An underwater photograph featuring a large striped fish on the left and a shark on the right, swimming over a sandy ocean floor with green seaweed. The scene is lit with a blue and green color palette.

Typehouse

Literary Magazine

Volume 8, No. 1, Issue 21

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Typehouse Literary Magazine

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 We are always looking for well-crafted, previously unpublished writing and artwork that seeks to capture an awareness of the human condition.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

Cover Photograph: ***Bright Kelp Cosmos*** by ***Jayne Marek***. (see page 78)

“Tidepooling offers one of the great pleasures of living along the Pacific Coast. The best experiences tend to be during summer’s extreme low tides, which occur in daytime. Here, the colors and shapes of kelp and sea lettuce, forced into proximity by the shallows, suggest an abstract design with remarkable dimensionality.”

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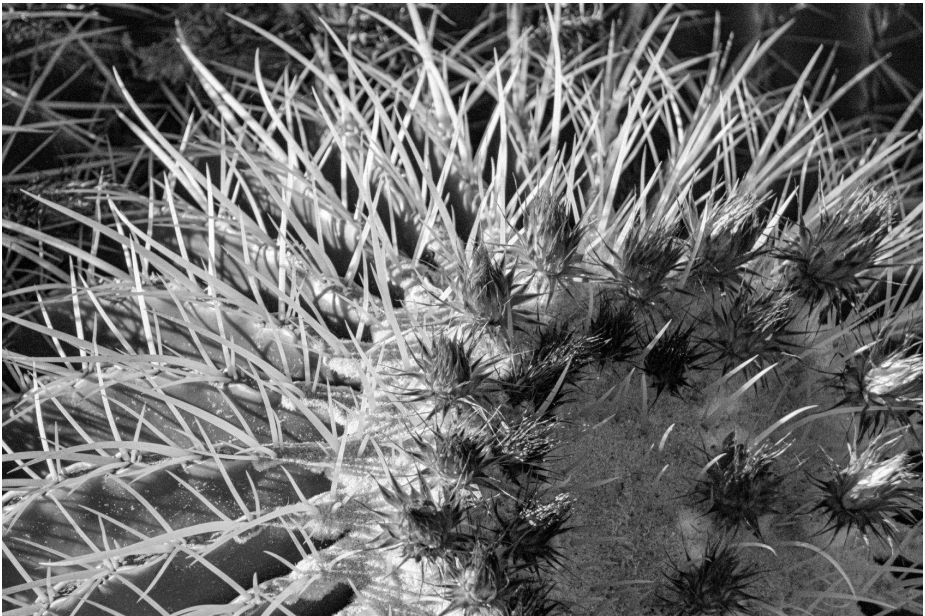
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Lorin Lee Cary (he/him) once taught Social History at University of Toledo and wrote historical pieces. He also served as a Fulbright Senior Scholar at University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. Now he creates fictional cause and effect relationships. The Custer Conspiracy, a humorous historical novel set in the present, is one result, the novella California Dreaming, a meta fiction venture, another. Short stories have appeared in *Torrid Literature*, *Cigale Literary Magazine*, *decomp magazinE*, *Lit.cat* and *Short Story*, as well in a couple of now defunct journals. (He did not cause their demise.) He is also a prize-winning photographer.



Pleased To Meet You

This cactus, one of many outside the San Luis Obispo County Office of Education office, caught my eye, as did the notion of its prickly off-setting nature juxtaposed with the purpose of the building it was next to.

Sudha Balagopal's (she/her) recent short fiction appears in Smokelong Quarterly, Split Lip Magazine, Milk Candy Review and The Dribble Drabble Review among other journals. She is the author of a novel, A New Dawn. Her work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, Best Small Fictions, and Best Microfiction, and is listed in the Wigleaf Top 50, 2019.

Review:

Two-and-a-Half Stars for Three-Piece Baby Jacket, Pant and Bodysuit Set

Sudha Balagopal

First, let me say that the hundred percent soft-cotton set my husband sent for our Leo is a boon for a baby with eczema. The birthday gift arrived after his first birthday last month.

Leo loves the mint jacket with the elephant motif. He wears the garment day and night. He throws a tantrum when I must wash the jacket to remove the stains of pureed squash and mushy peas.

The discoloration doesn't come off with the color-free, odor-free detergent I use. If I complain, my husband—who is a hundred and fifty miles away in Flagstaff—will call me strident, and say I find fault with anything he does. I remember a time when he told me my voice tinkles like a bell.

Leo is learning to eat by himself. My husband doesn't know that since he didn't come for Leo's birthday. He hasn't seen Leo for three months—not since the company moved him to headquarters temporarily. When I protested the move, my husband said life is no picnic for him.

He knows no one in Flagstaff except for Fiona who lived in our apartment complex. She transferred when she found a nursing position with a hospital in Flagstaff.

I'll admit the dark green pants don't show stains, but they've lost an inch of length. My husband is the one who taught me effective cleaning techniques—pre-treating, separating colors, using the right water temperature. We met Fiona while doing laundry.

The body-suit part of the set has another issue altogether. The garment is long enough, however, the neck needs to be wider. I struggle to get the opening over Leo's head, which is average-sized, and he wails the whole time. By the time Leo was four months old, I learned my husband has little patience with a crying baby.

Shrinkage is a major concern. The clothes shrivel a few centimeters

with each wash, like the minutes of my husband's calls.

Leo has pulled and pulled at the adorable elephant's trunk on the jacket and now the fabric flops, useless. The stitching's not strong enough, as was the case with my wedding dress which was made in three days. Although it fit my swelling belly at the time, the sewing around the waist had ripped before the reception was over.

Please note: I took away two stars from the review for staining and shrinkage; I subtracted another half for the torn elephant trunk. I'm not requesting a refund because the money would go back to my husband. Baby Leo loves the three-piece set and I'd hate to deny him something from his father. I don't know when he'll see his father next.

So, Child Clothing Company, if you could send me a replacement, I would appreciate it.

I'll revisit this review, then; I might even offer to add a star or two.

Claire Scott (she/her) is an award-winning poet who has received multiple Pushcart Prize nominations. Her work has appeared in the Atlanta Review, Bellevue Literary Review, New Ohio Review, Enizagam and Healing Muse among others. Claire is the author of Waiting to be Called and Until I Couldn't. She is the co-author of Unfolding in Light: A Sisters' Journey in Photography and Poetry.

Scapegoat

Claire Scott

See: Leviticus, chapter 16

And two goats were brought before the priest,
one for a sin offering and one for a burnt offering.
Lots were caste. One goat was slain. The other took
on the sins of the congregation and was sent
forth into the wilderness.

I don't know about killing one of the goats,
animal rights folk would not be so keen on it, but I think
we could all use a personal scapegoat who lets us silently
pile our misdeeds on his woolly head: the petty foibles,
the stolen nights, the white lies and bottles of bourbon.

I clicked on Amazon and ordered a large Saanen goat
who arrived last night, a stinking ball of bleating
and farting fur that ate my prize-winning roses
and head-butted me with gnarly horns.
I fed him hay and tin cans and began to recite my sins:

sticky fingers in the tip jar, deductions to nonexistent
charities, stealing Percoset from my eighty-year-old aunt.
He wasn't at all interested and ate my peonies.
I continued with come-hither Kate and Leslie of the big boobs.
I noticed my goat was staggering around the yard,

falling to his knobby knees.
This is not how it is supposed to go.
I apologized and took back a few minor peccadillos:
a lingering kiss with Sara next door, a forgotten first anniversary.
I put them in my pockets along with some used Kleenex.

Then I let him loose in the local park,
the closest I could come to a wilderness.
Hours later two police officers arrive in a van,
my goat standing proudly in the back,
chomping on the polyester seat.

Annunciation Overheard From the Kitchen

I didn't notice
the pea soup boiling over. Spilling on the stove. The floor.
Riveted to the conversation in the next room
where my good friend Mary was talking to a stranger.
He insisting. She refusing.
Wanting her life to be simple. Supper at six.
Boiled potatoes. A bit of meat. No interest in
her own TV show or heavenly Ave Marias composed
in her name. No interest in being revered by all women.
Joseph was enough. She patted her flat belly.
They wanted their own child. The stranger was clearly
irritated, raising his voice. He said God would be the father,
her son would be half immortal like Achilles, Aeneas and Hercules.
She was appalled. They all left home to kill Trojans or
slay mythical monsters. The stranger left, in what sounded like a flutter
of wings, threatening that her son would sleep in a manger. Only ox
and ass to watch over him. Maybe a few stray sheep. The place will stink.
Stink. To high heaven. But Mary got in the last word.

Find some other fool to accomplish your errand.

Ask Schubert to compose and Ave Nancy or Betsy or Gertrude.

Now excuse me, I need to boil potatoes.

My Son Telemachus

I wait, weaving and unweaving, watching my auburn curls wilt,
my lips pale, my stomach stretch and sag, scar-creased from his birth.
Telemachus.

Barely sixteen. My measure of time. Since.
A boy with ripped abs, a scribble of a mustache, a cocky grin.
Each day his father is gone, he a day more resolute, more manly.

The suitors are restless tonight.
Grumbling and threatening, drinking our wine,
butchering our sheep. Black-hearted Antinous eggs them on. They fight
among themselves to pass the time, the halls clashing with swords.
Bored with waiting. For me.

We hide in the back of the castle. The servants bring us roast goat
simmered in rosemary, crusty bread, cheese and olives.
Goblets of burgundy wine filled and refilled. Then they leave us alone.
We lie back on our rugs and tell tales of Persephone, of Perseus, of
Prometheus.

He with heated hormones, me with an aching loneliness in my groin.
There was a storm that night, lightning stalked on great stilts,
thunderbolts pulsed the sky. The raucous cries of an eagle circled
and circled over the dark palace. We knew we would have to pay.

Nikita Andester (she/her, they/them) is a writer, musician, and visual artist who lives in Portland, Oregon with an MA in Professional Creative Writing from the University of Denver. Raised in the deep south, Nikita's writing draws on her past lives as a farmer, waitress, ESL teacher, and farmers' market maven to uncover the magic lurking in the everyday lives of working-class characters. Her previous creative work can be found in Wild Musette Journal of Music, Mystery, and Myth; Argot Magazine; and Dirt Poetry Zine.

Such a Peach

Nikita Andester

The morning after Lina disappeared was a dance between pressing my coffee mug against my forehead and sobbing into her Wild Turkey t-shirt. A ring of snot and sweat and tears clung to the collar of my nightgown, orbiting my head, which felt as distant as the moon. That stupid peach sat on the table beside me where I'd ditched it the night before. Ripening as I slept, its creamsicle sunset now smudged the grey of the house, mocking Lina's absence from the corner of my eye. What the hell else was it supposed to do, though, hold its breath and mourn with me? Its scent—that bright, awful scent—curled into the corners of the kitchen, circling the dinette. I was starting to think it smelled like her.

It had all started with that dream two nights back, the one where my eyes were missing, seeds stuffed into my sockets. She'd been whispering my name—*Tanya, Tanya, Tanya*—sometimes so quiet I could only catch the first syllable. Groping for her, my hands grazed nothing but air. Then, silence.

When I woke up, she was gone. Instead, a peach glowed on her pillowcase, kind of reminding me of when you hit the highway just as dawn seeps across the sky, promising hashbrowns somewhere deep in the panhandle later. She never left without telling me, ever; just last Wednesday, she'd kissed me awake to say she was taking a walk around the neighborhood. But now? She was just gone. Peach in hand, I searched the house, finding nothing—no note on the dining table, no unread text from dawn. Her purse, phone, and keys all slouched on the coat rack, and my heart lodged itself into my throat.

Breath flickering like moths, I ran out our sliding door and to the edge of our yard, shouting her name into the moss-devoured oaks beyond, the damp earth staining my feet as twigs jabbed my arches and ankles. Part of me was sure this was some drama unfolding on our laptop screen, Lina and I's palm sweat mingling as we watched from a nest of blankets. My clamoring pulse told me otherwise.

By the time I finally called the police, her absence had carved me into

something made of glass, brittle and clear. They were two black swatches of night gobbling up the sunshine that wept with me across the living room floor.

“When’d you last see Ms. Flores?”

“Ms. Flores? That’s. Oh, god. That’s what we’re calling her? It’s Lina. Lina.”

“Right. Lina. When’d you see her last, Ms. Decatur?”

I wanted to say, “Last night when her sable eyes sang the lamplight back to me. I kissed her palm and she whispered, ‘I love you, darlin. I love you.’ That was when I saw her last.” But the cop was standing there, waiting for me.

“Last night. Before we fell asleep.”

When they left, I lingered in the doorway. How could it still be day? The azaleas and my neighbors’ porches all looked as if someone had cut them from paper and laid them flat against a stock photo of spring. A vulture eyed a dead squirrel from the neighbor’s driveway and the sun stitched itself into the bird’s raw head while I just stood there, chewing on my lips like I’d broken. Only the roaring of a plane overhead shook me loose, pushing me back inside.

Lina’s embroidery hung above the couch, tearing at my flesh. Two bodies overlapping, one stretched and lean, the other Lina-plump, perfect. Her fingers had once crouched over that fabric like Florida panthers. Her presence didn’t linger in those stitches, but I climbed onto the couch to trace over them, pretending it did.

On the off chance it might make time start moving again, I drank. The pinot grigio kept pace with the setting sun, emptying from the bottle as the light poured from the sky, until the kitchen’s only glow was from my phone, which I was curled over, scrolling through our texts from last Friday. I’d picked her up from Monet & Merlot after her shift, bringing that yellow dress she loves, the one with the eyelets on the shoulders. Lina’d wriggled into it in the backseat while I’d stolen glimpses through the rearview, feeling kind of like Patrick Swayze in that one scene from *Dirty Dancing*. We’d wandered the circuit of studios and galleries, her arm tucked into mine, and live music had sliced through the food truck smoke hovering above us. Whenever she’d smiled up at me, the light had turned her eyes into amber. Pure amber. A table at the mouth of one studio had been bursting with free wine and trays of pre-sliced fruit. Lina had popped a piece of pineapple into her mouth, and when I’d leaned over to kiss her temple, her hair had smelled like tempera paint.

After the wine was gone, I tried to sleep, but without her, the room spun and the bed was so large I had to put her pillow against my back to feel like she was spooning me. I wrestled with the covers all night, leaving me here, now, slumped at our dinette, the peach grinning up at me. For all the good it had done, I’d shown the stupid thing to the cops. The older one had snickered as the other snapped a picture of it. If I had to guess, they deleted it before even reversing out of our driveway. They had a hard time taking this

seriously. Taking me seriously. I guess grown women leave their homes all the time—but not Lina. It had been a full day. Twenty-four hours. When was the last time I went that long without hearing her speak? It must have been when she went to Guatemala after her grandmother's death. We didn't squeeze in a phone call for almost two days. In those forty-four hours, time had stopped without her helping me push it along. Every grocery run, every tooth brushing, it had all felt unfinished until her voice bounced from cell tower to cell tower and landed in the space behind my eyes.

There was no phone call to release me from limbo this time. There was just the silence, buzzing into my chest. Throwing on shoes, I plunged into the woods out back once more, calling her name as I trudged between oaks and pines. Every crushed water bottle under the leaves or candy wrapper caught against the trunk of a tree was a clue—or would have been, if any of it had been something Lina might buy. I took pictures just in case. Time passed—an hour, maybe a day—it was hard to tell. Long enough to make my throat ache from shouting for her.

I heard the pattering on the canopy above before I felt it. Droplets wove their way between the leaves, dappling my shoulders, rinsing away shoe prints or fibers snagged on twigs or Lina's sweet voice whistling through the branches, anything that might have led me to her. My heart cracked open and refilled with the rain, the ground slipping beneath my sneakers as I trudged home. By our back door, oleander leaves pulled at my shirt, begging me to stay outside. Instead, I retreated back to a dining chair, water puddling onto the table, creating an oasis for the salt and pepper shakers.

Just last Saturday, Lina had upended these shakers over her bowl of home fries and eggs. The same oleander leaves, dark with rain, had carved shapes into clouds out the window. Lina had squirted ketchup onto her eggs without glancing up from her book, licking some off her forefinger before passing me the bottle. I'd ketchupped mine, and we'd both read in silence, coffee steam braiding us together. Now, her chair was empty. I stretched my hand out to the space her fork had once lain, and my knuckles grazed the peach.

It might as well have bared its teeth, the way I recoiled from it. Lina had left this for me, but as a clue or a gift? I couldn't say. The only thing I knew for sure was that if I had to stare this peach in the face a second longer, I would scream. Snatching it from the table, I pitched my arm back to chuck it, to let its juice Pollock across the wall and dribble to the floor, until Lina's embroidery stopped me, a row of stitched eyes judging my rage, daring me to splatter them. My arm dropped. Instead, I tossed the peach in the compost bin by the sink and didn't look back. Freed of at least one mystery, I slept like the dead.

Until I dreamt again. Lina reached for me, moonlight bouncing off the hairs on her arms, and I buried my nose in her neck, losing myself in her

smell of peaches and rain on asphalt. “I’m here,” she said. “Still here.” Gripping my shoulders, she pushed me back and searched my face with dilated pupils before looking down. Her hips were gone, lost under a mountain of peaches rolling beneath her. Tears ripe as moons dangled from her lashes as she leaned into me, the round scent of stone fruit swallowing me until I groaned. When her lips touched mine, I woke up, the answer to this riddle of her absence ringing through the bedroom.

Lina turned into the peach; that peach—was Lina. I sat upright and laughed, tears catching in my eyes, before running to the kitchen naked, pulling her from the compost bin, and dusting the coffee grounds off her body. My pinky nail lifted a fleck of eggshell from her skin. “I’m sorry, darlin’. I didn’t mean—I didn’t know. I’ll fix this—you know I will.” Her fuzz tickled my lips.

For the first time in days, I showered. Lina deserved to see her girl looking her best. The soap bubbles seemed to glisten in time with my humming. Lina was here, in this house. And as long as we were together, I knew there was a way for us to get her back to normal. But just as hope began to crawl its way out of my chest, the sun caught the revolving prism in our window, splashing brushstrokes of rainbow across the walls and my breasts. The shower gel clattered out of my hands and hit the floor—the sun could never touch Lina’s skin while she was like this. Her new body was ripening by the hour. How much time was I wasting just by showering? She was counting on me, and I didn’t even know how many days it took for a peach to go bad. Three, maybe four. I barely rinsed the soap from my body before scrambling out of the shower, knowing I had to do what any reasonable human would do in a situation like this: google. Extensively.

Crouching over my laptop, the towel wilted from my body and across the dining chair. My searching pulled up articles on cheaters, advice on losing faith in religion, and think pieces about platonic love, but nothing about lovers turning into fruit. After an hour, I brewed some coffee and kept on hunting, but no matter how many different iterations of my question I asked, I kept pulling up blanks. Sure, Healthline had a lot to say about stone fruit allergies, and users flooded Reddit with their opinions on edible body powders, but there was nothing to save me and Lina—nothing until there was. On the eighteenth page of Google searches after yet another rephrasing of my question, a link made my heart blaze so loud, it must have vibrated Lina straight down to the pit. In the depths of Quora sat one post from three years back: “What do you do when your fiancé’s turned into a cherry?”

Most of the replies came from trolls, but one was real; it was enough. I read it three times, trying to pull on each word with a pair of chopsticks, to extract them from the screen and into a bowl, swallowing each letter like a grain of rice until I knew how to bring Lina back to me. But there was no solution offered—just a man grieving his absent wife. In the last paragraph,

he included an email address and said,

If you want to try and get him back, send me a message. I can help.

– *Randy from NC*

The original poster had never written again, but it didn't matter. For the first time since Lina's transformation, I wasn't alone. Emailing this man, I upended the pitcher of my ache, describing the peach and Lina, asking him if he's a hoax, begging him to help me get my girl back, threatening him if he wouldn't. Once it was sent, there was nothing to do but wait. From where I sat, Lina's embroidered eyes bored into me, watching my next move.

I couldn't look her art in the face, and focused on Lina cupped in my palm instead. Once, we'd gone to the growers' market at Lake Ella, where a peppering of vendors lounged under the oak sleeping in front of the cafe. One sold peaches. We'd only been dating a few months, so I didn't know yet how deep her love of them ran. She grabbed the fattest one off the display.

"Here. This one's ripe. See?" Her painted thumbnail pressing against that yielding skin had been, and still remained, one of the most erotic moments of my life. She'd beamed up at me. "We can split it."

On a bench facing the lake, Lina had pulled a knife from her floral-print purse—my lady of the ever-surprising rivers—and cut the peach in half. She'd sucked on the pit, lids flickering, before opening her eyes to stare at me as she pulled it from her mouth. The center flesh had been a furious red, so different from the yellow surrounding it, and when I'd probed that crimson middle with my tongue, she'd laughed hard enough to flash every molar my way. We'd watched the Muscovy ducks while slurping our halves down, juice dripping onto my skirt and running into her cardigan sleeves.

This Linapeach was almost as ripe as that one had been. The only thing glued more tightly to me than her was my phone as I refreshed my email every few minutes, getting nothing but newsletters from my senators and Home Depot. I tried napping, but sleep wouldn't come; every second that dripped off the clock was a second closer to Lina's spoiling. Continuing my Google quest from bed turned up nothing. Hours passed. Then, as the sun began to set, it happened: an email appeared from a Mr. Randy L. Stevens. Tasting my urgency through the screen, his sentences were as clipped as a telegram; you could practically hear him saying "stop" at the end of each line.

Tanya,

I know how to fix this. Too much to explain here. Need to make sure you're for real. You live in Florida? Meet me at the Waffle House outside of Atlanta off exit 91 on the 85. Should be about halfway between us. Tomorrow. Noon. Can you do that?

– *Randy L. Stevens*

After I replied, all that was left was for me to wait. All night, the duvet caught against my sweat as I twisted in bed, image after image of peaches and Lina and diners crashing behind my eyes. The Linapeach

huddled beside the lamp on the bedside table, eying me through the moonlight.

“Lina?” She used to love how I saw the world, the way colors came alive under my tongue or coffee pots sang along with the chickadees out the window, so I told her about how the sky had embroidered itself into that vulture’s gleaming flesh, and about the soap bubbles during my shower. She pulled the words from me, scarf after scarf of thought, until they puddled around us. Cradled by them, I slept.

It didn’t last long. Before the sun rose, I was already in the car, a mug of coffee in my cup holder and the Linapeach swaddled in the passenger seat, peering out from over the towel. She always did love a road trip. Vultures hopped around roadkill somewhere outside of Cairo, and I ran a finger across her fuzz. “You were listening last night, baby. You really were.”

