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junction

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junction
by
Grisell Buides

A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York
College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
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junction

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Abstract

This thesis is a hybrid work, and includes fourteen pieces: nine poems, two vignettes, and three short stories. Some of the pieces have been inspired by news stories, and others by the writer's photography and travel experiences, specifically, her semester abroad in China. Although the content varies, the subjects of perception, human relationships, death, and a focus on the seasons and urban landscape serve to create a connection between the pieces. The poems are all free verse, but many of them maintain a consistent form. The writer experiments with visual line breaks, inspired by the poetry of E.E. Cummings, as well as prose poetry. While the short stories have a traditional structure, the vignettes are less narrative and more impressionistic. The thesis is divided into two parts. The first has a greater focus on relationships between people, while the second emphasizes the city and touches on the subject of consumerism, particularly in the final three pieces. The writings of Matsuo Basho, William Carlos Williams, Sandra Cisneros, and W.G. Sebald have also influenced the content of this thesis.

Introduction

My thesis is a hybrid work, incorporating short stories, vignettes, and poetry. While the majority of my work is fiction, I also include nonfiction elements. Ideas can come in many forms, and several of the pieces in my thesis have been inspired by the media or by photos. Photography is a hobby of mine, and a lot of my poetry and vignettes are responses to the photos I have taken. The news also serves as my inspiration, and this is reflected in three of the pieces in this thesis: “Mosaic in the Snow,” “Rite of Passage,” and “a kitchen of teeth.”

The first is a vignette that attempts to describe the furor that often occurs on holidays, such as Black Friday, through the perspective of one character. The poem, “a kitchen of teeth,” resulted from a news story about a man who was practicing as an unlicensed dentist in South America. “Rite of Passage” is the newest short story that I’ve written, and the idea for this one also came from a news story about a body that had been buried in someone else’s grave. Other forms of media have served as inspiration for my writing as well, and I wrote the poem, “The Art of Soap Making,” after watching several YouTube videos on the subject out of curiosity. In the case of pieces such as these, I use the story or primary source as a starting point, but don’t limit my writing in order to be completely accurate.

Apart from photography and the media, travel also inspires my writing. I’ve visited my family in Cuba and Panama, and have also spent a semester in China, all places that have inspired writing in the past. The vignette, “The Zoo Overlooking The City,” is based on a trip to a zoo in Huangshan, China. Although most of it is

nonfiction, I attempted to make it more impressionistic and less like a travelogue. In this sense, I was inspired by W.G. Sebald's novel, *The Emigrants*, and his blurring of the line between fiction and nonfiction. The photos Sebald included in his work also motivated me to use photos as inspiration for my own writing, but in this thesis I have chosen to omit them, because I want the actual writing to be the focus. Although these pieces have all been inspired by either events in my life, or in the life of others, because of the changes I've done, I view them to be primarily fiction.

When first considering what I would do for my thesis, I knew I wanted it to be hybrid, though in the past I hadn't had much experience with hybrid works, and tended to view poetry and prose as separate entities. After reading William Carlos Williams' *Spring and All* and Matsuo Basho's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches*, both books that incorporate essay-like fragments with poetry, I realized how both forms can complement and enhance each other in a single piece. This requires the reader to be open to different forms, seeing them as a connected work, and not just pieces attached to one another.

What interested me about Williams' style was his experimentation with form and content, as well as his ability to create evocative images, particularly in his poetry. When I first began reading *Spring and All*, the style was a bit jarring, and I had trouble linking the prose and poetry. But ultimately, that wasn't an impediment to my understanding of his overall message, and I was able to recognize themes throughout. The work became more accessible to me, and the shifts between poetry and prose weren't as confusing. For example, in "CHAPTER XIX," under "The

Traditionalists of Plagiarism,” Williams describes the motions of a world that continually repeats itself, ending and beginning over and over again. In this fragment, his writing is as cyclical as the world he describes, repeating such words as “microscopic,” “spring,” “hoofs,” and “approaching.” “Approaching” in particular is associated with “beginning” and “end,” emphasizing the cyclical nature of the world, life, and death. Williams ends the section with the blunt statement: “Suddenly it is at an end. THE WORLD IS NEW.” We are then presented with the first poem, which features the image of a contagious hospital. The hospital and the road are the only signs of urbanization in the poem. The rest is dedicated to the awakening of nature after winter, as spring approaches. The poem extends Williams’ prose argument, in which he calls the process “the great copying.” As in the prose, the poem also contains repetition in the words: “tree,” “leaf,” and “cold.” In “CHAPTER XIX,” he discusses his beginnings and endings in the general sense, and in the following poem, he offers a very “microscopic” example: that of a plant with dead leaves reviving itself after winter.

While I enjoyed Williams’ writing, the essay style of the prose segments was not something that I saw myself writing, and in this sense, Basho’s prose felt more approachable. Like Williams’, I thought that Basho’s writing exemplified the hybrid form, and it led me to consider how some pieces would be interpreted differently without prior knowledge of the rest of the work. For instance, in “Records of a Weather-exposed Skeleton,” there is a prose passage where Basho revisits his village and is emotionally affected by how it has changed, especially his mother’s herb

garden, which has been damaged due to the winter (Basho 55). Basho is then given a bag containing his mother's hair, and he writes a haiku in response. In it, the context of his mother's death is missing, and without prior knowledge of that, it would be unclear what Basho was discussing. The "Icy strings of frost" (4), as translated by Nobuyuki Yuasa, do not give indication that Basho is referring to his mother's hair, without the preceding prose section. In another translation, by Robert Hass, it is translated as: "It would melt / In my hand— / the autumn frost." Although there is no context for the majority of the other poems in Hass' anthology, part of the prose passage is included before this piece, making it clear what is being discussed (15).

Basho's travel narrative style also reminded me of the journal writing I did during my semester in China. While I had previously written of my experience abroad, I wanted to work with it beyond the restrictions of nonfiction. I wrote a series of poems and vignettes that took photos or experiences and made them more abstract. I have been interested in the vignette form since I read Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* in middle school. In that first encounter with vignettes, I wasn't sure if I should consider them as short stories or short chapters. Their ambiguity also confused me, and it was upsetting how some storylines were left unfinished. I appreciate this form now, because I don't feel pressured to convey a complete plot. Not all writing is plot centered, and much of the writing that I admire focuses on an image or moment which is expanded. I enjoy Basho's haikus for this reason. They are fragments of moments that evoke certain emotions, such as nostalgia or happiness,

and provide a different experience to readers that does not involve the traditional story arc. I view such pieces as being more reflective and less narrative.

Unlike the vignettes, the short stories in my thesis needed more of a consistent structure and one that was definitely more narrative-oriented. In looking back at the short stories that I had already written, I realized a few of them involved the theme of perception, and how it changes depending on the setting or perspective of the character. I explored this in “Dolls,” a piece which originally started out as a poem in my undergraduate independent poetry study. In my first semester of graduate school, I decided to try to make it a short story, since as a poem I had broken it up into sections which I thought would transfer well into a story arc. In it, the protagonist conceives an idea of what is going on around her that may be exaggerated by her imagination and what she perceives to be a reality. Like the other two short stories that I include in the thesis, “Palpitations” and “Rite of Passage,” I focused on creating and heightening the tension as I moved through the narrative.

Two subjects that link much of the work in my thesis are the urban setting as well as an exploration of the seasons, and while these are in the background of my short stories, they play a greater role in my poetry. Recently, I have been reading the poetry of E.E. Cummings, and in my research of his work, found “Cummings’s Urban Ecology: An Exploration of *EIMI*, *No Thanks*, and the Cultivation of the Ecological Self” by Aaron Moe. In it he states, “Nowhere does Cummings implore humans to escape the city in order to identify with nature; rather, the assumption is that an abundance of nature already exists within the city” (749-750), and “he

identified not with the grandiose in nature, but with the subtle details that can be found everywhere. It seemed not to matter to him whether the more-than-human life flourished inside or outside the city; his ecological self expanded” (756). In my own experience, nature and the city have always been linked, and though I lived in the inner-city as a child, parks, the outdoors, and nature in general, always interested me. I try to include this duality in my poems, such as “the city is a pool” and “Appendage,” by depicting both the city and the nature within it. This not only emphasizes the seasons, but also strengthens that connection between the urban/technological and the natural.

