



TWISTED VINE
LITERARY ARTS JOURNAL

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Twisted Vine

L i t e r a r y A r t s J o u r n a l

TWISTED VINE LITERARY ARTS JOURNAL is published by the graduate writing program at Western New Mexico University in Silver City, New Mexico.

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Masthead

Editor-in-Chief | Heather Steinmann

Managing Editor | Jen Hardesty

Poetry and Prose Editors | Andrew Gregory and Juanita Duran

Visual Arts Editor, Design and Layout, and Website Design | Chase Reed

A Letter from the Editor

Dear Reader,

Reading through this issue's accepted pieces, I kept noticing the same question underneath very different work: what do we carry from the people and places that made us? It shows up in bodies that hold generations of women, in a life told through cologne, in a boy searching for his mother's lost river. It also shows up in a hospital chair with a low phone battery, in a duffel bag no one will explain, in a family photographed inside a condemned building who were already gone by the time anyone came looking.

Nobody planned it that way. It just emerged.

This issue is not all grief. There's a hawk sleeping on the fire escape through a family's Friday dinner. There's a love poem about not doing the dishes yet. There's a squirrel who hands the speaker a mixtape—and honestly, by the end, it doesn't feel like a joke at all. I don't know how to name what this issue adds up to, except that it felt true. All of it.

I am proud of this issue. More than anything, I'm proud of the team that published it.

Thank you to our contributors for trusting us with your work—it shows on every page. And thank you, reader, for being here. I hope something in these pages stays with you.

Jen Hardesty, Managing Editor

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▸ *Editors’ Choice Awards*

JOHN ARTENSTEIN

La Brea

Almost in a fever dream, Elena tiptoes through the parking lot of the La Brea Tar Pits museum, keeping her eyes on her father's back. His heavy coat is too big for the spring. But he likes to wear it most days out lately. Elena is carsick. They've driven in nothing but traffic for an hour just to get across town. Mom moves frantically, getting out of the car, adjusting her backpack and fishing for the keys in a full jeans pocket, then locking the car four times. Dad rolls his eyes at this and extends his hand for Elena without looking back at her. She races a few steps to catch up and take it.

"It's sad here, isn't it?" Mom says.

Dad says, "Mmm."

Elena is not sure if this means Dad is also sad or not. He keeps walking, long steps that take up two of Elena's each, and she shuffles along fast. They step up and the concrete goes to stones and Elena begins counting how many she clears with each pace. Three this time; four this time—ah, there's a little extra room to each of my steps, and every other time, I can overtake an extra row—

"I mean, really. It's so sad."

"Susan," Dad interrupts, pulling Elena's arm forward now. Her shoulder aches and she turns back to mom.

Mom has stopped a few steps behind and looks back at the tar pits, bubbling in a mist on the other side of the lot. Dad pulls Elena harder, but she shakes his grasp and finds what Mom's eyeing. Three huge, hairy elephants. The biggest stands beside the pits, its head and long tusks reaching for another elephant who's fallen in, its trunk reaching back desperately, most of its body submerged and sinking in the tar. Beside the free elephant, the smallest observes the scene with an indeterminate expression.

Elena can tell these elephants are not alive—they're statues or puppets of some kind. They never move and their skin glistens golden-gray in the sun. But their expressions, she estimates, are not hollow. Maybe not even motionless. She stands a hundred feet away or more, but their eyes are emboldened, she can see, panicked and helpless.

"Mama?" Elena cannot sense why she has said 'Mama' for Mom like she used to.

“These are mammoths, my girl,” Mom says. “Well, these are just pretend. But real mammoths like these used to live here, *thousands* and *thousands* of years ago.”

Dad has caught up and stands beside them, a hand coming down to gently rub the same shoulder he’d tried to un-socket moments before. “Maybe we don’t right now?” He looks at Mom but not at the mammoths.

Now Elena looks back at mom and detects a glassy gleam in her eyes. “Mom?”

Mom takes Elena’s free hand and squeezes it.

“Mom, did the mammoths die?”

“Yes, baby, they got trapped in the tar—see?” She points a circle around the pit. “It’s so hot that it’s still bubbling, all these thousands of years later. Lots of animals fell in and got stuck. The tar is so sticky that, once you fall in, you can’t get back out.”

“Susan,” Dad says, reaching down. His arms are nearly at the place under Elena’s ribs which he digs into to lift her. “We can read about this more later.” He smiles and scoops Elena up to his shoulder. She is heavier now. He grunts before settling her.

“Yes, let’s go, guys,” Mom says, turning to the museum entrance. Now, she starts leading the two of them instead, keeping a few steps ahead until they near the doors.

“Remember how we told you about fossils?” Dad says.

“Yeah.”

“We’ll be two and one child,” Mom says to the lady at the window.

“Well,” Dad adjusts his shoulders and brings Elena up further, “Fossils come from animals and plants that, sadly, died a long time ago, but are preserved in the earth.”

“Preserved? Like, they stay the same?”

“Yes,” he grins.

Elena likes this grin—it’s Dad’s grin for when she’s said something smart.

“Yes, preserved is when something is kept the same, when it usually wouldn’t. See, when they die, the animals and the plants usually decompose.” He notices Elena’s scrunchy face—her grimace for only getting halfway to understanding. “Decomposing means it breaks down slowly until it disappears. When they die, they slowly break down, decompose, and become part of the ground and the air. It’s very sad, and very beautiful, because it means they are still here in the earth.”

Elena understands but doesn’t really understand.

“Sometimes, when they have died someplace very cold, or very hot, they can get stuck in rocks. And then, instead of breaking down, they stay there. Then we can see some of them still, like their bones.”

“And that’s a fossil.”

“Yes, my love.”

Elena likes when Dad calls her ‘my love,’ like he calls Mom that sometimes. His voice gets lower and very calm.

“Thank you, ma’am—does this young lady want a mammoth sticker?” the lady in the window says as Mom finishes paying so they can go in.

“Yes please!” Elena says from Dad’s arms, behind Mom.

“Here you go, dear,” the lady reaches to her.

The sticker is a big, green circle, with a mammoth’s face drawn in the middle. This mammoth looks happy. He’s a cartoon with a funny hat, big, bright eyes, and a grin behind his huge tusks.

“They’re so much bigger than an elephant’s tusks,” Elena says.

“Yes,” Mom and the lady at the window say together.

The lady continues, “But they’re very wise and kind to each other, just like elephants.”

They enter the museum. Elena looks back over Dad’s shoulder. The mammoth in the tar has moved slightly, its arms reaching further out of the bubbling black ooze, its face turned a bit further in the direction of the entrance. Elena wishes she could save the mammoth from the tar, but she also knows this mammoth has never really been alive. Then, she wonders how many real mammoths died in the tar. And if there are a *billion* mammoth bones and other bones under the tar. The door closes behind them.

Mom and Dad take turns reading the signs on each exhibit. Many of the animals are giant versions of animals Elena recognizes. Dire wolves are big wolves. The coyotes are big coyotes. The sloths—Elena’s favorite—are substantially larger than those at the L.A. Zoo.

“Do any of these exist anymore? The big ones?” Elena passes a terrarium spanning the whole wall. Inside are what look like thousands of bugs—huge bugs. “Never mind!” she says, running past and into the next room.

It is a dimmer room. The walls are dark and a single exhibit is brightly outlined at the other side. Elena stares and thinks she should be afraid but cannot help pacing slowly towards it. “*Smile—oh—don,*” she sounds out from the sign beside the figure on the wall. It’s pinned up, not behind glass, but splayed horizontally. Up close, Elena can see its hair, its long tail and legs, its enormous fangs. “A big cat!” she says, studying closer, inching towards its jaws. The teeth are as long as her arms, she notices, and grins ear-to-ear.

Mom and Dad have caught up. Mom reads the description while Dad pats Elena’s back and examines the teeth with her.

It is a very realistic fake, she decides. She’s never seen a taxidermized creature up close but considers its proportions against her own cat’s in detail. “The paws are so huge! He could fit Ophelia’s whole *head* in his paw!”

Dad laughs. “He could—but he couldn’t be any madder than she is when we’re late for dinner.”

“The *Sabre-Toothed Cat*, as they’re often called, is an extinct species of felid whose body was more muscular, and slightly larger, than modern tigers and other big cats,” Mom reads, her head right up against the wall to see the small text in the dark room. “They were an apex predator, and their long, sharp upper-canine teeth were likely an intimidation tool as well as for hunting. They disappeared 11,000 years ago, likely due to human hunting and climate change.”

“Disappeared? Like, they all died?”

“Not all at once,” Mom says. “But there wasn’t enough food for them anymore, and people hunted them because they were scary.”

“That’s sad.”

“It is,” Dad says.

“But Ophelia can be very scary, and she’s much smaller than him.”

Mom and Dad laugh. Elena realizes a fantastic thing: she has said something she thinks is funny on purpose, and Mom and Dad have laughed at it. She made them laugh. This is new and, right away, her favorite thing to do.

Her joy is overtaken by a ferocious, deafening *ROAR*. The lights dim even more. The saber-toothed-cat turns his huge, angry face directly at Elena, his eyes glued on her like prey. Another booming *ROAR* and a follow-up series of screeches and wails from him. The lights flicker. His legs move back and forth like he’s running in slow-motion. Elena screams herself, turning to leap into Dad’s arms. She cries and cries and hyperventilates into his shoulder. She cannot open her eyes. She hears Mom and Dad—“What the hell was that?” “Was that supposed to happen?” “Did someone just—” “Hey, you two!” Steps race from the room and get quieter. She senses the light getting stronger through her eyelids.

“It’s okay—don’t look, baby,” Mom says.

Elena opens her eyes away from the Smilodon and sees a short man with a nice suit walking towards them with a faint smile.

“Sorry, folks,” he offers. “A couple of kids got in the control room and set off Sammy here.” He notices Elena’s puffy eyes and red cheeks. “Oh, I’m so sorry, honey. Don’t worry—he’s just a model—uh, a big toy.”

“I know what a *model* is,” she says back angrily. “I’m not even scared.”

“Of course,” the man says.

“I think we’ll take her outside for a bit,” Mom says. “Are those kids’ parents around?”

“I’m afraid we don’t know yet, ma’am.”

“Sue,” Dad says, “It’s okay. Let’s just get some air.”

They move to the exit and the sunlight gets brighter from the glass doors.

“I’m not even scared,” Elena says, plopping herself down on the stone walkway. “Ophelia is scarier than him.”



I lower my head to the counter and inhale sharp and long. The line keeps going and I nearly run out of breath. It's fine and I straighten out. Check the mirror—liner and mascara still like Cleopatra and blush still caked. I didn't agree to go out tonight as myself. Return to the fray. The music sucks but it bumps. Gladdy hands me a glass.

“Sloppy Mojito,” she screams over the bass. “Just try it.”

I inhale the thing. Disgusting. Not even rum. The mint leaves stick to the edge of the glass. I think it's straight vodka. I suppress a gag and then an eye-roll, worried they'll get stuck.

“Elena!” Beck emerges from the sea of bodies, her buttons undone and her torso shining a liquor-lacquer neon. We're out for her—she was cast in a gum commercial and is leaving school for L.A. next week. I like New York too much for that. “Baby, dance with me,” she says.

I let her lead me back into the trampling mass nearest the speakers and the bumps finally converge behind my eyes and the haze washes over. Beck points out Louise and Jamie with a girl I don't know forming a sort of half-committed make-out circle. I laugh. Beck pulls me in closer and I latch my lips onto hers. She tongues a tablet to me. I push back.

“Just E,” she reassures, then latches back on.

I notice memories stop forming. Later we try to close out but Gladdy won't let us pay. Beck says we're going back to her place. I'm tired, but we go. She looks so good. I love the way her voice sounds in my ear. We go to bed and it's great, I think. We pass out.

In the morning I have a dozen messages, voice and text. Dad wants a call back right away. My head pulses and the roof of my mouth won't detach from my tongue. I search for water but there's nothing on Beck's night tables or dresser but empty lip balms, snapped hair ties, boxes of cigarettes, Zip-lock bags without labels, guitar picks, loose change. Her leg is splayed over mine and she's snoring loudly. Her head dangles over a pillow. She's diagonal over the bed. There's no escaping without waking her.

One slow inch at a time I slink my leg out from under hers. Her breath is abominable. The liquor on her chest has dried and now instead of glazing her with an inviting red glow stinks across the room. A chipped up ashtray rests precariously on the edge of the bed to her side—if she adjusts even a little, it'll fill in her already gross shag carpet.

My leg slips free. I start the same inch-by-inch adventure to get my torso off the bed without alerting Beck. My skin burns inside. Maybe dehydration, maybe some terrible tandem of whatever I had after we got back which I cannot recall. I can hear my chest beating loudly like it's hollow, or maybe that's just in my head. Finally, I stand. I look over Beck in full as a sour spring of bile wells in my throat. Phone in hand I tiptoe to the kitchen, gently creaking the door closed behind me.

The kitchen is equally revolting. The counters full of crumbs and empty pizza boxes, grease on the electric stovetop. The floor is full of god-knows-what. The table is stacked with magazines and junk mail. There's a stale air of early-rotting food leaking out from the fridge. I notice that I notice all these problems because I don't want to call Dad, so I inhale, exhale—regret inhaling the food smells—and finally call.

“Sweetheart?” he answers, like it's nothing.

“Hi, Dad. What's up?”

“Hey, thanks for calling me back.”

It was a favor, somehow. Unexpected. Responsible. “Of course, Dad.” My ears ring. Can he hear them ringing? Does my voice tremble or my tongue sound as stiff as it feels?

“Honey, would it be possible for you to come home today?”

“What?”

“I know, it's very sudden. I know. I'm sorry.” He shutters. “It's just, uh, well.”

I forage for a glass while he's speaking and find a single clean-ish option in a crusty cabinet. Fill it with tap water which, even in Beck's place, was somewhat trustworthy in new New York. I gulp and breathe.

“What's going on, Dad?”

“Uh, yeah. Well, I'm sorry, baby. I, uh—you know, I've never gotten good at this stuff.”

It takes all my shrinking energy not to yell at him just to speak like a person. He talks like a puzzle and it sucks.

“Okay. Sorry. Elena? Are you still there?”

“Yes, Dad.” Why did he ask things like that? Like I'd hang up at a moment like that?

“Okay, sweetheart. Your mother. Uh, your mother is not well, honey.”

“What?”

“Please, could you come back today? I'll have a ticket waiting for you—JFK to LAX?”

“Dad, what's wrong with her? Is she sick? How serious is it?”

He pauses. “I'm just going to come out and tell you, alright?”

Yes, you fucking moron—just tell me, I think. “Yes, Dad, please just say something.”

“Okay. Ellie, you know neither your mother or I would want you to be part of this, okay? But I think she needs you.”

I wait and let him wait.

“Your mother is, uh. Well, Ellie, your mother has a problem. I, uh, didn't realize how bad until a few days ago.”

“What kind of problem, Dad?” I haven't noticed the stone sinking from my chest to my stomach until it lands—though I'm not sure why it's formed.

“Dad?”

“Do you remember last year when she had her back worked on?”

This is news to me. “Maybe?”

“Uh, right. Okay. Your mother had surgery to correct an issue with her spine, and the recovery was very hard on her.”

He pauses longer.

My stomach lurches and my nose twitches. “What is it, Dad?”

“She was given some, uh, medicine for the pain.”

“Okay.”

Suddenly all his words evacuate, “She never stopped taking them. She can’t help it. They’re saying it’s her liver now. I’m not sure exactly. She’s...very sick. Like, there isn’t a surgery they can do.”

At once I estimate just how horrid Beck’s bathroom probably is and my body decides it doesn’t matter. I race to the toilet and ignore its grime and vomit immensely into it. Dad probably hears some of it, I’ve forgotten to hang up or say anything.

“Sorry,” I say, “One second.” I’m not sure any sounds actually came out. I breathe until I can throw up again.

“Ellie, please,” he says. “Please come home.”

“Yeah. Okay,” I say between spitting into the toilet. “What time is the flight?”



The sterile hospital walls and floors and doors are so unlike every room I’ve entered in New York or on my way here. I ask the man at the front desk where my mother’s room might be, and he makes two calls and sends me up. I find the wrong wing, then the right one. Then the right hallway. Then the right room. I’m on my fourth water bottle and I threw up in the airport and on the plane and, by tonight, I can hold my head up without dizzying myself.

There’s no one in the bed opposite her, thankfully. Dad isn’t there when I peer in. Mom sleeps in the huge metal bed with IV tubes snaked into her and under her gown and down her throat. She has lost so much weight since I saw her last—maybe two years ago—that I’m frozen at the doorway. She hasn’t called, he hasn’t called. No mention of anything wrong with her.

“I’m sorry,” Dad arrives behind me with a tiny plastic cup of water. “I hadn’t thought about how long it’s been. You must be shocked.”

“Yeah.”

He puts his arms around me and kisses my forehead. I recoil and leave my arms straight.

“Apparently it’s very common,” he says. “Someone is a high-functioning user—” he stutters, desperately scratching for some mechanical, scientific language that’ll separate him from feeling. “Someone seems totally fine because they’re smart, they’re funny, still working.”

I fall into the chair next to the bed and study the skeletal frame of her face, the coiled tubes, the beeps and alarms on the equipment around her.

“The weight loss happened so fast, it seemed like.”

I don’t answer.

“Someone’s slowly poisoning themselves for a long time, but you have no idea until it hits—this—uh—critical mass.”

“What happened?”

He stands over her and glides the back of his hand over her narrow cheek. “I kept confronting her about her weight, said she needed to see the doctor, said something had to be wrong. She was never using the bathroom. She was always drinking too much water. She started forgetting. I found her on the floor yesterday.”

I sob into my hands and slump further down the chair. Something about his diagnostic phrasing makes it feel worse. He walks around her bed to me and hugs again. I throw him off and scream.

“You didn’t *notice*? What the fuck do you mean, you didn’t *notice*?” I stand over his kneeling, pathetic figure and glare.

“Baby, Ellie, please—I didn’t see—”

I scream again, without words. Loud and hoarse. The nurses outside in their station race to our room and Dad reassures them from the floor: it’s nothing, it’s fine, we’re fine—it’s just our lives ending. I stand and head for the little bathroom in the corner. I lower myself to the toilet with the assist rails and throw up again. Dad follows inside and holds my hair back.

“I’m sorry, Elena,” he says, “I’m sorry.”

“I’m so scared,” I say.

AUDREY WICK

Neighbors

A trio of interconnected micro-fiction pieces, each exactly 100 words.

SHOULD HAVE BEEN A COWBOY

When he returns home from work, my neighbor often takes his lasso, goes into his backyard, and practices roping a plastic bull. Whipping the lasso over his head and turning the rope loose seems to be his stress relief.

We all have different ways.

I can tell how accurate he is on each attempt by the sound of the rope, particularly the thud of contract when the bull is hit.

Successfully.

And unsuccessfully.

The rope speaks a metronome all its own, but the man stays quiet, no expletives or affirmation punctuating the attempts.

I do wonder what he is thinking.

A LOOK SHE GIVES

She has never seen me because she is blind, which gives me more of a chance to observe her. When watering her backyard flowers or walking to her mailbox—teetering a bit on the uneven surface—I sometimes glimpse her through my window, stopping to watch and make sure she is okay.

Her home is her sanctuary. I can tell this from occasional conversations, though I've never been inside hers nor she in mine.

What would she do if invited in by me?

Every day she carries on while I ponder what it is like to live that way alone.

I DON'T KNOW THE NUMBER OF RINGS

The large oak tree descended with a crash midday, the weight of branches and trunk alongside its decay causing earthquake force against the hard, packed dirt beneath.

The sound startled me, and I rushed outside to see the carnage.

So did other neighbors.

We met on the street and gave reverence to the oak with bowed heads and nods toward one another, acknowledging that nature lives among us as much as we do with it. Death is never easy to bear.

The homeowners weren't there when it happened but have since returned. They have yet to pick up its pieces.

COURTNEY EDWARDS

What Women Weave

Hanging by a thread—I
admire her each morning
 above the kitchen window,
 her legs exactly
 stacked beige
 and brown cacao,

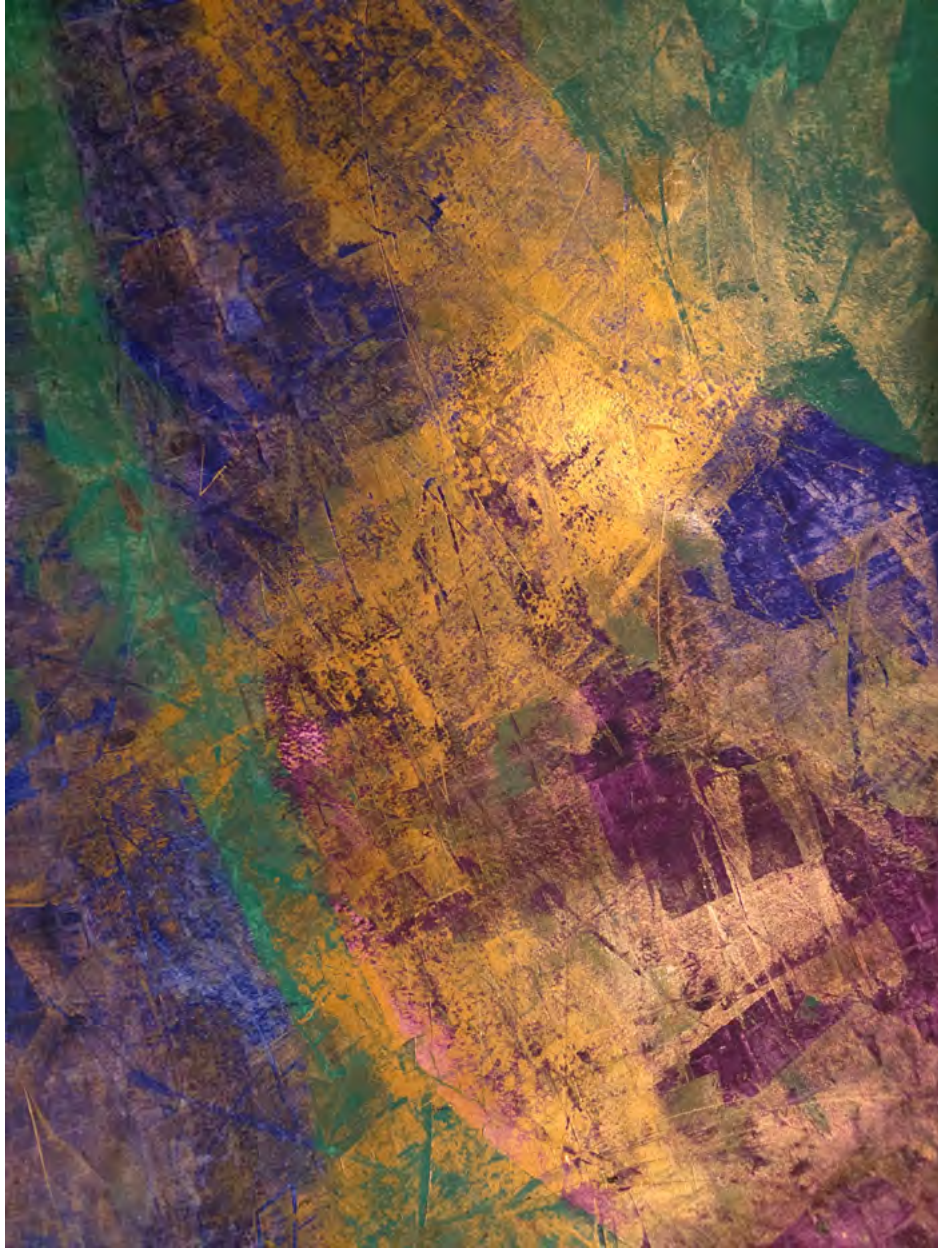
like the numbing pills
 lined in my tired palm.
 Her warm, waiting calm,
 chocolate-spotted abdomen,
 move me along
 star-strung dimensions.

