

FRANKIE SPRING

the desert, the lake, the moor

I see the old woman walking in winter,
and I see the little shepherd girl
with soft green bonnet and awkward
bend in the knee, where as a baby
the wolves usurped her cradle. thereafter
she carried the crooked chunk of flesh
like a trophy to prove to her flock
she would die for them not once, but twice, three times

on the moor the long-tailed yellow bird
is disappearing, having heard the alarum
of human footsteps in the snow, he dives
down a cliff face and resurfaces
just above the gap-tooth smiling rocks
ashy and melancholy their fingers point
to the open sea. my companion the yellowtail
follows me to the place where the women
sleep, lighting a gloomy cabin with oil
lamps to grow and name young shadows

these two women lived on the top
of the hill, in a dream

they knit sweaters with reams of wool
from the sleet-gray sheep the young one
tended while the old one
bent-back at the loom
canned their sour winter fruit
from the vegetable garden,
rode the wild horse neither of them
could feed, through the forest and the
weeds and never did they venture
down the mountain,
the young and the old
stared off the cliff
each night, heads clouded like
the sky from hand-hollowed tobacco pipes
how the light caught their smoke rings in the
watercolor sunset

AMANDA JONES

Short Lives in a Small World

"Don't you come out here! Stay inside! I don't want you seeing this!" My mom said as I tried fumbling my way past the clutter on our too-small-porch. I can't help myself though. I HAVE to look. I quietly slide the window and screen open and peek my head out. My mom is already on the scene. She ran outside so fast, as if she could actually reverse what just happened if she got out there fast enough. I've never seen two cars so wrecked. The hoods look like they were easily crinkled up like paper. The shards of glass and metal on the hot street twinkle in the sun among the heat mirages. The twinkles do an ironically happy dance as I move my head different angles to see better. There is an elderly couple in one car. They're dead. I can tell. There's blood all over them and by the way they're loosely slouching there...yeah... they're dead. The other car has one boy in it. He's dead too. The only person still alive is the boy strewn in the street. His blood pools around him, and there is a lot of it. I know he's gotta be cold with that much blood loss. My mom realizes this right as I did. She runs inside and gets him a blanket. I duck my head back inside and act like I haven't been watching. She runs back to him and swaddles him as the ambulance and police show up. I watch as my mom's tenderness washes over this terrified, dying boy. His blood pools into the sewer drain as the twinkles dance around him.

—What a fucked-up day that was.

I mumble to myself and to anyone around who might care to inquire as to what's fucked up. The bar tender is standing here obsessively wiping clean a glass. Doesn't seem like he's able to get it as perfect as he wants. News flash, buddy, nothing is ever as perfect as you want it to be. Hell, things are rarely even how you want them to be at all! This bar sucks. The people here are washed up miserable sacks of alcohol. But so am I, so who am I to judge. And I suppose alcohol would just leak through a sack, so these kinds of people are miserable already and angry they can't even contain their hypothetical alcohol. Does that even make sense? What the fuck am I talking about? Jeez, my drunken thoughts go from one place to the other in seconds. Maybe I should go ahead and introduce myself. My name is Oliver. Oliver Cadwell. And my mom just died. That's why I'm back in this washed up two-star town called Monroeville, Alabama. That accident was in 1979 and it happened right in front of my house. I was 8 years old and my sister, Kimberly, was 5. The town is small now and it was even smaller back then. It's a town where everyone knows everyone, and I mean literally everyone. The death of the old couple and two boys shook the town. The boy my mom comforted was named Jason Day. I thought about that accident I witnessed all the time and I don't know why. My mom acted

peculiar a few days after it. She wouldn't talk hardly at all, and my dad was quieter but also angrier. He was always a shithead, beating on us and my mom.

—Thank GOD it's Friday!

