

Typehouse

Literary Magazine



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Typehouse Literary Magazine

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 We are always looking for well-crafted, previously unpublished writing and artwork that seeks to capture an awareness of the human condition.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

Cover Artwork: **Jay and Turkey II**, 24" x 36," Acrylic on Canvas, from **The Three Jay and Turkey Paintings** by Elizabeth Eve King (E.E. King) (see page 49).

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Favela

Stripped of color, this restaurant facade on Frenchmen Street in New Orleans seems a rather ghostly welcome to the reverie of Mardi Gras.

Ryan Daskocil (he/him) lives in the mountains of Northern Arizona. When he's not writing, he spends his time reading feverishly, hiking aimlessly, downing ungodly amounts of coffee, and generally failing to avoid mischief.

The Soap Carver

Ryan Daskocil

Watching fats and lye saponify into a smooth cream gave Gerald peace. He hunched over a large glass beaker on a hot plate, his wooden spoon leaving graceful tracks in the mixture. Sometimes he would sit for half an hour or more, just stirring and dreaming and forgetting, as if his gnarled old heart could be folded away into the thickening soap.

Today the batch took nearly forty-five minutes. When it was ready, Gerald poured the hot slurry into two rectangular silicone molds, covered the molds with plastic, and left them on his workbench to set.

"There now, Corrina," he said, removing his gloves inside-out and tossing them into the wastebasket under his workbench. "All done."

The cat purred, its lemony scent rubbing off on Gerald's pant leg as it slinked along his shins. Corrina was made from his first attempt at carving something from his soap, honed from a single loaf of lemon and coconut oil, the milky color of which had reminded him of a cat's plush underbelly. He had never thought to carve his soaps before, but when he saw her shape in the brick he grabbed a scalpel and toothpicks and found her there within the fragrant block, like a gem embedded in a basalt matrix. He left her to harden for a full month up on the mantle, next to his mother's mahogany-framed mirror and a picture of his niece when she still wore pigtails. Then one day, just last week it had been, she leaped down onto the Saltillo tile floor and meowed at him as he poured his coffee in the tiny adjacent kitchen. She stood there as full of life as any cat of fur and flesh and blood, and he turned and stared until the reality of her solidified.

"Tomorrow we'll do blackberries and mint," he said now, stroking his rangy white beard. "Won't that be nice? And we'll carve them, too. The house will be full of life."

Corrina purred and leaped onto the workbench to sniff at the finished batch.

"No, no, Corrina. Stay away from the hotplate. You'll melt your poor feet."

He plucked up her toy-like body and lowered her onto the cool tile floor, giving her head a little pet. Her bright scent lingered on his hand. It was much more delightful than smelling a real cat's fetid litter box and rot-sweet

kibble. Best yet, she wanted nothing more from him than companionship. And maybe that was all he needed, too, since Midge had fallen over the balcony last year.

It had been such a grand idea to live with his twin sister in their retirement, just an old widow and widower unspooling their remaining days together. She made him laugh, that's what she did. Midge and her outrageous stockings with profanity printed up the side, with her Tom Robbins books and her love of Carol Burnett. They would sit with their brandies on the white porch rockers, just the two of them, and they would laugh and laugh about their childhood spent knee-deep in creeks, about their red dog who ran like a gunshot whenever he got loose, about how their mother burned everything she tried to cook.

Midge had taken care of Gerald in her own way. She'd made his grief scatter for hours or even days at a time, even though her legs were bad and she treaded through her own suffering. The diabetes had given her drop foot, and after Gerald moved in, her shuffling gait only worsened. He watched her struggle up the stairs every night, refusing his help, and watched her trip several times over the edge where the living room carpet met the kitchen tile. She would bruise her knees into morbid greens and purples, and she would laugh and say if she was going to crash and burn, she ought to at least have a drink in her hand. She would liken her bruises to the shapes of states. This one's Nebraska, that one's more like Idaho.

Gerald had been out at the mailbox that day, hoping to find the slim package containing their next Mel Brooks movie, when he heard the scream. It wasn't like Midge to scream. The sound tore the rainy afternoon in two. It bifurcated his sense of reality.

When he worked up the courage to open the front door, his own scream caught like a burr in his throat. The balcony had come down with her, and she lay twisted and broken on the Saltillo tile, her skull cracked like an egg, blood and gray matter weeping in a pool shaped like Texas.

#

Corrina meowed, startling Gerald from the memory. He stumbled against the workbench and knocked over his coffee cup, one of Midge's favorites (it bore a silhouette of a leaping cat, and said "Coffee makes me puma pants"). The mug fell and broke with a pop, dark liquid splattering over the floor.

"Damn, damn, damn," Gerald said, wiping tears out of his eyes as he fetched a towel. Corrina circled the spill as he went to his knees and pulled the puddle into the towel with a long swipe. "Damn," he said again, the mug shards crunching like bone. He crushed his knuckles against his forehead, trying not to see Midge again or the bulging terror in her frozen eyes. Tears trailed into his beard. He pressed his teeth together.

He grabbed Corrina. She squealed in his arms as he went for a pitcher of water. He returned to the remnants of the spill and splashed the water over it, setting Corrina on top and scrubbing the floor with her tiny feet. The soap foamed up around her toes as she mewled, and as her feet began to evaporate in the water, she stopped wriggling. Gerald scoured at the tile, seeing Midge's mouth as it had lain open, jaw shattered.

He wore Corrina down to a nub.

#

The blackberry mint soap sat for five days before Gerald decided it was firm enough to carve. He peeled it from its silicone mold and turned it upright, drawing the sky-fresh scent into his nostrils. The brick was firm, the fat properly solidified. He searched it for a shape. Should he carve Corrina again? His gut twisted when he thought of the way he had ground her into the floor in a melodramatic fit. No, he thought. Doves. He would carve a pair of doves.

Gerald often dreamed about a pair of mourning doves sitting in the old alder tree outside his bedroom window. He knew they were his subconscious rendering him and Midge together again. They had always been simultaneous, down to the smallest ideas and thoughts. The Twin Shining, Midge called it. He knew somewhere, if there was an afterlife, she was probably dreaming of doves, too.

The process took three days, an elaborate scraping and peeling of soap slivers that fell to the floor like flower petals. He worked from the top down, shaping their beaks and the tiny orbs of their eyes, the ornately lined feathers and the reptilian feet.

Corrina had taken a few weeks to cure before she'd awakened, so Gerald placed the finished doves on the same spot on the mantle to await the miracle. He cleared a space, taking down his mother's mahogany mirror and a pair of beeswax pillar candles. He positioned the doves so they faced each other, flanking the picture of his niece, Nora, in her pigtails.

Sweet Nora. He needed to call her. The phone always seemed so far away.

#

Gerald stood and kissed Nora on the cheek when she arrived at the cafe. He had chosen a table on the sidewalk, beneath a yawning teal umbrella. Flowering dogwoods brightened the lazy avenue. Cars cruised by slowly in search of those elusive downtown parking spots.

"How are you?" Nora said, slipping off her red lambskin jacket and draping it over the seatback. "I'm sorry we haven't talked. If anyone had told me law school was so unforgiving, I might have thought twice. Oh wait, everyone told me that." She grinned.

Gerald waved a hand at her. "Your life is full. Don't apologize for that. It's good to see you."

She tilted her head and smiled, her eyes like the fire in a winter hearth. You wonderful old fool, her expression said. You're too forgiving.

"How *are* you?" Nora said. "I mean really. Are you lonely?"

"It's quiet," Gerald said, adjusting his fork, squaring it on his napkin. "Your mother made everything a little brighter. Now it's all washed out. Like an old photo."

"I miss her," Nora said. "I wish I had told her I loved her more often."

Gerald reached across the table and patted her hand. Her fingernails were trimmed and unpolished and clean. "She knew," he said. "She always knew."

Nora retracted, her hand slipping to her lap. She dabbed at the corner of her eye with her little finger. Gerald understood her need to guard herself, because God knew what would come spilling out if she didn't. There was a reason they hadn't spoken much. Too many reminders.

The waiter came, and Gerald ordered a bowl of asparagus soup because his insides always ached with chill these days. Nora ordered a salad. She had never been a salad kind of girl, but there it was on her lips: Caprese salad. Basil vinaigrette.

"So how's the soap business?" Nora said.

Gerald nodded. "It's good. Steady as ever." He looked at his lap. "I started carving them. The soap bricks."

"Oh?" Her smile was back. "That's a great idea. You were always good at carving. I still have the dolphins you made out of the old oak tree."

"That's right. You were just a girl. I took the branch from that old tree in front of your grandmother's house before they cut it down."

"Why did they do that?" Nora said. Her hand was back on the table. "I always loved that tree."

"Oh, it was long dead. It was too close to the power lines, so the city made your grandmother have it removed."

"I barely remember that part. I remember it was there and then it wasn't. Mom said Grandma cried about it."

Gerald remembered Midge, holding their mother in the doorway as she watched the men with the flatulent roar of their chainsaws, chewing through the bark, gasoline fumes roiling and sharp.

"There were memories in it," Gerald said. "All the way down to the roots. But we can't hold onto everything, can we?"

Nora looked at her lap. "No, I guess we can't." Her face said this was an impossible thing to ask of her, to not hold onto everything. She sipped her iced tea. "Do you still have that old mirror of Grandma's?"

"The mahogany one? Yes, of course. It's on the mantle at home. Well, I had to move it, but it's on my workbench. Midge always wanted it set out. She said she could see our mother in it if she looked just right."

“She used to tell me that when I was a girl. Grandma’s always watching us, she said. It always creeped me out a little.” Nora grinned. “Sometimes I wonder if I could see Mom in it now.”

Gerald smiled sadly. Were there other conversations? Was every thought a circle that led them back here?

“You can have it if you’d like,” Gerald said. “It’s only collecting dust.”

“No, I would always feel like it was watching me. But thank you.”

“Of course,” Gerald said.

His soup arrived, a triangle of toast beside it with an overly blackened edge. Nora said it looked like something her grandmother might have cooked. No, Gerald told her. They’d have called the fire department if your Grandma had gotten hold of it.

#

The doves remained inanimate. Gerald checked them every day for weeks, but they were only soap. The nicks and grooves he’d made with his tools were creative, but not Creation. Maybe it was time to confront the idea that Corrina had only been a hallucination of his lonely, aging mind. He had spent long decades building furniture with his bare hands and caring for his wife before dementia had whittled her down into a breathing mannequin, a drooling doll. He was tired and his back had given out, and so he’d retired from furniture and turned to soap, and his hands had become spotted and veined, his skin like paper. Maybe his mind had slipped along with the discs in his back, had withered like the hanging flap of skin beneath his chin. Maybe Corrina had never been anything more than soap.

Although he *had* fashioned Corrina from the lemon coconut soap, and the doves had been blackberry mint. At this realization he set to work on a new batch, slowly adding lye to water, then adding the mixture to melted coconut oil and lemon zest. He stirred and stirred, thinking about the small fawn he planned to carve from it.

#

The fawn sat on the mantle beside the doves, its smooth neck a perfect arc, its legs wonderfully balanced, unmoving.

The weeks unfolded, and Gerald took his sliced bricks of soap to the farmer’s market and sold them for five dollars each, smiling at the number of noses touching his bars, the way the kids would sniff each one like they were sampling a dessert buffet. People asked odd questions: do you have any lye-free? Is there something that smells more masculine? He would explain that real soap bars could not be made without lye, and playfully ask to see the guidebook on what a “masculine” scent was.

I don’t know, one woman said, beer sweat? The man with her laughed. If there was a beer sweat scent, he said, he would buy one for each of his friends.

The days at market were long, but Gerald enjoyed the socializing and the currents of people. He would go home and fall asleep in his armchair, hoping to wake to his soap carvings looking back at him.

Nothing happened. Gerald reprimanded himself for having destroyed the miracle of Corrina. Lightning never struck twice, they said. Maybe the universe was loathe to give him a second gift when he'd been so careless with the first. Or maybe he really was delusional. Maybe Midge's cracked open skull had cracked him, too.

Maybe he needed to carve another cat.

Part of him was afraid to see Corrina come back to life, knowing he had destroyed her. But that was the answer, wasn't it? Same recipe, same animal. Everything the same. He set to work on another brick of lemon coconut.

He stirred and daydreamed of his wife, who had curled in upon herself for three years until there was nothing left. He dreamed of his son, who had been stillborn, of the finality in his small shape. He dreamed of his mother laying in the hospice bed, her frizzed white hair an electric burst against the pillow. She had never been silent until then. Gerald had never heard such quiet.

Then Midge. Midge split open. Midge's laughter exploded over the floor and evaporating. All of these endings, all of them so goddamned messy.

Nora called that afternoon, but he didn't answer. He was busy scrubbing, washing the bathtub out with his sage and lavender soap, the kitchen counters and floors with basil and mint. The house filled with floral perfume. When the phone stopped ringing, he took a cloth and wiped down the receiver. He took bristles to the tiled floor. He scoured the black spots from the stovetop.

When the lemon coconut had properly thickened, Gerald poured it into a silicone mold and left it on the workbench to set. He collapsed in his armchair and watched old episodes of *The Carol Burnett Show* in a stupor.

"I'm trying to laugh," he said as he flicked off the television that night. He might have been talking to Midge or himself, or both. "I really am."

#

"I haven't heard from you," Nora said. "I called last week."

Gerald pressed the phone to the curl of his ear. "I'm sorry. Time just gets away from me. You know?"

"I know," Nora sighed. "I just wanted to make sure you were okay. I know it sounds crazy, but sometimes I think I can hear Mom's voice, and she's asking about you. Like she's still watching over you. That's why I called. Maybe we both need to know you're okay."

Gerald looked at his soap creations lined on the mantle, at the new version of Corrina with her round eyes and jaunty tail. She'd been sitting there for the last week, unyielding.

“Uncle Gerald?” Nora said. Her voice softened, like she was coaxing an animal from a cage. “What is it?”

“Oh,” he said, and managed to skim off a small chuckle. He forced a bit of light into his voice. “I’m getting old, that’s all it is. My mind isn’t the same anymore. It’s a wonder I can find my way to the coffee pot in the morning.”

“I worry about you,” she said. “All alone in that house. Have you ever thought of moving to a retirement community?”

#

Gerald ran the feather duster over the mantle on the second week, keeping the space immaculate. He oiled the wood.

On the third week he inspected all the carvings closely, lifting and turning them, probing at the doves’ feet, the fawn’s legs, the cat’s tail. They were just as normal as they should have been. Just as lifeless.

On the fourth week he stood and held one of the doves, cradling it like an infant in the crook of his arm. He thought of the Aspen Senior Living Center, a sprawling resort filled with shuffling feet and bent backs, with scowling nurses and plastic-covered sofas and the permeating smell of piss. Was that where he belonged? Was the end of life supposed to be a slow fade into uselessness?

He held the dove out before him, its surface soft and its body the color of heavy cream flecked with spices. The smell of mint had already faded, like everything else. He was crazy, he realized. Who imagines a soap carving coming to life? Maybe he did belong in a nursing home.

“Damn,” he said, curling a fist around the lifeless soap dove. “Damn, damn, damn!”

He slammed the dove against his workbench and its head snapped off. The head lay there like a quail’s egg, an oval of defeat. He tossed the body beside it and went to his chair. He slept for hours with his mouth open.

#

A thumping woke him, the sound like a hand drumming on a tabletop. He wiped drool from his mouth and smoothed his beard. When the thump came again, he jerked upright in his chair.

“Who is it?” he called, his voice garbled from sleep. He pulled himself to the edge of his chair and groaned until he was upright, feeling that familiar ache in his lower back, the muscles seizing into fists. When he reached the door the thump came again from behind him, and Gerald spun. Something moved on the workbench. His heart twisted. He stumbled forward, one hand on his back, and then he saw it: the creamy shape of a dove’s headless body flopping around like a fish in a bucket.

“No,” he said, seeing the broken-off head lying beside the body, its beak opening and closing. The dove’s body writhed until it fell off the edge of the workbench and burst into pieces.

Gerald ran to the sink and filled a pitcher, then went back and knelt before his Creation, scooping the shattered bits into the water. When the floor was clean, he swept the head from the workbench. The water made a frog gulp as it swallowed the head; it turned cloudy and bubbly. He thrust the pitcher into the sink and clutched at his pounding chest.

Lightning had struck twice, and he'd managed to destroy it again.

He didn't understand. What had changed? The other dove, still sitting on the mantle, remained inanimate. He pulled out his wooden stool and sat, smoothing his hands over the workbench's surface. The wood was polished pine, stained to a golden sheen. His carving tools peeked out of an old ceramic coffee mug from an auto dealership, his hot plate and beakers were cleaned and arranged neatly on the left. A stack of unread magazines lay on the right corner, next to the pillar candles and his mother's old mirror from the mantle.

The mirror.

He snatched it up, his fingers gray around the darkened mahogany edges. He gazed into it, expecting magic, miracles, another world. But there was only an old man peering back, with an unkempt beard and red-blotched eyes.

"Mother?" he whispered. He gripped the sides tighter, looking deeply at his reflection. "Midge?"

#

May brought late Spring warmth, so Gerald left the front door open with the screen shut to enjoy the fresh air. He'd been battling strange waves of dizziness that morning, and he thought being closed up in the house so much was probably getting to him. He sat at his bench, stirring a new batch of patchouli soap and humming beneath his bushy beard. Sun poured in through the kitchen windows, warming the tile floor.

The cat skirted his feet as Gerald worked, and he looked down and rubbed its smooth back. It flicked its tail. The dove perched on the stair rail, making its strange warbling coo, and the fawn sat at the sliding glass door and watched the season's first insects skittering around the greening lawn. The mirror had been the final ingredient, and whatever it meant, Gerald was thrilled to have discovered it.

"What do you think, Cecily?" he asked the cat, scooping her up and setting her in his lap. She purred, her lemony scent transferring to his shirtsleeves. "A patchouli-scented elephant. Doesn't that sound nice?"

Cecily mewed. He set her back on the floor to keep her away from the hotplate and went back to his stirring. The batch had thickened nicely. He poured the cream into his largest mold and covered it in plastic wrap, then took the glass cylinder and wooden spoon to the sink and washed the caustic mixture down the metal drain.

The dizziness came again, and Gerald dropped his tools and clutched his head. His vision had been fluctuating for the past few days, something he

attributed to old age, but now his left eye muddled, the sunlit kitchen blending into a watercolor mess. He tried covering his eye with his hand, as if he could reset it, but when he touched his face, he realized his cheek was numb.

The stroke came in waves, robbing his lucidity, his ability to feel. He had the prescience to grab the phone, but before he could dial 911 the receiver clattered to the floor.

Cecily and the fawn came to him as he lay on the tile. The dove fluttered down to watch from the edge of the workbench. From the floor he could see his mother's mahogany mirror, glinting on the mantle where he had placed it last week, next to his carvings. Was Midge watching him? Would she hear him if he drew his last breath?

#

"You can't leave me," Nora said. As Gerald blinked he saw the heart-shaped cut of his niece's face, the flicker of her eyes. Where had she come from? He opened his mouth to ask, but his capacity for words had flown. Had he ever been able to speak?

"Uncle Gerald," she said, her voice choked. His head was in her lap, her face inverted over him. "I need you to stay with me. The ambulance is coming. Just hold on."

He could only see her out of his right eye, though he wasn't sure if it was really her or if it was Midge, come back as her younger self, as an angel.

"I heard her voice," Nora said. "Uncle Gerald, I *heard* her."

The paramedics rushed in, their black polo shirts like strange geometric shadows moving around him. They asked questions, they prodded him and threw flashlight beams into his pupils. Nora talked and shook her hands, pulled at her fingers, adjusted her necklace.

Gerald felt himself float upward, as if lifted by God, and then he was being wheeled backward to the front door. As Nora shut the door after him, he caught a glimpse of his mother's old mirror on the mantle, and the little group of soap carvings he'd made sitting like statues beside it.

***Anthony DiPietro** (he/him) is a gay Rhode Island native who has worked in community-based organizations for two decades. In 2016, he joined Stony Brook University, where he earned a creative writing MFA, taught college courses, and planned and diversified arts programming. He is now associate director of the Rose Art Museum in Waltham, Massachusetts. A graduate of Brown University with honors in creative writing, his poems and essays have appeared in Notre Dame Review, The Seventh Wave, Washington Square Review, and others. His chapbook about the pandemic, And Walk Through, is forthcoming from Seven Kitchens Press in 2021. His website is www.AnthonyWriter.com.*

Four Kisses in Search of a Title

Anthony DiPietro

the way he kissed me july 1st—like a
battlefield nurse, every wound in the world
closed as those eyes fluttered,
war negotiators, their interns and translators

put down their pens and went home.
and when we kissed october 1st at the cabin
where he once played cowboy and cop
with brother and sister, he climbed the roof

to get high closer to that black lake of stars,
he made my body a kitchen where fire
alarms shrieked from steam until someone opened
windows, fanned the cheap little sensor. but I can't

explain how we said goodnight october 1st—like
his mother, tired from making real pecan pie,
to his father, who picked up
his dickens, and they retired to separate rooms. then?

the way we kissed on january 1st
like caged thieves, like cornered cats, like wakened
bats, his beard bathed in pepperwood smoke and
kerosene, his mouth tasted of corn chips

and beer, my senses flash-flooded with every
man's kiss from his past: Kiss
After a Shattered Windshield, Kiss As He Left
the Courtroom in Handcuffs, Kiss with a Choke

Hold of Sudden Desire. and after we finished
we drifted, like the car whose stubborn driver
needs sleep, we crossed the dangerous
median. and one miraculous kiss

april 1st in central park, his brief arm
against my spine, a doric column made of hope,
whose handsome twin is fear. he walked away backwards
from me, becoming like that house

on a cliff in my hometown—the last one
standing, all the rest bulldozed to build an interstate.
he perched above it, wind rushing, cars buzzing by. what could I
say but please, don't jump. not without taking my hand.

How Many Ways to Punish the Self Before Breakfast

middle hours of the night, I'm rolling
those dice, flipping over poker cards. clubs
& spades spin behind my eyelids.
another morning lands with a soft

thud on the floor. on deadline to write
about gun control laws & therapy-pet
euthanasia, I lie there under
the LCD glow & cheers from world cup soccer.

a cough rips up my throat, then the copper
penny taste of blood. smells like sex in here,
charlie's german friend says, & the morning
takes off like a flight to boston.

on the platform, I feel the changing tide & spit
my coffee on the track. you're better off walking
the rest of the way. this is the G train. you girls got on the wrong train.
the red moon of waiting for a subway train.

one time, on a boat, my brother made me laugh
& the oppressive memory comes back to me now.
all boats of course are patriarchal.
la dolce vita, this boat used to say

after the engine died & my father
brought out a box of wrenches
& worked long after the sun disappeared
under the moon of the driveway lights

tweaking the gasoline engine
whose smell I still taste, & he tossed
leftover nuts and bolts beneath the chassis
like pennies into a wishing fountain.

Sara (she/her) grew up in Needham, Massachusetts and studied English at Northwestern University. She holds a Masters' Degree in Teaching and is a National Board Certified Teacher. Sara is a breast cancer survivor. She currently lives outside Columbus, Ohio with her husband, four young children and two old dogs. One is a ghost who haunts her couch. She is represented by Rachel Ekstrom Courage of Folio Literary Management and is on submission with her first novel.

Last Lost Boy

Sara Herchenroether

For Nick

Peter says it's time to take another baby. I don't want to—there's the stealing itself, then the bottles, the nappies, the crying—but Peter won't come off it. Wendy's scheduled to come back for her yearly visit, and he thinks it's the only way to get her to stay.

"She'll have to," he says one night, sitting by the fire. We're roasting grasshoppers for a night snack. They're good, with salt. "If she has a baby here, she'll have to stay. That's all she talked about the last time. She and the ogre are 'trying', she says. But 'nothing works', she says." Then he gets distracted by a firefly, popping in and out of the night.

What he doesn't say is the ogre is Wendy's husband—she's all grown up. Peter lost her years ago, but he's still trying to rewrite the ending. Every year, it's the same routine. He goes mad beforehand, then I go and hide on the other side of the island while she's here. I'm not supposed to let her see me—no one knows I'm here.

I'm the last Lost Boy. Unless I steal another.

#

The first time Wendy came, and the first time she left, she took everyone else with her back to London. Tootles, Nibs, Slightly, Curly, and my brother, Thom. We were the only Lost Boys who were brothers—because we were—are—twins. (I suppose twinship never changes, even when you're no longer the same age.) Peter never liked twins. Seemed a bit scared of them. He said if one of us left to grow up and one of us stayed, then we wouldn't be twins any more—we'd be ourselves, we'd be special. I was going to tell Peter where to stick his wooden pipe. He couldn't, he wouldn't separate me from my brother. We had always been together. A matching pair—mirror images of each other. But Thom disagreed. Right off, he said, "I'll go. Corks can stay."

It came as a bit of a surprise, being drop kicked like that.

Over the years, I figured out where Thom lives. When I go back to London at night, I pop by his window. He lives in a flat with a couple mates on Burlington Lane. His arms got longer, same for his legs. He's as tall as a giant. But his hair, the opposite of mine, is short. He still snores.

I watch him at night sometimes. He doesn't know I'm on the other side of the window, peering through my reflection to watch him. But there *was* one night. He had a girl over. I couldn't tell what they were playing. His pants were down with his bare ass painting two white circles in the otherwise dark room. He was smashing her into the wall, making all sorts of noises. I thought she saw me.

When I got back, I asked Tinkerbelle what they were doing,. She laughed at me.

Tink only said, "You idiot."

"What?" I asked.

She shook her head. "They were making a baby."

"That doesn't seem right," I said. Fairies put the babies in the mother's stomach and then the doctor gets it out through their belly button at hospital, that's what Peter says.

"You idiot," she said again. Then she closed the door to her fairy home.

But that was a little while ago. Thom's even older now. He's married that girl. And some fairy—not Tink or I would have known—put a baby in the girl's stomach. Two babies, even. They've got two cribs set up, two bouncing chairs, two changing tables for nappies—all blue. The girl's the size of a small whale. It's going be any day now that those babies come out.

I've been thinking. It's quite convenient really that they're having two boys. I could take one, and there'd still be one left over. It would be helpful, really. Two babies all by yourself must be an awful amount of work. If I took one, I'd be doing them a favor.

#

Sometimes, at night, I go down to Mermaid Lagoon. It's at night, mostly, when I try to remember my mother. All I've got is bits and pieces. An ivory hand reaching into my crib. A rocking chair by the window, curtains waving gently. I wish I could remember her face. There's nothing else to compare it to. Place it next to another, line up the similarities and differences. Like Thom and me. We're mostly the same. His eyes are a little farther apart than mine. I've got a birthmark running along my ribcage, under my left arm, like a faded handprint. It reminds me of her. That's what I remember most clearly, that feeling: of being held.

The mermaids are perched along an archipelago of rocks. When they've spotted me on the beach, two swim over. They stay in the water, propping their human halves up, their hands digging into the sand beneath,

their tails flitting and splashing behind them. The waterline grazes their stomachs, and the moonlight behind draws crescents along their curved backs.

"You're looking bigger," they coo at me. Amelia, the one with fire red hair, rocks back and forth along the sand, bobbing in the waves.

"I couldn't sleep."

"Bad dreams?" asks Amelia.

I don't tell her that I've been thinking about my mother and thinking about the babies on the way. Or thinking about Thom's girl and how she held onto his shoulders. I feel like the mermaids—two parts sewn together to make one person. A part of me is still seven, and another part knows I've been here for thirty years, and that somewhere, that time counts.

"Come swim with us," they call.

I don't have a reason to say no, so I go in up to my knees. The water's warm like a bath.

"No, no," they call. "Come out deeper."

I take a few more steps, and I can feel their tails wrap around my legs. A fin flicks my calf. Their bodies circle me above the water. A part of me wants to swim with them, to grab them and pull their hair. The other part of me wants to run back to the hideout. Something sharp brushes my thigh, and I realize it's one of their shells. Something soft presses into my back, then Amelia's arm wraps around my stomach. Her hands feels all wrong, like lightning or jellyfish tentacles. Suddenly, I want to be as far away from here as I can. I push them away. And I run.

#

When I get back to the hideout, I'm surprised to find Peter awake. He has his wooden pipe out, polishing it with beeswax. I've never had the courage to ask him, but tonight, I feel electric. I want this feeling out of my skin.

"Why did you take us?"

"What do you mean?" he says, not taking his eyes away from his work. He's rubbing one spot on his flute over and over.

"Why did you take us when we were babies? Why did you make us lost boys?"

"Different reasons."

Before, I would have left it at that, gone to bed. "Like what?" I ask.

"Well—like for instance," Peter says, putting his pipe down. His eyes drift off to the ceiling, recalling memories from years ago. "Take Tootles. His parents couldn't keep their lights on. I found him outside a church. And Lightly, he was the last of thirteen children. His mother would have forgotten about him, eventually."

"What about me and Thom?" It's the first time I've said his name. It feels like bits of hays in my mouth.

"That was obvious. I *had* to take you. You were twins."

“What does being twins have to do with it?”

“Well, if you never grow up, you can never die.”

I screw my eyebrows into caterpillars. “What does dying have to do with being twins?”

He sighs, goes back to the pipe. “People only have twins because they haven’t decided which one they like best. Mothers pick their favorite, keep the other one around for a while in case the favorite needs spare parts, then they forget about it.”

It’s the way he says *mother*, like it’s a smashed bug that needs to be scraped from the bottom of his heel. When Wendy would visit and play pretend mother, Peter would always leave the room. I remember once the only time Peter told us about his mother. It was during Wendy’s first visit. Mothers and twins are about the only two topics he avoids like a bad rash. I assumed it was because he didn’t understand them—but there’s a jaggedness to his voice that catches in the back of his throat. I press him.

“Is that what happened to you?”

Peter scrambles his face. Then swallows, hard. His pipe hits the table, hard. “I had only run off for a day. Only for fun. When I came back, the window was locked. My brother was in my bed, and there was only one bed left in the room. My mother had forgotten all about me.”

I remember this story he told Wendy and the other lost boys. I remember the image of Peter hovering outside his window, peering at his reflection.

“Your brother—he was your twin, wasn’t he?”

His chair gets thrown to the ground from the force of him standing up. Then he straightens his cap, adjusts his belt, tucks the pipe into his belt, smiles.

“Never mind,” he says, grinning from ear to ear. “I don’t know why we started all this mother talk in the first place. Mothers are wicked, it’s best not to think about them. What we should be thinking about is Wendy. She’ll be here in two days. You’ll get a baby for Wendy?”

