

# TWISTED VINE

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LITERARY ARTS JOURNAL



SPRING 2022

# MASTHEAD

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SPRING 2022

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# FROM THE MANAGING EDITOR

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Dear Reader,

I want to thank you on behalf of the Twisted Vine Literary Journal team for supporting both the artists and writers featured in this issue. Over the past few weeks, we have had the privilege of reviewing hundreds of works from across the United States and beyond. It's incredibly encouraging to see the creative process thrive in the face of a future unknown. With that said, a clear thematic picture emerged from the pieces submitted to our journal, which reflect a contemplative examination of our past, present, and future.

The works presented throughout this issue capture life in totality—a loss of childhood wonder reinvigorated by small moments of inspiration and hope. They remind us that even in times of devastation or loneliness, we take note of the things that bring us happiness. We return to the simplicity of our innocence and the awe of our imagination. Even as we age, our thoughts and feelings embrace a former naiveté that lives on deep in our psyche. It is an understanding that, no matter when our time comes, there will be another tomorrow.

First, I'd like to express my gratitude to the wonderful, hardworking team that put this issue together. Without their immense dedication, none of this would be possible. In addition, I want to thank our contributors for trusting us with the presentation of their work. It has been an absolute pleasure reading through the numerous submissions we received, and we're excited to showcase so many artists and writers. As Managing Editor, I now invite you to explore the introspective works of our contributors. I hope you enjoy them just as much as we did.

Happy Reading,



Taylor A. Russo  
Managing Editor

# ABOUT THE JOURNAL

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**T***wisted Vine Literary Arts Journal* is published by students in the graduate writing program at Western New Mexico University. We are committed to publishing both emerging and established literary and visual artists. *Twisted Vine* seeks to represent an eclectic mix of ideas and values. We look for both experimental and traditional forms of prose and poetry and want to provide a diverse experience for our readers. We have a particular interest in pieces that challenge or redefine expression in new and inviting ways.

## COVER ART

Reflection by Mark Rosalbo

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\* *Editor's Choice*

# GREEN LOVE

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Penny Jackson

**M**y father didn't notice that I had spilled catchup all over my school uniform blouse because he was busy examining dollar bills. The coffee shop waiter had returned with our change and my father was frowning. I knew the reason why. The dollars the waiter had returned were faded, wrinkled, one even with a little tear in the corner. "Oh shit," I thought to myself. I had just turned nine and "shit" was my favorite curse word.

"Excuse me," my father called out to the waiter. I saw people turn around and to stare. Although it was Sunday, my father was dressed in a three-piece suit and carried a suitcase. I was wearing my school uniform because I forgot to pack enough clothes from my mother's apartment.

The waiter, mumbling in what I thought was Greek since the diner was called Athena, my favorite Greek goddess, slowly walked over, his hands tying the strings of his apron.

"That's the correct change," he said to my father.

My father picked up the worst looking dollar in the pile.

"Do you know what this is?"

The waiter gave a half moan. "A dollar. What else?"

"This is an article of sacrament," my father said. "You wouldn't find a priest offering communion with a filthy chalice, would you?"

I looked down at my white sleeve covered with red sauce. Here was my getaway. "Dad," I told him, "I need to go the bathroom."

"Wait one second." My father stared at the waiter who was shaking his head like my father was crazy. When it came to money, my father was crazy.

"Money's money," the waiter told him. "Shall I visit the bank and bring you new dollar bills?"

“That would be very considerate,” my father answered. “I want the kind of bills that give you paper cuts.”

The waiter started laughing. So did the other waiter behind the counter and also the couple sitting behind me. I knew my father was about to lecture about honoring our national currency and no one respected a decent buck anymore. This obsession, was one of the reasons my mother left him for a poor artist from France named Michel. The irony was because he was poor, my father had to support my mother and also her new lover.

I rushed into the bathroom and tried to wash the ketchup off the cuff sleeves. I rubbed hard with soap, but the sleeve still had a pinkish tinge. I would have to buy another shirt.

My father waited outside on Madison Avenue. I had lowered my head as I walked through the coffee shop, convinced the customers and the waiters were still in hysterics.

“Why do you always have to embarrass me?” I asked my father, who was straightening his tie. He was a tall good-looking man whose nose had once been broken in a boxing match when he was in high school,

“Rose, as I told you before, if you don’t respect a dollar then you are...”

“Worthless,” I said.

“That’s my smart girl.” My father patted me on my shoulder. We were near the Rockefeller Ice Skating Rink. I could hear the laughter and the whooshing of the skaters nearby. Neither of us were dressed for ice skating but I desperately wanted to be on that ice, gliding beneath the lighted Christmas tree.

“I want to go skating,” I said to my father. “Please.”

He must have heard the catch in my voice because his face grew a bit pale and he audibly sighed.

“Sorry, Rose, I totally forgot. I have a meeting at the office.”

“The office? But it’s Sunday.”

“Not in Tokyo. Not in Sydney. My fault. I forgot this was my weekend.”

My parents had fought during the custody agreement in court. I was surprised he wanted to see me so much. My father complained it was too expensive to keep battling, so he had me

one weekend, while my mother had me the rest of the month. But now she was traveling more to Paris with her new boyfriend, so I was beginning to see my father more frequently.

“Hey,” My father stopped at a florist on the corner of the street. “Let’s go inside. I know you love flowers.”

I didn’t really like flowers but I wasn’t going to argue with him. I knew he would ask, “Who doesn’t like flowers” as if I were a criminal. He was always buying plants. His bedroom had hanging plants and potted plants. The room seemed to have a greenish glow. Paz, his housekeeper, hated having to always water them.

The florist shop was small and crammed with so many flowers that I sneezed. I went to a corner filled with green plants. They looked lonely there, small and ignored.

“Why don’t you buy this plant?” I pointed to a small green thing stuffed in the corner, as if the owner wanted to hide it. “You can keep it in your office and think of me.”

“You’re better than a plant,” my father said, picking up a large bundle of roses. “A Rose deserves roses.”

My father bought me a whole bouquet of roses. He arranged them in a vase in my bedroom, then returned to his office. Paz immediately took a look at my ketchup-stained shirt, told me to take it off, and have me one of my father’s t-shirts to wear as she washed it. “Querida, next time do not forget your suitcase,” she said. Paz always called me “querida” which meant darling in Spanish. Paz was from Chile, with bright dyed red hair. She told me her family had been persecuted by a terrible dictator named Pinochet who kidnapped babies. She lived in a tiny room in the back of my father’s apartment. After my parents’ divorce, my father rented a two bedroom on Third Avenue. My mother, after many arguments, still had our large apartment on Riverside Drive that faced The Hudson River.

After she washed my shirt, she started ironing my father shirts with grim determination. I loved Paz. I wished she would work for my mother but my mother said we had to be careful with our expenses and she didn’t want to share anything or anyone with my father.

I told Paz what happened at the coffee shop with the waiter. “Too bad you can’t iron his dollar bills too,” I joked. Paz didn’t smile.

“Money is made of the same paper you use to wipe your ass,” she said and then clamped her hand over her mouth. I was laughing. “Dios Mio! What did I just say? Do not tell your father!”

“But it’s funny,” I said, imagining Paz ironing a whole row of creased dollar bills.

“No, querida, it is not funny. Green Love is triste.”

“Triste. What does that mean?”

“Sad. Here, take off that shirt so I can clean it, Rose. And next time, bring more clothes.”

That night I had a strange dream. A seemingly endless supply of dollars was floating in the air above my head, almost as if they were injected with helium. I tried to catch the dollars, but they kept slipping out of my grasp.

I returned to my mother that week, who was in a fight with her boyfriend and had taken up smoking. I hated the cigarette fog, and opened every window in the apartment. I reminded her that this week in school was Bring Your Parent Day to discuss their jobs. My mother, who had quit modeling and was technically jobless, told me to ask my father instead. “He would love that,” she said with a crooked smile, her voice raspy from the cigarettes.

My father was thrilled. I told him to be there at my school at 10:00 a.m. Mrs. Sheldon, our teacher, had a large sign taped to the blackboard that said WELCOME PARENTS! The first parent was Joe Ryan’s father, who was a police detective. Detective Ryan wore this uniform and I knew several of the boys were disappointed he didn’t carry a gun.

“Most of you kids are good,” Detective Ryan told us. “But watch out for the bad. The kids who pressure you to make trouble. Just say no.”

“Did you ever catch a bank robber?” Alex Bradley asked.

“How about an axe murderer?” my best friend Zoe said.

Detective Ryan sent a searching look toward Mrs. Sheldon.

“Thank you so much. Next, we have Mr. Harrison, Rose’s father. Mr. Harrison works on Wall Street.”

My father seemed to glide in newly polished shoes and placed his shiny leather briefcase on Mrs. Sheldon’s desk. “Great to be here,” he said to my teacher. “How you all doing, kids?”

He could not stop grinning. My dad liked being the star of a show. He opened the briefcase and took out several bundles of tightly bound dollars. I could tell since I was in the front seat that these were one-hundred-dollar bills, or Benjamins, as my father called them. The class gasped.

“This is what Wall Street is all about,” my father said, pushing the stack of bills across the desk as if they were decks of cards. “Sometimes it goes to the right places. Sometime the wrong. But you have to keep moving. When it stops, I’m in trouble.

“Can I touch it?” Joey Barton asked.

“Sure,” my father answered. “And you don’t even have to wash your hands. I keep my money clean.”

“Is that like money laundering?” Nina Hopkins asked.

“What is money laundering?” someone from the back row shouted.

“Hey, Mr. Harrison, can I take some of that home?” Ricky Kling said, standing up from his seat. Now all the kids were standing to get a better view of the money bundles. Mrs. Sheldon’s face was pale. She whispered something to my father, who nodded and then began returning the bundles into his briefcase.

“That’s all, folks. Back to work. Good luck!”

My father winked at me as he left the classroom. Zoe touched my shoulder.

“What does your father do again, Rose?”

I shook my head. “I’m really not sure,” I answered.

I didn’t tell my mother what happened in my classroom but I did tell Paz when I was at my father’s the following weekend.

“What’s Wall Street?” I asked Paz, who was sorting through a pile of my father’s ironed shirts, all bought from Brooks Brothers.

“Ask your father,” she told me.

“I don’t want to ask him. He’ll probably talk and talk and I won’t understand a word. Wall Street sounds like a place filled with walls. Just like prison.”

“I have been to prison,” Rose said, her face bent over the pile of socks. “I am sure your father does not work in a jail.”

I didn't see my father until a month later. He was traveling, he told me, finalizing deals. My mother had broken up with her boyfriend but was still smoking French cigarettes. One afternoon on my way to my father's after school, I saw three police cars parked right in front of his building. A group of men were standing by the awning with cameras. When the doorman saw me, he shouted something and waved his hand. Then I saw him. My father in handcuffs. Two policemen, one who didn't look so very different from Joe Ryan's father, lead my father into the car. My father was staring at the ground. I called out his name but he wouldn't turn his head. The men with the camera were shouting at him. The flash from the cameras hurt my eyes. Suddenly, I felt strong arms around me.

"Dios Mio. Do not look, Rose."

Paz held me close against me but I struggled from her grasp. As the police car sped away, I started running to catch up with the blazing sirens. Of course, the car was too fast for me. I slipped and scraped both knees. They were bleeding and my vision was blurred with tears. Again, I felt Paz's hands on my shoulders. "Querida, come, with me. We need to call your mother."

The rest of the day was a haze of phones ringing, my mother sobbing, and Paz, who bathed my bleeding knees with ice water. No one would explain to me what happened except to say my father had made a big mistake. My mother drank straight from the mouth of a red wine bottle

"Did it just stop?" I asked her.

"What stopped?" my mother asked.

"The bundles."

"What are you talking about, Rose?" she said, waving the bottle so violently that the wine spilled onto the rug.

The following morning, nursing a hangover with an ice cube pressed against her temple, my mother explained that my father had been involved in a "Ponzi" scheme. I thought she said "Pizza" instead and when I asked again, she said she had a headache.

A few weeks later I was allowed to visit my father's apartment to pick up a few belongings that I had left in my room. The man who answered the door wore a suit just like my

father and did not smile at me. I wished Paz were there instead. When I had asked my mother if she could now hire her, my mother told me that Paz had returned to Chile, which I was sure was a lie.

After I collected a few shirts and two books, I walked past my father's office. His plants were still there. I walked inside and turned on the light. Several plants were dead already, their leaves cracked and crumpled. But one small plant, one that reminded me of the lonely plant I had seen at the florist with my father, was still half-alive. I ran into my father's kitchen and grabbed the biggest glass I could find. The man in the suit was talking to someone on the phone and ignored me. I brought the glass to the bathroom faucet and filled it to the brim with water. The dry soil of that plant soaked the water so fast that I quickly returned to the faucet and refilled the glass again. Was it my imagination or did the yellow leaves begin to turn green again? The other plants suddenly seemed to lean toward me, as if they too wanted water. I spent thirty minutes watering even the ones that looked dead, desperately hoping to bring them back to life.

# dentist

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Thomas Osatchoff

no solid food, no mouthwash, because Novel doesn't understand how to spit it out

only milk, soup, , etcetera followed with water, as long as there's no solids

until a month later when it's healed we can see the dentist maybe have an open conversation  
frames sans self-censorship, caution for the sake of career, popularity, etcetera  
courageousness between existing

liking yogurt, because it's a copy of almost like a memory of swallowing pain.

# MISCONSTRUE

Edward Michael Supranowicz

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# CLEAN, WITH BRIGHT LIGHTS

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Carter Vance

It was by the afternoon when I knew what this all meant. It meant another half-summer of tubes into my nose and wires set on my hands, with the next half talking through a half-broken jaw and not being able to run around much. Or get my hands dirty at all. Or being able to climb something higher off the ground than the downstairs couch. But that was how it was, no use in complaining about it.

Besides, who listens to you anyways when you're twelve, even the kind of twelve that would be described as "bright" or "exceptionally precocious" by sympathetic adults? Or "weird" and "loser" by less sympathetic peers? Not that all of my peers are unsympathetic of course, it's not like I have no friends. Having no friends, at least ones that exist in a physical space close to me, might actually be easier in a way. Nothing to get taken out of so consistently, not so many in-jokes you need to be caught up on after lying in a hospital bed for three weeks. Even if my friends are the fellow bright, exceptionally weird precocious losers, at least we are each other's. Taking that patina of protection away for months at a time was the worst thing about having so much wrong with you. So many decisions made before you even could have decided, or have decided for you, that you were the kind of kid who would be in need of the company of weird friends to feel safe.

