

Typehouse



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Typehouse

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Typehouse is a writer-run literary magazine based out of Portland, Oregon. We are always looking for well-crafted, previously unpublished writing and artwork that seeks to capture an awareness of the human condition. To learn more about us, visit our website at www.typehousemagazine.com.

Cover Artwork: ***With Eyes That Thrive Only on Sparks*** by Bill Wolak
(See page 109)

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Fabio Lastrucci was born in Naples (Italy) in 1962. Sculptor and illustrator, he has worked for the main national television networks as well as for the opera and prose theater. In the late 1980s he began to draw comics, publishing with *Ronin* and *Sherazade* magazines. His comics, artworks, and covers are published in *Shenandoah*, *Perihelion SF*, *Typehouse*, *The Tishman Review*, *Gone Lawn*, *Metaphorosis*, *Bards and Sages*, and *Press Pause*. Through *Pithead Chapel* he earned nominations in the *Cover Art* category for the *Best of the Net* in 2022 and 2023. As a writer he has published humorous novels, a fantasy saga, and science fiction problems, oddities, and comics. <https://www.instagram.com/fabio.lastrucci>.



Jungle Fever at Rhino

In the deserted streets of cities in full lockdown, the presence of man disappears, leaving room for the animals that appear at the gates of the metropolis claiming their own space as protagonists. With a bit of imagination, we can imagine this substitution game by playing on the symmetries between places and meanings. For this reason a Rhino bar welcomes the boredom of young rhinos, emulating James Dean, who dream of a Jungle Fever that is not just the name of an old pinball machine from the 60s.

Tara Campbell (she/her) is a writer, teacher, Kimbilio Fellow, fiction co-editor at Barrelhouse, and graduate of American University's MFA in Creative Writing. Previous publication credits include SmokeLong Quarterly, Masters Review, Wigleaf, Booth, Electric Literature and CRAFT Literary. She's the author of a novel and four multi-genre collections including her newest, Cabinet of Wrath: A Doll Collection. Connect with her on Twitter at @TaraCampbellCom.

In Which I Inherit My Father's Tendency to Minimize

Tara Campbell

Race was never really an issue
for my father
for me
Except when, as a child, he and his white friends
Except when, in high school, some boyfriends'
couldn't go to each other's houses
parents disapproved
after they played ball
once they found out what I was
Except when his boss
Except when my classmates
had a secretary deliver his performance review
told me my scholarships
after meeting with other men face to face
were reverse racism

Except in Texas when that bar kicked him out

Except when that colleague

and that restaurant would only serve him

made a crack about my hair

in the kitchen

in a meeting

Except when the Air Force insisted

Except when white stylists insisted

on giving his unit the oldest planes,

the ones that took

my hair was so damaged

it would take

a long time to fix

Except when he couldn't leave Anchorage

Except when I learned I was born in Alaska

for that new job in DC because he

because my father

refused to move his family

to a segregated, redlined city

but other than that

it's been fine

YJ has previously been published in Sci-Fi Lampoon, Typehouse, and The Quiet Reader. She lives on the East Coast of the United States with her wife, their cat, and their dog. You can find more of her writing at <https://yjjun-reads.medium.com>.

White Hair

YJ Jun

Maddie was in middle school when Hannah first saw it, right there above her left temple—a white hair. She gasped and cupped Maddie’s face.

“Honey, what’s *this*?”

Maddie squirmed. “It’s nothing, mom, *God*.”

“Madison Moonjoo Park, stay still.”

Her hands fell obediently to her sides.

The little white hair sticking out of Maddie’s crown was . . . not menacing. That would be a judgment word, Hannah reminded herself. Just coarse and uneven, like a fuse. But that didn’t make sense either, because it’s not like white hair *caused* disaster. It just indicated . . . what? Stress? Trauma? Rage and crippling depression?

Hair contained memories. That much Hannah knew. It’s why she had been so shocked when she met Maddie for the first time. “Why does she have so much? How could she be so hairy straight out of the womb?”

Her husband, Seongjin, had cooed and twiddled his fingers under the infant’s chin. “Who knows? Maybe it’s exciting inside your uterus. I certainly know it’s exciting inside your vagina.” He had giggled as Hannah sighed, too tired to give him a friendly slap. She’d simply smiled as a jet-black hair sprouted out of his head.

But white hair? At this age? It didn’t make any sense. A warm home, loving parents, good schools, private tutors, a French horn, birthday parties, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, braces, acne treatments, home-prepped meals, breast feeding. They were by no means perfect parents—Hannah admitted she was too strict sometimes, and that sometimes, Seongjin was too loose—but given all their shortcomings, hadn’t they given her all they could?

Hannah took a deep breath. Beamed. “Well, that’s exciting—your first white hair! That’s okay. You know you can talk to us anytime, sweetie, especially me. Just remember to *never* pluck a white hair, because if you do ___”

“—then ten more will grow back in its place,” Maddie droned.

“Ten? It’s three.”

Maddie squinted at her. “Abba says it’s ten.”

Why was she talking to her father but not her?

“Your abba is a tomatohead.”

“Stop *calling* him that!”

“Don’t tell your father.” She kissed her daughter’s temple before shepherding her out the door. “C’mon, we’re gonna be late for the bus. Actually, I’ll drive you to school today.”

She always wondered if there were bullies on the bus.

#

When Seongjin got home he entered the bedroom with a semi-twirl, both arms in the air like a football champ. “It is I, your lover, tomatohead.”

“She said she’d never tell.” Hannah sat up to kiss him as he plopped on the bed. “Should we be worried? You saw the white hair, right?”

“Yes, and no. Well no, then yes. Yes, the white hair.” He tucked one leg under the other, clasped his hands together on his lap. “White hair could happen at that age.” He said it like he was announcing the tomatoes had fallen early, slightly uncommon but within the bounds of nature.

“But it *doesn’t* usually. And look what happens when it does! That poor Parker’s kid . . . the eldest . . .”

Seongjin tugged his hair. “I heard they finally get to pick him up at the end of the summer.”

“Did they ever find out what caused it?”

Seongjin shook his head, the waves of his jet-black hair swaying in a way that still made Hannah swoon.

She had to admit: she could see why Seongjin was the favorite parent. Ever since Maddie started taking in the world with her pale brown eyes, her mother had only snatched things out of her chubby fingers, while her father gifted her a cornucopia of treats. Seongjin had let her trample the helpless basil sprouts and fling compost on his grinning face, while Hannah had chased her around the backyard garden, terrified she’d get cut by twigs or stung by bees or mauled by rabid squirrels. How many of the hairs on Maddie’s head contained memories with Seongjin instead of her?

He continued to be the cool parent now: “I think it’s best to empower her to deal with it on her own, in the long-run. We can keep an eye on it for now. Just, you know, don’t grow your own white hairs stressing out about this. And stop calling me tomatohead. In front of Maddie. In bed, though . . .” He wriggled his eyebrows. He was just about to mount a giggling Hannah when they heard a cry outside their bedroom window.

“Dad?”

“Coming!”

Hannah was out the door, down the stairs, out in the garden before Seongjin came thudding after her. “What’s wrong? What is it?” she asked.

She was struck again by how much the girl was cast in her own image, especially in this golden light that washed away her father's Korean coloring to accentuate her mother's German-Polish features.

Maddie's face soured. The Ziplock bag in her hands fell off a tomato still hanging on its stem. "I called for *Dad*."

"I'm here, sweetie—" Seongjin said.

Maddie groaned and pushed past Hannah, past Seongjin standing helpless on the back patio. The house swallowed her up.

Hannah blinked after her daughter. "I don't understand."

"Babe, look at me." He took her hand. "Maddie's been helping me in the garden. She's growing her own tomatoes. Planted the seeds weeks ago. She's probably trying to insulate the tomatoes from this freak summer frost we're set to get tomorrow."

She stared at the gaping door through which Maddie had disappeared. At the hardened green tomato still hanging above the Ziplock on the dirt.

"And you felt the need to keep this secret from me?"

"Maddie did." He squeezed her hand. "She loves you. And she needs space."

Cicadas droned and heat stifled as Hannah willed herself to breathe. Seongjin flashed her a goofy smile.

"Are you sure *I'm* the tomatohead?"

He laughed as she slapped him.

"She came out of my vagina, you know! My exciting vagina!"

#

Throughout the years Hannah had tried to educate herself, keep up with the ever-evolving science/magic of hair and why it grew. It was confusing given all the conflicting reports and cultural variations, but white hair was bad. This much she also knew.

Luckily for the family, Hannah had a PhD in public policy, which many mistook for the art of speaking bullshit but was really the rigorous analysis of data to test which policies worked best. Seongjin would know—they met in grad school. Teasing causation out of messy correlations was her passion and everlasting nightmare. Mapping constellations across academic papers was literally her bread and butter. Armed with academic journals and coffee, she started Maddie's detox program.

The trick was not to fall for causal reductionism, the silly notion that every effect had only one cause. They had to attack this from all angles.

Fish oil and chamomile tea. Eye masks and earplugs. Morning jogs; straight-from-school jogs. Waking up with the sun or sleeping in as much as possible. She started with things that worked on herself—Maddie was her daughter, after all. Things didn't seem to be getting worse. Of course she could calibrate the treatments more accurately if Maddie would let her

observe the outcome variable—the ratio of white to chestnut—but apparently she was not allowed to rummage through her daughter’s hair.

“Mom, stop,” Maddie said, pushing away Hannah’s hands.

“It is invasive,” Seongjin said when Hannah went to vent.

So Hannah would only look, not touch, and on several occasions she witnessed another a chestnut-colored hair sprouting from Maddie’s head.

During family movie night, while Maddie slept on Seongjin’s shoulder, Hannah couldn’t help but creep closer.

“Honey, what are you doing?” He peered over their daughter at Hannah. His whisper became an urgent hiss. “You’re—you’re growing a white hair.”

“Look.” She flipped up Maddie’s hair.

It was only about the circumference of a pencil eraser, but the sun-deprived skin was unmistakable: a bald spot. Around it, a rim of silver—Maddie had been picking white hairs, causing more to spring up around them. Hannah’s finger pressed against the naked skin.

Maddie bolted awake and excused herself to dash up the stairs.

Seongjin sighed and shook his head. A white hair curled out like a feeler.

#

Hannah drummed her fingers on the arm of the chair in the hair doctor’s lobby. Most of the waiting patients were old, as they should be. No matter how rich or fulfilling, a life acquires enough suffering throughout the years to turn white by the end of the eighth decade or so.

But there, sitting against the same wall, was a child. He didn’t look any different from Maddie’s playmates growing up. Hannah wanted to lean across and exchange notes with who she presumed to be the father. He wouldn’t be a random sample representative of the population, but maybe a case study rich in qualitative data was more relevant for her current predicament.

She drafted the survey in her mind: Was his son secretly white underneath his copper hair? Was he, too, here to get hair dye for his child? To avert disaster? Had he, too, found himself poring over social media and even religious texts, like a digital archaeologist, or a conspiracy theorist?

Had he, too, asked himself, again and again, staring at a hissing coffee machine or at a moon-lit ceiling or a glaring red traffic light: What else could they do to stop it?

“Shave it.”

Hannah turned to see a mustachioed man entirely too close to her face.

He mowed an imaginary razor across his fuzzy, snowy scalp. “That’s what they do in the army, right? Clear the mind. Remove distractions. Same as the monks. Look, I mean no harm. I’m just saying. How many young people

do you find with a head full of white hair? None. Because they off themselves.”

“*Ex-cuse* me!”

“You know it’s true. It’s a slippery slope. These white hairs are like weeds. *Re-lent*-less. You let one grow, might as well dig your grave.”

“I’ll dig your grave for you if you don’t shut your mouth.”

“Mrs. Park?”

Hannah turned towards a stunned nurse technician hunched over a clipboard.

“The doctor will see you now.”

The doctor seemed as uninterested as Maddie in the check-up. “You brought her in for a white hair?” She kept her eyes on the monitor, arms folded.

“A whole spot,” Hannah said. This doctor, she kept her head in a bun so tight it made Hannah’s hairline hurt to look at it. Surely she had it all under control. She’d bring a clear mind and steady hands to rooting out the terror crawling out of her daughter’s head like goddamn fucking pythons.

“Mhm.” The doctor stifled a yawn, got up to don surgical gloves. “How’s she sleeping? Eating? Problems with school? Boys, girls, et cetera? Friends? Teenage white hair is unusual but not uncommon. Typically these are simple fixes. You remember what it was like to go through puberty.”

“We’ve tried all that. We fear it’s getting worse.”

Was that true? Hannah looked at Maddie’s hair, wavy like her father’s, as if she could see the white hidden within. She shook her head.

Of course Seongjin feared, too.

“Fear won’t help.” The doctor ran a hand over Maddie’s hair. “I’m going to start the examination.”

“But it’s a slippery slope isn’t it? You pluck one, three more take its place.”

“Many studies find that it’s ten.”

Maddie raised her eyebrows at her mother.

“But it doesn’t matter how many grow in its place as long as you make sure they don’t grow in the first place . . .”

The doctor went still; Maddie’s hair hung limp from her frozen hands. Hannah couldn’t see the spot but she had a clear view of the doctor’s face, lips pursed. She didn’t turn when the receptionist knocked with an urgent call.

#

Hannah had never been to a hair therapist, but she knew in theory how it worked. How, if the hair growing out of your head mirrored the memories within, then working on the hair reshaped the memories or at least how we perceive them. She tried not to think too hard about how this reverse causation was not, according to the research, entirely reliable.

“The doctor couldn’t just give you a bottle of hair dye?” Seongjin asked as they folded laundry. “I thought they lifted the restriction on prescribing it to minors.”

Hannah beat a pillow into its case. “She said we’re too late for that.”

A week later, Hannah looked up at the mirror-like edifice of Ms. Yoo’s salon. In the rearview mirror, Maddie pulled at strands of glinting white hair.

Seongjin high-fived the steering wheel. “Well, shall we?”

“Welcome!” The receptionist beamed, hair in a proud ponytail. “Here for Ms. Yoo? I’ll lead you to the leader myself. Come on.”

The receptionist rattled off to the frenetic BPM of electronic music blasting over the speakers. “Now, you’re gonna be overwhelmed. Most people, they feel resistance. They tell themselves they can’t do this. It’s too much. It’s too frightening. But believe me, when you feel that resistance, you just have to push. Push through. Push through, Maddie!” Maddie jumped as she grabbed her shoulders.

Push through what? Hannah wasn’t sure. But did she did know for a fact that the receptionist’s athleisure cost a set of biking classes.

“We have six sections, four chairs each. A dedicated specialist for each section tailored *exactly* to your needs.” She gestured at a therapist and his client in session as they passed.

The therapist sprang up, arms wide, looking like a Jack-in-the-box with his striped long-sleeve shirt and white collar. “I’m feeling *gr-reat!*”

The aproned boy in front of him squirmed. “I’m feeling . . . great?”

The therapist pouted as he put his hands on his hips. “Now, Jeremy, that doesn’t sound quite enthusiastic. Looks like we might need a stronger gel today.” The therapist reached for a tube and squirted Barney-the-dinosaur-purple gel into a bowl before brushing it onto the boy’s hair.

“Is this the kid’s section? Shouldn’t Maddie be here?” Seongjin asked.

“With her condition Maddie counts as one of the big girls, because the strongest warriors get the hardest tasks, don’t they, Maddie?”

Hannah and Seongjin shared a look. “I’m sure it’s fine,” he mouthed in response to her raised eyebrows.

“Now the sections are spaced wide apart,” The receptionist continued. “That’s because we’ve optimized our facilities to maximize performance. Keep up, okay? Feel that burn in your arch yet?” She pretzeled mid-stride to flash the bottom of her pastel pink sneakers at them, then landed straight back into speedwalking.

They passed another therapist in action. His voice boomed over unseen local speakers amplifying his headset mic.

“No seriously? Seriously, dude? Think about it. Running water. Electricity. Democracy. Fucking Taco Bell at two in the morning or bottomless mimosas on a Sunday morning. You are literally hashtag blessed,

my friend.” Biceps bulged out of his white t-shirt, black text across his pecs commanding, “HARDER.”

A dome whirred above the client’s tinfoil-wrapped hair. Her frown turned into a sheepish smile. “Yeah, I guess I am.”

“Now say it with me: I’m kicking ass!”

“Yeah, *yeah*. I’m kicking ass!” Passing the phrase back and forth, their cries rang out like iron striking steel.

These people, the therapists, they’d all been through the treatment. Maddie could become just as chipper as them. They weren’t a representative sample, of course, of treated clients—only the ones who had survived. But was survivorship bias really such a bad thing? Would they want to see what the best case scenario looked like when the worst case outcome seemed so terrifyingly obvious?

“Now, finally, the woman herself, the one who made it all possible—Ms. Yoo!”

Ms. Yoo turned her head like an owl, an opalescent smile stretched taut across her porcelain skin. A wide headband safeguarded the magnificent plume hair of hair that crested inches above her head, then fell in one uniform, delicate wave, ending right above her shoulders.

She held out her hand. “Ms. Yoo. Pleased to meet you.”

While Seongjin introduced himself, Hannah wondered how Ms. Yoo’s sleeveless dress could seem so elegant even though it looked like an apron ironed onto a picnic blanket. She thought suddenly of manicured lawns and pleasant strolls through orderly supermarkets.

“And this must be Miss Madison.”

“Maddie,” she said softly, twisting her shoulders.

“Well, Maddie, we are gonna get you all. Fixed. Up. So don’t you worry.” She tapped Maddie’s nose to enunciate each word—and not a hair moved. In fact it seemed like Ms. Yoo’s hair never moved, Hannah noticed, as they walked away.

“Can we watch?” Hannah blurted.

Ms. Yoo pivoted, her smile somehow even wider. “Oh heavens, no. This is an intimate procedure. We won’t get the best result with her parents hovering around.”

The receptionist leaned in between them. “You *have* to check out our rooftop cafe. Beautiful view. Let me show you—” She guided them towards the elevator.

When the doors opened with a *ding*, Seongjin called out to Maddie. “Text us if you need anything.” The doors clattered shut.

#

When they saw her again, Maddie’s hair was completely black.

“Isn’t it amazing?” She twirled her head, grinning.

“All fixed,” Ms. Yoo chirped.

Seongjin placed his hands on his hips. “Oh, wow! You look great, sweetie! What a cool new look!” His lip twitched even as he smiled.

Maddie looked at Hannah expectantly. “You look so much better already—”

Ms. Yoo cut in to say she’d gift them a supplement to “maximize the treatment’s effectiveness.”

Seongjin and Maddie headed out towards the car while Hannah and the receptionist wrangled with the card reader. Just as Hannah got the card to work, Ms. Yoo dug French-manicured nails into her arm and hissed: “It’s *very* important that Madison apply the supplement to her hair.” When she pulled away, she donned that suburban-sweet smile again. “She’s a very special girl, your Maddie.”

#

For a week Maddie was the same girl who used to run around the house with crayons, except instead of crayons she was playing with makeup. Instead of helping out in the garden, she was sending selfies to friends.

“Well that seemed to work, didn’t it?” Seongjin asked one evening while they were spooning.

Hannah admired his cheerfulness despite his strained voice, but she wasn’t so sure. School had called to say Maddie had forgotten homework and straggled late into class; that she seemed generally absentminded and uninterested, sleep-deprived.

Hannah had been checking the supplement bottle since they got home every day while cleaning the bathroom and it didn’t seem to be getting any lighter. This morning Maddie had caught her and scowled and run off to blast music, but Ms. Yoo’s message rang in Hannah’s ears. What were the odds of Maddie recovering if she didn’t apply the supplement?

A sharp cry rang out across the landing, then a *stomp stomp stomp*-ing from the bathroom to Maddie’s bedroom. The door slammed. They launched out of bed.

Hannah hugged Maddie’s shut door. “Sweetie, what’s wrong?”

“Another. White. Hair!”

“Are you sure it was white?” She reached over to stop Seongjin from pulling at his hair with both fists. “Ms Yoo said—”

“She said I wasn’t supposed to *have* anymore. This is so—AHH!”

Seongjin jiggled the door handle. “Sweetie. What’s wrong?”

“Another one is *growing in*,” Maddie wailed. “I can *see* it growing.”

“Honey, I’m so sorry. I’ll call Ms. Yoo in the morning and ask her what’s going on.” She tapped her finger against the wood. “But, you know, have you been using the supplement?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“I—well, I just want to make sure. Ms. Yoo said it’s very important you use it.”

Maddie spoke so softly Hannah had to strain to hear her. “It makes my head itchy.”

Hannah balked. Scoffed. “Well, I mean no wonder your white hair is growing back.”

“What?!” The door swung open to a red-faced Maddie. “Are you saying this is my fault?”

Hannah was taken aback by the feral look in her face, like an animal that had been cornered. Why? Was this really the child she had created? The child she had nursed to life with chapped nipples and sleepless nights? For nine months she had taken care of her body better than at any other time in her life; thereafter she maintained it just enough to make sure it didn’t break down in the middle of the road like the fifteen-year-old Honda Civic that was her first car. She had wiped and tended and loved every crevice of this child—and now she was snarling at her?

But no—Hannah would not tolerate this. “Your father and I—I have done everything within my power to make sure this doesn’t get out of control and the least you can do is *follow instructions*—”

“You’ve been dragging me all over the place because you hate my hair so much!”

“Hate? *Hate*? I don’t hate your hair, I’m scared—”

“You’re always scared!”

“And I was right! All my life I try to protect you and then this—”

“I’m not a data point, mom!”

“No, you’re many!”

Maddie gaped at her. “Honestly, mom it wasn’t that big a deal until you started to *freak* out about it the way you do everything else.”

She thought of the Parker’s boy, the sullen tombstone that awaited him had his parents not shipped him off to rehab.

“I am not going to rehab!” Maddie said, ever-improving at beheading her mother’s arguments before they reared their fangs. “They basically lobotomize you!”

“They don’t do anything invasive, sweetie,” Seongjin cooed, but his voice caught. “It’s just therapy.”

“But they brainwash you. Jason used to be the *goofiest* kid but after he came back he’s like a zombie. He just—it’s like he’s barely alive.”

“You won’t be alive at all if you keep going like this!”

“I bet that would make you happy wouldn’t it?”

“What—how could you . . .” Hannah felt as if all the glinting white daggers in Maddie’s hair had pierced her heart. Hannah found her brain aflame with a phenomena she could not explain, data so noisy she couldn’t possibly fathom an experimental design to tease out causation.

What had happened to Maddie?

She fell listless as Maddie brushed past them down the stairs.

Seongjin's voice came to her as if from a dream. "You don't think I've been neglectful, do you? I didn't want to helicopter, but maybe I should have been more like you," he mumbled.

Hannah found herself by their bedroom window gazing out into the garden. *Sorry I can't be chill like you*, she would have snapped just twenty minutes ago. "We're allowed to have different parenting styles," she said, tired.

"It's just . . . It's scary, you know? Lean too far in and I could be stressing her out, lean too far away and she could feel neglected." She turned just in time to watch another white hair started sprouting from his crown.

She stroked it gently. "Kids, huh?"

They held each other and peered into the garden, where Maddie stood among the vegetables. In this deep twilight she looked not like Seongjin or herself, but a shadow-ridden creature with a cap of silver. Maddie crouched over a plant, one hand threaded through her hair.

Her face scrunched up; her fist tightened. Maternal instinct screamed at Hannah to intervene—*Honey, take a break!*—but again she saw Madison's feral snarl, those dagger-like words. Maybe Seongjin was right. Maybe she'd hovered too much. Better to let her face her own challenges, right? To make her own breakthroughs?

