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Petey's World

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Cover Page Footnote

This piece was written and workshopped in 18F.

Petey's World

I hear the roaring in my head when I squeeze my eyes this tightly. It almost blocks out the cassette tape that I have playing, but not quite. Eventually, I know this'll probably wear my car battery out, but I'm curled up in the driver's seat and I let my eyes slowly slide out of focus. I can't drive anymore, but I sit in my beloved old car, Tom, and listen to Fleet Foxes or the Beatles when I'm feeling especially cinematically dramatic.

I figure I have a few more minutes to stay out here before someone concerned comes and gestures to me with a confused look to come on in where it's warm. My son will tell everyone where I am if they ask, I saw the blinds of his room overlooking the driveway crack open and snap back shut a few minutes ago. So, a countdown. Leave at the end of the next song. I slide my feet onto the floor and roll upright, seeing stars across my field of vision. The door always pops when it opens, like a gunshot. My fault for backing out of the garage too fast once; now the front bumper is unhinged.

I slide my feet onto the gravel driveway: letting gravity pull me out of the seat, path of least resistance. It smells like rain, and there are new weeds uncurling between the pieces of gravel. I try to snub them out with my toe as I walk up to the house.

Inside, I hang my keys on the peg and take off my rain-boots so I can sneak upstairs like I used to when I was younger and haunted around my parents' house. I slide around the corner in my socked feet and take the stairs as fast as I can, counting even beats between my steps. I always count when I walk, metering out my steps on sidewalk segments 1, 2, 1, 2, 1, 2, 3, 1, 1, 2. I realize I've been holding my breath when my head pounds from the lack of oxygen at the top of the stairs and I fall into bed.

Some days I can't walk at all anymore, and I know I'm starting to slip in and out of the world. When I think about it too much, I feel that wrenching feeling that has an aftertaste of fear- and the scrambling assurances within my own head to myself that it will be ok. Chemicals in the brain, I remember. Survival instincts. Rationality.

In bed, I stare backwards at the sky, and think about the princess who was killed in the tunnel underground. Di. I wonder if she looked at the sky for one last time before her car went into the tunnel that she never came out of. It's probably better to not know you're taking your last look, better just to gaze up at the old sky with eyes not searching for any specific meaning. The sky gets darker until eventually the indigo slides into blackness.

My daughter Petey creeps into the room with bare feet after dinner. The older two are scared of my illness but more so of my despair. Maybe she can't feel it's tentacles like they can. I swivel my eyes in the darkness to follow her tiny head bobbing towards my bed. She gets close enough that I can't actually see her anymore, and then she climbs up and leans into me. She pinches my arm. "Can you feel that, Mama?" I feel absolutely nothing, and haven't for months since I woke up one morning with no sensation in that arm. But she loves the game. "A little!" I say. I watch her pinch up and down my arm, an act of love-giving pain. She smells like outside the way you do in the fall, like a touch of smoke and salt and wind and leaves. Suddenly, I need to be there.

I tell her to lock the door, and she pads over and does so. My windows are open too, and I tell her to draw the blinds. When it's completely dark, I start telling my daughter a story.

When I was your age, I used to go to the Apple Butter Festival every October back in North Carolina. My grandma would always tell me that I needed more clothes, but I always insisted I was fine. We would drive down Clark's Creek road through the cow pasture to the big field where the cars would park. My dad would buy me a hot apple cider because my fingers would already be going numb. Next, we would go see the llamas and touch all of the sweaters that were made from their fur.

She looks up at this from where she's sitting on the wood floor. I always have to pique her attention with an animal. She clasps two hands, as if in prayer, and suddenly the floor sprouts grass, trampled and strewn with hay just like I remember. Two llamas walk over towards me, and I realize I'm in their path. I back away, reveling in the fact that my paralysis, the bed, and the entire room are gone. I survey the festival. She did a great job with this one.

I whisper, *my parents would always pick out a carved wooden bowl, and I would look at the tiny carved spoons.*

She leads me by the elbow to the wood-carver's bench. My walk feels easy and natural again. I'm not sure what the rules are for interaction and touching yet in these worlds, but I do know I can feel with the bad arm. The first time Petey made a blue jay fly through the room, I screamed and it instantly evaporated. I try not to look too closely.

My daughter leads me through this world she has made for me. We watch the bluegrass band for a while, sitting on hay bales that don't scratch because they're not real. I try not to be too disappointed by this. We walk by stand after stand of craftsmanship- stained glass, ironwork, knitting, baking, whittling, and candle-making. It's exactly as I remember, the farm nestled between the two streams that form the Valley of the Cross.

I look around with a soft sense of wonder. Somehow she is inside these memories, inside my head. But she couldn't be. Again, I think, it's chemicals in the brain. This must be a mirage of my sick brain.

I wake up the next morning with her tucked against me, a stray piece of straw in her hair.