

YELLOW PASTELS

VIRGINIA SOILEAU

The wooden box has weakened;
its clasps hang loose, the corners chipped,
and the faded musk of pine
leaves only a flicker of a memory.
Stained, marked, its contents caressed
by fingers stolen away too soon.
Inside, soft pastels lay silently waiting,
each smear across the lid a tribute,
each autumn color like the last leaf of Fall,
slowly blowing across a canvassed surface
to lay brittle and broken—Summer's shroud.

Your life transcended into those pastels,
a vibrancy unbleached by illness.
Fragile fingers cherished brilliant yellows.
You slipped away, drop by drop,
like rain splattered across sunset reds.
As the cancer left you dimpled and scarred,
white, frothy rapids wound through healthy hills.
When you no longer had the energy to fly,
sketches of mallards winged through finger-smudged clouds.
In a quiet room, greens rustled from the canvas
as willow branches chimed in a lake-blue wind.

An entire life of dreams is held within this box.
My thumbs rest on the rusted clasps,
the closest I can ever come to holding your hand.

YOUR PRAYERS MEAN NOTHING

MASON PELLEGRINI

Arthur couldn't wrap his mind around what he was seeing. His worst fear had been realized. Tears pricked his eyelids. "It was your son that did this," his wife Maria said, standing near the doorway of the garage sobbing, still wearing her dressing gown. She let out a wail of anguish.

Arthur said nothing. He looked over the scene in his two car garage once more. The window had been busted out, the drawers in his tool box were all open, the door of his Buick was open, with the center console and glove box open. Their contents were thrown all over the interior of the vehicle. All of his air tools and power tools were gone. The meat freezer was open with all the steaks missing, and the ice inside was beginning to melt into a dirty puddle on the concrete floor. This couldn't have happened more than five hours ago. They had taken his laptop, which he had been using to tune his car. Even his 26-gallon air compressor had been stolen. It must have been a hell of a job ripping those bolts out of the concrete to move the damn thing. Arthur realized that this was just what Maria had been afraid of happening all of these years. He felt a tear run down his cheek as he squeezed his wrench so tight his knuckles turned white.

"Art, talk to me goddamnit! We can't just let him get away with this! He can't just do this because he blows all his money on dope and borrows from people that he can't pay back," Maria said.

"Maria, I know we have to do something, but I don't think it was him that did this. He hasn't fallen this low yet," Arthur said and turned around to look at his wife. Arthur put his big hands gently on her shoulders, looking down from his abnormally tall height.

"Arthur, the kid's a criminal and a cheat. We should be calling the cops on him right now," Maria said and shrugged Arthur's hands off of her. She began backing away from him.

Arthur's face involuntarily twisted with disgust. "We're not in-

volving the police, Maria,” he said flatly. “They can’t help Marcus, and they can’t help us. The kid’s not going to prison like I did. We’ve gotta deal with this ourselves.”

“Jesus Christ, Arthur! When are you going to learn that you can trust the police?” she said angrily. “You still need to do something about this. Go to Marcus and get the truth out of him, and if it comes to it, you better call the cops on him, Arthur. Don’t bother talking to me until you’ve figured this out.” She stormed off.

“I’m going to prove it wasn’t him!” Arthur yelled at her disappearing figure.

He was suddenly alone in his destroyed garage. He stood there for a moment, then carefully placed his wrench in its proper drawer in his tool chest and closed it. Could Maria be right? He thought back to the day that Marcus had twisted their relationship into the unnatural shape it was in today; the boy had flown into a rage and caught Arthur with his guard down, breaking his hip and arm on a job site in front of the contractors. At the time, Arthur was glad to have a reason to finally kick him out since the boy had been stealing money from him for months. That day was almost four years ago. Still, stealing a little money from your pops or getting into a scrap with him was one thing. Ripping everything he owned out of his home in the dead of night was something completely and utterly different. Could it have really been him?

He didn’t know what to believe. Arthur’s mind was about as organized as his prized and very expensive garage workstation was at that moment. He desperately needed clarification. Arthur walked out of his garage, through his garden, past his chicken coop, and back into his house looking for exactly that.

Minutes later, he sat at in his leather chair in his office, looking out at the morning sun shining through the slits in his blinds. It was going to be another hot, sunny day, and he was going to need to make decisions wisely if he was going to avoid messing things up worse than they already were. He took a drink of his black coffee. He needed to put the situation into the hands of something bigger than him. He punched in his sponsor’s number and let him know what had happened. “Someone broke into my garage last night and cleaned the place out. All my tools are gone, everything. Maria thinks that it was my son.”

