Autumn, for me, has always brought a strange sensation: the meeting of nostalgia and anticipation. It’s a funny concurrence of reminiscence and expectancy as one season comes to a close and another begins. With regard to the approach of the holiday season, it’s the ‘I remember last year’ turning into the ‘I hope it’s like that again’ (or, conversely, ‘I really hope things are different this time around’).

Youth—the general theme of this fall’s issue—is similar; it’s a position from which we can go over childhood memories with fondness or disappointment as well as look upon the future as holding promise. I hope it’s just as good as it was before; I hope it’s better.

We invited writers to approach the subject of youth from any perspective, and, interestingly enough, most chose that of looking back. This is the result: a compilation of honest works reflecting on the many facets of age and especially the departed childhood.

We have sincerely enjoyed putting together this collection. We’d now like to invite you to take a moment to look back as these authors have done, and—once you have done that—look forward.

Joni Chiang
Editor in Chief
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‘To die will be a very big adventure.’
- J.M. Barrie, Peter Pan

Our competition theme for this issue of The Inkwell was the spirit of Peter Pan/Peter Pan syndrome. As a very broad prompt, and we invited people to interpret it in whatever way inspired them to write, from the loss of innocence, to the childhood naivety regarding the future, to escapism.
I am five and he is nine. My big brother finds the robin’s egg in a crumbling nest on the school playground, knocked into the sandbox by a thunderstorm. He runs home, cradling it in his sweaty hands, his backpack bouncing up and down on his shoulders. I meet David at the door, eager to share the news that it’s fish sticks and ketchup for lunch. He says nothing, but reverently un-cups his hands.

Water drips from the fringe plastered to his forehead, and he breathes heavily as we stare, speechless, at the treasure between us. It is blue and perfectly round—so different from the big white eggs nestled in cups in the door of our fridge. He shows me the hole in the shell where the chick burst through after hours of chipping away with his tiny beak. David slips the egg into my outstretched palms. A gust of wind could blow it away. We smile at each other. My chest swells because David, my big brother, trusts me to hold it.

We speed up the stairs to show our mother.

“Mom!” David calls out behind me.

“Mom!” I echo.

I am small enough that I have to climb each stair in two steps. I can feel the anxious pressure of David behind me. He is faster. At the top of the staircase, I decide to take the last stair in one step. My foot just barely reaches the top, and I slip, my knees slamming down onto the stair below, my chest lurching forward onto my cupped hands. Mother comes out of her room to stand on the landing above us.

I open my hands to reveal the broken shards of the egg and burst into tears.

“Oh, sweetie.” My mother comes and crouches on the stair above me.

I try to explain through sobs what the egg had looked like. My heart fills with grief because she can never see the miracle we discovered and because I have betrayed my brother’s trust. I expect David to shout, or hit me, or storm down the stairs, but he just looks sad. I realize for the first time that there are some things you can never take back. There are some things that, once broken, can never be fixed.

I don’t recall what happened after that, or indeed, much else that happened the year I entered kindergarten. All I know is that each springtime, I peer in every crumbling nest I see, hoping to catch a glimpse of blue. If someday you discover a robin’s egg with a smooth shell, just the right shade of blue, take it carefully home with you, treasure it, and never let it fall.
“Evelyn,” Elijah winced once more as he turned to his sister. “How much longer must we go on?”

His companion, a girl with an altogether haughty demeanour, frowned slightly.

“I suppose that we stop once we’re sure that they won’t find us.”

Both siblings had hurried through the dense forest for quite some time before they came across the boy. He was a slight, dirty creature with wicked, wild eyes that danced about his pinched face.

“Running away, are we?” He smirked and spoke with a sharp, teasing tongue. “I don’t blame you. Grown-ups are foul with their grown-up words and grown-up rules. Where I live, we don’t have any of those things.”

“And where exactly do you live?” Evelyn wrinkled her nose disapprovingly. The boy looked and smelled as though he had not washed in weeks.

“Why, here of course.”

The boy gestured towards the abandoned well nearby. Evelyn snorted whilst Elijah peered over the edge.

“If you’re really serious about running away, then you’d better come with me,” their acquaintance nodded wisely. “Whoever you’re running away from would never find you. We have more toys than you can dream of, you can scoff ice-cream for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and you’ll never grow up!”

Evelyn surveyed the boy suspiciously.

“Who are you?” she asked. “What do you mean, we’ll never grow up?”

Carelessly, the boy ignored the first question in favour of the second.

“This was once a wishing well,” he explained. “A child named Michael wished with a heart most wistful that he would never grow up. His father wanted to introduce him to the family business, you see. The well was so taken by his wish that when the penny landed, the water instantly vanished and a kind voice called for him to jump.”

“Don’t tell me that he did,” Evelyn scoffed.

“He did,” the boy’s lips curled. “In fact, he jumped just like this.”

Before Evelyn’s very eyes, the boy hurled Elijah into the abyss. Astonishingly, Evelyn’s panic-stricken screams were met by echoes of Elijah’s delighted squeals and appeals for her to join him.

