



Issue 4

The Hooghly Review

April 2025

THE HOOGLY REVIEW

Issue 4



CURATED BY

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a magazine of literature, culture & arts

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*If you ask me what I came to do in this world, I, an artist, will
answer you: I am here to live out loud.*

— Émile Zola



Editor's Note

I have been deluding myself for weeks that the Issue 4 Editor's Note is going to write itself. That I just have to take it easy and let it come to me.

Here's what happened this morning: Tejaswinee sends me the final draft (minus the editorial), and seeing 265 pages I tell her, "Thought this was supposed to be a lean issue." To which she says, "It takes time to lose weight."

There, like that, the Founding Editor has arrived with her vintage savagery, launching a lemon I shall build my lemonade upon.

*

Now that I'm rehydrated and there's no blank page staring at me, something about Issue 4 and other recent stuff since the Founding Editor has been too busy (that's what she tells everyone) to deliver our monthly newsletter in months:

Murals, our first themed issue, guest-edited by the absolutely fantastic François Bereaud, was a hit—thanks to all who sent work, read the full-colour special, and spread love. But François is not done yet. He is brewing something superb that might actually happen.

The *Weekly Features* have been going stronger than ever: We have works lined up till October and a good many unread submissions in our inbox as I lie on my back to write this.

We have a new publishing concern, the *ASAP Corner*, where we invite reviews and promise ASAP turnaround and publication.

There have been discussions to do another *Wee Hooghly*—our young creatives special. More news will follow soon and *Wee Hooghly* may switch to year-long submissions for kids around the world.

Issue 4 was supposed to be leaner—thanks to cool new developments in your two editors' academic careers and the time our new gigs demand. We did receive tons of blew-me-away submissions this time too, and it will always be a pain to send emails nobody likes to see. Still, Issue 4 is brimming with beauty and packs enough pages to be enjoyed for weeks.

And we now have contributors from 60 countries based on all the works we have published and scheduled so far.

And we want to take over the world and for the world to take us over with all its beautiful bounties waiting to be discovered.

And you can always write to us with praise, complaints, suggestions, and anything you want.

And we will always love you.

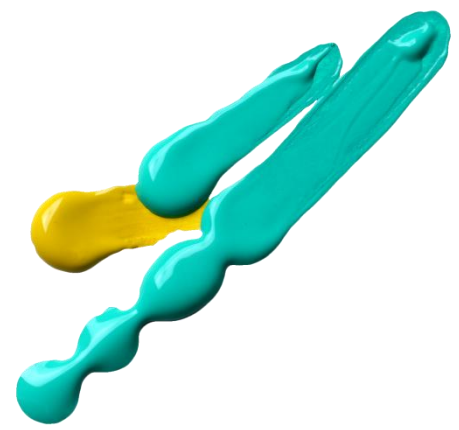
Ankit Raj Ojha
April 2025
Karnal



distant unintelligible noise

Tejaswinee
Year Unknown
Pluto

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WARNING

This magazine has content meant for adults as well as sensitive and triggering content such as mental health issues, racism, self-harm, violence, alcohol & drug abuse, sexual assault, and death.

Warnings have not been attached with individual pieces to prevent the work from being spoiled and the reader's experience from being diminished or hampered.

Ace Boggess

Voices

Pacing the patio with right hand holding
the lie of happiness to my lips,
I catch voices in snippets.

Good to see you, they say.
Bad day for it. Too hot. Or,
That's a big one. What's his name?

Dog walkers forced to travel
the street below. I see no one
through emerald density of June.

They could be talking about weather
or love of snack cakes—
their words directed at me

as if from my grandfather
whose voice I can't remember
having heard. It could be him telling me,

I'm exhausted, &, after a pause,
Guess you should be heading home.
I stay where I am, moving without going.

I don't want the Invisible
to lord over my life, though
I lift my ear toward the trees.



Allan Johnston

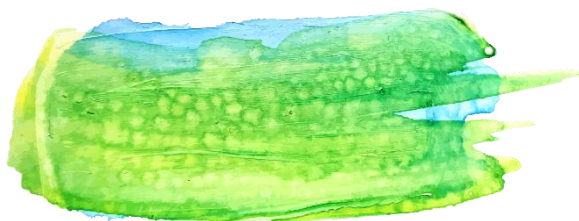
I Ate Sylvia Plath for Breakfast

At school, the linoleum
under the desk offered a break
from Geography. Its simple fissures
cut a path recalling a vision
of an earth I might never know.

Once the teacher sounded all clear
from the drill that was meant to protect us
from the Communist hydrogen bombs,
I got back to learning how long
a pen run over and over
in the same place would take
to cut through the top of the desk
and make a little black valley:
my sole permanent mark.

We knew, every time,
it was Russians who wanted it all.
They were ready to kill with vast
perfumes of flowering clouds.
We'd seen pictures of Bikini.

Every morning, instead of Wheaties,
cozy as a Rosenberg,
I sat, eating Sylvia Plath
for breakfast. She was crisp
and always flaky, best without milk.



Amlanjyoti Goswami

Ghatak in the Garden

Ritwik was here last night, strolling in the garden
Filled with moonlit champa and mahua.

A square peg in a round hole
In pyjamas and sandals, but bearded with time.

A vagabond for those who didn't know him
Though frankly, he didn't care.

Good for his health he said, this stroll
Stopping after a round, asking if I still had a swig left.

Too early, I replied, leaning into my cane
The night had not yet begun.

I saw him leave through the small gate behind those yellow flats
Feeding stray dogs crumbs from his pockets.

His eyes sparkled the story of Subarnarekha.
Their ears perked, their tails were flaming tongues wagging.

The Day after Durga Puja

They were dismantling the pandal
On a brilliant afternoon
The sun in full autumnal flow.

They were taking out wood and bamboo.
A truck lined up to carry
The remains home.

I looked away in sorrow
 Hurrying to the nearby store
 To pick up a packet of biscuits.

Bhakti is not for sale, I was told.
 Nibbling on wheat, I understood.
 Fear follows me wherever I go.

I must leave fear behind.
 Drop attachment like autumn leaves
 New flowers on the roadside.

Those who know no tomorrow
 Pour their soul into today
 Healing wounds in the flash of the moment.

But something still aches empty.
 Those who return to work
 Pick up files, open laptops, listen to bosses and clients.

Patients and doctors line up
 Mechanics and truck drivers
 Those who wait at bus stands, those who listen

To voices above.
 How did Ramanujan solve his equations every day?
 They say the goddess helped him in his dreams.

Prof. Hardy must have returned to work
 The day after Ramanujan died
 Grieving a little but pondering about the next equation to solve.

I was merely looking for biscuits and savouries.
 Forgive me.
 Tomorrow the park will be beautiful as before.



Barnali Ray Shukla

A summer wedding for Munia and Dhaani

Her legs keep up with dreams
that reach faster than time, she
rests by the pond behind that

old mansion. Her eyes, a pool
of wishes like a bird bath,
where sparrows stay drenched

with stories of plenty, she plays
with sunlight, dappled through
peepal, mogras in her basket

stolen from the garden of the
landlord. He looks the other
way, his wife jealous of mogra

blossoms of summer evenings—

She sings wedding vows, lavish
alta on her feet breathes red,
hair unfurled like clouds, the

wedding is today, Munia and
Dhaani like the dot on her
forehead, the two sparrows

perch on her shoulder, tug
at her earrings, she hurries
with the vows, as she wraps

her life, backwards—when flight
was home, light was birds, and

tugs felt a lot like wedding vows,

yet unspoken.



32C/1, Lovelock Street, Kolkata 700019

His watch still under the pillow
from a night peeled by that April
morning, a temple bell broke

the silence over lakes of writings
in blue, by a desk now dusty with
forgiveness, unwritten poems

stalk time, find words from
fights that were meant to be
lost over longing that followed.

Curtains swollen with messages

of a storm brewing, their mango
tree shaking its head, for it fears

only the strong would see days of
the fruit, succulent with hopes of
a summer outliving its time. She

checks the watch, still breathing
under the pillow. Her fingers
keep winding life, for she holds

the last touches of him that held
her in his arms, clockwise,
unwritten poems. His watch still

remains under the pillow, initials
embossed in an embrace, font
Lucida Bright breathing time

into what could have been theirs.



Brandon Arnold

Paper Fangs

I remember playing in the backyard, amongst the trees and dead logs, collecting the toads, crawfish, salamanders, and snakes. And one time, the snake bit me, right between my thumb and finger, and I imagined how I might die a slow, painful, poison-filled death. This was before I knew there was no such thing as a poisonous snake, and—if I knew then what I know now—would've instead worried about dying a slow, painful, venom-filled death. And I thought how, when something bites you, you probably earned it. I removed the snake from its home, slithering between the blades of grass, pretending like I wouldn't do the same thing if I was plucked by some god from between the trees. *That's* how I earned it. I think of how the edge of the paper bites my thumb for handling it without care, as if *it* were the letter-opener, and my thumb was the letter. When the poblano pepper has a little too much heat, it bites my tongue. All in the name of vengeance as I carelessly—without a second thought—continue my genocidal rampage on its brethren. And even when the new-born baby bites at their mother's breast for the first time, the mother too, has earned it.



Christian Ward

My mother's Kew Gardens tray

hangs from the kitchen hook
 like a reluctant bungee jumper.
 Nowadays, she rarely notices its salt
 shaker Temple of the Sun, a gothic
 cathedral brooding like a Brontë
 love interest, the screw of a Great
 Pagoda, or the ornate cake decoration
 of a Chinese Pavilion. The tray
 often has a cup of tea with a lily pad
 of sliced lemon. Fig rolls. Occasionally,
 ladyfingers crusted with sugar crystals.
 What matters are the hands carrying it:
 Outstretched like a giant sequoia's branches,
 they've planted more than I ever could.
 Almost ready to taste the sweet sunlight
 of the canopy and witness where it's rooted
 now, where its blessings of tomorrow might land.

The rainbow trout

is the only detail, sharp as a hook,
 from the family holiday in Dordogne.
 My sisters, blurry, out of focus.
 Like waking up without your glasses.
 Mother, off camera. The river water,
 glacial, stinging. The line taut
 as a bowstring. A sudden spasm
 and the fish is caught. Small
 in my father's arms, the rainbow trout
 is a summer watercolour: all pastels

and light. It blurs the water like soaking
paintbrushes as it's released. My father's
giant shadow draining all light. Dominating.
Now my father is old, *he* is small
in my arms. Vulnerable as the rainbow
trout latched on a memory as sharp
as a hook. Some nights, I dream
of flooding the house to release him
into the waters he must swim to.



Elaine Pentaleri

Carmarthen to Paris, 1978

For Kate

I don't remember how we did it,
crossing the English Channel.
I just remember hovering somewhere
over some white cliffs along the coast near Dover.

I don't remember the red car
or the solicitous man proposing a lift
for love by hand, "aimer a la main."
Just that your French was better than mine.

I don't remember the rain
or the ramp outside of Lille
or the miles between.
Just the tumbling, tumbling

out of the lorries
onto the dusky streets
beside the fountain
on the Boulevard St Michel.

I don't remember dropping coins
into the phone booths,
four dollars a minute in francs for an international call,
on the corner of St Germaine

or strolling through the Tuileries
or the persistent Tunisian men
or the street vendors selling textiles and souvenirs
or the book stalls near Pont Neuf,

or looking for postcards in the shops along the Champs Elysees.
Just the chocolate and whisky

and the spire of Notre Dame
seen that morning from the windows of the Sorbonne.

I don't remember the hostel
with its pink rooms and sequined pillows
and bowls of thick coffee
as the sun made its way into the alley at Rue de Nestle.

Just your round tender voice singing Ella Fitzgerald,
the company of TS Eliot and Thomas Pynchon in all our conversations,
and the sentimental journey that April
along the quays of the Seine.



Eugenia Pozas

young girl describes her dream husband

he reads me to sleep by the campfire,
weaves stories of kings and queens,
his voice teeming with worship like a temple.
sips a mug of broodiness on summer mornings.
wears kindness as easily as a coat.
lends his arm out to me so i don't slip
and fall on icy stairs, so i can place on him
my hopes; a bookshelf of longings.
at night, he sinks his teeth into plums,
lets the black juice of the sky stain the side
of his lips like dangling crystals.
stamps time portals on apple bites,
laughter bursting like a picnic by the lake.
arrives home triumphant, camillus on a chariot.
a stallion of darkness trots behind his every
step, less a husband and more a tethered
shadow with a long veil. a curious sort of beast,
chanced upon an exotic island, scribbled on
yellowed field journals; undiscovered, uncharted.
is this too much to ask? too much to ask for a man
whose hard skin, peeled open, should show me
the throbbing veins of the olive tree?



Gopal Lahiri

City Chromosome

Babus and *Bibis* turn into a circle of inferno,
swap places,
not knowing where the winding
alleyways lead to ecstasy or curse.
The late night has claws and shards.

Crows and pigeons snuff out the calmness of
the morning,
purging the dissident minds.
Cathedrals share space with the shining mall,
smoke filled pubs connect city people.

The broken rooftops and old bridges watch,
astronomical clocks
tracking stars and planets,
riots and conflict reshape the soul of its people
not the urban looks, nor the driven agenda.

Tourists bustle and absinthe mansions turn slowly
into a bohemian massif,
a ramshackle mindset,
ghostly dryads dance in the ruins of palaces.
Under the shaky porches, rusted iron railings.

Literature and myth
live in every brick and stone,
resolving even medieval alchemical mysteries.
Whispers capture the fables, sing folk songs,
the city doesn't let go, either of you or me.

Anaphora

My summer is what you smell
in old currency notes

My summer is my chests'
stone washed skin

My summer is a razor blade
for shaving

My summer is a language
unsaid on my dry lips

My summer is cleansing
into the black water

My summer is a whistle
to invite the foolish birds

My summer is both the hunted
and the hound.



Gordon Vells

70°C

My father used to twinkle when
he talked of theoretically
fashioning a teaspoon
from Wood's metal—
an alloy with a melting point of 70 degrees
and hence useless for stirring hot tea
except as a prank.

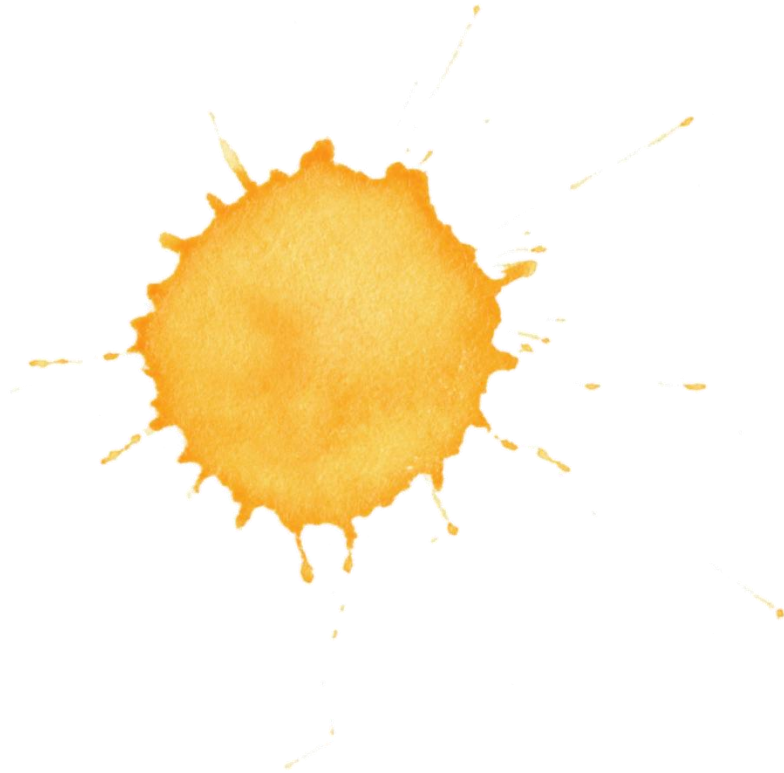
I say theoretically, but that twinkle
suggested that he might just have done it
as a young chemistry student,
just as he definitely did synthesise
a large batch of fluorescein
and smuggle it
on the Tube

to Trafalgar Square
to dye the fountains,
only to be thwarted by miscalculation
over the volume of water involved
and the amount of jossop needed
to satisfactorily render
the jets and cascades glowing.

In this day and age
such an act of intervention's
really not the done thing
(search "UK counter-terrorism legislation"),
nor are Wood's-metal-related japes
in view of the toxicity
of the cadmium and other contents.

And now I can't ask Dad whether
the spoon was a bona fide recollection

or just a potential joke from his youth:
first his memory melted
and some time later the rest of him followed,
an unfull alloy spoon
succumbing to the heat of the beverage.



Jarek Jarvis

Spring 2021

For Sophie

As the winter wind retreated and the air began to warm,
I took to cycling. Sometimes, it was to see you on your break
before I went in to teach for the day. Occasionally, I rode home

in the evening past Longtan Park north up to Flower Market
Street to its end at Chongwenmen East Street. I joined the throng
of cyclists, and scooters headed home in the cold embers of day.

As I passed the Old Ming Wall at dusk, lampposts cast the waltzing shadows
of the slow dancing retirees onto the weathered stone. I tried to capture
that image for you while pedaling and almost dropped my phone.



John Grey

Meet Me

By the clock tower.
Seven p.m.
When the crickets are like so many
clicking, clacking, chirring tongues.
And the grass is dark,
the church wall slightly moonstruck.
I'm the one with the beard
and a faint pink tinge
to the roof of my mouth.
I'll be translating the passersby
into you, maybe you
and definitely not you.
And I may be singing under my breath.
I must confess this is all new to me.
I typically meet people
in stages, from their name
to their looks, to their thoughts,
to their feelings.
And here's a situation
when they could all come at me
at once.
Yes, by the clock tower.
There's only one clock tower.
Seven p.m.
There's only one seven p.m.
My knees will be pale
but you won't know that
and my teeth could go
on a chattering binge.
Even when it's not so cold.
I'll try to smolder
but I don't guarantee it.
And be prepared for a confidence
that could shrink before your eyes.

I've never done this sort of thing before.
The clock tower is an old hand.
Three hands actually.
And 7.00 p.m. has been early evening
for so many couples before us.
But I'll be there.
A famous landmark.
A familiar time.
Everything not famous or familiar
will be me.

The Ones That Attend the Funeral

They are distant family.
I only ever see them
at weddings and funerals.

It's too bad we don't all wear nametags.
That way I'd know my George from my Harry.

An older man grabs me by the shoulder.
"Aren't you Laura's son?" he asks.
It's never, "Aren't you John?"
I'm known by the company I kept
when in the womb.

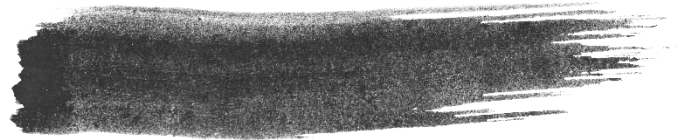
An aunt brags about
how well her goofy-looking children are doing.
A second cousin looks as bored
as a caged cheetah.
A figure from a lower branch of
my father's family tree
reckons he saw me a week back
riding on the same bus.
Of course, I never take the bus.

But someone died,

so we all have to be here.
It almost feels like a threat.
Don't show up red-eyed
and in a dark suit
and you could be next.

Finally, the priest does
his "ashes to ashes" bit,
the coffin's lowered
and we near-strangers
can go back to being total strangers.

Yes, family is family, no matter what.
Great uncle Albert says it best.
And out of my hearing thankfully.



KG Newman

Gills

I am most comfortable struggling to breathe
under a pile of couch pillows with two sons
heaped on top and our search-and-rescue dog
sticking his snout into a tiny crevice between
the padded tan squares. This is where

I do not care about fistfuls of ephemerals
or pulsars titled away from us. With
stilted inhales I just focus on what's left
of the half-lives of their invented portmanteaus.
I picture a fishing line untangling itself in a

refracted river. Where there's two honest clouds
in the sky and a faded johnboat on the shore,
tied to a mossy stump. An open invitation
for open air and a hover of rainbow trout
praying for bait. The grip of small hands.

The Siphon Era

Our house with creaking butterfly doors
and what can't be fixed with a wrench.

Mummies smiling behind the cloth.
Floats of us punctured on the one

streetlight that doesn't flicker. Field
of abandoned silos to which only

unlost birds return in winter.
Capri-Sun straw wrappers scattered

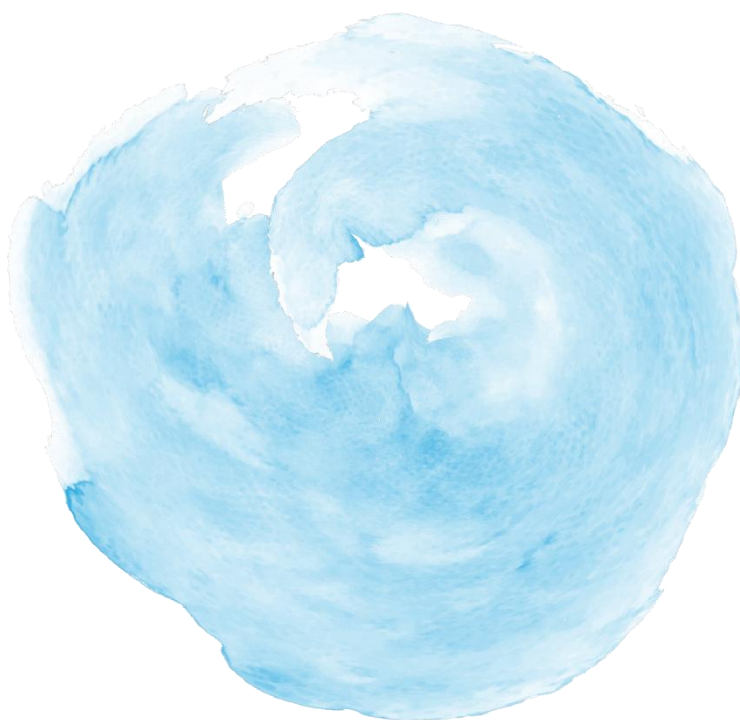
everywhere we step. Remember how
we had something to pray for.

We'd sit around the nicked kitchen table
saying the names of flowers we know.

Daisy. Chrysanthemum. Dahlia to
remind us of when charred forests

braved storms, and we built stadiums
we didn't need nor could afford,

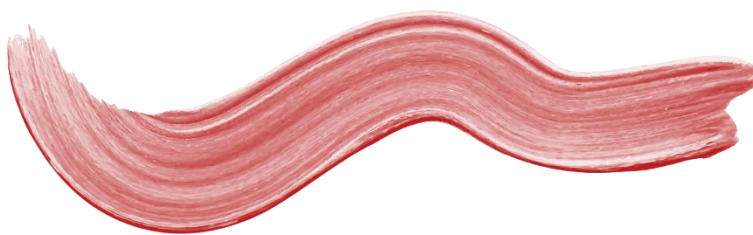
just to sit in premium seats and
watch fireflies resurrect themselves.



Kushal Poddar

Alone? Wanna Chat?

Midnight dials from a country
whose code you don't recognise,
you heard exists but cannot be
sanguine about, and asks you if
you are alone, if you desire
to chat with her wearing only skin
and truth. Oh, midnight, who
is not alone somewhere sometimes?
My bed is a foggy platform some nights.
You feel like the ghost of you when
you have to go for a long loo. On the other
side a window lights up itself. Some
nocturnal bird works hard. Can you hear
the rodent's cry? "No, midnight, I have
no coin left in the jar of desire." You lie.
It is okay she lies too about her existence.



Michael Mirolla

Punctuating Victoria Park[Colon] Regina

Question marks outnumber exclamation
 points on the avenues that embrace
 Victoria Park. I see them bent over
 hesitating at street corners unable
 to decipher the crossing signals.
 Some question marks step out from the sidewalk
 without straightening only to be greeted
 by the blast of an angry hyphen
 that sends them scurrying back. Or a dash
 that threatens to flatten them into a slash.

The parentheses avoid the streets.
 They sit huddled on park benches talking
 to the emptiness between them. All too often
 they descend to mere brackets, curling up
 against the wind that whistles through exposed lines.
 And never return to the graceful arcs
 that gave them pride of place.

Look long enough
 and you might catch the occasional glimpse
 of that lone asterisk loping carefree
 among the trees. Only to vanish
 and re-emerge as a full stop that requires
 defibrillation to prod it along.
 But even then barely managing
 an ellipsis that quickly finds itself
 in periodic crisis.

Oh you'll spot
 the odd semi-colon marching to and fro
 full of purpose and righteous intent.
 But they are no match for the blank spaces
 that pop up when least expected and swallow

all ambition. Still, the punctuations
 seem to get along or at least avoid
 tripping over one another. Trouble
 rears its head when the accents appear. No one
 seems to know how to handle the diacritics.



Poem Lost

You tumble from a dream at 6 a.m.
 in which the perfect form made itself known
 strung together with those primeval words
 that promise entry into the mystery ...
 the sharp nails hammered into the heart of things.
 And you tell yourself no need to worry
 no need to reach for that iPhone Notes app.
 Rest assured. When you re-awake in sunlight
 courtesy of your Fitbit watch alarm
 it will be waiting next to your porridge
 and tea. Laid out like an interactive map
 that slowly fills in once you get it started.
 So you sit up, eager to get it all down:
 The one-of-a-kind phrasing, balanced lines
 set in loose iambic pentameter,
 images like flashes across the sky
 unique and never to be repeated.
 All this before breakfast. You sit up and ...
 And it all goes blank. As if never there.
 You bang the side of your head. Twice. Come on,
 Come on. You must remember something.
 Reduce it to prose. The gist. Anything
 that will snap it back into place. No use.
 Console yourself. It was only a dream.
 Oh, you fool. If only you had reached ...

Namratha Varadharajan

It could be the Insomnia Plague, without the Insomnia

After reading One Hundred Years of Solitude

Yesterday, my friend said she had seen 3.33 pm.
She'd unlocked her screen and it was 5.33 pm.

This isn't my first clue that it's a pandemic.
There were other signs.

A few days back, I'd seen a video of my son
reading a book about the moon and wondered,
"When did that happen?"
I've opened my fridge and wondered why.
I don't remember the warmth of my husband's palms.

Initially, I thought it was just me.
Early onset of dementia? Like my grandmother? Amnesia?

But, on the news, a father said he had binge-watched
a show on Netflix, and turned around to see
his toddler grown up— off to his first day at work.
He remains perplexed. Blames wormholes.

Now I know, it's spreading like a silenced wildfire.
We need to go to the mattresses. Acquire paper
and pen. Label everything—
dreams, thoughts, how much you mean to me,
and why,
before we timelapse...

Hence, this poem. And the next.

Hopefully, we do not forget to read.



Oormila Vijayakrishnan Prahlad

Ganglia: a zuihitsu

// Mid-April, and spring is late. Clumps of verbena shiver from the earth. Crushed buds in my palms waft head notes in citrus, trailing to a soul of herb. For the longest time it remains my favorite scent.

// Father's first car, named for a warbler, arrives, its bottle-green torso shining in the light of the May moon, its muscular silhouette more beast than bird. I love the sound of its name, its strangeness in my mouth: *Buick Skylark*.

// June is the month of gunmetal sunsets and falcon wings, of father-daughter time, blitzing across the dust trail like demigods, hammer and tongs raised among the dunes. We listen to the wind sing of imaginary rivers and aeolian erosion. Everything is light and limitless. Invincible.

// At 32, brought to my knees by a knot of neurons turning rogue, I writhe in pain signals firing at will in my temple. Wrenched from the wheel in a violent gust, I watch the world fishtail in a haze of steel and spinning rims.

// I find a skylark in the Field Guide to Songbirds. The one that recurs in my dreams is camouflaged in myrtle, perched on the edge of the bardo like an unspoken temptation.

// In the magnetic belly of the MRI machine, I float like a marooned astronaut, counting the clapping of gradient coils as radio waves map the roots of crucified nerves. In the other-worldly terrain of my brain, a thorny Golgotha emerges, blooming like a kaleidoscope in the pattern of deserts and violet flowers.

// Wax on wax off with suds and flannel, like washing the body of a mythical creature, a lumbering lizard disguised as a bird. Father-daughter time, afternoon sun torching metal, shimmering with the newness of freshly molted skin.

// My seven-year-old fingers pick dandelions and lay them on the dashboard like offerings on an altar.

// The field holds the bones of all my fears, hollow and fluted, passerine feathers and healed stigmata.

// At 33 I rise, pushing away boulders. Tires spin on red dust shredding thistle into confetti. The wheel becomes a blinding halo of light.

// The road stretches smooth and grey like an unknotted nerve. I ace the driving test first go, with an unusual score—109 out of 100. Testing officer's note: *Nine bonus points for hazard perception, exceptional skill in dense city ganglia.*

The savior of birds: a zuihitsu

// At the station I hold my toddler's hand as he points to the thornbill gliding down from its nest, a wisp of brown in the path of the city express thundering in. A sweeping arc, a carefree wheeling, then the barely audible clink of the collision with the engine's metal hood, before it tumbles onto the tracks in a lifeless ball.

// Ten years old. The boy I befriended in the lagoons brings me a week-old duckling. I remember how frightened it looked as the clouds rumbled above, heavy and grey, in the midst of an Indian monsoon.

// The injured galah I saw on Pacific Highway flapped its wings, writhing between the dotted line and the haze of whizzing metal. A wounded attempt at flight.

// When we board the train my son sobs loudly, flailing his tiny arms, pointing to the thornbill's nest in the camellia tree. He begs me to save the hatchlings who don't know their mother is dead.

// The duckling that the boy caught stumbles among the maze of bulrushes. I scoop it up, and hold it close—a downy warmth against my chest.

// When I drive again on Pacific Highway, the galah is dead, its body ironed into the tar like a parched magnolia.

// For a very long time, the thornbill's starving babies flutter into my dreams at night, leathery membranes stretched over their eyes. They open their beaks wide and distend my head with their wails.

// When the duckling looked poorly, the adults offered no sympathy. I remember fingers of blame—for interfering with nature, for polluting with my hands, for taking gifts from strange boys. I found it the next day in a puddle by the river, floating belly up.

// I discover much later that scent-contamination is a myth, that birds don't reject their babies for being sullied by human smell, that you cannot infect a nestling with the odor of your hands.

// I kiss my sleeping son's forehead. His eyes, puffed from crying, look like the bulging lids of fledglings. I whisper how sorry I am that I was never cut out to be the savior of birds. I imagine I hear fading chirps, the flick of a feather on my shoulder, fine down settling on my ribs like a plume of forgiveness.



Richard Collins

The Guy Who Now Reads Only *Finnegans* *Wake*

He is one of those people so averse
to change that he tries not to finish
reading a novel for fear of veering off
into unfamiliar territories of the
imagination. Thus he lingered in
the land of Proust like Moses in the desert
for decades until he discovered Joyce.
Having come to the end of lost time
four times, he made time to hang out with
Stephen D. and wandered with Leopold B.
through the streets of Dublin for many a
groundhog day of sixteen June, 1904
up to the very hour of beddy-bye,
procrastinating shamelessly with
sleepless Molly until he could no
longer put off the climax of her
breathless *yes yes yes...* But no,
there was another tome at hand, one
which many are called to begin but few
chosen to end, a world of language
with finesse without finis, forever and
ever, amen; one that promised to take him in
new directions to the very terminus of
his—in fact everyone's—imaginarium.
With great trepidation he took the book up,
cracked first his plump knuckles and then its
stately buckram spine and dove in... *riverrun*,
past Eve and Adam's... but soon he knew that
he would never have to worry about starting,
much less finishing another novel
because this one would suffice not only for

this life but also for the one to come,
changing thus once and for all the indirection
of his inner life, exhausting the weakening
wakening of words by a *commodius*
vicus of recirculation back by Eve and
Adam's environs to again begin
again, the end.



Sahana Ahmed

Resurrections

The wise believe in May. I seek December.

On the troughs of the Tibetan Tethys, as frost descends, death invades the crowns of bat moth babies. It cracks them open, ripe, jejune, and stalks its way to New York news. Time waits. Times Square waits.

The skins of ghosts break in the sun. The sins of winter are the stain of summer.

Yankees shell out 800 an ounce for these Himalayan mummies. Sprinkle some on your supper and resurrect your bedspring.

The wise seek rebirth. I aim to perish. I wish to die like oceans do, never to rise again.



Samuel Faulk

Amphigory, noun

a nonsense verse or composition: a rigmarole with apparent meaning which proves to be meaningless

What does the poet say
when the muse has left?
What insight does the poet have
without the inspiration of the unknowable soul,
the ineffable connection to what makes us human?

I could string together pretty words like
kerfuffle, scintilla, and rigamarole,
and since I'm a pluviophile, I'd mention petrichor,
and bring it all within a propinquity of substance
to make it mellifluous.

I could speak of nature:
landscapes with verdant hills studded with
pastel ice-capped mountains of hope
—and just a shade of regret—
then hit the asphalt with Jack Kerouac
to work on my beat poetry.

Or I could speak of love,
with all its crimson trappings
and the devotion of the lover kneeling
at an altar of saccharine whispers.

I could speak on so many things
without really saying anything.
What does the uninspired poet have except
amphigory wrapped in a Christmas bow?
He has
a
thesaurus.

Of Time and Honeybees

I wish time moved
as slowly as
the hive of honeybees gorging
on the wild blackberries
outside Grandma's window.

I wish time flowed like
nectar being deposited
into crystals for safekeeping.

If only the hands of the clock would freeze in resin.
If only the drumbeat of the earth
did not echo as loud as the pulse of my veins.

If only memories faded with
the warm taste of bourbon
on my tongue the way they said it would.

Instead of returning with
the vengeance of a jilted lover
slashing your tires at dawn.

Is the headache of tomorrow
worth tricking time for just one night
to try and forget the fire of your skin on mine?

I'm not sure whether I want
time to stop and freeze this moment,
right now when I'm finally over you,

or if I want time to
burn with fire and
scorch the wrinkles of my brain
so that my neurons stop firing when I hear your name.
Either way
I'm reaching for the bottle.



Saraswati Nagpal

Purnima: Ode to Mother in Moonlight

Nineteen years I lived in sunshine. Then the soft
“whuff” of your ashes in a river, earth quaked, shroud
of shadows, a daughter’s heart eclipsed.

You grew larger and smaller, dead and alive within me,
a satellite in the sky, perambulating yet invisible, ever-
evolving myth of a woman I once knew.

Long nights I quested, the tide of my heart seeking your
silver voice — too far, too dark, too quiet.

But blood eventually *becomes* blood. A stream swells, a girl
grows *into* her mother, an ocean can bring the moon home.

And so, the ship has turned, Mother. The sea is a circle to my
heart. I am bathed in *Purnima*, a tidal wave rising, a song in
my mouth, its words spun from moonlight.



My mother’s name was Purnima, which means “Full Moon.” I only made the connection after a few drafts of this poem. Moon-focussed, I didn’t realise that I’d been orbiting her name all along.

Sita's Ballad

The first time she sees Rama in the palace garden, Mithila

Let us not leave this bower of flowers, my love.
Do not lift Shiva's bow, string it, win my hand.
Let us never marry.

There will be no exile, no demons, no vile claws
that abduct me. You will never gather an army,
wage war, conquer.

I will never hear you speak the word *unchaste*, watch you
watch me build a pyre, smell the fire melting my skin,
my hair, so you regain honour amongst men.

Here, the scent of roses has sweetened the hour.
Beloved, let us bind our hearts to this moment,
this dewy grass, these whispering leaves, and
write ourselves a new story.



Solape Adetutu Adeyemi

Loss

And when you break the heart-breaking news
of the loss of your entire shipment of goods,
your wife of less than a year
wraps her warm arms around you,
resting your head on her shoulders,
cooing words of encouragement and support.
But her eyes are at variance with her warm words
for they are coldly calculating
as she wonders if her old flame, Emeka,
who owns an oil block is still unmarried...



Adédoyin Àjàyí

The Shadows That Bind

You're lying in bed with Tobi. You met him at the gym. You liked the way the sweat dripped down his thick beard, his face contorted in a grimace as his fingers curled around the bars, muscles rippling in his arms. You wondered what it would feel like to have those veiny arms curled around your body. You imagined how his face would screw up **when** he slid into you. You didn't wait too long to find out. He has the comical look of a surprised cartoon character when he slides into you. He once asked you why you keep your eyes open in bed. And why you like the lights on. You had no answer for him.

"You're weird," he says.

Of course you are. That's why you've had six boyfriends in the past five years. It's why you go into your car during lunch break at work to smoke cigarillos.

You spark up. He watches you for a minute. You take a deep drag and blow out the smoke gently.

"Let me have one of those," he says. You're surprised. You sit up, cig in hand, covers around your knees, eyes wide. You toss him the pack. He reaches for the lighter. His fingers are deft, no stranger to a lighter's flick. You've never seen him smoke. But you can tell this isn't his first rodeo. His lips caress the brown. He exhales the smoke perfectly. He smirks at you.

Your grin is wide. You don't care that Kiki, your roommate, might smell the smoke coming out of your room. You don't care about many things.

"What's on your mind?" he asks you. You see his eyes on you through the smoky haze.

"Nothing," you say, stubbing out your cig. You reach for him. A grin splits his beard as you straddle him. You like the way his strong arms make you feel light, feel feathery. Kiki will hear your loud howl as he takes your nipple between his teeth. But you don't care. Nothing matters.



2014.

The country is in an uproar.

Two hundred girls have up and disappeared, like stars vanishing at the breaking of dawn. The heist of the century. “Chibok Girls Kidnapped” shoulders its way to the front page of every paper. Media houses fall over themselves in creating more titillating versions of the headline. Blogs race to outrun one another in reporting the news to draw traffic. It becomes the BringBackOurGirls campaign. Bad, bad news, really scandalous stuff. The vultures circle, jostle, and peck for the rottenest piece of carrion. The ambrosia of many a journalist. The glee of government detractors. The joy of several bloggers. Predictably, and rather unsurprisingly, it freefalls into a media fracas mottled with ethnic finger-pointing and acerbic comments swirling in the air. American celebrities flood the streets of New York, holding demonstrations. “Real men don’t kidnap girls,” they say. You see Justin Timberlake hold a rally in the streets. Human rights groups petition the government.

But this all doesn’t concern you much. You’re fifteen. Your womb’s monthly weeping begins. The first spot of blood in your underwear has you in a bind. You’ve also started feeling soreness in your breasts. Sometimes, the slightest contact with your clothes causes chafing and some pain. This conversation doesn’t fall under a father-daughter category. Jibike is always around. Even if she pays you little attention. But she’s there. You tell her of your bodily changes.

The smile on her face rapidly evaporates like a drop of water in the Sahara. She sneers at you. Her stare is withering. You feel your heart rot in your chest and fall to your feet like dead leaves off a tree. Her eyes are unforgiving, unblinking, like that of a judge pronouncing a sentence. Then she laughs. It’s loud. It thunders through your core and hacks through you like a saw. Hot tears sting your eyes. You run away.

Her laughter follows you all the way to your room. You’re ashamed. Ashamed of your body. Betrayed by your very self. You’ve not forgotten. You were fifteen. Like those poor girls herded off to places unknown, you were also lost.

You’d locked yourself in your room for hours following your step-mother’s taunt. Her ridicule dug deeply into you like predator’s claws around the neck of prey. You’d turned to Auntie Romola for comfort. She was your mother’s oldest sister. She made your childhood a little brighter. She always had these Danish cookies you munched on while you sat in front

of her huge TV. Her hugs were always long and comforting, her clothes smelling of the scented candles that burned proudly in her candelabra.

She often told you about the mother you had never known, a mother who'd died before your tiny, beady eyes could ingrain her face in your memory. Somewhere in your mind, you had a picture of your mother embracing you with Auntie Romola smiling in the background. It made you feel happy.

But on that day, nothing felt pleasing about the way she'd hugged you and pinched your chest. But she was your aunt. So you let her touch you. However, when she pushed you on the couch and forced her fingers into your underwear, you'd screamed. Her bosomy frame weighed down on you. She poked and prodded at you like she was sampling a piece of raw meat at Oyingbo market. She forced your legs apart and pushed her head between your thighs. You were choking on your tears, and your screams came out in gurgles. Her tongue lapped at you. You remember hearing the whirring of the fan and the way goose bumps rose on your body, a million pins boring into your skin, your condemnation. You remember hearing Auntie Romola's raspy breath as she forced her tongue into you while she lapped away like a hungry kitten starved of milk. You remember seeing the candelabra with burning candles as they witnessed the blasphemous, unfamiliar marriage of shame and arousal that flooded through you like a tsunami, the smell of the candles choking you.

Tears ran down your face while your feminine essence flowed out of you. And you felt ashamed all over again. Betrayed by your body. Betrayed by one you loved.

You loathed yourself.

But in a few weeks, you'll go back to her. You'll lay like a zombie while she has her way with you. You'll remember the smell of her sweat and the touch of her hands. Your eyes open and lifeless, wide and as empty as a goal without a goalkeeper, you'll watch her manhandle you. You'll tell no one. You hate it. But you like it at the same time. You don't understand it. So you keep it in. It devours you slowly, insidiously.

When you get in the university, you'll miss her. You'll crave her like an addict suffering from withdrawal symptoms. You'll look forward to the long breaks and her longer tongue. You'll detest her. But you'll crave for her still. No one else could play your body so finely, could strum your body like Jimi Hendrix's guitar. Not even Angela or Fikewa, your roommates in school who'd been a couple since their secondary school days. They wondered why your relationships with the boys never lasted. You gave them no answer. But they were always happy to welcome you into their beds after you came back from dates with your

boyfriends. But these trysts won't last. Your eyes will stay as open and blank as a new notebook during it all, and they'll be too spooked to continue. The knife of rejection will hack away at you, constant and unrelenting, pushing you deeper into the embrace of Auntie Romola's sweaty body and raspy breath. Your body won't forget the feel of her fingers and indents of her nails on your skin. She was your high, she was your bane.

Your eyes will stay open still. Unlike your open eyes, your heart is slowly caving in, closing around itself, like a wilting flower under the sun's harsh glare.

2020

Lockdown.

You watched as many videos of KravMaga that YouTube could show you. You started a journal. You dropped out of your law programme. You joined a gym. You dyed your hair. You got piercings in places that would horrify Jibike and your father if they ever saw it. You smiled with smug satisfaction. You started smoking cigarillos. You met Tobi at the gym. You disliked his big, owl-like eyes behind his horn-rimmed glasses. Though he had a jaw that mirrored Kanye West's, he lacked the accompanying larger-than-life braggadocio. He liked silly things that failed to conform to his macho looks. You remember the time he gave you a necklace with a locket of both of you at the beach. Or how you woke up next to him and found those owl eyes watching you with a beard-splitting smile.

Auntie Romola will slip and fall in her kitchen while peeling potatoes. Jibike will tell you that she died from the fall. A blankness, a deadness, will settle over you. A feeling that you lost a part of you. A feeling that you've gotten a part of you back. You'll remember her huffing breaths and see yourself, eyes wide in her grip as she stole your innocence. You wished you could have been there to see her head hit the tiles, crack open like a coconut and spill its contents out. You will remember how she preyed on you and how her lust for your young, ripe body sent you scurrying from arm to arm for a high only she could give. You felt a cruel version of poetic justice from her death.

You've heard of men raping women. Hollywood has shown you male inmates taking advantage of other inmates. But you've never heard of women raping women. But you now know you were a victim. Yet you find it embarrassing being the only proof of that unfortunate statistic, being the only prisoner of that cursed prison. You tried to tell Fikewa. Her bemused look, embarrassing questions, and sideways glances when she thought you weren't watching only drove a wedge between you both. So you kept Auntie Romola in your

head because no one would believe your pitiable tale. You wallowed in it. Auntie Romola might have been in the ground, but her rotting arms still ensconced you in their grip. You stayed shut in Auntie Romola's grave while you died inside. But when you reached for a cigarillo, her face faded away into nothingness.

You leave Tobi. The hurt in his eyes when you break up with him reminds you of a bleeding, beating heart within your chest. You can't deny that he cares about you. You can't deny that pulsing in your veins at the thought of him. He tries to love you with your demons, those demons that have turned your heart to a smouldering pile of wandering dust. Though he's unnerved by your open eyes whenever you have sex, he likes you with all your weirdness. He doesn't ask you why you like to leave the lights on when you're in bed. But you can't shake off the fact that Auntie Romola has set you on a journey to destinations unknown, a place your heart can't love and be loved.

Every time he spins you on the dance floor, your laughter chases back ghosts of your past a little more. Yet, try as he might, loving you was sitting at the gates waiting to be let in. It was like trying to love a shell, a hard cocoon that your heart had folded into. Tobi's arms, strong as they were, could not pull you out of your hell, your eternal place of torment that had sneering balls of fire eating away at candles in a candelabra. Not his soft kisses, nor his beard that covered his chin. So you leave him, and tuck him into the list of lovers who tried to love you with an unflinching love.

You puff your cigarillo harder.

2023

You get a job at a new radio station. Your silky voice is an instant hit with the owners. You begin a talk-show. Your talk-show makes the studio a safe space for women who've been abused. You like to think your version of girl power bests that of Beyoncé. Ratings blow the roof open and soar into the sky like a kite. You become a mini-celebrity of some sort. You use that gloss to buff the scaly parts of you. But it fails to quell your desire to have something deeper, something that goes beyond prodding fingers and long tongues. Something that can poke deeply till it can latch on your heart. Yet, it gives you a feeling of fulfillment. *Fuck you, Auntie Romola, rest in pieces.* But then again, you didn't know what she was doing. Nor could you have known your body only did what your body was meant to do. Perhaps you might have been more comfortable in your own skin. Perhaps you might have been able to stay with a guy. Perhaps you might have found the courage to speak up. Perhaps Auntie Romola might

have spent her last moments in a cell rather than in her kitchen. And maybe, just maybe, you might have been able to love Tobi, with his thick beard, strong arms, owlish eyes, and horn-rimmed glasses.

You still think of him. You wonder what he is doing. You wonder if he has found someone else. You wonder if he is happy. You cry. You blame the patriarchy. You blame your body. You blame your hormones. You blame the Nigerian government. You blame Auntie Romola. You blame online trolls. You blame your body. You blame your father. You blame Jibike. You blame Queen Bey. You blame girl power. You blame your body.

You think of the young women like yourself who you speak to during the day. The cathartic messages you receive from anonymous senders. Women on different paths to recovering what's left of themselves. Tortured women who've been sitting in the dank pits of self-loathing. They remind you of your nine-year prison. Your heart bleeds for them. After some time, you try therapy. It doesn't help much. You stop. You continue your talk-show. Lighting a path for others might just be as good as it gets for you. You're one step closer to shaking off Auntie Romola's decaying arms that have shackled you. At some point in the future, maybe you'll be able to love again.

Perhaps that same light will someday brighten your doorstep. Maybe it will show you a route out of the pits. Maybe it will be strong enough to pry you away from Auntie Romola's decaying arms.

Maybe.



Aditi Dasgupta

A Pinch of Time

Ma drifted through a memory of kitchens long gone. She sat at the edge of her rattan chair that had sagged under the weight of her years. Shoulders hunched forward, she stared at the recipe notebook as though it were a cipher. Ma no longer remembered the language of textures or the hum of the earthen stoves. The handwriting was hers, but strange.

“Add the...?” she whispered. The last few strands of the powdered sunlight slanted through the only window in her house, catching the silver in her hair, her neatly pleated saree, and the growing confusion in her eyes. She touched the page again trying to feel the letters as if it were in Braille. *Ma’s kosha mangsho*—a title she had carried with pride once. In her younger days, if you had sat long enough next to her cooking, you could have seen the tales she stirred up from the pot. Sitting on a low stool, grinding fresh mustard seeds to create an ecosystem of flavours in that salt-laden air, Ma was born with the rhythm of a ladle.

