

FAMILIAL DISTURBANCES

Mason Binkley



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Labor Complications

- 7 **Feeding**
- 9 **Twenty Little Fingers**

School in the Age of Mass Destruction

- 10 **A Prayer in Negation**
- 11 **Tutelage**

Homewreckers

- 14 **Colorsickness**
- 16 **Poisoned**
- 17 **How to Move Up!**
- 19 **Now He's Mine**
- 20 **Patient #19**

Parental Violence

- 21 **Excerpts from the Diary of Matthew Ward**
- 25 **Guidance in the Dark**
- 27 **The Storm Room**
- 29 **Fantastic Flights**

Obnoxious Old Men

- 31 **Mother Had a Strong Arm**
- 32 **Not Today**
- 35 **Switcheroo**
- 37 **Cognitive Dissonance**
- 38 **Welcome to Reality**

Gone

- 41 **The Cactus God**
- 43 **Helen**
- 46 **Information Deficit**
- 49 **Untimely**

Feeding

The larger a fetus becomes, the more it resembles a grenade. A fetus can blow a hole through the womb, putting the mother's life at risk. Theoretically, the mother could wake up at night to find a tiny leg protruding from her stomach.

When my husband, Adam, says I'm irrational for thinking this way, I want to scream and swallow him alive with one swift gulp. I'm only pregnant because of *him*, because he begged and begged for a child—not an adopted child, as I had insisted, but one “made of us.”

Instead of losing my composure, I say, “You're right, Hon. I'm being silly.”

A female wasp of the species *Reclinervelles nielseni* lays a single egg on a spider's body. The spider effectively becomes the mother, a non-consenting one, in that it's now responsible for the larva's growth and development.

After it hatches, the larva (i.e. baby wasp) latches onto the spider's abdomen and feeds on its insides. Eventually, the larva gains control over the mind of its eight-legged host, forcing it to construct a special web perfectly suited for the larva's protection. The spider hangs paralyzed at the center of the web, sort of like being awake under anesthesia.

Once the baby wasp becomes strong enough, it kills the spider.

Adam lies next to me at night. Sometimes, he stinks of bourbon and cigars. Other times, I detect the same citrusy perfume of another woman. (Pregnancy, it turns out, enhances one's sense of smell.)

He stares at my stomach, hoping to glimpse a hand or foot pressing against my skin. When he does, he smiles and laughs and says, “Look!” or “Right there!” or “Oh my gosh!” or “Wow!” Pleasure contorts his sugary-sweet face.

During the day, when Adam's away at work and I'm alone on bedrest, reading about insects or otherwise occupying myself, I sometimes see the outline of a hand or foot on my stomach, the fetus trying to rip through me. When this happens, I push it down, deep inside of me where I'm safer. Contrary to Adam, I'll say, “Quiet down little wasp.” Or, I'll just make a buzzing noise.

Occasionally, Adam lies in bed and stares at my thighs, arms, and cheeks. He asks questions, such as, “Should you cut back on the food?” or “Do other women gain this much weight during pregnancy?” or “Will you be able to lose all of the weight you’ve gained after the baby comes?”

I refuse to go hungry. Here are some things I eat, or fantasize about eating, throughout the day while Adam’s at work: key lime pie, lemon meringue pie, an ice cream truck, steak (extra rare), raw tuna, raw salmon, raw bacon, Adam’s eyes, Adam’s face, Adam’s voice, and Adam’s mistress.

My appetite overwhelms me when Adam’s asleep, too.

Some spiders are not passive. They do not let other insects take advantage of them.

Consider the *Latrodectus geometricus* species. The female can weigh up to one hundred and sixty times more than her mate. She allows him to take certain pleasures with her, to satisfy his manly urges. She temporarily offers up her body. She consents. But, when she loses interest in her itty-bitty admirer, she sinks her fangs into his flesh. She tears away chunks and swallows him piece by piece until not a trace of him remains.

When Adam snores, I typically watch the fan spin. When I somehow manage to sleep, I have a dream that’s been recurring now for weeks. I can’t tell Adam about it. He would suspect something’s wrong with me.

The dream goes like this: I hang paralyzed in a spider web in a corner of the bedroom, candles burning, piano music playing softly through the speakers. The door creaks open. Long, black antennae breach the doorframe. A man-sized wasp flies towards me and stops inches away, where it hovers, buzzing as loud as a chainsaw. Its razor-sharp mandibles could chop off my head. Its stinger, wet with venom, could pierce through my stomach and out my back. “You’re going to be a mother,” it says in Adam’s voice, laying an egg on me.

I wake up shivering and sweaty, feel something like a baby wasp fluttering around in my stomach, feeding on my fluids, stinging my organs. My four limbs twitch. Four new limbs want to emerge. I wonder if I need to save myself, to tear this creature out of me. My upper gums ache in two places, as if any second fangs will burst forth.

Originally published by Pithead Chapel, April 2019.

Twenty Little Fingers

“The baby won’t make it,” the surgeon said. “The baby won’t make it,” another surgeon said. They looked the same in their scrubs and caps, sounded alike with their terrible words.

Now at home, the mother said, “I’m going to the store.”

“Take your time,” the father said. “Please, take your time.”

The mother went to the store to buy diapers and groceries. Hair disheveled. Legs still hairy. Finally, she was gone. She had not left the house in three weeks, since coming home from the hospital.

The father closed the blinds in the living room, took down the full-length mirror and propped it horizontally against the base of the wall. He laid the baby on a pillow in front of the mirror, its skin soft, head soft, blanket soft. Milky-sweet breath flowed upwards. In the mirror, another man stroked a baby’s arm.

The father stumbled away and stared at the babies, the other man gone now. Just twenty little fingers reaching up, four eyes shifting side to side, cooing and gurgling.

Rain hammered the old tin roof. The smell of powder and cream filled the air. Soggy diapers overflowed from a trash can while hammers banged the thin glass roof.

The father looked around the spinning room, saw two sets of baby clothes folded on the couch, two pairs of baby shoes next to the door, two baby swings side by side — all identical.

“You’re having twins!” many had said. “What a blessing!”

Fortunately, the surgeons were wrong and the mother had finally left the house. Now there were two. Now there were two.

Originally published by Shirley Magazine, August 2018.

A Prayer in Negation

Eve pitter-pattered in purple shoes towards her classroom on the first day of kindergarten, when another world revealed itself. In this other world, a concrete wall did not fortify the elementary school. A police officer in sunglasses did not guard the main entrance under a sky as dark blue and icy as dead lips. Eve did not wear a bulletproof backpack.

Exhaust fumes from cars and trucks in the parking lot did not remind me of the stench of gunpowder. I did not envision how effortlessly a young man with a rifle strapped to his back could climb up the front gate and leap down the other side, black boots pounding. I did not picture this man running towards the cafeteria where a symphony of children's voices echoed.

No, the police officer did not caress the handle of the pistol. A burst of screaming laughter did not make me flinch. I did not almost unravel when Eve turned and waved, smiling with a missing tooth on the bottom row, dimples denting her cheeks. The bullet from an AR-15 could not tear a wound in her chest the size of the orange in her lunchbox.

Eve's white coat did not resemble a surrender flag. No, the bell did not blare like an ambulance siren. I did not regret lacking the money, time, and knowledge to teach her at home. Under my breath, I did not curse this version of America. Eve had not asked, after she had first tried on her backpack, "If the bad man kills me at school, can I get buried by the playground?"

Originally published by Noble/Gas Quarterly, December 2018.

Tutelage

You stand in a class full of high school students who think you're a joke, but you can relate to them because you used to mock the man who dressed up as a clown every year and preached to your high school about the dangers of drugs, using his own life as an example. Now you envy that clown because he could hide behind his makeup and costume, whereas you – with your professional attire and exposed face – might as well be naked. Plus your lower back hurts like hell, a constant burn that radiates down your legs.