After that, the spaces between my vertebrae lengthened, as if a balloon sat between each one. By the time I stopped to buy boiled peanuts and refill our coffee, I was even singing along to the radio. My Lina was coming back—maybe even today. Eating the peanuts while driving proved to be a fucking mess without her hands to help me, so I pulled over and leaned against the passenger side door, my styrofoam cup of peanuts resting on the hood. The sun cracked like egg yolk over the horizon, oozing between the oak trees and brush before me. For the first time since she’d left, my heart wasn’t filled with stones. I slurped the final peanut down, dumped the shells into the grass grazing my shins, and kept driving.

Past a dot on the map called Americus, I glanced at Lina and gasped. A shaft of sun was slicing through the window, boring right into her. It felt like someone had sucked the air from the car, despite the A/C button’s glow, and I pulled a hard right into an empty church parking lot. Shit. What we needed was a grocery store, somewhere to get bags of peas to keep her cool—but in rural Georgia, I didn’t even have cell service, let alone a Publix.

Diverting every A/C vent towards her, I pressed on, drumming the wheel and glancing down at Lina, flitting between catching my breath and whispering her name, until I came across a gas station slouching on the side of the county road. Peeling into it so fast our car straddled two parking spots, I ran inside, tearing through the aisles. Hurricane Tanya, Category Five, hunting for something, a cooler, anything to keep her safe. But there was nothing—they were even out of cups for coke. How is a gas station out of cups? I ran back to the car and grabbed the styrofoam container that had held my peanuts and filled it partway with ice, then bought a copy of *The Macon Telegraph* for good measure.

Swearing in the front seat, I crumpled the front page to cushion the Linapeach against the ice, then covered her in two more pages before closing the cup’s lid as best I could. After swaddling the cup in a towel, I threw my cardigan on top, just in case. The A/C was blaring and goosebumps raced up

my bare arms to my scalp, but I didn't mind. Anything was better than her spoiling.

Years ago, she'd licked salt from a peach margarita as the playoffs flashed across a TV hanging above the bar at El Jalisco. Humidity had pressed against the four corners of the parking lot, heavy as a comforter, but inside, like I was now, I had shivered beneath the fan churning air against our sweat-damp clothes. Lina had loved, still loved, sports, and her cheeks had gotten so flushed from shouting, you'd have thought she'd been the one coaching the Heat all year. Springing from her seat, her little ballet flats had curved around the barstool rungs as she stood, whooping above the TV's whisper. A half-second too late, I'd yelled too, mostly as support. Her pinkies had chilled my jaw as she'd cupped my cheeks, covering my peach-flavored mouth with her own.

Running through this wash cycle of memories was the only thing keeping my foot on the pedal those final two hours, and exit 91 took me by surprise. The Waffle House parking lot was empty and smooth, the color of an overexposed photo from a disposable camera. Not many people were inside, either: the cook, the server, one woman drinking coffee alone, carving into steak and eggs. A family in sweats, laughing, the condensation from their sweet teas pooling around their hashbrowns. I chose a booth in the corner and set Lina in the seat beside me.

My eyes were buttoned to the door, even as I ordered coffee, even as the server brought it out, and even as I drank it down and she refilled it, deft as a debutante. My fingers thawing around the mug, I waited. As soon as he opened the door, I knew exactly who he was. My God, was the man wearing cufflinks? In a Waffle House? Somehow, he made everyone in the restaurant look underdressed instead of the other way around. Tipping his stetson, he strode to the booth and settled in across from me. Before we had time to speak, the server was at his elbow.

“What're you having, baby?”

His eyes didn't leave mine as he answered. “Coffee and a sweet tea, ma'am.”

When she left, neither of us knew where to start, Randy's confidence evaporating into the air around us. He opened his mouth, only to close it when the server returned with his drinks. He cracked a creamer and upended it into the coffee. Then another, and another.

“You eatin'? It's on me.”

“Oh. You sure?”

“Positive.”

“Alright, well, yes I am. I mean, thanks.”

“Don't mention it.” He glanced into his pale coffee. The wrinkles around his mouth were so fixed you could practically see the dust gathering in them from years of waiting. The back of my neck crawled, and I traced the lip

of Lina's cup while we sat in silence. Neither of us seemed particularly eager to start, taking turns occupying our mouths with coffee.

The server returned, and I peeled my eyes off Randy to stare at her instead, this reed of a woman with large teeth and deep-set eyes. Her bottled-red hair escaped from the clip that struggled to hold it back. "Y'all ready to order?"

Randy went first—the All-Star Special. Pecan waffle, raisin toast, grits and bacon, his eggs scrambled. I got the Two Egg Breakfast and a side of sliced tomatoes. As soon as the server retreated behind the counter, she started barking out the morse code of our meals to the line cook. Randy removed his glasses (horn-rimmed), rubbed his eyes, and put them back. "See this?" Twisting his arm out towards me across the table, he pointed to his cuff link. One apple seed swam in a button of resin. "This seed's one of hers. She left me fifteen. Lots of chances to do it right."

I clutched his forearm. "How do you do it? What do I need to do—I need her, I need her back."

He extracted his arm from my grip and whispered. "Easy." Sipping his coffee, he settled back and smiled with so much pity I glanced away. "Subject's already strange enough as it is, honey, without prying ears pulling it apart."

My teeth sank into my bottom lip. "I can't take it though, I gotta get her back. I don't have time for this."

He laughed then, the saddest laugh I ever heard, revealing a missing tooth behind his right canine. Somehow that gap was louder than all his teeth combined. "Baby, all you got is time. Now," the server refilled our coffees again and retreated. "Let me tell you a story, the love kind. My Sherrie and I, well, we were two sides of the same heart. One complete cookie when we were together. I felt like, like I was part of her. Extracted, somehow, from her body right before I was born, so that when we found each other, it was like coming home.

"Her missing happened clear out of the blue. We'd just had a good night. You know, one that'd meant nothing at the time. Watched some TV, had a little whiskey, wrote our grocery list for the next day. Nothing special. Most times, it would've been a boring night, considering the things we used to get up to. But now? It's one of the finest nights of my life, 'cause it was the last night I got to look into her eyes. The next morning, she wasn't there. Poof. Gone. There was an apple instead, right on the couch where we'd fallen asleep together. An apple. Thought I was clean out of sharp knives up there—how does my wife just leave an apple behind as a clue? It stumped me—'til the dreams came, you know. You do know, don't you?"

Tears streamed down my cheeks, collecting at my chin, and I nodded. He nodded back, passing me a napkin from the holder.

"Thank you."

“Course.” After I wiped my face, he continued. “So I started searching, just like you. The internet’s an oracle, if you got the right frame of mind. But that apple, my Sherrie, started to get soft, and I panicked. Apples don’t exactly last forever you know. But right when I was starting to lose hope I—” Rubbing his nose, he broke off as the server unloaded five plates. She flickered at the end of our table while I dabbed the napkin under my eyes.

“Y’all need more coffee?” Her gaze crept from me to Randy. Staring my eggs in the eyes, I nodded. They looked like they were about to cry, too. With the corner of my toast, I punctured each yolk, stabbing those eyes blind. The server topped us off, hurrying away to focus on other, happier tables.

“So?” I said.

“So I found someone else like us. A woman who woke up with a pineapple in her bed.” Chuckling, he carved into his pecan waffle with the side of his fork. “Can you imagine? Not the most cuddly reunion. Anyway, she had it all—the dreams, the smell, you name it—and she’d learned what to do from another guy, who learned it from someone else. She said nobody knows how it all started, but we ain’t here for a history lesson, now, are we?” One bead of maple syrup trembled in his moustache. “She had to sprout her man from the stem—I sure as hell wouldn’t want to trade places with her. One chance not to screw it up—no offense.” He winced mid-chew. My grits swam in a yellow ring of butter. “Sorry, honey, I’m sure you and your peach will do just, just fine. The pineapple sure did. Why, just three years after she planted it, wouldn’t you know, it fruited, this little pineapple growing straight out the top. That very next morning, her fella showed up like nothing had happened, and that was that. She did say he always seemed a little shorter after that, the fruit being so small and all.”

His eyes creased at the edges, and my blood hummed in my ears. “I swear to God, if you’re messing with me I—”

“Never.” His smile fell. “I met him and her over Skype. They were my pen pals for a while, but, I don’t know. The memory got to be too much for ‘em, I guess. Moved to Chile one year, and I never heard from them again.” He pointed at me with a piece of bacon. “Now I’ve waited years. Years to get her back. Sherrie, she was—she is—my whole world. And I never, never want another living person to suffer this way. I’m not playing with you. This’ll work, I promise. It’s got to. It did for them, didn’t it? Here’s what you do.” My grits quivered on the spoon, as eager as my heart. “Eat that fruit—the entire thing. I ate my apple right down to the core, even the stem, just to be safe. Then you take that pit and do whatever you’ve gotta do to nurture it, so it grows into the finest peach tree in the whole damn country. Tend to it just like you did your woman, and eventually, when it blooms, she’ll come home. She’ll come home.” His shoulders slumped and he pushed his eggs around on his plate.

“How long you been waiting?”

“Six years.” A tear splashed just south of his waffle plate, so sad that I wished I’d never seen it. I reached across the table and touched his sleeve. “Feels good to talk about it, I bet.”

“Sure does.” He sniffed, then scooped a forkload of eggs to his mouth.

“Hey.”

“Hm?”

“What happened to the person online, the one with the cherry?”

He rolled sweet tea around in his mouth before answering. “Didn’t make it. Turned into a cherry the month before Colorado winter set in. Poor guy didn’t stand a chance.”

Lina’s cup bent under my grip. After that, there wasn’t much to say, so we finished our meal mostly in silence. Outside, humidity had begun welling off the pavement, and a breeze cooled the sweat between my arm and torso. Randy handed me his phone, clearing his throat, and I typed my number in. “Sherrie’s gonna flower this year. I just know it. My baby’s one hell of a fighter. I’ll send you a picture when it happens, how about that?”

The ice in Lina’s cup sloshed as I jerked forward to hug him. After a moment, he hugged me back. “You keep her safe, you hear?” He held me at arm’s length, nodding to Lina. “If you keep treating her nice and loving her with all you got, she’ll visit you sometimes, promise. Sherrie hasn’t missed our anniversary yet.” Randy blinked up at the sky and, without another word, walked back to his pickup.

All those years ahead of me without her barreled straight through my chest like the 95 roaring just past the parking lot. But the sooner I got started, the sooner she’d come home. Randy raised one hand out the window as he drove off, and I peeled back Lina’s lid to top off her ice, glancing in at her nest. Terror sliced through me from root to crown. The newspaper had wilted around her body like cabbage leaves, transferring words onto her skin from the pages. Lifting her from the cup exposed shreds of paper mingled with the ice, and her skin hung wrinkled around her body as she aged in my palms. A moan dripped from between my teeth, and my hands quaked so hard I dropped her onto the asphalt and screamed. Heads turned from inside the Waffle House, then looked away as quickly as they’d stared; the people of the freeway are used to witnessing others fall apart. Dropping to my knees, I cradled her, extracting each piece of gravel like a surgeon.

Apologies dribbled out of me on loop as I dug pieces of her flesh from the blacktop with my fingernails, bringing them to my lips and tasting peach and gasoline. Randy had said to eat the whole thing, and I wasn’t about to lose her to some parking lot in Georgia, so I brought my face to the pavement and licked it. Pebbles pockmarked my shins as my tongue roved the asphalt for any forgotten pieces of my girl, until I knew there wasn’t a trace of her left.

On the drive home, she sat on my lap, wrapped in my cardigan, the A/C cranked as high as it would go. Parts of the drive home had me shaking, others half-blind with tears, until finally, by the grace of I don't know what, I ended up here, in our driveway, Lina's bike chained to the front porch, its seat dusted in pollen, and I sat in my car wailing, blubbering her name as if that alone might summon her back. Like everything else I'd tried, it didn't work. But I knew now what I needed to do. Running inside, I kissed her once and set her in the fridge, sprinted back to the car, and sped to the bookstore to snatch up everything I could on cultivating peaches, muttering to myself in the aisles as I pulled book after book off the shelf.

Later, this mountain of reading cluttered Lina's half of the bed as I studied into the night. Just a week ago, in the spot my pile now occupied, she'd been reading, wearing that stupid Wild Turkey shirt. She'd gotten it from a shot girl. They were always falling into Lina's heavy, ripe orbit, cackling at her jokes, tilting towards her as if she carried her own gravity. She'd been reading something from the stack on her nightstand that was as varied as my current selection was narrow. Breakfast cookbooks, time-swept romance novels, *Idiot's Guide to Wine*—she didn't really care. The one she'd been devouring then was on Thailand.

I'd rolled to face her. "You planning us a vacation or something?"

"Just daydreaming. One of my customers was talking about it. Got me thinking." Setting the book down, she'd pinned the turkey on her shirt like roadkill, one wing escaping from the back cover. "You ever thought about us traveling some? I feel like, I don't know. I always wanted an adventure. A real one. Something I've—we've—missed out on. Know what I mean?"

Plucking the book from her chest, I'd freed the turkey and nestled into her. We'd read for an hour together after that, planning a trip we now might never get to take. Picking *The Mindful Arborist* back up from my lap, I read about peaches until the birds began to trill.

This morning, the Linapeach stared at me from the table. Apparently, I was supposed to soak her pit for a few days, and then let it germinate in a Ziploc in the fridge. I didn't know what I'd been expecting, but something more romantic than that. Burying it and saying some words, like a funeral in the movies, or at least a thunderstorm and some light prophecy. Instead, it was just this wrinkled, sorry peach and a cereal bowl. At least I'd chosen one of our nicer ones without any chips along the edge. It would have to do. Bringing her to my lips for a kiss, she cloaked me in her ripe, Lina scent. "Oh, darlin'."

It was time. Puncturing her skin with my teeth, Lina's nectar burst on my tongue. My tears fell fat, our fluids mingling down my chin like grease, her flesh falling apart in my mouth. She was delicious; I cried harder, sobbing until I was sucking her final threads from the pit's crevices, my chest soaked in juice and tears and snot and maybe even Lina's own warm blood. Dropping

her into the bowl and covering her with water from the filter, I sat down beside her and did the only thing there was left for me to do: wait for my girl to come home.

Martha Darr is a poet and literary translator. She has received awards from various organizations including the National Endowment for the Humanities. Her work has appeared in such publications as FIYAH: Black Speculative Fiction, Exterminating Angel Press, Journal of American Folklore, and a bilingual anthology Knocking On The Door Of The White House: Latina and Latino Poets in Washington, D.C.

Gombo Exaltation

Martha Darr

Undulating meat, okra, spice
Meet onion, pepper, celery: Holy Trinity

Called by Liquid Mother and Dancing Rice
Upside down melody

Forks, spoons, knives in gossip chatter
Feeling the magic the joy

Sensations in rhythm
Jubilee in a kitchen

Amen

Hallelujah

Amen

Chip Howard (he/him) lives in Chicago and is a ravenous book collector. Writing fiction has been a lifelong dream for him ever since, as a boy, he was introduced to Ray Bradbury's stories and Franklin W. Dixon's Hardy Boys series (which he, of course, collected in pristine hardcover volumes that lined his bedroom shelves where normal boyhood toys probably ought to have been).

Mother (A Listing)

Chip Howard

The house, if you should come for a look, is best viewed from the far northeast corner of the property. Granted, you will need to do this in the fall when the trees behind it can distract with reds and yellows, and when the fallen leaves can act as a concealer for the roof's age spots. And your visit should also be timed with the sunset so that the dappled light has a chance to smooth any sharp edges. It's best to stay within these guidelines and to avoid studying it for any length of time from the front—it will disappoint you, and you will disappoint it. The house was my mother's.

It's a very small house, you will quickly find out. When you step inside, you are already, suddenly, in the middle of the living room and well on your way to the kitchen. Surprise! There is no easing a person in. Nothing of the compress-and-release design principle (which we've learned about on our Frank Lloyd Wright tour in May) that the luxury of hallways affords. The house has one full bathroom off the kitchen and no closets to be found anywhere within the two rooms that we can only unofficially call bedrooms. All we can say on that matter is that my mother lived without them for nearly half a century, preferring to make small, sensible piles of her clean clothes around the room, at least in the beginning before she went a different direction. So, it *can* be done.

Returning to the living room, we encourage you to take in the decor with an open mind. The furniture we tend to describe as mid-century, but it's really three-quarters century as you will see from all the mustard. The green paisley wallpaper has admittedly begun to blister. The television console in the corner is the size of a child's treehouse.

This time capsule is not everyone's idea of a home, we know, and my husband and I did consider making some updates. Strangely, I was hesitant to disrupt this snapshot of my mother's curious choices, and whenever he brought up the subject of modernization I clammed up and would not speak to him for days. As a compromise, we tried putting it on the market as "fully furnished," but it wasn't long before we realized that no one wanted a kitchen

done in lime green. No one wanted to pay for a new septic tank. No one wanted to slip out of their modern comforts and into the pre-worn life my mother had abruptly left behind. “Were the Seventies so terrible?” I asked him. There was something in the way the mouths of prospective buyers fell open when they walked in that told us we were facing an uphill battle. They poked around a bit out of politeness, flushed the toilet, opened a cupboard, inquired about the pull-down ladder without quite asking to see the attic. “Well, that’s neat-o,” one woman said. What they really wanted to do was turn and run. I could see their point.

“This isn’t working,” he said to me. “Your mother is still hanging from every corner of this house, and no one wants that. We need to make some drastic changes.”

“If we just moved things around a little,” I suggested.

We brought in a woman named Cookie who claimed expertise in feng-shui. She walked inside, took off her sunglasses and said, “Yikes.” Then she rotated a full three-hundred-and-sixty degrees and said, “Where am I, even?” There was only so much she could do, Cookie warned us right off the bat. She seemed horrified that the lime-green stove was right next to the rear door and went as far as to tell us that it simply couldn’t stay there if any of this was going to work. As if it had another place it could go. As if we could yank the stove away from the wall and move it like an ottoman. We set about rearranging the living room, and with each mustard piece being lifted and shoved, I felt like I was displacing organs and bones that were not supposed to move. The Frankensteinian quality of the resulting arrangement worried me, and I decided I would move everything back when Cookie was gone. She asked me, putting her sunglasses back on, if my mother had died abruptly, and when I told her yes, in a manner of speaking, Cookie nodded with a knowing look back at the ill-placed stove, as if to suggest that my mother never stood a chance.

Feng-shui was not the answer for us, so we shifted disciplines from Eastern to Native-American and tried our hand at burning sage. This idea was his, not mine, and I suppose I ought to give him credit for at least trying. When he lit the little bundle and began to move from room to room, I asked him what was supposed to be happening. He told me we were cleansing the house of any loitering spirits, and without quite knowing why, I reached out and slapped the smoking bush from his hand.

“I’m starting to think you don’t want to sell this house,” he said, tamping out the wisp of smoke in the shag carpet with his shoe.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I told him.

Next, we turned our focus to the outside and went about re-siding the entire building. This sounds like an enormous project until you’ve seen the house, and then you’re left wondering what took us so long. But I wanted the very best siding for my mother’s house, and what I’d chosen went on

backorder. He accused me of stalling, but I can't see how the shortfalls of a shoddy fulfillment system can be laid at my feet. When it all finally arrived and our project was well underway, we stepped back to admire our work. I'd hoped the house might take on a more youthful vibe now that it was wrapped in this new garb, but it only had the appearance of a frail, bedridden woman who'd been shimmied into a teenager's skirt against her will. We were left with the impression of it being somehow age-inappropriate. Thus, we threw up our hands and painted the whole thing a sullen matriarchal taupe.

"No one likes this color," he said to me from the top of the ladder with the triangular trim brush in his hand. "Is it possible you're sabotaging us?"

In the end, we made one final and significant change before agreeing to step away and cut our losses. We relocated the walkway from where it originally spanned its utilitarian distance between the driveway and the front door. It now begins in the far northeast corner of the property (see first paragraph of listing) and dissects the yard at a diagonal on its way to the house, holding you to this very lovely, if specific, view for as long as possible. But nothing is lovely from every angle. We can only hope that a buyer's first and last gaze will be pleasant, and that perhaps the middle moments might be forgiven or forgotten.

#

Update: If you plan on coming by, you should know that we received our first offer last week. Of course, the deal fell through almost instantly because the young couple drove off a bridge not ten miles from here and had to be rushed to the hospital, where things are still touch-and-go, as I understand it. But we had a few solid hours of validation right up until the accident, a few palpable moments of hope that were—I feel certain he would agree—just as good as any sale.

Claudia Wair (she/her) is a Virginia-based writer and editor whose fiction has appeared in Fudoki Magazine, Writers Resist, and in the anthologies Dread Naught but Time and Fantasia Fairy Tales.

Cotton Laughter

Claudia Wair

cotton laughter



DOWN

1. What you do to avoid the people downstairs, the people bringing casseroles and salads and sympathy. Hint: You're exhausted. Your brain struggles to comprehend the reality that he's gone. You've been running on adrenaline.
2. Whenever you had a problem, he had the uncanny ability to get to the core of the issue and help you see the best way forward. But now that he's gone, who will you go to for ____?
3. He had a great sense of humor, silly and strange, so the house you grew up in was full of ____.
4. He was married to your mother, and with her, prayed for you to come into the world. He was filled with awe and afraid of breaking you. He couldn't wait for you to begin talking so he could get to know this person he helped make. And when you did talk, he was proud that you were his daughter.
7. You are on ____ when you get the news that the cancer is terminal. In their message, your parents tell you not to call, to enjoy yourself and you'd discuss the doctor's news when you return. But you have to know, so you call. You cut this short to go home.

ACROSS

5. The leaden pain you feel every time you call your uncle on the birthday they shared. He feels it too, and every year you cry together on the phone.
6. What you are doing to fill the hole inside you, that empty place. You keep doing this, more and more, long after the casseroles and salads are gone. Hint: You're still doing this, years later.
8. Your father's brother. They shared a secret language when they were little. They had a strange psychic bond. When the phone rang, your father would suddenly say, "that's Bubba," and it would always be Bubba. They were so different, your uncle didn't even look like his brother, much less his ____.
9. What the doctor who signs the death certificate suggests you and your mother take before the funeral, to calm your nerves. It works. When you get home and all the mourners leave, you sleep for 18 hours straight.
10. The funeral director approaches you and your mom at the church before the wake. He whispers to your mother, "I put ____ in the urn, so when the time comes, there'll be room for you." He walks away and you and your mom look at each other and burst into quiet giggles. "A two-for-one deal!" your mother says. Then you both sigh. You take her hand and put your head on her shoulder.

