



The Mercury

The Student Art &  
Literary Magazine  
of Gettysburg  
College

---

Volume 2024

Article 36

---

May 2024

## Unraveling Familiarity

Katherine C. Cornet  
*Gettysburg College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#), and the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

[Share feedback](#) about the accessibility of this item.

---

### Recommended Citation

Cornet, Katherine C. (2024) "Unraveling Familiarity," *The Mercury*. Year 2024, Article 36.  
Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2024/iss1/36>

This open access fiction is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

## Unraveling Familiarity

### Author Bio

Katherine C. Cornet is a sophomore at Gettysburg College who is currently majoring in English with a concentration in writing and an educational studies minor. She is also a women's soccer player. She loves listening to music, reading a good book, or hanging out with friends in her free time. She enjoys writing prose in the fiction genre.

# Unraveling Familiarity

KATHERINE C. CORNET

Three words shattered the warmth of a world Eliza had carefully curated.

It splintered the tinted glass of her apartment windows, forced the overhead lights to swing violently above, and made the water she had been drinking dribble down the corner of her lips suddenly uncontainable. The waxy feeling of the letter pressed between her fingertips was too smooth and perfect. Rose and amber wafted from the paper, the familiar scent of her mother's magic curling around her throat and lingering by her nose. It was overwhelming and overpowering. A stark reminder of everything Eliza had tried to forget. She reread the words, hoping to make it further than the first line.

"Come home, Elizabeth." The iciness of her mother's voice overshadowed her own. "Anton is dying, and he will not make it through the night." The words fell heavily from her lips and guided her shaky hands to her phone. Eliza picked it up and dialed a number she wished she had forgotten. Her thunderous heart blended with the dial tone, creating an arduous symphony. The crescendo as time stretched sent a sharp pain shooting through her head.

"Yes?" Her mother's voice cut through clearly, like an out-of-tune note. It forced everything to come to an abrupt end.

"I got your letter," she stuttered, trying to find more words to fill the air. "I can be home in a few hours."

"Good." Her mother had always been a woman of few words.

Usually, Eliza took comfort in this because it meant she wasn't doing anything worth criticizing. But now, she couldn't help but feel she wasn't doing enough. "Do you need me to bring anything?"

"No. Don't be late." Her mother interrupted.

Eliza's phone beeped three times and the call ended, leaving her in a room growing colder.

---

The house on West Hollow Street was exactly how Eliza remembered it. Dark wood brightened against the light that poured out from

the windows. The wind pushed against the branches of sturdy trees that brushed the grandiose arches. It was a piece of gothic perfection that throbbed with its own heartbeat. The thrum aligned with the pulse that emanated from the ruby in Eliza's bracelet.

During the car ride, Eliza had been toying with the idea of leaving again. Of disappointing her mother again. Of finding some way to hate Anton for the radiant sun he had become and the shadow he had created for her to stand in. Maybe then, she wouldn't have to stand in front a home she never loved. But even if she found a way to become comfortable with any of these options, Eliza was sure she'd find another way home. That is what Anton would call inevitable. A witch would always find their way back to their coven because the price of not doing so was deadly. And she had spent ten years deciding if that was a price she was willing to pay. The ruby pulled forward, wanting to reconnect with the home it lost. No longer able to put it off, Eliza walked up the steps, each one with a taunt of its own.

"Disgrace," one moaned.

"Useless," another creaked.

"Abandoner," the last one echoed.

The doorbell dared her to ring it. Once she did, the murmur of voices she could hear on the inside went quiet, and the door swung open. Her shoes slid on the buffered floor. Eliza was met with a frosty heat and the eyes of every witch in the room. She didn't know what to say; none of her words would be good enough to fill the perfect space. How could she address a room full of people she left behind? Everyone waited for her to say something while she struggled to find a way to blend back in. She opened her mouth to speak when an airy voice called out.

"Elizabeth!" It was enough to force everyone to return to their small talk, which Eliza was sure now included her. "Look how much you've grown." Her Aunt's frame enveloped her entirely as she was pulled into a hug. Bouncy, soft brown curls pressed into Eliza's eyes, and she could still feel the hands on her back even when they parted. "How have you been?"

"I'm fine, Aunt Priscilla," Eliza admitted.

"Really? You look like you've lost weight?" Priscilla snapped her fingers twice and waited until a silver tray floated between them. She picked up two cake slices and handed one to Eliza before popping the other into her mouth. "Eat this."

Eliza examined it. "Did mother bake this?"

"Alina bake something?" Priscilla laughed hard. "You haven't been gone nearly long enough for a change that big. She catered it from the small

bakery in town, the one your old friend works at. What was his name?" She pulled another cake off the tray as she tried to remember. "Cameron... Caleb... Calvin...?"

"Callum," Eliza said before eating her cake.

