



# Typehouse

Volume 10, No 1, Issue 27



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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 We are always looking for well-crafted, previously unpublished writing and artwork that seeks to capture an awareness of the human condition.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](http://www.typehousemagazine.com).*

Cover Artwork: ***Ordinary Objects IV*** by Moriah Hampton

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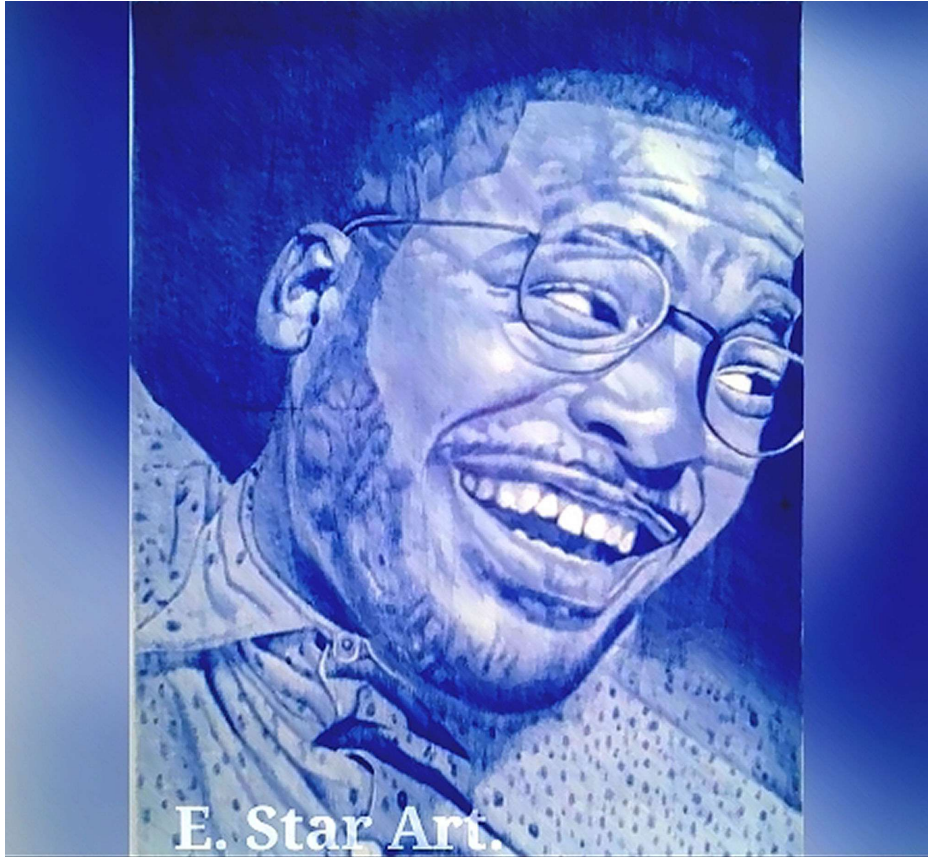
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**Emmanuel Kolawole** is a hyper-realistic pen artist who loves to explore both the monochromatic and coloured mediums of pen art pieces. His default shading technique is crosshatch. Emmanuel is passionate about developing his pen art skills in higher proportions as much as he can as he attempts to always make his next art piece his best. His Instagram is [@emmanuel\\_star\\_art](#).

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### **Guffaw**

*“Guffaw” serves as a gentle reminder that laughter is a precious gift, capable of healing wounds, bridging divides, and igniting the purest of human connections. It encourages us to embrace the beauty of spontaneity, to let go of inhibitions, and to revel in the joy that exists within our hearts.*



### **Sweet Music**

*The journey through "Sweet Music" is an invitation to connect with the artist's interpretation of melodies that are felt rather than heard, inviting us to embrace the ineffable power of music as it resonates within the depths of our being.*



### **Natural Beauty**

*“Natural Beauty” is a visual testament to the sheer power of simplicity, urging us to pause, observe, and reconnect with the captivating allure of our surroundings. It reminds us that within the realm of monochrome, a world of unspoken narratives unfolds—a realm where the interplay of light and shadow paints the most profound stories.*



*Michael Mark (he/him) is the author of Visiting Her in Queens is More Enlightening than a Month in a Monastery in Tibet which won the Rattle Chapbook prize and was published in 2022. His poems have recently appeared in Copper Nickel, Grist, Pleiades, Ploughshares, Poetry Northwest, The Southern Review, The Sun. [michaelymark.com](http://michaelymark.com)*

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# Putting On Her Face

## Michael Mark

*She forgot how to put her makeup on - my father  
growls - along with how  
to use keys, the frying pan, answer the phone.*

I wet a towel, scrub the red  
and purple lipstick streaking her chin,  
cheeks, ears.

On the sink's ledge, I line her Midnight Black  
mascara, stub of eyebrow pencil, cracked  
compact with pinkish blush.

*I'm putting on my face, she'd say  
back when I'd watch her squeeze the flesh  
foundation into her palm, dip*

two fingertips, spackle the goop  
over her forehead, spread it down the slope  
of her beak nose that reddens under my pressure.

*How you doing in there, Ma?*

Something else she won't remember: when  
she caught me using this same compact, swiped  
her finger under my right eye,

pressed hard, presented  
the rosy smear of evidence - *What's this?*

I shrugged.

*What - you got pimples?*

She thumbbed some pink powder from the pot, rubbed my cheeks like the zits were there. Then she turned us to the mirror.

*See? No one will know.*

*Which lipstick, Ma? English Rose? Cherry? Musky Dusk – that sounds sexy.* My father reaches, hands me the English Rose.

*How'd you learn to do this?* he asks.

I shrug

and stand her up, and turn us to the mirror. *Who's that?* I say. *Who's that beautiful girl?*



# My Father Asks If He Can Talk To Me As If

I were my mother.  
He's tried pictures like the grief  
counselor told him –

*the wall ones,  
dresser, my wallet - anyplace I see her.*

I want to say that's the sweetest  
saddest thing ever but  
I know he'd growl.  
It's like some song from his era, big band:

*It's been a year, four empty seasons –  
no sun, no snow, no leaves of red and gold –  
maybe, can I talk to you like I talked to her?*

That's not what he said, just what I heard.

Maybe he'll croon to me, to her, like he did  
with the record player, Sinatra filling  
the apartment while she cooked, cleaned.

*The Summer Wind came  
blowing in from across the sea...*

Or shout like in the hospital, her last days,  
over the pounding machines breathing  
for her. How there's a mess waiting – clothes,  
dishes, dust.

*I Need You! Get Up Already!*

I want to ask if he expects me to say what she would.  
If I get it wrong, will he get angry, scream  
like before the diagnosis,

*You left the door open all night! You said  
that a hundred times! You lost your damn purse  
again! I'm locking you in the house! I'm putting  
you in a Home! Who puts flour in tuna? What's  
wrong with you - you mental? You senile?*

He hangs up.  
Maybe I made him wait too long.  
I can't call him back yet.  
I have to get his words out of my head  
that she heard.

***Tophar Danial** (he/him) is an Arab-American writer and editor based in New Orleans. This story was inspired by his experience crowdfunding the cost of treatment for Hodgkin's lymphoma.*

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# The Museum of Modern Maladies

Tophar Danial

When the light clicked on in his Cube, it was not the blinding glare of the thin-beamed spotlight that nearly jolted Ramy out of his seat. It was, instead, the part he never seemed to get used to: the sudden appearance of his visitors, the materialization of their pale, gawking faces on the other side of the blue-black glass.

There were four this time, the most visitors to ever approach Ramy's Cube at once. Two of the faces—long and drawn, their topography pocked and cavernous—watched him with narrowed, searching eyes. The other two faces—smaller and younger—examined Ramy with a distillation of revulsion and fascination.

*A family. There's a family outside my Cube. This is their idea of a Saturday. Like a trip to the zoo.*

"Isn't he supposed to say something?" said one of the children, a girl. The Cube swallowed her voice, flattened it. To Ramy, she sounded like a radio playing underwater.

"This is boring," said the other child, a boy. "Let's go back to that burned lady—"

Ramy opened and closed his mouth several times, hoping the first lines of his script would tumble out by habit. What had the Brigade suggested during their last meeting? Something about his delivery, wasn't it?

Oh, right.

*Not desperate enough.*

Ramy constricted his throat, willing himself to sound small and broken, the way he'd practiced.

"My name is Ramy Abu Safar. Nine weeks have passed since the day I decided to stop living a lie. That was also the day I was thrown out by my f—"

Darkness. The faces disappeared as the light switched off again. Even squinting, Ramy could barely see the family stepping off the Observation Pad that controlled the spotlight in his Cube.

"Why do they even let people like *that* in here . . ." the father grumbled as he crowded his family onto the moving walkway that would

carry them to the next Cube. Behind him, the boy muttered dejectedly, “. . . didn’t have a single wound . . .”

The word “family” withered on Ramy’s lips and fell like a plucked petal. It wasn’t quite disappointment he felt; for that to be the case, he would have needed expectations to begin with, and seeing anyone approach his Cube was more than he’d bargained or hoped for.

What bothered him, really, was that something was still not working. He’d been sure that adopting a pitiful tone and leading with his family’s rejection would be the key to hooking the Heroes’ sympathies. What was he supposed to try now that that had failed?

Ramy took a deep breath, and another, but he could not seem to get enough oxygen. It was always hard to breathe inside his Cube, but today, the walls seemed closer than usual, the glass blacker, the air thinner, as though the eight-by-eight box had sunk miles underground and become his tomb.

His phone vibrated in his pocket. A text from Perla. “Hey, curly girly. Meet @ break room?”

Ramy hadn’t planned on meeting up with the Brigade today, but what the hell. He had two hours before his night shift cleaning the Luxton building downtown, and spending those hours alone in his dark Cube would do nothing to remind him that he did, in fact, exist.

With a sigh, Ramy tapped the small control panel in his Cube. The back wall rumbled and slid aside, revealing a narrow Askers access corridor that ran parallel to the visitors’ walkway. He stepped out, and the door closed behind him.

As he made his way to the front of the building, passing behind hundreds of other Cubes as he went, Ramy couldn’t help but wonder whether the people inside those Cubes felt as hopeless as he did, or as exhausted, or as invisible.

#

Once he’d checked out with the Registrar, Ramy turned around to make his way through the GiveNasium once again. The break room, as the Brigade called the unused supply room where they met, was at the far end of the building and could easily take a half hour to reach.

Not that Ramy minded the journey. This time, he would not be taking the Askers corridor. He would join everyone else on the main path.

As much as he resented the place, the GiveNasium always filled Ramy with a sense of wonder. It reminded him of a museum he’d visited with his parents when he was ten years old, which, at the time, had been the largest building he’d ever been inside. What he remembered most about that trip was how small he’d felt.

The GiveNasium made him feel even smaller. The building resembled a museum, at least physically: its cavernous ceilings were barely discernible in the sparse light cast by illuminated strips running along the central aisle.

The main path was flanked by the moving walkways, which carried visitors either deeper into the GiveNasium or out of it, depending on which lane they chose. They could step off the walkway at any time and onto the Observation Pad of an exhibit they wanted to see more closely.

No, not exhibits. Ramy grimaced as he stepped onto the rightmost moving walkway. That was how the GiveNasium was unlike a museum. The halls weren't lined with stolen artifacts or pottery or ancient tools. They were lined with people, living people, displayed in Cubes just like his own.

Today, the GiveNasium was packed with visitors—"Heroes," as they were called, compared to the "Askers" inside the Cubes. Ramy knew well the humiliation of being an Asker—of having people alternately ignore you and gawk at you like an animal picking ticks off its skin. But whenever the opportunity arose to see the GiveNasium from the other side of the glass, Ramy couldn't help but pay attention. Somewhere, at some point, he was bound to pick up a clue.

A few feet ahead of him, a girl who could be no older than twelve stepped onto the platform in front of Cube 8. The spotlight switched on to reveal an Asker around the same age, fast asleep in a hospital bed. Her skin was so pale and sallow that her veins stood out like a complex, branching highway of tattoos. Tubes snaked out of her nose and mouth and connected to beeping machines that cluttered the Cube, while a woman sat beside the bed, holding the Asker's hand.

"This is my daughter, Stephanie," the woman croaked. Ramy made a mental note to try and reproduce the shattered texture of her voice. "She has acute myeloid leukemia and—"

The woman's glazed eyes, which at first had stared unfocused through the glass, settled on the young Hero on the Observation Pad. "Holly? Sweetie, is that you?"

"Hi, Miss Harrell," said Holly. "I really hope Stephanie gets better soon. We really miss her in class. And I miss our sleepovers."

One by one, Holly deposited five gold Tokens into Cube 8's donation slot; each was received with a cartoonish *cha-ching!* sound effect.

Miss Harrell smiled and opened her mouth to speak, but whatever she said, Ramy could not hear. The walkway had carried him too far away.

Cube 12 contained a woman who'd lost half her arm saving her neighbor from an attacking dog. In Cube 26 was a couple fundraising to bury their daughter, who'd been shot on a playground. 38—a mechanic whose leg had been crushed by a faulty machine. 54—a single father trying to fulfill his son's end-of-life wishes. 60—a family whose home had burned in a wildfire.

On his second visit, Ramy had asked a Registrar how Cube assignments were determined. The Registrar had looked up from her tablet and assured him that, while the algorithm was confidential, Cube ordering was

based on “each Asker’s likelihood of generating Hero engagement and donations.”

Since then, when he saw Askers in prime placements, Ramy couldn’t help but wonder what factors made them more attractive of sympathy, more worthy, more deserving. Terminally ill children, the maimed, the broken—Ramy had no trouble understanding what made them shoo-ins for the early Cube placements. Their suffering was physical, tangible. It made for something to see. But how could it be that, interspersed among all those Cubes, was a teenager raising for a new mountain bike (Cube 42) and a former Olympic medalist who wanted to build a hobby shed (58)? And how was it that he, Ramy, as close as he was to rock bottom, had never been placed higher than Cube 397?

#

In the breakroom, Ramy found Perla and Bertram in their usual fold-out chairs, sharing a tapas of vending machine snacks piled onto the small plastic table between them.

“Not one Token,” Ramy groaned, dropping into the chair beside Bertram. “I did have visitors, though.”

“That family?” Perla slid her dark bangs out of her eyes. “Yeah, you and everybody else. They visited every Cube, all the way through the 400s. Didn’t give out a single Token, either.”

“Not so.” Bertram shook his head, causing his flat cap to slide sideways on his bald pate. “I heard an Asker ranting about them at the exit. Apparently, the father deposited their whole lot of Tokens in Cube 19 on their way out the door.”

“Who was in that one?” Ramy said.

“The Governor’s daughter,” said Bertram. “Attempting to ‘earn’ her graduation trip to Prague.”

Perla pantomimed a dry heave. “Figures.”

Perla Chavero, who at twenty was a full decade younger than Ramy, had been the one to recruit him into the Brigade nearly a month prior. She’d approached him as he was checking out with the Registrar following his seventh unsuccessful visit, and with her usual candor asked if he thought he might benefit from joining an unofficial “Askers emotional support group.” Of course, that was only how she’d pitched the Beggar’s Brigade in front of the Registrar.

The description wasn’t entirely dishonest: there *was* an aspect of emotional support to the group. But more than that, the Brigade meetings were workshops. They were a forum for Askers to edit, nip, and tuck each other’s stories—the details they shared, the words they chose, and even the emotions they performed to describe the bitter realities that brought them to the GiveNasium. Every suggestion, every idea, was an attempt to finally hook the Heroes’ attention, and Perla was never short on ideas.

Even on his best day, Ramy could not hold a candle to Perla's enthusiasm. She held nothing back, and any Hero who stopped at her Cube would hear not only about her mountain of college debt—which her immigrant parents would never be able to repay—but also about the corrupt systems of for-profit education and biased financial aid institutions that put her in such a situation. Perla was not just there to fundraise, but to make a point. And, if she happened to compile enough anecdotal evidence for a scathing thesis on the GiveNasium while she was there, it would be an unexpected but welcome incentive, as she'd explained several times.

Bertram Stodgson, on the other hand, was in his early sixties, and despite a past stitched with tragedy, was one of the most patient and gentle people Ramy had ever known. He'd spent a lifetime working as a mailman, but even a government retirement plan was nowhere near enough to pay for his cancer treatments. Ramy had been shocked—and sickened—to discover that it had been Bertram's oncologist who directed him to the GiveNasium in the first place. "Doc told me it would be a shame to climb from the pit of deadly illness just to fall into the neighboring pit of financial ruin," Bertram had said, somehow managing a laugh. "And I suppose he's right."

Aside from Perla, Bertram, and Ramy, there was one other current Brigade member, Autumn. Dozens of members had come and gone before them, and the constant influx of Askers meant their current quartet would certainly not be the Brigade's last iteration.

"Where is Autumn today, anyway?" Ramy said.

"Dunno," Bertram said, and Perla shrugged, just as the door swung open and slammed into the wall.

"I—am—so—so—"

Autumn stormed into the room, her blond hair streaking behind her. Without looking at any of them, she grabbed a granola bar from the pile of snacks and ripped it open. She managed to stuff half of the bar into her mouth before her outburst of rage melted into a series of choked, gasping sobs. "—over this," she whined.

"Lousy day?" Ramy said.

"Mhm." Autumn hiccuped and coughed, spraying chunks of granola like shrapnel. "Did you see that . . . that *family*?"

"We did," Bertram said.

"—and the boy? That smug-faced little . . . he was *in my class*."

Autumn gulped and slammed the rest of the granola bar on the table as she sank into a chair. "I don't know if he was the *one* . . . the one who . . . but the way he looked at me—and his *dad* too . . ."

"Your class?" Ramy said. "You mean . . . ?"

Ramy had learned Autumn's story secondhand from Bertram, who'd quietly explained that talking about the incident usually made Autumn break down in tears. She had been teaching a ninth-grade math class when her



school-provided laptop crashed. For the sake of finishing the lesson, Autumn had plugged her personal computer into the projector. The first image that came up was her desktop photo, showing Autumn and her wife, Carrie, on their wedding day.

It was up for a fraction of a second—Autumn noticed right away and opened a new window. But the next day, she was summoned by the principal. A student had complained to their parents, who had complained to the school, which had “no choice” but to enforce consequences. By showing that image, Autumn had violated the school’s policy of “keeping the private lives of teachers private,” and she was out of a job. Autumn came to the GiveNasium to not only keep herself and her wife afloat, but to hopefully fund a discrimination lawsuit against the school board. “That would never have happened if the image was of a husband,” Autumn insisted, and as much as he hated to think such a thing could be true, Ramy knew it was. After all, the blind hatred that had cost Autumn her job was the same one that had cost him his family.

“Alright! Let’s turn this anger into action,” Perla said with a commanding clap of her hands. “Ramy, you’re on the docket today. How did your speech go over with that family?”

Ramy sighed. “I barely got a sentence out. They didn’t hear much more than ‘My name is Ramy Abu Safar.’”

Bertram shook his head sadly, and Autumn gave Ramy’s knee a gentle squeeze. “Oh, honey,” she said, her eyes still wet. “Want the other half of my granola bar?”

Perla was silent, chewing on her thumbnail. “You should leave out your last name,” she said suddenly, snapping her fingers like she’d just cracked a decades-old cold case. “Can’t believe we haven’t thought about it before!”

“That’s ridiculous,” Ramy said. “It’s my name. Why would I leave it out?”

“You know. You say Abu Safar, they hear . . . you know.” Perla pantomimed an explosion with her fingers. “Doesn’t matter if it’s racist as hell. They’ll think it.”

“You really think so?” said Bertram. “I don’t think they’re all bad, the Heroes.”

“Of course *some* of them are decent.” Perla said. “Family, friends, maybe even a few pay-it-forward strangers—they all show up with pure intentions. But they’re not the ones with deep pockets, are they? And they’re probably not going to wander past four hundred Cubes to find *us*. We have to appeal to the big fish, like it or not.”

“I don’t know.” Autumn frowned. “Something about that feels . . . gross.”

“Gross? What’s *gross* is the position *they’ve* put us in.” Perla planted her hands firmly on her hips. “You’ve gotta think like them if you want to convince them *you’re* the one they’re here to save. Wouldn’t be hard to just . . . redact some details. If you wanted to, Ramy, you could even straighten your hair and tell them you’re a born-and-bred American. Your complexion could pass as a tan! They’ll buy it.”

“Why don’t you go ahead and do that, Perla? Tell everyone your name is Paula.”

