quality to it, like a tragic opening to a pseudo-play, where the characters knew they were actors, but died anyways. A ribbon of light gleamed from the horizon.

“Tell me,” I whispered.

“I can bend time.”

I pushed him. “Yeah, right.”

“Don't believe me?”

“Who would?”

He sighed.

“Show me.”

His eyes glimmered with light, like fish in the water, then, as smoothly as the sun slides over their wet bodies, he disappeared from my vision for a moment. He reappeared as a trout arcs over the sky, wet and heaving from effort.

I stared at him.

“Can you teach me?”

He smiled.

“Just close your eyes. And start dreaming.”

Good Things Find Us

Virginia Blackwell

Kiera wandered through the animal shelter, choosing directions in the hallways on a whim. It worked best that way, if she sought without purpose.

Skidding to a stop, she backpedaled. There was no traffic around this cage and the dog inside was curled on a bed, pointed ears perked at everyone passing by. He appeared older, silver fur beginning to streak his face. She nodded to herself. This one felt right.

“Hi, Titan,” Kiera cooed, putting her hand to the wire. The dog inside stood in a flash of dark fur, bounding the short distance to the cage door. He kissed her fingers through the holes in the cage, snout too large to poke through. A stubby tail wagged furiously. Large paws clawed at the floor as he whined.

“Okay, now *sit*.” When Titan obeyed promptly, rear wiggling against the ground, she praised, “Good boy! *Stay*.”

She sunk to the ground and pulled a sketchbook from her satchel. Selecting a fresh charcoal pencil, she began to draw Titan. He sat beautifully, ears alert and eyes intelligent. Every so often he stood to pace a circle, stretching long legs before he sunk back into an obedient crouch. It only took a few hours to have a full portrait in detail, from the tips of his ears to his toes. She placed the final touches—Titan’s name at the top, date and signature at the bottom. With the last flourish, she felt a spark at her fingertips.

“All done!” Kiera poked a dog treat through the door, then took the sketch home.

The next day, her phone rang. The screen displayed a number she recognized. “Good news, I hope?”

“You know it is! A month ago, a young man came in looking for a dog, but decided he wasn’t sure and left. He showed up out of nowhere this morning. Said he couldn’t stop thinking about Titan. We just got the foster papers signed!”

Kiera trapped the phone against her ear with a shoulder. Handling the paper with care, she pulled the charcoal drawing of Titan from the sketchbook. She stretched her arms overhead to fix it to the corkboard with thumbtacks.

Taking a few steps back, she inspected the board. Titan’s portrait filled a perfect hole, the hundredth sketch among other dogs, cats, and rodents. The oldest of the papers dated back a few years—a grumpy old calico named Saturn, immortalized in blue ink. An elderly couple gave her a foster home a few days after the sketch, then a permanent family a month later. Saturn wasn’t so grumpy these days.

Kiera was sure Titan’s foster papers would turn into adoption papers soon. They always did.

She smiled. “That’s great to hear, Janine. I’ll see you in a few days?”

“Of course. We can’t let you go—you’re our good luck charm!”

“Oh, I don’t believe in luck. Some things just need a little nudge.”

Beggars Would Ride

Kathryn Wilmotte

If wishes were horses, then beggars would ride.

No one spoke the adage anymore, because when wishes had truly become horses, beggars did ride. And much good it had done them, the poor bastards.

The Master of Horse guided his stallion, a fine-limbed chestnut, along the line of animals brought for inspection.

Most were common beasts: sway-backed and rheumy-eyed, more fit for carting coal than serving the queen. Horses born of common wishes, of uninspired imaginations. Hopes for good harvest, for money, for love—the horses produced by such wishes were sturdy, but unremarkable. Those who had done the wishing stood nearby, to see if their horse might be chosen.

Every now and then, you came across a fine specimen: a sturdy roan colt or a delicate black mare. Their owners always stood straighter than the rest, aware that they had spent their wish on something unique. The stranger the wish, the finer the horse.

There were limits. Wishing for a bear to tap-dance or the queen to marry your son could produce monstrosities. Last year, there had been a purple horse that breathed fire, born from a wish to become empress of the world. And there was only ever one: one wish, one horse.

The master surveyed the line again. Disappointing. He'd take the roan colt and the black mare, but he had hoped for something a little more impressive.

His stallion's ears perked. The other horses whinnied, turning their heads toward the child who came wading up the street, now churned to mud under so many hooves. Behind her was a horse of pure silver. That was the only explanation: mane to tail, it glowed as if it were made of moonlight.

