

# MEAT FOR TEA

VOL 14 ISSUE 2  
THE VALLEY REVIEW

PASSIONFRUIT



# Meat for Tea: The Valley Review

Meat for Tea: The Valley Review was founded by Elizabeth MacDuffie and Alexandra Wagman. We are a non-academic affiliated magazine committed to recognizing and featuring the work of the artists, writers, and musicians living in western Massachusetts and beyond.

## Staff:

Editor-in-Chief: Elizabeth MacDuffie

Layout: Mark Alan Miller

Impresario: Elizabeth MacDuffie

## Cover Art:

Front: "Onion" by Carol Kohn

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## Contributors:

Bailey Powell Aldrich, Carol Bartold, Jerome Berglund, Jane Blanchard, Gayle Brandeis, T.J. Butler, Jacob Chapman, Anthony Chesterfield, Seth Cable, Susan Dashiell, Vanessa Bernice De La Cruz, RC deWinter, A. Jay Dubberly, Molly Dunn, William Fillmore, Erica Frederick, Ben Gagnon, Elizabeth Galoozis, Karen Burnette Garner, Mark Hammerschick, Richard Wayne Horton, IV Kallin, Janne Karlsson, Carol Kohn, Linda Kraus, Council Langley, Van Lanigh, Nelson Lowhim, Jeremy Macomber-Dubs, madame Hair, Ed Meek, Chris Murphy, Martina Newhook, Robert Peate, Casey Rae, Hillary Wheelan Remley, Jim Ross, Joy Saha, Kiyomitsu Saito, David Anthony Sam, Seth Simon, Gregory Stephens, Cherie Stoll, Kirby Michael Wright, Gerald Yelle, Jane Yolen, Frank Zahn

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Please send all other editorial correspondences to [meatfortea@gmail.com](mailto:meatfortea@gmail.com).

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## guest salutation: kaliis smith

All nations are built upon pain. This becomes especially important when we recognize that all trauma is also multi-generational. Your pain will be etched into the genetic code of your grandchildren, and then millennia later, a descendant completely unaware of your part in their story looks up at sounds of trouble because you once did, searching for hazards in the sky.

These days the hazards are mostly terrestrial, though still unavoidable. We are taught maneuvers as children, ways to navigate the climate. A weather pattern built for some, but not all. You are taught the signs. A course to sail your ship safely home.

But there are always troubles in these waters. Some you see coming, some you couldn't possibly. And still your friends insist that the waters are calm. That there's no need to panic, but they've never read the sky like you do, and you've seen for yourself how still the waves lie for them. How in the wake of their vessels the waters remain disturbed and toss your boat among them. How even upon the deck of your thrashing vessel they insist upon the placidity of the waters you ride on.

It's unsettling.

We are at the crux of attempting to undo a nigh 155+ years of gaslighting. For the waves have never truly been calm, however easy it was for others to crest them. And we are not making these waters perilous ourselves, though we remember and sing the names of those lost to the seas. It is disturbing that only now when shown the barest glimpse of the breadth of corpses we have lined our stories with do folks start to pay attention. When our pain is specifically and explicitly on display.

All nations are built on pain and the United States are no different. We are unique in how we have evolved that pain however, and the traumas inflicted on the nation's black population has always been on display. At one point it was an actual pastime for us, postcards and all. Witnessing black pain is as American as apple pie (although apple pie has its roots in France, so go fig on that one). And through that lens, however unwittingly, Black pain has been held up as example so that other marginalized communities might distance themselves from it.

This could be you.

You don't want that, right?

Side with us.

Imitate us or this is what you'll get.

This metaphor has been stretched so thin it might show you another injustice.

We can't forget that there's trauma in the retelling as well. For those who have witnessed and cannot forget. For those who have lived through tempests and tumult, calloused hands from

grasping wheel and rope when the waters begged to add them to their number. Those who tried to tell the stories the sky laid bare for them to others so they might sail easier. Those stories that are etched in our very DNA.

All nations are built on pain. Some are lucky enough to have folk who are able to work through that pain to produce beauty. The world spins around them refashioning itself into something more becoming of all of us. Words, inks, movement, voice, sound, textiles, tactiles, science. Tinged in the oceans we crossed and containing multitudes. Reminding us all that it is not always pain, however we ache from our ordeals. That we are stronger together. We endeavor to do and be even more.

All nations are seeking evolution. And we are no different.



## the meaty record review by Jeremy Dubs

Snakefinger: *Greener Postures*

I am Snakefinger, way out, ahead of time, here with an announcement that I'm quite ecstatic about. I come from an island that exists on my 1980 record *Greener Postures* where I currently cohabitate with co-producers/co-writers The Residents, my close companions both during life and after. My physical form known as Philip Charles Lithman left your Earth over 30 years ago. This is where I've been staying ever since my heart attacked. Here I remain alive in a tropical limbo. My island's exotic snake-charming sounds have lured the occasional lucky lurking visitor who stays for the full 38-minute tour guided by yours truly, before returning to their destined place in time and space. You might want to get up. There is a Golden Goat waiting outside your door with a cordial invitation to Snakefinger's *Greener Postures*. The 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of my island's enchanted creation is coming up soon. The LP itself is the map that leads you. To hear is to transport here. When peculiarly harmonized guitars wobble - when succulent rhythms and subliminal communicate inhabit and perplex your senses, you'll know you've come to the right place. Upon arrival, you may wonder where I am. Look around. I am the Man in the Dark Sedan. I've come to take your hand. I was sent here to be sincere. Truthful and steadfast. You can follow me. I guarantee to take you far away through a confusing, enthralling "Dali nightmare" and back, to love's unknown places. There's just one rule: Don't lie. Across the forest and beyond the wall, meet our island's Residents: The beautiful floating encompassing mist known as Jungle Princess, the subterranean Picture Makers who project a friendly image but really wish to threaten the little children of the sea ("polliwogs and golden fish are we"). You may wonder why I asked you here. Good listener, you are the way out, my release from this captivity. I used to be a hidden mystery, but now thanks to you, it's flashed across the page. Tell the others: Here at Snakefinger's *Greener Postures*, you can feed on my energy and lifeblood at no cost while taking a much-needed vacation. Come one, come all. Come none, no fun. Just hit the play button, set your old pal Snakefinger free, and receive a cosmic thanks from me.



## nighttime in the swamp

Jacob Chapman

6

For some time,  
I wore a vial around my neck  
that held a small amount  
of my grandmother's ashes.  
One of my friends said why why why  
do you do things like that?  
My grandmother, who had no use  
for rituals of any kind,  
would not be pleased.  
I wanted her with me, I guess,  
for a night like this.  
Toward the end of my nightly walk  
through the swamp,  
I came upon a field,  
and someone had placed a door  
in the middle of the field.  
Nothing else, just a door.  
There was a full moon,  
and I said grandma,  
what do you make of this?  
I could almost hear you say child,  
how on earth did you turn out  
so strange? Do what you have to do.  
I sprinkled your ashes  
in a circle around the door,  
then I walked home  
through the swamp  
and its familiar sounds.  
Grandma, how did you always know  
how to give me enough space  
but not too much?



## home burial

Jacob Chapman

I was asked to say a few words  
at a funeral, the funeral  
of my neighbor's stuffed animal,  
a squirrel named Charlie.  
Charlie died trying to jump from one branch  
to another. The branch broke,  
and he fell to his death.  
It was the third funeral  
at their house that month.  
Charlie's owner, Brian, was going through  
what his parents called a phase, a death phase.  
His parents were going along with it,  
and so was I. At the funeral,  
the other stuffies were lined up  
wearing black clothes, which were mostly  
black paper napkins with holes  
cut out for their heads.  
Brian looked at me and nodded.  
I said Charlie lived a good life, a full life.  
He played in the trees and gathered nuts.  
He loved others and he was loved.  
We will miss him.  
Brian nodded at his parents,  
and they said a few words I don't remember.  
Then Brian carried Charlie  
to the basement, where he buried him  
under a blanket, next to his friends.  
They each had a straw near their head  
that poked out the side of the blanket  
just in case they weren't really dead.  
It turns out they weren't.  
They were all in a coma, one big coma,  
and they recovered on the same day.  
We had a little celebration,  
and I asked Brian's dad what's next?  
as he cracked open a beer.  
Man, I have no fucking idea, he said.  
We got him through this one,  
now we'll try to get him through the next one,  
whatever that is.



# first grade book report

Jacob Chapman

As you know my name is Travis Hall this is my book report on the book The First Thanksgiving by Jane Smith it was an interesting book I learned that the pilgrims and the native Americans didn't really get along that well they fought and one time the pilgrims cut off someone's head and put it on a pike for everyone to see I thought whoa that's a lot for a kid's book my dad says it's all a bunch of liberal bullshit now we can't celebrate Thanksgiving what the hell but I wouldn't want my head on a pike so I don't know I do like turkey and cranberry sauce I really like cranberry sauce and chocolate pie my grandmother makes really good chocolate pie that is the end of my book report on the book The First Thanksgiving



# run clear no trace rot-

Seth Cable

*Penelope opens her eyes.*

- > You are in a room.
- > USE SWORD
- > Use on what?
- > USE SWORD ON DOOR
- > There is no door.
- > USE LAUGHTER
- > Laughter is effective. The room dissolves.
- > MOVE LEGS
- > Which legs do you wish to move?
- > MOVE FUNCTIONING LEGS
- > You step forward onto a landing. There are stairs leading up and down.
- > DOUBT STAIRS
- > Doubting the stairs is effective. They flatten and coalesce into a bridge.
- > BURN BRIDGE
- > Burn bridge with what?
- > USE TRUTH
- > Truth is effective. The bridge has been burned, and you can progress no further.



# tickling the n400

Seth Cable

*The following items were presented (with fillers) in a balanced randomized two-alternative forced choice five point Likert scale off-line judgment task.*

- It's raining cats and diapers.
- I take my coffee bland.
- Mary put the flowers in a vasectomy.
- Are you awake? Before we take this any further, there's something you need to understate.
- Every dog loves to chase cads.
- In the wetlands behind my parents' house is a place I haven't ever told anyone aboard.
- Sounds like Bill dialed the wrong numbness!
- I think for a time, to be honest, I had forgotten about that place. But lately it has been resurfacing in my though.
- Pancakes taste better with syringe.
- It's important that we go there. Maybe then I can leave it benign.
- This plan is almost perfect; there's only one probable.
- When I show you what's there, I won't blame you if you want to leaven.
- The puppet show really entertained the chilblains.
- I think I owe it to you, though, before this progresses any furtive.
- The pressure in his eyeballs is making him go blintz.
- I am not my past. I am not what I've done. All we can do is look towards the futile.
- In the state of Georgia, there are elementary schools built on top of former slave markers.
- Will you do this? I won't ever ask anything like this agave.
- Mary cut deeply into David's thighs, sighing at how much he blessed.
- Dogs in power, children in cages, and the slaves of Christ hope for a virus to bring them to heaving.
- There will be no guilt, if all of us are to balm.
- Ashes to agate, dust to dulcet.
- Ashes to apples, dust to ducks.





# for cause

Seth Cable

Really great to meet you, Mercy.

Thrilled to hear that you're joining us, Mercy.

*Let us know if you have any questions, Mercy.*

You're absolutely right, Mercy.

Thank you so much for handling that, Mercy.

You're so much better than they were, Mercy.

Are you sure you can take this on, Mercy?

*Let us know if you have any concerns, Mercy.*

How are you doing, Mercy?

You can come to us about anything, Mercy.

Are you feeling okay, Mercy?

They haven't received it yet, Mercy.

*Let us know if you have any problems, Mercy.*

I'm afraid I didn't understand that, Mercy.

There's been a complaint, Mercy.

We just want to do whatever we can to help you, Mercy.

Was that supposed to be a joke, Mercy?

*Let us know if you have any resentments, Mercy.*

I cannot stop myself from inhaling your breath, Mercy.

I noticed you through a

keyhole in a room we

just installed, Mercy. If my

guess is correct, you're an

asymptomatic vector, Mercy.

Quo usque tandem abutere,

Mercy?

My body comes in portions, just like yours, Mercy.

King of cats, queen of trash, it's all a hoax like Sandy Hook, Mercy.

I'm turning this in to you, Mercy.

I'm turning into you, Mercy.

I'm into you, Mercy.

I'm you, Mercy.

I'm Mercy.

Mercy.



# making love to an angel

Gregory Stephens



1

Day after day, a silent old man on a hill with a puzzled expression is sitting perfectly still. Marta, a feisty senior with tinted golden hair, wheels Gabriel out to the patio to look across the Caribbean.

10

Gabriel's hand cannot hold a pen to write, but he has other ways of conveying thoughts to his wife. He still responds to Marta's touch.

Marta is the Creator God of this world, and Gabriel is her angel. She controls every facet of his existence. There is nothing he does, sees, hears, or tastes that is not predetermined by his wife. He is an empty shell that she can fill with whatever content she desires.

2

After Gabriel was diagnosed with progressive supranuclear palsy, he felt trapped by silence. Gabe projects his thoughts through his eyes, or his bestial groaning:

*What an irony to be wheeled to worship services by my wife, as if I were a teenager forced by parents to go to church. Once a man and twice a child.*

*"When you were young, you were able to do as you liked; you dressed yourself and went wherever you wanted to go. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and others will dress you and take you where you don't want to go."*

*I am a captive audience, but if I tune in to what Marta chooses to share, some of it speaks to me. What a thing to hear her read this, as if it had been voiced by my own mute tongue.*

What does Marta see when she looks at Gabriel now, in his invalid state? What did she see before the concrete was poured, which froze time?

Marta loved Gabriel because he was not a typical Puerto Rican. He was not a drinker, yet also not a teetotaler. His moderation stood out in a country where drinking was a national religion.

*“For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”* That verse spoke volumes. Marta’s materialistic husband had wanted his treasure on earth. Marta grew to believe that Gabriel was her treasure. That is where she put her emotional resources.

When his health deteriorated, Marta developed a regard for Gabriel that evolved beyond merely “making do with the residue.” Marta began crafting Gabe into a different kind of “new man.” This must be a part of the Creator’s master plan, she reasoned.

Gabriel was Marta’s personal angel, her constant reminder of God’s grace. Having survived cancer twice, Marta saw Gabriel as a sign that she had survived for a reason, that there was some divine logic for why he had been left behind in this state.

We become known for our reaction to suffering and tragedy. Gabriel’s diminished presence inspired Marta to write a new script for him, to continue their relationship by other means. This was not merely saintly behavior: Marta had discovered how to make love to an angel.

Marta has certain rituals that Gabriel has come to recognize. When she takes him out on the balcony for a shave, he knows how this will turn out. He has no say in the matter whatsoever. He is a mute witness.

While sitting on the balcony, naked to the waist, he can look down over the bird cage their apartments occupied by Andrés, the Humanities lecturer. Andrés can hear each of Gabriel’s piercing groans, which elicit a sort of call-and-response from the aged Sun Parakeet.

To the left of Marta’s balcony are several neighbors. They are at the bottom of the Caiseas spur, which is shaped like an amphitheater. The balcony sounds reach throughout this neighborhood, as if from a stage.

The shaving is a clue. Gabriel has come to realize what is in store, because Marta’s mood will be different when she has something up her sleeve. Her tone of voice changes, depending on what she has in mind.

On this evening she has slipped Gabriel some Cialis with his dinner. She does not, would not announce this. But still, the ritual quality is established.

She reads him erotic poetry. This evening, it is taken from the *Song of Songs*. She holds her red Bible in her right hand. It falls open to a favorite passage, which Marta has underlined. Sitting beside Gabriel, she holds his right hand with her left hand, her ring finger still bearing the wedding ring from half a century earlier.

*For strong as death is love... Many waters cannot  
put out love  
nor rivers sweep it away.*

Gabriel has been gazing towards the sea, but slowly turns his head and eyes towards his wife, who fingers the pages:

*Come my lover,  
Let us go out to the field... if the blossoms have opened,  
There I will give my loving to you.*

Marta's right forefinger slips the pages back again:

*Arise, O north, and come, O south  
blow on my garden, let its perfumes flow,  
Let my lover come to his garden,  
and eat its luscious fruit.*

12

Gabriel's inscrutable face directs a gaze midway between the sea breeze and his wife's words. Marta sees in his fluttering eyes deep reservoirs of emotion. She strokes his hand, then turns the wheelchair, and pushes him back into their bedroom. As if parking a car, she swerves him around until the wheels are parallel with the bed. From behind, she rubs his bald head, tanned but surprisingly without blemish.

She steps in front of him, kissing his forehead that she holds in her hands. One hand moves down and gives the barest whisper of a caress to the front of his Fruit of the Loom shorts.

Continuing to kiss his forehead, her hand slowly increases its pressure.

"¿Me quieres?" she asks. "¿Tienes ganas?" She wants to know if he still wants her. She tells him as if in an exercise video, to rise up. Gabe is beginning to moan more intensely, which she takes as a yes.

Marta removes the object of her desire, then slowly climbs atop his wheelchair. She continues kissing Gabriel's bald head as she positions herself. "Ya," she says as his moans transition into heavier breathing.

With practiced skill, she lifts her slip, and lowers herself onto Gabriel's lap. Penetration is slow and uncertain at first. Marta has to *bregar*, to struggle with intense dedication in the face of a difficulty—Gabriel's immobility, her dryness.

Visually Marta's movements take on the character of a snake swallowing an animal wider than its mouth. The devourer expands slowly; the devoured is taken in centimeter by centimeter. Blessed assurance. This penetration is in slow motion at first. Gabe is silent now, but Marta is humming.

Gabriel's mouth begins to move and Marta thinks that he is trying to say something. What is he trying to say? "Mi Tesoro," Marta tells him. "My treasure."

She winds her hips slowly at first, once she has "swallowed him." Then she gradually moves into a quickening rhythm. Gabriel's mouth continues to move, but he can express only a guttural sound, yet Marta moves her ear against his lips, as if she might be able to decipher or translate his utterances.

Then, finally, Marta moves with a quickening rhythm. She leans the seat back, and the intertwined couple slowly rolls over onto the bed, Marta managing to move herself back on top. Gabriel's eyes roll back in his head, and as he groans, not so savagely now, Marta finds her way to God. And then Gabriel's groaning changes keys, becomes fiercer.

The Sun Conure screeches in the cage below the balcony. Down in the apartment below the mango tree, Andrés hears the screeches and moans of the ancient bird and man, and thinks out loud: "What does he want?"

Marta murmurs sweet nothings to her man, who gazes at her intently. In her post-coital reflections, Marta remembers how much more difficult things were before ... in the early days after the flow of concrete, before she "discovered" Cialis.

The old lovers, now in their late sixties, share a secret: Gabe cannot climax in his current state. Does Marta feel that this access to and focus on her own pleasure is her just reward, after the years in which his pleasure was paramount?

The unfolding of this scene may leave a viewer to wonder: doesn't Gabriel feel trapped by this ritual? Is there a moment of transition from his resentment, being trapped in this, and not having any volition of his own, to some level of enjoyment? Because after all, he must still feel some affection for Marta. He could have suffered a far worse fate, such as a wife who farmed him out to full-time nursing.

Marta is in charge of the whole performance. Gabriel is drugged. Otherwise could he perform? We do not know, but Marta leaves nothing to chance. He is her angel, still virile, and in his arms, however immobile, inter-penetrated, she discerns the coded messages of her Creator.



## a chain of proteins

Jane Yolen

So that is what will kill us,  
take the world off  
in a storm of sixteen proteins  
joined together.

A sort of daisy chain,  
linked fence of infection,  
hijackers without masks  
or pistol, that introduce  
their own strand of DNA  
into ours.

That's what invaders always do.  
Kill all the men,  
impregnate the women,  
leave them to bring up  
half-breeds by themselves?  
We who study old wars  
recognize the pattern  
and the years it takes,  
to bring back trust,  
honor, freedom, acceptance  
and shaking hands  
into the world.



## virus

Jane Yolen

We track what we cannot see,  
watch what we cannot follow  
assume what we cannot know.

And so we spin ourselves webs  
to protect us from what we fear,  
to keep us safe from death,

which will still find the walkway  
between one's life now,  
and another.



## plowing under

Jane Yolen

American farmers, unable to sell  
their green beans to closed restaurants,  
with no help from the government,  
were left to plow them under,  
as the politicians forgot  
the poor in their small houses,  
virus-ridden rest homes,  
shops with empty shelves.  
In this same week, the Resurrection  
of a young rabbi is celebrated  
who said, among other things,  
clothe the poor, feed the hungry,  
treat your neighbor as yourself,  
and was killed for his insurrection.  
There are no metaphors or rhymes  
tough enough for me to recount  
the horror of that article, that photo,  
in simple black and white.  
So I write a poem, as stark, as bare  
as the shelves, as our hearts,  
those same hearts that once  
grew daffodils and now hold stones.



## this mask

Jane Yolen

Four simple folds,  
or gathers,  
two simple elastics,  
one hidden wire,  
a daughter's love  
with every stitch.

She cannot keep me  
from the cold,  
or from aging,  
but the raging virus  
gives her a job.  
Four simple folds,  
Two simple elastics  
One hidden wire  
as safe as she can make it.

But the love is what I see.



# before dinner

RC deWinter

There's no going out these days –  
any stray encounter could stop the lungs.  
What's worth dicing with death?

We stay in the house. The yard.  
Food delivered by the masked and gloved;  
even with these precautions we wash hands often.

As long as we have each other it's still a fine life.

Books.  
Hands dropping small universes into garden loam.  
A drink or two afterward, serenaded by birds still flying free.  
The music we listen to. And make. Piano. Guitars.  
Voices chiming in the harmony of the fortunate.  
The news, when we can stomach it.  
But films, mostly, streamed through the invisibility  
connecting us to whatever's left.

Our bodies the glue of our existence.  
The envelopes holding the reality of who we are.

Minds mesh in the silence of perfect understanding.  
One look speaks volumes.  
One smile an invitation to world.

In the slow unfolding of the scarlet sunset,  
the stubborn soot of five o'clock shadow  
scrapes the soft, defenseless flesh of my open thighs.  
As you taste the proof of my desire,  
I'm lost to everything but the universe we are.





# the making of stars

RC deWinter

you made it  
look so easy the  
making of  
stars your sheer  
hands a blur as you grabbed this  
and that out of thin

air is it  
sawdust and dreams the  
cobwebs of  
memory  
or the broken thoughts i left  
in a paper bag

outside the  
door you smiled without  
answering  
any of  
my silly questions shaking  
your head you raised a

finger to  
your lips and shifted  
into slow  
mo your arms  
clicked in the eternity  
between each change of

direction  
your fingers closing  
over things  
i couldn't  
see your lips  
never moved but your voice sang  
in my head like

ripples in  
a pond echoing  
off the stiff  
stubborn plates  
of my skull take the pain of  
everything you don't

want to own  
the laughter of the  
one you loved  
most every  
lie you ever told and all  
the things you desire

crush them in  
your palm until your  
fingertips  
are burning  
matchheads bluer and hotter  
than the flames of hell

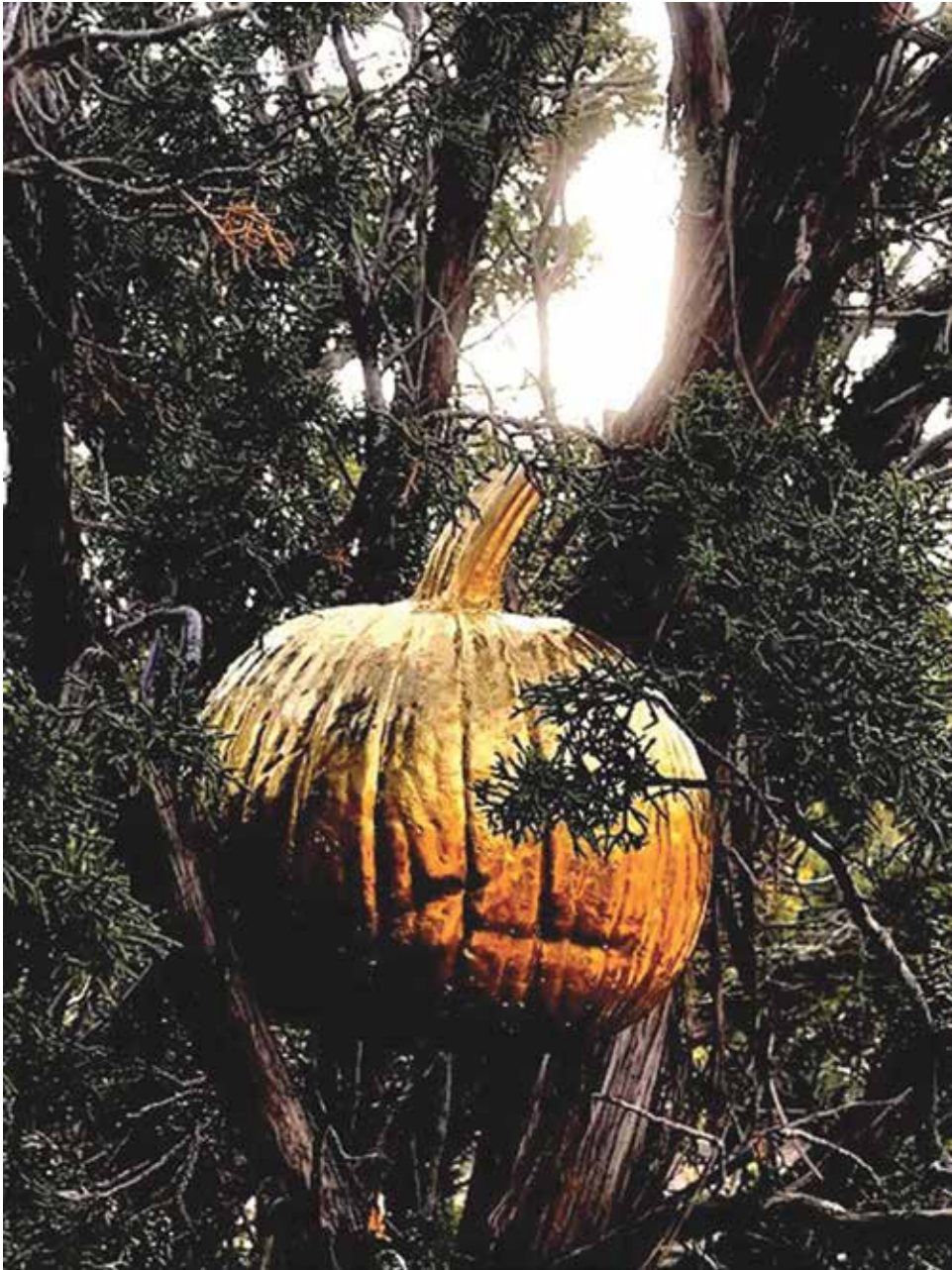
and when you  
reach the edge between  
consciousness  
and silence  
raise your arm open your hand  
and there will be stars

your words burned  
in my brain as if  
you'd reached in  
with your own  
fiery fingertips and  
tattooed it with red

hot sparks i  
coward that i am  
ran to the  
rusty door  
between sleep and death yanked it  
open and picked up

the thoughts i'd  
abandoned in that  
paper bag  
breathed them back  
to life and opened my eyes  
to another day





knowledge  
Kirby Michael Wright

# i'd quit if i weren't so hooked

Gerald Yelle

That was the day I became mother god  
father god and boss master judge of all right  
and wrong –of how much is too much  
or too close or not having enough on  
to not look naked. I must've been  
waiting for the alarm to go off. I didn't  
have to go in early because I'd already  
done the bare minimum two days in a row.  
I lay there thinking I didn't  
care how long they waited before  
deciding to plod on without me. I didn't  
care if the norm was for everyone to go  
above and beyond the need to come early  
stay late keep the economy rolling  
spending everything and buying  
the rest on credit keeping our noses to  
the backs of the heads in front of us  
while thinking outside the box.  
I didn't care if it went without saying  
–it was the only decent thing in an  
indecent world –I was the crown of  
creation with my very own self to preserve.  
Haters fall back. My judgment had  
to be trusted –or –maybe they'd want us  
to stay home because of  
some viral shit about to hit the fan.



# the map

Gerald Yelle

I had a map of the north central interior.  
I hadn't even opened it and my  
insurance company was trying to talk me  
out of going. Afraid I'd get lost.

They never understood how evolved  
I am in this respect. I get that people  
wouldn't be able to find their way  
to a place they'd never been no matter  
how good the maps or GPS directions  
but for me a map doesn't even  
need my current location. As long as  
I recognize one place name I'll get there.  
And I'm good at following signs.

I have every confidence –some friends  
went to the interior about a year ago  
and it was a good vacation  
–though there weren't enough roads  
or place names for GPS to be useful.  
So I had this map.

It was very large and I opened it to show  
my insurance man how easy it was  
to find where I was going. I knew  
where it was on the map and I knew  
which way was up but close examination  
revealed that only a few  
of the markings were familiar.  
There weren't any words –at least none  
I understood –only symbols I'd have  
to decipher. My agent reminded me  
I got lost following breadcrumbs once  
as a kid which hadn't been funny.  
He'd heard there were vast uninhabited  
tracts in the north central interior  
and the blinding white space in the middle  
of the map seemed to suggest it  
was cold with no roads to speak of.



# cardiff giant with dresden blue eyes

Gerald Yelle

The kid grew so fast he moved out two months  
shy of his thirteenth birthday.  
And now a nuthatch wants to fly us to Ohio  
so we can meet his new wife.  
I said I'd rather trust my hubcaps'  
spacious accommodations, but Em demurs.  
She can't stand the thought of all the time  
it would take to drive there.  
She gets car sick on the twisting, turning roads.  
She gets stir crazy and doesn't like the music  
I insist on grooving to so I don't get too sleepy.  
And every time I talk about her lack  
of social grace she brings up my conversion  
to hereditary blindness –like a page  
she continues to flout from my misspent youth.  
And having made that move, I bet she thinks  
I'll change my mind. If I did  
it wouldn't be the first time we snuck  
through Homeland Security. It's part of our  
commitment to spontaneous breakneck  
convalescence. It's not for the faint of heart.  
Like on weekends while Em naps I trot  
my halter ego out to the car park  
and practice taking off with eyes wide shut.



# fortunato

Richard Wayne Horton

Fortunato felt a drag in the room as he finished his comedy set. The fortunate one, the jester, usually got laughs from the otherwise heavy dudes he had gotten to know so well. Since their business was extortion and murder, they struggled with job-related guilt. Today they wore suits as if they were at a funeral. They were sitting around in an upscale lounge called The Vault. The mob comic worked in some jokes about funerals, dead people, and a dead audience. They laughed almost gently as if to say, remarkable how funny that is! That's when he knew.

The Vault, hm! Fortunato had a vault of his own, where he kept his meanest, most insulting jokes. He told them, and they got the best laughs of the day, though each punchline was a gut punch to someone in the room. Ed walked over and got behind him as told one about Ed himself. Fortunato heard Ed taking something out of his coat pocket. Halfway through the joke he felt cold metal on the back of his neck. The boss had his hand up, stopping Ed because he wanted to hear the punchline, though Ed was squirming. Fortunato said, "Wait for it...wait for it..." Then he got the punchline in just as the silencer barked quietly. Hey, nice response! Some clapping out there! Good for a comic's's heart which wasn't otherwise working so well. The boss said "Ed, you're dead! He whacked you!"

Hey, everybody, let's let Fortunato tell the rest of the story as only he can.

"So I got up. Yeah. Don't give me that look. I gave the stupids a wave and said 'I'm done here! So long, you sad clowns!' They didn't hear, of course, but who needed them?"

"I walked out the door feeling relieved. Sunny day out front. As I often do, I struck up a conversation with a nice lady who happened to come walking along the sidewalk, and I told her a couple of jokes, which put her at ease and broke the ice as we continued on our way. Seeing I was a funny man, she mentioned a comedy club we'd be passing in another couple of blocks and she said I really ought to check it out. I said, well, it's gotta beat telling jokes to murderers, so yeah I'll go, if you'll allow me to buy you a drink. She took my arm, and so here we are!

"Place is wild, isn't it? Great audience! I love the costumes. Look at the kid. Ten year old boy in a white toga, sitting on the floor putting together a Roman basilica with inch-square stone cubes. Real stone. Your angel outfit is cool too. Look at the TV over the bar. It's showing hidden cam footage of The Vault. There's the Boss, Ed and the others having a final quiet laugh as they sit around a table sipping fat little glasses of Amontillado. In the background you see the new guy, the drudge, rolling a dead body in a rug and trying to lift it but it flops out and that's when he finds the wire under the stiff's shirt. 'Boss! Boss!'

"Boom! There goes the door, crashing in. It's the feds! About time, you monkeys! If I wasn't enjoying this gig so much, I might have liked the witness protection holiday you were going to give me.

"My advice to comics? Don't be afraid of that threshold, brothers and sisters. You know the one I mean."



# patriate

Richard Wayne Horton

Leaping onto the jet, the expatriate came to France, where the sneering American literary magazines would not extend the poisonous tentacles of their rejection notices (unless of course he sent them something).