She hesitated over the spice box as though the vibrant powders had conspired against her. Spices and curries, since the last five years, hadn’t tasted like the rivers and rain, and cooking had ceased to be a communal affair.

She reached for the knife, its heft strangely alien in her palm. She wondered if the onion had to be washed first or peeled. Ma knew it needed slicing, knew the feel of its juice stinging her fingertips and the tangy sharpness it would release into the air. But she couldn’t remember how to start. She mouthed the instructions: *Heat the oil... brown the onions...cinnamon stick for sweetness*. The steps should have lined up obediently, like soldiers at her command. But she grappled with the weight of her ancestors. The oil in the big cauldron simmered, waiting for its first offering; impatient, bubbling faintly, as if reminding her of the urgency she no longer felt. A minute later, the smell of mustard oil rose sharply, and with it came fragments. She imagined the clang of metal spatulas, the raucous laughter of her family waiting at the table—everything. It was all there but just out of reach. I saw Ma close her eyes, inhaling deeply. For a fleeting moment, it did come back—the smell of caramelizing onions, the heady swirl of *garam masala* mixed with curd fermented in earthen pots, cooking it till the meat fell off the bone, the satisfying heft of ladling the *kosha mangsho* into a serving bowl. I saw her lips twitch in a half-smile, the phantom warmth of

churning out dishes like an army General during her years of memory. But the moment dissolved when she opened her eyes. She stared at the spice box, her notebook, and the stubborn onion and still failed to access that part of her mind.

My Ma's memory was now the invisible seasoning on the table.



Aisling Phillips

The Echo

Adrenaline. My heartbeat, in quick succession. It all comes down to this.

“Next group!”

My palms are sweating. When I grasp hands with Jen and Quinn, theirs are damp too. We step like a row of penguins onto the stage. We’re not fully blinded by the lights; we can see Madame and Monsieur Bouchet and Delia Devaraux somewhat behind the glow. I try not to think of Esme and Lila’s smug faces as we line up and Quinn signals for the music to start.

A low thrum of a violin as we all take a deep breath, raise our right legs and duck our heads down as one. Lindsey Stirling is ready to go and so are we.

It all comes down to this...

The Echo was born out of a lack of inspiration. Our teachers always want us to do original pieces for our assignments. Original is difficult when all the best ideas have already been taken—fairytales, myths, jewels, seasons, colours. We were surprised when Madame Marchant gave us the list of things we couldn’t do. One print of it could have filled the entire studio.

So there we were, the six friends assigned to come up with something that hadn’t been done before. Karli, Jen, Glitz, Omar, Lucas and Quinn setting out into the streets of Paris with culture around every corner, stuck to find something they could make up a dance about. Notre Dame was out of the question; its story had been done to death and besides none of us wanted to dance the role of a goat. The Eiffel Tower yielded nothing except a faint idea of how we could contrast the manmade with the natural as we watched it caught by the sunlight.

“But, of course, something like that’s bound to have been done before,” Quinn said, bitterly.

We took the waterbus past the Louvre. Glitz suggested we do something like Da Vinci painting the Mona Lisa or Rodin sculpting statues, with each dancer doing tableaux poses to fit each artwork. It wasn't a bad idea; though if I'd been part of The Kiss tableaux, I'd have rather been sitting with Jayden than one of our boys. It might have brought us closer together. But we couldn't see how the judges would get it.

"Delia Devaraux might think it's boring," Jen added, sighing.

Of course, we were eager to impress Madame Marchant after she was on the warpath with us for not always sticking to the rules, and Monsieur Bouchet, to show him what we'd done since moving on from his classes, but everyone wanted to impress Delia Devaraux the most. She was the biggest name in ballet since Anna Pavlova.

We caught the Metro to Montmartre, had a giggle at the sex shops and then it was Omar who pointed out that maybe we could do something about the cancan girls at the Moulin Rouge. Lucas thought that might be too much like the musical, even when Omar suggested using Glitz's idea of artists making art, this time with Toulouse Lautrec. I think that's what led to us then considering doing it with Edgar Degas's ballerina paintings.

"Too on the nose," Quinn shot down.

On the Metro back, I got the idea, looking at the list of lines. I'll never understand why people find the tangled weave of Tube, Metro or Subway lines difficult to unravel and read. I find it as easy as standing en pointe. One word stood out above the rest, the beginning of this all, the most daring dance we'd ever done.

"What about Versailles?" I suggested, and thus *The Echo* was conceived, though not yet fully formed. Currently it was a seed travelling down to fertile ground but it would bloom by the time we reached the Hall of Mirrors and grow, become watered and fed, harvested and finally presented. Almost as soon as we stepped foot inside the Palace, then *The Tragedy of Marie Antoinette* also began to take shape. We were swept away by the lush pink and blue fabrics and gold gilt paint back to a time when women could at least make their marks as style icons, to the time of clouds of big hair and skirts that could knock things over. We checked the list and it hadn't been done, so the cogs immediately began turning this idea into motion. We saw Quinn as Louis XVI, inexperienced to the point of frigidity and Glitz as Marie Antoinette, coaxing him to love her, and then the rest of us as the poor starving revolutionaries who rose up whilst they were enjoying their tea and cakes. It sounded simple

but effective. I knew that it was exactly the kind of thing Madame Marchant was looking for from us.

And then we stepped into the Hall of Mirrors.

By comparison to the other rooms, it was cool and airy, and I think we all felt the chill as we realised what possibilities could be created in this room. Standing in the middle we were multiplied, split into a thousand versions of ourselves, when we moved a thousand of us moved at the same time, in the same way. The seed began to sprout.

“Maybe we could be like a split personality,” Jen said, standing behind me to show what she meant. Jen has always been a lover of psychology. “An expression of the human psyche. We could all twirl out from behind one person and represent different parts of that person. Like I could be angry, or Omar could be lazy—”

“Like the Seven Deadly Sins?” Lucas said. “But there’s six of us, five if one person just stands doing nothing. Let’s stick with *Marie Antoinette*.”

Then, well everyone likes to credit me with the idea, but actually Quinn and I both said “Mirroring” at the same time and then it just sort of took shape by itself. The seed bloomed and blossomed right there and then. *The Echo*, a dance of reverberations, in which we all move in synch as six, nothing complicated, a plotless piece in which we all just danced. You can imagine all the tourists turned to watch as we made it up right there and then with no music. Some even filmed us on their phones. We didn’t care. We were too swept up in a new idea. We decided to practise both, though, in case one turned out better than the other. In the end, though, they were both the best things we had ever devised.

We went straight back to the school and started drawing out the choreography properly. For *Marie Antoinette*, we chose the only song that fitted which was an instrumental of a famous pop song inspired by the execution of Louis XVI. For *The Echo*, a Lindsey Stirling piece that fitted perfectly with our movements. We knew we were pushing our luck there. Madame Marchant had told us off enough in the past for not using “proper ballet music.” Last time she’d been so cross she’d threatened to expel us on the spot. But if this was the last chance we’d get to showcase anything in front of her, we were taking that risk. It wasn’t about the music; after all, it was the dance that would determine once and for all whether we’d made it.

Ever since each one of us was able to walk, we’d dreamed of making it into the Paris Opera Ballet. Each of us begged our parents to take us to the theatre whenever *Sleeping*

Beauty or *The Nutcracker* played. Each of us learning the names of the biggest ballet stars in the world; Anna Pavlova, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Vaslav Nijinsky, Darcy Bussell, Carlos Acosta. Each of us cut out and stuck up their pictures instead of football teams or boybands. We knew even then that ballet is a true commitment and we were all so devoted to it there could be nothing else. If we blew it, we didn't have a back-up plan. This was it.

Everything hinged on this last dance.

So we danced them both until we were driven mad by the repeated music over and over, and until our toes ached and our brains buzzed. We were sore and exhausted. Jayden came across us flopped about in the studio when we'd overrun and it was his group's turn. We must have looked sights with sweaty hair and red faces.

"I think you're pushing yourselves too much," he said, concerned about others as always. I do like that about him. I wish I'd had the courage to ask him out, but every time I tried, Esme and Lila got in the way. I got that they liked him too and we shouldn't be fighting over a boy like a piece of meat, but at the same time I wanted to yank their extensions right out every time they approached him. My only comfort was that he hadn't dated either of them yet. I probably still had a chance.

Maybe.

Who was I kidding? I had no chance.

Esme and Lila came in whilst we were groaning about and rubbing our legs after *Marie Antoinette*. They smirked all over their faces as usual. You always get those who think they're the best dancers in the whole school and rub it in. Obviously they were hoping we'd blow it this time. We didn't let their taunts get to us this time, though. We kept our heads up even though our feet were dragging. They always stuck to the classical stuff, which wasn't very original in our opinions, and that was what Madame Marchant had established—the piece had to be original. We left them probably pretending to be flower fairies and went to eat.

"I've been thinking," Quinn said over yoghurt, "and I don't think we should do *The Echo*."

"But it's the best thing we've ever come up with," Omar protested. "It could be a real dance that they make the kids here do years after we're gone. They could even make a whole ballet out of it."

“I know,” Quinn replied, “but I just think it’s too much of a risk. There’s only so many places in the ballet open, and if we want to get them, I think we need to go with *Marie Antoinette*.”

We all protested, of course we did. We all thought the same as Omar. Even Quinn thought it. But we knew deep down he was right, and we couldn’t throw away everything we’d ever worked for just to do things our way one last time. So, we put down *The Echo*, we knew it by heart now anyway, and focused on tightening our second dance up.

The real beauty of *The Echo* was that we could do it so simply. We only needed to wear the same colour costumes, and there were no props involved. With *Marie Antoinette*, however, we had to beg Madame Marchant to let us raid the props box and costume wardrobe, and she did so reluctantly, only after we told her that it was the only way our dance would be perfect. There weren’t as many seventeenth century costumes as we’d hoped for and we had to make do with Cinderella’s ragged dress and some of the Mechanicals costumes from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. But once we’d pinned on our Revolutionary colours and Glitz was wielding a polystyrene cake plate with a polystyrene cake on it, the effect was exactly what we were hoping for.

So, you can imagine our outrage when we spotted Esme wearing a luxurious Georgian outfit standing next to a scowling Lila in a plain brown dress as we queued up to await our turn to be called. Perhaps *The Tragedy of Marie Antoinette* wasn’t quite the original idea we’d hoped for. Still, we were distracted by the other dances, first a piece based on the Greek myth of Hades and Persephone, then a piece that featured all the dancers as fish and other underwater creatures, which was very enjoyable, and then a comical ballet scene of Falstaff being smuggled in a laundry basket. While we were watching this, Jayden came quietly up to me.

“Break a leg out there,” he whispered, and he squeezed my hand. My breath hitched and I finally managed to tear my eyes away from the stage. “I know you’ll do brilliantly.”

“Thank you,” I breathed and he kissed my cheek before going to join Esme, Lila and the rest of their group. Quinn was watching them scowling with his arms folded, but his eyes suddenly shot open as they began their dance.



It was *our* dance. It was *The Tragedy of Marie Antoinette* that we had carefully choreographed every little detail of meticulously, set to completely different music, but it was still the same dance, our dance. We stared open-mouthed as Esme danced the part of Marie Antoinette, Jayden finally plucked up the nerve to be romantic with her, Lila took great pleasure in snatching away her cake plate and Lisa, Marcus and Ben dragged Esme and Jayden to the guillotine. From where we stood in the wings I could see how moved the judges were. Madame Marchant had her hands clasped together in delight. Monsieur Bouchet was nodding his approval. Delia Devaraux looked on the brink of tears.

Our future trembled on its pedestal, ready to come tumbling down.

“We need to do *The Echo*,” I said. Sienna’s group were already halfway through their icy spirits dance and we couldn’t do *Marie Antoinette* one now, Esme and Lila had ruined it for us. “What else can we do? We haven’t got anything else prepared.”

The others agreed, even Quinn said it was all we could do, and we had just enough time to change into our red costumes and set up a different backing track before we were called up. “*The Echo* or bust,” we all said, clasping hands, before walking out onto the stage.

And now I can’t see anything, I’m not daring to look over at the judges; I just dance the greatest dance in the world knowing that it’s all I can do. It feels like the end of the world is on its way and the only way we can stop it is to dance. So, we all flow in synch, one, two, three, four, five, six, pirouette, plie, jete’, releve, arabesque and sauter. We can feel nothing except the thrumming bass of the music, we can hear nothing except the swell of violins rising and falling, we can see nothing except a thousand of each other like we’re back dancing in the Hall of Mirrors. For a moment it’s as if I’ve split into six versions of myself like Jen wanted, it’s artistic like Glitz and Omar wanted, it’s original like Lucas wanted, it’s unexpected like Quinn wanted. It’s *The Echo* just as I wanted to dance it.

The music slows. We reach its end. As it stops we end in a tableaux right back in the positions we started from. The silence is suddenly deafening, and as I raise my head, I know this is it, we’ve blown it. I’ve never seen Monsieur Bouchet sit so still, never seen Madame Marchant so tight-lipped. Delia Devaraux blinks, and in the ringing silence I can practically hear it.

My eyes turn towards the wings. Jayden looks as stunned as the judges, but Esme and Lila are smirking, they know we’ve blown it and they’re looking forwards to showing off

when they get into the ballet and we're rejected. I can feel their glee rolling towards us as we grasp for one another's hands again, clasping tightly. *The Echo* or bust, we're all going down together.

I squeeze my eyes shut, blocking Esme and Lila out completely, but I wish I can see the looks on their faces when the auditorium suddenly erupted with rapturous applause, echoing through every crevice of the theatre.



Ali Mckenzie-Murdoch

On Viewing

The viewer's pleasure often comes from the recognition of the illusion, aware of the trick once they understand it is an artwork.

It's easy to spot the dancers in the Ristorante Centrale. Lithe and long-legged, fresh-faced without stage make-up, they drape their spent bodies over sofas and armchairs in the foyer. One of the soloists, on exchange from the Tokyo Ballet, pulls her head to the side, sighs, rolls her shoulders, her body still wired from the final performance. Daniel would love her; he liked Asian women. Sometimes he called me his Chinese doll. Said I was fragile. Petite. But I wanted to be like the Spanish women. I wanted to fit in.

Moving into the restaurant, the cacophony of voices increases, like the bustling auditorium before the curtain rises. I know most people at this after show party, if not by name, then by sight. I worked mostly with metal workers, carpenters, the *Bühnenmeister*—all men. The only woman was the lighting designer, Silvia, who's leaning against a marble-topped wooden dresser, wine bottles and fruit-laden bowls glinting behind her. In the dim light she's vampiric with her rose-tinged plastic-framed glasses, powder puff skin and dark purple lips. I push through the crowd to reach her. She's eating a strawberry.

"Caught red-handed," she says. "I'm starting with dessert. Try one." I shake my head and look around for a waiter. I'm longing for a drink to smooth away the edges. Smooth away the thought of Daniel, and the kaleidoscopic memories flitting through my mind.

Silvia dabs her mouth with a starched napkin, and tosses the cloth onto the empty tray of a passing waitress. Her Mulberry lipstick kiss travels across the room, bobbing above the heads of technicians, performers, members of the costume department, their chatter broken by bursts of laughter.

The waitress disappears through a door in a wall beside a curtained window looking out onto hills and cypress trees. Moving closer, it's obviously an image painted on the smooth plaster.

"Trompe L'oeil," says Simon at my shoulder, handing me a glass of champagne. "To deceive the eye."

“Simon, you’re a hero,” I say, the bubbles tickling my nose.

“Hey cheers,” he says, tutting because I’ve already taken a gulp.

“I was desperate.” We clink glasses.

Simon nods, his expression saying, I know you, Clio Slade.

Side-by-side, we look at the blue strokes of sky hovering over a Tuscan landscape, framed by plush velvet drapes. “It’s a dreadful painting,” I say, “but it fools me every time.”

My mind flits between looking through a window and knowing it’s an illusion. Simon kisses the crown of my head. “We’re all fooled or foolish,” he says.

The last few months, Simon has photographed the set building, dance rehearsals, and taken photos for The Odyssey programme and press shots. He’s aged a lot since our first project together—the Festival of the Sea in Ceuta. He was handsome then, sleeping with a different cast member every night if he wanted. Now, his eyebrows are thick and grey, and the bags under his eyes swell like folds of uncooked pastry.

But some things haven’t changed. Simon sees under my skin. He saw me disappear with Daniel. He saw me crawl back to Zürich, shipwrecked and broken. I know he can’t be fooled. I know I can’t deceive his eyes.

The viewer typically expects a photograph to show a true representation of reality.

Simon collects people like some collect stamps, cataloguing their bodies with his camera. The curve of a shoulder, a collarbone, parted lips. My image is also in his collection, photographed after I ran away from Daniel and returned to Zürich. He captured my undernourished body, hollow, wrecked. Black and white. Out of focus as if underwater, Simon softened what was hard, what was difficult to view. The framed pictures in our hallway are a reminder I survived.

When Simon photographed me in his studio all those years ago, I balanced naked on a barstool, the wooden seat hard on my bones. A roll of black paper cascaded from the wall, like a dark wave sweeping across the floor. Heat from the lights washed over me but still I shivered, the silver reflector blinding, the camera lens circling. Simon crouched below. Snap. Snap. Pop. A white haze flooded my eyes. He told me I would look back on this moment as a new start. A baptism by flash. When Simon lowered the camera, coming closer without

breaking his gaze, only then was I stripped bare. His cheek against mine, a mix of breath mints and sweat. “Get dressed now. We’re done,” he said.

Now, sitting beside Simon in the restaurant, I ask, “Remember the photos you took after I escaped from Daniel? I look at them every day.”

Do I want to talk about the photos or Daniel?

A waitress places a plate of Risotto alla Milanese with Ossobucco in front of me. Reddish-brown juice seeps from the meat, pooling onto the white porcelain plate, streaks emerging like shadows in a developing photo, revealing its full detail. Simon sways in his chair, empties his glass. “You escaped? That’s just what you tell yourself. You could’ve left at any time.”

The viewer understands that the mirror presents reality as it is, albeit reversed and impermanent.

Simon helps himself to what remains on my plate. “My dear, we can’t let it go to waste.” I’m too preoccupied to eat. Daniel’s messages drape a gauze between me and reality. The party around me is capsizing, submerged beneath water. Tables laden with plates of risotto and veal shank disappear in a fog. Even Simon is blurred as if he’s an image in a looking glass.

I could be talking to my own reflection, my words resound hollow and leave no trace. “He contacted me again.”

Simon clasps my hand. “Don’t do it, Clio.”

“He got back in touch, that’s all.”

He clenches harder. “Life isn’t make believe like one of your set designs. Sometimes it’s just fucking and nothing more.” Simon pales, and gulps his red wine. “Have you been talking to him?”

Simon unpeels my mask with his questions. I’m exposed. Stripped before him, only this time there’s no camera.

“Only texting. Less real than talking to him.”

“So you’re playing out a fantasy, are you?” He laughs, dark fillings flashing in his teeth.

Reflected in the silvered mirror behind Simon, the party guests are leaving, collecting their coats, kissing goodbye. The mottled surface is scratched and uneven, light seeping

through the translucent patches like glimmering ghouls mingling with shadow people who merge as they embrace. Simon remains focused on me, still crushing my hand. His face splinters into shards the more I drink.

“What did Daniel give you that I couldn’t?”

The waitress interrupts us but Simon and I inhabit a memory stronger than the present. We’re together in a place with no answers. The waitress tilts her head, her mouth forming a question we can’t hear. When neither of us reply, she places the cutlery on our plates, and walks away. Tugging myself out of his grip, the restaurant noise returns—chattering, air kisses, the banging kitchen door. But still there’s nothing I can say. Even when Simon traces a tear on my cheek with his fingers, even when he smooths my hair, runs his hands over my face, closes my eyes, I can’t find an answer.

The viewer, captivated by the illusion, knows the ghostly figures on stage arise from angled glass or mirrors but still feels a sense of wonder.

Daniel, brightly lit, is hiding below stage, his reflection haunting my life. His texts, like the Pepper’s Ghost Effect, are a seamless blend of reality and illusion. If only I could disappear, stagehands sweating, using ropes and pulley systems to fly me through the air. But I’ve already slipped through a trapdoor, with nothing to break my fall.

I can’t look at Simon. If I do, he’ll see what drew me to Daniel—a twisted want, the push and pull of his words, an animal need to let him dominate me, to pound my body, pulling me apart only to piece me together— and what he, Simon, could never have given me.

When I open my eyes, I’m alone. Simon has gone, and the tablecloth is bare.



Allison Field Bell

Medication

A new one. Three times daily. Something to quell the urges. I will not vomit. I will not vomit. My doctor in California is also my therapist. We talk on the phone weekly. I wander through the yard while she tells me about mania, about depression. I pick glass bottles, metal scraps, bricks from the dirt, making piles to deal with later. I stop drinking. Or: I stop drinking for me. Which means one glass of bourbon here and there. I can't keep track of time anymore. When which meds started and which meds stopped. When I drank this here or vomited there. I know that in the desert, I love the ocotillo best. Its spindly arms reaching for the sky. Its fierce fiery blossoms. The way it looks spread across a landscape like kelp in the Pacific. I love that it can be made into a living fence. I love that it blooms with the hummingbirds. And I love the danger of it: sharp long spines disguised by delicate green leaves, petals.



Breasts

At some bar on Fourth Avenue, he's sweet-talked his way to the owner. She's drunk. It's a night of football—the super bowl. Or something else to celebrate. I can't remember. But here she is: a round, short, powerful woman. She commands a room. Her name is something like Deborah. She tells us about her breast cancer. “Double mastectomy,” she says. I think of my two grandmothers: one dead before I was born, one dying back in California. Both with breast cancer. Both sick in the brain too. Both undiagnosed. The owner of the bar lifts her shirt, shows us her nippleless chest. We look to be polite, then she lowers the shirt, defeated. We hug her and leave into the warm desert night. On the walk home past silent ghosts of cholla and barrel cacti, we laugh. “How crazy was that?” We say, “crazy.” I think of my grandmothers, of myself. Of the flesh at my chest and what it could eventually do to me. I'm thinking of death, and he's laughing. And there is no moon and it seems like the team I'm rooting for never wins.

Andrea Green

Full of Windows

There's no doubt my roommate was a peculiar man. He was in possession of two things that are rarely seen together, a particular pride in his online presence, and the possession of a brooding manner.

The very first afternoon that I moved into the fifth-floor seaside apartment; I observed him standing at the kitchen window, gazing out over the harbour. To his right, set up on the blindingly clean countertop, a ring light was producing an ethereal halo.

"There you are, old sport," he said, noticing me in the doorframe. "Don't mind me. I'm just taking some pictures for the gram." He angled his phone in my direction, and I saw a screen full of windows, all lit up. It appeared he was a minor celebrity, having almost a million, mostly female, followers.

In the months that followed, I observed his sacrosanct daily ritual of taking curated photos of gourmet meals, luxury accessories, and his pet Bichon Frise, then uploading them for the world to see.

One morning, he was in front of the camera, creating a cloud of *Ralph Lauren* aftershave while shaking his luscious locks the way you might see a horse do in a show.

"You must have women throwing themselves at you," I remarked.

"I do," he replied, without looking away from the lens.

"Don't let me stop you from bringing one or more of them home," I said, scratching my head.

He considered me for a moment the way one looks at the soft spot on an apple. "Penny will see my Instagram account one day," he said, "and she'll remember that she loves me."

Though he'd only mentioned her once before, I remembered that Penny was his ex-fiancé, so I said no more.

Later that night I went about a spot of sleuthing on the internet. Penny wasn't a difficult person to find. Her Instagram and Facebook pages were all wide open, loudly

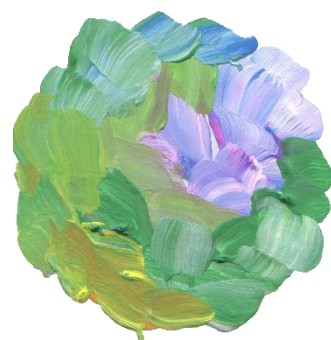
splashing pictures of herself with expensive cars, her angular husband, and her angel-faced child. I remembered my roommate's conviction—*she loves me*—and sorrow's gnarled fingers pressed against my chest.



Andrea Marcusa

Mourning Doves

You remember that summer you both worked in Paris and the Mourning Doves cooing at dawn. You remember their song, like contented children humming and you imagined entering the sound and floating on it like a cloud. You remember the way he'd stir, perch on his side and stroke your cheek with his pinky as the porters outside whistled for taxis and the morning traffic stopped and started, the sound like waves rolling to shore. You were always amazed when you awoke beside him and even though you'd been married five years it was like you were still in the throes of new love. Each morning, the two of you surrounded by soft pillows, watched the sky brighten from grey to blue until the sun flooded your bed with morning light.



Nestled next to him, as you felt the steady thump, thump of his heart, you didn't want the day to start because you had your cheek on his bare skin, and your thigh draped across his, and felt lulled by the steady, in-out of his breathing. His heart had not yet sped up, cartwheeling in his chest, the electrical storm in its tissue had not yet struck. His face was not yet ashen with panic jumping from his eyes like lightning, and your bodies tense, fright thick and fused to each limb like iron. You had not yet packed your books and research or said goodbye to your students and turned your back on a life Abroad to return with him to a specialist in New York City. There you would learn by heart the way to the cardiac intensive care floor and arrive alone to your silent home for another night away from where he lay dozing to the sound of monitors, amid the eerie green light of the vitals screen.

Sometimes after you've fallen asleep for the night on a hospital chair, you hear a Mourning Dove outside his window at dawn. As you stir, you dream of the two of you in Paris, on that old rickety bed, its sheets smelling of spring, your hands laced together, his deep brown eyes like velvet. You glance at him dozing in the dank room and reach for his warm hand. Resting there, feeling his fingers in your palm, listening to the cooing, its hollow resonance enchanting and mythical, you imagine the bird is serenading you, stroking your heart with its music. But on other days, you picture the bird alone, perched on a sooty ledge, its song soon to be drowned by the belches of buses and racket of traffic.

C. J. Anderson-Wu

I Am Not Broken

I just had my 26th birthday; “celebrated” it with my friends. They were unusual characters—ghosts, so they could be with me in this small place. I was grateful for their presence when my human friends were unable to join me for the celebration. I had been arrested many times and had been in and out of prison over the past years, and two years ago, this prison became my home. I spent my 25th birthday in the same place, by myself, although my friends and supporters outside had sent their good wishes during those days.

Then I encountered my ghost friends. They appeared one by one, three in total, at different times. They don’t know each other, and they never appear at the same time. I asked them if it was possible for them to show up at the same time, but they seem to have different times in their worlds, so I had problems setting up an appointment. They stopped by at different times, but they all made it on my birthday.

I knew Kimura first, he showed up by the basketball court during one of the very rare opportunities I was given to exercise outdoors. I thought he was waiting for our game to be over so he could play, but he did not approach when my game was over. I played another game, and when it was time for me to go back to my cell, I gestured that he could take my place, but he did not respond.

Several days later, I saw him during meal time. We did not interact. I knew I was closely watched, so I avoided bringing unnecessary trouble to strangers, until one night he showed up in my cell. I was surprised and thought he must be a prison staff, not an inmate, so he could get in the cell. He did not say anything, just sat down by the desk and read something.

“Hey!” I called.

He lifted up his head and nodded to me, then continued his reading.

“Who are you?” I inquired, noticing the uniform he wore was different to ours or that of the prison staff. It was white shirt, khaki pants and leggings. He slowly lifted his head and told me his name was Kimura, and he was from Kempeitai.

“What is Kempeitai?”

Kimura did not answer. Instead he stood up and came to sit next to me, on my bed, without being invited, “I am twenty-three years old, how old are you?”

“Twenty-five.” I was a little bit surprised that his unexpected movement and question did not annoy me.

“You are two years older than me. Did you go to school?”

“Yes, I was attending Hong Kong Metropolitan University before... before I was taken here. I did not finish my degree.”

“Me, either.” Kimura said, “I was drafted when I just started college.”

“If you have the chance in the future, will you complete your study?” I asked without really wishing to know the answer. Just trying to find a topic for a chat.

“Nay. I never had the chance.” Kimura replied, he looked lost. “You study by yourself a lot; can I study with you?”

“Of course.” I promised without thinking, but wondered how. Kimura seemed to be happy, and faded away while saying, “I will come back again.”

The next ghost becoming my friend was Joshua, “I am Joshua, can I share the table with you?” A middle-aged man inquired politely, like we were in a high-end bar, instead of being in a prison.

“Yes, please. I am Joshua, too.” I saw him two times before he introduced himself. He was in the corridor of our cellblock, he wore a formal suit and tie, and carried a black leather suitcase. Usually it caused loud echoes when anyone walked past the corridor, but this man never produced any sound. Based on my acquaintance with Kimura, when Joshua asked to share the table with me, I realized he was a ghost, too.

From our conversation, I learned that Joshua was a philosopher. He became my tutor in the following encounters and taught me scientific analysis of philosophic, moral, legal and social issues. Out of respect, I called him Dr. Liao, but he insisted on being called Joshua, so I called him Dr. Joshua. And when Kimura visited me, I taught him what I had learned from Dr. Joshua, although sometimes I was confused by different theories I learned. Repeating what Dr. Joshua had taught me to Kimura helped me clarify what I really understood, and what I needed to further pursue in the coming classes provided by Dr. Joshua.

As if my behavior interacting with ghosts was not crazy enough, the third friend showed up not long after Dr. Liao. It was a little blond boy with fair skin, probably three

years old, similar to the build of my cousin's child. He played by himself around me from time to time, barely able to talk. I described the appearance of the boy to Kimura, and he said, "It must be Brian."

Kimura told me Brian was taken here when he was around three years old, when Japan occupied British Hong Kong. He died of malnutrition when he was almost four years old. I was told that his grave was just outside of my cell, "He probably doesn't know he is dead." Kimura assumed.

"Ah! No wonder. The little boy always looks like he was expecting someone or something. Poor thing. What happened to his parents?"

"I am not sure. They might have died, too, or have been released afterwards and returned to the UK. I don't remember his parents."

"How about you, Kimura? How did you die?" I finally raised the question I had in my mind since I met him.

"I was hanged."

I couldn't hide my shock, so Kimura explained, "We tortured and murdered Hong Kong civilians during the war. Brian was one of them. We were sentenced to death in the trials after the war"

"You tortured and murdered Brian?" I asked, unbelievably.

"Not directly. I followed the orders from my superiors. I was at the lowest rank; I did what they told me to do."

A thousand questions rushed over my mind, and Kimura seemed to be understanding, "I was numb when I was executing my orders. The prisoners were asked to stand under the scorching sun for hours, or to be starved for days. When one made a mistake, we punished all of them. We did not see those people punished by us as humans."

"I see. We were not treated as humans when we were beaten up in the streets by the law enforcement, either. The police called us cockroaches."

Kimura was buried in the mass grave outside of the prison, he hung out in the screw pine woods a lot and seemed to be much more carefree in nature. No one except me in this prison was able to see him, and neither of us knew why. I wondered if he missed his hometown in Japan, and, as a ghost, if he was able to go home.

I had heard quite a few ghost stories about this prison established in 1937, and it indeed was haunted, considering the three friends of mine. But contrary to popular tropes, they were not scary at all. People operating this prison were scarier. Prisoners executed here a long time ago were buried in the mass grave, their families were not allowed to have burials until seven years later. Many were not reburied at all; Kimura was one of the unclaimed souls.

The next time when Dr. Joshua came, I boldly asked the cause of his death.

“I was poisoned, although the newspapers said I was killed by a cerebral hemorrhage. I was only 46 years old, it’s very unlikely I’d die by a brain hemorrhage, but it was the official story.”

“Why did they want to poison you?”

“I was campaigning for Taiwan’s independence from China.”

“I see. It had been a taboo forever... until recently.”

I told him about the other two ghosts who died several years before his death, Dr. Joshua was amazed. Obviously he did not hear much about it. He inquired a lot about them but I couldn’t answer, I promised him that next time when Kimura showed up, I would ask him. As to Brian, I suspected his extended term in the prison had resulted in delayed development of his communication skills. I felt so sorry for him and his parents.

Each inmate is allowed to have six books a month. They usually are brought to me by my family or friends when they have a chance to visit me. Prisoner visitation is very inconvenient here, visitors often need to wait for hours for a 15-minute meeting. The prison administration is not there to serve us as we are taught. I always asked my family and friends to bring publications related to Dr. Joshua’s classes, but many of them were very old and are no longer available. My family or friends try to find books with themes as close to my study as possible, and I show them to Dr. Joshua when he is with me. I am curious how a ghost updates his knowledge. Is Dr. Joshua able to exchange thoughts with the ghosts of other philosophers? I raised the question, and Dr. Joshua told me that in the world he lives now, the being of each individual is not tangible, thus the interactions between them are not as what we do in my world. I don’t really understand what this means, perhaps it is the so-called metaphysics?

As the next date of the trial of my next lawsuit approached, I got more and more unsettled. I was charged with “violation of the anti-mask law,” “organizing an unauthorized assembly,” “promoting secession or subversion” and “contempt of court.” I had been told

there could be further charges brought in the future. One morning I learned that my name was associated with a former activist, who was found guilty of corruption by connecting him to the money he had raised for public affairs. The report implied that I was involved in the scandal as well, although I hardly worked with the man in question. I was depressed, but couldn't do anything. Fortunately Dr. Joshua showed up, I told him what bothered me.

"It's normal. One of their common methods to stigmatize political dissidents."

I hesitated a moment, and asked, "What else?"

"I don't know about your situation, certainly it couldn't be as bad as mine. You already knew I was poisoned, and my siblings and my cousins were put in jail for the longest time. To save them from being sentenced to death, my younger brother went back to Taiwan from Japan and surrendered himself to the Nationalist regime. He was used for propaganda as proof of how evil the conspiracy for Taiwan's independence was, while my entire family was still under surveillance and humiliation for decades. Had my siblings known the price of confession was deprivation of our dignity, they'd persist."

I looked at him for a long time, and finally said, "Your spirit came here to warn me?"

"I don't know why I am here. I respect you greatly. You could be my child, and thinking what might happen to my own offspring, I struggle, it hurts me. Should I support them to do what they are doing, or should I advise them to compromise for an easier life, I have no idea. But I am confident that with more allies and supporters to support your voice, you certainly will see your achievement in a shorter period of time compared to mine, and your efforts will be recognized widely."

I felt I was wrapped by warm and chilly streams of air at the same time. When Dr. Joshua was gone, I stood up, closed my eyes and began to jog in my cell.

I imagined myself running in a prairie, it was so expansive that no border could be envisaged, and the breeze kissed my hair, my forehead, my arms and my torso, like I was embraced by a tender giant.



Author's Note:

Joshua Wong, a Hong Kong pro-democracy activist, has sent a message, through his allies, from the Stanley Prison after his 26th birthday, that he is not broken, even after more than two years of incarceration and faced with more charges and trials.

Catherine Rossi

A Life

With the library card in my small hand, I discovered mermaids and dragons and unicorns. Prancing and flying, they took me away from my world. When sister and sister and brother and the little ones were born, I walked them to the library. We snuggled on the sofa while I read their selections aloud. When Dad wrote a novel, I deciphered his scribbling on the yellow lined paper and typed, fingers flying as the Sisters taught. Afterwards, I holed up in my room to devour the romance stories they railed against.

One day a handsome professor entered the library where I worked. He left with piles of research and a date. He asked, “Can you cook?” I replied, “I can read.” The professor and I bought a house, filled it with bookcases, and stacked overflowing books on the ping pong table. I launched story time at the library where the neighborhood kids talked of fantasies and futures. As my children were born, I read to them every day until they could read to me. In a blink, I was sending them boxes of bestsellers at college. During retirement, I hobnobbed with authors at mystery conventions and sorted worn editions at the thrift store. When the professor became ill, I read his forgotten favorites aloud.

Then one day, I lay in bed and could no longer see the pile of books at my side. Siblings and children gathered around, recounting tales and comparing authors. My granddaughter climbed in beside me and read stories of mermaids and dragons and unicorns. I listened as they took me away from my world.



Chitra Gopalakrishnan

The Folly of Fools

A kingfisher is perched on a large rock on the banks of the river Narmada, close to the Chikhaldia village in the Dhar district of the central Indian state of India.

He watches its waters intently.

He gazes into the reflections of trees, the underwater weeds swaying in the currents, the speed and manoeuvrability of water beetles and the scuds of dragonflies as they hover over the glassy waters.

His chance of victory comes after hours of wait. With a fluid movement, he plunges into the Narmada to emerge with a slippery fish in his beak.

A little distance away Govindraj, a short, stringy fisherman who smells of wood smoke and sweat, scoops up the waters of Narmada from the edge of his boat and brushes it against his forehead in an act of homage. “*Har Narmada*,” he says softly.

Like the kingfisher, he is mesmerised by the spectacle of the river. It is bright green in some places, deep green in others, emerald in a few other corners, cyan further down and viridian at its furthest corners.

He casts his net but the catch is meagre, like the months and years before. The kingfisher at least got his meal.

Fear inundates Govindraj’s being as it has for many years. As his net emerges fortuneless, his village elders’ prophecy of destruction flashes before his eyes. They warn that if people tamper with the river, it will be the folly of fools, as chaos of an incredible magnitude will be unleashed—far beyond human control.

He has already seen unsettling fluctuations.

Narmada also called Reva, after the Sanskrit word ‘rev’ to leap, no longer cavorts and gambols. The Bargi dam built 650 kilometres upstream of his village in 1974 has stilled her burbling. This by forcing her to burst her borders to flood the entire area and then in stark contrast by holding her back, by forcefully containing several millions of tonnes of her water within the dam.

She is now a still, stagnant version of her former self.

In the name of progress, people have undone a sustaining and enduring way of life. He and his people who were farmers of musk melons have been forced to turn into fishermen as the dam flooded their orchards. With fishing a dead enterprise, many are becoming sand miners, robbing the Narmada of her landscape and the infinite life she nurtures.

What next?



Chris Clemens

Date “Night”

After three years of sickness you’ll do anything to meet girls, even Tinder.

Jessi’s blue shirt is wrinkled. She’s “passionate about logistics,” which seems like a weird thing to tell someone, but at least she laughs, knows it’s weird. She “liked” the new season of *Always Sunny*.

The real problem is the air quotes. Jessi uses them all the time, indiscriminately, with bunny-wagging fingers.

“Student” debt.

Super “bowl.”

“Social” anxiety.

You’re perplexed. Does she not understand how quotes work? Is conceptual reality fraying beneath her scrutiny, unraveling somehow?

When she asks if “you” are having fun, smile and say maybe.



Clodagh O Connor

A Shift in Perspective

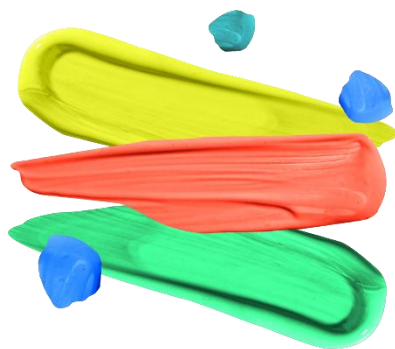
The artist spends a long time looking. He barely murmurs, “Pardon me, my lady,” as he touches the curve of my ear, tips my chin this way and that. I am clay in his hands and he discovers me as no other has. He is enthralled by my very being.

I am seated as the artist demands; he readies his weapons for capture. I lower my eyes and dip my chin; here to tell the story of my husband’s wealth, nothing more. I sweat and shift as the summer sun pours its light upon me. Over the rasp of the artist’s charcoal come grunts of irritation.

His apprentice watches us. He suggests I partake of a cooling draught. The artist’s glower softens as they exchange smiles. A table strewn with writings and drawings ensnares the master’s attention and he becomes blind to our existence.

I drink and feel the liquid cool my insides. Giacomo smiles and points to a prepared bowl of lavender water. He will sponge me down to ease the hours of sitting. Like his master, he is not interested in me as a woman. I acquiesce; remove my dress and all of the heavy garments underneath. My husband insists that his silks need protection from my skin’s touch. The boy loosens my hair and asks if he may sketch me as I am. When he is finished he hands me my undergarments, but I shake my head. The cool silk of the dress caresses my skin as I slip it on.

I settle myself on the upright chair; hand over hand, hair tightly bound now—the very model of a virtuous woman. A smile escapes me as I stare at Leonardo. He smiles back at me, moves to his canvas and begins to paint.



Delphine Gauthier-Georgakopoulos

The Forgotten Wisdom of the Three Monkeys

There was so much dust, loneliness left uneven, shuffling footprints as she trudged along a room she wasn't familiar with, her index finger lingering on broken objects.

There was a tear stuck on Pierrot's eyelashes that just wouldn't drop. It blurred his white-faced-porcelain-doll's vision until he blindly ignored his surroundings and got lost in a downpour of reminiscence.

The open music box played a tuneless memory to which Elise, the pretend-ballerina, refused to dance; she turned a deaf ear to it, preferring the rhythm of asynchronous inner monologues.

The wall clock's battery was so out of joy, Robin, the small wooden bird chirping the hour, remained muted; its routine love for life locked behind a closed door.

Pierrot, Elise, and Robin were but vague shapes glimpsed out of the corner of a blurry brain, caressed by unconnected fingertips, overheard snippets like nonsensical lyrics to a dissonant melody, and unexpressed feelings so thick on the tongue, they escaped with each sigh like a faint murmur lost in the breeze of time.

There was so much fog, confusion left uneven, shuffling footprints as she trudged along a room she couldn't remember, her index finger lingering on objects she no longer loved.



The Happy Train Family Set

An Instruction Manual

1. Open the box with care and place all the pieces on a flat surface before assembly.

The sun plays hide and seek with the fields dancing alongside the tracks. A fuzzy black-and-white picture juxtaposed with a wet on dry watercolour. Sunflowers, corn, a forest, and lines of lavender sweetening the summer breeze.

2. Press and snap together the railroad tracks.

I close my eyes, ignoring the constant buzzing of conversation between the wagons, and meditate my way to a majestic oak tree where I'm free to take off my brake shoes and dash on the damp earth, free to push my wheels deep into the soft soil; musky bark, leafy dew, and mouldy mushrooms fighting the air-conditioned nothingness that is my life.

3. Assemble all four pieces of the train: locomotive, dining car, first class & economy.

The mother of all locomotives drags me back to reality, fuming at my lack of interest. She says these things because she cares. Would I rather she didn't?

The Dining Car father figure mansplains the hooking system between the wagons as whiffs of red wine float in the air.

The golden First-Class sniggers and man-spreads.

I am on the wrong track. This is not my journey.

4. Place the batteries (not provided) inside the locomotive and pour water into the steam tank.

The wheels turn so fast they seem to be as immobile as my life.

The locomotive whistles her disappointment with each breath she takes.

This is not my final destination. It cannot be.

I grab the red hammer by the window and bang it with all my frustration.

Wind swirls in as I reach for the emergency brakes. Metallic sparks screech my angst.

5. Connect and disconnect the hook of the wagons with care.

The pathetic Economy Class of a wagon that I am smashes the hook connecting me to the rest of the train. The Happy Family's scorn rises, clouding the view before they resume their journey and disappear from sight, revealing a bright blue sky as I begin mine.

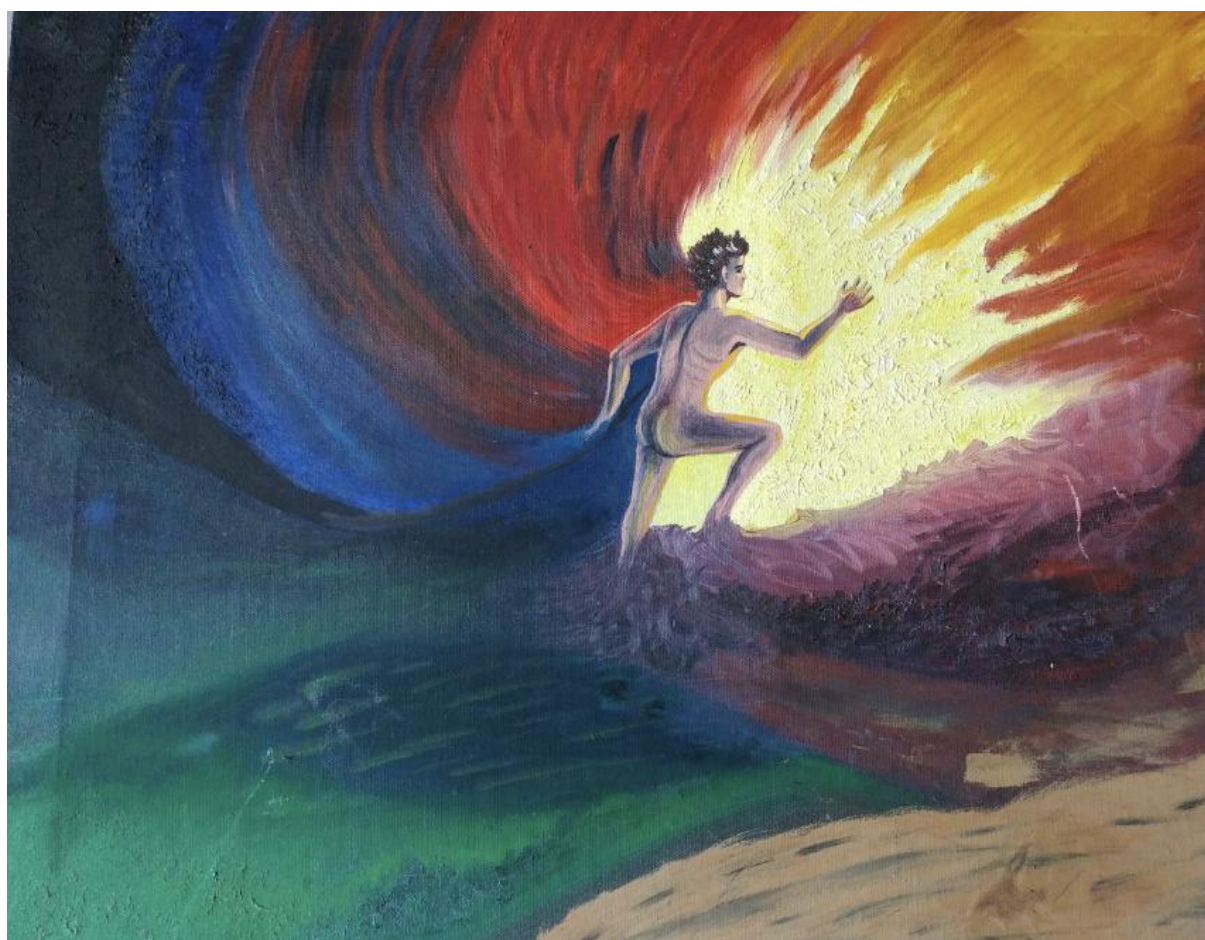


Carl Scharwath

The Light Calls

As an artist, I weave together the realms of art to create a dynamic visual narrative that transcends traditional boundaries. Each piece is a dialogue—a conversation between light, texture, and form—offering a fresh perspective on the world as I see it.

In all my work my goal is to simply offer a story that either of us could create.



