

BROKEN CLOCK
ISSUE 5

We would like to thank all of our incredible contributors and staff who made this issue possible. We would also like to thank Daniel Khalastchi and the Magid Center for their constant support and guidance. Special thanks to Lauren Wallis for the stunning cover and interior of Issue 5.

The Broken Clock Literary Magazine was open to all University of Iowa students, and each submission was subject to an anonymous reading and voting process. The views and opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and are not representative of Broken Clock Mag, the Magid Center for Writing, the University of Iowa, or its affiliates.

Broken Clock Mag is an undergraduate literary magazine focusing on the concept of time. We welcome submissions of all genres and are committed to providing a platform for work from a variety of diverse authors.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Dear Reader,

Thank you for picking up this copy of Issue 5 of *The Broken Clock Magazine*! You are one of a special few to witness our rebirth: a new timeline, if you will. Found in the digital depths of the Internet reside the early editions of Broken Clock, but now you hold the first physical issue in existence. With this exciting announcement, I want to welcome you to Issue 5.

Our staff and contributors have worked hard to bring this magazine into the world, leaving an eternal mark. I want to thank them for all of their hard work creating an imaginative and inventive magazine for the world beyond our tiny room in Phillips 318. As you navigate stories about failing relationships, reflections in the afterlife, and the changing of the seasons, we hope you can consider how time impacts your own life, big or small.

College is truly just the beginning of our lives, which creates space for simultaneous fear and excitement of the path ahead. To see where it diverges, loops in on itself, and where it stays firmly straight ahead. Yet, remind yourself to stay firmly rooted in the present. Don't let the days, weeks, months, and years slip by with your mind too far in the future. Grasp the memories you're creating now and look ahead for the ones you will experience one day. Above all, I hope that you find a story within this magazine that resonates with or challenges your own perception of time. Crack this issue open to a page whenever you feel like reading and contemplating how your life has shaped you thus far, and where it will take you from here.

Stay creative,
Solenn Vincent
Editor-in-Chief

LETTER FROM THE MANAGING EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Welcome to *The Broken Clock Magazine*! This is our first issue in print, and it means so much that you're here to celebrate with us. In an age where a majority of our lives has moved to, and become reliant on, technology, it's gratifying to remember the joy of holding a physical book in our hands. That delight is augmented when the work we hold is of our own creation. It is tangible evidence of our love for the craft that we carry with us through time.

Time is a funny thing. It's an adventure and a mystery, simultaneously coveted and dreaded. In these pages, it is explored and expressed in so many ways. These stories will push you to think about the concept of time in unconventional ways. They will cause you to reflect on your past and hope for your future; they will force you to ask yourself questions about the here and now. I hope, reader, that this issue of *Broken Clock* allows you to contemplate the way you perceive time, and the ways you will allow it to mold you going forward.

I want to take this opportunity to recognize our literary community. This network at the University of Iowa, and in Iowa City, is so special. The respect and value that is placed on literature is incomparable to anywhere else. Education and inspiration gleaned from reading are championed here. This community invites contributors and observers alike to be open and vulnerable; it is a space that welcomes every individual to be their authentic self. Here, the merit of diversity is not only understood, it is cherished. I could not be more proud to be a part of this community, in ways as minute as attending a reading at Prairie Lights and as extensive as being managing editor of one of its literary magazines.

This is my first time working on a lit mag, and I couldn't have asked for a better group of people to work with. Thank you to the *Broken Clock* staff, who brought patience, intelligence, and humor to every meeting; thank you to our incredibly talented contributors, without whom we wouldn't have a magazine at all; thank you to Solenn, our brilliant Editor-in-Chief, for believing in me and allowing me to do something I love; thank you to the Magid Center and Daniel Khalastchi, who see the value in lifting up students' voices and allow us to publish year after year; and thank you, reader, for helping us make those voices heard.

This publication is an end and a beginning all at once. It's a passing of the torch, from the Internet to the printer, from our hands to yours. I'm so grateful that you're coming along for the journey.

Welcome, reader. Issue 5 of *The Broken Clock* now belongs to you.

Best wishes,
Ellie Godsoe
Fiction Editor
Managing Editor

THE THREADS OF TIME

Reanna Robb

What is a moment but eternity's echo
Memories woven by hands we cannot see
Tangled, knotted, and intertwined
Placed in a way we cannot touch or rewind

The star-crossed weep while the catalysts rejoice
Time is an unwavering voice
Once pricked by the spinning wheel
Time murmurs its unwavering appeal

Life and death dance on a string
Connected by the charms that hang
One by one they all fall off
Yet the thread of time it doesn't stop

As everlasting as time may be
We are mere filaments, lost to the interweave
So plait your cords wisely, mindful of what you enlace
Traces of history are worn by the infinite space.

IT USED TO BE SOMETHING

Clara Jarecke



A ROSE BY ANOTHER NAME

Josephine Geiger-Lee

1997

Don't name a baby girl Chastity, her mother told her, armed with a cackling laugh that would haunt the young women of their bloodline for generations to come, *unless you want to chase down grandchildren in sixteen years.*

As she clasped her arms around her ever-growing stomach, she closed her eyes and imagined the next sixteen years. Her daughter would be as brilliant as her father; maybe, if they got lucky, she would sing like a songbird like him. She would spend her days in the hot Texas sun, soaking it up with nary a complaint, and she would find an early love, just like her mama did.

Mama, she said, *I think I'm going to name her Christina.*

Christian Atley just signed her husband onto an album, and she wanted to celebrate the generosity in the only way she could. He would give her family a fresh start, a way to drag themselves away from dead-end jobs that always left her daddy's back aching, the same jobs that he died at, so subtly people thought he simply had taken his fifteen early.

Her daddy would never get to meet her daughter, but she thought he would be proud regardless. He didn't like her husband—he called Richard Meyers *a good-for-nothing dreamer*—but he would be bursting at the seams to hear how he got his day in the sun after all.

If she got lucky, maybe Christina would take after her granddaddy, enough to ease the ache in her heart. She could even take after Richard's daddy, a New Yorker named Tyler Meyers, a man who worked as a banker on Wall Street and insisted it was not as glamorous as she had imagined it to be.

Christina Meyers, she whispered down to her baby, *you are going to be our good luck charm. I can just feel it.*

2015

"...a one-time offer to make it big. Don't disappoint me, kid."

She inherited a lot from her daddy, but Mama always insisted the dreams came from her. She couldn't imagine that: Mama who kept her movements small and precise so as to not cause a stir, Mama who hated when the photographers would press their lenses right up against the azaleas, Mama who would

not even let one of his records be played in the house by the end.

Yet, Richard Meyers ended up on star-studded streets, meeting with celebrities whose names echoed in every TV set around the nation. He sold out stadiums with his voice, and he kept a home in both the Big Apple and Tinseltown. Never once did he split a can of Chef Boyardee's Ravioli with his younger sister; never once did he have to go to the nearby Goodwill and beg for more money back on his nicest pair of jeans.

No, Christina wanted to take after Richard Meyers, and this was her chance.

She knew it was wrong. The suitcase came straight out of her paycheck, meaning they would not be able to make rent that month. Every article of clothing she packed was a betrayal, and every dollar withdrawn would be another memory wrestled away from her. She would miss their birthdays and weddings and funerals.

If she stayed, she would become someone broken by this, though. She would become someone all too much like Mama, whose hair greyed too early and whose smile stopped holding water long ago. Let someone else bear the burden of this sacrifice; let someone else bear the burden of this life.

She left in the morning, addressing a note to her only brother, with the simplest message she could invent.

If you need anything, call Dad.

2023

"This will be," she says, gasping for breath, his kisses already trailing a path down the base of her spine, "the headline heard 'round the world. I told you, Billy, I never should've agreed to that fuckin' interview."

He kisses her harder when he hears *fuckin'*, something perverse in the language she opts not to use. She needs to be a role model for the younger girls, the teenagers who still listen to her songs with a fierceness she only reserved for her father. None of her songs get the little *E* for Explicit, and when she walks down the aisles of Hy-Vee in between gigs, she can always hear the worst of her discography blasting.

She allows him one last kiss before pushing him away. "Are you listening to me?"

"Course I am," he says with that pout of his she loves. This tour might be her favorite yet. She tours alone, most of the time, and the backup dancers do not count. They want to know her as a *person*, and she wants them to know her as an *icon*, untouchable and perfect.

Billy changed it up, what with his sun-kissed curls grown long like he belongs in a grunge band. He brings that sound too, his voice just raspy and just deep enough to delight everyone when they collaborate together.

People call him the next Richard Meyers.

"Kris, babe, don't be like that," he says.

She smiles despite herself. Hearing *Kris* never fails to give her a thrill. She likes the friction of it. No longer will she be confined by the gentleness of *Christina*, a

name gifted by a woman she never especially liked. Instead, she gets a brashy K to start and a smoother end than the liling A.

And when she signs it, it takes up more space than *Christina* ever could.

