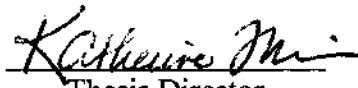


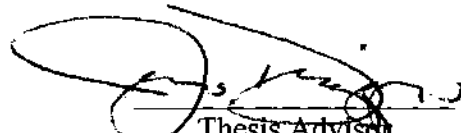
Indigo Journeyman

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By *Miranda Escalante*


Thesis Director
Katherine Min


Thesis Adviser
James Driggers

Indigo Journeyman

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Indigo Journeyman

The Indigo Journeyman

The first time she saw the man he was crouching in the middle of the street sidewalk. His feet were placed intricately among the cracks and crevices of the stoned street as if he was a part of the rock set by hands of men who had laid the stones hundreds of years ago. His pants were hemmed with a thick brown fold that had taken on a layer of grime, and he left his patched shirt unbuttoned at the top where spirals of hair lay like river anemones. Rings of heavy smoke emanated from the tip of his long pipe where the hull had been carved into a head of a crater-faced miner, dipped and knotted. The rings hung with hefty weight about the man's skull like dark halos and smelled of the Indian seas, full of spices and sweat.

Chamomile walked up behind him; she saw the man shift his weight from the sole of his holey left shoe to the other side as if he could feel her, though she was sure that her petticoat was the only shuffle that her body could have mustered. Yet, he didn't say a word. Besides the shift, he made no gesture towards her. He just sat crouched, immensely lost.

"Pardon me." The man did not budge at the sound of her voice, though she was sure he would. "Just what do you thing you are doing?" Her voice cracked with authority like mountainside thunder as she loomed over him like a circulating grey sky.

He was not shaken by her storm, but sat like a primordial cat hovering for a moment and then asked unwaveringly, "You from around here?" He still did not turn to address her.

"Of course. Sweaton doesn't get too many strangers."

“Then you just might know why I’m here like this.”

His impudence felt like a bracelet of mosquito bites wrapped around her arms and the more she stared at lines of shiny grease with sparkles of dust gracing the nape of his neck, the more she began to itch and swell. She crossed her arms together like the head of a skeleton key, “No. That’s why I asked. You could be stretching your legs for all I know.”

“Well, I have been walking for a long time now,” he said with a chuckle, but all Chamomile could see were his shaking shoulders. “And don’t a man have a right to do what he pleases?”

“Perhaps that’s what being on the road teaches a man, yes,” she said to the red patch on the shoulder of his shirt since she could not see his face.

“Not just the road,” he said, “but the world.”

“Doesn’t the world teach you to speak face to face with strangers?”

“Just with friends,” the man lightheartedly replied as he finally stood to face her. The first thing that Chamomile noticed about the man was his skin; his skin wasn’t dark, and it wasn’t pale either. It was slightly indigo, like an East Indian prince her uncle had once told her about when the fire had been lit and the moonshine had kicked in. Her uncle had sworn its truth, and now here she was believing him. She thought of this East Indian prince when she looked at him and thought nothing of the way his skin was reminiscent of the few departed founders who had once visited her home as a young child. She thought nothing of it as she looked at him in silence for a moment. “Now what?”

“What do you mean ‘now what’? I’m the one who asked you a question.”

Chamomile wanted to act a little more put off than curious.

“Here.” The man with the worn out shoes and colorfully beaded belt took her hand in his and formed it into a hard knotted fist, with her index finger as a pointer. Normally she would be frightened, but his smell brought her back to the days that she’d roll in the fields of hay. He smelled earthy in all the best of ways – honeysuckled dewdrops, deep red clay, and turning fall leaves. “Do you see that crack in the sidewalk there?” He pointed her finger to a black sliver in the sidewalk.

“Yes.” He let her hand drop to her side as soon as she answered him.

“Before I lit my pipe, I placed some leaves in the ground. And if you know anything about this place, you should know just what will happen.” He went back into his squatting position touching the ground with his one free hand.

Now Chamomile was really put off by his lack of knowledge. Who was this man? Sweatton hadn’t had visitors in years except for next of kin. “I’m glad you’re amused but things just don’t grow right before your eyes. It takes the night air to cause true growth.” The moon was the true source of growth; something about its beams seduced the plants to come right up out of the ground in the most peculiar ways. The moon stroked the plant and formed it into some great oak spindling, curling and stretching beneath the light of the moon. The moon was a tender lover whispering down the spine of the tree as it grew in the night.

“You’re sayin that it won’t grow right here in the light of day?”

“Not that I’ve seen. And I’ve seen quite a few plants grow in the Sweatton style, like I said; I’ve only lived here all my life.” Chamomile wasn’t boasting, she had. In the town of Sweatton people had found that if they buried just about anything it would shoot up in the form of a tree if taken care of properly.

There was something about the richness of the mountain soil, something about the way that the deep and gritty particles broke into moist black chunks in your hands. Yes, it was something about the soil. And the night air, the way that it stroked the trees in the starlight. Perhaps it was just something about this place, Sweatons.

"You don't say..." The indigo journeyman said with a grunt, as if to help him digest his thoughts.

"I *do* say. Mrs. Shelton, only last spring, grew a set of orchid trees lining her front yard." Chamomile explained. "They say that anyone who passes through Silicon Street becomes so intoxicated with the exotic smells from the buds that they best hurry home to their husband or wife."

"Do they?" Chamomile noticed that the wanderer wasn't really listening to her, he was still fixated on the crack in the sidewalk like a fox sniffing out a henhouse. She touched his shoulder to grab his attention. "Look, you'll have to come back tomorrow. Trust me." He said nothing. So there the man huddled, still smoking contemplatively. "Why would you want to grow a tobacco tree right in the middle of the sidewalk in the middle of town anyway?" She searched.

"Why wouldn't I?" He finally stood up and truly faced her. He wasn't completely handsome, just burly with quizzical eyebrows that made her wonder.

"I think the men of this town would appreciate it very much. I think maybe if you tried some of these fine leaves here you'd appreciate them very much too." He said with a laugh.

She noticed that he laughed like a childhood boy who was overly delighted in himself. With a robust 'Ha ha!' and then a slightly stifled 'he he' to follow. She didn't

know if she liked the way it sounded, so forced, like he was throwing knives in the air and didn't know when to expect them to come down. Yet, there was something so familiar about that laugh that it made her blood bristle and poke her deep within.

There was something about him. Something about the way his eyes looked deep into hers, traveled down her throat and slammed against her spine. His words went deep, and implanted themselves in her belly. She could feel them growing quickly, snapping into new positions with their growth.

"I, I best be going." She stammered. The tingling was creeping down her spine; beginning to microscopically gyrate in the veins of her arms. She felt that she had grown a large patch of forget-me-nots in the knot of her stomach.

"Aw, I'm just getting your goat, girl!"

"I know you were, but I just can't stay." She said stopping her breath with her words.

"Well, will you come see me tomorrow? I might have myself a tobacco tree by then. Trust me, there will be a crowd."

Chamomile did not know what possessed her to say yes, but she did. There was something about his laugh that harrowed her, but she wanted to hear it again and again. Yes, she would go back tomorrow.

Sweaton

The small town of Sweaton lay wedged in between the crevices of two pinnacles in the Piper Peaks, and it laid split right down the middle by an old miner's rail track. The Sweaton townsfolk were all secretly obliged to the coal miners for the tracks that separated their homes from the other side of town where the old founder's cemetery lay.

It was the miner's tracks that offered a boundary of some sort; yet, no one was quite sure what of because only the living paid much attention to this rickety hem in between the town. The old souls of Sweaton didn't mind disregarding the living's laws and superstitions. They'd cross over the cracked wood and jaded steel into town to carry on their unfinished business or simply stop for a chat. It wasn't uncommon for them to visit their old family homes and stop for a sip of iced mint tea in the heat of the summer months. The townspeople all treated each and every stranger that they saw shimmy up to their porch for a chat or that they ran into on the street with respect and a quieted dignity. After all, it could be a long forgotten relative or their Grandfather's lawyer that they were obliging.

The Sweaton folk always longed to treat all with respect, because if they didn't they feared that they'd lose their midnight serenades. Long after the evening gloaming has set in and all the sky's pearls were visible, the past founders of Sweaton would sing the praises of the celestial sky to them as they slept. The whispered hymns were as familiar as the pawing of the wind through the trees for every babe and mother of their little haven in the valley.

Sweaton never had any true outsiders, whether the townspeople knew it or not.

They'd shut down the gas stations years ago. Not that they meant to shut them down, they just hadn't need for them. The stations had shut themselves down the minute that Thunder Robinson discovered everyone's automobile would run on moonshine anyway. The aged gatekeepers of Sweaton were fixed under a heavy blanket of mountain grit and crumbling rock. Here the layers of pine needles and browned Rhododendron fronds composed chronicles of these two peaks whose secrets were known only to the dead who could no longer whisper them to the living. It was said that at the heart of these two peaks the hidden chronicles of the mountains hid in a burrow deep beneath the surface of the land. The true magic of this place was said to be known only to those that could trace the arteries and veins of the mountain back to the core of the two peaks. This was a truth that was passed down from each generation of mountainfolk to the next. A truth that had never been accomplished, yet firmly trusted in.

Rally

It was the night that she met the indigo journeyman that she dreamt of Rally. Something in his stance hearkened the cesspool of her past. Some days the wells Rally had dug into her life were much easier to hide than others. The wells were deep and churning constantly, producing fresh new water that she could not give to anyone but the hills in deep sobs.

The week that Rally had vanished her momma told her not to cry. "In hill country people always disappear, darling. It's just a way of life. You don't question it, it just is," she said to comfort her child.

