

Slime Flux

*“What the heart wants? The heart wants /
her horses back.” –Ada Limón*

The hospital room is too small, even just for me and her. It smells like sweat and uneaten mashed potato dinners, the ambiance thick as the lukewarm gravy. My mother lies on a metal bed wrapped in bright white sheets, hinged at a 45-degree angle like a sunflower snapped at the stem. A small end table on wheels stands beside her. It looks just like her nightstand at home—TV remote, claw clip, a pad of paper with a scribbled to-do list (as if there was still a life outside of this). But her Keystone Light has been replaced with a Styrofoam cup of ginger-ale that she requests every hour. Something to bring to her lips—*sip, sip, sip*—trying to drown whatever’s in there.

She won’t stop asking me to sneak her out to the parking garage to smoke a cigarette, a feat that can only be achieved if I pick her up and throw her over my back (which I think about doing, each time she asks). I look out the window, imagine myself walking across the parking lot like that, her body a sack of flour, my knees buckling under its weight. We’re fifteen floors up—mounds of snow pile in the parking lot speckled in black soot like scoops and scoops of chocolate chip ice cream, her favorite.

My father is usually in the room with me. Other times, he is pacing the maze of the hallways. Sometimes, he sits in the lobby and stares out the window, his gaze stuck and shallow, waiting for relief. I wonder what he’s thinking. I wonder if he’s worried. I wonder if he’s haunted, if visions of that morning wake him up as he dozes off at night. But I don’t ask.

He sleeps on the couch in her room almost every night the first week. It’s as if he’s been preparing for this: for a few months prior, each time my sister and I visited my parents’ house, pillows and comforters covered the living room sofa. *There isn’t enough room in the bed*, they answered when we asked them why they slept separately now. Or, *we like to watch different stuff on TV*. But entering

my mother's bedroom back then felt like walking into a hole-in-the-wall dive bar off the corner of a dimly lit street. Cigarette smoke hugged the space like saran wrap around old leftovers; the stench of piss and stale beer could no longer be scrubbed out of the sheets. Alone in the bedroom, beer in one hand and cigarette in the other, my mother's face bloated golden like the setting sun. My dad stayed as close as he could.

It's hard to say why he checked on her that morning. I ask him if he heard the thump of her body when she fell out of bed, but he says he didn't. Maybe, some part of him felt it—a jolt in his system as she hit the ground, a compulsion to move that he happened to attend to. Maybe, the house itself shook him awake, as her body jerked and shuddered, as it tucked itself under the bed, lodging itself there between the frame and the nightstand.

Whatever woke him that morning carried his body to the door, used his hands to turn the doorknob, walked him in. Whatever it was calmed him enough to call an ambulance, enough to explain to them what was happening as he waited—five minutes, ten minutes, a lifetime. Her moans, low and feral, replaced any chance of communication, no matter how many times he yelled her name. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head; her frail body trembled like a teacup in an earthquake.

“Make sure she doesn't swallow her tongue,” the 911 dispatcher said on the phone. “Make sure it's still there.”

When my mother moaned again, her mouth agape enough for two fingers, my father followed the dispatcher's instructions. The slippery organ was there, of course it was there, attached as ever to her frozen mouth. As her body shuddered, his thumb and pointer finger wrestled with the warm, squirming animal. And for a second, she was there with him too, her eyes wide with terror. But the recognition didn't last.

“She snapped her mouth shut right around my fingers,” my dad tells me years later. His voice is vacant; he is back there in that room, the way only memory can do. He is back there with her body, with the whites of her eyes. He is back there, fingers clamped between her teeth like a metal trap.

My mother. A hospital room. A short window of possibility for a new life. It was a fortune cookie of a moment; would she crack it open? She looks right through me when I ask her, as if trying to locate it, the answer, or the moment in question. Maybe, her processing time is slower because of the medications she’s on, their job to help her soothe the anxieties she’s been drinking to evade. The IV’s tendrils pump the cavernous receptors of her brain that crave dopamine, that relentless slog towards relief. Most importantly, they use the benzodiazepines to mollify her delirium tremens, or DT’s, the seizures that come from alcohol withdrawal. The benzos will wean her body off the usual five, ten, fifteen beers a day she’s consumed for over 30 years; the numbers, I tell to the nurse again and again. Tell to the doctor in the hallway. Tell to anyone who will listen.

