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Swallowed Glass

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Swallowed Glass

Author Bio

Chandra is a writing minor at Gettysburg College. She is continuing her long-time infatuation with story-telling, which began during the evenings filled with various tales from her older sister (a Gettysburg graduate). A common theme that focuses her work is the concept of “grayness” – the uncomfortable area between right and wrong, and the struggles imposed on people by this inescapable gray area. She draws inspiration from her own experiences, and although the connections may not always be clear fragments of her own life have been incorporated into the fiction stories she writes.

Swallowed Glass

Chandra Kirkland

Do you even know I'm here? I have been here a long time, but I forgot a long time ago why I stay. When you dream, I dream with you, and when you remember, I watch through your eyes, which have become weak and perpetually teary. You are going blind. Sometimes, on cold days when our life seems meaningless and an unexplainable hatred builds in my chest, I torment you with what little strength I have. I throw your cruelty in your face as you walk on the street, just to see your reaction; and your eyes may fill with barely suppressed tears, or your mouth may make an "o". You may wonder why you suddenly remember those terribly unkind things you said to your mother-in-law during New Year's two winters ago, or the blind eye you turned toward that annoyingly cheerful woman who used to greet you with a smile on her fat face everyday at work.

Why should you care? Everyone does such things, after all. But not everyone smashes their wife over the head with a lamp because she won't stop talking, and the news is on the old battery radio, and the beer is warm because the electricity bills have not been paid. I'll throw that in your face too. When this memory assaults us, I want to smash something on your head. But I can't, and your pain would hold me back even if I could.

Without your guilt, I would have faded long ago. The memories feed my existence, in a way. The worst ones seem to come on those bad days, the days when I want to hurt you. Remember how you left your daughter on the side of the road, holding her bruised face, wearing those little white-and-gray-striped tights and the blue dress, her eyes pleading? You came back for her, of course, but that's not the point. You left.

You are quite old now, you know. I've seen you staring at your creased face and touching those wispy tufts of hair that sprout from your ears, nose and chin. It's everywhere but on the gleaming peak, and the gray is all gone now because everything about you is pale, white. You cover your baldness with an old felt hat every day, even on the hot ones when it soaks up the sweat from your scalp, and you go to work with it pulled low so no one sees your muddy little eyes that are always squinting. You hate working where you do, but it's the only job you could get. That tiny retirement fund didn't get you far. I watch you fading every day, and I don't know how to feel.

The smile you give is so forced, but your coworkers buy it every time. Perhaps they find your fragility endearing. "Hello," you say with false cheer. "Welcome to Walmart!" Do you notice they don't really look when

they pass by? Only the weirdos get this job. I tend to watch from somewhere near the shopping carts: the furthest I can get from you. I am always by your side, and maybe I will be until you die. It cannot be too long now. Your walk to work is slower each day, and you rarely move once you get there. Wide unpleasant women drag their screaming children past, totting twenty-four packs of soda and microwavable dinners. Stick-like men in faded plaid button-downs with rolled up sleeves hobble by, and I know you're hoping you aren't just like them. Sometimes, young men and women from the university three miles away smile encouragingly at you. They read about people like you in their sociology textbooks, and they are almost proud of themselves for recognizing another victim of inequality. Their plucked eyebrows are turned up at the corners with pity. I watch it all with you, and I know that each day you retreat further, drawing away from this world in which you are almost as invisible as I am.

Every day, you try to eat lunch alone. But the frail blonde girl who attached herself to you three months ago always finds you.

“Hi, Mr. Kentz! Wanna have lunch with me?”

She always asks and then sits down without waiting for permission.

You barely spare Kate a glance, stirring your lukewarm minestrone soup with a cheap plastic spoon.

“Can you believe how busy it was earlier? You'd think people would have better things to do than go to Walmart!” She giggles.

“Wasting their meaningless lives away,” you grunt.

“Well, we do work here, Mr. Kentz.”

