



FLIPd

FPLD's Literary Anthology

COLOR
OUR
WORLD

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FPLD's Literary Anthology

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THE COLOR OF LOVE

BY
JOHN WOLFGRAM

FIRST PLACE

I never thought about love in colors until River. But with her, everything was vivid—like emotion left footprints in the air between us, drifting like smoke catching the light.

The first time I saw her, she wore a red hoodie, chipped nail polish the color of her lips, and a smirk that dared the world to keep up. I was leaning against a brick wall outside a coffee shop, watching people blur past. But she didn't blur. She burned. Red. That was River—fiery, untamed, all-consuming. She walked up like she already knew me, eyes locking with mine. "You look like trouble," she said. "But so do I."

Red was the fire of our first kiss. Her laughter echoing down narrow alleys behind late-night clubs and across rooftop restaurants where we sipped cheap wine and didn't care who was watching. Reckless. Wild. The kind of red that makes you forget to breathe—and wish the moment would never end.

But it didn't stay Red for long.

Pink came next. The blush of something unexpected. I didn't mean to fall for her, and I don't think she meant to fall for me. But there it was: the soft curve of her smile over coffee, the way she giggled when I told her about pulling the fire alarm just to skip a test.

We didn't live there long. But in quiet moments—in the late-night walks down by the lake holding hands and neither of us pulling away—it felt like something true.

Pink was fragile.

Then came Yellow. Fierce, defiant. River standing in the sunroof of my car, arms outstretched, hair tangled in the wind. River texting me a song with a note that just said: “For when it gets too quiet.”

She held her world together with sharp wit and rolled eyes, but I saw what others didn’t: how she cried in the bathroom after her cousin overdosed, how she shook in silence while I held her. Yellow was her glow. Her bravery. Her quiet hope. And maybe I was foolish enough to think that meant we could last.

We spent a weekend at a cabin that wasn’t ours. It belonged to a friend of a friend of hers, vacant for the season. We didn’t ask—we just went. Two days wrapped in flannel blankets and stories, sipping cocoa from mismatched mugs. River carved our initials into the dock’s wood with her keys and said, “This doesn’t make it permanent, but it makes it real—for now.”

But even yellow, warm as it was, couldn’t last.

And when it did, Green crept in.

Green was River barefoot in the grass, leaning against a tree, sketching spirals in her notebook instead of working on the deadline she kept pushing off. Green was the dream of something simple—and the ache of knowing we’d never quite have it. Green was my jealousy, rising like steam when she slipped away from me in crowds—always moving, always magnetic. It crept in like a vine, slow and quiet, until I couldn’t ignore it. I hated the way people looked at her—like they saw a version of her I hadn’t earned. Like they deserved her smile. I’d scan the room, trying to find her through the motion, needing to know where she was, who she was talking to, what she was laughing at. I pretended it didn’t bother me, but it settled deep. Not because I didn’t trust her—but because I didn’t trust the world to let her stay with someone like me.

Green changed, just like seasons do—quietly, and always too fast.

Then came Blue, slipping in like dusk. We argued more—about nothing, about everything. She’d vanish for a few days, come back quieter, like her mind hadn’t followed her home. But when we did connect, it was deep—like plunging into ocean water so cold it woke something in you. She saw pieces of me I kept buried. Blue was slow dancing in near-empty parking lots. Her fingers tracing the scar on my forehead—the one I got falling off the monkey bars when I was five. Blue was full of unspoken questions and apologies never given.

One night, out of nowhere, she said, “I don’t think I’m built for peace.” I didn’t get it then. But later, I did. Blue was the space between us, even when we

were close. The ache of wanting to stay but not knowing how.

But Blue got darker.

Purple came like a slow-moving storm, heavy with the weight of something inevitable. The color of endings. We didn't break—we unraveled. More fights. More jealousy. More unanswered texts.

We met a few more times—always brief, always electric. One night, she danced barefoot in my apartment, spinning, laughing, wild, manic—until she collapsed onto the rug, breathless. Then she looked at me, stripped of all defenses. “I think I love you,” she said. “Maybe I always did. But I don't know how to stay without hurting you.”

Then, as she opened the door to leave, she added, “I'm dying. I thought you should know.”

My world turned Black. Like someone had pulled a curtain across the sun and left only shadow and silence behind.

That was River. All or nothing. Mostly nothing, in the end.

Gray followed. The slow fog of her absence. The messages I never sent. The things I wanted to say but didn't. She moved away. Someone said she was dating a car salesman. Or maybe an accountant. The stories floated back, but they didn't sound like her. I thought I saw her once across the street. If it was her, she didn't see me. Or maybe she did.

Gray is the echo in an empty room. It's silence that stretches. A hunger that can't be fed.

Tucked like a secret between the novels on my bookshelf, I found a slim, worn folder filled with her sketches—forgotten pages, their edges curling like they'd been waiting all this time for someone to remember them. Swirls of color, bold and unanchored, danced across the paper. On one margin, scrawled in her sharp, looping handwriting, was a single line: “Some people are meant to leave thorns, not roots.” I stood there for a long time, fingers on the ink, like touching the words might help me understand them.

I drifted—through my workdays, through evenings that bled into mornings, through conversations I didn't hear and smiles I didn't mean. I sat in dim bars, nursing drinks I didn't want, playing her songs on repeat like a spell I couldn't break. I searched for her laugh in the spaces between the lyrics, hoping memory would be gentler this time. That was Smoky Blue and Whiskey Amber—

the color of trying to forget and failing, over and over again.

River's sister came by once. I'm not sure why. Maybe she was checking in for River. She curled up beside me, her arm looped through mine, and just sat there in silence for a long time. Then, her voice—soft as dust—broke the quiet. "You still love her, don't you?"

"Yeah..." I said. "I do." I didn't have the heart to lie.

One spring morning, a year after she was gone, I drove back to the lake, wondering if the road would feel different—if the ache in my chest would finally ease. It didn't. The trees lining the road had started to green again, their leaves just beginning to unfurl, but everything felt muted—like the color had drained out of the world and never quite returned. I could still see her in the passenger seat, one knee tucked up, humming along to a song I didn't know but loved anyway, simply because it was hers.

The lake appeared through the trees like something half-remembered—still and wide, blanketed in quiet. I pulled off the road where the gravel had settled into familiar ruts—where we'd parked that weekend, boots crunching frost, breath curling in the cold. The cabin stood silent, still closed up from winter. The windows were shuttered. The deck lay bare, save for a thin layer of pine needles and a sagging plastic chair tipped on its side.

The cottage had a new coat of paint, but the air—dry, sharp, laced with woodsmoke from nearby cabins—still whispered of that weekend. The morning she forgot to open the flue, the smoke curled into the curtains, our clothes, our skin. I never forgot the smell. Even now, it lingers—faint and stubborn, like her memory.

I walked to the dock. Each step felt like slipping further out of time. The boards groaned beneath me, stiff with frost. A gust rolled off the lake, tugging at my sleeve, and for a second, it felt like her hand brushing past.

And there, near the edge—our initials. Carved into the wood. Faded. Weather-worn. But somehow, still holding on. I crouched and traced them with my thumb. Not to prove anything to myself—but to feel something solid in a world that had gone dark around the edges.

Proof that once, something burned here.

I finally let myself cry.

A quiet unburdening.

Because love doesn't live in the moment it ends.
It lives in what lingers.
And real love? It never stays just one color.

It shifts.
It bleeds.
It fades.
It stains.

It shows up in old T-shirts you can't throw away. In a laugh you swear you still hear. In the way a breeze moves through the trees, and you turn—thinking, just for a second, that she might be there.

And River?

She didn't just color my world.
She was the whole spectrum.

She still is.

And somewhere, in a drawer I haven't opened in years, is a letter she left behind for me—sent after she died.

I haven't read it.
Not because I don't care.
Because I do.

I'm just not sure I'm ready to know what color it might be.

Maybe someday I will.
When I'm ready.

