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Daffodils: A Completely Unrelated Collection of Short Stories

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**DAFFODILS:
A COMPLETELY UNRELATED COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES**

by

SAWYER E.P. HENSHAW

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR ADAM NOVY
PROFESSOR KEVIN MOFFETT**

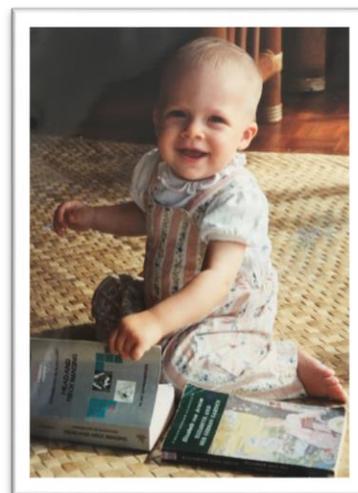
APRIL 28, 2017

Daffodils: An Introduction

By Sawyer Henshaw

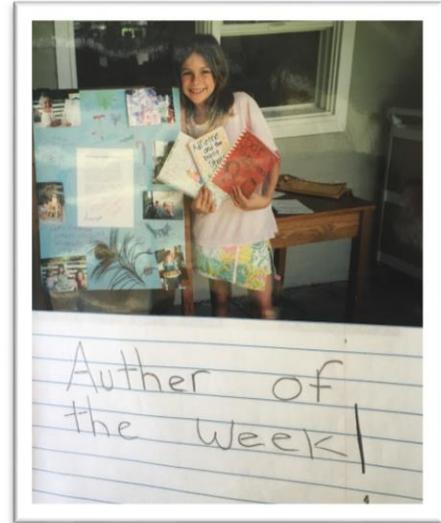
To say that my passion for fiction originally derived from the greats [William Shakespeare, T.S. Eliot, Emily Dickinson] would sound logical, impressive, obvious maybe, but it would not be true. There are greats predating these – not in a historical sense, but in the timeline of my own life. Children’s literature is often overlooked in top forty lists of best fiction or in the classroom setting past the glory days of read aloud and library hour. But it was these novels that first made me want to read and be read to, and, finally, to write. I now present to you my favorite children’s books that have inspired me in the stories I’ve written for my senior thesis today:

...A Wrinkle in Time by Madeleine L'Engle
Charlotte’s Web by E.B. White
A Little Princess by Frances Hodgson Burnett
The Giver by Lois Lowry
Harriet the Spy by Louise Fitzhugh
The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle by Avi
Anne of Green Gables by Lucy Maud Montgomery
Little House on the Prairie by Laura Ingalls Wilder
The BFG by Roald Dahl
Mary Poppins by P.L. Travers
Ramona Quimby, Age Eight by Beverly Cleary
Tuck Everlasting by Natalie Babbitt
The Cricket in Times Square by George Selden
The Golden Compass Trilogy by Philip Pullman...



And then there’s Gail Carson Levine, Elizabeth George Speare, Judy Blume, and the wonders that came even before them. There were “Winnie The Pooh” and “The Children of Noisy Village” and “Blueberries for Sal” and “Frog and Toad,” the books that influenced me before I can remember reading them. These were the books that made me an English major and a writer.

Notably, many of the main characters within these novels are themselves writers. Anne of Green Gables had a wild imagination and spent most of her free time telling stories to the flowers in the garden – a habit I quickly adopted for a summer in Maine. Charlotte Doyle kept a journal of her experience aboard ship on the vast sea, and Charlotte, the magnificent spider, spun words within her web. Harriet kept journal upon journal observing her neighbors, classmates, friends, and foes alike. In turn, my weekends were often spent crouched in the bushes on our lane, scribbling madly about the boys next door and that funny kid in my fourth grade class. The “Little House on the Prairie” series is an autobiographical narrative written by the main character, Laura, herself. The little princess Sarah Crewe transported herself from the confines of a dark attic in London to magical desserts, wild jungles, and sand blown beaches through her spoken tales. And though not all of these fiercely imaginative girls put pen to paper within their story, their bravery, intelligence, and charisma inspired me to do as they did.



Yet though it may have been the characters within the narratives that influenced me to tell stories to flowers and fill journals with my every thought, it became the authors that truly inspired me as I grew older. My story “**The Seers**” was creatively inspired by Madeleine L'Engle’s astoundingly imaginative novel, the world that Lois Lowry pegged down to its every last detail, and Philip Pullman’s keen intelligence and originality. Without these novels, my understanding of the science fiction or dystopian genres might have been somewhat stereotyped to Internet fan fiction, comic books, or poorly-written thrillers. As a child, these were not genres

that I found particular interest in, as I was hesitant to read such seemingly unrelatable stories.

This derived mainly from my misunderstanding that science fiction lacked depth within character development and physical description, relying more on its unusual plot and fact for intrigue. Yet “A Wrinkle in Time,” “The Giver,” and “The Golden Compass” opened my eyes to the opportunities for creativity within dialogue, description, and place in such fantastical otherworldliness, and left me eager to try my hand at it. In one particularly wonderful example, the descriptors surrounding the alien on planet Ixchel in “A Wrinkle in Time” reads:

“One of them came up to Meg and squatted down on its huge haunches beside her, and she felt utter loathing and revulsion as it reached out a tentacle to touch her face. But with the tentacle came the same delicate fragrance that moved across her with the breeze, and she felt a soft, tingling warmth go all through her that momentarily assuaged her pain.”

Not only is L’Engle using sensory images to give her reader a strong sense of these unknown beasts, she is alluding to a theme of the human focus on physical appearance. Through a completely imagined alien with hair for eyes and tentacles for appendages, she manages to comment upon the danger of judging through the physical. This combination of new, fantastical, imaginary and real-life application creates a style of unique sensory detail with the creative yet applicable thematic subtext that I strive for in my writing.

When writing “The Seers,” I began with the simple intention of creating a dystopian world completely disconnected from our own. There needed to be something distinctly unique about the planet they inhabited that would affect the “people” to be humanlike yet wildly different. Having recently taken Elementary Astronomy for my natural science requirement (who knew it would come in so handy?), I was fascinated by the fact that planets can orbit at faster and slower rates than our earth. For example, Mars takes two earth years to orbit the sun, so its seasons last twice as long as ours. What if – I began to wonder – there was a planet that rotated so slowly that there were months at a time in the dark followed by months in the sunlight. From

there I worried little about the scientific accuracy of my story (this was my fictional world after all!) and focused on the society that would be created from such a phenomena. How would they adapt? How would they evolve? What practices would they incorporate into their world that we do not need? While the idea stemmed from a scientific questioning, I drew upon the creative works I have mentioned for inspiration in creating a descriptive narrative and fully flushed characters within it. I loved the chance to ignore conventions such as dialogue and to come up with my own basis for language and the depiction of it. I was truly the creator of the world I inhabited, and it was truly a thrill to write.

As I grew up, school became the main source of reading, as homework took over and reading for pleasure fell too the sideline. Entering middle and high school, I often found myself re-reading books that my mother deemed “just for fun summer reads” because they were quick and relaxing. The more timeless books such as “To Kill a Mockingbird” or “The Catcher in the Rye” were left for classroom discussion, characterized as more difficult in my mind due to their association with schoolwork. To be truthful, it was mainly in college that I found myself finally able to connect my passion for reading to texts within the context of the classroom. Short stories in creative writing classes were somewhat of my gateway, as they were manageable in length and fascinating in subject. They were fictional, they were often current, and they were a length I could imitate in my own writing. Some of my favorite short story authors have been Alice Munro, Flannery O’Conner, Jack London, Joy Williams, and John Updike. Once the barrier between school and pleasure had been shattered, I was flooded with classic novels by authors such as Jane Austen and James Joyce, as well as contemporaries like Toni Morrison and Junot Diaz.

Specifically, Munro and Williams influenced my story “**The Winner.**” William’s story “The Skater” deals with grief and sadness completely below the surface of the narrative. She uses idiosyncratic detail for each character to demonstrate their varying strategies for dealing with death, only telling emotion in the briefest of moments. I attempted to use this same effect through Marilyn’s character. I wanted her to struggle with a complete loss of control, manifesting itself in obsessive running, over-aggression towards her lacrosse team, and disinterest in her husband. I didn’t want to say, “Marilyn feels at a loss, she is no longer in control of her own life.” Instead, I used William’s technique of demonstrating sadness and anger through repetition of the mundane, mixed with small explosions of emotion. Munro’s style of moving and developing narrative through time was also a key inspiration. I generally have trouble moving through large periods of time within my stories – most of my earlier stories took place within a few hours, or perhaps a day – so I turned to “The Bear Came Over the Mountain” for guidance. I admire Munro’s writing style in her ability to both focus on the character and their every position within the present action of the plot, and her simultaneous attention to moving the narrative quickly along. My story was very character based, yet I had a lot of plot to get through. I used Munro’s technique of focusing very intently on specific present scenes, yet moving speedily through them to push forward into the future.

