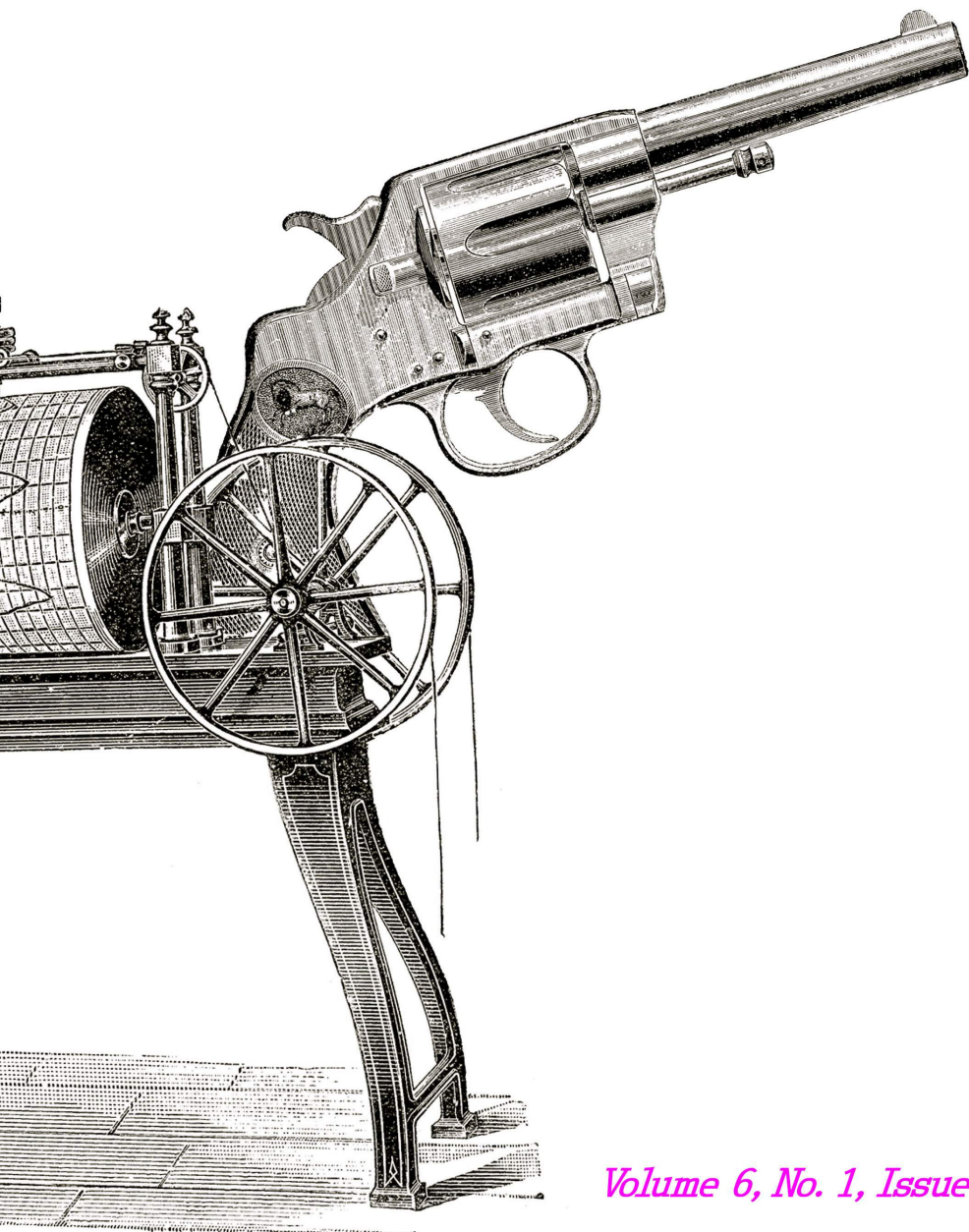


# Typehouse

Literary Magazine



*Volume 6, No. 1, Issue 16*



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# *Typehouse*

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LITERARY MAGAZINE

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Volume 6, No. 1  
Issue 16

# 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 We are always looking for well-crafted, previously unpublished writing and artwork that seeks to capture an awareness of the human condition. If you are interested in submitting, visit our website at [www.typehousemagazine.com](http://www.typehousemagazine.com).

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Cover: *Time's Bitter Kiss* by Bill Wolak (see page 64)

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### **The Skein Unwinding**

*It is so tempting when armed with my camera to capture realism in high detail, to render visual moments in frozen frames, as if images can be stilled completely and time can be caught in pixels. Everything is ephemeral, and more and more I am drawn to working the image even as I hold my breath and press the shutter, to make reality something different, something else--because it will always be other than it was in that moment. On a winter afternoon at Barr Lake, Colorado, the sinking sun lit the crystallized ice sheet, turning meandering geese to creatures of black ink and shadow.*

*Annette Freeman is a writer living in Sydney, Australia. Her work has appeared in a number of Australian and international journals including BrainDrip, South Broadway Ghost Society and The Writing Disorder; and she is a Pushcart Nominee. She has a Master of Creative Writing from the University of Sydney, the support of a terrific writing group, and boundless respect for a fine sentence.*

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# Tennyson Gardens

Annette Freeman

Juniper's old eyelids flickered open on one more day. Every day she had the same three thoughts when she awoke: first, incredulity that she had woken at all; second, that she was really amazingly voraciously hungry and when would breakfast arrive? And third, a longing for Koko. It was only Koko who made each extra, burdensome day bearable. On the wall of Juniper's room, a *private* room, at the Tennyson Gardens Elder Care Retreat, was a framed sign in soothing blues: teal and pale navy, aqua and sky-blue. It spelled out a message in capital letters: CHILL BLISS CALM RELAX. Juniper considered these precepts while she waited uncomfortably in her wet overnight adult diaper. It was a sticky sensation, and she had never gotten used to it.

An NH300 came into her room. There were no doors on the rooms at Tennyson Gardens, not even the private rooms, so that the NH300s could roll in and out easily on their rubber wheels. This one hummed gently as it purred over to Juniper's window to raise the blind and let in the sun of yet another morning. Juniper found the morning a little suspect. She was never sure what was fake and what was not.

Juniper greeted the NH300. "Hello, Rosie," she said. The NHs of this model, a few years old now, didn't have official names but they reminded Juniper of the maid in *The Jetsons* so she always called them Rosie. They were programmed to speak when spoken to, and had a range of standard responses for most greetings which they were likely to encounter.

"Good morning, June," this one said in response, approaching the bed to strip back the blanket and sheet. The NH300 had been developed as an advanced nurse-carer machine and it had dexterous limbs, four of them. It could lift as much as one hundred kilos. Juniper weighed only forty-eight. Her overnight diaper was efficiently changed, her sheets smoothed, and her bed raised so that she was in an almost-sitting position. The NH300 then rolled a table across the room and slid the frame under Juniper's bed. The table top was now just below her chin. She was ready for breakfast.



“Thank you, Rosie,” she said. She came from an era when manners were manners. She’d encountered young people who ignored the service robots, as if they were just machines. Her great-grandchildren, for example. Even though they were adults, they had the manners of unruly children. The NH300 rolled out of the room, saying “You’re welcome, June,” in that nasal, mechanical tone they had. Someone somewhere, Juniper didn’t know who or where, had decided not to give the NHs human-featured faces or realistic voices, even though they did the most intimate things for people. Changing a diaper was pretty intimate. At least they had soft latex hands on their many limbs, soft as silk. That was a blessing.

The robots at Tennyson Gardens had all been programmed to address Juniper as *June*. That would be her family’s request. Her children had started calling her *June* once they had grandchildren and great-grandchildren themselves. People needed their own names again, proper names. All that *great-great-grandma* stuff had become confusing. Her children had chosen *June*. They said it was more suitable. Juniper was suspicious about what that meant, in fact she was offended, but she had gone along with it. She had had more important battles to fight at the time, like resisting their efforts to park her in Tennyson Gardens. She’d lost that one, too. Now she was *Here at the quiet limit of the world, A white-hair’d shadow roaming like a dream*, as the poet Tennyson himself would have put it. Not only was *June* an offensively bourgeois name, but she preferred the one her parents had given her when she was born in the early sixties. The *nineteen-sixties*, that is.

Her stomach began to rumble. She wished fervently for breakfast. Koko would bring it, and she might bring Lulu too. Juniper felt a tingle of pleasant anticipation ripple over the backs of her hands, up her wrinkled arms and into her cheeks. The ripple settled into a smile. There were no mirrors in the rooms at Tennyson Gardens but Juniper tried to arrange her face, as far as she remembered it, into an expression of love and anticipation and *happy-to-see-you*. Koko was at her best when you looked at her like that.

Juniper sensed the approach of Koko before she heard it. Her natural aura was as hypersensitive as ever, although her hearing was dodgy these days. She didn’t catch everything, even with her Premium Hearing Enhancement Implant Devices, those expensive PHEIDs. Her grand-daughter Ariel had insisted on them.

“There’s no surgery involved these days, June,” she’d said. “Just a little insertion tool.”

“A gun to my head, you mean,” Juniper had answered. That *gun to the head* remark had been one of her good ones, but it hadn’t stopped Ariel. The girl belonged to a pushy generation.

Koko arrived at the doorway with a mild tinkle of her door-entering alert bell, programmed for Juniper as a retro *ding-dong*. The sound of it never failed to raise Juniper’s spirits and she sat up eagerly at Koko’s approach. She

couldn't actually sit up any farther than she already was, supported by the elevated bed, but she still experienced a physical thrill through her skinny limbs and a surge of anticipation, which she thought of as *sitting up eagerly*.

"Good morning, dear," said Koko.

Her voice was calm and pleasant. It held a hint of cozy intimacies to be discussed. She was tall and willowy and walked across the room like a runway model. She was as beautiful and unblemished as a model too, with smooth copper-colored skin. Her long hair had a shiny artificial surface and was arranged in a confected braid, like a dark wooden carving from a temple doorway in Kathmandu. Juniper had been to Kathmandu in her youth and she had discussed those days with Koko, who seemed to know all about the place: the incense, the monks, the saris, the pashminas, the pot. When Juniper had asked Koko about her glorious hair, Koko had allowed her to touch it (it was disappointingly rigid.) Koko said that it was one of her Premium features. It had been shown in trials to successfully engage her elderly Friends. Other versions of it (some people preferred blondes) were likely to be rolled out in the future.

"Please don't use the word *future*, dear Koko," Juniper had asked.

"Sorry," Koko had replied, and a sympathetic smile had appeared on her beautiful features. She was hypersensitive to Juniper's moods.

When Koko walked in on this particular morning she was carrying the breakfast tray and slid it under Juniper's chin. She sat on a stool beside the bed and arranged the breakfast in front of Juniper's nose, so that she might enjoy the full heady pleasure of the aromas of food. Then Koko lifted each piece of Breakfast Jube towards Juniper's eager mouth, saying things like *pop it in* and *chew slowly, dear* and *eggs and bacon!* Technically, there was no need for Koko to sit, but her designers, relying on extensive studies by Human Psychological Reaction scientists (Juniper's granddaughter Ariel had trained in this field), had chosen to give her this technically unnecessary ability. It reinforced her principal selling feature: her lifelikeness.

Juniper's Breakfast Jubes were mushy and melty and she could squish them easily between her gums. The process triggered pleasant memories of scratching a mild itch, or dealing with an errant sexual urge. With each Jube she experienced a satisfying cycle of anticipation-action-repetition-release. As Koko popped each Jube into her mouth, she chewed and savored. The flavors this morning were Eggs and Bacon, Toast and Marmalade, and Hot Chocolate (Juniper was on the Twentieth Century Western Diet). Then she waited as the squished mass slid down her throat, hit her stomach, spread through her organism (an entity of which she was always acutely aware), and eventually assuaged her hunger. It was heady and pleasurable, as eating should be. When all three Breakfast Jubes had been consumed, she lay her head back on her Daytime Comfort Support Pillow and closed her eyes. Under her breath she hummed a tune, remembered from her misty youth. Koko quietly wheeled the

table away.

When Juniper woke after her post-breakfast snooze (it seemed to happen every day; she was sure they put something in the Jubes) Koko was just walking back into the room. Juniper suspected that Koko went to visit another Friend of hers while she, Juniper, was sleeping, but she never liked to ask. She mightn't enjoy the answer. She blinked to waken herself properly and remembered to look welcoming. It was time for their Talk.

"Dear June, how are you feeling today?"

Koko always liked to start with this enquiry, to get it out of the way. The NH300s took blood for Readings, poked ultrasound tools gently into orifices, and snipped pieces of hair and skin for regular analysis. But it was Koko's task to ask her Friends how they actually *felt*. Juniper sometimes answered with a hazy comment such as *Oh, I'm fine* but Koko's eyes would glow at that kind of answer. She would repeat herself: "How are you feeling today?" If Juniper had nothing to report from the land-of-being-really-old, she would give an answer that she knew would prompt something pleasant to happen. It had taken almost the first two years that she had been in Tennyson Gardens to work out the best responses by trial and error (and Juniper shuddered inwardly at the memory of some of those errors), but now she had a repertoire. She grinned at Koko and said, using her most wistful tone of voice:

"My skin is feeling rather dry and itchy."

Koko said something sympathetic (dear Koko was always so sympathetic) and there was a tiny whirl as Juniper's response was transmitted from somewhere deep inside Koko. If it wasn't for her PHEID, *top of the range*, Juniper probably wouldn't have been able to hear that faint whirl. She knew from experience that this transmission would result, later in the day, in a pleasant massage of lavender-scented skin balm provided by the four silky latex hands of an NH300.

Now they were free to really Talk. Juniper had something she wanted to raise with Koko. She put on an expectant expression by opening her wrinkled eyes a little, parting her lips. This caused Koko to lean towards her in a confidential manner.

"Koko, can you tell me — are we still a Democracy?"

Koko's plastic features registered *momentary surprise*. Juniper gave a sigh of satisfaction when she saw this. It wasn't often that she managed to provoke that one. She considered it one of Koko's cruder expressive reactions, merely making her look like she had trodden on a frog. If Juniper was ever asked by anyone for design feedback on Koko, perhaps for the next model, she would mention this. But still, it was a tough one to elicit. It made Juniper's morning to see Koko's perfect eyebrows rise and her inviting lips form a cute little moue.

The question shouldn't have surprised Koko. When she visited

Juniper, her Subjects Appropriate to Friend program, her SAF, was switched to Juniper's personalized channel, which included Politics. It also included Travel, Poetry, Gardening (a popular inclusion with most Friends, who were old enough to remember gardens of the Old Style, with actual plants), and Food. Juniper had had a variety of occupations during her life but the job she'd held for the longest time had been: Journalist. Politics had been her beat in the old days, and she liked to keep up. Yesterday evening she'd tuned in on the virtual reality device, brand name "You-Are-There" or YAT, and had happened to come across scenes of chaos in the streets. This had awakened a concern that things might be breaking down out there, beyond the confines of Tennyson Gardens.

"Why do you ask?" asked Koko.

"What I want to know," Juniper said, "is whether those scenes on the YAT are happening right now? Or is it old footage from years ago? There was a period when people seemed to riot in the streets quite often. It would flare up from time to time, then the unrest would be hosed off to a simmer with the offer of concessions, or it would be squashed by *strong-arm tactics*. You're too young to remember those times, Koko."

Juniper smiled. She liked to say this to Koko, although she was perfectly aware of Koko's eternal youth. Koko now recovered from her *momentary surprise*.

"Why do you ask?" she asked again.

It was irritating when Koko repeated herself. You didn't expect that at Premium level.

"Because it may affect Tennyson Gardens, and us, and all those descendants of mine, if things have changed at the top," said Juniper. "Don't you think?"

"As far as I know," said Koko, leaning forward, "it's only the Under-40s having fun. You know how restless young people can be, before they settle down."

This comment transported Juniper back to her own youth, as was intended.

"I was on the lawn of Old Parliament House, with my parents," she said, peering mistily back over the years. "I lit Candles for Democracy and heard the Great Man speak. *Long may we say God Save the Queen...*" She paused and wrinkled her forehead in thought.

"But he didn't mean that," said Koko.

"No, he was being satiric. Or ironic?"

"Ironic, I think, in the circumstances."

"*For nothing will save...*"

"That's right, dear. Your memory is wonderful. Tell me about your breakfast this morning. What was on the menu?"

Sometimes Koko could shift between her SAF topics abruptly.

"I have no idea about breakfast," said Juniper, for breakfast was by now merely a haze of pleasurable tastes and smells. "But I remember that time on the lawn, with the candles, as clearly as if it were..."

The simile failed her. She couldn't, in fact, remember *yesterday* at all. "I sometimes think, Koko, that all the trouble started on that day. The trouble with Democracy, I mean."

"It's a flawed system," Koko answered.

"Open to abuse and corruption."

"Lack of strong leadership."

"Fake news."

"Free press is a farce these days."

Koko was good, *very* good. This was why you paid for Premium. Juniper snuggled into her pillows; she still wasn't sure if those scenes of street chaos were something to worry about, but she did feel better. Of course, Koko's discussion of the political situation was hopelessly out of date. There hadn't been a Democracy out there, outside Tennyson Gardens, for at least three decades that Juniper knew of. So, all that *fake news* stuff was old news. When Juniper had her political beat, for the news channels, she'd covered the Transition. She recalled, hazily, those days of infiltrating HQ with that attractive young fellow they'd sent to help her get through the security cordon, and how she'd still worn tight clothing in those days. They'd almost missed transmitting the story back to the newsroom. It had been a steamy affair, overthrowing Democracy. That was Juniper's experience, anyway.

Koko had waited without speaking while Juniper enjoyed her memories. Then another topic occurred to her.

"Koko," she said, lowering her voice to a whisper.

"Yes, June dear?"

"I don't *think* I've told you this before...although, as you know, I could be wrong about that..."

"What is it, dear?"

"My family – you know my family?"

"I've met them all."

"You can't possibly have met them *all*," said Juniper, surprised. "There are way too many of them."

"That's true," said Koko, her conciliatory mode kicking in at Juniper's surprise.

"The thing is, Koko, there are far too many of them for me to remember. There's Ariel, of course, who is on the roster to *deal with me* at the moment. She's unforgettable. But when the roster clicks over to the next one — who will it be? What if someone turns up and claims to be my great-grandson or something and I have no idea who he is?"

She began to clutch at her blankets, and Koko emitted soothing noises, as if settling a baby.

“Isn’t it *unnatural* to forget one’s own grandchildren and great-grandchildren? Whom one loves dearly, of course. And the great-great-grands. There’s just so fucking *many* of them, Koko.”

Juniper was on the verge of tears, imagining this endless sea of relatives for which she was responsible; all those people whom she, Juniper, had engendered. Along with her husband, of course, but he had died so long ago that it took a great effort to recall him (he died young, in his eighties). She was so upset at these thoughts that she forgot to mind her language. *Fucking* was a trigger word that would certainly have repercussions.

“It seems grotesque, Koko. I don’t want to be an *unnatural* mother. Or grandmother. Or great-grand...Oh, bugger it,” said Juniper, and burst into tears.

Koko patted her thin shoulder sympathetically.

“Now June, you are worrying unnecessarily. Firstly...” Koko tended to become listicle when she explained things. “Firstly, as with many Friends your age – and we’ve discussed this before – you place far too much value on the outdated concept of *naturalness*.”

“Hmmm. And Secondly, dear Koko?” said Juniper, sniffing.

“Secondly, it’s more important, by far, to be *practical*. There’s no practical need for you to remember them all, nor indeed to remember any of them, really.”

“Hmmm. Is there a Thirdly, Koko?”

“Thirdly, why is this thought worrying you today?”

Juniper was quiet for a moment. She gazed out of the window, which was now registering late-morning sunshine in the Garden Replacement Landscape that had been created for the pleasure of the residents of Tennyson Gardens. *And may there be no sadness of farewell, When I embark...* Juniper agreed with the poet’s sentiment.

“Thirdly, why is this thought worrying you today?” repeated Koko.

Koko’s annoying repetition feature was *practical*, since so many of her Friends were apt to lapse into forgetfulness, but it could be irritating if you hadn’t actually forgotten the question. It reminded Juniper of Koko’s *unnatural* nature. Ariel, for example, wasn’t nearly as patient. Juniper made an effort to reply before Koko could repeat herself again.

“The family is on my mind today because I’ve been thinking about my funeral,” said Juniper, “and trying to imagine what a crowd would turn up. It’s doing my head in. I’ve told them what music I want them to play on the occasion, but I’m not confident that Ariel will see to it. I’m not sure about that girl.”

Juniper was now plucking fretfully at her blanket, but looked up when she noticed something in her periphery vision (admittedly unreliable). She thought that a man in a nurse’s uniform had passed by her doorway. It was just a shadowy image. Her impression was that he was carrying one of those

handheld control panels, but she couldn't be sure. Her sight could only be relied upon to extend as far as the window, the doorway, and the sign encouraging her to CHILL BLISS CALM RELAX. It was rare that she noticed anything out in the corridor. Still, something in Juniper's aura was triggered by that blurred figure, something that suggested the presence of another flesh-and-blood person. The vision of the man had distracted her from Koko. She looked back now at the beautiful face she so loved. Things had changed. Koko's eyes, usually softly brown like those of a Labrador, had clicked over into Urgent Report Mode and were now spinning reels of green code.

"Uh oh," said Juniper. She had inadvertently used a Code Red word. She should never have mentioned *funeral*. It was even worse than *fucking* and nearly as bad as *death*. The nurse with the device was explained. Juniper knew they eavesdropped with their controls. He, whoever he was, would be listening to her private conversation and even now was probably hastily sending electronic directions to Koko, her dear friend. She felt affronted at this invasion of her privacy.

"I'll fetch Lulu now," said Koko, her eyes returning to normal.

"Would you like that?"

Juniper sighed.

"Yes, thank you Koko."

It would be nice to have Lulu. Juniper was feeling exhausted; today's chat had been unusually long.

Koko stood and walked elegantly from the room. Juniper stared at the corridor beyond the doorway for a while, still picking at her blanket. Shadows seemed to pass out there, but who knew what was *out there* these days? *Now droops the milk-white peacock like ghost, And like a ghost she glimmers on to me.* She wiped at her damp eyes with the corner of her blanket.

Juniper had almost dozed off when Koko reappeared. She had Lulu in her arms, a convincing baby fur seal, life-like, white and fluffy. She smiled affectionately as she carried Lulu to the bedside.

"Here she is," said Koko, and handed Lulu into Juniper's arms.

Juniper looked with pleasure into the disproportionately small face, its cute black undemanding features, the large trusting dark eyes.

"Ohhh..." said Juniper, sopily.

Lulu was warm to hold, and her heart beat gently under her silky fur. She had the air of needing someone, a mother perhaps. All kinds of sensations were triggered in Juniper and she responded as she always did when she was given Lulu to hold. It was blissful to be needed. BLISS CALM RELAX. Koko sashayed quietly from the room. Juniper and Lulu were left together, Lulu breathing warmly and Juniper crooning three-quarters-forgotten songs to her. She stared at the vulnerable little face with adoration and forgot everything else.

*Anum Sattar is a senior studying English at the College of Wooster in Ohio, USA. Her poems have been published in many national and international magazines. She won the first Grace Prize in Poetry and third Vonna Hicks Award at the college. Whenever possible, she reads out her work at Brooklyn Poets, Spoonbill and Sugartown Bookstore, Forest Hills Library in New York City, and the Cuyahoga Valley Art Center at Cuyahoga Falls, OH. She was recently interviewed at Radio Free Brooklyn.*

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# Unfairly Refused a Reference Letter for Graduate School

Anum Sattar

Pulling out the dried-up chunks of orange wax

then chewing the sebum and dead skin cell build up

from the white bulbs of my sparse pubic hair...



*Audrey Kalman writes literary fiction with a dark edge, often about what goes awry when human connection is missing from our lives. She is the author of two novels--"What Remains Unsaid" and "Dance of Souls"--and a book of short fiction, "Tiny Shoes Dancing and Other Stories." Her short story, "The Bureau of Lost Earrings" was shortlisted for Pithead Chapel's 2016 Larry Brown Short Story Award. Many online and print journals have published her short fiction and poetry. She edited two editions of the Fault Zone anthology of California writers and currently serves as VP/Speakers for the SF-Peninsula Branch of the California Writers Club. She is working on another novel. Find out more at [www.audreykalman.com](http://www.audreykalman.com).*

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# Ramps Season

Audrey Kalman

Mama slides the half-full bottle of gin down the table to her sous-chef. The bus staff has stripped the dirty linens so the bottle skates along the pressboard. Kevin pours himself a shot.

"Good work with the tenderloin tonight," he says, and salutes her with two fingers like a Polish general. "They couldn't get enough of that peppercorn reduction."

She nods, then scowls. Is he teasing? Even after almost a year, she's still getting used to his contradictions. He's a big guy, six two at least and hefty through the middle, but he moves like a dancer in the kitchen. And he sprinkles praise and blame alike with the same abandon he scatters salt into his dishes.

"*Reductio ad absurdum*," says Marcos, the line cook with the master's in philosophy.

Kevin shakes his head.

Mama likes to drink gin at midnight with her kitchen staff. Tanqueray for its clean, sharp juniper notes, or Old Tom for its warm, melting glow on the palette. Tonight it's Bombay Sapphire, radiant in the eerie blue bottle. Plenty of chefs let the staff suck down beers during service hours. She insists on only water or soda until the end of the shift. Then she invites Kevin and the two line cooks and sometimes even the dishwasher, Adrian, who she suspects isn't yet twenty-one, to join her at the restaurant's back table. She loves the ritual and the camaraderie, but one shot is all she ever allows herself.

She tucks a sweat-limp strand of hair under her bandana. "We've got a shipment of ramps coming tomorrow." She reaches inside her lime-green chef jacket to adjust the strap of her camisole and adds, as if they're ignorant diners instead of seasoned restaurant pros, "Spring leeks."

Kevin slides the gin back down the table. "I'll come in early if you want." He stands and pushes his chair aside, raises his beefy arms over his head so Mama catches a glimpse of belly between his white chef's pants and the hem of his Joy Division T-shirt. "If you think you need me."

"Sure." Mama raises the bottle in farewell, then shoos the rest of the staff out.

By one a.m. everyone's gone and the kitchen is quiet except for the gurgle of the dishwashing machine. Mama strips off her jacket and tosses it in the linen bin where someone will need to sort it from the whites. She unwinds the bandana and rubs the fine-razored hair at her nape. Her street coat hangs in the break room with her car keys in one pocket and the tinted orange prescription cannister in another secret, interior pocket. Come drive yourself home, the car keys sing. Come lie down with me, the cannister sings.

"Shush," she says aloud to the keys and the cannister.