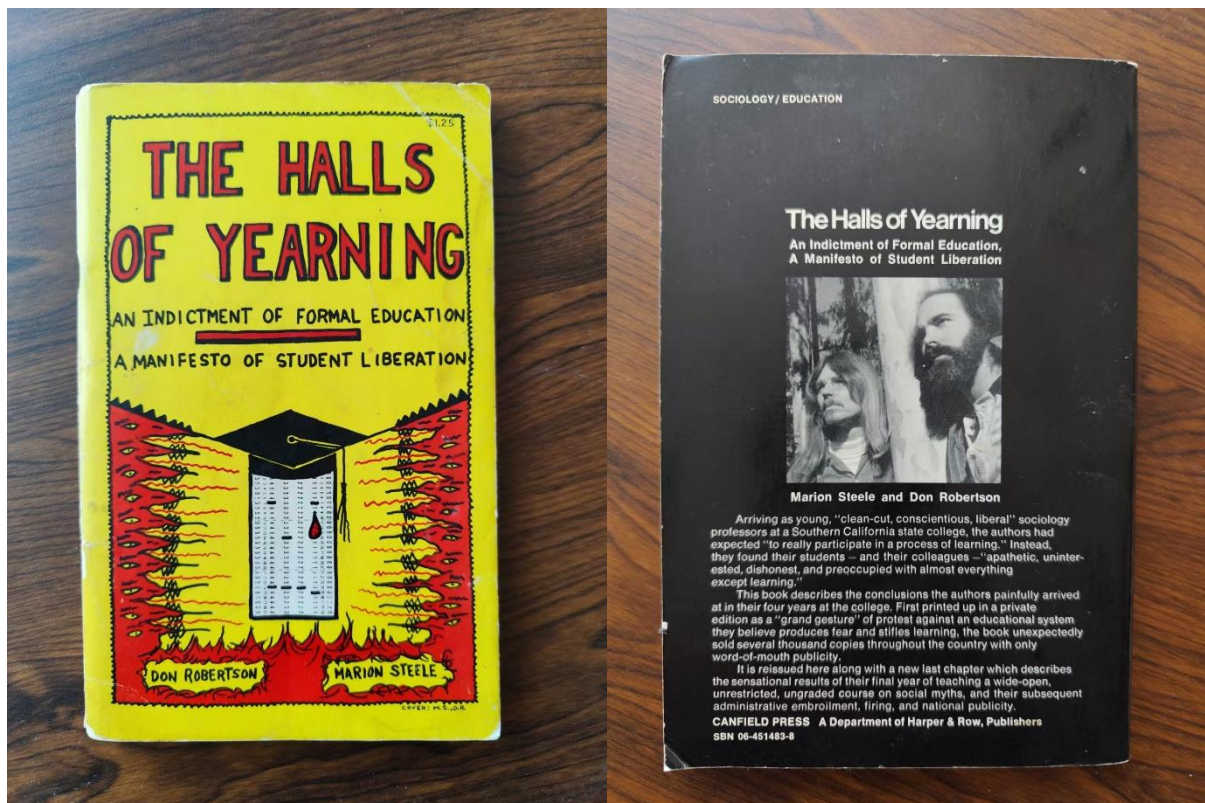
The Light Calls

Daniel Gauss

Montemurro's Revenge

Author's Note:

I found a book at a thrift store in Chicago called *The Halls of Yearning* by Don Robertson and Marion Steele. Written by two young professors in 1968, they questioned the foundations of formal education and tried to bring meaning and relevance—real learning—to their students. It was inspirational. When their university banned an art exhibit due to nude sculpture, they designed a class called “The Myth of Obscenity.” They hired naked models and engaged in a teach-in. Among other things, they showed a porno film next to a police training film (how to beat protesters) and asked which was more pornographic. They were suspended and left academia. Here is the opening of a play inspired by their attempt to destroy what is harmful about education and to recreate it as a humane endeavor. If Robertson or Steele should come across this piece, would you please drop me a line?



Characters:

Professor Ballantine

Professor Montemurro

Setting: A university lecture hall, with students seated and attentive.

Scene: *The stage is set with a lecture podium at center stage. Professor Ballantine stands at the podium, looking at a syllabus. Professor Montemurro stands slightly off to the side, appearing a bit disheveled and possibly intoxicated.*

BALLANTINE (*looking at a syllabus*): Welcome to Sociology 347, the Sociology of Religion taught by me, Professor Ballantine and my esteemed colleague Professor Montemurro. When putting together a syllabus I try to be very conscientious about title selection since I know how expensive books can be. The books on this syllabus can also be obtained from the campus library or any library and you can probably read them online for free. They are pretty famous books.

MONTEMURRO: You know, the Catholic Mass takes on a symbolic structure. The Litany of the Word is followed by the Litany of the Eucharist. This signifies the inferior position of the word to the sacraments. You get a direct spiritual experience through something non-verbal, beyond the word, through an engagement purported to be with the son of God, through bread. What you need to know is that we in academia are very Protestant. All we bring to the table is the Litany of the Word. We're Protestant, without the Reformation.

BALLANTINE: As you can see, I tried to put in a good mixture of the old theoretical writings, Durkheim and Weber, as well as newer empirical studies. My goal is to give you a nice flavor of contemporary research within a backdrop of theory. I want to give you an idea of what the field is about.

MONTEMURRO: They build an edifice of brick and slime and not stone and mortar! The syllabus, with its Carybdis the grading system, establishes your passivity. It makes the peripheral something central in your lives. And I don't care how radical a syllabus is. What gaineth one who is radical if one lieth embedded in the middle class? The syllabus does not help you one iota to acquire the insight and capacity for engagement which allows you to live

in a difficult and morally evil world with love and compassion but still a desire to keep rising and keep engaging others.

BALLANTINE: Professor Montemurro, you would not be criticizing some of our other learned and esteemed colleagues, would you?

MONTEMURRO: Here's something you need to know. Your professors are not committed to educational or social change. They are committed to their own rising within an organizational structure. This is what finally hit me in my own journey within academia. Your professors are using the rhetoric of change to rise within an organization that never changes. It is difficult for you to see this because you are doves and they are snakes. I was a dove too, who decided not to become a snake.

BALLANTINE: I must challenge my esteemed scholar and colleague. What is your source for this? Cite your references!

MONTEMURRO: We must be as innocent as doves and as clever as vipers.

BALLANTINE: There will be two major papers due and a multiple-choice mid-term exam.

MONTEMURRO: You also need to know that most professors dread reading and grading the shit you hand in. We all know you wait until the last minute and don't try to come up with truly thoughtful and creative ideas. Why the fuck should you? It's not like you're writing the Declaration of Independence. If you were motivated to write something meaningful you probably would.

BALLANTINE: Oh, that reminds me. If we detect that you are using artificial intelligence in your papers, you will receive an automatic F for that assignment and you will be reported to the Dean.

MONTEMURRO: Who the fuck cares anyway? Most of us have the attitude of "Don't make me work and I won't make you work." You are all here because your parents set high expectations for you and pushed and pressured and prodded you to do well in school. Once you finish your university studies, half of you won't read another goddamn book for as long as you live. I really don't know how many of you really give a fuck about learning or truly becoming a person showing sincerity and humanity. That's not what this university promises to do to you anyway. So we'll go through this bizarre, fucked up educational rite and you won't even notice how wrong or empty it is. You'll be proud of yourself. You'll think you've

accomplished something by getting your degree. I thought I accomplished something getting my PhD.

BALLANTINE: Your papers will be graded on the basis of your comprehension of the material. You will be graded according to a curve.

MONTEMURRO: I was once explicitly told by a department chairperson not to give everyone a grade of A because that looks fishy. That's what is meant by a curve. Grading is the real evil in education. Every justification for grading asserts that it is the necessary motivation behind learning. Bullshit. It only motivates those students of those social and economic classes that aspire to use the educational system to land their asses in a tub of butter.

BALLANTINE: Professor Montemurro, our grading system is as fair and transparent as it can be. Do the work and you will be rewarded.

MONTEMURRO: The grading system fosters competition for a false scarcity of good grades. Research shows that students who receive the best grades are those students who remind the professors of themselves. The grading system creates a mirror image of the competitive structure of our heartless society and legitimizes this structure. Grading is the whole basis behind the perverted power dynamic of academia.

BALLANTINE: I draw your attention to the university's policy on academic honesty. Plagiarism, collaboration and use of AI are severe violations of academic integrity and may result in your expulsion.

MONTEMURRO: Dishonesty pervades academia. What we purport to do and what we really do is the biggest lie. Who we admit to this school is a lie. Rhetoric about group work and a meaningful curriculum is a lie. The goals of this university are a lie. Our trust fund is a lie. Our administration is a lie. The racial composition of this school is a lie. Why this school has not led to any meaningful impact toward real and beneficial social change is a lie. I draw your attention to the school's policy on academic honesty. It's a lie!

BALLANTINE: You can see my office hours. You can make arrangements to meet me in my office at other times as well.

MONTEMURRO: Of course, it would be sacrilege for you to meet with your professor outside of office hours. Professors won't even use the same bathrooms as you. We need to keep a professional distance from you or you'll learn what frauds we are. You might ask us a

tough question we are not prepared for. What have we ever done, on a personal level, about racism? How do we feel about the fact that diversity is a joke at this school? What have we done about the prison system in America, where we breed crime so others can profit from punishing it? What have we done about the homeless we see all around us? Have we ever done anything even remotely original or creative in our lives? We don't ask ourselves the tough questions any more, most of us never did. Why do you pay so much tuition to come here? You leave exactly the same type of people. What are they really offering to you here? They are not offering to help you change or rise or develop in a humane way so you can have real impact in the world. Why did you come here?

BALLANTINE (*turning to Montemurro*): What kind of a question is that, Dr. Montemurro?

MONTEMURRO: A question loaded with our usual academic bullshit self-righteous irony Dr. Ballantine. I'm surprised you asked being a master of self-righteous bullshit academic irony yourself.

BALLANTINE (*striking a heroic, Napoleonic pose, quoting from Marlowe's Doctor Faustus*): Not marching now in fields of Trasmene, nor sporting in the dalliance of love, in courts of kings where state is overturned, nor in the pomp of proud audacious deeds intends our muse to vaunt our author's verse...

MONTEMURRO: Not in the pomp of proud audacious deeds, nor pointed out by God for unjust suffering, we are but disgruntled assistant professors at a fine university.

BALLANTINE: One of the finest Sociology departments in the country.

MONTEMURRO: Dr. Ballantine, a treat for you. A quote I found in a quaint and curious volume of forgotten 60s academic radicalism. Listen: "The current status of the social scientist is a comfortable middle-class position with role requirements stressing verbal behavior. This role, with its emphasis on discussions, writings, meetings and so on has left the arena of social change to others. The traditional, verbally oriented role, however, is no longer meeting the needs of society, if it ever did."

BALLANTINE: My God, only a fully tenured professor could have written that kind of navel-gazing self-contempt.

MONTEMURRO: A legacy of the 1960s, from a book published in 1968.

BALLANTINE: Meretricious persiflage.

MONTEMURRO: We folks in academia are so self-reflexive.

BALLANTINE: But we never move our asses.

MONTEMURRO: Shall we move our asses?

BALLANTINE: What are we waiting for?

MONTEMURRO: Then settle thy studies and begin to sound the depth of that thou wilt profess.

BALLANTINE: Welcome to Sociology 347, the Sociology of Religion.

MONTEMURRO: Where your professors don't pretend to know their asses from holes in the ground.

BALLANTINE: Fuck the syllabus. We plan on going to different churches in this city on Saturdays and Sundays. What experience are people getting in them? How fragmented is religious experience in America? What are people getting from their churches? How does this experience differ based on social and economic class and even race and ethnicity?

MONTEMURRO: What are these fucking preachers and priests saying and what kind of music are they playing? What are they trying to do, trying to give? Are they outraged? Are they bigots?

BALLANTINE: We want to discover the divisions in our country by going to its churches.

MONTEMURRO: God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints...

BALLANTINE: Martin Luther King Jr. said that the Christian Church should be a thermostat and not a thermometer. It should not reflect the values of a society, it should be guiding and developing the values of a society as the very early Church seemed to do. Can we find churches that are thermostats? Do we have churches that reflect the values of the early Christians and the sense of mission and brotherhood and justice they reflected?

MONTEMURRO: We are worried that you are so used to lying to yourself about the purposes of a formal education that you might not be able to attack religious hypocrisy either.

BALLANTINE: I once attended a church in Chicago, an affluent Presbyterian church two blocks away from one of America's worst housing projects. The church was attended by the wealthy, the power brokers and celebrities of that city. These were people that might have been able to help racially integrate that benighted city; with the proper message and pressure from their church, they might have tried to do something to effect real change. But the preacher did not want to offend them and merely advocated that they do time at soup kitchens and show tough love to their teenagers. This was his demand upon the power elite at his church, which paid him handsomely.

MONTEMURRO: Something drew you to this class. We'll start from that real, sincere interest, that desire to find something out. Fuck the syllabus. If you do any reading it will be based on what you experience in one of the houses of worship we visit. Your reading will be based on your own insights and your own desire to learn.

BALLANTINE: We played this bullshit academic game and we've read all this shit on your syllabus and it was never very satisfying to us. Jump into the action and then you see. On s'engage et puis, on voit.

MONTEMURRO: I once attended a United Methodist Church in Brooklyn the weekend after a Black man was shot by the police for no reason. It was a beautiful church, I always wanted to go there, I had no idea I would be the only White person in it that day as the neighborhood was a bit mixed.

The people of this church were outraged. The preacher allowed folks to stand up and say what they felt like saying about the shooting. One person said that White people obviously felt that Black folks were lower than dogs and could be killed in the streets. Another person stood up and said it was time for Black folks to use violence to make a statement and to fight back. All this time I'm sitting there, White as can be.

Then we came to a part of the service where newcomers were supposed to stand up and announce why they had come that day. I was the only White person there and there was no way around me standing up. So I stood up and I said, "I live in this neighborhood and have passed your beautiful church on many occasions. Today, I just wanted to come in and worship with you."

I believe the entire congregation applauded me. I'll never forget that. It inspired me to do whatever I could against racism, to take personal action to live a life among people of

differing colors and backgrounds, among other things I've done. I hope you have experiences like that. You can't get that reading Durkheim.

BALLANTINE: We won't limit our classes to what the allegedly great thinkers thought. They're dead, we're still alive. We won't foster learning based on any type of pressure. There will be no grading in this class. You can put your own grade down on our grade sheet at the end.

MONTEMURRO: Studies show that most of you will stop learning after you leave this school. We want to fight against that. We'll start with what's interesting and move forward.

BALLANTINE: So your professors are all playing the academic game of battle royale, all fighting to move up the organizational ladder or to find a lizard's niche within a rocky structure in which to grow fat. What function does the organization serve? This school has one function—to replicate social inequality. Academia is oil in the gears of a self-destructive world and not the sand in its gears we want to be. We don't want to give you a body of testable knowledge concerning religion. We don't care about true statements. We're interested in another process that Montemurro and I have experienced and we don't even know what the fuck to call it.

MONTEMURRO: So no papers, no grades. Every professor knows grading is bullshit and hates the grading process. If a professor doesn't hate grading people, they are total assholes. Grading encourages you to engage in meaningless activities for a reward. Fuck it.

BALLANTINE: There is tons of research to show that grading vitiates the learning process, yet it remains the currency of academia. This shows you the effect of academic research within academia itself. Absolutely nobody acts on it.

MONTEMURRO: We'll meet each other and share whatever experiences and insights we get. We'll challenge each other. Engage each other. We'll support each other. Perhaps none of us can get to where we ought to be, as kind, merciful, forgiving and joyous human beings, without a community of support.

We'll talk about hypocrisy and cowardice and maybe even something inspirational at times. What you learn in school is often forgotten while we are shooting for that which can never be forgotten. You get rid of grades and a curriculum and their whole system falls apart. Sounds good to me. We'll rebuild it in three days.

BALLANTINE: Anyone is welcome in this class. Grab people from outside and bring them in if you want to. Selecting some students for admission as opposed to others is total bullshit. If there is something worth learning, anyone can learn it. Real learning is not exclusionary. We're not here to help in the economic stratification of a racist society. Bring your friends.

MONTEMURRO: We'll see whether we can decide on which churches to visit through consensus. Or just go where you want to go alone or with others. We'll figure something out. But have experiences and share your experiences.

BALLANTINE: There's been a lot of talk about democracy in the classroom and this usually means the teacher allows students some control over the traditional educational experience. Bullshit. That's beneficence, not democracy. Democracy would be if the students perceived things to be wrong in the classroom and took it over, like the French students in Paris in May of 1968. Democracy in the classroom would mean the students take over and begin educating themselves, not for profit but for meaning. A political revolution would probably be easier.

Curtain.



Cynthia Yatchman

Nature

My art celebrates the unification to be found in transformational dichotomies and is frequently based on nature.



Altocumulus



Cirrocumulus



Cirrostratus



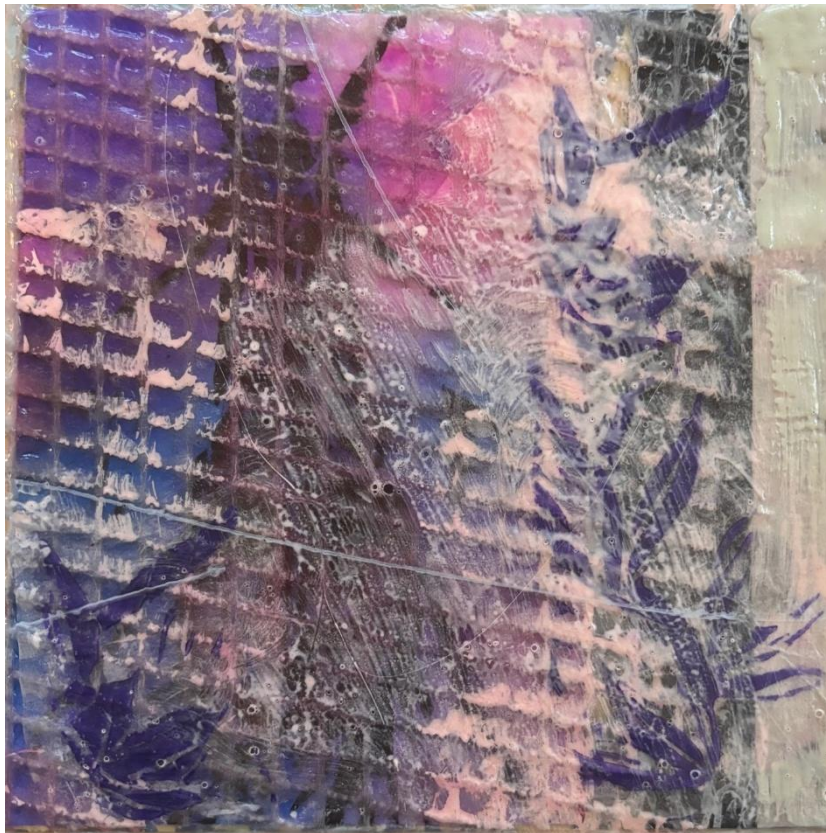
Cirrus



Cumulonimbus



Cumulus



Nimbostratus



Stratocumulus

Derrick Martin-Campbell

In the Shadow of the Elevated Freeway

In the shadow of the elevated freeway on the bucolic edge of town, Pablo and Lalo hike the creekside path, happy and destinationless with the first warm day of spring. With truck-thunder overhead and damp petals in their hair, they hang their coats from their packs, weary from a day spent unloading pallets of cement. They are accompanied on their walk by a voicemail from Pablo's wife back in Culiacán received earlier that day, her message played and replayed speakerphoned as they walked, voice raw, and tired, and joyful:

"My love," she says, "the night was long and the labor difficult, but we are here, safe and healthy, both of us. And he is beautiful, Pablo. Congratulations—you are a father."

Camped beneath a blooming dogwood where their path crosses another, the two men share their evening meal followed by a celebratory half-joint, their talk as easy as the creek's murmur beside them.

"This water is clean," Lalo is saying, "trust me on that. We could bathe in it, drink it all day. I have a sense for water, and this flows from a spring high on the mountain. A spring or the melting snow, something, but that it is mountain water I am certain, as certain as I am that I am a man of taste and refinement, and that you are today a father."

"I could baptize your son in this water," he says, "if you wish, Pablo. Cold, mountain water is best. Do you wish it? Are you listening to me?"

Smoke laughs from the corners of Pablo's mouth, Pablo loving when Lalo speaks this way, through eyes heavy-lidded, irony delicate as lace. It is the third time today Lalo has offered to baptize Pablo's son, a child hours old and two thousand miles away. Pablo's laughing turns to coughing.

"Let the coughing open your lungs" says Lalo, taking and dragging on the joint, crossing himself and then Pablo. "Let it fill every crevice."

As the sun sets, two white people approach from the cross-path, a young man and an old woman. They arrive already arguing in a language Pablo does not right away recognize. The young man stops short seeing them but the woman limps heedlessly on, her haranguing lecture of the young man pausing only when her boot strikes Lalo's pack. She squints,

comprehending them slowly; from her expression, Pablo understands that the woman is touched, and that language is not the only barrier between them.

“Come, Baba—” begs the young man, but is waved off. Still speaking, her tone softens now addressing the men reclined before her. With an aristocrat’s gentility, she offers Pablo and Lalo each a hand, fingers long and dancing in her too-big sweatshirt sleeves. White-hair leaks in tendrils from beneath her cowboy hat; beneath her skirt, her galoshes are caked with mud

“Please, Baba—”

While Pablo does shake her hand—brief, polite—Lalo, in contrast, intuits something in the moment, looks her boldly up and down, takes her small hand manfully between his own and, gazing deep into her eyes, smiles. The woman blushes and smiles back. Seeing this, Pablo smiles himself.

“Good evening,” he says to the young man, speaking English.

Embarrassed beneath a baseball cap and passing a SoBe bottle between his hands: “Hey man, I’m sorry, we’re just—my grandma—”

Whirling at her mention, the woman’s brutal scolding of her grandson briefly resumes before returning her attention once more to the two men before her, and to Lalo in particular, her guests perhaps, or the hosts of an event towards which she has traveled. “Hello, hello,” her wave a little girl’s, “Hola...”

They are Russian, Pablo decides, or Polish maybe, many such people living out this way.

Having little English, Lalo bows to kneeling at her feet with a stoned and noble flourish. The woman giggles, waving her grandson over and asking something of him, a request he at first resists, prompting a storm of scolding slaps. The woman’s cowboy hat is pushed back in the fracas and Pablo sees that, while pale and hunched, narrow-shouldered like her grandson, her eyes do glow in the golden dusk, and it is clear that she is beautiful.

“So,” says the young man, speaking at the woman’s behest, “we’re, uh, we’re headed to Mass. And my grandma—ow, fuck, I am!—my grandma wants to say that there’s gonna be food and stuff there. Free food. Like a dinner.”

He explains that the feast is soon to begin, at St. Andrew’s just ahead, the woman nodding warmly as he does. “It’s for whoever wants to go,” he says, steps back and makes to drink from the SoBe bottle before he is struck once more on the back of the head.

“Jesus!” rubbing his head, cursing in their language: “She says it’s Holy Thursday—”

“Maundy Thursday!” cries the woman, clapping hands in gratitude over her head.

“Great Lent is over!”

“Yeah, yes. Great Lent is over. She, uh, says you should come too. If you want. Come with us, she says.”

And the woman smiles, gestures down the path.

Lalo listens eagerly as Pablo translates, appears to consider the invitation before placing his hands upon his heart and, in an adoring and reverential Spanish, to the woman answers:

“He says,” translates Pablo, “that, while we would be honored to accompany her to Mass...such a beautiful woman...my friend fears he must decline, he says...because...”

And again Pablo is laughing.

“What? What is it?” asks the young man.

“He fears he must decline,” says Pablo, “as he does not wish to offend this, uh, the man who has come before him. Her sweetheart, perhaps. He does not wish to intrude.”

Lalo nods and, despite his words, takes the woman’s hand in his and, much to her delight, places there a suitor’s kiss.

“I think he means you,” Pablo says to the young man, smiling. And the young man rolls his eyes, takes a drink from the SoBe bottle, mutters in their language.

But the woman is unconcerned, submits happily to Lalo’s seduction, a reaction with which Pablo is well familiar from their time together, having witnessed it in friends, strangers, bosses and police, women and men both, even Pablo himself sometimes. He and the woman kneel conspiring in their camp, Lalo removing and displaying for her various treasures, the woman cooing her approval. The young man takes another drink, offers the bottle to Pablo as he digs in his coat for cigarettes. Parched from the joint, Pablo accepts, then chokes to more coughing on whatever burning liquid he finds inside.

“You live close?” Pablo manages, returning the bottle, and the young man nods, blows smoke back the way they’d come.

“My uncle has a place near the recycling plant.”

“I know where that is and it’s a walk. Have you much farther to go?”

“Not far,” says the young man. There is a way he holds his cigarette, all fingertips, lit end pointed down. “We do this twice a week so... not far.”

Turning at his friend’s summons, Pablo sees with some dismay that Lalo now holds open the violin case—that stupid violin—as if he and the woman had been discussing it. The woman regards Pablo as well, hands clasped in anticipation.

“She wants to know about the violin,” says Lalo. “Tell them. You must. Please. Please, my friend.”

And Pablo curses, sighing. “Christ, the violin...” he begins, then stops, holds his hand out for the bottle. The young man obliges.

“This violin belonged to a man at a camp where we stayed a few nights ago. He... died in the night, while we slept, and his body was found in the morning. But no one knew him, or could find on him any name so... we divided up his things. And my friend here took the violin.”

Honoring the dead, he crosses himself and raises the bottle before taking a drink and returning it to the young man who does likewise. Lalo and the old woman also cross themselves.

“It is... kind of a messed-up thing,” says Pablo.

“How did he die?”

“Drugs. His eyes were still open in the morning, things spread out around him. Someone said he’d maybe come down from Seattle, that the drugs are very strong there right now.”

Lalo encourages the woman to hold the instrument, triggering in her a ritual clearly familiar and long-practiced. She finds the bow and draws its slack hairs up tight with a twist of its end, intuiting a compartment in the case from which she takes an amber nub and rubs it on the bowstrings. Pinching the instrument neatly between her chin and collarbone, she plucks the three unbroken strings, adjusts tuning pegs, strokes once, twice, three times across the strings, adjusts everything a little further until all sings easily together.

“You see?” says Lalo to Pablo, his excitement growing, “I knew we were meant to take it. I knew it!”

“I’m thinking your grandmother knows how to play the violin,” says Pablo.

And the young man nods, just barely smiling himself, says that yeah, yes, she does.

“Right, Baba?” affecting his grandmother’s accent: “She learn to play in Ukraine!”

“Ukraine!” echoes the woman in a crow of joyful triumph as she tips the bow across the strings. And like a light switch flipped then, the idyl of their camp is transformed, filled suddenly and completely by the violin’s rich, arousing sound. Watching as the woman plays, Pablo sees that her long, agile fingers are no accident, dancing up the instrument’s neck, precise and arched, trembling only to wring the feeling from a note, bow held in a manner not unrelated to how her grandson holds his cigarettes.

But the music is not what Pablo expects: no slavic dance or obtuse mode but a simple, looping melody, notes straining against the edge of an aching major key, and yet it is also a melody familiar, though from where he cannot yet say. And by the combination of these things—the familiarity and foreignness—he feels his heart pried open, and even if it is just the joint, he knows already that he will cry.

Making a great O of her mouth, the woman looks into the middle distance as she plays, counting counting measures until, in an English having little to do with the few words Pablo has so far heard her speak, an English learned phonetically, right down to the keening, rural twang, she accompanies herself:

*Oh, I am a lonely cowboy and I’m off on the western trail
My trade is cinchin saddles and pullin bridle reins
But I can twist a lasso with the greatest skill and ease
Or rope and ride a bronco most anywhere I please*

A cowboy song then, Pablo realizes, nearly laughing, an honest to goodness country and western song, of the type already a novelty when it was first composed, the cynical facsimile of something much older, remembered vaguely and then recorded nearly a hundred years ago for an Anglo movie about white men in clean, ironed shirts. Pablo is returned to his childhood home hearing it, a place where his father, a collector of such records, loved and played them for his family, as Pablo’s wife loves and plays them still, on the same record player even, maintained at some expense. And the shock of it, this tender part of him discovered here beneath the freeway, far from home, it confirms his earlier premonition and fills his eyes with tears.

*Oh, I love the rolling prairie that’s far from struggle and strife
Behind a herd of longhorns, I’ll journey all my life
But if I had a stake boys, soon married I would be*

To the sweetest girl in this whole wide world just fell in love with me

Looking, Pablo sees that he is not the only one so moved: Lalo weeps openly at the woman's feet as the last light diffuses through the new green spring to fall upon them as through a stained-glass window, while her grandson gently beams, glassy-eyed. As the song concludes, its final note lingers with them there a moment longer—a magic, humming moment—then is gone, set free, never to return.

The young man's smoked cigarette falls smoldering through the dusk, extinguishing, and Pablo feels the chill of night approaching and, with it, the cold of a winter long and dreary spent here in this far, gray place. He wipes his eyes, says in English:

"That was beautiful."

"Do you know that song?" the young man asks. He drinks and passes the bottle.

"She knows lots of old songs like that. My uncles used to mail her the records, when she was little and still played, back in Kiev."

The old woman bows politely from the drama of her performance, saying, "Gracias, thank you, gracias," helps Lalo to his feet.

"She used to play all kinds of music, fancier stuff, but that's all gone now. Now, when she gets to play at all, it's just this, this same old redneck music, over and over..."

But his tone is reverent.

Pablo passes the SoBe bottle to Lalo who, wiping his eyes, raises it saying, "Truly, what a fine celebration this has been. Let us drink to friends, new and old, living and dead, to the end of Lent, and to the birth today of my good friend Pablo's first-born child, a son." Lalo drinks and hands the bottle to the woman who hands it on to her grandson, who in turn happily drinks once more.

"What did he say?"

And Pablo blushes. "He says that we should drink to friends, and to Lent, but also to the birth of my son which I have only just learned of earlier today. My wife back home has given birth to a healthy boy and, while I am happy, this one," he says, "has given me no peace since hearing about it. All day at work, all he talks of is 'your son, your son,' how proud I must be, and that I must choose him to be the child's godfather."

“It’s true,” says Lalo and, as the woman returns the violin to its case, snapping shut its clasps, Pablo feels his friend’s strong hands squeezing his shoulders behind him. “Everything this man tells you is true.”

Lalo insists the woman take the violin, a demand she refuses until, following much translation and negotiation, they agree that she will “pick it up on the way back,” and that Lalo will keep it safe until then.

“Please tell her again,” says Pablo, “thank her for her song. Her music is very, very beautiful.”

To which the woman nods, saying simply that, “Life was very beautiful.”

Later, laying out their bedrolls in the dark, Pablo’s mind lingers on thoughts of home, on his wife and the son he may soon meet there, and the music playing where they are. He watches Lalo work himself into his sleeping bag; they met three months before, at the day laborers’ clinic in the worst of winter, lines winding long through the rainy streets, every other person ill. And while Pablo appreciates his company, has come to like and even care for him, he is mindful always that Lalo is a bachelor and, whatever his thoughts falling asleep, Pablo tells himself they are beyond his imagination. Pulling his own sleeping bag up over his head, he rolls his body to spoon against his friend’s. For the warmth.

“So she was a ghost,” says Lalo. “I think it means good luck for us.”

Through the dogwood branches, a clear black sky looks down upon them, dense with stars. The freeway sound.

“We could use some more of that.”

That night, it grows very cold. By the morning the rains return.



Eve Müller

Animal Beauty

The pigs are back. She hears them. Their nocturnal murmurings. The way they root about in the meadow. On all sides of the house, she hears them. Calling to one another in their muffled way. Snuffling with their strange soft snouts. Ruffling the earth and uncovering last night's shit with their fleshy noses. Eating. Rutting. Grunting with abandon.

She always relieves herself far from the river. Far from the well where she pumps water. But not too far. If she wanders too far, she might just disappear into the black maw of night. It is like that here in *Paso del Muerto*. Just beyond the ring of village—just beyond the safety of houses—lies darkness so deep your eyes cannot trace the path of your own hand.

Her slumbering body wakes slowly. Eyes focus on the knotted wood above her. The steeply sloped roof of this house surrounded by pigs.

6am and he is already up. Washing himself in front of the porch overlooking the river. She can see him in her mind's eye. Crouched over the metal tub. Long arc of back. Chest bare. Soaping his throat and armpits. The water is cold. Their camp stove has only a small tank of gas, and they need it for frying eggs, reheating leftover beans. She shuts her eyes tight. Imagines him wince as chill water strikes skin.

She listens for him. For the sounds of his bathing there among the pigs. If she concentrates, she can hear water scooped up in his hands. Running down his neck in rivulets. She follows the water as it traces his contours: breastbone, ribs, concavity of belly and loin. He is all instinct, urge, muscle memory.

She climbs out of her sleeping bag. Stands hunched before the permanently fogged window. Ceiling so low, she cannot stand up straight. She ducks the beams, the fly paper hanging down with its bits of iridescent wing. She looks out over the dry brown meadow. Down the hill to the coiled yellow river at its foot. He is directly beneath her. The fouled window transforms him—their galvanized tub—into a soft blur. She imagines the surface of the water that reflects him. Offers up the swirling image of his familiar, animal beauty. If she looks into the tub, she will surely see his face, his eyes and lips, surrounded by an aureole of cloud.

One Saint or Another

The townspeople gathered nightly for the feasts of one saint or another. San Francisco and San Pablo. Santa Ana and Santa Catalina. All the days ran together. Miracles of bread and blood, of crutches tossed aside. Sun set over the *zocalo*. Over the tree-lined park in front of the pretty pink church. There were firecrackers and tubas. Herds of women pushed past in tight jeans and heels spiked as agave leaves. Lip-sticked girls sucked popsicles so cold and sweet the thought of them hurt the cathedral of teeth and tongue. The party was just getting started, but I was alone. The tall *gringa* in heavy boots and shapeless skirt who hovered near the edges. I'd left the apartment looking for something. Milk, perhaps. A bar of laundry soap. Escape from the tiny rooms where he and I bickered and fucked and conjugated verbs all day—*buscar*, to seek—*comer*, to eat—*tocar*, to touch—*perdir*, to lose. Everything around me was moving. Darkness and light. Sugar and smoke. The rush and blur of it. I longed to eat with my hands. Wear clothing close-fitting as a husk. Receive blessings from a saint of my own. The evening sky was littered with shrieking grackles and bright bursts of fire in the shape of crosses and sacred hearts red as meat. Jesus was nowhere in sight as embers rained down, and young men smelling of aftershave and desire cried out loud as the birds, and held cardboard boxes over their heads to catch the falling stars.



Daily Liturgy

In all the churches where I tried to pray, meanings were layered like sediment. Indigenous gods papered over with a pantheon of saints. Something always hidden beneath something else. You and I argued every afternoon. Our daily liturgy. I never knew if I uncovered the core of you. Caustic. Brittle. Or if further peeling would reveal softer, more secret strata. I stood before you like a girl in a crude childhood game. Busted open. Bare as an O'Keefe blossom. The poinsettias grew big as trees on our side of the stone wall and after we'd fought and gone through the motions of love and washed the sex off with buckets of water, we lay naked in hammocks beneath those bright burst flowers and breathed their sweetness and let the wind blow us dry. And when the wind changed direction, we could smell our own shit and everyone else's in the *barranca* that flowed just beyond the wall.

Gloria Rose-Potts

The Eubrontes Are Found Again

No one would have guessed the epitome of grace could be covered in feathers and scales. Probably because no one has ever seen them walk through ferns and shrubs, with long tails swaying over the tops of the green leaves, barely causing a stir. A rustle. Slow exhales. Mud squished between three toes, each punctuated by a long claw, like an “i” or even an exclamation point, depending on how the eye looking down is positioned. However, their chins stay. They don’t look down at their toes because they are moving forward through their world.

If my mother had an eon to guess what I was actually interested in, it still wouldn’t be enough time for her. She’d be too busy assuming she already knows what I am willing to spend my Saturday doing (hint not driving from Albany to the middle of Massachusetts, that’s for sure), and then waste all her time packing up the car for the two of us. This is what I am thinking as she blazing down the highway, with the back two windows cracked even though the AC is on.

“So I can finally smell the air,” she says.

I pull my hood of my ears and sink lower into my sweatshirt, and put my feet up on the dashboard. This is a dare. I know she hates when I do this. I even pat-pat-pat the sole of my shoe against the glove box.

Nothing.

Her eyes are still on the road. She’s still singing along to the same Lady Gaga album she always listens to. Mom’s fingers tap in tempo on the steering wheel. I can see her fingernails are chewed as short as mine are. I make two fists to hide this. I rest my head against the glass, with enough emphasis that it makes a noise. There’s nothing but land out here, and it’s the green kind. It’s all a blur of evergreens.

“I know this wasn’t your first choice for your day today,” she says. “But it’s going to be really cool, I promise.”

The yellow light ahead of us leisurely blinks to red and Mom eases on the break, slowing the car to a standstill. Lady Gaga keeps singing, and we all wait at the faded white line. I was supposed to be with my friends today, before Mom saw the Smog Report and packed me into the car with homemade tuna sandwiches. My friend's seemed relieved when I told them, because now no one had to sit in the middle seat of Stephanie's Jetta. I could practically cry when I read the text. It won't even feel like I'm missing.

A shadow glides across the pavement, and I lean forward to look through the windshield this time. There's a turkey vulture silently circling above the intersection. There's so creepy like that, with their reptilian red heads poking up from their feathers like it's a poet's black turtleneck. There's nothing on the road for this one. He stays in his circle in the sky. The light turns green, and we move forward, past the bird.

Another ten minutes, and Mom pulls into the tiniest parking lot I've ever seen. It's just a half-circle of dirt, and we're barely off the road. Mom says something about how lucky we are, and I slam the car door. We make eye contact for the first time in hours over the top of the station wagon.

"Come on, Auggie. You act like I've kidnapped you or something."

"Which you have, practically. And you didn't even let me bring my phone or wear my watch," I say.

"You'll have the rest of the summer to be inside with your friends, and text to your heart's content." Mom turns to the dinky trail, holds up one hand, and beckons me to follow. I blow a curl away from my face, and take down my hood. I try to stomp in the damp leaves as loud as I can behind her, but all they do is make a satisfied squelch under my white sneakers.

The woods on our left are thin enough that I can still see the highway, but the path is descending, moving us deeper down and away. It hardly seems like we're out hiking at all—we could have just stayed in Albany if Mom just wanted to take a walk. There are two robins picking through the brush at the trailhead. They flap their wings as we pass but only fly to low branches. Their cute little heads tilt from one side to the other as we walk by in our line of two. I refuse to share this observation. Instead, I tell Mom it's too buggy.

"It's supposed to be buggy." Mom says. Her legs are strong from years of surveying and proper hiking before that, with maps of old scrapes and scars. From her younger years, she has said. Because now she knows better, and always wears long pants—today, an exception, apparently. The muscles of her calves create an elegant ridge amidst the scars.

“I just can’t believe how clear it is! It’s just like a I remember,” Mom says. In the break in the canopy, there’s an Emission Tower blinking red above the tree line. “Well, almost.”

The hike does not take nearly as long as the drive. Like I said, we did not need to come all this way. We are already approaching the end of it—a large open space that almost looks like a parking lot, but the asphalt is wrong. It’s brown. There is still the highway to the left, we’ve barely gone anywhere, but there is also a river or something on our other side. The tree line dips into a giant U, and I can see the water crawling away from us. Mom stands in front of the sign, directly in the middle, so her crown of curls blocks most of it.

“This is why we came,” she says.

Mom steps aside. The sign has faded photographs of a clawed footprint. There’s an equally faded illustration of dinosaurs walking on two legs through the tall grass, looking back over their shoulders to the edge of the acrylic board.

“They were digging the highway in the 1930’s,” Mom says, and then she’s rambling about how they walked through here... this very spot! Millions of years ago! And found them digging route 5! Just amazing!

I lean in close to make out the tiny script. “Why are they called ‘eubrontes’? Is that the dinosaur?”

“So, if you look here,” she says while pointing at the text above the illustration, always trying to lead me rather than just answering the question. “The dinosaurs are actually ‘theropods’, and this type of fossil is called—”

“Eubrontes. Got it. Thanks.”

My Mom frowns slightly, and there’s a pang in my stomach.

“Let’s find some then...”

We walk with our heads tilted down and search for the footprints. The sandstone is bumpy but smooth at the same time, with ripples and tiny dimples that could hold a cool drop of a water. A wood thrush sings, like it’s coming from inside a mirror, the sound waves billowing across the surface. Mom points out how long it has been since she’s heard a thrush, but I don’t respond. She says it so quietly, almost under her breath, so I don’t think it was actually said for me.

Then, I find one. A footprint with three Jurassic toes, and I can even see where their long talons dug into what must have been mud. Suddenly, it’s like we’re intruding. Like

something is going to burst through the leaves and tell us we shouldn't be here. This is their spot.

"Mom!" My voice betraying my excitement.

We lean over, wisps of auburn hair caressing, and examine together. The footprint has a pleasantly round heel indent. It's clear where it's long talon pushed into the mud; the nails obvious. So old, it's like they shouldn't be here.

This thought. This thought makes my teeth feel strange. Like they are so soft and temporary. There's a buzzing in my molars; a rush of blood to my gums. I don't like it, and swallow three times to get rid of it, shaking my head. Mom furrows her brows but, mercifully, says nothing. I don't want to explain this to her, or maybe I just don't want to say it out loud. I swallow again.

The wood thrush is still singing, unaware of us marveling at the prints in sandstone. I put one foot on top of the dinosaur track, and then stretch to the next one and the next one, with my tongue against my back molar. Mom sits down to watch me. The wind picks up, and we can hear it moving across the canopy. The leaves rustle like a chorus singing in the round; each tree catching the breeze one after another. From the corner of my eye, I see something fly from one branch to another, but it's too fast for me to name it.

"Did you come here as a kid?" I ask.

"No, I was probably in my early 20's. I was trying to walk all the most interesting trails."

"Did you?"

"Almost."

I notice the slightest haze hanging over the river. Mom must see it too.

"I know you think I don't care about what you want. And maybe sometimes that's true, but I just can't stand the idea the world I grew up in isn't going to be the same one you will."

I stop moving and hover directly over one of the footprints. This one is harder to see. The sandstone is extra bumpy, so maybe the dirt the theropod walked through millions of years ago was extra muddy. But really, there's no way to know. I can't look at Mom, so I can't ask. I understand what she's saying, but I don't know what to say. To me, everything seems okay.

“The pine trees smell good,” I say, finally.

“They do.”

Another gust rolls through the trees. Another bird sings. Mom leans back on her hands, and looks up to the sky. Mom has a heart-shaped face and, with the sun coming from directly above us, I can see the dusting of freckles across her nose, which somehow compliment the mole on the hinge of her jaw. She’s so beautiful that it fills me with a hot shame. My stomach is tight. I go back to staring at the toes of the theropods.

“Can we go?”

“Of course, sweetheart. Whenever you’re ready.”

I walk away without stepping on the last footprint. I leave it as it is.

In the car on the drive home, Mom lets me pick the music. Even though she doesn’t know the words, I still can hear her humming along. Still tapping her fingers along the steering wheel. I watch our morning route flash by in reverse, but this time I keep my hood down and watch through the front windshield.

The light changes, yellow to red.

“Look,” Mom says. And there’s the same turkey vulture from this morning. This time, he’s on the side of the road. His bald head bobbing, wing spread slightly for balance, as he hops towards a flattened squirrel.

“It’s his lucky day.” She smiles, watching the colossal bird.

He leans his head back to gulp down his meal. The car is quiet as it drives by, and he barely looks up. He stays exactly as he is and pulls apart the small gray mass. I ideally wonder where he will go when the smog rolls in. Away, certainly. He’ll go away from here.



JP Relph

Selfheal

I find it behind the shed, where dad raked leaves into a rotting pile seeping something hot and funky, like dark ponds in summer. Somehow, it drew me here, whispered its truth to me like a secret between sisters. I reach in, down where the layers have smushed and tiny white mushrooms erupt like pimples. It's slimy, getting hotter as I push deeper. Then something cold, marble smooth, yet my fingers press in. I drag it from the mouldy tomb.

I sit the clay ball in my room's shadiest corner. It's the size of a curled-up cat. By bedtime, my fingertip dents have vanished: it's silky dark, shiny like a conker. A wavery image of me on the surface. It doesn't smell of pond-mud or unmade pots, just my soap-pink skin. I stroke it gently, like Gem's cheek when she was a baby. Gently so as not to wake her, just feel the realness of her. The clay is warming up.

I watch it grow, change shape, as if an invisible potter is at work. I move it to the back of the wardrobe before it's too heavy, so it's hidden. So it's mine. I get brown swipes on my shirt, like I was grabbed by a toddler's chocolate-smeared fingers. The clay stretches and splits and reshapes behind winter coats. At night it tears and shifts with sounds like pain. I curl my pillow over my ears.

I'm waking from a bad dream when I see it by my bed. I can still feel Gem's hand in mine, sticky with ice-cream, before it was yanked away. My palm burns like I've skinned it climbing walls. The clay girl—that's what it is now - shuffles closer, sits on the edge of the bed. Conker-brown has faded to summer tan. She has ribbony coils of hair. The unformed face shrugs under my fingers: a nose plumps out, a mouth opens, breathes soft. Colour flashes across the skin, through the hair. Claygirl's eyes flood violet-blue, like the flowers Nanna calls selfheal. Like mine.

I dress Claygirl in my old stuff, castoffs that should have been Gem's. She's awkward at first, mimicking my movements and facial expressions. Soon she's identical to me. When I find a raging pimple on my forehead, her skin rolls and reddens until she has one. She matches bruises, scratches. Perfects my laugh, my stubbed-toe yelp, my deep sighs. She struggles with the moments I lose myself in memories of Gem—her forehead creases wrong, her eyes are too bright.

I stay in bed and Claygirl goes to school. Her voice is faultless: a little sad and flat. Her smile is accurately contrived. My parents don't notice. Nobody notices. I'm free to slip away to the park, the river. The derelict house with the wild roses, enticing with a sweet stench. I'm retracing terrible steps, my feet sliding into ghostly footprints. The dark pond once hidden beneath thorny leaf-fall and creamy petals is filled in now. Grassed over. My palm burns.

I start changing colour, shape. Tearing and shifting with sounds like pain. I struggle to plait Claygirl's hair; my skinny arms like red-brown branches. My skin is always cold. All my ends are rounding. I warp inside Claygirl's hug; she leaves dents in my ribs, finger dimples on my neck. I smooth them out in the mirror, watch my hair flatten and fade. Beside me, Claygirl's eyes are spring blue, while mine are rinsing away.

I crab to the shed on the nubs of ankles and wrists, past a sun-bleached Wendy house ticking with torn windmill spinners. Claygirl's voice drifts from the house with breakfast stink. She might be laughing—she didn't learn that from me. Behind the shed, I writhe into the shrinking leaf pile. As my nose retreats into my face, it fills with dark pond. I retreat too, shrinking into a ball in wet shadow full of slippery cups and beetles.

Smaller than a curled-up cat.

Smaller than a baby's milk-sweet head.

Before my sight seeps away, I see a green stem with bristly leaves and tiny violet-blue flowers. Like my eyes once. Like my sister's.

I shrink smaller, feel a sticky hand on my cheek, stroking gently.



Jacqueline Goyette

The Sounds of Florence

My father says Florence sounds like the wheels of suitcases rumbling across cobblestones up and down Corso Cavour. I hear the city in other places too. The constant chatter on the walk from the train station to my father's apartment, the way the rain falls in fat droplets, hits umbrellas, piazzas, terracotta brick. The tap-tap of shoes on sidewalks, an engine vroom, the doors on the bus that swing open, squeak closed. In restaurants it's the clatter of forks on ceramic plates, mouthfuls of crispy fried artichoke, hot and salty. Sweet peppers stewed and eaten in quiet reverence, sauce sopped up with crusty bread. It is voices, languages—ones we recognize, others we don't. The way the American accent comes to me unexpected after years of this country. My ears perk up in recognition. Sometimes it's just us, sitting in a church cloister, whispering about the grisaille frescoes, the life of John the Baptist. Talking in family code about our shared stories. Recognizing, as we walk by San Marco, that our first time there was with my mother twenty years ago. How life has changed. Florence is an echo of herself: hello, *ciao*, *grazie*! An endless memory builder, every day new. Shutters closed, apartments too, that door that rattles and creaks, that you have to push extra hard. A pulling it shut. And then: "I love you, I'll miss you. I hate to see you go." Now the luggage is yours. The cobblestones too. Because sometimes Florence is goodbye.



