

2019 OYAN Short Story Contest

Winners & Finalists

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THE WEIGHT OF LIVING

By Mary Rudd

I was nine when it became clear that Grandma's feet could no longer touch the ground.

"Couldn't we just get her those weighted shoes, like on TV?" Jared asked, tossing a football in the air and catching it, over and over. He was at that perfect age where he was light enough to run and play sports, but not so light that he drifted every time he leapt. I wished I was a teenager. Everyone my age was heavy, but sometimes it seemed as if gravity pulled especially hard on me, like I had lead inside my bones.

"She's coming to live with us, and that's that." Mom moved across the kitchen, steps brisk, each only keeping her in the air a few seconds at a time. "She's only going to keep growing lighter as she gets older. She can't stay on her own anymore." She frowned, shifting boxes and cans on the counter. "Have either of you seen my keys?"

"On top of the fridge, Mom."

"Right." She pushed off with her toes, holding one hand above her to keep from bumping her head on the ceiling, and rose, plucking her keys from the top of the refrigerator before floating back down.

I always loved getting to see Grandma. She never called me Gloomy Gus or Slow Poke or told me to stop being so serious all the time. When we visited, while Jared ran around outside and Mom answered work emails on her laptop, I would sit and listen as Grandma told me all these crazy stories about birds and angels and ships in the sky. My favorite was the one about the lost island floating somewhere in the clouds—"I used to want to go out and find it," she'd say, and I could imagine just how she'd looked as a little girl, ready to go on an adventure. "Maybe I will someday."

"And I'll come too, right?" I'd say. I asked the same thing every time, but I always kept my eyes on her face, waiting to hear the answer.

"Of course," she'd say, and her smile was as bright as the sun peeking through clouds. "How could I ever go without you?"

When she arrived, Mom helping her out of the car, I could tell something was different. She seemed frailer than before, a little less solid, and her feet hovered at least an inch off the ground. But when she saw me, her wrinkled face melted into the same warm smile, and she

hugged me just as tightly as she always had. “Hello, Gabriel,” she said, and even though I was a little scared by how light she felt, as if she had hollow bones, my lips twitched up into a smile. She was the only who called me by my whole name. I was Gabe to everyone else.

“How do you feel, Grandma?” I asked.

“Oh, I’m just fine,” she said, laughing. “Just a little lighter on my feet than usual, that’s all.”

We made a space for her in my room, and I moved in with Jared. It didn’t take long for Grandma to settle in. She had some trouble getting around sometimes—it was difficult for her if there was nothing nearby to push off from—but there was always someone around to help, taking her by the hand and guiding her like a large, bulky floating toy in a pool. When she wanted to sit, we weighed her down with blankets, and the same for when she slept, so she wouldn’t drift or float out of her bed. And when she helped with the dusting, insisting on being useful, she sang, her high and warbling voice filling up the house.

Things were brighter when she was there. Not everything changed—there were still days when I got taken over by these dark raincloud moods, even if the sun was shining outside. When that happened, everything around me looked tinged with gray, and my limbs felt even heavier than usual, like they were filled with rainwater. I never told anybody about these days, and most people didn’t notice, since I was quiet anyway. But Grandma could always tell. “Keep your chin up, Gabriel,” she’d say, giving me a gentle smile. “It’s a beautiful day.”

I talked to her every day after school. Usually she’d be sitting outside on the porch, covered in heavy blankets despite the remaining warmth in the air, watching the birds flutter to and fro from the bushes out front. Sometimes her hands would flutter too; I don’t know if she noticed.

“I’m tired of being heavy,” I told her once, knees pulled up to my chin. It wasn’t a raincloud day, but I still felt a knot in my chest. “All the other kids can run and jump so much farther than me. What if I never get any lighter?”

“Nonsense,” she said. Her fluffy white hair quivered in a breeze. “You’re still growing; everyone gets lighter at a different rate.”

“I bet I’m the heaviest kid ever. The heaviest in the whole world.”

“Maybe it’s not you that’s heavy. Maybe it’s just the gravity pulling on you. This old earth loves you so much it doesn’t want to let you go.” Her face crinkled up in a smile.

I mostly knew she was joking, but my frown didn’t go away. “I don’t want it to hold on to me,” I said. “I want it to let go.” I pressed my palm against the wooden planks of the porch, as if I could push the whole earth away from me. “It’ll start to go down someday, right? There’s never been anyone who got stuck on the ground forever, has there?”

She laughed and reached over to ruffle my hair. “No,” she said. “Everyone gets lighter in the end. Don’t worry.” Her gaze drifted back to the birds flitting around the bushes. “Nobody stays on the ground forever.”

Time passed. We fell into our little routines: Jared went out every night to play football with his friends; Mom shut herself in her office to work on her laptop; I did homework on the kitchen floor while Grandma hummed in the next room. Life had stabilized.

But then Grandma started to drift even higher. At first it was just a couple feet, but soon she seemed to have lost any sense of gravity at all, bobbing gently against the ceiling like a balloon. “She’ll have to stay inside,” Mom said. “That’s all there is to it.”

But Grandma missed the sky. I often found her trying to look out the windows, pulling herself down by the sill. She grew distant, not always answering right away when I tried to talk to her. “It must be out there,” she would murmur, drifting, not looking down at me when I asked her what. “It must be... I just need to see...”

We worked out a system for her. Sticking a peg securely into the front lawn, we tied one end of a rope to the peg and the other around Grandma’s ankle. There she’d float, a couple yards up, the wind ruffling her cloud-like hair and birds circling and twisting above her. After an hour or so we’d reel her back down and bring her inside.

As time went on, we had to keep letting the rope out a little farther so it wouldn’t pull so uncomfortably. “It’s time for Grandma to get some air,” we’d say, almost making a joke of it. Mom and Jared seemed to get used to it pretty fast; once they got her set up, they’d go right back inside until it was time to bring her down again. I always sat on the front lawn, one hand resting on the rope, and watched, just to be safe. I knew the rope was secure; Jared had tested it himself, yanking on the peg with his football muscles. But still. I wanted to make sure she was okay. I didn’t want her to drift away from us.

When she was inside, I'd tell her stories, the same ones she used to tell me, but with new details I made up when I couldn't remember how the originals went. It was hard to tell if she was listening most of the time. Sometimes, though, her old self would flicker back in, like a TV set displaying a glimpse of a show before dissolving back into static. Sometimes I'd be having one of my raincloud days and out of nowhere she'd look over and say, "Keep your chin up, Gabriel. It's a beautiful day." Those moments never lasted long, but they still happened. She was still there.

One night, I woke up and stared at the dark ceiling, not sure why I was awake. Everything was still. Then I heard a noise, farther in the house. I slipped out of bed, bare feet heavy on the floor, and crept past Jared, who was sleeping in a tangle of blankets, one arm flung over his eyes.

A part of me thought maybe it was burglars, and that I should probably wake up Mom, but when I stepped around the corner to the living room, it was just Grandma. She was floating by the door, fumbling with the deadbolt.

She wasn't supposed to be out here. "Grandma," I whispered, going over to her. I put my hand on her arm. Her skin was hot. "Grandma, you should go back to bed."

She shook my hand off. "I've got to go outside." She managed to turn the deadbolt, sliding it with a click. "I've got to go."

"No, Grandma," I said, trying to pull her away. She was strangely strong now, and I couldn't move her. "It's not time to go out yet. Come back to bed."

She looked at me, her blue eyes distressed and clouded. "I need to see if the stars are out," she said. "I need to see..." And then, before I could stop her, she turned the knob and pushed open the door.

"No!" I grabbed her long white nightgown, but I tripped, so even though I held on tight, she still made it out the door, dragging me with her.

My hands slipped. I grabbed her ankle. "Grandma, stop!" We were in the front yard, lit up by the moon. I could feel her body trying to rise, but I was heavy, and I held on. "Grandma, please. You've got to come back inside."

She had been staring up at the sky, but now she looked down, and I saw that her eyes were bright again. "Oh, Gabriel," she said, and her voice was just like it used to be, the same voice that told me stories about angels and birds and the things that danced among the stars.

I tried to pull her down, the material of her nightgown bunched in my fists. “Come back inside,” I repeated. My voice cracked. “Please, Grandma.”

“I’m sorry, Gabriel.” The wind played with the cloud of her hair, fluttering it around her face. “It’s time for me to go.”

“No!” I pulled her down again; my shoulders shook. I couldn’t see properly anymore, everything growing blurry. “You can’t leave me here. You have to stay.”

“It’ll be okay,” she said. “I promise.” The pull grew even harder. “You have to let me go, now, Gabriel.”

“Take me with you!” My cheeks were hot and wet with tears, and I could feel my nose starting to run with snot. My words hiccupped out. “I want to go with you! You promised!”

“I’m sorry. I can’t, Gabriel. You know that. You belong on the ground.”

“Then so do you!”

“No, I don’t.” Her voice wavered. “I’m sorry, Gabriel. I wish I could stay with you. I do. Oh, you have no idea how much. But I don’t belong here anymore. The sky has been calling and calling, and I need to go.” She reached down, brushed her fingers against my hair. “Can you understand?”

I wanted to shout no—no, I didn’t understand, I didn’t want to understand, I just wanted her here—but the lump in my throat was too big for me to swallow, so I didn’t say anything at all. My arms trembled with the effort of holding on. I could feel my grip loosening.

Her hand, cool now, rested briefly on my cheek. “Keep your chin up, Gabriel,” she whispered.

And then I couldn’t hold on anymore. One moment, she was right there with me, where I could hear her, feel her, smell her, and then she wasn’t. She rose, nightgown fluttering around her, her face tilted up to the sky. In a moment, she was a white spot, and then a speck, and then I lost her among the stars.