#

I think about Peter’s twin. He must be an old man by now. His face, carved with wrinkles, spiderwebs spreading out from his eyes, hard lines framing his mouth from too much smiling, if that version of Peter has the same inclination toward rampant optimism. While I’m waiting outside the babies’ window, I imagine him—two faces that no longer match.

Thom’s baby boys are out of the girl’s stomach. She has one of the babies in her arms, in a rocking chair, right by the window. But there aren’t horns coming out of her head. Her fingertips don’t have talons. Maybe she isn’t wicked after all. In fact, nothing about her appears mean or forgetful, not even the slightest bit unkind. Her eyes are heavy and beneath them are dark smudges like she hasn’t washed her face for weeks. But there’s a smoothness

across her forehead and a smile stretching her mouth. She looks—it takes me a minute to remember the word—happy. I want to brush her hair.

I realize then that I don't want to take one of the babies. They should stay with her. Maybe she's a different kind of mother from the one Peter had. I think Peter's been wrong about mothers, about most things. The mother puts the baby in his crib and closes the door softly. I wait a moment, watching the little boy sleep, then I turn to leave, already trying to sort out what I'll say when I return empty-handed. But when I turn, I collide directly into Peter's chest in midair.

"Where's the baby?" he asks, smiling.

"I—" but I don't have time to find the words because he's already slipped into the open window, and before I can stop him, he has the baby—the same one the mother was holding minutes ago—in his arms.

"Come on!" he yells behind him, darting into a cloud. "Wendy will love him!"

#

He's only a tiny thing. More like a bird than a boy. He cries like the baby tigers in the jungle, meowing. He'll only take a little bit of milk from the bottles I give him, and I begin to worry it won't be enough.

"When is Wendy coming?" I ask on the second night. She'll know what to do. She should be here by now.

Peter's carrying a new piece of wood, half-listening. He begins shaving the bark.

"Peter?" I try again. Maybe he can't hear me over the crying.

"What?"

"When is Wendy coming?"

"Oh—" he says, distracted still by a bit of bark that won't break free. He rubs his thumb over the spot. "She's not coming."

"What?" I sit straight up, jostling the baby who begins to wail more and more.

"She's not coming after all. Stupid Wendy bird."

I wait for him to throw a fit. But he's moved on to other things. Instead of seeing people for who they are, he swaps in versions of themselves that match his own reflection: distracted, forgetful, cruel.

"So that means I can bring the baby back?"

"Oh no—it's too late," Peter says. "His mother's already forgotten about him."

I tell myself this must be true. Because I want it to be true for the girl and for my mother. I want her to have forgotten about me and about Thom. Because if she didn't forget—well—I don't want to think about what that must have felt like.

#

Three years go by. The baby isn't a baby anymore. He walks and talks. I named him Daniel. He's not big enough for pixie dust yet. It's best to wait until he's five or seven. Sturdy enough that he can climb and run, but still bendy so that if he falls from a high tree he won't break. I told myself I wouldn't, but I can't help myself. I go back to Thom's house one night.

It's dark. The mother is reading the other baby a story—only he isn't a baby anymore either. They're curled up in bed together, just the two of him. The little boy fits into the crook of her arm, which makes the other arm look lonely, empty. I wait, expecting Thom will be in any moment to give the boy a goodnight kiss. But they finish the story, and the door remains closed.

She tucks him in, brushes his hair out of his face and smiles—but then, her eyes freeze, her face collapses. She leaves the room, fast, and I follow her around the house, spying from the other window. She's in a ball on the floor on the other side of the door. That's when I realize: she hasn't forgotten. When she sees her son's face, she's thinking about the other—imagining what that other face should look like now, but only have a memory to compare it to.

After a minute, she pulls herself from the floor and goes into her bedroom, but it's not how I remember it. There's only one wardrobe. Thom used to keep his shoes lined up next to the closet door, but they're gone. So are his reading glasses that he used to keep by his bedside table. I realize then—Thom has left her.

#

When I return to Neverland, I stop Tink on her way out the door.

"I have a question."

"Yes?" she asks.

I whisper in her ear.

Tink nods. "Anything's possible in Neverland. But I have to warn you. It hurts like hell."

#

Out in the jungle with Daniel and Tink, I drink the elixir she has made. She stays to watch. "Just in case."

I drink deep, tipping the cup back. It tastes strongly of licorice. My arms stretch, my legs explode. My chest pulls across, then my back. I think I'm going to die, being pulled apart from the inside out. My clothes lie in little rags and pieces on the ground around me. Daniel stares up at me, unsure, like he's about to cry—waiting to see my reaction to see if he should. I scoop him up in my arms, which are now big enough to cradle him against my chest. For the first time, it feels like my body fits me, like my two parts match.

"It's ok," I tell him.

"You're handsome," Tink says, eyeing me up and down and tossing some abandoned pirates' clothes in my direction. "Don't let the mermaids see you."

#

I use the last vial of pixie dust to fly back to London with Daniel. My stomach flutters as we take the stairs. Daniel's wearing the same clothes I wore at his age. There are patches and a couple holes, but it's all we had. To passersby, we look like a couple of circus runaways, which all things considered, isn't that far off.

Before ringing the bell, I remind him of what to say and who lives here. His little finger presses the button when I lift him up to reach, then we hear a bell deep inside the building.

When her face fills the door, Daniel needs no reminding.

"Momma," he calls, his hands floating into the air. Her eyes have grown to the size of teacups. She picks him up, pressing his chest into hers. Her face is wet. Daniel's brother appears behind her knees, and he says, in his little voice, a shade deeper than his brother's, "You're back."

She sets him down, and the boys take off into the house.

Then, she turns to me.

There's a moment when I think she's going to close the door in my face, and I've already prepared myself for this possibility. I see her negotiating with herself—with what she wants to know, what parts she suspects, and what parts she doesn't want answers to. She's deciding if she wants to break the spell.

She wraps her arms around my middle, and I feel her hands along my ribcage, pressing her body into mine, and I hug her back, pouring myself into her, feeling warm and right. Then I know—I'm home.

Alessandra Davy-Falconi is a phoenix who completed an undergraduate degree in history while working full-time in corporate America. She writes, makes and seeks out art, explores the infinite outdoors, and reads as much as possible. Her work has previously appeared in Litbreak, Flash Fiction Magazine, Prometheus Dreaming, and TERSE, among others. Look her up if you're curious.

Unlovable

Alessandra Davy-Falconi

His lips had parted slightly, exposing the bottom row of teeth as if providing for a sleeping breath. In death, the line of his mouth stretched unnaturally wide, like a long cut made near the bottom of his face. His eyes had shrunk from their living largeness, where so much of his intensity had concentrated; possibly his body had shrunk as well, but it had been too many years since I'd seen him alive to be sure.

The room with his open casket was divided by a thin hospital curtain to maximize space. We couldn't see the other coffin, but its attendants were spilling over to our side in a mix of conversation and tears and the low disinterested voices of mandatory but unrelated guests. Occasionally the excess visitors cast a glance at my grandfather's small body in its jeans, the rosary around his slightly swollen fingers, the poster board with the cheaply printed script of unnecessary flourishes, *Eugenio Falconi*. There weren't enough people on our side to protect him from strangers' looks. At the end of over ninety years of life, my father and I were the only two people in the world who wanted to say goodbye.

I hadn't known him. I had only known of him: that he drove a lifetime of static rage into every conversation through a baritone that inspired you to crawl under rocks, and that he obsessively swung between stockpile purchases of Kavli and capers to extreme thrift practices that left the structure of my grandparents' home in question. Not long before my father left forever, my grandfather chased his family out of the house, knife in hand. Not long before she was diagnosed with terminal osteosarcoma, my grandfather knocked my grandmother to the ground. I was supposed to avoid him whenever possible, just in case. The one time I forgot to do this, he exploded at me, a seven-year-old asking for help gluing the steeple back to a broken church figurine. His blaring voice surrounded my grandmother's life unless she escaped to her study or her car; he used his words to assault her senses, from the beginning to the end. Every night, when he ate her exceptional homemade dinners, he would criticize in a crescendo between bites, and she would stare back at him

and pronounce her words more slowly and sharply as her disgust snowballed into *the butter is on the plate of silver*. SILVER. SIL—VER. Then she would look at me so I would know.

Never marry a violent man, never marry a violent man, never marry a violent man. In the year before she died, she loved imparting her wisdom to me, none more so than the injunction to *never marry a violent man*. Why did she stay with him? Because they were married, and she had committed. Because no one else, certainly, would have done the work of keeping him alive. Not at that point.

My grandmother's relatives refused to let him be buried with her in the family plot. None younger than seventy, they also refused to confirm their availability to attend the funeral. *Maybe, we're not sure. We have to check our plans.* These relatives were Eugenio's only relatives; the remnants of his own cruelly belligerent family had passed years before. My entire life, I never met someone directly related to him, even though his sister lived almost as long as he did. One of three children, my grandfather's favorite older brother, Cesare, was killed in The War, and his younger sister, a war baby for whom he'd once begged neighbors for milk to feed her with, as an adult became "The Duchess." When Cesare died, my grandfather's parents settled for their second-best son. When Eugenio's parents died, his sister took his share of the inheritance. When she died an old and childless woman, she left everything, family photographs included, to the local Catholic TV station. If you add ten pounds each of vitriol and resentment to the pronunciation, you can hear the Italian *La Duchessa*. Bitch.

The day before the funeral, my father and I went to clean out the nursing home room where my grandfather had passed. In his nightstand and dresser were the accoutrements of old men, an oversized scissors and toiletries dirtied with a whitish mix of dry skin and grey hairs. In his closet was an old jacket and two of the felt alpine hats he had always insisted on wearing. The room was clean and strangely peaceful, and as we slowly filled an old duffle bag, some nurses who had been with him at the end came by to briefly give their condolences.

My father couldn't let them go. In the years when senility had crawled its way through my grandfather's life, he'd been known to attack nurses, screaming at them and at my father over a 3,902-mile-wide phone connection, loud enough to be heard with the receiver a foot from my father's ear. The nurses explained that he hadn't been very strong or lucid in his last days, but he had mentioned his son, and he had mentioned me. Without prompting, my father began the explanation: when The War ended, teenage Eugenio had been sent to check the endless train cars of corpses for his dead brother. When earlier he had been sent to warn a Jewish doctor about the invading Nazis, he arrived just in time to see the doctor place a gun in his mouth and splatter his brains on the wall behind him. Despite the pernicious hunger and his

cherished, missing-in-action older brother, he'd become a fearless young man who risked his life in resistance, slashing Nazi tires and riding around manically on his bicycle. He had been a sixteen-year-old partisan whose zeal ultimately frightened his fellows enough to decide it was time to end him. With enough perception, he skipped the deadly meeting to pick up a new gun and kept his life long enough to keep struggling. When nobody ultimately believed that his brother could be dead without the proof of a body, Eugenio's parents sent him to the future saint Padre Pio, under the pretense of needing a marriage blessing. Before letting him utter a word, the saint told my young grandfather unequivocally: "Your brother is dead." The war had ruined him, they had to understand.

To say my grandfather and I ever talked would be a gross exaggeration. We only had one conversation that I remember clearly, while my grandmother lay on her deathbed and we were waiting for the cancer to finish eating her bones. He wasn't allowed to see her, but one day he called in tears to remind me that she loved me, that she had talked incessantly about me since the day I was born, and that it was my duty to be with her. My grandmother was confused by his tears, wondering whether he was believable, or capable of sorrow. It was the last conversation I had with him, even though it was another five years until he died.

We had trouble finding a photo of him in time for the tombstone. The few days my father and I were able to take away from our jobs to fly to Italy were hardly enough to manage the burial, the inheritance, and the debt. But the day of his funeral we went to my grandparents' apartment, housed in the mechanics' garage my great-grandfather had built and then rebuilt from the broken pieces of war-bombed buildings. We climbed steps surrounded by walls where black mold dripped down, finally wresting our way through the hand-carved wooden door that had swollen into its frame. Nobody had lived there for over three years, and mildew was everywhere, dusting the countertops, thick on the walls, bubbling into frames. The albums that were safe were in my grandmother's study, and they were filled with images of her. There she was, through the decades, always with her long legs, lithe frame, and the intelligent model gaze she gave to the camera. She tossed her blond hair, she lay on the beach, she stood in the Dolomites, all through his eyes: Eugenio had been her constant photographer. If love is a way of seeing someone, then somewhere in his soul he'd had it once for her.

When I was little he made me small gifts, a perfect child-sized wooden plate with my name carved into the rim, a little chalice with a lid. I had a piece of brown geode he'd discovered and polished himself on one of his mountain excursions, and instruments he'd built for measuring the perfect ellipsis. He worked with his hands, making tools for cleaning teeth and opening jars. Strange inventions whose sum I hadn't considered until he was gone and I was forced to wonder about the worth of the angry, talented

mechanic who died alone. I didn't know him. I never really talked to him. Everything I knew I'd learned as my father, with the distance of an Atlantic Ocean and thirty years of partitioned life, became more forgiving and more forthcoming. My father described his knowledge of my grandfather never to me, but to himself out loud, a slow, years-long turning of memory coins, a quiet questioning of the verdict he'd enacted through separation.

I was a granddaughter in name and genetics and distant stories only. And yet, when we finally reached the moment of burial and the body of my last grandparent was prepared for the earth, I unthinkingly stepped forward and gently kissed his coffin goodbye.

I could never have loved him. Had I been near him for any longer than I was, his constant hostility and his insanity-laced polemics would have exhausted me to pieces. At least by the time I was born, nothing in this world could bring him joy. The truth is, there is no real living with people who see Nazis at every German train. There is no living with people trapped in a world of permanent rage, who one day bring home a family dog and the next take the dog away to disappear, because happiness in their world is wrapped with a deadly disappointment. The departed have a way of acquiring brilliance in our memory, for no other reason than that they are gone and the power of deciding someone's legacy is frightening. When they can no longer terrify you in person, when nobody else is left to remember them, you can't help but excuse the hatred and forgive the broken bird in its cage, even if sharing in that cage would have meant enduring the bird's need to inflict the same suffering on every living thing in its vicinity. Eugenio was a man whose father dismissed the engine he built by hand at twelve years old, who had been the least favorite child, who took surreptitious photos of East Germany when it was still East Germany, who climbed mountains and biked in the dark, who could build cars by hand, who skipped the birth of his only son, who terrorized his family and might have murdered his dogs, and who survived to over ninety years of life without a single friend. And when his granddaughter had the chance to call him one last time, when he was dying, when the nurses had called to say it was time to make burial plans, she didn't; I figured he'd last until we got there, and what would I even say, would it even matter? Did he matter?

We have a bad habit of assuming love between immediate family members, because we believe that without love our family will lose their meaning in our lives. That without love, we won't care about their passing or their presence. It seems impossible to reconcile the identity of family with the description "unloved," but even though there was never any love between myself and my grandfather, he was still mine. When he died, some living piece of myself died as well. Some connection to the pain that inevitably survived my father's attempted immunity through distance disappeared and

left a hole. I felt him gone. It could never have been, but I wish I'd known him better.

No one could say he died beloved. Or respected. Or cherished. He was just a man whose talent and limited emotional reserves were crushed by the weight of a world war and an uncaring society until he became the unusually old, shrunken, completely lonely body in a sadly spacious goodbye room.

And now I miss him.

Megan Denese Mealor is a two-time Pushcart Prize poetry nominee and the author of two poetry collections: *Bipolar Lexicon* (Unsolicited Press, 2018) and *Blatherskite* (Clare Songbirds Publishing House, 2019). She is also a student and lover of photography, painting, and sculpting. Megan lives in her graffiti-hearted hometown of Jacksonville, Florida with her husband Tony, their seven-year-old son Jesse, who was diagnosed with autism at age three, and their two mollicoddled cats Trigger and Lulu.

Industrial Echoes



This photo was taken of a house built in 1875 in Jacksonville, Florida, now part of Walter Jones Historical Park. The desecration and subsequent sadness of this long-abandoned hovel crawling with decadent shadows called out to my inner artist. The eerie grace of the sightless window truly gave the setting its beating heart.



The shredded window of another ghostly building in Walter Jones Historical Park. I loved its rotting vanity, symbolic of its abandonment to modern-day ruins.

Jessica Evans (she/her) writes from Arlington, VA. She is the EIC for Twin Pies, poetry editor for Dress Blues, prose editor for Knight's Library, and serves as a mentor for Veteran's Writing Project. Work is forthcoming in LEON Literary Review, Emerge Literary Journal, and elsewhere. Connect with her on Twitter @jessica__evans.

Later Is One of Our Tags

Jessica Evans

Nate's blue Dodge caravan used to be his mom's before she started taking too many pills to drive. It's missing the steering column, but we use a flathead screwdriver to start it. Nate keeps saying he's going to fix it later. We all buckle up because Nate won't leave until we do. We light a joint, slide in a bootleg Three Six album. Nate drives us down Straight Street, turns left onto Calhoun and takes us back across the city.

Duck Creek isn't a creek. It's the place to explode televisions and learn how to fuck. The city uses it to funnel water from the treatment facility on Route 50 out into the river. We come here to light fireworks, to take mushrooms, to tag. It's where we come when the topside world is too busy, too bright, too loud. Here, sounds echo. They reverberate against the concrete walls, reminding us that later is eventually going to come back to us. Later is one of our tags. We spray paint words with double meanings, huff fumes and pretend we're doing it for the art. None of us are artists. We just like to get high.

Nate's tag is Mach One because he wants to be faster than the speed of sound. He parks in the shadows along Ridge Avenue, where the road curves a little to the left before a steep incline. This city is like that, soft and slow before steep slopes. Debbie's sister lives two houses up with an abusive husband who leaves her eyes black and her bones broken. Debbie pretends not to know where we are, and we pretend like she isn't pretending. This is the circle we know, the give and take of being here and being there all at once. It's called dissonance but none of us know that yet. We're too busy looking for ways to take in more air without drowning.

Leanne Drapeau (she/her) is a writer and teacher from Connecticut. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee and an MFA candidate at Randolph College in Virginia where she studies poetry and creative nonfiction. Her work is in or forthcoming from B O D Y, perhappened, Booth, The American Journal of Poetry, Sierra Nevada Review, DIALOGIST and other places. You can find her on Twitter @DrapeauLeanne.

You Opened Me Like A Fridge and I Was as Cold as One, Too

Leanne Drapeau

My body is the kind of hotel
that does not serve
continental breakfast.

My body is the kind of casino
where if you win too much, strangers
appear, drag you out back, and break

your kneecaps. My body is not the kind
of vault that wants to be forced wide
with a stick of dynamite. My body is

not the kind of body that wants
to be forced. I am not saying I hate you
but when you opened me

like a fridge all the milk turned
and now there is nothing left
for cereal or coffee,

now every shelf is empty
when the morning
comes.

If you squint it looks like love

I wear a mood ring on my thumb
to monitor how often I fall

in love but it mostly stays the green
of a busted thumbnail

and that's deeper than love, right? The
gathering blood of a bruise

the weight of a falling hammer, the lust
of a thumb that must

receive the blow. If I could take you
to that shadowy afternoon

in a house that was never mine you'd
understand. And that's deeper

than love too, right? The ability to stand
under and unflinching

in the windrush of every hammer
that's busted us both?

SOME DAYS ARE JUST THE WORST

I couldn't sleep all night.

You're a true princess they said

removing the small body of a frog
from beneath the lowest mattress.

Imagine that –

killing your prince the same
day you almost met him.

***Esem Junior** (he/him) is a former crime reporter, and his nonfiction has appeared in *The Wall Street Journal* and other newspapers. His fiction, meanwhile, has appeared in *Shooter Literary Magazine*, *J Journal*, and elsewhere, and has been nominated for Pushcart Prizes, PEN America, and other awards.*

Nothing Ha-Ha Funny at the Edge of the Light

Esem Junior

Yael Chalke, she wasn't a narcissist. Even at the top of her game, in those cavernous theaters with velvet curtains and seats to the heavens, her quest for laughs only soothed a deep ache for acceptance, not admiration. She'd wanted to know she was okay. But since she'd given up comedy and changed identities, Chalke at times would miss herself. That's why, in an alley near Shinjuku station on the other side of the world, under the wash of rose neon and crossing strings of paper lanterns, she found herself on her iPhone, watching a video of herself doing stand-up against the red brick wall of Manhattan's Comedy Cellar.

She'd been eight months pregnant at the time. There she was, pacing across the floor-to-ceiling spotlight, one hand on the microphone, the other leading the cord, sermonizing about her teenage years cruising the bar mitzvah circuit, a zitty but sexually adventurous time of her life. "At thirteen, little Yehudah Smilowitz becomes a man," she said. "He stands before the congregation, does a little baruch atah, and the rabbi welcomes him to manhood. But hear this, Rabbi Katz." She leaned forward, narrowed her eyes, and grabbed an invisible rabbi by an invisible tallit. Her voice fell half an octave. "It was I, Yael Chalke—not you—who made men at Beth Israel."

In the trail of laughter she splayed her fingers. The mic dropped—kuh-puhnk on the floor—and to no music she broke into slow-motion dancing. The running man, the sprinkler. Then a frustrated attempt at flossing, disrupted by her third-trimester baby bump.

Her ovation was the standing type.

Nine years later in the gut of Tokyo she smiled, remembering the moment. It felt good to smile, an echo of something familiar, because everything else around her was alien. Her spiky red hair? Grown long, dyed black. Her staple outfit, flannel shirts over yoga pants? Replaced by charcoal pencil skirts and blazers. At a glance she looked no different from the myriad

of other sallow but industrious Tokyo citizens, shuttling themselves home to matchbox apartments after fourteen-hour days. Anonymity was key. Her last years in America, after her daughter's disappearance, were steeped in a brew of public shaming, all recorded on terabytes of internet server space. Monster, they said. Derelict parent. Bitch deserved what she got. The death threats were more creative.

Anonymity was key, but maybe impossible. Chalke had an unforgettable grin—it was the gap between her front teeth. So when she smiled in Shinjuku's warren of alleys, her face matched the grinning star on the video, a perfect encore. Perhaps that's why a group of Western tourists stopped and pointed.

"Is it?"

"It is."

"Are you sure?"

From her days doing stand-up, Chalke had developed a plastic face, capable of dead-on impressions, and it formed itself into the tight squint of a Chinese take-out cashier she'd known in Park Slope. What spewed from her mouth was a mix of conversational Japanese, gibberish, and Hebrew prayer, and she went to town on the Americans until they broke eye contact and scattered into the neon night.

Was she proud of herself? Chalke leaned against a vending machine and put her hand to her chest. Her body trembled, including the hand in her purse, where her fingers strangled the handle of her 15-centimeter *tantō*, a Samurai-era knife she meditatively sharpened each night until her mind was clear and sleep was possible.

#

Chalke had lucked her way into a top-floor apartment in Nishi-Shinjuku, courtesy of her employer, which shielded its people from Tokyo's furious competition for housing. *O Nīchan* also arranged for the weekly delivery of fresh fruit, and a bowl on the counter held a pyramid of yuzu—yellow and plump, a bastard hybrid of lemons and mandarin oranges. Chalke wished for Florida oranges. That and hotdogs.

Unnerved still from her encounter in the alley, she flipped on the TV. In polite British English a BBC newscaster spoke about gangs of youth in Tokyo, squatting en masse in apartments, gumming up the Shibuya crossing with their flash-mob protests. Japan's deputy prime minister called this "a sickness contracted from American YouTube videos," and he warned of Western-style anarchy.

Chalke sighed. It would do.

In America drinking had been a sub-optimal way of dealing with problems, with many weeks lost to blackout, but she found herself rummaging through a cabinet for a liter of sake. It was the only liquor in the flat, captured in a translucent, sky-blue bottle, gifted from her section manager. She'd kept it

only because a quick sale on the secondary market could, if necessary, harvest enough yen for a flight to anywhere in the world.

But something was wrong. The sake level hung near the base of the bottle's neck—impossible because never, not once, had she drunk from it.

Chalke wasn't one to second-guess her memory. At thirteen she'd memorized all eight thousand throaty Hebrew sounds comprising her haftorah, and at thirty-three had delivered a full hour of comedy for HBO. But was it possible, she thought, she'd taken a drink? During one of those insomniatic nights spent in the ether of half-consciousness?

Maybe, she decided. But when she held the mouth of the bottle against a lightbulb, the blaze of the filament revealed the imprint of lips, recorded in purple lipstick. Yael Chalke owned zero lipsticks.

Her eyes traveled the apartment's perimeter. The door, the windows. Their locks. She even inspected the latches on the large air vent that hovered above the apartment's foyer. There were no signs of intrusion.

Think, she told herself.

Her *tantō* came cleanly from its scabbard, and she drew the blade across the sake bottle's cloudy neck, etching a line at the meniscus. The knife shook in her hand. Many of the online threats in America had been cartoonish, but others contained chilling specificities. About hiding in her apartment, creeping up, shadowing her sleeping form. She'd guessed, or maybe hoped, these trolls had lived in far-flung panhandles in secondary states but, in the months before she left, they began taking candid photos of her in Brooklyn, then posting them. It became a sport to photograph her.

Chalke sat at the table with a water stone and sharpened the knife until she could pinch the handle and push the blade through the girth of the yuku.

She speared each of the two dozen fruits.

The tremble in her hand never quit.

#

She took refuge in the neighborhood's subterranean ramen shop where she ordered soup from an e-kiosk, took a ticket, and followed a hallway to a narrow room where businessmen parked themselves at a bar against the wall, a wooden divider between them. A small window at elbow-level opened into the kitchen, through which cooks delivered soups. No eye contact, no speaking.

Chalke passed the receipt through the window. She closed her eyes and wondered, had she been spotted in Tokyo?

In her phone's browser she skipped through those websites devoted to finding her—all alleged sightings of Chalke were logged there. Times, places, and photos if taken.

All bogus info, at least in the past year. Sightings in Wyoming, Vancouver, Zihuantanejo, the product of overactive imaginations. And one

recent entry on BitchHunt.net, a half hour ago, and her heartbeat stuttered until she'd read the location four times: Toko. A New Zealand village where, in a rugby bar, she'd allegedly ordered a pint of Speight's ale.

Chalke inhaled, deeply. The sounds of the room returned. Sighs of the overworked, sips from soup bowls, the muted clink of dishware from the unseen kitchen. She pressed her eyes into the heels of her palms.

This underground ramen shop, she knew it well. It was the place she came to visit her old life.

Here, with dividers on either side, the steam off the soup warming the underside of her chin, she'd check in on her tormenters, but mostly the little girl she lost. The child she'd brought into the world, the protection of whom had been her only job. But why not let the girl walk alone to school, just a few blocks away? At birthday parties the other parents rolled their eyes about their helicoptering peers and reminisced about their own childhoods, whole summers exploring woods and urban industrial graveyards. So she let her baby girl walk to school. Even in the City she was surrounded by classmates. Neighbors and stroller brigades and shopkeepers lent a friendly eye, and paparazzi never hounded comedians and their offspring like the beautiful Hollywood stars.

But she was the one punished.

Chalke had her enemies. Unlike her comedic peers she went after the "unmoisturized supremacist turds" who voted in America's ruling party. Those "basement trolls who lived on Arby's meat, wiped their asses with corn husks and butcher paper, and couldn't find America on a globe"—as memorialized in one of her viral quips.

It'd happened in October. A neighborhood camera caught grainy images of her six-year-old walking by in her Big Bird scarf, then a crawling brown minivan with a doughnut wheel. Still, not even in the ramen shop would Chalke dare imagine the girl's last terrifying hours. Cries for mom and dad. Bound with duct-tape, maybe zip ties. Images would flicker and vanish and no thought found completion, not ever. But one day she'd go there, she owed her daughter at least that.

Anonymous hands delivered a plain bowl of noodles in steaming broth. This was the routine. She deserved no intimacy, no extras, because there were no second chances in circumstances like this. Three years after the abduction, all hope lost, she'd dyed her hair, packed a backpack, and ghosted her husband. Their home in Brooklyn, too, and all that she knew.

Chalke sat at the ramen bar and pondered her Tokyo apartment. She couldn't return there either, not that night.

#

Morning exercises took place in an interior courtyard within the *O Nīchan* complex where Chalke's section manager led her and two hundred co-workers through calisthenics. Her co-workers rolled their necks and stretched

their fingertips to the sky, patterning the exercises of grade-schoolers and geriatrics.

Chalke loved this time. Moving in unison with her section under the sharp commands of their manager, she could lose herself in group consciousness, blessed and safe in its anonymity. This day it was clutch. She'd spent the night in a capsule hotel, tossing and turning inside a sterile white cuboid, counting four hours of restless sleep. She couldn't fathom how her new countrymen routinely folded themselves up into such tiny places.

"Chalke-san!" Her section manager stood at her shoulder. She'd fallen out of sync with the group.

"It is important," he said, "to change one's clothes." His jaw was smooth alabaster, carved free of stubble. Of course he'd notice. But in his mouth lurked betrayals of a smile.

Chalke was an oddity at *O Nīchan*, almost a mascot. The company had pioneered digital surveillance, trading on software that detected and tracked shoplifters, but less than ten people in the corporation spoke English. Since America had become the biggest market for *O Nīchan's* products, native English speakers were tolerated.

"Hai!" Chalke said, saluting the manager.

She smiled too.

In its biopic, *The New York Times Magazine* described this gap-toothed smile as the "foundation of a pretty face—but a face with enough asymmetry to make her approachable." She'd rounded out her imperfections with humor and, under her manager's watch, Chalke let her forearm dangle from her elbow and, in robot dance moves, caught up with the team.

The manager looked away, fighting to keep his mouth straight, his eyes conspiratorially trained on a courtyard tree.

But something drew his gaze, made it refocus and tighten. It was a girl new to their section, stumbling in late, who Chalke knew as Toki. The Japanese girl shimmied between two others in the front row, occupying space meant to be empty, drawing micro-glances from neighbors.

The section manager issued the command for jumping jacks and Toki didn't even pretend to follow. She made a metronome of her hips and crossed them with straight arms, in front and then behind.

She was flossing.

Their manager dipped his head and inhaled, his nostrils flattening. For her part Chalke stifled a grin—until the girl put a chin over her shoulder and looked straight into Chalke and winked.

Was a wink truly a wink in Japan? Was it just a blink?

Chalke noticed then.

The girl's canary-yellow, Big Bird scarf.

A cold front descended through Chalke's intestinal lining, but there wasn't time for Q&A. A bell pealed through the courtyard's loudspeaker and

hundreds of employees broke rank, the courtyard instantly a maelstrom of black hair, Chalke adrift and without bearing.