But Maddie's face scrunched up too tight. So did her fist.

Maddie pulled away a clump of hair, took up a small shovel next to her, and started to dig.

Before Hannah could snap out of her shock—

"Maddie!" Seongjin roared.

Maddie looked up, hair in her hands, guilt etched onto her face.

They darted down the stairs and intercepted her in the living room. Hannah grabbed her daughter and rustled through her mane while Seongjin blurred out the back door.

"Umma, *stop*—"

Patches. Patches and patches were thin or outright missing. How had they missed this? "Did Ms. Yoo do this?"

Seongjin was in the doorway, clumps of hair and dirt in his hand. Even from where she stood she could see most of the hairs were chestnut brown, not just caked in dirt. "How long have you been burying your hair?" His voice broke. "Is that why you wanted to work in the garden?"

"*No.*"

"Look," Hannah said, and she showed him. Seongjin's face fell as he fingered through her patchwork hair. Was this why Maddie was falling behind at school, why she was so absentminded and forgetful?

Seongjin embraced her, his baby girl. He wept; Maddie just as softly. Hannah watched as a single white hair sprouted from each of their crowns.

#

It took Hannah great restraint to not scream when Ms. Yoo's receptionist picked up. Hannah launched into her account of what happened but the receptionist cut her off. "We'll have to call the police if you harass us again."

"Again?"

Seongjin had already dropped by.

Well good, Hannah thought. For good measure, Hannah typed up a scathing review—and found Seongjin's name atop the latest post.

#

Hannah doused her face in cold water and in the bathroom mirror saw a white hair had sprouted from her own crown. She opened the cabinet under the sink and cleared away toilet paper and value pack shampoos and a sitz bath to get to the far corner, where she stored her hair dye right next to Seongjin's. She kept hers in a translucent bottle, ready to squeeze and apply as needed. Seongjin kept his in the box. It looked brand new, untouched every time she saw it, even as his white hairs disappeared.

The first time she'd seen his true color was the second time they had sex; the first time had been too frenzied to notice much at all. They were in grad school and not yet committed to calling each other boyfriend/girlfriend, in part due to impending preliminary exams that determined whether they'd get kicked out.

After laughing their way through their second encounter, his face fell as dark as the cold Midwestern sky outside. "Fuck, I should be studying for prelims." He said it as if she wasn't there, as if she had evaporated across the snow back into her own apartment. She had lain still, watching him run a hand through his hair again and again.

It was the first of many hints that although she was the one people called uptight, he was the one battling sheer white.

He flinched when she reached out.

"I'm sorry."

"No, it's okay. Here."

He took her hand and raked it through his hair slowly. Everyone in their cohort had a few white hairs, if not by the time they entered grad school then certainly by the end of the first semester. But with Seongjin, a white line crept up his scalp as his hair tumbled down like the pages of a flipbook.

"I usually dye it once or twice a week. I've just been so busy . . ."

Over the years he told her all the things that had happened, big and small, that cast a white sheen over his thoughts and scalp. BeYourBest hair dye Black #2 had helped. Laughter had prevented white from growing in the first place. But still, he warned, "I could pass the white on to my kids, too. You should know, in case that's a dealbreaker."

She stared in the moonlight at this man who had given her the most joyful sexual encounter of her twenty-four-year-old life, and though she knew

it was foolish to envision her future while her blood was a Slurpee of hormones, she asked him, matter-of-factly, “Wouldn’t you be the best parent to a kid with white hair?”

#

Hannah sank into the armchair next to their bedroom window. Butterfly wings flashed in the garden below and birdsong seeped through the glass. She thought of how the weather might improve Maddie’s mood had she not been grounded.

Footsteps shuffled up the stairs and paused in front of Maddie’s room before Seongjin entered the bedroom. He sat on the arm of Hannah’s chair and stared down at the garden he had built.

“When I started going white, my family wouldn’t stop asking what was going on. It . . . didn’t make things any better, for them to keep . . . picking and picking . . . I didn’t want Maddie to go through that . . .” He stopped picking his own hair before Hannah could stop him.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a crinkled pamphlet. “This place seems to be highly recommended. It’s a bit avant garde, I was warned. But we can give it a go.” He took Hannah’s hand, sullen. Determined. “I just want her to be happy.”

She reached out to touch the wavy hair he’d passed on to their daughter, her tender loves who tended to their tender plants and watered them with tender tears.

#

They drove into an open parking lot and peered through the glass wall of “Ms. Kang’s Salon.” A figure seated in a chair swiveled towards them, waved, and rose to greet them at the door.

“We’re here for Ms. Kang?” Seongjin said.

“Ah yes, that’s me.”

Hannah held out her hand, but Ms. Kang went for Maddie’s instead.

“You must be Maddie.” Hannah took note of the softness in Ms. Kang’s brow, her gentle lips. She was envious, a little, of her ability to radiate warmth and sympathy and understanding, like a veterinarian after a successful surgery.

Inside, the walls were covered in white oak panels. On one side the room looked and even seemed to smell of summer, but on the other it felt quite glum and bleak. It wasn’t until Ms. Kang had served them tea that Hannah realized the wood throughout the shop was the same, just cast under different lights: warm-colored bulbs on the right, cool-toned lamps on the left. The walls were adorned accordingly. They stood closer now to the succulents and vibrant paintings, but across the room Hannah eyed the black and white photographs, the rustic wooden crafts.

Ms. Kang asked Maddie some questions, then went over the agenda, mostly addressing Maddie while her parents formed a wall of defense behind

her. “Feel free to interrupt with questions, by the way.” Seongjin took her up on the offer, then Hannah, then, at the end of the run-through, Maddie.

Just as Ms. Kang was about to wrap up, Seongjin asked, “Can we watch?”

Ms. Kang turned to Maddie. “What do you think? Do you want your parents to come with?”

Maddie shuffled her feet. “Maybe later.”

Later, Hannah registered, as in next time.

Hannah watched as Maddie walked away, her head already a bit higher.

#

Hannah sat on the back porch and watched as Maddie and Seongjin finally harvested the tomatoes. It had occurred to her that summer was ending and that she had never joined her family outside, only watched from within the house. Now she reclined in the wicker armchair as Maddie and Seongjin, yards away, swatted at unseen pests.

Maddie’s hair glinted in the golden light, and from afar, Hannah could no longer tell which were white.

She remembered being stunned when Ms. Kang finally explained the treatment to them. “You mean you’re *not* going to dye her white hairs?” She had turned at Seongjin, who nodded. “But these white hairs, they *bad*, right? Shouldn’t we do something about them?”

“That’s a common misconception,” Ms. Kang said from behind her desk. “Take this specimen for example, on the napkin before me. We saved it from one of our sessions.”

“So you plucked it,” Hannah said.

“No, it just fell out.”

Ms. Kang generated such peace and serenity that Hannah thought she must have gone deaf when Seongjin burst into laughter and she didn’t flinch.

“They, they just fall out,” he wheezed, wiping his eyes.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“They just fall out,” Hannah repeated flatly.

“Yes. At least some do, under the right circumstances, just as any other hair might fall out.” She picked up the strand and, almost lovingly, ran her fingers over it. “These beautiful hair exist for a reason. Sometimes we learn to live with them, so they don’t snag or fly in our faces at inconvenient moments. Sometimes they’re ready to leave us.”

At home that evening Hannah turned to find Seongjin leaving the bathroom with a trash bag. He paused as Hannah eyed the near-empty bottle of jet black hair dye in the clear plastic bag. “What’s up?” he asked.

“Can you not throw that away just yet?”

He pressed his lips. “I can’t keep dyeing my hair, hon.”

“No, I know. Just—” She crossed the room and reached into the bathroom cabinet, knocking over shampoo bottles as she pulled out her own hair dye. She tossed it into Seongjin’s trash bag.

One treatment, then two later, Maddie’s white hairs started to shine.

Maddie became the same girl they knew again, but in addition to picking up makeup brushes she started picking up watercolor and acrylic brushes. She’d send selfies to her friends, but she’d snap selfies with Seongjin and Hannah, too.

Just this morning she’d even asked Hannah for a ride to the mall, and in Aisle 7 of the boutique beauty salon explained to Hannah what the benefits of this or that brand were. Hannah caught herself wanting to blurt questions, rip the bottles from Maddie’s hands and read the ingredients. But she thought of Seongjin, of the white hair on the napkin, and held back. Instead she asked Maddie what she wanted, what she thought. In trying to recruit everyone from her husband to the doctor to the therapists, Hannah had not recruited one very important research collaborator: Maddie.

Since graduating, Hannah had only ever been paid to torture answers out of the data—but it wasn’t always that way.

Hannah stared at late afternoon sky behind her daughter in the garden, and she thought of the cool blue glare of her laptop, in grad school, lighting a dark room. More than the heart-wrenching anxiety she’d fall behind and get swallowed up if she weren’t a thousand steps ahead, more than the gratification of watching her advisor nod while she preemptively addressed counterarguments during seminars, more than the strained comfort of being able to make some goddamn sense of this world with the skill sets she had, the real reason she rose and went to the computer after Seongjin fell asleep, the real reason she decided month after month not to drop out despite tear-ridden conversations with her therapist, was because she had always inextricably felt the data was more of a friend to her than any person in the policy department besides Seongjin. She’d stayed up to peruse the data, to converse with it, to let it tell her stories.

Her daughter was not just a dataset, but maybe if she listened, Maddie would tell her her story, too. It was as if she could hear her now.

“Mom?”

She looked to where her daughter called, not from a far memory but from right in front of her.

“Mom,” Maddie said, arms laden with ripe tomatoes, hair glistening in sun, “can you help me?”

John Spiegel is a writer and English teacher in Dayton, Ohio where he lives with his wife and two daughters. He received his MFA from Miami University. He loves the satisfaction of a clean house and crisp stripes in a lawn. He's at the point of his life where he's ready to get really into bonsai. His poetry, nonfiction, and reviews can be read in Fence Digital, Milk & Cake Press, Vine Leaves Literary Journal, Garbanzo, and others.

Ode to Transplanting Tomatoes (After Ross Gay)

John Spiegel

which I finally got around to after 3 weeks
of waiting while seeds sprouted in
a repurposed strawberry carton;
cut the dirt with a pocket knife and
gently outturned into an awaiting hole,
my hands smell of tomato leaves after washing.
For fun, I germinated maple and juniper
seeds to train into bonsai, and you ask why
I don't buy one online. I called my mother this morning,
talked about the cilantro she'll soon
have to start cutting away like coral vine,
dad forgot to water the lettuce yesterday
and is afraid it will wilt. Each Mother's Day,
dad took us to buy a dozen annuals and she'd
spend the day outside by the patio. Years later
and a dozen roses now wilt in their vase
on the table; the tulips in the front yard
were blown away by a storm. Our Black Eyed Susan
has yet to bloom. I ask my daughter
if she wants to help water the garden with me,
but her answer is different this time.

Tabitha Marsh (she/they) is a UK-based illustrator specializing in ink and watercolour drawings. She graduated with a BA in Fine Art from Lancaster University in 2018 and has been working freelance ever since, mainly in publishing, but also exhibiting work at galleries in London and Leamington Spa. In 2019 she was shortlisted for the Stratford Literary Festival/Salariya Children's Book Prize, and since then she has illustrated several books and had her work published in a variety of magazines. Alongside this, she has been the illustrator in residence at the multi-award-winning independent bookshop Kenilworth Books since 2017.



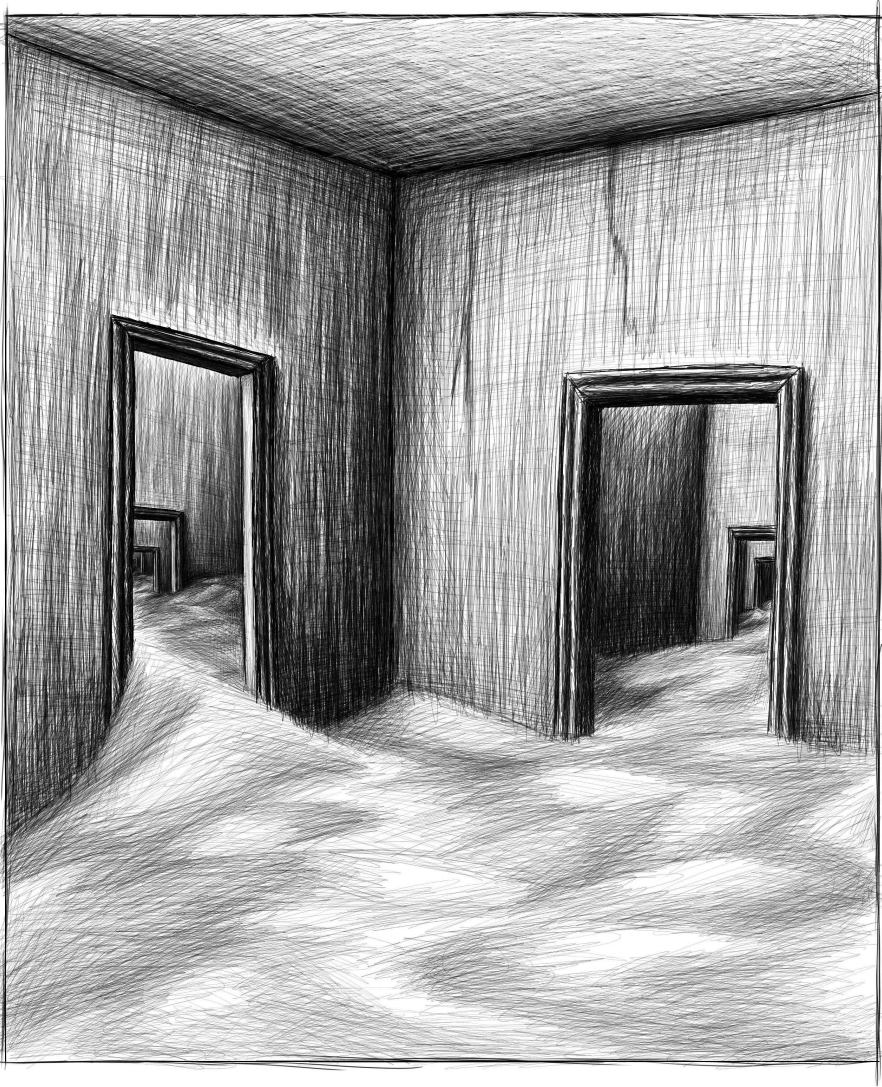
A Portrait

“A Portrait” was an experiment for me, because usually I draw things in very fine detail, but here I decided to overlay any detail with broad strokes, and an expressive use of light and shadow. It felt quite liberating, but also strange. Whenever I draw something like this, I always feel as if both the drawing and I know that it's only an intermission between acts, and will soon be over when I return to my regular style.



Hanging Figures

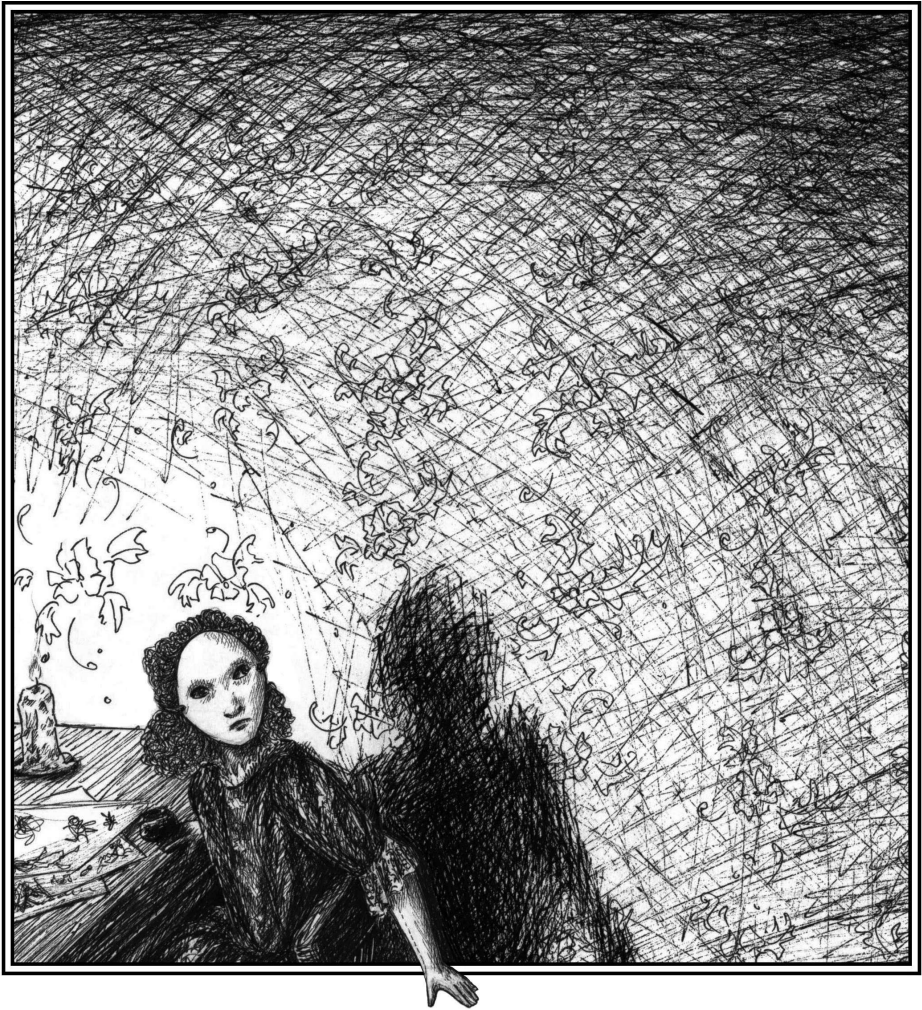
“Hanging Figures” was inspired by the short story ‘The Semplica-Girl Diaries’ by George Saunders. The image of small figures hanging in the air, their dresses blowing gently around them, seemed so visceral to me, I simply had to put it down on paper. Pen and ink seemed the perfect medium for this piece: I wanted it to be stark, simple, and finely detailed.



CORRIDORS OF SAND

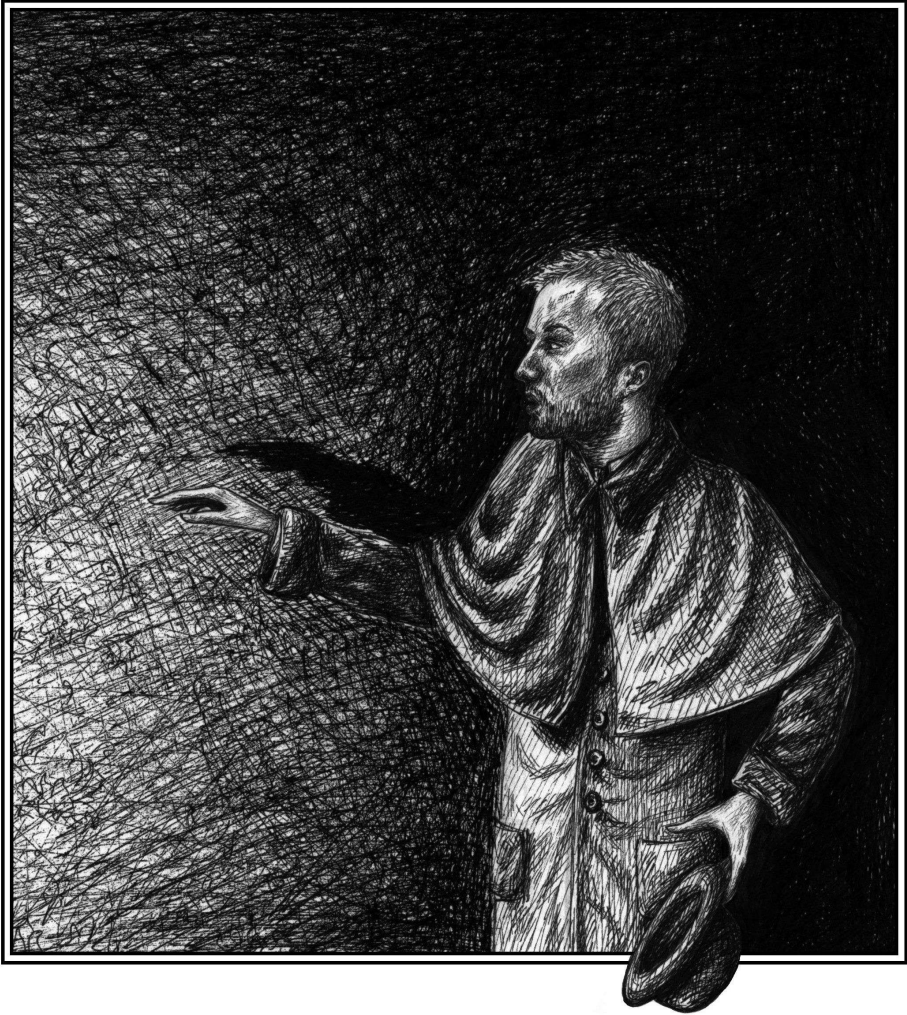
Corridors of Sand

I don't know precisely where the inspiration for "Corridors of Sand" came from. It was simply an image that kept returning to me, until I knew that I had to draw it. I love things that disturb the natural order of the world; a house, but empty and abandoned. An endless desert, trapped inside a house.



The Mask (left)

“The Mask” was drawn as a visualization of our fear of the unknown. Above all I wanted the piece to show an extreme contrast between light and dark, to heighten the tension and shock between the characters.



The Mask (right)

Working the ink into the paper to create the shadows was incredibly satisfying; the darker I worked it, the more tangible the scene felt to me.

Brittany Micka-Foos is a writer living in the Pacific Northwest. Her short stories and poetry appear or are forthcoming in Witness Magazine, Variant Literature, In Parentheses, and elsewhere.

Estate Sale

Brittany Micka-Foos

I awoke to the wind slamming against the shutters. I'd been dreaming about my father again. The night before, I learned he had lost his right eye. In my dream, I swallowed it. The soft, slick globe went down hard in my throat, sat heavy in my stomach.

This was the same morning my neighbor disappeared—the windiest in recent memory. From my window, I saw them selling off his paintings, hundreds of them. They laid his life's work across the front lawn, spread thinly on a green military-style tarp. Bargain hunters and well-wishers parked haphazardly on the street to rifle through the estate. They had to put rocks on the canvases to keep the wind from scattering them like ashes.

I put on my heavy coat and went out, stepping over dead branches that had fallen overnight. My neighbor to the left, Jeanine or maybe Jenny, stood in her fraying bathrobe at road's edge, arms tucked tight across her chest. "Did you know Ron?" she asked without looking at me. I didn't. "He's a local celebrity. A real talented painter." She rocked back and forth on her heels. "Great guy, too."

"Is he dead?" I asked. I guess she didn't hear me; she never answered. My voice must've been drowned out by the wind.

"Fifteen dollars for an original Ronald Watts! What a shame." I left Maybe Jenny there rocking as I crossed the street to the house where Ronald Watts had lived.

The front door was open, and a smiling young woman stood on the porch, holding a clipboard. She was dressed unseasonably in gauzy tights, a delicate and glimmering mesh. Through the door, I could see inside the entire house. The living room bled into the kitchen, a small cell of a bedroom on the right.

I lingered on the fringe of the lawn and listened to the young woman speaking over her clipboard to an older lady.

"He came into the bank with an armful of paintings, thinking I was an art dealer. He wanted me to send them off to some gallery in Seattle."

"Oh my god," the older lady said, hand hovering over her mouth in perpetual alarm. "That poor guy."