“Not by choice. If it weren't for the system, screwing me over, taking my life away...”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Threw me in jail for nothing, I tell you. Assholes.”

“You went to jail?” Her eyes are wide.

My attention drifts from your conversation. You always have these vague ideas about how “the system” has ruined your life, but I'm not sure you even believe in the words coming out of your mouth. We both know you did something terrible, but it remains locked away so deep that neither of us can see it.

“Well, what was your life like before that?” It's hard to say what it is about you that catches her interest. Perhaps pity drives her dogged attempts to befriend you.

“It was perfect.” You say the words bluntly, with no real feeling. “I had a beautiful wife, a daughter...” you trail off at this, staring blankly at the dimly lit gray walls of the lunch room. “We were very happy,” you conclude. And your mind is drifting to a moment that may very well be perfect, if you ignore the rot surrounding it. So simple: a walk back from the grocery

store.

Her hand is in yours, something beautiful and fragile nestled inside the calloused, familiar warmth. The sun is just edging from behind a cloud and the rays bursting through set the light drizzle of rain aglow. I am running ahead of you both, happy that your hand is not raised, but lowered and protective. I'm carrying the bag of bread, and I can't stop thinking about the French toast you might make for me in the morning if I am very, very good...

You snap back into focus as Kate's hand falls on your shoulder and something hard flashes across your eyes. She draws away slightly.

"C'mon, we have to get back to work."

You crumple the soup-stained napkins and squash them into your cup, bending the spoon inside before you cast it into the trashcan with too much force. Your knees shake as you stand.

You called in sick to work today. You woke with a fever, twitching in that ugly chair you slump in each night. The night was thick with the blurred shards of your life before this. I floated in the dark, torn between pity and disgust. How could you cause so much harm? You knocked your own small daughter from her chair because she made a mess, and she struck her head on the cold floor with a scream that brought your wife running. Now what little joy they brought has been gone for more years than you can remember, and the guilt eats at your gut until you become ill.

I'm disappointed that you roused yourself to make overpoweringly strong coffee with too much sugar and no milk – don't you know sleep is good for you? I almost wanted you to drown in those memories. I try to throw some more at you, try to make you hear me. But see, you're still not listening, you think you're crazy and maybe you are, but I want you to listen! Why won't you look at me? I want you to see me and tell me why I must follow you, but you sip your coffee like it's not poison, reading the news as if you can really see those tiny words, and your narrow shoulders are all slumped and weak.

The phone rings, and you move with groans and pops, placing the paper on that scarred plastic table that you took from the dumpster behind Walmart; why must you live like such a dirty old rat? I remember how the kitchen of the old house used to gleam softly in the afternoon sun, and in the spring there were often small, purple flowers in the old China vase above the sink.

Feeble, wide-eyed Kate is on the phone. She is asking if everything is okay, asking if you need anything, if you would like her to come over and help you with anything. Will you be coming to work tomorrow? Do you still have a fever? Maybe you should go to the doctor.

"I just wanted to check in on you; you've never missed work be-

fore!” Her high, airy voice reveals her good intentions, but it puts me on edge.

You hang up with short replies, assuring her that everything is fine. But you aren't fine. Are your shoulders even smaller than before? Now your eyes are narrower than ever, as if you're squinting through a storm. But that's not saltwater because you “don't do that sentimental shit,” remember? I would know better than anyone. You always yelled at me when I cried. But sometimes, when your wife locked you out in the rain to escape your drunken slurring, you would look just like this, like a very large, hurt child. Sometimes, I climbed out that window in the corner of the kitchen that never closed completely, and you let me sit next to you on the grimy cement that was our front porch. Now I am by your shoulder, just watching. I am always here. Your mind is drifting to that day, when they took you away with metal cutting into your wrists. I am sucked into the memory; I cannot escape the truly powerful ones, the ones that make you feel when we both believed you were past feeling.

