

Growing: with spirit and branches

- Ray Lee

The god was thrown away, buried in earth. The other gods told the dirt and grass to ignore the buried god, to not help them, in hopes they would forget themselves. The dirt spared no nutrients for the god, and the grass grew thick roots, drinking the water that sprinkled through the dirt.

The god curled into a seed, until the earth forgot they were there.

The god prodded the earth with its seedling body, begging for life. The dirt knew it shouldn't spare its own nutrients, but couldn't remember why. The grass spared water, harbouring a feeling of betrayal, but forgot who against.

The god-seed learned quick. When the dirt offered space, they took all. When the grass offered water, they took its root as well. When the god grew into a tree, they took up the mind of one, leaving memories that did not serve them, behind.

The god grew fruit. The birds and bees that took seeds and pollen were infected with the god's growth, and the god used the bloated bodies that fell from flight as mulch. Grew themselves into a forest.

The human was thrown away. They wandered and hoped and prayed. But the gods were preoccupied, so they found the buried god's grove.

The human thought they could make a life here. Make a house from wood, but the trees refused to be cut. Eat plentiful fruit, but the harvest writhed and grew in their stomach. They vomited the seeds into the grass, birthing the very thing that despised them.

The human begged for a blessing. But they prayed in the gods' blindspot, for they ignored their buried brethren.

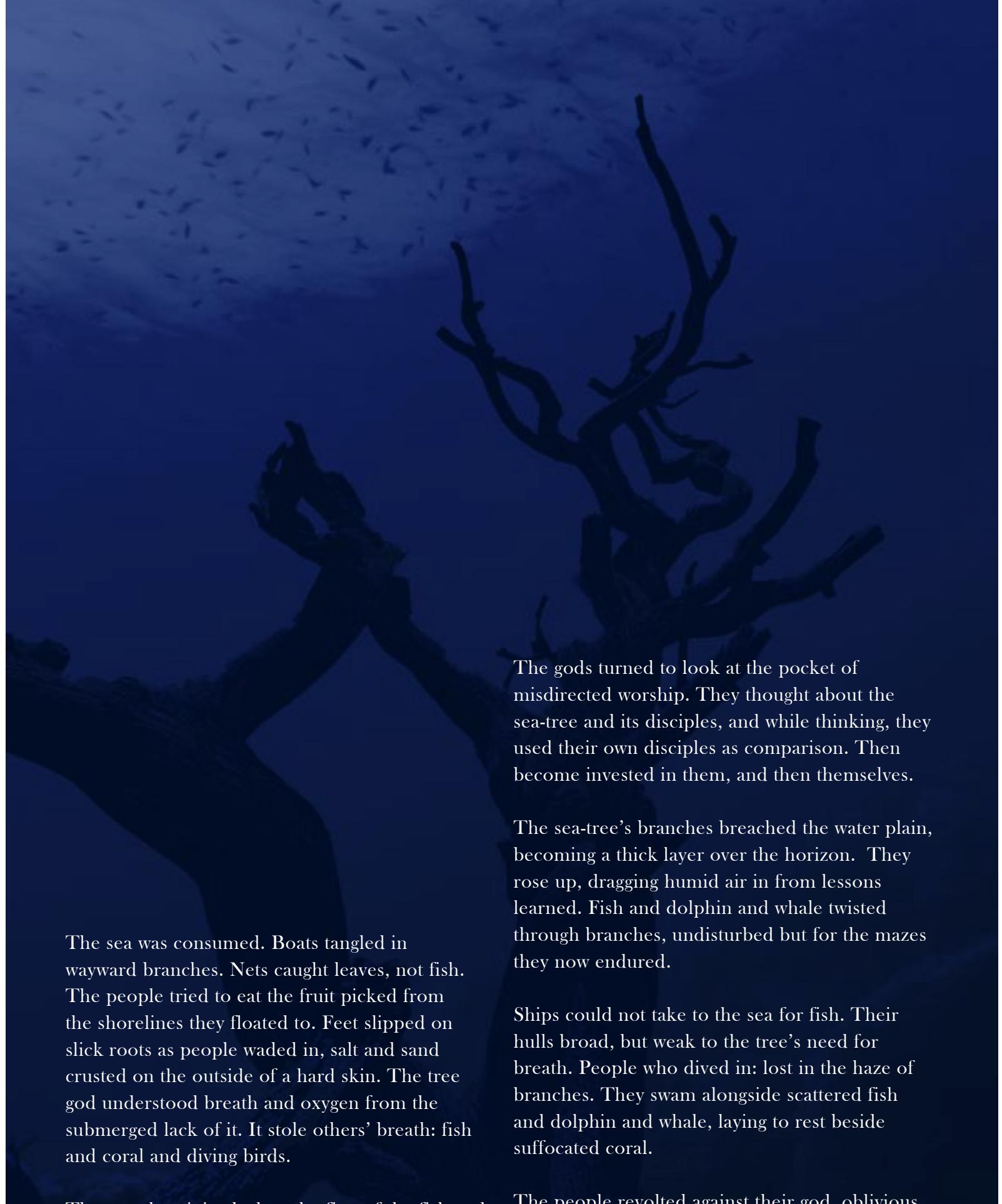
The human discovered all trees disliked fire, including ones grown from spite. The god's grove burned. It found itself in the smoke and smothered the air: in the open under the sky, in the close within a throat.