“Because I’m only a sophomore, which means another two years before I have to start paying back my loans,” Perla said simply. “It’s not do-or-die for me right now. Until then, I’m using my time here to remind everyone that this place is a farce. Plus, the longer I’m here, the more Beggars like yourselves I’ll be able to advise. That’s my plan until I have no choice but to swallow my pride. As for you . . . pride was never really an option.”

Ramy grunted. About one thing, Perla was right: he couldn’t keep spending his nights couchsurfing between friends and hookups, then willing away his days cleaning for minimum wage and sitting inside a Cube. His meager savings were already scarce between phone payments and bus tickets. He needed a change, and he needed one quickly.

Ramy was not altogether against creative solutions for success at the GiveNasium, either. Former Brigade members had offered many suggestions, some that Ramy had considered and even implemented.

*“Can you cry on command?”*

*“Talk more about your dreams. Like—try telling them your five-year plan. Show them you’re in it to make a change in the world.”*

*“Have you ever done volunteer work? Could you start?”*

*“Maybe if you leave out your age, they’ll assume you’re in your early twenties. Everyone has more sympathy for the young, right?”*

*“Not desperate enough! Show them your pain!”*

Those changes had been small and perfectly harmless, and hadn’t made much of a difference besides.

But excise his own name? Ramy was shocked Perla would even suggest such a thing. His name was more than a name. It was his heritage, his very identity, one he was still struggling to reconcile with another fundamental (he was finally willing to call it that) part of himself. His name was everything he was.

“I’m telling you,” Perla said again. “First name only, or come up with a new last name. Then straight to the family rejection stuff. And *don’t* forget the desperation. The Tokens will practically fly into your hands. Just think about it, okay? Ramy *Anderson*?”

“I’m not interested in lying, Perla. Besides, it wouldn’t work. The Heroes aren’t here to profile us.”

“But it *will*, and they *are*! Even if they don’t realize it!”

“Whatever,” Ramy mumbled. “Can we move on to someone else? Bertram?”

“Did me last week. Autumn?”

Autumn sniffled, and Ramy saw tears forming in her eyes. “I don’t know what else to try. I really don’t.”

“Hey now!” Perla shouted. “None of that defeatist stuff, okay? We’ll come up with something.”

“Like what?” Ramy said. “Telling everyone we’re descended from the founding fathers?”

“Ha *ha*,” Perla sang. “Fine. How about this? There’s this teenager who’s been raising to have an extra toe removed. She’s been there maybe three weeks. Nothing. Then today, she brings in a pad of paper and some finger paint and starts painting with the extra toe. The whole time she’s telling you about her situation, she’s dunking that bad boy into a bunch of different colors and dragging it over the paper. And if anyone donated, she’d tear out the painting and slip it to them through her Cube’s ventilation slats. It was a *hit*.”

“Did she meet her goal?” Autumn sniffed.

“No. But she came close. Her next visit will get her past the finish line, I’m sure.”

“I hope you’re not suggesting we try that,” Ramy said.

“Nah, it would only attract fetishists, anyway. Not that we’re ruling them out. The point is, we’ve got to put on a show. If it’s a *gimmick* they want . . .”

#

Two days later, Ramy returned to the GiveNasium with an easel tucked under his arm. It was a cheap, rickety thing, and the large pad of paper sitting on it was as thin and scratchy as the toilet tissue in the Askers’ shared bathrooms. The easel and pad had been cumbersome to haul onto the bus, but somehow, Perla had convinced Ramy that her plan would be worth the effort.

And maybe she was on to something. At check-in, the Registrar examined his easel curiously before giving him Cube 378—his best placement yet. Ramy couldn’t help but grin. He hadn’t thought that entertaining the Heroes was the key to victory, but the simple addition of the easel already seemed to be working in his favor.

Ramy took the Askers corridor to the back wing of the building, keeping an eye out for the other Brigade members as he went. He knew they would also be showing up with props in hand: Bertram with an old typewriter for poetry, Autumn with a sack of juggling pins, and Perla with a folder full of tuition and textbook bills she was planning to tear up and swallow in small wads. A part of Ramy was still conflicted about their plan—after all, this was not a circus—but it was something to try, and it didn’t require compromise or deception.

Once inside his Cube, Ramy set up his easel under the thin spotlight, positioned the sketching pad, and flipped to the first clean sheet. Then he pulled a stick of charcoal from his shirt pocket and waited.

An hour later, the spotlight clicked on. A woman was outside his Cube, her arms crossed and her head tilted so that her cropped red hair brushed her left shoulder. Ramy studied her face, raised his arm, and positioned the charcoal against the paper.

“My name is Ramy Abu Safar,” he said, as he sketched the woman’s brow. He hesitated in case she walked away after his name, but she stayed, so he began to shape her eyes. “Nine weeks have passed since the day I decided to stop living a lie. That was also the day I was thrown out by my family. They could not accept who I was—who I am—and could not allow me to remain in their household. In my own family. Now, I am forced to—”

He had just started to trace the thin outline of the Hero’s lips when the light turned off.

“Good luck,” she said, as she walked away. There was nothing about her tone to imply she meant it.

Ramy tore the page out, balled it up, and tossed it over his shoulder.

Over the next few hours, Ramy drew many pieces of many people: a mouth here, a set of eyes there, thick brows floating over a disembodied nose. Some stuck around for a sentence; others, for a paragraph. No one stayed long enough to hear Ramy’s full story, or to see their portrait completed. By four o’clock, Ramy had nothing to show for his time but a pile of crumpled papers at his feet, each unfinished face frozen in the moment they’d decided Ramy was not worth saving.

At five, he heard bells going off—the signal that somewhere in the GiveNasium, someone had met their goal. Ramy should have been happy for them, but he registered the sound as a nail in his coffin: he had never heard of more than one Asker meeting their goal in any single day. Still, he waited thirty minutes before packing up, checking out with the Registrar, and heading for the break room.

Perla and Bertram were already there, their scowls and sagging shoulders already betraying their respective failures. Autumn arrived soon after Ramy and sank quietly into a chair as they began to recount their days.

Perla had raised twenty dollars—four Tokens, each of which had been donated by Heroes who appeared to be students themselves. But most of her demonstration, Perla informed the Brigade, elicited declarations such as, “No one asked you to go to college,” or, “You knew what you were getting into.”

By comparison, Bertram’s Heroes were somewhat less critical, but just as cutting. After receiving a poem Bertram had written about her hat, a Hero had asked him if it was *really* worth spending his days enduring treatments when he probably didn’t have much time left either way. She’d donated two Tokens and the promise of prayer before walking away.

Ramy was next to tell the Brigade about his failed artistic endeavors, and he gratefully received the others' sympathies. Afterward, they sat in silence, their shared disappointment thickening the air like smoke.

"What about you, Autumn?" Ramy said, sitting up. "Did they like your juggling? Wait—where are your pins?"

Autumn had been quiet all afternoon, and now that he looked, Ramy realized she carried nothing but a small purse.

"What's wrong, Autumn?" Bertram said. "Didn't you try our plan?"

"Yes . . . and no," Autumn said. She looked at each of them in turn, her jaw quivering, tears already forming in her eyes.

"It's alright, Autumn," Ramy said. "Tell us what happened."

"It's just . . ." Autumn shook her head. "Did you . . . did you hear the bells go off?"

"Who could miss *that*?" Perla scoffed. "Wish I knew who the lucky bastard was so I could learn their ways . . ."

Autumn stood up slowly. She cleared her throat, opened her mouth, and closed it again. Then, instead of speaking, she slipped a hand into her purse and drew out something that elicited a collective gasp from the Beggars.

"Is that . . . ?" Perla mumbled.

"Yes." Autumn croaked through her tears. She jangled the pile of Tokens in her palm, managing a choked giggle at the sound. "It was *me*. I hit my goal. Can you believe it? *I hit my goal!*"

Perla leapt to her feet, mouth agape. "What the . . ."

"How?" Bertram shook his head.

"Well," Autumn sniffled. "I have Perla to thank. And . . . and Ramy, too, in a way."

"Me?" Ramy said.

Autumn nodded. "I thought about it all week. What you said about your name. And Perla's suggestion. And . . . I realized you were both right. The Heroes *do* make assumptions about us. But we *shouldn't* have to lie. So . . . I decided to try Perla's plan without lying."

"Perla's plan *was* lying," Ramy said, ignoring Perla's scoff of protest.

"Part of it, yes. But she also suggested omission. Remember? 'First name only.' And even if you don't want to do that, Ramy . . . I realized it could work for me."

"I'm not following."

"I think I am . . ." Perla said, already with a hint of a smile.

"I told the same story I always do." Autumn wrung her hands. "I still said my students saw a picture of me at my wedding. I just left out that it was a picture of two brides. I said I lost my job for violating a backwards policy that meant *normal* people couldn't talk about their *normal* families. I just didn't define normal. And I was careful. I didn't use any pronouns. I let the Heroes fill in all the blanks.

“At first, I got a few small donations. I wasn’t sure it was doing the trick. But then this guy came up. He was in his 50s, I’d guess, and he was wearing the most expensive-looking suit I’ve ever seen. He had a woman with him, much younger. It seemed like they were on a date . . . and judging by the way he kept flashing the pile of Tokens in his hand, he brought her here to impress her.”

“So you profiled *them*?” Ramy snapped.

“Whatever, Ramy!” Perla rolled her eyes. “It worked, didn’t it? And she didn’t tell one lie! Right, Autumn?”

Autumn glanced at Ramy and quickly away again. She was staring at the ground when she finally muttered, “Sort of.”

“Sort of?” Ramy said. “But that’s what got you the Tokens, right? Ambiguity?”

“Well . . . that was my *plan* . . .” Autumn’s voice was shaky again, her throat tight with oncoming tears. “Only . . . it d-didn’t work out that way. After I finished my story, the Hero . . . he said his mom was a teacher. That if anything like that ever happened to her, his dad would’ve torn the school apart brick by brick. And he . . . he said, ‘If I help you, your husband will give ‘em hell, just like my old man would’ve, right?’”

“Oh,” Bertram choked. “Your *husband* . . .”

“So you corrected him, right?” Ramy demanded. “You told him you have a wife?”

Autumn squeezed her eyes shut, but the tears streamed out nonetheless. “How could I?” she wailed. “I could see the Tokens right there. You h-have to understand. I can’t live like this anymore! This p-place. This situation. I j-just can’t! So I . . . I d-didn’t say anything. I just . . .”

Autumn took a deep breath as though preparing to confess to a crime. “I just nodded. And right then and there, the Hero sank Token after Token into my slot until the goal alarm sounded. He even thanked me, wished me luck because they need people like me in schools. Can you believe it? I got him to wish a lesbian was teaching his kids.”

Autumn laughed—a high, delirious, shuddering laugh—and then she deflated all over again, staring blankly at the Tokens in her hand and dousing them with a fresh wave of tears.

Perla, however, was charged. Electric. She curled one hand into a fist and punched into the open palm of her other. “*SEE?*” she hissed. “*See?* I knew it! It’s right there!” Her voice floated somewhere between triumph and rage. “*There* is the proof you’ve been begging for, Ramy! This place isn’t some innocent charitable cakewalk. It’s the same *in here* as it is *out there*. This is a game to them. A game they only want to play with people who remind them of themselves. *Here*,” she gestured at Autumn, “is the proof!”

“Give him a break, Perla,” Autumn reached over and squeezed Ramy’s hand. He kept his hand limp in hers until she let go.

“Yes, it worked . . .” Autumn continued, “but it didn’t feel good. It was like I had to tear a piece of myself out so I could put it away. Like Peter Pan and his shadow. And now, I’ve created a new version of reality . . . one where Cindy is separate from me.”

“Of course it felt wrong! That’s because it *is*!” Ramy was nearly shouting. “You did the same thing the Heroes do to us. You looked at someone and decided exactly who they were, without knowing anything about them! What if he didn’t care that you’re gay?”

“Who’s got time for ‘what if,’ Ramy?” Perla interjected. “Autumn got what she deserves. Her fucking *freedom*. And she gave us the truth: about this place and all the *Heroes* in it and the rules they’re playing by. We need to know what we’re up against. I’m glad you did it, Autumn. And not just because my thesis is practically writing its-fucking-self right now. Because *you* deserve this. I mean, we should be *celebrating*! *You fucking did it!*”

“Yeah.” Autumn managed a smile. “I guess I *did*, didn’t I?”

Ramy sat in stunned silence while Perla grabbed Autumn’s hands, pulled her from her chair, and led her in a gleeful, spinning dance. Even Bertram clapped an energetic tune. Everywhere, there was joy; Ramy felt it, too, but he neither contributed to it nor reveled in it. He was happy for Autumn, he really was. But still, he could not help but feel like her victory was a failure in some way, like it wasn’t justice at all.

“I couldn’t be happier for you, Autumn,” Bertram said.

“Thanks, Bertie.” Autumn let go of Perla’s hands and swayed dizzily on the spot. “I couldn’t have done it without you. All of you. So . . . before I cash in the rest of these . . . I’d like to say thanks. It’s not much, but . . .”

Autumn plucked three Tokens from her purse and pressed one into each Beggar’s palm.

“Oh, hell yeah,” Perla said. “We can use these in the vending machines, right? C’mon, Bertie. Help me pick out a feast?”

“It would be my pleasure.”

Perla and Bertram left the break room arm in arm. Ramy and Autumn sat in silence. He found himself avoiding Autumn’s gaze, even as he sensed her inching closer to his chair.

“Try not to hate me, Ramy,” she whispered. “I wish things were different, too. But . . .”

“It’s fine.” He said it less to comfort her, and more to convince himself. “I don’t hate you, Autumn. I’m just conflicted. But what now? Now that you got what you came for . . . are you gonna keep your promise to that Hero?”

Autumn shrugged. “I *did* always envision a fight. Making them pay for how they treat people like me. Not just teachers—students, too. But after all these weeks in the GiveNasium . . .”



She looked up at the doorway, as if to confirm that Perla was out of earshot. She lowered her voice. “Well, I’m not so sure I want a trial. It feels like I’ve been on one this whole time. And who knows if it would even work out in my favor?”

“So what, then?”

“Cindy and I have talked about moving away, somewhere more progressive. The money would cover the move and a deposit on a new place. All that matters is that I have the freedom to choose. Right?”

“I guess so,” Ramy sighed.

Autumn knelt down in front of him. “Think about what Perla is saying, Ramy. It could make a world of difference. You deserve this as much as I do.”

She picked up Ramy’s hand again and gave it another tight squeeze. This time, he squeezed back.

#

“Alright, Bertie, you’re up,” said Perla. “Take it from the top?”

“Does it have to be me today?” Bertram moaned. “I had chemo on Monday. Feels like I could fall asleep with my eyes open.”

“Which is why you need this more than ever.” Perla stood from her chair and began to pace the room, buzzing with restless energy. Ever since Autumn’s triumph the previous week, something had shifted in the Brigade. It was the first time they’d lost a member to success rather than defeat or death, and while Ramy sensed a renewed fire in all of them to meet their own goals, the balance between friendly conversation and rigorous scheming had noticeably tipped in favor of the latter.

Bertram huffed, straightened in his chair, and took a deep breath.

“Every day, when I open my eyes, I say the same thing to myself. ‘Bertram,’ I say, ‘you are lucky. You are lucky to be waking up today. Even if it means another day of battling your liver cancer—’”

“No! You’ve gotta say *prostate*, remember?” Perla interrupted. “If they hear liver, they’ll assume alcoholism.”

Ramy rolled his eyes. He was just as eager to achieve his own victory—especially after spending the last three nights with a bartender who kept calling him “homeless habibi”—but he was still not going to compromise on how he did it. “Ignore her, Bertram,” Ramy said. “Be yourself. Just take it a little slower. I know it’s hard for you to speak loudly after a treatment, so it’s extra important that you articulate every word.”

Bertram readjusted in his seat and picked up at the next line.

““You are lucky to see and feel the sun. You are lucky to read good books and to laugh at jokes on television. You are lucky despite all the unluckiness that has come before. Despite the pain of being poked and cut and burned. Despite the feelings of helplessness and the thoughts of giving up. You are lucky despite losing Keiana and Darius in that car crash, because you

get to be here, honoring your wife and son by moving bravely through this world. They would want that chance for you, and you have it.’

“I say all that to myself before I even get out of bed, so that I’m ready for whatever the day brings before my feet touch the floor. I do it to remind myself that you can always choose to look for goodness and share it with everyone you meet: in the grocery store, at church, in the street. Anywhere. I guess it’s what we’re all here for, really. To see the beauty and be the beauty, however we can. That’s why I’m here today, asking for your help. There’s nothing I want more than to win this battle. Because even if your Tokens buy me just one more day, at least it will be another day of living. Another day of loving.”

Ramy had tears in his eyes. The story never failed to move him, no matter how many times he heard it. “It’s beautiful, Bertram, really. Your pacing was perfect.”

Bertram deflated and slumped back in his chair. “Maybe it is. But beautiful words don’t seem to be cutting it.”

“What have we changed so far?” said Perla, who had been leaning against the wall with her eyes closed and her arms crossed. She strode to the center of the circle and counted on her fingers. “You added a mention of church, for the religious crowd. A note of altruism, with the spreading goodness stuff. You’ve got the sympathy, with your wife and son.”

Bertram sank his head into his hands and drew his shoulders down to his knees. He looked like an empty shell brought in by the tide, one footfall away from shattering. “That’s everything. There’s nothing else to change.”

Perla drifted over to kneel beside him. “Listen, Bertie. I think you know what you have to do. I know you didn’t want to before, but I think it could really—”

Bertram raised his head. “Oh, Perla . . . I just don’t know.”

“What are you talking about?” Ramy perked up. “I don’t remember that conversation.”

“You weren’t there,” Perla said hastily. “But it doesn’t matter. It’s not an option for you.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s not the same! But it *could* be a solution for Bertie, at least . . .”

“That’s enough.” Bertram’s jaw was set, but Ramy could see it quivering all the same. “Let’s just work on the story. I don’t think I’m ready to . . . to do *that*.”

“Fine,” Perla said. There was no disappointment in her voice, only sadness. Worry. “I’ll drop it. It’s your life.”

For the next hour, they brainstormed minor tweaks for Bertram’s script, but they got nowhere. Although they were perfectly cordial with each other, there was a palpable change in the energy between Perla and Bertram.

Ramy noticed it in the way they spoke, in the way they avoided each other's gaze.

"I'll walk out with you," Ramy said to Bertram, when the loudspeakers announced the GiveNasium's closure. He didn't want to say it aloud, but it seemed there was a good chance Bertram would need someone to lean on, even with the aid of the moving walkways. "You coming, Perla?"

"Nah." Perla was slung across a chair, her legs dangling over one of the plastic arms while she idly picked at her fingernails. "Gonna wait here a while. The janitor told me he sometimes sweeps up dropped Tokens. Said I could have them, if I stuck around after hours."

"How inventive," Bertram said. "Goodnight, Perla." He accepted Ramy's outstretched arm, and they set off.

The going was slow. Bertram lost his balance as soon as they stepped onto the moving walkway, and even after Ramy steadied him, his breathing remained thin and ragged. They had just passed Cube 400 when Bertram stepped off the walkway again and hobbled to a bench on the central aisle.

"Do you need to rest?" Ramy said, joining him. "Just say the word. My shift at the Luxton doesn't start for another hour."

"No, you go on. I don't want to hold you up. I just realized I left my bus pass back at the break room. Just need to sit for a moment before I head back."

"That's silly," Ramy said. "You stay here. I'll get it for you. Perla has probably—"

"Ramy." For the second time that night, Bertram's voice was severe. "I won't be treated like an infant. I appreciate it, but—please, just go."

"Oh," Ramy said. "Alright, Bertie. Sorry. I'll see you."

Ramy stepped onto the moving walkway and let it carry him past the dark, empty Cubes. He could not get Bertram's voice out of his head—how defeated it had been, and how angry. And although the anger had been directed at him, Ramy felt that he understood Bertram well enough to know the true cause was something deeper. Something sharper.

Something like a solution, proposed in secret, which Bertram had no choice but to take.

#

"Welcome to the GiveNasium, where second chances are born. Are you launching or resuming a campaign?"

The thought of tearing the floral scarf from the Registrar's neck to test whether her head stayed on flashed through Ramy's mind. Instead, he forced himself to match her empty smile. "Resuming."

The Registrar typed Ramy's information into the tablet she held poised at her hip. "Welcome back, Mister Ab . . . um, *Ray-me*. Cube 485 today."

Ramy snatched his magnetic access card from the Registrar's hand and let the crowd of early arrivals sweep him through the GiveNasium's main doors. He would not be taking the Askers corridor today. He needed to see the GiveNasium for what it really was—or at least, he needed to try.