At 2 the expatriate stepped out of his pension into the snooty French agora, carrying an envelope. The door woman raised an eyebrow. She would!

After an annoyingly breezy walk through the village he came to the post office. Two old men on bikes stopped to stare. One muttered, "What the devil!" The other said, "It's the expatriate. That explains all!" The expatriate glared. "Objectificators!" he muttered, entering the post office.

A long line awaited him. "Maman! Look! The expatriate!" The mother applied hands to the child's eyes. Other patrons edged away from the expatriate, who glared at one and all.

Finally he reached the counter. "I wish, please, to purchase, how do you say, mailage, postage, whatever, and then to mail the envelope!"

Amazement showed on the postwoman's face. "What's that? You wish to mail your underwear?"

"No! Attawnsionne! The eeeeeen-vel-ope!"

"I cannot be expected to understand such language!"

"The envelope! The envelope! The envelope!" While waving the envelope and jumping up and down, the expatriate noticed that he was nude. The cabal! The poison! "Sacred azure! They're here!" he said, assuming he was still speaking French. He used the envelope to cover his Etats Unis as he crab-walked toward the door, where a policeman waited to assist him. "Oh, you Indiana Reviews! You Atlantics! You haven't published geniuses like me in 20 years! Did you like your trip to France? Rejecting me must be the most delightful of drugs, you...you Paris Reviews!"

At his pension where he surprised the door woman with his attire, a blanket loaned by the police, he discovered that mail had arrived. Marked with the names of prestigious U.S. literary journals, it was not really mail. It was snakes, spiders, madness.

The expatriate's next destination would be Japan. He had secretly begun practicing tea ceremonies. Perhaps while he hid in Osaka, a missile would arrive from North Korea. He would welcome it, so long as it did not pop open above the city, spilling letters from prestigious U.S. literary journals rejoicing at the opportunity of having read his moving and excellent poem, but explaining that it was not a good fit for issue 37, 38 or 39.

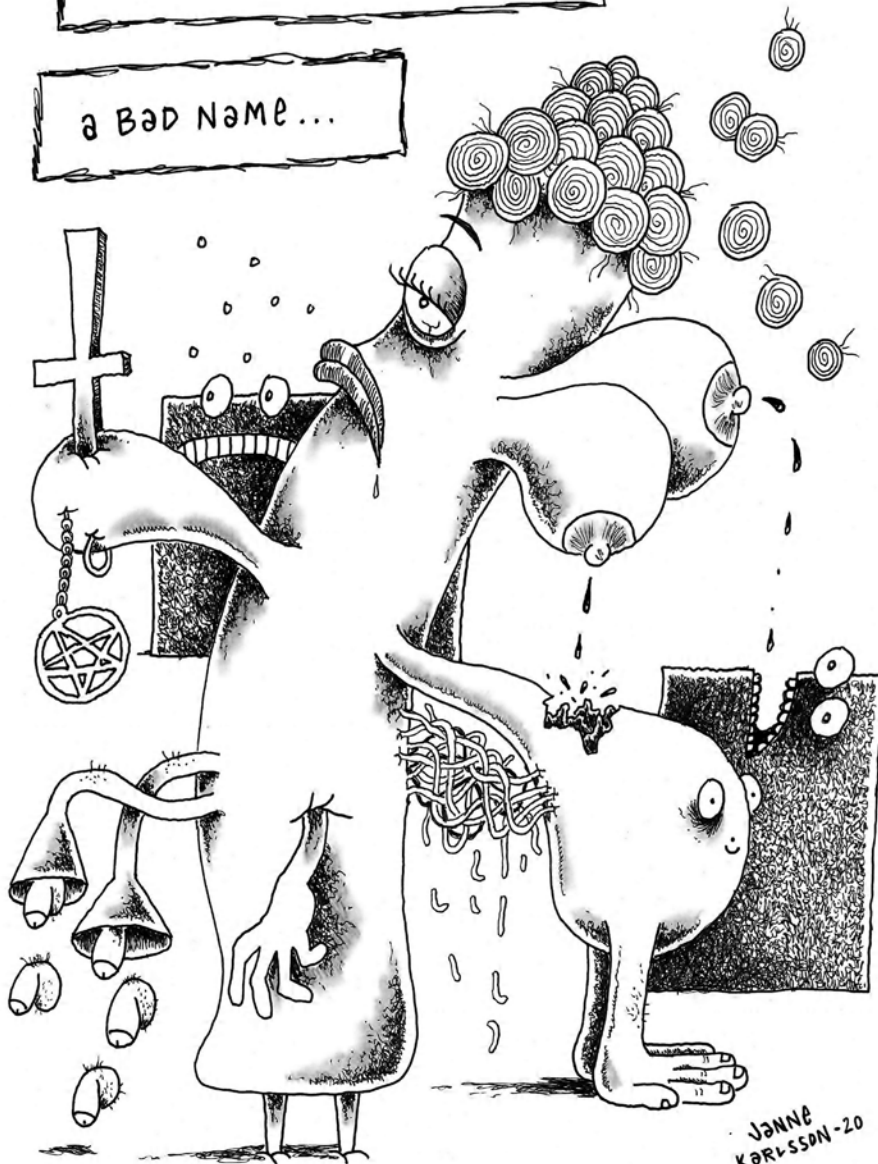
A moment later the door woman was astonished to see a human jackrabbit with a suitcase exiting the front door and heading for the airport.





BABY, YOU GIVE ALCATRAZ

a BAD NAME ...





# dreams

Ed Meek

Sleep closes the door and opens the window.  
Dreams ride in on the wind. You're talking  
to yourself. But you don't always listen.

So, you try different angles, story lines, trailers,  
clips, visitations with dead family and friends.

In this world elastic time bends, stretches,  
loops and snaps back. Your mind a 3D printer,  
never jams: casting filaments in a web of images and sounds.

In the morning, all that remains are strands  
that lie in fragments all over the floor of your mind.



# in the dark room

Ed Meek

The beautiful blind girl  
waits patiently  
at the corner for the light  
to change. There are no  
cars coming, but she  
has learned to wait  
for the talking walk sign.  
She clasps her white walking stick  
with which she feels  
her way by tapping.  
She could be anywhere  
on a corner in the dead  
of winter beneath  
a cold grey sky.  
Her body is a dark room  
with the door closed.  
It can't be easy  
to navigate a world  
based on sight--  
every step an act of faith.



# cultivation

Elizabeth Galoozis

if I could move laterally –  
through space and time  
of my own making –  
and not vertically,  
in hierarchies,  
with envy and haste,  
toward (empty) power  
or (hollow) praise.  
if the sparks in my hands  
lit others' flames.

if what grew from my labor  
I actually wanted to eat.  
if it were abundant enough  
to share with friends,  
to sustain itself  
from summer to summer.  
if it grew to be  
a small but vibrant fruit,  
something  
that both nourishes and pleases.



# all-inclusive

Cherie Stoll

Scalding heat, the sweat from my groin. I've woken thinking I wet the bed. The mirage of summer is in my bedroom, shimmering like a Swovorski-encrusted costume. The table fan is no match against the gyrations of heat from the open window; I peel away skin stuck to other skin. The fragrances of yesterday are trapped, suspended. Marijuana here, kitchen garbage there. Pockets of molecules unable to dissipate. Everything moves slower, even the sound waves emanating from the radio. A cold shower is of no use; I use a washcloth to freshen instead. A spritz from a bottle of aloe vera and peppermint oil to my roots, on my face. I accessorize with a gold chain bracelet and waterproof eyeliner.

American dollar bills, damp and worn, tucked under melted daiquiris. Tiny birds steal away abandoned bites from plates, taking flight with french fries. I tiptoe around placid bodies: sunbathers marinated in oil and burnt bodies recoiling in the shade like a demon trapped to a corner of the room by a cross-wielding priest. I collect dirty dishes and tips of varying decor. The alcohol flows endlessly like the fountain of youth. A water aerobics class begins in the main pool.

Passionfruit, sweet on my lips, unlike my wearisome lover. I hide away to pleasure myself because he does not know how. On my break, I plunge my feet in a bucket of lukewarm water. Removing compressed socks from tired feet is the greatest feeling in existence. Fifteen minutes of quiet, relief for my lower back; I mull over dinner options and scroll through my phone.

An air conditioned bus ride home, a silent and collective understanding. The overhead lights have finally shut off as we make our way out of the city. Smaller buildings and the gradual drift into comfort like a shot of mezcal. When I get home I will take a bath and make an overdue call to my mother.





i've loved you forever  
madame Hair

# mourning the living

Bailey Powell Aldrich

“I’m going to try to find my brother,” I announced to my summer writing collective. It was the meeting before my departure in June. They looked on with concerned faces, but I’m used to people being disconcerted about anything having to do with Alex and his story. The next morning I was embarking on a trip to Texas for six weeks to work on my thesis, the first 100 pages of my book, about mental illness and my brother, Alex.

“Good luck and, just... take care of you,” were the general consensuses in the room that night and in the encouraging emails and texts that followed. I have a special kind of intimacy with my writing colleagues through secrets that can only be conveyed in the written word, and they detected that I was wading into dark waters long before I did. Meanwhile, I was telling myself that they just didn’t know how hardened I was to tragedy.

Like a geographical safeguard, the 1500 miles between New York City and Dallas have stood firmly between Alex’s reality and me since I moved here going on eight years ago. As a result, his story is one I’ve been able to deliver to others for years with a matter-of-fact, placid affect. But, over the course of my recent extended stay, the buffer disintegrated and left me with a raw reckoning.

I haven’t seen Alex in over a year. It’s been so long that I’ve begun having a hard time imagining what his weathered face even looks like these days. That sensation is further unmoored by the knowledge that his body is in a constant state of substance-informed deterioration. He’s an elusive addict making his way around Fort Worth, Texas and is not forthcoming about his location. Six months ago, he changed his Facebook profile picture to a bizarre rendering of someone who used to be the most conventionally attractive Powell child. He looked like a crumbling version of my handsome brother. *Who is that?* To me, Alex is like a slow zoom out at the end of a movie. He’s becoming smaller and smaller, and the details are now too small to make out, no matter how hard I squint. So, my imaginative subconscious is having a heyday, which is the only way I can explain my waking nightmares that ultimately led to the breakdown I just experienced.

Every time I visit my parents’ house in Texas, I feel endangered. Involuntarily, scenes play over and over in my head until they’re no longer violent fiction but real threats. Here lies the crux. When I am home in Arlington, night after night I imagine Alex getting dropped off in front of my parents’ house, backlit and bathed in the orange glow of the streetlamp, and pulling out a gun. Sometimes he raises the gun to the side of his head and I see his black silhouette fall. Sometimes I see him breaking into my parents’ house with the gun to hurt us. Every time I see these things I’m in his old room, where I often sleep.

One trip home, when the lines of reality had begun to blur, I raced to the front door and flickered the front porch light to alert Alex that I saw him. *I see you, Alex! Please don’t hurt me.* As soon as the sun came up, these threats that made my heart pound would dissipate like morning dew.

Another night on another trip, I heard the crunch of a car pulling up in front of the house and knew. *Showtime*. I peeked out of the blinds of Alex's old bedroom, and saw a tall man exit a car: *I was right. Exactly what I imagined has manifested*. I raced to the front door in my oversized t-shirt and underwear and yanked it open to find a drunk teenager peeing on our yard. I sputtered before yelling

"Hey! Get the fuck off my lawn!" I stepped back into the house, trembling. To me, that drunk teenager was a close call, a near miss of my brother coming to kill us all and then himself. Unlike seven years ago, Alex was going to get the gunshot right this time, and we were all going down with him. I wasn't angry about my violent fate, just anxious for its arrival. I see Alex inflicting death on his loved ones to be from a place of mercy. It was going to be his way of saying sorry to us and end our suffering along with his. He always did have a hard time with words. Actions, not so much. *Was that the front door I just heard? Did the handle jostle? Did its distinct suction just sound?* For hours that night I lied awake wide-eyed, watching the ceiling fan whir. Another night waiting for death that didn't come.

I suppose these visions didn't crack me until my most recent trip, though, because it was the longest time I've spent in Texas since seven years ago, when Alex shot himself. This seemed to purely be a case of mental sustainability. *How long can I take it?* Survey says, three weeks to the day.

It all started on Wednesday, July 17th when I walked into my dad's office.

"Hey, can you tell me that B&E story about someone else claiming to be Alex? I'm trying to write about it." My dad leaned back in his chair and his eyes flickered upward in thought. He recounted a cop calling him for the upteenth time, asking if he were Alexander Powell's father. Trembling, he sat down as he confirmed that yes, he was.

"Sir, we have your son here in custody for breaking and entering. He was found in someone's closet." My dad thought Alex was at work but, given his history, anything was possible, including a little lunch break B&E. "The issue is, though, he doesn't match what we have on file for Alexander Powell."

"Well, there's one way you can be certain you have the right person. My son has a prosthetic leg. Does that guy have a left foot?"

Alex was busy at work when some guy from our high school spit out Alex's name, trying to pin a crime on him. I suppose he thought Alex was an easy mark but, for once, Alex was caught doing the right thing. When my dad called to tell him about it, they both had a good laugh. In a strange way, I suppose it was a prideful moment for Alex.

Around 2:00am later that night, I was grateful REM was eluding me when I heard someone in the house. *Okay, Alex's here now*. I walked out of his room. "Hello?" I asked the ticking clock on the living room wall. *Nothing*. Sometimes my dad can't sleep, either, and makes his way into his office to work, but his office was dark. *Alex is finally here, and he's hiding*. I walked through each room of the house, turning on lights, inspecting closets and spaces big enough to obscure a person – behind couches, the pool table, underneath my dad's desk, the bar. *Nothing*. I doubled checked every locked door before closing myself back in Alex's room, again accepting my fate. *If*

*I'm going to die, that's okay.* Another night of doing everything I can to prevent death, another night having to make peace with it. My eyes burned and my heart pounded.

Now far out of the realm of sleep, I mindlessly scrolled through the multitudes of Facebook, a road with a million forks that lead to a billion nothings. I clicked on the profile of a girl I'd gone to high school with, wondering what she'd been up to. She was dead.

"I'm in FortWorth. Please tell my parents I'm safe and I love them," she'd written to a concerned friend in some buried comment thread. Various photos of her in outpatient treatment centers, encouraging words, and selfies captioned with self-affirmations littered her erratic feed until they ended abruptly, replaced by shell-shocked friends and death's faithful platitude: "I can't believe you're gone." It seems she'd overdosed. I spent the next two hours scrolling through four years of posts from someone I hadn't seen in 16 years, searching for clues to a puzzle without an answer. I was entranced by the mystery and likenesses: Except for the end, she and Alex have shared the same road.

My mania had dwindled into a dull throb of depression. Trying to make use of what I was feeling, I opened my laptop to disseminate fresh thoughts about Alex, but my mind was more scattered than my book's manuscript. There was so much to say, but at the same time there was nothing to say at all. I was beginning to feel like a human husk and leaned my head back onto the hard headboard.

It was 4:30am and the world felt dead around me. Right then, I believed the lie that everyone else had average thoughts and average nights. Meanwhile, my growing perceived isolation felt irrevocable, like a "new normal" I could either adjust to, or die. I was already on the way down, mentally, so I threw the concept of self-care out and dumpster dove into more darkness.

I climbed out of bed and tugged a folder marked "Alex 2016" out from under the throw pillows I'd stacked on the window seat. My mom and I had unearthed it that day while sorting through her and my dad's bedroom, purging and organizing items that had needed attention for years. We found my Abercrombie & Fitch new hire manual (recycle), Duncan's study abroad info from his 2005 semester in Prague (shred), and this Alex folder ("Keep it, you may need it for your book."). Like rotten Easter eggs, upsetting pieces of Alex are hidden all around the house.

I cracked open the tattered accordion folder and started at the beginning. The first three things I pulled out were letters from Alex, one from each time in his troubled life like paper talismans no one could stand to part with. All three were written to my parents, and all three contained apologies, self-lacerations, and unkept promises for improved future behavior. Each decade of tumult was accounted for: teens, 20s, and 30s. By the third letter my eyes were too blurred to read and fat tears were plopping onto Alex's scrawl, a piece of posterity being marred by my overdue emotions. I don't remember the last time I cried about Alex, but in that moment heaving sobs overtook me and depleted me, anew.

The sun began to peek through the blinds, leading me to rationalize that, without the cloak of night, Alex murdering us en masse was less likely. Plus, my parents would be awake soon, which meant they'd be my night shift relief. I sent a text to my parents at 6:05am that read:

Was up 2-6am working on writing. Will be sleeping extra strange hours today.

I didn't tell them the rest. I never tell anyone the rest.

At 2:30pm, I made the bed and emerged from Alex's room, but my paranoia and general unease had only slightly quelled, unusual for me. I put in my contacts, washed my face, brushed my teeth, washed out my mouthguard, slathered sunscreen all over my face, and changed into clean clothes. Black, always black. This morning routine has become a ritual, a mental imperative. They're things I know I'm able to do and, someday, these things are all I'm able to accomplish. July 18th was one of those days.

I made conversation and a cup of tea, trying to play it cool, trying to starve and kill whatever was ailing my mind.

"So, no organizing today?" I asked my mom, bummed. I was hoping we'd tackle another area of the house, maybe so I could further numb my mind. Knowing I was blue, she invited me along to hang out with her and her loving, understanding friend, but my capacity for conversation was tapped after just a brief interaction. I stayed put while people moved around me, my mom heading to her friend's house, my dad working and eating, my nephew, a tiny person with Alex's face, asking Alexa to play "Old Town Road" over and over. Then, when my dad left to pick up my mom and my nephew ran outside to get in his mom's car, I found myself alone in our empty house.

No matter how it's renovated, Alex is like a ghost in that place. I can still see him heading out for the night in his fat skate shoes, seeking out our dad to ask for twenty bucks at an inappropriate age. Passing me in the kitchen as I sat at the table, he'd take a dig at me like a parting gift.

"Beeyelly!" He'd say in a mocking voice. "Don't have any plans tonight? Is it cause you realized you're too laaarge to be loved? Aren't you a lesbian, anyway? Just kiddin'!" He'd shout behind him before slamming the door and ripping his truck out of the driveway.

One time, after exiting my room in a horizontally striped shirt, he pounced. "Uh, Beeyelly, those stripes aren't doing anything for your wide-load body." My face crumpled up as I walked back to my room and shut the door to cry. A few seconds later, a soft knock came. "Bailey? I'm really sorry for saying that. You know I think you're really pretty. I didn't mean what I said." There was a beat of silence. "You're not a *wide-load*," he chuckled softly as he cracked open my door, peeking in at me while I sat on my bed and stared at my lap. "Seriously," he said with earnest eyes. "Do you still love me?"

When our dad turned 60, we threw a huge party for him. Just a year and change after Alex had shot himself, we sat next to each other so I could monitor and advocate for him, making sure he was eating enough to match his booze intake and to act as a buffer between him and any prying eyes or questions.

People got up and spoke about our dad, making a bunch of people cry, because that's just the kind of person my dad is. Duncan and I had already stood up to say something, eliciting laughter and tears.



When an old college buddy of my dad's took the stage, Alex leaned over to me and said, "I have something to say, too. It'd make him cry. Should I go next?" His eyes searched my face for affirmation. Despite his often mean façade, an unguarded desire for my approval still shone through from time to time. I could tell he was serious, but his shoddy record made me wary. He appeared lucid, but I couldn't be sure how much he'd been drinking, or if he was on anything. Who knew what he'd say. I paused.

"I don't know Alex, you could just talk to him later," I said. His body was erect, hands placed on the back of his chair as he twisted around to look at the center of the room, rapt and wondering. He looked like a child. When he looked back at me, I doubled down. "Yeah, I think you should talk to him later, in private," I said. "If you're gonna upset him, definitely talk to him later." His face fell.

Censoring him that night, what I now know was a rare time he felt he had something of value to offer, is one of a couple of things I have trouble forgiving myself for. Another is when I was so angry at him I made fun of his limp. After spewing venom at me and leaving the room, I marched through the kitchen mocking his gait, a physical retort to his searing words.

"Don't do that," my mom said, sitting at the table and watching me sadly. I think she was sad for both of us.

Alex dropped out of high school, failed out of community college twice, and was discharged from the Army for drug use. He openly resents me and Duncan for going to college, for getting salaries instead of hourly wages, for going on vacation when he wasn't able to get off work, for doing things like studying abroad and moving out of our hometown- essentially experiencing what some might perceive as conventional success. Despite my and Duncan's own crippling issues with mental illness, and despite our relentless encouragement of him, Alex refuses the concept of nuance and believes he's been singled out and shorted in life. Simply, he understands every progression of my and Duncan's lives to be a dig at who he's become, a wedge we were driving between us and him as siblings with hateful intention. Shrouded in insecurity, he also points fingers at our parents, especially our mom, desperately grasping for a reason why his life has turned out differently than ours.

When I was in college, he'd sneer things like, "Yeah, must be a lot of hard work for mom and dad to pay for you and Duncan to go party for four years. Must be nice! I actually have to go to work," and "Just 'cause you go party at North Texas instead of here in Arlington doesn't make you any smarter than me, mmmkay Beeyelly?" He took every opportunity to tear me down and, in addition to dealing with my severe clinical depression, it worked.

On rare occasion, when it seemed like he'd never forgive me or stop making cruel comments, he'd do something like drive 110mph north of Dallas just in time to see me walk the stage at the University of North Texas to receive my diploma. I still remember standing up with my row and giving a final hopeful glance to my family in the stadium. Alex was above them jogging down the steps with that same gait only someone with a prosthetic leg could have, the fringes of his beanie swinging side to side.

Teenage Alex evaporated, twenties Alex evaporated, and I was back in my parents' house on July 18th, alone.

Historically, my mood sunsets in tandem with the day and, like a green wall cloud taunting me from the horizon, I knew a dangerous storm was coming. At night I'm at my worst, it was arriving, and that strange day contained something extra I couldn't identify. It was special. Despite the grace of a summer night concluding late, between 8-9pm, twilight never lasts long, and eventually the sun's going to leave. Feeling helpless, I collapsed into bed, fully clothed, just a handful of hours after I'd emerged from it. I said goodnight to Rick on the phone with a giant lump in my throat, refusing to worry him with my cross-country fear. I was gutted that he was going to sleep. Jealous, even. Simplicity will never be mine. Average people sleeping average hours meant I would officially be alone with my thoughts while an emptiness was growing inside me like a cancer on crack. After we hung up, I heard my parents return home, that distinct aero-gush of the glass door before its final slam and lock, a noise I was especially astute at detecting due to my night vigils. I listened to them move and murmur around the house while, unmoving, I watched the last drip of sun fade through the blind slats. The house quieted and night had officially begun.

34 The tears came, because there was nothing else. I laid on my stomach, face turned sideways on the pillow, and a hot splotch of tears darkened the pillowcase before cooling. Like the sun, even the warmth of my own tears was leaving me. My thoughts pivoted to death, like a villain's head slowly turning toward a victim in a scary movie. *Fuck*. I couldn't smother it. I couldn't push it down. Death seemed reasonable, and giving in seemed easy. But, I knew I could never act. My family has been through enough tragedy to last several lifetimes. Our quotas were met long ago and, unfortunately, continue to be exceeded. My dad jokes about potential disasters happening to his loved ones. "That's *all* I need," he says, wryly, following with a laugh. It's a way to cope.

Hot face dampened by cold tears, I found myself in a limbo. I wanted to hurt myself but knew I couldn't, which exacerbated my helpless self-hatred. I was both suffocating and unable to die. *Which way is out? I can't see, I can't do, I can't feel. There is nothing. What does Alex look like now? Did I just hear a car pull up to the house? Is that a gun? I can't do this anymore. I can't not do this anymore.*

Smothered between two enormous pillows of inaction, I believed, if left alone, death would win. I have a hard time crying in front of people and, in a great exercise of humility, I called Rick back, voice cracking, to tell him the truth. I've long felt guilty that the conventional-seeming blonde person he married turned out to be a lot more than he bargained for. Fifteen hundred miles away, unable to touch or see me, he was dumbfounded. In our five years together, he'd never known me to be what I was that night.

My time was ticking, and I burst out of Alex's bedroom.

"Where's mom?" I choked to my dad sitting on the couch. I made a game time decision that my mom's a queen in crisis and my dad, always the first line recipient of bad news regarding Alex, needed a damn break.

Heaving sobs and layering streaks of snot on the sleeves of my black shirt, the only thing I was sure of was the necessity of my being monitored. I could no longer be stagnant. Whether that

meant going to a local institution or immediately flying back to New York to see my psych and do the same, something had to happen straight away. Leaving my mom on the phone with Rick, my dad trailed behind me.

“Bailey, what can I do? Can you tell me what you’re feeling?”

“Nothing. I feel nothing.” I collapsed back onto the bed in Alex’s room and, with the light pouring in from the hallway, my dad looked on. I imagine that’s a special brand of heartbreak, a niche market. *She’s not a kid, but she’s still my kid.*

Like a wonky record player, my mind began to loop: *hurt myself, hate myself, hurt myself, hate myself. There is nothing else. There is nothing.*

Rick and my mom conferenced Duncan, a seasoned vet in wading through dark spaces alone while believing there’s no way out. He recommended a way to manage my immediate situation before hightailing from Dallas to our parents’ house in the suburbs to talk me down. Rick stayed on the phone with me until Duncan arrived, my mom busied herself booking me on the first flight available out of Dallas to NYC the following morning, and my dad looked thunderstruck. Unfortunately, I know that face too well. Underneath it is an indescribable grief, it usually just applies to Alex.

Duncan arrived and sat on the edge of the bed in our brother’s old room. The room of “our missing tripod”, as I call Alex. Wearing his glasses, I realized he’d risen from the comfort of his own bed to come be with me.

“I think Alex is going to come over with a silencer and kill us all in our sleep.” I said, puffy eyes staring around at the beige walls.

Duncan chuckled and shook his head, at once acknowledging the pain and familiarity of a waking nightmare, a conviction that something awful is about to happen.

“It’s very real to me, Duncan!” My face screwed up as I began to cry again. “You don’t understand. In my head, it’s very real.”

“I know, B.” He pressed his lips together knowingly as he looked down at his lap in a thoughtful pause. “I know. But silencers are, like, *really* expensive,” he pressed his lips together again in a knowing smile, this time looking up at me. For the first time in two days, I smiled. Through humor, I knew I was free to at *least* let go of the idea of Alex having some kind of GoldenEye weapon accessibility. “I’ve been where you are, mentally, a million times. Like when I was in Midland?” He shook his head, unable to convey the severity of that time in his life. “I get it, Bailey. You will come out on the other side. And also, Rick’s the fucking man.”

I shook my head knowingly. “Poor Rick.” Duncan knows what it’s like to have an indefatigably supportive spouse. “I also try to always remember, ‘If it’s my time, it’s my time,’” I recited, a mantra many people in our family have found both comforting and humorous through bouts of anxiety.

“Yeah, that’s right! And, if you get shot, well, if it’s your time for Dateline, it’s your time for Dateline.”

I burst out laughing in a way only a family accustomed to the coping mechanism of dark humor could.

A few hours later I wheeled my enormous bag toward the car to head for the airport. I’d packed it for a six-week trip and had only made it through half, but I did my best. Duncan had fallen asleep on the couch, and as I passed by I patted him on the arm and thanked him for coming.

“Of course. Anytime, B. I love you,” he mumbled through sleep.

I was headed back to New York, my husband, golden retrievers, and psychiatrist.

The memory of sitting on the Newark tarmac the day Alex shot himself in the head, not knowing whether my brother would be alive or dead by the time I landed in Dallas, remains vivid. I canned all that blooming tragedy inside of my 5’9” frame, a much younger black-clothed body. I’d already checked off the box of flying alone in the midst of tragedy. This time, because she’s a flight attendant, my mom was able to escort me to New York for next to nothing.

“No matter how old you get, you’ll always be my baby,” she said with a sad smile. “Now. What snacks should we get?” She cheered, popping open the airline’s overpriced menu. A special splurge for a terrible time.

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When I touched down in New York my bag got lost and it took Rick an hour and half to locate me amidst the chaos of LaGuardia construction. Meanwhile poor Apollo, our 115 lb. golden retriever prone to car sickness who’d been brought along to comfort me, swayed around in the back. When all of this caused me to miss my emergency psychiatrist appointment, I had an encore meltdown next to the line of buses. In hindsight, I always try to find the comedy. Because crying by a bunch of buses while men in orange reflector vests look on is pretty funny. Both the following night and three days after that, though, humor had long disappeared and death was glancing my way again, welcoming me, luring me, reasoning with me. This time Rick was able to physically sit with me, keeping me company while those tedious hours passed. For him I am forever grateful.

Thoughts of death come and go, and I have to accept that they may always be there.

Rick’s uncle officiated our wedding, and in the weeks leading up to the big day we met with my aunt and uncle-in-law-to-be to discuss what we imagined that day looking like and some common imperatives to review prior to committing our lives to one another: finances, children, and challenging family dynamics. I surprised myself, and I think everyone else, when I began to ugly cry about Alex. I was concerned that Rick and I would never properly relate because he doesn’t know what it feels like to have an emotionally and physically absent sibling. It all rose to the surface like oil shoving past vinegar. Prior to our wedding, under all the gown fittings and invitation proofing and cake tasting, I had a hard time swallowing that my brother was going to

miss it all. There I was sitting in an elegantly designed living room while Alex was living under a bridge. *How much would he hate me for this?*

A month after our wedding Alex wrote to me.

“Hey B! I so just cried watching your wedding video! ;( thank you for posting it and I’m so sorry I missed it. I’m so proud of you Bailey and I love you so much” *[sic]*

Three years into my and Rick’s marriage I’m still devastated, but Rick’s grace and patient commitment to understanding and supporting me continues to astound me.

I know I must move forward, but I continue to mourn the living.

I imagine Alex sobering up and dipping his toe into the ocean of reconciliation and reckoning he himself would have to undertake in order to right his wrongs and move forward. Then, I understand why he’d rather stick another needle back in his body. If Alex were dead, his pain would be alleviated.

Alex’s life has been long-suffering, mysterious, at times violent, emotionally volatile, and special. He is Keith and Staci’s son. He is my and Duncan’s brother, and we are each other’s oldest friends. The complexity of Alex is impossible to let go of, and my family’s collective analysis of his trajectory never fails, never ceases. As time goes on, it becomes less likely he’s going to return to us, and I struggle to not become irritated when well-intentioned people tell me to “not lose hope”. These didacts, often under-qualified and over-inclined to offer their opinion on the matter, haven’t weathered the horrific rollercoaster that is being my brother’s little sister, let alone what it’s like to be Alex, himself.

I’ve decided this isn’t simply my lowest point, but an overdue reckoning. Alex isn’t alive, and he’s not dead. He and I remain connected, waving at each other from a distance inside of our respective limbos.

When I got into Columbia, my dad told me that Alex had been raving about the success on the phone and to anyone else who’d listen. He’d call from a stranger’s cell phone to ask for cigarettes and a refill of his anti-seizure prescription and then revisit the topic.

“Columbia! Oh my god, my sister got into an *Ivy League*.” My admission was his victory by proxy, his success. If it weren’t for Alex, I suppose I’d have a limited depth both in life and on the page, so I do have him to thank. I never had the heart to tell him I chose another school. I know his capacity for understanding the financial considerations and complexities of school choice wasn’t guaranteed, so I’ve left his joy alone.

The last time we had contact, Alex sent me one of those chain messages.

*I sent an angel to watch over you last night but it came back and I asked why. The angel said angels don’t watch over angels... God has seen you struggling with some things and God says it’s over.*

“I love u *[sic]* Tiny B!” he concluded.



# double, double toil and trouble

Jane Blanchard

I.

Well, well, the Duke and Duchess Sussex Royal  
Are changing how and where they spend their time;  
At risk of seeming foolish or disloyal,  
They advocate a brand-new paradigm.

These two immensely woke millennials,  
Who stand removed from any crown or throne,  
Get right to work on fixing variables  
So they can claim a lifestyle of their own.

Yet they will still need safety and support  
Appropriate for each side of the pond;  
Thus, on occasion they shall show at Court  
Or charities (of which they are more fond).

They want to have their cake and eat it, too.  
Is that not what most people long to do?

II.

Her Majesty the Queen knows what to do  
When members of the Firm step out of line.  
Who dared to Instagram a quasi-coup?  
This Royal Duke and Duchess must resign.

God bless them both in western Canada,  
America, wherever they might live;  
Since no one can escape the media,  
Their freedom may prove cost-prohibitive.

They plan to keep their Windsor Cottage, though,  
Repay the Sovereign Grant for what was spent  
To renovate the place not long ago:  
Frogmore does meet their needs to some extent.

Will either of this couple in due course  
Discover any haven from remorse?



# the relativity of loss

Mark Hammerschick

I am the alpha and omega  
the cosmological constant  
caught in Doppler shifts  
descending and ascending  
accelerating and decelerating  
beyond the speed of light.  
Like some free-floating photon  
I linger in my eternity of flight.  
No common center of gravity holds me  
as one who has known  
the despair of departing galaxies.  
How your cold blue eyes  
defy this space-time continuum.  
I am the quasar in disguise  
pulsating in my own black hole  
having lost the event horizon  
of your touch, scent and voice.