V. L. Seltsam (they/them) is their own twin. When not writing SF, they haunt Toronto's dog parks, drinking boba and yelling at the sky. Their notebooks are simultaneously meticulous and incoherent.

Side Hustle

V. L. Seltsam

Ethelmine Day stared out the kitchen window of her tidy bungalow. The floor was mopped, lunch leftovers put away, and the bodies outside frolicking. It was difficult for her to think of them as children, or human, or anything other than bags of organs. Still, a heart was healthier when grown in a happy home, and so she did her best to provide one: kissed them goodnight and chuckled over their nutrient baths and spoke softly when she stubbed her toe, which was often.

Her afternoons were always the same: a gentle variegated hum of activity. Perhaps the baking of bread, the sweeping of floors—or perhaps jotting of lists and the washing of dishes. Out in the grassy backyard the bodies played in the afternoon sunshine, their arms occasionally flapping in distress due to a collision with one of the others, or the tall wooden fence. She used to keep flowers, but the beds were trampled too often, since the poor dears couldn't see, relying purely on animal instincts relayed through their feet. She chuckled to herself, and dried the last dish.

Sometimes Ethelmine wished she'd decided to raise Labrador Retrievers; same mess but more trainable. But then there would be the shedding to worry about, and far less income when all was said and done. Dishes finished, she set the kettle on the stove, and while waiting for it to boil double-checked the emergency notification on her old-fashioned physical computer, set up in a corner of the tidy kitchen. Tonight's donor was Pepperidge. She'd always liked those cookies. She pulled open the drawer and selected her favourite knife, and the whetstone.

She knew she shouldn't name them at all, but names did seem to help calm the poor dears, even if they didn't have ears; they "heard" her calling them for dinner through vibrations in their skin. She didn't like to think about it. And she did her best to refrain from calling them anything humorous, even in her head. Blobby was unacceptable, as were Lumper, Ploop and Dumps.

Pepperidge was heavy; a chunkier, bigger-boned body, and she did not want to have to drag it down the stairs. She'd wanted a full week's rest after Periwinkle had wrenched her back, not that she got one; who would look after her charges while she was laid out? She hated to think of the poor dears getting too cold or hungry or even left out in rain, like that one time she'd had

a neighbourhood boy watch the house so she could travel. No, better to take things slow, and safe, and so she prepped everything in the basement first before standing out on the porch and whistling while the sun set between the monolithic apartment buildings that ringed her small property.

The bodies crowded around her, jostling, arms slapping each other as they blindly groped for what they thought was their food. Pepperidge was at the back, and if the body had belonged to a Labrador (and had had a head) she would have imagined it sniffing the air suspiciously. She sighed; watching them cotton on to their singular fate was the hardest task of the lot.

After the clean-up, of course. At least there was a drain in the basement.

“Hello, darlings,” she said, patting their curves and tickling their bumps. “Are we all ready for our nutrient baths? Who’d like a nice soak in their nutrient bath!”

Though without mouths, they did have gas bladders which pooted excess carbon dioxide, and often their emotions. Much was the pooting as the bodies stumbled into each other in their rush for the stairs and their individual tubs.

“Not you, Pepperidge,” she said, and swept the body into a hug before it could ascend the stairs. “I’ve got a special treat for you tonight, because you’ve been such a good sport!” She waited until the others were upstairs. “We’re going to go to the basement!”

Pepperidge pooted its excitement.

Organ donation, by its very nature, was about saving a life out of a tragedy; that is until the technology developed to breed creatures that were not human enough to warrant rights, but close enough to be perfect donors. One body could yield everything—except corneas, of course, but then, who these days would choose organic corneas over the stronger synthetic ones? so that no one with a failing heart need wait for the correct kind of accident to save them. But raising such creatures—giving them happy homes—space to exercise and be healthy—in this overcrowded age? That was trickier.

Ethelmine’s bungalow home sat on a quarter lot of what had once been a suburb, now surrounded by infill apartment towers. Over the decades she’d watched her neighbours settle up and move on, or stay until they died, their children signing away the valuable property the second the body was cold. She’d done neither. She’d stayed healthy and had no family, only this tiny home. So when the Depression came and she’d had the choice between selling or supplementing her pension . . . well.

She’d always considered herself industrious.

Pepperidge continued to poot gently as she strapped it into the harness, giving it gentle pats and soothing strokes. Some figured out what was going on sooner than others, and Pepperidge did seem astute for such a creature. She’d have to work fast. She hated when they struggled, futilely, in

the harness, and the stink they released from fear sank into her clothing, disturbing the others when she'd later tuck them in at night. But she had prepared this morning while they'd been playing. She'd learned, old Ethelmine, and that's why she still had her house and her yard.

The syringe was close at hand, and still unawares and happy with the petting, Pepperidge gently pooted its last.

She snapped on her gloves, double-checked the list of required organs, and got to work.

#

The hospital was downtown, of course it was, and she hated this part: the crowded sidewalks, the endless shoving, the dark forest of skyscraper pinnacles. She clutched her carry-alls to herself, afraid, but no one took much notice of an old woman in the crowd and barely spared a glance for the red crosses on the heavy-duty plastic.

When she arrived at the front desk, the admin staff recognized her, buzzing her in, nurses hurrying to her side. "You are a wonder, Ethelmine, punctual as ever."

"I am a professional," she reminded them, kindly. To her, they looked like children playing at being doctors.

"You should use a courier, save yourself the exertion."

She took a deep breath, counted to three, and smiled. "It's on my way to the market." Did she have to explain *again* how expensive the couriers were? How their insurance costs alone ate into her margins, barely leaving her enough to buy more nutrients for the bath? No.

The nurse-children relieved her of the first carry-all, already focused on the task at hand, the frail old woman forgotten save for hand-shakes and the old-fashioned cheque waiting at the front desk.

She was saving lives. That was important. But *her* life was also important, and didn't she deserve to spend her last years in comfort? She'd worked hard all her life, and raising bodies barely counted as work. Most days.

She tucked the cheque into her blouse, waved goodbye to the admin staff, and continued on to the farmer's market.

#

Once at the market she came more alive. These were her friends; people who enjoyed good food and saw no harm in making money from delivering the best and the freshest. And why shouldn't they, if people were willing to pay for it? And why not eke out a little more margin from all that hard work? All that investment?

Ethelmine reached her table, and settled in, unpacking the second carry-all, greeting and waving at familiar faces. Already there were people waiting, trusting her. They knew she'd be on time, and they always knew she had the best sausages in the city.

After all, the best meat came from the happiest homes.

Magdalena Gómez (she/her) is the Poet Laureate of Springfield, MA (2019-2021). In 2018, she was a recipient of the New England Public Radio Arts and Humanities Award. Publications include: L.A. Times; upstreet; Massachusetts Review; The Progressive; among many others. Her poetry collection, Shameless Woman, Red Sugarcane Press, NYC, 2014, is included in college curriculums throughout the U.S. Her poems have been set to music and performed across the U.S. and Canada. gen2genlegacy@gmail.com

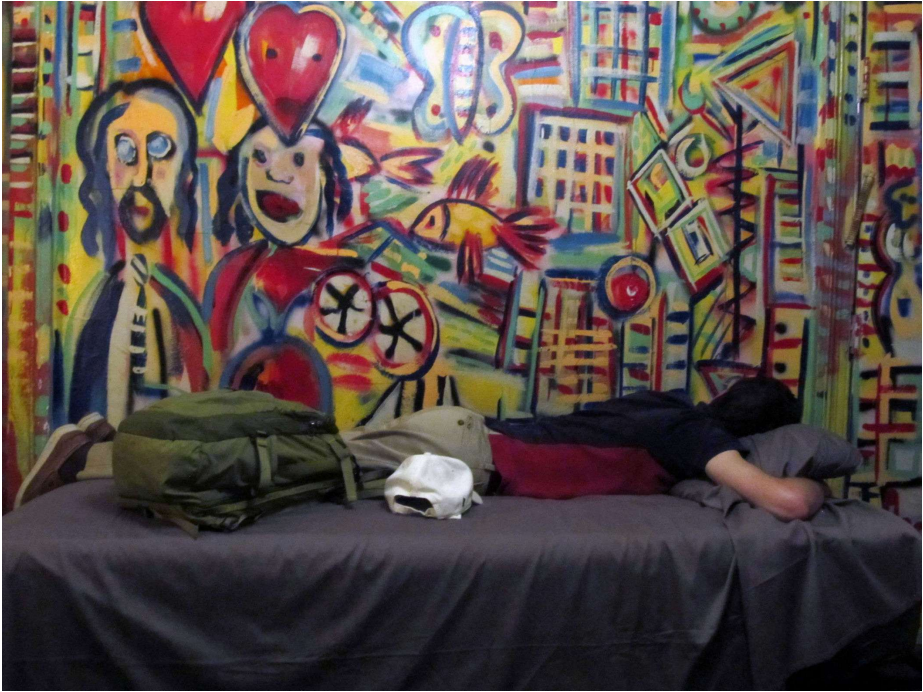
Media Illiteracy

Magdalena Gómez

I am told there has been too much lighting of Copal on theater stages.
I hear there have been too many poems about plantains.
Too much talk of Diasporas and Pan-Africanism.
Too much Black Lives Matters.
Too much rap about resistance.
Too much #MeToo and #Times Up.
Too much LGBTQA TQBIPOC Non-Binary Cis Trans talk.
Too much hogwash over gun control.
I am told I can stop complaining now since we are now *Post-Racial*.
I am straining to hear over bullets sprayed into peaceful crowds.
To hear over the muffled screams of the sex trafficked.
To hear over the gurgling of the publicly lynched.
Over the moans of masses ushered into corporate prisons shanked by
a justice that continues to be blind. Dumb ass. If you want justice you have to
know where to look and how to see.
I can't hear over asylum seekers wailing the names of their children into a
void.
I am told not to be so angry since I live in the best country in the world.
(I was also scolded in Watts. South Bronx. Oakland. While eating government
cheese.)
I cannot cannot hear over the counting of money. Over hunger. Over thirst.
The buzzing of saws.
The scorching of earth.
The pumping of oil.
The fracking of rocks.
The gang rapes of Rule of Law Rule of Law Rule of Law Rule of Law
The songs of equality sung by tomorrow's executioners.
I am told not to worry. The earth is not ending as we know it.
I am told that if I lose weight I will see the world differently.

There are coupon codes to get my resistant fat sucked out and be born again.
Call Now Call Now Call Now Call Now

Gaby Bedetti's (she/her) essays, photos, poems, and translations have appeared in New Literary History, Still, and Asymptote. Other works are forthcoming in Brooklyn Rail, Ezra, and Rhino. Visit her at <https://gabriellabedetti.wordpress.com/>.



Crashing at the Carlton Arms

*A hotel in New York City—
each room painted
with reveries to add your own*



Distancing Walnuts

*Sitting on the porch,
I feel the weight of the walnut
as it drops on the roof, a boisterous
welcome*

Kate Lechler (she/her) teaches English literature at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, MS, where she lives with her dog, Charlie, collects skulls, and writes about the apocalypse.

His Hands On My Skin

Kate Lechler

I see them everywhere. My future lovers, bedmates-in-waiting. She swaggers into the coffee shop, a yapping dog leashed behind her, tattoos licking up her calves. His chest is a broad blue beacon drawing my eyes across the street after him. Someone catches my gaze over a hill of avocados in the produce aisle, their pink miracle of tongue darting out to tease a lip ring.

And, sweat-slick and gulping, I imagine it.

It's not that I don't love my husband. But love changes over years—which he's had more of than I have—and our love has mellowed into something tender, diligent, bemused. I spend my days in the garden, tending tomatoes, while he engineers robots in his workshop for companies like Imitech and Pygmalion. He designs prototypes—security officers with cameras for eyes, cashiers with magnetic hands to handle coins—and he's good at his work. Puts something of himself into everything he creates. When I look through the window of his lab, he waves, his welding helmet turning his eyes into twin flames.

After a dozen years, marriage has settled into a series of conversations through locked doors.

#

I go to the bar alone. The neck of my shirt sliding down my clavicle, exposing skin still unwrinkled, cloaked in gardenia perfume. I toy with my glass, shoot glances down the bar. A woman smiles, comes to sit next to me, her skin tan and taut over high cheekbones. We talk and I watch the paler flash of her throat when she laughs, head-back.

At the end of the evening, her fingers find my wrist.

“What are you doing now? Do you want to go somewhere?”

I duck my head, suddenly shy. “No. Thank you, though.” Her smile crumples and I try to erase her hurt. “You're really pretty.” It doesn't work.

When I get home, past eleven, he's still in his workshop. I throw on a t-shirt, smudge my makeup off, and punch in the code to let myself in.

His coveralls stick to his back when I hug him from behind. I nuzzle his neck, hoping to start something, but he remains focused on work, manipulating a ball joint. A shoulder socket, it looks like, for one of Imitech's

more athletic models. Probably an agricultural or industrial worker.

Despite how age has slowed him down, his hands remain one of my favorite parts of him. Slim, tapered fingers, the muscles strong and tendons elegant under his skin. And, no matter how long he'd been working with oil and solder, his nails always pristine half-moons.

"Where've you been?" Is that a note of concern, of forced casualness in his voice?

"Out with a friend," I say. "That looks good, honey."

"They're just bodies," he says, repeating the commonplace he uses to defer my praise. He turns to give me a kiss and I notice a new crease between his brows. In a few years I may have one to match, which is part of the problem. We are both growing older. Time is running out.

I'm a fire, burning down, and all I want is to heap fuel.

#

I've never been one for eye contact during sex. When I feel my husband's hips angling beneath mine—the first time in months, if not longer—I close my eyes, find myself traveling some distant road from my childhood. The house with the guitar-shaped pool that once belonged to a rock star. The Chevron on the corner. The field with the spotted mare. I speed down this road, faster and faster, only to open my eyes near the end, look down at where his elegant hand cups my breast, watch the triangle of freckles at the base of his thumb as I come, dissatisfaction still looming somewhere behind my breastbone.

He knows something is wrong. We talk about it, in our way, while our cleaner robot swishes into the room, electronic eyes glittering in her blank face.

"I don't know how to want less," I tell him. "I don't *want* to want less."

His eyes are big and sad, like a tragic cow's. "I'm afraid you'll leave me. That once you—" he waves a hand in the air, gesturing towards everything outside the magic circle of our bed. "That you won't want me anymore."

I lean into him, inhale. He smells like sweat, smoke, and copper. "I still love you."

He flops back, exhausted by the sex or the conversation, I can't tell which. "I just want to take care of you."

#

I go out again. And again. I meet a dozen people, never going farther than a hand on an elbow, a brush of knees beneath the table. Every night, I return to my husband, wrap an arm around his waist and watch as he constructs body after body, listening to the thud of his heart and feeling sadness move in my chest like a cat panting in the heat.

Until, one night, I meet *him*.

The first thing I see is the man's smile, quick as lightning, easy as a reflex. His eyes a color that refuses to stay still—sometimes silver, other times green. Something pulses in me, rushing upwards to close my throat when he asks my name. I fumble my glass, ice rattling, then apologize for being clumsy. He laughs, a dark shot of sound past my ear.

"It's only awkward if you make it awkward." His fingers trace chills up the back of my arm, and I calm, settle, expand into a pool of glassy-eyed contentment.

We talk. He asks question after question, mixed in with perfectly-timed anecdotes, never too long, careful not to dominate the conversation. He weaves a spell of confidence and amused self-deprecation that cocoons me in its effortlessness. By the end of the night, it's only us, my abs tired from laughing at his jokes.

After he leaves, I wrap my palm around his glass, raise it to my lips. I lick the rim, two long swipes of my tongue all the way around, hoping to capture something of him in the film of whiskey left behind.

Then I see it, stuck to the bottom of the glass. A card, scribbled with his name and number.

#

My husband and I talk again.

"It's only sex. It doesn't have to mean anything."

He is working on a new robot, Pygmalion's answer to whatever he created for Imitech last week. I watch as he tests the hydraulics of the neck, then picks up a jeweler's wrench to tweak something within, a precise maneuver of finger and thumb, a flick of the wrist.

"It's not," he says. "They're people. And what's to stop you from falling in love, especially since ..."

He takes off his goggles, looks down at me. His face is tired. It has always surprised me that he works with robots, this big, soft, tender-hearted person. Unhappy and messy and kind. The least robotic person I have ever met.

"Since what?"

He doesn't answer, just massages his temples. His eyes look lost, and I want to tell him, "It's fine, I don't need it, I only want you," but I think of the man in the bar and my mouth dries shut.

"Okay. Okay," he says. "I don't want this to change things between us. But okay."

When I get to the next room, to my phone where I already have the number programmed in, my hands are shaking.

#

I meet the man a few days later for a casual drink. Which turns into three, which turns into a walk back to our cars, which turns into a detour to the herb garden by the library, which turns into me pressed against the rough

concrete of a bench while he kisses my throat.

It's late but there could still be people around. "Do you ..." My breath catches. "Have somewhere we can go?"

He nods, humming against my pulse, then pulls me to him in a rush. My blood spins with adrenaline and I barely notice the walk back to his car, the drive to his apartment, the stutter-step up the stairs to his door.

When we're inside, I step back, take a breath, look at him. His eyes flicker but the rest of him is solid. Skin damp with sweat. I want to lick the stubble from his face and knead hands into his shoulders and feel his grunting body above mine.

We don't even make it to the couch. By the time he takes his jeans off, I'm wedged up against his kitchen table, a traditional wood piece marked with water rings. I grip the edge with one hand, feel it cut into my palm, while I loop my other arm around his neck. He feels strong, alive under my fingers. If I pressed, I could leave red marks in the place where his shoulder meets his neck.

I'm halfway down the old road, hurrying towards that field, that spotted mare, when I look down to where he grips my arm and see it. The triangle of freckles at the base of his thumb.

I stop moving, grab his hand between both of mine, bring it close to my face. His fingers, long and slim. His nails, clean and trimmed to form exact white crescents.

My husband's hands.

I look back up into those eyes whose color still shifts, and see the lens adjust, the shutter click. He frowns at me, looks down at our joined hands where my ring digs into one of his fingers, and then at our joined selves. He flashes that easy smile.

"It's just bodies, babe. Nothin' else."

If I squeeze him hard, will my fingers leave bruises or sink into his plasticine flesh like dough? Will he come apart at the seams, his hands continuing to twitch and grasp after the rest has sunk down into a heap of silicone and gears?

I move his hand back to my breast and close my eyes, making believe this is exactly what I wanted.

When I come, the sadness and relief threaten to break like a wave through my sternum, to engulf us both, to wash away everything real or fake, until nothing is left but his hands on my skin.

Lane Fields is a queer, trans writer living in the Boston area. Lane's poetry was part of Tupelo Press's 30/30 Project and has previously been featured in rkvry Quarterly and New Millennium Writings. When not writing, Lane spends time collecting records, trying on chunky sneakers, and cat wrangling.

American Love Story

Lane Fields

41 y/o femme at the height of her sexual powers ... open to sweet young things

open, rose of salt/ open, beloved/ open your hunger, wit, DMs/ open casting call for new joys/ open season/ open wound between my thighs, behind my sternum/ open eyesmouthheart as one pulsating organ/ open, little black book/ open the door—this door—open—this—here—here—

Behind the Davis Square T Stop

it was April you were sleeveless
tattoos beautied your skin brown we walked
Diesel lemonade on a bench your arm
behind asked to kiss open
window like a summer day

Juliet

after Maggie Nelson

We fucked on your bed with no headboard,
seafoam sheets a tangle, then gave each other
languid head in the hazy laze of Sunday

morning. This was the world that spring, you
and me dizzy with delusion that it could last.
Breath of lilacs, kanji tattoo, you were standing

in the kitchen when I realized I could love you
without fear. A mother's hips, you were taller than
yourself. Dark pouring down your shoulders, hazel

-nut eyes, gold bangle on your dappled forearm,
your neck a delicate arch. I will always remember
you that way, festooned in that impeccable bright.

*Sam Heyman (he/him, they/them) is a gay, nonbinary writer housed in Nashville, TN. Published in *Hashtag Queer* and *Ordinary Space*, his writing often deals with themes of intersectionality, queer identity, and the human condition. His mission as a storyteller is to illuminate the nuances of queer experience beyond mainstream representations.*

Roses

Sam Heyman

He had only seen a corner, but Kenta knew. The very thing he had been seeking—an unsealed and paid-for issue of *G-Men*, a popular gay men’s magazine sold in shops between his school and the bus station—was right here, mostly obscured by office work documents, in his father’s office. The day before, when he was helping his father lug a few boxes of junk paper to the disposal—“Kenta, you’ve gotten so strong”—he had thought he had seen something. The sight made him twitch, gave him a fleeting flush of weakness where there needed to be strength. As he squeezed himself and his load of paper from the cluttered office alcove, Kenta faltered. Some of the weight he was carrying spilled onto the floor. His father, sidling past him to see what happened, showed a measure of concern that managed, for once, to pierce through his mask of thick, reflective spectacles.

“Are you alright?” he asked, receiving no answer. Kenta shook it off. He picked up the few pages that he had let slip out of his reach and kept moving. Pretending that things were fine seemed like the right thing to do at the time. After all, this was what men in his family did. But there were many kinds of men, and Kenta was beginning to realize he was a young man of a certain kind. He was strong, his muscles beginning to plump and round in areas where before there had just been the thick smoothness of fat, common of many boys his age. He was growing stronger with each day, with each overstuffed bento his mother made for him, with each saucer of sake he and his school buddies managed to nick off the heberekes at the local bars. His face didn’t turn the rose color that it used to, at least not when he drank.

At night, when he was alone, thinking, groping beneath his covers, there it was—all over his hands, and in the soft, smooth hills of his cheekbones. It was a color that spread with the quickening of his breaths, the heat of idle motion, the catching—of breaths when he came—back down to his body, warm and still, in his bed.

The sort of man Kenta was beginning to become was a young man who liked other men. He knew of many men like this, from television, from the music shows on NHK, and especially from manga. But looking at himself

in the mirror every morning, washing himself in the shower, Kenta knew he was destined for something different from those men. He wasn't slender or handsome. His blunt features and his deepening voice had removed all hopes he may have had at a singing career, and the womanly life of the o-kama did not appeal to him. All he had was a yearning for something that he saw, tucked surreptitiously beneath the bland, jargon-filled pages he thought his father should have thrown away, but which now clearly seemed to be serving a certain, clandestine purpose.

