

# EXPOSITION REVIEW

2020

VOLUME V  
**ACT/BREAK**



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Three years ago, *Exposition Review* had its first editor retreat. We had broken away from our previous print iteration in favor of an online platform, and had published issues we were proud of—but we realized that there was more. We sat around a table and asked ourselves a question that, in some ways, we’re still trying to answer: *Who are we?* That day, we decided a few things: We would continue to be exclusively online, we would diversify our readership and content as much as possible, we would pay our contributors, and—above all—we would be a platform for writers. All of it felt like a faraway plan, with goals we knew we couldn’t reach right away, everything in the realm of “what if.”

And throughout the growth, learning, trial and error, the last five years could be considered *Exposition Review*’s “first act.” We’ve settled into our skin—attempted to make those “what ifs” possible. We tackled transitions, an ever-growing submission slush pile, and the language of contracts. And we have a lot to show for it: four amazing online issues expanding our inclusion of art, comics, and experimental from our print days. We’ve launched a new publication opportunity to feature flash work across genres and started paying contributors with our [Flash 405 contest](#). Our community grew, with readers and editors coming from all walks of life, reading across time zones and messaging encouraging memes as we send to them more pages each week. Somewhere between the late-night meetings and stress over the website design and counting the pennies in our budget until they became dollars, we found ourselves.

*Exposition Review* is more than a literary journal. We host literary workshops, produce readings, promote contributors’ book launches, and provide opportunities for new voices and careers through our internships and work with nonprofits such as [WriteGirl](#). This year, the big win, we are finally able to guarantee payment for *all* of our contributors—something we’d worked toward since this all started. We wouldn’t have been able to do it without the support of [our donors](#)—thank you for helping to make this a reality.

As we consider this year and our theme of “Act/Break”, it’s tempting to call it a benchmark, a milestone, even an end to something we thought we might be. We’ve held on to some traditions and let go of others—we’ve tried and failed and learned. And yet, in a way, it’s all just another beginning. We’re no longer in the in-between, no longer the same journal we were when we started. With Volume V, we’ve been able to think about our value in a new way. We serve as the platform for extraordinary voices, and because of that we approached our whole process differently. We committed to giving submitters more thoughtful feedback in rejections and contributors more time to edit before publication. All of the work you’ll read or art you’ll view was either discovered while listening to an author or artist speak at a literary event or found in our slush pile, including our cover.

Then, there’s the elephant in the room. When we chose the theme, we didn’t anticipate how much the world would also be transitioning into something different. It’s impossible to talk about this year without addressing how COVID-19 has affected us all, *Exposition Review* included. Before the shelter-in-place took effect, on Saturday, May 9, we would have been celebrating with our local LA contributors at [Skylight Books](#), pouring wine and listening to the pieces we fell in love with read aloud. That time will come again, and hopefully these stories we present will serve as a reminder that change is meant to challenge us, not destroy us. We are so proud of how the literary community has adapted and recognized that as writers, artists, editors, we are stronger when we support each other.

The pieces we chose for this issue often spring from similar roots—they dip into a moment, a day, or even years, and form an experience that leaves their characters changed. That transformation is divided into sections—acts, chapters, numbers, lists, genres, pictures—pieces meticulously put together to create a whole from many parts.

From losing brothers to surviving the apocalypse, from breaking open wounds and healing others, to a woman who gives birth to a small primate (that's not a typo), we sit with these characters and hear their voices, feel their feelings. We are with them in alleyways and sitting on a couch watching soap operas. We consider what it is like to be an immigrant or to feel displaced in your own body. We challenge new entry points into storytelling, following characters through interactive hyperlinks and collages. We feel them build, break, splinter, and reconnect. The beginning, the end, and the space in between—that exploration is what we wanted, and it is most certainly what we got.

These are extraordinary writers, artists, storytellers. This is their platform.

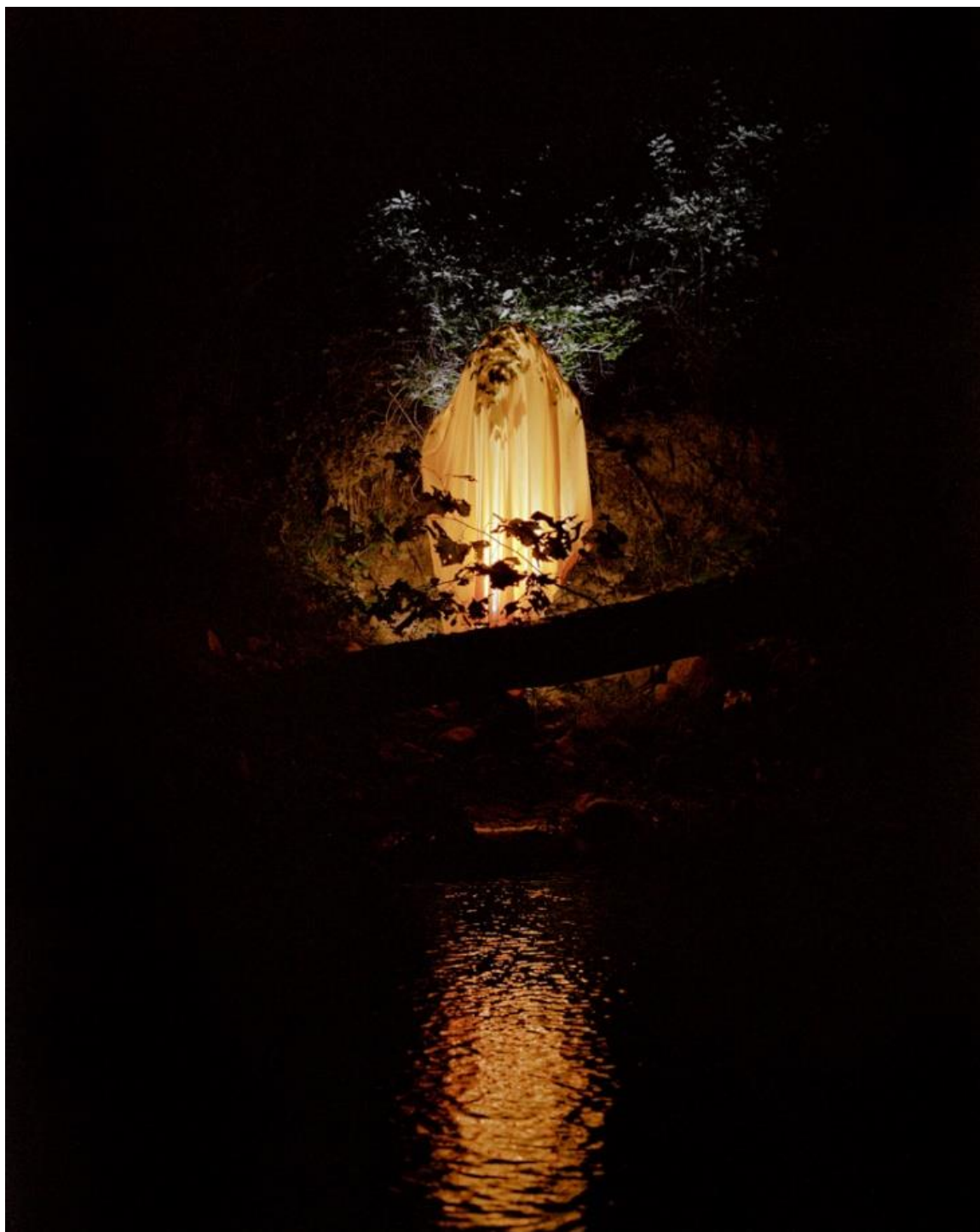
This is *Exposition Review's* Volume V: "Act/Break."

*Lauren Gorski*  
*Mellinda Hensley*  
EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

## There and Lack Thereof: Impermanent Marks

JOEY ARONHALT

PHOTOGRAPHY



Joey Aronhalt, *Untitled*, from the series (*There and Lack Thereof: Impermanent Marks*), 2019. Archival Inkjet Print, 17 x 22 inches



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Joey Aronhalt, *Untitled*, from the series (*There and Lack Thereof: Impermanent Marks*), 2019. Archival Inkjet Print, 17 x 22 inches

# Laugh

LIA DUN

FICTION • WRITEGIRL CONTRIBUTOR

My boyfriend cries when he comes home from work at ten and sees me on the kitchen floor eating Hot Cheetos and drinking chicken stock out of the box. “I left you dinner in the fridge,” he says.

“Didn’t have the energy to heat it up,” I say.

I watch him try to swallow a sob and snort snot instead. I think that’s funny but don’t have it in me to laugh. I should feel guilty. All I’ve been feeling these days is guilt, but maybe I’ve finally run out.

“How do I support you?” he asks for the trillionth time, collapsing down next to me. I consider his nostril hairs, much thicker than mine, tangled and twisting and sagged with mucous. I decide they’re my favorite part of him.

“Do you want to hear a joke?” I stare straight at him with my dead glass eyes. I offer him a Cheeto.

“Sure?” He doesn’t take a Cheeto.

“You know who I think is the worst? People who have biological children. For any reason. But especially people who have them on purpose because they want to be parents.”

“What?”

“Those people are basically rapists,” I say. “It’s like you’re forcing a person to have a body and exist because you just fucking want to. Without their consent. It’s a total power trip.”

“Baby, what are you saying?” He touches my cheek. I bat it away.

“You don’t think I’m funny?”

A couple months after we started dating, he took me to a Build-A-Bear, which I thought was cheesy, but I was going through a phase where I gave people a chance. At the stuffing station, he said, “People are just like these bears. It’d be so easy to rip us open and pull out our guts.”

We watched the bear get engorged with fluff by the tube in its back. I said, “That’s true.”

“Oh God,” he said. “That was so morbid! I’m sorry!” I didn’t mind, though. I was not swept up by doom at that point, but I knew I would be again. I wasn’t sure if I wanted him to understand or save me.

Sitting on the kitchen floor, Hot Cheeto dust staining my T-shirt and lips, I say, “I thought you’d get it.”

“I love you.” He tries to touch me again. I flinch away.

*Then laugh, I think. Why don’t you fucking laugh?*

# Ariadne

BRANDON FRENCH

FICTION

I had hoped Ariadne would be a good companion, like the capuchin monkeys I'd seen in movies and on TV, but she was even more terrified of me than I was of her, biting me on the hand several times when I tried to pet her. We ended up like prisoners in solitary confinement, her crouched in her cramped little cage in my one-bedroom apartment in Manhattan, combing her fur for bugs that she popped into her mouth like M&M's, and me on the sofa staring glassy-eyed at summer reruns on the TV screen.

Every so often, when my guilt overcame me, I let her out of the cage. She flew around the living room like a bat with faulty radar, screaming, defecating, and leaping away from me until I finally had to put on the heavy gloves I'd bought to handle her and tackle her like a linebacker to get her back behind bars. Afterward, she'd glare at me from beneath her little blonde crew cut with her lips rolled back from her tiny white teeth, forming a kind of horrific grin. I imagined her saying, *Are you happy now, bitch?*

Around Thanksgiving, I began to date Danny. He was the traffic manager at the advertising agency where I worked as a copywriter, the person who makes sure, at practically pain of death, that the ads get to the newspapers and magazines on time. Danny was a lanky Indiana boy with big, gentle hands and shoulder-length blond hair like an Afghan Hound, and absolutely nothing seemed to rattle him. He came from a long line of Midwestern men who kept things running—from John Deeres and Maytags to Chevy pickups and Falcon fighter jets, and he had a down-home manner, which let his native intelligence sneak up on you like a friendly squirrel. He moved in with me over Christmas, with two suitcases for his clothes and one cardboard box half-filled with DVDs, his Mac, and some toiletries, and by New Year's we'd decided that Ariadne would be better off at a zoo.

The Bronx and the Central Park Zoos turned us down, but the Staten Island Zoo agreed to adopt her. We managed to get her into Danny's cardboard box on a cold, clear Saturday morning in January with the help of Danny's stoner friend Armando, an art director at our agency who was covered from head to ankles with tattoos and curly black hair like an unsheared sheep. We took the subway downtown and were only three stops from the ferry when Armando decided to peek into the box. Ariadne sprang out like a jack-in-the-box before we could stop her, and in two leaps she was on the overhead bars, swinging and screaming through the car and scaring holy hell out of the old ladies and the snoozing bums. Luckily, a short, beefy fireplug of a fellow with a Silly Putty nose jumped up onto the empty seats and grabbed Ariadne by the tail, earning a sharp bite on his right hand for his heroics.



For some reason, I started to cry and couldn't stop myself. It was probably my hormones kicking in, because a few weeks later, I learned to my surprise that I was two months pregnant.

We received a very nice thank-you note from the zoo, along with an invitation to visit and see how happy Ariadne was in her new home with all her new monkey friends. But we were busy with work and never seemed to have enough free time on the weekends to leave the city. Or maybe we just felt too guilty about abandoning Ariadne to show our faces, even though we told ourselves that we'd done it for her own good.

Danny was excited enough about the baby to want to marry me, so we had a civil ceremony downtown, with Armando as best man, when I was six months along. But I held off telling my parents until after the birth because I didn't want them to fly out from Arizona for such a nonevent.

By the time my water broke, we had the crib assembled, and a little white dresser filled with baby clothes and blankets, and a basket piled high with stuffed animals, most of which we got at the baby shower our agency friends threw for us. It took only six hours for "the bump," as we called it, to be born, although I yelled bloody murder when the contractions grabbed hold of my guts until they finally took pity on me and put me out.

I was very disoriented when I came out of the anesthetic, and I couldn't see clearly without my contact lenses, but when I glanced at the infant in a clear plastic box next to me, I thought I'd gone bonkers. It was Ariadne, looking exactly as she did when we last saw her on Staten Island, only smaller. Feeling certain that I was hallucinating, I forced myself to fall back to sleep. By the time I woke up, which seemed like many hours later, the baby had been moved to the nursery.

"I had the strangest experience," I told Danny when he came into my hospital room. "I thought I'd given birth to Ariadne. Isn't that bizarre?"

Danny coughed a little and avoided my eyes.

"Did you see her? Did you see the baby?"

"Yes," he said, still not meeting my gaze.

"What—?" I said, suddenly finding it hard to breathe. "Did something happen to her?"

"No. She's—OK."

"What's wrong then?"

Danny looked at me like he wanted to say something but nothing came out of his mouth. It was as if he'd had a stroke and all his words had vaporized.

"Oh, dear God, no," I said, pulling the covers up over my head and starting to sob. I realized then that whatever I'd seen in the glass box wasn't a hallucination.

"Who is the father?" the obstetrician asked that morning, eyeing my husband suspiciously.

"He is," I said, pointing to Danny.

"It might be a recessive gene, I suppose. Some things in nature cannot be explained," the doctor said with a shrug.

But he was stern with the younger nurses, who giggled and stared and were reluctant at first to handle Ariadne. "A baby is a baby," he snapped. "And this young lady needs her diaper changed."

One of the older nurses, Carol, who was as stolid as a utility pole, brought Ariadne into my room for her midday feeding, swaddled snugly in a pink blanket like a child's doll.

"At least she doesn't bite anymore," Danny whispered, but Carol must have overheard.

"She's very sweet," Carol said, handing her over to me. "But the formula we gave her upset her stomach and made her vomit." She gave me Ariadne's warm bottle, which she'd wrapped in a diaper. "We decided to contact a vet, and he prescribed a soy concoction that works much better."

I was offended by the idea of them consulting a veterinarian. Ariadne was our daughter, not some exotic pet. But as I held her in my arms and watched her nurse, her bright brown eyes opening and closing with drowsy pleasure, I felt relieved that the vet's "milk" agreed with her. An unfamiliar sensation began to ripple inside me, like a warm wave spreading from my lungs to my throat. I thought it might be nausea, but I didn't feel like throwing up.

"Ari," I said, cradling her tenderly in my arms. "My little Ari."

We thought the best way to break the news of our special child to our families was to send them baby pictures. After we got home, Danny borrowed a camera from the agency and took several snapshots, some of me holding her and a few of her alone. Armando watched the three of us from the hallway, squinting and shaking his head like he couldn't believe his eyes. Danny looked over at him and shrugged, almost apologetically. I wanted to strangle them both.

Danny's parents didn't say anything about their new granddaughter when they received the pictures. They simply sent us a stuffed elephant, some onesies, and a check for a hundred dollars.

"We'll have to cut a hole in these," Danny said, holding up the baby clothes, "for her tail."

"Big deal."

"I'm just saying."

"She doesn't look anything like *our* side of the family," my father said when they called. My mother accused us of playing a cruel joke on them, which "wasn't the least bit funny."

Danny and I had discovered immediately that the crib was useless for a baby who could easily climb out of it—which Ari did the moment we put her down. She preferred to hang from me like a necklace day and night, her tiny fingers gripping my hair and clothing in a prehensile vise.

At the beginning, she slept most of the time, her breath a sweet little snore. I slept too, exhausted from the labor. Each time she awoke, I fed her—two ounces were all she could handle. As she nursed, I read to her from a pile of baby books I'd bought before her birth. Even early on, she had favorites, like *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and *Goodnight Moon*, appearing to enjoy the rhymes and repetitions of the words. *Three little bears sitting on chairs ... Goodnight bears, goodnight chairs.*

"Look how smart she is," I boasted to Danny.

He smiled at me, indulgently I thought. I desperately wanted him to feel about our little girl the way that I did, but he hung back, claiming he couldn't care for her as well as I could.

"As well, or as much?" I said, becoming tearful.

