ISSUE #3

NEON ORIGAMI

LITERARY MAGAZINE

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WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Fiction

BY JENNIFER FOREMAN

The woman reminded her of someone she hated. One day, Rebecca followed her out of the building they both worked in and saw where she parked. They had the same work schedule so that made it even more serendipitous. The next morning Rebecca began her plan of torturing the woman. After she got out of her car and stepped quickly toward the building to avoid transients, she slipped over to it and placed a handwritten note she found in one of the office's bathrooms onto the driver's side window. Don't leave your garbage in the stalls. We are not animals! Rebecca silently thanked the passive aggressive woman who wrote the note and made her way into work.

Rebecca and the woman both worked at the same corporate office. Every morning the woman made her way into the main entrance where security was housed. In Rebecca's case, she took a side entry into the parking garage attached to the building and used the stairs. She liked the quiet walk before a long day of dealing with people. The best part was the way the lights in the garage would shine more brightly as her motion alerted them to her presence. It made her feel like a divine being. Once in the building she waited for elevators to pass her by hoping when she pushed the button the one that came would be empty.

She was always polite with people, but the less she had to see them the better.

In her cubicle she put an earbud in her left ear and listened to a random playlist she found on the music streaming site she used. She prepared reports, stopping only to say good morning to the rest of the team as they came in for their shifts. Rebecca wished she could see the woman's face when she found the note but didn't want to have to interact with her if she was present when it happened. Best leave work a little later today. As she worked, she made more plans for the woman.

On Friday Rebecca used a dark red lipstick she bought at a drugstore to write Filth on the woman's back window. She tossed the lipstick into the dumpster near her work and walked into the building, beaming. Later that day her boss commended her for her great work and took her to lunch. Even the dainty salad and the droning conversation about sales targets couldn't darken her mood. When she left work that day the woman's car was still there. The letters stood out even more in the sunshine and she had to resist the urge to trace them with her fingers. She wondered how the woman would react.

On Monday, Rebecca was dismayed when the woman's car wasn't parked in the usual spot. She took the chance of walking in the main entrance and discovered the woman waiting for the elevator.
"Good morning," Rebecca said. The woman nodded but didn't smile.
"I know you park out in the alley. Have those transients vandalized your car at all?" Rebecca internally rolled her eyes that the woman blamed her handiwork on transients. Outwardly she put on a shocked face and shook her head.
"Did something happen?"
"Two times now," the woman hopped onto the elevator and held the door for Rebecca. "I don't know why they are targeting me," she said. Rebecca didn't know how to respond since she wasn't in any way sympathetic. The two of them stood there silently as the elevator climbed up the building.
"I've taken to paying for parking nearby. I'll give it a few weeks and then I'll try in the alley again. Tried to convince security to let me in the office garage but they wouldn't hear of it. Ridiculous," she said.
"Well good luck. I will keep an eye out for the vandals. Have a good day," Rebecca said. Her smile vanished as soon as she was off the elevator and she swore under her breath.
Waiting "a few weeks" while the woman tried to allay her fears was tiresome. She knew the woman's name now after glancing at her badge, even though she didn't want to. But now she could look the woman up in the personnel system for her office location and home address. Rebecca didn't look up the woman's information on her own computer since that was tied to her employee id number. Instead, she waited for her cube neighbor to slough off to a long lunch. He always left his computer unlocked, despite the pranks of co-workers who placed funny photos on his desktop wallpaper or sent silly emails to the team (their boss excluded of course). She glanced around for other co-workers and after seeing no one she quickly jumped into the personnel system.
Upon her search she discovered the woman's office was on the floor above her. She also jotted down the woman's home address on a lightning bolt shaped sticky note her co-worker had on his desk. Not the most convenient way to take notes but he wasn't known for being the most efficient worker anyway.
There were cameras everywhere at work so going to the woman's office herself would be out of the question. Instead she used a prepaid credit card to send her a voluminous bouquet of white roses and a dead eyed teddy bear. Rebecca's search of the personnel record revealed the woman was married and she didn't leave a note. Either her husband would take credit for it and chalk it up as an error by the flower company, or he would become suspicious of his wife. She preferred the latter but fate would play its hand the way it wanted.
Rebecca began going in the main entrance to be near the woman and watch her. After the flower delivery she was exuberantly happy which meant her husband was a skilled liar. He also must not be known for romantic gestures if the woman was that excited about some dying flowers and a stuffed animal made in a factory. She let the woman revel in her happiness. Knowing she was happy would make her fall into despair that much better for Rebecca. As she left the elevator and the woman wished her a good day, she decided a house call was necessary.
Rebecca drove to the house that night. It was a Cape Cod style tucked into the corner of a neighborhood. From the listing she found online, it had three bedrooms, an updated kitchen with white granite and a window seat, and a secluded garden backed up to protected land. The woman and her husband found the perfect hideaway from the hustle and bustle of the world. How lucky for them, Rebecca thought. She let herself in at the gate into the garden around midnight carrying a bag. Using only the light from her phone she placed thirty cheap plastic gnomes along the area in front of their expansive windows.

Hopefully they would give the woman a nice fright the next morning. As she got back into her car she decided she needed a snack. Gardening really works up a sweat, she thought.

Police Blotter: May 6th-Gnome Place Like Home

Woman called the police to report someone had placed several gnomes in her backyard. Gnomes were taken into custody without incident.

Rebecca wanted to frame the police blotter article but decided against it. Since she wasn't a serial killer she didn't really need mementos. She thought long and hard about her next step. While she watched television one night the terrible sex scene in the movie caught her eye. The woman in the scene wore lingerie with so many complicated straps and ties it was a wonder her lover got it off to have his way with her. The next weekend she visited a lingerie shop in the mall a few towns away and purchased something similar. It was red (of course) with tiny white bows embellished with red hearts and straps all over the place. The woman on the register arched a single eyebrow as she rang up the purchase.

"Ready for a fun weekend I see!"

"Oh definitely. My hubby won't know what hit him," Rebecca replied. She paid in cash and left the store, hoping the woman's imagination ran wild with sex scenes. After placing the item into a shipping box she sent it to the woman's house but addressed it to her husband. The typed note inside read For me to wear the next time we're together. XOXO. Rebecca laughed so hard that tears fell from her eyes. It was a shame the lingerie would never be put to good use. Not after the woman kicked her husband out for his fictitious affair.

At work the following week the woman met her in the elevator with red eyes. She wore no makeup and there was a stain of some sort on her collar. Rebecca made sure to wish her a very hearty good day when she got off on her floor.

As the doors closed the woman burst into tears. This put her in such a good mood she bought the team doughnuts from a local bakery. Her boss sent her an email thanking her for boosting everyone's morale and reminded her what a vital part of the team she was. Life was sweet.

Rebecca bought a haunted doll on an auction site for the heck of it. She doubted the supernatural had anything to do with the doll but it was eerie looking. It had round blue eyes and wore a faded white Victorian dress with threadbare gloves on its porcelain hands. The painted lips were chipped away and the bountiful curls were flattened on one side as if the doll had been sleeping in the same position for too long. She figured the woman needed company since her husband left, so once it arrived she re-packaged it and sent it her way. The doll held a sign that said *You are garbage.*

Another weekend she was perusing a thrift store when she found an award. It depicted a businesswoman standing atop fake white marble with her arms raised. The dusty engraved plate on the award read "Top Saleswoman 1994-Cynthia Boxman". It took very little effort for Rebecca to replace the engraved plate with one of her own that read "Most Worthless Woman in the World" from an online trophy site. She left it on the woman's doorstep late one night. In her imagination the woman displayed the trophy proudly in a china cabinet finally taking ownership for what a terrible person she was. But after doing a quick check of the woman's garbage can on garbage day she found the gold plastic woman's arms poking out of the side of a bag. Even amidst all that refuse the trophy reveled in her triumph.