Despite this, you continue talking about how your daughter made excellent grades, received a music scholarship, and smiled more than anyone you've ever known, how you drained your savings account in an effort to save her life, all of the money on rehab facilities, psychiatrists, psychologists, and gurus of every kind, and how – as you saw her body in a coffin, several days after the Fentanyl-laced heroin had raced through her system and killed her in seconds – you remembered the person she had been before the addiction and imagined the person she could have become. Some of the students in front of you roll their eyes and exchange smirks. Others look bored.

Your hands slap the podium. The students flinch and stare at you with ballooning eyes. Your palms sting. The ticking of the clock on the wall interrupts the silence.

“Pay attention for a couple of minutes, *please*, then I'll leave. I promise.”

They study your face and wait for the next words.

“Close your eyes and listen to this story.”

One by one, they do as you requested, some more willingly than others. In this miracle of silence, you say:

Imagine sitting on your back porch, with the back door cracked open so you can hear inside the house. The wind has stopped and the trees and bushes stand perfectly still. Even the birds and insects have fallen silent. The blades of grass, the leaves, the brown fence around the yard—all glowing in sunlight. It's a rare moment of calm. Just as you doze off to sleep, you hear a familiar sound. A thud. It's the sound of her body collapsing in her bedroom. You want to leap up and run, but can't move fast enough, like one of those dreams where you try to hurry although you can hardly lift a foot. When you finally unlock her door and stand over her, you suspect it's too late. Her lips are purple. Her face is pale. An

eternity passes between each motion, between each bend of your knee or ankle or finger. After you remove the Naloxone from a drawer, you kneel next to her, the Naloxone not reviving her, so you lean over the body and feel its warmth. You pray. A whimper crawls out of your throat. You want to administer CPR, but her jaw is clamped shut and her chest is concrete. Your hands shake so violently that you keep pressing the wrong buttons as you try to dial 911. You blame yourself.

The students open their eyes and watch as you grab your lower back and hobble towards the door. You glance at a boy. His lanky arms tremble and the expression of pity and fear on his face makes you hopeful that perhaps you saved at least one.

Mr. Armstrong, the vice principal, accompanies you down the halls, past classrooms with closed doors, a labyrinth of gray halls. Through the small, square windows on the doors, teachers pace back and forth, scribble on whiteboards, gesture with their hands and arms. You wonder, *How do they do it?*

“Thanks for coming,” Mr. Armstrong says, looking at his watch, the pace of his walk quickening. “I’m sorry you’re lost.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

You labor to keep up. Sweat meanders down your forehead. The pain in your back unleashes waves of nausea. Mr. Armstrong swings open the door that leads to the parking lot, a strained smile contorting his face. “Take care of yourself,” he says, and the building swallows him.

You stagger through the parking lot to an empty garden tucked away at the back of the property, a garden maintained by teachers and students, where you sit on a bench underneath a wooden pergola. You open a bottle of water and swallow three Oxycodone pills, two more than you’re supposed to swallow. You light a cigarette and watch the smoke curl upwards from your nose and mouth. Tobacco is killing you, but you find a strange comfort in knowing that at least it’s killing you slowly, by degrees your senses fail to detect.

Time unravels.

You sit alone in the garden, smoking another cigarette, the Oxycodone coursing through your body and the uncomfortable presentation to the students an afterthought because God this medication feels so good, the euphoric rush, the sensation of floating without pain, not just the physical pain, but the pain you’ve carried inside, the trauma of losing her, of knowing that her addiction started with Oxycodone pills she snuck out of your medicine cabinet.

There you sit, the wisteria flowers dangling from the pergola and swaying like wind chimes, dangling and swaying all around you, purple and white flowers, the colors of her face when you found her dead. Spots of sunlight jump across the grass, still wet with the memory of rain. You understand the power of these chemicals, their crippling and awesome power.

You close your eyes and see her standing in front of you. She's a young woman, the woman you remember on her seventeenth birthday, the day before your back injury. That smile! She hugs you and you smell her hair, feel her skin. You want to hold and protect her. You want to save her from the addicts you both became.

Originally published by Maudlin House, September 2017.

Colorsickness

Hoping to appear more muscular at forty-two, Henry joined a gym and shaved his chest raw. He stopped coming home at decent hours. “It’s been insane at the office.”

His clothes in the hamper frequently smelled of an unfamiliar perfume, more floral than anything I would have purchased.

One night, a streak of purple nail polish tarnished the back of his collar. She must have just painted her nails. As he tried to explain charges from restaurants on his credit card statement, he stuttered, although he had never done so before. “M - m - must be fraudulent.”

I have always hated purple.

My recovery, though slow and painful, began with the thud of the front door slamming, the whirl of an airplane, the lights of a strange city.

At first, I wondered what Henry and his lover did together.

I pictured them in a field of lavender flowers. Laughing, they would take turns kicking petals off stems.

They would enter a clearing where I had assumed the form of a wood post. They would carve their names into my body, hang their violet robes on my hooks.

She would remove her crown of lilacs and unfurl her wisteria hair. On a blanket, they would feed each other plums and eggplant skins, pausing to smile at me, their teeth stained purple. The sky would turn darker and darker shades of wine until nothing visible remained.

Then they would light the post on fire.

Henry and I soon developed an understanding. Whenever we communicated by phone or email, always exchanging sharp, stabbing words, mostly about the logistics of divorce – alimony, the division of property, the cat I refused to return – I would not insult him and his lover, if he, in his tone of faux-concern, would not ask, “Are you okay?”

Over the months, we communicated less and less, until we stopped altogether.

I reverted to my maiden name. He and his lover retreated into their purple kingdom.

I started walking regularly through the city, sometimes for hours, with no purpose or destination. Steady breaths, a calm pace, one foot and then the other. Through this process, I sought distractions, as well as reminders of the vitality and possibilities the world always offers. I tried to open myself to chance and spontaneity, refusing to lock myself away and brood.

But the people and objects I encountered were discolored, sickly. The sun itself radiated a faint purple, tinging everything – buildings and roads, cars, bicycles, musicians on street corners, pigeons in the park, my reflection in windows – with this wretched hue.

I settled on a route that led past a shop full of oddities. A trumpet with inverted valves, a skeleton of what resembled a bird with miniature human legs, a glass bottle – seemingly empty – in which sparks randomly appeared, all visible through the purple-tinted window.

When I drifted by, I usually saw a man behind the counter. Curly, purplish-black hair streaked with gray. Wire-frame glasses. A slim face glowing in the purple-touched light of a nearby lamp. He was typically reading.

One afternoon, I went inside and haggled with him over the value of a necklace. It had a long cord with a pendant shaped like a leaf.

“Let’s consult the spirits about the proper price,” I said, pointing to the Ouija board next to the sculpture of a wolf’s head.

The planchette slid across letters, his fingers on mine. Our fingers stayed entwined after the spirits had worked their magic. I watched his brown eyes turn hazel.

Together, we had spelled, “morning.”

On a Sunday in January, I made coffee for the shopkeeper in my apartment. He placed a train ticket in my palm, folded my fingers around it. “I’ve been saving for this,” he said. He had rented a small cabin in the woods, a few hours away. We rode there that afternoon.

At sunrise, I walked alone on a trail in the woods, when everything regained color. Frosted trees spiraling upwards in browns and silvers. Blues and whites, the cloudless frigid sky hovering over layers of snow and ice. Patches of copper grass. The blur of an orange fox. The pink tongue of a deer, reaching towards a stem. A brilliant gold sun, its rays burning lines through the air.

At night, shadows moved across the walls. The yellow and red flames in the fireplace twisting, lunging, grasping, unraveling.

Poisoned

Sweat-soaked from pulling weeds in the Florida summer, John stumbled into the kitchen and showed Dan the two bloody dots on his wrist. John's pulse quickened. A flood of nausea brought him to the floor. "Coral snake," he said.

A paramedic examined him.

Another paramedic walked inside with the serpent, after killing it. "It's actually a King snake," he said. "It's non-venomous. You'll be fine."

Convinced of imminent death, John had confessed to an affair. "Two years ago, with Mark from work. I'm so sorry, Dan. Please forgive me. Mark came on strong, and you and I, well, we had been fighting. That terrible argument, Dan, remember? Listen, please listen, I only love you."