“And he kept withdrawing all this cash. He’d hand me a painting, then make a withdrawal. Multiple times a day. Like he was making a sale. That’s when I knew something was off.”

“Jesus. Alzheimer’s is a bitch.”

“Yeah, he was in bad shape. I asked if he had any family. Eventually I found out he lived here alone. His daughter’s in Alaska. When I called, she had no idea—no idea he was even sick.”

The young woman turned towards me, cheerfully encouraged me to go inside; there were more paintings there. I joined the crowd of strangers filing in and out, squeezing their bodies through the maze of piled-up frames, beating down what remained of the carpet. It felt illicit, like wandering through a crime scene. The only furniture was a battered office chair and a particle-board bookcase, both marked “FREE.” I kept my hands in my pockets, careful not to touch anything.

I hovered in the living room, pretending to study the furniture, the unraveling edges of carpet. But I watched the two women on the porch through the filmy window. Their voices rang throughout the house, indignant little alarm bells.

“His daughter wouldn’t fly out here. Couldn’t be bothered, I guess. I felt so bad, he’s such a sweetheart. I had to do something, you know? I offered to organize this sale and raise money for his hospice care. His daughter said, sell everything.”

“Alexis, that’s awful!”

“Yeah, I wanted to shake her through the phone. Like, excuse me, ma’am, do you understand what I’m saying? Your father is very sick and he needs help!”

“Well. Thank God you stepped up.”

“Oh, I love Ronnie. He’s been nothing but polite to me. Every time he came into the bank—always smiling, asking me about school...”

“He’s lucky he has you.”

“It’s nothing, really. If it were my dad, I’d want somebody to do the same.”

“Of course. Still, it’s a shame...”

“It *is* a shame,” I mutter into the pane. “A goddamn shame what men do to their daughters.”

They continue on as if they haven’t heard me, so I begin to examine Ronald Watts’ empty bookcase, its frame warped and sloping inwards. Somewhere, my own father sits in a small house like this. My father, with hands like broken branches, who leers with his one good eye. Is he expecting me?

Does he wonder who will take care of him as his memory fades and his grip weakens? Does he clutch at his memories in the growing dark, or is he grateful to lose them?

My father is very sick and he needs me.

My father. With his eyes like globes, containing everything, reflecting me back to myself. He was always looking at me. And all I ever wanted was to be seen.

#

Before I left the house of Ronald Watts, I bought a painting: a little girl sitting on the trunk of a tree that lies fallen across a pond. Bare feet dangle in the dark water below. Her windswept dress is scattered around her thighs, revealing the partial white of her panties. She is staring down at her own reflection, her slender body angled away from the viewer. Away from Ronald Watts.

“Does ten dollars sound fair?” the young woman asked. I said nothing, just took the bill out of my wallet and offered it up to her, watched it flap around in the wind like a blind and flailing bird.

Danielle Lemay (she/her) is a poet and a scientist. Her poetry has been nominated for Best of the Net and has appeared in California Quarterly, SWWIM Every Day, New Verse News, ONE ART, Limp Wrist Magazine, Lavender Review, San Pedro River Review, and elsewhere. She lives in central California with her wife, two children, and six chickens.

Lyrics for the Half-Deaf

Danielle Lemay

In the school cafeteria of real
butter and fresh rolls baked onsite,
the girl next to me points to my untouched
roll. I ask *Will you write me the words
to Puff the Magic Dragon?* She nods,

snatches the roll, devours it whole
before we reach the gaping mouth
of the trash bin. I never get those lyrics,
not from her or the teacher with a budget
too slim for paper. The chorus teacher
chalks words on the board:

1. Sit up straight.
2. Fold your hands in your lap.
3. Sing with a smile.

How can anyone sing with a corset
laced and cinched by rules?
While my classmates sing words I'll never
learn, I study my teacher's face, her clownish
grin, her eyes that reveal an anger
she thinks she cloaks in time for class

after her lifetime of practicing singing
with a smile. I can't be fooled—
the body is my song.

Lindz McLeod (she/they) is a queer, working-class, Scottish writer who dabbles in the surreal. Her prose has been published by Catapult, Flash Fiction Online, Pseudopod, and many more. She is a full member of the SFWA and is represented by Headwater Literary Management.

MyGraine

Lindz McLeod

My Headache came from a carpenter who'd been working all day in the boiling sun. If I had to guess, judging by the look of the landscape and distant buildings, I'd have probably said somewhere in the Middle East. I couldn't narrow it down much further than that. Geography had never been my strong suit.

I called the Slough office and informed them of the reason I wouldn't be attending any meetings today. "Tell Stuart I prepped everything for the client, so all he has to do is click through a PowerPoint."

"Oh my god, do you really have the Headache?" the receptionist breathed down the phone, sounding more excited than I was prepared to tolerate at such an ungodly hour. "What does it feel like?"

"It feels like a bloody headache, Chris. Did you write down the memo about the PowerPoint?"

"Yeah, but they say—" the sound of papers ruffling, then a scratching noise as he covered the phone and yelped *in-a-minute-Helen-has-the-Headache*, before returning to me. "Do you have their memories? Word associations? 'Cause they say that you get little bits of the brain it was occupying before, and if you—"

My temples twinged. "Occupation is not a word it wants to use. In any sense." Well, that narrowed the geographical location down a fair bit, even in my limited knowledge. "Let's circle back to the Powerpoi—"

"Can you speak a different language now?"

I tried, and found I couldn't. "Nope."

He sounded disappointed. "Can you—"

"The thing is, though," I closed my eyes, pressing my forehead against the cool wall, "I actually do have a massive headache. And I'm the only person in the world to have the Headache right now, which I feel gives me a little leeway to do what I want. So I'm going to do the sensible thing and have a lie down instead of answering any more questions."

He was still fussing when I hung up.

Being the only person in the world to have the Headache made me feel rather special, like being a torturer's only victim. I'd known as soon as I

woke up that it was coming. The rumble of synapses, the incessant throb in my temples. The feeling as if my eyeballs were on the ends of rubber bands, stretching to breaking point. The phenomenon had been documented extensively over the last three years, so I knew I was in for a rough couple of days. Luckily, I'd had the foresight to mute all notifications on my phone, but I could still see the screen lighting up every couple of mins from missed calls and texts. I flipped it face down, downed a pint of tepid tap water, and crawled back into bed.

When the Headache phenomenon had been first identified five years ago, people had been certain something extraterrestrial had happened. Crowds gathered outside major government buildings and landmarks, chanting eagerly, keen to meet our new neurologically-numb overlords. But apart from the Headache, nothing had changed. Migraine sufferers around the world rejoiced in the safe knowledge that they'd only have to endure one more headache in their lifetimes—at least, that was the current theory. No one had yet documented having the Headache twice. My current worry wasn't the Headache, as such. Although deeply unpleasant and often incredibly painful, it wasn't fatal. My problem—at least, my pending problem—was the Leftovers.

Under the stuffy, warm cave created by my duvet, I breathed slowly and deeply. The Leftovers crept in by degrees; sensory experiences I'd never endured prickled my skin. Blistering heat, soft sawdust underfoot, the hum and buzz of a table saw. The scrape of something gritty against wood, smoothing out the surface. The smell of paint and polish. I could see the carpenter's hands, measuring and marking with a pencil, sketching out quick designs. I could feel the strain on his knees while lifting larger pieces of lumber or kneeling to inspect a level surface. My own eyes itched with dust and his exhaustion. I felt his pride, glowing in my chest. His fear for a brother in Palestine, his anxiety about email communication which had suddenly ceased without warning, thrumming through my veins. A father, long-dead. A mother, faint with worry and shaken to her core by recent events, certain that only one son remained to her.

The carpenter's grief and despair wormed into my own stomach. And still, he was thankful for so much. The pretty girl in the marketplace with the perfect eyebrows always put an extra apple in with his purchases. He had worked hard and had saved enough money to open his own store in the next year. His mother still had her health. At night, he wrote poetry and watched the stars. Everything was geometry with him, all angles and degrees. I thought perhaps we'd have liked each other, if we'd ever met, but I wasn't about to become a daisy-chainer.

The postman shoved several letters through the front door. The sound of them hitting the mat was enough to elicit a loud groan. A young couple held a loud conversation in the hallway outside my flat; laughter boomed through my eyeballs. Blood roared through the wrinkles in my brain; I could feel

every individual vein throbbing. I hauled myself out of bed and staggered to my bedroom door. Checked the mail, threw it onto the hall table. Swinging it shut against any further hallway noise, I retreated back into the safety and warmth of the duvet, only to find my safe space now painfully claustrophobic. I turned my face to the wall, rested my forehead against cold plaster, and screwed my eyes shut.

Over the last five years, there had been plenty of instances of daisy-chainers meeting. Several single people, newly armed with intimate details about the Headache's previous owner, had manipulated them into a relationship by pretending they were coincidentally into all the same things. Several politicians and actors had been held hostage by their own memories and experiences, and had paid thousands to keep the daisy-chainers silent. As a result, several laws had been passed to prevent after-owners from bribing, blackmailing, or otherwise harassing previous owners. Legally, at least in most developed countries, you were required to register on an international database within 90 days of your Headache beginning.

Of course, daisy-chaining had pros as well as cons; several people who'd committed unsolved murders had been discovered and prosecuted. An elderly man who'd been killing in England, who'd managed to escape detection for four decades, had been caught in less than a week. A current high-profile case in America concerned a double murder which the after-owner had witnessed through the shooter's eyes. The murderer was being sued by the after-owner, who claimed that being forced to watch two people bleed to death on a Boston street corner had given him incurable PTSD.

I burrowed under the pillow, allowing the Headache to take over, to reduce my conscious self until there was nothing left but the nexus of pain in the exact centre of my skull. For the next few hours, I didn't exist, with occasional bathroom breaks. Despite the pain, I managed to crawl to the kitchen, my most ragged and comfortable pajamas soaked in sweat. Against the protests of my stomach, I gamely swallowed half a tin of mushroom soup and a couple of slices of slightly stale bread. Half an hour later, I vomited the whole lot back up.

The Headache worsened.

The following three days were a haze of pain and unfamiliar memories. My ex texted me frequent updates about our son, accompanied by photos of Gav smiling, giving a thumbs up. His eyes were raccoon-ringed. Exhausted. I typed out something banal and apologetic, drowning in guilt, but I could no more have driven to his house than I could have flown to the moon. The Headache began to recede on the fourth afternoon and by evening was gone completely. I wondered whose brain it was now torturing; a brief flash of sympathy was overwhelmed entirely by relief.

Gav was delighted to see me. *A good day*, my ex mouthed behind him, closing the door so we could have some privacy. My son grinned. “Arsenal beat Chelsea yesterday. Dad’s still raging.”

“Can’t believe I missed it. Hope you rubbed it in.”

“Obviously. All my friends want to know how the Headache was. What should I tell them?”

“Tell them it bloody hurts.” I raked through a drawer, found our favourite, dog-eared pack of playing cards. “Like giving birth through your eyeballs.”

“Damn.” He leaned forward, fascinated. “Go on.”

I regaled him with every excruciating detail, making him laugh and groan over my adventure. After an hour or so, the colour had drained from his face and his hands were shaking, despite his best efforts to hide it. “I’m going to head off, mate. Give you a chance to rest.”

“You don’t need to go,” but his eyelids were already fluttering. “Stay a while. Tell me more.”

I took his hand and kept talking. Watched as he slid into unconsciousness, slid back through the years. Gav at thirteen, first diagnosed. Gav at ten, eager and energetic. Gav at five, discovering his love of reading. Crawling at two. First proper words at thirteen months. The soft, fine fluff of his baby hair. His little milk teeth, which I still had somewhere in a box, hoarded like treasure. I couldn’t stop watching him as the seconds slipped by, even as my heart broke again and again.

Everything was back to normal. Nothing had changed.

#

The following Sunday, I answered a knock on my door. A brown-haired woman, probably a little younger than me, wearing denim overalls, a slouchy, beige cardigan, and an expression so wrought with anxiety that it deserved to be called a full-on accessory. Her ankles were bare despite the cold. “You were first—I mean, I—” she stuttered.

I waited.

“I had it after you,” she clarified. “The Headache.”

“Oh.” My fingers tightened on the door. “I see.”

“And I just thought I’d come round to see if you were okay. Because, like, you didn’t seem okay.”

“Where did you say you’d come from?”

“Just, like, around the corner.” She shifted from foot to foot. I didn’t move. She sighed. “Preston.”

“That’s . . . quite a long way around the corner.” About two hundred and thirty miles, to be more precise. “And you’re not really supposed to do that.”

“I know.”

She didn't look vicious, although I knew that wasn't necessarily indicative of anything. I had a couple of inches on her, and at least twenty pounds. I assessed the situation; if I had to be perfectly honest, she was right. I wasn't okay.

I held the door open. "Well, you'd better come in."

While the kettle whistled, I pulled two decent mugs from the cupboard and dried off a teaspoon. "I don't really know what to tell you."

She eased herself into a seat at the kitchen table and folded her hands. "You don't have to. I already know."

"This is very—" I swallowed, tried again. "I mean, I don't know how I feel about you knowing everything about me when I don't know anything about you."

"Fair point. What would you like to know?"

Everything and nothing, I thought, but didn't say. "Surprise me."

She opened her mouth, then closed it again. "I'm Julie. I like regency romances, ham and pineapple pizza, and I think Meyers-Briggs is one small step removed from astrology." A quick smile, which didn't reach her eyes. "Look, I don't actually know a lot. You didn't use social media while you had the Headache and you didn't think about much except your—" she hesitated.

"My son." I turned away to make the tea. I didn't want to see pity in her eyes. "So, you know enough. More than most, anyway."

"Helen, why haven't you told anyone?"

Odd, to hear your name in a stranger's mouth. "Milk? Sugar?"

She nodded. I slid the cup of tea across the table and took a long gulp of my own. The water was scalding, allowing me to track the progress of the mouthful all the way down my gullet and into my stomach. She waited. I bit my lip. "Fine, okay. Loads of reasons. I don't want to admit he's sick, or have to explain what his illness is like. I don't want to have to answer a million questions about how long he has to live, or what we're going to do, or whether I've considered getting back with my ex for the duration, just so we're a united household. We weren't a bloody united household in the first place. That's half the reason we split up."

"You have considered it, though."

"Not seriously."

"Okay, so," she lifted the mug to her lips but didn't drink, "is there anything else you've seriously considered?"

Our eyes met. This woman had been inside my head, had read my thoughts, despite my best efforts to keep them repressed. She could have been a farmer in Australia, a realtor in New York, a Nigerian actress; she could have—and should have—been something, anything, far away from me.

I put my cup down, rubbed my thumb over a whorl in the wooden table. "Did you come here to stop me killing myself? Because—"

"I came here because I thought you needed a friend."

I answered too quickly. “I have friends.”

Julie tilted her head. “Do you? Really?”

“I think you should leave.” I rose from my seat, gestured towards the door.

She didn’t move. “I lost my brother to cancer. He was only fourteen.”

I opened my mouth but she beat me to it. “It’s not the same. I know. But it’s something. There are groups you can join, you know. For support.” Her eyes slid past my shoulder, recalling a memory. “Not that you’re going to Stubborn cow, aren’t you?”

I laughed, despite myself, despite the tears which blurred my vision. “Please leave,” I repeated, but my voice cracked and I leaned forward, unable to focus, unable to dam the torrent.

A thud of crockery on wood, and then Julie was wrapped around me, hair tickling my nose, murmuring words of no substance but full of meaning, like jars full of air. She held me until I stopped crying. The kitchen was dark, and when I straightened up, spine cracking, she made no move to put the light on. I crossed to the sink, ran cold water over my wrists. Splashed my face, dabbed it dry with a stained tea towel.

Julie scrolled through her phone. “I’ll order us a pizza, yeah?”

I nodded, too exhausted to argue, and led her through to the living room. She put on the TV and insisted I choose something—I selected a baking show, low-maintenance and untaxing. Contestants kneaded dough and fretted over flavors while we seated ourselves on my cheap, uncomfortable sofa.

I lowered the volume. “What was your Headache like?”

“Awful. I mean, you know. I never had migraines or anything so I wasn’t really prepared for how bad it was. Threw up a couple of times.”

“Do you have anyone to take care of you?”

Her hands twitched, and she shoved them into her pockets. “Not as such. My mum’s up in Glasgow. My girlfriend broke up with me a few months ago. Said there was no one else, but there obviously was, ‘cause she was posting pictures of them on Insta only a week later.”

“Sorry.”

She waved a hand. “It’s whatever. These things happen.” A sidelong glance.

“Oh.” Something between my stomach and my lungs fluttered. “I didn’t realize you—that I’d thought about—” Cheeks flaming, I stared at the screen, where a middle-aged woman was showing off a braided loaf to the several similarly aged judges. “It was part of the divorce. Not all of it, but partly. I loved him once, but he always wanted more than I could give. Sex, affection, time. I listened to my friends talk about their marriages and I realized they actually needed their husbands in a way I—” I broke off, cleared my throat. “I mean, he was my best friend. Still is, in a way. We shared so much.”

“But not everything,” she murmured.

The air thickened. Aware of her proximity, I shifted, tucked one leg under the other. “We both agreed we wanted to explore more. It was relatively amiable. But then Gav got sick, and I didn’t have the time or energy.” She already knew this but I pushed myself to say it out loud. “Maybe that was the universe’s way of telling me that I shouldn’t put myself out there. That I should stay self-contained forever.”

“I don’t think that’s true.” Her voice was gentle but her lips straightened into a hyphen, lit by the flickering screen.

“The thing is, my mother died when I got married. The day after the wedding. Quick and sudden. I suppose that’s why Edward thought I was so —” Onscreen, a young man in glasses pointed at a covered bowl of dough, mouthing words and smiling. “It’s not like I didn’t enjoy—I just always wondered if there was more. I used to look at women, sometimes, and wonder.” I shook my head, panic bubbling up. “I’m sorry, I don’t know how to talk about this.”

“That’s okay.” She patted me on the shoulder and I did my best not to flinch. Her nails were painted navy but chipped, flecks of pale skin showing underneath.

“It’s not like I care,” I babbled. “It’s not a bad thing. It’s just—what if there is more? What do I do then? I couldn’t even manage what I had with my ex. It was easier when Gav was born. I could pour myself into him. A baby needs your love but they don’t expect you to name your feelings, to label them, to discuss them in minute detail. You can pretend like everything is fine. They don’t question it, as long as it exists.”

The doorbell rang. She got up and returned with a pizza. “Plates?”

“Let’s eat like animals.” I managed a smile.

She beamed back and lifted a slice. Strings of cheese glistened, unwilling to let go of their attachments. “When do you have to leave?” I asked.

“Oh, don’t worry. I took a week off work. Wasn’t using my holidays anyway. I figured, if you didn’t want to talk, then at least I could wander around London for a bit.”

“Don’t let me keep you, please,” I picked up a napkin and wiped my mouth. “I’m sure you’ve better things to—”

She stopped chewing. Close up her eyes were green, not brown. “Helen, I came here for you. Just you.”

Embarrassed, not knowing quite what to say, I turned the volume back up. We finished the pizza while the contestants presented their final, baked creations. I offered Julie the guest bedroom—at first she declined, not wanting to cause me discomfort, saying she’d get a hostel and come back in the morning. I insisted and she finally caved, smiling, hair curling about her face. She paused on the threshold of the room, turned back. “I didn’t come here to

daisy-chain you,” half-smiling, half-anxious, “just so you know. It isn’t like that. That’s why I told you straight away. No secrets.”

“I appreciate it.”

“And if you’re—I mean, if you really don’t—I can go. Any time.”

“Don’t worry, I don’t think you’re going to murder me in my sleep or anything.”

She snorted, then caught herself, embarrassed. “I hadn’t planned on it.”

#

In the morning, I made a pot of coffee and ate a piece of dry toast standing over the sink. Julie emerged, tousled and bleary, and waved a shy hello before heading into the bathroom. She returned minutes later, fully dressed, and gratefully accepted a mug of steaming coffee. I wondered whether, if our positions had been switched, whether I’d have thrown caution to the wind and travelled hundreds of miles to help a stranger whose head I’d inhabited for a few days. Most people probably wanted to think they were sympathetic and compassionate, but each one of us had a personal line somewhere. Would I have risked what she had? Offered a week of my life to stop a stranger from killing herself? She already knew that I wasn’t planning anything violent or extravagant. I just wanted to fade out of existence. In her position, would I have had the confidence—the arrogance, even—to assume I could change someone’s mind?

“You’re thinking pretty hard over there.” She smiled over the rim of the mug.

“Sorry. Toast? Cereal?”

“Toast, please.”

I slung a couple of slices into the toaster and pulled out butter and an assortment of jams.

“So, what are your plans for the day?” Dark eyes, watchful, curious.

“I’ve got the morning off work. I’m going to see Gav, at my ex’s house.”

She nodded. I supposed she knew most of it already, so there was no need to explain why I’d moved out—my desire to explore new territory couldn’t be done on old ground. Besides, Ed had contributed more to the mortgage; he’d offered to buy me out, which seemed fair. He’d been surprised, as if he’d expected me to make more of a fuss, but of course he hadn’t had any idea about my plan. I felt it would have been selfish to mar our home with my final act. He wouldn’t be able to cope with the idea; he’d have to sell, which didn’t seem fair—he’d always loved the house. He’d picked it, after all.

#

Gav was awake when I arrived, which didn’t bode well. “Morning, mate. How are you doing?”

“Good, Mum.” Blue veins stood out on his pale temples, like motorways blocked by traffic. “How are you?”

“Oh, same as ever. Cup of tea? Game of cards?”

“Yes and yes.” He smiled, hands clawing over the blankets like baby crabs.

I won the first couple of games, despite my best efforts, and crowed about it in an attempt to hide my concern. He won the next three to my relief, and after he’d finished most of the tea, his cheeks had a little more colour in them.

“You seem different, Mum.” One eyebrow raised.

I dropped my cards. Scrabbled to pick them back up. “Do I?”

He lowered his voice. “Have you got a boyfriend? I won’t tell anyone.”

I hesitated. His eyes widened. “Wait. A girlfriend?”

“No! No. I don’t have a—anything friend.” My cheeks were so hot, I wondered whether if I touched them, they’d sizzle. Sweat had broken out between my shoulder blades.

He lay back on his pillow. “It’s okay. It’s good for you to get out.”

“I haven’t been out. I haven’t been anywhere.” I focused on rearranging my cards. Numerical order; aces on the left, royalty on the right. Numbers in between.

“Things are different these days, you know. Nobody really cares who you go out with.” He reached for the dregs of the tea, swallowed.

“I know I must seem ancient to you, sonny, but I’m not actually that old.”

He smiled. “Okay then. What’s a TikTok?”

“Um. A breath freshener?” I was only half-joking.

He laughed, then coughed. I dropped my cards, but he held up a hand. “I’m fine. Just tired. I want you to be happy. Dad does too.”

I bit back tears. “Your dad is a good man.”

“I know.” His eyelashes fluttered. “Sorry. I’m so tired.”

I watched him descend from shallow sleep into a deep, restful slumber. *You would have been a good man too*, I thought, and had to leave the room before I broke down silently at the top of the stairs.

#

It was amazing how easy it was to fall into a routine with Julie.

“Your life belongs to other people,” I told her over a plate piled high with chow mein. “That’s the problem.”

“That’s the wonder of it,” she protested, spearing a piece of chicken.

