



Literary Journal of the Metrowest Writers' Guild

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Vol. 1



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# Fiddlehead FOLIO

The *Fiddlehead Folio* is an annual literary journal showcasing the original work of members of the MetroWest Writers' Guild. While members of the Guild primarily hail from MetroWest Massachusetts, the Guild reaches writers in 5 states and 3 other countries.

The *Folio* is a production of the Puddingstone Press, the small press publisher of the MetroWest Writers' Guild.

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# EDITORIAL LETTER



**Start. Just start. That's what we tell artists who say they aspire to do something.**

"Just" start putting words on the paper. They'll come together in sentences. Those sentences will form paragraphs. Keep going and you've got yourself pages of story.

That's overly simplistic, we know. It makes for good encouragement and may even get some people walking on the path of storytelling, but eventually the simple falls away and the complications take over. How does a writer make a character feel "real" and "deep" in a story? How do they write worlds that are immersive and full? How do we string together events in a plot that entice a reader to keep reading? How do we stick the landing at the end?

Through the Guild, I've tried to create a community that catches the writers who are starting to ask those questions. When a writer is ready to start exploring the craft of storytelling and how they, specifically, can use craft techniques to tell the stories they want to, that's when I hope they find us. That's a really special time in a writer's life and the perfect time to be with others who are asking the same questions. The Guild has become home to over 200 writers who are asking those questions, trying out new techniques, and, yes, putting themselves out there by publishing their stories traditionally and independently.

You are holding in your hands the manifestation of a dream I've been working toward since 2019. Within these pages are seven stories by seven Guild members: writers who have chosen to put themselves out there and show off their craft. I'm so proud of them. Sharing your work in any capacity is an important decision, one that comes with a lot of vulnerability and, hopefully, a lot of joy. Each story is a little different and has a wonderfully unique style. I hope that you will enjoy them as much as I do.

If you happen to be reading this in Massachusetts, here is the best part about this journal: all of the stories in this journal were written in MetroWest Massachusetts by writers who are your neighbors. They join the rich tradition of so many storytellers from the region. I hope that you will read these stories and support the writers who wrote them. Let's enjoy the artists in our communities while they are doing their work now. Seek them out, encourage them, and share their work with others in your life. This is how we create a robust community of artists and a home for excellent stories.

As a final thought before I close this, I want to offer my deepest gratitude to the writers who submitted to this year's journal. This was a positive risk and one that I have tried to honor with hard work and thoughtful editing. I hope that's reflected in the pages here. And thank you, too, reader, for being here to affirm their work.

May this be the first of many volumes of the Folio. I look forward to seeing you again next year.

Submitted with gratitude,

K.W. Onley, Founding Editor



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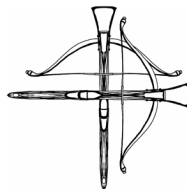
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Since I was little, I was warned about the wolves outside. Mom painted a dire picture of hungry maws and gnashing teeth; a myriad of dangers waiting to prey upon me should I venture outside.

The first time I met a 'wolf,' I didn't sense the danger until it was too late. I was playing in the yard, far from my parents' gaze. I still remember the bright sunshine, the green stains on my palms from fresh cut grass, and the pleasant man with the warm smile. There were promises of puppies and candy. A short trip. It sounded exciting.

It wasn't until my hand was on his car door and I heard Mom's shrieks that I felt the fear take hold. In the grasp of a predator, I froze: helpless as a mouse in the jaws of a wolf.

But my parents saved me.

And instilled the lesson that danger lurks outside, while inside is safe.

And forbade me from leaving the house without them.

And then forbade me from leaving at all.

In truth, they didn't have to; I spent my childhood gripped by fear anytime I went outside. My fear became obedience. Obedience became routine. And routine has been my comfort and my salve. When Dad left, Mom's fears overtook her and she bolted the doors over and over until she felt safe. Our haven became a bunker, protecting us from the wolves outside.

But years have passed. I'm fourteen. No longer a child, yet still caged like a pet mouse. I sit in my bedroom, nestled in the bay window that overlooks our blossoming apple tree. It's a beautiful day: the sky is a cloudless azure and the sun warms my skin through the windowpane. A gentle breeze blows the apple blossoms to and fro. I'm still not allowed outside, but on days like this, I try to remember what it felt like to lie on the grass.

The sharp, sweet scent.

The rustle of breeze-battered leaves.

Warm pools of light and cool patches of shadow.

Clouds above me, earth beneath me.

Perfection I fear I'll never experience again.

My fear of wolves eroded little by little as I watched each day pass from my spot by the window. Now, only my fear of missing out remains.

A world filled with wolves, but also beauty and adventure, exists just on the other side of the glass. I know that next time my experience outside will be different. What's so risky about relaxing in the sunshine for a little bit?

I can't suppress a mournful sigh. Maybe someday.

A foreign form coaxes my attention away from the apple blossoms. The twitch of a tail. A slinking shadow. He emerges from behind a bush, sleek and surefooted.

*A tiger.*

I blink my eyes rapidly and press my face against the glass. I must be imagining it. I hope against hope that it's real. For once, my day holds a glimmer of adventure.

I turn away from the window and close my eyes tightly. Count to ten. Steady my breath.

When I look back, he's still there.



It's really a tiger. A *tiger*! Not one of Mom's crazy metaphors, but a living, breathing tiger! I've only seen tigers in the movies; even then, just in the jungle or a cage at the zoo. I've never seen a tiger in suburbia or dreamed that one would walk down my street.

He bounds across Mr. Stevenson's front yard and bats playfully at a basket of flowers dangling above the porch. The tiger is tall, but even with his claws extended, he can't reach the petals.

He grows bored with the hanging basket and chases a butterfly. After a few playful swipes, it flutters away, and he flops down on the grass.

He looks so...happy.

*Surely that's not a normal expression for a tiger, is it?*

He stretches out, flicking his tail back and forth in the sunlight.

I know that I should do something — call Mom, call the police, call the zoo — to alert people to the danger.

But everything outside is dangerous.

The tiger must feel what I feel: raised in a cage, never allowed to roam free. Yet he's shaken off his shackles and is tasting sweet, sweet freedom in the sunshine. Only a monster would dare take that from him. And in a world of wolves, who will notice one tiger?

Besides, I want to stretch out on the grass too.

He looks up at me and our eyes meet. His are luminous, golden, and soulful. Mine are hungry: hazel tinged green with envy.

I know we are different, yet he is a kindred spirit. He understands me and I him.

He blinks lazily as he turns over. Stripes rise and fall as muscles tense and shift. The tiger gets up and flicks his tail. He walks away, ready to continue his adventure.

*No!* I want to scream, but he'll never hear me while I'm in here.

That's it.

I can't live my life caged.

Curiosity conquers fear once and for all.

I'm leaving.

I bound down the steps, ignoring Mom's startled shrieks. Before I know it, I'm at the front door.

Adventure lies on the other side and I don't care what horrors await in the outside world.

I unlatch the bolts: all six of them. Mom's rapid footsteps are growing closer — she'll be down the stairs in seconds.

I twist the knob.

It yields.

And now, unprotected on my front porch, the wind blows through my hair.

I am free.

"Tiger!" I call.

He turns and acknowledges me.

He growls menacingly. The sound reverberates like thunder before a storm.

The effect is immediate, visceral. Every muscle in my body tenses, my senses heighten. We are not just two souls: he is predator, and I am...

*Free.*

The tiger's shoulders tense as he springs into action.

Adventure races toward me.

All the lawns on Mentone Avenue are mowed on Wednesdays.

At seven o'clock on Wednesday morning, Brittney McArthur III silences his alarm the second before it sounds. He is a tall man, though not abnormally so. He dresses in a tailored suit, a crease ironed into the front of each pant leg. Today, his suit is gray, though tan would also be acceptable, as the days are still warm. He combs his mostly brown but partially gray hair. He does not mind that it is gray but wishes it would pick a color and stick to it. His favorite part of the day is picking out and lint-rolling his suits. He loves the simplicity of rules. A rule tells you how to behave in a given situation. When you get ready for the day, you dress appropriately.

Brittney steps outside his very rectangular, not at all unusual house to take his morning walk. He has taken the same walk nearly every day since moving into this neighborhood, counting the numbers on matching mailboxes from ten to two hundred and back again. To his surprise, the neighborhood is a circus of activity. Standing on the edge of his porch, he raises himself onto his tiptoes and cranes his neck to get a better look.

Across the street, a 'for sale' sign has been removed, and the new occupants of Number Thirteen Mentone Avenue are backing a moving truck into the driveway; its front end remains in the middle of the road. Motorcycles and camper vans are parked up and down the street. Their occupants converge on the old black house.

When Brittney moved here a decade ago, Number Thirteen sat empty, though his realtor assured him the house would soon be remodeled. It was built before the roads and developments and HOA. The old farmhouse featured strange additions added to it over the years, all painted one color as if that would make it match. It was a dark, looming house with a stone fence and a creaking wooden gate. Everything about the house remained the same to this day, except the lawn, thanks to Brittney. Tract houses built around it in the 1970s were compact and box-like, with decorative shutters and straight driveways, giving the old house the effect of being a weed in a vegetable patch.

As the new neighbors unload onto the front lawn, Brittney grimaces at the spectacle. An empty house across the street might be better than what is happening now.

