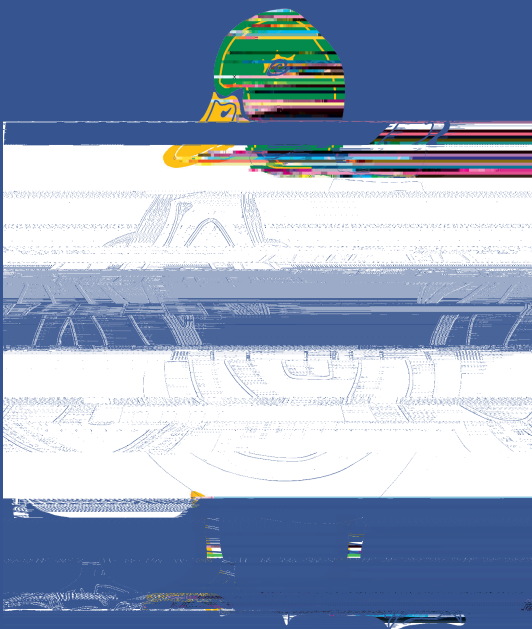


Fiction



Con Amore

Sage Jordan

There was something about him that was just... unreal.

Lithe and small, back against the mirror, legs slipping over the bathroom counter so easily, in a way that reminded inebriated Coda of running water spilling over the lip of a sink—too full. His feet fell from underneath him and his toes so delicately brushed the tile of the bathroom floor. He caught himself with almost intentional poise. His fingers curled over the edge of the counter. He pressed a cigarette to his teeth and locked it there. Smoke. White, feathery smoke almost like spider webs tangled around the loose locks of his nacre hair. The room was full of people, but this one—this one, Coda thought, was just unreal.

The lights were dim and murky in here, greenish in tint as though the bulbs hadn't been touched in ten years and their wire cages were left to oxidize. Soap scum was crammed in the grooves of the faucets, handprints blurred the mirror in long smears, yellow water damage patterned the ceiling, and strange brown spots covered the floor. Echoing inside the walls was the discordant, dissociated thrum of club music. They could feel the bass vibrating in the floor, throbbing in the walls, humming all around their heads. But this was not a crowd that cared. In this falling-apart bathroom existed an entirely different world, rocking back and

blurry faces, and he fit in so well he could have disappeared into the fog, but Coda saw him first. Coda couldn't stop seeing him, and he did not necessarily know why.

As if by command, the pearl-haired man's perfect features cleaved through the mist, and it was there that Coda saw them. Like two crystal snow globes on the mantel above a fireplace, the captivating smoky ring around the moon, the hue of the sky just before it kisses the horizon, the very first layer of waves as they peel away from the ocean, ghostly—his eyes were a pair of blue spirits, glistening as his white hair but so petrifying, pulchritudinous, incredible. Coda thought he was sober enough to keep his composure, but he wasn't: his jaw fell on instinct. Arden gave a very small grin. Cigarette smoke tickled through his teeth. Coda watched it snake around his sharp but delicate jaw, in the hollow of his cheeks right beneath his high cheekbones, in between gaps in a button nose; dancing across skin as deliciously white as itself. His cigarette remained clenched between two fingers as he tapped his hand, maybe to an unheard song, on his knee. Then he brought it to his lips again, took a drag, and looked away. The spell was broken. Coda blinked quickly.

He could get addicted to that stare, he knew, if he let himself.

He nearly brought himself to stand, pulled toward the man by an almost tangible drawstring; but in this hallucinated realm, his legs were useless. When his hands fell to the floor, the tiles sank underneath his fingers like the keys of a grand piano. He tumbled through halls of increasing violent noise, brilliant throws of Liszt and Mendelssohn and Bach. He fell back against the wall, defeated. He looked up. Arden was watching again. He blinked, shined those breathtaking blue eyes, and laughed. His laugh was entirely silent. Coda smiled back. What was he doing?