1999

He must have been born lucky, a popular talk show host said about Richard Meyers, her pretty little blonde curls bouncing with the enthusiastic nod. She would be quoted in every magazine for a week, everyone speculating on a man who emerged from nowhere and came from nothing.

He was born lucky, her mother told her, *because he got married to you. And that's pretty damn lucky.*

Mama! she laughed, swatting at her mother's arm. Christina toddled around, too young to understand to grasp the language flying above her head, but she still didn't want her girl to hear anyone speaking ill of her daddy. *Maybe I was the lucky one!*

Nah, she said. *If you were lucky, he would be here.*

That got the smile slipping away from her. She glanced down at her swollen ankles, remembering the times he would massage them when he returned home. Right now, Christian Atley insisted they 'strike while the iron is hot!' Richard spent most days and nights recording and sampling and mixing his music, and whenever she tried to understand what that meant, it left her with a fearsome headache.

What it means, Richard told her, *is that our babies are going to have the best daddy around. They ain't gonna want for nothing!*

Little baby Richard must have been lucky, she said, letting him spin her around despite the ache in her feet.

He stared at her with wide eyes when he caught her. *You're naming him after me?*

Who better? When everyone knows your name, sweetheart, everyone will know his name, too!

2020

A better brother would be in the stiff folding chairs, tapping his foot against the barely covered ice of the arena, waiting for her name to be called and for her to walk across the stage. He spent all morning preparing her for this. He helped her curl her hair; he helped her pick her best dress. She kissed him on the cheek as she left, insistent on carpooling with a friend, and she thanked him.

She *thanked* him.

Now, he stood in the bathroom, clutching the side of the sink with an aggression he thought might shatter it, trying to hold back the gaping sobs ripping out of him. He hadn't cried like this since Mama died, and even then, he waited until he got home, and he waited until everyone else in the house fell asleep. Right now, anyone could walk in on him. Anyone could mock the crudeness of this display when he should be applauding and whooping with the rest of the

proud families.

Dick *was* proud. If he carved himself out, laid himself bare, he thought *proud* would be the first thing people saw. He remembered the fights. For the better part of four years, they argued every moment of every day. She wanted to drop out of school to help. She wanted to get another job. She didn't want to apply to colleges.

They still made it through, without Mama, without Richard Meyers, without *Christina*.

Yet, as he stood there, heaving, he couldn't help but feel the faint flickering of his own ambitions, his own dreams. He would never get them back. He would never be the person he imagined he would become.

He gave himself one last sob, dragged his sleeve across his face, and made up his mind to go back out there and watch his baby sister walk across the stage.

2023

He paces the floor, getting the rug to ride up around the corners with every heavy footfall. Sometimes, he reaches up and *pulls* at his hair, the same black as his father's, the same style that got people asking after the resemblance. Then, he continues his rant. "—can't believe her, can't believe she would do that to us, after everything I did, she would still find time to go spittin' on everything we worked for, and—"

"Breathe," Hudson Bell tells him, sprawled on the arm of his couch with a Coke bottle hanging loosely between his fingers. "You still have to breathe, baby."

"They're going to ask the same goddamn questions again, the same questions they *always* do when she goes sticking her nose in our business. They never ask if we're happy. They never ask what my baby sister *is* doing up at her genius college—and speaking of which, she hasn't called me since Wednesday, so Lord knows what she *is* doing up there—but they always find time to ask if our family is *complete* and *whole* after our father abandoned us and Mama passed away—"

"Dick," Hudson says, slinking off the couch to grab his wrists before he could go back to yanking on his hair. "*Breathe*."

Dick takes a mockingly large breath, and, upon realizing how much he needs it, takes another one. He lets his head sink, brushing his forehead up against Hudson's, and he tries to clear his mind. The buzzing refuses to go away.

"Nobody will want to be a part of my family," Dick confesses, "if they keep listening to Kris. They're going to think we're a bunch of fuck-ups."

"There are more people who love you than your blood," Hudson starts, "and I know I would be honored to be a part of your family, even if you're a little fucked up."

2002

I think I will name her Madison, she told him the first time he picked up. He kept inventing excuse after excuse. The tour bus's tire popped. He ran out of min-

utes. The show went long. Neither of them talked about what existed between the lines, but they both knew what happened in the dark of rock 'n roll shows.

She heard Richard's voice hitch. *Madison?*

I always loved that name. Mama loves it too, she said but she does not add, *which is incredible, considering Mama hates every other name I've come up with.*

Her mother thought she gave too much to this ghost of a man, a man whose word was worth dirt. The first baby was named after his manager, the second named after him. *What's next,* her mother would ask, not bothering to hide her fury, *are you going to start naming them after the girls he meets on the road?*

He doesn't meet girls on the road, she told her mother, but she saw the way Christian Atley pitied her these days, watching her waddle around with her big stomach and nobody to hold her hand. Even he had settled down, and he sure as hell did not name any children after her husband *or* her.

How about Mackenzie? he asked, a tinge of desperation breaking through, and she knew, clear as day, why he would not accept her first name.

She bowed her head, and she took a deep breath. He had ruined scores upon scores of girls' names for her now. It felt like every time she offered one up, it served as a minefield, waiting to detonate. Sometimes, she wished if he had to cheat, he could pick girls with the same name. That way, she would know what to avoid.

Mackenzie it is, she said.

2013

"My beautiful baby girl," Mama cooed from her bed. "When did you get so big?"

"I'm not big, Mama," Mackenzie said, but she clung to the doorframe, unwilling to move forward, unwilling to budge a single step. "'S a matter of perspective."

It got a smile out of her, and *that* was when Mackenzie ventured forward. For weeks, Mama stayed in bed, her sickness starting to claim more and more of her. Her skin got pale. Her hair got oily. Her face looked like a skeleton's, sunk-in and tight around the bones. Neither Christina nor Dick acknowledged it, careful in their games of pretending, because if something happened to Mama, neither knew what would happen to everyone else.

The three of them—Mama, Christina, and Dick—pretended Mackenzie could not see it unfolding in front of her. They whispered and gossiped, but they never told her because she was *too young* and *too naïve*. She knew enough, though, to know why Mama had to recover at home instead of a hospital. She knew enough to know why Mama started scouring the phone books, calling up distant relatives, searching for anyone to help.

"I love you, you know," Mama told her. When Mackenzie pulled up a chair next to her, wincing at the sound it made as it scraped across their floors, Mama reached over and placed a hand in her hair, thumbing through it with a gentleness she knew nobody else would give her.

"I'm all you," Mackenzie replied.

Mama stiffened at that. “Mackenzie, don’t say that.”

“It’s what Grandma used to say,” Mackenzie insisted. She took every feature of Mama’s, from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. Grandma used to say Mama didn’t need a man to make Mackenzie because there were no traces of him there.

“He’s still your daddy,” Mama said. “He’s still your daddy.”

2023

The magazine forced her hand.

Maybe, she thinks as she sits at the bar, swirling her drink around, she *wanted* it to force her hand. If everyone expected drama from the Meyers family, she would not let it come. She would *cause* it. If Kris decided to raise hell for them, she would prove she could raise it even faster.

Onstage, he sees her, and he fumbles the chorus.

Richard Meyers stumbles off stage at the end of his set, and he goes straight for her, ignoring the clamoring of his band (*and boy, does she hate his band too*). She watches him collect pieces of his composure as he nears. He squares his shoulders. He tosses his hair—now more gray than black, she notes with a tinge of satisfaction—and he tries for an easy smile.

“I didn’t know you’d be coming. I would have saved you a better seat,” he says in his lazy drawl, the kind someone makes, not the kind someone gets born with. He pretended to be a New Yorker for years, and he hid the accent because he thought it made him sound like a *hillbilly*.

She remembered reading the magazine well as a child, and she remembered trying to hide her accent from that point on.

“I was cozy right here,” she tells him.

“Mackenzie—”

“MK,” she interrupts. It is an unyielding name, one that feels like you suffocate on it as you say it. Mama would have hated it, hated the way it never sounds lyrical or beautiful. It makes her sound tougher, though.

And she enjoys watching people choke on it.

And she enjoys knowing her father, even as Kris compliments in some article, has lost, in the end.

Because here he is. Alone.

THE END OF THE ROAD

Grace Westergaard

I've never believed in dead ends. On the surface, they're a nuisance to any driver. But if you look closer, they scream of mystery, a silent taunt thrown at the nonplussed. There *has* to be more behind that makeshift blockade.

What makes the end so *dead*?

I squint into the middle distance and can't see anything except a hazy fog coating the space behind the red fence. The fog is everywhere, in truth—it looks like my car is being swallowed by it. The bright yellow sign denoting the *DEAD END* feels like it's smirking at me as I scrutinize it through the cloudy windshield.

What an idiot, it says.

I agree. What kind of idiot drives through a foggy night and finds herself trapped at a dead end, out of gas and clutching a phone unable to locate a signal? Oddly enough, I can't remember the real reason I started driving in the first place. Maybe I needed one of those dissociation drives—albeit puzzlingly strong disassociation—where I'm not meant to think about anything important. But, troublingly, I'm also not sure what thoughts I'm supposedly avoiding. The harder I squeeze my mind for the answers, the more I come up blank.