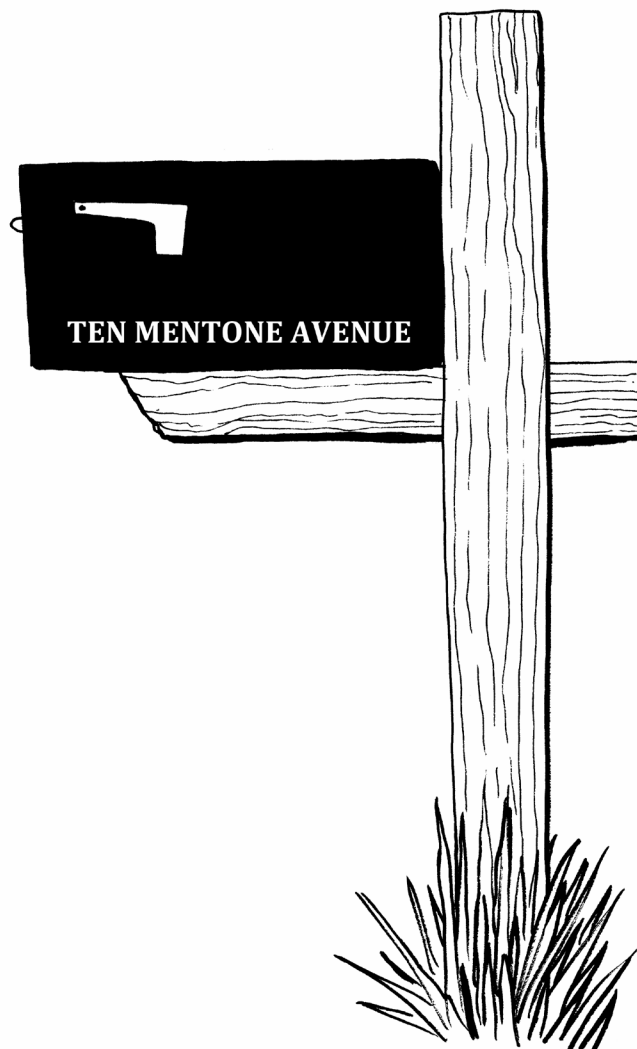
Brittney watches as two women remove a large buffet from the rear of the moving truck. The shorter of the two trips, sending the buffet crashing to the ground. Both women tumble and erupt with laughter. A man who had been fighting with an unruly chandelier throws it on the ground and hurries to help the women. They carry the buffet and set it next to a makeshift office that has been set up on the lawn, complete with an old wooden desk and armchair. The ringleader, a man in a black suit, barks orders, calling out names and locations from his spot instead of simply walking over to them. His slicked-back hair shines as the morning sunlight hits it. Two men arrive and grab dining chairs from the back of the truck. They set them down in the grass near the desk. The man in black throws his leg over the side of the chair and leans back, exchanging loud greetings with his guests.

"Furniture on the lawn. Unbelievable," Brittney mutters.

A woman with hair the color of fire—the kind that comes from a bottle of all places—steps out onto the front porch, and a line of colorfully dressed people stream out of the house behind her carrying oversized bowls and large steaming platters. They load the food onto a row of tables in the driveway. The fire-haired woman bellows and children appear from all directions, leaping into chairs and clambering for food.

Brittney, dizzy from the commotion, decides to abandon his walk. He heads back inside, closing the door gently, but tightly behind him.

At precisely four o'clock, ready to commence his afternoon rounds, Brittney tucks a wooden ruler into his





front jacket pocket and walks the twenty-four paces to the end of his driveway. The street is now quiet and empty. He takes a deep breath of summer air and turns to inspect his home. The trim below Window Three has a slight discoloration, which he writes in a small rectangular notebook. Turning his attention to the lawn, he pulls out the ruler and measures the height of the grass: Three inches.

The grass tips are thin and uneven.

Confused, he bends down, careful not to touch the ground, and re-checks the measurement.

*This lawn has not been mowed.*

When Brittney moved here, the Homeowner's Association did not include lawns. Anyone could mow it on a Tuesday or—perish the thought—let it grow wild. With his help, the Association established a beautification bylaw requiring a portion of the budget be used to ensure lawns are regularly maintained. If the homeowner is on vacation, behind on taxes, or dead, their lawn is mowed. Brittney couldn't take all the credit for these changes. It simply came down to doing the proper thing.

He stands, confused, and scans his property. He checks for specks of green grass on the sidewalk. Evidence that the work he pays for has been done. Evidence that is always present because no matter how often he points it out, they never get it all. There are no signs that a landscaper has been here. He sees a yellow paper waving from his mailbox, lifted by a light breeze.

"Sorry, we missed you" is scrawled on the front in black ink.

He turns the note over in his hand. The lawn company's logo and phone number are stamped on the opposite side. All down the street, yellow papers are taped to mailboxes.

Brittney heads back inside, stopping momentarily on his porch to take one last look across the street when a voice calls his name. His next-door neighbor, John, steps off his porch and walks right across the grass between their two houses as if sidewalks don't exist. Brittney grimaces, collects himself, and greets the man coming across his lawn. John holds his cell phone in his hand, looking down at it as he walks—another thing Brittney despises. In the twelve years they have lived next door to each other, John has grown less combative with Brittney's casual reminders about proper etiquette. He even bought new holiday lights a few years ago to match the specific kelvins the HOA recommended.

"Hey, Britt," John says. He lunges and rests a single dirty canvas sneaker on Brittney's third step. "Looks like someone finally bought the old Shelley place. It's too bad I didn't get the listing. Could've got great people in there," John says, jutting his elbow out conspiratorially.

Brittney takes a step backward. "As I have told you before, John, my name is Brittney. Are you aware the landscapers failed to mow the lawns today?" He says, his voice coming out louder than he meant.

"Lawns? No. Hey, did you see the car they got? I'd love to get behind the wheel of that," John says, motioning to the purple abomination across the street. Brittany is not a car guy, but he would recognize the make anywhere. It matched his father's prized possession: a classic white Ford Thunderbird. Sitting cross-legged on the ground scrubbing the white-walled tires every weekend while his father buffed the hood was one of his most cherished memories. The satisfaction he got from getting every speck of dirt and mud and restoring the tires to their pristine look. What kind of person would paint that car purple? He honestly could not imagine.

While he might have entertained John's habit of using many words to say nothing on a normal day, today was not the day for it. Brittney takes a steady breath. "Unfortunately, I am unable to engage in chit-chat with you, John. I must go."

John chuckles and pats the porch railing twice in quick succession, then walks back across the lawn. "Later, Britt!" he hollers as Brittney escapes inside.

The new neighbors may have abandoned their lawn, but now they have begun playing music loud enough to be heard across the street. Brittney paces in his den, trying to figure out what to do next. His other neighbors have started to arrive home; they gather at the ends of driveways, talking and motioning to the new house. No one takes a second look at their lawns.

*This will not do.*

He removes the carefully folded yellow paper from his jacket pocket and dials the number for the lawn service. After the third ring, he checks his watch. He is agitated when the receptionist finally picks up on the fourth ring. Her hurried breath into the phone just says, "Hello?" This is already not going well. How would he know that he called the correct number with a greeting like that? He would not. Except he regularly made phone calls to this particular establishment.

"This is Brittney MacArthur III of the Mentone Association. I am calling to report that we did not receive our scheduled service today. I assume you are aware of our longstanding account?"

"Hello, Mr. MacArthur. Yes, I am *familiar* with the account." A voice he recognizes says. "Our crews were unable to get the equipment into the neighborhood due to a large number of vehicles in the area."

Brittney taps his finger on the desk and says in the nicest tone he can muster. "Then you will need to return tomorrow."

"I'm very sorry, sir, but we won't be able to send a team out until next Wednesday. I am happy to credit the HOA for the service interruption."

"I need you to come out as soon as possible and perform the service for which you are hired to do," Brittney says, his voice raised. He is pacing again. His feet follow a faded line that is worn into the rug.

"I'm sorry, sir, that won't be possible. We look forward to resuming service next week. Please have a wonderful day."

Brittney hangs up the phone. He misses the old days when you could slam a phone down. The finality of ending a call is like slamming a door. Not that he would do such a thing, mind you. He throws himself into his desk chair and stares out the window, not moving for several minutes. His daydreams are filled with images of long grass blowing in the wind, leaves getting tangled in tall blades, strangers wagging their fingers in disgust.



Thursday comes, and the rhythm of the neighborhood continues beyond his window. No one stops to check their lawns. Yellow papers have been slid between unopened envelopes and cast aside on tabletops. Brittney pulls out his own yellow paper and rereads it, hoping the words have changed. He tucks it back into his pocket and whispers, "Six more days."

Brittney repeats his four o'clock measurement and is horrified to see that the grass has added a quarter inch to its height overnight. He glares at the looming black house. His eyes land on a second-floor window where the dark-haired man stands watching him. The man smiles, and Brittney tries to smile in response but can't manage it.

By Friday, he can no longer take it.

He tried to work.

He tried to do the dishes.

He even tried to dust, his least enjoyable but most rewarding task.

None of these things can ease his mind while the grass outside sways in the wind. Its height taunts him from the window.

At the end of his long work week, he attempts to tidy the desk that doesn't need tidying. He moves a pair of scissors from the desktop to a drawer, and when he does, it suddenly comes to him. A plan. He could leap out of his chair with excitement if he were prone to such acts of fancy. He calmly collects the scissors and heads for his bedroom. He opens his closet door and removes two hangers from the very end of the bottom bar: a black turtleneck and black dress pants. He lays the clothes on the bed and runs a lint roller over them. He dresses, slips on black loafers, and steps back to adjust himself in the mirror.

To allow this to go on would be madness. First, the lawns are not mowed. Then, people stop the upkeep on their homes. Before you know it, the neighborhood dissolves. People divorce and move away; the children are left playing in the street alone. He will not have it. This neighborhood will not fall into ruin under his watch.

He will cut the grass.

He will make it right.

He stands in his kitchen, outlining his plan. Starting nearest to the walkways in a grid and working his way out will be the most expeditious method. If he moves quickly, he can be done with the most apparent spots by daybreak. He gathers the scissors and ruler and holds them tightly in his hand.

The back door groans, announcing his covert exit. Of course, the door creaks *now*, he thinks, patting his chest for his missing notebook before realizing it is in his jacket. He slides along the side of the house toward the front. He peaks around the corner at the same time as a stream of light spills into the darkness. Brittney freezes.

John and his wife step out of their front door, casserole dish in hand, and cross the street. How could he have forgotten they were throwing a party tonight? Who throws a party in a house full of boxes?