Hurting an animal would never occur to her, they were the most innocent creatures. But she couldn't resist finding a taxidermied animal to deliver to the woman. The auction site she bought the doll from had a plethora of animals to choose from.

She thought about visiting a shop but figured purchasing an unusual item like that would call attention to her. Although the purchase was tied to her, the anonymity of online shopping fit her better. There were beavers with extra toes, a lizard placed on a tiny gondola looking like he would be at home on the canals of Venice, even a cat with an eye patch. Nothing quite made her think of the woman so she checked back every few days waiting for something to call out to her.

Late one night while scrolling through the endless taxidermy listings she found it. A raccoon with her mouth wide open, eternally ready to bite down and give someone rabies. Her tiny paws were clasped together as if in prayer. The thought of bidding back and forth for such an amazing creature gave her anxiety so she purchased her outright. She was perfect and worth the $62 plus shipping through the "Buy it now" option. Rebecca checked the tracking for her shipment constantly in anticipation of her arrival. Now she knew what mothers to be felt like in anticipation of their newborn.

When the box arrived Rebecca placed it gently on her dining room table and carefully cut the packaging tape with a kitchen knife. Frantically she tore the bubble wrap away to reveal her prize. The raccoon's glass eyes stared up at her and a glint of light from the dining room chandelier sparkled in them, making her appear alive. She placed her upright on the table and sat down next to her as if they were going to have dinner together. Rebecca named her Lucinda.

Lucinda spent several days on Rebecca's dining room table. Delivering the raccoon in a box through the mail seemed uncouth now that she had a name of her own. She decided to make another visit to the woman's house during the day. Although it posed a risk, Rebecca became excited at the prospect of seeing the discovery in person.

So early one Sunday morning she threw on some running gear and placed Lucinda in a drawstring backpack. Rebecca parked outside the woman's neighborhood and slipped unseen to her front door.

"Goodbye Lucinda." Rebecca placed the raccoon gently in front of the door as if she were a baby in a bassinet. Then she began running around the neighborhood. The darkness of the early morning soon turned to a soft blue light and she waited for the woman to find her gift. No one was stirring in the homes and for a while the only sounds came from the distant cry of a rooster and her shoes slapping against the pavement. When the lights came on in the woman's house, Rebecca made a point to stop and drink water on the sidewalk nearby. The front door opened and the woman stood there decked out in her own running gear. The woman stepped forward and her foot hit Lucinda, knocking her over. Rebecca hoped the raccoon was okay.

She occupied herself with placing the water bottle back in the backpack. When she looked back up the woman was marching to her garbage can and tossing Lucinda inside. She winced when the woman slammed down the lid and stepped off the sidewalk toward the woman's house. The woman caught her eye and recognition flashed across her face. Rebecca took off running.

"Hey, don't I know you?" The woman yelled. Rebecca didn't look back and kept running until she reached her car. Once she was home she passed by the empty dining room table. She wanted to go back to the woman's house and pull Lucinda from the garbage but it was too risky. After showering she went back to bed and stayed there the whole day. She left the woman alone for several weeks.

Her next idea came to her when she received a voicemail from a bill collector looking for an Enid Fleige. She created an online dating ad for the woman and placed her personal phone number on it.

Then she placed an ad for a bed on another site using the woman's work email. As a kind gesture she also added the woman's work number to a website called Prayers and Hope Services which made robo calls to people in need of prayer. Press four for prayers! Rebecca didn't understand why it wouldn't be option one but who was she to judge?
The fact that Rebecca couldn't see her plans come to fruition began to wear on her. She wanted to be there in person for something but wasn't sure how. Then she saw a Valentine's Day ad for a singing bear that would visit your loved one's home or office to show them you love them beary much. The pun sold her and she used another prepaid card to deliver a song and a message to the woman. The bear would arrive at noon in the woman's office so Rebecca planned to be on her floor when it happened. The hardest part was coming up with the message.

On Valentine's Day Rebecca eagerly headed to work. When she saw the woman on the elevator she grinned. The woman smiled back slightly but turned her eyes away to watch the elevator numbers increase. She made sure to wish her a very happy Valentine's Day on the way out the door. The woman didn't reply.

Rebecca took her lunch to the woman's floor and ate at a table nearby. She checked her phone constantly for the time. The bear announced his arrival with the sounds of his balloons volleying off of each other. Standing up quickly, she tossed her lunch in a trash can and stood by a pillar to watch. He approached the woman and began his song in earnest. The woman's nearest co-worker was on the phone and glared up at the bear before slamming it down. Others stood and watched with envious smiles. The woman was wary and fidgeted with the bracelet on her wrist.
When the bear's song was over he handed her a gilded envelope which contained Rebecca's message. Everyone gathered around to read it and the woman couldn't escape.

She opened the letter and began to read silently, her lips moving as she did. Others around her were much faster readers and stepped back in horror, hands clasped over their mouths. Rebecca hid her own smile and pretended to be an innocent bystander unsure of what was happening. The woman dropped the letter on the ground and screamed. Before anyone could stop her, she launched herself onto the bear.
"Why would you deliver a message like that? Doesn't your company review what people are being sent? You stupid bastard!" The woman began pummeling the poor bear, her fists hitting him mainly around the face and ears. The man inside the outfit yelled at her to get off but he had trouble pushing her away, confined by the stiff arms of the costume. Her co-workers stood dumbfounded for several moments until a man in a plaid tie rushed over and yanked her away from the innocent bear. The woman swung her arms wildly and smacked the man in the face. As he backed away the woman finally dropped her arms in defeat and looked around at what she had done. She ran to the bathroom as someone called security.
Rebecca made sure to watch as the woman was escorted out, a box of her belongings held in her arms. The woman glanced at her and she gave her a reassuring smile. It was the least she could do after all she put her through. It wasn't her fault she looked so much like the woman she hated. But she should feel lucky that she only lost her husband and her job. The woman she hated lost everything. That's what made it so hard, seeing her face in the mirror every day.

EFFIGY

Fiction

BY EMILIO CABRAL

Rows of living statues bracket Highway 281. Some are covered in gold paint, reflecting the setting sun, but most are tinged with gray—the ruddiness of their cheeks fading as their circulation deteriorates. They track the pale glow of my shattered headlights, courtesy of a midnight encounter with a deer in the Dallas suburbs. In the five years since the disease claimed its first victim, no expert has discovered a scientific explanation for why it leaves the eyes untouched while the body calcifies. Unable to move their eyelids, however, the statues are unwilling voyeurs, forced to witness time flow around them.

It is still strange to think of them as statues rather than people. The only difference between us is the disease that has fossilized each of the six hundred muscles in their bodies. As of now, only the big toe of my right foot, firmly pressed against the gas pedal, has been affected. The online medical journals my roommate, Sean, and I spent hours memorizing predict I have days before the condition is impossible to conceal. Last night, as I packed my suitcase, I told myself this homecoming was no different from my oldest cousin's surprise visit to announce her pregnancy. The analogy dulled, at least for a moment, the sharp edge of fear.

There are more beautiful places to die than the Austin suburb where I was raised, but none as fitting. Any of the statues on the highway could have once been someone I knew. The one still wearing its shattered wire-rimmed glasses—is it the cashier from my father's favorite HEB? The one dressed head to toe in dark wash denim—doesn't it bear a striking resemblance to the yoga instructor whose bulging pectorals were the only reason my mother renewed her yearly gym membership? The one beside the exit ramp leading directly to my neighborhood—what if it's my high school bully, who spewed homophobic slurs in class but solicited me for sexual favors in rank bathroom stalls?