In fleeting exhales, he recalled how much

more composed he could be in clearer air. Slammed by intense rehearsals, teaching and reteaching himself the music for his upcoming show, wondering if anyone he knew would be watching him from the crowd. Would they care? These countless faces he had memorized, once—would they shudder at the taste of his art? Would they hum, cry, applaud the way he moved between emboldened notes? Would he ever begin to impress them? Or would he stand there, making too much sense of such an abstract, antique thing as classical music, and they would grow bored and walk away? What was the point? Under the cloak of this underwater heaven, his efforts appeared so much more useless, rational, and complicated. But this green world was simple. Arden was simple. He was music in its clearest, crispest form. An exhale of gossamery focus, intense and wandering interest, violent intimacy, black and white brilliance, fortissimo temptation—it encircled his blue eyes the way nimble fingers encircle silver tuning pegs. Coda found the longer he stared into those eyes, the easier it became to fall into them. How could he ever fall that easily into music? It was an art, not a drug. Or was it?

tickle of smoke up the sides of his cheeks. Every time he breathed his cigarette, white cobwebs poured between his lips and wavered around in the air. Coda could taste the exhales. They traced around his chin and nose, dove into the belly of his cupid's bow, coated his eyes in disintegrated fragments of tobacco and made them burn. It was a very numb, almost delicious burn. He forgot, for a moment, how close he and his muse had become.

The air was hot, humming, very peacefully buzzing like a dull throb of electricity around their heads. Two oxidized light bulb cages. Two fascinated souls. Two silent men, making invisible music out of their shared and sudden heat. Coda wished he could thread Arden's hair between his fingers like rows of violin strings and play it. He wished he could capture their fascination in the maple body of a woodwind, and play it. He wanted to press into Arden's skin the way he could press into a piano, and make a symphony out of him.

But did he want it? Coda did not know. He inched so close to Arden's lips that he could almost taste them without touching them. And maybe he didn't need to be intoxicated, because those eyes made him feel so hopelessly high, like plunging into ponds of blue syrup. He figured Arden tasted like syrup, too. And sweat, and ecstasy, and conclusion. Not that Coda wanted an ending. Not that he wanted to let go, of course. Or perhaps he did.

Coda studied him again, but found nothing. Not a wrinkle in his skin, no scars, no imperfections. He was fuzzy at the edges, like a hologram. Barely real. But Coda could touch him. He lifted a hand to Arden's forehead.

their feet now, cheering. He counted the number of weeping faces, the grins, the fallen jaws that meant he had done something spectacular. But it was him. Him—the snow-haired angel of wavering wonderlands and endless incantations—among the audience that caught Coda’s eye. He had been there the whole time, watching. Marveling. Smiling, so beautifully. Coda had finally performed his first original symphony, and yet, for an instant, it didn’t even seem real. A very soft chuckle escaped him—he couldn’t hold it in. His lungs were throbbing with uncertainty, but also, perhaps, exhilaration. He bowed. The curtains closed.

“How do you feel?” Arden was waiting for him outside, when the crowd had eventually left, the stage had been cleared, and it was official—everything Coda had been wanting for his entire life was his.

“You aren’t allowed to smoke in there, you know.” Coda pulled his jacket on.

“Answer the question.” Arden pushed his cigarette in dissent, and smiled. “How does it feel?”

“A bit like a hangover.”

“Like the best high of your life?”

“Like the first and last.”

Arden laughed at that. He hooked his hands around Coda’s arm, leaned into him, and they began to walk. Rain peppered the street outside the theatre, reminding Coda of mourning tears, or the storm during a funeral. Not that music had died, of course. But that, perhaps, he came here to put it to rest.

“I might just compose from now on, by myself. Does that make me a terrible person?”

“No.”

“Am I the death of classical music?”

“Of course not.”

“Thank you.” Coda hid his red cheeks by turning down his head. Water fell from his hair. “For getting me here, I mean. I never would have done it without you.”

“You would have.” Arden grinned. “But I made it better.”

Arden always made it better. Coda wrapped an arm around his partner, and squeezed him, hard, to remind himself of that. Arden was unreal.

“So, what will you write next?”

“An ode, I think.”

“An ode to what?”

Coda looked over at him. They locked eyes. They were close enough that he could taste Arden’s cigarette, the dripping blue from his oceanlike eyes, the strung-out heat between their fluttering chests. Green light made the bathroom hazy. Ancient grime made the tiles sink. Distant club music, like a patient ghost, hugged them close, and they stayed there for a very long time, in the fog.