He had ignored the handwritten note shoved into his mailbox. A proper invitation requires an RSVP. A piece of scrap paper, however, does not. Number Thirteen is full of music, and light fills every window. John and his wife walk straight inside without even knocking. He will never get used to this type of behavior. Brittney glances around, and with no neighbors in sight, he lowers himself to the ground. The cool grass flattens under his weight.

His eyes adjust to the moonlight, illuminating the grass before him. Lying on his stomach with his arms stretched out in front of him, he measures the grass and snips small sections with the scissors. He measures again and snips. Measures, then snips. He loses himself in the work, feeling a sense of control for the first time in days. He crawls forward, ready to move to the next section, when a man's face suddenly appears in the grass before him.

Despite himself, he squeals in surprise.

"Hi, neighbor, I'm Frank," the face says. Frank mirrors Brittney's position lying on his stomach, his face inches from Brittney's. He extends his hand in greeting, absurdly stretching out across the grass between them.

Brittney's eyes widen, and he wants to get up and run, but he resists. Running away would be improper, and Brittney is many things, but he is not that. Resigned, he sets down his scissors and shakes Frank's outstretched hand.

Frank's face is relaxed, his beard is unkempt but short, and he wears jewelry on his ears and wrists. "I heard that you were upset about your lawn. John told me this is very important to you. I didn't realize," he says, motioning to the scissors and ruler, "exactly how important. Please accept my apology; I assure you it won't happen again. Not on my account, at least." Frank holds Brittney's gaze until Brittney can't help but look away.

"None of the lawns have been mowed. Not just mine." Brittney mutters and glances back at Frank.

Frank raises his eyebrows slightly.

Fearing he was beginning to be rude, Brittney adds, "for clarification." He had been caught off guard by this man lying on the ground in front of him. Now, he is lying here, worrying about the feelings of a man who finds it acceptable to lie on a stranger's lawn in the dark. Brittney knows that he set the precedent by being already on the ground, but surely this isn't the way to conduct themselves. Brittney stands up, adjusting his turtleneck and brushing himself off. Frank stands, and they are close enough now that Brittney can see his full towering height. Tiny threads of grass cling to his sweater front, but he makes no move to wipe them away. When Frank starts talking again, Brittney has to focus hard not to point them out.

"As you can see, I am having a little neighborhood get-together tonight. I am making amends to the others. I came to see if you would join us," Frank says.

I would not call that a little get-together, Brittney thinks, but does not say. A new song begins with the apparent approval of the raucous crowd. "No, thank you. I do not enjoy that type of music, and I prefer to be alone," Brittney says. Thinking this would surely end the conversation, he waits for Frank to leave, but Frank stays.

"You like music then?"

"Yes," Brittney relents. "Occasionally, I listen to Tchaikovsky."

Frank's face brightens, and he begins humming Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1. Gently waving his left hand to the rhythm. It is one of Brittney's favorites, and he feels warmth spread through his body even as the temperature drops. He cannot remember sharing such a moment with a neighbor, even after a decade of HOA meetings and the years of being trapped on his front porch by John.

Frank has moved past humming and is now singing the tune, reaching a crescendo. Brittney loves the song but cannot take much more of this man singing to him in the dark. Frank finally stops and smiles. "I love Tchaikovsky; I haven't unearthed him yet from the pile of boxes in the basement. I'll have to take another look," Frank says. "It was nice to meet you, Brittney. I must get back." Frank says, he meanders across the street and returns to the rather large party at Number Thirteen Mentone Avenue.

Brittney looks down at his tools, a flimsy pair of scissors and a wooden ruler, seeing them now as a stranger must see them. He was foolish to engage in such behavior. It is evident in hindsight that his plan was impractical. Frank could have pointed that out, as Brittney certainly would have had the situation been reversed, but he did not. Frank did not seem to find any of his behavior odd; whether that was a good thing or bad thing, Brittney could not tell. He retrieves his tools and walks back into his house through the front door. He changes his clothes, folds the black outfit, and places it in a pile for the cleaners.

Frank had shown him a kindness that he had not returned. Brittney is pacing in his living room, listening to the muffled bass from across the street. He is flipping through records, one by one, on his shelf when his second and final plan of the night comes to him. He walks one hundred and forty-six paces across the street and leaves a record on Frank's porch.

Back in his living room, Brittney sits in his armchair and picks up his book. He is resigned to the grass being mowed on Wednesday. The music across the street stops, causing Brittney to look up. He smiles as the opening notes of his favorite song play. He opens the window a few inches to let the music in and lets the song wash over him.





At precisely nine o'clock the following morning, Brittney walks outside to collect his newspaper. Up and down the street, lawnmowers and leaf blowers buzz. All the lawns on Mentone Avenue will be mowed today. Brittney looks at the black house and sees Frank leaning against his doorway in a red robe and matching fuzzy slippers. Frank raises his coffee cup, and Brittney nods back. He turns toward his front door with a smile on his face and the melody of lawnmowers in the background.



The phone rang just as Lexi's 6th birthday party was starting. Kendra, the college student I had hired to entertain the group of eight girls, handed them gauzy scarves and led them across the grass. "Be a butterfly. Float on the air," she called.

The girls followed, swirling and swaying. I admired how free they were, how trusting. It was only ten in the morning and it was growing hot. The sun pushed its way through the leafy trees and the air hung heavy.

The parents of Lexi's little friends had happily deposited their offspring and left except for one mother who had stayed. Why did it have to be Blair, perfect Blair? She always looked as if she had just stepped out of a magazine with her tailored clothes and assured air. I felt messy compared to her though I did feel confident in my floral sundress that day.

I went inside to put on lipstick to feel a bit more polished. My phone chimed with its Lady Gaga ringtone. It was my Mom, probably calling to wish Lexi a happy birthday.

"Tracy, your father is missing," my mother said, miles away in New York.

"Missing? What do you mean?" I asked.

"He left the house without saying where he was going and he's been gone for an hour."

"Hmm, that's not so long," I said as I watched Lexi wave a yellow scarf over her head. I hoped that she would enjoy her party. She hated being the center of attention. I had told Kendra, "Don't make too much of a fuss over her." Kendra seemed to be following my instructions.

"This is your father we're talking about, a man with memory issues," my mother said in her teacher's voice, slowly and deliberately, as if she were explaining a difficult concept to me.

"Okay, Mom," I said as I took the paper plates out of the plastic bag. "Let's think about this sensibly. Where do you think he might have gone? What stores does he go to?"

"The usual—grocery store, bank, bakery, post office. But he didn't take his wallet. He has no identification on him." Mom sounded sincerely worried.

Outside, the kids screeched with delight as they blew bubbles. "Mom, I am sure Dad is fine. Why don't you check those stores and see if he's there. If not, we will call the police."

"The police?" she shouted. "Why would I call the police?"

"Because he will be a missing person. He may not be able to find his way home. Listen, I want you to stay calm and be careful walking. It's very hot today. If you don't find him in the next thirty minutes, call the police and call me back."

My mother sighed. "I can't go on like this, Tracy. It's getting impossible. I had to hide the kitchen knives. I never know when he'll turn on the stove and forget to shut it off."

"I know, Mom, and I'm sorry I'm not there to help. We'll make a plan for Dad. It's Lexi's party today," I said, trying to cheer her up.

"Yes, I know. Tell her Happy Birthday and tell her we love her!" Mom said brightly. "Is Steve there?"

"He will be over later." Why did she have to bring up Steve?

"I should hope so. It is his daughter's birthday, after all," Mom said, her worries suddenly forgotten.

I ripped open the box of plastic forks. "Mom, let's focus on Dad. Take your wallet and your keys. Very slowly and carefully, go down to the boulevard and see if you can find him."

"I will," she said. "And I'll call you back."

"Thirty minutes," I said, "then you call the police." We hung up. I felt my stomach coil in knots and though I'm not big on praying, I said out loud in the sunlit kitchen, "Please let Dad be alright." I couldn't bear the thought of my father, my brilliant, funny, artistic father, losing his way so close to home.

Lexi's birthday cake sat on the counter decorated with rockets and robots. She wanted to explore outer space and venture into worlds beyond ours. I believed that she would one day.

The cake was safe at the moment in the air-conditioned kitchen. I would serve it soon and send all the girls home with their party favors before noon. The sliding door opened and Blair poked her head in. I had forgotten that she was here.



"It's awfully hot, Tracy. Do you want to move the kids inside?"

I was tempted to say, "If you weren't wearing a black shirt and tight white jeans, you wouldn't feel so hot. Maybe if you put your hair up in a bun like me and didn't have it cascading down your neck, you would be more comfortable."

What I said instead was, "Let's see how it goes. Kendra's got everything under control."

I tried to smile but my face felt frozen, a bit like Blair's face with all her makeup.

"We don't want the kids to get overheated," she said, tossing her hair.

"No, we don't. Let's wait just a bit. Here, have some sparkling water." I handed her a cup with rocket ships on it. She glared at me, but took it.

"Feel free to come inside where it's cool," I said in an effort to make her part of my team, the adults at the party. She glared at me again and went back out. I didn't relish the thought of the kids running around my house but Blair had a point. I couldn't let them get heat exhaustion. I put six candles on the cake and gave a vigorous push to the good luck candle.

What were we going to do about my father? Clearly, the situation in New York was not good. His health was taking a toll on my mother. I hoped Mom would find him soon.

Men were always disappearing. My husband had taken off a few months ago with a bridesmaid from his cousin's wedding. I should have seen it coming but I wanted to believe that our life was perfect. I had tried to convince myself that Steve really was working late all those nights, but he was seeing Ashley. They planned to come by later to take Lexi out to celebrate.

Blair opened the door again. "Tracy, there's a large cloud. The yard's in shade. Why don't you serve the cake now?"

She was trying to be helpful. I silently gave her credit for that. "Good idea. I'll light the candles," I said, reaching for the matches. Maybe I should take up smoking to relieve tension.

No, terrible idea. I marched out with the cake, flames flickering.

The girls sat on plastic chairs around the table with Lexi at the head. She smiled and didn't duck under the table the way she had at her party last year. That was progress.