My street is largely unchanged. Volkswagens and minivans line driveways, teenagers toss deflated footballs across cul-de-sacs, and gardens teem with rosebushes. If anything, it feels even more aggressively suburban than when I left for college. As if the homeowners association decided the best way to combat the disease was with manicured lawns and powerwashed sidewalks.

Here the statues are few and far between. There is no cure for the disease, but the statues can survive for months on life support machines meant to provide them with the nutrients and blood their bodies no longer produce. Of course, only people able to purchase expensive colonials amidst the housing crisis have the money to pay never-ending streams of hospital bills. A telecast Sean and I watched months ago reported that eighty percent of families could not afford professional care for their loved ones. This was followed by an interview with one of the families. The mother, a short woman with matted hair and mascara running down her cheeks, said keeping the statue which was once her son in the living room had taken a psychological toll.

"His brother and sister come home from school every day and see he's dying. But if I put him in the attic, he'll die alone. Tell me, what am I supposed to do?"

My parents' house sits at the end of the street. Built at the start of Austin's housing boom, it has survived flash flooding, wildfires, and two home births. This is the first time I have laid eyes on it in four years.

The car shudders as I twist the key from the ignition. Chances it will restart are slim. Even if I had the money, calling a mechanic would be pointless. I have no plans to ever get behind the wheel again. I allow myself a brief hesitation—the fleeting thought of driving until I run out of gas and am left to calcify alone in an abandoned field—before lifting my carry-on from the passenger seat and walking up the driveway.

My father answers the door seconds after I knock. He's lost weight. His sunken cheeks and concave chest, visible through the worn fabric of an undershirt several sizes too large, belong to someone in his seventies. Not the man who had just celebrated his fiftieth birthday the last time we spoke.

"Your brother said you were coming home," he says. Despite his emaciated body, his voice is strong and clear. "I wasn't sure I believed him. It's about time."

"You look awful," I say, hoping he hears the perverse pleasure it gives me.

"We got the graduation pictures you sent. Does that communications degree come with a job?"

"Is it cancer?"

"Stress," my father says. "Four years of radio silence will do that."

The implication that I am the source of his stress hangs in the air. But I will not give him the satisfaction of hearing me try to justify the choices I've made since I left. I did not come back for his approval. push past him and into the house. Like the street outside, it is practically the same as I remember it. The floorboards still creak when I lean too far to one side, sticky traps covered in the twitching bodies of ants and cockroaches are still tucked in various corners, and the stairs to the second floor are still desperately in need of a new coat of paint. The only immediately noticeable difference is the lack of family portraits in the hallway. Pictures of my parents taken after my brother and I went to college, chronicling my father's progressive gauntness, hang in their place.

"I thought you were scared of heights," I say, pointing at a photo of them on the edge of the Grand Canyon, arms outstretched.

My father does not so much as glance at the photo. "Your mother's in the living room. We have company."

I spent nearly the entire drive preparing, but the sight of Mr. and Mrs. Riley sitting side by side on our couch, bodies angled toward one another as they laugh at a joke my mother told, still lodges itself between my eyes like a bullet. The gray streaks their black hair has accumulated since I last saw them, and the slightly more pronounced lines around their mouths, do nothing to diminish their uncanny resemblance to their son. When the three of them first moved in next door, my brother was convinced Sean was a clone, gestated in a mail-order test tube like the protagonist of a science fiction novel.

I never did tell Sean about that.

Mrs. Riley turns at the sound of my father's footsteps. She sees me over his shoulder, and a smile blooms across her face. "You're so grown up," she says. "I almost didn't recognize you."

"It's nice to see you, Mrs. Riley."

"What did I tell you? Call me Jennifer. I want to cling to my youth as long as possible."

Mr. Riley reaches out to shake my hand. He's sharper around the edges than his wife. Brittle and taut. "It's been ages since the last time you nagged him, Jen. Cut the kid some slack."

"No," I say. "She's right. I should have remembered."

"Sean never remembers either," Mrs. Riley says fondly.

Mr. Riley squeezes her knee, somehow equally exasperated and amused. A move he must have perfected over their twenty years of marriage. "He shouldn't be calling us by our first names anyway. It's strange. Isn't it strange, Diane?"

My mother's lips curl. She is in better condition than my father, but her hair is thinning, and she has developed crow's feet at the corners of her eyes. "Sorry, Jennifer, but I agree with your husband."

"Look at that," Mrs. Riley says, making a show of rummaging through her purse. "I think I lost your invitation to next week's book club meeting."

"She's been a sore loser since the day we met," Mr. Riley says. He presses a kiss to his wife's temple. "Passed it on to Sean too."

Sean would be furious if he were here. He always hated that his parents divided all his personality traits amongst themselves, taking responsibility for everything but his queerness. It was the only thing they refused to claim. The only thing he had sole ownership of.

"Where is Sean anyway," Mr. Riley says. "I find it hard to believe the two of you didn't carpool. 'Save the planet' and all that."

Before I left Dallas, I wrote dozens of scripts. Lists of ways to tell Sean's parents he had contracted the disease over a month ago. That he asked to join the ranks of the thousands of statues lining downtown Dallas, and I did not have the heart to disobey his wishes and bring him with me. I could not have made the trip with him tied to the roof of my car, the thought of his supine body shifting above my head at every stoplight disrupting my concentration.

I practiced my speech on bewildered gas station cashiers, but none of those encounters carried the weight now settling on my shoulders. The weight of knowing Mr. and Mrs. Riley will associate my face with the loss of their son forever.

#

Sean lost all feeling in his left foot three weeks before graduation. He'd complained of decreased sensation in his toes for days beforehand, but we both assumed it was the lingering effect of a drunk crash against a frathouse pool table. I took him to the urgent care around the corner for a cortisone shot, but he left with a mutated fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva diagnosis. He would be lucky to have enough function to walk across the stage and receive his diploma with the rest of us come graduation.

He was the third person I knew to be diagnosed with mutated FOP our senior year. Every Friday, the gay-straight alliance hosted teach-ins to disseminate the little information about the disease available to us across campus. But with no way to detect the disease until an individual was symptomatic, no amount of well-crafted brochures would slow the tide of rising cases.

As gay men on a college campus, Sean and I had known one of us would get it at some point. I just always thought it would be me.

"It's not fair," I said, carding my fingers through Sean's hair. We were lying on our couch the afternoon after his diagnosis, watching reruns of Golden Girls. "There's no one safer than you."

"A jumbo box of condoms beneath my bed doesn't make me 'safer' than anyone else," he said. "There's no proof FOP is sexually transmitted."

He was right, but that did not stop the CDC from suggesting gay men abstain from sex altogether. Research studies conducted at Harvard found that mutated FOP was communicable, not congenital like its non-mutated counterpart. As such, though it was rarer in the general population, it was more difficult to study and treat. And because the virus largely affected queer men, the experimental treatments the government promised us continued to be further and further delayed.

"It's sort of poetic," Sean continued. "We came here to get away from our parents, and now I'll never have to go back."

"Don't say that," I said. "You're not going to die."

"Bless your heart."

"Or we can drive home. We still have time. Your parents will want to see you."

Sean sat up, grimacing as he lifted his calcified foot off the couch with his hands and set it on the ground. "I don't care what they want. I'm not telling them."

"You shouldn't have to go through this alone."

"I'm not alone," Sean said. "I'm with you."

It became his mantra as the disease progressed. By the time he was confined to bed—every muscle below his chest turned to bone—he would deliriously repeat it again and again until he passed out from exhaustion.