The Color of Love

By John Wolfram

First Place Winner



SECOND PLACE

MIDWESTERN FUN FAIRS

BY
**BERNARD GREGORY
DONNER**

The delight piercing the heart of this timeworn silverspun widow came from a daydream I had of my face pressed into my mama's washboarded housedresses, scented with octagon soap and line drying out back under a violet Nebraska sunset.

So touched, I indulged more such reveries—yellowed and sidestacked in my mind like old daguerreotypes—with a fine bias for the splendid whims from the annual funfairs that colored my elsewhere hardscrabble dust bowl girlhood.

Of the carousel's rhythmic postings, and I astride a jaunty playpony—his mouth agape and limbs curled smartly—whooshing me around in a glittering dioramic stampede set to canned calliope music,

my coltish notions on rainbows, unicorns, and scrapbooked keepsakes othered by flashes of my papa's rough farmer's hands and smooth Sunday churchgoing cheeks damp with witch hazel aftershave, as risings warm from the saddle into my tummy gifted a glimpse of the restlessness and bothersome changings waiting to overarch my oncoming adolescence.

And of pitching woo with my longtalldrinkofwater beau in a rocking bench
of the Ferris ride on a late summer evening, my knees parted just enough
to oblige his hands some modest liberties as we curved up, up, up and over
our fellow festive cornhuskers,

tickled silly with their high hopes and dreams and plushies and goldfish
trophies and faces pressed into tiny twisters of spun sugar-sweet and
pearlescent like lanterns guiding them to their own dear memories for
later use as a remedy for the sundry humblings eager to mount the great
wheels of even the best of them.

Midwestern Funfairs

By Bernard Gregory Donner

Second Place Winner





THIRD PLACE

ROBIN

BY

CHANTAL KORDE

The sky is still a deep velvety blue as I step out of my car. A few straggling stars are winking above me far in the distance, as though they stayed up past their bedtime just to greet me. I am grateful for their company in this forest preserve parking lot, empty but for an owl hooting softly somewhere off in the woods. I imagine that it's calling for its mate to come home from a hunt before the blinding dawn, before the larger predators awake. They will rest together in the hollow of their shared tree, sleeping peacefully while I make my trek. It's a comforting thought.

The gravel crunches under my feet as I approach the start of the path, steeling my nerves for the journey ahead. The trees in front of me form a foreboding wall, their branches waving ominously in the wind. I shiver, hugging myself, trying to ignore the goosebumps on my arms. I could still turn around, slink back like a coward to my car, its engine still warm, and pretend I was never here. But I look down at my hands, holding my old blue beat-up water bottle, and know that I can't. I've been putting this off too long. Despite my tired body, despite my aching heart, I have to. Gathering my strength, I take a step and am swallowed by the inky darkness of the forest.

The trees are thick, and the autumn leaves that cling to the canopy block out the weak light of the moon. I can barely see five feet in front of my face, and everything beyond takes on amorphous, misty shapes. It could be friend or foe; I wouldn't know the difference until it was too late. But I don't need a map or a light to guide me. I know my way well enough, it hasn't changed much in the year since I've been here.

With my eyesight restricted, the rest of my senses feel heightened, alert like a mouse being stalked by a bird of prey. The cool early morning wind ruffles my hair, and the mulchy smell of decaying logs drifts from deeper in the woods.

Under my feet, I can feel the softness of leaves muffling the sound of my steps. I know in the light, they would be brilliant red and yellow, newly fallen from their homes in the treetops. I can picture it in my mind, clear as day, images from years gone by. But I can't dwell on that right now.

At a fork in the road, I turn left onto a steeper path. My fingertips skim the bark of the oak on my right unconsciously, and I can almost hear a ghost of laughter coming from behind me. Laughter that traveled seven years to get to my ears, from a time when I could face the forest in the daylight. When my boots marched in lock step with yours, and I knew without looking over my shoulder that you were keeping up.

I pause, sighing. I know if I run my hand higher up the gnarled oak, I will find the dark brown gashes your penknife left behind, promises we made. I refuse to look, and while I cannot bear to forget, I don't think I can take the remembering, either. My heart is safe where it is now, encased in ice, kept numb. Mercifully, all I can see is the dark shape of the tree, black and solid against the mystery of the forest beyond.

Closing my eyes, I find the will to move on. Through a clearing in the branches above my head, I can see the steely grey beginning on the horizon far beyond. I still have a long way to go.

I trudge along, the path becoming steeper. The hard ground and leaves are now mingled with sand, which has found its way into my shoes. The grains seep into my socks, and I'm panting now, much more out of shape than I used to be. Unbidden, a memory rises to the surface of my consciousness, of you running ahead of me, looking back with a devious smile on your face. Challenging me. My poor heart twinges, rising higher, almost to my throat. The past is too much for me to face, and so I urge my body into a jog, then a run, hoping that tired limbs will cure me of imagining your smirk again. And your eyes, the way they twinkled in the light, the golden brown pools like honey, framed by long eyelashes that I was always jealous of, the eyes I fell for.

My chest constricts, and I run faster, try to outrun your memory, but my foot connects with a tree root hidden in the sand, and suddenly I'm flying. Just for a moment, I'm weightless, and my soul is floating far above me, away from here, but then reality sets in as I come crashing down. My arms flail, and I fall forwards, my mouth filling with sand, my body beginning to roll down the hill. I look up at the trees around me and realize that the forest isn't so dark anymore, and I can't hold back the tide of remembering that crashes over me. That autumn day we raced up this sandy dune seven years ago, the first time you showed me this path that nobody really takes anymore since the road to the beach was built. We were

just kids then, and I conspired to win our race by grabbing your ankle and pulling you down to me. We tumbled down, laughing, covered in sand, just like my aching body is now. I wanted to kiss you then, but I was too afraid to lose you as a friend. I had no idea you were thinking the same thing. Then, a year later, on the fork in the road, when we both confessed. You tagged that poor tree with our initials, and we promised each other our forevers. And every autumn after that, coming up to watch the sunrise on the highest dune, for five long years. Four of them in college, only seeing each other for a few months out of the year after painful stretches apart. But we made it through, even though everyone said we wouldn't. Then one blissful year after earning our degrees, dreaming of our future together. We had it all planned out. We were going to live in New York for most of the year to fulfill the career goals our parents had for us, and spend our autumns here, hiking our path and watching the sun rise over the water. You loved coming up here to see it, the dark of night transforming into the bright colors of the day and feeling all the possibilities that came with. But I hated waking up early, you practically had to drag me out of bed every year when we came up here to catch it. Now, funnily enough, I can rarely sleep past four in the morning. Each day I watch the sky turn from deepest black, to midnight blue, to steely grey, but once I see color on the horizon, I go close the blinds. I cannot bear to watch it alone.

But today I have made the effort. Today, I am finally here, ready to see it again. Maybe I can start trying to fit the jagged edges of myself back together again. At this thought, I pull myself out of my reverie, struggling to swim up from the waves of memories threatening to drag me back under. I stand up, straightening my sore limbs from the heap I've formed on the ground.

Suddenly, I realize I'm not holding my water bottle anymore. No. Please, please no. My heart races, and I whip my head around like a lost child looking for its parents, on the brink of despair. I can't have lost it. It's not possible. It's all I have left. I crawl around on my knees, hands digging in the sand, clawing around. Sand is in my hair and under my fingernails, but I don't even register. Finally, finally, my fingers touch cool metal, and I snatch it up, clutching it to my chest. My breath comes gasping and ragged, and I want to turn back, put it away safely on a shelf. But I can't bring myself to do that. To do that to you. Just a little farther. I have to make it. I did not come this far just to miss it. For you, I have to make it. Shakily, I pick myself up and make my slow way back up the dune.

I can see my surroundings more clearly now, the solid ashy grey tree trunks rising from the ground, and the birds sitting in their branches, watching me struggle. They sing cheerfully, and I can't find it in myself to wish for them to stop. This isn't their fault. My mess of human problems has nothing to do with them. Your namesake sits on a branch, its little orange-red belly puffing as it

chirps. Robin. They are still my favorite bird. Little pieces of you soaring through the sky, free as the wind. Robin, I love you. The last text you read from me. The one I regret the most. The one before you looked up and saw headlights reflected in your beautiful, golden honey-brown eyes. Robin. The name I screamed over and over and over until my voice was hoarse, when I got the call, a year ago. Robin. The reason my soul is broken in a million sharp, ugly pieces, and why I haven't been able to face these woods alone. Robin. My poor, beloved Robin.