I sigh, a sound that shifts to a yelp when I hear three soft taps on the window. Slowly, I turn to the left. I can't make out any features in the fog, but it's definitely a face staring back at me. I'm unable to repress the fearful shiver that dances along my limbs.

Contemplatively, I furrow my brows and quickly weigh my options: I could open the window and find someone willing to help or, perversely, murder me; I could leave the window closed and hope the person leaves me alone, in which case I'd still be stranded before this dead end with a dead phone and a dead car.

Option one it is.

The window screeches as it opens. I wave my hand in front of my face to clear the fog that's already started to attack the insides of my car.

"Hello. Are you alright?" a calm, feminine voice asks, cutting through the silent night. Her face becomes clear: youthful freckles pepper the bridge of her nose, and deep crows feet embrace her dark green eyes.

"Well... somewhat. My car's now out of gas." I awkwardly chuckle. "Do you have a charged phone on you? I should call a towing company."

The woman laughs good-naturedly. "Oh no! Let's see what I can do." She rifles through her pockets before shaking her head. "No phone. You could leave

the car and we will go from there? Maybe there is a spare gas tank somewhere.”

That’s what a murderer would say...

“I should stay inside, you know, in case,” I say unhelpfully. “I’ll try to charge my phone. Then I could call someone.”

The woman continues to smile. “That will not work.”

My stomach drops, plummeting through the floorboard. What does she mean, *That won’t work*? And what is she doing out here, in the middle of nowhere, no phone and alone? She must be as stupid as I seem to be.

Or she really *is* a murderer.

“Why?” I manage.

“Because that is not your real phone. And this is not your real car.”

I scoff. After a quick glance at my phone and car, I see that I’m still surrounded by comfy gray seats; my teal phone case is still placed on the center console. I’ve had both items since college, ergo, they are my “real” things.

Despite my unflinching knowledge that she’s fibbing, her words stick themselves in my brain like chewed gum on a previously gleaming sidewalk. I can’t simply pry it off; its residue would remain.

“How would you know?” I jut my chin at her, faking offense.

“Because they aren’t real. Mara...” She trails off, appearing to think something over. “You might want to buckle your seatbelt for this.”

I try to speak, but the words get caught in my throat, which suddenly feels like it’s filled with cotton. “How do you know my name?” I cough. The chills return as a new blanket of cold dread folds around me.

She looks in the car, then at my seatbelt—firmly set across my shoulders and waist—and nods affirmatively.

“Because you are dead, Mara. This is The End of the Road.” She looks at the dead end, the yellow sign still peeking through the fog, then back to me. “And I am The Attendant. I am here to make your journey as smooth as possible.” She smiles that eerie, familiar grin and stares at me.

I stare back. And then I burst out laughing. The Attendant does nothing.

“You’re totally lying,” I say between gasps. Out of everything she could’ve said, that’s it? In no way does my *dying* explain this odd situation. It can’t be the answer. “This must be a joke. Are you working with someone to kidnap me? Is that what this is? You’ve scoped out an area with no service and no gas stations. It’s actually pretty smart—”

“No, Mara. This is real.” As if to prove it, she snaps her fingers and I’m suddenly standing, sans dead car and dead phone. Still the dead end, though, glaring at me from a few feet away.

“How—”

“The car and situation is meant to make the journey to The End of the Road comparable to an experience you may have had in life. Do you feel assimilated?” she asks. The silence grows taut as I stare at my hands. They look pretty alive to me.

“There’s no way I’m dead,” I say, shaking my head. “I mean, just a few hours ago I was...” I pause. I’m not actually sure what I was doing before I start-

ed driving. But, then again, I don't remember why I was driving. *The unease*. I thought I was disassociating.

"Your cause of death was due to a fall down the stairs near your apartment building. It was a particularly snowy January. Stairs are slippery." She nods with empathy.

"No. I take those stairs all the time—" I gasp, suddenly assaulted with the image of... *me*. Bile rises in my throat as I see myself, laying at the bottom of the staircase, head turned in an uncomfortable angle. There's a dull, gray patch of cement among the white snow where my shoe must've slipped. A small pool of blood assuages the snow around my head.

Dead.

I must be dreaming. I pinch my arm and, after the first one does nothing to wake me up, I do it three more times. Still nothing.

"Do you believe me now?" The Attendant asks, arching a brow at me.

Unfortunately, yes. Against my will, I do. Seeing my own body lying prostrate at the bottom of the stairs in a pool of blood did wonders to my naiveté. My gaze wanders to the smirking sign and I smirk back, bitterness running like venom on my tongue.

"This can't be the end for me," I groan. "I was just getting started! I'm sure you bring people back all the time. Reincarnation *exists*. Just look at Anne Hathaway and her husband. You can't tell me that's not Shakespeare and his wife, coincidentally also named Anne Hathaway—"

"I can assure you that we cannot reincarnate you."

"But—"

"You have three choices," she says, ever chipper. "You can watch a quick replay of your life, stop by your loved ones and see them one more time, or none of the above." She smiles. "But..." I trail off and sigh.

Impossibly, I think over the options. I know right away that I'd rather not see a "quick replay" of my life; that would make me feel a heightened sense of despair, the despair of knowing that the life I'm watching is over, of knowing I can never go back to those things. I know this because I'm already feeling that despair like a bullet wound in my chest.

And, of course, I can't just pick nothing. Then the "journey" would be over and I'd have to face whatever comes next.

"I'll see my loved ones."

The Attendant nods, shuts her eyes, furrows her brows, and then we're nothing, or maybe we're floating through nothingness. I try to move by wiggling my fingers, but they're nowhere. The moment is over before I can feel any real panic.

We're inside of—floating above—an apartment. I'm too preoccupied with wiggling my finally-visible fingers to take stock of my surroundings.

"Mara," The Attendant chides.

"Sorry." Sheepish, I fold my hands together and look around. A man who looks to be in his late twenties saunters out of the hallway bathroom. His light green eyes contrast his dark brown hair, which I've always thought looks just like

the color of ground coffee—

“Wait, *Leo*?” I gasp to The Attendant. “Why are we here? He wasn’t even my boyfriend.” I frown, dumbstruck. I wouldn’t go so far as to call this man a *loved* one. More like a *possibility*. A *liked* one, on occasion. Leo plops on his couch, manspreading and scrolling on his phone.

“I am taking you to see all your loved ones.”

“Yes, but I don’t get it. I mean, sure, I have feelings for Leo, but...” I pause. The Attendant appraises me, eyes fixed on mine. “We were never exclusive.”

“He is a loved one regardless,” she replies. I continue to stare as Leo threads a hand through his hair, messing up the top, before he throws his phone onto the side table and plugs it in. I wonder if he’s texted me. *Oh*. I won’t be able to reply. What will he do then? Will he worry and come find me? Or will he move onto the next girl because he thinks I’ve ghosted him?

Or will he move on because I didn’t matter to him like he mattered to me?

“I guess.” I sigh. Leo flops on his back and shuts his eyes, snuggling into the couch. He *was* always fond of naps. “Maybe if things were different...”

“Yes?”

“Maybe we could’ve been exclusive. I don’t know, I was always too scared to ask.” Maybe then he’d actually care that I’m *dead*. Even if he doesn’t know it yet.

“Seeing as we are here, he did love you. I only take the newly deceased to people who reciprocate the love.”

My heart aches so acutely that I’m sure it’s about to explode. Leo loved *me*? Leo *loved me*? What were we doing then, dancing around our feelings and talking about anything but?

“I see.”

“Do you have anything you would like to tell him? Sometimes the people I attend like to say a few final words.”

I shake my head. “What good would that do? I can’t wish for things to change. I’m dead, if you haven’t noticed,” I retort. Anger sinches my nerves, hot and sharp, as I take in the unfairness of it all. Maybe I shouldn’t have decided to visit my so-called loved ones. Maybe this will be too hard.

The Attendant nods. I take one last look at Leo. Could we have had a long life together, full of love and little children running around, maybe a cat slinking around our house? Or would we have kept going on like we always did, saying nothing but knowing everything?

Knowing myself, probably option two. But the first one is a nice idea; I hope he finds that with someone else.

“I’m sorry,” The Attendant says.

“It’s not your fault—” I start, but suddenly we’re in nothingness again, brushing against time itself as we lurch toward another supposed loved one.

As we travel, I can’t stop myself from feeling overwhelmed—what was my life for? I failed Leo; I spent my life wasting the limited time I had. Although, while I was alive, I never saw it as limited. I saw it as this overflowing well of time and life and years passed, *slowly*. Nobody told me how fast life moves. I had to figure that out for myself the moment mine ended.

We appear above the bookstore I worked at. I repress an aggravated groan.

"Is something the matter?" The attendant asks, still holding my hand.

"No..." I start. I take in the shelves, the high schooler manning the register, the customers perusing the shelves, and feel perturbed.