Jahnavi Gogoi

Confession

Sunita madam often looked like she had stepped out of a Raja Ravi Varma painting. Somedays, she would drape a pure silk saree with a paisley motif, her hair in a neat bun. A string of pearls graced her swan-like neck. One of the teachers told me she was divorced. “It is a punishment posting,” one of the office clerks remarked. I bristled at the implications that a transfer to my home state was looked down upon by the babus sitting in the capital. The principal fanned the fire. “Sunita ji stormed out in anger today. I could not give her permission to attend a refresher’s course in Jaipur. Perhaps she had set up a rendezvous with someone.” I coughed loudly at this unwanted piece of information. As days passed, my discomfort grew. Mitali madam, the drama teacher, told us how the gardener had seen Sunita madam’s clothes hanging from the clothesline in so and so’s backyard, five years ago. The gentleman had been transferred elsewhere since then. One day, I heard the woman at the center of the storm, complimenting the canteen cook on her chicken curry. As far as I knew she was a strict vegetarian. Later, she turned to me and whispered “*Woh aaye the na*, he relished it!” I gulped a couple of times to stop the inevitable curiosity regarding the “*Woh*” in question. Then pretended I had to take an extra class. A few months later, Sunita ji came to school glowing. She had been away on a trip to Shillong. She showed me a few photographs. I saw a couple of gentlemen and in fear that she would finally point out her “*Woh*”, I fled to the library. Soon, I was able to secure a transfer to my city. The teachers spoke kindly at my farewell. Later, Sunita madam came up to me and whispered, “You must have heard certain things about me.” She looked like she was assessing how much I knew. Putting on a deadpan expression, I lied that nobody had told me anything. “Something important?” I asked. Her brown eyes had a smile which did not reach her lips but holding both my bony hands she said mischievously, “*Woh aaye the.*”

Note:

Woh aaye the: Hindi for “he/she came or visited.”
Woh can be used to refer to a variety of things.

Raja Ravi Varma: Acclaimed Indian artist who mostly painted women.



Jasmina Kuenzli

Butterflies

Butterfly migration patterns peppered the pages of my childhood, one standardized test to another. A black and white image, taking up half the page, of the mariposa, its proboscis extended, its wings out to catch the sun.

I find butterflies along the edges of my life. Catch them in the golden moments, like when the boy with the beautiful name told me about his home, and the sun was so bright, it nearly blinded me. The butterfly traced the edge of my arm, and then his. We looked at each other, and between us, the mariposa spread its wings. The Spanish and English curled together on a gust of wind, and was swept away just as quickly.

Today, death turns the sunny day into a snowstorm. Tiny little bodies, beating iridescent wings, smack into my windshield on the drive home. I feel them in the slight air resistance, and the windshield that sometimes is just pinholes, just the spaces in between. I apologize silently, a prayer for their tiny insect souls. *I'm sorry, I say. I just want to go home.*

In Ray Bradbury's *A Sound of Thunder*, the flap of a butterfly's wings spells doom and destruction. Forbidden to step off the path, the main character accidentally crushes a butterfly in the imprint of his boot. And the world ends. When he goes back, the guide turns his hunting rifle on him. A sound of thunder. Punishment for an alternate universe, a timeline reset.

I really want you to be here. And where before my iterations on the butterflies were a burst of joy, like the two girls who held hands and smiled at me on my drive home, or the beautiful boy from so many years ago, who still holds me suspended in amber, timeless—

Now—I see everything through a film of tears. As transparent as a butterfly's wings, set to light. Distorting rebirth into nightmare.

Like the butterflies on the top of the hill overlooking home. How they flew right in front of my face, and I tried to catch them, but I couldn't. I was crying too hard. I couldn't see.

They flew next to a family. A mom and her small children. They were laughing. One toddler reached out, squealing with delight. It landed on his arm. And then they saw me.

And I kept thinking, *you have no idea of the horror that lives just down the street. The butterfly flapped its wings. A sound of thunder.* I couldn't breathe.

You aren't here anymore.

Like the long car drives, and the coffee runs and grocery store trips, and the feel of your hand against my forehead when I'm sick. You're gone. Dissolved into the wind. A squish of a tiny, iridescent body on a windshield.

And I know that I'm not a child. I have grown up and put away childish things. I only believe in magic and time travel in the abstract, fantastical sense. I only let my imagination run wild in the place and time of my choosing, and never too far. I never let myself hope.

But in my head, I am a little girl, watching a chrysalis transform for the first time. Crying at the sight of a beautiful creature squashed on a windshield. And wishing for you, just one more time, to hold me. To help me think of butterflies, so that I can finally get some sleep. So I can finally get out of the nightmares.

But that alternate universe got crushed beneath a boot heel six months ago. The world ended, before I could see what happens next.

I just want to retrace my steps back to you.

But there's no such thing as time travel.

And the wings drift with the air currents.

Bearing me, endlessly forward.

When the chrysalis bursts forth again, and the seasons change, I'll see more butterflies. And I'll count them for you.

Because I can't help it, I'll try to make some of my own magic. I'll tell you a story like you're standing right next to me.

I'll wish for a time machine.

Or just for you to listen.



Jennifer Worrell

Rainy Days and Mondays Are Why I Built This Suspended Animation Pod

Dear Terry,

I was talkin' to myself the other day. Feelin' old, you know? And I said to myself, *Karen, it's every Monday with this. And every day it rains, too*—ever notice that, Terry? It's true. Fifty-two Mondays a year, another 28 on average that it rains. That's a lot of time to have the blues. Approximately 21.92 % of one's life, going by current expectancy rates.

You know what else I noticed? I always wind up here with you. Not saying it's a coincidence or anything... I mean, it's nice to know you love me, but it seems that's the only thing I know how to do: Feel another frown coming on; run to Terry. Feel like I don't belong; run to Terry. As soon as Sunday goes to bed or a single raindrop falls, I'm back in your arms. Over and over. It's an unhealthy pattern.

By the time you get this letter, I'll be hovering in technologically structured hibernation. I guess you could consider this the midpoint between “goodbye” and “I love you” since I chose temporary ametabolic function over you, so I hope you understand.

I got this idea standing in line at the airport. I was seconds away from buying a one-way ticket to Arica, Chile and their 0.76 mm annual rainfall, when I realized that jetting off to the driest place on Earth would only decrease the magnitude of my problem by 7.67 %.

So I built a suspended animation pod instead.

It's got a groovy little cot, an incense diffuser... I can even pipe in some of those rockin' drum solos I love. I just cozy in by 2300 hours on Sundays—or at the slightest hint of a storm—press a few buttons, and *voilà*: my body's temperature and autonomic functions are placed into biological torpescence.

I'll miss out on 1.19 % of the rest of my life, but isn't that better than walking around like some lonely clown, waiting for you to come home from the clubs?

I'm sure you're thinking this sounds impulsive. Which is why in my spare time I built a matter stream converter. Keep an eye out for a rather large crate, scheduled to arrive late this afternoon.

See, there's only so much time for scientific research and experimentation when you work with a taskmaster like Richard. It was easy enough to program automated release of the hatch and launch of my incremental re-animation cycle, but I haven't nailed the climate detection sensors. When exactly does a rainy-day end—at the last measurable drop, or at the dissipation of clouds? What distinguishes drizzle from morning dew?

These felt like philosophical questions to me, therefore the system's still a little glitchy. Do you mind poppin' in tomorrow—and every subsequent Tuesday—around zero-ten hours 'til I work out the kinks? And again whenever the climatological zone of Downey, California, re-stabilizes to its standard post-pluvial conditions? Five minutes to kick-start my natural bio-rhythms, you're in, you're out. Funny, but transmogrification seems like the only thing to do.

Oh Terry, I won't manage a day without you. Or 25.25 hours, more precisely, depending on the weather.

Karen



Johannah Simon

The Alliance

Game recognizes game.

At our first project call, you knowingly gave me the silent nod and I volleyed back with a wink, which meant “one-of-us.” So began our confederation. We bonded and became the kind of old-school Machiavellian Keys-to-Power, Art of War cabal that could make kings, win wars, destabilize regions, and of course, be deployed to create a 2-hour facilitated empathy session for software engineers. We scheduled daily two-hour meetings, so we’d have plenty of time to talk 80s music revival tours and debate the relevance of John Hughes movies in a post-pandemic world.

We (thought we) were that good.

We were (actually) delusional, like those young Salem women, accused of witchcraft, who experienced the shared hallucination that birds could talk because they suffered from hysteria caused by ergot, which I learned last summer at a local wax museum, was a food poisoning caused by ingesting a rye fungus. We spent weeks riding the high of a shared fantasy about a plum project, which in reality, was a prune. An irrelevant assignment offered to the two oldest analysts in the office.

It’s embarrassing to be put to pasture at 50.

Over the course of 6 weeks, we spun straw into gold. Our deliverable, a training program aimed at code-crunching Gen Z over-achievers from Ivy League schools, who evidently graduated pre-loaded with all the knowledge they’ll ever need to know about leadership. Which is a heap of bullshit because these supposedly brilliant, mechanical minds lacked basic communication skills. Geniuses, who lorded over their keyboards, but lacked the swagger to ask someone out on a date. Or asked too often and in the worst ways. Which evidently necessitated this “leadership” program that was more about not touching the asses of your co-workers, and less about demonstrating empathy.

Alliances dissolve when they cease to serve a purpose.

Looking back, I’m not sure if throwing you under the bus made me the strong one or the weak one. I’m the one that survived. The one who, a week earlier, casually mentioned to

my manager that we no longer needed a project team. The design was a large lift, but facilitating the training only required a single resource. One person. Me. When I was telling you to watch Game of Thrones and you pretended to listen but were playing Candy Crush on your phone—you should've paid more attention.



Josie Turner

Wheel of Fortune

Of course they were fools. It was their season for foolishness: twenty-five, walking the London high-wire, pretending to be adults. They sneaked drinks in bars until they felt attractive, and occasionally men would agree. More often they sat together under a blanket on Theresa's couch, watching *The X-Files* in darkness.

"I've been studying," she said. "I think I've got the knack now."

"Well show me," replied Zoe. She turned to look at her friend's profile, bathed in ice-blue light from the TV screen.

"I can't just snap my fingers," protested Theresa, snapping her fingers. "I need to set up, get in the mood. Feel inspired."

"Then when?"

"Friday," said Theresa. She flicked her cigarette ash into a plant pot. "Come round after work."

"I hate my job," cried Zoe, dropping her bag onto the hall floor and shrugging off her coat. "I hate working. The thought of doing this for the next four decades... kill me now. Trez?" She could hear her friend moving around the living room, squeaking chair legs over the linoleum. "Or give me a million quid instead. I've brought wine. Are we eating?"

"Come through," called Theresa.

"Ok. Oh Jesus—no way!"

Zoe peered through the doorway, hand clamped over her mouth. Theresa had pushed all her meagre furniture against the walls, apart from a small foldaway table she'd covered with a paisley cloth. She sat on a hard chair, and indicated an IKEA stool.

"Sit."

"Are you kidding? I'm starving. What do you look like?"

Zoe spluttered with laughter. Theresa had wound a floral scarf around her head. She seemed to be wearing all her jewellery at once. She exhaled cigarette smoke from one side of her mouth in a narrow silver plume rising to the darkened ceiling. One lamp was lit and covered with a square of purple chiffon.

“You didn’t say we were doing fancy dress.”

“Sit.”

“Alright, Mystic Meg.” Zoe plunked onto the stool and reached for the deck of cards stacked face-down on the paisley cloth. “Pick a card, any card,” she muttered.

“Stop!” shouted Theresa, striking her hand away.

“What the—?”

“You don’t touch them.”

Wordlessly, keeping her gaze on Zoe, Theresa lifted the deck and began to shuffle. Flashes of colour appeared as the cards slid and wriggled over one another. They seemed to gain momentum. Theresa stopped shuffling, and said she was ready.

“What’s your question?”

“My question? I don’t have one.”

“Yes you do.”

“Ok,” frowned Zoe. She was hungry and irritated. She would never have wanted a reading if she’d known it would involve props and costumes. She hated all that stuff. Adult life already felt like a bad play in a provincial theatre, with terrible lines and no-one watching. “Do I choose one, or what?”

“I’ve told you not to touch the cards. You’re the querant. Ask a question.”

“Fuckssake! Alright. When can I give up work?”

Theresa drew one card from the bottom of the pack, and another from the top. She laid them side by side, turned them over, then stared at them in silence.

“Well?”

“Seven of Pentacles. Wheel of Fortune in Reverse.”

“And that means what?”

“You won’t be giving up work.”

“Oh great, thanks. Glad I dropped by. How about marriage?”

Theresa shuffled the deck again, maintaining her unnerving focus on Zoe’s face.

Zoe looked away, into the dingy corners of the rented room. She wanted to meet someone who would love and rescue her, someone willing to supply the happiness she lacked. He would have to see past her cheap clothes and bitten nails, her honking laugh and junk food habit. He’d have to be virtually blind.

“Two of Cups in Reverse. Wheel of Fortune in Reverse.”

“Again?”

“Yep.”

“What does it mean, anyway?”

“Self-explanatory.” Theresa pointed at the card, and Zoe noticed she’d painted her stubby fingernails red. The Wheel of Fortune depicted a notched golden convolution surrounded by weird figures holding swords and scrolls. “Bad luck.”

“And the Two of Cups?”

“Partnership.” The corner of Theresa’s lip curled.

“Ok, so you’re fixing the cards,” said Zoe, rising from the wonky stool and looking around the staged room in disgust. “You don’t have to be such a twat about it.”

“How would I fix them? You watched me shuffle.”

Zoe reached forward and dashed all the cards to the floor. Theresa rose from her chair and shrieked. Cards flew into every crevice of the room: under the couch and behind the TV and out into the hallway. A card flew against Zoe’s feet and flipped over. She bent down to lift it. Wheel of Fortune, reversed. She tore it in half.

“Remember your witchy phase?” asks Zoe, proffering the wine.

“No more for me thanks—we’re collecting Isobel soon.”

“Go on!”

Theresa watches wine slosh over the rim of her glass. She glances at her watch, telling herself they can escape at twenty-past.

“Rich?” yells Zoe. “Another bottle, yeah?”

Theresa winces at her husband as he stands at the bar. He shrugs in reply. They’re both afraid they’ll be stuck with Zoe if she asks for a lift, or even, conceivably, somewhere to stay.

“We’ve really got to be going—”

“No, actually, I want to tell Rich about your fortune-telling past. Rich! Did you know Trez reads Tarot cards?”

“Many talents,” smiles Rich, putting a single small drink in front of Zoe and lifting his jacket from the back of a chair. “Shall we...?” he mouths to Theresa.

“Not that she really had magical powers,” snorts Zoe. “She cheated.”

“The power of suggestion. That’s all Tarot is,” says Theresa, purse-lipped, standing and letting Rich help her into her coat. “Nice bumping into you, Zoe.”

“And what exactly did you suggest, my dear old friend?” mutters Zoe. “And why did I believe you?”

Two of cups, she thinks, staring at the brimming glasses the couple leave behind.

She sweeps them both to the floor, where they shatter.



Juliet Waller

The Leak

I went to bed angry, and I know, I know they say never to do that. In general, I ignore that kind of thing because people give terrible advice all the time but this time, maybe I should have listened. Now, I can't say that I caused what happened next but one minute I was asleep in a tight ball of anger and the next minute there was a giant crash outside my bedroom door. Did I create a force so strong an explosion happened in my living room? I don't know but it is how I met my upstairs neighbor.

I ran out to see what had caused the noise. Our building is on a busy street in the middle of the city so it's never completely dark inside, no matter what the time. In this dim light, I saw that two hairy legs, plaid boxer shorts, and a belly button dangled from my ceiling. Chunks of plaster lay in a shallow puddle on the floor below this man.

I stood there in my nightshirt. I could not talk. I could not move.

A voice from the ceiling said, "Hello?"

I still could not move but I managed to say, "OH. MY. GOD. ohmygodohmygodohmygod."

"There was a leak, a flood in my apartment," he said.

I continued with my only thought. "Ohmygod, ohmygod."

"The floor just gave way," he said.

I heard his words, but nothing made sense. "Ohmygod!!"

"Um, could you call someone?"

An action! A job! I could do this. I ran into the bedroom for my phone. The 911 operator took several rings too many to answer. Finally, I heard a woman's voice. "911, what is your emergency?"

"A man fell through my roof! I mean, half a man! I mean." I didn't know how to finish.

She interrupted my nonsense. "Do you need fire or an ambulance?"

“Probably fire. And not the roof, my ceiling, from my apartment,” I said. Specificity seemed important.

The 911 operator had more questions for me. “Is he alert?”

He was. We’d spoken.

She asked me more questions, told me more things. They jumbled up in my brain, but the gist was to be prepared to let the firefighters in, they were on their way. Before we hung up, she said, “It’s a full moon so it’s a busy night. They’ll be there as fast as they can.” I wondered how many more people dangled from ceilings, waiting to be rescued.

In the living room, the man moaned. I decided not to tell him about the full moon and the delayed arrival of hope. I kept the lights off, no need to see this situation more clearly.

“Hi! I’m back. Firefighters are on their way.” I tried to sound cheery.

“Great. Ok,” he said. I couldn’t tell what kept him from falling through. I didn’t want to ask. All possible answers seemed grim.

“What were you doing up in the middle of the night?” I figured I should keep talking to him until the firefighters got there.

“I heard something. Not water, something outside woke me and then I heard the water.” He stopped talking and took some deep breaths.

“Have you ever fallen through a ceiling before?” I wish I hadn’t said that as soon as it left my mouth, but I heard him laugh a little.

“No. Have you?”

“Not yet. Bucket list,” I said. “Goals.” I wanted to bring him something to drink. I wanted to run his scrapes under water and give him Band-Aids. I wanted to say, stay there as long as you like, I really don’t mind.

“What if I put my bookcase under your feet?” I thought it would take the pressure off whatever kept him in place.

“Yes, if it’ll reach.”

“Yeah, I think so.” I tossed the books off the shelves then dragged the bookcase over until it was under his feet. They just reached the top.

“That’s better,” he said. “Thanks.”

“No problem,” I said.

“I mean, not exactly NO problem,” he said, and we both laughed.

Standing next to him now, I realized that water still came down from his apartment into mine. I got a bunch of towels and some plastic containers and put them under the hole, under the man.

“What’s your name?” I said up toward the man’s face which I could not see as it was still in his apartment.

“Bill,” he said. His voice sounded squeezed. “What’s yours?”

“Olivia.”

“That was my mother’s name.”

“That’s so cool!” It came out with about three exclamation points. I felt very happy about this. Too happy for a small coincidence. Everything felt magnified.

My neighbor continued. “Her name was Olive, but she preferred Olivia.”

Before I could tell him that I always wanted to be Olive instead of Olivia, the ceiling gave another bang. We both screamed. I held my breath to see if any more of Bill would fall into my apartment. He seemed to be holding steady.

Bill adjusted his feet on the bookcase. His knees bent a little more.

“You ok?” I asked.

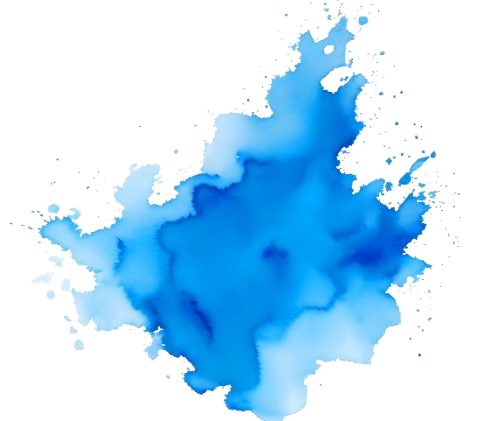
“I’m actually,” he said and stopped. I waited. “I’m actually in a bit more pain now. Something is poking into my back. I’m sorry if blood is dripping into your apartment.”

I moved my hand to his right ankle and squeezed. I didn’t think about it. Both his legs shook, and I reached up and put my other hand on his left ankle.

“Thanks.” His voice was more ragged now. “Can you just talk to me? Like tell me a story or something?”

“Sure.” Now I felt like crying. My emotions could not regulate. “Anything in particular?”

I still held onto his legs. They shook but not as much as before. He adjusted them slightly and I felt his body tense. “How about whatever you were dreaming when this happened.”



I thought about it. “I don’t remember,” I said. “I know I went to bed angry. I’m sorry if I made this happen somehow because of my angry sleep energy.”

He laughed a little. “You have some powerful anger. What happened?”

“It’s stupid. This is my first Passover after my divorce and I knew I’d do first seder with my family, but I don’t know, I thought I would still go to second seder at his childhood friends’ house, like usual. When I found out my ex didn’t want me there, I yelled, I cried. I went to bed angry. Something magical always happened at that second seder and the friend’s place seemed like neutral ground.”

“A Swiss Seder,” Bill said.

“Oh, hey, look at you stuck in a ceiling and making a joke!” I gave his ankles a little squeeze. I didn’t hear the sirens yet.

“Tell me about that second seder,” he said.

I kept a hold of his legs. Water dripped onto me as well, but I didn’t care. I barely noticed it. “During the meal part one year, when all the kids were young, they found the drawer with all the yarmulkes from bar and bat mitzvahs and weddings. The kids started to bring yarmulkes to all the grownups. Everyone took one, no pause in eating or talking, just thank kid, put on head. Soon, we all had five or six piled up. We became a table full of adults balancing yarmulke towers on our heads, as if this is what we always did. I don’t know, it just felt magical.” I paused in my story. The water dripped into the plastic containers. I heard a siren in the distance. “Bill! They’re coming! The fire department!”

Bill did not answer.

“Bill?” I thought I heard him make a little sound, a tiny hum. But maybe I imagined it because I wanted it to be true.

The sirens got super loud then went silent. I buzzed the firefighters in, and my apartment filled with noise. They yelled instructions as their walkie talkies coughed out sounds. In the light of their big flashlights, I saw the mix of water and blood that ran down Bill’s legs, pink rivers on a topographical map. A fireman with a bushy mustache asked me to wait in my bedroom as they started to set up ladders and ready tools.

In my room, I sat on my bed and put my hands over my ears to block out the noise of several humans working to save one human. I did not feel big enough to handle something of that magnitude. I took deep breaths. The firefighters continued to work. The EMTs

arrived. I felt so relieved that my apartment had filled with people who knew about wood and bones and gravity, who knew how to break the wood and keep the bones intact. The noise in the living room suddenly rose up and then got quiet. I rushed out to see what had happened. Bill lay on a stretcher surrounded by EMTs. I started to cry when I saw that he had an oxygen mask on. Oxygen meant breathing meant life meant alive.

The fireman with the mustache asked if I knew Bill, knew someone to call. I didn't. What I knew about him came from the patterns of his life played out on my ceiling. He got home around six most nights, he vacuumed on Sunday evenings. I'd heard him run across his apartment a few times and always wondered why.

Just after they wheeled Bill out, our building's maintenance man walked in. I hugged him. In any other circumstance it would have been weird but the weirdest had happened so the hug seemed normal. This man probably knew more about Bill than I did. He would have fixed Bill's leaky bathroom sink, seen his brand of shampoo, noted his dirty laundry and clean floors. The maintenance man said, "You'll need somewhere else to stay for a bit. There's an empty unit on the third floor. We'll move your mattress over for you." My first thought was that instead of moving to another unit, I should go stay with my ex-husband. Not to be with him but in his house that used to be our house. There was room. He just rattled around in there. But maybe he didn't. Maybe he was there with his girlfriend and some out-of-town guests. Friends of hers visiting from another country. I pictured calling my ex in the middle of the night and literally shuddered. Why had I gotten so angry that I thought I made the ceiling cave in? Why did I even want to go to that seder? It would be weird and awkward. I thought about the year the man leading the seder had asked a very shy, baseball playing boy if he could do a baseball announcer voice to help the people at the end of the table hear. The leader would tell us what page we were on or something and the boy would repeat it in his broadcast voice, every time, with great pride. And again, we all just acted like every seder had a baseball announcer helping us along. But that was years ago. Most of those kids wouldn't even be there, they'd be in college. I could make my own magical seder. I'd invite Bill. I'd invite the maintenance man. I'd invite all the firefighters.

As I packed up a suitcase, the maintenance man and the firefighters came into my room to move my mattress. They were back just as I finished putting the last things together. The firefighter told me what hospital they'd taken Bill to and that I could visit him tomorrow. I thanked everyone. The maintenance man told me where I was going and said the door was open, the key inside waiting for me. I rolled my suitcase out my door and down the hallway toward the elevator.

Kavan P. Stafford

Chekhov's Spoon

David took a cautious bite of the beetroot Eloise had just spooned on to his plate with a comically large dessert spoon and tried to stop his face from screwing up. He swallowed the bite and then put the whole slice in his mouth at once and swallowed it whole, trying not to taste it. He took a swig of water to wash the taste away. He could sense Myra looking at him and forced a smile before she took it in her head to elbow him in the side.

"This is very nice," he said. He could still taste the vinegar of the sauce on his tongue.

"Thank you," Eloise said. She was halfway through her own plate.

"Yes," Norrie said, his voice shockingly loud in the small dining room, "She opened the jar herself."

Eloise playfully slapped him on the arm and Norrie laughed.

David took another slice of the beetroot and swallowed it whole. It was slightly green in colour. Was beetroot supposed to be green? He wasn't sure. He had never really eaten it before. He shifted on the chair, uncomfortable on the small seat. It was warm in the little dining room with the heat from the kitchen where something that smelled much nicer than the starter was cooking in the oven and he was conscious that the light pink shirt he was wearing would show each and every drop of sweat.

"So, David," Norrie said, "What have you been reading lately?"

David swallowed his second last piece of beetroot and took another drink of water to wash the taste away. He shrugged in answer to the question, "Not much."

"Oh David," Myra sighed. She looked at Norrie and smiled, "He's been reading loads as always. I don't know why he always refuses to answer."

"Because it bores people," said David, not liking the pained tone of his voice.

"Not me," Norrie said cheerfully. He took a swig from the glass of red wine by his plate and pointed above his head. A degree hung from the wall in a black wooden frame. It attested

to the fact that Norman Woods had received a BA in English from the University of Liverpool. The grade below it was a 2:2.

“Well,” David said carefully, “I’ve been reading a bit of De Sade at the moment. *Justine*.”

Norrie wrinkled his bulbous red nose, “Isn’t that just a pornbook?”

He said it just like that. One word. *Pornbook*.

David shrugged, “I think there’s more to it than that. It’s about the limits of human depravity and how quickly the desire for hedonistic pleasure can morph into the desire for the harm of others.”

Norrie chuckled, “But that’s a bit of a surface read isn’t it? Once you get right down to it, there’s nothing different than you would find on that website. What was it?” he looked to Eloise for help, “The one we read about in *The Guardian*?”

“Literotica,” Eloise said, her cheeks colouring slightly.

“Aye that one. It’s just a nineteenth century version of Literotica.”

“Eighteenth,” David said.

“What?”

“Eighteenth century. It came out in 1791.”

Norrie waved a thick hand dismissively, “He died in the nineteenth. That’s what I count it from. No, you should get to reading some good stuff David, not this baser instinct shite. Read yourself some Marlow. ‘The jangling veins of father wits’ and all that.”

“The *jigging* veins of *rhyming* mother wits,” David corrected, “And isn’t the point of that prologue that he *isn’t* going to do that?”

“Och well who knows what any of that Dr Faustus stuff means,” Norrie said, waving his hand again.

“Isn’t that from *Tamburlaine*?”

There was a brief and uncomfortable silence at the table broken only by Myra cutting up her last piece of beetroot.

Norrie smiled tightly and pointed above his head again, “I think you’re wrong there, bud. Don’t argue with the master! Haha! Anyway, how go the buses?”

David shrugged, "It's always the same," he said.

"That's why you have all that time to read, eh?" Norrie said. He nudged Eloise, who smiled, "Not much time for that in my line of work! Can't remember the last time I had a lunch break!"

"So, Norrie," Myra said quickly, "How *is* your work going?"

Norrie took another gulp of wine, "Oh you know Myra. Hiring, firing and perspiring and all that," he winked broadly, "The usual stuff. All a bunch of nonsense of course but—"

His gesticulating hand hit his wine glass and it toppled onto the cream-coloured tablecloth, spilling wine in a blood-spatter pattern.

"*Norman*," Eloise snapped, "My good tablecloth. Oh God. *God*."

She had picked up her own napkin and was hastily blotting as much of it as she could. David could already see that it was no use. The tablecloth was gubbed. There was no chance of reviving it.

Eloise sat back on her chair, her face contorting as if she might cry, "For God's sake Norman, for God's sake."

For the first time Norrie looked slightly chagrined, "I'm sorry, it was an accident. It was—"

"Enough," Eloise snapped. She got up from the table and went into the kitchen, taking small prissy steps, her hands twisting about her wine-stained napkin. With an apologetic look Norrie got his considerable bulk to his feet and followed her.

Myra was looking at her mostly cleared plate, "This was your fault you know," she said.

"My fault?" David exclaimed, "How could it be my fault? I hardly grabbed the guy's hand and slapped it into his glass did I? Fuck's sake."

"Don't swear," Myra snapped, "Honestly, every time we see these two you insist on aggravating him and then act all surprised when something goes wrong. Remember the picnic last summer?"

"You mean when he tipped the disposable barbecue onto the blanket?" David said, "I suppose that was my fault as well. I must have whispered the desire to be a fucking pyromaniac into his ear, eh? Good thing we weren't next to a fucking petrol station."

“I’m just saying that you never just try to be nice to him,” Myra said, “He’s always making an effort with you.”

“Is he, fuck,” David said, “All he does is take every chance he gets to talk about his bloody degree! I mean, I know I didn’t go but if I did I would have gotten a bit better than a fucking 2:2.”

A quiet voice spoke up from his left, “Actually it was from a Russell Group university, David so it’s probably worth a 2:1 or maybe even a first from a lesser university.”

They turned to see Norrie leaning in the doorway of the kitchen, unsmiling.

David felt that he should say something and, judging by the sharp elbow dug into his side, Myra did too, but he couldn’t think of anything *to* say. His mouth opened and then closed without a sound.

“I just think,” said Norrie quietly, “That it’s a little bit *sad*, you know? Just a little bit sad to spend your time slagging off other people’s achievements because you haven’t got any of your own.”

“Norrie come on,” Myra said but Norrie waved her objection away.

“No, I have to say I’m really upset by this David,” Norrie said, “I thought we were friends.”

David looked at him, astounded. He had thought they were friends? What the fuck had given him that idea? His mouth spoke without his brain being aware of it.

“Our *wives* are friends Norman,” he said. He left the rest unsaid and the words hung uncomfortably in the air.

“Okay,” Eloise said cheerfully from the kitchen, “Crisis averted and it’s time for the main.”

She came in carrying a metal tray upon which, sizzling, was a perfectly cooked roast chicken. She made it two steps towards the kitchen door.

David saw what was going to happen before it did. Her slipped left foot struck Norrie’s broad shin and she began to fall. It would only occur to David afterwards that he maybe could have caught her if he had been quick enough but at the time all he could do is watch, as if in slow motion, as the event unfolded.

Eloise seemed to leap into the air briefly after her foot struck Norrie's shin and momentarily managed to land on her other foot as if she had merely taken an improbable bounding footstep. It was the chicken that was her undoing. It was resting on her outstretched hands and the weight was enough that catching herself was not an option. Her feet left the floor for a second time and this time she simply fell forward. The tray of chicken flew from her arms and struck the table with a terrific clang, the chicken itself flying into the air. As Eloise hit the carpeted floor face first the chicken landed beside her and rolled over several times, leaving a trail of grease and juices on the white carpet before coming to rest at David's feet.

"That was your fault you cunt!" Norrie roared.

"Norrie, what the fuck are you talking about?" David said, baffled, but Norrie wasn't listening. With a howl of rage he stepped over his wife's prone form and hurled himself at him. David once again acted without thought. What he did wasn't really even a punch. It was somewhere between extending his fist in a black power salute and trying to redirect Norrie from his path. At any rate, Norrie ran right into it and David felt the spongy flesh of his nose as it compressed on his fist. Norrie stumbled back clutching at his face and his heels hit his wife's arm. He too began to fly through the air as if he were not an overweight man in his fifties but rather Henry Cavill flying through the air as Superman, his hands outstretched.

He did not fly far. He struck the wall behind where he was sitting and crumpled to the ground, his head having left a dent in the plaster. His degree wobbled on its nail and then fell to the floor as well, leaving behind a wall peppered with a couple of holes from initial attempts to hang it up.

"Jesus!" Myra screamed and ran to see if Eloise, who was slowly picking herself up, her wire-rimmed glasses holding on only by one ear.

Norrie was also getting to his feet, clutching at his face. When he removed his hands David let out an inadvertent gasp. The bottom of Norrie's face was covered in blood.

"You broke my nose!" Norrie howled but the words didn't come out right. Instead he said, "Doo boke dy dose!" A spray of blood flying from his mouth and landing on the white tablecloth to blend with the wine that had caused all this in the first place. David saw, with a kind of bemused horror, that one of his front teeth was missing. It was lying on the carpet at his feet in a little puddle of blood.

"Norrie I—" he began but he didn't get the chance to finish. With another enraged roar Norrie launched himself at him. He grabbed something from the table and David just had

time to see the glint of stainless steel before he felt the sharp pressure of something stabbing into his midriff. Myra screamed again and David toppled back onto the floor clutching at his belly. Norrie came down with him and landed on him hard enough to force the air from his lungs with a soft wooshing sound.

Norrie rolled off him, shouting incoherently and David lay where he was, gasping for breath that wouldn't come and pressing hard on his stomach, vaguely remembering that this was something he should do. Being stabbed, he thought incoherently, did not hurt as much as he had imagined it would. In fact, aside from his difficulty in taking a breath, which was already easing, it didn't hurt at all. He removed his hands carefully, expecting to see blood pooled on his stomach but there was nothing there. The itchy jumper Myra had made him wear wasn't even ripped.

Slowly, painfully he sat up and took in the scene around him, which in his shock at the attack, he had been blocking out. Myra and Eloise were grasping at each other, both crying. Eloise's glasses were still hanging from one ear in a way that would have been comical were it not so intensely sad.

Norrie was sitting against the wall clutching the ruined bottom half of his face and weeping. A large spoon, the one Eloise had used to dish out the beetroot was sitting beside him.

Slowly, and wincing at the pain it caused in his stomach, David began to chuckle and then to laugh and then to laugh so hard that it became something almost hysterical. Perhaps in a film everyone would have joined in but this was real life and nobody did. The three of them wept and David laughed as drip after drip of blood from Norrie's face fell from his chin onto the slowly cooling carcass of the chicken.



James Diaz

My Life as a Raging Fire

My work focuses on people who are living on the outskirts of society, often in harsh and unforgiving terrains. I attempt to infuse elements of magical realism and surreal juxtapositions as a way of symbolizing the rich interior aesthetic life of all people, but especially of marginalized people, that singular and unique “inner chamber” that houses deep wells of wonder, awe, dreaming and creativity, in a world that is intent on denying these soul-tools of survival to most people. In these radically egalitarian worlds, countryside is fused with city and city with countryside, animals and people share common ground, and the ruins of capital are the humble dwellings of a new, magical and magic making humanity.



Ain't No Use Overthinking It



All in Good Time



My Life as a Raging Fire



Once More, Into the Light



Tess and Johnny on the Lam



Things Fall Apart; Things Find a Way to Fit Together Again



West of Remembrance

Felix Racelis

UpLyfted

Characters:

Mark: *Male, late 40s.*

Cara: *Female, late 40s.*

N.B. I welcome diverse casting.

Setting: A Lyft/Uber pickup location on a downtown street.

Time: The Present.

Scene: *A Lyft/Uber pickup location on a downtown street.*

Two angled benches represent a Lyft car.

At Rise: *Mark sits on the front bench in the driver's seat, mimes viewing his iPhone and stopping his vehicle.*

Cara, Sr, waves her arm to catch Mark's attention. She carries a purse.

Cara mimes opening the rear passenger car door and sits on the back bench.

MARK: Hey, how's it going?

CARA: Great, but I'm late for a big meeting at work. My radio station's got new owners who just cleaned house, got rid of a lot of dead weight. The place is insane.

MARK: Don't worry, you'll get there on time.

[Cara checks her make up in a pocket mirror.]

MARK (Cont'd): You look great.

CARA: Thanks, I rushed out of the house like a bat out of hell. (*noticing Mark*) Say... no way. (*embarrassed*) Oh my God! Mark? Jesus!

MARK: Yeah, it's me. Hi Cara.

CARA: It kind of looked like you on my phone, but the name said Peter. And your hair...

MARK: Yeah I've been dyeing my hair darker, and using my middle name. If you'd like to order a different driver, I understand.

CARA: No, God no, of course not. It's not far. You know.

[Silence.]

CARA (Cont'd): I'm sorry about what happened.

MARK: Are you really now?

CARA: Of course, I am. Look, Mark, none of us liked how the station treated you at the end. I mean to get escorted out by security with two minutes notice to clear your desk. It must have been humiliating.

MARK: Yup, it was pretty damn cold. Not exactly what I envisioned as my exit strategy.

CARA: I didn't have a chance to say goodbye or anything.

MARK: Let's just say management overreacted... badly. Or maybe I was part of the dead weight.

CARA: Mark, I'm sorry. I didn't mean you.

[beat]

Are you OK?

MARK: Don't I look OK?

CARA: Sure, God, how stupid. You look good, great even.

MARK: Thanks.

CARA: But...

MARK: Yeah?

CARA: You're driving for Lyft.

MARK: I drive for Uber, too. It's just temporary.

CARA: Maybe I should get out.

MARK: As you wish.

[Mark mimes pulling over.]

CARA: No, this is crazy. I'm sorry, Mark. Just keep on going.

[beat]

But... Mark...

MARK: Yeah?

CARA: You were my boss.

MARK: Funny how things change, isn't it? In a way now you're kind of like my boss. Like the Wheel of Fortune.

CARA: I saw your wife recently.

MARK: You mean ex-wife.

CARA: Wow, no kidding. I'm sorry Mark. So you two...

MARK: Yeah, we split. I harbor no grudges, Cara. I moved on with my life. Had no choice, really.

CARA: You're amazing. I mean you've got this great attitude.

MARK: I couldn't keep living that lie. I know I'm old, but I just had to...

CARA: Had to what?

MARK: Had to come out. Even at my advanced age.

CARA: I don't know what to say. Must've been hard.

MARK: April got pretty much everything in the divorce.

CARA: Sorry to hear it.

MARK: Yeah, well I should've been smarter and gotten a better lawyer. But I didn't leave totally empty handed. I got my freedom.

CARA: So you've been gay all this time?



MARK: Bi. Have been most of my life. Our kids are grown up and they're OK with it. But April took it badly.

CARA: I can imagine.

MARK: And then the station found out and Harold brought me in for a "meeting". And that's when they said I no longer was a good representative for the company.

CARA: But you'd been with the company forever.

MARK: Fifteen years. Yeah. Didn't matter. But I can't complain. I got my freedom. Plus, a really hot boyfriend. Well, looks like we're here at the old salt mine.

CARA: If I can ever help, please let me know.

[Cara hands Mark her business card.]

MARK: Thanks. (*reading card*) Well, well. Looks like you got my old job.

CARA (*embarrassed*): After you... left they offered it to me.

MARK: Well, good for you.

CARA: Really, if there's anything I can do, please call. I mean it.

MARK: OK. You know, it's a funny thing, but you'll probably be hearing about me sometime.

CARA: How so?

MARK: I'm suing your station.

CARA: What?

MARK: I learned my lesson and got a smarter lawyer who says I've got a solid case of sexual orientation discrimination. Says I'm looking at a seven-figure settlement at least.

CARA: Wow.

MARK: Yeah, no kidding. Wow. Well, so long, Cara, and, by the way... (*sotto voce*) I knew it was you when I picked you up. Plus I know you were one of the ones who wanted me gone. Harold told me all about it. (*normal voice*) Don't forget—five stars on the app, OK?

[Mortified, Cara exits the car.]

CARA: Ohh....!

Blackout.



UpLyfted premiered August 17, 2024 as part of the 2024 LA Brisk Festival. Directed by Jonathan Levit, it featured David Way as Mark and Michele Tannen as Cara.

Joshua Diabo

Internal Pantheon

I am a Mohawk artist, and these pieces are a part of our mask making tradition, but modernized. I sculpt the faces/masks first, using only artificial means, utilizing it as a cipher for negative and charged emotions, then digitally manipulate them to reflect my interiority and the energy I believe the masks have within them.



Apology



Heart Attack

Ken Poyner

Abandoned by the Civic League

There is a house at the end of this lane that seems never to light. During the day, it generates shadows; at night, the porch light is weak, the glow from windows stifled too thoroughly by unhurried curtains. Cars slow, but do not stop. It is possible its plot could be outside the town charter. No one has seen occupants there, but the lawn is cut, lights reluctantly go on, spectrally go off. It might be the perfect place for a family of murderers waiting for a stranded couple feigning distress once too often. Justice is not within our mandate.



Kiran Gandhi

Death and Monica Bellucci

Chellappan Pillai, or “CP” as he was economically called, was the kind who liked to steadfastly stick to his immutable routine. Last Thursday though, he tweaked it slightly to die halfway through his afternoon nap. Those who live alone and are conscious of their mortality secretly wish that God forbid in the event they bid goodbye to this world they are found by someone before their body consistency begins to resemble a mashed potato. CP was lucky in this regard, all thanks to the zest of the local temple festival organizing committee. When they knocked on CP’s door seeking donation for the impending festival, they had a steely resolve about them quite uncommon among the donation-seeking tribe. They were not going to return empty handed like last year or the year before that or any other year where anyone knocked on this door coveting a monetary contribution. This time they were going to coerce the voluntary contribution out of CP—a determination of purpose which made their hearts buoyant. But when they arrived at CP’s house, CP had neither the inclination nor the life left in him to heed their wish.

CP’s outside slippers were outside and the committee was sure he was lying low. CP didn’t venture out much anyway. The calling bell was struck in so quick a succession that the sound for one click merged with the next giving out a continuous stream of tintinnabulation. They had a look around and through the front window saw CP slumped down on the couch without a care in the world. “There is a saying that you cannot wake someone pretending to be asleep,” said a guy in the committee, exasperated. While the band of men hung around for decisive direction for their next move, the one Gen Z among them found a bamboo stick on the sit-out which CP used to shoo off dogs and cats from entering the veranda and poked CP with it through the front window. The stick whose one end was usually reserved for a canine or feline, felt a human touch at either ends for the first time. The length of the bamboo and the distance from the window to the couch was ideal for carrying out such a manoeuvre. The ‘can’t wake someone pretending to be asleep’ wisdom guy wanted to point out the impropriety of this but decided to let this slide as it was CP getting the stick.

Something was wrong. Even CP could not be this committed. Their suspicion was proved credible when the guy with the stick poked CP too hard and bundled him over to the floor. CP made his last sound on earth.

CP's sister who lived next door was informed. She came running at a languid pace with the spare keys to the house. They removed CP from the floor and put him back on the couch in a seating position. He looked more comfortable there. Then everyone gathered took their turn checking CP's pulse and heartbeat. They all preceded their diagnosis with a deep sigh. Consensus was reached about CP's state of life. One guy thought he felt a pulse but it was his own. The bamboo was still stuck through the window like a javelin in mid-flight.

To ascertain if someone is alive could be tricky but to find out if someone is dead is a fairly straightforward business. Still, they took CP to the hospital and the doctor declared him dead on arrival.

CP was from a generation that didn't get married for the vibe. Marriage in those days was like a newspaper subscription. You did it because everyone else was doing it and not necessarily because you wanted it. As soon as you entered the marriageable age, someone would come to your house with the 'there is a boy/girl' words. The match-fixing strike-rate was phenomenal in those days. You usually married the first person that was recommended for you. There wasn't much swiping left. Marriage didn't affect CP that much. Except for the brief sabbatical he took to father a son, and a daughter who died at birth, CP was practically single with a roommate. His wife had married him out of compulsion and left him out of boredom. When they got married, they were like two parallel lines that hoped to meet somewhere in the future. But that future never came and neither stuck around to see if infinity brought them together. She informed the son she had in the wedjam with CP about his demise via a simple *Your dad's no more* message, to which he replied with a thumbs up emoji and began searching with the 'cheapest first' search filter on for flights to India.

CP's death breathed some new life into his house. The funeral arrangements began in all earnest. The house didn't look any different to CP's wife except for the teapoy that was moved out of the drawing room and the couch pushed all the way against the wall to make room to display CP. A pandal abutting the porch was coming up. A fold of plastic chairs had already arrived. The bevy of bhajan-singing ladies took up their position on the drawing room floor waiting for their *raison d'être* to arrive. When somebody in the neighbourhood died, it was CP's sister who led the stoic bhajan singing. Being the griever-in-chief here, she had to delegate the task to someone else like a surgeon opting out of operating on their kin. They still kept her in the loop about the bhajan playlist though. They started *Hare Rama Hare Rama* when they heard the Ambulance. CP's sister gestured them to hold their horses till the body was brought inside. They started from the top again. CP's wife sat next to his sister who ignored her, giving her that out-of-place *deja vu* all over again in that house.

The turnout to see CP was slightly better than that for the first show of an indie movie. After the customary viewing of the body, people remained scattered in and around the house like tiny islands on the map and talked about CP in sombre tones. Since they didn't have much to talk about CP, they passed the one or two lines they had with utmost care among themselves.

CP was a simple guy.

At least he didn't squander all that generational wealth.

He stayed true to his roots.

CP belonged to the crop of men who became extinct long before they died. Death, for them was only an acknowledgement of this fact, like the asterisks at the end of a long-drawn-out text. The festival committee narrated with some embellishments how they timely found CP, carefully leaving out the part with the bamboo. If not for them CP would have remained dead for longer. They discreetly did the money collection drive for the festival as well on the side, approaching mainly people who stood alone. People in groups tended to question the suitability of their action in such a morose setting. So, they preyed on lone wolves. At the end of the day, they had a good haul and felt good about themselves for taking their resolution of not returning from CP's house empty-handed to such a profitable conclusion.

In sharp contrast to all those people that arrived to see CP's dead body, a guy came there looking for an alive CP. He was a delivery man. And in that house, he felt the helplessness of a sailor lost at sea. *People, people everywhere but no one to accept this parcel.*

From the first person he saw at the gate he told everyone that he had a parcel for Chellappan Pillai. They all pointed him in the general direction of someone else and after pinging off quite a few, he arrived in front of CP. The bhajan singing slowed down a bit as their attention shifted to the delivery guy. The lull in the prayer alerted CP's sister and she darted quizzical looks at the delivery guy and the chorus. The guy was already behind on his delivery schedule for the day. He had had instances where the recipient was absent. But the kind of indisposition this recipient had, he had not encountered before in his work. People were usually immortal between the time they placed an order and received it. He put the parcel beside its owner's corpus and exited looking at the bright side that this was not a cash on delivery. The next lot of people that came in paid their respect to both the body and the box.

CP's brother-in-law who had been a minor act in the day's affairs so far, saw his chance to become a seminal figure. "Dear brother-in-law, your parcel has arrived," he kneeled down and said to CP's face. Then to no one in particular and also to everyone there, he said that since this was the last thing CP bought in his life, he deserved to see it. No one dared point out that CP was beyond seeing now. CP's sister tried to rein her husband in but failed in that endeavour for the first time in her life. As CP's brother-in-law started unwrapping, the Gen Z of the bamboo fame who had a YouTube channel started filming the unboxing. The bhajans stopped completely. The parcel looked to be a long scroll of some sort of fancy paper and when CP's brother-in-law opened it for the first time it coiled back immediately into the fetal position. People huddled together to get a good look. And when the scroll was fully stretched out, an audible gasp fell in the room. A middle-aged man picked up the bubble wrap and started popping.