They talked for the better part of an hour. First, it was agreed that Arthur needed to do whatever he could to either confirm or disprove that it was his son. He couldn’t just drive to Marcus’s apartment and try to squeeze the truth out of him like a lunatic. Even though he didn’t really need the money, it was agreed that Arthur would have to confront him if it was his son and try to get his possessions back or paid for. He knew that letting Marcus carry on like this wouldn’t help him, it would only enable him, would only let things become worse.

His sponsor was hesitant at first, but finally agreed that if Marcus was the culprit, all of this was to be done without involving the police. Arthur knew that Marcus had already been nabbed on fourth degree assault and possession of stolen property earlier this year, the kid would be facing serious time if he was picked up again. The boy could still redeem himself without that kind of punishment. After he was done speaking with his sponsor, Arthur called his employees and let them know he wouldn’t be on the job site that day.

Arthur stowed his phone in his jeans and sat for a moment staring out the window again, then suddenly his head turned in the direction of his closet on the opposite side of his office. Inside the closet, there was a large metal safe which was bolted to the floor as the courts had specified, and inside his wallet, there was a key which would open the safe. He legally wasn’t allowed to have this particular key on his person because he was a convicted felon and inside the safe there was a small semi-automatic pistol, his wife’s Ruger SR22. Arthur had had to fill out a mountain of paperwork with his probation officer when Maria had first brought the firearm into their household years ago. His wife had entrusted him with the key anyways because she knew that he was trustworthy. He was not the person that he had been before he had gotten clean over a decade ago. Back then, before Maria and Arthur had met, Arthur had illegally possessed a different pistol which he had packed almost everywhere until his sponsor had pointed out that, in his thirty years of clean time, he had never seen a meeting turn into a shootout.

His sponsor’s command not to act like a lunatic bounced around in his head, and Arthur dismissed the notion of taking the pistol with him. He looked back out the window at the morning sun. Doing what his sponsor had told him had gotten him everything that he cherished in his life. Even if his son did run with a bad crowd these

days, not listening to his sponsor in a time of need would be idiotic. After all, Arthur reflected, anyone can do what's right when times are good, it's only in times of trouble that a person can really demonstrate their faith.

With that thought, Arthur stood and walked slowly to the center of his office, knelt onto his knees, and bowed his head. He began to speak quietly. First, he asked that the robber prove not to be his son, that it be some other thief. Next, he asked that he be given the strength to not act in anger, however the day turned out. Above all, he asked to be able to do God's Will, even if he didn't know that was what he was doing at the time, even if it was unpleasant for him. He rose, knowing his mind wasn't going to get any clearer than it already was.

Hours later, warm wind was whipping Arthur's long, greying hair as he sped his Buick down a dusty road. Don't do anything stupid, Maria had said when Arthur had told her what his plan was. She didn't really understand. She was a normie, and it wasn't her kid anyway. Arthur had already gone to half a dozen pawn shops in all the seedy parts of the city looking for his tools. He inhaled deeply the life-giving oxygen as it rushed past, then he slowly let it out. If it was indeed Marcus who had robbed him, this next pawn shop was probably where Arthur would find the goods. Arthur knew the boy was too lazy to have driven to a farther away pawn shop to distance himself from the crime, and this place was less than half a mile from his son's apartment. He pulled into the pawn shop parking lot, the Wright Pawn and Jewelry Company. Vulgar promises were painted across the store in colorful, inviting letters: NO CREDIT CHECK, NO LIMIT CASH LOANS, CASH IN A FLASH.

Bells tinkled as Arthur walked into the store. There were only a few people inside it on this weekday morning. A burnt-out man wearing a Hawaiian shirt was sitting behind the counter. Behind the man was a wall covered with guitars that had once been owned by dozens of desperate people. A large display of televisions of varying degrees of antiquity showed an old western movie, but their audio was all slightly out of sync, creating a strange babbling background noise composed of terse conversations and sporadic gun battles. The clerk seemed to have noticed Arthur's car through the barred windows of the shop, and called out to Arthur as he approached the counter.

"Hey, Hot Rod. You looking for anything in particular today?" he said.

Arthur had been asking for very specific tools of his that had been stolen, something that not just every pawn shop would have. "You got anything to measure compression in cylinders, something that can do single and twin two-cycle engines?" Arthur said.