Another aspect of Cummings’ poetry that attracted me is his use of unique and visual styles and line breaks. I felt that I did not experiment much with line breaks in my own poetry. I became more conscious of this after my first graduate poetry workshop, and since then, I have tried to be more attentive to style, line breaks, and punctuation. In “E.E. Cummings’s Parentheses: Punctuation as Poetic Device,” Roi Tartakovsky lists the different usages that Cummings gives his parentheses, which are prominent punctuation marks in his work. Early on, Tartakovsky states that an interesting point about punctuation marks is their “semantic in-between-ness” (215): “punctuation marks are amenable to appropriation, to exploitation, and to projection” (216). They are important in poetry, because they can either serve to increase the ambiguity, or provide a reading experience that is closer to the writer’s original intention. In fact, when analyzing the parentheses in Cummings’ work, Tartakovsky

suggests several purposes for their presence: from iconicity in resembling the moon (219) to framing and linking sections within poems (228-229).

In this thesis, I paid greater attention to punctuation, as well as the overall visual of the poem than I had before, and found that it can create new layers in the work. Some of the poems in my thesis experiment with parentheses and line indentation to create unique visual styles and serve the content more effectively. In “Appendage,” the parentheses serve to either emphasize the rest of the text, or contradict it. In “friend” and “a kitchen of teeth” I hope the more “chaotic” looking form emphasizes the disorder and movement occurring in the content. In “friend,” the beginning mirrors the movement of waves, but as the speaker reaches an understanding of the relationship, it gradually becomes more prose-like.

The final aspect of poetry that I experimented with was long titles, since generally mine tend to be short. In, “An orange stain, like sun on a windshield, spreads across the photograph, escaping” the title was a line that I had originally thought to add either at the beginning or end, as a connection to the speaker’s image of her father’s life fading. As I wrote the poem, I found that the line could work more effectively as a title, and I included photography imagery at the end to signify memory and connect with the title. While I felt uncomfortable with its length at first, I now think it accurately represents the poem, and look forward to using more long titles in my work in the future.

Because of so many forms, styles, and genres coming together, this thesis was more difficult to write than I had originally anticipated. While I had been accustomed

to focusing on just one form for an extended period of time, I now found myself switching between a poem and a short story, and so I think a lot of the themes and perspectives have crossed over both unintentionally and intentionally. I think a hybrid work requires a different mindset when reading, because it required me to think differently when writing, and choosing which pieces to include and in what order. Most books that I encounter are not hybrids, and they're not common in the market either, so I think many people are not used to reading them. Hybrid works can help introduce readers to new styles, and they create a greater connection between pieces that, though different in form, have similar themes.

Palpitations

It was just nearing 7:30 a.m. when Harvey sat down at his two-person round breakfast table with his phone and an orange. The December cold had settled in, and an icy draft snuck in past the loosened window frames. He told himself he'd have to get them fixed soon, or else he'd freeze one of these nights. Then there was the clogged sink and the rat problem. He'd have to do something about the lumpy mattress too, maybe even paint the grimy yellow walls. He had moved into the cramped one-room apartment a week ago, but had been too preoccupied with his condition to do much to the room.

He dialed the number and waited.

The palpitations had resumed the day he moved in, probably from carrying the boxes and setting up the furniture. They sprung up on him in the hallway, as he was walking to the bathroom. He didn't have his own bathroom, and had to share it with two other tenants. Just as he opened the door, a rat scurried between his legs, and then he felt it—a hiccup against his chest. He called immediately, but it was past midnight, and they were closed. So he spent all day Wednesday on hold, being transferred back and forth between departments. When he'd demanded to talk to management, he was informed they were on vacation until Saturday. So he waited until then and called the minute he woke up.

His pulse quickened at the thought that he wouldn't be able to fix this, and he found himself sweating even though the apartment was freezing. The palpitations had

been the reason he moved in the first place. He'd had to downsize in order to afford not having them. And here they were again.

The buzzing silence cut and a female voice intoned, "You have reached the Illness Prevention and Health Preservation offices. This call may be monitored or recorded. For English, press—As we have recently changed our phone system, please listen to all the options before making a selection. If you know your party's extension number, dial it now."

Harvey exhaled loudly.

"If you are a current client, press one now, if you—To obtain the balance on your account, press one. For Billing and Transactions, press two. For Technical Support, press three. For our Counseling Services, press four. To contact the main offices, please stay on the line."

Harvey tucked the phone against his shoulder and began to peel his orange. It'd be twenty minutes at least.

Whenever he was put on hold, he liked to stare out the window, since he no longer had a TV. His new apartment was located in a five-story brick building with no elevator, and he was number 52. To the left of the building, there were similarly built apartments. To the right, a laundromat, which Harvey thought had very fair pricing—only one dollar per load (the one near his last place charged two)—and he couldn't afford to waste any money. Across the street were income tax offices decorated in Christmas lights and an empty lot covered in snow that used to be an auto shop, before it burned down.

When he was only 31, he'd had his first heart attack, a few days after his father's death. He'd always had a weak heart, ever since he was a child. As he bit into a tangy orange slice, he remembered having to watch from inside the house as the other kids threw snowballs at each other on the street. He'd hated constantly being on the sidelines, but his parents had always insisted he be careful, so he'd done as they had told him. Now, he couldn't help thinking how it hadn't been much use.

He was almost done eating when he heard, "Good morning, my name is Tina. Before I can assist you, may I have your name and date of birth?"

"Harvey Green. May 19, 1976."

Tina's typing sounded slow, as if she had to pause after every key. "Okay, Mr. Green, what can I do for you today?"

He cleared his throat. "Well, the thing is, I called Tech yesterday about my services. And I was told that they had been canceled, because my check bounced. I don't know how that could have happened, because I made sure—"

"You'll want Billing and Transactions for that. I can transfer you—"

"No, no. I already talked to them yesterday. But, they don't understand my situation." Harvey switched the phone to his other ear, stood, and walked over to the counter where there lay a few scraps of paper lined in penciled cursive, an old lottery ticket, and a mustard colored brochure. He grabbed the papers and brochure, then sat down again. After scooting the orange peels to the other side of the table, he flattened the papers out in front of him. He didn't have to study them to know what was

written, but he liked to have them out, just in case. “I sent that check in less than two weeks ago, for four months. From a job I did—there shouldn't be a problem with it.”

“Mr. Green, I can see here that the check was not accepted due to insufficient funds. We had no choice but to freeze your account. If you would like to reopen it, you just need to make a payment. Would you like me to transfer—?”

“That's not right! The money was in the bank!”

Tina paused for a few seconds. When she answered, Harvey thought her voice was the voice of a person with no worries, light and puffy, like whipped cream.

“Hmm, have you contacted your employer, Mr. Green? It might be a problem on their end.”

Harvey stole a glance out the window. “Well, actually I've been unemployed for a while now—the money was from a private job.”

Tina paused again, then said, “It says here in our records that you've traded in several items. You might want to consider doing that again if you can't send in another check.”

Harvey let out a breath and looked around the room. He didn't think he'd spent all the money. He had calculated the exact amount he needed for rent and utilities. And then there was food. But he'd been sure there was some left in the bank. He suddenly regretted throwing out that box of old knick-knacks his mother had left him a couple of years ago. They might have been worth something. “I don't know. I don't really have anything.”

“Billing and Transactions can better assist you in creating some kind of payment plan. Would you like me to transfer you?”

“Okay.”

“Is there anything else you need help with today?”

“No,” Harvey said, looking up at the ceiling.

The familiar buzzing returned, as if a fan had been turned on to the lowest level while someone worked in silence.

Harvey knew he had nothing worth trading in. He thought of his old apartment, and the one before that one. He'd had plenty of stuff then. He thought of Sandra. He wondered if she still had the same number. It had been nearly three months since he had left her. She'd caught him stealing some money she'd put aside for emergencies. It had been an incredibly embarrassing moment for him. He had looked at the fresh rolled-up bills in his hand wanting to toss them on the carpet, then wipe his palm against his jacket. But he'd held onto them while she demanded an explanation. He didn't give one, because he knew she'd think the whole thing unnecessary, possibly even ridiculous. He could imagine her eyebrows twisting in a mixed look of skepticism and concern. He handed her the bills, and left.

“Can I have your name and date of birth, please?” a male voice asked on the other end of the line.

Harvey found he'd been leaning toward the window during his daze and immediately straightened. “Harvey Green, May 19, 1976.”

“Thank you. My name is Andres,” he said, then sneezed. “Excuse me. I will be assisting you with any concerns you may have regarding billing and transactions. What is it that I can help you with today?”

“Hi. I’d like to do a trade in, but I don’t have many items. Also, I think my account is frozen.”

