

In This, Our Life

by Kyle Hemmings

Her captors allowed her the use of the toes of one foot. It was hard to pretend she was numb—as if playing an art game indoors. With the ball of her foot, she primed the canvas. Her big toe acted as a fan brush, the rest were sable, flat, or pointy. She told herself: flesh = camelhair fiber. She strained and stretched her body as if she were a canvas herself. Exhausted, she could no longer move her toes. Her captors entered the room, examined the picture. One was male; the other female. Tell us what this means, said the male. In a weak voice, the girl said it was a portrait of her hanging upside down from her favorite fig tree as a child. In the background, she added with a dry tone, there was a small lake and a playground with swings, how she loved to arc. The captors noted that it was full of bright running colors. We will be back with a decision, said the woman, clicking her heels. The girl closed her eyes, thought death would be better than any of this, but then again, in this frame was her only life. The captors re-entered the room, released the girl into the desert surrounding the building. Looking up, blinded by the sky, she thought she heard helicopters, then a great wind swept through her, lifted her up. Back in the room, the captors cut out the background from the picture, placed a blindfold around the child, and showed her face, right side up on TV. They announced that either a ransom was to be paid or the girl would be de-pixelated across every computer screen. In their homes, thousands who looked identical to the male and female captors, watched in de-saturated hues of horror. They knew that no matter how much they gave, it would never save her, not the girl swinging absent-mindedly from a tree, or the one falling endlessly from the sky.