After the paramedics left, Dan continued to stand there in the corner of the kitchen, expressionless, staring at the set of knives.

How to Move Up!

A girl will need certain things after she splits to a new town at the age of eighteen.

1. A place. (It doesn't have to be the Ritz Carlton. My boyfriend's apartment is a bona fide dump. Cockroaches, leaky pipes, screaming neighbors, black mold spiderwebbing across the bathroom ceiling, the lingering stench of ass, etc. But I got a bed, toilet, shower, mini fridge, microwave, and the internet. That's okay *for now*.)
2. A job. (Something that pays and isn't illegal. My job, clerking at the pharmacy, gets old AF. Just remember, though, a shitty thing is temporary if you *want* it to be. Keep going!)
3. Pepper spray. (Creeps come out in the dark. Zombie-looking M-Fers. Some like to talk. Some stare. Others follow.)
4. A knife. (See above.)
5. A cell phone. (Got mine from a neighbor. Didn't ask where it came from.)
6. A hobby. (Mine's photography. My mom gave me a camera on my last birthday, when I still lived with her in nowhere Vermont. I've been snapping shots and putting my favs in a binder, giving each one a title.)

\$\$ Michael James \$\$. I took this pic after I paused to rest during one of my early-morning bike rides through the neighborhood a few miles away. Michael stands in the doorway of his three-story brick house, holding a briefcase. He looks fine as hell in that suit. Short black hair. Tall. Razor-sharp cheekbones. I learned his name by looking up his address on the property appraiser's website. His house is worth three million dollars! And what a yard! Oak trees sprawl out in every direction. Flowers pop in bright colors. Michael's thirty-six years old, which isn't *too old*. He's married, but that's fixable.

After getting situated, move up fast or get eaten. Here are some tips:

1. Look fab AF. (Go to the gym. Don't pig out. Wear makeup. Show off everything you've got. My mom always told me a pretty girl should never have to work.)
2. Learn how to flirt without seeming desperate.
3. Search for a man who's got his shit together, or a chick if that's your thing. (My boyfriend will never have his shit together, but he's a legit stepping stone.)

4. Laugh a lot with perfect white teeth.
5. Dream!

Elizabeth James – Future Divorcée. In this pic (which I took while hiding in bushes!) Mrs. James stares into the pool in the backyard, probably regretting her own reflection. Obviously, she's not exactly a trophy wife. She has dark roots because she hasn't colored her fake-ass hair lately. If my stomach and legs were as bloated as hers, I would never prance around in a yellow bikini. She has a disgusting scar on her left hip and apparently doesn't believe in shaving her pubes. How could Michael ever be happy with her? (When my mom and I watched TV together, she often pointed out that the sexiest people are the most successful. "Ugly ducks get left behind," she liked to say.)

What's my dream?

I'm rocking a yellow bikini in a way Mrs. James never could. Michael, in swim trunks, brings me a martini. He sits on the edge of my lounge chair as I sip and flirt. He can't stop staring. I'm buzzing now. We take a dip in the pool or put on a show for the neighbors.

Once you've set your goals, dwell on them until you reach them. As for me, I can clearly see my daily routine in the near, near future:

1. Wake up next to Michael and ask what he wants. Coffee? Eggs and toast? A blowjob?
2. Get the kids ready and drop them off at school.
3. Go to the gym.
4. Get cleaned up.
5. Pick up the kids, bring them home.
6. Have dinner ready for Michael. Look glam. (Every second a gal doesn't look extremely fuckable is an invitation for her man to leave her forever. During the months before my dad disappeared, he called my mom "horse-face" and "linebacker" and asked questions such as "When will you shave that mustache?" and "Why are your arms fatter than my legs?" and "Can you believe I wanted to procreate with you?" etc.)

My Children. In this pic, which I took while hiding across the street, Adam and Kristen are enjoying a game of tag in the front yard before school. They favor Michael, *thank God*. Adam is running around a tree with Kristen reaching out to touch his shoulder, her curly blond hair streaking back. Their uniforms are adorable! White shirts. Black pants for Adam. A black skirt for "Kris," as I'll call her. She's twelve years old, which is only six years younger than me. It might be weird at first, but we'll learn to love it.

Now He's Mine

After the undertaker boy completed the delivery, he wanted sex instead of money. "I'm not that kind of woman," I said. "I have values." He looked confused standing there on my front porch, covered in dirt and sweat, his eyes peeking through shaggy black hair. I doubled his payment and told him to go find a prostitute if he wished. "And don't tell anyone," I said, "or I'll kill you."

I had learned that Victor clutched his chest and died while sitting next to his wife at church as they listened to a sermon. I had spent weeks planning how to confiscate his remains.

Victor's wife, Mary, now a widow, has always presented herself as a good Christian woman. She wears dresses that cover everything, save her hands and head, and carries with her a brown, leather Bible. The Christian idea of sex (penetration in the missionary position for the purpose of reproduction) leaves no room for the higher forms of pleasure. Surely Victor died of boredom!

Mary knew he craved me. At the office Christmas party, after the bowl of spiked eggnog had dried, Victor appeared in front of me on the dance floor. Handsome devil. Desire saturated his face. Mary sat in a corner alone and glared at us through the entire rendition of "Winter Wonderland," Victor whispering in my ear.

Later that evening, as I applied a new layer of lipstick in front of the mirror, Mary entered the restroom. I tugged on the front part of my dress to expose more of my breasts and squeezed them together with my hands, knowing this would enrage her.

She stood next to me, her face red and fingers trembling, and said, "Leave him alone, whore."

I turned towards her, smiling, and said, "Be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest." I laughed and laughed as she stormed out in tears.

Now, on Sunday mornings when Mary attends church, I perform my own rituals. I bathe, brush my hair and teeth, and apply makeup and perfume. In my best dress, I climb the ladder to the attic and walk in my slow, seductive way towards the couch where Victor sits, a perfect skeleton. I pick him up, drape his arm bones over my shoulders and down my back. We twirl around the room, "Winter Wonderland" playing on repeat.

Patient #19

His wife divorced him and has full custody of their children. He has seen specialists, taken medications, and clung to religion. But the same dream recurs.

In the dream, he lies naked in bed, candlelight flickering on the ceiling, an empty wine glass on the nightstand next to him. The bedroom door opens and in walks a black sheep, grinning, its teeth clicking together.

What torments him the most about this dream is how much he enjoys the experience. He laughs and moans, runs his fingers through the sheep's fleece, and nibbles on its ears. He wakes up wishing he had given birth to lambs.

Excerpts from the Diary of Matthew Ward

August 9, 1999

Father carved a man's face into the wall today. He carved for six hours.

I opened my curtain a few times and encouraged him to rest. He didn't listen, just kept going. He didn't even stop to use the toilet. His pants were wet. Yellow spots were on the floor.

The man's face is several feet wide and maybe six feet tall. He's got a beard and long hair. His eyes are fiery and his mouth stretches open, like he's screaming.

Father said it's the face of Jesus. He said it talks to him, tells him what to do.

Father's been sitting on the floor all night staring up into those eyes on the wall, mumbling things I can't understand.

August 15, 1999

"Time for church." That's how Father has woken me up every Sunday since we've been down here.

I combed my hair and put on my suit. It's dirty and too big now.

Father and I met in the center of the bunker and sat on plastic chairs in front of the Jesus face. We listened to the recording of Pastor William's sermon about the end times, the sermon that convinced Father to build this bunker and lock me down here with him. "I'm saving you," he had said.

"What did you learn in church today?" He asks me this question every time the tape ends. I tell him what he wants to hear: the Lord will soon unleash devastation upon mankind; the wicked shall be damned; the righteous shall be saved. Father sits on the edge of his chair and listens, his eyes wide and fingers trembling.

We had "Sunday lunch," as he calls it. Black beans from a can. That's all the food we have left.