The day they took you, I was still aching and confused, convinced I was dreaming. I trailed you like a dog on the verge of terror and panic. The invisible binds holding me to you hurt when I tried to escape, and your pain hurts me too. You cried a lot. You drank bourbon until you passed out on the front steps and the neighbors came out to stare. When she came home, you had managed to crawl into the kitchen. Her face held disgust, but I knew she had forgiven you already because her brown eyes were soft.

“Get up, please.” Her black, pointy-toed flats nudged against your side.

You don't move, but your hands tighten around the smooth, cold bottle. You are afraid she will take it. Something like hatred begins to rise in a hot mass in the pit of my stomach. I know you did something, something for which you cannot be forgiven. But you are hiding from it, hiding in the liquor. You are so selfish. I want her to go into the living room, to see what you've done. The details slip away, but I know you've never made such a terrible mess before. It was all your fault.

She goes. Her feet leave slight dimples in the thick green carpet, and then she fades from sight around the corner. She is crunching over the shattered glass, skirting around the things you threw in a fit of drunken despair; a lamp, foam-green seat cushions, your tattered leather loafers, some damp clothes and cleaning solution that you could not bring yourself to use. Now she has reached the stairs. A thump. Scrambling in the splintered wood and glass. Then she is screaming, the worst sound I have ever heard. She comes rushing back in, and her face is a mess of emotions and smeared make-up. You have clamored to your feet, and your worn hands stretch toward her, quivering, begging for some shred of mercy. She has none. The phone is clutched to her

cheek, and in a second she is screaming into it, warding you off with aimless strikes of her delicate, blood-stained fists.

They come for you in minutes, sirens screeching as the lights reflect off of the cheap white siding of the neighbors' houses. The neighbors shake their heads and cluck their tongues, all the while creeping closer. Their eyes drown in hastily-summoned pity as the wailing from the house moves toward the front door. I slide into the police car with you, a little spot of scared nothingness hovering by your shaking shoulders. You stop feeling, so I stop watching, and everything blurs as we return.

At noon, you venture out of the hole you dwell in and walk with wavering steps to the park a mile away. Your bald head is bare today; it is cool out, and the gentle mist of lingering spring rain dimples the sluggish river and turns your folded gray skin sleek and bright. You creak onto a soggy bench, hands clasped, those ugly leather shoes resting on grass and pebbles and snapped twigs from the oak tree looming over you with broad arms.

If I were not bound to you, I would not be here. This park reminds me of the one we all went to on that spring day, when the sunlight pushing through the thick canopy of sweetly flowering trees made your lines fade away. You were so young then, too. And she was smiling, not cringing away but holding your arm fondly. Pinky the cat was only a kitten then, and you let me bring her along, a ball of fluff cradled in tiny arms. Only the falling night drove us away, and I still remember the deep, calm silence of the drive home. This park is all gray, and the huge oaks drip sullenly.

You seem to be drifting off, as men your age do. I draw closer, feeling the familiar pull of your consciousness slipping away as mine heightens. Your white, almost-invisible lashes flutter, and the half-eaten bagel in the wax-coated paper that you picked up en route seems at risk of tumbling away. I am sucked into the memory swiftly, a leaf spiraling into the tiny vortex of a stream. You are back in prison. It took ten years of your life, but only a sliver remains to make you feel. You dream of it so much. The stench of men; piss, sweat, shit, and despair. Iron embedded in cement. Tattooed arms and bloodied knuckles. You fought like the rest, and maybe you welcomed the beatings as a twisted kind of justice against your own crimes.

They leave you there in the crowded yard, against the wall where everyone knows to find you. No one looks your way; they don't care. Many have tried to beat the bitterness out of you, to no avail. The inmates move in a shifting mass of muddled shapes and colors; orange cloth, unwashed skin, distorted and fading tattoos down grizzled arms and cheeks and necks. Their blank faces are given expression by the rain-blurred light and the shadows that fill those sharp spaces beneath brows and jutting chins. Only one person

seems to care about your return. His face it tilted up, as if he were a German Shepherd on a leash who has sensed a hapless jogger. He smiles, and his abnormally thick tongue seems to fill up his mouth in the way that teeth are supposed to. Why are you watching him? You don't look people like him in the eye. Now he's coming out from the mass of squirming bodies.

