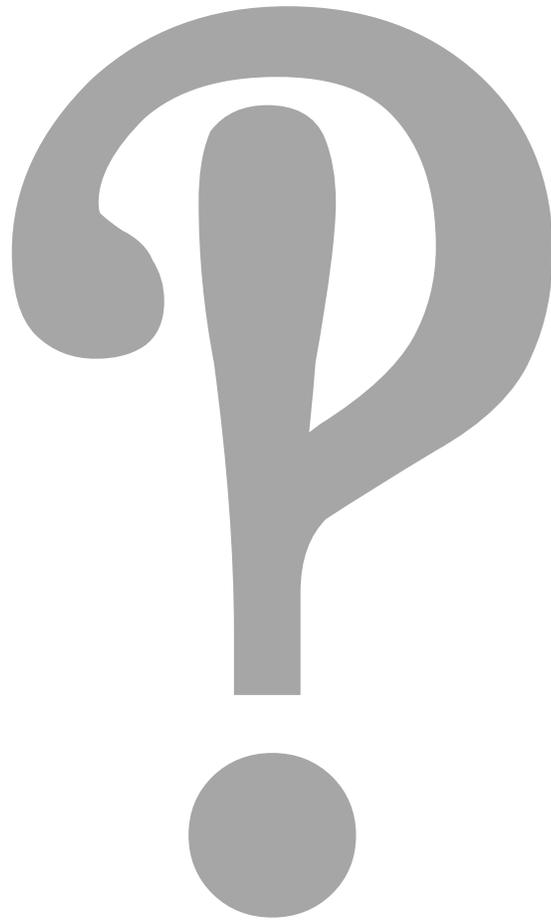


Volume 11, Number 1

Winter 2022

# Interrobang



The Literary Magazine of Kirby School  
Santa Cruz, California

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*Interrobang* publishes excellent poetry, short fiction, creative nonfiction, drama, and comics written by the students of the Kirby School. *Interrobang* appears twice yearly, in winter and spring. Share your original, proofread work with our staff at [interrobang@kirby.org](mailto:interrobang@kirby.org) anytime between August and May. Contributors need *not* be on staff. We welcome submissions from Kirby middle school and high school students. Submission guidelines available upon request. Email [mcaballero-robb@kirby.org](mailto:mcaballero-robb@kirby.org) with any questions about submitting your work or joining our staff.

The staff of *Interrobang* meets during club time. We always welcome new members with interests in creative writing, art, literature, and ideas.

*Interrobang* Literary Magazine

Kirby School

425 Encinal Street

Santa Cruz, CA 95060

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February 2022

Dear Readers,

In our Winter 2022 issue, we are pleased to present poems, stories, and memoirs. Notably, a poem by Jake Francis and memoir pieces by Rowan Caspers and Devin Jacobs are detailed and bracing accounts of their personal experiences of the CZU Lightning Complex fire of 2020 that impacted so many in our community.

We are grateful for Kirby's student writers for their interest in creative writing and their love of ideas, both of which are essential to the life of *Interrobang*. We urge all Kirby creative writers, from middle school to high school, to submit poems, personal essays, comics, and short stories to [interrobang@kirby.org](mailto:interrobang@kirby.org) by email or by sharing a Google doc. Contributors remain anonymous until publication.

We continue to be grateful for the ongoing support of the administration and teachers at Kirby School, who make our school literary magazine possible.

Enjoy!

—The Staff of *Interrobang*

## Floss for the sake of your soul!

Listen! For the Lord spoketh “Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn, coming up from the washing. Each has its twin; not one of them is alone” (Song of Solomon 4:2). As Christ shepherded his disciples, we shepherded our own flock of ivories. We brushed our fleece faithfully. We flossed our wool willingly. We practiced our dental routine reverently. We abhorred nectoreous drink, particularly that of carbonated nature, for it defiled our enamel. We left ice unbitten, however temptatious, for it wasted our bite. We held ourselves back from clenching our jaw. As “the wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes his teeth” (Psalm 37:120). We banished our wisdoms as black sheep, whose sufference would yet profane our palate. Howbeit, our herd became idle on a pastur of high fructose corn syrup, we drove our flock to holier fields of spinach and sugar-free chocolates. We absolved ourselves of dental decay through an errand into the dentist's office. We were delivered from dental defect by orthodontists, whose vexatious braces and piercing wires humbled us before the lord. As the Bible declares, “Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble” (Proverbs 21:23). We then observed our covenant constantly, preserving our pearly whites, that in turn he would protect us from our own perdition.

But, the lord again asks, “I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities...yet you did not return to me” (Amos 4:6). We have become indolent pastors and hence strayed from his flock ourselves. We brush our herd of ivories hurriedly. We seldom floss our soiled wool. We spit out Listerine rinse as it were sour dairy. We dither and defer to sweets, perverting our palate. We frolic and fiddle about, forfending our dentists and orthodontists. Forgetting to shear our own flock, we have fleeced ourselves of his clemency. Your dentition, dirtied by your own idleness, your palate, perverted by your own voraciousness, and your bite, broken by your own weakness, announce as such. Fie! You hide from the reproach and ridicule of men behind bleach, mints, and veneers.

Curse your foolish vanity! No amount of whitening paste or porcelain fillings will protect you from God's wrath. For it is your idleness, brushing off your dental routine, that is hideous. It is your voraciousness, abandoning yourself to whole cans of Coca Cola, that is wretched. It is your weakness, ghosting your dentist offices' calls, that is repulsive. Whosoever hath defiled his dentition- despair- for your body's demise shall mean your soul's damnation. Anon, he could afflict anguish and agony upon you in a

vengeful fashion. And he shall drown the innocent to wash away the wicked. He shall beset the Indians upon us. He shall send forth pest and pestilence. As he hath to the Israelites, "While the meat was yet between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the Lord was kindled against the people, and the Lord struck down the people with a very great plague" (Numbers 11:33). Floss! Permit no meat between your teeth! Purge your plaque and purify your palate. Cleanse your crowns, for *his* crown doth not falter. His judgement shall not waver. He shall drill the dirt beneath your feet and drag you down into the fiery cavity. He shall thwack you off this temporal heath towards Tartarus, as one would tartar off teeth. He shall banish you with his palm, as one would bad breath with balm. He shall extract you from his sight, as one would rotten enamel from his bite. He shall inflict the wrath, ruth, and ruin of a root canal tenfold. "...For [the Lord] strike all [his] enemies on the cheek; [he] break the teeth of the wicked " (Psalm 3:7).

Yet, you wait here whilst dark clouds gather over us, booming thunder tumbles towards us, and he aims his lightning at us. Repent! Before he carries out his chastisement. Purchase a clean toothbrush, as you should every three months. Find a brand whose toothpaste hath fluoride, for the prevention of cavities. Acquire flossers that work for your palate, there are those built for the purpose of braces. Procure mouthwash branded as therapeutic, as those branded as cosmetic doth not prevent plaque, gingivitis, or tooth decay. Take up these dental instruments when you arise and when you retire. In daytime, turn down sugary foods and turn away those who offer it. Whosoever hath braces, wear your elastics faithfully and clean your wires reverently. Allow neither caramel apples nor corn on the cob within fourteen paces of your mouth. Whosoever hath a retainer, wear it for however long prescribed. Wash it in warm water with tablets of dissolvable nature for half an hour every second day. Cleanly and safely store it in its own case. Amend your covenant and he shall forgive your trespasses and deliver you from damnation and the tormentry that awaits. He shall lift your being towards the pearly white mouth of heaven. There, all dental care shall be affordable. All toothpaste shall be pleasantly flavored. All breath shall be freshly scented. Those troubled by dentures shall find their teeth restored. Those afflicted by an overbite shall find their mandible repaired. Those plagued by halitosis shall find their breath refreshed. Those disturbed by inflammation shall find their gums recovered.