Dr. Clark was sympathetic to my silently felt plight, as he always was in that way that someone can be sympathetic when they know they don't *actually* have to modify their plans to accommodate you in any way. The smooth crop of his blonde hair cut a sharp contrast against the bland light blue of his hospital-issued smock, the chain which held his slightly worn, outdated ID card rubbing up against his neck. He'd described what was going to happen, the total remaking of some essential parts of my face to allow for better breathing and lessen the risks of catastrophic underbite later on, and I looked past him to the public health notice he'd posted behind him. It was some standard agency thing about taking a cautious attitude towards drugs,

alcohol, smoking, random teenage sex. I couldn't decide if he'd been ordered to post that up as he was the designated doctor for troubled youth (not that I was particularly troubled, or even quite yet to the point where I could be described that way), or he just liked the message. He did have a certain clean-living WASP vibe to him. The type of guy you could have imagined endorsing filtered cigarettes with a stethoscope wrapped over his shoulders if this were 1957. But of course, it wasn't, so, he'd have to tell you that smoking kills and you should take a run every day and drink lots of water. But not in a judgmental way, which was helpful considering the way parts of me were starting to slouch and droop inside my clothes in ways that couldn't be attributed to baby fat or considered in any way cute.

My mother wrestled out the green notepad she kept in her purse and jotted down a few of the things Dr. Clark was saying. Much of it was technical, big medical words for different types of small bones, so I wasn't sure what she got out of writing them down. Maybe it helped her to feel that she had control of the situation by writing it down, making it concrete in that way. Sort of like how people driving in cars feel they are masters of the situation and never going to get into an accident, even though really whether they make it home or not is up to hundreds of thousands of factors that they have absolutely no control over. Mom didn't like it when I said things like that, thought it was too grim for a child. She was probably right, but it was still undeniably true.

Personally, even though I thought maybe I could be like Dr. Clark one day after a lot more staring into schoolbooks, I was inclined to take it all on faith. Putting yourself under a knife like that was one big gamble. You just lie down and trust that the degree hanging on the wall behind the person in the lab coat isn't from a degree mill. Or that if it is, they at least picked up a couple of things by looking over a colleague's shoulder while playing doctor. Whenever he wasn't talking about how long I would need to recover for, or how I'd have to restrict what I could eat after it was all done, I just sort of spaced out. Not entirely, I was still in the room, hadn't decided to float out the window and down to visit the sausage guy out front, but just sort of floating in that in between.

"That make sense to both of you?" Dr. Clark cut through the haze I was creating for myself. He flashed that slightly nervous, very beaming white smile of his. "It's a fairly standard

procedure. Not cosmetic, so, no cost, government covers it. But you'll probably have to get a hotel for the night before, so, you know, just budget for that."

I did like a stay at the Delta, made me feel a bit like someone more important. Though I fully realized that the *really* important families could actually afford to live in Toronto so that they didn't have to book an overnight hotel room if their son's surgery was booked at an early enough time. Mom winced a little at the price involved but let that out in a sigh quickly after. She asked another couple of questions about timing, what she could do while I was under the drugs and bright lights.

"Well, it's hard to say but a little while, so, you'd have time for lunch, maybe some walking around. We would want you to stay close, though. Don't, you know, go gallivanting around the city, looking up at the tall buildings." Dr. Clark chuckled, like it was a joke more shared between the three of us than it actually was. He then swiveled his head slightly to face me directly, "What about you? Guess I shouldn't call you little man anymore, huh, you'd probably find that annoying?"

I took a theatrically large breath in and puffed out my cheeks, feeling the dusty office air fill my mouth. I couldn't actually think of very much I wanted to know that I didn't already. This *was* going to happen, and I wouldn't have much of a summer, *again*, and I'd have to catch up on everything was school was back open, *again*. Those "again"s started to dig at the corner of my thoughts, though, like an unpleasant shard of metal plunging through a soft-soled shoe. I decided I would just ask and see if I would get a straight answer this time. Maybe I was old enough for straight answers now.

"Will this be the last one? Like, when am I gonna be normal enough already?", I said, adding a flippant edge to the second question like I wasn't actually interested in the answer. "Not that I don't like the tall buildings and all, just was wondering when we're not gonna have to see each other again."

Dr. Clark gave a little smile, the kind meant to convey an experience dealing well with teenage sarcasm. "Well, it depends on how fast you grow. Hopefully, this is the last major thing for your mouth issues. Other things, well . . . I can't really say, it's not my area. But you're a good trooper to take all this, and I know it's not fun to not see your friends for a summer."

It was a bit selfish to even think like that, I knew. After all, as my mother never tired of reminding me, these surgeries would have cost us a fortune if we lived across Lake Ontario in that land of George Bush and medical bankruptcies. Let alone if I'd been born in one of those places that my grandparents had sponsored a family's small-scale chicken farm in. Who knows just what would have become of me then? Be grateful, something deeper down was saying. It was quickly overtaken, as Mom and I stood up and walked out, past the bored admin assistant at the half-round desk, by the sort of rural-exurb resentment of having to come into these big places so often and yet never really see them bred. I hit the elevator call button harder than I should have, with a half-closed fist.

"You're getting sulky for no reason again. You do know, that, right?," Mom said, playing with the loop on her car keys. "Just be lucky you get to have this done. Can't imagine the actual costs . . .". Her voice trailed off as the metal doors opened. "Besides, it's a fast one, just two weeks from now. Can't believe how quick they were able to get you in."

She said it liked I had won some kind of prize, like they fished one lucky kid's name out of a hat and made their surgery happen faster. She was right, in a sense, at least I wouldn't have long to dwell on this pre-made, mandated decision. I looked across to her like I could have said something mean about how maybe she wishes her kid didn't come out so wrong and she wouldn't have to burn money she didn't have on Toronto hotel rooms. But I thought better of it: a ninety-minute car ride after that would have made having your jaw broken and reset in several places pleasant by comparison.

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The scuffing sound of my running shoes filled the front hall of Adam's house with a grinding echo that made his older sister visibly wince in the living room.

"Tell your friends not to ruin the floor! Christ, Adam!" she shouted, attempting to project the adult authority she had been briefly entrusted with.

I walked a bit sheepishly to the basement door, avoiding what I imagined was a silent judgement she was making of me. It turned out she was well-enraptured in something on the upstairs TV with a MuchMusic watermark in the corner. I didn't have much to worry about on that front.

“Stop ruining stuff with your being a weird snitch!”, Adam yelled up the stairs as I opened the doors. I could tell he was struggling to hear himself over the sound of digital gunfire. “Who’s there? Alyssa, that you?”

I walked slowly down the newly carpeted stairs to what adults would call a rec room. It was really a mostly unfinished basement with a couple of throw carpets, a couch, some slightly bent folding chairs and, the most important thing, a rear-screen projection TV with various consoles hooked in. Some home gym equipment which must have been newly purchased caught my eye as my feet landed on the concrete floor after the last step. Maybe Adam’s dad was finally going ahead with his plan to actually do something with the space. A thought shot briefly through me that maybe this was the end of the basement as fundamentally *ours*, Adam and the crew of misfits. But Adam didn’t seem worried enough to have even clean up the sprawl of DVD cases and soda cans from taking up their usual space. I figured I wouldn’t get too ahead of myself.

Adam craned his head back at the sound of my sock feet sliding towards him. “Oh, hey, man, sorry”, he paused the game and made his whole body do the same half-turn as his neck. “Just was finishing. What’s up? You know anything more about this hospital thing? That must suck, having to be cut open so much.”

Adam had a certain lack of tact that he fully embraced as a form of mild suburban rebellion. He was the sort of kid who would ask a teacher about their divorce proceedings in the middle of class if he had learned about it through the grapevine of town gossip. If he hadn’t been so smart, he’d probably have gotten in trouble more, but most adults who were the direct target of it tended to write it off as a quirk of genius. I wondered a lot what the flaws of mine that would have earned me more trips to the principal’s office if I didn’t consistently rank in the top five percent of test takers. Probably the same sort of smart mouth, or maybe my heavy breathing on account of my weight. Certain things can’t help but come off as a bit better when you believe the person doing them is actually very intelligent underneath the annoyance they make. I came around the edge of the couch, noticing that one arm of the imitation-leather coating had been scratched at quite severely. The jury was out on whether that has first-person shooter induced rage on Adam’s part or the family cat, Ernest, clinging for life as Adam tried to move

him. I spun one of the folding chairs around to face Adam on the couch, his face taking on a pallid glow in the reflected light of the projector beam. He rubbed his right leg nervously, looking across to the stairs again, betraying that I wasn't the person he exactly wanted to see right now. The chair creaked slightly as I sat down, reminding that I probably spent too much time sitting.

"You waiting for someone else here? You're looking over at the stairs like you are", I said shifting to find a better position on the cold metal of the chair. Adam shrugged and I decided not to go further with it. "But, yeah, man, it fucking sucks. At least a week in the hospital, same fucking thing as last time. I mean, I get it, you have to do this stuff, but, like, I could do my schoolwork and shit from the hospital. That idea that they don't want to take you out of school is for, like, the dumb kids if you ask me. Like, we know half the time we're just bored there anyways."

Adam nodded along, following me while listening to the pause screen guitar chugs from the speaker stacks to the left and right of the screen. "Yeah, I dunno, man. Guess they always have to assume all kids are the same like that. Which, you know, isn't true." He paused and took a sip of soda out of a plastic glass with a pale flower pattern. "We'll miss you down at the hall, that's for sure. Always need more hands there. Goes faster."

I wouldn't necessarily miss the sweaty, quasi-legal work of setting up chairs and particle wood stages for the town concert hall. But I would miss the \$50 of pocket money it made for us. Enough for four movies if you stretched it right. Maybe I would work once or twice late summer. If they didn't mind working with a guy who didn't talk right and drooled out of the side of his mouth a bit.

I heard a rumbling of running shoes coming across the upstairs hallway and towards the open mouth of the basement door. The steps, fast and sure-footed, could only have come from one set of legs striking against the ground. Adam and I both glanced, eager but trying to be nonchalant, and saw a flash of blue jeans and a sharp swing of newly dyed, newly trimmed hair. We each swallowed deep enough that the other could see it.

Alyssa bounded into the room with an energy I could never grasp and Adam consistently denied himself. She flopped down on the couch beside Adam loud enough that it startled him upright

and sent the controller he'd left precariously on the scratched-up couch arm falling to the floor with a clatter. He dove down to inspect the precious object, pressing buttons to make sure they still functioned.

"Hey, watch it!", Adam said, dusting the controller off and placing it delicately on the table in front of him. "I just bought that thing, you're making me break it now."

Alyssa rolled her eyes, "I don't think I *made* you do anything, you're just a klutz. How are you two, though, enjoying living like sewer people on a nice day like this?"

Alyssa was paradoxically pale for someone who tried to drag us, our whole little crew, outside as much as she did. I studied the face I'd known since before I could remember faces or work out the male from the female ones. It looked roughly the same as it always had, give or take a more prominent cheekbone. The hair which framed it, though, was always changing, almost with the seasons, and was today close-cut into coquettish punk style, with dancing strands of red and pink. Alyssa smoothed it with her hand blithely, waiting for a reply from either of us. Adam responded with only a mocking shrug, so, I decided to take on the responsibility. "I mean, we'll do something else later. I just got here, ya know?" I studied her more as she shifted around, my eyes squinting slightly in mock judgement. "What's with the new hair?"

Alyssa stretched her arms across the top of the couch, slapping Adam's shoulder as he continued fiddling with the controller. She ran her other hand through her hair, studying it in front of her before she spoke. Lately the feeling between the three of us, the closest-knitted of the weird little too-smart crew, had taken on a hesitant quality. Comments about appearances, clothing seemed to be increasingly vetted for any hint of hormonal feeling, which would of course have to be batted away as a matter of course. Still, I could admit to myself a bit of twisting in the stomach when it came to imagining doing . . . I wasn't sure what, but something more than sitting on the couch playing video games with her. Mostly, it played out in a faux-macho competition between Adam and myself, like we were knights competing for favors. Who could run farther without stopping for breath, who could get a longer *Halo* kill streak, who could finish their test faster. Of course, I was considerably floppier than he was, made chairs creek considerably more when I sat in them, and had considerably more scars running in criss-cross

patterns across my legs. Alyssa could see that as well as anyone else. Perhaps more than anyone else, I worried.

“I dunno, just wanted to change”, she said, sounding vaguely offended at having to justify herself. “You’re like my mom, sometimes, ya know? Like, why this, why that? I dunno, because I want to.”

I wanted to say something about how it must be nice to have everything that can change about you be chosen by you, and impermanent to boot. I knew that wasn’t true, though, at least not for her, but it might have felt good to say in that moment as I tried to picture what I would look like with my lower jaw pushed back several centimeters. I didn’t come up with much besides I wouldn’t be able to do that stupid scary monster face that made people laugh as easily anymore. That would be a loss.

“I mean, it looks cool, sorry, jeez”, I apologized without knowing exactly for what. “It’s like, Green Day concert hair or something. Like a girl who would go to that. It’s pretty cool.” Adam shot me a glance and then cut the tense seconds. “Yeah, yeah, it’s cool. Come on, here, we’re wasting valuable summer talking about this,” he threw a controller to each of us. “You’re luckily all of these things still work. Deathmatch. You know the rules. I want to try a new thing here.”

Alyssa bit her lip quizzically and scrolled through the options on the screen. “Adam, you know, you could be nicer sometimes. Especially since, you know?”, she said, like I had a terminal diagnosis and could keel over at curt words.

“What? Oh, like, I know, it sucks, man, this is the last time you can come over for, what, a month?”. Adam wasn’t particularly paying attention to me but did at least feel obligated to face my gaze a bit. “Just hope they don’t fuck you up too bad. Don’t, like, die or anything.” He turned back to Alyssa. “There, that good enough?”