Novelist Megan Abbott additionally inspired me to write with the same intense focus on the physical that can be found in her novels. As I mentioned previously, I grew up loving “summer reads” with subjects such as high school social groups, and thrilling myself with the occasional mystery. I did not anticipate that these genres or age groups could be written for adults. Abbott skillfully combined mystery and youth, resisting what could have become cheesy or cliché through her attention to the sensory and physical. Abbott’s novel “You Will Know Me”

depicts gymnasts in their grueling training, demonstrating the effects it has upon their body. In describing Marilyn's spine hitting the rim of the tub or the sports bra digging into her skin, I strived for heightened attention to the physical. The entire story revolved around the sensation of the body.

In my final story, "**Plastic Flowers**," I returned to my most loved style of writing. Focusing on memory and character description, I attempted to depict one character through another, working within their misunderstandings and incompatibility to the love between them. As I mentioned earlier, I often write stories taking place within a single day. This story was set very starkly within Ben's 26th birthday, yet I often left the present to dabble into memory and past. This form of writing allowed me to delve deeply into idiosyncratic details of everyday people, describe mundane objects in a new light, and to develop a relationship between two people I had created. I enjoyed the opportunity to explore this long loved writing style alongside the newer genres I attempted.

With that, I leave you to my thesis, a collection of stories with no true thematic correlation besides the hint of daffodils. Instead of attempting to write multiple narratives with a connecting character, or basing the three stories around a similar event or subtextual meaning, I focused mainly on varying my writing style. Two of the stories are from female perspectives and one is from a male's; two are in present tense and one is in the past; two are in third person, one is in first. I dabbled in the genres of Sci-Fi, contemporary drama, and reflective romance. All stories hold feminist themes with intensely varied, strong female characters. It was a joy to explore my love for creative writing within such a wide, experimental range. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing.

A LIST OF OTHER THINGS I WANTED TO WRITE ABOUT (AND PLAN TO):
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Overheard Quotations:

When I was younger, my Grandmother Betty and I would wander up and down Lanikai Beach in front her rented beach house and write down bits and pieces of overheard conversation. Families with young children were usually the best for dialogue surrounding food outings, general complaints, and petty conflict. Yet conversation between young honeymooners often proved equally as engaging. Since then, I have kept journals, stickie notes, and (finally) iPhone notes compiling quotes I overhear in day-to-day life.

“Ok, so can we go home now?” Asked a pudgy thirteen-year-old. He was sitting, perched atop the arm of a Four Seasons lounge chair in front of a blazing fire. He had just eaten a s’more prepared for him by his mother. The gooey marshmallow still clung to the edges of his mouth.

“Your cat has been fighting with my cat,” an older woman said through the open window of my father’s parked truck. She glared at him expectantly, fingers tapping against her crossed arms. We didn’t live in the neighborhood. My father has never owned a cat.

“Oh, that was the Waikiki day,” a mother clarified to her twin sons, **“the day I got a headache.”** They were discussing their holiday in Hawaii, remembering each day by the unfortunate, the complaints, the woes of paradise.

“I haven’t smelled like myself in a long time,” the middle-aged woman said softly into her telephone, plodding slowly up Foothill Boulevard in the relentless, California sun.

“I could never date a guy who doesn’t eat chicken. I need a poultry man in my life,” she said loudly to her friend. The other girl nodded heartily in response. Around them, the rest of the study lounge cringed quietly in their cubicles.

“Everything about me is real. Except for my teeth,” said a beautiful blonde woman, smiling radiantly. Her white teeth shone in the sunshine.

Characters:

Whether observed in actual life or imagined, I often encounter people that beg to be written about. In New York City this past summer, my friend and I sat in Prospect Park and made up stories for the people around us. The group of young boys playing five hundred with a ball that kept getting stuck in a tree. The fathers that left their awkward cluster of adults to assist. I’ve taken to keeping lists of people (observed and read about) that could be turned into characters.

1. **Dewey Hamasaki** – since seventh grade I have been getting calls for a man named Dewey. He is greatly in debt. He is on the run. They have not been able to find him no matter how many times I tell them that my phone number is not the same seven digits as his. Where is Dewey? What did he do to get this deep into debt? I would like to make it up.
2. **Allegra Versace** – niece of the founder of the fashion company Versace, eleven-year-old Allegra was given fifty percent of the multi-billion dollar company when her uncle was shot dead. In the face of such wealth, Allegra attempted to make it on her own in Los Angeles, struggling with her instant fame and reoccurring eating disorders. I would love to write the life of the poor rich girl, Allegra.
3. **The Nanny** – the work of a woman picking up a seven-year-old from school day after day. Oh the conversations they must have in that car ride home. I would love to explore her relationship

to the child as mentor and guiding hand, yet not parent. And what will happen at the point when they do not need her anymore.

4. **The Herbalist Student** – standing in line at an airport security in Los Angeles, I found myself trapped between two students in the same herbalism program at a university. Delighted to see each other, they discussed upcoming exams, new herbal remedies they had tested, and made plans to meet upon their return from vacation. I began to wonder at the work of both the herbalist and the herbalist in training. A story bloomed.

5. **The Summer Lifeguard/Ski Instructor** – CPR in the summer and lines of puffy, ski-suited toddlers hurling down the slopes in the winter. Life as a recent college graduate stuck in the in-between.

General Ideas:

In addition to specific persons, places, or dialogue, I have jotted down general ideas for stories over the years. This feels like an appropriate place to combine the ideas I've noted while reading novels, in creative writing class, on public transportation, and all the other times (as is true with Christmas presents) you think of things you need in the moment you don't actually need them. Here are the back book covers of some of my to be written novels.

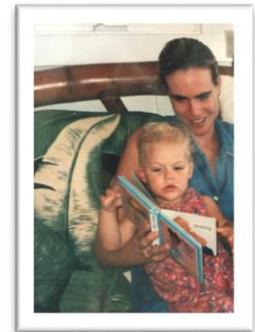
1. **“The Pastry Wife”** – located in a small bakery in San Francisco, wife of a renowned chef opens a shop making elaborate wedding cakes. The story is filled with sensory details such as smells of baking yellow sheet cakes, fondant stuck fingers, and the touch of whipped creams. Her marriage begins to fail as her success rises, yet she continues in her business of wedding cakes and spun sugar.

2. **“Sister, Oh My Sister”** – twin sisters in their early forties have never lived more than a few houses apart. Abruptly, one of them dies in an accident, leaving the other to adjust to life without her. Having never had children herself, she takes over the responsibilities of caring for her twin’s young children, as their father fails in grief. The story focuses on the grief of losing a part of oneself while maintaining their life without them.

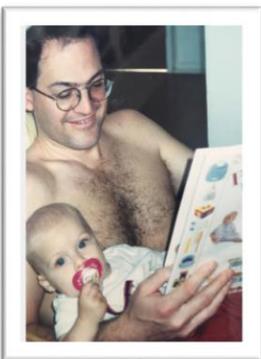
3. **“Please Remove Your Shoes”** – two security women work the early morning shift at an airport in Boston. A mostly humorous story, the women deal with frustrated customers and binding regulations, maintaining sanity only through each other.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

First and foremost, I cannot give enough thanks to my parents. Thank you for reading each and every one of the picture books I’d lug up the stairs and place in front of you. Thank you for the books on tape every morning on the drive to school and every afternoon on the way home.



Thank you for your love for literature and the love you have inspired in me. Lastly, thank you for your help with the edits of these three stories; I couldn’t have done it without you. A huge thank you to my two thesis readers, Professor Adam Novy and Professor Kevin Moffett. Your constant support, encouragement, and feedback were crucial to the process and final product of my thesis. Thank you to everyone who supported me in this process and thank you to those who are reading it now.



The Winner
By Sawyer Henshaw

He gets the call at three p.m., and they spend the rest of the evening packing everything they own into large, labeled trunks. Marilyn puts in her two weeks' notice at the consulting firm. Les buys a new suit jacket. And they kiss goodbye to Dorchester, shutting the door behind them by the end of the month. Les runs his fingers along each wall of the apartment, while she stacks boxes into the moving van. Then, they drive to the country.