“Correct, Mr. Green. But don't worry, that isn't a problem. I can quickly unfreeze your account so that we can begin the process. Your account is now active again. Do you have any specific items in mind?”

“Well, actually no, nothing specific. I traded in the car like five or six months ago—you might have that in your records—but, I'm not sure I have anything near that value right now.”

“That's not a problem, Mr. Green, and yes, I do see a car listed here, as well as a television set, some kitchen appliances, and other miscellaneous items . . .”

Harvey could hear Andres' quick typing and sniffing.

“I have here a list of household items that we accept. Would you like me to go through the list with you?” Andres asked.

The list was long and organized alphabetically. It contained around five hundred items, most only acceptable when grouped with other items because of their individual lower value. Harvey listened patiently while Andres read through the list, pausing every few minutes to cough.

“ . . . atlases (of any kind), autographed baseballs, autographed baseball bats, autographed baseball hats, autographed basketballs—”

“I don’t have anything that’s autographed.”

“Nothing autographed . . . okay. Let’s move on. Please excuse my voice if it sounds a bit raspy. Bear skin rugs? Or any type of rug?”

“No. Don’t you have anything a bit more common?”

Andres cleared his throat. “Bed? Chairs?”

Harvey didn’t think they’d take his old bed and rickety chairs. They were practically the only things he had left anyway.

“I can’t give those up.”

“Would you like me to keep going through the list?” Andres asked, then erupted into a coughing fit.

“No, don’t bother.” Harvey didn’t want to sit through an hour or more of hacking and things he didn’t have. “Is there any way you could do a loan or something? I don’t know—how about work? Is there anything I can do?” Harvey noticed the hint of agitation creeping into his voice, and he reminded himself to calm down.

“Unfortunately, Mr. Green, we do not loan time. Would you possibly like me to transfer you over to our counseling department?”

“No, please! This is really important, I mean, it’s serious. I’m only 37, Andres. I’ve had two heart attacks already. Really, I can’t have another one! You can imagine how it is, can’t you?”

Andres began to type again. Harvey gripped the phone, as if the pressure could prevent the line from being cut.

When Andres spoke, his voice was slightly lower than before. “It seems you are in a very difficult place right now, Mr. Green. We appreciate our clients here, especially ones as committed as you have been.”

Harvey nodded. “Yeah, thanks . . .”

“We do have a certain program where the range of items available for trade-in is expanded.”

“Okay . . . but like I said, I don't really have anything . . .”

“Your present standing qualifies you for the OATS Program—that is, Organ and Tissue Supply—where you are the supplier. Our most popular options include eyes and kidneys—”

Harvey's knee gave an involuntary jerk and crashed against the table. “You want me to give you an organ?”

Andres chuckled good-naturedly. “There is no reason to concern yourself, Mr. Green. This is not mandatory. It's only an option that is available to you, because of your good standing as a client and your urgent need. Please, also keep in mind that all transactions are entirely legal and we have very capable surgeons.”

Harvey tucked the phone against his shoulder and grabbed the brochure from the table. “I don't understand. Is this legal? Why do you want organs? What are you going to do with them? It's not legal, is it?”

“It's completely legal. We do not charge money for anything.”

“But what do you do with the organs? Do you have some kind of connection to hospitals or something?”

Harvey flipped through the pages filled with saturated photos of smiling people until he found a small box toward the bottom of page nine that read: “OATS – A special program for customers with financial difficulties. Call to find out if you qualify.”

“Think of it as a donation which ultimately benefits you. Also, because this is a special program, the time you obtain in return is extended.”

“Extended? How much?”

“Depends on the organ. Let’s see. For a kidney in average condition, you are able to receive anywhere from five to six years.”

“Five to six years?” Harvey's eyes widened. It was a lot in comparison to what he normally got. He felt momentarily frustrated. It might seem like a lot, but for all he knew, someone else might have gotten ten years. Ten years seemed more appropriate than five for a kidney.

“However, if you have a good, or even possibly excellent kidney, you can get up to nine years.”

“Nine years . . . ?” Harvey muttered to himself.

“Correct. Now, we have other options as well. I previously mentioned that eyes are also popular. Some clients have even been given fifteen years for a single eye. Missing eyes being more obvious than a missing kidney, you know.”

Harvey was silent. It seemed his brain was suddenly preoccupied with numbers.

“Mr. Green, what color are your eyes?”

Harvey blinked rapidly. "I don't know about an eye. Um, look, I wasn't expecting this."

"Don't feel pressured, Mr. Green. This option is now permanently open to you. I would suggest discussing this with family members before making a decision."

Harvey hung up after agreeing to ask for Andres when he called again tomorrow. His hand was red and tense from gripping the phone so tightly and he felt exhausted, but his mind kept making mental calculations. He stared at the bare wall across from him before sinking back into the chair. He needed a second opinion. It would be risky to give up a kidney. But it would give him at least a few years without the worry of not being able to pay another month. His hand automatically placed itself on his chest, and he held his breath, feeling his heartbeat. He stayed like that for a while, wondering how long he could go without any problems if he didn't overexert himself. But he hadn't overexerted himself before.

It was almost nine when he decided to call Will. Will had been his coworker and the one to suggest he subscribe to the program. At the time, Harvey hadn't understood exactly what it did. But then Will, sounding like one of those eager actors on late night infomercials, had said, "Illness Prevention and Health Preservation. It does what it says. Prevents illness and preserves health. Don't ask how it works; the important thing is, it does."

When Harvey first called the Illness Prevention and Health Preservation offices, they gave him a free first month, and he felt better than he had in all his life.

He was sleeping soundly, his fatigue was gone, and his bouts of coughing had disappeared. He was hooked. He couldn't go back to the way it used to be.

Will was surprised to hear from him. Harvey had lost contact with everyone after he'd been laid off.

“Hey man, how you been? You know I saw Sandra the other day. She’s got a part time job at the mall now wrapping gifts.”

“Really? How did she look?” Harvey asked hesitantly.

“Yeah, she’s probably working today.”

“Look, I called you because of the program. I’ve been having some financial trouble lately.”

“Still haven’t been able to find a job?”

“Nothing steady. Mostly just private stuff, you know?”

“Yeah.” Will sounded sympathetic.

“Anyway, they offered me this special program—OATS, it’s called—where you can give organs. Is that real? Do you know about that?”

“Oh yeah, they’ve offered that to me too. Once about a year ago I stopped the service because I was hard-pressed for money. I was fine a couple of weeks, but then out of nowhere I got one of my headaches, and I called. That's when I found out about it. I was *this* close to giving up my kidney.”

Harvey let out a breath. “You didn’t?”

“Didn’t have to. My great uncle died and left me a nice inheritance.”

Harvey didn't have any aging rich relatives. "So you're set for life then, huh? Do you think I should do it?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, I'm not doing that anymore. I cancelled my subscription."

Harvey paused, then asked, "You cancelled it?"

"In May. It was sudden. I just stopped it to see what would happen. I was tired of constantly having to pay. So I stopped."

"What happened?"

"I started to feel sick, but I had the money from the inheritance, so I just went to a good doctor. Hadn't been to one in years. Told me the tumor was benign and operable, so I got it removed."

"Really? You got an operation? So you're okay now? I didn't know . . ."

"You've been out of touch. But, yeah. I have to go back often though, just to keep checking, but I've been fine since."

Harvey heard voices on the other end of the line.

"I gotta go, but you should give it a try, stopping it, I mean. It might not be as bad as you think it is."

"Yeah . . . okay."

After the call, Harvey dragged himself over to the sink and flung in the orange peels. He hadn't expected for Will to tell him that he'd cancelled his subscription. Not when Will was the one who had introduced it to him in the first place. Harvey absentmindedly grabbed his apartment keys from the counter. He noted the extensive

amount of tiles that were missing. If all his money didn't go to his health, he could fix up the place, or get a better one. He shook his head as he grabbed his tattered jacket from behind the door and went out, locking up.

Outside, the newly fallen snow had buried the sidewalk, so Harvey took the street. He hadn't really thought about the long term—that he'd be paying to maintain his health his whole life. Month after month. Organ after organ.

He jingled the change in his jacket pocket as he neared the bus stop. Number 5 went downtown where he could get a transfer to the mall. Next one at 9:42. Harvey sat down on the frigid metal seat, glad for the bus stop shelter. He wondered if Sandra would even be working today. He didn't have to let her know that he had gone just to see her. People went to the mall all the time, especially during the holidays. She'd be mad, probably. That he avoided her, that he hadn't contacted her in all this time. She might have moved on.