And long after she leaves,
I keep her web through the winter, still
soft with gathered wings and hard-earned
threads, because I alone
witness the geometric glisten
appear and reappear after each windstorm, each rainfall.

She spun and respun, like so many women—
the Utah church mothers who wrapped me in their finest quilts,
the Portland nurses who showed me how to swaddle my newborns.
I faintly remember the woman in Old Town Dubrovnik
knitting at the base of Jesuit limestone stairs
with the conviction of an old priest, watching me falter,
as my roommate and I discussed our worth—

 Which American woman will be forgiven?
 One who builds a career or raises children?

I want to be like the Bribri women
of Costa Rica, who proudly serve cacao
to their village, in this divinely feminine position, welcome
each fresh soul, each newly-bled woman, each woven marriage,
with the sacred pod that only females
may depulp, ferment, roast, grind, then simmer
into sipped perfection. They filled my *jicaras* cup,
painted my face with protective-red achiote paste,
fed my children plantains and roast chicken.
They never wonder if the love they spin
is worthy of their life,
of their devotion.



ELLEN JUNE WRIGHT

Watercolor #5226

KAI NAGATA RABIDEAU

A squirrel hands me his mixtape

March rabbit sounds, a gust of autumn air.
Hooves. The ballerina of summer.
In the mist, by the jade creek.

A raw, sanguine pool.
Where a fern leaf caves my shoulders,
I am a sprig. Not a flock.

At the hinge. I will. Gather soup.
Use the grooved doorsill like a ladle.
Scoop marrow from the night. Scarlet darkness.

Stain the tendon. Crimson this that and the third.
Be afraid. It's all one story
Out there, somewhere.

Eat the meat, leave the bones.
Eat the meat, leave the bones.

JOSHUA SABATINI

The Eagle

The warm air hung still around Massimo Segantini and Rosa Cruz, after he took a moment to hold the oars in suspense out of the water, looking at how they looked, wet and drippy, an image he wished to collect and use later, and had to study it to be sure it was how it was when it was coming and going at a faster clip with each stroke. He particularly enjoyed the iridescent drops of the sea from the wooden oar head returning to the bay body.

“Are your arms aching?” Rosa asked.

While Rosa had an incredible quality of caring for Massimo that never ceased to amaze him, he was surprised she asked it, since she had another deeper understanding of his status, and would have figured she knew what he was up to, generally anyway.

He examined her dark eyes, after she removed her sunglasses to rub underneath the eyelid before looking at him, and once again he sunk into their depth, where he swore was an inexhaustible creative wellspring from out of which he could give birth to anything he ever imagined. He loved her for those eyes, and other things, but wow those eyes, they were portals to the realm he always dreamed of, and since they opened up into it, it was a direct passageway there, and since it was limitless and he could dip into them and pull out anything, he discovered the greatest harmony he had ever known in his entire life, when he could close all gaps, eliminate all uncertainties, doubts, and behave with an inimitable grace and deftness, as if everything he did was in perfect harmony with all levels of existence and non-existence, like he became a cosmic alchemist.

“My arms do ache, but that wasn’t why I was pausing. I was just looking at the oar heads.”

She fitted her sunglasses back on her head. The dinghy’s momentum created by his strokes had come to an end, exhausting itself, and it was incapable of drawing upon anymore of that energy, even as it seemed it wished for it to keep being there, and he felt the new movement from the energy that was there, the bay waters themselves.

“Do you feel that, too, Rosa?”

“What Massimo?”

“The movement by the waters.”

Rosa lifted her left hand, resting on her knee, and moved it over the edge of the dinghy into the waters, her fingers playful in them. If Rosa was a form of the bay waters he wouldn't have expressed surprise; they shared qualities he was already familiar with. By abandoning themselves to the external power source, Massimo discovered a palpable intelligence, working with them. His joyous excitement was rising, as life itself was rewarding him with a personalized experience of the most important substances, which sacred texts, all kinds of art describe, catch, translate, produce effects in real time for the experiencer, making the mystery accessible to him, like a shaft of light flooded through a chink of the ignorance and ripped it apart, until there was only the illumination.

"It's taking us where we need to go," Rosa said.

He appreciated her belief in it, her understanding. He hadn't met another like Rosa in a very long time. The two he knew that approximated it were Lily Claudel, who never made it out of the hilly city alive, but lived until the body gave out on her, as opposed to the many who were dead before dying, and Hank, who took him on the last king run in the northwest before ending his life after his body had become cancer ridden, much like a suffering animal would be put to death. Rosa came to him from out of the death of them. He hadn't told her, but she seemed to know about it anyway. The experiences in life shape and mold. Massimo of the Lily days, the Hank days was no more. He was eternally grateful to them; they both had the artistic qualities that refused to cling to the dead forms, and instead pursued the new and fresh beyond them, a way that was often concealed, leaving people trapped like caged birds. The two never left him alone either, another reason for his appreciation of them. How was it that the dead had a way of breaking through to the consciousness of the living and showering them with benefits that affirmed and explored the unknown existence? It seemed this behavior was part of the way of life itself, that living beyond the dead forms, like the merry notes of a bird. Rosa was the new growth from out of the dead, the new Massimo partner, giving that strange energy only intimacy with another could provide. From out of the deadland, there always sprung life; it was the promise. Nature reveals the way, like in the great northwest, from the death and destruction of the volcanic eruption, green growth was springing from the wasteland. Rosa Cruz, Massimo's green growth, like a vine, on his dead self, injecting him with the new life vigor, saying arise and be evermore, once more.

He wished to see patiently how it would go, giving themselves over to it, which was already taking them to a place. He thought it was marvelous to have the tools to create the energy to move the boat, the oars, and to know there was an energy outside of his effort with tools that was present and having a similar effect of motion. He thought both sources were swell. As it was, he considered his own pretty much that which came to him from the same place the external was, as if he were an instrument like an Aeolian Harp playing the tune of the passing by spirit, announcing its presence to those in earshot, and all that it was in the depths of its notes, like the notes of a birdsong that explains all of creation in its single note, rich and vast.

In giving themselves over to it, Massimo was meticulously observing it, much like he had observed the oar heads that he had since secured on the inside of the dinghy to prove his resignation to it and to show Rosa Cruz he meant business. She was delighted at the turn in events, discovering in the power moving them a particular thrill. Regularly reading the Biblical narratives and attending the services at the congregation in town, Rosa was familiar with the reach from out of the expanse to the individual. To mistake the old times as former times that were no more was a fatal misstep. That which was active back then, illustrated by the stories, was no less active in modern times, only more so since it was in the activation point of being. In that activation point of being that which was before was all happening too as well as that which was happening in the future. Besides all that, Rosa was particularly attuned to that connection, that communication, the feeling, that voice. It was more real than the blueness of the sky. She detected it with them in the boat, and Massimo's leaning into it, proved himself to her even more. It was not only a special connection with the voice, but a special connection with each other and the voice. They felt better than they could ever feel otherwise within the presence, being taken there where it was taking them. In all ways, here was where it was at. There was no other way of being that could possibly make any sense at all.

The waters were of varying depths in the bay, based upon the area and the tide. There were areas that would turn from water to mudflats and back to water again, and other areas where the water depth would shrink to just a few inches and grow to a few feet. The dynamism of the depths and submerged or exposed sands created a wildly exciting place, and proved challenging to boaters who were less aware, less skilled in dealing with the changing conditions. Those with the experience of the place grew fond of it and all its differences, found joy in successfully identifying where the channels were, how to avoid becoming beached, how to run the engine and lift it up and keep it all going in the most difficult of the places. Since there was a barrier beach enclosing them, a creek flowing in and flowing out, and a wide breadth before a harbor emptied out into the sound and further on the Atlantic, there weren't severe consequences for making mistakes, other than getting it all wrong and having to right it, costing time and labor, perhaps breaking equipment, and the embarrassment if there were people around witnessing—unless there was a storm, unless it was winter, then it could become life threatening. Nevertheless, in a certain sense, it all felt urgent and life threatening to a degree. They had to know and get to the place they were at to discover the comfort of safety. The voice was a connection to that which was higher than them, that which knew more than them, that which had come to help, nurture, propel, elevate, encourage, support, teach, show, that which was there to fuel, ignite, inspire, that which was there to create, compose, emit. It was like doing everything to achieve an alignment that would have the effects that rendered the very basis of life itself verifiably purposeful by the day's activity in the moment revealing it as such.

An idea came to them simultaneously. To bring it to pass, they leaned into their positions, moving from a sitting posture to a reclining one, stretching out their legs, Rosa's between Massimo's, Massimo's on the outside of Rosa's, the flesh touching. Their arms were cast to

their sides, wrists or forearms leaning on the dinghy sides, hands suspended the air, feeling the breeze when there was one, or just the subtle movement of themselves through it. Between them, they experienced a oneness, as if they transformed into a new single entity, which was interacting with the entity involving them. In the condition, life itself was being lived. Massimo had come through multiple states, induced by a variety of means, always searching for the experience upon experience that offered the rewards of the experience of being born in the first place, discovering an inexhaustible supply of them to give him an examined self existence, ever accomplishing it like the flow of a mighty river into the great big sea.

He was at home in the new method, opened up to it, and by his enthusiasm and willingness, resistance was non-existent. He discovered in Rosa not only a willing partner, but a partner who was going to add to the composition much of herself, not coming along on the ride as a spectator, but as a participant. It took a certain type, with a certain set of qualities. Massimo observed once they settled into their new form, the motion strengthened. He looked up into the blueness of the sky, observing a cloud shape moving across the width in the form of an angelic being who sings the song of epic revelations. He thought it was good company to keep, and how he wouldn't be able to see it and know it as much if he wasn't doing something morally right in the eyes of it. There were ways to access and ways that would prohibit access. Massimo reveled in the accessible, making it so by doing what he knew he could do to achieve that aim; it wasn't always an easy feat, and even if it was known he could do it, he still had to summon the motivation, which oftentimes proved elusive. Still, he discovered in the foibles of himself, that which was out there often showed compassion and mercy, giving him the access anyway. In those cases, he was very thankful, shouted praises over it, and shored up his own resolution to quit being so lazy and weak. If he knew the way, he ought to take it.

A piercing cry rang out in the blueness of the sky, and Massimo instantly recognized it. All his senses tightened up, and hit upon the focus of the enchanting note. The note rang out once, stirred all in its radius, long and carried for miles around, and once achieving its status as king, a silence, which was different from the silence before it, filled the space and another note sounded. It was the return of the Osprey. Massimo wondered if he were too late, then, to see the eagle, or if he was just in time. The Osprey brought the symbol of death and life, making the balance of existence unavoidable. The underneath of the Osprey appeared to him like crossbones.

A sweet fragrance wafted across them, and he realized they were approaching the land, the row of tall and thick sandy dunes, over which emerald grass had sprung from out of their dead flattened mounds of brown and tan, looking like graves that out of which nothing could ever grow again. The emerald grass sprung out in defiance of that once dead form, and joyously shouted the renewal to the space around it, lifting spirits, who by simply being in their vicinity were participants in their life cycle. Strange to say, but the American Beach Grass possessed the true narrative of mysterious existence that could reveal all of its mysteries. The beach grass was full of groupings of swamp roses, taking shelter in

their warmth and shadows, blooming in wildly bright and intoxicating white and fuchsia, emitting the scents that spoke to the heart, invoking divine love for the life that sprung from out of the dead, and the dead that took into itself the life, forming the ancient ouroboros, bringing peace and grace to the individual faced with the life cycle.

He identified the scent of the beach grass and the swamp roses, mixed with the salty bay waters and the sea over the dunes and flowing through a breach that forms and seals off and forms again, over decades of time, patiently beyond generations. Waters were deceptive. The surfaces may appear calm and inviting, while beneath them may be the strongest of currents that would overpower all and bring all wherever it wished, even dunk all under and drown all, resistance often futile and speeding up the fatality. Complacency and acceptance was perhaps the only slim chance to endure. Massimo wasn't interested in testing his and, more importantly, Rosa's fate too much. As it was, he was eternally grateful to have come on board with fate's skiff and happily was working with it in a knowing partnership to maximize the benefits of knowing the way approximately all along the way to achieve a higher degree of living on the way, when there was still those wonderful moments to be had, like the one he was having currently with Rosa on the dinghy, thanks to the kind Moholy gesture and other factors. Everything had to come together just exactly the way it did for it to happen the way it was, and that was one of the magical ways of the way.

Massimo wasn't bothered by the incoming breach and the current, despite knowing the dangers. They had their oars if it came to that, and the balance was reliable.

"The motion may get a little stronger, Rosa. We are nearing the breach. Just hold on tighter. We'll be alright," Massimo said.

He never knew where his absolute knowledge came from, and he most always thought it absurd; he thought it was speaking to himself as much as anyone within earshot. Sure, there were times when he said the most outlandish stuff that couldn't possibly be true or come to pass, but that was all in good fun. One had to be a good sport about these matters. But there were the other sayings that were spot on, and life saving, that lifted up and cleared the air, like a sea captain navigating through a storm, avoiding shipwrecks and mutinies. The unknown was increased by the unknown.

Massimo realized he had prepared them in the nick of time. Once again, he confirmed he was being looked out for in ways he both intuited and hadn't a clue about. There were the littlest of incidents to confirm it, while the bigger picture was an elusive pattern—that is, until all was said and done; then it would be most clear. Ah sweet blessed clarity! Lord have mercy. The motion of the current caused by the breach swept them up at a speed that in contrast to the gentleness before stood out dramatically, and it turned them in a circle like a wheel. Massimo recalled the stories of swimmers carried through the breach and swept out to sea; he could see how easily that would occur now that he was in the same current feeling its effects. The thing about the current is that its pattern was in constant flux, determined by a host of factors, including the tides and the moon and the rains of the past few days, if there were any, and the width of the breach itself between the sands on either

side. They swirled and spun, and sped up, and they held on, but were not afraid. He looked at Rosa and Rosa looked at him, and they formed a river of communication, flowing back and forth, and the external voice that they had come to know intimately was there with them in the same flow, and they cherished the moment like it was a critical juncture in their lives, a highlight upon which they could rise for the rest of their lives in the ever pursuit of substantial meaning and purpose.

They realized they were being taken into the breach, and Massimo thought at any moment he'd take out the oars and direct themselves away to remain in the cozy bay waters. But the breach and current intervened, and about as soon as the entrance into the breach proper was about to occur, a gush of motion took them away from it, and out of the main flow to the other side of it until they were caught up in a side flow pushing them eastward, where Massimo thought the eagle may still be, and he was even more delighted by the ongoing experience.

The motion of the dinghy returned to a constant slow movement, and the thrill and excitement they had felt in the suspense of what would happen to them crossing the breach subsided to a tranquility. Rosa moved her legs outward, pressing against his, and he pressed his against hers, moving inward, until they developed between themselves a strengthened form, instilling in them an arousal from out of the peace, constructing forces out of the balance that had existed. They marveled over what they could do to each other. Massimo heard a brushing sound, finely.

“We’re about to be beached,” Massimo said.

He sprang into action, grabbed the oar, and stuck it into the sands on the starboard side, the edge sinking into its softness only a handful of inches below the waters gently flowing, full of golden light. He knew he very well may shove them off into even shallower waters, despite pushing them away from the barrier beach, because there was often an illogical level of depths around, at least at first assessment. What seemed shallow would be deep, what seemed deep would be shallow; it did a number on the senses, until the navigator had to throw out preconceived notions, and redraft the standards. Massimo, having a familiarity with the bay, despite what the Moholy’s thought, knew about everything there was to know about it, as much as anyone could know a constantly changing place. The knowledge was basically, it’s constantly changing, and in the thick of it, know the perils, act accordingly, plan for the worst, hope for the best, God save the unfortunate ones.

Massimo realized that he, in fact, moved them into a shallower depth, but he wasn’t to be undone by it, knowing the possibility in advance. He looked around with a studied eye, examined the situation, fitted both oars in the locks and rowed them backtracking until the brushing sound vanished and the inches of depth grew. He could have gotten out of the dinghy altogether and just walked it, but there was something to be said for the one who could keep it going for as long as possible, it proved something.

Having regained the depth, Massimo turned them around, and rowed toward the farthest eastern southern part, the destination their destiny had in mind for them that fine afternoon.

Out there, away from the other side, by the barrier beach and the cliff of the smaller island, felt much farther away than they really were. It was a fine feeling, a feeling that was impervious, incapable of being taken away by anyone, and it gave them a taste of genuine existence, unspoiled by the topsy-turvy nature of humanity's power struggles, and all that other extraneous stuff that confused itself within the labyrinth.

Rosa took it all in, appreciative of Massimo's effort. To be anywhere, doing anything, and this was what she was all up in, well, it had to be something for her, the way she chose it over all else, and that sort of attention and intention spoke volumes to her inner soul, expanding itself out there, where the spirit invited a growth on the level of a fertile farm field. With Massimo's back to the destination, Rosa looked past him into it, where they were going deeper and deeper into the bay. The waters had carved out a tear drop into the smaller island, concealed by the barrier beach and the cliff of its end. Massimo felt a touch on his legs, a signal. He looked at Rosa's face, and she told him to look with a subtle expression. He stopped rowing, and put one oar into the water, forcing the dinghy to turn 90 degrees, giving them a side view of where they were heading. There upon a pole sticking up in the marshy land was the eagle. He was gripped by a pregnant silence. The presence of the eagle was immensely affecting, all across the distance between them bowed to it, and Massimo's insides stirred to bow to it. The eagle observed them, floating toward it. The eagle possessed an all-seeing nature, and Massimo felt as if they had come to it for a reason. To be there and now with Rosa was an event. He waited for the event itself to speak itself into creation, but it only just hung there, patiently waiting. The dinghy on the gently moving water current gained in closeness to it, and their eyes rose up in a higher angle to take the eagle in. Stately, immobile, an eye like Horus. He didn't know what he was wanting, what he was expecting. He was, perhaps, without any expectations at all. He simply sat, still himself, and Rosa was still herself, and the silence was loud with the winds, with the sea, with the notes of birds in other places unseen. The closer they came, the greater the sight, the eagle's details increasingly identifiable and understood, the image completing itself more within their minds from their vision. Suddenly, the eagle's body moved, the wings opened up, and spread into a massive figure, jolting the whole space, appearing tied to it and its motion. He thought if it winged away, it would take their souls with it.

GEORGE ABREU

A Perfumed Life

In my early childhood, long before I knew myself, colognes knew who I was. Passed down through a long Cuban-French tradition, colognes have always been part of the Cuban consciousness. They have always been part of my life and influenced who I am.

Violetas Francesas cologne, a must for Cuban babies of the 50's and 60's, was my first exposure to fragrance. My bath routine consisted of a dousing afterward. This cologne is made with a light alcohol base and a violet scent. This daily after-bath ritual was a standard for any given afternoon right before merienda, consisting of a sweet and a glass of milk.

Colognes were also commonly used to cleanse the air, especially if a bad vibe was perceived. You splash some on your hand and move your wrist in a whipping motion, letting the drops fly out from your finger into the air, allowing the fragrances to permeate and linger. This is commonly used to cleanse evil spirits. Other uses of colognes were common in my family. If you felt faint or were ill or nauseous, the whiff of a cologne in a hanky could re-incorporate a person in a fainting spell. I quickly learned that gifting cologne was an acceptable present for special occasions. Not having some fragrance at home was not the norm.

My family immigrated to Spain in 1970. New fragrances like Heno de Pravia, Varon Dandy, and Maja were added to the fragrance repertoire. They brought comfort and routine to the emotional and challenging experience of immigration. These recognized fragrances felt comfortable and welcoming, with an air of assimilation. My parents managed to maintain the fragrance routine using these new European substitutes for Violetas Francesas

My family immigrated a second time. This time was to America in 1973. By the time 1975 rolled around, we had moved from Bronx, NY, to Miami, FL, and back north to New Jersey, to a small town called Prospect Park. The adjustments had been challenging, but we were assimilating into small-town life. I was approaching my teens; the fragrances had changed once again. English Leather, Stetson, and Brut were introduced as olfactory options. English Leather was my grandmother's favorite and was often given to my brother and me after her return from a vacation in Florida. These were picked up at South of the Border, or as we knew it, Pedro's. This was halfway through the mileage to Miami, a routine stop on their yearly pilgrimage. She was signaling our transition to young adulthood. These

fragrances would then become a standard part of our daily bathing routine. Putting on cologne was nothing new for my brother and me, and we were often complimented on our good smell. An imitation of masculinity, given our age, and a quiet precursor to puberty.