We had to, she instructs herself, as the truck pulls out from between the rows of pines and into a tailored sprawl of path and field. What else had there been to do?

In the three years since their wedding, Les's bouts of unemployment had stretched itself thinly between them, coiling into tightening knots and threatening to snap if pulled too far apart. While Marilyn had woken early for her circuitous route around the botanical gardens and down past Sunny Smile Preschool, looping back up to their apartment, Les had slept. She'd showered, quick and hot, calling for him to join her as the steam pierced spots of red into her cheeks. But he hadn't. And coming home from her wide office on the fourth floor of the old brick building where she'd ripped apart the budget of another failing company and put it back together again, she'd found him sullen and quiet.

Les moves his fingers across the van's front seat bench searchingly, and Marilyn takes a hand from the wheel to meet them.

"You've got the brown dress shoes on," she says, nodding towards his feet. He smiles and brings her fingers to his lips. When he gets nervous, Les forgets what shoes he is wearing. Marilyn pulls her hand back to the wheel.

Victor Chelsea is the boarding school of picture books. It is white paned windows set into stacked red brick, sprawling lawn drowning in hard treaded snow. Skeletal trees crammed close together line paths directing towards doorways, making promises of loveliness in the spring. Marilyn shields her face down from the cold as they move from admissions office to classroom to gymnasium and does not notice. In early January, the trees crumple into one another as if they could snap.

Conversation is directed mainly to Les. Booming exclamations of welcome muddle into quieter undertones of housing accommodations and the weekly faculty meal stipend.

“Four meals to be used at your discretion,” a woman from the front office assures them seriously. “And you’ll have the fully functioning kitchen, of course,” she adds to Marilyn, smiling comfortably. The woman has heavy, sagging lines wobbling beneath her chin. Les nods rhythmically with her as she speaks.

The collection of faculty homes is located in the far south of campus, placed behind the business offices, their backs to the athletic field. Marilyn unlocks house number seven, and Les trolleys in their belongings behind her. The boxes are mostly made up of his books, labeled: “biology and advanced,” “botany/gardening,” and “just for fun.” But he handles them carefully, lifting the trolley over the landing and placing it down softly on the wooden floor. Marilyn doesn’t have many belongings to contribute. She makes her way through the single storied building, small kitchen opening into small dining room, cramped bedroom opening into cramped toilet. The shower curtain is made of thick plastic and is spotted with purple flowers. She rips it down hook by hook and shoves it in a cabinet beneath the sink.

“It’s twice the size of our apartment!” Les calls loudly from the hall. Marilyn sits down on the cold bathtub rim so hard she feels it in her spine.

Late that night, he finds her deep within the old sheets of their new bed and pulls her close to him.

“This is good, Mar,” he says, his voice too loud in her ear. “I feel like we’re going to be happy. Thank you.” Marilyn finds his mouth and shuts it with her own, working her tongue back between his teeth. Les stirs and moves further beneath her, pushing his hands up and around her back. Then he pulls away into the pillow. “We could try again, you know. Fresh start.”

Marilyn pushes off of his body and turns her face to the wall. “I’m tired,” she says. But it is nearing morning when she falls asleep. And when she does, she dreams of dead blades of grass falling from the sky, and stomachs, swelling to the size of standing men, turned parallel to the ground.

Les begins work mid January, settling deep into the routine of biology class sections A through D and assembly and faculty lesson collaborative and formal dinner every Sunday. He plants big bulbs of daffodils in pots along the front porch for springtime. He hums as he showers before leaving for the day. Marilyn does not know what mornings look like in their bare kitchen, but she sees the remnants of soaking cereal bowls and empty coffee mugs when she wakes in the early afternoon. In Dorchester, Les had bought the eggs and bread and cream at a grocery store down the street, and they’d ordered in most nights, ignoring breakfast altogether. Here, Marilyn scraps together stolen items from the dining hall – oranges, chocolate chip muffins, cups of peanut butter – and boils water for dried pasta. Sometimes she meets Les for lunch in the high-ceilinged cafeteria and watches the girls in ponytails and black uniformed skirts. Sometimes she asks him about his classes and helps with the grading. Sometimes she washes her hair and sits and listens to the faculty dinner conversation in the great hall. Mostly she doesn’t go at all.

Marilyn is a Home Mother at Victor Chelsea. She does not request the position, but Les falls easily into the role of first-year Home Father, and she is obliged to follow. Sunday mornings are drop in hours for students to come with complaints of grueling academics, bouts of homesickness, and petty conflict. Les is always there with store-bought blueberry scones and hand selected donuts. Already in their second semester and vastly superior in knowledge, the first-year students are few and far between. Mostly they come for the jar of spare change he's collected for the laundry machines. Marilyn eats the leftover pastries from her room by the handful, running for miles in the evening to shed them from her hard body. The rubber track strains against her as she pushes up through the heat in her quads, springing from the ground and into the air.

“Why don't you run in the mornings when I'm teaching?” Les pushes her when she returns from a particularly long run past dinnertime. Marilyn shrugs out of her running shoes and gulps at the water running straight from the metal sink faucet. It tastes mean and bitter running down her throat.

“Why don't you teach when I'm running?” she answers, stripping off clothes through the hall as she makes her way to the bathroom. He doesn't follow her to the shower; she doesn't ask him to come.

The following week, Les comes home with news. The girls' lacrosse coach has taken a leave of absence mid-season, the athletics department is desperate, the team is crushed.

“So?” Marilyn asks. She is sitting at the kitchen counter, still in her running clothes, moving her thumb methodically across her phone screen.

“So? You were captain of your high school team?” He beams at her. “You started your sophomore year of college?”

Marilyn's cheeks are pulled tight into her jaw, teeth pressed firmly together. She refuses to look up at him. "I'm not interested."

Les falters. "Mar, I know you aren't loving our situation here."

"I'm fine with the situation," she says, dropping the phone onto the counter with a crack. "This is your situation that I've agreed to. I knew what this situation was coming into it."

He flinches at the force with which "situation" spits from between her teeth. "You can't be fine just being a Home Mother, sleeping here all day, running all night."

"I can't?" Marilyn laughs sharply, "Who the hell could?"

"Then coach!" Les shouts. "Do something!" Marilyn pushes past him and out the front of the house into the dark, slamming the door behind her. And she runs.

She sprints in numbing circles around and around the track. The rhythm of foot hitting rubber hums steadily to her thoughts. Easy, malleable Les with his aquatic based gardening and shiny PhD, still warm from printing. Les. A bead of salty sweat makes its way between Marilyn's lips, and she tastes it with her tongue. Her feet turn their rhythm a notch faster. She might have left him once she'd married him, but she hadn't. It had been too early; it would have meant giving up. And then he had become a failing project that she could rip apart and force back together again – legs and arms glued into all the right places. Another success story for her record.

Marilyn runs until her legs are shaking twigs beneath her. She will not let him do the same for her now, gluing the pieces into the wrong shapes until she cannot recognize herself at all. She will not let him win.

Early the next morning, when Les has just left, she finds the number for the director of athletics and makes the call.

“Are you qualified to coach?” he asks skeptically.

“Yes,” she says.

There is a pause. “This is a big time commitment, Mrs. Rowe,” he says. “I’m sure you have other responsibilities, and I need to make sure the team will be a priority.”

“It will be my top priority.”

“Alright,” he says. She is to start immediately, practice is at four p.m. this afternoon, paperwork will follow. He says thank you and thank you again. She hangs up the phone.

The field is brown and half frozen in the afternoon air. Marilyn’s dark hair is tied up into a tight ponytail, pulling against her scalp. She feels a sting beneath her left breast where the red sports bra digs under a rib like a pointed fingernail. But she does not move to reposition the fabric. She has come early to scope the field, to reacquaint herself with half-forgotten drills, carrying a bucket of dirt-stained balls at her side. The new lacrosse stick feels light between her hands. Dropping the ball and scooping it up again, she jerks her wrist sharply to cradle it within the pocket. Then she runs the length of the field and shoots it deep into the net. Goal. She has won.

Marilyn is flushed and warm beneath her leggings when the team of girls approaches her across the grass. There are roughly eighteen of them, mostly upperclassmen, a few younger. They are wary but not afraid, she notes, watching them taking her in. She is young, one of them, newer than they. Short in stature, wiry in build. An interest but not a threat, their faces say, no one to be afraid of. Marilyn watches them reading her wrongly.

“I am Coach Rowe,” she says, addressing the group without smile. “Ready to work?”

She makes them run drills, testing them, pushing their limits to see how long they will go before they break. With her timer, she shouts from the sideline, observing their straining bodies.