He crouches down to eye-level, and his thick thighs strain against the gaudy, threadbare cloth like expanding ice in a plastic bottle. His long fingers are splayed on the wall as he leans forward, and his thick tongue, filled with bars of metal, slows the words to a menacing drawl.

"People don't do what you did to me. I'm going to break your back with my bare hands and tear out your spine in little fucking pieces."

"Right now?" You are so ignorant.

"Are you trying to be fucking funny?" His hand hooks your ankle, and he spins you onto your back so that you look even more like a turtle. His foot goes into your gut, in a silent and unobtrusive way somehow, so that no one seems to notice he's driven every breath from the smoke-scarred sacks and into the tight November air. I can feel it. Why is this all so vivid? You have lived it so many times and the pain is still the same. It's as if you have purposefully kept it fresh.

You never will remember what you did to him, will you? As he was beating you with his foot, as fast as he could before the guards came, you still didn't remember. The rubber sole struck your skull again and again, struck your ribs and hips, cracking a couple bones and leaving a smattering of boot-shaped bruises. Your skin is so breakable. I watch every blow; I feel no pity or glee, I simply must watch. I don't like the next part.

You really aren't that strong, and he has arms as thick as a car tire (you only won because you cheated, which is nothing more than I would expect from you). I don't know where you got that rock from. It just appeared from beneath your ass; I hate the way you cling to it now with white knuckles and that desperate glint in your eyes – they look like rabbit eyes, wide and popping against white. He only stopped beating you for a second, but you manage to move like someone who isn't entirely pathetic. You're up and ramming your bleeding skull into his crotch, and he's surprised enough to stumble back with a howl. Now the rock is spattering red against your arm and face, and he's falling back, tongue out as he screams. I don't think you meant to hit him in the eye, but it just exploded. You didn't notice the guards coming, but they've reached you with their sticks and Tasers and you're falling too. Will you even remember this with that concussion and those broken ribs that are swamping you with a thick pain? Yes. Now you are resurfacing, dragged into consciousness by some outward disturbance, and I am pulled along like a child on a parent's hand.

A police officer is grasping your shoulder with his hair-covered fingers, and kind, brown eyes peer from beneath the folded, bushy brow.

“Everything alright, sir? It's a nasty day for a nap; you'll catch cold out here.”

You struggle up, pushing his hand away in favor of the damp bench arm. Squinting up at him, you grimace fearsomely with extensive use of those battered teeth of yours.

“Do I look like a fucking grandpa?”

Oh yes, finally someone will really see you. The poor officer is taken aback, and he draws away as if struck by a snake. Yes, of course you look like a fucking grandpa. He still can't see past that.

“Sir, you don't look well. Would you like me to walk you home?”

“No.” You turn abruptly, teetering a little, and begin to stomp toward the cracked and moss-covered footpath. “Fucking filth.”

“What was that, sir?” The officer is touching your shoulder again.

You spin and nearly fall, but that doesn't faze you. You are spitting and your eyes are livid as you haul yourself up by his crisp, white shirt, which strains under your grip.

“I said *fucking filth!* People like you made my life hell!”

You throw yourself against him, dribbling spit. But you move like your age, and he has whipped out a pair of handcuffs and a baton by the time your fists strike with weak thumps on his sizable gut. Catching your wrists in his beefy pink mitts, he snaps the cuffs on and lowers you with surprising care to the ground. He is panting and red in the face even from this. I wonder if you have passed out. The muffled static of a walkie-talkie interrupts the breathing that fills the moisture-thick air of the park. Something like panic fills me, and I can't tell if it's yours or mine. We have been here before.

A younger, trim police officer emerges from the dripping park to take your other arm firmly in his fist. They haul you away, toward the cars parked in ruler-straight parallels to the glistening curb.