By then, my two years of sobriety had appointed me the responsibility to acknowledge the truth of our family—or at least that’s the responsibility I assumed. I understand that my mother won’t tell the doctors what’s really been happening; I understand that she will protect her drinking beyond reason, like I did. I understand that her mother, my grandmother, is only trying to protect her too, when she tells the nurses I’m exaggerating. But the fire chief, the police, the paramedics, they’d already asked their questions at her house that day, probing my dad for answers around her drug use, insinuating overdose again and again, as he ran around them in a panic, begging to just get her into the ambulance. The truth is less glamorous. Beer was all she needed to get herself here.

“There’s nothing we can do for that unless she asks us for treatment,” the doctor says at the threshold of her door. I don’t dare talk to them in front of her. “This isn’t a rehab.”

My eyes stare straight into his. “She will die,” I say. “Her body, it will shut down. Don’t you understand how much she’s drinking?” Sure, he does, he responds. But there’s nothing they can do without her consent.

“Look at her! What don’t you get? Her body will shut down. Can’t you see that?” But he just shakes his head and walks away.

One evening when I walk through the door, my mother doesn’t know who I am.

“Liv left earlier, Mom,” I tell her. She thinks I’m my sister.

From the edge of the bed, I watch her eyes flutter anxiously around the hospital room like she’s missing something. I turn my head away from her.

“What do you need Liv for, Mom? We’re here.” My dad is sitting in a chair behind us, silent.

“It’s her birthday!” she says. “And we didn’t even get a cake yet! When are we gonna celebrate?”

But it’s not her birthday. My dad starts laughing in the corner, and I recognize that she might be doing this a lot with him. I don’t think it’s funny. Instead of assuring her that she’s confused or calming her down, I grow cold and distant, a hidden anger welling up inside that I don’t yet understand—a fear too vulnerable for the situation we’re in. I look towards the window and take a deep breath, an attempt to regain my composure.

Soon, she is here with us again like it never happened, and I come back to her, too, laying my head on her chest. As the last of the afternoon’s sun covers us, I notice that her face is crowded with deep blackheads. They’re spread all over—from her cheeks to her nose to her chin, stuffed like the pits inside of olives. One by one, as the sun goes down over the parking garage outside the window, I press

the tiny marks on my mother's skin with the tips of my fingernails. One by one, I watch as the black pus wiggles its way out. Left cheek, right. The harder I press, the more that comes crawling. Jaw line, chin. The peace I feel with each clean ditch of her skin is like nothing I've felt since she arrived here.

My mother never flinches, just lies there with her eyes closed breathing gently. When I'm finished, I hold up a mirror to show her my work, and a smirk spreads across her face. She won't remember this moment.

A day later, the nurses move her to the Intensive Care Unit; the withdrawal symptoms are worse than they'd anticipated. They need to monitor her around the clock; her body's simultaneously fighting a bad kidney infection from a UTI she left untreated for no one knows how long. *I tried to tell you*, I mutter at the doctor under my breath. I repeat the numbers again and again: three cases a week, at least. Thirty years. But the truth is, I'm nothing but relieved.

As precarious as the situation is, this is what we wanted. My dad and I had tried for months to think of hypothetical situations that might get her to a detox center as we watched her feeble frame wilt at home, our prayers much more desperate than logical. We talked about dropping her off somewhere with a bag of her belongings, driving away and not looking back. But we figured she'd just find her way out. At this point in her drinking, she didn't risk driving for fear of being arrested for a DUI, so jail as a means to forced detox was unlikely. In fact, she really didn't leave the house at all; she didn't respond to most of her friend's calls. No one but us knew how bad the situation had become.

Even with benzos to calm her nervous system as her body recovers from the shock of no alcohol, my mother still sees tiny cocker spaniels and black, burly German shepherds walk in and out of her hospital room, their tongues frothing for affection. She asks the nurses if she can pet them. At first, we laugh. But sometimes, the dogs are replaced with human-like creatures, their flat backs bent

and bruised as they climb the sterile white walls around her. Their bloody feet and hands leave marks that she begs the nurses to clean up. We can't help her when she's lost in the hallucinations that come with DTs; no one can. But we listen. We do our best. We make sure the blood's scrubbed.