Ari and I were inseparable throughout my four-week maternity leave, as if an invisible wrapper encircled us, binding us together like sandwich halves. I had heard other women speak about maternal love, but I had never imagined the intensity of emotion that Ari inspired in me. It felt like some part of my heart had gurgled into life like a mountain spring, pushing through rock walls and gaining in force by the minute. I wondered if my mother had felt that way about me. What I recalled from my childhood was her worried face, as if she feared that at any moment I would reveal myself to be Linda Blair in *The Exorcist*.

Before I was scheduled to return to work, we interviewed a Puerto Rican girl from the neighborhood to look after Ari during the weekdays. But the girl screamed when she set eyes on our baby and fled through the front door, shouting her distress in Spanish. I had to scrounge around quickly for alternative daycare, hoping to find someone in lower Manhattan who'd accept our precious girl.

A neighbor in our building suggested Tante Sophie, of Tante Inc. on 10th Street. She was a German woman in her late sixties with a straight spine, curly white hair, and bright blue eyes that seemed to miss nothing, which was reassuring since she kept watch over eight children from infancy to age seven. But while she agreed to take Ari on a trial basis, she seemed to think that my daughter was a pet, a misunderstanding I was about to clarify when Danny pulled me aside.

"As long as she takes good care of Ari," he whispered, "does it matter what she thinks?"

"Yes!" I said, becoming emotional, but I held my tongue.

After a few minutes and several anxious shrieks, Ari allowed Tante Sophie to hold her, and she hoot-laughed and squirmed with delight when Tante tickled her furry tummy.

"She loves stories," I told Tante Sophie the next morning, handing her Ari's favorite picture books, along with her bottles of primate formula and enough diapers and onesies to keep her dry until six. "And she can play patty-cake and peekaboo," I added, wanting to ensure that Ari would be included in the other children's activities. I sorely wanted my little daughter to fit in.

Tante Sophie smiled at me indulgently. “Ja, ja,” she said with a merry laugh, “don’t worry, Mrs. Christina.”

Ari hung calmly around Tante’s neck, her bare feet resting comfortably on the older woman’s ample bosom. In her free hand, Ari gripped her “wa-waa baby” named Bonkers, a stuffed, once-white bunny that she dragged with her everywhere. But even though she seemed content to be in Tante’s daycare, I felt like a criminal when I tiptoed away.

I called three or four times from work that first day, just to make sure Ari was faring well. She had only been part of my life for a month, but she’d become as essential to me as air.

After work, I took a cab from Midtown to Tante Sophie’s and found Ari hanging from the neck of a slender, blue-eyed sylph named Ena, a languidly beautiful Teutonic princess of seven.

“Look how they luff each other,” Tante Sophie said with satisfaction.

Ari gave a shriek when she saw me, jumping down from Ena and climbing me like a tree. I began to cry and couldn’t stop kissing her, as if we’d been separated for days rather than hours.

I put her little yellow sweater on before we left because the autumn evenings were becoming nippy. But the sleeves were already too short for her long blonde tree-swinging arms.

On our way home, a Japanese woman approached, pushing a stroller.

“Ahhhh, cute kid,” she cried out. “Is that your only one?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Me too,” she said, tipping her head down toward the stroller.

It was empty.

“Mmmmm,” I murmured with a little smile, not knowing the right way to respond. Apparently, there were even more bizarre things going on in Manhattan than I’d realized.

I talked to Ari incessantly, and each day she seemed to understand more words. She could only make noises in response, little screams and squeaks and huffing sounds, but she quickly developed a series of pantomimes to let Danny and me know what she wanted. She’d pry our lips open with her fingers when she wanted us to smile, drum on the refrigerator when she was hungry, and leap onto the sink and suck on the faucet when she was thirsty. She also loved to dance and would jump up and down and screech beneath the CD player when she wanted to hear music. Her favorites were Pharrell Williams and Justin Bieber and some of the old Michael Jackson hits, especially “Billie Jean.”

Ari was also compassionate. When Danny banged his head on an open kitchen cabinet, she climbed up onto his shoulders and wrapped her little arms around his neck, whimpering and rubbing his forehead frantically until he pried her loose.

“She loves you—can’t you see?” I said, holding Ari protectively.

“Jesus, I’ve got a bump on my head as hard as a rock.”



I had heard about Koko, the gorilla who used sign language to communicate, and so I went on YouTube to learn how to sign. I made Danny practice with me each night until we were both competent enough to understand each other's words and then we began to teach Ari. "Banana" was her favorite word. For a while, everything was a banana, including us.

I felt fiercely ambitious for Ari, all the more so as I recognized the enormous obstacles that stood between her and a fully human life. Danny was more realistic, and I hated him for that. It became the basis of all our arguments, my wanting to demolish every roadblock while he argued for reasonable goals. I wondered if other parents of "special needs" children became quixotic like me, battling windmills even before they came into view. Or were they pragmatists like Danny, not wanting to set their children up for the inevitable disappointments, believing that wanting more than their children could achieve was inhumane.

I read every book I could find on the capuchins, learning about their intelligence, their capacity to be socialized and to live happily in human society.

"*Happily*," Danny said, "that's the key word. How does anyone know if they're happy living in an alien world, separate for life from their own species?"

"We're practically the same species!" I retorted. "99.4 percent genetically identical. We're just a bunch of monkeys in fancy clothes."

"You know that's ridiculous, Christine."

"No I don't," I insisted. "And Ari is not an alien. I gave birth to her. You fathered her. She's just as much a human child as any other."

"Chrissy, for Christ's sake, Ari is a freak. A delightful, lovable, inexplicable freak."

I threatened to leave Danny if he couldn't love her the way I did. And when she watched us fighting, Ari became frantic, screaming and leaping between us like a boxing referee. We both felt like monsters when that happened, but the arguments continued.

"You don't really love her," I insisted. "You're embarrassed by her."

"You're the one who doesn't love her," he said. "You're in love with a fantasy of her. You picture her graduating from Harvard!"

"Why can't she?" I shouted.

"Well, for one thing, we can't afford to send her there," he said.

I didn't want to laugh but he caught me off guard.

"She'll get student loans like everyone else," I said, smiling despite myself.

But the rift between us continued to deepen. I wanted her to be tutored. I wanted her to go to preschool. I wanted her to wear shoes.

"She hates shoes," Danny said. "Her feet don't belong in shoes."

"She'll adapt."

"How many baby shoes has she already destroyed? She tossed the last pair out the window. A bus ran over them."

"So she'll go to school without shoes. So what?"

"The schools won't let her."

"What about homeschooling?"

“Are you going to quit work?”

“If I have to.”

“Then you’d better move back to Tempe because we won’t be able to afford to live in this city.”

“Maybe I *will* move back to Tempe. At least then Ari will have grandparents who love her.”

“Oh, please. I’ve seen how delighted your parents are to have Ari as their granddaughter.”

“Fuck you!” I shouted.

“Oh, good. That’s great. Let’s see if we can teach Ari to sign ‘Fuck you.’”

A week later, Danny packed up and moved in with Armando. A month after that, I quit my job and flew back home to Arizona with Ari. I had to get a letter for the airline from a doctor saying that my daughter was my emotional support animal. I was incensed at the idea, but otherwise Ari would have had to be put in a cage and fly with the baggage.

Maybe I’d become a teacher, I thought, as the jet pierced the stratosphere at 600 mph. A special needs teacher for exceptional children like my daughter. Maybe that was my destiny.

\* \* \*

“Hi,” Danny said, standing over me. I opened my eyes and there he was, without the beard he had grown after Ari was born. I felt dumbfounded, as if I had fallen asleep in France and awoken in Fresno. “You were out a long time,” he said. “We were really worried about you.”

“Out where?” I asked.

“Good question,” he said, laughing quietly.

“Where’s Ari?” I asked, suddenly anxious.

“Who?”

“Ari. Our daughter.”

“Is that what you want to call her?”

“That’s her name.”

“Okay.”

“Is she all right?”

“She’s gorgeous. Wait ’til you see her.”

I managed to sit up, although my still-inflated stomach got in the way.

“Where is she?” I demanded, feeling suspicious now.

“She’s in the nursery,” Danny said. “I don’t know what anesthetic they gave you, Christine, but you’re still really out of it.”

I would learn that I had given birth to a normal, healthy, six-pound-two-ounce, twenty-one-inch daughter with blonde hair and blue eyes, whom Danny would eventually name Felicia. But I was unable to overcome the conviction that I had already given birth to another daughter, and that my other daughter had mysteriously disappeared.

My mother flew out from Tempe, and she and Danny had to do most of the mothering for our new daughter while I alternately slept and cried. I resented them both for making such a fuss over Felicia when they had been so unloving to Ari. I missed my little girl's furry, sinewy arms and her immediate ability to cling to me. Felicia seemed so backward in comparison. All she did was sleep and cry. Even her smell seemed alien; it lacked the musky nuance of Ari's little body. And Felicia showed no interest in the baby books on the rare occasion that I roused myself to read to her.

Danny insisted I see a psychiatrist, who prescribed an antidepressant called Cymbalta. The psychiatrist referred me to a therapist, Rowena, whom I had to see once a week. I told her about Ari, and she said I had something called a fixed delusion.

"Ari is not a fixed delusion," I said, enraged. "She's my daughter, my little baby. She's the love of my life."

Rowena urged me to tell Danny about the dream. She kept calling it "the dream," probably so I'd accept that the Ari I gave birth to only existed in my mind.

I went back to work two months after Felicia's birth. There was no Tante Sophie to care for her, just a nanny who also cleaned the apartment while the baby was sleeping.

I called this daughter "Flea," which Danny said was unkind. I tried to love little Flea, to find things about her that I could care about. But I was very bitter. *She* would be able to go to the best schools like other so-called normal children. *She* would have the capacity to speak, to recite the alphabet and memorize her times tables and go to proms and learn to drive a car. *She* would have a career and a husband and a human life. *She* could even go to Harvard if she wanted to. It was so unfair.

Danny spent nearly every weekend with Felicia, wheeling her in her pram until she could sit up, and then pushing her stroller, first to our neighborhood Tompkins Square Park, and then across town to the jazz and bongo-filled Washington Square, with excursions to the pungent little kosher food shops on Orchard Street and the bohemian cafes in Greenwich Village, sometimes by himself and often with Armando, who'd become her unofficial godfather. (He even stopped smoking dope when he was around her.) Occasionally I tagged along, although my presence felt irrelevant. Mostly I stayed home and napped. After a while, Danny became so upset with me that he took to sleeping on the living room sofa. He kept threatening to move out and take Felicia with him if I didn't shape up.

Finally, when Flea was eleven months old and could toddle competently, I bundled her up and we took a subway downtown to the Staten Island Ferry. As the train roared south, I recalled with a smile how Ariadne had swung from the overhead bars and bitten the game little fellow who caught her. Flea reached up and put her fingers on my lips, as if she'd never seen me happy until that moment. I noticed how long her eyelashes had grown and realized she was becoming beautiful, no thanks to me, of course. I felt sorry for her, as if she were some other mother's orphaned child.

At the zoo we rented a stroller; Felicia picked one that was painted gray with pink ears like Dumbo the elephant. We visited the lions and tigers and gazelles and snakes and leopards and bears and zebras. We ate hot dogs and potato chips and frozen yogurt and freshly made fudge, which gave Flea a comical little chocolate mustache and goatee. After

lunch, Flea had a pony ride, her first, which made her shriek with delight. Finally, we went looking for the monkeys. Past the gorillas, there were several cages filled with cavorting baboons and chimps, and then the smaller monkeys—howlers, tamarinds, and capuchins. There were a couple of big male capuchins, several females, and a few youngsters.

“Your sister Ari looked a little like that one,” I said, pointing to a small monkey with light-colored fur who was grooming a larger one with a baby clinging to her breast. I wondered if the small one was Ariadne. She looked at me once or twice without any recognition, and I was relieved. I didn’t want her to remember me or the miserable life she’d led caged in my living room. She seemed content and at home in the enclosure, designed to emulate the lowland forests of South America. I watched her merrily swing from branch to branch like a Cirque du Soleil acrobat, and my eyes welled up with tears.

“Ari would have loved having a baby sister like you, Flea. She would have tickled you and combed the bugs out of your hair and taught you how to say your name in sign language.”

I signed her name for her. Then I signed “Ari” and “banana.”

Flea looked up at me and giggled, a little clear drool leaking from the sides of her mouth. She said “Maa-ma.” She’d probably said it hundreds of times before, but this time I heard it.



# A Guide to Planting Trees (with Supplemental Notes)

LOIS ANN GOOSSEN

FICTION

## 1. DIG A ROUNDED HOLE AT LEAST TWICE THE WIDTH OF THE ROOT BALL.

Find the shovel, begin to dig. Stop digging, measure the root ball then measure the hole. Measure precisely. Be aware how your wife points out your careless attention to detail. Tell yourself that you are planting this tree any way you want, and your wife can keep her opinion to herself. Feel smug and righteous. Consider the reasons why all of a sudden it's so important to make sure this is done right. Begin to sweat and notice your neighbor, Bob, is drinking beer and yelling at his kids to shut the fuck up. Wish that Bob would shut the fuck up. Begin to feel that twinge in your shoulder. Take a break. Go to the kitchen for water and an aspirin.

## 2. CENTER THE ROOT BALL IN THE HOLE AND MAKE SURE THE ROOT FLARE IS AT OR SLIGHTLY ABOVE THE RIM OF THE HOLE. BE SURE TO WATER BEFORE PLANTING TO LOOSEN THE ROOTS AND MAKE SURE THAT THE HOLE IS CLEAN OF ANY ORGANIC DEBRIS SUCH AS TWIGS, LEAVES, OR PINE CONES.

Get down on your knees and with your bare hands scoop everything out of the hole. Note the sweet, mud-pie smell of the damp dirt, watch earthworms wiggle to safety. Wonder how much earthworm excrement you are getting on your hands. Look at your hands, wipe them on your jeans. Put the tree in the hole. It's a black cherry like the one you had in the yard when you were a kid. Picture the flowers that bloomed that one year at Mother's Day. Recall how they smelled like spring. See your mother, who is now dead, smile at the flowers you gave her, along with burned toast, Cheerios, and scorched eggs for breakfast. Realize you are now too big to hide in the branches when this tree matures. Regret this.

## 3. WHILE HOLDING THE TREE UPRIGHT, FILL THE HOLE WITH THE DISPLACED SOIL AND PACK WELL TO ELIMINATE EXCESS AIR POCKETS.

Let the tree tip at an angle while you get the shovel you left on the porch. Return, scoop the dirt into the hole. Realize the hole is too deep. Pull the tree out, add more dirt, then put the tree in again. Attempt to ignore Bob who is now yelling at his dog whimpering near the fence. Agonize whether you were that big of an asshole before you stopped drinking. Resist the urge to go over there and knock Bob on his ass. Hope his kids will be

OK, know they likely will not be. Try to remember your dad. Recall the smell of beer, cigarettes, and Jovan Musk for Men. See him wearing his favorite denim jacket and the back of his head as he drives away in the mud-caked blue Ford truck. Hear the tires squeal on the asphalt. Finish adding the last of the dirt. Press firmly. Hope the worms are going to be OK down there. Figure that they're worms, they likely will be.

**4. ADD QUALITY FERTILIZER THAT CONTAINS MYCORRHIZAE TO SUPPORT HEALTHY ROOT GROWTH.**

Go to the shed for the fertilizer. Search everywhere, insisting out loud to no one that it's here somewhere. Find it under your wife's geranium pot. Regret throwing the geranium at your wife's stupid cousin during her birthday party with all her other stupid relatives. Attempt to be forgiving, even though the cousin had it coming and should have kept her fat mouth shut. Try not to see the look on your son's face as the geranium flew through the air. Be glad it missed his head. Read the directions on the fertilizer bag. Correctly measure, then mix in water. Read that mycorrhizae forms a "mutually beneficial relationship between the plant and root fungus." Be amazed how nature works. Speculate if your wife is like the fungi or the root. Give up trying to figure it out. Feel lucky to have her.

**5. ADD A FEW INCHES OF ORGANIC MULCH AND WATER YOUR TREE DEEPLY.**

Place wood clippings on the fresh-turned and fertilized dirt. Watch the water soak into the dirt and clippings. Think about the future and wonder if you will be around to see this tree mature. Hope that you don't fuck this up.

# Wound

ALEXANDRINE J. OGUNDIMU

FICTION

When I entered the bathroom, it became a holy space. During adolescence, despite no lock on the door, my parents tacitly provided me with a single hour of time to myself.

Kids who are given time will make the best use of it they can. Watch the clock, spend the exact amount of allotted time on their preferred activity. Some masturbate, or style their hair, apply makeup. Others bathe until they are pink and raw.

I chose to attack my leg with a kit of tools I kept in my room, hidden in a shoebox under the bed. The nail file, the toothpick, the needle-nose pliers I had spirited away from my father's toolbox.

\* \* \*

It began as grooming. I would pick the hairs out of my left thigh until it became smooth, feel the glide of my palm over unmarred skin. Shiver with a pleasurable charge at the sensation. The growth of my body hair, long and coarse, was by far the most upsetting discovery that puberty forced upon me. It was dark, curly hair, not-white hair, immigrant, Nigerian hair. Hair that grew thick and lustrous from the scalp, demanded to be treated chemically, plied with heat and product, beat and trim into socially acceptable styles.

But it grew in bent, sharp forms out of the body. It scratched and curved, would not be ignored.

After a couple sessions of plucking the hairs with tweezers, one by one, a great relief washed over me at the smoothness of my thighs. Then, days later, I found to my horror that they had returned, thicker than before. Worse, they were ingrown, unpleasant infected bumps under my brown skin. So I had to dig into my skin with the blunt tweezers, tear out roots, bleed. The divine smoothness, then, would not last.

