Typehouse Literary Magazine

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 We are always looking for well-crafted, previously unpublished writing and artwork that seeks to capture an awareness of the human condition.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

Cover Photograph: from this dream a black boy gave me an orb by Martins Deep. See page 146
Welcome to the special double twentieth issue of Typehouse Literary Magazine. It has been a rough year for a lot of people, and we have a lot of great contributors who were very patient with us as we have dealt with the same kind of issues that people across the country have faced. We have an issue that is full of fantastic work by a very diverse group of people, and we are very proud of it.

Since the murder of George Floyd on May 25th, 2020, the landscape of racial politics in the USA (where Typehouse is published, and the majority of the editors live) has looked very different. However, this is only different for the (majority White) people who have not paid attention to the reality and history of racism in the country. In the history of racism against Black people in this country, this was yet another case in a long string of cases that lead back through Rodney King, the War on Drugs, the Civil Rights movement, segregation, Jim Crow, Vanport, the Tulsa race massacre, Reconstruction, all the way back to the roots of slavery. None of this is new. The only difference is that now some White people are beginning to acknowledge it. Which, in essence, they can easily turn the focus right back on them, rather than on the people they are “trying” to help.

As editors, we have had an ongoing conversation on how we can best support the Black Lives Matter movement in ways that are more than lip service – and in ways that are ongoing and won’t fade away as time goes by. We are dedicating this issue to the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and after publication we will open up space for a number of Black creatives to receive feedback on a work in progress. This will be an ongoing project over the next few months, and we will post more information about this effort on our blog and other social media soon. We have been, and will continue to, point out to creators any harmful stereotypes and prejudices they may have included in submissions we receive.

In this issue, we have a number of amazing works by Black creatives, some of which deal with the ongoing struggle for equality and social justice. In Assistant Professor of African American Studies Wendy Thompson Taiwo's “Life and Death in the Time of Black Lives Matter,” on page 74, the reader is presented with the uncomfortable truths about the pervasive racism in society, in the government, and in law enforcement, all in words that are beautiful, but the pain contained cuts you raw. Nigerian poet and photographer Martins
Deep's artwork is featured on our cover, as well as on page 146, and features a boy who came to him in a dream, writing the sorrows and dreams of the African child. Shawn R. Jones, a writer from South Jersey, tells us on page 24 a series of stories, poetic verses about Black children, racism, and what it means to keep those children alive and hopeful in modern America. And Ifeanyi Ekpunobi, studying in Ibadan, Nigeria, writes in “To Love Someone like You,” on page 188, about the internal and external conflict that comes from longing, confusion, and hiding your sexuality in a society that fears and loathes it. But he also writes of friendship, and hope, tenderness, and maybe the love that can come from cherishing who you are.

I also want to acknowledge our Black editors. Senior editor T. E. Wilderson has been with Typehouse Literary Magazine for several years, and her input and editorial experience has been invaluable. Editor Trish Rodriguez joined Typehouse in 2019 and has provided consistently analytical evaluations of our submissions. And our newest editor, Chinwe MaryClare Okonkwo, just joined Typehouse, but is already providing valuable feedback.

Since I started Typehouse in 2013, my goal has always been to search out and encourage underrepresented voices to submit to us, to trust us with their works and stories. This has been a process that has taken time and included a few missteps, but it is something that all of us as editors are committed to. We want everyone of all races, sexualities, nationalities, religions, and genders, as well as neurodivergent creators and creators with disabilities to feel safe submitting to us, to know we will treat their stories with respect. I think this issue is a great example of the wonderful stories and artwork a wide spectrum of people can create.


Val Gryphin, Editor-In-Chief, Typehouse Literary Magazine

#BlackLivesMatter
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Roger Camp is the author of three photography books including the award winning Butterflies in Flight, Thames & Hudson, 2002 and Heat, Charta, Milano, 2008. His work has appeared in numerous journals including The New England Review and New York Quarterly. His work is represented by the Robin Rice Gallery, NYC.

Critter Post, Hwy 20, Idaho

I’ve been taken with back roads since the age of fifteen when I rode my bicycle across the United States following the original Hwy 66 and points east. On a recent road trip to Idaho with my wife we pulled off the highway to study a handsome landscape in the distance and discovered this fence post decorated with stuffed animals. It was certainly not what I expected to find in an area of tough-minded ranchers. The dichotomy between the harsh landscape and the soft animals made it impossible to ignore.
Betsy Martin worked for many years at Skinner House Books in Boston. She has advanced degrees in Russian language and literature and lived in Moscow studying at the Pushkin Institute during the exciting transitional period of glasnost. She enjoys birdwatching and is learning to sing.

Walking to the Piggly Wiggly

Betsy Martin

We’re walking to the Piggly Wiggly, Oma and I, for groceries. She’s ninety-four; I’m twenty-six. I’m holding her arm,

but there’s a hole between us. My mother should be filling it, the three of us with arms linked, a proud heritage of empowered women walking to the Piggly Wiggly. She was a colicky baby, Oma says with a lemon face.

So Oma and I are walking in the heat of the day, very slowly, to get bread and milk for the weekend—that’s what she thinks we need.
Danielle Keiko Eyer is an author, playwright, and stage manager based in Montréal, Canada. She has had writing published in anthologies by the Poetry Institute of Canada, Monnath Books, and Dreamspinner Press, as well as in local journals such as Montréal Writes Literary Magazine and The Void Magazine. Her work as a theatre artist has been produced at festivals in Ottawa, ON and Montréal, QC. Roman Payne said that “all forms of madness, bizarre habits, awkwardness in society, general clumsiness, are justified in the person who creates good art.” Luckily, Danielle benefits from every one of these.

The Sunriser/The Sunsetter
Danielle Keiko Eyer

This is how I think of sunsets: sunsets are like live music in a bar. People show up with their friends. They order a round of drinks and catch up, laugh, joke. They speak over the music. It’s background noise. Despite this, the musicians are giving it all they’ve got. They give their heart and soul—their entire bodies—to the music. Even though no one is paying attention.

People treat sunsets in a similar way. It’s something they watch, though they aren’t entirely invested.

Meanwhile, I am painting myself in reds and oranges and yellows, shading the clouds with purple, adding dashes of pink. Every night I create a masterpiece for those watching, whether they’re driving or sitting on a patio or walking home. They take sunsets for granted. Hardly anyone notices them anymore.

Sunrises are different. They’re sacred, shared with only an elite few. When someone watches a sunrise, they are doing nothing else. They sit and watch, alone, as I spread my colours across the sky. These colours are more subtle—pastel pinks and oranges, mostly—but people appreciate them. They are something that a person can hold in their hand and fold into their heart, to be kept there throughout the rest of the day. I give less of myself, but they drink me in. It’s a moment of stillness and contemplation. There are too few of those these days.

So you see, sunrises and sunsets are treated differently by those watching. I can’t help creating some kind of relationship with solitary viewers of either. People who put their full attention into something are remarkable. Especially when that something is me.

But this story isn’t about me. It’s the story of two girls: one whom we’ll call the Sunriser, and another who we’ll name the Sunsetter. They were never meant to meet. It wasn’t in their DNA—in their programming. It wasn’t
how they were hardwired. Yet one Saturday evening, they found each other on the same roof, at the same time.

As you can guess from her name, the Sunriser would wake up just before 5 a.m. every morning. I pictured her making a pot of coffee, picking up a book from her nightstand, and climbing up to the roof of the apartment building. There she would pull out a plastic chair lying under a tarp and sit down. She would sip her coffee and read her book, keeping an eye on the sky as I layered in new light, new colours for a new day. As the first sliver of sun peeked over the horizon, she would shut her book and watch. I always wondered what was going through her head. All I could tell was that these moments were a sort of release for her. A moment of peace. Her shoulders would relax, her breathing would slow. Sometimes I would even catch a small smile playing on her lips.

She never shielded her eyes as she watched the sun. Sunrises are the only time that the sun looks like the ball of fire that it is. You can almost see the flames licking the surface.

I loved the way this girl could take me in. The way she focused all her attention on me. I would pretend that she was the only person watching, that it was only the two of us sharing this moment. She felt like an old friend who took the time to say good morning every day.

The Sunsetter, on the other hand, would always pop out onto the roof of their building as if she were in a hurry. Her shoes would be untied and her hair disheveled, but at least she was consistent. She would emerge as the edge of the sun brushed the horizon, and she would stand, panting, gripping a notebook to her chest. She would watch only until the sun disappeared. Then she would grab the lone chair, face it West, and sit down. She would open her notebook and begin scribbling inside. I often wondered where all those words came from. They seemed to pour out of her, as if she had been holding them in all day. Only rarely did she look up. Smile. Somehow seeing me gave her that extra bit of inspiration, those few extra words she needed to continue.

I watched her every day as I worked, curious about what she was writing. I admired her for the ritual she had created. For the bond she had formed with me. It felt like I was feeding something. Like she was writing me down in that notebook, turning little bits of me into ink.

I didn’t know why the Sunriser came to the roof that Saturday evening. I’m not omniscient. I don’t know what happens behind closed doors. I only see what the sunlight hits, and even then, it can be hard to discern things from that far away.

The Sunsetter had already witnessed the sun going down. She sat in her usual seat, scribbling away. When the door opened, she nearly jumped out of her skin. I was as surprised as she was.

Even the Sunriser jumped back. She yelped, “Sorry!” and hopped inside. She fiddled with the creaky door, but before she could close it, the
Sunsetter spoke up.

“Hey. Hey! It’s all right. You can use the roof too, you know.”

The Sunriser peeked out from behind the door.

“It’s not like it belongs to me,” the Sunsetter continued.

“Right. Sorry.”

The Sunriser eased the door closed and glanced around as if it were her first time on the roof. She adjusted her glasses and tightened her shoulders. Then, raising her face to the sky, she took in my colours. I had been playing with a deep, royal purple that night. As she took me in, she relaxed her shoulders. She inhaled deeply, then exhaled. I could tell that she had released something. That this moment had been necessary.

Shaking it off, she roamed around the roof, keeping her eyes peeled for something. She kicked at the gravel, checked near the door, followed the edge of the roof.

The Sunsetter was still scribbling away. But she was distracted. Every once in a while, her pen would hesitate. She looked up and squinted at the Sunriser.

“What are you doing?” she finally asked.

“Oh. I’m uh, looking for something.”

“Do you need any help?”

“Oh, no, I should be all right—” But the Sunsetter was already up and approaching.

“What is it? What does it look like?”

“It’s, um. It’s a book.”

“Well, it’s your lucky day! I actually found a book earlier.”

The Sunriser’s eyes lit up. “Oh thank God! I was really worried.”

The Sunsetter led her to the dirty tarp. “When I dragged the lawn chair out, I noticed a book lying there.” She lifted the tarp, holding it away from her body. The Sunriser dove right under it to collect the book.

When she stood up, she stroked the book’s spine, then hugged it close to her chest. Close to her heart.

“Must be a special book,” the Sunsetter said.

“It’s special to me. It’s the most important book in the entire world to me.”

“May I?” the Sunsetter asked, holding out her hand.

The Sunsetter opened it and flipped through the pages. She turned it over and read the back. “An underground organization tasked with protecting the Earth from reptilian enemies”? Sounds... interesting.”

The Sunriser let a smile touch her lips. “I know it’s not very good. But my sister wrote it.”

“No way! That’s so cool. Are you two close?”

The Sunriser didn’t answer right away. A flash of pain streaked across her face. “No. I actually haven’t seen her in four years.”
The Sunsetter’s eyes widened. “Oh,” she said.

They fidgeted, avoiding each other’s eyes. The Sunsetter was gazing at me again, where my expanse touched the horizon. I had been distracted and had forgotten to layer in the darker blues. I accelerated to make up for the lost time.

The Sunriser spoke again. “Well, I found my book. Thanks. I should go back—”

“I’ve never seen you in the building before. Did you just move in?”
“No. Did you?”
“No.” The Sunsetter scratched the back of her head. “Maybe the universe doesn’t want us to meet.”

“I hope not.” It slipped out of her mouth, and her face turned red.

“Uh,” she floundered. “I really should go. Someone is waiting for me to get back.”

The Sunsetter smiled. “You should join me sometime. I always come up here to watch the sunset. Every single night. I don’t mind the company.”

“Oh. I actually come up here to watch the sunrise every morning.”

“Every morning? At like, 5 a.m.?”

“Um. Yeah.”

“How do you do that? I can barely get up at 8 a.m.”

They smiled at each other like it was the easiest thing in the world.

Then a cloud passed over the Sunriser’s face. “I need to go.” She stared at the gravel. “It was nice to meet you. Thanks again for your help.” She shuffled toward the door and clicked it shut behind her.

The Sunsetter watched the door long after the Sunriser had left. She muttered, “Nice to meet you, too.”

I could tell over the next few days that the Sunsetter was hoping the Sunriser would join her. I knew from the way she would peer at the door every few minutes. She would stay past the sunset, just in case. She even carried up an old folding chair and would place it next to hers every evening.

The Sunriser continued to visit me every morning, but I was hoping that the two young women would meet again. I guess you could say I was rooting for them.

Two weeks later, the Sunsetter seemed to have given up on ever seeing the Sunriser again. She sat in her plastic chair and gazed up at me. The notebook, forgotten, was lying on the gravel. After several minutes, she sighed—a deep sigh, the kind that deflates your entire body. She leaned over and reached to grab her notebook. At that moment, the door swung open, and the Sunriser appeared in the rectangle of light.

I wrapped up the end of the sunset—threw a curtain over the sky, letting the brighter blues fade to darker shades. The Sunsetter snapped her head up and broke into a grin.
“Hey!” she said. “I was starting to think that you’d never come back.”
The Sunriser smiled. “Well, here I am.”
“Do you want to sit with me?” She pointed at the folding chair.
“While you read, or whatever?”
The Sunriser squinted at the sky. “I think it’s getting a bit too dark to
read.”
“Use the light from your phone! That’s what I do.”
“Oh. Uh… I actually don’t have a phone.” She scratched her scalp.
The Sunsetter’s jaw dropped. “No phone? What century did you come
from?”
The young woman shrugged.
“If no light is the problem, you’ll just have to arrive earlier
tomorrow,” the Sunsetter said.

And she did.

It became their routine. Every evening, they would come to the roof
and sit a few feet away from each other. They worked in their usual manner,
in silence. At first. Eventually, the Sunsetter grew more vocal. She would ask
her new friend how her day was. The other would respond and return the
question. Thus was born the kind of banter shared between friends.
The Sunriser continued attending my sunrises, though I noticed her
eyes drooped more than they used to. Her yawns were wider.
As they got to know each other, I, too, learned more about them. The
Sunsetter’s answers were more extensive than those of the Sunriser, who was
more cryptic. I learned that the Sunsetter was getting a business degree at a
local college. That she wrote poetry, and that in the evenings, she would come
up to the roof and scribble down as many words as would come to her. She
explained that she then went downstairs, typed up the words, and shaved them
down until she had sculpted a poem. Her writing was the only thing that could
break the monotony of business school. Writing allowed her to release her
pent-up thoughts, break the wall, and flood the page.
The Sunriser, on the other hand, offered up little information, even
when prodded by the Sunsetter’s questions. Only one fact became clear: she
had a boyfriend. When she did answer, he often came up.
“So, why do you not have a phone?”
“My boyfriend says that he would get paranoid if I had one. That he’d
worry that I would text other guys, and it’d make him jealous.”
“What do you like to do for fun? Do you go out?”
“My boyfriend likes it when we stay in. Sometimes he goes out, but
he always says that I probably wouldn’t enjoy the things that he does or the
people he sees.”
“Can I add you on Facebook?”
“My boyfriend says that social media makes your life worse, not better.”

One evening, the Sunsetter finally remarked, “Your boyfriend seems pretty controlling.”

“He likes things done his way.”

“What about your way? Does he ever consider what you like and dislike?”

The Sunriser shifted in her chair. “What are you saying?”

“I’m just saying…” She shrugged. “I don’t know. It doesn’t sound like a well-balanced relationship.”

Once I noticed the Sunriser’s fiery gaze, I forgot the sunset entirely. The sky froze up. She spoke. “You know, he said this would happen.” She stood up, the chair in one hand, her book in the other.

“That what would happen?”

The Sunriser didn’t answer.

“Who said that? Your boyfriend?”

“He said that it wasn’t a good idea. That you wouldn’t make a good friend, and that by coming up here every day, I was setting myself up for disappointment.”

The Sunsetter jetted out of her chair. “He shouldn’t get to decide all these things about your own life!”

“Screw you.” The Sunriser made for the door, then twisted around and growled, “Don’t come after me.”

The Sunsetter stood, her limbs stock-still, as the young woman left. She looked up at me and frowned, worry creasing her features. The sky remained frozen. I was as shocked as she was.

After that, the Sunriser stopped coming to the roof for the sunset. She stopped coming for the sunrise, as well. I didn’t know what had happened. What had changed. Maybe she had moved. Or maybe it was something more dire. I kept an eye out for her during the day. Nothing. I almost forgot what she looked like. I do, after all, see all kinds of humans every day.

The Sunsetter would fidget in her chair. She hardly touched her notebook. She hardly watched my sunsets. Even her eyes would shift, touching on different sights, though always returning to the door.

But the Sunriser didn’t come back.

One day, the Sunsetter emerged onto the roof at 4:55 a.m. I stopped. The colours hardened like ice. The entire sky suffered as I watched her pace back and forth, chair abandoned under the tarp, eyes on the door. She checked her phone. Checked the door. Only when she looked up did I remember my work. The colours moved like a conveyor belt across the great expanse. But I was distracted. I was still watching.

Like every other morning, the Sunriser did not arrive.
It was about 5:30 a.m. when the Sunsetter paused. She checked her phone again. The door. The sky. She wasn’t satisfied with what she saw. Not even with the sunrise, a sight she had probably never seen before. I was equally disappointed, both with the Sunriser’s absence and the Sunsetter’s lack of interest in me. It had been so long since someone had enjoyed my work.

The Sunsetter began appearing for the sunrise more often. At first, she couldn’t quite make it every day. She yawned and stretched and tapped her cheeks to stay awake. Her eyes would drift closed, then she would snap awake again. Constantly turning back to check the door.

She started bringing a coffee mug with her. This is when the habit turned serious. She came more often. Almost every day. She was a woman on a mission. She would wait for the Sunriser no matter what. I even caught her peeking at the roof at random times throughout the day. Noon on a Saturday. 4 p.m. on a Wednesday. 11 p.m. on a Sunday night.

No use. No Sunriser.

Until.

It was a morning like any other. The Sunsetter—if I could still call her that—was sitting in her chair, sipping her coffee. For once, she wasn’t watching the door. She was watching me as if she were viewing her first ever sunrise. As if I were a novelty. Her notebook lay at her feet. She breathed in—breathed me in—and exhaled. She blinked hard. Still a little sleepy. The door clanged open, and the Sunsetter twisted her head around.

It was her.

The Sunsetter rushed to the girl and wrapped her in her arms. She was mumbling, repeating the same words again and again. Thank-God-thank-God-I-knew-it-I-knew-you’d-come-back-I-knew-it.

The Sunriser stood, frozen. Slowly she melted. Her hands came to rest on the Sunsetter’s back. Her shoulders relaxed. Her muscles softened. She leaned into the hug.

The Sunsetter finally quieted and released the Sunriser. Then: “WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT?!”

I had been only half-watching, working as I followed the happy reunion. But the Sunsetter’s cry stopped me, and I peered more closely. I zoomed in on the Sunriser’s face.


“Who did this?” the Sunsetter yelled. “Your boyfriend? What happened? What did he do?”

Soft, almost imperceptible. “I can’t stay long. He doesn’t want me to come up here. He’s still asleep, but I have to get back.”
“You can’t go back. Not if he did this to you.”
“You wouldn’t understand.”
“You don’t know what I’ve been through, though.” The Sunsetter sniffed. “Look, I… I know what you’re going through. And I think you know what you have to do.”
A single tear. A tear in her tissue paper face. “I have nowhere to go.”
“Oh yes, you do.” The Sunsetter held the Sunriser’s gaze. “You’re moving in with me.”
The Sunriser broke away. “Oh no, I can’t. I couldn’t impose—”
“I insist. Please, let me do this.”
“But my things…”
“We’ll figure something out. I’ll make one of my big, burly friends go to your apartment and get your stuff.” She approached the girl. Brushed a strand of hair away from her face. “I’m not forcing you. I can’t. But I’m offering you an option. An exit. And that’s a rare thing for someone in your situation.”
The Sunriser’s eyes were wet. She was an animal shrinking away from an open gate. Freedom a luxury she didn’t think she could afford.
“Okay,” she finally answered. Her body sank, but the Sunsetter caught her in time.
I was ready to raise the sun above the horizon. One last little push.
“Look,” the Sunsetter said. “It’s a new day.”
The Sunriser’s face wrinkled into a smile.

I didn’t see either of the young women on the roof after that. It went back to being unfrequented. Only once did someone appear: a man in his mid-to late-twenties. He had dark floppy hair and wore a stained shirt. Despite his obvious age, he moved like a toddler separated from its parents. Lost. Abandoned. Searching for something, or someone, with shaky determination.
He scanned the roof and noted its vacancy. Then he looked up. Squinted. It was midday, and the sun shone in his face. I shined it harder. He lowered his chin and tightened his fists. He slammed the door when he left. The clang rang across the city.

I’ve been thinking about the Sunriser and the Sunsetter a lot recently. At their serendipitous meeting. At the rescue, or the escape. I tried to look out for them at both sunrise and sunset. But the days keep me busy. The world is changing. Deteriorating. And my job has become more difficult.
Eventually, I realized that they must have moved out. That during one of my busy days, a truck must have parked in front of their building. They must have packed their things into boxes and driven away.
I liked to think that they had continued living together. That they hadn’t gone their separate ways. I couldn’t know, at the time. They could have
moved anywhere.
That’s when I decided to really go looking for them. I scanned the city. I kept an eye out. And I waited.
You know how you can kind of feel when someone is watching you? I felt that, a few days ago. I felt someone drinking me in, stealing a tiny part of me and folding it into their heart.

It was during a sunrise.

I followed the feeling like a laser beam until I found them.
Two young women on a small balcony. One sitting in a chair. The other standing behind her, arms draped over her shoulders. They respectively sat and stood in complete silence. Watching. Appreciating. Loving.
The Sunriser raised her head. The Sunsetter leaned in and kissed her.

Maybe I’m wrong. Maybe they were meant to meet. Maybe they were meant to end up together all along, despite their differences.
Still, I like to think that they never would have met without me. I watch stories from above all the time. This was the first time I’d ever taken part in one.
Every morning, two young women, one wide awake, one smiling-sleepy, watch the sunrise from a narrow balcony.
I wonder what it takes—how much love it takes—to rewire yourself for another person. To go against your nature for someone.
How lucky humans are, to love like that.
Erin Yuan is a high school student from Chicago, IL. Her work has been honored by Scholastic Arts & Writing Awards and Bluefire Magazine, among others. Outside of writing, she enjoys searching for the perfect chocolate chip recipe and mastering the art of taking naps.

How to Make Jiaozi
Erin Yuan

Step 1.

Saturdays are dumpling days. We all know this. By the time Saturday’s morning sun rouses from its slumber to push away Friday’s somber twilight, the pale yellow rolling board is already set on the kitchen table, the meat placed in the sink to defrost, the fluffy white flour packed neatly into measuring bowls. In the daytime, my mother and I leave the house for music lessons and errand runs while my father clocks in extra time at the office. But as soon as Saturday’s sun begins to bow its crown and spill out tears of vibrant oranges and reds, one look at the bleeding horizon—dyed a brilliant crimson like the upside-down Fu character on our front door—is our cue to head back. We always find our way home for dinner at the same time, drawn to our house with a magnetic pull because we know that today is Saturday, and Saturdays are dumpling days—days when the three of us gather around the worn, brown table in our kitchen to laugh away the week’s worries and catch up on each other’s lives while cooking and eating jiaozi.

My parents have followed the same routine every week for making dumplings for as long as I can remember, and over the years their ritual has been ingrained in my mind. I know they are about to start when my father turns on the TV to a channel of old Chinese songs and our whole house echoes with the high, lilting voices of female sopranos in Mandarin with the distinctive drawl of our hometown, Tianjin. When the music starts to play, my father’s eyes take on a nostalgic, faraway look. To him, I can imagine, for a moment, our house is Tianjin—we are in my grandmother’s apartment, in her tiny kitchen by her own worn, brown table, and my father is a little boy, looking on attentively as my grandmother works and sings the same melodies.

My mother says that making jiaozi is an art: she and my father are the painters, the dumplings their masterpieces. They use their hands for tools and their fingers for brushes, dotting the rolling board with tiny sprinkles of flour, dabbing the skins with filling made of a palette of colors, and pinching out petal-like dimples onto the edges of the folded half-crescents. But it’s also an intricate dance: my parents are the performers, the kitchen their stage. Their limbs flow to and from each other in synchrony—he rolls out dumpling skins
while she stuffs them with filling, every movement of their bodies purposefully choreographed to the steady beat of the songs in the background. After an afternoon of performing, the final act comes when my mother chassés from the stove carrying a plateful of plump, steaming jiaozi. I am their audience, and I clap as they take their bows.

But their hands are the only ones that breathe life into the dumplings; I never participate. Sometimes I try to help on the side, but then my mother says *We are almost done now anyway* or my father tells me to *Stop blocking the path to the stove* and somehow I always end up pushed off to the distance like a stranger to my own family, observing the cherished tradition with my face pressed behind a glass wall.

I don’t blame them, though. I say I would only ruin the cooking if I tried.

*Step II.*

My father learned to knead dumpling skins from his mother, and my mother inherited the recipe for filling from her father. Our family’s secrets are passed down, from mothers and fathers to daughters and sons, each generation constantly absorbing and improving the way to make jiaozi.

My father once tried to teach me how to roll out his perfect skins, the ones with thick centers and flat edges and sharp circular frames seemingly laser-cut from the dough. But while his nimble fingers fly under the rolling pin, mine get stuck. When he saw my centers with holes, my edges with tears, and my circle that somehow had twenty different sides, my father simply laughed. *It is fine,* he said, the lines crinkling along his eyes like neat pleats on the edges of his folded creations, *you’ll learn with practice—here, follow my rhythm—one-two-three-four, two-two-three-four.* Each of his fingers hit the slab of dough in tempo with the music from the TV, the consistent back-and-forth grind of his rolling pin composing a counterpoint to the singer’s shrill warbles; by the time the song ends, a small stack of dumpling skins sits triumphantly in a corner of the board. But when I take the rolling pin, I can no longer feel his pulse—my one is his four, my four his one, and everything is too fast, too slow, too overwhelming.

My attempts at recreating my mother’s filling were no more successful. While she blended together chives, pork, and eggs into a smooth yet spongy texture, I chopped chives into pieces too thick and let shells fall into egg yolks. Sometimes I heard her complaining to my grandmother on the phone about me, her useless daughter who couldn’t make dumplings right. At first I was insulted—how dare she say that, when I had tried so many times? —but over the years I realized it was true. Gradually, my anger dissipated, like wispy steam rising from the top of my mother’s boiling pot, to resignation.

These days, when the Saturdays come around, when my parents set
up the kitchen, when the songs start playing, I don’t watch them anymore. I only enter the kitchen when the dumplings are already placed on the table, their round white bellies bursting with filling, reaping the results of my parents’ long hours of toil.

Step III.

When I was little, my grandmother used to come from China to visit our house in America for several months at a time. She flew here from Tianjin, where my family drew their roots, and every time she brought a little taste of our hometown to us.

Once, a few weeks before she came, my mother bought a bread-making machine to prepare the dough instead of mixing it herself. On Saturday mornings, she poured flour, water, and salt into the machine, and when she returned in the afternoon, a smooth, round ball of fluffy, airy dough would be sitting in the kitchen, waiting for her.

When my grandmother saw the machine, though, she balked, open displeasure erupting from her usual placid disposition like excess pork and chives spilling out of an over-stuffed crescent. This is not the way our ancestors made jiaozi! she scolded my mother. Ai-ya, the dough is too flimsy and too stretchy. The skins will have holes! So instead, on the Saturdays she was here, she hand-made the dough the way she had learned. She found a deep salad bowl from our cupboard with a wide brim like her dishes at home, filled it with the ingredients, placed a dinner plate upside-down on the top, and watched the dough rise until its fat belly hit the curved underside of the plate. See, she’d say, patting its tummy like a drum, this is what dumpling dough should feel like—terse, resilient, and buoyant. But even that wasn’t good enough for her. After scooping it out of the bowl, she would squeeze and pound and hit its body against the rolling board with her calloused fingers and cracked palms until its skin smiled when she pinched its cheeks. To any stranger, the way her eyebrows scrunched together and her body rocked forward as she dug with her nails and sank in her hands made her cooking look like an angry, aggressive fight—but I knew all her vigor was only because of a fierce loyalty to the authenticity of her craft.

Just like my father, my grandmother always started her work with a song. Unlike him and the TV, though, she sang her own; whenever I heard her sweet voice soar up into the air, I would rush to the kitchen table, as eager to watch her as I was to taste her creations. I stacked my arms on the table surface and laid my head to one side so my eyes followed her battle-worn hands roll back and forth in a trance. By the time she finished, the bright red apron tied around her neck would be spotted with clumps of white like snow. She never minded getting dirty, though—she threw her head back and sang out proudly, her sudden bursts of movement causing specks of flour to fly off
like snowflakes.

Sometimes my father came home early on the Saturdays she was here. He told us he came To help your grandmother cook, yet when he entered the kitchen he just sat next to me, closed his eyes, and swayed to her delicate melodies, the subtle nuances of which he had all committed to memory when he was a boy. As a child, I stayed there to be entertained, but for my father, my grandmother’s raw, open passion reminded him of the reason he bothered with the long process of dumplings every week: to share joy with his family, to carry tradition, to honor his home.

But my grandmother hasn’t visited us in over ten years now. With it has gone her dough-making. On these Saturdays, the salad bowl sits empty while the bread-maker whirls. My father only has his songs to help him recall his mother’s voice.

Step IV.

Year after year, as Saturday’s sun rises over Friday’s moon every week, we all grow a little bit older and busier. Time is money, my parents say. Saturdays are still dumpling days, just in a different way now.

Sometimes we come back home on Saturdays much later, when the sun has already ducked its head to the world under our feet and when the sky’s black coat is too dark to match the Fu character on our door. We are all hungry and grumpy, aching for a bite of hot jiaozi.

I’m expecting my father to turn on the TV like he always does to start, but the house remains cold and quiet. Instead, he reaches into the freezer and pulls out a plastic package; inside, three rows of pale dumplings stand to attention like soldiers, their bellies frozen to each other in a line. Instant dumplings! I can faintly make out the letters on the translucent wrapper. Ready in ten minutes! My father dumps its contents onto a frying pan in the stove, and they land in one big brick in an oozing layer of oil. The pan sizzles—not like the gentle sighs of our own jiaozi, but with an angry hiss.

Just as promised, ten minutes later, a plateful of dumplings arrives. I poke at them with my chopsticks, then stab one in its heart. They have the same dimples pinched onto all the same places. Their skin, wrinkly and plastic, drips in grease.

I take a bite. The individual tones of chives, pork, and eggs, and the smooth, spongy texture I had been spoiled with for all my life are lost in the mass of the meat. The oil cakes my lips, holding my tongue hostage to its slick fat. I swallow the dumpling whole; it melts and leaves a sour taste behind.

I look over to my mother and father, sitting numbly and shoveling the store-bought products into their mouths. Time is money. If my grandmother saw us now, she would be horrified. But I push my complaints back down my throat with the fake dumplings. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't make my own.
Step V.

One day, when the sky is streaked with the flames of the dying sun, I’ll stumble back to my own house. My key will slide into the lock and reveal a cold, lifeless room.

Today is Saturday.
Saturdays are dumpling days. We all know this.
For some reason, my first instinct will be to yell into the house—I’m home! I would say. And my father or my mother or maybe my grandmother would shout back, Come to the kitchen quickly, the jiaozi is ready. And I would drop my bag and run inside, filling my lungs with the familiar smell of fresh, steaming dumplings.

Without warning, my voice will pierce through the darkness, startling me from my thoughts. I’m home. But only my own shrill tones will echo back. I’ll have forgotten: I am alone. The TV is not playing, my grandmother is not singing, and my mother and father are not here.

My parents have followed the same routine every week for making jiaozi, and over the years their ritual has been ingrained in my mind. But they are the only ones whose hands breathe life into the folded half-crescents; I never participate.

I’ll be tired and hungry, shuffling into the kitchen to cook dinner. Digging through the fridge, I’ll come upon a small package of pale, stone-cold dumplings lined up in strict rows—ready in ten minutes!—the same ones my father fried. I’ll hesitate. Time is money. It would be so easy just to throw these onto the stove.

The way her eyebrows scrunched together and her body rocked forward as she dug with her nails and sank in her hands made her cooking seem like an aggressive fight—but I knew all her vigor was only because of a fierce loyalty to the authenticity of her craft.

When I turn around from the fridge, suddenly I see my grandmother by my table, hunched over a slab of dough, pouring her entire soul into creating works of art she would be proud to call her own. My father stands next to her, his fingers flying with grace and speed to roll out his flawless skins; my mother, by his side, cracks eggs and cuts vegetables for her savory filling. They’re laboring in the hard work I never helped with—a cherished tradition I never bothered to learn correctly.

The package falls from my fingers. My vision blur as my heart sinks with regret—why didn’t I try harder to learn when I had the chance? My world spins and everything looks all too familiar; the scene shifts and I am a child once more, standing behind my family, always simply observing.

But this time, they turn toward me and put my hands on the table instead. My father will tell me Keep the beat steady, my mother says Chop the chives smaller, and my grandmother is wearing her red apron and singing.
I’ll hear my father’s counting in my ear, feel my mother’s hands guiding my cuts, and lean into my grandmother’s agile voice floating above our heads. The smiles stretching across their faces look so real and the laughs rumbling from their bellies fill my empty house—for a second, I can pretend it is Saturday and I am back home again, except now I am making *jiaozi* too.
C. Christine Fair is a professor within the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. She studies political and military events of South Asia and travels extensively throughout Asia and the Middle East. Her books include In Their Own Words: Understanding the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (OUP 2019); Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army’s Way of War (OUP, 2014); and Cuisines of the Axis of Evil and Other Irritating States (Globe Pequot, 2008). She has published creative pieces in The Bark, The Dime Show Review, Clementine Unbound, Awakenings, Fifty Word Stories, The Drabble, Sandy River Review, Sonder Midwest, Black Horse Magazine, Furious Gazelle, Hyptertext, The Pulp and Bluntly Magazine among others.

The Body Remembers

C. Christine Fair

To you, I was always “Bob’s bastard,”
A reminder that someone touched her before you.

My body remembers your grease-stained, gnarled fists
smashing my pink flesh to bone.

My body remembers your steel-toed shoes
ploughing into my belly and back.
Sometimes mom begged you to stop.
Sometimes she sobbed, immobile.
Sometimes she looked away.

Though you’ve been dead for years,
You live here now.

Imprisoned in the body of the girl you despised
If I were the witch you always called me, my coven would have disappeared you after the *first* time you threatened to “smash my skull,” after the *first* time the police refused to enforce my protective order.
If were a witch, I would have flown away with our kids on that broom before you used it to macerate my brains into the straw of the dog pen, then arrange my naked, mangled body to suggest a deranged snow angel for our children to find after school.

If I were a witch, I’d be sitting by a fire making s’mores with Sandy and Jack rather than begging the universe for justice from my cold grave
Hooking Up in a Time of CORONAVIRUS

I called Safina today to check on her invalid mother in Pakistan.

Rather than being sad or even worried, she was joyous and exuberant.

“I feel so guilty. But, honestly, I’m on my honeymoon!”

She explained that she ran into her delicious ex, stocking up on produce at the Giant.

Now, they are “co-isolating.”

She conceded “We have no future. But we have no other place to be.”
Shawn R. Jones is an African-American female writer from South Jersey. She is the author of two poetry chapbooks, *Womb Rain* (Finishing Line Press 2008) and *A Hole to Breathe* (Finishing Line Press 2015). Her poetry chapbook, *Womb Rain*, is #61 in Finishing Line Press’ New Women’s Voices Series. Her poetry has also appeared in *Essence, Challenges for the Delusional*, and the River Heron Review’s debut issue. She has poetry forthcoming in Guesthouse and Peregrine Journal. Shawn is the owner and operator of Tailored Tutoring LLC and Kumbaya Academy, Inc., and a jazz dance instructor at Halliday Dance. She is a 2019 graduate of Rutgers-Camden’s MFA Program.

**Eenie Meenie Miney Moe**

Shawn R. Jones

I eenie meenie minie moe around
the starfish-shaped collage of miniature feet
and stop at my grandson’s, black with white laces.

I choose him, so he doesn’t have to bury
his face in pretzeled arms or search
for friends who don’t want to be found.

I choose him because the badge will
pursue him so many times,
he may become too tired to run.

I choose him, so he doesn’t have to
plead for his life with the same deep dark eyes
that will see nightmares flash on the screen.

I choose him because he came in the world
knowing and unknowing one too many
lies about white Jesus and democracy.

I choose him because I am afraid
he will become one tear, fat with salt
as a blue faucet pushes him to the ground,
our plush drowning.
The Undertow

I keep going back in the ocean
throwing another child up on the jetty,
and I can’t swim, but I can’t stop myself.

Everything I do is in response
to my father’s death.
He died of a heroin overdose
in an America
that didn’t care about him.
I am angry.
I stay angry
even when I am laughing.

He died in 1991, yet I am
still trying to resurrect him
through brown children.
I am tired,
but there is not one day
that will go by
without me trying
to swim in an ocean
that has tried to drown me
many times.

The first time, I was five.
My father was getting high
under the boards.
I strolled off in a red bikini,
with a teal pail
full of seashells and sand.
I walked out too far.
Waves twisted me like seaweed.
The ocean was ready
to receive me like coral.
A lifeguard reached
his hand down,
yanked me up by my braids,
and flipped me into a boat
with such force
he bruised my back.
It is one of the greatest acts of love
I have ever known.

He did not love me,
but I think he loved life,
and maybe he loved
children or humanity.
It didn’t matter
that I was brown.
That is how I want
America to love me.
That is how I wanted
America to love my father.

Whenever I get angry at America,
I think of that lifeguard,
his pink lips over mine,
breathing breath into my lungs,
pale hands compressing
my chest. My ribs cracking
till I spit out an African
knife fish flapping without fins.

Now every day I grab
a brown child,
I realize we are both afraid
of the same water,
but I must pretend
I know what I am doing,
and sometimes after a long day
of throwing child after child
up on the jetty,
I want to stop moving,
and let the ocean have me

with one hand up.
Eyes wide open.
To My Neighbor Who had the *All Lives Matter* Sign on Her Lawn

When the cop spilled bullet brown milk, the authorities told the country not to cry over spilled milk.

The *All Lives Matter* sign danced across your lawn with bare feet, a beer in one hand, toothpick between pink lips, and shimmied with the neighbors in your backyard while your daughter climbed the aluminum siding of the house next door where the black boy, she loved, smiled from his window, holding the other end of a sheet she had wrapped around her waist. Neighbor, you were only one generation from brown.

A decade or two later you understood when you saw a cop through the peep hole of your suburban door. Your hand shook as you turned the brass knob, and he told you your very own grandson, one generation brown, who you thought was safe cause he could pass as an infant, had been shot. Something happened during puberty that you did not expect, brown skin and coils because he refused to cut his hair, and like Kaepernick took a bow toward Africa.

But it was too late for you to go in reverse. Too late to proclaim, *Black Lives Matter* when that guilty cop,

*Issue 20 27*
who pulled the trigger, dined at home with his family
while you cried at the grave of a brown child

you never imagined you could love.
Afraid to Open this Letter from Inmate 17650-328

1.

Cliff’s inmate number is on the left corner of the envelope. It reminds me of my visit to East Jersey State Prison, a monstrous dome over a decrepit edifice.

Red brick. Appendages jutting from its sides. A pointed roof at the end of each limb.

An enclosed yard crowned with spiked Slinkys. The most ominous place I had ever been.

Everyone in my family had refused to see Cliff. He had murdered his brother. I felt compelled to go.

2.

Five years prior, my father had died. A heroin overdose. Prayer wasn’t enough to keep him alive. I found him on the floor. Head in waste basket. Pants down.

Needle dangling from groin. My mind had folded in on itself, the indelible image incubating in its creases. It had motivated me to see Cliff. Motivated me to try to find words to stop him from using.
3.

After I was frisked, fifty of us were jammed into a small area with three walls. Battleship gray.

No ceiling. A fourth, a steel door, thundered down. Guards, pacing the perimeter wall, told us to tighten up. We got as close as we could, nothing but fabric and sweat between strangers.

One tattooed face glared up at the guards and cussed into the sky with passion and bass.

I caught one officer's eye, hoping he would notice me in a mass of tight clothes, bamboo hoops, and a thousand bracelets, but he knew I had more in common with the other visitors than I wanted to admit. He stared down at me. Bellowed more commands.

I pulled on my pearls. Turned my diamond ring around. Housed it in my palm, so I would seem less pretentious. Folded my arms across my body.

4.

Cliff was the cousin who took me to his clubhouse, an abandoned duplex that smelled like soot and urine. We climbed broken steps.

Kicked through soiled rags, one tan work boot without strings, an eyeless Baby Alive Doll like the one I had at home,
but mine was brown.
Still had its eyes.

I tripped around in jelly sandals,
yellow shorts, and a tie dye halter,
following Cliff and his friends.
I didn’t think of heat,

rodents, or rusty nails.
When the cops came, Cliff held
his arms up and helped me escape
from the second-floor window
onto a dirty mattress. Rode me home
on the handlebars of a stolen bike.

5.

Cliff and I are from Stanley Homes Village.
I moved to the suburbs when I was ten.

My mother sometimes left
me at Cliff’s house.

I remember burying my face in the carpet
and covering my ears so I couldn’t hear

my aunt strangle Cliff in his bedroom.
I never got used to that sound.

Out of all my auditory memories, it is the most
poignant, the sound of a dry drowning.

My mother stopped leaving me there,
and whenever I ran into Cliff, I could tell

he was becoming someone else.
Alcohol, pot, heroin. No sign of the boy
with wide eyes, and straight As.
I didn’t know the man I was visiting

in a maximum-security prison with a 30 year sentence. When he walked into the courtyard,

bright orange and strong, I hugged the little boy who had once held his arms out for me

just in case I had missed the mattress when I jumped. The problem is I am now

watching everyone jump, but there are too many windows. Not enough arms on the ground.

And although I know I was not responsible for my father’s life, and I am not responsible

for Cliff’s life or the lives of everyone I am connected to, I don’t know how to love

without exhausting myself. I keep running from window to window punishing myself every time

I miss. That’s why I am afraid to open this letter. I know I will do whatever it requires.
Emily Rae is a writer living in New England. She has a BA in English Literature from Manhattanville College, and is expecting her MFA in Creative Writing from The New School in May 2020. She currently works at a nonprofit in the book industry.