“Knew he’d like it,” the boy smiled smugly before offering his hands for Evelyn to take. “If you’re too scared to jump alone...”

“I’m not scared at all,” she snapped.
They fell upon a nest of blankets and only once Evelyn had stumbled to her feet did she gasp. For the most wonderful assortment of toys surrounded them in thigh-high waves, so much so that one waded rather than walked about the place.

“Where did these things come from?” asked Elijah, wide-eyed.

Wordlessly, the boy plunged his hands into one of the walls and withdrew a clay-like substance. When he flung it to his right, it bounced and burst into thirty pink balloons.

“You can make almost anything you want to out of these walls.”

Yet it was a large painting that caught Evelyn’s eye. The brush strokes had spawned a cozy dining-room scene, with a man and a woman seated at either end of a large, food-laden table.

“This painting was here upon Michael’s arrival,” the boy shuddered. “It’s where he got our food from. You can step into it, see. But one day, he lingered in the picture for too long. He liked the woman, she reminded him of his mother. She—she spoke to him.”

The boy fidgeted uncomfortably before continuing, “He lost track of time and when he returned to this room…he was an old man. We had no choice but to expel him from the well.”

“Who’s ‘we’?”

“The other children and I,” he sighed. “Michael was our leader. It was because of his wish that children who never wanted to grow old didn’t have to. He cried when we banished him, you know. I’d never seen a grown man cry before.”

Evelyn glanced down one of several dark tunnels.

“The others are too shy to say hello. Anyway,” the boy continued, “we avoid the painting altogether now and I gather the food outside. Although I don’t venture too far in case I confuse my surroundings.”

“Don’t you ever miss home or life up there?”

“Never,” he replied savagely. “Sometimes I’ll hear the others weeping and I’ll remind them that they can leave any time they want to, the rope ladder is just over there. They soon hush up.”

Shivering now, Evelyn wanted nothing more than to return, alongside Elijah, to their parents. Her eyes longingly traced the entrance’s light above them and the boy caught sight.

“If you leave now, you might never find me again! You’ll grow old and wrinkled and you’ll,” he leaned forward and whispered fearfully, “you’ll die.”

Evelyn glanced about the enveloping darkness before contemplating the little, lost boy before her.

“That’s quite alright,” she concluded.

Chloe Neal
Spring blows kisses at blooming trees
and Olivia’s hair, cut short
like a cheat code for age.
I nod when she says
I should cut mine to match:
We’re almost thirteen.
We can’t look like kids anymore.

Standing in the once-forbidden woods
behind Bridge Elementary, the trees
still smell too lush to be allowed.
Olivia greets the green like a best friend,
tracing secrets on bark,
trading giggles with branches
that creak overhead.

I follow her lead
and put my palm to the closest oak.

I touch
I breathe
I listen

Baby leaves rustle
*hush, you belong here*
and I am planted.
I breathe in reverse,
swallow sunshine
and stretch against gravity,
blush when winter strips me,
paint my body
brighter every year.

When I open my eyes
I am as tall as Olivia.
We walk side by side back to her house
where her mom makes us lunch:
mac and cheese shaped like cartoons,
seasoned with sweet peach salsa.

Allison Kerper
She Died, Of Course

I laughed when she said that she loved everything because I knew that she meant it.

She liked to ask difficult questions and I laughed them away. ‘What are you thinking of?’, she would ask me. Should that be a difficult question? Or, how do you make quiche? She always seemed to think I would have an answer. I can barely make toast. She never seemed to mind that I choked my reply. The next day I would drop around to her place in town on my way back from work and she would have looked it up and made a perfect quiche: eggs transformed by supple witchcraft into a pastoral idyll of savoury foam. Like something from a farmhouse kitchen. It seemed wrong that it should be I who had the snug bungalow overlooking the harbour and she with the jumbled-up flat she shared with a rotating cast of hippies and musicians and house hunting new-in-towns.

It’s a co-operative, she explained to me. We run it ourselves. That keeps the costs down, see? I didn’t see. I said I did.

When she said she loved everything did she include me? I knew that she did, logically speaking. I wasn’t an outcast from everything, a torn page flung aside from the rest of the book. But she never said she loved me specifically. I never noticed this until I looked back.

She died, of course. That’s what I’m getting at.

I laughed when she said she was dying because she didn’t mean it then, or did she? Looking back I imbue her with all the powers of a mother goddess. Then I just thought she was joking. How are you? I’m dyyy-ing. Little cough, pathetic ahem, with head tilt, wide Bambi eyes pouting upwards, pause for sympathy. Duly submitted.

She would wear summer dresses late into autumn, then summer dresses under long coats in winter. Like she was trying to keep summer with her all year around. When I pointed this out to her, using those words, she just laughed. The next day she had been to the charity shops and bought jeans and jackets and a white fluffy fleece that became her second skin on cold days. I felt guilty for fracturing her artlessness. I think now that she didn’t like anyone to think that she was trying to seem like anything. I thought then that she just acted on whims and moonbeams.