The hills around Sweaton had a peculiar way of swallowing people up and leaving them for dead. Chamomile imagined that there was a multitude of singers of those lost who had all been swallowed by a cave in the stomach of the hills. The lost were the Jonahs of the peaks and to pass the time they had constructed the best choirs in the nation. Chamomile swore she could hear the hills competing in their songs, or on a day

that the sun was high and the leaves were budding they would sing in a round, one hill singing back to the other.

Chamomile could never find the lost singers. The truth was that no one could. And no one could ever find Rally.

Sweaton folk thought Rally was just plain dumb, though they tolerated him. The townspeople couldn't wrap their minds around the way that the small boy functioned. Rally had a tendency to explore and study each and every thing he touched. Whether it was animal or mineral, he plotted out a map of its crevices and facets in his mind as not to forget it.

“Rally, why do you do that?” Chamomile asked him as he gently turned a rock that looked like red sponge in his hand. They had been camped up the backside of a hill all morning because Rally was certain that they were laying on top of a sleeping volcano, a true Rip Van Winkle he said. They were determined to find the beard of the hill, tug at it and wake it up. They had heard a boy say his grandfather had done so a hundred years before. They were determined to be the next.

Never looking up, never losing his place of inquisitive study, Rally said, “Do what?”

“Look at things all over, real slow.”

“I don’t want to forget nothing. I want to know it all. Besides being slow is my way.” And it was, the Sweaton folk couldn’t understand the words that dripped out of his mouth. It wasn’t his inquisitiveness that got them in a tiff, it was the way he talked; it was too slow, even for the back woods mountain speakers. Young Chamomile didn’t mind, she loved the way his words swirled and slurred together. “Thuuuunda Rowwwinsuuun! Yeeehooo!” His words stuck, and rolled slowly like sticky fall molasses all over his lips. She never minded that it took him a minute or two at a time to get his words out. She liked to wait for him.

In her whirling girlish reveries she imagined if she were to kiss him, she would taste the autumn sugars. She was familiar with the process of the deep brown boiled down sugar cane that her family clan made with the turning of the leaves. All day long the goop bubbled and churned upon itself over and over. She imagined that Rally’s lips would taste like the final satisfactory moment of the day when her Uncle Jeremiah cut off a piece of sugar cane to let her dip into the boiler pan for the excess molasses that hadn’t

made it into mason jars. In her mind Rally's kisses were as sweet and fresh as autumn.

Chamomile's Momma, Melda, only approved of Rally because she knew what his parent's were like; the entire town knew Rally's history better than he did. His parents let him wander, because they couldn't stand the sight of him. Rally was born a tiny baby, born from an angry mother who didn't make it to the outhouse in time to pass what she thought was a kidney stone and ended up being a shriveled baby boy. Both of Rally's parents were stubborn as two grey mules and felt that this tiny abnormality of a boy couldn't be kin to them, and had misplaced him many times in his early years.

Every where that a baby should be, Rally wasn't. His parents were so used to him slipping through the cracks of his crib that they stored all of their canned goods in it and kept the crib in their pantry. Rally got used to sleeping curled up next to the family dog, Angelique, many of his nights he spent cuddled to the curl of her spine.

Once as a toddler he fell out of his mother's berry picking basket on a summer day only to live under the thorns of the blackberry patch for a few days. His mother found him days later when she went to go get a few more blackberries to finish her pie. There Rally was – with a goofy smiling mouth stained with the black juices, pink and red scratches along his face and arms; just sitting in his cloth diaper. She was so mad to find him there that she spanked him and kept him inside for months, hardly speaking to the poor boy. Luckily, Rally lived unbeknownst to his personal history, living like adventures were what little boys ought to be allowed to have all day.

Chamomile and Rally had their set of adventures together. They used to climb into the attic of Chamomile's relatives, and stock old shirt pockets with buttons that they had found in houses and sidewalks. Chamomile's aunts all had pink buttons shoved into

the pockets of old bathrobes, while her uncle's pockets of old overalls were bursting with buttons of browns and blacks.

Their adventures were pregnant with the hopes of youth. They were convinced that there was treasure to be found in the library. The books were old, and smelled of raccoon burrows. Layers of dust hung heavy on book pages to tell of their virgin life they'd spent on the shelves. Books always fascinated Rally and Chamomile because information was hardly ever passed in written words, but orally from each neighbor to the next. It had been this way for years. The corners of the library were havens for spiders and mice. Rally and Chamomile were convinced that somewhere in the building there must have been a secret passageway or two that lead to flakes of gold; the librarians acted as if they were all too suspicious peering at the children as they passed the circulation desk.

Rally was the only one that understood Chamomile's hunger pains for the mountains. Their feet padded on the emerald carpets of moss. Their arms stretched around trees and rocks in admiration. The owls would sing to them in the night, softly cooing them on as their laughs would pierce the air in jubilee.

Chamomile had forgotten how much she craved to be understood like that. She had hid Rally away from her memory. When Rally had disappeared she had dug a hole for him, buried him, mourned him, and moved him out of the perimeter of her remembrance. Only today when she saw the wayfarer in the street did Rally begin to rise from the ashes and invade her boundaries again...

Dear Lord. It was *his* laugh. He had finally come home.

Thunder Robinson

“Come on Chammy, let’s go spy on him.” Rally pleaded, his dirty small fists demandingly clenched like little mud pies they’d make after a cool rain. They’d been sitting on the hill above Thunder Robinson’s property for hours now and Chamomile was tired of the way that the sun sliced through her ivory cotton dress and made her legs burn.

“I don’t think we should. My momma said we best not.” The sternness in Chamomile’s voice sounded like her mother’s and made her itch on the insides. She didn’t want to sound like her mother.

“I just want to go see what he’s up to. Maybe we can find his secret still! And if we found it –” Rally stumbled over the words, only to be interrupted.

“If we found it and came home to tell the tale we’d get beat.”

“Yeah, you might,” Rally said with a giggle, “but my pappy don’t care.”

The town brewer and eccentric, Thunder Robinson, had trees to supply him with everything he needed to create Sweatons’ reserve of moonshine and bathtub gin. A tall tree with arms like an oak and branches that ended with the rough leaves of corn. No one had seen a corn tree like Thunder Robinson’s.

The massive Juniper tree that grew next to it was almost a match for the infamous corn tree. The Juniper had grown to be about 200 feet, with blue juniper berries the size of crabapples. People said that the only reason his trees grew so big was that he fed them with the sources they were going to become and sang them old moonshiner ballads – they grew knowing their purpose.

Rally was full with an unruly determination to have a conversation with the man,

"We could come back at midnight when the moon is high and the stars are shining bright. Then he'll be out to sing to his crops."

"Rally, no. I'll get my tan hide and then I won't be able to play with you no more," the more she opened her mouth the more maternal she sounded, "Neither one of us wants that, right? So hush your mouth about ol' Thunder."

"Aw, Chammyyy." He used his best whine that he learned from his pa's pig Blue. Blue died of old age because he whined with perfection every time his slaughtering time was near. His pa hadn't any sympathy for his boy, but his hogs were another thing. "Come on, Chammyyy."

The hog whine didn't work on Chamomile, but Rally's small brown beaded eyes did. Usually she didn't deny Rally anything because life had denied him so much. "All right," she said with a sigh she'd become familiar with through her mother when she got her own way in her relentless stubbornness.

"I'll come get you at midnight." When Rally said this, she was expecting some grandiose escape like way her last sister had eloped, but Rally just walked up to the door and rapped on it with hi little fist. Thom shuffled to the door with his rifle unready to fire, it was just for looks in case it was something serious.

He didn't even have to look down at Rally's smudged face to know it was him. He didn't even have to wait for Rally to say anything, he had rehearsed this line before. "No Rally, Chamomile can't come out to play. It's midnight, son." He said in tired rehearsed tones.

"All right, I know. Ok." Rally showed his two lost teeth in front with a smile and just stood there in front of Thom like a solicitor in the doorway not knowing just what he

was selling, and wasting your time all the while.

“What is it Rally?” Thom said hurriedly.

“Well, I was just gonna. Well, I was gonna ask you...” Rally was smarter than most people took credit for, he lost his credit for the pace of his speaking. His words often stopped and started, skipped to fast and took slow hops like a toad’s attempt to cross the road. “You know how I come over here sometimes...” Rally used this to his advantage. All the while he stammered Chamomile was busy sneaking out the window and heading to Thunder Robinson’s as her father’s hands guided Rally out of the doorway and lovingly shut the door behind him.

Ol’ Thunder was a weaver more than he was a farmer. Chamomile and Rally watched from the tufted up knoll behind his house as he weaved a delicate covering for his trees to grow. He weaved them with his fiddle first, with each pull of the bow across the strings Thunder composed threads of life in which his plants would hold on to until the next piece of the threaded song arrived. Chamomile noticed how the trees shifted and swayed when Thunder’s voice pierced his crops with moonshiner ballads and back hills swing. They began to touch and twist their branches together in such a delicate manner that it all seems natural. They were deeply rooted together to fulfill their destiny together and create a tapestry of tastes of Thunder’s moon corn shine.

“Let’s go talk to him,” Rally pulled the curtain of hair apart to whisper in Chamomile’s ear, “He can’t be all that scary.”

“I’ve heard he’s full of magic. I bet he could turn us into a stalk of corn if he wanted to.”

“Come on Chammy. There’s a difference between white magic and dark magic. If he’s full of dark magic, people would die from drinking his white lightning, or turn into crows or something... They don’t. People say his shine tastes like sweet summer spring water.”

Perhaps it was the strength and magic of the midnight air that convinced Chamomile to believe Rally, but she found her feet in following Rally as he tore down the hill and into the corn trees after Thunder Robinson who was beginning to sprinkle a little moonshine on his plants as he kept up the song he’d been fiddling with a gentle hum.