"Make a wish," I said, "and blow out the candles!" Lexi thought for a moment and with a large breath, she blew out the candles. Everybody clapped.

I cut the cake with a yellow-handled spatula from my Mom's kitchen. Blair gave out the slices. Even in the heat, not a hair was out of place, her nails were a bright pink and she had gold hoop earrings. What price did she pay for this perfection?

Her daughter, Aria, was a smaller version of Blair and, I had to admit, a sweet girl. Maybe everything was perfect in their family but who really knows what happens in other houses?

For a fleeting moment, I was happy as I watched the girls gobble their cake and wondered what Lexi had wished for when she blew out her candles. Then I remembered my father and felt fear rising. I had left my phone in the house. "Kendra," I said, "why don't you tell a story now? I'll be right back."

Kendra gathered the girls in a circle under a tree. "There was a bunny family," she began. "They went out for a picnic one day and what do you think happened?"

I went inside. Damn, I had missed a call. I listened to the message. It was Steve saying that he'd be a little late in picking up Lexi. Of course, he would. No surprise there.

I scooped up the basket with the kids' goody bags and opened the door. "Blair, could you give these out when the story is over? I have to make a call."

She took the basket and gave me a look that said, "I can run your party even if you cannot."

My phone rang. "I found him," my mother said. "He went to the bank. He's fine."

"That's great, Mom. Good work. I'm so relieved! Why don't you stop at that diner you like for lunch?"

"Maybe we will. You and I need to have a talk later, Tracy. We've got to make a plan."

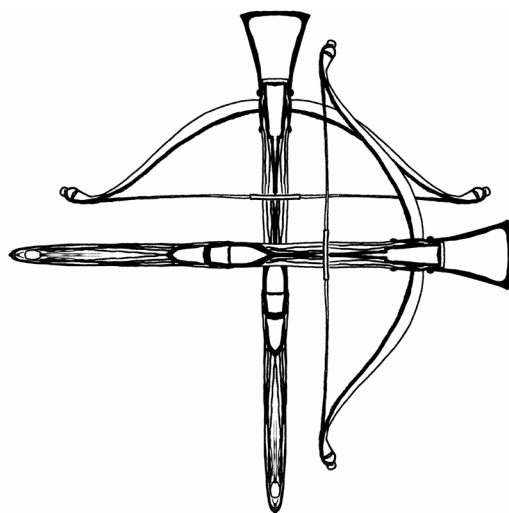
Out back, Blair handed out the goody bags. Lexi was talking and giggling with Aria. The sun worked its way through the cloud. Cars pulled up and parents came to collect their kids.

"Thank you," they called. A normal day, a child's birthday party, smiling faces, sticky hands.

Before Blair left with Aria, I went over to her. "Thanks for your help today. I couldn't have done it without you."

"No problem. Everything turned out fine," she said. I looked at her and wondered if her husband would ever be tempted to run off with a bridesmaid. Then I pushed that thought away and, for the moment, listening to the children's voices, I felt that Lexi's party had come very close to perfection.





Rabean plopped into his desk chair aboard our train. His blonde hair swayed with the motion. “Askar, they call themselves ‘wizards’ for crying out loud. What self-respecting User calls themselves that? I really don’t think they’re going to be that dangerous.”

The desk itself was a disaster, a perfect reflection of the man. Papers, files, notes, and books lay strewn about in no discernable order. My partner had never been one to be known as neat or organized. He was known for remembering the important things when they mattered, so I never complained, unless his mess spilled over onto my desk.

Having spent the last nine years as one of the Nineteen, a Prime Justice alongside Rabean, I’d learned to pick my battles. The desk was not worth fighting over. Over the course of that decade, we’d hunted our fair share of Users. It wasn’t ever “safe,” but there were instances in which it wasn’t as dangerous. In this specific case, I wasn’t as confident as Rabean was.

“If we’re going to rush into this, how do you plan on avoiding getting your head cut off again?” I asked.

“That technically never happened, Askar,” he raised a finger in punctuation.

“Fine.” It had come close enough to happening, though. I decided to try another approach. “How do you plan to prevent Chen ending up in the infirmary?” I asked, referring to one of the soldiers in our support squad who had accompanied us on that fateful mission.

Rabean threw his hands in the air. I crossed my arms and leaned against the doorframe, giving him my best stare down.

“There’s not much we can do about Chen,” the commander of the support squad, Darrun, admitted. Darrun was tall, taller than Rabean, and wearing his deep blue, double breasted wool uniform. The shoulders sported emblems of the Leonoghan Cavalry and the hawk denoting his rank. “The man’s one of the finest shots with a rifle I’ve ever seen, but by the Three Gods, he’s unlucky.”

While Darrun talked, Rabean gave me the look I’d seen countless times before, his “you’re not going to win this one” look. He wasn’t going to let it go. I wasn’t in the mood to continue the argument.

We were on the fifth mission in a row with no downtime or rest in between. Rabean’s gold hair was spattered with mud that had caked before it could be washed out easily. His skin was no longer its shining self, but instead splotched with some acne and bruising. The bags under his eyes were darker than I remembered.

I felt like he looked.

Still, there was no time to wait. Users always turned to evil at some point, without fail. There was something inherent about accessing magic that called out to evil. If we waited, there was a chance these Users would bring harm to innocent civilians. The entire point of the Nineteen’s existence as Prime Justices was to prevent such needless tragedies.

“Fine,” I sighed, pushing off the wall and walking over to fall into my own chair. “But we’re at least taking the support squad to help clear the tunnels. It’s a maze down there.” The information gleaned from our contacts said that this newest group of Users were set up deep within the hub of sewers underneath Colsach. Even after nine years, it still surprised me how many people end up using such predictable locations for their dens and hideaways.

“And then we do the final raid alone?” he asked with a smile. “Rabean and Askar?”

His suggestion was all bravado, but I gave the option serious thought. It was never a sure bet taking on a group of Users alone. We had trained our entire lives to do just that, however. Rabean also had a point—if they called themselves wizards, then they were likely just starting out their practicing of magic. Their magic would be just as dangerous to them as it was to us.

“I must recommend against that ma’am,” Darrun said, looking at me. His tone and demeanor offered nothing but respect. Still, there was a pleading in his eyes. It was usually wise to listen to the lieutenant’s advice but, he was a subordinate while Rabean and I were equals, our bond forged in the heat of battle. I would cave. Never had there been any real doubt of that.

“And then we do the final raid alone. Rabean and Askar,” I droned. Sometimes, being Rabean’s partner was like having to work with a child.

Rabean jumped out of his seat and grabbed the holster hanging from his bunk. He was infamous for that enchanted five-shooter. He had subdued a User before we met and had her enchant the weapon for him. He never had to reload, nor could he miss if he tried.

“Darrun, round up the squad. Askar, let’s get going while the getting is good!”

I let out an audible groan. “We can’t wait just a little bit?” My bones hurt. My eyes were heavy. I just needed a break. But Prime Justices weren’t always afforded such luxuries.

“How soon until the team’s ready?” Rabean asked.

“Ten minutes, if we’re in a hurry,” Darrun said. “Fifteen for a full prep if you don’t rush ‘em.”

“Fifteen is fine,” Rabean allowed, running his fingers through his hair. “Askar’s right. We’re going in with less than great intel. Full prep is best.”

“Yessir,” Darrun saluted. “Full prep. The squad will be ready in fifteen.”

“There’s your break,” Rabean smiled after Darrun left. At least he was letting everyone prepare. The last time we rushed the squad’s prep, they didn’t have time to pack extra ammunition for their hinge action rifles and we had to work double duty to get everyone out of that hellhole of a mess alive. I was glad to see Rabean had learned his lesson.

“I wanted an hour or two,” I couldn’t help but laugh. I reached back and grabbed the pillow on my chair and threw it at Rabean. He playfully swatted it aside and laughed as well.

A few minutes into our break, passed in relative silence, Rabean spoke again. “After this, we get a big break, you know.”

“I know. It just feels so far away,” I admitted.

“Mmm,” he agreed.

Rabean and I spent the rest of the squad’s preparation in the train car in silence. When the time was up, we both stood, looked at each other with a nod, and began to don our holsters and weapons.

“Askar, only you would bring still those mini crossbows to what is clearly going to be a gun fight,” Rabean teased.

“Some of us prefer stealth,” I retorted. “Plus, some girls like to be classy,” I added, clasping the final buckle. Exiting our office, really a bunk car on a long train, we found the squad ready to go, in formation, outside.

“Let’s go catch us some Users,” Rabean said, his face alight with excitement.

Had he known how the mission would turn out, I doubt he would have been as eager.



Rabean smiled at me and, despite the darkness of the tunnels, I could practically see his blonde hair shining, my memory creating things that weren’t there. Rolling my eyes, I urged him on. This was not the time to fool around, but that had never stopped his affable outlook on life from driving his actions. The soldiers were still in a cacophony of shootouts behind us within the tunnels.

Rabean entered first, as always. He was hopelessly chivalrous whenever we were in these dangerous situations, but his gallant nature was misdirected. If anything, he needed my help more often than I needed his.

I followed him in, mini crossbows at the ready.

The hub was located at the junction of seven sewers. Nearly fifty feet across, light streamed in from open grates in the ceiling, letting in daylight from the streets above. Someone had furnished the hub with flooring and furniture just above the water and sewage line. The presence of sewage was no less obvious, despite the attempts to make the place habitable.

Though the hub was empty, it was not lacking in bodies. The corpses of what must have been at least twoscore of guerrillas lay strewn about the hub, covered in blood and gore. Intermingled among the bodies of the guerrillas lay the bodies of Users, equally gory in their death throes. I took in the sight with horror. Rabean and I had seen our fair share of dead bodies over the years, but this was particularly brutal.

Standing at the opposite end of the hub was a man entirely clad in black—from his tailored three-piece suit and shirt to his boots. In stark contrast, his oiled-back hair was pure white, matching the point of hair growing from his chin. He held in his hand a glass, its contents a deep red.