Eighteen seconds for the hundred yards and the rest of the minute to get back to the line. Most of them make it for the first twelve. Then they begin to fall off. Two girls push their way behind the goal and vomit onto the ground. One on her knees, the other hunched, retching from deep within her stomach. Their acidic waste lies steaming in the cold spring air.

Marilyn pushes on. The adrenaline of drive and control is pumping through her chest and her shouting voice turns to roar as the last three push for their fifteenth set.

“Last one! Don’t stop! Don’t!” She barks, sprinting along beside them. Sweat is soaking through their Victor Chelsea pinnies; their eyes bulge sickly from swollen cheeks. She can hear their breath coming thick and heavy through their nostrils. They fall to the ground on the return, recovering belly up on the grass. Marilyn walks to them, standing tall above their heaving chests. “Good,” she says. “Get up.”

In the locker room, after scoop drills, and rounds ups, and a final game of four on four on four, they congregate around her, waiting. Wanting to know her, wanting to avoid her, fearing her.

“I don’t know what your last coach was doing,” she begins, “but it was not enough.”

A tall girl, one who finished the fifteenth lap, raises her hand. She has a long, blond French braid snaking down her back and wisps of hair have fallen out around her face from exertion. She doesn’t wait to be called on. “We’re top two in our division, Coach Rowe” she says, “We’re mid season and already beat last year’s champions.”

“Beaten,” says Marilyn. “You’ve beaten them.” The blonde girl scowls. “McKenzie, yes? And you’re team captain?” McKenzie nods along with the girls around her. “I’m here to take you from second to first, McKenzie,” Marilyn says, the ideas coming to her head as they leave her mouth, “and I’m going to need a captain who will do that.” They stare from her to McKenzie,

not breathing. “So from this point forward, you will prove yourself to me as deserving of captain, or you will be replaced by someone who can.” They don’t respond. Marilyn feeds from their silence. Marilyn feels happy again.

Les is home and in the kitchen when she comes through the front door. His daffodils have bloomed in their sickly, mustard yellow, and he’s collected a bunch for the cramped kitchen table. Two placemats are already placed on either side of them. He must have gone to the store today, she notices, he is cooking chicken in a red wine sauce and humming along to a song from Billy Elliot. The flame is high beneath his pan, and above the spit and crack of the simmering liquid and the music, he does not hear her enter. Marilyn moves quietly towards the counter and begins to pull the damp clothes from her body. He turns when she has stripped down to just her leggings and red socks.

“What? Mar?” He starts abruptly, dropping the spatula in his hand so that sauce splatters up along the white wall like blood. “I didn’t hear you come in.” She ignores him and wraps her naked arms around his body, pulling him into her.

They make love in the shower, water pooling along the bathroom floor as it sprays out around them. “I’m ready,” she tells him. “Ready to start trying again.”

It isn’t until he is sprawling, bathrobed on the bedspread, that he remembers the food – charred and heavy at the bottom of the pan. They have pasta again. Marilyn waits until he has fallen asleep to pick up her running shoes from the living room floor and push through the door and into the night.

They practice every day but Sunday, games are every Wednesday. Working on illegal checks as stick collides with shin, teeth grind into mouth guard, bruise builds on top of bone. She teaches them to play hard, to play dirty. She favors the defenders; she mocks them if they cry.

Run, she says, and they do. Les wants to have a baby. Has since before they were engaged. Marilyn has not. Does not. But now they are trying. Les thinks that Marilyn has been off the pill for two years now. She has just stopped taking it this April. This is the first time they have truly tried to become pregnant.

Les sets up the schedule in their bedroom. Charts of ovulation, menstrual cycles, body positioning. Marilyn is familiar with his rituals, resigned to sit back and allow him his obsessive analysis without participation. At practice, she maps their progress in a booklet, ranking the attack wings against each other, keeping the goalie and her backup after practice for additional drilling, replacing tall, blonde McKenzie with a curly haired junior. She watches their bodies tighten and harden into muscle. She takes notes for diet and health regiment. Soft pools of fat once protruding from waistbands shed like skin, breasts flatten into chests beneath sports bras. They become faster, stronger, winners.

“What a job you’ve done with those girls,” the vice principal remarks to Marilyn one night over Sunday dinner, cutting violently into a leg of braised lamb. “When Carolyn left we thought their season was over. Would have been such a loss for our seniors.”

Marilyn smiles back at him, “Just needed a bit of discipline, regiment, you know how they can be.” He nods, chin meeting throat, and chews.

“I only worry,” a woman whom Marilyn cannot identify leans towards them across the table, “just, that a few of the girls in my class seem a bit enervated recently.”

“Enervated?”

“Weary, exhausted, fatigued,” the woman explains.

“Yes, I know the word,” Marilyn’s fingers tighten around her fork, “but I believe physical discipline to be one of the most beneficial energizers for the mind and the body.” She spears a slice of radish and brings it to her lips, “Or don’t you agree?”

Sitting to her left, Les joins the conversation quickly. “Marilyn is incredibly disciplined, Cathy,” he smiles comfortingly, “But she’d never push our girls too far.”

Cathy looks uncertain. “All good and fun until one of them gets hurt.”

“It isn’t supposed to be fun,” Marilyn says. “It’s supposed to make them win.”

The vice principal chuckles to himself and his food. “Just bring them that championship they’ve been sniffing for!” he says. “Then we’ll all be happy.”

Les rests his hand atop Marilyn’s knee beneath the table. She moves her legs together so that it slips off. “I will,” she says.

In early May, a sophomore playing defense breaks her opponent’s collarbone. Illegal body check, socked right to the neck. The girl falls to the ground, gripping at her shoulder as she folds herself in half.

“I’m so sorry!” gasps the sophomore, kneeling over the girl. “I didn’t mean to.” Marilyn pulls her out for the rest of the game.

“Get it together.” She jerks her shoulder down onto the bench in front of her. “No one thinks you meant to hurt her.”

The sophomore pulls her goggles off and wipes at her eyes. “But I did,” she says, “I meant to win.”

“You should always play to win,” says Marilyn. “You have to put the consequences out of your mind.” The sophomore doesn’t show up for next practice, and she officially quits the

team by the end of the week. “We need to be tougher than that,” Marilyn tells them in the locker room. “We can’t fear anything.”

The sophomore’s departure spreads unrest amongst the team. Marilyn can feel their resentment in the daily warm up lines and mandatory morning weights. She pushes them harder, lengthening practice times, limiting recovery, but she has lost her control, and they have begun to give up. In mid May, Victor Chelsea Varsity Girl’s Lacrosse plays their final game against Hamlin School in the first round of playoffs. They do not score against them, the game ends 8-0, and they are out for the season.

Marilyn sits for a while in the old coach’s office after they have cleaned out their lockers and left. There are pictures of the woman’s young family hanging on the wall – a beaming, stocky husband and two tiny children. Carolyn left because her husband was sick, Marilyn has heard, up and gone within a week. One by one she takes the pictures down and puts them in a desk drawer. Carolyn’s wrinkling squinty-eyed face stares back at her as she shuts them in. Marilyn hopes that wherever she is, Carolyn and her fat husband are miserable, too.

When she undresses that night, she finds her underwear stained with brown blood. Her period, she is not pregnant. Some of it has smeared along her inner thigh, heavy and dark against her skin. Marilyn finds the old makeup bag tucked with the shower curtain under the bathroom sink and pulls out her stock of birth control. On a whim, she pushes five of the pills down her throat at once. Their chalky texture sticks in her esophagus and she regurgitates a wad of spit to force them down. Finally, they go.

“I’m so proud of what you did with your team,” Les tells her over dinner. “Those girls just kept on winning right up until the end.”

Marilyn wraps angel hair pasta around her fork and feeds it into her mouth. “They didn’t want it enough,” she says. “Not enough to do what it took.”

Les nods absently and smiles at her. “Chart shows you’re getting your period this week,” he says. “Any signs of the old buzz kill?”

“None yet.” Her stomach has tangled itself into knots, the pills releasing inside of her. “Maybe we’ll get lucky this time.”

“And if we don’t, we’ll keep on keeping on,” Les says comfortingly.

“If we want it enough, it’ll come,” she says, knowing that it never will.

Marilyn runs along the track until the sun begins to show beneath Victor Chelsea’s outer wreath of trees. Her stomach flexes, hard and strong, taut muscle stretched across abdominal. Sweat streaks down her back and she lets it fall, leaving it behind her on the path. It is her body. She will not let them have it. Legs pounding to the beat in her chest, arms sliding along her ribs and back again, she runs.

