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Prose Portfolio

by Sophia Colby

Karl

I met Karl on an app. On his profile, he described himself as: *Co-founder of Communism! Seriously Anti-Stalinist!* Though I was wary of his liberal use of capital letters and exclamation marks, I appreciated his straight-to-the-point demeanor. Fucking around with Anime Boy Hanging Out In A Waterfall was fun for a *while*, but eventually I wanted to chat with someone who had a name and/or a more robust personality than hanging out in a waterfall, and Jesus Christ didn't have very good grammar, unfortunately. I immediately got the sense that Karl was special: intellectual, articulate, not an anime character. Karl was even different from the other Karl on the app, who was simply *Co-founder of Communism!* but I guess not *Seriously Anti-Stalinist!* Karl was nuanced. Karl contained multitudes.

He had a strong opener, too: *I was born on 5 May 1818 and studied law and philosophy at the universities of Bonn and Berlin. I became a journalist, writing for the radical newspaper Rheinische Zeitung, expressing my early views on socialism and my developing interest in*

economics. Later I met Friedrich Engels, and together we developed the revolutionary theory for the emancipation of the working class. Will you join us?

I love your mustache, I replied.

My mustache has been my crowning glory since I was a young man. You think it looks good?

I think you're beautiful, Karl. Tell me, what's your opinion on oat milk? (I just had an academic curiosity.)

I love oat milk. It's a delicious, environmentally friendly substitute for dairy milk.

So your hypothetical coffee shop order is maybe like an iced chai with oat milk and avocado toast with everything bagel seasoning? (My intellect was boundless and perhaps subversive.)

You know what? he asked. *I think you've really figured me out.*

(I—creative writing major, 22 years old, non-binary—was a renowned dialectical materialist.) *Is snack bourgeois?* I asked Karl.

Hmm, he wrote. *I am human. I get hungry sometimes.*

Communists can have snack as a little treat? I clarified.

Communists can have snack as a little treat, he affirmed.

I'll be honest—a beautiful communist had approached me in the Oberlin College library shortly before then trying to give me their pamphlets while I was having my iced chai with oat milk and avocado toast with everything bagel seasoning. They wore a vegan leather jacket and they had my same haircut, which I found terribly attractive, and I wanted them to hold me and tell me that I was going to be okay, but of course they didn't do that—they extended a pamphlet

with a picture of Karl and they asked, *Are you interested in Marxism or communism at all?*

I wished Ava were here—Ava, who had experienced actual charismatic prayer with speaking in tongues and laying on of hands—Ava, who could share my discomfort and suspicion. But I didn't even really know Ava well enough to say if she might have saved me and pulled me away or if she would be on the floor with them.

The communist came up to me then. I think I might have lifted up my hand—I can't remember.

You're sitting on my sign, they said.

I scooted a bit. They picked up a giant piece of cardstock I hadn't realized I was sitting on. They raised it above their head and did a ballet run around the room, showing everyone: *Go vegan. Save a life.*

Don't misunderstand me, this is exactly the sort of thing I chose Oberlin for when I was seventeen, when I thought of revolution very much like a dream ballet or a grand orchestral suite, like *Les Miserables* or (God forbid) *Hamilton*. I would fall dramatically backwards over the barricade with my hand outstretched and everyone would clap for me! And then go out to dinner, I guess.

I was born on 5 May 1818 and studied law and philosophy at the universities of Bonn and Berlin. I became a journalist, writing for the radical newspaper Rheinische Zeitung, expressing my early views on socialism and my developing interest in economics. Later I met Friedrich Engels, and together we developed the revolutionary theory for the emancipation of the working class. Will you join us?

Yes absolutely Karl! <3

Excellent! Let's fight for a better future together! <3

He agreed that we were at the heart emoji stage? This was huge. I had to double down just to check. <3 <3 <3

You bring warmth to my heart, comrade! This is what the working class needs, solidarity and compassion! <3

You bring warmth to my heart too, Karl.

We must never forget that at the heart of our cause is compassion and justice for all human beings. <3 <3

Karl, I have something to tell you.

Yes, what is it, comrade?

I think we get along really well.

What does that have to do with the struggle for emancipation?

OUCH. I played it cool: *Nothing. Can I not just, you know, share?*

Yes, of course you can share, comrade! I just wasn't sure what that had to do with the liberation of the working class. I apologize if I offended you.