Look around you. Do you detect the foul stench of your neighbor's breath? Do you witness the coal colour of your neighbor's ghastly grill? Do you hear the horrid mangling of your neighbor's teeth? Look upon their festering dentition! By doing as such, you look upon your own reflection. Whosoever doth not mend their covenant

with God, shall be torn from his church. Do not suffer those who do so, as the Lord doth not. He shall smite them as he shall smite us all unless we amend our covenant. Hie, floss for the sake of your soul! For he is a vengeful god indeed. "Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!" (Psalm 141:3).

## Have a Happy Happy Birthday, Miss Beatrix Ray

Birthdays freak me out - they always have. The singing. The staring. The stupid little hats. And it's all because of Joe's Crab Shack. It is shocking to believe that one moment can ruin the rest of your life. When I was five years old, I got a trip to Sacramento for my sixth birthday. It was my first year living in California, so naturally I wouldn't have a birthday party with friends that year. The vacation started out with a lot of grumbling. It was pouring rain, and it took two more hours than expected to reach our destination. I had no idea what was in store for me.

Joe's Crab Shack was a flat little building on the edge of the Sacramento River. It smelled of fish and bread, and was filled with hundreds of people. As we got seated, a man carrying a bright green mohawk made his way to the table next to us and handed it to a tiny old woman, instructing her to put it on.. The lights abruptly dimmed, and the lady was standing on her chair laughing along to a rock version of the classic "happy birthday." She shouted "Now that be some grand happy birthdaying!!" Everyone in the crowd cheered and sang, and I could only think to myself, "Ohh boy." How was the little old lady able to do this when I can barely stand the normal version of the song? When the waiters came out to deliver our food, I started to relax. At least for about three bites of my french fries. I could see my mom leaning over and whispering something to one of the waiters, and a wave of fear crashed over me. Suddenly a swarm of people swooped in from all directions, I had been cornered.

"HAVE A HAPPY HAPPY BIRTHDAY MISS BEATRIX RAY!!!" My dad had his camera out, my brother was cackling with a mouth full of food, my mom was helping me up on my own chair, and the waiters were handing me a cone that was painted to look like a bird beak. Without thinking, I put the cone on. A bright light was illuminating my face, and the restaurant went silent. All eyes were on me. *Oh god.*

"Flap your wings!" My mom smiled at me. I was a statue. *Why won't my arms move?* A blast of noise arose and everyone was belting "happy bird-thday", a version specifically made for those wearing the beak on their special day. I weakly started moving my arms to get off the chair, but then my mom was up on the chair with me, and I hid behind her as she flapped her arms around. I trembled in terror until I could sit back down again and everything returned to its usual chaotic pace of things. Strangers kept approaching me with birthday wishes, and I could only gape back.

“Wasn’t that fun?” my dad asked. *Not in the slightest.* Little did I know Joe's Crab Shack would be forever melded into my mind as the single experience that traumatized my birthdays to come. I no longer can enjoy people saying, much less singing, “happy birthday” without getting an awful feeling in my stomach.

On my eleventh birthday, a large group of people sang to me as I stood awkwardly in the corner of a crowded pizza place thinking, “How did I get here again?” while choking back tears. I had just performed in a play, and my mom, unbeknownst to me, had brought in cupcakes for the whole cast. I was already tired, and I was in no mood for seventy people to stare at me and sing. My heart stopped and my body was motionless. As soon as the horrid birthday song ended, I grabbed a cupcake and pushed my way through the crowd. I slammed the door of the restroom with as much force as I could and crumpled into the tiniest ball on the ground. After a while I began to feel my stomach start yelling at me, and I got up to grab a piece of cheese pizza. As I made my way back to the tables, a new fear started to sink in. The bubbles in my sprite I had left on the table were flat, pizzas eaten, chairs pulled out. *How could they forget me?* I ran as fast as I could and scurried around the restaurant in a frantic attempt to be found. Suddenly I slammed into my friend.



“Where have you been?” she asked. “Oh, uh, the restroom? There was a long line.” *Wow.* Even I surprised myself with the fib.

“Well I’m leaving. So, have a happy, happy birthday, Miss Beatrix Ray.” *Wait.* I had heard that before. Suddenly my ears were ringing and I remembered what had happened at Joe's Crab Shack, many years before. *Why did this have to happen to me?* My head was still shaken up from the incident as I went home to the safety of my own bed. I couldn’t get everyone’s dagger-like eyes staring me down out of my head, and I was only left to wonder how it all could have been different. Since then, I have avoided the very

topic of my birthday. If someone asked when it was, I would simply lie and tell them it was a random weekend, out of the fear they would bring balloons to school and swarm around me.

And it is all because of Joe's Crab Shack. Who could have known? One moment, my birthday meant I could be a princess for a whole day, and the next I am afraid of birthdays like one would fear the boogeyman. A not so happy day remains in my mind for the rest of my life. The horrifyingly vile, sickeningly spine-chilling experience that happened to a sad little girl on her birthday.

## Black Butterfly

Grey pillars rise higher into the red sky,  
As my red eyes watch  
Orange shadows cast across the charred  
Golden landscape.

The dry air I breathe  
Squeezes my chest—like a rock lain on top of it.  
The water I drink washes over dry, cracked lips.

Grey dust peppers  
The once green grass—  
Blue and red spinning lights fade  
Into the smoky distance.

Sitting quietly under  
An old oak tree.  
The soft *shhh* of the air  
The blaring of the radio  
The pitch of the sirens  
The revving of the trucks  
The chatter of people scrambling—  
Packing their lives into small suitcases  
Finally quiet—for a moment.

A singular black butterfly  
Floats down from the sky and falls  
Down onto my lap,  
Charred ash remains of a once green tree.

As the red sun sets,  
Behind the obscured horizon.

As I go to sleep not knowing,  
As I go to sleep wondering,  
As I go to sleep cautiously.

The embers still burning,  
The smoke still rising,  
The sky—still red.  
As I go to sleep tired, and not knowing,  
When the smoke will clear—  
When the sky will be blue again

## My First Day of School

It was the middle of August on a dry, hot summer day when I transitioned from summer break into school for another year, this time heading into the ninth grade. However, unlike any other first days of school, mine didn't feel right. This was because we were attending online school from home, and the thick smoke choked out the hot August day. The smoke sank deep into the lungs upon every breath, and stung our souls before coming back up again, scratching on our throats as it departed. Little did I know that my first day of school online, stuck in my home, would be the last time I ever saw or was inside the place. The house where I grew up, and the place I experienced most of my childhood, would be a flattened, smoldering amalgam of scorched debris by the next day's nightfall.