After that, I went to my end of the bunker and closed the curtain. Father makes me spend most of my time here now. He hasn't trusted me since the day I tried to wrestle away the knife strapped to his ankle and slit his throat.

August 25, 1999

I was supposed to start my sophomore year today at Great Lakes Christian College. I don't have any close friends there, but even if I did, nobody would know where to look for me.

September 14, 1999

There are 600 calories in a 26-ounce can of black beans. Father had approximately two more ounces than me today. That's 50 or so more calories! Doesn't seem like much, but he only lets us split one can a day now. "Need to ration," he says.

I stared at the last bean on my plate and imagined it was Father. I took the skin off with my fingernails, piece by piece. The screams, what sounds! I then punctured the bean with my fork and let the tip of the fork stay there inside for a while. His body thrashed around, but soon went flaccid, like a dying worm. I put the bean in between my teeth and pressed down, slowly, until it burst.

Entrails everywhere.

September 23, 1999

Last night, I woke up to Father whispering, and to the sound of pencil marks on the wall. I waited until he went back to sleep, behind the curtain on his side of the bunker. I examined the Jesus face with a small flashlight.

In the beard, hair, and eyes, Father had drawn what looks like ants and goats. Hundreds of them.

October 11, 1999

As Father slept last night, I finally finished my knife. I made a blade from an old can of beans and secured the blade to a handle. Took me weeks.

The knife will cut through his neck like butter. His flesh will fall right off, a piece of meat. A steak, or a pork chop, maybe, sizzling in butter. A nice-sized chunk of meat. Sprinkled with salt and pepper. Sautéed onions and mushrooms on top. Gorgonzola crumbles.

"How's everything," the waiter says. "Fantastic," I say, "it's perfectly cooked." "Glad to hear it," the waiter says. "Oh," I say, "more bread, please."

"Sure thing."

October 19, 1999

We loved each other once.

As a boy, I played baseball in the summer. After each game, he drove us home in an

old convertible. The night air cooled our bodies and the pine-scented air filled our lungs. I stared at the stars and he talked about constellations, our place in the universe, or the concept of infinity. We exchanged glances and smiles as wind blew through our hair and the moon silvered the treetops.

October 31, 199

The path to God is sometimes broken.

November 13, 1999

I had a ceremony for Father today, as properly as I could down here. I cleaned his wounds and wrapped him tightly in a blanket, then prayed and sang hymns. The body rests on the cot behind the curtain, where he used to sleep. He looks so peaceful now.

I need stitches. That's the only way the gash on my left arm will properly heal.

November 14, 1999

Looked everywhere. Can't find the key.

November 15, 1999

Still can't find it.

November 16, 1999

Can't find it. Can't find it.

Can't find it.

FUCK.

November 24, 1999

Can't break through door. Have been trying. Nothing works. Too weak. Left arm throbbing.

November 30, 1999

Ate last few beans. Only twenty gallons of water left.

Can't move left arm. Swollen. Oozing.

December 4, 1999

Have been eating pages of diary.

December 6, 1999

Day after day
On the concrete wall:
The Jesus face.

December 10, 1999

Cannibalism: not unprecedented.
Look at history. Many examples.

December 11, 1999

Couldn't eat him. Rotten.

December 22, 1999

Heard him!
Last night, heard him whispering/drawing on wall!
Opened his curtain, saw only corpse in blanket.
On Jesus face, things have changed. Ants and goats now eating each other.

December 25, 1999

Happy birthday, Jesus!
Please forgive us.

December 29, 1999

Wound on left arm black. Can't stand. Eyesight failing.

January 1, 2000

World didn't end.
Wrong, Father. Wrong.

Originally published by Jellyfish Review, February 2018.

Guidance in the Dark

Nobody kidnaped me and my little brother, Charlie, twenty years ago. The news reports were false.

That night, we sat on the balcony of a motel room in Orlando, Florida, sharing a banana we'd taken from the lobby. Below, a rat in the empty pool shrieked and gazed up at us, nose twitching. Charlie threw his last bite to the rat. "It's hungry too," he said.

"I'm going," said our mother, Stacy. She gazed at us with wide, sunken eyes, trying to balance in pink stilettos scuffed and streaked with grime. A short, white dress clung so tightly to her body her ribs showed. Her left arm bore fresh track marks. "I gotta work," she said, slamming the door on her way out.

A camp appeared in the distance, across the field, near the wall of trees that marked the entrance to the woods. A fire encircled by tents. Screams and bursts of laughter. Flutes, violins, and drums.

Charlie leaned against the rail on the balcony, his face lit with wonder. "Let's visit," he said. Yellow and purple bruises marked his arms and legs, along with cigarette burns. I was out riding my bicycle, unable to protect him, when Stacy had taught him a "lesson," as she called it.

"Pack everything you need," I said. "We're leaving for good."

"What about Mom?" Charlie asked.

The flames exercised a hypnotic power, twisting and lunging harmoniously in shades of orange and yellow as the drums pulsed in a steady rhythm. A breeze from the camp's direction drifted over us, scented with smoke and pine, with bread, chocolate, and vanilla.

I dropped to my knees in front of Charlie. "You have to trust me."

He wrapped his arms around my neck, rested his head on my shoulder. "I do," he whispered.

We held hands and walked across the field in darkness, each of us carrying a backpack full of clothes and the little food we had kept stored in the room. The stars and moon brightened, blades of grass sparkling in silver.

At the tents, the group of men, women, and children stood together and watched us. All had fallen silent except the fire's crackling and hissing.

A woman with long, black hair stepped forward from the crowd, a green shawl draped down her body. Sparks of light flickered on her silver necklaces, bracelets, and rings. Feather earrings dangled from her ears.

At that moment, I knew Charlie and I would leave with these strangers, and this woman would raise and protect us. I knew it as she stood there with her arms outstretched, the blaze dancing behind her, and as she stepped towards us and said, “Come here, children. Let us show you other worlds.”

The Storm Room

Sometimes, when I misbehaved as a teenager, Lydia made me stand in the front yard with a “For Sale” sign hanging around my neck. I lived in the country and hardly anyone ever drove by my house. Still, a stranger could have pulled up and found me appealing enough to purchase.

“Maybe a pervert will buy you,” Lydia would say, a grin erecting across her face.

(I wish Lydia had been my imaginary companion, although I must concede she was a real woman. From what I recall, she lived a few miles away. My father, I think, sometimes paid her to watch me on the weekends when he worked in another town. She’s certainly dead now. She has perhaps turned to earth, providing sustenance to maggots and flowers.)

When I “severely misbehaved,” she locked me in a windowless enclosure in the basement. “The storm room,” we called it. The icy concrete floor numbed my bare feet as I stood in only my underwear waiting for my punishment to end. I prayed for socks and blankets, or for Lydia to enter and make me warm.

According to my last memory of her from this period of my life, I had grown drowsy in the storm room and curled up on the floor, suspended somewhere between consciousness and dreams, when the door opened. A flood of light singed my eyes. She appeared angelic, the way her body glowed. But as we absorbed each other’s warmth, my father’s voice echoed in the hall. Everything else remains a blur.

She has recently started visiting me again. She has not aged since her thirties (since that day I last saw her in my youth), whereas I have aged considerably. I have lost hair and teeth. Skin hangs from my arms. Numerous toes appear to have fallen off, or to have shrunk and twisted into new, stubby forms.

When she visits me now (always at night, when I am hopelessly tired), she lies next to me, her curly black hair brushing against my shoulder, a row of stitches around her neck. “I’ve missed you,” she whispers.

(Either she was decapitated somehow, perhaps in a car accident, or my father went insane. Maybe her head rolled along the floor and stopped with her eyes fixed on me, lips moving. Perhaps my father held me and said, “My boy, my boy, I’m so sorry she took advantage of you.”)

“Should we try something new?” Lydia asks. Her fingernails slide gently across my thigh.

“Maybe we shouldn’t,” I say, but I don’t mean it. (Shameful pleasures, like memories of traumatic events, want to hide.)

Our bodies lock together, trembling, overcome by lust and joy.

