

ATTRACTIONS: FIVE STORIES

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HONORS THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Attractions is a collection of short stories that portray the theme of how the past influences the present. Although the stories concern unrelated people and subject matter, they are united in a world where the characters are constantly attracted to people and things who remind them of events that have happened in the past. While some characters attempt to suppress their history in death, abandonment, greed, or escape, it always remains a part of them.

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COBWEBS

I cannot say I have been here before,

Yet I walk to an opened gate

And see that path in front of me is dark,

while the path I have left behind is clear and bright.

I walk past the gate and feel,

the lines of cobwebs upon my arms, chest, and face.

Although I brush the cobweb from my blouse

and continue over the unlit ground,

the strands remain.

Attractions is a collection of five stories that center on the theme of how the present is attracted, by people or events, to the past. My interest to write a collection based on this theme stemmed from my interest in anthropology's subfield, archaeology. Where archaeology seeks to interpret and understand past human life through material remains, the characters of my collection seek to understand what is going on around them and with others. They seek to understand their history so that they can understand themselves and learn what they will become. Without their past, these characters do not have an identity. My collection involves unrelated people and subject matter, and the characters must come to understand their own "attractions" of death, abandonment, greed, and escape. These characters may try to suppress their past according to their attraction, but it always remains a part of them.

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The Water Collector

Dave was pulled out of my life a month ago, maybe that was the reason I was riding on the road. I knew he wouldn't be out here. I was just lonely and Dave was too far away. I always thought he would have taken his bike if he left me, but he was dead and *that* road can only be traveled on foot, I guess. All that remained now was this road, the bike, and myself, because our house was too filled with the cold air from the absence of my husband.

I couldn't live in the house after Dave passed, so I went to my parents. I had been living with them for a month now, but the air was stagnant. I knew I needed to get out, so I returned to the house Dave and I shared and found his bike. I decided to ride and I pedaled as fast as I could.

On the road, my heart pounded in the cramped cavity of my chest, and still, I continued cycling at a feverous pace. My knees jerked in violent circular motions and cold sweat trickled down the back of my neck. The scenery blurred past my periphery in whirls of greenwhile, all along the road, overgrown grass bowed under the northern wind. The flesh of my jaw line shivered from the cool temperature.

The road was a former highway that had long since become the proverbial road less traveled. I learned of it from Dave, in the days when he rode out here and returned to me with his heated grin. Maybe it was something about the wind grazing his ears, but he was always riding. Dave could be gone for hours at a time, and when he returned, his exertion would cause his chest to rise high and low, and his arms and face glistened with sweat. To cool himself, Dave would lie on the ceramic tiled floors of our living room and listen

to the click hum of the ceiling fan. Slowly, his breathing would relax until he would stand, fully recovered.

“Why don’t you come with me next time?” he would ask.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Come on, Olivia. It’s not gonna kill you. Just this once.”

I would shake my head. I yearned to share the recovery on the floor with Dave, but I was frightened of my murmuring heart. It was my greatest fear that Dave would witness this weakness and I never wanted Dave to look at me as if I were fragile.

I was tired of the term “fragile”. My parents used those words to describe me a thousand times. I grew to believe I was indeed a “fragile” girl. I shunned rough sports and running, any adrenaline-inducing activities. Then I met Dave.

I had stepped blindly into his path as he was riding downhill. To avoid a collision, he sacrificed his balance and rolled a small distance. I was horrified at my carelessness, but Dave was made of stronger stuff and laughed off his injuries. He encouraged me to enjoy the recklessness of our youth. Still I would not join him on his rides.

“It’s flat as a plate, Olivia”, he would say. “And only eight miles. You’ll be alright, I promise.”

“What about the traffic?”

“There’s nothing out there. It’s all fields and country.”

On the road for the first time today, I suddenly understood the joy and peace Dave must have experienced. I passed telephone poles and thin trees and the fields seemed to stretch for an eternity. There was something that resembled flying, and the road was a

smooth grey ribbon beneath me. It was in this peace that I felt my chest grow tight and my heart began to pound. I ignored those signs.

I felt I was being watched then and I turned to face a woman leaning against an aged metal fence that enclosed a small vegetable garden. She wore a faded blue dress that fell to her knees. I met her eyes under the threadlike silver hair that blew across her face. She stiffened as we made eye contact, but beneath the strands of her hair, I saw a gentle crescent of a smile.

I turned away from her. There was something familiar in her eyes. It was the same look of fatigue that I saw in my reflection in the mirror. Then I heard the rigid breath escaping my mouth. I looked at the road again and the ribbon snapped as I collapsed into hard pavement.

The first thing I knew when I woke was a vicious throbbing in my head. I opened my eyes and saw the woman kneeling over me. Her wrinkled mouth looked tense and shocked. I shot up into a seated position.

“The bike!” I gasped, wincing from a burning on my head.

“It’s on the road” she said, pointing to it. The bike appeared stiff and lifeless laying on the road. I didn’t want to see it and focused my attention on the pain in my head.

I felt the side of my temple. My fingers touched something warm and rough. When I examined my fingers, I saw that they were colored fuchsia.

“How do you feel? Do you need me to call an ambulance?”

The woman looked scared. I realized she must have seen me faint. Suddenly I didn't feel the pain so much.

"No. I don't think so," I said. "I think I just need to rest a little." I started to stand and the woman helped me to my feet. I examined my arm and saw that the skin was torn, as if it had been scraped by a cheese grater.

"You could come inside, if you want."

"That would be great."

The woman lifted the bike upright and began moving towards her house. Instinctively, I reached for the bike and pushed it myself. She eyed me cautiously as I hobbled down her dirt driveway. My legs felt stiff. At least the throbbing was beginning to subside.

"What's your name?" I asked the woman.

"Eileen," She answered. "You?"

"Olivia. But thanks, Eileen. I'm real sorry about this."

Eileen continued to eye me warily, so I turned my gaze to my left hand that clutched one of the handles of the bike. I still wore my wedding ring. A few nights ago, I had removed it and saw that the skin underneath was pale and unfamiliar. I wasn't ready to part with the ring and quickly returned the band to its rightful position.

"You married, Olivia?" Eileen asked suddenly. She must have noticed me observing my hand.

I tightened my grip on the handle. "Yeah. He left me a month ago though."

That was the truth, technically. Dave died a month ago and left me. The euphemism was easier to voice than a blunt answer. I just figured Eileen wouldn't pry.

"That's too bad."

