

Hallowed Pines: A Narrative in Verse

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Introduction

This began as most books do: a hazy bubble of an idea patched together by the everyday. Before Juno and Evelyn breathed, before Hallowed pines housed its elderly inhabitants, there was reality—my reality. At seventeen, I applied (and was hired on the spot) as a caregiver at an elderly care facility near my home. My duties, along with the occasional kitchen and cleaning shifts, included caring for the twenty-some residents who lived in the century-old building. I learned tentatively how to spoon oatmeal into mouths, how to perform incontinence care, how to predict behaviors before they happened. While I listened and mostly understood the words being spoken by the residents, there was never a moment where I could fully peek inside their heads to uncover what the unsaid was. What fueled their behaviors? What prompted them to speak sometimes and not others? Why was routine so important? I always had questions about them, for them, for others. While there is definitely a psychological undertone here (I am a psychology minor), it was the story that most interested me. What events in their lives had founded the eighty and ninety-year-olds that walked and wheeled around me? In many instances, I pieced together the information—a dead infant son, a time spent building planes during the war, a dog rescue—over the course of weeks or months as an individual told snippets of stories. Other times, especially in the cases of those with dementia, the story often remained holey and incomplete.

Hearing those stories has somehow given me the responsibility to tell them. Of course, without appropriate permission, none of those stories can be perfectly replicated, but in this case, the sharpened-edges of truth are not the important thing. It is the outlined truth I am trying to reverently uphold here. I want Juno and Evelyn's story to be a look into reality. More people need to understand what goes on in nursing homes; they need to understand that isolation, depression, and ageism all weasel their ways into nursing home. But they also need to understand there are moments of joy—laughter, jokes, and festivities. What I wish to accomplish obviously can not run its course through a semester. Instead, I must look at what I have written thus far as a building block of the book to come.

When I first started researching, it became apparent that the genre of geriatric poetic narrative has not taken the literary world by storm. I could not pick up a book written in verse about elderly people because it has, to my knowledge, not been done before. Of course, there are books about elderly people—both fiction and nonfiction—and there are books written in verse. So I started there. Thomas Edward Gass, a social activist, accounts his time spent as a nurse's aide in the book *Nobody's Home: Candid Reflection of a Nursing Home Aide*. Chapter by chapter, he allows his residents to come to life through their own stories; one never assumes Gass is the main character in his story because he gives each person in his book such agency and life that the reader assumes all the people in the nursing home play an equal role. What struck me most was the amount of detail Gass included, which was something I wanted to incorporate into my story.

I wanted each of the characters to be backed by enough detail that he or she came to life. This is where details like Eddie's wife or Lucille's flirting come into play. Giving each character a personality was key in telling their story.

This brings me to the topic of believability. Because I had only spent time in one nursing home, I wanted to step outside that setting for a while. *Living and Dying at Murray Manor*, written by sociologist Jaber Gubrium, takes an in depth look at life inside a nursing home. The book takes the tone of a psychological or sociological study and accounts for different aspects of elder care, such as mealtime, floor layout, hierarchies, cognitive abilities, and the different perceptions of both aides and residents. Although my thesis is not necessarily research based, Gubrium's evidence allowed me to form the basis for *Hallowed Pines*. While many of the guidelines outlined in *Living and Dying in Murray Manor* do not appear in my thesis, they act as a behind-the-scenes structure that has allowed me to flesh out the story. I was able to use the hierarchy of Administration to Nurse to Aide to Resident to show where the power lies. And while the reader will never see the power hierarchy spelled out, I wanted it to be clear that this hierarchy is evident in the amount of agency and independence the residents feel like they have. Evelyn always feels like she is being forced into things: meals, activity, socialization; no one ever asks her what she wants.

This leaves only the element of the storytelling itself. I had never attempted to tell a story over the course of multiple poems, and I had never attempted to tell a story from multiple viewpoints. To capture the essence of poetic narrative, I turned to books like *Crossover* by Kwame Alexander and

Brown Girl Dreaming by Jacqueline Woodson. These works created the lens through which I worked. Dialogue, while capturing reality, needed tuned. Moments, while vital to the story, needed shortened. I realized by reading these books there was just as much in the empty spaces and moments in between the chapters as there was in the words I wrote.

Fiction is not my first passion in writing, so basing this story heavily in the realistic side helped me bridge the gap between my tendency toward creative nonfiction. That is not to say the writing was easy after I bridged the gap. Toward the beginning, I had difficulty capturing the voices of the characters, so in an attempt to better understand them, I completed character profiles. These sheets covered everything from basic physical traits to sleeping preferences to the character's greatest vice. These profiles allowed me to see each of the characters as people who each had a unique story—stories now intertwined with all the other stories. A sense of overlap was also important to my piece. I tried to capture the feeling that all the lives within Hallowed Pines had inhabited spaces long before and that each of those lives now, in a way, created friction against one another. While these people live together, it is important to realize that their lives often do not work in harmony. The story of who they once were is just as important as the story of who they are now.