Priscilla shrugged. "Sure." She put another hand on the tray, feeling around for another cake and frowning when she couldn't. "Are we out already?"

"I'll go check to see if there's more." Eliza excused herself, scurrying away to be out of sight. Entering the kitchen, she was comforted by the sweet scent of strawberries and listened carefully to Callum's humming as he stood with his back towards her. He had one earbud in and a cigarette behind his ear. Just like her, he was blissfully out of place. A bright rose that managed to break through a blanket of snow. Eliza placed both elbows on the island and leaned forward. "I thought you hated baking."

Callum turned slow, like molasses, and squinted as soon as he saw her. He stepped forward and then stopped himself, his face going neutral as he avoided her gaze. "I used to. Things tend to change when you're gone for so long."

"I meant to call," Eliza said as she reached for another strawberry.

"Sure, you did." Callum gave Eliza a light slap on the hand and pulled the bowl away from her. "You just didn't have the time, right?" There was a ding from the oven, and Callum grabbed the oven mitt from the countertop. When he opened it, Eliza was hit with the smell of fresh strawberry shortcake. She closed her eyes, letting the smell take her back to the days she spent with Callum in the bakery, stealing treats and glances. The pan colliding with the granite of the island yanked her back to the present moment. Callum stared on, waiting for her to speak.

Eliza fiddled with the ruby on her bracelet. "I didn't know what to say."

"Personally," Callum said as he crossed his arms over his chest. "I like to start with hey."

"And what should I say after?"

He sighed and used the back of his hand to feel the top of the cake before grabbing a piping bag full of frosting off the counter. "You could drag me through small talk before bragging about how amazing your life is without me in it."

She winced at the comment. "My life is far from amazing."

"Then why didn't you call me." His voice was wavering. "Or write me a letter so that I didn't have to beg your family for the information that

proved you were alive.”

“Because it was easier for me to pretend you didn’t exist.” Eliza watched as his face dropped, something breaking in her. Callum adjusted the piping bag in his hand and tried to pipe perfect frosting while his hands shook.

“I see how you feel,” he said, trying to erase all emotion from his face.

“That’s not...Cal I-”

The door to the kitchen swung open, and Eliza turned her head to see her mother standing in the door frame. “What is taking so long?” In the ten years Eliza had been gone, her mother had only changed slightly. Her raven black hair had two streaks of gray, and the space around her mouth and eyes had finally become dusted with slight wrinkles. “I see,” she said, staring at Eliza and forgetting about Callum. “You’re being distracted.”

“Not anymore, ma’am,” Callum said as he placed his earbuds back in. “The next batch of cakes will be ready in five minutes.”

Her mother gave him a nod before addressing Eliza. “You haven’t changed.”

“Thank you,” Eliza said.

“That was not a compliment.” She gave Eliza a once over, finishing it with a harsh glare. Her mother opened the door, leaving the kitchen, and waited for her to step through. Eliza looked back at Callum, who was already halfway done with the frosting. She hoped he would look at her one more time, but her mother cleared her throat and Eliza knew she was out of time.

Eliza followed her mother back through the parlor, feeling the sting of eyes against her back. She kept her gaze forward, up the staircase where the lights of the party faded. Her mother stood at the top of the stairs, stepping to the side to let Eliza through. The door to her brother’s bedroom sat at the end of the hall, a vase full of dying flowers on the table near it.

“He’s waiting,” her mother said impatiently.

“You’re not coming with me?”

“I’ve been by his side every day since his body started failing him. Can you say the same?”

“I would have if you had told me.” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

Her mother scoffed. “It’s taken me a while to acknowledge I raised a failure. Don’t tell me I raised a liar, too.”

Eliza looked away. “That’s not fair.”

“Your family is supposed to come before everything. You are a deserter. Never forget that.”

“Moth-”

“Go,” she said, cutting Eliza off. “Do not keep Anton waiting any longer.”

Eliza made the long walk down the hallway, the ruby on her wrist growing in heat as she did. When she reached the doorknob, Eliza took a deep breath to steady her emotions before opening the door and closing it softly behind her. Anton was propped up on a flurry of pillows in the king-sized mahogany bed. He had gone painfully thin, appearing more fragile than a piece of glass. Anton didn’t look right; he looked powerless.

“Hey,” Eliza said after overcoming her initial shock.

“You can get closer.” He smiled, the cracks in his bloody lips showing. “I’m not contagious.” Despite his physical appearance, Anton was still as charming as ever. He hadn’t lost that part of him yet.

Eliza walked until she reached the foot of the bed. “What happened to you?”

“Magic. It always comes with a price.” Anton coughed hard, the force shaking his entire body.

“You’ve always been too ambitious for your own good,” Eliza said once the coughing had ceased.