“That’s for you to figure out.”

A Mallard in a Pond

Joseph Martensen

A mallard sits before me in a pond. His colors are duller than those of his peers. Yet, he feels special, holds some sense of purpose and meaning that, he naively feels others lack. A group of gnats, minuscule but persistent antagonists, surround the mallard. His feathers seem to shudder, and his beak and tail tense. His eyes narrow on his new adversaries. Suddenly, he snaps at them, aggressively at first, but by the fifth try, his attempts show only desperation. His first strategy having failed, he considers a new option. The mallard dashes away splashing the water and creating great waves around him. The gnats however are determined. The mallard has weakened further; it cannot even take flight. Perhaps he is tired, or perhaps the unknown sky is too unknown and imposing to take on. But, the most likely and disturbing possibility is that my friend has grown to accept the gnats. He has come to see their presence as an inevitability rather than a nuisance. All of this I can see clearly in the mallard's eyes, but what I do not know is far more frightening. The question I cannot seem to answer is whether he has made a wise choice. Does coming to accept his pain show strength of will or weakness in ignorance? My friend comes to a stop and turns his head to look at me. Where his reflection lies in the water I see my own face instead. His beak creaks open and a voice comes out "what should I do?" I shrug in response and the mallard simply lowers his gaze, disappointed. He blinks once in grim resignation and then slowly the mallard spreads his wings. He does not fly, instead, he lies down on the surface of the water, body splayed wide. He closes his eyes and throngs of gnats swarm around him. They land on his wings and back and head, and slowly, I sink.

The Rule of Wild Dogs

Elena Wilson

The following is an excerpt from a longer piece. For the full text, please visit <https://journals.colorado.edu/index.php/honorsjournal/article/view/1661>

Today, as the sun rises to unbelievable temperatures, there is no savior for liars. Lying makes the heat worse. A guilty conscious develops a red-hot itchiness on their necks. The guilt won't subside unless the person absolves themselves of it. Here, in the desert, was great absolution. Sins do not survive underneath the hot cushion of atmosphere. They burn and swell and become ash. It is the way of the desert creatures. To be absolved, to repent, and to punish those who do not.

The velvet interior sweltered with a humidity that made it hard to think. He felt the onslaught of a headache. The half-empty can of Sprite sitting in the cupholder was warm and flat. It had no purpose except to keep his hands and mouth occupied. He kept flicking the aluminum tab on top of the can while staring at the back of the bank's exterior. He knew the time it would take to get in and out. Five minutes to wait in line. Once I get up to the far-left window, I'll pull out the gun. Then it should only take about 20 minutes to get everything in the bag. 25 minutes. Keep the engine running. It was a simple but effective plan. He worried it would take longer. He dreaded sirens pulling down the street.

Being the driver was a lot of waiting. Waiting to breathe for the first time. Putting the car in neutral, ripping out of parking lots without screeching the tires, practicing on abandoned roads, all while in a 2004 Saturn ION. He glanced at

the back of the bank again. His heart was beating faster. Only slight ticks came between pumps, but it was enough to raise his blood pressure. Unable to relax, he thought about the inside of the bank. His partner would no doubt be filling bags at this point and screaming for everyone to follow his directions. He would flail his gun at everyone. Even though he was wild, he still had complete control. He had dirt all over his hands from fixing the car earlier this morning. His hair was barely brushed, and he wore a red Hawaiian t-shirt. He looked regular, except for his eyes, a gaping chasm to his brain. He's a gunslinger and deeply psychotic. This got them inside the bank. This would not help them escape though. Only he, sitting in the car, could help them get out of here. The engine was running. The sun was blistering. But no sirens.

He knew this alley and the corresponding roads. He knew that even if cops were to the left or straight ahead, he could take a right and then zip through a tighter alley but still take it downtown. If the cops were positioned to the right, he would take a left and speed through the intersection, even if it was a red light. He studied this area, he drove it through many times, he practiced, but he still sweated through his shirt. Time was now on the very beginning of running out. 18 minutes were left. His partner was still in the bank. No sirens still. But he's quick. Too fast, like an apparition. He swore that his partner could move through walls. He would sometimes sit in the car for a moment and watch

quietly. It's like he could hear the ground shake and move. His partner could smell blood like a shark. He was a brutally unemotional man. But still, he thought of his partner as wickedly efficient. They were close in age, maybe even a month or two apart. What his partner was a

exactly sure if Lee had even go

about getting out and running up to the window just to peek. Don't ever get out of the car. So, he never would.