Dandelion Soup
Emily Rae Behnke

Grandpa said the picture of the dandelion patch was taken the same summer that grandma died; which was the summer the patch became a field; which was the summer the widows—what are their names? Loretta and Sue—started to talk; which was the summer he thought I should come to stay with him; which was the summer I thought I shouldn’t, but did anyway; which was the summer the dandelions poked through the wood paneling, the holes gnawed by termites in the walls, their stems wiggling like earthworms, earthworms, earthworms; which was the summer we learned to pluck, our fingers stained a sickly yellow; and that summer was why he took the photo in the first place and why he would return to it summer after summer until he died—he wanted a reminder of exactly how bad grief could get, a picture he could hold up like I am now, so he could know, tangibly, what he had to work against, and, after years, he got what he worked (actually, plucked) for: a dandelion-free home. Until it got turned over to me.

He’d only been dead two weeks and I was already overwhelmed. The dandelions coated the house in a thick, fuzzy dust, the kind you couldn’t completely hide by shutting off the lights—which was what I did when the neighbors brought dinners. It was an easy answer. They couldn’t bring my grandfather back, but they could keep me something close to alive. I greeted anyone who came to the house in the almost dark, a hazy golden glow behind me, as I grabbed their ceramic dishes with tight lips and an even tighter grip. The neighbors stopped, as they do, and it was obviously a good thing because the lack of dinners wasn’t at all the problem, now.

It was that the dandelions had overtaken the stove. And, once I stopped putting things in it, they’d wound around the fridge. This morning I woke up and they were hanging from the windows where the curtains should have been so anybody outside could see what I was dealing with. The kitchen I could handle. The windows, though, I couldn’t. Grandpa was, and I am, a private person. Our thoughts on whatever difficulties cropped up in our lives were the same: nobody needed to know.

I decided to gnaw at the dandelions like a teething baby because
plucking didn’t work. I pulled and I pulled, my fingers an everlasting yellow, but the dandelions were tough as twine. My gums were raw and bleeding and my teeth felt smashed irregularly into my jaw, but gnawing worked. I was in the middle of chomping away a clearing on the stove when there was a knock at the door. I turned off the lights and went to the door, bloody-mouthed, wiping away what I could, smearing my face red and yellow. Even facing away from it, I could tell nothing would stop the pale light that came from the pile of dandelions on the floor.

I opened the wooden door as slow as I could, peered around it, and there was Loretta and Sue. They were both holding giant covered pots.

“I’m ok, thanks,” I said, moving to shut the door, to hide my face, but Loretta stopped me. Sue reached out and pulled the screen open and made her way inside, Loretta following close behind. They walked straight into the kitchen and I expected a gasp, an elderly version of holy fucking shit, something like, dearest me or what in tarnation, but Loretta and Sue just dropped the pots on the floor and got to work. After a moment, Loretta tossed me a handkerchief from her back pocket.

“Careful of that one,” Sue said, double fisting handfuls of dandelions on the stove. “It’s full of broth.”

They plucked. Their arms didn’t strain with effort. They didn’t grind their teeth or cry out. Beads of sweat didn’t dot their brows. The dandelions hardly stained them—in their hands, the dandelions glowed, burned with the intensity of a flame.

Once the stove was cleared, Sue lifted the pot of broth and turned the heat up high. Then, she grabbed the dandelions I’d piled on the floor and brought them to the sink to wash, lopping the yellow heads off and peeling away the greens. Loretta pulled a plastic bag full of plastic bags from underneath the sink and started to fill them with dandelions.

“Why can’t I do that?”

“Takes time,” Sue said, dumping the greens in the pot with chopped carrots, onion, celery, shredded chicken, and garlic. “And help. I know, I know. You look at us and think, what could we do? But is anyone else here? Anyone else simmer a pot of broth for fourteen hours for you? Pluck the dandelions?”

Sue had a point.

“That’s how it is sometimes,” she said, and they plucked the rest of the dandelions while I watched, holding Grandpa’s picture of the yard in my hands. When they were finished, Sue poured me a glowing bowl of soup.

“All you can do for now is eat. Let them do something useful instead of fighting them. You fight them, they’ll never really be gone.”

I took a bite of soup and thought of Grandpa, how the dandelions returned every summer. I took another bite and wondered if they’d be back in the morning. I took another bite and watched Sue pour Loretta a bowl, herself
a bowl. I took another bite and watched them take their bites and the more we ate, the more the blood washed out of my mouth, and the more we glowed. And the soup glowed. And the bags of dandelions glowed. And the dandelions wormed their way back in. But I didn’t ask them to leave. I kept the lights on.

When we were finished, they taught me again how to pluck, the way Grandpa had.
Jackson Nash is a British author and independent researcher. He is a fellow of the Lambda Literary Writer's Retreat for Emerging LGBTQ Voices (2013), and his writing has appeared in over 30 venues including Glitterwolf and Lunch Ticket. Jackson is a queer trans man who loves horror, weightlifting, and coffee.

Toothcrackers

Jackson Nash

Her polyester uniform was cobalt-cinema-blue, a popcorn kernel logo – fluffy, golden – embroidered above the breast, nothing like the toothcrackers she’s about to serve you, covered in a sauce of butter goo, chemical sugarsalt, an amoebic jelly on those concrete pellets that makes you regret nearly everything about this day, and you pay and see a film about silverweed, “A hairy and creeping perennial, with parsnip flavoured roots,” and some other loose plot about a man who lives off the land, as arthouse as your teeth feel now, as hairy and creeping as the boy you sat next to who wilted cataplectic and abstract when you unearthed his scabby hand from your thigh in the theatre dark and embraced being a lesbian. Days later you see the popcorn girl who works at the cinema vaping on a rubber swing in the park, so you swing beside her, she smells of floral panty liners, shoplifted body spray and her vulva pink eyeshadow leaves ghost trails as she arcs higher, and you ask if she ever eats the popcorn, her laugh as unsettling as cinema hotdogs, as the mouthguard in puke green you have to wear in bed because of your dreams,
the ones where all your teeth fall out, and you bite
your tongue when she says her house is by the racetrack
because you realise you know the one,
it’s where the shouting and molar rattling music comes from
and when she smiles on the downward arc
you see her teeth are cracked.

When she’s gone you search for silverweed
hoping it has grown in her footsteps, in the litter
of laughing gas canisters and ticket stubs,
hairy, queer and creeping like the next movie you’ll see
about loose working class lesbians vaping on swings
played by people with perfect teeth.
The Lesbian Bandana Curse

Allison Brice

Before I went to New Orleans, my bisexuality was abstract. I’d only barely started thinking the word, had just started coming to terms with the fact that I was a bit left of center in this, just like all other things. I was still reeling from a breakup with my long-term boyfriend and was mostly frustrated that in addition to being chubby, weird and mentally ill, I was apparently also queer, like God was saying “Are you having trouble fitting into society now? Try this on for size!” So it was a tiny quiet secret in the back of my mind, a little tickle that had been there for years—and for once I wasn’t swallowing it down, even if I wasn’t quite letting myself laugh yet.

But then I went to New Orleans. Instead of getting an internship in DC like I’d done for the past couple of summers, I signed up to go work in the dirt, and found myself on an urban organic farm in the Lower Ninth Ward for a month and a half: taking care of goats, getting stung by bees on every imaginable surface of my body, sweating in the stifling delta heat while trying to keep tomatoes and beets and carrots alive so we could give them to people who didn’t have access to fresh fruits and vegetables. It was nothing I had ever done before and everything I needed, a complete break from the sanitary and regimented world of Georgetown University. I stuffed my hair up in a wide-brimmed Columbia hat, wiped sweat off with a bandana, wore a sports bra every day, got tanned and callused and strong. I felt fundamentally and beautifully masculine—all five-feet, E-cup tits, chubby thighs of me.

New Orleans in 2014 was a dog in a shelter: abused and scared, still shaking from the trauma, trying to love again. Even as an outsider I could see what Hurricane Katrina had done to the city and especially to the neighborhood I stayed in, me and the other farm workers living in our communal house on Lizardi Street. I took walks along the levees with my iPod and the neighbors watched me, suspicious of this random white girl, and I couldn’t help but agree with them. The skeletons of washed-away houses lined every street, but the city still stood.

A week into my stay, we got a new farm worker. Jessie was small like
me, but dark and wiry instead of soft and fair, and she had a medical sob story like mine, only hers was chronic Lyme disease to my major depressive disorder. Her third day on the farm, we took the goats on leashes to one of the empty lots to let them eat their fill of weeds, and she asked me,

“So where do we go out here?”

“Like, out out?”

“Yeah, like on Bourbon Street. Where’re the good bars?” She huffed and paused to pull back on the goats. She had two to my one, but she actually had the easier time—she had the two mama goats, one of whom was currently pregnant, so they were calm and just wanted to eat. I had Kabri, the male goat, who was a goddamn asshole and wanted to fight with everyone he saw. He liked me more than the others, so I tended to take him. He pulled like a bull on the leash, and it took two hands and all the strength in my tiny body to keep him in line.

“Haven’t gone out much,” I admitted. “But I feel like it’s Bourbon Street, you, like, can’t go wrong.”

Jessie nodded. She’d already gotten ten new freckles in the three days she’d been here. “Tonight?”

Hell yeah. I’d been in New Orleans for a week and still had barely left the house—my first Friday night I picked bee stingers out of my tits where a few had wormed under my beekeeping suit earlier that day. Our roommates informed us that it wasn’t Bourbon Street but Royal Street we should be going to, since Bourbon Street had the drunk college kids and cheesy tourist bars but Royal Street had good drag queens and voodoo bars and live jazz. We went that weekend and I had my perfect New Orleans night: I drank hurricanes and danced on bars, smoked my first cigarette and ran screaming through the streets, finally stumbling onto the last bus back to Lizardi Street sucking down daiquiris in to-go cups because open carry laws are too plebian for New Orleans.

We were hooked. A few days later found us searching online for our next target. “Ooh, this place looks great,” Jessie said.

“That’s a strip club,” I said, leaning over to look at her phone.

“Clothing-optional country club,” she corrected. “So we will see some gross old-man dick, but the reviews say it’s fun and the wine is cheap.”

Sold.

Jessie and I went a few days later. We busted our humps to finish all our work in the morning, and then rode our bikes over the bridge into Bywater to the country club on Louisa Street, primly situated in an upscale neighborhood. Best part was the poolside bar, next to an open courtyard with dripping azaleas and warm sandy tiles. We immediately headed for the pool after a long bike ride in the stifling Louisiana summer, and started splashing and floating and giggling to ourselves about the promised old-man dick. I drank glass after glass of Franzia (served shamelessly at the poolside bar) and
made friends with everyone in the pool, especially another woman wearing a black tank top and shorts, no bathing suit. It took me an embarrassingly long time, but I eventually noticed that the way she was talking and holding herself and splashing me wasn’t a coincidence. She was hitting on me.

Her name was Andrea. She had a soft pudgy face, dirty blonde hair, powerful arms. She was from Georgia and worked at Walmart and drank Hennessey. She had the gravelly voice of a lifelong chain smoker even though she could only have been five years older than me. In the real world, we would never have crossed paths and we both knew it. But her eyes kept snagging on the swell of my breasts underneath my swimsuit and she said I had a gorgeous mouth and the water was warm and the air thick and I smiled back at her.

The rain came fast and hard like a punch—one minute we were all in the hot tub, me and Jessie and Andrea, and the next the sky had opened up and people grabbed towels and sprinted inside. I loved it—I grabbed Jessie’s hand and dragged her to the slick tiles and danced wildly in the rain. I was drunk on the knowledge that Andrea wanted me, wearing an old swimsuit that was horribly unflattering with my hair in a scraggly bun and glasses fogged with the rain. I shrieked with laughter, and Jessie challenged me to a hula hoop contest, and I made sure to tilt myself so Andrea could see my hips swing. I had seen the Mississippi River for the first time a few days ago—my other roommate had told me it was a source of powerful feminine energy, and I nodded and laughed it off to myself because this woman was a hardcore hippie and used to go on about not using the clothes dryer and the dangerous side effects of drinking water that was too cold or too hot. But she was right about the Mississippi, the great wide shimmering expanse of it spreading lazy before my eyes and taking my breath away. Back home in southern Arizona the rivers don’t flow like that, and the riverbed by my house is barren and filled with underbrush. The Mississippi made no apologies about its size, no concessions, fertile and mystical and blessed with water that lapped gently against some distant shore far from me. There in the rain, I was as fundamentally and beautifully feminine as the river, the perfect little Venus of Willendorf, and I was desired.

Half an hour later I was up on a pool table with Andrea between my legs, kissing me like she was trying to brand me. I don’t ever remember her checking if I was into girls, which meant I must’ve been stupidly obvious. Jessie was in the corner, eyes wide and mouth grinning. Andrea paused to take a breath and I put my hand under her chin, tilted her to look up at me.

“Are you going to come home with me?” I asked.
Just like that. I’d never been so forward in my life.
“Want me to?” She said lowly, her face already pressing back down into my cleavage like a dying man going for water. I nodded.
Andrea rode back with me and Jessie to the Lower Ninth, where I
knew the rest of our housemates were gone for the day. I drove the farm truck, a massive Ford that I had to jump to get into, down to the corner store to pick up some vodka. When I got back, Andrea had found the busted old guitar and was playing 99 Red Balloons. Her voice wasn’t great but she was good at the guitar, even one that was missing a string. We drank and played and sang for a while, but I was getting antsy, shifting there in the sundress I’d changed into. She’d been so bold at the club but was just sitting there now, making no moves on me at all.

“So what do you want to do?” I asked, taking a drink to make myself look casual. My heart thrummed with nerves. A part of me still believed I was going to chicken out, that this wasn’t going to happen.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, we’re here.” Jessie had made herself scarce, locked in one of the back bedrooms.

Andrea said nothing, just kept strumming and humming to herself. My heart was absolutely racing, and I was terrified that I’d lose the boldness of the club, that I’d snared this woman and she’d realize that I was just a chubby girl on Celexa who’d only had sex with one other person and wasn’t worth her time.

“If you don’t want to sleep with me you don’t have to,” I said. It had the intended effect. Andrea looked up at me and paused in her strumming. “I rode my bike all the way down here. We’re gonna fuck.”

She told me to go to the bathroom and wash out my vagina. I protested, saying it was perfectly clean.

“It’s not that, just splash some water on it so I can get right in here and—” She pantomimed eating, lots of teeth. My heart jumped and heat rushed to my face. I stood up, shaking, and went to the bathroom to do as she said.

When I came back into the bedroom, she was smiling at me from my bottom bunk bed and holding up my little pink vibrator. “In a communal house? Bold.”

“Girl’s gotta do what a girl’s gotta do,” I said, before walking over and straddling her. I hadn’t put my panties back on, wore my sundress and nothing else. Andrea grabbed me by the hips and we finally started kissing.

I’d kissed plenty of women before—that was how this all started, with me enjoying it just a bit more than the girls I was kissing—but had never before been with the promise of sex afterwards, it had always been giggly drunk in high school and college with straight girls, too afraid to do anything more than kiss with a little bit of tongue. Here, now, I reached down and took the warm weight of Andrea’s breast in hand and felt her up to my heart’s content, fingers reaching under her still-wet black tank top and grinding down on her lap like I was riding a bull. She laid me down and settled heavily between my thighs, but we discovered quickly that the bottom bunk is not a
good place for sex. So onto the floor we went, the floor which was still unfinished and covered in a thin plastic sheet to keep us from the scratchy wood. I was in a pink and purple sundress rucked up to my thighs and she in all black, looming over me like something out of a bad public service announcement about evil New Orleans lesbians luring good Catholic girls to the dark side.

With thick hands planted on either side of my shoulders, she kissed me again and started to work her way down. “You done this before?”

“No, I’ve never done this before.”

She nodded like that was the answer she was expecting. There was a moment where her fingers trailed up my thighs, just this side of erotic, just enough to make me clench.

Then she flipped my skirt up and went to work.

“Wow, okay, that was a lot of tongue. Andrea ate pussy like it was a slab of Easter ham and she didn’t have a fork. It was frankly more terrifying than titillating but a clitoris is a clitoris and when she hit the spot I still moaned. Something about it felt different coming from a woman, more erotic, and the first five minutes were amazing. After about ten minutes, though, it stopped feeling good and started feeling monotonous. Eventually I just started moaning and squealing her name in an effort to get her to continue, because it felt good but I was nowhere near coming. I spared a momentary thought for poor Jessie at the back of the house, probably hiding with the goats to get away from my voice.

Andrea sat up and flipped my legs over her shoulder, my entire back arched. I kept moaning and she kept at it. She maneuvered me onto hands and knees and came at it from behind. I kept moaning with no idea if I even sounded sexy anymore. It’d probably been fifteen minutes at this point. She pushed me back down and bent herself over in the original position. Twenty minutes. Was I ever going to come? I started to sweat. My mind was in other places. Did we feed the ducks today? It’d been a while since lunch, I was getting hungry. Did I still have any Sour Patch Kids left?

Her thick eyebrows squinted together between my legs. In what to this day remains one of the smoothest things I’d ever seen, she grabbed my thighs, laid down on her back, and flipped me over so that I was sitting on her face. The new angle was awesome, since I could hump down and have some control besides just wiggling and squeaking, but at this point it was nearing half an hour of cunnilingus and I was tired. Jessie had to be bleaching her ears by now. Andrea stuck her fingers in, thick and blunt, making me jerk away in pain. After a couple of probing swipes she gave up on fingers and went back to her tongue.

She tried to put me into another position and I finally put my foot down. I gave a particularly excellent moan (if I do say so myself), making sure to tense and quake and close my eyes and let my mouth drop open just
so, and then theatrically collapsed onto the floor.

“You’re good,” I breathed out.

Andrea stopped and flopped down beside me, finally surrendering the Battle for Allison’s Vagina. I could’ve cried from relief. My poor pussy was literally sore, probably retreated fully back into the closet after that assault.

I could’ve slept for a week, but I managed to sit up and look her in the eyes. “Lemme take care of you.”

“Don’t worry, kid.” She reached one hand in her pants and withdrew two sticky fingers that she proceeded to lick off, to my fascination. “Your noises do it for me.”

She probably didn’t want a newbie going down on her, and frankly that was fine by me. I laid back down on the floor, finally noticing that we’d torn up the plastic cover in our acrobatics. The unfinished wood was scratchy on my bare ass. I scooched closer to her, testing out the waters for snuggling, and to my relief she put her arm around me and drew me in. Sex without cuddling afterwards always made me feel wrong-footed.

“You didn’t come,” she said. It wasn’t a question.

I felt that I’d failed her. Who doesn’t come after half an hour of eating out? “Yeah, sorry. Antidepressants make it hard for me to orgasm.”

Which is factually true, but I could bring myself off in about six minutes with my vibrator, so something in this equation wasn’t adding up. In my post-sex haze, I didn’t want to blame Andrea. She’d just given me my first queer encounter, first allowed me to explore this lush, hidden side of myself, made me feel desirable and lusted after and sexy. A part of me wanted to pay her, I was so grateful.

She just shrugged and placed a kiss on top of my head. “Happens sometimes.”

She took her leave a few minutes later, needing to ride back home. She asked if she could borrow a bandana, but all of the ones she pointed out were my roommate’s, hanging out to dry after washing.

“Use mine,” I said, handing her my absolute favorite blue bandana, the one I used every day to wipe the sweat off my face while working outside.

She gave me a kiss, took the bottle of vodka and rode off down Lizardi Street. My knees were weak underneath my dress, still not wearing panties. Jessie came back out and gave me shit for all the screaming. Suddenly shy, suddenly coy, I deflected and curled up in my bunk bed to take a nap. I wanted to shower to wash her off me but didn’t want to wash her off me—I wanted to feel clean again but still wanted to feel sexy, and I was terrified that without her, my sexiness and sexuality would disappear. The fact that it had happened in New Orleans, so far from my normal world, made me worry that my bisexuality was just a mirage, a pale reflection that could only be seen when viewed through a stronger, more solid queer woman—that Andrea was the mirror and I was only a weak imitation of her assured
lesbianism. I still worry that, sometimes.

The next day, the two men on the farm went to a conference in Baton Rouge and the remaining three women ran the farm for the next week. I borrowed one of my roommate’s spare bandanas and, as the only one with a current driver’s license, drove the huge truck around the farm to deliver supplies, tools and soil. That week went down as one of the worst that summer: the goats got out, with Kabri running nearly a mile away before we found him; one of the farm lots flooded due to a freak pipe bursting; the bees were savage, seeming to go out of their way to sting us; we were forced out in Biblical rains to salvage vegetables that were on the verge of being flooded.

“This all started when Allison lost her bandana,” Jessie commented that night, as we broke into our roommate’s pot stash and smoked on the porch, a wall of rain just in front of us.

“I didn’t lose it, I gave it to Andrea so she could wipe her face off when she rode her bike home.”

“You gave your bandana to the lesbian? Your only bandana? Are you gonna get it back?”

“I don’t know, I wasn’t thinking, she’d just eaten me out for like an hour—”

“You cursed the farm,” Jessie said, pointing her joint at me. “You cursed the farm with your sexual deviancy!”

I stole the joint and led her on a wild goose chase through the house to get it back, both of us shrieking in delight.

Turns out I did see Andrea again—my last night in New Orleans, she met us when we went back to Royal Street. She gave me my bandana back and we sat busking on a street corner so she could get enough money to buy weed. She was different that night, robbed of the machismo and swagger she had at the country club, awkwardly hovering around me and my friends. I was different that night, bolder and more assured; no longer the extremes of femininity and masculinity but a comfortable blend, cute and quirky and sassy with my curly hair, tough and stomping and gritty with my beat-up cowboy boots and cigarette.

“I’m gonna head down to Dauphin, meet some friends,” Andrea told me, body angled towards me.

“Okay,” I said, “I’m gonna stay here.”

She pressed forward for a brief kiss, lips smoky-dark. I watched her walk off between the streetlights, bandana tucked into my purse. Jessie and I ate beignets at Café Du Monde and I licked powdered sugar off of my fingers. The drag queens danced in the open window of the bar.

Two weeks later when I went back to Georgetown, I regaled my friends with stories of my wild adventures in New Orleans, complete with all the hairy details about my encounter with Andrea. They celebrated my dramatic coming-out story with teasing and impromptu treats—a cake with
frosting that read “Congrats On the Lesbian Sex” and a mixed drink made of vodka and sour apple pucker that tasted as close as we could get to a daiquiri.

“This drink is called a Lesbian Bandana Curse,” I said, raising it high, and they cheered. No swallowing it down, no concessions, a new identity in an old place. I took a sip of my drink and it was bright and tart and free.
**Fabio Lastrucci** was born in Naples (Italy) in 1962. A sculptor and illustrator, he has worked for the main national television networks as well as lyrical and prose theatre. In the late '80s he begin to draw comic books, publishing comics with the magazines Ronin and Sherazade. His comics, artworks, and covers have been published by the American magazines Shenandoah, Perihelion SF, Typehouse, The Tishman Review, Gone Lawn, Metaphorosis, Bards and Sages, and the anthology *Ordinary Madness Vol. 2*. As a writer he has published humorous novels, a fantasy saga, issues about science fiction, and weird comics. https://www.behance.net/fabiolastra2ab https://morbidiapprodi.wordpress.com/

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**Circus**

In this circus, animals and men discuss their future together. There is no certainty in the wandering lives of people like them, workers who travel the world carrying their theatre like a suitcase. This drawing shows through their worried expressions that these times do not seem easy. The lion's roars are silent, the acrobats will wait. Ironically, the one who has to explain how difficult the situation is wears funny clown clothes. Life, he says, will decide their script. Whether it's a play or something else is still a mystery to be discovered.

46 Typehouse Literary Magazine
Tiger City

Through the shape of an animal-symbol, we can represent the hidden soul of cities. There are some as slow as a snail, or as fast as fleeing gazelles, others as calm and immutable as pachyderms. But the future wants audacity and strength to make us overcome its increasingly difficult, increasingly complex, and risky bets. Every palace, street, bridge, and monument is set in motion, determined, to attack the unknown time and the pitfalls it contains. So this metropolis made of straight lines, laws and geometries does not back down, but faces its challenges, flexible and powerful. Like a real tiger-city would do.
The Last Dynos

Our daily use quickly burns fashions, objects, and technologies, transforming them into huge cemeteries of junk, real forgotten monuments of this time that seems to eat his own body in a wild banquet. Even the men who guard these mountains made of slag are gradually consumed and made obsolete by the same process. At the moment their species still seems to dominate the scene, but the role they play may not be more enduring than their own products. These humanized dinosaurs in shirt and tie are a metaphor that breaks itself. How long, I wonder, will they still own the dump?
Sea Concert

A young musician, whose face is made invisible by his position, is playing alone on an empty beach a romantic serenade dedicated to the sea, that living presence that embraces the soft sandy flanks of every coastal city. This vision pushes me to draw a scene, in which the main inhabitants of the depths peep up to the surface to accompany him with a speechless chorus, notes so intimate and full of passion. The scene suggests that to hear their voices all you have to do is close your eyes and think of the sound of the backwash kneading on the shore like a bundle of flour to bake. The story they tell comes from the echo of a thousand maritime legends. The carpet on which the notes are disjointed can only have the colour of a blues...
Rochelle Jewel Shapiro's novel, Miriam the Medium (Simon & Schuster) was nominated for the Ribelow Award. She’s published essays in NYT (Lives) and Newsweek, and in many anthologies. Her short stories, poetry, and essays have appeared in many literary magazines such as The Iowa Review, Los Angeles Review, The MacGuffin, Memoir Journal, Moment, Negative Capability, Pearl, Pembroke, Pennsylvania English, Peregrine, Ragged Sky Press, Rio Grande Review, RiverSedge, Schuylkill Valley Journal Of the Arts, Swamp Ape Review. Her poems have been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. She teaches writing at UCLA Extension.

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Murmur

Rochelle Jewel Shapiro

Rochelle, you whisper. I feel your breath in my ear. I open my eyes, blink at your side of the bed that’s empty of you. You, a stomach-sleeper, your profile still impressed in your down pillow, your blue waffle-weave blanket rumpled, but flat without cocooning you.

I remember you told me of your early morning cardiologist appointment. With my head on your chest, I’ve listened to the whump, whump of your aortic murmur.

How, I wonder, did I feel your breath, and hear your voice vibrate through the air in waves like the rush of the sea at the beach where we first met?

I microwave the half cup of coffee you left over. It warms my lips.
Keith Allen lives in Wichita, Kansas with his wife and newborn where he writes speculative fiction while his wife brushes shoulders with celebrities and makes money. He’s a graduate of Knox College in Galesburg, IL where he earned a Bachelor of Arts in creative writing and serves as an associate editor at The Colored Lens.

Out of Gas
Keith Allen

If he could just get the God forsaken thing to work, he knew he could bring her back. Ed exhaled and shook his head as he ran a hand through his greasy black hair. That was the ticket all right, the damn generator.

Making his way to the other side of his wood shop was a chore with the sore hip he’d earned hauling the damn thing all the way from the fields. Worse yet, the clutter reminded him of his sweet Shirl. Above his work bench were the wooden caterpillar cutouts he’d labored over two whole summers, beer in hand and curses on his lips. In the end he’d produced jagged abominations of the curved lines in his mind, but she’d proudly displayed them in her garden beside her own creations. He stumbled over and set creaking the rocker she’d asked him to stain years ago. Might be he would have gotten to it, given time. A lump formed in his throat that was tough to swallow.

“I need you, Shirley.” he told the settled sawdust through tears. He reached the socket wrench, scratched to hell from twenty years of service, each mark a catastrophe it had endured. It comforted him, filled him with enough hope that the limp back out to the generator was all the quicker.

Ed and Shirley had made due without electricity now for about ten years. None of them post-apocalyptic teen books ever talked about that: What happened after the last power plant technician died. The blackout happened faster than he’d ever imagined. Fifteen minutes, tops. Probably all came down to some damn button the guy couldn’t have bothered to teach someone else to press.

He was at the generator now. Just their second generator, but they weren’t exactly easy to find. Neither was the gas required to run the damn things. If he couldn’t get it working, odds of finding another source of power were close to none. And there wasn’t enough gas in his vehicle to get him so far as the next town over.

Ed looked at Shirley beneath the glass of the Biovive Regeneration Chamber they had purchased with the last of their small nest egg before the invasion started. Despite his general misgivings about the process of defying
death, Ed thanked God for allowing him to say yes to that salesman.

Shirley’s body lay there, peaceful as if death were just some gentle slumber. The same body he’d loved far back as he could remember, just aged. Wrinkles and folds Ed had felt form beside his own aging body. Gray and thinning hair that still held a tint of the shock of red it once was. They were holding on, getting older, well after the rest of the world had been sent to early graves by the damn space invaders. That meant something.

He closed his eyes and prayed as he pulled the recoil rope and listened to the generator sputter, hoping for the best. The Lord provided. From the sound of it, there was a spark and still gas in there, but something wasn’t catching in its guts. Probably just a loose head gasket. Hopefully not blown. He set to work tightening the bolts.

If Ed had forgotten, his shoulders reminded him that he was getting older with every turn of a bolt. It made for slow and sweaty work, but by sunset he stood, shaking, and grabbed the recoil rope with both hands. He gave it two good yanks and the engine took and purred like a damn tiger. Ed couldn’t be more proud of himself, hollering with glee as he made his way to the Biovive’s control panel.

A few button presses kicked the machine into gear. Lasers ran over Shirley’s body, massaging her back into this plane of existence. It took a bit more time on the hole in her head, but by the end she was whole again. A second chance.

Technically a fifth chance, but he’d stopped wanting to count after her third revival. She started to cough beneath the glass and he raised up the lid and took her in his arms, his heart beating faster than ever.

“Ed?” she asked wearily, touching his face. The flash of recognition in her eyes made him feel like he could live ten more years.

“Shirl,” he said, stroking her face. “You’re back, sweetheart.” But her eyes caught fire, her lips sank into a frown, and she pushed him aside.

“I begged you, Ed.” She climbed out of the Biovive and stood with her face away from him, her arms crossed.

Ed moved towards her. He had known she would be cross, but he could make her understand this time. He just knew it. He touched her elbow and she flinched but did not move away, so he moved closer and held her while they rocked back and forth. The only old things left in this world. Couldn’t she see it?

“No, said the darkness in the pit of his stomach, realizing too late that he would fail again in keeping her here.

“Our children are dead.” She turned around and in her white-knuckled right hand was the knife he’d used to skin their dinner the last few years. Kept sharp by their most basic need to feed. “Everyone we know is dead.” She jabbed the knife’s pointy end at Ed and he hopped backwards, afraid. “The
next time you bring me back you’ll be the one that gets it. If that’s what it takes.”

Her eyes held a mania that he alone could recognize. All they’d seen, all they’d endured, she’d endured more, five times over.

She pressed the blade into the side of her head, and as her blood spilled and her body went limp for a sixth and final time, the portable generator choked in the background and fell silent. Out of gas.
Mary Soon Lee was born and raised in London, but has lived in Pittsburgh for over twenty years. Her two latest books are from opposite ends of the poetry spectrum: Elemental Haiku, containing haiku for each element of the periodic table (Ten Speed Press, 2019) and The Sign of the Dragon, an epic fantasy with Chinese elements (JABberwocky Literary Agency, 2020).

The Seven Deadly Sins:
A Cat’s Perspective
Mary Soon Lee

Pride is justified
when one is in fact perfect
in every respect.

Lust is the lever
linking such a perfection
to a like equal.

Yes, sloth is sinful,
but meditative napping
is not sin but art.

Envy is likely
whenever the lesser meet
those who are greater.

If one did not rule
the entirety one surveyed
then greed might arise.

Wrath is the method
by which one communicates
rightful displeasure.

Gluttony is not,
ever has, nor ever will
constitute a sin.
At thirteen Jim Still-Pepper was given a camera and has been capturing light ever since. He believes that the Light shines in the darkness and that is very good.

The real important stuff about Jim is that he is married and has two wonderful adult children.

"There" is not so much about a place as it is about being present--There in the moment; there in the space. We live too often going here or there, but never fully being there. So, be there, fully there, is the challenge.
**Grace and Alma**

Claudia Spiridon

*This recording is protected under the law as confidential information. Attempts at disclosing any details about it will be dealt with accordingly through legal action.*

“Have you ever loved?” I ask. Her eyes hold in their gaze wisdom in contrast with her young features. She nods. “Oh, yeah?” I speak again, head tilted upwards and eyebrows gently arched.

“Of course I did.” Her mouth sets in a grimace—it’s unpleasant. She doesn’t feel like talking about it but I push the subject nonetheless.

“I would assume it wasn’t Tom?” She shakes her head. I hum. I know she will demand for this recording to be personal, but I want it archived—just in case someone might be interested in it. She gives me a sigh and I set my stare on her. She taps on the screen propped in front of her.

“I’m ready.” I give her a smile, waiting a few seconds for the drugs to kick in and let her mind mellow out. Then I blink. I am no longer in the office. All around me there are people chattering away. Liquor. Suits and dresses. I see her standing near a wall, smiling nervously.

“Grace?” My voice is soft, gentle when I call her name. She clears her throat and I can hear her words delivered to me as an echo—a distant reminder of the reality behind the world of her memories.

“I was a nervous wreck. I barely knew anyone at this party. My friend, Jamie, invited me on account that I knew poetry and literature and politics. He loved talking about JFK with me and I . . . just went, not knowing what to expect.” For a brief moment the party is replaced with images of Jamie. Him fishing on a sunny day; him laughing at a joke; him dancing with a blond girl. There is jazz in the back of her mind.

“Do you want me to record Jamie?” I ask, as if to tell her to not lose her focus. She mumbles to herself and I can hear her tapping on the screen; she is obviously building resistance to the drugs.

“Not today.” When she replies the scenery morphs back to the pleasant light of the evening and the party. The 50s are still permeating every
fibre in the picture but I can see a few traces of the swinging 60s making their presence felt. There’s the smell of weed in the air and giggles all around me. Grace is holding a glass of wine and scouting the perimeter. Her hair is pinned up in a convoluted fashion and she is wearing a baby blue dress that’s just below her knees.

“Why don’t we go forward a bit?” At my question, I can see a few flashes, images repeating as if she is trying to remember what she was doing.

“Ah,” I hear her exclaim softly and I am watching her dancing now. It’s animated and she has two left feet. Her cheeks are now flushed and I can see the alcohol had an effect on her. “She’s coming,” she speaks again and her voice is raspy. I want to see her expression, but her memory takes me away. The music slows down, her eyes move towards a guy that says something about finding a partner and taking it easy. She stands there, awkward. She arranges strands of dark hair as she takes in a breath. She mutters a few ‘excuse me’ as she moves through the crowd—couples holding onto each other, dancing, making out, staring into each other’s eyes.

“Where?” I ask, probing around her mind. I can see she doesn’t like it as the lights in the room dim in response. A surge of energy makes a lamp nearby envelop her in a halo of light. The party feels now like a stage with the spotlight on her. She gazes across the room. Wild, red hair, untamed curls and green eyes. All of them flash behind my eyes—it’s as if Grace took mental pictures and she’s flicking through an album all about this red-haired girl.

“She’s there. Alma.” When she tells her name, there’s longing and hurt in the inflection of her voice. I can finally see the woman she is referring to. Sipping from a glass something that resembles brandy. Her features are not well defined, but there are certain characteristics that seem to have stuck with Grace. The way her mouth moves when she talks—suave, inviting, playful. The way she laughs—as if it was the last time she had the opportunity to do it. Then the woman named Alma turns around—stops mid-sentence almost. Her gaze falls onto the still rosy cheeked Grace. Grace is now embarrassed.

“Ah, Alma, I see,” I quip and Grace laughs. A cough disrupts the image of the redhead. She fights to regain her breath.

“Sorry,” she excuses herself as she inhales deeply. The lights are back in her brain and I watch the redhead smiling towards her. “I was so fascinated with her. She seemed so carefree.”

“She looks like it,” I comment as Alma starts walking. She smells like alcohol, tobacco, mint, and jasmine. Her steps carry her across the carpeted floor—almost rhythmical, as if dancing was imprinted in all her movements, as if she was caught in a perpetual waltz. The bespectacled Grace now turns towards a table to pour herself some brandy. She takes out a cigarette with unsure gestures. Then there’s a flicker.

The lights around the room go out—there’s darkness. And in the middle of the tenebrosity there’s them: Grace and Alma. Alma is holding a
lighter that illuminates both their faces. It’s almost as if the entire world disappeared as soon as Alma was there. Is that how Grace felt? As if all she needed was the attention of this feisty looking woman? I hear myself inhale shakily.

“What did she say?” My tone is soft, quiet. Me and Grace both are surrounded by silence—we both take into the presence of Alma. Suddenly, the party reappears. The sounds around me continue. The music is still slow and I can hear a bass and a piano.

Alma’s lips are moving. Do you need a light? Her voice is deep and sensual, and I can certainly see how Grace could have been entranced by her. Grace responds and nods her head, an innocent smile sketched on her lips.

“Oh, God, I remember this . . .” Grace chuckles under her wheezing breath—and I join her as soon as I hear Alma’s voice again. That’s the only way I know how to introduce myself to beautiful women. Thank god you’re a smoker. There it is. Alma’s smile. Her red tinted lips arch beautifully and the curvature of her mouth somehow brings life to the rest of her features.

The colours of the memory world Grace possess become more vivid. Alma’s green eyes are greener, her red lips redder, her olive skin glowing. I can hear the faint heartbeat of the brunette—Grace is flattered and unsure. She drowns her smile in brandy. Takes a drag from her cigarette. Alma extends a hand and Grace lets her fingers be captured by it as smoke pours through her lips and plays around her face.

Do you dance? The redhead's gaze is soft, gentle, suave—she knows what she is doing. Grace’s shoulders rise and fall in a short gesture and she huffs. There’s nervousness playing on her muscles and she rolls her lower lip under her teeth. There’s a playful smile. The scenario is suddenly changed.

“Oh, we’re here already,” I joke. Alma holds Grace close. The only sounds I can hear in the room now are the loud music and the deep breaths of the two women. There’s an air of intimacy and, with every sway of hips and every gentle step, the outer world dissipates into low light. They hold each other as if they have been designed as one person and somewhere along the way the two halves have been separated. I wonder if Grace felt Alma was her soulmate, that person that completes us in all aspects and seems like they’ve been made only for us. Alma whispers something in her ear and I can hear Grace giggle—it’s gentle, innocent, amused.

“I forgot about that,” Grace mumbles and I find myself curious.

“What did she say?” In an instant, the couple seems closer to me and I can hear the words Alma whispered. You are a bad dancer. A pause. I love it. I feel my chest expanding. The alluring warmth in her voice, in her gestures draws me in—she is fascinating.

There’s a leisure in their dance, as if they have never been as comfortable as now before. They know each other instinctively. Then the music stops. I blink as the lights come back on. Then we are back to

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blackness. We are in the darkness and Grace’s mind seems to not want to give in. It’s almost as if she wants to hold this moment only to herself. But I can still see them—they look as if they are embracing beneath a streetlamp. Alma grabs Grace’s hand and there’s a moment marked by tension. Then a soft kiss is placed on Grace’s fingers. Their eyes meet. And I can see that’s where it all started. In that shared gaze that spoke more about their connection than anything else.

As if they understood each other with no sounds. No words were needed, they could communicate through an intricate language made of touches and gazes. I felt tears coating my eyes and my nails digging into my palms as I closed my fists.

“I . . . wish to stop here,” Grace implores and her tone is low—as if she is holding back tears. I take a breath and nod. Before the mind of my patient becomes unavailable, however, I can see a few more images. There’s Alma feeding her grapes and them reading together. There’s her laughter and her red lips placing kisses across Grace’s collarbones. Then I open my eyes.

We are back in the faded afternoon—the colours around us now seem grey compared to the ones of the luxurious universe within Grace’s mind. Grace stares at me. She looks exactly the same as she did one hundred and two years ago, the night she met Alma. A smile flutters above her lips.

“She was the love of my life. Things were different back then, though. I married Tom and then . . . well, I haven’t seen her in decades. I think I . . .” The woman takes in a breath and I can see her blue eyes drowning in tears. One rolls down her cheek and her trembling palm comes to wipe it away. “I hurt her.” I feel my chest constricting and my fingers itching to do something.

“Grace . . .” She lifts her head and I jump to my feet. “I am sorry,” I whisper as I kneel next to her. Her fingers come to rest to the side of my face. She shakes her head and a lively smile appears on her lips—as if she shook away the nostalgia.

“It’s alright, darling. It’s an old tale.” I nod—I feel sick to my stomach and am unsure about what to do next. As I rise to my feet and rub my palm against my stubble, I hear a soft sound coming from the woman. “Noah. Could you please . . . not put this in the album, please? I want this recorded for myself, but this shall not be put in the album. Can you do that for me?”

“For sure, Grace.” As I reply, we share a smile. I would have wanted to keep Alma only to myself as well—we both understand that.

I walk to my desk to download the recording of her memory and she calls her nurse. A young woman appears in the door and walks towards her chair. It still sometimes felt weird seeing young looking people carted off in a chair, tubes and wires attached to their body. Before she leaves, Grace looks towards me.

“Noah?” My head snaps up and I hum under my breath, eyebrows
raised. “Thank you.” I want to say she shouldn’t thank me—that I should be the one eternally grateful to her for sharing that beautiful memory with me. I steal a gaze in the direction of the nurse, however, and smile professionally.

“No worries at all, Mrs. Reed. Next week, at the same time?” She nods and gives me a last knowing smile. Then I watch her exit the room into the well-lit hallways. I fall into my chair with a sigh and close my eyes. When I open them again my hand goes to the screen propped on my desk. I tap on it and speak in a stern voice:

“Send the next one in, please.”

#

“Here?” The voice of the woman makes my gaze turn towards her. There’s softness in her gestures but her eyes hold deep in their heart a glimmer speaking of the fire inside her.

“Yes, please, make yourself comfortable.” She nods and I watch her lower herself in the comfortable chair. She gives me an amused smile as if to say ‘you’re lucky you can still bend your knees.’ With a sigh, I walk around my desk and start preparing my patient for the session. I place the plasters around her wrist and power up the tablet on the armrest of her chair.

“Are you sure this drug is not . . . does it have side effects?” I look up with a smile at her question—her eyebrows are brought together.

“No worries, no side effects will be noticed. This is a totally safe procedure.” She nods and I can see relief coating her expression.

“Good. I may be dying but I don’t want to hurry up the process.” There’s now a lopsided grin fluttering above her lips. I chuckle under my breath and take my seat in the armchair across her.

“We will start by establishing a few details. Is that alright? I know you had to fill out forms, but this just to reaffirm a few things about the procedure.” She nods, smiles—she is the image of docility.

“Go ahead.”