#

The lunch bell sounded and Chalke stood. She shared a long desk with ten peers and her hip bumped the backs of their chairs as she cut for the cafeteria. There she locked down a seat near the door and surveilled the room.

Toki didn't eat lunch that day.

At the day's last bell Chalke stood by the company gates as employees washed into the street with their ashen faces and matching coats. Nothing, not a hint of the girl. But in the underground labyrinth of the Shinjuku metro stop, a familiar yellow scarf flashed between crisscrossing commuters.

Chalke followed her into the bath of neon on the street, the furred wool of the girl's jacket set aglow with electrified reds and yellows. Near the cinema with its life-sized Godzilla face peering over the rooftop the girl ducked into a toy store populated with manga figurines encased in glass. Chalke wondered, how old was the girl? Now forty-two, Chalke couldn't sort a teenager from a twenty-five-year-old. Young, she thought.

But old enough to stalk.

In the shadow of a doorway across the street, Chalke scanned her phone and tried to reverse-stalk her, but the digital footprint of Tokyo's citizenry was catalogued in Japanese characters and Kanji remained outside Chalke's wheelhouse. BitchHunt.net and its brethren showed no signs of the girl so Chalke took a breath and checked her husband's website.

Long after police sent their files to basement archives he'd continued the search. For him, their daughter was impossibly alive, and his webpage bustled with clues and theories he'd crowd-sourced from Samaritans. Theories about amnesia and lost tribes of children in the Adirondacks, all born from madness. This pained her but she knew enough to say nothing. She'd abandoned him, after all.

Twenty minutes later Toki reappeared, stepping into the street, an elderly shopkeeper scowling after her.

From there she walked slowly, letting crowds gather and pass, a stone in a stream. She seemed to be looking for someone, her head shifting as strangers passed, evaluating the sides of their faces, their clothes. In this way Chalke and the girl wandered through Shinjuku's alleys, past cages of munchkin kittens for sale, past cat cafes and owl cafes and tiny restaurants hazed with smoke from yakitori grills.

A few steps under the arch of the red Kabukichō gate a man in skinny white jeans stepped from a love hotel and walked deeper into the red-light district. The girl followed.

Maids and schoolgirls appeared on the streets, clad in latex, hair in pigtails, skin filmy with cosmetics. The storefronts were replete with English-

language posters warning of Tokyo's disaffected youth. "Beware, they accost," the posters informed her. Chalke gathered her purse under her arm and found herself looking through doorways, seeing little but embered lights, hearing little except the husky cackles of over-whiskeyed men, until she found she was nearly on Toki's heels.

She stopped and held her breath but Toki's focus lay on the man ahead of her. Then, with the weightless movement of a marionette, the girl swept her arm forward and plucked the man's wallet from his back pocket.

Chalke inhaled and the girl rounded on her.

"Why are you following me?" she said.

"I'm not."

Toki regarded her. She shook her head. "It doesn't matter."

"What?"

"It doesn't matter." The girl stepped forward.

She didn't reach five feet, and Chalke could smell the apricot shampoo from the part in her hair. "You speak English?"

"A farmer gets a horse," Toki said, and held up the stolen wallet. "But the horse runs away." She pushed the wallet into Chalke's hands. "Bad news?"

Ahead on the street there was a disruption in the foot traffic, the crowd parting for a police officer. The man in white jeans trailed behind. The Japanese criminal system, Chalke knew, was draconian, and her gaze ricocheted through the streetscape ferreting places to secrete the wallet.

The girl still looked at her. "The horse comes back home with a friend, so the farmer has two horses," she said, and took back the wallet.

The officer blew a whistle and the pedestrian world froze. Inspections began, the officer scrutinizing people on the street, trading mutters with the man who'd been robbed.

"The farmer gives the second horse away, to his son," the girl said, and slipped the wallet into Chalke's coat pocket. "The son rides it and falls and breaks his leg. Bad news?"

Bad news, thought Chalke, though she dared not move. The police officer was meters away. Her heart chattered.

"Good news or bad news, who can say?" Toki said. "The next week, the emperor's guards come and take all healthy young men to fight in the war. They all die, except the farmer's son. He is spared, and the farmer is happy." With that same airy movement she took back the wallet and moved it to her hip, then slipped it into the pocket of a man who stood next to them. He didn't notice, his eyes trained on the policeman.

"You seem very sad," Toki said. She'd never taken her eyes off Chalke.

Chalke blinked. "Why did you do that this morning?"

"What?"

"The dancing. Today, during exercises."

“To wake people up.”

Chalke parted her lips to speak but the girl held up a finger and pressed it to Chalke’s lips. The finger was slight, featherweight. “Shhh,” the girl said. “Shut your eyes.”

This Chalke did. Her body tingled, her feet untethered from earth, and with eyes closed she had the sense she was moving through galaxy. When she opened her eyes again Toki had disappeared and the Tokyo police officer was at her shoulder, arresting the stranger at her side, his pocket disgorged of the stolen wallet.

That night Chalke returned to her apartment buzzed on an epiphany that, with only a tweak in attitude, nothing had to matter. She slept the heavy sleep of a child, lost in the wonder of pleasant dreams.

#

She could find Toki nowhere at *O Nīchan* the next day—not at morning exercises, not in the cafeteria, not in the hallways between bells. She didn’t know where the girl sat, nor how long she’d been at the company, and when she asked co-workers about her they offered polite smiles. Nobody spoke English.

Something about that struck her. Chalke, obsessed as she’d been with group consciousness, didn’t know a single person. Shared meals? None. Gossip over matcha tea in the cafeteria? Never. Chalke really didn’t know what thoughts structured the days of her peers and, hugging her ribs, she wondered, was it possible she’d made the girl up? In the absence of a friend, had she invented one?

There was so much noise, too much noise. Chalke closed her eyes and pressed fingers into her ears. She looked inward for an oasis of good memory, a calm moment in spacetime where all was quiet. But she landed elsewhere. The San Francisco Punchline, years back. A heckler—a frat all-star with the shiny complexion of the obliterated, yammering about driving a bus through the gap in her teeth. Then his penis. On stage while pretending to manage emails on her iPhone, she fired up her video app, egged him into more dong-talk, and uploaded the video to Youtube. She’d ended him.

That part of her, dormant so long—it stirred.

At *O Nīchan*’s commissary she purchased surveillance cameras. For Toki, she chose a pair of glasses with a pinhole lens, wired into the frame. For the sake thief, she traded yen for a doorbell with motion-triggered video.

At the closing bell her section manager stood by her chair, his hip next to her shoulder. “Chalke-san,” he said. He fanned a stack of printouts by her elbow—advertising copy that’d passed through her hands, the grammar mistakes circled red. Missing apostrophes. Mis-conjugated verbs. “This is *not acceptable*,” he said.

Her memory of the day had no shape or color and tears began to germinate. “I’ll do better tomorrow.”

“Hai,” the manager said.

He turned to leave when she blurted, “The girl, Toki—she was absent today?”

The manager grimaced. “Focus on your work, Chalke-san.”

In the restroom she washed her face and looked into her own eyes. The manager—he hadn’t answered her question. “*Not acceptable*,” she mouthed, then set the new glasses on her nose and synced its camera with her phone.

Before she left she stopped at the manager’s door and bowed. “Kacho,” she said, “the girl Toki borrowed my scarf. Please tell me where I can reach her.”

The manager looked up over his computer monitors. His eyes had a wild, uncurated look, two spinning black dimes. It was night outside and Chalke saw herself reflected in the window glass, shoulders stooped. She inhaled and lengthened her spine.

Her manager spoke first. “Chalke-san,” he said, and what came next was unfathomable, a rush of Japanese words. She only knew their conversation was finished by the sudden drop of his chin.

But what had he said? Speeding along the elevated track between Shibuya and Harajuku, she awoke her iPhone and reviewed the footage from her eyeglass camera. Her Japanese was poor—she recognized nothing—but on the umpteenth viewing, when she’d stopped focusing on the sounds, something familiar stood out, reflected in the nighttime window behind his desk. She touched two fingers to the screen and spread them, zooming in on the reflected image of his computer monitor where she spied a photo of herself. It was one she knew well, from a *New York Post* article. In the aftermath of the kidnapping, the paper published a shot from her set at the Apollo two nights beforehand, her face frozen in mid-joke, exuberant at the punchline she was seconds away from delivering. *Last laugh*, read the headline.

Chalke didn’t dwell on this. In the windowed reflection of the section manager’s other computer monitor, a woman hung from ropes, bound and gagged.

#

The perversions of Japan were well-known, she told herself. She thought of the red-light district with its maid cafes and soapland brothels.

In her apartment she went straight for the sake bottle, and when she held it up to the light the warped meniscus of the rice wine hung an inch below her knife mark. Chalke set her jaw. It was him, she thought, her section manager. Of course management had access to company apartments.

It’d been cold outside, the first chilly autumn day, and the weather seemed to leak through the air vent above her head. She peered up into it, wondering what lay beyond the ceiling, what lay beyond the walls. These

interstitial places in the universe full of lost items, missing children, bogeymen—perhaps, too, *O Nīchan* cameras and microphones. Chalke pinched her forearm.

Get ahead of it, she told herself.

Before leaving she emptied her purse of the camera doorbell, the one she'd purchased from the commissary, and stripped away its packaging. The device came with double-sided tape and, in the hall, she pressed it to the wall, then downloaded an app to her phone and activated the device. A small red light blazed above the camera's glassy black eye.

In the ramen shop she thought about the girl Toki and her parable, about things not mattering. Bullshit, she thought, how could one ever stomach the terrible things of the world? That's why she'd given up comedy. Humor, she realized, had been an abdication of responsibility. An anesthetic. It let people laugh off the world's sicknesses, and the girl's *hakuna matata* worldview was a load of crap. But when she pictured Toki—her large eyes, the dusting of freckles across her nose—her heart slowed and the rest of the world fell away.

An alert chimed on Chalke's phone, triggered by the motion-sensor on the doorbell-camera.

"Shii!" hissed a woman seated next to her.

"Sore wa jūyōdesu," Chalke hissed back. *It's important.* She punched opened the app to see what stood in her hallway.

A man. Black hair, the bone structure of an undertaker. A long neck with a bulging Adam's apple. The hall light, so dim, had pushed the camera into night-vision mode and all was ghostly monochrome. The stranger looked through the peephole in her doorway, then backed away and bent down and peered into the fish-eye lens, his face warped by it. He was an ugly man, with waxy skin. Not her manager and not at all Japanese, but a Caucasian man in his late twenties with thin, greasy hair. An ill-fitting overcoat, acne on his forehead and, in this accumulation of detail, the synapses in Chalke's brain fired their warning: the profile of a child abductor. The profile of a basement-living man who drove a minivan with cloudy windows.

The stranger raised a finger and tapped on the lens. His Adam's apple twitched with a swallow, he didn't like what he saw. Backpedaling, he slipped something into his jacket and receded into the hallway.

The world spun on a different axis and Chalke clung to the anchor of the cellar ramen shop, its warm smells, its thick stone walls. Was this the man, she wondered, who'd taken so much from her? Sensations flooded in from that earlier part of her life when all was perfect. Pancakes, their smell. Miniature clothing, the purr of tiny zippers opening and closing. She thought of new skin, the scent of baby powder too. She thought of Toki, of the girl quietly huddled over the glass showcase in the toy store.

This girl, this savvy iconoclastic girl, she could help Chalke. She'd know what to do. But where to find her?

Chalke glanced at her watch.

It was possible, she thought.

#

The girl's elbows rested on a glass cabinet populated with gashapon Samurai warriors, her chin nearly touching the surface, her breath raising clouds in the shape of butterflies.

Chalke fidgeted. What if she weren't real?

"Misu?" Chalke asked the elderly shopkeeper. "Kanojo ni aemasu ka?" *Do you see her?*

The shopkeeper's skin was the texture of parchment, but her irises were oily, her corneas pink. They turned on Chalke. "Mazu dorobō, gaikoku hito mo?" she snarled.

Chalke backed away, not understanding, and looked to Toki for direction, but with the shopkeeper so occupied Toki looked up, pressed a smile into her mouth, and reached over the top of the glass case and plucked a figurine through the back. It disappeared into a fold in the butterfly scarf that swaddled her neck. Then the girl stood and walked over to Chalke, took her arm, and tugged her into the street.

"Don't bother with her," Toki said. "She's an old racist."

On the sidewalk Chalke shook her head, eyes shut. "What are you thinking? That's stealing!"

"Bah." The girl flicked her hand. "Come, we have plans," she said, and pulled Chalke into the tide of foot traffic. Chalke felt the girl's small hand enclosed over her forearm, electricity coursing between their skin. The girl smiled, her lips full.

They stumbled first into a hair salon where Chalke was seated and blindfolded with a cloth mask. The snips of barber shears whispered in her ear, reminding her of the crowd's susurrations after her night at the Apollo. When the blindfold was lifted she beheld an earlier version of herself, with short spiky hair.

Toki bunched her shoulders and clapped her hands together. "I love it!" she said.

So did Chalke. She put her palm to the tips of her hair, testing their bite.

North of the subway station, in the neon canyon of an intersection, they ducked into a Japanese comedy club. "No," Chalke said, tugging against the tow of Toki's grip, but the space inside was dark and quiet.

Toki chewed her lip. Two dozen couples murmured across long tables, fidgeting, leaning away from one another, and Chalke understood they'd blundered into a speed-dating event.

“It doesn’t matter,” Toki said, and strode to room’s center and began announcing something in Japanese. It was only when she gestured at Chalke did it resonate: the girl had just introduced her.

Chalke froze. She’d been careful, so careful, to preserve her anonymity. This was no time for recklessness. But tiptoeing through the shadows—where had that got her? Two dozen faces were tipped in her direction, relievedly broken from the strain of small talk. A room of smiles greeted her, a room of gratitude, begging for help, and a soft applause broke out and one of the speed daters approached Toki and whispered into her ear behind a cupped hand.

Toki turned. “They want you to tell a joke,” she said. “I will translate.”

Chalke was distantly aware her comedy specials had a small, cult following on Netflix Japan. Against her better judgment her lips began moving. “So there I was, stuffing pulled pork into an envelope, you know, as one does . . .”

She finished her bit on autopilot because she couldn’t stop watching Toki, who took her words and body gestures and reweave them into a Japanese version, almost like Chalke but with better posture. The hand gesticulations in particular fascinated Chalke—less range of motion but more precision.

The speed-daters covered their teeth when they laughed and, after Toki’s last Japanese echo of Chalke’s routine, the girl turned and said, “Have them hold hands,”

“What?” Chalke knew intimate contact was a no-no in public, especially among strangers. She also knew that holding hands couldn’t be spontaneous in Japan. It warranted negotiation and discussion and, at least for Chalke, explained why forty-two percent of the city’s adult population hadn’t had sex.

“Just tell them.”

“It won’t work.”

Toki pouted. “Please? They love you, they’ll do it.”

“I can’t just —”

But Toki turned to the group and spoke to them anyways, and Chalke could only detect the sound of her own name. The would-be Japanese couples braced themselves, their jaws working a phantom chew, but one-by-one each took the hand of a neighbor.

“Now let’s go,” Toki said.

The street was not as they’d left it. A parade had flash-flooded the streetscape, populated by youths in Pokémon onesies and fluorescent wigs of every color and length. Magentas, electric blues, lime greens. Makeup flecked with glitter, lips marked in ultraviolet. Somewhere on the street a marching band—horns, drums, and all—manufactured the bubble-gum melodies of

J-pop music and, under the disorientation of flashing lights, Toki and Chalke were accosted by youths and handed wigs and glowing necklaces.

There was no telling what was up nor what was down, but Chalke held the girl's hand and that was all that mattered.

#

She invited Toki into her ramen shop where they sat at the bar with their knees touching. Toki looked down at their legs and asked, "You like girls?"

Chalke shook her head. She studied a chicken pox scar by the girl's eye. She tried to blink away tears but they fell anyway and she mopped her cheek with her sleeve.

"What?" the girl asked.

"I lost my daughter."

Toki nodded, and reached out her hand. "You are aware."

Chalke pulled her arm away. "Me?"

"You understand, not like your compatriots. In America you believe in God, who is easy to betray. An idea, so far away. In Japan, you betray the people around you. It is much harder to answer to them."

Anonymous hands passed soup through the window at their elbows.

"Japan is about honor," Toki said. "What you did, if you were Japanese, was unforgivable."

Steam curled from Chalke's soup. She picked up her chopsticks with both hands and began to bend them. "How dare you," she said, raising a stare. But the girl's face was cast downward, her thick lashes pressed shut.

"It's not you, it's *them*."

"I don't understand."

"On your CNN news, there was a story about the men who stayed at Fukushima Daiichi. Those men fought to prevent the worst, even though they were being poisoned, even though they knew. Your news called them heroes. They are no such thing here. The plant failed under their watch, they are a national shame." A tear bled down her cheek. "What matters is what happens, only. Here. Many places."

"I don't . . ." Chalke started. She unbowed the chopsticks. She did understand, a bit. "Tell me . . . tell me what's wrong?"

"Everything. Love, mostly."

"Love?"

"I know no such thing. Not here."

"Your mom? Your dad?"

Toki shook her head. "Foreigners do not understand. Once you leave the household . . . a girl moves out, her brother marries, the new wife is loved instead. Family is whoever lives in the house, it is important you know."

"Whoever lives . . . do you live alone?"

The girl shook her head. "I live with many."

“You’re a squatter?”

She shook her head again. “My household is *O Nīchan*. Same as you.”

Chalke thought to protest but it died at her lips.

The company housing. Morning exercises. Transition bells, weekly food deliveries, corporate graves and family planning too. The company was their household, a strange parent, with strange intimacies. “It’s not right,” Chalke said.

Toki looked into her eyes. “No? Should not your family be those around you? You Americans, you see family only at holidays and funerals. You do not even like each other.”

Chalke poked her ramen with a chopstick. The sounds of the kitchen drifted from the small window, the muffled clanks of dishware, the unseen, interstitial room, its staff lost in their work, distracted from the great emptiness beyond it. Nothing, Chalke thought, that she’d thought about Japan was true. The entire world was broken, here too.

She placed her hand on the girl’s hand. “It’s time I go home,” she said.

When she stood the girl did too.

“Home to America?”

Chalke nodded, and wiped her face again with her sleeve.

They stood there, unsure where to look, where to put their hands. Chalke knew this was goodbye, and that what little remained of her heart was breaking. She told herself that whatever existed between them wasn’t healthy—the surrogacies, a touch of celebrity worship. But she wasn’t responsible for every sadness. She had her own to fix, and the place to start was at home.

She reached and hugged the girl tight, contact through the hips, the girl’s chin on her shoulder. “You’ll be okay,” she said. “I want you to know that.”

#

Chalke walked home through quiet streets. It’d been one of those nights anything could happen. Anything did happen.

She stopped and admired her new-old haircut in a glass storefront, surrounded by mirrored Kanji and red lighting. It hadn’t been necessary to annihilate herself, there had been good parts. She could bring joy to people, still, through laughter, and evolution had never meant starting over.

At her apartment building she waited in the foyer for the elevator under the buzz of aging lights when she heard a noise, a foot shuffle. From the dim cave of the mailroom a white man emerged into the wash of the fluorescent lights, his forehead and cheekbones a lifeless green. Tall and gangly, his Adam’s apple a knot in his neck.

Chalk couldn’t move. Her legs were hemmed in by sandbags, her voice held in her throat.

The man smelled of children's cough syrup. He reached inside his coat, fumbling with an inside pocket, and withdrew a set of folded papers and thrust them into her chest.

"Yael Chalke?" His voice was wet, chased by a deep cough.

She nodded.

"You've been served." He released the papers, which dropped to the floor, and loped out the door and into the night.

#

Divorce papers.

They informed her that on November 16 in the superior court of Kings County she was to respond to her husband's petition "about a marriage."

Three hours later, finally calm, Chalke turned this over. "A marriage," subsumed in two words, all their love, their loss. It hadn't been a marriage, not for a while, but maybe, just maybe, there was really no such thing as a marriage without a child.

Chalke knew what she had to do, which was to free him.

She lay still and closed her eyes. Tokyo was asleep, that sole moment of the witching hour when fourteen million souls idled, and if not for the utter quiet she wouldn't have heard the click of the front door. She strained to listen, the universe returning just the thrum of blood in her ears, but then susurrations, the whisper of footsteps against the bamboo floorboards, the creak of her foyer console, the prattle of something latched and unlatched.

Her belly drew inward. Her bag and knife sat in the other room so she stumbled into the bedroom door and locked it, then found her bedside phone and dialed 110. The dispatcher's voice sounded mechanical, faraway.

"Bad man," she said in that other language. "Help."

#

They opened closets, cabinets, even the shower curtain. The sergeant spoke with his team, then sat across from where she sat at the kitchen table.

"There is nothing, miss," he said. "No evidence of intrusion."

Her hand twisted up, like in school. "Chotto matte," she said. *Wait a minute.*

Her fingers punched up the app for her doorbell camera, and it was there—a notification of motion, just twenty minutes earlier. She held the phone away from her body and thumbed the "play" arrow.

A woman spirited the hall, backing toward the camera as though vigilant for followers. The feed was grainy and monochrome but the woman's hair was short and spiky, no mistake, and Chalke brought a palm to the back of her own head.

It was all she could absorb.

The police sergeant watched over her shoulder. He turned to his team. "Kanojodesu," he sighed. *It is her.*

Chalke touched her hips, feeling for a stranger, her mind flipping through mental playbooks for something to say, but all those years of improv gave her nothing for a moment like this.

#

She sat at the kitchen table alone. The evidence was overwhelming. Chalke wondered how many people, in the throes of a psychotic break, came to this decision point. To keep going, or to gather one's personal items and check into the nearest hospital.

Feeling distant from her skin, in third person, Chalke lifted her purse from the floor and stood. It was time to surrender. But the weight of the 15-centimeter *tantō* tugged at the bottom of her handbag, and something inside her hardened. Because for Chalke, surrender wasn't in her DNA. Not when she'd bombed, night after night, in those ramshackle comedy clubs, enduring boos and hecklers and second-hand smoke and making back just enough money for gas and a churro. It'd been insanity, always, to believe in herself and move forward.

Chalke walked to the front door and opened it, but she didn't leave. She counted to three, then shut the door and slipped into the foyer's tiny closet with her purse, then took out her knife. The tip of the Samurai blade tapered to a microscopic singularity and she tested its bite against her finger.

She didn't have to wait long.

The ceiling above the foyer cracked, seams of a square parting, and with the venting moved aside a creature unfolded itself, as though emerging from a chrysalis. It unfurled and alighted onto the console by the door. Chalke found she couldn't breathe, couldn't scream, but she willed herself to move, her joints unlocking, and she took her Samurai knife and pointed it forward and centered the tip between the shoulder blades of the creature that crouched on the sideboard.

The skin arrested her. Not the rough, pitted rind of the yuzu. It was flawless, poreless, milky, and dimpled by the point.

All Chalke had to do was push.

#

As dawn broke and Tokyo stirred itself awake, they laughed about how Chalke almost killed the girl.

"Before, in the hall video, you knew it was me?" Toki asked, her hair in a ponytail, the wig from the parade stretched over her knee. They sat on the couch, shoulder-to-shoulder.

"No," Chalke said. "How would I have guessed?"

The girl nodded. "This was my home, before," she said. "I stayed here for six months. Then my old section manager . . . let me explain."

Chalke placed her index finger to the girl's lips. What the girl had to say wasn't important, nor what lay in the space above their heads. A tatami

crammed amid the ductwork, a jug of water, a light for reading, an extra set of keys—she wasn't interested.

"It doesn't matter," she told the girl.

Toki rested her head on Chalke's shoulder. They sat that way for a time. "When you moved in," the girl said, "I knew it was you, right away."

"How?"

Toki smiled and touched the middle of Chalke's front teeth. "The gap. Nobody else has it," she said. "But you were always sad, you cried so much. I wanted to be near you, I wanted to touch you, breathe you, be enveloped in you. It was *amae*."

Chalke asked her what it meant but the girl couldn't translate. She looked over and studied the baby hairs along the edge of the girl's forehead. They both wore sleeveless shirts and where their shoulders touched, the warmth of Toki's body matched hers, and she could hardly tell where the girl's body ended and her own began.

Chalke scanned the embered windows in Nishi-Shinjuku, so many hundreds of them, each enveloping a person, each of those persons pretending in this first light that the world held only them. Their thoughts and desires unrecorded, wonderfully dead to history, the world no longer framed by definitions that Chalke understood.

She turned that word, *amae*, over in her mouth. "I want that too," she said, and slipped her arm behind the girl's head. She didn't know quite what it meant, but understood that it meant this, whatever this was. In any case, she'd have to learn many new words in precisely this way, if she meant to stay.

E.E. King (she/her) is a painter, performer, writer, and naturalist - She'll do anything that won't pay the bills, especially if it involves animals. Ray Bradbury called her stories, "marvelously inventive, wildly funny and deeply thought-provoking. I cannot recommend them highly enough." King has won numerous awards and fellowships for art, writing, and environmental research. She's been published widely, most recently in *Clarkesworld* and *On Spec*. Check out paintings, writing, musings, and books at www.elizabetheveking.com and amazon.com/author/eeeking.

Calla Lilies



40" x 40" Acrylic on Canvas

I love the way flowers dance- and I have done a series of cut flowers inside. I like the contrast of the straight lines of buildings. Especially of the night outside - while we live in our artificial daylight complete with captive flowers inside.



Jay and Turkey III

Acrylic on Canvas

36" x 24"

*I did these paintings of Jay and his pet parrot Turkey in Guerneville,
California, where the pair lived.*



Jay and Turkey I

Acrylic on Canvas

36" x 24"

The communication and love between them was palpable.

Julie Allyn Johnson adores cool, crisp fall afternoons, meandering walks in sun-dappled woods, riding bikes on tree-lined trails, gravel-travel photography, crochet, reading, collage, hiking and poetry. She began writing poems post-retirement in 2017 when inspiration kept her awake all night. Her work has been (or will soon be) published in Lyrical Iowa, Persephone's Daughters, Typishly, The Esthetic Apostle, Chestnut Review, SPLASH!, The Loch Raven Review, Better Than Starbucks, Phantom Kangaroo, Coffin Bell and The Briar Cliff Review.

Twila

Julie Allyn Johnson

I.

Your bedroom window faces east.
I'm not used to an intrusive sun
so early in the day
but Saturday mornings mean cartoons:
Daffy Duck, Johnny Quest, Scooby Doo.

Your mother has a boy's name.
So does mine.
Al, meet Mike.
Mike, Al.

Our fathers' inebriation
at the Daddy / Daughter Tea
stands in stark contrast with the other
Brownie paternals who gaze
adoringly at their eight-year-old dates.

II.

It's the spring of my 22nd year.
Your father, still a fan of fiery libations —

his Al given over to early dementia —

presents himself at my door at 2 AM
hoping to partake in horizontal refreshment.

This is no Girl Scout HQ.
I'm not handing out shortbreads or thin mints

or any other kind of sugar.

No sash-badges
for charity.

Or community service, come to think of it.

Brittany Smith (she/her) is a sci-fi/fantasy and young adult author based in Virginia. A graduate of the University of New Hampshire's Creative Writing MFA program, Brittany's work is influenced by story-driven video games, action-packed anime, ancient civilizations, the tragic tale of the Library of Alexandria and her strong desire to experience space travel within her lifetime. Her work has appeared in the Bangalore Review, Penny-Shorts magazine, and FIYAH magazine. To learn more about her experiences as a writer, follow her on her personal blog, mylifeisbooked.blog.

With Love, From Waystation 4

Brittany J. Smith

I make my home in the arcade.

My living room is a row of salvaged coin-slot arcade games, their flashing lights and 8-bit title screen melodies welcoming me every time I enter. The centerpiece and the game that always captures my attention is the vintage Galaga machine. The mural painted on the side panel is what first caught my eye, the sole alien ship with a body dipped in oranges, purples, reds, and a silver that imitates a chrome finish and bright red eyes in the center that reminds me of a spider skittering across a pond of thin lines of stars stretched to their limits from the velocity of the ship. The ship is chasing an unseen target off the mural. Though I've never reached the final series of levels, I believe this ship is the remaining foe that sits between my vessel and the unexplored, open space. What lies beyond is frightening, yet it digs at my curiosity, a scab that I constantly feel the need to pick.

There are other amenities to the arcade, my home. My kitchen is the slop counter in the far back corner of the station's lowest bay, where Tony plates warm food and serves frosty drinks to me when I need to rest my hands or take the weight off my legs. My bathroom is, well, the actual bathroom that's down a narrow hallway, the entrance tucked away in another corner.

I would sleep here if I could. Management frowns at the idea. I've asked. At least three times this past week.

It's okay, though. It's hard to sleep over the loud music that plays from the overhead speakers or the squeals of the skaters as they race to the restroom or grab a bite of food. And no matter how tightly I shut my eyes, I can see the light from the kaleidoscopic disco ball as it sweeps an arching rainbow over the walls and along the floor. All of the conflicting sensations usually leave me with a mild headache. But I ignore the pain by swallowing cupful after cupful of sodas and milkshakes until my entire body is buzzing from the waves of sugar pumping through my veins.

I haven't visited Tony's counter tonight yet. I'll need a break soon. But for now, I focus on the glossy screen that casts a faint blue glow on my face, my black eyes following the alien ships as they sail in from the corners like synchronized swimmers at a show. I've been here for the past hour, fighting through waves of ships with my lone vessel sweeping left and right at the bottom. My name, *Marianne*, currently sits at the sixth spot when the top scores scroll up. It once sat at number one, but when I spent time helping my family pack our quarters, someone managed to knock me down several spaces. Now I have just tonight and tomorrow to climb back to the top.

I'm distantly aware of the DJ on their raised platform, bathed in light from their multiple monitors, pressing their mouth close to their microphone and announcing it's time to 'ramp things up.' Their announcement is met with a rising chorus of cheers and I'm hit with a fleeting coolness on all sides as other kids race to the central track as a new upbeat song filters through the speakers. The song is familiar, something from my grandparents' or great-grandparents' era when Earth was mostly habitable, but on the edge of a dangerous precipice that most chose to ignore. Though I don't know the lyrics, I bounce along anyway. The best way to play Galaga is with my whole body, jerking to the side in time with the ship, twisting my mouth to make the high pitched *pew pew* sounds as I fire missiles at the descending alien ships, mumbling the 'New Game' melody just before a round. I immerse myself so deeply in the game I feel like I'm in the cockpit, commanding the vessel and my life beyond.