"Matter of fact, we do," the clerk said as he eyed a young man rifling through electronics in one of the aisles, "just got a pretty nifty leak down tester in this morning. A Motion Pro Eight if I'm not mistaken. Should be on the far wall there." He pointed a hand covered with gaudy rings. Arthur's emotions were a dry pile of kindling in danger of going up in flames.

He headed to the other side of the shop. Arthur recognized the small silver box from a number of paces away sitting on the shelf. He picked it up and opened it, running his finger across where he had carved his initials on the inside of the lid. He snapped the lid shut, and had to consciously stop himself from grinding his teeth together and balling his fists. Discordant gunshots began blasting through the shop as a renegade sheriff tracked down an outlaw cattle thief on the many televisions covering one of the walls. The old fires had been ignited inside Arthur. After everything he had gone through to raise that ungrateful son of a bitch! He went back to the clerk's counter.

"You see the young man that brought this in here earlier today?" Arthur asked slowly. Arthur placed his left hand on the counter, which was visibly shaking, and raised the small metal box in his right hand level with the clerk's eyes. The clerk paused for a moment, still not looking at him. He still watched other customers handling merchandise in the shop.

The clerk finally gave Arthur his full gaze, a hint of a smirk on his face. "We don't divulge that kind of information about customers," the clerk said. The fires began blazing brighter inside Arthur and his heart began pounding in his ears. A sudden impulse shot through his mind to grip tight onto the metal box and smash it into the clerk's mouth, certainly spilling blood everywhere. But no, that wasn't God's plan for him anymore. He wasn't going to break his hand for the sixth time on some idiot's face. Arthur breathed deeply and looked down for a moment. He repeated the Serenity Prayer mentally, and felt God enter into his soul, allowing himself to come back together incremen-

tally. He looked back at the clerk.

"Look here," Arthur said, "this leak tester," he clicked it against the glass of the counter, "is stolen goods. It was taken from my garage last night. See my initials carved into the lid here? Arthur Kessler."

The clerk opened his mouth, but Arthur continued before he could speak. "That young man who brought this in here," Arthur said, "I'm pretty sure was my son." He was speaking loudly now, and his voice was heavy with emotion. The man looking through electronics glanced quizzically in their direction.

"Sir..." The clerk said.

"I don't want to hurt him or anything he's my kid, and I'm not asking you to give me my stuff back either," Arthur said, he was getting so worked up he was afraid that he was going to start crying right in the middle of the shop. "I just want to make sure before I go talk to him. I care about the dumb bastard. You don't even have to say anything. I'll describe him and you can just shake your head there or nod it."

There was a pause. Arthur said, "The young man that brought this in here. In his twenties, bout my height?"

The clerk rubbed his head with his hand then sighed. He looked Arthur in the eye then gave him a slight nod.

"Dark, straight hair. Good lookin' kid?"

The clerk gave another miniscule nod.

"Tattoos on his forearms, hands, and neck?"

The clerk nodded again, and Arthur felt like his heart stopped. He hadn't realized that even up until this point he had still been hoping that it wasn't his son.

"Pal," Arthur said, "you might have just saved a misguided young boy's life today." He returned the testing kit to its shelf and left the pawn shop.

Shortly after, Arthur sat in his Buick on a residential street, looking up at the window of his son's second story apartment. He had parked half a block away so that his son wouldn't spot him out there in his car getting ready to confront him. The powerful midday sun glared down out of the cloudless sky. Arthur texted his sponsor and Maria to let them know where he was and what he was about to do in case anything bad happened. Why did God have to test him like this?

How did he still find himself in these situations after his twelve years of clean time? His sponsor texted back in less than a minute asking Arthur to call him immediately after he spoke with his son to confirm everything was okay. Maria told him she loved him. He texted back his responses.

Arthur reached out and put his hand on the basic text of Narcotics Anonymous, which always sat on his passenger seat, and then he said out loud, "Thy will, not mine, be done." He got out of his car and began walking towards his son's door. Loud aggressive metal and the smell of weed floated down from his son's open window.

Arthur reached the door and began knocking, hard blows with the bottom of his fist. "Open this flimsy ass door or I'm going to kick it in!" Arthur yelled. He grabbed the door knob and began shaking it. Out of his son's stereo, a metal singer let out a prolonged death growl.

"Get the fuck out of here old man, we don't want any beef with you," his son's voice yelled from the other side of the door.

