

A Mad Hatter

By Lianda Burrows

You died in October and it is now June. You were a shot of pure joy, catapulted into the world and onto my weary lap.

I cannot make it up to you. There is nothing to make up. Existence is not divvied out according to some universal justice system in which we are all assigned a certain amount of grief or violence. A certain amount of hope and joy. No, no...

I was completely gripped with fear. It was an inexplicable fear that was impossible to relate to anyone else. Sometimes I wasn't sure what I was afraid of, but certain that I should be afraid, and so I was.

Mostly, however, I was afraid of things that had already happened, or were happening, which makes no sense. How could I be afraid of something that already was? Wouldn't a more appropriate reaction be... sadness? Or grief? Or anger? Something reactionary?

I think I was afraid because what I feared most was—I thought—already all around me and increasing every moment I was alive. And the feared object was multiplying, and I was powerless against its force—its momentum and expansion. It felt like I was, let's say, carrying a basket of marbles. Marbles kept falling out. At



first it was one or two and I could pick them back up and place them in the basket. But the rate at which they continued falling outmatched the rate at which I could pick them up. And the marbles began collecting under my feet, and then up to my knees, and it became harder to put the marbles back into the basket. I would fall and stumble. But the marbles had no tangible existence. They had no tactile base I could hold on to. No form I could see. It's all illusion. Which is not to say unreal—the illusion was simply

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another challenge—another obstacle making it harder to keep everything in order.

I walked. Trying to keep up. As though if I just kept walking or moving or running I might stay marginally ahead of the chaos erupting in my wake.

I paced in the shower. I wouldn't sit on a toilet but stood above it out of fear that I should rest too much. Night exhausted me. I rarely slept. I want so much to rest, but terror pulls me up and set me moving. I regret that my body forces me to lie down and be still. I pass out at eight after a meal. I sleep for three hours. At eleven I wake up, eyes wet and heavy. I drift in and out of consciousness until three in the morning, when I rise to begin again.

I knew I had lost my mind, more or less, but it was a small consolation. Perhaps I didn't know. Not definitively. I knew, but only intellectually.

How can I commemorate you? I reflect, sometimes, on what you ate—and think that perhaps that is how I should commemorate you. You ate the strangest things. I'm sure I never did that as a child. A crayon. A button. A coin. A starfish. This was your life—I could write a menu in your honour. A stick. Your own poop. You sister's. Everything, anything. All children do this

to some extent, but you were unflinching. You choked on the coin until your father, almost hanging you upside down, got you to cough it up. "Jackpot," he said. "This one's a winner." You were nothing like me. You were unreserved and unafraid. Who did you get that from? Your father? Is he really so brave? No, perhaps it was just you. I'm not sure why we try to take credit for our children. You were nothing like me.

Last night I looked down at myself and around me and I didn't recognise anything. I didn't recognise myself and I felt like I had been hijacked. I felt that I had been subject to a grand trick. And I pulled at my skin and paced and looked back at my flesh and looked up again, as if for answers. My husband, now accustomed to and tired of such displays, closed the bedroom door and turned up the volume on the TV. I put on my running shoes and left. I walked until I calmed down. I sat in an alley. I would feel better in the morning, I wagered. If I need a plan I can make one in the morning.

When I got home my husband, now old and as battle worn by this as me, asked me what was wrong. I started again. I started explaining what I could see and that I knew they knew. And that I knew they were laughing. And they needed to

know I know. I'm not stupid, I would say. I know.

I know. He sighed. "It's a disease."

I said no. It's not. Sometimes it is but this time
it isn't. I know. I need everyone to know I know.

He closed the door.

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