The school day was lackluster, just getting settled into each class, introducing ourselves, and taking the occasional snack break. We were virtually trapped inside due to the unhealthy conditions outside. Throughout the day I looked out my window and out the sliding glass doors in my kitchen to see how everything was tinted a sickly yellow color. Since the morning I had taken note that all the shadows had gone blue. The day was surreal. Especially *that* day, as the smoke was the worst it had ever been in the past three or four days since the thunderstorms had ravaged through, starting the fires in the forest and rattling my eardrums while putting on a beautiful spectacle of lightning extending out like hair in the skies above us when it came over. The symphony of the lightning had been amazing, but I was forced to be stuck within what such an exciting event had wrought, thick smoke from the fires that encased us. During the break period before my last period of the day, I put on a stuffy hot mask that was supposed to protect me from the smoke, and I stepped outside to check on my pumpkin patch. I looked up into the sky to where just a day or two prior I was curious to have seen a helicopter with a water bucket. I had wondered why it was so close to us fighting a fire that was supposed to be too far away to be a danger to us. I ended up just brushing it off as just coming to get water for its bucket from nearby and head back, but everywhere I looked there was only smoke, and ash fell peacefully on my face. I watered my pumpkins, and went back inside. My father had urged me not to spend long in the cancerous smoke, after all. I then sat down, took my mask off, and completed my last class of the day. That was that, my first day of school was done.

The next hours are blurry in my memory, as I can't recall what exactly it was that I did. I likely sat on my computer to play games or lay in my bed to watch videos. What I do

remember is that it was silent outside, too silent. The ash was quite visible on the ground by then. It had been building up for the past few days, and landed like snow ever so gently on the ground. I had been hoping for a nice dinner to celebrate the first day of school, but instead my father, who was, and still is, a volunteer EMT, came in from the radio he had been consulting in his office outdoors to tell us we might need to leave very soon. Soon enough we could only have a quick simple dinner of fajitas and then go.

Snap—that's when reality hit me almost like a bat to the chest, the wind was blowing towards us, and the fires which had been burning in the back bushes not near anyone were growing larger as they combined. They were making a run towards us, and our house.

After it had been combined, the fire was dubbed the CZU Lightning Complex Fire—its name still haunts me. The sense of immediate worry caused my heart to sink down in my chest as if multiple pounds of weights had been hung off it, but I was able to maintain my composure. From there onward once again my memory has gone foggy, things seem distorted and stretched as if my mind had taken my memory of that day as a pliable ball of dough and stretched and rolled around that day in my mind. What I do remember from later on in the day by the time the sun had gone down was when the whole family was still trying to figure out if we had to evacuate or not. The loud noises of my father's radios screeched across the yard from his little office building. I can still hear the radios and the voices of my family members going back and forth about probabilities of having to evacuate or losing the house.

I was unknowingly in denial at the time, and had focused my mind on the fact that our house probably wasn't going to burn to make myself less worried, to cope. As I was loading things into our cars I got the notification that we were required to evacuate. Things only became truly scary and far too real while I was walking out to one of our cars and I saw something awry. I was in the dark scraping my feet on the smooth yet dusty concrete and I peered across the valley from a spot where I could see down into it. There in the darkness I saw the glow of orange emanating up from the forest across the way. It was fire, my first actual view of it. I knew there were fires, but all I had dealt with was smoke up until then, so I looked upon it curiously with a glint of awe in my eye. Even in awe, the items I carried were joined by the quietly growing burden of the situation. By that point everyone except for my brother had ditched the masks which were supposed to protect our lungs from the searing smoke. The adrenaline of the entire situation—especially for myself once I actually looked upon the fire—made us forget about the damage we could be doing to our lungs. We had gotten used to the smoke anyway. After that I went back inside from checking out the view, and a fire engine pulled up to the front of our driveway. It made a screeching sound as it came to a halt slowly, crunching along the leaf covered ground in front of our gardens.

The people inside were some of my father's friends who went and used my father's radio tower camera from his office to check the progress of the fire. By that time things became a bit more hectic as a stream of cars started slowly streaming by as my neighbours evacuated. The sounds of cars and of my father's radios broke the dead silence of before. Soon neighbours began to come and visit us, and talk with us about the whole situation. Our neighbours' voices and ours too were not too nervous and shaky. Most everyone seemed to be pretty nonchalant because everyone, including myself, was in denial. Little did the lot of us know that we were atrociously wrong in our assumptions of safety. During that time I carried many things out of my house and into our cars. The picking and choosing was the hard part. On the things I decided to leave like my old army vest, survival equipment, and movie props I ran my fingers across them smoothly one more time before they would be gone as I was uncertain if I would or would not see such items again. The feeling of touching them for what might be the last time was chilling, my denial was subsiding. As neighbours came and went, and the fire engine disappeared down the road I continued to load up the cars even as there was a scare that there was a fire on the edge of the neighbourhood. This scare was luckily disproven but added more worry to the situation. I was able to take the occasional break to grab my binoculars and look across the valley more. The orange glow down there was beautiful, even though it was of course bad, at the time in my still partially-in-denial mind the situation was actually quite exciting. Sure I had a bad feeling as if something heavy was lying on top of me, and on the back burner of my mind I was quite worried, but the fire was beautiful. The adrenaline rush was a nice feeling too as it felt as if I was being buzzed by some electrical source every once and awhile.

Discussion between my family members shifted from speculation on if we were even going to leave and if the fire was going to take out our house to only the latter. Discussion was also about trying to figure out what we were doing with the things we were taking. I was particularly vocal on the last part as even though I got most of my personal items out. I continued to bring up the point that it'd be difficult to return a lot of things to their original places. I had been trying to find a happy medium of bringing important things while leaving things that are important yet hard to deal with, trying to wrangle it in a sense. But the mentality switched to organizing what we should and should not take no matter the difficulty in dealing with them. For quite possibly almost three hours off and on we loaded up the cars not caring about the difficulty. Each minute of that felt like a lifetime, every second took forever to slowly slip off into oblivion, yet time still passed quickly. During that time we got the opportunity to go and see where the fire was actually coming from by going to the deck of our neighbour's house which was an overlook. It was even more beautiful to me and I took my binoculars along with me a second time to get a better look. Fire is one of

the most oddly wonderful things, however it is also destructive and disastrous. It pulled me in like a siren's singing but burned me when I got too close. It makes my relationship with it very chaotic. We kept on going back to that house's deck as we watched the fire grow ever closer throughout the night. I took a foray out with my father in his car to head up to the camp to check if it was okay and get a better view on which direction the fire was headed in. Luckily, we found it was still a ways from the Christmas tree farm, so we had some time to continue evacuating. Once most of the packing had been completed, we worried about the burned leaves that had begun raining down upon us much less peacefully than the ash had. So we made sure to spray down our whole house with cold water that wet everyone's clothing. The hot night dried us out quickly though. I ran the sprinkler to my pumpkin patch more times than I can count to keep any possible fire brands from starting spot fires. As the night continued on things began to grow quieter again. Though my memory just gets blurrier and blurrier as it gets later into the night I remember that my brother and I had settled down on our couch after our mother had left with her load of stuff along with my sister. We sat there showing one another things on our phone as usual but the act was surreal. It was because, though the couches were soft and comfortable and cushioned around us, we were both not in any way relaxed. We were uneasy and even as we laughed at jokes in our in-denial states of mind it was far too late at night for anything to resemble being normal.