And because I'm so focused on this new level, I don't notice someone skating up to my side. When the song reaches its first chorus and I try to sing along, a second voice joins me to my left.

The machine teeters as I jump back and cover my racing heart with my flat palm. I search for the owner of the rogue voice that's more in tune with the singer than whatever strangled noise that comes from me.

"Nice moves."

The girl grinning at me is familiar. We're close in age and I've spotted her in the halls of the education sector, though we're in separate classes. While I usually look at the skating rink with a purposeful disinterest and a quiet nervousness, I've spotted her out there multiple times. A regular who comes nearly every weekend, she's lithe and graceful, swimming through the crowds with a warm smile and a quick rise of her brows whenever she encounters someone she knows.

My heart starts to slow, but the longer I stare, the more it beats irregularly and the spot under my palm grows damp from sweat. The girl's dark brown eyes flick from me to the screen and her mouth dissolves from a wide smile to a frown. "Aw your ship was destroyed."

I turn back and watch as the last alien ship flies away, it's bright blue wings fluttering almost as if in gloating while my white and red ship crumbles to dust. "Dammit."

She stands at my shoulder, confident on her skates. I glance down at them from the corner of my eye, amazed she doesn't wobble or reach for the nearest steady object to keep from falling. Her black hair is in three large braids that probably reach down past her shoulders, but tonight she keeps them tied in a loose bun. "Sorry. I think it's my fault," she says with a small smile. Inhaling, I catch hints of sweat and see the barest hint of a sheen of it on her dark brown skin. But over the sweat, I smell something sweet and inviting like warm summer air.

"It's fine," I say, my voice dry and scratchy. What's one more chance at starting over?

"Just I saw you singing and dancing," she continues. "You were into it. I couldn't help joining." She bends her arms at the elbow, sways side to side while shaking her shoulders. It's offbeat, but kind of cute and I laugh which she joins in as her arms fall back to her side.

"Thanks, though I think you were rescuing me," I admit. I clear my throat. "My voice is terrible."

"I didn't think so." Her hand rests near the bright red 'Fire' button, while my own hand is wrapped loosely around the sole joystick. The song switches then to another upbeat tune that rushes in as if the recording manager let the violins play for a few minutes before pressing the 'record' button. A woman begins to sing, with a man echoing her words as they both plead for the other to stay. Excitement builds within the girl, her shoulders rising up to her ears and her face breaks out in a wide grin to match the shine in her brown eyes. "I love this song! Do you want to . . ." She glances down at my feet, at the worn sneakers I tap against the carpet.

She's leaning away towards the makeshift rink that calls everyone back to its surface. Except for me. I clear my throat again and twist back to the machine, though I feel her hovering. The silence that follows her unfinished question is a bridge between us, but my feet are leaden weights pressing into the ground, preventing me from taking her hand that twitches at her waist. So I feed another coin into the Galaga machine and over my shoulder, I say, "Well, enjoy your spin."

"Yeah. Catch you later."

She skates away and I try to focus on the game, mentally preparing myself to tackle this challenge one more time. If I look behind me, I'm sure I'll lock eyes with her. And indeed when I turn, just to see if I'm alone again, I spot her near one of the ramps leading to the rink. Her smile is a simple stretch of her lips and she waves before joining the other skaters while the singing duo belts out their truth in the first run of the chorus. I turn back to

Galaga, my heart thudding in my chest as the first alien ship flies to the middle of the screen.

#

The number five spot is within range just as a rogue ship pelts my ship with a volley of fire and the red 'Game Over' screen flashes. Rubbing my eyes, I push back from the game and head to the food counter, planting myself on one of the barstools. Twisting from side to side, I watch Tony work. When he feels my stare, he glances up, grinning and tosses a dingy towel over his shoulder.

"Marianne! How's it going tonight?"

"Terrible."

"Where are you on the ranking?"

"Still at sixth."

"Well, a quick snack will pick you up. What're we snacking on tonight?"

People call him "Gentle" Tony for the way he uses care when plating food and setting it in front of you. But I think he's gentle in the way he pulls information from you, always attentive and casual in a conversation like we're all old friends catching up after being off station for a time. I knew my family would live here for a short period and I worked hard to keep some space between Tony and I. But he found a way in and without warning, I warmed to him and looked forward to nights when we could talk without major interruption. Outside of my family, Tony is one of the few people I regularly talk to. He's probably my closest friend.

"Are the fries hot?" I ask.

"They can be in a minute. You want a burger too?"

"Yes please!"

He pours a glass of soda and sets it in front of me with a sad smile. "I'm out of milk though, so no shakes tonight. But a shipment is coming in next week, so you'll get one next weekend."

"Next Saturday is the 20th," I say, glancing away.

"Ah right. Damn. Sorry." Tony props his elbows on the counter and leans forward. "Have you finished packing?"

I shrug and take a sip of my drink.

This station, Waystation #4, orbits, from a safe distance, a sole star in a planetary system filled with potentially habitable exoplanets. The station is a slingshot, a temporary base for many families before they transfer to one of the many small planetside camps that are in development. And after tomorrow, my family will be shot across the system to an icy planet that's just been cleared for scientists and researchers to study. It's meant to be a permanent assignment. Though Dad skirted around a definitive answer, even after I pressed him with a shaky voice and wet eyes. The frozen planet is called Tulus-4 and is home to large lakes that are frozen for most of the year, a

network of caverns and caves that shimmer from layers of ice on the walls and flat plainlands that are hidden under packs of snow. It's the perfect place for Santa to relocate his workshop if he wishes to.

"You can come for visits, right?" Tony asks. I watch as he lowers a cradle of crinkle cut fries into a vat of bubbling oil, which sizzles from the flecks of ice on the fries.

"I guess," I say, biting back the follow up '*But what's waiting here for me?*' There's Tony. But to him I'm no more than one of the many, many teens who cram into this lowest bay every weekend evening. I won't stand out in his memories other than as a fond whisper of past laughter shared over burgers and shakes. There are kids in my class, but I can't think of one who would want to continue our friendship when I'm on Tulus-4c eating soup or stew every night to fight off the cold. I have no reason to return to Waystation #4. Unless I fail to grab the number one spot on Galaga. "I'll have to save money. And by then, my parents will want me to go to a university or college."

"But things open up after that," Tony says with that easy smile. "No telling where you'll go after. Or who you'll meet."

"Is it really that easy?"

"Nope," he answers. "Doesn't make it any less fun though. Promise."

Tony doesn't force any conversation after that which I appreciate. He focuses on his craft, his slim fingers pressing the spatula's handle into his palm as he flips the patties. He turns to the fries, lifting them from the grease and shaking the excess from the basket. I continue sipping on my soda, turning his words over in my mind as if they're a puzzle to solve.

When I think about my future, the word 'permanent' is never attached to anything. I've always lived in a space of temporariness. From leaving Earth as a freshly born baby, to making a home on exoplanets' stations while Dad and a team of scientists survey and study the land. Within a year or two, we're forced to pack our provisions and make for another temporary station, quietly anticipating his next assignment. What began as one or two missions to newly discovered, potentially habitable planets for soil analysis and humanity viability surveys, quickly turned into a life of slowly touring this constantly expanding galactic system.

I think it's why I'm attached to Galaga. I'm familiar with squeezing myself into a shuttle and watching in awe as the stars pass by. But the game offers a control I've never experienced before, a freedom to fight my own battles and sail away to the next adventure.

But even that sense of control is fleeting.

"Here you go," Tony says, setting the food in front of me. I inhale and my mouth waters at the salt and grease that rises with the steam off the fries and burger.

"Yum! Looks good!" I jump, the girl's presence throwing me off again. Like last time, my heart races in my chest. She's there at my elbow,

peering over my shoulder at my food. Her breath warms my neck and cheek. Or maybe I'm flushing. "How much for some fries?"

"We can share," I blurt out, the words flowing as if they were perched on my tongue and ready to spring free at the first opportunity. There's a long pause as both Tony and the girl process what I said. I'm shocked too and begin to backpedal. "If that's okay. I, uh, just thought . . ."

"That's really sweet of you," she says, taking the seat next to me. The wheels on her skate continue to spin as if gliding along an invisible track. I wait for it, but the 'but' never arrives and with a sole finger I push the plate between us.

"We can share the burger too," I say slowly. "If you want."

Tony quietly slips back to his griddle and I'm left alone with this girl who is incapable of not smiling.

Tony cut the burger earlier, a neat slice down the middle. She takes one of the halves and bites into it, chewing slowly and nodding with approval. I try not to stare, but nothing seems as interesting as her.

"I'm Rhea," she says, speaking around the food in her mouth. She makes it look charming.

"Marianne."

"Do people call you Mari?"

"Uh . . ."

"Can I call you Mari?"

"S-Sure."

"Sweet." Like her smile, I think. Rhea talks through the meal, pausing to ask me questions. Her voice is soothing, like the *pitter-patter-plop* of rain on a windowpane during a drizzle. Her mother works for sanitation, her father is an elementary school teacher. I tell her that Dad's a planetary scientist, while Mom is a software engineer. Not wanting to spoil the mood, I don't tell her about our upcoming departure.

"How come I never see you out there?" Rhea's chin rests in her palm, her body twisted in the direction of the rink, before she looks at me.

"I don't know," I say, shrugging. There's one last fry on the plate and I offer it to her. "Not my thing."

"Oh." She looks at her lap. I chew the inside of my cheek and wipe my palms on my jeans. Rhea looks up again with a shy smile that's a slight upward tug of the corner of her mouth. "Have you tried it?"

I almost feel guilty for sticking to the arcade every night when I'm hit with the full shine in Rhea's eyes. "I don't have anyone to go with."

"I'm here."

Those two simple words feel like the completion of her question from earlier. And like last time, I'm flooded with adrenaline and anticipation, but I have nowhere to place it. Nothing that can steal my attention. Nothing that

calls to me. There's just Rhea, the rink behind her and the bridge between us. I don't think I can cross it. Not when I'm destined to leave.

"I can't," I say, sliding off my stool. I glance to the arcade, to the Galaga machine that's a necessary comfort right now. "There's something I need to do."

Skaters rush to the counter now, squeezing in around Rhea and I. It feels like being boxed in. Rhea's bottom lip wobbles and she extends a hand, the bridge still strong and cemented. But there's a bend to her elbow, a hesitation on her part that feels like a rejection or a resignation.

"Thanks for sitting with me," I whisper. My eyes burn and my throat feels as if it's closing around a thick boulder that refuses to budge. Rhea starts to say something, but I'm gone, pushed back by the first wave of sweaty bodies that hit Tony's counter.

#

I exhale and lean against the machine, but I can see the flashing "Game Over" screen. I'm no closer to number one than when I first started tonight. My focus is shot. And my heart's not in it anymore. It's hard to make out the screen through the blur that warps my vision. The music that once motivated me and was lively, has died away to a dull buzzing in my ears. Every time I glanced over my shoulder, searching for Rhea, my ship was captured or destroyed under a volley of missiles. I accept the sacrifices. Without them I wouldn't be able to spot Rhea weave through the crowd, smiling and dancing, unbothered by the failure of our earlier conversations. Our eyes never meet. I don't feel her searching for me like I search for her. We exist in separate orbits, the bridge between us no longer there to cross.

Every time I see Rhea I wonder what it would be like to skate alongside her. It looks like skating is similar to playing Galaga. It requires precision and quick reflexes, practiced, careful maneuvering to avoid falling or getting hit. And the music is there to keep people in a good mood, to encourage them to try something new or different. Maybe skate a bit faster than usual or flex their skills by showcasing a challenging move.

It's not that I never considered renting a pair of skates before. But the thought of trying to keep up with the crowd terrifies me. If I fall or go too slow, I'm afraid people will point and laugh. I'd rather be unremarkable than feel that biting humiliation.

I have a few coins left to spend, but I call it quits and wipe my eyes as the ranking list scrolls to the top one final time.

Rhea is on the far side of the rink when I make my exit. The kaleidoscopic light passes over her. Blue, green, orange and then a warm, bright yellow. She's like a star going through the cycle of life. She skirts in and out of others' personal orbits without disrupting them. But from where I stand, I feel her pull, a magnetism that chips away at my fear. I stand and

watch her for a second longer, wanting nothing more than for our eyes to lock and for that bridge to unfurl at my feet again.

When I finally turn away, I write off the feel of eyes on my back as wishful thinking and leave for the night.

#

Mom looks up from the metal storage crate when I enter. She brushes a lock of dark hair out of her face and says, “Did you reach first place?” She follows with her eyes as I hop and skip between crates and stacks of books to an empty space in the living room. The movers arrive early in the morning and for the first time, the realization of what’s coming hits me almost square in my chest. Distracted by this sudden heaviness, I miss a crate lid that’s on the floor. My foot catches on the side of it and I fall hard, face first, kissing the panels below. Mom shoots up to help but fails to reach me in time. I lay on my side and curl into myself.

“I don’t want to go,” I say, choking on the words that have been branded on my tongue since Dad first announced his new assignment.

Mom pauses with her hand outstretched, her mouth falling open and her brows rising to meet her thick curly hair. I push up into a seated position, cross my legs at the ankles and press my elbows into my knees. Mom settles next to me and my head falls to her shoulder. Tears fall down my face and I’m torn between wanting to hide them and turning so she can see them.

“When were you going to say something?” Mom asks, her voice only slightly above a whisper. She wraps an arm around me, jostling my shoulder in an attempt to make me smile.

“Never,” I admit. It’s not that I don’t want to leave the station. It’s that I’m tired of this cycle. We can’t avoid what’s coming. There’s no way to break it. I didn’t see the point in voicing my fears. The temporary relief of being heard would be swallowed by the grief of leaving once again for a place that will be home for a year or two.

“You don’t have to do that,” Mom says. “Bottles eventually burst when you add too much pressure. It leaves such a mess. And you *hate* cleaning.”

She chuckles, which I join in. I do hate cleaning. It was a family effort organizing my things in preparation for the move. Part of my mess was my usual disdain for organization.

But part of it was my frustration at leaving. Again. Knowing I’d endure two or three more spins of this cycle before I go off to college. If I didn’t pack, then the move couldn’t happen.

Or so I thought.

“We’ll come for visits,” Mom says wistfully, already imagining the gatherings with her friends that she’s leaving behind.

“It won’t be the same.”

“It’ll never be the same. But it’ll still be *here*, which is important.”

But will everything still be here or are there things that will only live in my memory? What's important now? I picture Tony. How would he change when I'm gone? Would we still be able to joke and talk at his counter? And then there's Rhea. Who is owed a massive apology. Will she be here in two years? Or in two weeks? Nearly everyone has their time in the station's slingshot seat, the trajectory of their future pinned to a new planet and a new home. Rhea approached me tonight and I rejected her twice because my time is ending and I can't get attached when my future is murky.

I wish I had met her earlier.

Mom flicks my nose and jostles my shoulders again. "Get some rest. We have work to do in the morning."

There's a mountain of work ahead of me. Can I climb to the other side by the end of tomorrow?

"Can I go to the arcade tomorrow night?"

Mom nods. "Just don't stay out too late."

She helps me to my feet and with a gentle push, sends me off to my room. I climb the stairs one step at a time, instead of my usual two, in a final attempt to slow things down, to push back against the move. The lights flicker on when I cross the threshold into my room and I sigh at the storage crates that loom in the corners. There's a narrow pathway from my door to my bed, with crates bordering the two sides and I walk, heel to toe, until I can flop on the mattress.

The weight of tomorrow sits on my chest. I hear the sharp violins and a duo singing their love to the other. The rink comes into view when I close my eyes and there's Rhea with arms raised in the air, feet smoothly gliding along the floor like she commands the world to move around her. I smell grease and salt, hear the *clangs* and *swish* as Tony showcases his culinary skills. Like a living journal, my jacket carries the scents of warm burgers, scalding fries and the memories of slow, easy smiles from moments gone by.

#

The rink's doors stay open to everyone who wants a quick spin around the track or who wants to lose themselves to the flow of music and the laughter of others. But the makeup of the daytime skaters and the nighttime skaters are as different as the opposite sides of a coin spinning in the air.

A cluster of small kids kick their feet hard against the floor, picking up speed as they near a corner. Collectively, they lower into a squat and take the curve with such velocity that, like missiles, they're shot down the track's side. Their parents yell and color rises in some of their faces as they stare with wide eyes. All of the kids, save for one, make the fast turn with no incident. And the one outlier teeters, their arms flailing as they fight, successfully, to stay upright.

I watch for a few minutes and imagine myself out there with the other skaters. Maybe I can partner with one of the seniors. Grip their liver spotted hands for support so I don't become a fallen casualty.

"Marianne? You're here early."

Tony arches an eyebrow as he slips out of his coat and drapes it over his arm.

"I thought I'd get an early start on reaching the top," I say.

"Last day jitters, huh?" His smile is nice, warm and genuine. Like he's inviting me to sit and rest for a while.

"I guess." I shrug and fight the urge to dig my foot into the paneling. It's lost its luster and covered in skid marks from skaters exploring the lower bay. "I'll miss you Tony," I say because it's true and feels like the right time to say it.

He squeezes my shoulder. "You're not gone yet," he says. "Make it count until the last second."

We split off to our different sections of the bay. When I stand in front of Galaga, I look back at the entrance once, nod to myself and start a new game.

#

When I sense Rhea skating close to me, a small jolt runs down my spine and my ship is captured in a halo of blue light that's emitted by a green alien ship. I accept the loss, ignore the ranking, and turn, searching for her. She weaves through the other arcade games, circling around a small perimeter as she tries to determine if it's worth approaching. My focus has been shot since I first started playing and I've sunk credit after credit into the machine, chasing away that flashing 'Game Over' message.

Rhea slipped in about an hour earlier, rented a pair of skates and immediately took to the rink. I considered approaching her and apologizing. But I couldn't find the right words. Or she was too far away. Or I clung to another excuse to ease my anxiety.

The night was closing in and we had yet to speak. I want to say something to her, yet I can't see past the potential rejection.

I think about what Tony said, about making every second count. And about Mom and bottles with too much pressure. How messy the cleanup is. And I think about the station, about this arcade where I first met Rhea while dancing and singing along to a song we both enjoyed. I think about how this rink will always be here, how I can return to it. And maybe Rhea will be here as well. Or maybe this is my one last chance with her.

I've started over so many times.

What's one more time?

Rhea skates through a small pathway between the racing games and a row of skee-ball machines. She purposely slows when she's close and I raise a hand to wave. She stops, her weight placed on her front leg, her mouth in a

perfect, thin line as she stares. My hand falls to my side, my insides twisting uncomfortably as she waits a beat before approaching. She leans to the side, catches a glimpse of the title screen as the machine waits for another serving of credits.

“How’s it going tonight?” she asks, straightening up.

“Not great,” I admit with a slight wince. My tongue wants to stick to the roof of my mouth. I look into her eyes, mesmerized by the deep browns that stretch into the black of her pupils. She keeps one foot behind her, ready to bolt at the first hint of my uncertainty.

But I still feel that bridge between us, a connection that I can easily cross. And I decide to take the first step towards her.

“D-do you want to watch? Or play?”

When she smiles, I exhale and we both chuckle. She stands so close that our hips touch. When I scoot to make room, she hip checks me, smiling, and presses closer. Rhea takes control of the joystick and starts a new game. I stare at her. Under her hand, the pixelated white and red ship zips across the bottom of the screen, destroying the alien ships as they swoop down or try to fly back to their formation. Her thick brows scrunch together and her mouth is pursed into a thin line as she concentrates. There’s a dark mole on her cheek and her nose wrinkles when she narrowly misses a missile. She survives the first round and grins victoriously at me. I blink, my heart jumping in my chest.

“Your turn.” She pinches my sleeve and pulls until I’m at the controls. We take turns, bouncing to the side when one level ends so the other can navigate the ship and clear the level. Working together, we reach a level I’ve never encountered before, our score so high we’re firmly in the third place. For the first time, the top spot is attainable. I wonder if we could merge our names together to signify our win? Should I let her name rest at the top, while I embrace the memories that will come out of tonight? Or—

“Crap.” Rhea stands back, arms crossed tightly over her chest and watches with a frown as a blue ship captures our vessel, ending the level and game. “Sorry. We were doing so well.”

“It’s fine,” I say shrugging. I’m low on money, but refuse to spend hers. “Do you want to grab something to eat?”

The corner of her mouth draws up in that shy smile and she nods, extending a hand which I’m quick to take.

#

“What’s it like out there?” I ask. Rhea pauses with a fry close to her lips and glances down at her skates. When we reached the counter, we ordered a basket of fries, two burgers and two sodas. Galaga no longer calls me. I’ll miss it when I’m gone and I’m flirting with the idea of asking Management for it.

But with a few hours left, should I really spend it arched over a machine, gripping a joystick and smashing my fingers on the bright red “Fire”

button? What good is it having my name etched at the top, when someone can easily remove it with luck, better reflexes and time I'll never have? I love that game, but it's not how I want to spend my remaining time on the station.

Rhea chews on her fry, staring off as she contemplates her response. "It's freeing," she says. She has a nice voice. If it were a planet, I imagine it would be brimming with vegetation and curious, gentle fauna that lap from deep oceans and graze at pastures that kiss the horizon. "There are tight corners in the station. I feel like I'm always squeezing into myself when I walk the halls. Like I can't take up too much space. But out there, I can move how I want. I don't have to squeeze so tightly for these few laps."

There is a tightness to the station. It's economical. Press as many people inside without overwhelming the station or its resources. We're all squished into this revolving door spinning round and round until it's time to leave. I'd love to freely stretch my arms and legs, to have complete command over my movements, to feel a gust against my face that I greet with a smile.

"Can you teach me?" I ask slowly.

"What?"

I chew the inside of my cheek, my palms sweating as I dodge the questions that fire off in my mind, one after another like bullets from a ship. "Can you teach me?"

Rhea takes my wrist and pulls, not too hard, until my stool spins and we're facing each other. The questions that rose like waves and crashed in my mind, still and go quiet. Rhea's grins and nods, before pulling me off my seat and we're both racing to the skate rental counter. I don't regret my choice. Not when she's looking at me like she is. Not when my stomach clenches in a way that's not wholly unpleasant. Countless people have played that Galaga machine. How many have experienced the bright, hopeful smile that Rhea shoots in my direction?

At the rental counter, Rhea makes small talk with the person behind the counter, pausing long enough to ask my shoe size. Glancing down at our hands, I wonder when we laced our fingers together.

"Don't laugh if I fall," I say. She sweeps side to side, a bundle of energy waiting to explode, as I sit on a bench and tighten the laces. When I'm finished, she's in front of me, holding out both hands to pull me up.

"I got you," she says. "You won't fall."

We skate a path on the carpet as she helps me find my balance and grow accustomed to rolling forward. I'm not really skating. Just being dragged by Rhea while my knees threaten to knock together. She corrects me every time I lean too far forward or when I rock back.

"We can stay here, you know?" When we reach the far wall, she brings my hand to it and turns so we can skate the path again.

"No," I say. "I want to go out there."

Rhea looks at me over our joined hands. “You sure?” When I nod, she smiles and squeezes our hands. “Let me test something. Brace yourself.”

She pauses, giving me time to realize what she’s going to do. Her grip loosens and for a few seconds, I’m balancing on my own with no help. I chance a step forward and when I don’t fall, I push forward again, closer and closer to Rhea. I understand why she likes this so much. I stand taller and feel as if I’m walking on clouds. It is freeing and for the first time I’m able to move how I want. Spin and turn and dance and . . .

“Whoa!” She leans forward and catches my hands again, creating that bridge between us, steadying me before I face plant or fall on my backside. We laugh. “I told you I got you.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t worry,” she says. “You go down, I’ll go down with you. Then we’ll get up.”

“Simple.”

Rhea sways with the music as she pulls us to the rink’s edge. She checks the traffic, before stepping down and waits for me. The step down is a few inches, like stepping off the curb. My stomach clenches again and I forget everything from our lesson. How to stop. How to slow down. How to balance. It’s like every siren in my mind has awakened with a shrill whistle. It’s a cacophonous orchestra that I’m forced to sit through.

I look at Rhea. At the curve of her smile and the crinkle around the edges of her eyes. I hear her ringing laughter. And I take a deep breath. There’s no “New Game” or “Continue” menu that leads to another chance with Rhea. There’s only tonight.

“It’s okay if I keep a death grip on your hand, right?” I ask.

“I think I’m the one with the death grip.”

I exhale and step down.

“See?” Rhea asks, still smiling. “Simple.”

#

I don’t fall. Rhea doesn’t let me. And I work really, really, *really* hard not to embarrass myself. I teeter and wobble. But a firm hand on my spine or an arm around my waist is all I need to correct myself. Everyone zips around us, leaving cool wind that dries the sweat on my skin. I find a comfortable pace somewhere around our third lap. My ankles hurt, which is something I’m not prepared for. But the pain is a mild annoyance and easily forgotten when Rhea turns to skate backwards.

“That has to be dangerous,” I say.

“I know what I’m doing.” She throws her arms around my shoulders, locking them at the wrists. I hold her waist because I need something to keep my balance. It’s then that I realize I’m a few inches taller than Rhea.

“Am I leading or following?”

“I think I’m leading,” she says. “You’re following.”

From the corner of my eye, I see a group of teens gather in the center, spinning and performing a routine that I'm certain shouldn't be possible on or off skates. "Do you have any secret moves?" I ask.

Rhea leans closer as we pass under the speakers. "I have some," she says, shrugging. "I'll show you later."

That last word pricks our small bubble and I try not to visibly crumble. Later. Right. "I-I'm actually leaving. Tonight's my last night."
"Oh."

I squeeze her sides. "I'm sorry. My dad was given an assignment off station. But I'm glad we met," I say in a rush. "And I'm glad you brought me out here. I wish I'd done it sooner. Though it wouldn't be the same without you holding my hand. I liked that. A lot, actually."

Rhea says nothing. She unwraps her arms from my neck, takes my hand and pulls us up an incline. I hold in a sigh when she helps me down onto a bench and settles next to me with our clasped hands between us.

"I like this part too." She squeezes my hand.

"I'm sorry I'm leaving."

She cups my cheek with her free hand and our eyes lock together. A silent question passes between us. And I smile just before she leans over and kisses me.

When she pulls away and I open my eyes again, Rhea is fidgeting and suddenly rises. "You should hydrate after skating." She pushes off to the food counter, leaving me with a hammering heart and a smile that I can't hide.

When she comes back, I'll tell her I liked that part too.

I liked it a lot.

#

Rhea walks me home. We skated a few more laps together, but there was no denying that the end is at the threshold. I'm happy we made the decision to leave, instead of letting our final second catch us off guard.

I wish I can say *I had a great time. I can't wait to do it tomorrow. Here's my info so you can message me when you want. Can we kiss again?*

I think there's a "tomorrow" for us, though it won't arrive as soon as I'd like.

We hold hands for the short walk from the rink to the lift, during the ascent up to the personal quarters and for the walk from the lift to my place. Outside the door, I stoop to kiss her. Not for the final time.

We do swap info and I promise to call her as soon as I can.

"I wish I approached you sooner," she whispers. Her thumb skates circles in my palm. "I spent nights trying to find what to say to you. And the one night I act courageously, you're slated to leave."

"I'll come back. We still have to reach number one on Galaga."

"And I have skating tricks to show you. Maybe you'll even let go of my hand."

I bump shoulders with her. “You said I didn’t have to let go.”
“I know.”

I don’t say everything I want to say. I don’t have the power to change anything. But instead of keeping it all in, I say, “I had a lot of fun.”

She kisses me again and I squeeze her hand. *Not for the last time*, I think as she walks backwards until she reaches a corner. We wave.

Not for the last time.

#

The first message I receive from Rhea comes as we touch down on Tulus-4c’s landing pad. It’s a photo of our Galaga machine with her smiling face peeking out from the corner of the photo. I trace a loop in my palm, imagining the rink under my feet and my wheels gliding smoothly across, while Rhea’s hand is nestled in mine. Shutting my eyes, I hear violin bows striking taunt strings as a couple sing into their mics. Over it all is the 8-bit jingle as a white and red ship appears at the bottom of a glossy screen, waiting for the new level to start.

Molly Williams (they/them) is a second-year fellow in fiction and poetry at the Michener Center for Writers in Austin, TX. They previously lived in Brooklyn, NY., and they are mixed-race and queer.

july 2024:
my father and I go to laurens, south carolina,
where our ancestors were enslaved by our
other ancestors
Molly Williams

we all have refusals. we tuck them in our cheeks
like chewing gum, would rather be stubborn than spit.
parks & millponds, historic sites & trails,
old houses, plantations, plantations, plantations. where marriages.
where broom-jumping, once. now white veiled ceremony.
this national park was *used by native americans*,
loggers, revolutionary war patriots, escaped slaves,
and more! do you use the land or does the land use you?
I sit still on the drive so that I can't be moved. I decide
a millpond is not a real pond. but anything's a pond.
any body can drown any body.
I am trying to control my anger,
or, I am learning how to wield it on command
like a joke. history is angry; history breaks
on the cliffs of our teeth. we always meant to come
but kept not coming. always some excuse,
rope burning the back of our half-baked plan.
now we're here & scanned by eighty eyes
from forty squeaky roll-down frosted windows
& our only free papers are our goddamned selves.
we set out for a plot of land containing houses
or waffle houses or bare bald headed earth.
we are looking for the origin of our suffering.
we park in a place with no nothing, just grass laid up
atop itself. now what do we do? there
is no one here we know. no one to know us.

Amy Whiting (she/her) is a Senior at DSU in Southern Utah majoring in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing. Reading and writing are her passions, and one day, she hopes to be a published author for young readers.

Eat the Fruit

Amy Whiting

When I was young, I really liked hearing scripture stories with my family. All the interesting stories in the Bible, we got to learn about them. We learned about David and Goliath. You remember, the small boy who slayed a giant with nothing but a stone and sling. Then we learned about David and Bathsheba. That same small David boy had grown up. He was a king now. One day he found a naked woman bathing herself on her roof, Bathsheba. He had sex with her, of course. We wouldn't have expected anything else from a man in power.

We also learned about Adam and Eve, our first parents.

That's when things started to feel a little off to me.

I was eight years old. A lamp stood at the edge of the room, the only light in the room, and it lit up my dad's face. I sat on the couch, my legs crossed underneath me, my elbows pressed into the insides of my thighs. I watched his every move. Stuck to his every word. My siblings were next to me, watching, listening, learning. All five of us were there, learning from someone we respected and loved.

"God specifically told Adam and Eve not to partake of the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. If they did, they would die," my dad said. Dark shadows from the eerie lamp light crossed his face, showing us the bright blue of his eyes, the stern set of his mouth.