The girl came right up to him. She looked about seven years old, with silver-flashing eyes.

“Will you take us?” she said.

The master opened and closed his mouth. He hadn't the money to pay her for that horse. Should the queen put her entire treasury at his disposal, it would not be enough.

The horse tossed its silver mane, filling the air with a musical jingle.

“What on earth did you wish for?” It was all he could think to say.

The girl grinned. “Will you take us?”

“Us?”

“I’m coming too.”

“But...but that’s not...” He fell silent.

For some reason, the girl would not ride the horse, so it was slow going back to the palace. All the way, the master wondered what kind of wish could produce such a creature. What a dreamer the girl must be.

He thought of the one that had made his chestnut stallion. A tawdry thing it seemed now.

After a while, the girl looked up. “You’ll never guess it.”

A fair point.

“I didn’t wish anything,” she continued. “I never even had a thought before yesterday.”

“What?”

“I never had a thought, because I didn’t exist. You see,” the girl patted the horse’s silver flank, “she is a horse, and she wished for me.”

Wishes and Desire

The Last War

Carlen Vigo

We had been sniping at each other across the river for weeks. Anytime something poked above the tall grass, we'd shoot until Sarge told us to stop. Then, it'd be hours of waiting around, guarding the bridge.

"I hope there's not a flood back home," Tommy said. "We've got every sandbag in the country here." He nodded to the line of sandbags about 4 feet high that stretched to either horizon.

We had our position about 50 yards away from the bridge in the no-man's land between the river and the forest. No one from either side had stepped foot on the bridge since we arrived.

"Now, boys, this bridge could very well turn the tide of the war." I tried my best impression of the Colonel. "If we take this bridge, then we take the northern shore, and it's a hop, skip, and a jump to their capital."

Tommy scoffed and threw his hand up dismissively. It was about the hundredth time I'd practiced that joke.

"Lock it up, apes!" Sarge called.

I settled my back against the wall of sand, rifle across my lap, and contemplated the forest. Through those trees and down about a thousand miles of dusty road, Loraine was waiting for me. I could almost smell dinner on the table.

I thought I was going crazy when Loraine's face appeared among the trees. I sat up, dumbfounded. She waded into the tall grass wearing my favorite white and blue dress. I scrambled up and ran to her.

"Loraine, what--?" I bumbled over the words.

She smiled and rubbed my arm. "It's over, darling. Time to go home."

I smiled. *If only*. I tried to usher her back to the trees but stopped when I heard, "Harold! You get your sorry ass back home right this minute!"

I turned to see a grizzled older woman marching through the grass toward Sarge. He stood agape by the sandbags. "Martha?"

"This mess is over," she cried and grabbed him by the ear. He wheeled his arms as she dragged him back to the treeline.

All I could do is laugh. Tommy was still sitting against the sandbags with his mouth hanging open, a cigarette dangling from his lip.

Just then, a white horse burst from the trees near the road. A woman with long dark hair in a tight braid down her back rode straight-backed in the saddle. A large white flag billowed out behind her. She galloped past the command bunker where the Colonel's wife was wagging her finger at him and up onto the bridge.

She stopped halfway across the bridge and stood straight up in the stirrups. She waved the flag with both arms above her head. A cry went up from across the river, hundreds of women shouting with joy.

The goddess of peace and her daughters took their men home. The war was over.

“Could've saved a lot of lives if wives and mothers from both sides came and dragged their fool men home by the ear.”

- Noah Hawley, *Fargo*, “Rhinoceros”

The Wishes of Twenties

Oghenevbede Eruteya

We talk about breakthrough incessantly with our left-over bones that others never put in cognizance the underestimated crushed and fractured self that we lost.

Like Mogenicok will exclaim, when we stumble on realistic tweets rather than motivational makeovers, *this is strong meat!*

I sat on a sofa, whose cry for an upholsterer has remained a prayer, legs extended over the wooden table and read the tweet for the umpteenth time. This time, I wanted to talk about many things; about being sixteen and having a list of *ME AT 26*, about now being twenty-nine and although beating my chest in a manner of consolation, I felt that uncomfortable nudge that Thirty gave. My wish of becoming one of the widely read writers at 26. Even though I had to sneak into the only community library with a friend's ID on certain occasions and read Camara Laye's 'The African Child', Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's 'Weep not Child' and Cyprian Ekwensi's 'Passport of Mallam Iliya' amongst other writers once. The dream of touring across countries with friends. At least these were wishes we knew will someday come, unlike ever wishing to be born with a spoon; whatever the make.