If everything was really as Perla said, and this was all a game to be played on both sides of the Cube, could he really bring himself to play along? Was he cheating himself more if he did, or if he didn't?

The main corridor was packed. By what Ramy could glean from snatches of other conversations, a group of major actors was there—dressed as the superheroes they played—and their presence had attracted a hundred journalists scrambling to capture their good deeds on camera.

Whatever. If it got more people through the door, perhaps that could be to his advantage. He shouldered his way through the crowd and stepped onto the moving walkway.

Cube 30 slid by, and Cube 40 . . .

At Cube 51, Ramy froze, stricken by recognition.

“ . . . you are lucky. You are lucky to be waking up today. Even if it means another day of battling your liver cancer . . . ”

The words were familiar, but that voice . . . it was too high, too clear of sickness and exhaustion. Ramy couldn't see into the Cube; its Observation Pad was crowded with at least a dozen onlookers listening to the impassioned speech. Ramy stepped into the center aisle and stood on his toes for a look at who the voice belonged to.

It was a small, blond White woman wearing the kind of bright pastel outfit Ramy had only ever seen on television moms. Her blue eyes brimmed with tears that did not spill over, but instead remained artfully poised to glimmer in the bright spotlight.

“ . . . despite the pain of being poked and cut and burned, despite the feelings of helplessness. You are lucky despite losing Kevin and Darla in that car crash, because you get to be here, honoring your husband and daughter . . . ”

“What the fuck?” Ramy breathed.

“Hey! Watch your language!”

Ramy turned to find Perla standing behind him. Bertram was beside her, leaning awkwardly on a walking stick.

“Just kidding,” Perla said. “Can you believe how many people are here?”

“What . . . what is this?” Ramy's eyes flicked between Perla, Bertram, and the stranger in the Cube. “Bertram, she's . . . she's telling *your* story, isn't she? That's *your* story!”

Perla crossed her arms and sighed. “And she's telling it splendidly, if I do say so myself. It is *such* a moving story. Your poetic touch really shines through, Bertie.”

"Are you kidding?" Ramy croaked. "Is this what you meant last night? Your . . . your solution?"

Bertram nodded, but didn't meet Ramy's eyes. "It does seem to be working . . ." he said.

" . . . *see the beauty and be the beauty, however we can. That's why I'm here today, asking for your help . . .*"

"That could be you, too, friend." Perla nudged Ramy with her elbow. "If you'd just be honest with yourself about what really goes on here."

"I've told you," Ramy snapped. "I'm not interested in lying. I'm not going to change who I am. I can't. I'm just . . ."

"Not yet desperate enough?" Perla said. "*Really*, though? Tell me, where'd you sleep?"

Ramy flinched. He could still feel the slats of the bench in the Luxton lobby pressing into his back. "That's not the point. I shouldn't have to pretend to be something else . . . *someone* else . . ."

"No one here thinks you should have to," Bertram said softly. He took a tentative step forward and rested a shaky hand on Ramy's forearm. "Every single person should be able to walk through those doors and get exactly what they need, exactly as they are. Some should even get what they *want*."

"But it's not that way," Perla said. "I'm sorry, Ramy, I am. But it's not about what we should or shouldn't have to do. It's about what we *do* have to do."

"I know it's tough to wrap your head around," Bertram went on. "I'm still not sure about it myself. It's not easy to treat my survival like a competition. But last night, I realized I was only resisting because I was still uncomfortable putting myself first. I deserve to live—and live peacefully, Ramy, as do we all."

"And the truth," Perla said, "is that every '*Hero*' who comes through those doors is looking for a mirror. They'll keep looking until they find the Asker who resembles them most. The one whose life they can imagine themselves in. The more different you are from them, the less likely they'll be to give a damn about you, because you could never be them, and they could never be you."

"That's bullshit," Ramy hissed. "It shouldn't matter!"

"But it *does*, Ramy," Perla sighed. "And you have the power to change how they see you. But Bertram?"

Bertram looked down at his own body, hunched and withered by sickness, his dark skin hanging loose and thin.

"Perla's right, Ramy. I can't hide. Words can't change anything about how they see me. What *can*—" He pointed a crooked finger at the woman in the Cube. "—is putting her in there. My story has everything they want to hear. The problem is *me*. But you? The Heroes don't judge you for how you look. They judge you for *who* you are. *What* you are. But you can tell them

what they see and make them believe it. The same way Autumn could. Don't you see the power in that?"

Ramy tightened his lips, shook his head. He felt as though he were straddling the lanes of the moving walkway, his two halves pulling in opposing directions. "I don't know what to say, Bertie . . ."

He trailed off, and Bertram offered a weak smile. "That's alright, Ramy. But you understand now, yes? I'm just doing what I have to do. And I won't judge you if you do the same."

Ramy opened his mouth—to speak, to scream, to cry—but another sound drowned him out.

*Cha-ching! Cha-ching! Cha-ching!*

#

Ramy positioned his chair beneath the spotlight inside his Cube. It was dim now, but at any moment, a Hero could come by and change that. The light would find him, make him visible, completely and all at once. Ramy would begin to search for a tell: a tilt of the head, a glint in the eye, the involuntary raising of a lip, something to tell him what the Hero saw inside his Cube, and whether they liked it.

Then, Ramy would tell a story. Which one, he had not decided. It would all depend on that moment when the light turned on, and when he looked up, whose face he would see in the glass.

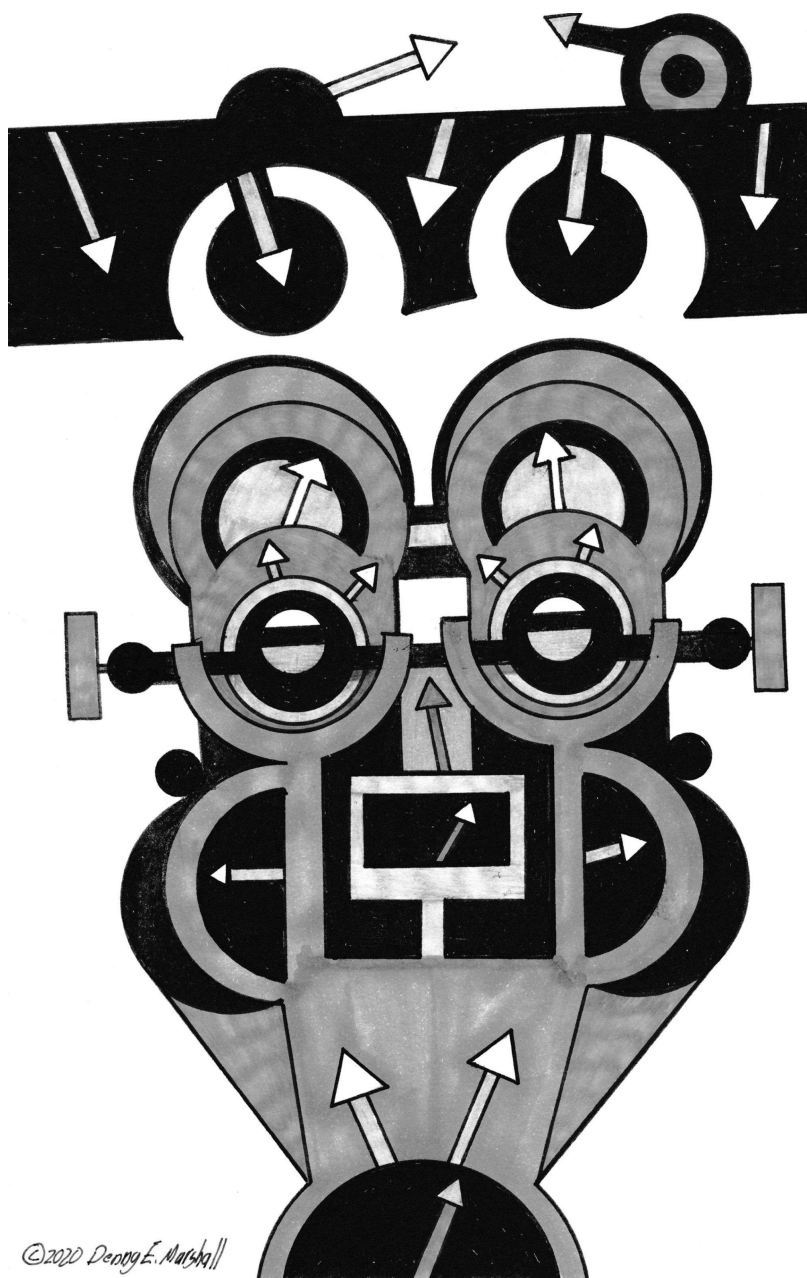
**Denny E. Marshall** has had art, poetry, and fiction published, some recently. (A partial list of credits can be found on his artist website [dennymarshall.com](http://dennymarshall.com).) Denny mostly draws.

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**Eyes Closed**





**The Meter**



## **Bounty of the Flightless**

**Bex Hainsworth** is a poet and teacher based in Leicester, UK. She won the Collection HQ Prize as part of the East Riding Festival of Words and her work has appeared in *Atrium*, *Okay Donkey*, *bath magg*, and *trampset*. Her debut pamphlet of ecopoetry will be published by Black Cat Poetry Press in 2023.

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# An Octopus Picks Litter at the End of the World

Bex Hainsworth

A serrated bottle cap. A triangle of green glass.  
These are unusual shells: strange, immortal tools  
that she collects during a morning's foraging.  
The ring pull from a tin can slides over one tentacle tip  
like the closing of a trap, but still she swims onwards,  
a chameleon umbrella, shimmering like an oil spill.

She adapts. This alien debris has bewildered her  
fellow sand-dwellers, but she is an architect, a pioneer.  
A cave of can. An inverted volleyball is an ample bowl.  
Yet she is also a soothsayer, a creature of Cassandra.  
She senses the prickle of warmer water, the stirrings  
of a terrible future. The sky is already falling around her.

A kinder death awaits. She is beginning to mimic  
the gentle bloating of plastic bags across the blue.  
Soon, she will retire to the darkness of a car tyre,  
its black, fraying edges floating like a shroud.  
Swelling with eggs, she will guard her nest:  
starving artist, sacrifice, prophet-martyr.

*James Keith Smith (he/him) is a writer of short fiction. His work has been published or is forthcoming in Split Lip Magazine, Pithead Chapel, and the Sierra Nevada Review. He was born in Detroit, Michigan, and currently lives in the Pacific Northwest with his family and their animals.*

---

# Black Moth

## James Keith Smith

My hiding spot isn't large, just big enough for a man as tall as me—six feet, four inches—to sit comfortably against the wall with knees bent. Quiet and dark, the room is cluttered with artifacts of my former life: stones from my mother's garden, a silver wristwatch with a broken second hand; a library card, though all of the libraries have been boarded up.

When Stevens and Haagen come searching, as they always do, I hold my breath and try to make myself smaller, knowing if they open the door, I will be discovered. But most of the time I spend in my hiding spot is pleasurable and restorative. The light through the door crack is minimal, and I bring a small flashlight that runs on batteries so I can read. The batteries are taken from a supply room on the second floor. If Stevens and Haagen suspect the missing batteries, they have not mentioned anything.

#

There are some days when I'm too busy to hide; these days are long and unforgiving. My body aches. My cough dry from the unfiltered air at Black Moth. I try to think of better times, better things. When I was young, perhaps. Sunlight on my face as I floated in the community pool. Water sloshing over the pool's edge, a lifeguard's laconic whistle. Off in the corner, the Sno-Cone stand. The unrestrained smile of my sister, before the accident.

#

### **Who We Are**

*Black Moth specializes in, but is not limited to, the production of corrugated cardboard boxes, microelectronics, prosthetics, prepackaged meals, steel bolts, preassembled cabinetry, and diesel additives.*

*Chances are, you've been using one of our fine products without even realizing it! Welcome to the family!*

#

Every morning, I see my neighbors' gray silhouettes walking up the hill, lunch boxes in hand. Past security and the water reservoir. On the train, no one speaks. Tracks rumble beneath us, the cars gaining momentum, building after building rolls by: long, flat warehouses; squat, colorless tenement buildings; the empty, derelict sports stadium. I imagine the

expression on my face. It is the same as the men and women around me—neutral, without emotion. Our collective fear prohibits us from acknowledging one another.

I eat an Oreo from my lunch box—the only sweetness of my day.

#

Sometimes, in my hiding spot, I hear a woman singing. A song I have not heard for many years. My mother used to play the kitchen radio as she prepared our meals, and one voice would rise above the others, the great Cyndi Lauper. Taco Tuesday, the smell of meat browning, onions simmering, cumin and other spices. My mother's hair in a long, thick braid. She touches the back of my neck, places a steaming plate of food in front of me. My sister humming along.

I lean my head back against the wall in my hiding spot. The memories are some of the few I have from before.

#

### ***Internal Memo***

*Black Moth is proud to announce partnership with Glide Co. Meats. For nearly half a century, Glide Co. has been the leading manufacturer of meat and meat-like products. "Our new partnership with Black Moth will increase production, allowing for even more flavors and textures in the ever-expanding meat market," said CEO Mike Larsen.*

*With our partnered technology, it is now possible to have a new and different kind of meat or meat-like product with every meal, 365 days a year!*

#

I have been discovered by a man with a vacuum. He walks down the hall, pushing his Hoover, just as I exit my hiding spot. His eyes are searching, anguished, as I imagine my own are. I stride away without turning back. Have I removed my personal effects from my secret place? My hairbrush? Loose change that's fallen from my pocket? Will the man with the Hoover report me to Stevens and Haagen?

I don't return to my hiding spot today. After lunch, Stevens and Haagen follow me down the blue corridor, and into the green zone. They walk thirty or so paces behind me. They expect me to slip up and lead them to my secret place. But I won't let that happen. I pass the man with the Hoover, but there is no recognition. Still, he is not to be trusted.

#

Upon returning home from work, I am filthy, covered in sweat. I only have one collared shirt, which I wash in the sink. I then use a compact hair dryer to dry it off. I sit alone at my round kitchen table, one leg too short, a bare bulb casting a black shadow. My Hot Pocket is dry, the cardboard shell has failed its one task. When I finish supper, I have an Oreo cookie—there are only three remaining in the sleeve.

I know there are others like me. Dozens, hundreds. Small men and women who easily fit in compartments beneath stairwells or in coat closets. Those who hide in Styrofoam containers, leaky ceilings above board rooms, behind potted plants. They see and watch anxiously, safe for now.

#

For many nights, I have the same dream. In the dream, there is no Stevens, no Haagen. There is only the singing woman, her voice carried through a darkened forest by the wind. In the moonlight, I can see the mountain peaks rising favorably to the east. Overhead, a red-tailed hawk soars. My feet pad along the pine-needled forest floor.

When my mother purchased the Ford Taurus, it was the best-selling car in the country, touted for its considerable safety features. But in the collision, our Ford Taurus crumpled like a tissue in Haagen's pocket. How can this be?

Normally, the memories of the accident are a jumble of disconnected thoughts, but tonight I recall the events with clenching clarity. My sister was taking me to music lessons when a white-tailed deer leaped into the road. Tires screeched, my sister swerved; bodies pressed against the dashboard, the windshield shattered.

My sister was sixteen at the time of the accident, long before the rise of Black Moth. She was no great beauty—her teeth were small and nubby, her lips thin—but now her head is misshapen and she does not look when I call her name.

#

After work, I go visit my sister in the state-run assisted living facility. The building is diamond-shaped with a large courtyard in the middle, but there is nothing regal or precious about it. A boar-faced woman pushes a cart filled with sedatives down a narrow hallway. The stained carpet smells of ammonia and cleaning supplies. In the courtyard, men and women sit in wheelchairs, smoking. Staff in white uniforms lean against a yellow wall, arms folded.

In my sister's room, there is a table lamp and one tiny window that faces the courtyard. A television plays Captain Kangaroo at low volume. I place my hand on her cheek. There is so much I want to say. About my hiding spot and the woman singing. About the many quality products manufactured by Black Moth. "Someday, you will come live with me," I say. "We will be a family again." But my sister's ears are unhearing, her eyes unseeing.

A man with a missing thumb places her into a wheelchair, and I roll her out to the courtyard, a soft gray blanket on her lap. A robin flits on a branch. Purple thistles break through a crack in the pavement.

"These are the trees," I say, pointing to an oak with green, hanging branches. "Those are birds. That is a cloud, a cumulus. It's supposed to rain later, but that's okay, we need the rain." I show her the iron gate of the

courtyard, wheel her to the benches where we sometimes feed pigeons and count the mossy bricks in the walkway. “The birds are getting so fat now,” I say, brushing away blonde hair from her eyes.

On the way out of the garden, I stop and talk to Mia, a nurse who smokes mentholated cigarettes in the courtyard. She’s pretty, even with the missing tooth.

“How is my sister?” I ask.

“The rash on her leg has healed,” she says. “She no longer cries out when she is moved from the chair.”

“That’s good. I left a crystal beneath her pillow.”

Mia nods, drops her cigarette, grinds it into the concrete. “You’re good to your sister. I had a brother, but he did bad, awful things to me.”

“And where is your brother now?”

She smiles, flashes the missing tooth. “I stuck a hot poker in his eye. And then, when he came at me again later, I stuck one in the other. Now he no longer looks at me the same.”

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“I’m not.”

#

### ***Internal Memo:***

*Sales of PPE have increased one hundred and ten percent since the last quarter. Vaccines, window cleaners, face cleaners, and arsenic are all performing well.*

*We’re going to the moon! Black Moth has partnered with Perfect Waste Solutions to develop the first orbiting trash facility, expected to be completed in the next four to six months.*

*Black Moth is committed to reducing pollution, and minimizing our carbon footprint. Finally, our trash problem is going away—238,900 miles away, to be exact!*

#

Today, Haagen calls me into his office. His face is cratered and ugly, his eyes cruel and unfeeling. When I began my employment, I had a different impression of Haagen. I sensed an openness to him, maybe a kindness. Once, we even shared a sandwich on the loading docks and he told me about an investment opportunity selling vitamins. That winter, he even presented me with a holiday card. But now Haagen has become hardened and mean, like Stevens. The recording device on his hip is always engaged, the red light flashing.

“I sent you an email yesterday,” he says. “You never responded.”

“Yes,” I say, though I don’t remember the correspondence in question. Each day, I’m bombarded with information. I’m buried by it, assaulted, suffocated. But I can’t tell this to Haagen, such an admission would be unacceptable. “I’m on it,” I stammer.

“Do we not treat you fairly?” he asks. “Maybe you’ve forgotten what your life was like before.”

“I remember,” I say.

“Do you?” Haagen puts his arm on my shoulder, an attempt to appear human. “Try to respond by the end of the day, okay?” he says.

As I am leaving the office, he calls my name again. The air becomes heavy, intolerable. I feel my face contorting into a mask of subservience. I try to relax, but sweat cascades down my back; there is a tremor in my right leg, my left eye twitches.

“We missed you at Natalia’s baby shower,” Haagen says. “Where did you run off to?”

#

In the breakroom, pink envelopes laid out on the table. Plastic pink fetuses, pink arms outstretched, a sign of fertility. Sweet-smelling pink flowers. Pink, pink, pink!

Oh Natalia, bearer of ripened fruit, mother to all—you were once a master of spreadsheets, now a baby grows inside of you. For you, I am happy, happy, happy! Natalia with the white Keds who sits near the fax machine. Natalia, who eats breaded chicken with a plastic knife and fork. Natalia, who waits for Dirk, operator of heavy machinery, to bring coffee during lunch. You will be the perfect mother!

The ancestors are waiting, Natalia. Bring forth a new life into this unseemly world. Make it better. Oh Natalia, I pray for the soul of your child and his continued health. When you take leave of this place for three to six months, you will remain in my thoughts!

#

Tuesday, I find a small paperback about lemurs on the floor. I have always admired the lemur for their ability to hide. Page upon page of brilliantly colored photographs: lemurs in repose on green, twisted branches of the Madagascar jungle; lemurs peering out from the hollow of a lightening-charred tree; lemurs concealed behind the petals of a tropical lily, their eyes sharp and intelligent. But now there are no more lemurs, no more jungles, only draught and dust. I slip the book into my back pocket so that I might take it to my hiding spot.

I see Haagen in the hallway and suddenly remember the correspondence. “It’s been three days,” he says. I tremble, lose my balance. The book about lemurs falls from my pocket, plops to the floor, but Haagen doesn’t notice, he’s already walking away. I must reply to the correspondence.

#

The facility is quiet with few visitors today. My sister and I are in the courtyard garden, beside a strange orange flower that grows like a horn. They’ve given her a haircut and she now looks like a turnip. I smear ointment



on her lips, wipe her face with a warm washcloth, sing to her. Mia comes over, her shirt pressed.