The Seers
By Sawyer Henshaw

When the seeing months come, the men will shave their knotted beards and shed their fur skinned flesh, and we will watch our hearts beating in our chests again. When they come, the seeing months, the women will touch their hands to partners' backs and see their insides moving quietly in between. See. They will see their insides; the parts we cannot feel. And everything will be light.

Babes, who've been born in the months when Sun has gone, and do not know touch from feel from see will move through Acclimation. And we all will. Testing each cone until it has been stretched and teased to its widest diameter. Like coiled snakes unraveling up through the air towards Sun. Our cones are reaching for it, straining for it, but we must be careful. No, we must not let them move too quickly, for fear that they will burn.

Babes have the newest cones, and so they must be awakened gently. The Acclimatory are selected for their softness of touch, for their heightened ability of feeling. It is the highest honor one can receive. The honor of teaching to see. It is something that cannot be taught, but is felt by special few each season. And this season, we are the few.

It was in the last seeing months that we were chosen, and Mumma is training us especially, my partner Glastis and me, because we have shown her our potential. She says she has gotten good, over her many years of training, at feeling which of the youngers will be chosen to join the Acclimatory. That she knew Glastis had a spark from the moment he learned to feel. But me, I was the tricky one. She says that I've always too much loved to see, been drawn too close to the light. Sometimes, when we have lessons, Glastis does not need to come. Just me.

There are twenty-three cone types behind the retina of our outside eyes, the process of a babe's Acclimation can take up to half the seeing months. The process begins with a sweet lick of yellow, trapped from the outside and brought into the dark chambers. The babe is laid on its back, and the trickle of yellow is released into their air. It can only fill the small space for a moment, rushing out of the jar and up, around the babe. The babe is drawn to it, and the light lives its brief life settled in their grasping hands and on their exposed belly. Then it is eaten by the dark.

I've yet to see it happen, and I do not remember my own. But during months of dark, Mumma will tell us of her rotation with the littlest ones, and through her we will see. How their eyes, startled open but not overpowered by the mild touch of light, would expand to take it in. How their oversized skulls would wobble on the ground as they shifted, trying to let it all in at once. And how she could see their brains lighting up in sharp sparks of streaking energy.

Light. She pressed into their temples with her thumbs. *This is light.*

Through every color, each cone, lapping up its light like drink, will grow strong. Flexing and unflexing its receptors. Opening and shutting its eyes. Babes do not fear it. Ever. For it is light, and they know it and welcome it.

Once they have gone through every shade of seeing – transitioning through the mild yellows, to the reds and infrareds, the rounditours, and to the harsher toquads – we are to give them a name. It is chosen off of the color that sparks the most reaction in their brains. Like my name: Amilet. After the orange-pink of the skin beneath our fingernails. Or Mumma's name, before she was Mumma. It doesn't matter that two or ten often have the same name, because the names feel different on each body. The Amilet sleeping eight beds down from me is nothing like

the Amilet that is me. And each cone has endless variations of its color, so the crossover isn't all that common.

Until then, until the half year of seeing months have begun their warping expansion up and over the sky, us youngers stay in the houses for training, and it is dark and unseeing. There is no cone for dark. And it is total dark. Nothing of the shadow that lies down next to the body, nothing of the blanketed gray that wraps itself around Sun until it weeps its terrible tears. In the dark, there are only the moons to show us where we are within the sixth month dark and how far we have to go. But the moons cannot show us the tangling veins drifting through our forearms. Or the shifting colors, moving through our partners' bodies. They cannot show us any light at all. And we touch and touch, but we do not see. It is cold now. But it has always been during months of dark, and we have learned to press our bodies to each other to warm our skin and know that we have not disappeared. Waiting.

Outside, in the world of the olders, the men grow the coat around their chins and on their backs, and women cover their bodies in coats of animal skin, protecting from the air and ice of dark. They go about the processes of food storage and production, and caring for the oldest, and disciplining the wrongdoers, all through feel and not see. They have gotten good, so good, at feel that they barely need to see. But they want to. And I imagine they miss it almost as much as we do.

And oh the joy, the wild joy to come in two shifts of the moons. It is what Mumma presses into us, when we are beginning to become restless in our empty eyes and long to see her heart.

Joy. She presses into my chest. Feel the joy of Sun so that you do not need to see it.

Her body is close enough to mine that I feel her heart. It slows my heart to steady rhythm, matching hers, and she presses *love* onto my forehead.

Next dark, I will be better. With every passing of the seeing months I can feel my cones becoming stronger, wider, more flexible. I can feel them surging with the coming dark, to test their seeing against its totality and feel where light cannot. Mumma is teaching us, season by season, as all the level three Acclimatory do. The ones with the touch but not the patience for the babes, so they are placed with youngers and the in-betweens, like me. But I hope to be with the babes. Hope to be deemed gentle enough; hope to teach them the overwhelming beauty that is see.

Mumma wakes us at the rising hour, what will be morning in the seeing months, but now cannot be called the day. I shift in the bed next to Glastis and push my forehead into his back, protesting Mumma.

I don't want to. Sleep. Let's sleep.

Glastis turns gently so that my forehead meets his chest instead and puts his hand under my neck.

Time, Amilet. Get up. He pulls my body up into a sitting position alongside his and rubs *comfort* into my shoulders. *Tomorrow there is dawn.*

I move my body up toward my ears so that his hands massage my shoulder blades. They are cramping from sleep, and his fingers break the muscle apart. I practice, as Mumma has taught me, and see the strands of tight cord moving beneath his touch, separating and humming with attention. But he bores easily and shoves me gently away.

Mumma called. There are things to do.

I roll my legs over the side of the bed and open my eyes for the first time. There is nothing to see, but it is a signal to my brain that we must wake. Our eyes must be open at all times when we are not resting. It is a way of training to see even in the dark. And Glastis is right, there is much preparing to do in this last time of dark.

Everything is soft in the chambers so that the littler ones don't hurt themselves before they know the place. I make my way to the waste rooms, running my hands along the ends of the beds to rouse the others, pressing *wake* into their ankles through the tangled sheets. They stir around me, pulling their legs up and away from my loud touch. But we are in the oldest of the in-betweens, Glastis and I, so we must act as the elders do.

The waste room is empty except for Fodiel, another boy of around my age. In proper dark months form, his arm is stretched out straight behind him to alert us of his presence. But this is mostly regulation for the youngers so that they don't bump into each other. I can feel his presence as I enter the small space, and I squeeze his wrist, wishing him *a good tomorrow's dawn* as I pass. He sends the message back, already aware of my being there behind him.

We relieve ourselves quickly, feeling the youngers entering cautiously and waiting for their turn. They are always touching each other; bedmates hold hands for conversation and comfort. It is a stage, crucial for learning to feel, Mumma teaches. It is one that I miss, though I am glad to have stopped bumping into others in the eating and waste rooms.

We sit together by age at breakfast, four to a table. The youngest are somewhere around nine, and we are just seventeen, or nearly there. There are twenty of us in total under Mumma's care, all training to join the older community, all being watched for Acclimatory potential. Like Glastis and me.

Breakfast is quick and warm, the usual wet grains drunk straight from the bowl. There is much to do, and we cannot linger long. The food is heavy moving down my throat.

Sludge. Fodiel murmurs along my arm, making me smile. I touch my finger to his cheek to tell him I am laughing.

Eat. Urges Glastis, picking up on his words from across the table.

Showoff. Fodiel shrugs him off. Still jealous that he was not chosen. That he will join the elders as a helper in food or care and not as an Acclimator.

Our fourth, Margize, is quiet, as she always is.

Today, as every day this month, the house must prepare for the newest group of youngest to come into our home. It is all of our jobs, once they come, to assist Mumma in their training, helping them to see in the days for seeing, and to feel in the days of dark. They have been in groups of one or two before they come to Mumma, learning to walk and breath and understand language. This is the work of level two Acclimatory. It is a difficult job, teaching one all they will need to know in order to learn the only things that matter. And it is an unrewarding one. Their children resist and struggle; not yet excited by the idea of feeling as we are.

But Glastis and I have other preparations to make. After our months of dark training, our first babes will be arriving today. Mumma will walk us through the training here, guiding us through the process for the first see, before each babe is able to move to a level two. Then we will be equipped to continue on our own, together and separately, with the real level ones. In community.

Mumma makes her rounds at breakfast and instructs us on the tasks of the morning.

Why are you wanting sleep, Amilet? She presses me. Seeing through my best efforts to hide my feelings of tire and impatience. You cannot hide anything from Mumma.