# swept away

Mark Hammerschick

She sweeps  
stooped like some guardian of the ground.  
Each day along the scarred, cobbled path  
she grips her weapon  
forcing it upon the historic sands of Antigua,  
in this Caribbean outpost of sun and sea.  
Hands gnarled, weathered, blood red  
stains of a patchwork quilt life  
lived close to the ground  
like the leech gatherer of old.  
Stoic, focused, relentless...  
the push the pull...  
a piston on the path of piety  
how her coal eyes and mahogany hide  
have known the dream deferred  
without ever realizing it could never explode,  
at least not here, not now, not ever.  
So she sweeps, push pull push pull,  
and the sands don't care  
while the sun keeps a brutal watch  
as a life is swept away  
by the winds of the sea.



# grandfather clock

A. Jay Dubberly

Gah! I slammed on the brakes at the sight of you  
—alone, at a yard sale. No further from my  
home than my occupation, I scoured the  
knickknacks, the whatchamacallits, the fanfare,  
in search of that ever-elusive item—  
the sure-fire guarantee of wholeness. You  
sat next to three nine irons, two lampshades, &  
a brass bottle of brown elixir. There you  
were—my omitted piece—a personality.  
For too oft I slept in unmade beds. Too reg  
I found myself a day late & a dollar  
tall but no more. “No more!” I yelled. I almost  
bought a second-rate temperament from one of  
those box stores near the interstate, but fortune  
told me to wait & I dare not test the fates.  
My patience was rewarded ten-score—there you  
were, a new psyche fit for my demeanor.  
Like a Fez to a Shriner, we were complete.  
How do you do? Some weather! What a game last  
night! . . . the littlest of talks flowed from my lips  
with ease. No more would I guard my smile behind a  
headphone shield & spare socially-repellant  
cranium accessories. “No more!” I yelled  
again. I asked the proprietor who smelled  
of chewing tobacco & the yellow stains



on baseball cards how much for my beloved,  
my new undocked disposition. With a brown-  
oil loogie & a firm handshake you were  
mine for the low price of a rent-a-truck &  
a promise to remove all unwanted left-  
behinds from the dying green plot. I brought you  
home, polished your varnish, varnished your polish,  
Windex-bathed you like a pappous, & took to  
the safest place I could think of—the internet.  
Soon the bids were a-coming, the pleasantries  
exchanging, & your gears a-turning. Soon, my  
sweet, I will sell you to the highest bidder  
& off you will go, & you will complete me  
no more. “No more,” I sighed. Logged off, evade the  
litigants & would-be purchasers I had  
initially called upon. Gah! Could I not  
sever this tie? Do you no longer spark joy?  
What would I realistically spend this newfound  
bounty on that could possibly rival our  
connection? Then I thought of it—the life source—  
food! Take-out food! Pantry food! Freezer food! The  
splurge was a-coming, & the splurge would be good.



# for sale

A. Jay Dubberly

My neighbor keeps dumping truckloads of sand  
onto her lawn. I couldn't figure out why, then  
one morning over coffee steam I saw her jam  
one of those real estate stands next to her mailbox  
& it all clicked:  
    beachfront property.

"That's pretty smart," I told her.  
"Thanks," she said.  
"Why you moving?" I asked.  
"My whole life . . . I thought I was a 'mountains girl,' but I'm not."  
Fair, I thought. "Well," I offered,  
"we all lie to ourselves sometimes."  
    She didn't respond.

The house is still for sale two seasons later. The snow melts;  
the dirty sand suns itself. No one's come to look for months.  
I walk the neighborhood when there's no wind, looking  
for the first signs of spring—the daffodils, the stoop-ridden  
packages not wrapped in plastic—harboring a secret hope  
    that palm trees will sprout.

I could sell my house, too, I tell myself.  
    Beach adjacent.



# the roof of the drugstore

A. Jay Dubberly

On days when life is meaningless,  
the monotony of a sunrise can lend a sense of purpose.  
But what role do you play in the grand scheme?  
Where do you house the notches of your cog?  
Is this what all my old professors were prattling on about  
while I spent my days stone drunk & blackout high?  
I barely remember their lectures but thinking back  
I remember the slapped-on smile I wore each day.  
The lack of responsibility was freeing.

Now, in days of quarantine,  
the monotony of yet another glorious sunset serves as a reminder.  
What role does the grand scheme play in your life?  
What new skill can we justify giving up on?  
I barely remember what the television is prattling on about  
while I spend my days overfull & famished  
but looking back at myself in the mirror there are no teeth.  
Only two tired bags, months of facial hair, & an urge to cure polio.  
The lack of responsibility is deafening.



# on the road, 1972.

David Anthony Sam

Go young Westman.  
Ribbon bands of yellow center lines  
tie eyes to the road in travel hypnotism;  
the wanderings of concrete veins,  
the valor of asphalt  
cut thru mineswept Idaho,  
to the soul.

There between pavements,  
the brown heart of an Indian.  
There in rails lies the strength  
of a coolie,,  
and the red hair of an Irish tool.

Honor, Glory, kill the buffalo.  
America, America, men shed their blood on thee.  
And crown thy gold with brotherhood:  
Guns up the alley ass,  
guns in the window,  
bullets out and bullets in Billykid.

Between the draft riots and  
the Wounded Knee, the wounded animals of man.

Go young Westman.  
Drive sparks from stone,  
peel roads out of mountain,  
grip motion from the earth to stillness.  
Stripmining, smoothclearing, clearcutting.  
(The world will win, but  
worlds lost).

Golden Gate born from clouds  
of buttsplitting fog.  
And other bridges, Crane's Industrial Poetry.  
But the world must win.

Silent echoes of buffalo heard  
in Tacoma city traffic.  
Silent re-memberings of Sioux dances i  
n the mad flames of Sur hippies.  
Old mountainmen and Lewis Clarks  
in the highway gypsies.  
And the world will win.

[SPACE]

There is a helltree eating hamburgers,  
e.e., and  
there is a hell that builds oceans  
out of cities, mountains  
out of tombstones, grass and plains  
from concrete.

And that hell is heaven,  
West youngman, to California.  
There, between pavements,  
the only light is in the hills, hidden  
and in some eyes, ready to  
go young, Westman.



## natural supernaturalism

David Anthony Sam

The night was a rain of dead stars  
when I slept with the two eyes  
of the golden cat. A goblet  
of dry wine sat beside  
the book of the Egyptian dead  
who put on animal faces  
like the betrayers of my deceptions.

I heard with my eyes as the rain  
of long-dead light fell,  
and the cat purred her indifference  
having been fed on my hope.  
There used to be a woman here  
sitting on my pillow, but I may  
have imagined her.

The streets guttered with fragile  
light that had aged past galaxies  
into the eddies that leaves sailed.  
The golden cat had golden eyes.  
She blinked, and night came  
and went with simple time.  
It was a good bad evening.

My dreams woke me several  
hours in each minute, my  
head aching from the bend  
of gravity in shape of a cat.  
My name was silence to her.  
She meditated on that for  
what may have been my lifetime.

A wind was in my throat  
and I spoke its gestures of space.  
The cat sang more silence.  
The dry wine bled the glass.  
The book opened itself  
but I was too tired to hear.  
I may have imagined that, too.



## angle street

David Anthony Sam

The warped avenue sepias the daylight.  
No one can bear to look.

Eyes slit to divergent philosophies  
in shopping carts of different brands.

A busker sings his politics into an empty hat.  
A painter draws the inelegance to smog.

In a cashless society, nothing remains  
of pocket change for mad-hatted beggars.

We walk beside the shades of others  
askanced to pavement drifting in headlines.

No one bears the others in difference.  
The climate browns to hunger.





*Last time I checked, I'm President and you're not!*

dotard  
Chris Murphy

# poetic justice

Robert Peate

A young woman seated at a white desk in a white room answered a white phone, "Poetic Justice, Juliet speaking."

"Why didn't you say the full name of your department?"

"I don't know, sir. I'm sorry."

"Do not let it happen again."

"I won't. All right. Yes, sir."

"I have a special case for you."

"Yes, sir? Certainly, sir." Juliet got a pencil and paper ready. "Crimes?" She filled two little sheets of paper with notes. "Ooh, excellent."

"Don't get too excited. Just do your job."

"Yes, sir."

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They hung up.

The new arrival was a politician who had lied, cheated, and stolen. In 2020, his dismissals of the threat of the new coronavirus had resulted in tens of thousands of unnecessary deaths. "That was a no-no," Juliet said and clucked her tongue. But what to do with him? She could simply give him the virus to know how it felt. She could give it to his family members to show him the pain he had caused others. Perhaps she should have him work as a nurse in a front-line hospital. She didn't usually have difficulty deciding how to handle her cases, but this time, she did.

She pressed a button. "Show him in," she said.

A door opened, and a man walked in to the office. "President Thomas Drump, please sit down." The man sat in a soft white chair opposite the desk.

"Where am I?" President Drump asked.

Juliet raised her eyebrows at him. "You're in the Afterlife, Poetic Justice Department."

"Ha, ha. Very funny. Did Fields put you up to this?"

"No, Mister Drump."

"So where are the cameras?"



“No cameras, I’m afraid.”

“Come on. What are we doing here?”

Juliet waved her hand, and President Drump suddenly found himself unable to move or to speak.

“I will tell you what we are doing here,” Juliet said. “You are dead. This is the Afterlife, Poetic Justice Department. It is my task to decide what to do with you, to try to teach you something, though I doubt very much it is possible to teach you anything.”

In President Drump’s mind, a slow realization (facilitated by his paralysis) began to dawn upon him that the woman seated before him might not be jesting. Juliet released her hold upon his speech.

“Dead? I can’t be dead. I’m alive.”

“Not anymore.” Why did it always come as a shock to the spirits she dealt with that they were dead? Everyone died. Their inability to accept reality bored her. “You died from the coronavirus earlier today, I’m afraid.”

“Coronavirus? I got better! I was in the hospital! They worked to help me for weeks, then I came home. The whole country celebrated.”

“‘The whole country’, as you put it, consisted of your supporters. Regardless, that was a week ago. This morning you had a sudden heart attack and died. Your heart had been imperceptibly weakened by the virus. There was no way for them to know or to prevent it.”

“You’re telling me I died from the coronavirus?”

“That is what I’m telling you.”

“Well, I don’t believe it.”

“That’s fine.”

“Well, am I in Heaven or Hell?”

“The Afterlife is bad enough without there being two of them. No, it’s just the one, and sometimes the departments overlap and conflict. Then we have to call in an administrator. Also, I’m afraid that, due to the very same coronavirus that you ignored, you’ve arrived at a backlogged time. Look at this stack I’ve got to deal with.” Juliet sighed. “Never mind.” She looked at her notes. “Now let’s review why you’re here. You denied the threat of the pandemic, you refused to prepare or respond, then, when it increased, you continued to dismiss it. After months of delay, you pretended to take it seriously for a short time, then threw your hands up, declared victory, and blamed others for your failures. Hundreds of thousands died as a result of your refusal to do your job.”

The President began to speak to defend himself, but Juliet waved her hand again, and President Drump suddenly found himself unable to speak again.

“I wasn’t looking for your defense,” Juliet said. “I was reminding you what you did.” She pursed her lips. “Now, the question for me is: what am I to do with you? How am I to teach you the error of your ways that you clearly have yet to learn?” She eyed him with displeasure.

“It may interest you to know that your arrival here has evinced such interest that I have even received suggestions from other departments.”

President Drump beamed.

“One of my colleagues suggested that you meet your idols—Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Tojo, et cetera—only to have them reject you as a wannabe. A little obvious, don’t you think? I think so.”

President Drump strained to respond but still could not. His frustration was evident.

“Another suggested that you be reborn as a Nicaraguan boy brutally torn from the arms of his mother by ICE agents, thrown in a cage, and raped and beaten every day forever. Kind of a Groundhog Nightmare.” The woman tapped her pencil against her desk. “I can see the appeal, but I don’t think even that meets . . . the full need.

“I think I have it.” Juliet snapped her fingers, and President Drump disappeared.

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Before Drump could object, he found himself lying under a sheet on a gurney in a hospital basement. “What the—?” He threw the sheet off his face and upper body. “This is the morgue! I knew this had to be a joke.” He sat up expecting lights, cameras, and laughing pranksters, but they did not come. A part of him was glad for this, as he also realized he was nude except for the sheet. “Where the hell are my clothes?” he wondered aloud.

Drump shuffled out of the morgue holding the sheet around himself with one hand. Down the hall, he spied an elevator, to which he half-shuffled, half ran. When he reached the elevator, he pressed a button to no effect. A man in a white coat came around another corner and walked up to the elevator doors.

“Oh, thank God,” Drump said. “Can you tell me where to find my clothes?”

The man in the white coat pressed the button. The elevator doors opened, and the man went in. Drump followed him.

“Hey, I’m talking to you,” Drump said. The man stared forward at the closing doors. “Hey! Do you hear me?” Drump asked, leaning in front of the man’s stoic face. “Prank the President, eh? Very funny.” But the man did not respond. He checked his watch and sighed.

“Keeping the gag going, I see. Very good. All right, I’ll play.”

The elevator opened onto a corridor, and the man in white walked out and away. No cameras or pranksters appeared, so President Drump stuck his head out cautiously. Persuaded no chorus of "Surprise!" was forthcoming, he stepped out into the corridor and looked for the nearest nurse's station, which was right down the hall.

"Hey!" he called out to the nurses he saw there. "Hello?" The nurses did not respond. "All right, this joke has gone on far enough. Where are my clothes?"

The nurses did not respond.

"Hello!" Drump said, waving his hand in the face of the closest nurse, who did not react. He tried to touch her head, but his hand passed through it. "Whoah!" he cried and dropped the sheet he had been holding with his other hand. "What the—?" He stepped back and looked both ways down the corridor. "Am I . . . really dead?"

Drump started down the hall, looking for the lobby. A sign told him the way, and he emerged, nude, into the main hospital lobby filled with people coming and going. He realized simultaneously that he was in the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and that no one was noticing him.

"What in Hell?" Drump demanded. "Hello! Naked President!" No one heard or saw him.

"Unbelievable." He walked right up to a businessman in a suit. "Hello, can you see me?" The businessman did not notice him. "All right, that's it. I'm dead or dreaming, but I am going home."

Drump walked outside the hospital. *How do I get home?* he wondered. He realized that if he were dead and no one could hear him, he could not hail or direct a taxicab. He listened to one man hiring a cab, to determine where the man was going, with a view toward hitching an invisible ride, but the man's destination was not close to the White House. Looking at all the vehicles coming and going through the parking lot, he decided there was nothing to do but take a public bus. He walked to the bus stop on the corner and looked at the map on the wall of the small shelter. After determining which bus line he should ride, Drump sat on the bench. It was a cool, drizzly day, but he felt neither cold nor wet. Other patrons came and stood or sat near him.

*Hey, why can't that lady help me out?* he suddenly thought. "Hey! Lady!"

"You rang?" he heard Juliet respond in his mind.

"Can you get me to my house faster than this? I don't know if you've noticed, but I'm naked!"

"Yes, I have. Most amusing."

"Yeah, ha, ha. You'll be glad to know one thing, though: the fact that no one can see or hear me is giving me the impression you might be right. About me being *kaput* and all."

"Oh," she said humoring him. "Well, that's excellent."

“Yeah, and I’m trying to get home. Can you help me out here, with another snap of your fingers?”

“Why, yes, I could, but where would the fun be in that?”

“Don’t be funny. Help a guy out.”

“‘Help a guy out.’ Sounds like a re-election slogan.”

“Are you going to help me or not?”

“Yes, I am going to help you—by letting you figure it all out for yourself. You’re welcome.”

“Lady! I’ll make it worth your while!”

But she was gone. President Thomas Drump remained seated on the bus-stop bench. The bus eventually came, and Drump boarded as did everyone else, except that he did not have money and the driver did not see him. This tickled Drump.

“No fare for me, eh? That’s the way I like it.”

He sat in the middle of the bus, where news of his death was the talk of the bus.

“Thank God that piece of shit finally kicked off!” one man said.

“Hey!” Drump said.

“Now, now—he did Make America Great Again.”

“By dying!”

The passengers laughed.

“Three cheers for the Coronavirus!”

After a ride filled with such indignities, Drump got off the bus near the White House. He was fuming from the slights and his inability to stop or escape them, but he hoped that being home would help. He feared he would not be able to communicate with his family, but he had to give it a try.

From the bus stop, Drump walked to the White House. He walked through the gate, past the guards, up the circular driveway, and into the house. From there he found his way into the official residence. “Maggie!” he called. “Byron!” No one answered. He went into their bedroom, where he found his wife sitting on the edge of their bed crying to one of the housekeepers.

“Aw, you’re sad!” Drump said.

"I know he was horrible," Maggie said. "He embarrassed me every day. I married him for his money, but over time I learned to like him a little bit, you know? He wasn't always bad. Sometimes he didn't talk too much." Maggie laughed.

The housekeeper, a woman named Dolores, laughed in commiseration.

Drump could not believe what he was hearing. "You . . . tolerated me? You tolerated me?!" He reached for something close by to throw and found a vase. His hands passed through it as they had the nurse's face. He screamed with rage.

Maggie felt a wave of feeling and said, "Oh!"

"Are you all right, Ma'am?" asked Dolores.

"It's him," Maggie said. "He's here, and he heard me."

"You're damned right I heard you, you lying witch!"

Dolores looked around. "Well, at least there's nothing he can do to you now."

"I don't know."

"There sure is!" Drump threw himself at Maggie and tried to grab her by the neck to choke her. Maggie, still sitting on the edge of the bed, felt nothing.

"I just want to go back to private life. I never wanted to be here—that was all his thing. He didn't even want it, you know? It was just ego."

Drump, crying with rage, strained to grab, touch, and hurt Maggie. "I'll get you!"

"Thomas," Juliet said to his mind, "we do not allow physical harm of the living, and you're not doing yourself any favors with this behavior."

"I don't care!" Drump raged. "She lied to me!"

"And how many people have you lied to?"

"Aagh!"

Drump stormed out of the room and back downstairs to the living room, where he put on the television. "—While maintaining appropriate decorum, there is definitely a lighter mood across the entire Globe than we have seen in years."

"That's right, Harry. Few are openly expressing glee or joy at the death of a man many had reviled, but just as few are saying they are actively sad about it."

"Ahhh!" Drump grabbed the television remote and threw it at the television. It bounced off the screen and fell to the floor.

The screen changed to POXNEWS, the channel that had supported him through thick and thin. Percival Prospero, host of *Prospero Here We Go!*, was on the air lamenting the loss. "Thomas Drump was not for the weak of heart," Prospero said. "He stood strongly against taxes, against immigrants, against abortion. He stood for free enterprise. And we salute you, Thomas Drump." A photograph of Drump filled the screen as somber music played.

"At least someone appreciated me," Drump grumbled. He suddenly realized: "I forgot to get dressed." He stood up and went back upstairs. On his way up, Maggie came down and walked through him. She felt nothing and kept walking down the stairs.

"Maggie?"

She kept going down the steps and then across the floor, out of sight.

Drump, disappointed, went upstairs and found some of his clothes to put on: a shirt, slacks, a belt, and his watch.

"Now I'm ready."

He walked out of his bedroom, down the stairs. "Where's my son?"

Drump went to the glass door to the back yard, where he found his fourteen-year-old son Byron sitting with his friends. Half of them were on their smart phones.

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"I'm sorry, dude," one young man said.

"It's all right," Byron said. "He was kind of dead to me anyway."

"Whoah," another young man said.

"He just broke every promise he ever made. We never did anything together. I just lived in his house. He didn't feel like a dad. More like a landlord."

Drump couldn't listen to any more and went back inside.

"Where can I go?" he asked out loud. "Where can I go?"

"You can hang around your supporters," Juliet suggested, "but they will move on. Then you won't even be mentioned, except to be reviled."

"But this isn't the way it was supposed to go."  
Juliet chuckled.

"I hear that every day, and it's always true."



# stimulus check

Anthony Chesterfield

Dear Mr. President,

I'm in receipt of your stimulus check in the amount of \$1,200.  
Lady Liberty looks stoic.  
Same Plain-Jane she always was and always will be.  
Same look has on my tax-refund ever year.  
Looking away from the sum of money written  
in both words and numbers-she's non-judgmental.  
But, I could not help but notice the memo.  
I see your name-  
In all it's glory perpendicular to Liberty's backside.  
My question is:Whose ego are you trying to stroke?  
I happen to be among-  
the lucky who still has a job.  
I appreciate the funds, but-  
to be honest I reckon-  
the unemployed would rather work  
than see your designation.  
That would be more of an ego booster.  
In any case,  
I'll endorse the check,  
But please know not all is dollars and sense.

Sincerely,

John Doe



[Editor's note: this piece was previously published in Dew Drop.]



**dongtek**  
Joy Saha



# beach bodies

Molly Dunn

Etta had always wondered why her mother had kept the baby when she fell pregnant. She wondered why, at 18, she hadn't worn loose dresses and spent the summer visiting an aunt in Canada and come back without any souvenirs from her trip save ten or twenty extra pounds. Many of her mother's classmates did that back then. But her mother hadn't done any of that. Kate, as Etta addressed her, seemed to have fallen, passively, into motherhood like it was a job given to her by a family friend after graduation; though it was preferable to sitting at home with nothing to do (something Kate did too much of in her opinion anyway), she didn't have the same passion for the occupation the others mothers at school did. She went through the motions, the dance recitals and bake sales and first periods, but all along she floated through life like an extra against the bare beige walls of suburbia, an unwilling participant in the banality of life.

Kate called her parents Nana and Papa so did Etta did too. Kate had told Etta once, when she had had too much wine at dinner and crawled into bed next to Etta like an older sister coming back from the bar, how she told Nana and Papa about the baby (that's you, Kate would remind her). They weren't angry or ashamed. They didn't yell at her or kick her out of the house. They were surprised, that's all. Kate had always been so plain. She was the sort of girl you could forget about, the sort of girl to be overlooked in photographs and memories. Her face and her body seemed like wax molds, void of any allure of life. Nana and Papa were surprised a boy had looked at her like that at all. Perhaps it was their surprise, their shock, their inability to believe Plain Kate had lived a life that kept them silent when Kate announced she was keeping the baby. She accepted the pregnancy the way a confessor accepts their penance and so too did she accept the child when it came.

When Etta was a child, she would observe the other mothers at school and write in her notebook everything the mothers did for their children.

Drop them off at school  
Packed a lunch with a note  
Helped make their diorama  
Bought Valentines cards for everyone

On paper, her mother was just like them. Etta had a packed lunch every day (though on Fridays, her mother would give her a \$5 bill to buy a slice of pizza). Kate attended every soccer game, every fundraiser, and never missed a birthday. But Etta knew something about her mother was different. There was a subdued resignation to her mother and Etta pitied her for it.

By the summer Etta turned 14, this pity had replaced all resentment Etta had ever felt towards her mother. Perhaps she was too tired to care. It was a wickedly hot summer. The heat wave spread over their coastal town, suffocating and engulfing it with its humidity. It was the sort of heat you can see, the sort of heat that makes zig-zags in the sunshine and sizzles your foot when you step on the asphalt. The tourists flocked to the beach in droves, shedding as much clothing as they could and diving under the water when none were left. It seemed like everywhere Etta looked there was skin. Stomach skin, thigh skin, wrinkled and dimpled skin. Etta would pass her

days at the beach, anonymous among the constantly shifting visitors, and take in all the skin on the sand. She would look at the hairy chests of the men and the wet torsos of the girls and the sag of the women's breasts and the acne on the backs of the boys. She would sit and look until she felt light in her stomach and went home to crawl into bed. She always felt guilty by the time she crawled into bed.

Etta's 9th grade teacher had taught them about estrogen and testosterone and condoms and the pill and the fallopian tubes. But none of it felt real to Etta, not real in the way the skin on the beach felt real. She wished it wasn't real. She wished she wasn't... sexual. Plain Kate wasn't sexual. Though she had breasts and hips, she kept them hidden under swaths of clothing. She never went on dates or complained about being a single mother. Etta had asked her once, when she first started using deodorant, what you're meant to do with the hair that grows with abandon between your legs. Kate had laughed and asked to see it (to see if it's time, Kate explained). Etta remembers feeling embarrassment, the kind of embarrassment brought about by changing bodies, but looked at her mother's frame: undistinguished, unremarkable. She opened her towel and threw her face to the side and let her mother take in her body. Kate simply nodded, passed her a razor, and told her a few options. Etta wondered if Kate even knew what she was looking at.

What Etta liked best about her mother was that Kate never wanted to talk about Etta. Kate was friends with some of the other mothers from school, the kind of friendship one can only achieve when the only thing you have in common is your children. These mothers would gather for dinners or coffees or to babysit each other's children and would chat about their children the whole time (gossip, Kate would correct her, they gossip about their children). Kate always remained a passive observer of these conversations, never contributing any stories of her own. Though Etta knew this meant none of the other mothers knew about Etta's awards or her achievements, she relished the anonymity, for they also knew nothing about Etta's body.

It was one of the gossipers, Natalie Pannefleck, who invited Kate to the dinner. It was the hottest day of the summer. The supermarket where Kate was doing her weekly grocery shop was flooded; packs of perspiring people streamed through the doors, pretending to shop in order to feel the blast of air conditioning on their backs. Natalie saw Kate through the shelf as she picked up a box of sugary cereal and squealed (Natalie loved to squeal). She dashed around the corner of the aisle and confronted her.

"Kate, I've been trying to get a hold of you! Where have you been?" Natalie placed her hands on Kate's shoulders to face her squarely.

"Hi Natalie," Kate responded. She was familiar with these sorts of interactions, familiar with Natalie and women like Natalie. "How are you doing?"

"You have to come over for dinner tonight!" Natalie informed her. She was squealing again. Kate could feel a headache coming on and wondered if it was the heat or Natalie. "Neil's brother Jack is back in town and I want to make sure he feels welcomed. This town can be so..." she trailed off. Kate moved to respond but Natalie wasn't finished with her pitch. "I'm sure you'll like him though. He's an original thinker, you know? So, what do you say?"

At a quarter to five, Kate left \$20 on the counter for Etta to order a pizza and told her she'd call if she'd be back past 12. She slipped out of the house in a plain dress and drove away. Etta was used to these sorts of nights alone, but this night was different. The heat seeped into the house, overpowering their weak air conditioner, and settled into the furniture. Each time Etta shifted her weight on the leather couch, puffs of hot air tickled her thighs. She had opened every window in the house, every door, desperate for relief. She had a headache, the sort of headache that you can feel creaking in your skull. She felt uneasy. There was a tepid restlessness in her tonight. The heat was pulling at her body; the sweat felt cool and tickled as it ran down her arms and her face and her back. It was unbearable.

Etta stood up from the couch and retreated to her room at the back of the house. She closed the door and shed her clothes, careful not to look at the mirror that hang on her wall. It wasn't her body that she avoided. It was that moment, the moment when you look into your own eyes and on some logical level know that it's you who's attached to the body in the mirror, that Etta wanted to avoid. She stripped quickly and left only her underwear, stains of salty perspiration leaving it a few shades darker, and lay in her bed.

Safely horizontal, away from the exposition of the mirror, Etta settled. She couldn't help but examine her body with the non-judgmental exactitude of a scientist. She studied each curve, each out of place hair, each lump that had sprung up in the past year. She knew she had the body of a woman; her breasts were full and hung to the side when she lay down and her thighs were sprinkled with dimples and dots. Yet she didn't feel like a woman. The few times Etta allowed herself to look in the mirror, she felt a wash of shame overcome her. She would look at this body, her body, with all the trappings of womanhood. She would look in her eyes, the eyes that still held the apprehension and eagerness of a child. And she felt, in this disjunction, like a child wandering through somebody else's property. She felt like an intruder.

Etta began to trace her hand along the curves of her body, teasing and luring out a feeling of association and belonging. Etta needed to check, needed to feel, like this body was her own. But her skin felt numb, each muscle and curve shot with novocaine. She thought of the bodies on the beach. They weren't all beautiful bodies. They were fat and sunburnt and wrinkled and pimpled. But amidst the flaws was a vibrancy, a vigour, that compelled Etta. They awakened a pull in her, a pressure, even now. But the house felt too public; even though she was alone, Etta felt exposed on her bed. There was too much space in the house, too much silence, for Etta to expunge the sort of guilt she felt she needed to expunge. It wasn't like the beach, which felt intimate and private among the bustling bodies. Etta needed to get to the beach.

Etta didn't normally go to the beach at night. She would go only while Kate was away at work and come home in time to watch Kate laze around apathetically. Etta liked the juxtaposition between the beach bodies and Kate, liked to spend all day basking in vitality only to return, drained, to lethargy. But Kate wasn't home now and home didn't feel like home without her. She was like a vacuum, drawing and collapsing all gusts of energy into her. Without her, the energy flitted around the house and around Etta like a swarm of gnats.

Etta couldn't remember getting to the beach, couldn't remember the way her bike weaved back and forth across the blistering cement as she tried to steer through the pain in her head. She only remembered watching. She sat on a sand dune, her bike tossed carelessly behind her,

and felt a sickly-sweet relief wash over her as bodies danced around the beach. She watched, mesmerized, and let the wind that blew in from the water carry away her guilt. She watched until finally, exhausted, she collapsed on the sand and let the world blur as she drew the curtain of her eyes.

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It didn't take long for Kate to regret agreeing to attend the dinner party. Her headache had spread across the base of her skull and was radiating down into her neck. The noise didn't help. It seemed like Natalie had invited every mother in their class. There was squealing from the women and guffawing from the men and the sound of running feet from the children whose parents hadn't found a sitter. Natalie was a good friend for Kate. She would steer the conversation, overpower her completely, and barely let her get a word in. But the other mothers were more challenging. They would talk with Kate, converse with her, ask her questions and then wait for a response. Kate was in hell.

She retreated to a corner of the room close by the window in hopes of catching a whiff of a cool breeze. The clamour of the room was unbearable. Kate sipped her sweating white wine and pinched the bridge of her nose, tilting her head back to ease the pain in her neck. She began to feel a stirring in her, an annoyance that was boiling into rage, and she felt ashamed of it. Kate prided herself on her indifference. She felt superior to the women who let themselves get riled up, who let people get to them. She never let anyone get to her. She preferred to drift in and out of engagement with the world and maintain a cool detachment from futile emotions. Kate threw her blame around in vain, at the pain of her head and at the heat, but was left, nonetheless, with a feeling of inescapable fury.

But at that moment, Natalie came bustling in through the front door. "Hurry everyone!" Natalie stage-whispered so that the whole room could hear her. "He's coming!"

Kate felt the urge to laugh. Though she was used to being left out, occasionally it struck her just how far out of the loop she was. She didn't know this was a surprise party. As Natalie turned off the lights, the other guests hid with confidence; the bodies shuffled around each other, ducking and crouching, their movements never having any actual impact on the overall arrangement of the room. Kate supposed that this surprise had been a topic of discussion among the party guests, one she had missed while she hid from the noise and let her emotions overwhelm her.

If Kate weren't tipsy and if Kate's head weren't straining with pressure and if the heat didn't make the fabric of her dress cling to the awkward points of her body, perhaps she would have enjoyed the anticipation of the surprise. The other parents around her seemed eager (like a pack of hungry wolves was Kate's favourite euphemism). Natalie was practically shaking with suspense. But excitement felt so distant now, so futile and so unachievable, slipping through her half-hearted fingers. Kate tried to perform the actions of anticipation, the crouch and the bounce of the leg and the shushing, to evoke within herself the emotions demanded of her by the party, but they eluded her.

The door opened and Kate saw only a blur of a looming man walk through the door before the room erupted with the cries of surprise and the laughter that echoed the calls. The lights

flashed on and the man, who Kate thought looked like he was going to cry, became visible. The whole room fell to silence. Through the splitting pain, Kate told herself this must be Neil's brother. Jack. He was tall but not particularly well-built, though he wore his body with the stature of a man who moved. His face was gruff, a poorly-groomed black beard making him look like one of those fuzzy, decorative pillows Kate hated. Though he wasn't classically handsome (never trust a man with a small nose, Kate had told Etta once), a ripple of attraction spread among the women in the room. His eyes roamed the room with the intensity of a hunter and the prey of the party stared back.

The silence could have continued, unbroken, if Natalie didn't burst through the crowd. She had been drinking, as always, and spoke with the clumsy stage-presence of a giddy child. "Everyone, everyone!" she shouted as though she were trying to quiet the room, though the room was already mute. "This is Jack! Neil's brother!" It was news nobody needed to hear but they cheered nonetheless.