Thunder stopped in front of Rally and Chamomile just before they got a face full of moonshine. “Hello, children.” Thunder said with a rabitty old smile exposing his skinny yellow teeth that looked like stalagmites hanging from the cave of his mouth.

When Chamomile heard Thunder speak she lost her breath and words, but Rally chimed right in like a second fiddler, “Hey there ol’ Thunder! I’ve been waiting my whole life to meet you.”

“What? All ten years, Mister Rally?” Thunder said with a laugh. His laughter was a heavy breath outwards that filled the air around them with a gust of wind. *He is full of magic*, Chamomile thought.

“Yes sir, all ten years. And how the pick do you know my name?” Rally asked in exuberant enthusiasm.

“I’ve seen you in my barrels of shine. I can see it all in the shine. I’ve seen you too Chamomile.”

Chamomile’s blood drained from her feet up, turning them into a rock hard pillar.

The blood rushed to her lips in a hurry to escape, but only made her lips pulsate as she croaked, “You have?”

“Yeah, I been waiting on you two for a few weeks. I saw that you’d be coming when the moon was high in the night. I just wasn’t sure when. Rally, you’ve been meaning to ask me something haven’t ya?”

“Yes, only all my life.” Rally said certainly which made Thunder laugh again, this time his laugh carried such a gust that the leaves of the trees were touched with his breath. This frightened Chamomile, and she secretly wished that Thunder didn’t find Rally so funny.

“Well what is it son?”

Rally glanced at Chamomile, and then turned to her. “Is it ok if I go whisper it in his ear? It’s just... I’d like to ask him by myself is all.”

Rally normally told Chammy everything, yet got quiet whenever she asked about his parents. Perhaps it was about his family, her Momma Melda told her not to interfere with such things. She obeyed for Rally’s sake. “Sure, go ahead Rally.”

Rally took a few steps towards the old over-alled man and tugged Thunder’s white beard gently until Thunder was the proper height for secret whispering. Chamomile watched Thunder’s face as Rally’s cupped hand kept his words from her, and harvested them for Thunder. Thunder didn’t laugh and his eyes looked sad for a moment. He sighed and dropped to his knees in front of Rally, grabbed his shoulders and began to talk to him, face to face, slow and tender. Chamomile couldn’t hear but a few words, just a few terms of endearment here and there and tried her best to lose interest for Rally’s sake.

She heard the last few words of the conversation. “Now son, do you understand

me?”

Rally nodded his head. “I do Ol’ Thunder. I do.”

“Good. You need anything don’t be afraid to come back. The barrels may have more to tell.”

With that Rally turned from him, grabbed Chamomile’s hand and they were off into the early morning light towards Chamomile’s farm. Chamomile had promised herself that she wouldn’t ask, but she couldn’t resist. “What did he say Rally?”

Rally kept silent for a while as he watched two sparrows chase after each other up and over the hill in front of them. He was lost so deep in thought Chamomile wondered if she’d ever find him again and they walked alone in silence for a time hand in hand.

He broke the silence. “We are going to go on a great adventure one day when we are older.”

Chamomile laughed, “That’s a well known fact to both of us. Are you sure he’s seen something in that shine besides his own reflection?”

“Yes I’m sure Chammy. Just listen, Thunder knows what he’s seen and there will be a great cost to this adventure.” Rally never used words like that, so Chamomile took that sentence with great heed.

Tobacco

Chamomile stood back as she watched the large crowd of Sweaton folk that had appeared near the Town Hall, the crowds huddled together like a patch of blackberries, tangled together in their inquisitiveness. Rally had tossed the tobacco into the sidewalk crack only yesterday, but there was a stalk of deep red bark with a few light green leaves about his height. Chamomile caught a glimpse of Rally through the bramble of bodies. He was not squatting, but holding on to two leaves with the fists of his hands. They lay deep in the heart of his palms, and periodically she would stroke the new leaves with the tips of his fingers. The men of the town were teetering around the tree inspecting it on all sides, old men were scratching their heads and damning themselves in mumbling sputters for not thinking of such a thing themselves. Young boys were wondering if these leaves would be good enough to cure and make into a good snuff for the days in summer when they could spend hours spitting over the porch. The women just sat back and clucked like hens, tsking their husbands.

She only caught glimpse of him, for the crowd was too thick with heated swollen bodies. Through the bend of an arm on a hip of a young man she made out a black curl that fell to the nape of his neck when he shifted the hat on his head. Over the shoulder of an old woman she saw the indigo hue of his wrists and thought of how soft they looked against the green leaves he held in his hands. Could this man really be her Rally?

It was finally when the crowd had settled, and the gleam of excitement had turned and faded that the crowds had dispersed and those walking on the sidewalk would only stop and examine the tree in passing. It was then that Indigo man approached her.

“Do you know who I am Chamomile?” His words were as precise as the stare he directed towards her eyes.

Chamomile didn't question why he knew her name, for he had always known it. “Yes I do.” She said as her words shuddered with the rest of her body and split as they hit the ground like walnuts falling from the autumn trees. She couldn't bring herself to say the name that she had tried her whole life to forget.

“Don't mutter a word.” He said as his pointer finger rested on his lips like a horizontal dam, perhaps to hold other words from tumbling out. “No one else knows and I'd like to keep it that way.”

“But why? You've been gone for so many years, and caused so many people grief, we left you for dead, and now you only want us to keep you buried? Why, would you do that to us?” Chamomile choked and sputtered through her words.

“Who is “us?”” The Indigo Journeyman asked.

“All the folks here in Sweaton.”

“Ah, I see” Rally said and then walked towards an old rounded man examining the tobacco tree, “Excuse me kind sir. I was wondering if I could trouble you with a question.”

“Sure son, if it ain't too much trouble.” The old man said. “This your tree here? Mighty fine looking one if I do say so myself.”

“Why thank you sir.” The Indigo Journeyman said with a short bow.

“What was your question, son?”

“Did you ever know of a little boy named Rally?” The Indigo Journeyman asked him inquisitively.

“Sure did, was a rotten little thing. Ran around town with no shoes on, just wearing some burlap overalls. Ran around town like he owned it, like he was Sweaton Holdenberry’s reincarnate.”

“Who was Holdenberry, may I ask?” Rally interrupted.

“Our good ol’ town founder, God rest his soul. Anyway this Rally kid never did any good for this town, probably because his parents were trash and treated him like lesser than that. He disappeared quite some time ago, most people say the mountains swallowed him up whole.”

“Really?” Rally looked back at Chamomile to make sure she had heard every word that the old man had said. “Sir, whatever happened to his parents? Do you know?”

“Nope. Haven’t seen them since the boy disappeared, but didn’t really see them when the boy was around either, peculiar folks. People say that they didn’t even notice he was gone.” The old man said as he tipped his hat, “Must be going now to feed my hogs. They get grumpy when I’m late for supper.”

Rally walked back over to Chamomile with a smile. “You heard that right? I think I’m Sweaton Holdenberry the second. Perhaps that isn’t the worst way to be remembered.” Chamomile understood why he had done this. Most of the people of Sweaton had let the boy Rally be a tiny glimpse of the past, and nothing more. This was the first time that Rally was a walking specter of Sweaton, and his presence was only known to her.

They walked from the bustle of the town square to a giant maple near the skirts of town, its leaves bright from soaking in the glory of the sun, to talk in the manner that only old friends can do. Their words were halted at times, as one remembered what the other

did not. Then their words created stories that both held the same place and time in their lives, but different facets of these memories. While talking about these moments their words became rushed, and jumbled together like the times they would roll down hills as children and crash together at the bottom in delightful disarray. Under that maple tree, in the middle of the sun's light and the shadows from the leaves that splotched their bodies all over, they reclaimed the lives of two children who roamed the hills and chased adventures.

Like We Used To

“Come with me,” he whispered through the wisps of hair crowding around her ear as he blew the heat of his mouth into it. He had come to her window like he used to as a child, only now he couldn’t fit through the window next to her bed so he stood on tiptoes and pulled the top of his body close to her face.

“I can’t Rally.” Chamomile said with a deep yawn.

“You can, you just won’t. What’s holding you back?”

“I just can’t that’s all.”

“There’s a difference between won’t and can’t. And you just won’t. I guess you aren’t the girl I knew.” Rally said. His words were heavy and swung weight of them around her.

“I am the same girl, just with more years of learning behind me instead of more years of learning still ahead of me. I’ve got more sense now to know than to follow you on one of your silly adventures.”

“Chammy, I can guarantee this one won’t be like our old ones.”

“Of course it won’t be, because I am not going with you.” Chamomile resolved.

“Fine,” Rally said unemotionally, “It’s not like the Dela and her sisters were of any interest to you anyway.”

“You mean Dela McNabb?”

“Yeah, I got a hunch she knows what I need to know. I’m going go find it out tomorrow with or without you. But it looks like its just going be without you. At least come with me there, and I won’t ask you to come on the journey with me.”

“Promise?”

“I won’t mention another world about it.”

“I’ll go with you Rally; after all it was the one place that we always wanted to go together on our childhood adventures and never had enough courage to go.” Chamomile said. “What do you need them to tell you anyway?”

“I want to know who I really am.”

“What are you talking about Rally?” This was the first time that Chamomile had said his childhood name. She thought it so odd how the word just slipped out of her mouth as slick as a salamander’s skin under a rock cool from the morning chill. Rally looked deep into her. He looked past her brown eyes right into her ribcage, and the depth of his gaze did not stop there. It was if he had to look inside of her to see who he once was, and he did.