I laughed when she said she loved everything because I was touched by her innocence, or was I mocking her naivete? I think the latter now but lately I am starting to wonder if I am too harsh on my former self. Yes I was derisive but is that so bad? If I wasn’t derisive, I wouldn’t have? Wouldn’t have what. There must be something.

When we realised that she wasn’t just coughing, wasn’t just cutely ill in a way that gave me the chance to bring around Lemsip and Cupasoup and be told I was the best ever, when we started to
talk about scans and samples, well, then. Well, then, what? Well, then: silences and other topics of conversation which petered out because we pursued them only in avoidance. When it got worse, she moved in. It was easier for her to be at mine, in its ordered quietness, than in her own beloved bedlam where housemates lurched around borrowing the milk and playing the uilleann pipes at half six in the morning. She had so little strength, and when I got back from work there would be flour all over the kitchen, where she had got up and tried to bake me something for when I got home but then she had run out of life halfway through and slunk away to curl up in a corner of the bed. Or there would be scissors and glue and bits of card and glitter stuck into the bedroom carpet where she had tried to make something, something beautiful with her hands, but the ideas wouldn’t come and she ended up with just ribbons and coloured card cut into lengths and strips and scattered, forlorn.

It took me a while to realise that it made her feel worse when I tidied these pitiful attempts away.

The lady from her job and the lady from her course were both very understanding, and they said of course, as long as you need, you can come back to us any time, just concentrate on getting better. And bless her she still had the strength to crack a smile and say, okay, I will, but I might be a bit dead, do you have a company policy on employing the living dead? But they couldn’t see that she needed them to laugh, and they frowned and said no, no. That’s no way to talk. Think positive, hen. You’re strong, you’ll make it through.

So she cried while I drove her back up to the house and she said, I shouldn’t have said that, should I? I shouldn’t have made them feel uncomfortable. So I swore and I muttered that she should say what she fucking wanted to and it wasn’t her fault that she was the only one with the strength to crack a smile. You’re the best, she said, but her smile was porcelain.

I learned to cook, a little, to make her the things she missed making for herself. I stopped buying ready meals when I drove home and started buying tomatoes and tarragon and fresh cuts of chicken. She would laugh, really laugh like she used to, as she told me what to do, how to mix spices and fold dough, and watched me bungle my attempts. I set up a kitchen table in the bedroom with a white sheet below it to catch the crumbs, so she could teach me cookery from her corner of the bed before I took the dishes to the oven. She could only manage a few mouthfuls, but she still loved the tastes.

The last few weeks were all pills and beds on wheels and toothpaste-green walls.

She died, of course.

That’s what I’m getting at.

Aran Ward Sell
“Customer notice: the museum will be closing early today because the staff are striking”.
They are striking. Stunning. Beautiful.
Visitors are paralysed.
Many fail to make it past the gift shop
as they stare at the assistant’s lovely face and sigh.
A customer, standing at the till
cannot bring herself to speak
mouth goldfish agape.
The assistant blushes,
and several tourists faint.
Beyond, in the gallery
the exhibits are outshone.
Axes and arrowheads sulk in cases
as the staff are put on pedestals,
revered beyond holy books and sarcophagus kings.
The museum is closing early today because the staff are striking,
but visitors will not leave
only gaze longingly into the stewards’ breath-taking eyes.
Some reach out to stroke their matchless cheeks.
They sigh, and smile, and will not leave.
They will not leave, that is,
until strikingly ugly staff arrive.
Malformed, misshapen, hunchbacked.
Tourists gasp, go pale, and even scream.
More faint, and all the rest flee.
The museum is closing early today because the staff are striking.
They shake their dreadful, perfect heads and close the doors.
Perhaps tomorrow they will break the curse,
of a phrase well-meant but poorly put:

“The museum will be closing early today because the staff are striking”.

Lewis Brown
Divide

A living room with two doors, one on the left and one on the right. The floor is strewn with all kinds of Halloween decorations. Timmy, a boy of about seven, sits in the middle of the stage picking through a large nest of cotton spider webs. Several empty boxes labeled ‘HALLOWEEN’ sit on the couch at the back of the room. Timmy is wearing pajamas that are appropriate for summer.

Mother enters stage left, having just arrived home. She is wearing a black dress that would be appropriate for a nice dinner. She never crosses to the right side of the stage.

MOTHER: Timmy, what are you doing up? Daddy said he’d tuck you in at nine.

TIMMY: Couldn’t sleep.

MOTHER (crouching down next to Timmy): How hard did you try?

TIMMY: I closed my eyes and tried to do the breathing like you told me, but I kept thinking about the spiders.

MOTHER: Are there spiders in your room?

TIMMY (shaking his head): Here.

MOTHER: The ones in the web?

Timmy nods.

MOTHER: What’s wrong with them?

TIMMY: I don’t want them to get separated.

MOTHER: Tomorrow, we’ll sort them so they’re all together, okay?

TIMMY: But then it’s not fair!

MOTHER: Why not? They’ll all be together.

TIMMY: Only one of you gets all the spiders.

MOTHER: That’s okay. Daddy can have them.

TIMMY: Then you don’t have any!