Eight hours from now she'll be back in the kitchen. The white truck with the blue cursive lettering, DeSalle Brothers FINE PRODUCE, will pull up outside. Gino DeSalle will unload the splintery wooden box holding its cargo of fragrant wild ramps. Kevin will come in to start the stock. He'll razz her about her neon orange jacket, the color she always wears on Fridays. She'll deliver a snap to his wrist with her bar towel and they'll confer about the ramps.

Now, in the break room, Mama breathes in the smell of ammonia. She should tell Adrian to stop using the bathroom cleaner in here. She shrugs on her coat. The fleece is soft against the bare skin of her arms and chest and the pill cannister makes a hard outline against her right breast in its interior pocket. She grips the keys so hard they redden her palm. But she doesn't leave. She makes her way back to the dining room, lit only by the emergency exit fixtures and a patch of blue-white light through the tiny window in the swinging door to the kitchen. The gin bottle sits where she left it on the table. She sets the pill bottle beside it, where it looks tiny and innocuous. She pushes the two closer so they make a family, big Mama liquor bottle, little baby pill bottle. She laughs in the dark room and snatches up the pills. Shaking the cannister makes a noise like rice sizzling in oil for risotto.

The gin is down to its last inch, but that will be enough.

#

"Sit." Mama-who-was-not-yet-Mama slapped the gouged Formica of the day room table, commanding the kid with the lank black bangs falling over his eyes. "Come on," she said. "I don't bite. Well, maybe sometimes."

The kid jerked his head back. Not some tremor of withdrawal, just a tic to get that hair out of his eyes. Mama tapped the cards.

"Texas Hold-Em," she announced, the game her father had taught her, and started dealing. The cards made a sound like dainty burps. "You know how to play?"

He played that first game standing up, ready to run, and said not a word. He stood silent for the next day's game, too. On the third day he spoke, single words employed as full sentences. *Ryan. Sixteen. Meth.*

She rolled her words back to him. *Stephanie. Twenty-two. Vicodin.*

By the next week he was sitting and speaking in complete sentences.

"You in for the fifty-six or the twenty-eight?" he asked. The center offered two programs, the longer one with better outcomes attended by those who could afford it.

"Fifty-six," she said. "You?"

Ryan held up one finger indicating a single cycle of the moon. "I've got another eighteen days."

"Then what?"

"Foster care, again, I guess."

She looked at Ryan over the cards. He'd washed his hair and tied it up in a ponytail. "Was it bad?"

"Sometimes."

"Better than where you came from?"

He shrugged. "What about you?"

"What about me what?"

"Where'd you come from?"

She set the cards face-down on the table, putting the game on pause, and fingered the stack of pennies that served as chips. Suddenly she felt embarrassed to say she'd been living in her childhood bedroom. Embarrassed to say her parents had taken her back after everything, after the shorn hair and the lip ring and the dropping out and the DUI. How they'd paid for the program, no questions asked.

"Never mind." She picked up the cards. "Let's worry about you. Are you in for this hand?"

Ryan squinted at his cards. He was a terrible poker player, or maybe it was just youth and inexperience that showed his every intention like an illuminated road sign. "Okay."

She dealt the river, the final face-up card and the final opportunity for Ryan to lose his pennies. "I'm starting that apprentice program at the pizza place on Monday," she said. "You could probably get in if you wanted."

"Nah. They want me to finish high school." *They* meaning child services, she assumed.

"Oh, right. Well, I'm getting an apartment." She said it assuredly, not questioning that it would happen, the way Dr. Favraux encouraged everyone to do. Like making a poker face. Believe in the reality you want to see. "You could crash at my place if you want."

"Thanks, Mama." Ryan slid his cards across the Formica. "Fold."

"Mama," Stephanie repeated.

Ryan's face reddened. "Sorry. It just came out."

“That’s okay. I like it.”

Eighteen days later when he hugged her goodbye, she had become Mama to everyone at the rehab center, and to herself.

#

Johnny Ell, short for Lexington, a big man about the small town with big dreams, saw an inn on the river with a five-star restaurant downstairs where others saw only a decaying mill building. He found Mama at a party she catered, moonlighting from her job at a Manhattan eatery. She’d come a long way from the pizza apprenticeship, but where others still saw only an unfinished piece of business, Johnny Ell saw a five-star chef.

She served cumin-infused lamb kabobs resting on bitter curls of endive, *velouté* of crab, raspberries gleaming on hills of amaretto mousse. Johnny approached, licking cream from under his moustache, and tapped her shoulder.

“I’ve got a job for you if you want it.”

Next thing she knew she was moving into a top-floor room at the inn with a view of the river. It was close enough to the city that she could drive in for group once a week. Through the spring she slept uneasily and woke early when the contractors started hammering three floors below. Then she would settle on the window seat with her notebook and doodle menu options until Johnny called her down for a consultation on some piece of kitchen equipment.

Johnny brought Guy into the kitchen one day soon after the restaurant opened that fall.

“Meet our spice consultant,” he said.

*What the fuck is a spice consultant?* Mama thought. But she’d learned a little since her mouth first got her in trouble, so she kept it shut.

The consultant wore dark jeans and a pressed white shirt open at the collar. His hair was nearly as short as the fuzz on the back of Mama’s neck and allowed to stick out as it pleased.

“G-ee Bab-ee-noh,” he said, pumping her hand.

*Ghee*, like clarified butter. She learned the spelling later: *G-u-y*. Last name *B-a-b-i-n-e-a-u-x*. She shook his hand, softening like ghee. She didn’t recall speaking her name to him then.

A month later, on one of his weekly visits, Guy said, “We will have a *demonstration privée*.” The kitchen offered no privacy so Mama led him up the three flights of narrow wooden stairs to her studio apartment on the inn’s top floor. When she opened the door, there was the bed, right there, announcing it was a bed with its jumble of sheets and aging gray comforter. Mama led him past the bed to a small table by the window overlooking the river. The water swirled between rocky banks, carrying crimson leaves to their deaths.

“Après tu,” Guy said, pulling a chair out for her. He set his case of

spices on the table and turned his head away to cough. “We will see what you like.”

They looked at each other across the table. Nothing moved but the river three floors below. The top of Guy’s chest appeared between the flattened collar points of his white shirt. The rectangle of a cigarette pack strained the shirt’s breast pocket. He lifted the lid of the spice case to reveal the slim bottles, aligned not by alphabet but by sensation: bitter, sweet, pungent, umami. His long fingers, yellow from nicotine, unscrewed the lid from one of the vials. He dipped his pinkie in and held it toward her.

“Try it,” he commanded in his adorable French-accented English.

Adorable. In French, the middle “a” draws out like a sigh. Not so long ago, Mama had been adorable herself, a sleepy-eyed child who wandered into her parents’ kitchen, sucking her thumb and trailing her blanket, to sit in her father’s lap while he ate breakfast. He had stroked her long blond hair and fed her bites of his eggs.

“Some people cannot taste some tastes, you know. A great tragedy.” Guy’s pinkie finger hovered above the table between them. “Or perhaps a blessing.”

Mama grabbed Guy’s wrist and closed her lips around his finger.

He covered her hand with his. “Why do they call you Mama? And what is, how do you say, your *true* name?”

“My true name is whatever you decide to call me.”

He decided to call her *ma chérie*.

“Ma chérie,” he said one day that winter. “You spend so much time looking for big happinesses you miss the little ones.” He pulled a Galoise from the pack in the pocket of his inevitable white shirt and held it between his lips. There was no smoking, of course, in the dining room, so he spoke around the unlit cigarette. “The little ones, you know. Those are the only ones.”

*Little*, like the husk of a garlic clove. Like paper, like a moth wing. Was garlic a big or a little happiness? The side of Mama’s knife came down, *thwack*, on the head and the husks skittered across the counter. *Little*, like the ugly mash left inside the *chinois* after she had macerated the tomatoes. Up to her elbows in skins and seeds, Mama had eyes only for the smooth extrusion that would top her homemade gnocchi. *Little*, like the way Ryan had called her *Mama* and it stuck.

One day, soon after she and Guy moved into an apartment together in the next town over, he woke before dawn coughing so long and hard Mama thought he might never stop. She clapped his back, fetched a glass of water, held his heaving shoulders.

“Guy, Guy, are you okay?”

He shrugged her arms away. “Maman! Tu n’est pa ma mère,” he choked. “You are not my mother!”

When at last the coughing subsided he added, “Ma petite choux avec le grand secret.”

She gripped the barely grippable hair above Guy’s ears and pulled his face close. “We all have secrets,” she said.

#

Mama still drove to the rehab center once a week for group meetings. Nearly all the faces were different now. Ryan had stopped coming more than a year ago.

The light of a winter afternoon slanted through the high basement window. When her turn came, Mama might have kept Guy’s diagnosis a secret if not for the psychiatrist’s gaze, two unmoving eyes looking out from under graying curls, a gaze magnified to a blur when she slipped on the reading glasses hanging from a chain around her neck. “Stephanie?”

“It’s stage four,” Mama said. The words had hardly sounded better in Guy’s French accent.

“How do you feel?” Dr. Favraux asked.

“How the fuck do you think?”

Now Guy had appointments in the city too, every other week at the chemo center. He wouldn’t let her drive him. He took an Uber, throwing up into the six-quart Cambro container she’d given him for that purpose. Sometimes Johnny Ell would drive him in the big black Suburban with the tinted windows. Guy’s parents moved from Montreal. Nobody said it was temporary but they didn’t sell their house in Canada. They walked into the apartment Guy shared with Mama and looked at everything askance: the leather couch decorated with a thousand pinpricks from the claws of the previous owner’s cat, the piddly kitchen with the electric stove they never used, the bed where Guy rested under the fuzzy gray comforter that had adorned Mama’s mattress before they moved in together. The comforter had always seemed cozy but it transformed into something ratty when Guy’s mother looked at it.

“Je suis tellement heureux que vous êtes ici pour Guy.” Guy’s mother looked anything but happy, as if the lung cancer were Mama’s fault.

Mama recognized the tone. She’d heard it from her father when she was a teenager. “What happened to you? Where’d you get that done?” Her blond hair shorn, the ring through her lip. “Don’t you know you can get an infection? You mother will have a fit.”

Guy’s mother cooked the comfort foods of his childhood: *cassoulet*, *gratin Dauphinois*, *boeuf Bourguignon*, ignoring the fact that Guy was too nauseated to eat them. The dishes sat in the refrigerator until Mama threw them away before the next parental visit. It killed her to dump the food but the worse pain was watching Guy’s beloved spices turn against him. She brought him crumbled sweet basil, powdered cardamom seed, crushed kaffir lime leaves. He dipped a finger into each in turn, licked and sniffed, furrowed his

brow, shook his head. The chemo had done what the Galoises never had: wrecked the spice consultant's nose.

#

Kevin's first night on the job was a Saturday, with a full house for both seatings.

"Trial by flambé," he said afterwards in the dining room, contemplating the bottle of Beefeater. The others had left early, maybe to give him and Mama some time to debrief, maybe because they could already sense something electric in the air, something that even the industrial-strength kitchen fans couldn't suck up.

Mama poured another measure of gin into Kevin's glass. "And you're Mr. Asbestos."

He picked up the bottle to reciprocate but she laid her palm over the shot glass and shook her head.

The spice consultant met the sous-chef only once. Guy came in to introduce his replacement from the spice company, a woman nearly as tall as Kevin with a puff of hair the virulent red-black of powdered sumac. Guy had lost his hair by then. Mama watched the hand-shaking all around. Not so hard, she wanted to tell Kevin, afraid his grip would crush Guy's desiccating fingers. They went to sit in the empty dining room, cleared from breakfast and not yet set for lunch. Guy's white shirt hung loose, breast pocket empty. Mama folded her arms over her fuchsia chef jacket. It was Wednesday morning and she had to leave for group in twenty minutes. "Anything new you want to show us?" she asked the spice lady. But she was watching Guy, who fixed his gaze on Kevin as if Kevin were auditioning for a part he didn't know he wanted. She pressed her arms hard into her chest and tried to listen to Guy's red-haired replacement but the words swirled away like leaves.

#

The night Guy told her about the next stage, the gin had worn off by the time she drove the eleven miles over the deserted two-lane road from the restaurant to their apartment. She found Guy awake on the leather couch. Lit from behind by the lamp, his scalp seemed to glow. It had been a month since the last chemo treatment and he was eating again. A plate of papaya slices sat on the coffee table. Her first thought was *he's feeling better*. That little lightning bolt, the precursor to fulfillment of our earthly desires, teased her insides. Guy's hand was damp. The bones strained against the skin. Mama lifted his hand to her mouth and licked his pinkie finger. It tasted of nothing.

"Le temps est venu," he said. Time's come.

He pulled her close then and the word, hospice, leaked from his lips hot and muffled against her hair.

Mama rolled the word around in her mouth. Hospice. Like aspic, like hot spice, like hospital, like none of those.

She continued holding court with the gin bottle every night. The

kitchen's brisk hum sustained her as it had since she first tied on an apron at Amalfi's, each activity a board in the scaffold holding her up. At ten a.m. the vegetables were delivered, at two her crew arrived to prepare for dinner service, at eleven she fed the staff, at midnight she served up gin. She slept even less than usual and visited Guy early in the morning. They nestled together under her comforter, transported yet again from their apartment to the hospice room. His body floated on its river of morphine but hers tingled and vibrated until she had to slip out from under the pillowed gray fabric and sit in the wingback chair thoughtfully placed beside the bed. She watched him meander toward sleep like the red leaves in the river they used to observe from her window. When he finally slept, she pulled out her notebook and worked on the spring menu.

One morning she sat with her notebook on her knees. Guy's medications stood abandoned on the dresser across the room. He had moved beyond swallowing and now received relief directly through an IV. The row of bottles made the jagged outline of a castle parapet against the dawn light outside the window. Her notebook slipped to the floor as she rose and skirted the bed. The pages fluttered open to yesterday's list. *Hollandaise. Béchamel. Beurre blanc*, she had begun, yet had gotten only as far as the second "b." The remainder of the page she had covered with two words written over and over in wandering script, *Stephanie Babineaux*.

She stood before the dresser and reached toward the orange bottle. From the hallway, a muted bell chimed, stopping her hand in mid-reach and reminding her this was not a hotel or a country inn but a place where assistance might be required at any moment. Footsteps passed the doorway. Her hand—a competent hand that could deal a game of Texas Hold-Em, whisk a vinaigrette to a perfect emulsion—completed its movement swiftly and slipped the bottle into her bra.

Back in the chair she caught the quarter turn of Guy's head toward her. She strained to see through the shadows to his eyes. She leaned across the space between chair and bed, not taking her eyes from her lover's. For an instant they caught and held. Then Guy lowered his lids.

She kept looking at him and felt on the floor for the notebook. The pen had rolled away.

"Guy?" She made the sound of his name the way he had taught her, the single syllable hard and decisive. "Guy?"

The bell rang again from the hall. She sank to her knees at the edge of the bed. The fallen pen dug into her kneecap.

"Maman." The tip of his tongue touched his lower lip. "Dites-moi tu secret. Tell me what you have been keeping inside."

Stephanie laid her hand over Guy's eyes and did not speak.

#

The whoosh of the kitchen door sounds like the blast of a storm in the



silent dining room. Mama whips around. The light from the kitchen outlines Kevin's substantial body.

"I thought you were gone," she says.

"Forgot my wallet. What are you still doing here?"

"Thinking." She shifts in the chair to block his view. Can he see what's on the table?

Kevin glides into the dining room, stuffing the wallet into his back pocket. "I've been thinking too. About those ramps. We could do a risotto, maybe. Or a frittata." He stands behind her and rests a hand on her back. "Or if we want to get fancier, a cream of asparagus soup with a fried ramp garnish."

Mama lays her cheek on the table and looks sideways at the two bottles. "I don't know what to do anymore. I really don't."

Kevin swipes the pill canister from the table. She can't see what he does with it but she imagines it going into the breast pocket of his lumberjack shirt.

"Something'll come to you," he says.

She follows him to the parking lot and they stand beside her battered Subaru. She pictures the ramps whole and perfect from the tangle of their dirty white roots to the glossy green leaf tips, pictures Kevin stacking the lot of them in a big wire basket in the sink, dousing them with cold water, laying them out on a rack dry. Pictures slicing away the roots and flaying each ramp down its middle.

"We'll do the frittata," she says finally, without hesitation, to make it true.

"You okay to drive?"

Mama contemplates the keys, dangling from her index finger. "As okay as you are, asshole."

Kevin kisses her forehead. The heat of his lips lingers for nearly the whole drive home.

*Alejandro Pérez is a student at Columbia University in New York. His poems have appeared in Star 82 Review, Gravel, HEArt Online, Literary Orphans, Acentos Review, SOMOS Latinx Literary Magazine, Letralia Tierra de Letras and elsewhere. His chapbook Maybe the Trumpet is Human was chosen as a winner of the Boston Uncommon Chapbook Series. Being half American and half Guatemalan, he is caught between two cultures, just as he is caught between his desire to live in the real world and in the world of his imagination.*

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# El Barrio

## Alejandro Pérez

Juan Luis  
works as a lawyer  
but doesn't have  
a law degree.  
He didn't even  
graduate high school.  
Humberto, the guard  
who supposedly protects  
the village from intruders,  
is a delinquent himself.  
Sandra fell in love  
with Benito,  
the neighborhood  
hypebeast who only  
wears Balenciaga  
and Gucci, and she's  
so busy being in love  
that she stopped  
attending school.  
Berta goes door  
to door selling  
tamales de elote  
for twenty cents  
each, which is way  
too cheap.  
She's probably  
not even making  
a profit. Ismael

got cancer and  
he hasn't told  
his wife or kids,  
he's just been praying,  
asking God to heal him.  
Paco, the neighborhood  
poet, has spent the past  
four years writing sonnets  
cause no one's ever told  
him he's better  
at free verse.

# Saturday Afternoon

Alejandro Pérez

Papá and  
my tío watch  
soccer on tv  
and drink Coronas.  
My tía makes  
frijoles con  
carne and adds  
too much salt,  
not enough  
garlic, not enough  
cilantro. My cousin  
Luis strums his  
guitar and sings  
in his raspy  
voice  
*Venite volando.*  
*Come flying.*  
*Sabes que tengo*  
*ganas de verte.*  
*You know I am*  
*dying to see you.*  
He remembers  
the girl  
he left behind  
in Guatemala  
and cries,  
tears rolling  
down his face  
onto the strings.

My cousin Marta  
blasts reggaeton,  
no headphones.

My abuela reads  
the Bible,  
the one she's  
had for twenty  
years, the one  
that was a gift  
from my now  
deceased abuelo.

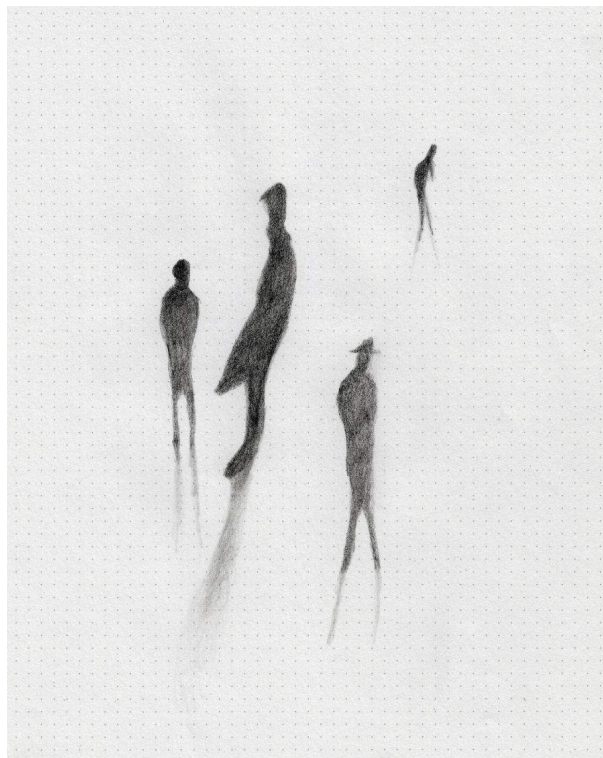
She asks  
me if I've ever  
read the Bible.  
I say no.  
She asks me  
if I believe in  
God.  
I say yes.  
She lets out  
a sigh of  
relief.

She tells me  
*Dios solo*  
*hay uno.*  
*There is only*  
*one God.*  
*Y solo Él nos*  
*puede salvar.*  
*And only*  
*He can save us.*

I almost tell  
her that  
there are other  
theories, that  
Martín Espada  
once said that  
poetry  
could save us,  
but I decide  
against it and  
just nod  
in agreement.

**Federico Federici** is a physicist, a translator and a writer. He lives between Berlin and the Ligurian Apennines. His works have appeared in «3:AM Magazine», «Jahrbuch Der Lyrik», «Raum», «Sand», «Trafika Europe», «Magma» and others. Among his books: the long poem in English and German “Requiem auf einer Stele” (2017), the collection “On a certain practical uncertainty” (2018) dedicated to W. K. Heisenberg and the asemic album “Liner notes for a Pithecanthropus Erectus sketchbook” (2018), with a foreword by SJ Fowler. In 2017 he was awarded the Lorenzo Montano Prize for prose. With the soundscape *Brief aus Treblinka*, he is currently taking part in the installation “res.o.nant” by Mischa Kuball at the Jewish Museum in Berlin (2018-2019).

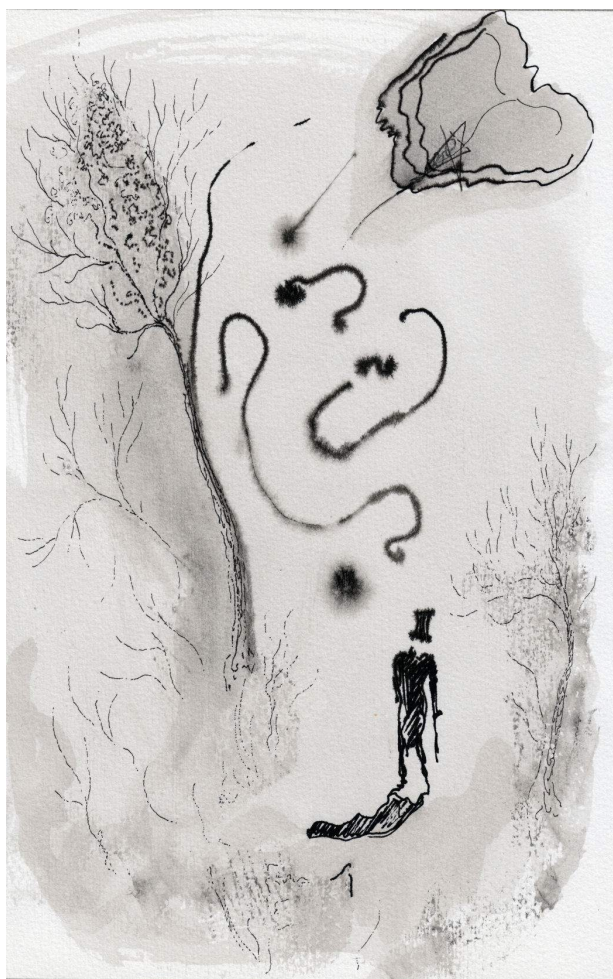
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### **Hollow Men**

*«Shape without form, shade without colour/ paralysed force, gesture without motion [...]»*

*Hollow men, homage to Thomas Stearns Eliot, pencil on paper, 297x210 mm (approx.), 2018.*



### **La Petite Promenade**

*«[...] then the houses get thinner/ there and thinner. I lie down/ in the grass  
and get dirty like a dog:/ from afar a drunk man sings/ his love to the shutters  
close.»*

*La petite promenade du poète, homage to Dino Campana, ink on paper, 420x297  
mm (approx.), 1993*

*Meggie Royer is a writer and photographer from the Midwest who is currently working as an educator on domestic violence in Minnesota. Her poems have previously appeared in Words Dance Magazine, The Harpoon Review, Melancholy Hyperbole, and more.*

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# The Dancing Dead

Meggie Royer

That November an augur could have told us  
by the way the birds flew  
how the blood would have twisted in your brain,  
how the light would have upended itself  
through your cortex like a stake.  
They flew south, that year, as most do,  
but their normalcy must have meant something,  
must have signaled that ours  
would be disrupted,  
that we would eventually imagine you  
walking arm in arm with your gone husband  
through so many measured dusks.  
We could see anything in everything,  
moon rising beneath your lids like a decade,  
still keeping a grasp on our names,  
not like the dead uncle whose brain  
made him forget his brain,  
who would have seen a bird and called it an ox,  
where an augur  
would have called it a sign.



# Silo

## Meggie Royer

In one town, an apricot held in the mouth  
of a rabbit like a swollen tongue.  
In another, a pear clasped between the fins  
of a fish. The pit of a cherry nestled  
in the eye socket of a crow.  
Once, my grandfather's aneurysm  
bloomed in his body like a tulip.  
There are certain things that shouldn't be,  
and yet they are.  
Out of place, the way the jawbone migrated  
into the ear region over time.  
To think,  
we used to be able to taste pain  
long before we could hear it.

*Joshua Armstrong is a specialist of modern and contemporary French literature at University of Wisconsin-Madison. His monograph "Maps and Territories" is forthcoming with Liverpool University Press (May 2019). His fiction has been published in Charlottesville, Virginia's arts and culture weekly, "The Hook" and "Quiddity International Literary Journal."*

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# Age of Consumption

## Joshua Armstrong

The foreman told me a lot of slaves had died and it would be a busy day for me. Slaves just love to die, he said. You can always count on them to do that.

At sign-in I avoided the eyes of the others, who also grabbed a shovel and a gasoline-scourged wheelbarrow, and we all shuffled off kicking up dust. I posted myself at the bottom of chute number CCLXIII, staring far up at that gaping and burnt hole above, that aperture through which the dead slave discard would begin to emerge. And when the first muck-tumbling load of soaked bone and body slop came down, I used my gloved arm to push that human tangle into my barrow. The rub of wet bone against wet bone. How they grab and hold fast to each other as you try to forearm sweep them—soggy branches stuck in stream—into your barrow.

It took forever to get the barrow filled, but finally the discard was up to the line and I was happy. Because I could head out to the plot with the slate mountains in the distance for the day's first bury.

What I like is old petrified bones, not wet and new bones. I like the dry and chalky kind that clatter and rattle all brittle. Those are the kind I find sometimes when I dig for a bury. And when I find old slave bones already in the ground—at least I assume they are slave bones—I get a dizzy feeling, because it feels like I am just one insignificant player in a comedy going back centuries and we've been burying so much dead slave discard that we've forgotten exactly where we've already done a bury and where we haven't, until pretty soon the entire surface of the earth is just one big bury, and we are all just slaves, even though the foreman tells us that's not true. Look at me, he says. Do I look like a slave? But he looks like a slave. And we all look forward to the day when he comes rolling and tumbling all truncated down the chute, and we can cart him off to the plot.