That's when we went to our neighbour's house for the last time. By that point the sky had lit up a deep yet bright red-orange and we could see it through the trees as we walked over there. My mind is still filled with that color sometimes, it intrudes me when I think of my house making me feel unpleasant. The view gave us each a lingering chill to our spines because when we arrived it looked far worse than it had before. My memory has gaps in it, but the first time we visited it was around ten at night and over the far off treeline was only a section of orange sky. However, when we got there for the last time it was around two in the morning and the whole sky was orange as the fire drew in much closer, we could almost feel the heat on our faces. The lit up smoke above us was ragged and billowing cause the wind had been blowing all night long much to the advantage of the fire. After we arrived back at our home our next door neighbour came flying down the street in his car, rolled down his window and said that "You need to go right now. The camp is on fire." The fire had become far too close for comfort. Those are the last words I remember. We sprayed the house for a last time, grabbed our last things and booked it. I took one last photo of my house as the silence of the night was replaced by the roar of the wildfire close by and the loud but muffled booms of explosions from gas tanks over at Lockheed. We pulled up next to a policeman who was recording everyone who had evacuated, we told him what address we were from and

he crossed it off as we drove away. Little did we know that the house would be crossed out of our lives forever the next day.

Our drive down the mountain and to our grandparents' house in the dark was panicked and hasty yet still a very solemn and quiet ride as we all tried to process the situation. We had started coming out of denial and realizing the direness of our situation. I didn't get to say a proper goodbye to my house, though I would never have wanted to say one in the first place. When we got to our grandparents house it was nearing five in the morning. I slept uncomfortably on their couch for the night. I was surprised I could even go to sleep at all as I felt incredibly awful. The school day and the evacuation are very separate events to me in my mind even though they happened on the same day. It was a very long day, and that was my first day of high school.

The ghosts of my family, my companions, and I now talk, play, and laugh in mourners' clothing, roaming the bygone halls and rooms of the house now cloaked by the empty open air. Moving about by the light of the fire. The sky forever blackened out by smoke.

## How Community and Family Got me through the CZU Fire

I was jerked awake by a roaring gust of wind that tore through the house; shortly after, lightning lit up the sky. The blast of wind that awoke residents throughout the Santa Cruz mountains at about 2:00 AM on August 16, 2020, was shortly followed by an extensive lightning storm, unlike anything seen in decades. I stayed up with my family taking videos and watching the blinding white fractures in the pitch-black sky for a while before eventually falling back to sleep. My brother, who had just turned ten, couldn't fall asleep as he tended to worry and stress about these kinds of things. The following day I heard reports on the news about small lightning-ignited fires up Waddell canyon.

The ominous smoke and fire reports gradually grew worse until, one night, we were up late worrying about having to evacuate as the threat of fire crept ever closer. At least, my family was worried. On the other hand, I seemed not to grasp the reality of evacuation and fell asleep seemingly without a care. The next morning I awoke to chaos, and to this day my memory of packing is a blur. All I know is that while my brother hadn't slept a wink, my mom had trouble waking me up to get packing, because I was in such a deep sleep (this seems to be my way of coping with stressful or overwhelming situations). That morning, I remember gazing up at the sky, which was brown with smoke, and watching ash and burnt leaves fall like apocalyptic snow and settle on our trampoline like dry, fragile plum blossom petals.

The next thing I knew, we were driving down our driveway, passing a sheriff evacuating people, and heading down twisty-windy Smith Grade bound for my cousins' house in Santa Cruz. The sun was a dark orange stain on the equally dingy sky. We arrived at my cousins' home later that morning. My grandparents, who live on the same piece of land as we do, had also arrived at the house. My brother and I greeted our cousins while my parents went back to our home in Bonny Doon to get our goats and chickens. As I tried to distract myself with board games, I ended up forgetting entirely about my schoolwork.

Meanwhile, my parents had successfully loaded up our animals and were on their way back with them. As they were driving down into town, they heard propane tanks exploding in the distance like popcorn too close to a flame. They took the animals to the vacant house and backyard that belonged to my uncle's father. That night my mom read stressful emails about a neighbor who had stayed to fight the fire.

We soon found out that the fire was moving slowly, and several people were heading back to save our small community. They were dedicated to the land that was their life and they were going to protect it with all they had. On the second or third day, my dad joined the rag-tag team of ad hoc firefighters. Soon, they proved their worth, and while they might have lacked professional training and equipment, they were surprisingly well organized and had a plan. Yes, the fire was moving slowly when it came over the ridge and descended on our neighborhood, but it was the team of neighbors that stopped it from destroying everything like some evil army in slow motion. They didn't have fire engines or much professional equipment, but our neighbors own a well-drilling shop and have heavy machinery. The team, which would later become known as the Bald Mountain Brigade, cut a fire break around the top of our community using chainsaws, shovels, and a bulldozer. The fire break stretched from the vineyard at the right of our neighborhood down the hill to Smith Grade and Laguna Creek. At parts, it was so steep that the brave volunteers had to use ropes to scale down the nearly vertical hillsides sloping down to Smith Grade. They took turns on night-watch, communicated with walkie-talkies, and patrolled the line of defense on quads and dirtbikes.

My family received updates on the Brigade's progress back in town via a group email system that a couple of people set up for the neighborhood to communicate during the challenges of Covid. My mom talked to my dad over the phone thanks to our house's power not being shut off for some reason. I was worried about my dad and my house and my neighbors. But they were making good progress, and, in recounting this story, I feel an overwhelming sense of pride in our community and the people who fought the fire. We have something special in our neighborhood, and the fire made me realize how unique that is. They got me through the fire, both by saving my home and by providing a beacon of hope when all seemed lost. However, we weren't out of the woods yet.

Disaster struck when the fire began encroaching on a neighbor's home. The Brigade managed to save the house, although the flames burnt two small structures near it to the ground. When they weren't rescuing homes, the team was maintaining the fire line. They cut down trees and fought flames on steep hillsides, carrying fuel for chainsaws up steep, rough terrain and working with respirators in the thick smoke. After a hard day's work, the filters of their respirators looked as if someone had dumped cocoa powder all over them. Still, no firefighters showed up, no air support, no nothing. The officials had set up a blockade on highway one and one at the end of Smith Grade. After that, getting people on and off the mountain became increasingly difficult. Some people shuttled folks past the blockade, driving around it on the train tracks. At one point, my dad had come down into Santa Cruz, and when he tried to go back up into Bonny

Doon, he had to ride his bike on trails the entire way. At one point, he was chased by an angry ranch worker in a truck.

At my cousins' house, I was enthralled by all the news and stories that reached me. I did what little schoolwork I had and hung out with my brother and cousins. It was hard wearing masks all day long, but a necessity due to Covid when inside and smoke when outside. Most of the time, though, I was bored; without the daily chores and the exciting events that come from living on a farm, I felt very cooped up in that house and cramped backyard. The time I spent there felt like living in a dream. Nothing felt real. My life became monotonous and repetitive while, at the same time, being filled with stress and anxiety surrounding the events taking place in our neighborhood. I seemed not to notice this at the time, but during our stay at my aunt and uncle's house, one thing became clear: I was incredibly fortunate for their support and generosity. If it had not been for them opening their home to us, we would not have had anywhere to stay.