The god could feel some remnant of itself buried below the groove. They could grow back, they knew.

They took themselves, smoke and ash, up, to where they fell.

The rain was displeased with any thing that rose so high. Too high, to where the gods resided. The rain poured to wash the smoke away. The god, sogged smoke, fell. Again. To the sea.

The god, collected on the seabed, devoured by the fish, grew, from the seabed, from the fish bellies. Grew in the only way they knew how.



The sea was consumed. Boats tangled in wayward branches. Nets caught leaves, not fish. The people tried to eat the fruit picked from the shorelines they floated to. Feet slipped on slick roots as people waded in, salt and sand crusted on the outside of a hard skin. The tree god understood breath and oxygen from the submerged lack of it. It stole others' breath: fish and coral and diving birds.

The people rejoiced when the first of the fish and eel and whale washed up on their sandy doorstep. They worshipped the sea-tree god. But the god had forgotten they were ever a god. They thought themselves a tree trying to grow in the sea.

The gods turned to look at the pocket of misdirected worship. They thought about the sea-tree and its disciples, and while thinking, they used their own disciples as comparison. Then become invested in them, and then themselves.

The sea-tree's branches breached the water plain, becoming a thick layer over the horizon. They rose up, dragging humid air in from lessons learned. Fish and dolphin and whale twisted through branches, undisturbed but for the mazes they now endured.

Ships could not take to the sea for fish. Their hulls broad, but weak to the tree's need for breath. People who dived in: lost in the haze of branches. They swam alongside scattered fish and dolphin and whale, laying to rest beside suffocated coral.

The people revolted against their god, oblivious to their ancestors' religion. They tried fire, like that which brought it here. But the branches were wet from waves, the flames devoured by a sea salted breeze.

So they tried drowning it. Tipped buckets, filled at home, to the sand for receding waves to drag away. Praying for the waves to sink the outstretched twig hands.

The sea began to swell. The sea-tree swelled in turn. Generations sponsored the water's battle with it. The battle climbed until people no longer needed to take buckets to the sea. The waves lapped at doorsteps, pushed down their pipes, and pulled back with everything.

The people watched from rooftops and high hills, this battleground bigger than them. They knew their action was to blame, but drowning was their religion. Scripts of worship forgotten deeper than the sea could find.

The gods were watching their fallen brethren now. How could they not when it had been so long? They could not remember if the sea-tree was a stubborn tree, a kind of child of theirs, or a thing they had cursed. But they had heard the prayers, the blasphemy. They discussed what to do, if they should do anything, as the battlefield leveled. The people watched, pointing to their children, finding which shadow in the ocean used to be their home. The horizon a tangled line of sunned water and silhouette branches.

