

“Brother”
by Sarah Mattalian

I begin painting the memory with a streak of yellow; the shawl of sunshine that my mother wore that day, singing gospel songs and kneading dough for a blueberry pie. Me, with wide, observant eyes, standing next to her.

“When this life is over, I’ll fly away...” her voice carried itself around the kitchen, the sound wrapping around my fingers. I add a curl of blue.

“Now, where on earth did Isaiah run off to?” Her Southern drawl sparkled as she peered out the kitchen window. I shrugged my shoulders, continuing to watch how her hands moved with the flour. Light dripped from the mess of brown curls that was confined within her ponytail.

She looked over at me, a smile splitting her face in half. “Do you know how lucky you are to have him, your twin brother?” she beamed. Her words, filled with love, compel me to add pale pink stripes.

“Yeah, I guess.” Of course I didn’t know how lucky I was; I was ten years old. My mother, however, was the one I knew I was lucky to have.

Mom stopped kneading to reach across me for a towel, and for a moment I could smell the vanilla extract that she always put behind her ears. I dip my brush in the coffee-colored paint.

Her tone was tender, knowing, light orange. “Some people look their whole lives for their other half. And you were born with one.” The sentence was pure and silver, floating gently through the air and landing on my shoulders.

Too young to fully comprehend what Mom was saying, I didn’t respond. Admittedly, I hadn’t given much thought to Isaiah lately; I’d been spending a lot of time baking.

“Oh, I just love both of you so much!” My mother burst open, purple and gold spiraling from her voice, and I smiled widely.

I was at least half of her greatest pride.

She took the rolling pin to the dough once again; the singing commenced. “Hallelujah by and by, I’ll fly away.....!”

I seize my brush, shove it in the red paint, and stab it to the canvas.

It always goes like that; I pick a memory, attempt to paint Isaiah back to life, and end up killing him again by the end of it. No matter which colors I use, the painting always ends up the same hue as that car that wasn't paying attention.

I take the canvas off the easel and set it against the wall. Piles of hideous abstract paintings – my failed attempts from the past month – crowd the floor of my room. “Listen, Cal,” Dad’s tentative plea echoes in my skull. “I know art is a way of coping, but could you at least try to keep it neat?” I had promptly ignored him.

I throw down my brush and wander into the kitchen to get a snack. My mother stands precisely where she was ten years ago, but she has long since stopped baking. Now her hands are like stone on the countertop, no blueberry pie to occupy them. Dust has collected in between her fingers.

“I’m getting food.” My voice hits every surface in the kitchen except her ears. Through the crinkling of the chip bag, I hear a sharp breath.

“Caleb,” she muses, letting my name stand in front of her. “Why do you do all those absurd paintings?” Absurd, shining a vexatious lime green, dances around the kitchen. I feel a slight drop in my stomach; her glimmering accent has vanished. Now, each word is made of ice.

“Just trying to resurrect Isaiah, Mom.” I slam the cabinet shut and walk out. All of our words quietly incinerate.

Her attacks on my artwork are always unanticipated and uncalled for; she lurks around the house, shadows hanging from her earlobes, gun loaded with splintery insults.

She was closer to Isaiah than I was.

I close the door to my room and stand at my easel again, trying to recall a memory of him: the library when we were five. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. I reach out to flip the page, but the book disappears.

Isaiah’s face is slowly fading from every memory; my supposed other half gets paler the more I paint him.

The deck of cards inside my brain shuffles. I reach my hand in to grasp a Queen of Hearts: holding Mommy’s hand at the park while he ran off with the other kids. Begging my mother to teach me piano while he fooled around on a drum set. Isaiah wanting to ride bikes in the street, while I stayed in to bake a pie with Mom.

Mother, mother, mother. The memories like shining chrome.

And then I realize.

So I lunge for my paintbrush.

When I finish, I discover that a definitive painting has miraculously sprung from my fingertips. There is no abstract element, only a picture woven perfectly from the colors of Isaiah's eyes. I text Mom to come to my room.

The door creaks open. "Cal, you should really move those things," she scoffs at the canvases that still litter my floor. "Don't – oh!"

Her last syllable is tinted with the fuschia tone of surprise, as she has finally looked up to see me standing next to my finished piece. Mom walks over slowly, reaching out to touch it, and the dust falls from her hands. The seams of her angry eyes come undone.

I inhale. "This whole time, I've been trying to paint Isaiah back to life. I realized that that was ultimately meaningless. Instead, I should've been trying to paint us back to life."

She looks at me, face half broken.

"I know that you were closer to him than I was. But you have to remember, I was closer to you than he was. I needed that, so I could paint this."

And suddenly she is hugging me tightly, and I am hugging her back. Amidst the scent of acrylic paint, I catch the slightest note of vanilla extract.