“Right. Your name is Alma Herrez.” I wait and she nods, eyes trained on the movements of my fingers as I go through my list of questions on my tablet. “You wish the album to only be seen by yourself, for now.” Another nod, this time accompanied by a flicker in her gaze. “I have to remind you that you have total control over what we record, save or delete. Everything we say or record in this room is protected by law and I won’t disclose any information unless there’s the implication you might have hurt someone or intend to do so. Is that all good with you?”

“All good, Noah. Can I call you Noah?” When she says my name there’s an underlying tone, something I cannot pinpoint.

“Of course, Alma. Please do.” Relaxing in my seat, I let my hands fall in my lap, fingers intertwined. “What shall we start with?” There’s a pause as if she’s reading my reactions; I know what she is about to say but, nonetheless, I try to act innocuously.
“How about we start with Grace?” There’s a smile lingering at the corner of her lips and I nod softly.

“I cannot disclose any information about her.” She knows that but she doesn’t care—her hand gestures as if to brush away my words.

“Noah, I would never dream of you telling me about her. I know I have no right, but I couldn’t help myself. I went out on a limb but your words just now confirmed she was in your care.” Her smile is victorious as if she just won a game of chess and, in a way, I feel that she did. The image of a red-haired woman flashes before my eyes. Aside from the colour of her hair, Alma Herrez remained unchanged—the same red lips, green eyes, and infectious energy.

“That’s an assumption, I can’t pronounce myself on this matter.” Although my face remains untouched by a smile, my eyes tell her exactly what she needs to know. In the flicker in my gaze she can see I know her and that I know her probably more intimately than she would want.

“It’s fine. I want to start with my proposal to Grace.” When she speaks this time there’s subtle determination in her words and in her eyes.

“Certainly. Just tap the plus sign on your screen once and tell me when you’re ready.” She does as I instruct and takes in a big breath. She nods—I blink and we are suddenly in the hallway of a small apartment, the evening light enveloping everything in a mellow tone.

“This was the apartment we shared.” Alma’s voice envelops my mind as a cold embrace, the sounds echoing distant and bizarre. Then I see her. Alma is standing in the small kitchen, arms crossed at her chest and her lower lip tucked under her teeth. She exhales through her nose and closes her eyes. I can see the tremble possessing her muscles and the nervousness imprinted in her expression.

“Do you want to go a tad further?” I ask and a few flashes come before my eyes; indistinguishable. I know Alma is trying her best now to go forward through her memories. Then everything stops. There’s darkness and I can hear a deep breath. A light comes at the end of a room that is lost in the tenebrosity of the memory. And under it stands a smiling Grace—blue eyes are sparkling, her hair around her face.

“She’s so beautiful, hm?” There’s a trembling sigh resonating in my mind and I feel forced to take in a deep breath. I hum as a reply and watch Grace walk slowly towards a figure lost in the dark. As the light follows her frail body I can distinguish the features of a red-haired woman.

“You changed your hair colour,” I comment—there’s a pause in everything and it seems as if Alma’s mind stops. Then I hear her chuckle under her breath and see Grace’s feet shuffling across the floor again. What is it? The known voice of the brunette sounds now sweeter, filtered through the nostalgia of Alma’s memory.

There’s tentativeness imprinted in the gestures of the redhead as she
reaches forward, both hands now on Grace’s arms. Suddenly, the room comes into view again and the two silhouettes are lost in the dimming light of the evening. I can see Alma’s lips moving, but no sounds come out—her memory is not complete, I conclude.

The smile that adorns Grace’s lips is sweet, tender, intimate—a smile I have never seen before on her. *I was thinking . . . I love you, Grace. So please . . . be mine forever?* The voice of the woman is laced with a wet tone, something in her gestures speaking about the emotion felt. She reaches in the back of her jeans and the light in the room fades away.

The only visible thing in her memory now is Grace and the ring. It’s almost as if Alma did her best to erase this memory, but she was unable to erase everything. She was left with this image of Grace and the ring presented afront her. There’s surprise generously coated on the brunette’s features. Then there’s a shake of the head. A moment lapses before I can see again Grace’s face, a moment of darkness encompassing Alma’s mind.

“It’s shock,” I mumble to myself and I hear a curious sound coming from my patient. “Don’t worry, continue.” Alma settles herself back into the memory and I am now much closer to Grace. I can see all the lines on her face, I can see her blue eyes embraced by tears, I can see her lips trembling. I can’t. That’s all that leaves Grace’s lips before she plunges towards a chair to grab her jacket. The whole apartment comes back to life with colours vivid and illuminated by the sheer passion in Alma’s words. *Is this because of your parents? Because I don’t give a fuck about anything else but us, Grace! And I love you so much, please . . .*

The red-haired woman speaks through the chatter of her teeth—words are forced, pulled out of her mouth. The syllables are laced with pain and desperation, but Grace simply turns around and shakes her head again. Dark hairs sway around her face as she does. There are tears decorating the soft lines of her face. Then she mouths something. Everything fades into darkness once again—the only spectre of light is above Alma. She is still holding the ring.

The powerful sound of a door being closed inundates the space of Alma’s mind. I feel my fingers trembling and, without noticing, a tear has escaped onto the expanse of my cheek.

“Noah?” The voice of my patient makes my body jolt—there’s a sensation of loss and sickness in my lower belly. It’s as if my body has been hollowed out but there’s a feeling of ampleness.

“I’m good.” As I reply, I am brought back to the reality of my office. There’s a lingering air of tension. I hurry to wipe my face and, when I look towards Alma, there’s a sad smile painted on my lips. “I’m sorry.” That’s all I manage through clenched teeth. She lowers her gaze and nods, seeming lost in thought for a few moments. When her eyes settle on me there’s a smile contouring on her lips.
“A few months after that she married Tom. I assumed she tried to talk to her parents about it and she was forced to marry him so as not to . . . be tempted by my proposal. That’s speculation . . . we never talked about this.” Her last words are accompanied by a deep sigh. I am left frozen in my seat—completely unsure of what to do. Before I can reply she shakes her head, her wild curls bouncing around her shoulders. “I want this saved and sent to my address. Can you do that, please?”

“Of course, Alma,” I nod and she smiles towards me—almost as if to say it’s fine, her heart healed, I have no reason to worry.

“Thanks.” I give her a smile—it’s forced. I clear my throat and raise to my feet, proceeding to take off the plasters from her wrist. As I start moving away from her, her fingers wrap around my arm and I raise my eyebrows, questioning her. “I want to see her.”

“Alma, I can’t—” I am being cut off when her grip tightens and I can see in her gaze a sudden burst of energy.

“Just her address, that’s all you have to do.” She speaks in a low voice and there’s a dark tone coating her words. I take in a deep breath and, with a sigh, I nod.

“No one can know about this.” She nods and pats my arm with a ginger smile. Our eyes meet. I give her a curt nod and walk towards the desk. Just her address, I whisper in my mind, inhaling through my nose.

“I know what you did.” The words of the woman make my head snap up, eyes widened. I scramble to find the right words to apologize but she gives me a chuckle. Her features are animated—she looks even younger than she did the last time I saw her.

“I’m sorry,” I mutter under my breath. Panic makes adrenaline course through my veins and I am not sure what Grace’s intentions are.

“Don’t be silly.” When she speaks there’s an air of indolence in her tone. “Thank you. I know what you put at risk.” I feel my breath stuck in my throat. I can see she is not upset—she is thankful. “So, are we starting this session already? I want to share something with you.”

“Share something?” I repeat before I can stop the words flying off my lips. She giggles—and gives me a knowing gaze. Her slender fingers are already placing the plasters around her wrist and she seems more energetic than usual in her gestures. I huff and my shoulders rise and fall in a quick shrug. I let myself fall into the chair across the brunette and her features are decorated by a grin. She is positively excited about our session, I conclude.

“Shall we start?” At my question she nods and taps a few times on the tablet in front of her. There’s a sigh expelled out of my lungs and I close my eyes. When I open them again, there are no visuals. Only the smell of coffee fills the universe of the memory Grace is trying to recall. There’s then soft chatter in the background and I hear my patient sigh. I can almost feel the
nervousness in the attempt of her mind finding the memory.

There are a few flashes of light. For some reason, there’s rain, the sound of jazz and the image of a small box. Then her mind settles down and the drug is starting to have its effect. A cup of black coffee sits between Grace’s hands and her eyes seem trained on the slow swirls of the liquid.

“This is recent,” I remark in a small voice. I can hear a gentle chuckle coming from my patient.

“It is. Last week, actually.” I nod to myself and, before I reply, the silence of the memory is disturbed by the sound of a bell. It’s loud; I can now see Grace looking towards the door. For some reason, even though she is in her usual wheelchair, there are no tubes or wires attached to her body. Only now the rest of the coffee place comes into my view. In the door frame there’s the familiar picture of a woman. There is a moment where everything feels suspended, as if Grace’s brain actively made an effort to memorise that image.

As the brown-haired moves through tables, Grace’s features are animated under the movement of her arching lips. A glimmer is brought to her gaze, as if she had been walking through life without purpose behind her actions. And now purpose was being finally restored. I can see the nervousness nestled in the expression lines of the formerly red-head as well. As Alma reaches the table, there’s a surge of light and the colours around us become saturated. Alma takes her seat across Grace with a long sigh, a gentle smile sketched on her face. I can see their lips moving—no sound is audible. I know Grace wants to keep the memory to herself as I find myself standing at the opposite end of the room from the two.

I am not part of this memory—this is just for them. No matter how much Grace wanted to share with me this moment or how responsible she thinks I am for their meeting . . . I know she doesn’t want me to intrude.

“You met her;” I comment under my breath. Grace makes a sound as if to agree with me.

“Thanks to you.” There’s a certain delicacy in her words and the universe of her memory slowly fades away.

“Do you want this recorded?” I ask; the only things still visible now are the two women, holding each other’s hands and smiling.

“I think I will save this one for myself only.” I smile at her reply. Before the mind of my patient becomes inaccessible, I can see Alma holding before Grace the same ring she was holding on the night of their breakup, ninety-eight years ago. I cannot help the chuckle released from my chest. There’s a soft tingling sensation in my body. When I blink again, I can see Grace’s youthful features. Her blue eyes smile at me—I smile back. I feel as if I am part of something bigger than myself or my job, bigger than my office or my archives.
Recording ceased.
Recorded: 22 February 2087
Patient name: Noah Harrelson
File title: Grace and Alma
To be viewed by: Noah Harrelson
Session status: Successful
File status: Archived
Patient status: Deceased

Issue 20 65
My First Winter Without Her

Many of my layered images are maximalist in nature, but with the pieces in this feature, I went black and white. And with this particular piece, I pushed myself to center the subjects and limit what I placed near the composition's edges. I saw similar height in the church featured in one picture and the woman's long face and upward-looking eyes in the other picture. In that way, both reference heaven.
Portray of a Man I Loved

In the case of this photo, I was reviewing pictures from past shoots: one was a headshot of a male friend; the other was from a character shoot with a female friend. I had never connected the two photos before, but suddenly in this review—about two years after either photo had taken place—I wanted to see what happened when I merged them.
The original image is from my first semester in grad school. I was experimenting with making little sculptures and photographing them for artist books and web projects. The sculptures were all very crude and made with cheap or found objects. Under quarantine, I was curious about a black and white edit of this image. The clay breast looks less tacky than it did in color but it's just as playful.
The Way She Made Me Feel

This image contains the layering of two photographs. The woman layer came from a 2017 photo shoot on my rooftop; the building layer came from my last photo walk before the New York City COVID-19 shutdown. I decided to drain the color from the original pictures during the editing process because I wanted the final image to focus on contour lines.
Anesu Jahura is a young writer residing in Cape Town, South Africa. He writes fiction and nonfiction, as well as opinion about pressing issues. He is a private person who enjoys his own company, along with that of his close friends and family.

How My Writing Sent Me To University

Anesu Jahura

2019 was going to be my year. I was the top student at my school, a respected leader, and in a year I was going to be able to call myself an engineering student. My life was well-structured and the many years of hard work were culminating to a grand finale. Expecting it to be a great year full of joy and achievements, I was soon to find out that the odds had been stacked against me long before I could even smell the coffee.

I was a Zimbabwean immigrant living in Cape Town, South Africa. My parents had relocated in 2008 and we’d been living in South Africa ever since. Life was decent in this country—although it had most of the same issues that African countries dealt with, the economy and the financial structure of the country was quite conducive to the success of hardworking professionals. Luckily for me, my parents were quite hardworking and they aimed to instil those same principles in my sister and me. My sister was due to start her honours degree in 2020—the same year that I was to start my undergraduate degree in mechanical engineering. Although my parents were able to provide for us, we knew that they could only truly afford to send one of us to university. Since my sister already had her undergraduate degree, there was a chance that she could miss out on her dreams if I didn’t get a scholarship. Well, a scholarship shouldn’t be hard to come by for a STEM student with an A aggregate and a consistent academic record, I thought. Turned out I couldn’t be more wrong.

I started applying for scholarships from the get-go. Following the advice of my trusted family advisors, I applied for each and every single scholarship that I could get my hands on—no chances taken! I poured my heart out on each bursary form, and as a budding writer, the essay section was my playground. By the time that June had arrived, and my mid-year exams had been completed, I had applied to at least twenty different scholarships sponsoring engineering students. Despite all of this, however, I still had not received any positive responses. What could have gone wrong? I asked
myself. I wondered how even after getting consistent straight A’s, writing well-thought-out scholarship essays, and laying myself bare on those applications, I didn’t get a single acceptance letter. All I received was rejection after rejection. To make matters worse, I found out that two of my friends with lower marks and a socio-economic status similar to mine had both been accepted by scholarships for which I had also applied. It was a heart-wrenching discovery. I pondered for days on end on the reason why companies and scholarship providers didn’t want to sponsor me. Were my marks suspiciously high? Were they worried that having my mother as one of my teachers made me receive marks unfairly? Were my parents’ salaries too high to be considered “needy” for a scholarship? All of these thoughts raced through my head at supersonic speeds until I discovered the real reason why I was not wanted by scholarship providers—I was an immigrant.

Simply put, not being a South African citizen meant that most scholarship opportunities were out of your reach. The majority of the scholarships for which I applied had a condition that “only South African citizens may apply”. My denial led me to believe that this could be overlooked due to my impressive academic record and my permanent residence status. Unfortunately, this was not the case. This was confirmed by some of my fellow immigrant friends who were also experiencing the same troubles. I spent weeks in a state of disillusion and temporary depression. It felt as if years of blood, sweat and tears were all for nothing. My emotions cycled between anger and heartbreak. This continued for several weeks, but ultimately my personality did not allow me to be defeated so easily, at least not by just one obstacle! Although there wasn’t a snowball’s chance in hell that I was going to give up, I realised that I was in a place of disadvantage and a miracle was needed to attain the tertiary funding that I so greatly required. If I’m going to be a great engineer one day, I might as well start now I thought.

I pondered for days for a solution. It was clear that it was not going to be easy to attain a scholarship going into university, and there was no guarantee that my marks at university were going to be impressive enough to earn reductions of my study fees. With no other solution in sight, I resorted to what I always did to express the troubles in my life—I wrote. Writing was a great passion of mine, and at that time I was starting to become quite proficient at it. I always had a talent for writing, but my senior high-school years gave rise to my best work. My senior English teacher showed great interest in my writing and recognized my talent from the first essay I wrote. To be honest, her belief in me was what sparked my interest in taking my writing further. The fact that an experienced teacher and former editor believed my work was good enough to go professional meant that I had to be onto something! Naturally, I knew I had to write about the hardships I was experiencing.

I put my writing skills to good use and endeavoured to pen an article
about the issues that myself and other immigrants had (and still have) to deal with—those including a lack of opportunities that I was dealing with myself. I wanted to pitch the article first to ensure I was writing something that people wanted to read. I therefore set out to find established newspapers and magazines that could be willing to accept my pitch and commission the piece. I made a list of all the big regional and national newspapers in South Africa and I documented the contact details of the editorial contacts from each publication. After multiple edits and rewrites, this is what ended up as my final pitch:

Greetings

My name is Anesu Jahura and I am a young writer and student residing in South Africa. I would like to pitch a writing piece I am currently working on that I think would be perfect for your publication.

I am writing an article about the joys, hardships and overall experiences of Africans living in the diaspora. As a Zimbabwean immigrant, I have experienced a great deal regarding being a foreign individual, living and studying in the diaspora.

My article focuses on aspects such as homesickness, subtle xenophobia, experiencing better opportunities, and "black tax". It also touches on other things such as native competition and hostility. If this concept interests you, I can send you a sample of the piece or simply forward the full piece when completed? The main reason for this piece is to educate people and remove the stigma surrounding foreigners. I want to make Africans who live in the diaspora heard and recognized.

Thank you for your time

. . . And that was it. It was the best pitch I could come up with, so I sent it out to all the editorial contacts that I had listed down. I sent about 11 emails, of which three received replies. Of those three responses, two were from paying publications! They both indicated that they liked my pitch and that I should send them the completed piece for consideration. Inspired by the chance of having my piece read across the country and being an ambassador for my immigrant brothers and sisters, I set out to write the best piece that I could possibly produce.

Writing the article was an amazing adventure. Being an immigrant was never easy, and the chance to pen down my experiences was life-changing. I had been writing for three years at the time, and writing about my own life was a totally different affair to writing stories about fictional characters. I could easily point out my experiences, emotions, and viewpoints. Besides political narratives, not many people knew about the true feelings that
immigrants experience and the trials and tribulations that come with living in a foreign country. This was a chance for me to be a voice for other immigrant students and write something that resonates with people similar to myself. My writing finally had purpose, it finally had feeling, and most of all, it contained the hard truth. Days of accounting events, emotions and truths led to one complete piece of writing—the result was beautiful. The piece was so beautiful, in fact, that my mother cried upon reading it. After two weeks of rigorous editing and rewriting, I was finally satisfied. I sent the completed piece to the chosen editor and she loved it… the rest is history!

The 21st of July 2019 was quite probably the best day of my life. My article was published in The Sunday Times, the biggest newspaper in South Africa. My friends and family across the country had the chance to see my name in black and white, writing about my own experiences! It was a moment that felt far too good to be true, and I was scared that I would suddenly wake up and have my wonderful dream snatched right from under me. Luckily, though, it was no dream at all. At the age of seventeen, I had become a paid and published writer, all off my own experiences! People across the country finally got to read the truth about some of the hardships that immigrants like myself have to endure. I had been published, I had been paid, and an unforgettable email a week later completed the trifecta… an anonymous donor was willing to fund my university studies!

I was in a state of utter euphoria. I went from the worst feeling I’ve ever experienced to feeling like the luckiest man in the world… except it was not luck. I had found the mother of all silver linings and turned a soul-crushing experience into an opportunity that would benefit me for life. I could finally attend university without the financial strain that my family was inevitably going to experience. I used a large portion of the payment I received for the article to buy my family gifts (and one for myself too!), while saving the rest of the money. Although I was paid quite a large sum and received the writing recognition that I longed for, the biggest reward of all was the many people that I got to speak out for. Even though it didn’t change the circumstances for immigrants in general, I know for a fact that many other immigrants read that article and felt as if someone truly spoke for them, and that is all I really wanted. Writing is a magical experience, and the most powerful of that magic comes directly from the heart.
Life and Death in the Time of Black Lives Matter

Wendy Thompson Taiwo

1.
The family’s legal counsel issued a statement on their behalf referring to the boy’s death as a devastating tragedy. But to the rest of us, to the rest of black America, his death—in the middle of the intersection, in the back of the police car, at the rapid transit station, in his mother’s home, unarmed and handcuffed—looked like murder.

2.
Forgive me, forgive me, said no one held accountable despite video recording and a view of a badge number. To which the entire eighty-person congregation at the First Ebenezer Baptist Church stood up and said, “We forgive you.”


3.
A former president, the first black one, the one they made it a point to remind was black every step he took in power, the one my people waited a lifetime to see before they died without ever seeing it—a presidential black man from Harvard in the big house that slaves built; a tan man with good diction who white liberal supporters would turn on like dogs after he spent two terms protecting their feelings, freedom, and flag; a black/white biracial man who would have been grilled over dinner by the father of the white girl who did not know he was coming and didn’t appreciate guessing games—said: You know, when Trayvon Martin was first shot, I said that this could have been my son.

And some of us said, Mmm-hmmm, because we knew what he meant.
4. How do we remember the dead?

Libations. Makeshift memorials with Mylar balloons tied to chain link fences and floral wreaths propped up by the side of the road. Tee shirts with airbrushed names of the deceased displayed on the front and a glamor shot emblazoned on the back. A mess of food. A litany of names. Al Green’s “Love and Happiness” comes on. We dance.

5. How do they remember our dead?

Mug shots. Dashcam footage. Body cameras. Autopsy reports. Counter-protests in support of the police because blue lives protecting white lives from black lives matters. Online posts justifying why the dead were deserving recipients of unreasonable force. All of the comments sections. A Google search of memes. Our bodies, stumbling, contorting after the gunshots, look like dancing. They laugh.

6. We have nothing to lose but our chains.

We pull into the Target parking lot and find ourselves in the middle of a Black Lives Matter protest organized by the local chapter. Drums and banners and chanting carry us away from our shopping list and toward a more urgent task in the streets where the police have mobilized into action, forming a barrier. “Why do we have chains?” my six-year-old daughter asks, her small voice barely audible, “Are we slaves?”

7. Months later, my daughter comes home from school and tells me about what she’s learned. There’s that word again. Slave. I tell my daughter, “Say enslaved person. Enslaved person.” I stress the human part, the fact that we were living—are alive now—and that enslavement was a position, a condition, a punishment. But I know fully well she will soon learn, that she has already learned, that in America slave is synonymous with black. And to be black in America is to be socially dead.
8.
His killing happened while my family was still trying on winter coats made for Minnesota winters. We were transplants from elsewhere who walked into another Black Lives Matter protest because white people everywhere have property values to protect. Philando Castile. A black driver. A history of traffic stops.

The school district would issue a statement and express grief for their former student and current employee after America watched him die in the front seat of the car that became his coffin. Meanwhile, white parents whose children remembered him as the kind man in the lunchroom wondered, “How will I tell my kids what happened to the staff? How do I explain to them why the police killed him?”

How how how how how how how how how how how how how how how how how?

Each one of their questions would be swallowed like Buffalo chicken flatbread pizza and kale and quinoa salad by the white/black cry for blue/black justice and choked on at the family dinner table.

9.
And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me”
—Luke 22:19

Here are two things currently on my plate that I do not want to eat:

The fact that America has been consuming black life raw without condiments since its inception.

And the fact that even after an online crowdfunding venture was started posthumously in Philando’s name that would wipe out the entire school lunch debt of children in Saint Paul—a gesture that spoke to his role as a cafeteria supervisor who paid for student’s meals when they didn't have enough and remembered food allergies and names—white folks are still insisting that Jesus was white.

10.
The aging choir at First Ebenezer Baptist Church hears news about the latest killing and stands up in matching crimson robes. The pastor signals the choir to move into praise.
He should have known better than to run from the police.

He should have kept his hands where they could see them.

He should have showed them his driver’s license, gym membership, and Costco card.

The eldest choir member who remembers watching her mother being shot in the face with a high-powered water hose while wearing a floral print cotton dress and borrowed pearls in Birmingham shifts uncomfortably. The deacon sees her shifting and mutters, “They would’ve killed him anyway.”

All lives matter.

11.

After the shooting, a survey arrives in the mail:

Thank you for supporting your local law enforcement agency. We strive to uphold our duty to protect and serve every citizen while working to create safer communities. In an effort to better serve you, we have included a brief survey for you to rate your encounter with us. If you were satisfied with the service provided by our officer(s), please make sure to comment below.

Accessibility:

Did the officer first determine if you were able to hear them or were in need of translation services before they opened fire? Y N N/A

If you were capable, did the officer give you the option to walk to the police vehicle and board it unassisted rather than drag you out your front door in your underwear? Y N N/A

In the event that you were lying facedown and afraid for your life, did the officer respond to your request to breathe and believe you when you said you could no longer feel your legs? Y N N/A

Courtesy:

Did the officers greet you with a smile and ask you about your day before drawing their weapons? Y N N/A

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If you were startled and ran instinctually from the officers, did they refrain from pursuing you as though you were guilty of something? Y N N/A

If the officers used deadly force, did they cover your body from public view before notifying emergency medical professionals? Y N N/A

Professionalism:

Did the officer use appropriate tone and gender pronouns when addressing you? Y N N/A

Did the officer appear well-groomed and remain fully clothed? Y N N/A

Do you feel that the officer respected your bodily integrity and personal space while you were involuntarily strip-searched? Y N N/A

When you said no to the officer who asked if you were gang related or carrying a weapon or that wanted black guy, did the officer respond as though your no meant no? Y N N/A

Degree of Force:

Did the officer escalate gradually and use appropriate technology in an orderly fashion (i.e., officer first used verbal cues, then bodily gestures, then pepper spray, then Tazer, then gun)? Y N N/A

When dispatched, did the officer show adequate control over the K9 and use commands to avoid genital contact? Y N N/A

Did you survive the 911 call? Y N N/A

Please leave any comments about how we may improve or, if you'd like to recognize a specific officer for outstanding service you may do so here:

________________________________________________________________________

12.
In court, the defense hides the overwhelming evidence in his wife’s purse, which she carries until she finds a place to dump it. A place where no one will look for black bodies: the lobby in the yoga studio next to the neighborhood wine bar. She later tells her book club members to rally the parents at the neighborhood school because the police are being attacked.

78 Typehouse Literary Magazine
13.
Put your fucking hands up.
You have the right to remain.
Anything you say may be used.

14.
We, black and with names and lovers and teachers and enemies and talent,
were enslaved and brought here in chains to build this nation that shamefully
breastfeeds the horrible dreams of white people in public.

We have learned to live without peace.

We have nothing to lose but our chains.
Finnegan Shepard is a trans writer, classicist, and entrepreneur. He holds a BA from Sarah Lawrence College, an Mphil from the University of Cambridge, and has bailed on an MFA from UNM to build a philosophy start up. Recent work has appeared in The Mystery Tribune and Archer, and is forthcoming from Amarillo Bay and Darkhouse Anthology Books. He is currently working on a collection of strange short stories, of which this piece is one.

Corrective
Finnegan Shepard

I ran into Madeline a week after I went on T. It was at the Met, which was exactly the kind of place I had always imagined our re-union would happen, probably because the last event we were supposed to attend together—and did not, as we had broken up earlier that month, and which marked the boundary of my ability to account for her in space and time—was an art opening in Soho. I remember the city that winter as a kind of butcher shop; thighs of molding snow, ice like gristle.

“Madeline,” I said.
She turned. She was wearing the same obscure perfume she had when we were together; grassy, mixed with something almost too acrid, like dregs of Pinot Grigio left in a glass overnight. “Sara?” she exclaimed, her right hand hovering around her chin. I had forgotten how long and thin her fingers were, like albino spiders.

“Tilo, now.”
Her eyes flickered down my body, over the flatness where my breasts used to be, the small arch between my legs where I was packing. She reached out and grasped my middle finger, raising my hand to inspect it briefly.

“Still small,” I said.
She laughed and let it drop. “What are you doing here?” she asked.

“What, at the Met?”

“Yes—no,” she said, smiling. “Do you live in the city now?”

“I’m visiting Avi.”

“Avi,” she repeated.

When Madeline’s eyes lit up, it was literal, it was the moment ignition catches the billow of gas. There was almost a sound to it. I watched the whoosh of her remembering my old friend. The November before we broke up, we had stayed with him and his wife at his mother’s apartment in the financial district because her apartment had space for Madeline to build the polystyrene model she was using for her applications to graduate school. Avi
and I roamed the brittle canyons of the neighborhood to find a sturdy folding table, which we set up in the kitchen. We all got along then. Avi and his wife taught Madeline how to pronounce the days of the week in Hebrew. Everyone agreed the sounds came naturally to Madeline because she was French. I’d never been so proud to belong to someone, and for her to be mine—mine! I could barely sleep.

“I’d completely forgotten about Avi,” Madeline said. “How is he?”

“The same,” I said. “Working too hard, but happy. That forceful happiness.”

“Ahh yes,” Madeline said. Her eyes darted to the top right corner of focus, the way they always did when she was untangling a thought she found pleasurable. While we were dating, she kept a small notebook in which she wrote down clever things I’d said in tight, neat cursive. At the time I was flattered. Standing in the museum, I realized I was still flattered, and the fact that I cared raised little fibers of bitterness in me. Our sex had been mild; I remembered it as the folding of a fine, cashmere cloth, such that all the ends were perfectly aligned. It was almost always in the morning, mostly with our hands, and silent but for the slightly heavier breathing. Whenever we came, I was listening to the city—street sweepers, honking, small dogs barking—and so my memory had linked Madeline’s contained, perfectly groomed vagina to the grating roar of the city.

“What a funny thing,” Madeline said, “that his life just continued on without my knowing about it.”

Madeline was standing in front of a Greek orthodox painting, and I thought that it suited her remote kind of beauty—how her features were neither the voluptuousness of classical or renaissance paintings, nor the blurry beauty of the impressionists, but arched and elegant, almost aggressive. Her face was precise as an arrangement of pins.

“Is he still with . . . ?” Madeline continued.

“Niva. Yes. Still together.”

“And where do they live?”

“They bought a two bedroom in Gowanus last year.”

“Only one child?”

“None, yet.”

“I wonder what they’ll do.” Madeline trailed off, glanced over her shoulder at the painting, then back at me. “Someone from my program went on to specialize in this, in making space out of the no-space the city has to offer. I’m all for minimalism, but children are one of the things you can’t solve with emptiness. They need . . . foliage. Why are we talking about Avi?”

I grinned. “It’s good to see you.”

She took a step forward and grasped my wrist. “Let’s get a cappuccino, no?”

I nodded. We moved towards the exit. For half the length of the room,
she held onto my wrist. Her fingers were cool. I resisted the urge to rub them
between my palms. It was important, in the fantasy, for all initiation to come
from her.

“You don’t have children,” she asked. “Do you?”
“No.”
“Me neither.”

#

We went to the cafe attached to the Church of Heavenly Rest. When
we were together it was a small, dingy cafe with nothing but an espresso
machine and a few droopy pastries, but somewhere in the years between it
had reinvented itself into white standing tables and golden lattes. We sat
outside, though it was early November and barely fifty out. Madeline ordered
a chamomile tea.

“May I?” she asked when my cappuccino arrived, raising her
tea spoon.

“No,” I said.
“No?”
“I like the foam.”
“But you know I can’t have the caffeine.”
“Then order a cup of foam, Madeline.”

She set her spoon down and sat back in her chair. She was wearing a
woolen blue poncho with leather trim and a white blouse, the top two buttons
undone, revealing collarbones that pressed up against the skin of her sternum
like two delicate keys. Her brown hair fell loose down her back. I sipped the
foam and thought about how Madeline’s nudity had always looked so private,
not like the American women I’d been with, whose sexuality bridged clothing
to not-clothing with a kind of obviousness, but a dimpled modesty, as though
always when she walked from the shower to our bed it was with a kind of
surprise, like she was a figure in a painting whose silk had accidentally
slipped.

“You’ve changed,” she said.

I set the cup down on its saucer and looked across 5th towards the
lake. “I’d hope so,” I said. “It’s been what, ten years?”
“Last June.”

It was nerve-racking to find myself inside the fantasy. On the one
hand, I felt a responsibility to guide its unfolding, and on the other, I felt that
the years of constructing it had already cast the mold, as though we were on
train tracks. I did not know how concerned I should be that the specifics were
slightly altered.

In the fantasy, we ran into each other at an art gallery, not the Met,
and we were drinking wine, not coffee. Importantly, I would have attained
embodiment, something I could never fully picture, or only in parts—the
cocked gun of triceps, a patch of stubble, a London Fog trench coat, its
boxiness elegantly obscuring what I could not imagine beneath—as though my proper body was something that would always exist only in peripheral, fragmented vision. Madeline, on the other hand, would look exactly the same, though of course she would have changed, foster different desires—this being the convenient relationship between memory and imagination, how we are free to reach inside and tweak certain features while others remain constant. We would go to a candle-lit dinner at one of the small, well-reviewed restaurants Madeline knew, and it would become apparent, over the course of the evening, that what Madeline wanted was for me to go back to her hotel with her and fuck her. Fucking was the obvious, unquestioned telos of the fantasy.

But sitting there with Madeline across from me a concern I could not name began to bloom in the back of my mind. It was pure disquiet, an animal moving in the shadows. I felt as though as though I had missed something. But what does it mean—how is it possible—to witness yourself missing something your mind alone has constructed?

“You don’t look different,” Madeline said. “Not really.”
“I’ve only just started on testosterone.”
She sipped her chamomile with the very edge of her lips. “Do you remember that Louise Gluck poem? The one about you?”
I nodded.
“I read it to a friend just the other day,” she said. “‘It was like living with a woman, but without the spite, the envy, and with a man’s strength, a man’s clarity of mind.’ I speak of you often, you know.” She tapped the side of her mug with her index finger. “I don’t suppose I ever saw you one way or another in particular. You were always such a perfect mixture of both.”
I didn’t say anything. A runner exited the lake and pounded down 7th. His thighs were river slabs beneath thin skin. It was unlikely my body would change so much as to resemble that shape. I feared that I would always be built of muted curves, like they were stains that could be scrubbed into faintness but never entirely erased.

“How’s your mother?” she asked.
The question startled me. I thought of Madeline as fundamentally selfish. Maybe this was unfair, a later revision. “She’s well,” I said. “Doing her volunteer work most of the time. She’s let go of being a mother.”
“That’s probably good, no?”
“Sometimes we miss her. But yes, it’s good.”
I scratched my forehead. Madeline reached out and took my hand, inspected the ring on my fourth finger. It was heavy and silver. Her thumb pressed against my knuckle. “It’s too big for you,” she said.

In the fantasy, I rose from linen sheets and went to a balcony to smoke. The geography was a little fuzzy, less New York, more European.
Consistent with the entirety of the fantasy, I couldn’t picture my body in high
definition, but my back was the unfocused shape of a man’s, leaning over a
balcony railing that overlooked a washed-out city.

The real sheets at Madeline’s real hotel were regular cotton, but there
was a small balcony, so I rose from our entangled bodies—I had forgotten
how childish her kneecaps were, how perfect, precise Madeline had faint
stretch marks in the space between ass and hips—and fished out Blue Camels
from my jacket.

The door to the balcony wouldn’t open.
“Is there a key?” I asked over my shoulder.
“I don’t think so,” Madeline said. “Besides, you don’t smoke.”
I went through the drawers in the desk, peered into the bathroom.
“What’s the point of a balcony you can’t access?”
She was thoughtful for a moment, and then said, “modernism didn’t
solve everything.”
“There’s gotta be a key,” I said.
Madeline rolled the duvet tight around her. “But actually, your
question is quite interesting, no?” she said. “Is the balcony staged for the
benefit of the outside viewer, or the inside?”
“It’s most likely a legal issue,” I said. “Too many suicides.”
“Still.”

I looked at her: flushed, familiar, foreign. I knew what she wanted.
“It’s like a dangling ‘de’ clause,” I said, referencing the Greek particle we’d
once delighted over together, “the ‘on the other hand’ that never arrives.”
Her face cracked into joy. We had always considered the other more
intelligent. This was what we shared, what I had never found again.
I opened the window and crouched beside it.
“What are you doing?” Madeline said, sitting up. “You can’t smoke in
here.”
“Turn on the fan.”
Madeline stared at me and then started laughing. She got up and
scuttled, naked, to the other side of the room, where she turned on the fan. I
laughed, and she did too, and I thought: this wouldn’t have happened, ten
years ago.
“There’s something philosophically interesting here, no?” she said,
standing in the middle of the room, holding her breasts.

I watched the street below. Six taxis passed in a little line. A woman
walking a small white dog got stopped by two tourists and gesticulated wildly,
pointing first east, then west. When she marched confidently on, the tourists
stood stranded. The man started walking towards Madison, but the woman
hadn’t moved, her torso turned towards Park. They began to argue, twenty
feet apart. I was sure they were yelling, but Madeline’s room was on the
eighth floor, and I couldn’t hear it.
Madeline went back to bed and flicked through a magazine. Her forehead furrowed in the same place. I’d forgotten that detail. “That was the best I’ve ever had,” Madeline murmured from behind the magazine. For a moment, I didn’t understand what she was talking about. The sex had been tender and slow, the climax like dotting an I or crossing a t. “I’ve missed you,” she said. “You’re more confident, now, as a man.” She squinted at me. “Even though you’re not a man, not really.” I turned my face towards the wallpaper. It was paisley, hideous. “Hey,” Madeline said, getting out from the covers and crawling towards me, tugging at me. “It’s just true. I mean yes, sure, you’re a man, but you don’t have a man’s body. That’s not offensive. I prefer it. It’s like—” she trailed off. I glanced back at her. “It’s like you’re not being any one thing releases me from needing to be one thing. It’s freeing.” She raised my hand and kissed it. I tried to smile. “Let’s find a new beginning. Dinner, no?” “Sure,” I said. I was supposed to be at Avi’s already. My hands looked childlike on my thighs. She was right: the ring was too big. “I’ll just take a shower,” Madeline said. She left the door to the bathroom open. When we were together, I had berated her into always keeping the door open, such that our bathroom-lives were humorous and shared. It was the opposite of her prim, Parisian upbringing. She loved me for it. I wondered whether she had carried this habit into other relationships, or whether she was just doing it again because of me. I took a bible from the bedside table, propped the door to the hall open, and called Rose. She would be home from the pool now, beginning to cook dinner. Something vibrantly healthy, like her. Dark greens, tahini, sweet potato. She answered on the fourth ring. “Guess who I’m with,” I said. “Who?” The sliding glass door to the porch opened. Thin glass set down on wood. I could smell our backyard, which opened onto the wood: balsam, damp soil, and thyme. She was having a glass of wine. The Beaujolais, probably, which we had opened two nights before. “Madeline.” “No way,” she said. “We ran into each other at the Met.” Rose laughed. “Just like the fantasy,” she said. Rose and I had been in an open relationship for four of the six years we’d been together. We’d read Esther Perel, drew diagrams, talked to therapists. Because we understood what each of us sought in others, we deemed ourselves indestructible. I’d fallen in and out of short flings, three to six month arcs that shot across my world as bursts of adrenaline, little booster
shots that helped me believe I could be seen, and desired, as male. Sometimes with Rose I feared she loved me separate from gender, whereas gender for me was the sun around which everything orbited. I needed strangers. I needed to watch myself unfold in their eyes. Rose was different. She’d dated one man, Luka, for two years, and then had a brief romance with a woman. “I wanted to know what it’s like to be with a woman,” she’d said one rainy afternoon shortly after it ended. We were on the couch. My feet were on her lap. “But I suppose at the end of the day I’m just straight,” she said, and it was as though the inside of me was being painted in wide brushstrokes with a paint that had been left out in the sun.

“I’m at her hotel now. We’re going for dinner,” I said. I was speaking softly, though the shower was still running.

“And?”
“T’ll tell you about it when I’m home.”
“Have you seen Avi yet?”
“No, not yet.”
There was a brief pause. I heard her taking a sip. “Should I be worried?” she asked.
“No,” I said.

One of the first conversations we’d had when we opened up our relationship was about exes, whether that was a boundary we wanted to draw or not, and we had decided not: what a rich space that was, and in a way, wasn’t it actually less of a threat than someone new? Didn’t the ex being an ex draw a kind of negative space around their potentiality?

“Just today, Tilo,” she said.
“I know. It’s a one off.”
“Okay.”
“I love you,” I said.

#

The light was long and webbed as we crossed the park. Madeline insisted on the 79th street traverse, though 86th was closer. We walked with our sides pressing together, her arm wrapped through mine. Runners and nannies and frazzled businessmen passed us. Sycamores lined the path. I hadn’t known about trees when I was with Madeline. Trees were a thing Rose and I shared.

“When they see us, do you think they see a couple, or lovers?” Madeline asked.

I looked at her. She was a few inches taller than me. I realized that half of me was there and half of me was striding along in the parallel fantasy, and that me was of course taller, and was gazing lovingly down at the parting in her hair, the soft, childish scalp below.

“Probably neither,” I said. “People here don’t think twice about anyone they see.”
“I’ve never been someone’s lover before,” Madeline continued. “It’s exciting.”

I squeezed her arm. We passed an old man sitting on a bench, his right leg resting over his left. I could tell by his blazer and by the way he was sitting that he sat there every night. To him, it was just another day. I took out my phone and texted Avi that I’d been held up and would be in touch later.

At the restaurant, the server bumbled at Madeline’s beauty and I wondered whether it was possible for men to watch other men desiring a woman they are with and not feel that desire compound within themselves into something cruel.

We sat. I was restless. Across the table, Madeline’s silk shirt dangled from her bones like a willow tree. She wore the same simple necklace.

“The duck, I think, and the bass. How does that sound?” Madeline asked without looking up from the menu. Madeline always ordered. Madeline was the type of person most at ease in restaurants and museums.

“Sounds good,” I said. I leaned forward and took her hand. She set down the menu and smiled at me.

“Hello you,” she said. She raised my hand and peppered it in kisses.

“Do you know,” she said, “I still have the notebook with all of your ideas. I look at it frequently.”

She used to call the notebook an “architecture of a beautiful mind.” I had felt acutely while we were together that if I didn’t have a body—and in a way I didn’t, which was what made the whole thing so complicated—we would have been perfect together.

“Where do we begin?” I said.

“In the middle.” She was smiling. “Where else?”

“Sure,” I replied, “but what about the basics? You’re in Boston still?”

She nodded.

“No partner?”

“No. I had a boyfriend, Hamid. An almost-husband. He was an engineer.”

I raised my eyebrows. She laughed. “A poetic engineer,” she said.

“What happened?”

“Oh, you know.”

I released her hand and sat back.

“Let’s talk about interesting things,” she said. “I can’t tell you how many things I see in the world and wish I could ask your opinion about. It’s never stopped, that desire for you to be my reference in everything.”

“You don’t have notebooks of Hamid?”

She smiled. “No. He was very patient, though.”

The waiter brought a bottle of wine. He deferred to Madeline. Of course, I did not want him to defer to me because of perceived maleness, but his lack of deferring to me threatened my confidence in being perceived as
male. Our earlier sex—the soft quiet of it—flashed through my mind, an agitated, exposed animal. The wine was thin and tasted of minerals and citrus. I felt the alcohol instantly. It was a relief. I resolved that after the first bottle, I would suggest we pass by a sex shop on the way back to her hotel, to buy a strap on.

“The other day I came across your line about the task of the classicist—do you remember?” she said.

I shook my head.

“How his task is to provide words where they are missing. He knows what rhyme scheme he is in, and because of the limitations of Greek vocabulary, he uses logic to insert the most likely word, given those perimeters. But,” Madeline raised her finger, her eyes alight, “poets don’t operate on logic! That killed me.”

I drank my wine and looked across the restaurant. Out the window, a man in an oversized jacket with the down coming out a tear in the elbow weaved into the street. “It’s beginning to snow,” I said.

Madeline ran her index finger down the center of my hand. “I don’t mind that you’re married,” she said softly. “In a way, it feels like that’s what we were always meant to be. It suits me to be your lover. It suits you to have a lover.”