It was an honor for Sean to trust me to care for him, but, for the most part, I resented him. There was no easy way to watch a boy I'd known since childhood waste away. Before then, FOP was theoretical. A specter haunting my bareback hookups in dingy club bathrooms. Statistics just worrisome enough to remind us how much more our communities suffered during the AIDS crisis in the 80s and 90s. Stories to exchange amongst friends as we discussed how lucky we were to have access to a free clinic invested in providing us with the quality sexual education we never received as teenagers.

But caring for Sean erased any possibility of escaping the reality of FOP. I brought him his meals and spooned them down his throat until the day his airway closed. I stripped him down to his underwear and ran a damp washcloth along the length of his body. I sat on the edge of his bed until he fell asleep, spending the night on the floor in case he woke up in pain. At the end, he developed nightmares that kept him wailing until dawn. To calm him down, I unpacked the photo albums our mothers had gifted us our first year of college. I figured reminiscing was the best way to distract him from the reality of how close he was to becoming a memory himself.

In his most lucid moments, he had me sit beside him on the bed and read every article and study on FOP I could find out loud. Knowing exactly how he would die was comforting to him, and he spent hours cycling through the various scenarios until he ran out and had to start again.

"Most likely," he said, "I'll die of starvation or heart failure. But this study from Mayo says some statues go into multi-system organ failure days after total calcification because their pancreas is the first thing to shut down, turning them into diabetics. Every other organ just follows."

No matter how often we repeated this conversation, his glib, and self-deprecating humor always brought me to tears. "I wish you wouldn't talk like that."

"And I wish the government cared about us enough to find a cure."

"If you call your parents, they'll pay for better doctors, who will put you on better treatments."

"There aren't any treatments," Sean said. "We've gone through all the literature, called every hospital. I'm going to die. Why can't you accept that?"

The day of graduation, Sean apologized for his temper and asked me to change him into his cap and gown. If he had to wear the same thing for the rest of his life, he wanted it to be proof that he'd done what he set out to do four years ago. Who was I to refuse a boy who, by then, strained to move his mouth?

It took an hour to dress him. The gown did not close properly over his chest, and the sleeves swallowed his pencil-thin arms. It reminded me of the ill-fitting dresses we'd sneak into dressing rooms when our mothers took us to the mall to shop for clothes. But those afternoons were euphoric, not devastating. He was now a facsimile of the boy I'd known. Closer to a modern art installation than a human being. He wanted to see himself in a mirror, but I told him there was no time for me to move it from the living room before I had to be at graduation. The truth was I had hidden every mirror we owned in a box in the bathroom. I did not want him to see himself like this.

"Do we at least have time for a phone call?" he said.

"Who do you want to call?"

His eyes watered with the effort of twisting his mouth into some semblance of a smile. "My mom."

The request surprised me. Through all the nightmares, pain, and vomiting, he had refused to let me inform his parents of his diagnosis. He had always taken the caution our families approached our queerness with harder than I did. He had no qualms about punishing them with silence for refusing to accept him. The only reason I had not reached out to my parents since leaving Austin was because I was afraid he would catch me.

But I stayed quiet as I dialed his mother's number and propped the phone up beside his mouth, putting it on speaker as an afterthought. It rang once, twice—

"Hello?"

"Hi, Mom," Sean said.

"Sean? Shouldn't you be at graduation?"

"How did you know?"

"You may not have invited us, but I'm your mother. It's my job to know where you're supposed to be when you aren't."

"It's just a little case of nerves is all."

"Maybe if I were there I could help."

"Trust me, you're helping already."

It was all too intimate for me. I went to step outside, but Sean held up a hand and motioned for me to stay.

"Truth is, Mom," he said. "I've missed you."

"Oh, honey," his mother said. "We've missed you too."

"I'm sorry I haven't come home in a while. I needed to figure some things out."

"You don't have to apologize for that. The important thing is that you're happy."

"I am happy," Sean said, looking at me. I leaned forward and kissed the corner of his mouth. "I'm the happiest I've been in a long time," he continued. "The rest of my life starts today."

#

I repeat the story of Sean's final moments three times before Mr. and Mrs. Riley are satisfied. They do not scream or shake with grief. The only sign they've lost their son is the slight quiver in Mrs. Riley's upper lip. They are out the door before my parents can offer their condolences. Claiming exhaustion from the drive, I escape up the stairs to my childhood room. The comforter is neatly creased, the floor freshly swept, and the action figures on my desk vigorously polished. Evidence that my parents, despite my father claiming he did not believe I would come, prepared for my arrival. The constant oscillation between cold and caring was more confusing than anger-inducing. It is why I left with Sean but struggled to give up my parents with the same finality. For all their faults, they love me. I just wish they understood me too.

I spend most of the night throwing the action figures against the wall. My parents shout at one another from the other side of the door. My father wants to send me somewhere else until I've calmed down. A hotel or my brother's apartment. My mother argues it is their responsibility to actively monitor my well-being. True to form, neither of them goes so far as to knock.

Midnight arrives. Out of trinkets to break, I pad down the stairs and rip the newly mounted pictures of my parents off the walls. The glass shatters. I take off my socks and walk across the shards, relishing that, for now, I can feel their jagged edges slice my soles open.

My parents' voices, muffled by sleep and their bedroom door, drift toward me. I limp through the hallway and out the front door.

The air is cool on my face. I close my eyes and imagine the soft caress is Sean's palm. When I blink, tears leak down my cheeks.

The summer before college, Sean snuck me into his house for a midnight movie marathon using the spare key his parents kept beneath a potted fern on their porch. We were caught by his father, who woke up to use the bathroom, but he must not have put two and two together because the key has not been moved.

I insert the key into the lock and slowly push the door open. If I am caught, I will insist I have every right to be here. I was not only Sean's best friend, I was his confidant; his doctor; his caretaker; his messenger; his priest; his funeral director. There is no reason I should not be allowed into his space when I am the one he chose to remain beside him. It is more than either of his parents can say.

A layer of dust covers Sean's room. There are no creases in his comforter or polished action figures on his desk. I would guess his parents have not been inside in months.

This would be as good a spot as any to wait for my body to calcify. If Mr. and Mrs. Riley did not come inside after the news of Sean's passing, I do not think they ever will. I could waste away surrounded by the things Sean loved. His Billy Joel posters and his Judith Butler books. Relics of the life we had.

But it would be too easy on my parents. Sean wanted to be set beside the rest of the statues in downtown Dallas because he did not agree with the notion that they were the castoffs of families too poor to pay for proper care. Rather, he believed a large portion of them had decided to use their inevitable deaths as a protest. In their family homes, they were invisible. Trapped inside the same four walls they had lived the majority of their lives. On the side of the road, and along the edges of the highway, they were impossible to ignore. That was why some of them painted themselves gold. To make themselves unavoidable.

Except, even now, I cannot muster Sean's anger at the world. I am not an activist. The only people who I want to haunt are my parents. So maybe I will not die here, ensconced in reminders of my best friend. Instead, I will sit on my bed and wait for my bones to calcify. For my mother to call me to dinner one evening and climb the stairs after receiving no response. For her to scream as the door swings open and reveals my body, perfectly still save for the green eyes still moving from side to side.

She will scream for my father, he will break down at my feet, and I will watch a man full of regret pray to the effigy of his son.

KICK THE CAN

Poetry

BY JOHN BECK

We kicked the can
until the chorus of parent voices
up and down the block
pulled us all
toward our homes
and dinner.

This was a special night.
In each house, the tables were set
for miniature feasts. The food was brighter,
bigger and ran with juices we knew

would force us to smile
widely, wetly into our napkins.

The smells were so sweet or
tall or red or rich that our teeth
tightened and we wanted to eat it all
to be rid of the hovering scent.

This was the night, the meal
of all bad news.

In each house, the parents
passed the bad news after the roast
and before ladling the perfect potatoes
with bubbling brown gravy.