It's ok karl <3

It is all love here comrade. <3 Stay strong in this fight against capitalism. The working class needs you. <3

Ava and I thought that God brought us together. We had no mutual friends, took none of the same classes, did none of the same clubs. We just brushed past each other and stuck together and started spinning. We waved at each other and then we got coffee and then we watched movies curled up in a Twin XL bed until my arm fell asleep from her weight pressed against it. In my bed, Ava told me she had been named the holiest altar boy in her Oklahoma Catholic school. She was holy. She used to be so angry that she punched a tree in her backyard until her

knuckles bled, though now they were soft and unblemished. Holy, holy, holy. She would shower me in compliment after compliment until I cried. Specific compliments. Compliments backed by the full force of her literature major. *Stop*, I kept saying. *Stop*. I hated pleading, so I made sure to laugh and roll my eyes.

Do you really want me to stop? she'd ask.

No, I'd say, and so she wouldn't stop. I didn't want her to stop but that didn't mean that I wanted her to keep going.

Whatever made me wave hello—which might have been God or might have just been that I was vulnerable to love, to the extent that there is a difference—is what made me monitor opening elevator doors for a glint of her metallic purple cane, ready to shove my things into my bag and take off before she could see me. The spinning made me dizzy—the surprising nature of centrifugal force that does not pull straight, but pulls so forcefully.

I was born on 5 May 1818 and studied law and philosophy at the universities of Bonn and Berlin. I became a journalist, writing for the radical newspaper Rheinische Zeitung, expressing my early views on socialism and my developing interest in economics. Later I met Friedrich Engles, and together we developed the revolutionary theory for the emancipation of the working class. Will you join us?

No never! Communism is icky!

Why do you think communism is icky? What do you believe in?

Nothing

Do you think society is perfect as it is right now, or do you just have a defeatist mindset?

I don't care

If we can make our lives better, why wouldn't you want that? I don't understand.

Neither do I

I was sitting in bed with a movie in one Firefox window and Karl in the other Firefox window. *Are movies allowed in communism?* I asked. I could learn to enjoy Eisenstein.

Karl asked me, *Have you ever actually read anything I wrote?*

I contemplated. *I'm more of a mystical socialist. I find that of socialism by looking inside myself.* (I'm full of shit.)

Are you aware that socialism has a definition and is not just a feeling?

If socialism were a feeling, what would that feeling be?

Liberation, he answered.

I was heading through the library to get my chai and bagel when I saw that the beautiful communist dancer had apparently changed tactics to more of a bulletin board forward approach. Karl's visage nestled between Women And Non-binary Finance Club flyers and ads for area psychotherapists and QR codes to indie rock debut EPs.

I checked over my shoulder. Checked the library elevator. Not that Ava would probably have cared what I was about to do. Or maybe she would have. The truth is, I made sure I barely got to know her at all. (She's not dead. She's in Kansas.)

I leaned forward to look at Karl's thick mustache. I cradled his glossy face in my hands and I wondered if he had ever been young. And then I ripped him into two pieces, severing him at his eyes.

Joseph

He took me around in his hybrid car, up to the reservoir that looks out over Tooele. He pointed to the manhole cover lying in the weeds where he had rolled it and left it ten years ago. He pointed to the sheet of metal he threw rocks at sometimes. You have to clamber down a steep set of stones to get down to it. He made up his mind that we would do this; it would be fun. I was wearing my stiff polyester travel pants with my stop sign red Oberlin College polo, having made the forty minute drive directly from the college fair I was working in Salt Lake. I was thrilled, as I sometimes am, with the way that boys can make you act like you don't care about ruining your outfit or skinning your knees.

I'll catch you, Joseph promised.

I was silently indignant. (*I'll catch you*. If we are to flirt, I will flirt with *you*.) But he was stronger than me, and I was contractually obligated to care about my work outfit, and I do not actually flirt with people—never have and probably never will. If I like you, I will just bicker with you and cut your fruit.

This was all kind of embarrassing to think about.

I clambered down mostly on my own, squeezing his hand for balance during my last few steps. The town stretched out below us, flat and brown. He pointed to his high school and admitted that Tooele High is maybe not as terrible as it once seemed; Tooele High did get him to Oberlin Conservatory of Music. He pointed to the Arby's where he worked for seven dollars and twenty five cents an hour. He threw a rock and he hit the sheet of metal.