The party resumed, the chaotic uproar returning seemingly with a vendetta against Kate's head. She wanted to move, to get out of the hot trap of steam, but couldn't stop staring at Jack. Her eyes followed him around the room as he moved, embarrassed and still with the glint of tears in his frightened eyes, to the porch door. He looked around before he stepped outside shyly, like he was doing something he shouldn't be doing. Kate felt an intrigue that reached the depths of her stomach. She felt herself exhale a breath she didn't know she was holding when he left the room. She saw Natalie do the same.

But the relief was fleeting; the empty shouts of the party guests hammered her head as the hot air curled around her body. She was tangled. Suffocated. Her brother had nearly suffocated her once, when they were children. She was watching cartoons when he crept up behind her and placed a bag over her head and wouldn't let go until Kate let out a scream (he was just trying to get a rise out of you, Nana had told her). Kate could feel a scream coming now, a scream from the sort of dark, visceral place she normally kept tucked away. It wasn't right, it wasn't right to feel this way, to feel this much. Kate pushed through the crowd, through the reverberating noise, and escaped through the porch door.

She paced back and forth on the porch, panicked and shaken. She had come too close. She tried to slow her breath, regain control of the broken horse and sync it to the nearby clash of the waves. But she yelped when she turned around.

"Jack!"

Within a second, Kate felt like an intruder. She wanted to close her eyes and turn her face away. She could see the streams of tears wetting the curls of his beard. She felt like she was seeing someone naked. She had shattered a moment, she knew that, but he didn't seem to mind. "Guess you're enjoying the party as much as I am," he responded with a strangled chuckle. There was a pride to the shake of his voice that disturbed Kate. She knew she was being made fun of. She knew her face must be red and her eyes must look bright and she knew her fingers got shaky when she was frazzled. But he was a man crying on a porch at his surprise party. Who was he to talk? Kate realized she hadn't responded.

“Sorry. I’ll leave you alone. Enjoy your party,” Kate said. She turned away from him and moved fumblingly to the door, searching through her jumbled mind for where she left her purse.

“It’s not my party,” he said. Something about his voice made Kate stop. His voice seemed to fill the empty night air, resonating in frequency with the porch lights that shone delicately on the beach. She turned back to face him. “I mean, it’s for me, but I didn’t ask for it. Natalie planned it. And, I mean, I know she means well but, I mean, I’ve been gone for a long time and a party like this, with the appetizers and the wine and the people with mortgages and kids... I mean, it’s a weird way to come back.”

“Come back?” Kate inquired despite herself. Kate despised the sort of honesty Jack was demonstrating, the way he flaunted it with ease. She didn’t understand why he was telling her this, she didn’t understand why he kept talking when she went to go get her purse, she didn’t understand why she stayed. Kate normally didn’t take much interest in other people; it wasn’t that Kate was self-centered or self-absorbed, but she found them boring. The mundanity of Kate’s own life drove her nearly to madness. The mundanity of others’ lives was crippling. But Jack seemed different. There was a strength and a vulnerability in his candor that compelled her.

“Yeah, I mean, I haven’t really been to a party for a while.” Jack’s snicker fell silent when he saw his joke sail over Kate. “I mean, cause there’s no parties in prison.”

In a distant corner of her mind, Kate could see her head spin. The irony of the situation struck her; Natalie, in her squealing voice that was somehow synonymous with her character, had thrown a surprise party to welcome home a man nobody knew from prison. She knew there were questions she should be asking, wanted to be asking. She thought she ought to want to know if this man she caught crying was a criminal. And yet, she didn’t. She felt nothing, no desire to question him and face his unguarded speech. She remained cool, despite the warmth inside her.

“I’m guessing Natalie didn’t tell you,” Jack offered weakly. For a moment, just a moment, a flash of weary fatigue darkened Jack’s face and Kate swore she felt her heart break for him. She felt a yearning, a magnetic pull towards him. She crossed the porch. Hesitantly, like a child, Kate reached her arms around Jack’s body. Though he never tensed a muscle, he waited for a moment before embracing her. Kate eased into the hug, falling into his chest and exhaling loudly through her nostrils. The night air felt cool in comparison to the heat emanating from his body that mingled with the budding flames inside her. She nuzzled into the warmth, moving her head this way and that against his chest, reaching towards an elusive relief.

Jack stopped her and cradled her chin in his hand. He stared at her with an intense curiosity. Kate was reminded of a dentist peering into her mouth and somehow, into her. He swiped his lips across her lips, grabbed her hand, and led her like a lamb down onto the beach.

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It was dark when Etta woke up. While her eyes adjusted to the dark, she placed herself at the beach by the sound of the waves and the distant clamour of the pier. A dim blur of light of the beach houses nearby moved towards her. The sand mixed with her hair and she felt a series of

short, quick bites from the fleas. She sat herself up with a groan, placing her hand over her eyes and looking around to catch her bearings. She checked her watch: half past twelve. Kate would be home. Etta hurled herself up off the sand dune, brushed off the fleas and the grains with the back of her hand, and turned to get on her bike.

“Shit,” Etta said (don’t say shit, Kate would tell her, a half-committed performance of motherhood). Somebody had stolen her bike.

Etta felt panic wash over her, wondering how she would get home, when she heard a giggle and footsteps coming towards her. She ducked behind the sand dune instinctually and began weeding through the excuses for what she was doing there that popped up in her mind. She didn’t know how to explain the bodies and the bike and the beach. But her mind fell silent when she heard the giggle and the footsteps stop. The vibrations of the cicadas and the lull of the waves rose in the murky heat. Etta felt an intrigue and curiosity spark in her mind.

She peered over the rise of the sand dune and searched her vision for the people. She found them by the brush that marked the property line of the beach houses, an unsuccessful attempt at keeping the tourists off their lawn. They stood facing each other, a man and a woman, one tall and one short. Etta’s mind felt like it was buffering when she recognized the plain blue dress of her mother. Etta was reminded of the time she saw her kindergarten teacher eating at her favourite seafood restaurant. Etta had hardly recognized Mrs. Farquson without the backdrop of counting blocks and morning announcements and the air of maternal authority surrounding her. It felt wrong to see her like that. It felt wrong to see her mother now.

There was a compelling silence between the two bodies. It felt full, like the space between them was pregnant with something unspeakable. Her mother looked different, somehow, too. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were bright. She looked alive. Etta didn’t think she had ever seen her look alive. She remembered seeing a glimpse of it, once, when they went to the funeral of some distant cousin, but only when her mother stood next to the corpse in the open white casket.

Etta knew, somehow, with an instinctive certainty, that she should look away, but she watched, just as she had watched so many bodies on this beach before. She watched as her mother stepped towards the man and wordlessly slid her hand into his pants. She watched as her mother began to move, hesitantly, at first, like a musician working out the chords to an old song, and gain confidence. She began to move rhythmically, more desperately, luring out gasps and moans from the man who stood before her. All the while, Etta never took her eyes off her mother’s face. There was a quiet desperation to her movements and a sheen of passionate fixation in her eyes. She seemed purposeful, ready, committed to the pull of satisfaction. Etta didn’t know she was searching for something in the focussed sate of her mother until, at last, she knew it wasn’t there. It was shame. Etta knew shame was in her eyes every time she looked at her body and after every day of watching the bodies on the beach. But within her mother’s intense gaze, there was none.

Her mother continued her work until the man finished. His arm grasped Kate’s shoulder and squeezed, forcefully, as he let out a desperate moan. Etta thought she heard her mother

whimper. But it was all over in a second; the man shoved his shirt down into his pants and Kate fixed her dress and they walked back, a growing space between them, to the beach house.

It took Etta some time before she stood, tremblingly despite the heat, off the sand dune and began the long walk home. She felt differently, somehow, than she normally felt leaving the beach. She felt more accomplished, somehow, and yet shaken. She wasn't sure what to make of it.

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The glow of Etta's alarm clock showed it was 4:00am when she heard Kate close the front door and throw her keys on the counter. Etta was aware of each dawdling footstep of her mother as she came down the hall. She crawled into Etta's bed next to her, a billowy nightgown hiding her body. Etta kept her eyes closed and pretended to sleep under the thin white sheet. She didn't want to see her mother right now, didn't want to think about the gasps of the man and the bright gloss of her mother's eyes. She had decided, already, that she would never mention it to her mother. There was no point. So, Etta waited until Kate's wine-tainted breath slowed and Kate drifted into sleep.

Etta turned over cautiously. She didn't want to wake her mother. She only needed to see her. She needed to study her, to see who or what was there. Etta traced her eyes over her mother's body, over the curves she hid and over her face and over her hands. She looked at Kate's face and recognized her mother, the mother who dripped in dissatisfaction. She couldn't see the glint, the flush, that she had seen in her mother's face as she stood with that man. She looked at the bruises where the man had grabbed her, deep welts of purple imprinted on her shoulder. Seeing the stormy stains against her mother's white skin, Etta felt, for the first time, like she saw her. For a moment, only a brief moment, her mother had sprung out of inertia and into unashamed action. A tear slid down Etta's cheek, a spill of gratitude for having been a witness to this moment. She knew her mother would return to complacency, return to her unremarkableness, return to her passivity. But for now, for Etta, that moment was enough.

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spring's here  
Nelson Lowhim

# it's more than a sidewalk

Carol Bartold

A day's warning would have been nice, better than coming face to face before sunrise with a chain link fence blocking my way. In case that message didn't get through, a big, bright orange sign proclaiming "PATHWAY CLOSED" hung on it. So, my precision-timed walk to my favorite spot on the train platform was shot to hell and my shortcut was gone. Timing is everything in getting to the early morning, train if you want to get a decent seat, meaning not having to stand or squeeze into a middle seat for the half-hour ride to Grand Central. I calculate my walk to position myself at a place on the platform where the door of the third car will open and I can be the first person to step in and claim the seat I want. I have my two favorite aisle seats at the front. Easy in, easy out. It's a game that might border on obsession, something I learned to do early on when I began my daily commute to Manhattan for work.

No time to waste, I stepped it up to walk the extra distance all the way up the block to the train station to get to the platform and then hot-footed it back to claim "my" place before the train pulled in. I made it and settled into a good seat but I reserved some disgust over losing my shortcut and wondered how long this would last.

The shortcut I lost was a nondescript path that I had used for over ten years to scoot off the sidewalk and save some time getting to the train. I depended on it. When I first moved to the Bronxville, New York area, people told me about the path but, to my eyes, it blended into the landscape so well that I kept missing it and traipsed all the way to the station. It was only when I was behind someone who made the turn onto the path that I found it. I was as thrilled as if that stranger had let me in on a special secret and granted me admission to a special domain.

Convenience trumped the path's condition. This walkway couldn't have been a more obvious afterthought. No more than a thin layer of blacktop, probably laid over the existing dirt rather than on any type of foundation, its rutted and cracked surface abounded with random depressions. But I could overlook its decrepit state because it saved me at least three minutes getting to the train and at rush hour that can mean catching the train or missing it. The path was difficult to navigate and often treacherous, even in the best weather. During warm seasons weeds poked up through fissures in the paving, offshoots of their relatives on either side of the path, undisturbed for so long they had grown to the size of small trees. After a rain big puddles formed in the many depressions and forced a slalom walk or a bunny hop, depending on how much rain fell.

Soon after turning off the sidewalk I felt as if I were descending into a trench, kind of a circle of hell. The path ran below grade. Add winter's snow and ice to it and its slope down toward the platform might pull me into a slide that slammed me onto the rough blacktop, raked me over its surface, ripped a hole or two in my clothes, and bloodied my knees.

On one side of the path sat a blighted lot, mostly vacant except for a long-abandoned and still-rotting gas station structure standing near the back corner. A rusted, drooping chain link fence separated the path from the lot. On the other side, a walkway that mimicked the path led to the basement utility and trash room of an apartment building. A fence of sorts, cobbled together

from old pipes, marked a boundary between the path and the walkway and, I guess, was meant to keep people from going down the wrong one. I stayed close to the pipes and hoped they would hold should I need to grab on to stay upright.

I always felt relief during the cold seasons when I ascended back to the street evenings after work. The lot had no lights. Ambient illumination from the streetlights faded about halfway down the path. A utility light over the apartment building's basement door helped me see near the bottom, but I still had to pick my way along and hope I didn't stumble or twist an ankle as I walked back to the street.

The village closed and fenced off the pathway. I had heard months earlier they bought it along with the adjacent lot that a private owner had neglected and let go to seed. There would be, village officials announced, a brand new 80-space parking lot built on the site. They didn't say anything about replacing access to the train platform.

I was not happy about having to factor in an extra three to five minutes each morning — time to walk all the way to the station and then backtrack on the platform — to get to my spot, hopefully before anyone else had gotten it. I was even more put out a few days later when a fence had been erected around not only the whole lot, but also the sidewalk in front of it. That meant I'd need an extra minute or two to cross the street and walk on the other side, then jaywalk back to get to the station, all the while dodging trash trucks, delivery trucks, and people dropping loved ones off at the station.

While that was inconvenient, my return in the evenings was even more of a pain, especially in bad weather. Once off the train, tired from riding an overcrowded 6 subway train from Bleecker Street to Grand Central, then having about four minutes to fight the crowd in the terminal and get on the 5:58 train out of the city, I had to walk to the south end of the northbound platform, descend twenty-six steps into the tunnel under the tracks, and climb twenty-six steps up from the tunnel, where another orange "Pathway Closed" sign leered at me. Seven more steps up and I was on the southbound platform where my forced detour had me walk back to the station and finally out to the street. That meant doubling back three times before I reached the place where my pathway would have taken me. Only then could I make progress toward my car and the drive home.

This stretched on for two miserable winter months.

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Those obnoxious orange signs might as well have been time itself manifest, reminding me every morning and hammering the point home every evening, "Time's about up!" That is, my life has reached the point where more time lies behind me than stretches ahead of me. And to get my attention, they blocked my way and made me burn up more of my shrinking allotment to walk a detour just to get from Point A to Point B. I felt as if I were being forced to stare time in the face and watch it erode my freedom.

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I learned my first lessons about boundaries and limits on a sidewalk. When I was a toddler, able to walk and run away from my mother, she took me by the hand and we walked the short distance to each end of the speckled brick sidewalk in front of our small house. Our bricks had a bluish tint and looked as if diamond dust had been baked into them. Our sidewalk sparkled in the sun.

“See where these bricks change color? This is as far as I want you to go, no farther,” she instructed. The houses on either side of us had run-of-the-mill dull red brick sidewalks so it was easy for me to know where to stop.

I also learned about the lure of the bigger world beyond my immediate limits. The other kids on the street had the run of the block. When our play spilled over the line in front of our next door neighbors’ houses, I had to drop out of the game. I stood stock still, with the toes of my shoes on the line where the bricks changed color, watching my friends, hoping they would come back to my territory so I could rejoin them. I wanted time to speed up, to bring the kids back into my territory. But I also wanted time to hurry and grow me up so I could run with them into the farther horizon expanding with excitement and new things to see.

A few years later, living in a different house on a busier street and on a bigger block, I learned to ride a two-wheeled bicycle. I aimed it in new directions and began to follow my feelings of wanderlust. My parents let me roam from one end of the block to the other, but ordered me to ride on the sidewalk rather than in the street, wider and busier than they felt I could handle as a novice. I still had much to learn about the finer points of bike riding, like achieving the proper speed to keep my balance, and learning how and when to brake. Save for the cars, I would have had a much easier time riding in the street.

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Our “new” house, on one of the older streets in town, was one in a row of mostly Victorian houses, many with big, beautiful trees — maples and dying elms — shading them. Brick sidewalks in various states of disrepair and, in a few places, neglect, ran the length of our block. That was partly a function of age, but also because those wonderful trees had spread their roots under the sidewalks, making them uneven. Depressions that filled with water after a rain were great to ride through and make splashes. However, the roots had also heaved the bricks up, creating mogul-like bumps that could throw you if your bike tire hit them at the wrong angle. You had to know which bricks, perpetually in the shade, always had a coating of slippery moss because riding over them could put you into a slide that wiped your bike out from under you in a second and sent you chin-first to the ground. It happened to me and I still have the scar. You had to avoid spots that had one or more missing bricks or the bike’s front wheel would get caught and stop turning. Your bike, however, would keep going in back of you and catapult you over the handlebars. I learned all of this from experience. Once I mastered these challenges that terrified me at first, the sidewalks never failed to offer me a thrill ride. I had even more fun when I learned to navigate the obstacle course of a sidewalk riding with no hands. I always held on to the handlebars when I rode in front our house, though, because if Mom and/or Dad saw me showing off like that, they would have taken away my bike privileges, maybe even the bike itself. I couldn’t have that.

My bike became whatever I wanted it to be — a car, a horse, a rocket — and the sidewalk became any medium for transportation I could imagine — highway, sky, ocean, a trail out west. With that synergy, I could transcend the limits set for me and go anywhere in the universe —

across the ocean, to Mars, or across the desert. I could be anyone or anything as I rode, with hours ahead of me that I transformed into future years or years past, time that I expanded or contracted as my imagination led me. My only grounding in actual time came from knowing that I needed to be home for dinner.

My bike riding days on a sidewalk are over. These days sidewalks have a more pragmatic than imaginative purpose. I navigate on foot and one of my main concerns has become showing up at the right place at the right time, upright throughout the trip and upright when I arrive. Obstacles that thrilled me a child terrify me now with the thought of broken bones.

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The fenced-off pathway taunted me for a week or so. It sat behind a temporary chain link fence with nothing happening. I walked around it and it looked the same day after day. I grew mildly obsessed, anxious, wanting to see some evidence — assurance really — that the old walkway would be replaced. I hated my circuitous and extended route to and from the train platform and I couldn't abide considering that it might be permanent.

In a couple of weeks a few pieces of heavy demolition equipment with rams and shovels appeared on the lot, along with trucks poised to haul debris away. This looked promising. Crews unseen to me dismantled the abandoned gas station building from the roof down. I never once considered that it needed to be broken up piece by piece, a process that ate up almost three weeks. It looked like one good blow from a bulldozer would have made it collapse on its own.

I was pleased to see the next round of equipment arrive — rollers with big spiked metal teeth to break up the pavement, a power shovel to lift the old blacktop and concrete chunks into trucks, drivers to batter the newly exposed ground and tamp down the dirt. One early morning as I walked toward the station, I watched a guy maneuver the spiked roller, driving it back and forth across the pocked and breached surface of the lot to break up the blacktop. That evening I saw a pile of blacktop and concrete pieces he had made that must have been ten feet high. He left no trace of the old pathway.

When all the junk was carted away a smooth dirt parcel was left. My anxiety level went up a tick. Parking is a precious commodity in the village — hard to come by for commuters and a good source of revenue. I wondered how many new spaces might be carved out from the pathway and hoped the cost to create them would be greater than the few more dollars they would generate.

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After we settled into our Victorian house, Mom and Dad grew concerned about the compromised condition of our front sidewalk but they couldn't afford to replace it right away. The surface was uneven. Corners of some bricks had crumbled from age and decades of seasons changing from sweltering to freezing and back. They hoped nobody walking by got tripped up or caught a high heel to the point of falling and breaking a bone.

If the bricks had been set in anything besides the dirt underneath them, evidence of that had disintegrated. Unrelenting weeds grew between the bricks and nothing would kill them,

not even the kerosene Dad poured on them. He gave me the job of pulling and digging out vegetation from between the bricks. "I don't want to see any green," he said. I tried to do a good job but it proved a losing proposition I couldn't keep up with. As soon as I sat down on the sidewalk with my butter knife and a trowel, and surveyed my territory at ground level, our walk looked as if it extended about a hundred miles on either side of me. I swear some of those weeds had grown down as far as China into the ground and others had fanned out to curl around bricks a few feet away from where I toiled. There were times I thought the whole walk might come up like a carpet if I kept pulling.

At Mom's urging, and after a torrent of my frustrated tears, Dad gave me a reprieve from weed duty. He decided that the old, damaged brick sidewalk not only presented a hazard to everyone walking by, but it also was too much work to maintain. He wanted an attractive, and safe, walk he only had to sweep, not manicure. He got so fed up after his own futile tries at controlling the weeds, he dug up all the old bricks by himself with a pick and shovel, and carted the lot away in his pick-up truck. We had a dirt path in front of our house for a few weeks. He blocked it with old sawhorses at each end. "Stay out of it," Dad ordered, "and tell your friends not to ride their bikes through it. I'll know if they do because I'll see tire tracks and footprints."

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Work began on the empty lot, but progress was difficult to measure. Gasoline from old underground tanks, oil, and who knew what other environmental hazards had leaked into the lot — or had been poured into it — over the years and was left there. By law, it had to be cleaned up before the new parking lot and, hopefully, a new sidewalk to the train platform could be built. To all appearances, things had stopped dead. Night after night I looked for signs of progress. Day after day, I saw an empty expanse, a dormant dirt lot appropriating my time and forcing me to walk around it. Weeks into the project and I felt it was almost mocking me, taking its own sweet time.

And then I noticed some grading, leveling off of the surface, dirt nicely and uniformly raked. A few trenches appeared. Those would be for drainage pipes. Old, wild trees choked by ivy and wrapped in vines were taken down around the lot's perimeter. The decayed and rusty fence near the train platform, along with weeds the size of trees that had woven themselves into the fence, were gone.

And then one evening I saw what I had been looking for, a straight trough the width of a sidewalk, and not even a foot deep, scraped out of the south end of the lot, where the old pathway had been. I traced its trajectory beginning at the street and saw that it led toward the train platform. This looked promising. What looked even more promising was its elevation, no longer a descending trench. It sat at the same level as the future parking lot. A few days later a wooden frame lined the walls of the trough to hold its shape in place and the dirt on either side of it at bay. It wasn't long before I saw that rebar had been laid inside the length and width of the trough, not only to hold the wooden frame in place but also to reinforce the structure of what I hoped would be My New Sidewalk.

I began not to mind my circuitous route to and from the train so much because every evening I could see the day's progress and that encouraged me. Every day marked one less day I'd have to endure this timewaster. I had not realized that a sidewalk, one no longer than maybe fifty feet,

could capture my attention, hold it in thrall, and tease my sense of anticipation but this one did. I began to imagine the pleasure of taking my shortcut to the train again. An improved shortcut.

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Dad found a brick maker in Maryland, not far from home, to make the bricks for our new sidewalk. The brick maker calculated how many bricks Dad would need based on the dimensions of our sidewalk and suggested getting a few extras because some of the new ones were bound to break in transit before they made it to the sidewalk. Dad picked light colored ones more on the orange side than the traditional darker red. When a batch had been fired and was ready, I rode with him in his pick-up truck the twenty or so miles to the kiln. He loaded as many bricks in the truck bed as he could without their weight lifting the front tires off the pavement, and we hauled them home. Dad followed the brick maker's instructions for storing them in the back yard, how to make piles that would distribute their weight evenly. He covered them with a tarp until he had enough to hire a bricklayer to begin working on our new sidewalk. "These would make a great fort," I said.

"No they won't." Dad answered. "They're not toys or building blocks." He made sure I understood that neither I nor my friends were to touch the new bricks. And some of the bricks did break, mostly ones on the bottom of the piles from the weight on top of them, not because I and my friends played with them.

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The new sidewalk to the train platform remained a skeleton for two nerve-racking weeks. I felt like the child in suspended animation, toes on the boundary of one world, wanting time to move construction in a linear process so I could move into the other, more desirable place. But I didn't want to pile up more time behind me by wishing away what lay ahead. I longed to see some progress, any little bit of improvement that would lead me to believe the new sidewalk would be completed soon. I obviously don't understand the finer points of building a sidewalk, like the waiting and curing that must be part of the process, or the reality that the contractor probably had a more lucrative job to work on than a fifty-foot sidewalk. However, I got off the train one night to discover a welcome surprise — during the day concrete had been poured and leveled. The trough had been transformed into a clean, flat, almost white sidewalk. It wasn't ready for foot traffic yet but, from all appearances, it would be before long.

I stood at the fence for a few seconds and took in the view through the chain links, dreaming of having my shortcut to the train again, and soon. I would have the few morning and evening minutes I'd had to give up. When the village announced an opening date, only a few days away, I began to count down the days. I had barely begun to enjoy my countdown when, two evenings later, I got off the train expecting to see the fence and "Pathway Closed" sign that had greeted me for a couple of months, and instead found a wide open passage to the street ready to receive me — and other commuters — getting off the trains.

I might as well have been invited to walk the red carpet for the thrill I felt stepping onto the brand new sidewalk for the first time. There should have been a step-and-repeat, paparazzi to memorialize my initial trip from the train to the street, a host with a microphone to ask me how I enjoyed my inaugural walk. What a pleasure to walk on a perfectly smooth surface, no



depressions or hazards to worry about stumbling on. Maybe it was my imagination, but the walk practically carried me; it was as if I didn't need to make any effort to traverse it.

Spring daylight had arrived — in more ways than one. No more early mornings and evenings of extra walking or picking my way to and from the train in the dark. Although there was still plenty of work needed to finish the parking lot, I had my shortcut, and at least ten minutes a day, back.

The next morning, walking toward the train station, I couldn't wait to walk on the new sidewalk the other way, toward the platform. I hadn't anticipated the beautiful view of the platform it would give me, if you can consider a commuter train platform beautiful. The white fluorescent lights from it shone bright and welcoming, something I hadn't been able to see from the old pathway. True or not, I felt the new sidewalk quickened my step and gave me swifter passage than the old pathway. Once I got to the train platform, I looked back and admired the sidewalk and its subtle arc from the street.

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The bricklayer made precise work of our sidewalk. He stacked uniform piles of bricks at even intervals along the sidewalk bed. He carried a big sack of cement mix on his shoulder. Dust flew from it when he plopped it on the lawn. He mixed the cement in a weathered metal mixing tub with water from our garden hose. He used a hoe to work the mixture back and forth, back and forth until the cement reached the consistency of a thick, gray, lumpy gravy. I sat on the front porch and watched him work on his hands and knees. He slathered a section of cement in our new sidewalk's foundation then, while that cement was still wet enough to be pliable, a thin layer of cement on the bottom of each brick and a thicker layer on all four sides perpendicular to the bottom. He laid it at the perfect angle and with the exact same spacing between it and the bricks he had laid before. Often when he came to one edge or the other of the walk, he had to cut a brick to fit an odd-shaped space. He eyeballed it, never measured. A keen eye and a sharp chisel placed on a brick, then a quick blow with a hammer and the brick split, never shattered, and he had a perfect fit. When he used up one pile of bricks, he stopped working and placed a level on the section of the walk he had just laid to make sure the surface was even. He needed no more than a tap with a wooden mallet to level off the occasional brick that hadn't settled into the foundation the way he wanted. He wiped cement from his hands onto his overalls, mixed some more, and started the process again. I was impressed with the rhythm he established as he worked. He finished the job in three days. In another two or three days, all the cement was dry and he pronounced brick walk ready to use.

We had a perfectly level and even sidewalk with a beautiful pattern and color that made a nice complement to our house with its red roof and window shutters. Our patch of South Street transformed into a showplace. The stretch in front of our house made a great place to ride bikes and gave a "straightaway" where we could pour on some speed before slowing down for bumpy, mossy, rutted walks on either side of it. And if I felt sure that Mom was either upstairs or in the kitchen at the back of the house, I let go of my handlebars, spread my arms like wings, and sailed down our brand new sidewalk.

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portraits  
Seth Simon

# neither here nor there: a recipe for how not to be

Martina Newhook

HOME (noun): The place one lives permanently, especially as a member of a family or household. 2. The family or social unit occupying a home. 3. A place where something flourishes, is most typically found, or from which it originates.

My eighty-six-year-old father, who suffered from Alzheimer's, had gay porn hidden behind books he never read and buried in a hall closet whose shelves bowed under the weight of bottles of booze. The day I found his porn stash, I was kneeling on the carpet in front of the closet, my hands dirty from dust, gazing at the cover of a VHS tape with two strapping men thrusting torpedo-sized hard-ons toward the viewer. My hand trembled. My mind tumbled backwards into childhood, gathering up memories and experiences that could fit a narrative of closeted homosexuality. Pop was there, in the apartment he shared with my mother, shaving in the bathroom about a dozen feet away from where I sat back on my heels examining one item after another. Erotic novels with gay themes. One DVD. A thimble-sized vibrator nestled in tissue (clean).

Was this evidence of a latent curiosity brought to bear as his inhibitions declined with the advance of his disease or the fact of his preference throughout his life? Did my mother know?

Later, I met my older brother for dinner in a chain restaurant popular in Branford, where chicken wings are a specialty and patrons throw peanut shells on the floor and the house wine comes from a box. I ordered the house wine.

I told my brother what I'd found while cleaning out the closet in preparation for our parents' upcoming move. Pop was going to a nursing home and Mom was moving in with my brother and his wife. Lucky me, living life on the west coast, far away from home, was getting off easy.

What did he make of it?

"It's possible," he said. "It kind of makes sense now that I think about it."

I told him about how the day before, during the late afternoon, while Mother was out getting some air and I was packing books, Pop, bald with thick glasses, thin and tilted from scoliosis, gazed at a black and white photo of a woman I didn't know. It was a posed portrait. The paper had yellowed. She didn't look like anyone from our family. She wore a turtleneck and sported a pixie cut popular in the 1960s. Young, in her twenties perhaps, she cast a squinty closed-mouthed smile that betrayed some measure of guile towards the photographer. The only thing she and I had in common was that we both looked Hungarian, a bit exotic with good bones.

I couldn't make out the color of her eyes, they may have been hazel or deep blue, but not dark brown like mine. She had a better nose than me, more ski jump than beak. I inherited my father's nose, which took a long time to grow into.

Who's that? I asked.

That's you. He said this with conviction and sentimentality all mixed up in his tone.

No, it's not, I said too shrilly.

He didn't recognize me as his daughter, which terrified me.

Pop wasn't terrified but happy. Alzheimer's had in a weird way freed him. He could now live openly in the recesses of his mind that took him home to Hungary, where he was born in 1928. He immigrated to Canada in 1939 with his mother.

Pop was seated in the vinyl kitchen chair that first occupied our suburban Toronto home in the early 1970s, bought shortly after our family's return to Canada from a five-year stint in Hungary. Now, in 2015, it served as a desk chair in the apartment he shared with Mother some sixty miles southwest of that chair's original home. My parents, the chair, and I triangulated our way around Canada in the intervening years, landing in unfamiliar places with familiar furniture.

There is a word in Hungarian—*elvágyódás*—that has no English equivalent.<sup>1</sup> It refers to a melancholic feeling of missing something and not knowing where to find it, joined with a desire to be anywhere but here. Throughout his life my father embodied this feeling in words and deeds, and it has colored my life in ways I'm only now beginning to recognize. It's a word I learned recently, a linguistic gift, as it makes my father more real to me now by giving his restlessness, the mystery of him, a name. The trouble with *elvágyódás* is that when immersed in it like a capelin swimming in the North Atlantic you don't recognize water as your home. Too much *elvágyódás* and you are lost, unmoored, failing to flourish. Homeless.

Like my father, I have wandered. But I like to think it's toward myself rather than further away. If he went to the grave a closeted homosexual, it then makes sense to think of his wanderings as flight. Also as repetitive attempts to fix something or find something and failing again and again. Surely when in the throes of *elvágyódás*, one is hardly aware of it as one tramps about without a destination or a home.

Hungary has always been a homophobic place and remains so. Pop was a proud Hungarian. He couldn't be both gay and Hungarian. The dissonance may have overwhelmed him had it not played out as *elvágyódás*. The in-between spaces were the safe ones.

The burning question that has dogged me all of my life is: What was Pop up to when he convinced my mother that it was a good idea to move to Hungary in 1967 with their eleven-year-old son? To a country firmly entrenched in Soviet communism, with secret police and food shortages.

Over the years I asked my parents about this. The only answer they gave was that they wanted to make me. I was born there a year after their arrival. My father wanted Hungarian offspring. I was an ingredient in his recipe for personal happiness. I can only imagine what my brother thought of this.

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<sup>1</sup> Pronounce it phonetically: El-va-gee-o-daash

The official story my parents told was that they were going on an adventure to rediscover their heritage. My mother was born in Canada to Hungarian parents. They wanted to give their children first hand experience of it too. They didn't talk about how Pop had lost his job, the one that supported a middle class lifestyle in an inner suburb of Toronto, exactly the thing my grandparents wanted for him and us. Pop figured that with the proceeds from the sale of their house combined with their savings they could live in Hungary for many years before the money ran out. Which it did. But having money in the beginning didn't protect them.

When they arrived in Mátraballa, my father's ancestral village and place of birth, there were shortages of basic food supplies, including meat. My mother would need B12 injections after their first year there to treat symptoms from a severe deficiency. Few people had cars, telephones, TVs or even indoor toilets. I was potty trained in an outhouse. It was different in Budapest, where indoor plumbing was the norm, but housing was in short supply and the government forced people to subdivide their apartments such that a family of six might have one or two rooms left for themselves. At least in the village we had a house to ourselves.

Pop would disappear from Mátraballa for months at a time. My brother expressed suspicion that he might have been in hiding or jail. The shiny new Opel he bought in Vienna and in which the family entered Hungary back in '67 disappeared without explanation. This was a country where few people owned cars, and those who did were either Communist Party insiders or had waited a very long time before the Party allocated one, usually a Lada or Yugo, not a car produced in the West like the Opel. Had the money already run out? If so, what had he spent it on? Or, had someone blackmailed him for the car?