There was a blue truck in front of the house. We passed the garden and I could see all sorts of vegetables hanging off the green stalks. I leaned the bike against a side of the house. Eileen led me up the three wooden steps to the front door. The steps groaned under our weight and I felt my heart palpitate in my chest. Eileen must have sensed my uneasiness because she said, “We’ll be inside in a moment.”

She set me down on a couch and disappeared through another doorway. I closed my eyes. Somewhere in the dark rooms of the house I heard a ceiling fan. I could feel my heart relaxing and growing regular. I opened my eyes. A light poured into the room through the blinds and created a glare that gave the room a smoky glow. The room was small and clean, but I could only think of the road.

When Dave returned from his rides, sometimes he would tell me about the road. He described it as a nostalgic vision of a past a he never knew. I would close my eyes and try to imagine all that he saw as he rode. Eileen returned from wherever she had gone and disrupted my thoughts of Dave. She had a wet rag and a glass of water.

“Drink this,” she said, placing the glass in my hand and began patting my temple with the rag. “What were you thinking?”

I tensed as the water touched my head, but I brought the glass to my lips and swallowed slowly before answering.

“I was riding,” I said. “It was windy.”

It had been windy on the road. That was one of the reasons I had been pedaling so fast. I was pushing against the wind. I felt like it was attempting to discourage me from riding, so I pedaled faster and faster, until my heart pounded in my chest.

“You got pretty scratched up from that fall.”

I brought my hand up to the rag and took it from her. Eileen stepped back. I felt the torn skin of my temple again. I felt lightheaded, but I wanted to see the extent of the damage.

She led me to the bathroom and I locked the door behind me. In the mirror, I could see bits of pavement embedded in my skin. My lip was swelling and numb and I could feel tender bruises forming. I was surprised the fall did so much damage. I cleaned the wounds with water and soap and dried them carefully with a towel. The wounds throbbed, but it didn't matter. I would heal.

I unlocked the door expecting to see Eileen waiting, but she was not in the hallway. As I walked down the hall, I observed some framed pictures on the walls. Eileen and a man, who I presumed to be her husband, occupied every frame. They both had those long thin crescent smiles. I was glad that Eileen wasn't alone.

I met Eileen in the living room. She was sitting on the couch with her hands on her knees. She stood, and said "Please, sit."

I shook my head. "I don't mean to be a nuisance, but could I use your phone?"

Eileen let me use the phone in the kitchen. I was going to call my parents and tell one of them to pick me up. I imagined they would yell at me for pushing myself too hard, for riding alone, for riding at all. I didn't want them to fret over me or treat me like a child, but I dialed the number anyway. The phone rang three times before I heard mom's voice.

"Hello?" she said.

"Hey Mom."

"Olivia? Where are you? You just left without saying anything."

I hesitated to answer. "I know, but I needed to get some air. I went on a bike ride."

“What? Where are you now?”

“It’s alright, I’m ok. I just fell is all.”

I heard her talking to someone in the background. It was probably Dad.

“Hey mom. I’m alright. I’m just scratched up a little.”

“Olivia, you tell us where you are, and I’ll come pick you up right away. I can’t believe you went out like this. Did you hit your head?”

“Yeah, my lip is kind of swollen.”

“Oh my God, Olivia! You know you have a condition,” she said. “What if you have a concussion?”

“I don’t think so. Goodbye mom.”

I hung up. It was a mistake to call her. I returned to the living room.

“Did you get a hold of anyone?” she asked.

“No,” I answered. “I left a message though.”

Eileen accepted my answer and looked at me uncomfortably. I felt that I was becoming an inconvenience.

“I guess I should get going then. Thank you for everything, Eileen.”

She looked alarmed. “Don’t you know, Olivia? It’s going to rain.”

She led me outside and pointed to the dark clouds that were almost over us. They must have been tailing the wind from the north. Eileen turned to me and said, “Why don’t you stay until the rain finishes. I wouldn’t want you riding in the rain and I don’t think it should last too long.”

“You sure?” I asked. “I really don’t want to be an inconvenience.”

“Please. I don’t want you to fall like you did again.”

She told me to take my bike inside and put it in the kitchen. I noticed that the chain had come loose from the bike. I crouched and lined the chain back onto the gears, staining my clean fingers with dark grease. I spread the grease over the palm of my hands. The grainy texture of dirt and grease was soothing. After I put the bike in the kitchen, I went outside again. I saw plastic buckets lined up against one of the sides of the house. I walked towards the back and saw Eileen carrying buckets from a small shed.

“I can help.”

“Are you sure?” She looked at me uneasily.

“Yeah. I’m just scratched up, but I’m ok.”

I took a few buckets and helped her to set them on the ground, just under the edge of the sloped roof.

“What’s all this for?” I asked.

“The rain’s coming. I’m collecting water.”

“Why?”

Eileen smiled. “My husband, Edward, got me started doing this. It helps to conserve and there’s a tank in the back that stores all the water. It’s just for the plants and the yard. You know, cause it gets real dry out here sometimes.”

I agreed. I knew how dry it got. Dave sometimes came home from his rides and told me how all the grass was turning to dust because it was so dry. I’d look into his eyes and see that they turned red from the particles of dead grass in the air. He’d swear that the grass would splinter into a million pieces if he slipped off the road.

When we finished, we went back inside. It had grown dark now. I could smell the rain and the wind was growing stronger.

“It should be a good rain,” Eileen said. “These should each fill a little over half way.”

Eileen brought a chair from the kitchen and we sat in the living room. I felt a connection to Eileen. It was as though we were related, although I couldn't say why. I wondered if perhaps I was merely a memory that she had stumbled upon, a memory that happened to fall along the side of the road. Whatever the case, the silence was driving me up the wall. Then I spotted the Singer in the corner of the room.

“So you sew,” I said.

She turned absently towards the machine.

“Yes.”

Suddenly, the rain came. It pounded on the roof, and, through the blinds, I could see the rain falling like a thick curtain. I was glad I was not on the road.

“Edward bought the sewing machine as a gift for me for our first wedding anniversary. He knew I always wanted a Singer.”

“That's nice,” I answered.

“I made this dress, you know. I found the fabric real cheap in the city and the pattern too. But that was a long time ago. It's cheaper now to just buy ready made clothes. When I was your age, I used to make everything I wore.”

Eileen turned away from the sewing machine.

“You said there's a tank in the back?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I could help you fill it up before I leave.”