Rally had to search long and hard for the boy that he once was long ago, the boy that he had left thrashing wildly in the woods somewhere. The boy he found in Chamomile was a scrawny looking thing, his hair was disheveled and his eyes were wild with the magic of the night and the consistency of the morning. There she had held his memory within her heart like a sacramental prayer. If he had only known that she had chanted his name over and over in her heart, he would not have wondered why she had kept him hidden in her chest for so long.

“I know who you are. You are who I say, you are Rally.”

“But I’m not, not anymore Chamomile. I can’t explain it, but I feel like I am some one that I just met. The past years of my life are like a smudge in a charcoal drawing. The

lines are hazy and I can only make out a few indistinguishable fingerprints here and there. Do you understand?"

"No, but I'm trying," Chamomile said with a sympathetic curl of her lips. "When did this happen? I mean I find it pretty improbable that you were walking along one day and just felt the sudden feeling that you had lost yourself and could not be reclaimed."

"Well, it was just that exactly," he said.

"What moment was significant enough to make you feel such a loss of yourself?"

Actually, it had nothing to do with the moment for the moment held no great significance to him at all. Rally had been swimming in the Ridgemount River with the trout. He loved their stripe that ranged from a light rose color to a crimson and the way that it contrasted against their freckle like spots, almost like a freckled face with a sunburn. This was the way that he always fished for his meals; fishing poles were for those who did not want to work for their supper.

He had been traveling up the Greenway Ridge for some time now, stopping in towns and cities looking for work or a good story or two, but he prized his days alone in the forest where he could roam free and explore every bend and cranny of the mountains.

As he swam behind a school of young trout, kicking his legs in quiet ripples as not to disturb them is when he saw an Ol' Boy. Ol' Boys were the biggest fish of the river. They were the fish that had somehow survived long enough not to die off or get eaten, and it was these fish that swam at the speed of slugs in the murky bottom of the water. Rally had caught many Ol' Boys, but not a good Rainbow Trout Ol' Boy and decided this was the day to wrestle him down a twenty pounder.

He followed the Ol' Boy as he skirted on the top of the water, high above the unsuspecting fish. What people don't realize, is that Ol' Boys don't mind swimming under humans because they often go unnoticed and swimmers hardly have fishing poles. Rally followed the giant fish down to a pool of algae and lost him for a moment. The algae in this pool had long strips that traveled from the top to the bottom, they were slippery and slimy to the touch. Rally had lost the Ol' Boy until he swam under the water and saw a path where the algae had opened up like two curtains having been separated by the weight of the big old trout and saw that he had made it safely through the algae to the other side through the crack of the curtain of riverweed.

Rally knew that he shouldn't swim through the riverweed, many have lost their lives in situations like that, but he wanted to see if he could create a tunnel like the fish had made. Rally experimentally stuck his arm into the weed to find it separated whenever it came into contact with him and was the same for every limb he tried into the garden of algae. Rally found that could swim the whole way of the pool without being touched by the green underwater leaves, so he did.

When he reached the other side of the pool, the trout was near the rocky banks as if he were just waiting for Rally. As Rally inched closer the trout did not stir underneath the water and Rally in all of his excitement dove for the fish who veered towards him with its giant mouth open. This Ol' Boy wasn't the prey as much as Rally had hoped he was, and Rally darted out of the way as the fish's teeth snapped and sent a wave of water that bubbled on the surface of the pool.

The fish swerved back around to face Rally, who now had his back to the bank, and lunged toward him and turned as soon as he got close enough to Rally to slap him in the face with his meaty tale as he knocked him back into the bank.

Rally woke on the shore of the river with a giant knot on his head. The knot was split open exposing flesh and oozed liquids of red, white, and clear colors. He did not know how far away the camp he had set up for himself was, he had lost time and distance in the chase so he pulled himself wearily from the bank underneath the brush and trees. The pain in his head was so great that he could not even remember passing out, but he remembered his dreams.

He dreamt feverish dreams that made him shiver and sweat. The tranquility of his mind battled with the torment of his body as he dreamt of her. He dreamt of Chamomile in the summer, of Chamomile in the winter, and of her in the spring and fall. He dreamt of her outdoor expeditions to the hills behind her childhood home. He dreamt of the way that she drank in the days like spring water from the crack of a cliff wall, how the days to her were so fresh and so sweet. And then she was running ahead of him, egging him on to run with her.

The last thing he remembered had nothing and everything to do with her. It was as if he was being shot with darts of the past. He remembered a boy that he once was, and his parents who were not his parents at all, and then he remembered Ol' Thunder Robinson with his eyes shining bright like a wolf. He remembered the words that Thunder had whispered in his ear, words he had forgotten, "Boy, don't you forget that you ain't just a pile of nothing. You are something big, wild, and bold. Those town folk don't get ya, cause you aren't meant to be understood. You are something that they'll

never be; you are part of the past, present, and future. A day will come when you will understand. There will be a great adventure with a great price. Tell Chamomile she must come with you too.” And then there was nothing.

When he woke he began to walk south, towards the place he knew scarcely remembered him, but held a piece of him just the same.

Chamomile

Chamomile had lived in Sweaton her whole life. She was born in a fall field of ferns. The ferns were reddening like a young fox's tail and the sun setting shone a red aura of light over her yelping mother and sweating and swearing father.

"You were born in a field of red light. You were born in a field of blood." Her momma would say. "I knew you had come as an omen to your pa and me. I just wasn't sure if you'd be a good or a bad one. I wasn't about to name you Scarlet. Even though I named you Chamomile, your daddy still got Formaldehyde the next day."

Formaldehyde was the auburn cow the next door neighbors gave in celebration of her arrival. No one could ignore the fact that Formaldehyde wasn't really auburn; he was more of a deep red. He disappeared after the first week they got him.

Most of the people in Sweaton didn't understand omens of any nature, and her parents were the only ones who really saw her as being a prophesy of goodness because they saw her for who she was, nothing spectacular.

Chamomile wasn't plain, she wasn't extravagant either. Most of the boys in school had made fun of her birth mark over her right lip as a child. It was a brown splotch of mess, and Chamomile always looked like she had a dirty face back then.

"No darling, that's just that the angels kissed your face too much when you were a baby." Her Momma would remind her, though it didn't help adolescent boys keep from jesting. The only thing that did help was time. And as time went on, the birthmark changed into a wonderfully symmetrical beauty mark like a pin up girl.

She didn't know that pin up girls looked like, but as soon as all the boys became men they did. It was Beau that told her so. She ignored him. She knew her Momma would be proud she did. But inside, she hid that gem of a comment gleefully.

Her Momma, Melda, didn't approve of much. She didn't approve of stomping around in fields. She didn't approve of boys and girls being friends. She was a woman of worries that washed her hands so much that you could almost see the bones. She always thought that after all her kids had left, she could quit washing her hands so hard. But she didn't, on a five acre farm there was too much to worry about... With or without children.

Melda permanently smelled of lye and oats. A combination only her husband could love; she smelled of their lives. Melda and Thom had four children, and all girls. She had successfully married off the first three, but had trouble with Chamomile when the marrying age came.

Melda thought that Chamomile was too much of a free spirit to understand the importance of martial bonds. Yet, it was something much deeper that kept Chamomile from longing to be linked to a townsman by the ring finger. It was the boy she lost to the mountains.

Every time Melda mentioned marriage Chamomile's disposition would change from a flower opening up to the love of spring, to a dark snake coiling in defense of a predator. Melda thought that finding the right words was just as difficult as locating the exact spot of the founder's gold. It had been lost by the dust and grime of the mountains long ago.

"Why now, aren't you ready to be on your own and have a family?"

“Momma, if I married I wouldn’t be on my own. I’d have to feed mouths and be chased by children and clean cobwebs. Does that sound like a girl being on her own?”

“Yes, Chammy. It does!” Melda would offer in a high pitch of exasperation only her children knew. Chamomile and her mother had had this conversation before.

Melda knew the five words she could say that would unravel the code of Chamomile’s organs. She knew that if she just could form words, “Chammy, he’s never coming back.” With these words she could spin her daughter’s world faster than either of them had been spun at a barnyard dance. Because the truth was that he wasn’t. Melda was sure that he had died at the unmerciful grip of the mountains. Yet, the lines that formed at the corners of her lips would only allow words such as “marriage” and “children.”

“If I were to be on my own, I’d live in the caverns of the mountains...” Melda would always interrupt her daughter here. That was the only path that would be taken; the path that leads to the edge of a railed cliff. They couldn’t jump and they could not proceed.

Crayburry Cove

Dela McNabb was a mountain witch who knew of the folks who never sleep, the cave dwellers who had made their home in the heart of the hills. Dela lived with her two sisters in Crayburry Cove, a place that few ever ventured to. They were known as witches to the people of Sweaton, but they called themselves ladies of the mountain. Their skin was like a white leather taken from a silver stag, their skins shiny with sweat and sparkling with the peat of the earth.

They knew many of the secrets to the mountains like the town celebrity Thunder Robinson, yet no one suspected him of cahooting as a sorcerer, at least not entirely. They understood the land that they lived in and spent most of their days beelining through the hills, gathering ginseng and sassafras, dressing hogs with wicked precision, and maintaining the tree crops of feathers they had maintained. Chamomile always admired them; they were just peculiar women with peculiar ways that secretly interested her though she feared them just the same as everybody else.

Even though everybody feared the sisters, Rally and Chamomile left the west side of Sweaton by way of a road of earth the middle of their torso's heavily guiding them forward. The closer they got to the cove the darker the foliage on the sides of them became and they knew that they'd soon enter the recess of the hills where the three women lived. The ground was dark and muddy with clay, and stained their shoes as they walked along. Gusts of wind attempted to blow them over as they trudged and slipped along the path. This is where most of the travelers would stop and turn back, where they would make up a grandiose tale about being chased by wild dogs to tell their friends.