Harvey heard the rumbling of the bus on the salt-coated street. As soon as the doors opened, he climbed inside before he could change his mind. He found a seat across a dozing old woman and her empty grocery cart, and settled in.

Hazard

In the incandescence of night,
a man sleeps with his snores.

They drift to the ceiling,
blusters of engine smoke,
hooves on pavement,
rumblings of an unnamed storm.
They bash into the plaster,
creating sinkholes full of sky.
His pillow tremors
from the seismic activity.

His neighbor's broomstick
collides with the ceiling,
the tabby cat slinking
underneath the window
howls in aural agony
and leaps into an alley,
while the arrows on clocks
point themselves away.

As the man keeps dreaming,
Silence rules the empty city.

An orange stain, like sun on a windshield, spreads across the photograph, escaping.

He's getting older,
even as he sits
in that armchair watching
commercials. He ages
into the leather, a mold
where there wasn't one before,
the edges of his face curling
into the middle.

He finds himself in bed,
and is it waking that he's doing?
He closes his eyes at one,
opens them at three and regrets
the two hours lost to sleep.

The curtains pool like dead leaves
at my feet, as I look
out to the parking lot.
I tell him I have to leave soon;
that the grass is covered in white.
He doesn't ask
when I'll visit again,
brave the halls of lime-
scented bleach and bingo games.
I collect the scattered photos
I'd laid out on the table
in an attempt at remembering.
Outside the snow soundlessly builds.

The Art of Soap Making

I watched while she poured the oil and lye mixture
into a rectangular mold, the thick yellow liquid

settling into its silicone bed in tight waves,
and as she began to smooth out the surface, she looked

up at me and said, “Why don’t you make the next batch?
I thought you wanted to help me,” with a face

that should’ve made me feel guilty I hadn’t done
anything, but it didn’t, because I hated the sound of the rubber

spatula as it scraped the last globs, because
I couldn’t understand the point of making soap

when you could buy it already made—the process
of creation that happens in a plastic bucket,

so that after a few days the soap can disintegrate
over dirty bodies, lathering away flaking skin until the force

of the water disappears the leftover pieces into the black
of the drain leaving only perfumed souls behind.

a kitchen of teeth

While his chapped hands inspected my blackened molars,

I'd lean back on the rickety chair he used for examinations—
the paint peeling like crumbs

stuck between incisors—
grip the edge of the table for support, eyes staring

into the swinging beam
of a flashlight dangling
by a cord from a nail on the ceiling,

and open my mouth wide—relieved

that I couldn't smell
the urine

of the neighborhood dogs
that would paw their way in

through the back door—always left open

so the air could circulate—

to sniff at the remnants

of rotten food in the garbage
while patients sat through cavities and extractions.

In a low rumbling voice

he'd explain what he planned to do. Sometimes he'd say
nothing and just begin

to take out his tools:

a small knife, rusted pliers—

recently boiled.

While he worked, he wiped his tools
on a scrap of towel—brown, so you wouldn't be able to see
the blood stains.

Even after the place was closed down
lingering plastic bottles and medicine jars
remained scattered on the floor.

They caught the hazy light that filtered
through the spaces in the windows
not concealed with wooden planks.

If you look closely at the ground
or around the porch,
you can still see the dull yellow
of the teeth people dropped on their way out.

Rite of Passage

“Don’t grind your teeth.”

I shot a sideways glance at my mother. “I’m not.”

She began to rummage through her purse, intently looking for something that could distract her from me while we waited for Mr. Edwards, the funeral director, to return from making copies of the receipt. She pulled out her pager, black and bulky, checked it for calls, then slipped it back into the zippered pocket where she kept a pack of Doublemint gum and the car keys.

I was sitting still.

“Sit still. That creaky chair is driving me nuts.”

“Mines isn’t the one creaking.”

“*Mine.*”

“Whatever.” I crossed my arms and let my head fall forward so that my thick, curly black hair covered my face.

The office was a square of bland. A couple of certificates hanging on the walls and a round glass paperweight with blue and green swirls were the only objects that managed to hold my attention for more than a few seconds.

“Can I have a piece of gum?” I murmured.

My mother turned to me with “no” on her lips just as Mr. Ed walked back into the room, a pack of papers in his hands.

“Here you go. It’s all settled for Saturday.”

While he and my mother discussed arrangements for my grandfather's funeral, I drew circles into the grain-colored carpet, already bored for Saturday. I had no choice but to spend hours hearing strangers and just as strange relatives talk about "passing away" and whatever else happens when people die. Worst of all is I knew I'd be on display just as much as my grandfather's suited corpse. At least his casket would be closed. I would have to sit up front, sandwiched between my mother and aunt, let smiling people pat my shoulder and ruffle my hair as they told me how "sorry" they were, etc., in pretend sympathetic voices that lasted the duration of the funeral, then returned to normal as they headed out the door, already forgetting.

Out in the hall, a large red-headed woman dressed like a peppermint candy and a man in a jean jacket and khakis sat in metal chairs covered in green plastic. I looked at them, because the woman seemed so ridiculously dressed to me that I couldn't stop myself from staring. A laugh bubbled in my throat, but I stifled it when I saw their expressions. The woman looked angry, indignant really. Her eyes were staring at the ceiling, off to one side, her thin eyebrows were both raised and straight, and her lips pressed together. I let my eyes trace the outline of her dark lip liner, and its contrast with her frosted pink lipstick.

The man, whom I had assumed at the time to be her husband, looked dejected. Everything about him, from his lanky black hair to his posture to the folds of his shirt, drooped. I imagined putting my hands on either side of his face and pulling down all the skin until I was satisfied with how the wrinkles were arranged.

My mother caught me staring, but only because she had been staring herself. She grabbed my hand and pulled me the rest of the way to the door.

In the car, I tried to convince her to let me not go to the funeral.

She took a few deep breaths, warning me that the argument would soon be over, then started backing up the car. “When grandma died you wanted to go to her funeral. What’s the problem now?”

“That was forever ago. I was, like, nine. I didn’t know I didn’t like funerals.”

I knew it was pointless to argue, and that I would be going on Saturday. I could tell when my mom would relent to something, even when she said no at first. But she was growing tired now.

“Veronica, please. Twelve isn’t that much of a difference. You—we’re all going to the funeral.”

I spent the majority of the next day at the laundromat with Mrs. Alvarez, the old woman my mother hired to look after me while she was working. There was nothing to do there, so I spent the time playing PAC-MAN and Street Fighter II while the sudsy whites whirled around. When I ran out of quarters, I sat at one of the plastic white tables and pulled out a Goosebumps book I had brought along just in case there was nothing else to do. I flipped through the pages, focusing on the bloody chapter headings, but not really reading anything. This was a new book, so none of the pages were dog-eared like my grandpa used to do after we read. I didn’t feel like remembering the last time he and I tried to read together, so I thought back to the time before last.

We had sat on the olive couch in our living room, the light landing unevenly on the pages, cartoons on mute in the background. It was nearing seven and my mom hadn't come back yet from taking care of the old people at the home. We had left off where the kid had just been devoured by a blob of slime.

"Ew! That's gross!" I laughed. "Do you think he'll throw him up?" I made gurgling sounds, then pretended to throw up on him.

"That's not creepy enough," he said. "Like this."

Our imaginary vomit lessons were interrupted by my mother and her grimace.

"That's disgusting," she said to my grandfather, "don't teach her that. And turn on some lights, you shouldn't be reading in the dark."

She didn't understand.

Mrs. Alvarez tapped me on the shoulder and stuffed a handful of bed sheets in my face. "Read that later. Help me fold this."

My mother had hired her when my grandfather had become too sick to properly keep looking after me. I thought she seemed nice, but generally I was pretty indifferent to her. I held the ends of the bed sheet up, joining them together when she told me too, but mostly I kept my eyes on the TV that had been set up in the corner by the ceiling.

"Listen!" I yelled, recognizing the woman and man I had seen at the funeral parlor the day before on the small screen. I shoved the half-folded sheets back at Mrs. Alvarez, then raced to the chair that had been placed under the TV set. I climbed on top of it, nudged the "DON'T TOUCH" sign aside, and turned up the volume.

“ . . . plot of land where recently deceased seventy-six-year-old Vivian Thomas was originally planned to be buried today. Vivian’s daughter and son, Eleanor and Joseph Thomas, received the call from Infinite Light Cemetery yesterday informing them that when the grave had been opened, they had found a coffin inside.”