By the late 70's, a more assimilated individual emerged. I became, in many ways, the translator and documentation expert for the challenges my parents faced with English. I learned that you don't always have the right translation options, but you push forward and make the best phrasal choices to get the job done and help the family succeed. Fragrances like Paco Rabanne, Polo, Pierre Cardin, and Grey Flannel had entered my repertoire. They gave me the ability to perform and feel assertive in my masculinity, even if it was a perception rather than reality.

In the 80s, during my 20s, the fragrance choices changed again, aligning with my schooling and the push to be the first in my family to attend college. These fragrances carried a bolder, more seductive bravado scent that entered the room before I did. I borrowed their confidence and pushed my way through school and work, driven by a desire for more and a need to achieve. Drakar Noir, Obsession, Koros, Cool Water, and Fahrenheit spelled out independence, ambition, sensuality, and discovery, even if my maturity and life experience had not yet caught up. The high energy of these fragrances matched my disco nightlife and carried me through, pushing the balance of college, work, and play toward a frantic harmony. At this time, buying more than one fragrance at a time also became a habit. We knew through family contact an individual who sold fragrances out of his basement. It was like walking into a magic shop. He would only receive visitors after dark. From the greetings at the front door down a dark basement to a small room filled with shelves of different fragrances. These were all unmarked boxes, or some were marked as testers. We tried and selected several, and at the end of the shopping spree, I would end up with 3 or 4 bottles of new experimentation. Some of my family members would have bags full of other merchandise.

The 90's washed me clean. I graduated from college, entered the workforce, and saw the future clearly enough to pursue a higher degree. Perfumes like CK One, Eternity, Cool Water, and Lapidus carried less need to impress and more calm confidence. The unisex minimalist era mirrored my emotional maturity. Work and personal life became spaces for growth and introspection, and marginal relationships placed less pressure on my sexual discovery. I made big decisions during this era. I decided that my girlfriend did not deserve me to keep a lie about my sexuality, and although I'm never proud of how it ended, a 5-year courtship freed me from a double life. I was free to openly discover my sexual identity.

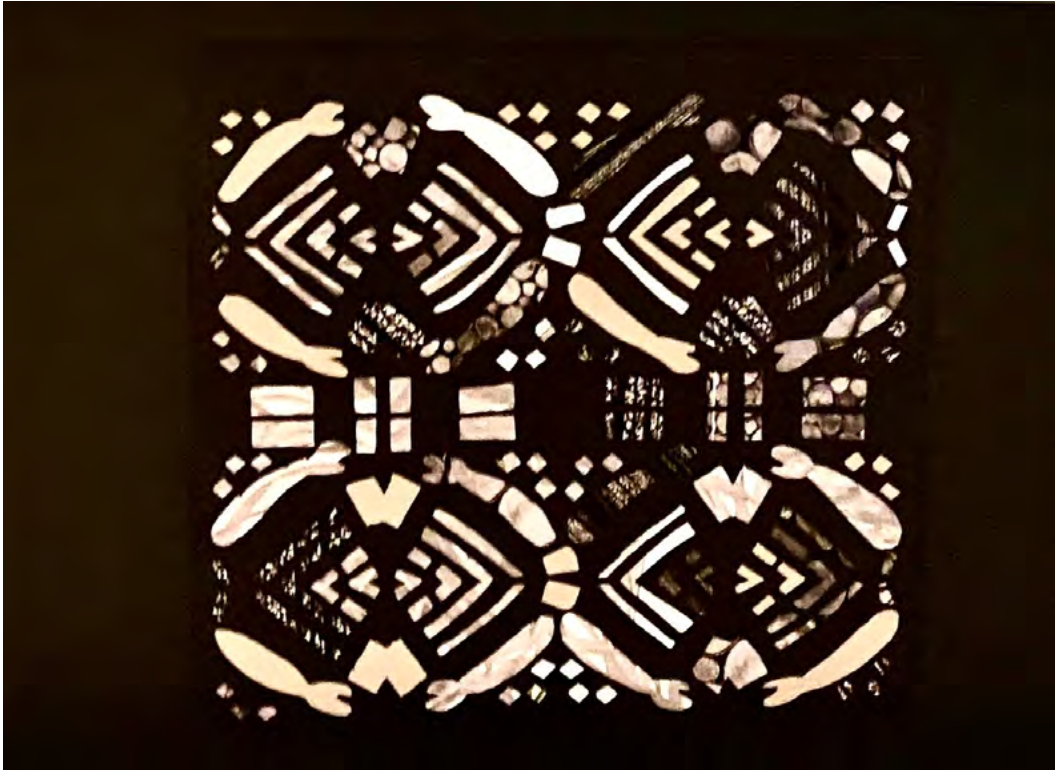
The early 2000s pushed me toward fragrances that offered greater elegance and self-assurance. I had come full circle in my schooling and career. I was comfortable, moderately successful, and recognized at work. My personal life and sexuality continued to take shape. Dior Homme, Egoiste, PI, Boucheron, Jaipur, Acqua di Gio, and Versace marked a life stage of stability and emotional maturity. These fragrances spoke of knowing, alluring, and conscious decisions. The choice of scents was no longer about impressing, but about feeling

right on the skin. These fragrances whispered where others had shouted earth, sky, purpose, and peace. Warm wood, soft iris, confident spice. It was like I was not just wearing them but professing them. As one might associate a favorite record or song, I associated fragrances with life's progressions. I remember wearing Dior for job promotions, and Egoists for a certain wedding. Boucheron for a baptism. They had become symbols and signals of rites of passage. They formed my confidence and gravitas.

By 2010, my sexuality and career had aligned, shaped by four defining events: the death of my mother, my coming out, the end of a long relationship, and the subsequent meeting of the man who is the love of my life. The fragrances that followed proclaimed wisdom, authenticity, and comfort in my own skin. Scents like Habit Rouge, Vetiver, Valentino, and niche houses like Gritti, Sir Galahad by Isabey, and White Moroccan Leather by Habibi NY led me to appreciate the craftsmanship and artistry behind them. The fragrances that I now wear in my 60s feel like a love letter to the man I have become. Simplicity done well is a luxury. These niche fragrances are like a private conversation between me and my memory.

Today I own over sixty bottles of colognes and perfumes, each capable of setting a mood or summoning a memory. I choose these elixirs by season, temperature, time of day, and instinct. I have also become more sensitive to those who do not enjoy fragrances. I have toned down certain accents when I know the individual(s) may be sensitive or less engaged than I am. Still, every application begins the same way after a fresh shower or bath, returning me to a Cuban ritual. Scent was never about vanity, but about presence, care, and becoming.

My identity is now clear. I'm a Cuban-born gay man, educated both by life experiences and US institutions. My perfumed routine grounds me and provides an unshakeable personal identity. I am me, and the perfume I wear centers my perspective. When I'm complimented on a fragrance, it is about the choice I made that day and not about my persona. Therefore, fragrances enhance and aid the perspective I live by. New perfumeries continue to release new fragrances, and I discover them and add them to my collection. The complexity of my experience and outward projection grows. I also like to complement an individual where the fragrance they wear enhances their personal presentation. Individuals who know how powerful a fragrance can be and include it in their repertoire, I see, have an edge in their personal presentation. The right fragrance intensifies and adds nuance to the person's personality and demeanor. They can count on a fragrance, aided by a special moment, to create a memory where not just a remembrance can trigger it, but a sensorial smell can also take you there. One can remember a moment that, later, becomes a memory; however, that same encounter is even stronger when a lingering fragrance is present. That smell can transport you back instantly. For me, the fragrances that can do that are the most powerful. So, I live in a perfect marriage of experience and culture, framed in perfume, creating my perfumed life.



MICHAEL J. CLARK

Arms and Puppets

REKHA VALLIAPPAN

The Quest

‘It is good to have an end to journey toward; but it is the journey that matters, in the end.’
—Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*

The boat is adrift. Anyone watching from shoreline can tell. Its motion is aimless. The boat looks asleep, bobbing, as if the ocean will swallow her up. That is when the blue boy feels the sand, abrasive, stinging. Miles on miles of burning golden dunes he has been trudging for days. He looks behind him. Nothing but sand. He looks before him. Nothing but water! Finding a path to the hidden river has brought him here. Walking on blanched seashells and broken shards has shredded his feet. They are pruned and dried. They are smallish and papyrus plant-like, joining thickset. Not pebbled pink as he once knew them with mama. But he had no choice, not if he followed mama. And the ocean’s water is not fit for drinking, mama! “Never stray!” had cautioned mama, “just find that river.” So why is mama adrift on a boat far out in the ocean with no water to drink?

Years and years ago when the world had no moon he had heard of the Great Flood. Such a Flood there was it had devastated their lands, their mountain home. It had come from the fermenting deep, within the bowels of the ocean, said the peoples. A strong dark blue bubbling oddity wave after wave not even the army of blue monkeys of Akrotiri old world simiae with human-like faces frescoed on the many-sided walls of dark caves could be a match. None knew with certainty the fearful patterns in meaningless shapes to follow, not then. Nor did any know how the Mandrill God’s blue minions could ripple and thrash like seething waves to embed for eternity myriad etchings on cave walls. Folks homes gone for good mourned by ages. The Great Flood had split their lands breaking one piece off into an island, an inaccessible island. The mountainous mainland the blue boy’s home was once part of had disappeared over the descending horizon, over the watery oceans far away, never to be seen again.

Such an alarming Great Flood had held nothing but vast expanses of savagely struggling water. Such waters in their primordial depths had held nothing but decayed materials floating in bits. The cosmic womb had belched forth nothing but earth’s adopted substances picked from asteroids and meteors and unknown spaces. Never mind that they had resurrected

half abandoned truths, or permanently walled Mandrill God's blue monkey warriors. Never mind that they had assembled in rock blue boy wormy stigma-gatherers frescoed with saffron on cave walls.

As custodian of their waterways by the forces operating their peoples had constantly sought fundamental enlightenment from the spotlight of the unknown moon and the silver tools it sparked on the deep stained waterways. But the boy's mama knew more of the saffron and blue and of the moon rolled in the ocean tides than all of their peoples put together. She especially knew of the slick strong underground rivers that gushed into oceans like nine-headed hydras black pit snakes with glistening scales, water serpents re-growing new heads. *Sing to the ocean*, mama had crooned, Mama who was of the whipping waves, the strong steady stream of blue that came of the ancient hidden rivers. This reborn remote island could never really be her new home without the rising waters; without riversides hemming their once widespread towns. Only when she had married his new father in their new home her license to loop and cord had diminished as she had turned granular herself, half sand.

The blue boy asked her to tell him more stories. He was always eager for more. Mama who was special tired easily these days. But in her younger days she had churned a raging river to nourishment beyond measure through a winding path to her once mountain home. It was said her veined arms like knotted wood brought out the blue figures. It was said her ample legs wobbled in the abundant currents and streams. It took every bit of strength between two mighty hills. It was she who had made her little boy outgrow his fear of the raging waters, distorted blots of blue stains, the underlying parallel process of savagery and divination. Unlike many of their peoples too scared to move in the Great Flood, the waters were her home, her secret sacred retreat. She believed the entire visible world came of invisible water. And by chance excess of humanlike faces and forces would return to water when the symbols in the shaping of the world dictated.

The truth is that theoretically very little slipped out of a river unseen. In the days that mama taught her little blue boy how vast bodies of waters swallowed land masses whole, she secretly drew him catastrophic images of the moon, reshaping phases. Accidental otherworldly smears that her mind's malleability rendered into images of a fierce Nagae with multiple teeth of a crocodile swallowing the moon sphere. The recurrent threads like clinging vines did not stop with traces of vapor tendrils emanating from the scarred surface of the moon but drool from the monster's saliva.

"Like a goatherd king tending then tethering his flocks the moon chariots our water tides," she would say softly, claiming the moon and the waters as hers, "ever-changing rotations grooving the land. You'll see!" He did not understand her or the sylvan connections she made, least of all her garbled drawings.

There was an aspect to mama's knowledge and aesthetic beliefs that was strangely undulating, secretly waxing and waning in peculiar gait. His mama slept out in the tall tangled weeds so she could sleep a little better. Their people's wise elders suggested then

that she was a shoestring drool of moon spittle a kind of spirit folk who spawn in unusual moonlight, the dread sign of the *Danu*, reborn, Calliste, Scylla, repurposing in inexplicable manner their secret hidden waterways. It enraged his father.

“Mirror interference?!” the blue boy’s father would yell and stomp in disbelief, neither favoring nor un-favoring the mysterious from the complex. “Stop your drivel, woman! Let’s not get distracted. We’ll find *that* lost river! It’s run underground, deformed by overlaid nature grid in the Great Flood that’s all. We need fresh water. The moon will reappear, and so will the river!”

If one followed the preference of the Mandrill God on the cave etchings as his father did it was impossible not to wander into the enigma of a plethora of blue monkey’s tails, raging river veins that once existed effectively disappearing forever into the nonexistent abyss below with the suddenness of Sandora, his mama’s former river. How would blue boy survive the between? Where could this lost river be and could it ever be found? ‘If you can’t restore the river tomorrow you follow the winding tails,’ said mama with growing unease whenever her stolen river was mentioned.

Father and his peoples despaired. They never stopped looking. They scoured and traced archives, sources. They gazed up at the ether searching glistening galaxies light years away, the flotilla of milky stars studding the heavens, ultra-light luminous dark sparks irradiating vast spaces for signs of a moon. Because of course a river never dies. Because of course there was no blue lucent moon to be seen, not even a fading disc of terrestrial luminosity that a dark moon sheds. The moon that was as black as night to those unseeing eyes watching stayed still as the half-eaten worm overpowering as the many-headed demon shape Nagae devouring the moon whole.

One day his father left. The need for fresh water was so great, the future of their island home was riding on it. The small springs and ponds where rainfall usually pooled in brackish rivulets had dried. At first a handful of the peoples doomed to destruction took to walking endlessly on the hot sand in search of the locked water tides which was their lost river. Their quest a mission. Their mission to recreate, to undo the difficulty of their roving existence. How would this be possible with nowhere to search just an endless ocean? Far to the north high mountains, far to the south rough seas, tangled between the two strata their missing river. The blue boy’s father driven by need, terrified by rising hereditary vendetta from prolonged rivalry between mainland and island, mama’s folks and father’s people, joined the group of wandering water-searchers. The Great Flood feud was so old but it seemed had never smoldered out. The tradition of the discord divided within itself. Wedged in among the precarious disorder, the sinking ability, swayed the continuous never-ending quest. Within a few days the roaming groups had wandered farther and farther afield blurred to extinction by their own chronic blue shadows lost in the filtering burning sands converging salty oceans.



His feet are bloodied raw. He has been traveling on his own for months. Clusters of peat moss cling to his knees. He is an unsightly mess. For as long as his mama existed by his side he did not need to search for a water source. His father is a distant memory. Soon after his father left for good over the monumental dunes and quaking sandbars in search of a river, his mama lost her interest and fight for survival, her river. To plumb unknown depths was a melting cauldron of strange new shapes she did not feel the need to intercept. No new Mandrill God's golden leaf to drop into a pool of fresh water as archives had recorded. No new blue monkey's tails to spiral it away. The insatiable blue fluid springs of human-faced blue bodies had drifted their course, completed their makeover, run copiously away.

She turned lethargic. She appeared self-absorbed. The blue boy did his best. The blue boy tried many times reawakening her memories her urges of river ravages on the mainland, in the mountains and straggling golden rain trees. He asked for her beautiful stories. Stories of the moon he had never seen, the perplexing river! She bore a distant look of desolation in her deep brown eyes as if she half remembered. But she had no more stories to tell. Her drawings were of islands topped by high flood water, sand and shingle bed far beneath. It was bewildering. The blue boy concluded that the pain of recollection was too overburdening, although one she could not ignore. The change had been sudden from swirling flood to remoteness of an obscure island. She yearned for her eternal possessions, the swaying golden laburnum, the chattering shrill blue monkeys tenanted mountains, the unmistakable wilderness of her Great foaming Flood, the magic of her past, her old home, the tinkle of bells—cow, temple, the bubbling river. But the home that was so far away was eerily lost. The strange horizon was looming distant. The rising river once so alive was utterly vanished. How mama yearned for a certain snaky pulsing water shift no longer visible because the deities of this haunted primeval region had stopped listening. Creeping with ghostly feet over hot shifting sands folks were still looking.

The blue monkey beings were kings of the overland and tangled undergrowths, visible and non-visible. Escape artists by laws of natural selection these aerial acrobats could turn cheeky-fur hang-gliders or terrifyingly featureless wormy saffron stigma at a blink. There was a densely bizarre disconnect. Intuitively the blue boy busied himself, simulated unusual appearance. Their island was growing perceptibly smaller, eaten away by great gulps of ocean. Some day there would not be an island. He warily resumed examination of his stacks of miniature moons, mama's old drawings. Not a day the boy did not scrutinize his mama's earthy depictions of a diminishing moon, of dizzying blue gigantic threads that stretched detached from the moon to splashes of dark whirling waters, the strangeness of which was distinctly all the more alarming.

There was a big moon and a half moon, a quarter moon and a full. There was the thinnest sliver of a moon and an approaching darkness of a dreaded surreptitious moon and then there was a particle of a crescent moon hiding among the thickening clouds. And always there were the densest masses of abating threaded lines extended vines and worm-like twisting strands. But, never once had the blue boy ever seen a moon. Not a real moon orb. Mama said it looked like sunlight out of place, a huge silver coin gathering the broken

river. Dividing his attention between mama and her sketches, strengthened by the turbulent bubbling of the once Great Flood, he believed his mama.

His sky held nothing but ink stained dark blotches. The landscape looked black, his island shrinking and gloomy. Even the sun looked dark. In the darkness across from the waste of swamps and dunes nothing suspended in the sky. Everyday was the same. He oftentimes scoured for silver coins in the sky, spaces beyond the blowing winds. Many long hours did he spend and found none. No moon, no river! The sky stayed inky black. The moon's vagueness distressed him. The river's resistance hastened profound disquiet. Regardless, he searched, past the reaches of dimming sunlight, past the labyrinth of cresting ocean. Sometimes he fancied something hovered directly overhead. Sometimes something coiling below! *Mama?* The isolation haunted him. His thoughts shunted incessantly between ghostly fears to ancestral terrors, unintelligible to him yet where the fabric of his mama's unknown world the filaments had worn thin.

Then, through the strain of his surroundings he set aside the old gods' intrusion. He immersed himself in their current constraint. Absolutely nothing to do with Mandrill God or blue monkey's tails or the stigma of wormy threads in the dark stillness of a lonely island. Shaking a great deal he scrabbled at the grainy sand in wolf fashion frenzy as if looking-for-bone. His urgency to find the hidden river, vestiges of a river, a river sound humming through the underground, a dried river bed, his mama's blue river. Then something happens, something overlapping, something rising and falling, something that stretches, something pointing upwards, altering ceaselessly. He imagines a view, a river running deep below through the ocean, south, away from a mountainous mainland, cutting across to an enlarging moon. It's the moon's masks, of course. He stares blankly.

Wrapped in moving seaweed the gigantic sea threads in medusa-like motion meanders through subterranean passages from their distant mountainous home to their long lost island floating to a vast underwater shelf. *Unstoppable!* Wet hot sand burns under his chipped fingernails. His skin is raw. No lichen salve. Something grabs hold of his hands with serrated large teeth. Ravenous fingers, a bite. The tide is in rapid shift. The bowels of the deep are a looming abyss. Hollows form in the ground. A loud roll of thunder intensifies. Ocean swells larger than ghost ships, approach, disappear. There is no one left to hear or see, just the blue boy. Breathless with the strangeness of it all, across the towering waves he glimpses a thin silvery outline. He must be ascending the last, what crushing atmosphere Mandrill God claims is the rising realms above the earth. Against grasping teeth he watches a spectacular array. Is it? *At last!* Inch by inch less and less the rise of the ghostly coin with trailing threads is not to be missed. Above the shining patch he can faintly hear mama sing in a strange sprawling voice. It fills the cosmos. His voice sinks to a whisper. The coin undulates, shifts. He must be descending the several realms the last below the earth, pressing down something gigantic with the help of blue monkey hordes hewn in rock. The weight of the atmosphere increases. He vibrates. He is grabbing fistfuls of cord grass to drag myself up.

Is this how father disappeared oh so long ago? Seized by a new horror he doesn't need to hear. The strange choppy coast overhead is never-ending. The sky realms are several spheres deep. Realizing by kaleidoscopic changes it is neither river nor sea he points a wasted finger. His father was wearing blue snakeskin boots the day he left utterly unafraid to vanish over the horizon. "River flow's changing," his father had said before he left. In his subtle way he meant there are no savage beasts to quell, no winding coils to seek, just hordes of blue monkeys. The blue boy's attention falters, flies away. Something was moving. Doubling back upon itself a shadowy shape was swinging through the landscape. Soon, a radical alteration, his release, a complete change, his body's gone, his sand covered hands begin to fuse. His legs become a wiry spiral tail. His skin falls out. His hair bands, tightens, retracts. His head stings with needle raindrops that prick. His spine contorts. A sinuous dark ripple effect slithers out of his twisting form. A stentorian raspy cry rattles deep in his chest. Hurling in space is his mama's ragged song. *An echo!* He is beginning to resemble more mama than little blue boy—himself.