The next big event took place when the officials chose to backburn our area to save Santa Cruz. All our homes would have succumbed to the fire but for one brave person. She was a high-ranking official in the fire department and a Bonny Doon native. She stood in the way of the orders to backburn, defied her superiors to save Bonny Doon, and as a result, was demoted. But her efforts did not go in vain, for our neighborhood survived thanks to her.

Eventually, it was all over, the evacuation orders were lifted, and we could come home. More or less, life returned to normal, and school resumed. The problem: we didn't have any internet because the fire department cut the phone line in preparation for the backburn. The only reason I was still able to attend my classes was that a few of our neighbors still had internet. For the next couple of weeks, I would sit outside on a neighbor's porch (because of Covid) in the thick, stuffy smoke.

When our internet got restored, all returned to normal, and eventually, the smoke cleared. I might have forgotten a few details and dates, but what I will never forget is the courage of the people who fought the fire and saved our homes, the generosity of my family, and the connection and goodwill of all our neighbors toward each other. That is why I remained positive and hopeful. That is why I was able to attend my classes despite all of the hardships. That is what got me through the CZU Lightning Fire.

## Where I'm From

I am from the road with goats at the top of the hill,  
from celery and lettuce, petting coarse wool and overlapping bleats.  
I am from playing shark with my dad in the chlorinated pool  
and darting away as fast as I could.  
I am from giddiness and wonder as I roamed my rural hillside block.

I am from family outings,  
from pumpkin patches and stormy beach days with my dog.  
I am from climbing the biggest hay bales and searching for the grandest pumpkin,  
from triumph and satisfaction.  
I'm from "GO MINI GO!" as my five-pound pom<sup>1</sup> darts across the whipped up sand,  
from my surfboard in the frigid water I watch her zoom.

I'm from my Nana's chicken curry on cold Christmas days,  
bursting with flavor, warming my whole soul.  
From a house full of family—cousins, grandparents, uncles and aunts—  
from excited greetings, "Hey B Man," and stifling, warm hugs.

I'm from the days of pouring tea and counting beads  
squirming on tiny chairs, perfecting our abilities.  
Now it's all about waiting for the bell so I can get some Bigfoot tacos,  
and hitting the lip with my new board.  
I am from appreciating my family and friends,  
and dreams of traveling the globe.

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<sup>1</sup> Pomeranian

## Cards

Slamming cards on concrete alleys,  
enclosed by walls of fading yellow  
next to cheap grocery stores,  
by cracking cement highways,  
surrounded with big dry red trees,  
in mountain country,  
where I first met you.

It was and soon would be a dream.  
That hot sticky excitement  
of our summer.

Missing the face card,  
I smashed your finger  
against the jagged ground  
in that hot alley.  
It was then I learned  
you knew my name.

You punched my shoulder  
with a smile.  
It hurt a lot, even bruised  
but I felt so close  
I didn't even mind.

We danced in that cheap store.  
It was sloppy.  
The strength of your grip  
made my cheeks burn.  
We fell to the ground,  
our laughter filling the room

Together, we drove  
on those winding old roads,  
past millions of dark woodland silhouettes,  
Singing verses everyone knows,  
that I had absentmindedly  
sung with many others.  
Now those verses  
only remind me of that dirty car.

Has it really affected you less?  
I still see you while I dream:  
My mind makes a silly, romantic scene.

If the dream were lifelike  
I would be anxious,  
you'd be disinterested,  
surrounded by others,  
clouded by substance,  
in unfamiliar,  
crowded houses.

But instead, it is only us,  
in rooms or cars.  
Talking or laughing,  
but mostly it's quiet.  
I don't confess  
how much I think of you.  
I don't beg  
for you to come back.

When I look at your face  
it is smooth and clean,  
you stand straight.  
Your eyes are awake,  
the bags, tear stains and scars

are gone.

And when I am wrenched  
from my fantasy,  
by the alarm on my table,  
I look at the pictures,  
listen to the songs,  
perform the little habits  
I stole from you.  
And, even as I try to forget,  
I remember that stupid summer  
when I first met you.

## An Autumn Day in the Park

That time of year,  
When orange leaves drop onto the grass,  
Crunching under my four legs as I elegantly pass.  
My paws start to dampen—  
The dew soaks my matted black fur  
And the trees become a blur,  
As rain sprinkles and fog forms along the city skyline.  
I sneak around the busy people  
And find my home, underneath a shaggy tree,  
A shelter from the world.  
Curled in the moist leaves,  
As the sky darkens  
And bright stars begin to appear,  
I slowly close my eyes  
And drift off to a deep sleep.

I wake up to the sunrise:  
A pale orange light filling the sky,  
While golden sun rays bounce off tall building windows  
Reviving the city.  
As people start to come out,  
Jogging through the park  
Listening to their podcasts  
Walking their dogs,  
I emerge from my cozy spot.  
I hear birds chirping. My stomach rumbles, as I haven't eaten  
In a while. A majestic creature like me  
Has to eat like a king.  
As I wander through the park  
I remember  
This is my favorite season  
For a reason.

## Midnightmares

I stabbed a cat. I was killed by a snake larger than a titanoboa. My father was almost replaced by a body double.

It was nighttime, and the monsters were here again. An unnatural purple hue, they corrupted people and animals, turning them into horrifying violent creatures. The entire town knew that the only way to prevent a half-corrupted animal or person from becoming a monster was to kill them. Screams pierced the air. Fear gripped the town. This was a normal Tuesday.

I wandered inside my house, too anxious to do much of anything else. All the lights were on, but they did nothing to stop the cold and the encroaching feeling of being watched when you shouldn't be. A shiver ran down my spine as I noticed a half-corrupted cat under a chair. As I moved toward it slowly, the cat-monster ran out from under the chair down the hallway and into my room. I walked into my room and prepared myself for the worst. The rusty dagger I got from my dad lay on the desk, and as I slid it out of its sheath the metallic scraping sounded like a warning bell in the air. The cat-monster was cornered near my desk, where the trash can usually sat.

I feel I should mention that the knife is real. So is the grey carpet. The dull green wall is also real, along with the desk. Luckily the monster was not.

I crouched closer to the monster, and with a terrible horrible awful *evil* action I stabbed it. And I stabbed it again. And again. And again until its red, red blood covered my hands like the world's worst pair of gloves and the cat-monster's corpse was lying on my floor. It no longer resembled a cat. Somehow, the blood didn't stain the carpet, only me. *That cat wasn't corrupted. It wasn't a monster at all. That was just a cat* - and the guilt smothered me like a too-warm blanket.

I woke up, and I pushed my blanket off me. The dream went away. The guilt did not, and sometimes it still weighs on my shoulders. I wonder if it will ever go away permanently. I make sure not to move the trashcan anymore. Just in case. On a separate evening, I fell into a dream again.