Malcolm heard that there would be
no bike for his birthday.

Tina learned the factory was closing
and her daddy would never again make tires.

Tomas heard about the brother
who had died that week in Vietnam.

Sara was told that the moving van would come
and that life would always be elsewhere.

Billy sat wide-eyed at the news that forty years
from now they would find the spot of cancer.

Whitney heard of the daughter, unborn yet for decades,
killed by a drunk on the road from college.

Gwen lost count after the fourth husband was described,
and cried through the tale of a life never happy,

never ever happy. James saw that all
his dreams would be all just that, just dreams.

I learned that I would always have only
a child's memories of grandfathers, no answers

to all my questions, that I would grow
into my father's clothes, feel his voice,
his words rising in my chest.

Outside on the street, the cans in their carnival
pile waited under the June evening sun for one last game,
on this the year's longest day, their curved sides
open to the coming kick.

Inside each can, label frayed, is the dangerous edge
sharp as sudden news that can slice
straight to the bone.

FROM THE EDGE OF THE CROWD

Poetry

BY RAIS TULUKA

I stayed near the back,
where the dust didn't rise so thick,
where a man could disappear
into his own doubt.

He was already speaking when I came
not loudly, but like someone
who knew the sound of his own name
in every tongue.
Some leaned in like he was bread.
Others wept.

I wanted none of it.

They say he turned a storm still,
that the fish leapt to his hands
like they knew him.
That he touched a woman's shoulder once
and her blood obeyed.

But I've seen magicians before—
men who twist crowds like cords,
who speak and coins fall
from the mouths of children.
So I stayed behind a fig tree.
Watched.

And then, the blind man came.
Eyes clouded like river stones.
He stumbled forward,
muttering thanks to air and staff.

I thought: Let's see it then.
Let the trick reveal itself.

The prophet knelt.
No oil, no chants,
just spit and dust—
mud made like in the beginning.

He pressed it to the man's face
like sealing a letter
to a place only heaven knows.

Then:
"Wash."

The blind man obeyed.
And when he opened his eyes,
his knees gave way
like a door unlatched.

He shouted out the shape of color,
the light in the crowd's linen robes,
the outline of olive trees,
his mother's face.

And I—
I stepped back.

Because if this is not magic,
then it is something older.
Something wilder than magic.

And if it is God,
then what kind of world
have we let fester
beneath His watching?

He walked past me then,
close enough I could see
his feet were cracked
like the land itself.

He didn't look at me.
And I didn't speak.

But I followed.
Far enough behind
to pretend I still had a choice.

SWIFTLETS AT DUSK

Poetry

BY KRISTY ETTEL

This time
they were not merely in flight
or soaring with joy or
performing their
sky-sweeping pirouettes,
as they are well known to do.

No, this time
they were a meteoric attack
quick this way and that—
the most ferocious frenzy
I think I'd ever seen,
flinging and flitting
inside-out one another
like a silent jet-skirmish
bursting below heaven.

All the while, they kept in sync, singing
swing-beetle-beak-gnat-wind
looping and zooming
weaving small swarms
in their pink heat evening's
gorging soot-storm;
and errorless, with not a single misstep
or stall—not a single winged pause.

Who knew such delicate nestlings
all cuddle and casual, daze-like gliders,
stored within them such sharp violence:
greed, snap-speed and, surely
many a death we'll never see.

Little divinities, now
avow to me loudly how
you plunge the air and pluck its meat
you seethe hot blood then lull in bliss
wonder-whistling sweet melodies.

Feather embers, embed in me
by word, by birth, by art of earth
your swift song of multiplicity.

THE GIRL FROM EVERLAND

Genre Fiction

BY A. FOREMAN

When people asked how she stayed so young, she lied.
There were always questions—sometimes playful, sometimes sharp as needles:
Was it yoga, red wine, or a good dose of lucky genes?
She'd smile, say "Yes," and let the laughter fall where it would.
But the truth was stranger, heavy and cold.
She had been born in a world where wolves sang across the glacial plains of France, a time when no borders broke the snow.
Her mother carved bowls from mammoth tusk.
Her father vanished before memory had teeth.
She bled at twelve and, by twenty-five, her body simply... stopped. No age clung to her. No line, no stoop, no gray.
The world grew old, and she watched time passing.

Was it a witch's joke, she wondered. Some fever or star's crooked blessing? The gods, she at first suspected, had played a trick, then forgotten her. Soon she lost belief in gods, and lost the habit of astonishment; weddings blurred into funerals, love into memory, memory into dust.

She changed her name with the generations: Q'on, Magmanal, Hsugeniakhs, Kehet, Demetria, Ruth, Aurelia, Hygd, Mieng, Gulrēz, Hélène, Vera, Ilse, Mindy....always new, never hers. Every time someone looked too close, she ran. The world spun on, and she grew thin as the wind, a ghost behind the glass. The mirror was a lie.
One day she would look it in the eye.

In the beginning, there was fire and bison. She traced her hand on the walls of the caves, red ochre staining the stone and her skin. They sang to the bear-god, danced beneath antler shadows. Her lover died in the cold, his name lost to the smoke and frost. She took up with his cousin to survive. One day she would not quite remember whether she wept for him at all, but she did. The cave grew silent, the gods dumb as stone.

Centuries thundered by in a rush of hooves. Among barrow-builders north of the sea, she learned to ride wild stallions, her hair streaked with copper and lamb-fat. They loved speed and the wheel. They prayed to Father Sky and knew the Thunderking was master of the oak.

One man joked that she was death's own riddle. He broke in her arms, his bones a secret she buried in her heart. They stormed the plains, burned and danced. The field was a graveyard,
and that was how things went.

She walked among the builders of what was later called Stonehenge, hands on rough lintels, feeling history grind beneath callused palms. They begged her for the secret of years, their eyes bright with longing. She kissed them and fled by solstice, always leaving before questions found root. The sun returned, but not the blood. The debt of warmth lingered on her tongue.

In Athens, she hid among the marble colonnades, always too young to be a widow, always alone. The city glittered with rhetoric and rot. Her lover sculpted beauty, died before the Parthenon climbed the sky. She sold her bracelets, kept her secrets, watched philosophy rise like mist over olive trees. She missed sandals, oil, the sea—never the rest.

In Palestine, she watched as a man who promised the world's end was crucified outside the walls. She believed him for a week, but the world did not end. A merchant loved her; he vanished in the bloodthirst of empire. She kissed a wine-seller, shared names that were never true, and left before the slow erosion of time revealed her for what she was.

In Constantinople, she walked through the plague, her face untouched while children and monks died in droves. A doctor begged for her secret. He died anyway. She prayed to God, to mud, to empty stars. The prayers echoed, unanswered. The city filled with silence and rot, and she kept walking, her heart untouched.

She had a daughter once, in Chang'an—a bright thing with a tiger's tooth smile. She named her Li, shared rice cakes and winter secrets, sold her rings for fish and tea. An Lushan's rebels swept the city.

Then famine swept beyond it. Li died at six, her hands warm in the cold earth. After that, she never had a child again. It was easier not to try.

In Shiraz, gardens soured with blood and betrayal, knew Hafiz. He was a decent guy. She even told him the truth about her. Maybe he believed her. It hardly matters. Mubāriz al-Dīn came. Bu Ishaq was killed. A winehouse burned and bodies swayed among the jasmine. A guard proposed, kissed with fear. She left before the dawn, before the city's prayers grew knifelike. Hafiz returned and found her gone.

She hid in Berlin as the sky burned and walls cracked open. She tended to ruined boys, stitched wounds, listened as bombs painted history in fire and dust. When the war ended, she felt nothing. The silence was only a pause between deaths.