I sure hope they don't eat that fruit, I thought. In my head, I could see Adam and Eve there, naked. The tree was there, too, looming in a shadowy corner of a beautiful, sweeping garden.

"For a long time, Adam and Eve lived in peace. They lived with the animals, they picked fruit. They were happy. They were at peace."

Oh, that's nice. I wondered what kind of animals were there. Did they get to swim with dolphins? Pet a lion? Jump with kangaroos? The possibilities were endless.

"But then the devil came into the garden, disguised as a serpent."

Oh, no. Snakes are the worst!

"The serpent went up to Adam and asked him to partake of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Adam said no, said that his Father had forbidden him, and he would not disobey his Father. He refused to partake."

Whew. What a relief. Adam was so smart. There was an audible sigh among the five of us. Our shoulders released. Adam was taking care of everything. It was going to be okay.

“But then,” my dad said, his eyes growing wide and animated, “the serpent made his way to Eve. He asked her to partake of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Eve said no, at first. But the serpent persisted until finally he beguiled her and convinced her to eat.”

What?! Eve, no! How could you! Anger roiled inside my small body. I could feel it in the way my fingers fisted themselves, in the way my chest grew hot and tight. I wanted to scream, to react, but my dad had more to say. My anger would have to wait.

“After she’d eaten the fruit, the serpent convinced her to take it to Adam and to beg him to partake. He told her that she would be alone in a vast and dreary wilderness if she couldn’t convince Adam. She was afraid to be alone, and ashamed of what she’d done. So, she went to him and she convinced him. Adam ate the fruit because Eve had told him to.”

My anger could not be contained any longer. My siblings were angry, too. Now that my dad had paused, it was our turn to react. There was a loud uproar among us kids. We threw our hands in the air, stomped on the ground, yelled out in a rage that only small children understand.

“Why did she do it?” my older sister wailed.

“She was fooled by the devil. She wasn’t strong enough to resist his cunning lies. She doomed all of humanity in a moment of weakness.”

We stomped. We yelled. My youngest sister, only a baby, started crying at the uproar happening in front of her that she didn’t understand. We were upset. Every bad thing that happened to humanity was Eve’s fault. Sickness, death, all of it. She doomed us. It was Eve’s fault. That was for sure. In the lamp light of the family room, we all knew it, too.

#

Years passed, and I learned more Bible stories. I kept going to church. Every Sunday, in sickness and in health, till death do us part, the pew and me. It was the same pew every time, too. My dad sat at the far end. He needed space to stretch out his legs. My mom sat next to him, and the five of us piled next to her, always fighting about who got to sit next to Mom. She passed out snacks and scratched our backs. My dad sat with his hands over his belly, nodding along, listening to the speakers. He probably got more out of the church meetings than any of us did.

Every night my family studied the scriptures. We took our studies very seriously, but the stories were less interesting to me now. After homework was done, and we’d eaten the dinner my mom had made, and the kids and Mom had cleaned up, we would sit in the living room to read and discuss. I fell asleep on the couch a lot. I was called to repentance for that a lot, too.

The topic of our first parents was something that we continued to discuss. Every time I felt this sort of unrest. At first, I thought it was anger directed at Eve. Still, I was upset that Eve had damned all of humanity. I was mad that I didn't get to live in the Garden of Eden because of her. How selfish, right? She took it all away in a moment of weakness.

But then the thing I thought was anger shifted. It revealed itself to me as curiosity. I wondered if I really would have been able to live in the Garden of Eden if Adam and Eve didn't eat the fruit. Would they have children if they had stayed there? And how long had they stayed there by themselves? Years? Hundreds of years? Thousands?

I voiced my questions to my parents, to church leaders, and was always met with the same answer: "Eve tricked Adam into eating the fruit, and all mankind fell."

Yeah, yeah, I got that. But what if that's what was supposed to happen?

Church leaders, parents, the general population of adults I looked up to, didn't like it when I asked that question. God had commanded Adam and Eve to not partake of the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. It made no sense that she was supposed to actually eat it. The act was forbidden. Rules are not made to be broken.

My questions were deflected for so long that I stopped asking them, finally accepting what everyone around me had accepted: Eve caused the downfall of mankind. She was supposed to be viewed as a warning. She disobeyed the one commandment that had been given to her. She ate the forbidden fruit. There was more evidence stacked against her, as it turned out. Did you know that she gave birth to and raised the first murderer? Yes, Cain was her son, and he had murdered his brother. Knowing this, how could anyone look at her and see something besides a warning? I couldn't. Not for a long time anyway. To me, she was walking cautionary tape.

It was around this time that I started to notice that I, myself, was a woman. Or, I would soon become one. I was starting to pay attention to what the women around me did. How they behaved, what they wore, how they spoke, acted, all of it. I was hungry and searching for who I should be. What was the right way for me to be? Eve couldn't be my example. She was irreverent and disobedient. Bathsheba became pregnant with David's child. When he found out about the child, he had Bathsheba's husband killed, and then married her. Was Bathsheba someone I should try and emulate? From the small amount that we know about her, she seemed to be submissive and meek, and those were characteristics that seemed to come up often when describing a woman, always said in a positive tone. Was submitting the only option available for me?

Without ever finding an answer that fit me, I grew up. I became a woman. A wife, a mother. I did what was expected of me. Women are made to

nurture and care and love their children, that is their purpose, I'd found out. Their one purpose. These small babies that I had were my one purpose.

I'd done what I was supposed to do, I'd had the babies and loved them the best I could.

But something wasn't right. I was unhappy. I was sick, depressed, heartbroken. I was confused, at odds with who I was and who I needed to be. I didn't find fulfillment in being a mother like I was supposed to. I found no purpose in changing diapers, in doing the dishes, in staying at my home, loving small people who couldn't talk yet. It wasn't a sanctuary from the world like I had thought it would be. It was a prison.

Without meaning to, without even thinking about it, I found myself stuck. I loved my spouse, and I loved my kids. But I had nothing. No money. No education. Nothing was mine. It was ours. I guess, you could say I was lost in the "ours" of things.

The question of Eve's purpose never went away. It still festered inside of me, creating a sore that spread until I couldn't ignore it. Until I knew I needed an answer. If I could find the answer to Eve's purpose, maybe I could find the answer to mine.

How long were Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden? That seemed like an easy place to start. Turns out, there are different answers everywhere: a day or two, weeks, maybe years. Time passed from one verse to the next, but the truth is, we don't know how long they were in the Garden of Eden.

Then came the questions that didn't have answers. How long does it take until paradise with only one person as your companion becomes something that doesn't feel like paradise at all? How many animals must you take care of until this paradise is anything but? How much fruit do you have to pick? A lot, I'll bet.

I thought of my own life. How many diapers did I have to change until I felt this magical purpose that mothers are supposed to feel? How many meals did I need to prepare? How many times did I need to rock them to sleep until I found, from these tiny bundled humans, my purpose?

I couldn't stop thinking of Eve and her choice to eat the fruit. It was her choice, I'd realized. Why was I so quick to write off a woman's decision? She'd only made one so far, and it has since been covered in controversy. Why was I so convinced that it was the serpent that made Eve eat from the tree? Why did that feel okay to me?

I don't think that Eve was fooled in a moment of weakness.

I think she had a yearning, a drive, a sense that she could make something better for herself, even if it went against what she was supposed to do. When she ate the fruit, she finally answered the call that came from inside of her. She knew her purpose, and it wasn't there in the Garden of Eden.

Eve knew what she was doing. She knew *exactly* what she was doing. She knew that if she ate the fruit, her whole world would collapse. Everything

she'd known would crumble, and she'd have to figure out how to start over. She'd have to dig deep and find out what she was made of.

I think that Eve had a deep, festering wound inside of her. She waited as long as she could until she couldn't ignore it anymore. She tried for years to do what she was taught to do. She tried to obey, to submit, to listen. She really, really tried. She tried to find purpose in caring for the animals that she didn't make. She tried to find fulfillment in tilling the land that she didn't get to create.

But Eve's purpose wasn't to do what she was supposed to do. Her purpose wasn't to follow the rules.

Her purpose was to break things and then build them back up again. Her purpose was to eat the fruit. Her purpose was to watch her world crumble, so she could rebuild it with her own hands, exactly how she wanted it.

The festering sore inside of me had healed, satisfied with this new answer that seemed to fit better, that seemed to be closer to the truth. If Eve could turn away from her spoken purpose, her given commandments, maybe I could, too. Maybe my purpose could be more than my kids. Maybe it was to create something that was my own.

Then, with one question answered, came the more curious question: why was Eve's story told to me as though she was the villain?

It is a theme in the society in which we live, the society that I grew up in: women are not allowed to want more than they have. They are taught to be grateful, to be selfless, to be obedient. The best compliment a woman can receive is, "She is so selfless." That's how she knows she led a good life, because she gave it up for everyone around her. That's what a nurturer does, that's what a caregiver does.

Eve was none of those things. She looked at the Garden of Eden, a paradise made just for her and Adam, and said, "Nope. I know I can do better." And she did. She created the entire human race. She started the world we live in today. She was a creator, an inventor, a visionary.

Why do we want to keep women from listening to the thing that is festering inside of them? Because when they do hear it, when they do listen, the earth shakes. When women listen to that little thing inside of their heart that is burning, telling them what they already know, the world crumbles.

Every time a woman trusts herself, listens to her own voice, the world changes and it becomes better. Where would we be without earth shakers like Eve? Without women like Harriet Tubman, who went against every order given to her and freed over *three hundred* slaves? Without Rosa Parks and her refusal to move from her seat for a white man? Without Jane Austen and the revolutionary works of literature that she created?

I want to be like Eve. I want to be like Harriet Tubman and Rosa Parks and Jane Austen and so many other women who have changed their worlds. I want to trust myself so completely that I defy the orders given to me

about who I am and who I am supposed to be, that I turn away from what makes me “good” and turn toward what makes me great.

If Eve, the creator of humankind, could break her world in the hopes of making it better, maybe I can, too. I can question commands. I can create my own life. I can write my own story.

And I can write stories that will mean something to another little girl, looking for her place in the world, searching for her purpose.

I can eat the fruit.

Wendy Elizabeth Wallace (she/her) is a queer writer with vision loss who grew up in Buffalo, New York, a city she will talk about for hours if you let her. Currently, she teaches English in Connecticut, and writes when her dog is not demanding walks. She is the co-founding editor of *Peatsmoke: A Literary Journal*. She met the good people who are willing to suffer through her rough drafts at the Purdue University MFA. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Rumpus*, *jmww*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, *Two Hawks Quarterly*, *Longleaf Review*, and elsewhere. Find her on Twitter at @WendyEWallace1 or at www.wendywallacewriter.com.

Zombie Kate

Wendy Elizabeth Wallace

Kate says she wants to scare her boyfriend. They've been watching lots of zombie movies together, she tells me, and I don't say, that used to be our thing. Instead, when I come over, I help her take scissors to one of her shirts, each of us making savage slices, then scribbling red Sharpie bloodstains into the armpits and where her stomach will be. I turn away when she strips down to put it on, but when I turn back I can see the undercurve of her ribs, a slice of collarbone, the side of a breast through the holes we made. She asks me to paint her face white, work black around her eyes and mouth. I use my fingertips, bite my tongue as I feel the delicate fuzz of her cheeks, the soft yield of her lips, the darting quiver of her eyelids.

This is the first time I've touched her skin. I don't think this is something she knows, how careful I've been until this moment. When I'm done, she gets up like she didn't have to remind herself to breathe with our faces so close, cracks two beers, hands over one of the IPAs she hates but keeps around for me, and sips carefully so as not to smear her makeup, then works gel into her hair so it looks woody and ragged. How's this, Grace? she asks, trying the sound she'll make, a deep curling moan, almost liquid. She doesn't sound like Kate. She doesn't look like Kate, either. That's the magic of her, the way she can be anything, throw herself in completely. It's very good, I tell her.

Here's the plan. Soon, when our beers are empty, I'll close her into the bedroom closet, slip out like I was never here. She'll sit quiet until her boyfriend gets off his late shift. Then she'll bang the door open, lurch at him, and at first, he'll jerk away, maybe even run, but then he'll be back, laughing and pulling her in, his hands sliding around her so quick, so easy.

I want a different kind of plan. One where I change myself the way Kate can, and become not the girl who helps her get ready but someone she'd hide herself away for, someone for whom she'd sit and wait and wait until the right moment. Someone she'd launch herself towards, expecting, after a moment, to be held.

Khushi Daryani (she/her) is an undergraduate at the University of British Columbia. She writes 4 a.m. angsty notes app poems because as she puts it, she just gets 'too many feelz' sometimes. She's previously been published in Polyphony Lit, Macmillan's 'Poems to Save the World With' anthology edited by Chris Riddell, Aerie International, Di-Verse City Youth Anthology, UNESCO's anthology titled 'Inside the Millennial Mind,' among other journals, and featured on the cover of *Apprentice Writer*.

you can judge a woman by the contents of her purse (and mine's empty)

Khushi Daryani

apart from an expired subway card and wrinkled lists of things I never bought
golden boy is telling me about his summer backpacking trip to Europe
if I was paid each time I told him the epiphany he had sitting in a yacht in
Venice was profound

I'd be the one on the yacht
he's spewing ontological nihilism out of thin air while you're figuring
how to reach home
there's a word for being able to buy time but you wouldn't know
(you're always window shopping broken clocks)

he's asking you about your parents
and you're wearing your mother's shirt
you don't love your mother or anything
it just goes with your skirt
when you were thirteen and depressed she explained you're sad because
you're the result of a failed marriage
it was actually because a boy called you annoying during school
(things don't always mean other things)

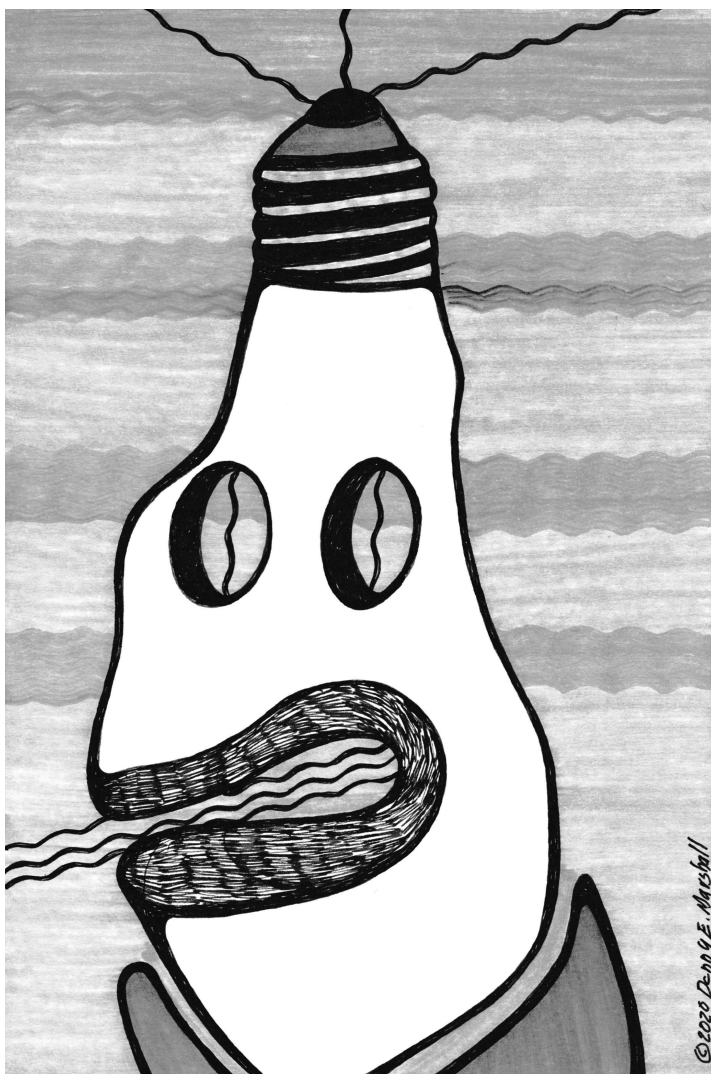
golden boy is showing you his poems now
and the first one's about an acid trip he had a while back
the second stanza compares the g spot to the human condition
(it spells clitoris wrong)
and you nod (you nod a lot)

he spends his days dreaming and writing prose at his father's vacation home
you can't remember the last time you dreamt because you haven't slept in
forever
you've been too busy working overtime and trying not to walk into moving
traffic
listening to people perpetually yelling from their car windows
"are you trying to get killed bitch?"

golden boy asks you how you got into writing
well, in fourth grade the first prize for the best poem was a trip to a faraway
hill station
you wrote the best thing you had ever written
the best thing you could ever write
planned you'll never come back
but you came in second and you've been writing ever since
(always trying to reach the place)

this isn't a poem
I just need the money to go home

Denny E. Marshall has had art, poetry, and fiction published. One recent credit is cover and interior art in *Dreams & Nightmares* Jan. 2021. See more at www.dennymarshall.com.



Upside Down Idea

When it's all said and done I have only one goal: That people would say, "His drawings don't all look the same."

Christopher Barker (they/them) is a non-binary writer—emerging and constantly evolving—in the Inland Northwest. They draw inspiration from historical nooks and overgrown crannies throughout the region. Basking in the interludes of life and stumbling through the moments that count is their strategy for survival.

Lilac Boy

Christopher Barker

I.

Jonas picked lilacs off a branch in the alleyway for his father. Bringing flowers to his mother always brightened her day, and Jonas thought his dad might appreciate a few flowers too. He placed one lilac in his brown curls and brought the rest inside.

“Give them to your mom,” his father said without looking away from the newspaper. He compared his lottery tickets to the winning numbers.

“But I picked these for you.”

His dad crumpled the papers and subtracted them to the waste bin. He looked at Jonas with a huff. “Why’s there a flower in your hair?”

“I like it,” Jonas answered. His dad’s face tightened, and Jonas knew he had admitted to something not allowed.

“No flowers.” His father swiped at the lilac. Jonas leapt back.

His father stood from the recliner. Jonas grabbed the flower and plopped it into his mouth.

“Don’t you dare.”

Jonas swallowed the lilac. Disobeying his father always came with a beating. Jonas was left breathing heavily with tears drying on his face, the other lilacs smashed on their stiff futon couch.

II.

Jonas senses others who swallow lilacs when their parents look away, and they can sense him too.

They exchange fleeting smiles with pollen-soaked lips. They share glances at the park, from either end of a swing set or while in line at the food bank. At the library, one boy offers a smile between bookshelves. When Jonas tries to talk to him, the boy shushes Jonas and buries himself into whatever book he’s chosen that week. One day he meets a boy in class who never got to eat his lilac. This boy says his mother caught him plucking the flower and grabbed the boy’s hand so tightly, he crushed the petals as she dragged him away. The boy carries the withered flower in his pocket as a reminder that he must never eat another.

Jonas soon learns that children eat all kinds of flowers. One boy preferred lavender and could not imagine that lilacs tasted any good. A red-headed girl caught Jonas eating lilacs from her grandmother's garden and chased him several streets to tell him she sometimes ate lilacs too, even though sunflowers were her favorite, which her grandmother always noticed went missing.

Winter is hardest for Jonas and his appetite, when the blossoms leap from their branches and feed themselves to the breeze. Blizzard winds blow in the stress of his family's survival. The others stop smiling during those cold months, though Jonas can still sense them at gas stations and in pews at church. The season without flowers gnaws at his head like hunger gnaws in his belly, and he never looks forward to the holidays.

III.

Jonas accompanied his mother to the library to look for a new job on the computers. Driving an ice cream truck had been her first job since Jonas was born, and though summer had ended, bills would not. His mother allowed him to wander through the bookshelves and pick out one book, which they will turn in late. The kind librarian with a raspy voice is working, the one his mom keeps his distance from for fear she's flirting. She always forgives the late fees.

Jonas spent that afternoon reading covers, hoping to find a fantasy book worthy enough of the several reads he would have to give it before either of his parents returned to the library. Thin layers of frost pressed on the windows, warning readers inside that winter would haunt them if they did not hoard books the way bears hoard food for hibernation.

He was lost in a book about witches being hunted for their magic when a boy startled him with a rather loud whisper. "Hey, I bet you'd love this book," He held out a cover of vibrant purple and pink swirls emerging from a sorcerer's wand.

Jonas had never heard the boy speak, and his voice was higher than Jonas anticipated, singsong in its falls and rises. His brown cheeks were splattered with bronze freckles, and Jonas followed their pattern until he met a pair of marigold eyes behind square glasses with thick rims.

"What makes you so sure?" Jonas said, grabbing the book.

"I see you cruising this section a lot."

"I'm sure I'll enjoy thumbing through it, then." Jonas slid his index finger into the pages.

"I'm Brahim."

"Jonas." They both smiled and looked elsewhere as the silence of the library flooded between them. Jonas opened the book and gasped at the sight inside. He looked back at Brahim with a springtime excitement.

Brahim shushed Jonas. "I have to go, but don't tell anyone, okay?" He rushed to a man who finished checking out at the front desk. Jonas looked at the bundle of lilacs pressed between the pages.

Snow smothered the city in gray that evening as Jonas curled up in a blanket with the book from Brahim. He had to catch the school bus early the next morning, but the story swept the night away with its stream of adventure and undercurrent of some alluring thing Jonas could not identify. As he came to the page where he tucked the flowers, Jonas saw evening wilt into morning and clasped the lilacs to his chest. He ate one petal and placed the bundle back in the book. The exhaustion at school buried beneath the excitement of reliving the plot in his head throughout the day.

Jonas reread the book several times and ate a petal whenever he reached its end. Brahim had introduced to him the perfect hiding spot for lilacs. It kept the flower fresh longer than his pillow did, filling him with stored sunshine on the shortest winter days. And his parents did not open books much, except for the occasional mystery novel his mother picked up.

They were much too busy to read now anyway. His mother got hired as a janitor at the local university, and his dad still worked at the grocery store, plucking overtime hours whenever the managers allowed. They did not return to the library for some time.

His mother interrupted Jonas on his fifth or sixth read through, calling him and his father to the kitchen. She prepared frozen TV dinners as Jonas and his dad sat side by side at the plastic table with lawn chairs scattered around it. She announced that her job would allow Jonas to attend college for free if she stayed at the university. Jonas did not quite understand why four more years of school would be exciting, but his father and mother decided it was cause enough to celebrate, and after dinner they bought ice cream from his dad's work.

"We've got to make sure you're ready," she told him as she scooped a spoonful of rocky road into her mouth. "You're smart though. I know you can do it."

"Yeah, you read a book faster than I can read the paper," his dad said, taking a coin to a scratch ticket. "That's what you oughta do, take him to the library and let him read the books he should be reading. Maybe get him his own card now."

His father's suggestion stunned them. His dad's mood always boosted when Jonas and his mother accompanied him to work, where he greeted his coworkers or an occasional regular with a buoyancy that Jonas never witnessed at home. The first few days after a check deposited into his account brought reprieve to their home too. Still, his mother voiced their disbelief. "You want Jonas to get a library card?"

“Of course, Sheila.” He slid the scratcher to the far side of the table. “Someone’s got to pay for my retirement. It’s not like I’m ever going to win big on these damn things.”

No one could disagree with him.

“But we’re gonna do it right and get a reading list from someone who knows what they’re doing,” his dad added.

The prospect of a library card excited Jonas like his parents. He did not want to inherit his father’s financial mood swings. Books seemed a promising distraction. Maybe he would get to see Brahim again. But they did not mention the library card after that. It wasn’t until he finished eating the lilacs from Brahim that Jonas asked his parents about the library card. They denied ever bringing it up. Jonas sobbed into a pillow. His dad beat him for being ungrateful.

On Christmas morning, when gutter water froze into holiday decor, Jonas discovered a library card buried in his stocking. That weekend his mother took him to the library. He would have liked to leave lilacs on the page where his favorite chapter in Brahim’s book began, but snow covered the branch poking out in the alleyway. His mother had bought a bouquet of chrysanthemum from a Christmas clearance sale. He plucked one of those flowers and pressed it into a random page.

Jonas searched for Brahim as he pretended to search for books. The deal was he got to choose any three titles while his mother retrieved two from a list given by a professor at the university. His mother grew impatient by the eighth aisle Jonas walked down. He chose three books the way his father picked lotto numbers, under the pressure of his mother’s sighs. He regretted looking for a boy instead of looking for books.

They left with a stack Jonas had to read in two weeks before it was due back.

When they got home, his mother handed him one of the books and took the others. Jonas went to his room to begin reading immediately. The plot did not possess him as the last book had; rather it was like swimming against a current, still fun, though a bit tiring. He did not keep awake to read it. Jonas finished the next day however and traded the book at dinner.

“Already?” his mother asked.

“I told you. He’s a quick reader,” his father said, picking olives off his pizza.

“Plus, it’s too cold to play outside,” Jonas said. “Nothing to do, nowhere to go. It’s like a portal someplace different.”

His mother rose from the table and left, examining the book as if trying to catch a glimpse of the other place to which Jonas referred.

“Someplace different, huh?” his dad said with a laugh. “I win that lotto, and we’ll be someplace different. Nothing to anchor us down.”

“Like where?” asked Jonas.

“You keep reading, and you tell me.”

She returned with a book titled, *The Great Gatsby*. “Now I know it won’t be as fun as your witches and wizards book, but that reading list from Gonzaga had this at the top.”

After dinner, he tried to read the first few pages, but it lacked an exciting plot like the action saturated fantasy books Jonas was used to, and instead spent a great deal on characterization to the point that he caught himself reading words without being able to picture the story. One moment Nick Carraway was in college talking with men and the next he was moving East and then he was back at college again. If the other books were streams, this one was a marsh he would have to trudge through, barely seeing beneath the surface. The random stains on pages soiled the story even more.

He tossed the book on his nightstand. A blur of color flashed through the pages as it flew through the air and disappeared when it landed. Jonas retrieved the book to investigate where the color had come from. As far as he could tell, this was a book without pictures.

He found folded gold parchment paper with a purple pansy wrapped inside. Jonas wondered if Brahim had left it here, or maybe someone else had. He liked to imagine Brahim left it behind for him to find.

Even though he would not eat the flower, Jonas returned to the beginning of the book with a determination to understand why someone left a flower within. He jumped to the beginning of paragraphs and sentences over and over whenever he lost track of what the narrator said, like a person lost in a hedge maze retracing steps to find their way out. Midnight spilled through his bedroom when he reached the end of chapter one with a murky understanding of Nick and Daisy’s family connection and how that brought him to *Gatsby*. Despite the book’s descriptions of Nick and *Gatsby*, Jonas pictured himself as Nick and Brahim as *Gatsby*, which made it a bit easier to read. He could not see why the book deserved a flower yet, but he went to bed excited to find out the following day.

Jonas woke to the intrusion of late-morning light, not the soft unfurling rays of dawn that usually greeted him in time for school. Showing up tardy without an excuse earned him detention with a voicemail left to his parents last time. He needed to intercept the call to avoid a beating from his father. Besides, he would rather stay home and read, feeling his personal literary pursuits to be more nourishing than anything offered at school. He longed to decipher the meaning of the flowers, yet he already wondered if the significance changed for every reader who left one behind.

Jonas chose to skip school and forced himself to read through the second chapter while lounging in his dad’s recliner, a rare occurrence. He paid special attention to the pages where he found the flower. Nick went upstairs with a man and seemed to pass out there on the floor. Jonas could not detect

anything special about it and decided that whoever left the flower behind had been in a hurry and put it on a random page.

The phone rattled midway through chapter three, catching Fitzgerald's words in Jonas' throat. Jonas panicked and answered the phone.

"Hi, this is the Carraway home," said Jonas into the receiver with a belabored baritone.

"Hello, this is Deborah at Garry Middle School. I'm calling about Jonas Garland."

"You have the wrong number," Jonas lied.

The woman fumbled on the other end of the line. "Oh dear, I'm so sorry. My apologies." The line went dead. Jonas held his breath for the rest of the day. One other person called, a bill collector asking for his parents. Jonas only hung up the phone as his mother did when they called.

At the dinner table that evening, Jonas waited for his parents to say something. His father spoke with all the usual happiness of payday. His mother cleared her throat. "This one is taking you a little longer, huh?"

Jonas did not realize she was asking about *The Great Gatsby* until his mother said, "The book?"

"Oh yeah, it's hard to understand everything going on."

His mother nodded. "Take your time." And he did. It took Jonas an entire week to read the book, but he caught himself sucked into the exuberance of Gatsby's wealth and personality, how it spilled into his library. When Nick found Gatsby in the pool, Jonas ravenously finished the book from there, entranced by the green light that impressed Gatsby from the start.

Jonas removed the flower to hide it from his mom until they returned to the library. He knocked on his mother's door once he tucked the flower into his pillow. She answered in her robe. "What's the matter?" she asked, rubbing her eyes.

He was not expecting his mother to be asleep. "I finished the book," he said sheepishly.

She frowned. "You couldn't wait till morning?"

"Sorry, I didn't realize it was so late." They both glanced at his snoring father.

"You're lucky you didn't wake him." She grabbed the book from Jonas. "So you liked it?"

Jonas nodded. "It ended up being okay."

She exchanged the book and Jonas took it back to his room. He immediately searched for a flower but found none. Disappointed, he set the book down and decided to start tomorrow.

IV.

None of the other books he read that week held flowers. The second book his mother gave was *Fahrenheit 451*, a book he enjoyed more than *The Great Gatsby*, despite not finding a flower inside. When they returned to the

library, Jonas wanted to find books with flowers in them, but his mother rushed him, and he selected three titles at random.

That spring he stopped eating lilacs unless he found them in books, which happened rarely. He found a rose among Shakespeare's sonnets. A violet dropped out of *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin. Two flowers, one daisy and one buttercup, were pressed into the pages of *The Outing* by James Baldwin. Not knowing why these flowers were put in books sometimes frustrated Jonas, but to be in on a secret so grand made him only want to embrace the unknown that much more.

At the library, he looked for Brahim, the same way he looked for flowers in books. Jonas wanted to ask Brahim about their meaning, though he worried the secret could get them both in trouble if he did. Summer came without a sighting of Brahim. But his mother soon announced that she and Jonas would have to take the bus to the far side of town. The library closest to their home had a long wait for the next read on the list.

They sat across from someone slightly older than him who smiled, and Jonas smiled back, sensing they too ate flowers. He could not tell if the stranger with long blonde hair, a soft face, and broad shoulders was a man or a woman. Jonas was trying to find what he found so alluring about this stranger when his mother said, "Okay Jonas."

Jonas looked away, afraid he had been caught. The eyes of the other passenger lingered.

