**Generations**

By Laura Perkins

The brush of skin helps through the dark. “Hold my hand,” says the mother. The children listen—even the boy, who is older. He trails behind, finger hooked in the broken beltloop of the mother’s jeans. His other hand hovers near his face, lips mumbling, but he won’t suck his thumb until he falls asleep and forgets himself. Too old—he decided this, not the mother. She would let him do it. There is little time left. She hasn’t the heart to scold.

 They move slowly. Their feet shuffle. The mother listens to the sweep of them. She is like a deer, alert to any sound. There are so many: the bone-break of twigs, an animal rustle, the dry whisper of tree branches, the chirruping thrum of insects. She used to lie awake at night to the base thump of music played in the apartment neighboring theirs, she would roll over and stuff her pillow over her ears to block the vibration from passing car engines. Police sirens, a far-off argument, always a dog barking somewhere. In this new, emptier world she expected silence but there was never that.

 They walk up the hill behind the string of dark houses where their home is. It’s dangerous, but there are fewer and fewer risks that the mother can’t justify. The girl’s small damp hand twists in the mother’s fist. Their pupils have long adjusted to the dark and the girl looks at everything. Her head like a loose joint, swiveling. She asks for a story. The mother shushes her. “Not yet. Come on. And quiet. Whisper-feet, remember.”

 A game. You can make a game out of anything, the mother decided as she lifted her daughter onto her toes, as she taught her how to roll her feet slowly, heel to toe. Touch every part of your skin. Quiet, quiet. The boy watched from the couch, itching at the sore lingering near the corner of his mouth. She did not need to teach him. He had lately realized that fears grew bigger when you gave breath to them and so he had stopped speaking. He communicates in sounds, grunts and hums. The mother knows what he wants, most of the time. It is a language like any other.

 They crest the hill. The grass is damp, and in the dark it looks furred—a carpet of black mold. The mother sits the children down and walks the perimeter, peering off the edges to the shadow-swollen below. Far off there is the haze from the fire, closer now, the woodsmoke scent already deep in their skin. She sees nothing but lingers, because she doesn’t know how to do this, how to say this thing. You are the last. There will be no more after. You are the last of us. They know already, in the way children somehow always know things, but it feels it should be said. She should leave them with something.

 A story, the girl begs. “In a second. Let’s sit down. Okay?”

 There are things that the mother has learned—how quickly, for example, this world stole back what humans claimed. Before the long time inside, the mother saw a tree that had grown crooked through a broken bit of roof, dry shingles littered like shed scales around its roots, sprouts bubbling green from the asphalt. A source of life unexpected. This was back on the edge of her denial, when she thought that change begot change—which it does but not in the way she wanted, never back to what it was.

 They sit together. The grass is damp. It seeps through their clothes to wet their skin and the girl begins to shiver and huddles close. The mother pulls her against her body. Skin to skin, the warmth of this—she’ll miss it.

 The mother braids the girl’s fine hair. She doesn’t tie it off and lets it unravel loose at the ends. The boy sits a little apart from them, watching, thumb indenting his lower lip.

Something.

She should leave them with something, but how to prepare them for the last blink of the world. She would not see it. She would not be there. What can she say now? There are no assurances.

“Come here. Come close,” she says. They do. They press together, their round eyes blinking to take in any light around them. “Hold my hands.” They fold their hands into hers. Up here alone with them, there is a kind of beauty in the darkness. The boy hums, a happy sound. It has been a long time since they’ve been outside.

 A story, the girl asks again. The mother nods. Of course. What else could she give now?

 “I love you,” she says. “Now listen.”