I stayed out there on the lawn all night. At first I cried, the stars swimming and blurring in front of my eyes, but then I ran out of tears and I just felt heavier than I ever had before. I couldn’t move to go to bed. I couldn’t go get Mom to tell her what happened. I couldn’t do anything. I was just heavy, stuck on the ground.

I was still there when the birds began to chirp back and forth, getting ready for the new day. The sky hadn’t really brightened; it was more like the dark had shifted, just a little. My

eyelids burned. I finally closed them and let myself lie down, grass tickling against my cheek, the earth's gravity holding me secure, like an embrace. As I lay there, thoughts beginning to drift, for a moment I thought I heard another voice joining the birds—something high and warbling, so far away. Something light.

But maybe I only dreamed it.

CHURCH MOUSE

By Erin Besse

You have no idea how to kneel. That's what people do, isn't it? How do they even fit? The rows of benches are so close together you can't stand perpendicular to them; does everyone really shuffle sideways when they need to reach a seat? The place is empty, of course. You wouldn't have come within fifty feet of this place if there were actual people in it.

It's dark, too.

That's a good thing.

Maybe in the light, the shadow of the cross at the front would not seem so... cross. It's cross and angry and cruel and ready to send you to where you belong. Maybe if you knew how to kneel, how to pray, how to worship it, things would be different for you. But of course, probably not.

You shuffle sideways, turn your back on the front, and leave.

You breathe again, fifty feet from the church.

<<>>

It's three weeks before you go back. You tried, earlier, but apparently that church has an event Wednesday evenings, so that didn't work out. Now it's a Friday and so late at night you have to jimmy open the lock on the outer doors.

No alarm goes off, not that you can tell.

It's a little stupid of them, isn't it?

You swallow that thought with a quiet glimmer of thankfulness and cross an open foyer into the big auditorium room. Auditorium? You wonder if they have a fancy word for it. Probably. They seem to have a fancy word for everything. You don't bother with the rows of benches this time, but walk straight forward to the darkened judgment of center stage. A challenge bubbles through your throat and escapes your lips as a muted squeak.

Do you laugh at yourself then? Perhaps, but then laughter has always felt more like tears of late anyway.

You had so many things you wanted to say, just a bit ago. Where did they all go?

A footstep.

You tense.

A throat clearing, behind you. Deep. Intending not to startle?

You stay affixed at the feet of the shadowy sticks of wood.

“I’m going to Biggie’s; that diner over on 5th, do you know it? Would you like to come along?” A man, elderly. Offering. “My treat.”

You turn. It’s still dark. You open your mouth, lick your lips, and still barely manage a confused “no?”

“Ah, pity.” Pause. “Please leave the door locked on your way out.”

Footsteps. A door creaking. Shadows lengthen into the empty spaces and fill the church with silence.

<<◇>>

It’s frigid outside the next time you go, when you have nowhere else to go. January has settled deep over the church with its own serving of judgmental silence.

You pick the lock, let the door swing shut behind you, and do not even make it into the auditorium. There’s a corner at the other end of the foyer, carpeted. You like the lonely security of the corner, well hidden behind a small cluster of chairs and a faded, broken couch. If you can just make here until daylight...

Things will look better in the daylight.

Things have to be better in the daylight.

You put your head between your knees and shake, a quiet disruption to that so comforting silence.

You’re still shaking when a chair shifts. A man hums to himself, shifting himself about in one of the chairs and dragging another, smaller chair over in front of him. He speaks, and you know it is the same one from before. He clucks his tongue before each sentence spoken. “I’m afraid I ordered too much mushu pork for just me. Never have gotten quite a handle on ordering for one instead of two.”

You stop shaking, if only out of necessity.

“Want to help me eat it?”

Even in the dark, you can tell he gestures to one of the other chairs.

You stay still.

“Let me know if you change your mind.” He starts to hum again, low, melodic, and soothing. You don’t know the tune, but it must be a lullaby of some kind.

Somehow, you are safe enough to fall asleep.

<<>>

He's still there when you wake up, asleep in his chair, now much more visible in the beams of early morning light. He's gray and wrinkled. His face is pale. His clothes are threadbare. An empty carton of Chinese food rests on his lap.

You stand.

You throw the takeout container in a trashcan on your way out the door.

<<>>

You still have no idea how to kneel, but things are bad enough now that you're trying to figure it out. You fold yourselves into the space between the benches, cross-legged on the floor because that was more comfortable than the proper seating. They probably have special names for the benches too, come to think of it. One of your eyes is swollen half-shut and throbs periodically if you pay it enough attention. It's not so bad whenever you manage to forget about it.

It's been hours, you think, of sitting here.

You wonder if he's going to show up again, but he doesn't. The silence stretches and warps until it consumes you. There's books resting in slots along each of the upright. You have a penlight in your pocket: an old, desperate habit.

The book you pick is cracked and faded. The pages wrinkle at your touch. Each page is labeled with numbers and titles and you've never learned how to read music. It has to be music, each page a song, right? There are words between lines. They don't quite make sense, one line read after each other. Some pages have three lines or four between each set of lines, or fewer, or more. Some have choruses. You find one in Latin and try your hand at saying the words aloud.

It breaks up the silence.

And probably gives a bunch of dead guys a laugh.

<<>>

You go back the next day, and he's there.

He smiles, worn. "Good to see you."

You nod and manage a wave.

It's early in the evening yet. "I need to mop out the sanctuary; would you like to help?"

He talks, smoothly, while you help. The mops are tall and unwieldy, but now you know what the auditorium space is called. It's a tile floor, and it's a pain to try and get the mops in between each and every bench... Pew, that is. His conversation is full of new vocabulary. He does not expect you to talk back. When he does not talk, he hums. Sometimes he even sings.

After you mop, there's cleaning to do in classrooms and you stumble after the custodian with no particular purpose.

Come daylight, he hands you ten dollars.

"It's all I have on hand, at the moment. But I'm here every Wednesday to Sunday evening, if you'd like a job. I get started around eight each night."

<<◇>>

You brave the church at eight the next Wednesday. There is an event, which means people, but you find him dozing off in a corner and sit beside him until work begins. There's an extra carton of Chinese food next to him.

<<◇>>

"Everyone should have a trade, Mouse," he says, every time you do not know how to change a light bulb, fix a broken cabinet door, or eliminate a stubborn stain. "Cleaning has always been mine. I got back from 'nam and, well, weren't too many options at that point but janitorial work fit me anyway. Why, it got to the point that my wife used to say cleaning was in my very blood and bones."

You're mopping the floor.

He sighs and then begins to hum. It is unfamiliar at first, but he's been trying to teach you some songs and all of a sudden you recognize the melody. It's lilting, sweet, and builds and builds and builds. He stops working, leans on his mop, and closes his eyes. The humming peters back into silence and its absence makes you sad.

You rest your mop for a moment. "Why that song?"

He opens his eyes. You have always worked in dim, half-lit spaces, unless a specific need required focused light. In this moment, you wish it were lighter. You wish you could see his face beyond tired shadows and heavy pauses. You remember that he is old.

"Rachel requested it be played for her." He says, slowly. "She'd always loved it. It was the last song she listened to alive, and the song we played when I buried her. *How sweet a sound*, indeed. She loved that bit. Thought no truer lyrics had ever been written."

You look away from the shadows in his eyes. You start to mop again, because you do not know what else to do. “You miss her,” you say, stumbling over every sound.

“Every day.”

<<>>

It’s May before you wonder how a church in a dilapidated part of town affords an overnight custodian and his sidekick. The pay isn’t great, and it’s cash wages, so it’s probably not as legal as it should be, but the days are going better now that the nights are filed.

<<>>

It’s two days after that you realize he’s paying you from his own funds.

<<>>

It’s not irregular that you have to pick a lock to get in, but it’s a Thursday and you cannot find him anywhere. You wait, in the sanctuary, setting in a pew, reading a song from a hymnal. You wait, and you wait, and he doesn’t show.

You get started, filling the emptiness with a poor imitation of his humming. You know almost every shadow in the church at this point, and they feel familiar. The cross never stands in judgment now.

<<>>

There are two people in the foyer when you arrive on Friday, still and stony faced. They greet you, as if they had been lying in wait. The light is on, which is unusual.

“Hi there. Are you Mike’s helper? I’m Rick, the pastor here.”

You tense.

“This is Anita, the office manager. And, I’m sorry, Mike never told us your name?”

You stare. The words have to be shared. “Mouse?” You do not stutter, which is unusual. It’s not your name, you know, but it’s what he always calls you and nothing else had ever mattered once you crossed the threshold of the church.

Anita chuckles and manages to sound unkind. “He’s asking for you. Mike, that is.”

Ice settles deep inside your stomach. You have to fight to breathe.

“We’d like to give you a ride down to the hospital, if that’s alright with you?”

You want to run away. You manage a quick nod instead.

They head for the doors, pause, and you realize you’re supposed to be following. You force one foot in front of the other. You turn off the lights on the way out the door.

Rick's car is an old, blue Saturn that has seen better days. Anita sits in the front seat and talks about her new grandkid. You sit in the back and lean your head against the window. His favorite tunes run rampant through your head, melodic humming and words you are just beginning to know. You squeeze your eyes shut and try not to shake.

The hospital is worse than it was every time you'd been here before. You keep your eyes on Anita's black shoes and barely manage to avoid running into anything.

Rick had given you the prognosis in the car.

You do not like it.

He's laid out in a bed, wired to machines, and barely breathing.

"We'll be just outside," Rick says. He touches your shoulder with his hand, you flinch, and he pulls away.

You stutter step into the hospital room and stop just shy of his bed.

He smiles.

If you knew, if you could, if—

"Hi there, Mouse."

You try to smile. You do not know if you succeed.