One afternoon, I tell my mom about something I read online, about a disease that trees can develop. Slime flux, they call it.

"Slime flux?" she echoes. I can already tell she's not interested, but I continue.

"Yeah, slime flux. The inner bark of the tree, it starts to rot, so the tree 'weeps' secretions from what looks like real wounds on its trunk." I struggle to explain it to her in a way that she'll comprehend. "Like cuts, cuts in the tree bark," I say. "They leak this poisonous liquid, try to drain it from inside."

I pause, look at her. "Do you get it? The tree's trying to get rid of the poison, it's trying to cry it out, but the tears are just as harmful to the healthy bark on the outside..."

She's not even looking in my direction, and I feel myself becoming wild with anger, exasperated by our differences. "It's sad, isn't it?" I'm practically pleading with her to care now. "Eventually, the whole tree is overtaken with the infection. The whole thing dies, Mom! And there's nothing it can do; the rot attacks the roots."

I sigh. When she finally brings her eyes to mine, I look away. "It weeps?" she asks. "What do you mean it weeps?"

With a huff, I tell her she doesn't understand a damn thing. I tell her never mind, just forget it. I tell her to go back to sleep. We're both silent now until she breaks it.

“You know what, honey, I tried too,” she tells me as she closes her eyes again. “Yeah, honey. I get it. We tried, too.”

She doesn’t want to hear about things like that. She asks me to read her a story instead. “Something you wrote,” she says. “Something that will make me laugh.”

I tell her I’m not funny; I tell her I can’t think of anything. But she assures me, so I try. It has been a while since we laughed together. Not the noise I give her on the phone when I’m not listening, but a real one—a burst of it; the thunderous sound of hooves like galloping horses headed towards new emerald pastures. But I can’t think of anything funny enough to save us now. Instead, I push her to tell me about her childhood home. I want to hear what it was like when she was young; I want to catch the details of her childhood before her thoughts run away again, rabid VCR tapes fast-forwarding.

“You know what the old schoolhouse is like, honey. You’ve seen it.” I had. She and her seven siblings were raised in a one-bedroom schoolhouse, the same schoolhouse where my grandmother grew up taking classes. It teetered on the edge of a winding road in Wellsville, Pennsylvania, it’s white paint molting like flaking dead skin pleading to reveal a new layer. There is nothing, though, underneath. The thinning walls would fall like the white pappus parachutes of dandelions one day, return to the earth where they’d begin to grow roots deep into the soil, fifteen feet perhaps. Sprout something new—if it ever had the chance.

But no one will give the house an opportunity to begin again. My mother’s brother still lives there almost forty years later, soon to marry his third wife in the backyard, junked up hoopties from his old life their witnesses. Dawson’s Garage sits only a few hundred yards from the schoolhouse. A booming auto repair business in the ‘90’s, it now stands in as a reminder of things long gone—tires,

wrenches, and bolts litter the concrete floor waiting to be picked up and used. Instead, they weaken and corrode, orange rust spreading like slime flux. Alcoholism crushing metal in its palm.

“He’s trashed the place since we lived there,” my mom continues, her voice course, bringing me back to the stale reality of the hospital room. Her usual tone of resentment is like a taste in my own mouth. Now, she tells me, pill cases and beer bottles decorate the schoolhouse floor like hidden bombs. Bottles full of urine have toppled over and created perfect circles beside his bed and the couch and the recliner. The corners of the carpets turn up at their edges, attempting to crawl away.

I watch the sun droop below the horizon like the buttery head of a daffodil from the hospital window as the second-shift nurse makes her final rounds. She calls me over to the threshold of my mother’s doorway, tells me she’s in stable condition, they will begin to wean her off the medication soon, she is officially coming out of the hallucinations. None of these words soothe me. I’m worried about her liver—the wrinkled, shrinking black knot of it.