I don't think I can make it. Not without you by my side, cheering or dragging me along. The light coming through the forest is gaining a brilliance that tells me dawn is almost here, and the hill to the top of the last dune stretches before me like a far-off finish line I'm destined not to cross. I grit my teeth, sand forcing its way between them viciously, and keep putting one foot in front of the other.

"Robin," I whisper, mostly to myself. I have to remember why I came. I have to see it. For you. My legs burn, my feet ache, and still, I climb up and up, sand slipping down the dune with each step I take. It cascades down like the runnels of time passed, like the trickle of a stream. A butterfly effect. A home purchased at the same time as a neighbor with a similarly-aged child. A friendly smile shared in class, choosing to play the same instrument. A longing look, a first kiss. Warm arms holding me for a moment in time. A poorly timed text, the slip of a hand on a steering wheel. And time ticking on, turning hope to love to tragedy, and then what? I'm not sure yet. All I know is I need to keep moving. I cannot forget. I could never forget, even if I tried. My first love, which I hoped would be my only. Ripped away just as quickly as it began. And so, I watch the robin float above the trees, and I keep going.

Impossibly, I feel the slope flattening and see the summit not far ahead. The place where I rested my head on your shoulder and breathed you in, trying to catch some last moments of sleep before you gently shook me awake to see the sunrise. Where we held our breaths, willing time to stop just for a second, just for us. And maybe it did, who knows. Maybe just for a moment, the entire world was ours. Our potential was boundless. We dreamt one single dream, hearts beating in tandem. Now there is no second drum matching my rhythm. The drumsticks flounder clumsily in my hands, and I have forgotten how to play. I have to start over. That's all I hear, echoed from different mouths, well-wishers parroting the same thing in a loop. But the only voice that matters to me is the chirp of the robin above my head, reminding me. Reminding me not of what the world expects, but of what you would have wanted. You would want me to remember, to walk our old path. To experience the sun, the glorious beauty of the world. To do it for you, if you couldn't.

I raise my eyes from the ground and realize. I've made it. I am at the top of the dune. Our spot, our secret hideout.

Tears sting my eyes. It's breathtaking.

I stare at the sunrise, the crimson and pink, the gold and blue of your eyes and mine. The streaks of color in the sky just like the paintings we made together, watercolors bleeding from the sky onto the sea, obscuring the horizon. Light touches the trees, lighting them on fire, the red and orange and green brilliant in the new day. I don't know how or when, but I've started crying, silent sobs wracking my body like the night I lost you. My eyes are blurred, my throat is raw, but I can't look away. I've never seen anything more beautiful. I know that you've sent it just for me.

"I miss you," my cracked voice whispers to the sky. You answer, moving the wind's currents to brush my hair onto my face, strands sticking to the wet streaks, as if wiping my sadness away. You point the branches of the trees towards the sun, and we stand, person and ghost, watching. The red-orange streaks of light are the exact shade of a robin's belly, reminding me. It's time.

The cracks inside me shift just a little. My soul will always hold the pieces of you there with me, but I can feel the sinews growing, beginning to patch the gashes. I will carry you and this place with me forever. Nobody can take that from me.

I uncup the blue water bottle, the one you got me so long ago, and it tumbles out of my hands, scattering ashes on ground. You swirl in your own wind, and I quietly sit as you watch the sun color your favorite place in the world with me one last time.

Robin

By Chantal Korde

Third Place Winner





FOURTH PLACE

A SUNSET

BY

SUZANNE MROTEK

Written in 1966

Someone stabbed the sun today.
It bludgeoned the entire sky.
And I could have sworn on the Bible
That I heard the wind cry.
A sea of blood pooled in the place
Where the earth and sky are pressed.
And in this magma of fiery red
The sun had descended to rest.
With its dying rays it stretched to touch
And tried to kiss some friends.
The grass, the trees, the flowers and birds
In gracious respect did bend.
The land was caught in a sacrificial glow,
A crimson dust over all.
The coffin of night crept softly in
To cover the corpse like a pall.
Giving up hope, the sun gave a sigh
And sank slowly into its grave.
And one friend turned to another and said
“Wasn’t it a beautiful sunset today?”

HONORABLE MENTION

Cynthia by June Zaragoza

It would not be too strong to say that the overriding theme of my Maryland suburban girlhood involved my friendship with my best friend Cynthia. We met in elementary school and soon found that we shared a passion for all things amphibian. I don't remember how it started, but we regularly crossed the street from her house to the Minnehaha Creek that eventually flowed into the Potomac River. It was a typical suburban creek of the time, teeming with all kinds of aquatic life: frogs, tadpoles, bugs, and crayfish. What started out as a hobby quickly became a passion. After school we would go whenever we could, roaming mostly upstream, wearing old tennis shoes that we, or rather our mothers, didn't mind if we ruined, to protect our feet from rocks or just not to touch the mucky bottom. We soon found that we had to approach each new area quietly, whether it was a deeper pool in the stream or a drop-off after a concrete tunnel, looking for the presence of tadpoles, listening for the occasional croaking of a frog, and just plain scouting. Sometimes we used a net, sometimes a jar, but mostly our hands. I had no problems touching a frog despite my somewhat fastidious nature.

There was one time, however, when we returned home earlier than usual. We were upstream and hunting tadpoles. They came in all sizes, newly hatched from eggs and looking like little sperm, or starting to sprout the bumps on their little bodies that showed their front and hind legs were developing. It seemed like you could pull the legs out easily when they were fully formed without hurting the frog. Then magically over time the tail would disappear and you had a miniature frog. On that fateful day we found little tadpoles. Cynthia stood on top of a concrete bank like many that periodically transected the stream. She was holding a tadpole in her hands. I carried the jar. She called or signaled that she was going to throw it to me. Loyal friend and companion that I was, I cupped my hands to receive the treasure. I also opened my mouth, perhaps as a concentration aide, and Cynthia threw. In a perfect arc the tadpole sailed through the air and landed plop right in my mouth. Spitting furiously over and over, I screamed as Cynthia laughed and laughed and laughed.

I don't know at what point we escalated our efforts and collected as many frogs as we could, but we eventually filled an aquarium in Cynthia's back porch. At one point we had ONE HUNDRED frogs. This round number

represented a wonderful goal of achievement for us, but as you might imagine things were not so wonderful for the frogs themselves. We knew certain things about ensuring their welfare, learned the hard way. For example, frogs or tadpoles should not be placed in water straight from the garden hose because they will die. We eventually deduced that the deaths were from the chlorine in the water, so we let it stand overnight. This seemed to do the trick. However, there was another crucial factor that we forgot, food. In our zeal to amass such a wonderful collection we neglected enough of that basic necessity.

The frogs got thinner and thinner pretty quickly, and then, of course, resorted to the inevitable. We had set up the perfect conditions to replicate an amphibious Donner Party; they started eating each other. I learned this graphically one day by pulling something that was sticking out of one of the frog's mouths; it was another frog. Being compassionate little girls, we tried to return the frogs to the creek, but they never seemed to do too well. I remember when returning to certain spots, we would see a frog we knew from our former collection. It was alive, but thinner and slower to react when trying to get away from us than a newer victim would. Had we permanently damaged their health or will to live? We never knew.

Whatever unintended atrocities the frogs suffered, my friendship with Cynthia bloomed. I don't recall any feelings of competition with her whatsoever, and judging from my usual behavior with my older sister Cathy, this was due entirely to her. We did everything together. She was the more athletic one riding horses and other activities. I was somewhat of a physical coward, though my passion for water and marine life exploration matched hers. I remember in her back yard once she tried to persuade me to swing on a long iron rod like a pole vault. No thanks.