There was desire, and later that night, with a brush of his father's ankle against his, under cover of their blue dining table kotatsu, there was fear. Retracting his feet away from his father's corner of the table, Kenta began to realize the consequences of his discovery that afternoon. Suddenly the lack of intimacy between his parents struck him as suspect, troubling. Did his mother know? Would he ever tell her? These fearful wonderings laid waste to his appetite, but Kenta still managed to finish his dinner without much trouble. He got up from his seat even sooner than his sister, Natsu, and retreated to his bedroom. Lying awake on his bed, listening to the distant clack and hissing of his mother doing dishes, Kenta hoped his father would skip the usual pit-stop at his office and, like him, at least try to go to sleep.

The next day was Sunday, Kenta's one full day off from school for the week. Natsu was finishing up getting dressed when he awoke and was gone before he had returned from the shower. The room they shared wasn't large, but it seemed to change size when Natsu came and went. Whenever she stood in front of their one closet, inspecting herself in the mirror, he felt as if there was a partition between them. They rarely spoke anymore. Kenta missed the little sister who would beg to borrow his manga. "The one with the girl and the moon cat"—*Sailor Moon*—had been her favorite, so they shared the series between themselves, collecting volumes one by one. But then, something happened—Natsu's friends invited her into their cult of fashion, and she hid her manga-loving roots away in a box in her closet.

Kenta was more of a homebody. It wasn't odd for him to spend a Sunday at home alone, reading manga or surfing on the internet. Today, however, he had a mission. After making certain that he was alone, he returned to his father's office. It was a paper-jammed shoebox of a room, only a few feet deeper and wider than a closet. Kenta waded through the refuse that remained, even from the work he and his father had done the day before. The magazine was sitting right where he had last seen it, with one corner of it peeking out from beneath a mound of papers, reflecting a glint of morning light. With both hands, he lifted the magazine from its paperwork nest and into the light trickling in a diagonal through the office's small window.

In the light, he at last began to ask himself the obvious questions: How long had this been in his father's possession? Kenta's mouth was dry, and his heart pounded deep and hollow, like the taikos played at summer

festivals. The magazine he had found, hidden beneath papers in his father's office, was one he'd seen issues of from afar, peeking out of the thin plastic bags of men who looked like his father—thin, with stooped posture and lifeless, graying hair—and tucked firmly, privately, under the large, sheltering arms of the men with whom he had come to identify, and for whom he'd come to harbor—perhaps, he hoped, mutually—some desire.

On this issue's cover was a man whose musculature looked truly formidable. His shirt appeared to have burst open, shreds of it falling across his tan-painted chest. Looking at drawings like these made Kenta feel small. It was a precious, pleasurable feeling, but Kenta was no stranger to images like these. Whether he was perusing the fan-made doujinshi he had purchased at Comiket—the bi-annual fan-comic convention he and his friends went to when they could all scrounge up enough yen—or the ones he found on the computer, the muscle-stuffed male stereotype was hard to escape.

Though his stirrings of desire had come years earlier, it was at his first Comiket as a fourteen-year-old that Kenta had realized manga could even be arousing. The exaggerated style of those drawings initially drew his laughter. He and his friends would read them, gawking and pointing at individual drawings, where the men in the stories would appear particularly hulking, mountainous with muscles, with cocks that defied all comprehension. They saw the sexual situations captured in these bara stories to be more like punishment for their participants than pleasure. In some of the stories, Kenta discovered as he read deeper, they were. Many stories saw coaches catching their pupils peeping at them in the showers, sniffing their fundoshi and rooting through their belongings. The punishment they inflicted, invariably, was sex. Often it was rough, occasionally it was humiliating, and it always looked somewhat more painful than pleasurable to Kenta. But he could see himself in these stories, could see his desire, his odd yearning to be held, grasped, restrained by another man, and also his desire to be as strong as these men were, as masculine and as tough as they were. But the stories he liked most weren't the ones about punishment.

The ones Kenta liked most, as a virgin anxiously approaching adulthood, were the ones about love. It was what allowed him to tolerate the fluffy yaoi stories he'd sometimes sneak home with him, the ones with the glossy, oftentimes floral covers. The fantasy that female manga-ka dreamed up about gay men in yaoi was often cleaner, and less explicit than the bara he preferred to read. The men in those stories were always young, or they at least looked young, and they were almost always very thin, like his father.

Their eyes were drawn large, speckled by drops of light like they were in the shojo manga Natsu used to read, the ones he had given her when he grew up and had to pretend he had stopped liking little girls' stories. Often when the men in these manga—yaoi and bara manga—had sex, one of the men ended up in tears. But this meant, to him at least, that they loved each

other. Sex—and love—hurt. Kenta knew this for certain. But no matter how ridiculous the situation, no matter how much pain one partner put the other through, it never killed them. And in the end, to live to love another day was all one could hope for. Kenta had not had sex, nor had he been in love, but he knew these things. He was certain that the things love made you feel were better than the numbness he was forced into by fear. But what he did not know about these things, and about the magazine he had found in his father's office, scared him more than the pain of the sex he had not yet had. This was in his father's possession, and now it was in his.

Kenta turned, his pivoting foot ruffling the paper at his feet, and listened. He listened to the odd almost-silence of his house, vacant but for him. His father was still at work—he would be bringing a new load of pages home when he returned to the house for dinner—and his mother was out shopping. Kenta sat down in his father's chair and began to read. The magazine was several hundred pages long, mostly filled with advertisements. It was printed on cheap paper, but the cover was glossy, full color.

Companies that catered to men like him poured everything they had into magazines like this, all the images they couldn't print in other publications, images of nudity and of men, together, holding hands, grasping each other's sizable shoulders. With every page he turned, Kenta felt a quiver; of fear, of arousal, of worry about what this magazine meant. The sight, which days ago could have satisfied his lonely midnight urges for weeks, felt tainted. Kenta closed the magazine. He had two choices. He could hide it under a new brush of his father's corporate leaves, or he could clean up the paper he had knocked loose, make things look like he was never there, and shuffle upstairs to his room, to enjoy the magazine in private. Ultimately, the temptation was too great, and, fearing he would be caught in the act if he remained in the office much longer, Kenta hurried back up the stairs and into his bedroom. With his bedroom door locked, he laid down on his bed, clutching the magazine to his chest, almost afraid to reopen it. He wondered how long it would be until someone came home and found him, who would come home first—and what he would do if it was his father? The drumming in his heart found a new home between his temples.

After a few moments of anxious silence, Kenta opened the magazine to a random place, and found something that set his afternoon alone down a new track: a mostly textual section of the magazine entitled "Life Tips." This section seemed to feature questions sent in by readers that were being answered by the magazine's editors. These printed inquiries, which put his frantic hunger on hold, comforted Kenta. They reminded him that there were others out there who had the same sorts of worries as he had, and like his father, he began to suspect, may have had. The questions were diverse. People asked about the best places to meet other men, about how to become closer with one's partner—one even asked how to write an effective personal ad.

Kenta read the answer to this question, which extended into a short feature, with particular voracity. The basic advice was, “Don’t list out your preferences; talk about who you are and what you do.” To Kenta, this idea was very provocative. He sometimes caught sight of personal ads, and they tended to contain statements like, “Seeking masculine men, no animal allergies, 5’9” or taller.”

There was a set of criteria for the desirable man that Kenta was becoming very attuned to, and more often than not, he was reminded of the ways he failed to measure up. He was years of high school and college away from being someone like the man drawn on the cover of the magazine: someone whose muscles were a bit larger than they should be, but who altogether still looked plausibly human. He kept reading. The magazine said that when it comes to partners, the physical aspect ultimately matters very little to most men. Kenta scoffed at this.

That the physical did not matter seemed like a ludicrous idea. One hundred and fifty of the magazine’s five hundred pages were advertisements that were selling nothing but the physical. They were selling the sexual, the privately muscled intimacies of the male form, and the bottom line was curved around the waists, cupped beneath the folds between the hips and the thighs of the men being sold. Kenta looked at these men, some of them photographed, some of them the work of talented manga artists, with equal parts hatred and envy. They were only images, but even in two flat dimensions, they had more to offer than he did. Suddenly he was crying, his tears bleeding the cheaply pocked ink of the magazine’s pages.

For a few moments, he closed up the magazine and set it aside. Tears still wormed their ways out of him, but he caught them with his balled fists, stemming their flow. When he thought the tears had stopped, he looked down at his moistened forearms and found the light from the window made it look like he was covered in golden grains of sand.

Kenta rotated his arms back and forth, watching the sand run, star-like, across the summer sky of his skin, reminding him of the festival he had gone to when he was young, before he had any measure of strength and size, before he measured his worth in comparison to the appearance of others. When he was just Kenta, when his father would carry him on his shoulders, Kenta would hold his father’s head in the crook of one arm and raise the other like a cat’s paw and shout, “Papa, I’m the lucky cat and you’re my treasure!”

Now, grown-up and alone on the same bed he had slept in for years, Kenta placed his hand on the spine of the magazine, and flapped it back and forth, testing its strength. Magazines like this tended to fall apart quickly. They were made to be consumed and then tossed aside. Maybe a few pages would be torn out and saved, but the rest was destined to become trash. Kenta checked to see if any pages had already been torn out and found the magazine free of manual censorship. But he noticed a folded page, near the section he

had been reading, that prompted him to reopen the issue and read it. Perhaps this would give him the clues he needed.

But then, he heard the creak of a door opening downstairs and the distinct sound of his mother's voice, chattering to a friend of hers, muffled only slightly by the rustle of grocery bags. He slapped the magazine closed and slid it beneath his bed. He would find a better hiding place later, but for now this would do. This was a side of himself that had to be kept hidden from everyone. He knew what happened when a man like him let his dark side out.

The explicit bara stories he had read by Matsu and Tagame told tales: some bright, others blemished, of love confessed and fierce, manly desire consummated. Men and boys, co-workers, brothers in arms and by blood—no relationship between men was off-limits for these graphic storytellers. Not even, Kenta found to his dismay and ashamed arousal, the relationship between a father and son. These stories, which depicted such love and such pain between family members, broke his drumming heart nightly, drew him in with their promise of resolution and ensnared him with their frank, steamy, and remorselessly animalistic sex.

Why could none of these stories end happily? Why could the father and son never reconcile? These were the questions Kenta would have asked, had he the courage to write a letter to G-Men's editors, or even Barazoku's. But Barazoku had been out of print for years when he found the issue that day in the garbage, when he stuffed it in his backpack while his friends were busy catcalling one of their female classmates and blaming it on adult passersby. Kenta had claimed it from the heap, and when he did, when he read the raunchy and at times even violent stories contained within, it had made him feel just as dirty and empty as what he had just salvaged. He later wished he had just left the thing alone. But then, Kenta would tell himself, they both would have been alone, discarded by the hands that had once held them with such love and care, but which now neither thought nor cared much about them at all.

"Kenta-kun!" His mother called up from below. Kenta knew his mission. She didn't have to say another word, and he didn't either. Rice, bok choy, green onions, water chestnuts, carrots—there was a lot of food. His mother had recently bought a wok for the house and had taken to making all of their meals with it. She was a good cook, she always had been, but Kenta's father preferred to bring a ramen bowl home from the store down the street, or eat dinner at the office on nights he worked late. Sometimes he didn't even join them at all. Those nights, it would just be Kenta, his mother, and Natsu, who spent most of her time at the dinner table typing away on her phone to her girlfriends, immersed in her own little world. When she wasn't out with her friends, Kenta could tell his sister longed to be out of this place, this house that no longer felt like the home they once knew, as their father showed his face less and less. Like the cheaply made manga anthologies they all bought,

read and tossed aside, the glue that once held their family together had dried and weakened with time.

Many readers of Weekly Shonen Jump could wait for their favorite series to be released in tankobon; it didn't matter if they kept the old issues around when they knew glossier and more durable volumes would be released in a few months' time—but Kenta and his family had no such luxury. There would be no reissue of their family's story. To Kenta, it seemed doomed to collapse, its pages and characters scattered to the wind, to be salvaged, perhaps, by some other perverse boys or girls none of them knew or cared about, lonely young men who would have no qualms with turning their pain into masturbatory fodder.

When Kenta went to school the next day, he almost didn't think about the magazine, or even his father, whom he thought about constantly. Instead, he thought of the young men he called his friends. He thought of the stories he had read, not just about men who had sex with men or boys who loved other boys, but of young men who banded together to fight evil, and he wondered: would any of his friends actually be able to do it? Would any of them have the strength of will to become heroes, given the chance?

Kenta thought then, of the other stories, of the mahou shoujo manga he once loved freely but now followed furtively, even more furtively than he consumed bara and yaoi, and of the young women with whom he also felt an odd affinity. If those women, if those magically inclined girls could find the strength in their own hearts to not only conquer evil but to find love and peace through their bonds of friendship, why could he not do the same thing with his male companions? Why was that such a queer thought?

Eating lunch on the roof with his best friend, Kazuki, Kenta asked, "Do you ever read any mahou shoujo manga?" And Kazu, to his surprise, said, without any hesitation,

"Sure. I just finished watching Madoka. It was actually really good." Then Kazu smiled at Kenta, and Kenta could not help but blush. He ate a bit more of the bento his mother had made for him, before asking what he had meant to ask.

"Have you ever wondered? What it would be like, if there were . . . mahou shonen stories?" Kazu pondered this question for a moment. Kenta did not know what to do with the silence.

He worried that Kazu would get up and leave him, or worse, look at him, hard-faced, and ask him a question back, something like, "Magical boy stories . . . Like with a group of ukes instead of girls?" This was, in fact, precisely the question that Kazu asked, though his tone was much less harsh than Kenta had imagined it would be. Kazu laughed nervously when Kenta stared at him and said nothing. And when, after a moment, Kenta had still said nothing, Kazu almost got up from his seat and left, but Kenta stopped him.

"Wait," he said, his face hot despite the breeze. "You read yaoi too,

Kazu-chan?”

“I thought you knew,” said Kazu, sounding oddly calm to Kenta. “I thought that’s why you always called me Kazu-chan?”

It was a joke that Kenta and the other boys always played on Kazu. To address him as Kazu-chan labeled Kazu as less of a man, more of a boy than they were. Kenta called his sister Natsu-chan until he realized he could make her angrier if he called her things like Natsu-bo, to poke fun at what a flat-chested pettanko she was.

“No, it’s not that,” Kenta started, trying to reassure his friend, but Kazu wasn’t upset. In Kenta’s experience, Kazu always looked so kind, so full of hope. That was what Kenta liked about him. He was different than the other boys. He never laughed at Kenta, not even when they were naked when they changed out for gym class and the other boys would tease, “Big Kenta’s got a tiny penis!” Kazu was always friendly, and he would always eat with Kenta when the other boys were too busy with their girl-ogling, and spitting on the kids who ate down in the school courtyard. Sometimes, during group overnights, Kenta would fall asleep and awake to find Kazu asleep, innocent and tranquil, against his chest. Neither of them ever said anything about it, but Kenta suspected his friend may have had feelings for him. Now was his chance to say something, but he was afraid to mess things up.

“It’s not that Kazuki . . . I just wanted to ask you a question, that’s all . . .”

“Ask away, Kenta-kun.” To Kenta’s amazement, Kazu was completely unfazed. He seemed to let it roll right off of him, the fact that Kenta was asking him about reading yaoi, the fact that he had just called him Kazuki, as if they were family, or lovers, or both. In this moment, Kazu reminded Kenta of many of the men whose words and images he had happened upon in the magazines he had read, but mostly, it felt to Kenta like he was in audience with one of the G-Men editors, whom he felt could give him some “Life Tips.”

“Well, I was just thinking, what if . . . we,” Kenta gulped. Kazu waited, expectantly. The tension was thick in the air, like they were standing in a greenhouse in the heat of summer.

“What if we, our friends, were in one of those manga?”

“The mahou shonen?” Kazu asked, smirking. “Those guys?”

Kenta couldn’t help but laugh. Kazu laughed, too, but his laughter was more because of the absurdity of it all than because of the stakes of the conversation for him. “Taro-kun would be like Asuka from Eva,” said Kenta, laughing.

“Funny,” said Kazu, “I would have said Rei from Sailor Moon, but I can see it.”

The two of them went back and forth for a while in this way, staying in the harmless realm of speculation, about which mahou shojo and feminine

anime archetypes their friends would fit into, about what would be the magical or supernatural impetus that would bring the group of boys into super-powered, multi-colored action. But then things drifted to the question Kenta had asked of Kazu in the first place, not the one that had broken the ice, but the one that had warmed the waters beneath.

“Do you read Matsu Takeshi’s stuff?” Kenta asked, feeling at once bold and fearful. He almost stumbled over pronouncing the man’s name, the man whose hands and creative mind had created the stories that had endeared the bara genre to him, taught him that not all stories had to end sadly, but that all stories, and many romances, did have to end. “They’re the best love stories I’ve ever read,” he hesitated, “I mean . . . about guys like us.”

“Matsu Takeshi . . . Honestly, I’ve never heard of him.” Kazu seemed open to hearing more about the manga Kenta held dear to him, but another one of their friends, Keitaro, had just approached from behind.

“Lookie here, seme Kenta and uke Kazu are talking romance over lunch. So kawaii!” Taro laughed, not exactly malicious, but in a familiarly boyish way that heeded neither of his friends’ emotions. “Anyway, Boys’ Love Lunch Hour is up—4th period’s about to start. Just thought you guys should know.”

Taro left them hurriedly, as he didn’t want to be late for class. But Kenta and Kazu were both, in their own ways, somewhat shell-shocked. Did Taro know? Was Taro like them, too? Were the others talking about them, expecting them to get together, like friends in yaoi usually did? A new tension had formed between them, in that moment.

“I’m not a seme,” said Kenta, his abrupt tone betraying his meaning. “I don’t want to . . . attack anybody.” Kazu smiled, looking as comforting as ever.

“Well, that works out great,” he said. “Cause I’m no defenseless, weepy uke. I prefer to protect, not just be protected. Though I do appreciate a good cuddle.” With that, Kazu wrapped up his lunch for later and walked, half-hurried, to class. He looked back at Kenta, seeming to want, seeming to hope that he would follow him. Kenta was for a moment paralyzed, frozen in place by his feelings. He was afraid that if he stood up too fast the blood he needed to stay upright would fail him and he would fall backward, onto his back, *light as a feather, stiff as a board*—or perhaps stiffer.

“I’ll catch up,” he said, calling to Kazu. “W-we should walk home together!”

“Maybe tomorrow, Kenta-chan!” All Kenta could hear after that was the laughter, the wonderful, beautiful laughter of his best friend, whom he hoped, more dearly than ever, felt even close to the way he felt about him.

When Kazu was out of sight, and in fact, there was no other soul left on the roof but his own, Kenta rose from his feet and let out a deep sigh. The breeze rushed up through his shirt, and as the sweat that had pooled beneath

the rolls of his belly fat cooled and dried, Kenta's heart sank, slowly at first, into his stomach. There was no avoiding the feeling any longer; he missed his father so much. All he wanted, at this moment, was to talk to him.

When Kenta returned home, he found it, once again, largely empty. It was more a receptacle than a house, more filled with garbage than intimacy or emotion. When Kenta kicked off his shoes, he heard his socks crinkle and crunch on discarded Pocky boxes and old newspapers his father, no doubt, had left on the ground expecting someone else to take care of. Kenta's mother did the cooking and shopping for the family, but she had given up trying to keep the house in any picture of cleanliness or order. A few weeks ago, she had started coming home with bags full of fancy clothing, and lately, Kenta noticed that she would leave the house for hours at a time, unannounced. A dutiful homemaker no more, Kenta's mother walked the streets, cell-phone and handbag in tow, like a younger woman; still older than Natsuko, but with the same hunger for life, and love outside of her marriage.

When Kenta got back to his room, he found the issue of *G-Men* right where he had left it: hidden in the space between his bookshelf and his bed, where no one, not even his sister would think to look. He opened quickly to a dog-eared page he thought, perhaps, he had folded down the last time he had been reading, but soon found himself pulled into a whole new mystery. The folded page opened to another advice column, and the question at the top of the page was hard for Kenta to read. It was circled and had been smudged by something. Clearly, it had been read, something about it was significant, but now it was blotted out.

Perhaps it had been done on purpose. Or perhaps, Kenta worried, the smudge had been his fault. He had forgotten just how much he had cried the last time he had held the magazine open in his lap. He checked the other pages, for where his reddened eyes had splattered onto the advice section. Flipping back and forth between the two pages, comparing ink blotches, he saw glimpses of the portraits that fell between them, of shirtless men, smiling, reclining. Their printed brows were without creases, and of this, Kenta was in awe. How could they lay in front of a camera, bare themselves to a photographer, knowing other men would be looking at them, touching themselves quietly in cluttered, private offices, and young men and boys might come across them and laugh at their imperfection, their round, distended stomachs, their sweat-glossed, blushing faces?

Kenta looked back at the blotted-out question and realized it was not the question that mattered, but the answer. From the answer, he concluded that the question's asker was a married man, not unlike his father, and that he was worried that his feelings for men would destroy his marriage. The answer provided by the editors to address this situation struck Kenta as dismissive, insensitive: "It's sometimes better to wait these things out. After all, what they don't know can't hurt them." Had this magazine directly advised his father to

lie to him and his mother, to hide who he was beneath a bed of dry leaves? The thought that lying was better than revealing the truth felt old to him. Descending the stairs and stepping gingerly through the mess back to the darkened alcove of his father's office, Kenta recalled what his grandfather had told him during the Ghost Festival, the year his cat Daisuke died.

"Shiranu ga hotoke," his grandfather had told him when Kenta had asked where Daisuke had gone. Kenta remembered being frustrated with this answer as a child and grew to distrust this general sentiment as a young adult. Not knowing the truth, in his eyes, was worse than whatever pain ignorance protected him from. Despite all the stories he thought he knew, he wanted—he needed to know the truth. Kenta set aside the magazine and searched through the other pages on his father's desk, no longer looking at images, but words.