Rally did not stop, but kept on trudging as Chamomile clasped to the back of his shirt and pressed on behind him. Surprisingly enough, when they reached the cove, they found the sun to be shining on a little garden. The garden was full of herbs, and the smells had drawn birds and rabbits to this tiny jungle of emerald near the foot of the hills. Among the critters and sprigs of green they found Dela McNabb with her arms deep in the soil and her head thrown back, her face to the sun. Her two arms plunged into the hearty soil like earthworms, shiny and banded. Her arms pulsated as if they were drinking in the soil in large gulps and the smile on her face twitched with euphoric delight.

“Dela McNabb.” Rally said loud enough to shake her from her trance. She wasn’t startled nor shaken, she just lifted her hands and forearms from the grit of the earth and wiped them on her skirt.

As she turned to him she spoke, “Rally Summerfield.”

“Yes, Dela. I’ve finally come.”

“I knew you had returned to this place, a little bird told me.” She said as she pointed to one of the birds perched on the fence of her garden.

“I also knew you were coming here with Chamomile.” Dela said with a pleasant smile on her face that warmed her belly like a hot drink on a frosty day, “You see, I can see what you shall see, and I can see the one who is seeing it. But the past? I cannot see it after it passes. My prophecies are only about things that shall come, and not of the things that have been.”

“So you know where we are going?” Rally asked with excitement.

“Yes, but the question is Rally, do you know where you are going?” Dela answered back to him.

“No, I’m afraid he doesn’t Dela.” Chamomile interrupted the conversation between the two to add her part. She didn’t like feeling like she had to be silenced, even when she wasn’t sure of the nature of the subject. This was a common habit that she had had all of her life, and Rally looked at her with delight as he remembered an aspect of her that he had loved and forgotten, and then been reminded of once again. It came to him like cool water in the desert of his memory.

“She doesn’t know that she is coming too.” Rally directed to Dela.

“Boy, Thunder told me that you were a seer and I do believe you are.” Dela said with delight as Chamomile’s stubbornness coaxed her to ignore this proclamation, mostly because Dela was never wrong.

“Is that what you call yourself, a seer?” Chamomile interjected once more.

“That I am, and all ladies of the mountain are. My sisters and all the other ladies of the woods and hills are, but that is not the purpose of your visit... You came to know about your journey through the hills and not of my journey. Rally, you long to go to the mountain of the Cave Dwellers, those that are said to be the heart of the hills.”

“Yes, what can you tell me? What have you seen?”

“You cannot see their home in the light of the day, it is only the moon that will guide you and lead you in. You must travel north by day, until you reach a mountain that cannot be covered by trees, one that is a bald rock during the day, and ruins of a city in the light of the moon. This is where you will find those that never sleep nor die, those that live forever.” As Dela spoke she moved through her garden caressing the leaves, and picking some of them.

Chamomile did not know why Rally was looking for the people that lived forever, and she did not want to ask him in front of Dela, even though she was sure Dela was a mind reader as well as a seer. So she just asked, "And when we get there?"

"And when you get there, you must remember these words:

A silver tree will lead you in,
and its silver roots will guide you.
Then cross a stream of leaves that swim,
to find the man beside you."

"What do you mean "a man beside you?"" Chamomile questioned, she did not like knowing just the boney structure of the journey, and if she was going she needed something more than just a simple structure.

"That is all that I saw Chamomile. That is all that I could conjure." Dela said.

"That's good enough for me. I was going to go with or without your help, but I am mighty grateful for it." Rally said as he went to shake Dela's hand and thank her once more.

Chamomile stood at the edge of Dela's garden just looking at Rally and the old woman talk. It was then that she was reminded of Rally as he was, and not the old soul that stood in front of her now. She remembered the time that they had gone to spy on Thunder Robinson, and how she never knew of the words passed between the two. She never knew of they were simple old mountain remedies or as Rally had really said, that they would too go on an adventure when they were older. There was a great chance that this was the adventure they were to go on, and yet there was a great chance that Rally was just up to his old schemes and his old ways if that were the case. The truth was that

she didn't know this man and that she was only grasping on to the remnants of the boy that she had once cherished.

Dela McNabb and Rally approached her with shoots of rosemary, "For luck," Dela said as she placed them in Rally and Chamomile's hair. Chamomile did not have the heart to tell Dela that she wasn't going with him, but she figured she was in need of luck just the same.

As they walked back into the dark tunnel of trees onto the muddy road back into town, Chamomile's thoughts fought like a pack of wild black bears gnashing their teeth and clubbing one another. She wondered who would be the victor, but also had the feeling that it would be the skinny and timid cub inside of her that would watch Rally set off for his journey alone, carrying her handkerchief full of dried meats and canned green beans she would take from her pantry and give him for his journey.

Rally watched Chamomile step carefully through the mud, trying to make it out without a smudge of mud. He watched her as she bit her lip and her brow creased in careful concentration. He knew that she had set it in her heart to not journey with him and her stubbornness was like a Venus fly trap, alluring and beautiful until it snapped you up with its strength.

He watched Chamomile create a hem between the patches of mud in the road with her careful feet and saw the first bit of rosemary fall from her hair. At first the rosemary clung to her long curls as if it did not want to let go, but then fell directly in front of her path where her feet smooshed it into the soft earth. Chamomile did not even notice. Rally watched as they walked closer and closer to Sweaton as each piece of rosemary fell and was crushed beneath her feet.

He knew she would not be coming with him, for his hopes had been crushed underneath her solid weight and determination.

The Woman at the Still

Hundreds of years before the town were defined; the founders had managed to find inhabitancy in between the cracks of the mountain range within this peculiar little valley. As the founders settled in to the place an old coal miner's track was constructed splitting the land of the living from the land of the dead. The only time that the Sweatons made it into Creely's Cemetery was in an oak box and the Creely family hadn't changed a thing about the cemetery in respect for those that had passed on. So, the ebony spiked fence now speckled with tawny shades of rust, still stood there since the very first burial of the town founder, Sweatons Holdenberry.

The peculiar thing about all of the settler's graves, besides good ol' Sweatons Holdenberry's, was that the plots were unmarked and unnamed. At the foot, or head, of the grave there wasn't a headstone, but a pile of sea sand covered in moss. The people of Sweatons hadn't any suggestions when it came to these curios piles, so they just let them lay untouched and awaiting the next in line.

Creely's Cemetery was a peculiar place to search for answers, but Chamomile often went there when she had been particularly troubled. Rally had come to her late in the night like he used to, asking her to come along with him like he used to. Deep inside her laid a tempest, rocking her back and forth between the town of Sweatons and Rally, between whom she should be and who she was, and between her fears and her hopes.

So, Chamomile went to Creely's Cemetery to search for an answer, but all she found was the Widow Ula Mae. Ula Mae was as young as she was, a pitiful thing and even more pitiful since her husband had passed. Ula was weeping as she held broken

pieces of pottery in her hands, her shivers and shakes looked as if she was a solitary corn stalk beaten by a gust of wind.

“Ula Mae?” Chamomile tried in her most tender of tones.

“Yes.” Ula Mae’s voice was glacier frozen.

“Are you all right, dear?”

“No. His soul is wrestling up and down the mountainsides with the Devil himself.”

“Pardon me?”

“So you see this?” Chamomile had to inch closer; she took tiny steps, light as to not wake the presence stirring in the place. But as soon as she was close enough to see over Ula Mae’s shoulders she new exactly what had happened.

It was custom in this place to leave a bottle of your best spirits, usually muscadine moonshine, at the grave of those you loved. The jug was not an ordinary moonshine jug, but one with a face as stern and angry as a reverend’s warning face. Each family member added a piece to the face the night of the wake – the brother adding the clay teeth and mouth, the sister adding the clay ears, the sons and daughters each adding a part of their own. The face jug was then left at the time of the burial for a year. If it stayed there for a year with no harm done to it, a celebration of fiddlers and a young hog was to be given in honor of the soul’s safe journey into heaven.

But what of the broken jug, you ask?

If a jug vanished, or was broken by the elements the loved one’s soul was said to be wrestling with the devil up and down the hillsides. Perhaps the founders sang them to

sleep to cover up the screams of the tormented souls; perhaps the founders had made it. Perhaps they knew what it was like, and perhaps they didn't.

"U-Ula Mae. I'm, I'm sorry." Chamomile's sentence came out stammering like a slightly dammed up brook.

"No need to be sorry for something you have no power over. The power over these things is far too great, greater than either you or me. The power that lies in these hills is greater than God in some ways."

"What do you mean?" Chamomile sputtered?

"The power of the mountains is tangible in all of its might. You know what I mean Chamomile."

Chamomile recalled the early morning where she watched a monsoon creep down the ancient butte behind her farm. The grey of the sky simmered and stewed in the clash of hot and cold. The wind pushed the dark mass down the hill and then pulled it into a pause for a few short seconds. There were flashes of light and the sound of the mountains offering – splitting trees resonated the cracks of thunder as they fell to their deaths. Trees and bushes began to sway beside her and she knew that it would only be a matter of time until the mountain's storm splattered drops upon her.

She found herself caught in a storm much larger than she could reckon with. It was a storm so mighty that it blew her from side, tousled and turned her in every direction. To remember how she had made it through the few violent moments of the chaos was beyond her. All she could remember was how her skin resembled the gator-like bark of the old oak she clung to, and how when she finally opened her eyes she and the old oak were the only structures left unbent and broken.

It was finally when she turned to return home, her skin permeating steam trying to let loose the water that had drenched her pores down to the bone that she knew of the true force of the hills. She remembered them now in the cemetery with this crumpled soul in front of her who had just reached this same enlightenment.

“You know it Chamomile; it’s drawing you unto itself even now. I can see it.”
Ula Mae said, almost in a trance.

