

OUTSIDE LOOKING OUT

by Bellabianca Lynn

I knocked on your bedroom door:

I knew you weren't home, after all, that's why I dropped off cookies. Just trying to stay safe. Mouthing "I love you," the air of prayer, the offering in my breath behind chocolate chip, only going as far as the crevices in the panels. And as with your texts, emptiness answered.

This wall of wood used to split my room from the sharp branches of the world that I didn't want scratching me.

I've been there.

This door, admired by both of us, blocks chaos from our safety:

I've been there. I've been there, just trying to stay safe.

Rocking back and forth against my bed with arms hugging legs,

I, too, forgot to hinge my vulnerability toward someone when I was a teen.

I, like you, could only start spelling "Voice?" as my knees peeled away from the cage around my heart. My elbows falling into bent lap. My "V" shaped lap. My "V" shaped body. Silent, strong, yet, exhausted body. Exhausted by the tornado lives I was born into. These tornadoes infected my comfort and because of that, infected my body. Moving

forward, anxiety's been the permanent side effect in my own shadow. Anxiety's breath took over my own.

Have you noticed that we were born out of the same tornado?

I haven't forgotten about the diseased-jabberwockies that've captured your body: the razor cuts from dull, yet, deep truths that were forced onto you; the regurgitation of love because you were never taught to taste the difference between artificial and absolute; the ghosts of panic puppeting your breath. You know, we should just be able to hang up our trauma once and for all like . . . keys . . . Because, once we hang our keys, our own fingers tell the vehicle—our jabberwocky of all diseased-jabberwockies—that *we* are in control. That we've been done to near-death and we're done.

I'm aware of the pills given to you. I'm sorry. I'm sorry that some people only know how to check-out rather than check-in, to see if you've been tainted by jabberwockies. Once they do check in, they know they've lost, and the only thing left to do is choose the easy option of numbing. But numbing is an absence, and some parents and doctors choose how you'll be absent from yourself. You don't deserve to be absent; you *cannot* be absent. None of us can afford to be.

Less than seven years ago, you were packing your book bag with back-to-school supplies *before July*. You opened your notebook, showing me notes on summer reading, nearly finished! You didn't want to be absent for a *day*.

They didn't see the shift, though. They numbed your mind because they didn't see.

It takes effort to open a door; fingers turn its knob with just enough pressure to just the right direction, like manipulating a compass. And only you have the compass that answers my knock.

You may think that your home sees only darkness across your door, but during my visit, I found a band of natural light between the floor and your wall and slid a pair of lips underneath. Do you remember these lips? I gave this blank voice to you as you barely reached that cardinal point of adolescence. Now you're almost done with this direction. But remember that branch wounds can scar, so pour your poems onto pale lips: push your bold and capital anger across the top; curl your static thoughts and give yourself permission to change them. Open the cage of your heart across these lips. Open your cage because a closed mouth is anything but silent! It is not an absence.

When manipulating your life post-adolescent jabbertwocky battle, how much will you manipulate yourself?

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THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME: Settling into a Distracted Life

by Jan Buhman

Our thirty-year-old, four-story home designed and built for a family of four became very small, for two of us, when COVID-19 hit. Like an intimate relationship, we had settled into a busy life of housekeeping details and maintenance and repairs of our home. Practicality took precedence over needs or want. And we were content and thin worked.

Suddenly, in lockdown, our kitchen was always open and busy and our living spaces became our work and study and eating areas with all of it stuffed together like a pile of unsorted mail. This unwelcome life forced me to consider my life with my husband. I did not want to live with him twenty-four hours a day and I questioned our life and space together.

I had to learn to dance again with my husband. We never got it right to begin with. I only knew how to lead and he hated to follow. This became a COVID vocabulary word for "get ready to switch." My first pivotal moment came like a piouette and a deep backbend dip, with my husband said to me one morning as I came into the kitchen:

"You know just because I am here, does not mean I am waiting for you to talk to me."