In Chicago, the L tracks rumbled almost like ancient mammoths at dusk. Thinking how that city could groan with any century, she sat in a diner, coffee bitter, waiting for the city to blink and swallow again. She'd worn a thousand lives—goddess, slave, nun, thief—and had seen the future enough times to know it never really changed. She didn't need to turn anymore pages to know it was time to eat the book. The room was quiet. The pills were lined. The water, cold. She drew the blinds, stripped the old names away, and waited for the last beat.

It ended as all things should—not with fire, but with a gulp, a hush, a single life folding itself into the dusk. No magic. No flame. No blood on the coat. Only time's return to the mud at last, and the story slipping thankfully out of time.

She left a note. But even that, the world would forget.

THE MOSS COLLECTOR

Genre Fiction

BY DAVID HORN

Ash moved through the fog as one might cross the threshold of a memory—slowly, with care, unsure what waited on the other side. The moor spread out before him, damp and drowsy beneath a low curtain of clouds. Moss clung to the earth in sprawling patches of green and rust, some of it bright as spring, some dulled to the shade of dried blood. Beneath his boots, the soil gave way with a soft, reluctant sigh, the way old things do when disturbed.

He crouched beside a patch that pulsed faintly beneath the surface, its edges tinged violet, as though bruised. With gloved fingers, he brushed away the dew, revealing a tighter weave of moss than he'd seen the day before. From his satchel he drew a narrow-bladed tool and a fragment of cloth, careful to disturb as little as possible. He worked in silence, breath steady, and his face was unreadable. When he touched the moss directly, a tremor climbed his wrist—not cold, not heat, but something alive in between.

The sound came then, soft and splintered, as if carried across a great distance. A girl humming. Maybe. Or the wind striking glass. He closed his eyes for a moment longer than necessary, listening, weighing.

Then he opened the journal balanced across one knee, flipped to the most recent page, and began to write:
Color: bruised violet. Texture: compressed, fibrous. Response to contact: auditory hallucination (possible)—note tonal shift. Humming / melody. Sound carries guilt.

He did not pause to wonder whose guilt. That kind of question no longer served him.

The fog shifted as he stood, moving like something that meant to stay out of his way but hadn't decided whether it liked him. He scanned the ridgeline and saw nothing at first—just the long emptiness of a world that had forgotten how to echo. Then, past the shadowed crest of a lichen-covered rock, a figure. Not moving. Not speaking. A shape drawn in charcoal against the mist.

She stood with her arms slack at her sides, posture neutral, as if unsure whether to vanish. No gesture of greeting. No warning. Ash blinked once, twice, but the figure held. A woman—young, maybe. Long hair blurred by distance and fog. When he stepped forward, she did not retreat. When he looked again, she was gone.

He did not call out.

Instead, he turned back to the patch of moss, now duller, its edges frayed as though weathered by more than his touch. He scraped a final sample from the centre, sealed it in wax paper, and folded it carefully into the book. With the page marked and zipped away, he continued his circuit, boots leaving a narrow trail that soon softened behind him.

In his years of walking these lands, he had learned not to chase visions. The moors offered many gifts, but certainty was not among them.

Ash kept to the lower trail, where the ground sloped toward a half-drowned fence line swallowed by turf and thorn. Years ago, it might have divided pasture from peat, though nothing grazed here now except the fog. He paused beside a familiar stump hollowed by rot, its roots curled like fingers grasping at air. The moss here had always been a mellow green, soft under touch, yielding pleasant memories, childhood laughter, the clean snap of bedsheets drying in wind.

Today, it throbbed a dull red.

He touched it lightly, not enough to draw sound, just enough to confirm what he already suspected. The colour deepened, streaks of black bleeding from the core like ink from a broken pen. He leaned closer, breath held, and let his fingertips rest fully in the weave.

A voice surged from beneath the fibers, loud and sudden—not laughter, but a shout. It cracked against his eardrums, sharp with panic, and brought with it the shiver of concrete walls and cold fluorescent light. A child, maybe eight years old, screamed for someone not present, and the echo collapsed inward like a door slammed too hard.

Ash staggered back, heart hammering as though he'd run. He wiped his hand on his coat and forced himself still. The moss quieted. The red held.

He'd catalogued this patch half a dozen times. Never had it turned on him. He flipped open his journal with stiff fingers, staring at the older entry. Green, low pulse, joy-coloured, soundless. There'd been comfort here once.

He added a note beneath the old record rather than overwrite it.

Sample integrity degraded. Emotional tone inversion. Recheck origin.

He tapped the page once with the pen, then looked up. Across the trail, perhaps twenty metres away, the woman stood again.

No wind stirred her hair. She wore no coat, no pack, nothing to suggest she belonged to the place. Her gaze remained unreadable, but something in her presence pressed against the moment, as though time itself had shifted slightly off centre. The moss beneath her feet turned grey.

Ash didn't move. He raised a hand—not in greeting, just enough to measure reaction.

She blinked. Once.

Then she stepped to her left, onto another patch. It withered under her weight. Not the dramatic decay of a ghost story, but the slow collapse of something too fragile to resist attention. Color drained from the moss like breath from a dying ember.

He exhaled through his nose, slow and deliberate. His instincts urged flight, but his purpose held him rooted. He moved toward her, cautiously, watching the ground.

By the time he reached the edge of her last footprint, she had vanished again.

He knelt anyway. The moss here had grown in a tight braid, as though shaped by repeated contact. He touched it with the back of his fingers, unsure whether to expect heat, sound, or nothing at all.

A hum emerged—subtle, harmonic, low. It trembled inside his chest like memory was misremembered. He closed his eyes and saw not the moor, but a hospital corridor, fluorescent light buzzing overhead. A small form wrapped in a too large blanket. A name he had not spoken aloud in years. Then the vision cracked, and the scene twisted: blood on linoleum, voices shouting behind glass.

He pulled away fast. Not from fear, but from shame. That memory was never his. The fog thickened as he stood. Behind him, the moss glowed faintly blue, as if unsure which story to keep.

Ash adjusted the strap on his satchel and turned his steps downslope, following the slight indentations left by the girl's passage—not footprints in any normal sense, but faint disturbances where moss refused to lie flat. Each patch she'd touched had changed, not just in colour but in shape, as if her presence rewrote the memory beneath the surface. Some curled inward like leaves scorched by frost; others flattened, dulled, and silent. None responded to him now.

He tested three samples along her trail and found nothing familiar. The echoes he normally coaxed—tones of loss, brief bursts of scent, or fractured voices—had gone still. He scratched lines through each blank entry in his journal, frustration rising like heat behind his teeth. His hand trembled, but he steadied it before writing again.

Trace analysis inconclusive. Subject presence interferes with sample fidelity. Color shift inconsistent. No auditory response.

The next page had already been marked from the night before—a page he didn't remember filling. He frowned, reading the lines twice.

Color: pale gold with marbled pink. Emotional tone: desire, confusion. Vocal fragment: her voice?

The pen strokes matched his, but the entry felt foreign. He ran his finger beneath the final phrase. A fine grain of dried pigment flaked from the paper. He hadn't used pink in months.

The moor ahead sloped into a hollow, where stones gathered in a sunken circle. Once, perhaps, a place of ritual or shelter. Now it collected fog like a wound refusing to close. At the centre stood the girl. Not watching. Not waiting. Simply there.

Ash stopped at the outer ring. She turned slowly toward him, as if drawn by the weight of his stare rather than its direction. Her face remained unreadable, layered too thickly with something he couldn't parse. When she stepped aside, it wasn't to flee but to make room. At her feet, the moss shifted from grey to deep green, pulsing faintly like breath.