I am excited for the seeing months, I admit to her, excited to teach to see. I want to sleep until they come.

She runs her fingers through the hair on top of my head. *You are too old to miss the seeing months so strongly, she reminds me. You are letting nervous overpower you.*

I press my scalp into her lacing fingertips to show that I understand. Then she takes Glastis's hands and places them in between mine. She presses them together, locking us as one. Reminding me that I am Glastis's partner. And he is mine. And we are sad in our fingertips and in the back of our knees together, happy in our eyes and our teeth. That we are ready for the Acclimation.

The babes are here.

We make our way to the front hall to receive the bundles, straight from the birthing ward, only a few dark months in age. The helpers are waiting in the doorway; we feel their excitement at the importance of what is to come. We feel the hot energy they are holding in their arms. And then they are passed from helper to Mumma to our arms.

Glastis is given one little girl, and I the other. For a moment I cannot move. I have never held another so completely in my arms, never felt the smallness that one of our kind can be. For a moment, I am struck by the gravity of what I am to do. But it begins to shift in my hands, so I cradle its soft head with my palm and sway from foot to foot to calm the wreaths of emotion it is producing. It is a babe. The first of many I will Acclimate into our world. I will teach it to see Sun, place a color to its sparking heart, begin to let it feel what it has seen and what it has not. Bringing the shifting body close to my chest, I press the promise into the babe. Though it will not truly have a name until Acclimation is complete, it has already taken on the hue of gold I love most dearly. The one closest to Sun. Emernith.

With the babes between us, Glastis and I find each other's foreheads and lay them against one another. Sharing the entirety of the moment. When we finally straighten, the helpers have left, closing the door behind them. We can feel Mumma's smiling.

We bring the babes to their Acclimatory chambers for the rest of the day. They are meant to rest for the process beginning tomorrow. And we are meant to bond with them. To read their feelings and press our own into their heads for understanding. Though this is supposed to be an individual task, I spend the time in Glastis's dark. There is only a single crib and rocking chair in each room, so we sit side by side on the floor. Together we marvel at their little bodies' abilities to feel the most simple of needs. The way their fingers grasp up towards the bottle as we tilt milk into their puckered mouths. Their small shocks of joy when we bounce them on our laps or twirl them in the air.

They're perfect. Glastis reaches towards me with his hand, his babe lying softly in his lap. His *pride* charges through his fingers into mine. If it were light, you could see our chests glowing. Emernith, worn from food and attention, relaxes towards sleep in the crook of my arm. We sit like this until dinner, babes sleeping behind closed eyelids, hands joined in our middle.

I am never able to find sleep the night of dawn. Instead, I lie in bed next to Glastis and keep my gaze focused where I know the east windows to be. I do not trust my eyes to recognize the light. They long to see Sun and trick my brain into believing the dark has begun to fade. Of course, the curtains will remain for the first few hours, and we will do our routine of Acclimation, but we have lived enough seeing months to be quick in the process. The olders take only a few moments.

I think of Emernith, alone in her dark chamber, asleep at last. I cannot stop myself from getting up to check on her when I feel an hour to have passed. Glastis has done the same, though we alternate times and mimic sleep when we feel the other rise.

At what I guess to be the fourth hour, I am certain of the first stem of light. The sheer, black linen covering the expansive glass has begun to distinguish itself from dark. The jet black now appears speckled with Sun, filtering in a whisper of color. It disappears when I stare at it for too long or too intently, so I adjust my eyes to the wall on the right of the window. Looking into the dark, the light grows in my peripheral vision, expanding and contracting in a blurred haze, still only the smallest touch. I take it in like bread, swallowed in huge, aerated bites.

Unable to keep still any longer, I move quickly to Emernith's windowless dark and lift her out of her crib and up into in my arms.

Today. I press into her smooth forehead. *It is Day and you will see it.* She stirs sleepily against me, and I sit in the chair, rocking gently. *Welcome to world, Emernith.*

Mumma enters the sleeping room at the usual time. I have made my way back to bed, aware that olders do not generally smile upon this kind of wakeful night on the day of dawn. Especially for the Acclimatory. But she feels my pulsing mind and comes to me first. I begin to see the edges of her shadowed shape as she approaches the bed, shimmering in the first light.

Not so restful today, Amilet? she teases, laying a hand against my cheek.

This close, I can make out the dark heat of her heart as it beats in her chest. It brings a tingle of pleasure to my teeth, and her hand moves with my face as it stretches into a smile.

We gather in the eating room, all of us, for cold cereal and Acclimation instructions. The air is alight with the thrill of dawn peaking into the house. Mumma feeds our babes in their

rooms upstairs, moving easily between light and dark, requiring no time at all to adjust. Then she returns and sits with the youngest to guide them.

On the half hour, each curtain spreads its fibers a millimeter apart to admit more Sun. In the moment of the shift, the youngers squint their eyes in brief pain, then they blink rapidly, catching and releasing quick particles of light.

Open. Pushes Mumma. *Hold.* And they do as they are told, slowly adjusting.

But we, the in-betweens, are able to keep our eyes open and breathe it in without her. I see Glastis on the third half hour, sitting across the table from me. He smiles his wide, tooth-filled smile and gestures loosely to my chest. It is glowing, a thick and red color, moogidel, circling in and out between my ribs. It is so beautiful I cannot look away. How we've missed the infrared light. To see the heat and feel it, too. Unable to stop myself, I reach my hand across to him and press it to his heart. Through widespread fingers I watch it beat, feeling each reverberation as it pumps into bone.

At last, the shades begin to roll themselves up into the awnings, and Mumma stands at our center. Her body moves in soft, happy waves, and we watch the signal fire from her brain and down into her hand, bringing it in front of her chest as she points to the door. Then we are up and running through it, out into the light.

The sky is a thick, dark blue, edging out the black, and Sun is poking gently from the farthest edge of ground that we can see. How we have missed this world of light and see, of color and of joy. The youngers run towards Sun with open arms. As we long to do.

But Glastis and I do not play with the others, with Fodiel and Margize, spinning through the thawing trees and rolling in the grasses. We are ready with containers, collecting light. Yellow. I make my way to the plot of garden tended by the helpers in the back of the house.

Daffodils, awakened from months of dark, have turned their mouths to Sun and are drinking it in. Yellow pulsates in throbbing swirls around their tops, and I scoop the jar through the air to capture it, screwing the top quickly shut as I have been taught to do. I feel the yellow moving languidly within the opaque walls, a lazy color, bothered by little. Glastis has chosen the yellow of the baby chicks, shaking color from their feathers in the dusty coop. And with that, though my body tugs against me, we move back towards the dark.

Emernith's room feels cold and empty when I enter, wishing Glastis *good luck* at the door. There is a small, curtained space before the chamber so that light cannot move in from the dawn. The door is heavy and slow. On the floor by the entrance, I put down the jar and move to her crib, feeling that she is awake and restless. *Just wait*, I promise, lifting her into the air, *just you wait*.

She resists as I place her down so quickly, the carpeted floor pressing against her back. But I let her wrap her fingers around mine and give her *comfort* for a moment before I return to preparing the room. The crib and rocking chair must be removed; it can only be the two of us when I release the light. And it will swarm to her, curiously, lovingly, forgetting me all together. As I carry out the rocking chair, I see Glastis rolling his babe's crib into the hallway, and it is so good to see him, I stop for a moment to watch his body move. But I think of Emernith lying alone in the dark, and I hurry my pace.

Standing in the empty room, I grasp the jar between my hands and raise it to my mouth. Then I kiss the dark exterior in *joy*, twisting off the cap as I do so, and thrust the yellow into the air. Despite its mild pigment, the color is shocking within such heavy dark, shooting up through the air. The momentum of my push sends it all the way to the babe in the center of the room, and it illuminates her little body. With a rush, the utter loveliness of the room spreads through me so

that I can barely breathe. I wait, paralyzed for the light to surround her, to tickle her nose and lick the bottoms of her feet. I wait for it to move. And I wait. The yellow hangs where it was thrown, completely still. Below it, Emernith struggles angrily on the ground, eyes blinking without resting upon anything at all.

Look. I press her. *See the color; see yellow.* But her eyes remain unfocused, and her head, wobbling on the ground, does not spark at all. This is wrong, I know. This is not what I have been taught, but I do not know what to do. After a moment, slowly, the yellow trickles back across the dark and wraps itself around my body. *Stop.* I push it away from me, trying to herd it back towards Emernith. Scooping it into my hands, and hurling it forward. But it moves back with my hands, clinging to the fingernails and resting on my neck. Frantically, I run to the babe and scoop her up off of the ground, pulling her into the color on my chest. But it ignores her, and she it, until it softly disappears into the dark. And there we stand, once again in the absolute, all-encompassing dark.