Juno and Evelyn's story does not end with my thesis. As with any draft, there are many loose ends and unsearched avenues. There are characters that still do not feel right, such as Christopher whose name still does not sit well on my brain. He has a story to tell that I could not even begin to write, and it is the

same for the Head Nurse. Her presence has much more influence on the people of Hallowed Pines than my story indicates, and in the future, she needs to manifest as a force to be reckoned with. In addition, Juno's love of art needs developed in order to create the needed tension between practicality (what her mother wants) and passion (what Juno wants).

I do not intend to let this thesis collect dust on a shelf somewhere. As evidenced by the lack of geriatric fiction, there is an untapped market here—one that I can use my voice to fill. Writing this story was important to me, and it still is important. The issues I faced while working in the nursing home still exist, and people need to realize what role the elderly played in this world. They need to understand that just because a person is over the age of seventy does not mean he or she has lost worth. Instead, he or she is still vibrant and full of life, a life lived and a life yet to live.

First Day

Juno

Scrub top tags hang loosely
from the armpit of the shirt
my mother had gifted me for
graduation

Oh, sweetie. You're going to love it.

Kittens mid-mew stare out
from the stiff pink material
that scratches as I slip it over
my head.

I practice a smile in the mirror,
practice another when the first
appears condescending.

When sixteen-year-old,
self-assured me proclaimed
I wanted to join my mother's
ranks and become an RN,
she was so excited
I couldn't go back.

Baby, that's great. You're going to love it.

There was no talk
of the in-between,
the transition from high school
to a college program.
from spooning oatmeal into mouths
to taking vitals.

Dropped Stitches

Evelyn

Five years have passed,
two new grandbabies
I've never seen--
their pictures hang
with two-year-old
Christmas cards
and birth announcements.

Rebecca always promises
she'll bring them around next
time.

*Mama, you know how it is.
We're always so busy.*

I am busy, too:
crocheting a blanket
and avoiding bingo.
I ran out of blue yarn
three weeks ago,
periwinkle
dropping into crimson.
I use what I have.

The aides around here
all marvel at it, like it's
some oddity that a woman
can crochet day after day.
None of them talk about
the dropped stitches
or out-of-sorts colors.

*Oh, honey, what a beautiful blanket.
Oh, Miss Evelyn, I never knew you crocheted.
Oh, sweetie, why don't you give the blanket
a break and come play some bingo?*

I only nod and say *Maybe next time.*

Oldness

Juno

The air inside Hallowed Pines
sags with industrial disinfectant
and a smell I cannot name.
The no-duh part of me comes
up with “old.”

I never did well with old.
My mother’s parents died
before I was born,
the only recollection of my paternal
grandparents is a hazy Christmastime memory:
grandpa lounging in the EZ boy half asleep,
grandma whipping up mashed potatoes in the kitchen.
They moved to Florida when I was seven,
so they have been reduced to Hallmark cards
and UPS packages.

I flop my hair up into a lopsided ponytail,
check my pocket for the BIC pen I placed
there this morning. And practice the smile.
But I can feel my eyebrows pinch in,
a crease forming before I even make it through
the foyer.

It’s going to be a long day.

Routine Steeped in Black
Evelyn

I've been awake since 5:00 a.m.
when the nurse's aide came lumbering in,
her knock a half-second warning before she
cooed in my direction

Good Morning, Miss Evelyn.

The *miss* annoyed me more than it should,
but I gave up correcting them months ago.
I'd prefer Mrs. Johanson
only Joseph ever called me Evelyn,
and even then, it was rare.

"I'm awake" croaked out,
impolite but effective.
She begins the ritual,
laying my clothes out:
faded flowered blouse,
black slacks,
black socks,
black loafers.

She helps maneuver my
mannequin-esque body,
quiet without talking--
both avoiding
looking at my sagging breasts
and freckled skin.

Nakedness here does not excite.

Welcoming Committee

Juno

*Greta, Emma, Lucille, Harold,
Mary, Margaret, Dorothy, Richard (who
insists on Dick), Lois, Evelyn, and John.*

My coworker--whose name I've already
misplaced in the maelstrom of my mind--
introduces a roomful with a single nod.

I'm rewarded with a false-toothed grin,
a practiced grimace,
two winks,
and indifference.

Lois wheels over my way,
looks me in the face
and spits on my shoe.