The sea-tree only knew how to grow, how to expand. Its need to rise up, to join its brethren, written in its design.

The branches grew slowly as it ascended, in the area between sky and space, where winds were

freely temperamental. But the sea-tree knew how to survive the ocean, it could survive lashing rain. Somewhere in its memory, waterlogged and hazy, it knew how to survive fire, and the sun's dry glare, it could survive lightning.

The gods look back, deciding that trees should be trees, not stubborn egotists, the sea-tree takes the weight of the clouds upholding their floor. And shakes.

The gods stumble. The sky, a haze of branches and leaves. People live atop the ocean and grass in boughs and hollows, not remembering a time when they didn't live here, freely eating fruit. Birds nest where they please. Currents travel through branches, shaping their curves.

The gods peer down at their world, the world that stares back with bark and branch and leaf. They gape, asking the thing that was once one of them: Who are you? What are you?

But their kin is a tree, and so, replies with the rattle of wind through leaves, and water lapping through branches.



Balloons

Louise McNarey

I let go of a helium balloon when I was a kid.

I didn't mean to. It was green, like forest moss or my sister's face when Dad built me that rocking horse for my birthday. I clutched the string so firmly that my nails etched crescents into my palms. I bragged to anyone at the fair who would listen, telling them about my iron grasp, almost daring the balloon to break through, but my palm was becoming slick with clamminess. I guess the string slipped right through when I wasn't paying attention.

I had magical powers back then. I stretched out my hand and squinted into the sky, commanding with my mind for it to return safely. Against the setting sun, my green balloon was a flying lime, its zest the flavour of my childhood. And it was flying away from me. The breath of my screams pushed it further into space. It shrunk to a grape, then a texta dot. A speck of mould that eventually disappeared into the air. I always thought, if I held tightly enough, the balloon would lift me across oceans to faraway lands, and I would live as a storybook hero in my own bubble of paradise.

I'm an adult now. I don't think that anymore.

Yesterday I got off the bus and went about my daily dodge of the city bustle. My chest tightened uncomfortably at the sight of a bearded man sat huddled with his shivering dog against a shopfront, but I strolled past without a second glance. I rolled my eyes at the idiots who insisted on waiting for the green man at the light even though there were no cars coming to bowl them over. I made a wide circle around a busker playing the violin; I'm sure he was talented, but I didn't have any cash on me. I couldn't even hear him over the zealots chanting Bible verses.

Maybe this was God punishing me for my ignorance, but I rounded a corner and caught a glimpse of my lost green balloon. Where had it been all these years? Its string was clenched in some child's grubby fist, its gleaming moss-covered face bobbing further down the street and somehow staring right back at me as if to say, 'I've found someone better.'

The road was engulfed by floating rainbows, a vendor selling coloured helium balloons at its epicentre. I was sure I was hallucinating as I witnessed all manner of clouds, roses, berries, planets, and fires attached to strings. A second green balloon snatched my eye, then a third, then an emerald glistening extra brightly on a necklace of priceless jewels, a single cactus rising in a desert sea, an olive in a fancy martini. In my mind I was back at the fair, staring after my runaway balloon that would do anything, even grow wings, just to get away from me.

A child's cry rang out right in front of me, a string slipping from an outstretched hand. The balloon was yellow, a weightless ball of mozzarella. It got caught in the awning and I reached up to retrieve it.

'Thank you,' the child murmured shyly, embarrassed, but overjoyed to be reunited with his small sphere of starlight.

I hesitated. I don't know why. Maybe because the balloon was so gleaming and perfect, the bright lemon to my lost, cruel lime. I wouldn't have to hold it tighter because it wouldn't want to leave me. I could find the green balloon and finally tell it, 'I don't need you anymore. I've found something better.' But I shook off my trance, handed the string over, and turned to walk away without a word.