"Well, yes. Why here?"

"Your loved ones are—"

"Yes, I understand that! But why here, exactly?"

I think of myself, newly twenty-two and afraid. Afraid of the world, afraid of my future. I loved making art and painting, but what good would that do me? No one would hire a *painter*. I majored in biology, but I didn't love it. I definitely didn't want to work in that field. I mostly studied it to appease whatever demon in my mind told me I needed a more practical degree.

So, naturally, I walked into a bookstore. Isn't that where all the answers to life's burning questions lie? I got to looking at the covers and artwork; I was drawn to them, like a moth to light. Soon after, I applied and started working there.

The attendant appears to think something over, squinting into the distance. "Why do you think we are here?"

"I..." I stall, lacking an answer. Why *are* we here? I look around the store, eyes drawing in the busy store; people mill about the shelves and gush about various titles. "The people, I think. I love talking to the customers about books."

The attendant smiles like her point is made. "The customers love you."

"That's not true. They just love me because I give discounts *religiously*—"

"Look." She nods toward the kids section, the two shelves at the back of the store, and I smile, despite it all. Kendra, our youngest regular, is looking through the young readers section. She's pursuing a series with pink, flowery covers.

"I recommended those to her," I say. A closer look grants me the information that she's removing the second installment from the shelf. She turns it over and reads the back. A soft smile begins to stretch her mouth as my eyes fill with tears.

She's continuing to read because of *me*.

"You did." The attendant smiles. She still hasn't let go of my hand. "How does that make you feel?"

"Like I've made an impact, no matter how small."

"Are those not the best kinds of impacts? You changed Kendra's life. Now she will have that book series to look back on for all her life."

The tears fall, and I do nothing to stop them. I look around the rest of the bookstore and feel a new sense of purpose. I was wanted here; it wasn't the gap-year-waste-of-my-time that I always saw it as. It was never a stepping stone to whatever a more impressive and successful future was. This *was* impressive and successful because I loved it. Because I recommended books to people.

That is a little life-changing, isn't it?

"Yeah. Maybe I did." I watch Kendra skip toward the register until we're in nothing again, zooming to another destination.

We arrive at my dad's house. I know before we've stopped, somehow, that it's his. Maybe it's the smell: his house has always carried the scent of evergreen

trees, a spillover from the real trees that tower over the roof.

We find my dad in his office, typing away on his computer. A weighted sadness enters my lungs, causing my breath to catch. *It's my dad.*

His desk is littered with loose sheets of paper and empty mechanical pencils. Black-rimmed glasses lay askew on his nose. I resist the urge to fix everything, just one more time. Not that I could, anyway. The feeling of being useless plagues me: Will I have to remember the way those trees smell forever without being able to see it again? Will I never be able to help him again?

"I wish I would've visited him more," I say. It's a dull summary of my feelings.

"He loved you," The attendant says.

I almost tell her to please shut up, I've heard that same sentence a million times already, but I don't. I realize that it's always nice to hear. He loved me, as did Leo and the bookstore patrons. I can tell my dad loves me from the photos of my graduation framed on his desk, from my favorite paintings I've given him that hang on his walls (even the bad ones).

Even though it's over, the love is still there—that could never fade.

"I know. I love him, too." My dad smiles at his computer. I pretend he's smiling because he hears me. I hope he doesn't take this news too harshly. It's not his fault. "Can I leave him a message somehow?"

The attendant stares at my dad, then returns her gaze to mine. She nods and, moments later, a cardinal flies through the trees outside his window. My dad must see the flash of red because he tracks it. It lands on the closest branch to the window and chirps three times.

"Thanks," I tell her.

"Of course." She pauses, squeezes my hand. "Do you see now? Your life was full. Maybe you did not get everything you wanted... but you still had so much good, Mara. You impacted people. That is enough."

"I see," I say. I turn my attention to my dad, who's still staring at the cardinal. "Bye, Dad. I love you."

And that's all the matters in a single life—loving and being loved. The unbearable grief I've felt about my death and what I didn't achieve begins to lift.

I was loved; I loved.

THE PAST

Aishani Kundu

A ten-minute play

CAST OF CHARACTERS

ESMERALDA: The Protagonist

REGRET: A wispy, floating object with red hair who Esmeralda meets in The Past

SETTING

The Past: Esmeralda finds herself in The Past, a place where people who dwell too much on their past are sent to. There are infinite bubbles moving across the place, each representing a fragment of life in the protagonist's past, characterized by a deep, woeful regret.

LIGHTS UP

(Esmeralda wanders around in a spherical turbid space stretching out into infinity. The air is cold and nip, and with each step she takes, she feels like she's losing her strength. Around her, there are gigantic spheres, enclosed within which she sees familiar figures and incidents that she had once encountered. Multiple diaphanous, floating bodies capped with red hair swim around her. She spots one such body sitting on what appears to be some kind of a rock and approaches it.)

ESMERALDA

Uhm...Excuse me...Where am I? What is this place?

(the red-haired body sitting on the rock didn't even turn towards Esmeralda when she spoke. Perhaps, it hadn't heard her. She was about to open her mouth to ask again when she heard a voice emanating from the body.)

REGRET

You're in The Past

(Esmeralda stood blankly, quite bewildered.)

ESMERALDA

(Esmeralda feels a knot in her chest grow tighter as she inches a little closer to the body.)

I'm sorry, the past of what? And why do the events transpiring inside these spheres look familiar?

REGRET

It's your past.

ESMERALDA

Is it a place? Another realm?

REGRET

It is a place out of time. No one comes here out of their own volition.

ESMERALDA

Why am I here? I don't feel good.

(Something seems to be closing in on Esmeralda, making her fingers numb and cold and her throat feels as if it's ablaze. Her voice slightly breaks)

REGRET

When people linger too much on their past, it brings them here. You've been dwelling on your regrets for too long a time.

ESMERALDA

How do you know that? And who are you?

REGRET

I'm one of your past regrets — the one you wish you could undo the most, and the one that continues to drive a knife into your heart every time you

come to think about it.

ESMERALDA

My husband.

REGRET

Yes.

ESMERALDA

I let him go on that flight when the doctors had clearly advised him against it. It's all my fault, and I should've been the one to die.

(As soon as Esmeralda says this, she feel more strength leave her body. When she looks down, she is appalled at her skin slowly crinkling up, her bones becoming weak and brittle to the touch, and her eyes losing their power to see.)

What's happening to me? Is this retribution for what I have done?

REGRET

In The Past, time moves faster — quicker than in The Present. The longer you allow yourself to be reigned by your grief, the more years you lose.

ESMERALDA

Am I dying, then?

REGRET

Not yet, but you're heading there. Unless you accept your past and move on, you'll be trapped here forever, unfortunately; and soon, your body will decay, and you, too, will become a thing of The Past.
beat.

ESMERALDA

But I've lost all the people I love. I don't know how to live without them. I wish I could go back and make it all right.

REGRET

Your son?

ESMERALDA

I couldn't save him either. I ran every test, talked with every doctor I could find, struggled to get the best medications, but in the end, he had to go.

REGRET

Your life?

ESMERALDA

I chose the wrong career. I thought I knew what I was doing, but it was never up my alley.

REGRET

Your sister?

ESMERALDA

After mom and dad passed away, my sister toiled day in and day out, took out a loan to pay for my education, and we would hardly get by, but I promised her I would fulfill all her dreams — the ones that she had to give up to look after mom and dad.

(Not long after Esmeralda finishes talking, the dissolving feeling in her marrows returns, this time corroding away her flesh and bones; she has to place her hand against the rock substance to steady herself. Her breaths become labored.)

REGRET

All of these floating bodies that you're seeing here are receptacles of all the regrets you've accumulated throughout your life. They love it here, staying in the past, blissfully playing around with the events that have now become memories. But, you — you can't stay here forever. Your body is already giving away; your mind, on the other hand, is still stuck in the past. Your body is aging faster than your mind. It will only be a matter of a few minutes before your body succumbs to the tragedies inflicted upon by your mind.

ESMERALDA

But, I don't want to die.

REGRET

It's not your calling.

ESMERALDA

I just want things to be the way they were.

REGRET

That can't be.

(Esmeralda's voice has reduced to a barely audible mumble. Her words are getting clogged in her throat, and her breath is becoming raspier and shorter. She is unable to stand anymore. She was losing years rapidly.)

ESMERALDA

What can I do to go back to The Present?

REGRET

You've to choose me. You've to live with me. You've to embrace me.

ESMERALDA

You know I can't do that. I can't live knowing what I've put my husband through despite being aware of his medical condition.

REGRET

This is your only chance at reclaiming The Present.

ESMERALDA

You know I can't. It's too painful.

REGRET

Yes, you can. Everyone can. You're just afraid. You're a coward. You think you can stay in denial forever? That's not how reality works. You want to live, but you're incapable of living in The Present, but you don't want to die either.

(Esmeralda can hear her heart beating — loud and slow against her ribs. She places one hand on her chest, as if attempting to restrain it from beating until she figures out what to do.)