That spring of 1964 we had a new amphibian target, though it proved to be short-lived, a splendidly colored red salamander called a newt. It was bright red with black spots and had lived, unknown to us, even closer to Cynthia's house than the frogs. Men had come to dig into the ground alongside the creek to fix or lay pipes. When they uncovered these wonderful creatures, I got a call almost immediately to come over and see them. Having apparently learned nothing, we decided to start collecting newts.

To document our collection this time we took pictures. I still have a number of fuzzy photos taken with a Brownie box camera of those red newts on a blue cloth. We didn't have any more than ten collected when suddenly everything changed. I don't remember what Cynthia's father did, but mine

worked for the State Department in Washington, D.C. One night my father came home, gathered us all in the kitchen and announced we were moving to Kuwait. “Ku-what?” we all said; it became the family joke. Cathy remembers the scene and was not amused, not wanting to leave new friends she had made.

And what about leaving school and friends for me? What about Cynthia? Without speaking about it, we felt the weight of our impending separation. Somehow, I contracted a bad case of poison ivy around the same time we would spend our last night together. We slept in a double bed in her parent’s unfinished basement. I was not feeling well and Cynthia stayed up with me as if I were a sick pet. I don’t remember our actual good-byes, but I do remember the tangible one that I ended up holding onto tightly for dear life. It was a card that arrived somehow that last day. On the front was a puppy. Inside it said goodbye and then

love, love, love,

love, love, love,

love, love, love, Cynthia

It was a good thing I couldn’t see into the future, because the next time I saw her, only two years later everything was altered, not on her part, but mine. Somehow, I could no longer connect with her, the only friend who ever expressed her love for me nine-fold times.



HONORABLE MENTION

Stream by Richard Palmer

You look down at the muddy, brown water. While the northern Des Plaines River has never been known for its rapid flow, this seems barely a stream. It's hard to tell if there's even a current.

A red-and-white plastic fishing bobber slowly floats past the canoe launch. If not for this contrasting orb, there would be little indication that the water was moving. It brushes against a branch stuck in the mud below the surface then continues to meander toward a hydrologically possible, though highly improbable, destination of New Orleans.

The lime-green molded-plastic kayak sits patiently at the edge of the lethargic water. You didn't get to paddle at all last summer because the water level was too low due to the lack of rain, and this year is starting dry also. A drizzly Wednesday here and some heavier downpours in southern Wisconsin helped with the water flow. Also, the kayak, being a low-draft watercraft, doesn't require much depth, which makes it ideal for small streams such as this. Indigenous peoples of the Americas navigated all over the continental waterways for centuries in canoes and kayaks, so you should be able to travel a few miles downstream.

You finish loading your supplies into the tiny boat, including a blue seat cushion that acts as an additional flotation device (but honestly, if you were to fall out, you could just stand up and walk). Your PFD is a faded, formerly neon-yellow vest that is a little snug if you were to buckle it fully (which you don't). You settle into the boat and push off into the listless current.

Testing the water depth, you can push almost the entire orange blade of the double paddle into the water before feeling the mush below, meaning there's enough water here at least that you shouldn't scrape the bottom too often. The repetition of paddling on one side then the other feels comfortably familiar yet oddly distant. You miss this activity and hope that this is not the only opportunity you get on the water this year. A few quick strokes and you pass the drifting bobber.

"Bon chance," you wish the sphere on its potential journey to the Big Easy, the Gulf of Mexico, and beyond. You're a little jealous that it has all the time in the world to leisurely float along for hundreds of miles while you have to fit your water time into just a few hours on the weekend. But it's better than being landlocked.

You look up between the leafy green branches at a patch of puffy white clouds drifting across the blinding blue sky. As you paddle around a bend, you scan the woods on either side for wildlife. A flutter in the dry brown leaves indicates an active squirrel. An occasional bird flits between the trunks.

Other than the gentle splash of your paddle propelling you through the quiet water, there is near silence, unless you strain to pick up some distant sounds (but why would you put in that effort?). Part of why you enjoy kayaking is for the silence and the solitude. Very rarely have you passed another paddler, and they are usually traveling in the opposite direction. You occasionally see an angler on the bank with a line or two cast out into midstream (and you are always careful to avoid their translucent filaments) or a cyclist cruising down (or up) the crushed, white limestone trail that follows the riverway. They are the only other humans you come across taking advantage of this natural recreational resource. A few times along this route, the waterway passes below a roadway, with drivers speeding along in their vehicles, oblivious of the serenity drifting beneath the pavement.

You continue paddling around gentle bends, periodically hitting the muddy bottom and stirring up an underwater cloud of gray murkiness. The bottom may also be sandy or covered with scattered pebbles, depending on what the current deposited. Every now and then, the meandering river straightens and deepens, allowing you to dig in and pick up some speed. You plunge one blade down to your hand, pull back, then twist over to the other side and repeat again and again. After a stretch, the river curves once more and the water depth diminishes again, stopping your sprint. You leave the paddle in the water on the side of the bend, and the bow slowly turns in the intended direction.

The green canopy stretches over the brown water, providing a brief relief from the blazing white sun. You hear a bird call off to the right, then a different melody on the left. A large blue heron that had been patiently wading by the shore in the shallow water and stalking its piscine prey takes to the air in search of a quieter spot downstream. In a short time, you disturb its hunt once again, and it lifts off from the water with a squawk. This process repeats itself as the bird continues to travel a short distance in the same direction you are paddling. Even when you try to just float silently by without disruption, it is not fooled by your passivity. It eventually goes against instinct and flies over you and back upstream, possibly to its original hunting spot.

A little ahead, the trunk of a tree, knocked over by age and weather, sits horizontally in the water, blocking half the stream. Was it an oak? Elm? Maple? It's hard to tell without the leaves (not that you could tell even if it were upright and

alive). You easily maneuver around the wooden impediment, thankful that the passage is still navigable. But your reprieve is short as you come to another fallen forest soldier that not only lies across most of the river but has been down long enough to collect logs and other flotsam sufficient to obstruct the entire span between banks.

You paddle back and forth across the stream, trying to find a passage through the tangled brown boughs. There is one spot that might work, but getting through would require a degree of physical flexibility to twist your limbs through the tree limbs that is now well past your capabilities, if it ever were. Near the middle is a section that could be scaled over by exiting the boat to stand on what looks to be a solid horizontal trunk then pulling the kayak over to the other side. This plan is short-lived after you press down on the step in question with only to watch the faded-brown branch sink into the dark-brown water.

The left bank could provide an egress, if it weren't for what is most likely poison ivy ("leaves of three, let it be"). The right side shows a little more promise, but the slope away from the water is a bit too steep and slippery to be a contender. A bluejay sitting in a tree up the bank seemingly mocks you and your situation (a mocking jay?), while on the other side, a bright-red northern cardinal judges in silence.

As the cardinal takes to the air and flies upstream, you follow its flight as it passes a spot on the right bank that has the opening and grade of what could almost be an intentional boat launch. A path, worn into the foliage, is likely a trail used by anglers over the years to cast their lines into the water in hopes for a bluegill. It turns to the left at the top of the slope and possibly leads around the blockage. A log resting in the squishy mud and sitting even with the bank (and which may offer a step up onto the land) currently acts as a leisurely resting place for a painted turtle. Its distinctive bright yellow, red, and orange markings on its head, neck, and legs as well as a smooth shell make it identifiable.

Before you can consider looking for another place to exit the river to make your way around the dam(n) trees without disturbing the snoozing amphibian, the creature takes it upon itself to clear out and silently slips into the water with barely a ripple. You give it a wave of thanks and plan your route out.

You maneuver the boat almost parallel with the shore then stow the paddle inside the front of the kayak. You push down on the log to make sure it can support more weight than a small turtle (it can) without slipping around (it doesn't). You put your hands on the gunwales to steady yourself, take a deep breath to calm yourself, then slowly slide into a crouch to position yourself. Your

self being ready, you carefully place your right foot on the log and press. There is still no movement. Assured at the step support, you slowly rise, still keeping a low center of gravity, and swiftly lift your other foot out and onto dry-ish land, while maintaining a grasp on the side of the boat. The bluejay does not sound impressed.