But now my father stands in the doorway, shaking. Disbelief contorts his leathery face. Why does he hold an ax, the blade so sharp? Why does he mumble, tears streaking? I want to steal Lydia away to a place where nobody can hurt her, but there’s nowhere to go. He walks towards us, silent now, raising the ax over his head.

Fantastic Flights

“You will be fired from the cannon,” Cleo said. Then again, perhaps Clover said it.

“I am not afraid,” Dante said. “I mean, I am afraid not.”

“This is not open for discussion,” Cleo or Clover said. They stepped closer. Dante could hardly tell them apart under normal circumstances, being identical twins, but now they wore matching leotards and tutus, hats with feathers, chokers with bells.

“It’s not fair,” Dante said, looking up at them.

“Don’t lecture us about fairness,” one of the twins said. She – whoever said it – gently slid her fingernail down Dante’s cheek. “We adopted you after your parents abandoned you near the lion cages. You owe us your life.”

The door of the dressing room flung open and Marvin, the circus master, stepped inside. His gray beard was rumored to have captured the souls of dead elephants. The top hat on his egg-bald head concealed scars from animal bites. “So, who shall it be?” he asked, clutching a whip.

Cleo and Clover smiled and looked down at Dante. “Me,” he said.

“Without further ado,” Marvin yelled into his megaphone, “I give you Dante the Dwarf.”

Dante, a boy masquerading as a small man, ran towards the cannon dressed in a clown costume, his face painted white. The crowd erupted, clapping and whistling, screaming and laughing. The scent of booze and vomit hung in the air.

The cannon’s polished black mouth formed a perfect O. Along the barrel appeared the words, “The Widomaker.” Cleo and Clover stood near the giant net in the distance, waving and blowing kisses.

“Behold,” Marvin yelled, “you will see this cannon fired for the first time.” The spectators roared, their mouths fixed open, eyes glowing yellow in the night.

At the top of the ladder, Dante stuffed beeswax and cotton inside of his ears. He glanced at the star-speckled sky, regretting the ladder did not extend into the heavens. He slid to the base of the barrel.

In the darkness, waiting for the blast to propel him through the air, Dante had this vision: The cannon fires and now he’s flying, watching the crowd shrink beneath him. He passes over the countryside, over cities and oceans, glides past stars and planets. Clouds

of gas and dust glow in purple and blue. When he comes down, he's somewhere similar to Earth, but everyone acts differently towards him. Children in the park smile and ask him to play games. Adults in the market wave. Some give him candy. Dante has a loving family in this other place. At night, near a gentle fire, he laughs with his parents and they read him stories. They promise to never abandon him.

Originally published by The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts, April 2019.

Mother Had a Strong Arm

I watched her transform by the sink over years and years. Black hair turning silver. Skin wrinkling. Fingers bending from arthritis. “These dishes take forever,” she would say. Night after night, with an almost religious devotion, she stood at the sink in front of the window and cleaned the dishes, scrubbing and drying until they gleamed. It would take at least half an hour, often longer. She never allowed me or my siblings to help. Only later did I realize she used this time after dinner for solitude, to escape the countless little interactions and activities that marked her days as a mother of five, but mostly to escape him, his booming voice and proclivity to yap and lecture. “Actually, Hon,” he would say. “Guess I have to explain it again,” he’d say.

She often hummed songs as she washed the plates, glasses, and silverware, and occasionally she looked out the window as the sun set to watch her favorite blue jays and squirrels eat the seeds she had left for them around the oak tree. Scented candles burned on the windowsill, golden light flickering on her dress. Father would sit with us in the adjacent living room and talk about Bible verses and politics as we feigned interest. Jonah did this, Reagan did that, and so on and so on. My eyes would inevitably wander to her, and I watched her grow old.

I cooked for her one evening after he died from “a bad heart,” as the doctor put it. We laughed and laughed over two bottles of red wine, just she and I, and after dessert I finally gave voice to my memories of her aging over the years by the sink. I offered to help clean up, but she had something else in mind. Making several trips, we carried all of the plates and glasses from the kitchen outside. Under a glowing orange moon, we took turns hurling them against the oak tree, shards flying in every direction, bursts of laughter in the night.

Originally published by Necessary Fiction, November 2018.

Not Today

“What do you have?” Esther asked. Darlene uncurled her fingers to reveal a book of matches. “Give them to me,” Esther said. As Darlene stepped away and slid the matches into her pocket, Mr. Hamaker opened the door. He wore tennis clothes, a racket tucked under his arm. He had puffy eyes and pallid skin. His short, white hair stood erect in places, as if he had stuck his tongue in an electrical socket. “Hey there,” he said.

“Good afternoon. I hope you don’t mind I brought my daughter. Her name is—”

“You couldn’t get a sitter?”

Esther wanted to explain herself. Her oldest daughter, Rose, who usually stayed with Darlene, had disappeared somewhere with her boyfriend. Esther couldn’t find a reliable sitter for a decent price on short notice. She refused to leave Darlene at home by herself. At the apartment complex where they lived, hyena-men paced around the common areas with their eyes bulging and mouths open. Instead of explaining, Esther said, “She’ll be good, I promise.”

“Better be,” Mr. Hamaker said, looking at his watch. “This way.”

He led them through his house, pointing out messes. “The old wife has been out of town, so I had to throw a party.”

Esther wondered how anyone could allow such chaos. Beer and wine bottles littered the floor of the living room. In the kitchen, the granite countertops glistened in spilt vodka. A pool of vomit had dried on the white tile floor.

Walking into the dining area, Esther gasped. A silver platter on the table displayed a rotting, half-eaten mass of cheese the size and shape of a human head. Its nose and lips had been eaten off. Gashes and cuts crisscrossed its cheeks and forehead where people must have scraped crackers. A chubby orange Chihuahua waddled duck-like towards the table.

“Go out back and sit by the pool, sweetheart,” Esther said, stepping in front of Darlene to block her view of the grotesque presentation. “Don’t touch anything.”

“But I’ll get bored,” Darlene said, tugging on Esther’s shirt.

Mr. Hamaker rolled his eyes. “Use your imagination, girl, and don’t touch anything, or I might bite off your fingers.” He laughed, snapping his teeth together.

Darlene skulked away.

Esther almost told Mr. Hamaker to be more considerate. She almost punched him in the face. Instead, she smiled and said, “I’ll get started.”

As Mr. Hamaker walked towards the front door, he said, “I’ll be back in a couple of hours.” He turned and glared. “Don’t let her sit on my furniture. She’s dirty.”

“Yes, sir,” Esther said. “You have nothing to worry about.” She smiled again and nodded, although she wanted to take Darlene’s hand and leave.

With Mr. Hamaker gone, Esther walked through the first floor of the house, grunting and cursing under her breath, unsure where to start. The dog was in the kitchen, staring up at a slab of blood sausage, its screeching barks reverberating off the walls.

Esther sat outside next to Darlene, who voluntarily handed over the matches. The beach came right up to the pool deck, the ocean no more than one-hundred yards away. Scattered along the sand lay white shells like eyes fixed open, admiring the sky. A cool breeze hinted at the coming of fall, the air salty.

Darlene looked at her toenails. The green polish had almost completely chipped off. “Why can’t we have a house like this, Mama?”

Still annoyed at Mr. Hamaker, Esther thought about how to respond. She put her arm around Darlene and kissed her forehead. Esther had always encouraged Darlene to use her imagination, to envision her wishes as reality.

“I tell you what,” Esther said, “let’s pretend we live here.”

Darlene’s eyes widened. “But you have to work.”

“Not today.”

Esther held Darlene’s hand, leading her up the spiral staircase and into the master bathroom. Darlene had never seen a tub this large, stretching as wide as a whale’s mouth. Esther scrubbed the tub clean, and filled it with warm, soapy water. She hummed songs as she washed Darlene’s hair with coconut-scented shampoo.