Our informants said Users. They never said he was a Three Gods-damned blood mage! A string of curses coursed through my head. I could only imagine what Rabean was thinking. While we were proficient at what we did, we'd never encountered a blood mage before.

All my instincts screamed to turn tail and flee. Two Prime Justices are not enough to take down a blood mage. We all knew that. All nineteen of us.

Knowing we were outmatched, Rabean let off three shots in quick succession before the blood mage even began to lower his glass.

I was still aiming my mini crossbows when time stopped.

Rabean's bullets stopped in midair, a few feet from the blood mage. I realized that it wasn't that time had stopped, but the blood mage's magic had suspended almost everything within the hub. The water down in the sewers still flowed, and so time did, too. But everything else was locked in place.

I tried as hard as I could to pull my triggers, but I couldn't move my fingers even a hair's width. Other than breathing, my eyes were all I could move, cursing me with no other choice but to watch Rabean and what would happen next. He had the same look of terror on his face I'm sure I wore. His eyes were fixed on the blood mage, who stalked towards Rabean while I struggled to move any part of myself. I tried to call out to Rabean. To anyone.

Nothing came out.

The blood mage stopped not a foot away from Rabean—a spider looking over its catch. He drew a long knife from within his jacket and slid it slowly through Rabean's ribs, a manic look in his eyes.

I hoped beyond hope that he had missed anything vital, but I knew deep down that he had pierced Rabean's heart. The blade protruded from this back.

He left the knife buried in Rabean's torso and walked over to me. I'll never forget the smile on his face and the pure joy in his eyes at the devastation he had caused. He looked me over in a way that would have made me shiver had I been able to.

I prepared myself for the same fate as Rabean, but instead, he spoke.

"I shouldn't let you live," he mused. I could see the debate raging behind his eyes. Were they silver? I had never seen silver eyes before. "But I think I made my point with your friend over there, don't you? Besides, I need someone to tell the rest of your precious Nineteen—or I guess it's Eighteen now, isn't it? Well, whatever the number is now, your job is to tell them not to come after me again. If I kill you, it will just guarantee a repeat of today's performance. And no one wants that."

I wanted to rage. To strike. To show him what a fool he was for leaving me alive!

But I couldn't. I couldn't move. I couldn't do anything.

"Besides, you're too pretty to kill, my dear."

With that, he walked past me, finger caressing my cheek as he did so. I heard him climb out of the sewer.

I could not turn to chase him.

Or run over to Rabean, the man bleeding out in front of my eyes. My partner. My friend.

Even though the blood mage had left, nothing moved, and I was forced to watch as Rabean stood there, knife through his chest.

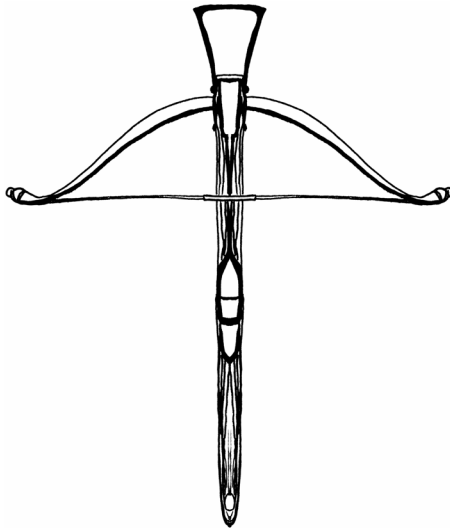
*He missed, I tried to convince myself. He missed the heart, and Rabean is going to be okay, just like he promised before we left.*

After what felt like hours, but was likely minutes, everything was released at once. The bullets Rabean had fired pocked into the wall directly behind where the blood mage had been standing. My repeated efforts to pull the triggers of my crossbow hit the trigger all at once, cracking the handles with my grip as the bolts were released to shatter against the wall. I dropped the crossbows and ran over to Rabean, now crumpled in a pool of his own blood, breath coming in gargled gasps as he drowned. Blood rushed from his chest, doing its best to make up for lost time.



I held his head in my lap and cried. It was all I could do for him to keep my eyes fixed on his as he left this world. To watch the life leave anyone's eyes is hard enough. To watch the person closest to you in this world leave you behind while they headed into the White Fields of Meogh...

It is not a pain I wish on even my greatest enemy. But that did not stop me from vowing then and there to send that white haired man into Rabean's waiting arms on the Otherside.



Had they not been out of even the basics, like bread and milk, Chelsea would have done her shopping in the middle of the week, never on a Saturday when the store was crowded with people. But with the pantry in its current condition, neither of them could have so much as a PB&J. Now that she thought of it, they were out of peanut butter. And jelly.

Resigned to a Saturday grocery run, she sat in the car, fingers draped over the steering wheel and took a few deep breaths. Her reusable bags sat in the passenger seat waiting to be filled with what she used to jokingly refer to as *real food* to eat this week.

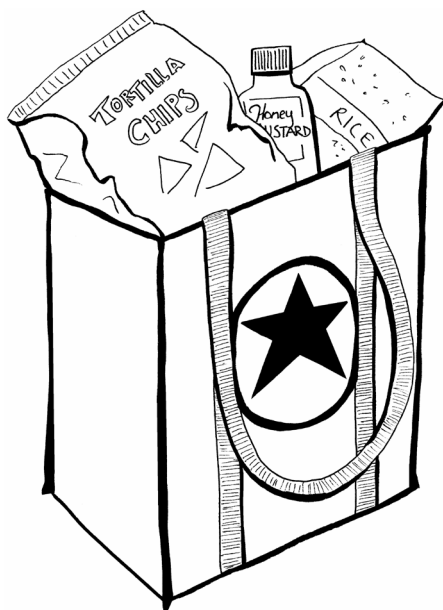
This shopping trip had to happen today or it would be yet another night of takeout. Not that takeout was always a bad thing, but after a while even that got old. And, if she was being honest with herself, she knew they were both missing her homemade food, though he would never say it out loud. Twenty years of marriage and three children with seemingly unending appetites had always motivated her to try new recipes and styles of cooking that takeout food could never match.

Since it was only the two of them at home now, grocery shopping was an easier chore than it used to be. With all those mouths to feed, Chelsea would often fill up her shopping cart to the point of overflowing and still have to make an additional trip or two during the week to keep up with all those hungry boys. A wistful smile crept to the corners of her mouth as she recalled those days. *"You people are going to eat this town out of all its food!"* she would tease as they piled their plates with seconds, sometimes thirds.

Memories of years past tagged along as she pulled the silver shopping cart from the long train outside the store. Her first stop was the cereal and cookie aisle, the scene of many a disagreement when the boys were small. All the food she hadn't wanted them to eat sat directly in their line of sight, each box more brightly colored than the last. The cartoon characters only adding to the constant temptation they'd faced. Even after she'd hurried them to the far end of the aisle, she would have someone pleading for a box of Frosted Flakes or crying for a pack of Oreos.

Standing before the adult cereals in their subdued packaging, all various shades of brown and orange, she patiently waited for an older woman in front of her to make a decision. Eventually, Chelsea pulled down two boxes of Special K and dropped them in the back of the cart. Before she thought too much about it, she plucked a package of Oreos from the shelf as she passed by, tossed it in next to the cereal, and turned out of the aisle.

She continued through the store, slowly filling her cart to levels she hadn't seen in a long time. Stopping to enjoy the coolness in front of the refrigerated shelves along the back wall, she looked over her list once more, crossed off things she had already located, and debated whether she bought enough eggs or too much bread. Contemplating whether to go back for the peanut butter she had missed or just skip it this week and move on, she lifted her head and her vision caught on a man standing in the chip aisle, no more than fifteen feet away.



A faint curiosity stirred as she looked a little closer. His tousled hair, his confident posture, and the slight stubble on his cheeks. She'd seen this man before, hadn't she? *There was no way on earth it could have been him. What was his name?* Her brain scrambled to remember but came up blank. The movie name came first. *The Avengers*. That was the easy part. But the guy. What was his name? It seemed to slip further from her mind the harder she tried to recall it.

Christopher, her youngest, had made her watch that movie so many times over the years she should know all the actors by heart. It was one of his all-time favorites. They would make a night of it when he was little — both in age and in size — snuggled up on the couch, a big bowl of salty, buttery popcorn between them. Once the movie began, speaking became a cardinal sin in their living room. The first couple times Chelsea watched the film, she'd enjoyed it, picking up little jokes and references she missed the time before. But by the fourth or fifth time, she'd stopped paying attention, mostly enjoying the popcorn and the company, and tried to keep herself awake. Sleeping through *The Avengers* was an even bigger sin than talking over it.

Renner! It hit her like a lightning bolt from the past. The man in front of her bore a striking resemblance to *Jeremy Renner*. Of course, this man was not wearing the costume of the character, because that would be weird. But his profile, his build, his hair — it was all Renner.

She had to know. She had to get closer and get a good look, just to be sure. What would Chris think of her if she missed an opportunity to get him an autograph? He might never forgive her.

In her heart of hearts, she knew it couldn't be him. How could it be? He was a big movie star and most likely lived in California or somewhere exotic. Why would he be shopping in a Star Market in central Massachusetts? She didn't need any salty snack food, but she did need an excuse to move in. With an equal mix of nerves and attraction, she straightened her back, pointed her cart in the right direction, and closed in on her target.

The superhero of aisle six had turned and now stood with his back to her, comparing one bag of tortilla chips to another. Pretending like she needed something there, she stopped next to him and said, "I'd go for the cantina style. Lighter texture and not as much salt. Unless you like salt, that is, then I'd go for the other ones." She reached up and grabbed a bag of pretzels.

With her arm raised less than a foot from the man's face, she became acutely aware that she had begun to sweat. Yanking her snack from the shelf, she prayed the radiating redness that flamed up her chest and into her cheeks wasn't nearly as visible as it felt.