I hear a ditzy blonde say. Ahh... Fridays. Fridays were good days for a while growing up. When I walked up those old porch steps, I could already smell that freshly popped popcorn. Every Friday, my mom made some right before my sister and I got home from school. I loved that smell. The smell of the fresh kernels popped on the stove in an enormous pot. That smell lifted me up inside the house, ya know, how they do in cartoons when there's a fresh baked pie on the windowsill. Those Fridays meant something to me. My shit head father worked late on Fridays, and so we were able to enjoy some peace and quiet with a movie and popcorn. It was the only time my mom didn't have to walk on eggshells in fear of getting a drunken slap to the face. She was such a lovely woman and mother. She had dark brown hair and bright blue eyes. Her voice could sooth a hurricane. Every day I watched her get older. It pains me that I didn't do more for her. She never stood up for us though. She could have gotten out. She could have run away and took us with her to never see his beady-eyed-constant-mouth-in-the-shape-of-an-O-face again. But she didn't. She let herself, my sister and I get beat. Almost every day. Except for Fridays. I know now my dad was out cheating and getting wasted on Fridays when he got his paycheck. That's where all his money went, on boobs and booze. By the time he got home, it would be late and he'd pass out on the sofa, so we had pretty much the entire day to relax. We'd laugh. You never realize how refreshing a laugh is until you live in constant misery. After a while, though, those Fridays stopped. My sister and I got older and movies and popcorn just didn't happen anymore. The beatings got worse. My mom got tired. She let it all fuckin' happen. I resented her for a long time because of it, but she's dead now and I wish I hadn't held a grudge. She tried hard, she really did, and I see that now. Of course, my shit head father is still alive. The bad ones always get to live. But he's living homeless somewhere and I don't care.

I miss my mom. She really was the only person who showed me genuine concern. She didn't mean to get tangled up with my dad, she didn't mean to get stuck in a situation she couldn't get out of, and she didn't want us hurt. She didn't know what to do. Without my dad, there was no money. He brought home just enough for my mom to buy the bare minimum necessities, while the rest went towards his almost daily dose of boobs and booze. Fuck him. She deserved so much better. But guess what makes this all worse? There's a reason my mom and dad acted differently for a while after that tragic accident. That boy, Jason Day, was their son. Yep, that's right. My piece of shit dad was the king of manipulation and got her to give up her

own son when they were 16. I found out when I was helping Kimberly go through mom's things. I was shuffling through a box and found adoption consent papers for a Jason Cadwell to a Mr. and Mrs. Day, and newspaper clippings of the accident stuffed at the bottom. The papers said that it was a closed adoption, so my mom didn't even know what he looked like when he got older. She only knew his name and his parent's names. That's why it took her a few days to read in the paper who she held during their last breaths. I have no evidence to support that the adoption was all my dad's fault, but there's no way my mom would give up her own child willingly. He probably wanted her to get an abortion, but I don't think even the best manipulator in the world could talk her into that. He put her through so much. I hate him. He's pathetic. But here I am in this two-star town and in this two-star bar getting wasted just like every weekend. I'm starting to be just like my old man. That makes me pathetic. I even had a really great girl who was way too good for me. She left me the other week because she found out I spent all my money on the double B's. She didn't mind the booze so much as she did the boobs part. I never spent a dime on her, but I sure as hell spent money on the nightly women. My mom would be so disappointed. I gotta get out of this awful bar. I'm thinkin' too much. I begin to walk back to Kimberly's where I'm staying for now. Tomorrow's the funeral.

I wake to the sound of Kimberly and her husband, Mike, making breakfast. I didn't wake to the sound of breakfast being made so much as I did to Mike getting loud with Kimberly, as he always does.

—How could you forget your mother's necklace!? And you just NOW remembered? We're going to be late!

—Mike, sweetie, I'm sorry. Okay? Let me see if Oliver will get it for me. Okay? I'm sorry.

I've never liked Mike. He's not awful, but he's not as nice of a guy as Kimberly deserves. Perhaps I became someone like our dad, while she married someone like him. The human psyche is interesting.

—Oliver? Are you up?

Kimberly asks as she knocks gently on the door.

—Yep.

—Would you mind going back to mom's house? I left her necklace there that I really wanted to wear to the funeral. It's a tiny blue gem on a silver chain. It's in her room.

I can hear that she's fighting tears back.

—Of course, that's no problem. I'll just get ready now really quick and meet you at the church. I'll give you the necklace in the parking lot before we go in.

—Thank you, Oliver!

