The Cape of Lost Hope
by Mark S. Meritt

Amber remembered vacationing each summer in her family's house by a lake. She'd look up from the ground and see trees reaching for the sky, leaves shimmering in the wind. In the woods, a squirrel stuffed its face with acorns. Every year a squirrel stuffed its face with acorns.

Following the path out of the woods, Amber found herself in a clearing next to the rippling lake. The coast stretched away from her to the left and right, forming the circumference of the lake, left and right meeting once again at a point far in the hazy distance, across the what seemed like an ocean.

But the lake's edge was not entirely smooth. Just to the left of the clearing, a piece of land jutted out, several yards into the lake, a slightly curving dock made of earth. Amber would saunter out to the end of the projection with a coloring books, a pad of white paper, and her Crayolas. Soon, the pad would hold a picture of her family, of the school bus she took while not on vacation, or of the pines across the way, triangles of dark green reflected upside down in the blue scribbled water.

Amber dreamed of being on this projection one day, sitting on a stool with a brush in her hand, making beautiful pictures with easel and canvas.

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"Amber, guess what we brought along this year."

"What, Daddy?"

"Watercolors."

"Huh?"

"Paint."

Amber swelled with joy, a smile lighting up her face in the back seat of the car.

When they arrived, Amber immediately took her pad and the new watercolors to her dock. She sat cross-legged at the very edge, plastic tray of paints set down carefully beside her. Inside the tray was an unused brush. Amber dipped the hairs into the lake, right where it met land, and wet the dark green chunk of powder. Strokes became pine needles, forming a triangle for each tree, followed by small brown pine cones, each little scale drawn in.

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"Mom, guess what. My drawings are on display at school. A whole display case in the hallway, right near my locker, with nothing but my pastel work."

"Amber, that's wonderful."

"Mom, Dad, I need to talk to you. I think I want to go to art school."

"Art school? Amber, why would you want to just throw away your grades like that?"

"I wouldn't be throwing them away, Dad. Intelligent artists are the best artists."

"And all artists are the poorest artists."

Amber pictured herself, walking by the promontory on the lake, pushing a wheel barrow filled with money. Miserable.

"Dad, I can make enough to get by. That's all I need. That's all I want."

"Honey, it's so difficult. You might not make it."

Amber remembered what her first English teacher had told her. Chasing rainbows is alright as long as you've got a good pair of running shoes. She looked at her hands. Her running shoes. "I'd rather be a has-been than a never-was. Mom, Dad, please, give me the chance to be a has-been."

"We can't stop you?"

Amber hesitated. "I want to go for it."

Amber's mother did not hesitate. "Go for it."

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For Amber, destiny was eating a bowl of cereal and finding out at the end of the bowl that there was just the right amount of milk left to engulf the final sugar puffs so you didn't have to slurp the rest from the bowl. That was destiny. For Amber, studying art was just as inevitable.

But not as sweet.

"Amber, you are working with paint. Make me a painting, not a photograph. You strive for too much detail. The painter's art is to communicate a thought with as few brushstrokes as possible. Give me atmosphere, Amber," said the gaunt man with the tousled hair and trim goatee which hovered above a black turtleneck. He popped a black olive into his mouth. Amber knew that he could never bring himself to eat a green olive, since it would clash with his monochromatic wardrobe.

"I thought you always said that the artist is the creator, the artist is next to God, the artist can do anything they want. Dylan, why can't I do what I want?" She knew that Dylan could never have been his given name.

"Amber, dear, if you can't capture the essence of your subject, how can you ever hope to grasp it in its completeness?"

"Don't give me that artsy bullshit, okay? It's a goddamn foot, Dylan." Amber, lying on her stomach, pushed away Dylan's foot from in front of her face. He towered above her and her canvas which lie on the floor.

"No. It is more than a foot," he commanded, stomping his foot down before her nose once again. "Now Amber, tell me what you see."