"You seem happy today," she says. "Good news?" Smoke curls from her cigarette. A squirrel chip-chip-chips in a tree.

"Tomorrow I'm off work," I say. "I'll climb the ridge and sleep beneath the stars, far away from the city." Each year I'm allowed four days of vacation; normally I sulk in my apartment, but this year I plan to forage for mushrooms in the burned forest.

"How wonderful," Mia says. "A charred forest filled with death." She squints at me as though I have tomato sauce on my chin. "They say you're simple. Is it true?"

"It's just that I can't remember," I say.

"But you come here. To see your sister."

"She helps me."

Mia's eyes are gray, like a wolf's. She grabs my elbow. "Summer's almost over. I know a place we can swim."

"Is it safe?" I ask.

"No one will know."

#

I've heard the water in Lake Okawanka is brown and nothing can live there, but when we arrive the shore is tree-lined and you can see each stone beneath the surface. I take off my shirt. Mia stands in her swimsuit, blue with polka dots. She shakes out her hair, climbs onto a rock and dives into the water with a tiny splash. I dive too, just as I did as a boy. Cool water rushes into my ears. I open my eyes to light and particles, colored pebbles. And then we are at the surface together, laughing.

We climb onto a boulder, lay on our towels. The rock is warm from the sun. Our shoulders nearly touch. "There have been many new and exciting products at Black Moth," I say. "I'll tell you about them now if you wish."

She shields her eyes from the bright sun and yawns. "I'm not interested in any of your new products," she says. Overhead, an airplane buzzes across the sky. I hear children playing through the bushes. "Tell me, why do you bring gifts to your sister?"

"She's my only family."

"But her brain no longer works. She'll never hear the birds sing, taste fresh rolls, or smell flowers from the market. I see you push her in the wheelchair. You're just like the others who come to the facility. You have hope for something that never comes."

"Someday she'll live with me again," I say. "I'll feed her, brush her hair, give her medicine. We'll be a family, like before. You'll see."

Mia snorts. "Do you know how foolish you sound? She can no longer tell up from down, right from left. Maybe what they say about you is true after all."

“And what would you do if it was *your* sister?” I ask.

“Let her die,” Mia says. “It’s the only dignified thing. If her tube feed is stopped tomorrow she would die within a week.”

“Starve her?” I don’t need to explain myself to this person. I stand, begin to put on my pants.

“Don’t go,” she says.

Now it is Mia’s turn to get upset. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen a woman cry. “I’m sorry,” she says. “Sometimes I say the wrong things. I have nobody who cares for me. At least you have her.” She lights a cigarette with a match. “Tell me about the many new products at Black Moth,” she says, wiping away tears.

There are medicines to help you remember, medicines to help you forget, advanced pesticides, pleasurable board games, weaponry, but I don’t talk to her about these things. I’ve worked innumerable days without rest and now I want only to forage for mushrooms in the darkened forest. The sun is warm, and the breeze pleasant, but I can no longer feel these things.

“There’s a woman who sings,” I say quickly. “I hear her from the room.”

“What room?”

“In the basement, at work. There’s a shipping scale in a hallway of broken office furniture. To the right of the scale, behind a dented metal cart, there’s a small room. Not a room—a closet, really. I go there and shut the door. Very little light gets in. It’s quiet, and I’m alone. I hide.”

Her eyes narrow. “Go on,” she says.

“That’s it. There’s nothing more. I hear the woman sing from behind the wall and I remember.”

“But what if you’re discovered in this room?” She’s quiet, waiting. “They’ll send you to the labor camps, or worse. And your sister? Who’ll bring her gifts then?”

I don’t answer. Mia puts her hand on my cheek. “You’re very stupid to hide, but also very brave.” Her face is close to mine and I feel the warmth of her skin. We kiss and I don’t mind the missing tooth.

#

Today, Haagen confides in me that his marriage is ending. I’m surprised by the admission, but even more so, I’m shocked that a man as ugly and rotten as Haagen has found a wife. Maybe he has a heart after all. Things are not going well for poor Haagen—young children to consider, finances to split, beloved pets. I wonder if he, too, has a hiding spot. Perhaps it is in the attic, deep within the rotting yellow insulation of his home, or maybe he hides in the crawlspace beneath the kitchen, his wife clanging pans angrily overhead.

“It was different when we were younger,” he says. “It was enough just to be in love. But then the children came, and my career is so demanding.” He

takes a dried apricot from his pocket, holds it between his index finger and thumb. “Now we eat in separate rooms, sleep in different beds. It’s too bad Black Moth does not produce a product to make someone love you again.”

“Maybe in time,” I say.

“What about you?” Haagen asks. “Were you ever married? I mean, before?”

“Never,” I say.

“You should marry. It’s not good to be alone. How old are you?”

“Thirty-five,” I say.

“I have a cousin who is fat and not so bright, but she’s unmarried. She’ll become a spinster like her sister if she doesn’t marry soon.”

When I don’t answer, Haagen sticks a dried apricot between his teeth, chews with his mouth open. His eyes are dark and cruel again. “What, think you’re better than us? Maybe you’ve forgotten what your life was like before. It’s not too late. With one word, they’d lock you up and throw away the key.”

Stevens comes in the door, and Haagen acts as though I am no longer in the room. “Leave,” he whispers. “Before I do something I’ll regret.”

#

I’ve passed by the café many times, but never stopped in until today. There’s a hand-painted sign, a flimsy screen door propped open in the heat. Mia is wearing a yellow sundress, bright like the flowers of Madagascar. She’s a regular, she knows everyone: the young girl behind the counter, the bald man who brings us coffees, she even knows the name of the dog who sits by the door. One eye is grey, the other brown. On the table, white lilies stand in a chipped jar. The bald man brings us a bowl of strange food.

“What are these?” I ask.

“Berries,” Mia says.

“And we can eat them?”

She laughs. “Of course. They’re fruit.”

The berries fill my mouth with sweetness.

“My mother used to bring us to this café,” Mia says. “We’d play games for hours and she’d buy me pastries filled with jam. At home there was always food on our table, singing and laughter, but one night, our mother didn’t come home. They said she was in an accident, but I know they did something. Black Moth always lies.” She slides an empty plate to the edge of the table. “I want to leave the city,” she says. “It’s full of bad memories.”

“Where would you go?”

“Minnesota. I have a cousin who stays in the country. She tends horses, cows and pigs. She’s invited me to come. There’s a room with a bed and a chest of drawers. You could come, too. We could go together.”

I pick at my onion roll, soft and buttery, unlike the waxy buns they serve in our cafeteria.

Mia stirs her tea, my coffee has grown cold.

“What is it? You don’t like me?” Her brow furrows. She’s angry now. The dog comes over, lays by our feet, looks up pleadingly.

“Mia,” I say, take her hand across the table. “It isn’t that.” I glance at her bosom, unhindered by the yellow sundress.

“Go on, have a look,” she says, and my face turns red.

#

From her eleventh floor window we can see the landfill, the dusty fields on the edge of town. A kettle boils on the stove. Bunches of lavender, tied with frayed twine, dry on a baseboard heater. She shows me a photograph of her mother standing before an expanse of blue water, a wilted flower curled in her hand. “Lake Superior. It’s as large as a hundred thousand Black Moths.”

“Your mother was pretty. You must miss her.”

She nods. “At Lake Superior, you can walk for miles and miles and see no one. You can scream into the wind and unburden your soul.”

We sit on her bed.

“Many patients at the state assisted facility are sick. It’s because the water isn’t clean. Even when boiled, there’s still lead and other metals. It poisons them, damages their kidneys, their hearts.” Mia says some patients—those who can still make decisions for themselves—refuse to eat or drink. Some die from dehydration. Everyone is afraid of the illness.

“When do you leave?” I ask.

“Tomorrow.”

“Will I see you again?”

“Never.”

It’s late. The train rumbles by her window. She turns over and faces me, her breasts against my bare chest. “If you change your mind, meet me at the facility. Twelve o’clock.”

When I awake in the morning, the sun shines through the window and Mia is gone.

#

There’s a dry, purplish rash on Stevens’s forehead. Syphilis. It causes him to act erratically. I eat lunch alone and when I’m finished, I leave the breakroom, careful to avoid him. I walk through the corridors, into the Tan zone, and up the escalator. No footsteps clap behind me, but when I arrive at my workstation, Stevens and Haagen are waiting.

“You still haven’t responded to that email,” Stevens says, spittle encrusted in the corners of his mouth. Haagen stands close behind.

“How long have you been working here?” Haagen asks.

“Seven years?” I say. It’s more of a question than an answer.

“Our records say ten. And how long have you been stealing company property?” He holds an opened packet of batteries in his hand, the same ones I use for the flashlight in my hiding spot. The coffee maker drips-drip-drips. The tube light flickers. “I found these in your locker,” he says.

"Those aren't mine." I stand like a lemur before the gaping jaws of a vicious mongoose.

"Stealing company property is an infraction we take very seriously," Stevens says. "What did you need these batteries for, anyway?" He scratches the back of his dry cracked hand. "If there is a power outage, how will we operate the label maker? Already, we have new employees arriving, their mail slots in need of names."

He takes a step closer, the recording device on his hip flashes. I can taste his foul-smelling breath on my face. I am the hare running in front of the Ford Taurus. I am the Ford Taurus. I am the windshield. "Tell him, Haagen," I say. "Tell him I'm a good egg. I've never done anything off color before."

"You need to be honest with us," Stevens says. "Every day at one pm, your chair is empty. Where do you go?"

"Nowhere," I say.

"Your compensation is fair, isn't it?" I look down at my loafers. There's a hole where my big toe has worn through. "It is," I say.

"Then why do you lie?" Stevens presses his finger to my chest.

"Go easy on him," Haagen says. "He's an imbecile."

"I'm sorry," Stevens says. "But when you lie, I can't trust you." He strikes me and I'm on the floor, a sharp pain in the ribs. He kicks me. The metallic taste of blood. "You have a sister, do you not? What if something were to happen to her?" Another blow, this time to my back. "The care in those facilities is not so good, eh? Patients go unaccounted for all the time. There's disease, famine, death. And here you are, stealing company property. If you're lucky, they'll send you somewhere with running water."

I'm nothing to them, less than a cockroach even. And now they plan to rid themselves of me. How will they do it? Death by hanging? Thrown into a boiling cauldron, my flesh separating from my body? Will they first pluck out my teeth, one by one, with a pair of pliers?

I stagger to my feet, steady myself against the wall. Stevens moves toward me and I swing, knock him to ground. I run. Through the green zone, past the cafeteria, and the loading dock. I'm outside, where the air is fresh.

#

On the train, the other passengers don't notice my filthy clothes, the blood. Only a child looks up, sticks out his tongue, makes a funny face. When I arrive at the facility, the hallway is quiet, like the inside of a coffin. There are no other visitors, no patients smoking.

The man with the missing thumb stacks bricks in the courtyard. He stirs thick paste in a bucket, grunting. The clock on the wall says ten to twelve.

"Where's Mia, the nurse?" I ask.

"I don't know any Mia." He turns back to his paste. I grab hold of his arm, squeeze tightly.

“Tell her I’m here,” I say.

His eyes dart around the courtyard. “What do you know?”

“Just tell her.”

Down the hall, my sister’s door is open. She’s there, but not there. The air is musty, stale. I bathe her with a sponge, clean beneath her fingernails, brush her thin straw-like hair. When we were young, my sister knew the name of every planet in the solar system.

One morning, we sat at the kitchen table after our mother had gone to work. “It’s easy,” she said, nibbling on a piece of dry toast. “The first letter of each word goes with a planet. Like this.” She drew two columns on a sheet of paper. “My Very Educated Mother Just Served Us Nine Plates. Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto.”

She taught me the seven continents, the four directions, to use “I before E, except after C.” But my sister will never teach anyone these things again. Now she only knows suffering, the slow turning of the clock.

It’s only a matter of time before Stevens and Haagen come looking for me. They’ll go first to my apartment, then come here. Nobody escapes Black Moth. But Mia’s given me a chance for a new start. There isn’t much time—I’ll need to be quick.

The pillow I use is nearly weightless. I don’t expect a fight, but it takes all of my strength, all of my love. My sister’s hand reaches out, but I press harder, harder, until, the tension leaves her body. When it’s over, I open the window so that her soul may escape. I sit on edge of the bed. There’s no name for this feeling.

The ancestors are waiting, dear sister. Take flight!

I hear the footsteps in the hall, and look up into the doorway.

**E.E. King** (she/her) is an award-winning painter, performer, writer, and naturalist. She'll do anything that won't pay the bills, especially if it involves animals. Ray Bradbury called her stories, "marvelously inventive, wildly funny, and deeply thought-provoking." She's been published in magazines and anthologies including *Clarkesworld*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, and nominated for a Rhysling and several Pushcart awards. She is currently painting a mural in leap lab ([www.leaplab.org/](http://www.leaplab.org/)) in San Paula, CA., and co-hosts *The Long Lost Friends Show* on Metastellar YouTube. Check out her paintings, writing, musings, and books at [www.elizabetheveking.com](http://www.elizabetheveking.com) and [amazon.com/author/eeeking](http://amazon.com/author/eeeking)

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### **For Every Jill a Jill**

*This was painted from a photo I took of two women in Haight Ashbury San Francisco. I have a series of faces and people, and landscapes that caught my eye, many from 1990's San Francisco.*



### Art Class I

*Art Class I & II are two Triptychs I painted from an art class I photographed at Berkeley. The "real" class was painting a nude male.*





*In one of the triptychs the class is painting a skeleton and on either side the skeletons are painting them.*



## Art Class II

*In the other they are painting Discobolus, the discus player statue. On either side the art has come to life and is transforming them, possibly against their will.*



*The pieces speak to how we see ourselves in everything. The discus player becomes a self portrait in the student's paintings. And the other triptych speaks to the fact we are all the same skeletons, all siblings beneath the skin, it's just a matter of time.*

**Anna Barker** (she/her) is an award-winning novelist, poet, and short story writer. Writing as Anna Ralph, her first novel *The Floating Island* (Arrow, 2008) won a Betty Trask best debut award from the Society of Authors. Her second novel, *Before I Knew Him* (Arrow, 2009), was shortlisted for a Good Housekeeping Good Read award. In *Rain Hare* (Iron Press, 2022) Anna ventured into short fiction with tales that explore the connections we make and lose. All the stories are disconcerting and moving in equal measure and as with her earlier work, all are rooted in northern landscape. Anna lives in Durham (UK) with her partner and daughter. Her collection of poetry, *Book of Crow*, will be published by Indigo Dreams in fall of 2023.

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# Matriarch

## Anna Barker

The cows, a scrum,  
shoulder to shoulder, formed a ring,  
rapt by Dad's rendition of the Beatles.

And Mum, she was a bright halo,  
hair scraped back, sunburned neck.  
Laughing.

I want to hold it—  
that laugh,  
though it's not like

the field mazed with pats,  
the stonewall we struggled to climb,  
the sandwiches she remembered to pack

could ever excuse her last  
heavy  
fall.

He was singing Strawberry Fields,  
I remember, and she was laughing  
the way people do when something's

both funny and tragic.  
But the cows didn't hurt him.  
They weren't even unfriendly.

Just one, perhaps,  
swaying forward, as though  
to test her courage.

The matriarch, darker than the rest.

# Mother orbit

I see you when I close my eyes,  
your highbrow, doll heavy lids,  
your hand, curled,  
as though the sum of me  
might fit into your palm.

My child's eye made no sense of it  
amazed only by how  
tall you'd grown in the night.  
Then I understood—

feet dangling,  
belt at your neck  
the great orbiting planet of your head  
and oh my god

I see you when I close my eyes,  
the shock  
of your beautiful, beautiful body.  
Give me instead

the kicked away bedroom chair,  
the bin bags stuffed with your clothes,  
the salty tang of sandals in Tesco bags.



# At my father's side

*- in memory of David Barker*

if only we could have gone together to the low tide  
we would have walked that hard mile  
hand in hand—your hand that  
great heft that still

contains your love.  
We would have stayed where  
waves perfected their art  
and a thousand points of light

glittered like a constellation.  
You would have told me this was the place  
where any glass could be a jewel.  
You would have told me—gently

when we reached the shock of water  
you would keep going.  
We would have left no footprints,  
no trace of us but

given enough faith we would have  
found ourselves, awash  
at the silver blue keen  
that dares to be touched.

There would have been time.  
I could have allowed the tide's certainty  
to pass through me as new knowledge.  
I would have welcomed the night,

how you didn't fear it  
though it seemed so vast.  
I would have been able to bear it,  
father, that unticking

of your heart and  
the sea's warm breath,  
how it smelled so sweetly of  
freshly dug earth.



***Emily Ehrhart** (she/her) writes creative nonfiction and literary fiction. She has been published in Voice Catcher, Honeyguide Literary Magazine, Portrait of New England, and Vegan Life Magazine. Currently, Emily is an MFA in Creative Writing Candidate at Vermont College of Fine Arts. She also holds a MA in Counseling from Webster University, and a BA in English and Political Science from Saint Louis University. Emily lives in Edmonton, Alberta, with her husband and two dogs, and frequently travels to the Pacific Northwest, where she lived for several years.*

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## Tiny Living

### Emily Ehrhart

Tiny living is a lifestyle that entails cramming my daily existence into 225 square feet of home. Its complications and frustrating realities foster a creative form of minimalism that is sometimes worn as a badge of honor, and other times carried like a cross.

Before making the lifestyle commitment of buying a tiny house, I had an obsession with reality-based television focused on alternative living. With curious admiration, I watched stories of people residing in Airstreams and DIY abodes with micro spaces that defied the conformities of modern living.

While some of the people featured on these shows were off-the-grid hippies pursuing lives radically different from mainstream society, most were normal people trying to get by in housing markets that had grown too expensive. Despite having careers and savings, these people could not afford houses or land without signing up for a lifetime of debt. In heroic fashion, they decided to stick it to the banks and real-estate markets by living tiny and cutting housing costs into fractions.

Tiny homes presented an opportunity to live simply and authentically to one's passions and values. Instead of enlisting in the rat race needed to finance a three-bedroom home with a two-car garage, Tiny Housers live with less space and fewer possessions, eliminating many financial constraints and creating the freedom for hobbies and travel.

Following Tiny Housers, I witnessed atypical approaches to daily routines that were rooted in self-sufficiency. These lifestyles, almost always beneficial to the environment, appeared free of the headaches and expenses that often come with modernization.

In an episode of a YouTube docuseries on tiny houses, a French couple avoided the hassle of fitting a refrigerator into their home by storing their perishables outside. This practice was possible because they were vegan and didn't have to worry so much about salmonella from rotting meat or

spoiled milk. They also lived in a cool climate where temperatures were typically comparable to a refrigerator.

They opened their kitchen window and set their soy milk and grapes on a boxed-in shelf attached to the exterior of their home, as they explained how unnecessary a refrigerator was for their lifestyle. While I was not ready to renounce refrigeration, I was infatuated with the idea of giving up an item most of us believe is essential. If they could comfortably make do without one of the primary staples of homes, what else were people capable of sacrificing? I wondered if the dependence on our modern amenities was an unnecessary illusion, and if we called out this fallacy, would life feel simpler? Not to mention, maybe less expensive?

As I further explored the teachings of minimalism, my revulsion of consumerism grew. It seemed that the concept of home was nothing but an entrapment to buy more things. First you purchase a home—something the vast majority of us cannot afford without a mortgage—then you buy the furniture and fixtures, the holiday decorations, the entertainment devices, and the technologies that optimize convenience. Credit and debt often pay for these goods, feeding into the ruinous belief that we should always want and buy more.

Tiny living opposes all of this consumerism. It encourages one to constantly do with less and to rewrite the narrative of wanting and buying by rejecting unnecessary dependencies that breed materialism.

Tiny living also displays an artistry in the aesthetic of homes—endearing facades that draw comparisons to beloved cottages from favorite books, color schemes that are bright and playful contrasts to the conformities of typical homes, and interiors that offer various forms of chic. Additionally, there is the genius that comes with fitting essentials of 21st-century living into a space that is typically less than five hundred square feet—storage contraptions underneath floors and stairs, furniture that transforms from a dining table to a queen-size bed, and sleeping lofts that offer cozy privacy.

Perhaps one of the most enticing aspects of tiny living is its altruism. Compared to the average-sized home, living tiny reduces carbon footprints by approximately forty percent. Tiny houses use fewer resources—less electricity, gas, and water—as well as fewer materials in their construction. Their limited space inevitably leads to a reduction in consumerism, which further cuts back harmful emissions and waste that ends up in overflowing landfills.

