

An Entrance, An Exit
By Jackson Hyland-Lipski

The flame formed a weak spot in the center of the largest log in the fireplace. This made it so that this log was precariously perched atop two smaller logs, forming a hut. The burning log remained on top for longer than seemed possible without crumbling down. Its heat absorbed in the young boy's forming toes, slightly heating the rest of his self yet not to its full potential.

"I don't want you getting too close", she would say.

She didn't say it now, but she made sure that the look in her eyes made it clear. She had given him this look enough for him to understand, or at least fear for what would happen if he disobeyed. She made this house his world, his everything. She had made herself the focal point of his life, and it became overwhelming. Now she stared blankly at the large log, hypnotized by its persistence, envious of its tenacity. She grabbed a cigarette from the pack on the table. "Hey sweetie do your mother a favor would you", she said, as her son was already grabbing her lighter from the counter.

The fireplace cut a large rectangle out of their living room. Earlier in the day she couldn't take the frigidity of the air, yet did not have the energy to build a fire. Hyperventilating over-dramatically due to the cold, she rushed to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee. This would be enough, she thought to herself. Her son wasn't complaining about it, so it must not be too bad. However, when they had finished eating their dinner earlier in this particular evening, winter's chill had reached its firm apex. As she opened the flue, the necessity for a fire grew, for the day's snowfall showered down their chimney and jolted the mother to an attentiveness she had not felt in years. The moment passed, and she realized that something other than the snow, which chilled her bare neck and inevitably dripped down her back, had come down the chimney with the weather. A bird lay broken by the fireplace, 'must have been trapped in the chimney before I opened the flue', she thought to herself. The mother quickly noticed its delicate condition and crept her hands slowly towards the animal, bringing the bird to a faint and fearful chirp. What type of bird this was, she could not tell due to the thick soot that was deeply involved in its feathers. At first she assumed this gray coloring was natural for this kind of bird, whatever it may be, but she soon noticed the same grim color on her hands, clothes, and face.

She put two skinny logs down in the pit of the fireplace, dropping the second one clumsily and loudly.

“Ah shit!” she yelled as her pointer finger began to bleed, a shard of wood sticking out from the wound.

“I mean, well...hey, do you think you can do something for me?” she asked her son, who had heard her exclamation from his room, and now stood over the weak animal with curious eyes trying to penetrate the situation. He was at an egotistical age, when one is non-empathetic towards other people’s pain. He didn’t know she was hurt, and assumed she was angry.

“Finish the fire for me, just put another small log on top of these two” she demanded, picking up the bird who was limply spread over her dirtied hands, breathing heavily, tranquil from its pain and its inability to do anything more than simply breathe.

“I’m gonna wash this poor thing off in the sink after I clean up this mess,” she said, holding out her arms to show her son.

The boy got on his knees over in the corner of the room where the pile of logs were, and picked up the largest log he could find. He put it over his head shakily and in an instant his grip loosened. The log only lost some of its outer bark as it hit the floor, and the child rolled it over to the fireplace, heaving it up on top of the lesser logs.

After washing her hands, the mother wrapped up the broken bird in a small cloth towel, damp with warm water. Ignorant to the specifics of its injuries, she left the wings spread out as to not disturb any fractures. With very delicate movements, she used the cloth to wipe away the soot from its feathers. A drop of blood from her finger fell on the bird’s twisted wing, and she dabbed the towel on it. Dark red stained the rest of the bird’s body beneath the gray, and the mother at first assumed that it was from her own cut, and then became filled with fear that the poor creature may be cut and bleeding. After closer inspection, after ridding the bird of most of its dusted exterior, she could see the proper bird. It was a young male cardinal, barely at an age where its vibrant red was growing in. As she wrapped it up, the bird began

to chirp less defensively, and to the woman seemed to be rather joyful or trusting. She took this as a thank you.

“You’re welcome,” she whispered self-consciously, for she knew this was a ridiculous response, or rather was not worthy of a response at all.

Turning his head quickly, the boy too felt the new found liveliness in the young animal’s chirping. He looked back at the logs, and with the pile of newspapers lying next to him, began crumpling up the pages and carefully placing them beneath the large log, inside the wooden hut as he had seen his mother do. She used to make fires more often, and as they lived in the mountains it was perpetually cold. She would make hot chocolate and they would sit by the fire, and she would play games with him. She was focused on him then, all the time, rather than spending her time in her own mind. He heard the shower turn on.

She turned the shower on. Her hand felt the cold water turn warm, telling her that she could step in. The gray soot washed off of her limbs and face and formed a dark cloud in the thin layer of water that lay beneath her. The painfully cold weather produced a perpetually chilled core within the mother, and as she took her time, she could not rid herself of this chilliness. She turned the temperature up.

“Ah shi-“ she said, catching herself after turning the temperature up too high and burning herself. Burning like the potential fire she was working on before the shower, she thought. She remembered her son, who was putting the logs on, helping her. She thought of the bird. She thought of the lighter on the counter with which she would light the fire. She thought of her son again.

On the tips of his toes, the boy barely reached up to the kitchen counter that lay about a foot above his eye level. He stretched his arm up onto the counter. Making his pointer finger and middle finger into legs, he walked his hand across the table, blindly searching for the long skinny lighter that he knew was always up there somewhere. His small hand made the slightest encounter with the lighter, and he quickly smacked it onto the floor and into his reach. Kicking it towards the fireplace,

he picked up the lighter and started figuring out how it worked. There was a child-safe button on it somewhere, but it wasn't difficult for him to find, after seeing his mother light her cigarettes with it on so many days. Those days were always bad, and even at a young age he knew this. She'd smoke a cigarette, dazing off into her thoughts, and he would be sitting there looking at her. Seeing her son staring at her curiously, she would snap out of it and attempt at a reason. "I have to make a phone call sweetie", she would say, as she grabbed her cigarettes before going into her room. After closing the door, she would sit on the bed with a new cigarette lit, not saying a word.

He pressed the button on the lighter and it made a click. His mother was already rushing in before it clicked, and her approach loudened once it did. She snatched the lighter from her son in a swift motion and she picked him up and held him in front of her eyes, in which a crescent of water had formed. She tightened her hold on him and threw his head next to hers. Following one last strong clench, she let him go and sat down on the floor next to him by the fire. They watched for a time as the large log on top maintained its weak spot in the center, delicately positioned as to not cave in. She thought of her son's life, her own, how short it can be. She thought of the bird. The young cardinal in the bathroom. She had forgotten about it, and it had died from its injuries when she went to check. She told her son to close his eyes, and he did as she brought the bird into the living room. She dropped the young bird into the fire and it collapsed that last bit of ash keeping the top log together, spewing up a few sparks. The smoke darkened. She put her hand on her son's back and led him out of the room. The smell would have been unpleasant, she thought, as the broken bird slowly traveled back up the chimney from where it had fallen.