“That would be good.” Eileen smiled at my suggestion. She must have been at least sixty-five, I guessed. She had a messy braid whose loose hair framed her face and made her look a little wild. I liked that she looked wild. I must have appeared monstrous to her with my grated skin and swollen features.

“What happened to your husband, if you don’t mind me asking? I mean, you said he left.”

I bit my lip. I really thought Eileen wouldn’t pry. I was wrong. She was just trying to know more about me.

“Was there someone else?” she asked.

“No,” I said curtly. “It was nothing like that. He just couldn’t stay.”

I started thinking about the buckets outside and all the water that would fill them. After the rain, the collected water would turn murky and green and grow full of mosquitoes. I would hate to be here when the mosquitoes rose from the buckets as blood suckers. Eileen could become a feast in a few days.

“Is something wrong, Olivia?”

I looked at Eileen. She was staring intently at me. It was that same look of fatigue that she had when I first saw her before I fell. I didn’t understand why she had that look.

“It’s nothing,” I said. “I just have a heart murmur. I’ve always had it. When I do something that overexerts my heart, I can faint. That’s why I fell.”

“Well, that can’t be helped,” she said.

“No, that’s not it. I know how I am, but I just wanted to ride.”

Eileen laughed. “There’s nothing wrong with that.”

The rain stopped about an hour later. There were still grey clouds in the sky and the sun was starting to set. I knew I would have to head back to my jeep soon. I didn't want to ride in the dark, even though the bike had a light. Eileen and I went outside. The ground was soft and wet from the rain, but we went to observe the buckets. Like she said, they had filled a little over halfway.

We carried the buckets to the tank. There was a tub into which we poured all the water. Eileen showed me how a pump would filter the water before it was stored. I noticed that every movement and direction that Eileen made was full of an intense emotion. It was as if she was acting out a ritual.

“Eileen?” I said. “Does your husband always get home this late?”

Eileen straightened and she suddenly looked frail.

“No, he died about six years ago.”

“I'm sorry to hear that.”

She continued explaining how the tank worked, but I saw that now her movements were quick and her voice turned flat. I regretted bringing up her husband. I didn't want to leave her with my condolences.

“Eileen.”

“Yeah.”

“My husband. He didn't just leave me. He died too.”

I heard Eileen breath deeply. Then she said, “You never had to say anything to me, Olivia. I just knew that look. I knew you had lost him.”

I was shocked. I felt my heart pounding and for a second, I thought I would faint again.

“You know, Olivia, I thought with you, I could pretend a little,” Eileen said. She took a step away from me. “But pretending wouldn’t change anything. Edward would still be gone. I guess you thought you could pretend a little too, didn’t you?”

“It wouldn’t change anything,” I said.

“No, it wouldn’t. Like I said, I knew that look.”

There was a wet film at the base of her eyes. Eileen took a second step back and we could only stare at each other. She looked so lonely standing by the tank. I rushed forward and embraced her with both arms.

“I don’t know what to say to you, Eileen.”

“You can’t,” she said. She pushed me away. “There are no words.”

The sky had grown considerably darker by the time we came to the front of the house.

“I could give you a lift,” she said.

I brought the bike outside and lifted it into the bed of the truck. The walls of the bed were wet from the rain and stained my shirt. Nevertheless, I got the bike situated and joined Eileen in the front. She started the truck and we jostled on her dirt driveway until we hit the road. I looked out the window. I didn’t feel like speaking. We drove a couple of miles down until we came upon my jeep. Eileen pulled over and parked. She helped me lift the bike from the bed and watched as I stuffed it into the trunk. As I closed the trunk door, I saw that Eileen had climbed into her truck.

I waved to her and she smiled sadly when my jeep started. We drove in opposite directions. After Eileen had gone into the distance, I stopped the jeep and glanced in my

rear view mirror as her truck diminished from a rectangular form, to a speck, and into nothing. I was alone, just as Eileen was alone.

Soaking

I was haunted. I was haunted by her pale figure because she bathed in a frigid tub, claw-footed, and filled to the rim with ice-cold water. She was burning, so the water steamed as she lowered her pallid body in the tub. It haunted me that she was steaming, my sister.

I was compelled to distance myself from her and lay outside in the sun, hoping for my brain to boil. If it boiled, I might not remember the reason I was haunted. Outside, there was this old table my sister and I used to play on as kids, with our lemonade glasses and homemade dolls with simple smiles that mama sewed on from her retired dresses. The table was painted a lovely maroon, identical to the sweet thick wine that opened my eyes when the young and jocular Evaristo grew quiet and pulled me close. A long time going and gone since I enjoyed that wine, but the sun faded the table grey.

It wasn't really bathing what she did in there, rather, she soaked. So I soaked in the sun, except I would hesitate to call it soaking too. What we did was more of another nature. We were waiting.

Cumulus clouds loomed above, transforming while they traveled as I lay out on that discolored table. I never saw anything I would call cute in the clouds. I've seen falling children and lions, but I never really saw anything in the clouds. Often, I would think of things, like if heaven were down below and hell were high up and people were praying opposite of their intended direction this whole time. I pictured good God underneath it all, scratching his head.

When I wasn't interested in the clouds or directions, I would close my eyes and listen

to the cacophony of cicadas and songbirds. Sometimes their sounds reminded me of something familiar, but more often, they reminded me of a primeval melody from the ancient days of hard-living survivors.

This particular day, I was troubled because my sister was taking an extraordinarily long bath, so I went outside to the old table. There was a tree whose branches were directly adjacent above the table. As I looked past the branches and leaves, I could see great black birds circling in the distance. With the highway a few miles out, I knew that those buzzards were doing a feast dance for some unfortunate wide-eyed deer, lying on the road with its innards slipping out. I imagined the circling was for me. There was a little comfort in the thought of being ripped apart: at least I wouldn't be haunted from her bathing.

My sister called in the middle of the night, her voice wet and cracked. She sounded coarse, even though she bawled during the entire conversation. It was a peculiar feature, that she could be two parts forced together, like the twin sides of a magnet. I was always surprised that she never cancelled herself into oblivion.

That was three months ago. Her husband walked out the door, stiff in the shoulders, not facing her, and saying she better be gone when he returned. I never thought her husband was much of a man, but for him to say that to her, and for her to heed his warning meant real trouble. And that real trouble went by the name of O'Henry.