After years of watching tiny house shows and idealizing this green, affordable lifestyle, I decided to join the club of ecoconscious minimalists and embrace tiny living.

As much as I admired Tiny Housers who took on the task of building their own homes, my repertoire of life skills does not include carpentry, so I decided to buy a premade tiny house.

Tiny houses are more affordable than a typical home, but they are not necessarily cheap. Most tiny houses cost between \$40,000-\$200,000, and usually have a higher cost per square foot than a standard home. Not having this cash in savings, I had no choice but to finance my tiny house. As I signed the bank's papers, agreeing to monthly payments and interest rates for the next ten years of my life, I was painfully aware that I had not escaped the consumeristic cycle of credit and debt I had been hoping to avoid in my decision to live tiny. My monthly tiny house payment was significantly less than the average mortgage payment, but the fact that it existed at all was disappointing.

Once financing was figured out, I moved onto the impending task of downsizing my belongings—a feat that turned out to be more challenging and emotional than I foresaw.

The mission of shrinking my life's physical baggage started off easy enough. I gave away casserole dishes that sat unused in cabinets, leather shoes and purses that were left over from my pre-vegan days, furniture that served no purpose, and Christmas decorations that were long forgotten. Boxes were packed and dropped at the local Goodwill, and yet there was still so much *stuff*.

I moved onto childhood memorabilia that had spent decades packed away in storage bins. On eBay, I sold my Cabbage Patch Kids and a Peanuts piggy bank, telling myself that as a woman in my mid-thirties it was healthy to say goodbye to these juvenile treasures. I then turned to my closet, deciding that anything that had not been worn in the last year had to go—even the pleather miniskirt from my college days that I had held onto, convinced it would one day be the perfect addition to a Halloween costume. I sold appliances, décor items, and outdoor equipment that took up a quarter of my storage space.

Nearing the delivery date of my tiny house, I scanned my surroundings, noticing that there were still enough belongings to fill multiple rooms, while painfully aware that the tiny house would be like having just one room, one small room. More had to go. I started to experience gripping worries about not being able to pull off tiny living.

*What else can I possibly give away? How can I do this?* My own voice screamed in my head.

My line of sight fell on my collection of books. A tall, cherry-stained mahogany bookcase held the texts that comprised the entire span of my reading life. Standing at nearly seven feet, the bookcase was already for sale since it was an impossibility for the tiny house. I realized that I had been fooling myself by believing the inhabitants of this bookcase would come with me and somehow miraculously fit into a space that could hold only essentials.

I made my way to the books, letting my fingertips graze the worn-down spines of classics that had been with me for years. My books were part

of my history, stories and words that had shaped me, each title associated with a period of my life—a college class, a certain city, or a beloved bookstore.

In a hurry, trying to avoid my growing reluctance, I packed my books and dropped them off at a donation center. I told myself it was time for somebody else to enjoy them. Maybe my worn-down copy of *Moll Flanders* would make some reader feel human again, or perhaps my anthology of American literature would spark somebody's personal renaissance.

The donation center volunteer shifted her weight from one foot to the other as she lifted my last box of books to hip height, her hands gripping and the whites of her knuckles showing. "You sure do got a lot of books," she said, trying not to drop the box as she smiled graciously and turned away from me.

I felt like I was giving away part of myself. Although I kept several texts that held a favorite status, after parting with the bulk of my library, I grieved the loss of my books for months. To this day there is still an ache in my chest when I think of the titles dispersed among the donation center's book fairs and secondhand shops.

#

The pain of downsizing was soothed when my tiny house arrived, delivered right to me by the builder. With awe and pure joy, I gawked at its charm—a copper-colored barrel roof, tall windows on each side, and an inviting red front door. Inside was living space that fit a small desk and an accent chair. There was a built-in bench that didn't offer much comfort for relaxing, but provided seating for guests. Underneath the bench were built-in cabinets for extra storage. Right off of the living area was the kitchen with a sink, counter space for a toaster-oven and microwave, and a three-cubic foot refrigerator. At the back of the house was a bathroom ill-suited for anybody with claustrophobic tendencies, but it provided the basics. Above the kitchen and bathroom was a loft fit for a queen-size mattress and a short dresser. The house had a front porch made of freshly stained spruce, where I immediately set up flower pots and a welcome mat.

The first place my tiny house resided was rented land in a rural area outside of Seattle. The acreage I resided on was surrounded by forests and quiet gravel roads. It was the perfect setup for the nature-oriented, simple lifestyle I imagined for myself.

#

Some Tiny Housers own land and build their homes on foundations or trailers that reside on their property. For me, and many other Tiny Housers, renting land for our transient homes is necessary. Usually this involves finding people, enticed by an extra income, with acreage or yard space and the ability to offer electric and water hook-ups.

Familiarizing myself with the process of renting land for a tiny house quickly dispelled the myth that tiny living was inexpensive. Although renting

space for a tiny house is perhaps more affordable than renting your average city apartment, it still is a weighty cost. Coupled with the monthly loan payment for my house, rent left me with housing costs that rivaled a typical renter's expenses.

In addition to finding rental opportunities for a tiny house, there is the task of moving the tiny house from one location to the next. Due to a disruptive neighbor, I decided to move my tiny house to a different location three months after it was delivered to me. My tiny house is small—even for a tiny house—eighteen feet long and a little over six thousand pounds. People with F-250 trucks love to tell me it's an easy haul, yet it requires a diesel-guzzling monster of an automobile to move it. Not able to buy one of these vehicles, I have to rely on truck rentals to move my tiny house. My experience with said trucks while hauling over three tons is limited to say the least, so I also hire skilled drivers when I need to move my house.

Since I have a history of moving frequently, I had hoped the tiny house would be the perfect remedy to the expense and stress of my nomadic lifestyle. I imagined traveling with my home, seeing North America, never having to pack boxes of belongings again because everything in the house could stay in it when moving. This delusional thinking failed to consider the difficulties and costs associated with hauling the tiny house. Not to mention, my home has small shelves holding stacks of dishes, art and photos hanging on walls, and cabinets with swinging doors that hold everything from cleaning supplies to crafting tools. Imagine not carefully packing these belongings and lifting the back end of the house two feet to a truck's tow ball, and then taking it all on a ride through city streets and freeways. Obviously, to assume moving the tiny house would require no work or packing was horribly naive.

#

Tiny houses offer an abundance of charms with their quaint cuteness and invitation to appreciate the basics, but there is no getting around that day-to-day living in a tiny house requires extra chores.

For example, with three cupboards, four drawers, and one small counter, there simply is never enough kitchen space for somebody who enjoys cooking. With so few storage options, I have to stockpile drygoods in my microwave. Every time I want to heat up leftovers, I open the microwave and unload flour, rice, oats, and various other items onto an already crowded counter. Once my food is warm, I precariously balance it on the remaining corner of counter space as I restock the microwave with my grains. The lack of kitchen space demands extra steps that make simple tasks more complex, something that is quite common in my tiny house.

The truth is that there never seems to be enough room in the tiny house. I have added shelves to every wall, and developed elaborate storage systems that utilize each inch of available floor space without cutting off a walkway. Some of my finest moments of pragmatism have come when

figuring out how to place everyday items in discreet nooks that create an aesthetically pleasing tidiness without impairing functionality. And yet, there is never enough space.

Each day includes juggling and shuffling possessions to pull out the tucked away thing that I need. The thought of buying new items or getting an unexpected gift creates a rush of anxiety and the looming question of *where will I put it?*

Minimalism is meant to be a life free of clutter that creates a sense of capaciousness and an appreciation for essential belongings. But when these necessary possessions barely fit my space, minimalism does not feel like minimalism. The space is crowded and everyday usage feels burdensome.

Sure, I could give up cooking, the limited outdoor equipment and books that survived my downsizing, and other little pleasures that reside in my home, but then what would my quality of life be? One of my primary drives for tiny living was to have more time and money for interests and hobbies, so wouldn't giving away these items defeat one of the main points of tiny living?

With resignation, I accept that I have hit my maximum for minimalism; there is nothing else that I am willing to give up. So, what I have must fit into my tiny house, which means every day involves a reconstruction of belongings that ultimately takes more time and patience than non-Tiny Housers could imagine.

#

The tiny house shows on YouTube tell you that having limited indoor space encourages more time outside in nature. Accompanying this promise are mesmerizing scenes of outdoor havens with hammocks, hot tubs, vegetable gardens and patio furniture. Who needs adequate indoor space when you have your own private Eden?

When I first got my tiny house, I hung a hammock, bought a patio table, and planted flowers—a hot tub was not in the budget. I spent summer days outside playing with the dogs, or casually swinging in the hammock with a good book. Almost every meal was enjoyed outside with sunlight, cool breezes, and the sweet scent of surrounding pines. Tiny living did indeed seem tolerable when nature became part of home.

Unfortunately, I live in a climate where there are only three short months of summer, and the remaining seasons are cold with a back-and-forth of rain and snow. Most months, living space does not extend to an outdoor patio, but instead is confined to the tiny house that is extra crowded with the coats, boots and winter gear required for the northern temperatures. Meals are now eaten on my desk that, after work hours, serves as a dining table.

#

When friends and family come to visit, they get a kick out of how I transform my office space into yoga space into den space. They are fascinated by the absurd complexities involved in everyday tasks.

“You have to pull out the hamper *every* time you shower?” They ask with disbelief.

“Of course, the shower is the only place to store the hamper,” I explain.

“I could never live like this,” they say in tones that blend admiration and pity.

The most fascinating talking point is the compost toilet. With each guest, I have to provide a quick tutorial on how to use the toilet, along with a fierce warning to never mix solids and liquids. There is always a slight cringe and a hint of embarrassment at the frank discussion, and inevitably there are questions about what happens to the waste if I cannot flush it into oblivion.

After I explain the daily dumping of liquids and the weekly chore of cleaning out the solids container, I’m usually met with guttural groans of disgust and looks that question my sanity.

Composting toilets do not have to be part of tiny living, but they often are necessary. If one travels with a tiny house, there will undoubtedly be stays that cannot offer septic or sewer hook-ups. Many property owners who rent land to tiny houses can only offer water and electric, which means the tiny house has to function without a flush toilet.

The benefit that pacifies unwanted chores and occasional odor issues is that composting toilets reduce water usage by over six thousand gallons per person in a year’s time. For this reason, many Tiny Housers sing the praise of composting toilets as they overlook the less attractive attributes.

#

For all of tiny living’s challenges, after two years in my micro-home, I have settled into a comfort. The additional efforts that come with tiny living are now part of my daily routines and habits. I have learned workarounds that maximize the space and allow for functionality that meets my needs. I still pine for a hot bath or an evening lounge on a sofa—two things that are not possible in my tiny house—but I have accepted that there are sacrifices and frustrations that come with this lifestyle, as there are with most.

Without a doubt, tiny living should not be the idealized lifestyle that is presented on Instagram feeds and YouTube videos. It is no easy venture to live in a few hundred square feet, and it will require adaptations that are sometimes frustrating because they create extra work. It is also not a lifestyle free of costs, real-estate markets, or lending. If you do not own land, you will have to rent land, which likely will be a cost determined by market rates. If you cannot afford the tens of thousands of dollars that a tiny house costs, then you will need to finance. With that said, costs are typically less than they would be with the standard path of mortgages and utility usage for a larger home.

Recently, tiny houses have progressed to address many of the laments I have outlined in this essay. For starters, they are bigger. When I first started

watching tiny house shows, 200-300 square feet was a common size, but now featured homes are closer to 400-600 square feet. These houses also model themselves after standard homes, presenting as miniature versions of the average suburban dwelling with modern amenities such as stairs, bathtubs, full ranges, washers and dryers. All of which make tiny living more comfortable, as well as more expensive.

My future as a Tiny Houser has limited days ahead, as I recently got married and two people in my tiny house takes the space to unbearable levels of stress. Although I do not expect to miss my home's micro-offerings and their associated irritations, I will continue to advocate for the tiny living lifestyle that tries to make living affordable and less harmful to the environment. While tiny living comes with a fair share of frustrations, the values that drive it deserve respect and consideration as we move forward in a world that continues to get more expensive and more destructive to the planet.

My hope is that as we progress to meet evolving housing needs, we find a balance that allows for eco-conscious and affordable homes to exist without creating challenges to our day-to-day living. This solution would likely encourage greater interest and willingness to embrace alternative housing that could offer the environmental and cost-reducing advantages of tiny living. Currently, I explore how to find this balance for my own housing needs, and encourage others to examine and try alternative living ideas that make the admirable qualities of tiny living more accessible.



*Ellery Beck is a graduate of Salisbury University with a BA in Creative Writing. They have poems published or forthcoming in Passages North, Colorado Review, Atlanta Review, Sugar House Review, New Delta Review and elsewhere. Ellery is also one of the co-founders of Beaver Magazine as well as a reader for Poet Lore.*

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# On Fraying

## Ellery Beck

Everything feels too fabricated. Too silky to hold  
still. I am a skirt, shimmering in the wind, one gust  
from forgetting this figure, my form. I am also the shiver

of flesh beneath—the seams slightly holding on. Here's how  
the unstitching starts. I'd rather be bare than have the crumbling  
cloth scratch my skin. Rather be too cold

to find out what touches next. To forget  
the wind and how it forces itself against—

# Daybreak Reverie

I watch you tuck yourself into the offing, surrendering  
us to past tense as if                      the horizon is a scale

of distance rather than sight. Clouds  
shift as they shadow over-                      head, your blood-rush

singing that same truth: if light takes its time  
to reach, then this must be history

warming our skin. Here, the present is a sight  
too spry to catch                      and the past a scene

too spacious to roam. If I must dream, let it be  
like this: to live in some sun, even if half lit.

# Pierce Cento

*After “Anthropocene Pastoral” by Catherine Pierce*

We were built to hold tight, built  
to love our warmth to warmth  
even if it looks manufactured. Built to say

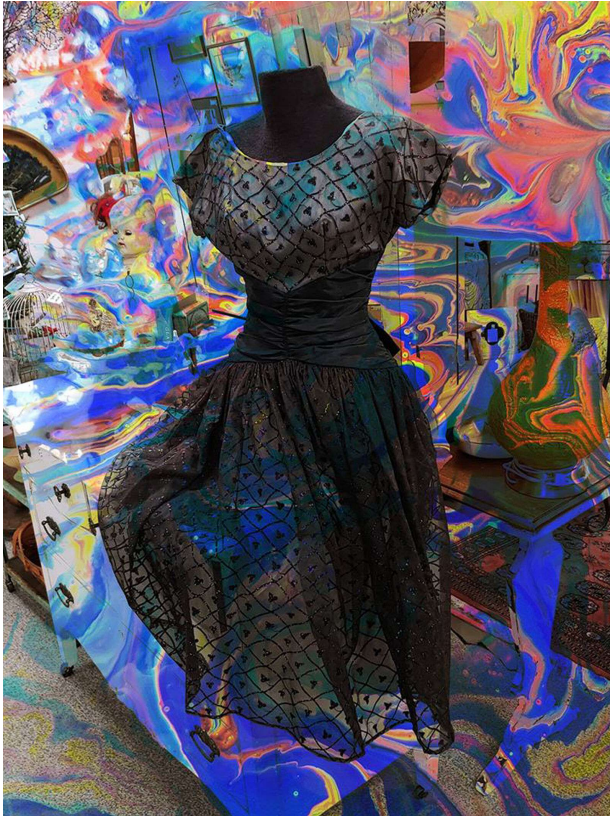
*sorry, I’m sorry, at least it’s starting—I’m so  
sorry.* Even as we held spring, open windows  
everywhere—the sky so blue—we were already near

the end. We were deep in orange poppies, daffodils, onion  
grass. A placebo, an absurd comfort. We were built to say  
*gentle*, to reach for the heat. Built to marvel at skin

on skin, at the ground all around us. Built to hold  
each other, together, towards the graying.

**Carl Scharwath** has appeared globally with 175+ journals selecting his writing or art. Carl has published three poetry books, two photography books, and his latest book Playground of Destiny features poetry, short stories and photography (Impspired Press). His photography was also exhibited in the Mount Dora Center for The Arts gallery and The Leesburg Center for The Arts. Seven global poets have also selected his photography to grace the covers of their published books. Carl was the art editor for Minute Magazine for four years, is a contributing editor for ILA Magazine and was a finalist for the Mary Cassatt award for photography. He is also a competitive runner, and a 2nd degree black- belt in Taekwondo.

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**Little Black Dress (photograph)**

*I always loved the cubist style of painting, the fractures and play of light, and I wanted to duplicate this effect in my photography. I saw this dress on a mannequin in an antique store and she called to me to be photographed. I then overlaid another photograph to have the desired effect of a cubist image.*



### **Searching 2 (paintography)**

*This base photo was again two mannequins found in another antique store. These stores are great finds for photography. I then completed a drip-painting for the desired abstract background and again did an overlay for the desired effect.*

*Deni Naffziger's work has appeared in New Ohio Review, Atticus Review, Pine Mountain Sand & Gravel, Pudding Magazine, Main Street Rag, The MacGuffin, and elsewhere. Her second book, Strange Bodies, will be published by Shadelandhouse Modern Press in 2023. Naffziger co-founded The Writers' Collaborative in Athens, Ohio, which partnered college writing students with adults with disabilities to write poems, stories, and songs. The collaboration was later expanded to include regional musicians and pre-professional dancers and culminated in 2 CDs and a 3-day celebration of collaboration, community and the arts.*

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# Assignment

## Deni Naffziger

Draw a timeline.            Begin  
with your birth and your mother  
who wove stories to bind you to her.  
End with your death and ignore imagination.  
You cannot forecast cause:  
brain cancer or heart attack in the produce aisle.  
Nor can you predict setbacks  
like crying at your first job interview,  
or drinking too much afterwards  
A timeline allows you to visualize  
significant achievements:  
graduation, employment, your wedding day,  
and so on and so forth until many years later  
when you learn about Andromeda  
and other galaxies and their relationship to you.  
Like your relationship to your mother  
who will surely have died by then,  
and on a particular date you will stop thinking of her  
as your mother and instead think of her  
like any other human being or something other  
than human because eventually  
she won't share any of the same qualities you have.  
She will simply be energy at that point.  
And you will ask yourself:  
How does that kind of consciousness work?

# Aria

Sonnet, with a line from Zakia Henderson-Brown

We inherit the tree, roots locked,  
brown and tender like a house wren  
choking from the tree hole:  
I can't breathe.

It's an anthem rooted at the heart  
of an ailing planet, a dirge hell-bent  
on coaxing the woodcutter to unlock  
the shed out back, to grab the ax.

Our inheritance is a nest infested  
with parasites that feed on blinded chicks.  
With our mother gone, what should we do  
but fill the roost with spiders,

then listen for an effervescent voice,  
the rush-and-jumble song that hope employs?

# Metaphor: Letting Go of Guilt

I dreamed I killed a bee—  
a brutal assassination.

To begin  
I laid the little thing on his back,  
sawed off his legs with considerable effort.

Nothing left but stumps.  
Figured he'd bleed out  
(though he did not).

He was as angry as a hornet,  
so I took him up behind the neck  
(like a mama cat carries her young)  
in order to toss him into the pond.

But this was no kitten!  
His triangle head, baring enormous teeth,  
lurched toward my arm,  
as if to bite me.

Over the water he soared as I watch from shore  
with only mild remorse  
as he worked hard to stay afloat,  
bobbing toward the spillway.



# Refugees

Why only remember the ones who perished  
in hot ash and pumice, their lungs on fire,  
faces covered with pillows and cloth,  
who refused to leave when blue skies  
darkened black as obsidian,  
and tall, broad flames blazed from Vesuvius?

Maybe because plaster cast bodies tell stories  
we cannot erase of a sky mottled and dirty,  
of men and women looking for one another  
in the dark as the sea shallows, and sunfish  
are stranded on dry sand.

What of those who have nothing to lose  
or everything to lose and leave anyway,  
who abandon plates full of olives  
and fava beans rattling on tables,  
who interrupt the songs of their children,  
invent new songs as they run with them  
past outdoor markets and bakeries  
with sun-gold loaves of sourdough  
still in the oven, past bright yellow frescoes  
of foliage and fowl?

What of wood pigeons and sparrows,  
blue rock thrush, golden orioles and even  
that harbinger of trouble, the black-billed magpie,  
who leads the way and no one thinks to praise or blame?  
Clouds sink behind them and cover the sea.  
It is daylight everywhere else.