I shifted uncomfortably, half because of the cold metal of the chair digging into me and half because I felt I had been made the object of charity. Perhaps I was acutely sensitive to this because I had been the sort of young child whose presence at play dates and birthdays was made obligatory by parents out of a sense of broader social propriety. Being tolerated, rather than wanted, was in a certain way worse than being rejected outright. At least with the latter you

didn't have to see the look on the person's face which told you everything about how they thought about you. I knew Alyssa didn't mean it all like that, and I flashed a quick smile across Adam's shoulder to let her know. She moved closer to Adam on the couch, each inch of fabric space seeming to take an eternity of heartbeats to manage. I peeled my smile away and focused my eyes back on the screen, scrolling through laser gun options.

"Well, *I'll* miss you for sure. It won't be nearly as fun without you", she said, crossing her right leg with Adam's left in a mocking gesture of distraction. "Let's play this thing, I'm gonna beat you losers, and then go outside."

Adam smirked and hit the start button on the controller, tightening the intertwine between his leg and Alyssa's. I felt something slipping down inside of me. Sliding all the way from the top of my stomach and out my feet onto the unfished concrete. The kind of thing that might have stained the old throw carpet even more than it already was had it been visible to the naked eye. It felt like having to miss out on a lot of moments like this one, for no decisions that you had actually made. But it felt more like by missing out on those moments you would be missing out on the moments that built on top of those, in an intricately linked pile of missing.

I tried to stop that feeling of spinning by focusing deeper on the hyperactive battle we were waging against each other on the projection screen.

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They'd botched it, hadn't they? Dr. Clark and that whole team of people with the degrees under glass we'd all just assumed, just taken on faith were legitimate. That's what I thought as I laid in the bed in the back corner of the shared room, seeing the pale light from the overhead lamps illuminate the dust particles in the air. Too many for what was supposed to be a sterile space, at least to my mind.

The distinct iron tang of blood in the back of my throat upon waking up was the first sign that something was amiss. If that was making itself known through the sweaty, anesthetic haze that always followed going under the knife, then it had to have been more serious than usual. A first sign that whatever fleeting chance I had at concert hall odd jobs and running around in the moonlight this year was going to be put on hold. I felt the usual drooping weight of the finger

pulse monitor on my right hand and let it drop to the small space between my side and the hospital bed railing.

I saw some flashes of movement in the small space I had to see the world between the tips of my feet at the ceiling lights. There were pale blue shapes fast walking in crisscross patterns. Whatever conscious thought I was capable of mustering could identify them as nurses, or something close to that in the elaborate hospital pecking order, but something stopped on the processing chain and they were just movements for then. I had a tiredness too heavy for even the sense-making effort required of watching the shapes move and drifted back to the comfort of dreamless sleep.

The next awakening was somehow ruder, though it came with Mom in the corner of my eye and a greater degree of privacy. I could see actual walls, not curtain rods, separately our space from the rest of the ward, and a cheery mural of cartoon animals decorated the one wall I see by turning my head slightly. There was even a window, which some light was getting through even though it seemed to be facing into an alleyway.

Mom looked up from her magazine at the sound of my stirring back to life, breathing out a combination of relief and exhaustion. She offered some words of comfort that I couldn't make out above the foggy din of my spinning thoughts and squeezed tight on the hand without a pulse monitor. I made out something about "going to get the doctor", but mainly just watched her dart hesitantly, looking left and right, out into the hallway. I groaned, my throat still slick with the blood taste, and shut eyes to a light that seemed too bright, too artificial.

Dr. Clark must have bounded in silently, either not reading my mood or trying to improve it. He shook hands with Mom and leaned down a bit to get closer to me. I obliged the gesture by propping up on my shoulder to whatever degree I could. I felt the tubes and wires stuck into me rustle about against the hospital sheets.

"Well, this is going to be more complicated than we thought, little man", Dr. Clark, not catching himself this time. "You've been in and out for a couple of days, so, we've got you stable now, that's good. The problem is, well, this is gonna take a bit to explain." He turned back to Mom, still occasionally glancing my way with one eye's corner.

I saw the scales of time falling out of his mouth as he spoke. There was a jumble of technical terms and hand motions to represent them, something about unexpected tissue damage and all that. What I got of it was “more weeks” and “if that’s the case, then . . .”. I had been prepared for a lot of waiting, this time as the others, but if there was one wish I had in that moment it would have been to run down the hallway, past the beeping machines and fragile parents, past the trapeze pig sculpture in the main entrance and out onto the busy city traffic. There I’d hail any taxi, red-and-yellow, orange-and-green, that would pass and not ask too many questions about picking up a pre-teen in a hospital gown. Then I’d ask to go . . . somewhere, my mind stopped at that point. It was all too much. I fell back to the bed.

I went back to counting the specks of dust I could see in the window light and settled my head on the pillow. I heard the whine of trolley cart wheels in the hallway, the kind that hadn’t been greased properly. My thoughts gradually drifted to how legs aligned and intertwined with each other, and how pale and numb mine would seem when school started again.

# RIGHT NOW

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Christina Gessler

I gathered up your words today:  
intolerable  
adapting  
brave

the way my grandmother wrapped up the other half of a sandwich:  
because she thought it was worth saving,  
even though she had so much of everything,  
you could just make yourself a fresh one tomorrow

but will you? there's a last time for everything

now and goodbye is in every moment:  
in this moment  
maybe all that matters is the word *and*—  
like the comfort of leftovers patiently waiting for you in the fridge

# THEY WAIT 2

Edward Michael Supranowicz

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# SOLILOQUIES

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## Noor Tannir

**January 7, 2022**

**Cairo**

5:41 PM

I reach the rehabilitation center every morning with an effortful feeling of defeat. The world has beat me. I had lost the game, as I usually do.

By the time the sun starts to set on Cairo I am in the white waiting room of my scheduled panic attack. I always expect it. I start to feel it coming, but my inner monologue aggressively reassures me that it won't happen.

After a while, I heard that conversation taking place in my head, but it ended in hyperventilation and stiff hands. My hands stiffening caused another overlay of panic. I began to feel alarmed about my uncontrolled hands and breathing, about the way I could feel my heart too perfectly, and how dry separated my lips were.

The first time this happened to me was in a mall in Maadi. Dima and Ahmed had an argument and I attempted to intervene. I had felt anxious throughout the entire car ride there and in every store we visited, until it finally broke out.

I was standing watching the exposed floors of the mall from the tip of the level we were on, holding onto the cold silver handlebar. Before I knew it, my breath turned short, quick and loud, the way it used to come onto me in my bedroom throughout university when I had a major paper to submit. While I was trying to accept my breath's speed and slow it down, and after Dima and Ahmed paid attention to whatever was happening to me, my hands went numb and I expressed what was happening out of fear of the worst taking place. I needed them to expect it.

I told them I couldn't move my fingers, and asked them to look at them. I knew they looked weird which made me panic more. The sight of my right ring and pinky finger stuck together shocked me. I couldn't get them to come unstuck. I couldn't get myself to make a fist.

I wondered if this was what mom had constantly felt in her left arm and leg. That thought made everything worse.

The second time this happened, I was outside mom's chalet at the rehabilitation center. I found Dima in front of me and Sima and Ahmed following the sound of my short breaths. It was after our daily "goodnight" to mom. She was laying in bed after a session of agitated soliloquies. I was over her head, saying my evening goodbye. I bursted out "goodnight mommy!"

She replies within seconds, "don't call me mommy. Every time you do, a piece of my heart breaks."

A strange pause took place in the dim lit room."

"Just don't call me mommy. Mommy is dead."

Within moments, I found myself outside: face snotty, breath quick and hands frozen in a signal I never planned. Sima was facing me, and I remember looking at her with a look on my face that I could not see, but that I am sure was asking "what's happening to me?"

The idea that I was panicking made me sink further into paranoia. I'm panicking, I'm panicking, and it's clear to everyone. I'm visibly panicking. I'm doomed and damaged. Dying.

A sudden dosage of air enters my nostrils, as if through a syringe. Following the shot, my breathing starts to take shape and sinks into the background of my physical happenings. The needles in my hands fall to the floor and warmth grows from my belly into my limbs. "It's okay, habibi," Ahmed declares.

**January 16, 2022**

**Cairo**

10:09 AM

I have a fantasy.

Instead of this Helwan highway I always find myself on, savoring the last minutes before I am faced with the infinite outcomes that arise when sitting with my now very different mother, I'm on the way to Chekka.

I'm on a sweet and empty gray road, in my dreamy Jeep Wrangler, exposed. I am thin and tanned. I have long brown hair that falls onto my thin linen top, in some fantasies it's lilac, in others green. You're sitting beside me, hands on the wheel. The drive is endless.

We sing perfect notes and laugh.

The windows show us the perfectly colored-in sea, and the breeze gives me the joy of a mountain drive.

The last few minutes of Helwan highway are savored no more. I step into the rehabilitation center defeated.

**February 11, 2022**

**Dubai**

10:42 PM

I took the metro home relatively early for a Friday night.

I couldn't sleep at all yesterday, waking up every hour of the night, checking my phone, switching my position, tucking myself into a colder space, and waking an hour later for the scheduled repeat.

I decided to sleep well tonight, wake up late tomorrow, have coffee in the morning, do some watercolor painting, binge-watch whatever's ready, and listen to music at the highest volume.

On the metro, self-care seems like a far destination. I ride through the entire red line, starting at the station nearest to my friend's hotel apartment, and ending at Union station. A 40-minute trip from the south-most point up to somewhere close to the border of the city, where I call my cab to take me across.

I value the way in which my life has dictated that Dubai is where I do all the anxiety-beating. I go out, I dance, I put on lipstick, I meet people and wear my nice clothes. Sharjah is my bedroom and Dubai is the guests' salon, green velvet, gold decals and all.

Sharjah, poster-ridden and colorful. Film cameras, expired film rolls, bright Zarif bedroom at sunset. Teal and sky blue at the early hours, yellow and white for the day, orange and pink through my favorite minutes, and purple and navy blue until the light comes back at dawn under a moment of lilac. I'm grateful to have found a city all for myself. There's all this space for a small girl who is too afraid to sit like a man in the first cabin of the train. A whole city that the Earth decided to give me, a city where no one lives.

Sharjah is a city only for those who have been there for decades, a city full of coffee shops open just for me. Corniches cleaned and ready for my walks, trees and bushes trimmed to my liking.

Green men lighting up the crosswalk when I press a button. Food arriving when I order it. Water where it needs to be and sun, sun, sun.

A port near my house with beautiful red, blue and green containers filled with non-explosive, totally safe material. A safe sea port that I can see from my bedroom window, where nothing will explode for me and where no one will laugh at my face for choosing the city.

Sharjah is a city that chose me and I chose it back as a naive 21-year-old, too full of shame and innocence, too prideful to recognize my own happiness, too young to understand my strength.

Blanket of Safety under the gently burning Sun. Sharjah, I'm coming home.

**February 15, 2022**

**Sharjah**

1:26 PM

The guilt has been lingering lately: crawling around my stomach and painting my dreams. The familiar voice of shame is floating and it makes the tips of my fingers tinkle.

I made a playlist yesterday, which I hadn't done in months. It brought me an intimate joy, instant inspiration. It made me spiral into a rabbit hole planning who I could be: what I could listen to, what my house could look like, what I could wear to a party and how I would dance, what I would study and where I'd live and who I could be friends with. Where I could publish whatever it is I'm writing now.

Don't you hate that feeling? That feeling of dreaming and snapping out of it? Doesn't it crush you the way it crushes me? When you wake up from a dream where you're near the one you love and the kiss was just perfect. When you spend an hour on Pinterest boards and Spotify playlists, but something stays hollow and see-through. When you try your best to conquer a feeling and it relentlessly bites you back.

But with the tips of my fingers on the perfectly-lined keyboard, the cold numb tinkle seems to trickle down.

**February 17, 2022**

**Sharjah**

6:02 PM

I go out into the sun, startled by the wish-wash sounds of passerby cars from over the fast bridge near my apartment building. The sky is creating colors, oranges and pinks floating around in my peripheries. It feels like the kind of day where you have an unexpectedly inspiring conversation with your taxi driver.

I remember Mr. Abdallah sometimes. I mostly see him in my mind through the rearview mirror of his Mercedes. He's seen me at one of my many lows as a 20-year-old girl in Beirut.

**February 23, 2022**

**Sharjah**

7:17 PM

Yesterday I told Dima about my dream where she and Ahmed joined my Zoom call with my therapist. They took up all 45 minutes of the session and I couldn't find a minute for myself.

I was afraid to reveal such a vulnerable dream to her, but I thought it could be my opportunity to express myself without saying much.

It was a nice conversation. We both opened up about our worries and expectations. We spoke about our fears, our anxieties, and our small joys all decoded in a 40-minute bound, once three-way, Zoom call. Ahmed left to catch a game of Padel.

She reheated a plate of Rez Blahem emptied from a Gourmet cylindrical Tupperware. Added the cold white yogurt near it which caused the rice to look so much hotter, it even let out more steam. Bite after bite, I told her all the thoughts that crossed my mind in that 40-minute window. She told me hers as well.

She told me about her students, I showed her my watercolors, we discussed TV shows and the latest Wordles. She reassured me of my strength and my composed behavior throughout this entire journey with mom's health, and I cried with gratitude. We ended the call as she was almost finished with dinner.

I realized I had missed sisterhood.

I missed when sisterhood could entail me laughing, smiling, and crying with no shame. I missed when sisterhood could mean me confessing what I thought were my deep dark secrets, which would turn out to be threads too common between Dima's life and mine. I missed when sisterhood meant I could behave comfortably, not overthink my posture, my hand sliding a piece of my hair behind my right ear. When I should laugh and when I should smile, when I should make whichever facial expression I'm expected to make. I had missed not knowing and not caring and just being. I had missed being Noor, pure and subtracted from this layer of thick cellophane that the world has passed onto me.

**February 25, 2022**

**Dubai**

2:54 PM

I remember Cairo as if through a piece of blackened glass smeared with Vaseline. I'm not even trying to be clever or outsmart whoever will read this - it seriously resides in my mind through blur and blackness.

I remember Cairo as a taxi passenger, in the backseat and anxious. I remember Cairo as a world framing my novel of choice. I remember Cairo to my right side and my sister to my left, my brother winking at me through the side mirror in front. I remember it smelling like Beirut sometimes, and looking nothing like I've seen before. I think that bothered me, that I could never pin down any similarities between Cairo and the other geographies my life had known.