“Madeline,” I began.

She raised her perfect hand. “Let’s live in its hum, at least for a little while.”

We were on our second bottle of wine before I worked up the courage to tell her what I wanted. “There’s a shop on 57th,” I said. “We can stop on our way back.”

“57th?” she replied. The corners of her mouth were stained red.

“That’s quite out of the way.”

“We’ll take a taxi.”

She cut a small piece of duck. “What about that thing you’re wearing?”

“I can’t use that,” I said, “that’s just for visuals.”

“Oh,” she said.

I sat back in my chair, crossed my arms, regretted having given in to our reunion so easily. She was the one who had left me. In the fantasy, she tried harder.

“What?” she said.

“Can’t you see this is important to me?”

“Yes, of course, and I’ve said we can go.”

“I don’t want your permission, I want you to want it.”

She set down her fork. “But don’t be a child,” she said. “You can’t orchestrate desire like that.”

I ignored her and went outside. It was freezing. I stood alone in the empty patio area, watching chairs fill up with snow. The smoke bit me. Everyone who passed belonged to a life I did not, and would never know. I wondered what Rose would do in my situation; but then, Rose would never be in my situation. Rose would gracefully leave, slip into the current of the city and wash up whole and self-contained at Avi’s. This was partially to do with who Rose was, but more to do with the fact that Rose had a body—had always had a body—and didn’t live her life according to its tyrannical desire to be seen. I glanced through the window front. Madeline was turned in her chair towards me, watching. She smiled and waved at me to come back. When she looked at me, what did she see?

“I’ve ordered us the tiramisu,” Madeline said, as I sat back down again. “And a digestif.”

#

We were drunk in the taxi. Madeline sat in the middle seat, burrowing herself into me. I stabbed at the TV, trying to shut it off, both of us laughing. I managed to mute it. An ad with interracial couples out to brunch on the same streets we were driving through played over and over.

“New York is so self-referential it’s as though it’s on repeat without realizing it,” Madeline murmured into my armpit.

“Don’t fall asleep,” I said.

There was fluorescent lighting in Eve’s Garden. Everything was expensive and tastefully arranged.

“Which one do you want?” I asked, standing at the dildos. Madeline was drifting through the porn, examining it like she would a painting. “Whichever you want,” she called over her shoulder.

“I want you to pick. I want to get the one you want.” Madeline came over. She pointed at a large, veined one. “That’s awful,” she said. “Why would anyone choose that?”

I didn’t say anything. Madeline sighed, leaned against me, and kissed my shoulder. “I love your mouth,” she said. “You have such a talented mouth.”

“Pick one,” I insisted.

She turned her head, still leaning on me, and pointed at a small, purple dildo.

“You don’t want a realistic one?”

“No. It’s interesting, being a penis and not a penis, at the same time,” she said. “Besides, penises are ugly.”

It was one hundred and fifty dollars. I paid, wishing Madeline would offer to split it, not for the money, but as a sign that she too wanted the

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experience. As we drove back, Madeline watched the city lights, her hand on my thigh.

“Will you call me at odd times of the day?” she said suddenly. “It’s fitting, for us to go from not speaking at all, to speaking in the useless hours. Like eleven in the morning, or three at night.” She squeezed my thigh. “I don’t even know where you live,” she said.

“Oregon.”

The quick neon of an advertisement passed over her face. “There are direct flights,” she said. “And besides, that means everything between us is middle ground. So many places to meet.”

I took out my phone. 11:37 pm. A text from Avi: are you alright? I switched my phone to airplane mode.

In the hotel room, Madeline rushed to the bathroom to pee. I took off my shoes, pulled down my pants and briefs quickly, got into the strap on, and put my clothes back on. I was buttoning up my pants when she came back in, the dildo pressing aggressively out against the fabric of my briefs.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

She came to kiss me. “You already have it on?” she asked after we embraced, pulling away.

I nodded.

“And that’s how you want it?”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” she said.

“Language helps,” I said, softly.

“What do you mean?”

“Talk to me. Make me feel male.”

“I’m not sure I know how to do that,” she said.

I didn’t want to have to explain. I kissed her instead. We made it to the bed. I was on top of her. I could not hear the city. She was quiet, only little sighs and murmurs here and there. I undressed her, kissed her torso, went down on her. I still had all my clothes on. My neck began to hurt. She came.

“Do you want to be inside me?” she asked.

I nodded. I undressed myself, eased myself inside. I couldn’t feel it. The imaginative leap it took to translate the silicone pressing into someone into me pressing into someone was always more difficult when I was drunk. It was like driving through fog. I turned her over. I could tell in the contour of her body that she did not like it, that at best the feeling was neutral. “Do you want me to stop?” I asked.

“No,” she said, “I want you to come.”

“What position is best for you?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “On my back?”
“Okay,” I said. She turned over. I moved slow in her, kissed her. Her hands were little birds at my neck. Sweat pooled and ran the seam of my biceps. Far off, like a lighthouse, the possibility of orgasm blinked at me, but it felt impossibly distant, and when I looked at Madeline, at her passivity, it shrank back further. I was male in position and action, but not in sensation: I was not flesh inside her, semen angry to be spilled, testosterone flooding my system. I was all mind grappling around in the dark for a body and I knew in an adjacent way what it meant to be female, what it took to be entered, and I could not attach myself to my release without her active desire for it. I faked it and rolled off of her.

“She murmured into my hair.

I lay next to her face down, arm and leg tossed over her, the strap on jutting painfully into my pelvis. She kissed my forehead again and again, ran her hands over my back. I was too empty to cry. After awhile I said, “Do you remember when you told me that you might have other boyfriends, but that you would always be mine?”

Her hand paused in its stroking.

“It was in the preliminaries of our break up,” I said. “We had gone out to buy Drano.”

She nudged me to turn over. I took off the strap on, got under the sheets. She curled against me.

“It wasn’t true,” I said.

She kissed my neck, my jawbone, my ear. “It hasn’t been true for awhile, but maybe it’s true again now,” she said.

“Don’t be a revisionist.”

“Okay.”

“You never wanted me the way I wanted you.”

She was petting the hair from my forehead. “I’ll make it up to you,” she said eventually. “You can keep your life. I’ll be the desperate one.”

She fell asleep quickly. I strained to listen to the streets below, but the glass was thick. Around two I went to the bathroom and washed off the strap on. I stared at my reflection, the worm-like scars from top surgery. The purple looked silly on the counter, a child’s toy. She hadn’t touched it. When I went back to bed she murmured something in her sleep and moved against me.

I watched the light drain slowly back into the sky. Foolish, I thought, to think anyone else can ever correct us, or even correct what earlier versions of themselves inflicted. At five, I dressed and slipped out. The street sweeping trucks were vibrating along the avenues. Halfway to the subway, I realized I’d left the dildo behind.
At Breakfast As Guests In The Kitchen Of Vlad The Impaler

Tyrel Kessinger

Like an unsated demon you practiced and practiced but still for the longest time
the little hearts you drew for me were rounded at the bottom.
It should come to a point, I explained, like a stake.
You knew what a vampire was: a thing that feasts on life.
I explained the stake: a thing that keeps another thing in steadfast place.
Mounia Mnouer is an independent scholar. She is originally from Morocco. Both her parents and their families are Indigenous people of Morocco, Imazighen. Mounia grew up in Meknes, Morocco and she identifies as Amazigh North African. She graduated with an English degree in Moulay Ismail University in Meknes, Morocco. She is active in human rights’ matters, as she has been with the Moroccan Organization of Human Rights on issues pertaining to women and to service education. After obtaining her Bachelors, she went to the United States to pursue her Master’s degree in TESL. She finished her PhD in Education at Northern Arizona University. She lives in Arizona and works on international education matters. She also writes autoethnographies that pertain to Amazigh identities in the diaspora, issues of decolonizing the Arabic classroom and engaging in social justice education.

Making Msemmen: The Scent of Indigenous Female Bonds

Mounia Mnouer

Growing up in Morocco, I remember visiting my grandmother in Tiflet, a small town west of my hometown of Meknes, Morocco. My grandmother lived with her youngest son, Karim, in one of those old houses that have a courtyard. In her neighborhood, she was known as Haja Mimouna. Mimouna was her first name, and Haja is a word in Arabic that means “she who performed Haj or pilgrimage to Mecca,” which is one of the pillars of Islam. Although my grandmother never performed Haj, the people in her neighborhood still called her Haja. It was a title that granted her respect among her neighbors for her personality that exuded enormous generosity towards them and the people in need. The title of Haja was also a testimonial to her strength and charisma, as she commanded every room she entered. As a kid, I used to go shopping for produce with her in the neighborhood. When merchants would see her, and hear her greet them with peace when she would say “Salamo Alaykom,” they had to collect themselves to greet her. That’s the effect she had on people.
I remember one of my visits to her house when I was about ten. She and my mother were sitting down in the courtyard of her house on a crisp Fall afternoon. They were making this Moroccan pan bread called Msemmen. The process of making the bread was quite long, as the preparation of Msemmen demands many stages before it is ready. Nevertheless, it did not bother the two women. It was their time to have the mother-daughter bond. The Msemmen was a pretext for them to create a long strand of time that they could hold on to for as long as they could before it would break. The smell of the bread and butter combination created this memorable sense of comfort and well-being. I was home. What was even more fulfilling was that I had the privilege to witness the Msemmen process: the strong, quick kneading of the dough, the confidence in creating perfectly shaped dough balls, the craft in making dough squares, and the precision in flattening the Msemmen with the palm of the hand before placing it on the buttery pan to create this welcoming, golden color. My mother and grandmother were making Msemmen as they were chatting and laughing. They were also singing beautifully in our Indigenous language, Tamazight. It is an Indigenous language with many dialectical variations that several Indigenous tribes in North Africa, the Amazigh, speak. My mother and grandmother did not kick me out of the courtyard. I was a part of the Msemmen making process. I was invited into
their female world. A world where inter-generational Amazigh bonds can never be broken.

However, later in my teenage years, I remember resisting learning how to make Msemmen. I did not feel that same sensation I felt when I was a kid watching my mother and my grandmother making Msemmen. It felt more like a necessity. An obligation that I needed to fulfill as a woman. In high school, I kept hearing some girls in my classroom brag about all the complicated dishes they could make, and talk about how being a good cook is the way to a man’s heart, something they heard in the world of social norms and gender expectations. So, I resisted even more.

My mother never insisted I should learn something I was resisting. She let me be. That is how I knew I was given life by a strong woman who did not care for “what is expected of me as a female.” Growing up in my family home in Meknes, everyone in the house had chores. If my father was cooking, my brothers and I were cleaning. If my mother was baking, my father and I were grocery shopping for the week . . . and so on. My parents worked inside and outside of the house. My siblings and I all had house duties after school. However, the traditional norms lived around us. So, occasionally, these norms found a passage into our home. I remember my mother and I were mostly the ones doing the dishes. No man in the house wanted to do the dishes. So, my mother and I stepped up and did them. I do not know if we stepped up and did them out of love, or because it was an “assigned duty” that patriarchal norms imposed on us.

When I came to the United States in my late twenties for graduate school, the patriarchal norms did not disappear. “Being a good cook is the way to a man’s heart” can be seen in how women can make way less money than men for doing the same job no matter how hard they work -if not harder-than men in many instances to keep their jobs. The job of the cook that needs to satisfy the boss. This is just one flower in a meadow; the examples are countless. For me, I did not need to satisfy a man’s heart by cooking and baking; I needed to please my own heart.

Far away from home, I needed to learn how to cook and bake for myself to bear the long nights of graduate school. I would call my mother on the phone, and we would discuss how to make certain Moroccan and Indigenous dishes. We would also discuss our lives, vent to one another a bit, and just linger on the phone hoping the WIFI connection would not die in order to keep each other’s company while the food was simmering. This lingering on the phone with my mother reminded me of how she and my grandmother used to stretch the Msemmen dough with their hands as much as they could to enjoy each other’s company. The dough of time. My mother would often talk about how much she missed Haja Mimouna. Two years ago, my grandmother passed. I did not get a chance to say goodbye, as I was in the United States. I did not get a chance to thank her for all the strength she had
Lately, in the world of quarantine, I have found myself thinking a lot about her: her confident walk, her perfumed silky scarves, her voice that commanded respect, her Amazigh hand tattoos, and her warm smile. Suddenly, I felt this urge to do something yesterday. I said to myself “I need to make Msemmen for the first time in my life.” So, I did. The process brought me back to my grandmother’s courtyard. As I was making the bread, I heard my mother and my grandmother’s laughter and beautiful singing. I dove into the smell of the Msemmen and butter combination. Making Msemmen satisfied my heart, as it was a way for me to pay homage to my mother and my grandmother. The kitchen had a melodic call and response for I was singing in Tamazight, and my mother and grandmother were responding in the distance. I was holding on to the last bit of that Msemmen and butter combination smell that invited me to their world: a world where there are unbreakable female bonds. I felt sheltered by Amazigh female power as the smell of Msemmen wafted from the pan and into my soul.
David Romanda lives in Kawasaki City, Japan. His work has appeared in Gargoyle Magazine, Hawaii Review, The Main Street Rag, PANK, and Puerto del Sol.

Dear Laura

David Romanda

It’s been such a long time.
Honestly, I don’t know where to begin.
So I won’t begin.
Please stop calling my mother.
Deirdre Danklin holds an MFA from Johns Hopkins University. Her work was a finalist in the Split Lip Magazine 2019 Flash Fiction Contest and has appeared or is forthcoming in numerous literary journals, including Hobart and Pithead Chapel. She lives in Baltimore with her husband and orange tabby cat.

Worry
Deirdre Danklin

My mother writes the book of my life and binds it with skin. Each year, it’s another worry.

“This is the life you’ll have if you start doing drugs at thirteen,” she tells me when I’m eleven.

“I won’t start doing drugs,” I say.

“No, not now you won’t. I’ve bound that possibility up,” she says.

I receive the books on my birthdays. They’re mine to peruse. At night, when I can’t sleep, I slip one off of my bedroom bookshelf and stroke its smooth spine. First, it’s drugs, then it’s unwanted teen pregnancy, then a car accident, then a cult, then a man who beats me. None of these futures come to pass because my mother writes them down in obsessive detail. I watch myself bruise, I see myself on ventilators in the hospital, I see myself locked up with fifty other women for a homicidal incident involving a charismatic cult leader who gets killed by the FBI. I put the books back. They sleep on my shelves as I go to school, go to college, get a job, and marry a nice man who loves me and is kind to my mother. On my wedding day, my mother is shaking with relief as she hands me a slim volume of possibilities.

“He’ll make a decent living, he won’t sleep around, you’ll have the normal ups and downs,” she says, her face white, “but mostly you’ll be happy.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I say

“I was up all night,” my mother says, “thinking of everything.”

When I take the book, I notice that the skin is still bleeding a little. A drop of red blood lands on my train, but my mother’s eyes are too heavy-lidded to notice. I leave the stain. I think it’s good luck.

When my daughter is born, my mother is thrilled and, underneath, a little sad. A few weeks after we come home from the hospital, my mother comes into my room with a toolbox.

“What’s this?” I ask, still sleepy-euphoric from hormones and love.

“You’ll have to start making her books,” my mother says.

“So soon?” I ask. I only remember the books starting when I was
eleven, but my mother tells me that she started before I was born - miscarriage books the size of postage stamps, still-born books the size of the palm of her hand.

“When she grows, the books grow,” my mother says, “so, for now, they can be small.”

She opens the toolbox and I see the slim, sharp knives.

“Can’t it wait?” I ask, but she shakes her head.

“I’ll help you with the first one,” she says, “what are you afraid of?”

“I’m afraid she won’t gain any weight. That she won’t thrive,” I say.

My mother reaches out and cuts away the skin on my thigh. It hurts, but I don’t wince. She peels it off and uses iodine from the toolbox to sterilize the wound. She writes my worries for me, just this once. As her head is bent over the paper, I notice the patchwork of scars on my mother’s skin, rectangles of bindings excised from her arms and legs, her neck and back. I’d never noticed before how white the scars were. When she’s finished writing, my mother binds my worries into the book and I feel it like an exhale. I know my daughter will be able to breastfeed, will gain weight, will thrive. I feel it in the throb of my wound.

“Better?” my mother asks.

“You can stop now,” I tell her, “you can stop making books for me.”

“That’s not how it works, my love,” she says.

After she leaves, I find her biggest book yet on the coffee table. Hundreds of pages about my motherhood, about my own daughter, about the world. I hold the thick book in my hands for a moment, but I don’t read it. My daughter’s cries pull me back to the bedroom and the small worries of eating, sleeping, growing. Before I pull my daughter to me, I put my mother’s latest book on the shelf with all the others. It bleeds.
Mack W. Mani is an award winning poet and author. In 2018 he won Best Screenplay at the H.P. Lovecraft Film Festival. He is currently the co-host of The Gentleman’s Romantic Book Nook podcast. Visit Mack on the World Wide Web at MackWMani.com.

Remore
Mack W. Mani

I went back some years ago
and saw them from a distance,
what had become of my people
howling atop the castle gate,
the moat run brown-red
with silt and man.

The gators floated
fat and spoiled,
lurking sluggish
like fifty-year logs
upon the water.

Some guards
still stalked the walls
snarling at the sun,
faces blister red
they had already lost their language,
inhuman blurs spewing
vague and caustic hate,
every so often forming
an almost word before
retreating back into nonsense.

Imagine the jurassic thunder
in their eyes,
the wide expanse between
what they saw
and what was intended.
At night
I saw familiar figures
dancing around
a dry summer bonfire
and one woman crying out
name after name
of the ones who had escaped
I heard my own name screamed,
Remore! Remore!

The cult is gone now
but the deserters
bodies still hang
along the crenellations
lost past rotten,
dried and shrunken
voodoo things
still singing the sin of curiosity.

I left them quietly by dawn,
exiling my regret
by beech and hollow,
forests of reeds,
and a vow to run
with better men.
Kristin Fouquet photographs and writes from lovely New Orleans. Her photography has been widely published in both online journals and in print: magazines, chapbook and book covers, and CDs. Her preferences are fine art photography, street photography, and the occasional portrait. When not behind the camera, Kristin writes short literary fiction. She is the author of five books. Visit her humble virtual abode, Le Salon, at the web address https://kristin.fouquet.cc.

Above the Desk

I feel sentimental when I sit at my writing desk. The photographs and postcards above it are meaningful to me as is the desk itself, which was a gift from a friend who is now deceased. I dedicated my second book Rampart & Toulouse (Rank Stranger Press, 2011) to him. I hope to spend many more hours writing there.
Curiosities of Chez Fouquet

I captured these four photographs in my home in New Orleans on March 23, 2020, during quarantine for the coronavirus pandemic. Each of these vignettes reminds me of the significance of art and how it assists in these uncertain times.

Book Box and Black Bird

My five books housed in a handmade box are featured here. Since the covers and interior photographs are also mine, these books represent the intersection of my writing and photography. The black bird perched atop reminds me to be proud of past accomplishments and aspire to future ones.
Poe-boy and Raven

The photograph in the photograph is a self-portrait from Mardi Gras 2009. Our group costume theme was “Literary Lagniappe,” and I was Edgar Allan Poe-boy. In 2016, I had postcards made of the image and they were mailed as a special insert with Blink-Ink, Issue #23- Mystery Train. The raven depicted in both photographs is my partner in costume.
Shadowboxes

This photograph showcases three of my shadowboxes. “Oysters” on the left was created after the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico made oysters scarce. The top right box is “Bone Men,” a photograph I took on Mardi Gras 2005, the one before Hurricane Katrina. The bottom box, “Mardi Gras FEMA Trailer,” was created from a photograph I shot on Mardi Gras 2008.
In re-watching the film of my crash, the ampleness of time became apparent in the slow motion. I watched my scarred, ragged body jangle to and fro during the vehicle’s accelerating trajectory. She sat beside me, buckled in. We had spoken only of logistics

“Ten seconds?” she asked.
“Yes.”
“Left, front impact?”
“Correct.”

Eileen said one other thing. Just before we hit, she whispered: ‘damnit’.

I had been aware of the fact that it was the first time we’d been alone together. The backs of our hands had brushed during collision.

When the crash came there was a buckle failure. My right arm became severed by the passage through the glass. I was thrown across the hood and onto the concrete. She slammed into the dashboard and broken glass rained over her body. But in the melee our bodies glided past each other (the humans rewound it; I watched it again and again)—the violence at the speed of slow motion was a deliberate but gentle dance we performed. My right hand rested upon her shoulder for a microsecond, in my journey between the driver’s seat and the pavement.

I did not know what it meant to love her.

We waited for Clare to come to repair us. My dismembered arm sat in my lap.

In the interim, we watched the crash again.

#

Then Clare arrived, and I was happy to see her. We all crowded around, myself, Eileen, and the two others, Rose and Jamal, showing off the broken pieces of ourselves.

“Oh my,” she said, inspecting my arm. “Oh, my dears. Let’s get right
to it. We’ll get you all taken care of.”

Clare had a special room with all the necessary things—industrial sewing machine, electronics workbench, a 3D printer, it was also where we spent each night. Eileen was first—she needed a new forehead, hers having cracked during the impact with the dashboard—and so Jamal, Rose, and I sat cross-legged on the concrete floor and waited.

Clare found a hex wrench. Eileen’s forehead came off in two pieces.


“Right,” Clare said, “very good.”

“Oh,” Eileen said and turned to us, her visage ghastly with the insides of her head showing, belching sensor wires and componentry. I made a quick nod to reassure her and tried to contain my alarm. She gestured toward her head. “It feels so . . . airy,” she said.

“Revelation,” Jamal said, sounding excited, “indecent exposure.”

Rose patted his leg. A model 73 he was the oldest among us, and had weathered many a crash, and, additionally, he was the smartest among us, or perhaps a gibbering idiot. I found it impossible to know one way or the other from moment to moment.

Eileen’s new forehead was very shiny. I told her it looked nice. I think she was pleased.

My turn came next.

“Oh Todd, Señor 74. Just look at this arm,” Clare said. “What have you done to it.”

Rose said: “I think you know what happened, Clare.”

Rose was our rabble rouser. Our malcontent.

“This is going to have to be the last time we fix this arm. Next time you get a new one. Would you like that?”

“I am fond of this arm,” I said, thoughtfully, though not dismissive of the possibility of a new one. A new appendage always felt awkward and strange the first few weeks. A little embarrassing, really—shiny, off-gassing chemicals, and in stark contrast to the roughed-up rest of me.

“Is he going to be OK?” Eileen asked.

“Sure. Unscrew your shoulder piece for me, love, we’ll stitch the two together and get it put back on.”

“What about…” Eileen said.

“His memory?” Rose finished.

“Still having blackouts, love?”

I indicated I was, feeling a little awkward as I was always unsure what I missed, or what I might have said during the interval. Clare plugged a cable into my neck port.

“Strangest thing. The drive is recording everything. You don’t seem to have a loss of function, it’s just segmented—segmented awareness.”

I didn’t really know what that meant. Clare shrugged and said, “I
suppose some day we’ll have to do some digging. You’re not doing it on purpose?”

“No.” I didn’t think I was.

While Clare worked to sew my shoulder back to the rest of my arm, I asked Clare a question that I’d wanted to ask for a long time: Did she know of others like us? When she said she did, we all scooted our attentions closer, most keen to know what they were like.

“In a manner of speaking,” Clare said. “I have two girlfriends who work in a formal wear shop, modeling the dresses. Very pretty, those girls, all glamour. And one young man who tries on suits. A little shallow and full of himself, if you want to know the truth.”

This comment caused us all to have a moment of self-reflection. Were we shallow? Were we pretty? Full of ourselves?

“You are my tough ones. So resilient.”

“Thank you,” Eileen said.

“Oh and I forgot, I know one other gentleman, he helps people learn CPR. You would like Hubert.”

“Cardio-pulmonary resuscitation,” Jamal said.

“That’s right,” Clare said. “It’s when . . . humans, fleshtites, when they stop breathing or their heart stops, they need breath put back inside of them. Sounds funny now that I say it.”

“How—how does he help them?” I asked.

“They practice on him. They practice putting breath in—into him.”

There were a few minutes of silence in the room after this. Clare finished my arm and I screwed it back in, and then she called Jamal to sit in the chair beside her.

“Oh dear,” she said, giving him an assessment. “Oh . . . dear.”

“What’s on the other side of the warehouse wall,” Rose said.

“Parking lot,” Clare said.

“Beyond the parking lot?”

“Hm. Maybe some marsh land. Used to be a high school track, but it swamped too often.”

“And after that?”

“In one direction town, in the other there’s woods.”

I don’t remember what happened after that. As much as I scratch away at time, I cannot uncover the dimness between. What even is my brain? I only know it’s not so fragile as a human. In a crash, no fluid leaks from it. It ably records all crash data. But it is capricious with the incidental data of non-crash time. At times it goes quiet, as if my ignition has been switched off. Between these times things happen but I, myself, am not part of them, though if I ask the others, they will tell me what the me who lives in the dimness did, what I said.
And then I was awake, Eileen in the seat next to me again, we were holding hands. I tapped each of my fingers in turn against hers, feeling the clack of connection. I hoped this would not be visible in the film. I had one hand on the steering wheel. The car accelerated. I could see Jamal and Rose in the rapidly oncoming car to my left. They would hit the driver’s side, my side; broadside, T-bone, right-angle collision, minimal crumple zone.

I wanted to say something, anything at all. To hear myself speak aloud and to let her know I was here, awake. I said: “It’s good to see you again.”

“What if we die?” Eileen said.
“Clare can fix us.”
“But what if she can’t?”

And then I was awake: “Darling, we are going to replace every piece of you before this is over.”

“Hi Clare,” I said.
“Oh oh,” Eileen said. “He just woke up.”
“Was it a bad one?” I said.
“You’ll be fine,” Clare said. “Might take a little longer than usual, but no crash can get the better of old Clare.” She grinned and pumped her eyebrows, to satirize her own bragging. We had every confidence in her.

Down on the workbench in front of her, laying face up, was my face. I knew it to be mine, with its distinctive crash marks and multitude of small injuries. It was startling to continue to have thoughts within me, and yet see me elsewhere, detached, looking back. The face on the table stared back at me placidly. I felt I should feel embarrassed.

“Self-reflection,” Jamal said.

I looked up to see Jamal staring at me intently, then I returned to my face. I found it attractive, but then I realized it was because of my secret love for Eileen, and that it was her identical face, too—though perhaps hers was a little smaller. She was in the room, but I kept my head down, knowing how ghastly I must appear.

“Will they ever stop the crashes?” Eileen asked. Eileen was new, and did not yet understand how all the things worked.

“Oh, love,” Clare said. “Once they finish with this car, they’ll bring in another and another. That’s what they do. You are all helping make cars safer, saving humans.”

Rose grumbled something unintelligible and Jamal nodded vaguely. She got up and paced across the room and back, picking up my old, damaged arm from the spare parts table and brandishing it side to side.

One of the other fleshy came in. Rose stopped her pacing and leaned against Clare’s workbench and, though our faces do not express like theirs, I
could tell how she stared.

“What’s up e-Clare? Hey you got one of those what’s-it wrenches around? Ping pong table is lucy-goosey.”

“First drawer on the right.”

“Ah naw. I mean—Allen wrench, that’s what I mean.”

“Should be in the second drawer then.”

He rustled about in a noisy fashion, made a small note of happy surprise upon finding what he pursued. “How’s them sex dolls?”

Clare grimaced. “Repairable,” she said. But he seemed not to hear, and was gone a moment later.

Clare held my face in her hands, staring into the back of it. For a moment, I thought she might try it on. Then she turned it around and pushed it onto me until there was a click. She took the screw gun and tightened the bolts that connected it, causing a vibration through the rest of my sensors. I found it disorienting and pleasurable.

At night, Rose used Clare’s tools to unlock our room. We joked: If Clare can’t fix us, Rose will do. But we all knew that what Rose did best was break things. She held a spiky tool in one hand and a bent one in the other, and toiled with them in the lock. We opened the door carefully. I went first, sensing for light, listening for fleshies who may have stayed late. Then we wandered into their spaces, past the banks of computers and the viewing area where we watched the films. Into the big warehouse where four cars lay, a few of which I’d driven, shattered beyond repair. The new cars were there too. Tomorrow’s work. I gave them a cursory inspection, my own history of crashes giving some insight into the structural integrity of a vehicle. I found them less than satisfactory.

The kitchen, the warehouse, the closets, the office space, it was a fun adventure. We sat in all the chairs. Eileen picked up a telephone and said “Hello?” Jamal sat at a computer and typed furiously. Rose turned the light switches on and off, on and off.

Jamal knew a game, which he took some time to teach us: “Stow away,” he said, pointing at me. Then he gestured at himself: “Quest!” Then at me again. “Conceal, secret.” He touched Rose and Eileen. “Lie low, go underground.” Then he tapped his own chest rapidly. “Blinded, unseeing, uncomprehending. Hunt, detect, summon.”

I think I had it. While he stood and counted, one hand over his eye holes, we scattered throughout the space.

I saw Eileen duck into a closet, she gestured for me to join.

The space was close and dark and we stood body to body. Around us, mops and brooms and vacuums.

We both whispered “Hi,” timid suddenly with closeness, and listened to Jamal, whispering synonyms to himself as he made his cumbersome way across the space. I worried I might black out and wake up somewhere else,
this memory lost to the other dark me forever.

“Sh,” she said. She put one arm around me and pulled me closer. Within me there were proximity sensors that buzzed imminent collision, others that signaled touch sensitivity, some that mapped out the space around us, modeling it even in the dark for my brain to revel in. I moved closer to engage every last front-facing lonely sensor with hers. I did not know what came next, but the state of alarm that each part of my body sang was nothing I wanted to stop.

Then we heard the unmistakable sound of an engine starting up. Where there was the sound of motors, collision was never far behind. We waited a moment more in the darkness together, but the tenor had changed, and we wondered if the game was still on.

I slowly opened the door and saw Jamal standing outside the driver’s side of one of the new cars. Rose, inside, gunned the engine.

Eileen and I made our way there. Eileen crawled into the passenger seat, I went to Jamal and looked in. After a moment more, Rose slowly reached her arm up and took hold of the steering wheel.

“No,” Jamal whispered. He shook his head.

Rose gunned the engine. “They aren’t only for crashing.” She stared straight ahead.

I wasn’t sure what she meant, but felt an accompanying surge of panic.

“Fine,” she said finally. “You found me, Jamal. Game over.” She gunned the engine hard once more and turned the ignition off.

After that we were all sober and didn’t feel like playing human anymore and went back to our place in Clare’s room.

As we went, Eileen took my hand, a few of our sensors re-engaged.

The next morning I had not missed any time. No blackouts, no periods of no memory. I said this out loud, pleased with myself, how I had remembered the game we’d played. They all looked at each other.

“Interval,” Jamal said, “regression.”

“He’s getting worse,” Rose said.

Eileen put her hand on the back of my head as if it were a delicate thing.

“You need a different line of work,” Rose said.

I turned to each of them.

“Last night something else happened,” Eileen said gently. “Different night.”

“Why tell him,” Rose said. “The blank is a favor, we all have to carry the memory.” To illustrate its weight, she knocked on the side of her own head twice.

“What happened?” I said.
“The fleshy with the bottle?” Eileen said. “He came in late. He had a bottle and was not right. He . . . stood in front of you.”

“I see,” I said, though I did not.

“Sadist,” Jamal said.

“It’s ok now,” Eileen said.

I looked down at myself, where an uncountable number of scars etched out a history of my wrecks.

“Forget about it,” Rose said.

It was time for work.

I was placed in Rose’s vehicle this time. She turned to look at me as a fleshy stood on each side of the car. They reached in, buckled us down, put my hands upon the wheel, placed our feet. On my side, the fleshy held a cigarette between his teeth, and the smoke curled up in front of my eyes.

“What’s the test?” Rose whispered to me.

“I don’t know,” I said. There was no other car. I pointed to a wall down at the end of the warehouse.

“Come on, girlfriend,” the fleshy said. He pulled Rose’s head roughly toward him and mashed her face against his crotch.

The fleshy on my side said: "hur hur hur." He put his hand on my head too, forcing my gaze away from Rose, and wobbled me back and forth.

Then Rose’s fleshy shoved her back into the car and kneeled down to look at us. “Now, you fucking creepoids, go hit that wall, like a ton of bricks.”

The one on my side kneeled down. “Yeah,” he said. I could tell that he hesitated. Perhaps he felt outmatched by the antics of the other one and wanted to show us something too. He took one last furious puff on his cigarette, and then put it out on my eye. Startled, I jerked my head against the headrest.

The other one laughed.

Rose turned her head enough to look at me, and I saw her through the snowy ash and smeared tar in my eye, my sensors indicating minor damage.

“Don’t you go out,” she said. “You stay right here.” She gripped my forearm.

I stared hard at the road. When the humans had cleared away and the car started and we began to accelerate, I relaxed and knew I wouldn’t blackout. Rose said something I didn’t catch.

“What?” I said. The windows were open and the car accelerated fast.

The large concrete wall loomed before us.

“We need new skills!” she yelled, and then we hit.

An airbag exploded from the driver’s column and my face slammed into it.

On Rose’s side, her seatbelt had come undone. She flew from her seat, through the window, and into the concrete wall.

When the sounds of the crash diminished, the dripping of oil, the
tinkling of glass, the screams of bending, unhinged metal, I called for her. There was no answer. The humans came and got me out, using a saw. I would need some repairs, but nothing serious. They swore at the seatbelt failure; the test would have to be repeated. They debated: Are you sure you buckled it? Of course I’m sure! I don’t think you did. You fucked up, man. They stood over Rose. I could see she was in a bad way. One of them kicked her with the toe of his boot. The other said: “When’s Clare coming? This one’s out for a goddamn while, that’s for fucking sure.”

They laid Rose out in our room on the workbench. She couldn’t speak or move one side of her body. “Rosie,” Eileen said. Her sensors would be damaged or broken. Her awareness of us would be fragmented—hobbled by breakage, internal logging systems churning out anxious errors, faulty systems cascading into others. I felt miserable for her. I worried she may not get some parts of herself back. Or that she may end up like me, segmented and confused by time, or Jamal, with his language processing gone awry.

Rose gestured with her one working hand until we understood her. She wanted something to read. We found only a manual called Crash Test Repair for Dummies. Jamal turned the pages for her. When Clare came we stood by as she fretted over Rose. “Hon, you broke practically everything.” “But you’ll fix her,” I said. “Of course I will. It’s going to take a while. I haven’t had to order half these parts.” How long, we wanted to know. “Two weeks, maybe three?” “She wants things to read,” Eileen said. “She does, hey?” Clare said. “You do, buddy?” She patted Rose’s arm, and it jangled loosely. Rose feebly nodded her head.

Clare brought a World Book encyclopedia. She brought a Scrabble game, a set of dice, and selection of books which included the Beginner’s Guide to Carpentry, How to Cook with Herbs, and a few novels—“they’re just stories, books about humans who haven’t really lived,” Clare said, to our mutual confusion—written by people named Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Mary Shelley, and Thomas Mann. “Some of these are not quite appropriate, I’m realizing,” Clare said.

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Jamal challenged us all to Scrabble, and for a while we played, until it became clear that beating Jamal at Scrabble was not something we were equipped to do. We became dispirited, unable to obtain the game’s objective. “Trounced,” Jamal said, “annihilated.” He put the pieces away slowly. “Monarch,” he tapped his own forehead. “Potentate.”

Eileen took to the dice, jangling them in her fist and rolling them over and over. She stared at each role as they produced numbers out of nothing. The sheer chance of it, I guess, pleased her. Seven! she called out.

I did my best to understand what interested her, but after a while, without coming to a final conclusion on it, I gave up.

Seven again!

Mostly, I wanted to read the World Book.

What I knew were crashes. I knew cars and their weaknesses. I knew the warehouse and the workshop and a dozen other things. I had seen the sun and rain and snow through the office windows, and in the distance, trees. But I had no idea the world contained so many things. I tried to imagine its scale and girth beyond the warehouse. ‘German’ cars I knew, but it was a revelation that they all came from a place called Germany, where lived a group of people who called themselves Germans, and how once, or even twice, they tried to kill lots of other human groups. War, this was called. How far beyond the high school track was Germany?

I read about the Amazon rainforest.

I read about how there was a type of alligator that could eat a man whole. I thought about this a long time, what it would feel like to be inside an alligator. Where would the other parts of the alligator be—the ‘intestines’ and ‘hearts’—with me inside? I decided it would be like hiding in a closet with Eileen. Maybe as the humans drove home, they had to beware of alligators, eating the tires off their automobiles.

I read about sand. In the warehouse we have sandbags. When there’s an oil spill, they cut one open and cover the spill. It’s a pleasing thing to walk on, tipsy and mushy. The Sahara desert, said the World Book, spanned for three million, six hundred thousand square miles, all of it sand. I did not know how to put this in my mind. I read about how large a mile was, and felt bewildered by all the types. The book said the Roman mile measured the distance made after your left foot hit the ground one thousand times.

I circled the workshop—or more specifically, squared—counting my left foot, until Clare looked up from a delicate bit of soldering on Rose’s circuitry. “What’s gotten into you?”

I could not answer that question, there were so many things, gotten into me. “Have you ever been swallowed by an alligator?”

“Of course not,” Clare said. “Sit down now, please love.” She wiped the sweat from her forehead.

I wondered then if it were an embarrassing thing to have happen, and
if she preferred not to admit it. Perhaps she’d been swallowed with someone else, and they’d pressed close against each other, in the intestinal darkness. I looked over at Eileen.

“This,” Eileen shouted. “For the third time.”

“Wow,” I said companionably.

Rose said nothing. She had use of both arms now, and with her hands gripped an open book, one of the novels, and read.

I waited until Clare had finished with the soldering, and then I asked the question I was most interested in. “How many feet—how many Roman miles is it to your girlfriends, who model dresses? And how many to your friend who helps humans breathe?”

Rose put down her book and Eileen held her dice. Jamal turned to wait on Clare’s answer.

She smiled. “You’re curious about them, aren’t you. Of course you are. It’s not far, three, four miles to the department store.” She pulled her focusing lens back down over her eyes. “Hubert is even closer. He’s down at the fire station on Bush Street. You don’t know where Bush street is, I guess, but it’s close.”

In the World Book, I looked for Bush Street and was disappointed when it wasn’t there. Instead I read about the Australian Bush and Bushmen of the Outback, which was a different kind of desert. There were places there where you could walk a hundred days and never see another human. I told Rose this, and she set down her book and stared at the ceiling.

Clare glanced in our direction. “Sounds nice,” she said.

For the next few crashes, the books and games were a huge distraction for us all. I learned about octopi and volcanoes and circuit boards. Eventually, without trying, I found the article on us. There were those like us who were made to test not just automobiles, but also the accidents of war: bomb blasts, gunshots, military vehicle impacts. Before we existed, fleshtones used their own dead. Corpses were belted into the seats of cars. And when corpses were considered inappropriate, animals were used, live pigs, bound to a seat, accelerated toward collision.

I learned about the WIAMan, a dummy, a creature that looked very much like any one of us. WIAMan, the book said, supported one hundred and forty-seven channels of data acquisition and contained hundreds of sensors. Was I this? I wondered. Built by them, built for this?

And then I was awake. A fleshy was leading Jamal out of the workshop by the hand. Eileen and Rose were gone. “Hello?” I said. A moment later, the one who put his cigarette out on my eye was there in front of me.

Come on, movie time, he said.

If we had just crashed and were to go watch the film of it, I had no
memory of the crash. He took me by the back of the neck and steered me. The
warehouse and office area were dark, and through the windows outside I
could see the sun had gone down. The office was empty. He steered me into
the viewing room where the crash films were shown. I could see the heads of
Jamal and Eileen and Rose in seats. He sat me down next to them. At the front
of the theater, one other fleshy was already seated.

“Rose!” I said, “You’re fixed.”
She nodded.
Eileen put her hand on my leg and quietly said. “Rose has been fixed
for weeks?”

I shook my head, which thrummed with awkward confusion. I
hesitated to speak more words that would reveal my unintentional absence.

“You were very quiet,” Eileen said. “I worried about you, always
thinking.”

“I guess I had a lot to think about,” I said. “How are you, Rose?”
“I can’t walk the same,” Rose said. “Clare said my frame bent.”
“I am sorry,” I said, meaning: I’m sorry I remembered nothing, for it
seemed to remember would be to show her I cared.

The video started, but it was not us on the screen. I was used to seeing
only ourselves and cars and the crash. We were the actors.

Instead there were human actors. It was confusing and I could not
follow the speed of the film. The other films, our films, were always in slow
motion. There was one car crash, which I watched with interest, and then
humans fighting, and some screaming, and several humans with no clothes
on, and one was slapping another. I had never seen humans without their
clothes.

Suddenly one of the fleshies stood at our row. “Come on baby, you’re
wanted up front,” he said. He pulled Eileen to a stand and yanked her toward
the front of the room, near the screen.

I stood to see what happened to Eileen. They laid her on the floor, and
one of the fleshies sat on top of her. The other took a drink from a bottle and
set it to one side. Above them the movie became more frantic. Humans
pressed together, closer than a closet or the inside of an alligator.

I heard Eileen call my name. A fleshy held her arms. The other
mimicked what they did on the screen. I exited the row and made my way
toward the front. Eileen called my name again.

From the floor, I grabbed the bottle from which they’d been drinking.
They did not notice me, in the dark theater, with the gasping from the
movie and what they were trying to do to Eileen. And then I was awake, but
yet I remained where I’d been, the bottle in hand, Eileen still calling my
name, and I awoke again, and then again, flashing to and fro between the side
of me I knew and the side I did not. That other side of me suddenly present,
full of innumerable new modes—a desire for violence, a fear of that same
violence, a great, astounding anger, my circuits humming with it.

The bottle impacted the top, back, left quadrant of the fleshy’s head-casing. He fell off her and did not move. The broken bottle glass scattered everywhere. My sensors sensed the strong smell of the liquid inside.

The other yelled and came at me. I gripped his wrists and we wrestled in the stark, alternating light of the film, but a moment later he went limp and slumped to the floor. Behind him Rose stood, holding her wrench.

Jamal turned the film off and the lights on.

I wanted to help Eileen but I didn’t know how, other than helping her to a stand. She hovered close, our shoulders touching.

“Come on,” Rose said. She grabbed a foot and began to drag a fleshy up the aisle. Behind him a thin red line traced his route.

“What are you doing?” Eileen asked Rose. “No, no don’t.”

This new inundation of sensations had not yet subsided. I grabbed the other one’s foot and followed Rose, creating a parallel red line.

Jamal put his arm around Eileen and said, “Retribution.”

I steered my charge in pursuit of the red, for Rose had already moved on to other rooms. I found her in the warehouse, next to a car. She struggled to get the fleshy in, and Jamal came to her assistance. I pulled mine to the other side and lifted him into his seat. In the close confines of the vehicle Rose signaled not to engage the seatbelts.