Step one complete, you consider your next move. You lean toward the woods and tug on the kayak to get it out of the water. You can feel the log start to roll under your once-white shoe, sensing that it is about to go into the water as it has many times before and get even further from its original shade. Shifting weight from right to left, and praying that the ground is not as slick as it seems like it would be, you push off with both feet and lunge away from the river. You land with a thud face first in the dirt, but successfully ashore.

You rise to your knees, turn back to face the water, and sit down. A blue heron (the same one as before?) glides by just feet above the water heading downstream. It gives an indeterminate squawk that you take as a nod of congratulations. The bluejay is silent now.

After a short respite to regroup, you rise to your feet and pull the kayak the rest of the way onto the trail. You remove the faded yellow life vest and toss it onto the molded plastic seat next to the orange-bladed paddle. Assured that you have all of your gear safely tucked away, you grab hold of the bright pink handle that is attached to a black cord tied to the bow and start to drag your watercraft over the land. The portage is fairly easy since the path worn through the brush is flat and wide. Until, that is, you come upon another fallen tree across your way. However, unlike the multiple twisted trees blocking the river, this is a single branchless trunk lying on the ground, and you can just step over it, lift the front tip of the boat, and glide it over.

Once past the impediment, you turn back down the path but stop in your tracks. There, not ten feet away, stands a white-tailed deer chewing on some. You note that with the Northern cardinal and the painted turtle, you have now spotted three of your state's official animals to get an air/water/land hat trick. It slowly turns its head, still chomping away, and stares at you with amber eyes. Like with the turtle earlier, you don't want to disturb the animal, but it is in your way. All you can do is stand and stare back at the majestic creature.

After half a minute or so, you take cautious step forward and stop. The deer (a doe, right, since it doesn't have antlers?) turns back to its lunch and munches down on some more leafy greens, while continuing to give you and your boat a side eye. You figure that if you just keep walking, then the deer will most likely skitter away into the safety of the surrounding woods. It's not very large,

probably weighs about the same as you. In a flash, the wild animal takes itself out of your equation and leaps gracefully into the forest and disappears among the standing trees.

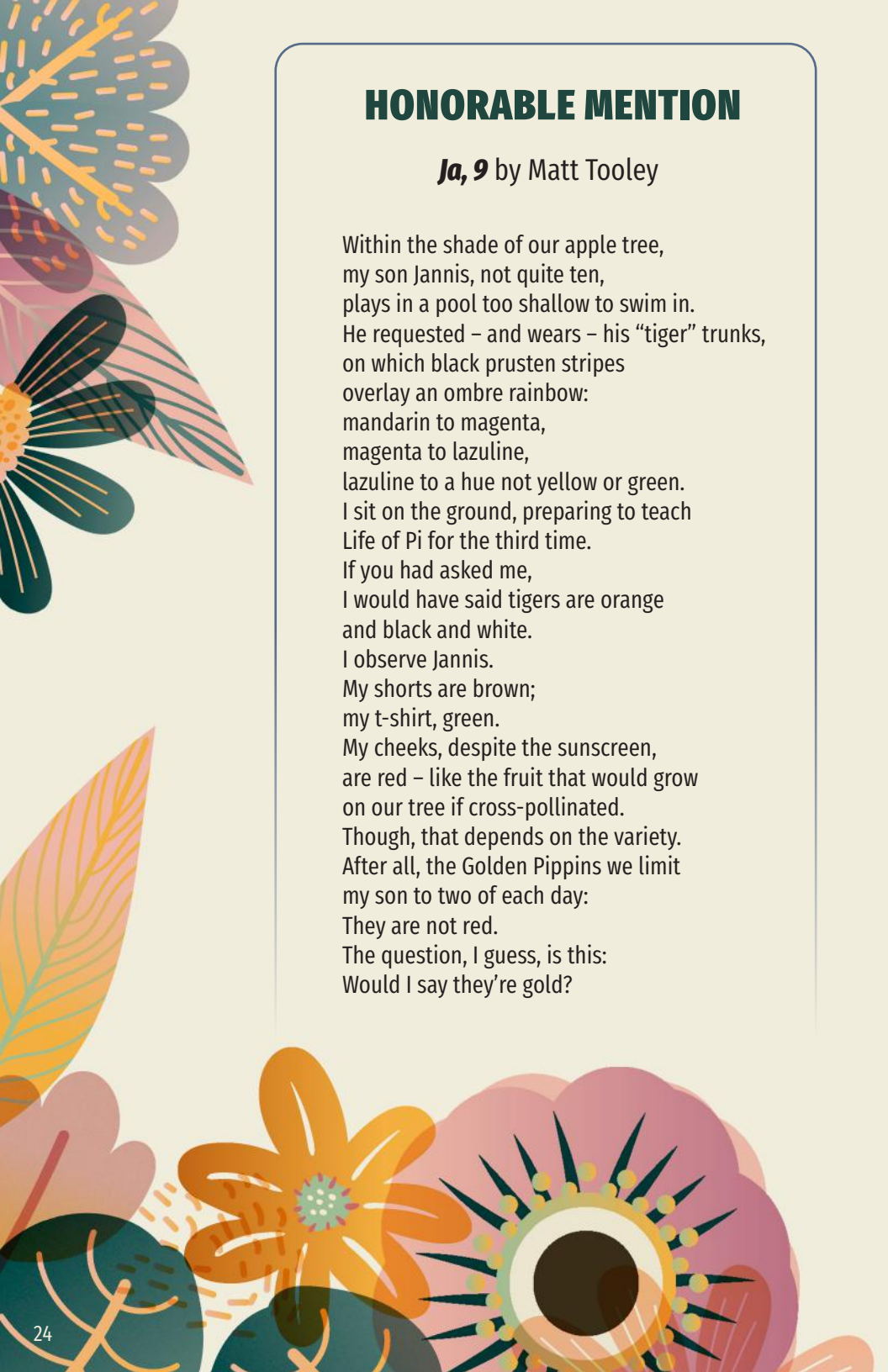
Cleared of this woodland obstacle, you continue to drag your kayak along the path, all the while looking for a suitable entry back to the water. As you search, a large yellow lab comes bounding down the path directly at you; its fluffy tail wagging furiously, its pink tongue drooping and dripping from the side of its mouth, and its eyes pleading for a petting. You graciously oblige. After a moment, the dog's human emerges breathlessly from the foliage and offers that "Igor is friendly," which you pretty much figured out on your own. Spotting the obvious lime-green boat sitting behind you, the person says that there was a good place to reenter the river (they apparently are a fellow paddler) a little further downstream. You give Igor another scratch behind the ears, thank the human, and continue your portage.

It turns out that they knew what they were talking about. About fifty yards down, you find a gentle slope of tan sand leading down to the water. With not much effort (you've done this many times before), you slide the boat into the water, step in, sit down, and shove off into the still stream.

You get barely a hundred yards farther on your water wander when you come around a sharp bend and see a site for sore eyes (and arms). A rusty red footbridge arches over the river where the bike trail crosses next to the forest preserve boat launch. Pleased to be done with your aquatic adventure, but also dismayed that it is over so quickly, you slowly paddle to the river outlet.

Getting out of the river is tricky because of the slippery rocks along the river's edge, and the wet grass leading up to the parking lot adds to the degree of difficulty. But you make it up top without trouble. When you emerge from under the leafy, shaded canopy, the brilliant blue sky temporarily blinds you. Once you regain workable vision, you dig out your cell phone and text your ride for a pick-up. Seconds later, you get a reply that they are already there waiting. Stepping out onto the faded black asphalt, you spot their silver sedan sitting in the solitary shaded spot and wave.

You think how every excursion out on the water is different. Sometimes, especially when the water level is high and the current is fast (though it's been a few years), there can be plenty of challenges. Other times, like when the stream is especially low (all too frequent), there can be more walking of the boat over its pebbly bottom than floating in it over the smooth surface. But each time on a muddy brown river, a mossy green stream, or a crystal blue lake brings you closer to all the colors of your world.