Amber was growing cynical. Exasperated, she looked at the unclothed extremity ahead of her on the cluttered uncarpeted floor. "I see a heel, a ball, an ankle, and five toes, and the toes serve no purpose in life whatsoever except to frustrate artists by making it hard to draw a foot."

"Exactly! You shouldn't be trying to draw the toes now. You have not yet reached that level."

"The conservatory thought I did, Dylan."

"Conservatories produce manufacturers, not artists."

"Dylan, that's why I left. They were teaching me too much. I didn't want to be a manufacturer. But you're not teaching me enough."

Hands on hips, Dylan released a sigh. He lowered his hand to Amber, offering to help her up. "It's time for a break."

Amber agreed. She got to her feet and kissed Dylan quickly on the lips.

"After you," he said, gesturing for Amber to lead.

"Oh, no. After you." Amber didn't believe in chivalry. She always pictured some horny guy in the Dark Ages who wanted to keep looking at some fair maiden's ass and therefore decided that for all eternity politeness would dictate that ladies went first. Amber was growing very cynical.

Dylan left the studio first. In the kitchen of his unkept twelfth-floor apartment, he uncorked a bottle of wine. Amber delicately placed two flexi-straws in through the neck.

"Amber, you must be brilliant," commanded Dylan.

"Look, I can be productive on command, maybe even talented, but brilliant is up to the ether. You can't just stand around and expect me to come up with a masterwork."

"Amber, do you care about your work?"

"Yes, but I can't deal with the essence of a foot."

"Amber, you must care about your work."

"I do."

"You must be committed."

Amber agreed. She could have used some time away from the canvas.

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The yellow dashes on the road whisped by. A traffic light was coming up. It turned yellow. Should she hit the gas or not? It turned red. Not.

Amber had been spending her time just floating around. But better to float than to sink. She wanted to paint. Or rather, she wanted to want to paint. She wondered if she wanted to paint because she had so many feelings and thoughts that she desperately wanted to express and convey to others, or because she wanted to create her own world, a world to which she could escape when she wanted to run away from her feelings and thoughts.

The light turned green. As the car moved on, her surroundings seemed oddly strange. They should be familiar to her. She'd driven on this road year after year, but only as a passenger in the back seat. Everything looked so different, years later, in the driver's seat.

The small towns grew fewer and farther between as the view through the windshield slowly dissolved into wilderness. She was getting closer. On the road ahead was a furry lump, encircled by a dark red stain on the pavement. As Amber passed it in the other lane, she noticed that it was a squirrel. She remembered the grey cheeks stuffed with acorns. Had drivers become more reckless, or was this just another sight that she had missed while traveling in the back seat?

Amber turned onto a dirt road, which led straight to her old summer home. She couldn't remember the last time she was there, and had no idea if her parents still owned it. No cars were

in sight, so she parked hers and got her duffle bag out of the trunk at the front of the car.

Making her way around the house, she entered the woods. Leaves rustled under her feet. Above, she could see the tree tops, bare branches poking feebly upward. As she left the forest and entered the small clearing, the lake swung effortlessly into view. Hardly an ocean.

The area had remained untouched. On the other side of the lake, she could see the mighty evergreens which she had drawn so many times, their images bouncing off the water, symmetrical across the coastline.

Amber's eyes followed the coast around the perimeter of the lake, toward herself. To her left was the small peninsula, sticking it's way out briefly into the lake. She walked toward it, then out onto its light green grass, feeling more and more engulfed by the lake as she progressed away from the land.

When Amber reached the edge of the headland, she sat down, cross-legged. Opening her bag, the sunlight peeked in, letting her see the fresh sketch pad and untouched box of Crayolas. She flipped over the front cover of the pad, revealing the first, blank page. Opening the crayon box, she immediately found the stick of wax marked "amber." She set it beside her.

Amber then pulled out the dark green crayon and began to draw triangles.