Paul's leg bounced uncontrollably now, his stomach doing complete 180s. Paul's sweat was getting out of hand. He was breathing in steam. All he needed to do was crack a window, only for a few minutes. Lee said to keep the windows up in case anyone saw him, but the sun was unforgiving. He rolled down the back two windows and the driver's window all the way. He inhaled a slow, exhausted breath. The air felt too good on his face. He breathed the sweet, delicious South, and it smelled a great deal better than the exhaust from his car. He peered through the small crack between the bank and the building next to it. Trying to catch a glimpse of a flashing light or even a police officer. But he saw nothing. Lee impressed Paul, every time.

Fate and Folly

Joseph Martensen

On 15th and Broadway, on a rather gloomy morning, a girl walks into a coffee shop. She makes herself small, drawing her shoulders in close. A bell sways above her as the door opens, but she takes no notice of it. It is a new coffee shop, the kind that is firmly known in the gentrification of an older community—all wooden walls and fresh plants and chalkboard menus. Behind the register, a young man's mouth moves. "What can I get you?" the girl guesses. "A small latte, please," she says, but something is wrong, the barista looks confused, almost disturbed. She has said the words, they are there hanging in the air, but they are a foreign thing. It is as if the barista has passed an old schoolmate whose hair has changed style. There is a striking flash of familiarity, but the difference from expectation is significant enough that he does not say hello. Such is the nature of the girl's words. Whether it be her timbre or inflection (or lack thereof) the girl's words are just unfamiliar enough that they defy comprehension. He repeats his question as if he has not heard her, and the girl suppresses her annoyance. With a tight smile, she reaches for her phone and types out her order. With her drink in hand, she heads for the door, but as she opens it a black cat runs out into the street. She had not seen it in the shop before. The rain spatters silently but she does not pull out her umbrella. The rain is a blessing. There are fewer people to bump into her, fewer people to ask for directions, fewer people to call out to her, fewer people to show her pity. But, the rain understands. It soaks her and chills her and makes her dark hair like it would any other. Each drop is a reminder that she is a part of this world. The rain is a blessing.

Two blocks away a man, a graying figure aged past his years, sits under a construction placard. The man is a listener. It is the foundation of his success, but luck was too difficult a mistress to keep. He still listens though. To names of orders at the new coffee shop a few blocks up, to credit cards and room numbers when they are read aloud, to a businessman's phone call to exploit his biases for some made-up charity. Today, however, it rains, and the rain is a curse. There are fewer people to walk, fewer people to talk, fewer people to show kindness, fewer people to show pity. He sighs, his blanket is wet, it will be a few cold days ahead. A meow bubbles up above the sounds of traffic and raindrops as a black cat slips around the corner.

In a basement apartment on the other side of town in a dark room with no windows, there is a boy reading. He sits in his chair and reads a book on chess. Perhaps "sits" is not the right word. He is coiled, delicately balanced on his tiptoes as if ready to pounce like a cat. He does not seem the sort to be alone in a dark room. He is young, attractive, and athletic, and yet he struggles to make friends. Perhaps it is his demeanor, a cold biting silence. Perhaps it is his smile, always a bit unsettling as if he is analyzing the person

before him. Or perhaps it is his posture, hunched over like Atlas carrying the weight of the world upon his shoulders. In the corner of the room lies a mirror image of the boy's crouched pose. Veiled in darkness there sits a cat, solid black, with two intelligent eyes.

Now, the observant reader may at this point have guessed that either coincidence or fate has something of note in store for these particular individuals. The observant reader may fancy himself clever, having deduced that these eccentric members of society are important far beyond their humble appearances. That

"Need a hand?"

"No, it's fine."

The crash of plates and flatware crescendoed, Sandra's scouring of some blackened substance she couldn't begin to name quickening in the scratch of steel wool against cast-iron.