He approached one step at a time, expecting her to vanish again, but she did not. She remained fixed at the edge of the pattern while he moved to the centre, where a cluster of moss unlike any he'd seen grew in tight ridges that curled outward at the edges like paper scorched at the margins. The moment his knee met the earth, sound returned.

Not a voice this time. A piano. Low, deliberate notes, out of tune and slow. He recognized the tune but not the hands. He hadn't played since before the silence began, but his fingers twitched in response to each chord, muscle memory reaching backward into a time he no longer claimed.

The music faltered, slid downward, fractured into silence.

He should have spoken. Asked her name. Asked whether she'd changed the samples or merely awakened what already slept there. But the words collapsed before forming, swallowed by the pressure building between them.

Instead, he reached for his journal, and for the first time in years, hesitated before opening it.

What had he come to remember? What was he willing to forget?

He turned a fresh page and wrote nothing.

He kept the journal closed as he stood, unsure whether the act of writing might anchor the memory or further unravel it. The girl remained kneeling, her hand still pressed to the moss, though the colour had faded back to grey. She showed no sign of discomfort, no response to his departure, only stillness. The kind that came not from peace, but from having no reason to move.

Ash walked uphill, following no trail now, only instinct. The fog swirled thicker at the ridgeline, softening the stones, the trees, the shape of the land itself. Behind him, the girl vanished again—not in a blink or a turn, but as though the air had decided she no longer belonged to it.

He crested a slope and found himself above a shallow basin, one he hadn't seen before despite years of walking in this region.

It sloped gently inward to a hollow lush with moss, layered in rings of colour: russet, gold, pewter, violet. The saturation pulsed with an unnatural rhythm, as though the earth itself had adopted a heartbeat.

No wind moved. No birds called.

He descended with slow steps, careful not to brush the patches lining the trail. His boots stirred with no sound. At the basin's centre, the moss grew dense, its surface irregular, almost calloused. He knelt and removed a glove, not out of ritual but necessity. Some part of him had begun to believe that the world would not speak to him unless he offered skin.

The contact hit harder than before. Not a whisper or a tone—this time a flood. Scent came first: smoke, iron, rain on sandstone. Then vision, strobing and disjointed. A room. A low table. A figure hunched over papers not unlike his own. Himself, perhaps, though older. Lips moving, but the voice came from somewhere else, a voice not his, sharp and sad: You keep writing them down, but you don't read them, do you?

His own hand on the page, marking notes without looking at the ink. The same symbols over and over, loops and slashes, as if hoping repetition might force meaning back into the world.

The vision dissolved.

He fell back onto one hand, breath caught in his throat. The basin shimmered, colour bleeding from the moss in waves. The edges of the hill were warped. He blinked hard and found the girl seated beside him.

No sound announced her arrival. Her face, tilted toward the moss, showed no surprise at his presence. When he turned his head toward her, she met his eyes—not for long, but long enough. A flicker passed across her expression, not quite sorrow, not quite pitiful.

Then her gaze returned to the moss, and she extended one hand—not to touch it, but to him.

Ash hesitated. The air had grown thick, not heavy, just full. As if the space between them held the density of memory compressed and waiting. He took her hand.

A wave passed through him. Not pain. Not relief. Something cellular, like recognition.

She closed her eyes, and the moss turned white beneath them.

Her fingers were slender, warm despite the cold, and bore the texture of skin often in contact with living things—soil, bark, wind-worn stone. There was no tremor in her grip, only steadiness, as if she'd been waiting not for him specifically, but for someone willing to hold the weight of their own memory. Ash studied her face without urgency. Her eyes remained closed, lashes still against her cheek, mouth neutral. There was no trance, no visible effort. The moment felt less like an exchange than an alignment.

The moss beneath their joined hands glowed white, pulseless but bright, as though it reflected nothing from above, only from within. The light did not cast shadows. It seemed to swallow them.

He didn't speak. He feared that words might fracture the balance—might force the moment into meaning before it had finished becoming one. Instead, he sat beside her, still holding her hand, and let the silence stretch. It wasn't absence, this silence. It carried substance. It hummed not in the air, but in the bones.

His breath slowed. For the first time in longer than he could name, his chest didn't tighten on the inhale. He noticed then how often he had held his breath without realising it, afraid that too much sound might break the world open in some irreversible way. The pressure between his shoulder blades lessened, and with it came something heavier: the realization that he'd never once questioned the cost of his work.

He had taken the voices, the visions, the fragments of pain and joy alike, and pinned them into pages without asking who they belonged or whether memory could be stolen.

Beside him, the girl opened her eyes. Her gaze met his and did not look away. Something in it was familiar—not in shape or colour, but in its stillness. It was the way the sky holds just before the rain begins, not yet falling, but inevitable.

“You’re not lost,” he said quietly, surprised by the sound of his own voice. “You were never lost.”

She didn’t answer. But her hand tightened slightly in his, a gesture so small it might have been missed if he weren’t already listening with everything he had.

The moss began to dim, the white fading to a soft grey that did not return to silence, but to rest. She let go of his hand, not abruptly, but with the same grace she’d held it. He felt the absence immediately—like stepping from sunlight into shadow.

They sat a moment longer, not as subjects or strangers, but as two pieces of something previously scattered. Then she rose and stepped past him, moving up the side of the basin toward a narrow path that had not been there before.

Ash didn’t follow. Not yet.

Instead, he opened the journal. For the first time, he read from the beginning.

The journal creaked open like a door in an old house, the spine resisting at first, then yielding with a soft groan. Ash held it in both hands, the weight of it more than he remembered—though the pages had not thickened, and the ink weighed nothing. His fingers moved with practiced certainty through the opening leaves, past the newer entries—precise, coded notations that had become his daily script. Moss samples, locations, sensations: brittle data dressed in poetry. But there was something in the shape of his handwriting that unsettled him. The loops were tighter than they should be. The spacing irregular.

He slowed as he reached the early pages. The ones from the first year after the Silence. The ones he hadn’t opened in some time, perhaps out of reverence, or fear, or simple forgetfulness disguised as discipline.

A page near the front caught him off guard. The paper was stained with old damp, the ink blurred along one edge. The heading was familiar: Sample 0041. North ridge slope. Amber spiral growth. He remembered the day clearly. The sky had broken briefly, a band of sunlight cutting through the fog to cast gold on the moor. He had written about the warmth. The sound of children playing. A girl’s voice—his niece, maybe—singing a melody he could almost recall. Only now, the entry told a different story. Color: amber laced with ash grey. Texture irregular—crumbling at edges. Emotional residue: disappointment. Sound: door closing, wind through a broken vent. Cold smell of burned plastic.

He blinked, disoriented. That wasn’t how it had been. That patch had been warm. Joyful. Hadn’t it? He traced the lines with one thumb. The ink was his. The shape of the words his. But the memory felt like a lie someone else had taught him to recite.

He turned the page.

Sample 0042. East hollow near drainage stone.

He recalled that one as somber, yes—but peaceful. Grief worn smooth over time. The quiet hum of a mother’s voice, a cradle rhythm long since stilled.

The entry said otherwise.

Color: oxidized red. Core rot. Response: immediate flash image—fractured mirror, blood in sink. Whispered phrase: ‘I didn’t mean to.’

He closed the book.

His breath had grown shallow again, his pulse fast beneath his skin. The ground around him no longer felt stable. The moss pulsed faintly at the edge of his vision, not in light, but in some vibration just beneath hearing. As if responding not to his presence, but to his doubt.

Ash realized then that he had not been recording memory. He had been recording something about memory. A reflection. A distortion. Possibly even contamination.

He looked toward the path the girl had taken, but the fog had thickened again, and she was nowhere to be seen.

He pressed his hand against the journal’s cover, fingers spread wide, as if to feel whether it still remembered what he once believed to be true.

Then he stood.