"You going to keep looking after that church for me, won't you?"

You nod, but you worry. You wouldn't be able to, if they didn't let you.

"Rick'll let you."

You stare at the floor. "Tell Rachel, uh."

He smiles again, bright.

"Tell her thank you," you whisper.

"Yes." He says, his smile not fading. "It'll be good to see her again. She would've loved you too." He looked in pain, but so, so happy to be going.

You sob, once, and desperately wish you could ask him to stay. Desperately wish that that request would do anything.

He shudders, the machines whirring with him. "None of that now, Mouse."

You wrap your arms around your shoulders, hunching over.

"I needed you, little one. I needed you, your company, your silence, your smile. I will—" he breathes, painfully, and seems to lose focus.

The world blurs around the two of you. You can hardly keep on your feet. “I needed you too.”

He smiles, still and quiet and brilliant and bright. A nurse comes in, too quiet and too close.

You skitter to the side.

She sees you and frowns. You remember every time everyone has ever looked down on you in that moment. “Please leave the room.” You feel so very small.

“No,” Mike says, “not yet.”

The nurse’s frowns deepen, but she does not protest further.

You remember his smile. You clench your shoulders tight with your hands and promise yourself that no matter what else, you would remember his bright, brilliant smile.

“And grace, Mouse,” he says, “And grace.”

You cry.

“And grace,” he repeats.

Through your tears, you manage a stubborn, quiet, “is leading you home.”

<<>>

You go back to the church, quiet in the back of Rick’s car. Neither he nor Anita try to talk to you then. They ask if they can drop you off at home, but you insist on the church. There’s maintenance to be done.

Rick finds you, the next morning, sitting in a closet and not yet ready to leave.

“His funeral will be Monday afternoon, if you would like to come.”

You nod.

“Perhaps we can meet afterwards and discuss formalizing your employment?”

You jerk. You look up at him. You wonder what he must see in your small, shaking little body. “Please don’t make me leave. Please.”

He smiles, still sad. “No, Mouse, no. There’s always going to be a place for you here.”

<<>>

You stumble through the Saturday evening shift in a dulled, heavy haze. The shadows of the church are still and quiet. You try to hum, but just make yourself cry.

You do not leave when people start arriving for the Sunday morning service. There’s an annex behind the sanctuary stage, a large closet that is sometimes used as a staging area.

Through a crack in a door, you can watch them sing and pray and listen and learn. No one kneels. They acknowledge his passing, thank him for his service, and share funeral details with the congregation.

They end the service with a quiet rendition of *Amazing Grace*.

You cry, silently, in the annex, where no one can see.

But this is your church.

After the service, you scrub off the tears, straighten your shoulders, and slip into the sanctuary. No one notices you, not right away, but that doesn't matter. You're already found.

THE PRACTICE ROOM

By Aidan Bender

I.

At the end of the hall on the right is practice room L37.

The L stands for how many rooms back it is. Room A, for instance, is the first room on the left and room B is the first room on the right. Etc. The 37 stands for how many times the room has been demolished, cleansed, and rebuilt. All of the other practice rooms have much lower numbers: room A is only A4 and even room G is only G10.

You see, room L is the most popular practice room on campus. Not because it has particularly good acoustics (all twelve practice rooms are made identical), but because it is the farthest down the hall. It is as far away from the outside world with all its noise and clutter and potential for unrequited magic as a room can get. In this room, no music exists except for what the student chooses to create while practicing.

And the echoes left behind.

II.

Josiah slides his copy of the key into the lock and it clicks open. He presses his hand against the synthetic wood and pushes the door open. It hisses against the taut carpet. Room L37 smells of fresh primer and swept-up sawdust and a false lack of humidity. In the corner of the room, the dehumidifier shuts off as it senses motion in the room. Its green light blinks angrily at him.

Well, it wasn't *his* fault. He shrugs and turns on the light, flooding the practice room with false sunlight: fluorescents tamed by an amber filter that makes his pale skin look spray-tanned.

He runs his fingers along the glossy finish of the upright piano and sighs. There used to be a grand piano in here, but the cleansers had ordered it destroyed, since it had been around from the beginning.

A bad source of magic, they said.

Josiah lifts the cover off of the keys and taps middle C. The note rings out clear and the air in the room thickens, the molecules shaking to attention. He slides down onto the seat and

strokes the cold faux ivory keys for a moment before he begins to play. If the first note causes the air to listen, the first chords of the song pull the attention of the walls and the ceiling and the lightbulbs and the dehumidifier and even the piano itself. He closes his eyes and smiles. Clean practice rooms feel so alive. Alert. Ready.

Plunk.

Thanks to his distracted thoughts, Josiah's pinky slides one too far to the left and the melody of the song crashes into a sharply discordant drone. He yanks his hands away as the room recoils. His heart races as the vibrations of the strings fades slowly into silence.

It's fine.

He's fine.

One note.

Just one note.

All the same, the air in the room already feels tainted, as if the one note has settled into the room with enough resonance to demand another remodeling. He curses himself and shakes his head before resuming playing from the same spot. It takes the room time to trust him again, for that feeling of being watched to return and settle between his shoulder blades. By then, he's already forgotten the mistake and the lingering feeling of regret and mistake.

In the corner of the room,
a black mote floats to the ceiling.

III.

The key to room L37 is always on reserve. It's the newest room, which makes it not just the quietest room, but the cleanest as well. Twenty-dollar bills swap hands for a chance at moving practice time super early, and the professors impose a time limit on how long an individual can have the room on a given day.

Maybe this seems excessive.

Maybe it is.

The students, however, know the worth of a room where nothing else exists: just the room and the instruments. No outside magic to wrestle with what is being created. Just the deep insulation behind wood-paneled walls and a high ceiling with a fake-amber fluorescent.

Perhaps there is something more to it: something behind the student's desire.

Perhaps the room wants to be desired.

Perhaps the room wants practicing students to come.

Come and make mistakes.

IV.

Tiffany grips the key in one sweaty palm and the handle of her cello case in the other and hurries down the dim hallway with a smile plastered on her face. She's waited a whole week for this chance. Six days stuck in room B4 and now she finally gets the chance.

She steps in and flicks on the light and takes a deep breath. It smells like old primer and new Lysol and music. She bites her lower lip and closes her eyes and listens. There are still echoes of music in the corners, last notes held out as a gift, perfect symphonies played in tribute of time spent here.

And...

Mistakes.

Not many, but a few. Missed notes or wrong keys played or fingers slipped off a string too soon. Memories of mistakes clinging to the cherry panels and buzzing around the light fixtures.

She shrugs her shoulders. Still fewer mistakes than her bedroom back home or her dorm room in Hilsbury Hall. Tiffany set the key down on the piano and closed the door. Her hands trembled a little from the excitement: finally, room L37. She'd slipped Margot forty bucks to get two hours here, rather than wait another two days.

She turns the clasps on her cello case. Whispers of music pulled at her from the case, happy memories of final notes still hanging about the strings and the bow. She takes her cello out of the case, along with the floor strap and the bow, and sits down in the chair in the corner of the room. Two days until her recital.

She bites her lower lip and sets the floor strap beneath one chair leg, and then positions her cello atop it. The familiar weight against her shoulder helps a little, but she wipes her palms on her leggings and clenches her fists to still the trembling.

Focus, she tells herself.

She shrugs her shoulders and settles back into the chair, the back shaped to provide good posture more than comfort. Tiffany licks her lips, checks each string for tune, and begins to play.

Schnittke's 2nd seeps into the room and it responds in kind by seeping back into the music. The notes hover about her, dancing on the motes of light and the dry air. Her fingers press tight against the strings and they push back against her and she smiles.

This is right.

This is better.

The recital fades from view as she plays, just her and the music. Notes remembered from hours and hours of practice. Movement one slipping by as a fond friend, movement two pulling at her, begging her to come with as it fades away under movement three.

Even without the other instruments accompanying her, it feels powerful. The air in the room shakes with the flow of the bleak notes and starkly desolate sounds. Tiffany feels the notes settle into her. She has to fight against the tone of despair as it struggles to grip her, too.

Sometimes, it wins. Sometimes she plays and she plays and then the music wins and she ends up slumped over her cello crying or staring dumbly at the wall.

Not today.

Today she has room L37.

Today, despite the despair of Schnittke, she smiles. And she plays through the fourth movement and descends into the fifth when---

Something is off.

One of the pegs settled just beyond her left shoulder shifts.

It's not supposed to do that.

To Tiffany, it's imperceptible. A fraction of a fraction of a scale. A slight disturbance to the tone of her music as she triumphs through the final movement. She doesn't notice.

But the room does. The room feels the power of the magic twisting about the slight imbalance and *inverting*.

Tiffany plays until she finishes, and then she holds the last note clutched between her fingers and the strings and the wood. Then she lowers her hands and takes a deep breath and smiles. It feels right, to play music in here. This room where nothing else interferes.

But something is off.

Even though she doesn't know, an itch settles between her shoulder blades. Just out of her line of sight, black motes flit about the ceiling and feed off the remains of her inverted magic, growing and turning—

Black to red.

Tiffany pulls out her phone.

One more hour.

She pulls out her tuner. She checks each string and frowns. One is off, just a bit. Must have slipped out as she finished. Oh well. Not a big deal. She tightens it back to perfection.

She thinks.

Tiffany plays through the concerto one more time, eyes closed and fingers dancing across the neck of the cello. Movement one, two, three, four.

The peg slips again.

She doesn't notice.

The room does.

It weeps.

V.

“How did you even get that key?”

“I just signed up for a time.”

“But you're not a music student!”

“We're all music students.”

She punches him. “You're not!”

“Why not?”

“*Doctor Miller?*”

“I'm not a doctor yet.”