After the bath, Esther trimmed Darlene’s nails and removed the remaining bits of polish. Esther used her fingers to style Darlene’s hair, and sprayed Mrs. Hamaker’s citrusy perfume on her neck and wrists. They looked in the mirror. Darlene lifted her chin and grinned, exhibiting a confidence she seldom showed.

“You’re naturally beautiful,” Esther said. “Don’t ever believe otherwise.”

They entered Mrs. Hamaker’s closet. One section of a wall showcased rows of heels, booties, and sandals from the floor to almost the ceiling. Blouses, pants, skirts, dresses, and coats were arranged by color. In an upper corner hung a gold-plated beehive. Silver bees dotted with red and green jewels clung to the hive, some with sparkling wings spread wide in preparation of flight.

“Here,” Esther said, placing a shawl on Darlene. She twirled and laughed, stroking the purple silk. Esther tried on pink slippers. She felt as though she were walking on clouds or cotton candy. A few minutes later, they fell down laughing, trying to balance in stilettos.

Having returned everything to its place, they descended the staircase, waving below to an imaginary audience. “Please,” Esther said, her voice booming, “take whatever you want.” Darlene stopped and said in her sternest tone, “Except the dog.”

They filled bowls with strawberry ice cream and lounged by the pool, watching waves splash onto shore, the sun splattering pinks and oranges across the sky. Darlene let the dog lick the remaining ice cream from her bowl. It fell asleep in her lap, snoring with legs twitching.

“We should leave,” Esther eventually said. “He’ll be back soon.”

“Yeah,” Darlene said. “This was a good day.”

“I’m glad you think so,” Esther said. “Want to play cards tonight?”

Darlene lit up with excitement. “Bet I’ll win again!”

On the drive back, Esther imagined Mr. Hamaker walking into his house. He would be angry, but perhaps something uncanny and miraculous would happen. Esther pictured him sitting at his dining room table, listening attentively and nodding at the head of cheese as it spoke to him from the depths of wisdom, saying everything he needed to hear.

Switcheroo

After Daddy cremated Mama's body, he put the ashes in a glass jar by the kitchen sink. During one of our visits, Sis and I saw this and encouraged Daddy to move the ashes to a more respectable location, such as the mantel above the fireplace or a shelf in the master bedroom. Hell, displaying Mama's remains just about anywhere else in the house would've been preferable to leaving them next to a dishrag and bar of soap. "She spent a lot of time near the sink," he said, "so that's where she'll stay."

For Mama, though, the kitchen was a sanctuary and a prison. Sure, she enjoyed cooking meals for the family on special occasions, putting on a show as she chopped vegetables with stunning speed and tamed flames that leapt up from the pan. She smiled when she saw our reactions to the taste of her macaroni and cheese, pecan pie, and other heavenly creations. We sometimes sat at the dinner table for hours, laughing and telling stories, the food and wine never-ending. Mama made those memories possible.

But she also spent untold amounts of time in the kitchen obsessively cleaning and re-cleaning surfaces and objects that already gleamed, missing opportunities for additional memories while the rest of us sat in the living room or out back on the porch. "Just let her be," Daddy would say. "That's how she gets her anxiety out."

Sis and I sometimes convinced Mama to take a break and laze around with us by the nearby lake. We always sat under an oak tree and snacked on strawberries, grapes, or watermelon, sipping the whiskey we'd snuck out of the liquor cabinet. Every now and again, Mama paused mid-conversation and gazed at the choppy surface of the lake glimmering in gold. During those moments, with her neck and shoulders finally relaxed, she seemed most at peace. "It's beautiful," she would say. "I feel free."

Sis distracted Daddy one day with a game of solitaire on the back porch while I swapped Mama's ashes with the ashes I'd gathered from a campfire. Instead of going home after dinner, Sis and I said goodbye to Daddy and went to the lake. We examined the wooden row boat he had kept hidden in bushes, but had stopped using. The boat seemed to be in decent enough shape and the secret compartment under the floorboard stored an unopened bottle of whiskey, so Sis and I lugged the vessel into the water and got in, wobbling back and forth until we re-learned how to balance. My nerves flared up because the last time we had tried to venture into the water Sis accidentally whacked me in the head

with an oar, leaving a lump and unsightly gash the doctor needed to stitch up.

Our shoulders and arms burned as we paddled back and forth. We distracted ourselves by talking about how tickled Mama would be to see us out here struggling like this, breathing heavily and rowing out of sync, our oars smacking together. When we reached a point at which we'd surely drown if we tried to swim back, we opened the bottle of whiskey. We each took a swig, toasting Mama, our throats burning and stomachs warm. The boat rocked and Sis fell into me laughing. "What in God's name are we doing?" she asked.

I opened my satchel and removed the jar of ashes, gripped it with both hands. Sis sat up and put the whiskey away. She wrapped her hands around mine, her face tense and eyes glassy. Together, we scattered the ashes across the surface of the lake.

Originally published by Barely South Review, Spring 2019.

Cognitive Dissonance

“Ole Pastor Ted,” as the locals called him, sat on the front porch of his country estate and sobbed, nobody else around. “Tragedy,” “earth-shattering,” and other apocalyptic words colonized his mind. He had found his wife dead in the garden, a dragonfly resting on the tip of her nose. “She died peacefully, of natural causes,” the doctor had said.

Still in his funeral attire, Ted stood and screamed at his conception of God, demanding to know how something so “horrific” could happen.

It did not faze him whatsoever that the sprawling front lawn across which his voice carried was once the site where Native American women, terrified by encroaching U.S. militias, killed their own children to avoid seeing them butchered.

Welcome to Reality

Dr. Gray and Mrs. Gray watched the sunrise as they stood, with several feet of space between them, next to the RV they had rented for three weeks. A wall of trees marked the entrance to The Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Dr. Gray had just “retired.” He had asked Mrs. Gray to travel the country with him, and to use this journey as an opportunity to salvage their marriage.

He turned to her and stared inquisitively, his furry white eyebrows resting on his forehead like caterpillars.

She grunted. “What? Are you wondering if I exist?”

He grinned and shrugged. “Forgive me. Old habits, you know, they’re hard to—”

“Let’s walk,” she said.

They drifted along a trail that wound into the woods, the scents of pine and flowers mingling. Birds called to each other and squirrels scurried up and down trees. Gold flecks of sunlight filtered through the canopy and floated to the ground like burning snowflakes. A wave of wind rolled across the forest floor, towards them, whirling orange and red and yellow leaves into the air.

“This life we have,” Dr. Gray said, “sometimes it feels like a radiant, improbable dream.” He gently squeezed her hand as the wind reached them, leaves fluttering around their ankles.

She pulled her hand away. “My arthritis,” she said.

They sat against the trunk of a towering oak tree, branches grasping in every direction. Mrs. Gray removed a sketchbook from her satchel and turned to the page with her latest drawing, a near-finished image of a woman alone in an empty room, standing in front of a window with her arms crossed, gazing outside. Mrs. Gray’s crooked fingers guided the pencil with surgical precision.

“I thought your arthritis was bothering you,” Dr. Gray said.

“The pain comes in waves,” she said. “You know that.” She blackened the woman’s eyes and mouth, scribbling and pressing the pencil down into the paper until the lead broke.

Dr. Gray fell asleep reading his forty-year-old copy of René Descartes’ *Discourse on Method*. He had put the book in his lap, left open to his favorite passage, “If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as

possible, all things.”

Throughout his career, Dr. Gray had highlighted and underlined this passage numerous times, using every color of ink, and had doubted all things on more occasions than he'd care to admit. Periodically, when lecturing to his philosophy students, he would study their faces and wonder if they were real.

“Let's go,” Mrs. Gray said, standing over him. “Mosquitoes are devouring my flesh.”

“How long have I been asleep?” he asked. His eyes fully opened and his senses readjusted so that now he clearly saw her, this woman to whom he'd been married for forty-three years. Or perhaps it was forty-four.

“Most of your life,” she said.

Back in the RV, Mrs. Gray driving, they entered a small town where they planned to fill up the gas tank before moving on. They stopped at a red light. One-story brick buildings with long rectangular windows lined the intersection. A bakery. A clothing store. Shops that sold furniture and books. People stood on the corners.