He stepped beyond the basin's edge, the damp grass brushing his calves with cold insistence. The path ahead sloped gently upward, flanked by low brambles and half-fallen stone markers—none of which he remembered passing before. That didn't surprise him now. The moor changed when it wanted to. It had always obeyed some rhythm deeper than maps could catch, something older than soil and names.

The journal remained closed in his coat pocket, heavy enough to skew his balance. He no longer trusted what it contained. Not because the pages had changed, but because they hadn't protested when they did. They had accepted the new memories with ink and silence, and that, more than anything, frightened him.

He crested the rise and paused.

Elara stood at the edge of a crumbling structure, perhaps the remains of a low wall or collapsed shelter. Moss had overtaken the stones entirely, draping them like the folds of a forgotten cloak. The girl's hands were clasped behind her back, and her posture was as it had always been—still, neutral, not beckoning, not retreating.

But she was waiting.

Ash approached with measured steps, unwilling to speak just yet. She turned only slightly as he was nearing, enough for him to glimpse her face in profile. She looked young, though not childlike. Her eyes were not unlined. There was depth in them, not age exactly, but weight. As though she had carried many seasons without ever owning one.

He knelt beside the largest moss-covered stone and examined the surface. It was different from any patch he'd studied before—denser, veined with thin strands of silver-green, like nerves just beneath the skin. He hesitated, but she did not move to stop him. He touched it.

The rush came fast and hard. Not a memory. A presence. The perspective flipped—his body seated, his breath shallow, but the gaze no longer his own. He saw himself through other eyes, seated here as he was now, journal open, lips moving silently.

A field note, a classification, as if the one looking at him sought to understand him in the same way he had cataloged the moss.

Then a shift. Another flicker—his face again, but different: thinner, older, beard ragged, eyes ringed with something between sorrow and mania. Speaking aloud to no one. Pleading, maybe. Laughing at something unseen.

He staggered backward, tearing free of the moss. He sat hard in the grass, heart racing, lungs desperate. Elara turned to him fully now, her expression unchanged, but her eyes holding him in place more firmly than her hands ever could.

He understood then. Or began to.

She was not a memory. Not a ghost. Not even a guide. She was an observer.

Not of the world.

Of him.

Perhaps she had always been watching—not just him, but any who came into this place seeking to preserve what could no longer be claimed.

"Have I... have I changed it?" he asked, more to the space between them than to her. "Am I the one twisting the voices?"

She didn't answer, but the moss around her feet turned from silver to deep blue. The colour of truth, if his old notes could be trusted.

He didn't reach for his journal.

He wasn't sure he ever would again.

Instead, he stood. Slowly. Quietly. Then he turned to follow where the path bent westward, down into a narrow valley he didn't recognize.

Behind him, the girl remained.

And ahead, the ground pulsed faintly with colors he no longer named.

The path narrowed as he descended, its edges hemmed by tall stones leaning in toward one another like the remnants of a collapsed cathedral. Fog slipped between them in measured swells, not aimless now but deliberate, curling with slow intelligence. The air grew thicker, touched with the metallic scent of old rain and something sweeter beneath—decay softened by time, like dried fruit or wilted petals.

Ash did not hurry. Each step pressed meaning into the ground, and the moss responded, not in colour, but in silence. It no longer whispered. It waited.

The clearing opened without warning. A wide, flat circle ringed in broken slate and filled with a tapestry of moss that pulsed in irregular patterns, a dozen hues overlapping and retracting, as though arguing among themselves. At the centre stood a single, gnarled tree, lifeless but upright, its bark veined with pale green threads that glowed faintly in the dim light.

Ash moved to the edge. He did not cross the boundary immediately. He'd seen places like this before—not on the moor, but in dreams. In the liminal space between waking and forgetting.

As he stepped forward, the air changed.

A sound rose—not from one direction, but from everywhere. Whispers, yes, but layered now, dense and urgent. Words tangled over one another: fragments of apologies, confessions, laughter cracked by regret. He turned in place, and with each shift of his body the tone changed—high, then guttural, then soft, then furious.

Faces bloomed in the mist. Not full-bodied figures, just eyes, mouths, outlines distorted by grief and heat. A child clinging to a soaked blanket. A man with blood on his sleeves and no recollection why. A woman mouthing silent words from behind glass. None of them known to him, and all impossibly familiar.

The moss flared beneath his feet, white at first, then gold, then red.

His knees gave slightly, and he caught himself on the trunk of the tree. It felt warm. Alive. The whispers poured through the bark into his skin.

He tried to speak—to say no, to say stop—but the voices surged louder, folding over him in waves, pushing images into his mind: his mother's voice reciting a poem he couldn't remember learning, a boy's scream echoing through a long hallway, the sound of flames and then nothing, not silence but absence, the kind that followed death but preceded mourning.

His chest tightened. His breath slipped.

He dropped the journal.

It struck the moss with a muffled sound, and the voices stopped.

The clearing shuddered.

Ash collapsed to his knees. His hands hovered over the closed book, uncertain whether to reach for it or push it away. His whole life had fed into those pages, line by line, sample by sample. A record of the world before, except now, he wasn't sure what part of it had ever belonged to him.

A hand touched his shoulder.

He turned slowly. Elara knelt beside him, her eyes soft, unreadable, but present. There was no glow in the moss beneath her. No pulse. Just stillness.

She extended her hand again—not as a guide this time, but as a question.

Ash looked down at the journal. Then at his hand, dirt beneath the nails, stained with old ink. His fingers trembled as he picked it up and held it one last time.

He opened to the first page.

Not a note. Not a map. Just a line in his own handwriting, one he didn't remember writing.

If you cannot remember rightly, it is better not to remember at all.

The wind shifted.

Ash set the book into the hollow beneath the roots of the tree. He did not bury it. He did not burn it.

He simply walked away.

Elara followed.

The moss did not whisper.

It breathed.

The moor changed as they walked. Not quickly, not with spectacle, but with the quiet certainty of something exhaling after a long breath held too tightly. The path beneath their feet grew less distinct, edges softening into long stretches of pale grass and scattered lichen. Patches of moss still dotted the earth, but none of them pulsed. None shifted colour or offered sound. They simply were.

Ash felt the weight leave his shoulders first—not all at once, but in careful increments, as if the wind were peeling something from him that had grown too close to notice. The ache in his hands dulled. The tension in his spine eased. He didn't speak. Neither did Elara.

They passed a stream that had not been there before, narrow and shallow, its water so clear he could see the pale stones beneath shifting slightly with the current. He knelt, cupped a handful, and drank. The cold shocked his throat, but he didn't pull away. When he looked to Elara, she was watching the stream, not him.

She did not join him, but she waited.

He stood again, water dripping from his fingers, and the two of them continued along a trail that didn't need to exist until they stepped upon it. At one point, they reached a rise where the fog parted in long strands, the sky visible at last. Gray still, but not oppressive. Somewhere above, the light moved in currents too slowly for the eye to follow.

They stopped near a stand of trees—not the skeletal ruins scattered across the moor, but young saplings, slender and swaying gently in the breeze. Moss grew at their bases, soft and vivid, but when Ash knelt beside one and placed his palm upon it, nothing stirred. No vision came. No voice. Just the quiet texture of life continuing.

He smiled. From relief.

Elara stepped forward then, past him, through the trees. Her pace did not quicken, nor did she look back.

He understood.

She had finished what she came to do. Or perhaps he had.

Ash remained for a while beneath the tallest sapling, watching its branches bend toward the light. He lay back in the grass beside it, not to sleep, but to listen—not for whispers or echoes, but for the rhythm of the wind, the rustle of leaves, the hush of the earth.

It was enough.

He no longer listened for voices in the moss.

Now, he listened for what came after.

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