Ineffective. I graduated to nail clippers.

In order to extract the hairs, I would have to break the skin. When the hair grew near the surface, this was a clean process. In time, they grew deeper. Now, I had to draw blood each time I removed hair. The follicles would scab over, but the hair continued to grow. So I would breach the scab and dig, ever lower, until at last I could remove the offending strand. I was going too deep, tearing too much. I would bleed, and the hair would be so short that the tweezers would slip. I would have to either pull for minutes at a time or commit myself to ripping the meat out with the hair.

It hurt. I liked the hurt.

\* \* \*

My father, in an ill-informed attempt to enforce heterosexuality, would show me music videos. Starting around when I was fourteen, we would sit together in silence and watch VH1. Mostly R&B and a little hip-hop. Suggestive videos featuring scantily clad dancers and a firm narrative of male-female desire.

He was, like most Nigerians, staunchly conservative. He believed in corporal punishment. His only concessions to middle-class American expectations were to apply force infrequently and to use an open hand in lieu of a switch.

My father, as he sipped glasses of brandy, one after another, killing the bottle slowly with modest pours so my mother and I wouldn't notice, would postulate on the taxonomy of the faggot. Never the *homosexual*, mind you. Faggot.

To him, it was a result of poor breeding and excess masculine libido while isolated from women. That's why priests fucked young boys, the pedophile being the cousin of the faggot. The faggot, and the lady faggot as well, represented perversion and rape, predators in gender-inappropriate clothing. They were the apotheosis of American decadence, and he was very proud that he wasn't raising one.

It is difficult to pin down exactly what about homosexuality my father disapproved of. On some level it was clear that he found the act of gay sex revolting, but it's unclear if he found the acts themselves or the actors more offensive. My father is a meticulous groomer who does not own a pair of blue jeans.

One day we saw a TLC video for a song called "Hands Up." It prominently featured several male strippers. To me, there was little difference between them and the women twerking on-screen a moment ago. I filed those men, with no intention, under the same category as the other dancers. There was a similar, albeit distinct, attraction to them. I had never seen a man in an explicitly sexualized manner, never had the idea that men could be an object of lust. But now I did, and that knowledge could not be lost. And what was worse was that I wanted to be like the women on screen so that men would want me.

My leg ached from where I had cut into it that afternoon.

I was not a woman, so this attraction would breach the narrative of male-female desire my father was attempting to nurture. Fearing the application of his open palm, I wisely decided not to remark upon these desires, nor to act upon any similar ones until after I became an adult.

\* \* \*

Soon my life revolved around removing the hair and skin from the leg, cleansing the leg with burning antiseptic, hiding the leg. Making excuses for the leg.

In time, the original purpose of the ritual was subsumed into the doing of the thing itself. I had a whole system involving a nail file, rubbing alcohol, the clippers, and various other bits of metal. I didn't know why I would spend an hour or more removing the hairs from my leg, blood pooling on the surface to be staunched with alcohol and toilet paper. I only knew that I must do it. This is the nature of addiction: whatever the substance was meant to alleviate is replaced, utterly, by the substance itself. Self-harm is strange among

addictions, much like how gambling is strange, in that it is an action taken and not a substance consumed. However, the mechanism of addiction is much the same.

I would often question my own motives during this ritual. At first I believed it was a simple wish to rid myself of the hairs on my leg. But then, why did I not shave?

\* \* \*

When I was about twelve and the leg was still intact, my mother called me into the living room. She held an old Polaroid camera.

"Take off your clothes," she said. "I want you to see what you look like."

I obeyed. I removed my polo shirt, as I was only allowed to wear collared shirts, and my khaki pants, as I was not allowed to wear jeans. The socks went too. I stood in the room in nothing but underwear. At that time I wore white briefs bought in bulk from Walmart. The offending hairs had already begun to come through, stiff and uncomfortable upon my legs.

"Stand still," she said. The camera flashed, and the motor whined and spat out a single floppy picture.

It flashed again. The camera cheerfully produced another photo.

"Turn to the side."

Flash. Photo.

"Now your back."

Flash. Photo.

"Okay. You can put your clothes back on."

We waited together at the kitchen table for the photos to develop: white giving way to faint, washed out browns and yellows, the black of my hair coming in first. It was early fall, but the chill came in faster that year. The linoleum chill came through my socks.

"OK," she said. The photos were arranged in front of me.

She did not have to tell me what to look for. The brownness of my skin and darkness of my lustrous, unkempt hair was considered a boon. It was the shape of my body that offended. I was, to be blunt, disgusting. My flesh lacked the tightness expected of adolescent boys and was padded with fat. It fell in bulbous lumps where my pectoral muscles should have been, hung in rolls over the band of my underwear, bunched beneath the elastic of the leg holes. My proportions were strange—too much leg and not enough torso. And my posture was bad, hunched and crooked, accentuating the lumpiness of my frame.

"Do you see?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

"You are fat. I do not know what to do about it. But you should lose some weight."

I saw something else that she did not. Upon viewing the shots, it was clear to me that I was not, and never had been, a boy at all.

That night, alone and fresh out of the shower, I examined the hairs upon my left thigh. The largest one stood out, an offending stalk in a meadow of fuzz. I found tweezers in the cabinet, squeezed the hair by the root. Grasped, pulled.

\* \* \*

As I dug ever deeper, the time for recovery grew longer. Until at last, my leg did not heal at all.

I tore off larger pieces of skin, cutting with the nail clippers then pulling them off with the tweezers. For the deepest hairs, I would dig with the pliers.

The various smaller bumps, the open sores that used to be hair follicles, they began to converge. What was once a constellation became a galaxy, a vast swatch of broken skin, ever bleeding. I cleansed the area with soap and doused it with alcohol, the pain eliciting screams I released into hand towels gripped between my teeth.

At first I used large Band-Aids to cover it up, but they wouldn't stick. So I faked an ankle injury following an odious sporting event, then convinced my mother to purchase an elastic bandage. I fastened various pads out of gauze I stole from her medicine cabinet, before finally resorting to ripping up my old T-shirts to staunch the leaks.

Every day, I continued to remove the bandage and inspect the leg for new hairs. Wherever I found them, I attacked. The pain was now so constant that I did not notice the fresh hurt from each stab. More and more of my allotted hour was taken up by this, forcing me to spend less time showering than I would have liked. My parents and friends remarked unfavorably upon the smell. I found it distinctly masculine.

\* \* \*

He didn't like the way I ran, my father. It was clumsy and almost like skipping, unmistakably feminine.

After a piss-poor performance at soccer practice, he drove me to a different park. He pulled a ball out of the trunk.

"You run like a—" and then he stopped short. The word caught in his throat, so implausible was it to him that I was anything but a strong, virile young man. He couldn't see me growing my hair, the lasers, the pain of breast buds, dresses, tights, sensible heels. He couldn't see me.

I dribbled the ball up and down the field, lungs burning, feet refusing to behave, the very image of unmasculine incompetence. Blood ran down my leg from the bandages and a purple-edged blackening spread from under the edges, across what should have been healthy flesh. Fatigue set in as I ran back and forth, egged on by his bellowing commands, wanting just to rest.

At last I collapsed on the grass.

"Get up." He stood over me, monolithic.

But I couldn't. I was done, and it was over. The leg burned, in more ways than one.

"Get up, you lazy bum."

I pulled myself to my knees. "Stop it. Please."

He buried the toe of his loafer in my gut. I bowled over with pain.

"Get up, you wimp. You sissy."

I dragged myself to my feet. He passed me the ball. As I moved to half-heartedly dribble, his own leg shot out, taking out my shin, bending my ankle the wrong way.

“Stop crying. Walk it off. You don’t want them to think you’re a faggot, right? Then don’t act like one.”

\* \* \*

When I got home, I bit down on a leather belt while sitting in the bathroom. Crying in hatred, I brought the nail file down into the most festering part of the wound. Over, and over, and over again.

“What are you doing in there?” my mother called through the bathroom door.

I had allowed my hour to elapse. In a panic, I rewrapped my leg with an old bandage. Somehow this caused a new, searing pain I was not accustomed to and I yelped.

“Just a minute,” I responded through chewed leather.

The tools were lying on the counter, caked in blood. I ran the sink and began to scrub it off as best I could, without any success.

“I’m coming in,” she said. “You spend too much time in there.”

“No.” I threw the half-cleaned tools into the box and began pulling the leg of my sweatpants over the sloppy bandage.

The door opened, and I made eye contact with my mother. Her face was a vision of fury. But then she looked at the open box on the counter and my poorly wrapped leg, and her face began to take on another, worse character.

Without asking my consent, she moved forward and seized the bandage. I protested as loudly as I could, but she ignored me, pulling the wrap off with increasing speed. When she saw what was underneath, her mouth opened and let out a strangled noise I will never forget.

The wound was no longer red and angry. It had begun to take on other colors—blue and black and rotten yellow. Dark blood and pus alike leaked out and ran, gently, down to my knee, as lines of putrefaction channeled outward. It was less a wound and more a crater, exposing layers of dead meat, down to something too pale and too hard. How it functioned, I did not know. I do not remember a smell, but it looked as if there was one.

I began to cry. She admonished me, asking questions. What was it? How had this happened? Why did I mutilate myself like this?

There was no way for me to explain. I had never heard of depression, or anxiety, or obsessive compulsive disorder, and certainly not gender dysphoria. I wasn’t even aware of the term “self-harm.” So, I just repeated the only thing I could think of, over and over.

“Don’t tell Dad. Don’t tell Dad. Please, don’t tell Dad.”



# You, Me, and *Yahtzee!*

NOELLE ROSE

FICTION

I've got a mangled teddy bear on the operating table when I find you on 1HW, or One-Hit Wonder, the exclusive online forum for singles seeking one-night hookups with former boy band members. You're grayer, anchored by those same green eyes, that charming crooked smile.

"Text Julie," I command my phone as I finish stitching behind the bear's sand-colored ear, the light from my headlamp caught in its bulging plastic eyes.

Weeks earlier: Julie and I stretch out on our stomachs in bed, shrieking into my laptop screen as I type out my hobbies into a profile, Julie's pink bunny slippers dangling off her toes, the footwear she insists on wearing on since her divorce became final.

*Looking cute down there has new meaning*, her mantra.

\* \* \*

*What I'd do to get with you:* Download and complete the most invasive paperwork of my life. List the exact generic names of every medication I've taken in the last ten years down to UTI treatments. Name the remote birthplaces of my grandparents. Tally the breeds of all the dogs I've ever loved. I text Julie as I slip the document page by page onto the scanner at work, looking around to make sure no one is watching—in the clean plastic head cap that crunches over my ears, I feel cloaked in the dirt of my secret.

*That's more work than I had to do before my wedding!* Julie sends back with a laugh-cry emoji.

A sensation in my chest like a ripple through water when I imagine marrying you.

\* \* \*

I arrive at the restaurant early and camp out in the women's restroom where there's a ceramic tureen of mints wrapped in shiny green cellophane. *Your eyes*—I unwrap three and pop them into my mouth. I scrub my hands—the soap smells like a flower that ends in *-anarium*. *You'll think I smell like a grandma*, I muse, worried the scent will obscure the lonely constellation my body has become.

When I am composed enough, I sit at *our table* where I imagine I will confess all the times I have loved in the same way you have in your songs, and all the times it went wrong.

I'm studying the door as you enter, your long gray hair sashaying behind you, green shirt buttoned all the way up to hide any hint of your chest. *Lilian* crawls out from under your sleeve and down your arm in curvy black letters, the name of your only child, mothered by a woman who had loved only the poster version of you. The teenaged hostess with a floppy red mohawk leads you across the dining room in a way that suggests she's too young to know who you are.

\* \* \*

I can't talk about the picture of you still tacked to the wall of my closet, hidden behind the pencil skirts and cardigans I've since grown into. I can't tell you that yours was my first concert without a chaperone, how I sat quietly in a passenger's seat next to Julie as she accelerated her dad's blue station wagon too quickly up the hill, tires squealing against asphalt. How I had dressed myself in a T-shirt that went down to my knees, shrouding the developing curves I was weary of, and how I returned to see you a year later in a belly shirt with a navel piercing given to me by Julie in her basement, the bite of the ice cube against my stomach before the needle. I can only talk to you about what I do for a living.

"Teddy Bear Surgeon ..." you repeat back to me with the same trepidation with which you chew your omelet. I watch your arm muscles tense as you move your fork to your mouth, the letters in *Lilian* locking around your bicep. "Sounds like fun," though your lack of inflection suggests your sentiment is insincere.

"I think so!" I hear the wine color my tone defensive. "I mean, you're a doctor without all the medical school debt."

I tell you the bear hospital is run out of the owner, Miss Lydia's, coach house, which sits to the side of her main property, how the whole thing sounds like the operation of a woman who would be labeled "eccentric," though she appears anything but: a lawyer, she leaves for her day job before the sun rises, her suits black and navy and mauve, and on Saturdays, she dons a crisp white lab coat to tend to her bear clinic.

I tell you that on an average day, we receive nearly fifty teddy bears in need of repair. They are delivered to us with their heads torn off, their arms lacerated, their button eyes hanging from threads—the polyester stuffing oozing from their necks and limbs somehow more devastating than blood.

\* \* \*

I excuse myself to use the restroom and crouch on the closed toilet seat lid to text Julie. *I AM TALKING TO HIM ABOUT TEDDY BEARS.*

She responds with a sobbing emoji, then, *Wait, where are you?*

I send back a smiling turd emoji followed by *room.*

*Ugh, girl! Go back out there and change the subject!* Julie texts, followed by ... *is he cute?!*

I respond with three flame emojis.

As I reapproach the table, I see you have it out: the Contract, spread between your half-drunk glass of iced tea and the plastic basket of bread, the undone trifold causing the

document to hunch up a little. I look around to make sure no one else sees and feel my cheeks burn.

There, as I resume my seat, are the 2D renderings of a male and female body intertwined in the Corkscrew, the *Yahtzee!*, and the Shooting the Moon—the three positions we’ve agreed to for our arrangement. Weeks ago, I’d sat at my desk and selected these from a list of diagrammed pairs of bodies balanced on each other in seemingly impossible ways, their faceless heads buried in between stick-like legs. Julie giggled as I scrolled down the list, clicking the box next to each position I’d be willing to assume, knowing you would have the final say on what shapes we’d make. Julie took hits on her joint and snorted out laughter as I read aloud the names of each figure, arranged in order of difficulty—the Tilt-A-Whirl, the Little House on the Prairie, the Dethroned Miss America.

“You have to pick at least one hard one so he doesn’t think you’re a *prude!*” Julie blurted out, smoke curling out of her nose and rolling down her neon sweatshirt as if she were a love-spurned dragon.

Two months earlier, I’d sat with Julie on her bathroom floor as she confessed to me that she couldn’t recall a single time her ex had looked into her eyes over the course of their marriage. An actor, his gaze was always trained on the spot between her eyebrows, she said. I’d squeezed her hands as the radiator clicked and sputtered beside us.

You’re pointing to *Yahtzee!*, where the flat woman figure sits atop the lap of the man, her arms and legs stretched open in a star position so that her hands, feet, and face are arranged like the dots on the five side of a dice. “I’m really looking forward to this one,” you say, looking into my eyes in a way that unhinges me.

I try to imagine the strength required to hold myself up in *Yahtzee!*, the angles my limbs will be asked to sustain. I selected the position from the list certain you would never choose something that would force me to work so hard—in your songs, your love was something you offered me simply because I was there, wanting.

“I haven’t even told you the most important part of my job!” I hear myself say, cupping my hand over yours and *Yahtzee!*. “Once we fix up the bear—you know, restuff the torso, find the right color thread, sew the eyes back on—we make a small incision in the chest or back, usually where there’s already an existing seam, and insert a small plush heart that’s tattooed with the name of the hospital and the date of surgery.”

It isn’t until you place your hand on top of mine that I realize my fingers are rattling the flatware. You lift my hand as you would your napkin and sandwich it between your palms, applying a pressure that seems both tender and clinical. This gesture feels more intimate than those pictured below, somehow, but I am unsure if you are attempting to get me to stop talking about stuffed animals or acknowledging the stunning logistics I’m willing to perform for you, while you need only sit and receive.

*Pips*, I remember, the name of the cratered dots on dice—my grandmother taught me.

In my second week working at the bear clinic, a mother, thin and dressed impeccably in taupe, came to the ER desk in tears. Her toddler's teddy bear—an expensive European make with posable limbs and maple-colored fur composed of a blend of mohair, cashmere, and pure wood felt—had fallen victim to the family pug, who'd taken the mother's efforts to release the bear from its jaws as an invitation to play tug-of-war. The bear, touted as “indestructible,” was delivered in pieces, its snout detached from the rest of the head, leaving nothing but a stuffing-spitting crater of a face, the severed plush paws loose in a plastic baggy the woman placed on the counter. I began to tell her that I was not allowed to admit special-made bears to the hospital, that the bear's manufacturer surely had its own rehab program and would allow the woman to send it back for repairs or replacement, but she burst into tears, her small shoulders shaking under her coat. She said the bear had been her father's, the last object he had gifted her before he died. There was no other bear like it, there'd been no other father like hers.

Moved, I took the woman's hands. “I'll see what I can do,” I said, then arranged the bear parts on a doll-sized stretcher and carried them back to my operating room—a typical office cubicle with the exception of the sewing needles strewn about the L-shaped desk, the swatches of plush fur used for “transplants” arranged in color order on a shelf, the spools of thread stacked in a pyramid next to a framed photo of Julie and me at a college party, our young faces soft and glassy eyes attempting to focus on the camera as we swirled red cups of beer in our hands.