I shook my head. “A life should be one’s own. You’re born attached, linked, connected. You exit the womb straight into another embrace. Slingshotting from one person to the next all your life, never getting space just to be yourself. It’s a pain in the arse.”

“Do you want to be yourself?”

“Ah, a trick question.”

She giggled. The sound had become familiar to me over the past few days. “I’ve got to go back tomorrow. Will you be alright?”

The question hung in the air between us, heavy as smog and just as choking. I wound my fork around the noodles and lifted them, watching as the strands curled together. “I think so.”

I’d thought of inviting her into my room, into my bed, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. I lay in bed that evening, kicking myself, knowing it was better this way. Wriggled further under the covers, put my head under the pillow and let out a half-hearted groan. I didn’t want one night before everything ended. I couldn’t let go of enough to focus on anything properly; I’d only end up crying naked in her arms. Not that this was a terrible idea—I blushed, glad she couldn’t hear my thoughts anymore—but it wasn’t a stable basis for any kind of relationship.

In the morning, she slid her coat on and shouldered her bag while I laced up my boots and tried to find my lip balm. “Who do you think has the Headache now?” she asked.

I dug down in the pocket of another coat, finally locating the item. “I never thought about it. It could be anyone. Someone far away, or someone right next door. Wild, isn’t it?”

“Do you think it brings people together or pushes them apart?”

Her tone was casual but she didn’t quite meet my eyes. I wondered whether she’d been waiting to ask me this. “Together,” I said, without pause. “I mean, a bunch of secrets were unearthed, sure, but if people didn’t want to get caught then they shouldn’t have been doing whatever it was in the first place.”

“You’re a very direct person, you know?” She grinned.

“So I’ve been told.” I reconsidered. “Although, that being said, maybe not all secrets are meant to be uncovered. We’re entitled to privacy, after all.”

“And secrecy?”

“Same thing.”

“Is it?” Her eyes sought mine.

A billionaire who thought himself a philanthropist had discovered how little his half-hearted efforts had changed his local community. After getting the Headache after the father of a dying child, he’d vowed to do better. The Headache had proved useful in more ways than one. Twitter, which could always be relied upon to make witty light of serious matters, referred to these ‘changed’ people as Ebenezers.

I’d never really thought of myself as much of a Scrooge. I donated to two separate charities every month. I gave my leftover produce to the local food banks. I’d gone almost full vegetarian in the last few years, only splurging occasionally on a nice steak at a restaurant when my carnivorous

side whined and whimpered. Yet I had been a terrible Scrooge—not with my money or my time, but with my self. I’d kept my heart secret, sacred, sacrosanct.

“What should I do?” The question was out before I could stop it. The lip balm was cold in my hand, the metal container refusing to give as I squeezed it. “I mean, I had it all planned. And then—and now—”

She cocked her head. “I don’t know. What do you think you should do?”

“Spend time with Gav.” I licked my lips, too self-conscious to apply the lip balm while she was looking at me like that. Fumbled my hands into my pockets. Felt the thread of destiny unspooling in front of me. “Well, I was always going to do that.”

“And afterwards?” she prompted.

“I don’t know,” I repeated. My hands curled into fists. “Grieve. Mourn. Treasure what I had. Afterwards, if there is an afterwards,” I stepped forward, leaning into her space, giving her time to move back. She didn’t. I leaned down until our mouths were no more than an atom apart. “Maybe I could start with this.”

“I think it’s possible,” she murmured.

“Likely?”

“Almost certainly. As long as that isn’t the only thing you’re sticking around for.”

“I don’t think it is.” My hands briefly flitted to her waist. She drew in a breath. “Although there’s no denying you’ve changed my life.”

She shook her head slightly. “I’ve just been there. All the credit for change goes to you. You’re the only one who could ever change your life. Maybe you can’t start with me, but maybe you could end with me.”

I hovered for a moment, considering, then pulled back. “You’re going to miss your train. Shall we go?”

I’d thought she’d be disappointed, but she took my hand and pressed first her fingers, then her lips, into the fleshy mound beneath my thumb.

A crowded station. A kissless goodbye that nonetheless felt more intimate than anything I’d ever done in a bedroom. A promise, reiterated. A figure on Platform 3, hair twisting in the wind like a restless bird; it turned back towards the car and waved, once, twice, and then was swallowed up by the swelling tide of commuters.

Salami Alimot Temitope (she/her) is an emerging Nigerian writer, phone photographer, digital artist, and essayist. She currently studies English language at Lagos State University, Nigeria. Her creative works have appeared or are forthcoming in *Lolwe*, *The Drinking Gourd*, *Typehouse*, *IbadanArt*, *Native Skin*, *Olney Magazine*, *Hey Young Writer*, *Icefloe Press*, *Brittle Paper*, *Arts Lounge*, *Terror House Magazine*, *Nantygreens*, *Kalahari Review*, *Pawners Paper*, *Nymphs*, *Nnoko Stories*, *The Hearth Magazine*, *Naija Readers' Buffet*, and shortlisted in the *Brigitte Poirson Poetry Contest August/September*. She says hi on Twitter & Instagram @lyma_lami.



Thole

Life is a journey and with each phase we encounter different situations. Some situations make us feel frustrated, tired, and perplexed but all we want is to feel at ease. As humans, we try to endure with the hope that there will be light at the end of every situation.

Maria S. Picone/수영 (she/her) is a queer Korean American adoptee whose debut chapbook, Adoptee Song, will be published in late 2022. She won the 2020 Cream City Review Summer Poetry Prize, and has been published in Tahoma Literary Review, The Seventh Wave, and Best Small Fictions 2021. She has received support from The Juniper Institute, Kenyon Review, and Tin House. She is Chestnut Review's managing editor. Find out more at mariaspicone.com, and Twitter @mspicone.

History of Adoption in KoreaMaria

Maria S. Picone

“In South Korea, adoption was initially introduced to find families to look after war orphans and mixed-race children, and has gone through a series of changes over the past 50 years. The nation’s economic development and improved quality of life have led to a rise in domestic adoption, enhancing the public perception of adoption. Recently, the South Korean government designated the National Adoption Day.”

-Korea Adoption Services Website, accessed 6/6/21.

<https://www.kadoption.or.kr/en/intro/opening.jsp>

당신은 한국인이 아닙니다

At four months old, I relinquished my rights as a Korean citizen. I became a doorway without country, swinging open and shut.

당신은 한국인이 아닙니다

2012 Special Adoption Law: “The Government shall endeavor to reduce the number of Korean children adopted abroad,” the law states, “as part of its duties and responsibilities to protect children.”

엄마, 아빠 □ 지켜줘!

January 1954. My mom’s birthday.

Mommy protect me. Daddy protect me.

You, stand on shifting, ground. You stand on shifting, ground. You, stand on, shifting ground.

June 25. My birthday. An invasion.

Mommy Korea, Daddy America.

The land fractures. The land fractures. The land fractures. The land in you.

1961. My father graduates from high school.

Mommy America; Daddy Korea.

당신은 변화하는 땅에 서 있습니다.

1976. My parents meet.

땅이 부서졌습니다.

1997. I enter junior high school.

Pencil in your rights. Pencil in your rights, Pencil in your rights. Pencil in your name.

I have two names. I do not have two names.

여 is a sound like a grimace. Open your mouth wide at both corners. 여 is the “over” ten adoptees in 1954.

우리는 한국인이 아닙니다.

Ink in your rights. Sharpie in your rights. Superglue your rights. Chisel your name.

여 is for the sound in 영- practice it over and over. Over ten times. Over thousands of times.

Your heart turns over before you say it. 영영영영. The unlucky number is four.

7,275 children were adopted overseas in the 1960s. 48,247 in the 1970s. 65,321 in the 1980s.

두 가지 이름이 있습니다.

여 is the over 65,000 adoptees. The annual average was 6,532.

Every year they emptied out a town. Every year they fractured a university. Every year.

The Korean government has designated the third wave of adoptions as ‘A Leap into Professional Adoption Projects and Child Services.’

I am a professional adoption project. You can Scrum me, don’t worry. The government’s phrasing will not harm me: 국적회복허가 신청서

I am not a diaspora. I am. You stereotype me but Korean food is one of the only tenets I can authentically embody.

I am an amateur Korean speaker. I rely on big corporations to speak my sentences. 여 is my sticking sound. When there are Koreans I shut my mouth. I do not open its corners wide.

I have no idea how it coheres. 저는 한국 여성입니다.

Actual Real Adoption Story

Let's say that two [REDACTED] people met within the confines of this classified [REDACTED] era of reconstruction [REDACTED] from the [REDACTED] circumstance neither could control. In the let's call it roughly late [REDACTED] period of [REDACTED] holiday, and suddenly a baby girl is due in [REDACTED] late [REDACTED]. Perhaps a [REDACTED] surprise. Then there's a lot of systemic detail to consider: does [REDACTED] know [REDACTED] well? Perhaps there's some [REDACTED] blaming here for the lack of protection or foresight or even some [REDACTED] blaming because [REDACTED] they are. Maybe the role of the [REDACTED] is discounted or [REDACTED] the government. It's never the lack of social support [REDACTED] culminating in a series of [REDACTED] apologies from the [REDACTED] family as they seek [REDACTED] perpetual [REDACTED] justice. And does it surprise you that the principal emotion felt is [REDACTED]? That the [REDACTED] word is too powerful to utter, that it took [REDACTED] adoptee organizations and positive [REDACTED] adoptees in media to convince them to restore [REDACTED] text the way this story itself [REDACTED] might become clarified to everyone [REDACTED] figuring out how to relate events in a way that might [REDACTED] give truth [REDACTED] voice [REDACTED].

Frutti di mare

O ancestors you who moved to the sea
to the tides who ate of wave born
harvest ate of wars
wreckage whatever was
caught that day you ingested fresh
deluge of blood fracture of border

I dedicate to you this meal of oysters
packaged for consumption like my body vessel
shipwrecked lost in currents & stars dredged
up dressed up in ancient
fermented juices shucked from one shell
to another jurisdictional sea
Italian American Korean American cut open
my belly read my entrails ancestry
colatura di alici gochujang contested territory
terra nullius O ancestors let me return

to simpler times before wars wracked
my body before man wrecked
your land before sea swallows
salt marsh before we
swallow marine life let me eat of
your uncanned gifts foreign
lunch on foreign coast
let me eat what comes to me
what tide brings what future sings

Kristen Ray's short fiction has appeared in The Ocotillo Review, Exposition Review Flash 405, Panoply, Women on Writing, Grande Dame Literary, and elsewhere. Kristen lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota. More of Kristen's writing is available on her website www.kristenrayauthor.com.

We Will Abolish Time

Kristen Ray

I remember the time I first saw Grazia: 10:17 a.m. How could I not notice? She came late, and late meant danger. Venice was a city of canals and bridges and clocks, too, gears and pulleys synchronized to the military minute. Every Monday at precisely ten, my tatting guild met in a drawing room off the Grand Canal to make filigree dresses for the dolls then the rage throughout the Republic—wind-up mini-humans that cried and slept and emitted papier-mâché excrement on schedule.

“Just like Venetian females,” a compatriot complained at 10:16, as usual, then laughed herself silly, as if our regimented lives weren’t cause for despair. She stopped. The pulley squeaking announced an unpunctual arrival. A creature with long hair and dark trousers—trousers?—crawled through the window that served as door when *acqua alta* flooded Venetian streets.

A collective gasp filled the room. Our skirts draped to the ankle.

“*Mi chiamo Grazia*,” she of the trousers announced, choosing the seat nearest mine. “I just moved from Rome,” she said. “My papà builds boats.”

February clouds dimmed the light, hiding my blush. “Susanna.” I tried not to gaze at her soft lips. “My family caretakes the San Marco clock tower, the tallest in Venice.”

“Really?”

I nodded. Her brown eyes melted me. “Father covers days. Ruggiero—my older brother—takes nights.”

“Ruggiero’s a handsome name.”

Tick-tock. “I suppose.” Was she just another girl wanting a timekeeper husband?

“Show me how tatting’s done, Susanna.” Grazia smiled, as if sensing my jealousy. “I’m not good at lace. The female sex in Rome has more freedom”—she winked—“if you know what I mean.”

I was twenty, old enough to be bedded, yet I’d rarely been kissed, and only once by a girl. I pushed away a longing the city fathers forbade. “Move your chair closer,” I said at 10:23, “and I’ll teach you.”

Our hands touched, thrilling me as I instructed Grazia how to move her needle, hoping she never learned. At 10:55, a wind-up woman mounted on the wall twirled and curtsied.

“Time to leave.” I dressed my baby doll in her lace dress.

“Those clocks must drive you mad.”

“Such talk’s not safe.” My heart pounded, whether from a longing for her boldness, or a longing for her, I couldn’t be sure. At 11:01, I said, “Come with me, *cara*. I’ll explain Venice. You can tell me about Rome.”

#

Rain fell, but our boots had mechanical flippers that cleared water as we walked. Girls in Venice followed a strict routine that a committee of men designed and enforced. Every square had a clock. Tick-tock, tick-tock. Every girl had a schedule every week, every day, every hour.

“At noon, I take communion.” Grazia and I entered the Chiesa di San Polo. Approaching the altar prompted a door behind the pulpit to open. A clockwork monk emerged, like a cuckoo, and dropped wafers into our open mouths.

“At two, I walk my dog.” I wound a clockwork Bruno. His paws made a clanking sound as they hit cobblestones.

“There are no real dogs?”

“They create waste,” I said. “Bruno doesn’t need food.”

“How convenient.”

At 2:11, we passed a woman prostrate beneath an oversized clock in the Piazza di Santo Stefano. Each time the second hand circled past, the blade attached slashed her back.

“What happened?” Grazia asked, face pale.

“She arrived late, or early, or—”

“Rome’s nothing like this insanity.” Grazia hurried us toward an empty piazza.

“How so?”

“It’s called the Eternal City for a reason.”

“Tell me more.”

We huddled on a stone bench at 2:30. Tick-tock, tick-tock; the clock noise never stopped.

“Who controls time, controls everything,” Grazia began. “Men own their days, thinking, inventing what they want, when they please. The shape of clock towers is no coincidence.”

“What?”

“The tallest buildings, erect, the dial at the top like—”

I put my finger to my lips. “How did you change things?”

“We started small,” she whispered. “Disrupted gears and pulleys, even a few minutes, to prove Father Time’s not absolute. Eventually, women occupied the clock towers, refusing to leave until they shared time power.”

“San Marco’s the master clock that all others here follow. But conquering that tower’s impossible.”

Her face drew near mine at 2:43. “Does Ruggiero have an extra key?”

My brother again. I imagined smashing clocks, controlling my life. “Yes. But I’m not brave.”

“Tomorrow’s *Carnevale*, easier for us to hide. We will abolish time.” Grazia brought my hand to her lips. “Or at least taste its sweetness.”

I never knew aching could feel so good. “I’ll steal the key.”

#

The following night, while Venice danced, we donned velvet masks with feathers that moved up and down, like birds flying free. I unlocked the tower door at 11:49, when Ruggiero often patrolled the highest terrace overlooking the city. We climbed stairs, creeping past giant moving clock parts, thick air stinking of oil. The gears and pulleys were deafening. I wore a pair of Grazia’s trousers.

“Baby doll,” she mouthed.

I passed her the miniature girl whose dress I’d tatted that morning.

“You do it.” Grazia tossed her back.

Pulse racing, I flung the creature into the gears.

Footsteps pounded, coming closer. “Hey,” Ruggiero shouted. “Who’s there?”

Grazia grabbed my arm. “*Andiamo.*”

The doll jammed the cogs. A screech like a baby dying, then the clock stopped, triggering a clanging so loud it hurt. We shoved Ruggiero aside and raced down, ears covered, emerging outside, fleeing crowds of costumed party-goers, racing along narrow streets, crossing arched bridges. Breathless, we found Grazia’s boat on a faraway canal. Before night ended, we’d sail the open sea.

How much braver could I be? “Grazia,” I said, “I’ve never felt like this.”

“Free from time?”

“Free to ask if I can kiss you.”

We tore off our masks, and she pulled me toward her. Bells across Venice rang in a crazy, random rhyme. I didn’t know the hour. I didn’t care. Kissing, we abolished time. Kissing, we found the infinite.

Amanda E. Machado (she/they) is a writer and facilitator whose work has been published in The Atlantic, Guernica, The Washington Post, Slate, The Guardian, Harper's Bazaar, and many others. She currently lives on Chochenyo Ohlone land in Oakland, California. You can find out more about her work on her website www.amandaemachado.com.

“She is one intended for public use.”

Amanda E. Machado

In the opening weeks of my first job out of college as a high school English teacher, a student slips his phone between my legs and takes a photo. I had leaned over another student's desk to help him with an assignment—a student I would later learn was “in on it.” I was wearing a knee-length sundress, and I never felt anything. I only found out after class when two girls approached my desk and said:

“We feel like you need to know something because . . . it's just not right.”

The principal later asks me to see the photos myself, to verify what happened. In his office, he holds the confiscated phone screen towards me, over his desk, so I can take a look: blurred images of my black panties between blotches of the brown skin of my thighs, framed by the blue and white waves made from my sundress.

“Yeah. That's me.” I tell him.

The student was expelled the next day.

#

In Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*¹, she begins her book with a photo she found while conducting research: a naked Black child from the nineteen-twenties, posed laying across a couch. In the nineteen-twenties, the legal age for consent was ten years old. Hartman analyzes the girl's expression in the photo:

“The look says everything about the kind of female property she is—a female not in the class of those deserving protection—and unlike the daughter of the bourgeoisie, whose sexuality is the private property of the father and then the husband—she is one intended for public use.”

¹ Hartman, Saidiya V. 2019. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments : Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. New York, Ny: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

A hundred years later, as a queer woman of color with far more agency than the woman Hartman studied, I am taken by all the ways my body, too, has still continued to be made public. In my first month teaching in a public school classroom, teenagers sneak a photo up my skirt. At a festival celebrating a holiday, my body is groped by a mob of men. While crossing the platform of a train station, a man passing by me slides his hand beneath my shirt and rubs across my back.

In public schools. On public holidays. On public transportation. My body still intended for public use.

#

In middle school, whenever any boy remotely expressed any interest in a girl—asked her to go on a date, take her to a movie, or for a drive in his car—the most common accusation thrown by other kids was:

“He’s just using you!”

I knew it was the absolute worst thing as a girl to be used by a boy. Girls were never supposed to allow this. We were supposed to cunningly slither our way out of ever giving our bodies away.

And yet, there was an assumption inherent in the phrase, *“He’s just using you.”* It assumed I actually had control over when and how my body would be used in the first place.

Even while young, I think I knew that my body always existed to be used in public by men. I have always known that when my body is in public, I’ve entered men’s space. They control what happens, and most importantly, they control what happens to me. I spent so many years trying to avoid this middle-school fear of my body being used, while always inherently knowing it will be used anyway.

When writer Rachel Hewitt recently reviewed² studies around the world on women and public space, every space that boys considered “safe,” girls still considered “unsafe.” Sixty percent of thirteen-year-old girls in Stockholm say they are scared in their own neighborhood. In South Africa, girls label over fifty-eight percent of public spaces ‘unsafe’ or ‘very unsafe.’ In every study, what girls feared most about public space: violence and sexual crimes from boys and men.

Coming out late into my twenties as bisexual intensified this. To be bisexual, to identify using that term, feels like being publicly sexual, as if there were some kind of exposing inherent in the term.

“My discomfort is contained in the word itself,” writes Reina Gattuso for *Teen Vogue*³. “Bi as in split, dual. Sexual, as in, well, sexual. I felt shame as though my identity was vaguely scandalous, the emotional equivalent of showing a stranger my panties.”

² <https://twitter.com/drrachelhewitt/status/1323616805026435073>

³ <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/why-bisexual-women-are-at-a-higher-risk-for-violence>

As bisexual activist Robyn Ochs said, “People often mistake someone coming out as bisexual as a sexual invitation.” The “both” underpinning my sexuality becomes mistaken for “ALL.” And of course, this leads to disproportionate sexual violence. Bisexual women are twice as likely to experience sexual violence than straight women. Nearly seventy percent of bisexual women have experienced sexual assault.

On one of my first nights out in the Castro—San Francisco’s proudly queer neighborhood—while I danced between two women on the dance floor, a man physically interrupted us by inserting his body right between ours. My chest, my shoulders, my hips that a second ago had gyrated on these women were now suddenly scrunched against him.

The same exact incident happened again a few months later. In each instance, when we asked the men to leave, they hesitated, raised their arms up on their sides in a confused shrug.

“Whaaaaat? Come onnnnnnnn.”

As queer women in public, we were automatically seen first as a performance, and then, an invitation. Each time, the men respond so confidently, as if to wholeheartedly believe that we wanted him there. They feel inherently invited—two women together in public must obviously be asking for them. The alternative would be impossible: women in public, existing only for ourselves.

#

In her book, Hartman notes that the only protection for a woman against public use is marriage. For the daughters of the bourgeoisie, their “sexuality is the private property of the father, and then the husband.” Hartman acknowledges, then, that even for the most privileged, a woman’s sexuality is still the “private property” of the man. When married, a woman’s private body is still never owned by her.

“For centuries, the marriage vow has functioned as an irrevocable, blanket sexual consent—by women, for men,” Chanelle Gallant writes, in her essay for the anthology *Pleasure Activism*⁴. She lists the stats: “one in ten women will be raped by their husbands. Another thirteen percent of women say they’ve had sex because they were ‘bullied or humiliated’ into it by their current husbands . . . The majority of married women report that they experience coercion to have sex from their current husband.”

Based on the numbers, Gallant makes a bold but fair claim: “Marriage reimagines the site of the most widespread rape and sexual exploitation in our society.”

These are the options: a body intended for public use, or a married body used privately by a husband. Either you belong to one man, or you

⁴ brown, adrienne maree. ed. 2019. *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*. Chico, Ca: Ak Press.

belong to everyone. To be clear, then, in no circumstance does a woman's body belong only to herself.

#

In 2016, a woman⁵ travels across Europe letting the general public touch her breasts. She wears a mirror box over her chest, with a hole in the middle covered by small red velvet curtains, then stands in the middle of Trafalgar Square. Anyone who agrees to her terms is allowed to push their hands past the curtains and touch her. In Amsterdam and Dusseldorf, she does the same project with the same box also placed over her vagina.

Four years later, I still know nothing of this woman's politics or personality, but I cannot stop thinking of her. A body intended for public use, this time entirely with the woman's consent.

#

The first time I visit a Las Vegas night club—nearly six months after the incident in my classroom—I can't stop staring at the women in the bathtubs. On elevated platforms leading towards the main dance floor, the women lay in the porcelain clawfoot tubs, submerged beneath a bed of floating rose petals. They lay there, submerged to their armpits, so that no one can see anything below their bare shoulders—their long hair pinned with a flower in a messy bun atop their head. Their body slowly sways with the beat of the music, their arms taking turns slithering into an "S" on each side.

"How much do you think they get paid to do that?" I ask the friend who brought me here.

She laughs and shrugs.

"Thousands."

In the years after, I will use these women as my bombastic punchline when my financial stability crumbles.

"It's fine, everyone," I'll joke. "Worst case scenario, I'll just become one of those women lounging in the Vegas bathtubs."

As a graduate of an elite university that demanded strict respectability politics, I know, in my circle, this joke is subversive. I know that in moments of financial fear, even the consideration of selling my body is taboo.

But honestly, I am always only half-kidding. For years since visiting Vegas, I have kept thinking about the women in the bathtubs and slowly rethinking everything I used to believe about sex work. I think about the ads constantly published in my university newspaper, offering fifty thousand plus to any Ivy League woman willing to sell her eggs. In my elite university circle, selling my body has *always* been acceptable, as long as it wasn't in public.