The corniche in particular made me anxious. It looked like Beirut's corniche but even larger, and more crowded. The destination was either home or hospital. I wasn't sure which trip felt worse, but I remember on one specific Friday, the trip to the hospital felt as stiff as sculpture. In Cairo, it feels like you are at the center of the world. It feels like the world is caving in, but almost in a satirical way. It feels like anything and everything could be a huge prank the world is playing on you. Maybe what I'm meaning to say is that Cairo didn't feel real. This could be a result of my chronic denial, a denial I deny even having. It could be how minute you feel in the city. It could simply be that I thought I was losing my mother and no one knew it.

I remember Cairo alone, despite always having either sibling with me, and usually my sister's friends, her dog, and most of the time, mom. I still remember it alone. I remember

visiting the hospital to see mom and finding that it was not really her. I remember visiting these places as if I were visiting a grave. They called it a visit but to me, it never felt like I was visiting someone I knew. It never felt like a “visit”. You know, that thing you do where you get dressed, look your best, and take a trip to see someone you know and love. I could think of a lot of reasons why our visits to see mom never felt that way, but deep down I know the biggest reason was my brain.

I think I refused to really fully engulf myself in a Cairo that housed my sick, unconscious, unfamiliar, aging, and dying mom. I refused to really exist in a time and place where Asma was not herself, or where the world finally beat her at their endless game of table tennis.

I usually connected with the city I found myself in in a primitive, childish way. I kept fighting it. I fought to exist as a passenger without a book in my hands, or one earphone inserted in my left ear. I refused to stay up late, drink Karak and watch movies. My body physically could not stand the idea of engaging with a life that looked like mine at the time. My body rejected staying awake past a time that I didn't need to be. I think I lost the joy that comes with staying up at night for no reason. I lost the perspective of just doing something for the heck of it. In Cairo, I did nothing for the heck of it. Everything had a purpose, or else it was filled with shame.

I remember purposefully staying up the entire night once when I was 13. I used MSN messenger and music on MySpace to keep me company. Through the internet-hungry rabbit hole that night threw me into, I came out of my dark room at 6 in the morning, having fully discovered the magic that was Daft Punk. I sat on the balcony couch still amazed by Human After All. I got shouted at by my sister and mother that day, who really didn't like the idea that I stayed up all night sitting on our computer desk. I think that was the first time I ever truly felt inspired by something. It could never be healthy to find inspiration and perceive it as a sin. I felt like a criminal.

I never stayed up past 11pm in Cairo. I also blamed this on the inevitable panic attack I would be woken up by the morning after. I saw it coming, so I figured I might as well sleep earlier, just to compensate.

Cairo was just as dark and blurry between my waking hours of 7 and 11. As strong as the sun strikes and as fast as its rays, it could never light up what were my darkest days. Feeling

overwhelmed by all the tireless roundabouts in my sister's neighborhood, I would take pictures of wherever I truly saw the sun. In some instances, I saw the trees and the sun shining on the dull concrete ground and forgot why I was in this city. For a few seconds, I could really be a professional pretender, and sometimes I would notice and just shamelessly let myself continue. That happened on nights at Khan el Khalili, dinners in restaurants, lunches by the pyramids and my birthday celebration. I shamelessly let myself pretend I was just visiting my sister.

I shamelessly pretended the Cairo sun could burn all my darkness away. I pretended the orange sun setting on the Nile could erase my Uber trip's destination: a fantasy of heading anywhere.

On those trips, the hospitals eventually got closer, and I got more anxious. On those trips, the sun could only burn so much.

**March 2, 2022**

**Cairo**

1:11 PM

I remember it. I remember it like you remember a movie projected on the scratched whiteboard of your grade-school classroom. I remember it with light leaking onto it through the room's broken blinds.

I remember it sensually, feeling the blood rushing to my knees and my head. I remember my white and greasy palms. I remember fixating on the billboards and the betrayal of traffic around us. I don't remember our Uber driver, but I was sure he could tell. He could tell that the three characters in his car were going to remember the trip.

I remember wearing Ahmed's cardigan and being so angry with myself at how slowly I tie shoelaces. I felt like a kid again, being driven to and yelled at by new parents.

I remember it like it was a movie I was in, a movie where I shared the blood of my character.

I remember the white corridor and the hospital staff. I remember pacing between two thoughts like a fleshy tennis ball. The surfaces of both thoughts are so rough, like falling on gravel. One side of the gravel meant I was to be motherless within moments. I grounded myself

in that gravel. You're motherless and miserable and mourning and you accept it. I felt that gravel brushing on my skin until that moment where I was falling head-first into it.

I found pieces of that gravel when I packed my bags, making sure I had enough black clothes and had only the necessary makeup I needed to hide tears of grief. I pictured what a funeral-friendly makeup look consisted of and packed it.

As we were arriving at and running towards the hospital with untrained shaky legs, I felt like an idiot. Falling into the gravel, I almost wanted to pour more on top of my fallen body. I wanted to bury myself in the cold, dry, powdery white gravel of motherlessness. I wanted to punish myself with an even deeper feeling of grief. I could feel that this gravel was the kind I would forever be pushed into and scratched with.

The opposing side's gravel, the second thought I paced into and out of, was my current gravel. Kinder, maybe. A gravel I would carry in my hands and pockets, as opposed to the kind you fall into and never get up from. Mom could still be alive, just not the same.

A few days after this panicked rush to the ICU, we learned that we still had a mom. She would just need a bit longer to be our mom again. Kinder gravel.

**March 24, 2022**

**Cairo**

8:15 AM

Ancient, transparent

I find it fascinating that we have the same innards as any other person did years, decades, and centuries ago. I wonder if this stops being fact the further that we head backwards in the timeline, but to a certain amount of years ago, I believe it remains true.

I wonder how my innards have changed from when I was a young girl to this day. What I know for sure: more cysts on my ovaries, more fat in my abdomen. I wonder if there are scars or marks in places I don't know about. I wonder if anyone else has the same ones and is also just as unaware. I desire this awareness so much, I always have. I desire so much to be aware of my inside workings, to be aware of how Noor's heart looks like, what my liver looks like and how bad it can get down on my ovaries. I wish to know how my endometrium sheds. Maybe that

bleeding, as any other bleeding, is my only connection with my body from the inside. That is, the parts of my body I know exist, but never see. Almost godly.

I wish we were transparent people. I wish I was so see-through that I knew exactly what was going on, full control. I wish I knew what was twisting and turning and when it would. I wish I knew exactly how it looks inside when I shake uncontrollably, what it was that has caused my right eye to continue to twitch so vulnerably since November of 2021.

I wonder whether Descartes ever had a panic attack. What about Cezanne? Merleau-Ponty? Frederic Jameson seems to be an anxious person... Lacan and Bataille, maybe?

I wonder whether Albert Camus had a panic attack when he got the call.

I wonder if the anxieties I feel and continue to fear are occurrences so ancient. Simultaneously, I wonder if this knowledge could ever console me like I want it to.

Does it being ancient make it less hurtful? Any less dangerous? Any less incapacitating?

Does it being ancient save me from its pain?

I wonder if the fact that everyone comes from a mother could mend my relationship with mine. Could it be that I can learn to view motherhood as a scientific and ancient human rule, and not as the natural perfume of Asma's skin? Even in her coma, intubated, un-showered with matted, half-buzzed-off white hair, and a crippled left side, she still smelled like my mother. It is the only thing she's retained that I know for certain. It is the only way I would know it was her if I were to lose the rest of my senses too.

In a hospital bed near the Nile river, where passersby walk fast and where cars swoosh by even faster, there, barely alive, sat my mother when my eye first began to show me its twitch. Every day had been a bargain during that time. We expected the call at any minute. My right eye expected it, the breath going in and out of my nostrils expected it, my two feet, my knees, my chest, my stomach all expected it. I wished to have been able to speak to my organs and prepare them. I wished to have had a chance to explain to my knees that I needed them to be firmer. I wished I could have told my right eye to save its coping mechanism for later. I wish I could ask my stomach to be kinder, my hands to be calmer.

I wished I was fact, ancient and transparent. I wished I was science.

# A NOTE FOR CAN YÜCEL

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## Carl Boon

In Turkey in Datça  
where it rarely snows  
and the radio tells the news

I walked along gravel  
with Ahmet the Almond Seller  
to the marina to watch

the water. On a bench  
scratched with unhappiness  
he told me of Can Yücel

who wrote poems  
of things that could've been  
and things that never were,

peace and exploding elbows,  
mold and what it means  
to be a vowel in a world

of consonants. We drank tea  
at the Mermaid Café, his sugary,  
mine plain, then went

to where the cobblestones  
crossed old soil, the old world,  
and I cried because

he cried, and I can't explain this  
to my mother or you  
except to say we were men

among a more decent man.  
Neither of us were poets.  
We only had the sea,

and though it sang it didn't  
sing to us. And though it was  
it wasn't ours.

# SCENES FROM KHARKIV

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## Carl Boon

A cat prances past  
Heroes of Labor Avenue  
and forgets to pause  
when the numbshock  
of more artillery  
smashes a building two blocks away.

Very pregnant, she has the future  
to protect, but even the tedious,  
twitchy catmind knows  
shelter's no longer shelter  
and fear and disgust  
soon become weariness.

A girl watches her  
from a third-storey window  
and no longer thinks of why—  
only of if—if she thinks at all. She, too,  
has grown used to it: the barrage,  
the same and useless ambulance

that swallows the dead,  
her mother's trembling, no ice cream.  
She always wanted a cat,  
this girl, and used to feed the strays  
at the courtyard swingset.  
A cat, she thought,

would match her moods,  
excuse her from the lame  
mathematics of school and life and  
her ranting vodkafather,  
but these days distance is enough.  
There are things more terrible

than moods and loneliness,  
things of sky and earth  
that soar and ruin so near, so near.  
A building has fallen, another might,  
and across them all the kittens  
might be beautiful.

# HALE-BOPP

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## Roger Hart

**D**elmar wanted to talk about Heaven's Gate and the mass suicide. I wanted to talk about the comet although, in a way, the two events were related. The comet, much brighter than Halley's, even brighter than Hyakutake had been the previous year, would take its lap around the sun and be gone. The members of Heaven's Gate, almost forty of them, thought the comet signaled a message from space or aliens, and to toast the visitor they drank vodka laced with phenobarbital.

"You know," Delmar said as we walked down the railroad tracks, Delmar balancing on one rail and I on the other, "they took out alien abduction insurance. Is that crazy or what?"

My father had recently been sentenced to prison for murder, and I was in no mood to talk about people killing themselves. "Crazy," I said. A pair of yard-sale binoculars hung around my neck and if the sky cleared later, I'd get my first close-up view of the comet.

Delmar insisted, despite my one word response, on explaining. "They thought it was an alien ship and hoped it would take them to a better place. Killed themselves two weeks ago and no spaceship has picked them up yet."

A woodcock flew up next to the tracks, spinning in tight circles like a derelict rocket, tweeting as it climbed higher and higher. I lost my balance watching the bird's antics and slipped off the rail. I waited, hoping to see it resumed the strange mating flight, but it remained on the ground, maybe waiting for the female to respond. I stepped back on the rail and continued my tightrope walk forward.

Delmar had ignored the bird and now walked ahead of me, still talking as if I were next to him. We were physics lab partners at Unity High School and on our way to Jennifer Coover's birthday party, an invitation that had surprised us both. Delmar was smooth-skinned, thin, effeminate, and moved with more of a glide than a walk. He wore a silver earring, had shoulder length black hair, and a wispy want-to-be moustache. He could have passed as Prince's twin

brother and encouraged the comparison by wearing purple pants. I was the new kid in school, my mother and brother and I having moved to Unity after my father's trial. We wanted to escape the stares, suspicious looks, and endless questions.

"I wouldn't have done it," he said, waving his arms to keep his balance. "Not even if there was a spaceship and the aliens were giving away pizza."

The tracks ran through the Appalachian foothills of southern Ohio, surrounded by forests and large rock outcroppings. Giant swaths of bluebells, trillium, violets, and white toothwort bloomed in the woods. Woodpeckers knocked on the trees and spring peepers sang louder than Delmar's belting out "Purple Rain."

"Hey, Russ. I'm Philippe Petit." Delmar spun around on the rail, took a few steps toward me and then spun back around.

"Yeah? I thought you were Prince. Who's Philippe whatever?"

Delmar dropped his arms to his side and stepped off the rail. "Really? He walked the tightrope strung between the World Trade Center Towers. You've heard of the Twin Towers, haven't you?"

I'd never heard of anyone walking a tightrope between the Twin Towers and thought Delmar was making it up, but I said, "Oh yeah, the Philippe guy." Delmar jumped back on the rail, and we continued walking. He'd said Jennifer lived on a farm and had horses. It was only a couple miles by way of the tracks.

Moving to a new school had its challenges. The bully lets you know who he is right away. Maybe it's a not-too-subtle shove that slams you into your locker as he passes in the hall. Maybe it's a foot tripping you as you walk down the aisle in history class. Sometimes it's a quick punch to the elbow that sends your books flying when your arms are loaded. Some bullies do it all. It's a challenge, a dare. He's telling you he's top dog and if you don't like it, well, do something about it. You're in this alone. Not only are you the new kid without any friends, the rest of your classmates snicker or smile when you and your books go flying. Charlie Palm added his own twist. When he walked by my locker he'd cough *killer*.

Delmar and I eventually arrived at an old two-story house with a wrap-around porch and a red barn that leaned to one side. More than a dozen cars lining the gravel road and dirt drive

signaled we'd found the party. "Wannabe," blaring from oversized speakers in the backyard, competed with screams from a volleyball game already in progress. Beyond the barn a path led up a steep hill to a clearing, an ideal place where I might view the comet later.

Delmar danced his way toward the volleyball game as I watched a fat man waving the smoke away from a grill. As I approached he stepped back. Coach Coover looked at me for a moment, his eyes watering. "Russ, right?" he said, his voice choking from smoke.

"Yeah, yes. Russ. Coach."

He eyed the binoculars hanging around my neck.

"Thought I'd check out the comet later," I said.

He nodded as if everyone came to the party with binoculars.

"Russ!" Delmar yelled. "You're on our team. Hurry up. We need help."

Coach pointed at a picnic table next to the grill. "You can leave your binoculars there while you get in the game."