Teddy bear surgery is similar to human surgery in that it requires a lot of the same supplies—there are rubber gloves to limit the amount of natural oil the fur is exposed to; there are purple and green scrubs with teddy bears printed all over; there are headlamps and hair caps and face masks.

In lieu of an X-ray machine, I photographed the bear and projected the image onto a large whiteboard on the wall of the cubicle, where I marked up my plans for surgery, circling the most concerning areas and noting the type of stitch I needed to use. I had to work quickly but carefully—if Miss Lydia found me working on a prohibited bear, I would be relegated to the incineration room to package the remains of “BBRs” (Bears Beyond Repair) into tiny urns. I poked my gloved fingers through the cavities in the bear's torso and limbs, the fur brittle and fraying against my hands. I scrutinized my stack of spools for just the right thread.

I worked for three hours, closing split seams with careful ladder stitches, stabbing gold silk thread into the bear's plush body and pulling it through. I felt myself breathing hard against my face mask, aware of all the barriers between myself and my patient. When I finished, the bear was like new, its fur shining under the light of my headlamp. As I sunk a heart through the chest seam into a soft cotton cavity, I came to understand the profundity of a successful repair.

\* \* \*

I study the diagrammed bodies that are to be ours in a matter of minutes. You let go of my hand and lift your glass, tilting it toward me to invite me to toast. We *clink* and finish our

remaining beverages at the same pace. I gulp down Chardonnay in an attempt to become thirteen again, when I knew that what I felt for you was love.

It's 1 p.m., and most of the diners have emptied the restaurant to return to their normal nine-to-five desk jobs, leaving me, Teddy Bear Surgeon, and you, Dream Hunk, almost alone. The sun slides out from behind heavy clouds and floods the dining room with afternoon light, catching the hairs of your beard—more of a wintry mix than I had noticed before, speckled with bits of egg white. I imagine kissing you for the first time, tasting the sour slurry of iced tea and crème fraîche behind your lips, the same mouth you opened in song to me years before as I drifted off to sleep with the radio on, as I stood on a grassy hill that seemed miles away from your stage, our bodies separated by beach towels, coolers, and a herd of awkward, gyrating children.

I must be staring too long at your beard—you quickly wipe away the egg flecks with a napkin. Our server comes to collect our plates, and I snatch up the Contract before she can see it. I look at her in a way that suggests I don't need a box for the mostly untouched BLT in front of me.

"Well, let's make this official," I say with all the confidence I can muster as the server walks away perplexing over my plate. I flatten the Contract in front of me and check off the listed guidelines to reflect that I have adhered to each: I have selected a "1HW-approved" meal option; I have not consumed enough alcohol so as to cloud my ability to grant sexual consent; I have brought along a toothbrush, floss, mouthwash, and red negligee (purchased with teddy bear wages) per your request; I have fully waxed my legs (below and above knee), arms, arm pits, any wisps on my face and chest, and most of my pubic area, save for a small, curly heart. I understand that I am allowed only one friend to confide my experience to (Julie), who must in turn sign a nondisclosure agreement, for which she can create a free profile on 1HW.

There is a place with a large X for me to sign, along with the implications of what will happen should I sign and choose not to go along with the hookup: an unflattering photo pulled from my Facebook profile, edited with a crude black mustache and devil horns, permanently posted on the website's Gross Groupie List.

I consider the new rawness of my body, an untouched glacier in need of melt, the floral scent of hand soap fading from my hands, and sign.

\* \* \*

You lead me to your hotel room three blocks away. We walk alongside each other in relative silence—we don't hold hands. I look around to consider who inhabits the world on a weekday afternoon: the knot of women with identical blow-outs carrying pink square shopping bags; an elderly man and woman on a bench, the man sleeping against the woman's shoulder, his mouth open and eyes shut—in the same way the woman sustains the man's head, the afternoon dwellers seem to prop up what would otherwise be a listless time of day.

I imagine the old woman I will become, the woman who serves teacups of grape juice to her grandchildren and tells them the story of how she met Grandpa because of *Yahtzee!* "What's an *OZZIE?*" little You the Third will ask, his green eyes sparkling and

teeth stained purple, and I'll look past him to the sun streaming through the window onto the carpet, considering an appropriate response.

You turn to look at me as if unsure I'm still beside you. Your eyes are hidden by your sunglasses, your mouth pursed around a cigarette. You point to a gray building across the street and grunt, "There," and a little plume of smoke clouds my face.

I let you walk ahead of me as I remember the girl I thought I'd grown up and out of—the girl to whom a pop song is a deeply blue sky, the girl seated next to You the Third, sipping grape juice and waiting for Grandma to share the world's most perfect love story.

We arrive at your hotel and the bellman holds the door open for us, desperately trying to be as useful as possible. You turn to me, your face expressionless. "Shall we?"

The woman I am considers making one more repair.

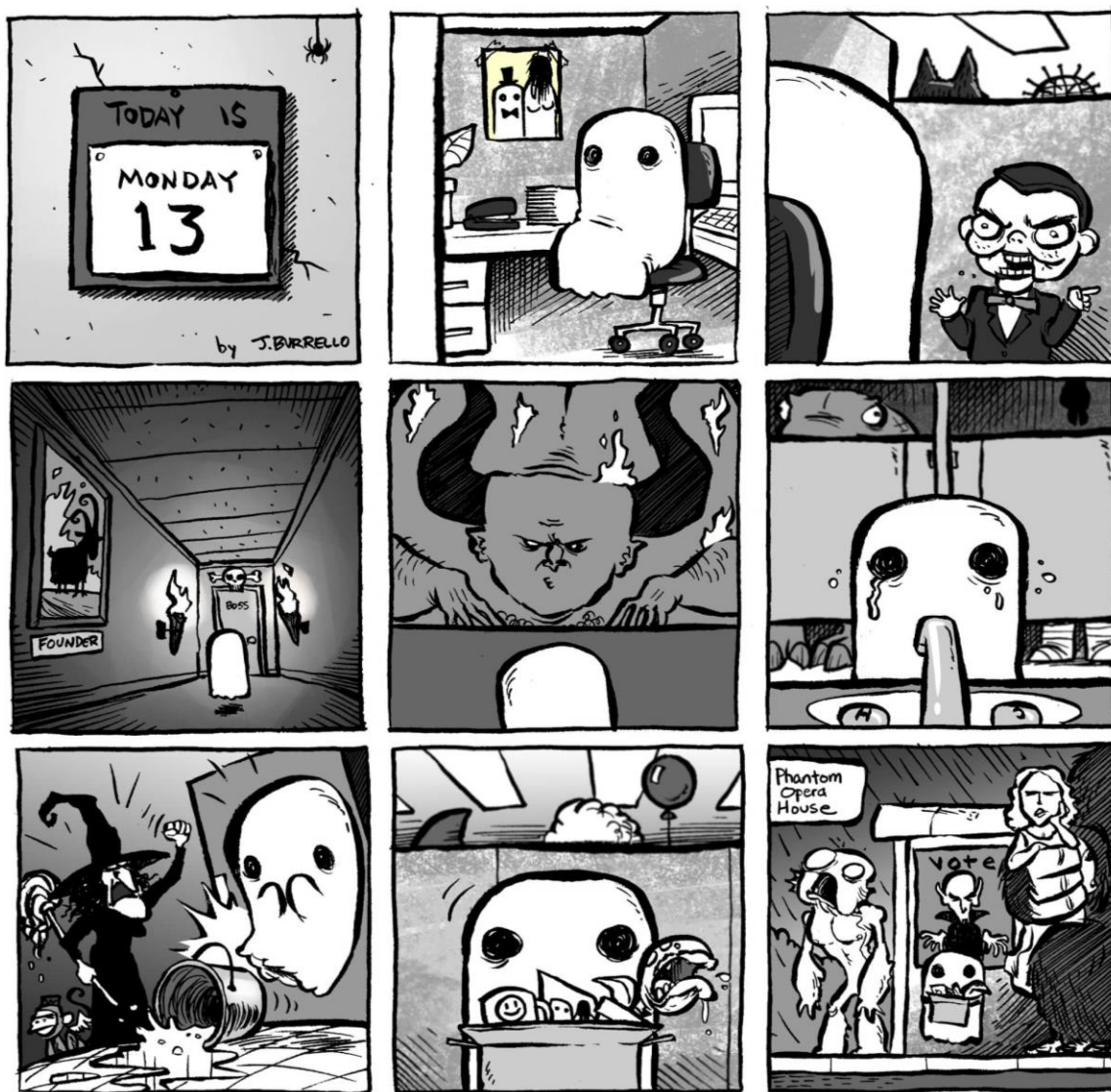
\* \* \*

In the morning, Julie hurls a balled-up garment at me from across her bedroom. I unfold a garish yellow T-shirt with a logo for Tommy's Tacos that had been her ex's. "I'm not going to sleep in *this* anymore. And you need something for a proper walk of shame!" I slide the garment over my head and arms—it falls to my knees, shrouding the spaghetti-strap dress I never took off. "Is it really a walk of shame if there's no sex involved?" I ask her, wondering if what I feel shares any bloodline with shame.

On the sidewalk, I watch the line of trees in front of me sop up the sun like hundreds of glowing sponges. My T-shirt bunches around my thighs, the ironed-on Tommy's Taco logo sticky and warm against my chest. I walk home, a human version of one of my patients, gowned and carrying a new heart no one can see.

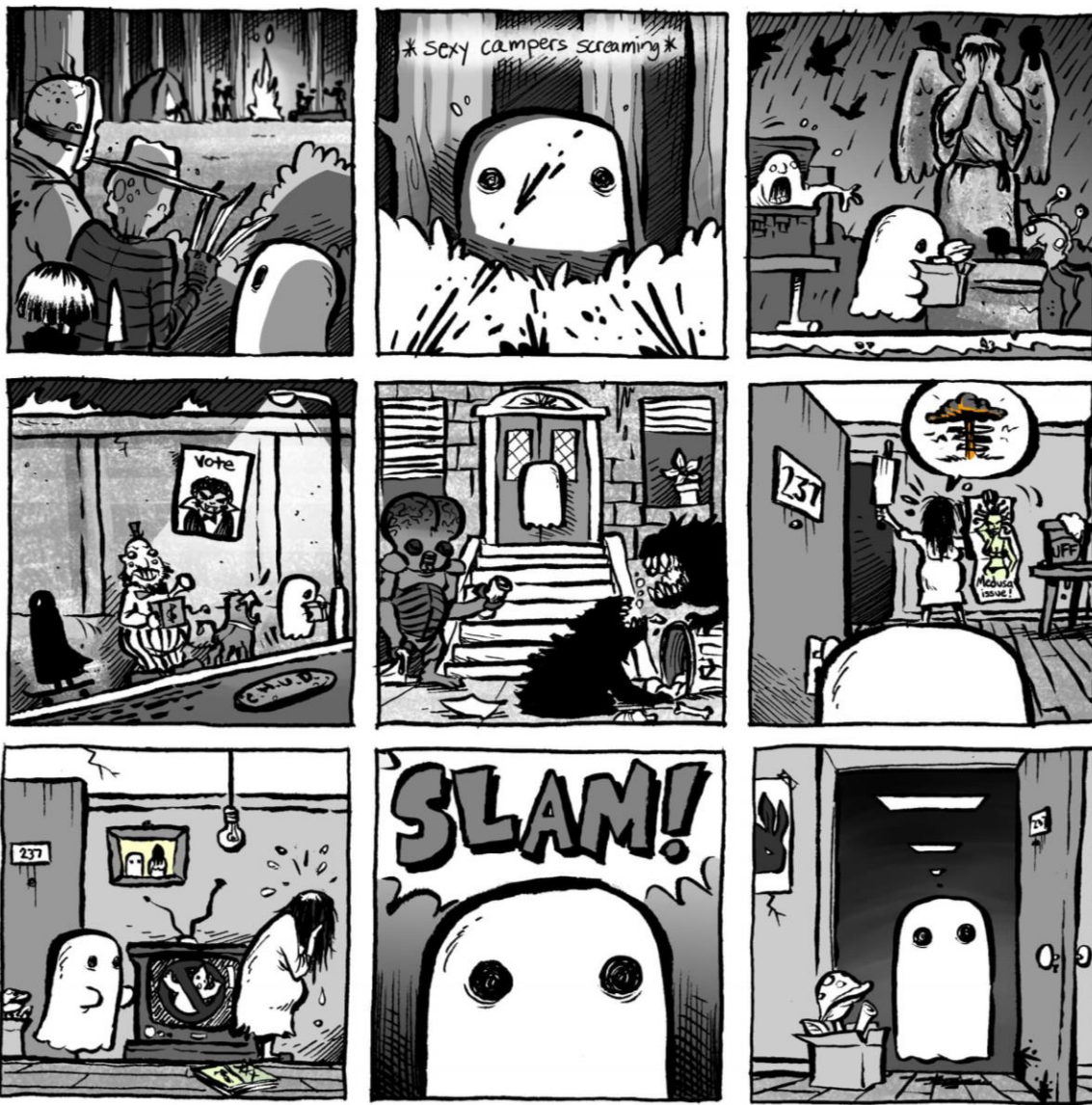
# Monday the Thirteenth

J. BURRELLO









# 318 Boulevard

LUCY VERLAQUE

FICTION • WRITEGIRL CONTRIBUTOR

Until I was eleven years old, I lived in a small town called New Canterbury, Massachusetts. It was four miles south of Salem, and anyone who lived there would tell you it was just as haunted.

The first time I actually went back was nearly twenty years after we moved away. My Aunt Jen had died of a heart attack; her funeral was being held at the community church on May 13. Upon hearing the news, my brother and I immediately booked a hotel room.

After the funeral, we took a walk down Main Street and turned onto Cedar Boulevard—the street our old house was on. Before arriving, I hadn't realized how much of my childhood I'd actually forgotten. The parts I could recollect sat in a dusty box in the back of my mind. But once I saw the pale blue walls of house number 317, that box exploded into a nostalgic mess. Old thoughts rang in my ears, forgotten feelings poked at my chest, hidden memories played so clearly behind my eyes that I couldn't believe my brain had packed them away for so long.

"Oh my God ... Ben, do you remember this?" I said. "I can't believe it. It looks exactly the same."

"Yeah, a little bit ..." he said slowly. He pointed to the front lawn. "You and that girl used to play out there a lot, right?"

I paused. "What girl?"

Ben ran a hand through his hair. "That girl—God, I can't remember her name. That skinny African American girl who lived across the street." He turned around, now pointing at house number 318.

It was far more run-down than our old house. The paint was chipped and flecked with dirt, the bottom window was cracked, the grass in the yard was dying. It looked like no one had lived there in ages.

"I don't know ..." My eyes traced the building, landing on a particularly distinct crack in the wall. It coursed down from the roof of the building all the way to the ground, like a streak of lightning. That's when it all came rushing back.

I first met Elsie when I was seven years old.

I was an awkward-looking child. My hair was bright red and only reached halfway down my neck. I had pasty, freckled skin and limbs that felt too long. The kids at school

made fun of my appearance, and at the time, I didn't blame them. But Elsie was the first person who wanted to be my friend.

Despite living just across the street from each other, I'd never seen her before. The day I met her, she was sitting on our lawn, facing a rosebush. I had been walking the family dog, Sandy, only to come home to this strange girl in my yard. Startled, I gripped Sandy's leash and shuffled toward her.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Elsie. I live across the street." She didn't look up. Her voice was high and squeaky, even for a little kid. "Who are you?"

"I'm Nora. *I live here.*" I watched her for a moment. Her mouth was moving, but no noise was coming out. "What are you doing in my front yard?"

"Talking to my friend." She stuck her left hand out at one of the roses. A bumblebee crawled out of the flower and onto her finger. "His name is Marvin."

My jaw dropped. "You can talk to animals? Are you magic or something?"

She looked at me warily, hesitating to let Marvin fly away, then stood up. "I'm a witch," she whispered. "But you can't tell anyone, 'kay?" She raised her right pinky. I shook it with my own.

An idea came to me. "Can you talk to Sandy?" I asked eagerly, lifting her up clumsily. She was a small dog, but I struggled to hold her in my arms.

Elsie looked into Sandy's eyes. Her mouth moved silently again, pausing every few seconds. Finally she looked back up: "Sandy doesn't like it when you hold her that way." She burst into peals of laughter as my face flushed red. I put the poor dog back on the ground, stroking her apologetically but failing to contain my own embarrassed giggles.

"Do you have any other powers?" I asked.

She grinned impishly. "I can make something amazing happen *right now.*"

She looked up at the sky and began talking, but I couldn't understand anything she was saying. It was as if she was speaking a foreign language. My brain was rejecting the words spilling from her mouth, unable to comprehend the unfamiliar tongue.

She didn't seem to notice my confusion. When she finished, she looked directly at me. Her eyes had transformed from a deep brown to a shocking blue. I marveled at the difference.

"Cool," I breathed, unable to look away. "Was that the power?"

She shook her head. A grin tugged at her lips as she whispered, "*Watch this.*"

Elsie squeezed her eyes shut. A gentle breeze blew her hair back, soft at first but increasingly stronger. The breeze became more and more forceful, spiraling into a violent wind that circled around her petite body like a tornado. Her hair stuck out all around her now; the long, black coils reminded me of Medusa's head of snakes, lashing about in a wild frenzy.