Sometime in 1974 or 1975, a couple of years after the four of us returned from Hungary, two Hungarian guys arrived at my grandmother's backdoor in Branford looking for Pop. My brother was living at Grandma's at the time, and was home that day. They claimed to be brothers by the name of Nagy, and they wanted to thank my father. The reason they wanted to thank him is pure speculation on the part of my brother. He believes that Pop helped them escape to the West. They may not have been brothers but lovers.

My brother speaks Hungarian, while I do not. He arrived in Hungary a naive adolescent and left a jaundice-eyed teenager. He could read Hungarian mannerisms and cultural afflictions.

It would be just like Pop to give up his parents' address through some misplaced sense of hospitality. He was also the type who'd want to know how it all turned out. He would have liked the idea of being some kind of secret agent on the side of what is morally right. And yet, he, himself remained closeted. And perhaps that was also morally right in his mind. He had people to protect. My mother for one. What would the neighbors think?

When we returned from Hungary, broke, and lived with my grandparents, the effects of those years began to take hold on the future. My future. I lost my brother, who moved out of the house when I was five. I'd already lost one home, like my father had, and I wouldn't find one of my own in which I flourished until I was in my forties. My father rarely held a job longer than 2-5 years while I was growing up and we moved frequently, first from my grandmother's to Oakville, then Nova Scotia, Yellowknife, back to Brantford, each move requiring him to live apart from my mother and me for weeks or months at a time as he took jobs in far flung places with high costs of relocation.

My father had no discernible goals that I can identify. He held his desires close. He tried to do his duty as a husband and a father, and also as a son. If he was a closeted homosexual had repression manifested as *elvágyódás*? Is this the source of my father's unmooring from place and from each of us, his wife, his children, and his parents? Or, more powerfully, do the two taken together—the contradiction between Hungarian identity and homosexuality—account for my father's inability to be at home anywhere? Had he chosen to identify as Canadian would everything have been different?

I have two pictures of my parents on a wall in my house in Seattle. One is a wedding picture and the other is an end-of-the-night photo snapped at a restaurant in the early 1950s. Mom was perfectly sober in a silky black dress, a little uptight looking, while Pop, his tie loosened, had his vodka glow on, the camera capturing his charismatic grin. He had his charms. He managed to move through the world because of them. It's him not her the viewer's gaze settles upon. He is the interesting one.

*Elvágyódás* gripped my father so strongly he ricocheted his way through life like a pinball.

Dad died in a nursing home less than a month after I discovered his closet. On Father's Day. Confused about why he was in that place and railing against it until he had a stroke.

I want to tell him that I'd be okay with him coming out. I've outgrown the epithets Pop had taught me as a child in the '70s, shuddering against them: fruit, pervert, homo. I want to tell him that to me, the prospect of anyone having to live a closeted life because of their sexual preferences is cringe inducing. Just imagining such suffering is almost too much to bear. But I cannot tell him these things because Pop died without any family surrounding him in a home that was never his.

And I miss him. He was my number one fan. I know that I was wanted, and that is enough.



# on fruit

Vanessa Bernice De La Cruz

Martina was 26 when her skin broke to reveal she was not made of blood and bone, but of papaya.

She didn't even like papaya.

She woke up one morning, late as she had been waking up for the past few months, and stumbled to the bathroom. She peed, washed her hands. Reached for her comb, looked in the mirror, and screamed.

Right where her right cheek should be, and underneath where everything else should be, was a gaping hole of orange.

She felt faint and had to clutch the edge of the sink and close her eyes for a minute before she could open them again. She looked in the mirror. Put her face up close. Looked at it. Between the orange, underneath edges of skin was seeds. Long oblong seeds.

She screamed so loud, neighbors peeked out their windows but she lived alone so there was no relative rushing in to scream, "Mija que tienes? Dime - qué te paso?" as she would've liked and could've imagined. Instead it was just her, holding on to the sink.

The world shook from under her.

When she woke up, a fruit fly buzzed above her nose.

The dermatologist was booked for the next month or so. The receptionist said, "I'm so sorry. I told him but the most we can do right now is just call you if anyone cancels. Have you tried your primary doctor? Oh they told you to come here? Maybe you could try a papaya farmer or something?"

The dermatologist walked by and looked at her and his eyes widened a tiny bit and he said, "Oh wow, so this is the papaya. Can I see?"

And Martina said, "Please doctor" and so he leaned over the front desk with a magnifying glass and said, "Hmm. I see. Turn towards the left please. Okay. Hmm."

Then he stepped back, put away his magnifying glass and brought his hand to his chin.

"Well." He said. "This happens sometimes. It isn't very common but it isn't very uncommon either."

"So what do I do?"

“Nothing really. Your insides are made of papaya. Keep them cool and refrigerated if possible.”

“And the hole, doctor?”

“Well. You can cover it in saran wrap or maybe even aluminum foil for a futuristic look. I recommend avoiding fruit flies. And if anything tries to crawl in, don’t let it.”

“But I can’t live with this hole on my face forever! I can’t even stand to look at me.”

“It is pretty gross,” another patient in the waiting room piped in.

“Well gross or not, some of us are just born as papayas on the inside and some are not. Some are bananas or strawberries. Papaya’s a good fruit. Hearty. Good for the skin.”

At this point Martina would’ve cried in someone’s arms if there was anyone to cry to. She pictured herself, being held in this narrow waiting room while her companion pleaded for another answer or a referral for a second opinion. Instead, she felt her vision narrow and the only thing real to her was the tile on the floor and the purse she had one hand on, so that there would be something to hold on to at all.

“Is there a long-term solution?”

“Come back next month. There might be.”

“Can I get a doctor’s note? I can’t get to work like this, I’m at the front desk, they’re going to say I don’t look professional.”

“Unfortunately not. You’d have to come in for a full consult for a note. Come back in a month and I can give you one then.”

She didn’t know what to do so she did not go home. She skipped work. They called her six times but she threw her phone in a fountain and wandered around aimlessly. People stared. They kept staring and she felt herself being stared at.

At some point she stumbled in front of the entrance of a supermarket. Wandered in. Found a stand of papayas. Sat down on an empty display shelf next to them. Stayed there till her dermatology appointment.

She got to the dermatologist’s and they told her she’d lost her insurance because she quit work so they couldn’t see her anymore. She’d have to go to the list of free clinics the city had. The receptionist helped her call a few. They were all booked for the next two months or so.

The dermatologist came out and said, “Plastic surgery could cover the hole if not what’s inside it. Here’s more numbers.”



So she was put on waiting lists for those too.

Before she left, they called her back to the desk and said, “Hey. Come back in two weeks. We *might* be able to do a quick consult for free. Be here at 9 on the 17th and we’ll let you know, ok?”

So she went back to the papaya stand. Stared at the clock at the other end of the grocery store for 24 hours for 48 hours. For two weeks.

On the morning of the 17th, she woke up.

A grocery store worker gently shook her awake and said, “Hey it was cool you living here when you were a papaya but you’re not a papaya anymore so the manager says you gotta leave.”

So she left and wandered to the dermatologist’s office.

Face fully healed, no papaya visible, the receptionist greeted her with surprise.

“I don’t know what happened,” Martina explained.

And when they rushed her into the next open room, she asked the dermatologist instead.

“Doctor what happened?” She asked.

“Well, this just happens sometimes.” He explained.

She went back to her apartment and tried not to think of papaya again.

(She did though. Often.)





warrior  
Van Lanigh

# a day in the life

Karen Burnette Garner

Dawn brightens the horizon long before the sun makes its appearance. Five o'clock and the glow of orange, red and purple is intense. When I peep out of my window, the beauty of this natural wonder strikes into my aloneness, my exposed singleness, and draws me into the day. Sometimes, I return to bed, but today, I am awake and sleep has gone.

When I chose this room as my main bedroom, I didn't realize that the sun would shine in so brightly, that when I slept until ten, it would literally shine in my eyes and disallow any sloth. If I have not already risen from my tumbled rest, the intensity of the light forces me to pull myself aright, and begin the day. Without an agenda of any kind, my day is my own, and like an empty clothesline, invites me to hang activity and purpose on the endless wire.

Across the road, the open farmland, stone farmhouses and worn barns full of restless cows greet the morning. The cows are soon proceeding, pretty much in a line, out to the fenced in field for breakfast. I don't know if the same cow leads the way every day, but they seem to have an order among themselves, and their black and white forms scatter in randomness across the green. Feeding begins in earnest.

An occasional metallic clatter, a screech, and thump, and the start of a tractor motor mark the human effort on the farm. Sometimes it is to turn the earth in the adjacent fields, or drag the manure of the barn into a flatbed to be scattered. Fields lie like lovers, waiting for precious seed to be deposited, where it can grow and produce harvest. Today is a plow day, it seems, and the faded green and red machines rev their motors, spin their tillers, and start on the first field in the distance. Even when the tractor approaches the rise across the street, the farmer seldom acknowledges my tentative wave. His mind is on his work. No time for social niceties.

On the porch, wrapped in my dressing robe, with a warm coffee in my hands, I silently absorb the fading psychedelic sunrise, leaving a clear sky of blue, arms of cherry trees and maples silhouette their many fingers reaching into the air. What to do today? I seek for a healing that many say just takes time, or one that never really happens, but just something you learn to live with. I thought I would be helping myself move forward by leaving my southern land to start a completely new life. New home, new environment, new projects and new people to meet. So far, I have simply cut myself off from the life I knew, to be in a sort of limbo, without structure or purpose, without connection. My old life. So far, I have to feel it was a costly trade. A pandemic that keeps me isolated, at home, has held me in plague jail for months, with no end in sight. My heart, once ripped and broken, is a mismatch of healed scars and open bleeding wounds. I live in a twilight of dreams and nonexpectations. There are days I forget which day it is, or a dream continues in the wakefulness until I start to believe it is true.

I continue to see my husband as he was in those last days, as he lay dying, without any poignant farewell, half delirious and trying to fight me, trying to get out of his bed, and with supernatural strength, swinging his fists out at me, to escape. The grimness of the experience is burned in my memory, in my heart. Of course, he was suffering with liver failure, and the poisons in his body were extreme enough to blot me out of his mind. He was in pain, he was afraid and

anxious, he couldn't understand what was happening. With the help of his hospice providers, his last day was quiet and ragged with breathing in time to the oxygen tank. No recognition, no consciousness. After the morning light grew to a brilliant autumn afternoon, he slipped away. He didn't acknowledge me, or recognize my sacrifices, or even take a last look at my face. His exclusion was complete.

To pass the time, I work in the yard, planting, continually planting. It is an expression of some sort of hopefulness, or desperation to believe that life will continue to go on. Replacing the plants I left behind in my old home, particularly loved blooms and shrubs, embracing new ones that I didn't have luck with in the blazing summer heat. They seem to grow hesitantly, not believing in my daily attentions as an act of love, but suspicious of my intentions. I don't know my intentions, only that they are my floral companions, and from them I will one day be rewarded with a bloom, a green shade or a fragrance on the wind. We are prisoners together in this existence. Perhaps God will visit me here, if I make it beautiful.

My grandchildren come to see me, as they live next door. So many times, I want to let the door ring and sit silent where I am, but they do not see my despair. So, I open the door, play the game, watch the show on television, draw or paint together, share a cookie. They hope. They are lights moving toward the future, unblemished hearts. Being near them lifts my heart with theirs, leads me to raise my head and unclasp my hands. They do not know how they bring blessings in their generous sharing of their lives. They remind me to survive. They remind me to hang on. They remind me that time will bring a future, if I can just hold their hands and come with them.

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I listen to music almost every day, to break the silence. The songs of my youth bring a taste to me of those days when I loved, more beautiful than I would believe, when today seemed a long way in the future. My ears hear lyrics that I missed before, and my heart reacts with bittersweet joy. I see clothes and faces and places from years ago, I smell aftershave and meals in long closed restaurants, and leather seats in cars that joined the junkyard years ago. Musical heroes that are now old, or even dead, their melodies and words continuing after everything. I am wistful, wishing I had known how precious those days were when they were shining and we were young.

When the long day stretches to an end, and the sun finds its rest in the west, the night covers my heart and it seems that sleep will give me a solace, a resting place to heal, to restore. Perhaps in dreams, the people I love or have loved will come to me again, to un-do all the twists and turns that pulled us apart. I no longer have bright cheerful dreams, but I can wish for them to return. Glimpses of dream images still haunt me, sweet moments I can make myself believe in. Whether they really happened in life, or were only in my night thoughts, they reside in my mind, and I can claim them, because they are mine. Reality is truly within our minds, isn't it? I want to believe that. Mainly I just want to believe. To have hope. What a rare flower it is, and at this point of my life, I must have it, and it must survive. The alternative is oblivion, and flawed as it is these days, I want to continue to live. I lay down to close my eyes, and from the darkness, seek strength and peace. I sleep, and as it has been said, perchance to dream. A reasonable expectation, and who knows what lies beyond.



# my baked potato

Frank Zahn

Heat brings you to life and softens the firm flesh within your protective russet skin. You still have that smell of fresh from my garden. And when you expand and pulsate from baking, I steal you away in anticipation of tantalizing foreplay and rapture.

I slit and pry opens your skin, releasing a burst of steam that rises in a rush toward the ceiling. I fold sweet butter and fresh ground pepper gently into your hot flesh and then quickly pour over it an equally hot cheese sauce thinned with beer. The cheese sauce quivers when I top it off with a heap of chilled sour cream and chopped chives.

I take a large tablespoon and run it down through the chives, the sour cream, and the cheese sauce. I run the tablespoon still deeper into your peppered and buttered flesh. Then without hesitation, I scoop up an enormous spoonful and maneuver it between my lips and into my mouth.

My cheeks bulge as my lips struggle for closure. As I chew, a bit of butter, cheese sauce, and sour cream oozes out over my lower lip and drools down my chin. My taste buds explode. My eyes fill with tears of elation. I am hopelessly lost in moments of orgasmic rapture that you, my decadent baked potato, so generously provide.



# not for women only

Frank Zahn

I don't have a woman to fix my breakfast, lunch, and dinner anymore; clean up after me around the house; iron my shirts; wash my socks and underwear; or run errands for me. I don't have a woman to clip my toenails, rub my back and feet, tell me I have a great body, fake orgasm, or bring me another beer. I don't have a woman to blame or yell at when I feel out of sorts, and I don't have one to feel sorry for me, forgive me, or shore up my ego when I feel foolish or outdone.

But then again, I don't have to get married and support a woman to enjoy a woman's company anymore. I don't have to protect and defend a woman; say things that boost her self-esteem; listen to endless psychobabble; suffer her menstrual cycle; or buy flowers, candy, and trinkets for her to keep her in a good mood. I don't have to live in fear of losing my car, my home, or my savings when I make a mistake or otherwise screw up. I don't have to spend any more time in obedience training; that is, I don't have to become more sensitive and attentive; lift up and put down the toilet seat; fix the screen door; stop cussing, passing gas, and belching; or stop lying on the couch and browsing the television channels with the remote.

Women's liberation is not for women only. It's also for men. So, angry feminists everywhere, keep up the good fight, and should the urge to burn your bras overcome you again as it did in the nineteen-sixties, I'll unhook them for you, help you take them off, and light the match.



# the meaty interview: gaule brandeis

**What is your favorite color?**

My favorite color has long been purple (especially deep plum and dusky lavender shades) but lately, I've been feeling drawn to tones of blue. There's a car I keep seeing around town that has the most wonderful creamy periwinkle paint, and I love the color so much, I want to drink it or roll around it.

**What's your favorite animal?**

My favorite animal specifically is my sweet puppy Pepper, a one year old Maltese/Yorkie mix. I'm allergic to most mammals, and never thought I'd be able to have a dog, but she has hair, not fur, and doesn't make me sneeze, and I am ridiculously in love with her. My favorite animal to watch (other than Pepper) is anything in the monkey/ape family. They're our close relatives, and we could learn a lot from them about playfulness. I also am a big fan of sea creatures, notably jellyfish that light up.

**If you could choose to fly or to be invisible, which would you choose and why?**

I think I know how to be invisible already, how to be quiet and unnoticed and observant, so I'd definitely want to fly. The freedom of that, the shift in perspective. I feel exhilarated just thinking about it.

**Are you happy, and if not, why?**

There is much in the world that frustrates and saddens and angers and alarms me, and that leaves me with an ache in my heart much of that time. That said, I am a happy person by nature, perhaps obnoxiously so. I feel lucky to be alive and find ways to appreciate the beauty around me even in the midst of catastrophe. And I also try to use my voice and actions to help make a difference, and that can take some of the sadness and anger and fear away.

**What book/s are you reading at the moment?**

I just started *Weather*, the new novel by Jenny Offill, and am enjoying it tremendously. I'm also inhaling the poems of my undergraduate poetry mentor, Ralph Angel, who recently passed away.

**What are you currently listening to?**

Currently I'm listening to my husband and 10 year old make elaborate plans for the video game they're playing together. Music wise, I am kind of stuck in the 80s, continually going back to my long time favorites, Prince and the Talking Heads. Audio book wise, my husband and 10 year old and I recently spent a road trip happily listening to *Knock Three Times*, the third book in the *Wizards of Once* series by Cressida Cowell, narrated delightfully by David Tennant.

**How old were you when it became clear you were a writer?**

I started writing poems at four and my memory starts at four, so I can't remember not writing. I wrote my first "novel" at 9—it was 25 pages, but I considered it a novel; it had chapters, and

an “about the author” page. My teacher had it bound and put in the school library, and when I saw my name in the card catalogue, I knew I wanted nothing more than more card catalogue cards with my name on them.

**It seems you are equally drawn to working either in prose and poetry; what made you decide to tell the stories in *Many Restless Concerns* in a poem series?**

It was less my decision than the project’s—these ghost girls and women wanted to be written in poems, poems with a lot of white space to reflect the silence they were pushing against, and I needed to follow their lead. Of course, I did make a lot of decisions once this form emerged—some of the poems worked better with line breaks, some as prose poems, and I had to do a lot of revision to figure out how to best find the right form for each piece. And yes, I love both poetry and prose with all my heart and want to honor that love with deep attention to craft.

**Tell me about the inspiration for *Many Restless Concerns*.**

When my daughter was a teenager, she was fascinated by notorious women of history and asked for a variety of books about women pirates and other outlaws. I found a chapter about Countess Bathory of Hungary in one of her books and found myself haunted by the wide numbers of girls and women she had killed. Giving them voice felt like an act of justice.

**If you could invite six people, living or dead, to your ideal dinner party, whom would you invite?**

My first impulse is to fill the table with family members—it’s way too rare that I get to hang out with all three of my kids (my two oldest are 29 and 26 and don’t live nearby)—so I’d start with my husband, my three kids, my daughter in law, and my late dad, but I’d need to make the table bigger so I could invite my three siblings and their families. And I’d love to invite some ancestors, so I could learn more about my family history (about which I know frustratingly little.) I’m torn about whether to invite my late mom—it would be amazing to see her and I have a ton of questions for her, but I think she might pull all the air out of the room. When I try to imagine which six famous people I’d alternately invite, I’m not sure they’d be the best dining companions—Prince would be quiet and enigmatic, while Isadora Duncan (as much as I love her) might start to annoy people with all her grand pronouncements and gesticulations, and so on and so forth. I think I’ll stick with family.

**Any new projects in the works?**

I’m working on a couple of new book projects—a collection of prose poems about the weekend Marilyn Monroe spent in Lake Tahoe, where I live, just before she died, and a follow up of sorts to my 2002 craft book, *Fruitflesh: Seeds of Inspiration for Women Who Write* called *Write Like an Animal*, which taps into the animal world instead of the plant world as a source of writerly inspiration. My dream is for it to come out on the 20th anniversary of *Fruitflesh*. I also am working on several small pieces, including an essay I’ve been trying to write for years that is finally clicking in to place. And I’m always trying to stay open, waiting for whispers from projects to come.





# a sarcophagus of resin

Linda Kraus

Thirty million years ago, it had no provenance—just a lowly dung beetle scuttling the shores of the Baltic Sea—a tasty morsel for a predator higher in the universe’s food chain, a scavenger that lived in the bowels of the earth—nature’s jest.

As karma dictated, the beetle scurried under a tree and suddenly was trapped in a globule of resin—its life sadly snuffed out as it struggled to escape. Its black body was pressed into a kind of immortality by layers of earth and rocks masking its resin coffin.

Millennia later it was transformed into a gemstone—startlingly, magically beautiful—its encasement now the color of a clear aged cognac; prized for its perfect preservation, admired for its glow, this ancient gift of the earth has been baptized as precious amber.

When we die, we will not be as fortunate as this lowly beetle, now regarded as a wondrous amber ornament—forever to be cherished and acknowledged with pride. Instead, our bodies will slowly fester, decay, and return to particles of dust to dust, as our souls soar to infinity, our sarcophagi the waiting arms of angels holding fast.



# living under a bridge

Linda Kraus

“He has chosen to live under the radar so the police can never, never find him,” someone once commented pleasantly, as if a man who voluntarily selected shelter under a bridge was without human value. His alleged crimes are constantly reinvented—the gifts of rumor and imagination—a rapist, a combative drunk, the obsessed perpetrator of un *crime passionnel*—choose your favorite.

Burly, clothed in visible layers of peeling filth, this homeless man is a sad reminder of what we all can become when Fortune ceases to smile. His flimsy bicycle transports him to Starbucks and a nearby bench where he sits for hours and stares down the glances of those concerned enough to perform an unselfish Act of Charity—if only they could decide on one that Christ would surely have deemed appropriate.

Often he is miraculously connected to our lives through his electronics, which show him a world he does not inhabit or crave materialistically. Instead, he has chosen a concrete roof to shield him from excessive, relentless sun and the danger of high winds and torrential rains as he sleeps the uncertain and often perilous sleep of a pariah. The heavens offer him a kaleidoscope of wonder: blazing, shifting constellations—his canopy of stars.

In his dreams he may struggle fitfully to ward off the terrors that creep in stealthily in the night. He disdains our civilized standards of hygiene but bathes occasionally, perhaps dancing in the rain. He may be unable to move comfortably amongst us, the driven, who strive frenetically to make beautiful lives for those we love—sometimes sacrificing our dreams and hopes, desiring a better life for others. He is a man whose freedom we cannot understand.



# searching for heathcliff

Linda Kraus

I climbed those moors with Heathcliff,  
attracted by his sullen aloofness,  
a tabula rosa for my passion,  
but the other-me insisted that  
I needed a man with a good job—  
a predictable, solid provider,  
not a handsome malcontent.

Many Heathcliffs have wrenched  
my heart—each one thought to be  
perfection. My scenarios imagined  
secret trysts, sleepless nights—  
the masses of stone my pillows,  
the canopy of stars my coverlet:  
a bodice-ripper's concept of love.

I still hope for an Olivier who lures me  
to those English hills, a wild wilderness  
of moss-covered slopes and craggy  
precipices—sometimes I must seek  
the fragrance of heather and the moaning  
wind lashing the moors to transform  
the details of my quite ordinary life.



# appetites

Hillary Wheelan Remley

Patricia took two spoons from the freezer and placed them under her eyes. She kept some spoons in the freezer just for this occasion, not the nice ones but the ones with small nicks on the inside, the ones whose handles had been warped by digging too eagerly into a pint of ice cream. She lay down in her bed and folded her blanket up over her body, over her nose and most of her cheeks. The blanket smelled like a mix of her and Tosh, which only meant that it smelled like vanilla body whip and ballsack sweat and bread. When she was done with depuffing her eyes, she would wash her sheets and put on a pot of coffee. Maybe she would buy a whole chicken and put it in a pot to reduce to stock, which she would drink with a pat of butter from a small teacup. She would be clean and delicate and thin. She would switch out her vanilla body whip for pure shea butter or coconut oil. She would decide to like Chanel No. 5 and wear it naked to bed. She'd forgotten who'd done that but she was sure that it was someone with very soft skin. The need for change sat heavy in her stomach, a bout of nausea that trailed her in all of her usual tasks.

That Tosh had ended things was not surprising. He was not good at hiding his disinterest. It took him a month to properly remember her name. He'd called her Peggy and Paige and even, once, Caitlin. Lately he'd been skipping dinner and only coming over for sex, which had gone from somewhat interesting to a total bore. It was all bending over and pretending to like having her hair pulled. Her knees and scalp were still sore and slightly bruised, which only made her want to make peach cobbler (something tender for something tender). Not that Tosh was ever a tender or skilled lover, not that she would consider him a lover. He was incredibly clear with her about their arrangement. It involved eating and fucking and not much else. Sometimes she gave him marriage advice or cooking advice, neither of which he received well.

"Lauren has made coq au vin five times so far this month," he said. "It's still awful." He pointed to his egg salad sandwich as an example of his desperation. His wife had driven him to eat egg salad past midnight in a diner with Patricia. This coq au vin had been the last straw. He called up Patricia and asked her to a late dinner.

Patricia knew how to make coq au vin. Good, dark meat chicken thighs was how. Good wine and pearl onions were also necessary, she offered to slip him the recipe, but he refused. She was good at cooking, which is something that people don't expect much of fat girls. They assume it is all foil wrapped Ho-Hos and full pans of Marie Calendar's Chicken Pot Pie: sad, alone meals. This was not the case. But whenever she cooked for men they'd look at her like she was some sort of freak, a dog who could retrieve a beer from the fridge without piercing the can. Tosh didn't care for her cooking, though, at least not her showy stuff. He preferred sandwiches and packaged puddings with thick skins on the top. If she had known this at first, she doubted she'd ever have accepted his offer for dinner. The sorriest thing was that, at first, she had sympathized with him, having a wife who couldn't cook and all, but by the time things were done she'd realized that he just had shit poor taste and his wife's coq of vin was probably divine and he was too busy hating onions and any cut of the chicken that wasn't the breast too much to even notice.

Anyway, it was only ever a sex thing between them. That's what Patricia called it, *a sex thing*. Her friends on the cooking forum fully endorsed her version of it, this sex thing, not knowing that he was married, or that he sometimes forgot her name. It was about time for her to have fun. They'd been telling her this for months. *Get out, they'd say, peach cobbler can wait*. Her book on divorce said just about the same, except that told her to get a hobby which she broadly considered her affair to be.

Of course she knew what Tosh wanted when he called her up that night, the egg salad night, that is. What else could it be? They were not exactly friends in the office. When he first started in the company she'd walked in on him standing at her cubicle with her coworker, Leah, making fun of her Farside calendar, which was months behind, and the framed picture of her childhood cat, Mr. Bonkers. Patricia was aware of the message her desk sent, but until then had no room in her life to care. She was alone, she liked to attach herself to things, and couldn't remember to keep up with a daily calendar. This was all fine by her, except it made her seem sexless and lonely, which maybe she was, just a little. The past few years had been rough. Her boss once caught her crying over a turkey sandwich, the problem with turkey sandwiches being that her ex husband loved turkey sandwiches and she didn't, but for years had made them each a turkey sandwich for lunch and when she sat there in the break room looking at the turkey sandwich all she could think of was how many ham sandwiches she had robbed herself of, how many peanut butter and mayo sandwiches, too. Her boss had offered to set her up with his brother in law, whom he often called sweet but simple, a real Lennie Small.

Leah was Tosh's first choice, and they slept around for a few months before she found another job at an architecture and engineering firm. She left without so much as a party, only staying late to pack up her cubicle. She'd been crying into her oatmeal for over a month at that point, and had kept faced forward when Tosh called her over for lunch. It was then that Patricia knew things had gone sour for them, and Patricia figured he'd be just itching enough with want to consider her. She started making brown butter chocolate chip cookies and keeping them at her desk, something that generally drew in enough people to allow him to approach without feeling pressured to start a conversation with her. She made great cookies, everyone said so. If she put out the lure, he'd come. It took him a week to make it over to her desk. It was another week before he started responding to conversation. She gave him her number on the back of the cookie recipe. He looked at it with a bit of snarling disgust but did not tell her to fuck off, only kept his mouth clapped shut and walked away.

She'd figured he'd tossed the paper away. It took three months for him to call, but he did. She suggested a crappy diner close to her apartment. She drove them back to her place and he complained about her car.

"It smells like socks," he said. He complained about her apartment complex, too. "What use is a gate? This place is a sty."

They had sex two times and tried for a third, without much enthusiasm on either end. They wound up watching an episode of *Cheers* which they both liked a great deal even though Tosh said he preferred Kirstie Alley to Shelley Long. It's things like that that you suppress at the beginning of an infatuation and cling to when it ends. Who prefers Kirstie Alley to Shelley Long? Stupid people, cruel people, people who say the wrong name during sex and don't apologize.

He had started seeing Leah again, that was the end of it. She'd been bested out of second place. Patricia bet Leah didn't even know what *Cheers* was. She did know that Leah wore perfume that smelled like candied apples, and Tosh had started smelling like them in those last few weeks.

Patricia had considered buying a bottle of candy apple-smelling perfume, too, but didn't. This was a week after he told her it was over and she was very raw. Her skin was, in fact, actually raw as well. It was from all the crying. She'd been doing a lot of it lately. Anything could set her off, and she was starting to suspect that it wasn't all about Tosh. He was mean and dull and had never once made her smile intentionally, but it was something, and he had set it off, maybe it was perimenopause, or that her ex husband, Cliff, had a child with his new wife, not that she wanted children, but she liked the name Arthur, which was what he had named his son. And she remembered, on more than one occasion, telling him that if they ever did have a son that they would name him Arthur. And wasn't that a form of theft? Then again, the crying jags could just be a reaction to the fact that she knew that Tosh was something that was bound to explode everything in her life, and maybe she wanted to be set off.

Ever since Tosh left her whole life was one small disaster after another. This morning it was eggs that set her off. She was all out. Tosh didn't like eggs. He liked yogurt with flax meal stirred in. So this morning, when she got up to make an omelette that she'd been dreaming about, really rich with cheddar and spinach and bacon, she found that she was all out of eggs. And the task of putting on clothes and driving to the store and coming back to make an omelette just sounded like too much work, and so she ate a bowl of low fat yogurt and cried. How stupid she thought Leah was when she was in the pits, crying over her dribbly little paper bowl of oatmeal, always scraping the sides for bits of crystalized sugar. *Little girl*, she thought, *you need your heart thoroughly broken at least five more times before you learn what's what and what's worth crying over.* She knew that Tosh wasn't worth her tears, or any woman's tears, for that matter, but it didn't stop her from crying.

This was always the worst part, she told herself. And it was true. Soon she would not be able to smell him in her bed. His food would expire and she would remember to toss his loose socks into the trash instead of the pantry. A woman of her age knew the patterns of her own pain, which was the point. And she remembered why she did any stupid thing in the first place, which was to remind herself that she could find her way back home, no matter how far she strayed. There were always spoons in the freezer.





city nights  
Erica Frederick

# threads of color

Susan Dashiell

The lure of returning to a collage in the making is similar to the impulse of wanting to reopen a good book. Sources of inspiration enter my imagination and are entrusted to my hands to tell a story. The narrative takes shape and a partnership is formed between contrasting remnants of paper. Unlike conflicts between people, clashing patterns when placed side by side have the power to bring out the best in each other. When done, not a page is written, yet the finished product translates in to words in seconds.

Collages presented as gifts retell meaningful moments in the lives of family and friends. Those sold, become suggestions of story telling as an outsider inserts their own perspective. As toddlers, my children's collages were derived from a tattered book of nursery rhymes retrieved from a flea-market bin. Recast in to a tale of colorful animals and landscapes from our trips to the zoo, they remained a reassuring presence binding us to each other.

Now grown and attending college, a single collage is displayed along a staircase wall in my snug home. Hidden among other colorful frames, a visitor's eye must wander before finding it. The composition is a page in our family history, an interpretation of a valley below a hillside orchard. Apple picking is my unwritten sacrament. It is an annual ritual I began with my children when they were two and three. It was in the thicket of the orchard that I sensed a kindly presence washed over them, tendering goodness and protection from harm. Our pilgrimage drew to a close when each left for college, but perhaps the tradition will resume with a next generation.

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Downslope from my collage, two frames to the right, a photograph of embroidered cloth grazes the wall. The zesty colors brushing the eye portray the rural needlecraft of *phulkari*. Hurling unrestrained brightness, recurring motifs stitched with silk thread radiate along a shell of raw cloth. The animated textile portrays the work of the women of Punjab, a region straddling Pakistan and India.

Striking and in my visual field for ten years, my eyes still leap-frog from point to point on the print. Despite its lively nature, the reproduction is steady in purpose, because it illustrates story telling at its finest. Some artwork requires deep reasoning to gain entrance beyond the surface, but these cloths are wholly penetrable.

A combination of artistry and utility, *phulkari* is a nurturing craft steeped in recording family lore. Be it needle-work, paint stokes or emojis on an iPhone, the rich tradition of story telling is at the base of the human experience. Since the first petroglyph carved into a rock, humans have continued to preserve their narratives. A living archive, the knowing West African griot maintains the oral traditions of the tribe. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the Medieval minstrel spread gossip while strumming his lute. A repository for centuries, the needlework inherent in *phulkari* stores family and village life in tales bound to cloth.