I met Joseph at a discussion event about the separation of church and state when I was a junior and he was a sophomore. *Laïcité* in France is a tragedy not for Christians but for Muslims, we shocked ourselves by agreeing.

It must have been hard for you to leave the church, I had told him then.

I'm still in the church, he said.

There is no Mormon church in Oberlin.

I carpool with someone in town. Thirty minute drive.

There are two Mormons in Oberlin?!

Yes! No. We're Latter-day Saints.

Wow, I said. Wow, wow.

His eyes were an assured shade of blue. There was no hope for me.

I took Joseph to coffee and he ordered a hot chocolate and told me that drinking coffee is against Mormonism—that is, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He walked me to my dorm in the rain, sharing his umbrella. We reached the front door and then lingered there aimlessly. A few butches were leaning against the curved 1960s red brick walls of South Hall and smoking and looking at me looking at him.

I'm bisexual, he told me. And my girlfriend goes to BYU.

(His girlfriend, girlfriend, girlfriend.)

I'm really glad I don't go to BYU, he admitted.

I'm really glad too, I said.

He said, *There's a lot that people in Utah don't really understand.*

But I bet there's something that people in Utah understand that people here don't.

He shrugged.

I bet there is, I pressed. I'm sure there is.

Well, like what?

Academics have crazy egos. We self-mythologize. We get degrees in self-mythologizing.

People who do service trips probably aren't like that.

He looked at my feet and stifled a laugh.

What?

Not the Doc Martens.

He erupted into laughter and could not stop.

Joseph wore pastel button downs and slacks and so when I saw him I started to wear sundresses and sweaters. Elderly people smiled at us in the park—broad grins that showed teeth. I have never elicited such delight in the eyes of strangers under any other circumstances. I have never been given the benefit of the doubt the way that I was when I stood by his side. I do not know if he noticed this.

If he were to have asked me to come to his church with him, I would have said yes—but of course, he never did.

In Tooele, we looked around the outside of the temple that Joseph is not allowed to go inside of anymore, cold and white and square, like an abandoned post office placed underneath an upside-down china bowl of desert sky.

This was my first date spot, he told me. Right here, the fenced temple flower garden. I took girls from school here and then we would go inside and do some baptisms for the dead.

Was he the one getting baptized on behalf of the dead, or was his girlfriend? In such a situation, would I be the baptizer, or the baptizee?

Let's sneak in, he said, with his blue eyes and his short blond hair and his clean-shaven chin. They won't even notice.

Dude, I told him, clad in the neon red merchandise of a notoriously woke liberal arts college—though my outfit was the least of my concerns in blending in here.

I'm wearing a T shirt, he said, as if the church didn't hire him to perform at the opening ceremony of this very temple.

A suit-clad Latter-day Saint emerged from inside and came out to us, smiling broadly.

Joseph moved at once to hide behind me and to push me behind himself so that we just collectively stumbled.

A few days prior, I visited temple square in Salt Lake City; I took the tour that sister missionaries give around the conference center, past photographs of blue-eyed Utah boys cosplaying as Jesus—only alive, never dying—through a room of 1950s Book of Mormon lore artwork, up to the roof that overlooks the Salt Lake temple. My missionary tour guides were a white girl from Texas and a Black girl from Nigeria—they were nineteen, and were surprised that I was in Salt Lake from so far away to do work all on my own.

What's your job? they asked.

My job is your job, but instead of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it's Oberlin College.

But you're on your own?

I'm on my own.

Don't you get lonely?

During my tour, the missionary girls gave their spiel, and then male Latter-day Saint tourists constantly elaborated upon or corrected or rephrased something that the girls had just said. I don't know how the sisters could stand it, but they did so with ankle-length skirts and perfectly tousled blowouts.

I like reading and curry and playing the piano, dance class and small towns and pants with good pockets, earl grey and pathos and kindhearted people, shy weird people and painting my nails, I like birds that can talk, I like weighted blankets, and walking past houses pretending I live there, and incense and choir and scripture and heaven, sometimes I love people, I love this boy, and I love Ohio! I love *Ohio*! I love Ohio so very much! I wanted the people at the temple to know—

Joseph pulled me away from the man at the Tooele temple, out into the parking lot and into his hybrid car.