HELL WANTS
JAZZ

By Eliza Burrows



I sent a letter. Yes, a letter indeed! And, you poor earthly souls will never learn. For why would you ever trust a demon as hellish as me? Have I not yet proven my worth? My boots are by the door, my trenchcoat ready, my axe able, and yet you think you're prepared? Stay on your toes all nite, isn't that what my letter read? Well *he he he* and *ha ha ha*, you imbeciles will meet your fate. 'Cause baby watch me hack at your neighbour, splinter 'em to bits and spare you a taste.

I know, aren't I cruel to give you hope? But, what fun is it that I just let you be? New Orleanians, get those Jazz bands ready, 'cause tonight I'm swinging for free. I *must* say, I thank you though, you *really* do turn me on: putting on those dancing shoes, following my orders and jittering through till dawn. I ooze for that control – it really is a hoot – however, the outcome of my pen I'm afraid I must withdraw. See, bouts of kindness don't keep well in God's basement; on the contrary they seem to have thawed.

Now, I know that I said your homes would be spared, if they sang out like Sidney Bechet. That the expense of your jives is I making good on that one little hell sworn threat. But, what can I say? I am a demon, and that of the hottest regions of Hell. You mere mortals simply obeying me is a testament, to a mind most certainly unwell. I believe it would be fair to compare your idiocy to me putting my fate in God. I've tricked you, you see, I am no saint: I'm nothing if not a fraud.

So, New Orleans, I thank you, swing my axe up high, let it rest atop my shoulder. For I won't be visiting your regions tonight, no: instead some folk a town over. Their sweet symphony of pleas will stall in the air, stuck between the carrying beat of your drums. But, please carry on dancing in fear, of course. This little game of ours has been fun.

And by morning, come blisters to remind you: I made you jive long past your will. Mere pawns of a game, and alas for you, my reign it'll continue still. Although, I feel some sort of endearment, for your ridiculous, blind trust in my word; you foolish humans named me your Axeman, when I am Hell's Demon on Earth.

TINY Earthquakes

BY AVA FAHEY

When Mum wasn't at home, the couch stopped holding its breath and the dining table sunk deeper into the floorboards. Tiles and bowls and light switches all felt loose in Frankie's hands – not that she ever wanted to hold things particularly tight anyway.

The house seemed to stand at attention for Mum, ready to serve. Frankie was only just tall enough to see over the kitchen counter. Sometimes she wished she wasn't. In the evenings, with her school bag dumped on her bedroom floor, she'd watch Mum make dinner. There was a loud rhythm to all of it. Thumping the knife down, tossing the potatoes in the pot. The sizzle and pop and crash, all of it surveyed by a furrowed brow. Frankie could see over the counter top, could watch Mum's hands move, but it kind of freaked her out.

So, it wasn't lost on her when it was Dad's turn to cook. Mum had shrugged on her blue coat. Frankie liked that one, even though it scratched her cheeks when Mum bent down to hug her. Mum had

walked out the front door and turned on the car, headlights streaming through the blinds. And then Mum was gone. Hanging out with Aunty Liv, she said. Frankie thought of the alien movies she had watched with her cousins, where light lifted people into the sky and took them away. Maybe to somewhere better. The movies never really talked about that.

Dad was the best cook in the world. He pulled frozen chicken nuggets out of the deep freezer and gently scooped them onto a tray. He even asked how many Frankie wanted. The tray slotted neatly in the oven while Frankie sat at the kitchen bench, listening to Dad hum. He wanted the dinner out of the way so he could get started on dessert.

Dad was the best cook in the world. He got out a light blue mixing bowl that Mum never used. He cracked eggs with the back of his palm, like he was born knowing how to do it. And when there was cookie dough to run his hands around, he put one ball on the tray and one in Frankie's hands. And he'd wink at her. Maybe all good cooks wink?

‘Alright, bugalugs, time for bed.’ Dinner was done, cookies were eaten while they were as warm as they could tolerate. Frankie normally sat next to Dad at the dinner table, but tonight he sat across from her. It made her feel like the adults she saw in restaurants, seated at the two-person tables that

she never got to sit at. Frankie nodded and got up. The sooner she got in bed, the sooner she could enjoy what always happened next.