I was motionless as I watched her. She was no more than three feet away from me. I could feel the vibrations of the wind right before my face; it was now moving so fast I could *see* it. It enveloped her like an ocean wave, clear and tendril-like, but almost reflective—I could see sunlight bouncing off of it and even a rippled picture of my own face right before me. It was loud, too, producing a thick whooshing noise, as if the volume of a regular gust of wind had been amplified a hundred times.

The tunnel of wind began to take on a darker hue. I looked up to find the clouds turning gray. Thunder roared above us, almost as deafening as the rushing wind. Sandy whimpered. I gave her a reassuring pat on the head but was too enthralled by Elsie's magic to be of much comfort.

Rain fell from the sky. Like the wind, it started off slowly but was soon erupting from the clouds like bullets. I laughed wildly against the outpour, but my voice was drowned out by the storm. Elsie, still encased in her tunnel, seemed unaffected—while my clothes were soaked in seconds, hers remained dry.

Lightning illuminated the dark sky with a startling blue glow—the same color Elsie's eyes had turned. The crackling brilliance snaked across the sky like an electric vein. I gazed at it, captivated.

There was an earth-shattering *CRACK!* next to us. I was wrenched from my trance. The house across from mine trembled. A black fracture smoldered in the front wall, zigzagging from the roof down to the earth. Smoke drifted in the air, gliding among the rain like an angry ghost. Sandy howled, cowering against my leg. My heart had jumped to my throat.

Elsie's eyes flew open.

"No!" she screamed. The sound was muffled, but her high-pitched voice was distinct enough to cut through the rushing wind. Before I had time to look away, it had all stopped. The lightning vanished, the thunder hushed, the rain ceased, the clouds melted away. The world was silent again, frozen. Elsie stood before me with wide eyes—I could see they had returned to their normal brown. Her hair tumbled back around her face, the thick curls bouncing slowly to a halt. Everything became so still that it felt as if nothing had moved it in the first place.

I could hear a vicious hissing from where the lightning had struck, but I kept my eyes on Elsie. Her hand was clasped over her mouth.

It felt like a lifetime before I broke the silence. "Was that supposed to happen?" I stuttered. My voice was small. I *felt* small.

She shook her head nervously. "That's my house. My mom's gonna *kill* me."

She never created another storm, not that I can remember. But she did show me all sorts of other magic. She had collections of rocks and crystals, herbs and spices, even little animal bones, all with different magical properties. One glassy purple crystal could help you see the future, and one smooth orange one could give you immeasurable strength, at least temporarily.

We would sit on the lawn together, and she would talk to little birds and bunnies and deer, as if she were a fairytale princess. She could make flowers bloom from her bare hands and trace galaxy-like illusions into the air. She could blow flames onto the end of a stick, then put them out with the snap of a finger. She could manipulate time so the minutes we spent together felt like hours.

When my family moved away, my mom promised our new house would be *just* as nice as the old house. We'd make new friends *just* as nice as our old ones. The new town would feel *just* like home in no time. And sure, I got used to it eventually; but I'd left something behind in New Canterbury that I would never find again.

“Nora? You OK?”

I glanced over at Ben. He was looking at me expectantly. I smiled.

“Elsie. That was her name.”

He smiled back. “So you do remember.”

I nodded, taking one more good look at 318 Cedar Boulevard. The fracture in the wall was faint now but unmistakable. Even after nearly two decades, it was ingrained in that old house like a tattoo. I pointed to it.

“She made that happen.”



# Audio, Video, Cogito

JACK BASTOCK

NONFICTION

Here is your life. First, select all the action. When you were the center of attention. When you were in a fast-moving vehicle, or flew. When you fucked and it felt good. When you were in a fight. When you fired a gun. When you had to run. When your life was in danger. When you fell in love. When you cried. When you died.

Hold on to these. Meanwhile, take a pinch of all that is slow, or quiet. The sleep and the wandering. The menial work, the workouts. The chores and errands. When you were alone, or waiting. Sprinkle this between the action—mostly at the start, or in the happy ending.

Now, hold up your event-filled life and make it look bolder. Zoom in on all the faces, as if you were leaning in to kiss them. Slap on filters and make colors tone-rich. Click your fingers to make all the people otherworldly beautiful. Give them clothes to wear that blow in the wind. Make their every step, their very posture, seem as studied as an arabesque.

Now put it all together. No breaks or pauses. Here's some extra life, too, to splice into yours: a fight against evil, and any day that one person saved the day.

Turn the volume up on every noise of importance: a heart-breaking cry, a voice of joy or sadness. Sync every scene to music, with a variable tempo suitable to how you're feeling.

Notice how you've sped up the passage of time, so that an hour goes by in a minute, and a day in an hour. A life in a moment.

Play this new life everywhere: on walls, on-screen, in your hands and pockets. Get attached. Watch to feel awe. Watch to see beauty. Watch to feel fear, sadness, lust, or devotion.

And for the rest of your days let the whole lives of others flash before your eyes.

\* \* \*

Take the vision I have given you above, and tell me what your life has become.

The medium to which I find myself most exposed—and that most affects my body—is audio-video. Learn = video. Reminisce = video. Share art = video. Catwalk, theater, market, stage = = = video. To be clear: this is not a complaint. I show myself larger-and-louder-than-life stories in order to live. My point is that when I say “video,” I really mean all of the above. All the videos, for all the reasons they're screened.

Cut to a shot of a brightly lit phone screen. Cut to a montage of other screens: an open laptop, a drive-in cinema, TVs stacked in store windows, etc. DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

(VOICEOVER): “*My real dependence is on the fantasies and the images that enable them, and thus on any technology that can make images both available and fantastic. Make no mistake: we are dependent on image-technology; and the better the tech, the harder we’re hooked.*”

Image, yes, but don’t forget audio.

Music brings me to tears both more easily and more frequently than any unscored moment of my “real” life. More and more easily than any birth, death, or put-down; more and more easily than any breakup/breakdown I’ve seen or gone through.

I cherish the hour or so after a movie, when the story spills and spreads like a vapor from the exit to the cinema. The city is shaken up, in a post-filmic daze; the bokeh glow of streetlights and the crowds and the storm clouds as vivid, for a time, as the frames of the screening/saga/show that had me hooked. The cars and the passersby hold an intrigue well in excess of an evening commute, or a casual rendezvous. Before, their velocities were explained away by capitalism or the urban traffic grid. But now they are the *dramatis personae*, and the fast pace of the city is an effect of the editing.

Tell me, when will I be rescued from the top of that tower, by a stud-savior played by Zachary Quinto? Will there be a disaster in which I’ll play my part as hero? Will I have a place—indeed a role—not here in the street but in the epic twenty-four-frames-per-second cosmos?

I catch my hair blowing in the reflection of a storefront window, or the mirror of a parked car, and I am suddenly standing on a windy cliff face, high above a valley where a battle still rages.

Holding the rim of my umbrella at the level of my eyes, I seem to line it up with the horizon of Beyoncé’s hat brim in *Formation*.

The long thin water bottle in my one hand is a scepter; the bag in my other is the orb. Queen Elizabeth/Cate Blanchett is Queen, but we are all three of us in full coronation regalia.

Cut to the inside of an office. David Shields sits in an armchair, where he faces the camera. Books line the shelves in the background. SHIELDS: “*Movies are the synthetic injection of these feelings [of love and survival]: the whole world comes into focus and seems alluring and dangerous; our lives, which aren’t lived on the grand scale, are lived on the grand scale. Give me the heated-up myth, each of us practically prays to the screen: make life seem coherent and big and free of my qualifying consciousness.*”

Yes, but—I am as much moved by (music) videos that don’t always have stories, plots, or characters. What gets me going is the ear-eye spectacle: the sparks of a bonfire, the meteor shower in the sky.

In the street I hear no cars that rattle or whine, but only those that purr. For that is how the vehicles sound in the twenty-third century, courtesy of the foley sounds for the sci-fi films that are my favorite flavor.

In the street I hear a low, loud bellow in the distance, and it is a reminder that danger could be anywhere, that threats worse than Tripods could be hidden in real cities, where a rather different *War of the Worlds* is ongoing.

Every outfit should aspire to snakehood, seen for what it is only when it is moving. Kimono robes that trail like capes; jackets with bulky trims that jiggle; ponchos that drape

all over (and must be cast up, like a toga, should the wearer need their hands or fingers); long, long parkas that fan out at the brim-base, where they twist with my every step.

Something must be playing at all times, unless it is raining (loudly) outside. My earbuds are a vital organ. My speakers are an external appendage. They pump anything and everything—from a white noise loop while I sleep to a 350-beats-per-minute psychedelic trance track. But they must be on all the alone-time, for every length of alone time.

E.g., I've racked up one hundred-plus plays of Yoncé's *Irreplaceable*, in as many three-minute gaps between \*when I'm finished getting ready\* and \*when I am actually ready to leave my room, thanks\*.

For there is a void and I have seen/heard it. It's the black hole that opens when a long-form video ends—when the credits have rolled, and the speakers click off—leaving only my bedroom and the sudden darkness. Cue *Disturbia* by Rihanna. I'm on edge but should I really be surprised? What is turned up must surely turn down.

Listen, I get it. Earbuds turned up this much, for this long, will eventually deafen me. But the music-feels are proportionate to the volume. And, as with drink, so with audio: sobriety is a trade-off between the goodnow and the badlater.

SHIELDS: *"Two questions constantly occur to me: what would this look like filmed? what would the soundtrack be?"* It's true that I am recording what I see, from the lenses of my eyes, and the boom mic of my ears, onto my episodic memory. But here's the thing: any moment that I think would shoot well—any moment that is motion-picture perfect—is also more profound. More captivating.

Cut to a busy street in Melbourne, where I am flâneuring. ME (VOICEOVER): *"When I walk, I put the world in motion. My body is a camera on a dolly, and what I see I see in a tracking shot. My head turns and my eyes follow, panning all the way to one side and across the street."*

Let it all be videographic. The scattering of light by my lashes is really a lens fare. A person seen up close is also in a close-up. The crowds in a busy street are extras on a set. My eyes pin to a fixed point, and my attentional spotlight spreads: we have ourselves a wide angle.

Life, art, art, life. But it's not just my ears and eyes that are artful. It's also my ego. I say this because when I have this experience, my body is frequently the thing that is in focus. I am what I am also recording.

And so it is practically impossible for me to dawdle in public. I may be en route to the market for bananas, but my stride says I am late for a meeting with the president.

But then is "walking" the right word? In its place I would put "strutting" or "prancing" if those words weren't also pejorative. Alternatively: racing.

I am always overtaking others. I jaywalk, too, at every opportunity. I bend slightly forward, crane my neck, turn to face the car queue or green/yellow/red light that is my cue to break ranks and continue. I hardly wait for the traffic to stop or go before I step out from the curb to cross—I am going so fast, and I get so close, at times, that if the cars were to brake, it would be a literal case of hit and run ... only that the running came first, and I hit the car.

I am secretly thrilled when a car cuts across me at a crossing. I look dead ahead and step after it, as if nothing had happened. So far so good. I walk away unharmed but also elated: a close call with a car shall be no less seamless (stylized? stunt-like?).

Long steps. Head high. Arms straight, swimming wide. Face frozen in a blank expression. The hallmarks of a long, pseudo-dramatic character entrance, or an ungainly runway roll. Not just the pace of pop song ensembles, but also the mannerisms of those featured in them.

When my creative nonfiction class is asked to write a second short piece on “an object of deep personal significance,” I immediately think of my body. When I realize I’ve been writing that piece all along, I turn instead to something from my wardrobe. Tentative title, “Spectacle,” but

my shades are no mere prop  
or accessory.  
The product type is  
life device  
(AR from the  
twentieth century).  
Time aside,  
we’ve got something in common:  
every day is ugly,  
to naked eye  
and eyeglass alike.  
It’s too bright  
too colorful.  
We want our sight  
to develop  
on the fly  
in a darkroom;  
amber tint or  
sepia-toned.  
And mirrors, mirrors  
everywhere.  
A mirror on the front, reflective coat  
to make eye contact  
impossible.  
A mirror on the rear, reverse side  
to reflect my eyes  
on my eyesight.  
We’re nose-to-nose, my glasses and I.  
Pupil and iris enlarged  
in *Blade Runner*  
Voight-Kampff Test  
style.

Our retina dilemma:  
 What makes a human  
 This person?  
 “Who do you think you are?”  
 say the eyes of the guy who sees  
 me wearing sunglasses sans  
 Sol, indoors or  
 under cover.  
 But we’re not hiding anything.  
 We’re partners in vision and  
 if we’re gonna split, there’d better be a  
 slow-mo shot of me  
 slipping off my specs  
 and a damned good reason.

That actors still “play a part” on talk shows and interviews is, somehow, a revelation to me. Their body language, and the cadence of their voice, and the words that are scripted, and the wardrobe assigned, and the makeup added, and the style in which the whole of it is filmed/edited/broadcast. They are charged for the screen, in the trappings of a fiction. MCLUHAN: “*The medium is [still] the message.*”

Cut to a living room at night. DFW flicks through the channels on his TV set. WALLACE: “*These persons behind the glass—persons who are often the most colorful, attractive, animated, alive people in our daily experience—are also oblivious to the fact that they are watched. ... Plus the idea that the single biggest part of real watch-ability is seeming to be unaware that there’s any watching going on. Acting natural. The persons [we] study, feel for, feel through most intently are, by virtue of a genius for feigned unselfconsciousness, fit to stand people’s gazes.*”

Show me this cracked, inadequate reflection; the fracture in a self that is always already on the verge of breaking. It’s worth the risk; for in the place of comparing, I will sub-in becoming. Call it what you will: a parkour of performativity, an L.A. aesthetic of social agency. Think of how empowering this can be, for someone who has had to grapple with the gaze of others for their safety and survival.

Cut to a clip from PARIS IS BURNING: “*When you’re gay you monitor everything you do. You monitor how you look, how you dress, how you talk, how you act. Did they see me? What did they think of me?*” Now at last I will signal immunity to the scorn of any stare.

Obviously not every femme-identifying person has/must/should dress or behave like a diva. But in the culture that was handed to me, it was the female sex (there being no talk of gender) that could be decked out, dolled-and-done-up in ways that were—still are—frankly dangerous for the “boys.”

What I wanted as a garçon: hair that could be grown, styled, and swished to and fro; the faces done up to exageisherate expression; a head adorned with hoops; curves that sway; the twirl of skirts; the flow of summer dresses, of chiffon shirts. Heels that would make every step a step in a dance, set to a clip-clop beat that is paired with the jingle of bling.

Cut to Shields' office, sun-drenched in the late afternoon light. SHIELDS: *"I wanted the camera to find in me, and love me for, qualities that I don't and couldn't possibly possess."* ME: But are these really limits of class, or gender, or even status? Videos are but eyes and ears; their bodies, our bodies. As Wilde said, *"One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art."* Why not both? I'll do what I must for the wear: steal, cut, stitch, genderfuck. Then I'll move as I please for the be.

He tilts his head to whip his hair back and forth, but his hair is too short to be flicked. He rocks his butt and shakes his hips, though he has neither. He puts one foot in front of the other and listens for the clap of a half-inch heel on the sole of his unisex dress shoes (while, privately, he is stepping deftly in six-inch stilettos).

WILLI NINJA in PARIS IS BURNING, re: the style of dance he perfected in the Harlem ballrooms of the '80s: *"The name was taken from the magazine Vogue because some of the movements of the dance are also the same as the poses inside the magazine. ... [It] takes from the hieroglyphics of ancient Egypt. It also takes from some forms of gymnastics—they both strive for perfect lines in the body"* (my emphasis).

I insist on holding my bag in my hand, and not on my back or my shoulder (where it simply would not sway). I put the other hand in my pocket, or I cradle a counterweight (two paperbacks, an aging Mac) in my opposite elbow crease—whatever gives my long/straight bag arm more of that oh-so-important swing.

Cut to a café where Susan Sontag is seated at a table, reading from an article she has written. She pauses. Looks up. SONTAG: *"Indeed the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration."*

Certain other clothes I love for the way they frame the shapes and movements of my body. The oversized coats that encase my torso; stiff shells through which my arms, neck, and legs will poke, seeming both softer and nimbler. The thick black boots that give my every step the weight of ink striking paper. The short shorts and the skinny jeans in which I can more or less be seen walking naked.

What do we mean, for instance, when we say that smoking cigarettes looks/sounds "cool"? Lips pursed. An angle in the arm. An O or a V formed by the fingers. Smoke blowing where it shouldn't. The sizzle at the tip, and a face lit up by fire.

I chew gum slowly, with my mouth slightly open. In the streets, I take large, juicy bites from the apple that I am assiduously eating on the go. Here is my body, I seem to want to say (and show and feel), having as good or intense a time as the ones projected on me. Throbbing, frolicking; suggestive, sensual; indifferent to any risks in the pursuit of carnal pleasure.

In the café where SONTAG is still reading: *"It is a feat, of course. A feat goaded on, in the last analysis, by the threat of boredom. The relation between boredom and Camp taste cannot be overestimated. Camp taste is by its nature possible only in affluent societies, in societies or circles capable of experiencing the psychopathology of affluence."*

Fidget. Stretch neck. Flare nostrils. Cock head and split lips. Part hair, re-re-reapply lip balm. Here are my front teeth and the tip of my tongue between them. Here is my hair, and my hands that are fixing it. Here are the backs of my hands, my fingers flexed, my skin. Here are my palms, my fingers curled and my nails. Here are my eyes that are shut, and my chest rising with my breath.



For I have not come from the streets. It was the screen that sent me, the screen where there was dancing, fighting, rooting, shooting, and riding deep into the night.