What he found were the words of men, and of his father: a man who suffered work silently and seemed to do little else. The words on these pages seemed to resemble his father in the way Kenta had come to imagine him. They fell in neat rows, typeset and uniform, without curvature, though some of them were covered by folds that had been made in the pages. This anomalous disorderliness told Kenta that the paper wouldn't be missed, and the words they housed told Kenta nothing but what he already knew, and did nothing to calm his suspicions. His father, slight and frail as he was, was a man like him. Not a man who could hide beneath a cloak of muscles, but, perhaps, a man who wished to. Kenta sighed, defeated, as he plunked himself down in his father's office chair, and opened his chest to breathe. He heard the crinkle of pages, and felt larger now than he could remember feeling an hour ago. Something hard inside of him had opened, unfurled, began to bloom.

"Kenta," a voice said. Kenta opened his eyes and saw his father staring at him.

"Father," Kenta rose to his feet, but his eyes fell to the floor, as he bowed his head and apologized for intruding, for making such a mess. Paper completely covered the ground at their feet, while his father's desk appeared unfamiliarly clean. On it, unconcealed, lay the magazine, with the man with the burst-open shirt on its cover, his bare skin a fearsome armor. There was no hiding it now. Kenta felt a warm hand on his shoulder and was startled at first by its suddenness, and then by its quivering hold. He found the courage to meet his father's eyes and found his face already wet.

"I'm sorry," he said, the skin behind his glasses pinched forward by pain. "I didn't want you finding out like this." Kenta stepped away, putting some distance between him and his father. He knew this story, or he thought he did anyway. He had seen how this story ended, written in another author's pen. Facing the wall, he began to carve out his own tale, his fists balled tightly at his sides.

"When were you going to tell me? When were you going to tell any

of us?” he asked.

“Your mother . . . she already knows. She said . . . that we can both have freedom, if that’s what we want. She’s already taken her chances. I suppose,”

“Is that what you want? Freedom?” Kenta’s heart ached. Here was when he would turn, turn and face the man he thought had run out of love for him long ago, and say whatever cruel things his neglected heart would bring him to say. Maybe they would come to blows, or worse—

But when Kenta did turn around, what he saw—not mere moisture on skin, but dew on flower petals—struck him. He saw a beautiful, kind man who hid behind stoicism and scarce smiles, whose face never crimsoned and flushed but now showed a desperate vitality Kenta had thought was lost long ago. In the reflection of his father’s glasses, Kenta saw another man, who worked so hard not to cry it welled beneath his skin, swelled him in places, made him appear strong at his many weaknesses. Through the eyes of a boy who could not afford to lose one more loved one, he saw a man who could not endure another heart drifting away. For that boy’s sake, for the sake of both men in the room, he told his father the truth.

“I don’t want you to disappear. I don’t want you to leave, for me to not know where you are. I just want . . . I just want you to know that, that I understand. You don’t have to be afraid anymore. You’re not alone.”

Kenta knew his father’s struggle better than he could say. He approached him, warily at first, and wrapped his arms around him, a beetle embracing a firm stem. Words had gotten him this far, and now, when words failed him, the one Kenta loved most was there, ready to hold him close, let him cry. He had inherited his name well and every day he was becoming a man, a part of himself unfurling within. But today, Kenta was just a boy, and his father had enfolded him in his arms for the first time in years. Out of his heart shuddered a rippling, relieved sob, and words, long-felt, that ached to be said: “I missed you, papa.”

His father squeezed him tighter, like a lost treasure recovered at last. He knew precisely what his father was feeling. The stories Kenta had loved reading most were about people; some ice-cold, some melting, some desperate, starving for love. Here, as he stood in his father’s office, was his story being told: the tale of two men who, after years of avoiding each other, found themselves embracing, fully clothed but with their hearts burst open. Discarded leaves and fallen petals at their feet, these men stood like two roses, each setting aside their thorns to bloom in the same light.

Rick Swann (he/him) is a former children's librarian and a member of the Greenwood Poets. His book of linked poems Our School Garden! was awarded the Growing Good Kids Book Award from Junior Master Gardeners. He's been published in Windfall, Blue Collar Review, and Red Eft Review.

Sweet Murmurs

(for Carlyn)

Rick Swann

Black turnstones queue atop the old-growth log
half out of water and weathering on the beach.

A circling eagle sweeps them seaward
and they shape-shift into a towering beast,

a murmuration like the one in your mother's photograph
of dunlins taken at the mouth of the Skagit River

the year we were married. You say they look
like music written in the sky, crescendo

after crescendo. You understand music, not birds,
even with an ornithologist father, something

that surprises people who don't know you well.
After your mother needed more care

than your father cared to give, he emptied the house
and gave us a coffee-table book of black-and-white

photos of starling murmurations that looked like swirls
of dark smoke or Rorschach tests. If the swarm

of turnstones is a Rorschach test, it must show
we belong together. Thousands of birds turn in tight

coils by each individual sensing its neighbor's turning.
In concert we turn, too, to continue on our way.

*A spiritual director, nonbinary person, and quasi-hermit, **John Backman** (she/her) writes about ancient spirituality and the unexpected ways it collides with postmodern life. This includes a book (Why Can't We Talk? Christian Wisdom on Dialogue as a Habit of the Heart) and personal essays in *Catapult*, *Tiferet Journal*, *Amethyst Review*, and *Sufi Journal*, among other places. John was recently named a creative nonfiction finalist in the Wild Atlantic Writing Awards.*

One of Those Exquisite Nothings

John Backman

Apply two thin coats to exposed surfaces. The key word is *thin*: if you put too much sealant in the brush, the excess will drip and splash, and drips and splashes are forever. I know this because a footboard on our new deck looks like a Jackson Pollock, brown scars desecrating golden wood, a memorial to an afternoon when I was distracted and impatient and tired. This was on a Monday, hours after I first learned about my condition, so distracted and impatient and tired was natural. It doesn't change the result, though. Wood shows no mercy.

#

My condition's name is five words long, and that Monday my doctor said one of them. I didn't notice the discrepancy because I hadn't known about the condition. Sure, a particular set of numbers was off—they started veering off a year ago—and that's what we discussed. But the softness of her voice lulled me into focusing on the normal numbers, the numbers that told me I didn't have the diseases that scared me silly, like diabetes.

I should have suspected something once she handed me the massive urine-test jug and told me to go fill it at home. My walk from the exam room to the checkout desk gave me enough time to look at the lab order that went with the jug.

My doctor said *kidney*. But she never said *chronic*, or *disease*, or *stage 3*.

#

You'd think every health condition would have its own set of facts, universally acknowledged.

Chronic kidney disease does have some truths of its own. The damage is irreversible. Stage 3 is the last way station before things go south. In stage 3 you can adjust your diet or change medicines and you may well live a normal lifespan. Stage 4 is where doctors start talking dialysis, another word that scares me silly.

Beyond those facts the picture gets fuzzier. I can't tell you what my chances are. One source says 2 percent of stage 3 cases progress to stage 4. Others say 20 percent, or 50 percent. Just an interesting variation until they're your kidneys and you need hard numbers to plan your next move.

#

You have to clean your deck before sealing it. Not just water or a broom, but something called wood cleaner, which comes in a non-urine-test jug and must be scrubbed onto every exposed surface. Our new deck has fifty-five square spindles gracing the railing, and various boards and posts holding them in place, so that is a lot of surface to scrub.

You must do this because most pressure-treated wood is coated with mill glaze. No one's exactly sure how mill glaze happens. In one explanation, the heat of the milling process brings the wood's resins to the surface, and when the wood cools so do the resins, creating a surface varnish. Mill glaze doesn't come off with water, apparently, and sealant can't do its job if you don't take the mill glaze off.

The strangest part of this whole business is that mill glaze may not even exist. Researchers have tried to reproduce it in controlled conditions and failed. So it's possible my wife and I spent a Saturday scrubbing hundreds of surfaces to remove nothing.

#

A small group of researchers think too many older people are being diagnosed with stage 3. Kidney damage comes with aging, they say. We shouldn't scare patients by overmedicalizing a natural decline, they say. If they're right, filling the urine-test jug was a waste of time, like scrubbing nothing off a deck. If they're wrong, I need the data hiding in that jug.

All I want to know is what to do—or that it makes a difference—and no one can tell me for sure. So I fill the jug anyway and bring it back.

#

The quest for facts wears me out, so I turn to non-thinking.

Every morning for fifteen minutes I sit and non-think. It's harder than it sounds. My mind drifts, a lot. Some people would call this Zen meditation, but the word *meditation* doesn't exactly fit. Dōgen, a Zen master from 800 years ago, called it sitting and non-thinking, so I do too.

Sitting and non-thinking bleeds into other activities. When sealing the deck—when I wasn't distracted and impatient and tired—the motion of my arm was a metronome that swept my mind blank. Mowing the lawn is like this too, concentric rectangles that banish all thoughts.

I'd like to tell you the sitting and non-thinking made the sealing and non-thinking possible, or better, or more fruitful, but maybe it's the other way round. Who can tell? We can't even figure out whether mill glaze exists.

#

If you really want to see effort ostensibly about nothing, try another

branch of Buddhism: Tibetan monks making a sand mandala.

I watched them once at a conference—four of them, working away in the cavernous entry hall, dressed in saffron robes, bending over a sand painting that redefined *intricate*. Each monk scraped a block of dyed sand at high speed, laying a burst of color into a tiny portion of the mandala. The emerging piece took my breath away.

So does the next stage, which I've only read about, when they dismantle the whole thing and throw the sand into a body of flowing water, gone forever. Something clutches at my heart when I imagine this: an agony, the sense I could have saved a work of art if I'd reached the monks the moment before the disposal. Which is a benefit of the sand mandala: to expose my attachments to impermanent things, the attachments that hold me back.

#

But I already know where my attachments lie, or some of them anyway. I saw them after the deck was finished.

You'd think the words *stage 3* might have scared me silly, but so far my reaction has been different. One night I walked onto the new deck with the new sealant and looked for the fireflies that grace our backyard each summer. It was too early in the season for fireflies, I had forgotten that, so there was nothing to see. But there was something to think, a voice arising: *I'm going to miss them*. A mantra for the hour of my death, whether at sixty-five or ninety-five, whether from kidney disease or something else. A cry that had nothing to do with terror or annihilation or clinging to life but was rather a simple sadness at parting, at saying *adieu* to each tiny yellow flash that glides through the darkness, one of those exquisite nothings that make up the universe, like decks and mandalas and stage 3, ephemeral as sand filtering through water.

Zachary Kellian is an Irish-American writer living in the Pacific Northwest, the closest climate one can find stateside to compare with The Land of Saints and Scholars. He can be found on social media: @zackellian

Founding the Irish Porn Industry on My Summer Holiday

Zachary Kellian

I once asked my mum, an unlikely yet immutable a source as ever, why there wasn't a pornography industry in Ireland. She didn't even pause between adding the egg and the buttermilk to the soda bread mixture:

“Because we're all good Catholic girls here.” She continued stirring, then, as an aside to no one in particular, she added, “Plus we're all ugly as sin.”

America had San Fernando Valley and Miami. Germany had, well, everywhere. But what did Ireland have? True, there were a few soft-core films that had, by the grace of some God other than our own, made it into theaters. But to call that an industry would be more generous than calling the talent involved tan.

And so it was, during the summer of my Senior Cycle that I, Ciara Siobhán Jameson, did set out wantonly and with lechery aforethought to found Ireland's first porn company.

#

I came upon this plan to build a new industry in the midst of a recession. “The Celtic Tiger,” our turn-of-the-21st century economic boom had drug us out of the farmer's muck and the fisherman's guts of the old economy, but then it promptly died. No one knew how to properly care and feed a tiger in a land where there had never been one. So, they settled on milking it for all its worth. Then they skinned it, flayed it, and made cheap tourist jewelry from its teeth. You do mad things during a recession, allegedly to keep the finances limber, but mostly just out of sheer boredom. You train to be a cage fighter, or you call your local radio and start an entire neighborhood feud about the placement of wheelie bins, or you give up drinking all-together. Looney shit like that. I suppose it was in that spirit, or rather possessed by it, that I started to wonder why the land of my birth had never engaged in the simplest, most recession-proof industry of all.

First thing was first when starting a proper porn studio: I needed actors. Or “talent,” as I would insist we call them. For what they did, or what

they'd be asked to do, could certainly never be called acting. Ireland was the land of Peter O'Toole, Richard Harris, and, by adoption or thievery, Daniel Day-Lewis. We knew acting and two secondary school dropouts shagging one another on camera was most certainly not in league with that delicate art. But talent? Surely what they did could be considered talent. So, I started collecting people.

"What about me?" I'd asked myself rather morosely in the mirror one morning. I'd ask again, later, and drunker, but the answer was still the same. I had a boy's body. Always had. The American porn actresses had tits inflated by bicycle pumps and asses as gold and round as church domes. I was a pale and uninspired thing . . . like something drug out of a river in a Japanese horror film only to return with its stringy black hair to haunt you forever.

No, I was out of the talent running. But I knew how to write, and I could make a guess at directing—both of which only seemed to be nominally important in this type of film. I would work my arse off by playing double or triple duty, and maybe then I'd made up for my lack of feminine allurements.

My good mate, Bobby—platonic excluding a playground grope-and-see a decade earlier—was next in line for assessment. We met in the jacks at our local pub, and I told him to just whip it out. He must have still been harboring some latent affections for me, because he did so dutifully and with a pre-teen glee across his face.

"Well, what do you think of that?" he asked. Men were always so proud of it. I'm not one to put a damper on positivity, but I do know that if I had some geezer's left-over elbow skin just hanging from a fleshy hook between my legs, I'd be neither proud nor unabashed in my willingness to show it.

"Does it grow at all?" I thought it was rather judicial phrasing and was enamored with my own sensitivity.

Bobby seemed to disagree. He pulled up his trousers and buckled them with the exaggerated actions of a tantruming toddler.

"I didn't mean like that," I swore to him. "I meant to say, what's the phrase? Is it a grower, not a show-er?"

"'Tis." Came Bobby's curt reply.

"And have you, you know . . .?" Being friends of the nonsexual variety, we'd never discussed such things in any great detail. He'd dated a few girls from school, and one from church on his mother's recommendation—he'd likely learned the most from that girl—but he had never really been much of a playboy.

Bobby was having none of it. "Suppose you explain to me what this is all about?" I think he was still hedging his bets that maybe his little member would see some action yet.

"Let me ask you a question," I said over the shouts of the other lads we'd locked out of the toilet. "Why don't we have porn in Ireland?"

“What are you even going on about? Of course we do.”

“Do we? Name one.”

“Well . . .” his brow wrinkled in consternation, “They don’t exactly have names, like, but I’ve seen plenty.”

“Where? On the web? In a video store?”

“At mates’ flats mostly.”

“Video? Film reel?”

“Christ! Are you langered?”

I checked, my eyes looking up for a moment to consult my brain.

“Sober as a teetotaler. Now answer.”

“Answer what?”

The pounding on the door grew more and more emphatic. Bladders must have been busting outside.

“The format of the films? Are you even following?” I could see he wasn’t at all. “We don’t have a pornography industry in Ireland. Not a proper one anyway. Why’s that?”

“Don’t know.”

“Think, Bobby!”

Now those outside were practically trying to break the door down.

“Christ.” He stood there, fuming, but the look on my face let him know straight away: I wasn’t going to drop it. “I guess, I don’t know. Jesus, my parents even have sex in the dark. I just don’t think it’s the Irish way.”

“Neither were computers and the like 20 years ago; now we’re practically infested by googles and yahoos . . .”

“Listen to them outside,” The other lads were, indeed, in a frenzy, “Let’s continue this discussion out in the pub before our pints start collecting flies.” He wasn’t understanding me.

“Can’t. Not out in the open like that.”

“Since when have you played the prude?”

“Savvy, mate.” I rested a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “It isn’t savvy to talk trade secrets in public.” The banging on the loo door was reaching a crescendo.

His shoulders slumped. “Just tell me what you need me to say.” I’d broken him down far quicker than I’d expected. Cheers to the seething crowd of maniacs outside who couldn’t bear to hold their piss for a moment longer.

“I’m going to start making pornos. Do you want to be in them?”

“Jesus. Christ. Finally, you meander to an actual point, and that’s what you—”

“Well, do ya?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Swear?”

“Yes, Ciara Siobhán Jameson, I swear.”

And with that I had my first male talent. The women, I would learn,

would be much harder to persuade.

#

By the by, if you're still trying to get past my preposterously Irish name, first, let me apologize, then let me ease you into it. One thing you need to know, my parents themselves are preposterously Irish. When the English, during the Six Nations Tournament, start calling us a bunch of potato farmers, I often wonder if they have any idea just how inclined we are to cozy up to our stereotypes. For instance: Did you know we have our own potato themed amusement park and zoological garden? We do: Tayto Park—think of a lazy Irishman saying po-tay-to, and you'll get the joke. It isn't a very good one. My parents work there.

They met at a crisps factory and now they work at a crisps-themed park and factory tour. So, being the daughter, not of potato farmers, but of potato museum and rollercoaster curators, I would simply have to have a name like that, wouldn't I? *Ciara*, spelt like the early 2000s R & B singer, but pronounced completely differently: "Kee-ra." It means dark-haired girl, which is true in my case, but it also promises more mystery than I'll ever have to offer. *Siobhán*, pronounced like it's composed of entirely different letters than what you see: "Shi-vawn." Which could, itself, be an R & B singer's name. And then *Jameson*, which is simple enough and fits the broad stereotype rather well. It's also porn royalty, if you didn't know. As in: Jenna Jameson. No relation.

#

It was Sunday, and Sunday was church. Father Garrity was giving the sermon. He looked like a fat, ruddy Tom Hanks and he always spoke like he was out-of-breath from a long run. I wasn't paying much attention to what he was saying; I never did. I perked up once when he talked about intercourse, but he was just clarifying the Pope's position on second marriages whose first hadn't been properly annulled yet. The rest became one long, sustained drone and I only stayed awake to please my mum.

Once, up late at night and watching BBC Northern Ireland—where all the good stuff could be found—I watched a film about a woman who chose a life of prostitution to support her children. I think it was set during The Troubles, or thereabouts. Their weepy dramas were always about car bombings, whereas ours were always about the Potato Famine. Plus, theirs sometimes showed partial nudity. Bombs and nudity, was it any wonder the Protestants up there felt it was worth fighting for?

Anyway, this woman, mother/prostitute/heroine, would tell herself in the mirror, right before turning a trick to buy bread, that the nasty guy in the next room might be able to have her body, but he would never have her heart, nor her mind. It was like her battle cry. I liked it. It perfectly summed up my feelings on The Church.

The good Father had tried to talk to me about sex once. I think my

parents put him up to it. I told him if I wanted advice about sex, I wouldn't solicit it from a sworn virgin. I was proud of myself, I almost said "pedophile" instead of virgin, after all. I'd stopped myself though, because God may or may not be real, but His guilt-trips were as real as anything. Besides, Father Garrity was just trying to be helpful. Adults were always trying to talk to me about sex. My parents: awkwardly. My clergymen: disconcertingly. And once, though I could never be sure if it was a fever dream or not, an animated potato who my mom found on tape at the local library. *Spuddy Learns About Fertilization*, or something like that. Did anyone who ever sat me down realize they were talking to a future porn magnate? I wonder if Michelangelo was constantly having to deal with people giving him pointers on proper sculpting?

Father Garrity's sermon finally wrapped up and the puffy-cheeked Father had managed to not hyperventilate too much. My duty was fulfilled. In the parking lot outside I gave my dad a handshake and saved a hug for my mum. Then I met up with Bobby's parents, they'd stopped making him go to Church last year as I constantly reminded my own family, and got a ride back to his place with them.

#

We'd been meeting at his house almost daily. There were many details that still needed sorting out: recruiting women, coming up with a company name, defining profit-sharing matrices, streamlining our synergistic doodads, etc.

The female talent: I'd thought about my approach carefully—no one paid to see a porn for the lads, not even the lasses, so the female talent had to be something special. Something that could really put the asses in the seats and the come in the aisles—if you'll excuse my vulgarity. I'm trying to sound more industry these days.

Bobby, being a horse's ass, suggested showing up at dance recitals and watching the little step-dancers whose sad faces registered their dads had once again failed to show up. Then we'd find them afterwards and tell them to call us in a few years time. I smacked him upside his head. That thinking was playing the long-game—we needed to get filming quick if we were going to capitalize on the market vacuum.

Besides, I informed Bobby, porn was no longer the refuge for damaged women. It was a symbol of female empowerment, and most of the porn stars from across the Atlantic I'd heard interviewed swore they were happy in the work and were there through no fault of their traumatic childhood. The traumatic childhoods, it turns out, were merely incidental, not ancillary.

"What if we just recruit at the strip clubs?" I proposed as we lay on the floor of Bobby's bedroom. I figured if you wanted to convince someone to swim, you might as well start when their toe was already in the water.

“Aren’t any.”

“Don’t be an idiot, of course there are. What about Galway?” I could be shrill, at times, especially when I was focused on an objective. My parents found me so stubborn they felt it was best to just let me figure stuff out on my own. It also played nicely into the swaddled warmth of their RCP (Roman Catholic Passivity).

“Sort of.” Bobby stammered. “I mean yes, there are clubs.”

“And do those clubs . . . have strippers?”

“Not in the sense that they take off their clothes.”

“For feck’s sake! Do they just sort of shimmy and dance around?”

“Not much of that either.”

“Then what do they do in there?” I implored.

He just shrugged and went back to focusing on the pieces of scratch paper in front of us, marked up in my wispy handwriting with a dozen failed company names.

“What about, Emerald Isle Birds?” I suggested.

“Doesn’t market well internationally. People will think we’re a bunch of geezers spying on puffins through binoculars.” Bobby had been shooting down my suggestions all evening.

“Green-Eyed Entertainment?” He looked at me dumbfounded, but I persisted, “Because green eyes are the image of jealousy, and . . .”

“It needs to be something snappy,” Bobby explained. “something that reminds folks of Ireland, but also breaks with our chaste reputation. Maybe Flaming Bushes?”

“So, we’re a Biblical Moses cult, then?”

“Perhaps not.” He pondered some more. “Irish Intercourse?”

“Sounds like a lecture series from the Department of Health.”

“Celtic Cun . . .” I slapped the back of his head before he could finish.

“No,” I said, “But I do like the alliteration angle. What about, Galway Girls?” Bobby and I both had an affinity for the song. The Steve Earl jam from 2001, not the Ed Sheeran shite of the same name.

“Add a Z,” Bobby insisted. “It gives us an edge.”

“What an American thing to do,” I scolded.

“So’s porn,” he replied. And I knew he was right.