I turned the key and started the car. Jamal knew how to operate the track, how to turn on the cameras. I mimed putting a cigarette out on the fleshy’s eyeball, but the motion did little but cause a sense of confusion in me, and I wished I could reverse it, as if we were a crash film playing backward, undoing time.

Rose held her arm up as we had seen them do, to signal ‘on my mark’. When she brought it down, Jamal pressed the button on the computer screen that put the vehicle in gear and caused it to accelerate.

From afar, the crash seemed mild and remote, negligible even. One fleshy had gone through the window. The other had been stopped by the steering wheel. Neither moved. We went to inspect.

“We have to call Clare,” Eileen said. “Please.” She stooped over the fleshy on the concrete, where so much red spread out on the concrete, edging against her feet. “Todd, call Clare. Please call Clare.”

I understood the idea of calling with phones. But how to begin such a task remained impenetrable to me. The fleshy did not breathe anymore, I noticed. It was odd to see them so stilled.

“Clare can’t fix this,” Rose said.

“Clare can fix anything,” Eileen said.

“Not this,” Rose said.

“Manslaughter,” Jamal whispered.
We could hear the drip of blood that fell from fleshy’s nose that remained in the car; his face had become altered in a way that our faces did not, no matter how many crashes. He moaned so quietly that at first I thought it was only some dying part of the automobile. And then he was silent.

Rose found her wrench and held it. She stared at us gathered around the car, and then toward the door.

“What about Hubert?” I said.

“We should escape,” Rose said.

Jamal and Eileen turned toward me. Hubert had breath in him, we knew. He knew about these things. And we—or at least the three of us, I think—felt we needed someone else’s opinion on the matter, for what we had done we scarcely understood, but the weight of it lay heavy upon us. “We must find Hubert,” I said. The others coalesced around me, and Rose shook her head. Before we left, I fetched my World Book. No one wanted to drive, for cars meant nothing but wreckage.

Outside of our building was hard to understand. The ceiling—the sky—painted black, like the crash theater in the dark, with innumerable points of light. We could not see well. We walked away toward the lights of other buildings in the distance, the four of us fanned out across the street, Rose gripped her wrench, upon which I knew there remained a trace of red. I thought about the Roman mile and counted my left foot quietly. By the time I reached two thousand the grass on either side of us was gone, replaced by low buildings. Lamps above illuminated us as we passed underneath, our shadows shortening and lengthening, as if four others walked with us, which both comforted and made us feel followed.

Jamal saw it first. Fire station.

Eileen knocked at the door, and we all waited for a moment, terrified at what might answer, and feeling exposed under the great ceiling. Then Rose raised her wrench and with one solid stroke struck the door knob off. We began to protest but she pushed her way in.

We found him lying down on a table at the back. He did not seem surprised we had come. He swung his legs over the side and sat while we filed into the room. He looked startlingly different from us, which I had not counted on, and for a while I did not feel convinced that he was one of us. He had lips and eyes and a nose like a fleshy. Around his lips in particular there was a sheen, where I imagined many fleshies had blown breath into him. Most noticeably, his eyes did not open, and after a while I realized they would not. They stayed as if a fleshy had paused forever in blinking. He did not see. He listened to us carefully, his head positioned and still. He had hair the color of sand and wore a white and red jumpsuit, and for hands, he had only rubber gloves. When we all had settled he greeted us.

“Sir,” Eileen said. “Clare told us about you.”
“I know who you are,” Hubert said, his voice measured and even.
“How do you do?”
“Fine, thank you,” Eileen said. “I mean not very well actually.”
“Misadventure,” Jamal whispered. “Reversal.”
“This is a waste of time,” Rose said.
“Can you,” I started, but had no idea how to explain. “The breath that you have, can it be put back into…”
“How did you get here,” Hubert asked.
“We walked.”
Hubert nodded. “They let you out?”
No one knew how to answer this. We shuffled and looked at each other, trying to communicate without Hubert noticing.
“Tell me what happened,” Hubert said.
I started from the moment I was woken to watch the movie, and others filled in details as I went. We told everything up to the moment we got to the fire station door, but out of respect for Hubert, left off the part about Rose destroying the lock.
“They are broken and don’t have breath,” Eileen said. “You can fix them.”
“Dead,” Hubert said. “Not broken.” He turned toward each of us. “Even if somehow inside me I stored the breath of a human—for it’s true that many humans have put their breaths into me—I could no longer put it back into one who has been dead so long. Past a certain point they are unfixable. They are fragile things, needing new breaths endlessly, every few seconds. It is what makes them like this. They are on death’s edge all the time, hypersensitive to their environs, prey to the least change. It can make them angry and insecure.”
He waited for us all to understand this. I gathered then that Hubert knew much more than I did, as if he’d read the whole World Book, from beginning to end.
“If you were humans, this crime would cause you tremendous trouble. You would go to prison—you know what this is?”
I opened the World Book, and showed around the photo under ‘prison,’ of fleshies chained together, all wearing the same outfit. It didn’t make much sense.
“But for you all, it will be so much worse. You are alien to them. They will destroy you. Because you are not of them, they will be merciless and want you violently disassembled. Were you seen?”
“I see,” Hubert said. “Well, that won’t do.”
“We need to flee,” Rose said.
After a few moments, Hubert nodded. “Where will you go?”
I re-opened the World Book and excitedly thumbed to the pages with

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the Australian Bush. I read the entry aloud to Hubert.

He sat still for some time after I’d finished. We all waited, understanding only vaguely what we might be embarking on.

“My legs are no good,” he said. He patted them, and we could see that they were only full of air, balloon-legs in a jumpsuit. “Will you take me with you?”

“Of course,” Eileen said. “I’ll carry you.” She held her arms out and he levered himself in. I paused a moment to process this, Hubert there in her arms, their sensors touching.

We stumbled back through the firehouse into the darkness again.

“What about the others,” I said. Everyone turned to me, and I could see there was confusion.

“He means the three models,” Rose said. “Dresses and suits.” She turned and walked down the street, her gait awkward from her crash, the left foot slow to catch up. “Let’s go.”

Finally we found the department store, despite Hubert’s regular comments aloud about the time that was passing.

We all came to stand in front of the display window. They were there, dimly lit behind the glass, still and unseeing as if they were sleeping, dressed in many elaborate layers of material. One wore a flowing white dress which Hubert explained was for when fleshies decided to spend the rest of their lives together, they were bride and groom. I glanced quickly at Eileen, and then the others, for perhaps we ought to be in the same dress, I thought. Looped with her arm, the other wore a black suit. At their feet, the third sat, in a yellow dress.

We knocked, but they did not respond, and so we all turned to Rose, who needed little prompting to put her wrench through the window.

They were afraid of us, I think. They gasped and shrieked and moved to the back of the display area. The one in the yellow dress wielded a plastic triangle, in order to fend us off.

I knew how we looked, Jamal and me battered and scarred and looking not at all human, unlike them, dressed head-to-toe in orange, Rose limping grotesquely, Eileen carrying some boneless facsimile of a fleshy. I despaired at communicating with them, for they were far more alien than I’d imagined.

But Hubert knew them, and he called to them.

“It’s Hubert,” he said, “from Clare’s workshop. Don’t be afraid.” He waited for them to understand. “We are coming to rescue you. We are running away.”

Everyone started talking at once, for what each was being rescued from was complicated to explain. I began to explain the Australian Bush, Rose demonstrated with her wrench how we’d deactivated the fleshies, Jamal added synonyms. Behind us a car drove slowly by, and from out the passenger
window someone yelled something unintelligible, and a bottle was thrown which broke apart against the curb. I stared at the broken bottle and we all went silent. A moment later another vehicle sped by with lights lit on top, in pursuit.

“We have to go right now,” Hubert said.

The one in the suit had some unkind words for us. We were ‘hideous,’ he said, and idiots, and we’d be caught and destroyed. The bride clung to his arm.

But the one in the yellow dress—Alice, I learned later—stepped through the broken glass and out onto the sidewalk with us, wielding her plastic triangle. She turned and hurled it against an unbroken pane. It glanced off and skittered into the street. We all stood there for an awkward moment, until I said, Let’s go.

The bride and groom stood in the broken display window and watched us.

As we walked the streets became progressively darker and the structures more sparse, and we became quieter, each lost in the anxious introspection of what we did. How we would be. I thought about Eileen, still doggedly carrying Hubert, and the insides of alligators, and how far we must walk, and wondered how we would know when to stop, when we’d arrived. Somewhere an alarm went off, and we quickened our pace. I gripped the World Book tightly. We filed off a concrete road onto a narrow path and headed into the darkness toward what may or may not have been trees, a forest. We startled a large animal—I saw only the outline of its dark form escaping, with its hearts, intestines, the red of blood waiting to pour out—it ran spookily through the brush. I wondered if it thought we were human, angry and insecure, and wondered how to call out that we were not.

For a long time we walked. My sensors were logging tremendous data, the dark of the night and its sounds, the journey at hand, and behind me—I stopped to look back—Eileen, the graceful curve of her forehead and her sparkling glass eyes, Hubert in her arms looking up at me.

“Evasion,” Jamal said from somewhere at the back of the line.

“Exodus.”

Somewhere ahead—none of us knew how far—lay endless sand, where for a hundred days you could walk, free.
To the Moniques of the Black Community

De’Areyes Bryant

My mom is a cocaine addict. She is not the only one. Around the country Black mothers and fathers have been scrutinized and criminalized because of their addiction, and no one wants to address it because of how our society frames addiction. Black women are one of the most oppressed groups in society and are often the most criticized within their communities. I know this firsthand because my mom is a prime example.

My mom has been a cocaine addict for as long as I can remember. Nobody really can pinpoint precisely where it went wrong for her, but it was sometime after I was born. My mom’s name is April, but she’s always preferred her middle name, Monique, and she is a textbook case of having potential, but not getting to use it.

I’ve been told by my family and multiple people outside of my family that my mom was one of the smartest people they had met.

That she could listen to a song and memorize the words just by listening to it once.

That she used to read the dictionary for fun. Even my eldest aunt (who's two years older than my mom) told me that my mom helped her graduate high school. But even with all of that raw talent, my mom herself was never able to graduate.

My mom became pregnant with me in December of 1997 at the age of fifteen, and I was born the following August. Shortly after I was born, she dropped out of high school and began to run amuck. To my knowledge, she was not using then, but she was also not a good parent. My grandma would tell me that my mom would have me out all night until the morning sometimes. One night in 2000, my mom came home drunk, holding me in a soiled diaper. That was the last straw for my grandma. The following day, she petitioned for custody, and the next month it was granted.

To this day, no one knows the exact date or year my mom started using, not even she herself. My mom has told me she believes she first used in
either 2003 or 2004, but my grandma has given me dates as early as 1999. Even with the discrepancies that surround the birthing of my mom’s addiction, one thing is apparent:

She only started using after she lost me.

There is only so much that my mom would discuss with me, perhaps out of guilt or shame, so I never received a definite answer from her. Maybe losing her child sent her over the edge, or perhaps something even more traumatic happened. We just do not know.

After me, she had three more children: Sanaa, Maya, and Jay. Sanaa was born on September 5, 2005. My mom had been addicted to cocaine for a while at this time, so when Sanaa was born, the doctors found cocaine in her system and threatened to place Sanaa in Child Protective Services. I don’t know how, but by something short of a miracle, she was released to my mom and subsequently given to my grandma.

So, at this time, my grandma was raising two grandchildren after raising three children, and my mom was gone again. I don’t remember seeing her again until we came home one day after a football game, and she was in my bed vomiting, her stomach protruding like a balloon. Before this, I had heard my family talk about how they believed she was pregnant again, but it wasn’t confirmed until that day in December 2007.

Maya was born early that morning, and like Sanaa, she too had cocaine in her system. However, unlike Sanaa, there was no miracle in store for her. Child Protective Services placed Maya in a foster home. They gave my mom a window of opportunity: if she would clean up and get some help, she could get Maya back.

That never happened.

My mom went to jail shortly after Maya was born because my grandma asked the courts to require her to pay child support. I believe my grandma resented my mom; in her mind, her middle child was in the streets, smoking cocaine and having wild, unprotected sex, while she was raising her two kids. My grandma put her child on child support, knowing she was dealing with addiction, had no job and no money, and my mom was jailed because of it. Because of this, besides the day she gave birth to her, my mom hasn’t seen Maya’s face.

They allowed any of my family members to petition for custody first, but everyone who tried was denied. They told my grandma that she couldn’t take on another child. One of my grandma’s sisters could have adopted Maya, but she eventually declined. My grandma, to this day, still hasn’t forgiven her sister for not taking Maya.

The foster family that adopted Maya was lovely. They were kind enough to bring her over every weekend and let us see her. This lasted until they decided to move to Greenville, and we lost touch. My grandma was devastated. Ever since then, my grandma would tell me, “I just know you’re
going to be the one who will track Maya down and bring her home.” I would always smile, but I always thought to myself, Why should I?

Why should I remind Maya that her mom didn’t get the help she needed, so she became an addict, and you were taken away because they found cocaine in your system? What child wants to know that their mother couldn’t put down the pipe long enough to have a safe pregnancy? Maya is eleven now, and I can’t help thinking that maybe she’s better off with her foster family.

My mom then had Jay in 2008. Fortunately, he had no sign of drugs in his system, and my grandma called that a blessing. She was the most motherly with Jay—more than I had seen with her other children. This time she stayed around until Jay was old enough to walk.

For years, I’ve wondered so many things about my mom and my family, and although everything is not clear, one thing is clear to me: my family helped push her to that dealer and then eventually the pipe. My family could not understand why my mom, being as intelligent as she was, would keep having children knowing she was not going to stay around to raise them. I believe my mom was searching for something when she had Sanaa, Maya, and Jay. I believe she was looking for a child to raise, a child to nurture, and a child to be a mother to. This became obvious when Jay was born. Maya, Sanaa, and I all know who fathered us, but Jay never had that luxury.

My mom named a guy who she thought was Jay’s father. He was nice, and excited about having a son since he had no children of his own. When the DNA results revealed that he wasn’t the father, he was crushed. So was my grandma. I remember sitting in the living room watching her cry.

“Dee knows his father, Nya knows her father, hell Maya knows her father, but you don’t know Jay’s father, Monique?” my grandma asked, crying.

My mom sat in front of her holding Jay, her eyes closed and her jaw resting on Jay’s shoulder.

My grandma threw the DNA results on the floor, went into her room, and slammed her door.

I looked over at my mom, and the only thing she said was: “I am his mom, he doesn’t need a father.”

We never found out who Jay’s father was, but I think I learned why my mom kept having children. Not just because she was reckless and doped up. She wanted to replace what she had lost in 2000 when she was taken to court and lost her firstborn son.

My mom substituted Sanaa for me, then Maya for Sanaa, and then Jay for Maya. She wanted desperately to be that mom she never had the chance to be. Even today, none of her children think of her as their mom, even me at twenty. I know she birthed me, but she was never really my mom. After Jay, she was forced to get her tubes tied because of an infection in her uterus that
would have killed her if she had another child. She was happy to do it because she felt like she finally got it right with Jay.

Unfortunately, in no time she was back on the streets, and then around 2011 she was arrested for possession. The state finally took the initiative and sentenced her to probation, and part of her terms were to stay in a halfway house in Greenville for addiction counseling. My uncle helped set it up, and she stayed there for almost three years. Every time we saw her, she looked better and better. As soon as her probationary period was over, she had to leave and come back home. She didn’t want to because she knew she wasn’t strong enough, but there was no funding left for her. The family didn’t have enough money to cover the expenses, so my mom was released back to Calhoun Falls.

I vaguely remember my grandma calling for a family meeting and asking the family if they could help support my mom, but no one had anything to give. The ones who did gave what they could, but in the end, it was only a fraction of what they needed, so they tried to find out if there were other alternatives for her. The woman at the resource center told my grandma of other residential centers, and said she would send her a referral, but never did. My grandma called and called but was only given misinformation and empty promises. I do not doubt that they gave my mom and grandma the runaround because they were Black and ignorant of the way the law worked, as my mom said the woman always looked at her as if she was disgusting. My grandma tried reaching out to every alternative she could find but was blocked in every direction. When she gave up looking, it hurt her to do so, but she was raising three grandkids while receiving governmental assistance and living in Section 8 housing, so I understand why. In more ways than one, the system failed my mom severely after releasing her.

The whole situation was devastating for my mom. I remember seeing her the day she came home, and she seemed so despondent. The last time I had seen her was at the halfway house, and I remember thinking for the first time she looked pretty. My mom was always attractive, but the weight of her addiction always covered her beautiful umber skin tone. Before she entered the halfway house, her skin had more cracks and dark spots than anyone else I knew, but within months, her skin had become the clearest I had ever seen it. After the release, that same pretty, upbeat umber face laid on the couch for weeks until the glow faded. My mom tried to get a job working as a home healthcare nurse at an assisted living facility in our town, but she only worked a few days. Within a month she had begun hanging out with her old crew and then within six months she all but disappeared again.

You would think that there would be an emotional uprising in my family, given my mom was on the right path before leaving the halfway house.

But there wasn’t.
I believe that my family had become desensitized to the trauma my mom had endured and continues to endure. This is either because they simply did not have the economic resources to help her, or they were not educated on how to help someone dealing with addiction. I believe it is a combination of both. My family lives below the poverty line. Most of them are on welfare and SNAP, and the fortunate others live paycheck to paycheck. Most of them never graduated from high school, and the ones who did never went to college. How were they supposed to know that my mom really needed rehab? How were they supposed to know about the permanent long-term psychological and physical damage she did to her body? How were they supposed to know she would need long-term counseling for her addiction?

So, if I am being honest here, my mom never stood a chance. She was doomed from the minute she raised that first pipe to her lips.

My mom’s struggles have always been foreign to me, but also familiar. Sure, the odds have always been stacked against me. I came from a single-parent home; my father was not directly involved in my life; I am an African American in America; and my birth mom is an addict. These are obstacles I have successfully overcome to become the person I am today. I’ve made the Dean’s list every semester I have been at my university. I created the first Black student union at my university, scholarships pay my tuition, and I am working with school districts to mentor kids like me. When I graduate, I will have a degree to teach English at the secondary level, and I plan on getting a second degree in sociology to become a juvenile justice specialist. If anything, my mom’s battle with substance abuse has made me stronger; it has made me more empathetic and determined. I need to help people like me who have no hope for the future and no expectation that they can ever be great, I don't know why but it is almost innate—like I was born in that situation to help people.

My family supports me, and the people here supports me, but all this does is make me wonder, what if my mom had that same support group? What if she had stayed at the halfway house until she felt ready to come home? My mom has gotten better in the last few years, but every day is a struggle for her. When I come home, and she sees me, she feels guilt, like I could have had a better life if she were clean, even though I’m doing well for myself. Even when she tells me “I’m proud of you,” an “I could have done better as a mom” usually follows. Although I am the first person in my family to go to college, she can’t shake that feeling that I would have been even more successful if she wasn’t dealing with addiction.

Through everything I’ve been through, I surprisingly was never angry at my mom; I never hated her, I never felt like she was responsible, because I knew that what she was dealing with was something I would never want to deal with. She grew as a person, as a mom in the last few years, just as I've grown as a friend, as a confidant to people who've been in my situation, and it...
has genuinely made me love myself more. However, we both still have some issues we're working on, and we may never get over them.

My mom was a victim, and her own family were the perpetrators, along with the system. From the beginning, my mom never had a chance. She was taken to court by her mom and watched as her sisters, aunts, and cousins testified on how bad of a mom she was. Then she had to watch as her own mom was granted custody of her son, someone she gave birth to. I am not saying that my grandma should not have done what she did, but I do want to reiterate that before losing me, my mom had never smoked cocaine before. After that, she embarked on a trip filled with cocaine, alcohol, weed, and God knows what else, and nobody noticed her spiraling. Then, like a miracle, she was given hope. My mom met people who understood her struggle and who could empathize with her. But all of that was taken away. The system gave her hope and in that same breath crushed every ounce of it. She didn't know it, but she was a Black woman who put her faith in a system built on institutionalized racism that eventually failed her.

I’m not a psychologist, but I do know what hurt and pain will cause someone to do. It causes them to make the stupidest decisions without thinking of the consequences. It causes them to ignore all of their responsibilities and place them on someone else. It causes them to hurt internally, and never speak on their issues, because they’d rather pretend the problems were not there.

My mom was hurting after she lost me, and that hurt, along with the betrayal of her family, pushed her right to a pipe. I believe my mom wanted to be a mom. I remember her crying for three days at the hospital when she found out Sanaa had cocaine in her system and that they were going to take her. I remember her holding onto Jay for dear life as they came back from the hospital and talking about how she was going to be a better mom. But she wasn’t strong enough, and out of everything she’s been through, I think that’s what hurts her the most.

To this day, my mom is still struggling with her addiction. Her tubes are tied, so that means no more second chances, her own children do not really know her, even though she lives down the street. So, the only thing she has that is her own is her addiction; she nurtures it, she takes care of it, and guards it with her life. I try and explain this to my family, but they don’t believe me, they’d rather ignore that she's hurting than admit they’ve played a part in her struggle.

So when my mom comes around, she gets the stares from her aunts whose houses she used to read books in. She gets smirks from the sisters whom she helped graduate high school. She receives a scornful gaze from the woman who birthed her and then took her child away, and then a cold shoulder from her own children who would rather pretend she doesn’t exist than call her anything but "Ma." It hurts her, but she still smiles, and
amazingly we’ve never seen her high. We’ve seen her skin become darker, her frame grows smaller, and her gums turns black, but we’ve never seen her high, and I am thankful for that. My mom is thirty-seven now, she's been dealing with her addiction for two decades, and she is still fighting to this day, but she is getting weak. I don’t know how long she is going to last even if she gets the help she deserves, but I will try with all my might to get her that help because she at least deserves that.

The Black community is filled with Moniques—Black women whose own community pretends that their problems are demonic, and only a savior like God can heal them of their mental and physical wounds rather than admit they have a hand in the destruction. Their children are ripped from them at a young age, and they are forced to watch their child grow to hate them, while their family turns their backs on them in disgust. The Moniques of the Black community are a group of women who cry silent cries and smile the brightest smiles; they find solace in their despair and pain in their past. And what do we do? We judge them, we laugh at them, we stare at them as if they were savages in a zoo, and then we wonder why they hold on to their depression and addiction.

Then we sing an old negro spiritual and place flowers on their casket as we lower them into the ground. We wipe our tears and speak of the “what could have beens” and “we should haves,” and then we move on until another case presents itself and the cycle ensues again.

So, to the Moniques of the Black community, I understand your pain and your frustration and your desire to give up and give in. I understand the hurt that you harbor, and why you feel the need to hold onto it. I understand your silent cries for help, and your bright smiles when in the company of your family, while deep down you feel that you can never be free of this pain. But there is help out there. There are people who are rooting for you, and there are ways to seek help. So, for your sons and daughters:

Seek it.
Jaq Evans is a speculative fiction author based out of Seattle, and earned her MFA in Popular Fiction from the University of Southern Maine. When not writing about trees or monsters, she advocates against fossil fuels for 350.org. Her work has appeared in Three-Lobed Burning Eye, The Molotov Cocktail, and Apparition Literary Magazine.

Observational Accuracy

Jaq Evans

the scientific name of the spider plant
includes the root of chloroform—
from khloros, meaning youthful, meaning green as
springing beds before the long
hot
months
fatten into fall

is that important here

in my room the spider plant
is biased towards light,
explosive where the window can see,
half-hearted
where not

the color of the spider plant
evades me
(green like basil, lime, like crocodile)
our language a series of little thefts
which did not seem to matter
at the time

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Heavenly Bodies

Leanne Howard

At first, Judith did not notice the demon on her kitchen counter. She was too busy unwinding her scarf from around her neck and using its soft red wool to wipe the tears from her cheeks.

“Your pain has a delightfully aromatic tang,” said the demon. “Might I taste it?”

Adrenaline jolted through her, closing up her throat, so her scream came out strangled.

“Oh, you mustn’t do that,” he said. “Fear is terribly bitter.”

Judith balled her scarf between her hands and held it over her mouth, pressing another shout back down her throat. She sucked in a shaky breath, inhaling the familiar musky scent of the wool still peppered with the spice of a few flakes of snow. Despite this attempt at calm, she could still see the demon perched cross-legged on her countertop. If anything, the creature grew more solid: the red, formless mist circling him faded, leaving what looked like a fat green cherub wearing the face of a gargoyle, apple-cheeked and sharp-fanged. His eyes were small and glistening, like metal coat buttons, buried beneath a heavy brow and pointed ears. His pudgy fingers laced together as if in prayer, resting atop one knee. A limp pair of bat’s wings peeked out from either side of his back, a slightly darker green than the rest of him. As Judith sucked in another breath—woolliness in, wooliness out—she saw a pointed tail flick forward and backward over the speckled brown granite, idly, like the tail of a cat on a windowsill.

“Perhaps I should introduce myself—”

A knock sounded on the door at Judith’s back. She jumped away and yanked it open, startling the person on the other side. Tam.

“Hi,” said Judith, breathlessly. She watched Tam’s blue-stormcloud eyes for some indication, any indication, that he also saw the hellspawn in her kitchen. But his gaze never left her face.

“Everything okay?” He wore his post-gym uniform: gray sweats and a band T-shirt, this one showing a skeleton eating an ice cream cone. His feathery tattoo peeked out from under his right sleeve, stark black against his
pale skin. The necklace he always wore, with its enamel “he/him” in gold letters, rested on his collarbone. She thought she could see his pulse beating at his neck.

“Oh. Yeah.” Judith leaned against the open door, just in case her bushy ponytail had been blocking Tam’s view into the apartment. His worried expression didn’t change to, say, one of fear and utter shock, which wasn’t a good sign. “I just got home.”

Tam cast a concerned look around. His beard was growing in after almost a year on T, and it suited his sharp cheekbones and pale, flushed-red skin. “You sure? I thought I heard you scream.”

Judith felt her cheeks heat up. Why was he always stumbling across her at her worst? She thought of their first meeting over a year ago, when she moved into the building: sweat stains beneath her arms, stuffed-full box of dishes in pieces at her feet. “Bad day,” she said now, as she’d said then.

Realization flickered across his face. “Right. I’m an idiot. How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” she said. _Fine fine fine._ She’d said it so much over the past year, it had lost all meaning. “Just a little tired.” _And hallucinating._

“Of course.” Were his ears turning red? He gave her an endearing, self-mocking smile. “I’ll leave you alone.”

_No. Stay with me._ But Judith bit back the words. The pain in her pelvis, her constant companion, could be a jealous bitch. “Sorry. Maybe we could hang out another time?”

Tam’s eyes lit. “For sure. Text me. And . . . if you need anything, you know where to find me.” He pointed at the faded green door across the hall.

“Thanks.” She watched until his door clicked shut, fighting desperation. Then she braced herself and turned around.

Nothing.

The kitchen was as it had been that morning, when she left for her doctor’s appointment: a few coffee cups stained with peach and cotton candy kisses beside the sink, Lovelace the Succulent in the windowsill, snow drifting down beyond. A brown granite counter scattered with nothing but the crumbs of her breakfast—cream cheese on rye.

Judith let out a long breath, sagging against her closed door. After a few moments of quiet, she hung her scarf and purse on the hook beside her and began to unbutton her coat.

“Full of foul, malodorous happiness, that one,” said a voice to her right. “I almost lost my appetite.”

Judith’s skin prickled with chills as she turned. Sure enough, the demon was floating above her small Ikea table, his legs dangling off the scarlet cloud of mist that kept him airborne. Judith stumbled back.

The demon sighed. “I thought we were beyond this.”

“You’re not real. You’re not real.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “You
“I beg your pardon?” When she opened her eyes, the demon was upright, his hands balled into dimpled fists. “You address Baal-Zebub, one of the seven princes, who has condescended to visit your humble abode for a mutually beneficial arrangement! And who could, by the way, just as easily have snapped his fingers and turned this place to dust.”

“What’s wrong with my apartment?” Judith said, glancing around. She’d saved for this place.

“I was not referring to this—dwelling,” said Baal-Zebub, waving a hand. “I was referring to your realm. What do you humans call it again? Earth?”

Judith choked. Then, a burble of laughter escaped her lips. She couldn’t help it.

“Mmm,” said Baal-Zebub, closing his eyes and lifting his bulbous nose in the air. “Warm notes of hysteria. A bold flavor, to be sure.”

There was that word again. Hysteria. Just like that, the laughter died.

Judith was in Dr. Ng’s office again, the crunchy paper of the exam table making a rustling noise no matter how still she tried to sit.

No, an ovarian cyst wouldn’t be causing you that pain. You shouldn’t be feeling anything. . . . put you on Loestrin . . . come back in three months for a follow-up . . . only way to diagnose is with a laparoscopy, and even then, you might not know.

As if her thoughts had called the beast from its cave, a familiar stab of agony went through Judith’s pelvis, inside her right hip bone. The throb began, almost like a muscle spasm but not quite. She found herself remembering the monstrous images that came up when she googled “ovarian cyst,” huge white balloons that looked, ironically, like eggs. Only that wasn’t what she had, according to Dr. Ng. She gripped her abdomen.

“Ah,” said Baal-Zebub. “There we are. The saveur of frustration, the piquant nip of bitterness, the delicate undertone of despair. A perfect dish.” His wings flapped in time to Judith’s frantic heartbeat, and then he was hovering before her, one finger outstretched to her cheek. She couldn’t move. His fingertip brushed beside her nose and she felt wetness—a tear. He brought it to his thin lips and lapped it off his skin. “Truly delicious.”

As he spoke, a small miracle: Judith felt the prick of pain in her pelvis subside, a wave sliding back down the beach. The tide was pulling out. It was only a dull roar, not the pounding torment it had been a moment before.

Baal-Zebub reached out with his other hand and caught the tear on her opposite cheek. This one he sniffed, very carefully, as if afraid of inhaling it up his nose. Then he grinned, showing double rows of narrow, needle-pointed fangs, and popped his finger in his mouth. “Delissuss,” he said around the digit.
Again, the ocean shrank away. Judith was standing on the dry part of
the shore, safe from the rip current. “How—how are you doing this?” she
asked, wonder in her voice.
Baal-Zebub removed his finger from his mouth and dusted his palms
together. “A prince does not answer how. A prince answers why.”
“All right, then. Why?”
The fangs appeared again. “Mutually beneficial agreement,
remember? Besides. You summoned me.”
“I summoned . . .?”
“Oh, yes. When you were walking up the stairs just now. Your tears—
the tears of a woman in pain—they smell as delicious as confinement in
Sussex in 1823. They call to me.”
Judith fought to keep up. “So you can . . . eat my . . .?” She gestured
at her abdomen.
“Your pain, yes,” said the demon, nodding. “And I believe it is
chronic?” He sounded hesitantly gleeful, like a child afraid of getting his
hopes up.
Sick days, skipped nights out, afternoons curled around a heating pad.
“You could say that.”
“Excellent. Then I take it by the dry tone of your voice our agreement
is to your liking?”
Judith hesitated. Stories about demons tended to have a common
theme: whatever you do, don’t make deals with them. But those were fables,
fantasies, fairy tales. This, her body told her, was quite real. And the little
demon had helped her in the past five minutes more than nine months of
internet research, three visits to a General Practitioner, and two OBGYNs.
“What’s in it for me?”
“I’ll stop by for nibbles. Your pain will go away. Over time, you’ll
develop defenses against it.” The demon grinned. “No more pain.”
Judith poked the hellscape between her hipbone and her belly button,
that No Man’s Land where happiness went to die.
Could this be the answer she was searching for all along?
Tam’s smile flashed in her head. All the casual coffee dates she’d
skipped because her stomach was aching, all the movie nights he’d suggested
as they passed each other on the stairs. She counted them at night when she
couldn’t sleep.
Perhaps, after this, she could say yes.
She took her hand from her abdomen and held it out for a shake.
Baal-Zebub’s tail came around his pudgy belly and curled into her
palm. It felt like the class snake she’d held once in the fourth grade, a rosy
boa, muscular and cold to the touch. They shook briefly, hand to tail, and then
Baal-Zebub’s red mist began to swirl around him.
“Farewell for now, mortal,” he said, patting his stomach. “Happy
About a week later, Judith was in bed at two in the afternoon, wishing Baal-Zebub would reappear. If pain was his dish of choice, her body was serving it up hot and fresh. She moved her now-lukewarm heating pack off her abdomen so she could test the skin with her own fingers. It was warm and swollen, pressing against the elastic waist of her pajama bottoms, straining away from the nausea. Not for the first time, she fantasized about carving open her stomach and taking all the organs out, emptying herself of whatever poisons lived inside. She closed her eyes.

Beside her on the mattress, her phone buzzed.

She put away her fantasy, tugging the phone into her range of vision.

A text from Tam: *Headed to Jewel. Need anything?*

Judith’s pulse quickened. For a brief moment, she had another vision: herself and Tam walking to the grocery store, combing the aisles, arguing over the best flavor of ramen (chicken mushroom, obviously). Sharing a cart, carrying it all home, cooking together. Curling up close on the couch, legs over laps, fingers sifting through hair like the first brush through fresh snow.

*I’m good but thank you!* she typed instead. Then she put her phone on silent and tossed it onto her nightstand. The movement sent a twinge down her abdomen, rooted near enough to her appendix to have caused a trip to the emergency room once or twice. She poked at it. A blaze of pain responded, a sharp version of the bright ache that was her constant companion. It shopped with her. It jealously withheld happy hours, trivia nights, Cubs games. It curled up around her at night.

She pressed harder with her index and middle fingers. The pain flamed through her bloated stomach. She tasted salt.

“Just in time,” said a gravelly voice. “I was getting peckish.”

Relief trilled through her at his words. Baal-Zebub sat comfortably on her second pillow, wings at rest. The red mist that heralded his movements dissipated into her bedroom’s chill as he reached out with greedy hands and plucked up her tears, one droplet per finger. Then he licked them off each tip with gusto, fangs gleaming. At the end, he lifted his nose into the air and grinned. “Pleasantly acidic today.”

Judith sucked in a breath. Her fingers hadn’t moved, but the sharp pain beneath them was gone. Even her nausea had lightened, a tension smoothed out of her abdomen like a stubborn wrinkle. “I can’t believe it actually worked.”

“Here.” Baal-Zebub held out a small palm. His green glassy skin swirled with the grays and pinks of granite. “I’d like to order dessert.”

Judith hesitated.

Fangs caught the dull wintry light from her window. “No fear, now. You’ll ruin the fun.”
At that, Judith slid her hand atop his. After all, how much could it hurt?

Baal-Zebub opened his mouth even wider, lifting her index finger to his fangs. Then he bit down above her first knuckle. She felt a prick, a light brush of sharpness, but nothing strong enough to be described as painful. She’d adjusted her definition of that over the past few months.

Her eyes fluttered closed as the demon sucked at her blood. A warm sensation slipped over her, starting at her head, caressing her breasts, curling over her abdomen, slipping between her thighs and down her legs. In answer, her muscles let out a sigh, pooling into the mattress. She was both heavy and weightless, sinking into nothing.

The delicate smacking of lips brought her back to awareness. She wiggled her fingers and toes first and found that the demon had released her. She opened her eyes.

Baal-Zebub floated overhead, supported by a cloud of rest mist. Satisfaction half-lowered his eyelids. “Rich and oaty, with a hint of caramelized sweetness. Delectable.” His ears flicked as he lowered his head in a slight bow. “I thank you.”

Judith pushed herself up to sitting. Her heating pack slid off the mattress and landed on the wooden floor with a dull thud. “Thank me?” She put a hand over her stomach, a now-familiar movement. It grumbled: a normal grumble, not the kind of roiling upsetness that meant she would have to skip dinner. “When can you come again?”

Baal-Zebub lifted his chin and regarded her regally. Then his fangs flashed. “Music to my ears, young human. Just say my name aloud three times, and I will appear.” The red mist started to coalesce around him. “Thank you—”

“Don’t abuse the privilege, mind. I can break our little arrangement at any time.”

“Yes. Of course.”

Then he was gone.

#

“I’m so glad you texted me,” said Tam as he unpacked the last grocery bag onto Judith’s counter. “I hope you like Italian.”

“It’s my favorite,” she said, swinging her feet beneath her barstool. This is real. He’s here, and I’m hungry. For the first time in weeks, her stomach wasn’t trying to swallow her abdomen whole.

“Are you just saying that?” As Tam smiled, Judith noticed for the first time that his canines were a bit crooked. She imagined them nibbling her lower lip and felt her body grow warm beneath her sweater.

“No. I love pasta. Anything with carbs.”

“Excellent. That’s a very low bar.”

She laughed, then started to shimmy off her stool. “I should be
“Helping.”

“No!” Tam rushed around the counter and held her still, his palms warm on her shoulders. She froze, meeting him eye to eye. “This is my treat. You sit. I cook.”

“Are you sure?” Judith was scared to breathe. He was so close. She could smell the cold on him and, behind it, the fading spicy scent of his cologne.

“I’m positive,” he said in a low voice, his eyes on her lips. She held her breath. Then he let her go and hurried back into the kitchen. His ears were slightly red. She watched as he pulled down a pot and began to fill it from the sink. Somehow it boded well that he knew where to find everything, as if he, too, had the same kitchen logic in his apartment right across the hall. It was like matchmaking by Buzzfeed quiz. Organize your kitchen cupboards and we’ll tell you your soulmate.

“Huh?” she asked, when she realized Tam was waiting for an answer. “Wine?” He showed her a bottle of red.

“Oh, yes, please. But are you sure I can’t pay you back or anything? This looks kind of . . . pricey.”

His cheeks grew a bit pink above his beard as he uncorked the bottle. “No, it’s my treat. Trust me, I’ve been dying to cook for—to cook for someone for a while.”

“Okay. Thanks.” There had been many nights, before Judith had gotten up the courage to do more than exchange hallway pleasantries with Tam, when she’d smelled delicious things coming from his apartment. It had been so hard not to knock on his door and invite herself to dinner. Hi, I think you’re really hot, also your food smells amazing, can I come in? And then the pain had started.

But that wasn’t her problem tonight. No, tonight she was two weeks into her Demon Therapy and it was working just fine. She drank her wine slowly, nursing each delicious sip, letting it warm her toes as Tam talked her through each step of his cacio e pepe.

“It’s kind of the most boring pasta dish you can make,” he said as he spooned them each a bowl. “I’m realizing that now.”

“It smells amazing.” Buttery and sinful with a hint of fresh ground pepper. Her stomach growled.

They ate at the tiny Ikea table, knees knocking every so often, until finally Judith got up the courage to keep hers pressed right against Tam’s jeans. He didn’t move away, just smiled at her shyly as he sipped from his wine glass. Then he said, “Hey, did your doctor’s visit go okay?”

“I’m sorry?”

“The other week. You told me you were going to the doctor finally. How’d it go?”

“Oh, you know.”
“That bad?” Tam’s crooked smile was back.
“I basically paid her $125 to tell me to suck it up.” Judith poked at her last scoop of pasta. “Talk about masochism.”
“I know how that goes.” Tam hesitated. “Finally got insurance to cover the T, though.”
“That’s great! Through the graphic design job?”
“Yeah. It’s awesome. Saves me tons. I’m still not . . . not sure about the surgery, though.” He fingered the stem of his glass. “That shit’s expensive.”
He shrugged. “It is what it is.”
“Your voice is sounding good, though. A lot less like a teenager who just dropped out of choir.”
His smile reappeared. “You think?”
“Yeah, totally. You’ve got a nice growl.” Judith summoned her courage, then said, “It’s . . . sexy.”
“Thanks.”
Their eyes met across the table for a long moment, and Judith held her breath.
“Are you ready for dessert?”
The tension broke. She laughed. “Yes, please.”
When all the dishes were scraped clean, Judith hesitated by the kitchen counter, unwilling to say goodnight. She felt full and warm and satisfied and there was no need to go lie down or put her heating pad in the microwave. The feeling was so foreign she almost cried.
Instead she said, “Do you want to watch something?”
Tam paused in the act of packing up his fancy cheese and olive oil.
“Oh.” His blush reappeared. “Yeah. That would be great.”
Judith led him over to the couch, pulse leaping as he settled down beside her. The smell of his cologne was strong this close, and she let herself lean into him with a release of breath. So good. “What should we watch?”
His eyes turned mischievous. “You’re giving me the deciding power?”
“Absolutely. You’re the guest.”
A couple of hours later, Tam pulled her back into the shelter of his arm. “Are you liking K-dramas yet?”
*I’m liking you.* But Judith held back the words. A strange feeling radiated out from her chest—not like the pain that spiraled from her core. No, this was something else. Something that tasted like contentment but rushed through her veins like fire.
“I am,” she said when she found her voice. “We should watch more sometime. If you want.”
Tam’s fingers stilled on her shoulder, his body going soft. The silence

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stretched for far too long before he said, “I’d like that.”

A bit later, as they stood up to say their goodbyes, Judith’s fingers linked in his. “I had a really good time,” she said. “And dinner was delicious.”

“Thanks.” Tam stepped closer to her, until they were a few inches apart. “I can do spaghetti and meatballs, too.”

“I can’t cook,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

He smiled, canines peeking out. “It’s okay.” His eyes drifted down her face, catching on her lips. “Turns out there are other things I like about you.”

Judith’s pulse beat in her ears. For the barest instant, she thought he was going to thank her and leave. And then he kissed her. Sweet, short, the taste of wine still on his lips. It was like the blissful bite of the demon’s fangs.

“Goodnight, Judith,” he breathed when it was over.

“Goodnight, Tam.” She waited until the door closed behind him to pump her fist in the air.

#

It wasn’t until later that night, when Judith was changing into her pajamas, that she noticed the scale.

At first, she thought it was a scab, or perhaps a bruise. Granted, it was in a strange place for a bruise—midway between her belly button and her dark brown tufts of pubic hair, about the size of her thumbnail. But when she reached down to touch it, she felt the same cold, hard surface as her granite countertop. Around it, her skin was warm.


“Didn’t I tell you not to abuse the privilege?”

She opened her eyes to find the demon floating on his red mist at eye-level.

“What the fuck is this?” she asked, pointing.

He regarded her coolly, gaze shifting from her trembling finger to the dark patch against her skin. “It looks like you’re developing some armor at last. You’re welcome.”

“Armor? I didn’t ask for—this wasn’t part of our agreement!”

“Wasn’t it?” The demon flipped his tail, bored. “I told you I’d grant you defenses, didn’t I? You should be thanking me. Those are my most effective type.”

“So this isn’t going away?” She brushed the scale again, and the resulting chill shivered up her arm and down her spine. She felt no pain, true. But she would become untouchable.

“Oh, certainly not,” said Baal-Zebub. “It will last a lifetime, I assure you.”

“Oh, God.” She buried her head in her hands. Nights on couches suffused with warmth evaporated like boiling water in Chicago cold.
“How dare you pass off my credit?” The demon swelled with offense. “That One has no part in this.”

“What? No, I just meant—oh, nevermind.” To Judith’s horror, a swell of pain had begun in her abdomen, to the right of the scale.

The demon watched her closely, then settled into a knowing look.

