

Junior Division, Prose

Emma Cole, St. John's

A Few Minutes

I remember being hungry when I woke up, and too exhausted to speak. There was grey sunlight in the living room; dust floated in the air and crackled across the television screen, muddling the cartoons that marked the beginning of the weekend. The distinction between weekend and weekday didn't matter much to me, though. By then I had already forgotten about going to school. It felt distant to me the same way dreams did. Padding along the sidewalk to meet the big yellow bus might as well have been chasing gummy bears across a rainbow hilltop.

That morning, I knew that I was up before mom was, even when I had just barely opened my eyes. Both rooms felt quiet; the door between them still closed, the same pile of dishes and bottles on the counters. The sink was perfectly level with my eyeline by then. I hadn't noticed that happening, getting taller. Mom had never mentioned it.

It started to rain, which in retrospect must have been what woke up mom. The metallic pangs of rooftop raindrops were far louder than I could have been. But in the moment, I assumed it was something I had done. Eager to hide myself out of guilt, I crouched behind the end table, where I could clutch the unplugged lamp cord with one fist. On that side of the sofa, I'd scratched through to the stuffing in one spot, years of mindless picking away. I had completely forgotten about that specific compulsion, until I went to throw out the couch decades later. I spotted it and could instantly feel the itchy fibers beneath my soft fingernails.

Down in the corner, mom was just her long legs and short hair. The angle of her chin. There would always be talking that I didn't understand. Ranting that turning into shouting, yelling, shaking, bones rattling. The cord was ripped out of my hand, the end table flipped aside. Hands and elbows, feet and knees.

The next clear memory I have of that day is the rain on my back as the door to the house was slammed in my face. Cool and tingling, sliding across my hair and down my neck. How quickly I dropped to my knees, skin skidding on the porch planks. The doorknob wouldn't turn. Didn't turn. Soon I was scratching at the door, probably howling, nails driving against the wood, grinding and pawing to be let in.

The front porch under my legs became front stairs under my butt, and then grass beneath my whole body. Nose nearly touching dirt as I crawled beneath the house, next to the cinderblocks. There it was colder, but much drier.

It was only a few minutes.

Maybe an hour, at most.

I watched the rain continue, become heavier and then lessen; changing but still present.

I saw the big yellow buses roll past, sighing and wheezing on their bloated tires.

My mind was empty.

Not much time had passed before I was scooped out from the underneath, guided inside. Mom softly brushed my hair once she'd collected me, placing me on her lap. The cold slowly drained from my body the longer we sat, my numbness rolling over, squirreling itself away.

The years between that day and this one stretch like a desert highway, long and tiresome. The house is now empty, I've made sure of it. Nothing left but the grime between the tiles under my feet. No one but me has any memories of this house. No one else knows how we lived, saw the days pass by, heard the noises where they were loudest.

The sofa where I noticed the bald patch has been moved. The TV has been thrown away, too old to be of any use to anyone. The last box of assorted knickknacks is pressed between my hands. There's no one to live here, no one to remember except for me. I look out the window, still thinking about mom's fingers tugging gently through my hair, her breath warm on my neck.

I remember something else.

The Saturday morning cartoons had been playing, shifting and warping across the TV when I had woken up. I'm sure of that. With the outside world as nothing but a fantasy, the consistent scheduling of the blurry shows were the only things that seemed real to me.

And I had seen school buses. I remember that so clearly, also; the buses I had long since given up on, rolling through the streets to pick up other children from other homes every weekday.

I put the box down in the barren living room, standing still and stoic beside it. Tears fall from my eyes with no resistance, as hot as my mom's voice.

It had only been a few minutes.