Welcome to the party.
She says as she speeds off
cackling in a cloud of White Diamonds
perfume.

Don't pay her no mind.
My coworker chimes on cue.
*Just a bitter old hag, has been
since I started.*

The insult ended in a smile
and I followed her sashay
to another room of people,
another list of names,
that I resolve never
to completely remember.

Lipstick Smiles and Forgoing Depression Evelyn

After breakfast I lounge
in the common room--
Nurse's orders to keep me
from getting *depressed* or *withdrawn*
or whatever it is when old women want
to be alone.

Robin walks in with a little pinch of a thing,
smiling like we are a carnival sideshow,
and I know she won't last more than a month.
Too soft around the edges.
Too thin: the kind of woman
who lacks the hutzpah to reach eighty eight.

My neighbor Lucille lips a red grin--
her shaky lipstick outline a sliver of the smile
beneath. So I smile, too, because Lucille
is smiling.

I wait for the customary greeting,
the old perv to my right
winks and sticks out his
parched tongue,
the more senile patients stare,
and I wait for her to leave
so I can nap.

I nod off to the smell of White Diamonds,
broccoli and antiseptic.

Lingering Antiseptic
Juno

The day ends with the emerging
callus on my left hand,
stain on right pocket,
and a hazy tiredness that seeps into my shoes,
or maybe that is the leftover squishiness
from morning showers and a spilled pitcher
of ice water.

I trip up the steps onto my mother's porch--
my porch--and sneak upstairs
like a teenager breaking curfew.

Hey! How was your first day?
My mom sets aside the salad
tongs and beams up at me.

It was. . . good.
I met a lot of cool people,
you know how it is.
I hid my picked cuticle
behind my back.

Oh, Juno, that's exactly what I thought.
I knew you'd love it.
You're going to be a wonderful nurse.

Here's to hoping
I agree, trying to flash
a grin reminiscent of the one
on the little white-haired lady
earlier that day. And it works.
I leave her in the kitchen in my pursuit
of a hot shower and a evening free of antiseptic.

Another Evening

Evelyn

The evening monotony sets in
as I base my excitement around
supper: a watery vegetable soup,
beef I cannot chew, and the promise
of a desert leftover from yesterday,
the graham cracker crust already stale,
the chocolate mousse much too rich.
I never did like chocolate.

Eddie sitting across from me jovially
smiles through a chocolate moustache.
He told me once his wife baked the finest
pastries in all of Indiana. So I scoot my saucer
in his direction and watch his eyes light up.
He doesn't talk anymore, but he offers a low
tone of delight and tips an imaginary hat in my direction.

Hey sugar, meet me in the TV room?

Lucille winks like a man intent on courting me
but I follow her anyway to the powder blue room
where six of us sit to watch another day of news.
Another day of housefires. Another day of troops coming
home and troops leaving. Another day of sunshine and
seventy-five. And we are all here for another day.

The news over,
we wait for our real love:
This is Jeopardy
that Lucille and I watched
faithfully with our husbands.
We don't know any of the answers,
but we never really did. Because this
isn't really our show, as much a habit
we cannot let go, so we live to see
another day of Jeopardy and chocolate
mousse pie.

Ruining the Routine

Juno

I read yesterday's scrawl
hastily outlining a "normal" day:

7:00 a.m.	Breakfast preparation Check on the women sitting in common room
8:00 a.m.	Breakfast
10:00 a.m.	Help willing participants to activities rooms.

And get stopped midway by a man
grinning over glasses rims.

*Looks like some stellar notes there.
Wish someone would've told me to
take some my first day.*

His scrubs say he is one of us,
but he seems out of place,
much too muscular, much too
willing to smile at 7 a.m.
much too--

*Christopher. You can call me Chris.
Lois prefers bastard, but I try to keep
that on the downlow.*

His dimples show, and I wonder
how a man got lost in a nursing home.
*Juno. Do you know who I'm training
with today?*

*Me of course. First things first
let's get rid of those notes.
It's good to know nothing
ever goes as planned.*

Restless Crocheting

Evelyn

*Got any cards, sugar?
I wanna play some poker,
you, know? Like the boys did
back in the day.*

Lucille yells at me from
across the hall at a decibel
that suggests she took her hearing
aids out, or maybe she assumes
mine are out, too.

Either way,
I ignore her and pick up the stitch
on every aide's favorite blanket.

*What about dice?
Or dominoes. The boredom's
gonna kill me before the heart
disease does.*

I stay silent and wait for the telltale
shuffle of loafered feet across the tile
hall.

*Hey, honey, you got your
hearing aids in? I brought some of those caramels
you like.*

She smiles softly and sinks into my floral bedspread,
making herself at home without invitation,
without hesitation
the way she did on day one when we met.