MOTHER: I don’t need any spiders.

TIMMY: But what about your half of the web?

MOTHER: Daddy can have all the web too. We’ll sort it out in the morning, okay?
Father enters stage right, groggy, having just woken up. He never crosses to the left side of the stage.

FATHER: I thought I heard fussing. How come you're out of bed?

MOTHER: He couldn't sleep, but he's on his way back to bed now.

FATHER: Is there a problem?

TIMMY (looking at Father): If you get all the spiders, what does Mommy get?

FATHER: What's that?

TIMMY: We have to keep all the spiders together.

MOTHER: We'll talk about it in the morning, Timmy.

FATHER: If we ignore what's bothering him, he'll be up all night.

MOTHER: Of course we won't ignore it, but it can wait until we've had some sleep.

FATHER: You can't put things off. If something's important now, you talk about it now.

Timmy is crying. Neither parent notices.

FATHER: He can't sort things out on his own.

MOTHER: The only thing he's sorting is the Halloween decorations.

FATHER: You think this is about the decorations? (Pause) Fine. I'm going back to bed. You can help him.

Timmy has mostly stopped crying, with some effort.

TIMMY: Mommy?

MOTHER (almost surprised that Timmy is there): Hm?

TIMMY: If Daddy gets all of the spiders...Maybe you can have all the ghosts?

MOTHER (sighs): That sounds about right, honey.

Mother rubs Timmy's back. Timmy stands up and exits stage left to go to bed. Mother kneels alone in the room, surveying the mess.

Allison Kerper
We used to laugh in the sun. The light breeze of a Bangkok monsoon whistled through the spaces between our sweaty fringe and our forehead as we ran one after another, beneath the sky, our deep blue school skirts dancing at the joint of our knees. You were already missing one front tooth.

‘Pa-ae!’, you screamed as you slapped on my arm a little too hard from excitement. ‘Pa-ae, you’re it! You’re it!’

And you ran. Faster than any of us could keep up with. Across the cemented pavements between the worn down buildings, dashing past the uniforms (white tops, blue bottoms, like all the other Thai schools), past the plaids and ribbons and schoolboy haircuts. Breaking the ‘never tag back’ rule, I picked up my short chubby legs, one after another, clambering fast past the myriad of mildly annoyed faces, my pupils darting in all directions, trying to find you. But I was too late. You have vanished between the kindergarten playground and the red soft drink stand. The lens on my thin, pale-pink glasses fogged, and I quickly turned around to find some slower-legged victims before I was once again crowned the ‘it’ of lunch break.

The truth was, running and anything else sporty were your ‘thing’. I was the nerdy girl. Even at the age where that word had no coherent meaning, I still knew that was my ‘thing’, my indicator, the concept around my math homework, my *Ladybird* Books collection, my English story cassettes played at bedtime. But it wasn’t the kind of thing that stops you from getting tagged or gets you picked for the break time jump rope teams. You, on the other hand, were always picked first. You were the fastest runner in our class, the best swimmer, the best at basketball. Everyone looked up to you. And you were skinny - even back then, that quality held some magnitude. Though back then I knew nothing of cliches or bullying, I still understood that we were so different.

But somehow you remained my friend. Despite my hopelessness of not ever outgrowing my baby fat, you still called to me every morning, and together, we did so many things. We bought soft drinks in plastic bags. We made new games and collected pebbles. We swallowed lunch with difficulty and bought one baht sweets. And together, with your hand pulling mine forward, we ran, and I felt faster than the wind.

I wish I remembered your name. Lost in the cracks between one memory and the next, the phonemes and phonetics that lead to you lie untouched, undusted, unremembered. But all else remains. The short bob haircut just below your ears, mandatory for a Thai girl in a Thai school. The map-like birthmark on your forearm. That grin with one tooth missing. The pain of your palm as they grabbed my arm, sweaty from the inescapable heat, pulling me from one adventure to another.

Perhaps it’s a ‘Ch’, or ‘J’?
When we reached primary, the school asked our parents to pick one of two separate programs they offer: standard Thai or English-based ‘bilingual’. Different classrooms, different buildings, different corners of the world, or so it seemed. Seeing my older siblings had yet to complain, I was sent to the bilingual class. Your parents picked Thai. We promised to meet every break and lunch, but as soon as I was able to break away from my new set of friends - and you, yours - we barely had time for anything further than a run, a quick ‘hello’, a run back.

My family subscribed to cable TV. I watched Friends, and got hooked on Disney. You kept up with the Thai lakorns, soaps with jokes I didn’t find funny and love triangles I didn’t approve of. I told you about the Lion King, and you reminded me to watch the puppet show Nok Khuntong. I had missed it for weeks. I preferred the Teletubbies.

Gradually, we stopped meeting. I bought fake cards, made up fake games and imposed fake rules. Thai and English words began to make some sense. My classmates made references to Elvis Presley, and I laughed because I knew who he was and that his hair was funny. We knew friends of friends who went to international schools. I entered a spelling bee. Our teachers were mostly American, and after 9/11 they all wore black in mourning.