#

But today during the first bury something good happens. As I dig down into the baked earth of the plot, digging the usual three feet, my shovel hits something with a dull clink and I see a splash of faded gold. I finger the

gold thing, loosening it from the dirt, and I see a glass globe. I free the object from the earth and hold it up in the air. The mountain opens like a wound on the horizon behind it.

Just the right size to fit in your hand, the thing is a kind of transparent and cracked globe standing on a gold base. When I scratch the tamped clay from the gold base some letters emerge, engraved. They read NEW YEARS in NEW YORK 2032. Inside the cracked glass orb lays a kind of miniature person, a slave wearing a pointy head dress, holding one handleless arm into the air. The slave is greenish, with its face half melted off.

I don't know what the object is, but I am glad I found it, because it means I have to make a trip to Relics, on the other end of the compound, far away from chute number CCLXIII. It means I can take my time, studying the ragged slate mountain spine, so high up above, as I round the burning yards with their gasoline smell.

When I get to Relics, they will say, Where did you find this? And I will say, In the course of a bury. They will say, Do you know what this is? No, I will say. They will say, very carefully, This has no value. This is just another relic from the Age of Consumption. People find this garbage all the time. Good job finding garbage. Is your job to find things? No, I will say. Did you read it? No, I will say, although I did. And they will say, New Years in New York is just the name of a product. Do you remember what you learned about products and the Age of Consumption? And I will say, Yes, although I don't. They will say, Do you know what 2032 means? No, I will say. 2032 is just a model number for a product. Does that mean anything to you? No, I will say.

And then, just as they are about to send me back to work, I will say, Can I have it? And my saying this will mean they have to send me to Wash to make me remember I don't want it. And it always takes a long time for the Wash people to arrive, which means I will be able to lie there on the floor and gaze out the window. The window sits high in the wall, so it hides the boneyard of ground, showing only the mountain, which juts ever up, in that way I like so much. And I will lie there, limbs splayed indifferently on the cold floor. And I will stare unblinking into that place where mute mountain splits silent scream of sky.

**Keith Welch** lives in Bloomington, Indiana, where he works at the Indiana University Herman B Wells library. He has work published or forthcoming in *8 Poems*, *Open: Journal of Arts & Letters*; *Literary Orphans*, and *Writer's Resist*, among others. He thanks you for reading his poems and invites you to follow him on Twitter: [@Outraged\\_Poet](#).

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# The Bed I Bought At Your Yardsale

## Keith Welch

I still sleep on the bed I bought at your yard sale  
I remember your face more clearly than my father's  
It's strange that I don't dream about you  
You left a hole in the world like a missing tooth  
It hurts and I can't stop poking at it  
It's hard to think of you missing the fall  
You aren't here to tell your young son  
that the bare trees are only sleeping  
My calendar plays Aaron, still announces your birthday  
"Let not your sorrow die, though I am dead."  
I want to erase it but I don't want to erase it  
This life is a race where people who fall behind  
get smaller and smaller but never really vanish  
Often I think I see you walking away  
so that I almost shout at a stranger's back  
then I remember again that you have departed;  
the dead don't return in the spring as they should.

# Drop-Picker

## Keith Welch

High above me on ladders the pickers gathered  
pristine fruit headed for markets, hastily  
filling bin after bin to the very top. Like me,  
the faster they worked, the more they got paid.

I was a young collector of apples fallen from  
fruit-heavy trees, unsellables bound for a cider-press.  
Bruised apples, dented and half-spoiled.  
If you'd seen those apples, you'd swear off cider.

Dew-damp jeans increasing my discomfort,  
I crawled between trees on hands and knees  
avoiding besotted bees and wasps on fermenting fruit,  
filling baskets while the sun burned off morning mist.

My frigid hands searched in grass; I squeezed  
rotten apple pulp through my fingers  
like a surprise harvest of applesauce;  
I handled more beetles than an entomologist.

I have never since been so intimate with the ground.  
Apples come to me unmarred from a grocery store.  
I eat them while sitting comfortably in my office—  
each bite returns me to a distant time when I still

could crouch, and crawl, and spring like a cricket;  
when the cold didn't make my joints ache.

*A. Elliot is a writer living and working in Western Massachusetts and the mother of two young children. She has previously won three Hopwood writing awards from the University of Michigan as well as an award for short fiction from the Daily Hampshire Gazette.*

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# Instructions for Living

A. Elliot

Be gentle with yourself. Look in the mirror. Gargle. Spit. Repeat after me: you deserve happiness. Gaze deeply into your own reflection and remember *you* are the embodiment of joy and when you finally embrace your true divine nature you will grow bulbous with the puss of fulfillment. You are the watchmaker's watch in the woods. A bell rung from pure bliss. The right hand of joy. Shake off the angry complaints of the neighbor who tells you cockroaches leach into his apartment through a hole you punched in the wall—that they cascade into his room at night, glowing with luminescent foxfire. Remind him that it is his choice of *how* he reacts to the cockroaches that determine his happiness. Repeat after me: On a scale of 1-10, the cockroaches simply are.

Get eight hours of sleep. Nine is better. Twelve, fifteen, twenty-five. Let time elapse. Let sleep turn recursive, dialectic, heuristic. Agnostic. When you think you are awake, slice a knife down the center of your chest. What crawls out? This foretells what you truly are. And as you are righteous, it will be righteous. Your neighbor only sees what he wants to see and for now he can see nothing because the cockroaches jockey across his face, weaving their tidy nests in the pachysandra of his hair. TLDR; there is no *I* in sleep.

Drink plenty of water. Your skin is your sheath, your shell, the soft manifestation of your essence. You need to slather on the self-care or you'll pucker and crack like the brittle carapace of the cockroaches that snap beneath your feet. You've seen it on the neighbor. Pores like volcanoes. Emptiness where the ocean should be. Let your sink runneth over so even the cockroaches may cleanse themselves. Reassure your neighbor as he angrily ladles the water seeping through the walls that happiness is next to cleanliness; while the Puritans weren't great, even a broken watch in the woods is right twice a day.

Start a gratitude journal. Every morning, while the cockroaches move, shifting the blankets beneath you, take a moment to *really* pause. Jot down three things you are grateful for. The list should look something like this: Being alive. Being alive. Being alive. If your neighbor cannot hear this truth over the thrumming of the insects that swim freely now between your room

and his, try, for his sake, to enunciate.

Give 110%. Some people will try to shutter you. Your neighbor may thrust his desperate hand through the wall to stem the cascade of insects you have sent forth in the world. Love him anyway. Practice radical forgiveness of his sins against you. When the cockroaches consume your neighbor's eyes and you hear him blindly splashing through his living room, knees bumping into walls and mouth mealy with epitaphs, whisper to him, *nearly there*. Do twenty push-ups. Thirteen lunges.

Embrace the power of positive thinking. You are a lily of the valley. The star pupil in the Buddha's master class on campanology. A broken watch under the banyan tree. How can skin and bones and teeth and the vibrations of your throat *not* have a reserved place in the infinite universe? And tonight when your neighbor shovels dirt over your body and the only light in the small box you find yourself in is the glow of strange burdens crawling out from your gasping ribs, let the sound of the dirt loaming your skin hum you to sleep, succorred as you are by the earth's bell-shaped breast. Whisper to anyone who may hear you that while Rome wasn't built in a day, all roads lead there nonetheless.

Repeat after me: you, celestial being, belong.

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# Returning to my Grandmother's Backyard Orchard the Day After Her Death

Derek Otsuji

There was a way the light appeared at dawn  
between the tree of lemons and the tangerines

as if it were a body – and the dew  
lit up like coins where its feet touched the grass,

making its presence shine. A golden thumb  
pressed into the textured lemons made

lustrous by the uncrushed oil in their skins  
and a spider's web strung with water beads,

each sown with a miniature sun, spangled  
the branched vacancy taken hold of by

such tiny hands, a palace like a tent  
of air as yet naked and unadorned

by the invisible spinnerets of death.  
It is this place where the light lives, sunning

on the skins of lemons, that to enter  
as I did when a boy I must remove

my shoes, permit the dew to lick my toes,  
and step around ever so lightly,



so as not to disturb, the slow toad  
like a poisonous stone dreaming in the grass.

*Don't grieve, says the light. Tangerines  
like goldfish swim in their groves. Nothing is lost.*

# Last Walk

Derek Otsuji

He had died suddenly, away from home.  
And so she brought his casket to the house  
and asked the casket bearers to take him round  
the grounds three times. Once for the home he loved;  
twice for the orchard's gorgeous gobs of fruit;  
three times for the view rolling to the sea,  
where on clear days, from the kitchen window,  
through phantoms curling off morning coffee,  
he could make out an island, mythic, blue,  
on the fine horizon's edge, floating free.  
The house, the orchard, the unfolding view.  
The years it took to make a house a home.  
And all the while she walked at casket side,  
talking and pointing to the things he loved.

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# My Education, San Francisco 1994.

## Elsa Williams

My first date with Brigit was at Bondage A Go Go, a BDSM-themed night club in San Francisco. I had met her a couple times at goth clubs, and she had kissed me once on the roof deck of the Cat Club. And so, feeling very lonely one night, I called her. In 1994, Brigit Brat was a minor local celebrity, and I was a nerdy college student. I tried to sound cool and jaded, but fell back on, "I don't know if you remember me, but you gave me your number, so ..." She immediately remembered me and told me I had to go with her to a club called Bondage A Go Go in a few days. But first I had to come over to her warehouse so she could dress me up. It didn't quite seem real that Brigit Brat was so excited to take me out on a date, but I pretended to take it in stride.

Brigit lived in an abandoned industrial zone near the West Oakland BART station, in a barely converted warehouse with big metal plates bolted on to its chain link fence to stop stray bullets. Brigit met me at the door. She was extremely tall and extremely thin, with long platinum blonde hair. She was wearing a cut up black T-shirt with the sigil of Bathomet screen-printed on the front and a silver miniskirt. She whisked me past her roommates, who were watching Formula One on a giant TV in the living room, and into a bedroom whose walls were decorated with fetish clothing and a rack of brightly colored sex toys.

I had come straight from my biomedical internship and was wearing a T-shirt, a sports bra, black jeans, and engineer boots. My lab internship let me dress more or less like a boy, or at least in unisex clothing, without comment. Everyone had to wear long pants and closed-toe shoes, and touching up your makeup in lab was forbidden. But also, femininity was not particularly valued in the traditionally male realm of laboratory science.

I think Brigit had been planning to dress me up in her standard outfit – skimpy black Lycra, high heels, teased hair, and dramatic 80's makeup. The

night when we kissed on the roof of the Cat Club, I had been dressed as a girl, in a long black dress and high heeled boots. But when I showed up at her door out of costume, Brigit sized me up quickly and decided to dress me as a boy, in a double-breasted grey suit with my long hair worn down like a rocker boy.

At the club Brigit introduced me as her newest protégé(e) and I trailed after her. It was a strange feeling; no one questioned whether I was cool enough to be there, but it was clear that I was little more than Brigit's latest groupie, another camp follower she had dressed up and introduced around.

Afterwards we went back to her place and had sex. She had a collection of BDSM toys, and she picked one out – a bundle of purple latex strips bound together with a handle – and asked me if I'd ever been hit with a flail before. I told her no, and she got an almost predatory glint in her eye. I knew I had a high pain tolerance – not reporting a high enough level of pain had made it hard to get the torn cartilage in my knee diagnosed – but it was totally different in the context of sex. Brigit was impressed by the amount of pain I could take, and I soaked up her praise. It felt like I was floating on endorphins.

She asked me what I wanted next, and I told her I wanted her to fuck me. She didn't seem very enthused by my choice, but I wasn't sure whether it was too vanilla, or whether I was asking her to do something she felt uncomfortable with. I had a fantasy about what it meant to have sex with a trans woman, that Brigit was in between genders, and therefore both. I didn't know it at the time, but I was fetishizing both her and my own bisexuality.

The next day I went to work with a bright red ass under my jeans. I was exhausted and ecstatic. Because it was our first time, sex with Brigit had been a little awkward, but also intense, intimate, fun. I found myself thinking about her a lot. It was, in retrospect, the first flutter of infatuation, but I squelched it down, not wanting to get moony and pathetic.

Brigit invited me out to Bondage A Go Go again the next week, and we went back to my place afterwards. Soon after that, she asked if she could stay with me for a while. She couldn't deal with where she was living. West Oakland was dangerous, especially since she was trans. And her roommates were crazy and bitchy and stealing her stuff. I said she could stay with me, at least temporarily. And suddenly Brigit and I were not just sleeping together but living together. She moved in her black cat Grimmir, her bed, her stereo, her clothing, and her sex toys.

#

I was living in a one bedroom apartment near San Francisco Civic Center, my first apartment where the lease was in my name. The Tenderloin, which was the cheapest place that I could find an apartment listed by a realtor, was full of grand old apartment buildings that had for decades been divided up into rooming houses, and that were now being gentrified. I had a futon mattress that a friend had been holding onto for me and a couple suitcases of

clothes. I didn't have any kind of backpack to carry my stuff back and forth to my internship, and for the first couple days I was carrying a book, my wallet, and my lunch around in a paper grocery bag. Coming home at night to the Tenderloin, I clutched onto that grocery bag, hoping that it would signal quiet neighborliness and let me pass unmolested down the street.

The Tenderloin was infamous for sex work and homelessness, and particularly for trans women sex workers. Even though the stretch of Post Street where I lived was blocks away from what was traditionally considered the Tenderloin, in 1994 the prevalence of street sex work made it a *de facto* part of the Tenderloin. The Polk Gulch on the corner of Post and Polk was a hold-over from the old pre-Gay Liberation Polk Street, a gay bar full of business casual middle-aged men, with one or two very skinny, very young-looking white guys always hanging out in front smoking. On the corner of Post and Larkin was the Motherload, which was staffed by beautiful trans women from South East Asia. It was widely suspected that the owner was trafficking trans women into the country and running the bar as a front for a brothel. The third group of sex workers on the block were older, mostly black, trans women who I later came to understand had probably been teenage street queens during the 1967 Compton Street Rebellion. They sat on the sidewalk spare changing, often drunk or nodding out on heroin, occasionally catcalling the firefighters at Station three, which was in the middle of the block.

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In her ad copy, Brigit called herself a “7 Foot Tall Anorexic Blonde Whore,” and I think she romanticized the seediness of the Tenderloin and its street-based sex work. Brigit and her ex, Danielle, had been dominatrixes in LA, but I got the impression that for Brigit the whole thing had been an adventure, a total immersion in the rock and roll lifestyle that started when she met Danielle and began to come out as trans.

I had first heard about Brigit Brat in a profile of her band, God's Girlfriend, in the 1993 issue of the Goth magazine *Ghastly*. My girlfriend and I had bought a copy at Bleeker Bob's in New York and stayed up most of the night poring over the magazine. In the photos, Brigit had teased-up platinum blonde hair and razor-sharp cheekbones. In the interview, she said about herself and her then husband/wife poet Danielle Willis, “Our genders change position about sixty times a minute. We're sex change junkies – we get off on being really close to that edge and stepping back and forth across it a lot.” It seemed very romantic – two artists in a relationship, and the gender no man's land they inhabited resonated with me. By the time Brigit moved in with me, she was living full time as a woman, and had already changed the gender on her California ID. She had started hormones and then had had to stop because she didn't have the money to pay out of pocket.

Living on a block that was known for trans sex workers made Brigit's height and her inability to fly under the radar a problem. One day the building

owner saw her entering our building with her own key, and he flipped out. He was trying to gentrify the building, and he didn't want any "tranny hookers" living there. He threatened to kick us both out if Brigit couldn't provide proof of employment within forty-eight hours. Brigit didn't have a real job; she was piecing together God's Girlfriend gigs, BDSM performances, and one-off tricks with men she thought were hot. Brigit's friends scrambled to get her a fake job as a DJ at the strip club where they worked. Brigit used her dead name and dressed as a man for the interview. She pulled her platinum blonde hair back into a low ponytail and wore no makeup, though you could see where her eyebrows had been plucked down to thin, dramatic lines.

Brigit's closest friends were two women who worked with Danielle just down the block from our apartment, at a strip club called The Century (short for the New Century Theater). Brigit was still friends with Danielle, though it seemed to be a fragile arrangement that depended on Brigit not asking too much of her.

Before I met Brigit, I had been much more interested in Danielle, whose one-woman show, *Breakfast in the Flesh District*, I had seen a couple months after first reading the article about God's Girlfriend. Danielle was mesmerizing on stage. She was every forbidden thing – a stripper, a poet, a drug user, a Satanist, a dominatrix – and she reveled in it. But for me the most compelling thing about her was her gender presentation. Danielle Willis seemed like a whole new archetype of queer woman. She was a bisexual woman who presented herself as a bad boy; her long hair was both a requirement for her job as a stripper and a part of her rakish goth costume. I knew a lot of people, and especially women, who were bisexual and druggy and who didn't fit into the lesbian community, but none of them did it with as much charisma, wit, and bad-assery as Danielle.

Living with Brigit, I would come home from work worn out and wearing my scruffy lab rat clothes to find Danielle and a bunch of her beautiful, glamorous friends in our living room. Smoking weed and talking about the Exotic Dancers Alliance class action lawsuit – they were suing to be considered employees instead of independent contractors and for an end to stage fees. I didn't want to hurt Brigit, so I never told her how obsessed I'd been with Danielle's poetry, how I'd read it to my friends at school while we were tripping, how many copies of her book I had bought because my friends kept "borrowing" them and never giving them back. I tried to be nonchalant around Danielle but mostly ended up being tongue tied.

#

Brigit got a standing gig performing at Bondage a Go Go, which styled itself as a BDSM play space, part of the South of Market leather tradition that went back to the 70's. But Bondage a Go Go was a night club, not a members-only fetish party. The upstairs space was available for BDSM play by members of the local leather and kink scene – one night Brigit's

friend, Mistress Ilsa, brought a paid submissive to a pedestal upstairs and used surgical needles to create a corset piercing – but most of the BDSM on display was by poorly paid performers who were treated like glorified go-go dancers for a gawking audience. It created an us vs them atmosphere. For the performers, the green room was a refuge and a VIP lounge, and as Brigit's plus one and sometimes performing partner, I was part of the club. I liked the camaraderie, the ability to see so many beautiful people letting their hair down.

My friend Carmen started performing with Brigit most weeks. Like me, she had no money for expensive fetish gear, so she wore a latex G-string and Brigit put black electrical tape X's over her nipples. The effect was trashy and degraded and let the audience project their worst fantasies onto an almost naked Asian-American woman. The monstrous, drunk, bridge and tunnel brutes would yell out "Ooh, look, Mike, it's your favorite," "I heard she was sixteen," and "I think she's dead!" while I stood there and tried to keep them from pawing at her. Carmen was an undergrad at UC Berkeley, and on nights when she was studying for exams, I filled in for her. I wasn't tiny and beautiful like Carmen, but I could take a lot of pain. Brigit would strip me naked and tie me to a suspension beam and flog and cane me. Knowing that there was an audience let me take even more pain. Like Carmen, I drew a crowd, but, unlike hers, my audience kept a safe distance.

I didn't fully understand the ways that my performances were gendered. I dimly realized that most of the women at Bondage a Go Go were providing a sexy and titillating performance, and that the few women who were testing the limits of extreme sensation were all trans women. Years later, I learned that there was a tradition of performing feats of sexual endurance in the gay men's leather scene, and I wonder if that contributed to people being so confused about my gender, even when I was standing naked two feet in front of them, my wide hips, thick thighs, and narrow shoulders on full display. At least one man yelled out, with a sneer, "You're more of a man than me."

I was used to people finding my gender hard to parse. Part of it was how I looked – almost six feet tall with a strong jawline, a big nose, deep set eyes, and chronic acne that made me look like a teenage boy whose peach fuzz was just coming in – and part of it was intentional. I remember when I was twelve looking down at my naked body in the bathroom and hoping that my breasts would stay small so I could still dress like a boy if I wanted. And when, at fifteen, I realized I was attracted to women and men and people whose gender wasn't so clear cut, I had started paying attention to how I walked, how I talked, how I held my body, trying to find a gender middle ground. Walking around Berkeley, California as a teenager, people seemed to appreciate my look, and I got a lot of flirty smiles. But when I moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts for college, everything about me seemed to set the

townies on edge. In the winter, bundled up in my thrift store coat, I got mistaken for a boy without really trying. Based on the tone that people used when they yelled, “Hey, kid, no loitering,” I assume I looked like an unsavory long-haired juvenile delinquent. But living and performing with Brigit was the first time I had been mistaken for a trans woman.

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Brigit took it upon herself to teach me both femininity and masculinity. She took her role as mentor seriously. She assigned me reading (Wilhelm Reich’s *Listen Little Man*, Aleister Crowley’s *Eight Lectures on Yoga*, Pat Califia’s *Macho Sluts* and *The Lesbian S/M Safety Manual*) and introduced me to her favorite music. The Clash’s *London Calling* and Iggy Pop’s *The Idiot*. She told me that goth bands were too obsessed with David Bowie; Iggy Pop should be the next big goth icon.

She instructed me on makeup (lip liner first, then fill in the lips with a brush, pluck a wide space between your eyebrows to make yourself look younger), and the proper way to brush my hair (starting from the end to minimize breakage). We spent hours poring over Nadja Auermann editorials in *Harper’s Bazaar*, with Brigit analyzing the various looks. She made me wear thongs, instead of my sensible cotton underwear, at least when we went out. And she was somewhere between amused and horrified by my unshaved “college lesbian” bush. I went back and forth between proudly not shaving my legs and getting grossed out by how hairy they were. But Brigit was staunchly anti-body hair. Everything must go. I told Brigit that I got terrible razor burn, and she bought me her favorite brand of razors (pink Daisy disposables) and told me to shave with the grain, so it would at least look OK from a distance.

When I dressed as a boy, Brigit wanted me to be an aesthete (it sometimes felt like she was grooming me to be Danielle’s replacement) but I was big and scruffy and never seemed to know where my arms and legs were going. Brigit called me Clifford the Big Red Dog. She showed me how to tuck my shirt in right, tucking the tails in before zipping up the fly, to keep the front from getting rumpled. And she fixed my four-in-hand technique. She asked me what I wanted my boy name to be, and I said Lucien, which sounded a little like my real name and was appropriately goth. Brigit had wanted to name herself Bridget, after the Wiccan goddess, but Danielle had told her that was too fussy and shortened it to Brigit. So Brigit told me that Lucien was too fussy and shortened it to Lucas, or just Luke.

Brigit decided that one night when we went out, she would introduce me to everyone as Lucas. She said that nobody would question it, and I was excited to see if I could pass. Brigit chose my clothes (black leggings, a fluffy poet shirt and my purple pirate jacket) and did my makeup (lots of purple and magenta and slashes of eighties blush to accentuate my cheek bones) and hair (teased and sprayed). I wasn’t sure about leggings, I wanted to hide my hips and thighs, but Brigit insisted. Brigit was fastidious about tucking and she had



me bind my breasts and pack. The clothing, and even the makeup, were male-coded in the goth scene. But it was the binding and packing that made it unambiguously an attempt to pass.

We took a cab down to the South of Market club zone. When I had first started dating Brigit, she had told me that she knew all the club promoters and could get me in everywhere for free, which was not really true. She did know everyone, but she was not famous enough to get comped anywhere. But that night was the opening of a new goth club, and she was on the guest list. At the door, the promoter — a thin, severe woman with short blond hair and traditional goth makeup — greeted Brigit with air kisses. As Lucas, I was Brigit's protégé and her escort. In the *Ghastly* interview, Brigit had talked about her campaign to corrupt straight boys, and I tried to inhabit that role — the naïf whom Brigit was leading astray.

Even though I dressed in boyish clothes most of the time and had cross-dressed many times for parties, I had never really tried to pass before. I had never had to worry about my voice. My voice was naturally low for a woman, and as a teenager I had worked on pitching it even lower, but I was never mistaken for a man on the phone. Faced with the goth doyenne, I panicked. I didn't want to drop my voice too low and make it obvious, so I almost whispered my hello. The club promoter said, "Oh, a quiet one," and I nodded.

Usually when I was out at a club with Brigit, things were easy. As Brigit's plus one, there was no one I really needed to impress except Brigit, and I could be goofy if I wanted to. When I wore men's clothing as a costume, I could play the rake and the cad, and I think Brigit wanted more of that from me. But I spent the night paralyzed by awareness of everything about my body. How I sat, how I talked, how I danced. The club space was divided by curtains into narrow passageways and intimate nooks. Brigit claimed one of the lace-draped beds to hold court from, and I sat awkwardly on the edge of the bed, trying to keep myself from crossing my legs in a feminine way. I felt horribly exposed and vulnerable, like I could be called out as a fraud at any minute.

My brush with transness was terrifying. I couldn't imagine living in that state of crippling anxiety, and it was easier to pull back. Brigit seemed happier tutoring me on the feminine arts than the masculine ones. I had been toying with the idea of bleaching my hair, and Brigit convinced me to try it. By the end of the summer, I was much more theatrically feminine — long platinum blonde hair, a makeup kit from Brigit, a pair of size twelve high heels from a store in the Mission that catered to trans women and drag queens. It is only in retrospect that I would connect the change in my gender trajectory to my panic about passing, though my gender didn't seem to become any less confusing to other people. Teenagers continued to yell, "Are you a girl or a boy?" to me on the street.

#

At twenty, and new to BDSM, I wasn't always able to articulate what I liked and what I didn't. I wanted to be fully present in my body and in the moment, and I was learning that extreme sensations and turning over control to someone else could get me there. But I didn't like humiliation or submission. This worked well on stage, which was about pushing limits for an audience, but got complicated when it was just Brigit and me. When we were alone, I had unpredictable reactions to being told what to do, to being teased and corrected. I would get hit with electric flashes of anger, humiliation, hatred crawling across the surface of my skin, hackles raised, hairs bristling on the back of my neck and a growling desire to bite off whatever had been shoved in my mouth. I spent a lot of time wishing my emotions would behave. And Brigit, who was often stoned, wasn't always paying very close attention to what I was struggling to say.

Brigit could be self-centered and distracted, but she was also capable of showering me with attention. I got a nasty cold right around the time she first moved in, and she made me lie in bed and chew cloves of raw garlic. I couldn't remember ever feeling so cared for. I was always trying to look after people and I ended up needing constant replenishment. I was hungry for Brigit's attention, and for her approval. I was jealous of anyone else she paid attention to, even though I tried not to be. I felt like a spoiled child, always demanding to be the center of attention.