During the report, shots of the cemetery and Eleanor patting her red hair in the parking lot flashed on.

“My mother paid for that plot of land every month,” she announced to the camera while next to her, and slightly off frame, her brother swayed from side to side, silent. “How are they going to tell us someone else is already buried there? Is this how they run a cemetery? Burying bodies wherever the heck they want then lying to people so they can get more money?”

The camera cut back to the news anchor as she looked through the papers in front of her. “Infinite Light Cemetery has declined an interview, stating only that an investigation is taking place to identify the body.”

“That’s crazy,” Mrs. Alvarez remarked next to me. “Isn’t that the same cemetery they’re burying your grandpa in? Careful someone’s not already buried in his grave.”

On Friday I found out that it was the body of a young boy, probably buried in the early 60s, and that he wore braces. It was a welcome distraction for me from the prospect of my grandpa’s funeral, and that evening while my mom and I had dinner, I bothered her with questions about it.

“When I die, will they bury me with my glasses on?” I asked as I dragged my spoon across the plate, making black bean trails.

Her fork paused halfway to her mouth. “Is this because of grandpa?”

“Didn’t you see the news? They found a boy in that woman’s grave.”

“Oh, I heard about that.”

“Well, he had braces on. So would they—”

“I don’t know. Anyway, don’t think about that.” She started to pick up the plates from the table and stack them.

“Why not? It doesn’t bother me. Everybody dies, don’t they?”

She set the plates down and took a deep breath. “I’ve had a long day. All I want to do is take a shower and go to bed.”

I was left alone to stare at my plate. I didn’t understand why she was so upset, when she hadn’t even cried over my grandpa’s death. I let the plates drop in the sink, hearing them clanking against each other, then went to my room.

I hardly slept that night. If it hadn’t been July, I would have sworn I’d have one of Ms. Jennings’ math tests in the morning. After I got tired of tossing and turning, I tiptoed into the living room and turned on the TV, lowering the volume so it’d be barely audible. I had found out from overhearing Mrs. Alvarez the day before that the Thomases would be having the funeral Saturday, now that the cemetery had provided them with another grave. I wondered what they had done with the body of the boy. Did they burn it? Did they even find the family at all? Maybe they’ll just put it back in the grave, I thought. I couldn’t imagine myself buried underground for the

rest of forever. What if I woke up and died again because everyone thought I was already dead? I shivered. I didn't want to think about those things, so I forced myself to go back to bed.

The morning was rushed and tense, and I felt like as soon as we were done with that day we could take one deep breath and forget about it all. My mom forced me to wear the dark gray dress I'd worn for school picture day last year. It was ugly and faded now, and I knew after this I would never wear it again. My legs felt itchy from the stockings and I looked even more ridiculous with the floral headband on. We rode to the funeral parlor with the radio on and only a few words between us.

When we got there, I wandered around our salon until people started coming in. There were chairs set up and bright light streamed in from windows that led into the parking lot. The casket rested in a corner, surrounded by a few sparse bouquets of flowers. I watched the room fill up with people I hardly knew or never saw, giving my aunt and mother condolences. My five- and six-year-old cousins squirmed in their chairs, and I waved at them from my spot, but didn't go over. I sat in tight silence throughout the service, hearing my aunt's husband give a speech about how good of a person my grandpa had been. There was no clock and I was anxious to get outside.

I turned to face Mrs. Alvarez, who was dressed in a dark brown pant suit and clutched her black purse to her lap. "I'm going to the bathroom," I whispered quickly, and slipped out into the hall. It was warmly lit and carpeted in burgundy, and doors framed each side. I passed the one to the restrooms as I looked for the exit. The

cemetery was across the street, and I thought I knew where the spot was where they had found the body, since I'd seen it on the news.

It was simmering outside. I could see heat waves floating above the passing cars on the street. I inched closer to the road, waiting for a break in traffic to cross. I walked quickly, trying not to look like I was up to anything strange. I could feel the velvet of my dress clinging between my legs because of the stockings, and I pulled at it self-consciously as I made my way past the cemetery gates.

It was only my second time in a cemetery. My eyes jumped from grave to grave, and it seemed unnatural to think that under each tombstone there was somebody, some person who, maybe not that long ago, passed you by on the street, not even present in your peripheral vision, but there. I started to look for the boy's grave. I figured that it would probably be surrounded by police tape, or some sign so people wouldn't get near. But everything looked the same, just different lengths of stone embedded in grass. The funeral parlor stood grim across the street, as if it knew that I wasn't inside. Had my mom noticed that I wasn't there? Would she come running out, worried that I was missing? Maybe she'd ask around, and someone would say they had seen me cross the street. She'd come find me, then haul me back inside, promising to ground me for a month.

I looked for a good ten minutes, when I noticed that a grave had been prepared. Somehow I instantly knew it was his. Cautiously, as if fearing he would spring out at me as a ghost, I crept up to the grave, and read the words on the tombstone. His name looked strange engraved in the stone. I glanced down at the

grave and couldn't help thinking how suffocating it looked. But that wouldn't really matter, would it?

I walked back to the funeral parlor slowly, twisting a strand of hair, and thinking. I thought back to the last time I went to see him at the hospital. I had brought a new book, hoping to show him. He was wearing that stupid-looking hospital robe, his cheeks were hollowed out, and his skin pale. It would have been pointless to have shown him the book; he hadn't even realized we were there. I spent the entire visit staring up at the ceiling as I sat by the window, awkwardly kicking my legs back and forth, eyes fixed on the TV.

When I reached the door of the salon, I remembered the boy's body, and glanced back, as if I might see him roaming the hall across the restrooms. I rolled my eyes and went inside.

The Zoo Overlooking The City

The steps snake left to right up the side of the hill. The staircase has sections partially obscured by the trees, and red lanterns hang from the tall stone gate near the top. You had been exploring the traditionally built shops along Old Street when the banner near the bottom caught your eye. You begin to climb the steps, passing the hanging vines on the wall until you reach the banner decorated on each side with a guardian lion. Although the words are written in characters, you're able to read: *Entrance to Park. Smoking Prohibited.* Behind it, there is a map, its paths engraved in stone; you admire it for only a moment before continuing up the steps. Through the gate, there is one last flight of stairs. There are characters painted on the gate, but they are stylized and more complex, so you can't understand them. The only one you can read says "public," so you continue.

At the top, you follow the path for a while before reaching a playground. The monkey bars are painted blue and yellow. You remember trying to make your way across similar ones as a child. There isn't anyone, but you hear voices from nearby. They lead you to another gate, where you can make out the word "zoo." There is no visible sign with price of admittance; only a feeble man whose skin hangs listless from chin and stomach. He points two fingers in the air then brings them down into the cracked basket resting on his lap. You put the money in and step through the stone doorway, wide and hinge-less.

At first there is nothing—grass and bushes, drooping trees—until your eyes rest on the ground. Plunged into the earth, there is a structure of cement. You kick the

gravel and dirt with the tip of your sneakers as you near the edge—there is no fence—and look down into the wild, endearing faces of the monkeys. Skinny, hair in patches, some sit on the tip of a metal pole, while others scurry into their open jails, gripping the side walls as they enter. You clutch your camera in wonder, snapping blurry photos at zoomed-in portions of their heads. They call out to each other, to you, but you don't get too close.

The monkeys only hold your attention for so long before you move on to the next exhibit. Black and ferocious, the bear stands on his hind legs and growls at your exhilaration, widening his moist, pink jaw. You're stunned. You've never seen a bear this up close before. You're insulted. Like the monkeys, he lives in a hole in the ground, but smaller. Probably smaller than your room. As you watch him, he lowers to the ground and circles a few times. You've never seen such bleak conditions for a caged animal before and want to look for the owner and demand—what? That he be released into the streets so he can rent a room in one of the hostels? You're scared. You imagine yourself falling over the railing, into the pit, lunch slopped onto a plate. He'll swerve his neck and look at you, maybe give a surprised growl, but stay fixed to his spot. Or clamp down on your shoulder blade and pull, gnawing at the particularly chewy bits of muscle. You don't fall into the pit, just walk away, and leave him standing there, waiting.

You begin to realize how completely alone the zoo is, how you haven't seen anyone but a worker who lives near the peacocks hanging his soaking laundry. It's so high over the city, people who don't live in Huangshan might not even know about it.

As you near some bushes, you catch a glimpse of the city below. The buildings look like they've just sprung up from the ground, the shadows like streaks of mud lining the sides, rubble trickling from in between the balcony railings. They sprawl out before you, fading into the setting sun. You think how ancient everything looks and feels—the view itself a relic, like the ones in the antiques shop you visited earlier.