Cut to a studio where we are watching an actor audition for a role, with the judges seated at a table. A close-up on their face as they read out a passage of writing by BAUDELAIRE: *"The idea of beauty that man creates for himself affects his whole attire, ruffles or stiffens his coat, gives curves or straight lines to his gestures and even, in process of time, subtly penetrates the very features of his face."*

Once, while talking/face-expressing, I felt that Meryl Streep's features had been laid on top of mine; but it was not the first time this had happened, and hers is not the only on-screen face in which my body has cast itself.

The voice and the limbs can be seen and heard, all right; but there is no light, or sound, emitted by the brain. So I narrow my eyes, furrow my brow and turn my gaze down, to one side. An amateur attempt at what is faced everyday—with more skill, and a larger store of gestures—by actors onstage or in front of cameras.

Cut to a clip from "How Does an Editor Think and Feel?" TONY ZHOU: *"[It's] all about the eyes. ... Moments when I can see a change in the actor's eyes, like when he's making a decision. It tells us, without words, what he's thinking."*

Likewise chin-stroking, gazing at the sea or the moon or quivering my lower lip and jaw, in a move that smacks of Toby Ziegler's signature tic in *The West Wing*. The eyes stare straight ahead, the head is still, but the lips and chin are trembling. So: his mind is turning over while he keeps his mouth shut. To keep the peace with his colleagues. The habit, as well, of stopping mid-speech to chuckle at something that is apparently so silly it has left him/me speechless. Boy oh boy were Schiff's shticks catchy.

The walk-and-talk shot popularized by Sorkin's show is no mere cine technique to me. Now every path or stretch of road has the hermeneutic floor plan of a hall in the White House.

Which is not to say that these experiences are at all conscious. The videos have long since settled in my nether-mind. I do not play them back. There are no originals, only copies. And ultimately it is not the image but the music on my earbuds that is conducting.

Cut to a clip from Def Poetry Jam, So4EO4. KEVIN COVAL (QTING. AFRIKA BAMBAATAA): *"When you hear the break beat, you let your god-self get loose."*

Rhythm. I set my steps to land in time with the 4/4 signature. At a turning point in the song—a shift in tempo, a solo vocal; the kick-in or the breakdown of a beat—I shift my gaze, raise my head, move, breathe. No battery? No worries. There's always the song that's struck in my head.

It's tempting to call this "posing" or "acting," but that risks trespassing on the very real and consummate art of poseurs and actors. Better terms: attitude, attention, and perception.

Having my voice recorded or my pic/video taken feels rather like being forced to confess something. A lens in the real world ruptures what was before a continuum, with art at one end—and me at the other. It is akin to the kick made famous by Nolan's *Inception*, a redoubling of the difference between "ordinary" life and extraordinary screen. It does not break the fourth wall. It breaks down all four walls.

What I want to say is equal parts vital and pedestrian. It has to do with thrift stores, quiet nights, low stakes, nobodies, and, yes, this phrase in which I have inscribed them. My body makes of these things events: scenes, shots, *acciones*.

BAUDELAIRE: "*The specific beauty of the dandy consists particularly in that cold exterior resulting from the unshakeable determination to remain unmoved; one is reminded of a latent fire, whose existence is merely suspected, and which, if it wanted to, but it does not, could burst forth in all its brightness.*"

\* \* \*

Now take down the life you made earlier. Undo every effect: color, camera, mix, music. Let time slow to its sober self. Let all the sound drain, leaving only your breath, the beat of your heart and the echo of your feet on the cool bathroom tiles.

Blink and see the world with only your eyes. Turn the taps and hear the water crash to the floor. Let a song spring to mind, and hum the words of the first verse.

Step in the shower. Begin to sing, and be sure to mean it. Feel the water shoot from top to toe. Watch it spill off your skin according to the angle of your body beneath it; now slow and heavy; now fast and light in a spray. See the room fill with steam, as you sway your shoulders and tip your head from side to side.

Shut your eyes. Raise your voice above the water and watch how you flicker on the screen of your mind, pleading to the stars in the rain.

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## Lost Archive Series & City Scraps

FABIO SASSI

PHOTOGRAPHY



Fabio Sassi, *Lost Archive 1*, 2018. Photograph, 8 1/2 x 11 inches



Fabio Sassi, *Lost Archive 2*, 2018. Photograph, 8 1/2 x 11 inches



Fabio Sassi, *City Scraps*, 2018. Photograph, 8 1/2 x 11 inches

# Scatter

KATIE DALEY

NONFICTION

It's been ten days since my brother Walter killed himself, and my brother Tom is whooping with laughter. He's laughing so hard, he's almost choking as he steps over to the fridge, opens the door, grabs two eggs out of the egg tray, and turns to face the far wall. As he hurls them, he lets out a long, guttural howl. It starts as a "*Nooooo!*" but gets much deeper and more complex. He's not sobbing or screaming. He's pissed.

As soon as the eggs crack and splat against the wall, just under the kitchen clock, he turns back to the fridge and grabs two more, bellowing again as he hurls them. He turns and does it one more time.

Now there are six eggs splattered across the kitchen wall. Six whole shells crackled into bits and shards, six splats of yolk and albumen beginning their trek down the wall. Like the trek I've just begun to make. Stalling in pockmarks of plaster like I'm stalled in Tom's apartment in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where I never meant to stay longer than a day or two. Meandering off to the right, then veering downward the same way I veered down the globe to get from my hometown of Cleveland to here, the first stop of my journey. The big, wild, maybe never-ending road adventure I've been dreaming of taking since I was a little kid. Eighty-one days after I turned eighteen and twenty-one hours after I finally set out on that adventure, we got word that our brother Walter had finally done it, finally left this globe entirely, as far as I can tell.

He chose to die on the eve of my father's fifty-second birthday: March 28, 1975. While Walter was contemplating running off the rooftop of a ten-story apartment building in Boston, my father, divorced mattress salesman-gone-travel agent, was in San Francisco, booking flights. As Walter walked along the edge of the rooftop and measured the distance to earth in his mind, my divorced writer mother was at her day job in Cleveland, answering phones, typing letters, setting the margins on her page. When Walter backed up to the middle of the roof so he could get a running start, my oldest brother Bill was two stories below, sitting on a couch and reading a book before he left for his graveyard shift at the Boston dump. And as Walter lit up his last Camel straight, put it in his mouth, and ran off the edge, Tom and I were in this same kitchen in Chapel Hill, fixing breakfast and trying to make each other laugh.

Among other things, we were trying to laugh about Walter's latest botched suicide attempt. The week before, he'd waded into the Atlantic Ocean, intending to drown himself, but, he told us, the water was too cold, and he turned back to shore. *See*, we were trying to say to each other, *he doesn't really want to die. Yeah, he's schizophrenic and tortured and*



*the disease has his mind by the throat, but he's also our brother—our brilliantly funny, love-hungry, sometimes goofy brother. He wants to be warm and dry—not dead.*

While Tom and I traveled to Massachusetts for Walter's funeral, my traveling partner Tina, whom I haven't known for long, stayed in Chapel Hill. Somehow, in the time it took us to bury our brother, she decided she didn't want to travel after all and headed back to Cleveland. As for me, about the only thing I know for sure these days is that I *do* want to travel after all. But here I am, motionless, watching broken eggs slide down a kitchen wall in some corny apartment complex in North Carolina. I'm a grieving zombie who longs to become human again but has no idea how.

When Tom first started laughing so wildly, he was reading a condolence card from our father's first cousin Nancy, and I was reading somebody else's I'm-so-sorry-about-Walter letter. Out of the blue, he erupted in big whoops.

"Oh, my God," he gasped. "This is classic Aunt Nancy." He looked down at the card, trying to catch his breath. "But even for her, it's a little over the top."

He read from the beginning. About how sorry she was to hear the news, how awful it must be for our family, the kinds of things pretty much everybody says to us these days. Then she writes about Walter's schizophrenia, what a tragedy that was. What a sweet, funny, clever kid Walter was, even after he got sick.

Tom's voice mounted, started to break up a little as he read. Not from tears, but from the pressure of holding back laughter. "Wasn't it a shame," he read, then stopped, trying to calm his voice so he could keep going. "Wasn't it a shame that Walter couldn't have taken things a little less seriously instead of letting them worry him to death?" He barely finished the question before he dissolved into big yelps and guffaws. I saw the humor in it, but I wasn't laughing like him.

He read the question again, but this time in Aunt Nancy's Worcester, Massachusetts, accent. This is something Walter would have done, and Tom and I have taken to doing it too, even before Walter died. Walter was a master impressionist, and he mimicked people all the time, not only when he was telling a story that involved a particular character in our lives—our grandmother, our old grammar school principal, Richard Nixon—but also whenever that character's take on life fit into a conversation or argument we were having. Walter's not here anymore, and Tom's impression of Aunt Nancy needs some work, but he got the general gist of her accent down: melodious, a little crackly, full of soft a's and dropped r's.

*Isn't it a shame Wahltah couldn't hahve taken things a little less sehriously instead of letting them worray him to death?*

Tom handed me the card and leaned back against the wall, his eyes wide as he gasped for air between squalls of laughter.

I silently read Aunt Nancy's words from start to finish. Seeing the question in her handwriting helped me hear the absurdity of it better. How could she write that and not scratch it out? Her own son is schizophrenic too. She must have been bucked around by a few of his psychotic breakdowns by now. She must have been shattered and re-shattered, watching him try to get through the world all wild-eyed and lost from himself. She's got to know Walter was in a whole different solar system than worried. Worried would have been

a day at the beach for him. Still, she put it this way: He let things “worry him to death.” It’s so harmless and quaint, as quaint as her accent.

I started to laugh too. I still wasn’t blown away by it like Tom was, but his reaction was contagious. His raucous laughter was like a room packed with New Year’s revelers. I wanted to slip into the room and be loud and wild like them. I was aching to make some noise. So I laughed.

Tom’s not laughing now—just gasping for breath—and me, I’m quiet as we watch the broken eggs stumble and slide down the wall. But the shouts of laughter and caterwauls of rage are still very much with us, the way somebody with a lot of charisma leaves a zing behind whenever they walk out of a room. The kitchen feels cleaned out now, like a greasy film has been peeled off its surface and now everything’s gleaming. It’s like diving into water that’s almost too cold to bear. Once your head goes under and you’re entirely wet, you feel brave again. Like you can start over now, no matter what time of day it is or what kind of nothingness you’ve been lying around in lately. Your skin is almost burning with the cold, and your neurons are in too much shock to remember the foggy, hollow feeling they were in the process of delivering to your mind, just a few seconds ago, before you dove all the way in.

Not that I’m shocked by what Tom’s just done. Even though it comes clear out of the blue and I’ve never seen him—or anyone—do anything like this. Even though it’s never occurred to me to be angry about what happened to Walter and what happened to the rest of us because of our close proximity to him. But it feels like Tom has just filled in a big blank in my life with his wail.

There’s a difference between us, though. Tom’s the one who’s thrown the eggs. The howl came from his throat, not mine. He’s wrapped himself up in that howl and hurled himself out of this swamp of numbness we’ve been wandering around in for days, ever since the glamour of shock wore off. But I’m still here, up to my neck in it.

We stay there for what feels like a long, long time, his gasps subsiding, me silent, both of us watching the eggs until they’ve stopped meandering and begun to dry on the wall. Tom finally steps over and begins picking out the smashed bits of shell that cling to the wall or have ricocheted to the floor. I get up and grab a sponge from the sink, but he stops me.

“I don’t want to clean it up,” he says. “I’m just picking out the shells so it won’t be quite so lurid.” He stands back, cupping the broken shells in his hand as he gazes at the rivulets of broken yolks. “Let’s leave this up here for a while. As a testament to how our brother Walter let life worry him to death.”

As it dries, it starts to look like a map. A map of rivers and paths, some yellow, some clear and shiny, some a little of both. Some joining up, some splitting off. A few starting in the middle of nowhere and stopping just as suddenly. Every time I go into the kitchen, it calls out to me. But instead of hearing Tom’s bellows when I face it, I hear the silence in it, the way a map can be silent even though it’s so full of promises. It’s still there a week later when I finally start out for Key West on the second leg of my journey.



# Off the Rails

AMANDA FLETCHER

NONFICTION

## Sunday, September 8, 2002

I wake up to the sound of the sink running, the smell of coffee. It is my first morning home from the hospital and everything hurts. Even the bright sun in my face. It is always sunny in Arizona, and for the first time that fills me with rage. I can see the heat on the other side of the window, and I am already sweating in the air-conditioned cool of the living room. I didn't sleep so much as lose consciousness, sitting upright in the living room, here in this lawnchair, with the dive, the ICU, and the months to come, spent like this, playing out on the backs of my eyelids like an old TV. Just thinking about it all is exhausting. Yesterday they shot me up with hydroxyzine to control my anxiety. They gave me Demerol for the pain. They sent me home with muscle relaxers and hydrocodone. They made me sign a contract. I wonder if that's because they can tell who I am. I'm sure I never said. Never told them how I'd shake a few crystals of speed into my palm when I woke up and again around dinnertime, licking it clean with my tongue. Chasing it with a Diet Coke. How I smoked it in a glass pipe for a few months, until the hallucinations got too intense. Maybe they could tell. Maybe it was in my blood or in my bad skin or in my hollowed-out eyes.

## CONTRACT FOR CONTROLLED SUBSTANCES AND OTHER PRESCRIPTIONS

1. I AM RESPONSIBLE FOR MY CONTROLLED SUBSTANCE MEDICATIONS. If they are somehow lost, misplaced, or stolen, or if I use the medication up sooner than prescribed, I understand that IT WILL NOT BE REPLACED.

*How many times have you combed the carpet, looking for drugs? Just one crystal you can drop in the pipe, knowing it'll hold you over for another few hours, just that one hit. When the bag is full, you are careless. It's possible there could be some down here, you think. The way you shake the bag to drop some in your palm, it could happen that some got lost, landed down here on the floor. It is feast or famine. You go so far as to hide some now and then, knowing you could forget about it. Tweakers think in spurts—it requires effort to get from here to there.*

2. I WILL NOT REQUEST OR ACCEPT controlled substance medication from another physician or individual while I am receiving such medications from the doctors who are making me sign this form. It is illegal to do so and may endanger my health. The only exception is if something is prescribed to me while I am admitted in the hospital.

*I got my drugs from Mike, and he got them from some guy who wanted to use my car in a drive-by. Mike was the keeper. He always knew when and where and how much I was using, and I had to wait until he pulled out the stash. At first that was fine. They'd smoke before going into the shop for the night, and I'd take a hit on the way to the gym. After awhile, I didn't want to wait for him. I wanted to get high when I wanted to. I started stealing a little out of the packet in the fridge. We kept it in the butter drawer. And maybe he knew I was dipping, probably pointed it out to everyone, made some kind of joke that was no joke at all. So I went in on a bag with a friend. A girl he knew but didn't know was buying. She paid so I did the pickup. I'd meet her guy at the Walmart down the street from her house. We'd meet in an aisle and pretend we hadn't seen each other in a while—oh hey it's you how are you—and then we'd hug one arm overtop and the other down low enough to drop money in his pocket, feel the envelope drop into mine—so good to see you hope to see you again real soon.*

3. REFILLS OF MEDICATIONS:

- WILL BE TAKEN ON MONDAYS THROUGH THURSDAYS FROM 9 AM TO 5 PM. YOU MUST ALLOW 24 HOURS FOR REFILLS TO BE AUTHORIZED BY YOUR DOCTOR AND CALLED IN. REFILLS WILL NOT BE MADE AT NIGHT, ON HOLIDAYS, OR WEEKENDS.

*Once, when we were at Laughlin for a bike show, I freaked out and flushed all of our drugs down the toilet, a bag of speed as big as my hand. Nevada is a zero-tolerance state. I thought Mike was going to kill me—it was Draper who was cool about it. So they were sober and I was high because that girl was there and she had a stash but we couldn't say because her boyfriend didn't know. She begged me not to rat her out. And she didn't have enough for all of us, anyway.*

- WILL NOT BE MADE IF I “RUN OUT EARLY.” I am responsible for taking my medication in the dose prescribed and for keeping track of the amount on hand.

*I was a responsible user. I wanted to get buzzed and not eat. I didn't want to be blitzed out of my mind. I was a functional addict. Went to work, went to the gym, carried on. Just a few crystals in my hand a few hours apart. Smoke a little weed to come down. Take a valium if I was really stuck—hey, maybe even stay up all night. And, yeah, maybe I passed out that one time and didn't show up for work, but it was just that once. The other time I was just late. Mike, though, he never wanted to sleep. He'd go days and*

*days. Just do more. And it didn't really matter because he was the boss. The only people he had to hold it together for were his parents. And he was good at that.*

- WILL NOT BE MADE AS AN "EMERGENCY" such as a Friday afternoon because I suddenly realize that I will "run out tomorrow." I must keep track of the medication and plan ahead. I WILL CALL AT LEAST 24 HOURS AHEAD IF I NEED ASSISTANCE with a controlled substance medication prescription.

*People get high and don't go off the rails is all I'm saying. They know how much they have and how much they need and when they're going to need more. Maybe tweakers are just hyperaware of what's happening. We're good planners.*

4. I understand that IF I VIOLATE ANY OF THE ABOVE CONDITIONS, my controlled substance prescriptions and/or treatment may be ended immediately. If there is a violation involved in obtaining controlled substances from another individual as described above, I may also be reported to my primary physician, local and medical facilities, and other authorities.