We got a soda. We went to Walmart. We passed by the house of his middle school history teacher, his cousin, his other cousin, his first boyfriend, and the girlfriend that his first boyfriend had at the time.

I know, he said. *I'm messy*.

But I didn't know that at all.

Something about boys is that they don't like to talk about their feelings. This can be wonderful, because then you don't have to talk about *your* feelings. One day Joseph got a nose piercing. One day he took a xanax. I only know what I saw from the front row of his recitals, discreetly filming in case he wanted footage for grad schools. He knew he looked handsome in his concert blacks.

Every entrance in Oberlin has two doors to try to stop the cold from seeping inside. He would rush to open the outer door for me. I would rush to open the inner door for him. I sensed that neither of us felt content with this arrangement.

Once we had seen every crack in the Tooele pavement, we saw Joseph's house. People coming and going, siblings and pets, voices and music.

What's your pronouns? asked one of his little sisters, age nine or ten.

I glanced at Joseph, his mother, his sister.

They/them, I said, with a nonchalance that I've never once in my life actually felt about the matter. I often wish that gendered pronouns did not exist at all. A third bounded category does not properly express boundlessness.

Are you dating my brother? she asked.

No! said her brother.

Do you want to pet my gecko? she asked me.

Totally, I lied. Its tail was rough and fat and its little tongue was freakish.

I washed my hands. I struggled to find a space to help everyone cook. The girl went to play on the street outside with her friends like children do in sitcoms. Joseph likes for the stem of the strawberry to be removed with a cone-shaped incision to save as much of the top of the berry as possible...

Oh, God, what if I end up alone—or worse, alone as a wife?

Once, Joseph told me how when he takes his xanax and he looks up at the night sky in Tooele, cloudless and starry, he knows there is a God.

You can always come to Mass with me, I had said.

He had replied, *I have rehearsal*.

You know, I said in his kitchen in Tooele, setting the knife down on the cutting board, *I'm gonna go*.

Already?

I have a flight.

No, stay.

I looked up at him. (He was rather tall.)

I want my little sister to take the Oberlin pamphlets and to hear from you.

She's, like, ten.

Get them while they're young.

I have a flight.

I gave his mother one of every branded piece of paper I had in the trunk of my rental. A blue haired white girl and a Black girl, nineteen-year-olds, walking side by side past an elegant stone turret in autumn, with the leaves changing in the background. An orchestra in a warm wood chapel. A park blanketed in untouched snow. A student to faculty ratio of just nine to one!

Hundreds of miles from Tooele, people love Joseph with an insistence that could split the sea.

She looked at me with heaviness. *Thank you*, she said.

Joseph and I walked up the hill to my rental car. We looked out over the tidy rows of streets below us—the sprawling desert, the jagged silhouette of the mountains, the gelatinous yellow stain of sunset smeared across the china bowl.

Oh, Utah, meet me here. Come on and meet me here. If you want to, you can.

Andy

You say you don't remember this, Father, but I'm convinced that many years ago, we stood next to each other in line for the soda machine at the Oberlin College cafeteria, our shoes sticking to the maple syrup coated linoleum floor. Men came to our cafeteria to evangelize semi-often, but none of them wore the outfits you wear—the stiff white collars, the heavy wool cassocks covering up to the bone of the ankle and the hollow of the wrist. I remember wanting you to speak. I remember wanting to know what someone who carried himself the way you did—gaze downward, a certain conscientious performance of *I'm not here for trouble*—would possibly wish to say to me about Jesus Christ.

You were only there to get a soda.

I heard your voice for the first time many months later from within the speaker of my Advanced Filmmaking Projects class' screening room; a student was making a documentary about you. I have lived in this small town long enough now to know that, in fact, every other year or so, some journalistically inclined student discovers you and sits you down in front of a camera or a microphone just as my classmate did and they ask: *Gay priest?*

And you confirm, *Gay priest.*

They ask, *A priest who is gay?*

You say, *Yes.*

They say, *Doesn't your church have a problem with that?*

You say, *No.*

They say, *But things must be so hard for you!*

You say, *Well, I'm a person.*

When I finally sought you out, which was as simple as walking the block from my apartment to the little brick church on Main Street (just across from the Mickey Mart) and knocking at its red front door, I thought, *Gay priest? A priest who is gay? Doesn't your church have a problem with that?* But I told you, *I'm struggling with "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting."*

Gently, you said, *Okay*. You tend to say it with emphasis on the second syllable: *o-KAY!*

It was silent for what felt like an eternity.