I can now hear the relief in her voice now that she doesn't have to deal with any more arguing with Mike. The suit I hung up on the guest room's closet door mocks me. It waves slightly in the wind from the fan across from it. It's weird what we humans do, to wear such nice things for ugly occasions. As I leave the bedroom, Kimberly pulls me to the side and talks to me quietly.

—Dad might be coming to the funeral.

—What!? How does he even know?

—He's been staying at a homeless shelter two cities over and I got a message to him.

—Do you suddenly not remember what we discovered the other day? We had a brother! Who dad made mom give up! Who died in her arms!

Kimberly shushes me and peeks around the corner to make sure Mike isn't over-hearing.

—Will you be quiet! I know what we found out is fucked up and I know dad was a piece of shit but he deserved to at least know! I told him he's welcome to come to the funeral and I sent him some bus fare to get here if he so chooses. But I honestly doubt he'll even show. I just didn't feel right if I didn't inform him or give him the welcome to come.

—Okay, fine! But he better not show his face.

I was stewing the whole way to my mom's house. He seriously better not show his face. I really think I'd punch him right in it. Who would he think he is to show up after everything he's done? After all the shit he put my poor mom through? She shouldn't be the one dead. I soon realized I didn't want to walk back into my childhood home when I pulled into the driveway. When I went before with Kimberly, I was pretty buzzed, so it wasn't as bad. I'm stone cold sober now, though, and this shit sucks. Good thing I brought my flask.

The inside is still pretty much the way mom left it. Kimberly and I haven't gone through much yet. I didn't notice before that the ironing board was out with a shirt sprawled out on it. She would never just leave anything half done. This must have been what she was doing and where she was when she keeled over from the heart attack. Despite how shitty my childhood was, I'd do anything for this house to be filled with yelling and chaos again. It's so quiet now. It's the kind of silence that screams at you and makes your ears ring. My mom kept everything so clean all the time. The old man didn't like an untidy house, but I think she liked the cleaning. It gave her control over something. I see dust just barely beginning to develop already, as if it just couldn't wait for her die so it could settle. I make my way to her

bedroom and grab the tiny blue gem necklace.

Kimberly is waiting in the parking lot for me, and I can see Mike has been growing impatient. I put the necklace around her neck and we shuffle inside the church. The church is beautiful. It's the Eastwood Baptist Church, the place we went to as kids only a handful of times for Easter and Christmas. It's a small gathering. We don't really have any other family. I pretty much only have Kimberly. There's a few people from town, neighbors, friends of my mothers and a few childhood acquaintances. I don't know if these people actually even care. It's probably more of a pat on the back for them, so they can feel good about themselves for going. My mom is dead now and is still underappreciated. I begin to stew again over the idea of my dad showing. He never showed her an ounce of appreciation. It all started with him. I walk down the aisle and see the casket. Oh no... I haven't prepared myself for this. She's in there, still and dead. The tips of my fingers start to tingle and the back of my neck feels hot. My head feels light and my breaths are short. I'm panicking. I can't do this. But I have to do this. Kimberly looks back at me and I can see it in her face that she's feeling the same thing. We're in this together. I grab her hand and we walk to the casket together. Mom's face doesn't look the same. It's not quite the same face I remember when I left ten years ago and didn't look back. Only now I wish I did look back, I could have seen her face well and alive one more time. She's wearing a yellow dress with her favorite silver chained heart necklace I got her one mothers' day before all my bitterness and resentment set in. I know Kimberly put all of this together. She dealt with all the arrangements and she picked that outfit out. I feel awful I didn't help. I keep thinking I see mom breathe, or an eye or arm twitch. But she's so still. I don't think the brain is used to seeing things so still, so it plays tricks on you. The pastor walks up to the podium and everyone sits. He says a few things but what can he really say? He didn't know her. He gestures for Kimberly to come up and read her eulogy. She's known for her poetic words so I'm eager to listen to what she has to say. She begins speaking. She's doing a great job keeping her tears back. I know if I was up there, I'd break down entirely. The church door opens but I don't bother looking at who it is since just about everyone here is not anyone I care too much about. But Kimberly looks up, pauses, looks at me, and then continues talking. I look back. It's an old, feeble man in a wheel chair. It's him. It's my dad. What the fuck is he doing here! I get up abruptly and grab his wheel-chair to take him outside with me.