No. Baluchistan is a place. This is Bellucci, Monica Bellucci. The Gen Z paused his filming to correct the crowd. They all began to see CP in a new light. CP's brother-in-law went back to being a minor act. It was to this atmosphere of befuddlement that CP's son arrived to find his father lying next to Monica Bellucci. He was too tired to care.

The people talking about CP now had one tidbit to add to their bio of the deceased. They who thought CP was a simple guy who lacked the imagination to throw his money away. Now CP was a guy who felt that he needed a life size poster of Monica Bellucci in his life. He not only felt that but went on to do something about it as well. In that moment they felt for CP what kids these days call "mad respect." One guy googled her filmography to see if he had seen any of her movies.

CP was a simple guy.

At least he didn't squander all that generational wealth.

He stayed true to his roots.

And he had a thing for Monica Bellucci.

The mobile cremator arrived. As they began setting up in the backyard, the bhajan singing picked up the pace. The body laying chamber was carried off by three people to the back and they returned to take the LPG cylinders.

It usually takes a cylinder and a half for a body. It took somewhere between 90 to 120 minutes, the length of a football match if it went to extra time to burn the body completely. The cremator guy did an impromptu FAQ for the curious while setting up. Seeing the LPG

cylinders, a woman remembered her cylinder refill was due and went to a secluded part outside the house to call her gas agency. It was the corner of the house where CP used to pee even though he had a functional toilet inside the house. The remnants of CP's last reliefment still lingered and it made her teary eyed.

A kid asked if they were going to cook the uncle now and was immediately shushed. He will get an education on the subtle difference between cooking and cremation when he got home later.

White cloth was laid out in the chamber. Sandalwood splinters and some flowers were spread on top of it. Then the burners were placed, two on each side, one each at the head and the toe. CP was taken outside. His son bathed from the well and came to do the rituals in his cargo shorts. There was some mumbling from the crowd when they saw he was not wearing the *thorthu* aka the Kerala bath towel. They found solace in the fact that the cargo shorts were white at least.

CP's wife peered at the proceedings from inside. After the rituals were done, they carried CP to the back of the house past his peeing spot. The women stayed behind. CP's body was laid down in the cremator's chamber. His son circumambulated the corpse three times carrying on his shoulder a clay pot filled with water and a hole in it to let the water out. He was instructed to pace his walk so that the pot was empty at the end of the third round. Then he threw the pot backwards over his shoulder to the ground and it broke into many pieces. The first minute of CP's 120 commenced. The gathering began to disperse carrying the momentary dispassion with worldly affairs they usually felt at the sight of another's death. CP's wife from his past life found the poster still lying on the floor. She picked it up and hung it in CP's room over the Manorama calendar. A draught came in through the window from the back of the house. Monica Bellucci swayed in that room, prominent, like the first citizen of a country that no longer existed.



Laura Eppinger

Roxanne

In the backseat, while his sister drives, Martín holds me close to keep me warm.

At the water park we wore bathing suits underneath our clothes, but were still riding the slides when the sun set. The park closed, the air cooled, and our cotton layer absorbed that wet chlorine then hung around us, heavy and loose. Had to strip that off. We cling together now, dodging seatbelts, in only bathing suits. Strange to be cold—we've spent months in the dry heat of the first summer either of us had ever fooled around. A breathy season.

The only thing I want as badly as my body against his, is an older sister to pass me Anne Rice books. A sister exactly like Martín's.

Martín hates his sister's boyfriend for being short-tempered and odd, for his deafening carpool karaoke that drowns out the radio. But at least this guy DJs from the '80s. When this next song comes on, about *that dress so tight*, about *put away your makeup*, I know every word.

I can moan like Sting as he begs a woman to stop being a sex worker just because he's jealous. Martín drums along on my shoulder, smiling at me as I hit every note.

The song ends and I lay across the backseat, resting my head in Martín's lap, facing the way I probably shouldn't. My mouth sits just under his belly button; this patch of his skin always felt smooth under my fingers. My lips are more sensitive, and detect sharp hairs that prick. It's a sandpaper ache but I do not pull away; this summer Martín taught me that I like little bites along my collarbones. Every nip so far has been pleasurable, so I can't fathom just how deep another person could slice.



Maureen Tai

A Note from the Orphaned Gods



TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Excuse the impersonal tone of this note, but we're in dire straits. We've been informed that we must vacate our premises by June 19, the choice of this deadline itself further proof of the insensitivity of the goons charged with the task of getting rid of us (the 19th day of the 6th lunar month being Big Sister's annual celebration of her attainment of enlightenment, so a very auspicious day indeed).

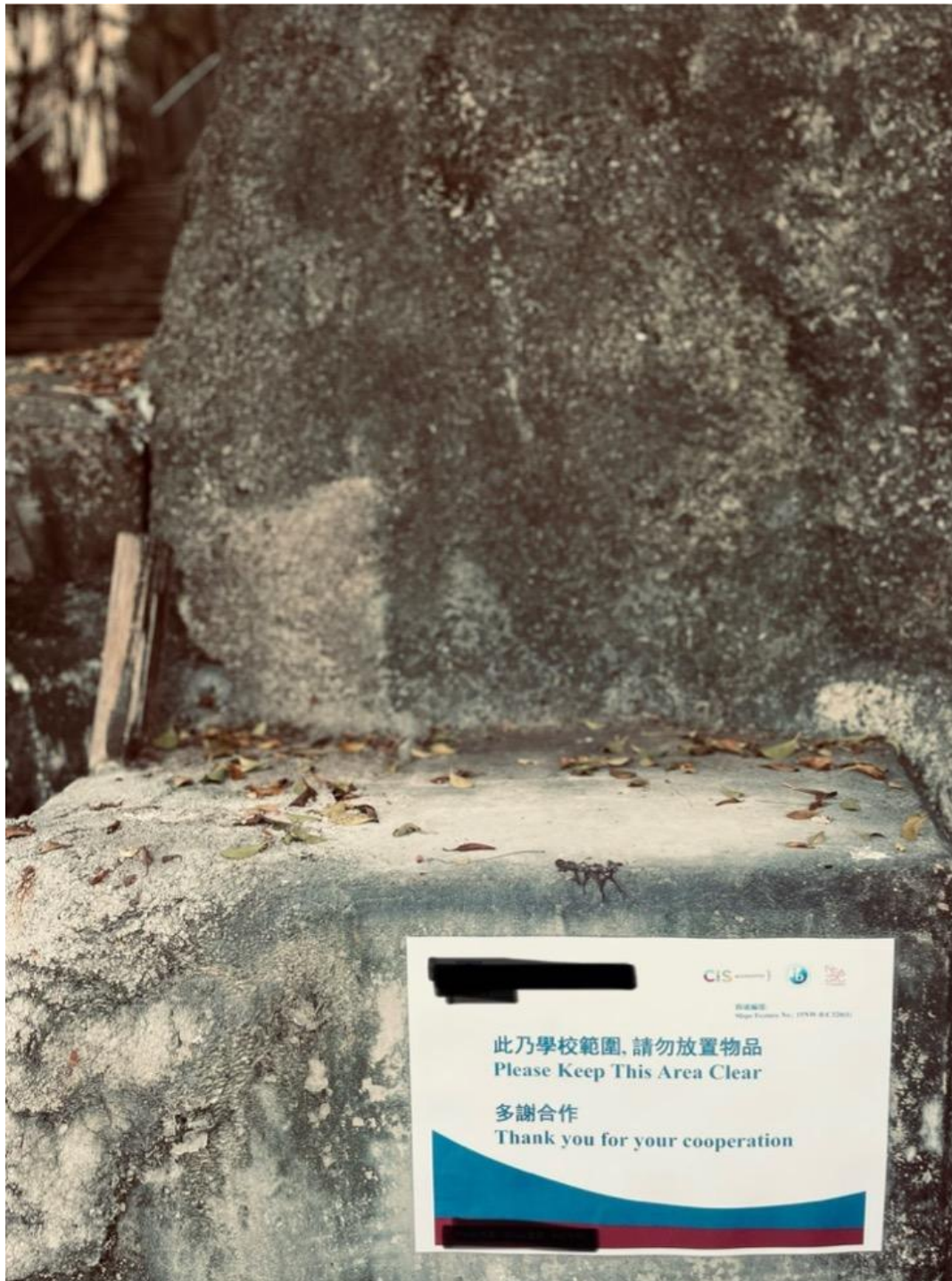
True, most of us here are not new to abandonment. Big Sister, rudely ejected from her previous home after some child broke her hand off with a misplaced kick of a ball. War Bro, deemed unworthy after his Green Dragon Crescent Blade lost its golden lustre due to Hong Kong's atrocious humidity (the fact it's made of cheap plastic may also have had something to do with it). Dragon Breath, retired after the mystical flames along her back broke off during some over-vigorous cleaning. Also true that nothing explains why some of us, unblemished and in perfect shape, find ourselves on this ledge, exposed to the elements: me, Little G (short for Gautama - we like to keep things casual and relaxed around here), Little Sister, D1 and D2 (or the Double Dees as they like to call themselves) and Mad Cow (well, War Bro has a theory about Mad Cow, the operative word being "mad," but we'll let that one slide shall we?).

Anyway, it's all very nice and good that we're frequently left flowers and mooncakes and fruits (but keep it seedless folks! Those tiny blighters tend to lodge themselves in between Dragon Breath's canines and War Bro has to use his Blade to pick them out) but what we really, REALLY need, and now, is Love Sweet Love. Yes, you heard us right. We need New Homes. Or if possible, One Single New Home (that isn't a landfill). It would be grand if some kind soul could take us all as a package.

You see, after all these years, we've become quite fond of each other (yes, even that crazy bovine and his udder jokes) and it would be Sigma if we could stay together (our current home is next to a school, so we know all about Skibidi Toilet Rizz!). We're diverse, charming, funny, and very flexible. Pop us in a cupboard, or line us up on a shelf in the kitchen (I'm especially keen to learn healthy cooking these days after I found out my BP is a bit on the high side), shove us into some unused or unusable corner of your house or garden or balcony, we don't mind. To top it off, we're extremely low maintenance. You don't need to walk us or clean up after us or dust us. You don't even need to prostrate yourself in front of us or light us any smelly sticks. We get it, life's busy right? Who's got time to pray these days? Besides, if we could really grant wishes, don't you think we'd grant our own? Big Sister would have a

fully functioning hand, War Bro would have a magic toothpick like that Monkey Dude, Dragon Breath would be able to fly, I could ditch my BP meds, and we'd all be living in some sweet, air-conditioned villa overlooking a beach. We wouldn't need to beg like this.

So. We've had a good run, but we are where we are. Let us know when we can move in with you, and soon. We could make this world so much more beautiful together.



Megan Hanlon

I Can See It

“Mom is all good, I’m on the way home,” the text message said.

I can see it.

I can see my mom emerging from a dull gray Ford Taurus in a driveway 1200 miles from me. Bent and shuffling, she takes light steps since she weighs less than a buck now, a portable oxygen machine swinging over her shoulder like a millstone around her neck.

She climbs the front steps one at a time even though there’s only two, unhooks the cannula from each freckled ear, and sets the black bag on the other side of the stoop. Then she folds into herself until she’s seated on the concrete. It’s twilight and the cold will seep into her bones soon, so she can’t dilly-dally.

I can see her fish for a pack of cigarettes and a plastic Bic lighter from her bottomless grab-bag purse and settle the brown stick between her lips, next to her new dentures. Complete uppers and lowers, her real teeth so eroded from constant illness that they had to be pulled out and refashioned, and Medicaid won’t foot the bill so I did. Eventually the tar will layer a brown shadow on her new acrylic resin teeth, but she’ll know she’ll probably be gone before then.

I can hear the flick of the lighter and see her holding the orange flame to the tip until it’s a glowing cherry. She takes a long, deep drag like a sigh, then closes her eyes while the nicotine puddles around the burst air sacs in her lungs and winds through the wrinkles of her brain. I can smell the sweet tang of the just-lit cigarette that comes before the scent turns thick and ashy, and I miss it a little too much.

As dopamine floods her system, her straining heart speeds up but her shoulders, even the painful one, unclench. It still hurts from two winters ago when she staple-gunned thick plastic sheets over her trailer windows to keep out the cold, back before the doctors declared her too frail to go on living on her own. She lets go just a little then, of the doctors and pill bottles and loneliness and endless repetition of days until there aren’t any more days.

When the cigarette is half-gone, she field-strips it against the concrete to save for tomorrow, and tucks what’s left inside the pack between the plastic sheath and the cardboard

label. I can see her brace spidery hands against the house to work herself to standing, pick up her purse and portable oxygen, and push the front door open against the whoosh of what's inevitable.

Once inside her son's house, she drapes across her face a different cannula, one snaking from a full-size oxygen cylinder on wheels. It's silver with a shamrock-green cap like a leprechaun whose luck is perilously low. She probably named the thing, something like Seamus or Ivan or Charles, just like she named that ankle-length brown faux-fur coat she bought at the I-95 flea market, Herman, who she had to give up when we moved to Texas. I hated that stupid coat and its bamboo toggle buttons. As a kid I was embarrassed at the way it made her look like a sasquatch walking around the grocery store, but I'd pay good money to hold it now and see if it still carries her perfume.

I can see her easing down the carpeted hall and crossing the threshold of her bedroom. As she passes through the doorway, my mother is abruptly transformed. Her sallow, mottled skin glows pink with oxygen. She gains 20 pounds of lithe muscle and small dimples that whisper of her love for coffee ice cream. The lump of her upper back unfurls as vertebrae slide back into place, and her steps become sure.

I can see her walk unencumbered to her bed, the one spread with my old, faded-pink comforter covered in smiling white flowers that I gave to her when I left for Ohio. I can see her sit gently on the edge of the bed and stroke the striped cat with the white tummy, the one who has been patiently waiting for her, purring, keeping her spot warm. Then she lays down—whole, healthy, independent—and rests her hands across her middle. I can see her ivory teeth, narrow and straight, as she smiles.

"Wrong number," my thumbs type into my phone. "My mom's been dead 13 years. But I'd like to think this message was still meant for me."



Meredith Toumayan

Pitch In!

“Let’s get that wood, load it up! Get it in the barn.” My old man announces, “More hands, less work!” He clap-claps vigorously, like he wants to slap-slap my brothers to attention. My brother, Tom, sits on the edge of the sagging farmhouse porch. At twenty-one he is betwixt-and-between—towing the line to keep a bed under the crumbling shingle roof. My youngest brother, John, sits at the far end, hiding in the shade, and no doubt wishing he had stayed inside playing Nintendo. My husband, as always, obligingly stands to lend a hand. The boys swing up by the porch posts and amble down the road. My old man drives his juddering pick-up—rust winning the tussle with the matte gray spray-on—to meet them at the field where the wood pile waits, throwing back the heat of the sun. My old man’s attempts at blending back into rural life are gaining traction, evidenced by his handy back-up skills, snug to the wood pile, the splitter cooling nearby. The boys tag-team toss the logs, fast, efficient, sweat building. It will take a few runs back and forth, from field to house, to fill the tilted woodshed, holding the house and barn together, like a child stretched from one parent’s hand to the other.

The boys throw the logs down in the old pasture, beyond the shade of the fir trees, while I sit leaning against a porch post—no pitching in for me today. My childhood refrain, “I’m bored”—spoken often in this same rural village—has become a secret desire. Now a mom, punching a clock, I craved moments in which to still my body and mind, a beacon of relief to know I could just sit. Our son runs along the porch behind me in his sky-blue coveralls, bought to match his eyes. His toddler wobble brings him bomp-bomping down the boards before he swings, cowboy-style, into my lap. I flinch instinctively as he lands on my taut belly. Will it be a boy or a girl that joins us this winter? This, I think, is what farmhouse porches are made for—growing life while watching hummingbirds duke it out over bright red feeders below the eave.

July heaved upon us, an onslaught of whining mosquitos, shimmering hot air dancing like wood nymphs above the tarmac. It was with relief that I loaded up the Justy that morning, to travel the three hours north from Massachusetts. I yearned for Maine’s cooler air and deep quiet, all left behind with my school days. I missed the heat lifting the delicate but distinct scent of fir trees from the cone-laden earth, where voracious squirrels left piles of

scales in the wake of their pine nut dinners. I let my mind float in unison with the rhythmic susurrations of cicadas. I looked forward to the pleasures of visiting now that the pendulum had swung back and my parents had returned to my hometown.

I am still sitting there on the porch, wondering how long they would be down there, lobbing logs into the bed of the truck, when I am jarred by a flurry of movement. My brother Tom comes running up the lawn from the street, arms pumping. Hot though it is, his face is even redder than expected. He's sprinting.

"Where's Dad? Did you see him? Is he here? Where is he?!" he gasps.

"I don't know!" I call out as he passes by me, coming to a halt just inside the heavy shade of the barn door. "What's going on? Is something...?"

Tom looks frantically around him, looking to hide. Then I hear a roar coming from the back door of the barn. I see Tom has about-faced and our old man is coming up hot behind him, holding a pitchfork aloft in one arm like a javelin. Poseidon's trident, three curved prongs, sharp as nails, jabbing at the air as our old man heads toward Tom.

"I will kill you, you son of a bitch! You fucking try and kill me, well, I'll show you how it's done."

Tom scrambles, ducking thrusts of the pitchfork as he is backed up against the wall of the barn. The pitchfork slams into the old boards of the barn wall, just missing Tom, and sticks hard. The old man is screaming, "You throw that fucking log at my head and you will not live to tell the tale! I will fucking kill you! I never want to see you again. Do you hear me? Never! OUT, GET OUT!" Tom dodges one more parry and sprints back down the lawn past me, where I still sit, agape, on the porch. He turns hard to the left and heads down the street, the slap of his sneakers fading in the wake of his retreat.

Stunned into silence, having forgotten my own baby boy, I look at my old man standing in the doorway of the barn. He is staring after Tom. Where is my mother, I think, our perennial buffer? Where is she hiding? My old man finally drops the pitchfork, and disappears into the house. Some minutes later I still sit, cuddling my own boy who is asking, "Where Uncle Tommy go? Is Grampa angry?"

"Shhhh." I whisper, "It's going to be okay."

My old man reappears on the porch. He has two black trash bags and is trailing clothes behind him while simultaneously shoving them into the bags.

“Take these!” he spits at me, “Take all of this! Get it out of here! Throw it in the dump, I don’t care—just get it out of here!”

He finishes scooping the rest of the clothes into the bags, then comes and drops himself down next to me. I warily turn to look at him. He cries—wordless, subdued, man-sobs. I search my brain for some appropriate platitude, because that’s what my brain has been trained to do, trained by my mother. I come up with nothing. Years of working to bury the fear in order to function normally and then, like a rabbit having come upon a coyote, I am surprised by it all over again. Silence envelops me. I go cold, with the confirmation that moving away is not escaping.

I see my husband walking fast towards us, coming back from the field. Despite having missed the failed attack on Tom in the barn, he was, nonetheless, witness to the prelude of this tinderbox. In a rare instance, for a typically unflappable man, he says flatly, but definitively, “Let’s get our things. We need to leave now.” His jaw is set with a resolve I had yet to see in our young marriage. My inertia dissolves and I bounce up, despite my baby bump, and go into the house to collect our diaper bag, story books, and my lower-back pillow. Back on the porch I lean down to scoop up Tom’s clothes in the trash bags. “What’s that?” My husband demands. I can’t bring myself to answer, knowing they’ll be taken to the town dump the minute we leave, so I give him the little shake of the head that says “Please, don’t ask.” I had no idea what I would do with those bags of clothes, but I couldn’t bear for Tom to lose what few possessions he had in this world.

We are jammed into our little hatchback on the street in front of the house, when my mother appears on the porch. She must have heard the kerfuffle of trash bags, possibly my old man had even called out to her looking to find them. No doubt she had been upstairs in her sewing room, sewing cloth into dollars to feed her hungry men. No relaxing on the porch for her. As my mother stands there, the glint of a needle dangling from a piece of cloth in her hand, she looks perplexed. But her eyes are tinged with understanding, floating over the perpetual underlayment of fear. A look all too familiar to me, born of the struggle of being wife to my old man—who still sits on the edge of the porch, motionless, staring away up the hill. The tears have dried upon his face—crocodile tears, frozen on a remorseless countenance. As our car pulls out, I see my mother lift her hand in a tentative wave, I return the wave, vigorously, from the car window, straining to be normal, “See you soon!” I volunteer weakly.

We drive west down the village road, headed to the highway and south, back to our own life. “What happened? What did Tom do?!” I ask my husband. Anything or nothing, it would have been, as ever, a perceived offense.

“I don’t know, it all happened so fast. One minute your dad was standing by the back of the truck, and the next he was on the ground, on top of Tom, punching him upside the head.”

“What do you mean? Why?” I ask, as though any explanation for what had happened by the wood pile could rationalize what I’d just seen in the barn.

“No one wanted to be out there in that heat, throwing wood. Your dad backed the truck up to the pile, and we started at it, heaving logs—fast. Your dad got out of the driver’s seat and came around the back of the truck—and started doing that thing that he does, always trying to tell people how to do a job—and Tom threw a log that whizzed by his head.”

“Ooooooh!” I say, eyes wide, “I’m glad *you* didn’t throw that log!” only half joking. “Besides,” I continue, “that’s rich, coming from a man who can’t change a light bulb.” I’d always wondered if that lack of handiness was point-of-pride or a God-given inability. My old man would certainly tell you all about how to change a light bulb, or any other topic, complete with an on-the-fly bibliography of at least five books he’d read on the subject.

My husband continues, “And then your dad, he started in with the screaming, ‘What the fuck are you doing? You could have killed me! You work like a *boy*!’ Well, you know your brother Tom, he started to mouth off, ‘Well, then, get the fuck out of the way!’ The last thing Tom got out of his mouth was, ‘You’re gonna die a lonely old man...’

And that was it, your dad was on him before any of us could move—sitting on Tom’s chest, pummeling him, over and over. And I’m yelling, ‘Stop! Stop it! What are you doing?!’ Finally Tom managed to roll out from under your dad and took off.”

“Oh.” I say, my mind reaching, with perverse gratitude, to confirm that there were no visible injuries when I had seen Tom run by me—injuries that would let the secret out, make it public, allow people to ask questions. Us kids were nothing if not raised to keep our mouths shut. All in the name of protecting the family, a family that would not protect us.

Moments later, my husband slams on the brakes, and there in front of us is Tom, tumbling out of the trees and down the embankment alongside the road. Flooded with relief, I roll down the window, yelling, “Squeeze in!” while glancing back down the road—as though our old man might be, once more, in hot pursuit. As the car moves away, I twist my

burgeoning belly awkwardly around to look in the backseat, where Tom has wedged himself in, next to our boy in his car seat and the bags of clothes. “Where are you going to go, Tom?” He looks back at me, laughing nervously, caught somewhere between the exuberance of adrenaline and a palpable relief at his great escape. “I don’t know,” he says. My husband looks at me and I look at him, crammed in our two-door hatchback, with a two-year-old and another on the way. My husband knows. He’s seen the non-committal bruises, heard us siblings laughing through the lunacy—but this was the first time he got to see my family in action, in living color. I’m amazed, flooded with love, when, after a pause, he says, “It’s fine, Tom. Come home with us.”

I stare out the window as we pick up speed. The tall summer grasses ripple along the unmowed verge. My frenzied mind cools, feeling it’s way around what I had just been witness to, contemplating whether I should have done more, jumped up faster, somehow put an end to yet one more episode tearing apart the fabric of our family. I wonder idly how my father was spinning the story for my mother right at that moment, as we drive along in silence—always convincing her he was justified in his actions. It doesn’t matter, I tell myself, his words have no bearing on reality, unlike his actions.

Where had my youngest brother, John, disappeared to? I did not see him before we left, a teen who slinks along the walls, head down, keeping his balance in a house that trembles while clinging to a granite fault line. Though Tom has made it out this time, we have abandoned John. I have abandoned John. We are all just swinging in the balance, I think, just one stray piece of firewood away from the next conflagration. I picture my youngest brother, curled into his Nintendo chair, eyes stuck on the game—turning up the volume against the invariable shouting of our old man making himself understood. Will John pick his moment to sprint through the woods? Perhaps he will be forever hiding in a land of mushrooms as Mario dodges Goombas and Bullet Bills, *bada-bu-pe-bada-BEEP, dute-dute da-dute*.



Nicholas De Marino

The Beachland Ballroom

Is no one going to talk about how John just tried to kill us?

“Hey, Mikey,” Oz shouts and shakes a Big Gulp over his shoulder from the driver’s seat. “Another dee-licious road pop, sir.”

Mike reaches from the back of the Ford Fiesta while Sarah complains she’s hungry.

Someone’s going to say something about how we all almost died, right?

“Hey, me, too,” John says from the passenger seat. “All the way to the tippy top, please.”

Him. That soft-spoken husband and father of two who looks like the lovechild of Spock and Luigi. He tried to kill us.

I grab his cup from the backseat and crack the lid.

None of us screamed when it happened. John just reach over and yank the steering wheel.

“Oh shit, my bad,” Mike says, spilling Old English. “Party foul.”

“Jesus, Mikey,” Oz yowls. “Clean that shit up. What if we get pulled over?”

The rumble strip roared and the shocks bucked but he held on to wheel.

“I’ll take one for the cause,” John says. He undoes his seat belt and tosses back a flannel. “Amanda got me that one, anyway.”

The car stopped a yard from the treeline.

John welds all day and delivers pizzas at night. He plays with the kids while Amanda gets tarot readings over the phone. All that, and he walks in on her blowing the neighbor.

Knees steering, Oz thumbs the mini-disk player wired through the tape deck. “Talking in Code” by Margot & the Nuclear So and So’s twangs as the sun crashes toward Cleveland.

Sarah grumbles. Mike sucks air through an empty straw.

No one says anything. The Fiesta barrels west down I-90 for a Monday night concert at the Beachland Ballroom.

Sarah's still hungry.

I don't have money for real food—my check for content farm writing is late—so Mike, Sarah, and I leave the Beachland on foot.

I bring up what happened in the car as we pass closed shops and houses with tiny square lawns.

"Dude, that's fucked up," Mike says. "You think he meant it?"

I remind him we almost crashed then we wander into a gas station.

Fritos, M&M's, and a Coke for Mike. Four two-for-one taquitos and bottled water for Sarah and me. That's four bucks. Add in tickets, booze, and chipping in on gas, and I'm down twenty-seven dollars on the night.

We eat on the curb. Sarah chews, tears, and gulps, down, down, down.

"Let's head back," Mike says, not noticing Sarah because she's not real. "I wanna check out the merch table."

I swallow hard to keep my stomach—which is also Sarah's—from tumbling out of our mouth as we walk back. Meanwhile, Mike talks about D.I.Y. bands and artistic integrity.

Back at the Beachland, Mike explains how the new Margot and the Nuclear So and So's record is called "Animal!"

My arms and chest tingle in hot, white shivers and Sarah panics.

"That's the LP. 'Not Animal' is the CD version," Mike says, flipping a record sleeve.

Bathroom? Maybe dirty. May be full.

"Five of the songs are the same, but—"

Whofuckingcares. Outside. Past the doors. Around the building. Into the parking lot.

Jagged chunks of fried tortilla soaked in malt liquor and stomach acid spray then drip onto the concrete. Warm blood throbs in my eyes, ears, mouth, nose, and throat. The hollow inside my chest where Sarah lives purrs. For a moment, we're safe. Then some hipster girls walk by and laugh. But not really. No one's around except Oz.

"Hey man, you shoulda ate here," he says, ashing an American Spirit.

I follow him into the tavern side of the Beachland where John's groaning behind a plate of fried dough.

"Ever had a Trailer Park Monte Cristo?" Oz asks, introducing a deep-fried peanut butter and jelly sandwich. "It's the ultimate cure for the drunchies."

I cover my mouth. Sour clings to my stubble.

"Whatcha got there?" asks a scrawny guy in a ball cap over at the bar.

"Hey, man, you gotta check this out," Oz shouts, grabbing his plate and plopping down next to him.

I ask John if he knows anything about the opening bands.

"No clue," he says. "I'm still trying to figure out which of these guys is Margot." He offers me a bite. I shake my head.

The hardwood floors, the sweat and disco ball, the hip-high stage—you'd swear it was a middle school dance. And here I am, a decade later, still slouched at the side.

"There's no paneling, so you need a bigger crowd to soak up that echo," Mike says, talking shit on the acoustics and sound guys. "See how they miked the amps? Totally amateur."

Cloud Cult or Ice Palace is on stage playing music for people who watch Wes Anderson movies.

Sarah's quiet. My mouth's still wretched, even after turning my last fiver into a Pabst. That's thirty-two dollars on the night.

John's on the floor, swaying near a girl with a side pony tail and chunky boots.

"Hey, hey, hey," Oz lumbers over. "You'll never guess who I met."

That guy at the bar was the frontman for Margot & the Nuclear So and So's. I know because I pitched an article about this show to *Cleveland Scene*. Even if they'd accepted it, I'd still be down seven bucks.

I scratch my neck and my chest, but I can't reach whatever's itching. I ask Oz about what John did.

"Probably a joke," Oz says, shaking his head. "He's gotta get laid, big time."

One song with three parts later, the band's done and we head on the floor. John's chatting up side pony tail, chunky boots girl. The split ends of her hair shimmer in the dim light.

"Johnny Boy!" Oz shouts. "You remember that guy from the bar?"

Margot and the Nuclear So and So's start sound checking their gear and John's girl sidles up to Oz as he tells his sandwich story. When the band plays, it's the audio equivalent of Salinger and the only girl on stage isn't named Margot.

A few songs into their set, side pony tail, chunky boots girl leans on Oz's shoulder. He puts his arm around her. John looks sad.

Sarah and I are both pissed the dumpster behind the pizza place was a bust. A freebie would've been nice.

Across the street, Mike, Oz, and John aren't outside the Beachland. They usually schmooze with bands after shows. Mike will hand out demos in about fifteen minutes.

A block toward the gas station, flashing eyes lunge from the dark. Of course I fall on my ass. The dog's chain clinks taut three dog lengths away. Backing away, I tell him he's a good boy and squint to see the glow of his *tapetum lucidum*. That's the scientific name for that shiny eye thing. I know because I wrote about it before skipping lunch today. As the author of "Why Do Dogs' Eyes Shine at Night?" and the self-plagiarized "Why Do My Dog's Eyes Glow?" there's thirty dollars headed my way in two weeks. And you know what? That counts for tonight. I'm still down two bucks, though.

At the gas station, Sarah demands cookies and cream ice cream. It comes up cold and soothes your throat, but there's no time. Let's find safe foods. Baby carrots? Nope. Rice cakes? Nope. There's oatmeal packets and pre-popped popcorn, but my joints ache. That means nuts or, here we go, a jar of Jif. Plus some water.

That's four-seventy-eight and I'm out of cash.

"There's a five-dollar minimum for cards," the clerk says.

In my head, I'm screaming that rule's for credit cards, not debit cards, calling him a balding tyrannic asshole, human piece of shit.

In reality, I'm grabbing beef jerky.

Outside, a pair of hipster girls are smoking. Real clothed girls. I ask if they saw the concert. They just keep talking like I'm invisible, just like Sarah.

They don't notice as she wolfs down peanut butter. They don't see how the plastic spoon breaks and she uses her hand, or how she gags because that's usually what happens when she puts fingers in her mouth.

Near the Beachland, I toss the dog a piece of jerky. It starts choking and I run up to help, but don't know how. It pukes up the jerky and eats it again.

I ask John if he really wanted to crash earlier tonight.

I'm sitting shotgun. John's driving the Fiesta. Mike and Oz are in the backseat sleeping off the hash they smoked with Margot et al. Sarah's quiet.

"Oh, that was just a joke," he says forcing a grin, more Spock than Luigi.

I asks if it hurts as the trees race past in the moonlight.

"What?" he asks, but he knows.

"That guy, the neighbor? He lives in his parents' basement," John says, the dashboard lights glaring in his eyes. "He plays Pokémon, semi-pro."

Humans don't have a *tapetum lucidum*.

"Fucking Pokémon," John says, strangling the steering wheel.

I tell him it's not that guy's fault, not really.

John's inhaling and exhaling with his whole body. The car's too small for him.

"Then whose fault is it?" His voice cracks. "Amanda?"

I tell him no as the trees strobe faster.

"Then who?" he asks, but he knows.

"I go to work every day. Every fucking day. Me," he says and lets go of the wheel to wave his hands. "And when I get home? I go out and work more."

I could never yank the wheel like John did.

"And when I don't go out?" he says. "I fucking hate it. I hate being a husband. I hate being a father. I hate it all."

I ask him what he's going to do about it.

He frowns and stares out the windshield.

I never get to call him a pussy because a deer bounds into the road and freezes. It's eyes blaze in the headlights.

"Shit!"

John yanks the steering wheel and the Fiesta roars over the rumble strip.

THUMP.

We all check out the damage.

The deer took out a headlight and left a huge dent, but the wheel well's fine to limp home.

Mike and I check by the road.

The deer stopped a yard from the tree line. Not much blood. Small antlers, leg twitching.

"Dude, that's fucked up," Mike says.

I say we should get a tire iron from the trunk and make sure it doesn't suffer. We don't check when we get back to the car, though.

Oz takes the wheel. Mike rides shotgun. John and I slump in the back.

"I don't want to hurt anyone," John says.

I'm quiet.

"I love my kids," he says. "I love them so much."

I spot the glint of change on the backseat floor and pocket it piece by piece. Only down nine bucks now. Sarah's going to be hungry in the morning.

No one says anything. The Fiesta barrels east down I-90 toward a shared house with three beds and a broken couch.



Nina Miller

Half-Woman All-Magic

Two nights a week, Marco the Magnificent sawed my Momma in half. I asked her why she didn't have a fancy name, like Marco, and was just "my lovely assistant, Cheryl." I asked her why she smoked more than she ate and whether the sequins itched when she got a wedgie. She told me to be quiet, or she'd stop bringing me to the theater. She told me to hold her smokes while she stretched or finished her hair. She told me how to fit in by disappearing like she did.

I saw the other younger assistants giggling as they watched her. I'd tell Momma how they made kissy faces at Marco, let him slap their behinds and called her "Old Cow" when she was not around. "Jealous," my Momma said, lighting a match against her hip bone before lifting it to her cigarette. That's part of my Momma's magic, I always thought. Then she tells me with a wink, "It's 'cause I can make myself small. Fit into a box like no one else can." I wondered what boxes I'd need to fit in when I was older. Wondered what would happen if I didn't fit in.

Momma's 'fraid to get glasses 'cause they'll make her look old. Her eyes squinted as she tried to read the directions for hair dye. She told me the cheap stuff burns a little, but that's "the price you pay for beauty." But I knew she was afraid of losing her job. It was the price to stay that hurt more. Like the splinters in her knees from the cheap pine box she gets into, the rope burns from dangling too long, and the weight loss pills that gave her the runs. I told her I didn't want to fit into anyone's box if it meant this much pain. "Oh, baby girl, there's always a box men will want to put you in. Your Daddy wanted me in a box, and your Grandpa did, too. I picked me a magic box, that there has made all the difference." She picked up a pack of smokes, another box she got lost in, and when she saw it was empty, threw it away.

Marco told me eleven was too young to understand what my Momma does. Too young to notice him showing off in front of the new assistants. Too young to see him enter their dressing rooms. Like everyone else around here, he pretended he was all the magic in their act. He's all "blah blah blah, abracadabra," but it's my Momma who made it happen. Eleven was old enough to examine the set pieces. Old enough to see the space my Momma

had to squeeze into before the blade came down. Marco had the banter, but it was Momma's body that did all the work. "I get half the pay, 'cause they cut me in half," said Momma, in her I'm-joking-but-I'm-miserable voice to all that would listen. In the night though, when we'd whisper-whisper before going to sleep she'd say, "Don't worry kiddo, your Momma's got big plans."

Marco, who wanted me to call him "The Magic Man," asked if I wanted to be in his show one day. Asked me if I was as limber as my Momma. Asked me if I'd be his assistant. He looked me up and down like he did the other ladies, and he said "ASS-istant" like when he talked with the other men. I told him that I was gonna have my own show. Told him it'll be bigger than his, with my name and my Momma's in lights. Told him, "I'm not going to fit into anyone's box. I'm made for bigger things." My Momma always told me that, and it seemed right to say that to Marco. He laughed so hard that I saw his fillings, his nose hairs all white, and his fake hair flapping. Age didn't matter when your last name was Magnificent. "Girl," Marco said, all quiet like, like we's the only two in the theater that day, "You'll be crawling on your hands and knees to work here one day. Beggin' to do anything for a job. Mark my words. Just don't get fat on me." He walked off, cape swishing, still laughing and leaving me small enough to fit into a box of toothpicks.

When I next saw Momma, I was 'fraid to look her in the eye. Marco's words kept playing in my ear like he was beside me, but you can't push away bad thoughts. So I sat with them swarming around me like mosquitos, making me itchy and sick. Momma was smoking like them cigarettes were air and she was drowning. I learned from Momma that you can't cling to anyone who's going under, they'll just take you down with them. So I looked elsewhere. The other women were whispering, looking at me and back at Momma. I wondered if they'd start treating me mean like they did my Momma. If they saw Marco talking with me, being close with me. If I made them jealous or worse, made my Momma jealous of me. I disappeared for the rest of the day.

That night's performance, Momma screamed as the blade hit her foot. Blood started running down the cut in the box, and one of the stage assistants fainted. People were sent home. Told they'd get their money back. Backstage, Marco told Momma that she was too damn fat to be his saw-in-half lady while I held pressure on her foot. Told her she was a useless old hag while the medics wrapped it up. Told her she'd never work in this town again while Momma lit one of her cigs. Told her she was fired while she blew smoke in his face, disappearing as they wheeled her away.

Momma was the magician all along, saving her best trick for last. Turned out Momma heard what “Marco the Maggot” said to me that afternoon. She wasn’t gonna fit into anyone’s box no more and left a wee bit dangling outside of it. Turned out cutting into a bit of your foot wasn’t fatal but bled like crazy. But still good enough to find out that Marco wasn’t insured and got into a heap of trouble. Turned out the other assistants didn’t like to be paid less and less to deal with more of his drinking, his yelling, his manhandling. They supported Momma like she was their own. Turned out that an “All Female Magical Review” was just what the town wanted. I liked cutting my Momma in half every Saturday night, Sunday afternoon, and sometimes on weeknights when there’s no school the next day, ‘cause Momma wants to make sure I get my full education, cause there’s no telling what magic I’m capable of when I’m full grown.



Peter F. Crowley

Knife

The smoke was thick and acrid; a yellowish-orange sky coughed down.

There was a church steeple in the town center that faded in and out of the haze.

A young girl wandered outside, towards the raging conflagration, where the verdant lawn met a wizened forest, which stretched on for miles behind her house. Instructed by her parents to embrace the Apocalypse, she walked into the flames and disappeared.

Jeremy pumped gas while intermittently coughing into a wet rag. He got the bare minimum to get him back to his apartment in the center.

As he walked into his flat, he found his roommate, Caitlin, drinking orange juice out of the carton.

“Ok, I own it now. I’ll buy us another,” she said when she saw his face redden.

Jeremy felt his sinuses caving in on themselves. He grimaced as he returned to his bedroom where he used an inhaler.

Brian, a thin-faced, white man, looked at himself in the mirror, smiling as he eyed his outfit. He wore army fatigues that were his father’s and a belt holding a sharp pumpkin carver on one side and a serrated kitchen knife on the other.

He walked towards the town center as floating ash fell from the sky. Some people he passed were packing their things into their cars, while a few watched him from their windows. He strode with the gait of a soldier down the middle of the street.

It was a perfect time for him: the police station had been evacuated before being engulfed by the forest fire. Brian knew that if *his time* should ever come, the target would be a school or the small set of apartment buildings in the center; they ensured the largest number of people in one place. Since school was cancelled, there was only one option available.

He rang Jeremy's buzzer from downstairs and Caitlin buzzed him in. He took out his Halloween carver before knocking, holding it behind his back. Caitlin opened the door, smoking a cigarette. She took one look at him and snickered.

Brian lunged at her and jabbed her in the neck with the carver. She clutched the wound as blood spewed out and, with her other arm, tried to regain balance. Brian pulled her towards him, spun her around and stabbed her in the back, then brought her to the stairway and threw her over.

Having seen this from their apartment, Jeremy darted towards his room, opened the window and climbed down the fire escape, while peering up. The strange man who had stabbed his roommate was nowhere in sight. When Jeremy jumped off the bottom of the ladder, the thin-faced man, with a large yellow mole on his cheek, stood smiling before him and pounced towards Jeremy with a kitchen knife.

Jeremy, a former high school running back, pivoted to the side, avoiding the knife. He ran to his car with Brian only a few feet behind.

Once inside the car, Jeremy switched on the locks.

Brian stood outside the car with arms folded and a slight grin as Jeremy drove away.

Before long, there was a thunderous noise coming from Jeremy's car and he felt the car not obeying the floored gas pedal. A flat tire! Despite the inconvenience, Jeremy was able to amble along for a bit until the tire's rim broke off and the car would go no further.

Brian trotted with the casual air of a jogger, though with a kitchen knife in hand. He gave a quick wave to the people gazing out their windows as he passed.

Jeremy was still in his car hoping it would go forward when Brian knocked on the window and waved. Brian's countenance changed as he shattered the front side window with his elbow and thrust the kitchen knife at Jeremy. Jeremy backed away to the passenger seat and bolted out the door. The only direction that he could run was towards the flames.

He had not gone more than a few yards when he glanced over his shoulder and saw no one. There was only an empty road with ranch-style houses spread out on either side.

Jeremy's cough grew intense and he could hear himself struggling for breath. He paused for a moment to use his inhaler and walked to the nearest house; he had to get out of the smoke.

After knocking on the front door, it creaked open. He went through the living room to the kitchen where he found a family sitting around a table and singing “Happy Birthday” to a young girl. Jeremy waited until the song ended before he told them about someone chasing him and for them to call 911.

The parents smiled at him and shook their heads as if he was a silly child. The girl kept glancing at him, making him a bit on edge. Then she stared at him fixatedly. Jeremy tried to indulge her, thinking she wanted a staring contest.

“Would you like to cut the cake?” the father asked the daughter.

She nodded and took the knife, not breaking her gaze from Jeremy.

When he blinked, the girl and her family vanished.

Brian appeared at the refrigerator across the room, with his back to Jeremy. When Brian turned around, the gleaming pumpkin carver and kitchen knife became visible at his sides. Brian walked slowly towards Jeremy on tiptoes, glancing back and forth from his tiptoed feet to Jeremy, laughing quietly.

Why is it taking for ever for him to get to me? Just get it over with already. Kill me! Do it!

There was a loud rap at the door. Was that the police?

Brian looked alarmed and leapt at Jeremy with the pumpkin carver.

The knock grew louder. Jeremy found himself in a swirling tunneled space, feeling like he was stuck in an endless washing machine.

Then he felt something sharp piercing into his neck.

This is what it must be like to die.

He heard his name being called.

Maybe I’m in a hospital and they’re trying to save me. Or maybe it’s my dead father...no, wait...

He rubbed his eyes and looked around. Caitlin had walked into his bedroom.

She had a furrowed brow and asked, “You ok?”

Jeremy gawked at her.

“I heard you shouting in here. Must’ve been a bad dream, huh?”

“Yeah. I guess.”

“Oh hey, now’s probably not the best time, but I wanted to introduce you to my new boyfriend.”

A man wearing army fatigues came into the room. His lips curled upwards as he saw Jeremy’s face whitening. With one hand behind his back, Brian stepped forward and put his other hand out to shake Jeremy’s. Jeremy didn’t budge. With a decisive lunge, Brian plunged the pumpkin carver deep into Jeremy’s neck. Jeremy’s eyes rolled backwards and blood gushed out onto the white bed sheets.

“I didn’t think he would take it that hard, really. I knew he had a crush on me, but still,” Caitlin said, fixing her long black hair as she looked into the mirror behind her roommate’s bed.

“What a scumbag,” Brian muttered.

Looking down into a rotting, hollowed-out tree stump, Jeremy had watched the scene unfold. He glanced in either direction and saw the forest fire closing in.

I need to wake up. I just need to wake up!



Rebecca Field

In the Age of AI, the Former Hand Model Finds Herself Unemployed

Friday night. She checks her phone for messages again, slide-taps the screen closed with her index finger.

It's been increasingly difficult getting work lately. Since the development of AI tools that can generate realistic hands without adding extra fingers, just about anyone can hold up the latest soft drink or model some jewellery, if required. Hands covered with age spots, veins bulging, nails bitten to the quick; AI erases all imperfections. The photographed hand is merely a scaffold, ready to be airbrushed and manicured with the click of a few buttons.

She's hungry for something salty, something rich and filling; a noodle broth maybe. Her former husband was a great cook, she misses his homemade katsu curry. Meal preparation was one of the practical tasks she was happy to delegate to him. All those years spent protecting her assets: forbidden from chopping vegetables, decorating, opening cans with ring pulls. She never learned to play tennis or volleyball, never went backpacking or used public transport, never used a screwdriver or a hammer or a cleaver. Activities like these were stipulated in the insurance contract she signed when her career took off. She got used to the fleece-lined gloves she wore outdoors, kept her hands pale, soft and unblemished. But now she's alone and can't so much as open a can of soup for dinner, can't bring herself to lift the metal ring; she might break a nail, or worse. She gets a sick feeling in her stomach just looking at the array of organic soups she bought last week with their garish depictions of vegetables. She throws them all in the trash, dials for another takeout she can't afford.

At the height of her career, her hands were insured for half a million dollars. She acted as a hand double for the most famous models and actresses, cupped the chins of women with faces much more beautiful than her own, caressed the bodies of their stunt double lovers. She slipped on diamond rings, slipped off satin nightgowns over dainty wrists, wondering if there was a woman alive who had it all: the perfect face, hands, body, voice. Every woman has some part of herself she hates.

She met her former husband, the C-list actor, at an after-show party. Their hands met as she reached for a glass of Champagne. He remarked on their softness, laughed when she told him about their role in the movie they'd just seen. He said he'd go back and watch it again, freeze-frame every shot of her hands. He took her left hand in his right, turning it over and over, touching it to his lips, like a perfect shell washed up on a beach.

Her apartment is stacked with unpacked boxes. The walls feel too close, the rooms cramped and cluttered. Her kitchen overlooks a communal courtyard with benches nobody sits at. In the centre, a lone tree she doesn't know the name of. Today a plastic bag is caught in its lower branches, flapping in the breeze like a captured butterfly.

Previously, she employed a cleaner, someone else to deal with interior décor and storage solutions. Her husband opened the drink cans, accompanied her to parties, took care of the things she couldn't. Her earnings afforded them a certain lifestyle, until they didn't. Still, hand modelling never felt like real work, it felt like getting away with something that might catch up with her eventually. Only now that it has, there's nothing else she's trained for, no other part of her that feels worthy.

After dinner she loads her plate and fork into the dishwasher, cleans down the surfaces wearing rubber gloves, moisturises for the fifteenth time. Despite her best efforts, her hands have aged. She's been in the business for twenty-five years. Logically, she understood this might happen; her hands would fall out of favour, replaced by those firmer and smoother. There is a market for older hand models of course, advertising things like mobility aids, gadgets to open jars and cans (oh the irony) and knitting projects. Presumably the AI tools have that covered too. She never could save for a rainy day, or imagine a future self with an aging face and hands to match. She'd hoped her former husband would have got his big break, the movie role he'd been grasping for, but when the money ran out so did he.

The former hand model sits on her bed, buffs the edges of her nails with emery boards of varying abrasiveness, massages her cuticles with a special oil. The upstairs neighbours are banging cupboard doors and crashing pans, cooking together perhaps. She slips on a pair of bamboo-fibre mittens, lies back, places her hands on her ribs and closes her eyes.