HONORABLE MENTION

Ja, 9 by Matt Tooley

Within the shade of our apple tree,
my son Jannis, not quite ten,
plays in a pool too shallow to swim in.
He requested – and wears – his “tiger” trunks,
on which black prusten stripes
overlay an ombre rainbow:
mandarin to magenta,
magenta to lazuline,
lazuline to a hue not yellow or green.
I sit on the ground, preparing to teach
Life of Pi for the third time.
If you had asked me,
I would have said tigers are orange
and black and white.
I observe Jannis.
My shorts are brown;
my t-shirt, green.
My cheeks, despite the sunscreen,
are red – like the fruit that would grow
on our tree if cross-pollinated.
Though, that depends on the variety.
After all, the Golden Pippins we limit
my son to two of each day:
They are not red.
The question, I guess, is this:
Would I say they’re gold?

HONORABLE MENTION

The Woman in the Grocery Store by Nicole Bakirtjy

Sometimes I still think about her
when I see a cardinal out my window or a
candy apple car with rhinestone plates.

I don't know her,
and she doesn't know me,
but we engage in a ritual
as old as trade.

I give her my food.
She gives me a smile.
I give her my cash.
She gives me my change.

That should be it
but she sticks in my brain like gum,
a bright pink pop,
because if color was a woman
it'd be her.

Among grey aisles and mechanical belts,
she's a beacon of crimson.
A fruit stepped away from the produce
section. "It's for Valentine's Day," she says,
with a red smile between heart earrings.

Next time I see her she's weighed
down with green necklaces and trinkets.
Gold glints from emerald braids.
"For St. Patrick's Day!"

Pink has me stumped.
I find out it's for breast cancer.

Sometimes I still think about her
And I wonder where she is and if she's happy.

HONORABLE MENTION

Paint Your Family by Dorothy Bakirtjy

Eight-year-old Carlos skipped home with his painting flapping in the wind. I can't wait to show Mom the painting I did of our house. I found just the right color red for the floor tiles. I'll tape it on the refrigerator door.

Carlos unlocked the front door and stopped. The house was scary silent. Where's Mom? He didn't hear the familiar sounds of music and cooking. The usual smells of onions and browned beef for the tacos and tamales were missing. Why isn't she cooking? Running to the kitchen, he stopped and looked around. The bright yellow kitchen was spotless. This is wrong. How did she make the tamales to sell to the neighbors today? He looked for his after-school snack that his mother always put on the kitchen counter for him. Nothing. He carefully placed the painting on the kitchen counter.

Running through the house, he checked every room for his mom.

Maybe something has happened to her. Maybe she's hurt.

"Mom!" Carlos shouted. No response.

Running up the stairs to the bedrooms, he heard scratching. He opened his bedroom door and was almost knocked over by his dog, Bluey. He was a shelter dog, however, his huge ears screamed 'Cattle Dog.'

"Bluey, what are you doing up here?" Carlos bent down to scratch the dog behind his ears. He wiggled and licked Carlos's face.

"Where's Mom?" Bluey ran down the stairs to the back door of the house with Carlos right behind him.

"Is she outside?" Carlos opened the back door to the fenced-in yard.

Bluey ran outside and sniffed all around the yard. The yard was as empty as the house. Carlos waited for him to finish his business, then called him to come back inside. His dog found a ball in the yard and brought it to him.

"You wanna play?" He tossed the ball, and the dog charged after it. Mom is missing and you just want to play! He shook his head.

"Bluey, come. Let's go inside."

Bluey ran to Carlos with his ball in his mouth.

Maybe there's a note. Carlos searched the entire house looking for a note from his mom. Looking everywhere, there was no note. Nothing. Maybe she texted me. He looked for his phone in his backpack. He wasn't allowed to have it on during his school day. After finding it, he turned it on. There was a text message from his mom in Spanish.

"I was arrested today. I asked Uncle Juan to take care of you while I'm away. I love you. Listen to your uncle and do as he tells you."

Carlos looked around the room and saw no colors. Everything was shades of gray. What happened to the colors in the house? He slid to the floor and touched the tiles, moving his fingers over the cold surface. Why was everything so gray and watery? Where were the red tiles? Bluey ran to him and began licking the tears from his face.

"Bluey, my mom is in jail!" he said as he hugged the dog.

The doorbell rang. Bluey barked and ran to the door. Carlos froze and looked at his shaking hands. What if it's a stranger? What if they're coming to arrest me! What will happen to Bluey? Carlos hid behind the sofa under the window. He peeked from behind the curtain to see who was at the door. It's Uncle Juan! Carlos scrambled out of his hiding place and opened the door. He rushed to hug his uncle. Tears streamed down Carlos's cheeks. Uncle Juan hugged him and whispered, "Let's go inside."

Uncle Juan guided Carlos inside the house, and they sat on the green sofa in the living room.

"Your mom was arrested today. She called me and asked me to take care of you until she is released."

"Why did they arrest her?" Carlos's eyes met Uncle Juan's.

"The government said that she is in this country illegally. She may have to leave. But don't worry, you were born here, so you can stay with me." Uncle Juan put his arm around Carlos.

"But I want to be with my mom." Carlos's lip began to quiver.

"I know, but that isn't possible right now." Uncle Juan looked very serious.

"Why can't I stay here?"

"You need to stay with an adult until we figure this out. You can't stay here all alone."

"What about Bluey?" The dog perked up at the mention of his name.

"Bluey can come, too. You need to pack for him. What does he need?"

"His ball for sure. His food, leash, doggie bags, and his bed. And his Lamb Chop squeaky toy! It's his favorite."

"You go gather his things while I get the suitcase out of my car. I brought it to put your clothes in." Uncle Juan let himself out and retrieved the suitcase.

Carlos spread Bluey's things all around the living room. When Uncle Juan returned, he went into the kitchen and took a large plastic bag. When he reentered the living room, he handed the bag to Carlos. "Put everything into this bag, so we can carry them to the car."

Carlos scurried around, picking up toys and bones and putting them into the bag. Bluey grabbed a toy and ran around the room.

"Bluey, you're not helping!" Carlos chased the dog to get the last toy.

"Great job, Carlos. Now let's go upstairs and pack this suitcase." Uncle Juan headed upstairs with Carlos reluctantly following him. Bluey was right behind them. Carlos sat on the bed while Uncle Juan emptied his drawers into the suitcase. Bluey jumped on the bed and nudged Carlos's hand. Carlos scratched behind Bluey's ears, and the dog licked his face.

"Are these shirts, ok?" Uncle Juan looked at Carlos for an answer.

Carlos looked up and shrugged his shoulders.

"Are there any toys or other things you want to take to my house?" Uncle Juan asked.

"My markers, paints, and drawing paper."

"OK. You gather those things up and I'll bring up a box to carry them in." Uncle Juan took the filled suitcase back to the car, as Carlos collected his art supplies. Bluey sat on the bed and watched. When Uncle Juan returned with the box, Carlos put the supplies into it.

"Anything else you want to take? Your pillow? Your blanket? A stuffed

animal?" Uncle Juan looked around the room to see if anything might be important to Carlos.

Carlos ran over and grabbed his weighted stuffed dinosaur, his pillow, and his comforter.

Glancing around his bedroom, he took the picture of his mom and him from his dresser and put it into the box with the art supplies. On his way out the door, Carlos stopped in the kitchen to pick up his painting off the counter.



Uncle Juan lived alone in a small one-bedroom house. He carried Carlos's suitcase and Bluey's bag downstairs to the unfinished basement. Carlos carried his box. Carlos looked around the room. There were boxes stacked everywhere. It smelled musty and spiders were crawling on the ceiling. The walls were cinderblock and painted gray.

"You and Bluey can stay down here. I set up a cot for tonight. Tomorrow we can get a bed."

Carlos looked around the room, biting his bottom lip. "I want to go home."

Bluey started to sniff all around the room. A spider scurried across the floor. Bluey was on top of it in a minute, snatching it up and swallowing it.