She'd let the dishes pile on long enough: might as well get them over with.

Jack sat curled on the couch with a book, his head popping up every few seconds to check on the situation in the kitchen.

Let him rest. She stared straight at the suds browning up through her nail beds, at the window's overlook on the blue grass separating the drylands from the parking lot, at the reflection of all behind her. All that worry.

Outside, a young couple hovered over a car hood, rolling a cigarette between them back-forth, back-forth, that red glow circling an entire horizon before the stars would roll around, settle down alongside the night.

Now here she was, slaving away at a pan.

crying days: in bus stops, in bathroom stalls, on break behind the diner, after filling out forms and standing in line for hours on end in her stilettos, her one good pair of shoes, once for a night out, then for looking well-kept, legible, legal. She'd graduated high school. She'd done good with her life. How could anyone talk to her like that?

Hunched over the kitchen sink, her scrubbing quickened pace. The solid bits were starting to chip away, that grit sliding down towards the drain. No matter her nail polish. Her skin.

"Shit!"

The grit sliced through skin and she pulled the cut to her mouth, sucked blood.

In a second Jack was standing over her with a towel, running her hand under the tap.

Outside the window, the young couple was turning in for the night, snuffing out their light. Stars had descended over the drier flats, a prairie dog whistling out from the distance.

But she knew the fridge was stocked—at least until the weekend. And she had a bank account in her own name, something those classes had never explained but that she had pursued anyway. And Jack was a healthy boy—a kind boy—a boy who didn't mind green beans.

They would never become those caricatures. Not on her watch.

*In the summers before we were women,
we snuck through the walls with the
farm puppies.*

*We found hips with the youth chased out, an
old kitchen still ripe with genesis and
dust.*

Sitting at the kitchen table over his English assignment (they were beginning their poetry unit, the scansion sheet just by his elbow), Jack couldn't help thinking about Mom.

What he knew of her childhood was little. It took on the shape of a farm, a lot of yelling.

He had a hard time imagining her as a girl. Sure, she was girlish—all those magazine quizzes, her laugh making her seem younger than his friends' moms—but never really a girl. He could picture her with braids, a pail for collecting eggs and a bible on her hip, but her trajectory always pointed towards motherhood— "guns and puppies and my gold colored shoes."

Now he troubled himself over the words, what Faulkner meant by hips with the youth chased out and how they were found, not grown.

*In supermarket tanks the lobsters would
pile*

their crowding bodies on top of each other and we

Everything a boy could ever want.

Except a stick.

She'd waited for him to pad out of his room—watched as he took giant, careful steps to avoid the edge of his oversized plaid pants—made sure to hand him a cup of coffee—before broaching the subject.

"I don't know kiddo," she said, sliding over the flier. His cheeks flexed, his tell when he was trying to keep calm.

"You know how tight things are lately. I don't think I can balance out a hockey stick this month, let alone registration fees, gas to get you to practice and games." Each word got quieter and quieter.

"But I've got it all figured out!" he said. "All you'd have to do is sign a paper and my fees are paid for—it's really just the stick."

She took another sip of her coffee.

"The school said they'd take care of most of it because of—well—because..." He was always embarrassed to say "our situation" because he liked it here. It was better than Denver. Better than some of the other motels, other towns, they'd had to pass through just to get here.

"...because of how it is. But they can't cover the stick: those you have to get custom-fit."

He waited, wrapped one of the pants' drawstrings around his finger.

Experience

Diego Woodward

The following is an excerpt from a longer piece. For the full text, please visit <https://journals.colorado.edu/index.php/honorsjournal/article/view/1889>

You sit on the train tracks and watch as the black smoke figure ahead of you grows. Its shrill whistle screams out at you, begs you to reconsider, but you're motionless. A sense of terror grows from within your gut 'til it nearly overflows. That figure keeps nearing, its form gets clearer and clearer. The definition is pristine, you can practically see the conductor yanking on the brake hoping to spare your life, you feel nauseous. And then, well past the moment of no return, the steam train plows through you. You can hardly notice it knocking you back onto the ground before the fuzzy sensation of your flesh being torn to shreds under its wheels and hooks consumes your body. Without the pain, it can best be described as ticklish.