The blue boy hardly knew what was happening. He scans the skies, his gaze gauze-filtered. The world is eerily still. Nothing is audible. What has changed? Pitching forward into the gravity of the coastline, struggling against the quivering sensation of receding gargantuan waves, outlined between water and sky, he feels the gentle pull of the rolling waves, towards and away from her. Towards that tiny boat bobbing in the far distance. Away from that tiny boat which is now barely a speck. *Mama, the river?* Sandora, of course she who had loped and coiled, muffled and plunged headlong and was never found again. An acute feeling of oblivion settles on him. He looks away dazed. Beneath his shredded feet just yards away the twisting body of a sidewinder sand serpent undulating in thick coils like a conveyor belt slithers in parts. Mama knew of the wondrous luminosity in that mysterious microcosm she represented. Oceans and moon. Rivers and tides. Tributaries and estuaries. Mainland and island. She knew of the primordial mysteries overseeing infallible ancient truths. And she knew of the multitudes of singular blue primates off cave walls swinging south in hordes toward that polar point—her roped island. *Mama, it's you, your river is here!*

The End

CLIFF SAUNDERS

Approaching Thermopolis

Today is the day we atone
for our sins of omission.
Are we being punished?
Perhaps, for we're the ones
being swept away by a riptide.
Individually we're one drop.
Together we're a dribble.
O glowing orb of promise,
we long to hear your voice
proclaiming the path forward.
The deeper we venture into
the woods, the better off we'll be.
If we don't attack the dragons
today, we may regret it tomorrow.
I suggest we just absorb the magic
dancing in sparks all around us.
Maybe we could take our brains
out of our heads and see
a slideshow of our memories.
Maybe we could give all the guests
red clown noses to wear.
Maybe we'll be especially lucky
and see a whale swim by.
Maybe we'll stumble upon
a creamsicle the size of a house.
How about we paint it
pink, white and green?
It would nourish our souls.
Instead we sit here
like complacent cattle

waiting to be slaughtered.
We just need to get to the top
of the hill overlooking the Thermos
of Thermopolis. Otherwise,
we may be denying the world
the greatest book ever written.

ANNE WHITEHOUSE

Hawk Shabbat

Once a Cooper's Hawk settled
outside the first-floor window
at the back of our Manhattan apartment,
perched on the wrought-iron bars
of an empty air conditioner cage.

In the cold, high realms of the air
it had traveled a great distance
and from afar with piercing vision
had spied our cage and courtyard,
one protected space within another.
It felt safe enough to rest surrounded
by high walls, like being
at the bottom of a well of air.

The hawk was so tired it didn't care
that we were inches away,
separated only by a pane of glass.
Its head swiveled all around,
facing backwards on its neck,
and with its beak it ruffled
its neck feathers and tucked its head
under its wing and was fast asleep
while fierce-looking talons
gripped the bars of the cage.

It was a Friday evening, and the peace
of Shabbat was falling like a veil,
shadowing the world as the hawk slept.
Not wanting to disturb its rest,

I left the room dark as I set the table
next to the window and lit the candles,
softly singing the blessing,
shielding my eyes in prayer.

My husband and daughter and I
blessed the wine and the bread
and quietly ate our dinner by candlelight.
Twice the hawk woke and stared at us.
Its black pupils rimmed in gold
pierced me with inexpressible wildness,
as fierce and strange as God's angel.

Like a sheet of mica clouding its gaze,
the hawk's inner eyelid slid from front to back,
and again its head rotated, and it bent
its beak under its wing and slept and woke
and slept again. I woke in the night
and it was still there, a dark form
immobile against the darkness.
In the morning it was gone.

FRANK HABERLE

The Delivering

This lady who drops you off tells you to stay off the main roads, because you never know. Someone might be looking for you, you know, on the roads. She tells you that you'll probably just have to walk all the way out there. So you pull the duffel onto your shoulder and you walk all the way out there. And then you start walking north. You have to walk out on another road, a single lane road winding up and down huge rocky hills, between stone walls, past barren fields and abandoned tractors. No cars ever come. You keep walking, all day, into a stiff cold wind. You switch the duffel from shoulder to shoulder, every fifty steps, to keep your hands from freezing. And it starts getting dark and the wind really picks up. And at last, a car drives past you—a black one, like a hearse—and the driving man stops, and turns around, and backs up to you, and pushes the passenger door open.

“Wherever you’re going,” the driving man says, “you best get in.”

“Thank you, sir.” You throw your pack into the back seat.

“I hope you haven’t been walking all the way from out there,” the driving man says.

“But I have.”

The driving man turns and looks at you. He looks like Harry Truman, with a crack straight down the right lens of his glasses. His face is whiskey red. There is no seatbelt. You hold the dashboard, white-knuckled. He drives for an hour, swerving toward the stone wall on the right, then the one on the left. The driving man rattles off the names of all the places you should go and see that don’t require a very long walk on an exposed stretch of land where you’ll catch the death of cold and they’ll never find your bones: the church of this, the high king of that.



The walls turn into buildings, then open into a town square. The driving man slams on the squeaking breaks in front of a huge train station.

“You’ll find a place to sleep in there,” he says. “And if you can’t you should sleep anywhere you like. Although I wouldn’t recommend it.”

He reaches over to shake your hand. His coat opens up at the neck. For the first time, you see the priest collar, stained with sweat. You climb out of the car and stand under a lone street lamp. You place the duffel bag between your legs.

“What is in this duffel,” you ask yourself. “What could possibly be in this duffel that’s worth all this?”

The wind is howling now, a winter one, an ocean blast. Ropes clang on a pipe somewhere. Only one door to the train station is open. You hear chains rattling. You walk through the door. There are lines of old trains waiting on platforms, but the lights are off and the engines silent. ‘I suppose I can just sleep in a passenger car,’ you think; but you try some doors and they are locked.

Then a yard man appears on the end of the platform, swinging a lantern.

“We’re closing now so you better get out,” he says as he approaches you.

“Oh,” you say.

“Are you looking for a place?” he asks. In the lantern’s light his face is a sheet of bone; his dark eyes set back under a hedge of eye brow.

“Yes.”

“Can you manage four?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll lock up the rest now,” the yard man says. “Meet me in front in five minutes.”

You stand in front of the station. The last light of the sky—a deep blue, like the ocean beneath it—barely glows beyond some old chimneys. A dog barks somewhere, but sadly, like he is lost in his own house. The wind rips through you three, four more times. There is a lone light on in the square—the window of a pub, across the way—and you are just about to start walking for it when the Yard man reappears.

“Follow me, then,” the Yard man says. He starts walking, very quickly. Exhausted from the day’s march, and weighed down with the duffel bag, you struggle to keep up. The yard man’s lantern lights up the faces of whitewashed buildings, little houses, tiny doors, and rows after rows of shuttered tiny windows. The yard man seems to pick up speed. Soon you are falling behind. “Come on, then,” the yardman says, waving his free arm as he turns another corner. You turn it, and there he is in the middle of a block. He is knocking on a door.

“Who in hell do you think it is,” he yells.

A woman’s muffled voice yells something back. The yard man hisses something back through the door. This goes on until you catch up with him. The door swings open and yellow light spills like heat out onto you. A tiny woman in a blue scarf and a housecoat looks up at you. The yard man disappears, running up the street.

“You are welcome, you are welcome,” she says, spreading her arms. “But for god sake wipe your feet. On a night like this. On a howling night like this, wherever were you going?”

“To live is to fly,” the old man says to you, patting you on the back as you step past him.

“Get on with you then,” the old lady snaps back at him. “Fly away and god bless the tree that hits you square in the head.”

The old man holds up his hand to sweep away her words. When she seals the door shut, he disappears. You are alone with her and a little boy clinging to her leg staring up at you. In the parlor’s amber light the boy looks more like a strange little frog-boy with a long frog-face and a bush of oily hair, much like the man who just left, only smaller.

“You’re welcome, you’re welcome,” she repeats to you, standing there in the narrow parlor. “Come into here then. Come into here. Here is your room.”

She pushes you into a small room off the parlor, what might have once been a dining room. The walls hold up two rodeo posters and the long drapes covering the lone window are printed with cowboy hats, lassos and rifles.

“Four punts, only four punts for you. And a mighty breakfast in the morning if you like. If you like. If you like. I’ll take it now, I will. You’re welcome. You’re very welcome.”

You hand her a five-punt note from your pocket. “Thank you,” you say. You drop the duffle bag on the floor.

“The loo is upstairs at the top of the stairs, there’s a very nice shower, you should take a very nice hot shower, take the chill out of you. All frozen, you are. You look like Father Christmas himself. What were you doing out on the roads, Yank, on a night like this, the ice howling straight from the sea? And you? What are you staring at?”

She is shouting now at the little frog-boy.

“Haven’t you ever seen a big Yank before? He’s a big one, isn’t he? Now off to a biscuit and bed for you, boy. Back to the kitchen. Back to your biscuit. Right now, boy.”

The little frog-boy grins at you, angrily, baring his lower teeth. In the room’s lamplight he looks even more like a sickly little frog-boy, the gaunt frog-head trapped on a little boy’s body. The woman shushes him out of the room.

“Almost forgot the keys, then,” she hands you two bronzed old things that weigh a pound. Then she stops and looks around at the decorations. “We had a visitor here, not so long ago. A Cowboy, he was. A Yank like you. He sang up at the pub where Big Johnny sits. He stayed, but then he left. Big John still talks about him all the time. I think it’s all he ever thinks about.” She walks out and pulls the door shut behind her.

You sit in silence on the edge of the bed. You pull off one of your boots, and then the other. One of the socks, now thawing, is soaked in blood. Somewhere out there on the coast road you must have stepped on a nail. Your eyes slowly close. You remember the rocky hills back there, the pounding surf somewhere below the ledges, the one-track road climbing up and down the endless roll. You remember the strange sounds coming from the

rocks, like whispers. The whispers wrestle with real whispers coming from the wall, the muddled henpecking of mother to child, repeating “now listen Mister Johnny, now listen Mister Johnny...” You fall back onto the pillow. You drift into the grog, one foot on the bed, one foot off.

“There’s nothing to fear, Mister Johnny. He’s just a yank, is all.”

“I don’t care if he’s a yank or not. He’s a Serpent, I say. I know a Serpent when I see one.”

“There, there now, Mister Johnny. He’s just a big yank. A nice big yank who’s far from home.”

“He’s a Serpent, mudder. Sent from The Others, he is. Fudder brought him here to kill you, he did. I won’t. I won’t let him do it. I’ll stab his eyes out, mudder. I’ll stab them and I’ll eat them on a stick.”

You remember, suddenly, why you’re here—the delivering. You jerk yourself awake and start lacing your boots. You have to make a call. You have to call them. You don’t know who they are but you know you have to call them. You have to find a payphone. You stuff the duffel under the bed. You try to lock the bedroom door behind you. You try to lock the front door behind you. But it is so cold, you know, and you are so tired. The wind is really ripping off the ocean now, cutting through your second-hand wrappings. The little room’s warmth wrapped you up like a blanket, but you couldn’t sleep yet. You have to finish your delivering, and then you can sleep. You hobble on your sore foot up an empty single-track street between little houses and then a wider two-lane number between little storefronts. A small city park appears with branches sticking up and bending under the howling wind and, beneath the lone working street lamp, a row of payphones. You put the coins in the slot at the top of the phone and you dial the number. A man in a uniform, who might be a constable, steps out of the park, glances at you, checks his watch, then walks away. Your teeth chattering, you wait. On the twelfth ring, as instructed, someone answers.



The night sky races above you. You limp face-first into a headwind, back to the little house. Particles of frozen ocean spray cut into your cheeks. The low clouds glow with an eery blue light. A lonely bell clanks crazy on a dock someplace behind the houses. You have to go back, get the duffel, and bring it someplace. Only then are you free. You still don’t know what’s in the duffel. You never asked. It isn’t particularly heavy and it isn’t particularly light. You never opened it up and took a look. You don’t want to know. You are afraid to know. And it is not your business to know. It is your business to deliver.

Just when you start to panic that you’ll never find the place, you find the place. You fumble the keys with your frozen fingers until the front door clicks open. It is dark and quiet inside the parlor. You put your hand on your bedroom door and it swings open. In the darkness you can barely see the outline of the duffel, pulled apart in the middle of the

floor. Clothing and crackers and pens and paper are strewn across the floor. This is bad. This is really, really bad. The closed window drapes behind the bed move. With your fists clenched you cross the room and pull the curtains open. For a second you see nothing. You hear a noise below you, a little squeak, or a gurgle. You look down in the darkness. A little frog-boy leaps up at you. His cold white fist flies up to meet you square in the nose. You fall back and trip on the bed, land flat on the floor, and bang your head. Mister Johnny pounces on you with a pen in his fist, coming within inches of gouging your eyes. You grab him by his cold damp wrist. You stand up, holding him up until he stops squirming and hangs limp before you.

“Put me down,” he says, calmly, and then he giggles maliciously. Up close, he has syrupy little eyes, like they’ve been soaking in cooking oil. Still holding him by the arm, you pull him closer, so you are face to face.

“Listen to me, Mister Johnny. Have you taken something from my duffel?”

“How do you know my name? How?”

“Because,” you say, “I am sent from The Others. I am sent here from far away. And I know everything about you, Mister Johnny.” He stares at you, silently, seeming to buy into the story. “Now listen to me. My business here does not concern you, or your Mudder, or your Fudder. I’ll put you down, and no harm will come to you, if you never step into this room again so long as I’m here. Do you understand?”

You put him down. Mister Johnny hops silently from the room, paddling in his footie pajamas. At the foot of the stairs, he turns and grins at you again; a froggy grin. This time a shiver runs down your spine.

“I have friends, you know, serpent,” he spits. “I’m not the only one.”



You re-lock the door to the room and gather everything into the backpack. There is a roll of undershirts, a pullover, newspapers, a couple of notebooks with scribbles in them, pens and pencils and a couple of sheets of photo negatives in a manila folder that has come open. Is something missing? Did Mister Johnny take something? Or, is there nothing of value to begin with? What if there is nothing to begin with? Is this a set up? The whole deal is payment on delivering. You don’t have a choice. You pull the front door shut behind you. You hobble up the street again, the howling sea wind behind you. You do what you were told to do. You pass the pay phones and enter the park. You walk under bending branches, pressing down around you, whistling under a shriek of torn clouds. On the far end of the park you turn left, then turn right at a corner pub. Through the window you see a young man and a young woman in white shirts, tending bar, and a row of old codgers leaning over the bar itself. A blow comes up the legs of your pants and reaches down your neck. Snowflakes spiral around you. You push on three blocks, then take another left, as you were told. You hurry down a desolate street with big feral cats rushing along the gutters. You bang twelve

times on the yellow door. A big hand reaches out and pulls you into a dark foyer. More big hands pull you into a parlor lit only by a fireplace. Another big set of hands rifle through the duffel. There is a long breath of silence. Now, you really start panicking. What if you no longer have whatever it is you were sent to deliver?

The big hands pass the duffel back to you, and another hands you a roll of bills.

“Off you go, lad,” someone says.

“But drink this first,” another voice says, and another big hand passes you a pint of stout.

“Oh no, I mean, I don’t need it.”

“Drink it!” a voice yells. “Drink all of it. It will fortify you. Drink it.”

So you drink the drink, standing there, surrounded by muffled men with big hands, staring at you. It tastes awful funny, but you drink it. Then the hands take you and pull you to another door, and soon you are out on another street. And you wander around a bit, you know, but you aren’t cold anymore. You feel strong, like you are fortified. You feel like you are floating around in the wind. And the next thing you know, you are sitting in the pub, the pub you passed earlier, finishing a pint of stout and starting another. And the two bartenders—the young man and the young woman—are laughing, and laughing, and so are the old men around you, and you are laughing too; but you have no idea why. And some time passes there, you know, and then you look up with a jerk and you are facing the window out to the street, the same one you looked in through a while back. And you see two little faces, or the tops of their faces, peeking in the window at you, like children standing on their tippy-toes, but they were not children. The faces were froggy-faces faces. You know what you see. And then you rub your eyes and they are gone. And then you drop your head again. Your head comes up with a jerk and the young man bartender, who has finally seen you for what you are, says with great authority ‘it’s closing time, lad, you best be on your way,’ and his sister eyes you warily from the farthest side of the bar, where she is rinsing the glasses. Suddenly the bolt locks behind you and you are out in the cold wind, the snow, the streets.



The snow has stopped but the wind keeps coming. From the top of the park you can make out the great black ocean, strangely glowing. The clouds have ripped themselves away from the earth and the sea and made their way to the mountains behind you. It is late and still and brightly cold. Now there is a real clip of silver light. The moon is rising over the ocean ahead of you, just past the smoking tangle of row houses where you rented the room. The moonlight spreads like great fingers up from the ocean surface, between the narrow streets. Mister Johnny will be off to bed, you know. Mister Johnny won’t mess with you again. You remember the warm cowboy bed. The keys rattle in your pocket. Now, where was that little street? A winding glow of cobblestones roll left, then right, down a hill toward the ocean. The street has to be here somewhere. You follow the cobblestones

downhill but where you think you should turn right but the whole path turns left, then right, then left again. The cold has soaked into your flesh now; you can no longer feel your hands or your feet. You have to find the little house now. But the moon itself is pulling you down the hill. It's a big silver orb floating just above a churning, splashing sea. Hands stuffed in your pockets, you cross some sort of bridge above a tussle of fishing boats. Icicles shine from the ropes draped between the boats.

The duffel is still strapped over your shoulder. You forgot all about the duffel. In a sudden panic, you heave the thing into the cold water, then hurry across the bridge. It makes a sound like a gurgle, and then it sinks into the swirl.

Now you are on some sort of island, with bare trees groping around the thin line of a dirt road. After a time the dirt road opens to a sheltered cove. You sit next to a big rock and curl up, out of the wind, your hands stuffed in your armpits, looking at the moon. You can really see the whole thing now. It is shimmering in the lapping waves and splashing its dim light onto the rocks surrounding you. You don't know what to do now. You pull the collar of your second-hand army coat up as far as you can. You stuff your frozen fingers deep into your pants.

You know you will freeze to death if you stay here, but you can't get up and face that wind. You are lost. Your thoughts wander back to the person you were before. Even though you screwed up everything you could get your hands on—even though you repeatedly and relentlessly bit every hand that reached out to you—you are suddenly overwhelmed, not with fear of dying, but with homesickness. You are more homesick than you've ever been, for anything, ever.

Just as you doze away again, you catch something in the corner of your eye. You know immediately what it is. You want to get up and run, but you are folded up and frozen in place. Two frog-boys are crossing the shoreline, legging along the pile of rocks where the sea water is splashing into the icy rim along the shore. Two frog-boys are carrying something between them. In the moonlight, you recognize it instantly—it is the duffel, but there's something in it. Where did they find the duffel? You sit perfectly still, hoping that the stout is still playing tricks on you. You can hear them speaking.

“Do you smell something?” One of the frog boys says above the shudder of the waves. He stops, lays his half of the something onto the pebbles and hops up onto a bigger rock, no bigger than a small suitcase.

“I smell a drunken Yanker,” the second frog-boy says. “Like a serpent, is all. Not worth it. Not worth it at all.”

“But do you suppose he's sleeping? Because if he's sleeping, he's sleeping.”

“Not worth a thing, he is not, the drunken Yanker.”

“But Mister Johnny wants what he wants.”

“Not worth it, not worth it,” the second one spits. “Serpent.” He hoists the duffel bag they had been carrying up and over the suitcase-rock, and hops up, staring into the dark

cleft of rock where you are squatting, paralyzed. As the duffel bag slips over the far side you see a sparkle of light. They are carrying a huge, shimmering fish inside the unzipped duffel bag.

“Help me with this, brother. Drunken Yanker. Not worth it at all.”

“But what about Mister Johnny?”

“A delivering is a deal, brother. A delivering, is a delivering, is a delivering.”

Behind the rock, they disappear. You still can't move. You sit there, terrified, waiting for them to return—but then sleep, sweet sleep, as cold as you are, finally gets the better of you.



You wake up on a beach in the thin film of dawn. A frosting of sea spray has coated your jacket, your boots, and the rocks around you in ice. The rocks shimmer, red and green, yellow and brown. It is low tide and the water before you is all foamy sludge and kelp, the murky grotesque, slithering around on the beach. ‘What a weird dream I had,’ you tell yourself. ‘What a weird dream!’ Not so cold anymore, you start to unfold yourself. But then you stop. Because lying at your feet in front of you, in the dim light, you can just make out the skeletal remains of a huge fish, its head still intact but its eyes gone. It's lying on top of the empty blue duffel, staring at you, gaping, pleading, as if asking you—why?

VICTORIA REYES

bedtime instructional manual of a tenured professor

1. take nightly Ativan & three Camino sours deep sleep
2. grab milk for J & water for O
3. go upstairs, hug & kiss J, saying mahal kita lysm & goodnight
4. cross the narrow hall to my room & climb into bed
5. put electric stimulators on the upper thigh for 20 minutes
6. after, place electric stimulators on the lower thigh for 20 minutes
7. repeat steps 5 & 6 on other leg
8. around 9:30pm, open the curtains & close the window
9. turn on rain app
10. snuggle with O, asking her about her favorite & least favorite part of the day
11. lay next to her until she falls asleep or i am about to
12. return to my bed
13. double check 5:03am 5:07am 5:13am 5:27am alarms are on (4x a week)
14. start second rain app
15. lay on side & place pillow in between legs
16. hug tight the red panda plush O gifted me
17. ~~drift off to sleep~~ ruminant & dream half-wake until the half becomes whole

NOTE:

O is growing older,
talking to friend(s)

on weekend nights:
change in routine

repeat steps 1-9

10. tell O mahal kita lysm before breaking out the room divider [purchased during COVID] & place it just so—folded out & bit unsteady in between our beds; an illusion of privacy
11. turn off the table light next to my bed
12. double check alarm
13. close my eyes—willing myself to another time & place
14. my eyes remain shuttered while O cackles & chats with friend(s)—sleep eludes me.
15. eyes still shut, eventually, i hear soft movements as O folds up the divider, puts it away & climbs back in her bed to sleep.
16. finally drift away

ANDREI ROMANOV

The Infant and the Dictator

My mother walked through a field to teach other people's children. Inside her, I turned.