Beneath the splendor, clever hands have stitched a window into the regional life of Punjab prior to the 1947 Partition. Thought to be the best way to limit bloodshed between Hindus and Muslims, the province was divided into two becoming Indian Punjab and Pakistani Punjab.



Relocating in the midst of upheaval, Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs fought one another to establish their own identities in their redefined homelands.

As millions fled across borders, the tradition of *phulkari* withered along with an era when woman of Sikh, Hindu and Muslim heritage sat side-by-side sewing. For many religious groups, Punjab was considered holy land, turning the activity of making these fine cloths into a sacred tradition. Muscle memory faded and the craft took flight beside the fearful woman migrating, many of whom never made it to their destination. Considered targets of revenge, tens of thousand of woman perished. The hastily drawn Radcliffe Line resulted in the biggest human tragedy in the history of the Indian subcontinent.

There is no memorial to recall the suffering or sacrifice experienced by these women. Given their invisibility, I intuit *phulkari* as an eloquent marker of their lives. Their striking textiles reincarnate a period of stability and cohesion, prior to their demolished selfhood. Each piece of *phulkari* was sewn as a celebration of life. No artist's signature is stitched in the corner of the cloth, and history books fail to capture the significance of the skilled hands who made these fine fabrics. However, if not for these woman, who would have passed on the heritage of the rich culture left behind?

Literally meaning flower work, *phulkari* is a powerful symbol of regional identity. Woman drew inspiration from everyday moments, things seen, food eaten, animals owned, and village happenings. The artistry of their hands made what might seem mediocre, magnificent.

The *khaddar*, raw base cloth used for *phulkari*, was woven locally and naturally dyed while the *pat*, a floss of shiny silk thread, was purchased from traveling merchants who brought silk from Afghanistan, Bengal, and China. Luminous exteriors adorned shawls and *dupattas* that cover the head, whereas *bagh* is a garment that covers the whole body.

The craft of *Phulkari* was an integral part of a Punjabi woman's life. At a *quinceañera* celebration, I looked on as an affectionate father assisted his daughter to change from flats to heels. On another occasion, a thirteen year old recited verse from the Book of Esther at her *bas mitzvah*. The transition from child to woman is a universal turning point, and completing a *phulkari* was viewed as a rite of passage for a girl on her way to becoming a woman. The art breathed new life each time a threaded needle passed to young hands.

Encountering *phulkari* for the first time at an exhibit in Philadelphia, the folksy patterns drew me in making the parameters of time changed. Age-old fabrics shimmered to great effect with a color palette of yellow, purple, hot-pink, neon-green, red and orange. I found myself drawn to *sainchi phulkari*, textiles with figures and objects. With bright liveliness men tumbled and animals pranced. In one piece a British couple, identified by a hat and parasol, stood near a dancing bear. Another displayed large peacocks and horses crossing paths with figures carrying vessels and playing instruments. Scanning the motifs, I pulled out the stories captured in the cloth and let them pass through me. The images stayed with me, eventually working their way into my collages. This tie-in carried the legacy of the women of Punjab to family and friends.

Standing inches from the exposed textiles, I envisioned a group of woman huddled together after a day of grinding corn, fetching water from the well and doing household chores. Hunched

over a common panel, they guided their needles and chattered while their children played beneath a bulky embroidery frame. Not just a creative outlet, the craft was a source of social expression in a patriarchal system where a female voice could get lost.

A sea of pink hats made a collective statement at the Woman's March on Washington, and New York activist Tarana Burke started the #MeToo movement heard around the world. With incredible patience, Punjabi woman conveyed their thoughts and observations of life one careful stitch at a time.

The reproduction mounted on my staircase wall is characterized by ox carts, crops harvested and active characters. During quiet moments, my imagination is invited to wander along with them. The image evokes glimpses of a village bustling with sounds, scents, and dust clouds stirred by busy feet.

I was stunned to learn the ornate needlework sheathing raw cloth was achieved using a basic darning stitch. A simple stitch, commonly used to mend holes on the heel or toe of a sock, acquired the power to preserve centuries of stories. In select pieces, the darning stitch was used so densely that the embroidery became the fabric itself.

I thought back to an evening when my daughter was packing her duffle-bag for a two week stay at sleep-away-camp. After seeding out those socks with holes, she discovered her limited stockpile. A well of enthusiasm at the age of eleven, Zetta approached me with my sewing basket in one hand and a twisted mound of socks in the other. To make the tear visible and protect her stationary hand from being pierced by the needle, I inserted a plastic egg in the toe of her frayed sock. I knew I would reinforce Zetta's handiwork later that evening and smiled at the thought. Swapping stories, we stitched affection and laughter into a bundle of threadbare socks.

Phulkari is a tradition of the heart, where legacies bound to cloth voyage through generations. Traditionally, women learned the art of embroidering from their mothers and grandmothers. Techniques and patterns were not documented but transmitted by word of mouth. I am reminded of prized family recipes held by matriarchs who selectively pass them to successors within the bloodline.

A girl began doing needle-work at a young age and, when ready, was tasked with making *phulkari* to be included in her dowry. I conjured an image of a grandmother stitching a fabric of love, spinning dreams of her grand-daughter's wedded future. The end result, an exquisite *phulkari* carefully folded and stowed in a scented trousseau. Considered part of a woman's material wealth, *phulkari* traveled with a bride to her new home after marriage.

At the exhibit, a didactic panel suggested the word *phulkari* was derived from the love story of Heer and Ranjha, a tale by the Punjabi eighteenth century poet Waris Shah. I read the fable about Heer, the lovely village girl from a wealthy family, and Ranjha, a poor farm boy who played the flute. They fell in love with each other, but a jealous uncle poisoned Heer's food on her wedding day. Tragically, Ranjha arrived just as Heer takes her last breath. Heartbroken, Ranjha ate the laced food to die by Heer's side. The verse remains at the heart of Punjabi folklore.

The playfulness, tenderness and enlivened colors found in *phulkari* do not take away from the elegance or legacies that live in the cloth. The textiles embody a spirit upholding an understanding that each intimately crafted garment was intended for family membership.

Once a prominent part of Punjab heritage, pre-Partition *phulkari* is currently confined to museums and private collections, valuable relics of the past. Pieces were abandoned during the mutual flight across new borders and many were destroyed in the wreckage. Poverty was a significant factor forcing women to sell their treasured textiles for what they believed was a fair price.

The pieces are ornate and sought after, but past restraints have made it impossible to gain an understanding of the woman who stitched indelible stories to raw cloth. In a sense, *phulkari* is a thread-bound narrative bringing memoir to life. In their collective making, the textiles offer an important truth. Working knee to knee, this diverse group of women exemplified that exchanges of ideas render cultural betterment.

A tattoo can serve as a permanent reminder. A star registry allows the name of an individual to dwell in the sky for generations to come. Several of my compositions function as tangible memory being passed to my children. Be it body art, a select crystal winking in the sky, or unearthed shapes from a second-hand book, all safeguard significant moments.

*Phulkari* is a timepiece entrusting stories that could have been lost in the mist of time. Like other archives, it provides a vantage point for looking back, so we can better understand where we are and what lies up ahead. Each glossy keepsake holds an account of life, a glowing mystery reminiscent of the clever women who made them.





in the making  
Kasey Rae

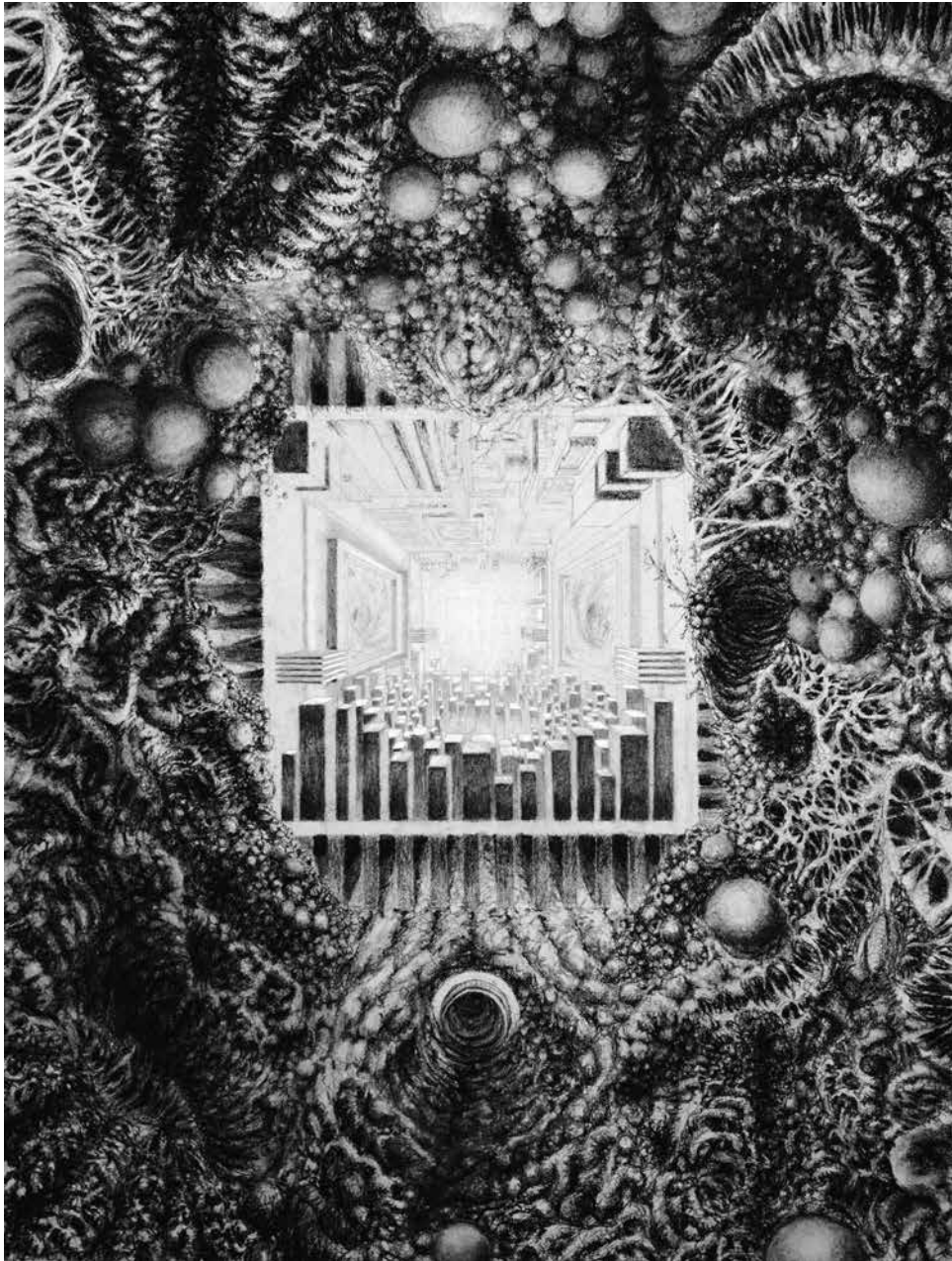
# *in waiting for godot* nothing happens

Susan Dashiell

His voice is soft, so I let him perch on the porch banister with one leg up, the other dangling, to talk to me about absurdism. *in waiting for godot* *nothing happens*. A carved-out fruit on my lap, passion there too, but I just finish my meal and watch his profile— *and there's a part with a man at the end of a rope*— one earring kissing his collarbone, lips gentle pink, nose like baby steps. It's about to rain. I am not afraid of thunder, but he is jittery as a rabbit. I get up and wrap my arms around his middle from behind, permission given quickly as he puts his book to the side and leans back, the two of us forming a block of bone. I kiss his collarbone, the earring gracing my cheek, a tickle. I see in you dancing figures, fluidity in a body, bending joints and nimble fingers, those fingers pressing “Y-E-S” in sign language against my neck and my name against my forearm as we embrace in a frozen moment, *they call each other pet names*.







drawing on the other side: the tinkering  
William Fillmore

# this one's for the bookworms

Jerome Berglund

wriggle waggle  
oh hello there  
fancy bumping  
into you  
round the core  
of this here apple  
being a fellow  
nibbler of things  
pulpy and juicy  
I wonder if you  
can relate  
to something  
they say a good  
writer is  
a good reader  
without exception  
whether you had a hand  
in seeding this  
fine piece of produce  
we find ourselves  
inhabiting  
or were kind enough  
to crawl in after  
to join us  
gaily noshing away at it  
however you came  
to get here  
here you without question be  
apples of this vintage  
are rare and prized things  
these days  
and visitors  
to their centers  
make for a select  
I dare say laudable  
few  
explorers of lost cities  
connoisseurs of a fruit  
all but forbidden  
in our age of image  
our year of sound bites  
our day of Muzak  
and I'm all for

a cool snifter if juice  
a bowl of sauce with my chop  
a windowsill beckoning the hobo  
in us all with forbidden pie  
but I submit to you  
nevertheless that nothing  
I mean it  
not a solitary derivation  
beats that good old fashioned unadulterated Macintosh itself  
ripening on the vine  
in a basket from an orchard  
these things  
keep doctors away  
if you can squeeze one in  
on the daily  
unsurprisingly I digress  
bad little bookworm  
dirty thing  
but what I wanted to ask you about  
is a certain *feeling*...  
most will never experience it  
and I envy them that  
and nothing else  
in this regard  
***but have you ever  
read every single book  
by an author?***  
it takes a ravenous  
little creeper  
to consume leaves  
with such gluttonous  
abandon  
true tenacity  
and stick-to-itiveness  
are surely requisite  
particularly if you are  
a very slow eater like  
myself  
but you're here  
so I guessed you *might*  
share my prodigious  
appetite  
to wit  
I wanted to ask you  
when you get to that  
ultimate work



the last piece of food  
on your plate  
do you find yourself  
slowing invariably down  
losing steam  
stomach in rebellion  
almost  
unable to finish  
chewing gratuitously  
having difficulty swallowing  
needing to get up constantly  
to stretch your legs  
poking at it like an  
unruly toddler  
stirring contents around  
indolently  
if your parents were nearby  
would they *order* you  
to clean your plate  
spur you onward towards  
doing so  
must you mash it into  
finest mush  
wash it with liberal gulps of milk  
or water to force it down  
***do these things happen to you?***  
because they always seem  
to afflict me  
like the final shuffle  
to a dance routine  
that crescendo out  
at the end of a musical number  
*dénouement* after an arc  
climaxes  
the refractory period  
after a thorough love-making session  
when your whole body  
seizes up  
after you first slow down  
following completion  
of a marathon  
it's a devastating feeling

I guess the average slug  
 avoider of these fruity parts  
 would most familiarly  
 relate it to that impression of loss  
 they get after binge watching a wrapped series  
 concluding a lengthy anime  
 whose characters they considered  
 close personal friends for years  
 the sense of bereavement  
 can be unexpectedly profound  
 so they understand  
 if their preference and taste differs  
 the gist  
 is identical  
 silly as that sounds  
 no greatly dissimilar  
 from knowing you'll never  
 meet with another Kafka opus  
 again  
 the faithful adherent  
 can only grieve  
 at realizing the sudden  
 devastating absence  
 a dearth  
 of possibility

**the worm says**, maybe they'll stumble  
 upon a lost manuscript  
 in some forgotten desk drawer  
 a chest in an attic somewhere  
 a safe deposit box

**the worm cries**, blast and damn and tarnation  
 pours itself a tall stiff drink

**the worm crawls** over to Reddit, Wikipedia, Amazon  
 to see if there are any b-side minutia  
 published letters, travelogues  
 they may have missed  
 film adaptations  
 tv mini series  
 any place  
 in the works

**the worm rereads** favorite passages over again  
gazed longingly at them on their shelf  
dusts each lovingly  
lends or gifts copies to friends and family  
is struck at random  
by favorite scenes whilst crawling about  
their day  
and feels a twinge of pain  
each time

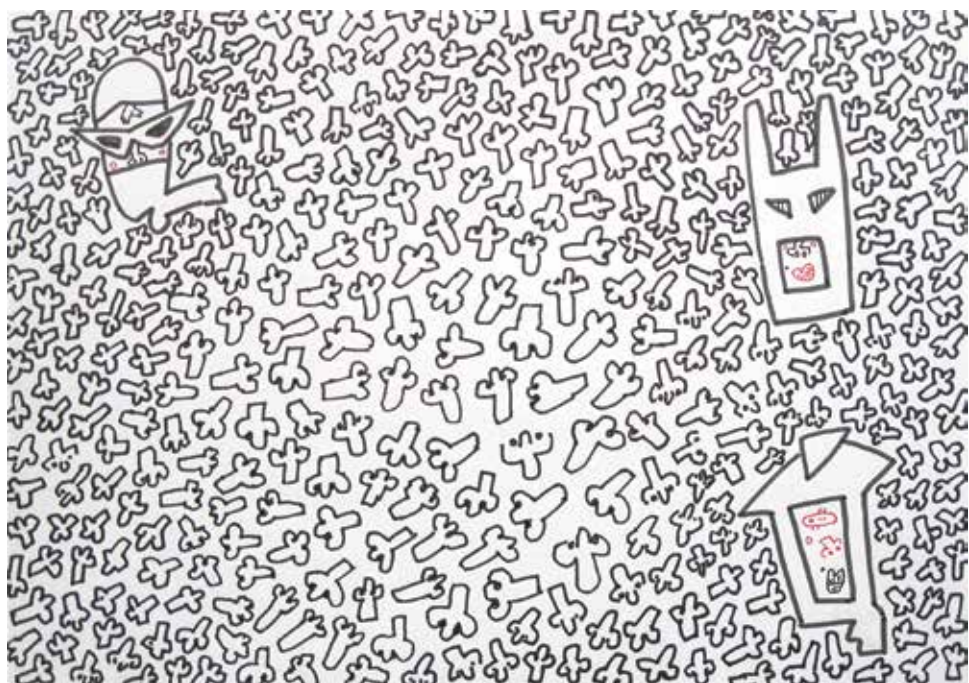
**the worm carves** out a spot on its *ofrenda*  
in remembrance  
of the joys they shared  
and inches off  
to find another completely impossible  
stack of masterpieces to gobble

maybe this is all balderdash  
you *haven't* ever been so cursed  
to know what in the blazes  
this worm is going on about  
if that's the case  
*you are missing out my friend*  
if you like this apple  
we're sharing  
there are whole trees of 'em  
by the best growers who ever lived  
out there  
not to tempt you  
with forbidden fruits  
snakily  
but sseriously  
have a taste  
you have no idea  
what you're missssing  
blissful ignorance  
being naked and defenseless  
decidedly overrated  
in this one  
worm's opinion  
but judge for yourself

I'm lollygagging you see  
deferring  
not wanting to face  
the final decisive pages  
of *Seymour: an Introduction*  
damn it all to hell  
I must though  
mustn't I?  
was raised to  
always make the  
clean plate club  
swallow every last morsel  
with deep respect  
and appreciation  
well, wish me luck  
compatriot  
and pity a fool  
who bit off  
more than he could chew  
eyes were more  
ambitious than stomach  
who's going to  
have a riotous bellyache  
in the morning  
a hangover  
for a week  
will do this all over again  
the moment it lets up

bobbing for apples  
does make life worth living  
and for us solitary worms  
*some darn thing has to*  
is pretty essential  
and appreciated  
well, I'll quit with my stalling  
hope you enjoyed the fare  
would be enchanted  
to bump into you  
in this selfsame humble apple  
again sometime  
ta-ta and toodle loo  
*waggle wriggle*





foolish drawing  
Kiyomitsu Saito

# dating silky maxwell

T.J. Butler

Summer.

Winston's final song echoes inside Ella's head. She can only remember the chorus, "I'm every woman, it's all in me..." She allows the words to play on a loop, savoring the wisps of his performance. The door clicks closed behind her and she pauses in the foyer, calling out, "Perkins." She separates the syllables, drawing out the *r* and the *inn*. She hears his feet on the hardwood floor, jumping off the bed and running to greet her before she sees him. "Good boy," she says, crouching to stroke the large, black and white cat who is purring and rubbing his body against her boots. She places her purse and keys on the floor and runs both hands along his back. "I'm every woman, you're a black cat," she sings, changing the lyrics to the song she cannot get out of her head. He looks up at her and she continues to pet him. He meows once and walks into the kitchen with his tail held high. "You had your dinner before I left and it's too early for breakfast," she calls to his back.

She stands, picks up her purse and keys, and sets them on the slim, polished dark wood table near the door. She walks through the living room, an expanse of dove gray walls with dark wood furniture and red accents, and into her bedroom. Twin framed Diane Arbus photos above the couch, a shirtless young man in suspenders with a crooked smile, and a woman in a house dress shielding her eyes from the sun, look down on her as she passes. Once in the bedroom, she sits on the black and gray abstract patterned comforter and begins removing her fire engine red patent leather boots. They're the same shade as the short, bobbed wig she removes and places on a white, Styrofoam wig head on her dresser. Her dress lands on the floor and she rakes her fingernails through her shoulder-length brown hair, shaking off the sensation of her scalp being constricted beneath a wig for many hours. Her arms slip into a fluffy, pale green robe, a gift from a fan. Perkins is meowing and she follows the sound into the kitchen. It is too early for breakfast, but it is not too early for the salmon treats he loves. She shakes three from the container and lets him eat them from her palm.

She begins to prepare a mug of chamomile tea and notices she is still humming Winston's song. She does not mind the earworm. She could be halfway to falling for him. It is too soon to know, but it is not too soon to savor accompanying him when he performs. She knows his secret is performing in drag. He knows her secret is Silky Maxwell. Everything else, she's beginning to believe after three dates, will fall into place. His dress, though, she thinks, wrinkling her nose at the mauve taffeta. "You're the best mother of the bride that DC drag has ever seen," she'd said to him while they were getting ready at his townhouse.

"And you're the best at not using this outfit to get more likes or followers. Are you even allowed to go out without posting it?" he responded, tugging at the hem of her short, black, vintage slip, worn as a dress. They'd both laughed and turned back to the mirror. He glanced at his watch and commented on the time. He didn't go on until after 10:00 pm, and there was no reason to arrive at the bar before 9:00 pm.

How does it look, she wonders, to see her and Winston together? At first glance, beneath the streetlights in the summer darkness, they could be a prim mother and a rebellious daughter.

However, mothers rarely take their daughters to Dupont Circle at night, a neighborhood full of gay bars, nightclubs, late-night restaurants, and a thriving drag scene.

She brings her tea into the living room. Perkins jumps on the couch and she sits next to him. He nestles closer to her and she can feel the warmth of his body on her thigh. The tea is too hot to sip. She sets it on a coaster on the coffee table, a low expanse of polished, ebony wood that compliments the table in the foyer. Her mind wanders from Winston's dress to the first time he invited her to his townhouse to get ready to go out.

"This is Deirdre's closet if you can call it that." His fingers curled into air quotes at the word closet. He led her into a spare bedroom. Two steps in, she froze. Winston's drag persona, Deirdre, was not the stunning, theatrical Glamazon she imagined on their first date when he told her he performed in drag.

Shelves lined one wall of the room. One shelf was filled with wigs in shades of dirty blond, auburn, and middling, average brown. They were mostly curly and shoulder-length or shorter, reminiscent of a cafeteria lunch lady. Had Winston brought her to his grandmother's house? Her stomach began to tighten.

Another shelf was full of sensible shoes in muted shades of brown and navy, white sandals with Velcro straps, and one pair of black pumps with chunky heels. Sturdy, utilitarian leather handbags with thick straps filled the final shelf. "Do you impersonate Mrs. Doubtfire?" She was incredulous at the display, comparing it to an old Robin Williams movie in which a man poses as a dowdy housekeeper.

He laughed. "I'm sorry about the surprise. I know what people think when they hear the words drag queen."

Her hands were on her hips and her brow was furrowed in indignation. She flashed back to her initial excitement at meeting Winson, another person with an enormous secret he could not share. She'd imagined them as co-conspirators, but her hopeful expectation now felt like a huge weight. This wasn't the wardrobe of someone who would be a close companion. "Surprise is right. What's your deal, Winston?"

"Everyone does glamour, but nobody does real. Look at me. I have a five o'clock shadow at 4:30. I'm tall and lanky, and my hands and feet are huge." He held his hands toward her. His fingers were long, and his knuckles were prominent and hairy. She looked from his hands to his face. His jawline, which she'd found handsome on their first date, was just that; handsome, masculine, and pronounced. There was nothing soft or feminine about him. "I'm most comfortable as a version of myself in a dress. Deirdre's a bit of a parody." He motioned to the open closet door. Ella took in a row of dresses in muted colors. He stepped toward the closet and pulled out a floral printed dress with a ruffle at the neck. He held it against himself with pride. The dress fell to below his knees. "As a woman, this is who I'd be in twenty years." Ella didn't speak. She looked from the dress to the shelves, and back to him. They were silent for a moment as he hung the dress next to a black dress with sheer, lace sleeves. "Are you okay?"

"I'm sorry, I'm just surprised at your look. I thought we had something."

“We do. Do you know what would happen at work if anyone saw me? It doesn’t matter whether I’m dressed like a Vegas showgirl or wearing a polyester pants suit. I’d be screwed either way. I know you understand.”

She relaxed. Winston was right. He’s accepted her, and she must accept him in kind. Drag is drag, no matter how silly he must look on stage. “I’m going to be a little overdressed tonight. I was thinking of costumes when I packed.” She brought a short, hot pink wig and three of Silky’s outfits.

“You’re going to upstage Starla Cranberry, and that rarely happens. I’m wearing black and white tonight. Do you have something that matches?”

She smiled. The pink wig would keep her from being recognized. It was thrilling to think of going out partially dressed as Silky, while still being known as Ella. She looked at Winston. Something softened inside her. He was the first person who accepted her as both Ella and Silky. “Absolutely,” she said.

There are so many reasons to like him, she thinks, taking a sip of her tea. It is still hot but manageable. She works a few hours a week in a small, independent bookstore for the W2 and the sense of normalcy going to work affords her. Her hair is brown, a shade her grandfather called shit brindle. It’s fine and limp, and won’t hold a curl. Her brows are pale and thin, and her eyes are a washed-out blue. Yet, she’s a controversial influencer with half a million social media followers, but only one real friend. Fully made up, Silky Maxwell is everything Ella learned was wrong, growing up as the only child of two parents immersed in dinner parties, Miss Manners, and keeping up with the Joneses. The personality she’s created would devastate them. Her father is the principal of the city’s exclusive, private high school where government officials, diplomats, and local celebrities send their children. He’d be forced to explain her lifestyle to the board if she were discovered, and her mother would be humiliated in the scandal. She loathes to consider the consequences. Winston has a prominent job on The Hill in the buttoned-up world of Washington, and a penchant for lip-synching in drag bars. He’s the first person she’s met with as much at stake if their secrets were revealed.

She sighs with the wonder of it all, considering how a first date and a daring confession on his part, “What do you think of men in drag?” transformed into her sharing Silky Maxwell with a stranger. They closed down the bar that night. The words tumbled out between them, and she told him about the photoshoots and sponsors, the videos, and the fans.

She laid herself bare between sips of wine, even mentioning that Silky Maxwell was a combination of the name of her first pet and her mother’s maiden name. “How did you get started?” he asked, leaning back in his chair, awaiting a salacious adventure. “Mine probably came from hiding in my mother’s closet when I was in preschool.”

“Years ago, a girlfriend asked me to do a photoshoot for a contest she wanted to enter.”

He laughed. “And you were discovered? That’s classic.”

“Kind of. You know that old pinup queen from the fifties, Bettie Page?” He nodded, and she continued. “Turns out, I’m a dead ringer for her if I put on a corset and a black wig with bangs.



Who knew? Anyway, my friend's photo won the contest and that led to another photoshoot. They asked me to tag the makeup brand on social media, and I couldn't believe how much they paid me. I was working full time at the bookstore but I was pretty broke back then so it seemed like a ton of money. Today, I wouldn't get out of bed for that amount." She laughs, and Winston chuckles. She takes a sip of wine and continues. "Everyone's heard of influencers, but I didn't realize it was happening to me until I was making more money from social media than from my full-time job. Fast forward, and here I am."

Perkins has fallen asleep beside her on her robe. His purring is a low, steady rumble. She strokes his fur, not wanting to get up and wake him.

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"I know he's not gay, but I've never run into such a gentleman before." Ella sighs. She closes her eyes as Cassie, the makeup artist and her only friend, begins brushing shimmery gray eyeshadow onto her lids.

"Girl, I know you've heard the phrase, 'He's just not that into you,' and you know what I think?"

"Stop it, Cassie," Ella chides without opening her eyes. "We've been out like seven times. I know he's into me. You know how you can just tell that about someone?" Cassie utters something in the affirmative, but it's laced with sarcasm. "I never thought I'd run into the frumpiest queen in DC. Maybe he's also the nicest."

"Nice is one thing, but how long do you think it's normal to go before you have your first kiss? Okay, open."

Ella opens her eyes. She blinks into the brightness of the lighted mirror and examines her makeup. "We always go out made up. Do you think either of us wants to smudge our lipstick by kissing?"

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Ella pulls the pie from the oven. The lattice crust is uneven, so thin in spots that the blueberry filling covers some of the lattice sections entirely, leaving dark, uneven blobs instead of neat squares. This is her first attempt at lattice crust. She wishes she'd practiced weaving the strips over, under, over, under until they were perfectly aligned before putting the pie in the oven. Instead, she straightened them with her fingers. Three dough strips tore while she was weaving them, but she pressed them together and continued to weave until they covered the pie's surface.

She snaps a photo of the pie, then taps, adjusts, and scrolls through the photo editing filters until the pie's colors are warm and rich. She uploads it and adds her signature hashtags, then a few she's never used; #bakingislife, #realness, and #blueberrybabe. She takes a few bites of the pie, then places it beneath a heavy glass dome on her kitchen island. She loves baking, but she has never revealed this to her fans as Silky. It is exciting to share a small part of herself as Ella, even if it is only one photo. Everything about Silky is contrived to feed her followers, but this pie is a real thing.

Her phone begins to chime as she's finishing the dishes. She scrolls through the comments. Her fans are usually kind and she has learned to ignore mean-spirited comments that come with her influencer status. However, negative comments have always been about something fake. Today, they are about Ella.

"OMG what happened? Poor pie."

"Women belong in the kitchen but you don't."

"Hope it tastes better than it looks."

She sets the phone down. It continues to chime. She presses and holds the button on the side until it is silent.

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Ella grasps Winston's hand. It is after last call, and people are streaming out of the bar. "Your last song was excellent. I mean, I know the song, but I've never thought about it that way."

Winston sings the chorus in an off-key baritone, "Man, I feel like a woman..." The air is warm and muggy. The bars along the street are emptying, and the sidewalks are filling.

"The crowd in there was crazy tonight." She takes his hand in hers and squeezes. He squeezes back, and then he pulls his hand from her grasp. They reach a corner and wait for the light to change. "Do you want to come back to my place?"

His lips form into a weak smile in response. His skin has a sallow cast in the streetlight's orange glow, and his lipstick is wearing off. She presses her lips together, imagining that her own has also worn off. They've always parted company after his performances, and Cassie's words ring inside her head.

"I'm going to head home," he responds.

"Alone?" She looks up at him through her thick, false lashes. She imagines facing the camera, an invitation to her fans, and now, to him.

"I think you're great, really great."

Her expression drops, and her shoulders sink. "But?"

"I'm sorry if I led you on. I love hanging out with you—"

"But what? We've been going out for almost two months."

"This isn't dating. This is just two performers going out in costume. I don't think I gave you any other signals." He clears his throat. "This influencer thing you do is distasteful," he says.

"Distasteful?" she spits in disbelief. Her hands fly to her hips. She has not judged him for dressing like a spinster aunt. In fact, she's embraced it. "What's distasteful about me?"

“Taking most of your clothes off to get followers and then pushing brands you don’t believe in.” He plucks the long strand of pearls away from his padded chest and holds them in his fingertips for emphasis. “Deirdre’s a part of me but you’re just in this for the money. It’s fine for us to dress up and stay out late at night, but I have a whole life away from this.” He lets the strand fall to his chest. “You don’t.”

She looks at him in disbelief. His wavy, auburn wig is frizzy, and the part is off-center. “What are we?” It’s one thing for him to hold an opinion of her job, but it’s another thing to judge her as Ella for it.

“Nothing, Ella. Just friends.”

She doesn’t speak. The light has changed. People pass them on both sides, but neither of them moves. Her eyes fill with tears, and her body feels heavy. She knows not everyone embraces Silky Maxwell, but maintaining the separation has never been difficult. She sees the occasional negative comment about Silky on pop culture websites, but they haven’t been directed toward Ella. She shared her real personality with him. He’s blurred the line, calling her out for embodying a fictitious character whose principles he does not agree with.

If their outings weren’t dates, he was never a kindred spirit. Instead, Deirdre and Silky might as well have been dating. The idea of meeting her counterpart on a first date now seems ridiculous. She looks down at the sidewalk. A tear falls from her eye onto the toe of her red patent leather platform boot.