She may not be my friend by choice,
but she was the first one here
who ever tried.

Lucille
Juno

These are your people.
this is your wing.

I look down the hallway
at the line of half-closed doors,
their fronts decorated by a mix
of premature Christmas wreaths
and right-on-time autumn scarecrows
and think that *my people* would not decorate.

Have you met everyone on this hall yet?
Chris has been smiling since conception I think.

No.

It's mostly women. Quiet ones who don't say much,
except for Lucille.

Is that the one in the wheelchair
who spit on my shoe?

Nah.
Lucille is one of the few good things about this place.
She's a flirter on her best days,
a crier on her worsts.
If you're nice to her, she'll give you candy.
If she doesn't like you, she'll just stick
to talking your ear off. That's just her way.

She sounds like my grandma
in Florida--
the one my mother hates.

How 'bout we go meet some of them?

Stillness

Evelyn

Lucille retreated back to her room
after a half-hour of chatting.
She asked me to teach her to crochet,
to play dominos later that day,
to do anything to relieve the restlessness
she felt bubbling up in her legs.

I am no restless person.
It drove Joseph crazy the way
I could sit for hours with a project.
He was always moving,
always bouncing from one room
to the next when he wasn't working.
He was the man of half-finished novels,
set-aside kitchen repairs, garden growing
attempts. I learned early to finish what he started.

Three loud raps on the doorframe then a moment
of silence.

Mrs. Johanson

Pause.

It's Christopher.

I thought to tell the boy I knew it was him
based on the pair of black sneakers he wears
every single day or the way he actually waits
for an answer before barging in.

It took some time to unwind my old modesties,
to bare my breasts in the shower to a man young
enough to be my grandson.
But really, there wasn't another option.

You may come in, Christopher.

Nice to Meet You

Juno

The first room we enter hangs in silence,
no sounds of 11 o'clock news blaring
from the other side of the door.

*She's been here a few months.
Not a talker, cranky before noon.
She stays to herself and likes it that way.*

I scoot aside the walker
blocking the door and move in
to her bare room. No momentos
or keepsakes, only neatness and the absence
of noise.

She doesn't acknowledge our presence,
just continues knitting or crocheting--
whatever it is with one needle.

*Mrs. Johanson?
Christopher waits for her to glance up.
Lunch time. This is Juno. She just started,
so I'm teaching her the ropes.*

She still doesn't say anything,
but the corner of her mouth lifts
up, and her hands momentarily cease
their fluid motion of twist and loop.
I wait for some recognition
like she owes me something.
But she just nods and goes back
to twisting and looping the yarn.

It's nice to meet you,
I venture.

She nods.

Cravings

Evelyn

The girl surprises me.
She came back, and that is more
than I expected.

She is pretty, features clean
like my granddaughter Anne,
but not nearly as personable.

She doesn't ask about the blanket though.
So that is a start, unless the boy told her
to be nice, in which case, she probably should have smiled.

How hard would I have to fake
a migraine to coerce the nurse
to have a lunch tray brought to my room?
Or to skip the meal all together?

Rumor has it we're eating pot pie again,
a goopy concoction without salt or substance.
But I go and resolve to give Eddie my desert.

Lucille waits outside my door, so we can walk
down the hall together.
Her chit chat leaves me distracted
and longing for the recipe she describes:
a flaky crusted pie with the vegetables
picked straight from the garden.
Or maybe gooey cookies with cinnamon
swirls half melted in my mouth.

I am hungry for something,
that's for sure.
Some people call home and ask
their families to bring them take-out--
cheeseburgers or milkshakes.
I wonder if they would bring me one,
too, if I paid them well?

Rainy Days with a Side of Pot Pie
Juno

It's raining outside,
and the residents shiver in their skins
like the rain is inside and icing their old
arms. They all want jackets and sweaters,
even though it is a comfortable seventy-five
inside.

Morosely, they push the mashed
pot pie from one side of the plate
to the other--some of them even
venturing to scoop spoonfuls
onto flecked tile floor.

It looks gross.

Evelyn slides her lime Jello
to Eddie who rewards her
with a toothless grin
and offers her his biscuit.

Shaking her head, she downs
her coffee--black--and shoves
her uneaten pot pie in the center.

I feel my own stomach grumble

She stacks knife, fork, spoon
on top of napkin, plate, pie.
She says goodbye to Eddie
and shuffles out the door.

Love Story

Evelyn

It's Tuesday, it's raining,
my joints are aching
and I'm munching on some crackers
I won the one time I played bingo.

I'm thinking about Suffolk, Virginia
where Joseph found me--
a pale, saucy thing with wide-set
brown eyes and a quiet smile.