Some days, growing old is scary; an inevitable nightmare that wraps itself around your unprepared self. Making your birthdays strategic avenue for supplications to whoever cares to listen. And to believe the mirage that the economy has your wish also on their list is even more traumatizing.

A call from Auntie Enifome came in. I could guess why she was calling me, probably to pick up the marriage discussion from where we dropped it last month. At this point, I told myself that I have had enough of her incessant talks about marriage, about reproductive clocks.

I stood up and walked towards the window, pressed down on the hinge to slant open the louvres and gazed at the street; caressing my hand over a dusty pan. This was weekend. Retail shops, food canteens were all opened for business, enjoying the patronage of customers as they come and go.

The phone rang twice and stopped. I wish she knew how I so much want a significant other. How many times I've secretly fantasised about her colour, her voice, her self-esteem, and curves that only the eyes can express. But as one of the few graduates who recently got employed as a Data Analyst, after a long search for freedom from the crowd where hopes filed in envelopes seek employment, I knew that in this life, there's no magic wand. That poor people have more wishes than the rich and that in the process of *Becoming* what I wish for or dream about, I must stop comparing myself with peers. Even if they go to places, strange places where cars and wines whisper to them to run from the body where conscience rules to dark places.

I picked up my phone and left for the canteen to get lunch.

I Wish I Could

Debora Sousa

God, I wish I could study.

That thought started washing over me every night after I saw a beautiful white man driving in the streets of my town. But believe me, none of his looks were what caused me to want to study. It was his words.

Later on that day, when I was already inside home, we heard a knock at our door that made the whole house freeze. My mom slowly walked to the door, opening it cautiously. I think she thought a bomb would explode at her face. But instead of the disgraces we thought that would appear at the door, a white man was there instead. And in the eyes of my mother, those two things were the same.

"Good afternoon ma'a-"

"We don't have anything to give." She hurried to say before closing the door at his face. After a few seconds, he knocked again.

"Look, I don't know what you want, but-"

"Ma'am if you give me a second," He smiled nervously, "I'm opening a small school in the center of the city and I got to know you have a little son and daughter. I'd like to welcome them both at our school.

"I don't know what you want with my children," She glared at him, "But you're not getting any of it. Stop knocking at my door before I get my rifle."

"Listen, ma'am-"

Too late. My mom had already slammed the door shut, shooining us to help her finish dinner.

And after that afternoon, every single day, I'd ask her to bring me to school, but I couldn't help it. My curiosity was bigger than any of my mother's fears, so one day, when my work downtown was over and she was too busy sewing, I sneaked out.

The school was small and simple. As I walked through the foreign halls, the same man approached me with a smile. Since then, I came back. It took about a month before my mom found out what I was doing. After that she'd lock me inside home, and I'd stare at the stars through the ceiling creaks and wish I was at school.

Not too long after that my sister fell ill, causing my mom to stay awake with her every night to watch her fall asleep. She was scared my sister would die. And as desperate as I was, I ran to the only person I knew that could help. The same white man from before arrived my home. At first, my mom objected. But she was just as scared as I was.

"It's a simple infection, these are enough." He offered my mom a tablet of pills. She took them instantly. "Give her the medicine. She'll be fine."

My mom nodded and waited for him to leave. The second he did she ran to my sister, thanking all the Gods for letting her little daughter live. A few days after that, she sat with me on bed. Her lips trembled, and still, I was the to cry.

My mom had a school uniform in her hands.

The Heart of Progress

Yingtong Guo

I woke up in an old hangar in the middle a snake cage that contained a miniature version of industrial England. A train rattled along the edges of the rectangle, churning out the start of a lullaby. The country was a music box and the train its self-turning handle, powering the workers and machines at the assembly lines as well as the hustle and bustle in London's pubs.

I walked around the glass case and reached the opposite wall where seals, madly alive and thrashing about, were pinned to flaky scraps of yellow plaster like magnets to a fridge door. They zoomed against the wall like bees in a hive, but couldn't escape the magnetic force that held them and bled them.

This magnetic force came from seal blood, of which glassy beads popped out from under voluptuous bellies and clotted together to form blobs of glue with a life of their own. These blobs ambushed and devoured anything too rebellious from a squealing mouth to a batting tail. The remaining liquids in the seal blood flowed and shone and pulsed in dark streams the ghostly pipes of the dilapidated building.

Time had whipped and flayed the building's hallways and staircases until these blood vessels laid exposed to the dust and the grime in that room where no plane had rested in a hundred years. They expanded and contracted to 3/4 rhythmic patterns that also dictated the rise and spread of puffs of smoke from the jolly factory chimneys which coughed and danced within the snake cage's confines.