Because there was a certain sound when Mum wasn't there. It was in the thrum of the oven and the wind through Frankie's window. It hovered just above her quilt as she pulled it up to her chin, as she waited. She laid as still as possible, listening. For minutes, for eternities, all she heard was quiet. Maybe Mum had come home early? Maybe Dad had just walked into the living room and turned on the TV?

And then, joyful unquiet.

Frankie put her face into her quilt, trying to stifle her own excitement. She had to play this cool if she was going to get closer than last time. Maybe she could even make it halfway down the stairs? She pulled back the sheets and tiptoed out of her room. The sound wafted up the staircase – gentle, high plinking. Frankie could picture Dad's hands on the top end of the piano, with that same unassuming expertise that he used on the eggs.

Frankie was halfway down the hallway. Past the bathroom, past the cupboard with the towels. Dad added some lower notes – if Frankie stood still for long enough, she could feel them in the floor. It was what she imagined earthquakes felt like. Dad made tiny earthquakes.

The light was low upstairs, but Frankie kept

going with one hand running gently along the wall, letting her fingertips see for her. Eventually her hand felt the sharp edge of the corner. She worked her hand down the wall until she reached the wooden banister. Her toes wiggled slowly forward until she could feel the curve of the steps. She put one foot out to begin the journey into dangerous, uncharted territory- and then Dad began to sing.

Frankie didn't know the song. At least, not at the time. When she was a teenager, Dad would burn CDs for her to listen to when she drove. Sometimes one of the songs would show up on her skin like a scar, and she'd remember that in a long-forgotten memory, Dad's own voice had traced the sweeping of the melody. And she'd love the song so much that it was all she could hum, all she could think of before she went to bed.

But for now, it was all new. Every song Dad sang sounded like he wrote it. He was never unsure, even when he was trying not to wake up his sleeping daughter. Frankie didn't even think about the steps anymore, she just lowered herself halfway down the staircase, where she could see Dad's bare feet on the pedals. Where she could see his hands traversing the keys, his knees just tucked underneath the brown piano. It was there that she sat. Seven years old and humbled like everything else in the house.

Frankie had heard a lot of voices in her time, or

maybe she hadn't. She didn't really know what classified as a lot. A month ago she performed in a play for school and Mum took a video of her singing. Frankie never knew that her voice sounded like that – that low, that weird. She wondered if all those people that Mum and Dad listened to, all the people on the radio and the TV, ever listened to themselves and thought the same thing. When she listened to Dad, it was like meeting a different Dad. This other guy that had her Dad's body and her Dad's voice, but was doing something new with it. She found it strange, almost scary, but she loved it all the same.