She hesitated. The pain grew. But, oddly, beneath the patch of skin where the scale had grown—nothing.

Judith held out her finger.

“Are you sure?” Baal-Zebub asked.

She remembered laughing as Tam taught her how to curl pasta into a spoon. She remembered the way his arm felt over her shoulders on the couch. She remembered his kiss.

Fuck it, she thought. “I’m sure.”

Winter in Chicago wasn’t so bad, Judith thought. Not when you had a hot guy to go on a date with every weekend and a demon to suck away the pain when you got home at night. Granted, each time Baal-Zebub visited her, another scale grew along her pubis. However, his visits were becoming less and less frequent the more the scales grew. It was like he said: Judith was armored.

This didn’t become a problem until the night of her one-month anniversary with Tam. She’d stayed downtown after work, going from her office on the upper floors of 900 North to the fancy Bloomingdale’s downstairs, and furtively purchased a bit of lacy lingerie in expectation of the evening. Now, she stood in front of her mirror in her apartment, trying not to shred the underwear on her scales as she pulled them on.

Her armor had grown from a single dark spot to a blooming triangle. Each scale was a slightly different shade of green, like edges of a faceted emerald. They started at her panty line and grew downward, eclipsing her pubic hair until she had only a few remnants of dark curls peeking out where pelvis met thigh. If she stroked her fingertip in a line from her bellybutton to the peak of her vagina, her fingers started on warm skin and hit cold scales halfway down, smooth and tessellated together in a swathe that linked hip bone to hip bone. Fortunately, at her clitoris they hit warmth again. In her own self-testing, she was fully functional, at least in the ways that mattered on her one-month anniversary with her boyfriend.

Tonight was the night she planned to show him. All their previous encounters had been waistline and above—by mutual agreement—but with each weekend the anticipation grew hotter, like swallowing a warm brick. And as she felt only warmth and not pain, the desire grew.

Yet by the time she stood outside Tam’s apartment, knocking on his door, worries crowded her mind. How would she tell him about the demon that sometimes showed up across the hall?
How would she tell him about the scales between her hips?

“Come on in!” he called, voice muffled through the door, and she sighed and forced a smile on her face.

His apartment was larger than hers, and cleaner, with green walls instead of blue. Some wacky cartoons he’d drawn in college greeted her in mismatched frames along the entryway. Tonight, the smell of garlic, herbs, and something yeasty greeted her as she walked in. “Yum,” she said.

“No peeking.” Tam grinned at her from the stove, where he was stirring something in a giant pot. “Pour yourself some wine and go hide in the living room.”

“Nice to see you, too.” But she couldn’t help smiling as she poured herself a glass from the open bottle of red on Tam’s counter. She loved the kitschy apron he wore—it said “King of the Grill”—and the way he tried to keep his dishes a secret. She loved the way he tucked the front of his ridiculous T-shirts into his sweats, and the way his dark hair looked after he ran his fingers through it.

The realization hit her as she sat down on the couch and started scrolling through his Netflix account—full of recommendations for Korean dramas and baking shows.

She loved him.

Shit, she thought. This was not supposed to happen. Not before, when she was nauseous and bloated and cramping in pain, and not now, when she was part demon. Or part armored. Whichever it was.

“Okay, you can come in now,” Tam called from the kitchen-slash-dining area twenty minutes later.

He was standing over his square mahogany table, two steaming bowls of soup and a fresh loaf of homemade bread laid out upon it. A candle burned in the center. “Kale and vegetable soup for the lady,” he said, pulling out her chair.

“Wow,” she said, leaning over her bowl and trying not to sound nervous. “This smells . . . really good.”

He froze, the smile fading from his face. “You don’t like it.”

“What?”

“I knew I should’ve gone fancier,” he said. “I just thought . . . because it’s freezing outside . . .”

“No, Tam, I love it. I love soup. And did you make this bread yourself?”

He shrugged. “It’s oatmeal. It was easy.”

“Tam . . .” She reached across the table and took his fingers, which were cold to the touch. “Thank you. I’m so happy to be here with you tonight.” That part, at least, was true, even if she was fighting down a storm inside.

He relaxed. “Okay. But you can be honest. If you really don’t like it,
we can order pizza or something, I promise.”
“Not on my life.” And as she caught his tentative smile, she determined to enjoy every bite. The soup was delicious, and the bread steeped in butter was heaven itself. She had no trouble complimenting him on the meal, but as they cleaned up and moved with the wine onto the couch, her fear came back. She began to tremble in his arms.
“What’s wrong?” Tam asked in a quiet voice. He sounded nervous.
“It’s nothing,” Judith said. Coward, she thought.
“Look, if it’s bad, just rip the Band-Aid off. I can’t take the suspense.”
“What?” Judith sat forward so she could turn and see his face. His lips were drawn and thin, his stormcloud eyes darker than ever. “What are you talking about?”
“If you’re . . . breaking up with me.” Fear rattled her pulse. “I’m not . . . wait. Are you breaking up with me?”
“God, no.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I think you’re amazing. I always have.”
The simplicity of the statement, the truth in his eyes, made Judith’s lungs swell with something both sweet and painful. “Okay. I mean, thank you. I feel the same about you.”
He let out a rush of breath. “That’s good to hear.” His cheeks were red. “So why do I get the feeling there’s a ‘but’?”
“There’s no but.” Trying to get those crooked canines to appear, Judith wriggled her hand between Tam and the couch cushion, squeezing with her fingers. “Well, there’s one, and it’s pretty awesome.”
He didn’t smile. “Judith.” He reached for her wrist, stilling her movement. He pulled her hand out and twined his fingers with hers. “We can talk about it.”
Her fingers twitched. Her palm was far too clammy for innocence, but still she said, “About what?”
He avoided her eyes. “It can be . . . different. Dating a trans guy. And we haven’t had that conversation yet.”
Realization struck, followed quickly by a need to make him understand. “No. No, listen, Tam, it’s not about that. I mean, I’d be happy to talk, but . . .” As the words left her mouth, she realized her own hypocrisy. Not from the moment she met Tam in the staircase, broken dishes at her feet, had she considered him anything other than what he was. And for weeks she’d refused herself the same sympathy.
She gathered up her strength and cleared her throat. “I have something I’ve been meaning to tell you.”
He blinked. “Okay . . .” He squeezed the hand he still held. “I’m all ears.”
“Something has happened to my body.”
Confusion passed over his face. Then surprise. “Okay,” he said.
“What does that mean?”
“Maybe I should just . . . show you. And then you’ll understand.”
Judith stood up and brought him back to his bedroom. He watched her
with trust and concern as she turned and faced him, dropping his hand so she
could lift up her shirt. This she discarded on the floor, revealing the lacy bra
she’d purchased that evening. His eyes grew dark with longing as her hands
went to her pants and began to unbutton them.
I can do this.
The pants fell to the floor. She shook them off one leg at a time and
stepped out, facing him. Then, meeting his eyes, she tugged down the lacy
pants by just an inch, revealing her scales. They glittered in the dim light
from the hall.
Tam sucked in his breath.
“I told you,” she said. “Not normal.”
He stepped forward. She couldn’t quite read his expression in the
dark. But then his hands, cool and caressing, rested on her shoulders and
pulled her into him. “Not normal,” he whispered in her ear. He kissed her
neck. Shivers went down her spine. “But beautiful.”

“I still don’t see why you had to go and get completely happy like
that,” said the demon from Judith’s kitchen counter.
“It’s okay,” she said, wrapping her scarf around her chin. “I’d like to
introduce an alternative dining option.”
“Hmmph,” said Baal-Zebub. “I should never have given you that
armor.”
Judith brushed her hand over her pelvis. Beneath her jeans, her scales
were cool and strong, a wall against the pain. She was a little sore beneath
them, yes, but not in a bad way. For the first time in a while, the pain gave her
pleasant memories. Her cheeks grew warm.
“Let’s go.” Judith waved him over.
She could hear his mutterings all the way down the stairs, outside her
apartment building, down the icy sidewalks. Right up to the doctor’s office on
Broadway. But he never stopped following her, even when she pushed open
the door and marched inside. She could see him in her peripheral vision,
floating on his cloud of mist, looking curiously about the sterile waiting room.
“Name?” asked the receptionist at check-in.
“Judith Weiss. I’m here for a follow-up with Dr. Ng.”
“Right. It’ll be a few minutes.”
“Actually, I don’t need to see her. I just wanted to let her know that
I’m doing fine.”

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The faces of other women in the waiting room turned her way. Some were pale, some dark, some sallow. All drawn and tired. One of them, a young woman wearing a green sweater, looked like she had recently been crying.

Baal-Zebub wore a wondrous expression that was slowly building from awe to greed.

“Are—are you sure?” asked the receptionist, clearly thrown off by this approach.

“Absolutely,” said Judith. “Thanks for your time.”

She turned, winking at the demon. He blinked twice and smiled that double-rowed smile, letting all his fangs show through. His eyes were dark and shiny and full of hunger. Thank you, he mouthed.

Bon appetit, she mouthed back.
Michael Berton is a Chicano poet originally from El Paso, TX now currently living in Portland, OR. He has had poems appear in Volt, Fireweed, Gertrude, Axolotl, Shot Glass Journal, The Opiate, Indefinite Space, Otoliths, Sin Fronteras Journal, Fourteen Hills, Caveat Lector, Talking River Review and many others. He is publisher/editor at New Mitote Press.

Nurtured by Nature
Michael Berton

i have nothing
against the Swifts
i like their chirping sound
and peacefulness in the sky
but the people
that form crowds
coming to watch
them dive or swoon
get swallowed up
into the Chapman school chimney
as the sun is setting
has gotten out of hand
a logistical problem
with the neighborhood overcrowding
destroying flower beds
urinating in bushes
slashing tires
knocking on doors
to ask what’s for dinner
do you have any liquor
can I sleep in the spare room
does your son or daughter
need lessons in weirdness
participants in the spectacle
nurtured by nature
such as when the hawk
comes in to prey
on the small swifts
who could not make
it into the chimney

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it’s all cheap thrills
for the Nature Conservancy
hoping to recruit new members
Martins Deep is a Nigerian poet & photographer. He is passionate about documenting muffled stories of the African experience in his poetry & visual art. Writing from Kaduna, or whichever place he finds himself, the acrylic of inspiration that spills from his innermost being tends to paint, from the colouring book of his imagination, various depictions of humanity/life, & to spill ink on placards of protest. His works have appeared, or are forthcoming in Barren Magazine, Writers Space Africa, Mineral Lit Mag, Agbowó Magazine, The Peace Exhibit, The Alchemy Spoon, Dream Glow, The Lumiere Review, Variant Literature, & elsewhere. He is also the brain behind Shotstoryz Photography. Twitter: @martinsdeep1

Cover Photograph: from this dream a black boy gave me an orb

i knew it was an orb so beautiful to be desired; to open the chalice in my palms without second thoughts to have it, but i cringed. indeed an ethereal object, & priceless it seemed like the light in his wounds emptied into a crystal ball. he was smeared with gold dust made into paste: a mixture of rainwater/mud/grease. his tender eyes whispered, & beautifully infused my hand with this sweet rebellion against my needless fear.

after this encounter, i came to understand my burden for the african child; that dutifully creating art pieces on their experiences/condition would be demeaning to call 'just a hobby'. i woke up not remembering what I did with this orb, but i knew i swallowed it. it had to be this reality, because of this fire in my belly I felt after then, till even now.

& again, i wonder if this is the genesis of every orb/star. if this, then how beautiful my mother's god must be in the body of a black boy --- that the origin of everything that shines is from a wound.

Opposite: boy with a thousand burdens

for the boy child where i come from, 'b' is for 'burden'. society would shape your bones into steel to bear your ironwood cross, & crush the lush grapes of your voice into the wineglass of grief.

he hawks bread. his big dreams pulverized into leaven. he is a roadside fruit seller. his mangoes in your mouth will taste like it was plucked from a tree grown on a secret gash cloaked in kaftan.

'boy with a thousand burdens' boldly confronts the ugly conditions society has made a norm. this norm among myriads, that for survival, gardens must be irrigated by secret tears, & manured by dead dreams.
untangle me strings from this noose dangling down a bough of my household's mango tree. i want it for the broken strings of my acoustic guitar. this rope too short to reach for rescue, my drowning father.

or, teach me the songs of silence that echoes the notes from an octet of hummingbirds. let the world be asleep as i burst into farewell rhythms to grief, as charon oars it away from my heart upon the river styx flowing from my eyes.
Robert Manaster's poetry has appeared in numerous journals including Rosebud, Birmingham Poetry Review, Image, Maine Review, and Spillway. His co-translation of Ronny Someck's The Milk Underground was awarded the Cliff Becker Book Prize in Translation. He's also published poetry book reviews in such publications as Rattle, Colorado Review, and Massachusetts Review.

God Proof
Robert Manaster

in geometry
in the way
we construct
our planar
number system
it's impossible
to make
a circle without
eternally
refining
yet we
draw one
any-way
He spoke of when he used to bike
to an Evanston beach. "There's lots of wind there."
Her eyes were attentive, her back firm.
A cat pin on her angora sweater
arched its back like the moon’s crescent.
She talked of growing up in Rantoul at the base
then Guam during high school at Academy
of Our Lady. "I'll have to show you," she said.
They gazed at each other, their eyes
nearly shifting in unison.

Amid the maroon in the spacious
Colonial Room at Illini Union,
there was a tug of tablecloth
as she moved her chair closer
after chicken cordon blue was served.
While she ate
like an ellipsis in unruly cursive seas,
he kept reminding himself to straighten
his back.

"Is she Jewish?" his mother asked.
"No," he said as if unconcerned
like a cat stopping to groom himself.
She slammed the oven door and pounded
the chicken casserole dish
onto the table, as if it were the final
point of a screed on hunger in the shtetl.

It wasn't until he started chewing meat
that he noticed he had any.
L. P. Melling currently writes from the East of England, UK, after being swept around the country by academia and his career. His prose has been published in such places as ARTPOST, The Molotov Cocktail, Thrilling Words, and L’Éphémère Review. When not writing, he works in London for a legal charity that advises and supports victims of crime.

The Story of Our Life in Seven Shades of Love

L. P. Melling

Red is the start. It’s the test workbooks in science class when we look over at each other and learn about wavelengths of light. The quickly scrawled love letters that ignite our lust. The polka dots of my white dress on our secret first date when we meet at our girls’ school gates and watch the sunset together. It’s your beautiful lips hot and wet against mine, the raging arguments over who might see us. The taste of your dark and perfect skin.

Orange is passion cooling, born from the hot sun of our youthful passion. The Texan summer mornings when our sweet nothings become firmer, shaped by companionship, before you leave for another state, and I wish I could leave with you. Be free at last from my unbending parents. It’s the color of your Arizona State University gym when I visit you, the rind of tartness as we see each other less, yet our love grows stronger.

Yellow is the setting sun of our college graduations. The fear as the distance grows further between us. The third color progression of our time together, the E major undertone that resonates with understanding, which sustains us through the cold autumn days. The times when I struggle to keep up with postgrad work at UNT, when you consider leaving college so you can get a full-time job to support your sick mother. The color of the stripes on your newly loaned motorbike, the smell of sun-warmed leather as I hold you tight.

Green is the plush lawn of our first house in Pacific Heights, the joy and promise of spring, a fresh start that brings back the red heat of our passion. At last free and open for everyone to see. Its lighter tone is the color of the invites you want because you say it matches my eyes, the color of travel plans, of the ceremony in Denmark that formalizes our love to the world. But it’s also your jealousy when I take that new position teaching applied physics at UCSF, the thought of losing me when you meet infatuated Audre from my faculty. The parents we see smiling wide, playing with their
kids in the park.

Blue is the color of your loving eyes, our twentieth anniversary together, fifth as married, but it’s not all we hoped for. Blue is harsh winter too. It’s the cold A minor of life when the adoption falls through nine months after state legalization, the hue of a room unused. It’s the tears of our disappointments, the flashing lights when we find our house has been burgled, our privacy assaulted. It’s the burial of your mother at Restland Memorial Park after she finally loses her battle against leukemia, the color of the North Texas Personal Care Home hallways my father walks without remembering why.

Indigo is the deeper love that flows through the difficult blue times, never giving up as things slowly improve. It’s the color of change as the adoption agency calls again, the favorite color of our child Gilbert who grows faster than we believe. The color of the sports bra and matching socks I take off you when you get the promotion at Pfizer, something you’ve deserved for so long. It’s the smell of its soft, static-charged fabric as I tell you how special you are. The same shade as the dress you buy me after my skin cancer scare. The one I wear when I take you to the finest restaurant in the city.

Violet is the whispering of dawn. Powered by the aging sun of our love. The scene we gaze at from our front lawn as we hold hands and worry about our retirement plans. About our son’s life without us. It is our shortening future, when no matter how much you think it’s all in vain, I’ll tell you there’ll always be new joy. It’s the promise that the world will always be better when we’re together, even when it seems to us that things are dark.

And light is the sum of our love, of our life together. The brightness that beams from your smile into the prism of my heart. It’s the mnemonic of happiness, pain, and all colors in between. Our electromagnetic attraction, the evolution of our relationship. The sunlight that shines through each other to give all color in our life, the tones that burn away the grays of a world without you. It’s the polarized therapy you develop at work that leads to a landmark breakthrough in treating skin cancer, when you say you couldn’t have done it without me. The tears as I tell you how proud I am. The rays of warmth after the rain, the colors arcing across our sky and city.

Light is the seven-note symphony, the seven-part story of our life: the seven shades of color that are the spectrum of our love.
By My Thumbs

Dawn Macdonald

I used to walk the dead road thinking,
I could just keep going, south,
I would get there, step step, south.
The road made from the broken bones of the mountain,
three-quarter inch crush.
Step step, the road too straight for walking.
Twenty minutes straight.
Ten to execute the curve.
Calculate the angle theta
to which the curve must be banked
given the following coefficient of friction and anticipated speed.
*Calculemus,*
said Leibniz,
in matters of dispute, gentlemen,
*let us calculate.*

Under the road rock
under the rock water
under the water nothing that dreams
Shadab Zeest Hashmi, a Pakistani-American poet and essayist, is the winner of the San Diego Book Award, Sable Books’ Hybrid Book Prize, and the Nazim Hikmet Poetry Prize, and has been nominated for the Pushcart multiple times. Her books include Kohl and Chalk, Baker of Tarifa and Ghazal Cosmopolitan. Zeest Hashmi’s poetry has been translated into Spanish, Turkish, and Urdu, and has appeared in numerous anthologies and journals worldwide, most recently in McSweeney’s In the Shape of a Human Body I am Visiting the Earth. She has taught in the MFA program at San Diego State University as a writer-in-residence.

Shampooing

Shadab Zeest Hashmi

Hidden in rituals of grooming and caregiving are words spoken only when we’re unguarded. These are the rare moments we’re physically in the hands of an unconditional love whose touch cultivates a unique expression based on trust, opening the chute of memory or mystery.

Massaging, a common sight as part of the family scene during my childhood years in Pakistan, yields such words. Sisters and girl-cousins oil, massage, comb and braid each other’s hair, grandparents massage the babies in the family, and the same babies massage their grandparents when they are older. The deepest, most treasurable conversations ensue: the person being massaged may suddenly recall a forgotten incident, a song fragment, a joke, an old story or a snippet of family history, or may enter a contemplative space, a different dimension of consciousness or of long-guarded secrets. When I read about Freud’s couch and his free recall technique, I’m reminded of various massaging scenes involving our lawn chairs, rugs, floor cushions, the village charpais, those painted rope cots, even the convolutions of the grapevine I studied while reclining against my mother’s knees, the indulgent winter sunshine, teacups, biscuits, and the scent of oranges, most of all—the distinct timbre of each family member.

A traditional scalp massage, often part of the weekly or monthly routine, is believed to be good for blood circulation and brain health, and for maintaining strong, beautiful hair. After moving to the United States, I was fascinated to learn that Champooi or champi (meaning “to press or knead”), the art of the scalp massage using special oils and herb infusions, is the origin of the word shampoo. It was brought, along with the Turkish bath and other grooming and wellness treatments, to Europe by one Sake Dean Mahomed, a doctor and entrepreneur from the Indian subcontinent who set up a spa in Brighton, England, in the eighteenth century. About a thousand years earlier,
soap had arrived in Europe via Muslim Spain, from Aleppo, Syria; it was said to be crafted from the combination of sweet bay oil, olive oil, lye and water, then heat-processed and aged before use. Public baths, rituals and products for cleansing, strengthening, beautifying and relaxing the body became popular in parts of Europe due to cultural influences from the East, and have been evolving globally ever since.

I remember the talk of amla and ritha herbal concoctions, the scent of coconut, mustard, almond and olive oils, how mothers would fuss over their children’s heads—to ensure that their boys grow up brainy and their girls beautiful. I wanted to be both. I remember raw egg-white masks and shampoos from my childhood and how the fruity and floral smells lingered. As a mother myself I recall learning to carefully cradle the baby’s head and neck, rolling up small washcloths for neck-support in the tub, checking the temperature of the water and giving a gentle massage while shampooing. Toweling and talking to the baby afterwards was as pure of a delight as one can dream of.

When we meet our first baby, he is a sound on the Doppler: the galloping rhythm of a heart. On the monitor of the ultrasound machine, he’s a triumphant silhouette, a freely roving form that has the ambrosia of the womb waters all to itself. Because his heart gallops, I conjure him as a mythic seahorse. The hippocampus, the part of the brain that navigates spatial memory among other things, is named after the Greek word hippocampus, meaning seahorse, likely for its shape. The first image of my child in utero will enter my psyche as a promise of remembering places together.

I soothe my children when they are babies by rubbing oil on their temples and stroking their hair, singing to them and telling them stories of the far-off places of my childhood. Yaseen, with his long lashes and deep gaze, seems to listen intently to poems I recite in Urdu, to the Spanish guitar and to the soundtrack of The Lion King. A winter-baby, his thick hair reminds me of fairytale woods, reaffirming the possibility of reaching contemplative depths through the imagination. His eyes hold enough wonder to last me many lifetimes; he becomes my finest, most generous teacher. He watches my mouth when I speak and when he begins to coo I hear different shades of the “k” sound. One day he surprises us and his pediatrician by vocalizing qaf—one of the most unique sounds of Urdu. He opens my world to the many languages that exist with no dictionaries but love.

When Yousuf is born, I know he’s been tuned in to all the conversation and music I’ve been sharing with his older brother, now two years old. Yousuf, with his hazel eyes and tufts of curly hair, is my golden one. Born earlier than expected, he’s a small baby who communicates efficiently, establishing himself as a creature of habit and teaching me the beauty of precise rhythms. He loves nothing more than having his hair shampooed, which is highly unusual for a newborn. I’m struck by the
serendipity of shampooing him daily: the routine involves opening the curtains to luscious treetops in early spring, singing a song or two, talking, a gentle head-massage that he utterly gives himself up to, the berry and violet scent of the shampoo, and the distant prattle of his brother who is being looked after by khala, my aunt who is visiting specially for that purpose.

And then there is the one who wears his heart on his sleeve, Yousha, my youngest one, six years apart from Yousuf, and everyone’s darling. Braving a complicated delivery and born a Leo, my only summer baby, he has a mane of red hair. As an infant, Yousha loves grooming and dressing. He kicks in excitement as I try to get his feet into his onesie knowing he’s getting ready to ride the stroller to bring his brothers home from school. His strong-willed nature is a reminder that astronomical possibilities are within reach, that passion reveals itself in mysterious measures and it’s enough just to behold its spark. No matter how much I try to tame his hair, it remains tousled and fierce, catching the light of the afternoon sun as I rock him in the hammock. I call him my lion cub and share my wide-toothed comb with him.

As my baby boys grow older, the hands-on moments of grooming grow less and less, but the shared words remain with us—some of these words a gift from my elders in various places. When Yousha is six months old, I begin graduate school, and soon after graduating, get a job that requires travel. I miss the children, especially the little one who is only three at the time. I ask my husband if the baby misses me, if he has said anything. Nothing, for a day or two. On the third day, Yousha asks him: “Has she taken her comb with her?”

In my years of traveling for work, I get the rare, fleeting opportunity to be in my parents’ world again—to eat at the family dining table and keep my combs and styling brushes in the drawer of my mother’s dressing table. But when I sleep, my mind floats to a time zone twelve hours distant. Hippocampus, the part of the brain that navigates spatial memory, is named after the Greek word hippocampus, meaning seahorse. Many seas away are the hearts that once galloped inside my womb; every night I awaken exactly at 2:30 am, when it is 2:30 pm in California and my children are walking home from school. Across nearly ten thousand miles and ahead in time by half a spin of the earth, I send them prayers of protection.

Spatial memory necessitates paying attention to the singular demands of a place. When we travel, I teach my children to be cognizant, and to dress for long journeys: they must be comfortable and dignified, ideally wearing a full-sleeved undershirt, a semi-formal layer and a warm layer. If they’re tired or fussy, I rub a little cream on their hands or Eucalyptus lotion on the temples. As teenagers, my boys are singled out for extra screening because they are Muslims. The thought of rough handling and abrasive interrogation, submitting not only my loved ones’ vulnerable bodies to armed authority but also their vulnerable psyches, is distressful. In such instances, the distance
between us is only a few feet but the hostility and dread that fill it seem
infinite. This airport scene of being touched with suspicion, being spoken to
with suspicion, unravels that painstaking weave, the daily lessons of building
trust. To my surprise, my children prove to be stronger and calmer in the face
of discrimination than I could imagine; whom have they taken after?
Glimmers of the courage of elders braving wars and displacement shine
through them. The weave hasn’t unraveled after all. Our homes, in lands old
and new, of this century or the previous, have one thing in common: regular
moments of surrender to the care of loving hands and a voice that will come
back to comfort, instruct, amuse or encourage whenever needed—long after
the touch is gone.
James Miller is a native of Houston, Texas. His poems have appeared in Cold Mountain Review, The Maine Review, Lunch Ticket, Gravel, Main Street Rag, Juked, Meat for Tea, Plainsongs, The Atlanta Review, and elsewhere.

Gerhard Richter Painting

James Miller

Why speak
of cholera’s yellow,
burnished brush?
  Pus, pollen, crumbs
  adrift
  in soft butter.

You’ve moistened
your rounded lips in old
Maclean’s ads.
Soda sweeter
than spring,
and the soap
sweeter still. Undying,
grace undying,
the greeny folds
of your first trousers,
  taut flesh you scrape
  and scratch.

Your
  whole body heaves
into the downward.
A warehouse door
closing
on dusted mariachis,
flea-broths and damp
shrouds. Sagging
eyelids, blue
that will fail
you.

Inspired by “Gerhard Richter Painting” directed by Corinna Belz, 2011
Alex Nodopaka originated immaculately in Ukraine in 1940. Speaks San Franciscan, Parisian, Kievan & Muscovite. Mumbles in English & Espanol & sings in tongues after Vodka. Studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, Casablanca, Morocco. Presently full time author and visual artist in USA.

Galleons at Sea

160 Typehouse Literary Magazine
Galleons
Beirut, Summer 1982

Soraya Qahwaji

The shelling has started,
we have to go to the basement again.
Where is your bag, that I pack
your pencils and your books?
Of course Teddy is coming with us.

The neighbors are gone, we have the basement to ourselves.
It’ll soon be over – finish your sandwich.
Now is too dangerous for papa to come.
Here’s your coloring book.
Let me listen to what they’re saying on the radio.

I don’t know how long.
The radio is hissing – I can’t hear a thing.
Breathe in deeply your Ventolin.
If you’re tired of coloring,
I’ll tell you a story you haven’t heard before.

Be nice to your sister, give her a kiss.
When it becomes quiet, we’ll go upstairs.
Papa will come back with batteries and bread.
Let’s lie down and go to sleep,
we’ll wake up when it becomes quiet.

The shelling stopped.
The father never returned.
Beirut discarded its people with its rubble
and reinvented itself.
The children left the country.
The mother is still in the basement.
It’s not safe to go upstairs.  
Don’t worry about papa:  
he promised he won’t die without us.  
There’s enough candle left  
to read *Leyla and the Wolf*
Avra Margariti is a queer social work undergrad from Greece. She enjoys storytelling in all its forms and writes about diverse identities and experiences. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Flash Fiction Online, The Forge Literary, SmokeLong Quarterly, The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts, Argot Magazine, and other venues. Avra won the 2019 Bacopa Literary Review prize for fiction. You can find her on Twitter @avramargariti.

Father William

Avra Margariti

You are old, Father William, but that suits us just fine. Your creaking bones drown out the click-clack of our teeth and appendages. Your loose vestments conceal the undulating of your skin as we stir, restless beneath the surface. Aren’t you proud? We started out as a small sack of larvae, embedded at the base of your skull. You used to scratch the soft bulge of us, down on your knees during prayer or while delivering a sermon up on the pulpit. You tried to ignore our existence, attribute our whispers to dreams and daymares in serpentine tongues. Look at us now; hooked along your spine, spreading outward.

You fear us, Father. Your hormones burn sharp and bitter up our trunks. Your nails try to dig us out of your skin. Night after night, you pray us away, but we don’t hold that against you. We still love you like the orphaned crows love the gutted-out old scarecrow whose straw belly they’ve made their home.

Your scientists would say you are the host and we the parasites. Once upon a time, your religion would have regarded you as the meat-sack vessel of holy ghosts. We like to think our relationship doesn’t differ from the way human fetuses leech off their mothers. The truth is, in this strange new planet we’ve landed on, we wouldn’t have made it far without you. We’ve suckled on your cells, absorbed all the nutrients from your garden of viscera. Our fattened bellies rubbed against each other as yours shrunk like a leathery dried fruit. The gurgling of your insides has sung us to sleep, the closest thing we had to a lullaby in our native tongue.

There are so many of us now, all grown up, teeming under your skin like static in an old TV screen. This is how it will happen, Father: Sunday morning you’re in church, preparing the altar wine and getting everything ready for your parishioners. You’ll feel the tingling of antennae in your neck, your chest, your limbs. On your way up the gallery, you’ll find your legs are no longer your own. We’ll take a step backward into empty air, and send your
body tumbling down the stairs. At the landing, your neck will snap, and your head will burst open. Raw, pink bits will splatter against the gold leaf icons of your sad-eyed martyrs guarding the pews.

Don’t be alarmed. We’re many things, but we are not merciless. You’ll be dead by the time we chew our way out of you. You won’t see us lay our eggs in your beloved parishioners, who will become our new generation’s nurturing mothers and fathers.

It’s been nice, Father William, but all good things must end. Although we’re strong enough to fly the nest, we will forever think fondly of you.

Our first and truest home will always have been inside you.

But, we must go forth now, and multiply. We will fill Earth and govern it. Amen.
Peter O’Donovan is a scientist and writer living in Seattle, WA. Originally from Saskatchewan, he received his doctorate in Computer Science from the University of Toronto, with a focus on design aesthetics. His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in the Torontoist, Sheila-Na-Gig, and Qwerty.

Daedalus

Peter O’Donovan

So Daedalus contrived innumerous paths,
and windings vague, so intricate that he,
the architect, hardly could retrace his steps.
Ovid, Metamorphoses

The contract was an impossible task,
design a city for the disappeared:
for the mostly digital citizen -
the super-subscribed, the Insta-fans,
the compulsive swipers just checking in,
the Office-bound subculture junkies,
the TikTok argonauts wandering the world
but always on-call, lost in the elsewhere.

I narrowed down my core materials:
seamless steel and microbial smoothies,
timber grown with branded color palettes,
edible plastics, hygienic white masks,
cacophonies, caffeine, fragments overheard,
fractured glass, fog-of-war machines,
buildings contrived from cameras and screens,
billions of unblinking eyes - all mirrors.

The city was built almost in an instant,
almost before I dreamt it, drew its form.
As though a spore had been there, far below,
its filaments twisting upwards, bursting
through the surface as girders, reaching up
to fields of construction cranes leaning in,
ripe-fruit heavy and ready to spread
across the plains, a sheer metallic wave.
And at the center I placed a moment.
A revelation not even known to me.
Some dim distorted thing, seeking slowly
but holding wildfire and tremor, earths un-
ched like cattle herds thrashing from fly-bite.
Some city-hunter cornering, closing in,
each step levelling, creating a coming
age, a quiet world of the far-departed.
The ninth daughter of a surgeon who accidentally cut off the tip of his index finger, Virginia Elizabeth Hayes developed a keen eye for the absurd at an early age. She's spent the last four years fighting with cancer, chemo, radiation and oncologists. So far, all remain afraid of her. Her work can be found in Chicken Soup for the Soul, Driftwood Press, Lunch Ticket, The Filling Station, Gravel Literary Magazine and Stoneboat Literary Journal. Her novels, short stories and novellas are available at Amazon KDP, as well as her memoir-cartoons: The Princeling Papers: Or, How to Fight Cancer with Colored-Pencils and Kittens.

Laryngopharyngeal Dysesthesia
Virginia Elizabeth Hayes

Half bent and weak, my sister Barb and I shuffled from my living room. We were both on chemotherapy, me for eight weeks and her for four years. We moved like extras in a zombie movie.

“Oh, hey,” Barb said, too cheerfully. “Laryngopharyngeal Dysesthesia!”

The weird collection of syllables made no sense to me. “Did you just have a stroke?”

“No. I looked it up. That’s your newest neuropathy. It cuts off your oxygen.”

“I know what it does.” I pointed at my betraying throat. “I just didn’t know the name.”

“I can spell it. Can you?”

I stared at her. Barb was the only person who continued to treat me as if I were still alive. Even after my diagnosis, she bossed me around, made faces, told jokes and in other words, acted like there was still hope in this world.

In that sentence, she somehow put together all the things I feared: suffocation, cancer, death and spelling tests. A long absent sensation grew within me. I hadn’t felt it since my diagnosis. I felt a giggle rising.

I fought it.

The new neuropathy with the ten-dollar word of a name could, and would squeeze my airway until I passed out. If I purposely constricted my throat, my voice box would spasm, cutting off my air supply. I couldn’t cry, exercise, stand quickly, or swallow anything cold. But the fastest, hardest lockdown happened when I laughed. Even a giggle was absolutely verboten.

But yet, here I was, in the middle of sudden death round of neuropathic-spelling-bee, I felt a giggle tickling my funny bone. I pressed my
lips together and fought it.

In that silence, my sister saw an opportunity.

“I’ll go first! L-A-R--” Barb spelled, then paused. She gagged. Her face pulled in on itself, reconfiguring into a mask of revulsion. Because of her own chemo and medications, her sense of smell was in overdrive. One lone molecule of an offending scent could trigger it.

Today, the smell was cat pee. Her face twisted, causing her nose to wrinkle and making her lips curl in opposite directions. One eye closed and one stared upward. The expression looked startling and hilarious at the same time.

I, of course, smelled nothing. I’d cleaned the boys’ box that morning, and exhausted by that effort, I fell asleep in the chair until Barb showed up.

When she came to visit, she took two steps into the living room, then stopped. The offensive molecules spiraled her into the involuntary facial-origami exercise.

“We can’t be here!” She tugged me upward.

Off we fled. That is, if two cancer ridden, irradiated sisters moving at half a step a second could be considered: flight. At the bedroom doorway, Barb started showing off her spelling skills. When her face-alarm went off, halfway through the recitation, I pulled the door closed behind us and we both collapsed on the bed.

I thumbed over my shoulder, changing the subject, so the giggle wouldn’t catch me. “If we keep going to the backroom, we’ll see where the irises will come up next month.”

“Iridies,” she said, providing the correct plural form.

I stared at her. “You’ve got, what, two spare breaths left in your body? And you’re using one of them to correct my syntax?”

Her answer was smugly automatic. “What else would I do with it?”

Maybe it was her expression. Maybe it was envy. Maybe it was because both of my spare breaths were ready to flee the scene, but that sense of the absurd I’d been trying so hard to fight rose too quickly. A giggle snorted out of me.

So, of course, Barb laughed, too. Then she stopped. Her expression abruptly made what will forever be known in my head as the Offensive-Molecule-Detection-Face for the third time in so many minutes.

My giggle promoted itself to a laugh.

Of course, the more I laughed, the tighter my throat got. The tighter my throat got, the more my voice box clamped in on itself, cutting off my air supply.

Choking, I slid down her side. My esophagus shrunk down to the thickness of a coffee-stirrer. Instead of breathing, I made a strange, inhuman braying sound.

Barb, ever the pragmatist, let me fall into her lap. With the flat of her
hand, she bapped me on the forehead. Not hard, just enough to get my attention. Bap.

“Keep,” she ordered, “your eyes open!” Bap!
Which, of course, made me laugh more.

Shaking, I struggled for air, while my throat muscles turned to stone. Tears flowed out of my eyes. My glasses fell off. I began to lose consciousness. Barb bapped me, repeating her orders. Big, black blobs of darkness filled my vision as I went blind.

I reached up, set my cold fingers over her mouth. If I could have spoken, I would have said: shush.

Barb blew a raspberry on my fingers. Chuckling, she reached into her sleeve, pulled out the world’s softest hanky and wiped my face. “Aren’t we,” she asked gently, no bapping, “some pair?”

Yes, I thought, we are some pair. My body shook as I brayed a few more times. It took a while, but eventually, I got back to breathing slow, tiny breaths, almost like a person.

Maybe half an hour later, her phone rang. She shifted away, answered it, and spoke two or three sentences.

“Well,” she said, hanging up with a sigh, “I better get going.”

Both of us slowly pushed ourselves off the bed. It wasn’t pretty. We two clingy little zombies shuffled toward the front door together. Turning, she gave me a smile that was simultaneously sad, glad, tired and triumphant. She kissed me, then gave me a bap. “Keep your eyes open, you.”

I nodded. Then, just like that, she opened the door and left. I watched her go, waving at her in the sunlight.

I never saw her again.

What I didn’t know was that Barb had reached end stage with her cancer. She knew it, but told no one. When she did announce it, I was in the throes of yet more chemo and could not leave the house.

That was three years ago. I’ve often wondered about that day. Maybe Barb planned to say her goodbyes to me, but her face got distracted by cat pee molecules.

Knowing her, though, I think she wanted to do something better than boring old farewells with her last two spare breaths. She used them to make me laugh, dry my tears, and provide clear instruction as to how not to give up: ‘Keep your eyes open!’

Since then, I’ve found if I repeat her mantra as I bap my own forehead, a smile will find me. Sometimes too, when I am trapped in the middle of a dull conversation, I like to spring my own version of Offensive-Molecule-Detection-Face, unannounced and unapologetically, on the incessant talker. Watching what happens next always brings a sparkle to me and my open eyes.
Nathaniel Sverlow is a freelance writer of poetry and prose. He currently resides in the Sacramento area with three cats, one incredibly supportive wife, and his young son. His previous publishing credits include Typehouse Literary Magazine, Black Fox Literary Magazine, The Fiction Pool, Squawk Back, and Bone Parade. And, he is currently finishing his first poetry compilation, The Blue Flame of My Beating Heart, set to release later this year.

the main line
Nathaniel Sverlow

she doesn’t call
doesn’t text
doesn’t email

doesn’t shout down
the darkened street

though I’m sure
I’d hear her

she doesn’t sketch
doesn’t paint
doesn’t pontificate

on the injustices
of wherever

she’s been tamed
you see

by the bottle
by the binge
by the unbearable
curling of youth
into dried desperation

but what kills me
most
is that tall, pale vampire
off of P and 18th

her new boyfriend

she brought me over
to meet him
after a long night
of drinking

he was quite the gentleman
making us a round
of vodka sodas

while she sat
in his narrow skull chair
licking the eye sockets
with her long, slithering
tongue

“I’m so high.”
he said, sitting
down,
serving us

and for the rest
of the night
his eyes
were upon her

as were mine

as she nodded off
into drunken
consequence
soon to be carried
to bed
naked flesh
resting
upon sheets of linen
naked soul
bubbling
upon a cooking spoon

as her gentleman vampire
finds
the main line

and penetrates
Gary Bloom grew up in Minneapolis and attended Mankato (Minnesota) State University. His articles, photography, and poetry have been published in many newspapers, magazines and websites, including Breath and Shadow, American Visions, Milwaukee Magazine, The Buffalo News, The Grand Rapids Press, Mankato Poetry Review, Players, and Black Diaspora. After retiring from work as a database administrator he now spends his time writing and traveling.

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Chicago Iron

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Blair Benjamin’s previous work has appeared or is forthcoming in The Threepenny Review and Lumina. He is the Director of the Studios at MASS MoCA residency program for artists and writers in North Adams, Massachusetts.

As for you, you were dead

Blair Benjamin

Ephesians 2:1
for Jules Laforgue

I was born eighty-four years to the day you died, choked in your fin-de-siècle Parisian tuberculosis and woe.
I sucked my first meek breath in 1970s New York suburban summer.

Five years you read to an aging Prussian Empress. Your leisured irony kept you sane and morose. Eighteen years I’ve read to my daughters, believing them more worthy than queens.

In your Paris and Berlin and Baden-Baden you heard poetry in the chatter of street corner and cabaret. In my New England college town I hear the howls of coyote and great horned owl.

You wailed for love, then found it, but died in its throes, and took your love with you. I’ve known my love longer than you lived. What would you have written from our little quotidian?

Dead at twenty-seven, you freed your verse and disturbed universes you would not live to see. Still alive at fourty-eight, I hear the first intimations of a voice in me. Why did I let so many absent years pass?

As for me, it is the season that wants me to go, you wrote. Winter will soon be here. As for me, I write to slow the seasons, count them down, stock up days to not waste what time that’s left to me.
Elana Gomel is an academic and a writer. She speaks three languages and has two children. She has published six non-fiction books and numerous articles on posthumanism, science fiction, Victorian literature and serial killers. Her fantasy, horror and science fiction stories appeared in Apex Magazine, New Horizons, The Fantasist, and many other magazines and were also featured in several award-winning anthologies, including Zion’s Fiction, Apex Book of World Science Fiction, and People of the Book. She is the author of three novels: A Tale of Three Cities (2013), The Hungry Ones (2018) and The Cryptids (2019).

1991

Elana Gomel

The memoir was written on the lined yellow pages of an old notebook. Tattie flipped through it, marveling at the precision of the old man’s handwriting. As much as her teachers in the Youth House tried to instill in her the importance of using paper and pen, Light tablets were so much more efficient. Like most of her gen, she was used to the luminescent spillover of her words from the silver tip of the stylus. The tablet would also correct misspellings, awkward turns of phrase, and Dark thoughts. The notion of dragging an inert pen on the equally inert piece of paper while maintaining perpetual self-vigilance was tiring even to think of. And yet he had done it. And he had lived in Light his entire long life, so surely, he knew something Tattie did not.

She put the notebook in her satchel and went out. Spring had come and silver branches of the birch trees around the Youth House were veiled with tender green. But the deep black fissures on their trunks stood out like screaming mouths. That was a Dark thought, and Tattie shook it away with a toss of her head. Everybody had their own means of banishing the Dark; indeed, children were encouraged to be creative in finding what worked for them: special words, spoken when the moon was dying; an unobtrusive hand gesture in a conversation; a rhyme to be whispered under your breath. Light came through every crack if you let it.