He told me that night he was going to marry
me someday, and I agreed.
No one knew it would be three years after
he lost his wife to another man. Then he found me again,
thrust his baby girl--all gap-toothed and red-haired--
into my hands.

*Her name's Rebecca, after her mother.
Take care of her, and I'll take care of you.*

Joseph never was one for romance,
more for the practicalities we could
offer one another. And I was to be a mother
for a girl not my own.

I claimed her as my own, my Becca,
my silly little toddler falling in the grass
and grinning with dandelions in her hair,
but as she got older, she had questions,
questions her daddy wouldn't answer,
questions I didn't dare answer.
Until he died.

It Gets Better
Juno

The air, thick and muggy, a remnant of a late Indian Summer in Virginia, slaps me in the face as I step out of the door.

My mom packed my lunch and left it on the table, I left it on the table, so she will see I do not need her help. She helped me into this job where, muscles aching, I come home every night and fall into bed. Unshowered.

Unsure.

Uncaring.

And on the stairs each morning, I grin at my mother. she tells me to have a lovely day. And I pray the time will go fast.

It gets better, you know?

He finds me--head on table--in the break room, anxiously chewing a granola bar and a hangnail, a trail of blood trickles down my thumb.

What does?

*All of it. The people. This place.
The job. My first week was Hell.*

How'd you even get here?

Easy. Guy like me didn't have many options. I grew up taking care of my sick mother, so it just made sense.

This doesn't make sense, not for me.

Brochures

Evelyn

I wake up at 2 a.m. to pee
for the third time and think about
coffee, the way my husband used to brew
it--dark and thick. A coffee you could almost
eat. Not the watered down decaf of latter years.

I crave coffee at the oddest moments, crave the warmth
and bitterness, a combination I never find here in the oil
skim and potato mush.

They had promised a gourmet kitchen,
not that the food enticed me into a care
facility. More of the realization that this
was my last resort when Rebecca refused.

*Mama, we just don't have the room.
Now that Jenny's moved in with the baby.
I'm sorry.*

The brochures can only say enough to cover
the holes, to hide those of us too far gone
to pose behind card table and on porch swings.
I have yet to find the porch. It seems to be some
coveted Atlantis, buried but still desired. Even
Lucille has never seen the porch overlooking
gardens rich with gardenias and chrysanthemums.

The doctor told me once gardening is good
for memory loss. I'm as sharp as a scalpel,
but I do love gardening, love it more than
Joseph ever did. And it was his garden.

Braids
Juno

Good morning, Lucille.

*Morning, Juno. Your hair is looking
beautiful today. Trying to impress anyone
in particular?*

She winks and jerks her head toward Chris
who watches, amused.

Suddenly aware of the braid's tight pull
at the base of my skull, I tug at the end.

Oh, don't take it out on my account.

I still slip to the bathroom
on my lunch break to unravel
the straight strands of hair,
to twist them into a ballerina
bun at the base of my neck--
neat and severe like the nurse
wears her hair.

*Hey, it looks nice both ways.
Just so you know.*

*You're a guy,
you have to say that.*

*Nah, if so I'd be telling
every woman in here how
pretty she is.
But I like personality better
than hair any day.*

I resolve to leave
the braids for my mother,
to stick to what I know.

Kicking and Screaming

Evelyn

It is shower day. Not my favorite
But I won't go in screaming like some
of the women in here who don't even
know what day it is.

I know the day of the week sans date.
Mondays denote showers,
where I get all suds up for five minutes
where the water spray randomly chills.

I know it's for my own good,
to relieve my body of the sponge-bath
stink, but a lady can do a lot with a wash
cloth and some deodorant.

*Ma'am, I've come to give you
your shower today.*

It's the young one with the bun
who looks afraid. I realize belatedly,
it might stem from my scowl.

*Please don't call me ma'am.
And I will be down in a moment.
I need to gather my things.*

Soaps and shampoos and lotions
and ointments. All the slippery
substances to make my skin
feel like skin again.

I will be down shortly.

Yes, ma'am.

Morning Showers

Juno

Sticky hair loose from my bun
clings to my cheeks.
The water is on--warming as if for a child.

Naked bodies everywhere. Naked bodies without
any idea they are naked.

Too cold for a shower.

A 90-pound feisty woman swings
her arms out, begging to hit flesh.

Wash my back a second time.

I lather, rinse repeat.

Are we done now?

Almost. Still to wash the hair.
Or to not wash the hair? She had a perm
early this week, the curls still tight to her head,
waiting to be uncoiled and recoiled into a fashion.

Do you need your hair washed?

Vacant stare with shrug.

So we wash it. Lather, rinse, repeat.