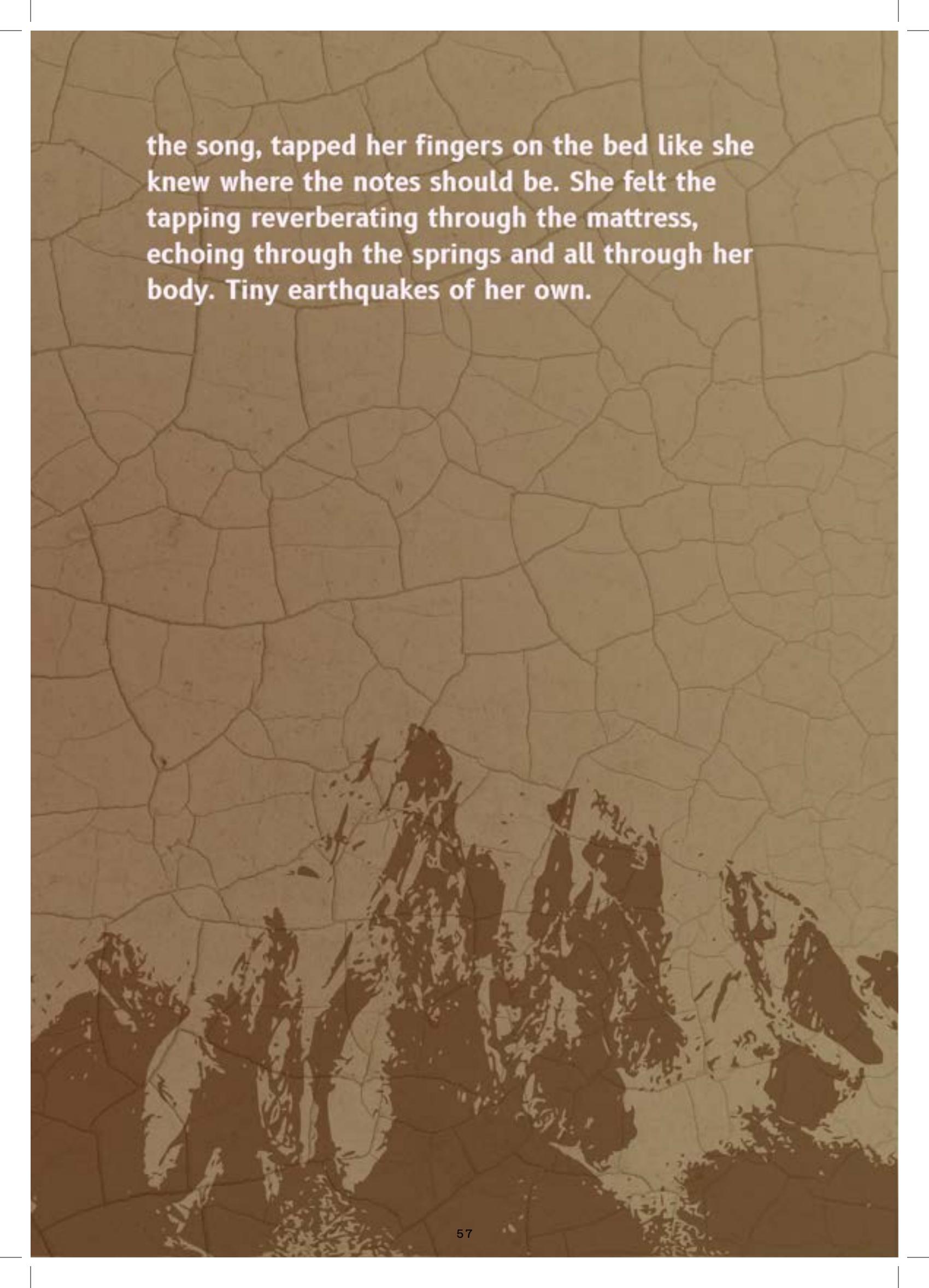
'I'm nervous. I don't think I wanna do it anymore,' Frankie sniffled on the day of the play.

'Everyone gets nervous,' Dad replied.

Even Dad. Even though his voice could weave itself through the threads in the rug, could pull the walls in closer and dry the dishes by the sink. Even though his hands have known their way since they were created, his fingers saying what he never could. Even though, in this moment, he was the maker and the made, the doing and the receiving. What could Dad possibly fear, when he could create such quiet out of noise?

But headlights seared through the windows, and the music stopped. Frankie raced back to her room, tucked herself in. The house clenched in silence.

Frankie hummed what she could remember of



the song, tapped her fingers on the bed like she knew where the notes should be. She felt the tapping reverberating through the mattress, echoing through the springs and all through her body. Tiny earthquakes of her own.



Shifting Goals

by Amelia Drew

Vivian used to think that pain helped her do better. She told herself bruises were medals, that Lisa's teasing was affection, that all she needed to do was work harder to keep up.

The steam still clung to her skin as she tugged on her shirt after practice. Blood slid down her shin from a scrape that burned like fire.

'God, what a day,' she muttered, pulling her sock over it.

A hard smack landed between her shoulders. Vivian gasped. Lisa grinned down at her, unbothered.