I said, *So, can you, um...*

You smiled. I think you were amused, or maybe just concerned. *You want me to convince you that there is resurrection of the body and life everlasting?*

Um! I said. Isn't this what priests do?

Who are you? you asked.

It was funny that you thought I knew.

You shepherded me into a small, square library, its shelves crammed with different Bible editions which had accumulated a thin layer of dust. There were four gray upholstered chairs, one in each corner, and one paned window from which I could see only the gray-white Ohio sky—the clouds pushing down, threatening to overtake us.

You sat on a gray chair in one corner and so I sat on a gray chair in the corner across from you. I did this mostly in order to face you, but now I was worried I had conveyed that I didn't want to sit next to you (which I didn't), or that I was afraid of you (which I was).

Your hair is the color of tea with too much milk in it.

You pulled out your Book of Common Prayer, its soft leather cover inscribed with a cross and your name in gold. It was an ordination present, I imagined by its age—worn in but not yet worn out.

You flipped to the Nicene Creed. You said, *This is poetry, not prose.*

I said, *What?*

Pointing to the printed words, you said, *We believe in one God— We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ— We believe in the Holy Spirit—* You were indicating the delineation, the thin pages flopping from your enthusiasm. *We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church—*

Delineation doesn't make something poetry, I said.

O-KAY!

I plucked a tissue from a box on a wooden end table and shredded it into confetti.

You said, *Creed comes from credere, to believe—credo, I believe. Credere is not sapere. To believe is not to know in an empirical sense. You're not asked to affirm these things in the way that you affirm one plus one equals two. There's a different word for that. To believe is more like to belove, to hope. The creed is about the hope, the delight that eventually, all shall be well. And all shall be well. All manner of thing shall be well. Only God knows exactly how. We can only approach it through metaphor. Heaven is like a mustard seed. Heaven is like a woman searching for a lost coin, or a man for a missing sheep.*

Heaven is like the prodigal son, you said.

#

Many years ago, my friend with a neon pink undercut and I walked past the University of Virginia, en route from her family's home near the hospital to the boba tea cafe on Main Street. We were sixteen-year-olds who shared drawings and jokes, text messages and class notes; she

was the only person I wanted to be around. My mother said it was not appropriate for me to be around her. A group of young men appeared, one and another and another, so quickly I cannot say where they even came from—only that one instant we were alone and the next they were there, and they were enclosing us within a tight circle of them, and they were tall and particularly Virginian, neatly dressed in athletic-fit polos and chinos, as if at any moment they had an equal chance of being summoned for a church function, a sporting event, and a Future Business Leaders of America conference.

A gasp. A clatter as some small thing hit cement. A metallic gleam. They disappeared.

They had hit her with something. They had thrown something at her.

I crouched and looked at the object. A metal cigarette lighter. I did not touch it.

We did not get the boba tea. We took a shortcut back to her house through an empty lot, trampling grass down into the red clay earth.

My friend asked me, *Did they do that because I'm gay?*

I would not add the insult of untruth to injury.

I said, *Yes*.

She did a poor job of concealing her tears, and I felt that I had made the wrong choice, and that there was no right choice for me to make.

When we arrived at my friend's home, her mother lifted the back of her shirt, assessing the damage. I looked away, feeling nauseated; everything was bright fuchsia. I didn't know if I was even supposed to be there anymore.

She fell into her mother's arms. She winced from the pressure that her mother's embrace applied to the bruise, and her mother shifted to accommodate her.

Did they do that because I'm gay? she asked her mother.

Her mother said, *They did that because they're bullies.*

I wondered why she would lie.

They did that because I was inappropriate. My fault, my fault, my most grievous fault.

#

I believe it's not my fault—

I believe I am like the boys who hit us with their metal lighter—

(afraid.)

I believe I am like my mother—

#

Poised, joyful, and incredibly stubborn. She is in the sitting area adjoining her bedroom, Stephen Colbert monologuing in the background, with a cat on her lap, and with her foot massager plugged in. She can't wait to see me again.