I put Emernith into her crib and wait outside of Glastis's chamber. My blood feels too hot beneath my flesh, building thick around my reeling brain. He comes soon, bursting through the door from the heavy black behind him. His face is shining, aglow with light and wonder, overcome with seeing.

Did you see it? He grabs me close, pushing his shining skin against mine. *The way her neurons jumped through her skull. As if they wanted to touch it.* I remain stiff against him, the depth of my *failure* seeping out of me. Feeling this, he pulls back, holding me at arm's length so he can study me. *What's wrong? What happened?*

Nothing. Nothing happened.

Glastis searches my face, uncomprehending.

It didn't happen. They didn't bond, she didn't see. I have just begun and I have already failed.

That isn't right. Where's Mumma?

Mumma. Of course. Where is Mumma? She will know and will guide and fix and soothe as Mumma always does. I need her so badly, the feeling throbbing in the center of my chest, that suddenly she is moving up the stairs, and I am falling down into her arms.

Stop, Amilet. The severity of her shocks me upright. She picks up my chin in her hands.
Tell me what happened.

I describe to her the yellow's pause, the babe's wrestling body, their disconnect, the final empty black. She nods lightly when I have finished, her strong chin shifting in thought.

I will try. She finally assures. *Go with Glastis, watch him move through yellow.*

My stomach churns in misery at my own incompetence, but Mumma presses her fingertips against it to slow its twisting green. *This is not your fault.*

Glastis and I collect another yellow from the yard, pure sunlight this time, concentrating in pockets around the youngers' heads as they try to catch it in their hands. We can feel the babe's want as we enter its chamber, its craving for the touch of light it has gotten to come again. Glastis walks to the babe until he is standing directly over her, then he unscrews the jar's lid and gently shakes its contents onto her body. Little arms stretch towards the touch of Sun, and it rushes to meet her, brushing her cheeks until they have flushed with pink. Then it wraps itself around her entirely and settles down. The babe's soft head is abuzz with sharp reactions, stemming through her optic nerve. The signals move in paths and blips, shocks and electrical waves. When the dark begins to prick at the sunlight's outsides, it buries closer to her. We feel her sorrow when it disappears completely. We feel her loss.

It was different for you? Glastis kneads his thumb into my knuckles, pressing in deep circles. I cannot reply.

I spend the rest of the day sitting with Emernith in the dark, cradling her softly in my arms, pressing the feelings of light into the spaces around her eyes. She seems to feel me, though I am not sure she understands. How could she if she cannot see? What we feel, what we know, it is all learned from the foundation of the color of Sun and our partner's mouths and the chicken's feathers. Without it, everything is lost. We cannot survive without see. At some point, Mumma brings in a bottle of formula and food for me. And Glastis comes to sit for a while. But worn from the day of dawn and my lack of sleep, I drift in and out of consciousness, unable to tell the hour.

Finally though, I must fall into a total sleep because when I wake, I am in bed with Glastis lying beside me. The light has doubled in size since I last saw it, and I look for a moment at his lungs, moving quietly within his ribs. His chin has begun to grow fur along its edges in a darker color than atop his curly head. Soon he will be a man and he will shave it in the seeing months, too. Carefully, I pick myself from the sheets and make my way downstairs to the front door. The intensified gathering of the light stirs inside me. Today, I will continue to teach. Today, I will make her see, testing every color in this great big world against her dull eyes. I am an Acclimatory, after all.

Outside, Sun has pushed a sliver more of its body up into the world, dousing the sky in a milky orange light. I do not linger at its awe. With my jar, I scoop a heap of illigum, the lightest green, from a new patch of grass and capture it quickly inside.

The dark feels heavier than yesterday as I push through her door, pressing down against my body with a suffocating weight. I feel for Emernith in the room but cannot grasp her within

mind. Cannot feel her heat. The crib has been placed in the chamber again, pushed to the farthest corner. I walk to it slowly, place the illigum at my feet, and reach down in between its bars.

There lies a babe.

I pick her up.

Here lies a babe in my arms.

Here is a babe pressed to my chest.

Here.

My body jolts with shock, knocking into the jar at my feet, shattering it to pieces. The spurt of illigum jumps into the air, rushing up around my legs and encircling the babe resting in my arms. In the fine glow of the light I can see her clearly. The babe that is in my arms. The new babe that is not Emernith.

The babe's eyes dance back and forth, taking in the color, feeling it in her skull. *More.* She presses into me. *More. More. Illigum.* And suddenly, though I do not know where my first babe has gone, it is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. Suddenly, I want it too.

Good. Smiles Mumma when I tell her of the new babe's love for light. *We are the seers, Amilet. We have to see to feel.*

I do not respond, not knowing if this is true. Mumma feels *doubt* in my chest, sees that I cannot look her fully in the face. She wraps her arms around me, seeping *faith* through her body into mine. *She was not the first of all babes to not see, and she will not be the last. She wouldn't have survived in our world.* I watch her heart pumping through her. And for the first time, I present a feeling that I know is not true. I present *trust* and smile up into her face. For the first time, I lie to Mumma.

I understand, I press onto her. But I don't. And when I walk out through the front door and into the fresh light of the seeing months, I am not sure if I can see anything at all.

Plastic Flowers
By Sawyer Henshaw

At seventeen minutes past the hour he allowed the worry to slip into his thoughts. It was his birthday. His twenty-sixth, what now seemed an utter nothing of a birthday.

Ben had awoken to a call from his mother. And it had taken seconds to register the gaping space beside him. The sheets twisted into knots and pushed to the brink of the bed. She always kicked the sheets, and he always brought them back to the top again. He pictured her long feet thrashing at the yellow fabric, spreading her legs across the mattress until he, in sleepy stupor, obliged and draped his arm off of the bed.

She was a three-quarters sleeper, she had warned him on one of those early nights. You can push me and push me, but I'll always roll back to the place I want to be. He had laughed and kissed her pale lips. Nothing could have kept him away.

"How's Julie?" His mother had asked after the appropriate birthday niceties. She was never one to use discretion, but as she'd aged her tongue had loosened further. Time wrinkling her words along with her knuckled fingers.

"She's good, Mum," Ben had answered as he always did, maintaining enough distance that she never noticed the different shades in his voice.

"And what did she cook you for birthday breakfast?" She pushed, the rounded edge of her voice becoming sharp at the end.

"French toast," Ben lied.

Julie was a student in culinary school, a waitress on the side. When they had begun seeing each other, she had made him promise to tell her only the foods he didn't like. She loved a challenge, first making him mushroom soup on a winter night in her tiny apartment. He'd told

her he'd never tasted anything better, licking the silver bowl clean to make her smile. She hadn't believed him, but she had smiled, reaching from her kitchen counter to the small, tin sink.

He pictured her apartment now, perched comfortably up at the top of an old brownstone on the Upper West Side, and wished he were there instead. That they had spent the night tangled in her yellow bed instead of in his larger, newer, metal one. Where Ben had a set of matching silverware and mostly empty spaces, her apartment was filled with the useless. Small tables and stools littered the living room floor, stacked with cookbooks, a collection of porcelain elephants, wire twisted into a little girl standing on her tiptoes. There were big, corduroy pillows sprawled across her rug for sitting on the floor. Ben loved that about her. Loved eating standing at her counter, or bumping his head against an ornament she couldn't bear to take down, hanging on a doorframe.

There were flowerpots in each window, both daisies, both long dead. She adored flowers but had neither the attention nor care to keep them alive.

Ben watered them whenever he spent the night, but they were long past resurrection. He'd bought her a fake orchid on her first birthday with him, her twenty-third. He'd known immediately that it was the wrong present. Eyes a touch too wide, she had kissed him and placed the plastic flower on her windowsill. From there it mocked him in its shiny perfection, stem drooping in an unnatural arch to rest upon a browned, dead daisy planted in earth.

"Isn't it funny," she had thought to him in the quiet husk of her voice one afternoon, "isn't it funny that the most beautiful parts of nature, something like the tiniest sprig of a radish plant, are valued on their level of perfection." She had flipped onto her stomach. They had been in Bryant Park, he remembered. "And when they reach that perfection, we say that they look

fake.” She looked up at him to see if he was following. “We call the things that are most real fake in their perfection. And when the fake is perfectly reproduced, we say it looks real.”

Ben had thought he understood, but she wasn’t satisfied. Julie hated feeling misunderstood; she said it made her feel stupid.