He came into her life rambling on about some fast scene, just like a good short story. A relationship blossomed between them. My sister found herself followed. When she was with her husband, it was O'Henry she imagined at her side. O'Henry followed her in her mind, when she woke next to her husband, breakfasted, and when they said goodbyes. O'Henry was always with her.

Soon enough, those imaginary scenes became tangible and she loved him. But my sister was an honest one, and admitted the infidelity to her husband. From his reaction, I suppose they both knew their marriage had been disintegrating, but he was still sore hurt. It was what came later that night that broke my sister and caused her to whimper, with her hands wrapped around the phone, shaking.

O'Henry was following other women. She could not have him solely for herself, and he did not love her. With a husband full of hate and a lover stuffed with lust, she checked into a hotel and gathered enough courage to call me. I didn't listen to judge her. I listened because I was all that we had.

The dirt in the air from the driveway signaled her arrival. She stepped out of a gray paint-chipped truck and withdrew two suitcases from the bed. Her hair was light and dusty from the unpaved road, whose dirt surface had spilled into her truck through the lowered windows. She wore a distinguished look in her eyes that I had not seen before. Adultery begets notability, I thought. Her eyes were hazel, sometimes green, and other days gray and brown. My sister stood away from the light so that her face was darkened and her eyes danced, changing from green, to grey, brown and back again. It reminded

me of the eyes that danced as the river ran over them.

She slept late into the day and early into the night. For a week she did not leave that bed, and I was frightened to visit her. Then one afternoon, she emerged from under the quilted blanket, went into the bathroom, and turned on the water. It thundered into the tub. The scent of cold water spread through the house. When her flesh touched the water, her steam floated over the wooden floors. That afternoon as I waded through the steam that covered the floorboards, I was again reminded of Evaristo, my Evaristo bathing at the bottom of an emerald bed of riverweed, the water steaming from his warmth.

I recalled the river, made clear by the sun; I could see straight through and count stones on the riverbed. It was a cold morning, sullen-cold, but the water was alive and running. A steam veiled the riverbank. When I rushed to the source, he was laying on the bottom with his eyes glistening under the water. Later I learned he had taken a midnight swim while his friends sat along the edge. For a moment, they turned their attention elsewhere, and when they noticed his silence, he had disappeared. It was a joke, they thought, because he was always looking for a laugh.

I stood looking into his eyes that looked through me as figures pushed me and jumped into the river, pulling him out. With my eyes still locked onto his, I went over to him and held his hand. It was warm, it was burning. I knew the water steamed, because he burned.

In the light of the sun, I thought of my sister laying in the tub. My home had become a tomb to her body and to my memory. We could wallow together, as sisters, as spirits, but I wanted her to live, so I moved towards the house, leaving a warm spot on the old table.

“The door’s open,” she said in a routine voice. Since she bathed so long, it was a rule that I could enter the bathroom for the sake of relieving my bladder. I did not enter the room. Instead, I sat down near the door holding a fresh towel in my lap. Closing my eyes, I listened. From the silence, my sister did not move in the water.

“I don’t need to go” I said.

She remained silent.

“I wanted to talk to you.”

When she didn’t answer, I figured she had not heard me, so I repeated,

“I wanted to talk to you.”

“I heard you the first time.”

She waited. I fingered the threads of the towel, wanting to return to my place at the table. She led me to that spot, but I could not allow for her to make the water her own- it was a place that had been filled a long time ago. She waited for me, to hear what I had to say.

So I started. “There was a boy when I was in school, a boy who was loved by everyone. He brought us a real gift; he made us laugh. Even his name was something delightful on our tongues. He made me laugh then, he made everybody laugh then, but what I remember the most about him came from one night at a party. I had gone with my friends, although I knew little about the place and hardly any of the people. The boy was there, but I only recognized his face and his jokes. I did not know the boy. It was something, how quickly all the kids welcomed me. I had never felt so included.

“It was requested that every one of us bring drinks. I remember there was someone’s uncle’s homemade wine. Huckleberry- that’s what it was. It was beautiful, sweet, its taste was so thick that I thought it could be chocolate melting in my mouth. I brought generic stuff from Dad’s liquor cabinet.

“I was apprehensive when we brought the drinks out. I didn’t want to drink, but my

friends persuaded me to take something, anything, so I chose the huckleberry, since no one had touched it. For some reason, perhaps it was because the bottle appeared foreign in my hands, I made my way to an isolated tree away from the crowd. I sat down under it.

“The boy was sitting against the tree, but I didn’t startle him when I sat down. He began to laugh immediately. When I asked him what was so funny, he revealed to me that he came to the tree to be relieved from the crowd. He found it humorous that I came to the same tree.

“He asked me to stay with him, since we both sought solace from the tree. He said we could split the bottle. ‘A dessert wine’ he told me. At some point I addressed him by name and he grew quiet. He pulled me close until we could see the Cyclops we both really were. He asked for my name. ‘Minnette, call me Nettie, but never Minnie.’ I told him. He didn’t laugh, most people think it’s a joke when I say that. ‘Of course Nettie’ he said.

“Someone called him away from the tree so he left me. ‘Just give me a minute, alright?’ and I waited for him, sleepy from the wine bottle long since empty.

“He didn’t come.”

It was silent for a minute, then she answered,

“Is that all? How some boy didn’t come back for you?”

“No, that’s not it. I waited for the boy, but he didn’t come. That was my choice. I shouldn’t have waited. What I’m trying to say is you can’t wait the rest of your life for something that won’t come. I should have gotten up from under the tree; I might have found him somewhere. We might have had fun, but I didn’t get up to find him. It’s exactly what you’re doing- waiting for something that’s not going to come. You can just

keep laying in there, or you can get out and dry yourself off. What are you going to do?”

The sound of water rising against the walls of the tub broke the silence. It ringed and I imagined the glassy texture of the water broken while my sister lay in a bed of rippling liquid, her skin shining from the glow of the bathroom lighting.

“You didn’t have to bring all that up Nettie. If you want me to leave, say it. I’ll go. I don’t want to be a burden on you.”

“I don’t want you to leave. Stay. You can stay. Just listen to what I’m saying. Take a look at what you’re doing. Come on take the towel.”

I held out the towel through the sliver of the door. The weight of the towel pulled heavy at my arm, as though the forces of nature were attempting to discourage me from reaching my sister. We waited, my sister in the water and I, tired from my outstretched arm. It was a moment of silence where heroes are made, where a voice is heard and I felt myself pushing open the door and crawling on the bathroom floor until I was directly in front of the tub, holding the towel extended towards her.