Something about the woman in the bathtub feels like a reasonable compromise. A profiting off the public imagination of your body, without

⁵ <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/news/a60728/milo-moire-mirror-box-vagina-art-interview/>

having to reveal all of it; a body sold publicly, while still holding onto some privacy beneath the petals.

And then I think about the incident in my classroom, and every violation of my body ever since, every time my body has been used without any of my consent, and I ask myself, really, what is paid exhibitionism to a body that has always been public?

When I think about the woman in the Vegas bathtub now, I realize it wasn't her bargaining of a half-revealed body that enticed me, but again, her agency. Like the Swedish artist exposing herself in Trafalgar Square, the woman in the Vegas bathtub knows the terms in which her body will be used, and is treated in accordance with that—an experience I then realize I have never had.

#

What happened in my classroom was followed by a widespread pattern of nonconsensual photography. In the last ten years, with the ease of cell phone cameras, dozens of celebrity scandals have emerged involving a man leaking a woman's private nude photos to the public.

In 2014, when over five hundred photos of celebrity women—including Jennifer Lawrence, Lea Michele, Kate Upton, Kirsten Dunst, Hope Solo⁶, and others—were leaked all at once, Roxane Gay wrote for *The Guardian*⁷ that “The Great Celebrity Naked⁸ Photo Leak of 2014 is meant to remind women of their place.”

The limitations of a woman's public movement are inherent in this common phrase, “remind women of their place.” The geography of sexism dictates that a woman in public is already at fault. She did not listen to the limitations we place on her own public mobility. She did not know her place. Instead she risked her body in public, and so whatever happens to her body is what she deserves. And as Gay affirms, taking that risk will always be interpreted as a kind of arrogance.

“Don't get too high and mighty, ladies. Don't step out of line,” she writes, “Your bared body can always be used as a weapon against you . . . Your bared body is at once desired and loathed.”

As I researched celebrity nude photo leaks from the past decade, I also came across a new pattern: women like Bella Thorne and Alissa Violet—who, upon receiving threats and exhortations from men who have illegally gained access to their nude photos—decide instead to release the photos

⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/01/nude-photos-of-jennifer-lawrence-and-others-posted-online-by-alleged-hacker>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/01/celebrity-naked-photo-leak-2014-nude-women>

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/film/naked>

themselves. When Whitney Cummings⁹ did this, she wrote on social media, “If anyone is gonna make money or likes off my nipple, it’s gonna be me. So here it all is.”

Madison Beer: “I’m putting this out because it’s MY DECISION NOW. YOU DON’T GET TO TAKE YET ANOTHER THING FROM ME. I can sleep better tonight knowing I took my power back.”

As much as I want to feel empowered by these celebrities, something about it still feels demoralizing. It feels like a last-ditch effort. Though I crave deeply to genuinely shout like Madison Beer, “You don’t get to take yet another thing from me!” maybe it’s the “yet another thing” that gets me. It acknowledges how much has been taken already. When Hartman reflects on the nineteen-twenties naked portrait, she writes:

“Is it possible to give what has already been taken?”

#

To be clear, the violence inflicted on the Black women Hartman studies in her book dramatically differs from the violation of a celebrity leaked photograph or whatever has happened to me. As Hartman writes, for Black women with a lineage of slavery, the public display of Black women’s bodies is “redolent with the auction block, the plantation, and the brothel,” and comes with a violent history.

“It is hard not to look at the photograph and not think about the images that preceded it and the images that would follow in its wake. After images of slavery intended to remind the viewer of the power they exercised over such a body and the threat hanging over the subject captured within its frame of the kinds of terrible things things that could be done to a black girl without a crime having occurred.”

When I research the celebrity photo leak of 2014, I notice that out of all the statements released by female celebrities, it is only a Black woman—Gabrielle Union—who connects the leak to a longer lineage of sexual exploitation.

In her statement responding to the leak, she said, “I can’t help but to be reminded that since the dawn of time, women and children, specifically women of color, have been victimized, and the power over their own bodies taken from them.”

As Hartman continues to reflect on the naked Black child in the photograph, she notes, “. . . so much time accumulates on her small figure, the girl might as well be centuries old, bearing the weight of slavery and empire.”

This accumulation, this weight is specific to Black women. And yet as a queer woman of color who has been sexually assaulted multiple times, I resonate so strongly with what Hartman writes next:

⁹ <https://pagesix.com/2019/08/13/whitney-cummings-takes-on-extortionists-by-posting-her-own-nipple-pic/>

“Violence is not an exception, but rather . . . it defines the horizon of her existence.”

#

A complicated truth: when the context and conditions were under my control, I’ve never actually minded exposing my body. Since childhood, my family would scold me for leaving my bedroom blinds open at night with my light on. As I changed my clothes by the window, my parents—appalled by my indifference—would rush towards the translucent plastic cylinder hanging from the blinds to close them.

“Quieres que todos te ven?” *You want everyone to see everything?*

In all honesty, it never felt obvious to say, “of course not.”

In high school, I convinced friends to leap out of my bedroom window naked and streak through the sprinklers of the neighbors’ lawns. My senior year of college, I joined a secret society of students who streaked across campus libraries the day before finals, nakedly handing donuts to students who studied in desks between the stacks.

When my student took the photo under my skirt, I worried that he somehow could detect this, that my history of exhibitionism was somehow palpable. Maybe that meant I deserved it.

In her essay “Intrusions,” writer Melissa Febos explores her experience being stalked by a stranger who looks into her bedroom window each night for months. She admits she worries that an essay against voyeuristic sexual assault could harm the reputation of those who enjoy exploring voyeurism within their own relationships. “The difference between consensual voyeuristic practices and nonconsensual is analogous to that between sex and “rape.”¹⁰“ Similarly, the difference between consensual exhibitionism and non-consensual exhibitionism makes all the difference.

As a sex worker at the time of her assault, Febos also admits she struggled not to “compound what was happening with the idea that my purpose was to perform erotically for men. The difference between what happened at work and when my stalker came at night felt clear inside of me—labor versus terror.”

#

In 2016, while living briefly in Berlin, I see folks sunbathing naked in public parks, and witness public sex openly in night clubs. In Germany, nudism is known as Freikörperkultur (FKK)—Free Body Culture. To this day, over six hundred thousand Germans have registered in private nudist clubs. There exists terms—“Nacktjoggen” and “nacktwandern”—for naked jogging and naked hiking through public trails.

At first this makes me think of German culture as wild and unrestrained. But then, every morning I get reprimanded for walking on the wrong side of the sidewalk, or accidentally tip-toeing into the bike lane, or not

¹⁰ <https://tinhouse.com/intrusions/>

entering the metro according to the protocol. Germans seem to believe deeply in both sexual freedom and following all the rules. Coming from the U.S., this feels like an impossible paradox.

Later, I realize that in Berlin, nudists are actually only allowed in designated areas of city public parks and beaches. There are certain clubs, or rooms in clubs, reserved for public sex. In some ways, consent is built into the city's architecture, policies, and structure.

In Berlin I realize my body does not necessarily feel free because of a hedonistic anarchy I imagined, but instead within a safety created by collective agreements. This is the part I had always misunderstood: sexual liberation in fact required rules. It required explicit conversations and intentional structure.

Of course, there is no amount of structure that can make a place completely free of rape culture, and Berlin, for all its sexual freedom, was not utopia. Sometimes, there was no order. Friends in the city still shared stories of assault. One night, in a nudist club, a man voyeuristically stared at me in a way that felt utterly uncomfortable, but I couldn't quite figure out what agreement had been broken.

There will never be enough rules to guarantee safety. And yet, after years of traveling semi-recklessly, always chasing a feeling of limitlessness, Berlin was perhaps the first place I visited that made me consider the liberation actually possible through boundaries. I think of the woman again in Trafalgar Square with the wood mirror box, the miniature curtains, the simple instructions: *let's talk before touching. Let me set the terms.*

#

During an autumn evening in my senior year of college, I sit on a stool in a heated studio while dozens of students sit quietly and paint me. I have volunteered to become a nude model for a figure-drawing class, and every student appears to be over the age of sixty-five.

Nothing about the experience feels difficult. Every few minutes or so, the students smile warmly and ask me to raise my arms, hold my hair up, or turn and look to the side. I move my body as asked and sit still, enjoying the music, the view of the brick buildings outside the window. I am not in desperate need of the eighty dollars they paid me for sitting there, but the hours feel far easier than any other eighty dollars I had ever made.

After the session ends, as each student shows me the work they created—each of their artistic renderings of my own naked body—I fall a little more in love with myself, with the curves of my collarbone they noticed, the draping of my hair that felt important enough to shadow.

Maybe this was vain, or maybe it was finally a genuine reclaiming of something. I so rarely can tell the difference.

#

In another essay from the book *Pleasure Activism*, burlesque performer Michi Osata writes about the possibility of an experience being “private in a public setting.”

“While there is something about other people being present and witnessing, it is not the same as it being *for* them,” Osata says.

This was what I had always craved: an ability to consensually engage in and inhabit public space as if it were private; a claiming of a public space for my own intimate experience. Streaking around a library tossing donuts was one of the most private, intimate moments I’ve ever experienced with myself—even as everybody watched. Working as a nude model for a portrait drawing class gave me the magic of someone capturing that private intimacy in a painting and reflecting it back to me.

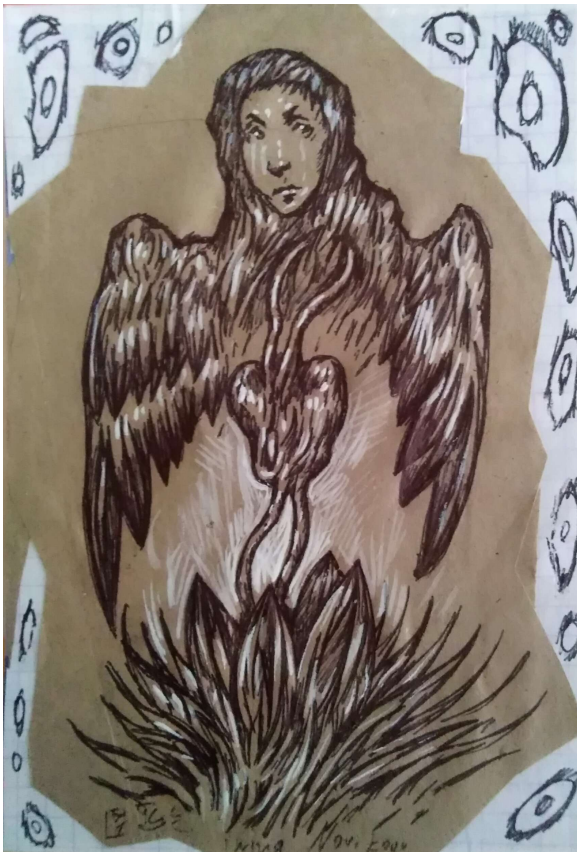
The Swedish woman in Trafalgar Square with the curtains over her breasts, and the naked sunbathers in their prearranged corner of a Berlin public park, and the woman bathing in a Vegas tub of rose petals and getting paid, maybe taught me everything I needed to know about power and consent—all summed up so succinctly with Osata’s phrase:

“This is not *for* them.”

A public body with my own private agency.

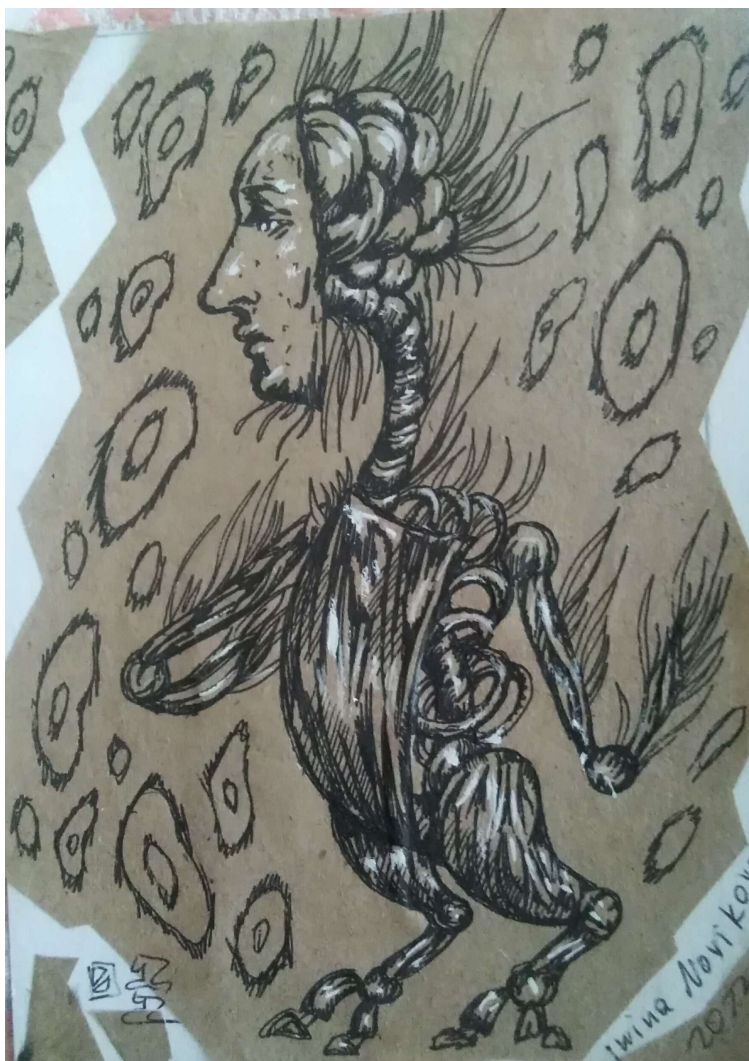
A public body that belongs deeply to myself.

Irina Tall (Novikova) (she/her) is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator, and writer. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design. Her first personal exhibition, "My soul is like a wild hawk" (2002), was held in the museum of Maxim Bagdanovich. In her works she raises themes of ecology, draws on anti-war topics, and in 2005 she devoted a series of works to the Chernobyl disaster. The first big series she drew was *The Red Book*, dedicated to rare and endangered species of animals and birds. She writes fairy tales and poems and illustrates short stories. She draws various fantastic creatures: unicorns, animals with human faces; and she especially likes the image of a man and a bird: a siren. In 2020, she took part in Poznań Art Week.



Fiery Heart

Gouache, ink, collage, paper, cardboard, 2022



Mechanical Bird

Ink, gouache, paper, cardboard, collage, 2022

*In search of moments, purity and colors . . . What will you find there, in that
lost happiness, absorbing yourself into non-existence, inserting it like
brackets into the veil of gaps . . .*

John Picard is a native of Washington, D.C., living in North Carolina. He received his MFA from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. He has published fiction and nonfiction in The Iowa Review, Narrative Magazine, Gettysburg Review, New England Review, Alaska Quarterly Review, and elsewhere. A collection of his stories, Little Lives, was published by Main Street Rag.

The Maestro

John Picard

I'm awake when the knocking starts. Who can sleep with the neighbors being arrested night after night? Women wailing as their husbands are dragged off to the Lubyanka? Every nerve in your body straining to hear where the footsteps will stop next?

"Nikolai Fylypovich! Open up!"

"Don't answer," Vera whispers.

"They'll just break it down," I say.

More knocking. The children crying. Anna and little Vanya clutching the hem of Vera's nightgown.

I step over and open the door.

"Nikolai Fylypovich," says one of two men in red and blue caps and black boots, holstered Tokarevas hanging from their belts. "Get dressed and come with us."

It's common practice for the NKVD to search an apartment for incriminating evidence, pulling out drawers, upending furniture, ransacking closets. That they bypass these procedures can mean only one thing: the evidence against me is already strong and whatever I said or did that displeased Stalin's regime doesn't require further proof. Had I let slip some word that was misconstrued as critical of public policy and reported by an informer? Had one of my students taken a dislike to me and turned me in? Or had someone under torture simply rattled off every name they could think of just to stop the pain?

"Hurry up," one of the men says.

I grab my boots and yank them on.

"Quiet!" the other tells the crying children. Backing up, he bumps into the piano, which sets my porcelain bust of Chopin teetering. I watch helplessly as the statuette falls to the floor and shatters.

"You oaf!" I shout.

“He didn’t mean that,” Vera says to the men, her hands folded pleadingly under her chin. “He’s just frightened. Aren’t you, Nikolai Ivanovich?”

“Yes,” I say, realizing my grotesque blunder. “Forgive me. I didn’t mean to—”

“Let’s go! Hurry up!”

Giving Vera and the children quick hugs and kisses, I tell them not to worry, knowing, of course, there is every possibility I will never see them again. I am not a man given to outward displays of emotion. But as I walk down the stairs with my escorts and the full force of what is happening hits me, I begin to weep. When I see the Black Maria at the curb I break down completely.

“Get a grip,” I’m told. “The boss is expecting you.” The men put me in the back seat, close and lock the door.

We speed into the Moscow night.

Minutes later, as I’m trying to reconcile myself to my fate, the gray Lubyanka prison looms up. To my amazement, we race on past it. A few minutes later we pull into the Kremlin and stop. I’m handed over to two other men, nondescript types in suits and ties who greet me by name. Their deference is touching and strange and I wonder if I have underestimated the subtlety of the NKVD. We arrive outside a set of double doors. “Go in. He’s waiting for you.”

Entering, I halt in my tracks. Standing behind a large desk in the right-hand corner of the modestly appointed room is the General Secretary of the Soviet Union, the ruler of all Russia, the man who’s been systematically arresting all the old Bolsheviks (Zinoviev, Kamenev, Rykov, Ryutin . . .), putting them on trial for betraying the revolution and then executing them. While doing away with his old cronies, Stalin has been rounding up hundreds of thousands of ordinary citizens suspected of disloyalty to the regime. They either disappear without a word of explanation or are sent to Siberia for sentences of ten, fifteen, twenty years. (For good measure, he arrests the family and friends of the accused, as if to root out all potential opposition.) One fellow I knew was arrested and never heard from again for saying within earshot of an informer that he thought Stalin wore lifts in his boots. Another of my acquaintances, a flutist, was arrested as a spy because he once vacationed in Paris. My stomach churning, my bowels cramping, it doesn’t seem possible that I’m in the presence of the author of all this mayhem, the person who has the power of life and death over every citizen of our country, but here it is.

“Come in,” he says. “Sit.” From the fifty-foot-high portraits of Stalin that hang in Red Square I almost expect to meet a figure of gargantuan proportions. Instead, I’m looking at a short, stocky man with a pocked face, a full head of graying hair and a bushy mustache. “They tell me you’re a musician,” he says in his thick Georgian accent.

“Not at all, Comrade Stalin.” My voice quavers. I clasp my hands to hide their trembling.

“I’ve been lied to?”

“No, Comrade Stalin. Of course not. I mean...I just mean I’m no Yudina.” Any Russian with a trace of culture knows that Maria Yudina is Stalin’s favorite pianist.

“Well, who is?” Stalin says, then glances down at a sheaf of papers on his desk, what is surely my dossier. He will read that I was an aspiring pianist in my youth, studying with Meshcheryakov. He might also learn that I lacked what it took to become a soloist and that now I play at weddings and parties and other social gatherings to supplement my meager income as a piano teacher. What he will not find there is that I could make more money in some other line of work, but thanks to a loving and understanding wife I am able to indulge my first love and my great passion—music, the universal language.

Stalin lifts his pipe from the ashtray and sticks it in the corner of his mouth. He explains that he has brought me here not in my capacity as a musician but as a teacher. His doctors have been hounding him for years about working too hard, his need for recreation. With the recent increase in his already heavy workload he has less time than ever for frivolous pastimes. Lately, however, the unrelenting burden of his job, the constant demands upon his time, have begun to take their toll. He feels stale and sluggish, no pep. A break in his grueling schedule, a diversion, might have the effect of reinvigorating him. He’s always been fond of the piano—he took lessons when he was a boy in Tiflis—and would like to resume them with me. The first lesson will be tomorrow at nine a.m., he tells me. Comrade Molotov will fill me in on the details.

“Thank you, Comrade Stalin,” I say, meaning, above all, thank you for sparing my life. “It will be my honor and privilege to serve you.”

“What’s your fee?”

“My fee?”

“What do you charge? How much a lesson?”

“Nothing, Comrade Stalin.”

“Nothing? How do you live with no income?”

“I mean...nothing for such a special pupil.”

“Nonsense. How does ten rubles sound?”

“That’s extremely generous, Comrade Stalin. Thank you. Thank you very much.”

Stalin shifts his pipe to the other side of his mouth, brushes a few flakes of tobacco off one sleeve of his tunic. “Just make sure you’re worth it, eh maestro?”

#

Vera’s and the children’s joy is rapturous when the Black Maria returns me to the apartment safe and sound. Vera and I are so excited we

spend the whole night talking. We hardly know what to make of this bizarre turn of events. We actually discuss what we might gain by such close proximity to the leader—a bigger apartment, better schools for the children, our own dacha. But we can only entertain these fantasies for so long. More than anything, my sudden elevation is a reminder of the volatility of the times, a reflection of the regime's erratic, unpredictable nature. We are well aware that I can be thrown down as quickly as I've been raised up.

"Do you think he'll be any good on the piano?" Vera says. "Stalin wouldn't do anything he wasn't good at, would he?"

"No," I say. "He's too proud. He'll be great."

#

He's awful. A minute into our first lesson—held in Stalin's office where a Steinway upright had been brought in—I know I have my work cut out for me. It doesn't help that his short, stubby fingers are unsuited to the piano—they have the dexterity of sausages—or that throughout the hour he insists on smoking his pipe, a gray cloud hanging perpetually over the keyboard.

To show me he isn't altogether a novice, Stalin thumps out several ditties half-remembered from his youth. I wonder at first whether his sloppiness is due to the misapprehension that it isn't necessary to play all the notes, only the notes he likes. It is worse than that. He thinks he has flair.

"That was lovely, Comrade Stalin. Do you know anything else? Encore."

"Child's play," he says, modestly. "Now your turn."

"Mine? You want me to play?"

"You're the maestro."

He produces some sheet music and places it on the stand. It is Balakirev's "Sonatina Esquisse," a beautiful and delicate piece of music and, coincidentally, a favorite of mine from the Russian canon. Only five and a half minutes long, it's relatively easy for an experienced pianist. My hands shake through the first few bars, but the music has a calming effect and I manage a quite respectable rendition all in all.

"I apologize for that rocky start," I say.

"I want you to teach me this."

"This? It's rather advanced for a beginner."

"You can't do it?"

"I can do it, Comrade Stalin, but why not pick something a little more
—"

"End of lesson."

#

How do you teach someone to play a musical instrument who won't admit his mistakes? Stalin really believes he can master a complex piece of

music without hard work. After two more extremely frustrating lessons, I tell him he needs to practice every day for at least half an hour.

He glowers. "I'm a very busy man."

"I know you are. But unless you practice you'll never be able to play the Balakirev. Even Yudina has to practice her scales. I'd like to make one other suggestion."

"What?" he bellowed.

"Never mind."

"What? Don't be so womanish."

"You'll never play the 'Sonatina' unless you do something about your hands."

"What's wrong with them?" He examines his stumpy hands, back and front.

"Nothing. Nothing that can't be improved with some stretching exercises."

I am beginning to see more clearly his human qualities. He's full of insecurities—about his physical stature, his lack of worldly sophistication (his hatred of all things European indicative of this), his narrow intelligence. While suggesting exercises he might try to extend his reach, I notice that, self-conscious now about his hands, he's placed them in his lap.