*Marianne Xenos (she/her) is a writer and visual artist living in western Massachusetts. She works with photography, collage and stories. Along with narratives about shapeshifters and urban dragons, Marianne is working on a fantasy novel set in 1983 featuring Nick Xenakis' great-granddaughters.*

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# The Language of Water

## Marianne Xenos

Nick Xenakis sat on the grassy bank of a stream in the woods of Dogtown, watching his granddaughter fill two small cups with clear water. She balanced carefully as she climbed barefoot up the bank.

Nick took one of the wooden cups and thought of his aunt—his *Thea*. She once said that a Greek without family was like meat without salt, or salad without oil. Nick was an orphan, and his *Thea*, an elderly fortune-teller in the port of Piraeus, took him in. She had a knack for divination, but not for business, and they were always poor. Nick wondered later if she'd foreseen her death and knew Nick would be better off, no matter how unhappy, in America. She paid for his trip, and he came alone to work in a granite quarry in Gloucester, living with a large Italian family that spoke Italian and English, but no Greek. Language, like the ocean, was a wide border, and difficult to migrate. Nick Xenakis was as lonely as a young Greek boy could be.

Now, sitting with his granddaughter in Dogtown, Massachusetts, he spoke English, Italian, and a smattering of Mi'kmaq, along with his well-worn Greek. And today they were studying the language of water.

"Here, Papouli," Isabelle said. "You go first." She was eight years old, and sometimes bossy, which her grandfather was guilty of encouraging.

Nick sipped from the cup. His *Thea* had told him that water could tell the past, and in rare cases the future. Greeks read coffee grounds for divination, rather than tea leaves, and his *Thea* had read fortunes outside a kafenion in Piraeus, flipping the small porcelain cups to see the patterns in the muddy grounds.

"*Thea* said that coffee doesn't gossip. It's water that spills the beans."

Isabelle rolled her eyes. "Take another sip, Papouli, and focus."

"Water will tell you its history, and if you are patient, it will also tell you a person's secrets."

Isabelle sighed, and Nick smiled. His granddaughter complained that he talked too much.

Nick sipped again and tasted the mineral tang of the stream, the gray stone under the mud. And underneath that...the Atlantic, sooty oil from the

freighter that had brought him, the char of street food at the port in Piraeus. Maybe it was the stream, or maybe he was just remembering his own story.

Isabelle, he knew, was a more skillful reader. As humans left Dogtown, the spirits reclaimed the forest, and the little stream was like a message board that Isabelle could read. She was the forest's grandchild as much as his.

Nick had given her an old botany textbook, and Isabelle brought it to the woods, whispering the plants' names in Latin. She knew which plants were edible and which were toxic, which were tasty, and which simply moody and irritable, just by touching them.

Isabelle sipped the water in the small wooden cup. Then she smiled and took a deeper sip.

"Once upon a time," she began, looking up at her grandfather, "a handsome young stranger fell in love with the town witch, and he built her an invisible cabin in a haunted wood."

#

Later that night, Nick played guitar on the back porch. He smiled to himself—*handsome stranger?*—and thought about his love for the town witch. Jeanne, his wife, was traveling in Canada, visiting relatives and looking for traditional medicines for their daughter Thalia. Nick missed his wife, and worried about his daughter, but tonight his grandchildren were fed, the dishes were done, and Nick played guitar as he did every evening. He played at dusk, smoked a few cigarettes, drank a single glass of whiskey, and, lately, waited for his *fata* son-in-law to show up.

Nick had mixed feelings about the *fata*. Or the *neraida*, the *daimons*, the fairies. *Fata* was the Italian term, but whatever the language—Italian, Greek or English—the *fata* came and went as they pleased, and lived by their own rules. Nick had been waiting months for his son-in-law, but he didn't wait by the front door, because the *fata* always came from the woods.

Nine years ago his son-in-law had walked straight out of the haunted woods of Dogtown and up to the back porch with a shiny ring and a shinier smile, and he asked for Nick's daughter's hand in marriage. He didn't knock on the front door like a reasonable suitor, and the growing bump in Thalia's belly was already obvious to the world. Nick loved his daughter, and she loved this *fata*, so he gave his blessing. What choice did he have?

Now he'd been waiting for months, smoking and playing his guitar, but the nights were getting chilly. This wasn't the first absence, or even the tenth. Nick's son-in-law wandered back and forth from the Otherworld, restless as a traveling salesman, disappearing for months or a year. Each time he returned Thalia recovered, and she sickened each time he left. Nick felt in his heart that this time was different, more dangerous.

Isabelle came out and joined him on the porch. She had been the bump in Thalia's belly nine years ago, the child of the *fata* from the woods.

Isabelle was confident and clever, and she looked like her father. *God help her*. She had Nick's olive skin, but her father's soft black curls, and dawn gray eyes. She carried herself like the heir to the goddamn fairy throne. Plus, she was too smart for her own good, Nick often said with pride.

Isabelle picked up a ukulele to plunk along with him.

"Is your brother asleep, Bella?" Nick asked.

"Snoring like a bear with a head cold."

"Good . . . good." He played a riff from an old Greek folk song, and she followed along.

"You yelled at your mother tonight. I heard through the window."

Isabelle kept plunking. "I'm not sorry, Papouli."

They heard a sound at the door. A chubby boy in flannel pajamas stood on the threshold, sniffing. Orsino, Isabelle's little brother. His ragged stuffed dog matched the cartoon puppies on his pajamas.

"Snoring like a bear, eh? What's wrong, honey? Come sit with me."

Nick put the guitar aside, and the four-year-old boy climbed into his lap. Nick soothed his thick brown curls. Orsino looked nothing like his *fata* father. He looked like a Xenakis, which was fine with Nick.

Nick knew what was bothering both his grandchildren. Their mother, Thalia, was dying. And if that wasn't enough, she was dying of a broken heart. Even worse, dying for the love of someone who left two half-human children for an old man to raise.

Isabelle put down the ukulele. "I won't ever forgive her, Papouli. Not ever."

Nick sighed and raised an eyebrow.

Isabelle said, "I tasted her water, from the glass on her nightstand, and I know what she feels. I told her that I'm not going to cry if she dies. And I'll plant poisonous flowers all over the grave." She held up her fingers to tick off the names of plants. "Foxglove, nightshade, bloodroot, oleander...all of them! Then I'll put on my prettiest red dress so I can spin and spin and then I'll piss on all the flowers!" Isabelle paused for effect, and said, "And I'll make Ori do it too."

The little boy had been crying quietly, but now he complained, "No, Bella! Won't!"

Nick patted the boy's back and shushed him. "Ori, don't worry. You don't have to pee on any flowers." Then, since it was late, he told them to settle down and sang a song in Italian, and then another one in Greek that he'd learned from *Thea* about a mama bird who brings her babies carnations and daisies. When Ori was asleep, Nick carried him to his bed. Isabelle followed, and he tucked her in. "I mean it, Papouli," she whispered.

"Okay, Bella, we'll talk tomorrow. Make me a list of your poisonous flowers. Better yet, you can draw them, and let Ori color with you. But Isabelle . . ." He waited until she looked him in the eye. "Nobody else can piss

for you. He's a baby, but he has his own feelings, okay?" They agreed, and he kissed her goodnight, then went to the door of his daughter's room. Thalia was difficult to see under a pile of quilts, but she seemed smaller today than yesterday.

Nick took the glass of tepid water from the bedside, and brought it to the kitchen to exchange for fresh. He paused and sniffed the cup, tempted to know what Isabelle had learned, but poured the water down the drain. Daughters deserved privacy. And so did mothers—he'd have to talk to Isabelle about uninvited tasting. He brought fresh water to the bedroom, straightened the blankets, and fluffed the top quilt. Then he sat gently on the side of the bed and took his daughter's hand. Thalia stared at the ceiling, unmoving despite Nick's fussing. "The babies are asleep, sweetie. They miss you."

Thalia never spoke anymore, but Nick spoke to her throughout the day. He brought her water and soup, told her about the family, and watched her face for a spark of recognition. There was only one name that brought a spark, one name that could make her speak. Out of principle or stubbornness he refused to mention that particular name. "So, what did you think of Isabelle's threat? She's going to piss on your grave in a red party dress."

Nothing.

"But your baby bear Orsino refuses to be involved. He knows where a big boy does his business."

Nothing.

Thalia looked pale and thin, but radiant—*God help her*—despite her sickness. She looked like a fairy bride in a movie, or like Mary Pickford in technicolor. And it wasn't just a father's doting. Even as a child, Thalia was radiant. People stared, followed, or tried to touch her. More than once strangers picked her up to carry her away. Nick suspected some wild magic gene on his wife's side—Jeanne hadn't been the town witch for nothing—but whatever the cause, he did the only thing he knew how to do. He hid her.

"I heard from your mother. Turns out they have a postal service in Canada after all. Do you want me to read you the letter? She found an herb that might help you feel better."

Nothing.

Nick had a knack for hiding. All the Xenakis had knacks of one kind or another, like his aunt's fortune telling. In the years before he met his wife, Nick made a small fortune hiding and moving contraband for friends. When Thalia was four, and a second stranger had tried to walk away with her, he worried for his daughter's safety. So, Nick built this cabin among the haunted stones of Dogtown, and hid the family. Those were happy years, but little did he know the back porch of the cabin was visible to the *fata*.

Nick squeezed Thalia's hand. One foot in the grave, but she glowed like a beacon on a mountaintop. He sang a few lines of his aunt's lullaby, and

then let go of his stubbornness and said, "Thalia, sweetie, I remember what you asked about Lucien."

There was the spark. Thalia's cheeks flushed, and she struggled to turn her head. She whispered, "Lucien?"

"Yes, Lucien, the bastard. Lucien the wayward *fata*. Lucien, whom I hate, but *you*..." he touched her feverish cheek, "you are my *louloudia*, Thalia. My flower. I'll do what you want. Do you understand? I'll do exactly what you asked." With a half-smile Thalia nodded and closed her eyes and Nick sang in Greek. *Nani, nani to pethi...so your lover will come, bringing you flowers, carnations and daisies.*

Nick went back to the porch, lit a cigarette, and picked up his guitar. He played for a moment, and then he paused. At the foot of the steps his son-in-law waited. As usual, he'd come out of the woods, and certainly hadn't knocked on the front door.

"I've come for my wife," Lucien said, one foot casually resting on the bottom step. Nick was unsurprised, but still itched with anger. The *fata* were undeniably beautiful, like cellos or jazz or sunlight streaking through a forest canopy. Lucien had Isabelle's beauty—wavy black hair, eyes like the midwinter ocean, and an innate radiance—but none of Isabelle's quirks. And he had none of Thalia's passion or vulnerability. Nick thought these *neraida*, *daimons*, *fata* burned white like a drug. Like cocaine. Pleasure, addiction, then a crash—always a crash. Just look at his daughter's suffering.

Nick wanted to spit, but took a drag from his cigarette instead. He said, "Your wife? She has a name: Thalia. And what about your children? Have you come for them too?"

Casually, as though bargaining a contract, Lucien said, "I can take the girl, but not the boy. He has the blood, but not what we call the *aman*, the fairy soul."

Orsino was Lucien's child, but he was a round, warm puppy of a boy. Human and loving. Nick wondered momentarily if all *fata* were snobs, or if it was just his particular son-in-law who was unbearable. Lucien had never recognized his youngest child's gifts, dismissing him as a mortal cub. But for the moment, Nick set aside his dislike, and stuck to the business at hand.

"She's dying, Lucien. Thalia is dying."

"She's my wife, and you can't stop me from taking her."

Nick felt like spitting again, so he did, but off the porch and into the bushes. They'd had this argument before.

"Try a different approach, *gambros*." Nick used the Greek word for son-in-law, but it held no affection.

Lucien sighed, and pushed the hair back from his face. In the porchlight his skin was as white as the moon. "If I take her, she may live. She'll die if she stays."

Nick thought of Isabelle's poisonous flowers. Was it better to bury your mother, or to know that she was alive but left you willingly? The children were abandoned either way. For a moment Nick hated the *fata*, magic, and even the spirits of Dogtown, but then he thought of his half-*fata* grandchildren and Thalia's beacon of light. He would do anything to protect them. Nick flicked ash from his cigarette, then looked straight at Lucien.

"Promise me she'll live, that you can cure her with this *fata mojo* of yours."

"I can only do my best."

"Once again: try harder, *gambros*."

"She's dying for lack of *me*, Nick Xenakis. This is about magic, and the Otherworld will heal her."

Nick paused to draw deep on his cigarette, squinting against the smoke. He took his time and let out a long breath. "And the children stay with me."

Lucien sighed, relief flickering across his smooth face.

"Agreed."

Nick felt silence at the door; someone was listening from the shadows. Isabelle, of course. But he didn't call to her. She was Lucien's child, but also a Xenakis. She knew how to hide. Tomorrow as penance to her, he would turn the earth for her garden of poisonous plants. Nick only hoped that someday Isabelle would forgive him for the bargain he was making tonight.

A moment later, when Nick held the door for Lucien to go inside and wake Thalia, Isabelle was gone from the shadows, but she soon reappeared. "Hello, Pappa, " she said to her father. She was holding a large stone goblet in her steady hands. "I brought you a drink of water." When he didn't take the goblet immediately she said, "In Greek households, it's polite to accept something, even just a sip of water."

Lucien never accepted food or drink. Greeks have their customs, and the *fata* have their own. But his eyes softened when he looked at his daughter. He was leaving her behind, possibly forever, so he took the goblet from her hands. Lucien took a long drink, and handed it back to Isabelle.

"Thank you, Isabelle Xenakis," he said, in a formal voice, and went to Thalia's bedroom.

Nick followed Isabelle to the kitchen and said, "What did you just do, Bella?"

"Nothing! I just want to know."

Isabelle stood at the sink with the heavy stone goblet, and glared at her grandfather.

"It's not *poison*, Papouli," Isabelle said. "He's my father. I just want to understand." She brought the heavy stone goblet to her lips and took a sip.

Nick didn't ask what she sensed in the water. It was none of his business, and none of hers either, but he understood her impulse. Or he

*thought* he understood. Isabelle was reading her father's future and possibly her mother's. Nick felt suddenly over his head—very human, and very alone. His small tricks and knacks were no match for Otherworld magic. Nick leaned against the doorjamb, missing his wife, knowing he was losing Thalia, and that thought brought a tide of grief, distant memories of his parents, and a painful yearning for his *Thea*. Even after forty years, he wanted her advice and wondered what she would think of his bargain with Lucien. For just a moment, Nick felt like that orphaned Greek boy again. He looked toward the hallway while Isabelle slowly and purposefully drank the last of the water in the goblet.

Nick didn't know he was crying until Isabelle reached up to touch his tears. He took her hand away gently. "Privacy, Bella." He squeezed her hand. "From now on, a person's tears are private. No rummaging in people's feelings without consent. That goes for goblets too."

Isabelle nodded, but seemed to know that something else was worrying her grandfather, even without touching his tears. "I won't leave you Papouli, not ever. I just want to understand. He's not very nice, and he confuses me. But now I can always find them, no matter where they go."

Nick sighed and kept his opinion about Isabelle's father to himself. He heard Lucien talking to Thalia in the other room, and Nick knew they would be leaving soon. He said to Isabelle, "Tomorrow we'll start a new garden. You can stay up a bit longer and make your list of poisonous plants."

Isabelle pulled out her grandmother's copy of *Culpepper's Complete Herbal*, and sat at the table with a notebook and colored pencils. "We'll have some poisonous plants, Papouli, but everybody gets a special plant. Like feverfew to help Nanna's headaches, and peppermint because Ori likes it. What plant would you like?"

"Oregano or sage, so I can cook something tasty."

"And my plant will be belladonna, because it's like my name. Or maybe milkweed so the butterflies will have something to eat. Milkweed is poisonous, but not for the butterfly babies."

Nick picked up the stone goblet. He thought of Lucien, and felt a strong urge to hurl the goblet through the window—exile everything *fata* from the house. But he couldn't, of course. He wouldn't. He was a *Papouli*, he loved his grandchildren, and—he smiled to himself—window glass was expensive. Besides, hating magic was like hating the moon or fighting the tides. He felt like an old man shaking his fist at the trees, demanding the dawn chorus of birds sing a different song. Instead Nick would be a *Papouli* and teach magic some indoor manners, starting with his granddaughter. Tomorrow, while they were digging, they'd have another talk about privacy, and maybe encourage a few more nonlethal plants.

"So the baby caterpillars eat the leaves, but what do the mamma butterflies eat?"



"The nectar from flowers, silly."

"Oh...very clever for a poisonous plant. What else do butterflies eat? Butter and flies?"

"No, Papouli, I'll show you."

Nick smiled while Isabelle brought two hefty books from the shelf and divided her list into three sections: poison, butterflies, and family favorites. Nick turned to the sink and considered the stone goblet, then he hummed as he washed it carefully, dried it with a gingham towel, and put it back on the shelf.

**Amanda Yskamp** (we/us) is a writer of many genres and a collage artist. Her artwork has appeared in such magazines as *Black Rabbit*, *Riddled with Arrows*, and *Stoneboat*. She lives on the ten-year flood plain of the Russian River, where she teaches writing from her online classroom and serves as a librarian at the local elementary school.

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### Over There

*I create images that are narrative, featuring visual schematics, relying on juxtaposition for contrast or disjuncture.*



### **Blue Calibration**

*I consider my pictures to be literary, but calling upon a less verbal sensibility, thus liberating me (and the viewer) from the literal.*

*Yael Aldana (she/her) is a Caribbean Afro-Latinx writer and poet. Yael and her mother and her mother's mother and so on are descendants of the Asario people of modern-day Colombia. She earned her MFA in creative writing from Florida International University (FIU). Her work has appeared or is upcoming in Miniskirt Magazine, The Florida Book Review, South Florida Poetry Journal, The Human Prospect, Scapegoat Review, Antithesis Blog, and Slag Glass City. She teaches creative writing at FIU, and she lives in South Florida with her son and too many pets.*

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# My Mother and I Save Our Yogurt Containers to Reuse Them

Yael Aldana

We people are part of the dirt and loam  
of the wet between the toes. This, our sun,  
prickles our skin. An ancient return of the bones  
formed from old habits. We are inconvenient.  
Not plastic parts blooming and becoming  
filler of this aching body we call Earth. This  
is a calling. We are a net, small dots winking  
in and out. This is not of convenience, not  
in comfort. We stretch wide and thin  
across this dream that is both thin and deep,  
red-black and yawning as a moonless night.  
We have no humility. We sniff and point fingers  
at the Styrofoam cup in your hand. Sleeping  
and dreaming of a body consuming so much,  
to burst the web, of never having enough  
of everything. If only to taste the blood.

# We are Very Witchy

*Nos estamos haciendo muy brujitas* - Sandra Cisneros

*We are becoming very witchy* - Cisneros translated by Ruth Behar

We make altars in glittering blue and white mosaics  
with plaster skulls and black and white photographs.  
We burn candles. We clutch our talismans:  
the gold embossed cross around your conquistador neck  
the hammered silver cross around your English neck  
pictures of stark dour grandmothers  
money from absent and dead grandfathers.

Ancestors come to the fore  
My mother and I call you.  
All of you  
from your islands beneath my sea.

This is how we burn next to stiff white Anglican Prayer books  
next to Methodist prayer guides with jaunty yellow flowers  
next to gold edged Roman Catholic Bibles  
Ave Maria!  
It's still Coatlicue. It's still the Oshun  
It's still Yagé Medicina. It's still Obeah  
It's still Benin Voodoo, clad in crisp white filaments  
and wrapped in fire.

# Brown Girl

I didn't grow up hating  
myself  
grew up on my island hearing  
You are such a nice Brown skinned girl.  
nice Brown  
nice skinned  
nice girl.  
I was nice and Brown  
I was nice skinned  
I was a nice girl.  
Until I came to Brooklyn  
I became tough and Black  
I became un-nice  
An imitation of a hard-mouthed  
Nuyorican  
Brown became bad  
Girl became bad  
here skin is a problem.

# To Watch The Emmett Till Movie

I cannot watch the new Emmett Till Movie  
It is me always dying in that river  
Me calling and calling for my mother as the life  
    is smashed out of me  
Me lying in that casket so chewed up my mother  
    only knows me by my ring  
Me receiving my child's masticated corpse  
Me clutching my red beads and a bobbin-lace handkerchief  
Me in my black crepe dress  
    my face on fire from crying.

My white-passing brother sits on the couch  
a promo for the new Emmett Till movie pops  
    up on our TV.  
He cannot watch.  
It's him putting a crisp new suit on his dead, bloated son  
    in the most expensive casket  
It's still him dying in that car  
Him getting his eyes gouged out  
Him covered over in the dark airless ground  
    in the most expensive casket.  
My brother finds my face with his haunted slate blue eyes  
He asks, *What would you do if it was me in that river?*  
I say, *I would walk out this door into God's sunshine*  
    and call and call your name.