Maybe tomorrow she'll get the call she's been waiting for, her agent will turn up something. If not, she'll call her former husband, invent some pretence to have him come over. His acting career has taken a downturn of late, she's heard through the grapevine that he's single again. They need each other now more than ever, he just needs to see it. They fit, like hands in gloves.



Rola Elnaggar

The Silverfish



It seems like it was yesterday that Naya saw a silverfish crawl across the hallway of her family home. She thought they only existed in Egypt. It turns out that no matter how far she goes, they find her. She can cross oceans and still find one creeping down the wall of her NYC apartment in the middle of the night.

The sight of a silverfish slithering through the room used to scare her. She always asked her mother to get rid of it. She wouldn't dare enter a room where it once existed. She could never fall asleep unless she knew it was gone.

She never really got close to one until... *now*. She is staring at it, observing it squirm in fear. It's all alone, trying to escape her. Little does it know she is just as scared. Should she kill it? Squish it like the bug it is? Crack that silver-scaled body and watch its antennas and bristletails flail for one last cry for help?

Squishing it might feel good, but it's only temporary, and she has never killed one before.

Naya is looking at the silverfish, but she is watching a little Naya getting a piggyback ride from her dad. Little Naya was on top as her dad crawled across the floor in search of her lost earring. A black silverfish came suddenly running from under the couch, startling her and making her lose her balance. Naya can still remember the metallic taste of blood in her mouth when her bottom lip was busted open on the corner of the table.

If she split her lip open now, there is no dad around to stitch it back. Such ideas keep her up at night much longer than what the mere presence of a silverfish used to do.

Up close, the silverfish seems harmless. A stealthy nocturnal life. A life that will progenerate and infest her little apartment if not dealt with immediately. It carries traces of home. Did it follow her, or was she seeking it?

When you kill it... do you kill an insect or a memory?

Roopa Menon

A Touch of Tikka

“Was today Tuesday or Wednesday?” I panicked, stumbling out of bed. For the last three months, time was a blur. Weekends only existed in calendars. My husband looked up from his newspaper. Steam, thin as ribbon, rose from his cup of chai. “Today is Sunday. You need to relax,” he said. I rubbed my eyes. I hated that five-letter word. I couldn’t, he knew that. Before I could coin a caustic comeback, I saw my daughter curled in bed, her hands wound around her favorite toy. I studied her face. I was trying to remember the last time I kissed and hugged her. I planted a kiss on her cheeks that smelled faintly of cookies and chocolate. Phone buzzed. It was time to wrestle with work.

Your writing is strong. I love how you use pauses in your sentences, they said at the first review. Their voice was kind but doubt glistened on their eyebrows like gossamer.

My mother loved to adorn my forehead with a vermillion-colored tikka with reddish flecks before every important event in my life. It was her way of wishing me luck and protection. I clung to this ritual long past my school and college years. But on the first day of my latest new job, I had forgotten to follow my mother’s instructions and apply them. Instead, I found myself reaching for baby-pink-colored antacid during meal times. I should have known then.

You will have to write a lot, sometimes on the fly, they said at the second review. There was a shadow of a smile on their faces. I nodded eagerly.

Yes, there was writing. Words flowed at first. I felt a thrill and satisfaction. Then it stopped. Writing blocks are treacherous vines. It starts slowly; first, no image creeps into your mind, sentences are scarce and time slows down. Soon, you are staring at a white blank page, caught in its blinding vortex. You never realize it until the vines are wrapped tight and you can’t breathe. You try everything: from caffeinated drinks, long walks to even writing crystals. But nothing arrives and you are left alone in the terrifying company of your deadlines that rise like a tsunami.

Your answers are generic, they said during another review. They paused and grinned at me. Somewhere in my underbelly, I felt a sharp slice. But I ignored it and grinned back.

They loved to watch me suffer. Every day, by noon, the bile in my stomach swilled around. When I Whatsapped my doctor for new antacids, he Whatsapped a photo of a sieve. “If you don’t stop, you could use your stomach as one.” He loved to crack corny jokes. Usually, I would send a polite smiley. Not that day. In response, I popped an antacid from my old stock.

There were no questions during the fourth review, only meandering conversations punctuated with smiles, leaving me on a cliffhanger.

“Ma, did you know next Wednesday is Reading Day? Anya and I have been chosen to read a chapter. Her mum is coming. Can you come too?” My daughter asked, her mouth covered in toothpaste foam, and eyes warm with hope. I helped her rinse her mouth and said I’ll try without meeting her eyes. “Did you ask Pa?” But she looked away, her shoulders slumped. My heart swelled in pain as did my stomach; I tried not to think of antacids.

I was no longer in control. It was free fall. En route, I dreamed of antacid confetti—pinks and blues. My hands were shaking as I poured myself a glass of water. The water was salty. I realized I was tasting my tears and not the water. I cupped my wet face and waited for my heart to stop beating.

During the last review, they said they were keen to set me up for success. I believed them. Their voices were pure and warm like sunlight.

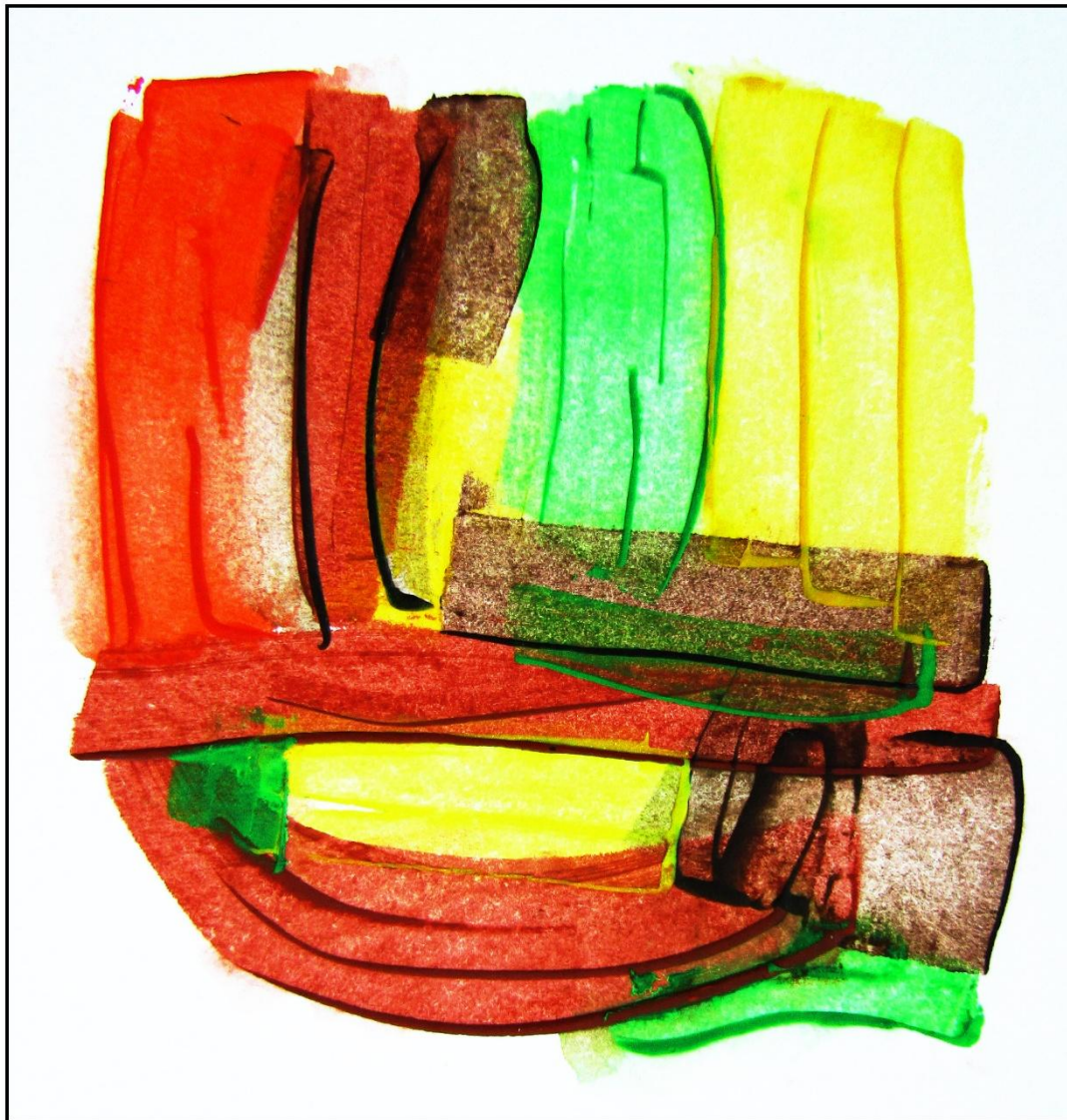
On a Tuesday, a week after my final review, they said, they were letting me go. *Sorry, it isn’t working out*, they said. I was staring at a well-knit Gucci bag. It was over. I could now breathe. On my way home, I rolled down the taxi window and emptied all the antacids from my bag, leaving a pinkish-blue mark on the tyres of the cars rumbling down the road. I pressed my face against the window. The pinkish-blue powder had turned into a tikka. I blinked back my tears and looked at the skies. An auspicious omen—exactly what I was looking for. Of beginnings, freedom, and life.



Michael Moreth

Strokes

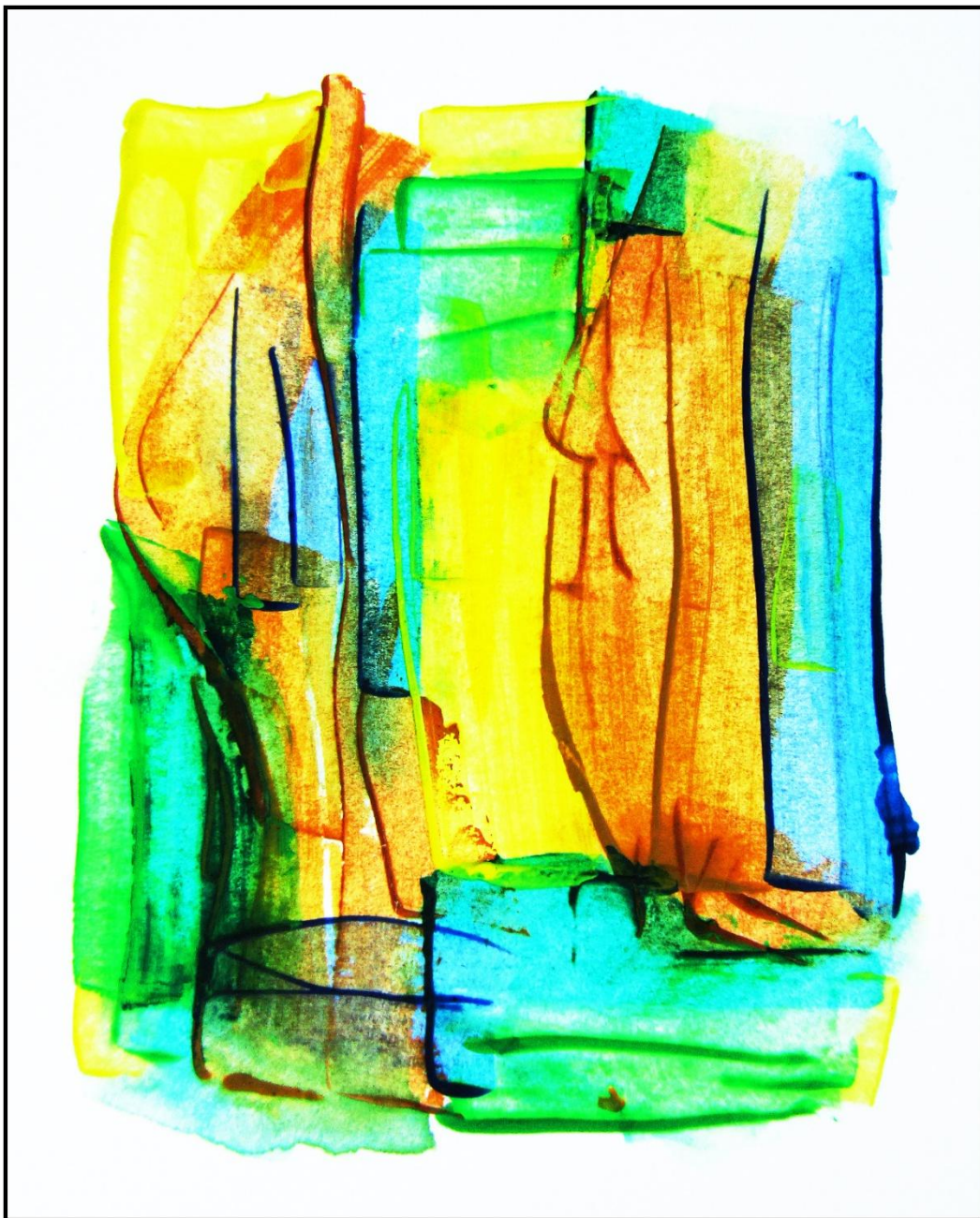
These are abstract watercolor paintings.



Dignified



Endearment



Foresighted

Jaime Alejandro Cruz

The Winding Down

Characters:

Ruthie Lloyd: 30s, older sister.

Landon Lloyd: 30s, younger brother.

Place: An empty house, with a backdoor that looks out to a vast Wyoming brushland.

At Rise: *The Lloyd House in a small Wyoming town. The home is empty save for a chair and packed water bottles stacked to the side like a tower.*

There's a wide door to the backyard, overlooking wild sagebrush steppe that undulates toward the horizon. A massive ocean of rolling hills and brush. The edge of humanity.

Ruthie Lloyd (30s), the older sister, yanks a water bottle from a pack. She rips the plastic away and balls it up, and the shrill crinkling bounces off the walls as she discards the plastic ball like a displeased cat.

Landon Lloyd (30s), the younger brother, carries a light suitcase as he enters.

Silence separates them.

Ruthie sips from a bottle and leers into the distance.

RUTHIE: See the storm out there? They never linger.

LANDON: I'm leaving, Ruthie.

RUTHIE: The storms. They scurry east. I wish the rain would come.

LANDON: What do you want storms for?

RUTHIE: I planted tomatoes again this summer, next to my squash.

LANDON: Any luck?

RUTHIE: Squash went well. Tomatoes came out small. Still sweet, though.

LANDON: They seem delicate.

RUTHIE: No, they mature quickly. Small windows to grow anything, but tomatoes seem to know that.

LANDON: Right. But you need longer seasons.

RUTHIE: I'm not moving, Lan.

LANDON: Forgive the advice, it's involuntary.

RUTHIE: I should be the one dishing out the advice.

[Pause.]

RUTHIE: Landon. Sorry.

LANDON: I don't mind, call me whatever.

RUTHIE: It must be painful to be this civil. You weren't civil last time.

LANDON: I never meant to imply you should abandon your life—

RUTHIE: —So you've said.

LANDON: Can I explain myself, do you mind? What are you looking at?

RUTHIE: Don't tell me I could have left anytime. I could have spoken up, I have lists of all I could have done besides stay here but please: feel free to prescribe me your list of coulda-shoulda's...

[Pause.]

RUTHIE: Those clouds are indecisive today.

LANDON: We can talk, you know?

RUTHIE: Yes. Thanks for the offer.

LANDON: I won't be here tomorrow—

RUTHIE: —You weren't here yesterday either. I'll manage.

LANDON: Ruthie, I should be the one getting an apology here!

[Landon stands to make his rebuttal, stops short of erupting at her. He walks out.]

[She sits on the floor and looks to the horizon.]

[Landon re-enters.]

LANDON: I have a therapist.

RUTHIE: Good for you.

LANDON: His name is Jonathan O'Shaughnessy.

RUTHIE: Sounds expensive.

LANDON: I can never spell it. He's helping me manage my temper.

RUTHIE: Does he charge you by the bulk?

LANDON: What?

RUTHIE: Seems a bit unfair for a therapist to charge the same for the easy clients and those who have problems by the bulk.

LANDON: I have a handful of normal concerns—

RUTHIE: You certainly do, who doesn't struggle with their temper?

LANDON: —and he's being compensated fairly. Trust me.

RUTHIE: Must be worth the pennies.

LANDON: You bet he is, I have a goddamned outstanding therapist and we're making progress! Are you happy with yourself?

[Pause.]

LANDON: Would have been nice to have kept the furniture. There's money in the furniture.

RUTHIE: It wasn't your furniture to keep.

LANDON: I didn't say that, for Christ's sake: I'm not coming after you with any of this, where pray tell are we supposed to sit?

RUTHIE: Thought you were leaving. A few more minutes of standing won't hurt you.

LANDON: Right. It must feel lovely to see me leave a day early, then. Must be a tremendous relief for you.

RUTHIE: Yep.

LANDON: Did you forget how to talk to people?

RUTHIE: Forgive me, I must have tossed out my manners with my dead father's belongings and other such trash.

LANDON: I can almost materialize in real-time the cross you have chosen to bear.

RUTHIE: I don't think you understand the aftermath of a hoarder's life.

LANDON: It would have been nice to get a sense of that tragedy, seems a foreign one to me at this point. My own father's hoarding.

RUTHIE: You don't get to call yourself the cavalry, Landon: Late or not, cavalries eventually arrive to save the day. Where were you?

LANDON: Had I known—

RUTHIE: —What was there to know you didn't already know?

LANDON: Ruthie, I'm trying to understand—

RUTHIE: —What is there to understand? You can't wash your hands of family only to arrive at the 11th hour under the banner of responsibility. Frankly, I don't know why you bothered coming here at all.

LANDON: So because we've had our differences I don't have your permission to grieve? I can't grieve with you?

RUTHIE: You said you wanted to stop by the house one last time, so here you are. Enjoy yourself.

LANDON: I would have appreciated a little warning before seeing the place so empty like this.

RUTHIE: What are you so broken up about? It's stuff.

LANDON: It's his stuff. And mom's before him: Gone!

RUTHIE: Were you hoping for a memento? A trinket of your bygone era to present to your coastal friends over cocktails?

LANDON: Something to remember my father by!

RUTHIE: Sure, a trophy of the past. Nostalgia's a great hobby.

LANDON: You had no right to destroy what was left of his life—

RUTHIE: If you knew anything about Dad...

LANDON: —And I don't do cocktails!

RUTHIE: All the same I want you to look at this house, bare like bone peeled from flesh: take a good look.

LANDON: What are you on about?

RUTHIE: You say you want to understand? Here you have it: You're not welcome here. You stared at your father who broke his body for you, building gas pipelines all across Wyoming in the dead of winter and said, I'm better than this. Better than you, Dad. Better than all of this.

LANDON: I've said some things I regret, but I have been actively—

RUTHIE: —Yes, it was your temper, bless you for being so brave and open about it.

LANDON: If I knew anything about him, and I do: It's that he loved his son 'til the end. And he would have wanted me there.

RUTHIE: Well, you weren't. But I was. And lo and behold he reached out to Mom in his dying delusion and left me to tend to his body, and his bills, and the debris of his life. Did he mention you? Not once in the last four months. If you had any decency you would have kept your promise and stayed high and far above us, where you claim to belong.

LANDON: I just... I just wanted to say goodbye, Ruthie.

RUTHIE: See the problem, Lan? You are a true sentimentalist.

LANDON: Please don't...

RUTHIE: From the day you came into this world, we knew straight away your heart's compass ran counter to all of us. You saw differently, you felt everything deeply. You found a tall sunflower swaying in the wind and your joy was a religious experience. Someone made a face at you and you felt the rejection in your bones. And I bet you must have felt your ambitions much more intensely than anyone else around here.

LANDON: There were plenty of sunflowers out back, weren't there?

RUTHIE: Not anymore.

LANDON: Look, why don't you take a break and spend a few days out in California with us? I'll take time off work and we'll go to the beach? Callie would love to meet you—

RUTHIE: —No need for the olive branch, I'm sure you and Callie are a match made in sun-kissed California heaven and a sight to see out in the waves, but I've already inconvenienced you enough.

LANDON: I'm not going to take offense to that.

RUTHIE: It's not bait.

LANDON: Take time off work. I'll get you a plane ticket when we get to Denver. Come with me.

RUTHIE: Why in the world do you keep thinking I want to leave?

LANDON: Because you've become miserable and you're rotting away here and you can't even drink the water and I'm trying my best to mend what's left of our family, Ruthie. I swear to God I haven't been there for anyone and I beg you please come with me.

RUTHIE: You weren't here when the tap water caught fire.

LANDON: I know.

RUTHIE: See the ridge to the left there? Where the storm is headed? A couple years after you left, there were crews working at a well site over there. If you squinted hard you could see them from here. Dad would come out and drink his coffee, feeling like his job followed him into retirement. The first time I realized something was wrong, Dad was standing there in September, drinking his coffee out there. He collapsed as he watched the sun rise. He felt his day was about to begin, but it became a sunset out of the blue.

LANDON: They shouldn't have been fracking that close to town—

RUTHIE: —I'm trying to tell you something.

LANDON: Go ahead sis, tell me once again the cancer deaths in this town are unrelated to the drilling!

RUTHIE: Maybe your therapist can improve your listening skills. You're still insufferable.

LANDON: Ruthie, that company poisoned this town! Maybe you should start listening before it's too late.

RUTHIE: Keep your narrative. Whatever alleviates your suffering, do it. But not here.

LANDON: You're delusional if you don't believe natural gas fracking 20 miles north of here didn't destroy the water table, and your father.

RUTHIE: Indignance is fashionable but it can't undo years of indifference. Again I ask: Where were you?

LANDON: Even if I was here, what was I supposed to do? How could we know? When these companies and the town council and the mayor said nothing—

RUTHIE: —You don't have to blame the company for your father's passing. It was his time, Lan.

LANDON: We have time, Ruthie. Spend some time away from here. Please.

RUTHIE: What makes you think I have time?

LANDON: What do you mean?

[Pause.]

RUTHIE: I used to look at this landscape and imagine fairy tales that took place here. Fantasies about protectors of the earth...

LANDON: Ruthie, answer me.

RUTHIE: But this land is beautiful. It has always been a blank canvas begging for something new. No one gets in the way of change.

LANDON: Ruthie, what's wrong?

RUTHIE: Lan. I'm gonna be here just a little bit longer, and I'm going to sketch the land. I'm going to spend my time like I used to.

LANDON: Is it cancer? Is it cancer like Dad, Ruthie—

RUTHIE: —It's okay. It's okay, Lan.

LANDON: How can you say that?

RUTHIE: Listen: Dad used to say the land is there for us. For the taking. The land is a canvas. For us to reap and sow. The land is a gift from God...

LANDON: Ruthie stop for a moment—I can't leave you like this!

RUTHIE: Yes you can. You have left time and again and again.

LANDON: That was a mistake—

RUTHIE: —It's okay, Lan.

LANDON: I don't want to go back: I need you in my life you're my blood, Ruthie! While there's still time!

RUTHIE: Stop it!

[Pause.]

RUTHIE: ...Will you and Callie ever have kids?

LANDON ...What?

RUTHIE: Have you thought about kids?

LANDON: Um, no. Yes.

[Pause.]

LANDON: No kids. I got the, procedure—

RUTHIE: —You got the snip?

LANDON: I...

RUTHIE: It's okay. I'm not judging. Good for you. I get it.

LANDON: You do?

RUTHIE: The dating pool isn't much around here, so I probably would have done the same too. If it came to that. It didn't.

[A long silence.]

LANDON: What now?

RUTHIE: Will you take my advice? As your older sister?

[Landon surrenders to her with a nod. Directionless, like a child.]

RUTHIE: This is the third time we've spoken in fifteen years. You don't belong here anymore, but I do. And it's time for you to leave.

LANDON: But what about the bills and the house? What about—

RUTHIE: —You disowned us first, Lan. We're not your concern, haven't been for a long time. We're winding down, this family of ours? We're going extinct. Us. Right here. Just like this and every other boom-and-bust town in the region, just like cultures of old that you teach in your Social Studies class, just like empires we revere. Soon enough the land will reclaim all,

sun-bleached bones half-buried in dirt and brush, and there will be no one left. No one left to tell us apart from the earth we once believed to have tamed. Then we won't worry about storms at all. All families go extinct, Lan. Some just get a head start.

[Pause.]

RUTHIE: It's okay, Lan. You are not my brother anymore. Say goodbye.

LANDON: Goodbye, Ruthie.

RUTHIE: You are free of us.

[She hands him a water bottle for the road. He nods like a stranger, picks up his suitcase, and exits.]

[She eyes the empty house all around her, then stares at the vast landscape. The last sentry standing braces for the end times.]

Blackout.



Michael Smith

I have been a hobby photographer for many years, collecting images from travels far and wide. The fundamental principles have always been—no filters, no digital tricks—what you see is what the camera sees, pure and simple.



Old Mill at Sunset



Berlin Sky

Nuala McEvoy

City Vibes

The changing lights and shades in cities have always fascinated me. A city can look so different throughout a day. The pulsing heavy vibes of a city sweating under the heat, traffic, crowds and noise at the end of a hot summer's day is what I tried to portray in this painting. I used acrylic paint and marker pen on canvas to bring this picture to life.



City Vibes

This painting is currently on display in The Cavendish Centre, 44 Hallam Street, London.

Sai Pradhan

Katha Chatur

Hello,

I'd like to submit a review of A.S. Byatt's *The Matisse Stories*. I read it recently in my quest to read more of her writing after she passed away. A woman often disparaged for her complex interests, who refused to be pigeonholed, she came into public fame somewhat surprisingly. As we look back on the reception of her works (now commonly lauded), I thought that this, a smaller and slightly sidelined work of hers, was worth highlighting.

Here is all the relevant information:

Title: *The Matisse Stories*

Author: A.S. Byatt

Name of press: Chatto & Windus Limited

Publication date: 1993

My name: Katha Chatur

Email: kc949838stories@protonmaildotnet

My biography follows below. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Katha Chatur

Biography

Katha Chatur is a writer and artist who lives in the foothills of the Himalayas. She used to lead a global technology company where she rose through the ranks on merit alone and was the highest paid employee at every stage of her corporate climb. Her art has focused on female figures; it immediately obtained both financial backing and public recognition. She has published three bestsellers, and fiction and nonfiction pieces in the Hellsink Review, Year of the Capybara, Sea of Aggression, The 10:50 Rajgadh Express, Clever Stories, GoodArtOnly, Yesteryear, Duckbill Slate, 23rd Panic Station, and the Flying Cephalopod. She has four degrees, plays the Sarod, and speaks eight languages. She has two sets of twin girls named

Muriel, Spark, George, and Eliot, two rescued Ragdolls named Tristram and Shandy, and one unfortunately purchased Tibetan mastiff named Italo. Her work has been heralded as both erudite and approachable, humble and soaring, Marxist, and hypercapitalist. She bakes a mean pumpkin bread, heads her children's parent school boards, and runs high altitude marathons in her spare time. She suffers from imposter syndrome, but sometimes has a visual flash in which she imagines she is not only capable of writing a clever story but manages to look sophisticated while doing it, head inclined sagely towards her laptop.

Review: A.S. Byatt's *The Matisse Stories*

Title: *The Matisse Stories*

Author: A.S. Byatt

Name of press: Chatto & Windus Limited

Publication date: 1993

My name: Katha Chatur

Word count: 555



The three stories that make up A.S. Byatt's collection, *The Matisse Stories*, are a clever exercise in ekphrasis and art criticism, elaborated as they are in meticulous detail with descriptions that are as "orotund and idiosyncratic" as the disquieting character of Professor Perry Diss is described in the third story, "The Chinese Lobster," a set of adjectives that neatly adhere to Matisse's art as well.

Each of the stories is linked to a specific Matisse piece as a primary anchor.

"The Chinese Lobster" is linked with Matisse's *Nymphe et Faune*, which depicts a voluptuous woman in congress with a hairy beast, with consent quite possibly absent, but in keeping with the times, hotly debated.

In the story, Peggi Nollett, a self-described "woman and student," has written to Dr. Gerda Himmelblau, "Dean of Women Students" at a university, that Professor Diss has critiqued her work on Matisse in an "extremely aggressive (sic) and destructive way," and sexually assaulted her. We understand that Dr. Himmelblau has set up an informal meeting with Professor Diss in a Chinese restaurant to discuss the accusation. The build-up to the horrific conversation she has to have with him, is built-up like a painting does over time: layers

upon layers, with contemplations and diversions in between, until the picture clarifies for the reader and becomes a comprehensible thing. It isn't pretty. It is flawed and full of lies.

"Poor little bitch" is Diss's jarring response to hearing the contents of the letter, which doesn't leave much room for doubt on his overall character. One might imagine he also called her difficult and added the words "who does she think she is."

Meanwhile, Nollett's critique of Matisse includes thoughtful observations of his sexism, remarking on his work's grotesque emphasis of female body parts that were thought to appeal to men, and how the women are depicted with faces that are "Blanks, like Dolls." Despite the chaotic set up of the letter that Nollett has written to Himmelblau, which we are meant to understand as a portrayal of her imbalanced mental health, it is clear Nollett is hitting on something substantive. Surprise, surprise, she isn't just hysterical.

Both Nollett and Himmelblau are hemmed in by Diss in their own ways: Nollett physically and academically, and as we learn, Himmelblau in several structural ways as well, including her inclination to invite him to a meal to informally discuss a serious matter which should have taken place formally, as an investigation.

This residency in awkward, constrained womanhood carries through in Byatt's first and second stories as well.

In the second story "Art Work," which is linked to Matisse's black and white reproduction, *Le silence habité des maisons*, which depicts "featureless" people as the opening of the story tells us, Byatt makes the link obvious with alacrity, telling us that the protagonist Debbie's daughter Natasha's face "has the empty beatific intelligence of some of Matisse's supine women." One might wonder if the women would object to being seen that way by anyone, but one is unfortunately stuck at simply wondering. One might also posit that there is nothing wrong with a woman at leisure, who refuses to have an expression on her face. What did the models think? What did Matisse intend? How did he see them? How did they feel to be seen?

We are drawn into the story of the Dennison household which financially runs on a woman, Debbie, who works at a magazine called "*A Woman's Place*," in an on-the-nose highlight of the theme. Debbie has put aside her creative desires to engage in a job under the thumb of a mediocre man to sustain her household, while her husband Robin has dedicated himself to his own pursuits robustly and with the unshakeable confidence of an average white male. A woman named Mrs. Brown has been hired to keep the domesticities flowing smoothly, as women are. The useful Mrs. Brown is remarkably withdrawn in sharing her

personal stories but attired in a profusion of extroversion, and as it turns out, the fabric is indeed, fabricated.

Matisse's *Luxe, Calme, and Volupté* makes several appearances in conversations, drawing the reader into Matisse's foray into fauvism, when he started distorting figures more than before. While Robin spends time condescendingly "educating" Mrs. Brown on artistic techniques, Byatt reveals that Mrs. Brown has been building a very creative art practice herself, stepping well beyond the figure the Dennison family believes she is, in a neatly inverted echo.

The final story, drawing to mind a contemporary, neatly narrated episode of Apple TV's *Roar* perhaps, is "Medusa's Ankle," linked to Matisse's *Nu rose*. *Nu rose* depicts a physically hyper-exaggerated, reclining woman, apparently allowing herself to be gazed at quite without evident concern or discomfort.

The protagonist of the story, Susannah, a middle-aged woman in conflict with her aging body, is quite the opposite. Perhaps all the female protagonists Byatt writes of, are under a male gaze structurally and otherwise, and can do no right when held to impossible standards by social design that does not serve them.

Susannah has a hard time looking at herself in the mirror at her hairdresser's, and is full of anxiety over what she perceives others see when they look at her. When the salon decor changes from a rosy hue to a grey-maroon modernity, and Lucien the hairdresser critiques his wife's thickening ankles which remind Susannah of her own aging body parts, she loses her decorum perhaps just as the salon has. She takes on a Medusa-like raging form in keeping with the story title, and smashes the mirror her image resides in.

In a surprising and disarmingly rare twist of solidarity, Lucien tells Susannah that he has often felt like smashing things himself "just to get out of it - like a great glass cage it is - and go out into the real world." Perhaps Susannah is destroying the "double consciousness" that women are theorized to experience. "A woman must continually watch herself," wrote the wise John Berger.

Through all three stories, Byatt exhibits her usual love for the minute details and behaviors that make up people, which readers find in her thicker tomes like *The Children's Book*, but in an admirably concise format. That format makes each story compulsively readable, like a filling but reasonable bite of a decadent dessert, or perhaps, more appropriately, a museum-goer's decision to focus attention on one piece instead of crowding time with too many. Her descriptions are deliberate strokes on a canvas that draw a reader in

to want to view what she's sketching with wide open eyes, with perhaps a hand outstretched to touch the material she unfurls, as she demonstrates its every fold and crease, warp and weft, turning it around in the light to show us its sheen or its tears.

Through her stories, Byatt asks us to ponder many questions on art and art process, universal ones that sneak into any thoughtful discussion of art. What is the purpose of representational, realistic art? What is truth, and what is not truth in art? What expectations of truth do we have in art and of artists? One might ask, what expectations of truth do we have of writing and writers?

We are left grappling with these larger, gaping questions even as we enter into the quotidian minutiae of the characters and their lives, their words, and their sounds. The salon music that Susannah tolerates, which is a “tinkling and tripping and dropping, quiet seraglio music, like sherbet,” and the outfit and jewelry of the gallerist, Shona McRury, who Robin Dennison is hoping to impress, consisting of “topaz ear-rings, little spheres on gold chains, that exactly match her eyes, and an olive silk suit, with a loose jacket and a pleated skirt, over a lemon-yellow silk shirt, all of which tone in impeccably with her eyes,” are just a few examples of the sumptuous details that serve to both add and subtract from the reader's attention.

There is so much color and shading across the stories, which forms the nod that Byatt elegantly gives to painters like Matisse with her own skillful wielding of literary brushes. We are taken on a walk past a palette of rose madder nails, ivory lacquer teeth, a sunny-yellow, butter-yellow, and buttercup-yellow “reproduction sauceboat from Monet's self-designed breakfast service for his house at Giverny,” decor described as the colour of “dried blood and instruments of slaughter,” fern-green cake dye, and even something unnamed that is a “peculiarly luscious new purple, like bilberry juice with a little cream swirled in it” that Debbie is trying to describe for her work. How could anybody drag their eyes away from such a profusion, created, as all creators do, out of everything real and nothing at all, to attempt to discern reality if there is such a thing?

At the conclusion, one is left in admiration of Matisse's art in spite of becoming aware of his less admirable qualities, a discomfiting notion indeed. Baudelaire, from whom Matisse borrowed the title “*Luxe, Calme, et Volupté*,” might have called us hypocritical readers. Then again, dear reader, l'ennui is the worst of miseries if we are to hear Baudelaire out, and perhaps discomfort and a few lies along the way may shake us out of it.

Salma Ahmed

The Shop Down the Street

It was the fifth of the month, but he couldn't remember what month it was. Maybe close to January, but far from December. The calendar next to him on the counter was stuck on the same date: 18th of May, 2020. It was 2022; at least he was sure of what year it was.

He stood in his usual spot that has become a daily routine in his life. He would fix his hand watch even though it didn't need any fixing; it was always stuck in the same place because of how tight he liked to wear it. The watch didn't even work anymore. Why? He couldn't really remember. But he liked to feel like time is frozen whenever he would look at his watch only to see that it was still 2:37 pm.

The trip to the kitchen wasn't something he enjoyed because he always feared that someone would come in and steal the cash register. This is why he bought a bell for the door one year after the opening. The first year was spent at the counter with him eagerly waiting for customers while his daughter and son waited patiently in the kitchen. When they were young, they wanted to learn everything he knew about cooking. So he taught them. He could still imagine the distant memory of the twinkle in their eyes as they listened to him explaining the right way to cut onions.

They didn't need to know that he never really knew how to cut onions. Just like he didn't know what is the right way to raise kids or the right way to run a sandwich restaurant. He also didn't know if wearing his shirt tucked in was the right way a restaurant manager/chef/cashier should wear his shirt. After 51 years on this earth, he was still an empty book where no lessons were written. He didn't know the right way to do many things that he suddenly became nothing. He is a passenger on a train going full speed and everyone is getting off while he is still thinking if this stop is the right one for him.

His phone didn't ring today or yesterday or the day before it. Marie, his wife, would usually call him to ask how are things going and he would always say, "I have to go. The shop is filled with people!" while staring at the empty red seats across him.

"She could be busy," he muttered to himself as he waited for someone to come and order something so that he can pretend he knew what was the right way to cut onions.

What was the right way to break the small mirror that used to hang on the wall? What was the right way to throw it in the trash bin under the counter? What was the right way to stare at the broken pieces laying there reflecting fragments of who he once was?

He didn't recognize the pieces of the man staring back at him with one eye in a small piece of glass. The lines on his face used to tell many stories and used to carry dreams. He had a dream of his shop becoming the best out there even if it took him years. The years passed but this status of being the best still seemed far away.

He stared at the ceiling once again and prayed: "Guide me to the right way to find success."

It was a prayer he was familiar with. His father used to say it in the darkness of their house after the electricity was cut off because of late bills. The shop was his way of trying to change fate. He didn't want to follow the footsteps of his father and work a job that didn't pay anything worth working for but still not being able to leave it. The tucked-in shirt of his father is a habit he carried with him into adulthood just like he carried his prayer. The watch he clasped tightly around his wrist was more fancy than the ribbon his little sister made for their father and made sure that he wears it every day; tightly as if the air would carry it away like it carried away the dreams of their father.

Mr. Shaun, that's what his neighbors called him, did everything he could think of to find his way to success. The remaining pennies in his wallet at the end of every week found their way into a black bag he kept under his bed. He would wait in the darkness of busy streets for any hurried traveler who could drop a dollar or two in his rush to hail a cab. The hard part was rushing as well to the spot where the dollars lay before anyone else claimed his prize. The "borrowed" dollars (he didn't like the word stolen) will then be added to his pennies in the black bag. He would do the same trip to the same streets every day to claim whatever he could find. He wished he was the one being borrowed from, that he had found the road to success where he will have to rush like all these people. He longed for the feeling of being busy with many things to do that you wish for a thousand hand. Instead, his road to success was one without lights or signs. His legs couldn't rush in this foreign land. Why didn't his father tell him that he wouldn't just inherit his habits, but will also have to walk the same road? One where there were no shortcuts and almost no end.

These thoughts of despair evaporated whenever he dropped new coins and papers into his black bag. By the end of every month, he would make the trip to the bookshop near his house. He bought all kinds of books talking on and on about how to find your way to success,

how to run a business, and how to cut onions. The sentences he read and repeated while his wife and kids slept peacefully (he liked to think that they, unlike him, knew what peace was) didn't seem to turn the lights on in his road.

The black bag was emptied every month and his brain was filled with words, but he still knew nothing. He still cut his hand while cutting uneven pieces of onions. The droplets of blood didn't seem real to him at times. For he felt like he didn't have any. If he didn't rush like the humans on the busy streets, if he didn't know how to cut onions or how to unveil the secrets of life, then how could he be a human? How can his skin feel like the skin of others when he feels like an intruder?

He didn't have a phone, but his family did; he made sure of that. When his daughter, May, asked him "Daddy, why don't you have a phone like us?" he told her, "I don't like these devices. They will take me away from you." He was also good at lying just like his father was.

Shaun could have found a new black bag to fill and find his way to a phone shop, but he didn't want to. He knew how to use these devices, but he didn't want to. For he wouldn't be able to stop himself from checking the roads of his fellows. All his classmates' names were itched into his memory along with the words of the useless books he read. And if he were to compare their journeys, their roads, he will find himself losing an undeclared race.

He was at the back of the line of life. He was no longer the bright student challenging fate, but he became the old man refusing defeat. If he raised the white flag would that make the world tell him its secrets? Will he know how to cut onions or how to have a good and happy family? Would he stop staring at his reflection in the broken mirror under the counter?

Another day passed, and Mr. Shaun still waited. He stood by the counter counting the heads of people passing in front of his shop. When he reached 352, he knew he had to do something. Anything.

He headed to the outside of his shop and waited. Maybe if he buffed his chest, he would look appealing. Maybe people would then want to try his restaurant. But he didn't have any chest to buff out. His skin was covering heaps of bones that were jutting out with how skinny he was. He could close his hand around his arm and still have more length to use. Sometimes, the sound of his stomach begging for food would be louder than the bustling street outside.

He tried to smile then. If he can't buff his chest then maybe he can smile. He did his brightest smile trying to remember what was the right way to smile. Should he show the entire set of his teeth or do a closed smile? When he remembered that it was too long since he

washed his teeth, he chose a closed smile. He hoped that his eyes twinkled the same way his kids' eyes twinkled when they still thought he held the secrets of the universe.

When he saw him coming down the street, he felt like all his problems would be solved now. He stared at his old classmate, Mark, as he was coming down the pavement with his wife and kids. Shaun already knew who they were. He knew their names, ages, hobbies, and more from the stalking he once did using May's phone. He almost asked a Photoshop expert to edit a photo of Mark and his family and replace their faces with those of his own family.

The only thing that stopped him was the lack of pennies in his bag.

The price for such a service cost more than what he saved in six months, and so, he had to use his imagination to replace the faces. Each time he tried, he wouldn't be able to put his face in the place of that of Mark. He wasn't able to dream of success for himself.

"Mark! Mark! Don't you remember me?" His excitement was evident once Mark reached the spot where the shop was, but it wasn't reciprocated.

"Shaun. What are you doing here?" Mark glanced right and left looking for something or someone. He talked hurriedly as if he had somewhere to go.

"I work here! I own this shop," he pointed at his dearest, and only, possession standing tall behind him. "Doesn't it look great?" he could already imagine Mark's excitement. He would ask to feature him in his weekly newsletter about spots to visit. Everything was going to change now.

Everything.

"Yeah, sure. Listen I have to go but it was great meeting you."

Shaun felt the world around him falling. His heartbeat increased just like Mark increased his footsteps as he walked away with his family. Suddenly, Shaun couldn't replace the faces of Mark's family with those of his own.

Suddenly, his imagination no longer worked.

The walk back into the shop was the longest one of his life despite the short distance. By the time he reached the counter, he was panting. The dizziness of the shock didn't stop him from opening the locked drawer and pulling out what he hoped he would never use.

As he put the gun to his head, he stared at his favorite seat in the shop.

It was the seat where his first, and last, customer sat.

On the 18th of May, 2020 at 2:37 pm Shaun thought his dreams would come true and that it was the first step to a filled restaurant. And finally, he accepted the truth. Finally, he accepted that Marie took the kids and left him.

The red seat was the last thing Shaun saw before fate took over.

The shop was suddenly filled with people. They rushed to see the end of another man who dared to dream. The noise of their screams was louder than the bustling street. The fan in the shop kept spinning as Shaun lay there. He wasn't there anymore to realize that he did have blood to spill; he had something to lose.

The last onion he tried to cut remained in the kitchen abandoned.

Shaun wasn't there to see his shop filled with people and noise. And Marie wasn't there anymore to call and ask about Shaun. Even if she called now, Shaun won't be there to answer her and finally say the truth in his words, "I have to go. The shop is filled with people!"



Slawka G. Scarso

Hunger

She walks into the bakery every other day. She goes when it's quiet, when he'll have time to talk. One loaf of bread and two pastries, she asks. Always the same. She watches him seal the bag of pastries with a heart-shaped sticker, wrap the bread in paper, caressing it gently before handing it to her. She likes to think he slows each gesture so they can chat longer.

They started with the weather, but soon moved to films, music, books. Recently, dreams.

When she talks, he listens.

At home, her husband munches the pastries and doesn't mind.



Stuart Docherty

The Pat Test

After we'd all shovelled the snow out of the pit, Dad got everybody to back up, line up around the edge of the hole, and watch. Day two of another Avalanche Safety Class. I held my shovel while the more energetic members of the class did all the digging, Dad calling out "lift from your legs, not your back" or "toss the snow down the mountain" without getting his shovel cold. When they had dug a section of the snow out deep enough for him to stand in with a flat wall at the far side, Dad took over. He sheared off a few layers from the plane at the back with his shovel, making it into a near-flat surface.

Dad drew his finger, bare-skinned, across the surface of the snow. I'd seen him do it many times before, but that time I saw all the layers beneath his finger sparkle.

"It's important," he said, turning, "to track the snowfall throughout the winter. Each of these lines represents a storm. Like the rings of a tree, they tell us the history of the snow as it piles up on top of the last storm. And if you know your history, you can make a good guess for the future." He winked at one of the girls, one of the only girls in the class, and flicked at one of the lines in the snow. Above it, all the concatenated layers of snow came rushing down over his arm.

He didn't grin when they all started oohing and ahing, but I knew he was smug. He waited for them to calm down again before pulling a saw out of his rucksack.

"What I'm about to show you is essential backcountry survival. If one of your buddies thinks he's too hot for this shit, then I suggest you find a new buddy." Dad drew the blade down a section of the snow, marking out a rectangular shape down from the surface into the wall of the pit. He took his time and made sure the section was cut free from the snowpack, getting down on his knees to check if the lines were level. Placing the beat-up old shovel on the topmost layer of snow, Dad put one hand on the surface and held the handle with the other. "We call this the pat test. I know you learnt this yesterday, so let me ask you how many times we should do this?"

One of the older guys in the front row raised his hand, but Dad pointed to the kid next to him. The kid was one of the seasonal workers, fresh into town that winter and still happy to shovel shit for the rich assholes as long as he could get to ski every morning. He looked around at all the faces as the group turned to face him.

"Three?" he asked, unsure.

“Three is correct.” Dad beamed at him and nodded. “One for each joint: the wrist, the elbow, then the shoulder. Place the shovel on top, apply the first tap, moving from the wrist, the second, moving from the elbow, then the last swing from the shoulder.”

Dad turned to the snowpack, lifted his hand from the blade of the shovel, from the wrist, and patted it back down.

“C’mon son, it’s not that big of a drop. I know you can handle it,” Dad says, gripping his poles tight. We’re standing at the top of an eastern slope staring down at what, for me, is new terrain. It is late January, and Dad has already achieved more than fifty days of skiing this winter, far more than anyone in his age group and most in mine. At fifty-two, he is in far better shape than his peers. Behind him, the wind picks up the dusting of snow from last night and swirls it around in the air. I cannot see home from here, only the rows and rows of snow-capped peaks that surround us. “This is that same terrain I showed you last night on the map.”

I look down the slope again, at the pastures of untouched snow. We are several thousand meters above sea level, several hundred above tree-line. He told me he had toured through this area before, though it was twenty or thirty years ago.

“Back when there weren’t any highways,” he’d said last night as we huddled in the hut. It was a familiar hut, but this part of the mountain is often too far to make in one trip.

Dad whacks at the snow with his ski pole, the metal whipping through the air. Small clumps of white flick from the basket as it reaches upwards. It makes a dull, flat sound as it hits the snow.

“Don’t you trust me?”

Dad’s hand hit the metal and compressed the top layer of snow, the fall from two nights before. Otherwise, the pillar he’d carved out was undamaged. He removed one hand from the shovel blade but still held the tool in place by the handle with the other.

“As you can see, no trouble. If we were to get anything here, the day out would be a definite no-go.”

The class was shifting from foot to foot, getting a little cool after the short hike and the digging. All around us, skiers and snowboarders were gliding down the mountain, basking in the bright winter sun. I heard someone talking beside us and watched as a group of kids rolled over a small mound of snow, a naturally formed ramp. They all scurried over it, one by one, going just fast enough to avoid scraping their gear.

“Of course, my son can answer that one.” Dad’s voice pulled me back to the class and I saw them all looking over at me, the question unheard lingering.

“Ah, well,” I said, running through his routine in the back of my mind, “hoarfrost?”