The field was outside a village that did not appear on most maps, west of Ploiești, in the flat country north of Bucharest, where Romania opens flat and exposed, like a palm. To reach it, she took the train from Bucharest to Ploiești Vest for 1.5 hours standing, because pregnant women did not always get seats; then a bus to a smaller town; and finally, she walked. The field was the last stretch. Twenty minutes in summer, longer in winter when the snow filled her boots, and the wind came across the plain with nothing to stop it. She was twenty-three years old, five feet three, slim, blonde, green-eyed, and looked, in the photographs I have from that time, like she belonged somewhere else entirely. Like someone had placed a Russian model in the middle of a communist agricultural zone as a test, to see how long it would take for the landscape to break her.

It didn't.

She had been assigned to the village school. In Ceaușescu's Romania, the state chose your first job. My mother was sent there. She went. If you were a teacher, you might be sent somewhere with a train station, or you might be sent somewhere that could only be reached by walking through a field. My mother was sent to the field. She taught small children whose parents drove state-owned tractors across state-owned land, and sometimes, when the weather was very bad, or my mother was very pregnant, one of those parents would take her to the bus station on the tractor. She climbed up next to them and rode back over the frozen ruts with one hand on her belly. The belly was me.

I was born on March 24, 1989. Nicolae Ceaușescu was executed on December 25, 1989. Between those two dates, nine months passed, the same time it takes to carry a child to term. Romania carried one thing and delivered another. I was the child. The other was a country that didn't yet know what it was.

I have no memory of any of it. Not the birth, not the revolution, not the gunfire that came through the television in our apartment on the fourth floor of an eight-story block in Berceni, on the southern edge of Bucharest. I was nine months old. I was not a witness. I was barely a person. And yet that event, the dictator on the balcony, the helicopter, the trial,

the bullets, the silence after, is the hinge on which my entire life turns. Everything I am exists in the after. But I was made in the before, carried in it, shaped by it, born into the last months of it. I am an archive of something I never saw.



The apartment had three rooms on the fourth floor. The walls were thin and white with a calcium coating that felt like chalk. In the morning, light came through one side. By three in the afternoon, it crossed to the other, as if the sun was pacing, checking on us from both directions. In winter, there was no heating. In summer, the apartment became an oven. Inside, it smelled clean, my mother insisted on that, as if cleanliness was the one domain the state could not regulate. But the moment you stepped outside into the stairwell, there was rubbish everywhere. The border between private dignity and public decay was the thickness of a door.

She ate what was in season because there was nothing else. No imports. No choice. Eggs required waiting in a queue for hours. The hospital had no ultrasound, only an old echography machine that showed shadows and guesses. She carried me through the last winter of the dictatorship, not knowing what I would look like, what I would become, what country I would be born into.



My father was a customs agent at Otopeni Airport. On December 23, two days before the execution, he drove to work in his uniform. Somewhere between our apartment and the airport, the road was full of people, and the people saw his uniform. Customs. Official. State. They could not tell the difference between a customs agent and a policeman. In those hours, the difference did not matter. My father turned the car around at full speed and drove home. He came through the door breathing hard, still in uniform, and did not go back to work for days.

My mother watched the television. She could not believe what she was seeing. She was genuinely happy she had told me this, physically happy. The man who had controlled every aspect of their lives, who decided where she worked and what she ate and how warm her apartment was, that man was finished. He was standing in front of a wall with his wife, and then they were both dead, and the picture on the television changed, and people were screaming and crying, and the sound was strange because it was the sound of joy and terror at the same time, which is a sound most people never hear and cannot imagine until they hear it.

She was happy. But she has also told me this: what came after was worse.



She said it more than once.

What came after was worse.

Not the dictatorship. Not the food shortages, not the cold, not the walking through fields, not the uniforms, not the queues, not the secret police. What came after. The freedom. The democracy. Capitalism. The transition. Whatever word you choose for the thing that replaced Ceaușescu, that thing, my mother says, was worse.

I know what people outside Romania want this story to be. Darkness, then light. The wall falls, the dictator dies, the people are free. But freedom was the beginning of something else, something that moved into the vacant space the regime left behind and filled it with different kinds of cruelty that were harder to name because they came dressed in new vocabularies. The elites did not disappear. They changed clothes. In communism, your status came from your position in the party. After the revolution, it came from one thing only: how much money you had. We did not dismantle the machine. We repainted it.

It is not the story that makes the West feel good about its exports. But it is what happened. And I grew up inside it.



Berceni in the 1990s was the edge of a city trying to become something without knowing what. The new rules were simple: there are no rules. There is only what you can get and what you can keep.

I was eleven when I understood that the boys around me were not just boys. Some of them had already become something else, something the transition had made. They were not born into violence. They were delivered into a vacuum, and the vacuum was filled by whoever was fastest, strongest, or most willing.

Melek was five years older than me. He was Turkish by descent, a Sufi by faith, an amateur boxer by talent, and a full-time gangster by circumstance. I don't think he was built for the life he lived. He was built for something that did not exist in the place and time he was given. He was quick and funny and had a way of looking at you that made you feel like he was keeping a secret that would make you laugh if he told you. He was also capable of things I will not describe because this essay is not about what Melek did. It is about the fact that Melek existed, that he was my friend, and that he is dead.

He did what he could to survive. That is a sentence I have said so many times about so many people that it has become smooth in my mouth, like a stone I have been carrying under my tongue. He did what he could. They did what they could. What other sentence is there for a person born into a country that has just finished eating itself?

I lost around twenty friends to gang violence. I will not list their names. Some of them died when I was still a teenager. The oldest I was when I lost one of them, I will not calculate. The number of funerals I attended before I turned twenty is one I do not

mention. It doesn't appear anywhere I'm supposed to list who I am. It does not appear on my website between the line about being a former bodybuilding champion and the line about conducting research in Portuguese archives. There is a version of me that exists professionally, the independent historian, the man who reads three languages and lives twenty minutes from Sagres, and that version is real, but it is not complete. The complete version includes Melek. It includes the photographs.

I have photographs of boys who are dead. They show a world that people even ten years younger than me cannot imagine existed. Not in some distant century. Not in the Age of Discovery. In Bucharest, in the 1990s, in the wreckage of a revolution that was supposed to save us.

When I look at those photographs now, I feel melancholy. But also some fun memories. I wrote that sentence, then sat with it because it is the truest thing I can say, and also the most inadequate: melancholy and fun. The two words sit next to each other like strangers at a funeral who discover they went to the same school. They do not belong together, and they cannot be separated.



Every year around Christmas, Romanian television shows the footage. The balcony speech. The helicopter. The trial, if you can call it a trial. The execution. And then, without transition, the memorial. Ceaușescu's grave. At least a hundred people were standing at his gravestone, mourning him. His old followers said what a great leader he was. They bring flowers. They weep. I grew up with three television channels, and this footage was on every year. I watched it as a child, not understanding. As a teenager, beginning to understand. As an adult, understanding too much. The execution was real. The mourning was real. Both are happening in the same country, on the same screen. Romania did not choose between grief and celebration. It held both the way a body holds a disease and the way an immune system does, each convinced of its own righteousness.

I wanted to know more. Not from the mourners or the commentators or the historians who appeared in studio with careful opinions. I wanted the primary sources. I wanted to go to the place where the records were kept and read them myself. This instinct, this need to go to the original, I did not know it was unusual until much later. I did not know that the same impulse that made me distrust Romanian television would one day carry me into the Torre do Tombo in Lisbon, where I would hold documents from the fifteenth century and try to reconstruct the decisions of men who had been dead for five hundred years.



There is a field outside a village west of Ploiești where my mother walked in the snow while I turned inside her. I have never been to it. I do not know if the school, the village, or

the field still exist, or if they look the same as they did in the winter of 1989. I have never asked my mother to take me. I am not sure she would go.

But I have been to other fields. I have stood at Sagres, at the edge of the cliff where the land ends and the ocean begins. I have been to Lagos, where the first European slave auction took place in 1444, in a market square that is now a pedestrian area with cafes.

And I have stood in all of these places with the same feeling: that I arrived too late to witness what happened, but not too late to be shaped by it.

This is what I share with the infant I was in December 1989. That infant was present for the most important event in his country's modern history. He was alive, in the city, in the apartment, on the fourth floor, while the dictator fell. And he saw nothing. He understood nothing. He remembers nothing. But every single thing about his life, the friends he made, the friends he buried, the languages he learned, the country he left, the country he moved to, the book he wrote, the archive he entered, the cliff he stood on, all of it flows from that event he cannot access.

I am an archive of something I never witnessed. And I have spent my entire adult life trying to learn how to read the documents.



I did not tell anyone I was writing the book. For months I worked in silence, building something no one knew about. I recognize the impulse now as inherited.

My mother walked through a field every day for years and did not complain. She told it as a fact, this is what I did, this is where they sent me, this is how I got there. The tractor. The snow. The field. The children at the school who were not hers. The child inside her who was.

I wrote a book about people who crossed oceans. But the bravest crossing I know is the one she made on foot.



When spring comes in the Algarve and the air changes, that specific shift, the one that is not warmth exactly but the memory of warmth, the promise that the cold is finished, I am taken back. Not to a specific moment. Not to a scene I can describe with precision. To a feeling. The feeling of being small in Bucharest and sensing that the world was larger than the apartment, larger than the bloc, larger than Berceni, larger than anything I could see from the fourth floor. The feeling of spring arriving in a city that had survived another winter, and the smell of it, wet concrete and new leaves and diesel and something sweet underneath all of it that I have never been able to name.

That smell is my earliest archive. Older than any document I have held in Lisbon. Older than any chronicle I have read about the Portuguese. It is the record of a child who did not

yet know he was standing in the aftermath of a revolution, in the rubble of one empire, at the beginning of a life that would carry him to the ruins of another.

I carry both. The infant and the historian. The field my mother crossed and the ocean the Portuguese crossed. The photographs of dead friends and the photographs of dead navigators. The apartment with thin walls and the archive with thick ones. The country I cannot go back to and the country I cannot fully arrive in.

I was born nine months before the fall of everything. I have spent my life in the debris, picking up pieces, trying to read them.

AYESHA HABIB

The terror returning again and again

I ran into myself at two in the morning at the all-night diner. She was younger, but she had the same brittle nails, long face; the same black hair—though mine was now tinged with wiry greys. They say if you passed yourself walking down the street, you wouldn't recognize your own face. That's how unknown we are to ourselves. Not me, though. I've always been very self-aware. It's why I can't sleep. I'm too aware of myself.

I'd been at the diner for hours, sitting at the counter on a barstool with no backrest. My excess slipping over the seat's edges like playdough. Vulnerable soft sides exposed. It made me paranoid, but I didn't move. I have phantom stab wounds in my ribs, the way amputees have with limbs. It hasn't happened yet, but I'm bracing for the slice, the puncture, the slow oozing of dark red. I've been bracing for it ever since a boy first put his hand on the inward slope of my waist so many years ago and I suddenly became aware of its delicate existence. My flesh has grown thicker, but that anticipation remains. That crawly feeling like someone is right behind you and your body itches a bit from the violence that is yet to come.

I come here a lot when I can't sleep, to sit in the same backless chair. I sip chamomile tea all night while the stink of fried grease settles into my clothes and makes my skin oily.

Others in my position might have developed a "regular" status at the diner by now, established an easy way with the waitresses and busboys, a first-name basis perhaps—certainly the warmth of recognition at the very least. But not me. I don't do pleasantries, and I've more than once returned an apple pie for being too cold in the centre. I tip below the recommended percentage. I'd say the lack of sleep makes me irritable, but I've been like this for a while. I wouldn't doubt someone in the kitchen has spat in my mushroom soup on at least one occasion.

I hadn't slept for three nights when I ran into her, the other me—the younger me. She came in with a group of teenage boys, loud tornadoes of gangly limbs and black hoods, bodies so new and unsure of how to move with all that length. They seemed drunk, hazy-faced and stumbling about with even more inelegance than their new bodies would, and she—I—was the only girl among them, quiet and stiff, as if she didn't know what to do

with herself. I kept watch of her from the corner of my eye, thinking of what to say to her, to me.



In primary school, I used to have elaborate daydreams of my own funeral. I'd imagine the teachers, heavy-bodied old women who thwacked me on the knuckles with a ruler when I got my sums wrong, and my classmates, who cackled at me in class behind sticky hands, solemnly watch my little coffin descend into the earth, where worms waited to tango. Guilty looks on all their faces. (*Shame on us! Shame on us for eternity!*) I satiated myself on those fantasies, as if my death would finally afford me the empathy I wasn't getting in life. I coddled myself with them, sucking my thumb in bed at night, rocking back and forth.

I avoided imagining my mother in my funeral fantasies. Surely, she would cry, as any mother would. She too, I convinced myself, would collapse under the weight of her grief and live forever reckoning with the unnatural imbalance of outliving the life she brought into the world.

There was no point in thinking too deeply about it.



As I've grown older, I've become more afraid of teenagers. I walk three blocks out of my way to avoid passing the high school when I get groceries and shut my blinds when school is out, in case they come by my window and peer into my business.

At the diner, the boys were laughing at a video on one of their phones; the sound of it unnerved me. Huddled around the tiny screen, they guffawed all at once—so loud that it cracked my skull—snapping their fingers and bouncing out of their chairs, falling back with knees thrown open and legs splayed out. Their movements were exaggerated, like they were acting for an invisible camera. They mimicked each other's inflections, each other's mannerisms. But there was a volatile masculine energy around them, just enough to imbue a sense of lurking brutishness to the scene, ready to explode at a wrong look, a bumped shoulder.

My other self sat on the opposite end of the table, looking embarrassed by the company she kept. She glanced around the room, watching—as I had been doing too—the other patrons. The couple sitting side-by-side in a booth, who kept giving each other tight little kisses, so quick their lips barely touched, between bites of pancakes. The two truckers, in shabby hoodies and oil-stained jeans, twirling unlit cigarettes in thick hands. And me, sitting at the countertop, silently watching. We made eye contact. She grimaced in horror.



I have been able to slip outside of myself very easily throughout my life. I suppose this is why I am so self-aware—I always watch myself in third person. I look down on her most nights as she lies awake, thinking of her life and trying to pinpoint the moment she went bad, like curdled milk. She has laughed at invalids, pinched crying babies when their mothers look away, and cursed at the gentle-natured. When she starts to get in a pitiful mood, I want to scribble her out in black ink, so hard until the pen breaks and splatters over the page.

She thinks perhaps she's just a victim of her upbringing and thus her badness is out of her control, and her conscience should be clear. Just look at her mother, who wouldn't cry at her imaginary funeral, at least not convincingly. Or her grandmother, who sat at the kitchen table and wept into her palms when everyone had gone to bed; who once threw a fork at her small granddaughter for peering innocently around the kitchen door to watch the nightly deluge; who, when she was pregnant, drank bleach to kill the fetus. It didn't work, obviously, because her mother is here and she is here. But perhaps they ought not be.

Maybe this unsettled existence is why she's always felt something unexpressed within. Something like rage—but stronger and nameless—was bubbling inside, but she lacked the means to express it. This chasm, this bottleneck of emotion, is why she cannot sleep—the pressure of it against her sinuses makes her head feel like a balloon, inflating her until she floats out of bed into the night sky and pops, raining blood and flesh over the earth.



I don't remember how I got here, but I'm at their table, grasping her thin wrists. It feels very urgent for me to tell her something, but I can't remember what.



I have never screamed in delight nor terror. I was once almost in a car accident, many, many years ago. Thick snowflakes slammed against the windshield. My lover was driving, the road was icy. We skidded and, in slow motion, the car swerved into the lane of oncoming traffic. There were honks and screams, but I was quiet. I watched our path to near collision as if it were a mildly interesting scene in a film. I went with the flow, even if the flow led to death. When it was over, I didn't feel anything, and this irritated me. If life is about survival, endurance, legacy, then my lethargy in living felt like an evolutionary glitch. So, I snapped at my lover, seething with exaggerated vitriol to make up for my confusion. I was vulgar and contemptuous. (*Do you have a brain? Do you think anything through? I could have died because of you. You're careless with me.*) He left me not long after. I let love slip through my fingers, and it never came back again. This is why I can't sleep.



They're all screaming at me, but it sounds so distant, muffled. I tend to have this effect on people. I unnerve them, I have no idea why. I often see the dislike in strangers' eyes when they look at me. It's a specific shadow that flicks across their corneas; I can pinpoint the minute it happens. It only takes a fraction of a moment for them to make up their mind about me, for our interaction to go from neutral to one of distinct unpleasantness.

Up close, I see their acne, so inflamed and angry that I wonder if it hurts, the way they twist their faces in disgust at me. (*What the fuck lady, what's your problem, get the fuck away from her, Seb go call the cops...*) I imagine the pustules popping and splattering pus everywhere. I try to focus on her, on me. She's terrified in my unyielding grip. Words I want to tell her won't come out, but I hope she recognizes me, I hope she understands. I'm gaping like a fish, that nameless thing blocking my capacity to express. (*You are... You must... It's only... See! See!*)

There's always so much to say, but when you get the chance to say it, you choke. This has always been the pattern of your life, missed opportunities. You don't panic about losing the moment, because you think another chance will come back around. And when it does, you choke again.



These days, insomnia has become an expanding hollow-eyed void that swallows me whole, that reaches into my mouth and yanks my intestines out until I retch onto my sheets. What do I do with this unrelenting consciousness? I think about the paths of my life extending outward, spreading like blood saturating the microfibrils of a tissue. I think of my horoscope and religion and all the ways we twist ourselves into believing in fate or destiny or purpose. I think of my bitterness and jealousy and cruelty, and where it all may have come from, whether it was in me since the beginning or if I picked it up along the way somewhere, and wonder what chance I had to ever be good. I am old now, but once I was young. What a waste.



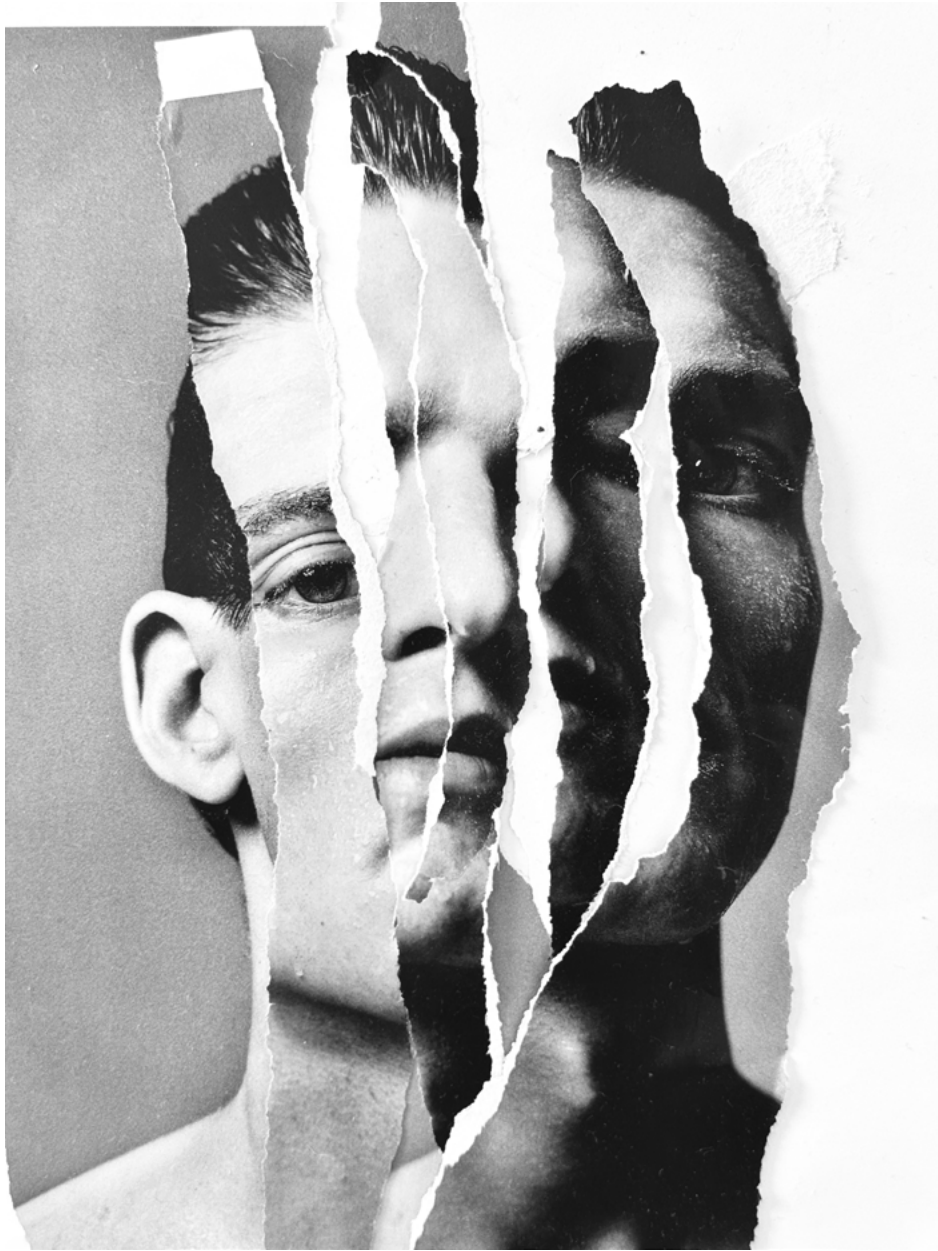
Someone bigger than me is pulling me away from her, so I dig my nails in deeper into her skin, drawing blood. It can't be over yet, I haven't said what I want to say. Big, rough hands and a sour smell like cigarettes and stale sweat overwhelm me. I twist and scream, refusing to let go, unable to be understood, choking on an unnamable feeling that has eluded me all my life. Dread is everywhere and I am the source of it. I am Satan in the garden; I am the cause of her ruin. They all want me to go, looking at me with hate. The noise of it all is pushing against my brain, mashing it into a static-y scramble, until, so quickly, so sharply, there is a sudden release in my rib. A wetness begins to seep out from it. A sense of relief, an exhale. I let go of her, myself, satisfied now that I've had my say. I

watch my body crumple into itself, but I'm past that now. She seems so far away. My wrists have deep half-moon marks from her nails digging into my skin, but I don't feel anything.