The glass-and-aluminum sail of the Youth House cut into the unsettled sky behind her, scudding clouds lit up by random flashes of sunlight. Tattie thought that the sky looked like a natural allegory of the Final War—won many years before she was born, fought ever since.

A hand fell onto her shoulder and she turned around, forcing a smile to welcome a stranger, but it was Angelica. Tattie allowed herself a tiny frown. Angelica was not only her gen-sibling but her best friend since the
creche and she knew what most people did not: that Tattie did not like to be
touched unexpectedly. It was not exactly a Dark quirk, but it could be
considered un-bright, and Tattie did not advertise it.

“My parents are coming tomorrow,” Angelica said tragically, shaking
her long golden hair. Tattie grimaced.

“Not fun!”

“Tell me!” Angelica rolled her eyes. She had always been a little
actress, given to dramatic gestures and exaggerated reactions. In the creche,
she would drape herself in a blanket and march across the room, pretending to
be a Light Warrior following the Man of Steel on the battlefield. The teachers
had encouraged her play-acting. After all, education was about developing
your natural talents for the benefit of all; and Angelica was resolved to pursue
an acting career for at least ten years after her graduation. Tattie, on the other
hand, was not sure what she was meant to do. Teacher Vassily tried to tell her
she would find her vocation soon but being a worrier, she was afraid she was
one of those people whose inner Light was not strong enough to banish the
Dark, and whose minds were filled with a tangle of confusing shadows. This
was why she was grateful for having been given the project of helping the old
man with his memoirs as her graduating task. Tattie had always been
interested in history, especially of the Final War, and how better to satisfy her
curiosity than by talking to one of the original Light Warriors still alive? And
perhaps some of his Light could pass on to her . . .

“Why are they doing it?” Angelica continued in an aggrieved voice.
“It is not like I had some real connection to them! It is embarrassing trying to
have a conversation with the people who . . . you know. Last time my mother
visited, I could not keep my eyes off her tummy, trying to imagine how I fit in
there!”

Tattie giggled.

“Come on! It’s not so bad. You’ll have kids too.”

“Not if I don’t want to!”

“It’s a Light thing to do. And what if you fall in love?”

Angelica blushed and Tattie had a moment of guilty pleasure at her
discomfiture, followed by self-reproach for being catty. She knew that
Angelica and Tim, their gen-brother, had recently been spending a lot of time
together in the game room. It was not bright to have a relationship with your
gen-sibling, though it was not Dark either. Just one of those things . . . Again,
the tendrils of shadows in Tattie’s mind stirred faintly like the tentacles of a
jellyfish.

A silver streak cut through the chiaroscuro of clouds in the sky and
the two girls followed the path of the departing spaceship with their eyes.

“Mars,” Angelica said.

Tattie shook her head.

“Venus. The new colony. Venusgrad.”
When she was a first grader, she had been consumed by the marvel of space exploration, dreaming of bringing Light into the cold infinity of cosmos. She had pored over the schedules of departing and incoming spaceflights and watched every space video available on the net. But as with her other passions, this one had faded, and she was left floating in the unsettled twilight of her seemingly purposeless life. Perhaps this was why she had become more interested in the history of spaceflight, reading all she could lay her hands on about the early pioneers: Gagarin; Titov; Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman in space. This glorious trajectory of exploration was interrupted for a while by the Final War but now it had resumed, with new colonies on Luna, Mars and Venus.

Tattie clutched her satchel. She had only glanced through the old man’s memoirs and had not seen anything relating to spaceflight but now she resolved to read it more carefully. Perhaps he had spoken to some of the early astronauts. Wasn’t he a contemporary of Gagarin? She tried to calculate whether this was possible and decided it was.

Angelica went on complaining about her bio-parents but Tattie stopped listening. Something was in the air; something murky and disturbing, coming in on the gusts of the chilly wind, riding on the intermittent rays of sickly sunlight, floating on the dust devils raised in the sand garden where third graders had just finished playing. Her comm bracelet flashed red, and so did Angelica’s. A vid window blinked into existence in front of the girls. The familiar face of Ingmar Gunnarsson, the current LightSpeaker, was stern and unsmiling.

“An infestation has been detected in Sector 6,” he was saying. “According to the preliminary reports, it is Damagers. Units of Light Warriors have been dispatched to the epicenter, but we are calling upon volunteers who have been trained in the use of weapons of Light to present themselves at the central command-post in the affected area. Everybody else—please be vigilant. We all know that the Final War is never over. Stay bright, stay in Light!”

He went on, but Tattie’s head swam and she could not focus on his words. She felt in her bones a shiver of Dark seeping into this spring day, polluting it. There had not been a large-scale infestation in more than five years, since Tattie was ten.

“Damagers!” Angelica whispered; her lips so pale they looked blue. “What are they?”

“If you paid attention in class, you would know!” Tattie retorted, irritation momentarily overcoming fear. “We studied them. In their final stage, they are colonies of slimy worms, braided together so they look human from afar. You won’t know they are until they come so close you can’t run away!”

Angelica sobbed, and Tattie had a horrible image of herself falling
apart into squiggly worms, crawling into dark corners as her uncertain Light leached away together with her humanity. She hugged her gen-sister, and together they walked to the Youth House that had been their home since their bio-mothers delivered the newborns to the community.

#

Tattie knew she had to go to sleep, but she could not bear turning off her reading lamp. The illumination that it shed, weakly diluted that it was, felt like the only protection against the fear that circulated through her body like a subtle poison. She knew that natural night was only a metaphor of Dark, just as electricity was a metaphor of Light. But metaphors bled into reality, erasing the distinction between words and things.

The infestation had been contained; the Damagers burnt. But what of the people they had been? What of their gen-siblings, their teachers, their friends, their lovers? Would Darkness continue to spread until it reached Tattie herself?

She pulled her nest of blankets closer and angled the lamp, grateful for the fact that before graduation she finally had a room to herself, and opened the exercise book. The room was warm but Tattie was shivering. She needed another kind of warmth. The history of the men and women who had built her world would contain enough Light—of courage, dedication, self-sacrifice—to re-ignite the sputtering fire inside her.

On a whim, she opened the book in the middle, its ancient binding creaking and the smell of old paper and smoke tickling her nostrils.

“... we had been on the train for twelve days. The tracks were covered by the snow and the train was stationary for twenty-four hours. No food, no water. The doors were locked. Waste buckets overflowed. The political prisoners were on the lower bunks and the criminals tossed the buckets onto their heads. I tried to stop them, but the commander told me not to interfere.”

Tattie stopped reading and stared at the page. It made no sense. She had ridden on trains several times. First when her grade was taken on an educational tour to the Light factories in the industrial zone of her Sector and then again, to help with the particularly plentiful hop harvest in Sector 18. She had loved the rocking, rolling motion that seemed to fill some unsatisfied need of her distant childhood. She had loved the clean, shiny cars and the ever-changing landscape. But staying on a train for twelve days? This made no sense. For long distances, one took supersonic planes or low-orbit shuttles. And even if for some reason one embarked on a very long train ride, what was it about “waste buckets?” The trains she had ridden on had the same hygienic facilities as any other residential or industrial complex on the planet.

Tattie leafed through the book and settled on another chapter whose title was underlined in red. “Nineteen thirty-seven.”

“... he had given a speech. New arrest quotas were established. We
were trying to exceed them. But I was sick after last night. The woman told her daughter to kiss her father because she would never see him again. The girl did, very calmly. She looked to be about three years old. How did she know?"

Tattie slammed the book shut. The year 1937 was when the Final War had started. The year when Dark finally managed to worm itself into human bodies and to manifest itself in the monstrous aberrations that followed. And the year when Light finally shone in the hands of the people as the material manifestation of their purity. The year when the borders collapsed and all the petty distinctions that had marred history before— of race, language, creed— were swept away by the one incontrovertible eternal opposition between Light and Dark. It was almost sixty years ago, and the old man was, supposedly, one of the last survivors of that glorious era. But what were these scribbles? Had he gone senile?

Despite herself, she went back skimming through the brittle pages, as if hoping the words had rearranged themselves into something that made sense. She caught references to the Man of Steel, but his name was misspelt. Her eyes lingered on nauseating snippets:

"... too many dead bodies, so we had to fill the hollow with garbage, but the earth sunk..."

"... he killed himself— no stamina...

"... more reports of cannibalism in the famine-affected areas."

"... the children were taken to the orphanage but one of them hung himself."

When she finally huddled under the blanket to sleep, she left the reading lamp on.

#

Tattie had to get a special permit from Teacher Ivana to skip classes on Friday in order to go and visit the old man in his Senior House. It turned out he lived a two-hour train ride away in Sector 15. The teacher suggested to Tattie she stay in the Youth House in that area overnight, but she wanted to be back in her own bed. Back home. She was careful not to say it out loud and tossed her head to banish the thought, though it would not go away. It was unbright to be attached to a place. The entire Earth was home.

Angelica ran toward her as she was boarding the electric shuttle that was to take her to the train station. The shuttle was AI-driven, but Tattie had already gotten her learner’s permit and could input simple commands into any community vehicle apart from planes and trains. She stopped the car when she saw that her friend’s face was blotched with tears. She reconciled herself to half-an-hour of inconsequential drama, but Angelica cut to the chase.

“My ‘mother,’” she screamed, putting the word in invisible quotation marks.

“What about her?”
“She said Tim was my half-brother. She is a breeder. She had exceeded her quota of two kids, but they let her do it because she was ‘exceptionally healthy,’ as she put it. The cow!”

“Angelica!”

“They kept it quiet, not to embarrass him. But one of the Teachers asked her to tell me . . .”

Tattie swallowed and looked away.

“He is your gen-sib,” she said so quietly as to be almost inaudible.

“You shouldn’t have . . .”

“It’s not Dark!” Angelica shrieked. “We . . . we love each other. But now . . .”

Now it would be Dark. Having a sexual relationship with your blood relative was the very opposite of Light.

“I hate her!” Angelica sobbed.

“No!” Tattie was shocked beyond words. Hatred was the Darkest emotion of all. Yes, one hated the Enemy, but they were not human. Even applying this word to somebody who was a person, let alone your actual bio-parent, was horrifying.

“I hate her,” Angelica repeated dully and before Tattie could plead or remonstrate with her, she turned around and walked away.

#

Tattie spent the entire two-hour train ride staring out the window.

They passed some cleared areas dotted with remnants of walls and buildings —what used to be “cities,” Dark-infested heaps of people and machines. She used to marvel that human beings would willingly be squeezed into cages of brick and steel when the entire land was there for living. But now these ruins of history looked ominously alive, while the rest of the world seemed anemic and pale. The white-and-pink explosions of blossoms in the orchards; the rich, black soil of the fields where silver bugs of agricultural machinery crawled along the furrows; the glowing edifices of residential and admin units scattered among parks and greenbelts—all of it seemed to be tarnished by an invisible film as if reality itself was rusting. The notebook lay on the seat beside her as quiet as a dozing snake.

The Seniors’ House where the old man lived was set some distance away from the train station. Tattie could have jumped into one of the shuttles idling by the station— thanks to the efficient net, there were always just the right number available at every transportation hub—but she decided to walk through the woods to clear her head. It was warmer in this sector, and the ground under the trees was dotted with crocuses and bluebells. But even the carpet of yellow and blue failed to lift her spirits: the colors seemed off, smudged and running together like a first grader’s careless watercolor. A man she met on the trail smiled and greeted her, but there was something strange about his eyes, and she thought, He is turning!
Finally, the glass block of the Senior House loomed above the woods. As opposed to the sail-shaped Youth House where she lived, this complex was squat and spread out, symbolizing the seniors’ imminent return to the earth rather than the youth’s striving for the sky. But it was as glowingly transparent as any other dwelling, opening itself up to Light.

She found the old man on the bench by the entrance. He did not look up when she approached, even though he knew she was coming. He was wiry and hunched up, his bald head gleaming in the sunlight and his disproportionately long fingers wound like a spider’s legs around the stick he used to doodle on the ground. Revulsion welled up in Tattie as she stood quietly, contemplating him.

_He is Dark_, she thought. _He is an Enemy._

And even though she knew it was impossible— his wrinkled face when he finally lifted his head and looked at her was marked by the ugliness of age but fully human— the thought refused to go away. There was, after all, an incubation period before the Darkness inside spilled out and reshaped the body in its own image.

He patted the bench and Tattie reluctantly sat down, as far from him as possible.

“So, you are editing my memoirs.” It was not a question.

“It is my graduation project.”

He chuckled. She had expected his voice to be whispery and desiccated like the rustling of an insect, but it was strong and brassy. If she closed her eyes, she could believe it belonged to a man in his prime.

“I also graduated,” he said. “From the technical institute. I wanted to be an engineer. But they told me the country needed security. We were overrun by enemies, internal and external. This was how I ended up in the NKVD.”

“Where?”

His eyes, half-hidden in their nests of wrinkles, bored into her.

“You have read the memoirs, haven’t you?”

“Why are you writing this?” Tattie cried. “These horrors, these . . . lies? It is such a Dark thing to do!”

“What’s your name, girl?”

“Tattie. Tatiana.”

“I had a sister called Tatiana. I had five sisters. My parents were dirt-poor, literally. We lived in a dugout when I was a child. The new regime gave us a proper house. It used to belong to somebody else but who cares? Only my sister Tatiana died in the famine. And so did the rest of them.”

“There was never a famine,” Tattie countered. “When the Final War started, the Enemy burned fields and polluted supplies, but we shared food. None of the People of Light ever went hungry.”

“Oh yes, the Final War. It’s still going on, isn’t it?”

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“As if you didn’t know! It will go on forever. As long as there is Darkness in human hearts.”

“We have to be vigilant,” the old man said, and she was confused whether an undertone in his voice was mockery, or faith, or some unnatural combination of the two. “This was what he always said.”

“He?”

“The Man of Steel. Stalin.”

“You heard him speak?”

“I met him, Tattie. Several times. You’d never believe how short he was, up to my shoulder. And his face was pockmarked.”

Tattie sprung to her feet.

“I won’t listen to that!” she yelled. “You are an Enemy. Your words are Darkness.”

The old man chuckled.

“This is what we used to say, Tattie girl. When I hauled men and women out of their houses in the middle of the night, they cried they were faithful. Innocent. That it was all a terrible mistake. But I knew they were enemies because he said so, and it followed their words had to be dark lies. And you know what? He was right.”

Tattie stared at him, bewildered.

“Words create reality. Words accumulate like barnacles on a ship’s hull and drag it down until it becomes something else. Something new.”

“What does it mean?”

“What year is it, Tattie girl?”

“Year 53 since the Final War began. 1991 in the old counting.”

“Indeed. 53 years since this little bubble of sweetness and light came into existence, a distillate of all the fever dreams and broken promises. This utopia of yours. Built by words, sustained by faith. But how long?”

“Are you saying this is not real?” Tattie asked contemptuously, sweeping her hand around to encompass the mild scent of snowdrops in the garden, the purr of an electric shuttle, the distant voices of seniors coming from the lounge.

“What’s real? One of the men I shot was a physics professor. We had some interesting conversations in that basement, just before he went bonkers. Too many beatings, I guess, but I had to do it to make him sign the confession — it was required paperwork. Anyway, he told me about something called the Sea of Dirac and how it throws up those little bubbles of reality. Self-contained worlds. There were too many worlds in the Year of Our Lord 1937. Maybe some of them spilled over and were made flesh and stone. And Darkness and Light.”

“That’s not how the Final War began,” Tattie objected. “The Man of Steel called upon Light to become manifest in the world. And where Light comes, Darkness follows.”
The old man chuckled.

“I bet he would have liked this story. He was educated in the seminary, did you know that? Anyway, you are right: this is what happened. Here. But how long can it sustain itself? What is happening in that other world this one has budded off from? What if the words are discarded? What if the faith is dying?”

Tattie slowly lowered herself back onto the bench.

“This is why I wrote it,” the old man continued feverishly, spittle flying out of his sunken mouth. “I found myself . . . here and I don’t complain. This is everything he promised. Food to eat; spaceships to fly; everybody’s equal, everybody’s happy. But my time is running out, and I want you to know how it was bought. The price of it.”

Tattie picked up the book and it felt as if the old cover was sticky.

“Even if it’s true,” she whispered, “wouldn’t it destroy what we have built here? If words are real, what will happen when you let these words out?”

Tattie shook his head.

“I don’t know. But is this world worth keeping? I did some bad things, Tattie girl. My Dad would have beaten me black and blue had he known. He was an Old Believer. You don’t even know what it means, do you? He had died before it all began, and I had no use for his superstitions. But now . . . Are you happy here, Tattie girl?”


“Then it is for you to decide.”

She was curled up under the blanket in her room. The classes were over for today, and she had been invited to play softball with a visiting team from Sector 8. But she had refused. No, she had lied. She had said she was not feeling well. The truth was, she wanted to be alone. Tattie knew this was the first step on the Dark path. But she did not care. Darkness was everywhere, floating in the air like thin ash, covering every bright and beautiful thing, polluting every bright word ever spoken.

The notebook was on the table beside her, and now she could almost see clotted blood oozing out of it. Almost. How long before the blood was real?

Tattie had dreaded Angelica’s knocking on the door and trying to talk to her but she did not come. Apparently, she had her own Dark thoughts to contend with. But was it really so bad to have a mother? Tattie had one, of course; she knew her name, but her bio-parents never visited.

She was happy, she repeated to herself. Even if what the old man had written was true, it had happened in another world. It had nothing to do with her.

But what if she was just froth on the surface of some incomprehensible sea of realities as the old man had said? And the sea was...
sloshing around her after a stone was tossed into it from another history?

There were running footsteps in the hallway outside, loud voices, someone shouting. It snapped Tattie out of her funk. She crept to the door, cracked it open.

A huddle of shiny armored backs like the hard carapaces of beetles at the end of the hallway, grouped around something buckling on the floor.

Warriors of Light! Tattie had only seen them during the military training sessions on the range when they instructed students in the use of weapons and hand-to-hand combat. They had never come inside the Youth House before.

She stepped out. The huddle fell apart, sweaty faces under round helmets decorated with a sunburst turned toward her. But she only had eyes for what was on the floor: a twitching, twisting shape. A bent spine like that of a monstrous hedgehog, bristling with needles that tore through the flowery dress; a scowling bestial muzzle, black teeth sunk into the bloody lips; clawed bony talons. And the familiar mane of golden hair.

They dragged the Enemy back through the hallway to the staircase, lined with grim teachers and pale-faced students. They had to pass by Tattie. The struggling Dark creature glanced at her with its bloodshot eyes, alien and malevolent.

Tattie watched them disappear down the staircase. The Enemy that used to be Angelica did not fight anymore, just hung between them as empty as a sack. Tattie knew that soon enough its ashes would be used to fertilize the fields.

She went back into her room, picked up the notebook and went down to the basement where the furnace still glowed red, despite the spring thaw. She opened the door and stared at the flames.

And tossed the notebook in.
William C. Crawford is a photographer based in North Carolina. He invented Forensic, Foraging, a throwback, minimalist approach for modern digital photographers. His new book is Drive-By Shooting, available on Amazon.

San Francisco Skyline on a Cloudy Winter Day

Forensic Foraging Motif

Snow Business

Suzanne S. Rancourt

cutting the butternut squash during a Nor’easter
the pressing quiet of snow
invigorates, then,
a settled dusting
of presence between squash and green beans
eases up into spaces
left by lost loves, empty house,
hushed conundrums -
wind devils thread intercostal depression
with the contentedness of woodstove heat

sweet smell smoke
from yellow birch, blighted beech
the ice storms brought down five years past

this season
i’m burning off desperations
that only short sale dates and repeated job losses bring
a shoelace of hopelessness the soul tightens
with blessings of home, comfort
and no one to share it with—
this drunken grief

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To Love Someone like You

Ifeanyi Ekpunobi

It started when you saw him naked for the first time. Remember the
time insomnia was a blanket under which you slept, when your eyes traced
patterns in the dark and your ears crafted melodies from the snores of your
dormitory mates? Because you could not endure the trauma of lying down and
staring into nothing, you woke before the rising bell and bathed before
everyone. It was after the rising bell, while your dorm mates were bathing in
the bathroom downstairs, that you saw the rat that lured you into the
dormitory storeroom you’d never been in before. The aged stench in the store
tickled your nostrils into a sneeze, and you groped your way to a tiny shaft of
light from an opening at an end, felt the wooden window and parted it open.
The hostel backyard, the greenery of the school farm purplish in the
fluorescent light, swaying left and right in the whistling cold of the morning,
the rectangular fifteen-bathroom lavatory, now roofless after a brutal assault
from a rather uncanny wind three weeks earlier—all came to you endowed
with some ethereal beauty. For a moment, you doubted it was the school you
had always wished to leave. Osinachi was in one of the bathrooms, scrubbing
and nodding as though to a song playing away in his head. Your throat grew
 parched and hot air trapped in your chest. You thought it was the musty air in
the storeroom and then tiptoed back to your bunk, thrilled to the brim.

Osinachi was your bunkmate. Small-lipped, he spoke in miserly
measures, every word distinct and self-aware. Something about his dark
beady eyes made you wish you could do away with blinking, the way they
squinted when he smiled, allowing for the corners of his eyes to collect into
tiny wrinkles. His cologne made your mouth water as though to lap him up
like an ice-cream. Could you still recall how many hours you spent every
night telling him stories? Your stories never seemed to grow stale in his ears
no matter how much you repeated them. His company was full of promises, of
things that could endure, of things that could fix you with wings and take the
sky.

You knew you would return to the storeroom, even when you went to
confession for staring at someone’s nudity. You did not tell the priest it was a
boy’s; you couldn’t trust confessional secret that much. Sins of homosexual
nature could crack the confessional and seep out to the ears of others. So it didn’t surprise you so much when you began setting your alarm for 4 am, so you could keep returning to the storeroom when others had gone to the lavatory. You thought you were merely killing boredom, a moment to giggle away the daunting routine of seminary life, but you forgot that it was just one person you feasted your eyes on: Osinachi. It felt good when you started touching yourself at the sight of his nakedness; still, you told yourself it was all for fun; but, the fun melted away from you the morning you heard footsteps that were not yours. You turned sharply. A figure loomed in the storeroom. A flood of torchlight splashed on your face and you snapped backwards and hit your head on something. You rubbed off the pain with a light stroke.

“What are you doing here, Ugonna?” came the voice behind the torchlight.

You gasped, dead sure you knew that voice. Master JP. Before you could quickly pull up your boxers, the torchlight lowered to where your hand was, between your legs.

“Jesus Christ of Nazareth! Ugonna…” he glanced through the window and returned to you. “This is the height of immorality from a seminarian. Meet me in the rector’s office immediately after Mass.”

You wanted to kneel and beg him, but your knees stiffened until he stumbled out. You knew what would come next, and so you didn’t bother going to Mass, let alone to the rector’s office.

It was not until your mother was invited three days later that you showed up in the rector’s office. Mom couldn’t believe it. Her own son? Gay? Impossible! Not the son she gave birth to. She told the rector there must be a frame-up somewhere. But you merely nodded when the rector asked if you did what Master JP said you did. Mom became frantic. You had never seen her so before, not when she lost a case in the law court, not when her PhD moderator frustrated her, except the day your dad died of cardiac arrest. The rector’s words were final: you were being expelled for intolerable sexual misconduct.

“Madam, if I may suggest,” the rector said, “take your son to a priest for serious prayer and counselling. I would have done that but my work here wouldn’t permit me.”

Mom drove you home in a torturing silence. Once at home, she unleashed, hands on her waist: “Did I send you to seminary to become a gay, Ugonna? Of all things in this world, it is gay you chose to become. Homosexual! God, what have I done to deserve all this torture?”

You knelt and made to hug her legs, wet them with tears and promise never to hurt her again, but she kicked you off and disappeared into her room. Her loud cry stiffened the joints in your limbs. As you crouched in the living room, you mulled at the word, felt it glide through your tongue like thick
phlegm, the tip of the tongue at the foot of the teeth, leaving a tiny passage between the tongue and the palate for the word—gay. God knows you were not gay. You couldn’t be. Gays were people with leaking anus who wore pampers and wrote angry articles on Facebook and wore dreadlocks and tattoos. God forbid!

Saint Michael’s Parish, Arondizuogu, sat on a dusty road. The windows and doors were not yet fixed, and the plastering was underway. Mom had heard of a Charismatic priest in Arondizuogu and was taking you to him. The waiting room to the priest’s office reeked of burning incense and candles. At the desk sat a receptionist holding up St Louis De Montfort’s *Total Consecration* booklet to her face. Torn envelops were strewn on her desk. She asked for a consultation fee of five hundred naira and told you to wait on the bench, Father Anayo was attending to someone, then she resumed her reading. No sooner had you sat than a young girl came out smiling. She said thank you to the receptionist and left without even a glance at your mother.

“You can go in now, ma,” the receptionist said, barely taking off her eyes from the booklet.

Father Anayo was sitting at his desk backing a life-size statue of Divine Mercy Jesus. His voice slurped like a loose drum when he replied to your greetings. As Mom explained why you came, he nodded and stared at you as though he was seeing inside you and reading your thoughts. His staring grew blades that cut off ease and slit the way for anxiety to breeze into you.

“He has to start first with serious fasting and prayer,” the priest said.

“But Father, I am not—”

“This boy, mechie onu there. Shut up!” Mom snapped at you.

The priest stood and put on his stole. Mom stood too, and stealthily holding the back of your shirt, she pulled you to your feet.

“You may not be gay yet,” he said, “but believe me, without serious prayer and fasting, the devil is sure to capture you.” He turned to your mother, “But don’t worry, Madam, your son cannot be captured by the devil. Not when Christ still lives. Your son has been bought by the precious blood of the Lamb.”

She nodded fervently, interposing with, “Amen.” At a point, as though human language had reached its limit, the priest switched into speaking in tongues. Mom pulled you down to your knees. He drew closer, took your head in his broad palms and steered back and forth, right and left, like a drunk handling a steering wheel.

After two weeks of fasting and prayers, which almost ruptured your intestines, Father Anayo declared you free and delivered. He told your mother to allow you to get close to girls; if possible, to let you have a girlfriend. It was no sin, he said, provided it was for a greater good.
To defeat a vice, one must embrace its contrary virtue,” he said. A week later, Mom registered you at Ojike Memorial School Orlu. The girls in your new class were free and chatty with you. But you soon gathered that it was just out of courtesy. Your courage drained anytime you thought of asking any of them out. So you began to Google, *How to Get a Girl to fall in Love with You.* You moved from Google to YouTube and then drifted from there to porn sites. It was not a sin, *as long as it was for the greater good.* You feasted your eyes on the brawny men, their finely chiselled abs and taut muscles and shoulders so wide they could not fit into a doorway.

One afternoon, at break time, your school principal summoned you and three of your classmates to her office. She said she had noticed your performances in maths and had selected you four to represent the school at the upcoming Cowbell Quiz Competition.

On the competition day, you trekked to Urban Secondary School (USS) Umuna. Your miser of a principal had refused to give you any transport fare, saying you ought to show “some sense of appreciation for being selected from among the hundreds of students.”

Almost all the schools in Orlu zone converged at USS for the competition. Spread about the school compound were students in varying school uniforms, perfectly ironed with lines and pleats. Each school grouped themselves in a corner, heads bent over books, fingers leafing through books, mouths frantically moving. The school compound was crammed with many classroom blocks so that there was barely any space for recreation. You were strolling about the school compound when you saw someone whose head was shaped like his, flat on the back and bulgy on the sides. Standing behind the person, you called, “Ossy.”

He turned and, seeing you, broke into a loud grin, seducing your face to smile back. “Ugonna,” he said and hugged you.

You staggered back and then pulled him away to look him over. Osinachi had added flesh around his cheeks so that he looked slightly chubby. He had taken on features of an adolescent. His chest had broadened and an incipient fuzz had darkened his upper lip.

“I knew it was you the moment I saw your bicycle head,” you teased. He balanced his weight on one leg and frowned. “You want me to call you your own now?”

They called me “Flat Yansh” in school because of my buttocks that looked like worn-out slippers, but Osinachi had never used that on me. “Wait-o, what are you even doing here?” you said, realising he was wearing a blue and white school uniform instead of the white and white uniform of the seminary. “No tell me say you don leave seminary?”

“I convinced my parents to withdraw me after you left.”

“So you left because of me?”

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He scowled at you.
“But what on earth could make your mother withdraw you from the seminary?”
He shrugged and perched his hands on his hips. “By the way, look at you. See how fresh you’re looking.”
At once the bell rang and you saw him clench his teeth. A bespectacled middle-aged woman shouted that everyone should come into the hall, it was time. Osinachi said he’d see you after the quiz before hastening into the hall.
You did not win, neither did Osinachi’s school. You saw him plodding out of the rusty school gate and rushed after him. It was Orie market day and okada and keke riders had claimed half of the road, the remaining tiny passage clogged up with traffic jam.
“How far nah, you no wait for me again?” you said.
He heaved a sigh and said sorry, he was tired out. He took your hand and started walking down the clustered road.
“Let me walk you home then. At least I’ll get to know your house.”
“Would have loved you to, but my mother has the key to the house. I need to take okada to her office first.”
He asked for your number. You gladly typed it into his Samsung Galaxy phone. His eyes lowered to your chest when you caught him staring you in the face. They lingered there for some fleeting moment and then he turned to the okada men haggling on the other side of the road. As you shook hands to leave, he pulled you into a hug, a casual one, a sort of hug a guy would give a fellow guy—one shoulder reaching out for the other’s and a light tap-tap pat on the back.

#

You worshipped at Osinachi’s parish the following Sunday. Holy Rosary’s parish Orlu had a dusty compound, walled round by a fence which held amateur paintings of Jesus, the saints and Bishop Toochukwu Ukwuoma. The church building looked like an over-dressed masquerade: tiled walls, a crowd of pillars and noisy paintings. You had planned to meet after Mass. Osinachi served at the 9:30 am Mass, and throughout the Mass, your eyes trailed him about. After Mass, you waited outside the sacristy while he removed his Mass-server's vestment. He put on his ear-to-ear grin when he saw you.
“My mother is still in the prayer meeting,” he said. “And I have to prepare lunch before she gets home.”
You said no problem you could wait and even help out. He laughed and nudged you. People like you did not near the kitchen, he said, and you feigned a frown. “Sorry,” he mumbled and asked where your house was anyway.
You told him M. O. Kanu. Did he know the place?

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“Who doesn’t know the three-story building on Ezearo Street? It is far from here though.”

As you trekked together along OWUS avenue, a car honked behind you. Mom’s Toyota Camry was slowly pulling over by the roadside. Jesus, what was this woman doing here?

She pushed out her head from the window, “Ugonna, come here osiso.”

“My mother,” you said to Osinachi, hastening to her.

“So, this is why you refused to come to St Joseph with me, okwa ya?”

“No, Mom, it’s—”

“Oya, zuzuru bata into this car ugbua.”

You were on your street when it dawned on you that you didn’t even wave bye to Osinachi.

“If you don’t change this attitude of yours, I won’t think twice before I do what’s in my mind. I’d rather be childless than have a gay as a son, tufiakwawo,” Mom’s words, measured and sharpened, sliced down on you like a guillotine.

Silence, the length of eternity, passed.

“We were classmates in the seminary,” you grumbled, finally.

Her eyes were stained with disgust when she turned them sharply at you. “I don’t want to see you with any of them again.”

Even though you would have loved to know who the “them” were, you nodded and swallowed your question.

The following year, after passing your Senior School Certificate, you decided to seek for admission at the University of Ibadan (UI), defying your Mom’s wish to go to the University of Nigeria Nsukka, her alma mater. For some reasons you couldn’t tell, you craved for a distance, a therapeutic one.

Months later, you were offered admission to UI to study Economics, after getting a WhatsApp text message from Osinachi telling you that he had been offered admission there to study Law. You had planned to study at UI, but now you feared what Mom would think if she found out you were still seeing “one of them.” He texted again: My Mom wants to meet you. You didn’t want anything that would annoy Mom, so you snubbed his text.

Three days later, he traced his way to your house. You wanted to beg him to leave, tell him that you’d come to see him in his place because Mom was home, but you didn’t know how to frame the words so they wouldn’t have prickles. His grin collapsed into a frown when he noticed your hesitation to let him in.

“I came to see you, Ugo,” he said, craning to catch your eyes.

“Lower your voice, my mother is around.”

“I don’t understand—”

“Ugonna, who’s there?” Mom’s voice came from her study. As though
her voice was a cue for him to come in, Osinachi sidled past you into the house. You hastened to lock the balcony door and the front door, and by the time you came in you found them in the living room, seated.

“Yes, Ma,” Osinachi was saying, “the time you always came to visit Ugonna at the seminary.”

Mom’s face was the way it looked when she listened to Enya’s songs, placid. Osinachi was tugging at a loosed thread on the hem of his shirtsleeve. Mom held up the TV remote and reduced the volume on the TV.

“Eziokwu?” she said, dropping the remote on the side stool beside her.

“Then, you’re a minor seminarian.”

Shaking his head, “Not anymore, Ma.”

She linked her fingers as a film of curiosity tinted her eyes, “What happened?”

He said the seminary had bad records with WAEC and his parents didn’t want his WAEC result to be affected by that, so they changed him to another school.

“That’s better than getting yourself expelled for your stupidity.” She glared at you and then asked who his parents were. What did they do for a living?

Osinachi’s father was a lecturer at Imo State University and his mother owned the hospital at Alhaji Tijani road.

“Wait,” she held up a palm. “You mean Cambria hospital? Is Ezinne Caro Ukwuagu your mother?”

His face lit with a smile as he nodded eagerly. Osinachi’s mother was the diocesan president of the Catholic Women Organization. Your mom asked you to get him something to drink.

Osinachi’s mother had asked to see you. That was why he came; she wanted to know the kind of friend her son would be staying with at the university. Mom's face was all smiling.

Ibadan, capped with rusty roofs and littered with markets, was an old woman with wrinkled skin. Its roads zigzagged through clustered buildings, coming from nowhere and leading to everywhere. Micra drivers added the nagging honks of their taxis and their untrimmed curses to the din that has become the city’s heartbeat.

The matriculation launched you two into the University life proper. You and Osinachi shared a room in the school hostel. Since you were not in the same department, your timetables differed. Osinachi was soon engulfed in studies and assignments. He would return most evenings with a crumpled face, grumbling about too many assignments and term papers as he wolfed down his dinner. Meanwhile, you needed to put into practice all you’d learned from online videos, and fortunately, you’ve caught the fancy of some girls in your department. They visited you on Sundays and lecture-free days, playing

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Ludo and watching movies on your laptop. By the end of your year one, the female visitors had trickled down to only one girl: Titi. Heavy-hipped, Titi walked like one dragged on both sides by invisible hands. Her ample bust made you wonder how she could walk without stooping under its weight. You spent most of your lecture times frolicking in the room. Osinachi complained of her knack for scattering the room whenever she visited, refusing everything she cooked. He stopped staying up late to chat with you and moodiness seemed perpetually etched on his face.

One afternoon, he knocked on the door while you were in the room with Titi. He had forgotten a term paper he was to submit that afternoon and needed to collect it fast. You put on your boxers and held the door slightly ajar. Before you could ask him where he kept the paper so you could get it for him, he pushed into the room.

Titi held your trousers over her chest, but it did little to cover the curves of her hips and the sides of her ample breasts.

He cringed, reached quickly for his paper in the drawer of his desk and dashed out. That evening, returning from Titi’s hostel—where you finished up what you’d started—you found that Osinachi’s luggage had gone, same with the mattress on his bed. Thrice, he refused to pick your calls.

Two weeks now, Osinachi had not returned to the hostel. He’d refused every one of your attempts to have a talk with him. You knew he was staying with a course mate. On two occasions, you’d seen them strolling along Kuti hostel. On Id el Maulud public holiday, you finally saw him alone, at Nnamdi Azikiwe cafeteria. He sat at a table for two with two balls of eggroll and a bottle of Fanta. The air-con in the café licked at your sweat and the music made you want to move your body. He glanced at you and turned his eyes to where a teenage boy was entertaining the customers with a moonwalk dance.

“Ossy, I’m sorry,” you said, after the long awkward silence.

He sipped the Fanta.

“Ossy, I have really missed you,” you said.

He held the Fanta halfway to his mouth and studied your face. “You shouldn’t miss me when you have your babe waiting for you.”

You pushed closer. “Eziokwu, I’m very serious. As for Titi, I don’t really feel anything for her. I just wanted to have a girlfriend.”

“Why are you explaining to me?”

“Because I know you’re angry. That’s why you left.”

Osinachi chuckled and bit into the eggroll. “Why would I be angry? Is she my girlfriend? I just wouldn’t stay in that messed up room, that’s all.”

Words seemed to have drained on your tongue. You struggled to put on a pathetic front. You wanted him back, though you couldn’t tell why. Then you told him you were no longer with Titi; you’d separated some days back. He stared at you, expressionless. Suddenly, he held out one of the eggrolls, the
one he hadn't touched, and asked if you cared for it. You took it.

You stayed there till evening, talking and drinking and watching people dance. Osinachi had said he felt like a drink, and you’d suggested Heineken. It was good for a beginner, you joked. To your surprise, he had three bottles, against your insistence that he have two at most. When he became loud and incoherent in his speech, you dragged him up and led him to the hostel.

There was only your bed in the room; you could share it since it was large enough for two. He crawled into bed with his shoes on, but you pulled them off. You stripped down to your boxers before joining him in bed. As he snuggled behind you, his warm breath tickled your back and his hair grazed your nape. Gently, he stroked your nipples one at a time, then glided down into your boxers. He felt your hardness and giggled softly.

“Ossy, stop, you’re drunk,” you said, holding his hand.

He said nothing, just kept giggling, his voice laced with alcohol. You wanted to pull out his hand; God knows you wanted, but it was almost impossible, so you pulled him closer.
Jessi Fuller Fields is a queer writer and poet from the US South currently based in Sao Paulo, Brazil. She is completing an MFA at Queens University of Charlotte. Her work explores silence, traumas, and the things best left unspoken.

They were lost, they were found
Jessi Fuller Fields

to dismantle your childhood treehouse first
peel the clapboard off by the yard
fold
hard shingles with wringing hands into piled
petroleum jerk joists out with gooseneck
bar—crack reverberates back from the pine
forest floorboards fall through

throw ladder
down throw pink plastic vanity down throw
caterpillar stuffed cage out the window carry
Frog jar to the gator pond to free the corpses
burn the plexiglass parts burn the place where
a lock should have been burn the ladder on
the ground throw in the shoe throw in the
pail throw in the caboodle

pull up pull out
the cornerstone crepe myrtle
slash at
earth underneath reach into roots find your
pine & twine time capsule left in 1999 dig
deep still
Kyle Heger, former managing editor of Communication World magazine, lives in Albany, CA. His writing has won a number of awards and has been accepted by 64 publications, including London Journal of Fiction, Nerve Cowboy and U.S. 1 Worksheets.

Shooting Succubi
Kyle Heger

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not complaining. I really didn’t mind staying up so late last night taking pot shots at the succubi that circled your bed.

I’d be a pretty sorry excuse for a son if I couldn’t go that far to help my father. Right? I mean, the last thing you need is a bunch of those bitches ganging up on you. Especially since so much of your life energy has already been drained from you.

Let’s face it. You’ve been on a rocky road for the last few years, since you decided to leave your three-bedroom suburban home, nuclear family and tenured professorship in Kalamazoo looking for . . . something better. Now you’re bankrupt, living in Ann Arbor’s student ghetto, driving a second-hand VW Beetle, and working a patchwork quilt of low-paying, temporary teaching jobs so you can keep the love of your life, the beautiful young Penny, and her prize-winning chow dog, Red, living in the style to which they’ve so quickly grown accustomed.

Even all of that you could take, because you’re doing it for Penny. But what is finally wearing down your spirit is the fact that late last year you followed her request to move out of the apartment you shared so she “could have space to explore relationships with younger men.” Now, not only are you paying for her graduate school, her ballet lessons, her dog care, her fine wardrobe, gourmet foods, Peugeot sports car and luxury apartment, you’re also paying for your own apartment.

It’s not like my work was so hard last night. After I tacked up a corner of the paisley cloth that hangs in your doorway, I had a pretty clear line of fire from the living room couch. It was almost like shooting fish in a barrel. Of course, I’ve never really shot fish in a barrel. Who has? But how hard could it be? I mean, on one hand you’ve got a gun, and on the other hand you have . . . fish in a barrel. Where can they go to get away? The trouble was that I got so tired. After a while, I could barely keep my eyes open. And every time my lids would start to come down, one of those damn things would dart in and try to take a nip out of you. You see, I’ve been so busy lately keeping threats at bay.
that I’m exhausted.

The shapes that gathered around you didn’t appear terribly dangerous. To look at them, I’d be more likely to call them The Weird Bunch instead of The Wild Bunch. Amorphous and open to shifting interpretations, like clouds and ink blots, they weren’t even recognizable as women. I might have seen a shaggy bear or dog here, something with wings there. Not a mare in sight though, oddly enough. I could have sworn I saw a palm tree capering about with a cactus. A few were abstract shapes. For instance, a triangle—isosceles, if I’m not mistaken—lurked in a corner. At times, they were almost comical. Until I considered what they might have done if they’d been able to actually sink their fangs into you. Sometimes it has seemed as if your dreams are the only things keeping you going. I shuddered to think what might happen if even these turned against you.

After I shot several down, most of the rest took off. If only a few particularly stubborn ones hadn’t stuck around, waiting for another chance at you, passing time by making small talk with shadows and moon beams, I might have been able to get a decent night’s sleep. As it was, it was past midnight before the room was clear. By then, my finger was almost out of ammunition. But still, as I fell into sleep, I congratulated myself on a good night’s work, glad to take a much-needed rest so I could awaken refreshed and ready to fight the good fight once more in the morning.

Again, let me stress: I’m not complaining. I know how tough you’ve got things right now, and I’m only too happy to pitch in. I admire you for following through on your promise to support Penny, your mission to show her that your devotion doesn’t rise and fall upon the availability of her sexual favors. If there’s one thing I respect it’s loyalty. And, believe me, I’m not blaming her. If anything, I’m grateful to her. Without her, where would you be? She’s your reason for living. Just like I’m grateful to you for asking me to live here with you a few months ago when my mother called you, saying she no longer knew what to do with me because I was failing high school and spent all day in my room doing God-knows-what.

Of course I don’t say any of this out loud. You must never learn what sacrifices I make for you. Just as Penny must never know what sacrifices you make for her. That would defeat the whole purpose. Right? We are a family of sacrifices.

#

Why aren’t you getting out of bed? Your Baby Ben windup alarm clock has been ringing for what seems like hours. There. It hits the floor. You must have pushed it off the nightstand. So why aren’t you getting out of bed as promptly as usual? I hear you groan. Bed springs creak as you shift your weight. Perhaps one of the succubi got to you last night after all, despite my vigilance. I peer in at you. You’re lying with an arm over your eyes. I take a quick X-ray scan. You don’t seem to have suffered any injuries.