“My ambition saved the coven. We lost a lot when you left.”

Eliza laughed. “You’re the only one who seems to think so.”

Anton shook his head. “I’m the only one choosing to voice it.”

“How much longer do you have left?” She wanted to change the subject entirely.

“Who knows. If I suddenly became very unlucky, I might not make it to midnight.”

Her lips parted slightly as she tried to understand what she heard. Her older brother, her only brother, would be dead before the morning. The shadow she was forced to exist underneath would disappear with the sunrise. “Mother couldn’t find a spell to help?”

Anton sat up straighter in his bed, adjusting the covers so they fell to his waste. “She did. It’s why everyone in the coven is here. It requires all of us.” Eliza marveled at the intricate ink across his arms. He was covered in runes, each one symbolizing life in some way. A pit formed in Eliza’s stomach as the metal of her bracelet hissed against her skin. “Do you believe in second chances, Elizabeth?” There was a shift in his tone. All the warmth he had been feigning left as his expression darkened.

Eliza took a step back. "Why?"

"Because this spell can give it to both of us. You get a second chance to support your family. I get a second chance to live."

"What would you need me to do?"

He waved his hand, signaling her to come closer. Once she did, he picked up a small dish of black skin paint. "Untwist the cap for me."

Eliza did as she was told. Anton dug his index and middle finger through the paint with steady hands. He grabbed her wrist, the pressure firm, and drew a straight line up her forearm. Then, he drew a shorter line extending diagonally from it on the right side. Anton didn't have to finish for Eliza to know what he meant to draw. She pulled her hand back in shock. "What are you doing?"

"The spell. Give me your hand. I need to finish."

"You're going to draw a death rune on me!" Eliza worked to rub off the paint that was already there to no effect. "What is the spell going to do?"

"Trade your life for mine," Anton said as if he were talking about something as simple as a candy bar.

Eliza was at a loss for words. "How could you ask me to do that?"

Anton sat up straighter. "I'm protecting you from a much worse fate."

She couldn't find the courage to look him in the eye. Leaving had left her with regrets and an insurmountable amount of guilt. But every time she thought about that night, she wasn't torn up about leaving her family behind. She was worried about what might have happened to Callum. Callum, who had been there to comfort her every night when her mother called her a disgrace. Callum, who had distracted her with amazing deserts and stories so extravagant, it provided her with a temporary escape. Eliza hadn't abandoned the people that mattered most, she had abandoned the person who meant the world to her, and she never apologized for it. Callum was left to pick up the pieces she had left behind, and she never thanked him for doing so. She couldn't let herself die before then. Eliza turned around to leave, the door only steps away from her.

"Do you really think we'll let you leave again?" Anton asked as if reading her thoughts. "This spell is your only way out."

Eliza felt the burn of her bracelet. She knew what she had to do. "No, there's another way out." She unhooked the bracelet around her wrist and watched the ruby shake intensely. The price of leaving the coven would be deadly. But if it meant she could apologize to Callum, then it was a price



worth paying. She let the stone drop and slammed her foot on top of it, listening to the crack with satisfaction. Eliza could hear her own heartbeat in her ears, and she clutched at it, the sudden strength taking her by storm.

"You...you..." For the first time since she got here, Anton stuttered. "Get out." She went to the door, opening it to a foreign hallway. A figure at the edge of the staircase looked like her, but Eliza couldn't understand why. The face was a blur, and the memories were fading with it. They mumbled something. Eliza felt a sting on her cheek as the slap echoed. When she looked back to face the figure, Eliza couldn't see them. She was losing everyone, her mind erasing them before her eyes.

Eliza flew down the stairs, stumbling into the kitchen but finding no signs of Callum. She noticed the door leading to the backyard. She walked out and found him standing next to a rosebush, earbuds in and a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. She raced towards him, her own fear taking control of her movements.

"Cal?" She was scared to speak any louder.

He turned around, his face in high definition, the memories they evoked clear against the overwhelming static.

"What, Liz?" He dropped the cigarette and smothered it beneath the bottom of his shoe.

Eliza hugged him, tears filling her eyes and staining his shirt. "I'm sorry."

He froze underneath her touch, but eventually, Eliza felt his arms press into her back.

"I really hated it here, Cal, but I never hated you." She pulled him tighter.

"You were the only person who could stop me from leaving. The only one worth staying for."

"I forgive you," he whispered.

She felt her restless heart cease. When the hug finally broke, he stood there with the same warm smile he had always given her when they were kids.

"Do you want to get out of here?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

Eliza interlaced her hand with his as he guided her to a car full of baking trays and leftover ingredients. She opened the door and slid in, finding comfort in the warm seat. Callum started the car, and as he drove down the streets, Eliza had no desire to look back. Everything she needed was in the car with her. Everything she wanted was on the road ahead.