—Go back where you came from! You don't deserve any closure you thought you'd get by coming here!

He wouldn't even look me in the eye. He just kept looking down. He's almost all the way bald and any hair left on his head is grey. I was starting to think he wasn't

going to say anything until he took a few raspy breathes, as if he needed to gulp down air in order to speak.

—Son, please. I just... I just want to sit quietly in the back.

—Do you know what Kimberly and I found out the other day!? Jason Day was you and mom's son! You shit head! Every damn day you hit me, you hit Kimberly, you hit mom, you cheated on her and never showed her any appreciation! And to top all of it off you made her give up her first son!? And then he dies in her arms! You probably wanted her to get an abortion, you selfish prick!

He still hasn't looked me in the eye. He looks so weak and feeble. His arms are skinny and his hands are tiny.

—It's not like that, son. Your mom is the one who decided to give him up for adoption. She wanted an abortion in the first place but I talked her into keeping the kid and giving him up for adoption!

He begins to cough when he tried speaking just slightly loud.

—I don't believe you.

—Listen, I know I was a bad dad. I always held resentment for your mom after she gave up our first-born son. And then he died! If she would have kept him with us, that accident may have never happened! My resentment and bitterness grew and I became a mean, womanizing alcoholic. But I loved her! And I know I was a shit head, but your mom wasn't an angel, either! But I'm sorry... I'm so sorry. For everything. For being the piece of shit I was.

He begins to cough so hard that he can hardly catch his breathe. We're both crying now.

—Are you sick?

—Yes, son. My liver is failing and my lungs are in the beginning stages of cancer. It's what I get for being a scumbag all my life. This is what happens when you drink and smoke and live how I lived. I'm getting my karma, okay? Now let me in there to sit peacefully in the back... please.

He's actually remorseful. I stare at him for a few more moments. He's still looking down and not at me. It's like he's too ashamed to look at me. As I stare at him I realize I'm looking at my future. I will be this weak man in a wheel chair at only 55 years old, if I continue letting my bitterness grow and turn me into someone I'm not. He sees the tip of my flask sticking out in my jacket. He slowly turns his head up at me and finally looks me in the eye.

—Don't... don't be like me, son.

JEN HEITER

Behind Curtain Number Zero

I often wonder which thief I would have been hanging next to Christ—thief, yes, *definitely*, caged by my desires for a better deal I envision myself with her husband's soft hands or that one's six figures, theirs as curtain number two: the grand prize! while I load my lifetime consolation of Rice-a-Roni into the back of my minivan. Struggling

to breathe, I push upward on the nail with each wheeze of suffocation. My quads are shredded, burning pain radiating so long it has cooled to numbness as the audience strolls about at my cloven feet sipping their mocha frappes from the Starbucks booth and grazing their Pop-Tarts and donuts, the cinnamon sugar dusting the neckline of their flannel pajamas. My shoulders popped out of joint hours ago my breasts thrust forward, my flagrum flesh clotting crusting and flaking... in the wind of my wailing, I glance over at Jesus—skin as dark as separate drinking fountains and fatal gunshot wounds eyes as opaque as mud mixed to cure a lifetime of blindness. Mouth silent. When

you left me for the couch, anger became my lover, stolen warmth continually whispering injections into the loins of my ego. I didn't realize the depression was dismantling you its host with every broken window and spittle-laced invective: diagnosing my own was not my spiritual gift. Meanwhile I see the crowds have been home to shower and trim their ear hair and return for a corn dog from the concession stand. Littering their cotton candy cellophane & flayed ketchup packets at the base of the crosses, they point to the man beyond the carousel and the juggler. Suspended next to Jesus on the other side he appears to have expired. I can barely hang on. The curtain cleaves. The earth convulses. Truly

a thief, *of course*, but left, the mocker Gestas, or right, the penitent Dismas? Glancing to the side, I spot the uncast stones, little *ostraca*, still encased in my left hand.

(Please forgive me.
I know what I did.)