"You have strong Russian hands," I say. "The hands of a worker. They just need some limbering up."

Still smarting, apparently, he cuts the lesson short.

#

"He's hopeless," I say to Vera. We're lying in bed, our voices lowered. There are stories in *Pravda* about children informing on their parents for criticizing the regime, an act the authorities are always quick to applaud as a sterling example of putting the state before everything, family included.

"It doesn't matter if he's hopeless," Vera says. "Humor him. Lie to him. Do whatever it takes to keep him happy."

"You don't know what it's like. If he were anyone else I'd tell him to quit now and take up stamp collecting."

"But he's not anyone else, Nikolai Ivanovich. You can't treat him the way you do your other pupils."

"And how's that?"

"You're an excellent teacher. Everyone says so. But you can be very demanding."

"I expect my students to take the music as seriously as I do. That's all."

"This isn't some nervous eight-year-old. It's Stalin. And you tell Stalin whatever he wants to hear."

#

“You’ve been practicing,” I say to him at our next lesson. There is, in fact, some slight improvement.

He’s beaming. “You can tell, eh?” He takes out a box of matches to light his pipe. I stand by and watch this foul ritual: the lighted match held over the bowl, then the vigorous huffing and puffing that sends a dense cloud wafting into the air.

I step away, smothering a cough. “I take it you’ve been doing your exercises?” I say.

He shows me his splayed fingers.

“Very good.”

“Now we work on the Balakirev,” he says.

“I admire your ambition, but I’m not sure you’re ready for that yet.”

“I’m ready.”

“With all due respect—”

“I’m ready!”

“Fine,” I say and slap the sheet music down on the music stand.

He gets four or five bars into the Schumannesque miniature that opens the “Sonatina” and stops. He’s reached the end of what he’s already taught himself.

“Learning the piano is a slow and arduous process,” I explain. “No matter how dedicated, no matter how gifted, you can’t play a piece of music until you’ve developed the proper skills. Why not try something more in keeping with your abilities?”

“You mean,” he snaps, “something more in keeping with *your* abilities—to teach.”

“Exactly, Comrade Stalin. I’m a very poor teacher. *Please* forgive me.”

“If you can’t do it, you can’t do it.”

“I’ve been teaching piano for almost ten years. I can do it, I assure you.”

I suggest to him that we meet every other day instead of every third day. He’s resistant (the show trials are starting up again, this time for those ex-revolutionaries accused of being rightists, wreckers, and Trotskyites, and he will be busier than ever), but he finally agrees to the more intensive schedule when I argue it will save him from having to practice so much.

#

I decide to take the “Sonatina” a little at a time, so that he might learn it in bits and pieces and hopefully put them all together into a coherent whole. We’ve been at it for a week, the week that Bukharin, the party’s main theorist, is put on trial, having admitted to conspiring to overthrow the Soviet system that he has done so much to create. As with the other Bolsheviks, there are rumors that he’s confessed under torture and that once the verdict—a foregone conclusion—is reached he’ll be summarily shot.

My situation can't compare to Bukharin's and the other unfortunates, but I suffer. Besides the stress and strain that has turned me into an insomniac and destroyed my appetite (I have lost fifteen pounds in a month), I am witness several times a week to the massacre of a sublime expression of the Russian soul. The little improvement Stalin has made with his exercises is not reflected in his attempt to learn the "Sonatina," which is going nowhere. If anything he's getting worse, and the worse he gets the more arrogant he becomes. He has the annoying habit of turning to me after what he feels is an inspired bit of playing and, the omnipresent cloud of smoke between us, raising his thick eyebrows as if to say, "How about that, eh?" and then refusing to look away until I acknowledge him with an enthusiastic nod or words of praise. When he's feeling particularly pleased with himself he won't settle for anything less than applause.

At our next lesson the room is so thick with smoke that I raise my voice to him. "How do you expect to learn to play the piano with that smokestack in your face?"

Stalin stops playing and glares up at me.

"Would you at least consider not smoking during a lesson?" I add quickly, tempering my outburst. "I think you'd make much better progress without it."

Stalin's answer is to strike a match, hold it over the bowl and puff like a locomotive.

#

"I don't know how much longer I can take it," I tell Vera.

"You have to be strong."

"It's like he's doing it on purpose. Playing all the wrong notes just to torture me. For all its simplicity, the "Sonatina" is a profound work. It's deserving of respect."

"Nikolai Ivanovich! Don't you see what you're doing? So what if Stalin's a terrible pianist? So what if he plays the wrong notes? You have to think of your family's safety. You have to think of the children."

#

I do my best to abide by Vera's wise counsel but Stalin is beyond infuriating. He can't be bothered learning the "Sonatina" piecemeal or any other way. He only wants to *play* it, and he only wants to play it straight through, beginning to end.

"Stop!" I say, interrupting him in the middle of his third or fourth run-through. I take a breath. I count to ten. More calmly, "Each piece of music has its own structure, its own integrity. Borscht is made with beets, correct? If you made it with anything else—apples, say—it wouldn't be borscht. It would be apple soup. And nobody likes apple soup. You need to play slower—much slower. And softer. It's a sonata, not a polka. And again, the pipe. It's very distracting. Have I made myself clear, Comrade Stalin?"

“Very clear—*maestro*.”

“Excellent. Let’s try it again.”

Without taking his eyes off me, he commences the relighting of his pipe, holding the match over the bowl for longer than necessary, puffing until the flame grows higher, then flicking the match to the floor. The pipe jutting from the corner of his mouth, he proceeds to pound out the music, ignoring everything I just said. He puffs harder the further he gets into the piece, the smoke billowing up to the ceiling. My eyes are burning by the time he gets to the adagio. I bat away cloud after cloud of putrid smoke. Stalin launches into the allegro, the music even louder, more discordant. He turns in my direction, grinning around the sulfurous pipe, waiting for some show of approbation. He heads pell-mell into the “Sonatina’s” conclusion, the allegro finale. Yet again he faces me—preening, bumptious, full of himself.

I snatch the pipe out of his mouth, snatch it with such force I can hear it scrape against his teeth. I’m instantly horrified by what I’ve done. Stalin, his hands frozen over the keyboard, is staring at the pipe, its bowl warm in my palm. He looks from the pipe to me. We look at each other. There’s only one thing to do. With a shaky hand, I aim the pipe at Stalin’s mouth—clamped shut. I can’t let that or the mustache that covers his lips like a heavy curtain deter me and move the stem toward its intended goal. I can feel Stalin’s eyes on me, hear his wheezy breathing, smell his acrid body odor. Having brought the pipe within three inches of his mouth, I pause, waiting for him to open up. Five, ten, fifteen seconds pass, an eternity in those circumstances. Finally, the mustache lifts, the lips part; small, yellow teeth come into view. I insert the stem. He bites down. I’m about to fall to my knees when Stalin rises abruptly, straightens his tunic and stomps away.

Presently, two armed guards appear and hustle me out of the room. The privilege of being chauffeured to and from the Kremlin having been rescinded, I return to the apartment by bus. I don’t question whether I should tell Vera what happened. She’s my wife and we don’t keep secrets from each other. I find her in the kitchen making bread. Like mine an hour before, Vera’s reaction—turning from the mound of dough and coming straight for me with the rolling pin—is impulsive, unpremeditated. I collapse where I am, shielding my head with my arms. She strikes me again and again before her fury is spent. Seeing me on the floor, battered and bleeding, she drops the rolling pin. Sobbing, she covers me with her body, begging my forgiveness as I beg for hers.

#

I have the full use of my arm again. The bruises are mostly gone. Life has returned to normal, or what passes for normal in our benighted country. I have not heard from my last pupil. Who knows what that means. Who knows why he hasn’t sent his minions to arrest me, or why, for that matter, he didn’t have me arrested on the spot. It could still happen., of course. I could be

rounded up tomorrow, or next week, or next year. Or not. This is the game the regime likes to play. As with every Soviet citizen, Vera and I will never stop listening for the Black Maria in the middle of the night, will never stop living in fear until, hope against hope, the Georgian gangster, the mass murderer, the devil-come-to-earth is removed from the scene.

Meanwhile, I've decided to sell my piano. I might buy another one someday, but not for a while, not until the children are grown.

Monday I go to work in the factory.

Shannon Connor Winward (she/her) is the author of the Elgin Award-winning chapbook Undoing Winter (Finishing Line Press, 2014) and The Year of the Witch (Sycorax Press, 2018). Her relics linger in places like *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Strange Horizons*, *Analog*, *Skelos*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Literary Mama*, *Deaf Poet's Society*, a feature in *Poets & Writers magazine*, the annals of *Science Fiction & Fantasy*, *Poetry Association*, too many anthologies to count, and here and there a Review. For now Shannon's mind lives on in the brokedowntower of her body in a blue room, where she writes madly against the gods and the clock, and edits *Riddled with Arrows Literary Journal*.

Coming Home

Shannon Connor Winward

I looked at my reflection in the moon roof
as he crested the Delaware Memorial

my neck craned back, my face flat and white
studying this new angle of myself as if considering a lover

in an open coffin I thought about
my fear of bridges the long fall drowning

behind locked windows I remembered my father
in the kitchen sweeping glass, a marriage of window

and high-heeled shoe that night my mother took me
from my bed to her sister's house in South Jersey

the bridge I'd only ever seen before in sunshine
made alien like that little me once

unafraid I watched the lights of the twin spans overhead
a glittering gateway to dark rivers above and below

Fear of Strangers

The baby cries when you visit
and can you blame her—you are
a sallow, bruised
loud, invading
storm of cigarette stink

and perfume, diamonds
sagging from your wrists,
dialysis ports
like Popeye muscles
protruding from your arms

(though your kisses are still soft
as powder,
and smell like love).
Stay longer, Mom

or don't come at all. We can't fear
what we don't know
can hurt us

we can't learn
what precious things
can be ugly, needed,
if they are never around enough
to miss

it's what is out of place, what visits
just now and then that sticks out
to become the patchwork
of our nightmares.

See, this is how you start the list
of things she learns
to cringe from.

Cutting Teeth

You aren't that girl anymore.

The ghosts of old wives, the fetch of you lingers

a pinch over the shoulder, mourning

the rubble of spine, of belly, of breakfast.

Your mouth of wisdom like tooth dust, doled out

for your daughter now in your mother's voice

you look just like her, your hand not even shaking

on the spoon.

*The poetry and prose of **Robert L. Penick** (he/him) have appeared in over 100 different literary journals, including *The Hudson Review*, *North American Review*, *Plainsongs*, and *Oxford Magazine*. His latest chapbook is *Exit, Stage Left*, by Slipstream Press, and more of his work can be found at theartofmercy.net.*

One More Night

Robert L. Penick

Another New Year's Eve at the Shelbyville Road Burger King and a few things have changed. Inside dining? They locked the doors at six p.m. and only the drive-thru is running. McGaff explains to the new kid about the Great Hamburger Riot of 2016, the broken window, the ketchup on the floor that had the first EMT calling for backup. Who needs it? Now it's ten minutes to midnight and the line of cars make a noose around the building, trailing out onto the street.

"Whoppers and fries. Just keep them coming," he tells his three man crew. "These people want cholesterol and they want it now."

The new kid is good, tossing baskets of fries under the heat lamp with one hand, then throwing hamburgers together with the finesse of a Las Vegas blackjack dealer. Most highschoolers are distracted by the noise, or goof off, or just don't care about the quality of their work. This guy is down in the ditch with a shovel. Twenty cent raise the minute he clears probation.

Were those gunshots in the parking lot or just fireworks? Now sirens. *Somebody* thought they were gunshots. Something slaps a window hard, but it doesn't crack. Now screaming outside, more popping. McGaff cuts the lights, inside and out. The sign, everything.

"Let's take a break while the cops do their thing," he tells his crew. They take seats in the dining area and watch the melee going on outside under strobing blue lights. Twelve years wearing the uniform, seven as store manager. Thirty more until the first thought of retirement. He keeps busy to avoid thinking about it.

"Okay, guys. Who wants a frozen Coke? I'm buying."

He laughs maniacally as fireworks light up the horizon.

Long Form

Fenster, a fifty year-old English professor, is writing a novel about a fifty year-old English professor who is trying to write a novel. She has been working on it for thirty years and the accelerating pace of technology keeps setting her back. At first her heroine was an undergraduate, clacking away on an Underwood electric typewriter, hoping her genius and inner turmoil would be recognized by the benevolent souls at Faber & Faber, publishers. But five years swept past her like a bus behind schedule and her Underwood was replaced by a Brother word processor. The protagonist became a graduate student, then the keyboard belonged to an IBM PS/2 with a WordPerfect program. Now she clicks almost silently on an Apple laptop, telling the story of a woman in middle age. Her characters are aging along with her. If only she could get time to stand still.

Call her preoccupied with the present moment. Say she has no stomach for nostalgia. Perhaps the opposite is true. There are those who build their hearth in the past, using yearbook photos and the oldies station to keep warm. Others are so broken or wounded by history they till the present until the ground is barren. Every life has its story arc and the trick is to know one's true position on that curved line. If you can't do that, fake it, pick a spot that feels right.

Fenster reboots her story one last time: The star of this epic is ninety years old, frail but full of life, looking back over her catalogue of events. The view is clear in the rear view mirror, each image exact. It's easier to work backward in time the closer you get to the end.

Gone

She sat in her kitchen next to a metal wastebasket, lighting photographs one after another. Gazing at each as it burned. She watched her past curl and blacken and run toward heaven like a faulty prayer. When the flame reached her fingers, she dropped the photo, watched it burn out, picked another memory to immolate. At seventy years old, she had a lot of memories.

She began in the middle, with the marriage pictures. Took a subdued delight in torching that failed, childless endeavor. Seeing her ex-husband wrap up into darkness. The bastard. A brief hesitation before setting off the honeymoon postcard they sent to themselves. That was one heck of a beach. But up it went. Next up were the middle-aged photos, she and her co-workers at her retirement party. Another in red hats at Churchill Downs for the horse races. Not a peep from anyone after she left work. Thirty years of conversation, shared lunches, talk of spouses, neighbors, other people's children. Then, once she wasn't available to cover someone's Saturday shift, she didn't exist. Poof. She lit three at once and they went up, a geyser of flame. She held her hand over the basket, but felt no warmth.

Now came the school photos, exiting this Earth in reverse order. High school graduation, gone like youth. Sweet sixteen at the roller rink. Woosh. No proof that day ever happened. Her last photo she held for a few minutes, examining her newborn self and wondering who that woman was holding her. There was no one to inherit this evidence, no one to keep the memory. She struck the lighter and erased herself.

***Olude Peter Sunday** is a writer, an artist, and a poet from Ogun State, Nigeria. He has a few of his works featured in magazines including *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *The Rush Magazine*, *Erogospel Magazine*, *Parousia Christian Magazine*, *Mad Swirl Magazine*, *Kalahari Review*, and others. He won the third place prize in the *Endsars National Poetry* contest in October 2020. When he isn't writing, he is painting pure pictures with poesy and Photoshop. He tweets @peterolude.*



African Love

A digital art piece depicting two birds seeking solace from the bosom of their own selves. The artist dreamt of painting a picture of lover birds who feel the world is made of love and light. This is however evident in the piece.



African Woman

The title hails from the lyrics of the great Nigerian multi-instrumentalist, Pan-Africanist, bandleader, composer and political activist Fela Kuti's EP, titled "Shakara," The art piece got its title from the specific song "Lady," of which Fela Kuti revealed the gaits and pride of an African woman. Singing, "If you see 'African Woman,' she go say I be Lady o." Meaning African woman doesn't like to be the so-called "Woman," as the term "Woman" should somehow be accorded to market woman (for an exempli gratia). The art piece reveals the pulchritudinous face of a belle, if not a woman, in both sleek and nice skin with finely woven scarf and alluring ear-rings. As seen, she poses like a lady.



Behind the Scene

Behind the scene is a piece of artwork carved in digital painting depicting the solvent face of a lady with stares likened to be confounded at a crossroad. Her countenance asks, when you are left alone with unpredicted decisions, do you fast quake? Or when your life deepest fear assails you, do you like Keke Palmer's song "keep it moving?"

Emily Hockaday's (she/her) first full-length collection Naming the Ghost is forthcoming September 2022. She is the author of five chapbooks, most recently Beach Vocabulary out with Red Bird Chaps March 2022. You can find her on the web at www.emilyhockaday.com and tweeting @E_Hockaday.

Looking for the Comet

Emily Hockaday

It has been 98 minutes since sundown
and 34 months since you were on this Earth.

Inside, the baby weeps; frightened
by an oil painting that, in the dark,
became a maw to another dimension.

Over the southern horizon
Jupiter glows a brilliant white,
and Saturn hangs to the side.
It is impossible to see the comet,
a light smudge below
the ladle. I've found myself back
here, pulling your rhubarb
from beneath the tall pines
behind this house
where I learned to walk.

The night is polluted;
the sky is like a wavy glass.
The old yard looks different
and the same. I tap into
the dark pockets of my
hollow heart and focus
the binoculars. I want to see
the comet. I emerged barefoot
into the warm night, ginger
over the sharp dry grass,
to see what so many others
have called once in a lifetime.

Leanne Jepson writes short stories in her car at the beach, in her hometown on the South Island of New Zealand.

Exotic-Food Consumer

Leanne Jepson

Your sister, Ashley, is back in the country for a few days. Baby Zara is on her hip, reaching for the nuts and nibbles you've prepared, and printing tiny, greasy fingerprints onto your polished-steel counter-tops. The negative pregnancy test is in your pocket. The most recent one, anyway. When you tried to call Ashley about your first negative test she was in a hostel room in Belgium, tackling a mammoth nappy explosion. The second time, you didn't tell her because she and Wes had just lulled Zara to sleep and were having a wine-and-cheese date-night on the terrace of their rent-a-villa at some vineyard in the south of France. The third time, there was no test. Your period arrived early. It was Deep-Clean-Thursday and you were on all fours in the kitchen, scrubbing at the toe-kicks—stripped down to your bra and undies because no matter how much Pine-o-Clean was sloughed over those tiles, your clothes always felt dirty after being down there. A bright-red stain tinged your knickers. You were glad it happened before 10:30 am. because you hadn't started the whites-bleach-wash cycle yet. Cole came home while you were folding the clean knickers into the drawer. You cried in his arms.

#

"These are for Cole," Ashley says. She takes a block of something covered in butcher's paper from a shopping bag, and places it on the middle shelf of your fridge. "Escargots," she adds.

You want to remind her that disgusting things, like snails, should go on the top shelf with the patés and smoked fish and other squishy things that only Cole eats. They shouldn't be placed beside your cranberry yogurt drops. But then Ashley laughs and says, "Cole will love them, won't he, Wes? Escargots? Delicious, aren't they?"

The guys break from their conversation. Wes leans on the breakfast bar. "If you like a mouthful of garlic slime, then yeah, you'll love them, mate."

"He can't stomach them," Ashley says, "It's hilarious. We ordered a huge plate to share and I had all but one!"

"Hang on," Wes says, "I ate plenty of weird stuff—frogs legs, and that funky cheese in Italy. But snails are something else. If you can eat one of those and not throw up, nothing else will bother you."

Cole looks at you. "I'm not sure about garlic slime."

“It’s not garlic slime,” Ashley scoffs, “They’re just like garlic mushrooms. Seriously, you’ll like them. Zara even chewed on a little piece, didn’t you, bub?”

You watch Zara’s little toes flexing and try to tune out the revolting conversation, and the twisting in your guts.

“I’ll be trying guinea pig when we’re in Peru next month,” Wes says.

Ashley says she might do too, but she draws the line at rat.

You wonder how she ended up being so adventurous, so unafraid.

You wonder why you turned out exactly like Mum.

#

Ashley lays Zara within a barrier of pillows on the double bed in your spare room. You pull the curtains closed and imagine, again, how you would arrange the space for your own baby.

“We’ve been trying,” you say, “for a few months now, but . . .” You hand her the pregnancy test and she squints to see the result in the low light, although she must know from your voice that it is negative.

“Bree,” she says. “Babe. It can take a while, you know.”

You sit opposite her on the bed and stroke your fingertips against baby Zara’s pillow-soft thighs. “I know.”

“Babies are messy though,” Ashley says, “they’re really disgusting. Like that time with the dogshit and the tennis ball at Uncle Ray’s—but times a hundred. And I’m not trying to be a bitch, because I love you, but do you really want to be a mum? Really?”

You don’t answer. Zara sucks her pacifier and it rolls like tiny waves on top of her lips, you continue stroking her thigh; her eyes close.

You knew Ashley would say something like that. It’s why you found so many excuses not to tell her. Why you waited until you were in a dark room, putting a baby to sleep, so that the conversation would be hushed and calm, and so she couldn’t see the tears welling up in your eyes. It isn’t fair that, despite enduring the same childhood, Ashley had grown into a fully functional adult.

She’d shared the same mum who taught you to fear anything sticky because germs clung to sticky things. The same mum who said germs attached to your skin and crept in through your pores and rode around in your bloodstream, infecting your brain and your tummy—turning your insides to an icky goo that eventually dripped out of your nose. Ashley had been there when, as a seven-year-old, you’d sneezed a huge glob of your liquidized insides onto the knobbly bit of your knee below the smiley-face shorts you were wearing that day. Mum had huddled in the cleaning cupboard under the stairs, screaming.

Ashley said your eyes had rolled back and you went all floppy and she had to drag you across the floor into the bathroom to get you cleaned up. You don’t remember ever sneezing again until the vacuum-cleaner wedding-

gift exploded all over the lounge and Cole had laughed—somehow that ordeal hadn't seemed quite as scary as the one sixteen years earlier.

#

You don't feel like sex after Ashley, Wes, and Zara have gone, but you read online that if you do it every other day then the chance of conception is higher. Cole runs the bath while you strip off in the bedroom. Usually shower-sex is the only way you do it—the icky, sliminess is instantly washed away and antibacterial soap is ready to be dispensed from that cute sea-shell holder you bought at M&S. But the website you've been reading also said that position is important too, so you figure if you lie in a bubbly bath with Cole on top then you'll still feel clean.

The water splashes over the edge as Cole thrusts his body. You try not to think about the reality of lying in a pool of sperm soup once he ejaculates, so you dwell on Ashley's wild life again, and the unfairness of it all. You wonder, if you'd married a travel writer too, would you be more outgoing.

"You okay?" Cole asks. He stops thrusting and scrunches his eyes in that cute, puppy-dog way.

You feel angry at yourself for blaming your situation on Cole. You love him with an intensity that you'd never experienced before you met him, and he has always been understanding. Besides, you're the writer—you could've written about travel instead of doing content creation for the 'Dazzle-Shine' cleaning products website.

"Sorry, I don't think I can do it like this," you say.

"It's okay," he says. "I was thinking maybe it's the water that's the problem anyway? Like, it's washing my little guys away or something?"

#

It's that time of the month when you're fertile and your hormones are crazy, and you're thinking about Cole's fingers between your legs when you're supposed to be writing about the super-powers of 'Dazzle-Shine' stain remover.

Ashley has already traveled through Peru, and eaten roast guinea pig. The three of them have driven through Chile and are on their way back up through Argentina. The escargots are still on the middle shelf of the fridge where they've taunted you for the past three-and-a-half months. Every time you see the packet you hear Wes' voice, *If you can eat one of those and not throw up, nothing else will bother you*. It has become a challenge. Over the past two weeks you've peeled off the layers of butcher's paper, and now you pull out the shrink-wrapped pack and stab it with a knife. A garlicky smell belches out. You keep going, hacking at the plastic and tipping the contents into a pan. You put the extractor fan on high and try to picture plain spaghetti with garlic butter as the smells permeate from the rattling lid.