Days slowly slipped away.

The sun was scorching the day we ran into each other by the soft drink stand. As we ordered Sprite in plastic bags, our eyes squinted quizzically at each other. We both tried to hide our suspicion, our bewilderment. You said my name and reached for your drink. I said yours, for the last time. We laughed and talked of things deemed important to primary students: homework, irritating siblings, new snacks and lack of pocket money. Our ice had long melted and the plastic bag sagged sadly when the bell rang. Students ran past us as we both stood up, fixing our skirts, unsure of what to say. We promised to see each other again. I forgot to tell you I got into an international school, and was moving away.

And so we parted, and your name faded. Like a faint shadow hidden behind that grin with a tooth missing, the word you were attached to at birth and will be carried until death remains to me a mystery. I rarely think of it, as I rarely think of you, and the woman you must have grown up to be: tall, beautiful, a full set of teeth, that map-like birthmark. And if you haven’t changed, we must still remain in our places, at polar opposites: you with your athleticism in the Bangkok sun, me with my books watching the first snow seven hours in the past. I rarely think of you. Yet, whenever conversations turn to the early years, no matter what the subject may be, I’ll still see you there, running away with the deep blue skirt dancing on your knees; toothless, nameless, full of life.

Thanita Phuvanatnaranubala

illustration © Sarah Sheard
Haiku 2
(Dead Flowers)

We are dead flowers
Rotting slowly in the sunlight
Like little matches

枯れた花

私たちは、死んだ花です
日光の下でゆっくりと腐敗
少しマッチのような

Stuart McKenzie

illustration © Ailie Ormston
The Accomplice

I walk home from Dempsey Elementary every day because my house is just across the street and one block up, and because, since old Mr. Barney is the crossing guard at Becker Avenue, my mother doesn’t have to worry about the cars that speed around the corner.

Even though Mother gave me a house key on a special Minnie Mouse keychain, the lock is new and stiff, and I can’t open the door no matter how hard I yank the key and rattle the doorknob. So today I have waited until I am sure that my mother is home from work and the big red door is unlocked.

Instead of going around the parking lot and up the road to the crosswalk at Becker Avenue, I take a shortcut through the playground. Past the jungle gym, past the seesaw with chipped red paint. Through the sandbox, kicking up clouds of sand and knocking over a crumbling castle.

When I reach the line of trees that divides the playground from the road, I hear a shout, and I turn around. This is what I see: a boy, belly down, draped over the tire swing that hangs from a branch of the pine tree by the sandbox. His arms and legs are dangling, barely scraping the earth as he swings gently back and forth. The playground was empty when I passed the tire swing only moments ago.

Beside him are the Jepsen brothers: Brady, who is in the fifth grade, and his little brother Jeff, who is eight like me. Like all of the Jepsens, Brady and Jeff have red hair and blue eyes. They are both wearing overalls. Brady is holding a razor with a long handle, like the one his father, the barber, uses at Jepsen Cuttery when a customer wants a real close shave.

The tire slowly spins around and I can tell, from his shaggy hair and pale, fleshy cheeks, that the boy in the swing is Henry Pafford.

Henry is deaf in one ear because he was born that way. He is teased in school because of his hearing aid, but also because he is fat. The other boys make a game of whispering insults quietly so that Henry can’t hear them, but usually he does hear and then tells the teacher. The kids call Henry a tattletale behind his back, and after school shout curse words so loudly into his ear that his hearing aid squeals and his face twists up in pain.

Brady got suspended earlier this week because he called Henry a faggot and because Henry told.

Now I watch as Jeff crouches and grips Henry’s wrists tightly in his hands. Henry struggles; he tries to back out of the tire swing, wiggling his butt and dragging his feet on the ground, but he is unable to move either forwards or backwards. Brady leans down and whispers something into Henry’s ear, his bad ear, and Henry moans and shakes his head.

Little Jeff yanks on Henry’s wrists, hard, and Henry is stunned motionless, his eyes big and his mouth open.

So quickly that I don’t know what’s happening until it’s over, Brady yanks Henry’s bad ear so that his face is forced upwards, and holds Henry steady while he separates his ear from his head with three quick strokes of his father’s razor.

The ear and the flesh-colored hearing aid drop into the grass of the playground. I stare at
them, pinkish objects that from this distance look like they could be anything—a pale flower or a piece of trash or curled up worm—when the long gargling scream erupts from Henry's throat.

His face is raised to the sky, blood streaming from the place where his ear used to be like a fluid scarf, soaking the shoulder of his white T-shirt.

He slips backwards through the tire swing and lands on his butt in the dirt. Henry curls on his side, cradling his head in his hands and alternately screaming and sobbing. I watch him, although he is partly hidden from my view by the black circle of the tire swing. The swing rocks back and forth.

Brady wipes the bloody razor on the grass before closing it and slipping it into the pocket of his overalls. He picks up the severed ear. He takes a long look at Henry, and then yanks Jeff forward by the strap of his overalls. The brothers run up the slope, run towards me. I stay put and look Brady in the eye when he comes up the slope and into the cover of the trees, panting.