“But why did they let a *doctor* get a music room?”

“I'm not a doctor!”

She shakes her head as he unlocks the door and opens it. “Close enough.”

He grins and wraps his arm around her waist, gestures into the room. “It's all ours.”

“For how long?”

He shrugs and walks into the room, flips on the light switch. “'til one, I think?”

Technically longer, since no one wants to check out a practice room for two in the morning.”

She follows him in and closes the door. He sits down at the piano and flips open the lid, it bangs against the piano and a shiver of notes escape.

“Whoops,” he says. He glances over his shoulder at her and grins.

“Don’t do that!” she says, “you’ll break something! Those things are worth like a million bucks.”

“Not even close,” he says, shrugging his shoulders. He plays a note. “Which one is that?”

She leans over his shoulder and looks down at his finger. “E.”

Another note, discordant to her ears, invisible to his. “This one?”

“B.”

“What are the black ones, anyway?” He slams his fingers, spitting out twelve notes that clash with each other and ring deeply through the room. “Sharps, I think. Or flats. I dunno, I haven’t played since I was eleven.”

“Cool.” His fingers prance across the black keys in no particular order.

The room is awake.

And it listens.

“Come on, stop that,” she says, tugging at his arm, “you know you’re not supposed to play.”

He shrugs. “What’s it going to do? I’m not trying to make music. And no one is around anyway, I’m not going to hurt anyone.”

“I’m right here!”

He swings his legs over the bench and faces her. “I’m not going to hurt you!” He reaches out and pulls her arm so she steps forward, and then he pulls her down so she sits on his lap. She smiles at him and shakes her head.

“Fine,” he says, “I won’t play the piano.”

His tone says more, and his smile gives it away.

“You’re the worst,” she says, smacking his chest.

He winks at her.

The room watches.

What they do is not... music.

Not really. But there is a rhythm to it. A gentle sort of rhythm at first.

And then---

Sharp and wild and staccato and broken and loud and fierce and---

Slower again.

The room watches. It doesn't understand, because it is just a room.

But it watches.

And the red motes spin violently in the corners and seep into the wood.

VI.

Josiah touches the doorknob to L37 and it reaches for him. He jerks his hand back, fingers tingling with the sensation.

Already?

It's too soon. Rooms didn't need replacing for years, not weeks. Even L37. He reaches out for the doorknob again. It reaches back for him. This time, he grits his teeth and twists the key, feeling it twist him back. He swallows hard and shakes his head.

Just a room.

Inside, the dehumidifier hums at him. He steps into the room and flips on the light switch. The amber light flickers at him, less of a dull orange and more of a faint red. Josiah glances around at the empty walls and the upright and the chair in the corner.

Nothing seems off.

The dehumidifier still hums at him.

The green light remains steady, like a single eye staring up at him. Who could have possibly messed up this much? He ran down a list of his students, crossing them off in his mind one by one. They all knew the cost of a practice room, the cost of messing up this much. The feeling of wrongness presses against him, sinks into his skin like an oily film that slicks across him. He wipes his hands on his slacks, as if the motion will help, and swallows.

Well. This could be remedied. Perhaps it wasn't the first time something like this had happened. The first time during his tenure, but someone could certainly have done this sort of thing before. The school pays for this sort of thing, anyway, and they had enough money for it. Josiah shrugs his shoulders, the weight of the slime of the air pressing down against him until his shoulders slump. The door creaks shut and latches with a sharp click that causes Josiah to jerk around, his skin crawling beneath the residue of the room and every hair on his arms and neck standing upright.

“Hello?” he says.

Silence.

Josiah moves to the door and grips the doorknob.

It grips him back.

The light turns deep red.

And goes out.

VII.

The room feels him enter. He reaches for the room and the room reaches back out to him. It wants to know him, to understand him, to understand....

Everything.

The man withdraws, so the room does as well.

Then he returns and enters.

Oh.

He *enters*.

The light flicks on and the red motes dance across it as the man looks around. His face is pale and half-hidden by a full beard. His dark eyes scan the walls and the piano and then the dehumidifier that buzzes in the corner. The room feels through it, feels the currents in the air that crackle across the electricity in the walls and course through the lightbulb as the motes draw on it, draw on it as hard as they can, so that they pulse and hum along with it.

Below, the man wipes his hands on his slacks.

The room closes the door.

It can know this man now. It can *understand*.

“Hello?” the man says.

The words hurt.

Oh.

They hurt.

The room seizes the man and releases the electricity from the walls and the light and everything plunges into darkness as the man seizes, gurgles, and slumps into the grasp of the dry air. The dehumidifier goes silent, the green light blinking off as the power cuts. The air in the room breathes, breathes, breathes.

Oh.

It picks up the man, cradling him in firm air. Then, slowly, the pitch black of the room fades back into light. The dehumidifier blinks back to life and gurgles onward, pulling moisture out of the air.

Air.

Up at the ceiling, the body of the man spins slowly, slowly, and then it

d i s s o l v e s

into red notes.

VIII.

Tiffany slides the key into the lock and opens the door. As she flicks on the light, the dehumidifier shudders. She glances around practice room K15 with a sigh and shrugs her shoulders. It's not L37, but it will do. Over her shoulder, a faint whisper of music comes from L37, where light seeps between the ridges of the carpet.

Room K15 smells of middle school deodorant and old broccoli. Not the worst effect of messed up magic, but an unfortunate one. Tiffany wrinkles her nose and sets down the cello case. Not her cello, which was more unfortunate than the smell. Hers was stuck in the repair shop on campus: a loose tuning peg kept the third string from being on tune. It only threw it off by a fraction of a note, but her teacher had noticed and demanded she get it checked.

Loose pegs could mess up the whole song, and ruin the magic of it.

Tiffany shrugs her shoulders and takes the borrow cello out of the case. A cheap knock off, by comparison to hers. But it will do. She positions herself in the chair, lowers the cello against her shoulder, and begins to play.

Ten hours until her recital.

If only she could practice in room L37.

She loses the thought in the concerto and lets the magic seep out of the notes and fill the room. The remnants of old, discarded magic mutes her notes a little, as did the cheapness of the cello, but she plays through it and the music overpowers all of the white noise. She smiles as she plays, and the light dances behind her eyelids. In her mind, the story of the concerto plays out, the grief of the loss and the hope in the new discovery and the power of one sad man writing music to expression how he feels.

As she finishes, she opens her eyes. Before her, spread out across the practice room, is a scene like she pictured. Crowded around the piano are the phantoms of trees and dappled green light, and an old man with deep wrinkles and tears streaming down his face sits at the piano with sheet music spread out before him, pages just transparent enough that she cannot read the notes. Across the room, thunder clouds hover at the ceiling and a mirage of rain and lightning hisses against a cracked sidewalk. The same man slumps on the concrete, his head tucked between his knees and his arms wrapped around his legs. He is younger there.

And between them, between the two sad scenes, is one fainter, but more vibrant. Deep pinks surrounded the same man, younger still, and he holds a woman in his arms. He looks down with a wide smile and she looks up with an expectant expression.

As Tiffany looks at them, they begin to fade against the background of the practice room, and then disappear. She swallows and lowers her bow and takes a deep breath. It always surprises her, no matter how many recitals she has, no matter how many images she creates. Her teachers call it impressive, her parents call it a gift.

She calls it... normal.

And kind of useless.

What good is painting pictures when she could be learning to mend relationships or craft useful, physical things, or even just movet hings? Oh well, she thinks to herself. She pulls out her phone, checks the time. Nine hours. She has time to run it before lunch. Tiffany settles back against the chair and begins to play again. Maybe this time, the scene will stay for longer.

IX.

The room understands.

It plays its own music.

The man taught it how to play, how notes work, how magic is made.

The room understands.

Notes that it plays don't sound at all like what the man used to play. No, these notes are discordant. The make the room shiver and the motes dance. The light glows hot as the room pulls the music out of the piano and inverts it, twists it on itself, and concentrates it.

The room understands.

X.

Tiffany plays.

She sits on a stage, with three lights trained on her. Behind her in the darkness, a percussionist thumps a soft rhythm for time, alongside a violinist who tags the high notes her cello can't reach.

Her cello.

The peg is repaired and her cello rests firmly between her knees, now, the neck a familiar weight against her shoulder and the strings humming beneath her fingertips. The lights burn brightly on the other side of her eyelids, but right now, the audience is invisible to her as she plays. It is the same story of the old man full of old regrets, composing a story to grieve his loss. This time, however, it is not hampered by years of other students' mistakes, and it is not clouded by the quality of the instrument. Instead, it is amplified by the beat of the percussion and accented by the violin and her throat constricts as she tells the story to herself.

To the world.

As she soars into the final movement and plunges down into its final, triumphantly sorrowful notes, she opens her eyes. Scenes like the ones from before dance across the stage, but instead of stagnant animations, they flit across each other, the man aging from scene to scene, then growing suddenly younger and the woman dances about him between the scenes, and he is left alone as she descends into the final notes.

She struggles to breathe, to remain calm. The visions blur, to her, as she tries and fails to hold back tears.

And the song ends.

There is a long, long silence as the last scene slowly fades from the stage and she alone. And there is applause. She barely hears it. Instead, she stares at where the man was left desolate. She swallows hard and finally sucks in a breath as the applause breaks through to her. Tiffany's teacher climbs the stairs to the stage and gestures for her to stand. She does, lifting her cello and turning to face the audience. She manages a bow, they clap.

"Beautiful," her teacher whispers in her ear.

Beautiful.

XI.

The boy and the girl return.

The room still does not understand.

He plays wrong music, music that makes the room shiver.

And they play not-music with their rhythm.

It stops them.

And then---

It understands.

XII.