'Good job today. Next time, though, you'll have to be faster if you wanna beat me in that obstacle course.' She winked, smirking.

Vivian's cheeks flushed. She scrambled for a laugh. 'Y-yeah, sure! I'll try harder next week.'

'Good. I can't be dating a slowpoke.' Lisa pressed a quick kiss to her cheek and strode off.

Vivian's smile twitched. She stood a moment longer, bag clutched tight, wishing the words had warmed her instead of stung.

Alice nearly choked on her sandwich when she saw Vivian limp into the cafeteria.

'What the fuck happened to you?' She yelled across the table.

Vivian slid onto the bench with her tray. 'Rough training. Tripped over the ladders. Scrapped my knee. It's fine.'

Alice raised an eyebrow. 'Did you trip? Or did Lisa trip you?'

Vivian stabbed a nugget with her fork. 'I tripped. Don't worry so much.'

Alice leaned forward, eyes narrowing. 'You know she's rough with you. Too rough. I see the way she pushes you.' 'She's just focused,' Vivian shot back. 'Like me. I should pay more attention so she doesn't run into me.' The excuse tasted stale even as she said it. Alice's frown softened, but she didn't look convinced. She dug into her bag, pulling out tissues and a bandaid. 'Here.'

Vivian took them, carefully patching her knee. 'Thanks, Ali.'

'Of course. Just... don't let her wreck you before the game.' Alice's tone was light, but her eyes lingered too long. Vivian looked away. It wasn't the only time.

After practice a week later, Vivian shuffled into Alice's car with grass stains running down her thigh. Alice's knuckles whitened on the steering wheel.

'She pushed you again, didn't she?'

Vivian shook her head quickly. 'It was an accident. We collided going for the ball.'

'Viv.' Alice's voice was low, sharp. 'Accidents don't happen that often.'

Vivian forced a laugh. 'You're overreacting. Lisa's just competitive. I like that about her.'

She didn't meet Alice's eyes when she said it. If she did, she knew that her friend would see right through her. Alice exhaled slowly, staring out the windshield. 'I don't. I don't like seeing you hurt.'

Vivian stayed quiet, her throat tight. They drove in awkward silence all the way to Vivian's house, Alice shooting concerned glances to the girl next to her at every red light.

After a few minutes, Alice pulled up to Vivian's house. She went to say something to Vivian, but she was already out the door, slamming it behind her. Alice sighed and ran her fingers through her hair, swallowing the lump in her throat as she drove off.

Vivian looked back as she heard Alice's tyres rolling away. As she walked, shame in her chest, she wondered what it would feel like if the person driving away was the one she kissed every day.

She shook her head and shoved that thought down. Vivian couldn't think that way, she already had a girlfriend. But why did it feel like her friend cared more about her wellbeing than her lover did? Her eyes stung with tears, and she blinked them back. Vivian took a deep breath, and kept walking.

Lisa's demands only grew sharper. On the soccer field, she ignored Vivian's open calls for a pass, choosing instead to score alone. When Vivian stumbled, Lisa brushed her off with a sigh. 'Walk it off. You're fine,' she said every time.

But one time she wasn't fine. She ended up in the nurse's office for the fifth time that week, ankle swelling. 'You know,' the nurse said gently as she wrapped it, 'I see you in here too often.'

Vivian laughed weakly. 'Guess I'm clumsy.'

The nurse gave her a look that said otherwise. 'Or someone's pushing you

too hard.'

Vivian bit the inside of her cheek. She didn't argue.

Later, Alice met her outside the nurse's office, carrying both their backpacks without asking. 'What happened this time?'

Vivian forced her lips into a smile. 'Nothing. Just tripped again. Sprained my ankle a bit. It'll be fine in a week with rest, she said. No biggie.'

Alice stopped walking. 'You always "just trip." How many times are you gonna defend Lisa before you admit she's hurting you?'