The town is speeding by through the glass, and I can see the white glints of watchful eyes from the pedestrians moving purposefully down the street with their high-chinned expressions of self-importance. Crusty, groaning buildings are stacked towards the sullenly-weeping sky like mold-ing wedding cakes. The gleaming windows of the sizable bank built three years ago smother the streaked facades of Frank's Used Parts and Bargain Books. An airplane is cruising by high above, a mere glimpse through the dribbling gray that engulfs the town. The police station, which employs a grand total of twelve of the town's citizens, is located six miles from the park on Cherry Street. We round the corner with a deliberate click of the yellow left blinker, easing into a freshly-painted space.

You sulked during the entire drive, and they had to pry your claw-ing grip from the cold white metal of the passenger-side door. I grow tired

of your stubborn self-righteousness. Your anger brought us here, just as it did before. You let it destroy everything dear to you, and it is eating away your freedom. Now the same anger is gnawing at me, and I can't escape it. Is this familiar? Are you pleased with yourself now? Do you feel justified? Three slabs of cold rock and a wall of rounded metal bars – you got off easy this time. There's even clean toilet paper lying partially unraveled in the corner. You can watch the large police officer and his fit friend converse grimly over stacks of untouched paperwork as they shoot furtive glances in your direction and take turns snatching up the phone for breathless, thirty-second conversations. It's doubtful that you'll be here long, but you are pacing like an old wolf, throwing your bulk against the stone and making your arthritis worse. Each time you do this, your watchers grimace and wince with guilt in their eyes. Yes, you won't be here long. But perhaps you will really hit the wall a little too hard, and then you'll never leave this cell. I always wondered why you survived the last one. Death in a cage suits you.

The last light flickers and fades to nothing, a snuffed-out spark of life that leaves you and me alone. Here we are. You sit with your knees pulled to your chest, running your hands over your shiny crown with agitated motions. I watch you as I always do, buckling under your guilt and my own growing anger. This is the second time you landed yourself in a cell, and by default I am confined to the same imprisonment. Why must I follow you? Why am I here? I have put up with you for so long, and now it is clear that you have not changed. You are trapped, and I am trapped, and it is your fault.

The memories are crashing down on you, and the undertow sucks me in. I'm almost tired, but that hot mass of bottled, frustrated rage is exploding from me as scene after scene unfolds. I watch the terror that was my fleeting life. I want to hurt you, as you hurt me, as you hurt my Mommy each time you beat her. I always watched, compelled by a grim terror and fascination. You hurt us so much, and I want you to drown in the memories. Here, take this pain, take this memory of your absence from my life and your simultaneous domination of it. Remember the time you stuffed a cloth in my mouth to stop my crying? Remember Pinky the cat, my cat, which you threw from the window of the moving car because she shat on your bed? Do you remember Mommy, the way she cried in the corner as you screamed in her face and pummeled her with your fists, which were large and strong way back then? I can see that you do, I can see you remember. You are sinking onto the floor, a quivering, pitiful heap, and your eyes hide behind those lumpy, vein-covered and spotted knuckles.

You're so tired, and somehow so am I. My rage is nearly spent, but you're dragging me into another of the strong ones, the ones that make you feel again. This is the strongest, the one you pushed away and locked

in a dark corner in the back of your mind, the one you have denied every day and night for decades. You drowned it out in the alcohol-induced blackness, and the slightest mention of it has always sent you into a fit of rage. Prison made you push it away more; you could pile the hazy bouts of semi-consciousness one top of it, using the beatings to numb your mind and push away the last memory left from your dysfunctional but somehow whole life. What you did shattered that life. I was shattered with it. I have been hiding too, but I can't anymore.