They're cooked and cooled and presented on the lemon-yellow serving tray when Cole comes home. There's a small snail—or half a snail—

on the side that you've singled out already, and as soon as Cole walks into the kitchen you toss it into your mouth and swallow it whole.

"Jesus!" Cole says.

"I know!"

You can't stop talking about how you finally did it, and Cole says he's not even sure he can do it, and that makes you feel like even more of an intrepid, exotic-food consumer.

Cole studies the packet, reading the descriptions, psyching himself up, and then he says, "They expired six weeks ago."

#

Stripped down to your undies—because the waves of nausea rolling up your esophagus make your clothes feel instantly dirty—you sit in the empty bathtub and dry retch over the side into the big cleaning bucket. Nothing comes out, but you can't leave the bath. Cole takes the bucket away and joins you in the tub, where you share a packet of chewy minties and talk about work and home decor, and anything but garlic escargots. An hour goes by, maybe two, and your hormones perk up again. You're half naked in the bath, your legs either side of Cole's waist, and all you want to do is strip his clothes off and turn the shower on. But it doesn't happen like that, because you've reached a new level of distinction—you've eaten an expired escargot and now nothing can bother you. You do it right there in the empty tub, and it's not that bad. You turn the shower on afterwards and feel clean again.

After that day, you have more tub-sex. You wait longer and longer each time before turning the shower on. You lie there with your legs in the air and think about chunky baby-thighs poking out of animal-patterned cloth-nappies. Disposable nappies won't be required, because nothing can bother you now. You're attending hypnotherapy sessions twice a week. The patés and smoked salmon are no longer relegated to the top shelf of the fridge, they are dispersed amongst the shelves like little trophies marking your progress.

Another month goes by.

Another negative test.

#

Four weeks later, Ashley is back from South America. The three of them are at your house again for another debrief of their adventures. Zara is commando-crawling through your thick-pile carpet. You clutch the pregnancy test in your pocket, waiting for Ashley to stop talking for a second.

"We're done traveling for now," Ashley says. "It's getting a bit tricky with Zara crawling around. She's a little monster."

You glance at Cole. He and Wes are sitting on the floor, tickling Zara.

"Wes has taken a job at the Evening News. He'll still travel a bit but . . ." Ashley gives you a coy smile. She rubs her belly. You know what she's going to say and there's no way in hell she's going to steal your thunder. Sure, she's traveled the world with a baby. She's handled nappy explosions in

hostel rooms and a screaming baby on long-haul flights. But you have squishy food on every shelf in your fridge, and you've eaten an expired escargot. You have conquered a life-time of fears to be in this moment. Ashley starts to speak but you shout, "Stop!"

You thrust the pregnancy test in her face.

Positive.

Tiffany Elliott (she/her) is an asexual, neuroatypical, and disabled woman who has served as a mental health professional and teacher for over a decade. She received her MFA from New Mexico State University in 2020, where she was awarded the Mercedes De Los Jacob's Thesis Prize and the Sutherland McManus Prize for Literary Criticism. Her works explore the mythologies we experience, those we create for ourselves, issues of abuse and trauma, and how people can remake themselves. Her work has appeared in Spectrum, Riggwelter, Atherton Review, isacoustic, Inlandia, MUSE, Pacific Review, and others.

The Language of Bees

Tiffany Elliott

I fawn over your bawdy beard
of bees, caressed by stingers and tiny
bee hands and wings that ignite
dances of language

flowers drooping outside
sign to the bees

I fold you into
petaled security
sing you to sleep among
the stamen and its pollen
little bees snore their dreams

inching my ear near antennae
I lean in for secrets
that aren't theirs to share

I follow honey scent
and sweet wine to the hollow
of your eyes, plant
lips over each
sip your tears

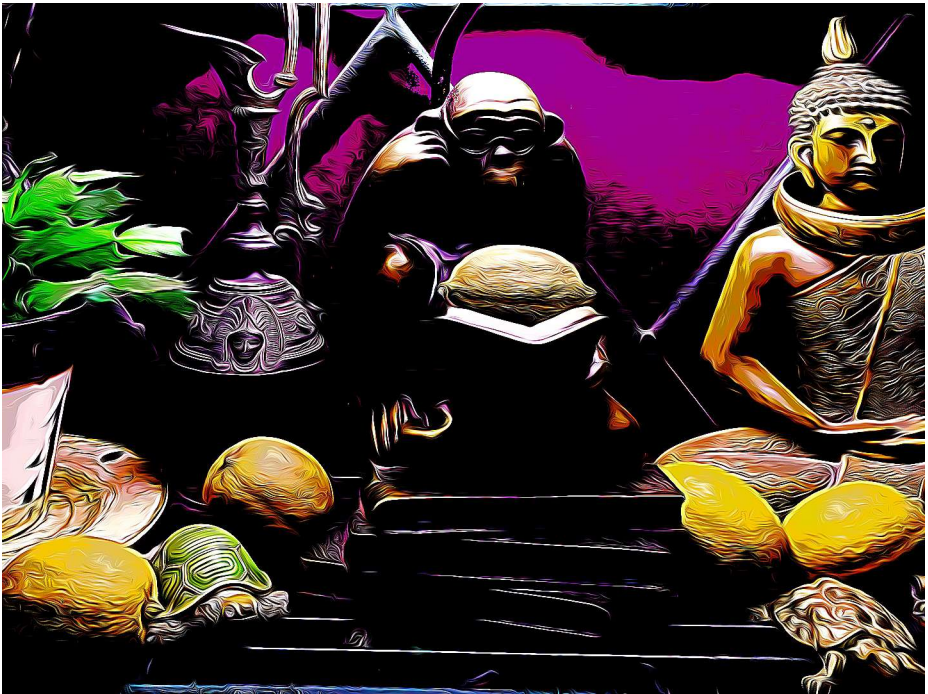
bees tickle over my chin and I ask
each in turn how to say I love you

Climate Change

A sand crab crawls from the lapels of my grandfather's double-breasted suit, across prayerful hands, to the elbow and over silk lining his casket, from the edge, leaping onto seafoam carpet, another, then another, a wave of crustaceans, crawling over the lectern, over the feet of the priest, into barrels of rifles ready for the 21-gun salute, a crab crawls into my throat, I choke on the sea, my words eaten one by one, the little crab growing, it clambers into my lung, tiny stick feet poking and burning like liquid in my chest, my airways full of the sea, I cough and nothing comes up the way he coughed in the ER, the way he coughed while his lungs filled, the way he coughed when he told me the final secret, his loved ones crowd me, spit home remedies my way, ask me if I have forgiven my father yet, if I know how ill anger will make me as I try to swallow, try to cough, the ocean filling my thorax, grandfather told me he knew about the abuse when I was two, told me he was so sorry, he wished he had done something, said something, my heart pierced by an urchin's spiny body, leaking sea water, I pull myself through the crowd, a swimmer against rip tides, the crabs clawing my calves, my lungs burning I gasp for air, I make my way to my mother, my mother who sees my struggle, and—as always—she turns away.

*Self-identifying as a neurodivergent, two-spirit, elder, storyteller, and contrarian deeply rooted in the roar and lore that's become Portlandia of The Left Coast, **Lindsey Morrison Grant** (she/her) attributes success and survival (if not salvation) to superlative supports, mindfulness practice, and daily creative expression in words, sounds, and images,*

Even before COVID-19 restrictions were imposed, I had a dedicated intention to employ repurposed materials in my art-making.



Shrine to Wisdom & Absurdity

High-resolution, digitally manipulated still-life photo.

Having survived drownings, vehicle collisions, cancer surgery, two heart attacks, domestic violence, evangelical cultism, too many mental ward stays to remember and the adolescence of four offspring . . . as well as my own, I'm a firm believer in second-chances.



Homage to Flexibility

90% reclaimed materials in a repurposed shadowbox frame signifying the essence of success: a Plan B, Plan C, and so on. 2022.

When I rescue items to incorporate in a work, I'm offering them a new life and collaborative voice.



No Evil T

High-resolution, digitally manipulated still-life photo.

Although it maybe perceived as somewhat Frankenstein-esque, this act alone speaks volumes of my perspective as an artist and grateful inhabitant of Turtle Island.



Turtle Mojo Shadowbox

95% reclaimed materials, a shrine to honor Turtle, first Native American animal totem and namesake of Earth/"Turtle Island." 2021.

Jennifer Lynn (she/her) is a poet and short story writer from Los Angeles who is based in County Wicklow, Ireland. She has had work published in The Honest Ulsterman, Anti-Heroin Chic, No Parties Magazine, Paradox Lit Magazine, and Crow of Minerva, and has been a featured poet at Pride Poets, Dublin. She has upcoming publications in Púca Magazine and Howl. She can be found on Twitter @TerpsichoreDubh.

Sin Vergüenza

Jennifer Lynn

By the time we were in the ambulance, Grandma was unconscious. She looked funereal before the oxygen mask was placed on her face and the beep beep beep of the EKG kept us assured that she was still with us. I had a little stain on my tennis shoes, an ugly brown smudge. They were pristine otherwise, a brilliant white. The blond paramedic said, Stay with us, *mamacita*.

On the beach she wore a big straw hat from the Vietnamese supermarket on the corner. She tied it under her chin and wore it with a shapeless floral-patterned dress. She never took her shoes off on the sand and never went into the water. When we went home, she scrubbed my skin raw in the shower. *Sucia*, she said, my skin browned by the sun with the little freckles that had appeared on the tip of my nose. The water was tainted from all the people that swam in it and the 187 quintillion gallons that made up the Pacific Ocean were not enough to dilute the filth.

Mom's boyfriends were named Randy, or Ray, or Mike, or Chuck. They drove pickups or El Caminos, drank Budweiser and snorted meth. Grandma told her she should stick to her own kind. She said, *Más vale malo conocido, eh?* Grandma spoke Spanish and we always replied in English, except when Mom called her *la vieja bruja*. In school Mom was put in the corner every time she spoke Spanish, until she stopped speaking entirely. The teachers wanted Grandma to take her to a psychiatrist.

Listen, the doctor said, there isn't much hope here. We can leave her on life support indefinitely. We can keep her going for weeks or months, but it's no life. I'll leave you to think about it. He placed his hand gently on my arm before walking away. A little girl with pigtails ran up and down the corridor trailing a blue helium balloon behind her. It was tied to her wrist very tightly so that her little hand looked swollen and red.

Grandma used to sit on her back porch with a hand full of birdseed and the little sparrows would come and rest right on her hand, eating from her palm. She taught me once how to do it, to sit very still and not to move.

Esperas, she said, debes ser paciente. They came to her easily because they were used to her. It took an hour before one of the little birds sat on my hand and it was a moment of such magic that I moved slightly, and the bird flew away. All that work. All that work for nothing. I tossed the birdseed out onto the lawn and the little birds swooped down to feast.

The house was dark and stuffy when I went in, the air thick with dust and the smell of stale cooking oil. I could see the phone on the floor and its angry tone, eh eh eh eh. I replaced the receiver on the hook and heard the low moaning from the bathroom, is not mine, is not mine, grandma was saying. She so rarely spoke English, so it was strange that in her pain she latched onto her second language. She was on the toilet, half-dressed, with her head in her hands. She often prepared foods we could not eat, like tripe or beef tongue or head cheese. Every night she scrambled an egg for me and served it with Mexican rice and refried beans. We ate mangos and let the juice spill down our chins, dripping onto the table.

Mom answered with a lazy voice and said she was leaving soon, that Charlie was going to give her a ride to the hospital and she was on her way. I sat by Grandma's bed and listened to the beep whoosh. Nurses came and nurses went, changing IV bags and giving sad, commiserating smiles. One said, it's terrible to see the abuelitas like this, no? And of course, it was terrible. The stain on my shoe was causing me great annoyance and I went to the bathroom and tried to clean it off with a paper towel and some soapy water. I only succeeded in causing the whole toe area of the shoe to be smudged with the brown.

Grandma never opened the heavy velvet curtains for fear of people looking in on her. I played with the heavy rope cords as a child, pulling them until light spilled into the room like liquid, Grandma running towards me shouting, Cuidado! Cuidado! The front door was always double-locked and the windows shut and barred, but the back of the house was left open, the air cool from the shade of the avocado and fig trees. The back porch looked out on the herb garden, the fruit patch with its strawberries and watermelons, and the sugarcane we used to hack with a machete and suck the juices from. Grandma had deadly aim with her slingshot and if any local cat tried to use her garden as a litter box, a perfectly timed projectile stone would send the cat back over the fence with a shriek.

I gently leaned Grandma forward and took the toilet paper to her rear end, coaxing the hardened pellets of shit out, the smell repugnant. I lifted her up and with my support, she was able to take little mincing steps towards the bedroom. There was shit on the floor. She was brittle and thin and weighed next to nothing. I said we had to call an ambulance and she spit at me and said, sin vergüenza.

The sheet covering Grandma had been pulled down, exposing her entire chest, which seemed deformed and twisted, bones protruding where

they should not, a tube shoved down her throat and taped to her face, her head tilted back and, in her eyes, the look of a terrified animal. She tried to pull the tubes from her mouth with too weak hands and the doctor quickly said, oh, they don't like the tubes. Then he chuckled and said, don't worry, she's well-medicated. The next time I came into the room, her hands were tied to the rails along the side of her bed.

Mom called me and said, you have to go over to the house, something's wrong. She said Grandma had answered the phone and wasn't making sense, that she dropped the phone and that it had been busy ever since. I said that I was at work and that I couldn't get away. Why can't you go? I asked. She said she was in Sunland and it would take forever to get back into Hollywood. I could hear a cough behind her, another person in the room, a male. I'm at Charlie's, she said, as if I was supposed to know who that was, or care.

Have you thought about what we talked about? The doctor asked.

Grandma made teas and pastes with the ingredients she bought in the Botánica or grew in the garden. She could massage out any pain with her bare hands and take away headaches with an alcohol-soaked half potato to the forehead. She said the hospital was peligroso para las mujeres. She said, te roban el útero. There was no reasoning with her on these things.

The doctor came to find me eventually and asked, Español o Ingles? I answered in my gringa accent, Ingles, and he was visibly relieved. I guessed that he'd learned Spanish for the job but that it was a taxing responsibility to have to communicate in that language. He had little wire framed glasses and curly hair. He told me that she'd had a stroke and she was very weak. She was on a ventilator, but she was conscious. You can speak to her, he said, she can hear you. He led me to a double room with a curtain drawn between Grandma and the other patient. I could see the sensible, unfashionable shoes of the other person's visitors from under the curtain.

Mom did arrive that night, with a younger man in tow, another of her pickups who she'd met in a bar. I reckoned he was at least twenty years younger than her, not far off the age I was at the time. He was a wounded, quiet type who stood awkwardly but patiently by her side and was happy to be dispatched to vending machines or to put money into parking meters. He also had the benefit of being sober, while Mom most certainly was not. Later that night he would drive us home in his pickup truck, the three of us shoved into the front cab. We were mostly silent on the way home and when we got there, Charlie came in with us. He stayed for the next ten years, and I can't say I minded. He was ultimately a good man.

In Grandma's room I found only an empty bed, stripped of all its sheets. I rushed to the nurse's station in a panic to be informed that she'd had another stroke and was in ICU on full life support. There she was with the tube sticking out of her face and the machine going beep whoosh beep

whoosh. With each whoosh her chest inflated like a balloon. She looked like a gruesome children's toy.

I called Mom and told her that the ambulance had come and taken us to the hospital. She said, Oh Good. So, everything's okay. She said it more as a statement than a question, her voice thick and slurry with drink. I told her that everything was not okay, that Grandma was most likely dying. Oh fuck, she said. OK, she said. I'll get there as soon as I can, she said. Grandma said I wasn't like my mother. She said I was a blessing but that my mother was una huevóna. Mom said Grandma was stuck in the past and that she didn't understand America. She said Grandma should go back where she came from and stop driving everyone crazy. Grandma would say to Mom, te crees muy muy. She called Mom una maldita borracha.

The nurses said, pobrecita, as they changed Grandma's IV bags or took bloods. I felt them becoming more judgmental, looking at me as if waiting for me to do something. I'd shrug my shoulders and say, my mom will be here soon. The hours passed and when the doctor came back, I gave my consent. I ended her life. The machine was turned off and the tubes untapped and pulled gently from her mouth. The whoosh of the machine stopped but the beeps continued, coming more and more slowly. The beep and then the beep and eventually the flatline. Sin vergüenza, I heard her whisper in my ear. I had no idea if I'd made the right decision or not. The medical staff seemed happy, but in the coming months my mother would say, they just wanted the bed, or they don't care about old people, or you should have waited for me. She cried crocodile tears in the waiting room of the ICU and chastised the nurses and the nice doctor. She called them murderers and then glared at me.

With Charlie around, our home became an English speaking one. Mom pulled the heavy velvet curtains open, and the light spilled into the room like liquid. The windows were opened up so that the air circulated through the house and she blasted her Bon Jovi or her Metallica on the stereo. But sometimes, I'd come into the living room and I'd see those curtains closing all by themselves, and in the dark, I'd hear the soft moans from the bathroom and I'd feel stricken by terror.

Nikhil Sethi (he/him) is a poet and writer of Punjabi descent living on Ohlone Land in San Francisco, born on Muscogee and Cherokee lands in Atlanta. His work has been published in the lickety-split and Dirt. He writes a weekly newsletter called Splash and is trying to learn how to identify local birds. You can find him on Twitter @niknaps.

Anatomy Lesson

Nikhil Sethi

If you grind up bones, you can make plants grow healthier, greener, more. When you've finished with the bodies, picked them clean, burnt them to ash, you can take the remaining white pieces to nourish something. Once you spend enough time nurturing the body, you start to wonder what it's for, what it can do. I paint these pieces of keratin and brush these chunks of enamel, scrub the epidermis, stretch the fibers so maybe we can start the operation. It's an auction.

This liver has a few miles on it, but it'll save someone in a pinch. These biceps were built to rest tired heads upon, create perfect eye contact. Hands so soft enough to chastise a man for having them. A heart too capricious to be relied on. And eyes perfect for holding a sea of fear. Everything must go!

I've been leaving buckets of blood on the doorsteps of everyone I thought needed tenderness, my femurs rest in the mouths of stray dogs, my ligaments tie together bouquets of flowers. I must give it all away, I must rid myself of it all. And once it's all gone I'll finally be a part of the world, your world, my shattered sternum feeding your blackberry bush.

the future sounded more promising when we were younger

join me for a drink at that bar on the corner,
i've been draining glasses of fear for so long
that they taste like nothing, how water
tastes without thirst, i've started writing
obituaries on the bar napkins for what's to come

but this is no way to start a conversation,
sit down, have a coke float, the ice cream
scooper is filled with ash & the soda machine
ran out of syrup so long ago we learned to love
the bubbles by themselves or that's just what we say
& the record player goes at half speed & we
can pretend that it lengthens the dwindling
moments we have left

Lorin Lee Cary taught Social History at University of Toledo and as a Fulbright Senior Scholar at University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. He wrote historical studies and now creates fictional cause and effect relationships. *The Custer Conspiracy*, a humorous historical novel set in the present, is one result, as is the metafiction novella *California Dreaming*. Short stories and flash fiction pieces have appeared in *Corvus Review*, *Impspired*, *Torrid Literature*, *Cigale Literary Magazine*, *decomp magazinE*, *Lit.cat* and *Short Story*, among others. He is also a prize-winning photographer with credits in journals such as *Typehouse*, *Constellations* and *Wrongdoing*.

One of the gems of California's Central Coast is the Fiscalini Ranch Preserve in Cambria. Community action forestalled a developer's plans for McMansions and today, and any day, you can wander trails along the bluff and enjoy the beauty. This shot came at sunset as a group of folks did just that. For further information see <https://www.fiscaliniranchpreserve.org>



Sunset Serenity

*At sunset we walked
A bluff beside the ocean
Blessings rode on waves*

L. Acadia (all pronouns) is a lit professor at National Taiwan University, a dog pillow at home, and otherwise searching Taipei for ghosts and vegan treats. L. has a PhD from Berkeley and creative writing published or forthcoming in Autostraddle, The Dodge, Lothlorian Poetry Journal, Neologism Poetry Journal, Neon Door, and Subterranean Blue Poetry. Twitter / Instagram: @acadiadialogue.

Panko

L. Acadia

The mason gave me a pitying look,
one blank form, and four lines in granite to

represent her life. “It’s standard to carve
name, dates, places, an Epitaph perhaps . . .”

A photo of her at about six, on
a Japanese imperial soldier’s

lap belies the birthdate on her passport:
Jan twenty-third, ’45. The mason

can’t carve how she stopped drinking and started
speaking fluent English when grandpa died

nor the song she sang that we only hum.
I will ask him to carve the swoop of her

tattooed eyebrows and the fried shrimp that made
her sniff thoughtfully then look far away.

Jefferey Spivey (he/him) is a Des Moines, Iowa-based freelance writer and editor. His short stories have appeared (or will soon appear) in Flying Island, decomp, and Las Positas College's Havik anthology. Additionally, his humor fiction has appeared in Slackjaw, and his nonfiction work has been published in DADDY and Parks and Rec Business magazines.

Moments When You Knew You Weren't True

Jefferey Spivey

I.

Leisha and Edgar start the day's search at 181st Street and work their way down. She takes him to four apartments—a studio with an exposed brick wall but multiple spots of water damage on the ceiling, another studio with a handy Murphy bed but also rat droppings, a prewar one-bedroom so tiny he feels there isn't enough oxygen for both of them to breathe simultaneously, and finally, down by 135th Street, a newly renovated one-bedroom with parquet floors.

The fourth and final viewing is the best of the day, and Edgar wonders if Leisha planned it that way. They are friends, but not the closest kind. She's a saleswoman first.

The place with the parquet floors is in a complex with six buildings. They stand in the middle of the grassy courtyard to recap Edgar's choices. Edgar looks up at the various buildings. The drab, red brick makes him think of housing projects. Across the property, there's a playground and a half basketball court that looks freshly painted. Small groups of Black children roughhouse while their parents look on.

"You've got people who've lived here since the fifties, and you've got the newbies. You'll probably still see a crackhead or two, but the rents are getting high and most of these places aren't rent-controlled. So, you know how that goes," Leisha says, wiping sweat from her forehead. It's early summer, and the heat is stifling. Edgar can see sweat rings under the arms of her cap-sleeved sheath dress.

"Is it safe?" he asks.

Leisha chuckles, but in a condescending way.

"You won't get robbed," she says. "Besides, if you don't want to pay more than fifteen hundred this is as good as it gets. Trust me."

Edgar nods, a reluctant acceptance. When he moved to New York, he imagined himself living downtown, somewhere below 96th Street, within walking distance of gluten-free bakeries, trendy Thai restaurants, and gay bars. A life of glitter and convenience. But without roommates, his life would not be established; it'd be up and coming. He'd never thought of himself as the person who arrived ahead of the glamour. Or that he'd make a home in a neighborhood in which he wasn't even comfortable spending two hours at a bar.

Leisha notices his hesitation.

"We can go downtown a bit," she adds, "but the minute we reach the Upper West Side, be prepared for the sticker shock."

He ponders it.

"Maybe it's worth a look?"

II.

The Pan-African Kinship Collective meets weekly at a community center in East Harlem. It's a no-frills affair, plastic folding chairs for seating, mini bottles of Aquafina for refreshments, dim, fluorescent lighting and ceiling tiles, the sort you'd find in a corporate office.