Because I was tall I was pushed to the front line across from who else? Yeah, Charlie Palm, who had the sloped forehead, bushy eyebrows, and prominent jaw of a Neanderthal. He smelled of booze.

As the ball came over the net in my direction Charlie coughed, "Killer."

I tried to spike the ball at his face but slammed it into the net. Those on Charlie's side clapped and cheered. On the next serve Charlie made a sizzling sound and jerked like he was being electrocuted.

The ball went back and forth, each side cheering a successful return, groaning when a serve was lost. When the serve changed sides and the other team rotated—Charlie moving away from me—a girl took his place. She wore ripped jeans and a green sweatshirt with the outline of a butterfly on the front. "Russ?" she said, bending down as if her voice wouldn't carry through the net. "Russ?"

I squinted, leaned closer, trying to remember. "Cass?" I hadn't seen her for five years. We'd been sweethearts for several weeks one magical summer and here she was, older, prettier, no longer the kid who briefly lived across the street.

"Russ?"

Her dimpled smile suggested she was amused.

The future me shouted: This is the one! Friend, girlfriend, the love of your life. The present me didn't know what to say. Fair-skinned with a splash of freckles across her nose, her cheeks flushed as if she'd been running. The volleyball smacked the back of my head.

"You've grown," she said.

"You, too." I said, immediately regretting the way my comment might be taken. Yeah, she was taller, a lot taller, but she'd grown in other ways, too, and the baggy green sweatshirt didn't hide the fact.

Delmar tapped me on the shoulder. "Rotate."

I waved him around me.

"Where . . . What . . . How . . . I haven't seen you in school," I said. "I mean I just moved here a couple weeks ago, so I . . . I just thought . . . You look different. You look . . ."

She bared her teeth. "No braces. Jennifer's my cousin. I've been back for a couple days. I'm staying with my grandparents." She shrugged. "Wow. Here we are."

I sensed she'd changed, grown up, matured, all that stuff, more than I had. She'd sprinted into the future while I'd lingered in the past. Before I could ask more questions—and I had quite a few—the ball came over the net, and, hoping to impress her, I dove for it, landing on the ground. She reached beneath the net with an outstretched arm and pulled me up. We held hands a longer than necessary.

"Would you two get your heads in the game?" Delmar said.

The team on the other side of the net rotated, and I no longer paid attention to the score or who was supposed to serve. Cass and I exchanged a quick glance. *Isn't this something?*

I met her the summer after seventh grade. Her father was in the Air Force, and during a transfer she stayed with her grandparents, who lived across the street from us. The day after she arrived, she was sitting on the steps of the front porch blowing dandelion puff into the air, and I walked over to see her. "Took you long enough," she said.

During the day we went for long bike rides along the towpath of the Hocking Canal. At night we shot basketball at the lopsided hoop hanging behind Doctor McMullen's garage or played Hearts on her grandparents' front porch.

She stayed with her grandparents a month. The night before she left we rocked on the porch swing until after midnight. Neither her grandparents nor my parents noticed or cared. “I’ll be back,” she said in her best Terminator voice. And here she was, like a comet making another loop around the sun.

Annie Lennox blasted across the yard and echoed in the trees that ran along one side of the horse pasture. When “I Only Want To Be With You” began, we passed grins back and forth. Words between us had been few, but we knew.

We knew.

After the volleyball games died and the sun set, Jennifer’s older brother started a campfire. Marshmallows, graham crackers, Hersey candy bars, and more hotdogs. Cass and I stood side-by-side pretending not to notice each other while our hands brushed and fingers occasionally linked.

“Want to see the comet?” I whispered.

She nodded.

We were walking way from the campfire when Jennifer tapped me on the shoulder. “You’ve met my cousin,” she said.

I tried to stifle my grin. “Yes, I, she,” I said.

Cass said we were going up the hill to see the comet.

Jennifer looked at me, then Cass. “Stay on the path. It starts by the barn. Have fun.” She smiled like *have fun* was code for something else.

The sun had set, and we held hands as we carefully picked our way up the hill to avoid tripping over exposed roots and rocks. I didn’t know what to say. I felt she’d already figured everything out, and I’d come late to the movie.

“So,” she said, “how are your parents and brother?”

Perfect example of how she was ahead of me. I mean more mature. Sophisticated. You name it. She was asking about my parents, and I wanted to forget the comet and kiss her.

“My father’s in prison.”

“Prison! The guy who made us popcorn?”

“The same. My mother worries what everyone will think of us. My brother found religion and is pushing everyone else to find it, too. How are your grandparents?”

“Wait. Prison? What? Why?”

“Murder.”

She stopped, maybe trying to determine if I was joking, maybe trying to figure out how the guy who made us popcorn murdered someone.

I waited for her to respond, maybe pass judgment, but she only shook her head as if it was all too much to believe.

“And?” she said. “How are you with all of this?”

No one had asked me that question, and I wasn't sure how to respond. “Don't know. Guess I feel guilty. Angry. Embarrassed. Confused. Take your pick.” I shrugged. “But now, here, I'm happy. Your turn. How are your grandparents? Your family?”

The trees lining the path created a canopy that blocked out the starlight. We walked slow and hunched over, trying to see where we were going. Her hand was warm and soft.

Cass sighed. “My grandfather's getting old, just celebrated his sixtieth birthday. Grandma's fine.”

“A normal family, then,” I said, hoping I hadn't sounded as jealous as I felt.

Cass tripped, caught herself.

“Ha! There's no such thing as a normal family. They're all screwed up.”

We reached the top of the hill, found a boulder, and sat there, our feet dangling over the side while we whispered back and forth. She said she worked part-time as a waitress at the Dinner Bell and went home smelling of fried chicken. She'd been accepted into the California Institute of the Arts in the fall, although her parents thought art was a waste of time and frequently asked what she planned to do for a living.

“Your turn,” she said. “What about you?”

I said I'd stocked shelves at the local grocery until we moved, and I was looking for another job. I told her I wanted to go into science, major in physics. I didn't mention college might not be possible, not right away.

Family and jobs and college. I wondered if we were circling a more important conversation or if this was as far we were going. I looked at the sky. Polaris, Bootes, Virgo. Then I spotted the comet. “There,” I said, pointing.

She pressed the side of her face against my outstretched arm.

The moon was not yet up and stars filled the sky. She smelled faintly of vanilla, and her leg pressed against mine as we leaned into each other, the binoculars hanging around my neck. An electric current ran through my body.

She took the binoculars and aimed at the sky.

My eyes had adjusted to the dark and while she gazed at the comet, I focused on her, the glimpses of skin visible in the slices of her jeans, the rise and fall of her sweatshirt with each breath, and the scar on her earlobe.

She sensed my looking and smiled. “Wow. Oh wow,” she said, still staring at the comet. “The scar is from an earring that was yanked out.”

She knew what I was thinking before I did.

We passed the binoculars back and forth.

Hale-Bopp was magical. Stretching across the sky, the two tails, one blue and one white was spectacular.

Soon, others climbed the hill to take their turn viewing the comet. There were oohs and ahs. A few lingered while most, eager to get back to the campfire or whatever games they were playing in the backyard, rushed down the hill. Jennifer’s father, Coach, smelling of charcoal smoke, came up and joined us, reminding us there was more food, more pop, back at the house.

Like his daughter, he told us to have fun and be careful not to cross the fence.

A gibbous moon rose above the horizon, signaling it was getting late. The music and laughter in the backyard faded and the campfire, visible earlier, died down. We were lying next to each other on the rock, staring at the stars. “This is something,” I said.

“It is,” she said.

Then Delmar showed up. “Hey,” he said. “I heard there’s a comet up here.”

He gave us the run down on what was happening at the party, who had paired off with whom, how a toasted marshmallow landed on Lydia and burned her leg, and that the birthday cake was a bit stale.

Soon after he finished his party update and before he had a chance to check out the comet through the binoculars, Charlie Palm and Bob McDowell staggered up the hill.

“Oh shit,” Delmar whispered.

“Well, well, well,” Charlie said, a beer can in his hand. “What kind of party do we have here?”

Delmar pointed at the sky. “We’re looking at the comet.”

Charlie spun around, looked at the sky and almost fell over. “You don’t say,” he said, stepping closer. Bob stood off to the side, a sneer stretched across his face.

Charlie stared at Delmar like he was trying to remember why he’d come up the hill. I tried to refocus his attention. “Want to look?” I asked, holding out the binoculars.

“Delmar?” Charlie said in a sing-song voice. “Come here, my little friend.”

Delmar stepped back. “Leave me alone.”

As quick as a snake, Charlie grabbed Delmar, wrapped him in his arms and carried him to the fence and dropped him on the other side. “Delmar,” he said, “we’re gonna fix those ugly pants.”

“Leave him alone,” I said.

Charlie laughed. “What? You going to kill me?”

“No, Charlie,” Delmar pleaded. “No! Let me go!”

I handed the binoculars to Cass. “Leave him alone,” I yelled.

Charlie and Bob let out a whoop and began dragging him by his legs through the pasture. Delmar looked like a bronc riding cowboy getting dragged behind a bucking horse with his feet caught in the stirrups, and I, like the rodeo clown, jumped the fence and raced to save him.

Delmar’s pants and back were exposed to everything the horse pasture had to offer.

Cass yelled for them to stop. Delmar yelled. I yelled.

Charlie and Bob laughed and whooped as they dragged Delmar in a large circle, the two horses watching from the corner of the field.

I caught Charlie by the arm. My fist was clenched, and I was about to swing when lightning flashed behind my eyes and my mouth exploded in pain. I landed on the ground. “You’re next,” Charlie said, still holding Delmar’s leg.

There was a sharp thud, and Charlie dropped to the ground like he’d been shot.

Cass stood between us, the binoculars hanging from the strap in her hand. Charlie wasn’t moving.

“Delmar?” Cass said. “You okay?”

Bob let go of Delmar’s other leg. “Charlie, get up,” he said.

Charlie didn’t move.

Bob nudged his shoulder.

For a second, I wished him dead. And then, I was afraid he was. “Charlie!” I said. He didn’t move. I was sick to my stomach. We’d go to prison. I’d never see Cass again. Who should we call? The police? An ambulance? Shouldn’t one of us run down to the house and get Coach? I had a flashback to my father’s trial, to what it had done to my mother and brother.

Cass turned to Bob. “Go get Coach. Tell him to come up here, tell him I got Charlie. Go!” she said.

Delmar wiped his hand across the seat of his pants and slapped Bob on the side of the head. “Eat horseshit,” he said.

Bob, momentarily stunned, stood over Charlie.

Charlie blinked.

“He’s okay,” I said.

Charlie looked around like he’d dropped something. Blood ran down the side of his face. Bob put his arm around Charlie’s shoulder and they staggered toward the fence and down the hill.

Cass let out a sigh of relief. “We need to get the two of you cleaned up,” she said.

I picked up my binoculars. Glass clinked inside.

“Oh, God. I’m so sorry,” she said. She took the binoculars and held them to her eyes.

“Russ. . .”

“It’s okay,” I said.

Delmar stomped in circles over the humiliation he'd experienced. I wiped my bloody lip on my shirtsleeve.

"The barn," she said.

There was a spigot and hose on the pasture side next to the large sliding door. Cass told us to turn around and bend over. Then she hit us with a cold stream of water. The moon was higher now, but we were standing in the shadow of the barn, and I couldn't see Delmar, how he was holding up.

Water ran down my legs and into my shoes. At times Cass's aim was off—I think it was intentional—and water sprayed my back. She moved closer. "Drop your pants, Delmar, and I'll spray your underwear. You can drop your pants, too, if you want, Russ."

Delmar dropped his pants. I did not.

It scared me what had happened, what could have happened. I wanted to erase the past twenty minutes and go up the hill and sit on the rock with Cass. Eventually, when she turned off the faucet, Delmar and I were soaked from the waist down.

The party had moved indoors. Charlie's car was gone. "I'm going home," Delmar said. His voice was soft, unlike the voice that had been singing "Purple Rain" earlier.

"I have to go now, too," Cass said. "Promised I'd be back before too late. They'll worry."

Cass and I stood at the end of the drive while Delmar waited a respectful distance down the road. We hugged each other and unspoken promises went back and forth. Later, I'd think of a hundred things I wish I'd said.

"I hate him," Delmar said.

We were walking down the tracks, on our way home, and I was thinking about Cass.

"Charlie," he said. "I hate him."

"Don't blame you."

That seemed to satisfy Delmar and I went back to thinking about Cass. Far up ahead a car crossed the tracks. Beyond the trees a faint security light burned next to a small house. Crickets and spring peepers sang. Hale-Bopp, always on course, would circle the sun and head back into deep space. The universe was sending a message if I could only understand what it was saying.

"Think we'll see it again?" Delmar asked.

“In four thousand years,” I said.

Delmar stopped. “Four thousand years! We’ll be dead.”

Time. When would I see Cass again?

I was on the verge of an insight into love, false hopes, false steps, and the short time we’re alive, how one man walked a tightrope between the Twin Towers and forty others died trying to meet a ghost starship full of aliens. A cloud passed over the moon. Delmar disappeared in the dark, and it was impossible to see where I was going or what might be waiting up ahead. I fell off the rail, and all insights were lost.

# MY OLD BUSHIDO

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Joseph Hardy

## MY OLD BUSHIDO

no longer carries me

*Bushido*, being the way of warriors  
of self-sacrifice and honor in feudal Japan.

Although I did not know the word then,  
it was a promise I made to myself as a child.

Something I found in boy's books, written  
decades before I was born, whose heroes

spoke of *pluck* and *grit* and unsparing  
humility that would win the day.

Stripped-down, it had the chill beauty  
of polished steel. Was guiltless in its poverty.

Meant nothing could touch me.  
Nothing would be enough.

Useful, I found, in schoolyards  
where boys make rules and choose sides

and years later, navigating faceless buildings  
where money and meaning are confused.

But now, more like a faithful old sedan, a Buick  
or Lincoln town car, left up on cinder blocks.

Something I maintained with pride for years  
then abandoned, wanting more.

Wanting someone closer  
than its clean and soothing emptiness.

# Reflections/snoitcelfeR

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Scott Beard

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This is the tangled mess of letters I read as they bleed through the paper that d

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of an empty jar. I stare past the letters and see my reflection/noitcelfer in the glass, but the rain *blurs* the image.