The man raised his eyes to meet hers, an easy smile on his face and, she noted, no ring on his left hand. *Why the hell did she notice that?* A quick glance told her this wasn't the person she thought it was. It also told her — screamed at her — that this guy was pretty good looking in his own right. Glancing briefly at her ring finger, he shifted his gaze to look her in the eye. "I actually do prefer the lighter texture. I guess I'll give 'em a try." He put the other bag back on the shelf, laid the cantina style chips on top of a carton of eggs. "Thanks," he said and continued on his way, leaving a faint trace of his warm, spicy scent in his wake. Cologne? Soap? Deodorant?

Holding an unnecessary bag of Rold Golds in one hand, she spun her wedding ring with the thumb of her other hand. She had just flirted, as awkward as it was, with a strange man in the supermarket. Spinning the ring so the diamond was on top of her finger, she stared down at it. A sparkling oval cut diamond surrounded by a halo of smaller stones, the ring was just as stunning as the day Dan slid it onto her finger. Swallowing around the thickness that had lodged itself firmly in the back of her throat, she took a slow steadying breath and closed her eyes against the sting of tears.



"Hey, Sweetheart," she called when she heard the front door open and close two hours later. She heard his footsteps approach and enter the kitchen. The setting of the late summer sun cast a deep, warm yellow glow throughout the room. "You're right on time," she said. "I'm making honey mustard chicken." She turned and smiled, secretly pleased at the bewildered look on Christopher's face. He must have thought she'd forgotten how to make his favorite dish by now. "How was your game? I hope you worked up an appetite." While he watched her in stunned silence, she reached into the cabinet to grab out some dinner dishes.

"Yeah, Ma," he finally managed. "The game was great. I'm starved, actually." He took a halting step forward, eyes large and hopeful. Tentatively, he asked, "Any chance of rice pilaf?"

"Yup," she said. "Green beans, too. Why don't you go up and shower while I finish getting dinner on the table. You've got about ten minutes, so be quick." She smiled at him as he continued to stare. "You going back out tonight, or staying



home?” she asked as she taste tested a spoonful of pilaf. Oh, how she missed that taste.

“Because if you’re staying in, I was thinking maybe, if you wanted to, we could make some popcorn and watch *The Avengers* — or whatever movie you want. You know? Like we used to?”

Christopher walked over, leaned down to kiss her cheek. “Nah, I’m not going anywhere tonight. Everyone’s working but me.” He chuckled. “And *The Avengers* sounds good. It’s been a while since we’ve watched that.” He lifted the lid off the pot of green beans, stole one out and popped it in his mouth. “That’s good,” he said with a sigh. His eyes brightened as he threw out casually, “Oh, I forgot to write down the message earlier, but Charlie Pierson called again.”

She heard the optimism in his voice, felt his eyes on her, waiting for her response. With a vise-like grip on the spoon, she stirred the rice pilaf, trying so hard to seem nonchalant. “Oh yeah?” Resting the spoon on the counter, she turned, reached into the drawer to grab silverware. “What did he want?” Actively working to still her trembling fingers, she placed the forks and knives on the table, hoping Chris hadn’t noticed her reaction to Charlie’s call.

“Seriously, Ma? What do you think he wanted?” Chris smiled, grabbed a couple of glasses from the cabinet and walked to the fridge to fill them up. “Come on, give the guy a break. Give him one chance. One date.” He chuckled, placing the glasses on the table. “You know it’s not easy for a guy to ask a girl out...”

Crinkling her nose, she said, “I feel bad for any girl you ask out if you show up smelling like that!” They both laughed in an easy way. The way they used to. One of the bands that had been twisting so tightly around her heart loosened, easing the ache that had taken up residence there when Dan had died. “Go take your shower so we can eat.” Brushing an errant tear from her cheek, she shooed him away.

He backed away from her, hands up in mock surrender, his eyes full of laughter. She’d missed that. “OK, OK. I’m going,” he said as he turned and left the kitchen. Grabbing onto the doorframe, he leaned his head back in. “You should definitely call him...”

Before she could reply, he had gone, sprinting up the stairs toward the bathroom.



Conversation was minimal as they ate dinner, both sitting with the changes they could feel happening. Was there a time limit on grief?

Once the dishes were cleared, the popcorn popped, buttered, and salted, she and Chris took their old places on the tan, suede couch. The familiar movie started on the big screen on the wall across from them. At the first sight of Renner, the band around her heart finally fell away, halting her breath in its tracks. Wrapping her arms around her middle, Chelsea hugged herself to keep it all contained.

“What’s up?” Chris asked, casting a sidelong glance her way.

On an unsteady exhale, she whispered, “OK, I’ll do it.”

Chris paused the movie, turned to face her. “Do what?”

Blinking rapidly, she raised her teary eyes to meet his expectant ones. “I’ll call Charlie Pierson. It’s just one date, right? What’s one date?”

Clicking play again, Chris took the bowl of popcorn, grabbed a handful. “Shh,” he said, turning to watch the action on the screen. “There is no talking during *The Avengers*.” He shoved the popcorn into his mouth, and sank back into the couch, a smile like she hadn’t seen in years firmly fixed on the face that looked so much like his father’s.



Kamala wouldn't meet my eye, just stared at the bonfire. She wanted me to just leave her alone, but I couldn't. She needed me to convince her to dump her boyfriend.

"I know what I'm talking about," I said. "I dated him for 3 months. I know how he is."

Her silence stretched on, so I looked over her shoulder, at the huge bonfire. The hostess was flowing through the crowd, offering drinks and chit chat with everyone she encountered. She was blond and willowy and had a smile you could bask in all day. The host, on the other hand, was a solid slab of a man who was manhandling a huge log onto the fire. He looked like he dragged those tree trunks around just for fun. Probably while shirtless. And sweaty. His beard and hair were short, glossy - both of them light brown speckled with grey. His forehead sloped down to his nose in a curve so strong that his eyes were hidden within its protective grotto.

I forced my attention back to Kamala.

"You have to see what he's doing," I said to her. She said nothing, but her frown deepened and got sharper so I assumed she was listening to me.

"Everything is about him. Even when it's supposed to be about you, he makes it about him. Surely you've noticed that by now?"

She finally fully focused on me. "You know, Colman, when I offered to drive you to this party, he warned me about you and what a selfish little man you are. How you make everything about you. He knew you'd try to flip that around on him." She snorted. "Typical."

I sighed. He'd only broken up with me the week before, but he'd already repackaged all his pain as my fault. I should have expected that—it was the same way he'd hooked me in the first place. Still, they'd only been dating a week. There was still a chance to convince her to get out.

"You complained that he doesn't really listen to you," I said. "I had the same experience. All he's doing is waiting for a pause, so he can bring the conversation back to him."

Kamala had an amazing ability to communicate soul crushing disdain with a single muscle on the side of her nose. She let the sneer linger long enough that I was starting to wonder if I really was the bad guy.

"No!" screamed the host at that moment. The light from the fire made him look as red as a lobster. His entire body was tense and yeah, he clearly worked out. He was shaking with the effort of holding back the violence that roiled through him. His wife had her hands up, pleading. She looked so small, so fragile next to his sleek bulk. She reached out to stroke his huge bicep, but he jerked it away.

The whole party had stopped to watch the drama. Someone even paused the music. The only sounds left were water lapping against the rocky beach and the fwump of a marriage combusting before our eyes.

"You promised." His words were tight, controlled, quiet.

"Please? If not for me, then for what we once had?" Her words caressed him, stroked his ego. "For what we once were to each other?"

She whispered something to him and his posture went completely rigid. Her body language was silky, but I saw the desperation underneath it. He bellowed and grabbed a large rock from the ground. It must have weighed at least 20 pounds, but he palmed it and easily hefted it to his shoulder. He paused and stared at her, his glare communicating something that made her take a step back. Then he heaved the rock past her head and so far into the bay that we couldn't even hear the splash.

"I won't give up." His voice was flat, focused, intense. "Not ever."

It was classic abuse dynamics. The controlling husband, the pleading wife. Anger, bargaining, cold distance, the threat of violence and, inevitably, actual violence. He stomped off, into the dark past the bonfire and stood in the surf, staring out at the distant peninsula tips. She faded back to the shadows ringing the bonfire.



“Go ahead,” Kamala said, glaring right through me. “Go save her. That’s what you do isn’t it?”

I shook my head. “No, it’s not like that at all. Don’t you see? That was a beautiful example of exactly what I’m trying to warn you about. That’s what Aiden and I looked like after a few months and that’s what you and Aiden will look like in a few months. “

“You just can’t stand it when other people are happy, can you?” Her arms were crossed and her jaw was clenched, but she kept breaking eye contact. Like she wanted to be mad at me but wasn’t entirely convinced. I had to make my point quickly, before I lost her completely.

“Look, I’ve told you about my thesis, right?”

“Yes, yes, ‘Cryptids as Abuse Allegory: Deconstructing Cryptozoology as the Intersection Between Zeitgeist and Weltanschauung’. Do you Sociology majors get bonus points for using extra words?”

“It’s just a working title! What’s important is the premise—we can learn about the fears of a society by looking at the cryptid stories they told.”

She raised one eyebrow sarcastically and I rushed to continue.

“Selkies, for instance. They provide a good example of what I’m talking about. On the surface, they just seem like any other shape-changing creature. They’re seals when they’re in the water. But when they come on land, they can pull their skin off and transform into beautiful women. Or men. But they are almost always described as feminine vixens. And that speaks to the underlying fear and anxiety that their stories are meant to soothe.”

She turned her head decisively and looked past me. But she wasn’t leaving yet. I still had time to convince her.

“Most of the stories follow a variation on the standard patriarchal fantasy – a beautiful woman falls in love with a man and changes to fit his needs. She can always put her seal skin back on and go back to the sea, but she can’t come back to the land if she does that, so she stays. And, so, for a while, everything is good. She loves her husband, and often bears his children, who she also loves. The problem, though, is that the sea keeps calling to her. The lure eventually gets to be too much. In the end, she can’t help herself, she has to leave them and return to the water.”

Kamala sighed and shook her head. “Seriously, Colman. You were trying to convince me to dump Aiden. What does any of this nonsense have to do with that? Just make your point and let me leave.”