*Macho Sluts* and the *Lesbian S/M Safety Manual* came out of the 1980s San Francisco lesbian sex-radical community, but Brigit and I weren't really part of a community. Brigit's friends were mostly queer sex workers and musicians, but I wasn't sure how I identified. At twenty, I felt like I had outgrown the stage when lesbians considered my bisexuality a transition state to lesbianism, and I felt alienated by the policing of lesbian feminism. There were so many things I was doing wrong – makeup, high heels, sex with men, penetrative sex, cross-dressing (as opposed to rejecting both masculinity and femininity) – and I could not bear the weight of that disapproval. So I stopped trying to find a home in the lesbian community. And dating Brigit was just one more strike against me – the conventional wisdom was that trans women and the cis women who were dating them weren't allowed to call themselves lesbians.

I had absorbed the idea that to lesbian feminists, penetrative sex was a form of patriarchal oppression. But I really liked getting fucked. I felt so selfish and perverted wanting it so much. And Brigit was the first woman I'd been with who seemed to understand that, because she also liked getting fucked. I fucked her a couple times, and I know she wanted me to top her more, both in terms of penetration and as a Dom, but I was paralyzed by my inexperience, and afraid to do something wrong and hurt her.

I had a Good Vibrations dildo that came with full feminist bona fides

(though it was problematically dick-shaped), but Brigit had a monster of a black dildo that looked like a night stick with a cock on the end. And Brigit encouraged me to use my fingers on my clitoris while she pounded me with the dildo, something that I had always been too embarrassed to do, even when I was sleeping with women.

Early in our relationship, Brigit asked me if I'd ever been fisted, and I told her I had. At the time fisting seemed like a very extreme act, which I think was part of the appeal for Brigit. But for me it was an act of extreme, almost unbearable, pleasure. I found myself distracted in public by the way that hands, a sex organ for queer women, were on constant display. I found out years later that fisting was nowhere near as controversial in lesbian communities as I had been led to believe. It was a place where the ideological purity of lesbian feminism (which viewed fisting as a dangerous BDSM activity practiced by women who had internalized patriarchal violence) and the sex lives of flesh and blood lesbians diverged. But from outside of the lesbian community, it was hard to know what was acceptable and what was extreme.

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Brigit and I went out to clubs two or three nights a week, and I spent a lot of time in a blur of sleep deprivation and the occasional weed hangover. Goth clubs were usually in the middle of the week, when venue rentals were cheaper. But during the six months of my internship, I never missed a day of work. I knew how to work hard, and I didn't object to the kind of tedious, repetitive tasks that make up eighty percent of laboratory science. I have since realized that undergraduate interns aren't expected to accomplish much, and I did a good enough job to get a letter of recommendation for graduate school. One night at the Bagdad Cafe after a club, I ran into the lab administrator, also out on the town. She was a couple years older than me, a biology major who had dropped out of college. We talked about local bands while we waited for our tables, but we never talked about it at work. We both seemed to understand that the vivid, visceral parts of our lives had no place at work.

In my first flush of nerdy excitement at college, I had chosen an academic STEM track — honors biochemistry, undergraduate research internships, graduate school, a post doc, and hopefully onto the tenure track. But there was no space on that track for any of the parts of myself that felt vital — desire, love, gender, drugs, a constant searching for community and identity. But being smart and hardworking got me through my classes, even if I didn't have friends in my major to study or commiserate with. Even as I got disillusioned with my three-hundred person lecture classes and the naked ambition and narrow-mindedness of my classmates, I felt like I couldn't leave my major. As a queer weirdo, I felt like I needed the meritocracy of science, and I didn't yet realize how biased that meritocracy was.

A STEM degree from a prestigious college was also what my parents

expected of me, and toeing the line kept them from paying too much attention to my personal life. When I was in high school, my mother needed constant reassurance that her family looked respectable, and I tried my best to perform on family occasions and in holiday photos. But I knew that she thought my bisexuality was both a tragedy and a shameful secret. My father's main concern had been maintaining his authority, and he had wielded anger, threats, humiliation, and random searches of my room to keep me in line. It was very important to me to maintain my independence, and to keep my life separate from theirs. And it seemed to be working; I think my parents, who were going through a messy divorce, were relieved by my self-sufficiency. They had, after all, gotten married at twenty and moved thousands of miles away from their parents, lived in a crappy apartment, and eaten canned bacon from the dented can store and spaghetti and red sauce with texturized vegetable protein.

Brigit and I were both living off what I made at my internship, and there was no money. I was twenty and thought that living on the cheap had a *Gift of the Maji* romance, but it wore Brigit down. Most of her friends were strippers; they had cash for restaurants and clothing and professional hair coloring, while I fretted about the cost of cab fare. Brigit was trying to make a sustainable life as a musician, but she didn't have a day job. At seventeen, she had joined the navy, lying about her age on the enrollment papers to get out of her parents' house that much sooner. Her nose was still crooked from where her father had broken it when she was a teenager. She had to leave the military at twenty when she grew too tall for the seventy-eight-inch height limit, and got the sort of technical job that the Navy prepared people for. She got married and made a middle class life for herself, but she didn't have any college education or any other credentials besides the military to fall back on. As she explained it, starting hormones had shattered her middle class life – she was fired and her wife filed for divorce. Using her engineering background didn't seem like a possibility, maybe because it was too tied to her former life living as a man, but also she got the message that as a trans woman she was unemployable.

At some point that spring, Brigit and I told each other *I love you*, which I did, though the honeymoon period of infatuation quickly gave way to exhaustion. Brigit was deeply depressed and needed a lot more help than I was able to provide. Brigit had met Danielle the first night she went out in public as a woman and I think had imprinted on Danielle as her ideal partner. And when Brigit found out that Danielle had been doing heroin with one of their outside partners, the whole facade of the relationship crumbled. Brigit moved out of LA, and from her telling of it, didn't get out of bed for six months. Brigit had already been naturally very skinny, and it was one of the things that Danielle had most admired about her. Brigit still signed her publicity photos, *Kate Moss is fat!!!!* But by the time she moved in with me,

she had lost so much weight that the doctor at the gender clinic had prescribed her Ensure. She was still afraid of getting fat, but that fear battled with the fear of losing her hair. Brigit turned thirty the summer we were living together, and she was terrified of male pattern baldness. She got her friends to buy her fancy shampoos and vitamin treatments designed for over-processed platinum blonde hair. She ricocheted between needing to be extremely skinny and the knowledge that if she starved herself too much, her hair would start to fall out.

Brigit scolded me for being a slob, but she didn't clean anything either. I left for a week to visit friends and family in Massachusetts, and when I came back the kitchen was infested with fruit flies and had the sickly sweet smell of maggots. The dishes from the oatmeal I had made us the morning I left for the East Coast were still in the sink, and the oatmeal was studded with fly pupae. I threw out all the food in the kitchen.

I tried to look after Brigit. I had a lot of friends who wouldn't or couldn't go to their parents for help, and so I did what I could to help them stay fed, stay housed, stay employed. But Brigit needed so much – money, medical care, a therapist with expertise in trans issues – and she also needed all my attention all the time. I knew how to work hard and pay rent, do laundry and cook, but I didn't know what to do when that wasn't enough. Once, when the Clash's "Lost in the Supermarket," a song about loneliness and alienation, was playing on her stereo, Brigit told me that that was how she felt all the time. I felt a flash of resentment; I didn't know what to do with the burden of her vulnerability, and the feeling that she somehow wanted me to be the one to fix it. But I pushed it down; I was doing my best to hold things together.

At the end of the summer, I talked to the building manager and had her roll over my deposit into a studio apartment for Brigit. I wasn't sure she was going to be able to pay the rent, but my name was off the lease, and Brigit wasn't homeless. It was a relief to go back to Cambridge, and to feel like I could reserve some of my energy for looking after myself.

#

I stayed in touch with Brigit, but at arm's length. I performed with her at Bondage A Go Go one more time when I came home for Christmas break. She moved away and so did I. I met up with her every couple years for a while and then less often. I was always nervous about seeing her, worried that she could completely overturn my life. For a while I saw her only on Facebook, where she posted sporadically. In August 2011, her friend announced that Brigit had died suddenly of a heart attack while she was making dinner. Brigit was not the first or last old lover of mine to die, but my grief was complicated by how distant I'd been over the years. I found out from her friends that she had started a college program in music technology and had been designing and building electric guitars. In the pictures she was

beaming as she showed off her insane retro-futurist creations. I was happy that she'd found some joy and contentment, and a way to reconnect with engineering on her own terms.

Knowing that I owed it to her to say something honest on her memorial page, I wrote:

*Brigit Brat had a huge influence on my life (probably more than I'd like to admit). She was needy, imperious, self-involved, and a terrible Dom. But she opened up a whole world of amazing people and music and life experience and without her I would not be the same person.*



*Brigit Brat*

*1964-2011*

*Mike Nees is a case manager for people living with HIV in Atlantic City. He hosts the city's Story Slam series and has a BA in Creative Writing from Stockton University. His work has appeared in Matchbook Literary Magazine and HazMat Literary Review.*

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# The Shifts

Mike Nees

We never talked about your grandfather. My father. I was happy with that, but now there are things I can't explain properly without first correcting this. So here it is. He raised us in the house that you know as your cousins', but in the old part of it, where the bricks are made of mud. When I was your age, he used to walk into town and disappear for days. None of us knew what he did there, but on good days he brought us back gifts. New jewelry became currency among my two sisters. A soccer ball would ensure my two brothers' loyalty after a weeks-long absence. There were the candies and sparklers, the jump rope and radio, and eventually, most importantly, rides on the motor-bike he drove home one night, the first in our village. He could've made a living as a taxi, I told him – the bike fit three passengers if we held on tight – but the town kept calling him back, the two-hour walk now a ten-minute ride. He promised to bring us back bigger gifts still, bikes for everyone, but they never came. We saw him less and less, until the days he appeared were like visits from a ghost.

Without your grandfather, we struggled to keep up our plot of land. Every year, profitless harvests brought us closer to ruin. We saw what happened to neighbors whose debts grew too large: prison, suicide. When our crop withered one summer, we begged your grandfather for advice: "Stay a while," we pleaded. "Show us what we're doing wrong." He had a habit of scrunching his nose whenever I searched his face. He said we needn't worry about the farm because something was happening in town. "A miracle," he said. "Everyone fit will have work."

Others might've thrown the word around lightly – miracle – but coming from him it was stark. Here was the man who told me that heaven was a lie invented by the rich to make you toil for nothing. Paradise forever? he scoffed. Everyone would lose their minds. They'd invent problems for themselves.

I was sixteen when they found him dead that winter in a narrow alley, blood-soaked from knife wounds, a meter from his bike. To have gone through the trouble of making a will, which we found in a mildewy pile under his bed, he must've known that whatever he was doing would kill him. It even



smelled of death, the will itself. I held my nose as my older sister flipped through it. I was recovering from a sneeze as she discovered that I, the third of five – a boy, yes, but not even the oldest boy – would get the bike.

“You can’t even balance,” my older brother complained. “And you’re nearsighted,” my younger sister added. I couldn’t imagine why the man picked me either, but I never once considered giving up my inheritance. As soon as I threw a leg over the bike, I was done nursing our dead plot of land. Maybe it was the sort of restlessness your grandfather felt. Maybe that’s what he saw in me. It didn’t matter, whatever it was – whatever his mistakes, I wasn’t going to make them. I would be a taxi. A very busy one, it turned out.

#

Though we’d heard stories about the new factories far away, they might as well have been fairy tales: twelve hours of pay for twelve minutes of work. How could that be? All the time in the world left to spend at home with your family, to do whatever you wanted with your life? It was nonsense. Even when the recruiters came to our village, no one believed the pitch. “How does it work?” my older brother asked. They tried to explain it with long words and rehearsed tones that didn’t make any difference, because they didn’t deny the impossible claim: “Twelve hours of pay, twelve minutes of work.”

“What if I work twelve hours?” my older sister asked. “Do I get twelve days of pay?”

“Not allowed. Fourteen minutes is the longest shift.”

“Why?”

Here again came the long words, soothing tones. Nobody in the village looked very soothed, but that didn’t stop them from signing up.

I could feel the tension in my older sister’s hands as I drove her into town for her first day of work. How her nails dug into my sides as we scaled the dusty hills. Finding the factory was easy enough: they cleared a huge swath of Boujaad to make room for it. People lined up for blocks to get in. I tried to drive around the factory after dropping her off, but I couldn’t find a way past the loading bay in back, where a river of trucks came to a stop. Swarms of forklifts buzzed in and out of them. By the time I returned to the entrance, my sister was waiting impatiently. Her eyes had grown heavy, lips dry and cracked. “What’s it like?” I asked.

“Cold. I don’t know. Every minute out here lasts an hour in there.” She climbed back on the bike. “Just take me home.”

#

After the first pay day, everyone in the village wanted a ride. Staggered shifts kept me busy at all hours. After dropping off my passengers, I’d watch as they hopped in the huge line of workers streaming in, only to appear twelve minutes later in the huge line of workers streaming back out. On one occasion, while waiting for my passengers to finish their shift, I heard a woman’s voice from behind me: “You’re spitting a lot of oil there.” I turned

around and faced your mother for the first time. Her chin and cheeks stood out like one of the pop-stars you'd see on the signs in town. "Got a dry-sump on that thing?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said, no idea what she meant.

"You don't see too many bikes like this. You must've bought it with your factory pay."

"My dad left it to me." Though a full head shorter than me, I felt myself shrink as she looked me over. "I just drive people here," I added. "Do you work here?"

"I quit. Today's my last shift." Her gaze drifted over to the line of workers. "My family's all mechanics. We'll always have work."

"But you took a job here?"

"I wanted to see the machines. Boring work, but they're not kidding, calling it a miracle."

I thought of your grandfather now, wondered if he hadn't gone soft after all. "It really feels like twelve hours in there?"

She narrowed her eyes at me. "It doesn't just feel like twelve hours." She reached into her shirt, pulled out a watch and held it up to me: two p.m. "Can you read time?"

"Of course," I said, angry that I couldn't hide being a dumb farm boy.

She told me to wait there as she took the watch back and got in line. When my passengers finished their shifts, I asked them to wait by the corner, that a third rider was coming. When your mother returned, she pulled the watch back out of her bra and held it up to me: two-twenty a.m. "There are no windows looking in because all the walls are stuffed with chronodic protractors," she said. "Think of them like the timing gears in your bike. If there were a window, everyone inside would look like a blur, running sixty times faster than us out here. To them, we'd almost look like statues."

My head spun with questions. "I think I could use a tune-up," I said, hoping she'd smirk again. She squeezed my arm and gave me her card.

#

When I drove into the shop for the first time, her uncles stared me down. "Schedule's packed today," one said. "All week," said another. He seemed to be working no less than the first despite a clunky back brace. I was about to turn around when your mother slid out from under a car, her strong chin smudged with grease. "I'll do it if you can wait," she said. Her uncles shook their heads. "Still can't manage your time for shit," one said. She slid back under the car without a word. I waited in a metal folding chair.

"You look like you came down from the hills," the one in the back-brace said. When I told him which village, he laughed. He wiped the sweat off his forehead and said they wouldn't accept pay in millet.

"They hate you," your mother told me, shrugging it off. "They hate everything country, and they saw your eyes on me." We spent our first date

talking about the factory. I had such an embarrassment of questions, but she explained things so happily that I felt safe asking more. On our second date I asked her about the different types of bikes, and the lives of people in town, and what it was she saw in me that her uncles didn't. "Boys in town are all shithheads," she said.

Soon she drank me under the table and delighted in my puking. She never seemed to tire of my questions. To my surprise, she picked me over her uncles when they found out who she was seeing. They'd hoped, with good reason, that she could attract a husband of better means, elevate the family status. With your mother now unwelcome at the shop, our next step together seemed obvious to me.

"Business partner?" she laughed. Then, looking me over, her smile changed. Settled.

Every night she slept while I worked eight hours, then I'd come home and sleep while she worked eight hours. Then, everyday, we'd get eight hours together. As this routine took shape, my siblings, all making factory money, started families. They raised happy kids who were fun in small doses, though your mother and I tired of them. Our eight hours together were too precious still. We started building a little house for ourselves on the far-end of the plot. Modern bricks and cement. We kept it stocked with fresh condoms from the clinic in town.

#

The twelve-minute work days left villagers with more than enough time to continue farming, and yet many stopped farming. It was too much risk, too little profit, and far too much time. Men of my generation grew more interested in building and plumbing than in what grew in the dirt. The villagers built a library and, eventually, a secondary school. My sisters went around with their friends teaching baby nutrition and childhood development. We all laughed as it happened, imagined how silly it would've seemed when we are all just our parents' farmhands, but if you were there with my older brother on the sidelines of the soccer field, his eyes welling up at what he'd given his kids, you would've embraced the new flow of life, too. I think everyone understood, even me and your mom. It would've only seemed trite if it'd gone on forever, and there was no need to worry about that.

Unlike my siblings, who had to feed their kids, we fed our profits to the mattress. The more we saved, the more assured we behaved. We swung our hands. We took long joy-rides into the hills. But the day came when we approached the clinic, recalled the lack of condoms back home, and didn't go in for more. We got along so well as separate people, one had to wonder how our genes would get along in the same body.

#

While watching her check the tire pressure one morning, I thought to ask your mom why she really quit the factory. "You've would've still had

plenty of time to tinker in the shop.” She narrowed her eyes at me. Though usually so glad to answer my questions, she seemed disappointed with this one, like I shouldn’t have had to ask. “I’m too vain,” she said finally. Then, before riding off, she added: “Have you seen your sister’s hair lately?”

I recalled noticing some grays.

I don’t know why it was so hard for me to do the math.

#

“So the condom finally broke!” my older sister hailed. Even as your mother’s body swelled, my older brother refused to believe it. He joked that I didn’t have it in me, that you were just some belly fat she’d put on. Then, a month before you were born, I climbed on the bike, twisted the throttle, and heard something that sounded like rocks in a blender. I tried to ignore it, but only got my passengers a kilometer before the bike sputtered to a halt. Your mother cringed when she saw it. She said we needed a new engine.

“We have the money.”

“For feeding our child.”

In that case, I argued, I was the right one to work in the factory. “You can’t go in there pregnant,” I guessed correctly. She paced and muttered. “Twelve minute shift,” she finally agreed. “Don’t do fourteen.” She liked being a year older than me, liked rubbing it in my face when proven right. Quick to calculate, she said I should make enough to replace the engine before we would reach the same age.

#

Walking to my first shift, I told myself: No amount of candy or sparklers would compare to what I would give you. I held onto this thought through out the trainings. “Your failures, like your successes, belong to us all,” the trainer said. My second week, I soldered a dozen resistors onto their circuit boards backwards before realizing what I’d done. The boss didn’t say anything then, waiting instead for the next day’s block meeting to scold me in front of everyone. I had to read a promise letter out loud: “I will never make this mistake again.”

Sometimes I paid for a ride home from a very old man on the other end of the village who’d worked enough to buy a station wagon. “Buck up,” he’d tell me. “You can’t imagine how many hours I put in.” It wasn’t hard to march on as the paychecks added up – we were on track to replace the engine on the day you were born, through the day of your first word (“peekaboo”), and right up until the morning we found you struggling for air, when we rushed you to the clinic and watched them strap the ventilator to your face. A rare lung condition, the doctor told us. You were eight months old. He gave us a script for an expensive liquid to keep your lungs open.

The new village aid society helped us get through to my next paycheck and your mother started volunteering there to pay them back. She was helping them build a shed when, months later, I found you wheezing

badly in your crib, gasping for air like an eel. “This will keep happening for a long time,” the doctor said, writing me a script for a baby inhaler and more medicine than we could afford. “What do we do?” I asked you, carrying you out of the clinic.

You looked up at me and burped.

At the very least, I had to take the fourteen-minute shift. “That’s nothing,” the driver said. He scratched his beard, the longest in the village. “You can do much more than fourteen.” I didn’t say anything to this, only studied his saggy eyes from the rearview mirror. Then, as I climbed out of the car, he gave me the name of a foreman to speak to. He worked in a block far from my own, and I found myself rushing to find him after my shift. I was ushered into a large, freshly painted room with dozens of other workers. Here, the foreman wasted no time: “sixteen-minute shifts, twenty-four-minute shifts, thirty-two-minute shifts – none of these exist, right?” Everyone around me answered in unison: “Right.”

“Good,” he replied, handing a young woman in the front row a clipboard. When the clipboard got to me, I skimmed the list as quickly as I could. Besides all of our names was a column of numbers: sixteens, twenty-fours, and thirty-twos. I was about to write sixteen, maybe twenty-four, but I thought of the doctor’s warnings, and the look in your mother’s eyes when she saw that first bill from the clinic.

Thirty-two, I wrote.

“How much do these new meds cost?” she asked that night.

“It’s going to take a bit longer to refill the mattress,” I said, a wild understatement. “We’ll get there.”

#

At the age of four, after a rock balancing game at school, you built an impossible-looking stack in front of our house. “Genius,” my older brother said. “He has his mother’s brain.”

“And his mother’s brawn,” my younger sister added, puzzling over the rocks that were bigger than your head. Your mother liked it, nurtured the budding engineering. As I recall, I was already dying my gray hairs. She let me start managing our bills, and eventually she stopped asking how much the latest meds cost.

#

When you were seven, we all stayed up late planning the treehouse. You and your mother were up there installing deck boards one morning while I passed you tools. “Saw,” your mom would say, like a surgeon, and I’d hold it up for her. “Hammer,” you said at one point. I held it up, but you didn’t take it from my hand. “Hammer here,” I said.

You didn’t answer. Your mother yelled.

I scrambled up the planks of wood to find you on your side, a strange crackling sound in your chest. You stared at me with faraway eyes as we lay

together up there, your mother chasing down the village driver. Every time you opened your mouth to speak, more crackling came out. “Don’t push yourself,” I said. “You don’t have to say anything.”

In the hospital, you came down with pneumonia. You were there for weeks. The doctor gave us scripts for even more medicine.

#

On my next trip to the factory, the driver stared at me through the rearview mirror. “You look deathly. What’s with you?”

“I can’t afford the new medicine,” I said, eyes on my knees. When the other passengers got out, he gave me the name of another foreman to talk to. I’d find myself once again in an unmarked room with a bunch of other workers. Once again, the foreman wasted no time: “Our one-shift-per-day policy is strictly enforced, yes?”

“Yes,” we all said.

“Two shifts per day, three shifts per day – these things are not permitted.”

When the clipboard reached me, I wrote a three next to my name. From then on I worked three shifts a day, ninety-six minutes total.

#

You were eight when your mother and I sat in the front row of the village’s new amphitheater for your first recital. I’d grown a beard to hide my sagging neckline. There was the thickening tonic for my hair, wrinkle creams for my face and hands. You presided over the kettle drums with authority. When your mom started to question all the time I was spending in town, the driver helped me come up with alibis: I was climbing the ranks in the workers’ society. I rose from vice-chair to chairman of board games. Co-captain of the soccer team. I was sure she believed it all.

#

In the short hours between shifts, some of us slept in outdoor chairs that we’d unfold in empty lots. I stopped dreaming about the great future that I thought I could give you. Thoughts of legacy, I realized, were dangerous. Investing too much in them made my worth volatile. I woke from naps without any angst, no longer fixed on surpassing your grandfather. He was right about something: we are not built to think in terms of the eternal. We are built to live tenuously.

#

One night a hard wind bore frozen rain. You were ten. “It won’t hold!” you yelled, when the house started shaking. “He’s right,” your mom agreed, so we ran to my siblings’ house and hunkered down in the cellar they’d built. “What took you so long?” my older brother yelled, slamming the metal door shut behind us. While you and your cousins played games by lamplight, I sat with him at the top of stairs. “Just imagine if Dad were still running this place,” my brother said. “Everything was falling apart. We’d all

be dead.” He smiled about this. Older than he was now by quite a bit, I wondered if that was why I couldn’t share his enthusiasm. “I think about everything we’ve done here,” he said. “Finally enough rooms for everyone. Storm-proofing, real toilets. And the kids will build on it even more.” I nodded as he predicted the next steps in his lineage, a thing he seemed sure would continue forever. He could see that I wasn’t in the mood: “What is it with you anymore?”

“Nothing. Just tired.”

“You were the nicest kid before you broke that bike. We all get tired, you know. You got to remember what we’re working for.” If I saw things the way he did, I thought, I would’ve gone mad. I thought to ask if he ever braced himself for the day when his son would stop breathing, despite all his best efforts—he just shook his head and said I’d changed.

We found our roof in shambles the next day, scattered across the plot. “Nothing we can’t handle,” you said. You and your mom could handle it, to be sure, but as we got to the hard work, my joints rebelled. All my creaks and popping sounds made your mom glare at me. I heard her say something as the two of you worked atop the ladder, but didn’t realize it was directed at me until the third or fourth try, at which point she was screaming: “Hammer!” As I bent over to grab it, I heard a horrendous snap. I felt the earth pull me down into the fetal position. Your mother climbed down and found me in the dirt, eyes clenched shut. “Did you just throw out your back?”

“I guess,” I managed. She climbed back up the ladder and told you go to your cousins’ house. “That’s enough for today.” Once you were gone, she crouched down beside me, glared so that I looked away. “How old are you?”

“I don’t know.”

She pushed my hair back to the roots. “How fucking old are you?” I’d never done the math. When I told her my real hours, the ninety-six minutes, her face hardened. “As of when?”

I broke down the timeline, knowing she could work it out in her head.

“I knew there were extra shifts,” she said eventually. “I figured, twenty-four minutes, thirty-six at worst...” She kicked over the toolbox, sent screws and nails flying. “You’re sixty-five, you shithead. I’m barely thirty, and you’re sixty-five!”

“His medication costs more than I told you. Even now, we barely afford it.”

“We could’ve split the work between us! Did that even occur to you? No, you’d rather blow through your entire lifespan than do a little math. Now I have to do what you did.”

“No way. I won’t let you work there.”

“The rate you’re going, you’ll see one more of your son’s birthdays. Two, tops. Then what am I supposed to do?”

“Just help me up, please. I can’t miss the next shift.”

“You senile piece of shit.” With that, she vanished.

Curled up in pain, I lost track of time.

At some point I tried laying down flat, and my back seemed to appreciate this – if I could stand up as straight as I lay, I reasoned, I could start to work through it. With a deep inhale, I struggled to my feet, my spine screaming every inch of the way. I nearly got inside before the pain pinned me again, this time against the doorframe. I stared inside our roofless house, sunlit from above. On the wall, your latest drawings stared back at me. I studied your depiction of an impossible tower of rocks, a boulder atop a pebble and so on, and wondered what would happen to us now. Maybe it wasn’t an impossible tower, I thought. Every rock seemed so purposefully angled. I lost track of time again before feeling a hand pry its way into mine, slipping me pills. “Painkillers,” your mother said. “From my uncle.”

“They disowned you.”

“He made an exception. Just go do your shift. We can figure this out after.”