It's her handwriting. Her capital "I's" always have e l o n g a t e d waves on the tops and bottoms that would run across the entire page when she got too carried away. The paper is ha

ng

ing on the glass with a piece of Scotch tape, losing its adhesive in the wet and cold morning. The wind *b l o w s* again, and I feel it stabbing at my back. The spray tickles my face. I leave the note on the wet glass and go inside.

She's at work now and the house is clean. The piles of clothes: dirty shirts  
mud-stained jeans  
underwear  
socks  
have all been t h r o w n across the floor. The hallway closet door is open, and I notice that her pink suitcase—the one I bought her for her girl trip to Hawaii last summer—is missing.

In the kitchen, the fridge is still FULL. I reach for a bottle, listening to the rain dance like popcorn on the roof.

K c a b in the living room, the couch is empty, getting cold from the slow draft that breeches the old windows that have shif

ted so much they don't close all the way anymore.

The fireplace hearth is cold. There is no fire there, only the black embers of flames that once burned. The mirror we got as a wedding gift from my aunt still hangs above it. A picture still

rests on the mantle. Her soft blue eyes stare back at me. I can hear the breeze that has pushed her hair up; it is warm, familiar. But now, those memories lay b

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d.

Now, I hear a knock, but when I get to the door, no one is there. I step onto the empty porch. The rain has stopped now. I stare out across the lawn, over the hills to the east, but it's still **dark** there.

I turn to go in. I see her note from the inside of the cold and damp glass of the storm door: *I just don't think this is working out.* I see my noitcelfer /reflection in the door. The cold air hits the glass. For a moment, I can see her face staring through the fog. I close my eyes again, but when I open them, all I can see is an image of me.

# BURRELL ROAD VOICES

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Ann Calandra





# MEMORIES OF A QUIET PAST

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Tom Wade

I

**I**t was a July afternoon and hot. I heard a deep voice singing in the distance, coming from a field adjacent to our yard. Though it was faint to my ears, it had to have been resounding at the source, as I could make it out over the popping clamor of an old John Deere tractor. My dad was singing a slow ballad I didn't recognize. I have overheard him intoning to himself before, but this was my first recollection of thinking this habit was idiosyncratic. I watched him as he drove a tractor the same shade of faded green as the grass and weeds he was cutting. Although his crooning was rhythmic and steady, it bothered me. He was singing for no one other than himself, disclosing contentment I seldom witnessed.

The singing was a variant of Dad's self-talk. A farmer, he kept his own company as he worked alone. I can picture him wearing heavy work jeans and a blue denim shirt like those favored by young revolutionary types in the nineteen sixties and early seventies. He had a small herd of dairy cows, and his main chore was to milk them twice a day. Twenty to twenty-five times, he would place a milking machine by the side of a cow as she ate grain from a trough, a stanchion around her neck to keep her still. He put on the suction cups, his large, strong-looking hands that, like his face, were ruddy from exposure to the sun and wind. As he went about this and his other routines, he spoke to himself in hurried, subdued utterances.

Since his soliloquies never seemed to cease, they became background noise that I grew accustomed to, as people living near airports or busy roads become acclimated to the din. Though there were moments I could make out what he was saying, I didn't eavesdrop. He never talked to us about himself, and I saw his reticence as a desire for privacy, which I wanted to honor. And I had another reason: I feared getting too close, afraid he'd reveal flashes of the insecurity and dread that erupted on occasion. He kept to himself, and I didn't want to know why.

## II

Despite his constant chatter when by himself, Dad was quiet around others. He never initiated a conversation unless he had to, such as in a store asking for assistance. And when he was talking to someone, he relied on stock phrases, “It looks like we’ll get rain.” One typical exchange I had with him was a five-minute call he made to tell me my mother had pneumonia. He said something like, “Mom’s in the hospital,” not volunteering anything else, and then answered my questions about how long she’ll be there and the severity of the illness. He had nothing else to say, didn’t ask about my family or remark on the weather. This call mirrored the other interactions we had had over the previous forty years. His shyness was contagious. Unable to come up with something else to say, I was relieved to hang up.

My dad was sensitive about his bashfulness. Once, he bought my sister a few school items at a dime store when she was with him. He got her a box of crayons, but it was the wrong type. She didn’t say anything then but later complained to our mother. Mom asked why she didn’t tell Dad, and she said, “He doesn’t talk to us.” I overheard my mother tell him what my sister said, and her tone seemed a mild rebuke for his being remote. He denied my sister’s claim, though we all knew it was true. His indignant voice trailed off as he moved to the nearby couch, speaking in a hurt whisper, loud enough for us to hear but not grasp. I glanced at him staring at the newspaper with slumped shoulders, eyelids half-closed, and wrinkled brow, mumbling. He appeared to be more ashamed than angry.

Sometimes, his behavior reflected his convulsive self-talk. Early one morning, in a back room of the milk barn, a cow pushed the top off a wooden box containing oats and began eating. Dad chased her out. A few minutes later, I went to the same bin and scooped a quart of grain for my horse. Dad didn’t know I had entered the barn, and when he heard me rooting around in the box, he thought the cow had returned. Furious, he came hollering and swearing. I froze, not knowing what to do. He barreled into the room, coming to a sudden stop when he saw me there cringing. Perplexed, I realized, after a second, his mistake. He apologized, distressed by his behavior. He acted as if he had harmed me. While startled, I wasn’t scared. I understood how the clamor I was making confused and agitated him, but I couldn’t understand his remorse, for it was

a simple mistake. As he said he was sorry, the anguish and helplessness in his face disquieted me.

When in the house, an hour later, he expressed his regret again, saying he thought the unruly cow had come back. His need to apologize once more rattled me, and I weakly said, “It’s OK.” I turned my attention to getting together my schoolbooks since I had to catch the bus. As I did, I tried to ignore his passionate and persistent replay of the scene under his breath. I have no other memories of receiving an apology from him, and he gave it twice.

### III

I suppose my dad’s behavior could be ascribed to his upbringing, although the signs are mixed. We didn’t see his parents often—some holidays and Sunday afternoon social calls once or twice a month, except for the week my sister and I spent with them when our mother went to the hospital for our brother’s birth. They were both stern disciplinarians, but what stays in my mind is our grandfather didn’t hesitate to spank us if we were slow to obey him. Perhaps he lost his patience because he was too old for a toddler and a preschooler, or it could have been that was his disposition. Regardless, I didn’t anticipate my grandpa’s short temper.

Both of our grandparents were loquacious, though my grandmother was the more talkative. During our Sunday afternoon visits, sitting in the living room or on the front lawn in warm weather, she chattered nonstop, gossiping about the farmers and townsfolks they knew. After a neighbor of theirs died from a heart attack, I went with one of my uncles to visit the man’s mother to give our condolences. My grandfather was there. He and five or six other farmers clustered around the kitchen table, ill-at-ease, not knowing what to say; after a momentary, embarrassed hush, Grandpa spoke up, consoling the grieving woman by noting her son’s thoughtfulness. Someone murmured in agreement. A minute later, during a lull, Grandpa gave another remembrance. I was struck by how he thrived around people.

### IV

My dad got out of farming when I was sixteen, leaving me in need of a summer job. Not wanting employment in a gas station or grocery store, I asked his brother Jiggs, who still made a living off the land, if I could go to work for him, hauling hay. The first summer, I labored for the money. I came back the next two summers for the fellowship.

Jiggs was outgoing, like his parents, not hesitating to start a conversation with anyone he encountered, whether friend or stranger. Unexpectedly, his gregarious nature was a balm to my anxious and uncertain emotional state. What we talked about wasn't as important as the spoken exchange. He was the first adult who didn't patronize me or dismiss my opinions (on most subjects). Much of the talk was about farm affairs—discussing if clover cut yesterday will be ready to bale today—but we sometimes veered off into current events.

He supported the segregationist George Wallace, who was running for president, and he held that Blacks were inferior, not to be trusted. Although he acknowledged, "They've gone too far in the South," it didn't stop him from idolizing Wallace. I argued with him, making clear that he and Wallace were wrong, yet, while I was sincere, my comprehension of civil rights was abstract and limited. We each knew we wouldn't reach a middle ground.

Jiggs and his wife, Louetta, could be big-hearted, traits that, for me, were most evident at the end of a workday. My family seldom had company. I remember evenings at my aunt and uncle's place, in which relatives and friends crowded their kitchen, dropping by to borrow a tool or socialize, and stayed for supper. In those gatherings of seven or eight, my shyness dissolved as I took part in the small talk and banter. Pleased with my newfound extroversion, I felt accepted.

## V

Ten years after Dad's death and some two decades after Jiggs died, I made a trip to see Louetta and her two children in Missouri. Mid-afternoon, on a warm, sunny June day, after a visit with my aunt, I went to one cousin's house out in the country; it was on a gravel road eight miles from the nearest town. Judy was in her late sixties and her husband, John, was a year shy of eighty. As soon as I drove up, Judy had me go to their daughter's place down the road a couple of hundred yards. Their daughter, son-in-law, and grandson were there. The son-in-law, who I learned had terminal prostate cancer, busied himself outside, not participating in the confab and ignoring me. Yet, their daughter and grandson gave me a friendly welcome.

We assembled in a large shed with metal siding that housed a tractor, pickup truck, various pieces of gardening equipment, and a workbench. The fifteen-foot-high roof covered a concrete floor about twenty by thirty feet, providing us an unconventional setting for catching up. But though the building was not uncomfortable, it had an unpleasant aura.

Confederate battle flags lined one wall. Four of them hung from the wooden frame, appearing enormous. I ignored them, keeping my gaze on my hosts. I live in Georgia, where the “stars and bars” remain commonplace—incorporated into the state flag up to twenty years ago and still displayed on bumper stickers and custom license plates. But I don’t recall seeing such a blatant symbol of racism in Missouri (albeit intolerance has a formidable presence in the state). While I refused to look at the odious pennants, they hovered in the corner of my eye, evoking bright-colored, poisonous vines. I’ve convinced myself they were the work of my cousin’s son-in-law (who avoided me). Although they didn’t disavow them, I want to conclude the others present saw the flags as an outlet for the son-in-law’s frustration or a sign of his independence. These emblems left an indelible imprint in my mind, but I’ve never mentioned them to anyone.

For some reason, Judy started telling her grandson, Zack, about my dad. Not calling him “Bub,” a moniker used by Dad’s family and childhood acquaintances, but that he and my mom thought demeaning, Judy told Zack about “Uncle Wilford,” using his given name. I remember few specifics because she reminisced about Dad’s personality instead of a narrative of past events, character rather than a story. She made a point about his most distinctive attribute: He hardly talked. In her account, this quality was integral to his independence. After a few minutes, John added several memories, reflecting, as Judy did, on Dad’s manner rather than relating anecdotes. He described a laconic spirit who didn’t hesitate to forego time and respite to complete a disagreeable job. Uncle Wilford was the kind of person, he said, who would work in the hayfields until everyone finished at 6:00 and then milk twenty-two cows, another two-hour chore, by himself. While Judy and John exaggerated a couple of points, everything they said was complimentary. To my surprise, when they finished, my face became warm, and my breathing became lighter as I relished a moment of pride.

Yet their tribute was in a setting evincing the belief that skin color determined a person’s value, which permeated my dad’s upbringing, and that Judy and John accepted. I feel that while extolling his worthy features, they took for granted he was like them: someone who, if not embracing it, wouldn’t be uneasy standing there in a makeshift shrine to hatred. I, on the contrary, thought of him as a person who had shed the racism of his youth. While he didn’t

respond, he seemed to agree with my mother's disapproving opinion of segregated restrooms and white flight. But though he's my father, I don't know for sure.

## VI

Genetics and the environment are powerful forces, and thus, to an extent, I'm like my dad. However, there are facets of his personality I try to avoid. Whereas I tend to say little, I become discomforted if I perceive that in a given situation, I'm too reserved, causing people to view me as aloof or, worse, shy. When this occurs, I strive to join in the conversation by posing a question or stating a bland cliché. A more pronounced divergence is how I interacted with my daughters growing up. From the days they were toddlers, I made a point of talking to them and paying attention to their remarks and questions. I spent time with them playing catch and taking them swimming on summer Saturdays. Although I wasn't a model parent, our communications were usually relaxed and not self-conscious.

When in his presence, I felt my dad's quietness, and because it was a mystery, it intimidated me, as did the anger that simmered below the surface in his self-talk and occasionally exploded. I remember when he told me to cut a board in two, instructing me to take long strokes with the handsaw. He became impatient at my clumsy attempts, and after a few exasperated words ("not that way, long strokes"), took the board from me. Incompetent and worthless and small, I stood there without reacting. Still, I remember when he fed motherless kittens that he found in an outlying barn until they could fend for themselves. And I remember when at a county fair, he watched a drunken farmer order his teenage son (who had prize-winning sheep), "Don't bring those goddamned sheep home. Sell them. I don't care where. Get rid of them sons-of-bitches." Disturbed by the tirade, I glanced at the son's stony face as he absorbed the abuse and then at my dad, whose countenance matched that of the boy. In Dad's unyielding stare, I knew he, too, was disturbed. But I couldn't tell if he saw himself in the son or the father. I departed to the carnival midway.

# ON THE EVENING OF THE BLOOD RED MOON

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Barbara Hageman Sarvis

On the evening of the *Blood Red Moon*  
I dreamt of flying back and forth, back and forth  
on a tree swing trying to touch the moon with my toes.

On the evening of the *Blood Red Moon*  
I heard the sounds of a *Spirit Raven* cawing in my ear:  
“CAW - WOW-CAW-HOT—HOT- WOW —- WAKE UP!”

On the evening of the *Blood Red Moon*,  
I WOKE



Barbara Hageman Sarvis

# COME JOIN US BY THE FIRE

---

Ella Cashman

“Come join us by the fire!” they call out to me. They are all on top of the hill, their silhouettes flicker in the light of the bonfire. Smiles stretch across their faces. I can hear my mom’s squeaky laugh, my dad cracking the top of a can of beer. My sister hunched over the flames roasting a marshmallow or perhaps poking at the embers with a stick.

When the screen door slams shut, it cuts off the light from the kitchen leaving me to stand alone in the dark. I wave my hands above my head to alert the motion sensor of the porch light. A dull bulb covered by a cracked plastic shell. Moths begin to huddle around its glow as if begging to be let in.