“I’m not sure what you are talking about Ula Mae.”

“You do Chamomile. You do. You know of this force. You can feel it. It’s wildness is stirring behind your eyes.”

Chamomile stood in the silence, almost enraged by the truth but also somehow calmed by it. “I think I know what you are talking about, Ula,” Chamomile finally admitted more to herself than to the woman.

“Then you know that you must go.”

Indigo

Out in the wild Rally had seen a mess of things, men that resembled dogs, and women with arms as colorful and scaled as garden snakes. He tried to explain this world he had found on the dusty roads between towns to Chamomile as they trod through forests and woods thick and dark. “One circus show even asked me to join. The ringmaster claimed that I could get ten cents a pop for people just to gawk at my skin.”

His skin. Something that Chamomile had wondered about as well as Rally’s perfected sense of speech. Why he hadn’t mentioned their hometown. It had been a decade or so since they last saw one another, but these were things that she couldn’t just ask him. A sense of uneasiness plagued her to think that she may never know where he had been, or who he was now. How did she know that it was her Rally if she didn’t even know where he had been or who he was now? If she kept on this journey without ever knowing she felt that she would be following a ghost of a man through the mountains, for reasons she was unsure of.

When he had come to her in the night he was her Rally, he wasn’t afraid to touch her hair. Ever since they began to walk deeper and deeper into the woods he grew more and more silent, yet his eyebrows shifted and his forehead would curl and she knew he was lost deep within himself so far gone that she didn’t feel she could reach him.

“Where are you now and where did you go?” she finally asked. Her inquiry was long past due, they had been walking through the mountains for three days now.

“Then?”

“Yes, then. When we were young.” Chamomile said.

"I was wondering when you would ask." Rally smiled and his forehead unfurled as his thoughts let loose their grip on his mind. He had wanted to tell her for as long as he could remember. He had thought about this moment for so long and it was nothing like he had planned it to be, he had thought that he would tell them all, all the Sweaton-folk around the town square, with his perfect words and riveting tale. Yet, here they were their third day of walking through the mountains. The deep earth had crusted to the hem of her blue cotton dress and his ragged pants had caught leaves and pine needles that gathered around him as they walked.

As they trudged through the woods they had hardly spoken, and Rally wondered if their past was the only thing tying them together. He wondered if she knew that he had thought of her every day he was gone, all four thousand of them did not go without a thought of her. Out in the wild he knew he had been missing it, even when he first left his home at the age of twelve. He'd always known she wasn't like anyone else in Sweaton, her spirit light and soft like a bird. No one could contain her for she had a true mountain spirit that could never be crushed.

Deep in the woods, on his own, he could feel her. He could recall the day when he realized she'd already started to wear her hair up. How he had waited his whole childhood just the day that she would, where he could look at the small of her neck in the sun of the day and the moon of the night. Rally had had that thought when he was part of the traveling circus and a little boy had come up to him and asked him how old he was, he couldn't remember his age, but he could remember Chamomile's. When he told the little boy that his friend was now a woman of twenty his heart grew heavy with sorrow. He had to lay his image of the girl he ran around the hills with to rest, and imagine a

woman he did not know, wearing a loose bun on the top of her head, tendrils falling across her brow and the nose she squinted when she looked into the sunlight. Rally could no longer imagine himself as a comrade, but only as the lone tendril tickling her nose, ever present, ever wavering in the light next to her.

He felt Chamomile still, and felt her now even though she was so keen on walking in front of him, leading him, never loosing her step, and hardly ever looking back at him. And no, never touching him. He felt her though, and knew she was trying ever so hard to keep from feeling like the girl she once was, and to accept the woman her mother had pressed her to be. He knew her mother's frustrations with her, but he also knew her mother, Melda, could never contain her no matter how hard she tried. So Rally followed her, lost in thought most of the way, as he watched the small of her neck lead him through and up the hills.

"So, aren't you going to tell me?" Chamomile asked with frustration as way to interrupt Rally from his thoughts. "All you've been doing is lagging along, lost in thought, grinning like a dope drunk on corn shine."

"Maybe I am drunk on corn shine. Maybe I'm just wondering why you are so keen on leading the way when you don't even know where we're going!" he said.

"And you do?"

"Better than you."

"Oh, do you?"

"Woman, don't you test me. Just shut your mouth and move along." Rally said with a smugness that couldn't be ignored.

Each finger, sinew, and bone in her right hand unified in concrete formation as a fist. Her fingers, which had counted the never ending days of Rally's disappearance, were clamped tightly to one another in a magnetic bond. Her sinews, which had been strengthened by her many years of farm work, were clenched so tight they revealed the tiny structure of her hand. Her bones, which had always ached for the mountains and for him, she now used to send him backwards into a bramble of mountain holly covered with browned pine needles from the trees tall above it. Before she realized it she was throwing and kicking needles, leaves and dirt from the floor of the forest on top of him and was screaming words that she had only heard men use when she had passed the town tavern at night.

The most infuriating thing about this scene to her was that Rally just sat in the holly bush laughing. His laugh was so loud in its depth that it caused her to stop, frozen. She had used all of her tears for sorrow, and now could only use them for her rage. She looked at him covered in pieces of dirt, crumbled leaves, and pine needles. She saw him just laughing in such a way that it shook all of the grime off of him. And when he got up, she expected to see a welt near his eye, but did not see a thing which infuriated her even more.

"Now are you going to tell me?!" Chamomile had to shout over Rally's laughter mostly because he was heeing and hawing like a donkey, and mostly because her anger was almost uncontrollable.

"Yes, yes. Let's stop here for the night," he said in spurts through his laughter. "I'm sorry for laughing at you." He said as he began to laugh even harder.

"I don't understand what in the hell is so funny!"

“You! Think about how you just looked. Ha! And then I was just thinking about what your momma would say if she saw you!”

Chamomile thought about it, and pictured her mother in her white apron standing with her hands on her hips in disbelief and shame. She was not her mother’s daughter, she never had been. Laughter escaped from Chamomile’s throat like an unexpected guest who had been starved from a hearty meal of laughter for years. She finally felt like she could be the girl that she truly was, the one that hid in the hills keeping her mountain spirit hid from her mother’s sight. Forget what Rally’s quest had come to do for him, this is what he had truly come for. He had come to wake her up again, and let her free from the slumber of adulthood. He had come for her.

They set up a camp and built a fire near the holly bush where Chamomile had knocked Rally to the ground, and he finally told her where he had been all of those years as the firelight danced across their faces, shedding them in the most intimate of light as they feasted on bread and dried meat, guzzling wine to wash the dry food down to their stomachs.

“I just up and left, Chammy. My parents hadn’t given me a bed to sleep in or food to eat in years and I was tired of looking for places to sleep and food to snatch in a town that I felt unwelcome in.”

“But you never said goodbye. You just left. You left me all alone.”

“I know. I came to your window one last time, and I didn’t have the heart to say goodbye. You were the only thing keeping me there, and if I said goodbye to you it

wouldn't have been a goodbye at all. I would've stayed." They had now inched closer together, facing one another not touching, but so close they could smell the mulled wine on each other's breath.

"Where did you go? What did you do?" Chamomile asked hazily and her eyes fluttered as the combination of wine and tiredness pulled at her eyelids.

"It was nothing romantic. I've been everywhere, just walking by foot. Surviving in the woods, visiting towns, hearing stories, meeting other wayfarers on my journeys. It isn't everything I had thought it would be. It's rather lonely. You get used to being your own best friend."

"I suppose it doesn't matter that you left, and where you went after all these years. It just matters that you are here." Chamomile said, her eyes were shut now as she drifted between the worlds of waking and sleeping. Her hair and skin tinted orange were so warm and inviting, and as he placed his lips on hers he couldn't help from saying, "Yes Chammy, I'm here."

In this crevice between her sleeping and waking she knew he was there, she knew her lips were touching his, she knew that he was kissing her collar bone gently. Yes, she knew all this though his touch was so tender that she could hardly feel it at all, and all the while she could hear his voice over and over like a fiddle, playing a harmony of 'I'm here, I'm here, I'm here' as the crickets kept the time.

Cave Dwellers

The rolling of the hills was a song. It wasn't just a backwoods ditty of harvest, nor a shoe shiner's hummed melody. It was far more orchestral and intricate with each turn and incline, and with each bend no one could know what would be found. Not even Rally and Chamomile. The fifth day of their journey the two travelers found themselves enclosed in a gypsy camp. It wasn't as if they had found it and decided to journey into it. No, they had just found an old southern path worn from only time and foot travel and decided to take it to make their trip lighter and their steps easier.

It was on this worn path that Rally and Chamomile began to spy tents of delicious colors, ruby reds and tangerine in the thickets beside them. As they walked on they spied smoke rings here and there, a bell or two ringing, a cry of a hawk, and the laughter of children. Before they knew it the gypsy camp had surrounded them. The warm smells of the encampment and its people had permeated the air, whirling them into the tapestry of the wood. Inside the quiet whirling winds were the spirits of the people, spirits with their faces painted bright, welcoming them into this place in the woods. The spirits had the distinct faces of children with no distinguishable bodies; perhaps because they moved and danced in motions so fast and yet so slow that they could scarcely be seen. The gypsies didn't worry about newcomers, for they all had come new to this place at a point in time, many of them outcasts from the world finding solace in their fortress in the woods.

"Are you stumbling in or running away?" A man asked them as he approached them from side of the trail and began to walk it with them. Specks of grey lined the chin of his black beard, and the curls of his moustache curled around his lips when he talked.

Soon behind them two men followed that looked just like the man, perhaps his brothers.

“Stumbling in, I suppose,” Rally said to the men as he tilted his hat to each of the men. “I am Rally, and this is my traveling companion, Chamomile. We could actually use your help. You see, we’ve been traveling for quite a few days now seeking proof of a legend. If you tell us your version of the legend, we in turn will be willing to trade you ours or another tale of your choice.”