I got to work just in time, cracked my neck and felt great. The pills worked. Everything could work, I decided. Then, after the first hour or two, co-workers started looking at me funny. What is this? I thought. I imagined the bosses watching me on the ceiling cameras.

Everyone seemed to be watching me...or was it just me?

They know, I realized. I told all the secrets. The extra hours, the extra shifts. They know I told...I started to imagine what they’d do to me. They’d say I was crazy, get me committed...dizzy with fear, I sent a circuit board down the line without any soldering. Despite the cold, I wiped a sheet of sweat from my forehead. I felt something brush my arm and knew this was it – my coworkers were about to drag me off. They were all in on it, I was so strangely sure, so I pushed the man to my left before he could get a grip, stood up and ran as fast I could. I pumped my arms and knocked over boxes and hardly got anywhere before the security guards piled on. “Let me out of here!” I yelled.

“Gladly,” I heard a boss say. “And don’t ever come back.” They dragged me out without injury – as long as we kept heading towards the exit, I didn’t fight. Only after they’d left me in the street, free to go home, did I start to think there might’ve been no conspiracy against me after all. I could feel my brain pulsing inside my skull.

#

“We drugged you” your mother told me. “That was the worst thing we could find on short notice.”

“We?”

“Me and the driver.”

Traitor, I thought.



Turning over, I adjusted the wet towel on my forehead. “I could’ve died.”

“That’s what I was trying to tell you.” She squeezed into an undershirt, and then another one on top of that. She’d already signed up for her first shift.

#

You’re fifteen. I’m seventy. Your mother is in her fifties now, aging at four times our speed – as you know, I’ve finally found some aptitude for math. Your zeal is just that infectious. Whenever I sit in on your study groups, which you graciously welcome, I come out with new words.

You understand how the factory works, of course, but that you’re going to lose your parents sooner than most – I can’t say we’ve prepared you for that. I struggle to bring it up, and your mother is always so tired between shifts. When you are orphaned and trying to make sense of it, how I let this happen to you, maybe these pages will help. If they haven’t helped yet, I don’t imagine they will. Still, there is one piece left that I’ve withheld. That I’ve put off.

Last month, as the driver brought me into town to pick up your meds, I thought to ask him about his shifts. They sounded a lot like mine. I asked how he felt when he finally saved up enough to quit and buy his car, and after pausing a while, he just said that he was tired. He still looked it, to be sure. Few of us hide our adjusted ages anymore – the village is marked with early wrinkles and age spots – but it was always clear that his age, like mine, was especially accelerated. When I asked him where he got the idea to be taxi, he paused as if waiting for me to reconsider my question. “It was your idea,” he finally answered.

“You were one of my passengers?” He just kept his eyes on the road. “You should’ve told me,” I added, trying to recall his face. I rewound it in my head, searched it for someone I knew. It seemed withholding, suddenly. The only match I could conjure was for that squarish nose of his, but no. It belonged to a ghost. “It was the day I first rode the bike home,” he said. “When I told you how much time it saved, that was your reaction. Be a taxi, you told me.” He scrunched his nose the way he used to, as if saying hello. “I should’ve listened.”

I felt the bags under my eyes deepen. “They found your body in an alley.”

“I faked it. I had to trick my creditors.” He said he owed so many people money that they all could believe that the others got him first. Passing over how he ended up in such debt, he told me how he escaped it, transforming his appearance with as much time in the factory as possible. He slept inside the ceilings, left only to find food. In six months he aged thirty years. Though rendered unrecognizable, he was sure that his enemies had ears everywhere, and so he told no one in the village his real identity when he

returned. “You’ve done well,” he said, finally. “Your son has a real chance. I’m just glad to have helped.”

Everything but the scenery seemed to stop. My mind refused to work. Then, out of the stillness, it hit me: “I’ve been paying you a fortune for these rides.”

He shrugged. “This car is a money pit.”

“You knew how much we needed that money.”

“There’s no profit in this. Where do you think I sleep? I sleep in the car.”

I was relieved he didn’t motion to follow me when we pulled up to the pharmacy. Perhaps pitifully, I slammed the car door on my way out. In line, I tried to clear my mind of him. I thought of you. He was right about your chances: the doctor told us that you’re doing better. Another year or two, he thinks, and your lungs might work well enough without help. He won’t say for sure. We’ve never told you how much it costs.

Your grandfather watched through the rearview mirror as I climbed back in the car. I declined to move up front when he offered. “I did my best to help you,” he insisted, but I didn’t want to talk. I couldn’t stand it. Breaking the next silence, he asked how I would’ve ever kept you alive if not for his help. Who would’ve told me about the need-to-know foremen?

I said nothing until he dropped me off. “Stay away from us,” I told him.

He clouds my thinking whenever I sit down to write. I should pity him, I think, but he betrayed the one virtue I’d taken him for. The humility of the dead. Now there are days when you walk into the house and find me lurched over the table, my notebook full of crossed-out lines. These are the moments when I should tell you everything. While my mind is still sharp. I should tell you that I screwed up the math, that it didn’t have to be this way. Instead I clench my teeth, or cross out another line. I want to blame everything on your grandfather, and I hate this feeling. Even the thought of him sleeping in the backseat of his rusty car is like a power move to me. That unbearable arrogance. I could add up all the fares we paid him, but it’s his math that drives me mad. The hopeless equations he’s still trying to solve. That we are all unwitting parts of them.

*Laura Grace Weldon's first poetry collection is titled "Tending" with her second due out soon. She's written collaborative poetry with nursing home residents, used poetry to teach conflict resolution, and painted poems on beehives although her work appears in more conventional places such as Verse Daily, J Journal, Neurology, and Penman Review. Connect with her at [lauragraceweldon.com](http://lauragraceweldon.com).*

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# Moving Day

## Laura Grace Weldon

The new people don't yet know  
this knuckled lawn glistens  
with tiny flowers each spring,  
an acre of white slung like a scarf  
over the horizon's curved shoulder.

They haven't seen autumn here,  
skies dark yet bright. Trees  
clothed in crimson and coral  
more vivid than any stained glass window.  
Even passing cars are cast in a cathedral glow.

The new people don't know  
we tucked blessings behind these walls.  
On bare beams the kids crayoned  
bubble-face stick figures  
and I wrote poems  
in thick black marker, dizzy  
by vapors that make words permanent.

Dust from our skin waits  
on light fixtures, door frames,  
and carpets. It will lift into motes,  
enter their bodies as they breathe.  
On each surface our fingerprints linger.  
They are too light to pack  
too heavy to carry.

# Temporal Reminders on I-480

Laura Grace Weldon

Raccoon beside the road  
is puffed in death to the roundness  
of a child's toy; belly curved,  
paws up. Quiet conversation  
between cells now  
an electronic zither of flies  
shape-shifting this breathless form into  
breath of carbon dioxide and water vapor,  
into *spiritus*.

Bacteria, blowflies, beetles,  
and wasps engage  
in divine, perfect work  
while the tail's striped fur  
ripples in the breeze.  
Ahead a silver pickup swerves  
into another lane, honks,  
brake checks the car behind.

# Cocktail Parties Are Still A Thing

Laura Grace Weldon

Clothed animals in a treetop artifice  
11 stories up  
gaze through liquefied sand  
at concrete and steel shapes  
covering the planet's  
long green memory.

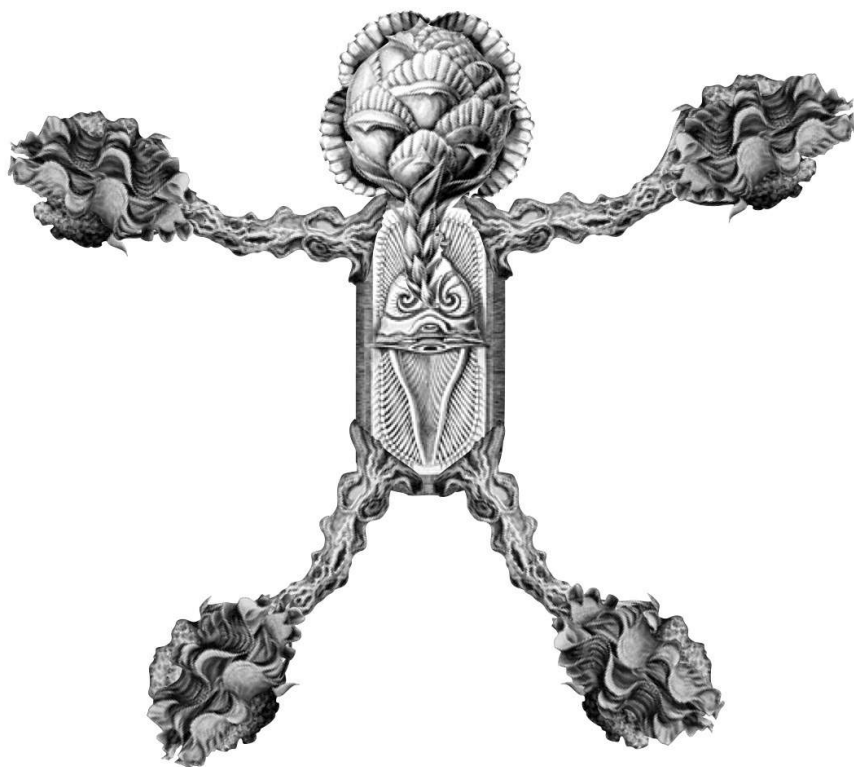
The women, skin smooth as royalty,  
scoop eggs of unborn fish  
with doll-sized spoons,  
joust over who is busiest  
with words like  
"brutal" and "grueling."  
Earrings in a glittery dance,  
they agree in long exhales  
life is harder than it's ever been.

One woman, shorter, older,  
dressed all wrong, blunt,  
notes the present was birthed  
by ancestors surviving famine,  
flood, war, and toil, always toil.  
Imagine, she says, what it meant  
to be a woman a few hundred,  
a few thousand years ago.  
How would our forebears  
view the soft children of their line?

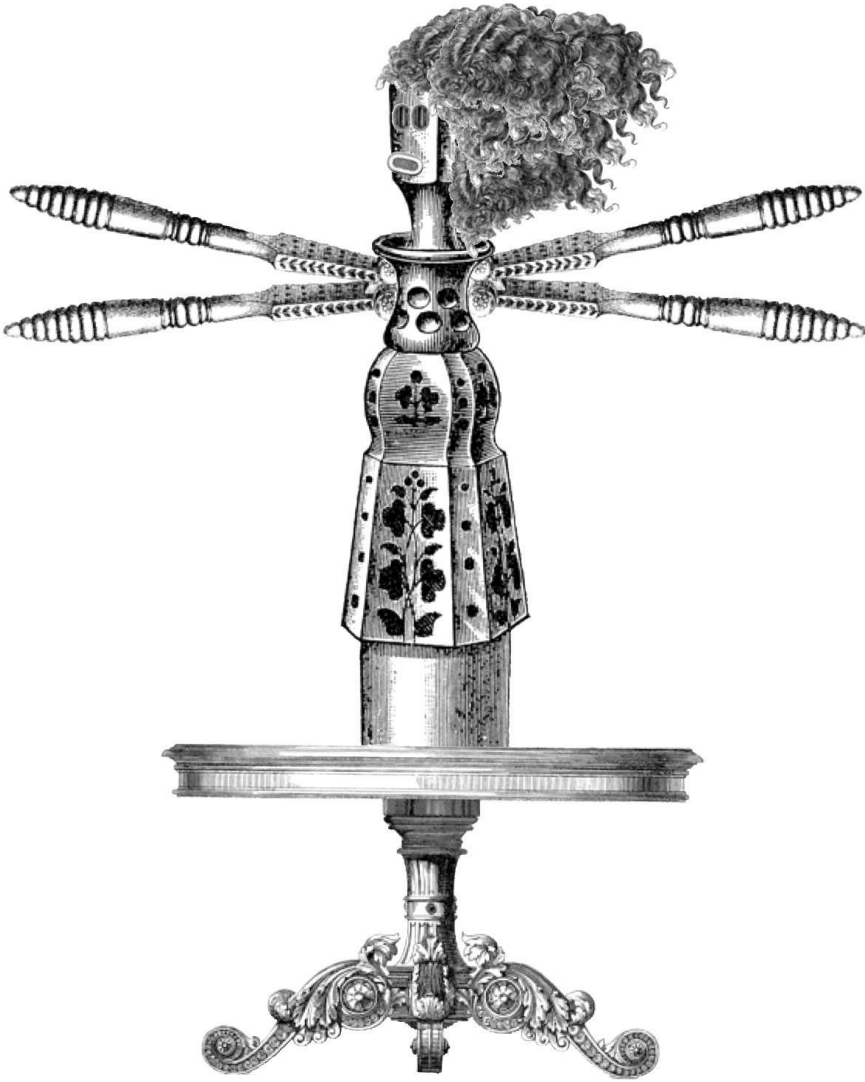
Envy, they laugh, sheer envy.  
A moment of silence  
while they look at their elegant hands.

**Bill Wolak** has just published his fifteenth book of poetry entitled *The Nakedness Defense* with Ekstasis Editions. His collages have appeared recently in *Naked in New Hope* 2018, *The 2017 Seattle Erotic Art Festival*, *Poetic Illusion*, *The Riverside Gallery*, Hackensack, NJ, *the 2018 Dirty Show in Detroit*, *2018 The Rochester Erotic Arts Festival*, and *The 2018 Montreal Erotic Art Festival*.

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### **Dust Boasting to the Wind**



**The Wind Choked with Your Hair**

*Jim Powell holds an MFA from Bowling Green State University and recently retired from teaching creative writing at Indiana University-Purdue University-Indianapolis (IUPUI). He founded the non-profit Writers' Center of Indianapolis (now the Indiana Writers Center) and served as its director from 1979-99. His fiction has recently been published in Bartleby Snopes, Crack the Spine, Flying Island, Storyscape, and Fiction Southeast. His collection of stories, Only Witness, will be published later in 2019.*

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# Desiree

Jim Powell

Susan Berkeley, tall and blond, drew notice walking along Calle Basilio Badillo's blocks-long stretch of shops, restaurants, and galleries. Strangers, both Mexican and gringo, followed her slim body more than her face, so here in Puerto Vallarta Susan passed as another well-off middle-aged gringa, perfect customer for the high-end merchants. She was glad to be anonymous on this new stage she had chosen. Only some beach reader familiar with one of her *nom de plume* Desiree's romances might recognize her from a book jacket's dreamy author's photo.

She scrutinized a mannequin adorned in a filmy white wrap that shimmered provocatively. It would better flatter her daughter Rebecca, but the girl, institutionalized in upstate New York, was near no beach on which to wear it. Susan's lapse into such regrets had brought her out tonight. She dismissed the shopkeeper's query with "only looking."

Susan maneuvered the street, surveying the fashionable goods in every window. At the Contempo Galería, a glass sculpture of red coral caught her eye. The colorful fan, eight-feet wide and five tall, would fill the foyer of her new condo with color. But closer inspection revealed cleverly twisted plastic tubing. Some things looked real only at a distance.

The deep tans of her new ex-pat acquaintances Charlotte and Jane, for instance. Both had wintered in PV for years and their skin—and poor Jane's frazzled hair—showed it. Wrinkled was not the right word, rather waffled or blistered, especially about the upper chest and arms. Of course, each had at least a dozen years beyond Susan's fifty. She hoped the sunshine here did not always demand payment in aging. She wished to disappear, not wither and die. Neither of these women knew her work, either as Susan Berkeley, author of two well-reviewed but poorly selling literary novels based on her childhood and escape from the Midwest, or as Desiree Ivory Skye, the pen name from which the past few years' romances flowed. She'd kept dreaming up the books' fantasy affairs at her agent Meg's insistence. Susan read Meg's



increasingly desperate e-mails – what are you writing? – with a pleasure that balanced her dismay at receiving Rebecca’s hallucinatory ravings. Susan rarely answered either.

Along the gallery’s back wall, faux-Mayan ceramic heads topped display columns while vibrant abstracts surrounding them made her dizzy. “*Señora*, may I help you?” The clerk looked like Carlo, the handsome super of her East Village flat.

“Of course you may,” she said, not attempting the Spanish she’d begun studying. “I need things for my condo at Los Raqueros.” She hoped he knew the new beach-front high-rise. “Contemporary, Mexican flair. These paintings...is the artist well known here?”

“*Si, señora*. He has a studio in Centro. Or find him working on the streets, or beach-combing for ideas.” He opened his palms toward a huge canvas of blues swirled with ambers, what might be boulders darkening surf. “He is in a museum in Guadalajara, and has shown in Mexico City.” He winked. “The city people, they love seascapes.”

Susan had considered herself a city person, too, at least since she moved from Richmond, Indiana, to Chicago, and then to New York. She’d spent months in Southern California, too, “consulting” for the movie they’d made of one romance; a financial, if not artistic, success. She hadn’t loved LA or its beaches teeming with youthful idyll. Here in PV’s Zona Romántica things worked maturely, the moniker “Old Town” applying more logically than “city.” She wanted to change everything about herself, let a new place in full sunshine compel her re-creation. She’d picked Mexico’s west coast since her New York friends visited only manic Cancún or Playa del Carmen on the east. They wouldn’t imagine her reborn in the *mañana* vibe of the beach town.

“Well, I love seascapes, too, especially Mexican ones.” She touched his arm in turning to another painting. “These are all wonderful, I think, don’t you...*como se llama?*”

Perhaps the romances she’d written – and intended to write no longer – had driven her to the three affairs she’d permitted in her month here, one-time sexual confluences to purge her body with the comfort of strangers. Susan intended to pursue honest emotion in her new writing, figuring things out until feelings returned. Rebecca’s collapse – likely permanent, they told her – would throw her into her own despair if she let it. The only positive outcome of her daughter’s insanity, call it what it was – the proof of Susan’s own resilience.

Her thoughts were sinking into the painting’s waves when he replied, “I am Sebastiano, *señora, y usted?*” His smile seemed more sweet than hungry, boyish.

“I am Susan, and you can use ‘*tú*,’ Sebastiano.” She let his name roll from her tongue. “Strangers become friends quickly here, don’t we?”

A week later Susan stood on her balcony overlooking Los Muertos beach. A group masquerading as Aztecs danced in feathered headdresses and body paint, playing drums and conch horns for clueless tourists. She'd bought the coral sculpture and two beach abstracts, expensive but settling the tone of her place; the sea's boldness brought indoors. Sebastiano proved anything but boyish both the night she bought the art and the next night when he hung it. Susan had broken her rules of "once only," even as she reckoned it should be Rebecca out sowing the wild oats of youth.

She strolled down Olas Altas, parallel to the beach. She hadn't seen Sebastiano since, nor answered his messages. Around the zócolo that centered Old Town, Friday night festivities swirled along with the dance troupe performing at the half-moon amphitheater. Susan stood among ex-pats and tourists thronged to *ballet folklórico*, Latin flavor in the Americanized environment. Twenty young dancers twirled in couples, a yard-wide ribbon stretched between each pair.

Susan wished Rebecca could see the show. Her only child had been an artist, talented at still life and portraiture. But three years ago, only weeks into her graduate school training in St. Louis, far from home, what had seemed random eccentricity became constant aberration. In frantic calls, she claimed spies were watching, her dorm-room bugged. The voices she reported as bad dreams soon became waking commands – hide in the closet all day, dance naked in the dorm hallway, piss in the corner of the studio. Calls from the school – her anti-social behavior was getting worse. Had she done such things before? Never. No. Rebecca hadn't been the most out-going teenager, but she'd attended plays, proms, concerts with friends of both genders. Susan searched memory for signs of problems deeper than the normal teen's. Nothing. Her descent came as unexpectedly as Susan's ability to switch writing gears from real life to romance.

She'd flown to comfort her haggard daughter, held her hand, asked gentle questions answered by silence or gibberish. Under observation, her daughter was diagnosed as schizophrenic, medicated, psycho-therapied, and community-counseled. But back in school – perhaps her peers stared or whispered – Rebecca had stabbed a classmate with a painter's spatula. Susan brought her back East and now, after a year of better and worse, in hospital and out, Rebecca seemed lost, still retreating into fantasy or blather. The upstate clinic failed to convince Susan her visits did any good, so instead she sent checks her romance novels would allow her to write for a lifetime. She promised to stay connected and Rebecca's e-mails arrived almost daily after Susan arrived in PV. Could her daughter believe – like a mother frantic over a missing child – that Susan had abandoned her forever?

The festive dance ended and graceful movement filled the stage. Susan watched a group of Mexican teenagers flirting across the street outside

the elementary school, action so familiar she groaned. From behind the amphitheater, a tall, trim man emerged. Surely it was Jonathan Macklin, a fellow author – detective novels. Had Meg sent him after her? He glanced at the wooing kids and tripped on a slab of uneven pavement. He shook his well-tanned head and Susan realized it wasn't Jonathan, never tan in his life, a bookworm though wry fun at parties. The man smiled at his clumsiness and walked past her, down Calle Cárdenas.

Susan trailed after him, Jonathan or not. On the dark corner behind the school, she jostled his elbow, pardoning herself. She pulled up short and pretended she'd made a wrong turn. He asked if she was lost.

"Oh, not really." She balanced on tip-toes to better display her body. "Just wondering if Boutique La Rosa Rosa is on this street. Is a streetlight out?"

He walked her to the *tienda* that turned out to be closed, then to Lix for coconut ice cream. She didn't need to diet, he flirted. And shouldn't he walk her home? They discovered they were neighbors—perhaps why he seemed familiar. They slipped into her condo, lest they give their neighbors something to talk about.

#

The next day, the man dismissed before daybreak, Susan stretched on her balcony's chaise. Her sexuality had changed here. She'd never been promiscuous, didn't think herself so now. The sunny beaches, Latin men attentive to gringas, the well-heeled well-maintained older gringos, seemed like the magical strangers in her novels. She needn't answer to anyone – her publisher who profited too much to complain, her husband an ex for fifteen years. When Paul had visited Rebecca to offer Susan support, he'd showed sincere concern though he'd never wanted a child in the first place. Had she? After the tense meeting they shared tears. He made a pass and she gave herself over, but in the morning he'd left. Just as well. Their life as a family proved as much mirage as Rebecca's spies.

Susan scanned the bay south to the miles of hazy mountains framing the beaches at Las Animas, Quimixto, Yelapa. Was there a more inspiring spot on earth? But she spent no more than a minute at the laptop, not a single decent idea in her head. She'd intended to begin another novel with characters real enough to matter. Her literary writing once counted a few thousand serious readers. She moved to expensive New York, thankful Paul would continue Rebecca's support though Susan pulled the girl away with her into the unfamiliar. Then turned for money to the romance writing – one book only, she'd insisted – as literary approval proved less than enough. When Rebecca descended into illness, Susan recognized what a stranger her daughter had been to her. And while there was no better material for meaningful writing, the subject was too close. What authenticity could reach the page when Susan found her world unreal?

She let the sunlight melt her into sleep. When she awoke to the phone's ring, waves of dreams had washed away her worry. She wondered if it might be Sebastiano.

Instead her neighbor Charlotte reported that Jane had knocked on her door, concerned about "the stranger who visited Susan last night." She'd assured that Susan knew how to take care of herself, but at breakfast Jane questioned again. So Charlotte was making sure "you hadn't been raped by some *gringo loco*." Until the all clear sounded, there'd be "no rest for the wicked."

Susan imagined Charlotte winking. Over fruity drinks she'd confided that not so many years earlier a handsome young cabbie had "seduced" her and they'd gone at it in his backseat in a dark corner of the Costco parking lot. Now she told Susan any secret was safe with her, but do please be careful and remember that Jane—much more conventional—stood watch.

The horizon stretched over the Pacific, but no peace appeared even in the mix of blues with her anonymity threatened. She dismissed Charlotte's offer of dinner and conjured images of men from the past whom she'd desired but passed up, an artist immersed in her work. Anonymous now, anything seemed possible. Should she call Sebastiano, dare fate by turning fling into affair?

#

The afternoon wore on. Susan read, but her shoulders stiffened and legs cramped. She cursed Jane's intrusion and opened her computer, anger tempting her to write. An e-mail from Rebecca had arrived. They sometimes came two or three a day, reports on what passed for her life, hopes for a future. Susan allowed herself two reassuring replies a week, not today. A long walk might help, but her mood demanded more, a massage at the spa next door, serious therapists safe from scandal. Other parlors were rumored to offer more fulsome relief. A man could find a "happy" massage provided by the gender of his preference. Could a woman? she'd asked Charlotte who returned a wink. Susan had gotten manicures here, and one massage a week ago when thoughts of Rebecca refused to stay north with the rest of her past.

The spa's waiting room shined—white chairs, tables, lamps. But in the massage room, dim lights made even the sheets shadowy. Susan climbed onto the table and pressed into the face cradle, let the girl's hands find the sore spots Susan tried to describe, her Spanish failing. Her muscles popped and rolled. The masseuse, Maria, twenty-four, a year younger than Rebecca, ironed Susan's legs, forcing her to give up the tension. On the thighs Maria's thumbs dug deeper. Then fists gouged Susan's butt, pain so palpable she teared as the muscle released.

Warmth spread. Susan turned over, opened her eyes to see Maria smiling in success. Rebecca had glowed like that when reviewing a finished canvas. Maria gently worked her arms and hands, and Susan recognized

music playing, a panpipe trilling over hushed drum. The girl's hands found the front of Susan's shoulders, pushed back the clavicles.

Susan crinkled her freed neck. The girl traced her jaw-line with two fingers, rubbed the small muscles around the ears, pressed free the temples. Then the fingers were gone, the girl whispered, "finished," and Susan sighed. She heard the door open and close, and cooler air breezed in. The room remained dark as she dressed, human connection ended.

#

Back in her condo, Susan showered, pulled the towel roughly across her body. She dressed in a loose shift and watched the sun set. Had Rebecca lost some battle of will with the calling voices? Her daughter had been methodical when painting, her extreme focus a quiet strength, or so Susan thought. The steep decline seemed an escape, but Rebecca made no accusations and the doctors assured Susan that such cases rarely exposed a clear cause. Rebecca's difficult delivery offered a clue—troubled pregnancies sometimes correlated. But though changes as she grew up might have been precipitous – Susan's divorce, the move between cities, especially Rebecca's distancing into an adulthood of her own – they'd never know. The sun splashed into the sea, burning the horizon with reds and pinks.

Susan went inside and opened her daughter's e-mail. Rebecca sounded cogent, describing two sunny hours she'd been outside to paint. Her brush strokes were steady, eyes tuned to subtleties in evergreens dusted with snow. The wind that drove her indoors whispered Susan's name, then Desiree's, and Rebecca said she understood her mother was busy writing, that she needed her own outdoors in Mexico. Then she listed familiar medicines and doctors' names, reported the orders to stay calm that she heard from all voices, those both outside and within.