"Good job, Bluey!"

The dog ran to Carlos for a reward. He wrapped his arms around his dog, while Bluey licked his face.

Carlos opened his box and took out his Bluey themed blue comforter. He spread it on the cot, making the room a little more like home. Uncle Juan walked to the other side of the room and picked up a small bedside table. He carried it over and put it down next to the cot.

"I found this table for you."

Carlos took the picture of him and his mother out of his box and carefully placed it on the table. Uncle Juan had tears in his eyes as he smiled at the picture of his sister and her son.

His uncle shifted uncomfortably. "I'm afraid this is your home for now.

We can clean up this mess over the weekend.”

Carlos looked around the room at the gray walls. “Can we paint it?”

“Yes, we can. What color would you like?”

“Something happy – like our yellow kitchen.” Carlos smiled at the memory.

“You got it. We can paint it this weekend. You can help me.” Uncle Juan ruffled Carlos’s hair.

“How long will I need to stay here?” Carlos chewed on his lip.

“It could be a long time.” Uncle Juan’s shoulders slumped. “If your mom is deported, it could take her awhile to come back for you.”

“Where will they send her?” Carlos’s eyes filled with tears.

“They could send her anywhere in the world. Maybe Africa.”

“Africa! Why would they send her to Africa?” Carlos threw his hands in the air and looked up at the ceiling,

“The government just wants her out of the country. They don’t care where.”

Carlos straightened up. “When I grow up, I’ll find her.”

“I’m sure you will. Or she’ll find you. That’s why it’s important that you stay with me. So, your mom knows where to look for you.”

“Can I have some tape?” Carlos looked hopefully at his uncle.

“There’s tape on the workbench over there.” Uncle Juan pointed to a cluttered countertop.

Carlos ran to the workbench and searched through an assortment of various hand tools until he found the tape. Smiling, he took the picture of his house and taped it to the wall. “That’s a great picture,” Uncle Juan said.

“It’s for my mom when she comes back. I made it for her.”

“I’m sure she’ll like it. Now, let’s go get dinner.”



The next day, Uncle Juan took Carlos to his new school. The school had a high fence around it and looked like a fortress. It was made of brick.

"This school is really old." Carlos wrinkled his nose.

"It's been around a long time," his uncle agreed.

"My school was new." Carlos whined.

"This school has history," his uncle teased.

"Why can't I go to my school?" Carlos resisted getting out of the car.

"I don't live in your school district. You can't go to your old school. Now, get out of the car."

"No." Carlos held onto the seat.

"If you're going to live with me, you have to obey me. Now, get out of the car." Uncle Juan's face tensed, and he clenched his fists.

Carlos slid out of his seat and walked stiffly to the school's entrance. Uncle Juan tried to put his arm around Carlos, but Carlos moved away from him.



"We have a new student today. His name is Carlos," the teacher announced loudly.

Carlos wanted to hide under his desk. He looked down at the floor. The other students just stared at him.

I want my mom, my house, my school, and my friends back.



In Art Class, later that morning, Carlos was given paper and paints.

"Today the assignment is to paint your family," the teacher announced.

He just stared at her. Do I still have a family? Who's my family now? My Mom might be in Africa. My uncle is making me sleep with spiders and making me go to this school. What does family mean? Love? Loyalty? Friendship? Someone Who's Always There?

HONORABLE MENTION

Powdered Paint by H. M. Lawson

“What in the world were you thinking?” Annabel Atkinson’s mother stooped to collect the blue and white shards of what, seconds before, had been one of three small ceramic vases on Aunt Ida’s fireplace mantle.

At sixteen, Annabel knew better than to play soccer inside, but she hadn’t been the one who sent the ball flying. Her brother, Jack, attempted a trick, and kicked the ball at a wayward angle.

Annabel’s mom pressed her lips together. Her eyes darted to Jack, who stared at the ground. Jack was fourteen, but in moments like this, his cheeks still reddened like they did when he was little.

Annabel knew a quick apology was the way to avoid a lecture. Jack wouldn’t be able to pull it off.

Annabel eyed the tell-tale vein pulsing at her mom’s temple and knew she’d need to sound extra sincere. “It was an accident. I’m sorry. We’ll clean it up.”

Jack followed her lead and called over his shoulder on the way to the kitchen, “I’ll get the dustpan.”

Annabel’s mom sighed, and the vein subsided.

“I’ve got calls with clients all day. I can’t afford to lose any accounts, especially now.” She eyed the stacks of boxes lining the living room walls.

They’d been in the house for almost a week already and most of the boxes were exactly where the movers left them. Annabel never met Aunt Ida, but she must have been loaded. In her will, the old woman left her entire estate to them. A massive house with a lake sounded amazing compared to their cramped apartment. The day they’d arrived, she’d realized why her mom had been reluctant to move.

The house was in disrepair. Outside, the yard was a jungle, and inside, everything was covered with dust. The wifi was non-existent, the electricity was spotty, and cleaning was slow because the vacuum kept popping the breaker. Annabel and Jack were handed dust rags and brooms and tasked with “brightening things up.” Every square inch of every room had to be wiped down to remove the gray. They’d finished the bedrooms and bathrooms and were ready for the main floor.

Annabel's mom tapped a finger against one box with the words Kitchen Fragile written across the front. "Start with these this afternoon so we don't have to eat off paper plates again."

An electronic melody rang out from the direction of the study. Annabel's mom gave her a look that said, Don't disappoint me, then hurried away. Seconds later, the ringing stopped, and her cheerful voice became muted as the mahogany door closed.

Jack returned, broom and dustpan in hand. He looked at the broken vase, and his shoulders slumped. Annabel nudged the soccer ball off the chair and caught it with the top of her foot. After juggling it three times, she flipped it up to her thigh, bounced it twice, and caught it in her hands.

"See? That's how you do it. It's all about control."

Jack scrunched his mouth to the side. "Thanks."

Annabel knew he was talking less about the soccer lesson and more about the fact that she hadn't thrown him under the bus.

Jack knelt and began sweeping the fragments together. He poked at the pile with his finger. "Check it out."

Careful to avoid the shards, Annabel dragged a finger through the small pile of blue powder. She rubbed the substance between her finger and thumb. It felt cool against her skin. "I hope these aren't someone's ashes."

Jack looked horrified and glanced at two remaining vessels on the mantle. He picked one up and peered inside. "I can't tell what's in here." He handed it to Annabel. She tipped the vase and poured out a red powder into the palm of her hand.

"Looks like chili powder." Jack sneezed.

Annabel brought her palm to her nose and inhaled. "Doesn't have a smell."

She carefully returned the powder to the vase and inspected the contents of the other vase. Yellow powder. Annabel frowned, then looked around the room, thinking. Along the baseboard was a collection of small, framed portraits they'd removed to prepare the walls for painting. "Mom said Aunt Ida was a painter, right?"

"And a teacher." Jack nodded. "You think these powders are some kind of paint or something?"

Annabel shrugged. “Maybe.”

Jack rubbed his arms. “I hope Mom doesn’t put those creepy paintings back up. I feel like their eyes follow me when I move around the room.”

“Don’t be such a wimp,” Annabel scoffed, but she’d noticed the same thing. One painting, in particular, made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up every time she looked at it. She’d tucked that one behind the others, so she didn’t have to look at the girl in the white dress. The child sat on a blanket spread across a flat boulder next to a calm pond. Several dolls spaced out with teacups in front of each. Despite the tranquil scene, Annabel thought the expression on the girl’s face was one of worry. She stared out from the canvas directly at the viewer. Annabel shook her head to erase the mental image and returned the two vases to the mantle.

A series of loud clunks echoed through the floorboards from the basement. The overhead light flickered then brightened.

A shadow of concern flashed across Jack’s face.

“Mom said the electrician was coming today,” Annabel explained.

“Finally. We can use the vacuum.” Jack banged the dustpan against the side of the garbage can, sending a plume of blue dust into the air. He sneezed.

Annabel coughed, then scolded, “Jack!”