From behind the transparent shower curtain, her silhouetted figure resembled an upright egg. I was taken aback. I had imagined that I would find her laying, instead she was curled, in a defensive position, waiting for an assault against her body and her mind.

A surge of her breath filled my ears and I felt her words sliding down into my stomach, as she said, “It’s that feeling ...I was a part of something with him. I thought he wanted to be a part of me and I of him. Do you know I haven’t felt like that in so long? And now that he’s gone. It’s gone too. This doesn’t make sense, but it was real.”

My sister faced me behind the curtain, her features were distorted, but I was staring straight into her eyes.

“That boy, what was his name?”

I had only truly known Evaristo as he stood from under the tree and left me. In that simple desertion, I knew I had a decision: I would remember him because I had seen all he was and all he would ever be.

“I don’t remember. I heard it a long time ago”

She accepted the answer, but did not turn her gaze from me. Suddenly, she looked so young behind the curtain, no longer a distorted figure but something defined, while I felt old and warped. She could really walk out the door without a haunt to follow her. It was too late for me. I never stood up from under the tree. If I could make her understand, she would not have to become a vessel like me, to store the memory of someone the whole world’s forgotten. It wasn’t too late for her.

“Take the towel.”

“Take it” I repeated, “Come on. We’ll go out tonight, you and me until we’re both so exhausted that we’ll just collapse. I’ll be there for you until you don’t need me anymore. Come on. Take it.”

I thought of his eyes dancing in the river and I, the girl, now a woman, who waited for him under the tree. That girl never left from under the tree. She was still hopeful. I thought of the old table outside with all its memories of the weight it supported from the girl, now a woman alone. I did not want my sister to become a woman clinging to a memory.

“Take it” I said once more.

I heard a shift of the water and her fingers grazed the plastic of the curtain.

Purgatory Nights

The night Jix came home, the moon was bright and looked like a silver dollar suspended in the sky. The moon always looked like that. Even with the light though, shadows still managed to cover his face. I thought Jix was a stranger, and I would have known him for every day of my life. Mama didn't recognize him either. Maybe it was the way he stood. It wasn't familiar. The Jix I recalled always stood straight and appeared to reach the sky, but the stranger at the screen door was crooked and grey. His clothes were the color of dirt and the smell coming off him was something of filth. He was foreign and did not belong in our clean kitchen. Then Mama asked hesitantly, "Can I help you?"

We had forgotten Jix. Purgatory kept us in the moment of our deaths, but Jix had changed. Behind the dirt and greasy, wild hair, I saw the stranger's eyes change to alarm for a second. Suddenly he began to laugh. I knew it was my brother then. It was his smile: the opened grin and those pearly teeth that stretched too wide across his face. Mama screamed his name, leaving her mouth gaping at him. I unlocked the door and Jix entered the room, taking a seat at the table. He sighed and said, "It's good to be home." I watched Jix as he smiled at us. Although he had been gone for three years, it could have been as if he never disappeared.

Jix vanished on a summer night three years ago. I had awakened to a silent house and saw that the digital clock on my dresser was flashing numbers. In the night, there had been a harsh thunderstorm that must have knocked the power out. I wasn't afraid of thundering or lightening then like I am now, and Mama usually woke me so I would not sleep the day away since I was only twelve— still relatively a child— so I was surprised

she had not come yet. I wasn't worried though. I was sleepy and enjoyed the warmth of the bed. I wasn't worried though. I was sleepy and enjoyed the warmth of the bed. My bladder caused me to climb from the bed and move into the hallway to the bathroom. After I finished, I heard a sound.

It was a low moan coming from Jix's room. The door to his bedroom was left ajar, but I hesitated to open it. With a deep breath, I pushed against the door and saw Mama, kneeling, almost prostrated at the foot of the bed. She wore her night dress with her long hair curtaining her face. Behind the hair, her face was swollen, but my mother's appearance was not the most alarming sight of the room. That sight was reserved for the bed. It was made up and cold from having not been slept in. From her position on the floor, Mama glanced up at me and cried, "Where is he, Valie?" I recall that my knees shook and I had to sit. I didn't understand.

All I can say is from that morning after my brother's disappearance, Mama and I suddenly began to change. Overnight my pleasant girlish mother transformed into a skeleton. Her mouth tightened while her eyes grew tired. Even her hair thinned and eventually fell out in handfuls. But it was her hands that underwent the most frightening change. And she had the loveliest pair of hands I had ever seen.

They were a paradox; they were soft and strong. As a child, I remembered at times her hands were harsh, since they carried out corporeal punishment, but they were also healing hands that caressed away my pains. However, in Jix's absence, the skin of her hands seemed to wither until they resembled something of nightmares. Mama's hands assumed the appearance chicken feet and when she grieved for my brother, her fingers, like talons, pierced into my back while I trembled from the sight of her.

I also aged. During his absence, I was forced to mature too early. When I observed my features in the mirror, I appeared malnourished, while my skin seemed papery, almost translucent. I ached too— although I cannot say from exactly what. Maybe it was from missing Jix. I don't think Mama ached though; she was beyond aching.

The night Jix returned, neither Mama nor I could sleep. We were afraid that if we slept, then we would wake to find that my brother's return was only a dream. Together we waited out the night and in the morning, I peered into Jix's room. He lay curled in bed and the sheets moved according to his breathing.

I wish Jix hadn't come back. I think it would have been better for Mama and I. His vanishing made us grow so ugly. It wasn't fair that he should be able to return and smile as though he had never left. But we couldn't change the fact that he was sleeping in his bed again, and the emptiness that caused us to age before our time had departed.

There had been many nights during my brother's absence that I created lists to ask him. I wanted to know the places he had seen or the people he had met. Those questions were merely words to fill the emptiness, and they floated around the house like packaging Styrofoam that served to protect precious items within a box. My lists protected Mama and I from the reality of our deaths— we had been burned alive. Instead, we often thought of the wonderful adventures my brother was witnessing in life. And now that he had returned, I realized I had nothing to say to him.

He rose in the late morning, closer to noon. Jix's footsteps were hard, but Mama and I were still surprised when we saw him enter the kitchen. "Good Morning" he said in a melodious voice that made my ears ring. I watched as Jix returned into the hall. The

sound of running water let me know he was in the bathroom. I left the kitchen to join him.