Tiffany unlocks the door to L37 and stops. She frowns down at the doorknob and pushes the door open. For a moment, everything felt... wrong. She glances down the dimly lit hallway, toward the bulletin board where the posters for two missing students and Professor Galloway flutter from the air coming through the vent below them. But she shakes her head.

It's fine.

She's fine.

It's just been a hard week.

Half of her classes are canceled while the music department scrambles to cover Professor Galloway's schedule with one less professor. And new music for her next performance meant even more time practicing. And these songs were way less interesting: mostly just theoretical works meant to channel specific magic.

Boring.

She flips the light.

It glows red.

And it reaches for her.

Tiffany screams and trips backward out of the room. She drops her cello and falls over the case, landing hard on her back. The light *reaches* for her. It reaches and she scrambles back as it *hisses* a discordant sound. From inside the room, the piano plays notes that war with one another.

The door slams shut.

Tiffany lays on the floor gasping for breath. She stares at the door for a long, long moment, and then she scrambles to her feet.

“What the hell?” she whispers.
The room does not whisper back.

XIII.

“TWO STUDENTS AND A PROFESSOR GO MISSING, PRACTICE ROOM HELD RESPONSIBLE”

“PRACTICE ROOM CLEANSED, REMAINS OF THREE MISSING PERSONS DISCOVERED”

“STUDENT WHO DISCOVERED THE ROGUE ROOM GIVEN RECOGNITION”

“UNIVERSITY UNDER INSPECTION FOR PRACTICE ROOM QUALITY CONTROL”

“MUSIC STUDENTS GRANTED SEMESTER IN LIGHT OF REVELATIONS”

The headlines decry the people.

The room forgets.

Practice room L37 is restored again, and becomes L38.

A red mote floats around the light fixture.

It winks out.

THE END

COMFORTABLE LIVES

By Lydia DeGisi

Bates was going to talk about New York again. Sanders could hear it in his sigh and could see it in his slacked work pace. Sanders nailed him with a searing glare as the two of them continued to shuck the peylep pods. The last thing either of them should've been thinking about was New York.

"You know what I miss about New York?" Bates asked, tossing a handful of shucked pods into the woven grass basket.

"Yes, I do: Everything but the murder. That's how every single one of us feels about New York, so there isn't any point in talking about it, now, is there?"

"Well, I'd miss the murder, too, but you exude so much hostility that I feel right at home in that respect."

"Pining about going home can only drive us insane," Sanders said. "Why am I the only one on this planet who realizes that?"

"Nobody's going to go--"

Sanders glared at him.

Bates quieted down and continued his shucking. He didn't go any faster.

Brighton had died a full two months ago, anyway. The junior biologist couldn't survive the revelation that they would never, ever make it back to Earth. If the rest of them had survived that bombshell, you would think they had the psychological wherewithal to endure a few comments about New York, but Sanders was worried about the accumulation.

With no way to leave this planet and no outside help, everything would accumulate forever.

"I was going to say I miss the bagels."

"How petty."

If Sanders was foolish enough to pine over missing things (which he was not), he would've said he missed sleeping in areal bed.

They didn't have a good place for meetings. The ship they lived out of had sleeping quarters, a control room, and storage bay, and none of those spaces were quite large enough--but

of course they weren't. Space ships have to be built for maximum efficiency, otherwise they might break down on an uninhabited planet or something. And wouldn't *that* be awful?

So they would gather around a clearing they had made nearby the ship, somewhat resembling a camp site, but with fewer s'mores. At first, their meetings had all centered around arguing with the engineers over whether or not they were *really* stuck or not, but there wasn't anyway to win that argument--without hyperfuel, it was impossible to reach lightspeed, and there were no other habitable planets within a survivable distance. And no, you really can't synthesize hyperfuel on in the wilderness by banging together rocks and sticks like a caveman.

Then their meetings moved on to discussing how to fix their communication devices to get a rescue crew, but the engineers eventually convinced them all that yes, that was impossible, too.

The next meeting had been called by Grady, a junior pilot and the youngest member of the crew, who had prepared a slideshow for his presentation (he had projected it onto the side of the ship). The first slide read, "An Alternative Food Source: Let's Eat the Engineers Already."

Ever since then, only Sanders would call meetings, and they were all on the same topic: how to sustainably survive away from Earth.

This meeting, he started with the positive. He had learned to do that early on. "We've made a lot of progress here, everyone." He swept his gaze across the group of men--23 in all, since Brighton was gone. "A few months ago, we were still scavenging for our food, one bad search away from going hungry. But we all worked together to find a way to cultivate the peylep plants--special thanks to the botanist team--and now the possibility of starvation is remote."

The group continued looking dour as ever. They must have been thinking about Earth too much--they couldn't be content if they were still dreaming of Earth. So Sanders pressed on. "We've got food, we've got clean water, we've got shelter. It's time to look ahead. What's next?"

A hand shot up--one of the engineers.

"Yes, Fikkert?"

"It's hard to feel comfortable when everything's so worn and dirty. Obviously, we've been trying to wash our things occasionally in the river, but nothing's really getting clean."

“All right, noting that.” Sanders quickly typed the notes into his tablet. “Other issues?” Their habit was to come up with a list of a few problems first, then to move on to brainstorming how to solve them.

“We need to find a way to weave more fabric,” one of the engineers said. “I mean, learning how to clean our clothes thoroughly is a good step, but eventually we’re going to need to replace our things entirely. I’m sure there must be native plants whose fibers we could use, but need to figure out how.”

“That’s a bit more long-term, but still, noted.” The list at Sanders’ fingertips grew. Achievable, it was all achievable. They could survive.

Their assistant personnel coordinator killed himself two months later. The crew had finished their first successful weaving venture two days before.

Sanders tapped his stylus against the tablet, a wide but professional smile on his face. “I am so proud of what we’ve managed over the past week. The more we build and adapt, the more comfortable our lives are becoming. A special thank you to Suzuki for his work making peylep pods more palatable, to Weitzman for fixing the ship’s air conditioning, and of course to Bates, for heading up the construction for the new living quarters. It certainly is nice to have a little more privacy these days.”

The crowd made general rumblings of agreement.

“Now, if anyone would like to mention any new needs--”

“I’m exhausted!” Grady burst out. “I’m glad about our progress, too, but how about trying to get to a point where we can afford to have some time off?”

Sanders was about to dismiss Grady’s suggestion as the whining expected from the baby of the crew, but to his surprise, the rest of the men stared piping up in agreement. “Fine, fair point,” he said, cutting the others off. “We can’t keep pushing ourselves to our limits forever. Your idea can be our next goal.”

“I’m not sure why I didn’t think of this myself,” Sanders commented to Bates one day as they gazed at the swimming hole. “Leisure. Of course people are going to go a little...unwell without any leisure.”

Bates squinted at the shining water. “I don’t think that’s the reason we’ve lost two men on this trip.”

“Not entirely, no. We’ve also been thinking too much about Earth. And fine, fine, I’ll grant that it’s almost impossible not to think about what we’re missing--but still.”

“You think those are the only two factors?”

“Well, look at it like this: If we have some work and some rest, and we’re always making progress to things getting a little bit better--that’s not just surviving. That’s life.”

“It’s not all there is to life, though.”

“It’s how we lived when we worked in New York, wasn’t it? Work, rest, progress. That’s the formula.”

“The formula for what?”

Sanders was the last person to speak to Grady, the junior pilot. Grady had been indulging in far too much reminiscing--and after they had been away from Earth for so long. After they had built their new lives to be so comfortable. Sanders had to reprimand him, he didn’t *want* to reprimand him. Thinking about Earth was deadly.

“And why even pine for it?” Sanders had said. “As I recall, plenty of horrible things happened on Earth, too. At this point, with everything we’ve built for ourselves, are our lives here any worse?”

“That doesn’t help!” Grady had snapped.

And now Sanders was thinking, was stuck on the thought, *Usually, when someone young dies, they say he had so much to live for. But did he?* Sanders had thought he did. He had thought they all did.

Sanders hadn’t held any meetings in over a week. He sat on the ridge overlooking the swimming hole. Everyone else was working on something. He couldn’t quite remember what the project was.

Footsteps.

Bates sat next to him. Sanders did not look at him, but he doubted he was exuding any hostility this time.

The water rippled under the breeze. It was very quiet out here, with none of the familiar Earth insects filling the air with their calls.

“I never meant to be overbearing,” Sanders said. “I didn’t.”

“We know you didn’t,” Bates said. “I just want everyone to survive. That all I want.”

“And you’ve been doing a fine job.”

“I don’t know.” Sanders scraped the surface of the table with his fingernails. “I don’t...Do you remember that secretary back in the research center, Rose? I used to flirt with her, and I thought she was flirting back, but then it turned out she had a boyfriend. That’s messed up.”

“Sanders, are you okay?”

“Every once in a while, you used to bring bagels in for everyone on the team. That was so nice of you. New York bagels.”

Bates put a hand on his shoulder, a little too hard. “Sanders, please, calm down.”

“But we’re all going to die.”

“Not anytime soon.”

“But we’re all going to die.” Sanders had been such an idiot. It had taken him this long to realize it--but he had always known it, ever since he was a little boy. Secretaries and bagels had nothing to do with it, they had never been what he lived for. Their presence or absence was purely cosmetic.

Bates shook his head. “Fine, Sanders, you were right. We shouldn’t talk about home. It just freaks you out. Nothing more about New York, okay? You’re right about it, anyway--our lives here aren’t so different from how they were there. Okay?”

“Of course, I’m right, you’re right, we’re both right,” Sanders said. “We could just as easily be killing ourselves in New York, right, Charlie?”

THE PALE

By Laurel Elizabeth

Underneath the water, I heard all sorts of voices. I thought it would be silent there, deafened; and in a sense, maybe it was, blocking out everything above me. But the river held onto everything it heard, and it wanted me to hear it, too.