His mother rarely talked on their way to the library. The bus was not the most private place, and his mother did not like to have conversations in which others could overhear her. She seemed to make an exception now. "Now that it's summertime, I think we should change the rules."

"How so?"

"Well, we might make more trips to the library," she glanced around as if the whole bus were listening. "We could grab two books. And I'll start reading one while you read the other."

Jonas forgot about the androgynous person completely now. "You want to?"

His mother looked out the window. "I might get my GED so I can also use the free tuition."

"Wow! Have you told dad?"

Jonas heard her sigh over the hiss of the bus. "Let's see if I can finish my GED first. I always hated school when I was younger. We'll see if I even get that far."

"I believe in you."

"You might have to help your old mom with some of these books though."

They got interrupted by an elderly woman asking to seat herself next to them. For the rest of the ride, they sat in silence. Jonas began to think

seriously about college. His mother seemed to believe it was something special if she wanted her son to attend, and she was now questioning it too. He considered asking why she wanted so badly to go, but the bus announced their stop. He flashed another smile at the passenger on their way off.

His mother disappeared down one of the aisles with an overly eager male librarian. Jonas went to the young adult fiction section. He gasped when he saw Brahim scanning the titles with another boy. His chest felt like a book slamming shut and Brahim glanced up. Jonas smiled through the tightness in his chest. Brahim excused himself from his friend.

“Jonas!” he whispered excitedly.

“Brahim!” Jonas whispered back with more excitement than he intended. He grabbed a book and pretended to be more interested in it as they continued speaking.

Brahim’s cheeks had gotten thinner, their childish plumpness migrating down to make his face longer. Jonas wondered if Brahim noticed the small changes in his own appearance too, such as his nose which had grown less bulbous as his cheeks sunk in. “It’s been awhile.”

Brahim scratched the back of his head. “Yeah, I got an internship with this library. I went back a couple of times to tell you, but never saw you.”

Jonas shrugged nonchalantly, when really his heart fluttered as if the book inside his chest opened and flipped through its pages. “I left a flower in the book you gave me.”

“I saw.” Brahim smiled. “I’ve been sprinkling them here and there.”

Jonas’ chest tightened again.

The other boy interrupted. “Brahim, I think I found a new series we might like.” Jonas wanted to throw the book at this stranger.

Brahim’s cheeks burned with rust. “Well, I should probably get back to—”

“Yeah, me too.” Jonas said.

“Good to see you.”

Jonas only hummed in return. He walked to the aisle his mother stood in with the book he randomly grabbed off the shelf. Returning to that aisle would be an impossible task. Jonas was stuck with this book, *A Series of Unfortunate Events: The Wide Window*.

On the bus ride home he tried to start reading, but images of Brahim with that other boy boiled so hot in his head. He could not focus and stared out of the window to avoid glaring at the other passengers. Even the green petal peeking out from the back cover failed to calm him.

When Jonas brought *The Wide Window* to his mother, her drooping cheeks filled with red. “I haven’t finished *Catcher in the Rye* yet.”

“Take your time, mom.”

“No, no, you go ahead and take it. I’ll take that,” his mother insisted. They traded books, and when he opened the pages, a tulip waited, pressed

inside. Jonas did not think his mother set it there. He feared what might happen if he asked.

He read many books with his mother like this, where she would read as much of a novel from the list as she could until Jonas brought her a book from *The Series of Unfortunate Events*, a thirteen-part installment she thoroughly enjoyed. Sometimes he found flowers his mother never mentioned. In Homer's *The Iliad*, a poppy waited amongst the pages about Patroclus and Achilles that his mother could not have missed even if she tried. Picturing Brahim as Achilles and Patroclus as Brahim's new friend was painful, though he could not stop his imagination from taking its course.

Eventually his mother gave up reading books from the list at all, but she devoured the young adult fiction of every genre that Jonas brought home. She and Jonas turned dinners into their own personal book club while their father begged them to talk about something else.

One day after Jonas started high school, his mother made an announcement at the dinner table. "I want to write a book for young adults!"

Jonas' father guffawed. "Honey, you barely have energy to cook when you get home anymore. What makes you think you'll be able to write a bestseller?"

"More coffee and less sex with you," she said. "Do you think I can do it, Jonas?"

Jonas had his doubts too, not in his mother's capability to multitask, but in her grammar. She had secretly been attending a class to prep for her GED, and writing was the subject she struggled with the most, often coming to Jonas for help with commas and tricky clauses that Jonas still struggled with too. She had abandoned the idea of college completely.

"Of course, mom." Jonas could tell he had not been convincing when his mother's face deflated. He added, "I'll even read over drafts for you," and his mother's pink cheeks drooped a little less.

"Oh good! I was gonna ask."

He regretted that promise the moment it left his mouth. Jonas was struggling to keep up with his own work. Reading late into the night had become a hobby of Jonas', and with it, skipping days of school to read without his parents knowing. He intercepted phone calls enough that the school stopped calling. When the secretary asked about it one morning, a lie trembled through Jonas' throat before falling from his lips. "We can't afford a phone at the moment." They printed off a form for his parents to sign. Forging their signatures was easy.

Something else had been overwhelming Jonas too. He first realized it after his last encounter with Brahim, and his budding feelings crashed into him like waves against the shore. Jonas liked boys, and he spent a lot of time throughout the day trying to hide it. His voice deepened when answering questions in history class and his eyes kept to the ground when changing in

the locker room for gym class. Jonas was only beginning to become aware of this, but beneath that part of him that refracted these observations, the flowers still blossomed morsels of joy inside of him.

He would not fully realize his desires until college, which his mother and father reminded Jonas was a blessing from some higher power. “My mother and her mother before never got this kind of opportunity, Jonas.”

Guidance counselors and teachers echoed his parents at school. Other classmates dropped college into conversation like it was a universal theme to be tended to. And yet, Jonas traded dreams for stories early into the morning, convinced that a lifetime of imagining books was better than fantasizing about a retirement he might never achieve.

On one such day in early spring, after the words of a dead man tucked Jonas in much too late, he woke to the sound of someone bursting through the front door. Jonas sucked in a breath and froze. He would finally be caught skipping school and the hiding would be tremendous.

A trickle of footsteps passed his bedroom. At the other end of the hallway, drawers opened and giddy laughter flooded through the house. Jonas tried to identify to whom the laughter belonged to no avail. The hardwood creaked by Jonas’ door as someone passed again.

“So long!” a voice from an arid throat cried. “I actually won.”

And as soon as his father had arrived, he was gone.

V.

One glossy postcard with an anchor splashing off the San Juan Islands. That’s the last Jonas ever heard from his father. The back of the postcard notified them that he paid off their house and would be sending a bit of money every now and then. He would provide for them, which was love enough in his father’s eyes. At least that’s what his mother said. She would still have to work for groceries and heat, but they would manage.

Jonas and his mom had already cried all the tears they could afford. She leafed through the other envelopes and gasped.

“What is it?” asked Jonas.

“It’s from that publisher I mentioned!” She tossed the rest of the mail onto the couch and tore into the letter. Her eyes scanned the page like a typewriter carriage, heavily sweeping from left to right and jingling back to the left again.

“It’s a rejection but, it’s got a lot of feedback, and no publisher’s given me that before.” She sat on the recliner and continued to look at the page. “I need to spend more time writing.”

“I could get a job, drop out,” Jonas suggested.

A deeper sadness overtook her face. “Now why would you suggest that?”

The relief he felt in tandem with fear on the day his father won the lottery prompted Jonas to honesty now. Jonas confessed to his lies with the

school. He wanted to confess about the flowers too, about the feelings he barely understood despite their underlying presence as far back as he could remember, yet he still did not have the words to explain. Jonas settled with a different confession. "I don't think I want to go to college anyway."

She rustled Jonas' hair and thought for a moment. "Come with me."

Lilac bushes lined the library on Gonzaga's campus. A northwestern breeze welcomed visitors with their sweet floral scent. The building's plain brick exterior did not promise much else. His mother took him to the third floor, to a cavernous room with silence so deafening, Jonas clasped a hand over his mouth and giggled in fear. The room was awe-inspiring, with a decorous green and gold dome overhead and expressionless tomes lining the circle of shelves beneath it.

"I clean that room every evening," his mother said when they returned outside. "I always picture you reading there one day when I do."

"It's so cool!" Jonas admitted. "Eerily quiet though."

"The silence grows on you," his mother said.

They waited at the bus stop now with a group of students sitting opposite them. Newspaper clouds crumpled against the horizon. His mother scooted closer to Jonas, and the sun hit her graying brown hair with a tint of red that Jonas never noticed before. He studied her face, realizing time had sown spreading vectors into her forehead, rows of tilling from repeated expression. Jonas wondered how many of those lines came from watching her husband fail at being a father.

He pulled lilacs from behind his back and watched her smile irrigate some of the contours there.

"I picked these for you."

His mom took them in her hands. "When? You haven't picked me flowers since you were young."

"Outside the library when you went to pick up your check."

The bus teetered onto their street. Jonas' mother sniffed the flowers. Whatever ray of sun had landed on his mom met Jonas' face. "By the way," his mom started. She took one of the lilacs and placed it in her son's hair.

"Whatever you choose is fine by me if it's fine by you."

They boarded the bus, and Jonas knew she was talking about college, but he liked to pretend that promise would extend to the other parts of himself he had not yet chosen.

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My Mother's Vanity

Maria Ceferatti

The modest piece

possessed, like her,
a frugal grace

Perhaps it was an uncle's gift

a sweet sixteen
its seat, petite, poised on

Slim aluminum legs

holding her
gaze in the looking glass

It was here she'd primp

frosted gloss and ironed hair
for a date with my dad

Here, she affixed the veil

to her black beehive. Long, false
eyelashes blinking into her future

Soon, she'd allow her little girls

to fancy themselves mommies
puckering, playing and press-on nails

Then, she moussed her perm

a spritz of *Gloria Vanderbilt*
before my college graduation

Later, she put on readers
to see the small print
on the box of Revlon dye

And did she reflect on her reflection
after taking her niece
to get an abortion
when no one else would go?

Eventually, two Styrofoam heads
sat with silent eyes
to keep her wigs in shape

It was here she penciled in her eyebrows
Autumn Brown
when the chemo took them away

And when it was time
I sat on that seat
wobbling on uneven legs

To clean out the bobby pins
and lipsticks, the earrings
and rosary beads

I don't have the space
for that kind of piece
I quick flick mascara and

Smooth on chapstick in the car
my son singing
from his booster seat

So, it was there, on the sidewalk
where I placed the vanity
just in time for its mirror

To watch the hot orange sunset
cool to its nighttime blue

Naira Wilson (she/her) is a writer and editor based in Northern Virginia. Her writing has appeared in places such as Dynamis Journal, The Root, and Bitch Magazine. Find her on Twitter @naira_wilson.

That Changes Everything

Naira Wilson

You know it's wrong to go through your soon-to-be roommate's things, but you do it anyway because you're curious. All that you know about her is that, like you, she's sixteen, and her name is Heidi.

You carefully peel back the tape from one of Heidi's boxes and peer in. At first, you feel disappointed, like you've violated her privacy for nothing because you only see a few cardigans and a pair of tennis shoes, but when you spot a photo album, the violation seems worth it. You lift the album from the box as though it were a newborn.

With the softest of touch, you flip past photos of Heidi smoking, laughing with her friends, and posing awkwardly with her family. Heidi is beautiful the way a baby is beautiful. She has a small upturned nose, a large round forehead, and big blue eyes. You stop to study the photograph of Heidi sitting on a patio with her father. They're holding up paper cups in some sort of toast, and the way the sunlight hits Heidi's wispy blonde hair reminds you of fire. You stare at the picture so intensely, you feel as if you're at the table with them, celebrating.

We're going to be good friends, you think, *just like sisters*, but from the moment Heidi arrives, she makes it clear that you will most certainly not be good friends, let alone sisters.

She smiles stiffly when you introduce yourself and doesn't look you in the eyes when she speaks. She tells you she's from Norway, but for the past four years, she's lived in Zimbabwe because of her father's work. As Heidi speaks, you notice her looking at the box with the photo album and wonder if she can tell that you opened it.

"Let me know if I can help you unpack," you say eagerly. You sound suspicious.

Heidi doesn't respond. Instead, she scans the room, and you suddenly realize that it was inconsiderate of you to have claimed the best spot—a nook with a large window overlooking the Alps—without asking first. It's the only part of the room with natural light. You're about to offer to share the space, but before you can speak, Heidi pulls a sheet off a spare bunk bed and uses it to separate your side of the room from hers.

Your mother used to say, “familiarity breeds contempt,” especially around the time she was divorcing your father. Now, as you watch Heidi thumbtack the sheet in place, you wonder if she has some sort of policy about not getting too close to people she lives with.

Or if she just prefers the dark.

#

Your sunlit part of the room has become a haven. Because of your mother’s work as a diplomat, you’ve lived in various countries, but until now, you’ve always lived in either cities or suburbs, never a quaint little mountain village like Leysin.

One afternoon, you try to capture everything you see out the window in your sketchbook—a narrow winding road, the layers of mountains that turn dark to light blue depending on the distance, and the clusters of small buildings sprouting from the earth like mushrooms.

As you color in the sky, you listen to music on your boombox because you lost your Discman and headphones. At first, you worry this might bother Heidi, but when she doesn’t say anything, you turn up the volume until Kurt Cobain’s guttural screams fill the room.

You listen to the Fugees as you color in the trees. You’re tapping your foot and mouthing “Ooh la la la” with the chorus when Heidi calls out, “It’s too loud!” so you turn the volume down.

“It’s still too loud,” she shouts. You turn the volume down even lower until the voices are like whispers.

When you look up, you see Heidi holding up the sheet divider. “Can you just turn it off?” she asks. “I really can’t stand this kind of music.”

You stop the CD and finish coloring in silence, but after a few minutes, you stop. The silence makes you realize that you hate your drawing, so you rip up the page and throw it in the trash.

#

One night, you feel a tap on your shoulder that startles you awake. Heidi is looking down at you, her face half in shadow, half illuminated by your nightlight.

“You left a HUGE mess,” she says. You’re groggy and confused.

“Come see,” she says. You get up and follow her into the bathroom where the bright lights sting your eyes. She points to a corner in the bathtub.

You look at her, then back to the spot. When your eyes finally adjust to the light, you see it—a clump of your dark wet hair, clinging to a shampoo bottle.

You feel the same strain of shame you felt back home in Virginia when a hairdresser body-blocked you from entering her shop and said curtly, “We don’t do Black hair.”

You apologize and crouch down to pick up your hair as Heidi watches.

#

Unless she's making a demand, Heidi never speaks to you. It's as though you're a ghost. Her sweaters always reek of perfume and cigarettes, and without acknowledging your presence, she enters your space to air them out the window.

Outside of the room, the only time you see her is in history class. On the day Mr. Talbot gives a slide show presentation on apartheid, Heidi is sitting in the row behind you.

"I want you to get a sense of what it was like," Mr. Talbot says. In the dark classroom, "Whites only" signs light up the screen—Whites-only beaches, Whites-only benches, Whites-only bathrooms. Ch-ch-click. Now you see a picture of children standing behind barbed wire. It goes on and on. The flashing images become progressively more disturbing.

You feel that same drowning sensation you felt in eighth grade when Mrs. McDermott showed pictures of lynchings. Then and now, it's not the images that make you squirm—it's the fact that you're the only Black person in the room. You want to throw the projector against the wall and watch it break into little jagged fragments that fly through the air like a grenade exploding.

Then it occurs to you that this doesn't have to be your pain to bear. Your family is American. You've never even been to South Africa. This imagined distance comforts you until you hear Mr. Talbot say, "Yes, Heidi." You turn around to see Heidi's raised arm.

"I don't think this is fair," she says. "White Africans didn't do anything that Americans didn't also do."

"True," Mr. Talbot says, and Heidi smiles.

You want to slap that smug look off her face. It's the first time you feel the urge to hurt her.

#

You suspect that the reason Heidi doesn't like you is because you're Black, and this belief changes everything.

What was once beautiful is now flawed. Her nose is no longer charmingly upturned. It's a pig snout that reminds you of the pig-faced people in that one Twilight Zone episode about beauty being subjective.

You don't notice Heidi's clothes are cheap until your friend Steffi points this out one day when the two of you are lounging on your bed, eating chocolates. You come from the middle-class world of bland suburbs and flying commercial and being told that getting into the right college is the key to a good future. But Steffi, who is German, comes from a much posher world. Steffi lives in a world of gorgeous chalets and private planes and knowing that she'll never have to work for a living unless she really wants to.

"See," Steffi says, yanking down one of Heidi's sweaters draped over your window ledge. For the first time, you notice the fabric. It's acrylic and

has begun to pill. Steffi holds it out in front of her with two fingers as if it might infect her, and you both laugh.

#

Everything about Heidi annoys you to your core. You hate her high-pitched laugh and the odd way she pronounces words. It reminds you of a seal trying to speak. You hate her limp ponytail and dirty tennis shoes with dried mud on the outsoles. You even hate the sound of Heidi breathing. It seems amplified during study hall, when everyone in the dorm must sit quietly at their desks, and late at night when you can't sleep. On these restless nights, living with Heidi is like living with an invader.

#

Not only is Heidi a pig-nosed, loud-breathing bigot, she's also a thief. She stole the diamond pendant necklace your father gave you before he left to start a new family, and there's no way to get it back. The school year is over, and she's already flown back home. All that remains are a few of her boxes.

You feel the urge to kick one near her old desk with the word "fragile" written all over it in thick red ink. The box contains six crystal glasses carefully wrapped in paper, a gift Heidi got for her parents.

As you carry the box to the bathroom, you tell yourself you'll only break one.

You swaddle a glass with a towel and turn on the shower to muffle the sound of it shattering. It feels so cathartic, so sublime, that you can't help but break another, then another, until you have broken all six. The paper holds the broken pieces together. You place them back in their nesting spots and carry the box back into the room. It makes a clinking sound that reminds you of Christmas music and an incandescent thrill, thump, thump, thumps in your chest. With this act, this justified act, you have morphed from victim to victor.

But when you return to the bathroom, you spot your necklace behind the toilet, and this discovery changes everything. It makes you sick. You sit down on the cold bathroom floor and hug yourself. For months, your blossoming rage had seemed so solid, so righteous. It gave you a bump of energy every time you thought about how much you hated Heidi. But now, for the first time, the justification for your hatred seems hollow. Was it Heidi you hated, or was it something else all along?

When you remember the wreckage of crystal, waiting to be shipped, guilt grips you like a shackle. What will Heidi do when she realizes not a single glass managed to survive the voyage intact? Will she blame you? And if she blames you, will she blame you alone or blame your entire race? Will this blame lead to fury? And if she feels fury, will it run through her quickly, like water flowing through a stream, or will it feel much too hard and precious for her to ever let go?

Joanne Bolling (she/her) loves photography. Her work has appeared on the cover of *Frederick's Child Magazine*, *Problem Child* an *Alternative Literary Magazine*, and many other journals. She was awarded a PSA Silver Medal at the 71st Wilmington International Exhibition of photography.



Pier at Key West



Icicles in the Dark.

Joanna Cleary (she/her) is an emerging artist and recent graduate of University of Waterloo interested in using poetry to explore the intersection of sexuality, shame, and the body. Her work has previously appeared or is forthcoming in The /t&nz/ Review, The Hunger, Gordon Square Review, Every Pigeon, Always Crashing and Apricity Press, among others. Follow her on Instagram @joannacleary121.

Coyote Bones

Joanna Cleary

You told me twice about the old coyote
you'd found lying dead in the woods:
you'd dig up his bones in the spring,
then, you forgot where you'd chosen
to bury your stranger. In between,
we told each other what hurt—love,
its absence. I tried to be a hurt and sexy
animal for you. Pick me up, I said,
bathe me, dress me in little sweaters
and share the pics with Instagram filters.
Cuddle me late at night and whisper
all the secrets you no longer tell me,
clinging to me as lovers come and go.
Forget about your coyote from long ago.

You didn't listen. As the ground thawed,
you got in your truck and drove elsewhere.
I saw the carcass once—a dirt-encrusted,
enchanted thing. Before you moved out,
you washed the bones, touching them
in the careful way you used to touch me.
You said you found them so close by
that you could've walked. Months later,
I start looking for their burial ground,
only to realize I want to water the plants
at home instead. Before I leave, I kneel
and touch dirt. An image of your coyote:
fur slicked back in the rain, laughing
that rough laugh of all animals who hurt
just like us. He fades when I stand up.

My legs ache from crouching, so I shake
the stiffness off, then continue on my way.

Kimberly Moore (she/her) wrote educational scripts for videos you slept through in high school. Her work has appeared in Vignette and will be appearing in 34 Orchard. Her first novel has been shortlisted in two current competitions and she was a runner-up in the 2019 essay contest for The Fountain Magazine.

Poaching Souls

Kimberly Moore

The inside of my father's 1973 GMC Jimmy is lined with black paper, stuck to the interior with silver duct tape. Crudely cut holes are strategically placed in all directions for his Nikon camera with its heavy telephoto lens. My invitation to join my father today was a last-minute decision involving a disagreement with my mother. I have to be quiet, still, and stay on alert for any sign of the Amish.

"Why do people call them Mennonites around here?" I ask.

"Nobody seems to know what they are. I hear both Amish and Mennonites." He fidgets with his camera equipment in the dark.

"What's the difference?"

"Spelling." I can barely see him, but suddenly he is alert. "Hear that?"

I get out of his way as he lines up his camera with a hole to the road behind us. Through another hole, I see a distant horse and buggy. My father gives them verbal direction, the same way he talks to girls who pay him for photos. "Look up. Come on, baby. Look this way. That's right. Ooh, a kid. If that asshole would get his arm out of the way . . ."

Meanwhile, the camera whirs, and I enjoy espionage from the passenger side, across a newly plowed field. "Two boys are working over here."

"Be there in a sec."

I seem to always be in the way. I ask questions about what they are growing here, how they keep their clothes on without buttons or zippers, and why they speak German in church. He doesn't answer any of my questions.

Eventually, he looks away from his camera and asks, "Are you writing a book? Jesus."

"Why won't they let you take pictures of them?"

"One of them told me it has to do with a commandment about graven images, but I think it's superstition. They believe the film steals a part of the human soul." He needs more film. "Don't worry about it. They're ignorant and what they don't know isn't hurting them."

He shows me the perfect light of sunset as it ricochets and breaks into fractals on the working boys. He rushes to set up the shot, the way hunters aim to kill. I imagine these boys going home later, feeling sadness without knowing why. It could be like the feeling of a drastic haircut when I swing my head and feel off-balance when there's no ponytail to follow.

"How would you know if your soul was stolen?"

"It's just religious bullshit. Nobody's stealing anything."

My father's photographic prints of the Amish have won awards. He sells them and keeps the profits. That feels like theft, but I can't decide why. I go to church with my grandparents. When I mention anything about right and wrong that I've learned at church to my father, he tells me I won't always be gullible and stupid. I'm stuck in this confined space with him so I choose not to argue.

The knock on the driver's door shakes the truck and I almost scream.

"Goddammit," my father whispers. "Stay down." He points behind the back seat and I lie down on a pile of blankets near his bag of camera lenses. I hear the tearing of paper and the sound of the window rolling down. Light invades, along with the chirping of birds.

"Sir," a man says, "it's against our religion to make pictures."

"Then don't make any." The window rolls up again, darkness returns, and I hear more duct tape ripped from its roll. "It's the same bastard every time." He returns to the passenger window, but the boys have left the field.

"Another buggy back here," I tell him.

He leaps over the seat and peers through the hole. "Perfect. Good job, sweetheart."

"Do you know what Uncle David said? He said the Amish have shadow puppet shows on Saturday nights about your death."

We laugh together. "I'm sure they do." Then, he is lost in voyeurism again, talking to the buggy passengers as if they can hear him. Sometimes, he commands the horses and curses shadows from trees. The perfect light is fading when he lowers his camera.

The first stone cracks the window by my head. My father pulls me behind the seat again and throws a blanket over me. The pelting continues, denting the body of the truck. More glass cracks on all sides. I hear my father turn the ignition and peel the paper from the windshield. We are still under attack. Voices of men and children tell us to go away and mind our own business while my father laughs.

"This is what religion does to people!" he yells at me. "Keep your head under the blanket, baby doll!"

Later, in the darkroom, his trophies fade in from nowhere onto white paper, like the sorcery the Amish believe it to be. In the pan of swaying chemicals, a tight-lipped, young woman stares at me from under her black bonnet. Her constricted pupils sharpen first. I had hoped to avoid prosecution.

David has navigated meaning and illness through the arts since childhood. He lives quietly with his wife in Lawrence, Kansas.

The Time Spider

David Evan Krebs

The Carlsons won't be back till March, and even then they'll only be stopping in. Ben will be able to live here free and unharassed until then, and probably longer. It depends on how long it takes him to make the house rentable. It's only late August now. But the Carlsons aren't in a hurry. Fixing up the house isn't really the point. The point is that Mary Carlson's brother-in-law—a friend of Ben's brother—pities Ben and his failures. So as long as Ben keeps making the house slightly more livable, he's got a place to stay, free of charge.

The place is utterly charming. Grassy beach for a back yard. It'll be a timeshare when it's finished. Or an Airbnb. Oregon is a magnet.

#

“Jamie.”

It's six a.m., but not the early-morning kind of six a.m. The late-night kind. The kid is obviously stoned. Maybe a sixteen-year-old boy or an eighteen-year-old girl. Jamie is holding out the joint to Ben while he stands on the beach, wondering why he woke up after only two hours of sleep, in awe that he could walk along the beach in the wind when he did wake up. In college he would wake up after two hours of sleep and it was a nightmare, lying awake in his dorm room. Here, it's like he just keeps dreaming.

“Ben,” Ben says. He waves the joint away but does it in a way that lets the kid know it's cool and he's grateful. The kid seems to get it, shrugs, takes a drag.

“I know a cool spot,” the Kid says. Ben realizes he's capitalized it in his mind—the Kid. The Kid is black and skinny and has a hint of a flattop that belongs a quarter century ago. Ben imagines a jean jacket to go along with it, in place of the shapeless hoodie.

Ben watches the flattop and follows the Kid even though the Kid didn't really tell him to. It's like they're going somewhere to smoke pot together like kids do and don't need reasons or communication. Or maybe like Quaker Friends, Ben thinks, or like group therapy on a short-stay psych-ward where no one wants to talk, but they're all secretly glad to sit in silence with people who are in no position to judge them, where no one is expected to look good or say anything.

Ben wonders if he might end up taking a drag off the joint, but knows he won't.

The Spot—which he realizes he's also capitalized—is up against the leg of the pier. The tide is way out, and there's concrete around the leg, which is dry enough. It's still dark—the lights of the town make a flickery, phantom, fairy-tale town in Van Gogh strokes on the waves, dim and diffuse—unseelie fey living on the other side of a shroud, mocking Ben's side.

Reading his mind, the Kid says, "This is why it's the Spot." The Kid doesn't even point, but Ben knows that the Kid means the unseelie other-town. In his mind, Ben is smoking the joint too, back in college, not flunking out (getting As, even) but feeling like he is. But his hand stays still, here, not in college anymore.

"Cool place, Jamie." He uses the name because it reminds him of a TED talk he saw on getting people to like you. He figures the bond here is tenuous enough that anything counts. Or maybe he's alienating the Kid the way the TED talk alienated him. He wonders why the Kid showed him the Spot.

"You look like you've been up all night," the Kid says.

Maybe that's the answer, even though it's only partially true. Maybe that makes him cool automatically. "Mostly, yeah." He tries to think of something else to say, even though maybe that's not the point. He doesn't know how the TED talk applies here. He hedges his bets, says, "I guess a lot of people party around here." Rich folks are probably getting soused on the beach all summer long. Smoking them up probably opens doors to some interesting nights.

"I gotta go, man," Jamie says, and is already standing. It's abrupt, but Jamie gives Ben a long, lazy, measured look that says things are cool, that Ben didn't do anything wrong. Jamie huffs a laugh at nothing, or at something Ben doesn't notice, then leaves the still-burning roach clamped in an unbent paperclip on the cement foundation. Jamie gives it a pointed look, then looks back to Ben to let him know he can smoke it if he wants, like maybe he'll get over his white grown-up-ness enough to live a little as soon as no one is watching.

Ben carries it back home, catching its scent on the breeze until it goes out.

#

He's working on the second-story window frame when he first gets the idea. He's outside on the porch's roof, looking in at a barren room he's tearing the floor out of. He's stripping the paint off the window frame. He just needs to put something on it to keep the weather from eating the wood, for now. The salt in the air is a bitch.

The glass is old. Glass is a liquid and runs very slowly. The ripples make weird things out of the light, sometimes. Little things, but noticeable

ones. The light on the wall of the room, through the rippled glass—the slow fluid—looks vaguely like a distorted version of the ceiling of an indoor swimming pool, but frozen in time, muted—another glimpse of the unseeable village across from wherever Ben has always lived.

He once read that if you dose a spider with a tiny amount of caffeine, its web becomes chaotic. He thinks he might have seen a picture of it once in a science journal when he was a kid. And now the reflection of the water on a different time scale reminds him of the spider, because it's still, waiting, not trembling in the endless non-commitment of a swimming pool ceiling.

Ben goes inside, nails boards he pulled out of the floor to the wall in the pattern of the lines from the window. Vague hexagons. It doesn't matter that he's messing up the wall—it will have to come down eventually, anyway.

#

Ben stops to watch Theresa through the window for a moment before he opens the door to the general store. She's maybe fifteen years older than him. Whenever he comes in, he flirts with her. She thinks it's a joke, but it's not. He doesn't think she's just *acting* like it's a joke. He thinks she *believes* it is. He's too timid to make himself clear.

The *ding* of the door is swallowed by a gust of wind from the ocean, like it isn't even there. Like the store isn't.

"Hi, Ben," Theresa says. Maybe she saw the TED talk, too. Her boss, Floyd, glances back at him. He's younger than her, older than Ben, ambitious. Out to make a killing on vacationers. The store is nice, clean, but not so much that it doesn't feel like an escape for the clientele, like a dose of authenticity.

Theresa, Ben guesses—because they've barely spoken—is probably divorced, probably has a grown kid or two. Is sad, sad that she's working here, but probably has some private skill—like painting, or origami—that she does very well, that gives her self-esteem, or maybe that simply expresses that she has a rich inner life and so isn't too preoccupied with self-esteem. That's what he likes about her—all of it. But none of it is likely true.

"Anything you're looking for in particular?" Theresa asks.