“Because in every story, the fisherman hides her skin! By the time she can’t bear to stay with him any longer, she discovers that the fisherman has made it impossible for her to leave. He robs her of her agency, transforms her into an object that he can own. Sometimes it’s out of desperation and love, sometimes he’s a cruel objectifier from the beginning. But in every case, he willingly imprisons her on the land, knowing it will cause her agony.”

She uncrossed her arms then and I thought I had her.

“It’s an abuse allegory. It’s a fictional method of warning women like you about men like Aiden. You have to leave him before he makes that impossible!”

Kamala glanced just past my shoulder and smiled. I thought I had scored a point with her, that she was starting to understand. I took a breath, ready to press my case. But when I inhaled, my head filled with a scent like seashells and citrus and musk. It triggered a memory of an ex-girlfriend who’d worn a perfume called Ambergris.

Kamala took advantage of my momentary loss of focus and backed away quickly. By the time I realized what was happening, she was gone.

“That was never going to work, you know.”

It was the hostess. She was the one who smelled like ambergris.

I shook my head in confusion. She was achingly gorgeous and clearly much younger than her husband. Her long blond hair was bedraggled but her eyes twinkled when I met her gaze.

“You can’t save her until she’s ready to be saved. She’ll need to suffer first.” There was a lilt in her voice that belied the harshness of her words.

“I had to try,” I said. I didn’t keep the sadness out of my voice. “I really thought she was ready for my help.”

“Well, I’m here now. Maybe you can help me?” A tiny little smile tried to play across her lips.

“What can I do?”

“Tell me what happens next? In the Selkie story?” she said.

“Oh? You’re really interested? Well. They all pretty much end in one of two ways. Either the Selkie can’t find her seal-skin and she dies a terrible death, far from the place her heart longs to be, or she gets her sealskin back and leaves everyone and everything she loves in order to be back in her element, knowing she can never see them again.”

She tucked an errant strand of hair behind her ear and leaned in, her voice low. “So, no Happily Ever After then?”

"Well, occasionally. Sometimes Selkies are seen in the surf, briefly playing with their children. They can't return fully to the land, and they never ever see their abusive husbands again. But it is a happy ending. Of a sort. As happy as the Scots will allow."

The hostess looked down at the ground between us. Her body language was soft, like she was trying to make herself seem smaller. Was she shy? Scared? I took a step forward, reached out to put a comforting hand on her shoulder. She flinched and took a half step back before visibly forcing herself to stand her ground. My eyes moistened and everyone else in the party receded to the horizon. I could still hear the fire crackling and the rhythmic surf but the noises of the crowd just faded.

She looked up at me, which felt weird—I was sure she'd been taller than me. Tears streamed down her cheeks. She didn't make a sound, didn't hiccup or shake the way most people do when they cry. She was completely still, nothing moving but the small rivulets of saltwater leaking from her big blue eyes. She said something so quiet that I took another step forward instinctively.

This time she didn't back away.

"I said that I'm Moira."

The October ocean breeze made me shiver and I wondered how she could look so comfortable in such a thin grey sleeveless dress. I quickly glanced at her arms. No bruising. She wouldn't have bared them in public if they'd sported grip marks, but still, I'd expected bruises.

"I'm Colman," I said and held out my hand. She glanced at it, then around to the rest of the party, then directly into my eyes. She must have seen something she liked because she sighed and fell forward into my arms, locking hers together behind my back. Her grip was surprisingly strong, like she could break one of my ribs if she'd wanted. But she didn't, she just stood there, enmeshed in my arms, silently quivering.

While I waited for her trembling to slow, I looked over her head to the party. No one paid any attention to us. Moira's husband was anchored with his toes in the surf, back to the party.

"You're wrong about Selkies," Moira whispered. If I had turned my head, my mouth would have brushed up against her ear.

"Mhm?" I couldn't muster anything more eloquent when her scent was filling my head with the ethereal hint of crisp breeze, underlined by the stink of low tide by the boardwalk.

"Selkies aren't like sirens and succubi. They don't try to seduce or deceive. They wouldn't be such victims if they were manipulative. They just plain can't help being so damn lovable - it's just what they are." Her breath singed my neck. "And they do truly fall in love with humans and try to commit their entire selves to making it work."

"So, why do they want to leave then?" I asked, wondering why she seemed so passionate about this obscure cryptid.

"They don't want to. They're creatures of both the sea and the land," she said. More tears welled up in her eyes. "They belong to both. And to neither. And no matter how much they love their human spouse and children, they can never completely escape the lure of the sea. It pulls on them, relentless as a rip tide." She looked at the waves crashing down on the pebble beach and sighed.

She wasn't looking at the bonfire. Or her husband. Just out. Following the tide. After a long silence in my arms, she said, "But..." and leaned back. As she inspected my face, her down-turned mouth softened, a hint of a fresh breeze.

"But what?" I asked.

She pulled away and looked back toward the sea. But this time she was looking at her husband. His broad back was turned to us. His open Hawaiian shirt flapped in the strong breeze and occasionally revealed his naked torso. It called to mind an abandoned mast - powerful still, but inevitably wearing down into driftwood.

Moira's expression was split equally between anger and lust and I sympathized. It's what my mirror looks like when I contemplate all my failed relationships.

"When I met Morvyn in Scotland, it was wonderful, right from the beginning," she said. "That first weekend together was...so comfortable. So natural. We fit...perfectly." She turned back to me. Her eyes pulled me in. "Have you ever connected with someone so instantly, so completely?"

I chuckled. "Oh God, yes. All my relationships, I knew within five minutes that we were meant to be together."

"And how did that work out?" Her smirk burned like a shot of rum.

I laughed. "Poorly. I should not be allowed to make quick decisions from the heart."

She put her slender little hand on my arm. Her fingernails were long and tapered and smoothly shellacked, but contained no color. "No! You can't think like that. All the most important decisions are made from the heart."



"And how is that working for you?" I knew I'd regret the snark even before it was out of my mouth and I wasn't wrong. Her face fell instantly. She shivered. I suppressed the urge to envelop her again, to give away all of my warmth to her.

"Honestly? I wouldn't change any of my decisions." She whispered it, then straightened, looked out to the ocean. "After that first perfect weekend, Morvyn got scared. He fled to America, to this godforsaken uncensored land of Maine." She breathed out heavy. "I couldn't bear to be separated from him and I followed immediately.

"Our love was still strong. It was good for many years. But now...."

She took her hand from my arm and placed one on each of my shoulders. I was engulfed. By her eyes. Her trembling lips. Her jagged breathing. "I really do need help, Colman. Can you help me escape this torture?"

My throat wouldn't work. It was too tight, too dry. I simply nodded.

She pulled me away from the bonfire, away from Morvyn's tense back, away from the party. She danced down an unseen path through the scraggly weeds that grew through the beach rocks. We came close to the water, but edged away. The beach quickly swept up, becoming a short rocky cliff face, topped with sickly looking blueberry bushes.

After a few minutes of skirting the bluff, she stopped and looked up at the slice of moon. She glanced back at where Morvyn must have still been standing. She didn't look scared. She looked alert.

"We don't have much time," she said, and slid sideways, hugging the wall of rock. She instantly disappeared and I heard her voice whisper, "Follow me, quickly."

I touched the rock with my left hand and stumbled toward her voice. The ground sloped down fast. I almost tumbled but caught myself with another half step into the dark. The rock was on either side of me then. It was a little crack in the stone that led to a larger space.

"No one who's drawn to the sea would think to look here." Moira's face was lit from below by her phone. It was just enough light to see the hint of a smile on her lips. "I'm smarter than he thinks."

The cave smelled of unwashed bodies and rancid fat. Moira turned her phone to the center of the room and the shadows ebbed, revealing the source of the smell. It was a pile of something I couldn't identify. Something I didn't want to identify. She pointed to it but didn't approach it.

"Take a closer look."

I wrinkled my nose and tried not to gag.

"You said you'd help."

I pulled out my own phone for more light. Some of it was slimy but part of it looked ... velvety. I dropped to my knees and reached out, took hold of the soft part, pulled gently. The whole thing slid toward me and I gasped.

"Is that..." I couldn't finish the question. It felt too ridiculous. But she nodded.

"Yes. A real live Selkie skin." Her voice was completely neutral, no hint of any feelings escaped.

I knew it was a ridiculous assertion. Selkie stories are true in the way that parables are true, but they aren't literal. This couldn't be a real Selkie skin. I knelt to stroke the fur. It so luxe that I only just barely stopped myself from burying my face in it. It felt like the biggest fluffiest kitty tummy ever. It was the platonic ideal of a seal skin rug, shaped exactly as you'd think it would be - domed head at one end, little feet at the other, two cute flippers on either side. It was big, though, much larger than Moira. Larger even than her husband Morvyn. The overall color was a creamy grey, with gentle gradations toward dark grey, approaching black but never quite reaching it.

Moira stood with her back pressed against the wall of the secret cave. She was right next to the entrance, leaning toward it slightly. Her face was frozen in an ugly moue. I couldn't tell if it was fear or disgust. Somewhere in between, perhaps, but it was clearly painful. I was about to jump up and comfort her, but she snorted, pointing to the sealskin.

"Well? What do you think?"

I stroked the fur. "It's glorious. So soft, so pure."

"Flip it over." Her voice was blank. Any emotion was submerged deep inside.

I stuck my hand under it so I could flip it over, but my entire arm jerked back immediately. My fingers were a sticky greasy mess, coated in a stench like bacon fat and urine. I looked back at Moira.

With a grim smirk, she said, "I thought you wanted to help. Don't be so scared. Go ahead. Really get in there."

I nodded and flipped it as quickly as I could, grabbing the fuzzy side as much as possible.

It lay just as flat this way. The shape of it was the same. But it seemed a foul evil thing, covered in gobbets of fat and exposed skin and stringy bits that might have been tendons. Ligaments? I don't know, I'm not a biologist. But from this side, it was clear that the removal of it had been a violent, ugly thing.

"Still think it's pure? Beautiful?"