So, we became Galway Girlz Entertainment, LLC. The “LLC” stood for something positively filthy, but I’ll let you figure that one out on your own.

Then, Bobby turned to me and, with a positively sheepish look on his face, asked, “Do you think we’d better watch some films first?”

“Of course,” I was confident I could handle it. “But none of that shaky cellphone-filmed shite. Let’s look at the real professional stuff.”

“So, something American? Or German?”

We both suspected we weren’t ready for the German extreme, so we

pulled up a handful of American dot coms and began randomly clicking through. Six and half minutes later we weren't any closer to having real answers. In fact, it had raised even more questions.

"What's with the United States' preoccupation with step-moms?" Bobby asked.

"And are they all going to die of melanoma in the next decade? Is that how China wins?"

The porn, by the way, had done nothing for our libidos. But that only refueled my interest in making a porn for us, by us.

An afternoon well spent, I said my goodbyes and hoped beyond hope that my Dad would ask what I'd done post-church. I could tell him "watching porn with Bobby" and he wouldn't bat an eye. Sometimes I wondered if my parents took me seriously at all.

#

It being summer holiday, we found ourselves midweek on a train to Galway, having pretty much decided that the very Catholic west country would have the most girls looking to get back at something or someone. Plus, there were some fun universities there—as opposed to the east of Ireland, where they only had the smart kind.

"She's gotta be red-headed." Bobby proclaimed as we were nearly into the Galway station.

"Personal preference shouldn't come into play."

"No, no. It's just what people will be expecting from us. Plus, no one is immune to wanting to see if the carpet matches."

"I suppose you're right. And redheads are fiery, or so they say." I said that with a bit of jealousy. My rat-black hair didn't even have the decency to be adorably mousy.

"Let's talk dimensions."

And so, we did—for a good ten minutes. It was only seven minutes in that I noticed the woman across the aisle listening to our conversation, her eyes widening, her face grown slack with cold and shock. If she'd had a rosary she'd have surely been clutching it. I waited until we'd fully fleshed out—so to speak—the female talent of our dreams before acting like I had just noticed the scandalized pensioner.

"Oh, mam," I addressed her pointedly, with all the faux embarrassment and humility I could muster. "I'm so sorry you had to hear that, but I promise you. It's not what you think."

She relaxed her guard a little bit, and that was all the permission I needed.

"See, my partner and I," I gestured to a red-faced Bobby, "we're only talking about a woman in such a clinical and detached way because we plan to kill one here in Galway. One girl, from every county in the Republic, that's what we've been commanded to do. Only then will the Dark Lord we serve be

appeased.”

I didn't stop to see if she'd fainted completely, but I did feel some satisfaction in knowing she wasn't likely to listen in on other travelers' conversations anytime soon.

#

The Galway Train Station had the decency to spit you out right in the center of town. The English-built lines were all like that, our British conquerors never wanted to venture too far out into the country where the real Irish lived (or wallowed, from their perspective).

Shop Street was absolutely jammers with tourists snapping the exact same photo on their cellphones as depicted on the postcards in their purses. Buskers belted out all the hits, all the classics—each one of them hoping for their own *Once* moment, failing to realize the number of times Ireland would have a moment, like that film, was right there in the title.

We spent the next hour being jostled by girthy vacationers and never once saw an Irish face. But once we crossed the River Corrib and got into the meat of the town, we started to see more freckles and wide-set eyes than we could count. We also met up with our friend, Maggie, who was taking a summer course there. Now Mags, being the type to take yet more schooling during her summer holiday, was not the sort to be brought into our scandalous venture. That said, I was employing something we in the Irish Pornographic Industry like to call: optics.

It works like this: How do you walk up to a woman you've only just met and ask her if she wants to have sex on camera? You surely don't do it with just you and your awkward-looking male friend. Instead you have him nurse a pint at the other end of the bar and you make the ask yourself, with an even more attractive female friend by your side. That was Mags.

I'd never been hit on by a guy in a pub before, but I had thought about it an awful lot. I knew for a fact that it would feel down right eldritch nine times out of ten. Mags was here to help make my very creepy ask slightly less creepy. Unfortunately for my plan, Mags was also too smart not to immediately figure out what was going on and then just as intelligently see her way out of it. Fortunately, she did not share the same aversion to whiskey as I did. So, we filled her up on Powers shots, on the premise of celebrating whatever academic nonsense she was undergoing, and she soon became a smiling, blurry-eyed accomplice.

The first girl we approached at The Quays Bar was clean on. Red hair. A fine figure. Every curve on her was a new moment. I struck up a conversation, ignoring my peripheral vision where I could clearly see Bobby giving the thumbs up sign from across the bar.

I introduced Mags, who by now was in such a whiskey stupor that she looked like she had just escaped a sped-up carousel, and then proceeded to get right to the point.

“Do you fancy making some quick cash?” I hadn’t got her name yet I realized only after.

“Pardon me?” Her English was perfect. Too perfect. She was Dutch, with nary a trace of Irish lilt to her voice. The most beautiful girl in town would be Dutch, wouldn’t she? You look at Holland on a map and you wonder how in the holy hell that country nearly colonized the world. Then you meet your first Dutch person and you understand right away. If the English had been half as beautiful when they’d tried to colonize us, forget about the centuries of fighting, we would have gladly bent over for our new, angelically handsome overlords, no fussing.

“Sorry, you’re not from Ireland, are you?”

She shook her head.

Bobby, whose hearing must have been made superhuman after his sixth pint then shouted, “It’s okay, we don’t have to give her lines!”

I apologized, both for my presumption and the uncouth manner of my associates.

We made a few more abortive runs at the second, third, and fourth most beautiful women we saw, but it really was an impossibly awkward conversation to have.

“Has anyone told you that you could be a model?”—sounded far too sinister.

“Have you ever wanted to be famous?”—too dumb, because of course everyone under age twenty-five would answer “yes.”

“Would you be interested in getting in on the ground level of a nascent Irish industry that will make us all millionaires.”—sounded too much like a Ponzi scheme. (True, both involved getting screwed, but our pitch needed to sound more legitimate.)

The evening had worn long. We’d missed the last train—Bobby and I would have to take the 2:45 bus—and we still needed to walk Maggie back to her flat. Taking a drink at each pub, she and Bobby were both *locked out of their trees like a monkey who forgot his keys*. That is to say—they were piss drunk. And if you ask why we say that, I haven’t a clue. We have as many euphemisms for getting drunk as Eskimos have for snow—unfortunately almost all our sayings are devised *while* drunk, so they tend to make little sense, especially when committed to paper.

Mags insisted she wait with us at one of the late-night pubs near the train station. She had gotten home on autopilot plenty of times before, she bragged, and with her smarts, who were we to question? Plus, I’d always figured she’d fancied Bobby, so this was likely just an excuse to get closer to a future Irish porn star.

“Oscar Wild!” by the way. That was the *nom de guerre* he’d chosen for his porn name. Exclamation point included. I’d told him there was a standard formula you were supposed to follow. Middle name followed by the

street you live on. (Conor Castlewood would have been his—fecking brilliant.) But he insisted on something with a little more panache. Everyone will think you’re a different kind of film star with that name, I’d told him. He said the real Oscar Wilde transcended sexuality. I remarked that it was a shame the English Courts couldn’t see that in 1895.

#

At some point in the evening, I was surprised to learn on the bus ride home—we’d missed the 2:45 and had to settle for the 5:00—Maggie had nominated herself to star in our premiere film. I protested that I had not been a part of this decision, but Bobby explained that they had snogged while I’d gone to the jacks and that she’d passed her make-out audition with flying colors. They would have to go and ruin a perfectly good thing by fancying each other, wouldn’t they? I was irritated, but I fought that emotion until it subsided. There were plenty of porn stars who dated within the industry, after all . . . and maybe that could be part of our brand . . . Monogamous Irish Porn Stars: Vatican Approved!

It was set then. We would return on the weekend, giving Mags time to free up her studies and Bobby time to work out his nerves. My job was to do all the rest, which included getting the level of equipment needed to compete with the strange, surreal lighting we’d seen in so many American pornos. “The Vaseline Sheen,” Bobby and I had taken to calling it. Every porno we saw looked like the characters had suddenly ascended to Heaven, so soft and bright was the lighting. A Heaven which, by the way, consisted mostly of used couches and cheaply potted plants. Don’t let The Church tell you any differently.

If I had my druthers we would have seduced some older, wealthy person and we would be financed. However, it was my name on the masthead—we’d already printed company stationary—and so the job of securing funding from more legitimate means fell solely to me. As I was currently jobless and with the new media scrutiny, The Bank of Ireland would be hard-pressed to justify yet another ridiculously bad decision by giving us a loan, I had only one place to turn: dear old mum.

#

“Ma!” I called out from the other side of the anthropomorphic potato who announced *Queue forms here*. The shock on her face registered well and clear, even from a distance. Surprising her at Tayto Park had been my long-go-to sneak attack. I’d always been too embarrassed to visit my parents there. Free admission for family members had been a threat, not a perk. So, she never saw this coming.

Truth is, I was proud of my parents. They’d slaved away at the crisps factory for years, and somehow parried that quite nicely into fairly cush jobs giving tours and maintaining the wooden coaster, *Cú Chulainn*. But pride in one’s parents needs to be closely guarded by a strong fortification of mortal

embarrassment—and so I'd never visited them at the park in the past eight years. My mother's surprised look upon seeing me, however, was quickly replaced by skepticism as to the true nature of my visit. A smart one, she was.

"What a pleasant surprise!" she said as she put up her lunch break sign. "Come to see your inheritance?" She waved her hand around at all the potato-y glory.

"Very funny, ma. I've come to join you for lunch."

"Let me ask the Tayto factory if they'd produced enough crisps today," she replied. She knew I hated the things. Being raised on a steady diet of the discarded batches will do that to you.

"You're hilarious, ma." I could tell by the wrinkle in her nose that I'd overplayed my hand there. "I also wanted to ask you about something."

She nodded with the pious look of a mother who thought she knew her child. Whatever conversation she thought we were going to have might as well be in a different language compared to the one I had planned. I almost pitied her.

"Do you remember the question I had the other day?"

We were walking to the staff cafeteria now. I was pleasantly surprised that everyone seemed fairly normal, and not a goofy spud-shaped hat or mask in sight.

"Of course, I remember," she said, "And I've put a lot of thought into it."

"You have?" It was my turn to be surprised.

"Mhmm." She replied. "And I think you're old enough to know that if The Lord's message isn't reaching your heart, then you're probably old enough to not waste your time or His by going to Church."

I hadn't expected that. Who was this woman? "Well, Christ, I mean geez, ma. That's grand and all, but I was hoping you and Dad could help me fund a project I'm working on. As a loan, of course! As ground-floor investors you'll surely reap the rewards once the sales pick up."

"What project is that?"

"We talked about it over soda bread, remember?"

She clearly did not.

"A pornographic film. I'm going to become Ireland's first pornographic filmmaker."

She was unfazed. How did she manage that, always? "And what would Father Garrity have to say about that?"

I was quick with my reply. "Hopefully he'd say my first film was at least three out of four stars . . . or whatever scale priests choose to rank their porn."

She remained placid. It was infuriating how little a rise I could get out my most-Catholic-of-mothers. What was the fun in piety if you couldn't expose its cracks?

Her serene face smoothed into a warm smile, “Ignore my knee-jerk reaction. Who cares what Father would say, I guess, most importantly . . .”

“I already know, ma. You wouldn’t approve.”

“. . . what would Ciara in five years say to a plan like this?”

“During or after my acceptance speech for director of the year at the first All-Ireland Adult Film Awards?”

“Maybe after, when you’re tucking your own daughter in at night.”

“I’m not having kids, ma.”

“Ok.”

“And I’m not getting married.”

“Fine.”

“And what’s more, I won’t be starring in these films.”

“Oh? That’s a shame. Someone as pretty as you?”

“I’ve got a boy’s figure, ma. I’ve no hips and no chest and my hair resists styling like a Protestant resists a Papal decree.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t be an adult film star.”

“It does. It does indeed.”

“I guess what I mean is, no matter what you think you look like, others see you differently. And regardless of how you look, or feel, it definitely doesn’t mean that you can’t enjoy sex.”

“This has nothing to do with—” I stopped short. It was the first time I’d ever heard my mother use the s-e-x word. It felt like getting hit on the head with a hurling stick. Why did she have to be so blunt about it?

I like to think of myself as fairly mature. I mean, how many teenage movie producers do you know? But in that moment, I regret to say, my maturity failed me. This was the same woman who had measured my skirt length before heading off to primary school every morning. The same woman who thought the “Song of Solomon” was smut. The very same woman who would sometimes say cryptic things about the price of milk and boys’ willingness to purchase a cow. And so, with that absolutely scarring breach of long-standing decorum, I turned tail and ran.

I ran through the throngs of holidayers, eating their spuds-on-a-stick, past the Mr. Tayto Meet and Greet, around the Tiny Tater’s Patch Playground, down the center of the Crispy Maze, and finally through the exit turnstiles of the Park. That’s just the way, isn’t it? You go for a simple day out among starchy-punned amusements (and one out of place Viking-themed attraction), and your mother ruins it all by acting like a total weirdo.

#

Bobby had insisted on wearing a mask the day of our shoot. He said it was to give him some anonymity in case he ever went into politics, but I began to fear I’d made him self-conscious in the toilet the other week. I’m sure he was fine. I didn’t have much to compare him to, regardless.

Along with the mask came a new porn name as well: The Masked

Shamcock. I told him that would only make people think his man parts were phony, but he was too pleased with the pun to listen. Maggie had come up with a name too. She'd heard that the formula was your first pet's name and the last name of the doctor who presided over your birth. I very much tried to dissuade her from using Bitsy Balakrishnan but to no avail.

And so, The Magnificent Masked Shamcock (née Oscar Wild!) and Bitsy Balakrishnan (née the last girl on Earth I thought would be up for this) stood in terry-cloth robes before me, some shadeless lamps, and my iPhone 7 on a tripod.

Bobby, I noticed, was trembling like an addict. As the director, it was probably my job to settle him down.

"Just remember, Bobby, no one will be watching you in this. It's all eyes on Mags."

"Christ," she blurted out. "Thanks a lot!"

"Just do your job," I continued, "get it done, finish in frame, and all will be okay." Bobby stood there, his body made of jello; his stone face, apoplectic.

Mags, at least, seemed a bit more chipper. The shot of Bushmills had helped. Who knew she loved getting lustered so much?

She walked up to me while Bobby tested out the springs on the mattress we'd acquired like someone kicking tires on a new car. "So, em, when Bobby climbs on top of me, what comes next exactly?"

"What do you think comes next?"

"What I mean is, em, shouldn't you be the one to block it?"

I hadn't thought of that. That was what directors did, wasn't it, block things? "Well, I suppose we'll just go with standard missionary at first. Then maybe mix it up a bit from there. This is just rehearsal, mind, we needn't get too elaborate."

She turned to Bobby for help and then looked back at me. Unblinking stares now from the pair.

"Listen, you both agreed to this, but I'm not going to force you." It's possible a proper porn director would never say that, but these were my only friends, after all.

They looked at each other now, this time without blushing, as they'd done when they first saw each other in their robes.

"We're just looking for more direction from you is all," said Bobby.

"And maybe, em, some tips, like." Maggie was starting to lose the bit of liquid courage she'd gained.

"Christ," I said. "Don't tell me you don't know how to do it!"

"Well," said Maggie, looking down at the floor. "It would be my first. First to go all the way that is. I've done loads of other things, just not, you know."

I shot a look at Bobby. He read my face clearly. I did not expect him

to let me down.

But something in Mags' admission had freed him. "I want to. Maggie's beautiful and all, I just . . ."

"It's your first time, too." I moved the tripod/cellphone camera to the side. The life of an auteur was not an easy one.

I stared at my friends and they looked back at me with aching expressions. In that moment, I felt as vulnerable and naked as they did shivering in their thin robes.

"What a fine company we are." I heard myself say. "We just can't do it with this lighting. We just can't." Backed into a corner, I was on autopilot. "That's why you're both still nervous. These lamps? It looks unprofessional, plus there'll be weird shadows and the like. You don't want weird shadows on your bum, do you? Course not." My speech was racing like an auctioneer. "I'll work on drumming up some more finances, get some proper equipment, and we can revisit this next quarter." I had failed. They had called my bluff.

#

My mum could tell I was upset—how, I still haven't been able to figure out—she can usually tell before I even know.

"Weren't you supposed to shoot your porn today?" She asked it like she was checking up on the progress of one of my household chores.

"The talent got cold feet."

"Maybe the talent wasn't ready."

"I was nervous, too, but I was going to make the most of it." Then I caught myself and shot her a steely gaze, "Of course, ma, I've been with loads of men." I watched her face for any sign of disturbance, but I don't even think she blinked.

"Certainly, but it sounds like maybe Maggie and Bobby haven't had quite so many partners. And as the more experienced one, you need to be able to help. Show them it's okay to approach sex on their own time, when they're more comfortable. Some people are ready young, Ciara. Others aren't ready until they're 18. Some might never feel ready. It's all okay. That kind of timing is part of God's plan, too. What matters most is you approaching it when you're ready. Wait until you're ready and make sure it's with someone who cares for you, and who will make your first time something wonderful."

And that was how my Mum and I finally had "The Talk." A bit circuitously perhaps, and certainly later in life than most do. But we'd both gotten through it. I didn't dodge it, or run away. She'd done it without being too awkward or making it a whole big Catholic thing.

#

Galway Girlz Entertainment LLC folded that same summer. We all went on to other pursuits. Mr. Shamcock and Ms. Balakrishnan started dating and became Facebook official that same month. They'd cast their porn identities aside as well, and I never pried, but whatever Bobby and Mags were

doing behind closed doors, it was surely making them smile more than liquor ever could.

I got asked out on my first date, too. His name was Pádraig, and he was handsome—sandy hair and the eyes of a poet. He thought I was clean on, too. I guess he liked his girls looking like Japanese Water Ghosts. I haven't mentioned anything to him about my past as Ireland's first ever porn producer. Not that I'm ashamed of that rung on my resume at all, it's just that it's more of a second date kind of revelation, you know?

Peter Grandbois is the author of eleven books, the most recent of which is the poetry collection The Three-Legged World, published as Triptych with books by James McCorkle and Robert Miltner (Etruscan 2020). His work has appeared in over one hundred journals, including, Kenyon Review, The Gettysburg Review, and Prairie Schooner. His plays have been performed in St. Louis, Columbus, Los Angeles, and New York. He is poetry editor at Boulevard magazine and teaches at Denison University in Ohio. You can find him at www.petergrandbois.com.

The sound of rain

Peter Grandbois

She sits playing guitar
in the bedroom, sound
mapping squares of light
across the dog on the
hardwood floor, light gusting
through half-shuttered windows
and purling over her son
skating in the driveway,
wind spinning filaments
of web, almost translucent,
about her husband reclining
in the living room, reading
texts from work. Let us imagine
this repurposed melody
making of these remnants
something like the sound of rain,
something that might almost
contain the sacred. Let us
imagine her looking up
from her guitar. Let's pretend
she sees herself—a girl
again sitting beneath
the birch in the backyard,
a yellow bough bending
toward her shoulder. Let's

pretend as night cants to
oher she still feels the weight
of touch like a torn poster
for a concert that never arrived.

Speculation on wandering

How sweet the book of
unseen blossoming
we share with trees and
the windy evening.
How true the curve of
forgetting that lets
us walk long into
the cicadas' silence.
I am a pilgrim
through the deer's heart and
the hush lining the
owl's wing. I am the
story upon which
the coffered hours wander
and through which the days
flow and steady go,
dripping down cracks and
crevices, water
filling the memory-
bog—and still sometimes
a mild riding light
rings out from these lines,
clearing the flooded
grass, and other times
darkness huddles deep
and all this wild wind
of words can do is
dig a hole I step
into like this poem,
a well filled with circling
shadows returned from
yesterday's sleep—and I,
thrumming with the faint
sweep of churning stars,
stray everywhere.

The cup we share

Where is the map to the next world
That country of stray dogs

Where everything I have to say
I can say in the dark

And the cup we share
Is a house

Small enough to fit
Under the pillow

And the time that lies
Between us

Folds smaller
And smaller

Until the air unwinds
And we wake

To the steeper path
Of sorrow

You know the one
The ghost-covered stair

That trembles through
The sun's slow course

We are always escaping

Pernille AEgidius Dake (she/her) was a finalist for the Glimmer Train Press 2014 New Writer Award as well as december's 2015 Curt Johnson Prose Award and has been published in *Skirt!*, *Meat for Tea: The Valley Review*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *Dime Show Review*, *Glassworks Magazine*, and elsewhere. She is an MFA Candidate in Writing at Vermont College of Fine Arts.

Where I Sit

Pernille AEgidius Dake

I find myself reading the end of the novel *Imagine Me Gone*¹—a hardcover edition with its dust jacket torn—sitting on the bench, where he'd taken me for our first two dates

he served beer re-poured into ginger ale bottles, matching the blonde caramel-color, and homemade sandwiches, then next time supermarket sushi on both occasions, with a demonstratively joking tone, he praised his ingenuity and “wonderful cooking.” So did I, naturally, and grinned and loved how he then beamed—a light piercing mine—and I reveled at the moment, unable to hurt his feelings, given the fact they weren't mine to upset

there we were, being loosey-goosey, for the world to see, on our bench

where he, two months later, asserted: “It wasn't cheating if we weren't having sex at the time. You're comparing apples to apple sauce,” and tee-heed and so did I and swallowed his reason when he designated it as such

where he, on our six-month anniversary, lambasted me for covering my emotions up too hard and not sharing enough about my amicable divorce, and he repeated: “For us to succeed, I deserve— No, I have a right to know why it ended”

but where he, a month ago, dissected, then re-linked, twisted, and tied the history of every one of my relationships' cordial split-ups into what became a knot in his chest that he swore was giving him “a fucking heart attack,” because he was convinced I manipulated and lied, “like Putin,” he said, and I tried to smile, as I said, “Oh Crimea river,” and he sputtered, “But I'm the guy who does all the pro-bono work at the Women's Shelter, not you. I'm wonderful”

¹ Haslett, Adam. *Imagine Me Gone*. New York: Back Bay Books, 2016.

our initial picnic on this bench, when he'd guffawed over his Wonder Bread sandwiches, first, so I could chuckle-choke along, as did I, again, when he said, "Goes down gingerly," and swigged from his bottle like someone who'd just brought in a harvest, recollected in my mind and awakened every one of his impressions I'd laughed at

my mouth so wide open that he, like a magician with his fingers down my throat pulling out lengths of bright-colored scarves tied together, had extracted my compliances, which enabled me to string myself along and, also, not say the bread was stale

since we were having such a good time, there on the bench

where he now insists, "I'm the best you'll ever have," and gets up and strides off with halted speed down the concrete path that crosses our town's small park of conifers, granting me time to catch up, sneaking side glances to check if I'm coming: a pull that illuminates like airplane aisle emergency lights—brightness that cannot blind

I lean against the bench's backrest, crack open the still somewhat-rigid spine of *Imagine Me Gone*, and I laugh, then cry over how a fictional family reconciles with a father's, then the son's suicide—real agony.