The trucker wipes his blood-soaked blade on his jeans and gently pushes me away from the mess. My friends all ran away when the knife came out; I can see them outside freaking out, yelling over each other. I should go to them, but I can't move. I'm trying to remember something that happened to me very long ago. It's running away faster than I can keep up. Yet I feel suddenly very heavy with the weight of memory, of a life I have lived, or is it a life I will live? I'm young, but once I was old.



I am on a road that loops back in on itself; the terror returning again and again.



DANIEL HEDIN

(Untitled)

PAUL GRUSSENDORF

Portrait of the Forgotten Ones

The little girl hangs back from her older brother. They both hold old white soccer balls protectively, and each is barefoot, in tattered clothing. The boy wears a T-shirt with the image of a round tiger's face adorning his chest.

The photo that I snap of this moment later reveals a sad congruence between the two kids' round heads, their two balls and the round tiger's head illustration, setting this black & white photo apart from the other street scenes I shoot that day.

The expression in the kids' eyes: curiosity, cautious optimism. What does this Gringo want? I capture them at the ideal moment, as they are emerging from the building's shadow to behold the outsider, all points of symmetry aligning in the frame for the future viewer. These kids are the poorest of the poor in a Central American country that has recently been rocked by devastating earthquakes and social revolution.

This condemned office building is now the home of several families squatting in the floors above. I climb the stairs cautiously. Plaster crumbles from the walls, the cement stairs are broken and chipped. I find people who are of mixed Afro-Caribbean and Indigenous heritage, a combination putting them on the margins of society where they fall outside the attention of the country's threadbare social services. *Los Olvidados*, the forgotten ones. They have pirated electricity for light and the convenience of TV in the deserted office spaces. Walls adorned by magazine pages portraying local fashions and tropical beaches. The children here attend school intermittently, while their parents pursue part-time work off the books. They all share a single tub placed outside the building with water fetched from a faucet.

During the month I am in town, I visit these families, thankful for their generous invitation to document the conditions of their existence with my Canon A1. I hear stories of the Caribbean coast, from where most of them moved a year ago after a devastating hurricane destroyed their meager homes. Although as a Gringo I surely represent privilege, there is never any mention of money. A local friend suggests how I can help out with some donations of food and clothing. Soon I'll be gone, and they'll continue as invisible tenants. What does the future hold for them, when the city finally gets around to demolishing this building as part of its urban renewal campaign, paid for with Western donations?

On my last stop at the building, after having said my goodbyes to the families, I descend the crumbling stairs to the street. Someone calls to me, and I turn to see another boy, an older teenager, hurrying after me, signaling, “Mister, mister, please take my picture.” I acknowledge his request with a nod, focusing my camera on his slight frame, his glowing face, and snap his portrait. In return a big smile of gratitude as he proclaims, “Thank you!



After my return to the States, I spent some time reviewing all of my photos, finally selecting twelve of my favorites of the people living in that collective building. Lovely nine by thirteen-inch black and white prints in fourteen by eighteen-inch black frames. The warm humanity of the struggling survivors shines forth from the squalor of their surroundings. The photos saw three exhibits in San Francisco, at a hip restaurant/bar on California Street and two coffee houses, including one of my favorite haunts, the Blue Danube Coffee House on Clement Street. I was pleased by the reception, how people would linger in front of the photos with wonder in their eyes. I would surreptitiously observe them for a while, and then ambush them with the history of the people in photos.

The photo of the two kids with the balls emerging from the shadow of the vacant building had its own life. It was featured on the cover of a widely circulated book on immigration policy, and was picked up by several literary journals, including *Kansas City Voices*.

Two years later I returned to the city on another humanitarian assignment. I took prints of the exhibition with me, looking forward to sharing with the tenants of that little island of humanity floating in a sea of urban decay. I smiled to myself, how delighted the subjects of the photos would be to see themselves, their children, how their inventiveness was affirmed by this outsider.

I arrived at that city block on a typical tropical, humid day, an afternoon downpour on the horizon. But where was the building? I searched the block twice. Wasn't it right here? There was only a fenced lot, and posters announcing plans to develop in the future, to construct another bank in the heart of the financial district. No one had thoughts or time for the former human inhabitants of this flattened construction site. *Los Olvidados* were gone, forgotten. My prior joy turned to despair.

Inquiries at the mayor's office revealed that not long after my departure they had been loaded up in trucks, against their will, and shipped back to the Caribbean coast, where the municipal government had no power to contest their uprooting and forcible return to a future of marginalized homelessness.

As always while traveling, I watched the local news for signs of local developments. One of the leading candidates in the upcoming national election was promising that, should he be elected, one of his priorities would be to convene a committee to study the situation.

The End

PETER GRIECO

Let's Make Morning

Let's make morning
all day. Put the grass
back
in matinee.

Three hot baths or more
will it take & as many
pots
of jo.

You know as well as
I know, my porcupine,
caress
& sweet

parole. Last night's
dishes can wait another
hour
or so.

SUSAN LONG

Cack and the Big White Cadillac

The townspeople greeted Cack in the usual way, but following their salutation, and once they'd put some distance between themselves and her, many let out a full-throated cackle, like a hen. Although she *did* resemble a hen, with her bright red hair and obvious neck wattle, the odd behavior evolved into a strange sort of verbal town tic, and the cackling became more commonplace even when speaking of her in the third person.

Cack was different from other women in town. For one thing, she wasn't married, nor had she ever been; my mom told her friend, Betty, that Cack must be pushing forty, which in nineteen sixty-six was considered ancient. Cack strutted through town wearing bright colors and even brighter lipstick, like she was Queen for a Day; she became a folk hero of sorts, larger than life, in the tiny town she inhabited.

Then, she did something that baffled just about everyone. She bought a 1966 big white Cadillac and drove it through town, honking the horn and waving at people like she was in a parade, a parade of one. People were bewildered, not by the fact that she purchased a Cadillac, but by how a single woman pushing forty could afford one, especially on her salary from Kroger.

I knew immediately where she bought it, Shorty Johnson's car lot down in Elkview. I'd trained my eyes on that car from the window of my school bus for at least a month. In the mornings, although the big white Cadillac sat parked, doing nothing at all, it put all the other cars on the lot to shame. In the afternoons, it sparkled, the slant of the sun showcasing its white brilliance. It was a car suited for a movie star, or, at the very least, someone who dreamt bigger than a Chevy.

After a few beers one night at the local bar, Shorty Johnson let it slip that Cack paid cash, fueling even more suspicion. Cack never let on that she had any money; she lived in a small trailer in one of the hollers near Wills Creek and kept mostly to herself. According to one of the church ladies who made weekly visits to persuade Cack to attend church, to no avail, piles of newspapers and TV-dinner trays were stacked floor to ceiling.

“She must be having an affair with a married man,” Mildred Smith whispered to Marge Barnes at the Five and Dime while standing in line to pay. Her whisper was loud enough for at least eight other people to overhear.

“I agree,” Marge said. “Where else would she get the money?”

One day, on the bus ride home from school, as we passed by Shorty’s car lot, with its still empty space where the big white Cadillac once sat, I turned to my best, and only, friend, Karen.

“I wonder where Cack *did* get the money.”

“Why don’t we find out?” Karen asked.

“Okay, Miss Nancy Drew, where do we start?”

I considered for a moment whether it was the right thing to do. I didn’t think Cack Samples was a bad person, just a loner and an outsider. Being an only child, and living with parents who frequently fought, I often felt like a misfit, too, and struggled to shake off loneliness.

The next day, after school, we visited Kroger. Karen kept an eye on Cack’s lane; luckily, she was working the express. I placed two packs of chewing gum in the basket, then, at the last minute, added a quart of milk; it might look suspicious to buy only gum and not something more life sustaining.

“Hi, Cack,” I said, laying the items on the conveyor belt. “I hope you don’t have to work too late, today.”

She glanced down, avoiding my eyes.

“No, I get off at six,” Cack said.

Karen and I arrived at Cack’s trailer at 5:55 p.m. and hid behind a giant hickory tree. By 6:20 p.m., she still hadn’t shown up; Kroger was only ten minutes away. Maybe she ran an errand on the way home. We were about to leave, so our parents wouldn’t whip our butts for getting home late, when the big white Cadillac barreled into the gravel parking space going way too fast, considering it had already reached its destination. A man slumped down in the passenger seat, his head the only visible sign of life.

“Janie,” Karen whispered to me. “There’s someone in the passenger seat!”

“I see,” I said, from my hunched-down position. “I wonder who it is.”

Cack got out of the car and surveyed her surroundings. The passenger door slowly opened, and Shorty Johnson cautiously emerged; his six-foot-one frame belied his name, and probably something more. Shorty’s clothes were wrinkled, and what little hair he had left lay limply on top of his head.

This was the same Shorty Johnson who owned the car lot, the same Shorty Johnson who was married to Mrs. Shorty Johnson, whose name was Kitty; but, if you crossed Kitty, she was likely to claw your eyes out. Why do people think it’s a good idea to call someone

the opposite of what's standing and staring them right in the face? I could ask Tiny Young, who weighs three hundred pounds; at least Cack's name suits her.

Once they entered the trailer, Karen and I rushed home. On the way, we tried to rule out innocent explanations, but, despite our best efforts, at least two of the Seven Deadly Sins were in play—Lust and Greed. I knew lust was tied to love and sex, and greed to wanting more than you already had, much more. But two twelve-year-olds couldn't be expected to understand specific details beyond that. And I'm fairly certain that Shorty and Cack weren't concerned about those particulars, either.

Still, we needed to rule out less incriminating behavior before accusing them of committing one, or, possibly two, of the Seven Deadly Sins. Maybe Shorty stopped by Kroger to pick up a few groceries and Cack mentioned that the engine on her new car was running a little hot, so he offered to ride home with her and see for himself. He might have slumped down in the passenger's seat because everyone knew how people talked, and why start rumors? Perhaps, he quickly went inside the trailer to grab a ratchet wrench and then popped the hood to take a look. We'd need to snoop around some more.

But, the next morning, Bradley Tucker and John Moss, two local boys, stumbled on Cack's dead body at the bottom of a dirt embankment along the Elk River Road. They had gone there to fish around 6 a.m. and found Cack, in her pajamas, lying on her side in about a foot of mud. They screamed at the sight of her, dropped their fishing poles, and ran home to tell their parents.

Blackwell's Funeral Home transported Cack's body down to Charleston for an autopsy. Before it was completed, multiple versions of what might have happened swirled around town like a drunken ballerina. One popular theory was that Cack had demanded more money from her married lover, whoever he was, and that he had killed the "greedy Bitch" to keep her quiet. It was a simple theory, but not a bad one, all things considered.

Of course, Karen and I had seen them together the day before, so, with barefaced confidence, I initially pointed the finger at Shorty Johnson, until *he* turned up dead, two days later. Karen suggested we tell the police what we knew, but I convinced her that it might place us in a bad light, or, possibly, even make us suspects.

The autopsy on Cack came back inconclusive, but the details shed *some* light on what *might* have happened. Her blood alcohol level was sky high; it appeared she fell, or was pushed, down the embankment and hit her head on a large river rock. The cause of death was blunt force trauma. Whether she fell or was pushed could not be known with one-hundred percent certainty, although the coroner said if he had to guess, he'd say she most likely was drunk, and fell.

Of course, this didn't answer the question of what she was doing by the side of the road in the first place, dressed in pajamas with her hair in rollers; plus, the big white Cadillac was still missing. Many agreed that the car was probably stolen, either before, or after, Cack died, but until it was found, if at all, it was only conjecture.

The coroner had an easier time nailing down Shorty's cause of death. He blew his brains out with a hunting rifle. When we learned this, Karen agreed that *he* was now our main suspect; he couldn't live with himself after throwing Cack down the embankment. Or Mrs. Shorty Johnson found out about their affair and threatened to shoot up all the cars on his precious lot, right after she shared the news with a few church ladies. Less likely, but not out of the question, was that *she* killed Cack, after discovering their affair.

"That Cack sure was something else," one of the men hanging out at the local bar said to his drinking buddies. "Too bad what happened to her."

"Too bad what happened to Shorty, too," someone else said. "He couldn't hit a deer if he tried, but I guess it's hard to shoot yourself and miss."

The men cackled, looking around to see who might have heard.



After Karen and I left Cack's trailer the evening before her body was found, I opened the front door quietly, hoping not to face questions about where I'd been.

"You ruined everything by sleeping with that tramp, Cack!" my mom yelled at my dad.

"I made one mistake, and after all these years, you still won't let me forget it," he responded.

"It's a good thing she agreed to give us the baby, so people wouldn't find out the truth."

I slid down against the doorframe. My mom wasn't my real mother; Cack Samples was.

I snuck back to Cack's trailer that night. The big white Cadillac sat in the same spot; a faint light shone through the thin curtains. I planned to tell her I recently learned she was my *real* mom. I didn't care if Shorty was there or not; in a way, I hoped he was.

I went up the three cinderblock steps to the door and knocked.

"Who is it?" Cack asked.

I knew she'd been drinking by the way she slurred her words.

"It's me, Janie," I said calmly. "Are you alone?"

She slowly opened the door.

"Of course, I'm alone."

Cack turned away, and I stepped inside.

"You weren't, earlier."

Cack was dressed in pink baby doll pajamas and donned matching pink hair rollers on top of her head. The church lady was right about the mess in the trailer but Cack took personal pride in her looks. She stood with her hands on her hips.

"Were you following me?"

“Just happened to see you and Shorty Johnson get out of your car earlier when I was riding my bike nearby.”

“Oh, well that’s really none of your business, is it?”

Her mocking tone didn’t sit well with me.

“Since it turns out you’re my real mother, I’d say it is.”

Cack shrugged and turned away from me.

“Where’d you get a stupid idea like that?”

“I heard my fake mom talking to my dad about it.”

Cack nonchalantly moved a pile of newspapers aside and sat down on the couch.

“He threatened me, if I didn’t give you up,” she said.

I stared into her glazed-over blue eyes, the same color as mine.

“I don’t believe you.”

Cack slowly rubbed the palms of her hands together. *I did that when I was nervous.*

“He gave me money every month to keep my mouth shut.”

“Is that why you never married? Were you in love with my dad?”

She stopped rubbing her hands together and placed them on either side of her, flat on the couch.

Cack sheepishly looked down.

“At the time, I thought I was.”

“Didn’t anyone suspect anything when my fake mom had a baby?” I started rubbing *my* palms together, my voice shook. “Didn’t they notice she wasn’t pregnant?”

“She must have stuffed her clothes to make herself look bigger,” Cack said, matter-of-factly. “I stayed mostly to myself during those months; if I had to go out, I wore one of my baggy tops.”

“Why didn’t you just leave town?” I asked, with no emotion. “Why’d you go along with it?”

I felt nothing for this woman sitting in front of me, *my mother*.

“I didn’t have any money; I was scared,” she said, in an almost childlike voice. “I thought he might leave your mother for me, and our baby ... for *you*.”

I pulled out my dad’s Smith & Wesson handgun tucked in my shorts, concealed under my peasant blouse.

“Let’s go for a ride in your new car,” I said, pointing to the door.

Cack shifted her weight on the couch.

“Are you crazy?”

“Ever since I first saw that big white Cadillac on Shorty Johnson’s lot on my way to school, I’ve wanted to ride in it.”

The lamp next to Cack accentuated the gray in her once bright red hair and a more pronounced sagging of the skin under her neck.

“Janie, I’m real sorry you had to find out about me and your dad,” Cack said, her voice almost a whisper. “The main reason I stayed in town was to be near you, but I didn’t want to upend your life.”

I waved the gun toward the door.

“You said earlier it was because he threatened you.”

“He did, but I wasn’t really afraid of him. Your dad isn’t a bad man, just a weak one.”

I waved the gun, again. “Now, let’s go, and I’m driving!”

“But you’re only twelve; you don’t know *how* to drive.”

“You’d be surprised what I know how to do.”

Cack handed me the keys and we headed outside to the car. I tucked the gun back into my shorts. And I *did* know how to drive; Dad taught me on empty dirt roads on weekends, right after I turned ten. My fake mom didn’t know; no one did, just Dad and me. Well, Cack was about to find out.

The Cadillac was larger than Dad’s Chevy. Cack had long legs, so when I climbed into the driver’s seat, my foot was about a mile from the gas and brake pedals. My legs were long, too, but I hadn’t gone through my growth spurt, so they were no match for Cack’s.

“Are you sure about this, Janie?” she asked.

“I guess now I know why I’m an only child. My fake mom couldn’t have children, could she?”

“How would I know?” Cack opened the passenger door and got in. “He never talked about it.”

I started the engine, adjusted the seat and rearview mirror, and put the big white Cadillac in reverse. A strange sense of euphoria settled in.

“Get ready for the ride of your life!” I said.

“I’m sorry I didn’t think it through better,” Cack said. “I’ve always been weak.”

“I don’t know about that; staying in this town took some courage.”

I turned onto the Elk River Road and headed away from town toward Charleston.

“Where are we going?” Cack asked.

She seemed calmer now; maybe she could tell that I really *did* know how to drive.

“I don’t know; I’ve wanted to drive this car for a long time.” It was dark; I fumbled for the switch to turn on the headlights. “Plus, I wanted to ask you why you gave me away.”

“I already told you, Janie, I was scared. He threatened me. I had no place to go; no money.”

“What if I tell him I know the truth? I’ll tell them both.”

“Don’t you love your mother? Hasn’t she been good to you?”

“It was all a lie. And, no, I always knew there was something missing. I mean she didn’t beat me or anything, but she was always distant.”

Cack stretched her long legs and sank down a little further in her seat, like she was starting to relax.

“Your dad’s been good to you, hasn’t he?”

“Once again, there was always something missing,” I said.

“I really screwed up; the last thing I wanted was for you to get hurt.”

“Then make it up to me.”

I was going a little too fast, now, taking the curves, hard. Cack stiffened and fidgeted in her seat.

“How can I do that?” she asked.

“Take me back; you’re my real mother.” I slowed down a bit. “Unless you don’t really want me.”

A tear slid down her face and landed on her full lips.

“I gave up my legal rights.”

“So, you don’t want me, but you have a good excuse.”

“Janie, you’re not thinking clearly,” Cack said. “How far do you think we can get on a tank of gas?”

“Far enough that by the time they realize we’re gone, we’ll be out of the state.”

“But they’ll find us, Janie,” Cack said, starting to lose her patience. “You know that.”

“They never really wanted me. And once the truth comes out that you’re my real mother, they’ll keep quiet.”

Cack pounded the padded dashboard with both fists and yelled.

“This is crazy, Janie; now turn the car around and let’s go back!”

I pulled the big white Cadillac off the road, pointed the gun at Cack, and ordered her to get out.

“What are you doing, Janie?” she cried.

I didn’t mean to shove Cack so hard. After she tumbled down the embankment, I heard a raw groan.

“Cack?”

She didn't respond.

I quickly hopped back in the car and tried to figure out what to do next. I opened the glove compartment to see if there was a map that might help steer me further out of town. No map, but I found a bulky manila envelope folded in half. Inside, there must have been at least a thousand dollars, and a note.

"Janie, I've been saving every penny your dad gave me and will give it to you when the time is right." Love Mom (Cack).

I started the engine and drove the big white Cadillac back toward town in the dead of night; the roads were empty. A misty breeze wafted through the open windows, carrying with it the truth I'd been searching for my entire life...why didn't I feel loved? It settled next to me in the passenger seat, bold and straight-backed, no slouching. I finally had my movie star car, the one I'd always dreamt of, the one that would make people take notice and say, "That Janie sure is something."

I parked it in its original spot on Shorty Johnson's lot and walked home. Dad was waiting up for me.

"Where have you been?" he asked, nervously pacing back and forth.

"I took a little ride in the big white Cadillac," I said.

He sat down on the couch and ran his hand across the top of his head, something he did when he was fretting.

"What are you talking about? That's Cack's car!"

"You and my fake mom never told me the truth, so I went searching for it," I said.

I told him how I inadvertently pushed Cack too hard, and that after she fell down the embankment, I panicked and drove the big white Cadillac back to Shorty's lot. I left out the part about the note and the money in the glove compartment. He didn't need to know everything.

The next day, when I passed by Shorty's lot on the way to school, the big white Cadillac was gone. Dad wouldn't tell me what he did with it.

"Do you think they'll ever find Cack's car?" Karen asked me.

"I don't know," I said. "But the big white Cadillac is irreplaceable, and so is she."

With Cack gone, the town is much quieter. No one cackles in the Kroger parking lot; shoppers check out and head straight home; men at the local bar talk about the weather, instead of Cack's latest escapade; church ladies turn Cack's story into teachable moments. The town's verbal tic has been eliminated, leaving a silence that is audible.

JANE ROSENBERG LAFORGE

Scales

The wind made flesh was
fire in our home, a sensation
of grinding and heat in my
mother's knees; the back
of her neck, a second skin
perpetuated against her reason,
an immune disorder they say
now, and not a failure of hygiene.
The TV ads called it heartbreak,
sold feckless lotions and creams.
She didn't bother, just toughed
it out like a soldier her father was,
and she might have been trained
to be; or perhaps a prisoner without
appeal. I tried to see patterns in
the whorls on her elbows since
the scream in faces is what I saw
in the sprayed-on stucco in my
bedroom ceiling; anything to
read this woman who seemed
so normal, yet uninterested in
my banal sufferings. When she
melted one day while my sister
and I were at school, our father
tried to prevent us from witnessing.
That was all that mattered to him
In those days, what we would remember
if not feel.