Dad raised an eyebrow and I saw some of the students smirk. I’d guessed wrong. “Not quite,” he said. “You’re getting a little ahead. But warming is important, we certainly need to keep abreast of any changes in the weather. The three I was looking for were the aspect, the snowpack, and the incline. We need to remember where we are and what we’re doing.”

He turned back to the shovel and placed his hand on the blade again. “Number two, from the elbow.” Dad bent his arm and let it fall back down.

Dad pushed open the door and let it slam into the cabinet. It rattled and bounced back at him.

“What’re you still doing down here? Why haven’t you got that suit on yet?”

He moved closer to me and snatched the waxing iron out of my hand, knocking the wax stick onto the floor. Skin singed against the hot plate and he dropped the iron, yelping and shaking his fingers in the air as the smell of flesh and burnt hair filled the room.

“Damn it, I fucking told you.”

“Dad, I just wanted to—”

“This is the ski club’s biggest meeting of the year and you’re dicking around down here twenty minutes before I told you we’re leaving?”

“But, Dad, I—”

Dad looked right at me, his jaw moving from side to side.

“Thirty-five years, Nick. Thirty-five years in this town. You know how important this is to me. Clean this shit up and be dressed and good to go in ten minutes.”

The iron sat on the floor, searing the rubber safety mat.

“And brush your fucking hair.” Dad marched out of the room, holding his burn and slamming the door behind him.

During the climb, after we had left our camp and started our ascent up the mountain, Dad stopped us in a clear patch of snow when the mountain levelled out. When he turned to look back at me, his head steaming in the crisp air, his smile was ear to ear.

“Look, there,” he said, pointing. “That’s a white-winged crossbill.” He was pointing to the top of a conifer tree where a plump, tawny, and greenish bird perched. It looked about before leaning down and pecking at a cone, wrenching free a seed.

“There, too,” he said again, turning my attention back down the slope. The snow was smooth, untouched by humans, but disturbed. A recess that had been refilled in the recent storm. “I’ll bet you fifty bucks that’s from a goat.”

He lifted one of his skis and flicked some snow in the air, delighting as it landed and rolled, picking up more snow and getting bigger, before stopping in the goat tracks. The crossbill departed at his movement.

“Son, I know you’re not quite old enough yet, but when we get back to the cabin tonight, I want to share a beer with you. You just gotta’ promise me not to tell your mom.”

I smiled and nodded.

Dad waved his hand and turned back to the trail. “Let’s get going and make it to the top before noon.”

Dad’s hand came down onto the back of the shovel again and the snow beneath compressed once more, but only the uppermost layers. He knelt and examined the damage.

“Another good sign. No clear fracture.” He turned and grinned at the class. They were mostly all smiles, taking in the wonder and excitement of learning. One or two at the edges had started to shiver and lose focus.

Dad stood up straight, hand still on the shovel’s lower handle, and waited for the class to fall silent.

“Like my son said before, hoarfrost, or surface hoar, can be a real problem. When a weakness forms, it’s often buried. Now it might compress, harden up. It might not. Can anyone tell me where we find it? What aspect?”

The class remained quiet.

“In the night or in the shade,” I called out.

Dad nodded. “Right you are, son, right you are.”

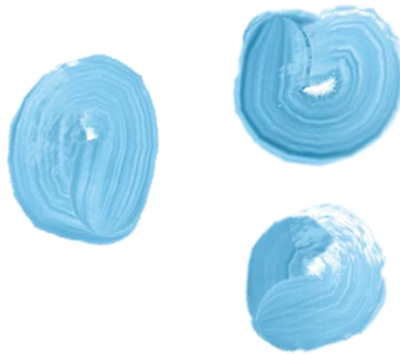
He turned back to this shovel and raised his arm again, this time from the shoulder.

“Number three, the biggest of the bunch.”

I am pulling at the handle of my shovel but the strap just won't seem to come undone. I think of all those safety videos, how most people don't survive more than fifteen minutes under snow, and my hands are shaking and the strap unclicks.

I am certain he is here, somewhere. My pole hit something and the transceiver said he was close. I was just above the crown when it broke, the snow yawning beneath my feet, when he was engulfed. For several seconds I saw him picked up and washed down the slope with the falling snow, just bobbing up near the surface. Then he disappeared. How long has it been now? How many minutes has it been? How long did it take me to take out my transceiver?

The air mists with my breath as I dig.



Susan H. Evans

Call of the Ring-Necked Dove

I scurry along an aisle past a gift shop selling miniature polar bears and moose tea towels. My heart skips a beat, eager to answer Jack London's call of the wild, contemplating the great frontier experience shining like a neon sign ahead of me.

In baggage claim, a bearded railroad conductor with a dark green angler vest, tee shirt, and barbeque Bermuda shorts, takes a giant step forward and says jocularly, "Welcome to Fairbanks!" He is my host, Dick Olofsson.

The airport misplaces my luggage, but returns it the next day after sifting through my undies for explosives. But never mind. I'm in the glow of Gold Rush country!



Dick's tan split foyer sits cozily in a shady, middle-class neighborhood. His wife, Yvette, and he could be matching salt and pepper shakers from a Christmas store: gnome-like with white hair, round bellies and rosy cheeks. I can almost hear the jingle of sleigh bells.

The next day, Dick—chipper as an emcee at a Friar's roast—drives me to the train museum. Through the small intestine of the small building, he leads me. Then almost with a drum roll and some soft shoe with a "ta da" finish, he dramatically unlocks the door guarding his treasure.

And there it is: a black, hulking, sooty monster gloomily hunkering down in a dusty garage. Dick exclaims that it is the famous Engine #1, the oldest steam locomotive in the Yukon (1899,) transported via an alien mother ship to Fairbanks in 1905 when gold was the rush in Fairbanks.

I try for enthusiasm. The engine, Dick says, is stoked up for special occasions.

Then he hands me a work schedule. I am to be both a volunteer sales clerk and amateur archivist.

Dick loaned me his small brown truck to get to the museum. Dog saliva streaked the windows.

Soon, I tie on a long, white, ruffled apron at the gift shop and ring up miniature trains and over-priced railroad caps to toddlers with sticky hands.

Otherwise, I'm in the back of the building, sitting on the floor, flummoxed by countless cardboard boxes. I'm to set up a filing system out of billions of sheets of paper tossed together willy-nilly related to the museum and Engine #1's history, plus cost estimates, correspondence, nail and newspaper clippings, and minutes of old board meetings hailing back to the ice cave days.

Lest I become too slothful, Dick has thoughtfully volunteered me to help Pete, a tubby, retired pilot, at the air museum, too. Fashioned to look like a gold airplane hangar on the outside, and unintentionally dark and crypt-like on the inside, the museum tells Alaska's aviation history through exhibits, old logbooks, maps, and vintage aircraft, chiseled out of shaved ice or dug out of frozen trash bins. Only ex-pilots visit.

Mostly, at both museums, I watch the clock with a high degree of professionalism, dying to abandon both mini-hells and exit underneath the moose antler archway out of the park.

After Dick and Yvette leave town, my twenty-year-old daughter flies in from Philadelphia for a week's visit. The lower states have record high temperatures and she takes a look around the tiny airport parking lot, breathes in the cool air, and sighs with relief at all the open space.

The next afternoon, we sail down the Chena River on a short cruise and view an Athabascan village, a mushing demonstration led by brained-washed canines, and hear more information than we wanted to about salmon fishing.

At Denali, on a stunningly bright day, four caribou wander by our tour bus and, later, a nonchalant moose sidles by with twins. As usual, Mount McKinley is shrouded in clouds, but I get a mosquito bite on my pinkie finger and behind my left ear in consolation. Estimators guess that Alaska has 17 trillion mosquitos. The tour guide says that mosquitos help pollinate wild flowers and provide food for migratory birds. I polli-hate them.

On the way back to Fairbanks from Denali, my daughter pulls off the road to pee, at my suggestion, since we are miles away from any outpost of civilization, as is most of Alaska. While I gaze mesmerized at a moose lapping water from a stream, Laura slams back into the

truck, and yells, “I should have known not to listen to you! I had just pulled my panties down when a thousand mosquitos swooped in!”

Her bottom is no worse for wear, so the next morning, Laura takes the Steese Highway for a little over an hour to the Chena Hot Springs, conveniently located in the wilderness.

Soon, in a pungent, mineral water lake surrounded by boulders, we bob up and down, searching for a spot not too hot or cold. While saturating myself in the healing, costly liquid, I engage in conversation with a nice woman that enthuses her father knows Sarah Palin. Fancy knowing a woman that can see Russia from Alaska. I can’t even see Anchorage from Fairbanks.

The next day, Laura and I visit the University of Alaska Museum of the North. Its shimmering white, swooping, modernistic shape was designed to reflect the contours of the state’s glaciers, mountains, and coastline.

The museum houses Alaska’s largest display of gold nuggets, impressive displays of mammoth, mastodon, and polar dinosaurs; Blue Babe, a 36,000-year-old-mummified steppe bison dating back to the Ice Age; and most impressively, Scrat hugging his acorn.

Laura and I walk a short ramp and stand in wonderment at a large sound and light installation simulating the Northern Lights in sparkling curtains of green, blue, purple or red.

After my daughter leaves, gloom sets in like a wasting disease. Near the state’s border with British Columbia, a giant landslide gobbles up a glacier. It is a metaphor, I think.

On July fourth, I climb onto Engine #1. Granddaddy clatters down the rail track a short distance before collapsing completely, giving the mechanic a headache and passengers the early stages of COPD.

Dick and Yvette return home, so I pack my suitcase and move over to the Heine’s (just like hind end). Their house squats in a bad neighborhood with a drug dealer across the street and low-rent housing all around.

Doris Heine is a bespeckled, gray-haired school teacher, brisk, nice, and organized. Her pale husband seems like an obedient, nerdy student of hers.

Doris leaves me an acre of flowers inside and out to water, and a drain problem that might flood their basement. Rick leaves me his ring-necked dove named Flapper. I fear fowl. They peck your eyes out. I know. I’ve seen Hitchcock.

Doris cautions, “Flapper poops on everything, so don’t let him out of the cage if you don’t want to. He’s about nineteen years old, and if he dies, do not to worry. He’s already lived seven years beyond his life span.”

She wants the bird dead, I think.

After they leave, I cover and tape my big bedroom windows with aluminum foil, so I can sleep at night. The sun rises at 3:40 AM and sets at 12:10 PM. A good rule of thumb: if it gets dark, you may as well stay up because the sun is about to rise.

Every moment that the cage isn’t covered, Flapper coos, sounding like “work Har-der, work Har-der.” He seems harmless enough, peering at me with beady, black eyes through his cage.

Feeling pity, I decide to let him stretch his wings a little, and coax the bird out of the cage. With loud, beating wings, he soars straight up and over me and attempts to land on my head. I screech and call Dick, who said he’d help with my bird sitting.

Dick arrives in his railroad conductor’s cap, a red tee shirt with a vest, and khaki jodhpurs, exuding stage presence. While I cover my head and Flapper flails his wings and sails down on tall pieces of furniture, Dick plops down like Liberace and tickles the ivories on the Heine’s piano. He says he was in musicals with community theater for years. Dick fascinates and repels me, sort of like an infected ingrown toenail.

Over time, I finally come to accept the vagaries of Alaskan life, including the realization that the residents of the 49th state are one snow block short of an igloo.

The Heine’s newspapers confirm my opinion that the state has spent too much time in the dark. The entire population reminds me of a gaggle of frat boys in otter fur hats and bunny boots with too much time on their hands.

For instance, *The Daily News Miner* (“the voice of interior Alaska since 1913”) reports that Seward hosted its annual “Mount Marathon” 5k race with a 3,027 foot “scramble” up and down a shale-covered mountain. It is a massive elevation gain (3,00 feet) on a very steep mountain. A 66-year-old man goes missing and is presumed dead, and a 44-year-old father of four lies in a coma with brain injuries from a fall. Really, people?

In other news, Talkeetna, a census-designated place in Alaska, elects a yellow cat called “Stubbs” as honorary mayor.

After the Midnight Sun festival in June, the Gold Rush Days celebration commences in July. The Duck Committee releases 8,000 rubber duckies in the Chena River, racing for cash and prizes totaling \$2,700.00.

After so many sunny days, the weather waxes morose and cool with passing showers. I slog to work and back in a damp mist, slaving over hot cardboard boxes, in a fog of confusion about what to do with all the papers, losing weight from ennui, and wishing to send the childish workers at the air museum into outer space.

When the sky doesn't pour buckets, I dutifully hose Doris' overwhelming abundance of vegetables, petunias, delphiniums, and marigolds. I water her 14 African violets inside when it rains and listen to the bird. His relentless racket threatens to snap my last nerve like a rubber band pulled too tight.

When I hear the rain beating down on the roof, I check the drainage situation, racing to man the torpedoes, whip the galley slaves to row harder, and prepare to bail water if the flood water's rise.

I wish so many times I would just pull the plug on Alaska while I am at it, and get my heinie to the airport for the red-eye express back to the lower states.

There apparently are two birdbrains at the Heine's this summer.

The bird coos on, day after weary day, as pernicious as a drip from a cracked ceiling. I wish the feathered fool would develop tail rot, ending his Ripley's Belief It or Not record.

Sort of like the salmon fishing, Fairbanks seems often to run out, close prematurely, or become outdated. One Saturday morning, I stop by Big Red's consignment store. It is closed. I drive to the Pizza Hut for salad and cheese sticks. The chain is out of salad. At Taco Bell, the window cashier says they are out of tomatoes. Back at Heine's, I make tuna salad. In the night, I throw up, and discover in the morning that Heine's mayonnaise (not to be confused with Heinz's) expired a year and three months before. I rummage around for nausea relief and find two bottles of tums in the linen closet. One expired three years ago and another eight years.

Unfortunately, Flapper and I live on. I feel certain that I'll die before him. I seriously doubt he can die at all.

Plus, he begins to molt. So do I, losing track of the endless days—19 hours, 45 minutes, and 11 seconds of them. I hear planes overhead as I water Heine's flowers. Dick says Delta flies non-stop in the summer. Probably, people desperately trying to save themselves. Many

don't make it. Every year, between 500-2,000 people disappear in Alaska and are never accounted for. My guess is that avalanches bury them, earthquakes shellac them, huskies eat them, cryptids marry them, some topple over into the Alaska Triangle, and many find themselves up Ship's Creek.

One morning, I settle down with a cup of expired Yuban coffee at the Heine's kitchen table and, with a heavy sigh, open the *Yukon Press*. It tells me, "For the weak-minded, {Alaska} is the wrong place to be." And then the weather report in *The Daily Miner* says, "Expect clouds, more, clouds, and more clouds, with a high of 63 degrees." It is now mid-July.

I feel I'm on the tip of an iceberg miles and miles away from everyone I know. Which I am. Four-thousand and some loose miles away, in fact.

Flapper's beady eyes often survey me—look through me, actually—and croak, "Coo, oo, oo." I beg him to stop. He responds, "Coo-OOO?"

I yell, "Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" But he doesn't. I want to throttle him and hide his remains under a big head of lettuce in Doris' garden or chop that bird up and cook him in a stew.

In a few more weeks, I kiss Yvette—that doesn't appreciate the gesture—goodbye and say so long" to Dick, who never says thank you, and board a 5:30 A.M. flight home to Tennessee. Blearily strapping my seatbelt on, I am relieved to finally depart the Last Frontier state. For me, Fairbanks was sort of like the abandoned gold rush town of Chena, now a swampy thicket. I missed its heyday, if, indeed, it had one.

While I nibble on a Delta stale ginger snap and sip water from a plastic cup, a memory surfaces from years ago. My dimwitted sister, dollar signs in her brown eyes, and her pathological boyfriend planned get rich working on the Pipeline, the 70's version of the 1896 Gold Rush.

I connect that memory with my ride to see that famous Trans-Alaska Pipeline yesterday with Dick and Yvette. The line is an 800-mile engineering marvel, I was told by Dick who knows everything, and built with a zig zap design to withstand earthquakes. Four-hundred and twenty-one miles of it were constructed above ground due to permafrost. The pipeline system coped with 34 rivers and 800 streams, and accommodates 554 wildlife crossings for moose, caribou, and Big Foot. On closer inspection, 48-inch diameter carbon steel pipe doesn't look like much.

My sister and I dreamed the same dream, really, but I was dumber—rushing to Alaska to pursue a romantic pipe dream that became nothing more than a tedious dredge. I feel as if Buck, the sled dog in *Call of the Wild*, took a big bite out of my nether regions.

My northern exposure gained me nothing much but a lousy sweatshirt from Big Red's, mosquito bites in indecent places, and the echoing strains of a bird in my inner ear for the next ten years.

I beg to differ with the *Yukon Press*—Alaska is precisely for the weak-minded.



Suzanne C Martinez

DUMBO, Easter Sunday—1982

Celeste's family was due to arrive at our loft in Brooklyn for Easter dinner. I triple-checked to make sure everything was tidy—not easy with all the art supplies and equipment we had. Celeste monitored the progress of the scalloped potatoes and the ham in the oven. A homemade apple pie was on the counter. This was their first visit, and we were making an effort.

“Ben, we should go outside to wait for them now.” Celeste grabbed her keys.

“Good thinking.”

No one in our building had a doorbell. Visitors would shout from the street to the people with lofts in the front, but our place was in the back. Explaining to her family about calling us from the phone booth on the corner was more complicated than waiting for them on the loading dock in front of the building. Sundays were quiet in our neighborhood with all the factories closed. Hoping we weren't setting ourselves up for a disaster, we waited holding hands until we spotted her parents' silver-blue Impala slowly turning onto our street.

“Hello and welcome.” Celeste waved like a kid. “We're so glad you're finally here.”

I directed Celeste's father to a safe parking spot near the building. Her parents, Joe and Bernice, with Celeste's younger siblings, Tina and Carl, emerged from the car, scanning our street as if they'd arrived in an alternate universe.

“Quite a neighborhood.” Joe double-checked his car door locks.

Tina handed a plant to Celeste. “We brought you an Easter lily.”

“It's beautiful,” said Celeste, hidden by the leaves. “Thanks for coming.”

Bernice frowned at the dirty façade. “What kind of building is this, Ben?”

“It used to be the Brillo Soap Pad building. Now it's artists' lofts.”

After brief hugs, I led the family up the steps onto the loading platform to our building's steel front door, which was decorated with ‘A.I.R’ (Artist in Residence) in white spray paint. They followed me silently in single file past the jumble of colorful handmade

mailboxes festooning the narrow entrance and up the rickety wooden stairway to the third floor.

“How far away is your place?” Bernice stopped at the top and peered both ways as if looking for the bogeymen.

“It’s in the middle of the block, but this is the only entrance. The owner stores the file cabinets he makes on the first and second floors. Most of the artist’s lofts are at each end.”

“They should put in more lights,” said Tina. “This is creepy.”

I waited for the group to catch up and then continued across the warehouse with Celeste in the rear to shepherd any stragglers. At the far end, I guided them down a flight of stairs to the second floor and through the fire door to our loft where we lived and worked.

“So, how was the drive in from Jersey?” I asked as we approached our door.

No one replied.

Celeste’s family shuffled in after their convoluted journey to our loft. They lingered in a tight cluster and blinked like moles at the bright light streaming in the windows.

“Where should we sit?” Bernice seemed reluctant to touch anything or move away from the front door. She was slightly plump, dressed in beige pants, an embroidered sweater with little bunnies on it, pearls, and a blonde wig.

When we decided to invite her family for Easter dinner, I was pretty sure her parents would hate the loft, but we both wanted them to see where we’d invested our energy and every dime we’d earned since finishing college three years earlier. Her parents lived in a cozy, split-level in the suburbs. Their idea of a proper home for their eldest child was not a cavernous loft in an old warehouse in an industrial neighborhood without the usual domestic comforts. Until today, family holidays have been celebrated at their house.

I wondered what my parents in Texas would think of our place, but they’d never see it. People in my family didn’t travel unless it was to follow a job or, in my dad’s case, a new posting. I was raised with four brothers in ‘base housing,’ single-story ranch houses with not enough room for anyone. Once my dad retired from the Air Force, he landed a maintenance job at the local Veterans Hospital. He wouldn’t leave Big Spring. My mom, either.

“This one’s comfortable, Bernice.” I pulled a wheeled office chair from under the work table—now a dining table, which Celeste concealed with a bed sheet serving as a tablecloth topped with a basket of daffodils and a shallow bowl of Easter candy.

Bernice scrutinized our freshly painted blank white walls, formerly the color of coffee. After countless hours we'd devoted to building partitions and painting, we hadn't the heart to deface them with any picture hooks yet. She scowled at the frosted windows with embedded chicken wire and the two skeletal black printing presses occupying the center of the loft. We often joked about sewing quilted tea cozies to make the presses less conspicuous, but we hadn't gotten around to it. Our rustic handmade work tables were painted bright blue, and the concrete floors were battleship gray lit by harsh fluorescent lighting. There was nothing cozy here.

"How about something to drink? We have wine, beer, and seltzer."

"I'll have a white wine," Bernice sat gingerly, while I served the drinks from the top of the flat files on which we'd assembled a temporary bar.

"This is so cool, Celeste." Tina raised her arms and pirouetted. "It's so big."

We'd devoted three-quarters of the loft to an L-shaped printmaking studio lit by three banks of windows. Our living area, with a tiny kitchen, bath, and sleeping alcove, was relegated to the windowless back corner.

"I'll show you around." Celeste guided her sister and brother through the loft while Bernice sat stonily sipping her wine, her back to the studio.

"Smells like a print shop." Joe had been editor-in-chief of his high school newspaper and worked for a midwestern book publisher. "I always loved the smell of ink." He followed the others into the studio. He was slim, white-haired, dressed in a sport coat and slacks, as casual as he ever appeared in public.

"What's that awful roar?" Bernice covered her ears dramatically.

"The subway train crossing the Manhattan Bridge. There won't be another one for at least fifteen minutes."

"Doesn't it sound like the surf at Seaside Heights, Mom?" asked Celeste from the studio.

She'd mentioned that when they were kids, her family used to rent a house there every summer for a week of crabbing, sunburns, and nights wandering the boardwalk.

"Hardly." Bernice finished her wine and held her glass out for a refill.

“Celeste, let’s serve the appetizers.” We met in the kitchen and arranged an assortment of crackers, olives, meats, and cheeses on a tray. “Your Mom is completely freaked out.”

“Well, I’m disappointed but not surprised. We’ll give her a nice dinner and send her home before dark.” Celeste peered into the frig. “Ben, where’s the heavy cream? And the string beans. I looked everywhere.”

“Jeez! I’m sorry, I forgot. I’ll run and get them now.”

Joe wandered into the kitchen. “How far away is the grocery store?”

“About a mile. A fifteen-minute walk.”

“I’ll drive you, Ben. I’d like a little tour of the neighborhood.”

Celeste kissed my cheek. “I’ll turn off the oven. But hurry back.”

We left in Joe’s car with me in the passenger seat. “Point the way,” he said.

“Just drive straight until we’re under the bridge.”

He nodded and drove slowly over the jaw-cracking cobblestones. The factories in the area were closed for the weekend, so the usual obstacle course of tractor-trailers and box trucks was missing. The neighborhood was starkly industrial; the only green elements were the weeds growing between the cracks in the sidewalk.

“Not exactly bucolic, is it?” When we arrived at the intersection under the bridge, Joe rolled to a stop.

A large obstruction blocked our way. This no man’s land between Water and Front Street under the Manhattan Bridge was notorious for attracting people wishing to dispose of unwanted items. I’d already scored a working deli meat slicer and two airline beverage carts, minus the tiny liquor bottles in this spot over the last couple of years.

“My God! You certainly don’t see that every day,” Joe said in his flat Ohio accent.

It appeared to be a male mannequin face up on the cobblestones dressed in a tuxedo and patent leather shoes. His footwear gleamed in the sunlight filtering through the Manhattan Bridge trestles looming above us. His face had a yellowish-gray tinge to it, like spoiled chicken.

It was no mannequin; it was a dead man. My breathing became labored. I’d seen bloody accident victims on the Autobahn years ago when I was a military policeman. This guy was

unblemished, lying flat, as if positioned carefully for public display in death. I frantically scanned the area to see if whoever abandoned him was still around. The area was deserted.

“What kind of neighborhood is this, Ben? I’m scared for Celeste and you.”

“Nothing like this ever happened before,” I said, almost positive it was the truth. “It’s New York. Crazy stuff comes here to happen.”

“The city’s changed so much since I was a young man. It’s falling apart. Are you comfortable living here?”

“It’s getting better since Koch became the mayor.”

Joe fingered his door latch. “We should do something, Ben.”

Blaring sirens approached.

“Hear that? Somebody’s already called the cops,” I said. “Take this left, Joe.” I quickly switched on the radio to find a baseball game in progress. Joe loved the Yankees.

“We should stay, Ben.”

“If we do, we won’t get back for dinner. Bernice will want to know what happened.”

“It took me weeks to convince her to come to Brooklyn.”

“I’m not surprised. She’s pretty high-strung.”

“What do you suppose happened to the poor guy?” Joe peered over his shoulder as he pulled away, a little too slowly for me.

When we leased our loft in 1979, it was very cheap and raw with a capital R. There was no bathroom, kitchen, interior walls, or heat, as we discovered the first winter. We’d put off this first family visit until we’d installed some basic human comforts so her family wouldn’t be completely traumatized by their daughter’s home. Unfortunately, we couldn’t control what happened on the street.

“I’m sure it’ll be on the news tonight.”

“Ben, let’s not mention it. It might open...” Joe trailed off.

“Fine with me.”

When we returned, everyone was seated at the table, chatty and slightly tipsy, as Celeste had been topping off everyone's glass. Neither Joe nor I mentioned the dead body, though I'm pretty sure we were both thinking about him.

"That took long enough." Bernice looked at Joe like she'd caught him attempting an escape without her.

Joe sat next to her. He was an easy-going guy unlike his wife, Bernice, who seemed to seethe with irritation whenever she saw me, ever since Celeste and I became a couple in '78. It might have been because we weren't married and had no plans. Since we'd both abandoned hasty first marriages, we knew dissolving a marriage was more complicated than a quick 'I Do.' Or maybe it was my Hispanic background or my choice of career, but it was Celeste's passion, as well.

"Dinner in ten minutes. Ben, why don't you put on some music?"

After being paid for printing a suite of lithographs recently, we splurged and bought a stereo system with Klipsch speakers. After spending all day trying to listen to music coming out of a tinny clock radio, it was heaven hearing melodic sound soar out of the 3-foot-high speakers. I chose a classical music CD I assumed Bernice might like, but she didn't seem to notice. Joe did.

"What's that composition?"

"Vivaldi's Four Seasons." I laid out the plates. "The New York Philharmonic."

"Beautiful."

"Those are amazing speakers." Carl was the younger of Celeste's siblings. He was in his final year of law school and still living at home. He and his girlfriend were to be married in August. He licked his lips, scrutinizing our speakers like they were cake.

"They're almost as big as the ones at Danceteria," said Tina. "Very cool."

"Everything's ready. Ben, can you help me bring the dishes in."

"So, is everyone hungry?" I sprinted to the kitchen.



Celeste and I marched back and forth with platters of ham, scalloped potatoes, string beans, dinner rolls, etc., and everyone found places to sit at the table.

“I’ll serve the scalloped potatoes from here. The dish is hot.”

“Everything smells delicious.” Joe smiled and nodded. “Pass the ham, please.”

“Your speakers are too big for a normal house,” said Carl. “Here, they’re fine.”

“Maybe you can get a loft, too.” Tina poked Carl in the ribs. She was taller than Celeste and had the same long, dark hair. “I love this place, all the space, and the high ceilings.”

Carl shook his head. “I couldn’t be comfortable in a place like this. We’re getting a brand new three-bedroom condo by the beach.” He smiled confidently. “With a deck.”

“I’m jealous of these speakers,” said Tina. “How about putting Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers on next?” She picked up a CD from the stack.

“Probably not dinner music.” Celeste nodded toward their mother. “We first heard these speakers at an artist’s loft and decided to get them when we’d saved enough money.”

“I don’t understand. Why didn’t you buy a couch instead, so you’d have a place to sit or a rug to cover these floors?” asked Bernice. “Did you see how Pat Nixon is redecorating the White House? Her taste is exquisite, isn’t it?”

“We haven’t seen anything about it, but we don’t watch much TV,” I said.

“Why is your table so far from the kitchen?” asked Bernice.

“We have a small one by the kitchen, but there isn’t enough room for all of us there.”

Bernice daubed her lips. “I assume you have a bathroom.”

“Yes, Mom, I’ll show you.” Celeste rose from the table and walked toward the kitchen.

“Is that where you sleep?” Bernice pointed to our bed wedged in a corner across from the kitchen.

“Yes. Let me turn on the light.”

“I believe I can find my way back.” Bernice closed the door.

“Ben, this place is huge,” said Joe. “It must’ve been a big job to paint it.”

“We used 25 gallons of white for the walls and ceiling and another 10 gallons of gray for the floor,” I said. “It took forever. We had to build a scaffold on casters to paint the ceiling. It looked like a trebuchet.”

“Well, I’m impressed.” Joe seemed to be enjoying the visit despite the dead guy.

Bernice returned from the bathroom. “Whatever possessed you to buy a blue toilet and bathtub?”

“Pink or blue was the closeout special. White would’ve cost more. I kind of like it.”

“We bought all the bathroom and kitchen fixtures, including the water heater, for a little more than a thousand dollars,” I said.

“Really, that much?” Bernice sucked her teeth.

“Anyone want more potatoes?” I asked.

Bernice said, “I’ll have more string beans.”

“Well,” said Joe. “Everything tastes wonderful.”

“What do you use this table for when you aren’t entertaining guests?” asked Bernice.

“It’s a curating table. The prints we make are often large, and we need to check them for stray marks or fingerprints before the artist signs them. We made this table lower because it’s easier to sit. It can take hours.” Celeste passed the salad to Carl.

“Can I get another slice of ham, too, Celeste?” Carl asked. “It must be weird to live and work in the same place. Short commute, though.”

“How do you get printing jobs? Do you advertise or something?” asked Joe.

“I had a job printing at a workshop in Manhattan when I was still in art school and met some artists there,” I said. “The first artist we worked with was this crazy French guy who had a dozen editions he needed to be completed. We printed them the first summer after graduating. It paid for the two presses, the building materials, the kitchen, and the bathroom fixtures.”

“We also get steady work from a teacher from the art school and an artist we met through his brother, who owns an art supply store,” said Celeste. “It’s all word of mouth.”

“Artists are big gossips,” I said. “We often meet potential clients at gallery openings in the city.”

“It seems chancy to me,” said Bernice.

“It’s probably like sales in any business. You need to make the contacts, do what you promise, and deliver on time,” said Joe. “All you have is your reputation.”

“Also, it’s so desolate in this neighborhood. I can’t imagine what it’s like being here at night.” Bernice placed her utensils across her empty plate with finality.

I held my breath, afraid Joe might mention the dead guy, but he said nothing.

A dead body under the bridge was a gruesome but apt metaphor for a city emerging from a terrible decade. Shocking as it was to see, I wasn’t all that surprised. I’d read thousands of New York families had fled to the suburbs driven by crime and high prices in the sixties. The city was falling apart, going downhill for a long time.

The Son of Sam serial killings between the summer of 1976 and 1977 brought the city’s spirit to a new low. People were afraid. As if that wasn’t enough, the blackout in July 1977 was followed by widespread looting throughout the city. I’d watched everything on TV from Texas with my bags packed for art school in Brooklyn. But I didn’t hesitate for a minute. I wanted to be here, even though the sidewalks glittered with broken glass for months. That September, Celeste and I started classes in Brooklyn and met shortly after.

“Everyone done?” Celeste rose and headed for the kitchen with a pile of empty plates. “Who wants dessert?” she asked over her shoulder.

“I can’t wait for a bite of that apple pie I saw,” said Joe.

I grabbed the potato casserole and ham platter. Tina picked up the balance of the dishes and we all trooped to the kitchen. I started scraping plates.

“Ooh, real whipped cream.” Tina eyed the bowl in the fridge. “You went all out, Celeste.”

“Think Mom is impressed?” Celeste rolled her eyes.

“If we can wrap this up before dark, it’ll be fine. Is it dangerous around here?”

“Lots of people in the building have been mugged. We almost were once. Please, don’t tell Mom.”

“What do you do to stay safe?” She kept her voice low.

“We go out together or use our bicycles to go into Brooklyn Heights, where all the stores are. We take the subway during the day. Lots of people have dogs. We might get one.”

“Why do you live here?” Tina looked up at the high ceilings. “It’s cool, but...”

“Nicer neighborhoods cost a lot of money. We never would’ve been able to start our printing business in Manhattan. A place this size would cost ten times more. It’s a trade-off.”

“I hope it’s worth it.”

“We hope so, too.” I handed Tina the plates and forks and carried the whipped cream.

I hoped the dead guy was the last of the terrible setbacks in the city and not a new trend. I needed to keep us safe. We should get a big dog soon. I dreaded telling Celeste what we’d seen. She headed for the table where everyone was waiting for the pie.

The apple pie was a big hit, but there was no lingering over coffee.

“We need to leave before dark,” said Bernice, standing. “But dinner was very good.”

We walked back through the warehouse with her family and out to the car, which was fortunately unscathed. The goodbyes were quick. Carl and Tina hugged us and climbed into the backseat. Bernice stared out the front windshield, looking ahead, apparently out of questions. Joe shook my hand like we’d agreed on something, which, in a way, we had.

“Dad, take a left at the corner and head up the hill. Turn right at the second light. That will take you to the Brooklyn Bridge entrance,” said Celeste. “Thanks again for coming.”

The car pulled away.

“At least that’s over. Mom will probably spend the next year talking about her adventure in Brooklyn.”

“For sure.”

I had a vision of the dead guy but put it out of my mind to enjoy the moment. We stood on the loading dock holding hands long after they’d left, listening to the sounds of the neighborhood, the buzz of traffic on the bridges, and the subway train rumbling in the distance.

After doing the dishes, we cuddled in bed to watch the evening news.

“I’ve got to tell you. Joe and I had a shock when we drove to the store.”

Celeste, who was half asleep, turned to me. “What? You didn’t say anything.”

A TV newscaster appeared standing under the Manhattan Bridge. “The body of a middle-aged man was discovered earlier today. The police are investigating how he died and why he was left here. His identity won’t be announced until his family has been notified.”

“Ben, that’s down the street from us.” She sat up quickly. “What happened?”

“I don’t know. We saw him on the way to the store, just lying there. I heard sirens, and convinced your dad to drive away before the police arrived. We agreed not to mention it. He said it would wreck the atmosphere.

“Too true.” Celeste, shivering a little.

“I wonder if Joe will tell your mom.”

“Let’s hope not.”



T.L. Tomljanovic

Fried Chicken, Three Princes, and the Wolf

On the wrong side of the one-way, stood a chicken shack. It was said one bite of King's Fried Chicken could satisfy any appetite.

The king had three handsome, but useless sons. There was the eldest, Eric, fair and serious as a hound. He strode his father's poultry fiefdom like he already owned the place, but not a dish did he wash nor a wing did he fry. That fateful day, after the lunch rush, Eric marched to the best plastic booth in the shack and seated himself as though upon a throne. The middle son, Hans, was dark and sly as a cat. He slunk when he walked. Hans had spent the morning sleeping instead of helping his father, and slid into the booth across from Eric with a yawn and a stretch. The youngest, Kristoff, was brown and bland as a mouse, always a step behind. Kristoff often burnt the biscuits or let loose the hens while collecting eggs. Unsure which side of the booth to sit on, he stood.

As the princes were about to tuck into their mid-day meal, a beautiful stranger swept through the door. Clad in fur, her blood-red lips parted to reveal ivory teeth, which she licked as she approached the king.

"My liege, tales of your chicken have reached my ears. I have travelled from distant lands to be satiated." Her eyes flicked to the princes. "But I'm so bewitched by your strapping sons, I shall also take one of them as my husband."

Seizing the opportunity to rid himself of a son, the king clapped his hands in delight. "But which one will you choose, my Lady?"

"Whomever feeds me the tastiest morsel."

The princes scrambled to satisfy the stranger's cravings. Eric shoved ahead of his brothers, offering his plate—a repast of skinless chicken breast. His choice of cut was lean and protein rich. As she ate, her hair grew glossy and long, so long it soon curled down past her ears, shoulder, chest, and waist.

She smiled. The breast was satisfying.

Hans slid over a deep-fried drumstick. Grease dripped from the lady's fingers as she chewed on crispy skin and gristle. Her nails thickened and lengthened into elegant points.

She pursed her lips. The thigh was even tastier than the breast.

Ever indecisive Kristoff had nothing on his plate to serve the stranger, so he darted behind the counter in search of the perfect bite, but not a strip of cooked chicken nor a crumb of fried batter was left. In desperation, he ran outside to the coop and snatched a live chicken.

Swinging the squawking sacrifice before him by its feet, wings flapping, feathers flying, he sputtered, "I could maybe make a soup, or smoke it over cherry wood, or slow roast—"

The stranger stopped Kristoff's ramblings with a single pointed finger pressed against his mouth. Her eyes gleamed as she tore into the bird's neck with her teeth; blood spurted and bones cracked. The stranger's skin split revealing a black wolf.

Kristoff fled.

The two older princes and the King froze. The wolf devoured them nose to tail bone.

Kristoff returned holding two more chickens. He hadn't fled. He had merely gone back to the coop for more food to sate the beast's appetite, but had dithered over whether she would prefer a Silkie or a Leghorn.

Oblivious to the wolf's protruding belly, the youngest prince asked where his family had gone.

The wolf smacked her lips. "Why dearest, at seeing how happy you've made me, your father decided to leave us this lovely shack so we can begin our lives together. And your brothers agreed."

Kristoff didn't question his good fortune. After all, woman or wolf, he still needed someone to make decisions for him, and the wolf needed a mate and provider of fresh fowl. They lived happily ever after running the rebranded Claws & Clucks Chicken.



Vishwas Tanwar

Clean-shaven

I remember it was forty or so years ago that I first held my father's razor in my hand, which I had sneaked into my bathroom, and the working of which I wasn't sure I understood properly. I looked at it and then at my own reflection in the mirror, which introduced me to new hair below my temples. I knew what was coming, for my father sported a rather imposing beard. My source of discomfort was that this couldn't qualify as a beard just yet, being patchy and shoddy. Looking at myself again, I was seeking the answer to one question: "Should I keep what little's here, or shave it all off?" After all these years I again stand in my bathroom, having sneaked in my son's electronic trimmer whose working I'm not sure I understand properly. This time my gaze is fixed above my temples, at the site of an inevitable baldness. I still have hair left on my head, but it is mostly a shameful reminder of what used to be. I fiddle with the trimmer but it scares me. This generation! Looking into the mirror, I ask the constant eyes, "Should I keep what little's here, or shave it all off?"

First word

"Narayan" was Prahlad's first word; his salvation. Words save. Sitting vacantly after dinner, my eyes wandered to find a resting place. They did so on a lady, looking much older than her actual age, with a kid in her arms, and another by her side. The bigger one had learnt the trade by now, for he knew the face to make, the precise hand gestures, the right words in the right tone. He didn't mean any of that, but who at all means anything they say at their jobs? For the younger one too, it wasn't the first day at work. His hunger was the capital; his face was the advertisement. Today however, perhaps being the prop didn't feel adequate to him. He had been on enough of these trips to know the drill. He attempted what came out at a vague request in the most posh accent of a child's gibberish. He was emulating his elders, who looked at him with affection and pride. Those were his first words. Asking for something to eat. The mother's eyes beamed with elation. Their line of work has a lot of competition, and

she holds a child prodigy. We live in a meritocracy; he shall win. I supposed I must have uttered those too, but to my mother, not along with her. Like his clothes, his eyes were terribly oversized as well, and as far as I probed there was no soul in that bottomless pit. Only the pit and the mud around it. There is no soul... in any of us. Our beings are built on what we're fed. This boy has been fed hunger thrice a day. He's made of flesh and hunger. I felt like tearing his head off and sucking out the hunger, but while he may remain himself without a head, he would not anymore without his hunger. In that bottomless pit, on the other end of infinity there seemed to be my own reflection. There was fresh food in my belly. Its fumes ran in the insides to my nose. I stank of a system wherein I was born to win. She left with a couple of biscuit packets in her hands which someone was kind enough to procure. Give a man a fish, he'll eat for a day. Give him life in a fisher clan, and he's cursed to eat all his life.



Raatrani's tears

It was his last night in Baroda, and there was no question where and with whom he was going to spend it. They never really needed to talk on the phone, for they knew the place and time to meet. Moonlight strained through the same raatrani tree on their blurry faces. Sitting on the blanket of flowers, they said nothing, for they already knew what would be said. A moonlit silver tear fell from his eyes on her hand, which made it go around his waist. They hugged and shed tears. Wind blew, and the tree shed its own silver tears on them. They lay on the ground in each other's embrace; flowers below them, flowers above. Tears mixing with tears. Not a word said. Not a word needed to be said. The golden rays of the sun brought separation. The tree bade farewell to its fragrance for the day, and they to each other, without knowing for how long. He came back to his room, picked up his bags and left for the station with his roommate. In front of the train he hugged his roommate, who upon sniffing a faint but amorous fragrance, asked him, "Wow! What perfume is this?" He smiled and replied as he was getting on the train, "Raatrani's tears."

Sabyasachi Roy

Bleeding Glitches

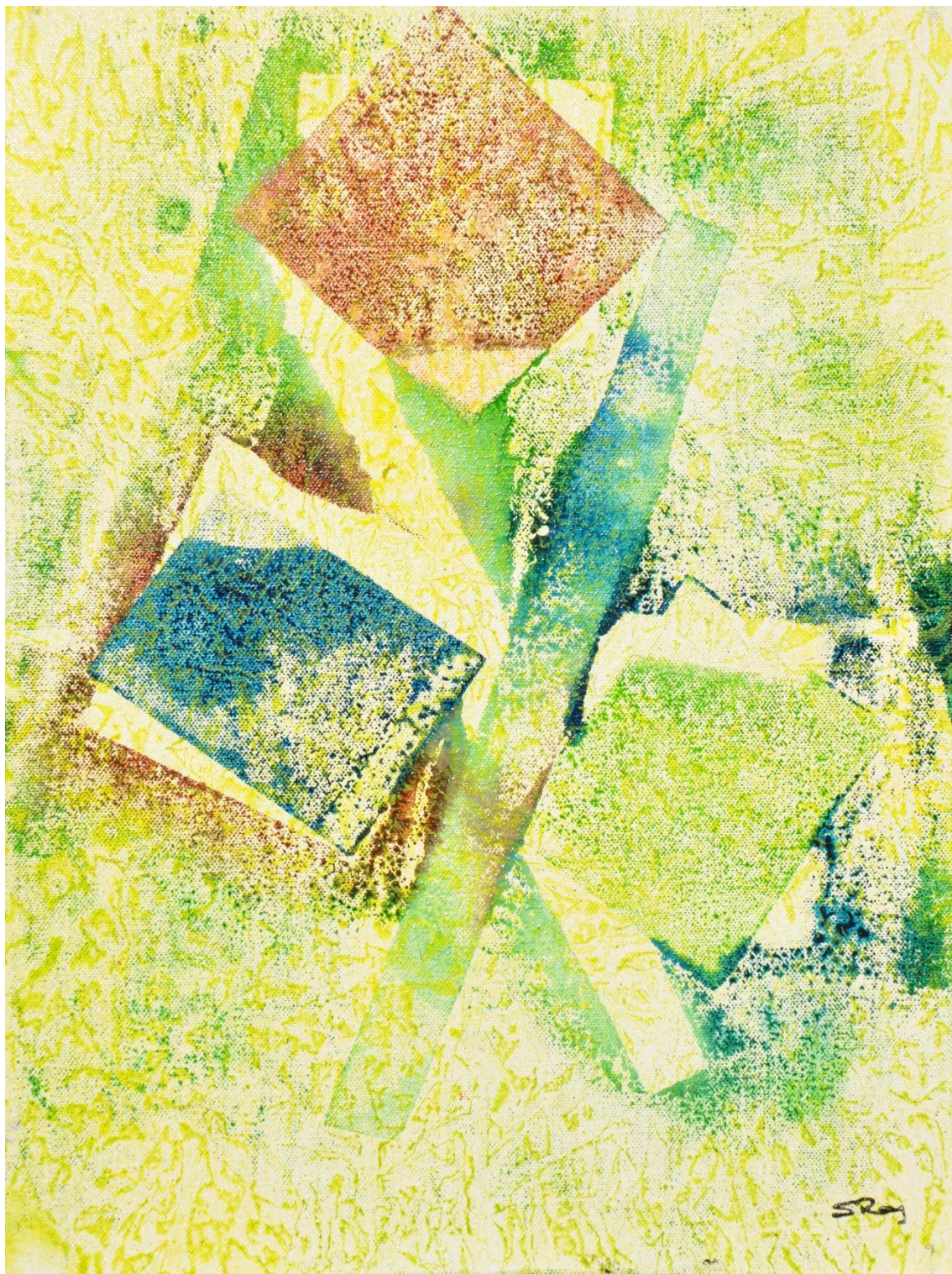
Birth of an Uncharted Universe captures the raw, cosmic chaos of creation—where color is energy, and form is still negotiating with void. Through layers of blue space, sudden bursts of yellow, red, and white evoke a galactic embryo coming into being, challenging viewers to confront the wonder and mystery of origin itself.



In *Harry Potter's Car and Apu's Door to an Exploring Universe*, I reimagine portals—both magical and mythic—as electric pulses of color colliding in textured space. The work blends pop-culture fantasy with cosmic curiosity, inviting viewers to step into a liminal zone where imagination overrides gravity and maps are rewritten in light and pigment.



In *Distorted Living Room*, memory and domesticity are deconstructed into shifting planes of color and form. What was once familiar becomes fragmented—each angular shape a flicker of furniture, light, or emotion—suggesting the way our inner worlds refract the ordinary into abstraction. This piece is both an excavation and a reimagining of lived space.



The painting, *Dreams and Nightmares of a Geisha*, captures the duality of performance and identity, where the ornate allure of the geisha's world unravels into abstract tension. Color and texture clash like opposing desires, evoking both reverie and restraint.



Here, in *Memories of a Geisha*, memory is presented not as clarity but as shimmer and blur—a flickering image of grace refracted through time. The composition suggests both reverence and erasure, as if the past can only be touched through layered emotion.



Richard Newman

Big Boy

Characters:

Alex: Man, late 30s, a bit disheveled, but wearing an expensive jacket and name brand dress shoes. He carries a small backpack and a bottle of Jim Beam.

Big Boy: Vintage 60s Big Boy statue, five feet tall plus a podium, a bit faded, weathered and stained, missing a hand which once balanced a platter with a hamburger, but otherwise intact and smiling foolishly.

Setting: Summer solstice, late afternoon or early evening. Abandoned construction site. At center stage a Big Boy statue stands facing the audience. There are a few cinder blocks scattered at the feet of Big Boy. Some old liquor bottles and beer bottles lie strewn about the stage and also in a pile at stage right.

Scene: *Alex enters from stage left. He stops a moment and starts to take a swig of Jim Beam but notices Big Boy. Curious, he screws the top back on the bottle then moves closer to investigate.*

BIG BOY (*In a big godly voice*): Draw not nigh hither—

ALEX: What? Who's there?

[Pulls out a gun from the back of his pants.]

BIG BOY: Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.

ALEX: What? Who is that? Where are you?

[Looks around, looks behind statue.]

BIG BOY: I sayest again: draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.

ALEX: I heard you the first time. Fuck you. Show yourself.

BIG BOY (*in a normal voice*): Oh come on, just joking. I love saying that. I said that once to some high school kids drinking beer and they ran off screaming like babies and never came back.

ALEX: Where are you? Show yourself.

BIG BOY: I'm right in front of you, dumbass. I'm Big Boy.