"Just more paint, I'm afraid." He smiles at her. He's good in long, slow conversations, but bad at this. But maybe she is too, because they both smile the same kind of smile that maybe says that about them. Her face is sunworn, windworn, her hair a little naturally bleached and dry. So maybe she's been here for a while. She probably grew up here, went away for college, came back. He doesn't mind that he's filling in too many blanks. He'll forget them when he needs to, when he learns something.

He drags out his time in the store, catching her looking at him once. She looks away. He'd like to imagine she's blushing. He lets his imagination run away with him.

#

The spider lives there, under the pier. The Time Spider that wove the time web where he's stuck—she's why he's always been here, repairing this house on the beach, between the real town and the unseelie fey town that mocks the real town.

He imagines smoking the joint that Jamie offered him that one time. It's almost 9:30 p.m., but it's still a blue-glowing light out. Like it was at 6:30 a.m. that one morning.

He watches to see if Jamie will emerge out of the nowhere-expanse of the beach again. But the Kid is nowhere to be seen.

The joint he's not smoking, that Jamie isn't offering him, reminds him of college again. And his grad degree. And of not being an artist despite hammering boards to the wall in the shape of the light. His degree was in literature but he doesn't write, or even read much. Mary Carlson's brother-in-law is a friend of Ben's brother, and he knows Ben is really smart, is really gentle, and doesn't hold jobs well.

The Spider isn't real. Ben knows that, but sometimes it seems like the only explanation.

#

Jamie takes a really big drag. Like he-or-she is really into smoking tonight—not just puffing idly, out of habit. Maybe Jamie is expressing feelings about the ocean, like maybe the ocean is smoking *them*. Or maybe that's Ben's idea of a joke about how stoners think, a dig at something he wants to believe he's outgrown.

He's telling Jamie about the Time Spider, because Jamie is stoned and so might make sense of it, or not remember it, or lose track of its strangeness in already-strange thoughts.

He's telling Jamie about how the Time Spider lives under the pier in a web made of light on the waves, and how she's the reason he's always been here, repairing this house that isn't broken or fixed, where nobody lives, not even him. He explains how he's probably always—or at least since the Spider caught him—been between the unseelie fey and the rich vacationers' hideaway. He's always had the Kid to talk to; he just says that: "the Kid." The Kid scoffs, like none of this is news, or like the Kid is used to hearing rants from uptight grown-ups loosened at the edges by champagne or coke. That it's desperation in Ben is a fine point Ben hopes is lost on Jamie.

"I know it's not real. The Time Spider." Ben looks at the Kid, suddenly worried that the Kid thinks he's crazy.

A warm glow lights up the Kid's face. Ceramic pipe. Everything reminds Ben of college.

Ben lies back on the beach, the field of stars unmooring him, like maybe he's slipped out of his body. Maybe he's looking down at his body now, and the stars are what it looks like without his corporeal senses in the way. He can't see the Time Spider. He thought he'd be able to see her if only

he could get out of his body. But he can't. Maybe that means she doesn't exist, or maybe only that she's hidden behind layers of the time-vortex's fabric.

Ben props himself up on his elbows, needing abruptly to be back in his body. Jamie is still sitting there, but not smoking anymore. Ben wishes they had a fire. It's not that cold—just dark.

"We're never leaving, you know?" Ben says to Jamie.

"I know, man," the Kid says.

Ben doesn't know if Jamie is humoring him, and does this for all the tragic adults, or if the Kid really *gets* it and basically knows about the Time Spider already. Or maybe Jamie knows what Ben *really* means—like a therapist would—even though Ben doesn't know himself.

"We've always been here," Ben says into the wind.

Jamie doesn't say anything.

Ben lies back down, looks at the stars that are maybe his body. He expects the Kid to leave, but the Kid just sits there.

Maybe the time vortex is tightening—it's not just these days, this summer, the house, and the ocean and Theresa anymore. Maybe it's just *now*, here, on his back, staring at the stars, Jamie staring at the ocean with no face—just the backside of a hoodie. Maybe Jamie was the Time Spider all along; maybe the Spot is the center of the web. Maybe Ben never should have come here.

He laughs. Jamie laughs too. There's no unseelie village, because the lights from the town have all gone out.

Nate Maxson is a writer and performance artist. The author of several collections of poetry, he lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

The Domestic

Nate Maxson

I broke a glass this morning, accidentally dropping it on the kitchen floor,
careless of me

And kneeling down after having put on my shoes, picking up the shards with a
paper towel and carefully with my fingers

One considers the narrowing of the world, the iris shot of one's time down to
small domestic tragedies and miniature omens

How we wash our cars either right before it rains or on the same day as a
funeral but don't quite understand why

Something about spilled milk and bended spoons, forks blackened, rooms
gone to dust and white sheets on furniture that no one's using

When I was small I remember living in houses that the adults around me
described as having been previously owned by do-it-yourselfers, with
flickering bulbs and crudely tiled bathrooms being the result

I felt like the spirits of the old men who hung the drywall and put in the new
windows were still there with us, living in the wood and concrete, it reminds
me of a fairy tale

Hans Christian Andersen's "The Snow Queen" where a piece of glass goes to
the little girl's heart and makes her grow cold, that's the one, in hindsight
that's the key to this whole silly endeavor

Tender, the curved glint on the fingertip, and if the glass should vanish? They
might find the missing piece years later, in the farthest corner, under the
refrigerator or on the tip of my tongue, previously unnoticed

The way the light forms small rainbows at the edge, it's like daylight turned
coincidence, the tremble in the hand, foretold to shatter

Nathan Alling Long (they/them he/him) grew up in a log cabin in western Maryland, lived for several years on a queer commune in Central Tennessee, and now lives in Philadelphia. Their work has appeared on NPR and in various journals, including Glimmer Train, Tin House, and Crab Orchard Review. Their collection of fifty flash fictions, The Origin of Doubt, was a 2019 Lambda Literary Award finalist, and their current manuscript, Everything Merges with the Night, was a finalist for the Iowa Fiction Award.

Takahashi at the Desk

Nathan Alling Long

For Judy Copeland

At the end of class, Takahashi placed his small, nearly translucent hands on the edge of Mrs. Ellison's wood desk. He liked to touch the raw wood that had worn free of the once shiny veneer. In Japan, he had never felt such a thing. The furniture there was either ultra new—clean steel and arched plastic—or made of an old wood that had somehow perfectly preserved its surface.

To distract Mrs. Ellison from his fingers which stroked the desk edge over and over, he would ask her questions about the assignments she had given for homework. Other students simply raised their hands high above their heads in class, or called their questions out loud, but ever since his family had moved to North Carolina for his father's business a year ago, Takahashi had taken advantage of his foreignness, of his presumed quietude. He only talked to his teachers one-on-one—that is, up close. In this way, he could look intimately at the shades and creases of their skin, at the unusual undulations of their fat, and at the size and complex colors of their eyes. They never ceased to look foreign, like fantastic animals one visits at a zoo.

How different everything was here, from the taste of candy to the shape of plates, from the acrobatics his mouth had to perform when speaking English to the size and brightness of light fixtures in stores.

Throughout fourth grade this year, Takahashi never left class without asking Mrs. Ellison some question, for there was the feel of the edge of her desk to enjoy before returning home, but also the pale blue of her eyes. It was a combination of texture and vision that was almost too much to withstand. And, to be honest, this desk and the clean piercing blue of his teacher's eyes were some of the only things Takahashi enjoyed in his new home.

#

So there stood Takahashi that afternoon, looking above Mrs. Ellison's stack of teacher's editions and a large rolled up map of the state of North Carolina which she had pulled down from the wall earlier with such accidental force it had come off the roller all together and now lay awkwardly across her desk. On the world map on the opposite wall, Takahashi's country formed only small squiggles in the Pacific Ocean, marked by a single, unfamiliar word: Japan. He never looked over at that map, for the size of Japan on the vast surface of the map seemed to only erase where he had come from.

As Takahashi waited for Mrs. Ellison to notice him at the edge of her desk, for her to cast her huge lupine eyes upon him, he contemplated what he could ask her. The homework for today was to make a diorama out of a Kleenex box, which she had miraculously provided for each of the twenty-two children in the class. She had explained exactly what a diorama was and told them they could make a historical, personal, or fantastic scene—virtually anything they wished. “Be creative and use all the space inside,” she'd said. What then, Takahashi wondered, was there to ask her?

Mrs. Ellison watched the last of the students collect their things and leave, and although she should have been accustomed to finding Takahashi there at her desk, started when she turned to discover Takahashi, his tiny translucent fingers moving across the edge of her desk.

“Taki,” she said, taking a breath, “What? What can I do for you?”

Takahashi had to think quickly. He looked into Mrs. Ellison's eyes and wondered if he saw comfort or fear within them. He was unsure, and so he closed his own eyes and felt the smoothness of worn wood below his fingers. This afternoon, its surface reminded him of something very unusual he had recently felt, something very American which he could not now exactly recall.

“Can I,” he began, his eyes still closed. A muted orange color came into his vision then, perhaps because the wood felt like that strange hard root vegetable he'd felt the other day at the grocery store.

“Can you what?” Mrs. Ellison asked.

Takahashi opened his eyes and saw her lift her head in a gesture of patience. “I'm sorry,” he said. “I mean, what is name for these vegetables, orange and hard? Sweet and soft when you cook them?”

Mrs. Ellison furrowed her brow. “Do you mean sweet potatoes?”

“Yes,” Takahashi said. “I do.”

“Is that what you wanted to ask me?” Mrs. Ellison tilted her head. She then looked among the folders on her desk, as if his answer might be a long time coming.

Above, the florescent lights hummed. Otherwise, the classroom was silent. All the other children had already left the building.

“No,” Takahashi said, though he regretted saying this, for he had no other question for his teacher. He glanced down and saw that his fingers were still rubbing the edge of the desk, and it seemed as though he could not stop them unless he brought his other hand up and pulled himself away. His hands felt as though they were no longer his. This made him panic, for what if his body continued to leave his control? Was this what happened if you lived too long in a foreign country? He tried to will his hand to stop, but it would not.

He just stroked the smoothness, like the skin of a sweet potato, again and again. What a lovely sounding vegetable, he thought, retrieving himself from some dark place. A *sweet* potato.

Suddenly, the idea of sweet potatoes seemed to him the answer to all of his problems, all of his doubts about this new place he found himself in. “Can I,” he said again, “use it in my diorama?”

Mrs. Ellison held two files in her hand, limply, as if surrendering to this exchange and giving up the idea of returning to her work. “A sweet potato?” she asked. Her lips pressed into a gesture that seemed between pleasure and disbelief. “Why would you want to do that?”

“For peace,” Takahashi said. It seemed the most obvious thing to him now. “They are symbols of peace in Japanese.” He said this as if fully convinced it was true.

“In Japan?” she asked, correcting. “They have sweet potatoes in Japan?”

Takahashi slowed his fingers down by pressing harder into the wood. His hand nearly came to a stop. He remembered benimo, the sweet potato he used to eat after school back in Okinawa. He simply nodded, reverently, as though he were affirming some great cultural legend.

“And what is the name for them, Taki, in Japanese?” Mrs. Ellison asked.

Takahashi was surprised by this. He pulled his hand away and placed it on his chest. Why would she want to know this word? She had never even said his full name after the first day. Benimo did not seem like a good word, the right word. He liked sweet potato better. But what would she know? He could say anything. “We call it Takahashi,” he said. He smiled and began to rub the desk edge again, more confidently.

“*You* are sweet potato? That is *your* name?” Mrs. Ellison turned now, dropping the files on the desk and tilting her head in surprise.

Takahashi nodded again and noticed that his fingers were now sliding back and forth quickly, like some frantic set of commuters. He felt a deep elation. *I am sweet potato*, he thought. *I am the sweet potato*.

And perhaps he was, for hadn’t he just invented now some kind of new language, one in which each word in Japanese could stand for one in English, but not as one might find in dictionaries? And in this new language, his name, of course, could mean whatever he wanted.

“Well, that makes sense, Taki.” Mrs. Ellison said. “Now I see why you want sweet potatoes in your diorama.” And then, as if it had just come to her, she added, “So, your name is also a symbol for peace?”

Takahashi nodded again. *Yes*, he thought. *Why not?* For wasn’t he, alone, managing to bridge the entire world and all its difference, standing there at Mrs. Ellison’s desk? *He* was the one who was reaching out, touching the surface of this other world, gazing into the strange blue eyes of his teacher. How much more could she, or his parents, or anyone, expect of him, adrift in this new continent, this boy who was only ten years old, this brand new sweet potato?

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Congregation

C. J. Trotter

She's been collecting white feathers since her father died,
plumes she sees on the street or anywhere she can find them,
boardwalks, tree pits, desk drawers, even file cabinets,

everywhere, she says, when you just pay attention,
small visitations she believes come from the beyond.
She feels compelled to explain them to the men

she meets—strangers she invites to her bedroom—
since she's collected so many they've become a sort of
soft, floaty carpet. Sometimes she tells the men they're

part of an art piece she won a big prize for, back
when she had a scholarship to a fancy art school,
perky breasts, and dreams as big as the sky, when

the caption under her yearbook photo read
Most Likely to Succeed, before she left school
to keep an eye on her father, track his garage visits

and gas gauges, hide the razors, rifles and ropes,
before she forgot belts could be tied to doorknobs
and she'd become an orphan at 22. Before

her bedroom turned into a fairyland of sorts,
with every breath of air, every movement, lifting
the congregation of angel plumes into the air,

making them sail and hang and fill the space
like the insides of snow globes her father gave her,
back when hope was as verifiable as gravity.

after Sarah Freligh

Preeti Vangani (she/her) is an Indian writer. Her first book of poems, *Mother Tongue Apologize* (RLFPA Editions), was the winner of the RL India Poetry Prize. Her work has been published across genres in BOAAT, Gulf Coast, Threepenny Review, BuzzFeed, and Huffington Post among other places. She is the Poetry Editor for Glass, a Poet Mentor at Youth Speaks and holds an MFA in Writing from the University of San Francisco.

Work Wives

Preeti Vangani

After being in a semi-coma for over three months, mummy had finally spoken without being artificially stimulated. *She asked for bhajiya-pav, her favorite, can you believe it, she was so clear, not confused like before,* my dad chirped loudly on the phone as I waited in line to receive my MBA degree, my graduation robe violently flapping in the Ahmedabad wind. Our school lawn filled with a sea of chairs occupied by my classmates' families, I imagined mum in the front row, as I walked down the giant stage, set up under the Ashoka tree. If she'd been even slightly able, she would have definitely been here. She'd never missed a single thing I went up on stage for. Once, I was on the Set Team for a school play, switching props between scenes, and to my embarrassment, she clapped and whistled from the front row, each time my silhouette appeared in the dark.

Scroll in hand, I walked down stage carefully in mum's cream sari, scared that it's delicate lace border might get stuck in something sharp. The wind had calmed down and people started taking photos and lining up for the reception buffet. In the dinner queue, I looked up the earliest flight out to Mumbai. It was in two hours. And mum loved a good surprise. I pressed Purchase and felt strangely content, despite not having eaten. My shoulders loosened, as if I'd just taken off a heavy backpack I'd been lugging around for a long unquantifiable time.

#

On the flight I fidgeted with the red ribbon on my scroll. I'd finished first in class and landed the highest paying job. It didn't come as a surprise because, after all, this is exactly what mum had slogged so hard with me for, all these years. Not because she cared about number one or the money but perhaps because she was married off a semester before she could finish college. *Of course I was no scholar, I was bewakoof, mostly Cs and Ds, but still, they could wait a little bit,* long ago I'd overheard her complaining about her parents to her sister. When I reached the hospital, my mother was not in her bed. They must have shifted her to a better ward, a floor for non-coma

patients, I thought, running excitedly to the information desk, counting down seconds to when I could have mummy hold my scroll.

#

Soon, I started my marketing job where I met Radhika, my first work friend. Our quick closeness made everyone on the floor joke that she was my work wife. Or me, her work wife. It was the same thing. Radz and I went through a long orientation period together. Our company sold soaps and dishwashing detergent and deodorant. And the final consumer for these were always women. More precisely, our target was an optimistic housewife (non-working) who played a significant role in household decisions. Optimism defined as willing to try new products. The consumer, we understood, was always a woman, unless we were selling men's deodorant. Then the consumer was defined as *a boy, a dirty boy, a very very dirty boy who needed just a little boost to work his charm on women*. This one-line consumer definition had entered the hallmark of fame in our team. Frequently peddled around in meetings as the golden example of specificity and sharpness, it was written by our colleague, Ankur, who'd been in the company long enough to help us new kids navigate its ways but not long enough to be our boss. He couldn't even if he tried, his face wouldn't let him, his cheeks soft as boyishness itself, eyes, light gray, handshakes soft, and a y-shaped cleft sat on his chin adding yet another dimension to his already dimpled smile. He'd soon become my boyfriend except we would never publicly say boyfriend and girlfriend. Because, what if my father found out? Because, what if the office thought less of us? Because, what if we were more?

#

Our training period was only just over, and Radhika and I found ourselves in 40 degree Celsius Madurai, shipped off by the company for three months of grueling fieldwork in sales. The morning of our first sales route, as we walked, heat nested in the backs of our formal full-sleeve kurtas, coiled underneath our bra straps, stuck behind our knees. We were to cover 40 stores on foot each day. 200 in a week. We worked as a team going store to store taking orders from middle aged retailers for our new line of rose-scented toilet soaps. Most shop owners, not used to seeing saleswomen, mistook us for customers, some took pity on us and placed a small order, and some asked us why we weren't married yet or told us women should stick to easier jobs like teaching or tailoring. The sun hot as coal, we made our way through sleepy gullies, jealous of autorickshaw drivers taking a nap inside their vehicles. We walked past residential blocks with AC units dripping water, schools and colleges shut for summer vacations, trees still as statues—as if everything around us was joyfully and rightfully hibernating from the heat.

We trolled our heavy company-branded bags across concrete footpaths, broken gutters, and skywalks, all the way rattling with samples and merchandising material. *Only two types of people are out in such heat,*

madam, a shopkeeper joked with us, offering us water, *dogs and salesmen*. In our break time, we drank coconut water or fresh lime juice. Except we were both cursed with exceptionally small bladders and public toilets on our routes were grimy, often just a rickety door with an unreliable latch. So, we took turns covering for the other. She protected me often by holding out the length of her dupatta. As I squatted on the dusty roads, through the dupatta I could see her silhouette holding me in her watch as she kept me safe from the gaze of the world. I felt good then, cared for, and also a bit silly and exposed, as I often did with mummy.

#

Radz was beautiful, much more beautiful than me. Except for her one bad eye that made her look like a side actor who always gets cast as the loyal and funny best friend. She suffered from epiphora, a condition in which her eye held and stored excessive fluid in her tear duct, blurring her vision. When simpler remedies like eye drops or a warm compress didn't work, she had to be taken to the hospital so the doctor could drain her eye out. This happened often and unpredictably.

We were a month in into our sales stint, and having achieved our target at 110%, at the end of our route, we sneaked in some local beers to celebrate quietly in her room, so as not to catch the attention of other company staff in the shared guest house, fearing the stories they'd carry back about us to our bosses. Instead of blaring music, we were singing dance numbers softly, shimmying our shoulders, taking sips from the same bottle, when her eye started watering. I helped her insert the drops, but her eye just kept on leaking, so I made a rough glove out of toilet paper to sop up as much of the thick fluid trickling down her cheek, worried if I was pressing down too hard, as she googled emergency clinics.

Forty minutes of driving later, the government dispensary doctor wouldn't treat her until he got the permission forms signed by someone related. *But she's my sister*, Radz said, pointing to me. I nodded urgently and signed my name with her last name. Radz started putting me down as her emergency contact even after we returned to Mumbai. *I like you more than my own sister*, she said to me once, her head pushed back, in our office bathroom, as I held out a thick bunch of paper towels, waiting for her artificial crying to stop.

#

Throughout my student years, the month before final exams, I'd wake up at 4:30 a.m. to get some studying done before the day kicked my butt. I was a big grouch about waking up early so mummy would set an alarm for 3:45 a.m. and try waking me up every ten minutes until I was finally, truly up. Not snoozing on the study table, drooling on my textbook. One year we had abnormally long hours of power cuts. I remember sitting up with my history notes in a bed of my own sweat as my mother sat half-asleep, fanning me with

an old women's magazine. Rheum still crusted in the corner of my eyes, sweaty and sleep deprived, I asked her, more frustrated than serious, *why do I need to study so much?* And she whispered in the little English she knew, *so you can learn to be independent.*

#

Radz approved of him, when I told her I had a crush on Ankur. Ankur and her had grown up in the sister cities up north, Delhi and Noida, where the everyday version of Hindi sounds more respectful than the dialect of Hindi I spoke in. They used the plural 'hum' instead of the singular 'main' for 'I'. 'Aap' not 'Tu' for 'you', imparting the receiver respect. A shiny kindness laced their words, like silver foil over cakes of mithai. My Hindi, in comparison, sounded cheap, pedestrian, utterly casual.

#

Still shy to go out on dates, Ankur and I made a ritual of taking breaks at the same time. The first time we were together alone, we were in our office pantry, and he kept his one foot out the door, to give off the impression to any suspecting employee that our being here together was purely accidental. He asked me why I didn't bring food from home, given I stayed with my family. I told him about mummy.

How did it happen, he asked.

I am not exactly sure, I said, pressing my nails hard into the bottom of the paper cup, it was the night I graduated, my dad told me she was getting better actually. It was the second relapse that did it, in her lung this time and the doctor said stage 3, recovery is hard from chemo's side effects, but you know, my dad is a hopeful man, we kept our hopes up, so I wanted to surprise her, just give her my certificate, say look I finished.

My boss walked in, in his too high trousers, patted Ankur on the back and asked us if we wanted to do an Escape Room hangout as a team bonding activity soon. *Fantastic idea,* Ankur said.

My boss left and I continued, but when I reached the hospital, she was already in the morgue, sudden heart failure, the doctor said, sometimes the body can surprise itself, get better before it absolutely gives up. The old nurse at the reception said, I am the same nurse my dear, don't you remember, I delivered you, did your mummy's c-section too, you look just like her, you're like my daughter. Don't ever feel alone.

How did you take it, Ankur asked. What a strange question, I didn't know how to answer.

Just relax my dad had said, *you don't have to join any office,* after the funeral ceremony. *I'll give you whatever salary, just stay at home, no need to go outside.* I didn't know how to relax given my mother was dead. Who'd iron my shirt for my first day of work? But dad was different, he hated me being outside the house. The night I left for school he declared I had saddened him

so much he'd go on an indefinite fast. My mother told me he'd forgotten his declaration by breakfast.

I am in the fifth stage of grief, I think, I said, do you know the stages? Did you ever read The Five People You Meet in Heaven? That book helped me so much, I said, already having forgotten the author's name, hoping he wouldn't quiz me about it.

I am so, so, so sorry, he said. *Hum kya karein tumhare liye?* Meaning what can I or we do for you? He was sorry, I was sorry, we were all sorry. I never knew where to look when people said sorry. I fixed my gaze on his office ID instead and nodded my head as if in acceptance of his apology or my grief. He always looked photo-ready good. Photo-ready clean.

#

I always asked him to cum on my face. I hadn't had sex with anyone before him, hadn't seen porn even. Over a few tries, I did learn how to make him cum though. A long scratch down his back would do it. We couldn't stop fucking. We fucked before work. After work. If we had ten extra minutes at lunch, we'd drive to his house across the street on his motorcycle and fuck. I didn't know how to cum. He didn't know how to make me cum. We never spoke about it. I never looked down directly at sex while having sex. I was afraid of what mum would think. But the fucking felt good.

When he was inside me, I was the farthest away from the usual clutter inside my brain, farthest away from wanting to be at the top of everything, from words like career and consumer, from dad asking me to stay home, from thinking about mummy, the color of her skin when the nurse peeled the white sheet off of her, crescents of nail polish still on her fingers. I'd lick all the cum he left on me. From between my fingers, under my breast, the hardening spill on my chest. Unlike at home, I had less trouble falling asleep when he was with me. Often he drove me home on his motorcycle, navigating potholes, all the way from Ghatkopar to Dadar in peak traffic, car horns and fumes from exhaust pipes lacing the humid air, lights from billboards shining all around us. I'd rest my cheek on his back, one ear blocked from the commuter chaos of Mumbai unfolding all around me and fall into a gentle sleep. If there were a speed breaker coming up, he'd gently tap my knee seconds before to protect me from the jolt. And there were a lot of speed breakers.

#

Radhika was my alibi for my relationship with him. Every other Friday, I took permission from my dad for a sleepover at her house. When I was with him, according to dad, I was with her. And I was never not with her. Even when I was with him at his house, she was only a door away. They were neighbors, living in the same rent subsidized quarters our company provided. With him still asleep, on Saturday mornings, I'd take myself to hers, lie down next to her, sushi-rolling myself into her sheets. When my dad called to check on me, I'd show him she was right there, attached to me, proof I was where I

was supposed to be. When she came over to our home for stay-overs, my father would bring out his best whiskey for us, allow us small pegs with Coke, say to her, *I am so happy you are her friend. Take care of each other, beta. It finally looks like she's healing.*

#

Friday nights when we got ready together to go to the club, Radz would say, both of us too close to her mirror, *see, this, from here to here*, sliding her hand from the curve in her breast to the bulge of her hip, *could be a ten on ten but fuck my fucking eye, I am at best a six now or maybe seven.* I'd copy the way she drew thick lines over her lids, my amateur hand shaking. She'd pull me away, erase my untidy lines with the sides of her cool palm. But with or without kajal, with her bad eye, she perennially looked like she was about to cry. When we'd return drunk and tired, before turning in at Ankur's, I'd do one last round of eyedrops for her. Hold the bottle to her eye, her gaze fluttering, as if she were entering another world. It reminded me of the last time I'd seen mummy alive before she'd become comatose. Already a lot gone. Chemotherapy had stolen most of her cognition, she was half her size, eyes shuttling like ping pong balls between wall and ceiling. Waiting by her bed, when dad was not in sight, I'd made clapping actions in front of her face, as if I was swatting flies, to get her attention, hoping my clapping might jolt the tiniest sliver of her memory back. I mimed clapping, slow, then fast, then the speed at which she did when I was on stage, very quietly though, I didn't want any audience to my desperation. *Can you tell me who I am*, I asked her, *tell me who am I, come on* and I clapped and clapped.

#

Humein kabhi koi nahi milega, Radz said to me, waiting for the eyedrop to take—crying through her disorder and her sadness—*I/we won't ever find a guy.*

I dug my nose in her hair, laying next to her, imitating her voice & her honey coated Hindi—*humein koi bhi ladka mil sakta hai*—I/we can get any guy I/we want, *you know you're far prettier than me, right?* And I started crying too. It was easy for me to cry. All I had to think of was the way mummy said the word, *indee-pendent*. Or the way my father cursed when mum and I returned home later than his curfew for us. Or remember the monsoon night mum and I were stuck on the bus returning home from maasi's, in a pre-cellphone era, relishing our double-decker toasted cheese sandwiches, the bus moving inch by inch through overflowing gutters, not fretting about the umbrellas we didn't carry, our mouths baptized by full-fat cheese, the two of us suspended in a delay that was beyond our hands, in the hands of the rain that forced within us a slowdown, against which even dad's anger would come unfounded, it was something else, to be stuck on a road with my mother—to feel free and protected at once, a feeling I never felt with dad, one I could conjure but only experience in fragments, if ever.

I really miss her, you know. I wish it was him who'd died, I said, my grip loose around Radz's waist like dew on a drooping petal. The vileness of my wish became clear as I spoke, and it made me cry even louder. I had done it again. Invited my dead mother into a room to outrun someone else's sadness. I did this often, even with Ankur. Even with dad. *Don't start with your self-pity again,* dad would say. What else could I do though, to hide my powerlessness.

#

We fit well into each other's lives, Radz and I. Because I knew she'd always be insecure about her face, and she knew I could never be rescued from my mother's loss. I could be driven away from it, though, whenever Ankur fucked me or lay next to me. Laying next to him felt like a kind of happiness, no, a kind of relief that wasn't conditional. It felt necessary and natural like a good sleep, except I was awake, awake enough to feel that the sadness of her death had been blocked or diluted, like she was now someone I knew only from afar.

#

Ankur was stern that we maintain our distance at work, but on my pleading he agreed to take short post-lunch walks around our company's end-of-the-road factory, where they manufactured soap. Our walks were haunted by whirring motor sounds and the smell of palm oil and fatty matter vapours thickening the air. That stench, sour and pungent, often made me want to throw up, but I'd suppress it by reminding myself of the luxury of these few work-day solitary minutes I got with him. He wouldn't allow me to touch him at work. Sometimes our hands brushed. *Enjoy this,* I'd tell myself, *enjoy this,* making of the slightest enjoyment a prayer.

#

Obviously, my objective was marriage, I'd think to myself all the nights I slept alone, waiting for him to send a final good night text. The idea of wifehood grew on me. I already felt a part of his family. When his mother called, we'd receive the call on speaker and talk while doing chores around his flat, fill up our minutes with weather talk and questions of home improvement. How many whistles to pressure cook the dal? And the rice? How to tell when pears were ripe? *My beta,* she called me, as she did him, *my child.* I'd often ask her about her health and feel the performance build in my voice, as if I was reading aloud lines from a script I'd just been handed—the words felt right, but the cadence or emotion felt awry. How perverse it felt to ask after her when I wasn't around when mummy needed me.

#

Ankur and I opened up our partnered life to Radz. She came along on my/our afternoon walks. With her, we could be more us. People didn't stare at me/us as much. I/we called her for drinks, brunch, grocery runs, movie and game nights and nights where all we did was dissect the personalities of

everyone at work. She had a car, he had a motorcycle, I had a father in another corner of the city to get to. Often she/they would drop me home in her car, and they'd return together to their subsidized housing. Often, they'd come to the office in her car. *Where's the bike*, I asked him. *It's not good for her eyes*, he said. I was the first to be promoted between us three. I was now labeled an independent contributor, given a little cubicle. Nothing really changed. Except there was a glass wall between me/us and them. On our walks she/him/they often made inside jokes I didn't get at all. Although I was the one inside. Inside the glass box. It's nothing I thought, and I wondered how to get my target group to buy more of my brand's promise.

#

Radz started missing work. A lot. It was a day here and there first, then whole weeks. It was her bad eye being bad again. It was the eye watering and refusing to stop. Her doctor said surgery, said, sooner rather than later. At about the same time, Ankur said on one of our walks, he'd rather focus on work, *I want a break*, he said, *tired of doing the weekday-weekend thing you make me do, I need to focus on being a better manager*.