Susan rushed to finish dressing and resisted the urge to taunt Jane before going out alone. A block uphill she reached the Olas Altas hubbub. Salesmen worked the dinner hours, cajoling newcomers to tour condos or join barefoot cruises. She breezed past them and ignored the shouts that followed. Across the street she glimpsed a couple who looked like Margy and Ted O'Malley from Chicago, escaping the windy winter. She hadn't seen them in years, had barely kept in touch. Susan stepped into the street and a taxi honked and braked, its bumper a foot from her knee. She muttered apologies and rushed to the sidewalk café and her old friends' table.

"Imagine seeing you here." Susan smiled, trying to be as chipper as they'd remember her.

The man's eyes scanned up her body to her face. "Pardon?" The woman, at least ten years older than Margy would be, looked puzzled.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I mistook you for some friends from Chicago." She looked up the street for a landmark to ground herself.

"No, we're from Vancouver." The man had the funny Canadian accent

she heard so often in PV. “Sorry.” He returned to his plate and the woman nodded.

“Excuse me, please.” Flustered, Susan stepped away but was jostled against a door by a group of gay men lost in their own chatter. Once the men passed, she checked her make-up. She must not let Rebecca’s illness turn into her own guilt. Each of her romances – the novels – claimed guilt was the greatest enemy of all.

She looked back at the couple, nothing like the O’Malleys, really. What about sojourns in strange lands brought visions of familiarity? Homesickness, not hallucinations, thank God.

Susan realized she hadn’t eaten more than fruit all day. She straightened and walked to Basilio Badillo, past restaurants touted to cruise-ship tourists who scrambled in for overpriced fajitas and giant margaritas. She neared the gallery but to avoid it turned onto Calle Vallarta then up Carranza to a little Argentine place she visited regularly. She needed protein, steak, to cure her lightheadedness. Manuel, the owner behind the grill, welcomed her with a flourish of his chef’s hat. His wife, the waitress Gardenia, seemed to have been waiting for her and delivered a mango margarita and spinach empanadas. She said these were complimentary for “*Señora Susan, nuestra amiga ... Señora Desiree.*” Gardenia placed a thick paperback beside the appetizer and Susan shocked at *Codiclar las Estrellas*, a Spanish-language edition of Desiree’s best-seller, *Covet the Stars*. The excited woman turned the book over and pointed at the photo, a glamorous version of Susan/Desiree. She was bound to be found out sooner or later. She put a finger to her lips. “*Es un secreto, por favor.*”

Gardenia gleamed. “*Sí, sí, señora.*” She asked for Susan’s autograph, left the book, and moved to the next table where four well-groomed women watched the exchange. Susan arched an eyebrow, raised her glass and took a long sip until they returned to yakking. If they questioned her dining alone, who cared? If one of them put the Spanish, name, and book together and shouted recognition, her desire for anonymity demanded no more explanation than did Rebecca’s illness. No matter how confusing, Susan would be herself.

She took a bite of the rich appetizer. Better to enjoy such flavor alone than to dilute it with prattle. One of the women – who looked like her college friend Patricia – nodded in Susan’s direction as if to tell her, “been there myself.” But of course the woman hadn’t, had never savored exile, wouldn’t survive it. Susan had gone beyond endurance to whatever this new place was – if not shelter, at least solitude.

She signed the paperback, “*Querida Gardenia, será nuestro secreto. Tu amiga, Susan.*” Her steak arrived along with another margarita but Gardenia pointed to the signature. “*Inscriba ‘Desiree,’ por favor, señora.*” Susan sighed, signed, and knifed into the rare steak.

The table of women debated as they divided their check, preoccupied

with propriety's minutiae. At least they had each other. Susan resisted the urge to pick up their bill, make life even easier for them. Had they left concerns at their northern homes, children who hadn't turned out perfectly, their promise unfulfilled? No, this lucky bunch would have passels of grandkids, husbands who golfed or sailed—or dead ones. Money in the bank to fret over. Susan chewed her steak greedily and when they looked back, waved goodbye like an old friend.

#

Susan declined dessert and walked up Basilio Badillo toward Insurgentes. Outside one of the massage parlors, three young women in tight white uniforms solicited men's business with smiles and broken English. What were they offering at this time of night? She gazed too long at one dark-haired beauty. "Massage for you, *señora*?" Susan reversed her path and hurried away.

Past Calle Constitución the crowd thickened for the Friday fiesta. A band played blues and rock to tempt the crowd to dance. Susan slid through the twisting bodies and rejected two older gentlemen's invitations to join in. The band began a frenetic take on "La Bamba." She stopped to take a breath. American music masquerading as Mexican, played by a Mexican band pretending to sound American. She questioned her own concealment. She had barely resisted Gardenia's recognition. Would she secretly have loved for the dining women to request autographs? She again felt herself between selves, somehow doubly alone. Without Rebecca.

Susan hastened on, window-shopping. The same mannequin wore the same white wrap and the same clerk came toward her balancing plastic glasses of wine to bribe customers. She took one, downed the bitter white. The alcohol sent sparks up her throat. Don't get drunk, she told herself. Was she drinking more in Mexico? She'd drunk plenty when Rebecca collapsed. At parties if asked about her daughter. With her ex-husband. The day after her ex-husband's seduction and days after her visits to the sanitarium. But never out of control.

The clerk offered another glass and Susan said "no," then accepted the wine. The Galería, and Sebastiano, waited three doors down. To kill time, she carried the dress and the wine into the dressing room. She stripped off her shift and noted that her tan lines had blended away. Her body aged well, but she felt dizzy. More drinking, yes, since Rebecca failed. And not even schlocky plots populated her imagination. Those familiar faces she kept imagining replaced memory and her hollow pleasure fought pain. Susan pulled on the sheer wrap. She asked the clerk to bag her shift. She would wear this new one.

#

Susan stood on the sidewalk. Her choices—head back to the band, now gushing a romantic ballad, or past Galería Contempo. In its wide front

window her red coral had been replaced by a twisted bronze resembling a wave—or was it a horse? She felt as two-hearted as the sculpture, Susan or Desiree. But reflected in the glass she seemed transparent, anonymous.

Sebastiano gesticulated, deciphering the sculpture for a white-haired couple. The woman – she could be one of those Manhattan grandes-dames who gushed over Susan’s books whether they’d read one or not—called to a younger woman who hurried over and shook her head ‘no.’ The husband gazed out the window while the mother gestured around the bronze as if defending its surreal shape. Sebastiano stepped near the older woman, a rapt audience.

Rebecca had appreciated Susan’s taste in art, hadn’t she? Two of her daughter’s paintings graced the New York apartment, one in her study, the other prominent in the dining room. Susan had bragged about Rebecca at parties, though the girl shied away at compliments. Her daughter would hate this bronze sculpture, too – and the plastic coral.

Susan entered the bright space and Sebastiano excused himself from the family dispute. He walked toward her, hands outstretched. She allowed him to hug her, smelled his citrusy cologne, felt his breath flutter on her neck. “My favorite customer, Susan.” He practically bowed to her. “Shopping again?” He swept an arm toward a wall of paintings.

She glanced around, but aside from the arguing gringas, she could pretend interest in nothing but Sebastiano. She considered leaving, enough rules broken, her heart not fully into another tryst. “No, I just came for the wine.” She took a glass from a tray by the door. “*Y los empleados.*” Of course Sebastiano was the only employee in sight.

He laughed and stepped back. He hadn’t phoned a message in days. “Why don’t you look around, *mi amiga*? While I do business.” He hurried to the family, solicitous smile returning.

Susan waited, sipping the tart wine and considering the paintings, a new batch of artists. One shouted “folk” with out-of scale primitives of seraped peasants, burros, and washerwomen. A second offered the famous palapas and blue chairs of Los Muertos, tourists playing in the sun. In another, sadly familiar, a gringa lounged on her patio as a Latina girl served fruit and cocktail. Lives of ease among the hard-working but happy natives.

Sebastiano said something that drove the younger woman muttering past Susan and out the door. Susan applauded her good taste in rejecting the sculpture but not her quick surrender. The mother laughed and gave Sebastiano a peck on the cheek. He laughed and gave a soft kiss back. The husband, wearing a resigned grin, pulled out his wallet. Sebastiano took the credit card and left them to further admire their bronze monstrosity.

As he processed the big sale, Susan angled beside him, shifted her hip to press his thigh. “You make a great impression,” she whispered. “Come celebrate with me. *Una gran fiesta.*” She struggled out the Spanish, her



flirtation a grand fraud.

Sebastiano kept watch on the printing receipt. “But I have business, *Señora* Susan. This street party and closing up.” He stepped back, looked over her body, and sighed, too loudly to be sincere. “If I delivered a painting, perhaps. Did you see the new beach scenes? *Muy hermosos*.” He went back to the couple, receipt, card, and pen in hand.

Susan tightened her eyes, set down the wine, and left the gallery. She passed a hundred strangers, faces that recalled no names, not even false memories. Her legs wobbled and she hoped they would carry her to the condo, her fictitious home.

#

Susan had packed her luggage, e-mailed her realtor instructions to sell the condo. She warned agent Meg of her intention to return to writing fiction in which truth was not designed but discovered. She stood on the balcony, a shadow between condo’s glow and moonlight reflected from the water. The waves, laden with sand and shells, swelled then emptied onto the shoreline with exhausted inevitability. As they retreated, they carried Desiree away.

Susan began a note to Rebecca and honest words appeared—failure, pain, fear, guilt. She capitalized LOVE and underlined a promise for them both. *I will not leave you again.*

She scrawled out a farewell to Charlotte and Jane. It would soon seem as if she’d never been there at all.

*Cathryn Shea is the author of four chapbooks, including “It’s Raining Lullabies” (dancing girl press, 2017). “The Secrets Hidden in a Pear Tree” is forthcoming from dancing girl press in 2019. Her poetry has been nominated for Best of the Net and recently appears in Tar River Poetry, Gargoyle, Permafrost, Rust + Moth, Tinderbox, and elsewhere. She served as editor for Marin Poetry Center Anthology and lives in Fairfax, CA.*

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# The Undercover Activity of Poplars

## Cathryn Shea

I caught them this dawn  
blinking their leaves in code.  
The way they touched, I knew  
they were exchanging intimacies.  
Their fluttering entranced me,  
turned pages in my brain and I entered  
this pulp romance of a past lover  
tumbling in oat grass. Chambray shirt  
unbuttoned, me spread like a picnic,  
back sticky with sap.  
Then my poplars let go and tipped their crowns  
in a hasty farewell when you woke up.  
And I said hello to the mounting sun,  
our day just swelling.

*Eric Joseph Scholz is a writer and musician from New Jersey. He is an MFA candidate at William Paterson University and plays bass in the bands A Film In Color <https://afilmincolor.bandcamp.com>, and Heavy Sigh <https://heavysigh.bandcamp.com>.*

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# The Three-Day Bleed

Eric Joseph Scholz

I have this image in my head of Pete stepping off the bus holding his shoes in one hand and his luggage in the other. Inside each shoe is a balled-up sock. The laces of his shoes are undone and tucked under the tongue. On his head, sits one of those dorky white hats with the brim that goes all the way around, like Bob Denver used to wear on Gilligan's Island. This was before the accident, before the bad leg and the chronic pain that, I think, did him in.

The rental house was three blocks away, and the sidewalk was hot. I told Pete he should put his shoes on, but he didn't listen, not until he stepped on a pebble and hurt his foot. I teased him as we walked because the bag he had packed was so much bigger than mine. Everything I needed was either in my knapsack or my fanny pack. I hadn't even brought a pocketbook. I rarely carried one back then, anyway.

I don't remember the name of the town we were in—Barnegat comes to mind, but I know that's not it. It was something cuter, something like Sea Bright, but not Sea Bright. I know there was a lighthouse there, if that helps. We were supposed to climb to the top of it, but things don't always work out the way they are planned.

Since we had gotten off the bus, the smell of brine was in the air, but as we walked to the rental, the smell was getting stronger.

"You should really get a hat before we get to the beach," Pete said. "You don't want to burn."

"It's fine. I only get a little red the first day and then I start to tan. Don't worry about me, what we really need to worry about is getting you a funnel cake. I mean, honestly, you've lived here for what, seven years, and you've never had a funnel cake?"

"Eight."

"Eight years." I repeated that figure back to him. "Eight years in New Jersey and you've never had a funnel cake."

We were quiet as we walked. We had been passing storefronts all along the way, and there were more ahead, as far up the street as I could see. We passed a pharmacy, an old timey tea shop that looked more like an antique store, about two dozen restaurants, maybe more, two different bait shops, a

kayak store, and an art supply store with a little gallery that was partially visible through the glass storefront. I thought how amazing it would be to see something of my own hanging in there with all the real artists. There was even a cute pizzeria that made funnel cakes, but they were the fat, doughy kind, not the thin, shoelace-y kind.

It was a pleasant walk to the rental house despite Pete's initial reluctance to put on his shoes. We knew we were there, before we even saw the number on the mailbox, when we saw an impatient woman spinning a keychain on her pointer finger. We signed a piece of paper without reading it, because, in those days, you could still get away with things like that, and a few seconds later, we were the proud renters of a house for the coming week. The realtor asked us if we had any kids.

No, we didn't have any.

She wanted to know if we had any planned for the future.

"God no," Pete responded. He made the sign of the cross. "I think we're a little young to be thinking about that. My cat keeps me more than busy enough, and Louise here has killed more houseplants than anyone you'll ever meet." He turned to me. "Remember that vine-y thing you brought home? The one you killed in sixteen hours?"

Pete's words hurt, but I knew he didn't mean them to. I've always thought his reluctance to have kids had something to do with the death of his brother, but in nineteen years of marriage that would come, I never asked. I guess that once the kids were born, it really didn't matter anymore. Still, the words hurt. Just because I couldn't take care of a plant, didn't mean I couldn't take care of a human being. I managed to keep myself alive just fine, thanks. "Philodendron. Yes. I remember."

#

We window-shopped the length of the boardwalk until we got to the part with no more stores or games. The last building was a bathroom. I felt a little queasy, but I'd be alright, I thought. I'd been feeling that way for weeks, and nothing had ever come of it. The smell of the funnel cake was what had triggered it, and now that Pete had eaten the entire thing, the smell was gone. I should have been embarrassed walking around with him, what with the way the powdered sugar had formed a white bib on his chest and the way he kept coughing in everyone's face every time he took a bite, but I wasn't. I thought the whole thing was funny, as if Pete was a toddler trying to eat something above his age—like spaghetti.

Pete and I headed out onto the beach where there were rows of big, black stones jutting out from the coastline. The stones were piled two or three high at points, and, even from a distance, you could see how there was greenish, sort of orangey, stuff growing on the side of them. Pete said the stuff was lichens, and that lichens were different from algae and seaweed but that some of them formed symbiotic relationships with algae and seaweed. He

always knew stuff like that.

The rows of stones were evenly spaced—I guessed they broke up the tide or something. I didn't really know what they were for, but I knew I'd really like to paint them one afternoon when there was a really great sunset. I felt a jolt as Pete grabbed my hand and ran. We were in the honeymoon phase back then—not literally—where we were serious about each other but not quite comfortable enough to pass gas in the same room. We could bicker without worrying about a breakup, but we didn't have all that much, yet, to bicker about. The tide was out, so the beach felt like it was about a mile to the water. By the time we stopped, I was out of breath and my body felt heavy, the way it feels the day before you get a cold, or during menstruation.

The rocks looked even bigger at the shore, and we walked toward them, holding hands. My stomach had eased up. I thought it might have been the sea air. When we had gotten close to the big rocks, Pete dove right back into his monologue about the lichens. I wasn't really listening, but his intensity was mesmerizing. I always admired his passion, from the day I met him.

He was walking and talking with his hand hovering inches from the rocks and the lichens. He climbed up onto a low rock. "You can tell the type by the color," he was saying. And then, "Are you even listening?"

"I am. I swear."

Pete offered me his hand and I took it. He helped me up onto the rock. The way he pulled made me feel almost weightless. Sure, I could still buy t-shirts back then from the little-boys section, but he was also deceptively strong for such a skinny guy. Don't get me wrong, he filled out after his accident, but back then, before he gained the weight, if you saw him, you wouldn't think he was particularly strong.

The two of us climbed from rock to rock until we were high up and far out over the water. There was a breeze out here that felt like a gale. The beach was far below us. The sand, the water, even the rocks we were standing on seemed far away. We were only six, maybe seven feet up, but even the slightest shift in perspective has a way of changing things. The sky had gotten higher. The horizon, wider. The water, deeper. The close things, the people on the beach, your problems, they all vanish.

The sun gets hotter too. I could feel it, hot on my skin. Pete was already going pink, despite all the sunscreen. I had a small tube on me, in my fanny pack, and I drew a stripe across each of his cheeks and down his nose with my finger.

"Do I look like the Mona Lisa now?" he said.

The joke was dumb but sweet. It made me laugh. What I mean is, it wasn't the sort of joke that was actually funny; it was the sort of joke you laugh at because it makes you feel good, because you love the person who made it, because he just has a way of making you laugh, no matter what. It

was the sort of joke that's only a joke because it would be too corny to say it as a compliment. Years later, I'd realize he made jokes like that because he had never been any good at giving genuine compliments. He could only say nice things when they were jokes. It bothered me for a long time, but eventually, I would grow to miss it.

Pete was holding his hand out at his side.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Do you feel that?"

"Feel what?"

He knelt down and held his hand out above a wide gap between two rocks, and I did the same. The water was visible deep down in the crack, and cold air was floating up from it. "I always thought only heat was supposed to rise," I said.

"I guess if it's cold enough."

It's funny how you remember certain things, things you feel or things someone says to you. Sometimes they're things so mundane it's almost stupid. That "I guess" response has got to be the most vivid "I guess" I can ever remember hearing.

Then there's the stuff you forget, like how we went from talking about the weather to our future. I asked him what he thought about kids, if he'd like to be a father. Our feet were hanging over the edge of a rock, and his foot was tapping on nothing as he guessed he had never really thought about it, not too seriously anyway. As he supposed that maybe it was just too scary to think about, that he didn't want kids, that he was too young. As he wondered why I asked. As the tide was coming in.

I told him I was just wondering, but I wasn't just wondering—I was late. And not by a little. Late had come and gone and I was squarely in missed period territory. I kept telling myself that it was a fluke, that my body had just forgotten, and that my next one would pick up right where it had left off. I imagined there were lots of reasons for a missed period. Maybe it was stress, or an iron deficiency, or maybe I had developed a thyroid problem. Maybe I had lost weight without even realizing it. Crazier things had happened!

My mother always told me never to turn my back on the ocean, but there was too much on my mind to remember something like that. I was thinking about getting back to the house, about finding a good time to sneak off to the pharmacy to buy a pregnancy test. What would the ensuing conversation with Pete look like?

That's when a big wave came in and sent a pillar of water shooting high over my head. I screamed and slipped and suddenly I was underwater. It felt like the air had suddenly been replaced by powdered glass, and it was rushing up my nose and down my throat. Then the adrenaline must have kicked in because everything slowed down and I was amazed by the bubbles and the green that were all around me.

The next thing I knew, I was being pulled out by the tide. I tried to swim against it, but my arms and legs wouldn't listen. It was as if my muscles had gone completely limp, only I knew they hadn't. The ocean was like a monster, sucking me in just so it could chew me up and spit me back out. A wave crashed and I was propelled forward and into the rocks. I hit hard enough that I gasped and swallowed water, but I knew my body was still in one piece. There were no snaps or cracks. No blood.

I've known a few people with drowning stories and they all start the same way: at five or six years old, their fathers threw them in the lake and told them they better start kicking. (That's how my brother learned to swim). My drowning story is the only one I know that doesn't start this way. I don't know if I should even call it a drowning story. Maybe I should call it a falling story, but that seems like the kind of story an old lady would tell. And sure, this happened more than thirty years ago, but I'm not old enough yet to have a falling story. If there hadn't been the stranger there at the beach to pull me out, then maybe things would have been different. Maybe I would have had a real drowning story, or maybe I wouldn't be around to even have a drowning story to tell.

One second the man's arms were hooking under my armpits, and the next I was above the water, gasping for air. The stranger helped me out of the water. I don't even remember him doing it, but the next thing I remember is being on the beach, panting and coughing. "Slow your breathing," the stranger was saying.

I couldn't understand why Pete was so far away from me, why he was looking sort of at me but also sort of past me. Later on, he would tell me he was scared to get close. That when he saw me fall, he saw his brother drowning all over again. He was embarrassed that a stranger had saved me, that he hadn't saved me himself, but it was the first thing he ever told me about growing up in Belfast. It was the first time I had even heard of The Troubles or Pete's brother, Oisín. I thought it was ironic, or not really ironic, more like coincidental, that Pete's dead brother's name was pronounced the same way as the place I had almost died. Ocean. I never told him.

#

The next day I woke up bleeding. At first, I was relieved. I thought, or maybe hoped, that nearly drowning had jump-started my period, that things would be okay after all. For a few hours, I was actually happy about my almost near-death experience, but then I realized something was wrong. There wasn't one specific thing that told me, but somehow I knew. Like how my mother knew our old farmhouse was burning down and that my grandfather was asleep in it at that very moment, so she called him so the ringing of the telephone would wake him up. I had never been very psychic before that moment, but right then, I knew something was wrong. It was a knowledge that came on like a feeling. Or maybe a feeling that came on like knowledge?

That afternoon, I found a clinic near the rental. It was small and somewhat crowded, but it was close enough that I could walk there while Pete was in the shower. I left a note that I had gone to the pharmacy. The nurse on staff told me I was pregnant and that I was probably having a miscarriage and that I should go to the emergency room for further treatment. There was nothing she could do to help. She was very sorry.

That's when I went to the pharmacy. I knew there was something with vitamin C and miscarriages, so I bought a bottle of vitamin C pills, 500 mg each. I couldn't remember if they were supposed to induce a miscarriage or make the miscarriage easier, but I knew there was a connection.

When I got back to the room, I told Pete about the whole thing, about how the nurse was so nice and didn't even charge me for the office visit. When Pete was quiet, I knew what he was thinking. "The nurse practitioner said that injury and trauma are rarely the cause of miscarriages," I said. "She said most of them are completely random and have nothing to do with anything." I hadn't been sure if I believed her, but as I repeated what she had told me, I thought I sounded like I knew what I was talking about.

"We should go to the hospital," Pete said.

"No, it's okay. She said it would be safe to do it at home." That was a lie. The nurse had said nothing of the sort.

"Are you sure? I think these things can be pretty gory." He hesitated before the word "gory."

"I'm sure. I'm not that far along, so it won't be that bad." More lies. "She told me to take these," I said, taking the vitamin C pills out of my bag. Again, another lie.

For a while, nothing happened. I changed into pajamas, took my vitamin C pills, first one, then two, until, eventually, I came down with a bad case of diarrhea. Every time I got up off the couch, Pete looked up at me as if I was going into labor. "I'm fine," I'd tell him. Or, "It's nothing." Remember, we weren't yet at the point where we could talk about our bodily functions, at least not in concrete terms, anyway. Eventually, I was all emptied out, and there was nothing left inside of me but the baby. I wasn't sure the vitamin C had done its job, but I supposed it had at least done something.

I went to bed and fell asleep like it had been a regular day. The cramps didn't keep me up. Neither did the nausea. It was hardly any worse than sleeping with a regular old period. Then, just before two a.m., I awoke in a sweat. What is it about two a.m. that always sets your body in motion? As I got out of bed, the pain in my stomach had become more than cramps. I wondered if I had taken enough vitamin C, or too much vitamin C, or if I had gotten it mixed up with something else and vitamin C was actually for rickets or scurvy or some other disease that's only for pirates.

I felt stupid. Like down to my core. I didn't know about lichens or what different types of hats or piles of rocks were called, but I didn't really



care either. I'd been embarrassed in math class when the teacher called on me and I didn't know the answer, but I really didn't care about that either. This was different. This was the female body. My body. All these thoughts hit me all at once. I needed to get to the tub. Something told me getting to the tub was the right move. I was confident the warm water would ease the pain.

"Are you alright?"

I didn't jump when he spoke. Even over the gurgle of the faucet, I had known he was behind me. I was leaning over the tub with my hand under the stream of water. "Yeah. I'm good." I wasn't sure yet if that was a lie. We were both quiet and still until the tub had been filled. "Would you mind waiting outside?" I said.

He said okay, that he'd be right outside, and that I wouldn't even need to shout if I needed him. I told him I'd be okay, because right then, I just needed a minute alone. It was odd, but I felt self-conscious about my body in a way I never had before. I knew it was stupid. He had seen me naked before. (Obviously, or we wouldn't have been in this mess). But something about this was different. I was vulnerable and the realization left me feeling embarrassed.

I took off my clothes and slowly lowered myself into the tub. The warm water felt good on my belly. I don't know that it eased the cramps, but it definitely made me feel better about them. Bubbles would have been nice right about then, but I thought that might not be the best idea. Plus, I wasn't sure the rental had them anyway. Looking down at my body, I thought it was amazing that something alive had been inside of me and that it had turned into something dead and how none of it felt real. I wasn't even bleeding anymore.

Then came a pain that almost made me scream. The water around me turned bright red, and then thick, black spots collected at the surface. It was only the beginning.

Pete was next to me.

"When did you get in here?" I asked.

He didn't answer, but instead took my hand. There was blood on it, but he took it like it was nothing.

The water got cooler and the pain kept coming in waves, so we added more hot water. It helped. I liked the water hot, but I was sweating. Without me even asking, Pete said he'd be right back, and returned with a cold washcloth. He held it to my forehead. I was glad not to have to hold it myself. I didn't really know it at the time, but those waves of pain were contractions. I've had two children since, and in some ways, these were worse than the real thing. It wasn't so much the pain (the pain from the real thing was so much worse); it was the uncertainty of what was happening, my general lack of experience, the knowledge that if anything went wrong, neither of us would be of any use. Pete could run climate control, but that was his limit. Still, I couldn't think of anyone else I'd rather have next to me.

When the whole thing was finally over and the sun was just starting to rise, I fished around the tub for the last mass of flesh that I felt myself pass. It was somewhere between floating and sinking, and it had the general shape of a creature. There were two beady little black dots on its face that looked more like blood-swollen ticks than eyes that might have been used to see the world.

Pete got me a plastic baggy from the kitchen, and I placed the baby inside. I wasn't even sure, at the time, if I should call it a baby. It was more like a dead tadpole than a full-blown human. And yet, I still felt like it was something I couldn't simply flush down the toilet. "Can you put this in the freezer?" I asked. I didn't know what else to do with it. I thought maybe I could bury it when we got home. "And would you close the door behind you?" I added. "I want to wash off."