I breathed through an incipient gag, nodded slowly. "Oscar Wilde said that all beauty must look ugly in some circumstances but that, equally, even the most grotesque object will be beautiful in the right light."

She laughed at my pedantry. "You think that skin represents the best of me? Hope and promise? No. That is not my freedom. It's my leash, my collar. It binds me. Limits my choices. We can't ever be together, Morvyn and me, not really."

She sighed and forced herself to look directly at it. "Not until it's destroyed."

"You.... you want to destroy it?"

Her mouth closed, tight, a flat line. There was a cold strength that I hadn't seen on her before.

"It has to be done," she snarled. "It has to be burned. Only then will I be free to love as I choose, to be free from what fate wants to force upon me."

Her anger was proof of the truth of her words and I was filled with glee. How many women can sever their bonds as easily as this? "Here's a lighter. Use it. Free yourself!"

She shook her head. "No. No I can't do it. These hands, they can't—it has to be...."

She trailed off, clenched her eyes shut. Took a deep long ragged breath. Held it, every muscle tensed. And then let it out smooth, calm. Her face was placid again. Eternally youthful. A hint of a hopeful smile. Her eyes opened and her need harpooned deep into my soul.

"Please. I need help to escape this trap."

She placed her hand on my wrist and breathed "please" a second time. Her touch was gentle but heavy and my resistance crumbled. She needed me.

The next few minutes were a haze of effort. I managed to wrap the thing up around me like a cloak and stumble out of the cave. Every step was an agony of effort, both physical and emotional. The ocean breeze kept changing. When it blew away from me, I could focus on the softness of the fur, the purity of it, how precious it was. But when the wind blew into me, my head filled with the greasy stench, images of the gore and the violence it represented.

I vacillated the entire time I lugged that immense sealskin toward the bonfire. Moira led me the entire way but paused frequently to stare at me or dart glances into the darkness.

"Hurry," she pleaded. "He is coming! I know it! He will do everything in his power to stop us. You must hurry!"

It took all my strength and concentration to haul that fur across the pebble beach without falling over. I assume that the guests made a commotion as they saw what I was dragging, but I don't remember hearing anything. I don't remember any shocked faces or people in my way. It was just me and Moira and the fire and that monstrously heavy burden.

Moira stopped by the fire and looked behind me. Her breathing got faster, more ragged.

"Hurry!"



There was a bellow of pure rage behind us. Large pebbles scattered with Morvyn's every step, each explosion punctuated with another gasp of anger, frustration, horror. And it did not cease as I struggled the last few feet toward the fire. His bellowing was continuous, never ceasing, ever closer.

"Faster!" Moira's eyes darted from the fire, to me, to her husband so close behind me. She was losing faith. Her spirit was breaking as she became convinced that I wouldn't make it in time. Her chest started to move in those shallow murky gasps that precede an anticipated grief.

I roared from the depths of my soul and pitched myself forward. All my energy was spent on that last desperate heave. The mucous sealskin stuck to me slightly, as if it wanted to pull me into the fire with it. But my surge was forceful enough that the giant sheet of rotting viscera launched right onto the top of the crackling logs. My knees hit the rocky shore. The hard ground punched me in the face and pulled the breath from me. My lungs fought hard to suck in a desperate gulp of air, rank with sizzling hair and fat. I choked on wood smoke mixed with the stench of burning grease and my own sweat.

Behind me, Morvyn hit the ground with a massive grunt. He howled repeatedly with a deep anguish that filled me with shame. It was a powerful, masculine cry, but still somehow sounded like the wail of a terrified baby.

I looked back to see if he was going to kill me or Moira. But he was flat on his belly, and looked like nothing more than a pile of blubber with a face near the top. His arms were partly pinned under his chest, so only his hands were visible, splayed out in front of him, twitching feebly. His mouth hung open, his graying whiskers motionless.

He never stopped his plaintive honking, but I could have survived that. It was his eyes that undid me.

Large, too large. So dark. Almost black. Moist. They were focused past me, on the skin I had launched into the fire. They didn't blink, like he couldn't bear to miss even one tenth of a second of the immolation.

I looked back to Moira. Her facade of helpless need had fallen and she was grinning an ugly rictus of triumph. She didn't glance at me even once. She had eyes only for Morvyn. Each time he cried out, her smile widened.

"You can never leave me now," she whispered. "Never."

That's when I finally understood.

Selkies, you see, are not always female. And the jealous spouses trapping them on land are not always men.

Morvyn snuffled and whimpered, his last hope for freedom sizzling behind me. His eyes lifted to mine and I saw no anger there. Only a mute helpless need. His gorgeous eyes. His prematurely aged face. His firm, strong bulk beginning to wither.

I opened my mouth to apologize, but what was there to say?

I stood and looked down at that beautiful, ruined man, seal, Selkie. He looked back at me, and I saw the tiniest hint of what his happiness might look like. His beard twitched.

Before I could reconsider, I dove into the fire to save what I could. It probably wouldn't be much, but he needed me to try.

In the end, that's the only thing that mattered.

He needed me.



# THE DEATH VALLEY MOVING ROCKS: Verso

In Death Valley, one moving rock collides into another.

One says, "Hey, you're in my way."

The other says, "No, you're in my way."

And they both strain against each other, trying to continue in the path they started on.

Eventually the first rock says, "Look here buddy, one of us just has to move half an inch in any direction and then we can both be on our way.

The second rock responds, "Alright, buddy. Any day now, you are welcome to move; I'll be right here waiting."

The first rock says, a little indignantly, "Clearly, I was here first, so you should cede the right of way."

The second rock says, a little mockingly, "Clearly, we both arrived here at the same time, otherwise we wouldn't be in this situation. Since you had the brilliant idea of moving, why don't you go ahead and follow through."

The first rock huffs a rocky huff and digs into the sand a little.

The second rock cocks an eyebrow.

Next to the two rocks, observing their predicament, is a short, sprawling beavertail cactus. While the two rocks argue over right of way, the beavertail cactus grows five big, wrinkled magenta and mauve flowers. The flowers have always known the moving rocks, because to the flowers, the moving rocks have always been there. A wind picks up, and the petals shudder in the breeze, surprised. They smell salt water. Briny seaweed. And they don't know

where that memory comes from. All they have known is the cactus, the sand, and the moving rocks.

The first rock looks to the sky and says, "Looks like rain."

The second rock looks to the sky, prepares a sarcastic remark, but says nothing as little drops of rain fall on its surface.

The cactus and the rocks are soon partially submerged in water.

"Well." The second rock says. But he phrases it like a question.

The beavertail cactus flower petals stop trembling as the water level rises.

The first rock, muffled by the flood, says, "This is an interesting development."

The second rock says, slightly stifled, "You don't say."

The first rock slides half an inch to the right as the sand shifts with the weight of the water.

And the second rock chuckles a little, low and menacing. Until the second rock realizes he is stuck. "Shit."





THE DEATH VALLEY BEAVERTAIL CACTUS: Recto

It starts with the seed in the sand.

But it starts before that. It starts with a bird that carried the seed it picked up while it was grazing for insects in tall sea grass two hundred miles away.

It starts with the seed in the sand, and then a little bit of water in the dry sand, and the seed drinks it all up and grows and grows until it grows into a beavertail cactus, sprouting like a hand rising from the grave. It drinks and starves, and drinks and starves over the course of many years. Its leaves expand and shrink, and those leaves grow new fingers — hands sprouting out of hands. Some years it grows flowers, bright furled purple and pink. It joins the desert in a celebration of color. There are other cacti in this part of the desert, who grow great, big, beautiful desert flowers — burnt orange, bright red, alarming yellow. But none of these cacti or flowers are close. So the beavertail cactus admires them from a distance.

Other birds carry seeds and drop them in the nearby sand, but they do not grow. The cactus is alone for all the years it has known.

One day, just over the horizon, the beavertail cactus notices two large, round objects on the horizon. It measures the distance to be about fifty miles apart from each other. As the days go by the objects move closer to the beavertail cactus and closer together.

It takes long months before the two objects come into focus. Rocks. Two big boulders, moving at a slow and steady tic, set on a path of collision. They do not know it yet. But they are moving at the same speed, in identical conditions, destined to meet. The beavertail cactus knows this and wishes it had a way to communicate this with the rocks.

It has met a rock once before.

It was not a kind encounter.

It starts with a seed in a sand that grows into a cactus that lives a long and fulfilling life, with challenging and fulfilling days of water and a beautiful landscape to watch. Some days there are birds overhead. Some days there are objects on the horizon. But the beavertail cactus knows that most days just bring sand. Sand and more sand.

The rocks continue on their path for long months of sand.

The rocks continue on their path for long months of sand.

The rocks continue on their path for long months of sand until their paths finally meet and they collide.

The rocks continue on their path for long months of sand until their paths finally meet, and they collide, and they spend long months arguing. Who should move. Who should roll. Who should cede the right of way. Who is in the right. Who is in the wrong. And then it begins to rain.

The Death Valley beavertail cactus has never known it to rain quite like this, where the skies open up and sheets of water fall down on the earth like a waterfall. The rain smells briny, a storm picked up on the coast. The beavertail cactus remembers its beginnings. A small seed found on the coast, picked up by the feathers of a bird as it was digging for insects.

The water smells like home.

Despite its origins as a coastal seed, the cactus has never known this much water. The ocean always seemed too far away, and it never seemed this large. The ocean was always a strip of blue on the horizon. Harmless. Pretty.

The rain falls too fast to soak into the sand the cactus has known for most of its life. The water levels rise. The petals stop moving. Float away. The leaves move in the current. The cactus thinks the rock shifts, but it can't tell under so much water.







# Fiddlehead 2023 FOLIO Vol. 1

## Seven stories by MetroWest authors!

Neighbors, friends, authors: that's what members of the MetroWest Writers' Guild are. Contained in this journal are seven stories written right here in MetroWest by writers who are working on their craft and telling awesome stories.

Within these pages are stories about tigers, "superheroes," selkies, mothers, rolling rocks, and wizard-hunters. Each offer unique perspective and powerful voices! Pick it up today and cheer on working artists living in your area!

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