You rip off the headset and wipe your brow, chuckling nervously.

"That's too real! That felt like the real thing! Oh my goodness I thought I was gonna die!" You shout, and your friends all cackle. Your name is Colton, and you're spending a weekend at a friend's cabin, but instead of enjoying the wilderness, you've all decided to immerse yourselves in something a little more novel.

"My turn!" shouts another of your friends, and your vision fades to black.

You take off the glasses and shake your head. "That was terrible. Stupid Oscar-bait. Wow, amazing, technology has come so far. I'm an artist, I will not resort to cliches like that. My art is going

to change the world!" Your name is Axel, and you're going to be one of the greatest experience writers alive, one day. You feel yourself filled with inspiration.

he thought. Then, his eyes gazed over the rest of the intimidatingly long list as he tried to decide what kind of feeling he felt, what kind of story could match his mood. Still, much like life itself, an experience is difficult to qualify with words alone and impossible to predict, so Edwin didn't bother reading into himself too deeply. Julia, he settled on a story that caught his eye, Julia, I hear that one's good.

Down where the water meets the tips of the leaves, you find yourself here again. You turn to your right, and there she is, like all the times before. Julia. She smiles a light smile, and the weight of life is lifted repeatedly. You slowly shift your gaze back to the lake, and see spots of birds drift across the sunset sky and dip down to where the hum of insects warms your mind. You take a deep breath, and close your eyes. You open them again, and redirect your slurred gaze to Julia beside you.

"How do we know this is real?" You hear yourself ask as the autumn leaves behind her drift all together like a hundred paint brushes coloring an expressionist's canvas.

"We don't," she says.

You laugh, and look down at your feet. The cool air breezes past the tips of your ears—you just feel so light.

"But I know that I love you." Julia says.

You feel your heart soar and you laugh like a hot cup of tea on a frigid day.

Edwin flicked off the experience and jolted up off the couch, running his hands through his hair. He paced around the coffee table, shaking his head. He stopped at the fourth corner and took a deep breath. He closed his eyes, then opened them again. It's fine,

You feel the weight of the lives of Grawl, and Eckle, and the unforgeable Ski. It's all been leading up to this. You step forward as Kipple brings the medal forward, and he places it over you so it sits upon your worthy, massive chest.

"Captain Charles T. Baker, you have saved not just our world, but many, thanks to your brave sacrifice." Vernkot says, and the audience cheers.

Pride floods your system. Finally, you can rest.

Edwin flicked off the experience. Three years, god damn. Wow. That was kinda corny but still actually fantastic. Shit, that last battle was so fun, they really pulled everything out for that one. I was on fire! Love when they really tap into the thrill of the kill. He chuckled to himself. It might be interesting to use that feeling for a morally questionable character, actually, he thought as he emptied out his tear valve and checked his watch. 10:16. I've still got the whole night left before school. Alright, tonight's a research night and then I start writing some tomorrow. I should really try pushing myself, that last one was three years long but it was totally awesome. Edwin went through his list to check off Veteran's Rebirth and immediately scrolled back to near the top of the list. Hills of Water. 65 years long. The last one was a long one too, and it was fantastic. I'm ready, I might as well. It's finally time. Edwin took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and opened them again. Shit,

I forgot to do it last time. It's alright. He sighed. Maybe I should check on my parents first, it isn't good to be lying still for so long.

He got up from the couch to walk down the hall to his parents' room. He could hear the sound of a movie being played inside. As he approached, he felt a warmth come over him—not a physical warmth, but an emotional one. There's a shadow in the corner, just around the hall closet, a shadow big enough to conceal someone. He stops and gasps a little, trying to fight back a grin. Julia. He stepped closer, and then another step, and the shadow revealed itself to be nothing but an empty wall. Nothing there. The warmth flew away along with that ambiguity, like leaves in the wind. Edwin took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and opened them again. He walked down the rest of the hallway. Two knocks, then he opened the door.

"Hey guys, just saying goodnight. How's the movie?" he asked.

His mother shifted up in her bed at the sight of him. His father was already asleep. "Oh, it's good. Kinda confusing, they were in all these different dreams and now there's these people that think they're still asleep. Also one of them is a detective? I think? I don't know, it's kind of hard to follow. But it's interesting."