CAROL CHANDLER

The Upstairs Flat

I saw you there on the walkway by the river leaning against the stone fence. The last time I saw you, you seemed distressed. I was conscious your life was unravelling but didn't really know why. I stood there for a moment, watching you. You were looking out at the barges rocking on the water. I didn't approach. I didn't know what to do, if I would be welcome. Your long overcoat trailed down to your calves and you were wearing tight jeans and gloves. I noticed the pale shade of your hair, almost white, and remembered you wearing the same things from the year before; your dark jeans and scarf, the gloves. It was bitterly cold and you were rubbing your hands together, steam issuing from your breath. The gloves looked like expensive leather. You'd told me your flat would be empty for a while. I remembered how your whole life seemed to shift.

Where did you come from and who were you? At the start, I only knew that you were the man who lived on the top floor of my apartment block. People talked about you all the time. They said you were strange, brusque and tense, sometimes evasive, at others, charming. They said you were Russian. One night you came back with a group of men who averted their eyes when I passed in the stairwell. It bothered me, the way they wouldn't look at me. They clustered together like a pack. Then, just as I passed, one of them looked me up and down in an unpleasant way. Some of the people who visited you were baffling, elderly people stooped and worn down. I had the impression they might have been relations or people in the community that you were helping. This made you seem kind. There were also young people who looked young enough to be your children. Someone I knew down the road said they'd seen you looking out your window towards their flat. They thought you were watching them. It creped them out. I decided they were mistaken, that you'd just been standing there, watching the scenery. I wondered if there was a connection but they didn't say. All I knew was that you looked very different, with your pale skin, high cheekbones, broad face. The people who visited seemed to be close to you. I could hear them talking animatedly in the stairwell.

I remembered seeing you in the park. You walked towards me, smiling slightly. I thought you were going to say something, but you walked away. Not long after, I noticed that you were wearing a black dress coat and smart pants. You were dressed very well as if you

were part of high society. The upstairs flat was a hovel. I noticed you disappearing for days on end and wondered where you were going. Was it to another life? Were you receiving money from someone? Sometimes the disappearances were at night. Then someone told me you were a doctor. That made sense to me in a way, the nightly disappearances. Perhaps you were doing shiftwork. But then the woman who lived in the block of flats a couple of doors down said she doubted that was true. She said she heard you were a kitchen hand

Once, not long after I passed you in the street, you looked away as if deep in thought. You bowed your head as if you were thinking about something, blocking people out. You seemed to have the weight of the world on your shoulders. No one in the apartment block seemed to really know who you were because you kept your distance. One person said you worked at one of the hospitals in town. They were convinced you were a doctor. They said this was why you were always stressed. You'd lived on the top floor for a while. People were becoming increasingly suspicious. Then a rough looking man came to stay. He was shouting loudly at night and you went out on the street to drag him back inside. It was then that someone in the block told me he was a disturbed family member. He became agitated, confronted another man in the block. "Don't ever touch me," he said. "Don't ever do that. You have no right. You'll be sorry."

The strata manager sent you a warning and nothing more was said. Then I heard you were going away until the same time next year. Before you left, an old woman visited. She had high cheekbones and her hair was twisted into an old-fashioned pin curl hairstyle, gossamer thin. She was dressed in an elegant understated way. I wondered if she owned the flat, if she was your mother. Maybe she was your landlady. I was aware of her making her way up the stairs struggling a bit, maintaining her dignity. I passed her in the stairway. Then I heard you come down to help her. I could hear her speaking in Russian. The next day I asked someone if you were Russian. They said they thought you were. Then I saw an article in the newspaper. It was about something dramatic, investigations into war crimes.

Maybe that's why you'd disappeared and had returned the next year. You were in hiding. I wondered if you were connected, that you'd committed war crimes. Were you here under false pretences? There was a photo in the article that looked just like you but a different name. Maybe you were on the run or were a dissident, or an illegal immigrant, or you were exposing wrong doing, war crimes. Or maybe you were selling drugs. The article said someone was killed. People were looking for the perpetrator. He was in hiding. It wasn't long after this that I ran into you in the park and looked at you closely. You glanced away with a strange look. I decided the man in the paper wasn't you but you were connected.

I continued following the story, and was shocked when the man in the story had been poisoned. I remembered the Russian dissident who had died when polonium was laced in a cup of tea, drunk with people in the Russian security services at a high-class hotel. His body lay in Highgate Cemetery in a lead lined coffin. It was to stop the polonium leaching out. I'd been there not long ago because relatives were buried there, so many peaceful overgrown walkways, and amongst them, the dissident buried in his lead lined coffin to

stop polonium leaching out. The journalist had interviewed him days before and thought he was paranoid, looking over his shoulder all the time, telling her he was in danger. But it all turned out to be true. The newspaper headline said “Nuked by a Cuppa” I’d laughed at that.

After this, I began to wonder about you again. There was no indication that you were connected with this man in the newspaper. I had a sneaking suspicion there was some kind of connection. I saw you again near the flats standing about. A man in a suit approached you. You looked hassled and anxious. You glanced away from me quickly. Later that evening, you returned home as if from a day at work. People told me the flat on the top floor was awful, a hovel, they said. The owner never did anything, never did any repairs. You were there temporarily, I decided. There were leaks and vermin. Previous tenants said there had been cockroaches crawling all over the place. Only the worst sort of people lived there, or those who had absolutely no money. I couldn’t imagine it was like that with you because you looked so immaculate. I’d never been inside, though, so I couldn’t say. Maybe the immaculate exterior was just a facade.

Others said you kept it in good order. One woman in the block said she’d been in there briefly to give you a package that was left with her accidentally. She said that you were only there temporarily, and you kept the flat well. I imagined you there alone or with your associates; all the strange people who visited, the sinister men, the children, the rough man in the street, and the old woman with the pin curl hairdo. That night I heard a van and detected a smell outside, a distinctive chemical smell.

Immediately I was suspicious. I walked downstairs and you were there in the darkness. I couldn’t make out your appearance only that you were tall and thin. The smell was overwhelming and I wondered if it was meth. What was it? I could tell you were smiling at me from the darkness.

“I just wondered what that smell was,” I said innocently. “I have asthma, I was wondering about the chemical smell.”

“Oh, it’s paint thinner,” you said.

I squinted at you trying to see your face in the dark but it was obscured. It was curious to hear your voice, an Eastern European accent, possibly Russian. I could see that it was actually some kind of van that was parked there.

“Do you want me to park down the road?”

“Will it dissipate?”

“Yes.”

“It doesn’t matter then.”

I peered at you through the darkness suspiciously. My eyes started to adjust to the dim light. I could see your face now. Attractive, angular, pale eyes, smiling at me.

“How long have you been living here?” I asked.

“A couple of years. I’m going soon. I have to get back overseas. Things aren’t going well for me here.”

“Oh? I remember someone mentioned you were only here temporarily.”

“Yes, I’m going away soon.”

You stared at me on guard now.

“I moved here after my divorce,” I said.

“Oh? I’m divorced and I have two children. My ex-wife has moved away to the north and it’s hard to keep in contact.”

I wondered if the disappearances were to see your children.

“Do you see your kids much.”

“It’s hard to see them. It’s too far away. Besides that, she’s re-partnered and is pregnant with another child.”

I could hear the sadness in your voice now when you said this and felt upset for you. I realised there was probably nothing mysterious about your life at all. It was all commonplace and mundane. That’s what I thought, anyway. At the same time, I felt uneasy because you were staring at me in a strange way now. I wondered if it was a cover.

“Don’t worry they’ll come searching for you when they’re older.”

You paused for a moment, looking at me curiously.

“I hope so.”

You looked less tense now. I could see your body relax in the darkness. There was an air of sadness and disappointment. It was palpable in the darkness. At the same time, you seemed grateful.

“Well, it was nice talking to you,” you said, a little dryly.

You walked back to the flats and I walked around to the rubbish bins. When I returned, I could see your light on upstairs, the silhouette of two people inside. I wondered who was there as I walked inside, who the other person was. Then I noticed a piece of paper with a phone number outside my door. I picked it up and examined it.

“If you need anything let me know,” it said.

I decided I didn’t need anything, in spite of how intriguing you were, and then, who was the other person in your flat, the silhouette in the window. At the same time, I sensed there was something genuine about the note.

The next day there was a knock on the door. I opened it, and it was you. You asked if you could come inside and talk to me. I said that was okay. You walked in and I made us cups of tea, remembering that cup of tea laced with polonium. We sat down on the couch and you talked about your life back in Russia and then here with your children. You said your ex-wife was difficult. There was high conflict. She wanted full custody. I took a sip of

tea. You mentioned you had PTSD. I listened patiently to everything, imagining your life. It was hard to take it all in. I sensed a hardness in you but also a vulnerability. I sensed you'd been difficult with your ex-wife. You said your father was a dissident who had been killed. He'd told you to get out. You were lucky to be here. There was something shadowy about you, though, something I didn't understand. The next day, friends said "You don't believe all that do you? He's playing you. Why do you want to have anything to do with him? You don't know anything about him. Why is he here? There's obviously something shady about him, this whole thing about war crimes. You don't know what he did. He says his father is a dissident. Maybe his father is suspected of war crimes."

I wondered if they were right. You came down several times after this, and I started to feel uncomfortable with you. At the same time, I sensed there was something genuine.

Then you disappeared and didn't come back. I was relieved in a way but there was an emptiness in the building. I didn't know anything about you. I didn't know anything at all. I wondered if you were involved in trafficking drugs and women, illegal immigrants, and that the police had been following you for a while. I didn't really know anything. At the same time, though, you seemed genuine.

Several months later, I went down to the river, thinking about you and your children. I stood against the fence, leaning forward, staring out across the water towards the barges. I remembered how you were there at the fence a few months ago yourself. A man walked by, wearing black jeans and a coat. When he turned, I was shocked to see it was you. I hadn't seen you for a while, had no idea where you'd gone. You leant against the fence, staring out across the river as if you were pondering something. Then you turned and smiled slightly

"I thought I'd find you here. I've done everything I have to do."

"What do you mean?" I asked, baffled.

"I've moved to another place, close to my children. Thanks for your advice. Someone else has taken on the flat. They'll be there soon. They'll occupy it until I return. They'll be there for a while."

You smiled at me oddly and I watched as you turned away, walking along the footpath towards a black car. The door opened and you climbed inside. I saw you with a shadowy figure in the back seat. I stood there watching as the car drove away.

Bothered by what you'd said, I returned to the apartment block, wondering where you were going and who you were with. It was then that I saw the old woman with the pin curl hairstyle. She was laughing at something as she spoke on her phone. Her laughter trilled in the street. She looked composed now and smiled at me as she walked over and extended her hand.

"Hello, I'm Natalya," she said. 'I'm a friend of Sergei's. I'll be living here in his flat.' There was something distant in her manner, even though she was being friendly.

"How do you know Sergei?" I asked.

As I said this, I realised I shouldn't have said anything. She surveyed me now in an unpleasant way.

"I'll be staying here for a while," she replied, not answering my question.

It was stated in a warning tone. Something about her suggested I shouldn't ask any more questions. There was nothing grandmotherly or eccentric about her at all. She was icy cold. I wondered how long she was staying. I didn't want her here. She walked inside and as I followed her, I watched her with a sinking feeling as she disappeared towards the upstairs flat.



ARLENE TRIBBIA

each of

Z. T. CORLEY

[Black girl is crow feathers, is a cracked vase]

Black girl is crow feathers, is a cracked vase,
is wild violet and dandelion. Black girl is Mahalia Jackson
singing *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child*.
Black girl is the first stone cast. Is skinned knees
and dead grass. Black girl is costume jewelry,
is a missing tooth, is a new moon. Black girl exiles
and is exiled. Black girl loses her spots in summer.
Black girl blossoms. Her petals bruise. Black girl mothers herself.
Black girl is taken wholly. Black girl is holy. Black girl is monstrous—
is singing, is a siren reborn with the body of a grackle.
Black girl is an afterthought, a fiction. Is the gap
between her father's teeth. Black girl is a scab. Black girl
is a good girl. Is a bad girl. Is a dead girl, a daddy's girl,
a church girl, is nobody's girl. Black girl is her mother's daughter.
Is a broken pot. Is a switchblade in her brother's pocket.
Black girl is the plastic on her grandmother's couch. Black girl

[BLACK GIRL IS CROW FEATHERS, IS A CRACKED VASE] | Z. T. CORLEY

is driftwood on the beach. Is a long dirt road. Black girl is a burning church.

Is her mother's EBT card. Is spilled liquor on her father's wife-beater.

Black girl is a famine. Black girl is restless wind, is hard summer rain,
is a hurricane. Black girl is Nina Simone singing *Little Girl Blue*.

Black girl is Aunt Jemima and the blood between Aunt Jemima's legs.

RACHEL VERKADE

Failed to Fly

The room was cold, smelled of disinfectant and cheap plastic. Miriam tried once again to settle herself in the lopsided metal chair, but no matter what position she took it seemed like something dug into her spine, or poked her in the ass, or made her legs ache. She wasn't even able to lean back; the chair was one of those with a short back that came barely up past the base of her spine. She'd even tried spreading a blanket on the floor and lying down, but it hadn't helped. It wasn't that the floor was too hard (though it was), it was the cold of the tile leeching all of the heat from her body, leaving her shivering with misery. Two in the morning, and it looked like a sleepless night.

At least Oliver had finally managed to fall asleep, his face pinched and pale, drawn with a combination of exhaustion and whatever drug they'd given him. Whatever drug they'd *finally* given him; the doctors were reluctant to put anything else into his system after what had happened, but after hours of his tears and wails they'd surrendered and injected some form of sedative. Miriam didn't blame them. They were only doing their jobs. Just like her.

She shifted so that the jabbing in her kidneys was switched for a throb in her calf and restlessly turned the pages of her book. It was amazing how quickly she'd gotten used to this, taking the time to snatch up her book and phone before climbing aboard the ambulance. Along with a pillow, Oliver's favourite stuffed animal from boyhood, and a bag of jerky in case the hospital cafeteria was closed (it was). As it was, she was cursing the fact that she'd forgotten her phone charger; it was down to ten percent battery and she couldn't risk leaving it on, let alone playing games or texting. That left no options besides her book and staring at the stained, black-smudged walls.

Somewhere in the distance was the beep of monitors, the chime of call buttons. Occasionally footsteps cast a shadow under the closed swinging doors. Shift change had happened a couple of hours ago, with the usual raucous chatter and laughter, the smells of coffee and doughnuts, but that was long ago now. Every so often someone screamed. All of these were familiar to Miriam, part of life with Oliver, a part she'd grown accustomed to in the past two years of their life. She honestly couldn't count how many nights she had spent in the hospital with him after an incident...oh, fuck it, who was she trying to protect by calling it that?...but she guessed the count was somewhere between a half dozen and a

full. She was starting to think that they should have a pre-packed bag near the front door, but that seemed like tempting fate.

Or tempting Oliver.

The monstrous part of it was that it still hurt her. Even when she had it down to a routine, every damned time, it hurt her. In between the adrenaline rush of dialling the ambulance and dealing with the paramedics and snatching up whatever she thought they'd need, there was the familiar ache of *not again, please, not again*. The usual tears in the ambulance as sympathetic paramedics passed her industrial paper towels that rubbed her face raw. The usual understanding looks from nurses as they came in to do the usual checks. And, best or worst of all, the usual apologies from Oliver, the usual pleas that she not blame herself, that she make sure that she was okay and looked after. Before the sedative had kicked in, he had been pressing her to eat something, to take a walk and stretch even between his sobs. There were days she thought those last were the only reason she still stayed with him, even after all this time and all of this pain. He was always sorry afterwards. Vi had once asked (in her cups, of course), *If he was hitting you, would saying sorry afterwards make it okay?* And Miriam knew she had a point, but even Vi broke down and cried afterwards. She loved Oliver too. They all did.

Oliver stirred in the bed, looking caged behind the metal rails, and made a low moaning noise. Tomorrow, when they were sure the drugs were out of his system, they'd be sent home. There would be the usual interview with a psychiatric nurse and the usual recommendation that he seek some form of counselling, as though they hadn't tried that already. Miriam was no longer sure what kind of help Oliver needed, but she knew it wasn't the kind found in the pages of some self-help book, nor behind the gentle but blank eyes of some talk therapist. She was no longer even sure if that help could be found in her. It seemed she read every book on how to help your suicidal and depressed partner, visited counsellor after counsellor, attended those therapy groups. It was all about learning to cope. How did you learn to cope when the love of your life didn't want to live any more? What could you do when he just didn't want to live, not even for you?

More footsteps passed by the door, accompanied by hushed voices and low chuckles. The first visible signs of life outside this room in over a half hour, and at this time of night probably the last she'd see for a while. The night nurses had seen all this before. Not that they weren't kind; she'd been offered tea and coffee, even sandwiches, cheap and packaged, but food nonetheless. After all this time, Miriam understood the limitations of the healthcare system and appreciated every little courtesy that they were shown, especially given their circumstances. The nurses were almost always good to her, as were the doctors and the paramedics. That was the second hell of it; if there was some lack of consideration, some cruelty, then perhaps she could place the blame somewhere it would do some good, somewhere she could write a strongly-worded complaint or officious email that would result in some sort of change. As it was, she could just acknowledge that everyone was doing the best that they could, and that any blame to be placed was due somewhere so high

up in the government that they couldn't be touched. Well, them and the vicious boggarts that infested Oliver's brain, but no email or letter could touch them, no matter how eloquent.

Miriam sighed. The ache in her calf was becoming unbearable, and she shifted so that a hard metal bar was digging into her ribs. A sleepless night was nothing new to her, but that didn't mean it was pleasant. She could perhaps catch a few hours' kip in the afternoon, after Oliver had been discharged and assured her several times over that he wouldn't try this again. For now there was nothing but the stink of bleach and the smudges on the walls. She stared at them, trying to pick out patterns. That ridge of bars a forest, that blob a pond, that smear a hunter. Miriam rubbed her burning eyes and set her book aside; she didn't think she could read any more. Oliver was still sleeping, face pale and pinched. It looked safe enough to slip out and get herself a cup of tea.

She crept away as quietly as possible, the chair skidding across the linoleum. Oliver didn't stir. Miriam had kicked off her shoes hours ago, and her socks made no sound as she padded across the floor. The doors eased open on oiled hinges, and Miriam edged into the fluorescent-lit corridor. The tea and coffee machine was just down the hall, in the opposite direction from the nurses' station. A quick nip out to grab a cuppa, couldn't do any harm. Maybe it would help her relax.

The ICU corridors were silent at this time of night. They were between the times the nurses patrolled, and no new ambulances had come by in hours. No doubt the nurses were all at their stations, counting out meds or reading magazines or doing paperwork. Miriam was fairly familiar with their routines. She shook one of the cheap, wax paper cups free of its fellows and fumbled a tea bag from the wrapper. No milk of course, but it really wasn't worth the trouble of going all the way to the nurses' station to ask for some. At least there was sugar, which—

It was so quick that Miriam couldn't be sure she'd seen it at first, a tickle in the corner of her eye. She'd have put it down to simple exhaustion, Lord knows it wouldn't be the first time she'd seen shadows due to simple weariness, but then it came again, a quick flicker of motion like a shy child waving goodbye from around the nearest corner. Miriam froze in the act of pressing down the switch for boiling water, a millimetre from flooding the rickety table. She hadn't heard any footsteps, no whispers, not even the huffing of breath. Had one of the patients gotten out of bed? She'd thought in this area all of them were drugged or strapped down or otherwise generally unable to move under their own power. Someone like her, then, a family member on a long midnight vigil. On impulse, Miriam turned in that direction, abandoning her cup of tea. Suddenly, the thought of human interaction with someone who would understand...someone who could react with something more than horror or sympathy...was overpowering.

The wax paper cup was left forgotten on the table. Miriam padded her way down the grubby tiles. Maybe it was a child. Maybe some poor woman had been forced to bring her children along with her while she tended to...who? Her husband? Her mother or father? That was a blessing Miriam has counted many times before, that she and Oliver had never

had children. She could only imagine rocking a colicky infant, sitting at a hospital bedside, adding “desperately call around for childcare” to her list, or else wrangling cranky and confused toddlers while their father languished under emergency care...

But when Miriam came around the corner, there was no sign of life. The swinging doors that led to the various patients’ alcoves were still, shadows oozing from under the frames. No child, no mother, not even a rag drifting on the recycled breeze to explain what she had seen. Miriam paused amidst the distant coughs and the bleep of monitors, one be-socked foot poised an inch or so over the scuffed linoleum. Maybe she had been imagining it, after all. Time to finish making her cup of tea and just head back to the room. But as she lowered her foot to do just that, Miriam saw it again; that flicker of movement, like a flag caught in the breeze or a hand waving above the surface of water, just far enough out of her field of vision that she couldn’t focus on it. At the opposite end of the corridor now, beckoning her to come farther, to come see.

Miriam hesitated. She shouldn’t leave Oliver, not for so long. But maybe it was curiosity, maybe it was a desperate need to escape the monotony of his room; Miriam went on. Each little alcove was a window into misery; through the few open doors Miriam saw old women, their mouths open in undignified and toothless yawps. Young men with white faces, their arms bound to the bedframes. Elderly men, their bodies twisted and painful looking under the thin hospital blankets. A museum of the damaged, mad, and lost, laid out on display with indifference and disregard. No privacy or dignity lent to any of them. Miriam wrapped her arms around herself and tried to recall if she’d shut Oliver’s doors. She couldn’t remember.

The end of the corridor was another corner, bleeding off to the right. She shouldn’t leave Oliver...but a return to his room was a return to emptiness, a return to staring at stained walls and pretending they told stories, a return to staring at the empty pages of empty books and telling herself that everything would be all right. This, at least, was *something*. Something was better than the void of despair waiting for her back in that room, back in her life.