Jix stood leaning over the sink with his mouth foaming from toothpaste. He stared directly into his reflection. Jix was the only person I knew who stared into a mirror and when he did, it was like he was watching someone he recognized. Whenever I looked into the mirror, I was surprised to see that the reflection was what my body appeared to be.

He saw me and spit. “Come here,” he beckoned with his hands. “I want to get a good look at you.” I stepped in front of the mirror with my brother. Jix still towered over me. “I missed you Val”. He put an arm around me and squeezed my thin shoulder. I glanced into the mirror then. We were brothers and we looked nothing alike. “What happened to us, Valie?” I listened for my mother but only heard silence. “Valie?” Jix was waiting for me to answer. I looked into the mirror again and saw a series of puncture marks running up my brother’s arm. At the base of his arm where it connected to his hand, was a deep line filled with dried blood. “I don’t know,” I said and bolted to my room.

Over the next few days, I overheard Mama and Jix speaking of how things used to be in the time before Jix vanished. They never spoke of the reason Jix left though and Mama never asked. She was content that my brother was finally home.

Then one night, Jix came into my room. I could hear thunder outside and lightening was flashing. I closed my eyes. Ever since Jix left, I couldn’t live for the sound or flashing of a storm. They served as reminders of the terrible night when Jix left us. But I felt his hands nudging me. “Valie. I need to talk to you.” I opened my eyes to see the

silhouette of my brother. I shot upright in bed. “I need to talk to you about *that* night,” he said.

I could hear him breathing. It was hard and staggered, as if he were trying not to whimper. “I didn’t mean to leave you or Mama” he said. Lightning flashed and I saw Jix’s smooth cheek dotted with rain shadows from the window. I closed my eyes again. I was tired. I wanted to sleep even when it was impossible because of the sound of our two pounding hearts.

“What do you remember about the night?” His weight shifted on the bed. Behind my closed eyes, I could vividly recall the night Jix disappeared. “It was just like tonight,” I said. “There was a thunderstorm.” I could feel Jix leaning towards me. “And in the morning, you were gone.”

He sighed. I couldn’t see Jix in the blackness behind my eyes, but I imagined that he was turned away from me, too ashamed that I would see his tears. “I tried to come back so many times after that night,” he said with his voice muffled as if speaking from behind his hands. “I just couldn’t”. Jix’s weight lifted from my bed and he left my room.

I didn’t speak to Jix about coming into my room. Around Mama, we ignored the meeting too. And then one day at the table while Jix and I were eating and Mama was washing dishes, I saw a worm fall from my brother’s nose. It was fat and white and squirmed on his plate. Without flinching, he picked out the worm and squeezed on it until it popped. He wiped the worm from his fingers in a napkin.

I rose from the table and staggered into the bathroom, kneeling over the toilet mouth. Jix’s footsteps sounded in the hall. “Don’t!” I cried. The door pushed open, but it wasn’t Jix; it was Mama. She placed her hand on my shoulder. I looked at her. “Mama.”

She embraced me with her sharp hands, but I welcomed her. In my ear she whispered, “It’s going to be alright Val”. Jix was at the door now. “What do you remember about that night?”

“I don’t remember anything.” Mama released me, holding me at arms length. “It’s alright Val, you can say it,” she said. I took a deep breath and bit my lip. “You said we never had to say what happened that night,” I responded to Mama. “I know, but now’s the time. Jix is home.”

My brother was watching me with his bright, sad eyes. “He knows, doesn’t he?” “Yes,” Mama answered, “But you need to tell Jix you forgive him. I already have.” “Why? Can’t he stay with us. I missed Jix so much.” Mama shook her head and turned to face my brother. He was staring into the mirror, watching the reflection he recognized as himself. “It’s not fair Val, but I can’t stay here. I killed myself. And I’m starting to decompose. I need your forgiveness, so that I can move on before... well, I don’t want y’all to see me any other way except like this.”

I nodded. It was cruel of me to deny Jix forgiveness. In a few months, he would be nothing but a mass of writhing maggots. I wouldn’t want to see him that way, and Mama didn’t need to either. So I started, “I remember, it really was a dark and stormy night. Mama was asleep in her bed and I was asleep in mine because back then, the lightening and thundering didn’t scare me. And sometime in the night, a lightening bolt struck the house, starting a fire. The smoke killed Mama and I before the fire did. But the roof collapsing certainly finished us off. You weren’t home though.

“You had snuck out like you usually did in those days—to be with your friends or just to get out of the house. Then you came home and there were fire trucks and a crowd.

You watched the house burn to a skeleton, Jix, and you knew that you were all alone. If only you hadn't snuck out, then you would have died in your bed like Mama and I. That is how you left us, Jix. You didn't die with us, but I forgive you."

I was bawling by the time I finished, Mama's eyes were wet too. Jix just stared at me from the doorway. "It would have been better if you didn't come back," I said. He smiled. "I know. But I got so lonely." Mama and I rose from the floor, my knees shaking a little. Mama hugged Jix and kissed him on forehead. He put his arm around me, but looked to the direction of the front door. "I should get going soon."

Mama and I agreed. Jix stayed a while longer and I cherished the last days with him. Then one evening, he faced the front door again and said, "I should get going." Mama and I didn't try to stop him. We held each other as Jix put on his good coat and shoes. He opened the door, but held the screen out. "It was good to see y'all again." My brother stepped out through the door into the night.

It started with a Pair of Pearl Earrings

I can say that we weren't rich, and we weren't poor either. We were comfortable, but we were not without want. I remember in the kitchen with Mom in all her finery, the blue silk kimono that was frayed along the hemline— she desperately wanted the appearance of luxury. And Leonard with his pressed shirts that he would spend his evenings making sure all the creases were perfect to the “t”. Even in the evenings of our normal dinners, Mom would take out the fine China and use the glass cups to fill with fresh tea. If I chipped a plate, through carelessness or otherwise, she made sure there was hell to pay. Yes, there were wants.

Then one day Dad came home with his hat skewed to the side and grinning between his ears. So we listened, Mom, Leonard, and I, and we learned of the promotion. It seemed that Dad was finally recognized. He would have to go to work in suits and buttoned shirts and shined shoes and ties that hung around his neck. All of these things would cost money, but surely, his promotion would quickly pay off. We assumed so and sure enough, they were paid for in no time at all.