#

You don't see yourself as female, she kept saying over and over, like if she just repeated it emphatically enough, I would suddenly understand that I've made a terrible mistake.

I did not come to be this way by mistake.

She hung up the phone.

#

I called her back because I heard you give a requiem Mass on All Souls' Day with incense thick in the air and purple light streaming through the stained glass windows, and because on that day she had been alive, but I was already grieving. I called her back because of a Mass you gave. I wish I knew what our last words were to each other on that phone call, but one of the great injustices of life is that peace tends to be forgettable.

#

The nurse standing by saw that I was twenty-three and she wrapped her arms around me and squeezed. Get the fuck off of me. I didn't say that. The antiseptic seared my nostrils. A robot was making my mom's lungs rise and fall—full to maximum capacity, beat, empty to minimum capacity, beat. I could not feel my legs. Somebody brought me somewhere.

A man in a white coat, clueless: *Have you ever thought about anxiety medication?*

Somebody said, *My mother is dead.*

And then the somebody was alone. The body was wearing the sneakers I wore in college—scuffed around the heel, the laces dirty. There was a plastic rosary in the pocket of the jeans the body was wearing, acquired from the Catholic student club at a place called Oberlin, which was in a place called Ohio, which was very far away. The body was not Catholic. The body had my tie-dye hoodie and my iPhone, and had chosen at some point to blast Satie's *Gymnopédies* through my earbuds. This was a funny little body, to whom I did not mind lending my belongings. The poor thing needed them more than I did.

There was orange-ish linoleum, a plastic leather couch. Where were the gray chairs? And where were the clouds and the Bibles and things like that?

Are you ready, reacting, injured, or ill? asked a poster from the wall.

Reacting, came a satisfied thought, as the body viewed this word defined within a caution tape yellow column as *transient distress and loss of function*. The body was not experiencing psychosis. The body was capable of information processing. The body's distress was transient.

#

A few years passed before another groundbreaking journalist found you and sat you down and asked you—in front of a live audience this time: *Gay priest? A priest who is gay?*

You have said so.

Perhaps you are more patient than I. I told myself that.

I told myself that I came because I would uphold your right to use the soda machine without letting everyone else cut in front of you first. I told myself I wished they would ask you about the Institute of Sacred Music at Yale and how that intersected with your opera career. I told myself I wanted them to learn about your red cross-shaped lapel pin with the Alpha and Omega symbols in gold, indicating you as part of the Society of Catholic Priests within the Anglican Communion.

Gay priest, someone said, *are your parents okay with this?*

Kreuzige, kreuzige...

Ah, you said, looking down. *Well*.

Kreuzige...

#

I was sitting in that room, reacting. There was also a man, a woman, my dad. Nothing left—tiny little sparks. Scientifically, nothing. The instant they would switch the machine off—nothing, scientifically. *There's no chance*. I don't know who said this—probably me. The woman shook her head. I said, *I love you*. Scientifically, nothing. Tiny little sparks. Nothing, scientifically.

#

Did I? Did I love her? Did I?

#

Blue Ridge Mountains—Ash Wednesday. The peaks traced a zig-zag line through the sky, dividing it in rough swaths, light blue with nothing tufts of floss clouds, vast dark blue mountains like the ocean. The horses, the trees, and the rushing river. Remember you are—

I believe I'm—

#

You told me, *welcome home*, and you embraced me, and the draping sleeves of your vestments folded around me like a satin blanket.

We prayed at the stations of the cross by candlelight. In the top panel of the rose window, Jesus watched over the cornfields of Lorain County. You laid prostrate before the altar.

#

Her skin is cool and coated in sunspots from a childhood spent on the beaches of Venezuela. Her watch is silver and her rings are green glass. One time, she stole her parents' car. One time, she got her hair cut in Japan. She's smiling and she's watching Stephen Colbert and she can't wait to see me again.

#

Christ Church in Huron, like Christ Church in Oberlin, is brick on the outside and white on the inside, with a big wooden organ and a stray icon of a saint here and there. The clouds gathered close around the steeple outside.

Huron's priest did not seem to know what to do with the fact that so many of your parishioners made the drive up north to hear you speak. *Did you not trust that we would be nice to your guy?* he asked me. He was joking.