Dr. Gray turned on his recording of Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*. In one of his courses, he had taught the Mallarmé poem that inspired Debussy's work and enjoyed lecturing about the faun who, awaking on a warm afternoon, could not determine whether the nymphs he briefly perceived were real or creatures of his dream. Dr. Gray posed to his students a series of written questions:

1. What does this poem say about the nature of reality?
2. Can we verify the existence of anything outside of ourselves?
3. If nothing external can be verified, should we trust and rely on the self?
4. If so, should we also exalt the self, which is, after all, the basis of liberalism and capitalist innovation?

Students often complained about Dr. Gray's questions, but he kept asking them, semester after semester. He could do that, having tenure.

He could do almost anything, that is, until a female student accused him of misconduct. Touching her shoulders and hips, asking about her sex life, inviting her to dinner. These allegations prompted an investigation and led to Dr. Gray's early retirement.

“You don't actually believe her?” he had asked Mrs. Gray. He would have taught until the moment he died if it hadn't been for that student.

Still waiting for the light to turn green, Mrs. Gray noticed a woman who stood on the sidewalk near the intersection. The woman's clothes, torn and streaked with grime, swallowed her frame. Scraggly black hair hung at her shoulders. Shredded shoes clung to her feet. She held a cardboard sign with outstretched arms in the direction of a semi-truck, stopped at another red light. The sign read: “Need Work.” The trailer attached to the

semi-truck displayed the name “Davidson’s Groceries” in green letters, along with images of a lobster, asparagus, a wine bottle. Nobody appeared to notice her.

“Do you think she’s actually unemployed?” Dr. Gray asked.

“Of course she is,” Mrs. Gray said.

“I don’t know,” Dr. Gray said. “Some people pretend to be homeless. These people have good jobs, but they scam—”

“Please be quiet,” Mrs. Gray said. She turned off the music and rolled down the windows.

The light turned green and Mrs. Gray drove towards the middle of the intersection slowly. The woman seemed to say, “I’m real.”

Mrs. Gray threw an object, yelling, “Take it.”

“What did you do?” Dr. Gray asked.

He looked at her face, and then at her hands, and then at her ring finger. Her diamond wedding band – the one he’d given her on a quiet beach under a star-filled sky – was gone.

The Cactus God

“At first, the truck driver thought the man he spotted was Jesus,” the police officer said, standing in our doorway. Jesus in the desert, running across the road in only sneakers and underwear, his beard and hair covered in dust.

The officer stepped closer and removed his sunglasses to reveal a glass eye, shiny and unmoving. “Then, the truck driver saw the tattoo of Amelia Earhart on your father’s back and reckoned he was just some lunatic.”

He put the sunglasses back on. “Don’t go looking for him. It’s too dangerous out there.”

The last time we had seen our father, his breath reeked of rum and his pupils swelled to the point of almost bursting. He complained about his job at the gas station. He spoke of raising our mother from the dead.

The desert opened up in front of us like a mouth desperate for water. The flat, endless landscape swallowed us whole. The youngest of us had insisted we search. We called her “Y” because she asked so many questions. She was seven, and always carried around an orange, stuffed jackrabbit our father had won for her at a carnival.

We wandered for days, seeking proof of his existence, our food and water vanishing. Vultures appeared overhead and stalked us, carving circles in the sky. The heat made us feverish and turned our minds inside out.

Over here, a spiny, low-growing plant that whispered in foreign tongues. Over there, the flutter of an invisible insect’s wings.

With the sun nearly blinding us, we heard a buzzer go off under a boulder. Like the buzzer on our stove, reminding us to remove the food. We strained against the boulder until it rolled a few feet. Perhaps we expected to find a meal, but we only discovered some sort of bone.

Crying and demanding answers, Y knelt before a towering cactus.

“Don’t beg a plant,” somebody said as we held her. “If anything, ask the Lord for help.”

We suspended our search for William to find God so we could beg face-to-face for help staying alive, finding our father, and returning home.

We eventually came across a horned lizard resting on a heap of sand. We asked, "Where's God?" Perhaps possessing a secret knowledge, the lizard scurried away in fear. We turned around and there stood that same cactus. The vultures cackled in the sky, dropping pebbles on our skulls.

On the last night, the air cooled and clouds swelled, pregnant with life. We screamed at the clouds until finally they ruptured. We drank until our bellies filled, rolled around in puddles, washed away our heaviness.

Lightning branched across the dark-purple sky. Y stood and pointed at the illuminated rock formation in the distance that resembled a lamb's head, or a jackal's head, depending on the angle. Seeing that, we knew how to find our way back.

We stumbled into the house at dawn and shoved bread in our mouths, took turns drinking from the kitchen sink.

After sleeping all day, we brushed Y's hair, made her pretty. We cautioned her against growing bitter if he did not return this time. We told her how much she's loved.

Helen

When she was a toddler, I'd sometimes wake up to her laughing and stumble across the dark house and into her room, only to find her missing from her bed. I'd then discover her in another room, as if she'd passed through the walls. She'd be stalking the cat or playing with a dead bug or reaching for a sharp object. She was fearless that way, frequently escaping to explore and flirt with danger.

This tendency persisted as she grew older. She'd vanish from the house as a teenager, camera in hand, eager to hone her photography skills and expand her collection. She already had an impressive portfolio at the age of fifteen, with each photograph titled and arranged in a binder.

If she had simply died, I would have spoken at her funeral about these qualities, about her curiosity and adventurousness. Perhaps I would have said something like, "Helen was extraordinary. We can honor her memory by engaging the world with the same curiosity and passion." (Of course, I wouldn't have mentioned her fascination with the occult.)

Next, I probably would have continued teaching political theory at the local college, started dating again, and labored through the stages of grief until I reached acceptance. Death at least presents an opportunity for closure and healing. Having a missing child, conversely, offers no chance of peace.

Three of Helen's photographs especially unnerve me.

Animal Instincts. In this one, a brown bear faces the camera maybe fifty yards away in a field, with its mouth stretched open and its fangs and claws fully extended, desperate for something solid. A plume of hot breath erupts from its mouth through the frigid air while two cubs cling together nearby, crouched down low, trying to vanish into the snow. The bear appears to be levitating. It must have just leapt straight up, creating the illusion that it's floating, or perhaps the camera had somehow malfunctioned.

"What were you thinking?" I must have asked Helen this a dozen times after she showed me the photograph.

She laughed and laughed until she finally caught her breath, regained composure, and said with a straight face, "I was safe, Mother."

What torments me about the image today is not her proximity to this giant beast at the time, but the fact she was alone when a later threat emerged. I should have been there

with her, like that bear protecting its cubs, ready to rip off skin and crush bones.

Absence. In this photograph, I'm sitting on a bench in the front yard, writing in a notebook. I remember this day well. I was preparing for a lecture on the gap between theory and praxis. I didn't know Helen took this photograph until I discovered it in her binder after she went missing. She doctored the image by making me so faint that I nearly blend into the background. Only my silhouette is visible, this ghost of me.

Helen never fully appreciated the challenges of a single mother. I worked hard to give her a good life, but she often criticized me for not being there. "Aloof," she'd call me. "Disconnected."

How do I let her know I am here *now*?

I have driven down each road, walked along each trail, and crept through each abandoned building in and around this miserable town, looking for her, trying to make my presence known. I have searched the campus of her high school, called television and radio stations and begged for airtime, and joined online communities of activists and volunteers.

I want her to know I am here for her. I am *here*.

One night, after I learned the case had gone cold and the police would stop actively investigating, I went to the field where Helen had photographed the bear and its cubs. A cluster of meteors streaked across the sky and I imagined they were angels rushing towards the Earth with their eyes wide open and wings on fire, bringing her back to me. And I reached up and screamed her name.

As I stood there alone grasping towards the heavens for her with my trembling hands, for an instant I swore I could see right through them.

Freedom. This photograph shows only a bird between spongy white clouds high above. The bird appears to be falling with its head twisted backwards.