"Sounds interesting. Alright, well goodnight."

"Goodnight. Love you!"

"Love you."

Edwin's father mumbled a

“Goodnight”, eyes still closed and still on the border of some shallow dream.

Edwin walked back to the couch and scrolled back through his experience service to find Hills of Water. Okay, here goes.

And so you lie there, in your so , wiry mattress, looking up at the light and letting it blind you. You feel someone hold your hand; you can hardly spend the energy to look to see who it is. But the chance that it's Annie crosses your mind, so you find it within yourself to look. It's Joan.

“Joan... where's Annie?” You whisper in a voice you can hardly believe is yours. It's so hoarse, so frail, it's an embarrassment anyone can hear you like this.

“Annie's not coming, dad.”

“Oh.”

“I'm here for you, I'm not leaving.”

“I know.”

“I love you.”

Your eyelids feel heavy. You find yourself drifting away, back down that river, back over those hills, to the City of Lights, to Julia.

“No, I'm not ready to go,” you say.

You feel someone squeeze your hand and say “It's okay.”

In the boat beside you, those wrinkled eyes, that crooked smile, you see Elias.

“Elias.”

“Elias?” A voice from some distant place asks.

You look back forward and watch

those waves drift over themselves under that shimmering night sky, and you can't help but feel relieved.

“He's finally here with me.”

Edwin lurched off the couch, the experience flicking off on its own as he fell to the ground. He stays there, lying on the carpet, staring at its folds and threads. He sneezes. The tear valve was leaking, filled to the brim and begging to be emptied, but Edwin doesn't feel like doing anything at all. A tear rolls down his cheek. That was heartbreaking; I can't believe they did that. It makes sense, but Annie... That was brutal. I don't want to believe it. He sneezed. He wanted to take a deep breath, close his eyes, but he isn't ready for the real world. Not so soon after.

There's no rest, you're just in one world and then out in another, he thinks.

The soft, cotton candy cloud cushions your feet with every leap you take.

“To the castle!” You cry, and your teddy bear friends shout and giggle in agreement behind you.

[...]

To read the rest of the piece, please use the QR code to access it online.

Black Sea Glass on the Shores of Time

Jemma Kuster

Samuel can no longer remember how long they've been looking for the ocean.

In the early days, he had attempted to keep track by counting steps, methodically recording each slap of his leather soles against the snowmelt sogginess of the road. Every footfall had been a sound as much as a sensation, syncopated staccato beneath the rattle of kicked-up bits of gravel falling

jacket when he tries to hide his face for too long. No one had ever touched Samuel's face before Annie.

Sometimes, in passing puddles of melting snow or the warped metal of the stirrups hanging off the horse's saddle, he'll spot his dreadful reflection, the wobbly outline of a creature that wears his face, and wonder what kind of person he's meant to be. What do other people see in the gaunt boy with sunken eyes who stalks in Annie's shadow? What do they want to see? What would they have seen back home, if she had never stopped to offer him her hand?

If he makes the mistake of lingering too long on the sight, the woman in question will come to his side and run her fingers through his hair, once-pretty nails chipped from foraging through brambles. "Oh my," she'll say, the hints of a smile forming on her chapping lips. She'll know, as she always does, what he must be thinking. "What a handsome young man we have here."

It's an effort that succeeds at embarrassing him every time, sending his neck back into the coat and scarf like a turtle as those forgiving hands tighten the cords of his muscles and help him onto Carrot's back. The horse will snort and Annie will pat his mane patiently, lovingly, before taking the reins to walk alongside them.

Samuel likes that about her, the fact that she walks. She doesn't glide or prance, her steps aren't particularly elegant or angelic, she just walks. She walks and her feet will eventually start to hurt in her shoes and she'll have to place something in between the material of the shoe and the skin or she'll get blisters on the backs of her ankles. She bleeds sometimes and has to wrap the wounds, but she never cries. She's an optimist, and being an optimist is painful, he thinks, in a way that being a pessimist isn't, because she always tries to be

hopeful, to see the good in people, and then gets crushed into a tighter and tighter ball each time they fail to meet her expectations. But despite it all, she keeps walking.

Samuel wants to walk with her forever.