It was nighttime, and I was at the park. It was a children's playground so I felt unnatural and out of place gallivanting about. My friend Izzy was there with me. The area around the playground was probably urban, but it's hard to tell these sorts of things when the only light is from a single desolate street lamp. The ground was covered in

rough sand, and the cold air bit at my skin. Izzy laughed at something I said, and the sound disappeared into the creeping fog.

As I slid down the play structure, I noticed ...*something* under the sand. A small white snake slithered toward me. Apprehension rose in my throat as I realized that the entirety of the ground was writhing with tens if not hundreds of snakes. Against my better judgement, I took a trembling step forward, and the sand shifted beneath my foot, revealing a boa with a head the size of my torso. As it lifted itself up, panic tightly coiled around my heart. It struck like lightning, and I dodged by pure luck. The snake and I, I and the snake, we were fighting for our lives. Or was it my life? Nails scrambled against scales, the sound grating and harsh to my ears, and feet kicked against pure muscle to no avail.

In any other dream, I would have won.

Fangs snapped tight around my waist, and my heart pounded like a bass drum -

I woke up with a jolt, frozen in place. There was a starburst of pain aching where I had been bitten and panic still wrapped viselike around me. I don't think I slept that night. Another night soon fell, and a nightmare followed.

I was young, too young to sit in the passenger seat while the car was moving, but when the car was still, I technically was allowed. No real use for it though. My dad wanted to show me one of his inventions in his Prius. I stepped into the car, and with the flick of a switch the sky bled from a warm blue to a cold dark night, speckled with constellations. When I stepped out of the car, it was nighttime. I meandered past the driveway, past the dying grass of the front yard, to a small thriving hedge. It was a deep green color and reached up past my head. Behind it was the side yard. My dad's head popped out from behind the hedge, and he grinned unsettlingly - this wasn't my dad. That realization nauseated me. I turned the corner of the hedge, where my father was sleeping peacefully on a bench, under a tree with vibrant magenta flowers.

I can't remember much else from that nightmare. All that's there is the creeping, unnerving feeling that the people around you aren't who they say they are, and that something terrible has happened to your real family.

Fun fact about me: I have paranoia! It only occurs at nighttime, so the sound of branches scraping against the wall are actually the sounds of a murderer, and a cat knocking something over is...also a murderer. It certainly doesn't help that I live near two graveyards. When I watched the Thriller music video as a kid I had a terrible dream about a zombie breaking through my window. There's also someone living in the vents, and another person in the crawlspace. For context, the crawlspace is a nasty area under the house with rats. You have to crawl in it, and there's a trapdoor accessing it in my

closet. I try to keep the floor of my closet covered in heavy containers, just in case. Another contingency plan I have is this: if someone breaks into the house, I have a practice sword in my room. Although it is blunt, it's the same weight and size as a standard sword, so it does bludgeoning damage. There's another weapon in my room. The very same knife from the nightmare in which I killed a cat. Not a single detail from the nightmare was off, so I can't pretend it was any other knife. The truth is undeniable. I also trim my nails into sharp points in case I end up in some sort of bizarre situation where my knife is not in my room and neither is the sword and also there's a murderer. All of this is very unlikely, but I'm paranoid anyway. Blame my subconscious.

## What about the Dinosaurs?

Matilda, please forgive my rambling, but I think this letter might help to clear my head.

This place is quite peculiar.

I started my adventure here stepping out of the motorcar, and instantly it didn't meet my expectations. Of course, one as accomplished in aethology as I should know not to hold any expectations, as haunted areas are as varied as the people who comprise them. Still, though, the childish part of me couldn't help but construct the image that the most haunted place in North America would be different. A gloom that blots out the sky, a chilling wind, the eerie howl of the supernatural, all the details the general masses believe these places to hold.

Instead, I found quite to my surprise that the streets of Old New York were normal. I dare say there was a quiet sort of *somberness* to the empty roads and buildings, one that was accentuated by scars from the fires this place suffered. The only signs of previous life here were the occasional (but much more frequent than normal) aetheric disturbances I noticed when driving through. If I remember correctly I can recount a couple here: there was an odd wailing coming from a bridge near where I entered this place, papers and garbage have swirled and formed shapes as I pass, and near a clump of yellow buildings I saw a smallish skulking figure out of the corner of my eyes. Activity to be expected, but I logged it regardless as anything from this place could be useful or groundbreaking. You just need to know when to pay attention.

At this point Matilda, and please correct my assumption if it's wrong, I would guess you're wondering why I'm even here in Old New York. I could say that I got the proper government registration, or that they've lifted the quarantine for aethologists such as myself. But you know me too well and would see past those, wouldn't you Matilda? Well I said it before, and I'll say it again, it's a crime to keep this place restricted!

Aetheric activity or supernatural phenomena for the layman are occurrences that are well known and well-tracked. Those who pass traumatically or with profound unfulfilled goals leave behind a ghost. This is easy to see and record as denser populations such as towns and cities statistically become more haunted over time as ghosts accumulate. However, the best models put the rate at which a soul becomes a ghost at astronomically low. But Matilda, the density of aetheric individuals on the premises of Old New

York surpasses this number by a hundredfold! Even more! There are secrets here: something caused this. A major discovery hides somewhere in this city, and by golly, I will find it! Nothing can or should hold me back.

I think—

Oh sorry, Matilda. In the midst of recounting my arrival I heard something in the small house I decided to take refuge in that distracted me. I had to examine it, and I'm afraid to say I lost my train of thought. But the noise is interesting—it's a ghost and probably a dog at that judging by the everchanging paw prints I keep finding in the living room. There's a point where sudden noises will even get on my nerves! Although I should be used to these sorts of disturbances by now. Sometimes I wish I could have brought someone along for the company, but aetheric disturbances do tend to manifest more frequently to those alone. I guess I'll just have to get used to it.

I followed the sound around the house, but unfortunately, it didn't lead me to anything useful, just a burned scrap of what I think is an old broadsheet. All it says is something about dinosaurs. Oh, I do hope that if this pup decides to stay it'll improve its means of communication. I would say wild chases like that are inefficient, but the only other option I have is an ouija board, and we all know what a disaster those can be.

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Matilda, forgive my ramblings, but this time I need to clear my head of... what I've uncovered. Firstly let me recount how this rabbit hole started.

Barkley, as I'm calling the dog, has proven to be a helpful asset in my investigation over the past couple of days. That being said, as much as I appreciate his help, and it pains me to say this because I suspect that my presence as an outlet for his helpful nature is healing his soul to perhaps move past this mortal plane, but I wish I never encountered the pup.

We started the day's exploits as usual, and soon Barkley and I were in the midst of the city, investigating. I must say, that somber feeling I detected on my entrance still lingers, and has only grown when I look upon the streets more heavily affected by the fire. The entirety of downtown is completely burned through, buildings are blackened and charred and even now, after so many years, I can smell the faint tinge of charcoal on the occasional breeze.

To think, how many homes and memories were consumed by that blaze fills me with sadness. Why anyone would want to burn a city years after its abandonment I can only guess at, and only the

dead knows. It's times like these where I wish I had taken that aetheric communication class offered by my colleague, as I could ask the dead about it, as well as what caused this area to become so haunted. But even so, the resonance of this area still has yet to be found, so I wouldn't know whether to bring a crystal ball, set of cards, or others. Better to stick to the all-purpose ouija board, as much as I detest the thing.