ALEX: Don't fuck with me. Come out, wherever you are.

BIG BOY: Calm down. Do you see anyone else around? And what are you gonna do with that gun, Mr. Tough Guy? You planning on shooting someone?

ALEX: No! Of course not!

BIG BOY: Planning on robbing a liquor store?

ALEX (*laughing*): No. Frontier Liquors already robbed me for this.

BIG BOY: Yeah, you don't look like an armed robber. So you always carry guns around with you?

ALEX: No, I... uh...

BIG BOY: Oh, I get it now. You're planning to shoot yourself. Well don't do it here. I don't want blood on me.

ALEX: Fuck you.

[Coming closer and inspecting.]

Are you really Big Boy?

BIG BOY: Where's my voice coming from?

ALEX: I can't really tell. I guess from the statue.

BIG BOY: That's me, dumbass.

ALEX: What the fuck? Is there like a speaker somewhere?

[Inspects statue more closely.]

Huh.

BIG BOY: Satisfied?

ALEX: Not really.

BIG BOY: You might as well sit down. You look tired. And you're already hitting the sauce.

ALEX: It's been a rough day. I *will* sit down.

[Sits on concrete cinder block not far from Big Boy and puts gun down on another cinder block.]

But I'm *not* taking off my fucking shoes. There's broken glass everywhere anyway.

BIG BOY: Make yourself at home.

ALEX: So are you really Big Boy? Are you really talking to me?

[Takes a swig of Bourbon.]

What's in this stuff?

BIG BOY: Yeah, I'm Big Boy. But did you think I was God... for just a minute?

ALEX: Not really. I actually thought I was going to get mugged. So what are you?

BIG BOY: Dude, I'm Big Boy. I'm a five-foot tall fiberglass statue made in the early 60s.

ALEX: How could that be? Are all the Big Boys alive? Or are you all the Big Boys?

BIG BOY: I'm this Big Boy. I don't know about the others.

ALEX: How did you get here?

BIG BOY: Some college kids stole me from a Bob's Big Boy in Cincinnati about 30 years ago. They brought me here and tried to dismember me. But it was harder than they thought, so they gave up and I've been here ever since.

ALEX: That explains the hand.

BIG BOY: Yeah. I was lying face up for years and years. Some drunk homeless guys put me back up and worshipped me as a god—as a joke, of course. Until I spoke. Then they got scared and apologized for their sins, promised to mend their errant ways, and never came back.

ALEX: Huh. But I meant, like, how are you alive? How are you talking?

BIG BOY: No idea, buddy.

ALEX: That makes no sense.

BIG BOY: Tell me about it. I didn't make the world.

ALEX: Yeah. Whoever did did a shitty job of it too.

BIG BOY: So, yeah, why don't you tell me about that. What's your story?

ALEX: I don't really feel like talking about it. Especially to Big Boy.

BIG BOY: Oh, come on. I'm a great listener. And it's not like I can go tell people your problems. How could you stumble upon a better confidant?

ALEX: I don't want to think about it anymore.

BIG BOY: Oh, come on. Maybe it will make you feel better. Why was your day so bad?

ALEX: It's complicated. I don't want to get into it.

BIG BOY: Problems at work?

ALEX: If you call getting fired a problem at work.

BIG BOY: Jesus. That's a big problem.

ALEX: Yeah.

BIG BOY: What the hell happened?

ALEX: Do you know what sexual harassment is?

BIG BOY: I wasn't born yesterday.

ALEX: I'm not sure you were ever born.

BIG BOY: Of course I was. And of course I know what sexual harassment is. I'm guessing you were on the giving end?

ALEX: Yeah. Supposedly.

BIG BOY: I see. Where do you work? If you don't mind my asking.

ALEX: At the university. I'm in alumni relations. Probably the same asshole alums who abducted you all those years ago trying to make amends by giving back to the university.

BIG BOY:

[pause, two or three beats]

I see. But you said supposedly?

ALEX: I asked a woman out for drinks.

BIG BOY: That's all? What's wrong with that?

ALEX: Nothing, right?

BIG BOY: So you asked a woman out for drinks and she filed a complaint?

ALEX: Exactly.

BIG BOY: That doesn't seem fair.

ALEX: It isn't. It's crazy.

BIG BOY: And nothing else happened? You didn't grab her ass or something?

ALEX: Of course not!

BIG BOY: Well, that just doesn't seem right at all. No wonder you're upset.

ALEX: Well, I did ask her more than once.

BIG BOY: I see. You didn't ask her every day, did you?

ALEX: No way! No more than a dozen times, over, I don't know, the last few months. But I asked her casually, you know? Like, "Hey, I want to hit the happy hour at Spiro's—you wanna join me?" That kind of thing.

BIG BOY: Dude, getting fired over something like that is crazy.

ALEX: Yeah. Tell me about it. She reported it this week. Yesterday afternoon I was told there would be a disciplinary hearing today. We had that in the morning. And a few hours ago, I was fired.

BIG BOY: Jesus. That sucks, buddy.

ALEX: It was a long day.

BIG BOY: I bet.

ALEX: Did you know today is the Solstice? It's the longest day of the year. I kept thinking it was probably the longest day of my life.

BIG BOY: I bet. I can't imagine. Well, actually, I can imagine. All of my days are pretty fucking long.

ALEX: Right.

[pause, several beats]

What do you do all day?

BIG BOY: Well, you know, I do a lot of decorative gardening. I bake bread, sew my own clothes.

ALEX: Must be hard to do with one hand. Seriously, what DO you do all day.

BIG BOY: Well, there's this colony of ants that keeps moving from home to home. I don't know why, but that's pretty exciting. Sometimes a fly lands on my head and crawls around. And... did I tell you about the ants?

ALEX: Jesus. Those must be long days.

BIG BOY: Try long decades. But enough about me. What are you going to do now... other than shoot yourself?

ALEX: I don't know. But this morning my wife emailed me. She knows now.

BIG BOY: What? You're married? Why were you hitting on a colleague?

ALEX: We're separated. Six months.

BIG BOY: I see.

ALEX: But I was hoping we'd get back together.

BIG BOY: But that's not possible now?

ALEX: Her email said, wait a minute, (*takes out his phone and reads in a slightly mocking tone*) "Dear Alex, I'm sorry for the difficulties you're going through right now at work. I just wanted to tell you that you should not plan on any kind of reconciliation. This just confirms that I made the right decision, which I actually made two years ago. It just took some time to implement it. I'm telling you this not to be cruel but to be honest with you and not to give you false hope. Love and light, Angela."

BIG BOY: Wow. That's a doozy of a letter. Sounds like you read it about a hundred times.

ALEX: At least.

BIG BOY: So if you wanted to get back with her, why were you hitting on a colleague?

ALEX: Uh, I was lonely? Haven't you ever been lonely?

BIG BOY: Dude, I have been alone on an abandoned construction site for so long I don't even know what year it is.

ALEX: Yeah, that must be pretty lonely.

BIG BOY: If there were a Big Girl anywhere within eyesight, I don't care how big or how old, I would totally hit on her. Or a Dairy Queen, or Wendy. Hell, even another Big Boy or fucking Ronald McDonald. You can't imagine how lonely.

ALEX: Yeah, I really didn't want to imagine you getting busy with Ronald McDonald.

BIG BOY: But I'm not making light of your situation. I mean, that sucks. You still love your wife?

ALEX: Yeah. I was hoping she'd come back. But I think in my heart I knew she was done, so...

BIG BOY: Hence the colleague and the drinks.

ALEX: Yeah, pretty much. And this sealed it.

BIG BOY: You mean the email?

ALEX: Yeah. See, I loved her, but I hadn't always been the most faithful husband.

BIG BOY: I see. So... she was done but you weren't.

ALEX: Pretty much. I mean, I was done messing around. I think I finally got it out of my system and wanted to just focus on Angela.

BIG BOY: But she was already done at that point. Too bad. Alex and Angela. It has a nice ring to it.

ALEX: Yeah, our friends called us Angelex.

BIG BOY: Cute.

[Alex and Big Boy pause for several beats.]

[Alex picks up his gun, looks at it, fingers it, looks through the sights.]

ALEX: What do you think happens after we die?

BIG BOY: How would I know? I'm a fiberglass hamburger mascot.

ALEX: True. But taking a guess, do you think we just die? Or do you think there's something after this?

BIG BOY: No idea. Not many people have died and lived to tell about it.

ALEX: Also true.

BIG BOY: But I will say this. Nobody knows. And anyone who claims to know is either lying or delusional or both.

ALEX: But it can't be any worse than this. I mean, just nothing would be better than this.

BIG BOY: That may be true, but what if it's not nothing? What if it's worse? No one knows.

ALEX: If it's not nothing, it has to be better than this, right?

BIG BOY: Dude, that's just it. Even when we—and by we, I mean you humans—imagine an afterlife, we can't escape the limitations of the human experience. When you humans imagine an afterlife, it's always a cartoon version of the human experience you have on earth...

ALEX: You're thinking—

BIG BOY: —heaven, hell, purgatory, paradise—

ALEX: —Valhalla!—

BIG BOY: —I kind of doubt you'll be going to Valhalla, but yeah. Even reincarnation, coming back as a flounder or a flea circus. Some imagine an eternal waiting room with other people, you name it.

ALEX: You're pretty smart for a fiberglass hamburger mascot.

BIG BOY: What can I say. I have a lot of time to think about these kinds of things.

ALEX: Still, it couldn't be worse.

BIG BOY: For all you know, the afterlife could be a bureaucracy made up of endless paperwork, forms, stamps, notarized documents, and 30-day computer passwords.

ALEX: That would figure. But it seems like there's a 33% chance of it being either better, the same, or worse. And even if it's the same horrible as now, at least it's a different horrible. I can't endure this same horrible anymore.

BIG BOY: Well, you've got me there. I must admit when someone moves me or turns me around and I get a different view, it's at least a new kind of boring. But is it really that bad? Are you really that miserable?

ALEX: Obviously. I have no future.

BIG BOY: You can't get a new job?

ALEX: No one is going to hire me if I've been fired for sexual harassment. Except maybe Frontier Liquors. (*picks up his bottle and takes a swig*) And I think we both know that would be a bad idea.

BIG BOY: What you need is a social safety net. Family and friends.

ALEX: I don't really have any family. I'm estranged from my mother. My father has Alzheimer's and doesn't even know who he is, let alone me.

BIG BOY: Friends?

ALEX: Work friends. Or ex-friends now. My two best friends from college joined AA a few years ago and kind of cut me off, which I get, but still...

BIG BOY: Well, that sucks. But... you have me. I'm your friend.

ALEX: No offense, but if my only friend is Big Boy, that's pretty depressing. In addition to being insane.

BIG BOY: Good point. What about hobbies, something to engage you while you work through this?

ALEX: Dude.

[Puts his head in his hands in defeat.]

I'm depressed. I don't exactly feel like starting up kickboxing or learning Mandarin.

BIG BOY: Well, you've got me there again. I must admit I'm a bit stymied. I really don't know what I'd do in your situation.

ALEX:

[Picks up the gun again and looks at it.]

Put a bullet in your brain?

BIG BOY: I'd be lying if I said no.

ALEX: There's something else. I owe quite a bit of money to the IRS. It was a mistake, but the interest over the last few years, plus the fines... it's... impossible. I'll never pay it all off.

BIG BOY: Jesus. What a hole you're in. I've been trying to be upbeat, but... you know... I have to say it's getting harder and harder to find the bright side.

ALEX: Yeah.

BIG BOY: I wish I had a solution for you, Alex.

ALEX: Ugh. I just can't anymore.

[Picks up gun again and stares at it.]

BIG BOY: It seems like you've been suffering a long, long time.

ALEX: Yes.

BIG BOY: And you basically just want it to stop.

ALEX: Yes.

BIG BOY: So, uh... I know I shouldn't say this, but you're right-handed?

ALEX: Yes.

BIG BOY: I really hate to tell you this, but if you want it to be quick and painless, put it just above and behind your right ear. That will immediately destroy the brain stem. I'm sure you won't feel anything.

ALEX: Right.

[Pause several beats]

Well. Cheers.

[Takes a long swig of whiskey and tosses the empty bottle.]

Stage goes black. There is a sound of a gunshot and a body and a gun hitting the dirt. There is a brief pause, then there is the sound of wind blowing and Big Boy laughing ecstatically. His laughter fades.



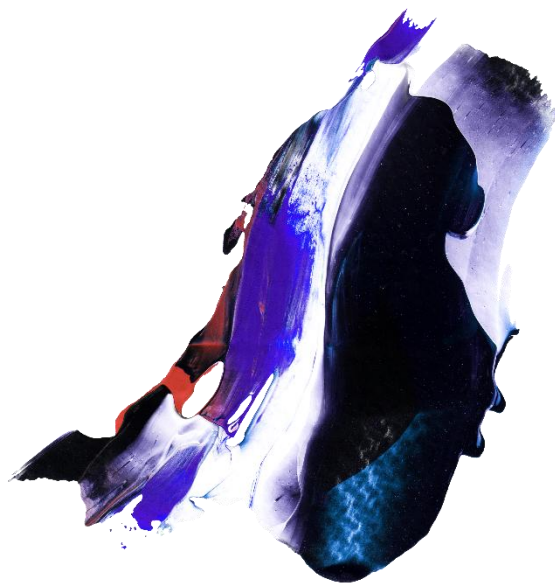
After a few seconds, the lights come back up. Alex's body lies sprawled, dead, from where he sat in front of Big Boy, the gun fallen from his hand.

ALEX (*his voice now coming from out of Big Boy*): Huh? Where am I? What the fuck? Big Boy? Big Boy! Where'd you go? Come back! Hey, Big Boy! Why can't I move?

[pause, several beats]

Is that me? Am I dead? Am I Big Boy now? Am I fucking Big Boy?! No no no no no, please, no! Come back! Big Boy! Please!

Stage goes black again.



Winniefred Sharp



Lost Presence



Panic of the Heart

Katie Hughbanks

Water Is Best

My macro photography focuses on the impact of water, air, and light—these are primal elements we all need for life, a need that inextricably links us all. In an ethical world, we (humans and animals) would have free and abundant access to clean and fresh water and air. In an ethical world, we would preserve resources for the generations to come. This artwork celebrates water, air, and light as life forces.



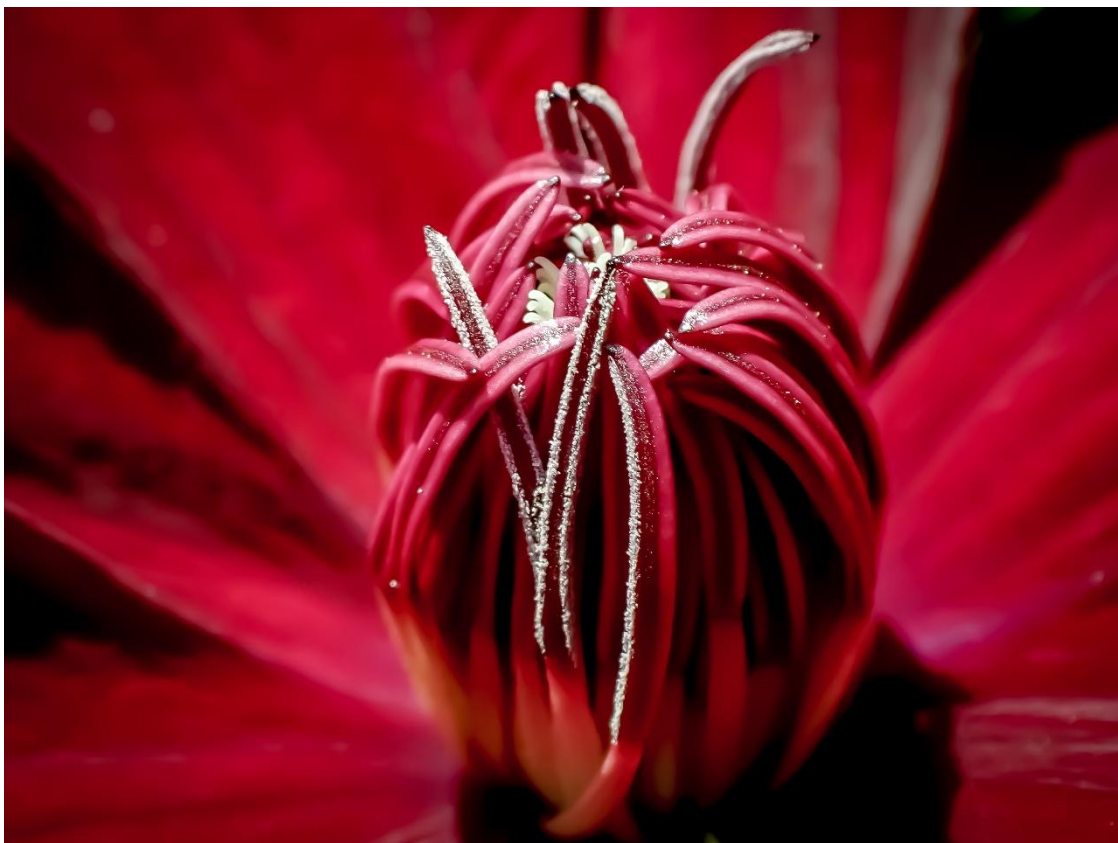
Aquamarine



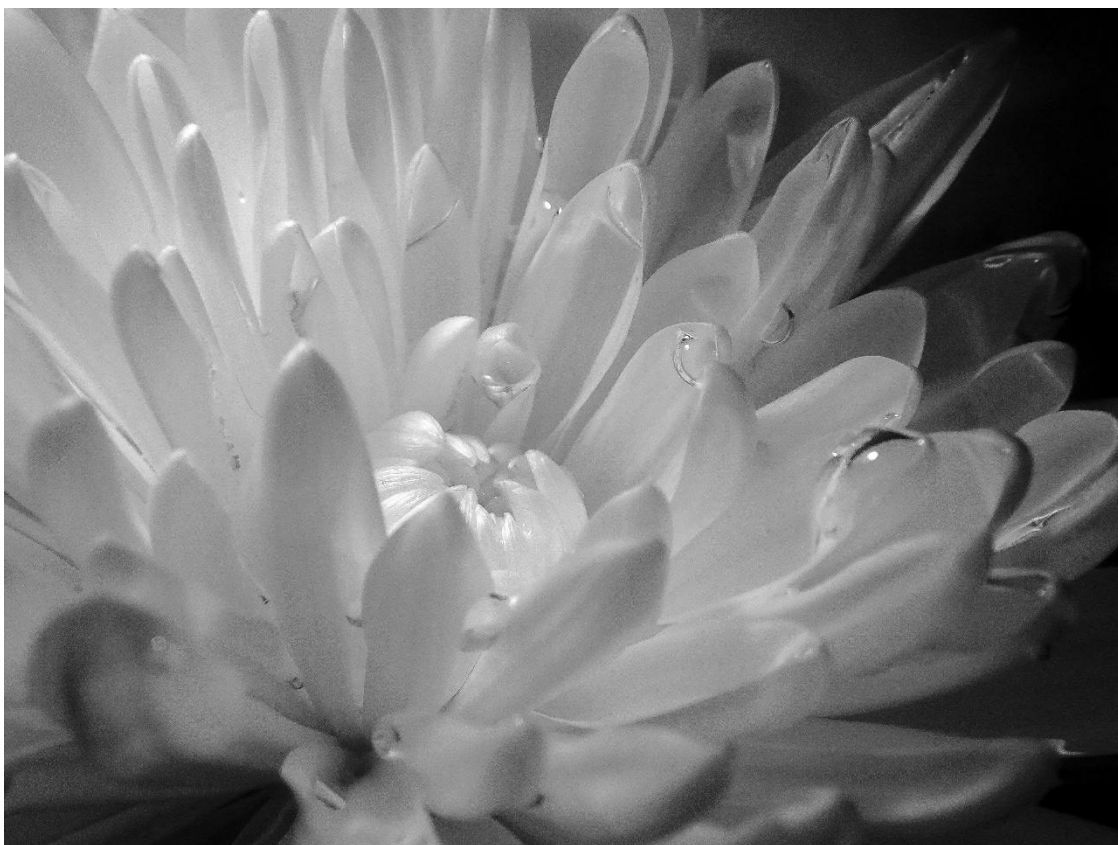
Lavender Dream



Pink and Silver Domes



She Grows



Wedding Flower

*To practice any art, no matter how well or how badly, is a way to
make your soul grow, for heaven's sake. So do it.*

— Kurt Vonnegut



Contributors

Ace Boggess is author of six books of poetry, most recently *Escape Envy*. His writing has appeared in *Indiana Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Hanging Loose*, and other journals. An ex-con, he lives in Charleston, West Virginia, where he writes, watches Criterion films, and tries to stay out of trouble. His forthcoming books include poetry collections, *My Pandemic / Gratitude List* from Mōtus Audāx Press and *Tell Us How to Live* from Fernwood Press.

Adédoyin Àjàyí is a young Nigerian writer. He writes from Lagos, the city that never sleeps. Nature is the biggest influence on his writing. His work has appeared in *Brittle Paper*, *Kalahari Review*, *Afrocritik*, *Livina Press*, *Fiction Niche*, *Literally Stories*, *Maudlin House*, *African Writer*, *Ngiga Review*, *Spillwords Press*, *Journal of African Youth Literature*, *Everscribe Magazine*, and elsewhere. He was longlisted for the 2024 JAY Lit Awards (fiction category). He's addicted to cakes, books, and suits. He tweets @AjayiAdedoyin14.

Aditi is an ordinary feminist with an extraordinary hunger for stories. A researcher at heart, her MPhil in English literature delved into postcolonial traumas in Indian literatures. She honed her craft through a Diploma in Translation & Creative Writing at Ahmedabad University, a residency at Yale, and the Institute for World Literatures at Harvard. Her book, *Silencing of the Sirens*, has drawn critical acclaim, and her words echo in *Borderless Journal*, *The Wise Owl Literary Magazine* and *The Writer's Hour Magazine*, weaving history, pain, and resilience into narratives that refuse to be silenced. IG: @girlinkafkaverse

Aisling Phillips was born in Pembrokeshire and has been writing since the age of fourteen. She has previously had work published in the anthology *Legendary* edited by Laura Harvey as well as articles published by the *Worcester News* and *Hereford Times*, and was the runner up of the Pembrokeshire Online Ghost Story Competition in 2020.

Ali McKenzie-Murdoch (UK) lives in Zürich, Switzerland. Her work appears in *JMWW*, *Fractured Lit*, *Ilanot Review*, *Litro*, *Gone Lawn*, *Bending Genres*, *Your Impossible Voice*, *LEON Literary Review*, and others. She is a *Fractured Lit* Flash Open Contest Finalist, was shortlisted for the National Flash Fiction Day 2023 Micro-Fiction Competition, and received an Honourable Mention in the 2023 *Scribes Prize*. Nominee for Best Small Fiction 2025 & Best Micro Fiction 2025.

Allan Johnston earned his M.A. in Creative Writing and his Ph.D. in English from the University of California, Davis. His poems have appeared in over sixty journals, including *Poetry*, *Poetry East*, *Rattle*, and *Rhino*. He has published three full-length poetry collections (*Tasks of Survival*, 1996; *In a Window*, 2018; *Sable and Selected Poems*, 2022) and three chapbooks (*Northport*, 2010; *Departures*, 2013; *Contingencies*, 2015), and has received an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship, Pushcart Prize nominations, and First Prize in Poetry in the Outrider Press Literary Anthology competition. Recently he has co-translated poems and books by Moroccan poet Abdellatif Laâbi, with collections published by Diálogos Books and Shanti Arts.

Allison Field Bell is a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at the University of Utah, and she has an MFA in Creative Writing from New Mexico State University. Her debut poetry collection, *All That Blue*, is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press in 2026. She is also the author of two chapbooks, *Without Woman or Body* (Poetry, Finishing Line Press) and *Edge of the Sea* (Creative Nonfiction, CutBank Books). Find her at allisonfieldbell.com.

Amlanjyoti Goswami's new book of poetry, *A Different Story*, will be published by Poetrywala this summer. He has written two books of poetry, *River Wedding* and *Vital Signs*, published by Poetrywala. *River Wedding* was shortlisted for the Sahitya Akademi award. Published in journals and anthologies across the world, including *Poetry*, *The Poetry Review*, Penguin Vintage, *Rattle* and Sahitya Akademi, he is also a Best of the Net and Pushcart nominee.

Andrea Green is an emerging writer based in Queensland, Australia. Andrea is currently completing a Master of Creative Writing and enjoys trying her hand at different styles and genres of writing. When she is not working, studying, or writing, Andrea is kept busy with her collection of succulents, a tall stack of library books, and her cat who takes every opportunity to create chaos.

Andrea Marcusa's writings have appeared in *The Gettysburg Review*, *Moon City Review*, *Milk Candy Review*, *Citron Review*, and others. She's received recognition in a range of competitions, including *SmokeLong*, *Best Microfiction*, *Cleaver*, *Raleigh Review*, and *Southampton Review* and is the author of the chapbook, *What We Now Live With* (Bottlecap Press). She's a member of the faculty at The Writer's Studio in New York City. For more information, visit: andreamarcusa.com or see her on Bluesky: [@andreamarcusa.bsky.social](https://bsky.social/atandreamarcusa).

Barnali Ray Shukla is a filmmaker, writer and poet. Her writing has featured in *UCity Review*, *Indian Quarterly*, *Out of Print*, *Kitaab*, *Voice & Verse*, *Bengaluru Review*, *The Punch Magazine*, *Usawa Literary Review*, and *The Hooghly Review*. She also has work in anthologies from HarperCollins India, Sahitya Akademi, Speaking Tiger, Hawakal, Pippa Rann Books, and Red River Press. Barnali has two feature films as a writer-director, four documentaries and two short films, as well as a book of poems, *Apostrophe* (RLFPA, 2016). Her new Hindi feature film, *Joon*, is streaming on Amazon Prime Video. X/Instagram: @barnalirays

Brandon Arnold is not a fancy wordsmith or written word artisan. He tries to keep things simple. His home resides in an unremarkable town in the Midwest of the United States where he writes his poetry & fiction. Brandon also has work forthcoming in *Ink Sweat & Tears*.

C.J. Anderson-Wu (吳介禎) is a Taiwanese writer who has published two fiction collections about Taiwan's military dictatorship (1949–1987), known as White Terror. The books are: *Impossible to Swallow* (2017) and *The Surveillance* (2021). Her third book, *Endangered Youth—Taiwan, Hong Kong, Ukraine*, will be launched in May 2025. Her works have been shortlisted for a number of international literary awards, including the International Human Rights Art Festival and the 2024 Flying Island Poetry Manuscript Competition. She also won the Strands Lit International Flash Fiction Competition, the Invisible City Blurred Genre Literature Competition, and the Wordweavers Literature Contest.

Carl Scharwath, has appeared globally with 250+ publications selecting his writing or art. Carl has published four poetry books and his latest book is *The World Went Dark*, published by Alien Buddha Press. Carl has four photography books, published with Praxis and CreatiVingenuity. His photography was exhibited in the Mount Dora and Leesburg Centers for the Arts. Carl is currently an art editor at *Glitterati* and former editor for *Minute Magazine*. He was nominated for four Best of the Net Awards (2022-25) and two different 2023 Pushcart Nominations for poetry and a short story.

Given that her parents met in a library, it is no surprise that **Catherine Rossi** owned a library card at age 4. After graduating from the University of Michigan, she had a lengthy tech career, where she wrangled words and people as frequently as code and data. She frequently writes about strong single women, inspired by decades of bad dates. Her work has been published in *Midstory Magazine* and *Raw Lit Magazine*. Read more about her at <https://catherinerossi.com>, on Bluesky @catrossauth.bsky.social, or on X @catrossauth.

Chitra Gopalakrishnan, a writer based in New Delhi, uses her ardour for writing to break firewalls between nonfiction and fiction, narratology and psychoanalysis, marginalia and manuscript, and tree-ism and capitalism. Author website: www.chitragopalakrishnan.com

Chris Clemens lives and teaches in Toronto, surrounded by raccoons. Nominated for Best Microfiction and Best Small Fictions, his writing appears in *Invisible City*, *JAKE*, *The Dribble Drabble Review*, *Apex Magazine*, and elsewhere.

Christian Ward is a UK-based poet, with recent work in *Southword*, *Ragaire*, *Okay Donkey*, and *Roi Fainéant*. Longlisted for the 2023 National Poetry Competition (UK), he won a number of competitions in 2024, including the Maria Edgeworth, Pen to Print, London Independent Story Prize and the Shahidah Janjua Poetry Competition. IG: @fighting_cancer_with_poetry

Clodagh O Connor has always loved reading and story-telling. She is curious about the world and its workings. She can be found on Bluesky [@iamagnat.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/iamagnat.bsky.social) and IG [@photoclodagh](https://www.instagram.com/photoclodagh). Her words have been published in *Silly Goose Press*, *Retreat West*, *50 Word Stories* and *The Dribble Drabble Review*. Her story in *The Storms Journal* has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Cynthia Yatchman is an accomplished Seattle based painter and printmaker, whose career spans over 30 years. She shows extensively in the Pacific Northwest and her works are housed in multiple private and public collections.

Daniel Gauss is a working-class nerd, born in Chicago, who has been deeply influenced by the passion and activism of the 1960s. He attended a couple big and famous universities in the USA, but mostly learned everything by himself. He has struggled in the field of education to provide meaningful and transformative experiences to his students despite all obstacles. He writes a lot of pro-social nonfiction for *The Good Men Project* and is proud to have been published by *The Hooghly Review* once before.

Delphine Gauthier-Georgakopoulos is a Pushcart-nominee Breton writer, teacher, mother, nature and music lover, foodie, dreamer. She loves butter, needs coffee, and hates easy opening packaging. She is a contributor to *Poverty House*, co-founder of *The Pride Roars*, and the EIC of *Raw Lit*. Her debut historical novel *Laundry Day* was selected as a Runner-up at the Irish Novel Fair 2024. She lives in Athens, Greece. X/Facebook: @DelGeo14 & Bluesky: delgeo14.bsky.social. Website: <https://delphineegg.weebly.com/>

Derrick Martin-Campbell is a writer from Portland, OR in the United States. His stories have recently appeared in *The Ghost City Review*, *Cold Signal Magazine*, *Joyland*, *The Evergreen Review*, *Apocalypse Confidential*, and *Necessary Fiction*. Find his work at linktr.ee/derrickmartincampbell. He can be found on Bluesky [@dmartincampbell.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/dmartincampbell.bsky.social) and IG [@delerrickoriordan](https://www.instagram.com/delerrickoriordan).

Eugenia Pozas is a bilingual writer based in Monterrey, Mexico. Her first poetry collection in Spanish, *Náufragos (Castaways)*, was published in 2022 with 42 Líneas. Her poetry has been published or is forthcoming in *Dust Poetry Magazine*, *Stone Circle Review*, *The Basilisk Tree*, *Kaleidotrope*, *Sontag Mag*, and *Crowstep Journal*. You can find her on Instagram and X as @eugepozas.

Eve Müller lives in Eugene, Oregon with her sweetheart. She has recently published in *Camas*, *Cirque*, *Empty House*, *Marrow Magazine*, *Sea Wolf Journal*, *Sequestum*, *Thieving Magpie*, and *The Writing Disorder*. Some of her work has been anthologized, and her first book, *Guide to the Ruins*, was published by Plan B Press, with a second book, *Birds and Saints*, forthcoming. She was awarded a PLAYA artists' residency this year, and her work was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. When Eve is not writing, she bakes, hikes, conducts research on autism, hangs out with her mom and two feral daughters, and skinny-dips whenever/wherever she can.

Felix is a Los Angeles playwright whose full-length plays include: *Fearless Bloodsuckers of Hollywood*; *Fallen Comrade*; a short play evening, *Motherload!*; *Suicide Interruptus*; and *As Straw Before the Wind*. Over 80 of Felix's one-act, ten-minute, and one-minute plays have been produced around the country and internationally, and many have been published. Felix is a member of the Dramatists Guild, the Alliance of Los Angeles Playwrights, and First Stage LA. FB: [@felix.racelis](#); IG: [@felixracelis](#); Website: <https://felixracelis.com/>

Gloria Rose-Potts is a nice lady. Her creative life has led her to many ventures, including stand-up comedy, producing variety shows, some light acting, and plenty of writing and journaling. Originally from Cape Cod, Massachusetts, she has followed in her state's tradition of being fascinated by horror and nature writing. She received her MFA in creative writing from American University, and her work has appeared online in *Superstition Review*, *Grace & Gravity*, and she has a piece forthcoming in *Whistling Shade* in early 2025. You can find her @prosepotts on Instagram and newly @prosepotts.bsky.social on Bluesky.

Gopal Lahiri is a bilingual poet, critic, editor, and translator. He has authored 31 books, including eight solo/jointly edited books. His poems are published across more than 150 journals and translated in 18 languages. He was nominated for Pushcart Prize for poetry in 2021. He has received Setu Excellence Award, Pittsburgh, US, in poetry in 2020 and First Jayanta Mahapatra National Award on literature in 2024. X: @gopallahiri; IG: @gopal_lahiri; Website: www.gopallahiri.blogspot.com

Gordon Vells is a writer and translator from Dorset, England. His latest collection is *Wasp Disentanglement for Beginners* (Xenon Lobster Books, 2022), and he has recently had work published in *And Other Poems*, *Ink Sweat & Tears* and *Flights*. Website: www.xenonlobster.co.uk; Instagram/X: @xenonlobster; BSKY: @xenonlobster.bsky.social

JP Relph is a writer from the Northwest of England, hindered by three cats. Tea helps, milk first. She mooches around in charity shops looking for haunted objects. JP writes about apocalypses a lot (despite not having the knees for one) and her collection of post-apoc short fiction was published in 2023. She recently got a zombie story onto the Wigleaf longlist, which may be the best thing ever. Never ask about "the novel," her eyes will roll right out her head.

Jacqueline Goyette is a writer from Indianapolis, Indiana. Her work has been nominated for Best of the Net, Best Small Fictions and Best Microfiction and has appeared in both print and online journals, including *JMWW*, *trampset*, *Phoebe Journal*, *Stanchion*, *Gone Lawn*, *The Citron Review*, *The Forge Literary Magazine* and *Centaur Lit*. She currently lives in the small town of Macerata, Italy with her husband, Antonello, and their bilingual cat, Cardamom. X: @JackieGoyette78; Bluesky: @jackiegoyette.bsky.social; Website: <https://jacquelinegoyette.com/>

Jahnavi Gogoi was born in Assam, India and was raised in Gauhati by her bibliophile parents. A former educator, her work has been published in several international journals and magazines. Growing up she once told one of her teachers that she wanted to be a writer, and life was kind enough to provide her with ample opportunities to pursue her passion. Her work is often nostalgic and based on her real-life experiences. She has dabbled in children's fiction, poetry and most recently flash fiction. Jahnavi was nominated for the Touchstone Award and a Pushcart Prize in 2024 for her haiku. She lives in the scenic town of Ajax, in Ontario, Canada with her husband and precocious nine-year-old daughter. X: @JahnaviGogoi2; IG: @add_a_dash_of_words

Jaime Alejandro Cruz writes and records. He produces the *Arts Calling Podcast* and features short-form literary works and audio projects at the coalition. His work has recently been published in *Barrelhouse*, *Foreign Lit*, *The Belfast Review*, and others. His plays have been produced here and there. Website: www.cruzfolio.com

James Diaz (They/Them) is the founding editor of the literary arts intentional community and healing space *Anti-Heroine Chic*, as well as the author of three full length poetry collections, *This Someone I Call Stranger* (Indolent Books, 2018), *All Things Beautiful Are Bent* (Alien Buddha, 2021) and *Motel Prayers* (Alien Buddha, 2022). Originally a southern native, they currently call upstate New York home. Twitter/X: @diaz_james; IG: @jamesdiazpoet

Jarek Jarvis (he/him) is an emerging Hoosier poet. He lives in Central Indiana where he teaches English at a high school.

Jasmina Kuenzli (she/her/hers) loves telling stories. When she isn't doing so, she can be found playing soccer, reading, and devising plans to land herself a villain role on *The Bachelor Franchise*. You can find her adventures and her insights on grief, the fall of democracy, and true love on Twitter @jasmina62442 and on Instagram @jasminawritespoetry and @jazztagrams. She would like to thank Brenna and Sarah, who hear all the stories first, and to Harry Styles, who is sunshine distilled in a human being.

Jennifer works in a private university library in Chicago and occasionally thinks up stories while sitting in traffic on the Kennedy. Her short stories appear in *NECKSNAP Magazine*, *Broken Antler Magazine*, *Channel Magazine*, *Witcraft*, and *Little Old Lady Comedy*, among others. She has written one novel, *Edge of Sundown*, and swears she's working on another. More information is available on her [website](#) and [Bluesky](#) and more via linktr.ee/jenniferworrell.

Johannah Simon is a corporate learning strategist by day and (sometime) creative by night. A Midwest GenX multi-genre writer, her tiny pieces have appeared in literary journals, including *Stanza Cannon*, *Micromance*, *Bending Genres*, and *Janus Literary*. You can find her on X @JohannahWrites, Bluesky @johannah.bskey.social, and at www.thewritingtype.com.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *New World Writing*, *City Brink* and *Tenth Muse*. Latest books, *Subject Matters*, *Between Two Fires* and *Covert* are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *Amazing Stories* and *Cantos*.

Joshua Diabo is a Mohawk from Kahnawake, outside Montreal, Quebec. He received his BFA in Film and Transmedia from Syracuse University, and is currently undertaking an MA in Literature and Writing Studies, and teaching at California State University San Marcos. His work has been featured on *The Horror Tree*, *Screenrant*, and *318 Journal*.

Josie Turner lives in a small town outside London and works for an educational charity. Her fiction, essays and poetry have been widely published in the UK, Ireland and the US, including in *The Four Faced Liar*, *Msllexia*, *Brittle Star*, *Story Unlikely* and forthcoming in *Syncopation Literary Journal*.

Juliet Waller is a Seattle, USA based writer and playwriting teacher. Her pieces have appeared in, among others, *3Elements*, *Mountain Bluebird Magazine*, *New Delta Review*, and *Does It Have Pockets*. Her pieces often revolve around minor catastrophes and strangers meeting in unusual circumstances. She has an upcoming piece in *Pixie Literary Magazine*. You can find her on Instagram: @julietpersimmon.

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Katie Hughbanks (she/her) is a writer, photographer, and teacher whose photography has been published nationally and internationally in more than 50 magazines. She is the author of two chapbooks, *Blackbird Songs* (Prolific Press, 2019) and *It's Time* (Finishing Line Press, 2024). She teaches English and Creative Writing in Louisville, Kentucky, US.

Kavan P. Stafford is an author, poet and reviewer based in Scotland. His works have appeared in numerous publications including *The Piker Press*, *The Big Issue*, *Bella Caledonia*, *Unpublishable*, *The Manchester Review* and many more. He is currently writing a non-fiction book on homelessness and libraries for Facet Publishing. You can find him on Instagram and Twitter @kavanpstafford.

Ken's nine collections of brief fictions and poetry can be found at Amazon and most online booksellers. He spent 33 years in information system management, is married to a world record holding female power lifter, and has a family of several rescue cats and betta fish. Individual works have appeared in *Amsterdam Review*, *Analog*, *Rundelania*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Best Microfictions 2024*, and elsewhere.

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Kiran Gandhi is a writer from Kerala who is still trying to come to terms with a world where Roger Federer does not play tennis professionally anymore. He likes writing about the quotidian life with a dash of humour. He tweets @Kirangandhi.

Kushal Poddar has authored ten books, the latest being *A White Can For The Blind Lane*, and his works have been translated into twelve languages, and he has been a sub-editor of *Outlook Magazine* and the editor of *Words Surfacing*, and he does some illustrations and sketches for various magazines. BSKY: [@kushal-poddar-poet.bsky.social](https://bsky.social/@kushal-poddar-poet)

Laura Eppinger (she/they) knows that the Jersey Devil is real. Laura's work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize as well as Best of the Net. Follow Laura on FB: [@eppingermonsters](https://www.facebook.com/eppingermonsters), BSKY: [@lolaapp.bsky.social](https://bsky.social/@lolaapp), and lauraeppinger.blog.

Maureen Tai is an award-winning Malaysian writer, speaker and visual storyteller living in Hong Kong who has published creative works in literary and online magazines such as *Cha*, the Asian American Writers' Workshop, *Kyoto Journal*, *Mekong Review*, *Voice & Verse Poetry Magazine*, *Coffee and Conversations*, *Porch Lit Magazine* and *The Hooghly Review*, as well as in local and international anthologies. Primarily writing for children and teens, she has published short stories for children with Oxford University Press and Marshall Cavendish (Asia). Maureen's work and book reviews can be found at www.maurentai.com. She counts her time as the Program Director of the Hong Kong International Literary Festival in 2023 as a highlight of her literary career to date.

Megan Hanlon is a podcast producer who sometimes writes. Her words have appeared in *The Forge*, *South Florida Poetry Journal*, *Variant Literature*, *Gordon Square Review*, and more. Her blog, *Sugar Pig*, is known for relentlessly honest essays that are equal parts tragedy and comedy. Find her on X, Bluesky, and Facebook at @sugarpigblog and read her blog at <https://sugar-pig.blogspot.com/>.

Meredith Toumayan is a shepherdess ensconced in Midcoast Maine. Her first career, after a Bryn Mawr College degree in Anthropology, was mortgage underwriting—where she wrote bleeding heart essays to convince old-school bankers to take a chance on young families. She now writes the weekly town news column for her local newspaper, *The Midcoast Villager*, while working on her memoir. IG: @meredith.toumayan; FB: Meredith Toumayan and Mulberry Marsh; Goodreads: Meredith Toumayan.

The author of more than two dozen novels, plays, film scripts and short story and poetry collections,

Michael Mirolla's publications include a novella, *The Last News Vendor*, winner of the 2020 Hamilton Literary Award as well as three Bressani Prizes. From September 2024 to June 2025, Michael is the WIR for the Regina Public Library. Born in Italy, Michael makes his home outside the town of Gananoque in the Thousand Islands area of Ontario. Website: <https://www.michaelmirolla.com/>; X: @MichaelMirolla1

Michael Moreth is a recovering Chicagoan living in the rural, micropolitan city of Sterling, the Paris of Northwest Illinois, USA.

The absurdities of life are a rich source of material for **Michael Smith**, as is the international nature of his day job. He has self-published two collections of short stories, *Fonts*, then *Songs*, and *Gruseltal*, a humorous novel. His short stories have been published online by *Freedom Fiction Journal*, *Heimat Review*, *Impspired*, *Witcraft*, *Winamop*, *Fevers of the Mind*, *The Writers' Journal* and *The Hooghly Review*. Website: <https://frucht-schleifen.weebly.com/books.html>

Namratha Varadharajan writes to clear her lens in a world of excess. She writes poems that explore the nature of emotions, relationships, and our interconnectedness with nature and attempts to chip at the prejudices that plague us, one syllable at a time. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Rattle*, *ONLY POEMS*, *Briefly Zine*, *The Yearbook of Indian Poetry in English* (2023, 2021), *Usawa Literary Review*, *Muse India*, among others. She is a reader for *ONLY POEMS*. You can find more of her work at namrathavaradharajan.substack.com and IG: @namrathavaradharajan.

Nicholas De Marino is a neurodivergent writer and poet. He founded *Senses* and is a *foofaraw* columnist and Codex member. He's got several writing credits, degrees, and accolades that have nothing to do with cats. Plus some that do. Read more at nicholasdemarino.com.

Nina Miller is an Indian–American physician, epee fencer, and creative. She loves writing competitions and nursing cups of chai. She's in the Wigleaf Top 50 for 2024 and her current work is in *Sci-Fi Shorts*, *Micromance Magazine*, *Raw Lit*, *Trash Cat Lit* and forthcoming in *Silly Goose Press*. She is a contributor for *The Pride Roars* blog. Find her @NinaMD1 or @ninamiller.bsky.social. Read more at ninamillerwrites.com.

Nuala McEvoy started writing and taught herself to paint during the pandemic, at the age of fifty. Since then, her writing has been published in several literary magazines and she has read her poems on podcasts. Nuala paints daily using acrylics and pen on canvas. She started submitting her artwork for publication a year ago, and since then over 100 of her paintings have been accepted for publication in over fifty literary magazines and reviews. Her art has been accepted as cover art for several of these reviews. She has had two exhibitions in Münster, Germany and currently holds an exhibition in The Cavendish Centre, 44 Hallam Street, London. X: @mcevoy_nuala; Website: <https://linktr.ee/nualamcevoy>

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Rebecca Field lives and writes in Derbyshire, UK. She has flash fiction in several print anthologies and has also been published online by *The Phare*, *Ghost Parachute*, *Fictive Dream*, *Gone Lawn*, *Tiny Molecules*, *Bulb Culture Collective* and *Milk Candy Review* among others. X/Bluesky: @RebeccaFwrites

Richard Collins is a Zen monk and abbot of the New Orleans Zen Temple. After teaching literature for many years in the U.S. and abroad (including Romania, Bulgaria, and Wales), he retired as Dean Emeritus of Arts and Humanities at California State University Bakersfield. He now lives in Sewanee, Tennessee, where he directs Stone Nest Zen Dojo. His writing appears in *Alien Buddha Zine*, *Clockhouse*, *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, *MockingHeart Review*, *Pensive*, *Prosetrics* (Amsterdam), *Religion & the Arts*, *Sagesses Bouddhistes* (France), *The Seventh Quarry* (Wales), *Shō Poetry Journal*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and *Urthona: Buddhism and the Arts* (UK), among others. His books include *No Fear Zen* (Hohm Press, 2015), a translation of Taisen Deshimaru's *Autobiography of a Zen Monk* (Hohm Press, 2022), and *In Search of the Hermaphrodite* (Tough Poets Press, 2024).

Richard Newman is the author of four books of poetry, most recently *Blues at the End of the World* (Kelsay Books, 2024). His work has appeared in *American Journal of Poetry*, *Best American Poetry*, *Boulevard*, *I-70 Review* (featured poet), *Innisfree Poetry Journal*, *Literary Matters*, *Poems & Plays*, *Poetry East*, *Rattle*, *Tar River Poetry*, and many other magazines and anthologies. His plays have been produced in St. Louis, San Diego, and Wilmington. He currently teaches Creative Writing and World Literature at Al Akhawayn University in Morocco. Before moving to the Maghreb, he and his family lived in Vietnam, Japan, and the Marshall Islands.

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Sabyasachi Roy is an academic writer, poet, painter, and photographer. He regularly contributes craft essays to *Authors Publish* as a guest writer. His poetry has been published in *The Broken Spine*, *Stand*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, and other print and online magazines. He sells his paintings through online galleries. His photograph has appeared on the cover of *Sanctuary Asia (Cubs)*. More at <https://www.eycem.com/u/sabyasachi13/illustrations>.

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Stuart is a British writer and poet based in Tokyo, where he writes, eats too much, and pretends to speak Japanese. He has work in *Ergot Press*, *Maudlin House*, and *Black Hare Press* among others. Find him on Bluesky @doc12345.bsky.social, where he's just as boring as everyone else, and more of his writing here: <https://linktr.ee/dococococotopus>.

Susan H. Evans is a former English professor, currently living in Baltimore. Always eager to thrust her big toe into unknown waters, she spent a summer in Fairbanks, Alaska. As they say, the odds were good she'd enjoy the experience, but the goods were odd. Evans enjoys writing poetry, creative nonfiction, humor, and memoir. She is published in many online and print magazines and journals. FB: <https://www.facebook.com/womanacrossthewater>

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Winniefred is a multidimensional artist navigating words and images in a world where all art is free from boundaries. They write, create clothes, videos, photographs but also lace pieces, because art is limitless in this existence. Living by the North Sea, with chocolate milk in one hand and their camera in another, their art has already been published in several magazines. X: @winniefredsharp



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