Brady glances thoughtfully at the ear in his hand, which is lumpy and still bleeding and smaller than I expected. Then he looks up at me and smiles. He grabs my left hand and closes my fingers over Henry's severed ear. It is warm. It is soft.

"Get rid of this," Brady tells me, and then he and his brother take off across the road, just barely dodging a red truck that honks its horn at them.

I am left standing in the trees, holding the bloody ear, watching the red stain my palm and feeling the short, transparent hairs on the earlobe tickle my skin. Henry is still screaming in the dirt. A teacher comes running out of a classroom to kneel beside him and staunch the flow of blood from his head with her dress.

I put Henry's ear on the ground beside me and dig a hole in the loose earth with my fingernails. By the time the ambulance comes, its siren whining and the red flashing lights illuminating the dark windows of the classrooms, I have made a narrow hole about six inches deep.

I place the ear in the pit, and some shifting dirt tumbles into the delicate, fleshy curves, into the tunnel that once led to Henry's eardrum. I cover the ear with dirt, handful after handful. When the hole is completely filled, I pat the top of it smooth and watch as Henry is carried away on a stretcher.

His shirt is soaked with blood. He is whimpering, too exhausted for screams. His hearing aid lies forgotten in the dirt of the playground, trampled into pieces by the feet of the paramedics. When the ambulance is out of sight and its siren is only a distant moan, I walk through the trees and cross the street at the crosswalk where old Mr. Barney nods hello to me.

When I reach the house, I turn the handle and the door slides open easily. My mother is home. I can hear her speaking on the phone in the kitchen. I drop my backpack and leave my shoes on the mat. I go to the bathroom sink where I scrub the blood off my hands and scrape out the dirt from underneath my fingernails.

I dry my hands on a towel, and inspect my perfectly clean skin and nails. I cross the hallway to the living room, and turn on the afternoon cartoons as my mother walks through the door with a jelly sandwich for me.
In the Order it Happened

A face with the teeth of the breaking-sea
is nestled in the wide mouth which shakes
open with the empty lung, mottled and grave.

And it is the mouth,
in the order it happened.

The clocks swallowed the pocked foam like love.
And you swallowed me.

And I’ve wanted to tell you
of the pitch-black fields, choking with tilled earth
under the fullness of the suffering moon;

of the camera crashes, rolling and flashing,
the depths down and the milk froth,
in the order it happened.

Helen Frances Smith
The steam rose in a fragrant twist, dancing away from the smooth rim of the cup and into the chilled air. Up, up it floated, propelled by its weightlessness. It stretched up to the roof, curled around the spears of ice dangling there, and spun, invisible, up to the stars. The child had watched its journey, as far as was possible, before the steam cloud merged with the cold air of the night. The child sighed contentedly, searched in the cup for the next small billow of steam to make the journey from the warmth of the mug into the wintry unknown of the night.

The steam held a secret interest for the child, for it was evidence of her disobedience. As she breathed in the strong smell, she heard her mother’s voice in her head, telling her that she was not to drink the coffee, it would stunt her growth. The fact that it was forbidden only fuelled the child’s curiosity, strengthened her need to discover it. The strong taste of coffee was just one of the many forbidden sensations of the child’s world. She had taken the cup from inside the house, where someone had carelessly left it on a table, just within her reach. Had stolen out of the back door, the mug cradled to her chest, the secret kept concealed from prying adult eyes. Now, she gazed at it with wonder, breathed in the bitter yet tantalizing scent of it, and wondered if the mysterious black liquid was really so dangerous, so powerful, as to keep her from growing tall.

She had been sitting with the mug, gazing into its depths, for a long while now. To her, the moment spent with the mug seemed like an eternity filled with both the temptation of the unknown and the fear of discovery. Her ears had become attuned to every sound coming from the house, and she was ready to flee with her treasure at the first sign of any imposing steps that might dare to interrupt this moment. The girl took a breath, preparing herself for the sip that would carry her to the point of no return. She knew that this sip at once would destroy the curiosity she had for the drink and fulfill her need to taste it. She watched one more wisp of steam make the journey from mug to sky, then lifted the steaming drink to her lips and, cautiously, yearningly, sipped. She held the sip in her mouth for a while, letting the taste roll in waves over her tongue. Bitter, from the beans, yet sweet, from the sugar someone had stirred into the mug. Then there was the comforting creaminess of the milk, which contrasted pleasantly with the boldness of the brew. The child swallowed, then set the mug down and sighed. She heard an adult voice, piercing in the still night air, calling her name. She smiled into the last of the rising steam.

Zoe Whittall
Winter Day

The world is smothered in its silence.
In a whisper, the colours muted
till all is black and white and black again.
The ground stretches out. A blank page.
And slowly tracks appear, like words
Written with a foreign hand.

All that was familiar is new
All that was forgotten is alive.
Trees are decked with leaves of ice.
They glitter like diamonds.
The world is beautiful in its brightness.

Rebecca Shaw
See a penny

and all day long

you’ll have a penny.
“Calm down, Grub,” Gorgo Scratchit called back from the kitchen.