You pick a prismatic peacock feather from the many that are scattered on the ground—something to spin between your fingers for a while as you wander, feed leaves to the deer, watch the pigeons peck the ground. You think about how you'll show these photos to your friends later. How you felt as if you had walked into another dimension, silent, except for the occasional rustle of leaves, and the cries of the animals.

The descent to the city is a rocky path. You think when you get there, the first thing you want to do is get a foot massage. When your sneakers have finally hit pavement, you feel your stomach tighten, and a strange sense of guilt. In your mind, you let the animals out of their holes and cages, into a forest that doesn't exist. Instead, you stop thinking about it and cross the street, letting the mangled feather drop.

Causeway

The afternoon is a tent of rain, plips and plops falling on the mossy-gray waters of the lake and the foggy-gray stone of the causeway. There is no one, not even shadows, only peripheral onlookers inside a bar, a shop, red and warm, a beating heart of light, music, body heat, behind glass. By the lake, the autumn leaves tumble, dead brown things, shriveled, crunchy to step on, leading into the water or piles of themselves.

The taxi, having finally gotten there, stops. She sees it all from the inside of her jacket, pulling it against the wind and rain that manage to sneak under the umbrella. It slips from slackened hold and pokes her scalp.

He descends in a flurry of motions, a bird caught in a rainstorm, with only a black tree for cover—it would've been great, if not for the weather. The shutting of the taxi door, the engine, there then gone, the near empty street.

Faint trances of smoke, the smell of coffee probably coming from the place across the street, shoulder nudge, practiced surprise and anticipation in raised eyebrows. He takes the umbrella, and holds it over both their heads, "Ready?"

Appendage

Trash
cans tumble, lids scratch
 against asphalt, plastic
bags torn to feather
 shreds flap,
(neon pigeons)
 catching in the incisions
between gutters
 & chain-link fences.

The sky is smudged charcoal,
 (but, rainless)
reflected in puddles
 of iridescent oil appearing
in the empty lot.

When I was a square
on a repeating grid,
 I fit in the city
(when it was the size of a sidewalk).
 It dragged me
around as I clutched
 (bars on the playground)
onto dandelions.

Now those same locations
 (being one location)

have worn themselves away.

But they still latch on
(stubbornly, to the soles of my sneakers)

& I can't unstick
(myself away from)
them.

the city is a pool

it rained so hard it drenched
the street in the static
of a thousand hazy bodies
whose limbs pulled each other
from all sides, expanding
and contracting inside
sets of milky eyeballs:
black branches wobble
while the remaining leaves
dangled like tousled
laundry hung over a balcony
on a day other than this one,
while cars cut through puddled streets,
drowning sidewalks
into gray waterways—
when the rain stopped,
there was no sky
left over, not even that slit
of white that sometimes
appears between
clouds—the streets carried
the emptiness, the mute footsteps
and heartbeats, the bodies now
leaning further away:
the air still humming
with the current
of the last passenger.

it was then that he left
his apartment, bundled
in a jacket of smoke,
heading to a scenery
equally intangible.

the city is a pool of people
draining into my vision,
a heap of sounds
discarded by the door.
their voices leave
clumps of tar that line
the circumference
of my throat, their gazes
saturate my cornea
and channel down
my cheeks. i strive
to pull back the windblown
edges of physical reality
even as i am slowly forgetting.

friend

listen, the tide is not so sporadic.

a predictable manipulation of motion

drawing in particles of sand.

see, the complexity of the splash

is unpredictable, but the resulting

ripples will always form circles.

your palm is sticky from the sea

salt, it holds the mangled curve

of a scallop, and offers it to me, a dead

half covered in water droplets.

do you expect me to grasp

it? superficially

examine it with my eyes? but you haven't

noticed that my hands are full of shells, and I don't have room for more.

you walk like a shadow smudged

to soak your feet in the water.

wrapping the towel around my waist, i run

from the shore, as the shells topple

in a patternless decoration of the grass.

We diverged though we're headed in the same direction. Was that you in the end, or a shell, torn and calloused, worn and once shed, empty with a red lining?

Urban Seasons

Large quantities
of OFF!
needed
for BBQ.
Sudden awareness
of UVB
rays
& UVA too.

Pumpkins now
trendy
to eat
& mutilate.
Trick-
or-treat pails
on display
since September.

A dozen boxes
of LED
lights to impress
the neighbors.
Waiting
10 hours
in line for Barbie
& Apple.

Pollen at war

barricade

sinuses & dye

eyes red.

Rain drowns

basement

mementos

for garage sale.

Mosaic in the Snow

Faint melodies echo through the speakers positioned high above the tiled floors and plastic stands drowned in yellow “Clearance” signs. Brown boxes containing everything from Blu-ray players to color coordinated sets of kitchen towels wait patiently stacked on top of each other, while the flickering TVs showcase a series of repeating commercials in varying levels of brightness and saturation. Some of the employees have been stationed near the entrance, the rest scattered in key places around the store, resembling cardboard cutouts swaying subtly from the heated air blowing through the vents.

A pair of glass doors separate the interior from the clamoring crowd outside. They huddle not so much in warmth, but in preparation, tiny muddy spots in a snow-covered parking lot. A man among them tries to keep his balance within the agitated mass. He is pushed against from all sides, and a middle-aged woman behind him jams her elbow into his side. She doesn't notice as she attempts to restrain the sheer salmon headscarf that billows in the wind, revealing the foam green rollers underneath.

The wait has been hours long, and they all want something—some deal, some special, a two-for-one, a half off. They ache to see percentage signs and numbers dropping in the form of bills. In their heads, the dingy heaps of snow turn green and papery, edges bent and torn from being kept in pockets for so long. The snowflakes land with distinct clicks on the plastic ground—heads and tails. He feels the pressure on his back from the shoving hands and kicking feet that are racing towards the newly-opened doors. In the cold, the pain is still barely perceptible. His gloveless

fingers are numb and his grip on his jacket begins to slip, until he doesn't bother trying to close it anymore. He only wants to pass the entrance, reach the warmth of the store.

In the moments before the commotion, while the wait had still been tolerable, he had imagined a quick trip. A flat screen TV to replace his beaten up 24-inch and a few toys for his daughter. She'd be in bed now, huddled under the blankets, in sleep. With no sense of the wet snow seeping through the soles of his boots, or the burning in his reddened ears, or the shoving. The flock of bodies shoving and running under a darkened sky. Howling and laughing, limbs struggling. His vision blurs and he tries to rapidly blink away the water, but all he can see now is a teary world whose colors melt like rain on window.

Losing balance, his feet trip themselves, and his way to the ground is a gradual jagged tumbling. The landing rings throughout his body in painful waves of ice and pavement. He bangs his head against the back of someone's boot and he feels the throng of bodies climbing over him as if he were another mound of snow. His muffled yells mingle with the frenzy before getting lost in the vastness of the lot. He opens his eyes to catch the red so symbolic of the season smeared with snow. If somebody would notice, he thinks.

Dolls

As soon as the bell rang, the doors of Middle School #12 were flung open by children ready to search for their bus numbers or parents among the dead leaves and muddy snow. The halls had been emptied, the chairs hastily propped onto the desks, and the blackboards wiped. Only a small group of seventh grade girls remained, their clarinet lesson having just ended.

Janet clicked her case shut and walked over to Olivia, who was patiently wiping her clarinet. "Congratulations! Everyone knew you'd get the solo."

Olivia blushed. "Thanks! But I don't practice nearly hard enough to have gotten it."

Janet stiffened. She had always thought Olivia was too modest. She was always saying she never practiced enough, but then always played the best.

As the girls started to exit the room, their teacher, Mrs. Moore, stood in front of the door. "Hold on everyone. You know two girls were reported missing in the area, so be careful if you're walking home. I suggest you go in groups if you can." She stepped out of the way to let them pass through. "Remember to practice for the concert!"

Outside, the girls drifted into their usual pairs for walking home. Courtney, who usually took the bus, tagged close to Olivia and Janet.

"So what are you going to wear for the concert?" she asked Olivia.

"My mom said if I got the solo she would buy me a new dress. We'll probably go today."

“I bet you’ll look so pretty! Right, Janet?”

Janet rolled her eyes. Just because she was happy for Olivia didn’t mean she needed to keep hearing about her getting the solo for the rest of the day. “I can’t wait for Christmas!”