Between me and the fire is a long stretch of darkness. A winding, uneven path leads up to the pit. Smoke rises in plums into the night sky. Since our house is far enough from town, there are no other lights to compete with the stars. There are millions of them, gleaming in the vast blackness.

I can hear crickets chirping and other clicking, rustling sounds of the humid summer night.

A mosquito has already found the sensitive skin around my ankle and I lift my leg to scratch it.

“Come on!” My dad calls out again. I want to shut my eyes and sprint up to them but I can’t. The hill is steep and makeshift steps made from rocks and logs are more of an obstacle course than a pathway. I’m sure that during the daytime the firepit doesn’t seem this far away.

But things are different in the dark.

I suck in my breath and take a step leaving the safety of the porch light behind. My shadow dissolves into the night as I’m instantly swallowed up by the darkness.

My eyes strain to see in so I keep them fixed on the blazing light at the end of the tunnel. I resort to feeling senselessly with my feet to avoid falling. Somewhere to my left a twig snaps. My heart jumps into my throat and I stop. Every muscle tense, I peer into the darkness for what

made the sound. There is nothing there, or at least nothing I can see. Perhaps it's lurking, just out of sight, hiding in a bush or behind a tree—waiting for its chance to snatch.

I quicken my pace, my sandals slipping on the steep slope of the hill. I try to tune out the sounds of the night by humming a tune of my own.

*Hey diddle, diddle,*

*the cat and the fiddle.*

*The cow jumped over the moon.*

*The little dog laughed to see such sight,*

*and the dish ran away with the spoon.*

Is that the rustle of a rabbit looking for food in the underbrush or something ravenous stalking me? Are those little crickets that are chirping so loud? Or some creature sharpening its talons against a rock? Are those yellow eyes in the darkness looking back at me?

Something grazes my ankle and I'm sure it's a gnarled claw trying to grab me.

I take off running and I know the creatures are following in pursuit but I don't look back. They grind their teeth, chitter with laughter, and howl hungrily.

“Yes!” They cry. “Come join us by the fire.”

I fall, my knee searing with pain as the top layers of skin are scraped away. But I get to my feet and keep going. They are right behind me now—I can feel their breath on my neck, smell their foul odor, and hear their eager teeth gnash.

I lunge into the fire's halo. Safe again. I let out an almighty breath, one I didn't realize I was holding.

“Whoa there kiddo. Careful by the fire,” My dad says.

I look back. The creatures shrink away into the night, away from the light, not daring to come any closer.

“We'll get you next time,” I hear them whisper.

Or is that just the rustling of the wind?

# TO MISS OHIO: A MIDWEST ECLOGUE

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Annie Diamond

Parties underfurnished houses  
warm tomatoes on midsummer

vines September morning each leaf  
newmade April hotter than August

Barefoot first springfeeling dawn  
verdant loveletters newsprung grass

October rains earthsmell earnest  
November cold Limoncello sip

starlit cornfields folding over  
damp lawns a June night First

pond swim after winter  
mikvah like I wonder

what happened to her to that fervent  
artless kid who wanted to grow apart

from all the things she knew  
who wanted to seek a newer

world Snow in Pittsburgh  
waiting for a bus back east

It took her a lifetime to get there  
Sometimes seems I have been

gone from it a lifetime  
sometimes seems I was

never there Mud tomatoes  
pondwater the truest things I

ever touched their existence  
undeniable hers not so much

# UNDER THE TABLE

---

Michael Lockett

**W**ho cares if they ran me out of the fort in the woods. None of those boys own *Dukes of Hazzard*. Especially not Danny Drasky. Who says a boy can't play Daisy Duke?

Well, Danny doesn't know I stole his Matchbox General Lee on my way out of the fort.

I head down the path from the woods to my house. I can feel the little General Lee against my leg in my pocket. I imagine the look on Danny's face when he realizes it's gone. He might think he lost it, have all the boys search for it. He might figure I stole it, but by then, he'll be too late to catch me.

The path from the woods comes out between my yard and our neighbor Ms. Cunningham's. I step through her grass. I rip a fistful of the pink peony blossoms that grow next to her house, since they happen to be near me. I toss them in front of me, like real hard, but the pedals just float gently as I move along. Some stick to my shirt.

My mom appears from the corner of our house on her way to Ms. Cunningham's back door.

"Mom," I call out, as I run toward her.

I want to tell her what happened in the woods—well, the part about being run off. Not about the car. I reach her and throw my arms around her waist.

"Danny Dra—" is all I get out.

"Quit your whining," she says. She pulls my head against her hip.

Ms. Cunningham comes to her back door. "Hello," she says.

Mom brushes my bangs from my forehead with her hand.

We step up onto the porch.

"Shoo," Mom says to the cats on Mrs. Cunningham's porch. The cats eat milk and bread from the old pie tins Ms. Cunningham puts out. A white, a tabby, and a tiger cat all scurry off.

"Oh, the cats are no bother," Mrs. Cunningham says. Then, she waves us in the house with her arm.

In the doorway, Ms. Cunningham stoops over to kiss me on the cheek. Her lips are red and wet. She peers over the top of her glasses at me. She grabs my chin. Then, she gets her handkerchief from her shirt pocket and dries my eyes and nose.

“Did I see you out the window ripping up my posies?” Ms. Cunningham asks. “It’s a sad world for a boy who destroys pretty things. Now what’s the fuss?”

“There’s always a fuss with that one,” Mom says.

“Why don’t you go get Dolly,” Ms. Cunningham says. “Only if you can be ginger with her. She’s upstairs on the footstool in my room.”

Dolly is an old Barbie Ms. Cunningham and Mom let me play with. Only when I’m at Ms. Cunningham’s place though.

“Promise,” I say, looking deep into Ms. Cunningham’s kind eyes.

Then, I dash up the steps to fetch Dolly.

I pick Dolly up from the footstool. I move my finger across her pretty face. She’s old. Mom says from the fifties. She has curly red bangs, big blue eyes, and a black and white swimsuit. I pull the General Lee from my pocket to show Dolly. I run the little car over the foot stool at her feet.

Then I take Dolly and the General with me to head downstairs. I peek around the landing at the bottom of the stairs. My mom and Ms. Cunningham’s backs are turned at the sink talking. I think it is a fun idea to spy on them a bit, and I slip under the table. Surely, they don’t know I’m there. The lace tablecloth hangs over the sides of the table, like a roof to my very own fort. *Who needs one in the woods with the other boys?*

“You and your cats. Psst. Down now, Suzie Thomas! Nothing like a cat’s arse in your face while you’re sipping tea,” Mom says.

The kettle on the stove hisses softly.

“Don’t you mind old Suzie Thomas,” I hear Ms. Cunningham say.

With a soft thud, Suzie Thomas appears like magic on all fours near the edge of the table. A fine, fat, old tiger cat with a pink collar, Suzi Thomas stays low to the floor. It comes under the table and rubs against me. Then it slips around the leg of the table, out of sight at the stairs.

“And what a name, at that,” Mom says.

I hear a noise at the screen door. I peek under the tablecloth. I see two pairs of legs sticking out of two pleated khaki skirts. Brown nylons. White loafers. One's ankles are thick and fat, like dough. The other's are thin and nice. Not like they belong to a plump lady, though they do.

It's old Mrs. Goss, Ms. Cunningham's sister, and Mrs. Goss's daughter Mary Catherine.

"You'd have to have the good sense to know a girl cat from a boy cat," Mrs. Goss says, as the screen door creaks open. "How long did it take you, sister, five years to figure it out?" she asks.

"Oh balderdash," Ms. Cunningham says.

I lift the table cloth to get a better look.

Ms. Cunningham steps over to Mrs. Goss. She takes a covered dish and pecks her old sister on the cheek. She comes toward the table, so I slide back to the middle of it. She sits the dish on the table. It clanks above me.

"Maybe six," Ms. Cunningham says, laughing. "Hey, I don't go 'round inspecting cat genitals with a magnifying glass. I'll never forget the vet's face when he told me *she* was a *he*. So, I just added the *Thomas* for good measure. Whatever *it* was, I reckoned, *it* was up to Suzie Thomas to decide."

The women all laugh.

"Where's the boy?" Mary Catherine asks.

Even under the table, I can smell Mary Catherine's dank, old perfume and the hairspray on her perfect blue hair. Mom says Mary Catherine is awfully old for her sixties. I envision her face, which is round and wrinkly and always full with a smile.

"Up playing with that old doll again," my mom says.

I pull the doll close to my chest.

"Aren't you afraid that boy will turn queer?" Mary Catherine asks.

"Better queer than like the rest," my mom says.

I think on the word queer—I hear it means strange.

The women laugh again.

"Isn't that the truth," Ms. Cunningham says.

“Oh, there’s no harm in a boy playing with a doll,” Mrs. Goss says.

“As long as he only plays with it here,” my mom says. She raises her voice, I think, so I can hear upstairs. “His dad would stomp him into the lawn if he found out.”

“Let the boy be,” Ms. Cunningham says. “Besides, I heard you caterwauling on the porch last night, after your husband’s car tore up the road. He’s stomped you into the ground a time or two.”

The room gets quiet.

“He’s running around again,” I hear my mom say. “I wouldn’t care so much, but he spends all the money on the whore.”

“Who is it this time?” Mary Catherine asks.

“Angie Davis,” my mom says.

I put my hand over my mouth. I’ve heard mom use the word whore when she gets angry about the women who run around with my dad. Because of this, I know it’s bad. I imagine Angie Davis. She’s the lady, I’m pretty sure, that works at the little post office down the road. Bright red hair. Great big boobs. Shirts so tight they look like skin. A little like Dolly but with wonky teeth, I think, looking down at the Barbie.

“That old cat! She’d lie with anything,” Mrs. Goss says.

“Men!” Ms. Cunningham says. “The only man I had ran off with my sister. I haven’t had one cross my door stoop since.”

I imagine Ms. Cunningham, how she stands firm at her front door every time my dad comes over. What she says is true.

“Hey,” Mrs. Goss says. “Lucky you. I had to put up with him for thirty years.”

“And how long did it take you to figure out *he* was queer?” Ms. Cunningham says.

The women laugh.

“That’s my father you’re talking about,” Mary Catherine says.

“Well, I’d say in our first year of marriage. I came home and found him in my chiffon. God rest his soul,” Mrs. Goss says.

“Dear God, Mother,” Mary Catherine says.

“What can I say? The girl’s proof. I tried my best,” Mrs. Goss says through a snort.

The women laugh even louder.

I can't help but laugh with them this time. I cover my mouth again, so I don't blow my cover. My mom has a pink dress she calls chiffon. It looks like a peony. I imagine an old, bald man twirling about in it. I think Mr. Goss has been dead for a long time. I never knew him. I imagine he might look like Boss Hog from *The Dukes*. What does it hurt? I think. Girls wear pants. Why can't men wear chiffon?

The women carry on laughing and talking and milling about the kitchen. I hear the clank of china being set out on the table; the stir of a kettle coming to a soft whistle on the old cook stove; the sound of drawers opening and closing with silverware. I hear the sound of the cookie tin being pried open.

I try to keep quiet, but I can't stop thinking of Boss Hog in a chiffon. My laughter bursts and gives me away.

"What on earth?" I hear Mary Catherine say.

Mary Catherine's face appears beneath the table cloth. As she stoops, her rosy, chubby cheeks droop around her round, little nose.

"Why you rascal," she says.

"Under the table, of all places," Ms. Cunningham says.

"God help those little ears," I hear Mrs. Goss say.

"For Christ sake," Mom says.

"This is my fort. I'm not moving," I say.

Mary Catherine says, "I think any other boy might try and peek up the skirt, but—"

"I think we'll be alright," I hear Ms. Cunningham say.

The women laugh again, including my mom. Who'd peek up a skirt, I wonder. I've already seen Ms. Cunningham's plain, white bloomers on the line. I can't imagine Mrs. Goss's or Mary Catherine's would look any different. Now, Daisy Duke, curling her long, spider legs in the window of the General, that's a different story. Heck, you couldn't cram a bloomer under those jean shorts of Daisy's, I reckon. That's why I pretended to kick off imaginary bad guys on my tip-toes back at the fort, like Daisy does in heels. I tied my T-shirt in a knot above my belly

button, just like Daisy does. Well, until Danny Drasky said, “Disgusting. Man, you a sick-o or something? Really, a boy acting like a girl.” Then, the other boys said, “Eeww.”

The smell of butter crisps from the tin fills the air. Ms. Cunningham hands me one under the table. I snatch it out of her hand and take a bite. The cookie melts in my mouth and crumbles down my shirt.

I hear the women pour out the tea kettle into cups on the table.

Then, there’s a knock at the screen door.

“Hello,” Ms. Cunningham says.

“Is Jimmy there?”

I know that voice. It’s Danny Drasky. I peer under the tablecloth. I see his legs through the screen door. The other boys, too, stand with him on the porch. They have sticks, and they clank them against the floor.

“Is Jimmy here?” Ms. Cunningham calls out in the room like a mockingbird.

“We want him to come play with us,” Danny says.

I slide to the back of the table, away from the door, so the boys can’t see me. I hold Dolly firm. I hide the General Lee under my leg. I do not answer, thinking I’ve got the best of both worlds, a girl toy and a boy toy and no one to bother me.

“I guess he’s not here,” Ms. Cunningham says.

“You boys best be running along now,” Mary Catherine says.

I smile.

The boys scatter off the porch.

Suzi Thomas leaps from the landing of the stairs onto the table. Something gets knocked over and clinks above my head.

“Shoo,” Mom says, and she stomps by the table.

Suzi Thomas thuds back down on the floor. The old cat lands on its feet.

The women settle into their chairs for tea. Their legs come together under the table and wall in my fort.

# EVE OF DESTRUCTION

GJ Gillespie



# CHARLIE THE VENTRILOQUIST

---

Anthony Alas

Charlie was a loner. While the other kids played basketball and traded magic cards on the asphalt playground, Charlie sat alone. Typically, he daydreamed of far-off destinations and of being a writer. Other days, he pulled out a new novel. This helped him drift into a world that wasn't high school, algebra, or especially sports. At 2:30 pm, the school bell rang. It was freedom.