Gorgo managed a quick kiss goodbye to Tabitha before Grub’s head, already securely stuffed inside his green beanie, poked back round the kitchen door.

“Da-ad,” Grub said, at pains to keep himself on the side of the door closest to the wrestling arena. It had taken long enough to get that far, with his mum fussing over his mittens and tucking in his jacket. He wasn’t about to cede an inch of that hard fought ground.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” said Gorgo, picking up his old coat.

“Bye boys,” Tabitha called after them as they headed for the front door. “Have fun. And remember, there’ll be supper when you get back. Don’t fill up on pies.”

Grub’s finger stopped mid nose-pick. The pies at the arena were the best bit. All crunchy on the outside and dripping with gravy in the middle. And the rim on the pastry meant you could fill the whole top with red sauce, without it spilling down the sides. You couldn’t go to the wrestling and not get a pie. It just wouldn’t be right.

Gorgo put a huge hand on Grub’s beanie. “Don’t worry honey,” he said, dropping Grub a wink. “We won’t.”

The Scratchit’s lived on the northern edge of Ogre Town. Here people - meaning ogres - lived in underhouses. To picture an underhouse, imagine a gnarled, fat tree growing on top of a small hill. Then imagine that a team of burrowing creatures have hollowed out the inside of the hill, leaving only the tree roots and an earthen shell as a kind of superstructure. To picture an ogre, think of a large, round, lumbering humanoid: short, stocky legs supporting a wide, round body, and topped with an equally round, knobbly head. If there is a neck anywhere in your picture try again.

Gorgo opened the front door. Grub rushed through the gap and out onto the street. He turned this way and that, scoping out the fastest route to the arena. Gorgo, for his part, fell into that purposely slow walk fathers only seem to do when they know their children are ready to burst with impatient excitement.

“Da-ad.”

“We’ve got plenty time. The match doesn’t start for half an hour.”

“Yeah, but, we’ve still got to get there, that’s ten minutes, then I need to get a badge for my hat, that’s five minutes, then you’ll want a Bogril, and there’s always a big queue for that, then we need to get to our seats. You have the tickets don’t you? Did you check?”

“Tickets?” Gorgo paused and screwed up his face as if trying to solve a complex quadratic equation. He patted his coat pockets. “Tickets... I’m sure I’ve –”

“Dad,” Grub stomped a wellie-clad foot. Every week, the same joke.

“Ah,” Gorgo produced two tickets from his back pocket with a flourish and a smile. “You mean these tickets?”

“Very funny,” said Grub, jumping and grabbing at the yellow stubs.

Gorgo easily lifted them out range. “Okay, okay. But I’ll hold on to them. Don’t want to lose them in the crowd.”

The crowd in question was already massing in the streets around the arena. Streams of ogres filled Mulch Lane: brothers merrily swaying in tandem, uncles and nephews, friends and mates, other fathers being pulled along by
short armed sons, all sporting at least one garment in Ogre Town’s oozy green. Every junction brought the press
tighter in. For Grub, the way ahead quickly became a maze of legs and knees, cutting of his attempts to run on
ahead.

When they crossed Slug Road the crush pressed in even more. Gorgo scooped Grub up and plonked him on his
shoulders, one green wellie by either cheek. The crowd would determine their speed now.

Grub bounced gently in time with his father’s slow steps, gripping the top of his bald head. The arena rose to
meet them. Between here and there a river of shoulders and heads sloshed from one side of the street to the other,
broken only by the swampy bubbles of other green beanie hats, just like his.

Parts of the crowd were singing. Grub’s wool covered ears couldn’t pick out the words (which, given the kinds of
words they were, was probably just as well) but the joy of the tune was impossible to miss. It carried them along, the
call of a community, right to the open gates.

“Dad, Dad, look!” A huge poster dominated the arena entrance. Gaseous Clay, Ogre Town’s (and Grub’s) fa-
vourite champion, decked out in his trademark green trousers and cape, stared menacingly at his challenger, the evil
Gorge Fourman, toughest troll this side of Boulder Ridge.

This was going to be the fight of the year. The decade. Maybe even the century! And it was nearly time to start.
Grub didn’t want to miss a single second.

The crowd thinned out when they got through the gates, most heading for their seats, or for the pie stand, or the
toilet, but Gorgo stayed in the entrance way looking up at the arena.

Grub shuffled his legs restlessly. “Can I get down now? I need to get my badge before it starts.”

“Let’s get a picture first,” said Gorgo, heading over to the big poster. There was a new camera stand beside it.
You got your photo taken and they had it ready for you by the end of the match.

“Does it take long?”

“No. It’ll be quick, I promise. And we can show it to your mum. She’ll like that.”

“Okay, but then I need to get my badge.”

The picture didn’t take long, just like his Dad had said. Still, as soon as it was done, Grub shrugged himself to
the ground, checked he had the two groats he would need for the new badge and marched confidently towards the
merchandise stand, melting into the crowd.

“Grub wait.”

“It’s okay,” Grub called back. “It’ll be faster this way. I know where I’m going. I’ll get you inside.”