I lather, rinse, repeat the next two women,
wonder where Evelyn is.
She arrives in a silk housecoat,
unbottons to reveal nothing under.

*I get dressed and undressed
in my room only.
I can wash myself,
except my feet and back.*

Yes, ma'am.

Resigned

Evelyn

Rebecca isn't coming for Christmas.
She and David have decided on a week
in the mountains with their children.

I decide I'll stay in my room when
Lucille comes calling me to bingo.

I bring out the blanket and pick up
where I left off in a plummy shade of purple.
The little one won't ever get this blanket until
someone comes to see me.

I think Rebecca is still grieving,
for her father,
for the truth.
She wanted me to be her real
mother. But I can tell she's known
for a while where her auburn hair
came from.

She doesn't care I came into their lives
when they needed me. She cares
about the biology of the matter,
cares that she has no sister or brother
to call her own.

But she's not coming for Christmas either way,
so I should settle myself in for the day,
take a nap before Chris comes thumping
at the door for lunch.

I miss my daughter, even if I am not her mother.

**Art
Juno**

Beautiful,

Chris said, his fingers skimming
over my art work,
an oil canvas glossing
Evelyn's quiet smile into immortality.

*She doesn't talk,
but that's what my brush
remembers, the smile she saves
for Lucille or Eddie, the smile
she doesn't hand out freely.*

Why not painting?

His eyebrows crease,
opening his face into earnest
contemplation.
What do you mean?

*Art school. Art lessons. Anything to further
this gift you have.*

*It's a hobby,
a way to pass the time
until I have a real life.*

This could be a real life.

Art does not pay bills.

But you are not happy at Hollowed Pines

But my mother loves to see me there.

Juno, your life is not your mother's

Just Visiting

Evelyn

I hang the dreamcatcher
leftover from craft hour,
the feathers and suede laces
coloring my walls with an orangey softness.

Dreamcatchers always welcome
in the land of catheters and wheel chairs,
where we succumb to Ambien dreams
that tone the past in sepia.

Becca comes to me,
Christmas morning, gap-toothed
grin lisping out *Mama*
her grin morphing into a sneer.
You are not my mama.

I always wake on the verge
of incontinence, a thick sweat
trickling under my silk nightgown.

But dreamcatchers are meant to catch
those sorts of dreams. I wonder what my neighbors
dream about.

Lucille or Eddie,
waiting for families who have no steady
visiting schedule. Lucille's son calls
once a month and leaves her in a nervous
ball of depression for days before she's
cracking jokes again.

*Hey Sugar, movie time
in the Rec room. Someone said
that old nurse brought some sugar cookies.
Maybe the punch is spiked, too. She winks.*

I smile and agree to go,
only for an hour though.

Orders

Juno

Ma'am, Lucille is refusing lunch.

The nurse stares out from her enclosure
where she pops pills into little cups all day,
smoothing some into applesauce.

Convince her to come then.

I tried.

As I say it, I see the insult of incompetence
in her glare.

I don't have time to convince her otherwise.

Yes, ma'am.

Juno, do you like it here?

My clammy palms
clasp one another in forced
calm. My mother says *of course*
you like it there. Instead I say,
I'm not sure, ma'am.

*You seem like a smart girl.
If you want to leave,
get out while you can,
before all your time
is wrapped up and you begin
to grow old here.*

Yes, ma'am.

I fidget with my collar,
the stiff v-neck itching across
my collarbone.

Maybe this isn't for me.

The Act of Remembering

Evelyn

I pull the photos from my nightstand
where the stack of my family sits
reduced to glossy paper and scrawled
names in pen.

Babies at plastic kitchen sets,
cousins smiling from reunions at the lake,
a host of family pets jumping into autumn leaves.

There are animals that visit here,
their tail wags a relief from the sameness
of each others' faces.

When winter sets in the activities increase,
begging residents to fight cabin fever or depression,
bingo, pumpkin painting, cookie decorating.
It's a scene out of *Better Home and Garden* magazine
and Lucille can't get enough.

Today is flower pot painting, even though
all the flowers have died,
in preparation for winter.

I wonder how many of us
would love to do the same,
to slip unnoticed into the ether,
forfeiting the malady
of the big three:
Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas--
or at least slip unnoticed from craft hour.

The Rut
Juno

The morning brings spilled applesauce
and urine, the kind of morning casted from Hell.
I slip into my extra pants, the ones with a ripped
elastic band, and resign myself to pulling up
the waist every time I move.

Huffing into my assigned hallway,
I score a wink from Richard
and a shimmy from Lucille
who says my hair *puts all the ladies*
to shame. I tug the braid,
remembering my mother who taught it
to me, who showed me how to weave
over and under and back again.