When I last saw Helen, she was almost sixteen. She stood in the doorway at the back of the house with her camera. Her wild black hair dangled just above her shoulders and her green eyes burned, those little emerald fires. The hexagram tattoo on her left ankle, which she had acquired without my permission, pulsated in rich colors—purples, oranges, reds. "I'll be back before dark," she said. She then took my photograph. When she lowered the camera, she was giggling. She turned and hurried off, her green backpack bouncing in concert with her footsteps.

An elderly woman, who has since passed away, reported that Helen entered the woods with a man later that evening, a man described as a dwarf who wore only a cloth around his loins, a dwarf with golden hair, a potbelly, tiny hands, and goat-like hooves for feet. The police didn't bother to create a sketch. Who can blame them? I still don't know what

this man looks like, despite trying to learn anything I can about him for nearly eleven months now.

“She seemed happy,” said the old, senile woman, referring to Helen. “She seemed free.”

I chose the name Helen because it means “light,” and I have to think her light will one day guide me to her. Or perhaps she will escape and come to me, instead. Perhaps her light will one day guide her home.

When I’m too tired to search for her, I sometimes sit at the table near the back door where I last saw her and lose myself in this image: the door opens on a brilliant day, sunlight pours in, and she enters.

Originally published by Ellipsis Zine, April 2018.

Information Deficit

June 5th

He came home early from work yesterday afternoon, still wearing his white coat. A stethoscope remained coiled around his neck like a noose. As he drifted inside, he forgot to close the front door. “I was drafted,” he said.

I wrapped my arms around him and laughed. “Not funny.” I tried to kiss him, but his lips were stiff and cold.

“Military officers came to the clinic this morning. They told me there’s a shortage of doctors.” Fingers trembling, he showed me the draft papers. “They said it’s an emergency. They need me.”

June 7th

We went to the beach today and sat in the sand. Dark-gray clouds stretched across the horizon and suffocated the sun. Rain from those clouds fell ceaselessly into the ocean, a hail of bullets. Wind rushed over choppy waves and onto shore, howling and singing warning songs. We leaned onto each other and waited for the rain to arrive.

“We should try to leave the country,” I said.

He shook his head and looked down at the sand. “That would be too dangerous.”

June 19th

On our last night together before he departed, we climbed onto the roof of our house with pillows and blankets and made love, the stars pulsing and swirling in jubilant madness. I fell asleep with my head on his chest, trying to memorize the rhythm of his heart and the rise and fall of his lungs.

I awoke alone to sunlight and birds chirping. I stood on the roof and screamed his name.

July 9th

I have been following the news, searching online, and calling state agencies, trying to learn whatever I can about the war, but the government has seized control of the media,

internet, and means of communication, and has restricted travel. Accurate information is impossible to acquire, truth and propaganda hopelessly blurred.

August 11th

So many people speak of victory and peace. An aura of contentment surrounds them as they go about their lives.

I have told everyone I know, "The war isn't over. He hasn't come home."

Nobody listens.

August 24th

My friends and family have distanced themselves from me. "He left you because he stopped loving you," my sister said. "Why can't you understand?"

September 1st

At 3:00 a.m., he called from somewhere... To finally hear his voice!

My love, he said doctors have become useless and the military needs more soldiers. He is learning how to fight, this man who only wants to heal. He must have looked so awkward when he first held a weapon, an assault rifle melded to the same hands once used to check pulses and close wounds.

"They say the war's over," I said. "They say—"

"I have to go," he whispered. "I hope to come back soon."

October 12th

Last week, at the nearest military base, I begged what appeared to be a guard on the other side of the gate to let me enter. He stood maybe twenty yards away, feet clamped together, arms at his sides. Dirt and grime streaked his uniform. His shoes bore holes. He did not respond. He did not even look in my direction. I threw pebbles until one struck him in the head, but still he did not budge. Perhaps he was not a person, but a decoy.

The base itself seemed to be desolate. Grass and weeds stood several feet high and crept up the sides of unlit buildings. A banner in the courtyard said, "VICTORY!"

October 13th

I spent the entire morning meandering up and down the aisles of a grocery store, pushing an empty cart. I imagined hordes of people running in and out, stumbling over each other and grabbing everything they could, the roof trembling from nearby bomb blasts. I wanted confirmation of the war to prove I was not losing my mind.

But, cheerful music played through the speakers as men and women calmly filled their carts with groceries. Crushed pecans. Blood-red tomatoes. Raw meat.

“Have you heard about the war?” I asked a woman sniffing an orange. She smiled with sparkling teeth and shook her head, walked away.

October 24th

Now, as I sit alone at the same beach, I envision ships slicing into the water and jets cutting across the sky. I picture red waves splashing onto shore – a graveyard of scattered limbs, a feast for the birds – as ashes from chemical clouds twirl down. The sun no longer shines and flowers no longer bloom.

Of course, what I actually see differs. I see sunlight on crystal-blue water. A child builds a sandcastle, the upper level slanting to one side. An elderly man walks alone in a leisurely, meditative way, leaving behind footprints. A dolphin’s fin breaches the water’s surface and bright-white seagulls fly overhead, the smell of salt hanging in the air.

It’s infuriating, this façade of normalcy.

I try to convince myself he will eventually return, maybe to this exact spot. In my gut, however, I fear nobody can live to tell about a war that has become so secretive.

Originally published by The Airgonaut, March 2019.

Untimely

The seat next to him at the concert remains unfilled. Mozart's Requiem in D Minor, her favorite classical work. "He died at thirty-five, before he could finish it," she said after she purchased the tickets.

For months, they planned to renew their vows in a garden, in celebration of their fifth wedding anniversary. He imagined red and gold leaves fluttering up from the ground back to their branches, purple flowers releasing sugary scents and invisible euphorics, champagne flutes bubbling with sunlight. Everyone in attendance would have been love-drunk, airy. Perhaps they all would have floated into the sky where the couple would have exchanged cloud-blessed promises.

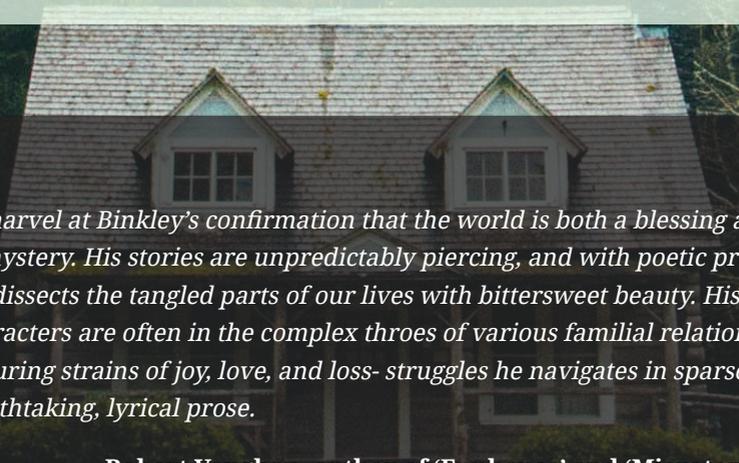
In her note, folded sharply in his hand, she speaks of impossible visions. Speaks of the frustrations in unfinished endeavors. Laments abrupt endings.

In this collection of flash fiction, internal and external forces strain the relationships among family members.

Some of the characters learn to cope.

Some do nothing.

Others descend into madness.



I marvel at Binkley's confirmation that the world is both a blessing and a mystery. His stories are unpredictably piercing, and with poetic prose, he dissects the tangled parts of our lives with bittersweet beauty. His characters are often in the complex throes of various familial relations, enduring strains of joy, love, and loss- struggles he navigates in sparse, breathtaking, lyrical prose.

Robert Vaughan, author of 'Funhouse' and 'Microtones'

'Familial Disturbances' is a strong, political and astute flash fiction collection that starts with an explosive first line and never drops below excellent. These stories will jam you into uncomfortable shoes, rattle your emotions, then make you reflect for days after reading.

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