*T. K. Rex (she/they) writes science fiction and fantasy in San Francisco, tweets dinosaur stuff as @tharkibo, and grew up mostly in California and New Mexico. Look for their recent stories in Asimov's, Reckoning, and Club Chicxulub.*

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# Ravens Made of Lichen, with Beaks of Black Basalt

T. K. Rex

An empty dining table stretches wide between Alana and her father, untraversable. His face has fallen into an expression that she's never seen before, forehead wrinkled up like laundry, one eye twitching at the edge.

He says, "I've never really loved a human woman."

Is he crying? Fuck, what's happening.

"There was a mermaid, back on Earth, I met in college."

She tries to be respectful, nod politely, but in truth she's tense as hell, armpits filling up with nervous sweat. This conversation has the tone of all the ones she's had with him right before some huge thing changed, like the one before they moved to Mars, the one before he married Mia, the one before he said she couldn't go back to her mom's again. She tries to take this whole mad conversation at face value, but inside she's fifteen and afraid and reeling, and seeing someone broken like this breaks you, too, a little, when they're your dad.

"Maybe I'll tell you the whole story another time. But I'm going back to Earth, Alana. I'm going to try to find her. Mia wants me gone before she wakes up in the morning." He sighs and chokes a little, wipes his eyes and Alana has to look away. "Say something, Alana, anything."

"I'm sorry Dad."

"Am I doing the right thing?" The center of his eyebrows raises, far too earnest, far too small. He's never asked her this before or looked at her like this and the tiny shift of tone and muscle moves the balance of the weight between them far more to her side than she can carry gracefully.

How in the fuck would she know if he's doing the right thing? She dated one boy once for like two weeks. "You have to follow your heart, I guess."

He cries in earnest then. Should she hug him? She's too frozen. And he's all the way across the table.



“I love you so much, Alana. Thank you for understanding. You can stay here, with Mia, until you finish out the school year, and then hopefully I’ll have a place back on Earth where we can live. Near the beach. Remember when we went to Florida when you were young?”

Alana nods. She remembers gentle waves, thick humid air, lush green things growing all around, and the mermaids in the distance in the sea. And how he pointed to them, smiling, telling her how humanlike they were.

And then he stands, and now she knows it’s time to hug, and even though she’s horrified by the broken state he’s in, and even though they’ve had so many fights the past two years that their neighbors have expressed concern, and even though she has a sinking, sick, deep-down feeling like her life is on the edge of changing irreversibly, she stands, and lets him hug her, way too tight, and tries to hug him back as best she can.

He cries a little more, and then he takes his bag, and says he’ll call her when he’s settled on the ship to Earth, and leaves.

#

Mia barely speaks at breakfast, as they both eat cereal while standing in the kitchen. “Did he talk to you?” she says.

Alana nods. Takes a bite of the crunchy corn squares Dad threw in the grocery cart the week before.

“You can stay here til the school year ends.” It’s her teacher voice, the one she puts on every day before she talks to other people’s kids. “I hope we can still be friends,” she says.

“Yeah. OK.” Alana pokes at a corn square, breaking it up into tiny fragments, drowning them in oatmilk.

“That’s it? OK?”

What else is she supposed to say?

Mia drops her bowl into the sink. It clatters harder than it should in Martian gravity. “Have a great day,” she says between her teeth.

#

Alana goes to school. It’s like all the other days. Martian History and Physics, Soil Science, Terraforming Principles, and Artificial Atmospheres. Her favorite class is Art, the last one of the day, and today she paints her canvas black.

Ekaja texts her as she’s rinsing out her brushes. The water swirls black into the drain, and then—she knows from Water Reclamation—through a filter back behind the sink and up into the faucet again. A circle. Clear to black to clear again.

Ekaja: want to see a movie

Ekaja: there’s one about a princess who’s a monster that I really want to see

Alana: my dad and mia are splitting up

Ekaja: fuck

Ekaja: meet outside?

#

Ekaja smiles when she sees her. Alana tries to smile back but fails. "What happened?"

As they walk, Alana tries to tell her, but the bit about the mermaid doesn't quite come out. It's not the kind of thing that people talk about, not even in the movies. There's no template for that conversation.

"I'm so sorry, Alana. When my dad died . . ."

"He's not dead. He's just going back to Earth. And then I'm going to go back, too, as soon as he has a place to live there."

Ekaja squints, then looks up at the dome, where the duster drones are dusting off the red in long, slow streaks, sunset climaxing in blue behind them. Ekaja bites her lip, and says, "Do you want to go back?"

Alana hasn't thought about that yet. "Not really." She doesn't have any friends there anymore. She'd like to see her mom in person, but it's been years.

As the thought of moving back to Earth seeps in, and she imagines leaving everyone she knows, she finally feels the first emotion she can name since last night.

Anger.

#

The movie is a beautiful two hours about a feral princess and an earnest prince who save an ancient Martian nature spirit from the ravages of human war.

"They're real, you know," Ekaja says, as they push their empty popcorn bags into the recycler. "The nature spirits. Have you been out past the dome to Cordwainer Mesa?"

"A few times." With Dad. They used to hike there, sometimes just the two of them, sometimes with Mia. Alana never saw a nature spirit, but she's heard of them. Mia said she saw one, once.

"I think Kate and them are going hiking there this weekend, want to come?"

"Sure."

#

Alana wakes up on the trundle bed in Ekaja's room, to the sound of Ekaja's mother yelling at her older sister downstairs. The words *fucking slut* waft up through the floorboards.

It's still less uncomfortable than waking up at home, where Mia glares at her in silence every time she leaves.

"I hate them both so much," Ekaja mutters.

"We could sneak out and go to Kate's early."

"It's Sunday. Kate won't even be awake yet. But yeah, we can walk to the cafe. I think I have enough allowance left for breakfast."

Alana doesn't get allowance anymore. That would require speaking to Mia, whose only words to her when she tiptoed past the dining room table yesterday morning were, *You know you're going to fail your classes and end up like your parents, right?*

Ekaja says, "I'll buy you breakfast. It's still your birthday if we go by Earth time, right?"

#

Ekaja's mostly Indian and Mexican, third generation Martian, with long, straight black hair and eyes like the sky above the dome on dusty nights. Strong chin and just a little taller than Alana. They met in school, in Spanish class, the year before, and simultaneously decided to be friends when they realized that they both knew Kate. Ekaja from school the year before, Alana from community theater.

Ekaja sits across a full, small table, crowded with condiments and coffee cups and plates of French toast and huevos rancheros. She talks about her sister and how she's always hooking up with jerk-ass men too old for her, and how her mother makes it worse by going psycho, and how her dad would do it differently. If he were still alive.

And then the silence, where Alana never knows exactly what to say. She offers a bite of tortilla dripping with green chile.

Ekaja bites it off her fork. "Thanks. What's it like living alone with Mia?"

"Sucks. I hate it. She never talks to me, and I don't want to talk to her, so that's fine, but . . . I hate it there."

Ekaja offers her a square of sugar-powdered bread. "You must be excited to go back to Earth."

The French toast fills her mouth with chewy sweetness. She shakes her head.

"Maybe you could do what Kate did? Get a job, your own apartment, become an emancipated minor. Then you could stay." Ekaja smiles like a glint of sun. Alana swallows, and a spark of sugar lingers on her tongue.

#

Kate's two years older than Alana, one year older than Ekaja, and she has her own apartment in town, a few blocks from the cafe by the plaza. There's always people there, kids who've fallen through the cracks. They're always up late drinking, smoking, talking about all the things school never taught them. Alana knows a few of them from when she volunteered backstage at Little Shop of Horrors. They've had long conversations, brushed her hair, done each other's nails, offered her all kinds of drinks and drugs she wasn't ready to try and never pressured her to do anything she didn't want to do. It was the only place, the only people, she could simply *be* around. No one at Kate's ever judged her, made assumptions, or expected anything from her.

She started spending every weekend there around the time things started getting bad at home a year ago.

The sun is climbing in the yellow sky behind the dome when they get to Kate's. One of the theater kids opens the door. "Kate's taking a shit," he says. Kate yells something from the bathroom down the hall Alana can't quite hear. The kid ignores her and asks, "Want a beer?"

Ekaja declines. She never drinks.

"I'll take one," Alana says, and steps inside. She's never gotten drunk, but something to hold on to when there's a drink in everybody's hand makes her feel like she belongs.

Kate's apartment smells like stale cigarettes and the last two slices of a pizza that's been on her counter long enough to fossilize. The curtains are all made from different fabric, scraps of sheets or found upholstery, and drawn so tightly closed that only narrow beams of light come through, making the smoke and dust that linger in the air shine, in golden floating streaks across the room.

Kate comes out in a teal bathrobe with her hair up in a bleach-splotted towel, lights a cigarette and glances at Alana's beer. "Aren't you like fourteen?"

"Sixteen yesterday."

"Oh shit. Happy birthday."

Alana takes a sip. It tastes like bread and alcohol and something bitter. She doesn't like it that much but she knows she should, so takes another.

"Your dad called me a few days ago," Kate says.

Alana almost spits the beer out on the dingy carpet. "What!?"

"He asked if he could buy some tar."

"What the fuck?!"

"Did you tell him I was selling?"

"No! I didn't even *know* you were selling!" She also didn't know her dad was still in town.

"Well I'm not," Kate says, flicks her cigarette into an empty cereal bowl, and goes to her room.

The rest of the small group filters in, some from the room in the back and some from the street. There's banter, flirting, grumbling, and teasing, more cigarettes, more beer. She's the youngest but there's no one over twenty, and up til recently, she had the brightest future—decent grades, two working parents with no reason to disown her. How much will her life here change as the ripples from that parental point of failure spread? Some things might get harder. But she can't fucking wait to be rid of Mia's constant, judging scrutiny. To make her life her own.

Kate comes out in tight black jeans and a long black sweater, bright dyed-red hair in waves floating just above her sky-pale shoulders. Enough black eyeliner to turn day into night. Cute as hell, but for a hike? They'll all be

in pressure suits the whole time. Maybe it does matter, though, what people know you're dressed like underneath.

#

Alana's grown one size in pressure suits since the last time she was at the rental stand. With Dad and Mia. The clear globe helmet seals in place, and the pressure pack starts working with a quiet hiss. Everyone looks at their arm displays for the green light, and when all six are glowing the group heads for the airlock.

Past the dusty dome of Canter, the landscape stands out bright and clear. The towering red wall of Cordwainer Mesa up ahead, the sun centered in the yellow sky, the long horizon with the train tube stretching to infinity. That's the way Dad would have gone to get to the New Albuquerque spaceport, if he'd left by now.

The trail winds through boulders splattered with black lichen, then down into a canyon. Everybody stops when Kate does, at a wide spot where the trail begins to slope up through a boulder pile to the smooth red rock above.

One of the kids starts picking at the lichen on the rock he sits on. Another one gently scolds him. "Dude, not cool. Don't touch the lichen."

"What's the lichen ever done for me? It'll be a thousand years before anyone can breathe out here, what's the difference if a single patch gets poked a little?"

"That single patch has been there longer than anyone you know has been alive. It's a matter of respect."

"Everybody be nice to the lichen," Kate says to the group. "And come get some tar."

"Oooh Kate brought tar," the lichen-picker says, and gets up to sit next to her.

Alana and Ekaja watch Kate plug a cartridge into his emergency oxygen port, filling up his helmet with white vapor. He breathes it all in through his nose in one swirling vortex, and coughs it out in a haphazard cloud. A circle forms, everyone who takes a hit plugs the cartridge in for the next person.

"You wanna try it?" Alana asks Ekaja. "It's not addictive or anything." No matter what Mia says. Turns out Mia doesn't know shit about a lot of things she always sounded confident about.

Ekaja shakes her head. "My mom will know."

"Come on. How?"

"She just will."

"Alana," Kate gestures her over. "No peer pressure, but there's a birthday hit here if you want to try."

Fuck it. She gets up and joins them.

"Don't tell anyone we gave you this," Kate says.

“Yeah, of course. Don’t worry.”

There’s a little pop behind Alana as Kate plugs in the tar. Her helmet fills with vapor, and she can’t help but breathe it in. She coughs until she cries, and Kate laughs.

When she can breathe again, she looks around. The rocks and lichen are the same, the globe helmets of her friends still faintly fogged, except for Ekaja’s. Kate can’t stop smiling. Alana isn’t sure what she expected, but . . .

There’s a warm feeling in the center of her, spreading out into her limbs. Like every cell is waking up.

“Come on, let’s get up to the top, I wanna see the view,” Kate says, and leads the group up the slope.

Smooth sandstone, worn by billions of years of gentle wind and streaked with black. Alana’s never seen how beautiful it was before, just by itself, this rock that once was sand.

“It was dunes once, right?” she asks the open channel.

“Ocean,” Kate replies. “For a long time. Then dunes later.”

An ocean. Here, above them. She imagines all the water filling up the canyon, rising past the trail, submerging them and reaching for the sky. She imagines mermaids swimming past the boulders, frolicking in shifting beams of light as sun falls through the blue-green waves above.

“What’s it feel like?” Ekaja asks privately.

“It’s nice,” Alana answers. “We’re in a sea.”

“Are you hallucinating?”

“No, it’s not that kind of drug. I’m just imagining it, kinda vividly. It’s beautiful.”

“It’s beautiful without the sea, too.”

Alana turns to her. A smile passes in between their globes.

The whole world rests at the top of the trail. The dusty dome of Canter and all its buildings tucked inside are just another feature of the land from here, connected to the long horizon by the transdome tube. And all across the landscape, a gradient of lichen. It’s one thing on the boulders and the cliffs, another thing entirely when it darkens the curve of the planet itself.

“You good?” It’s Kate, standing next to her.

She nods. “There’s so much lichen.”

“Yeah,” Kate laughs. “Welcome to Mars.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever really seen it before. It’s usually just . . . not Earth. It’s always looked so dead, you know?” She can almost hear the lichen, feel it turning sandstone into something nearly dirt. The work is slow, but happening right now. Right here.

Everything else, the friends, the dome, the voices laughing to her left, dims a little and she’s standing on a planet, an entire planet waking from a dream.

A billion years of life, barely enough time to start considering complexity, then the internal forces of the planet burned out, overworked by friction and underpaid by gravity, and the core got cold, and the magnetic field flickered out like a wick in its last pool of wax. And the tiny organisms that evolved when things were good were still too young to go it on their own, so they all moved underground, and hid, and got real small and slow and cold. A biosphere suspended in the sand.

For three billion years.

And now . . .

Something in the distance moves. Black and winged, an eagle maybe, made of lichen . . .

What?

It flies toward her. A raven. Black matte wings with frilled edges, feathers made of lichen, beak basalt, eyes star-filled nights. Its wings fill up the sky and she falls back, ducking from it, covering her helmet with her arms.

Someone catches her. “Whoa, you OK?” Kate. Private channel.

“Thanks. You’re sure tar’s not hallucinogenic?”

Kate laughs. “Not at your dose. Trust me, you’d puke in your helmet first.”

“I’m gonna sit down.”

Kate joins her on the stone, one knee bent, the other leg stretched out, a posture with an easy cool. Alana will never be that cool. And yet, right now, Kate’s also just a kid, eighteen, lost in the desert, knowing what comes next as much as her, an ignorance as big and dark as space.

There’s a teasing smile in Kate’s voice, when she finally talks after what seems like ten minutes but was probably just seconds. “So. You and Ekaja . . . ?”

“What?”

“You two . . . *you know*.”

Alana shakes her head. Ekaja’s never been into girls. Or anyone. And her mom’s the same kind of homophobe that keeps half Kate’s theater kids on the street. So what’s the point of letting that emotion grow at all?

#

Some days Alana doesn’t go to school. She wanders the plaza, or hangs out in the coffee shop, like now, and draws. Ravens made of lichen, with beaks of black basalt.

She’s shading a wing when a message interrupts.

It’s Mom. The last time mom sent her a message, Dad was still with Mia, and Alana was blissfully unaware of his merphilia, which she still doesn’t know how to process. She was just a high school sophomore, with years to go before adulthood. Now she’s a high school sophomore looking for a job and an apartment. If Mom knew what Alana’s life was like . . . well it might still be less chaotic than her own.

She opens the message. Mom's face is smiling at her, vastly paler than Alana's, framed with light blond hair cascading past the bottom of the screen. Alana's hair is almost that long now, brown but with the same soft wave.

Mom smiles and her cheeks—just like Alana's, high and wide—light up with genuine emotion. Nothing like the fake half-smiles Mia used to bother with.

"Hi Alana, sweetie, well firstly, I love you so much and I miss you, I know you're sick of hearing it, but it's true. I miss you every day." Mom sighs, and then goes on without the smile, "Listen, I talked to your step-mom, and—" Wait what? They never talk, Mia thinks her mom is low-life hippy scum. "—she told me what happened with her and your dad. I want you to know that you *always* have a home with me. I'm looking for an apartment we can share for the next couple of years until you finish high school, and I have a little bit of money saved that I can put toward your ticket back to Earth." Alana knows better than to believe it'll be anything close to enough. "I'll let you know the moment I have it, OK sweetie? And just, I know this must be a really hard time, and—trust me—I know what it feels like to be let down by your dad." That stings. Alana feels suddenly defensive of him. "We can talk all about it the moment you get close enough for realtime. I love you sweetie, and I'm here for you."

And then she's gone, and it's just Alana and the drawing of the lichen raven, and the barista, who pretends he didn't hear.

She walks out, finds a bench in the square, stares past her tablet at the bright speck of Phobos in the sky through the dome.

*I told you not to fucking talk about my dad.*

*Why are you talking to Mia? You know she hates you right? She thinks you're a drug dealer*

*Do you even have a job*

*You know we can't just go back to how things were before I left*

*I don't have any friends there anymore. You even lost my cat.*

*I left because I wanted to see Mars. Don't you get it? I'm not done here.*

*I left because I missed my dad. He was moving to Mars and it was so far away and I was never going to see him again, not even on summer vacation.*

*I miss you all the time. I miss how we used to drive down to the river when we were both sick of doing homework and throw sticks in the water and watch them float away.*

*All the rivers here are dead.*

I'm so fucking sick of living in between two worlds. If I leave Mars now there'll never be a place that ever feels like home.

"Hi Mom. I don't really want to leave. All my friends are here, and I think I can get a job and find my own place to live. That way you don't have



to worry about getting a bigger place or using up your savings or anything. Love you Mom. Bye.”

She drops the tablet on the bench and pulls her knees up close to her chest.

#

Alana’s never been out past the dome alone. It’s five to rent the suit, and she takes the credits from Mia’s purse. She’s obviously ditching school, but no one at the counter stops her.

She takes the same trail, through the boulders, up the rock face, to the top of Cordwainer Mesa where the world is as big as possible.

She’s not on drugs, this time.

It’s silent, and she’s alone, with the lichen and the stone.

A dust devil swirls in the empty plain below.

She closes her eyes, and whispers, “Lichen spirit, show yourself.”

One deep breath, and she opens her eyes.

There’s no raven.

Wow, this was stupid.

Something moves just to her left, and she turns to look. A fox sits there, tail curled on the stone, black as paint with eyes like starry nights and instead of fur, a sort of fluffy lichen, layered in a way that looks almost soft to touch, from nose to tail. Its ears are pointed at her.

The fox says, in a voice a little like an older woman’s, a little like the sand, “What’s up?”

“You *are* real, aren’t you?” she asks.

“Realer every day.” The fox looks out at the horizon and twitches her black tail. “But that’s not why you asked for me.”

Alana takes a deep breath. This is all she really wanted, right? To know if what she saw when she was high on tar was real. And apparently it is. Which is pretty fucking cool.

The slight wind throws dust across her helmet, making tiny scratching sounds. She sighs and finally says, “I don’t want to leave Mars.”

“Then don’t.”

“It’s not that easy. I’m only sixteen.”

“I’m four billion, what of it?”

Alana sighs and the sigh burns through her tightened throat on the way back out. “For the first time in my life, I actually belong somewhere. You know?”

The fox twitches a black frilly ear, then says in a voice like dust, “I was an entire biosphere, and I lost everything. And three *billion* years went by, and now I’m waking up, slowly, regrowing cell by cell, mostly ghost but one part algae, two parts fungus, a thousand parts still mourning and angry, and you want me to help you decide what to do with your single, short life?”

Alana laughs and sniffs back would-be tears. “Yeah, I guess.”

A twitch of a tail, a glitter of eyes. "Do whatever you can to survive."  
And in another breath Alana sits alone.

#

Dad's been sleeping on a sofa, crashing with a guy he used to work with. He didn't say when he called why he hasn't left for Earth yet.