“Sorry.” Jack eyed the vacuum. “I’m sick of cleaning. C’mon, Mom said she there’s leftover pizza in the fridge.” Jack hopped up and made a beeline for the kitchen.

“You can’t just leave this mess,” Annabel hollered after him. “There’s still blue dust.”

“Leave it. I’m starving.”

After lunch, the sunshine beacons them outside. Jack led Annabel to an overgrown pathway he’d seen from his bedroom window. They hopped over knee-high weeds growing between the steppingstones. The further they got from the house, the denser the vegetation became. The steppingstones led into the woods, but the path was obstructed. What looked like a decades-old tangle of vines had coiled around the posts of a metal archway and pulled it sideways.

Annabel shook the frame, which felt sturdy. “You’re smaller. See if the trail opens up back there.”

Jack picked his way into the tangle and disappeared into the dark shadows. "It's clear."

Annabel maneuvered through the matrix of woody branches before emerging into the woods on the other side. She brushed off her arms and legs from spider webs and bark debris and looked around. "Whoa."

"Cool, right?" Jack asked.

"Yeah." Annabel rubbed her arms to warm them against the chilly, dank air.

The treetops formed a thick canopy—completely obscuring the blue sky—and cast a green tint over everything beneath. Annabel looked at Jack, whose blond hair was now the color of algae. His tan skin took on an emerald hue. Annabel's hands and arms reflected the same greenish tint.

"Looks like we're underwater." Jack pinwheeled his arms as if swimming while hopping from one stone to the next.

"Let's follow the trail."

After a short time, the trees thinned, and the yellow light spilled in from the opening beyond the far edge of the forest. They emerged into a clearing next to a serene lake.

Jack trotted up to a break in the tall grasses lining the water. "I'll bet there's some huge fish in here."

The sunlight warmed her skin, but Annabel felt a shiver run up her spine. The clearing was quiet. No birds sang from the trees surrounding the water. No bullfrogs croaked. There wasn't even a breeze rustling the leaves. It was dead quiet.

"Annabel!" Jack cried.

She'd lost sight of him in the tall grass. "Jack?"

"Over here!"

She followed the direction of his voice, but just as she saw the top of his blond head a few feet away, her toe caught the edge of a rock, and she fell to the ground.

Jack rushed over and helped her up.

"I'm fine," she said, concluding there was nothing she could do at the moment about the crimson scuff and pinpricks of blood on her hand.

Jack led her toward a collection of three flat rocks with arched tops sticking out of the ground.

"Tombstones," Annabel whispered.

"They're old, too."

The engravings on the first two were so worn, they were indiscernible.

The third was closest to Annabel. "This one marks a kid. Only twelve years old." The top of the stone was jagged. "Looks like something broke off of this one." She used her toe to poke around in the grass and found the angel-shaped stone she'd stumbled over earlier.

"The angel tripped you," Jack grinned.

Annabel found it less funny. "Let's get out of here."

Back at the house, the office door was still closed.

Annabel sighed. "We'd better get some work done."

Jack darted toward the living room, but Annabel read his mind. "I call vacuum."

Jack groaned.

Annabel chucked a dust rag at him.

"Fine," he pouted as he lifted a heavy box of Kitchen Fragile, "but we're switching in an hour."

Triumphant, Annabel found an outlet and pressed the vacuum's power button.

Nothing happened.

She switched to a different outlet and tried again with the same results. She muttered to herself and picked up the dust rag. The pile of blue powder caught her eye. It was Jack's mess, but she knew she'd take the heat again if it was still there when her mom emerged from the office. She swept the dust into the dustpan and wiped the floor clean with the rag. Working around the room, she

dusted every surface. The room was sparkling and bright. Annabel felt proud of her work. When she got to the paintings on the floor, she gasped. The paintings were exactly where she'd left them.

Except one.

The painting of the girl in the white dress was no longer on the floor. It was hanging on the wall.

"Jack, did you move one of the paintings?"

"What?"

"Did you hang that creepy painting up?"

"No. Why?"

"It's literally hanging on the wall."

Jack appeared in the doorway. "Mom probably hung it."

"After she asked us to take them down? That makes no sense."

"What are you suggesting then?" Jack forehead wrinkled. He crossed his arms and smirked. "Hmph. Nice try. I don't scare that easily." He disappeared toward the kitchen.

Annabel noticed a small signature in the corner. *Ida Gilmer.*

Aunt Ida.

Annabel frowned. The girl in the white dress was standing. She'd been sitting before, right? The dolls and teacups were scattered.

The tall grasses and the pond looked familiar. Annabel realized the scene depicted the same area near the graveyard she and Jack had seen an hour earlier. The details were identical. Even the tombstones peeked out from the tall grass.

Annabel shook her head. Paintings don't just change. This is probably a different one, part of a series. She checked the frames on the floor. The original girl in the white dress wasn't there. Is this the same painting? Get it together, Annabel. She took a deep breath and distracted herself by cleaning. She wiped off the frame on the wall. To her surprise, the blue residue from the rag swirled into the air and flowed on the canvas.

“Jack! Get in here!”

Jack joined her in front of the painting. “Didn’t her dress used to be white?”

The girl’s dress was now an unmistakable shade of blue.

“The dust from the rag just kinda floated onto the canvas.”

“And turned her dress blue?”

Annabel nodded.

“Guess you were right about it being powdered paint.”

Their eyes turned to the two remaining vases and moments later, they’d poured a small amount of yellow powder onto the rag and when they held it close to the canvas, just as before, a swirl of yellow floated toward the image. Tiny yellow flowers appeared on her blue dress.

Jack’s eyes widened. “Let’s try the red.”

Seconds later, the red powder was poured out. The powder curled into the air and attached to the canvas in splotches above the girl’s head. The letter R became clear, followed by the letters E and D. The letters were sloppy, and the paint dripped down the canvas over the girl and the picnic scene.

“What does it mean?” Jack asked.

Annabel shook her head and was about to say, I don’t know, when the doorbell rang. Annabel and Jack heard the office door open, then footsteps in the foyer. Peering around the corner, their mother’s figure blocked their view of the visitor.

“Please come in.” Their mother led a young woman wearing a black, wide-brimmed hat and a flowy white sundress into the living room. “Annabel? Jack? This is Lydia, one of Aunt Ida’s former students.”

The phone rang.

Annabel’s mother looked panicked. “I’m terribly sorry. I’m expecting a very important call. Please excuse me.”

An awkward silence filled the room.

Lydia smiled. “I miss Ida terribly.” She looked around the room. “She used

to invite me over for painting lessons—in the gardens, mostly.” Lydia noticed the painting on the wall. “Oh, you left it hanging? It only works when it’s hanging.”

Annabel smiled politely. “What do you mean?”

Lydia walked up to the painting. “Did you know that some flowers have certain powers?”

“Medicinal power?”

“In a way. Ida and I figured out that by mixing certain dried flowers together with paint pigment, you can really experience art. It’s quite life-changing, in fact.” She approached the painting. “Oh! I see you found the colors!”

Annabel was at a loss for words, but Jack replied, “Yeah, they sorta changed it.”

Lydia frowned. “It seems you didn’t add quite enough red.”

“The red spelled out RED,” Annabel explained.

“You always need more red. No worries. I always carry a small stash.” Lydia pulled a tiny vile from her pocket and tapped some red powder into her hand, then blew the dust onto the painting.

Annabel and Jack took a few steps closer, waiting for changes on the canvas.

The light overhead flickered and the vacuum cleaner suddenly roared to life.

Annabel rushed over to turn the power switch off. “Our electricity’s been goofy. Was it like that when Aunt Ida was alive?”

“That only happened once, that I recall.”

Annabel barely heard her reply. She was busy staring at the painting. The letters appeared as before. R-E-D. After a moment, they rearranged themselves floating across the canvas like leaves on water. D-E-R. Then three more letters appeared. M-U-R.

“Murder!” Jack whispered.

“That little girl in the painting is me, you know, when I was young,” Lydia whispered. “And I always do what the colors tell me to.”

The light in the room flickered and went out.



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