Years before this, my grandmother told me about a doctor’s appointment where they found out my mother’s liver was failing. “They took one look at the yella’ of her eyes and knew it,” she’d said in a hushed whisper as we laid down to sleep in her waterbed. “And don’t you dare tell her I told you.” My eyes blinked in the dark as I nodded my head up and down. This was how things went; the secrets spread as quickly as weeds.

As the nurse explains our next steps to me, I picture large, rust-colored organs pickled in mason jars in a locked metal cabinet in the hospital’s basement waiting. Could they be watered and massaged back to their original shape? She’s looking at me, waiting for a response, but all I can see is a line of desperate patients, dark skin under their bottom lashes caving, cheeks strapped to the bones of their faces. I see bumps and craters all over that could be connected like constellations. And the whites of

their eyes—vanished—swallowed up by large pupils and bordered in a vague, wallpaper yellow. In the threshold between my mother's room and the hallway, I see the livers beating like hearts.

“She won't be needing a liver transplant,” the nurse assures me one last time, but I can't get the pounding bodies out of my brain.

My mother falls asleep again, her breathing a slow sap stretching to a drip. I want to buy her something, to brighten up the place, so I leave her to rest and head downstairs. The gift shop lies near the entrance in the lobby. It's small and stuffed and cruelly overpriced; the cheapest 'gift' a pack of gum for a few dollars. *She wouldn't want that*, I grumble to myself as I toss it back down on the shelf. “It's too expensive in here, Beth!” I almost hear her say it, right there at the register.

She and her siblings shared one bedroom in the top floor of the schoolhouse growing up, sheets hanging from the rafters, makeshift walls like dutiful ghosts. I see her brothers and sisters scrambling to get ready in the mornings—all lazy-eyed and running out of time, hips bruised like soggy plums from being tossed into door frames on their way in and out and in and out. The tiled bathroom floor always caked in long brown hairs and dried globs of toothpaste.

I see their one heat source, a vent in the living room they all stood around in the mornings, huddled together in their blankets. No hot water from the sink. Boiled baths. Ketchup and mayonnaise sandwiches. Fights over the last piece of bread. On the days her dad brought them home their special dinner, steamed shrimp cooked in Old Bay spice, they'd store the leftovers in butter jars, make it last as long as possible. I picture the kitchen cabinets from my own childhood home: lids jammed into each empty crevice and, somewhere, their matching plastic, yellow tubs. I think of my aunt and uncle's barn, the butter jars that hold the screws and bolts stored beside the toolbox. I see the chicken pot pie leftovers in my grandma's fridge subdued in the plastic.

But once a month, she told me, my grandma would spend an afternoon with her sleeves rolled up, brush in hand, repainting their kitchen. Bright pink, every shade of yellow they could imagine, sky blue. Once, a brilliant green like a tree's revival. I think of my grandmother's wardrobe now—colorful and kitschy, full of sequins and glitter and matching sets. The way her earrings clash with her statement necklaces. Pastel eyeshadows and bright red lipsticks. Making beautiful what she could, what she had.

I take a deep breath and walk out of the tiny shop with nothing, pace around the lobby. Blink my tears back. Look around at all the nurses in pale blue uniform, the families in and out of the automatic doors, the older man resting on an oversized chair in the corner. I sit down on the nearest empty chair and close my eyes, begging for the sound of the hospital's hustle—squeaking shoes and quick, muffled conversation—to drown out the racing in my mind. But all I can see is my mother in her bedroom at home all alone putting lips to a Keystone Light can, lips to can, lips to can—and again. I could scream. I could run out of the hospital's front doors, never come back again. Even if she makes it out of here, she has to stop drinking. There is no other choice anymore. And the truth is, I don't believe she can do it. Addiction douses hope with kerosene. Lights it up like forest fires.

“Morton? Room 213.” The woman's voice at the front desk bring me back, the gift shop straight ahead when I lift my gaze. I take an audible breath, my chest rising with the inhale, and walk myself through the doors again. In the refrigerator in the back of the shop, I find a sunflower in a mason jar, just one left. I decide the price is worth it, all \$20; she can keep the mason jar and reuse it when she leaves. Anyway, sunflowers are her favorite. Anyway, who cares that flowers die in only days, their drooping petals a sick metaphor for her current state. Anyway, what's a waste in final moments?