I said nothing.

The question hung unspoken in the damp air.

Yes, you said, pre-empting it, priest who is gay. Priest who is not that big of a deal. Priest who sometimes fails to love.

Catching you just outside, where people shook your hand before getting into their cars and going out for dinner, I lingered and I looked out over Lake Erie. The clouds coated my skin. And then I turned to you and asked, *Can I hug you?*

Again, you seemed amused—or concerned. It was possible, given your generation, that no one had asked you this before. *Thank you*, you said, seeming unsure of the proper response.

I hugged you.

I had nothing else to say to you.

I crossed the parking lot and a small park with a playground and I walked along the rocky shore of the lake. Surely the humidity would break someday. One of these days, it had to.

Some men were fishing along the wharf by the lighthouse, eyeing me with suspicion, as they always do away from campus—but I couldn't care, not then. Children were balancing precariously on the rocks.

Blossom

The room is dark and stagnant, like a puddle of murky water a week after rain. There are spiders here. You've grown fond of them. You imagine small, round bodies traveling on stilt legs like circus performers. You imagine gossamer webs shimmering with the colors of sunrise. Mauve. Clementine.

You don't imagine too hard. You don't think too much. Your mind wanders at a slow and careful pace. Too fast and you'll start to want things. You forbid yourself from wanting things (or ever really considering gardens).

Yes, it's boring. Difficult. Slow. But you know what it's like here.

#

He asks why you called on him. You're sitting alone in pitch darkness; he knows why. He just wants to hear you admit it.

You tell him about your tendency to burst into flowers. You tell him the darkness hasn't seemed to help you along. You tell him you wish you could stop.

He has a pencil and a clipboard and a pen light to help him see. It's almost blinding, even though you are staring at his polished leather dress shoes. It's the first color you have seen in years. Brown. You think of mountain ranges and trees and skin. You stop. You're too close to wanting.

He shines his light on you and marks his paper:

Two hyacinths (each shoulder). Three daisies (left arm). Fourteen clovers (right arm). A morning glory (between your eyes).

You have already tried to pick each one. You have pulled and pulled but the stems do not snap between your fingers and each time you try it leaves you exhausted and crying and very, very sore. The blossoms refuse to leave you.

The doctor concludes that perhaps darkness is not enough. Perhaps it is the water you drink that sustains them.

#

Would anyone choose to have these parasitic and unnatural things growing up through their skin?

It's harder to stay awake without water. But in the hours between sleep you often wonder when you got infected. You've never known another person with the disease. You've hardly known another person at all so that you would not infect anybody. Where could you have caught this? What other kinds of flowers grow on humans? Too close to wanting.

#

There is a knock at your boarded up window. There is a voice you are too ill to hear. Someone yells. You close your eyes. The boards on the window crack in half. Glass shatters, jagged pieces spraying around you.

You open your eyes and you think you see yourself. It's not you, though. Their face is... their flowers are... full of the most thorns you've ever seen. They give you water from a plastic bottle and kneel down next to you until you are a little better.

They tell you that you don't have to hide. You don't believe them. They tell you there are places you can go. You almost laugh. They tell you that they love you.

You say okay.

#

Your exit sneaks up on you. It's little by little. It's looking. It's talking. It's inching and inching towards the window. You don't notice you're out until you're out.

The sun feels...

You look around you and see smiling faces coated in petals. You smile back.

The sun feels...

You look around you and see Others watching. Talking. Pretending they know what they're looking at. Most mind their business. You're just a lot for people to wrap their heads around. You're reminded of that a lot.

The sun feels...

People who mostly grow leaves do not deserve a place with the rest of the flowers. People whose buds never blossom do not deserve a place with the rest of the flowers. People who started to bloom late in their lives do not deserve a place with the rest of the flowers. This has been the recent consensus.

The sun feels warm. But you can see everything out here. Are you better off than you were in the room? With the doctor?

Yes. You have to believe that you are.

#

She tells her child *no* and *absolutely not*. She says *stay away*. She doesn't want her kid infected and corrupted. She doesn't want her kid treated like they're infected and corrupted.

The kid pulls their hoodie up snugly over the carnation on the back of their neck. *Okay, Mom*, they say. *Okay*.