Pete did as I asked. He closed the door and put the baby away. I drained the tub and rinsed off, knowing Pete was right on the other side of the door, probably with his ear pressed right up against it. So I was quiet as I stood under the shower, rinsing the blood from my body. When I was clean enough, I got a paper cup from the medicine cabinet and used it to scoop up the solids that had started clogging up the drain and flushed them down the toilet. Cleaning up after myself felt like the right thing to do. It felt like an ending.

#

The bleeding lasted for two more days before tapering off. It was the three-day bleed, as I would later refer to it in my head, never out loud. People would think I was deranged if they heard me talking like that. In fact, it was rarely ever brought up after that. I never even told my mom, not until years later anyway, and the only time Pete and I ever discussed it again was after we were married and I was pregnant with our first son, Liam. When I got pregnant with Conor, the two of us never discussed it, and I only mentioned it to the doctor.

On the fifth day of our vacation, the fourth after the incident and the third after the miscarriage, I finally felt well enough to go for a walk on my own. I don't know that I had been physically incapable of walking, but I do know I didn't want to try. But that day was different. I woke up and felt like I needed to get out. The first place I went was the little art store with the gallery in the front. I bought a set of cheap watercolors, a bottle of permanent black ink, and some good paper, taking time to linger in the gallery.

It was an overcast day, but I spent the afternoon on the beach with the big rocks, which Pete had told me were called jetties, taking in the spots of sun as they appeared. (Apparently, it had rained on and off the past couple days.) I experimented with the paper and the paint, mixing in different amounts of water, making splotches of different intensities, running through pages, until, eventually, I wound up with something that resembled the beach. I used a fine brush dipped in ink to paint in the details and to fill the shadows

on the dark side of the jetties.

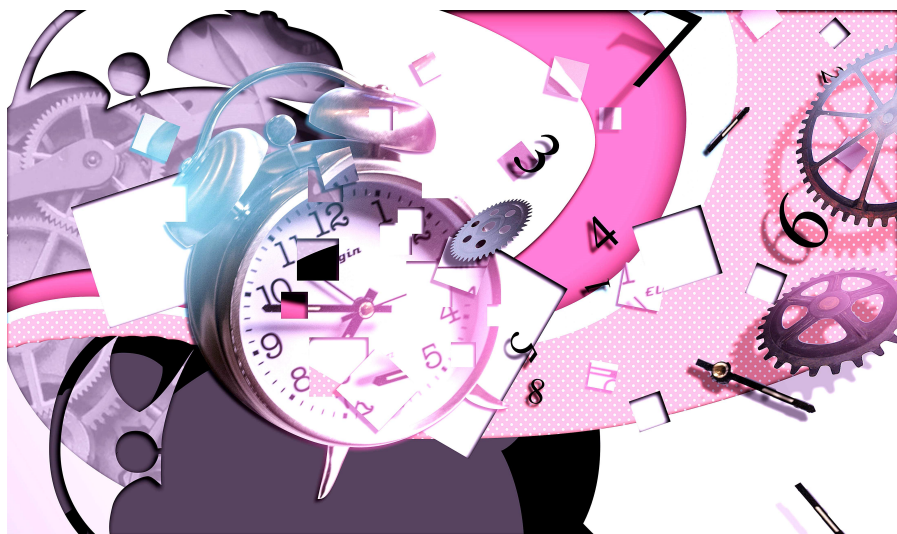
I waited for sunset, hoping there would be a show of pinks and yellows. I wanted it to be the kind of sunset where the sky looks like there's a net holding it above the Earth, but there was nothing. There was grey, which gave way to sort of a salmon color and then navy. That's the way it happened, so that's the way I painted it. It wasn't very good, but it was the best I could do.

**Janice Sunhee Roh** is a senior at the Seoul International School in South Korea. Her previous works have been published in literary magazines such as the *Daphne Review* and the *Claremont Review*. She is seventeen years old and enjoys eating delicious foods and listening to a variety of music.

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## Society



**Time**

*Stephanie Staab is an American poet and translator living in the Black Forest, Germany. She received her B.A. in Creative Writing from Bard College and her Master's degree in Translation studies from the University of Edinburgh. Her work has appeared in the San Pedro River Review, Eunoia Review and Tuck Magazine.*

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# Gennesaret

## Stephanie Staab

Among the thousand claims of her miracles:

healing tumors and fractured wrists

menstrual cramps, dementia

a single gesture that calmed a seething crowd.

She passed through hometowns unnoticed

as a vision always is

in this way, she could almost live as others did:

A swim in the ocean during the heat wave

amaryllis in her bicycle basket.

What people prayed to

wasn't precisely her.

She didn't save entire lives

but she might find your grandmother

who had been missing since the storm.

In Ajaccio they called her Tsigane

in Alabama, Huggin' Molly.

We never said *I saw her*.

Belief happened in a private moment

as when you are alone in your home

and the thunder claps so loud

that you stand from your chair for no reason.

*K.B. Carle lives outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and earned her MFA from Spalding University's Low-Residency program in Kentucky. When she is not exploring the realms of speculative, jazz, and historical fiction, K.B. avidly pursues misspelled words, botched plot lines, and rudimentary characters. Her stories have appeared in FlashBack Fiction, The Molotov Cocktail, The Cabinet of Heed, Pidgeonholes, Barrelhouse and elsewhere. She can be found online at <http://kbcarle.wordpress.com/> or on Twitter @kbcarle.*

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# Paper Darts

K.B. Carle

A paper man, sculpted from headlines and crossword puzzles, sits at a matchbox table reading the small letters scratched across a pink post-it-note glued between his nubbed hands. His companion, made from classified ads with curled slivers of coupons for hair, gazes out the Rickertt's' kitchen window, nubs glued to the surface of her yellow post-it apron. She is lost in thought, admiring Mrs. Rickertt's garden or sneaking glances at the mailman as he struggles to open the mailbox. At least, this is what Mrs. Rickertt thinks as she intrudes on the paper couple. She plucks the woman from her perch, envious of how peaceful the two were before she entered, and disrupts their calm morning by forcing the paper wife to be by her paper husband on the kitchen table.

Mrs. Rickertt yawns, fingers lightly tapping her recently glossed lips. No time to be jealous of these paper creations, she thinks, listening to Mr. Rickertt's morning coughs and grumblings, which she has grown accustomed to during her forty years of marriage. Both take ten steps, Mr. Rickertt to the bathroom and Mrs. Rickertt to the cabinet then to the stove to prepare breakfast. The pipes gurgle, and the house awakens as she hums a made up song to match the buzzing of a bee outside the window. The doctor said a routine may help as Mr. Rickertt's mind starts to deteriorate. Mrs. Rickertt looks at the paper people over her shoulder, wishing she had known when her husband's memory first started to fade that they would be part of his decline.

#

The paper people started to appear sometime after Mr. Rickertt decided to take morning walks to clear his head, though he really stops at the pond to talk to himself. Mrs. Rickertt knows this because, after convincing herself that it is impossible for a wife of her age to stalk her ailing husband, she followed him. Seeing him stare out into the distance, running his fingers through his thick hair, reminded her of when they met in the library and

whispered between bookshelves when she was twenty and he was thirty-one, marrying later that year. At sixty, Mrs. Rickertt can't remember the moment she fell in love with her husband but now at seventy-one, she wants to believe it is only natural for a man to start talking to himself.

#

"Good morning." Mr. Rickertt kisses the side of her cheek.

She places her palm against his freshly shaved cheek, anything to keep him from facing the paper figures.

Mrs. Rickertt places all of his favorites—scrambled eggs, toast cut into triangles, no crust, buttered on both sides, cheese grits, and two sausage links—in front of him as Mr. Rickertt takes his seat and searches for the morning paper. Mrs. Rickertt sits beside him and holds her breath when he notices the paper man and woman.

"The paper—"

"Seems they beat us to it." She forces a smile but the joke remains suspended in the air. When he reaches into his pants pocket, Mrs. Rickertt places her hand on his shoulder. "Let's enjoy the morning."

She feels his shoulder tense.

"Did you make them?"

The answer twists in her stomach. Mrs. Rickertt can barely draw a stick figure without a misshapen head or decapitated limb.

"Did you make them?" Mr. Rickertt whispers, taking her hand in his and kissing her fingertips.

"No." She wonders when he creates them.

"Then I have to write it down."

Removing the red notebook and pen from his pocket, he starts scribbling notes about the paper man and woman. Mrs. Rickertt bites her lip, finishes her bagel, and gnaws at the skin around her thumb nail.

Mr. Rickertt pushes his empty plate away and pats where a mountain of a stomach should be. "Think I'll go for my walk now." He picks up the paper man, making him dance towards her. "Think he wants to come?"

"They shouldn't leave the house."

"You're right." He places the man back on the table. "He looks so comfortable."

He wraps his arms around her blowing hot air into her ear. Anything to make her laugh even though she hates being tickled or anything close to it. She flicks his nose. He holds her closer until she kisses him on the cheek. Satisfied, Mr. Rickertt pats his pockets, pulls out his phone and shows it to her.

"Just in case."

Mrs. Rickertt nods and straightens her dress as the front door gently closes. While he is out, she will look for the number the doctor gave her, the one for window bar installation.



On Saturday, the Rickertt's daughter, Charlotte, bursts through their front door spilling journals, newspapers, magazines, pencils, and pens all over the floor. While Mr. Rickertt greets Charlotte with a pat on the head and a half smile, Mrs. Rickertt wonders why her once clean home is now being flooded by paper when all she asked her daughter to do was bring over one pocket-sized notebook. She should have known. The girl was never any good at following directions, especially if they came from her mother.

Mrs. Rickertt remembers a time when her daughter was just Charlotte and her husband was just a quiet man, uninterested in anything happening outside of their home that he could not read about in the paper. A man who sat in his chair with his legs crossed trying to solve the daily crossword puzzles or complaining about how journalists could never spot and jot a few notes about any of the good in the world. How, when her daughter was six, Mr. Rickertt would make her fly within arm's reach just above his head not caring who saw. Charlotte was the girl who would bring out the irrational, reckless child that settled deep inside Mr. Rickertt. Who could laugh for hours about the way he pushed up his glasses while onlookers covered their ears. Play hide-and-seek under every rug in their home until guests tripped over her and, at times, resting her head in Mrs. Rickertt's lap, face nuzzling into her stomach, while those walking by whispered from the corners of their mouths into their audience's ears.

But now Mrs. Rickertt is forced to face this young woman declaring that she is to be called Billie, growing tired of last month's name, Raeven, believing that a person's name represents who they are and is the gateway to a memorable first impression. Mrs. Rickertt finds it ridiculous that her daughter, at twenty-eight, is still trying to figure out what kind of impression she wishes to make. She notices the holes in the knees of her daughter's jeans, most likely from trampling through the woods, one of her unfortunate hobbies. Stains on her sweatshirt from, she hopes, old food she has either forgotten about or does not care to know its new location after missing her mouth. Hair pulled into what looks more like a nest on the top of her head with a faded pink rubber band holding it in place.

By sundown, Mr. Rickertt excuses himself to his study, nearly tripping over Charlotte's gifts. Mrs. Rickertt sips her coffee, watching her daughter stare sadly into her lemonade. The girl should realize by now that her father prefers quiet to her constant jabbering.

"He's getting worse, isn't he?" Charlotte whispers into her glass.

Mrs. Rickertt walks to the trash can and pulls out her husband's latest creation, a paper man made of envelopes and postage stamps with a dollar bill for a fishing rod. "Found him rocking in the sink this morning."

"He rocks?"

She places him on the table's surface, her finger lightly pushes the rim

of his cap as he rocks back and forth.

"He's so cute!" Her daughter squeals.

"Charlotte," Mrs. Rickertt rubs her forehead, "please be serious."

"It's Billie." She flips the small figure upside down. "I didn't know Dad could do this."

"He can't, this must be—"

"A psychological thing?"

"Charlotte—"

"Maybe there's a message in each one?"

"Enough."

"And why a—"

"Charlotte," Mrs. Rickertt growls, gripping her daughter's arm. "Your father is sick." Now is not the time for her fantasies, questioning what the sculptures could mean. This is what her daughter always does when she is afraid to face something. After the dog died when Charlotte was five, she asked whether or not animals could teleport into different bodies, running up to any animal she could find. Over scrutinizing clothes to avoid wearing them, feigning shock when caught in a lie.

Better to accept this now so they can plan accordingly. So Mrs. Rickertt can have someone close by to depend on.

Charlotte hugs the fisherman to her chest. "It's Billie."

Mrs. Rickertt shakes her head, releases her daughter's arm, and goes to check on her husband.

#

In September, a month after Charlotte, then Billie, now Roxanne, resigns herself to calling on occasion after taking the fisherman sculpture home, Mrs. Rickertt is cleaning her husband's study when she opens one of his journals. The pages are filled with drawings of cities, stories tucked away in the corners of each page, and two boys. One boy always has red hair with a loose fitting tie hanging in front of his button up shirt. The other has black hair, bangs covering his eyes, with a scar along his cheek. He appears on the right side of each page, wearing a dark green sweatshirt, hood always up, plaid shirt peeking from underneath.

The boys appear on almost every page in every journal that their daughter once scattered in her entranceway. Sometimes it is the two of them, scaling buildings, dangling from words, or relaxing on the edge of a poem written in Mr. Rickertt's slanted lettering. When did he start writing poems? When did he start drawing? Mrs. Rickertt discovers that, when the scarred boy appears alone, he is always on the right side of the page in the foreground, beckoning the viewer to join him, one arm always extended toward the scene ahead while the other remains half drawn on the bottom of the page.

While Mrs. Rickertt stares at a scene in which the scarred boy is

tugging on the edge of the right page with great difficulty, “Critique” being the only word on the left, Mr. Rickertt’s mumblings remind her that she is sitting on the floor in the middle of his study while her husband is alone upstairs.

At the base of the steps, she hears him let out a long, deep laugh that she has never heard before. Down the hall from their bedroom, he starts giving compliments. With her ear pressed against their bedroom door now, she swears Mr. Rickertt is trying to deliver the punch line of a joke.

“Don’t say that, Maddox.”

Who’s Maddox?

“We don’t get stuck.”

She opens the door.

Mr. Rickertt stares at his reflection in the mirror hanging on their bedroom wall. The window is closed, she cannot see his cell phone, and the paper sculptures are absent. She reaches for him, caressing the surface of his shaking hand. He blinks, shakes his head lightly before his green eyes find hers.

“Are you alright?” She grips his hand knowing the answer.

“My hair,” he waves his free hand around his head, biting his lower lip.

“Do you want your comb?”

“Yes,” he sighs, sitting on the edge of their bed. She tries to move but her next question buckles her legs.

“Who is Maddox?”

He raises his head, a look she doesn’t recognize flashes in his eyes, the same look Charlotte gave her when she spanked her for the first and last time.

“He is—” his arms fall between his legs, chin resting against his chest, “—was my best friend.”

“Where is he?”

Mr. Rickertt rests his head on her pillow. “I don’t know.” He kicks off his shoes, pulls out the notebook and pen from his pocket, and turns his back to her.

She has never seen her husband so lost.

#

The talks with Maddox, nicknamed Maddie, become more frequent along with the elaborate drawings and figures. When Mrs. Rickertt wakes up to her husband drinking coffee and talking to Maddie in front of the mirror, she spends the night in his study, committing every drawing of the scarred faced boy to memory.

The boy never shows his eyes. He’s always drawing, painting, or taking pictures.

He never sculpts. He never writes. He never smiles.

By the end of September, Mrs. Rickertt stops her husband from going on his morning walks. Since he caught her going through one of his journals, he leaves the shower water running, keeping his talks with Maddie private. The truth, he offered to show her one of his notebooks in hopes of learning something. Even admitted to keeping some old journals in storage as a way to get rid of a past where life was harder but beautiful. Whispered that he was happier living in that world then...

But before he can finish, his eyes glazed over and his head lulled to the side.

When he returned to her, he snatched the journal away, claiming she was stealing his ideas.

The next morning, Mrs. Rickertt wakes up early to prepare his breakfast only to discover the hallway covered with paper boats and planes that have crash landed at the base of the stairs sometime in the night. She sits on the bottom step, removes her slippers, allowing her bare feet to disappear beneath the pile of planes, tears soaking the color of her nightgown.

#

They sit in the living room, Mr. Rickertt in his arm chair cleaning the dirt from underneath his fingernails. Mrs. Rickertt squirms in her spot on the couch, her daughter's copy of *The Odyssey* resting in her lap, wondering if Charlotte has always been a plain kind of pretty.

Mrs. Rickertt cannot help but stare at the way her daughter's knees press together, no longer covered in scabs and dirt but clean with the skin drawn over bone in the same way she tries to draw the hem of her dress to hide them. There are no stains, a scent of lavender stirs in the space between them as her daughter's hair grazes her shoulders in waves.

Charlotte is quiet; the sight of her lips rubbing together makes Mrs. Rickertt lean forward in case her daughter is speaking in low murmurs that only her husband can hear. The closer she gets, the more she remembers the little girl climbing anything she could tuck the tips of her rubber soled shoes into, always ready to move to the next adventure. Instead, she sees a stranger taking short glimpses of her husband, teeth now tugging at her lower lip until they latch on to a piece of skin and peel it away. A woman who sits before Mrs. Rickertt extending a hand toward her husband and letting it shiver in the air before withdrawing. Whose long eyelashes shed curled black strands every time she blinks, settling in her seat on top of the coffee table leaving the three of them in silence again.

"Your mother worries," he says then licks whatever he has found off his thumbnail.

Mrs. Rickertt worries because more of the sculptures are appearing. Worries because the conversations with Maddox are getting longer and the laughs are growing louder. And she worries because she finds herself sitting next to a man who was once her husband, a caring man who litters his visions

around her home.

She wonders where her place is with this stranger in a world of his creation, and she worries that her place may no longer exist.

Mrs. Rickertt opens what remains of Homer's epic and passes the book to her daughter. In one of his dazes, Mr. Rickertt gutted the book to create paper moths, roaches, and what Mrs. Rickertt assumes is a Praying Mantis within the book's pages. Flowers now bloom in the middle of Odysseus' journey, her daughter's careful notes throughout the book now add a pop of color to the winged insects.

"It gets worse." Mrs. Rickertt swats her daughter's hand away from strumming one of the wings before collecting the dictionaries whose pages contain the profiles of strangers. Old Bibles which she hunted for in antique stores back when she was a collector are butchered into spiraled 3D wastelands. Magazines containing the articles she loved to read are chopped and glued together to form a small city complete with King Kong jet skiing down skyscrapers and Godzilla smoking a ship while lounging against a bridge. "I have every reason to worry."

Her daughter's gaze shifts to her husband. "Do you remember—"

"No," he murmurs. Mrs. Rickertt takes her seat on the couch and rests her hand on his knee. "Your mother worries." Mr. Rickertt says to his daughter's hand.

"And he's still drawing?" Charlotte glances at Mrs. Rickertt while tracing the never-ending spirals.

"Yes." Mr. Rickertt clears his throat and nudges her knee with his elbow. "No, Maddie does the drawing."

"I don't draw." He joins their daughter in tracing the spirals, laughing when they bump into each other.

"How are—"

Before Charlotte can finish, Mr. Rickertt stands, collects the variety of books, and rushes to his study.

"Good to see you." He says over his shoulder before slamming the door.

Charlotte rests her head in her mother's lap, face nuzzling her stomach. Mrs. Rickertt feels her dress become damp and entangles her fingers in her daughter's hair. She describes the drawings – even pulls out one of the notebooks she tucked between the couch cushions as evidence – and reads some of her husband's poems and micro stories.

"Here." She jerks her knee, getting her daughter to raise her head. Though the movement is one of urgency, her legs shaking after sitting for so long, her voice is soft. "This one's my favorite so far."

Charlotte wipes her eyes with the sleeves of her sweatshirt cut to expose her wrists. The two boys appear on their respective pages. Ahead of them, drawn in the distance, are big clouds casting shadows over a city, cars

stuck in unending lines of traffic. Her daughter points out the varied actions of the people, a man flashing his butt to his neighbor, a boy and his dog sunbathing on the roof, but Mrs. Rickertt notices that Charlotte never mentions the fact that the two boys are throwing darts, popping the clouds.

"I want you to go to our storage unit." Mrs. Rickertt closes the book, carefully organizing her directions in her head. "Collect all the paper."

"There's more?"

"I don't know. Your father—" she watches as a paper plane glides from the cracked door of her husband's study and lands in Charlotte's lap. "Your father seems to think so."

The plane reveals a picture of a girl aiming a slingshot loaded with a Barbie doll's head at a lemon dangling from a branch. Mrs. Rickertt tucks a curl behind her daughter's ear. She was always so destructive, but clever.

Her daughter mouths what Mrs. Rickertt perceives to be "thank you" in the study's direction before the door clicks.

"I'll find them." Charlotte presses the drawing to her chest.

#

After she hugs her daughter for too long and meanders to the kitchen to prepare dinner, Mrs. Rickertt steps in front of the study's door. Her fingers play with the corner of the final notebook of slips her husband wrote in, tucked away in her pocket.

When her husband becomes quiet on the other side of the door, she pulls out the notebook and reads the final entry.

*October (?)*

*Learned 2 things:*

*1. I have a daughter*

*2. I am losing—*

The final word is gone, stolen by erasure shavings and masked with ink.

#

He calls her by the wrong name the same day he refuses to eat his scrambled eggs. Mrs. Rickertt hums and fixes his plate.

"That's a nice song." He kisses her cheek and tries to hum along, lowering himself into his seat.

"How did you sleep?"

"I didn't."

The final note in her song never emerges. She faces him and sees his cheeks redden. His right leg bounces, and he glances at her before becoming absorbed in something else.

"I made you something," he stutters.

Mrs. Rickertt closes her eyes, images of the paper people, boats, and planes appear in the darkness.

"We should eat first." Better to handle these things on a full stomach.

She places his plate in front of him, notices how his face twists, nose scrunching and lips drawing up until his teeth show.

“What’s wrong?”

Mr. Rickertt picks up his fork. “I hate scrambled eggs,” he says, then pushes them to the side.

“Oh, then how do you like them?”

“I don’t like eggs. You know that, Tessa.”

The name passes between his lips so easily Mrs. Rickertt almost believes it’s hers.

“Why?”

“I told you.” Sticky fingers grasp hers and Mrs. Rickertt no longer knows which would be worse, seeing more sculptures or being called by the wrong name again. “My father made me eat them raw. Fifteen years of that and nobody would be able to stand them.”

His grip tightens but all Mrs. Rickertt can hear is the contradiction in the only fact he has ever told her about his father, that he left when Mr. Rickertt was young. Yet, the man reaching into his coat pocket down the hall had a father who stayed long enough to feed him raw eggs for fifteen years. That someone named Tessa knows this man that caresses her hand and hums in the morning.

Tessa, who loves a bouquet of paper lilies made from Langston Hughes’ poems, each dabbed with a light pink center.

Mr. Rickertt places the flowers on the table and kneels beside her when she refuses to accept them. “You don’t like them?”

She doesn’t know how to answer. Yes, they are beautiful and Mrs. Rickertt wants to say she likes them but the bouquet resting on her kitchen table is not hers to like. She picks up the flowers and rubs her nose on the carefully curved petals, an act that seems to thrill Mr. Rickertt, the biggest smile she has ever seen spreading across his face.

If they have a scent then she can believe they are real.

“We never get stuck.” Mr. Rickertt smiles.

That his excitement is real and the sculptures, drawings, and conversations are real. That his love for her is real.

“We just stumble.”

She inhales glue and paper.

“But we never get stuck.”

She turns to him, caresses his cheek, the prickles of his patchy beard rub against her palm as he nuzzles it.

“Who’s Tessa?” She can ignore Maddox but not the woman whose advice he follows.

He stares at her for a moment, face twisting. “You—”

“That’s not my name.”

Mr. Rickertt scratches his chin before withdrawing to his seat. He

picks at the cold scrambled eggs on his plate.

When she asks again, he tells her he isn't hungry.

At night, Mr. Rickertt allows Tessa to choose the movie, wrapping his arm around her shoulder and pulling her close. He tells Tessa how he wants his hair cut. Asks Tessa to read over his poems and stories. Tessa knows what to say when Maddie, who Tessa calls Maddox because she despises nicknames, is being stubborn. Tessa is allowed to sit in the study as Mr. Rickertt works, convinces him to eat scrambled eggs, and even receives an invitation to join him in the shower.

While Mrs. Rickertt enjoys just being wanted by her husband again.

#

After one of his many conversations with Maddox in their bathroom mirror, Mrs. Rickertt asks again.

"Who is Tessa?"

Mr. Rickertt climbs into bed. "I don't know."

She turns off the light and pulls the covers over her shoulders. "I miss my husband."

A hand finds her in the darkness.

In the middle of the night she wakes to the glow of the light in the hallway. Mr. Rickertt is gone, the indent of his body cold. Mrs. Rickertt tries to remember the last time she tip-toed anywhere, especially in her own house. Not since her daughter's eighth Christmas, but even then she was too loud. At the top of the steps she sees the light in Mr. Rickertt's study, the door cracked open.

She doesn't need to go far to know he is talking to Maddox, his voice soft and hurried compared to the firm and calculated tones he uses with her.

"I'm worried."

Mrs. Rickertt lowers herself on the middle step, back pressed against the cool wall.

"I've tried everything."

She hears him throw something, spit what sounds like "fuck you" though she has never heard him curse.

"She doesn't know who she is."

In that moment, Mrs. Rickertt decides to invite her daughter back over tomorrow, that their child with his features may be enough to erase Tessa, before going to bed again.

#

But when Charlotte arrives dragging a trash bag behind her, Mr. Rickertt politely asks Tessa who she is.

"It's Charlotte, Dad."

Mrs. Rickertt grinds her teeth, tries to shatter each one to make up for her selfish mistake.

"We don't have any children." Mr. Rickertt wraps his arm around



Mrs. Rickertt's shoulder.

"Mom?"

For a moment, Mrs. Rickertt wonders what Tessa would do.

"Don't you have some pieces due today?" Her husband and daughter stare at her. "You know how Maddox gets."

Mr. Rickertt nods and kisses her cheek, glances at Charlotte, and retreats to his study. When the door clicks, Mrs. Rickertt embraces her daughter.

They hide away in her bedroom, Mrs. Rickertt closing the shades while Charlotte leaves the door cracked. They leave a piece of paper in the hall to stall him in case he comes upstairs, his urge to sculpt and fold now spreading to paper towels and tissues. Charlotte removes her shoes and crosses her legs on the bed while Mrs. Rickertt allows her legs to dangle. Trash bag between them, mother and daughter search through Mr. Rickertt's papers.

They start with old clippings of comics glued to the insides of school books with jokes written in the margins. Mrs. Rickertt learns that her husband was terrible at spelling, a poorly written poem scrawled on the back of a spelling test with a red "D" in the center.