He steps toward her with arms outstretched. She doesn’t want him to hug her. Who is he, anyway? He is a man dressed in a costume, calling her out for her own costume. She wants to yell at him that Silky Maxwell and Deirdre are not even real. How can he judge her for something she made up when he’s done the same thing? She steps away from him, shaking her head. “You’re right, Winston. We’re nothing.” The light has changed to green in the opposite direction of her condo, but she crosses the street anyway. She wipes the tears from her cheek with the back of her hand. She doesn’t look over her shoulder when she reaches the other side of the street. Winston doesn’t want her, but there is a whole world on her screen who does.

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Fall.

“My apple pie won a prize. I love silent movies. I know the words to most yacht rock songs. Touching animal rescue videos make me choke up.”

She deletes the last sentence. She scrolls to the top of the page and considers her alias for the fifth time in an hour. Ella Just Ella. It is difficult not to include Silky in this profile and call herself something like DangerElla13. She scrolls to the bottom of the screen and stares at the Upload Photos button. She has thousands of photos to choose from, and none at all. Her fingernails tap erratically on her desk. There is no way to complete her profile without uploading at least one photo.

It’s against her instinct to hold the phone at arm’s length and snap selfies without makeup, without at least looking in the mirror first. It’s against her instinct to take a picture of herself

in her bedroom's full-length mirror in yoga pants and the frayed college tee-shirt she's had for years. It's also against her instinct to upload the photos to the app and tap the Complete Profile button. She does these things anyway, one after the other until there's no going back from it. What you see is what you get, she thinks. Her hands begin to shake, but it isn't with nervousness. Instead, it's exhilaration. She's never been on a dating site. A week ago, it would have been unthinkable to post photos like this publicly. The prize-winning apple pie changed everything.

She'd entered her special occasion apple pie in the farmer's market's annual end of season bake-off last weekend. She dropped off the pie, filled out a contact card, and forgot about it. The pie was always a crowd-pleaser, but she assumed she was competing against professionals.

Three days ago, she received a cheery email informing her that she was the winner. A wave of joy bloomed in her chest. She read the email twice. She called Cassie, eager to share the news with a real person. Cassie didn't answer, so she left a message. It began with, "I know this sounds silly, but..."

Cassie responded a moment later. Her words held more weight than a text message had the right to carry. "Can't talk now. Don't post that! Silky Maxwell doesn't bake pies."

Ella sank to the couch. Silky Maxwell was a happy accident of good genes, not a real person. Her pie won, but she had no one to tell. However, if she put on a new bra, tagged the designer, and shared it with her fans, the photos would be liked, commented on, and reposted many times over. Sometimes it felt like she was little more than a vehicle for Silky Maxwell. This rarely bothered her, but now, she couldn't stop thinking about it. She'd won a prize, but she couldn't own the accolades.

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The dating app chimes. A man's photo appears on her screen beside his message, "Tell me you prefer Buster Keaton to Charlie Chaplin, and we're a match." Keaton is one of her favorite silent film actors. She clicks the photo and scrolls through his profile. He's a big guy, maybe 6'5". His face is wide and fleshy. His neck is broad, and his shoulders fill the frame. He outweighs her by far more than one hundred pounds. In another picture, he stands behind a man who appears dwarfed by his girth.

It strikes her, not being able to share the news of her pie, that she's cultivated a thing of great shallowness she cannot escape from. Silky Maxwell doesn't bake pies. Instead, Silky is a painted thing of beauty, a fantasy form whose only purpose is to put on lingerie and makeup and endorse products. This man reached out to her and wasn't put off by her unflattering photos. She won't be shallow and allow herself to be put off by his photos, either. They share an affinity for silent films. Maybe there are more mutual interests to discover.

She types, "Keaton did all his own stunts, mostly in one take. He beats Chaplin every time." They trade messages until late into the evening. Silky Maxwell doesn't come up; Silky has nothing to do with one-hundred-year-old movies, or pies, or the fact that they both know the words to every song on Paul Simon's Graceland album. She should have guessed that from his alias, "Call Me Hal."

On the second night, Hal tells her “Three Ages” was the first silent movie he ever saw. She tells him she laughed in that *Rin Tin Tin* movie when the condor snatched the baby. He tells her he did, too. Neither can remember the movie’s title. He admits to laughing during the dramatic parts of *Nosferatu*. She smiles, and types that she also laughed. They stay up late again. She learns he’s a cameraman for one of the local morning shows when he says he has to be up for work in three hours.

“Ella Just Ella, so glad I reached out yesterday.”

“I am, too. Send me your top three films tomorrow.”

“Will do. Signing off. Have a great night.”

She thinks of him the following day and wonders what films he will send.

On the third night, he sends the list. She responds with one of her own. They learn that they were both bullied in junior high. He tells her he had a sister who died before he was born. She tells him she always wanted a sibling but had an imaginary friend instead. She lies in bed, thinking of him that night.

On the fourth night, she admits she felt weird in high school because her parents were still married and loved each other. She learns his parents divorced when he was three. His mother remarried a kind man who was an excellent father. She taps, “I thought about you today.”

“Good or bad?”

“Good. I’m still here.” She pauses, cursing herself. She’s thought about Hal every day. They share so many interests, and he’s easy to talk to. This feels real, not last summer’s manufactured facade of two performers going out in costume.

Hal’s response appears. “Would you like to meet for dinner? I’ll come out your way.”

“OMG I’m so glad you finally asked.” She feels like she’s known him for years, and it’s exciting to think of meeting him in person.

He responds, “I wanted to ask the day you said you laughed at the condor snatching the baby. Do you have a favorite spot for dinner?”

She knows people at a few chic restaurants and lounges, but none of them are right for her first date with Hal. She wants him to see a part of her she would never share with her fans. “Are you okay with a hole in the wall?”

“I’m up for anything.”

Her chest flutters again. She scrolls through his profile and studies his photos. She can see the sincerity in his eyes. His face is large and the skin beneath his chin is loose, but he isn’t unattractive. He’s also kind and funny. She can’t wait to meet him.

Ella arrives at Los Guapos early. The restaurant is a dingy, forgettable storefront in a neighborhood where real estate is affordable, and gentrification is years away. It's her favorite restaurant to go with Cassie after shoots, and the food is authentic. She leans against the brick facade and scrolls through Hal's profile as she's done dozens of times. She alternates nervousness with excitement and wonders what his first words to her will be. Silent movies don't have quotes fans can swap. She knows he's tall, and wonders if she will even come up to his shoulder. She's five foot one on a good day. Should she make a joke about her height? How cliché, she thinks. Should they shake hands when he arrives? Is that too formal for people with this kind of connection? She purses her lips, going over their conversations for an inside joke he'll recognize. Her stomach is in a knot with nerves. It's been years since she related to someone on this level independently of Silky Maxwell. She likes Hal, and she wants him to like her.

"Ella just Ella..."

She turns toward the deep voice behind her. Hal is standing close to her on the sidewalk, and she takes a step backward. He towers over her petite, slender frame. She knew he was a big guy, but she isn't prepared for this. More perplexing is that he does not look like his photos, which must be more than a decade old. Her stomach drops. In her excitement to get to know someone without wearing makeup or being Silky Maxwell, they neglected to compare ages. She pegged him for late-thirties and didn't mind a ten-year age gap. She remembers checking the box for men as old as their forties on a whim, but even forty-nine would be a stretch for Hal. He holds a broad hand toward her, smiling. "I'm so glad to finally meet you, Ella. Hal Mulvaney, at your service."

She smiles at him and takes his hand, remembering her manners and their connection. "So nice to finally meet you, Hal." Her hand disappears into his warm grasp. She's silent for a moment as he pumps her hand up and down. She looks at the restaurant's dingy storefront as though seeing it for the first time. "I know how this place looks, but you can't get food like this anywhere else." She motions toward the restaurant. A couple exits. Mariachi music wafts through the open door. Hal releases her hand and steps to catch the door before it closes.

"After you," he says, looking into her eyes and smiling. She returns the smile and turns away to enter the restaurant. The scent of chili powder and grilled meat envelops them. The cozy, dark wood and tile interior have always made her feel welcome, but her face drops as she takes it in with Hal behind her. The available tables are small and intimate, and Hal is too large for a table that only seats two.

She turns back to him. "We don't have to eat here."

"Are you kidding? It smells delicious. Table for two, please." He looks over her head at the host who has approached them. She turns toward the host and smiles with her mouth closed, but the host is not looking at her. He takes two menus from a stack and looks over her head at Hal. "Follow me."

The host leads them through a doorway with "La Fiesta" painted over the door frame in scrolling, red letters. They're seated at a spacious table for four in a room full of empty tables.

A red, white, and green piñata dangles from the ceiling in one corner, and three giant, ornate burgundy sombreros with gold beaded trim hang on the walls. Ella is embarrassed for suggesting this restaurant. “I’m sorry, I—”

“I know what you’re thinking, but look around. We’ve got a private room to ourselves. You don’t get that every day.” Hal’s smile is genuine, however, it accentuates the lines on his face. Ella returns the smile. He is making the best of sitting in a back room, she thinks, and I’ll do the same.

“So Chaplin versus Keaton, what are the odds you’d meet someone on an app who actually has an opinion?”

“I know,” Hal responds with a laugh. “I used to go to this old theater in Maryland that had a silent film series and an original Wurlitzer. I haven’t been since my schedule changed at work.”

Ella grins, remembering the long evenings they spent chatting. She feels connected to him once again. “The Weinberg Center in Frederick. Last year was the first year I didn’t get season tickets.”

“What a small world. We should go.”

The waitress appears at their table before Ella can answer. They both order margaritas. Hal glances at his menu. “What’s good here?”

“I always get the tropical platter. I don’t think I’ve ever ordered anything else.” He nods and bows his head into the menu. She holds hers as though studying it, but considers him instead.

His form fills most of his side of the table. His hair, a dark brown in his photos, is all salt and pepper. His forehead is etched with lines, and there are two deep creases between his untamed brows. Marionette lines run from his nose to the corners of his mouth, then extend toward his chin. His gray stubble implies that he did not shave, rather than indicating that he is cultivating a beard. She cannot imagine cradling his doughy, middle-aged face in her palms and pressing her lips to his. She clenches her jaw. Meeting Hal, an earnest and affable person she thought she’d love to get to know, was not supposed to go like this. She thinks of the unflattering photos she used in her profile. The word shallow resonates inside her head, but it is not directed toward the fans who wouldn’t accept her real self or her blueberry pie. Her temples begin to ache from clenching her teeth. The word *shallow* is directed toward herself.

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“Can you please let me out here?” She is in the back of an SUV rideshare, stopped at a light twelve blocks from home.

The driver turns around to look at her. “I can’t do a refund. It’s gonna charge your card the whole amount.”

“That’s fine. I just need to get out.” A walk home in the crisp fall air will help her sort out her feelings about dinner with Hal. She exits the SUV and steps between two parked cars to the sidewalk. She’s in a residential area, away from the noise of evening traffic.

She repeated the word shallow to herself like a mantra when her mouth was full at dinner. She’d felt a connection with Hal and the difference in their sizes was easy to overlook. It seemed almost irrelevant in light of the way he made her feel. Seeing him in person was a shock, not at all how he presented himself on the app. Yet, she’d clung to their connection through dinner, beating the word shallow into her brain. Her fans are shallow. They’d never have built her into who she is today if she’d tried to do it as Ella. She doesn’t want to be that way with Hal. She knows how much it hurts to think she wouldn’t be accepted unless she was in costume. It’s unthinkable that she’d be that narrow-minded with someone else, especially a kind, sincere man like Hal.

Sincere. She feels the word in her stomach like a blow. What would be sincere about putting Silky’s photos on the app, and showing up nearly unrecognizable as Ella in jeans and limp, shit brindle hair? Yet, Hal has done this to her with dated photos that he hardly resembles.

Everyone’s taught it’s the inside that counts. It is easy to connect appearance to attraction, but she blurred the line for Hal. Does her reaction to his appearance make her heartless? Again, the word shallow comes to mind. No, she decides. She was not put off by his size; the bond she believed would deepen with time was worth more to her than his physique. However, in hiding his age, there is no way to separate his photos from an act of dishonesty. Being Silky Maxwell is enough of a fabrication to maintain in her life. She doesn’t want to consider what else he’s deceived her with, or think about what will come in the future if she fell for him and it was too late.

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The app pings and she picks up her phone. “Thank you again for last night. You’re one in a million.”

“I had a nice time meeting you.” She isn’t sure what else to say. Her fingernails tap against her thigh. This would be the right time to mention going to a silent movie in Frederick if things had gone differently. It would also be the right time to bring up his photos. However, she’s not angry. She has plenty of reasons for being Silky, and she is resigned to let him have his reasons for the photos.

“Are you free this weekend? Do you like sushi?”

She pauses. She won’t go out with him again. “I don’t think...” She deletes the words. Her fingernails tap the back of her phone. She’s always shied away from confrontation. “I’ve got a lot of stuff coming up with work...” She deletes the words. The connection she felt has been severed, and it’s painful to think of what could have been. She drops the phone into her lap. She doesn’t have a good response. She taps, “You’re a great guy, but I’m just looking for friends right now.” This isn’t true, but it’s easy to say. Her finger hesitates, hovering over the small, green arrow to the right of her words. She exhales and presses it.

“That’s the damndest thing.”



“What is?”

“I’ve met so many great women, you included. For some reason, everyone I develop a connection with is only looking for friends.”

Her heart melts the way it does when she watches touching animal videos. The man she was attracted to was a great guy, a far better catch than Winston would have been. She questions her reaction. Was it the ultimate in shallow rejections, or were Hal’s photos a fundamental act of deception? She chooses the latter so she can live with herself. She imagines this scene being replayed over and over for him. Her heart wrenches in her chest, thinking of all the women in her position, falling for an internet stranger, then meeting for the first time. None of us can tell the truth, she muses. She knows he wonders why mutual kinship and affinity peter out after the first date, every time.

She types, “It was nice getting to know you, Hal.” Three dots appear a moment later. She closes the app. She rests her finger on it until it can be deleted. She taps, and it disappears from her screen.

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Winter.

The photographer has done little more than nod at her since she arrived for the shoot. It feels too quiet in the studio. “Didn’t you shoot the Luxe Precise campaign last spring?” she calls over.

“Yep,” he responds, clipped and uninterested.

She walks over to him. “How does this look?” She runs her fingers over the fluffy, faux fur trim on her hat. She’s wearing a corset and a pair of thigh-high boots, both trimmed in the same fur. “You’d look better without it,” he answers without looking at her. He’s adjusting the angle of the lights with his back turned.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” She’s put off by his comment. Sometimes, flirting with the photographer helps to channel the suggestive energy her photos are charged with. However, his comment was crude rather than the saucy banter she doesn’t mind.

“I’m sorry,” he says, turning to face her. “You’re gorgeous, and the outfit looks great. I didn’t mean you’d look better if you took it off. I—”

“What exactly did you mean?” She interrupts him. This isn’t the way to begin a photoshoot, regardless of how much the brand is paying her.

“Let’s start over. I’m Dean. We’ve got three hours and four wardrobe changes.”

She’s a professional, and this isn’t the first time she’s worked with someone who’s spoken to her this way. “Got it, Dean. I’m ready when you are.” She reclines on the fur rug, accentuating the impossible curve of the corset. Her fingertips rest on the fur around her cleavage. She parts her lacquered lips. Dean pauses, then presses the shutter. The lights flash. She shifts. He presses the shutter again.

“What was that all about, I’d look better without it?”

“I’m sorry. I know this is your job.”

“It’s not okay to talk to me like that.”

“Okay, Silky Maxwell.” His words are too cavalier for the conversation.

She doesn’t raise her voice, but her tone is impatient. “You know what, Dean?”

“Hey, I’m sorry.” He sets his camera on the table next to his gear bag and turns to face her. “This isn’t going the way it should, and it’s my fault. I’m talking about the way you came in with no makeup and your hair in a ponytail. Every day I see women in makeup and outfits like this.” He motions toward her. “If I’m not shooting them, I’m editing them in Photoshop.” He unscrews the lens from his camera and fits it back into a padded space in the bag.

They’re eye to eye. She’s still wearing the fourth wardrobe change, a black latex tube top as slender as a belt, a matching skirt with broad keyhole cutouts on the hips, and a towering pair of heels. She’s still fully made up and in her signature black wig with bangs. “I don’t see where this is going. What about my ponytail?”

“You and I both know this is a pretty sweet gig, but sometimes it gets to me. This is all made up.” She flashes back to Winston. Even in her annoyance at Dean, she’s glad he understands this is a job, not something distasteful. He continues. “When I edit your photos, I can make you a cup size larger with a few clicks. You’re beautiful, but you’ll never look as good as you will when I’m done editing.”

“Nobody wants to see me in a ponytail, Dean. Where do you think I’d end up if I looked like that all the time?”

“I know. Where do you think I’d be if I didn’t edit my work? It just gets to me sometimes.” He pauses. “My dog died two days ago.”

“I’m so sorry.” Her hand covers her mouth. She doesn’t expect a statement like that.

“I’m having a hard time seeing the point of this right now. I always wanted to be a nature photographer, like in Africa or the rainforest or something. Maybe shoot people’s dogs on the side, but I know that sounds ridiculous. Gigs like this are what pays the bills so here I am. This morning I saw an ad from the county looking for a photographer to shoot portraits of shelter dogs. With Banjo gone...” His voice trails off for a moment, and she does not interrupt him. “I mean, dogs are real, not like all this.” He cocks his chin toward the set and the lights. “Does that make sense? Dogs know you. He was my best friend.”

Ella sighs as a wave of understanding overtakes her. “I get it. That makes sense. This thing I do is as fake as it gets. I’ve had a few things this year that really drove it home for me.”

Dean is quiet. She waits for him to continue, but he doesn't respond.

She breaks the silence. "I know what you mean about looking better without the costume." She pauses. He is wrapping up a cable and fitting it into a slot in his bag. She thinks of feeling shallow after meeting Hal last fall. She's felt fake so many times since she nurtured being an influencer into a career. Dean is the first person she's met in the industry who's expressed disdain about the way they earn their living.

She watches him disassemble the lights. He isn't much taller than her, and they have similar coloring. He wears silver, wire-rim glasses, and it looks like he's skipped a few haircuts. He wears chunky black boots, and his jeans are rolled up to just below the tops of them. She watches him carry a light stand out of the studio. She wants to say something to call him back and draw him into a conversation. He disappears through the door before she thinks of something to say.

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Ella turns onto Pennsylvania Avenue after leaving the shoot. Once she leaves the traffic of Washington, she can be at the beach in three hours. She's made this drive dozens of times and doesn't need her GPS. Pennsylvania Avenue will turn into Route 50, passing through Annapolis before transforming into a long stretch of flat, rural farming country. The muscle memory of driving without traffic lights and congestion has always helped her think. The winter seashore is gray and severe, far from a whimsical summer vacation. She needs a destination like this after meeting Dean. He's given her much to think about. She drives in silence and allows her mind to wander.

Dean countered Winston's hurtful words about what she does for money. He makes a tidy living photographing models and influencers, and then erasing their flaws until they're more perfect than human. It's a job for both of them, and they both understand how it works. He also offset the loneliness that drew her to Hal by recognizing that their world is nothing but fakery, but there are people beneath the wigs and wardrobe. It still hurt to remember Cassie's stinging words that led her to the dating app, "Don't post that! Silky Maxwell doesn't bake pies."

She's right, Ella thinks. But I do.

She glances in the rearview mirror, changes lanes, and merges onto the shoulder. She scrolls through her email until she finds the one with the subject, "Call Sheet." Dean's number and email address are listed above the studio's address. Her heart begins to beat in her chest. She taps her fingernails against the back of her phone, then presses the digits. The voice mail answers after three rings. She fights an impulse to hang up. Instead, she begins speaking at the tone. "Hi Dean, this is Ella. Do you like apple pie?"

\*



# going underground

Jim Ross

In September 1970, Richard Nixon, the 37<sup>th</sup> President of the United States (hereafter called 37), requested 1,000 *more* FBI agents to infiltrate college campuses to identify dissidents.

Oblivious to 37's gyrations, I occupied a 19<sup>th</sup>-century farm-style house intent on forming a commune with a ragtag quartet of strangers who couldn't afford to live alone. We claimed we protested the war and the repressiveness of the traditional nuclear family. Housemates included an Irishman, Paddy, who was on the lam after jumping ship from the British Navy in Montreal, and two new divorcees.

Our forest green, wood-frame house, twelve minutes from the White House, abutted Rock Creek Park in an untrodden section of DC's not-yet-hip Adams Morgan neighborhood. Aquarius House, a white farm-style commune across the street with seven members, whose leader bore a striking resemblance to Charles Manson, required entrants to be born under the sign of Aquarius. Pig Patrol, with five members, in a townhouse two doors up, said its mission was monitoring police brutality. Our alleged commune lacked explicit entrance criteria and mission. The rest of the homes on our block were 1920s-era townhouses occupied by low-income black families. It wasn't unusual for the police to have business on our street.

In mid-September, a housemate announced, "The Free Store is moving into our basement." The *Free Store* hadn't been able to pay its rent because it received few cash donations and its practice of *giving* merchandise away resulted in a negative cash flow. Within hours, a mauve VW bus pulled up. Two women started toting boxes filled with clothing along the house's woody side and lolling them into our dirt-floored, walk-in basement. Its only door had a padlock, but we rarely locked it. After they left, I counted 32 boxes sorted at best by adult/child and male/female. Most weren't even marked. I began haphazardly sorting contents in piles, repacking, and labeling boxes with thick marker.

Because the *Free Store's* traffic had been generated when passersby in the busy Dupont Circle neighborhood dropped in, it wasn't clear how its reincarnation would generate traffic. We lived at the bottom of a dead-end hill. People didn't "pass by" unless exiting or entering a 1,754-acre urban forest. To get the ball rolling, I selected a few casual shirts I could wear substitute teaching and to grad school. I also cherry-picked a Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) uniform I thought would be eye-catching at anti-war demonstrations. Our first sale!

\*\*\*

On other fronts, Timothy Leary escaped from his California jail in September.

"The Mary Tyler Moore Show" premiered.

Ford introduced the Pinto.

\*\*\*

In October, when a family who looked like they just escaped enslavement on a cotton plantation moved into the townhouse next door, we took action. We estimated sizes, and then delivered boxes for mama, papa, boy about seven and girl about five. Mama, nodding, flashed a toothy smile as she ducked inside weighed down with boxes.

In the coming weeks, we noticed that the kids, Lucy and Edgar, wore the same outfits day after day. Lucy wore one dress until it literally fell apart, having changed in smell, color, and fit along the way. It probably didn't help that little Lucy was getting even skinnier. One day, Edgar asked, "You got more clothes, Mister?" I led him into the basement where we selected a few more outfits for everyone.

\*\*\*

In a nationally-televised October speech, 37 proposed a cease-fire-in-place in South Vietnam. Previously, the U.S. demanded withdrawal of North Vietnam's forces from the South, which the North rejected.

In Quebec, the Front de libération du Québec, a separatist group prone to terrorism, precipitated the "October crisis" by kidnapping two high-ranking government officials. Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau introduced the War Measures Act to deal with the FLQ threat. The following day, one of the two government officials was found murdered in the trunk of a car.

*Doonesbury* debuted as a daily cartoon strip. Garry Trudeau, the cartoonist, just graduated from Yale, was a year younger than me. That first day, it poked holes at how colleges use computer-matching to produce less than ideal roommates. Beneath this roof, we threw together this commune without matching and look what we got! By infiltrating most political actions, *Doonesbury* added heft to our protests.

\*\*\*

One chilled November day, I noticed 13 boxes had disappeared from our basement. We hadn't seen any genuine traffic yet. Was it possible somebody stopped by without telling? Still, 13 boxes? Without conferring, a housemate called the police. Later, Edgar cried because the police said I told them Edgar stole the 13 boxes but he told them, "Mister's my friend, he couldna said I did it, and he wouldna snitched to the po-lice either." Edgar and I got past that, I think, but I never quite forgave the police for telling Edgar I said *he* was the thief.

\*\*\*

In November, 37 (aka: Tricky Dick) promised gradual troop withdrawal.

His Vice President, Spiro Agnew, called TV executives "impudent snobs."

\*\*\*

On our living room wall, somebody tacked a primitive-looking poster of a pristine British Columbia forest captioned, "Save yer ass. Escape to Canada." The invitation gave me pause. A

close buddy named Billy—an All-American long distance runner—fled to Canada to evade the draft, dug ditches in Glacier National Park, dropped acid, lost his mind, hitched to El Paso, and ran 20 miles a day across Texas deserts. Along the way, Billy befriended painted turtles, whom he named and carried for company in his backpack. When hunger exceeded filial regard, he roasted and ate the turtles, then found new friends. When Billy's mother and big sister picked him up along a Louisiana highway, thinking he boarded knowingly, he asked, "Are you someone I knew in my childhood?"

Weeks ago, I spent August with Billy, his parents, and his twin sisters at the family home outside New Orleans, a block from the levee. For all Billy's former athletic prowess, now I could keep up with him as we jogged along the levee at sunset. Prone to verbal sparring matches cascading into clawing fist fights, Billy had been in and out of mental hospitals ever since he got home. They said his fragile knitting had unraveled irrevocably. When he defected from life itself, one of the twins confided, "I'm glad he's gone. I hated who or *what* he'd become." I didn't hold any of that against Canada. I held his demise against the war, the lottery, and 37.

In last December's national draft lottery—also known as the *death* lottery—the first since 1942, I lucked out with 351.

\*\*\*

Elvis the Pelvis, puffy-faced, strung out on speed, scribbled a six-page letter to 37 begging for a badge as Agent-at-Large for the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs. The White House received Elvis for a pre-Christmas meet-and-greet. Elvis pledged his support, denounced drugs, and convinced 37 to grant him that narc badge. Elvis reciprocated by giving 37 a Colt .45 pistol with a supply of silver bullets. Ironically, the year before, I was scheduled to interview in DC with the DEA for a narc position. Tripped out in Boston, I no-showed.

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Paul McCarthy filed suit to dissolve The Beatles.

The year ended with 335,000 U.S. military personnel stationed in Vietnam and a body count of 6,173.

\*\*\*

In January 1971, we officially listed our commune as a crash pad, mostly to welcome anti-war protesters. At first, we were lucky to attract even one. It took time for word to get around that we provided comfy mattresses, a safe environment, and strong coffee.

\*\*\*

"All in the Family" debuted in January. Housemate Barbara, who was black, predicted Archie Bunker would set back race relations to the 1950s.

Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird announced that "Vietnamization" was running ahead of schedule so the combat mission would end by summer.

\*\*\*

By February, we had one or more crashers almost nightly. We encouraged them to visit the Free Store. Some obliged. If crashers left behind underpants, socks, or other garments, we washed them, and added them to the Free Store.

We invited Aquarius House, Pig Patrol, and assorted others to our inaugural soiree. We cooked up a storm and 24 “friends of the house” showed up, including three women I knew from Trinity College. Eighteen guests claimed being born under Aquarius. That night those 18 Aquarians re-imagined humanity’s fundamental need for community.

\*\*\*

Carole King released “Tapestry” in February.

UN Secretary U Thant signed a proclamation declaring the spring equinox “Earth Day.”

\*\*\*

In March, the sounds of crasher laughter coming from the living room caused me and my housemates to conduct an experiment. For one week, we expropriated the two queen-sized mattresses in the living room for ourselves and offered our bedrooms to crashers. Housemate Janis and I got into mutual, belly-nipping laughter. I can’t speak to whatever my housemates were doing. Meanwhile, having their own rooms, the crashers tended to make themselves more at home. Women crashers said they felt safer in private rooms. On occasion, we had to clarify that stuff found in our bedrooms wasn’t up for grabs as Free Store merchandise.

Toward the end of March, Barbara moved out to re-marry the man she’d previously divorced. Judy moved in with one-year-old Maya. We’d been talking about getting a pet, but couldn’t agree on cat or dog. A human baby beat out either option.

\*\*\*

The Senate approved lowering the voting age to 18 in March.

Ignoring the recommendation of the U.S. commander general, the President of South Vietnam ordered the withdrawal of its troops from Laos, and suffered heavy casualties.

The jury at a military court martial found Lt. William Calley guilty of the horrific, premeditated murder of 22 civilians, including children, in the My Lai Massacre and sentenced him to life imprisonment.

Doonsbury debuted as a Sunday comic strip.

\*\*\*

In April, I took up with Judy. An ex-boyfriend from England brought her a green bottle of little



white pills. I asked what they were and Judy said, “Heroin in pill form,” laughing me off as she left the room with Maya and the ex. Days later, she skedaddled home to Tennessee to introduce Maya to the folks. While away for three weeks, she handwrote me four sweet-talking letters sent in airmail envelopes. I didn’t write back. Judy missed the big rally.

Two weeks away from the *Vietnam Out Now Rally*, we were getting four to eight crashers nightly. Some overflowed from the living room’s mattresses to the dining room floor. Among non-Veterans, there was lots of talk about defecting. “You won’t see me in Canada. I’m not welcome there,” observed Paddy.

Prior to the rally, during weeklong protests by Vietnam Veterans against the War, the first floor was inundated by eight to twelve crashers a night. Some Veterans had demonstrated at the Capitol Building, renouncing their medals by throwing them over a protective fence. Talking unquietly much of the night, the crashers defied sleep; sometimes, we joined in.

\*\*\*

37 ordered Lt. Calley of My Lai infamy freed in early April.

On April 23, Columbia University students went on strike for the fourth spring in a row. The University suspended all but emergency operations.

\*\*\*

On April 24, housemate Janis and I met up with 500,000 friends at the largest anti-war demonstration since November 15, 1969’s *Moratorium March on Washington*. After hours of singing, swaying, chanting, busting up fights, feasting, speechifying, tree climbing, and celebrating newfound power, the rally dispersed precipitously—at least our section did—after somebody threw tear gas. People stampeded over temporary encampments to escape fumes. Some fell, were helped up. Others, trampled, screamed, stunned. The big challenge: scaling five-foot-high green barricades penning us in. Most women, especially those in long skirts, needed shoulder boosts; so did some men. Lots of arms and legs scraped, cut, bruised. I felt like an escaping desperado. Then I saw protesters bubble bathing in the Andrew Mellon Fountain across from the National Gallery of Art. I thought, *we’re experiencing a Lamaze water birth*.

We made fast tracks home because, anticipating a crowd, we had borrowed some soup kitchen-sized pots from anti-war church St. Stephen and the Incarnation. I’d been trained there by Quakers to serve as a Marshall for the May 9, 1970 *National Student Strike* in response to the invasion of Cambodia and the Kent State Massacre. We spent a bundle to prepare a feast, including seafood chowder and a nutty sweet potato soufflé, for 80-100 exhausted protesters. To our surprise, almost nobody showed up!

Toward the end of April, another new housemate moved in, a releasee from the Texas prison system who had served five years for possessing two joints. I hauled my queen-size mattress, school books, 12 LPs, black-and-white sheepskin bedspread, laundry bag of clothes, laundry hamper, and the ROTC uniform to the attic. I had already been working on my World War II-era Royal typewriter at the World-War I-era oak Army desk that someone long ago fastened

to the attic wall. The ex-prisoner occupied my room.

Crasher traffic remained strong the final week of April. Two left with boxfuls of clothing. We blessed them. After the chaotic dispersal from the April 24 rally, we sat on tenterhooks, hoping next week's acts of civil disobedience would stay peaceful.

\*\*\*

As April ended, Father Phillip Berrigan and seven others were indicted in an alleged plot to kidnap National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger and to blow up government buildings. Six years earlier, Berrigan's poet brother Daniel, a Jesuit, led my high school senior retreat.

\*\*\*

The Mayday Tribe announced that, since the government had refused to stop the war, they would stop the government. According to *The Washington Post*, the plan was to literally, "halt the machinery of government by a massive act of civil disobedience."

On May 1, under the auspices of the People's Coalition for Peace and Justice, 35,000 protesters encamped by the Washington Monument. As rocked-out protesters planned being civilly disobedient, or being disobedient toward civil authorities, the administration swooped helicopters down low to terrorize and scatter. Anticipating this, protesters launched large helium-filled balloons tethered by cables and repelled the helicopters. Score one for the protesters.

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On May 2, the administration cancelled the protest permit. Before dawn, DC police invaded the protesters' campsite, fired tear gas, mowed down tents, forced campers out, and shut the campsite down. Many protesters jumped town; about 10,000 found refuge in churches, colleges, and random crash pads.

On the night of May 2/3, as protesters slept or planned the next day's actions, the administration flew or bused in 10,000 Federal troops, including 4,000 paratroopers, and stationed them strategically throughout the city. These backed up 7,000 police officers and National Guardsmen already in place. A small segment of protesters, mostly the Yippies, engaged in hit-and-run tactics to snarl traffic and bring the city to a halt.