This memory is familiar and alien at once. I know this is the same day they took you, but you have somehow kept this part from me until now. Perhaps the alcohol nearly erased it; perhaps you are just discovering it yourself. I'm sitting in the rocking chair I always loved, wearing the tattered pajamas that Mommy had to talk you into buying for me. The plastic soles with little dots on the bottoms don't come close to touching the ugly, army green carpet. What are you doing? Don't come near me. I'm rocking by myself and I like it that way. I don't like you much when you're drunk, and Mom has already left in a storm of tears. She took the car again. You couldn't keep up with her as she dashed into the bedroom and wrenched the keys from the nail on the heavy oak door. You couldn't even stop her on the stairs like you did that other time: the time she broke her hip. Now she is gone, and the neighbors are shaking their heads and debating calling the police, but they are too used to it to really take this consideration seriously.

It hasn't taken long for you to finish that fifth of bourbon; as you told the guys from work, you can "handle liquor like a real fucking man!" I'm watching you stumble toward me, wishing Mom would come back. You're stretching your arms out like you want a hug. There's something in your eyes that I've never seen, something that dispels my usual aversion. You're my daddy and I love you, so I'm going to make you feel better just this once. You reek. Your clothes feel grimy under my sweaty palms. I don't care; you're warm. Your arms are strong as you pick me up, spinning around as I laugh with surprised delight. The bottle lies forgotten on the stained carpet; am I more important?

"C'mon Lacey, we can have fun without your mom!"

You rush around with swaying motions, zig-zagging around some obstacles and stumbling over others.

"Is she gonna give me a bath tonight?" I pant a little, struggling to cling to the folds of your clothing with my peach-sized fists.

"No, honey, you don't need a bath tonight."

"Can I get down now, please, Daddy?"

You're laughing, but it's not the sarcastic laugh you use for Mom, or the spiteful grunt that you sometimes emit while watching the news. You

sound more like the Joker this time.

I think I'd like to go back to my rocking chair now. But we're surging up the stairs, and my hands are damp and slipping. We're going so fast, this doesn't even look like our boring, old house anymore. The unpolished wooden banister glides beneath your hair-covered hands, and I can feel the vibrations from your heavy footfalls reverberating up to your arms. Mommy put my hair in white ribbons this morning, and the bouncing is making them come loose. I never knew you were so strong; strong enough to move up the stairs in great bounds as if it were the easiest thing in the world. I almost laugh, but the bouncing is starting to hurt my arms. I wish you weren't so sweaty, and I wish I were stronger, strong enough to hold on forever. We're close to the top – we just climbed a mountain, just us two, and now you can tuck me into bed. It's too bad you slipped on the second-to-last step.

We didn't fall in slow motion like they always say you do. We fell so fast that I barely felt my neck snap before I was floating, screaming with pain that was already gone. I didn't recognize the twisted body at first: the little girl in those hand-me-down pajamas bought for a dollar at a yard sale. You rolled off me too late, and the blood from my mouth was on the elbow of your shirt. As I stared down at you, struggling to leave this place that no longer resembled anything I would call home, I knew that you were broken forever. Everything went from your eyes, life sucked up in a giant vacuum. And I couldn't bring myself to leave you.

They only kept Mr. Kentz for one night, but he was drooping alarmingly by the next morning, his small eyes fixed on the floor. He touched his bald, dully gleaming head more than was necessary, mumbling to himself as he shuffled out onto the chilly street; and as he climbed into the battered red Jetta driven by that wide-eyed girl from work, he thought of his empty house with dread. The fresh memory that had plagued his night with countless sweating nightmares was still raw, aching. Something had pulled it from the depths, tearing it from under the alcohol-induced haze. That night had always been a black spot in his mind, a mere blur of movement and panic. Now it was fresh and piercing, a constant pain that was all the worse because it was so belated. He felt more utterly alone than he ever had before.

He returned home at 11 a.m., and it was only after Kate drove away with a slight wave that he noticed his front door was ajar. Inside, a grizzled man with one eye was sitting at the kitchen table. His grin was like that of a panting dog; mouth wide open, teeth bared, tongue out. Pink flesh punctured by thick metal bars was the last thing Mr. Kentz saw before the mouth snapped shut.