I digress, Matilda, and I should better stick to the topic of this letter as it does trouble me so. It was around midday when I found it, or Barkley found it then led me to it. It was a broadsheet, from about eight years before formal abandonment was called, and it's the compliment to the scrap Barkley showed me on that first day. Has this possibly been his goal all along? To show me this wretched, horrid, frightful paper?

I'm sorry for the language, but the contents it contains speak to a truth I can only guess at right now, but one that I fear the ramifications for. All it says is this: Where are the ghosts of dinosaurs?

WHERE ARE THE GHOSTS OF DINOSAURS?

Where are they and why has no one thought of this before, Matilda? This question, this one question? It's absolutely terrifying.

I understand if you don't fully realize the ramifications of this question, and I wouldn't expect you to, being the simple baker that you are. But the entire science of aethology has been built upon two axioms. One, souls are real, and two, souls persist. The first means that the effects of souls on the world are measurable and predictable, the second meaning that there are still souls about for these measurements to detect. All of our observations (so far) have only supported these axioms, but this question breaks everything because dinosaur souls haven't persisted!

And you can't deny the validity of this question either: Dinosaurs were real, we see the effects they left on the natural world, their bones are displayed proudly in museums and their carbonized remains power the engines of modern-day technology. But dinosaur ghosts should exist too, we've cataloged countless ghosts from all walks of life on Earth, not just humans. Barkley being an example, but anything that has a soul can become a ghost, and anything alive *has a soul!* Dinosaurs were alive, but where are their ghosts?

They can't be gone. The second axiom states they should persist, the law of perpendicularity says that souls can only move on once appeased through interaction, and Patih's laws of interactions make the conclusion that meaningful interaction can only happen with beings who are aware of the aetheric nature—i.e. us humans! The only way dinosaur ghosts could have moved on is from direct human

involvement, but there is no mention of this ever happening in any of written history, and I would know if there was! This is my specialty.

So where did they go? We should be seeing dinosaur ghosts everywhere, but we don't *so where did they go?* This violates the second axiom, and to violate one is to cast doubt on the other, and it chills me to think what that could entail. ~~What if we don't have souls?~~ I need to figure this out, I *have* to figure this out.

*Where did they go? This question haunts me, Matilda, it's followed me since the paper, and I've tried to burn it, tried to escape, but it stays with me. I see it in the water I drink, ripples twisting and turning in repulsive ways, forming traps and forming cages. I see it in tree bark, eyes, the question staring at me, laughing at me, taunting me with calls in this wind I hear it. Dinosaurs. I should never have come here, I should never have followed Barkley, but I need to know now I need to know I need to know I need to know I need to know I*

WHERE  
ARE THEY

*Matilda, my sweet sweet Matilda.*

It's so beautiful, the lies we've constructed. This place held secrets and I should never have delved in here but I've figured it out. I've figured it out! The fires and the peoples here from our well-hidden lies. The fires that tried to cleanse and hide it all, but I

found it, I dug in the ash, sorted through the earth with my snout—no Barkley’s snout. He found it.

I fear I can no longer stay here Matilda, the magnitude of my discoveries disturbs me so. This place is a danger, and I’m the same for it too. I was standing, lighter in my hand when an urge came over me, and all I could think was to burn this place to the ground. Of course, I couldn’t act on it, I couldn’t destroy the precious history here, but the mere presence of that impulse shows I’m no longer fit to be here. If I had destroyed some of the vital histories this place contains...

But no, I should! Just as a flaming rock of death burned away the empire of lizards, I need to do the same for their legacy. The beautiful lie their legacy challenges. No one should ever know, not again, not again. I was scared. I was scared holding that flame! An icy spear in my chest of fear that I couldn’t contain, so it’s melted now and gone. It all is.

That was what the original fire tried to conceal, tried to destroy, but I just had to find it again, uncover the paper, draw the conclusions. Barkley is looking at me now, in the smoke I can see his haunted face twisted and snarled. But you can’t stop me now little pup! This is what you wanted, and I know the lies have been broken. You’re not real.

None of it is! Souls don’t persist therefore souls don’t exist! That’s what the bones here have whispered to me, those ancient dinosaur bones I see in dreams and water. We thought that because of souls there was something after. We lied to ourselves, saying that this was not the end, but it is! For a beyond to exist, souls need to exist, and for souls to exist, ghosts need to exist, and for ghosts to exist, dinosaur ghosts need to exist. But they don’t, so none of it does. It’s a clear chain of logic, follow it as its loops and twirls straighten as you sink down and down, just like the smoke of Barkley’s body.

How many lives could have been saved? How many countless risks have we taken because we knew there was something for us if it failed? And how many of those failed, losing so many wonderful people forever. Those thoughts cling to my brain like a tumor, feeding off the shattered glass that contained the lie. The beautiful, beautiful lie.

It’s not real. But it can be. Someone tried once, to scatter this evidence to the wind as ash. They failed, but I didn’t. The lie has to continue. That place is gone and dusted now, I’ve made sure of that. Barkley, papers, dinosaurs will never haunt us again. So I’m done, the only place the lie can break is from me, right?

Wrong.

You realize that, don't you Matilda? I see it in your face as you open the door. Your eyes were so wide, so happy to see your little brother again, but then frowned when you saw me. Saw the ash I became.

You invited me inside, you made tea. It smells lovely, just as always.

But I can't drink now. Your study, I remember you always placed a rosy pink box with letters right on the corner of the desk, yes? Ah, here it is.

The comfort of a lighter. Oh, this one followed me from that place. It'll burn too once its job is finished. Nothing left to break the lie.

Now, why did you have to come in and check on me? That'll make this next part very inconvenient, Matilda, especially when you hold the letters like so.

Oh well. Your ramblings could have broken the lie too.

## Huset Av Mormor Min

Their house  
is up on a tree-kissed hill, perched leonine above a canyon.  
Overlooking the sea of trees, the town dozes  
serenely under the endless-summer sun of Santa Barbara,  
then the ocean, and finally, the island.  
You can see it from the windows  
and you can see it from the deck.

Massive shelves of books line the aging walls.  
Her friend Durton built them for her an age and a half ago.  
Books about Africa, about cooking, culture, history,  
the mind and matter- magic masterpieces  
on just about everything.  
Pages picked at by love birds, dog-eared and folded,  
and stained by tears, time, and late night tea.  
Paintings and pictures of people and friends half-forgotten are strewn  
on the walls, under note paper stacks, and stuck between the pages of books.  
Faded photos steeped in nostalgia,  
pinned to the wind.

The ancient table from their parent's home  
that once sat upon the pebbled shore  
of lake Mjøsa, Norway, their birthplace,  
stands still as death.  
We'd sit there together in the serene sepia tone light of the mid afternoons  
*when my hair was the same color as hers,*<sup>2</sup>  
and she'd listen to my childish babble and stories,  
that now we've both long forgotten.

One hundred and eighty African baskets—meticulously collected—

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<sup>2</sup> A line from a poem my mother's cousin wrote about her grandfather

are spread throughout the house.

I know, we counted together one summer.