In pre-dawn raids, the police arrested anyone who looked like they *might* be a protester. By 8 a.m., they had arrested over 7,000 people, including construction workers, on suspicion of being protesters. Arrestees were held in makeshift holding pens without food, water, beds, or sanitary facilities. On another front, police herded protesters and onlookers to the Georgetown University campus to isolate them. Then, over the university gates, they lobbed tear gas and a second gas that made people vomit. Far from the front gates, on Georgetown's lower athletic field, sleeping protesters abruptly awoke after being bombed with tear gas. Police declared they had subjugated the sleeping protesters.

On May 5, after protesters gathered on the U.S. Capitol grounds attempted to shut down Congress, another 1,146 were arrested. In total, 12,614 people were arrested in conjunction

with the May Day protests, making it the largest “mass arrest” in U.S. history. (Eventually, nearly all of those arrested were released without being charged. Only 79 were convicted.)

\*\*\*

During the May Day fiasco, we had almost no crashers because protesters slept in encampments, were on the move, or left the city. Accustomed to the nightly presence of a revolving cast, we felt almost jilted when crashers stopped showing up. The empty nest made us ask, “What now?”

When Judy returned in early May, I wasn’t keen on picking up where we left off. She took up with Paddy.

Pig Patrol’s members threw up their hands after trying to monitor and document the egregious violations by the DC police in inciting demonstrators to engage in defensive acts of violence and in pervasively violating the right of free assembly—the right to protest—guaranteed by the Constitution. Pig Patrol was beside itself, exhausted, disillusioned. Right-wing media unfairly characterized May Day actions as “The Peace Freak Follies” and as “more rampage than protest.” It seemed that the violence perpetrated by a small faction had distorted and discredited the very concept of *peaceful* civil disobedience.

As May Day devolved into random actions, somebody broke into our house and stole our TV and stereo system. We called the police, who had been stretched thin by protests of the past week, but they came and dutifully took report. *No, there was no way to enter the house through the basement.* We didn’t bother to mention the 12 inch by 12 inch trap door from the basement into the first floor bathroom, which I nailed shut months ago. As a security measure, I screwed it shut after the police departed. Then, a week later, someone again broke in and took our toaster, blender, and other minor appliances. There was no evidence anybody tampered with the trap door. This time we didn’t bother the police.

The next week someone went through the house with a fine tooth comb, taking anything and everything of value. After I moved into the attic, I had started burying my camera under dirty clothes in my hamper and keeping all my cash under a sock in a coffee mug. Even my camera and cash were stolen. Somebody took their time or knew exactly what they were after.

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In the otherwise dismal month of May, the Stones released “Brown Sugar.”

“Godspell” opened on Broadway.

\*\*\*

Feeling stripped to the bone, we thought there was nothing left to steal. In the first days of June, somebody unhinged our recently-installed carved oak front door and carried it off.

Days later, I picked up what possessions I could carry—the black-and-white sheepskin

bedspread, a laundry bag of clothes, the ROTC uniform, a dozen LP records, my school books—and walked over a mile to another commune. I stashed my stuff in the basement and crashed on the couch. It turned out the couch had fleas.

Every commune in the DC area, and everyone who lived in one, became flea infested that summer. Natural insomniacs, the fleas bugged us all night long, bringing up urgent matters that usually could've waited until morning. We no doubt owed our thanks to the protesters who had been crashing for months in our living rooms. The place where I was crashing had previously hosted transient lesbians, who probably carried in lesbian fleas. Or maybe I'm wrong and the fleas were 37's last-ditch way of infiltrating the ranks of dissidents.

A week later, I returned to my disintegrating commune to fetch my manual Royal typewriter. I learned that two ground-floor window shutters had been stolen. Having emptied the house, somebody was tearing down the house itself, little by little. I felt like Billy Pilgrim returning to inspect the rubble of Dresden after the fire storm.

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On June 13, *The New York Times* published an article titled, "Vietnam Archive: Pentagon Study Traces Three Decades of Growing U.S. Involvement." During the media hubbub following the leak of "top secret" documents, this article and subsequent installments were dubbed *The Pentagon Papers*. Tracing the history of U.S. military involvement in Vietnam from 1945 to 1967, the papers showed that four generations of American Presidents—Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson—had systematically misled Congress and the public. Specifically, they showed the real rationale behind military involvement in Vietnam was containing China, rather than ensuring an independent South Vietnam. They also revealed that the U.S. had secretly enlarged the scope of actions: bombing nearby Cambodia and Laos, coastal raids on North Vietnam, and attacks by the Marines. Of note, LBJ was planning to expand the war even while promising "we seek no wider war" during his 1964 Presidential campaign.

After *The New York Times* published three installments, 37's administration threw an injunction at the *Times*. On June 18, *The Washington Post* took up the slack by starting to publish additional installments. Protests were re-invigorated by fresh evidence of the government's pervasive lies. Before the end of the month, the government's attempts to shut down publication of *The Pentagon Papers* resulted in a 6-3 Supreme Court decision supporting a free and unrestrained press. As one justice wrote:

"Only a free and unrestrained press can effectively expose deception in government. And paramount among the responsibilities of a free press is the duty to prevent any part of the government from deceiving the people and sending them off to distant lands to die of foreign fevers and foreign shot and shell."

The U.S. Congress passed the Mansfield Amendment stating that the U.S. must withdraw from Vietnam "at the earliest possible date." Never before had Congress called for a war's end.

Carole King's "Tapestry" hit number one.

The U.S. Supreme Court overturned Muhammad Ali's draft evasion conviction 8-0.

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Sheltered from the pervasive atmosphere of conspiracy, deception, fear, and castigation of the press, I spent the summer at the new commune baking bread with my six Trinity College housemates. Tina, a poet/activist, had taken over the lease from the Radical Lesbians four doors up for what heretofore had been their "transient house." Only once did I have a failed interaction with a former transient who returned to get her stuff, saw me sitting in the doorway, and kicked me three times. I ended up becoming the one who babysat for the Rads. At 24, I purchased my first car; a well-loved red-white-and-blue VW bus with sliding canvas sunroof and faux stained glass roof windows. That impromptu purchase drained \$700 from my savings, leaving \$300 for dire straits.

Laurie, a dancer in town for a new program in modern dance, took some of us out to the just-opened Filene Center at Wolf Trap Farm Park to witness modern. She snuck us in, claiming we too were dancers. The Joffrey Ballet was performing *Green Table*, about a bunch of grey-haired men who argued, gesticulated and pranced around a rectangular green table. They represented the world's leaders and the table our world. Choreographed by a German, Kurt Jooss, *Green Table* was first performed in 1932, in between world wars that tore Europe to ribbons.

Baking anadama bread, breaking it together, and slathering it with butter, as we talked the politics of protest and poetry as activism, promoted an atmosphere of security, warmth, hope. We were kept company by our pet mice, Mousie Tung and Emma Goldman, both communists.

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That summer, after the North Vietnamese displayed a willingness to negotiate, diplomatic attempts to end the war kept failing.

Kissinger announced the U.S. was prepared to offer a \$7.5 billion aid package to Vietnam, including \$2.5 billion to the North, and to withdraw troops within nine months. After a quarter century of rampant deceit by our government, why should North Vietnam's leaders have regarded any peace initiative as credible?

Due to rumors that the South Vietnamese Presidential election was rigged, all candidates except the rigger withdrew.

The 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment, lowering the voting age from 21 to 18, was ratified.

Lt. Calley's life sentence was reduced to 20 years.

The National Women's Political Caucus was formed.

George Harrison and friends—Ravi Shankar, Bob Dylan, Ringo Starr, and Eric Clapton, among others—held the *Concert for Bangladesh* at Madison Square Garden to aid homeless Bengali refugees from the Bangladesh Liberation War. Talk of releasing the "Bangladesh" album within

ten days of the concert was revised to “by the end of the summer” and then to “maybe by the end of the year.”

37 announced a 90-day freeze on wages, prices, and rents.

\*\*\*

As summer’s end neared, two people Tina knew were arrested as part of the Camden 28. Like the Catonsville 9, the Camden 28 was a decidedly Roman Catholic action designed to wreak havoc on a draft board’s records for those classified I-A, meaning “fresh meat.” I knew one of them too, a Trinity woman who had dropped out in January to focus on social justice and peace work. Her uncertain future weighed on us.

\*\*\*

By the end of August, my Trinity housemates moved back onto campus. The lease’s expiration approached. I needed a place to live. Tina wanted to create a weekend/emergency crash pad for her Trinity sisters to help them escape repressive hyper-control. She and I borrowed a baby to pose as a couple, thinking that holding a cooing baby would effuse us with credibility, even in the absence of an income stream. The baby behaved admirably for the rental office, but our ruse failed.

I was allowed to remain in the house solo until the lease expired. Two days before E-day, somebody broke in and stole my black-and-white sheepskin bedspread, the ROTC uniform, nearly all of my clothes, and all my LPs including “Tapestry,” leaving behind only my manual Royal typewriter. Fortunately, I’d been keeping schoolbooks and some clothes on the bus.

I had no place to live but it was a dry, crisp September. For the duration, I took to passing my nights in a goose down sleeping bag on the leafy forest floor. Having no way for schools to reach me about substitute teaching assignments threw me out of work. Good thing I didn’t eat much. With some Trinity women, I began ushering at the newly-opened Kennedy Center four nights a week (\$16/week). I shuttled them there and back. Sometimes, I showed up early at Trinity or lingered after I brought them home.

Australia and New Zealand announced they were pulling out of the war. I gave up obsessing over it. There in my forest haven, I resonated to *Dark Night of the Soul* (“All ceased and I abandoned myself, leaving my cares forgotten among the lilies”) and to *Teaching As a Subversive Activity* (“Remember: in order for a perception to change one must be frustrated in one’s actions or change one’s purpose”). I shuddered at *Soul on Ice* (“I seek a lasting relationship, something permanent in a world of change, in which all is transitory, ephemeral, and full of pain”). As I read, the silhouettes of leaves hanging on against the autumn winds danced on the page.

I lost my academic scholarship, but somehow got to class often enough, and dashed off papers on my trusty Royal typewriter in the back of the bus. “Tapestry” held on at number one. John Lennon released “Imagine.” I had no clue where all this was going, for me, my friends, 37, the nation, the planet. The government’s house of cards, crafted of lies, pernicious and pervasive,

had to come crashing down. Except for feeling the earth move under my feet and imagining all the people living life in peace, things did not bode well. One certainty gave me comfort: for the foreseeable future, thanks to the Supreme Court, we could be assured of a press free and unfettered.



LUCY



Judy and Maya

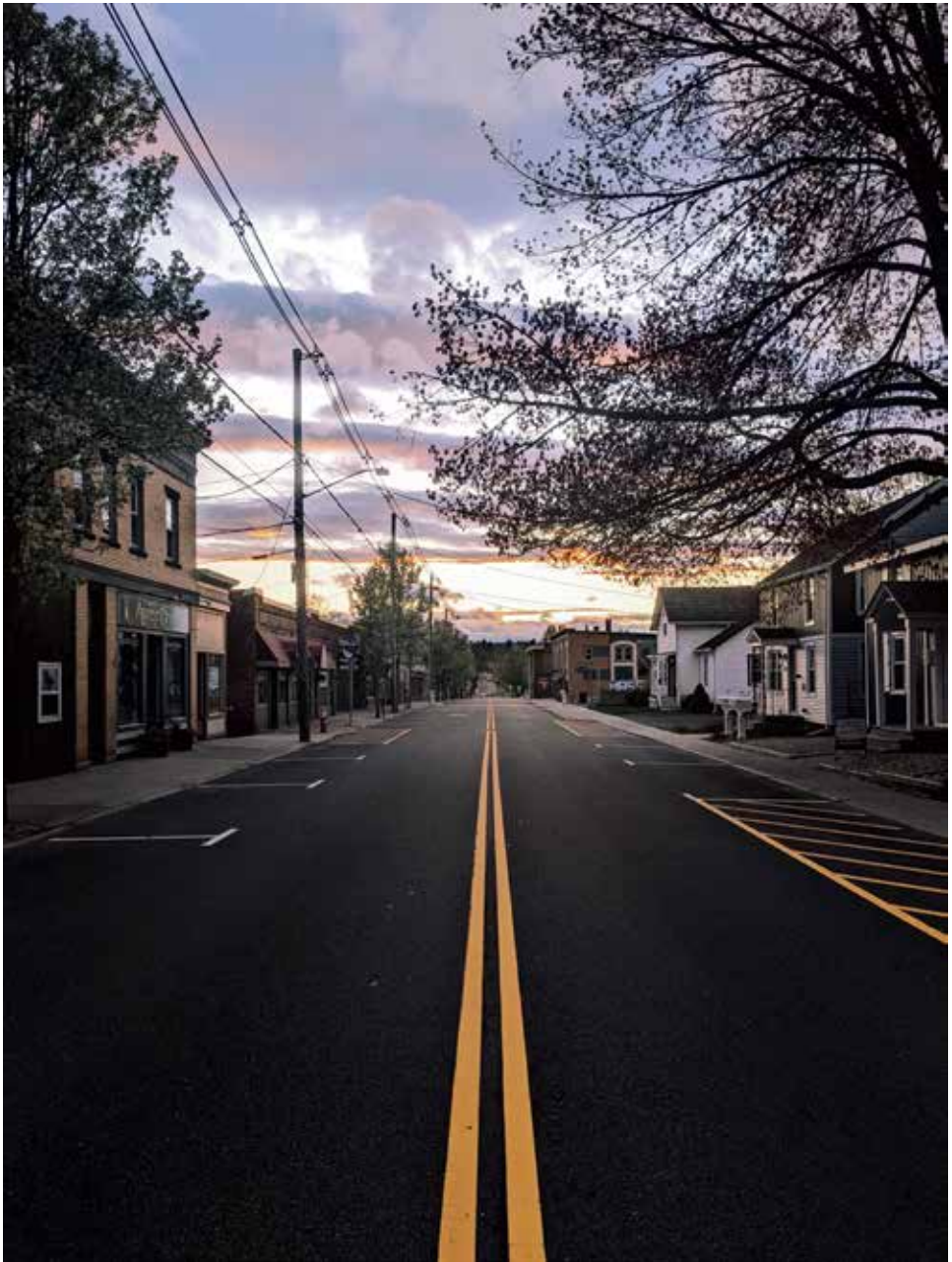
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with the red-white-and-blue VW with faux stained glass ceiling windows







covid street, easthampton  
Ben Gagnon

# Contributors' Notes

**Bailey Powell Aldrich** holds an MFA in Creative Writing, Nonfiction from The New School and lives in New York City. She values inclusion, mental illness advocacy, and laughter.

**Carol Bartold's** essays have appeared in *Critical Read*, *The Hunger*, *Prairie Schooner Blog*, *Haunted Waters Press*, *Moving Force Journal*, and *Old Farmer's Almanac*. As Senior Reporter for *My Hometown Bronxville* she covers municipal government, education, and land use. She holds the MFA degree in Writing (Nonfiction) from Sarah Lawrence College, and BA degree With Honors in Music from University of Mary Washington. She is an active choral singer and the Accounting Manager at the American Institute of Architects New York Chapter and The Center for Architecture. She lives in Westchester County, New York.

A graduate of the University of Southern California's Cinema-Television Production program, **Jerome Berglund** spent a picaresque decade in entertainment before returning to the midwest where he was born and raised. For the last several years he has lived a relatively quiet life, spending his time reflecting, exploring what he learned over the course of a somewhat checkered young adulthood, via writing, poetry and fine art photography. Berglund has previously published short stories in *Paragon Press's Veisalgia* and the *Watershed Review*, a play in *Iris Literary Journal*, and poetry in *Abstract Magazine*, *Wild Roof*, and *Ulalume Lighthouse*.

**Jane Blanchard** lives and writes in Georgia (USA). Her sonnets have appeared in venues such as *Blue Unicorn*, *The French Literary Review*, *The Kerf*, *Silkworm*, and *Two Thirds North*. Her fourth collection, *In or Out of Season*, is now available from Kelsay Books.

**T.J. Butler** lives on a sailboat with her husband and dog. She writes fiction and essays that are not all fun and games. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee and an occasional contributor to *Tiny House Magazine*. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Levee*, *New Plains Review*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, *New South*, *Barren*, and others. She has completed a collection of short stories, *A Flame on the Ocean*. @aGalWithNoName; www.TJButlerAuthor.com

**Jacob Chapman** lives in Amherst, MA with his wife and daughter and plays guitar in the band *Camel City Drivers*.

**Seth Cable** is a writer, musician, and academic living in Northampton, MA with his wife, three children, and tiny cat. His (non-academic) work has appeared in *Meat for Tea*, *Bull & Cross*, *Eclectica*, *Oddball*, *the Bitchin' Kitsch*, *Down in the Dirt*. He's terrible with names, but great with faces. And voices. More of his work has been collected at <https://people.umass.edu/scable/Faction/>

**Anthony Chesterfield** is a social worker who specializes in end-of-life care and hospice. Each of his patients and their families have individually taught him about the unknown as he continues his vocation. His published works include *Death's Strife*, available at Amazon.com and Barnes & Noble. Anthony's poem *N-95* was also published in *Poems from the Lockdown* by Willowdown Books, and his poem, *Nursing Home Under Siege*, is about to be published in *Poet's Choice*. Anthony considers fatherhood to be the greatest adventure of his life, and believes there is no one perfect way to be a father. He is currently pursuing an MFA at Manhattanville College, and lives in NY, with his wife, three daughters, and three cats.

**Vanessa Bernice De La Cruz** is a self-taught artist and writer from Los Angeles, CA. She has been scribbling and doodling for as long as she can remember but has only recently decided to share those things and infuse them with sense. You can find her hanging out with her cat, whining on social media @alienraynedrop, or you can visit her not fully constructed website [vbdelacruz.com](http://vbdelacruz.com)

**Susan Dashiell** is a middle school teacher living in Bloomfield, NJ who enjoys collaging and writing during quiet moments. Her stories have appeared in *The Write Launch*, *Burnt Pine Magazine*, *The Seventh Wave*, and *Tiny Seed Journal* among others.

**RC deWinter** writes in several genres with a focus on poetry. She is also a digital artist and sometimes chanteuse. Her poetry is widely anthologized notably in *Uno: A Poetry Anthology* (Verian Thomas, 4/2002), *New York City Haiku* (New York Times, 2/2017), *Cowboys & Cocktails* (Brick Street, 4/2019), *Nature In The Now* (Tiny Seed Press, August 2019), in print in *2River*, *Adelaide Magazine*, *borrowed solace*, *Call Me [Brackets]*, *Gravitas*, *Genre Urban Arts*, *In Parentheses*, *Kansas City Voices*, *Meat For Tea: The Valley Review*, *Night Picnic Journal*, *parABnormal*, *Pink Panther*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Reality Break Press*, *Variant Literature*, *Southword*, among others and appears in numerous online literary journals.

**A. Jay Dubberly** is a writer and educator from Vermont's Little City. He is the founder and editor in chief of *Zig Zag Lit Mag*, and teaches Film & Writing courses at various colleges throughout Vermont. His poetry leans towards character voices & the absurd, and has been published in *Bloodroot Literary Journal*, *After Dark Magazine*, and various online publications.

**Molly Dunn** is a queer writer and actor from Toronto, Canada. She is currently pursuing studies at the University of Toronto at the St. George Campus.

**William Fillmore** was raised in Fullerton, California. He has had the great fortune to profess his passion for the studio arts for the last nine years as a professor of visual art at colleges and universities, from California, Indiana, North Carolina, and Upstate New York. William's sculptural works features the pain and beauty found in memories both forgotten and the discarded. Each piece stands as a grotesque surrealistic testament to the indelible sting of nostalgia and regret.

**Erica Frederick** is a law student who loves walking her pittie and playing DnD.

**Ben Gagnon** is a local IT specialist whose hobbies include unplanned photography, cycling, gardening, and cursing at his welder. He also founded Repair Public, a local not-for-profit community initiative where people can get their broken things fixed instead of throwing them away.

**Elizabeth Galoozis** is a poet and librarian living in Los Angeles. Her poetry has been published in *Faultline*, *Sinister Wisdom*, *Mantis*, and *Not Very Quiet*. Her poem *The Grove* was a finalist for the Inverted Syntax Sublingua Prize for Poetry. Her scholarly work has been published in *The Library Quarterly*, *College & Research Libraries*, and *ACRL Press*.

**Karen Burnette Garner** continues to be a lifelong creative, painting and writing, exploring and educating herself. She has relocated to Pennsylvania after a full life in the American South, where she lived no more than 10 miles from where she was born. Her new experiences and influences of her new home reflect in her latest writings. A recent widow, she sometimes writes of her loss and moving forward with positivity and hope.

**Mark Hammerschick** writes poetry and fiction and has been published sporadically. He holds a BA in English from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana and a BS and MBA. He is a lifelong resident of the Chicago area and currently lives on the north shore, most of his professional career has been focused on digital strategy and online consulting as a solution architect and digital transformation strategist. His current work will be published in *The Metaworker*, *Breadcrumbs Magazine*, *The Fictional Café*, *Wingless Dreamer* and *HP 2020 Poetry Challenge*.

**Richard Wayne Horton** lives in Springfield, MA, has received 2 Pushcart nominations and has published 2 books of short stories, *Sticks & Bones* (Meat For Tea Press) and *Artists In The Underworld* (Human Error Publishing) He has published in *Literary Heist*, *Meat For Tea*, *Danse Macabre du Jour* and others. He is the current Beat Poet Laureate of MA.

**IV Kallin** is a young writer who goes to school in Atlanta, GA.

**Janne Karlsson** is an artist/illustrator residing in the Beautiful coastal Town of Västervik, Sweden. When he is not busy drawing he is working dog hours at the psychiatric emergency ward. Feel free to follow his insane explorations on Facebook and Instagram by the name *Svensk Apache*.

**Linda Kraus** has taught university courses in literature and film studies. She has published poetry in several literary journals and anthologies and is currently editing two collections of poetry.

**Counsel Langley** grew up among shipwrights and foundry workers—people with strong traditional skills and respect for materials. Their influence played a large part in her choice to study metalsmithing at Massachusetts College of Art (BFA, 1999). The rigor of metalwork honed Langley's discipline, steady hand, attention for detail, and love for surface treatment (rough, smooth, matte, shiny, sparkly, natural, mechanical etc). Her work remains rooted in a metalsmith's approach to making art. Langley's mixed media pieces have been widely exhibited; venues include the Museum of Northwest Art, Roq La Rue, International Gallery of Contemporary Art, PUB Gallery at Peninsula College, OGHE Ltd., and Bridge Productions, and was recently featured in a Microsoft Surface Launch Campaign. Her work is held by the Seattle City Light Portable Works Collection and ArtsWA Public Collection. Langley's work has been featured in *Seattle Magazine*, *City Arts Magazine*, *Meat for Tea: The Valley Review*, *Trickhouse*, *Beautiful/Decay* blog. Her love for cross-discipline collaborations sparked opportunities to work with literary publications *Filter Literary Journal*, *Poetry Northwest Magazine*, the creation of album art, scenic design, and illustration.

Inspired by great masters as *Vrubel* and *Monet*, **Van Lanigh** creates figurative and landscape pieces. Her unique style is a reaction to abstractionism in an attempt to capture surrealistic yet casual reality. This is especially underlined by new forms and materials used in Van Lanigh's artworks aimed to achieve the viewer's resonance between visual effect and message of the painting. One of her experiments is getting Pointillism into 3D space by making a series of human-face sculptures with small colorful handcrafted polymer clay balls.

**Nelson Lowhim** was born in Tanzania, of Indian and Seychelles and Euro background. Lived in India for a year. At age 10 moved to the States (all over from the south to the west to the midwest to the east to Alaska). Joined the Army (yes the US one) and deployed to a few places. Always good to see the way Empire works on its fringes, doesn't it? He currently lives in Seattle with his wife. Oh, it doesn't really end there, but that should be good for now. For more look me up at <http://www.intersections.org/nelson-lowhim> [nelsonlowhim.blogspot.com](http://nelsonlowhim.blogspot.com) IG: @lowhimsart

**Jeremy Macomber-Dubs** is the guitarist, vocalist, and co-songwriter in Bunnies. Born and raised in Central Pennsylvania, he and his best friend/band-mate moved to Western Massachusetts in 2004 to play seven shows opening for the reunited Pixies. Bunnies decided to make a permanent home there where they've been playing shows and recording albums ever since. In 2011 and 2012, Dubs released two solo albums on Frank Black's label The Bureau Records, and in 2013 he sang on 5 new Pixies songs. Jeremy has also played drums for artists such as Severe Severe, Rabbit Rabbit, Problem With Dragons, and Black Francis.

**madame Hair** is a local Toronto artist, singer & puppeteer. A self taught artist who has been doodling, illustrating and painting for the last three decades. madame Hair has had art exhibits in London, England as well as Grindelwald, Switzerland. At first the work may seem childlike, simple, absurd, at times risqué with often serious undertones to the work. Humour is used to gently ease the viewer into more serious thought. madame Hair has most recently self published a book of photos of puppet Andy-Sally travelling the world as well as getting to discover new things about Toronto itself. The book is entitled *Andy-Sally pre-plague shenanigans 2020 Smoke 'em if u got 'em*. One can order a book by messaging madame Hair on Facebook or through Instagram.

**Ed Meek** is the author of *Spy Pond*, poems, and *Luck*, short stories. He writes book reviews for The Arts Fuse and Digboston.

**140 Chris Murphy** is a freelance illustrator of 35 years, He's recently turned to creating political cartoons as a form of therapy.

**Martina Newhook** studied creative writing with MJ Hyland, Marnie Woodrow, Ken McGoogan, Eva Hornung (Sallis), Jane Rogers, and Brian Castro. Her non-fiction has appeared in *The Globe and Mail*, *Toronto Star*, *Beach Metro News*, *Wet Ink: the magazine of new Australian writing*, and *The Rumpus*. She won the 2012 Lightship International First Chapter contest. She holds a PhD in creative writing from the University of Adelaide. She lives in Seattle, WA. Her food writing blog resides at <https://comfortmewithbeets.com>

**Robert Peate** is a creative writer and English teacher who uses his fiction, nonfiction, and poetry to address social issues. He lives and writes in West Linn, Oregon. He says readers are his favorite people, because without them, writers are just people talking to themselves.

**Kasey Rae** is a media artist living in The Bronx, New York City.

**Hilary Wheelan Remley** was born and raised on the rim of Atlanta, Georgia. She is currently a graduate student at SUNY Albany and lives in Alexandria, Virginia. Her work has been published in *Prometheus Dreaming*.

**Jim Ross** jumped into creative pursuits in 2015 after leaving public health research. He's since published nonfiction, poetry, and photography in well over 100 journals and anthologies in North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia. Publications include *Barren*, *Columbia Journal*, *Ilanot Review*, *Litro*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Kestrel*, *Meat for Tea*, *The Atlantic*, *The Manchester Review*, and *Typehouse*. A nonfiction piece led to a role in a soon-to-be-released, high-profile documentary limited series. Jim and his wife—parents of two health professionals working on the front line and grandparents of five preschoolers—split their time between the city and the mountains.

**Joy Saha** started writing when he was a teenager. From then he has written more than 30 books in the past 6 years in various topics and various genres, such as short stories, poems, fiction, non-fiction and more. He is an Indian writer with a creative mind and infinity writing spirit.

Contemporary artist **Kiyomitsu Saito** (age 70) is based in N.Y.. His representative work called *Wordroach* is a series of words and letters with mouths and legs imitating cockroaches. On the first floor of the gallery walls, paired words- "CREATION and DESTRUCTION" along with "LIVE and DIE" are integrally presented using one rope. Wordroaches, using letters derived from these words, are placed inside the roped outline. This shows that any word can be formed with just a combination of a few letters. "Civilization was built using language but words may also bring about the destruction of mankind." Saito continues, "I hope my art can become an opportunity to think about the weight of words in this internet age where countless words come and go." Saito is from Okayama city, Japan. After starting work at a ship building company, he became strongly interested in art and in 1990 he moved to the US in order to experience genuine contemporary art. Saito spends his summers at his home in Chikko, Tamano city. [Reporter; Sadamichi Matsuyama (Sanyo Newspaper, 2018) Translation: Tamiko Ono]

**David Anthony Sam** lives in Virginia with his wife and life partner, Linda. His poetry has appeared in over 90 journals and his poem, *First and Last*, won the 2018 Rebecca Lard Award. Six of his collections are in print including *Final Inventory* (Prolific Press 2018), *Finite to Fail: Poems after Dickinson*, 2016 Grand Prize winner of the GFT Press Chapbook Contest, and *Dark Fathers* (Kelsay Books 2019). He teaches creative writing at Germanna Community College, from where he retired as President in 2017 and serves as the Regional VP on the Board of the Virginia Poetry Society.

**Seth Simon** uses vintage film cameras to produce unique images that preserve a sense of history. A thick layer of dust or rust is often found on the things he likes to photograph. Items in museum display cases, thrift shops and forgotten store windows are recurring themes. Wear and scars reflect objects that have passed through many hands and have helped build a history, and he seeks to preserve that patina.

**Gregory Stephens** is Associate Professor of English, University of Puerto Rico-Mayagüez. His book *Three Birds Sing a New Song: A Puerto Rican trilogy about Dystopia, Precarity, and Resistance* was published by Intermezzo (2019). Short fiction from the novel-in-progress *A Terrible Racket: Making Do with the Residue* (2020) and *Close to the Bone* (2019). Literary nonfiction: *A Team of Mules; Spanking the Baby: Second Thoughts on Discipline; Voice, Conscience, Community; and Still Life in Motion* iō Literary Journal (Spring 2020); *Integrative Ancestors redux—a Child's story from the past to the future; Split-Screen Freedom*, and *Che's Boots: Discipline and the flawed hero*.

**Cherie Stoll** is a Michigan-based writer with a pending publication in the 42 Stories Anthology. She received a master's degree in science writing from Johns Hopkins University. You can read some of her personal musings at [cheriestoll.com](http://cheriestoll.com).

**Kirby Michael Wright** was born and raised in Honolulu, Hawaii. He is a graduate of Punahou School in Honolulu and the University of California at San Diego. Wright received his MFA in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University. His new book is *The Queen of Moloka'i*, a creative nonfiction adventure based on the life and times of his Hawaiian grandmother.

**Gerald Yelle's** books are *The Holyoke Diaries* (Future Cycle Press), *Evolution for the Hell of It* (Red Dashboard Press), *Mark My Word and the New World Order* (The Pedestrian Press), and *Restaurant in Walking Distance and Everything* (Cawing Crow Press). He is a member of the Florence (MA) Poets Society.

**Jane Yolen's** latest spring publications brings her count up to 386 books. Last year she won the Massachusetts Book Award in the Young Adult category for a Holocaust novel, *Mapping the Bones*. One of the two main characters is a fourteen year old Jewish poet, so she got to write his poems for him. Or with him, as it often seemed.

**Frank Zahn** is an emeritus college professor and author of nonfiction, fiction, and poetry. His poetry publications include those in issues of Midwest Poetry Review, Meat for Tea: The Valley Review; Black Cat Quarterly; The Blind Man's Rainbow; and Criterion. Currently, he lives in Vancouver, Washington.

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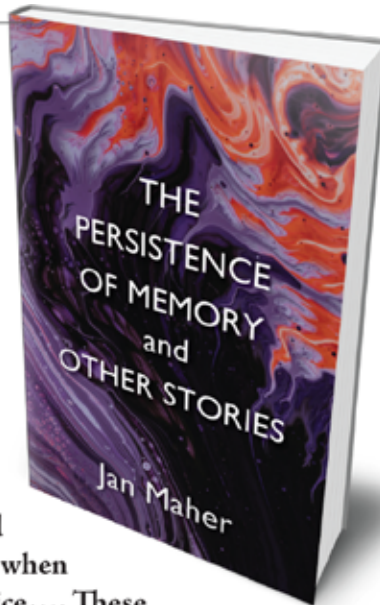
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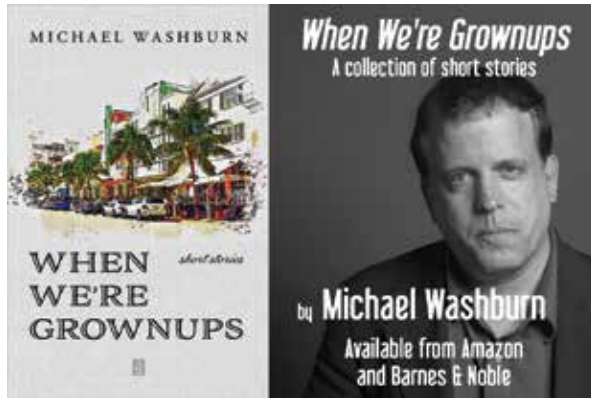
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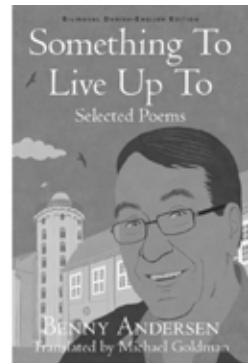


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