*I wasn't the one who finally said I needed help. That was Mike. Crying on his knees. Explaining to his doctor how he couldn't make change at the liquor store anymore. The prescription for Wellbutrin hidden under the bathroom counter and never refilled. I didn't want to stop. I was fine. But woman fine, like, full of fucking rage because he was the one who'd started this whole thing and now he couldn't handle it. I loved not feeling hungry. I loved tracing my hip bones with my fingertips, how my jeans hung off them, like a hanger. The disconnect was so soothing, gliding through the world on a hum of adrenalin. I felt like I was the opposite of him, like I could handle anything.*

Here's the thing about handling shit: It's not about being brave. It's about not having a choice. I left Mike because it was the only option. I went home with Chad because it was the only way I knew how to grieve. I took that trip to the lake because I couldn't be alone. Now here I am, sitting in a chair in my best friends' living room, wearing hospital pants and a T-shirt that says *Whatever* with the neck cut out to fit around my head and the halo screwed into my skull. Like I can handle anything.

The sheepskin lining of the plastic vest is hot against my bare breasts. My head throbs and my eyes ache, so much that I am doing my best to keep them closed against the too-bright room and the urge to look around. I want a cup of coffee, but I can't drink it. Think about how you need to tip your head to the lip of the mug, what it means to take a sip of some hot liquid. In the halo I need to drink everything out of a straw. I can put some ice in it, Emma says, rushing around the kitchen before work. OK, I tell her, hoping that the caffeine will help me go to the bathroom. The opiates are making me constipated and I'm starting to freak out about it. The only reason I fucked with speed in the first place was because it took away the insatiable hunger that I had no cure for, other than to eat and eat

and eat. The joy I felt watching the weight fall off me when I started getting high is indescribable. I wasn't hungry. I just was. It was a miracle, the lightness of being. Now I am this thick thing, here in this chair. If I think about it too hard I will start to scream.

There is a need to be otherworldly, inhuman. Ethereal. Void means to discharge or to drain away, but it is also the state of being completely empty, clear, and free.

Chad's mother comes over in the afternoon. It is their first meeting, made even more strange because Chad is at work. She brings the girl two bottles of lemon-flavored magnesium citrate. I had a colonoscopy last week, she says. This stuff worked like a charm. The girl drinks an entire bottle, spends the afternoon in the bathroom, and by the time it is dark, she is me again.

I am shuffling out of the bathroom when the doorbell rings. Can you grab that, Sal asks. Seriously, I say. It's for you, Fletcher. Fine, I say.

It's Chad. He's wearing a short-sleeved button-down tucked into his jeans, and he smells good, like it's a date or something. I met your mom today, I blurt at him. I know, he says, in that quiet way that I'm starting to realize is just how he is. I see movement around his legs. See him reach behind him for a tiny arm in a pink T-shirt. This is Presley, he says. She peeks out from behind him. Say hi to Amanda, Presley.

I can see how she reaches out to me, holding up the ratty hairpiece she's just dragged up the driveway, clasped in both hands. Thank you, I say to this tiny blue-eyed towhead. She looks just like me. Come in, Emma says from behind me. I'm just making dinner. She crouches low, says, Are you hungry, Presley? And the little girl nods.

When he sees the hairpiece, Sal asks what it is. It's a wig, I tell him. Where did it come from, he asks. Presley gave it to me, I say. Why, he asks. She left it in the boat, Chad says. Took it off right before she took that dive. He gestures at the halo in conclusion. Hold up, Sal says before turning to me. You were wearing a wig at the lake, he asks. And when I say, yeah so, his braying laugh follows me all the way back to my chair.

I am too much and not enough all at the same time.

I wonder how that's possible.

## An Interview with Amanda Fletcher

Amanda Fletcher doesn't hold back. From her nonfiction to her direct, no-nonsense attitude to the way she talks about her life. She's a 2012 PEN America Emerging Voices Fellow who now works with PEN as program manager, cultivating new writers and voices, and shaping the authors that will ultimately be on our shelves someday.

But she's also honest—a woman who will crack herself open and bleed words onto a page. Her work is a peek into her private world of pain, addiction, loss, and self-destruction that's somehow tender and visceral all at once. But finding that voice didn't happen overnight. Fletcher's writing journey has run in tandem with her journey of self-love and recovery, a path that has led her to *Halo*, a memoir that's almost twenty years in the making. We're extremely honored to include an excerpt of it in this year's issue.

We had the privilege to sit down with Amanda (virtually, of course) and chat with her about that journey—the act of writing a life down on paper, then choosing what to keep and what to lose, where craft intersects with career, and what life looks like now in the midst of a pandemic.

***Exposition Review: This is a conversation we've been looking forward to having—to just sit and chat about nonfiction and craft and your journey to doing what you do best as a storyteller. When did you discover that telling stories really resonated with you?***

**Amanda Fletcher:** I was a storyteller from a young age. I started as a poet, writing limericks in the third grade, and lucky for me, my mom kept all of that stuff.

I come from a blue-collar family who believed that writing [as a career] was not a thing. I remember telling my dad that I wanted to be in advertising, and he said, "That's so competitive. You'll never make it. Get a real job." So, I stopped taking English, creative writing, and art classes.

I ended up getting a degree in kinesiology and becoming a personal trainer. While life was progressing, I always knew I wanted to be a writer in the back of my head. When I had enough mental space to take my first creative writing class, it was Creative Writing 101 with Sandra Desjardins at Scottsdale Community College in 2005.

***ER: What were some entry points that directed you specifically into nonfiction and your memoir, Halo?***

**AF:** Well, first of all with my family of origin—the well is so deep—why would I not talk about these people? David Ulin once said at the L.A. Times Festival of Books, “Every story is about our families,” and that is so true. I just happen to have had so much fodder.

I broke my neck in 2002, and whenever I would tell anyone about it, they would say, “Oh my God, you have to write this story.”

I took that first creative writing class in 2005, and we did an exercise based off of a Joyce Carol Oates essay. It was one where we were shifting points of view, and it was this lesson in deconstruction. There was a section for events and a section for characters. [Our professor] wanted us to write something in that same style, and that was how I started my book. It was an easy way to order the story: this is the time, this is the place, the setting, the characters. It was an easy way in.

It’s been almost a twenty-year process. I’m still working on copy edits now, but I’m at a place where once this is done that I’m comfortable showing it to agents.

In 2007, I moved to Santa Monica and started taking classes at [UCLA Extension Writers’ Program]. I remember being in a class and one of the other students kept saying, “Sam Dunn says this; Sam Dunn says that; and you should be doing this because of Sam Dunn.”

And I thought, “Who the fuck is this Sam Dunn dude and why are we talking about him?”

Well, Samantha Dunn is not a dude. I ended up taking a weekend workshop with her, and the night before I went into it, my friend gets hit by a car on his bicycle and ends up in the hospital with a shattered femur and damage to his spinal cord. It was really triggering to see him in the hospital in a neck brace, so I missed the first day of the workshop.

I came into Sam’s class probably halfway through the Sunday session because I thought, “I paid for this. I need to take this.” That started the path that I’m on now. Being in Sam’s class led to a private workshop, which led to her suggesting that I try to go to Skidmore for the Summer Writers Institute, and then that I apply for the PEN Emerging Voices Fellowship. She was the one who told me that I had to keep going because I was doing something special. And every writer needs to hear that, right? It makes you continue.

***ER: How did your writing journey run in tandem with your emotional journey to all of those events?***

**AF:** When I started writing this in 2005, I was in a relationship and still using drugs and drinking. I was a disaster of a human being. I had no idea what I was doing, and people in my creative writing workshops kept saying, “How does [this character] change? What does she want?” I couldn’t answer either of those because I didn’t know. I had to change.

[After getting a DUI in 2007], I started going to AA meetings, and I realized how small my story actually was and wondering what right I had to tell it. We have this saying in AA that “You’re the piece of shit that the world revolves around.” So you have this crazy low self-esteem, but you’re the center of the universe, and as a writer of nonfiction, you do need to be the center of the universe because you are the protagonist. But that’s a kind of

narrow story. Until you can see that you are the center of this very small thing and everyone else is the center of their own small things and we're all just orbiting around each other, you can't write—you're not going to write a good story because you don't have an understanding of human nature.

[Since 2005] I got married. I got divorced. I moved from Arizona to California. I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I got sober. I became a part of this literary community where people need you and you need them. Not out of obligation, but a sense of privilege. Especially when you have pushed people away your whole life —that's instrumental. All of those things I had to go through in order to write a story that I was proud of.

***ER: It's a craft to look back and select the moments that you know are striking and relatable and real and you expound upon, but at the same time they have to work together in some way.***

**AF:** I have read a lot of recovery memoir—a lot of good recovery memoir and terrible recovery memoir. Just because all of this fucked-up shit happened to you doesn't mean you can write. I realized that I had to be careful of that, because I had all of these really terrific plot points, but what did they all mean? How were they going to cohere? What do you choose to include and what do you leave out?

***ER: As you were writing Halo, what helped you make those really important choices?***

**AF:** I don't think you can really ask yourself that until you get it down. Especially at the beginning—don't worry so much what it looks like, just worry about getting it down. That was really helpful for me. The best advice I ever got came from Samantha Dunn: "You write it all." You write it all, then you figure out what the themes are through the writing of it all. Then see what you can lose, because it doesn't thematically go along.

At the beginning, I was just writing scenes, things that stuck in my memory or things that impacted me. And then after, I considered, "Well, how does this push the narrative? What is this story really about? What does this girl really want, and why are we including these elements or these characters?" I took huge breaks — I didn't write for months at a time. But Victoria Chang, an Emerging Voices mentor who was essential in setting up the partnership between the Antioch MFA with the Emerging Voices Fellowship Program, would always say, "Writing isn't just about writing." Even if you're not in front of your computer, every experience feeds the writing.

***ER: There is a line from your piece "Off the Rails" that was particularly pertinent: "I became me again." It's almost this act of stepping outside yourself, and then slowly coming back, and doing that over and over again. Can you expand on that a little bit? Like what it means to you to "leave yourself and come back" as a literary device and how it informs you?***

**AF:** There is an immediacy to writing the scenes when you're in it still and that can be dangerous. When I was so close to the experience, I thought, "You have to write it now, or else it'll be gone." The book that I used as the perfect example for that is Jerry Stahl's *Permanent Midnight*. Jerry wrote [*Permanent Midnight*] while it was very fresh. There wasn't a huge distance between the addiction and that story.

There are segments of the book that I started writing while I was still using. There's a pinnacle scene that's closer to the end that I stayed up all night before class writing. I broke into a secret stash of cocaine and that's how I got through it.

But when I got sober, suddenly I hated the person I was writing about. I had zero compassion for this person who was a narcissist and mean. I hated that person, but also hated myself.

So, it's twofold, right? I hated that person, and I realized that I'm not that person anymore, but ... that *is* me.

I had to figure out how to be compassionate for this woman, whose mom had killed herself. There are three more suicides in my family, two murders, paranoid schizophrenia on top of bipolar disorder ... I'm sure my mom was depressed, you know? A lot of trauma ... childhood sexual abuse, just so many things. that [my sponsor would ask me], "If you heard that story from someone else, you would have so much compassion for that person, so why do you not have it for yourself?" And I just said, "I don't know."

I had to make her a character: She was a she. That helped sometimes. While constantly having that loop in my head of: "If this was someone else telling you a story, you would have compassion for them."

***ER: Can you talk about therapy and what that's done for you as a person and writer? How did you start to accept therapy as part of your life?***

**AF:** I'm an addict. I've had an eating disorder. I was a smoker, drugs, alcohol, shopping whatever—I just did the thing. In 2007, I ended up getting a DUI and spending the night in jail. I was still so drunk that when they took my mugshot and the guy said, "Smile," I did.

When I told my dad and my brothers, it was a rite of passage. Like, "Oh, Amanda's been to jail now, you're part of the family." Everyone in my family has been in jail or prison. So it scared me straight to some extent.

But I didn't want to stop drinking. I was court-appointed to go to AA meetings, I lost my license for six months, and I was like, "OK, I'm gonna go—but alcohol is not my problem, it's food." I went into treatment for my eating disorder. Which, whatever, it takes what it takes.

I went into outpatient treatment. Being in treatment means you're in group therapy. It was the first time [I got close to] women from all walks of life, all types of problems. We had anorexics and bulimics and binge eaters, and everybody had overlapping addictions.

That's when I realized that trauma feels the same for everyone, but that the cause of that trauma can be anything. That broke me open.



***ER: Memoir takes a type of bravery and courage that sometimes can have a pressure that once it's done, you've healed. Does that affect your relationship to what you want to reveal?***

**AF:** I've been told that once the book is done and on the shelf, that part of your life is also on the shelf. Which also contributes to a dragging of the heels, and understanding that no one's waiting for your story. There's 12 million other books out there. It's a commodification that feels really uncomfortable.

[With that said], even if I didn't love myself at this time, I love these characters. I love the people that I'm writing about. I'm not friends with them anymore, and I get to visit them. I get to be with my mom. In my family, we don't dwell on the past. But in this case, I needed to. If you're ruminating on those things [from the past] from a different place in your life with perspective and compassion, you get this greater understanding not just of yourself, but of your family and the world at large.

***ER: What was one surprise that came from writing your story?***

**AF:** I came to love my stepdad in a way I never had. We never had a relationship, and I was able to write the scenes with him with love, whereas when I started writing this in 2005 I wasn't able to. When I started writing there were clear heroes and villains.

Now, that is not the case. Getting sober allowed me to make amends to him. To be able to go to him and say, "I'm sorry I left you, I left everyone." And to authentically mean that.

***ER: And using that same compassion for yourself.***

**AF:** Totally! If I've learned anything in sobriety, it's that we're all doing the best we can. And sometimes that best looks really terrible.

***ER: We definitely want to talk with you about the work that you've done with PEN Emerging Voices. What led you to ultimately becoming the Emerging Voices Fellowship manager?***

**AF:** In 2010, I applied to Emerging Voices and I was twelve-and-a-half minutes late for my twenty-minute interview. I could tell as soon as I walked in the room that I was not getting it. I kept writing; I kept taking classes. The next year, I applied again with a completely different segment of the story.

Then in September 2011, I was diagnosed with breast cancer at 37. It was a reckoning where you're confronted with your own mortality. I remember saying, "Well if I have cancer, then I'll work on my book."

I went to my EV interview in October, a week before I had a double mastectomy and would start chemo. The biggest concern was, "Are you going to be able to do this?" Because the fellowship would start in January, and I was going to be doing

[chemotherapy] until May. I said, “I don’t have a job. My husband supports me. If I do this, this and chemo are going to be all I have.”

So I was an EV Fellow in 2012. I look super rad in all the photos because I’m bald, but it looks like it’s a choice. Jillian Lauren was my mentor, and I had just read her memoir *Some Girls*. It sounds cliché to say Emerging Voices saved me, but it probably did.

I stayed in the fold once I graduated from the fellowship. I was available for them all the time, asking, “Do you need me to supervise a workshop? Do you need me to check people in? Do you need me to volunteer for the fundraising gala?” Whatever they needed, I gave.

When the job opened up [first as program coordinator and then manager], it felt like the next logical steps.

***ER: How would you describe your relationship with the EV Fellows and the program today?***

**AF:** These writers are my folx (thanks to 2019 EV Dare Williams for introducing me to that word). I would not be the writer I am without Emerging Voices, without reading people’s work, without talking to them, without being available to them. I hope it is a mutually beneficial relationship!

I finished this book because we started doing National Novel Writing Month in November of 2018, where Emerging Voices alumni were meeting in the PEN office on Wednesday nights to write together as a group, and that’s how I started writing again on a regular basis. 2011 EV Jamie Schaffner and I are still accountability buddies, checking in (almost) daily.

***ER: What are some tips you have on how you’ve stayed sane through the shelter-in-place and quarantines?***

**AF:** Be kind to yourself. Realize that everybody’s having a hard time focusing. This is not a regular work-from-home scenario; everyone’s afraid of the world ending and rightly so.

Reach out. Do the phone calls. Do the check-ins. The people who you would normally email, maybe call them. And if you feel like you have to, give them a heads-up that you’re going to call because then people aren’t like, “Why are you calling me?”

Don’t “should” yourself. Times like these, your creative side is what suffers, because you’re tapped out. If it’s true that we all operate up to our maximum capacity, when you add some other crazy element, that changes your maximum capacity. Try an hour in the morning of your own creative stuff, but also if that doesn’t happen, it’s OK. We don’t have to fix everything right now. [If you do want to write], be task-oriented. Setting a timer is essential, especially if you have concentration issues. Start with 20 minutes, and in that 20 minutes you are focused on one task. You aren’t doing anything else.

Have fun with it. Do you have blue eyeshadow? Wear the blue eyeshadow! What amuses you? What’s fun for you? Do that thing. That’s how we get through. It can’t all be doom and gloom. With creative nonfiction, my topics are all dark, but there’s also humor. That’s life. Funny shit happens. Yeah, my mom committed suicide, and maybe I am

generally a dark person, but funny shit still happens—in my book and in my life, there is joy.