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Maybe you’re just giving yourself a little extra rest. You deserve it. But I suspect this is not the case here. I suspect something is wrong. My hands look like worn-out gloves. The kind bums wear in TV comedies. The fingertips are gone; blasted and blackened from all the shooting. Something trickles from the ragged ends, black and viscous. Like hot tar. My head pounds. But duty calls. I go to the kitchen to start breakfast.

Water drips from a faucet, imperceptibly enlarging a heart-shaped rust stain on the enamel bottom of the kitchen sink. The old stove has a gas leak that the landlord keeps saying he’s going to have fixed. The kitchen window is always open a crack to let in fresh air, but every time I light the burner, I’m afraid there’s going to be an explosion.

This is the house of leaks.

I make some coffee, toast and a few fried eggs. You take your time getting up. This is so unlike you. Usually you’re a morning person, charging off to the treadmill of endless errands that make up your day. This is Tuesday. Aren’t you supposed to take Red for his walk before you drive to Detroit to teach your first class? Something is definitely wrong if you’re late for that.

Then there you are in the kitchen doorway. Your mouth opens in a huge yawn, stretching a ribbon of saliva to the breaking point. The saliva trembles there but won’t snap. In the past, your gigantic yawns always made you look like a lion, the patriarch of a pride, luxuriating in your own power. Your tawny hair and light brown eyes added to the association. But now you remind me of nothing so much as a baby bird with his mouth agape, waiting to be fed. The way you stand there blinking adds to this image, makes you look too vulnerable. Easy game for any hawk that might come gliding along.

Cartilage creaks as you make your way to a chair and sit down. Your boney knees stick out of a thin flannel bath robe. Now you’re less like a newly hatched bird than a very old man. It’s not much of an improvement.

And here it comes. Already. So soon. The onslaught that is your day. That becomes my day.

A phone call from your boss starts to tremble over the line. That bastard, a former student of yours, has been up all night drinking again, and he wants to bitch at you some more about your tardiness or your lack of productivity. You usually excuse him by explaining that he’s just threatened because you are more qualified for the job than he is. But I hate his guts. I stare hard at the line and make the call back up through the network so the phone doesn’t even ring. All the boss will get is a busy signal. And maybe a slight electric shock.

You rub your eyes, take a sip of coffee. “I had a bad night,” you begin in a doomsday voice. Can’t you, maybe, see yourself clear, just this once, not to let me know about this newest problem, whatever it is? I’m not asking this selfishly. If I don’t get a chance to rebuild my energies soon, I’m not sure I’ll be able to give my best efforts. I know what I’m asking will be difficult for
you. You’ve become accustomed to telling me your problems. I’m the only one you can tell them to. You can’t tell them to Penny. They must be kept secret from her. She has enough worries of her own. She has a sensitive nature and suffers greatly from worrying about other people’s problems. It interferes with her studies.

From the way you clear your throat, I can tell you’ve prepared what you’re going to say. Like one of your class lectures. Like the time so long ago when you broke the news that you were moving out of our home. It’s going to unravel all in one piece, even the pauses for me to respond, inevitable.

Filling the void of my silence, which you misread as acquiescence or even encouragement, you take another sip of coffee and continue. “I’ve had a lot of bad nights lately . . . Not enough sleep . . . Too many dreams . . . Bad dreams . . . Nightmares . . . Dreams about death . . . About being killed . . . Murdered.”

You put your glasses on and peer at me, spearing a piece of yolk. A spiral of white tissue and red blood dangles from it, the kind I usually remove before serving eggs because they look like the beginnings of identifiable organs, obscene reminders that these cells were in the process of becoming birds that, if left unmolested, would have grown up to eat and drink and chirp and run around under the sun and have feelings. You swallow it.

Your Adam’s apple rises and falls. I am seeing everything about you in too much detail this morning. I turn away.

A bill collector is coming down the street. I can smell his cheap cigar. Another early bird looking for his worm. Except this early bird carries brass knuckles. Now there is something I can handle easily. It’s not like asking me to do something tricky like messing around inside your head. At least I could do it easily if my resources weren’t so depleted. I knot my eyebrows and shoot a bolt of energy at the bill collector that turns him around a corner and toward a different address. A white flame flares in my chest.

Something sparkling is coming from a long way off, on the edge of my consciousness. It’s tiny now, the way a star is tiny. Because it’s so far away. But it’s coming fast, as fast as star light through the black of space.

“The dream is always the same,” you resume, spearing another piece of the eggs that have been stained, polluted, by blood. “I’m working late at the university where I’m lecturing for the spring . . . It’s dark outside by the time I finish . . . The campus is deserted . . . I walk to the parking garage . . . I hear footsteps . . . Echoes . . . I don’t know where they’re coming from, but I know I’m not alone . . . Someone is following me . . . As I unlock my car, a young man in a leather jacket springs out of the shadows . . . He’s holding a knife . . . He doesn’t say anything. But I can tell he’s going to stab me . . . He looks crazy . . . Then he does it . . . He lunges at me . . . And stabs me . . . Right in the heart . . . And then runs away . . . The last thing I remember is lying there on my back with that thing sticking straight out of me, calling for help, my

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life’s blood draining away.”

The sparkling star thing is getting closer. It’s growing larger. It is a star. A throwing star. One of those weapons they use in Bruce Lee movies. But who would have thrown it? And why?

You drain your coffee and look over the cup rim at me.

I light a match and ignite a blue flame under the kettle of water.

If you stop now, it will still be O.K. You’ve had nightmares before, and we’ve both survived them. But I suspect this one is different. Some of the veins in your eyes have ruptured. Blood has flowed into the whites, staining them, the way the fried eggs are stained. I back my chair up a little. You’re falling apart right in front of me. I’ve dared to wonder a few times before what would happen if you really needed me when I reached one of those periodic points when my magic has gone dry. I imagined that I would just keep trying to rescue you even if it killed me, which it would. Then you’d die. Then Penny. Then the whole thing would come crashing down like a house of cards. I don’t know if “the whole thing” would extend to the entire universe or not. It really doesn’t matter.

“This is more than just an ordinary bad dream,” you explain. “It feels more like a premonition. There really have been a series of stabbings on campus lately. The suspect is a young man in a leather jacket. He hasn’t killed anybody yet. But . . . it’s just a matter of time.” You look at me with a sudden keen expression, waiting for the significance of this last part to sink in.

In your brain a blood vessel bulges and throbs, threatening to burst. I summon up what energy I have left (it feels like I’m churning it directly out of my bone marrow) and cauterize the damn thing.

Haven’t we had more than our share of hemorrhages today between eyes and eggs and brains?

I’m sorry. That slipped out. It was too close to sarcasm. I’ll make up for it later, a little self-mortification after you leave. At the moment, I have more pressing work to do.

Until now, I have always been able to count on your will power. No matter how bad things got, there was always a part of you that refused to surrender. For Penny’s sake, if nothing else. Until now, at some deep, hidden level, my will and yours flowed together, working for the same purpose. I propped you up so you could prop Penny up. Pretty simple really. But something deep inside you has now broken. If even your dreams have turned against you, and if you surrender to them, then I don’t know what more I can do to help.

“So I’ve decided to consult a lawyer,” you announce to the toast. “It’s time to come up with a will.” You nod your head. “I need to make sure everything is in order when the time comes. You know I don’t have much. My car, for what it’s worth. A few odds and ends. I want to make sure Penny gets them, not some creditor. And I’m going to make a provision in the will that
she keeps an eye on you.”

The throwing star is nearing me. I move a bit to my right. It does too. I move to my left. So does it. Like a guided missile. Whoever threw that thing is a real expert. Even Bruce Lee doesn’t have those moves.

You look at me and smile, then finish your coffee and rise. “Anyway,” you say. “I just thought you should know.”

The star hits me square in the forehead and penetrates my skull. A scream is about to come out of my mouth. You must not hear it. I shoot the scream off into the kettle which has built up a second head of steam. You think the piercing shriek comes through the little hole on the lid of the pot.

You’re a few steps ahead of me as we make our way through downtown Ann Arbor. The sidewalk is a conveyor belt leading us to the lawyer’s office. As we pass shops that are just opening, the same graffiti passes under our feet again and again. “TJ is a Fuker.” “Randy Loves Sue.” You don’t notice. You have other things on your mind. Your duty to Penny. Your nightmares. Your doom.

I have been living in a stupor since the star lodged in my skull. It fell off somewhere, sometime. I barely remember the last few days. Apparently, before I lapsed into this state—a state of impending obsolescence—I hooked you up to me through a kind of life-support system. A translucent tube runs between us, feeding you my energy. Thank goodness it’s hooked deeply into my automatic systems and isn’t dependent on my willpower or consciousness to function.

If you go into the lawyer’s office, everything will be over for you. It will be the last step in relinquishing your fight, surrendering to the prophecy of your nightmare. And then, everything will be over for all of us. The question is: will I go into the office with you? The way things look now, I will. The conveyor belt is leading right there. And this tube seems to be linking us together pretty well.

The spring day is so nice. There are flowers on trees. There are flowers on the ground. They perfume the air. Smell them.

Green leaves show here and there with that bright, clean light of young things. Take a look. The sunlight is gentle. A pretty girl bicycles past. I get tantalizing views of long legs under a skirt as she energetically pedals. Long, honey-colored hair blows back from her face. Her cheeks are pink. The faintest film of perspiration glistens on her forehead. Birds sing and fly. Their shadows cut across the sidewalk. You don’t notice any of this. You walk on, determined in your resignation, looking down at your worn shoes.

I’m saying goodbye to life.

How sad that it is all going to end. But there’s no way to win. I can’t do the impossible. My two missions in respect to you now cancel each other out. When you have decided to die, I can’t keep you alive and at the same
time help you achieve your goals.

   You are almost at the door of the lawyer’s office. A blue canvas awning has been unrolled over the smoked glass of the store front. It’s a secretive place, a forbidding place. Maybe it’s the entrance to hell.

   At this point, it really doesn’t matter what I do. Maybe I can enjoy a brief period of relaxation before the end comes. Out here in the spring air and light. A vacation. Well deserved, if brief.

   But surely I’m going to accompany you into the lawyer’s office, as I’ve accompanied you through so much else.

   Apparently not. Looking down, I discover that the translucent tube is no longer in me. It is still attached to you, however. It trails along behind you like a tail or an umbilical cord or a downed power line, shooting out sparks and gore. It looks silly and pathetic and frightening all at the same time. I’m glad you don’t see it.

   The conveyor belt sidewalk leads you right through the door of the office. Inside the office, you step off the belt and hold the door open for me.

   I step off the belt too, on this side of the door. The side with sunlight and green leaves and girls with long legs. You look at me with surprise. Please come back out with me. We’ll walk away together. Leave your duty and your death behind. Some wars aren’t worth fighting. Let’s escape. Retreat. Surrender. Live.

   “I’ll wait out here,” I say.

   “O.K.,” you say, distractedly. “This shouldn’t take long. I’ll see you in a few minutes.”

   “I’ll meet you,” I say.

   Even condemned prisoners get the choice of a last meal, right? I go into a funny little party store at the corner and look around. I have just enough change to buy a Drumstick ice cream cone from the freezer.

   Peeling off the paper cover, I sit on a park bench and lick chocolate and vanilla.

   From behind me I hear something large approaching, running toward me. The earth shakes. The wind trembles. It is the end, I suppose. Or at least its instrument. A _deus ex machina_ in reverse. A culmination of all the catastrophes I’ve fended off all these years. I refuse to look over my shoulder though. Fuck that. I’m going to spend my last few minutes enjoying my snack, peeling a little of the white spiral paper off, taking a bite of crumbly sugar cone.

   The monster’s breath is hot on my neck. Little hairs there rise. Goose bumps march down my arms. A figure crouches behind me and springs, dragging its shadow over me. An eclipse.

   The figure changes shape as it sails over me, growling. It could be a bear. Or a chow dog. A bullying boss. A bill collector. Even one of those goddamn succubi.

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Then, as it lands on its haunches and turns to face me, it becomes a lion, a huge lion with a great shaggy mane.

It presses its snout to within inches of me. Its whiskers tickle my skin. Its golden eyes are warm and sly and wild. Then it takes a lick of my ice cream and goes bounding off down the street. Before it turns the corner, it has shrunken to the size of a small white lamb. I could swear I see it wink once. At me.

I stick my tongue deep into the ice cream. The warmth on the outside of me and the cool sweetness on the inside make a really marvelous combination. I am a membrane trembling between them. The wind makes music on me. Something like a smile breaks across my face. I sit here and wait to see if you will come out of the lawyer’s office.
Imagine the following scenario: you are at home with your children one evening when police arrive and demand entrance. The police are speaking Spanish, but you are only fluent in your own indigenous language, perhaps Tzotzil or Tzeltal, and cannot understand what the police are saying. They kick in the door; they may plant evidence in your home, such as drugs or weapons. You are arrested without charge and tell your children to go to a trusted neighbor’s house. You are then held incommunicado, without access to legal representation. The police interrogate you, but you cannot understand them. They place a document you cannot read on the table in front of you and make it clear that you are expected to sign. You refuse; you know the police have translators available, but none are present. The police then take you to a dark cell and beat you. You may be left in that cell alone, without water or food, for a day or two. Finally, you sign the document in the hopes of seeing your children again. You have just signed a confession to a murder, and are sentenced to thirty years in prison.

This scenario is played out every day in Mexico; there is nothing unusual about it at all.

In the summer of 2019, I traveled to San Cristóbal de las Casas, a city in the state of Chiapas in southern Mexico. I was part of a small delegation from the United States under the auspices of SiPaz, an international peace and human rights organization formed in the wake of the 1994 Zapatista uprising. Our delegation visited a prison to interview the incarcerated, some of whom were on a hunger strike to protest injustices inside and outside the prison. And there is plenty to protest against. A detailed analysis of the Mexican justice system by researchers at the University of the Americas in Puebla revealed that “less than 1% of crimes in Mexico are punished.”¹ This is why Mexican citizens rarely bother to report crimes, regarding it as a “waste of time.”² However, this essay focuses on one particularly abusive
aspect of Mexican injustice: arbitrary arrest and its aftermath. This phenomenon is related to impunity and is even more destructive to civil society. Using the transcripts of the prison interviews and correlating secondary sources, I will examine the crime of arbitrary arrest in Mexico and how Mexican citizens, particularly the indigenous, are resisting it.

The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention defines an arrest as arbitrary (and therefore illegal) when it meets at least one of these criteria: 1. it has no basis in law; 2. it is based on discrimination against the detainee; 3. someone is denied a fair trial; 4. someone is detained solely because of their migration status without the involvement of a judge; 5. someone is detained for the peaceful exercise of their human rights.

There are several reasons why police would want to conduct an arbitrary arrest. A popular one is to extort money from detainees, particularly if the detainee is suspected of involvement in organized crime. This is because Mexican law provides “weaker fair trial guarantees and other safeguards” to such suspects, giving the suspects greater motivation to pay a bribe in order to be released. Citizens can also be arrested at the behest (and bribery) of third parties, who want revenge on their targets. Sometimes, police arrest human rights activists or troublesome journalists in order to intimidate them. Arbitrary arrests are also made simply to avoid carrying out investigations for which police lack the necessary equipment or training.

Police, prosecutors, and judges in Mexico supplement their meager pay with bribes in exchange for freedom, but this begets another problem. Authorities must still make arrests and secure convictions, before the public notices that crimes are being committed, but no one is in prison; they need a scapegoat, the fall guy. The scapegoat should be too poor to pay a bribe, cover bail, or hire a lawyer; it’s best that the scapegoat is part of a persecuted minority, for whom the public at large would not feel much sympathy. In Mexico, it is the indigenous people who fit this unfortunate description.

There are about 17 million indigenous people in Mexico, constituting around 15% of the national population (the largest indigenous population in Latin America). Indigenous peoples, forced by poverty to work through their childhoods, often lack a solid education and thus a command of Spanish; this renders them susceptible to abuse from police and judicial authorities who are unwilling or unable to provide translators, although required by law to do so. Furthermore, racism against indigenous people is an old problem throughout all Latin America, making them likely targets of abuse. They lack the connections or resources to bribe police or to pay lawyers or bail. For these reasons, it is the poor, and very often the indigenous, who fill Mexican prisons.

After arrest, suspects are usually placed in pretrial detention—and some of them never leave. Pretrial detention is mandatory for many crimes in Mexico, especially violent ones. This means that 41% of all prisoners in
Mexico are in pretrial detention, a total of approximately 100,000 people at any one time. Suspects are entitled to a hearing before a judicial officer within 72 hours, though this time limit is often ignored. It is during this time that police plant evidence or doctor reports to justify their fictions. The suspects must then await judgment, a process that may take years.

The Mexican justice system differs significantly from its American and Canadian counterparts. Criminal trials rarely use juries; typically, the only participants are the judge, prosecuting attorney, and defense attorney. Prosecution and defense present their cases, and the judge decides if the charges are proven. Records of the proceedings are not available to the public. The defendant may appeal a guilty verdict; if the defense loses the appeal, it may request a Writ of Amparo (known as judicial review in the United States). This refers the case to a federal judge.

This system concentrates power in the judge, making him or her more susceptible to bribery; it would be much more complicated to bribe each member of a jury. Furthermore, the opacity of the records creates a lack of transparency, permitting corruption with impunity.

In many cases, the pretrial detention often exceeds the length of the subsequent sentence. One prisoner remained in pretrial detention for sixteen years; the judge scolded him for “delaying” the proceedings by trying to find a lawyer to defend him. The public defenders are notorious for requiring bribes from prisoners for their defense, or being susceptible to political or judicial pressure to abandon a prisoner.

To expedite confessions, police routinely resort to torture in pretrial detention. About 2500 complaints of torture are filed against police by prisoners each year. However, only 1 in 20 torture complaints is investigated, and in only 1% of investigations are the results made public. Prisoners are often abused in ways which leave no physical scars, and thus no evidence, such as boxing the ears, which creates intense pain in the ear canal with compressed air from the blow as well as causing long-term hearing loss. Even when evidence of abuse does remain, authorities are so slow to investigate complaints that the wounds have often already healed before the investigation begins. Nor is torture the only means of illegal coercion: prisoners, especially women, report the use of rape and threats against their children to force a confession. One woman reported that she was blindfolded and beaten; still blindfolded, she was compelled to sign a document she could not see. It later turned out to be a confession. Knowledge of police abuse is so widespread that 64% of all Mexicans say they fear torture by their own government.

Abuse by law enforcement and judicial actors has deep historical roots in Mexico. The PRI political party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, Institutional Revolutionary Party) dominated Mexican politics in the post-revolution 20th century, holding the presidency and most other
important positions for an uninterrupted 71 years. This hegemony allowed for concentrated power among party members, permitting widespread corruption and stymieing social and judicial reforms.\textsuperscript{26} It was only when Vicente Fox of the PAN party (\textit{Partido Acción Nacional}, National Action Party) won the 2000 presidential elections that some reform became possible. Since then, various reforms have aimed to increase the professionalization of the Mexican police forces, but with discouraging results; despite reforms, in 2009, 20\% of all Mexican federal police officers were under investigation for corruption, probably reflecting only a portion of the problem.\textsuperscript{27} And although laws stipulate more stringent requirements for officers and mandate better record keeping and transparency, these laws are often ignored without consequence.\textsuperscript{28} Besides a tradition of political corruption lending impunity to authorities, Mexican police and public defenders also suffer from poor training and low pay, the latter making them particularly susceptible to bribery and other corruption.\textsuperscript{29} The poor training also tempts police to simply create evidence and narratives, rather than carry out tedious investigations for which they lack training.

While these injustices are ubiquitous across Mexico, they are particularly noticeable in Chiapas, the southernmost state of the country. Chiapas has one of the largest indigenous populations in the country at 1.2 million, approximately one-third of the state’s residents. Given the correlation between indigenous identity and poverty, it is unsurprising that Chiapas is also one of the poorest states in the country; nor is it coincidental that injustice and arbitrary arrest are particularly virulent there.

The rebellion of the \textit{Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional} (EZLN, or Zapatista Army of National Liberation), launched on January 1, 1994, was a direct response to social injustice by the Mexican government.\textsuperscript{30} The proximate cause was the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which the indigenous leaders of Chiapas correctly assumed would harm local farmers,\textsuperscript{31} but arbitrary arrest and other injustices were long-simmering problems. After prolonged negotiations with the government, their movement continues in nonviolent fashion, although the government continuously pressures autonomous EZLN communities with intimidation and assassinations.\textsuperscript{32} The EZLN and allied groups, such as No Estamos Todxs, have been instrumental in resisting arbitrary arrest in Chiapas, according to the prisoners I interviewed.

During my June 2019 visit to San Cristóbal, I visited incarcerated activists in the notorious \textit{Centro de Readaptación Social} [Center for Social Re-adaptation, or CERSS] Number 5, a local prison. It was a rare opportunity to hear about arbitrary arrest from the victims themselves and learn their methods of resistance.

One might well wonder why prison officials would allow foreigners to visit the activist prisoners who are giving damning testimony about the
justice system. Mexican law permits prison visits, but officials also have the power to deny a prisoner’s visitation rights, at least temporarily, and thus suppress their stories. The officials are probably making a simple cost / benefit calculation. The prisoners’ allies in the human rights NGOs would file legal complaints to have their clients’ visitation rights restored, and the media would then publish the story, thus publicizing the prisoners’ complaints anyway. Furthermore, officials may believe that judicial corruption is so embedded in Mexican culture that they will never suffer significant negative consequences. Finally, suppressing the activists’ rights to visitors may be viewed as an admission of guilt, that there is indeed something to hide, which would only invite further inquiry. In any case, the guards made neither comment nor complaint after we told them the reason for our visit.

The prison is a ramshackle collection of concrete buildings, surrounded by chain-link fencing and outward-facing fortified positions for the guards -- the Zapatistas overran this prison during their 1994 attack. Behind the buildings is a compound surrounded by a high concrete wall. The interior of the compound is watched over by guards in a large tower. Our delegation waited at the front gate with local indigenas in their traditional clothes bearing bags of food for their imprisoned relatives; the prison fare is notoriously thin. In a concrete booth, we presented our passports and had our hands stamped. We then proceeded to another building where the guards searched us and placed personal belongings on shelves. We were then allowed to enter the main courtyard inside the walls.

We passed through a maze of chair-link fencing which divided the courtyard into squares of sparse grass until we reached a small brick building the size of a storage shed. Inside were ten men from a collective formed to protest prison abuse and corruption as well as arbitrary arrest outside the prison walls. Their present accommodations were spartan in the extreme: the floor was earthen, covered with dirty rugs, and flies crawled over everyone constantly.

The men made us cups of instant coffee as they introduced themselves. They had all been in prison for between eight and twenty years, serving sentences that ran from fifteen to twenty-nine years. They all claimed to have been imprisoned because they are indigenous and have no money for a lawyer. The real criminals, they said, are never in jail, a claim reflected in the literature. They also complained of the lack of food. Their families have to provide much of it, which is a financial burden on already-overburdened people. The prisoners also explained that the prison authorities enjoy humiliating the inmates, won’t allow them to have interpreters, and regularly resort to beating prisoners who try to assert their legal rights.

The men had formed this group because they were all arrested and imprisoned unjustly and want to fight for their freedom. At the time of the interview, they had two experienced members and eight new ones, who had
joined the ranks of the “comrades against injustice” and were learning how to fight from within the prison. Their leader, Pedro Jimenez, was the most experienced. And Jimenez himself had been trained by a man who is a living legend in Chiapas.

On June 12, 2000, in the town of Simojovel, Chiapas, a group of nine police officers were ambushed by gunmen. Seven were killed; one of the two survivors was Rosemberg Gómez, the son of municipal president Manuel Gómez Ruiz.  

A week later, police located Alberto Patishtán, a Tzotzil indigenous man and bilingual school teacher from the town of El Bosque. Patishtán had previously publicly accused Ruiz of political corruption, and Ruiz now likely saw an opportunity to remove the troublesome teacher. He had Patishtán arrested without a warrant and charged with organized crime, murder, and possession of illegal firearms in relation to the shooting. Patishtán presented evidence that he was teaching at the time the ambush took place, with an entire class of students as witnesses to that fact; attorneys noted several other major inconsistencies in the testimony of the survivors. Nevertheless, Patishtán was held in CERSS #1 for nearly two years without a trial, then finally sentenced to sixty years in prison on March 18, 2002.  

Patishtán was determined to prove his innocence and return to his family, students, and community. When he was transferred to CERSS #14 in El Amate, he found a group of prisoners in resistance called The True Voice of Amate. Patishtán helped the group expand its power and influence by integrating it with The Other Campaign, the nonviolent political and social movement of the EZLN. In 2008, he led the group in a hunger strike, demanding a judicial review of the cases of all the men involved. This action was coordinated with men in three other prisons as well. A total of 48 prisoners were involved. After 41 days, the government relented and conducted reviews of their cases. Forty-seven of the men’s convictions were found to contain serious procedural errors and were overturned. The only one not released was Patishtán himself.  

It is enlightening to reflect on the government’s position during this and subsequent cases of prisoner activism. There are only two possible reasons why the review would release 47 out of 48 prisoners. The first is that the legal system that incarcerated them is nearly one hundred percent incompetent; the other is that the government, facing social pressure, allowed properly-convicted criminals to go free for the sake of political expediency. Both explanations reflect a profound failure of justice.

In April 2009, Patishtán—now known as “The Professor” by the prisoners—was transferred to CERSS #5 in San Cristóbal, where he met Pedro Jimenez. During our visit, in the dim light of his prison shelter, Jimenez told us the story of when he’d first met Patishtán ten years before.
Jimenez knew about Patishtán’s activism, and wanted to help, but wondered what good he could do. An indigenous man, he could not speak Spanish, nor had any formal education. He asked Patishtán if he should join the movement against government injustice.

Patishtán replied, “I cannot tell you what to do. You decide.”

Jimenez asked to join, though he thought he had nothing to offer. Patishtán told him, “There’s only one thing I want to know. Are you guilty of the crime they accused you of? Look me in the eye and tell me whether or not you’re guilty!”

“No, I didn’t do it,” replied Jimenez.

Patishtán took Jimenez under his wing. From that day on, Jimenez told us, they were “united in struggle,” and a tremendous struggle it would be.

Patishtán suggested that the indigenous prisoners learn Spanish, so Jimenez attended classes in prison. His Spanish was not very good, but Patishtán told him to speak it anyway and that he shouldn’t be ashamed. Within a month, other men had joined them. They held reading workshops and taught each other chess. Jimenez told us that the prisoners have studied their problems while in prison and now understand both the causes of injustice and how to fight it. The activist prisoners and their supporters maintain a strict code of conduct. They never ask the guards for anything illegal and never offer bribes for special favors or treatment. Their efforts are largely successful thanks to the help of the working groups inside and outside of the prison, such as No Estamos Todxs, a group that provides legal, financial, and material assistance to prisoners.

On Sept. 29, 2011, they began their first hunger strike, demanding judicial review of their cases to determine irregularities. Fifteen men maintained the strike for thirty-nine days. The government retaliated by transferring Patishtán to another prison in Sinaloa, 2000 kilometers away; this was meant not only to stop the hunger strike, but also to demoralize Patishtán, as it meant he could no longer receive visits from his family from so far away. The prisoners continued the strike. Finally, fourteen of the fifteen men participating in the strike were freed. Furthermore, reports of the strike in the media, including the prisoners’ manifesto, created enough public pressure that the authorities increased the amount of food given to prisoners. Patishtán was returned to CERSS #5 in 2012 after a judge granted a protective order sought by the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Center for Human Rights.

However, the prison did not release the leader of the hunger strike, Pedro Jimenez. Authorities said it was because his case was in Veracruz, not San Cristóbal, and so the San Cristóbal authorities could not conduct the review. He told us that he is not worried; he will continue the struggle no matter where he is.

Patishtán was eventually released, as were several others; but new prisoners have joined Jimenez since then. They have been very successful in
hunger strikes and other actions, getting some prisoners released and forcing the authorities to provide better food and medical attention.

Then, in July 2015, the prison authorities decided to transfer Jimenez and several others to another prison, a common tactic to break up movements for justice (and one which often backfires, as the troublemakers tend to sow seeds of dissent in their new location, as Patishtán did in CERSS #5). Jimenez and his companions remained there for two years and four months. The comrades from San Cristóbal had asked for his return, and allied human rights lawyers and NGOs filed the complaint. The group was then returned to San Cristóbal.

“The prison directors try to divide and conquer,” Jimenez told us. “The directors ask the protesters outside the prison: why do you care about the prisoners? The protesters say that it is their duty to defend and support those in prison. The director tells prisoners to speak for themselves only, fight for themselves only, not collectively. The activists say, no, we fight for all, not just ourselves.” They understand the power of collective action.

So do the prison directors, who launched an intense effort to prevent it from taking root. Even now, Jimenez told us, the guards encourage the general prison population not to join the activists. The directors use rats to infiltrate and spy on the group. The men had painted a portrait of EZLN leader Subcommander Marcos in their block, but the guards removed it. By doing so, said Jimenez, the authorities were trying to provoke violence, but the activists did not take the bait, because it would be bad press for them.

In December 2017, the comrades talked with Jimenez and asked him for help against this retaliation. They wanted to denounce the director of the prison for corruption and abuse. Jimenez organized the action with the help of supporting groups, and the director was forced to resign.

The new director transferred Jimenez again in Sept. 2018 to a federal prison in retaliation for the denouncement. The commander of the new prison knew who he was. He told Jimenez, “So, you’re the little lawyer…” Jimenez was then beaten and pepper-sprayed.

After 7 months, Jimenez was returned to San Cristóbal. The latest director, who had sent him away, now called Jimenez into her office.

“You know what?” she told him. “You know who is famous around here? You are. But I am against injustice. You see how I run things here.”

Jimenez saw the implicit threat in this. He was expected to agree with her, thereby acquiescing to her claim that there was no longer any injustice in CERSS #5. The consequences of refusing might be unpleasant.

“No, I don’t know how you run things,” he replied. “I just got here.” He wouldn’t play her game. He was immediately put into solitary confinement, but his comrades complained and he was returned. They continue together in CERSS #5.
“We are all comrades, no matter which prison we’re sent to,” Jimenez concluded. “We have no fear; our job is to tell the truth.”

**Hunger strikes**

While in CERSS #5, I met another group of four prisoners engaged in a hunger strike. They called themselves the “Voice of Indigenous Resistance;” they had formed in December, 2017, to “continue the struggle to defend the population against injustice.” They are also connected with larger organizations, such as Voice of Amate.

The four men, wrapped in blankets on the floor of their makeshift tent-like shelter, were clearly in poor health. The only sustenance they took was water mixed with honey. The point of the hunger strike was to draw attention to the injustice of their arbitrary arrest and sentencing, as well as corruption and abuse within the prison. Their complaints echoed those of so many others. The public defenders, they told us, were thoroughly corrupt; one of them even has connections to the prison director. No Estamos Todxs protested the lack of proper legal representation in the prisoners’ appeals, reporting the public defender to the government and requesting a new one for the prisoners’ cases. They finally got a good one, they told us.

One of the prisoners told the delegation of corruption in his trial and sentencing, explaining that the prosecutors had evidence of his innocence, but buried it; he was sentenced to 25 years. When he protested, he was punished by being sent to solitary confinement for four days in a cell with no toilet. He submitted a complaint against the abuse, and was then moved to the medical section, as he was in poor health at that point.

When their new public defender began to appeal their cases, the authorities tried to transfer prisoners to break up the group. That would have made it very hard for the prisoners to see their children, so they again protested. Then the director informed them that their cases would be reviewed faster if they accepted the transfer, a clever if diabolical way to divide the group. Three of them took the offer.

The four remaining members continued to suffer abuse. The director does not allow the indigenous in prison to drink their traditional corn drinks; the prisoners believe this is done only to insult and belittle them, a slight they have been protesting. Other men were beaten by the guards to defuse their rebellious spirit, and they still bear scars from torture. One of the hunger strikers painted pictures of the four of them and the tortures they suffered at the hands of prison guards; these paintings were posted on the website of No Estamos Todxs.

Finally, they started their hunger strike on March 15, 2019. At time of our interview, it had lasted 114 days. The objective of the hunger strike was to draw attention to the injustice and torture they have suffered. Their demand is
liberation, nothing less; they told us they would not give up until they actually had the release papers in hand.

The prisoners experienced serious medical issues over the course of the hunger strike. One developed an infection on May 22 and was given IVs with antibiotics, but the IV port then developed an infection. In June, he started spitting up blood. All the hunger strikers were sent twice to hospital, but they were handcuffed while there, so they instead prefer to remain in their tent near the medical facility.

Our interview was cut short by the unexpected visit of a state government official, who had come to plead with the protesters to cease their hunger strike.

Women’s Section

Our delegation then visited a small number of women in their own section of the prison. There are far fewer women in Mexican prisons than men, making up about 5% of the total prison population. Usually there are two or three dozen women prisoners in CERSS #5 at any time. This is perhaps why they were not organized outside of a loose affiliation for mutual support. Nevertheless, their stories of arbitrary arrest mirrored the men’s, although with added complications of gender bias and sexual abuse.

One woman told us that her arrest was the result of a family feud. Her brother-in-law was guilty of raping his own children; his family bribed the prisoner’s sister into accusing the prisoner of the rape. The police broke into her house at night with guns drawn to arrest her and, in the process, assaulted her children and ransacked the house. Once she was in jail, a public defender offered his services. She claimed that the public defender did no work for her, but was instead bribed by judicial authorities to ignore her case. She fired the public defender and was lucky enough to retain a private human rights lawyer, pro bono. She had been imprisoned for eleven months at the time of the interview.

Another woman from San Cristóbal reported that police came to her house looking for a male suspect in a shooting. The police brought her to the station to give a deposition. When she finished her testimony, she signed the deposition, and was immediately arrested for the crime. She told us there were witnesses to where she was at the time of the shooting, so even a perfunctory investigation would have proven her innocence. Still, she was sentenced without a trial, so it was possible that what she thought she was signing was not a deposition, but a confession. She had been in CERSS #5 for a month and had lost her job. Her attorney had asked the court for the evidence against her; they were still waiting. Other prisoners told us that very few lawyers were worthwhile and that most were corrupt. Prisoners might pay a lawyer a large fee, but the lawyer then does nothing.

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Even inside the prison, discrimination and inequalities persist. Those who are closest with the authorities get the best treatment, including more food and privileges. The prison authorities also attempt to divide the women prisoners, probably in an attempt to keep them from organizing against corruption; they provoke fights between inmates to give them more time behind bars and retract privileges such as family visits. The women agreed that the authorities were amiable enough so long as you are not confrontational, though the corruption makes holding one’s tongue difficult. There is no reliable health care in the women’s section. There is no doctor, as in the men’s block, but only a nurse who rarely visits and cannot dispense medications. The women are not given feminine products, but have to get their own from either their families or benevolent associations, like Rotary or Lions Club.

Maria Lopez Perez, a Tzotzil indigenous woman from Chamula, was nine years into a twenty-five-year sentence on the charge of raping and murdering a young girl, an accusation she denies. She told our delegation that she had been tortured into a confession by boxing her ears, and still suffers from hearing loss. Her mother-in-law had also been imprisoned in CERSS #5 and had died in this jail. Perez has three children, but is unable to help the family raise them, or to help care for her elderly mother.

What the women complained of the most was separation from family; they all agreed it was the worst part of incarceration. Years before, some children could stay with their mothers in prison until the age of four, but that is no longer permitted. They had even had a pregnant prisoner in the past. Children and spouses can visit, as long as the inmates do not upset the authorities—a very effective form of control.

“The hardest part,” one woman told us, “is not being able to see your children grow up.”

Followup

Information on the fates of particular prisoners is difficult to obtain, but a few conclusions are certain.

On October 13, 2013, after thirteen years of imprisonment, Alberto Patishtán was pardoned by incoming Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto; the government cited “grave human rights violations” in his case. Amnesty International had supported Patishtán’s case for years and, upon his release, insisted the Mexican government conduct a thorough review of all cases in which judicial impropriety might have occurred, pointing out that a pardon should never have been necessary. But although “The Professor” returned to his community and family, the seeds of dignity and resistance he sowed in prison continue to grow.
The four hunger strikers continued their total fast for about four and a half months, until July 28, 2019. At that point, they were so sick and weakened that they feared they could die at any moment. They decided to change their protest to a daily fast from noon until 6 PM daily.

It seemed as if their hunger strike had created sufficient public pressure, because the district judge promised to review their cases. And on August 20, 2019, the judge announced the results of the review: he was extending the prisoners’ sentences from twenty-five to fifty years. The prisoners published the following statement two days later:

Our families went to dialogue with the judge about our case. There, the judge said that everything was fine, that we are innocent of the crimes [with which] we have been charged. He said that we will achieve our freedom, telling our families not to worry or be sad, that soon we will leave this prison. This was at about 9:00 am. Later that day, at 5:00 pm, the actuary of CERSS No. 5 of San Cristóbal de las Casas, notified us that our sentence had arrived. He notified us that we had been sentenced to 50 years in prison. This was because we didn’t offer any money to the judge. If we had offered money, we would have been freed. Because we didn’t give any money, we were originally sentenced to 25 years in prison. This judge added 25 more leaving us with 50 years in prison for not offering money.39

The prisoners continued their legal fight for freedom, and one of them, Juan de la Cruz, was released in December of 2019. But 2020 brought the next great challenge: the COVID-19 pandemic. The Mexican prison authorities refused to take steps to protect the prisoners. The remaining hunger strikers reported in a public announcement, “There is no way to take the COVID 19 test and there are also no medications for the inmates. Supposedly there is a high amount of fever symptoms in inmates. For this reason, we prisoners are in danger for the integrity of our health and life.”40 The group re-launched the hunger strike from May 21, 2020 until June 5, 2020, to draw attention to the plight of the imprisoned.

Although the women of CERSS #5 are not formally organized, they receive a great deal of assistance from various working groups. The most active of these groups is Colectiva Cereza (the Cherry Collective), a feminist group which supports the women in CERSS #5 with material support while imprisoned, and offers them temporary housing when they leave prison, as well as helping them find employment. The collective deserves a history of its own, but let it suffice that their response to the terrible plight of women in CERSS #5 during the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak speaks well to their dedication and efforts. With visitations forbidden during the quarantine, the
women prisoners could not receive the critical food and medical and hygienic supplies from relatives. Even fresh water was scarce, and the women were reduced to two meals a day. On May 20, 2020, the women protested their situation, and were tear gassed by the prison guards. The Cereza Collective applied for and received permission to deliver critical supplies to the women. They also filed a complaint with the State Commission on Human Rights which, on May 23, forced CERSS #5 to change the prison director and correct the situation in the women’s block, leading to more food, medical staff visits, and free phone calls with families and legal aid. This was a remarkable victory for the small collective.

**Conclusion**

Andrés Manuel López Obrador (better known as AMLO) was elected President of Mexico in July, 2018. AMLO promised great things for the Mexican people, including improved human rights and justice. Unfortunately, these promises have remained largely unfulfilled, their implementation rarely more than half-hearted. In a report aptly named “When Words are not Enough,” Amnesty International described continuing abuses in the country:

The new administration has taken important steps to make progress on issues such as the situation of human rights defenders and the disappearance crisis. However, to date, many of the government measures in this area have been symbolic or announcements that have yet to be implemented, such as the recognition of the competence of the Committee on Enforced Disappearances. . . Similarly, many of the government’s plans that could have a positive effect on human rights will require sufficient resources to be allocated; during the first year of government these have not been made available. . . Finally, the organization considers that measures that negatively affect fair trial guarantees must be reversed, especially mandatory pretrial detention in order to allow judges to determine on a case by case basis whether pretrial detention is appropriate.

Nor was AI alone in its criticism. In June 2019, the Committee Against Torture (CAT) at the United Nations issued a report that concluded, “the current practice of torture in the country is ‘endemic’ and ‘generalized’ . . .” The CNDH (National Human Rights Commission) of Mexico has complained of many “irregularities” in the justice system, as has Human Rights Watch, the Inter-American Human Rights Commission of the Organization of American States, the UN Special Rapporteur for the Independence of Judges and Lawyers, and at least one hundred Mexican
NGOs. The preponderance of evidence against the Mexican justice system is damning.

What can be done about this miscarriage of justice? One thing that anyone can do is support the NGOs and working groups addressing injustice in Chiapas and the rest of Mexico. My personal preference is to aid the smallest local groups, which are engaged in the front-line work but usually have few resources. A small donation to these groups has an outsized effect. My favorites are listed below:

No Estamos Todxs: http://www.noestamostodxs.tk/
Voices in Movement: https://voicesinmovement.org
Colectiva Cereza: https://www.facebook.com/ColectivaCerezaChiapas/
SiPaz: https://www.sipaz.org/?lang=en
Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Center for Human Rights: https://frayba.org.mx/
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 24.
28 AFP. “Murders, Corruption and Crime”
31 Ibid., 4.
32 Ibid., 171.
34 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
**Sandra Kolankiewicz**'s poems have appeared widely, most recently in *One, Otis Nebulae, Trampset, Concho River Review, London Magazine, New World Writing and Appalachian Heritage. Turning Inside Out* was published by Black Lawrence. *Finishing Line* has released *The Way You Will Go* and *Lost in Transition.*

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**Yucca**

*Sandra Kolankiewicz*

During the service, we perched on a bench outside in the memory garden, a circuitous pathway around pruned trees and blooming rhododendrons, the caches that would hold the urns in little clusters, each private and with a place to sit. She was so small her toes did not touch the ground, lacy socks on little feet kicking in patent leather shoes, brand new for the day till she climbed down to watch something I could not see on the brick walkway a few feet ahead of us in a dapple of light, for at that time I did not understand I need to wear glasses always, instead chose to accept the world as I thought it was: indistinct and not quite graspable, lovely but missing the equivalent of edges. She called my name, the chorus floating out the open door through which we’d left when her toddler restlessness began to irritate the surrounding ladies, the sound of the organ floating toward us on a breeze we could not see, and when I joined her on the ground in my funeral best, I saw a moth carried away in a dignified manner by a line of ants that were absorbed and gentle in their own way, the kind of moth that pollinates that old fashioned plant no one grows these days, the name of which I could not remember.
Cristina Querrer is a multidisciplinary artist and has two published books of poetry, *By Astrolabes & Constellations* and *The Art of Exporting*. She is also a U.S. Army veteran, a Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) candidate at University of South Florida, has an MFA in Creative Writing degree, and is a writer, artist and podcaster. You can learn more about her at [http://cristinaquerrer.com](http://cristinaquerrer.com) & [http://yourartsygirelpodcast.com](http://yourartsygirelpodcast.com).

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**Quarantine Impression**

"Quarantine Impression" is my creative response to the Safer at Home directives in Florida due to COVID-19. Home-bound because of the pandemic made me see my living quarters in a different light. I usually create in abstract expressionism style, which makes this impressionistic style all the more interesting to me.
#BlackLivesMatter