"You already have beef with me you pussy! Now open this door and face me like a man," Arthur said commandingly. The door flung open, and Arthur's ears were hit with a blast of black metal and his nose the pungent smell of marijuana. Suddenly, Arthur and his son were standing face to face for the first time in over six months, taking one another in. Two of Marcus's little hoodlum friends were sitting on a couch in the room looking up at Arthur. Quite visibly, one of them was holding a pistol in his hand, which rested on top of the table.

His son's tall frame was emaciated. He wore a dark-colored long sleeve shirt, which had the capitalized block words YOUR PRAYERS MEAN NOTHING emblazoned across it. Arthur remembered the concert his son had bought it at. The shirt hung off of his skeletal frame so much that Arthur could clearly see the bones in his neck and shoulders. On this 95-degree day, the long sleeve shirt could only be to conceal track marks or abscesses in his arms. His shoulder length hair was lank and unwashed. Arthur looked Marcus in the eyes to examine his pupils and saw that they were contracted into tiny pin drops despite the semi-darkness of his apartment. He had clearly used some of the money and scored already.

After what seemed like five minutes, Arthur finally said, "I think you have something that belongs to me." He set his jaw rigidly. The double bass drum thudded angrily out of the speakers on both

sides of the couch. Marcus's cronies looked at him expectantly.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Marcus said flatly.

"Okay then. If you didn't rob me, then why does your little friend have his goddamn twenty-two sitting on the table there?" Arthur said, reverting to the behavioral patterns prison had instilled in him, channeling his fears into a cutting display of domination. "Why the fuck are y'all so scared?" The man on the couch stirred uncomfortably.

"I don't know. Maybe he's afraid of big-ass crazy old tweakers busting into the apartment and starting shit for no reason?" Marcus said.

Marcus's other wannabe gangster friend covertly closed a laptop, which Arthur suddenly recognized was his own, and stowed it under the couch. Arthur's breathing sped up, and his fists balled. He was going to give Marcus one more chance; he didn't want to have to do this.

"Fuckin' comedian here," Arthur said. "And it's just a coincidence that the guy at the pawn shop said some young kid who looked like you was coming into the shop this morning selling my tools?" The hoodlum without the pistol stood up and began walking to stand behind Marcus.

"There's a lot of people that look like me in this city," Marcus said and smirked. Tears came to his eyes, and he considered grabbing his son and dragging his disrespectful ass out into the street to wipe the smile off of his face, but he knew now that Marcus couldn't listen, not until things became much worse for him. Even if Arthur caved in his face and forced him to give to give all the money back, it wouldn't save his son. Arthur closed his eyes and mouthed the Serenity Prayer for what seemed like the thousandth time that day. The fires inside of him were suddenly extinguished, and he became strangely calm. It was finally over.

"Now why don't you take your old, grey ass off of my doorstep and run home to Maria. I know that she's all you care about. Her and your stupid, bullshit fellowship," Marcus said, still smiling. Arthur recognized the smile, he used to wear a similar one on his face many years ago.

Marcus's friend said, "Yeah, get the fuck out of here old man!" Marcus took a long drink of his beer, LIVE FREE was tattooed across

his son's knuckles.

A tear ran down Arthur's face for the second time that day, but for the first time today, there wasn't a trace of anger in the tear at all. It was a sad tear. "Goodbye," Arthur said, and turned around, starting back down the stairs. Arthur heard the door slam behind him. It looked like Marcus was going to have to learn the same way that Arthur had. Arthur knew better than most how old habits claw and struggle like scared animals before they can finally succumb to death. The last time someone had spoken to him like those kids did, Arthur had grabbed his throat and broken his face on a bathroom floor, but he had changed over these years. Ghostly notes of an aggressive guitar solo followed him as he walked away.

Arthur got back inside his Buick. He sat there for a moment, then sent Maria and his sponsor a quick text telling them everything was alright. Everything was going to be okay. Arthur pulled out his phone and dialed 911 for the first time in his life. He knew that, for a convicted felon on probation like his son, just having a firearm in his home was a mandatory 48 months. It didn't matter who owned it, and it was probably stolen anyways. Tears flowed freely as he told the police the whole story. "Yeah, they still got my laptop in there, looks like they at least haven't gotten rid of that yet. I got the serial number for it and an insurance policy at home. One of the boys is packing heat too."

Arthur gave them the address. "Yeah, I'll wait until they show up. I'll make sure none of 'em leave."