Edgar sits in the back taking copious notes as a dreadlocked man named Cassius facilitates a discussion about anti-capitalism, mostly pertaining to a community garden that the collective plans to start in "the near future." Nothing particularly useful results from this meeting, no defined timelines, no action plan, no duties assigned to members of the group. But everyone seems satisfied with the outcome.

When the meeting adjourns, Edgar searches for Olivia and finds her talking to a beefy man with a five o'clock shadow.

"You're down with the movement?" Olivia asks.

"It's research for the podcast," he says. "I'm a neutral party."

"Ain't no such thing as neutral when you're Black," she says, scowling at Edgar.

Edgar usually doesn't spend time with Olivia without Leisha present. To him, she is Leisha's girlfriend; to her, he is Leisha's friend. But they have no credible connection to one another.

"What's the podcast?" the beefy man asks.

Edgar tells him about *Just So You Know*, a modestly successful show that offers thoughtful, accessible deep dives into trending issues. Their forthcoming episode will dispel myths about the Movement for Black Lives, mainly in response to a conservative senator who spread sensational falsehoods on the Sunday news shows. The beefy man asks more questions, and Edgar answers them. Olivia continues to stand there watching them, not unlike an approving chaperone.

Edgar learns that the man's name is Bryson. He's an insurance salesman by day and aspiring poet by night. He says his poems are still too amateur to be shared, but he's taking a workshop to get better. Edgar finds this charming, not just that he's creative, but that he's humble enough to know he needs help to improve. Bryson is a born-and-bred New Yorker who's spent his entire life in Brooklyn. This is only his second meet-up, and he's on the fence about whether he'll come back (he says this once Olivia has walked away). He also invites Edgar to a nearby wing spot that's one of the city's best-kept secrets.

"Maybe another time," Edgar says.

Bryson tries his best not to look defeated.

"Yeah," he says. "Don't be a stranger."

III.

Edgar watches as Ethan slides out of bed and into his boxers. The sight of his nearly naked, brawny body makes Edgar hard.

When they were younger, Ethan had pasty skin, scrawny arms, stick legs, a mischievous spirit and corny sense of humor. But now he's filled out in all the best ways, somehow thick and lean, like the rugby players Edgar jerks off to sometimes. Present-day Ethan has tanned skin, sharper, more angled features, and an air of confidence.

He moves through spaces with the assuredness of a hot person, who knows that men and women are sneaking second glances at him. This makes Edgar feel desirable by proxy. It also makes him seethe with jealousy.

He finds Ethan perched on one of the leather barstools in the kitchen, eyes glued to his laptop. There's a mug of coffee waiting for him on the kitchen counter. He doesn't need it or even particularly like it, but he takes a swig to ingratiate himself with Ethan.

"I have to head out soon," Edgar says, hoping that he'll be missed.

"Cool," Ethan says, not even looking up to acknowledge him.

This reaction shouldn't surprise Edgar. They are hardly domestic, having carnal, unromantic sex with each other and then pretending neither of them wants more. Yet in the two months that Edgar has been crashing in Ethan's apartment, Ethan has taken to spooning him at night, an act that Edgar finds comforting and that he imagines Ethan enjoys, too. Edgar takes it as proof that he hasn't overstayed his welcome, that if it takes him another month or six to find the perfect apartment, it'll be okay. Ethan's nonchalance, however, is an act of casual cruelty that suggests otherwise. Edgar can't square this Ethan with the man who presses his penis into his backside as they sleep.

"But you're coming to drinks tonight, right?" he asks Edgar.

"Oh, your pre-birthday thing," Edgar says. "Isn't that just for your friends?"

He pauses a moment to avoid seeming too eager.

“I thought we were going out for dinner next week, just the two of us.”

“We’re not friends? I’ve known you longer than everyone else who will be there,” Ethan says.

Edgar stays silent for a moment, unsure of how to respond.

“Is this what you do with all your other friends?” he asks, feeling a bit hurt.

Ethan looks up for the first time, raising his eyebrows at Edgar.

They’ve never really argued, though there have been times like this, inklings of tension that could grow into something more if they allowed it.

IV.

Ethan and his friends gather in a cozy bar in the West Village. There’s a group of eight, including Edgar. Edgar is the last to arrive and finds that Ethan hasn’t saved him a seat. He ends up sandwiched between two people he doesn’t know, barely able to hear anything that Ethan says.

At one point in the conversation, Dennis, the bearded and obnoxious Brooklyn hipster to Edgar’s left, makes a comment about an actor he recently saw in a musical.

“He was so hot for a Black guy,” Dennis says. He rolls his eyes in the back of his head and places his hands on his chest dramatically, to indicate swooning. The other guys at the table all nod in agreement, including Ethan.

Edgar wonders if this is what Ethan thinks of him, that his attractiveness must be quantified and ranked in accordance with other types.

Ethan looks over at Edgar, and Edgar averts his eyes.

V.

“The Black Star Line was ahead of its time. It only failed ’cause the feds didn’t want us negroes getting too uppity, realizing we had autonomy and shit,” Olivia says.

Edgar’s in a West Harlem sports bar with Leisha and Olivia. Olivia is recapping that evening’s meeting of the Pan-African Kinship Collective, apparently mistaking a history lesson for a roadmap.

“We could really pull that off today. Hop on that boat, head to Liberia. We could make a new Liberia,” she continues.

“So your idea of Black freedom is piling into a boat and making a reverse Middle Passage?” Leisha deadpans. “What do you think, Edgar? Should we commission ocean liners for our return to the Motherland?”

“Wasn’t Marcus Garvey convicted of fraud?” Edgar asks.

Olivia huffs and turns to Leisha. “Of course he’d say that. He’s fucking the oppressor.”

Leisha gives her a warning look. They don't always seem like a match, Leisha with her business dresses and full-time employment and Olivia with her graphic tees and radical beliefs. But then Edgar can see it in these moments, how they balance each other, how Leisha can simply narrow her eyes and rein Olivia in.

Edgar slinks off to the bar for a refill, hoping that gives Olivia enough time to cool off.

Standing by himself, he starts to feel uncomfortable.

There are parts of the experience that he likes, the camaraderie and warmth amongst different clusters of friends; the couples on the small dancefloor, grinding to early nineties Mary J. Blige like no one's watching; the feeling that all the patrons have a special space, with a language and customs and cultural touchpoints that outsiders wouldn't understand.

But there are times when he feels like the interloper the space is meant to exclude.

His jeans are a touch too skinny, his English too proper, his walk too tentative, his attitude too docile. Being in a room full of Black folks always leads him to question himself. There's a group of jersey-clad men beside him, exuding a raucous, hypermasculine energy that makes him nervous.

When he gets the bartender's attention, he tries to make small talk by rattling off trivia from an old *Just So You Know* episode about the spirits industry—the origins of National Vodka Day and that one time in the 1970s when vodka first surpassed bourbon as America's most popular liquor.

The bartender waits patiently for him to finish and then, instead of engaging, asks if Edgar wants the house vodka or something from the top shelf.

The jersey-clad men break out in laughter. Edgar has missed the joke, but he has a sneaking suspicion that it's him. He can't get away fast enough, jamming his card into the bartender's hand and nearly sprinting back to his table.

Olivia is still going, and Edgar doesn't want to rile her up any further. He texts Leisha instead.

I think your girlfriend is a Hotep, he writes.

She's just exploring her identity. It's fine. Maybe you could learn something?

Maybe I could learn something about my own Blackness?

Leisha doesn't respond.

He glances up and she gives him that same look she shot Olivia earlier, the warning.

VI.

Edgar knows that his arrangement with Ethan is temporary, but this hasn't stopped him from developing a routine. He can navigate small talk with

the doorman, Darron, on autopilot. He's no longer disturbed by the jarring, off-key sound of Ethan's clanky buzzer. Even the swoosh of the brass-framed revolving doors feels familiar. All of it is part of his rote memory. He often finds his mind wandering until he's in the apartment, sometimes not even recalling the journey upstairs.

But this day is unlike the others.

He has stepped out to buy milk, enduring the never-ending line at Duane Reade because Ethan couldn't bother to get dressed. Edgar had protested, but then Ethan had grabbed his crotch suggestively, offering Edgar a consolation prize for his inconvenience.

When he steps into the revolving door, it grinds to a halt.

He believes the culprit is a harried man who has just rushed in from the lobby side.

Edgar waits a beat, assuming the situation will correct itself, and then pushes forward. The door begins to glide, he makes his way into the building, and everything is as it should be. Autopilot back on.

He waves at Darron, who waves back, friendly as always. But Darron frowns suddenly, attuned to something or someone else behind him. Edgar turns as the man from the revolving door barrels toward him.

"That was my foot!" he yells.

He's shorter than Edgar, so he looks up at him as he yells this. He's a squat man with awful, patchy facial hair, and he displays the kind of indignation that only a white man can, the kind of absurd flare-up that usually happens in a yogurt shop or a Target and ends up going viral on Facebook. He's watched several of those videos as background for *Just So You Know*, but he has never witnessed this explosive brand of privilege up close. Growing up, his father had spoken about white people as if they were wild animals. Never raise your voice, never let them see you sweat, never be disrespectful; never make any loud noises or unexpected movements, never wave raw meat in front of their faces, never get too close during mating season. But he'd always found his father to be wounded and overly suspicious.

He stays cool. The squat man is not particularly imposing, but he's so beside himself that the moment still feels dangerous.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I thought it was just something with the door."

"Well, it wasn't the goddamned door," the man says. "You could've broken a bone or something, and I doubt you have the money to pay my medical bills."

He infuses the you with a bitter disgust, incredulous, as though Edgar is a filthy panhandler. Edgar lets the comment roll off his back, determined to defuse the situation.

"Listen, man, I said I was sorry. It was truly an accident," Edgar says, hoping he sounds sincerely apologetic.

"Is your foot okay?" he asks the man.

By now, he gets that the man just has a flair for hyperbole. Still, he asks after him genuinely, so as not to appear apathetic or, worse, threatening.

“You think that’s funny?” the man asks. “How about if I call the police and tell them some Black guy just assaulted me in my building?”

He then looks to Darron, as if Edgar is no longer standing there, and says, “This is why we need tighter restrictions on visitors. I’ve been telling you this.”

Edgar has always thought of his Blackness as an approachable kind, a skinny jeaned-Blackness, a lighter-skinned Blackness, an impressively well-spoken Blackness, a welcome in majority-white spaces Blackness. Not a clutch your purse tighter Blackness, or an escalated traffic stop Blackness, or a false accusation of harm Blackness. Not visibly nerdy or weak but also not menacing. So vanilla he’s had to prove to classmates and cousins alike that he is not just a husk for a Caucasian person.

Yet how far he’d come.

Edgar stares down at the man, not meaning to loom or seem sinister, but he can feel the adrenaline releasing, pulling him into the moment at full attention. He can hear his father’s voice in his head—don’t let these white folks get the best of you. He ignores it.

“How do you know I don’t live here?” Edgar asks.

The squat man smirks and eyes Edgar’s plastic bag with the milk.

“Delivery boys can’t afford this.”

Edgar isn’t violent, but this leads him to ball up his fists anyway, unsure of what he’ll do with them. He’s never so much as taken a swing at anyone. Maybe this automatic reaction is ancestral.

Before Edgar can do anything that he regrets, he feels a hand on his shoulder. He turns to see Darron. Darron is Black, too, fifty-something with snowy, close-cropped hair and a dog-tired facial expression that suggests he’s been in Edgar’s shoes many times before.

“Let me talk to Mr. Cook,” he says to Edgar firmly. “Why don’t you take a walk, maybe come back in a few after you’ve cooled off?”

Darron is rescuing him, forcing him to heed his father’s advice though he’s never heard it, because these admonitions have been passed down to every Black man like family heirlooms. But Darron has no actual loyalty to him. Edgar gets it. Still, this doesn’t stop him from feeling guilty, for being the right person at the wrong time.

Edgar steps back out into the warm afternoon. He feels his heart jumping around in his chest, the vibration reverberating up through his neck and face and ears, his pulse loud like a drum. His palms are slick with sweat. His legs are shaky but they carry him around the block. The more he walks, the more he turns over the incident in his mind. His eyes well up with angry tears. He’s not sure he can go back, embarrassed that he gave in to being

provoked, afraid that he'll never again feel welcome in the place that is currently his home.

Ethan texts, snatching him out of his spiral.

Did you get lost? ;)

He finds himself back at Ethan's building and reluctantly steps into the revolving door.

It glides around smoothly this time, like it always does.

VII.

"He was probably just having a bad day," Ethan says to Edgar once he reaches the apartment. Edgar has to concentrate to keep his hands from shaking. His voice is a bit wobbly.

"If it had been you in the revolving door, nothing would've happened."

Ethan scoffs.

"Do you really think that? I mean, this is New York."

Ethan once proclaimed that he was colorblind, in the racial sense, not the vision deficiency sense, believing himself to be some kind of woke cosmopolitan.

Though there was a recent evening when he screened applications for his bank's internship program and stumbled over the name Deiondre. He laughed hysterically, not at his inability to say it, but at the name itself.

"I'm not, like, a racism denier. I'm just saying we can't automatically go there because you had a disagreement with someone," Ethan says. "Think about it—there's the adrenaline, the frustration. In situations like that, we all say things we don't mean."

Edgar takes a deep breath.

"It was the insinuation," he says.

"So you're mad about something that the guy didn't even say?"

It's then that Edgar knows what he has to do.

VIII.

Edgar throws a housewarming party after his second month in the renovated one-bedroom with parquet floors.

The party is premature. His walls are bare. His furniture is sparse, nothing more than a secondhand futon, some beanbag chairs, and a wrought iron floor lamp that his mother ordered from Amazon. His guest list is comprised of attendees most likely to show up with essential housewares instead of booze. He has also fired up a playlist of high-energy indie pop to overpower the constant loop of trap blaring next door. His housewarming is not a festivity to mark a milestone—it's a ruse to get towels, dishware, wine glasses, revenge.

“Give it a couple years. They’re trying to rebrand the neighborhood SoHa. You’re lucky to have gotten in here when you did,” Leisha says, still selling him the apartment.

Roughly twenty people have crowded into his living room. Across from them, Olivia chats with Bryson, whom Edgar certainly didn’t invite and hasn’t seen since the Pan-African Kinship Collective meeting.

“I hear that Bryson likes you,” Leisha says. “You can’t tell Liv I told you, but she’s trying to set you up.”

Edgar sighs.

“I know, it’s cheesy. She assumed that you were a free agent since you finally moved out of Ethan’s place. He’s good-looking, you have to admit that.”

It’s not so apparent. Bryson is doughy with a boyish face. He’s cute, serviceable, but good-looking is going a bit far.

“I invited Ethan,” Edgar spits out. “So, it might get weird if he shows up. ’Cause obviously, I’d be the only person he knows here and I can’t ignore him. I’m not saying I won’t talk to Bryson, or whatever, but competing priorities.”

Leisha looks disappointed. It’s clear Olivia hasn’t acted on her own.

“If you’re not into him, just say the word.”

“I’m not saying that. I’m just stating the obvious.”

There’s no guarantee that Ethan will show.

In a text exchange earlier that week, Ethan had referred to the trip uptown as a “trek,” suggesting that taking the train from Chelsea to Harlem was akin to a cross-country expedition. When Edgar told him he was being dramatic, Ethan texted, There’s also the fact that I’d be a walking target up there at night.

It’d be nice to see you, Edgar texted.

Ethan didn’t respond, which didn’t upset Edgar. It just made him feel pathetic.

Later, as Edgar’s guests start to filter out, Leisha and Olivia attempt to leave, hinting that Edgar and Bryson should spend some time alone. But Edgar insists he’s had too much wine to be of any use. Unsurprisingly, this doesn’t go over well with the girls, but Bryson is buoyant. He extends his hand for Edgar’s phone, and Edgar obliges. This is the least he can do. Bryson enters his number.

“Seriously, this time, don’t be a stranger,” he says.

“I won’t,” Edgar says, because this is what Bryson, Leisha, and Olivia want to hear.

They leave, Ethan doesn’t show, and Edgar finds himself on a hookup app looking for an Ethan surrogate. His top pick, George, has Ethan’s build, Ethan’s brown hair, and Ethan’s unfelled confidence. But they are sexually incompatible.

Despite this, George asks to stay the night because he doesn't feel safe going out in the neighborhood so late. Edgar lets him stay, figuring something is better than nothing.

IX.

On their first date, Bryson takes Edgar to the infamous wing spot. Then they have dinner at the Red Rooster. Then a drink date, and another dinner, and before Edgar knows it, it's almost winter and hardly a night goes by where Bryson doesn't sleep over.

They typically spend time uptown, but Edgar isn't fully satisfied living an uptown existence. He's grown more comfortable in his surroundings and even befriended Esther, an elderly woman who lives at the end of the hall. But he misses the downtown life he lived before.

He drags Bryson to Chelsea, to a sports-themed bar where shirtless bartenders wear football tights and smear eye black above their cheeks. The soundtrack is high-energy, danceable pop, and the vast majority of the patrons are white. Bryson is out of his element.

"This is what we're doing tonight?" he asks Edgar.

"Is it really so bad?"

Bryson turns to take in the space, for dramatic effect.

"Yeah, it is," he says once he's facing Edgar again. "This space isn't for us. At best, this is a room where we're tokenized or fetishized, but not humanized."

"I see you haven't stopped going to the meetings."

Bryson laughs.

"Where's the lie?" he says.

Edgar once again finds himself breaking tension by ordering a drink. As he waits, he spots Ethan at the other end of the bar, because even though it's New York fucking City, the gay scene is claustrophobic and of course Ethan is there. For a moment, he just stares, unsure of what to do, how to react, how to explain Bryson. He feels nervous, overly concerned about presenting a certain image to Ethan, about showing him how great his life is without him, even if he knows that's utter bullshit.

Ethan turns to sit his empty glass on the bar and sees Edgar. He smiles and waves, and it seems genuine, like the surprise of seeing him is pleasant, as opposed to simply unexpected. Edgar waves back and smiles, too, a bit too aggressively.

But then neither of them moves. Neither of them makes the effort to walk toward the other and catch up. Edgar wonders if it's because that conversation is too weighty for this environment. Or if Ethan just cares so little for him now that a wave and a smile are enough. Whatever the reason, Edgar finds himself obsessing, smarting that Ethan is exerting this control over him so easily. Once he has his new drink, and while Ethan is still

glancing in his direction, Edgar pulls Bryson into him and shoves his tongue in his mouth. There is nothing remotely sensual or appealing about this stilted kiss. But it's communicative. It says to Ethan that Edgar has someone. It says to Ethan that he's not in control of the narrative.

X.

One night soon after, Edgar and Bryson lie in Edgar's bed. The room is bathed in blue light from the TV. Edgar has chosen to watch *Manhattan*, because it offers an incarnation of the city, black and white, sophisticated, flawed, cultured, that he wants to live in, a version that probably doesn't exist anymore. Bryson dozes on and off. When Edgar picked the film, Bryson told him that a Black director who was also a pedophile would not be revered by anyone. Edgar didn't respond to this.

"This Manhattan never existed for Black folks," Bryson says when he wakes again.

"Do you think it never existed? Or that it just wasn't captured for us to see?"

"We had a different world, more soulful, more complicated. Black people couldn't be in those spaces, the literal ones and the figurative, movie ones."

"Couldn't one of us imagine ourselves in those spaces? And then force our way in? Didn't we have a right to be there?"

"Why would you want to? If you have this desire to gain their approval and beg for entry into their stories, something about you isn't true."

Edgar ponders this for a moment. What does that even mean, to be true? He thinks of the squat man from Ethan's lobby, and Darron, and the different truths the three of them believed about him.

"Have you ever had those moments, when you knew you weren't true?" Edgar asks.

"What do you mean?"

"Moments when the world reminded you that it saw you differently than you saw yourself?"

"Hasn't every Black man?"

"This thing happened to me a few months ago," Edgar says. "I was walking into my friend's building, where I was living at the time, and this man, this white man, came after me in the lobby, screaming that I'd hit his foot with the revolving door. I don't care about people yelling at me, whatever, that's New York. But this bothered me, you know. It was the way he looked at me, like I was nothing, like I didn't deserve to belong anywhere so nice, like I'd forgotten my place."

This is the first time Edgar has talked about the lobby incident to anyone. He hasn't chosen Bryson for any particular reason. He's just ready and Bryson is there, and it helps that he's Black, so he doesn't have to explain

why he was upset, and it also helps that he doesn't know Edgar that well, because he won't know that his quiet indignation is part of a lifelong pattern, a side effect of an inferiority complex.

Edgar tells him more. He quotes the squat man, and Bryson lets out an audible gasp. Edgar can tell Bryson finds his story far more compelling than Manhattan.

"And what did you do about it?" Bryson asks.

Edgar looks at him and shrugs.

"Nothing."

XI.

Bryson breaks up with Edgar the week before Christmas. He tells Edgar that he isn't free enough for them to be together, that he's too occupied with seeking out the white gaze, that they have different understandings about how to be in the world. Bryson's reasons all sound like talking points from any conversation he's ever had with Olivia. And he's spent so much energy combatting her critiques that he has nothing left to fight Bryson's.

Bryson tells Edgar that he'd have to change all of these things about himself if they were to work out.

Edgar doesn't want them to.

The same night of the breakup, Edgar and Ethan meet for a drink at a dive bar near Ethan's building. Edgar has forgiven him for skipping his housewarming party. Or not so much forgiven him as decided not to bring it up. He wants to be invited back into Ethan's bed and doesn't want to jeopardize his chances.

Ethan's black T-shirt seems to cling to every muscle in his upper body and his forearms look more vascular than usual. Edgar wonders if this is a genuine observation or if he's just in heat.

This is how he'd felt when they'd first reunited, after Edgar's mother had run into Ethan's mother at Publix and they'd discovered that both their boys were living in Manhattan. They'd gone for drinks then, too. Ethan had let it slip out that he hadn't met any decent guys in the city yet, and Edgar's mouth had dropped open.

"I'm surprised you never figured it out," he'd said to Edgar. "We were so close in high school, and I was never really with any girls, at least not for long."

"I wasn't either," Edgar had said. "Not really, anyway."

"So we're the same then?"

Ethan had invited Edgar back to his place, where they'd kissed each other sloppily and fumbled through clumsy sex, Edgar's first time with a man, though he didn't say so. He'd always given Ethan the upper hand.

"Do you like it up there?" Ethan asks, about Harlem, as if it's Alaska.

"I have a lot of space now."

“But do you like it?”

Edgar nods, not all that convincingly.

“You could’ve stayed longer if you wanted,” Ethan says.

Edgar doesn’t know what to do this. He watches Ethan’s phone light up. He can see several notifications with the Jack’d logo though he can’t see their contents. A reminder of all the men who want Ethan.

“We’re not the same, you know,” Edgar says, as though Ethan is privy to his private nostalgia.

“What?”

Edgar smiles at him, the kind of devastating smile you give when you want to avoid being a sore loser.

“Nothing,” he says. “I’m just really in my head.”

Bill Wolak has just published his eighteenth book of poetry entitled *All the Wind's Unfinished Kisses* with Ekstasis Editions. His collages and photographs have appeared as cover art for such magazines as *Phoebe*, *Harbinger Asylum*, *Baldhip Magazine*, and *Barfly Poetry Magazine*.



With Eyes That Thrive Only on Sparks

(Cover image original)

#BlackLivesMatter