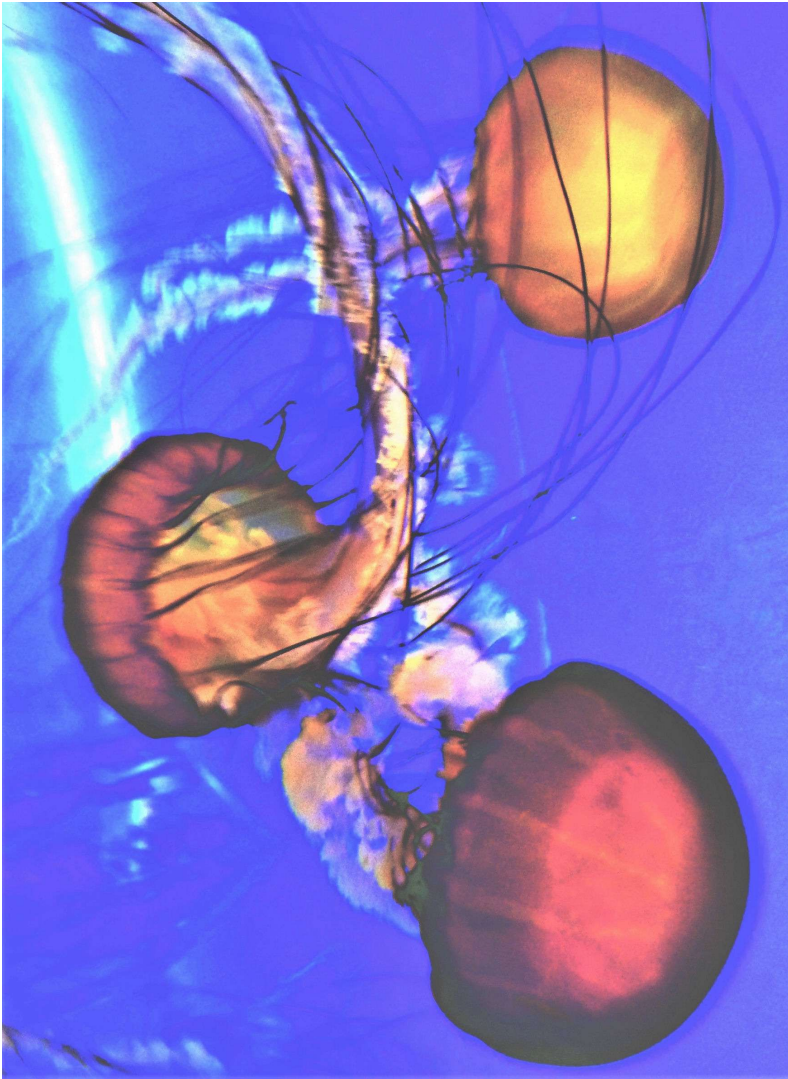
Jayne Marek has provided color cover art for Chestnut Review, Silk Road, Bombay Gin, Amsterdam Quarterly's 2018 Yearbook, The Bend, and her recent poetry books In and Out of Rough Water (2017), The Tree Surgeon, Dreams of Bowling (2018), and Dusk-Voiced (2021). Her writings and art photos appear in One, Eclectica, Salamander, QWERTY, Folio, Gulf Stream, Women's Studies Quarterly, Grub Street, Spillway, The Cortland Review, The Lake, Bellevue Literary Review, Camas, Notre Dame Review, and elsewhere.

While these pieces are representational, they use degrees of abstraction to encourage viewers to take a second look. I experiment with exposures and cropping to create visual ambiguities. This approach suggests that objective reality can be perceived in multiple ways. Unexpected patterns and bold colors add emphasis to the aspects of my subjects that I find particularly beautiful and intriguing.



One Fish Two Fish

This carp at Chicago's Shedd Aquarium marks another experiment in photographing through and into water. Here, the various surfaces of glass, fluid, and scales combine to create an illusion that I find especially pleasing for its color and the way the images seem to move in and out of focus.



Jellybellies

What visitor isn't captivated by the jellyfish exhibits at the Oregon Coast Aquarium? These large moon jellies are so vibrantly colored, and move with such grace, they suggest to me the same mysterious interplay of subject and ethos that is evoked by abstract expressionism.

Lorrie Ness (she/her) is an emerging poet working in Virginia. Her work can be found at Palette Poetry, THRUSH Poetry Journal, Typishly, The Shore and various other journals. In 2019 and 2020 she was nominated for a Best of the Net Award by Sky Island Journal.

Healing Arts

Lorrie Ness

Hand blown
is a controlled exhale—
sculpting with breath and lips.
He cups the metal pipe to his mouth.
Some bodies are accustomed
to handling fire.

Calloused palms
and a whisky-charred throat
insulate him from embers. He plunges
infant glass into the furnace. The edges
soften. Steel tongs stretch and pull
until the rim is fluted.

He knows
about limits. How flames
can make a brittle spot supple enough
to bend without breaking. He understands
the final colors only appear after
the tangerine glow
subsides.

The leather apron
is just for show. His arms
have their own thick hide. Life
is equal parts construction and destruction.
Inside his shop, shelves display vases
born from his abuse.

Carrying Weight

There's more to drowning
than lake water in the lungs. The shoe
bobbing under thin ice in spring.
That all comes later.

Consider the rucksack filled with sand.
The hoisting. The buckling. Chain cinching the straps
across her chest. Finally, the padlock.
The kind with a key.

Rewind some more,
to brown hair bleached by sun. Three of them
in sack dresses and dirty anklets. Feral
as angus heifers in the field.

Consider being raised as stock.
The rubbing. The wrinkled hands lifting
all those cotton skirts. Wrestling rayon slips
over her knees.

Consider the years eating her body into armor.
Belly folds ribbed with stretch marks
wafting up yeast. Making his eyes
turn to her sisters.

Feel the relief of being untouchable,
fermenting with sobs from the next room—
shifting from victim to accomplice
as her flesh grew.

Drowning is what she did
long before she walked the February ice
toward open water, listening for it to crack
beneath her weight.

*Born and raised in Russia, **Jackie Bee** (she/her) lives in Israel with her husband and two children. Her fiction has appeared in Weirdbook, Phobos, Sanitarium, Kzine, NewMyths and Literary Hatchet, among other publications. She can be found online at <https://www.facebook.com/jackie.bee.3785>.*

Something

Jackie Bee

Chicken taco salad or pasta Carbonara—that was the question.

The salad seemed like a good idea at first, but now, she wasn't so sure. She had made it last week, and Mike—well, not that he actually *said* anything, but he didn't *look* too happy. Pasta, then? But he didn't finish his spaghetti on Monday. Perhaps she should just call him and ask. Unless he was driving. He hated to be bothered when driving.

She slipped into the high bar chair. Why hadn't she called him an hour ago? Why always leave things for the last moment? Stupid. Can't get anything right.

"Mommy, I go to work!"

Liam rode his tricycle into the kitchen. He held a blue toy mobile phone to his ear, imitating his father's manner of speech. "Yes. Yes. Be right there." He pressed one of the buttons, and the phone emitted a string of unpleasant swishing and crackling sounds that made her wince.

"Baby, give me a few more minutes. Mommy's cooking."

"Okay." He nodded and pushed himself out of the kitchen. She followed him with her eyes. Since his second birthday, his talking ability had been improving by the day, and she was still adjusting to the fact that she could suddenly have conversations with her toddler.

She went to the stove. Preparing both dishes was the safest bet. She reached for the cooking pot, then winced again, as a new wave of unpleasant crackling noise spilled out of the dining room. Where did Liam even get that phone? Probably Mike had brought it, in one of his lame attempts to make up for his behavior. If so, he could at least have bought some nice toy that played music, not a piece of plastic rubbish emitting grey noise.

The sounds continued. She filled the pot with water, put it on the counter, and went into the living room.

Liam sat on the carpet, listening to the cacophony of noise his toy was producing.

"Turn it off, sweetie."

"But I talk." He looked up, the phone pressed to his ear. "Yes, yes, I

hear.”

She smiled. “Who are you talking to?”

He shrugged. “Something.”

“You mean, someone,” she corrected. “And who is that someone?”

“Just something,” he repeated stubbornly.

“And what does he tell you?”

“Things.”

She hummed. The kid had imagination.

“Can I listen, too?”

“Sure. Bye, something!” He handed her the toy and scrambled away to his tricycle.

The phone was still warm from his touch. It had stickers for buttons, a display covered by another blue sticker, and it made hissing, spitting, rustling sounds. It was clearly broken. She pressed its only real button on its side, and, thankfully, the sounds stopped.

“Things.” She shook her head and threw the phone on the couch.

Liam nodded, one of his feet over his bike’s seat. “Car things.”

It could still be hard sometimes to understand what he meant. She sighed and glanced at the clock. Six. Her heart sank. She probably had no time to cook both meals. She would have to call Mike and ask what he preferred.

He answered after the second signal.

“Yes.”

“Hi, sweetie, just wanted to ask—”

“It better be something important.”

She heard traffic noises in the background. Damn.

“Oh, I—are you on your way home?”

“Of course I am. Didn’t I tell you not to call me when I drive?”

“But I didn’t know you were—”

“I usually drive home around this time—is that too much information to remember? How many times do I have to—”

Some distant shattering sound cut him short. Then, almost immediately, he was shouting and cursing, calling someone names. Her blood went cold.

Then, he was on the phone again. “See? See what you did, stupid cow? Made an accident, all because of you. Just wait till I get home, you just wait.”

The phone went quiet in her hand. She stared at it, frozen. It seemed cooking the wrong dish would be her least trouble today.

#

“Wow.” He contemplated the burrito stack on his plate, then reached out to her. She recoiled instinctively, but he only patted her on the hand. “Good job.” He was nice today. He was always nice on the days after—well,

after the bad days.

“Bon appetite.” She forced a smile. “I’ll go check on Liam?”

“Sure.” He dug into his plate.

In the nursery, only the night light was on. Liam sat on his bed, wearing his pajamas, surrounded by toys. He had been somewhat subdued throughout the day, after all the yelling last night. She had tried to make it up to him, to play with him more, but he didn’t need more playing time. He needed a happy Mommy.

“Can’t sleep?”

He gave a one shoulder shrug. She sat down on the bed, and began to move the toys, making space. Among the stuffed animals, her fingers found something warm and slick. She picked it up. The toy phone.

Liam took it from her, stuck it under his pillow, and announced grudgingly, “Something called.”

In the gloom of the bedroom, the words gave her chills. Dismissing imaginary friends had been easier in the daylight. “Car things again?”

“Car things was yesterday.” He gave her a somber look. “Hand things today.”

“Hand things?”

‘Car things’ made her think of the accident Mike had made the day before, smashing into another car. A peculiar coincidence, for sure. ‘Hand things’ didn’t make any sense at all. Still, she felt uneasy.

“Sweetie, it’s just a toy phone, you know. It doesn’t really speak to you.”

He looked away. Then, unexpectedly, he moved over and leaned into her embrace. They sat in silence for a while.

“Mommy, I want to go away.”

Me too, she thought. Me, too.

Once he was asleep, she retrieved the phone from under his pillow, and went back to the living room. Mike sat there, slumped in the armchair, the remote control on his lap, watching a soccer game.

“Did you buy it for him?” She showed him the phone. “It’s broken.”

He gave her a plain look. “Never seen it before.”

“It makes creepy noises, and he treats it like an imaginary friend.”

“So what? I said I didn’t buy it.”

“Just wanted to check it’s okay if I throw it away.”

“For Christ’s sake, do you have to ask me about everything?”

Suddenly, he sat upright, glaring at her. “Can’t you decide anything on your own?”

“I just . . .”

“There, let me help you.” He got up from his chair, grabbed her wrist, and pulled her to the kitchen. “There—see? Open that. Garbage bin inside, right?” He was pulling and pushing her around, grabbing the knob with her

hand, pulling, opening, reaching, forcing her fingers to let go of the toy phone over the bin. “See, was it that hard? To throw the freaking thing by yourself?”

“You’re hurting me.” She was sobbing. She didn’t know when she had started, but now everything around was a blur.

“That’s how you throw things away,” he said, teacher-like. He gave her wrist one final twist and let go. “Let me know if I you need more lessons. Maybe how to brush your teeth, or wipe your ass?”

“No . . . no.” Her wrist hurt. She might need to go to the emergency room, but they had only been there two weeks ago. He surely wouldn’t allow her to go back so soon. Despite his glasses, his high-tech job, and his mild manners, a woman repeatedly slipping and falling naturally draws unwanted attention to her spouse. The nurses had asked her questions already. But she hadn’t told them. She knew him too well. She couldn’t risk making him angry.

“Let me see.” His voice sounded calmer now. He took her hand, carefully this time, and examined it. “I’ll bandage it for you.” He gave her a guilty smile. “There, there, stop crying. I didn’t mean to hurt you, okay?”

She followed him meekly into the bathroom. Her fingers looked puffy, and the skin around her wrist was turning blue. *Hand things*. The thought sent shivers up her spine. At least they have thrown the stupid phone away.

#

“Wake up already.”

She sat upright, instantly awake. The room was dark, save for the shadows the street lamp threw on the ceiling. Must be well past midnight. Next to her, Mike moved, turning to his other side.

“He’s awake,” he muttered. “Shut him up.”

She slipped into her robe, handling it awkwardly with one hand, the other pulsating with pain under the tight bandage.

“Mommy!”

“Coming.”

The night light in the nursery was barely enough for her to see the furniture’s outlines, and Liam sitting in his bed.

“What happened, sweetie?”

“Something woke me up.” It took her a few seconds to notice the toy phone in his hand.

“Sweetie, why did you take it out of the garbage bin?”

“I didn’t.” He looked at her uncomprehendingly. “It was under my pillow.”

The phone crackled again. She snatched it from his hand, then dropped it to the floor—the damn thing felt hot. Not just warm from Liam’s touch. Hot.

“Something said things,” Liam continued. “What’s ‘death’?”

She stared at him.

“Where did you get this phone, Liam?”

“Under my pillow.”

“Not now. I mean, the first time, who gave it to you?”

“Nobody.” He shrugged. “It was always under my pillow.”

A sound of the doorbell made her jump. In the silence of the sleeping apartment, it sounded outrageously loud.

“For fuck’s sake,” Mike bellowed. “Tell them to go away.”

She got up obediently. Then, she froze.

Death things.

The doorbell sound filled the apartment again—loud, persistent.

Mike’s voice followed from the bedroom, “Hell, do I have to do everything by myself?”

She shut the nursery’s door and quietly turned the key.

A moment later, Mike shuffled by it, moving towards the hall, cursing under his breath.

She leaned on the door, and then she just waited.

Mischelle Anthony's (she/her) poems lately appear in Cream City Review, Ocean State Review, American Chordata, and Right Hand Pointing. She has a poetry collection, [Line] (Foothills Press), and a scholarly edition of an 1807 memoir of sexual assault, Lucinda; Or, The Mountain Mourner (Syracuse University Press). She founded Luzerne County, Pennsylvania's Poetry In Transit, and lives and works in Wilkes-Barre, PA.

It's Been So Long Since the Last Divorce

Mischelle Anthony

I've forgotten how to gather the energy, how to store bitterness in the throat like a cinnamon disk. The kitchen threshold is heat and love, sugar ants and pantry moths. No one crouches terrified under tables, and the ceiling cracks come from a settling foundation. I wear my shoes across the dining room. Complicated recipes, waistbands, people, and poems. Give me a slab of sunshine in the afternoon, doesn't matter where. I barely remember my mother's voice: *There, there.*

Abby Rose Manis (she/her; they/them) grew up bringing books into movie theaters and suffering from an intense crush on the zombie from Hocus Pocus. Nowadays she's pursuing an MFA and writing her little heart out (though the crush remains). Abby has published work in Aletheia and Mensa Bulletin; the latter story was recently nominated for a PEN America prize. Though no genre is safe from her grasp, Abby mainly writes fantasy, gothic horror, and magical realism.

Discovery

Abby Rose Manis

The drooping sun stretched my teammates' shadows as they headed for the sloped tanglewood where our soccer ball had disappeared. I decided to check lower on the hill, in case gravity had won against nature's scrubby restraints. The brambles here were thickest, sinking their vicious little fangs into my clothes and angrily crackling underfoot. Syrupy shadow wreathed the area, pooling and gathering as the twilight deepened. Despite the June heat, my sweat-salted skin prickled with goosebumps. Finally, the toe of my sneaker bumped against the round shape of the ball, obscured by the darkness and thorny undergrowth. Eager to be out of this murky gloom, I hauled back and kicked with all my strength. There was a moist, organic crunch as my foot punched through the ball, which didn't budge. It was the sound of an egg cracked on the side of a bowl, then pulled apart to spill its contents. Or was it a melon's impact with concrete, its thick rind ruptured and leaking fleshy matter? Suddenly dizzy, I tried to reconcile the sound, the sensation, with my tactile memory of a soccer ball. I yanked my foot free with a churning squelch that coated the inside of my mouth with queasy saliva. Swallowing convulsively, I looked down at my shoe, which was covered up to the laces in wet dark. As I crouched down, searching with eyes fruitlessly wide to combat the retreating light, I left the clustering whine of midges above me and entered a deeper, throatier sound: the droning of blow flies.

Sonia Beauchamp (she/her) is surrounded by feral chickens on the North Shore of Oahu. She is a healing artist, a mother of two, and the daughter of a Chinese immigrant. Read her work in Maudlin House, Anomaly, and pioneertown. Find out more at www.soniakb.com.

Apology

Sonia Beauchamp

I am from tart tiger lilies
in the month of July
and the sweat-covered body
of summertime in the Deep South,
where my skin never turns gold,
but instead, turns to brown ash
like my mother's.

I learned about love
from calloused hands
and twenty-dollar bills, folded tight
in my bra against hard nipples,
high on trailer-park crank
while my mother vomited
alone after chemotherapy.

I am the crumpled sheets of paper
from my diary that she will never
have the chance to read.
I toss them in the garbage can—
where my apology comes
with the faint smell of shit.

Ian O'Leary (he/him) graduated as an ecologist from Eastern Michigan University, intent on entering the field of sustainability and environmental science. He turned to writing to sort through the emotions which those stark truths sparked.

Valley Eld

Ian O'Leary

Old stars shine above the child and the knight. Night breathes through the ruins of a moss-strewn courtyard. Between strands of lunar shade the truth of this place is told by roots and fissures and weather-cracked flagstones: It is silent, and it is cold.

It is the knight who speaks first. "I must ask what brought you here."

The child, fiddling with a sapling in a dead engine, mutters, "A walk through the woods."

"Ah. The beginning of many stories." The knight smiles. The vines along his jaw curl in response.

The child does not look up from their work.

"Come closer to the fire, little seed. The wind bites."

The child marks the gentleness in the knight's voice. They move to the knight's side, who raises a bundle of leaves into the flame. Something contained within ignites.

"Does this tongue feel foreign to you, child?"

"The words are ugly and odd."

"With time, it becomes an old friend." Moss has found purchase in the crevices of his armor. As he lifts the bundle from the flame, the leather straps creak. "I'm one to know."

The knight lowers the cooked bundle and peels open the charred succulent leaves, revealing three pink buds within. The child views the knight from the corner of their eye as he plucks a bud free and places it in his mouth. There is a soft *pop*, then the air fills with a sweet aroma.

"I see you watching," says the knight. He takes a second bud between thumb and forefinger. "Here."

The child takes it, sniffs, and eats. An easy puncture brings forth delicious juice.

The knight smiles. "I spoke with a kingfisher the other day—a fellow all ruffled with pride. He swore my fruits were the sweetest in the land. Do you know the fable of the kingfisher?"

They shake their head, chewing through the rind.

"He is slave to an endless hunt," says the knight, "and a constant

hunger for more. Do you enjoy your fruit?"

The child nods, swallows, and says, "Does this land have many such dangers?"

The knight shifts a branch in the fire, revealing a shaft half of charcoal. "Yes, little seed, there are dangers. The nights come riddled with dark things."

"I think I may have seen one."

The knight looks up, saying nothing.

"A thing of flesh and metal," mutters the child. "Tall as my father, with empty eyes."

"Yes. The creatures of the kingdom, their souls stolen by a timeless hunger. 'Tis all that remains of the denizens of this once-proud land. You met one, yet made it to my flame unharmed?"

"I hid in the brambles where it could not reach."

The knight creaks as he lifts another bud into the heat. "Clever child—or perhaps wrought with fear."

"I am not scared."

He smiles. It is gentle and old. "Very well, little seed. Very well."

#

In the heat of the night, the child dreams of a tunnel in the woods. An opening in the trees; something not seen until looked at twice. They dream of surrounding bramble, marble balustrades, and forgotten machines.

A passage to Valley Eld.

Then the dream shifts. They see the moon above a lake. Shadowed cliffs extend to all sides. Starlight glitters along cobalt waters.

Far above, suspended on a summit of crags, stands a soaring ivory tower.

The child's eyes fall upon this edifice and cannot look away.

Something looks back from its window.

#

The Queen feels memory tear from the sky and collapse like rain.

Remember the sounds of spring? The rounds of robins carrying a new season's song? There were children, then—those who loved her, those she loved in return. A finger pricked upon a spinner's wheel; elbows marred from a fall. The castle courtyards were home to many such battles, and she was a valkyrie for them all. Soft words, motherly smiles, a push back to play.

She remembers her sacred charge. To raise the children until just-ripe. To lead them into the temple. To conduct their treble voices in song, echoing the halls with fright. And once their sweetly youth had fed the engines of her kingdom, they were returned home—empty save for a desire to serve, duned-eyed, hardly children at all. Such perfect harmony!

The Queen remembers these children, and the night is swollen with her weeping.