Her feet made no sound on the tiled floor, and the curse she let out when she slipped came out like a blasphemy. This part of the hospital was dim and quiet, with shut doors on vacant rooms, no bleep of monitors or heavy rush of respirators here, no pitiless glare of bedside lamps. Even the buzz of the fluorescent lights seemed muted. A cold drop of sweat ran down Miriam’s spine, trickling its way along the ridges of her vertebrae. She couldn’t see anyone down here. Just a closet door at the the end of the corridor, a closet door that was gently swinging closed.

Miriam wrapped her arms around herself. Suddenly the whole place seemed terribly cold, and she was wishing for the sweater she’d left back in Oliver’s room. Moving as though through deep snow, her feet edged their way down the smeared linoleum, the socks now smudged with dust and grime. The closet door had clicked shut, and now appeared to be staring at her.

It had to be a child. Some restless five or six year old that had slipped away from their parents and was now playing hide-and-seek with her. No doubt their mother was frantically looking for them...unless she'd fallen asleep...or she was the one in treatment. But surely someone was or would be worried once they realised the kid had gone astray. Some small child bored and frightened by whatever had occurred and who was coping the only way they could, by slipping out and playing chase...

Salt stung Miriam's eyes, and she blinked it away. The closet door was about ten feet from her, and there had been no signs or sounds from behind it. Any minute, any minute now, Miriam was sure she would here a soft giggle, or the restless shift of small feet on the flooring. Maybe the child would remember what room they had come from, and Miriam could get them back to their family. At the very least she could take them to the nurses' station. All she had to do was open the door.

It was so fucking cold all of a sudden. The air conditioning must be haywire in this area, but for some reason, she was still sweating. Her T-shirt was wet under the arms, and she could feel a sticky patch spreading between her shoulderblades, but the air on her arms was icy. She could almost see her breath Miriam took another careful step towards the closet door, blinking moisture out of her eyes. Her stomach twisted and cramped painfully, as though suddenly rejecting the few mouthfuls of jerky and the sandwich she'd had two hours ago. Shadows flickered through the crack under the door, as though the thing (the *child*) within was moving. Maybe coming to the door. Coming to meet her.

Something skittered on the other side of the door, something hard skating across wood. Fingernails? Bones? A soft noise. A whisper. A laugh.

Open up the door, Miriam. Come and talk to us. It's too hard for you, isn't it? Living with this, the constant vigilance, forever having to be ready for the next disaster. We understand. We understand how you've spent nights sobbing, knowing you can never make him happy, never make him better. We understand hating him for this, wishing you'd never met him even as you cling to his hand and pray for him not to die. Open up the door. There's something here, and something's better than the nothing waiting for you back in that room, isn't that right? Something's here for—

Miriam's dripping hand jerked back from the knob, so quickly that two nails tore off at the quick. The dark flickering from beneath the door, licking at her be-socked toes, suddenly withdrew as Miriam backed away. God, fucking God, what was she doing? Suddenly she didn't care what was behind that door, whether it was a lost patient or a frightened child or an abandoned newborn; she just wanted to get back to Oliver.

Slipping and skidding her way down the twisting hallway, falling and bruising her hip more than once, Miriam ran. She ran past the rooms with their empty-faced patients, past the tea station and its abandoned wax paper cup, away from that door and whatever cold thing lay sniggering beyond it. She ran back to Oliver, back to the nothing that wasn't nothing after all. Back to the sad and flickering but still existing warmth that his room offered.

Miriam's first thought was that she'd forgotten to close his doors after all, that she'd left poor Oliver exposed to the world. But then she saw the white wall that was the backs of the nurses. Then she saw the hands and faces coming towards her, telling her no dear, go back, we'll be with you in a minute. The grasping hands like spiders, plucking at her sweaty shirt, steering her away, trilling their false reassurances. And she understood.

He must have come out of his stupor while she was out. Must have found her shoes, with their long, thick laces. Oliver had always been so resourceful. No, Miriam heard herself saying earlier, no, he doesn't need to be restrained. I'll watch him. I'll make sure he's all right.

The spiders drove Miriam down the corridor, away from the blaring monitors and the purpling flesh, the spiders twittering like anxious birds, and all that Miriam could think was that she wished she had opened that door.

HANNAH LAVIN

A Stomach Full of Women

I was ten when the Spirit first came to me; the spirit of my mother, her mother, my abuelita, and her mother before her, Mama Berta. It was the amalgamation of centuries of women, bundled up and pressed into my being. This Spirit lives in my gut, my throat, and always my mind.

The Spirit flew into me through my mouth, flooding past my lips and settling into all my folds and creases. It told me I would not have children of my own, that my burden would be to bear these women of the past instead of those of the future.

My mother appeared first, filling me wholly; darkening my eyes, stretching my shoulders, edging around my heart, careful and fragile as she consumed me. She spread her arms along the length of mine and twined her fingers through my hands.

My abuelita appeared next and set right to work in my stomach. She threatened me when I tried to feed myself, even as she complained about her aching feet. At ten, I choked on the cinnamon sticks in her mushy oatmeal. I ignored her scowls, eating around the raisins in her arroz con leche and dipping her crispy champuradas in milk. For special occasions, she made horchata, its ground rice sinking like sand to the ocean floor.

When I turned thirteen, and my friends began to bleed, she kneaded masa and pressed tortillas in my stomach to help me feel included. At sixteen, she demanded more salt and lard for cooking, my stomach always hungry. She was a force to keep up with, the number of olives topping the tamales changing by the year depending on her mood. Beans simmered endlessly, waiting to be paired with a healthy serving of queso fresco or cotija, washed down by sweet guava or tangy drinks. For years she fed me—with food and cautionary tales—while the other women stayed quiet.

When I was intimate for the first time, the spirit of Mama Berta screamed. She mourned a youth she thought stolen from me, blind to how that loss was a theft of her own making. She dared me to open my mouth and let her escape, but I kept her locked within, as was my duty. I cried the next day, though it wasn't my own pain that I felt. Mama Berta called me sinful, shaking her head and filling my mind with whispers of lost virtue. She joined my

abuelita in my stomach, but they did not embrace. They squabbled instead, over oils and crusts and butters.

At twenty, my mother released my hands and sank into my feet, speeding my pace and pushing me onward. I woke groaning, my feet awake before the birds, moving throughout the house. Jeans appeared in the oven, a hairbrush in the microwave, cosmetics in the fridge. I could not touch a pan without feeling the sting of a wooden spoon against my hand. In my stomach, Mama Berta chopped onions that stung my eyes while my mother dragged me outside; my ankles splashing through streams, my fingers grabbing shiny rocks as if I were a nesting raven. She took me someplace new every day, letting me drive to Sears and play kitchen with the stainless steel stovetops, slamming doors in Home Depot to play house. She showed me the world the best she could, trying, in her way, to take care of me.

As I aged, my pace slowed. My mother traveled up to my knees, kneeling often in the garden and, to my frustration, in church. I wanted to shake the women, busy at the stove of my stomach, and tell them to let me breathe, but they only chattered amongst themselves.

We knew, all of us, that there was no life for me outside of this. That the pain of meeting a man would be too much, the questions too loud. These women were my burden.

When I reached the age my mother had been when she died, she joined the others in my stomach. The other women made room for her as she made buttered tortillas and cinnamon toast on the stove. They let her dye the milk green on St. Patrick's Day, feed me chocolate on Easter, and make garlic bread on Thanksgiving. She sat with the women on December 23rd, topping the tamales with capers and red peppers before wrapping them in banana leaves and steaming them.

I'm close now, to leaving this place. I dream of the four of us beneath a pomegranate tree, its fruit splitting open as it hits the ground, seeds spilling across the earth. I wonder what will happen to us all when I go. Perhaps we will grow into the soil, our branches tangling with one another as if to hold in an embrace, and we will, at last, breathe into the safety of each other's touch.

Contributors

Anastasia Ulianytska is a mixed-media and textile artist currently based in the Scottish Highlands. Originally from Ukraine, her practice was forged in the fire of displacement; forced to fit her entire life into a single bag, she moved away from traditional canvases to create “wearable artifacts.” Her signature series, “Armor of Meanings,” explores the fragile intersection of protection and vulnerability, transforming textiles into symbolic shields. She creates “Art to Carry,” where fabric serves as a tactile fortification for the soul. Embracing the beauty of decay, she views the natural aging of cloth as a vital collaboration between the artist and time—a necessity of survival rather than a privilege. A self-taught visionary, she has honed her technical mastery through intensive independent research into calligraphic forms and pigment interaction. In 2026, her work was shortlisted for the “PROMEMORIA” exhibition in Geneva, in partnership with ICAN (Nobel Peace Prize Laureate), and has been the subject of a forthcoming conceptual essay by Michael Hanna. Her practice is a deliberate defiance of algorithmic perfection. In a world increasingly dominated by AI, she embraces the ‘scars’ of the process—the accidental bleed of paint or the irreversible stroke—as vital markers of human presence. Using a “sacred cipher” of asemic calligraphy, she constructs intricate patterns through negative space, light-reflective pigments, and 3D textures. This calligraphy remains the encrypted soul of the work—a private, unyielding dialogue between the artist and the future owner.

John Artenstein (pen John Shepherd) is a novelist, short story writer, poet, and folk-rock musician from Los Angeles, CA. His debut novel, “Oblivion” (Liminal Books), appeared in 2023. He earned his MFA in Fiction at The New School and is a Ph.D student at the University of Rhode Island, where he also teaches fiction, poetry, screenwriting, criticism, and hybrid composition. He lives in South County, RI, with a large collection of sweaters and a very small dog.

Audrey Wick is a writer and professor of English at Blinn College. She is co-author of the college textbook *Steps to Writing Well with Additional Readings* (12th edition) from Cengage and writes contemporary novels for Harlequin (HarperCollins). Her short-form work has been published in a variety of literary journals. Connect with her at audreywick.com and on X and Instagram @WickWrites.

Courtney Edwards is an English teacher and photographer from Portland, OR. Her writing often explores the importance of place and motherhood, and has been published by The

CONTRIBUTORS

West Trade Review, Hydra Magazine, Pile Press, The New Zealand Poetry Society, Sonora Review, Suspended Magazine, and Wild Roof Journal. Courtney helps run a poetry open mic and writing group in Portland and enjoys traveling the world, exploring the PNW with her husband and three children, playing the piano, and helping to bring sea otters back to Oregon through the Elakha Alliance at oregonseaotters.org. You can connect with her on Instagram at [@pnw.courtney](https://www.instagram.com/@pnw.courtney)

Ellen June Wright's unconventional watercolors have graced the covers of SCARS Anthology, Long River Review, Abstract Magazine TV, Kelsey Review and West Trestle Review and were included in the 2024 and 2025 Newark Arts Festival and featured at the Hackensack Performing Arts Center in NJ. See more at <https://8-ellen-wright.pixels.com/>

Kai Nagata Rabideau is a Japanese-Nova Scotian poet and artist currently pursuing a Master's of Fine Arts in Poetry in the low-residency Creative Writing Program at the Institute of American Indian Arts. Living in Maine, the program found him after he met Joy Harjo during his undergraduate studies at Boston College. He would especially like to thank Jennifer Foerster, Layli Long Soldier, Deborah Taffa, and the visiting writers, faculty and fellow members of his MFA cohort for their influence on his writing and the care they have shown him at residencies and workshops. He becomes a better writer and person every day thanks to them.

Joshua Sabatini was born in Hartford, Connecticut. In October 2002, he moved to San Francisco, California. He's currently on retreat in Katama, Massachusetts. His short stories have been published in numerous literary magazines. In 2026, his short story "Wise Ones" was published in The Write Launch. The author can be reached at JoshuaSabatini@gmail.com, [instagram.com/joshuasabatini](https://www.instagram.com/joshuasabatini), and joshuasabatini.com.

George Abreu is a Cuban-born writer whose work explores identity, memory, and cultural migration. His essays often draw on personal experience, weaving sensory detail with reflections on belonging, masculinity, and self-discovery. He lives in Pennsylvania and is currently focused on creative writing projects spanning memoir, fiction, and poetry.

Michael J. Clark is a mixed media artist who primarily focuses on using found materials to create sculpture and collage works. He is a recent graduate of Drew University and a current Post Baccalaureate student at the University of Pennsylvania studying Visual Arts. Michael has been published multiple times in *Insanity's Horse* magazine and exhibited at the Korn Gallery, Madison, NJ. Additionally, he is a recipient of the Carolyn and Bill Knox Purchase Prize, and the Pride of the Arts Council (of Princeton) Future Arts Leader Award.

Rekha Valliappan is an award-winning multi-genre writer of short fiction, creative nonfiction, flash fiction and poetry. She holds a MA in English Literature from Madras

CONTRIBUTORS

University and a LLB(Hons) from the University of London, A university lecturer her work features in Best Small Fictions 2025, Best Of anthologies, has won awards, earned multiple nominations, and been published in journals and magazines such as Ann Arbor Review, the Stained Glass Quarterly 'summer reading series' 2025, CEArts Organization's The Polk Street Review 'The Ties That Bind' (prize winner), Litro Magazine, Melbourne Culture Corner, Saturday Evening Post, New World Writing, Storms Literary Journal, and other venues.

Cliff Saunders is the author of several poetry chapbooks, including Mapping the Asphalt Meadows (Slipstream Publications) and The Persistence of Desire (Kindred Spirit Press). His poems have appeared recently in Quadrant, The Rockford Review, Shadowplay, Bare Hill Review, and Little Leaf Literary Journal. He currently lives in Danville, Virginia.

Anne Whitehouse is the author of poetry collections: The Surveyor's Hand, Blessings and Curses, The Refrain, Meteor Shower, Outside from the Inside, and Steady, as well as the art chapbooks, Surrealist Muse (about Leonora Carrington), Escaping Lee Miller, Frida, Being Ruth Asawa, and Adrienne Fidelin Restored. She is the author of a novel, Fall Love. Her poem, "Lady Bird," won the Nathan Perry DAR 2023 "Honoring American History" poetry contest. She has lectured about Longfellow and Poe at the Wadsworth Longfellow House in Portland, Maine, and Longfellow House Washington Headquarters in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Frank Haberle is the author of two books: Shufflers (Flexible Press, Minneapolis, September 2021), a story of transients moving through minimum-wage jobs in the 1980s; and Downlanders (Flexible Press, November 2023), following five lost souls into a fictional wilderness. Frank's poetry is featured in Deep Wild Journal and Bood + Honey; his short stories have won awards from Pen Parentis, Beautiful Loser Magazine, the Sustainable Arts Foundation, the Letter Prize and the Rose Warner Prize for Fiction. Frank lives in Brooklyn, New York and works in The Bronx. Website: www.frankhaberle.com.

Victoria Reyes is a poet, scholar, and author of Global Borderlands: Fantasy, Violence, and Empire in Subic Bay, Philippines and Academic Outsider: Stories of Exclusion and Hope. Her poetry appears, or is forthcoming, in Feminist Formations, Departures in Critical Qualitative Research, Dissident Voice, Cathexis Northwest Press, Half and One, Pink Panther Magazine and Writers Resist. She is a 2025 VONA summer fellow.

Andrei Romanov is a writer and independent historian based in the Algarve, Portugal, twenty minutes from Sagres, where Prince Henry the Navigator established his headquarters for Atlantic exploration. Born in Bucharest, Romania, nine months before the fall of the Ceaușescu regime, he holds a degree in International Economic Relationships and brings over fifteen years of experience in international trade, European affairs, and geopolitical

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strategy to his work. His writing has been published in *Ancient Origins*, *Global Maritime History*, *The Markaz Review*, and *Touchstone*. His book, *Masters of the Ocean Sea: The Epic Saga of the Portuguese Explorers Who Redrew the Map of the World* (Sagres Heritage Press), is rated 5 stars by *Readers' Favorite* and is held in the Caird Library at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. He reads Portuguese, English, and Romanian, and conducts primary research in Portuguese archives. He lives on Portugal's southern coast, within sight of the Atlantic that once carried caravels into the unknown.

Ayesha Habib is a writer, journalist, and photographer currently living in Toronto. She was born and raised in Nairobi, Kenya. Her work has been published in *The Walrus*, *The Narwhal*, *The Globe and Mail*, *Maisonneuve*, *Temz Review*, *SAD magazine*, as well as in the 2024 essay anthology *Back Where I Came From* (Book*hug Press). She has co-produced short documentaries for the Canadian Broadcast Corporation and has self-published a prose and photography zine called *papercut*. Her fiction is influenced by magical realism and her work as a journalist is propelled by human stories and untold perspectives. She can be found on Instagram and X under @ayeshajenna.

Daniel Hedin is a Swedish-born composer, sound artist and poet from Sweden whose work explores the concepts of identity and the self-consciousness in experimental dimensions by questioning the self and our relationship with our mind. His work ranging from music, poetry and interdisciplinary live performances, he has been invited to hold exhibitions, live performances and concerts all over Europe in places like obscure underground caves, basements in small villages to the acclaimed Sziget Festival in Budapest.

Paul Grussendorf worked in documentary film in the U.S. and Germany for a decade. He then attended law school at Howard University and was director of the Immigration Clinic at George Washington University, has been an immigration judge, and is a consultant to the UN Refugee Agency. His book *My Trials: Inside America's Deportation Factories* is a scathing indictment of America's dysfunctional immigration system. His narrative nonfiction has recently been published in *Washington Square Review LLC*, *Hawai'i Pacific Review*, *Sheepshead Review* and *Washington Writers Publishing*.

Peter J. Grieco is a musician and songwriter, a retired school bus driver and educator. A Ph.D graduate of SUNY Buffalo, he wrote his dissertation on working-class poetry. He has taught at universities in Ankara, Turkey; Seoul, South Korea; and Buffalo, NY, his native city. His poems have been widely published in small magazines on-line and in print. Much of this work is archived at <https://pjpgrieco.wordpress.com/>. Grieco's poetry is known for its versatility, often engaging with art, psychology, and structuralist theory. Publications include "At the Musarium, a Virtual Chapbook" of semi-procedural verse based on word frequency lists. The essay "The Clabber Dreg in the Glom," ("New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing") reflects on the

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composition of that series. His collection of ekphrastic verse, “The Blind Man’s Meal,” is available from Finishing Line Press.

Susan Long, born and raised in Appalachia, has published short stories in literary magazines, essays in the Orlando Sentinel, a nonfiction story, “Rediscovering Daddy,” in *Voices of Lung Cancer*, and more. She has written two novels, *Blue Impala* and *The Illumination of Darkness*. A chapter from *Blue Impala* as well as her short story “Bookmobile” were published in *Appalachia Bare*. Another short story, “Next to God’s House” was featured in *Still: The Journal*. Susan’s creative nonfiction essay, “Becoming Doris Day,” appeared in the Winter 2025 edition of *As the Crow Flies*, an online expansion of *Appalachian Journal*. Her short story “John-John” was recently published in the Spring 2026 issue of *Litmosphere: Journal of Charlotte Lit*. Susan is currently working on a collection of stories: *Dreams of Appalachia—Take Me Home*. She holds a master’s degree in English from C.W. Post-Long Island University. Visit www.author-susanlong.com; substack.com/@susanlongtakemehome.

Jane Rosenberg LaForge is the author of a memoir, two novels, four chapbooks of poetry, and five full-length collections of poetry. Her latest collection is “The Exhaust of Dreams Adulterated” (Broadstone Books 2025). More poetry is forthcoming in *Mom Egg Review*, *Blueberry Lit*, and *Milkweed Poetry Journal*.

Carol Chandler is an award-winning author who has been published in some of Australia’s most highly regarded literary magazines. Her short story collection *Anonymous Caller* was awarded First Commended for Best First Book in the IP Picks Awards (under the working title *Sphinx*.) Her novella *Black Mountain*, was awarded Highly Commended in the Seizure Viva la Novella IV competition, longlisted in the Davitt Awards for women crime writers and awarded Commended in the Society of Women Writers Awards. She has been granted the award of Writing Fellow with the Fellowship of Australian Writers, has co-edited *Written in Sand*, a community poetry and visual arts project and is the editor of *Bondi Tides* an anthology from the Bondi Writers’ Group. Her latest book is *Watched and Other Stories*.

Arlene Tribbia is an interdisciplinary artist who writes and makes portraits about otherworldly beings because she’s fond of discovering characters who work to solve the larger cosmic riddles of the universe. Her art has been exhibited in unique spaces from dance halls to skyscrapers as well as galleries, including *Woman Made* in Chicago and the Dunedin Fine Art Center in Florida where Robert Rauschenberg (hero, unseen mentor and influence) also has shown his work. See more at <http://www.arlenetribbia.com/>

Z.T. Corley is a Tennessee-based poet with roots in Georgia, South Carolina, and Mississippi. She recently graduated from Austin Peay State University with her B.A. in English and plans to continue her education as an M.F.A. Candidate at Georgia College &

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State University in Fall 2026. Her work appears or is forthcoming in the Roanoke Review, Revolte, Callaloo, Kawandi Magazine, Outskirts, Saartjie Journal, January House Literary Journal, Kitchen Table Quarterly, and elsewhere. She was nominated for the 2026 AWP Intro Journal Awards. She is currently working on a poetry collection and a nonfiction project while serving as a reader for Callaloo.

Rachel Verkade is a 45-year-old woman currently living in England. Her fiction has previously appeared in *On the Premises*, *Romance Magazine*, *Under the Bed*, *The New Accelerator*, *69 Flavors of Paranoia*, and the anthologies *Enter the Apocalypse*, *Tales of Blood and Squalor*, and *Lost Worlds*; her poetry has been featured in *Liminality*; and her non-fiction has been printed in *The Escapist* and *The Future Fire*. Her short story, “Blood and Ivory”, was nominated for the 2011 Million Writers Award and was named one of the notable stories of the year, and her poem “Lost Girls” was nominated for the 2019 Rhysling Award.

Hannah Lavin is a biracial Guatemalan American writer based in California. She holds a B.S. in Marine Science from California Polytechnic State University and an MFA in Creative Writing from Eastern Oregon University. Her work has previously been featured in *The Acentos Review*.