“If I grew the most beautiful daffodil in the world, people would say that it was too magnificent, that it couldn’t be true. And if I constructed the flower with plastic and felt and wire, they would tell me it was so good it looked real,” she tried again. He nodded and told her that he understood, but she flopped back over onto her spine. He had pulled a piece of browned grass from her hair.

Ben didn’t tell his mother that Julie wasn’t there when he awoke. That it was now late morning, and she hadn’t come home. Instead, he’d hung up the phone, watched an old episode of *It’s Always Sunny*, and made himself a bowl of cereal. He ate it now. Slowly. Letting the bran flakes grow soggy in the cold milk. The next episode ended and prompted a five-second warning until another one began. Ben turned off the TV and looked through his Facebook, already crammed with birthday posts. Instead of reading them, he thought of Julie and where she might be if not in his bed on his birthday.

She’d taken to swimming in the morning. She hated waking up early but hated herself more for staying in bed. Doing something, anything, that was the point of a day. A note to jot into a calendar, distinguishing one week from the next.

She didn’t even like swimming, Julie had explained to him. The idea of dipping into the nauseating blue of chlorine made her sick. She hated the way it smelled, the way it made her skin feel as if it were stretched too taut around her body. She hated the monotony of her arms pressing deep into her chest and erupting into the water as if trying to break glass. He’d shown her the

backstroke and freestyle and told her that she could take water aerobics, but she'd said that wasn't the point.

Ben tried to convince himself that she was caught up in the soothing monotony of lapping back and forth, but he didn't really believe it. Julie had grown up on the ocean. He'd tried to take her out to Coney Island and Orchard Beach in the summer, but she'd turned him down. Not wanting to admit that she missed it. He'd thought it was for his sake at the beginning, as if she were worried he'd feel that he was trapping her here in the city, but he knew now that wasn't true. She liked the idea of being someone so self-assured she could go anywhere, with anyone, but she wasn't.

She'd told him once that she used to swim down to the bottom of the ocean and push her face into the sand. There, she would kiss the gritty floor with closed lips. *I love you*, she would think over and over until she was sure the ocean knew. Then, with aching ears she would climb back out of the water to roll herself in the warm sand.

Ben pictured her now. Her thin, fluttering feet pushing her to the bottom of the YMCA pool. Her lips grazing the concrete floor, the sharp surface drawing a shadow of blood, erased instantly into the plastic blue. The image was so suddenly grotesque to him that he had to shake his head to lose its effect.

Maybe Julie was back at her apartment. Or scrambling for a last minute birthday present. He'd told her, cleverly, he thought, that she had a gift for buying presents. It was Christmas Eve, and she had laughed from the small kitchen. She'd gotten him a thrift store t-shirt reading "Wilson!" Quietly teasing for crying that time they'd watched *Castaway*. He loved that shirt.

It had been two Christmases now, and they had made a tradition of opening their presents on Christmas Eve. Neither of them was religious nor had much nostalgia for their families. It had

been Ben's idea. He'd often found himself forcing their every intimacy to become tradition. It made him feel as if his life were intertwined with hers, inseparably. He'd suggested they get a dog once and waited to see if she would initiate, but she never had.

Ben pictured her again at the bottom of the pool, sharply and inexplicably afraid that she was dead. Her hair, darkened by water, lifted and spread into each direction. Her pale body turned the wrong way - down, eyes pointed open to the floor. He typed out a text and then erased it. She would have left a note if she wanted him to know where she'd gone.

Sick of himself, he pulled on a fleece and left the apartment. Hurrying down the communal steps and out the building's glass faced door, he was quickly on his busy street in the financial district. September air crawled around his neck and down his back, bringing unknown hairs up his spine. Twenty-six years old.

Carefully observant, Ben noticed each person he passed in the eleven o'clock sidewalk traffic. He took in a mother rushing her toddler across the street. She hoisted the child onto her hip as the blinking hand froze in time and jogged the rest of the way. The toddler screamed.

He noticed a beautiful girl and the men turning their heads to watch at her as she passed. An old woman played jacks on her front steps, expertly bouncing the ball and scooping it up again, hand full of spiky metal.

Last Friday, Ben had eaten at Julie's restaurant, coming in late so he would be there when she got off. It was a small Italian place a few blocks from her apartment, famous for its pesto garlic bread with pine nuts and Parmesan.

"I'm up for a promotion," he told her when she sat down on a break. "Senior analyst."

"Congratulations!" Julie reached across and ate a piece of tortellini from his plate. "Two years, wow, I can't believe you've been there that long."

Ben felt a pang of frustration. “It’s a successful company. Great pay for the level I’m at.”

“Oh, I know,” Julie said, smiling at him. “I just can never picture you there. Up in that big, glass building, and your only view a computer screen.”

“It’s more money,” he argued, “and I don’t mind doing it.”

Julie picked up his hand in hers and rubbed between his fingers. “I’m happy for you,” she said. Then she had gone back into the kitchen, and he had left before she came back.

Ben studied the lines on the dark street. The manmade straights, the unruly webs of time sprouting out from them, only to blend back in again. Once he had noticed them he was conscious to step over and around and never on. The old child’s rhyme buzzed somewhere in the back of his mind, singing of cracks that break mother’s back and lines for spines.

He walked his street, up and down and back and forth again, until he almost wasn’t thinking of anything at all. Almost.

There were new people to see at every stoplight, different cars idling and revving up again to pass them. The woman playing jacks went inside for her reading glasses and came back out again.

Ben bought a cup of coffee for a bearded man hunched into the steps beside a convenience store. The man was reciting what appeared to be verses from the bible. Over and over he rocked forward with one word and back with another. Ben looked back at him before turning the corner; the man hadn’t touched the coffee. A waste of two dollars.

When he could no longer convince himself that thinking nothing meant feeling better, Ben made his way three blocks east, rode the subway, and trekked up the darkened stairs of another apartment. Second, third, fourth floor. He rapped his knuckles against the door.

“Ben,” Margaret answered, smelling of lasagna and loneliness. “Happy birthday.”

He kissed her hard on the mouth. But her lips pushed back too eagerly, and he pulled away. She followed him through the open door.

He'd come to know her apartment, Ben realized as he stepped inside. He hadn't meant to. The statuette of Santa Claus she hadn't taken down from last Christmas, the mismatched shoes lining the door at all angles, her discolored cream rug. The smell of cooking food infiltrated his head, and though he was hungry, he felt his stomach cramp the way it had since he could remember. A guilty six year old with a piece of stolen peppermint bulging in his cargo pants. He'd eaten the candy and told himself that that was why his stomach ached. But he'd dreaded grocery shopping with his mother for years after. He tasted it now on his lips. The sick sweet of peppermint.

Margaret sat him down and fussed over him and brought him the lasagna. And Ben pretended not to notice the sharp, purple envelope with his name scrawled across it on the counter, the cellophane present poking out from behind.

"I hoped you'd come by," Margaret said as he ate. "Made your favorite just in case." He smiled at her through his bite of food. "But I figured Julie would make you something special."

Ben swallowed and put his hand on her arm. She was sitting too close to him at the table. "You know how much I love your lasagna," he said.

Margaret leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. "I'm glad you came," she said.

The present was a set of geodes for his collection. She told him they could hammer them open together. The card had a picture of Benjamin Bunny on the front. She smiled at his jokes and laughed when they were good, and she brought him a birthday cake with a single candle in it. And everything seemed as he had wanted. His tongue licked the peppermint around and around his lips.

It was Ben's birthday. His twenty-sixth. A day of complete nothing, of complete and palpable emptiness. Julie was in the kitchen cooking a beef stew when he pushed back through the door of his apartment hours later. A large bouquet of flowers squatted on the table beside her. He hated stew. He was full from Margaret's lasagna and mashed potatoes and cake.

Julie came to him as he pulled off his boots and went to put her hands between his armpits and around his back. He let her through, waiting to feel the worry slip away into the cracks of his bones.

"I'm sorry," she said.

Her brown hair pressed to his face, he breathed her in. He let the porcelain animals and torn cookbooks and dead flowers fill his nose. He breathed her in and waited for the wholeness between them to solidify, to harden, to dry. But it didn't. He smelled the chlorine and brown grass and mushroom soup. He smelled Julie. He breathed her in until he realized that he could no longer smell himself in her at all. That she loved to love but lacked the time and patience and sun and water and soil, and that he was gone. That he'd woken up alone.

"It's alright," he breathed out into her hair. And it was. And he ate her stew until the bowl was clean and smiled. And he let her go.

THE END.