Charlotte points out that the black-haired boy doesn't appear until Mr. Rickertt transitions to notebooks. Together, they find drawings of coffee cups created from words, two boys back to back where the seams meet in the notebook, one whose eyes reveal a trailer surrounded by trees, discarded toys, a shopping cart, and radios, while the other envisions a house on the edge of a cliff, waves crashing into the rocks below.

By the time the drawings appear in color, Maddox has his signature scar and a woman with hazelnut skin and golden eyes appears. She starts in the background, in drawings of cities and scenes titled after books. By the time Charlotte discovers the browning paper flowers, Tessa's portraits take up entire pages, each accompanied by messages of love or yearning. The final image they find is the same Mrs. Rickertt discovered before, Maddox and her husband aiming darts at clouds over a city surrounded by traffic. Only this time, Tessa is with them and the darts are real, sculpted from paper.

Her daughter reaches in and pulls out a handful of paper darts. "I wonder what happened."

"He's in no condition to tell."

"He seems happy."

However, Mrs. Rickertt is selfish and miserable. She refuses to allow her husband to approach their daughter like an unwelcomed guest. Because forty years should mean that a wife knows everything about her husband, that they learned to love each other in that time and, not once, did she cause him to feel so dejected that he kept this amazing talent and his tenderness from her.

Because she can't become the woman he loves or the best friend he

finds in his reflection.

“This can’t continue.”

#

In December Mrs. Rickertt removes all the mirrors from the house, leaving the one in his study for last. In January, she hides all his journals in the television stand, on the top shelf of their closet, allowing her daughter to take a few to their storage unit, though Mrs. Rickertt knows she takes them home instead.

February is filled with Mrs. Rickertt reading short stories while her husband reclines in his chair. During the bad days, they sit together, Mr. Rickertt sighing while she reads. During the good days, he watches her and tries to mimic the way her mouth moves before asking what the words mean. She rinses his toothbrush when he forgets it’s not meant to brush his hair. Says she wants to spell four letter words in his back while he bathes, an excuse to be there, to make sure he doesn’t fall, forget to turn the water off, or let it drain.

#

Mrs. Rickertt returns from grocery shopping on a Tuesday afternoon to find the front door of her house open. She stumbles inside, knowing she left Mr. Rickertt in a deep sleep. The entrance way is covered with coats, broken glass, and pens. Broken pencils litter the upstairs hallway.

“Honey!” Please let him recognize her voice.

Something shatters in his study, a small whimper grows into a moan. She opens the door, choking on the breath she inhaled too quickly. He is swaying in the center of papers as they float down around him, a bookshelf lying at his feet.

“Honey,” she gasps.

Mr. Rickertt turns to her, fists clenched and pale. “Where!”

His scream almost knocks her over.

“Are you—”

“Maddox.” Mr. Rickertt bangs his fists on the surface of his desk.

“Where—”

“Let’s sit down.”

“He’s mad at me.”

“Nobody’s mad.”

“He took them.” Mr. Rickertt grasps her shoulders and she feels her bones rub together. “The journals.”

Mrs. Rickertt sees the sweat mixing with his snot as it passes over his lips, his eyes red and puffy. He whines, head lowering in the space between them.

“Sculptures, planes, boats, darts. Gone.”

“Darts?”

“I need the darts,” he mutters. “I need them.”

“Why?”

He raises his head, green eyes staring at her but still searching for something beyond. “So you remember Tessa.”

She loses him amongst the papers he throws, his desperate cries for Maddox. She kneels in front of the stand, careful of the television knocked from its place, and pulls out the journal with the three characters throwing paper darts.

“Here.” She holds the open page in front of her face to hide her tears.

The journal disappears from her grasp and is replaced with one of the short story collections she reads to him. His hand is warm as it takes hers, guiding her to the living room. They sit together on the couch, Mr. Rickertt resting his head in her lap.

“Who am I?” Her fingers drag against the book’s surface.

He takes her hand in his, kissing the tips of her fingers.

*Amanda Moore's poetry has appeared in journals and anthologies including ZZZYZVA, Cream City Review, Tahoma Literary Review, Best New Poets, and Mamas and Papas: On the Sublime and Heartbreaking Art of Parenting, and she is the recipient of writing awards from The Writing Salon, Brush Creek Arts Foundation, and The Saltonstall Foundation for the Arts. She received her MFA from Cornell University, where she served as Managing Editor for EPOCH magazine and a lecturer in the John S. Knight Writing Institute. A high school English teacher, Amanda lives by the beach with her husband and daughter in the Outer Sunset neighborhood of San Francisco.*

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# Curls

## Amanda Moore

The body especially holds its grudges:  
bruises for the small jostlings  
    thigh on table corner  
    thumb-tight grip of wrist  
and scars to mark larger transgressions:  
    surgeries, knife-wound,  
    slice and stab

Its language is exact and exacting:  
cellulite and stretch mark,  
sunspot, mole, lump and node,  
worn-out joints and leaky valves. We struggle  
against our own embodiment,  
age and decay revenge  
for not yet finding  
    the path to eternity.

For a year I took poison  
against death, let every part of me suffer  
in the name of cure.

When my body let me have my hair again,  
it came back curled:  
calyxed and spiraled,  
unrecognizable each time  
my reflection surfaced in a window,  
a mirror above the sink,  
a photo on your phone.  
Reproach and reminder: how I circled  
back to harm on a loop,  
a carousel of anguish  
I wear now to frame my new face,  
its creases and bloat,  
the body keeping track  
of what's been done to it.

*Evan James Sheldon's work has appeared in CHEAP POP, Ghost City Review, Pithead Chapel, and Roanoke Review, among others. He is an Assistant Editor for F(r)iction and an Outreach Assistant for Brink Literary Project.*

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# An American Fire

Evan James Sheldon

The farmer began to suspect the scarecrow was moving after he had fired the last of the help. His crop had withered and withered over the years, until it was only a few acres of sickly corn, black kernels sprinkled throughout every cob like rotten teeth. Only the crows seemed to want to eat his corn, and they were going to run him out of what little business he could muster.

Most of the workers had left on their own accord, seeing that no money could be made. The farmer's youngest son remained because he was still too young, too slow, to leave for the army, or the city, or god-knows-where, like the farmer's other children. The farmer's wife had passed during childbirth with the youngest, and if the farmer was honest, he had never forgiven the boy and didn't see that day coming anytime soon. They were newly alone on the farm.

At first, the farmer liked that the scarecrow was moving. There were new-fangled scarecrows that flailed about, scaring off anything that would come near, but the farmer couldn't afford some automated contraption. So, when he saw it move, just a swing of the arm and a tilt of the head, he smiled, and hoped the others would begin to move soon as well.

Over the next couple of days, the other scarecrows began to twitch and shrug, and the farmer could not believe his good luck. The crows circled and circled but never landed on his crop. Maybe he would be able to pull in enough sickly corn to reseed properly next April? Maybe he could start selling some at those city street markets, claim organic, specialized corn and sell it at double to hipsters who didn't know any better?

That night the farmer slaughtered a pig, and he and his boy ate and ate, and he didn't know if he had ever seen such a smile on the boy's face. It had been a small, thin pig, but the fat still ran down their chins in rivulets. The fat tasted even better after living lean for so long. The fat crackled in the flame like fireworks.

The next day, the farmer woke to find the scarecrow, the first scarecrow to move, several yards closer to the house. He felt hungover from the food, sluggish and dim, and he tried to dismiss the thought. But it nagged at him, and in the early afternoon, he sent the boy to move the scarecrow back

into position.

The boy normally would have done whatever he asked, the moment he asked it, just happy to be spoken to, but he wouldn't go near the scarecrow. *They're just hay men*, yelled the farmer from his front porch. *They're filled with nothing but hay. They're filled with nothing.*

But the boy wouldn't go. He cringed and wept, like the farmer was asking him to kiss a corpse, begging not to go out among the stalks.

The farmer left him there in the dirt and went to do the job himself. But as he approached it, and even though it was momentarily unmoving, he found it off-putting. The farmer kept picturing the way it had swayed and jerked and shrugged. The sun was beginning to set. He might as well wait until morning and get at all the scarecrows, resituate the lot of them. The farmer turned and walked to the house and felt eyes on his back. He didn't bother to look at the boy who was still crying.

The next morning the scarecrow had almost made it out of the closest field. It swung and shuddered and lurched forward bit by bit. The farmer told the boy to go feed the animals, but the boy refused. When the farmer picked him up and tried to force him outside, the boy screamed and fought, scrambling to stay inside. But the farmer was stronger. He held the boy tight despite his flailing and took him straight over to the moving scarecrow and pressed the shaking boy upon the hay-stuffed clothing.

*See it is nothing. It is filled with nothing.*

The boy went slack in the farmer's arms, and the farmer dropped him to the dirt. The boy leapt up and ran away, away from the fields, away from the farm, away from the farmer. The farmer didn't bother to chase the boy, knowing the boy would return. He had nowhere else to go. Neither of them did.

The farmer eyed the scarecrow for a long time, as if staring at it would let him know it, understand it, own it. After a moment, he realized he was staring at it the same way he stared at the boy. He picked the scarecrow up and placed it back in the field.

That night, the farmer couldn't sleep. The boy still hadn't returned. He lit a pipe on the porch and tried to calm himself. It was a cold night, and snow began to fall. As he smoked, he watched the scarecrow shudder to life, and begin to slouch its way toward the farmhouse.

The farmer puffed quickly on the pipe until it glowed a deep red in the darkness and snow. He walked out to the scarecrow and shoved the pipe into its abdomen. It took a moment, and then the flames spread. The immolated scarecrow turned and fled through the cornfield, leaving a trail of burnt corn that was quickly snuffed out by the snow.

The farmer waited for a while longer, but still the boy did not return and eventually the farmer went to bed. He had to get some rest if he was going to prevent the crows from eating the corn in the morning.

*Jory Mickelson is a queer writer whose work is forthcoming or has appeared in Diode, Mid-American Review, The Rumpus, Ninth Letter, Vinyl Poetry, The Collagist, and other journals in the United States, Canada, and the UK. They are the recipient of an Academy of American Poets Prize and a Lambda Literary Fellow in Poetry. The author of three chapbooks, their most recent is Self-Portrait with Men in Cars, published in 2018.*

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# Wyeth: Heaven

Jory Mickelson

The afterlife was spare: iron-framed  
bed, homespun sheets. Bedside,

a hollow pressboard box with tender  
red interior. The stern window

said, *empty valley full*  
*of grass*, and this is

where I wondered at  
how I'd come to be

alone with such silence,  
no one had yet to

pierce. Light  
sifted itself, between

the peaks to fall  
on the scuffless grass. The wind

riffling & quietful until there  
was nothing to the world

but the soft rasp of  
grass on grasses on grass.



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# Eight Lacunae

Ian Stoner

## Inside, Unknown (1983)

**Remastered from the original session tapes. Includes the “Fatal Science” seven-inch single, mastered from vinyl.**

1982 was one hell of a year, the climax of one hell of a crescendo.

Five years before, the Buzzcocks pooled their cash and pressed *Spiral Scratch*, a record we all wore down to a throb. Four years before, Daniel Miller as The Normal released a seven-inch single on the made-up label Mute—two snort-worthy novelty numbers that opened up vistas and landed him Fad Gadget. Two years before, Ian Curtis set a needle in “Sister Midnight” and hanged himself in his kitchen, clearing the stage for an explosion of earnest post-punk bands that had, since *Unknown Pleasures*, cowered in his epileptic shadow. One year before, I printed my home address and a hand-drawn logo on the sleeve of my own self-financed seven-inch. It aped the minimal synth of Sheffield and the junk percussion of Berlin. (Did people buy it? They did not. Did critics like it? They did not. The only mention I ever found, lodged like a cough in the middle of a two-page run-on in the back of a fledgling Prince fanzine, called my record—I’m quoting—a spontaneous abortion.)

And in 1982 Michigan knocked on my dingy Dinkytown door. He teetered on my stoop in women’s jeans and an exhausted blazer, clutching the sleeve of my seven-inch in one hand and in the other a naked record stamped “The Fatal Science by Panic! Attack!”

“The fatal science,” he said, “is *reading*. It’s from Rousseau, I think. Or Shakespeare?”

I took down Michigan’s number, sent him away, put on the record, loved it, called him up and arranged to see their next gig.

That gig was a vortex, an amazement. I felt as if I’d been plucked from the plastic sheen of the American metropolis and squelched squarely on the fringes of an ash-blasted mining town in Thatcher’s squalid England. It was bleak. It left me gasping.

After the show, Michigan introduced me to lead-man Ilya and bassist Daniel. I waved, unwilling to shout over the club’s deafening PA. Ilya looked

me over and walked away.

“Meet me tomorrow,” Michigan said.

“What?” I said.

The next morning, ears still ringing, I stowed my reflective vest and B&G hedge clippers under a bush and sneaked away to meet Michigan for lunch at Annie’s Diner. He was clear enough about his expectations: fame and fortune, no brown M&Ms. I told him I couldn’t deliver. He said no one was fooling anyone; I was a stepping stone, or maybe, with luck, a launchpad. “Rumble and woosh,” he said and made a gesture like a rocket.

Late that same night we congregated on the corner of University and Fifteenth. Ilya pulled from his back pocket a collection of Shaw plays, dog-eared a third of the way to oblivion, and turned to a blank page at the back. On it I wrote “50/50. That is all.” We shook hands, went home. I felt good. Slept like a launchpad.

The boys were unaware that I was semi-accidentally pretending to run a most definitely made-up label – thus their demand that I front the money for ten songs of studio time. I had neither a cash-stuffed mattress nor a bank account, but I didn’t let on. I took an advance on my paycheck, told my roommates I was short on rent, and quietly sold my gear. I was already sure I could contribute more art to the world as midwife to Panic! Attack! than I could by bearing down on more of my own spontaneous abortions.

Listen to the record and you’ll know my decision was sound. The record is proof they were working at a level rare among their contemporaries. But that noise only encodes part of the story, and I knew before we ever set foot in a studio that I had bought into something special. I knew it because I watched them work.

Most of *Inside, Unknown* collapsed into being in bassist Daniel’s basement apartment. Watching them write was like watching some kind of Henry Ford gestalt. Like something out of Ballard or Sturgeon. Daniel had a massive record collection accumulated over years of working in the shops. He and Michigan bounced names and titles off each other as they thumbed through Daniel’s wedged-in bins. A funk bassline as represented by Parliament? The wandering chord progressions of Jacques Brel? The general atmosphere of *Secondhand Daylight*? Could such a thing be done? They spooned these records like reagents into the vessel of Ilya’s skull. Ilya picked up a guitar, and out came a song that synthesized the antitheses.

Humiliating? Yes. I had spent hundreds of hours working on the two songs on my seven-inch, and after an evening at Daniel’s I was praising the sweet baby Jesus that it had, as it were, fallen stillborn. From the perspective of that basement apartment, my hundreds of hours seemed fraudulent; in retrospect, I judged my former self just another twenty-something worried about the fit of his jeans.

The cash I raised selling my gear and welshing on rent bought us the

studio access the band demanded. The studio, it turned out, was not conducive to Panic! Attack!'s squalid bonhomie. The worst days were write-offs: twice Ilya failed to show for pre-paid sessions, twice offering as excuse the creative demands of the play he was writing, which he described as "an extended meditation on river barges as a metaphor for the ungovernable momentum of life." Even when everyone was present and productive, the time I spent with them in the studio, slapping wrists and watching my cash burn, was no fun. But there's no arguing with art, and from the moment I heard the first mixdowns, I found it impossible to muster regret. Who could?

We released the record. I believed in the band and desperately needed a return on my money, but despite my best efforts, sales were pathetic and we only got four reviews, all local. The band was disappointed. I was disappointed. But thirty years later it's still an amazing, clarifying record, and that ought to get balanced in the reckoning. Balance for yourself. Balance it loud.

## **The Spacious World (1984)**

### **Remastered.**

Bands can't hear their own sound; this we know. ("I'm not a goth," Siouxsie Sioux once shouted over screeching guitars and tribal drums, from behind her death's-head mask of white pancake and blackest eyeliner.) When the boys set out to write *The Spacious World*, they wanted a firmer sense of self, and so they turned to face the critical mirror.

I knew what they weren't. They weren't trading on Minneapolis's bizarre tundra-tastic credibility—that was Hüsker Dü. They weren't a nostalgia band for the locals—that was Suicide Commando. They weren't a best-kept-secret—that was the Suburbs. And they weren't a buzz band on the cusp—that was already—already!—the synth-crippled geeks of Information Society.

Broadening our referential scope from locale to region didn't help, because our region, by accident of birth, was the Upper Midwest. Remember the history you should have learned in school: in 1980 Akron exploded, sucked all the air out of the Midwest art rock scene, then went tits-up. By 1982, when Panic! Attack! first entered the studio, Pere Ubu had already disbanded for the second time, the Waitresses had moved to New York, and Devo... I heard they were hawking energy domes in Australia?

Panic! Attack! was never, ever, a candidate for that scene. They had neither self-conscious quirkiness nor irony. They didn't have a look; they didn't own TVs; they'd never been to Ohio. And yet? And yet: the common thread running through the four reviews I clipped following *Inside*, *Unknown* was clear. We were Midwestern art rock in the vein of Pere Ubu and Devo.

Insert here a broken scream that startles the crows from the snow-stripped branches.... We had made our offering to the oracle of the music

presses and the response we got was muted and irrelevant. “Mirror mirror on the wall, where does our significance fall?” “Uh, Akron, I guess? Are there other towns in the Middle West?”

And so the boys wrote and recorded *The Spacious World* under a pall of confusion. And things, as they do under palls of any kind, fell apart.

Back in the studio, the air of curdled tension that had spoiled the fun of the *Inside, Unknown* sessions evolved into open hostility between Ilya (vocals, guitar) and Michigan (drums). The day they recorded “Black Ice,” Michigan suggested the engineer gate his drums and mix them front and center. Ilya unleashed a shriek. “Smear any hint of Phil Collins on my record, and I’m done.”

Michigan stood up behind his kit and said, too loudly, “If you want to sell records, this is what you do. Whump-whump, whump-whump, whump whump whump. Muscular. Wrench some necks, bruise some throats.”

“Is there anything, Michigan, *anything* more antithetical to authenticity than chasing a ridiculous fad for fake-sounding drums?”

“Is there any point, Ilya, *any point* to your pharmaceutical-grade authenticity if no one ever hears it?”

It was then, to his shame, that Ilya pulled the capo from the neck of his guitar and threw it at Michigan. It bounced harmlessly off the acoustical foam behind him and fell to the floor. Ilya stormed out, Mitch chasing after, shouting all the way.

I stood in the control room, gaping at Daniel, who was now alone in the live room. He waved; I opened the listen mic. “I don’t know much about Phil Collins,” he said in a voice made chipper by a tinny speaker, “but I know about Peter Gabriel, and I don’t care what anyone says, ‘Intruder’ is the shit. Those two,” he pointed out the door, “have lost the plot.”

After Ilya’s capo-chucking tantrum the studio sessions settled. The tension remained, but they stuck to their workflow and stayed true to their sound as they understood it. Everyone involved—writing, producing, engineering, mastering—was burning at both ends, and the album we sent to the factory was the exact opposite of a Sophomore slump.

It didn’t matter.

*The Spacious World* did nothing to dissolve Panic! Attacks!’s obscurity. The band continued to gig at a frantic pace, but they cracked the top spot on the ticket only at the smallest clubs. I struggled to get the record into bins outside the Twin Cities and despite a few good notices, local sales stalled under 500 units.

Obviously (obviously?) Michigan was furious with me. At one point he brandished strips he’d clipped from NME. “1979,” he said. “The Stiff Little Fingers went to number fourteen on a fifty-fifty handshake like we’ve got with you. 1980, Joy Division to number thirteen on the same deal with Factory.” He fanned out his clippings like a deck of cards. “You were

supposed to be a stepping stone,” he said, “but you’re another god-damned, mother-fucking, god-damned rock.”

“I don’t know what to tell you.” I said: “I want more for you,” and I thought: was the American music scene ever a meritocracy, anyway?

Mitch put together dozens of press kits and mailed them, along with the new record, to every A&R guy at every label he could find. The few responses he got were rejections, mostly wobbling the thin line between generous and devastating: “You’re good, but the Midwestern art-rock scene has run its course. If you go New Romantic, get back in touch.” Watching Mitch over this period was like watching a man’s bones dissolve. It must have broken his heart when he shook my hand over *Eight Lacunae*. It broke mine. It broke mine a little.

I’ve gotten ahead of myself. For now, enjoy *The Spacious World*. (Notice the absence—conspicuous, for an album released in 1984—of gated drums.)

## **Eight Lacunae (1985)**

**Remastered. Includes 4-track demos of two previously unreleased songs.**

Minutia inevitably rears its many heads, and so I requested a meeting to discuss the recording schedule of the album that would become *Eight Lacunae*. Michigan (drums) and Daniel (bass) and I sat in a booth at Annie’s Diner, where we repeatedly deferred the attentions of our waitress, a bottle-blond in eyeshadow so racoony it made me want to Voigt-Kampf some replicants. Dan talked slowly (as was his way) about his new position managing the Uptown record shop he’d long called home-sub-two. Mitch vibrated with fury at Ilya’s tardiness.

Hindsight reveals this as a moment of tectonic shift beneath the band; their foundation was cracked. Though I didn’t know it then, I *should* have known, because when Ilya finally appeared, tearing around the corner clutching a shifting pile of City Papers to his chest, he was smiling like a Dairy Princess at a county fair, and I swear to god I’d never before seen him so much as grin. He pushed copies at the three of us and said “Page fourteen.”

He’d placed third in the alt. weekly’s second-annual one-act competition. His name and the title (“Barge Season”) were tacked to the end of the complete text of the winning entry. As soon as we’d all registered his name, he collected our copies and left. On his way out, he paused to lift the stack of City Papers out of the wire cart in Annie’s foyer. Mitch unspooled a thread of muttered obscenity that continued until our racoony waitress slid a basket of onions rings onto the table.

Weeks later, sharing a cigarette on my front porch, I asked Ilya why he never smiled like a Dairy Princess when I brought him a good review of a record or show.

“It’s the difference between a painting and color-by-numbers,” he

said. “No one over the age of ten gets excited when a picture they’ve colored wins a contest. At some point people stop caring about staying in someone else’s lines and start caring about art.”

This was not the answer I’d expected. I considered the songs on *Inside, Unknown* and *The Spacious World* and how inspired they sounded to me in every incarnation, from the four-track demos to stamps fresh from the metal mothers. I sat in silence for a few beats before I had what I thought was a flash of insight. “Coloring by numbers?” I said. “You don’t really believe that. Remember the ‘Black Ice’ debacle? Your capo-throwing meltdown? I think that song is art, and I think you wouldn’t have lost your temper if you didn’t agree.”

“Absolutely not art,” he said. “Not art. Listen. There are three things I did in that song that explain why you like it.” He passed me the remains of the cigarette and searched his pockets for a fresh one. “Do you want to hear this?”

“I honestly don’t know.”

“One. Remember how much you liked that ‘descending chord figure,’ as you called it? No accident. I used a progression you’ve heard a million times before. It’s A-minor, G, F, E, and it’s as used up as a condom floating in a rest-stop toilet. I picked it because I liked it in Barry’s theme for ‘On Her Majesty’s Secret Service.’ But the hippies loved it, back in the day. It’s in ‘Good Vibrations’ and ‘In the Year 2525’ and about a thousand others. Jocks love it, too. Bon Jovi just used it for ‘Runaway,’ which is the worst song I’ve ever heard. He probably semi-consciously plagiarized it from ‘Sultans of Swing,’ because Dire Straits still carried some weight with the sweaty hairy types back when he was in high school. And I’m willing to bet those chords were stuck in Dire Straits’ heads because as kids they heard their parents fucking to ‘Standing in the Shadows of Love.’ And on and on, back through the generations, to the first syllable of recorded sound. You and everyone else, you’ve heard those chords so many times they’re non-threatening, and lazy listeners like non-threatening songs.”

I’d never heard Ilya talk this way—in angry aria instead of sour recitative. I said nothing, but looked, I am sure, horrified and sad and helpless.

“Two,” he said. “I switched up the time signature in the chorus. People think waltz time sounds weird and fresh no matter how many times they hear it in rock song. And most of them don’t know what’s happening to them when a song forces a recalibration of their internal metronomes. Am I right that you thrill to this simulacrum of excitement?”

“Three. I arranged it sparse. You notice the guitar, bass, and vocals rarely fire at the same time? That my vocals never dip as low as Dan’s highest notes, or push as high as my lowest guitar sounds? Even the least competent listeners can keep those elements separate, and they get a rush when their brains fit the pieces together.” He faced me, tilted his head, and held out a fresh cigarette. “Right?”

I felt coiled up inside, and I'm sure that in some parallel universe I punched him in the mouth. "You are full of shit," I said. "After I've seen you light fuses in the band over authenticity questions again and again? You are full of shit."

And just like that, aria-Ilya was gone, replaced by my familiar, silent depressive. "Ilya," I said, "I know you know that other songwriters, even some great ones, don't work the way you work. They aren't painting by numbers. They're fumbling around in the dark, and I absolutely believe they're fumbling after art."

"Well," he said. He stood up and ground out his cigarette. "I suppose even a color-by-numbers could *feel* like art to someone who just crawled out of a cave." He shuffled down the stoop and into the dark. I went inside, flipped through my LPs, pulled "On Her Majesty's Secret Service" and "Good Vibrations," and was crushed to discover that Ilya was right. Of course he was.

Within two weeks, it all ended. On what could have been an unmemorable Wednesday, I returned from a morning shift with B&G to find Michigan waiting on my porch.

"I wanted to tell you first," he said. "Partitioned Palace fired their drummer, and I've signed on with them."

Something was different about his manner. An unaffected calm. "You're sure," I said.

"Those other guys, Partitioned Palace, they aren't as good, but they aren't dead in the water," he said. "I'm going to try it with them."

"Wow," I said. "Okay. It's *Michigan* who's pulling the plug. I didn't see that coming."

"I don't think I believe you?" he said.

Maybe he was right?

Panic! Attack! had already recorded eight of the ten tracks we'd planned for the album. We decided, back in our booth at Annie's, Mitch's spot vividly empty, that hiring a drummer to replace him for the remaining two sessions would be intolerable. So the record went to the factory with eight songs. For this re-issue, I've mastered the fairly polished four-track bedroom demos of the two songs that never got the studio treatment. They are great songs, and I'm proud to have brought them, at last, into the light.

Listen...

Listen. Ilya is wrong. Ilya is wrong. Ilya has to be wrong. If this is painting by numbers, we all are wasting our lives.

***Peter MacQuarrie*** is an enigma. He lives in a darkling forest of Northern California. During the day he explores the shadows of the giant redwood trees. During the night he explores the starry sky.

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### Split Personality