Autopilot all the way to lunch,
necessary smile, followed by on-cue
shrug. My knowledge carries me when
my interest does not.

My mother is the best nurse
I know: focused and compassionate,
her patients' love shining through her own
eyes, but she and I don't have the same eyes,
or the same anything.

The workers here all have their reasoning
for staying--a passion or an obligation.
I have neither, not tie between me and the elderly.
If anything, I have more reason to leave.

**Refusing
Evelyn**

The unmailed letter sits on the stand,
waiting for someone to take it to the post.
To Rebecca, an apology for the years
of pretending to be a mother when I had not
carried her in my belly.

Her real mother, a blip on my radar
before she died two years ago, who
never responded when I reached out
to her, begging her to meet her daughter.

But we come from the I've-made-my-bed-
now-I-have-to-lie-in-it generation,
so she never responded. My own pride,
shelved for the time being,
until I am met with indifference.

Time for lunch, Miss Evelyn.

The aide stops in,
and I roll over on my bed
and pretend to sleep.

Evelyn! She touches my shoulder.

I won't go.

I hear her walk away,
before I take out me hearing
aid, letting the edges of the world
fuzz and hum into something more
bearable.

The Rut Part Two

Juno

Two week notice?

Creased eyebrows,
hand on hip,
a mother's look turned dark.

Baby, I thought you loved it.

*I thought I would
with time, but my kind
is not meant to spend
days stuck in antiseptic halls.
I am losing touch with what I really want.*

*If you aren't happy
don't stay.*

Work that day is clouded
by knowing the end is near.
I go through the motions:
wash, rinse, repeat in the showers,
the rhythmic spooning of potatoes at lunch,
the chicken-with-its-head-cut-off
that is the after lunch rush of potty breaks
and naps.

I go home exhausted,
forgetting to put the notice in,
vowing to do it tomorrow when
things aren't so busy.

Happy Holidays

Evelyn

They hang the wreaths on our doors,
misshapen and sagging with plastic bulbs
to 'Tis-The-Season our way into the winter,
even though Christmas is two months away,
and Halloween has barely ended.

Life here exists in a series of decorations:
tinsel, and Easter grass,
wreaths and patriotic flags.

The decorations act as a colorful
calendar, the seasons ticked off
with the change from pastel to patriotic
to harvest fun and back again,
a cycle swirling so seamlessly,
we lose ourselves in the sentimentality
of all the yesteryears we have forfeited
to reach this point.

Soon the aides will exchange Secret Santa
names, and the cards from Girl Scouts
and 4H will flood in, reminding us
of families we love, reminding us
of the families long gone.

Joseph gifted me the same
freesia scented candle
on Christmas Eve,
down to the brand name,
until they discontinued in in 1982,
the year he broke down and bought
me a silver freesia pendent necklace.

It lays unclasped in my top drawer,
not around my neck, but still present.

A Skin More Wearable

Juno

At five years old,
I told my mom I wanted to be
just like her:

a nurse with a nice house
and a nice dog
and a nice daughter
but I am starting to think
nice isn't so nice anymore,
that if given the opportunity
of fight or flight out of this cookie-
cutter life, I would run into someone
else's skin before I stayed here.

I want a skin more wearable to me,
one that does not equate to wearing
scrubs all day and learning when to pop
blistered soles vs. leaving them alone.
Chapped lips, cracked hands, a host
of bruises without a cause.
My skin has faded and traded its vibrancy
for a complacency.

But this complacency could cement me into
the life I always wanted,
the picket fence and greener grass.

I'm starting to think I'm on the other side,
the side with wobbly shutters,
a rickety porch,
a white fence starting to peel.

I'm weary of this attempt
at wearing my mother's skin.

Survivor's Remorse

Evelyn

Eddie died today.
He was not one of the ones
who went out fighting--
no oxygen tank hissing in his room,
no mucused cough taking over.
Instead, he went out soundlessly,
quietly in the night like we all hope
we will.

For the first time, we find he has a wife,
a busy blip of a thing, who bustles in dry-eyed
to clean his room. She doesn't speak to any of us,
sitting wide-eyed in the common room, only sets
down Eddie's extra Search-A-Words, a tin
of peanut brittle, and a dog calendar.

She never said what to do with it, so the aides
eat the sickly sweet brittle, leaving us with paper
memories of Eddie. I riffle through a host of Golden
Retrievers and Schnauzers and stop to study Eddie's
scrawl across Christmas and his his wife's Birthday.
He drew balloons for her, but none of us even knew
her name.

At dinner, I stare at the empty chair across from me.
They forget he is dead and bring out broccoli
soup and a sandwich for his eating pleasure.
I scoot my plate of chocolate cake to where
his hand would have rested and smiled.