This was someone else's baptism: my younger sister's. She still felt reverberations of the same hurt that had settled into all of us, the way you grieve for the brightest people when they go dim. But there was excitement, too. A little peace. Enough of the darkness had been washed out by the water.

The swelling emotions within her didn't take up the entire scene, though. Everyone carried something with them to the river. I felt it like heavy waves in the water.

My older sister: something too dark and shapeless for me to name, or the river to touch. But she appeared calm.

Our aunt, my mother's sister: sadness again, but a more complete happiness, too. She found today a happy memory.

The boy next to me, someone I'd been close with until the river broke that, too –someone I'd loved: red-hot, white-faced terror.

I hadn't meant to go in, to interrupt the baptism rite. I hadn't been near the river in months, didn't know it would draw me in like that.

When I rose from the water, the noise left my ears, but not my head. My entire body felt tense as the priest was finishing his prayers and blessings, words I couldn't hold onto. As people began to notice my appearance in the water, he trailed off into silence.

If my face hadn't already been dripping from the river, I would've had to explain why I was crying that day. But I couldn't explain why the world had become violent and pale to me in these last months, why everyone's grief now soaked into me like poison. Or why the river couldn't make me feel clean.

After my mother's death, I had to take care of her garden. Her name was Paradise, and it suited her; she was all pink, yellow, blue magical flowers, even before she ever started to grow

them. I'd always been happy enough with the greener plants that grow wild outside my bedroom window, but she needed vivid, heavy brightness around her. She lived on the perfumes, and on sunshine.

She poured her life into those flowers, surrounding them with her ambition like a mother's arms. She made them perfect.

I couldn't replicate those magic flowers, though. My sister was born in the image of our mother, so clearly that Paradise named her Echo; but even under her hand, the flowers choked.

After two months, I gave up on the garden entirely. Perhaps Echo kept it up for a time after that, but I wouldn't have known. I'd trained myself to never look, never seethe garden, even as my eyes glanced over it.

After her death, the world had metamorphosed, shifting into someplace unrecognizable. Now it was an overgrown, venomous thing, violet and vicious. I felt the world around me in constant, tangible waves, felt all its textures and tensions. There was no hiding from it. Sometimes at night, with the window open, it would seem calm enough that I could breathe again; other times, even the hollow dark was oppressive, sepulchral.

I couldn't be around anyone. The disconnected sadness I'd felt from the others began to lurk in me instead of around me, like specters permeating my brain. The bedroom window mostly stayed shut, as did the door.

Sometimes I heard Sugar, the boy who used to know me, talking to my aunt or to Echo. He was asking after me. "Is Cashmere around? Is she okay? Is she awake?" His anxiety had never bothered me before, but when he was around me now, I couldn't think. His questions, as I heard them through the wall, made me feel so tired. Finally, he stopped coming at all. I missed him, but only after his anxiety had long left the house with him.

Eventually, something changed in me again, on the one-year anniversary of my mother's death. That day, armed with all the apathy I could muster to protect myself, I stepped again into the garden. Something about the world that day was so tired that it couldn't hurt me now.

It was deep in the evening, but not quite dark yet. A sonorously blue time in April, a season that felt so sacred to me now. I felt quiet.

The flowers, or the straggly remnants, were almost colorless, but they looked nice in the bluish-grey light. Melancholy, but delicate.

While I was there, Sugar came to visit me, for the first time in weeks. I was so spaced out that I hardly noticed him there.

“What,” I asked tonelessly, my mouth feeling numb and clumsy around the sound. “What is it?”

He looked so strangely at me, a wide-eyed boy staring at a ghost. He looked entirely different than the last time we’d spoke. Faded.

“I haven’t seen you,” he said slowly, “in months.”

“We’ve talked about it.”

“No,” he said. “Your aunt has talked about it. Your sister has. But I haven’t even seen you.”

“So why did you come back?”

The moon was out early, and I was still sitting in the dirt. I picked absently at the stems left in the ground, because I hated how my hands were trembling.

“Because I think there’s something wrong,” he murmured. “I think it’s got something to do with the river.”

He bit his lip, shaky and scared.

The gesture was too much. He was starting to get to me. His presence wasn’t hurting me like it usually did, but still drained me. He was taking away this one moment I had of respite—one I didn’t know how to replicate, wasn’t certain I’d get again.

“The river,” I told him, “is the *one thing* I can stand now.” It wasn’t a lie. The water rushing past lulled me when even silence got too loud. The river was something to hold onto, even after what I felt during the baptism. “I’m sick. I know that. It’s okay,” I said.

Before he could reply, I saw something dark flicker behind him, but my eye was too slow to really catch it. The blueness was mostly gone by then, replaced by the chilly moonlight, and shadows were taking their places around us. Maybe that was all it was.

“I’m not okay, though,” he said, drawing my attention back. “Did you know that? Did your sister tell you? Because we never talked about that, either.”

And suddenly, I felt his grief, too. It was so much sharper than mine. He wasn’t just scared; he was haunted.

“What’s wrong?” I finally asked, suddenly afraid for him.

He sighed. I almost felt it before he did it, like a dream. “I keep seeing things. I have, for a long time, but it went away for a while. They’re like...”

“Distortions,” I finished, staring somewhere past him. The flicker behind him was becoming clearer. Did he know it was there now?

“Yeah,” he continued, “distortions.” We couldn’t say the real word to each other. “They put me on edge, even when they’re not there. I can always feel them nearby, so I have to wait for them to come out again.” He breathed out, hard, relieved.

But a moment later, he saw it in my face: the ghost was behind him, practically a reflection. Even in the dim light, I watched color drain from his expression. “Oh, it’s here, too.”

He froze, and I nearly did, too, enraptured with this ghost of his, and the cataclysm of emotion in this world between them, now sucking me in.

But just for a second. I took his hand and pulled him into the garden with me. “It’s safe here,” I told him. “I mean it. It won’t move, see?”

It didn’t. It was a little ghost, I thought, but I didn’t know what else a ghost should look like. It was more of a shape, or a texture, than the remnants of a person. I didn’t really know what it was.

But it was sad.

It didn’t stay for long. When we were sure it was gone, I told Sugar to stay in our house for the night, and he was too nerved up to say no. It was difficult to rest after all that, but at least the river was high during those weeks. It helped keep our thoughts quiet.

In between my usual staccato sleep cycles, I dreamt about my mother, both of us sitting by the river with our feet dipped in. Brilliant flowers sprouted up around her, not unlike life. I remembered, for the first time in a while, that we had the same pitch-black hair. Her voice seemed to blur slightly, the way my mind reassembled it in dream-memory, but it wasn’t unfamiliar. She seemed determined to give me this peaceful image, no matter how distraught the rest of the world was.

When I woke up, the world was back in a blue-grey pallor. All I felt that morning was the ghost’s sadness.

Did Sugar feel this all the time? I shook him awake, suddenly afraid that he was having bad dreams. He was quiet and dull-faced when he came to, but he managed to walk back home and I got a little more sleep, although it quickly became restless again.

I obsessed over that ghost in the weeks that followed. It was unrecognizable in that form, yet it felt known to me. It was a trick, I thought; my feelings were not my own anymore.

I tried to fix the garden again, and even though I couldn't make the flowers grow right, even though it still made me feel a little ill to be there, I visited it daily. My aunt was delighted with my apparent emotional progress, but I hardly noticed a change. The habit was just away to make my exhaustion feel like a duller buzz every day. Nothing like a recovery.

Sugar didn't come back. I had a new memory of him now, though, and it stuck with me: alternating thoughts of his red-eyed anxiety and the small bit of peace he gets in sleep. Maybe my mother looks at me similarly, if she can see me at all.

Echo followed me one day to the river, buckets in hand. She hadn't vocally offered to help me with the garden this time, nor had I asked her to. I wished she wasn't there; there was all this tension in her, choking me like tendrils of ivy.

"It's almost like you've seen a ghost," I said drily to her, when we got to the riverbank.

"What?" She said.

"You just seem stressed," I replied, dunking the bucket into the water. I realized this was the first time we'd come to the river together since the baptism I ruined.

"No. No, I just... I hate this river. I never liked being around it, you know. Even when we were little, I wouldn't help her carry the buckets." She laughed abruptly. "She thought I hated gardening, but it was the river. It's too strange. It shouldn't be here."

In the next moment, she was crying. I watched tears melt into the clear water in the buckets. There was nothing I could say. She felt the same way about the river that I felt about the world around me. "I hate this river," she repeated.

"Usually, the ghosts are just remnants. Memories. They can't hurt you."

Sugar was helping me pick wildflowers near the river. It'd been months since we'd seen each other, but I had asked him to help me that day. I wanted to bring something to my mother's grave. For Paradise, flowers could replace anything she lost that mattered to her; she could admire them instead of grieving. But I couldn't even honor her that way, and so her memorial garden really was just a memory now. There was still no new life in it, despite my best efforts. I had let all the things she'd tried to preserve forever die.

“How many ghosts have you seen?” I asked him. We hadn’t spoken since a few days after we’d seen the ghost. He had told me that he thought the ghost was my mother, although I’d already suspected it. I had been avoiding him since as a result but couldn’t stop obsessing.

“I saw them more when I was little,” he told me. He shrugged, and I realized he didn’t know how to talk about this yet. But I couldn’t help pressing.

“Do they ever leave?” I asked.

“I don’t really know what happens to them,” he muttered, “but they always go back to the river. I can hear them whispering here, the ones that stay—but they won’t bother me. It’s sort of their resting place, I think, if they don’t find their peace anywhere else.” He paused. “But sometimes, they follow me, scream at me. They’re...anguished, and they think I can help them just because I know they’re there. But I just can’t.”