ESMERALDA

But what about the other regrets that I have?

REGRET

You can only pick one, unfortunately.

ESMERALDA

But the others would eat me alive.

REGRET

You're losing time. You only have a few more minutes left.

beat.

ESMERALDA

I need more time to think.

REGRET

You don't have more time. Your life is leaving your body with every passing second.

(Esmeralda's thoughts all began to mash into one another. Her papery skin felt weightless, as if there was no gravity to hold it in place. Parts of her body were slowly morphing into a luminous transparency. Blood was slowing down, and she saw her internal organs caked in a white dust.)

ESMERALDA

I can't decide—

beat.

I'm not ready—

beat.

I don't know—

beat.

Help—

beat.

There must be another w—

(Esmeralda's entire body has turned into a lucid transparency. No blood is coursing through

her veins. Her open eyes, limp with fear, stare off into the distance. Her body takes on a wispy, opalescent white form, decked with red hair. Her life has become one of the Past now — a wandering regret with no memory of The Present.)

LIGHTS DOWN

THE BETTER ENDING

Elana Walters

Six hours after,

I told my roommate we broke up. I told her how it happened, what he said, why I did it. I told her the end of our story and she looked at me sadly and whispered into the empty room, you deserve a better ending.

Teary-eyed, I looked at the closed door of the apartment and said just softly, as if I couldn't believe it to be true, I think this was the better ending.

A couple days earlier,

I told him we needed to communicate more. We were unhappy. We were starting to spiral. I cried on his bed and confessed that I didn't want him to swallow his own struggles to help me with mine. I wanted him to be honest with me. He needed to know it was okay to step away. I needed to know it was okay to do that too.

Wiping my eyes, I told him I would still love him if he did step back. I would understand what it meant for him to choose himself, his life, and his wellbeing. I told him I would understand, no matter what, if we needed to end things in order to save ourselves in the long run.

When I asked him if he had anything to add, or if he was feeling anything he needed to get off his chest, or if he wanted to tell me something that had been bothering him, he said, no, I don't have anything else to say.

Afterward, when he brushed my tears with his thumb later that night, he smiled, and said to me sweetly, that was a really adult conversation for us to have tonight.

Two weeks earlier,

I dropped him off at the airport before 4 a.m. We waited in a long, shuffling line to check his suitcase and he panicked about missing his flight. I told him that he could check his bag at the gate after going through security. It's what I usually do, I said as a frequent flyer.

He told me that's not how it works. His dad, apparently, had never done it before, so why should he? We argued in line between sleep-deprived flyers and the occasional inch forward until he finally listened and made for security.

As I walked back to the car, he called me to say it worked. He got his luggage on the plane. He couldn't believe he could do that. I smiled in the darkness of

the driver's seat and joked that he never lets me be right. He waved me off, but I asked him to remember that I was right.

I am right about some things.

Three weeks earlier,

We attended a magazine launch party. Two of my pieces were being showcased, and I said I wanted to leave early to talk to my friends. He argued that the event was five minutes away. We arrived two minutes before the party began and afterward, he told me that he teared up while I read. He liked how I brought up so many memories of us. He liked how I portrayed our love, and I told him he needed to read the other published piece when he got a chance.

He promised he would, but in the end, I was the only one who was just as proud of it.

Five weeks earlier,

I went home for winter break and smiled whenever my hometown friends asked how he was. We're great, I said behind a flashy grin. We've never been better.

Some of them remembered last winter break and asked if he was still texting, still calling, still asking for more reassurance any time I left the house. I shook my head and replied, we've built a lot of trust which is why he doesn't text me that much anymore.

But that still didn't stop me from texting him five times that night to tell him what I was up to, who I was playing games with, that I missed him, and eventually shutting myself into a room to call and say goodnight. He didn't answer the texts, but he picked up the phone and kept it quick as we whispered in the dark that we loved each other.

Seven weeks earlier,

We argued about whether I should go home for New Year's Eve. He wanted me in the city where we could celebrate the night in a sports bar downtown. I argued that I wanted to see my friends who were graduating college. In the end, we compromised: I spent New Year's Eve with my friends and returned to the city a week earlier than expected.

But it didn't feel like a compromise when I listened to the artificial sound of my friends' laughter through the other end of the phone and I started to cry while tucked in his bed, wishing I was still at home.

Eight weeks earlier,

I told him that I thought smoking weed was affecting his health. Maybe you should take a break, I encouraged him. You could see if it makes your cough go away and helps you sleep better. He told me he would probably go his entire life and never stop smoking.

Weeks later, he went sober for the very first time and lost his cough.

When I told my friends about it, I joked about how girls tell boys things and then boys act like they figured it out all on their own weeks later. I laughed and

wondered what it would be like to be listened to on the first try.

Ten weeks earlier,

he told me that he hoped I would get accepted into Columbia's MFA program after graduation. I told him I wasn't sure if I'd try for an MFA, but he loved the idea of living in New York City. It would be expensive, I argued. And I don't think I can get in anyways.

He assured me that I would, so I tried to imagine the two of us in a cramped apartment and living off my stipend until he found a job. But even then, the memory was bleak, and in it, I was always the one frowning.

Eleven weeks earlier,

we got into a massive fight.

At the dinner table, he asked why I hadn't checked the night before if he had set his alarm before he fell asleep. I almost missed work, he complained from the other end of the table. I shook my head and replied in disbelief, I woke you up twice and asked if you had an alarm set. You told me you did both times. He then told me I couldn't trust anything he said in his sleep.

The conversation ended with him asking if I could set his alarm for him each night. No, I refused. I'm not your mother. He told me that I should think of it as doing him a favor.

That night, he passed out drunk on the couch. I struggled to wake him up, struggled to get him off the couch, struggled to open his phone to set the alarm—only to find the battery dead and needed to be plugged in upstairs—struggled to get him into his bed, and struggled against the lump in my throat because if he missed work, it would be on me.

In a sudden rage, I grabbed him by the shirt collar and hissed in his ear, don't ever ask me to mother you again. He bolted upright, scowled at me, and stomped up the stairs as I grabbed my things and went home for the night. I called my mom and cried about it to her on the phone. I'm not his mother, I wailed. That's not what I signed up for.

But when we made up, I apologized for getting angry. I apologized for not waiting until the morning to say anything, apologized for making a big deal out of nothing, apologized for ruining what was supposed to be an amazing birthday dinner for him. He accepted my apology and then told me I couldn't hit him when I was angry.

I didn't hit you, I said through snuffles.

Yes, you did, he said and mimicked the motion of me grabbing his collar. You hit me.

I didn't hit you, I said again, this time through tears, because I knew what hitting was, and I hadn't hit him. He told me it was okay. I didn't mean it.

But I said it again. I didn't hit you.

Yes, you did.

And it would have gone on like that. It would have gone on and on—I didn't hit you. Yes, you did. I didn't hit you. Yes, you did—until at last, I burst into

tears and said I was sorry. There was no point. I was sorry, and I was grateful when we just moved on.

Later, I called my mom and told her we made up.

Did he apologize, she asked, and it was quiet on the phone when I couldn't answer, yes.

Sixteen weeks earlier,

we saw Priscilla in theaters. Afterwards, he complained about the ending. That ending was terrible, he said. Why didn't we get to see her life after she left Elvis? I told him it was symbolic. Her whole life was made public, but now, we don't get to see what it looks like because it's finally hers. It's not for us to weigh in on anymore, I explained.

He didn't agree and we never talked about the movie again.

The entire summer earlier,

I felt like he was slipping away. He rarely called, rarely texted, and our conversations on the phone were short, full of nothing new. I took long car rides to have a place to cry alone and voice aloud that I needed more. I needed to hear more about his day, his thoughts, his opinions, anything. He told me that FaceTime wasn't his thing. I would just have to deal with it until I saw him again in the fall.

Towards the end of the summer, I cried in the car to Taylor Swift's, "You're Losing Me," and I told my mom that I thought he was going to dump me. But you just got back together, she said. Do you think the distance has really changed things?

The distance had changed things, but maybe it was just for me.

Forty-five weeks earlier,

he asked if I wanted to get back together.

At breakfast in a dingy diner, he told me he had changed. He was finally better, healthier, and ready to give me everything I needed. He loved me and he wanted me back, but breaking up had been necessary. He needed the time to figure it all out—all seventeen days of our brief breakup were spent working on himself along with knocking on my door at 4 a.m. and sending me texts about how much he missed me whenever he could.

But nevertheless, he said he changed, and I hesitated.

I don't know, I said at first. I missed him. I still loved him, but I wasn't sure. I'm going home for the summer, and I don't know when I'm coming back.

He reminded me that we had done long distance before, even if it was for a month. We could do it again. We loved each other enough to try. I should try again.

But I need more communication, I insisted. I need you to give me the benefit of the doubt. I need you to trust me. I need you to treat me like a partner, not someone you can point blame to when things go wrong. Can you do that? Yes, he said. Absolutely.