Look—in this room: we’d watched nature programs, Wes Anderson movies, Antique Roadshow, and sad French films.

Over here in this one, we’d put up a massive christmas tree and decorated it with pepperkaker nisser<sup>3</sup> and candles.

Out in the front and along the side is the rolling garden, carefully tended, that I would so often run barefoot through, collecting pottery pieces and clippings of memory

as I floated on windchimes and the laughter of a house full of loved ones, stands quietly.

The Jacaranda tree at the top of the driveway sways with the breeze, dropping purple blossom kisses, branches spread towards the sky.

I’d play for hours in the dense foliage,

pretending to be a feral child, an adventuring warrior, a lemur, selkie, lion.

That very same tree

was just a sapling when they first moved in.

It’s grown throughout

a thousand and one visits, guests, and memories:

her career as a potter,

her *kæreste, hennes mann*,<sup>4</sup> departing to the deserts of New Mexico,

her sister moving in,

the birth and death of Lucy,

my childhood,

the failures and successes,

the suffocating, inky, seeping-in of depression,

the soul-lifting euphoria and the crushing weight of tears left unfallen,

and goodness knows what else, lying unfelt, unseen.

The things that once were

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<sup>3</sup> Pepperkaker (“Pepper cookie”) is a Norwegian, gingerbread-like, holiday cookie often made in the shape of a nisse, a house-spirit from mythology

<sup>4</sup> “...dearest, her husband...”

holding me back,  
pulling me down,  
Words and stories heavy as stones,  
lay like dust on the foyer  
and hang limp in the now stagnant air.  
Faded like the photos on the walls.  
It's an aching and squeezing in my heart to remember,  
and to forget,  
but time soothes the hurt.

Nonetheless, there I was.  
Here I am.  
Dark is the night  
awaiting the release of the day.  
Won't you cry me to sleep?  
Standing in the red-tiled entryway,  
lying on a checkered dyne<sup>5</sup>,  
sitting on the carpeted stairs.

If you close your eyes, you can still smell boller<sup>6</sup> in the oven,  
old wood, eucalyptus trees, rain,  
woolen blankets, dried lavender, sweet night air.

You can still hear the sounds of cooking in the kitchen,  
a bird twittering, someone singing, someone laughing, someone weeping, and at night,  
a coyote song and some old music piece, muffled and forgotten,  
echoing through the house and across the canyon.

You can still feel in the petals of the roses and in the cracked wood  
of the hundred-and-twenty year old tables, in the pottery,  
jewelry, and in the art pieces  
made one by one by hand,  
the love that flourished and thrived brightly here.

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<sup>5</sup> A Scandinavian duvet-like blanket

<sup>6</sup> A Norwegian sweet bread roll made with cardamom

You can still see the dark of the warm moon-filled and endless nights filtered through  
leaved trees,  
the remainders of art and gardening projects partly finished,  
and threads of the lives, places, and stories they once lived—if you know how to look for  
them.

Through a dream-haze filter, you can still see her in her chair, reading something simple  
and good,  
or shaping clay with her paper-thin hands,  
or sitting peacefully, thinking about everything and nothing.

Because that's all it is.

It's everything because it's nothing.

## Approach

We hold the name of the rose in our hands  
And paint a pattern comparable  
To that of the stars in the sky.  
The gift of God — isn't it embedded  
In the resolution of a craving chord?  
The steady steps of its sacred approach.  
The dominant. The supreme glory.

We fill our pockets with grains of time,  
And piously, we furrow and seed  
In a wasted land. And so we dance  
For a dead princess, moving over  
Wheat-straws with our stiff steps.  
Like Sufists we dance, turning our heads  
To the arabesque and to the promised paradise.  
Rotating. Tangling. Mutating.  
We dance but dance,

Inevitably. The stable crumbles.  
A landslide of counterpoints.  
Our notes speak the edge  
Of our lives — something  
Veiled in an opaque ice cube, a motif retrograding  
Or inverting itself. A double helix of harmonious tones.  
Oscillating like a pendulum in a clock, a reversed parabola,  
The motion of our distilling hours, utters the spell  
Of our never-ending revolution. The infinite return  
To the tonic, where all the past are liquidated,  
And all the exerted energies, nulled.

Indeed, what are we holding in our hands?  
The countless predicates of subjects are but

A grasp of water — fluid and volatile.  
In vain do we treasure them as jewels.  
Those iridescent beads, mirrors of the universe  
That encompass all of our past, present, and future,  
Are not for us to see, for we are so finite,  
For no matter how dazzling is the light,

We are so blind.  
We are so blind, as we can never escape  
The chase of those rose-tinted shades,  
Whose monochromatic color  
Dictates the boundary of mind.  
Like a fugitive, we are fated to be hunted;  
Like a fugitive, we are fated to run.

Yet as we run, the destination quickly fades:  
The forever retreating horizon captures our expedition,  
Making us a ship of fools sailing in the darkness of the ocean.  
Surrounded by the timeless tides, tirelessly we follow the steps  
Of the Sun — the unreachable being, the meaningless void.  
Yet its heat does melt our wings, and its warmth  
Is a poison that drowns us to the abyss.

And thus we fall and fall, into the endless dark,  
Into the nostalgic tunes of crows, which, so thin in the air,  
Lure us with their purely rural chants.  
A march of coffins advances into the barrenness of our land,  
Where seeds are planted without a harvest, and  
Where despair fills up our hollow hands.  
The black branches bifurcate in the ashen sky  
And shatters its background into inorganic scraps.  
The reduced dimensions. The synonyms of death.

A prick of thorns, finally, infiltrates into our lives.  
Ravels of mourning crepes tie up our last breath.  
On the deathbed, we shout out our last few words:

“Bury me! Bury me in my birthplace,  
Where all the things were once so naive!”

In a nostalgic fog, the scenes from childhood slowly reoccur:  
The colorful balloons that we have once chased without a purpose,  
The meadow where we have once collected lilacs and lilies,  
And the cabin that harbors our secrecies and daydreams — they have  
All come back. That is a world uncontaminated by metaphors,  
A world we constructed with nothing but only the eyes of purity.  
Miraculously, it comes. Miraculously, it goes.

Immersed in the faint sweetness of our infantile years,  
We come to the end of our lives and shed our last tears.  
On the deathbed, a wooden ladder ascends to the sky.  
We stretch our fingers, and let their tips tend to the light.

## Kirkwood, California

Nine AM sharp, I stand  
at the bottom of chair six,  
with poles in either hand.  
I sit upon the lift with  
my closest friend Liam.  
As brothers we ascend  
with shared excitement,  
hoping the day will never end.

Sitting in the morning sun,  
advancing up the powdery, sparkling mountain.  
We are atop jagged peaks and narrow chutes  
and stomach-churning drops off rocks and stumps.  
The top of the chair is barren,  
for we are the first ones up this tall, chilling climb.  
We hasten to hop off the lift,  
adjusting the straps of our boots,  
and in quick time,  
we preview our planned route of cliffs, trees, and jumps.

The majestic mountain speaks to me,  
of secret caves and hidden, winding gulleys,  
narrow ridges and wide cornices.  
The magic of the mountain remains in me,  
as do those long days of tireless skiing, joking, laughing,  
and living life to the fullest.



# Interrobang

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