Most journeys have endings, he has to remind himself, his field of vision wobbling up and down to the rhythm of Carrot's leisurely pace. It's just too easy to pretend that this one will be forever. That time might really stop, just this once.

"If you don't move forward," Annie likes to say, "you can't get anywhere." But the thought of arriving at a destination is as terrifying as the thought of a vast expanse of rising water crawling over the edge of the earth, clawing its way higher and higher with every passing year. If the ocean, in all its supposed endlessness, will be an end to her walking with him, to her caring for him, then he hopes that they never find it. He hopes that it isn't real.

On the best of days, the days of little wonders, he's able to forget his worries.

Spoiling the tiny slices of paradise hidden among the ordinary is Annie's specialty; she'll point one finger into the woods with a delighted hum to show Samuel something he'd never have looked at twice on his own. In her eyes, even the pervasive hoarfrost must look like sugar sprinkled on a tray of pastries, the storm clouds in the sky like a particularly thin layer of lemon glaze melting into speckles across the surface of a cake.

"Fairy gate," she'll say of a little birch arch, clearly formed by the wind and the weather. When he squints and frowns, she'll only smile even gentler. "Oh, Samuel. You're looking for something that isn't there."

This, of course, always serves to confuse

him further, at which point she'll clarify. "It doesn't have to be there to be real. Isn't it lovely to pretend sometimes?"

He doesn't, won't, ask if she's pretending about the ocean. If it's just a girlhood dream carried on the wind as little seeds swallowed down and replanted by the traveling buskers who fly from corner to corner. If she's looking for something impossible out of fear of whatever follows behind her.

Instead, he'll shrug, nod, and stare harder into their surroundings, searching endlessly for something that he can blurt out, something that will impress her, will reassure her that he does care, he's always cared, he's just never been good at this sort of thing. Strange, for a boy to be so unimaginative, especially when surrounded by so many sources of inspiration. That's what he sometimes imagines that she might think, and then hates himself for it. Funny that his imagination works perfectly fine when it comes to creating monsters.

"There," he'll try. "The rocks by the river."

She'll turn her undivided attention to the unremarkable stones and he'll swallow down his fear.

"They're, well, they're chairs. For the toads and frogs. And the turtles. Sometimes."

Her hands will clasp together and she'll look as if he has produced the sun itself from his bosom. "How wonderful! Oh, how wonderful! They must have quite the time together, don't you think?"

"I dunno," he'll reply, combing a hand through Carrot's mane more for his own sake than the animal's. "I guess."

"They must. I'm sure of it."

His lips will begin to part to reveal wobbly teeth and he'll have to duck behind the scarf once more to hide the smile, thinking about a ridiculous little tea party between amphibians with opposable thumbs as Annie starts to come up with ideas for what the squirrels might be chattering to each other

about. And so time passes, in approximations of moments and minutes, in hours and hands rubbed together to stay warm, and Samuel forgets about endings, about people coming and going.

"Is Annie short for something?" He asks one day as they stop outside one of the few towns that haven't yet been completely abandoned, immediately regretting it when she remains silent for several moments.

"I don't remember," she replies, one hand on her purse.

It's a strange answer. She must remember, he thinks, because how could she not? Unless she would rather pretend to have forgotten. Maybe her real name had been something she'd left behind along with her old life, something she'd gladly abandoned along the road.

"Does it seem like it should be short for something?" Annie continues. "Do I look like an Annabelle? Or an Anne? Maybe Annalise—"

"You look like an Annie," he interrupts. The smile that splits her face reassures him that it's the right answer.

When she leaves him with Carrot and wanders off to attempt a trade, he sits down in the wet grass and thinks about names. He spends so long thinking about names, about gaining them, about leaving them behind, that when Annie returns and tries to show him a map she'd bartered for, he can barely focus on the letters. He's never felt very good at reading, despite Annie's best efforts to teach him. It's too embarrassing when he can't do it, which means he often doesn't want to try at all.

"What is it?"

"The ocean," she replies, and any happiness he may have found in his burst of imagination disappears instantly.

In the face of her unwavering elation, her sunflower smile that has finally managed to completely rotate into the sunbeams, he can manage little more than a croaky, "it's real?"