Traveling gypsies are known to have a great weakness for tales; it is common practice in their communities that the man or woman with the most tales is the most powerful member of their society. They will often humor a common folk with one of their tales to get another in exchange where it can be used to the best of their advantage.

“Which legend are you looking for?” The man asked as a fox like smirk crossed his face.

“The legend of the Cave Dwellers, the ones who live forever.”

“Ah yes, the people we call *Owenathee*.”

“You know of them?”

“I can arrange a bargain once you come to my tent. We can exchange information there. You must tell your tale first so that I know I have a good bargain, but yes – I can tell you of the Cave Dwellers.” The gypsy man said as he rubbed his hands together, warming them with his excitement.

Rally and Chamomile followed the man and his bothers to a tent made of material that was the color of a robin blue sky. Chamomile didn’t mind letting Rally speak to the man, she trusted that his tale would be far more satisfactory than any tale that she could give so she just listened as the words spilled out of his lips.

In my days of the traveling circus I once met a man with a squid-like arm. His eyes glossed and gleamed in their inky color as he would recall his days living on the water as a sailor. 'There are mazes created under the sea,' he had told me one night as we sat drinking the gin he'd made in a porcelain sink. 'They peak up over the water in lacey formations, and yet they're strong as steel. They'll rip a hole right into your ship if you're not careful,' he had said. I had thought these words to be impossible, and how odd from a man full of possibilities. I never knew him to lie no matter how much drink had gotten into his blood.

He had spent 33 years out on the water, and in his later years he was known as the best oarsman across the seven seas. Captains and sailors alike held him in the same reverie as the Holy Virgin and the howling Banshees. He was born an orphan as soon as his mother had seen his arm, outstretched and curling like a squid, but he later used it to his advantage. He could steer through the toughest of waters; he was always a coxswain and never a captain. 'What the sea wants, the sea will have. And the sea always wanted me to lead a boat, and not men' he told me.

It was around the turn of the century that a ship full of looters had hired him to navigate them through waters so daunting that no man could get through them. They challenged him to the test, and of course he agreed. There had been no storm, nor any sway of the sea that he hadn't been able to get through.

The looters had kept their mouths shut for two months, as it is bad luck to speak of your destination while out at sea. They had sailed calm and tepid oceans and seas, and had not hit one storm or swell. The coxswain had grown tired and restless, for most of this journey he had let the boat float along its own course at the captain's orders. But one

blistering day in the middle of the summer, the captain brought him to the bow and handed him his eyeglass. 'Don't look for land,' the captain began, 'Look right above the water, and then follow what you see down into the depths.'

Looking through the eyeglass my friend, the coxswain, could only wonder what to make of these thin, skeletal, lacy structures peaking above the water. And then he looked as the captain had instructed, and followed his view of them down into the water of the ocean, finding that they never had a bottom. 'What's the meaning of this? What kind of curse?'

The captain began, 'It's the Reef of Titan. No one is said to have made it through this maze alive. Those walls, though they are as dainty as lace, will cut your boat in half if you are not too skilled enough to make it through. No one knows what lies beyond that point. Seafarers speak of riches never seen, ladies far more beautiful and dark, and rum so strong a sip will have you in its spell all night. My crewmen seek these tangible things, and I... I seek to know.'

It was with these words that the coxswain finally knew why he had been asked to journey with them. He was indeed the finest navigator of water around, but could he make it through a deadly sea labyrinth with walls so dangerous? These bony structures alone could hold the bones of many men. This is where my story ends. You see, the coxswain with the squid-like arm never could finish this tale though he tried many a time to do so. Perhaps it was because of the monstrosity of what he had encountered, or maybe it was from the delight he tasted when he survived. Either way, the guilt weighed on him the same.

"This is the end of your tale?" The gypsy man said in a way that Chamomile

could not tell whether he was satisfied too little or too much. "I have not heard of this Great Reef. How true can you say this story is?"

"It's as true as I can tell it. That is all I know of the story, and I never knew the man to lie." Rally said.

"I can promise you my tale of the *Owenathee*, for I have never heard of the Great Reef. It is a good bargain." The gypsy paused in thought for a moment then asked, "What do you know of the *Owenathee*?"

Chamomile longed to chime in even though she did not know anything but what Dela had told them, so instead she nodded towards Rally and he began, "I know from my travels that they are those who never sleep, they don't have to. They live forever. They live inside of a mountain, one that you cannot see in the light of day – just by the moon. This mountain, it is said not to be covered by trees. Is this true?"

The gypsy man smiled at the information, "Yes."

Chamomile finally felt brave enough to chime in, "We were told that we must travel north by day, until we reach that naked mountain. Does this mean that we can only enter in at night?"

"Yes, at night the mountain looks as if it is a city on a hill, crumbled in ruins, yet more fabulous than you can imagine," the gypsy said.

"So then, you've seen it?" Rally questioned.

"I've seen a great many things, far greater than you can imagine."

"We were told to remember this when we got there:

A silver tree will lead you in,
and its silver roots will guide you.

Then cross a stream of leaves that swim,
to find the man beside you.

Do you possibly know what it could mean?" Chamomile asked bewildered by the words out loud, even though they had seemed to make sense in their familiarity inside of her head.

"You talk like you have been there." Surprised, the gypsy drew his hand to his chest.

"We haven't. We went to a seer who told us these things," Rally interjected.

"You must wait until the early hours of the morning in the late hours of the night to find this tree. Its silver hue can only be seen in the moonlight. There you will find a crack in the wall that will lead you by its roots to the stream where you will find the leaf-finned fish. This is all I know. It is as far as I have gotten."

"So you have been!"

"Yes, when I was very young. But I did not see anyone or anything that lead me to believe that the *Owenathee* still exist." With the gypsy's words came a heaviness that filled the tent.

However, this heaviness was no match for Rally's fortitude. "We will still seek what we search for."

The gypsy laughed, "Yes, much like the captain of your tale. Let's just hope that you will come back with a story to tell."

The Crystal Palace

Strange place that they had stumbled upon, Chamomile thought. Clouds covered the peak in a maniacal fashion, as if they were looking down and jeering at her and Rally's quest.

"I promise it's there Chamomile." Rally took her hand, funny how his hands swallowed hers up now, unlike when she was a growing young girl with the bigger hands and feet. She knew the dome was there, she knew it. She trusted him for she had every reason to now. "The naked ruins should be on this side of the mountain. Remember how we saw it gleam in the moonlight on the hill near Shady Grove when we were young?"

She remembered. That night the moon was full, it was shortly before he had disappeared. They snuck out at midnight to see the legendary ruins shine their light, as if they were sending a message to those that looked for it in the night. The ruins only gleamed under the light of the moon; it was in the light from the sun that they were hidden and unsearchable to all. Under the sun the ruins remained camouflaged to the human eye.

This is where Dela said they would find those that never died the people of the hills that lived forever; they just had to find a way in. There was no real clue to how to find this opening, and once they came to the bald rock that shined like ruins in the night, they could not see them for they rose high over their heads. Chamomile was sure that they had searched the whole circumference of the mountain and began to grow weary of their quest. This quest had been a whole lot of looking with nothing to show as of yet.

Rally knew that it was always when you were most ready to give up that you usually began to see the light, so he kept on hoping for what they had not seen just yet.

“I’m tired Rally. Let’s just sleep, and search again tomorrow.” Chamomile tried to sound convincing by adding a yawn.

“You would say that. Don’t you want to go in?” He asked as he pointed straight ahead.

There was the opening – a tree so great and white that Chamomile swore it had been dead, petrified, and polished. The bark was soft like the wood stripped to make walking sticks, and was whiter than bone and snow and sky. There were silver leaves, glistening and waving as if in a steady and gentle wind, but there was nothing else around the tree that shifted the way the leaves did in that still moonlight. Chamomile and Rally’s pinkies found each other’s and linked when they saw that behind this tree was a raven black sliver between the sandy walls of the ruins.

Rally thought to ask Chamomile if she was ready, but he knew that she was when she shifted from a linked pinky to a hand’s grasp. Rally lead the way into the crack which was covered by silvery white roots that seemed to plunge deeper into the mountain than the tree was tall. The crack in the wall looked like just a tiny shaft, but when they began to venture in, they found that there was room enough for them and the giant roots that lead them further in.

“Do you hear that, Chammy?”

She heard it. It was a simple sound. One that reminded her of home, and also of the time that her grandmother had taken her to the brook beside her home to try and hear the gentle trickle of the water among the crashing of the rapids. She had said, “If you can

find that trickle in the stream amongst the clatter of the larger waves you'll be closer to heaven than you can imagine." It was funny that her grandmother had said that to her only days before her own venture into the afterlife.

Chamomile had kept her hand in Rally's and her eyes shut through most of the squeeze between the two walls and when she had opened her eyes, she found herself in the mouth of a cave, that also looked to be a great room. The moonlight shone through a hole in the ceiling of the cave, and the sky looked closer to her than she had ever been to it.

"Did you see?" Rally spoke from just under her, squatting like the first time she had seen him in all these years. "The silver rooted tree guided us here, to the stream with leaves that swim. Dela was right."

Chamomile squatted to see creatures with large eyes that flashed from green to gold and back again. Their bodies were covered with large fins shaped like oak leaves in every shade a tree could turn from the beginning of the year to the end. When they swam into a moonlit section of the water, they turned into creatures of bright white looking more revitalized than before. Chamomile and Rally stood and studied them like when they were children.

"What would happen if we took one out of the water, I wonder?" Chamomile posed.