Courtney elbowed herself between the girls. “Oh my gosh! Me too! What do you think you’ll get? I already asked my parents for a puppy. They just started to let people have pets at our building, and I *really* want one!”

“My mom says animals are too much work,” Janet declared. “Our downstairs neighbor has a pair of cockatoos and they never shut up!”

Olivia gave a disapproving stare. “Birds aren’t supposed to be pets anyway.”

“What do you want, Janet?” Courtney asked.

Janet rubbed her gray mittens together as the cold began to settle in. “Well, you know the doll shop on Wynn Street? There’s a doll on display that looks just like me. I’ve been wanting it forever, but it looks like it costs so much.”

Courtney pulled on Janet’s clarinet case to slow her down. “What’s the place called? I’ve never seen a doll shop there before.”

“It’s not really a big store. Plus, it’s new.” Janet tried to remember when she first noticed it. She didn’t tell the girls, but she’d never actually been inside. It looked so fancy she didn’t want to be disappointed.

Courtney raised an eyebrow. “It can’t be that popular if I’ve never heard of it.”

Janet glared at her. Why was she walking with them anyway? Didn’t she take the bus?

“Okay, we normally split up here,” Janet announced to Courtney.

“I have to go your way, Janet. I’m going to my grandma’s today. She lives on Peartree.”

“Oh, right.”

They waved goodbye to Olivia as she crossed the street, and they continued past the grocery store. For two blocks they walked without speaking to each other, though Courtney hummed incessantly. When they reached Wynn, Janet turned into it.

“Hey, do you normally go down this street to get to your house?” Courtney asked.

“No. I’m going to show you the doll shop so you can see how nice it is.”

Courtney lowered her voice as she said, “But you know, this is supposed to be the area where those girls went missing.”

“Don’t worry, it’s still light out. Plus, it’ll only be a sec.”

She continued to walk past the tall dark blue buildings, and Courtney followed. When Janet finally saw the two garbage cans propped near an alley, she stopped. Before them stood the doll shop, its plain walls painted a light peach color and big display windows on either side of the door. The snow reflected in the glass, brightening the shop’s exterior. The sign read simply: Dolls.

Janet neared the display window she knew her doll would be in, but Courtney gripped Janet’s hood and pulled her back.

Courtney sunk her sneakers into the snow, refusing to move. “It looks closed, let’s go.”

“It’s not closed! And I’m not going inside. The doll’s in the window display!”

“That’s okay. I can see her from over here.”

“Fine! Give me a minute.”

Janet shook herself free from Courtney’s grasp and walked up to the window, brushing away a pinch of rooftop snow that had fallen on her face. She pressed herself against the glass, looking beyond the faint scratches. Her gloved hands cushioned her head as she inched closer. The doll sat cross-legged, one porcelain palm resting over another delicate porcelain hand. A honey colored bob framed her face, and she had lips like pink frosting, eyes like two fireflies. Janet was so tightly compressed against the glass she could have practically sunk right into the olive velvet of the doll’s coat.

“See, Courtney? Her coat’s the same color as—”

The jingle of a bell interrupted her, and when she looked up she saw a man leaning into the door. She unconsciously gripped the handle of her clarinet case tighter and stole a glance in Courtney’s direction. She was still glued to her spot by the trash cans, though now Janet could see her arms trembling inside the sleeves of her denim jacket.

“Aren’t you interested in coming inside?” The man wore a newsboy’s cap that was too small for his head and tiny round glasses. Only the dingy brown apron tied loosely around his waist looked too large.

Janet’s eyes involuntarily shifted to the doll. “We were just looking really quick.”

“Do you like this doll? You know, it won't be there for much longer.”

“Did someone buy it already?”

He chuckled and stepped closer to the display window. “No, but it's a one-of-a-kind doll. They sell fast.”

“Yeah . . . she *is* really pretty.”

He pushed his eyeglasses up. “She looks kind of like you, doesn't she?”

Janet blushed, and faked surprise. “Oh yeah, wow.”

“Um, Janet?” Courtney's voice quivered. “I need to get home now, and it's getting late.”

“Your friend's right. It's getting dark, and you girls don't want to be out so late these days. But you should come inside sometime, there's plenty more to see in there. Maybe your mom or dad can buy you something.”

“Okay . . .”

He gave a quick nod to both girls then went back inside.

Janet was left staring blankly at the display window as she tried not to imagine the doll being sold to anyone else. She walked back to the sidewalk, where Courtney stopped her.

“Oh my gosh, wasn't he the creepiest?”

“Um, I don't know.”

“Has he talked to you before?”

“No . . .” It suddenly occurred to Janet that he might have been looking at her all those times she'd come to the shop before. It felt unsettling to have someone

watching you and not say anything. As they walked away from the shop she looked back at the doll. It still sat there, looking rosy and comfortable. Smiling.

When they reached the corner, Courtney said her grandmother's apartment building was to the left, so she said goodbye and jogged away. Hoping she wouldn't get into trouble herself, Janet ran across the street and the last two and a half blocks until she reached her building. It was a much shorter structure in comparison to the others around it, and the green paint was already flaking in places. She counted four windows up and hurried inside after seeing the kitchen light on. Ignoring the elevator, she took the stairs three at a time until the fourth floor, almost running into a woman lugging up groceries. Janet pulled the keys from around her neck, unlocked the door, and ran down the long hall to the kitchen.

"I'm home!" she announced.

The kitchen was empty. She peered into the living room and saw her dad exercising in front of the TV.

"I said I'm home."

He turned around briefly to ask how her day had been before returning to his workout.

"Where did Mom go?" Janet asked, shrugging off her coat and setting her clarinet case on the table. She uncovered a pan that was on the stove, but there was only room temperature water inside.

"Oh, did she leave? This program's kind of loud. If you're hungry there's some leftover salad I made in the fridge. At least until your mom comes back—she

probably went to get milk or something.”

“I think I’ll wait.” She started to go to her room, but then remembered the doll. She should just get it over with so her parents could buy it before someone else did.

“Hey, Dad, since Christmas is coming up and you and Mom were just wondering the other day what to get me, I already have something I want.”

He clicked off the TV and started moving the sofa back to its original place.

“What is it?”

“Just a doll. It’s a porcelain one.”

“Sure, just let your mom know so she can buy it.”

“Buy what?” Janet’s mother appeared in the living room, holding a plastic bag with a pre-cooked chicken inside.

“A doll. That’s the only thing I want this year. It’s from this little store.”

“I think I know which one you’re talking about. The one on Wynn.” She set the chicken on the table and slipped off her gloves. “Laura from downstairs says she saw you the other day on that street. You don’t need to go down that street to get here. From now on come straight home and don’t go there.”

Janet crossed her arms. “Why not? Is this just because of those girls that went missing? What’s that got to do with the doll shop?”

“There are a lot of weird people out there, Janet. When Laura told me you were hanging out there, I went to see what the big deal was. It’s dirty and cramped inside. Gave me a weird vibe.”

Janet thought “weird vibes” were a stupid reason, but she didn't say anything.

“Can I at least get the doll for Christmas?”

Her mother sighed. “I don't know. Maybe. Anyway, I had thought about getting you your own clarinet, so we wouldn't have to rent it anymore.”

“But I hate the clarinet!” She had been hoping to quit next year. “You know I'm horrible at it!”

“You just need to practice more. By the way, what happened to the solo announcement?”

Janet slumped her shoulders and looked up to the ceiling. Her mom was wrong. She practiced *a lot*. Janet hated being jealous of her friend, but it wasn't fair that Olivia always got the praise even though she barely practiced.

Her mother sighed. “Why don't you go practice for a while before dinner?”

“I don't feel like it.” Janet grabbed her backpack and stomped down the hall to her room, ready to slam the door shut. She caught it at the last minute then flung herself on the bed so hard the purple comforter swelled up around her.

She never got what she wanted. Olivia was perfect at everything. If she wanted to play the piano all she had to do was look at it. Janet sat up and looked for something noiseless and unbreakable to throw. She settled on a pillow and tossed it against the door. She had reached for another one when she noticed her plastic piggy bank sitting on the dresser. Jumping off the bed, she rushed to it, opening the bottom. She pulled out a few scrunched-up bills and some change. She counted it three times to make sure: \$6.87. She had expected at least double that. There was no way she

could afford the doll with so little. She should have asked the owner how much it cost when she had the chance. She shook her head. What was the use? Her mother would never give her the money.

The next morning Janet went to the kitchen to get some breakfast before school. As she opened the cabinet to get a box of cereal, she heard her dad come in from his morning run.