At first, I remember that Mom was able to give us nicer things, like replacing the curtains and the bedroom sheets, they were all replaced one at a time, and then one day, I came home from school to see, like muted stars on her ears, a pair of pearl earrings. They were lovely, I thought so then as I do now, except I didn't understand their purpose. Mom had procured them not as for the benefit of the family, but for her own appearance. It was not

I who questioned her on the earrings though. Dad came home, with an unfamiliar shadow under his eyes and said, “Are those new?” Mom smiled girlishly with a shoulder shrugged and twirling her fork in spaghetti, “Well you know...”

There were little things, small changes to our surroundings, and later those changes began to trickle into our dress and manners. I guess it was about this time that I entered Leonard’s room searching for something— for what exactly, I cannot recall— and I saw lining his closet floor were large plastic bags reading J—’s Cleaners. Upon further inspection, I learned that Mom was having his shirts dry cleaned and pressed, and when he passed me at the house, whether that was the kitchen, the hallway, or the living room, I caught the unmistakable scent of dry cleaning formula. There were noticeable changes.

Even Dad was affected, not only in appearance, but also at home. Mom got one of those remotes that controlled the television, VCR, stereo, and other things. I just sat against the couch, imagining I was sinking into the depths of the cushion, and watched as stuff accumulated throughout the house.

It was some time after these changes that one evening after accompanying Mom at the grocery store, I discovered the cranberry nail polish resting on my dresser. I was taken aback for a moment, then I remembered that it was the exact color and vial I was inspecting in the beauty aisle. But I explicitly recalled having replaced the polish in the slot on the counter. I gave it a few moments of consideration and decided that the polish must have simply followed me home.

Two days after discovering the polish, I painted my nails with three coats and as I sat for breakfast at the table, Mom said matter-of-factly, “Oh good, that *was* the color you liked. I was afraid I took the wrong one.” I looked up from my plate at her, but she had turned away from me and instead focused her attention on flipping the hissing bacon on the stove.

There was something about the way she turned that struck me odd. At the grocery store, I watched as each item was scanned by the apathetic looking cashier. I did not see the nail polish. And Mom tapped her fingers on the counter so that I heard her nails clicking like the quick roll of drum sticks over a snare rim. It was the sudden impatience, the same in the store as the way in which she turned.

I watched her closely on our mother-daughter excursions to the grocery store or elsewhere. We would enter these stores and her behavior would suddenly, as if by the simple flipping of a switch, grow impatient and her mouth would become taut in a need to hurry. She walked quickly between aisles or clothing racks, her eyes darting from item to item. She was searching for something, I knew that immediately, but for what, I could not say. She bought very little on these excursions.

A few weeks went by and I found a new nail polish resting on my dresser. These discoveries continued, one every week, until I had accumulated a very detailed collection that could have matched any painter’s color palette. I changed the colors daily, as if

according to my mood, and rarely would I consider when Mom must have gotten the polishes because I never witnessed as she purchased them.

Then one day as Mom and I sat watching the tube, Leonard entered the room with a small flat rectangular box in hand. Shaking his head, he stretched the box to Mom and said, “I don’t want this. I don’t need it.” I watched as Mom’s placid expression slowly distorted into a furrowed brow and wrinkled mouth. “You didn’t like it?” she said. “I liked it well enough,” Leonard answered. “I just don’t need it.” With that he dropped the box in her lap and disappeared into the hall.

“What’s that?” I wondered. “A watch,” she said. Mom still looked upset, but her expression struck me as confused. She couldn’t understand why Leonard didn’t want the watch. After all, he had liked it.

Not long after that, I saw Leonard pull out the ironing board and he slowly began to press his shirts. “I thought you were going to the cleaners,” I said. As he pressed, he answered, “Yeah, Mom was sending them, but it costs too much, and I can do it here myself for free.” I listened and looked down at my painted fingers and thought how the cotton balls and acetone and q-tips all added up, especially when I changed colors every day.

In the evening, or more accurately, in the middle of the night, I woke to the sound of hushed voices coming from Mom and Dad’s bedroom. They were arguing in whispers and the sounds frightened me more than shouts. “Where’s all the money gone to?” my

Dad hissed. "...everything just costs money," my Mom answered. "And the prices are rising." There was silence for a moment, but soon enough, the voices stormed on again. "I don't believe it. How can we not save money?" I realized then that the polish, the earrings, the remote, all the changes in the house were costing us and that ever since Dad's promotion, our wants had been growing and growing, whereas in the time before the promotion, we were content with maintaining an appearance of wealth. Now, once we were able to afford luxuries, the cost was in fact pulling us apart. Instead of having an appearance, we were strained.

The whispering continued on a weekly basis, and still, Dad asked, "Where's all the money gone to?" Mom ceased answering him after a time, there was no answer she could give, or was willing to give. Then one day at the grocery store, Mom's purse fell from the counter and I saw as if gushing water from a faucet, dozens of white slips of paper spilling out of the mouth of the purse. Quickly, Mom fell to her knees and gathered the papers from the floor. She stuffed them into the purse. There was evidence to where the money had gone.

I came to the realization that I needed to inspect Mom's purse. It was a red leather bag that she usually wore over her shoulder or rested on the kitchen counter. It had a metal zipper which she usually kept closed, and after the spill, she was more careful to keep the mouth shut. Her purse was forbidden territory, to myself as well as Dad and Leonard, but as she took a shower, I unzipped the bag, grabbed a handful of the papers and dashed to my room. I began reading the papers. They were receipts.

As I scanned the receipts, I was struck at the memory of my surroundings. She had been replacing more things than I realized. The pots, the silverware, the china, the pillows, the soaps, they were all new. Our foods were not store brands but name brands, and only of the most expensive quality. Then I saw the clothes receipts and I remembered that Mom was dressed impeccably. Her shoes were not the worn house shoes. Instead she dressed as if every day required her Sunday best. And her nails were not short and dull. They were long and glossy, the work of a manicurist. Her make up too, was not the usual catalog variety. It was the designer kind, the kind that was found behind glass counters in malls. There was a place the money was going to. Mom had found a place.

Mom had found things that she liked and therefore, she had bought them. It was only reasonable to her if Leonard or I liked something, that it should be bought. So it came that she could not understand why Leonard did not want the watch. She purchased items solely on the basis of like and want, and not on the need. Leonard had observed her behavior and as a result ceased to contribute to the excess spending. I had not, and I continued to feed her habit.

In my room, I debated if I should reveal to Dad the receipts or to speak to Mom. I went to return the receipts to the purse and discovered that it was gone. I walked slowly to my parents' room and pushed the door open. Mom was seated on her bed— on the new comforter in her new kimono that didn't have any tears. She noticed me and held out her

hand as I returned the crumpled receipts to her. She didn't say anything, and I backed out of her room.