These are the fading hours of her kingdom, and in its death throes, the land has been reduced to its final state. A reservoir of memory locked shut on all sides, every gateway filled with dust, mortar, and marble sealant. Tell her; tell her true. Is stagnancy such an ultimate truth? Can no more dreaming and loving and wondering be shaken loose from the rubble of a thousand stillborn epochs?

“We merely wanted more,” mutters the Queen. “Just a little more. Was this truly such a sin?”

And more. And more. And more.

Until the land was no longer fertile with their tender, succulent songs.

Oh, how she misses the taste of youth.

The Queen will find her children again.

#

Come morning, the child rises from a metal slab carpeted with moss.

The knight is already about the fire, feeding into its depths rich dark wood. His greatsword rests diagonally against a white pillar. “A lovely sun,” he says, “peeking out from behind the hills.”

“What lies beyond them?”

The knight smiles. “The path home, little seed.”

This comforts the child. They curl up next to the fire, watching the birds flutter amongst the trees. Eventually, they announce, “I’m hungry.”

“I will fetch some berries once the Waystone is tended.”

“Why do you bother with that old rock?”

The knight is bent over a flat stone set atop the grass. Its grey face is riddled with symbols etched by a precise hand. He coats his finger in silvery dust from a pouch and rubs it along these carvings. “Worry not of this silly thing—a relic, much like myself. And as for your breakfast, you won’t find much but fruit in this stretch of the ruins.”

“I liked the fruit very much.”

“Oh?” In response, the knight finishes dusting the stone and begins flaming another bundle of fruit. When it is cooked, the child eats in silence, watching the knight gather the fixings of his camp into a woven sack.

“Are you leaving?” they ask through a mouthful of juice.

“We are. I cannot let you loose in this land. Gather your things, little seed, and we shall depart.”

“I have no things.”

He gestures to the pelt of moss strewn across the metal slab. “But you are mistaken. I have now given you this pelt, never to weary nor tear. And this, too.” The knight hands the child a sack with burlap straps. “Stow your pelt, and let us away.”

The child rolls up the moss pelt and tucks it into the sack. The knight quenches the flame and fastens the old greatsword to his back. The travelers carry on beneath the heat of a midday sun, into a great ruin long overcome

with growth. There are arches and columns and courtyards; there are roots, boughs, hanging vines. Metal beams jut abruptly from the walls, sometimes pried open to reveal circuitry and cables within. This place is woven seamlessly with the cliffs and hanging forests of the land, as if both components had been crushed to dust and mixed. The stone structures are as natural as the dark-trunked trees that pierce the stones and fill the cracks with mortar of root and vine, and as old as the dead machine lights that once loomed proud above these paths. The knight lifts a fallen pillar from the way, cracks open a rusted metal door, squeezes by the trunk of an oak swollen through a room. He seems familiar with this labyrinth of marble, given his decisive turns.

Ahead, a tower of stairs built into the side of a cliff climbs into the clouds. Metal scaffolding once held the stairs aloft—now, rusted and rotted, they are left to elemental decree. Far in the distance sleep surreal twists of land, banking and cutting wildly, peppered with the dull or shining remnants of machinery and forest and moss-covered marble.

The child has little appreciation for such stark beauty. Their eyes are cast instead to the warped tiles at their feet. This is a place they do not know, and prodding their memory as to how they arrived yields little. A walk through the woods, three hops across the brook, a step into the glade . . . Then a run through the night, stumbling over stones and roots with searing eyes in pursuit.

The knight's voice pulls them from their reverie. "Just above, little seed. We shall climb and view the world from on high."

"What is your name?" asks the child.

"I am Ota, though most call me the Waymaker."

"You mean to guide me home?"

"For such grace is all we can hope."

The two begin to ascend. The protective wall which once contained the tower has been torn asunder by endless wind and countless winters. The child stays close to the central pillar and watches Ota take the steps without hurry, his sword bouncing with each purposefully placed foot.

Eventually, the knight speaks. "Long ago, I travelled in the breast of a great and golden ship. We made our path between islands keeping an eye always to our instruments—but despite this focus, soon strayed off course. Weary and far from our destination, we stowed our sextant and chart within a locker and looked instead to the naked sky. The stars and fate. Then, freed of woes, we found our way in but a breath."

The child says nothing.

"The opportunity to stray off course—to break from the order of things—is a blessing that must be seized. To do only what the world expects is terrible folly. You must push beyond the laws which bind you. Sometimes, dear child, you must wander lost."

“I do not know what is expected of me.”

“Not yet, little seed.” Ota continues his upward climb, not turning.
“But such innocence is a treasure widely sought.”

Soon they mount the clifftop and see the impossible world stretched before them. Cold winds infused with the scent of growth and elden places brush along the bald summit, curling against the thin, bent boughs of thousand-year-old scrag-clinging trees. A mechanical structure which once gave this hill its meaning has been reclaimed by moss and weathered weeds. It lies heavily on its side, the skeleton of a slain thing.

“I have seen much from this stand,” says the knight. “I have watched the sun and moon trade burdens a dozen times from this very hill. Winds from the sea have reached my face, still tinged with distant salts. Time and place are one, riding tandem, each etched with the other’s tales.”

“You speak in puzzles,” says the child, smiling.

The knight returns their grin. “Forgive me. Often my tongue dances ahead of sense. Let us carry on.”

But a sudden wave of sorrow finds the child. They wonder where they are and when they will return home. Or, more pressing . . . “*How* will we find my home again?”

The knight kneels. Gently, he says, “Through the Wellspring, at the edge of all things. It shall speak with your soul and send you drifting downriver—toward home.”

“You are certain?”

“Yes. We are together. Thus, it is only a matter of time until we reach our destination.”

The knight’s soft voice is enough to undo the spell. Ota reaches again for the child’s hand. They take it with silence.

The two descend a weather-beaten track towards the forest at the mountain’s base. Running along the path are wooden poles linked by parallel cables that have fallen and cracked the earth, their black arteries now draped along sun-warmed boulders and bare concrete. Eventually, the track enters a deep thicket of woods, where trees beyond age are layered in wood so gnarled and black as to seem like sheets of iron. The sweeping emerald crowns glitter with sunlight, each beam sliced in two by wide, ancient leaves. Rumbling roots pass underfoot and force cautious passage.

An hour of mutual silence is broken when the knight suddenly crosses an arm in front of the child’s path. They had been watching their feet, unaware of the clearing just ahead, where a small hill hosts a single sunny oak.

Slumped against the trunk rests a man in old armor. Sunlight falls upon his pale face.

“Greetings,” calls Ota. “I did not mean to disturb your rest.”

The fallen one looks up. A sword is embedded into the earth several

paces away, beside a hump of asphalt crumbled nearly into nonexistence. “Approach,” he calls, hoarse. “I can’t so much as reach my blade.”

“A fallen wanderer,” mutters Ota to the child. “Mark the yearning in his eyes.” He subtly loosens the sword in his sheath. Together, they approach.

The wanderer considers them with a glacial blue eye. The other is lost beneath a bandage. A scar-hatched hand rests upon the moss in which his rusted sword is impaled. “I know you. Oh, yes, I mark thee well. The Waymaker, treading his destiny in the opposite direction. How tired a sight. Well, see firsthand what your rebellion has done to our order. Or not. I care little anymore.”

Ota stiffens. His hand drifts to his sword.

The child, noticing this tension, says, “Who are you?”

A gentle smile cracks through the wanderer’s lips. “Once, I sought the Waystone at the behest of the Queen. One of the many knights charged with its reclamation—after *one* of us went and stole it away.” His single eye blinks. “Eventually, time came and carved me up, as well as a roaming monster or two, and I found no need to keep pacing the earth. I realized that I need not seek the Waystone any longer. No—I could simply . . . *walk away*. Like our dear friend here.”

“A deserter,” growls Ota.

“A happy one,” the fallen one counters. “Can you say the same?”

“One must embrace fate or defy it. There is no in-between.”

“Fate cares nothing for us. We needn’t care in return.”

Ota’s frown is deep. “Apathy is not action.”

The fallen one waves a hand. “We don’t all have your courage, Waymaker. Even if by a lesser degree than yourself, I chose to turn from evil. I can make peace with that half-measure.”

The child asks, “But how can you find peace when pain fills you whole?”

For a moment, the fallen one is silent. Then he says, “There are times in which the agency of one soul is less than another’s—but together, our small courages might’ve sung a chorus to the heavens. If every knight had turned away, all those many years ago . . .” Again, a smile. “I did what I could.”

A sudden tug on the child’s shoulder turns them around. Ota growls, “This is naught but a troubled revenant of this land. Recall the demon which chased you into the bramble—now behold one too weak to continue its hunt.” There is hurry in his voice. “Come, little seed. We must away.”

As they are pulled, the child turns to face the fallen knight once more.

Again, that smile. Faint, on the precipice of failing. The warrior’s many wounds hold him to the earth, but still, his back is upright against the wood of the tree. His hand is near his sword.

After the settling of a lifetime of dust, his smile remains.

Once they have made their distance, the child says, “Ota, there was no

yearning in his eyes. Only contentment.”

The knight trudges through the ruined courtyard with ease. The child finds difficulty matching his pace. A grunt from ahead: “All or nothing—this is the only way our world can heal. To slumber in a forest is no act deserving of merit. By indifference, he is no better than those of corrupt mind. ‘Twas a memory desperate for remembrance. The Valley Eld knows not how to forget its famine.”

“There is much worrying over memory here.”

“It is woven into the very soil. Once, our people slayed, and took, and sought glory. But too much was consumed. Now the spirits of this land wander, bereft of purpose. And that knight was the worst sort—deluded as to the virtue of his actions, thinking himself a saint for once lifting a finger.”

The child says, “He spoke of your stone. And a Queen. I had a dream that someone watched me from a tower. Perhaps it was this Queen?”

Suddenly, the knight turns.

He kneels and rests a moss-bitten hand upon the child’s shoulder. His eyes have widened. “Tell me now. Tell me true.” His voice is calm, but forcefully so. “Did a voice reach your ears? Across that tranquil lake, did someone sing?”

“No.”

“The dream ended? As you looked upon her tower, you were freed from your sleep?”

“Yes, Ota.”

“So she reaches further.” The knight pulls the child in for an embrace. A great hand begins to stroke their head. His voice comes as a rapid, ragged whisper: “Gracious moon, I thank thee. Spare this child. Spare one more.”

“Ota, the stone that you tend . . .”

The knight goes still. With a level breath, he draws back from his embrace. Old, hollow eyes meet the child’s own.

“Do you mean me well?” they whisper.

“Trust in me, little seed,” says Ota. “I will return you home.”

A shared gaze, rife with fear, intent, and loyalty.

No time to waste on anything but trust.

The two depart once more, hand in hand.

#

In the dead of night, the child faces the tower.

A song leaks from its highest window—mournful, a nocturne of once-upon-a-time. In its wake, the moon-touched water parts. A faceless figure wades through the open space, one stately step after another. Her black dress drifts like water, though there is no breeze. Something silver glints upon her wrists.

“Hello,” says the child.

“Hello,” says the woman.

She comes close enough for the child to examine. The silver on her wrists is a set of chains. Her face is a mask of featureless porcelain skin. The suggestion of her mouth does not move as she says, “I must speak the truth of our land. There is an explanation for this emptiness, ruin, and lingering will: We have consumed our fuel. Legacy has been surrendered for self. Every child was used up in the grand pursuit of glory. Now, you are the last which remains, stolen here from another world. But hear my plea. If you would give yourself to us, we would subsist a while longer—enough to last until the *next* child. This is the sacrifice I ask of you, little one. Enter our engine. Grant us your soul.”

The child swallows. “You are the Queen. I was warned of you.”

The ghost of a frown through her faceless skin. “Ota kills us with his resistance. Each child led to the Wellspring is another bell tolled. The cliff cracks further. The sea approaches from below. The Waystone was a desperate measure, little one, meant to siphon children from other worlds . . . but Ota stole it away. So long as he sates it with moondust, he holds reign over our dearest resource, while the kingdom he betrayed withers.” She kneels. “Our children are dried up, and even the slow trickle of the Waystone has now ceased. As such, you are our final chance. Our only hope of continuation.” She reaches a hand toward the child’s face. “So please. Give yourself to us. Please. Feed us your youth.”

“You wish to harm me,” says the child.

The Queen’s skin stretches with a smile. She shakes her head. “No, no! How foolish! Only the *child* will be devoured. The rest of you will remain whole.” Her hand touches their cheek. “With us. Another for the ranks.”

The child shies from her touch. “No. *No.*”

The Queen cocks her head. “I do not understand. This is the way it has always been.”

“I do not care. Leave me be.”

Her grip reaffirms itself. The chains rattle. “It is not your choice. You came to this world. You must abide by its rules.”

The child shakes free and covers their ears with their palms.

In the child’s mind the Queen rasps, *You will damn us for our desire to grow? You will curse us for our nature? You will let the way-things-have-always-been crumble into dust?*

Distantly, a touch upon the child’s consciousness, rumbling, worried.

The Queen rises to her feet and begins to approach.

Rage growls in the back of her throat. Her black-nailed hands curl; beneath the veil of her face a fanged maw is desperate to break free. A talon reaches forward—ancient, vicious, trembling with terrible hunger.

At the last moment, something pulls the child from their dream.

#

Ota’s eyes, deep forest green flecked with bronze, blink like the wings

of a butterfly. “Back,” he mutters. “Back, back, back.”

The child groans. Rubbing the cobwebs of sleep from their eyes, they say, “Ota. I am hungry. Is there any fruit?”

The knight laughs in sudden relief. The child feels his arm around them—leather, moss, muscle. The weather-worn greatsword is unsheathed, its pommel firm in Ota’s other hand. “My child,” he says in a trembling voice. “The song called. You shut your ears. Fruit, you say? There is plenty. But unneeded. No. Come now. We must go.”

Ota lifts the child to their feet. They offer no protest; something in the nightmare sapped them dry. It is all they can do not to drift back to sleep as the land passes by with each of Ota’s steps. He mutters words in an elder tongue to accompany his quick, frightened march.

They soon reach the far side of the forest. Here the trees are sparse, their crowns grown wide for lack of competition. The grasses, soft and plush, leave afterimages of the knight’s footfalls. His path is hurried and straight. Small white flowers are speckled here and there, concentrated mostly where pieces of old machinery—a metal husk, weathered cables, a pole of wires tipped into the crown of a tree—lie at rest. A pale squirrel chitters atop a severed, fallen pillar. Somewhere near but far away, a kingfisher’s call echoes through the glade.

At that moment the child notices that the forest horizon is drenched in a shimmering mirage. They adjust their position in Ota’s arms and narrow their eyes.

“You see,” says the knight. “It spreads further every year.”

“We near the end?”

“Yes, little seed. Home.”

Before long, they reach the mirage. It is water—crystal clear, a finger length deep, but not natural in the way of a pond or lake. Plush grass wavers just beneath the surface. Ahead, the forest continues unimpeded, the oaks and elms unbothered by the water at their trunks. The stones and branches and leaves show no sign of waterlogging. Pristine, like petals in amber.

The ground has been sloping gently down for a stretch or more. As such, the water seems to grow deeper as they follow the grade of the ground. What could cause such a thing? The child imagines a hole in the earth into which the land itself is draining, poured like liquid into a yawning maw.

“Ota,” they ask, “What is the name of this place?”

“The Wellspring,” he whispers. “The edge of the world.”

As they march, the water rises from the knight’s ankle to knee to thigh. They pass the foundation of a building embraced in submerged grass. Small fish nibble at the moss on Ota’s shins. Fallen leaves and uprooted flowers drift along the surface, while sunlight filtered through the canopy strikes fractals in the water. Perched upon a rusted lightpost, the child spots the kingfisher which had spoken earlier of water on the horizon.

Scents of rain and earth fill this place at the end of all things.

“I am tired. I am scared.”

“Yes,” gasps the knight, strained by the weight of them. “But your woes shall soon be salved.”

The trees become sparse. One every dozen feet. Then less. Then less. Until when the child looks around there is more empty space than anything else. The water, now waist-deep, stretches to a boundless horizon.

But every journey has an end. Just ahead stands an old metal frame—once a place for souls to sit and wait, hooded from the rain. In the shade of that final structure, a boat rocks side to side in the waters of the Wellspring.

A silhouette stands within, oar in hand, ink-black against the sun.

Ota lets loose a ragged gasp. He pushes ahead with desperate urgency.

The child remains silent. They are weary, rendered weak and sorrowful by the melody in the back of their mind—the distant warbling of a mother spurned. A dirge of a fallen kingdom. The way things were, now inverted. To quell these thoughts, they think of the beauty of the crystal lake, of the boatman’s gentle swaying, left, right, left, right. These comforting sensations almost lull them to sleep.

The lantern on the boat’s horn drifts with a breeze. Though some distance yet lies between them, the boatman lifts a hand, palm upturned, beckoning Ota forth. The water is up to the knight’s chest. He has risen the child overhead, breath coming heavy and slow.

“Another,” rasps Ota. “One more.” The water resists his every step. The inertia of this world, come to its last stand. “Another, to break this foul curse.”

“Are you alright?” asks the child.

“You are the last. How could I be anything but pleased?”

“Will you lay down to rest, like the revenant at the tree?”

“All will be laid to rest. The ruins will give way to greenery, reconciling in but a few lonely years the many mistakes accumulated before.” Ota breathes heavily. “And in sunlight and rain, for countless seasons unchecked, our mark upon the world will fade, carried only by the child which remains.”

“I do not understand.” The child yawns. There is not a flicker of worry in their heart, safe as they are in Ota’s arms.

“Is that not the very beauty I seek? That you shall never know the burden they thought you must shoulder?”

“The Queen said the kingdom will fall without me.”

“If such sacrifice is required for it to subsist, then it deserves to fall.”

“But you are part of this Valley. If it fades, won’t you as well?”

Ota smiles and takes the final steps toward the craft.

Even this close, the boatman is shrouded in shadow. He extends his hands. The sun buzzes behind him—a dream of dusk, the lake painted in

sunset shadows.

The water has reached Ota's neck.

The child looks at the boatman from the corner of their eye. "Will he hurt me?"

"No. He will take you home. Where the world ends and spouts forth again, clean, unsullied by our touch. To the passages beyond."

"Home?"

"From whence you came, little one. It is time."

They yawn. "Very well."

And the knight gives the child away.

The boatman takes them into his arms. He finds the child a comfortable place to rest within the craft. The oar is grasped. The water whispers aside as the boatman pushes off; the wood creaks as it turns.

The child's eyes begin to flutter shut. They rub them, muttering, "Thank you, Ota. I think I'll sleep now."

"Slumber peacefully," says Ota, "And soon you shall awaken, this place nothing but a memory of a dream."

The distance grows.

The child yawns. "Where . . . my pelt, where . . ."

Ota lifts an old, root-warped hand. "Goodbye, little seed."

The rocking of the boat—left, right, left, right—peels the melody of endings from the child's mind and guides them into the soft embrace of dreams.

Ota steps back, relieved of his burden, and watches the silhouette of the boat grow smaller with each breath. A minute. A dozen. Left, right.

Eventually, the boat reaches the sunset, blinking away.

#

Alone, with his breath finally caught, Ota steps forward. The last of the petals part for his procession. There is nothing but flatness beyond. The water is cold. It is final. He removes his greatsword's leather harness and lets it fall, joining with the rest of this land's sunken past.

A second splash follows as the Waystone is consumed.

With this gesture the last bell tolls, sounding the close of the Queen's endless hunt. The curse of their civilization shall now give way to reconciliation. A pendulum returns by the same momentum which propelled it. Thus, in the wake of their cannibalistic growth, the only solution was to fall—and so they shall, quietly, with all the weight of a feather. Relief shall wash like a flood upon this weary earth, freeing it of the hunger which brought it to its knees.

The water has reached Ota's neck.

Facing the setting sun, he says, "May this world persist unwitnessed."

Then the knight sighs, and smiles, and finishes his march.

All is well.

All is still.
Somewhere, a kingfisher sings, flying off into the dusk.

Rodd Whelpley (he/him) manages an electric efficiency program for 32 cities across Illinois and lives near Springfield. He is the author of the chapbooks Catch as Kitsch Can (2018) and The Last Bridge is Home (coming in 2021). Find him at www.RoddWhelpley.com.

Harsh to blame the maple tree

Rodd Whelpley

Harsh to blame the maple tree out front
that, in a single day, for each of twenty autumns,
tucks the fingers of its sack-like leaves
toward their petioles, extinguishes October
to a thin, brittle minute, then lets it drop, as if
another year means nothing, not one orange,
red or gold occasion to match the neighbors—
a haughtiness I bargained for when I took it
from the nursery, full expecting a Socrates tree
that, when choked of chlorophyll, would philosophize
the wit of deciduous colors, one last dialogue
with the short-lit days, then slowly drift to sleep,
the way a good man with his final breath reminds us
to pay every debt of our estate, the shady and the small.

Bulky, Dark Sweaters Are My Friends

I wear them too deep into spring—
my last vanity: me, with hair thin
and white, teeth like coffee, glasses
thick, a map of wrinkled lost ways
across my face. I've never been
a captain of my industry or the intellect
of my family table: all features,
which make invisibility, are mine.

The winter-white pasture by the freeway
is dressed with cow-shaped blotches that,
when I drive closer, reveal themselves
as cows—the resigned lying
in the milky field, the brave or stupid
upright, shank deep in freeze, staring
into windshields, wondering, so clearly,
what has happened to the grass.

I share with you my bovine nothings,
which you paste into scrapbooks, or
when sick of that, you knit. We were young
and knew our colors, back when we believed
what we didn't understand would come to us
by children, novels, and experience. But now
upon us is our welcome time of melting,
stillness, the whoosh of traffic passing by.

Jennifer Weigel (she/her, they/them) is a multi-disciplinary mixed media conceptual artist. Weigel utilizes a wide range of media to convey her ideas, including assemblage, drawing, fibers, installation, jewelry, painting, performance, photography, video and writing. Much of her work touches on themes of beauty, identity (especially gender identity), memory & forgetting, and institutional critique. Weigel's art has been exhibited nationally in all fifty states and has won numerous awards.

I have always photographed things that catch my eye, especially the more mundane or overlooked those things might be. I am particularly drawn to views of nature, sky & ground and abstracted details of objects found in urban settings.



Cannonballs

This photograph features the cannon balls on display as part of the Civil War Memorial outside of the library in Newton, Kansas.

#BlackLivesMatter