No quicker could she say this, than the way that Rally's hand was in the water and back again. He opened it in front of her eyes only to hold a withered brown oak leaf in his hands. This peculiarity startled and caused them wonder, but what caused them wonder even more was the whisper that was coming from the corner of the cave.

“You should put him back in the water. He’s much happier there.” It whispered in a gracious tone. This was a voice that you could not be frightened by. It was small and yet great, powerful and yet calming.

“Ok. I’ll put it back.” Rally said as he gently placed his hand in the water and let the fish swim right out of it.

“How did you catch that fish?” The voice asked from the shadows.

“I caught it the way that I always do,” Rally laughed, “with my hands.”

“Ask the girl to try.”

Chamomile normally would question anyone asking her to do something she was uncertain of, but for some reason she trusted this voice in the darkness. She knelt towards the stream and placed her hand to the water, only to find that it was solid ice, impenetrable and frozen. It hurt her hand with its unexpected wintry bite and she gasped.

“What’s the matter?” Rally asked, and for the first time he was unable to see into her.

“Put your hand in again. Catch me another,” she said numbly.

When Rally put his hand in she saw it dive into the deep of the stream, and the voice said, “Now girl. You do see what I see.” As the voice spoke a man of indigo crept into the moonlight where they could finally see him.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“I’m the last *Owenathee* left, because I did not want to be left behind. They ventured on into a place I could not see, and I did not want to leave this place.”

It became as clear as the first cold winds of winter, and it shocked her just the same. Rally could not see what she saw. She knew he could not even see the blue of his

own skin. She knew that he, like the *Owenathee*, had chosen to not leave something behind.

Transistor Radio

“I’m not sure what is going to happen to me Chamomile.”

“What can happen to you now that you’re already dead?” Chamomile asked, trying to make light of a situation that can never be lightened in its gloominess.

Rally had given her a sympathetic laugh and then paused and let his brow furl and unfurl with his thoughts in a way that was all too familiar to her. “This is what I’m thinking,” Rally tried to make light of his plan. “We’ll head back to Sweaton. If by the time we get there, you’ve decided you want to come with me, we’ll just keep walking. If not, you can stay in Sweaton and then I will just keep walking without you. But you’ve got to let me know when we get there.”

They had walked for days and finally would come upon Sweaton the next morning. It was this night that she was faced with the choice between man and nature. Rally had given her an ultimatum to weigh in her hands as she walked through the hills on their way back towards Sweaton.

She was to weigh between the two poles of her heart, for she could not bring them together. Chamomile loved Sweaton in all of its complexities, and especially loved the craggy domes around her home. She thought the hills to be Nature’s steeples of praise. She thought herself to be an abbess of the land. They whispered her name, “Sister Chamomile” as she walked deep into the forests with her arms stretched in praise.

Her love for the mountains wasn’t a shallow admiration. The peaks called her name in deep, languid vibrations. Her Momma always thought that she had a heart murmur, but all Chamomile could hear was the way the mountains murmured her name.

She loved the mounts so much that as a child she had calculated with her steps what she thought to be where the mouth of the peak was. There she would lie for hours in the sun kissing the ground and listening to the histories the crevices would intimately breathe. The hillside would often recite its history of changes to her – seasons, landslides, and lost settlers and their settlements.

Even when she became a woman she'd run to the hills, their winds would brush her hair like a tender lover, and she'd run her fingers over every surface of the hill's body. The mountains were more intimate than a lover's promises ever could be, until she saw him again for Rally had reclaimed his space in her life, and she hadn't been planning on losing him once more. Her heart already had told her it couldn't handle it.

The two loves of her life faded in and out like a transistor radio, the old station just crackling its last songs through the new, attempting just to stay in her life.

No Further South

Usually the promise of an Indian summer is that it will come to an end. But this year, the people of Sweaton were left sweating through the mid and late winter months, wondering if the end would ever truly come to them. The witches in Crayburry Cove felt that time had run out for the mountain town and that the end was near.

Not only had the promise of winter vanished, but silver beetles had come and were eating holey patterns in every bush and tree in sight. Mrs. Shelton had lost all of her orchid trees, and Thunder stayed up all night and day trying to protect his corn and juniper trees from the beetles. The crops were diminishing at a rate so alarming that the town counsel, who hadn't been summoned in a hundred years, met each week to discuss the imminent future of the town.

Yet, it wasn't until the sweltering night in January that the town summoned the magic of the sisters of Crayburry Cove and Dela McNabb came into the light of the town's streetlamps for the first time in fifty years and was seen by the gleam of the lanterns in the city hall. She walked up to the stage in a dress made of grey and silver feathers, the iridescent oils on the feathers transfused a silky light. She lifted her right hand and the crowd fell silent, a few with respect but most in fear.

"Sweaton folk, Sweaton kin, gather around to hear me this night. I was here when the streets were still dusty roads. I was here when the first corn was planted and took root as a tree. I knew Sweaton Holdenberry, and was there for the birth of his first child. I know this place and I know the enchantment of this place. I have found it. I know it. And I know its death is near."

The crowd didn't gasp in one giant's breath, all at once, deep and horrified. They did not stand up and protest. They did not holler and moan. They just stood together rocking, like

Dela proclaimed that it would only worsen as the days slugged along. "After our crops shrivel to their deaths the spirits will leave us. Three days after the spirits leave the heat will turn into a tempest of hail that will pound at our homes and send our trees to the ground. The hail will melt into our dry ground and become a wave of mud," Dela paused and closed her eyes as if to truly see, "and then there is nothing, there is no Sweaton."

"No Sweaton?"

"What does this mean?"

"Where will we live?"

"How can this be?"

The townspeople's voices raised in a unified cry that melted and merged into a chorus. "What are we to do?" they all began to ask in unison.

"All that there is left to do," Dela said dejectedly, "We must disperse among the cities and towns around us. We must go back to the lands where our families once came from, and find solace there. The life of our town is diminishing in the most alarming of rates. We must leave with the spirits of our founders unless we plan to be wiped away from memory with the mud."

And the day that the founders did not appear for afternoon tea, the Sweaton folk bowed their heads in grief and left their home in the hills for places where the enchantment had long been dead.

The return to Sweatton weighed heavily on Chamomile's heart as they walked on the dusty path that would lead her home and to the place where she must decide between the two desires of her heart. Rally had remained silent ever since this morning when they awoke and he asked her if she had already decided, and when she said that she hadn't his words had dried up ever since.

The road seemed to take longer than she remembered, and as they walked along the road they were suddenly surprised by the end of it. "Did we take a wrong fork in the road somewhere Rally?" Chamomile asked as she faced a massive bald field. The only trees she could see were a few miles off in every direction and were the opening to a dark wood. Rally pulled out his compass and surveyed the land.

While she was waiting she took off her shoes and wriggled her toes in the grass, cooling them on the small green blades. The grass felt new and fresh underneath her feet. She lifted her hand over her eyes to shade them, and looked around the field something about the sounds of this place were so reminiscent of Sweatton that an eerie shadow of her home crept up her back and rested on her shoulders.

"What is it about this place?" Chamomile asked Rally who was lost deep in the map of their journey he had created every time they had reached a new landmark to help them get back home. He had created many of these maps for each and every journey he had ever taken, and his maps were never wrong. "Don't you feel it?"

"Feel what?" Rally replied just to appease her, for he was too lost in his study of the map.

“The distinct feeling that I know this place.”

“You probably do. We should be getting to Sweaton at any moment. I don’t know what happened. I don’t know how we got here and we were never here before.” Rally said and scratched his head through his hat.

“But we have. I know we have.”

“Perhaps as children, but not recently. I just don’t understand this.”

“What?”

“The compass, the map, all of the days it took for us to get back... they all show that this is Sweaton.” Rally said in the most perplexed of tones.

“It can’t be.” Chamomile said in disbelief, but something inside her screamed otherwise.

“Let’s walk around and see what we can find,” Rally said as he began to walk towards what seemed to be the center of the field Chamomile slowly crept behind him as not to disturb the ground they were walking on. When they got to the center of the field Rally tripped over a rock that was not foreign to the wood in material, just in shape. He bent over it, and brushed off the layer of caked mud that covered the slab.

“Rally, what is it?” Chamomile asked, trembling from within.

““Here lies our blessed town founder Sweaton Holdenberry, a beloved father, husband, and friend.” Rally read from the gravestone.

Chamomile covered her mouth as she choked, trying not to wretch into her hands. “What, I mean... What? What does this mean?” She muttered in between the beginnings of her tears.

“It means that you were right, this is familiar. This is Sweaton.”

“No! No! It can’t be. We were just here and all of the sudden it’s gone? What happened?”

“By the looks of it, what didn’t happen? It seems to have been swallowed up from the inside of the earth,” Rally said, “I’ve heard of it happening before, I just never believed it. Let’s look around and see what we can find.”

They ran through the fields searching for evidence of their hometown, but the only evidence they were left with was Sweaton Holdenberry’s headstone and the lingering feeling that they were in an all too familiar place. This hunch of familiarity couldn’t be shaken, for it was a pit of truth deep within their bellies. After hours of running and crawling across the field Chamomile and Rally stumbled upon the tracks of an old horse drawn wagon.

This could only mean one thing, “Thunder,” they both said breathlessly as they met the tracks head on. They could see the deep grooves of the tracks creeping up what used to be the back hills of Sweaton. “Well, I suppose we should track the old man down, he’ll know what to do. That’s the only plan that I can offer you Chammy” Rally said defiantly as he started up the hill.

He left Chamomile looking back upon the field, bathed in the light of the gloaming sun. What choice did she have now but to mourn it and bury it like she had done with Rally years ago. Or perhaps, she could chase and search for it like she could have done instead of let him creep away in the night. So she turned to follow him up the hill with the buried town and the evening light at her back.