“My mother,” I said; “she’s following you now?”

Sugar nodded.

“Does she talk to you?” I asked, my mouth gone dry.

“No. Like I said... it’s more like a memory than a person. She’s hardly there at all.”

I paused, having pulled some daisies too hard and torn them, my palms crushing the petals. “Why at the baptism, though?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I just know she’s here.”

I looked up, alarmed. “Here? Now?”

“Not too close,” he said. “I don’t think she wants to be near the graveyard. But she isn’t far.” I took a deep breath, clutching the bundles we’d gathered. It wasn’t enough, but it was the best tribute I could give her.

Echo was already there, kneeling in the dirt and grass in front of our mother’s headstone. She was holding Paradise’s flowers. They were instantly recognizable; always so vibrant, as if Paradise had created her own glowing species. I only got to see them in dreams, but here my sister was, clutching them like prayer beads.

“Her flowers?” I whispered, but she didn’t hear me. “Where did you find her flowers?” I asked again. I was nearly shouting, but trying to remain reverent, trying to stay calm.

Echo jerked awake, dropping the flowers. “I picked them. The day we lost her, remember? It was okay, because she knew I wouldn’t let them die.”

“They’re flowers,” I said, almost speechless. “They have to die.”

When I heard rustling behind me, I had to cover my mouth to keep from screaming. But it wasn’t my mother, alive again like her flowers, as I’d half-expected; it was Sugar. He had stayed near enough to hear me get upset.

Echo stood up, looking more serene than I had ever seen her. She held my hands and smiled at us both. “She needs me to keep her here. That’s why I kept the flowers alive. To make her happy.”

She let go of my hands and went to pick up her flowers. When I looked down at my fingers, they were stained in pinks and blues and purples.

I glanced back to the headstone, and saw the little faceless ghost stood behind it.

“Echo,” I said, the whole labyrinth of sadness in her becoming clear to me, turning instead into an abyss. “The flowers aren’t real. They died, a long time ago. She died. You’re holding a memory.”

And we finally both saw the flowers as they were: no different than the ones Sugar and I had picked by the river. Muted, but not lifeless. Unspectacular, but true.

The little ghost, the distortion, faded the same way, until I could no longer make it out. Sugar said it just as I noticed it. “She’s gone back to the river.”

We all stared at the headstone for several moments, and then Echo began to cry. I cried, too, because it all felt like the river rushing in; instead of the stillness and the voices, we were breathing again. Even if it came in sobs.

Eventually, the flowers did come back, vibrant and electric over time, nearly like my mother loved them to be. The mutedness, the pale, had passed.

Meanwhile, I felt the rest of the world quiet around me. Grief had made me sensitive, more than I had ever known; but the release of it had kept it from destroying me.

I never spoke to Sugar about the ghosts he saw again. He and his family left a few years later, but he had seemed more at peace by then than I had ever known him to be. The terror had quieted for him, too. But he never told me just how much he had been haunted. How much of this place stayed with him?

I grieved for him, too, I think. Inexplicably, I had felt sick that I couldn't swallow up the fear he carried around, or drown it in the river where it belonged. The guilt faded as well, though, like everything else I couldn't save.

This is how loss moves through the world. The flowers grow back, and the river reminds you what peace feels like.

PETUNIAS IN SPACE

By Miguel Flores

I have heard them say that the universe is constantly expanding, that one day the constellations will have pulled so far apart from one another that they might as well not exist. It's like stretching an old rubber band until it snaps. Or spreading a trail of powder one fleck at a time until the whole thing disappears.

On the far side of this thinning fabric of space exists a tiny planet. Or what used to be a planet. It is very hard to be a planet without a star. One may find that it loses all sense of direction, not to mention is abandoned by the weight of gravity which keep sit tangled in orbit.

Perhaps that is why this planet had drifted so far out and away from everything. The last time anything was measured at all, this planet was roughly three hundred million, four hundred and eighty-nine septillion light years away from the next closest asteroid. And that was...Well, let us say that the last measurement on record was conducted a very long time ago. For all we know, this planet might now exist on the tip of the knife, at the pinpoint of the literal edge of the universe. Though for all we know, it might not.

I am not sure what this planet's real name is. I only know that it exists, and that on it lives some sort of person. A young human. A little girl.

The girl calls herself Petunia and she claims her planet is called Cinnabar.(It might as well be, seeing as there is no one here to argue any differently). The first thing you notice about her is not that she is alone, but that she is happy. See her now as she climbs out of the ground, which to us is a hole and to her is a door. She blinks into the light, which does not seem to come from any visible sun but instead radiates from the soft, pink-tinted atmosphere surrounding the planet. Her hair, a tangled mess of curled, wire-looking odds and ends, is pulled back into a very loose bun with a once-black hairband that's been worn gray. Her arms, already brown, are made darker by a thick layer of dirt and an absolute refusal to wash it off. Her nails are the only part of her kept clean, by which I mean they have been clipped more than once a month.

Lastly, Petunia is small and short, so you may consider it safe to assume she is not very old.

I do not know when she arrived on this planet, or why. I think she must have come here using the tiny spacecraft which is anchored to the surface of Cinnabar, floating a modest distance away from the planet's breathable atmosphere. She is currently wearing a t-shirt with a giant moon—in front of which are big, bold letters saying NASA—and shorts made of a tough, blue material. Those might be jeans.

None of that is very important. The important thing is that she is the reason I continue to call this place a planet and not simply an asteroid. Or a rock or insignificant or small or debris. She loves her planet very much, so I try my best to love it too.

If you will, allow me to show you atypical day of her work. It will be easy to do. It looks like she has already begun.

Petunia, after pulling herself from her door-hole, now walks in her bare feet along the surface of her planet. She pokes the earth every so often with a bent, metal rod which used to be an antenna for her spacecraft.¹

She is looking for moon-worms, named not for the moon of her planet—which does not exist—but for the color of the moon she remembers existing in a very old memory. Petunia doesn't hate very many things, but she does hate moon-worms. Although they aren't very big, the creatures are capable of carving 3.4cm tunnels in Cinnabar's mantle, which makes any soil they eat through contaminated and incapable of nourishing the seeds she will later plant.

When this is done, she pulls on her spacesuit (a child's size s) and sticks her head in a helmet that looks too much like an upside fish bowl. She will grab the long, winding cord that connects the ship to her planet, and pull herself up until she reaches the bunker's entrance.

Like many of her other possessions, her spacecraft is adequate and small. When she enters the craft, there is barely enough room for her to lift her elbows. Hanging from hooks on the inner wall of the room are many packets of seeds, a hand shovel, and a picture of a family that does not look like her. The face of the adult who looks least like Petunia is circled in a red marker. Next to the face are written two hearts and the word, "Mom."

¹ This earth, by the way is not green and brown, but aquamarine and maroon. The pansies are not yellow and pink, but alabaster and obsidian. Any water to be found is not blue, but umber like dark honey.

Petunia barely glances at the picture before she slides the shovel into a strap along her right leg and places two different packages under her left arm. Two labels stick out from just below her elbow. One says tulips and is for looking. The other says carrots and is for eating.

She pats the spacecraft on her way out and climbs back down to the surface. It is burying season, which means the earth is moist and the air is warm, so she does not spend much time in the atmosphere. When it is reaping season and the planet remembers it does not have a star and thus lowers the heat covering its surface, she sometimes sleeps up above under a pile of blankets. I'm not sure if she stays here because she wants to or because she has to.

Either way, as I said before, she appears to be happy.

After she's returned to the surface, Petunia walks to a side of the planet where the soil is deep blue. She puts down the two packets, takes off her helmet, and ties the top half of her suit around her waist so that she can move her arms freely. She pulls out her shovel and spends the next few hours digging tiny holes in two neat four-by-eight grids. There is no reliable method of measuring time on Cinnabar, so I am not sure how much time she actually spends doing this. Sometimes she sings to herself, sometimes everything is quiet except for the rhythm of her soft panting. If the hole she digs is a little off, she fills it in and starts over. When each line is finished, she walks back over them and drops each individual seed in. When every seed is deposited, she packs the dirt tight.

After all this, she stands up and turns the white packets inside out. She pulls out a permanent ink marker from one of her suit's many pockets. She writes "tulips" on one, "carrots" on the other, and places them in front of their respective grids.

When that is done, she wipes her forehead with the back of her hand and pushes back some of the hair curls which have fallen across her face. I can tell she has done a good job because she is smiling. She picks up her little shovel, sticks it back through her leg strap, and walks to yet another side of the planet.

Here one can barely see the soil because of how many cauliflowers and sunflowers cover the surface. Instead of being divided into two grids, these plants twist around one another like vines among vines. In the small pockets of space where you can see soil, you may find there to be a pale shade of orange. Petunia doesn't harvest any more than what she will eat tonight. But, by the time every plant is pulled from its roots, the earth will be gray and require rest before it is ready for the next burying.

Petunia bundles her harvest with loose netting—pulled from yet another well-hidden pocket—and walks to the last side of the planet she will visit for the day.

When she arrives, her smile fades away.

The ground here is upturned and ash white. Dry, brittle leaves litter the surface with perfect circular holes burned through them. Burrow remains are now exposed to the air. The moon-worms themselves are gone. This is typical. Once the food is gone, the moon-worms always die soon after. The fact that they are parasites only makes Petunia hate them more. They are not a thing to live with. They do nothing helpful or kind. All they do is eat and poison and die.

Every moon-worm is the same as every other.