But deep down, could we do this again? Could we right the mistakes we had made in the past? Somewhere, I heard no whispered among all the yes.

But by that point, the no would still need forty-five weeks to finally gather its voice, overpower the hope, and shout above every reason to stay, so until then, it was obvious that the only answer I could possibly have said in that moment was, yes, let's get back together.

Six hours after,

I told my roommate we broke up. I told her how it happened, what he said, why I did it. I told her the end of our story and she looked at me sadly and whispered into the empty room, you deserve a better ending.

Now, I look to the closed door of the apartment and wonder which ending would have been better: the ending of us in the diner, the ending of us in my apartment, the ending of us that are still together, somewhere, continuing with our relationship, or all those moments in between when I could have turned away for good.

Of all the endings that could have been, I can honestly say yes.

This was the better ending.

WHEN IT RAINS

Lynne Inouye

I meet you on a Tuesday—the rain is pouring, the wind howls, and you fall in a puddle with a splash. People hurry by you, shoulders hunched against the storm and eyes downcast. For them, there are a million better things to look at: the clouds overhead, the solemn buildings, billboards and flashing advertisements. For them, this is another moment like all the moments before.

But for me, there is only you. You, in a red raincoat, staring after your umbrella as it floats then flies into the sky. You don't stand up. When I walk up to you, holding out a hand, you don't look at me. Your gaze doesn't stray from the sky. The stark white of your umbrella grows smaller and smaller, further away. It dances and twirls in the wind.

"That was a good one too," you say. "Shame."

I angle my umbrella so we're both standing underneath it, shielding you from the rain. People jostle us on both sides, pushing and elbowing, but you remain steadfast. Looking. When you finally turn to me, your face is open. Your smile is crooked, your lipstick smudged. Your hair hangs in limp, dark strands around your face, and I am utterly entranced. "Coffee?" you ask.

I agree.

The next week, it rains on and off. The storms seem never-ending, flooding the streets and weighing down the Earth. My boss gets sick of emailing and canceling meetings on the weather's whims—on Monday, he tells us all to work from home. On Tuesday, the WiFi goes out, and all of a sudden, I have more free time than I know what to do with. The first few days, I watch TV until my eyes burn. Then, I start to think of you.

I put on my raincoat, grab my umbrella, and I venture out into the downpour.

I find you sitting on a park bench, observing a water-logged playground. The trees sag with extra weight; the grass squishes under my shoes as I approach. I don't question how easy it was to find you, fall into your orbit. I just focus on your smile, and I remember our coffee date—how you ordered tea, and we talked for hours. I sit next to you on the bench. We sit there for a while, and I let my umbrella fall to the ground. I'm already well on my way to soaked, and you're not much better.

"Do you like the rain?" you eventually ask. You gather your hair in your hands, squeezing out the water.

I hum, shrugging my shoulders. Then, I think about it a second longer, and I shake my head. The rain means free time—means time to think. More and more, I'm realizing that's not always a good thing.

What would my younger self think of me now? In college, I was so worried about losing myself. I was beyond concerned that the monotony of a nine to five would be soul-crushing. Now, it feels like I can hardly live without it. I'm so used to the days passing in a flurry of activity—meeting after meeting and hours of overtime. Without it, time stretches slowly. My thoughts grow darker. I try to explain this to you, and you nod.

"This is your chance then," you say, "to find yourself again."

I don't say anything, and in the silence, you grab my hand. Your fingers are ice cold. I find that it feels right.

The next day, we meet beside the library. The day after, it's near a cafe. The days still drift by; my apartment walls still suffocate. But you make the boredom, the anxiety, almost worth it. We talk about everything and nothing; we sit in the rain, go out for lunch, eat soggy sandwiches or salads wet with rainwater. We hold hands, and we wander, and in those moments, I feel alive.

"For someone who doesn't like the rain, I sure see you out here a lot," you tease. We're standing close to where I work—skyscrapers stretch into the sky, like jagged, pointed teeth. The windows are dim. It all feels secondary compared to you—your grin, the way we fit together. For once, the thought of work doesn't drag me down, draw me closer to that gaping mouth. I feel exhilarated. I want to hear you laugh, and so I say the truth: I'm not out here for the rain. I'm out here for you.

And there's the laugh. You lean in and wrap your arms around me, and the skyscrapers disappear from view. You steer us elsewhere; we wander on. The city is ours for the taking. "I'm out here for you too, love," you say. "I'm out here for you."

We meet in a parking lot a few days later. You're sitting on the curb, your arms around your legs and ankle-deep in water. It's only sprinkling now, but the city's drainage systems are still struggling—overworked and unused to the constant rain. I splash over to you. I stand awkwardly for a second, eying the damp curb, before I sit down. You laugh at me and kiss my cheek.

"Hello," you say, grinning. You bump our shoulders together.

I smile back at you, and then I turn to our surroundings. There are people running to cover, cursing as their socks and shoes get soaked. Cars inch by and park haphazardly; half the stores are still closed, but many are also open. This must be the most people I've seen in one place since we first met. The whole city has been turned on its head. And yet, normalcy threatens to return.

It doesn't seem to click. For me, the storm feels huge, never-ending. But my boss already emailed to say we're going in-person on Monday. It makes a pit open up in my stomach, but at the same time, I know I can't continue on like this. So much time and nothing to do. Surely, once I get back in my routine, I

can forget the wanderlust and the doubt.

I tell you my thoughts. Your reply is quiet, almost lost to the sound of the sprinkling rain: "I'm leaving tomorrow," you say.

My body jerks, and I turn sharply to face you. I tighten my grip on your hand. You keep staring at the people—or perhaps the sky, and I am reminded suddenly of our first meeting and your lost umbrella. I feel dread—something worse than dread—settle within me. A part of me always knew that you would leave. It's the same part of me that knows you're much more than ordinary, that analyzes and wonders at how we manage to meet without ever planning to do so. But it hurts. You, like the storm, were supposed to be endless.

You must read some of my grief on my face. "It'll be ok," you say. "It's not goodbye forever."

It feels like it, though. It feels like it. You grab my hand and lean in close. "There are some things," you say, "you'll have to do on your own."

The rain dwindles from a sprinkle to a few drops to nothing. I lean my head against yours, and I can't pretend the water on my face is anything other than tears.

On Monday, I stand outside my office. I look at its jagged, gray exterior, and then, I look higher—toward the sky. The sun is out. The rain is gone, and you are gone with it. Normalcy. What even is normalcy? I am starting to think that it can be what I make of it. I remember the hours spent wandering the city; I remember who I was in college: young and full of dreams. It's not too late. There is nothing grounding me here.

I turn on my heel; I walk away from the building. This is my chance to find myself again, and I am going to seize it, grab it with both hands. And maybe along the way, I'll find you, too. Maybe, the storms will gather once again. The clouds will thicken; the rain will start.

I suppose that time will tell.

I drive out of the city in the early morning, and I cannot remember what day it is. I pack everything up; I drive without looking back. The buildings grow smaller, sparser, around me. Soon, I reach the countryside, and I take in the wide, expansive fields with a grin. How long has it been since I've been this far from my apartment? Months and months. Maybe a year. I roll down the windows, and I let the wind rush by.

As I look out the window, one hand on the steering wheel and the other carding through my hair, I catch a glimpse of something white, tangled in the branches of a tree. My heart lurches in my chest, and I am turning on my hazards and slowing the car before I have a moment to think. The car behind me honks as I pull to the side of the road. I don't spare them a glance; I'm too busy opening my car door, stumbling out and past the road.

An umbrella. A white umbrella, just like yours. I laugh, and then I can't stop laughing as I double over, resting my hands on my knees. I think of your gaze, looking to the sky, looking past the city. I think of you saying that it's not good-
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bye forever, and for the first time, I start to believe that's true. When I glance to the horizon, I see wisps of clouds. Gathering. Watching, as I retrieve the umbrella and shove it in my trunk.

One day, I'll give it back to you. The weather is ever-changing; the world is wide, and I don't know when I'll see you again. I don't know exactly who you are or what your presence in my life might mean, but I know that I love the rain now. I love the feeling of the wind in my hair and the open road ahead of me, and maybe, I even love you. You gave me that; you helped me remember that I can go anywhere.

I can go anywhere. I grin, and I start the car, accelerating back onto the road. Anywhere. And yet, one day, when it rains, I know that I will go back to you.

CLOCK SCULPTURE

Caroline Börk

Clock is a ceramic sculpture inspired by the abstract concept of time as non-linear. In the inside rim of Clock is the inscription “Time is an illusion that helps things make sense so we are living in the present yet,” which repeats in a circle, furthering the concept of time as abstract. The strange, vaguely human elements of the form are made to emulate the idea that everything is as it once was in our present body. Clock is intended to evoke feelings of disturbance or discomfort just as time disrupts our thoughts.