The chill of the glass mason jar on my palm is no match for my worry's persistence. It doesn't make sense—the resilience of love, left wounded in the face of resentment. Or perhaps, they're made of the same substance, the same grit. The gummy trails of her addiction were like a salve to the scraps on my knees before I even knew what was happening. Here, something about a family's history: no matter its muggy bits, no matter its secrets, no matter its diseases, it's home. The slime flux that attacks the trees, it was ours.

In just three days, the sunflower is wilting. I pick the pot up from the bottom and shove it in front of her face.

“Water it,” my mother says. Her eyes are closed.

“I've watered it every day, mom. Look at this thing.” She cracks open her right eye slightly, blinks a couple times.

“It'll be fine,” she tells me. I roll my eyes. “Give it a day or two to soak up the water and it'll be fine. You know I grew a sunflower once, outside in the schoolhouse garden? It grew so tall it peered into my bedroom window.”

“Sunflowers don't grow that tall,” I say.

“Mine did,” she says. “I'd sit under it and the little seeds would fall into my hair. I'd find them on my pillows at night.” I try to believe her.

“Well, did you replant them?” I ask. “Can't you replant the seeds and grow new ones?”

“What did I need a new one for?”

The next time she falls asleep, I tip-toe into the room's private bathroom, looking over to make sure my mother's eyes are still closed. I slip inside and shut the door, press my ear to the metal, listen

for the soft *beep, beep, beep* of the heart monitor. It reminds me of her pale, bloated hands. Her hunched shuffle. Her father.

“I knew that he wasn’t good,” she’s told me before. “I knew he was drinking. I watched him get sicker and sicker.”

“Yeah,” I tell her. “Yeah, I get that.”

“He called me that morning, rambled on about the same things as usual. Same thing over and over,” she was getting upset now, an axe splintering a lifetime of calloused grief. “God, I was so angry at him. So damn frustrated. I begged him to get it together for us.”

“What did he say?” I ask her, even though I know what he said, even though I’ve heard it all before, from her.

“He told me he would, of course. He told me he didn’t want to live that way anymore. ‘I know what I gotta do. I’m taking care of it.’”

And then there was the drive to bring lunch to his house on East Princess Street where he moved after he left the family at the schoolhouse. Then, there he was, lying on his side out on the porch, front door swung open. Her, rushing to the neighbors for help. But he was already cold when she got there, beer left warm on the chair’s arm beside him. The corner store they frequented down the street open for business as usual.

I think of him, and I know that miracles sometimes don’t make it to us in enough time. I know that healthy livers are reserved for people that “stay straight,” as my grandmother would say to us. I picture my mother at my age: her hair long and dirty blonde, the glow of a young face free of blackheads and baggy wrinkles, her icy blue eyes. I see her there on the porch with her father—her tenacity, like tall, thick trees.

I drop to my knees in the hospital's bathroom, let the cold, tiled floor ease my aching forehead. My hands stretch out in front of me, palms face down, an arm lying by each of my ears. Child's pose. I think of the single prayer my sister and I learned when we were growing up, a staticky phone line to a God we didn't know. *Now I lay me down to sleep.* We'd say it before bed every night, all three of us snuggled together, my mom holding our hands as we squeezed our eyes shut. *I pray the Lord my soul to keep.* We'd concentrate, attempt to keep our minds from running away into thoughts of monsters in the closets, a hand under the bed just inches from our feet, a kidnapper outside the window waiting. *If I should die before I wake.* But this part, this part scared me more than any make-believe monster my mind could summon. *I pray the Lord my soul to take.* I never told my mother that every time we whispered that final line in harmony, I pictured something tall and dark coming. I'd see it behind my twitching eyelids, its black, ragged robes descending closer, poised and ready to snatch my soul right out of my tiny sleeping body.

The prayer always ended with 'God bless' and a list of the whole family, our friends, everyone we could think of. Cousins Jamie and Robert, Aunt Tetes, Shawnta. Grandma, Pappy, Juanita, Tim. God forbid, I forget anyone. On nights my parents went out, we'd shove ourselves into my grandmother's swaying waterbed, her soft, plump body like an anchor between us. All three of our heads arranged like peas in a pod across the horizontal side of the wooden frame, our feet dangling over the opposite edge. The blessings came for us here too; it was the same: the people to pray for, the not-forgetting, the way my chest would tighten in preparation for the listing. Those fifteen minutes I'd spend spouting name after name after name.