I do not mean this to be in appearance only. I mean that they are literally the same at every strand of their genetic makeup. What makes them so unique is how perfectly uniform they stay. They each have transparent exoskeletons which reveal the thin red cord that makes up their digestive track. At the front of their heads are glazed-over, little beads which they use not to see, but to feel and sift through obstacles. Their mouths have no teeth, but rather rubber-like lining which they use to grip. They consume soil by latching with these linings and then regurgitate acid from their stomachs to help them process. Using this methodology, the moon-worms burrow in straight lines, always parallel to the surface, as the dirt makes its way in their mouths, through their stomachs, and exits out the tissue with makes up their anuses.

Moon-worms are not very big, but they are incredibly destructive. To them, this planet is not a home but an open bar whose tender they never plan on paying.

Petunia has tried many times to get rid of them, but somehow they always return.

She is not sure why.

She is more concerned about what used to be on this plot of land, before the moon-worms devoured all the seeds. They hadn't been anything consumable. They were not vegetables or fruits or legumes. They were purely for looking. She had planted an entire batch of petunias, and now she only had one packet of them left.

Petunias had always been her favorite flower. I often wonder if this is why she called herself Petunia, or if that just happened to be a pleasant coincidence. To be very honest, I'm not sure which one makes the better story. Here are some interesting things to know about petunias:

- Petunias happen to share the same subfamily as tobacco, tomatoes, nightshade, and chili peppers.
- Petunias have a widespread assortment of potential colors to be, including various shades of purples, pinks, whites, blues, and yellows.
- Petunias can also be multiple combinations of the afore-mentioned colors.
- Petunias have a high tolerance for harsh weather conditions.
- Petunias are believed by some cultures to be useful in warding off evil.
- Petunias are supposed to only grow in areas with “positive energy.”

It's the second half of that list that really bugs Petunia. It seems a cruel joke to have flowers which are normally so resilient be the one batch that get completely consumed by moon-worms. But what can she do that she hasn't tried already?

The real question we should be asking is where did these moon-worms come from. Petunia knows, though she dislikes ever thinking of it. Where they came from no longer matters to her. Only that she can get rid of them.

The answer, however, matters to me.

When Petunia was between one and two years younger, a very lost crew of six traders arrived at Cinnabar in an intergalactic cargo ship. They had been following the outer rim of the Banshee galaxy when they suddenly fell out of orbit with a volatile red giant. They lost track of how much time they'd been adrift, or how far they had gone, when they found Cinnabar and the little girl who lived there.

As soon as she saw their arrival, Petunia reaped every single crown of broccoli she had and offered it to them to eat. Between the six of them, they spoke three different languages, but none of them could speak Petunia's.

Thus, the six travelers and Petunia communicated by way of crude drawings.

The six of them stayed a couple seasons, each doing their part to help Petunia grow more than enough food. None of them wanted to leave her behind, but none of them wanted to stay either.

Eventually, feeling guilty for eating the child's food, one of them cracked open one of the pods in their hold and attempted to plant strange crops from their own home planet.

The plants sprouted quick and tall, poking their way through the atmosphere and letting the exosphere leak in. This was how the first moon-worm larvae entered Cinnabar. They fed voraciously on these strange plants, all the way down to their roots (which had sunk several layers into Cinnabar's mantle) and spread until they also ate Petunia's flowers.

With an angry scream, she broke off the antenna of her ship and shouted at them in the only words of their most commonly known tongue that she knew:

“Go away!”

Despite their protests and their apologies, she shouted it over and over, clanging the metal rod against her ship and wearing her voice thin. She even offered them whatever extra fuel she had and to make them leave the same day.

They continued to protest to the very end, until one of them turned to the others and told them there was no helping it. One by one, they all entered their ship, until the last one turned and said they were sorry.

After four seasons of being guests on the planet of Cinnabar, the travelers left her behind. But now she can never be alone.

Though she uprooted every plant, burned every inch of visible soil, cut apart every pale husk she could find, the moon-worms remain. They continue to burrow through the planet. They continue to poison her plants.

It took many seasons for the soil to be healthy enough for vegetation again. When the ground became well, Petunia planted things in small batches—often only using a third, or even a fourth, of each packet she had.

When the moon-worms wouldn't touch her crops, or when she was quick enough to kill a cluster of eggs before they could grow, she grew in confidence and planted more.

This was the first season since the moon-worms first arrived that she had tried to plant a whole packet of petunias. And it was the first time they devoured an entire batch of her flowers.

If she knew how to, Petunia might have cursed.

She is currently standing above the remains of her petunias, looking for any color left above the surface. She finds none. The moon-worms are efficient. Effective. They never overlook a single bud or stalk or stem.

Maybe she is insane to keep attempting the impossible. Maybe she should have left this planet with the travelers, or not welcomed them in the first place. Maybe she will never get to see petunias again.

But she will not stop tending to her planet-sized garden.

She refuses.

It is true that if she does not continue her work, the moon-worms will have no way to sustain themselves. That they would eventually shrivel up and die, and their bodies would then poison the air and cut through the atmosphere until they were nothing but dust again. But that means they will have eaten through the planet, and so the planet would be dead too. As long as there is the hope of having her Cinnabar be healthy again, Petunia is willing to continue planting and harvesting, eating and looking, hunting and guarding. If she does not do this, who will?

She still has one packet left.

She knows that someday the flowers inside it will once more bloom, even if she cannot see them with her own eyes. She knows there is a future for her beloved petunias in space.

THE LETTERS I'LL BURN

By Catherine Haws

Dear Viney,

(You will never read this, for I intend to burn it as soon as I finish.)

I swore to hate you forever the day I found out you would be born.

You'd laugh if you knew that, but then you'd ask me why.

That's why I'm burning this letter.

I swore to hate you, because I still hated your father -that would also make you laugh, because Jedrick is the most amiable man alive.

I hated him for that.

You once asked me why your father and I weren't always friends, and I told you it was because he has perfect teeth. You scoffed, but it was part of the truth.

Perfect teeth. Perfect build. Perfect words. The perfect man.

Everything I am not.

I hated you until the fire.

You would have killed many people if I hadn't seen the smoke and felt it in my fingertips as only I can.

The women all panicked on the fire escape halfwaythrough hanging laundry to dry, and your mother screamed your name as they dragged her down.

I knew you were left inside.

I thought of leaving you.

I sometimes wonder about all that would be different if I had.

I burn those thoughts.

Scaling the fire escape by the outside bars, I reached the open window to your family's apartment.

My sweaty, leather gloves clung tight as I ripped them off and danced among the flames.

You've asked me before what it feels like to "play with fire", but I've never told the whole truth.

It chokes me.

It hates to be tamed.

When I draw it inside, it fights in my veins. Only when I release it and let it fly am I free.
As I cleared the smoke, I found you starring up at me wide eyed. You didn't cry.

You had climbed out of your crib, a bad habit of yours, and toppled a candle. You stood there, still holding it like a torch. The red wax dripped like blood onto the blackened carpet. I replaced my gloves. You blinked your calculating black eyes in fascination and waved the burning candle in your hand.

I crouched and snuffed it out with an inhale of breath.

We stared at each other for a moment.

You smiled like your father, but your eyes squinted like your mother's.

Outstretching a delicate finger, you pressed my nose like a button. Warmth flowed through me. Not the warmth of fire, but a different kind: a new kind.

You laughed.

And then I laughed.

I couldn't hate you anymore.

- Flint

Dear Mylan,

For all I know you could be dead. I've heard stories that people are supposed to sense when their brother has died, and I have not felt anything, but I also don't really believe those stories. I hope for your sake that you are not dead. You are the most lively person I've ever known.

When I finally gained my wits, I asked around town for you. None of your employers seemed to notice you were gone. The fat coot at the newspaper didn't even know you played violin. A man at the bar remembered you, an old fisherman. He said he missed you because no one else could mix his favorite drink with all the colors separated: Sailor's Delight. He said you always talked about hitching a train to thesea some day, and the last time you mixed his drink you said you'd finally do it.

I never remember hearing you talk of the sea.

Is that where you disappeared to?

I wish you'd taken me with you.

- Flint

Dear George,

I didn't exactly mean to kill you, but I'm not exactly sorry about it either.

I wonder if you ever realized you ruined my life for eternity. You could say the experiment worked. You will live forever: in my memory.

Does that please you?

I wish I could forget again.

I'd trade places with you if I had the chance. I'd gladly burn in your hell if I knew you were living mine.

You'd curl up like a baby and curse the scorching sun for turning around the world so slowly. Trapped, locked inside the body of a child never to see eye to eye with the men who look down and mock the forgery of your youth, while you fully know their grandfather is your age. If you had friends, they'd all be dead by now. But that's absurd. You had no friends.

I, on the other hand, would go to hell.

Just think of it: me with all the fire in the world.

Sounds like heaven.

- Flint

To Whom It May Concern,

No one ever taught me how to tame my fire. While the other kids learned how to walk and read, I learned how to keep from killing everyone. Tried to, anyway.

That's why I'm writing this letter. Maybe it will turn into a series of letters. My personal advice column to you, my unfortunate descendant.

Some advice:

1. Gloves are your greatest asset.

I prefer leather. The driving kind, with the holes for the knuckles, work nicely. Secure, effective, and as breathable as you can expect from leather.

2. Water is your greatest ally.

If you have access to a natural body of water, utilize this to your advantage. Otherwise, a tub full works – a metal tub not wood. There's nothing quite like tearing off your gloves and

building up steam after a long day of pent up energy. Make sure to keep a window open unless you want a soggy mirror.

3. Music is your greatest pleasure and greatest enemy.

Avoid music in public at all costs.

Do not, under any circumstances, dance without gloves.

I know this is the hardest advice I have to give.

Well, perhaps this next piece is:

4. Friendship is your greatest risk and greatest need.

Find someone to share the secret.

You must trust them with your life.

You will need it.

You cannot survive without them.

You cannot survive in utter solitude.

Trust me.

I've tried.

- Flint