The East Village was Charlie's actual playground. He enjoyed growing up around tenement buildings, pizzerias, Tompkins Square Park, mom n' pop restaurants, and bookshops. On his walk from his school (at Third and Second Ave), to his home (on 11<sup>TH</sup> and Stuyvesant), Charlie loved the (appropriately named) "Shop of Quirk." The window display had shrunken heads, cuckoo clocks, funky paintings, and Russian dolls. Passing by the quaint shop on First Avenue, Charlie was taken aback by the new character in the window display. The puppet had enormous round glasses, a grey cardigan and slacks, rosy cheeks, and curly dark hair, it greatly resembled Charlie.

"Wow, this puppet can dress!" he thought to himself.

Charlie examined the similarities. Rather than go inside, he raced home to his apartment. The thought of the doll did not leave his head. Charlie walked up his historic brownstone. As he stopped on the stoop, Charlie couldn't bring himself to go inside. Instead, he headed back toward Seventh and First Avenue, back to the "Shop of Quirk," Charlie went in. Olga, the owner, wore her vanilla cowboy hat, western inspired blue blouse, and thick glasses, but she came with a surprise.

"Howdy, sir, You looking for something?" Olga said, with a Polish accent.

Olga studied him with familiarity. He looked around the shop. Quickly, he grabbed the puppet. Olga chuckled.

"How much is this fella?" Charlie asked.

“You wanna buy your twin? \$50. This guy has had a long journey. He moved from Cuba to New York in the 60s. That’s all I know. The owner didn’t give much description,” Olga said.

“Is that for reals? My parents immigrated from Havana in the 60s. I’ll give you 45 bucks for him,” Charlie said.

“It is for real. I met the man’s daughter. Fine, 45 bucks,” Olga replied.

Charlie walked out with the new puppet. Even in the jaded East Village, people stared at Charlie in awe. Back on his block, Charlie schlepped the semi-heavy puppet inside. He made it past his sister, Mirtha, who was distracted by her chemistry homework. His brother, Pedro, spoke loudly on the phone. It startled Charlie, but he did make it to the safety of his bedroom. Charlie’s bedroom had floor to ceiling bookshelves. He had a few posters, mainly authors; Edgar Allan Poe, Virginia Woolf, and Dorothy Parker. Charlie eyed his copy of “One Hundred Years of Solitude.” Then Charlie sat in front of his mirror with the new puppet on his lap.

“I shall call you Marquez,” Charlie said.

Charlie was able to make Marquez talk. However, but his lips were moving more frequently than he would’ve liked. It took many attempts for Charlie not to visibly move his lips. He took a breath and kept trying over and over again until concentration was finally broken.

“Charlie, why is there a fucking \$45 dollar charge on my Visa?” Magaly yelled.

“Ma, wait a second,” Charlie replied, as he hid Marquez under his bed.

Magaly barged in. She looked like a business woman, with her power suit and hair pulled back. Charlie smiled and sat back on his bed, and pretended to read “One Hundred Years of Solitude.”

“Why are you spending money? And what are you spending money on?” Magaly asked, with the the veins in her forehead moving back and forth.

“Ma, it was nothing, just some old books,” Charlie said.

Magaly noticed a lump underneath Charlie’s bed. Charlie stood closer to the edge of the bed to keep her from noticing.

“Ma, it’s just some dirty laundry,” Charlie said.

She threw back the sheets. Marquez’s eyes met Magaly’s eyes. Magaly grabbed her chest. Charlie looked back, puzzled.

“Dios Mio,” Magaly proclaimed

“It’s a doll, ma. Doesn’t he look like me?” Charlie asked, trying to break the awkwardness.

“Pedro, Mirtha, help!” Magaly screamed.

Pedro and Mirtha ran over. Both looked on in shock as Magaly fell to the floor. The three siblings tried to revive Magaly.

“Charlie, what did you do? Pedro asked.

“I’m so tired of being blamed for everything,” Charlie said.

Mirtha looked over at Marquez sitting with a smile. She looked over at Charlie.

“Charlie, you idiot. Where did you find grandpa’s stupid doll?” Mirtha asked.

“Grandpa’s doll?” Charlie asked.

“This is Manolo, grandpa’s doll from Cuba. Ma hated that doll,” Mirtha said.

Magaly woke up. She gathered herself in Pedro’s arms.

“I told Olga, not to put that doll in the display window,” Magaly said.

“This is why you have that charge on your credit card,” Charlie said with a nervous smile.

“Return it,” Magaly said.

“Return it, idiot,” Pedro responded.

“Shut up, Pedro, at least I can read, you, dumb jock,” Charlie said.

Magaly grabbed the doll in one hand, Charlie by the other. They descended into the East Village night.

“Charlie, that doll is evil. My dad loved that doll more than us. He wouldn’t talk to us without Manolo getting involved. The doll even immigrated with us. I’m surprised it survived. Immigration officers tore him apart,” Magaly said.

“Why didn’t you tell me anything, Ma?”

“I told your siblings. That was enough. I wanted to forget about him,” Magaly said.

Charlie felt embarrassed and waited outside the shop. He saw Magaly exchange Marquez through the window. Anxiety came over Charlie’s body. He felt it physically, a very jittery feeling. Magaly walked out with a smile. Charlie became depressed.

“Ma, Pedro is the jock. Mirtha is the future scientist. I’m supposed to be the artist. Every time I want to express myself, you and dad hate me for it,” Charlie said, as they walked Uptown.

“I can’t let you have that doll. I’ll put you in a creative writing class,” Magaly said.

Not the same...I want to be a performer,” Charlie said.

“I’m not paying for any future liberal arts degree,” Magaly said.

They reached their apartment. The door opened. Charlie looked at his siblings gathered for dinner. Quickly, Charlie ran into his bedroom. From his record collection, he played the “Fiddler on the Roof” sound track.

“Mijo, arroz con pollo, come and get it,” Magaly yelled.

Charlie turned up the music. He turned off the lights and drifted away. He ignored Magaly’s calls for dinner. He wandered into his daydreams.

### **Five years later:**

The marquis on First Ave read: “Off, Off, Off Broadway presents: “Charlie the Ventriloquist.” Charlie sat on stage with a full orchestra. A new puppet sat on his lap, not Marquez. Charlie wore a grey cardigan, black jeans and t-shirt that read, “The Amazing Singing Puppet,” The puppet wore a Guabayera (traditional, linen, button up, Cuban shirt). The puppet sang, “If I were a Rich Man.” Charlie sang without moving his lips. Then the crowd rose to applause after it was done. Emotions ran through him. He wanted to cry. The adulation became so overwhelming.

When the curtains dropped, Charlie returned to his dressing room and readied himself for the cold (pea coat, scarf, and beanie). He placed a leather jacket on the puppet and turned off the lights. Charlie exited the side of the theatre. Snow fell from the sky. Charlie covered his face with the scarf and carried the puppet along. Each block was more overwhelming as the snow fell more intensely. He walked by the “Shop of Quirk.”

“The Shop of Quirk,” is a yoga studio, wow. Of course, it is,” Charlie said to himself.

He walked up First Avenue. Sidewalks covered in snowbanks and black trash bags created a very New York memory. Suddenly, big brown eyes peered at him from underneath the snow banks and trash. He walked away, but curiosity couldn’t hold him back. He dug through the trash. Marquez, was there! His face filled with marks from neglect. Charlie teared up.

“Marquez meet Paolo, your new performance partner,” Charlie said.

Charlie grabbed Marquez. He opened the doors to a tenement building with a pizzeria below. He climbed up the five flights and created a new family of puppets. He would feel their love and acceptance for life.

# CONTRIBUTORS

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**ANTHONY ALAS** is a nine-times published author. His works have appeared in the Pacific Review, In Parentheses, Scribble Lit, Inlandia, Azahares Magazine, Sandstorm, and Defunkt Magazine. After many years in New York City, Mr. Alas now calls California's Inland Empire home again. He holds a Master's degree in English literature from CSU San Bernardino.

**SOPHIA BALLARD** is a student at Eastern Illinois University who will, next year, begin traveling abroad to teach English, to write poetry, and to be a playwright.

**SCOTT BEARD** has both a B.A. in Creative Writing and an M.A. in Curriculum and Instruction from Wichita State University. His writing has appeared in The Report, LEVITATE magazine, Dime Show Review, Please See Me, Military Experience and the Arts, The Showbear Family Circus, and Abstract: Contemporary Expressions, to name a few. His literary criticism has been published in the October 2019 edition of Coffin Bell Journal. He enjoys fishing, hiking, reading, writing, traveling, and ice hockey.

**CARL BOON** is the author of the full-length collection Places & Names: Poems (The Nasiona Press, 2019). His writing has appeared in many journals and magazines, including Prairie Schooner, Posit, and The Maine Review. He received his Ph.D. in Twentieth-Century American Literature from Ohio University in 2007, and currently lives in Izmir, Turkey, where he teaches courses in American literature at Dokuz Eylül University.

**ANN CALANDRO** is a writer, artist, and classical piano student. Her fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry have been published in literary journals, two anthologies, and a chapbook. Her mixed media artwork and photography have been published, exhibited, and awarded prizes. She wrote and illustrated three children's books, published by Shanti Arts. Read more at [www.anncalandro.webs.com](http://www.anncalandro.webs.com).

**ELLA CASHMAN** is a reader, a writer, and a strong believer in the Oxford comma. Her stories have previously appeared in Underwood Press, Hive Avenue Literary Journal, and Sandstorm.

**ANNIE DIAMOND** is a poet, Joycean, and breakfast enthusiast living and working on the traditional unceded homelands of the Council of the Three Fires. She has been awarded fellowships by MacDowell, Luminarts Cultural Foundation, The Lighthouse Works, and Boston University, where she earned her MFA in 2017. Her poems have appeared and are forthcoming in No Tokens, Yemassee, Tar River Poetry, Rabbit Catastrophe Review, Western Humanities Review, and elsewhere.

**CHRISTINA GESSLER, PHD**, is a historian and poet exploring what stories we tell and what happens to those we never tell. She has been published in journals including The Black Fork Review, The Grief Dialogues, Entropy, and the Santa Clara Review. She lives near the sea in a small cottage with a small dog, where she produces the weekly podcast The Academic Life.

**GJ GILLESPIE** is a collage artist living in a 1928 farmhouse overlooking Oak Harbor on Whidbey Island (north of Seattle). In addition to natural beauty, he is inspired by art history -- especially mid-century abstract expressionism. The “Northwest Mystics” who produced haunting images from this region 60 years ago are favorites. Winner of 18 awards, his art has appeared in 56 shows and numerous publications. When he is not making art, he runs his sketchbook company Leda Art Supply.

**BARBARA HAGEMAN SARVIS** is an artist, writer, educator, and activist living in Vermont after a successful career in art education and administration. During the past ten years, she wrote, illustrated, and published five children's books in addition to having 3 paintings published this past year by literary journals. Presently, she works as a gallery teacher at MASSMoCA in North Adams, Ma.

**JOSEPH HARDY**, a reformed human resource consultant, lives in Nashville, Tennessee. His work has been published in: Appalachian Review, Cold Mountain Review, Inlandia, Poetry City, and Poet Lore among others. He is the author of a book of poetry, “The Only Light Coming In”, Bambaz Press Los Angeles, 2020.

**ROGER HART’S** stories and essays have been published in Natural Bridge, The Tampa Review, Passages North, Runner’s World, and other magazines and journals. His story “Mysteries of the Universe” won the McGlenn Fiction Prize and was published in Philadelphia Stories. He recently moved to Montana where he writes under the supervision of his wife and two big dogs.

**PENNY JACKSON’S** poems and stories have appeared in magazines both here and abroad such as The Edinburgh Review, The Ontario Review, The Croton Review and The Pushcart Prize: Best of the Small Presses. Her short stories are published in a collection L.A. CHILD by Untreed Reads. Awards for her writing include a Pushcart Prize, a MacDowell Colony Fellowship and The Elizabeth Janeway Prize in fiction. She is also a playwright and a filmmaker.

**MICHAEL LOCKETT** holds a B.A. in Communications from Clarion University and an M.F.A. from Carlow. He served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Mauritania, West Africa as an ESL teacher. Originally from Central PA, he currently resides in Pittsburgh. He works as a Mental Health professional. He is a writer of short stories and is published in the Northern Appalachian Review and Prometheus Dreaming.

**THOMAS OSATCHOFF**, together with family, is building a self-sustaining home near a waterfall. Recent work has appeared in The Decadent Review, Red Coyote, Trainwreck Press, and elsewhere.

**MARK ROSALBO** was raised in Leeds, Maine. He spent much of his early childhood exploring along the banks of the Androscoggin and Dead Rivers, the latter one of only a handful of rivers in the world that can flow in either direction. Early life socio-economic hardships shaped much of Mark's artistic choices as a composer, actor, and painter. Many in his circle, including his brother, succumbed to various cancers like Leukemia as a result of living along Maine’s rivers once polluted by paper mills. After graduating from high school, Mark moved to

Los Angeles to study at The American Academy of Dramatic Arts. After graduating from AADA, he moved to NYC. He also became a successful trader on Wall St. and remained in the city until shortly after 9/11 when he moved his family to Vermont to enjoy the banks of (this time much cleaner) rivers.

**EDWARD MICHAEL SUPRANOWICZ** is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in Fish Food, Streetlight, Another Chicago Magazine, The Door Is a Jar, The Phoenix, and The Harvard Advocate. Edward is also a published poet.

**NOOR TANNIR** was born and raised in the city of Beirut, Lebanon and is currently based in Sharjah, UAE where she works for independent art initiative Barjeel Art Foundation. She graduated from the American University of Beirut in 2018 with a BA in Art History and minors in Philosophy and Film and Visual Culture. Noor is interested in pursuing a career in art and memoir writing, and spends her free time crafting editorial makeup looks which she shares with her community. She has previously published journalistic work with student-run newspaper Outlook at the American University of Beirut.

**CARTER VANCE** is a writer and poet originally from Cobourg, Ontario, Canada currently resident in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. His work has appeared in such publications as The Smart Set, Contemporary Verse 2 and A Midwestern Review, amongst others. He was previously a Harrison Middleton University Ideas Fellow. His latest collection of poems, Places to Be, is currently available from Moonstone Arts Press.

**TOM WADE** is a retired state government employee. He lives in the Atlanta area and volunteers with the American Civil Liberties Union. His essays have appeared in Canyon Voices, Dr. T. J. Eckleburg Review, Lunch Ticket, Inlandia, Harmony Magazine, Rivanna Review, The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, 805 Lit+Art, and other publications.