Alana meets him there. The apartment smells like tar smoke and there's drawings of nude women scattered all around the walls, in stacks on every surface. She knew Dad's old coworker was some kind of artist, but this is . . . not what she expected.

Dad hugs her way too tight. She hates how awkward it feels. She used to run into his arms when she was little and he met her at the airport back on Earth, when her parents only had a continent between them.

"I hope Mia's taking good care of you?"

She hasn't seen Mia in two weeks. "Um. Sure."

"Sorry you have to see your old man like this," he's joking, sort of, so she tries her best to smile. "Sit down, kiddo, I want to talk about something."

Again? Can't it just be a normal conversation? Will they ever have those again?

She sits. The sofa has a black-rimmed hole in it the size of a cigarette tip. It smells faintly of vomit. "What's up Dad?" She sounds much calmer than she feels.

"Honey, I talked to your mom," well that's already weird, "and we agreed that you should go back to Earth and live with her. So . . ." he lets out a sigh the size of the whole, stale room, "Here's your ticket."

He holds out an envelope. She takes it. "I'm coming with you?" She doesn't want to go, but she also doesn't want him to leave, and right now she feels a mix of things that all can't live together in the same chest.

He shakes his head. He's going to fucking cry again isn't he? She bites the inside of her cheek to stop her chin from shaking.

"I don't have enough money for two tickets, honey. Not yet anyway. But I'll get back on my feet, don't worry about me." His face says, clearly, *worry about me*.

She shoves the envelope back in his hand. "I'm not taking your ticket. And anyway I don't want to go. I have friends—"

"Not those losers who hang out down by the plaza? They're all drop-outs and drug dealers."

"You know what, you're one to talk!"

He says, "That's fair," with a short, broken laugh.

She stands, feet eager to take her running back through the paint-peeling door. Dad stands, too. "Just take the ticket, Alana."

She bites her tongue as hard as she can.

This is all his fucking fault anyway.

She grabs the envelope he's offering and leaves.

#

She remembers forests. Remembers climbing trees, running down hills without a pressure suit, swimming in a cool clear shady stream on a hot summer day. She remembers summer. She remembers rain and red sunsets and the way twilight sings when there's so many animals they have to split the day and night between them, 50/50.

She stares at the ticket, sitting on the floor of Ekaja's bedroom, back against Ekaja's bed.

Ekaja comes out of the shower fully clothed in jeans and tee-shirt, drying her hair with a blue towel. "You're going to take it, aren't you?" she says, and hangs the towel up, and sits cross-legged on the floor across from Alana. The sunlight filters in just right to make her brown cheeks gold and her dome-at-night eyes sparkle. Would it really be so bad to kiss her now, with so little left to lose?

She puts the ticket back in the envelope and sets it down on Ekaja's violet floor. Holds out both hands. Ekaja takes them in her own without question. "You're my best friend, Ekaja."

"Back at you," Ekaja says, and smiles, but her eyes are sad as hell.

"I don't want to leave you here."

Ekaja nods and bites her lower lip. "I might go to college on Earth. I've been thinking about it."

"Earth's a big place. But if we both end up there I'll find some way to see you, I promise."

Their hands are still together, gripping tight. Ekaja rubs a thumb across the back of Alana's hand. It feels like sparks, like tar, like cells waking from a dream. She looks down at their hands and when she looks back up, Ekaja kisses her.

Soft and warm and powdered-sugar sweet.

Ekaja pulls away. Lets her hands go.

Alana reaches for her, pulls her back, hand all mixed up in her wet black hair, fingers on her warm neck, lips and tongue this time all hungry, all inside each other.

An entire biosphere explodes inside her, continents of flowers, oceans of seagrass, undulating, dancing with the sunlight pouring through the blue.

#

Why now?

Why not a year ago when there was time for . . .

But there wasn't, was there? Not with Ekaja's mom the way she is. There was only ever space for something fleeting, something secret. Something this.

A little taste of what it's like to have a love that someone won't accept.

Alana: hey dad

Alana: are you sure you want me to have this ticket  
Alana: i mean you deserve to get back to Earth and find your mermaid  
He doesn't text back for an entire day.  
Dad: Don't worry about me, kiddo.  
Dad: It means so much for you to say that, though.

#

"Fuck, if I had a free ticket to Earth I'd leave this shithole yesterday,"  
Kate says, and offers Alana a cigarette.

"Uh, I'm OK."

"Good, don't start." Kate flips it deftly to her own lips, pushes her bright red hair behind an ear that glitters with five different piercings, lights it up, and looks back at Alana through her black-lined eyes.

Alana feels a hundred different things. One is definitely grief and the rest she's never had a name for. Maybe one is gratitude. Kate's not the closest friend, or the warmest, but she's always made Alana feel accepted.

Whatever else this threadbare living room has been, it's always safe. In a way that Mia's never was, even when Dad was there. It's why Ekaja comes around so often even though she doesn't smoke or drink. It's why all the kids in town who don't belong at "home" show up at Kate's eventually.

Alana wants to leave some part of her here, some little piece that can be kept OK forever while the rest of her tumbles out into the vast, black void her other planet spins around in. But she has nothing left to leave behind except, "Thanks, Kate."

"You're doing the right thing, Alana. Ekaja's gonna miss the fuck out of you, but you know. We're survivors." She winks, and flicks her cigarette into an empty beer bottle. "So are you."

#

Mia's gone, who knows where, the day Alana packs and leaves.

There's nothing left to say to her anyway. Only an entire adolescence of shit that can never be unsaid.

#

Ekaja: counting down the days until I can follow you through that abyss

#

Mars flickers past the window of the train. Black and red and motion-smearred nearby, dusty yellow in the distance.

She wants to save this landscape on her retinas, the tingle of Ekaja's final kiss still on her lips, the knowledge that, however briefly, she belonged somewhere.

Maybe even with someone.

Out between the dust devils, a raven perched on sandstone meets her eye, fluttering black lichen feathers as her train rumbles in its tube toward New Albuquerque. Fast, too fast.

*Bill Neumire's first poetry collection, Estrus, was a semi-finalist for the 42 Miles Press Award, and his second, #TheNewCrusades, was a finalist for the Barrow Street Prize. His poems have appeared in Harvard Review Online, Beloit Poetry Journal, and West Branch. In addition to writing, he also served as an assistant editor for the literary magazine Verdad and as a reviewer for Vallum.*

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# My wife asks Melanie, the medium, to contact her dead father

Bill Neumire

whose lungs bloomed blue tumors until laughing choked him. Melanie says he's here, though, in the atmosphere, curious why we haven't yet planted the blue hydrangeas.

*But it's a con, I say, not wanting to.*

*It doesn't matter, she says, it still feels better.*

*They just look you up, find out what you want to hear; I say, picturing my own father's hard laugh, his salt-lipped boots, his hand on my mother's back as they walked in from the car at night.*

She twists the bottom of her tie-dye shirt into a small pink bud.

What if I die first, seeing wild answerlessness while everyone around me says it's ok?

Melanie's yard is quiet & her fence is lined with oversized Christmas lights & her pitbull sleeps contentedly. She's the kind of woman who strokes a dog's forehead between the eyes gently with one finger. I don't hate her, even if I don't believe her story that we dissipate into a spiritual field after death while somehow maintaining enough individuality to wonder about the flowers, to spend the hours feeling pride & watchfulness.

*When do you think you'll be home?* my wife asks the long hills of beech trees & scrub vines dark between us, the ripple of sumac & fern, the fleeing deer.

She smiles when she says her father knows she still feeds the hummingbirds because that's how he visits.

Rain fills a firebowl. The listening eaves house us. I can't hate Melanie's scam, even if I am in the car out front because *I won't be lied to*. Even if I'm crying now in the hot summer dark, trying to melt into that dog's sweet sleep, trying to feel the cheap lights & the street, to hear every word Melanie says, to write it in my inside for every I-don't-know-what's-happening-to-us night to come.

# One night we stole a house

*William Shakespeare teamed up with a group of actors armed with daggers, swords and axes to steal an entire theatre and rebuild it as The Globe, a 400-year-old document has revealed.*

- *Joseph Curtis*

because we were caught in the unruled  
town where we smoked weed, three of us  
like a broken vow, on a hill where it might be  
strategic to build a castle or hang a man as warning,

& deep in our high, but bleeding cold,  
we knew there was a house no one had  
lived in for months & its heated dark teased us  
& told us we weren't worth gold backing, so we stole

down the darkest street in town, with axes & saws  
& drills, & we took each wall board by board,  
vacant years now since the old Nestle factory left,  
we with our prybars & ratchet sets, our winches

& bolt cutters, our gleaming teeth like organs  
of a not yet animate deity. *Stay Awake Stay Alive*  
signs flashed while helicopters searched  
for the criminal poor; we worked, we winged ourselves

with sheetrock, copper pipe, rivets, beams,  
& sneaked back through bankrupt roads to the clearing,  
level ground, its dust & ashes, its low-fi hum where we raised  
the rafters like pagan flags, hung the doors,

our quick hands taking, retaking the air, the lifelong  
industry of debt cleaned beneath some smoggy  
stars overhanging what was ours. We took each window  
& door but one & rebuilt the house on our scabby hill.

That door we left as a dare--*come get us*, we said with our theft,  
*come see if you can take back what you never had.*

***Ojo Victoria Ilemobayo** is a Nigerian literary enthusiast. She is a poet and a smartphone photographer. Some of her works can be found in brilliant magazines and anthologies. She tweets @ilemobayo-ojo.*

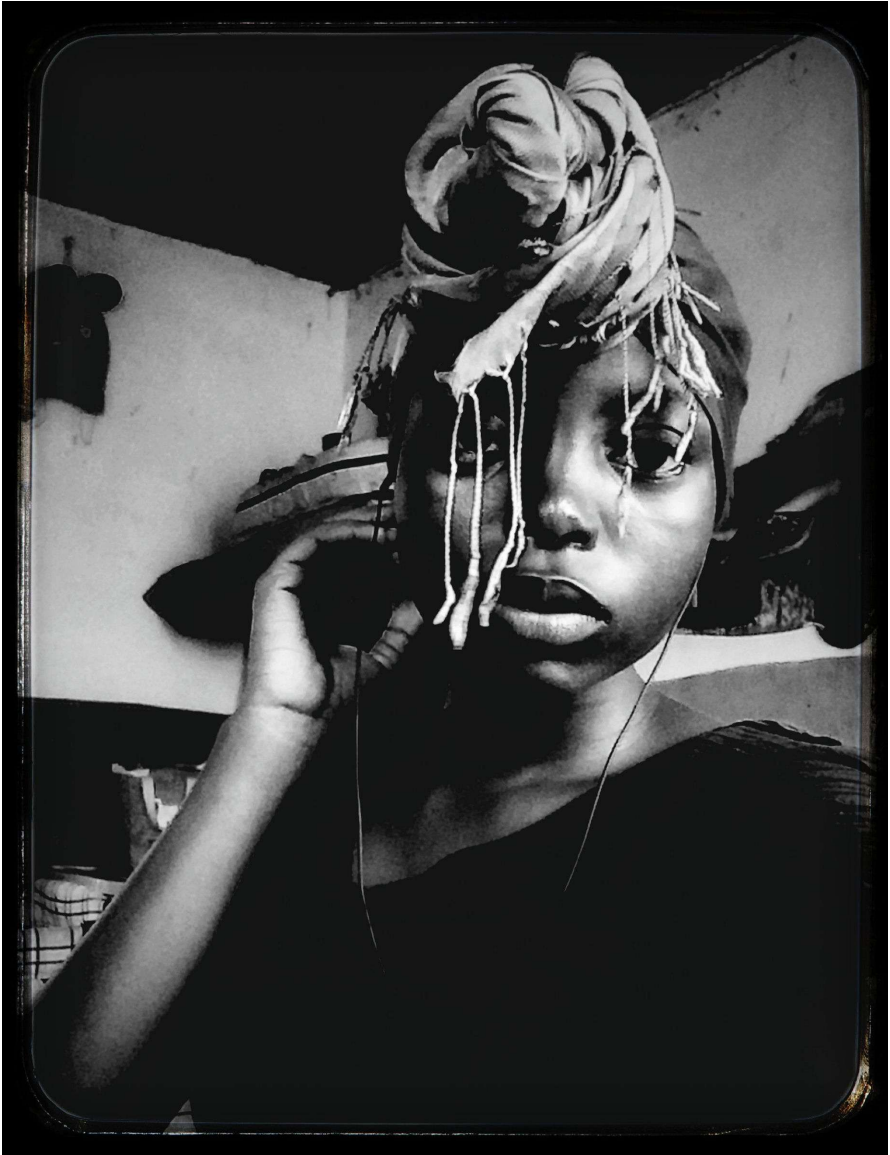
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**i am a stream—opening up crevices**











**Catherine Fahey** (she/her) is a poet and librarian from Salem, Massachusetts. When she's not reading and writing, she's knitting or dancing. Her chapbook *The Roses that Bloom at the End of the World* is available from Boston Accent Lit. You can read more of her work at [www.magpiepoems.com](http://www.magpiepoems.com).

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# Fairy Houses

## Catherine Fahey

No one leaves milk and bread by the back door anymore  
that's just superstition and I don't need

to make offerings to myself. I leave  
bowls of kibble for the feral cats and

nips of Tullamore Dew for the neighborhood  
drunks who always wave and smile and

invite me for dinner and tell me I'm pretty as if  
that script is all they remember of human

interaction. It's damp here and close and  
I can almost see the dead though

it's not a barrow but an illegal in-law apartment  
with one window. The room tastes of mold and

sweetness from the dryer vent and I can feel  
the roots and buds of tulips but not the flowers.

# May Day

I'm up before the day, not to welcome the sun  
but thanks to the mice. Crepuscular critters skittering  
in my walls, gnawing my life so much I should  
charge them rent; temporary housemates  
I thought I left behind. I've left no flowers  
on my doorstep, though feral violets  
found a crack through the concrete.  
I walk into a fog bank, thinking I've passed  
between the worlds but I've only crossed  
the street. I wipe the dew from my face,  
think about bonfires and sex  
in the woods, remember the feel of pinecones  
carving my back, an audience  
of raccoons, owls, and deer ticks. I'm grateful for DEET  
and once in a lifetime experiences, things that should remain  
kept in the walls and not fluttered like violets  
in the bright morning sun.

***Dorothy Rice** is a writer and the managing editor of the nonfiction and arts journal *Under the Gum Tree*. In previous lives, she cleaned up toxic waste sites and abandoned tire piles with the California EPA, earned an MFA in Creative Writing at sixty, and raised five children. She has published two memoirs with small presses (*Gray Is the New Black* and *The Reluctant Artist*) as well as essays and fiction in a number of great lit mags, including *Hippocampus*, *Under the Gum Tree*, and *The Rumpus*. Find links to lots of her work at [www.dorothyriceauthor.com](http://www.dorothyriceauthor.com).*

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# The Safe House

Dorothy Rice

The Mother slept as stone, as fingers of falling sun and settling mist slithered all round, through and under the transparent walls of her glass coffin. With shuttered eyes, hair of silky silver coils on an ivory sateen pillow, hands laid atop a mounded belly, day turned to dusk, and tree shapes shadowed her creased brow. She would not, could not wake.

Not yet.

In the distance, wolves and men of that other world bellowed and bayed. Closer still, a footfall, a snapped twig, the Daughter's whistle. The girl's spirit owl soared overhead. The forest opened to admit the Daughter into the circle of fog and setting sun, then sealed the opening shut behind her.

She stumbled into the clearing and approached the coffin, her breath jagged and short, desperate after searching for the Mother for so long that time had lost all meaning. Sensing no rise and fall of breath, no movement, no droplets of condensation trickling down the glass, she feared it was too late, that life had left the Mother. The Daughter pressed her bloodied palms, then a hot cheek, to the cool glass. Her steamy breath clouded its surface.

Weary of running, of hiding and searching, of being afraid, the Daughter rested her chest atop the coffin. The Mother's legs were pillars of stone draped in faded lace. Her feet stiff and arched, bound in smooth bands of rose-colored silk ribbon that covered all but the tips of her toes. The Daughter reached one arm towards that hint of visible flesh.

The Owl shrieked its warning, high and shrill. The wolves howled with hunger lust. The men shouted, blew their frugal horns and slacked their whips, cracking the sky. The nearby treetops bristled and moaned.

The Daughter murmured her goodbyes, the incantations of a thousand years and a thousand tears. As the entire forest seemed to shudder and quake, the Mother's toes began to glow, rosy with blood, pulsing with life.

The Daughter leapt from the coffin and shielded her eyes.

Gray Owl ceased its protective circling and hovered above the coffin, talons poised for landing like a great feathered spaceship. Directing the force of its golden gaze down upon the lid, Owl splintered the glass into a kaleidoscope of light and color that spiraled skyward, freeing the Mother from her prison. She opened her eyes and reached for the Daughter's hands. Limbs stiff from disuse, tingling with blood, she staggered to the edge of the clearing.

In the instant that the first wolf leapt upon the empty coffin, the forest parted, revealing a narrow, circuitous path. The Daughter dragged the stunned Mother through the opening. The Owl blocked the entrance to the path with its great wings, sharp talons and beak. Once the Mother and the Daughter had safely entered the path, the forest sealed the entrance behind them and the Owl took to the skies, knowing that its job wasn't done, that its Job would never be done.

The Daughter and the Mother proceeded single file as the path zigged and zagged through the Cumbersome woods, beneath Omega Falls, and across a beckoning patch of memory-foam bunchgrass that was hard to resist—though they knew better than to fall for that deceptive temptation again.

All the while, the Owl scouted overhead to assure they weren't followed, occasionally perching atop the Daughter's head, its talons giving her scalp a rough scritch-scratch, which she was in sore need of, having missed bathing in longer than she cared to recall.

The women stilled, catching their breath, as the House came into view on a rise above the never-named wetlands—it was important that some places retain their secrets and avoid maps and names altogether. The house was as they remembered, shingled and shiny, with a peaked roof and that mysterious weathervane that might have been a pig, a shapeless weather-worn cow, or no animal at all. The gardens were gone to seed, the fruit trees saggy, but nothing that couldn't be put to rights, or not.

With a jagged, *ba-ripping* sound, the path that had brought them thus far zipped itself into oblivion.

Owl took flight for the weathervane. Mother and Daughter dashed for the House, snatching at handfuls of rust-hued drowsy grass as they raced to see who would be first to burst through the glass-paned door to put the infinity kettle on the big, humpty, pot-bellied stove.

There would be issues in the afterlife. There are always issues. This isn't a fairy tale, after all. The Mother would sometimes bemoan her mounded belly, do nothing constructive about it, and this would irritate the Daughter. When she was overwrought, the Daughter would yank her sparse eyebrows out, and this would irritate the Mother. And try though it might, the Owl could not stick to a vegan diet for more than a day, and this would make the Daughter wistful for the soft, furry creatures of the forest, with whom she was conversant, or believed herself to be. Yet, the Mother and the Daughter were

happy in the House, and they were safe, which, after all, was what they had wanted most, and what they had been searching for oh so many years.

As for the Owl, with the Mother and the Daughter snug by the fire at night, doing whatever it is that mothers and daughters do—strange, complicated doings with their fiddly, busy finger sticks, involving strings, needles and buttons, papers, pencils, and books, and their *voices*, forever rising, falling, making all manner of strange, sometimes amusing, sometimes terrifying, sounds—the Owl perched atop the ambiguous weathervane and explored the night's mysteries with its profound senses, swiveling its great head all the way round, blinking its great yellow eyes as it captured every scurry and flutter, every twitter and squeak, protecting the Safe House and, as an adept multitasker, contemplating its next meal and foreseeing the future, which, fortunately for all concerned, was *safe*.



**Jim Still-Pepper** believes art captures light. He also knows light is fragile, and it is fleeting; it fades; it is easily taken for granted. So, Still-Pepper creates while there is still light. Still-Pepper is honored to have work published first and foremost in *Typehouse* (Volume 7, No. 2, Issue 20), *Sunlight Press*, *Forbes*, *Unstamitic*, *The Mud Season Review*, *Forbes*, *US News and World Reports*, and *Driftwood Press*. Still-Pepper's "real job" is diverse—he is a therapist working with at-risk families. He also creates living art as a public thinker, putting on workshops throughout the country. Still-Pepper has a strong belief that the Light shines in the darkness and that is very good!

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### ***Hope Needs the Chains to Change***

*Your chains. My chains. All chains hold hope down. Hope needs chains to change. All change begins with change. As I look at this image, I visualize changing the chains. What can you visualize?*





**#BlackLivesMatter**