* 

Always in a rush. That had been him back then. He’d always wondered why his Dad was never in the same hurry,
why he always wanted to wait, to do things slowly. Grown-ups and kids, always going at different speeds. Him racing
forward, his Dad holding back.

Now he knew why.

He brushed a film of dust from the picture frame. His Dad’s bright smile still shone in the flash. Grub put it back
on the mantle, back in its place. It was the first time he’d been back to Ogre Town in months.

Mum was seeing out the last of the well wishers. Just them now, in the cold, cavernous under-house. The day had
been over in a flash, the whole week in a blink, the last few years in a moment.

He wished he had waited more. Waited with his Dad.
The wind obstructed the sun. He was burning, really, but he didn’t feel that at all.

The type of silence you hear in films. Everything was roaring, really, but he couldn’t hear that either.

The wind was rushing so fast he could barely breathe in through his nose, choking and thriving on velocity all at once. She was behind the wheel, kept veering onto the wrong side of the road, tempted to run off into the fields and mow down the harvest. Grown for a reason. Reasons and goals.

Perhaps she’s screaming a little, thrilled or horrified, we wouldn’t know.

It’s what they call a farmer’s tan. He had never been so dirty in his life. Really, physically dirty, not like this. There were the times on the farm, mud pies and mud fights and mud from quad bikes and tractors. That’s just superficial dirt, though. No, this is ‘grime’. ‘Grimy’ was a choice word at school, but always a concept. Now he really was. Grime; tiny speckles of dirt and filth, mixed with dead skin and greased sweat. It doesn’t come off in rivers. It doesn’t come off washing in lakes or rain. Sweat that lingers in the hair of your armpits.

They’d soon stop in a town, in a hostel, get clean again. Her more than him. There are some things one simply can’t bear to go without. Not having a hair dryer was bad enough but she really had to draw the line at a hair brush. Haystacks if not. And not golden ones either, not artfully dead ended angel hair gold, just real matted knots like the bedraggled sheep dog.

‘Pierrot, le fou!’

- Moi aussi, Marianne.

Really, it would have been better had she been blonde and found the sunglasses before she left. Men can pull off a lack of glamour, but no not I.

Will they ever be true rogues? Or has the time passed for that? And we’re not talking about the twenty-something years in between their births and the present moment. Time in general, I mean. Time, as in, ‘it’s not the 1950s any more’. You can’t just walk into a bar and get a job any more. You can’t just go off the map any more.

People can’t just go missing any more. We have ways of knowing now.
But, really, she did have this feeling: veering off into the corn or wheat or — why had she never been taught the name? — like leaving sledge tracks in the snow. Mowing it all down, insouciant. Making a mark on the virgin. Expanses like that made you want to run into them, expanses like the future. Blank pages - or perfection - great expanses like that. You never begin at the start and you never reach a point, a fulfilment. That’s the thing, never reaching the point. If she mowed it down, she wouldn’t be satisfied. Yet if it remained perfect, she’d always itch to mow it down.

Like laying eyes on Westminster Abbey or Notre Dame, multiple times. When she saw the lily pads the first time. Or Picasso’s Guernica. Frappé. She wanted to feel frappée. Knocked over, struck. Instantly knowing, as if bestowed by the great minded gods, the meaning in these things. Instantly understanding. I feel nothing when I look upon beauty. I’ve seen it too many times before.

Perhaps, as she sometimes thought, perhaps I’m just too young.

This is what meditation feels like, really, I think so. Head first, barely breathing because of the wind. Mind blank, drowning in air. Suffocating on air. \textit{Life!}

\textit{LIFE!}

Just, life.

Why, isn’t it beautiful? Shouldn’t we move here? We could live here, we could be happy here. Very happy. Really, simple living, we wouldn’t need anyone else!

The image is more a panning shot. A boy standing up into the wind, a girl behind the wheel. Driving along a road between two fields, driving away from the camera. A great swell of strings.

Rachel Wilson
The First Act

I wore my prettiest shoes,
the ones with beads and bells like
an African warrior queen
ready to conquer,
and I painted my face and nails too.

Stop and stare as you walk past.
From behind the glass
she looks so perfect.
But you cared not for my pretty picture,
you only wanted beer.

I waited by the wall for you to come
with Him
(because you couldn’t come alone)
and I let the sun do its golden damage,
burning through my skirt like a
prying child, insolent.
As were you. You were late.
And you made me leave the sun
for colder comforts.

We sat, us three, I in the middle
Our faces upturned to the glowing screen
like a rosy-checked girl tilts her head to her lover
hoping for the best angle.
What were we expecting from
this unfeeling thing?
Soulless eyes breathe glamorous lies
and noisy deceit
with slight of hand and a sweet, soft touch.
We must only expect so much.

But I expected more,
not from Him of course.
But your head swelled with arrogance
till you could not see through your eyes.
And your bored show of pretence
dulled my senses forever.

He liked my warrior shoes
and the colour of my nails,
and the film made his head hurt
like mine.

Louise Gossage
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