“Good morning!” He grinned at her and went into the living room to turn on the TV.

“Morning, Dad. How was your run?”

“It was kind of short. I had to take a detour because there were a couple of police cars a block away. I want to see what happened.” He sat down and turned to the local news channel.

Janet was too busy munching on her breakfast to care until she heard “Peartree.” She remembered Courtney mentioning that was where her grandma lived. As she leaned over to see what the reporter was talking about, her dad flipped to another channel.

“What was it?” she asked him.

“Another girl went missing.”

Janet bolted from her chair, milky cereal still in her mouth, and grabbed the remote. The channel had already gone to a commercial break. The idea that it could be Courtney crossed her mind, but she quickly brushed the thought away.

“I have to go to school.”

“Hey, wait a minute.” Her dad pulled out a fifty from his wallet and handed it to her. “I think your mom was a little harsh last night. Here.”

“Oh, wow. Thank you!” She gave him a quick hug before rushing out the door.

As she ran down the sidewalk, she wondered if Courtney would show up at school. She couldn't have gone missing. Janet regretted not walking with her all the way yesterday. Courtney pretended to know everything, but she was scared of everything. Janet was tempted to pass by Peartree to see why it was blocked off, but she didn't want to be late for school.

At school, Janet looked for Courtney among the kids getting out of their buses, but she didn't see her. Courtney was absent the whole day. Janet considered telling her suspicions to someone, but they'd think her ridiculous. She hadn't even had the chance to see which girl it was. She remembered the money her dad had given her, and felt better at the thought that she'd finally have her doll. It made everything else seem normal. Courtney was probably just sick. After buying the doll, she'd go to Courtney's grandma's house and make sure nothing was wrong.

When she got to the shop Janet stopped dead. The doll was gone and in her place posed an elaborately dressed clown in front of a small Christmas tree. Janet ran to the other window, but there was only Santa and his sleigh. She couldn't believe that the doll had already been sold. Maybe he'd just moved her inside.

Without thinking twice, Janet walked up the three narrow steps leading to the door and opened it so carefully the bell barely rang. When she looked up her jaw

dropped. Janet had never seen so many rows of toys and dolls all crammed together. In one section there were doll houses filled with tiny furniture pieces made out of wood. Janet began scanning the lines of glassy eyes and unnaturally bent joints, trailing her fingers along the dusty shelves. There were dolls in gowns of every fabric imaginable: velvet, satin, tulle—even ones wearing fur coats. She had to squint to see the tags on the dolls, because the lighting was so dim. Janet searched for the owner but the shop was much bigger than it looked from the outside and there weren't any other clerks or customers in the maze of aisles.

She turned a corner and was surprised to find herself at the checkout counter, right near the entrance. The owner was carrying a medium sized cardboard box and was just stepping out from from a closet.

“Excuse me,” she said.

“Yes, can I help you?”

His shadow loomed over her and she noticed how much taller he seemed now that they were inside. He didn't show any signs of recognizing her from the day before.

“I want to buy the doll that was on display.”

“Which one? There were several I put up there.”

“The one in the green coat.”

The owner took a step closer to her, as if to hear her better. She unconsciously backed away, but caught herself in time to not seem rude.

“Oh, yes, I know which one you mean.”

“How much does she cost?”

“I believe that one is \$45. Let me bring it out.” He went around the corner and she followed from a short distance. She could hear the sounds of cardboard boxes being shifted around and his loud footsteps on the wood floor.

Alone again, Janet continued to peruse the nearby aisles. One doll in particular stood out to her. Janet’s eyes widened at the sight of a tiny puppy in the doll's hand. She reached out and instantly grabbed the tag attached to the doll's wrist and read the letter: C. She instantly knew it must stand for Courtney! The doll looked exactly like her friend. The same dark brown pony tail, the denim jacket, the puppy Courtney had said she wanted for Christmas. There was no way she would have had it custom made. Courtney had been so scared that she hadn't even wanted to go into the shop yesterday. Janet trembled. It was too eerie seeing a perfect porcelain copy of her friend, even down to the annoying dimples.

The sounds of the shop owner rummaging around reached her again, and a horrible idea filled her head. What if he was the one who had taken the girls? They had all disappeared in this area, after all. Janet swung around and smacked into a shelf. It wobbled and a doll house that had been perched on top crashed to the floor, nearly striking her.

“What happened?!” the owner yelled.

Janet screamed and grabbed the Courtney doll, then made for the exit. But she couldn’t find it. In her nervousness she only went deeper into the shop. She seemed to be circling, past the doll houses again, a box of puppets, more and more dolls. She

couldn't understand why that doll was there, or why Courtney was missing. Janet felt dizzy as she turned around, trying to find a way out, gripping the Courtney doll to her chest.

The man's voice seemed to be getting nearer. Janet thought back to the day before when he had caught her looking in the window. He probably had been spying on her all this time. Just waiting for the moment when she would come into the shop, like all of those other girls had. She heard his footsteps coming closer as he kept shouting. She saw a darkened corner behind one of the shelves and squatted in the shadow. She could see a row of dolls from where she was. A light layer of dust adorned their ruffles and lace. How long had they been there? Janet tried to think back to the first time she saw the doll in the window, when she first passed by and noticed the sign. She couldn't even remember how long ago that had been.

Beads of sweat began to collect under Janet's bangs but she didn't wipe at them. She only focused on the dolls around her, their long eyelashes shielding blank eyes, ribbons fraying like the ends of a spider's web. Their eyes looked pleadingly at her, like they wanted to get out of that stuffy room, out of those porcelain coffins.

"There you are!" yelled the owner above her. He went to grab her and Janet screamed.

"What the hell are you doing?" Janet's mother bellowed. She sidestepped the man and pulled Janet from her spot by the corner. "What's going on?"

"Hey!" the shop owner yelled. His nostrils flared as he put his hands on his hips. "Look, your kid just broke a three-hundred dollar doll house and has been

running around like crazy!”

“No I haven’t!” Janet jumped up and into her mother’s arms. “He’s the one who’s kidnapping those girls. He took Courtney and turned her into a doll!” She held up the doll, now disheveled and head bent awkwardly. “See?”

“Oh my God, this kid’s insane! Don’t you know how to control your child?”

Her mother held her at arm’s length. “Janet, what are you talking about? I just saw Courtney’s grandmother on my way here.”

“She didn’t go to school today!” Janet insisted.

“Courtney’s sick. She’s got a cold.”

“Then why is her street blocked off?”

“Car accident!”

“I’ve been keeping an eye on this girl for about a week already,” the shop owner interrupted. “Every day she comes to the store and hangs around outside. Look!” He pointed at the doll Janet held. “She was planning on stealing it!”

“That’s a lie!” Janet cried. “You turned my friend into a doll. And you were going to turn me into one too! You even have a doll that looks just like me! Look!”

She pointed at the doll the owner still gripped in his hands. He held it up to the light. Now that she could see it up close, it didn’t look like her all that much. The only thing they had in common was the coat. Janet sprung up and grabbed the doll from his hands and hurled it at the floor. Its face broke into jagged fragments and its limbs splayed out around her cloth body.

“What are you doing?” the owner screamed.

Janet's mother stared dumbfounded as Janet bent down and grabbed the tag that had been hidden inside the doll's sleeve. She saw the same C that was on the Courtney doll. When she flipped the tag over, it said \$49.99 in small print.

Janet staggered back, confused. "What does C mean? Why isn't it J?"

The owner knelt down and started picking up the doll, while shaking his head furiously. "I'm calling the police!"

"What does C mean?" Janet repeated, louder now.

The owner shouted, "It's the brand! C for Charles—my name!" He pointed to the small, handwritten tag pinned to his shirt. He looked at Janet's mother. "You're paying for all this!" He spun around and started walking back to the check-out counter.

"If I had known earlier that your dad had given you money, I would've picked you up from school today. You stay right here! I'm so embarrassed right now!" Janet's mother turned to follow the man, pleading that he not call the police.

As they walked away, Janet wiped the tears that were streaming down her cheeks and stared at the mess she had made. She looked at the doll she still held, the one she thought was Courtney. She was in so much trouble. She carefully put the doll back on the shelf and stepped over the cracked remains of the doll that she had wanted. Janet bent down in embarrassed horror to pick up the remaining pieces. As she cradled the little pink mouth in her open palm, she heard the sound of an orb rolling across the floor until it hit the bottom of a shelf. It was the glass eyeball staring back, the faded brown iris just like hers.

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