ROOMS

Lynne Inouye

When I turn around at night, my knuckles scrape against the popcorn ceiling, and I am everywhere at once. A red house in Wisconsin, three pine trees in the backyard, a fairy painted on the wall. A room cluttered and unkempt, the comforter torn and sewn-up and torn some more (We're selling it this year). An AC unit humming away, looking out at the forest, at the two-car garage, the moon a sliver in the sky. A dorm room. A low ceiling. Pain in my hand; I disregard it. I tell myself it doesn't matter yet. In the morning, I will deal with it.

In the morning, I forget.

GONE

Ezra Smith

42 A part of my innocence died in the basement of my great grandmother's house.
I wish there were smashed glasses and black eyes, physical brands to
remind me of what was real. It's all hazy images and a burning lump in the
back of my throat. I made my own scars as an apology, something Even
no one else spoke even as the sun rose the next day.
as my parents continued to argue, like harsh words didn't have such explosive
consequences. I can't tell when I started to notice the repetition
in my grandparent's actions. They slipped out of consciousness without a
sound, quiet declarations that they were finally *gone, gone,*
gone. Our parents are dead to us and they aren't coming back. How many times do I have to tell
you for it to get through your head? The garage was cool against my skin
when I ran. My sister's arms were warm when they were wrapped
around me. The echoes of my family's laughter still hung in the air,
but they were ghosts. Just like the kids who grew up in this house. Just
like their mother, and everyone before her. Just like how they will be. My
grandparents keep looking for places that have been lost to time
for decades. It's no longer on the map and the people they want to meet
there don't exist. I tell them that as means to placate but it's met with hysteria.
They beg me to answer the same questions over and over
and over. Insanity coats my responses as I wonder if I too have lost my mind
alongside them. Even alone, I question it. In the end I can't
fathom how it's real: that my sweet soul of a grandmother
and my steady hand don't even know my first name.

I SAW THE DEATH FALL BRINGS

Brooke Wise

The autumn breeze carries the nomadic leaves
the air is crisp, much drier

wind whispers beside my ear
singing a sweet melody for me

her soothing, charming chorus—
oh, what a grim interruption

the apple lies before me
he fell from a branch above

motionless, lifeless, deceased
eternally bruised

fated to be juice or a pie
nothing more

only deemed useful once dead
with only his taste left to give

the crunchy-red skin
tempts me to bite, but i don't

plucking him from this barren path,
i throw him toward the creek to escape

our goodbye, though lacking, is true
may he find peace, to rest in peace, oh please.

UNDERNEATH THE APPLE TREE

Kaylee Allen

“Do you really think this is a good idea?”

Maeri tilted her head. “I see no issue, Leio,” she said.

Though Leio stood over her, imposing in his size and power, she kept her head lowered, eyes on the infant in her arms. A burn marred the child’s neck, stretching the delicate white skin. The wound was red and puffy, but the child had long since fallen asleep. Maeri brushed ash from her cheek. The child’s dark eyes opened briefly before closing as she was lost to sleep once more.

“I must caution you against this action,” Leio said. “Humans are fleeting, selfish little things. They are not worth your time.” His eyes flashed, crashing waves against the cliff face. “Please come back to us, *pavesyr*.” Little Sister.

“I cannot leave her,” Maeri said. “She has no one.”

“Then find another human to take her!” Leio’s voice cracked, and a tree, its trunk charred and splintered from the fire, fell to the ground in an explosion of ash.

“I saved her,” Maeri whispered, as she tucked the girl’s blonde curls behind her ear. “Her whole family burned. The winter has been harsh; the humans here have nothing more to give to a stranger. She has no one.” Maeri lifted her eyes to meet Leio’s.

He studied her until at last he let out a breath. “You will not change your mind.”

“No.”

“Then be warned,” he said, voice low. “Time for them is different. For humans, it is limited. They feel as though it lasts to eternity, but it flickers from their grasp in an instant. It will be painful for you to remain in it for so long. But do not let it separate you, or she will be lost.”

Maeri turned, but he was gone, imprints in the ash the only sign he had ever been. Maeri stood from where she kneeled, clutching the babe close to her chest. The child’s eyes opened and squinted against the dying fire’s light. Tears pooled, and cries came from the little being.

“Calm yourself, child,” Maeri whispered. The baby hiccuped as she breathed. She reached out a tiny, pudgy hand. Maeri grasped it in her own. “I have you now,” she whispered. “You are safe.” Maeri pressed a kiss to the child’s forehead.

With effort, Maeri opened her eyes. Some days were harder than others to remain present, to keep herself from slipping into time’s current. But Leio’s

words echoed in her mind, and she would not leave her girl. Across a field of grass and wildflowers, the girl laughed and danced as she chased grasshoppers and ladybugs. Maeri's lips smiled against her accord.

"What is her name?"

Maeri shifted so that she could see the newcomer. A woman, older than Maeri, though youthful in her eyes. She watched the child as she stumbled and fell, laughing loudly. The woman's gaze shifted to Maeri, and a surge of warm familiarity fluttered in her chest.

"Hello, Rashin," Maeri said. She gestured to the girl. "Her name is Elysande."

"This is why you have not been home?" Rashin's nose crinkled. "A human girl?"

"She had no one," Maeri said.

Rashin let out a puff of air. She lowered herself until her back was against the tree beside Maeri. Rashin leaned until their shoulders touched.

"We miss you, *pavesyr*," Rashin said. "I know it hurts you to be locked in time with the girl." Maeri's eyes sharpened, and she pulled away.

"I am not coming back yet," Maeri said. "I will not leave her." Rashin nodded.

"I know."

Maeri frowned but turned away once more to watch Elysande tumble and roll. "You disagree with my actions."

"I fear you will be hurt," Rashin said. "Elysande would never--"

"Not by the girl," Rashin cut in. "Other humans will not share the same kindness for the girl as you." Rashin rested her hand on Maeri's. "But I can see you care for her... And I have seen her care for you in turn."

Maeri raised her brow, a smile tugging at her lips. "Have you been watching me, *mansyr*?" *Elder sister*.

Rashin smiled and lifted her shoulders. "Leio told me you had gone. I was curious why."

Maeri tilted her head; she hadn't thought enough time had passed for the other godlings to notice her absence.

Rashin's smile flickered away. She watched the girl pick up a rock and study its glistening surface in the sun's rays. "Please, be safe, Maeri."

And Rashin was gone, a sprinkle of sun dust all that remained of her presence. Maeri turned away as Elysande shouted, holding the glittering rock. Despite the worry tugging at her mind, Maeri found herself smiling as her little girl bounded forward to show Maeri her treasure.

"Mama," Elysande said, tilting her head so her dark blonde curls framed her heart-shaped face, "since when have we had an apple tree?"

"Hm?" Maeri hid her smile. "What ever could you mean?"

"Mama!" Elysande laughed as she was scooped into Maeri's arms. Maeri spun them both around until they stood before the newly grown apple tree.

"If you wanted apples, Mama, why did you not buy some at the market?" Elysande's dark eyes blinked up at Maeri. She leaned against her chest, her tiny breaths puffing on Maeri's skin.

"The market's apples were not fresh," Maeri said. She reached up until her

hand grasped the red fruit. Plucking it from the branch, she gave the apple to her child.

Elysande took a bite, and her eyes lit up. "Mama, it is delicious!" she cried, taking another bite. Maeri laughed, cautioning Elysande to slow so she did not choke.

Elysande bounced in Maeri's arms as she lifted sticky hands. Obliging, Maeri lifted the girl above her head until she was within reach of a hanging fruit. Elysande pulled, grunting until the fruit and tree separated. She held the apple in her hands but frowned at the smaller size and green skin.

"I do not think this one is ready," Elysande said.

"Hm, let me take a look," Maeri murmured. Elysande placed the fruit in Maeri's dark palm. Before their eyes, the fruit grew in size, darkening into a deep red that shone brilliantly in the late afternoon light. Elysande laughed and clapped her little hands together.

"More, more!" she cried.

The sun's golden rays had dimmed by the time Maeri and Elysande had finished picking apples. They sat beneath the tree, a pile of apples on either side. Maeri pressed her fingers into the apple's skin, and it fell apart into perfect slices. Elysande giggled and picked up one of the slices. Maeri clutched the girl to her chest, her heart thudding in time with Elysande's. She leaned down to press a kiss to Elysande's forehead. The little girl looked up, grinning widely.

"Thank you for the apples, Mama."

"Anything for you, my love."

Time scraped on either side of Maeri, rushing past while she stayed locked into place. She gritted her teeth and clenched her eyes shut. She was nearing two decades of remaining firmly in the time stream, and more and more could she feel it grating on her very essence.

Beings of infinity did not mix well with time, she knew that, but Maeri would be damned if it took her away from Elysande.

Forcing her eyes open, Maeri looked out the cottage window. Elysande sat beside a stream. A young boy near her age fidgeted next to her. Maeri couldn't help a flare of amusement as he fumbled handing her a bundle of hand-picked wildflowers.