I grabbed the snake cage and felt a hot sting in my right palm. Shards of glass melted back into rivulets of sand which converged in the loops and whorls of my fingertips. The snake cage shook and shrank while the opposite wall dumped the screeching seals in a heap on the floor like potato bags. The pipes spouted blood, the ceiling rained soot, and the sudden cold froze the red drops and the grey specks colliding in mid-air into shapeless rubies with motes of dirt suspended in the center. The snake cage in my right palm was now the size of a Rubik's Cube, but with the railways replaced by the Atlantic Ocean and Germany's U-boats.

I appeared at our door right on time for Christmas dinner. My son answered the bell with hopeful eyes and scruffy hair as I held up Santa's gift — a singing heart the shape of a glass case that contained the past, present, and future of human progress. He had begged and prayed for this terrible beauty last year, the year before that, and the year before *that*. But now it was finally within arm's reach, he took an abrupt interest in the curious spectacle that was, apparently, playing out in the sky outside. "Mom," he whispered, as flakes ashen and languid dangled in beams of streetlight and settled on strips of pavement. "Someone's dusting the moon." In his eight years on this grey earth, it snowed again for the first time.

Dropped Baby

David Daniel

If you were around forty years ago you may remember the story. I've read about it. A fire in a triple-decker tenement in Lowell, Massachusetts, on a night so cold that the hydrants froze and the firefighters had to use blow torches to open them. It was all over the papers and TV news, even went national for a couple weeks. Someone dropped a baby out of the burning building, and three floors down someone caught her. "*What else was I going to do? Anyone would.*" Just ordinary people, doing extraordinary things.

In real ways the incident shaped the child's life. In the short term, sure. Baby Jilly (as the media called her) was a cute face smiling from the tiny halftone dots of newsprint and pixels of television screens. She was featured in *Life* magazine. The larger context got lost: a mother burned to death, a father in the Air Force, ill-equipped to raise a child. Parenting duties went to relatives in Duluth (later Spokane, Mobile, and eventually Central Falls, RI).

But even the most miraculous stories, like the most bleakly tragic, pass into time—though not always for the protagonists. The quick-hit celebrity culture can suspend people in the roles they played in a brief drama long after the footlights go down.

Baby Jilly grew up. *Jillian* went to high school, danced at her senior prom (where she was runner up queen). There were men who'd been affected by the original story, and were inspired (or driven) to try, years later, to be her rescuer. Those things tend to be built on the merest strands of imagination, as ephemeral as two seconds of free fall through a January night.

But here, almost four decades on, I remember the tenderness with which nameless citizens came together to rescue me. I'm sure my father and relatives would have thanked them, thanked everyone who helped save the child.

I've lived in nine states, have been married and divorced three times. I work in an animal shelter and, recently, earned certification as a dental assistant. As I reflect on my life, I guess I have trusted everyone who's ever shown me affection. So far my trust hasn't always been well placed. But I remain hopeful. I think I still want to be caught.

Three

Sophia Metcalf

summer.

you sit on my lap at a party. i keep looking at you. i guess i can't really help but look at you, because you have made yourself the foreground of anything else i might try and look at. but i don't mind, because mostly, i'm looking at you. your hair is very long and tawny, and you have crooked teeth. your lips look soft. you smell like cigarettes and your potentially-soft lips are purple from the wine. you might read this.

i've thought a lot about how to do our little thing justice because it wasn't much. i wish it could have been more, i guess. if you are reading this, you can stop after this paragraph, save me the embarrassment. i'm sorry i wrote you that email.

the party was at the house of a mutual, male friend. i'd been non-monogamously sleeping with him all summer. it was toward the end of my time in new york. i'd be leaving for california in a couple days to start graduate school. "my mom lives in san diego," you told me. you were going to see a concert out there—joan baez? you told me to keep in touch, to try to get tickets. you were one of those people it was easy to meet and an hour later to promise, to promise i would get joan baez tickets too, and drive two hours to san diego. to see you, of course. although i do love joan baez.

fall.

california. orange county. the least queer place i have lived. no cafes with hot baristas, their bangs across their foreheads sharp and jagged like a picasso painting. no dyke bars, no casual glances on the street in recognition. i can, and have, passed in straight spaces. i've had deep and loving relationships with men. i don't mind dating men. but i think i didn't mind it when i knew i had the option to date women and nb folx, too.