But the prayer I say on the bathroom floor here in the hospital with my mother is different. *God, don't leave her this way.* I pop my head up, look at the door, make sure no one's coming. *Take her or make her whole, but don't leave her this way.* I hear my mother's voice from far away telling me God won't do for us what we can't do for ourselves. I stand up. When I open the door,

she's snoring now, her mouth hanging open like a screen door left ajar. Droplets of drool slide from the left corner onto her chest.

I inch my body in next to her, the sterile hospital bed creaking raucously beneath me, but she barely stirs. Liquids crawl from the wires beside us into her veins and keep her calm. As I curl my arm around her delicate body, I think of how long she held me—my sister and I cuddled on either side of her in bed each night, terrified to sleep alone, even when we were far too old to crave the comfort of our mother's arms. I know now my fear was misunderstood.

Soon, I am dropping into sleep beside her, our chests in cadence with one another. Soon, I'm dreaming that I am kneeling on a wooly rug in the hospital's bathroom to the right of us. I watch myself stand up suddenly, as if realizing where I am, rip open the door, and find myself back where I started. My mother completely still, alone beneath piles of white blankets. They cover her like dogwood flowers.

"Mom?" I call out to her. She doesn't move. "Mom! Wake up!"

Finally, her head starts to stir on the pillow. A deep sigh escapes me, but my body stays straight and unmoving. Her eyes, droopy and low, scan the room. I watch her realize she is still here. Here, still withering away.

"Mom, let's go," I say, walking towards the bed. "Come on, let's go, let's get out of here."

I'm shaking. She looks at me, disoriented with sleep, and I smile to ease her confusion. My body relaxes as she smiles back—alive with my fervor. A force that she knows: my resolve is her own.

"Where are we going, honey?" she asks, and I hear her trust in me.

“Just get ready, mom. Are you ready?” My speech is slurred and quickened, the way I remember hers when she’d been drinking. Wires run in and out of her nostrils; she’s a soft ball of yarn, the IV machine the needle. I need her to move, but the wires, they’re holding her there like roots.

“Get up, Mom! Get up!” I shout. I’m out of breath now. She isn’t fazed; I’m ripping the layers of blankets from her body. “Get up, Mom! Hurry!”

“Go on without me, honey,” she says, her eyes glancing up towards me. “I’ll catch up. I don’t want to slow you down.”

“No, Mom. It’s close. We just have to hurry. Just get up; come with me.”

With an exhale, she lifts her head from the pillow and leans forward. The motion is sturdy and measured. Her eyes are closed again as she starts to remove the wires. First from her wrists, then from her nostrils. I move closer to the bed and tell her to climb on, to imagine the horses she rode when she was young.

“Think of Snip,” I say, “No problem, right?” I’m smiling again now as she mounts my back, the grace of a natural. And I lift her right up; she’s as light as she looks.

The window is just a few feet from the edge of her bed, and I walk over, her arms around my collar blades; her weight hanging against me like a cloak. And the window, it opens right up. She gasps, almost breathless at the sight of the sky, bright with the colors of early morning: purple and magenta like the undersides of eyelids. Her legs squeeze tight around my waist; my hands wrap around the shrunken meat of her calves, keeping her close.

“You ready, Mom?”

She doesn’t answer. Just nods slightly, her weak breath warming my neck. The courage of faith seeps like a current between us.

First, the left foot. The windowsill is higher than I expected, but I heave us up onto it.

I think of the way that sunflowers turn towards each other when they can't find the sun. I think of the soft cushion of tussled dirt.

Then, the other. She's buoyant on my back; silent despite the drop now in front of us; fifteen floors are a long way to fall. I take a deep breath and squeeze her feet in my palms.

"Ready, Mom?" But I know she won't answer this time, either. The only thing left is the thud of our hearts beating in unison—the rhythm of grieving. All five stages in sync. Hers, a soft thumping at my back, nudging me forward. The sound of wild horses approaching.

Two sunflower seeds left on the pillows behind us.