I wanted her to say something. I wanted her to give me a reason to her unruly spending. Anything would suffice. I just wanted to understand why she felt that she needed to buy new things. Most of all, I wanted to know if she was aware, really aware, that all the changes only made us strained, rather than content or happy. I wanted many things from her. I had wants.

Underwater

Mom held me in the most peculiar fashion. It was close and tight, her arms like thick cordage from a rope that bound me. And I could not escape, even when I was a head taller than her. The sensation of her embrace was strange too. It was not unlike being underwater, that equal pressure upon all parts of the body and the slow realization of a burning in the lungs. It was exactly like being underwater: I was bound and drowning in her arms.

I had to stand straight and accept it, her hug. There wasn't anything I could do. She was my mother. In the end, she released me and stepped back as she wiped away a long trailed tear. She examined me as I waited. We were in the Portland International Airport. "Your hair's gotten too long, Lincoln" she said finally, reaching to twirl the strands in her fingers. I moved my head away from her grasp. "If you needed money to cut it, I could have sent you some." I hadn't seen my mother in a year, not since I left Texas in the middle of spring. I remember how she cried, "Why do you want to go *there*?" She couldn't know that it was her who drove me away from home.

There were too many "accidents", that's what she called them. I think it came from being an only child. She would fret and attempt to coddle me, as if I were an infant. Then the day came when I was caught with a DUI by her brother, Mr. Officer. My uncle didn't care that we were blood, but I remember how she spoke to him at the front door after I

was released from the station. The garage light yellowed her face and made her appear as if she were afflicted with jaundice. “He doesn’t know any better, Hector,” she said, with her hands grasping folds of her nightgown. “He’s just a boy.”

It wasn’t true. I’m sure she believed that I didn’t know better, but I did. As soon as I started the car after having too much to drink and my mouth curling into a smile because of a joke that no one said, I knew better than to drive. I drove anyway and was pulled over by Mr. Officer for the most asinine excuse- I forgot to turn on the lights.

But maybe that was my mistake. I was always overlooking the obvious. Like this morning on the way to the airport, I forgot to bring an umbrella and it was pouring. “Hey kid can you spare some change?” a wino asked. I gave the guy a dollar just so he wouldn’t talk to me and took shelter under the transit canopy. “What’d you do, fall in the Willamette?” he said before taking a swig from a flask he had in his pocket. I guess Mom knew, right from the womb, that I wouldn’t be able to see what was in front of me. So she made it her duty to protect me. I just didn’t appreciate her. I couldn’t; I needed to live.

We left the airport and took the transit back downtown. I could never get over the smell of the cart. It was a mixture of disinfectant and piss. That’s one thing I never liked about Portland. It was one of the cleanest looking cities I had ever seen, but there was the unmistakable smell of people. And for all its impeccable appearance, the smell always lingered.

I carried her bags into my apartment. I had tried to get Mom to agree to get a hotel, but she wouldn't hear of it. "Don't you want to see me?" she asked. I couldn't tell her no. I lived in a one room studio on the second floor that was as bright as day no matter what hour of the night, on account of the streetlamp right outside my window. She looked over the place with her watery eyes and turned to me. "This is quite a place," she said while walking over towards the window. "It's just a little larger than your room at home."

I know she missed me. Back home, Mom had one of those hundred-year-old houses with the high ceilings. For as long as I can remember, it was the two of us living in that house, since Dad walked away and all, but I could only imagine how empty it must be now that I moved out. There wasn't any choice though. I think that's the worst of it.

It was like the time when I was fourteen and someone tried to break in through the back door. Mom got all shook up after hearing the shattered glass and couldn't sleep alone for a week. I remember the horror of waking in the middle of the night to the touch of her cold feet against my leg. I shouldn't have been that close to my mother at that age.

Mom wanted me to take her somewhere. "I just want to see the city," she said, so I decided to take her up to the park. I thought that she might like the Rose nursery on account of her own penchant for gardening in Texas, and then we could hit the Japanese Garden. I asked her if she wanted to take the transit again, but she waved her hand in front of her face as if shooing away a bad smell. "We can walk." We walked about a mile uphill, passing at least two dozen coffee houses and boutiques until we ascended the

mossy green cement steps that led us into the mouth of Washington Park, at the statue of The Coming of the White Man. I could see sweat glistening on her forehead. “Is this where you go for fun around here,” she asked.

Since I’d come to Portland, I had only been to the garden twice. Instead, I frequented the hazy music halls and the bars that were too loud. The music made my head throb, but it was in these places that I could thrash about and scream. In the chaos of unfiltered noise, I was able to breathe. I was unrestrained.

We had to hike along a paved trail to get to the nursery. Mom didn’t say too much because she was breathing hard. I guess she wasn’t used to the altitude. And suddenly the forest opened up and we saw the brilliant green terraced lawn of the nursery. There were a lot of couples walking slowly between the budding plants. But mom walked around biting on her lip, observing the tight bound petals of the roses. I lingered behind her.

Next we climbed the stairs to the gates of the Japanese Garden. I paid for our admission at the gate and handed Mom the brochure-map hybrid. We walked along the gravel pathway, stopping every now and then to look at the shrubs or patterns in the raked rocks of the Zen garden. She took a seat on a bench. “Why don’t you come back home, Lincoln?”

I had been waiting to hear her ask me that, ever since she hugged me at the airport. In truth, I was surprised she waited so long. I looked out beyond Mom and her pleading

gaze, beyond the Garden wall and the treetops of the park below and I could see that the sky over Portland was stone grey. The rain would fall again soon, and I forgot to grab that umbrella.

“What’s so great about Portland anyway?”

I didn’t know what to say. The city wasn’t so great and the smell always got to me.

Maybe it was the rain, the warm Pacific westerlies colliding with frigid continental air masses causing constant sporadic rain every day, sometimes all day. At least in Portland, the grey days didn’t last forever. And at least the rain washed the smell away, if only for a moment.

“Lincoln, can you just say something, just one reason why Portland’s better than home?”

Her tired mouth closed tight and she waited. I breathed in air and swallowed. I couldn’t say anything to her; she was my mother. The truth would crush her. I just felt that if I tried to say something, no sound would come out. A cool sensation fell on my arm. I looked and saw the tiny shine of a rain droplet. “I guess I like the rain.”