i couldn't make it to the concert. i was performing the same weekend, and to be honest, i was hung up, heartbroken and alone. i didn't think it would be fair to bring that to you. a badly wrapped gift. why is it that every queer woman seems to be hung up on a man? is that just my experience of queerness? is everyone hung up on someone, regardless of gender?

winter.

home for christmas. our mutual male friend and i take a cab from his place where i am staying for a few weeks. we bring a lot of wine, and there is food, and two other friends who i don't remember the names of now, and you've set up a lovely tiny christmas dining table in the bedroom of your studio apartment in crown heights. we hug in that way that i think only queer women hug each other—three points of contact, arms, chests, pelvis, and a little too long. you made this incredible dessert. dark chocolate and salted caramel. we opened a fourth bottle of wine. i think we were playing cards—the three boys and you and i.

lots of little touches, playing literal footsie. you went into the kitchen to grab something and i followed you. this is a brooklyn, studio-apartment kitchen, though, so really, that and the wine and the hug and the months without you or queerness in any real, sexual, heated way, queerness

in any way at all that wasn't academic, all that combined with the wine and the food and the longed-for eastern winter and your lovely studio apartment and your laugh and you—all that combined meant there wasn't any way i couldn't kiss you. or you kiss me. or both. or everything all at once. and your hand was in my jeans, and i was holding you and kissing your crooked teeth and wine-lips and full of heat and light and a boy walked in. to find something. and found us. pulled away suddenly and apologetically.
we kissed goodbye i think. i'd like to think we did. the friend and i ubered back to his place in bushwick.

10/9/2018

sent during the party, while you were reading a piece of a paper you'd written
subject line: you're hot
i'm honestly just too distracted by your intelligence and incredible critical thought to write anything remotely comprehensive??? you're fucking incredible????
liked the bit about dreamers. felt like the part about refugee stories was a little long. then again, drunk.

10/10/18

i hope i'll see you again before you leave.

10/10/18

free tomorrow evening after 6, and wednesday evening after 5. free saturday all day.

10/10/18

that's totally fine. thanks for letting me know.

The Shelf of Shattered Dreams

Levi Noe

Somewhere, there is a shelf. This shelf exists, whether you were born with a silver spoon in your mouth, or you've been boot-strapping since birth. We all have a shelf of shattered dreams.

The shelf may contain childhood dreams, aspirations of ballerina stardom, rock and roll fame, space exploration, or athletic prowess. But somewhere along the line a teacher, a parent or life came and crumpled your dreams. If this is all your shelf contains, count yourself blessed.

For others, the shelf may be more molded and mildewed, with all manner of fetid, foul, dreams in all stages of decay. You may think you can bury this shelf under mounds of old magazines, behind the lawnmower or the moth-eaten suits of yesteryear. But deep down, whether in your attic or in the flooded sub-floors of your unconscious there is a stale stench, a spider-creeping nagging. The shelf will not go away.

What are you to do? Clean with the vigor and vigil of Mary Poppins? Burn it all down and dance in the ashes? I'm afraid none of these will do. The broken, battered, stillborn dreams will find their way back and remake the shelf from the sinew and bones of its predecessor. And they will take up residence once again, in the dark, disregarded borders.

Since destruction and denial are not options with this shelf of dreams, you may want to consider a radical alternative. What if you brought the shelf out into the light? Perhaps the paper from your high school notebooks could be composted and used to fertilize your garden. Is there a chance that guitar you never learned to play and that song you left unsung could become new playthings for your children? Use your imagination, for though those dreams may be more like lumps of crusty play-doh than a mound of fresh clay, they are nonetheless made of the stuff that all creation is born from.

If, after much honest thought and objective introspection you come to find that certain shattered dreams are not worth up-cycling or repurposing, then you may search for a safe and respectful way of disposal. But don't attempt to simply toss the dreams in a dumpster or pawn them off to Goodwill. The broken dreams are like lost souls bound to you deeper than your own teeth and skin. They will come back if not given their proper rites.

If nothing else, take comfort in knowing that every single one of us has a shelf of beaten, misused, maltreated, miscarried, fruitless or neglected dreams. It is one of the few universal truths in this life that beggar and royalty alike are united in their loss of dreams. We can all rest secure in the knowledge that our dreams will always outnumber our numbered days.

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Thank you for reading the inaugural issue of Tidbits: One-Page Stories! Our next microfiction anthology will be available Spring 2020.

About the editor:

Suzy Woltmann is a professor of literature and writing specializing in adaptations, gender and sexuality, and fairy tales. Her articles can be found in *Postcolonial Interventions*, *Preternature*, *Humanities*, *British Fantasy*, and *Language, Literature, and Interdisciplinary Studies*.