Dinner, quiet in the wake of his death,
quiet at the realization it could have been
any one of us, but it wasn't.

Two Weeks

Juno

I'm quitting.

Finally?

No notice yet, though.

Why?

Haylee walked out.

We are short-staffed.

We are always short-staffed.

I don't want to cause it.

*You wouldn't cause it if it is
inevitable.*

Do you want me to leave?

I want you to leave if you are unhappy.

I'm not wholly unhappy.

But you don't like the work.

I thought you liked me.

*Of course I do, but I can like you
plenty of other places.*

I'll finish out this payterm.

The two weeks, you mean?

Yes, Chris, the two weeks.

Two weeks notice.

Bingo
Evelyn

I don't want to play.

But it's bingo, for chips.

I don't like chips.

You do so!

They stick in my dentures.

Well, give them to me then.

Why would I do that?

Because I'm your friend.

Yeah, my only friend.

Well, if you went to bingo more often. . .

I don't need any more friends.

Never said you did.

You didn't have to, Lucille.

*Call me crazy, but I think you're
starting to like me.*

Nonsense, I don't care for people.

Suit yourself, I'm going to play bingo.

I will be fine.

Right here.

Working on my blanket.

Another Week

Juno

*Can you maybe stay on another week?
Just until we find someone to replace you.*

I say yes before my brain
has the time to form the proper
refusal, my skin hums in indignation
and sulk back out to the common room,
ready to put my head down and work.

Can you get me my socks?

I sigh and remind Richard he already
has a pair wiggling on his toes and another
tucked beside him in his wheelchair.

Can you comb through my hair?

I tell Lucille her hair looks fine
and walk away, mid-sentence.

Can you tell me what's for dinner?

I remind Gert it is a surprise,
that if I tell her she wouldn't come
to supper.

Can you cover my shift tomorrow?

Delilah cracks her gum,
the Wintergreen reminding me
she covered my shift two weeks ago.

Can you stay tonight? Someone called off.

I put my head down and keep working.
I stop looking at the clock. I stop pretending
I am happy to be here.

Paid Dues

Evelyn

The night nurse gave me a stamp
when I awoke at 2 a.m. and demanded
one with dreams of Becca still fresh
in my head.

In the dream, I am dying.
I am alone here,
she does not come.

In life, I am dying, slowly.
I am alone here,
she has not come.

The afghan, now big enough to cover
my legs, grows heavier with each stitch.
If no one stops me, I'll have a blanket
bit enough to cover the entire hallway,
to cover our ward to the Alzheimer's unit.

If Becca ever comes, I will tell her to do whatever
she wants with the thing. It sure isn't pretty--the rainbow
mess of dropped stitches and uneven panels. Maybe
I should just throw it away, start over with new yarn,
new purpose.

And then I remember my purpose
is used up. I did my wife-ing, my mothering,
my gardening. I did the cooking, and the cleaning
and the husband keeping.

I am done with this world, but it hasn't
given me up yet.

**My Wing
Juno**

Another round of snoozed
alarm beeps and a mother
bellowing from downstairs

Juno, you're going to be late!

Another day with another pair
of pants I scoop off the floor.
I scratch at a stain on my way to work,
letting the dried broccoli flake onto the floor.
I have learned to wear wrinkles
better than the women I take care of.

I am disheveled--my sixteen hour shift
from the day before dragging the circles
below my eyes lower, shading them darker.

My final week looms larger than my first,
the memory gone cloudy with routine
and apathy.

Morning, Sunshine.
Chris smiles a tad too Cheshire
and shoves a coffee my way.

What's your deal?

What do you mean?

The pep?

Fake it 'til you make it, Juno.

I take the coffee and walk down the hallway.
Away from him and his chipperness,
away from the Head Nurse,
away from the gossip,
toward my wing.

A Sign
Evelyn

The midmorning sun filters
through the finally-hung dream catcher,
splashing my wall in magentas and blues,
hues to make any morning more pleasant.

I stare at my closed door,
waiting on a sign, some sort of divine
assurance of good news to come.
A knock.

Morning, Mrs. Johanson

It's the girl with the scowl.
But today she is smiling,
smiling in a way reflects off
the dreamcatcher and its light,
the tiny crystals
prisming her into a kaleidoscope
of wrinkled clothes and rainbows.

Morning, Juno.

*I brought down your mail--
a letter is all.*

The envelope sits in my lap
for an hour before lunch,
an hour after, fifteen minutes
While Lucille chats my ear off,
another twenty as I nod off in my armchair.

I am ready.
Tearing into months
of silence to find her scrawl
looping across the page,
ready to unveil her secrets.

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