I said, *I am ready to talk to my father, let's take this forward*. He said he didn't want me to. And then it was just me texting him. And waiting. And texting. The string of texts looked like I was talking to myself. Dad often called mummy a madwoman for talking to herself, but this was before the cancer. The cancer had softened him, that's what it took. I took myself to Radz and cried. And she cried when I told her how alone I was. It was her eye crying. It was me crying. I cried that I needed him/her. She said he seemed busy.

It must be work pressure, or nothing at all, or I was overthinking. I asked, *what did I do wrong?*

She said, *Distract yourself, I'll be back in no time*. I kept going into work and left funny post-it notes at Radz's desk. Often, an old inside joke. Often, a stick-figure drawings from our stint in Madurai. I slept with someone from finance. Then operations. Then both at the same time but never together. Yet, I didn't feel distracted.

#

Nobody on the floor spoke about why he stopped talking to me. When I mined for signs of sympathy in my team's eyes, there were none. And why would there be? After all, there was no boyfriend and girlfriend. There was nothing to speak of. Just like nobody I slept with ever spoke about why I didn't cum. I didn't know why we called it sleeping around. Nobody actually slept. I definitely didn't. I was awake. Awake and angry all the time. *Jobs give you stress you don't need*, my father said. *Just leave it if you don't like it*.

It was Ankur who left the job first. He was made a better offer from one of our competitors in Delhi. A position higher than mine. The whole department was sad, including me, that we'd lose the talent who had cracked

the male consumer open for us. *Anyone would be lucky to have you*, our boss said. I stopped sleeping all together. I started being inside the house so much, now my father was worried why I was always inside. *Did you fight with Radhika? How is her eye? Did you say something to her? Should I speak to her?* Then he advised, *get married beta, have children, your restlessness will be settled*. When he was out of ideas, he'd slump down next to me on the sofa, and we'd let the dull sounds of late-night TV kidnap our senses.

#

Radz's surgery was the day Ankur was leaving, or perhaps he'd planned his departure around it. I took a day off work to see him alone before he left, just for a moment, but there was no way to get him to respond. I wanted to know, if not for what we had, at least the occasion of physical parting would birth in him some residual feelings for me. Maybe he'd say, *I was a nice person*, or *it was good while it was*—something satisfactory. Or maybe I just wanted the sick joy of an afternoon quickie. Imagine if someone got me a sampling of the last of my mother's cooking, a pleasure as small as that. Or even just one kiss. I'd fill that kiss with all the futures I had wanted. It could be that simple.

#

His door was slightly open when I reached. I rang the bell and went in as if entering the house for the first time. The kitchen was empty. His name sprawled in red sketch pen on an assortment of packed brown boxes. His/our mattress gone, the twin bed frame left behind for the next employee. He was winding his laptop charger into a neat coil when I stepped in. He turned around and looked predictably annoyed to see me.

Can I at least give you a hug before you leave? He said it wasn't time yet. His flight wasn't until after the surgery, and like me, he was headed to the hospital. I walked around the house checking if I could be helpful with any packing. *I hope she isn't in a lot of pain after*, I said.

Even if she is, she is strong enough to handle the pain. He always pronounced the *as thee*. In his *thee*, even pain felt holy. I sat next to him on the slatted bed frame, as he ordered a cab. I rested my head on his shoulder. *Please, don't start this now*, he said, moving himself away from me.

Please, I said, *what are you punishing me for? Nobody is punishing anyone*, he lifted my hand off his thigh and I leaned in to kiss him. He pushed my shoulders away with both hands, but I dragged my face closer in until he gave in and kissed me back. I stood up and dragged him along, my back to the wall. I was wearing my blue linen wrap dress. The one the guy from finance called my *fuck me now* dress. I was about to unknot the thin tie, but he'd already lifted me, pulled my underwear down to my knees. It wasn't the longest sex we'd had, or the shortest. It was a quick, unsatisfactory fuck. The suddenness of it, at least more enjoyable than any of its outcomes. But also its occurrence itself felt like a win.

His phone screen buzzed, it was Radhika's mother, in town to see Radz through her surgery and after care.

Since when did you start speaking to her family?, I asked, tugging harder on the knot in my dress.

You won't understand baba, they trust me with her and what she's going through. He went into the balcony to receive the call, so I couldn't hear him.

But they could also be trusting me, right? What am I missing?

He came back out, chin pressed to shoulder, continuing to appear busy on his phone and said matter-of-factly, *We've been, listen, we didn't want you to get hurt. Besides, I didn't want her condition to worsen with the drama you would make after you found out.* He rolled his sleeves twice over, making sure he wasn't leaving anything valuable behind, as I tailed him, adjusting my dress. *Come on quick, he rolled his luggage out, taxi isn't going to wait forever.*

Found out what, Ankur?

Why don't you get it? We are together now, I mean, we have been.

Do you mean you, you and Radz? Are you having sex?

It's not only sex, aap samjho baat ko, we are close.

Close as in shut or intimate. I felt my ears turning hot, following him into the cab. On the way, I cried much louder than the hurt I was feeling, hoping that the demonstration of my outburst would make him pity me, or make him feel more terribly about what he'd done. *So you're not even going to apologize.*

Apologize for what, he said.

#

We waited in the lobby as my/our friend underwent surgery. Ankur continued receiving goodbye calls through those waiting hours, giving him a valid exit from my questions. Why did I still want to lay my head on him? Maybe because I'd been too awake. And if you're too awake for a long, long time, doesn't that overwhelming sleepiness become a kind of blindness? I ached for sleep to take me elsewhere. I tucked my chin into me, the way mummy did, making of her chest, a grave, when she looked at her watch, worry lines on her forehead deepening, whenever we were late to return home.

#

We were all on a reality TV contest, a cooking show of sorts, Mum and Radz and me, on a neon green set, buzzing with a fake-smiling, enthusiastic paid audience. Radz and my mother were the last two contestants. Whichever woman could be fed with bhajiya pav first would win. I was neither a contestant, nor the chef. I sat close enough in the audience to touch them both but wasn't allowed to. The chef frying the bhajiyas could only hand

them out to the hungry contestants if they passed his boss' quality test. One mistake, and the dish would be scrapped.

The first plate he brought out was fantastic and I prayed he gave it to mum. Unfortunately, he handed the first plate to Radhika. This was a strange dream because Radz never touched bhajias in real life. What, *ruin my waist, no thanks*, she'd say, *my face is already ruined with this eye*. The next plate looked even better than the first. You could touch their golden-fried crunch on the zoomed-in shot on the big audience screen. But the chef's boss just wouldn't approve of it—not because the dish was bad—but because the chef had worn his hat back side front, breaking some minor etiquette rule. *Come on, come on, come on, give it to her, it's good enough*, I said, seeing that time was running out. But he couldn't and mummy was left hungry. She didn't look sad or defeated, just hungry. A big red X sign lit up behind her, blinking with a beep beep beep.

I woke up, my heart racing, surrounded by pin drop silence, pierced by the occasional bells of elevator pings. There was no sign of him. His bags, his backpack, all gone. I checked the time. His flight would already have rolled into Delhi airport by now. Radz's mom texted me that Radz was asking for me. In the elevator mirror going up, I saw a tiny wound reddening above my breastbone—Ankur's teeth. I pulled my neckline up higher, tried covering the bruise with my bag strap.

#

I sat on the edge of the guest bed, bag still on my shoulders, fidgeting my toes, not keen to spend a minute more than what was necessary. Radz's mum was by her side sneaking homemade food into the bland hospital lunch plate. Auntie offered me some of her home cooked meal, in the same respectful dialect, *aap kuch kha lo. Sorry, but your food will never be as good as my mother's*, I wanted to say. But expunging my spite here would be as useless as the middle finger I'd shown my mother when she didn't respond to my clapping. I didn't know then that the anger I'd inherited from my father would become the last thing I would leave my mother with.

As Radhika returned from her numbed state, I wondered if she ever planned on telling me. Or if she'd asked Ankur too, lying under his body, in his/her/their bed, *Do you think I am pretty, who do you think I am, a six or a seven*. Her cell phone beeped. The screen lit up with his name. She opened her good eye and asked her mum to raise the bed, and clutched her phone. I assumed she'd just found out that I knew. I would have screamed but for her mum. And besides she was just returning from a phase of quasi blindness, how could I be rude. Or perhaps by now I knew slightly better than to expunge my anger into the cold and sterilized air of a hospital room.

#

Opening her newly fixed eye, Radhika looked out the window, detangling her IV tube with her free hand. I leaned forward to stroke her head

and withdrew halfway. *Aur tum kaisi ho*, how are you she asked, using the formal pronoun. Was I okay? Was we okay? Were we okay?

#

Green has never looked so green, she said, looking at the fake cactus on her side table, blinking eerily slow. My dad video-called to check how I/we were and insisted on saying hi to Radz. Inverting the phone camera, I sat on my knees, next to her bed, a section of both our faces visible. She took my hand into her palm and guided my finger towards her recovering eye. *Look*, she said to my dad, hovering my resisting hand over her lid, *it'll take time to heal, but I can already see clearer. Good, good beta, god bless you*, he said, *just ask my daughter for whatever you need, she takes good care of people*.

And who would take care of me now? My boyfriend, my work wife? My father? *But I thought you were healing, beta*, he'd say if I cried to him. Maybe this is what independent meant. I hung up. Was healing necessary or even possible? The room darkened and an evening prayer rained forth from the mosque's loudspeaker, the sun collapsing slowly behind a periphery of billboards. I was already late.

#

I got up to leave, switching the tube lights on, on my way out. Radhika made a long mmmm sound in pain, the suddenness of the flash irritating her eye. Maybe it was just a lie, like my/our relationships, maybe there was no such thing as healing, but just the wound of grief taking different shapes.

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carry on Danielle Fleming

i am the wayward daughter of a wayward daughter
who made way from the sky delivered
on the subtle cadences of hope

gifted. blessed with the graceful audacity of
generations of daughters. daughters
who held up

every. all.
who loved, who sheltered, who formed the earth. who
replenished us all.

i am mother's enduring empathy.

i never mapped peace enough to stop pain
nor claimed to know the secret of
becoming. wise. my elders
became more. i am

becoming more than one who holds herself in.

lest i allow them to divest the regency in my blood
rewriting my story before i ever tell it.

lest i allow them to outlaw my spirit shackling it
with ought tos,

lest they seek to intimidate me with my mother's bruised heart.
i am

becoming more. becoming my mother, the way daughters
become their mothers became their mothers.
becoming more than my mother. my mother

the wayward daughter of a wayward daughter
that made way from the sea manifested
on the back of a moonstruck prayer.

do i not come from wild magic?

honey, my ancestors were alchemists who distilled dreams
from stardust and tamed the moon.

what else could i be, but celestial?

i am. i have always been a wayward daughter of a
wayward daughter of the wayward daughter of the sky
of the sea gifted
with the weighty rebellion of fate.

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Terrence's Birthday

Michael Williamson

For his eighteenth birthday Terrence wanted to be a woman.

Early in the evening he begged off from dinner and cake with his folks and hurried across Palace to his friend Dee Dee's house, where they took turns behind the shower curtain, sliding their bodies into the dresses and stockings they'd lifted from the local Goodwill. At the bathroom sink they nudged one another for space in the mirror and did their best to follow the makeup tutorials they'd researched online. An alien smell, girlish, hung on the air around them, the perfume they swathed themselves in, a woody scent like that of their mothers and other older women they knew.

In the mirror, Dee Dee's face took on a mirthless expression. "This is fucked up," he said. "I don't look nothing like a real girl."

Terrence blinked his lashes across a mascara wand and focused in on his friend's face. He could tell right away what Dee Dee meant. Whereas Terrence had for years seemed stuck in boyish adolescence, Dee Dee appeared in all respects masculine, with a bricklike jaw flecked with stubble that sprouted past the icing-thick layers of foundation and rouge on his face. He was squat, plump but broad-shouldered, with shaggy fronds of inky black hair that grew in a manly, side-swept pattern. Even the navy tent dress that billowed over his torso did little to conceal the boy he was underneath.

"I think you look great," Terrence said. Even in the confines of the bathroom his voice was quiet, delicate and unassuming, scrubbed clean of the Kentucky accent that still kinked the center of Dee Dee's vowels.

"Not like you," Dee Dee said. "You could pass for the real thing."

At this Terrence felt a warm rush of pride sluice through him and with it a jolt of blood to his midriff. He was so bad at taking compliments usually—for whatever reason, the praise of others tended only to wound him—but this one, to his mind, he'd earned. Of the two of them Terrence was unquestionably the more convincing, a fact he couldn't deny as he swept his gaze from Dee Dee's face to his own in the mirror. The ceiling in Dee Dee's bathroom was on the verge of buckling, stained with rust-colored continents of water damage that offered little in the way of proper background, and the string of un-shaded light bulbs above the mirror lit him in a harsh, glaring

yellow—but still the sight of his feminine reflection sent to his gut a wave of excitement. Gone was the boy he'd always known himself to be and in his place: this, a stranger, beautiful and new. His wiry frame, usually hidden beneath baggy t-shirts and jeans, was for once pronounced and attractive, wrapped as it was in the sparkly bodice of his red sequined mermaid gown. As he smoothed his palms over his chest and hips he thought of those gaudy pink balloons he'd sometimes see floating by the checkout on trips to the pharmacy with his mother: *It's a Girl!*

"Weirdest damn birthday gift I ever gave," Dee Dee said. He clacked a makeup brush into the sink and scratched the thick carpet of chest hair cropping from his neckline. "You ready to show Alicia?"

Terrence diverted his gaze to the chipped linoleum floor. "I guess so."

"I keep telling you she's cool. Nobody will know about this, just us three."

Terrence nodded. He trusted Alicia, sure, but only because he had to, only for Dee Dee's sake. They had been friends for so long, he and Dee Dee, and so exclusively, it had become difficult for Terrence to see much good in anyone else in Palace.

One of the bulbs above the mirror flickered and stole for a moment Terrence's attention. Dee Dee took the opportunity to shoulder past him, into the hall, and moments later Terrence heard the high-pitched trill of Alicia's laughter from the living room. It just about killed him, the sound of it, knowing he too would be subjected to her the moment he left the bathroom, and he wondered if he might not just lie in the tub and stay there the whole night through. But that would ruin his night with Dee Dee, he realized. They were lucky to have the house to themselves at all—Dee Dee lived alone with his father, who worked sporadic shifts at the only bar in Palace, a place he spent probably more than he made.

Terrence lifted the hem of his gown and steeled himself as he flicked the light switch and followed Dee Dee out the room. When he crossed into the living room, he found Dee Dee standing behind the couch, hands on his hips. "Babe," he said, "it's not that funny," but this did nothing to stifle Alicia. She leaned against the armrest, a forearm bent across her belly as she tossed her head in laughter, her long sheaf of auburn hair spilling down the back of her camouflage t-shirt. When Dee Dee saw Terrence, he turned to him, his lips upturned despite himself, and said, "I can't get her to shut up."

There was a change then in Alicia's eyes—a withering, a slow glance that tracked its way down Terrence's body piece by piece. She sputtered out a few leftover giggles, but it was clear their derision wasn't targeted at Terrence. "You look great," she said.

Terrence again felt warmth at the compliment, but of a different sort this time. It wasn't unusual for him to feel embarrassed in front of Alicia, she seemed to always stir up some discomfort in him. But now, dressed as he was,

he felt more at a loss with her than ever. “You don’t have to be nice to me,” he said, his eyes on the hem of his dress.

“I ain’t a liar,” Alicia said. “Look at Dee Dee: he just looks like a dope in a dress. Not like you. Hell, you’re prettier than I’ve ever been.”

Terrence wasn’t sure what to say to this. As the youngest of four siblings, the rest of them boys, Alicia was never one to fuss about looks, but it still struck him as odd to be compared against her in this way.

When Terrence said nothing, Dee Dee spoke up. “I told him the same thing, babe.”

“You told him you was a dope?”

A mischievous glare came over Dee Dee’s face then, and he gave Alicia a gentle shove, toppling her onto the cushions, where he soon wrestled his body close to hers, each of them laughing now. Amid the tussle, Terrence couldn’t help but notice the lining of Dee Dee’s off-white boxer briefs peek from his dress.

“Knock it off, you two,” he said. He made his way around the couch, through the light of the matching cottage lamps on either end table, and negotiated the train of his dress in order to sit on a nearby recliner.

“Alright,” Alicia said. “I’ll share.” She and Dee Dee straightened on the couch, their bodies now entwined into one another’s, and their tittering faded until all that could be heard was the steady overhead click of the ceiling fan. After a moment, Dee Dee leaned toward the coffee table and retrieved from it a lighter and a pack of Marlboros; he snapped out a flame to light a cigarette, which he passed to Terrence before doing the same for Alicia, and finally himself. When they had each pulled from their cigarettes, the room now dense with smoke, Alicia said, “What do y’all want to do now?”

Terrence and Dee Dee met eyes and shrugged, they hadn’t planned this far ahead.

“God, boys are so damn boring.”

“What would three girls do right about now?” Dee Dee said.

Alicia let out an exasperated grunt and said, “Ain’t this supposed to be a party?” She reached to the ground to retrieve her backpack, and from the open flap she withdrew a speaker the size and shape of an egg, but black, with a field of pinpricks on its upper half. She flicked a switch on its side and, after skidding her thumbs across her phone a few times, a great pulse of music throbbed from out the speaker, a noisy electronic blur of sound.

In a second, Dee Dee had stubbed out his cigarette and leapt to his feet. He kicked aside the coffee table, its rattle muted by the song, and gyrated on the makeshift dance floor. He pogoed up and down, mimicking the motions of the concertgoers in the internet videos of punk shows he must have shown Terrence a dozen times or more. Out of breath already, he made his way to Terrence and yanked him up from the recliner by the wrist. Terrence stood there with crossed arms as Dee Dee writhed around him, bemused and unsure

what to do with himself, even as Alicia hollered, “Come on, ladies! Give me a show!”

It took Dee Dee’s touch—their interlocked hands as Dee Dee convulsed him, coaxed him to dance—to shear off the top layer of Terrence’s inhibitions. He couldn’t replicate Dee Dee’s manic jumps and thrashes, but over time he devised his own moves, a progression of kicks and body rolls. When his knees buckled, he made a show of it, he pulled up his dress and leaned on the chair to strike a pose he imagined was seductive, whipped his head this way and that as though he had hair down to his ass. It felt right, good even, to lean into joy with Dee Dee like this, on his birthday. Pretty soon all three of them filled the room with laughter, the only sound that could rival the bassy thud of music.

The song came to a close with an abrupt downbeat and just as abruptly Dee Dee lunged himself at Alicia as she squealed and applauded for them. He straddled her on the couch, his dress hiking up to reveal the meaty slabs of his thighs as he depressed more and more of his weight onto her lap, then he snaked his tongue into her mouth. She didn’t pull away from him, just the opposite, she wove her fingers into the hair at the back of his head to pull him close. The living room had gone quiet now, the noise of their smacking lips and tongues louder even than the ceiling fan as Terrence looked on. He stood there and watched, his dress still bunched in his fists; he would have liked to look away, to afford them all some privacy, but he found his eyes latched onto them both, too stunned and too intrigued to look elsewhere. Whatever joy he had felt moments ago replaced itself with something fierce and sharklike: he wanted to wrench their bodies apart, or maybe he wanted to glide his way somewhere between them. Either way it shamed him a little to feel this way, a shame that doubled when he realized how long he’d stared at the two of them. His gaze felt to him more carnal even than their kissing, and yet the urge he felt was stronger than any will he could shore up.

Out of nowhere, in a surge more sudden than a lightning flash, all the movement and vision drained from the room around him—the lamps winked out, the whirl of the ceiling fan dwindled, and the appliances let out a long, groaning beep from the kitchen as they too shut down. Terrence wondered for a moment if he hadn’t willed all this into being, until Dee Dee stood from Alicia’s lap.

“Goddamn it,” he said. “They shut off the power again.” Even though the long vertical blinds on the sliding glass backdoor were pulled, they still let in slivers of moonlight, so that stripes of shadow and light patterned across the carpet and the fishnets on Terrence’s feet. Dee Dee gave a couple of useless pulls to the beaded lamp string and ran a hand through his hair, his face reshaped into a knot of discontent. “Dad must’ve forgotten to pay the damn bill.”

“Surely you got a breaker you can try?” From the couch, Alicia stroked Dee Dee’s forearm. It was a gesture of comfort, meant to soothe Dee Dee when he was riled, a gesture Terrence recognized. She, like Terrence, must have known that the state of his home life was one of the few things that could cause Dee Dee shame.

“Won’t do no good,” Dee Dee said. “But I’ll try. Y’all wait up here. Worse comes to worse, we just hang outside.”

Terrence felt his whole body heat up with fear. “Are you crazy?” he said.

“I only meant the backyard, T, nobody but us.”

This calmed Terrence, if only a little, and at last he loosened the fistfuls of fabric held at his sides. Remote as Dee Dee’s house was, the thought of someone he knew in Palace driving by and spotting him like this filled him with dread. He knew how word spread in Palace: fast, like ice on a windowpane.

Dee Dee stumbled toward the kitchen and fiddled around until he reemerged with a flashlight, the dull beam of which he tracked along the carpet until he disappeared into the cavernous black of the hallway and downstairs to the basement. Alicia slinked off the couch, then crawled to sit by the backdoor, where her face was cast in slats of moonlight. She patted a spot on the carpet beside her, over which Terrence fanned his dress in order to sit. She lit herself a cigarette, and handed one to Terrence, and then smiled at him. Again Terrence felt an unease fester between him and Alicia, there was something grim about the speckled red dot of her cigarette in the dark, and he lit and then took a drag off his own to distract himself. His subsequent plume of smoke mingled with hers in the air between them.

The truth was he and Alicia had a complex history, one he tried to store in the recesses of his memory. She had saved him, once, on his walk home one day in seventh grade, from the usual group of mean-spirited boys who followed and taunted him most everywhere he went in Palace. Usually it was Dee Dee who kept him afloat in such situations, but he’d gotten detention that day, and so Terrence was forced to keep his mouth shut and walk home as briskly as he could. It was as one of the boys—a burly one, Ross Collins was his name—tossed down his bike to get close to Terrence that Alicia swooped in. She yelled from across the street for the boys to buzz off or she’d sic her three brothers on them. They scrambled too, probably as much out of boredom as from actual threat, but it was enough to convince Terrence from that moment until the end of eighth grade he had a crush on Alicia, a secret one, shared only with Dee Dee. Even though so many years had passed since then, Dee Dee had still gone so far as to ask Terrence if he was cool with him pursuing Alicia before they got together, had promised to call it off if it bothered Terrence even one bit. Terrence had told him no, don’t be crazy, that was a lifetime ago. But—and he tried never to think this, however true—

sometimes the sight of them together felt stifling, as though he'd been dunked in boiling water.

Alicia wolfed smoke into her lungs and said, "So what's this all about anyway?"

Terrence knit his eyebrows at her, felt the eyeliner crinkle on his face.

"This girl stuff. It's more than a game, ain't it?"

He mumbled some vague, noncommittal answer, but it was the closest thing to the truth he could muster. He didn't understand it himself, this drag, this being a woman, the desire had surfaced seemingly out of nowhere. It felt to him like one step closer to something, but he couldn't for the life of him say what. At first he wondered whether it had buoyed up on the back of his hatred for Palace, as though leaving behind the sad boy Palace had shaped him into might be a little like leaving the town itself. But that felt somehow insufficient, too narrow, too easy, and so pretty soon he stopped wondering altogether. All he could be sure of was that once an urge broke the surface of his repressive outer layer, there was no stopping him, and so here he was.

"Well, you sure pulled it off. You're awful pretty. More to it than that though."

"How do you mean?"

"There's more than one way to be a girl, I guess, but none of them are as easy as you think, just makeup and dresses." She ashed her cigarette onto the mangy carpet. "Nah, a real girl is surer of herself than all this. Tougher."

Terrence ran a hand over his exposed neckline. "I could be tough."

"Nice of Dee Dee to go along for the ride like this."

"I didn't ask him to," Terrence said into the smoke he exhaled.

"What do you mean? Of course you did."

"All I asked for was for help getting these clothes, and for one night to dress like this," Terrence said. "Dee Dee was the one who decided he'd do the same. He told me it'd be too weird to let me try this out by myself. It wasn't what I asked for. But I could tell it was nice of him to offer."

Alicia regarded him for a long moment, blew out a long, gray spool of smoke. "He's just about the only person in Palace you've let in, ain't he?"

It was true, what she said, or at least not entirely unfounded, but it seemed to Terrence too that it was irreverent, cold even. He hated Palace, sure, but only because he could never get a sense for how he was supposed to carry himself in this place, where everyone's eyes seemed glued to him all the time. It was different with Dee Dee, easier, they'd been friends for forever, ever since first grade, back when Dee Dee was still Darryl, before he'd heard the first Ramones album and rechristened himself in its honor. If he was the only person Terrence let in, as Alicia put it, it was only because he was the only one who'd so far shown himself worthwhile.

Just as Terrence went to voice some half-baked version of these thoughts, there was a clatter from the hall, followed by a narrow circle of

white light that floated through the room and landed on Terrence's face. "Pretty even in the dark, ain't he, babe?" Dee Dee said from somewhere in the surrounding blackness.

"Was just saying so," Alicia said, her eyes on Terrence. "No luck with the breaker, huh?"

"Flipped each switch ten damn times and nothing." Dee Dee stepped closer to them, into the vague light, where Terrence could see the downturn of his face. "Sorry, y'all. My dad's been going through it lately."

"Don't apologize," Alicia said as she picked herself up from the floor. "It'll be more fun watching you girls dance for me under the stars anyhow." She unlatched and slid open the backdoor, which rattled along the sill in its track. A chill laced its way into the air around them once the door was open, but Alicia seemed not to care, she flicked her spent butt into the yard and stepped outside. Close behind, Dee Dee paused only to offer Terrence a hand and pull him to his feet so they could each follow Alicia.

Dee Dee's yard was wide but fenced in, a tangle of overgrown chicory and foxtail weeds all cast in shadow, some inexact shade of gray in the night. The moon whitened things some, plugged, as it was, like a nailhead into a dense ceiling of stars. Alicia padded her phone again, an upward glow lighting her face, while Terrence and Dee Dee waited beside her. There was a chirr of insects from some faraway trees, cicadas, faint enough to resemble a staticky radio signal.

"Y'all looked worn out by that last dance," Alicia said. "So I'll pick something slow this time."

Dee Dee peered at Terrence then, the sly smile on his face intimating restrained excitement. "More dancing?" he said.

"I was promised a party, young lady," Alicia said. She swiped a puddle off a nearby lawn chair and took a seat. With another few strokes of her thumb on the screen a whole new song leaked from the speaker: country music this time, slower but no less jubilant, a sultry-voiced soprano wailing over the twang of a steel guitar.

Dee Dee gave an exaggerated bend of the knees and leapt into the grass, his dress catching in the air on his descent. He landed in the weeds, moonlit, his legs jutting like tree trunks from under his dress. With an extended hand, his palm skyward, each of his fingers beckoned Terrence to come. The longer Terrence stood there and took in the sight of his friend the more he felt what little resistance he had give way. He turned toward Alicia in her spot on the lawn chair, the speaker held firm in her hand. "Don't look at me," she said. "We ladies have to make our own decisions."

And so Terrence moved toward the center of the yard, toward his friend, and draped his wrists around Dee Dee's neck. The sequins on his gown caught shards of moonlight and reflected little ebbing pools of it into the weeds. Soon enough, Dee Dee's thick fingers found his hips and brought with

them a burst of warmth, which trickled through Terrence's stomach. Together, he and Dee Dee made a slow, tiny orbit through the grass, knocking dandelion seeds loose from their bulbs as they stepped, cracking their stems.

Chaste a scene as it was—their bodies a good six inches apart, like the couples Terrence used to observe at middle school dances—it nonetheless stirred something in Terrence to have become so undeniably the focus of Dee Dee's attention. Something strong, something he'd felt before but only faintly, hit him hard, all over, like a wave slamming against the shoreline. It was like those stirrings he used to feel when he looked at Alicia back in middle school, but less willed, more sudden somehow. It didn't surprise him, this feeling, or scare him. If anything he felt foolish to have never named it before, foolish and yet also grateful, for his ignorance had led to this moment of recognition. Desire, that's what he felt, he realized, as Dee Dee guided his body in circles to the steel guitar whine.

"Happy birthday," Dee Dee breathed to him then, the words themselves a gift.

Terrence wondered what it might be like to respond to his friend with a kiss, to bring their two bodies together, to writhe their tongues into one another like he'd watched Dee Dee and Alicia do only moments ago, but he didn't dare, not in front of Alicia. Besides, it was enough for now just to feel it, to allow the feeling to happen to him. It mattered little what the future held—that soon they'd make their way inside and scrub their faces clean before Dee Dee's father got home, that the sun would rise tomorrow on the same old Palace, Kentucky. All he really wanted, Terrence thought, exaggerating but only a little, was to drown here in this moment with Dee Dee. He could sense where Alicia's eyes were: on them, on him, but what did it matter, the dark afforded them all the privacy he needed.

The song came to a close and left in the air only the chirp of cicadas. Dee Dee moved to pull away but Terrence firmed his grip to keep their two bodies together, took in the musky scent of Dee Dee's sweat beneath the perfume. A swoop of air rushed under his dress, through his legs, as he pressed his chest against Dee Dee's and nestled his face into his friend's neck. Long after the song had ended he held him, accepting the pats on the back Dee Dee offered. Alicia, who before had applauded the end of their dance, now yelled to them that the song was over. Dee Dee too faltered after a while, Terrence could hear incredulity in his heavy, broken chuckles where before he had heard only good humor—but he wouldn't let go.

Not just yet.

Jim Ross (he/him) jumped into creative pursuits in 2015 after leaving a rewarding career in public health research. Since then he's published nonfiction, poetry, and photography in over 150 journals and anthologies on four continents. Recent photo essays include *Barren*, *Kestrel*, *Ilanot Review*, *Litro*, *New World Writing*, and *Roanoke Review*. Jim and his wife split their time between city and mountains.



Fragility

Butterfly wings lose their integrity to hungry birds, flying insects, sudden winds, and heavy precipitation. Yet, even as a butterfly's wings fray and thin, it keeps soaking up the sun and sucking nectar from the nearest flower. It doesn't know that a week ago it had more speed, strength and agility. It only knows the moment as if it were its first and last.

#BlackLivesMatter