Vivian's chest tightened, her eyes lit with anger defensively. 'She doesn't hurt me. She has *never* laid a hand on me. She's my girlfriend, Alice.' She sighed, deflating. 'She loves me. I... I'm just clumsy. And she just wants me to be the best, like her. Besides, if I'm slacking, I need a bit of pain to motivate me to do better. It's fine.' Her voice broke.

Alice froze, eyes widening. 'Vivian.' Her voice cracked with anger and something softer beneath. 'Don't you dare say that. You don't deserve to get hurt. Ever.'

Vivian's eyes watered, and she looked away.

'I guess so.' Her gaze dropped to the ground. Her cheeks burned not from shame alone, but from the way Alice's voice trembled with care.

Later that night, she told Lisa over text that she was out for a week because of her ankle sprain, Lisa barely reacted. All she said was 'Maybe you should have tried harder.' And when Vivian replied with a 'Good luck at training, love you,' her message was left unseen. It took hours before she received a reply, and it was only a simple heart.

Vivian laid there in her bed, her ankle aching with ice resting on top of it. Her eyes watered as she put her phone away. She let the tears lull her into a deep sleep.

A few days later, Vivian sat on Lisa's bed while Lisa scrolled on her phone.

'Coach says I'm killing it,' Lisa said. 'Thinks I'll definitely make the college team.'

'That's great,' Vivian murmured, staring at the wall.

Lisa frowned. ‘What’s with you? You’ve been weird all week.’

Vivian hesitated. Her throat felt tight. ‘When I sprained my ankle... you didn’t care. You just kept going.’ Lisa rolled her eyes. ‘Viv, we’re athletes. Injuries happen. You can’t expect me to stop every time you trip.’ Vivian swallowed hard. ‘It’s not just that. You push me so hard I feel like I’m never good enough.’

‘You *aren’t* good enough. At least not yet. I’m making you better,’ Lisa snapped. ‘We’re a team.’

Vivian’s voice wavered. ‘It doesn’t feel like we’re a team. It feels like I’m just here to make you look better.’

‘You’re being dramatic. If you can’t handle the pressure, maybe you shouldn’t be on the team.’

The words cut clean through her, chest tightening. For a moment, she saw herself from above: bruised, limping, begging for scraps of affection while Alice had always – always – been steady at her side.

Vivian stood, shouldering her bag. ‘You know what. Maybe I shouldn’t. We’re done. Goodbye.’ She went to walk out the door when Lisa grabbed her arm roughly.

‘What the fuck did you say?’ She yelled. Vivian flinched and tried to free her arm out of Lisa’s grip. ‘I said we’re over. I’m breaking up with you. Let go of me!’

‘You can’t dump me. You *need* me. You’ll never get any better without my help.’

‘*Your* help?’ Vivian laughed dryly, tears burning her eyes as she blinked them away. ‘You never help me. You only keep me around because I make you look better. All you care about is yourself!’ She yanked her arm free, fuming. ‘I’m leaving.’

She walked out the door, hearing Lisa yelling behind her. She just ignored her, relief and fear swirling simultaneously in her chest as her wet cheeks shone in the moonlight outside.

Now, the bruises were fading. Vivian limped less each day. Alice walked with her after school, matching her pace without complaint. Sometimes she teased her into laughing, sometimes she just sat beside her in silence, letting the air fill with something easy and warm.

One afternoon, as they sprawled in the grass, Alice picked a clover and twirled it between her fingers. ‘You don’t look over your shoulder as much anymore,’ she said.

Vivian blinked at her. ‘What do you mean?’

Alice shrugged, tossing the clover onto Vivian’s lap. ‘Just... you look lighter. Happier.’

Vivian stared at the tiny flower, her heart thudding. ‘That’s thanks to you,’ she said before she could stop herself. Alice’s smile faltered, just for a second, then grew, gentle and real.

Vivian didn’t say anything else. She didn’t need to. The time of bruises and empty kisses was behind her. This – Alice’s laughter, her quiet care, the possibility of something more – was her now.

And for the first time, Vivian wasn’t afraid to step forward.

THE END.