The boy, Richard, had stumbled upon their cottage one day by coincidence, if such a thing were possible, and Maeri had instantly felt the adoration he had for Elysande. Though he had not revealed it to her nor Elysande, Maeri knew the boy was the youngest prince of the nearby kingdom. She also knew he was destined to be king due to his elder brother's inadequacies on the throne, just as she knew he and Elysande would fall in love. Maeri had always had a knack for foreseeing human relationships.

Elysande flashed a shy smile as she took the flowers. She held the lilacs, her favorite, to her face and breathed their scent in deeply. As their hands touched, pain spiked through Maeri's head. She cried out and pitched forward, clutching the sides of her skull.

Agony roared in her chest as she fought to keep herself grounded in time.

Glass crashed as dishes lifted in the air. The furniture of the house scraped along the floor, pushed back as Maeri yelled out.

“Mum?”

Maeri’s eyes flashed open. The air around her stilled. Elysande stood just inside the doorway. The boy was long gone, and the sun had evidently set hours ago. Maeri released her grip on the counter and forced air into and out of her chest.

“I am sorry, my love,” Maeri whispered. Her head ached, and pain sparked with every word she spoke. “I am not feeling well. I think I may retire for the evening.”

“What is wrong?” Elysande asked. She stepped forward to rest her palm on Maeri’s forehead. Maeri removed Elysande’s hand, holding it in her own.

“Do not worry about me-”

“Please,” Elysande said, her eyes darkened with worry, “please tell me what is going on.”

Maeri closed her eyes, pressing them so tight colored spots danced across her vision.

When she opened them again, Elysande was still there, patiently awaiting Maeri’s words.

“You know that I am not human,” Maeri said.

At that, Elysande laughed. “I may have figured that out, yes.”

Maeri smiled at her brilliant, humorous girl. “It is... hard for me to remain in time with you.” Elysande’s brows furrowed, but Maeri pushed on. “Time for you is linear, marching at a steady pace. Time for me is infinite, flowing around and surrounding everything. My brothers and sisters and I live in a place outside of time, though we sometimes visit humans.” Maeri brought her other hand up to cup Elysande’s face.

“I was visiting the human realm when I found you,” Maeri said. “There had been an accident. Your home had burned and your family had perished.” Elysande nodded, fingers touching the scar on her neck. This she knew.

“And you decided to raise me?”

Maeri nodded. “When I laid eyes upon you, I knew at once I could not leave,” Maeri whispered. Her voice strengthened, and she said, “My siblings warned me that it would be difficult to stay with you in your time. But I did not care- I do not care. I will not leave you.”

“But it hurts you to stay,” Elysande said. Her eyes darkened. “Mum, I am nearly an adult now. If you must leave-”

“No,” Maeri shook her head. “I will stay.”

Maeri did not attend Elysande and Richard’s wedding; it was too hard for her to be around other humans anymore. Too often she would collapse under time’s weight, and Maeri would not ruin Elysande’s day. But Maeri did watch from afar as Richard was crowned king years later. She saw as his elder brother stormed from the castle, seething with his blackened heart. The king had seen his eldest as volatile, too erratic to lead the kingdom through another period of peace.

Maeri stood at the edge of the village’s main courtyard as Richard was an-

nounced to his people. Elysande stood by his side, radiant in her queenly glow. Maeri knew she would be looked down upon by many for her lack of royal blood. But Elysande appeared to give the murmuring people no mind, her gaze full of kindness.

It was weeks later when Elysande returned to the cottage in the woods. She'd finally been able to break free from the kingdom's royal guard who were so intent on keeping her inside the castle's walls. She pushed open the cottage's door. Though its rusted hinges squealed loudly, there was not a stir from the occupant inside.

Elysande opened the door to Maeri's room. Though wrapped in the bed's many quilts, Maeri shivered. Sweat gleamed and rolled down her dark skin. Long fingers dug into her matted curls. Maeri's jaw was clenched as she fought back a scream.

"Mum," Elysande said. Maeri opened her eyes, alighting on her daughter. The tension left her jaw, and she removed her fingers from her hair.

"Elys," Maeri croaked. "I meant to visit."

"Mum." Elysande shook her head. She laid down on the bed, curling her body against Maeri's. Closing her eyes once more, Maeri leaned against her daughter. She breathed in, smelling the lilacs that were woven into her braided hair.

"You have to go, Mum," Elysande whispered. "I can not leave you," Maeri said.

Elysande shook her head. "You must take care of yourself. You can not live like this." Maeri opened her eyes. Pain flared through every vein in her body.

"I will not be gone long," Maeri conceded. "A brief reprieve, and I will be back. I swear it." Elysande smiled.

"I know."

Maeri stepped into the forest and knew in her chest that a deep wrong had seeped into the land. The apple tree was bare, its fruits long since bloomed. The sky rumbled with thunder but no rain fell to the dry earth.

In a breath, Maeri was at the village. The castle loomed before her, but the sense of wrongness had pervaded it. The flags signifying Richard's rule were torn to shreds. Blood and oil dripped down its walls, and the stained glass windows were shattered. But Maeri could hardly see the castle.

In the center of the courtyard, beneath the castle's shadow, was a crudely constructed gallows. Maeri moved past the man kneeling before the gallows. Richard breathed, but only just, his head and hands locked into the pillory. Maeri paid him no mind, her gaze fixed on the gallows. Seven people hung, their lifeless bodies swaying in the wind. Six children, four girls and two boys, flanked the woman in the center.

Under the woman's noose was a pale scar of a burn from a lifetime ago. The rope cut into the skin, severing the scar in half. In between one breath and the next, Maeri's knees cracked against the stone courtyard. Distantly, there were shouts as her presence was realized. Men in armor, men cloaked in shadows, were running to her, their weapons drawn.

Maeri opened her mouth and screamed, and the earth shuddered. Black

poured from her eyes, her open mouth, her hands. The darkness filled her chest until it imploded. The men screamed as it filled them. They crumpled to the ground, paper dolls around her.

Maeri rose and the ground pitched. She lifted her hands and the sky folded. Lightning cracked, striking the stone beneath her feet. The river that cut through the kingdom surged, crushing houses like matchsticks. She seethed, and fire erupted in the air. It burned the oxygen from lungs and seared skin from bones. Maeri brought her fingers to a fist, and the kingdom erupted in a breathless explosion.

The dust settled, and Maeri kneeled at the center of her destruction. She cradled Elysande's body in her arms. She sobbed, the cries torn raw from her body. Tears soaked bloodied hair and trickled over cold skin. With trembling fingers, Maeri moved a curl of hair behind Elysande's ear. Maeri screamed and cried until her voice was nearly gone and the sun had long disappeared. She took a breath. Closing her eyes, she bowed her head until it was just above Elysande's face.

"You were right," Maeri spoke. From behind her, Leio placed a hand on her shoulder. Maeri had heard him arrive long ago, but he had remained silent until her sorrow had ebbed.

"I should never have involved myself," Maeri's voice cracked. "Humans are selfish, cruel creatures. They took her from me." Maeri lifted her eyes to the charred mutineers' corpses before returning her gaze to Elysande's still face. "I could do nothing to save her." Leio's grasp tightened.

"I should not have left her." Maeri's words were barely whispers. "I thought I would only be gone a day, maybe two." She looked to where the gallows had stood. "She had children. I did not get to meet them."

Leio took a breath. "Maeri."

But Maeri shook her head, silencing him. Maeri lifted Elysande in her arms. She breathed, and the three of them - the human and two godlings - were in the woods. To their right, a small cottage, dusty and dilapidated. To their left, a bubbling creek dried long ago.

Maeri knelt and laid Elysande on the ground. She placed both hands on either side of Elysande's face and leaned forward until she pressed a kiss to her forehead. When Maeri stood once more, Elysande's body was gone. In its place sprouted an apple tree, barely as tall as Maeri's waist. A bundle of lilacs rested at its base. Maeri turned to her brother. Leio studied the tree. His gaze flitted to Maeri.

"Take me home." Maeri's breathless words were stolen by the wind as it ruffled the apple tree's leaves. But Leio heard, and he inclined his head. He held out his hand, and Maeri placed her own in his.

The godlings were gone, as though they had never been present. To a being of infinity, a human life is fleeting and hardly existent. But a love between a mother and daughter knows no such bounds, and Maeri knew within her heart that she would never forget such a smile beneath an apple tree bathed in afternoon's flickering light.

THE ANATOMY OF AN HOUR

Rebecca Feldman

I put my teeth to the neck
of time.
I choke, I choked
down splinters
I spit, I spat
up wood.
I pry, I pried
open the face
of my Grandfather and
I find, I found
the pearly cloud where
time lives, time lived.
It spills, it spilled
down the ridges of my throat as
I drink, I drank.
It is, it was
always hands
reaching, reached
for the minute, for the hour.
But never fingers
grasping, grasped,
but never arms
pulling, pulled.
My knees knock, knees knocked
against golden chimes,
golden vocal chords
that welcome the birth and death
of a day,
As I sit, I sat
at the dinner table of chronology.
I eat, I ate
every second my grandfather
can spare, could spare
and find, found
myself unspooling, unspooled into insatiability.
I put my neck to the teeth
of time.