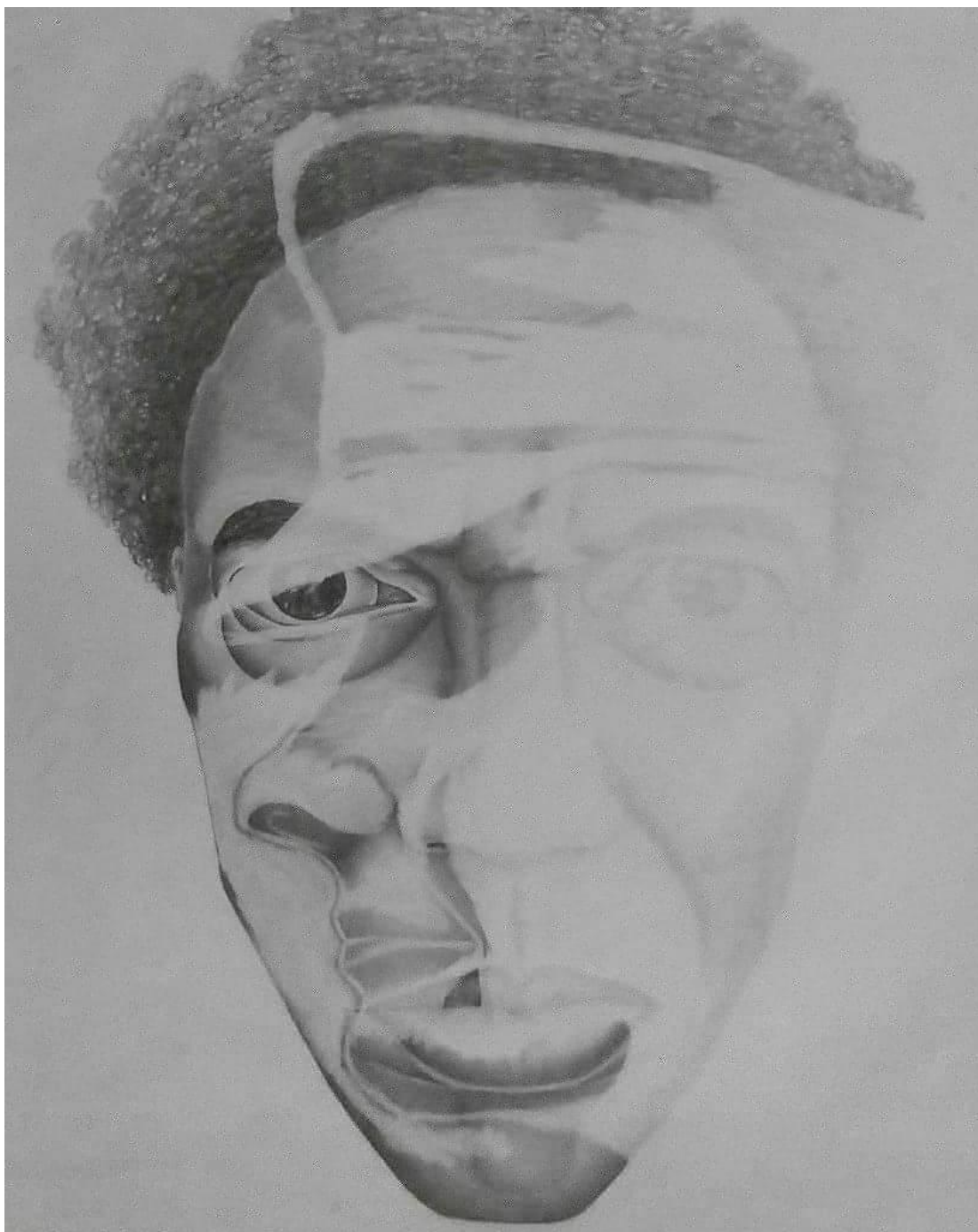
***This interview has been edited for clarity and length.***

***Read “Off The Rails” [here](#).***

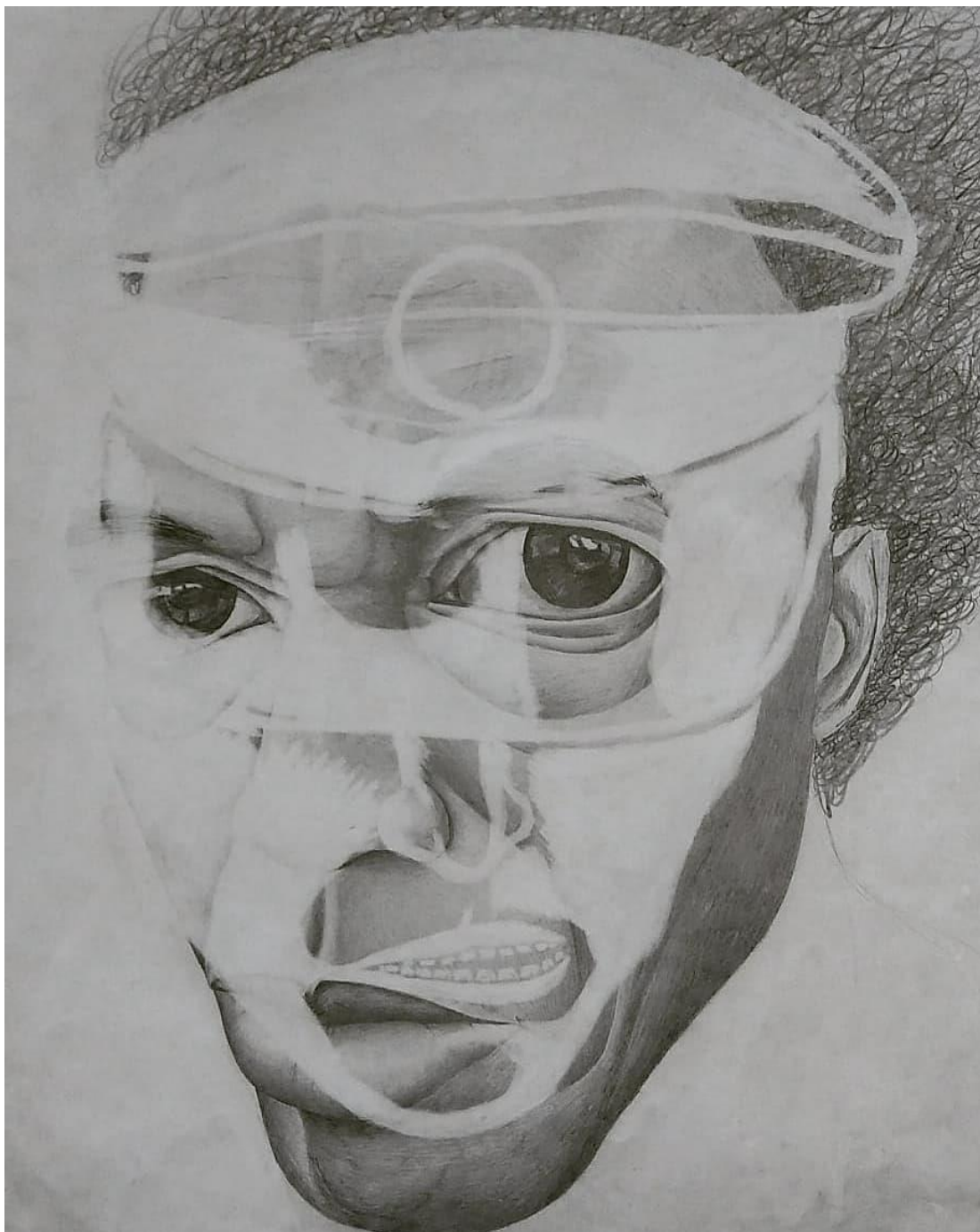
## e(race): the persistence of desire

K. KHALFANI RA

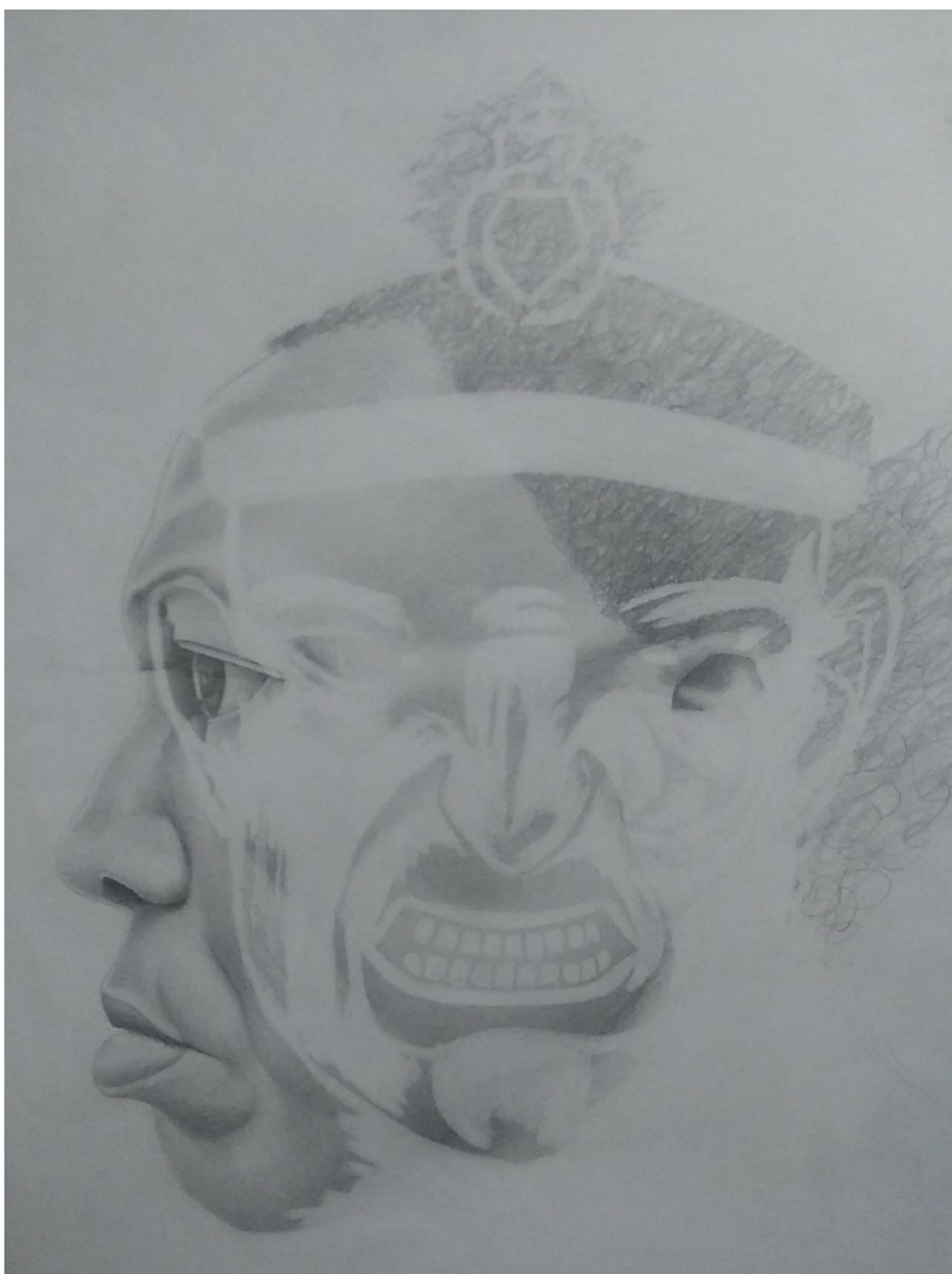
VISUAL ART



K. Khalfani Ra, *(e)race the persistence of desire, #1*, 2017-2018. Graphite and eraser on paper, 97 x 64 centimeters



K. Khalfani Ra, *(e)rce the persistence of desire, #2*, 2017-2018. Graphite and eraser on paper, 97 x 64 centimeters



K. Khalfani Ra, *(e)race the persistence of desire*, #3, 2017-2018. Graphite and eraser on paper, 97 x 64 centimeters

# How to Survive a Genocide

LORI YEGIAYAN FRIEDMAN

NONFICTION

First, be born to Armenian parents in Santa Monica, California—

Not in Armenia—the landlocked, stone-covered, shitty piece of the Caucasus bequeathed by the Allies and the Ottoman Empire via the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres to the Armenians, which becomes a Soviet Republic.

Not somewhere in the Middle East—like Lebanon or Egypt or Iran—where Armenians fled during ongoing massacres and, finally, an attempt at total extermination by the Ottoman government in the early years of the twentieth century.

Not even in Glendale or North Hollywood or any of the other Armenian-dominated neighborhoods of Los Angeles where the largest population of Armenians outside Armenia reside.

Your family will have survived the attempt to wipe out your kind: their loved ones slaughtered or starved, their homes and lands stolen, their dreams smashed, histories erased. You will rise from these ashes, untouched by the Catastrophe, so ensuring the continuation of the race will be on you: an American.

Still, your Armenian father will not want you to grow up with the “riff raff” of the Los Angeles Armenian community, so you will live in West Los Angeles where you will go to public schools in a very white, very affluent part of town where, to most of your classmates, your last name is exotic and possibly Asian. Know zero Armenians, other than your own family members.

When visiting your cousin in Fresno, have her teach you dirty words in Armenian, like *eshegg* (jackass) and *vorig* (tushy). Enjoy having a secret language none of your friends at school know.

Be excited to share your favorite food, *yalanché*—cold rice wrapped in oily grape leaves—with Mr. Felhandler’s fourth grade class for international day at Brentwood Elementary School. Your classmates will think it looks disgusting, even worse than the sushi Minako brought. Overhear one kid whisper to another: *Who eats leaves?*

Grow up in the shadow of Hollywood. Be aware of Armenian entertainers and sports stars: Mike Connors, Cher, Andre Agassi. Know that you are required to be proud that they are Armenian. Tell everyone you know that so-and-so is Armenian. Watch American TV: *The Great Pumpkin*, *The Six Million Dollar Man*, *The Love Boat*. Be enthralled watching a movie in which a young woman with brown hair and braids sings on a Kansas farm. Dream of going over the rainbow like the bluebirds, like Dorothy—of being

an actress like Judy Garland, transporting people away from their gray, stormy reality into the clear beauty of a Technicolor dream.

Have your mom drive you to Armenian school on Saturdays at a temple in Santa Monica—rented out by the Armenians—where you draw strange shapes that look like hieroglyphics onto dotted-lined paper, tracing them over and over like you did in kindergarten, only now you're nine years old and you already know how to read and write—in English. Perform a dance for the parents where you lock pinkies with the other kids and move together in a circle, while wearing a traditional costume and long braids fashioned from brown yarn. Enjoy performing. Understand none of it.

One afternoon, have your mother try once again—this time in junior high school—sending you to an after-school language program at a nearby elementary school. You will be the oldest student in the multi-purpose room, with tables that reach your knees. The students—little kids—will be bent over their papers, coloring their hieroglyphics with crayons. Cover your embarrassment, try to laugh it off by saying to the young, plump, fresh-off-the-boat teacher with Brillo pad-like hair:

*Just consider me an American. Ha ha.*

Out of the corner of your eye, see her arm shoot out. Feel her muscular fingers clamp around your wrist with urgency, like she's a boat captain and you're a passenger gone overboard. Look up in time to see a flame light up in the center of her black eyes, her lips pressing tightly together. She will stare into your eyes and say, in her slow, Dracula-sounding English:

*I will consider you an Armenian who has not learned Armenian ... yet.*

Turn to stone, paralyzed first by humiliation, then rage. Make it through the hour, somehow. When your mom picks you up be sure to tell her you are never going back.

Meet your friends in Westwood later that night. Over pizza at BJ's act out the scene between you and the Transylvanian transplant. They will say, on cue: *What a bitch!* Appreciate their loyalty and commitment to playing their roles with conviction. Want your friends' reassurance to make you feel better. It will. Also, it won't.

Stumble into doing theater at Paul Revere Junior High School. Your best friend Katie<sup>1</sup> will not want to take the theater class alone, and you will need to pick an elective anyway, so sign up. Dazzle everyone when you steal the show during the school play—you, strangely named, short, round, bad-skinned, un-dazzling you.

Decide that theater is your life and that becoming an actress is everything. It's a phase your parents will hope you outgrow.

*Be a lawyer*, your father will say. *Armenians make good lawyers.*

Feel inside like you are Shakespeare heroine Cordelia from the play King Lear—Lear's loyal, sweet youngest daughter, the source of his redemption. Be cast as Goneril, the eldest sister, the one who poisons her other sister Regan and suggests plucking out the eyes of an old man, her dad's friend. It will be the curse of the ancestral tragedies you carry in your DNA—along with your dark hair and dark eyes which equal dark heart in a world that believes light is the same as good—to be cast this way.

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<sup>1</sup> Names have been changed



You are Dorothy. But your long nose, square jaw, and bushy, dark eyebrows will make you a shoo-in for the Wicked Witch of the West.

Try to enjoy getting the juicy, non-ingenue parts throughout high school, even though no boy ever fell for the girl who played witch-accuser Ann Putnam in her high school production of Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible*.

Be a high school senior when a 6.8-magnitude earthquake kills 45,000 Armenians in the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. On TV, see old Armenian women that look just like the ones you see ambling down the aisle of St. Garabed Armenian Church leaning on their sons' arms during Easter services. Like the church women, they will wear dresses of heavy dark cloth, heads covered with lace. The TV women, however, will be weeping among rubble, speaking that impenetrable language.

Graduate high school. At commencement, sing the alto part in a choral version of Pat Benatar's "We Belong."

Plan to flee as far as possible for college—to the Ivy Leagues, to the East Coast, to the Pacific Northwest, anywhere but Southern California, a place you're sure you don't belong.

Stay in Southern California for college. Manage to live in the region of the world with millions of Armenians—the largest population of Armenians, in fact, outside of Armenia—without running into one.

Run into one. Attempt to bond over being Armenian. *I'm Armenian too!* you will say to people you meet with Armenian last names (that end in -ian and -yan) to see if, like the quote from the writer William Saroyan (that you sometimes see printed on posters in people's houses), you will not create a New Armenia.

Nope. Having not experienced being Armenian as a novelty—like a distinctive-looking hat—they will look at you like: *Good for you*.

During your freshman year, live through the birth of a new world order when the Berlin Wall falls. The Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic will be among the first to declare independence from the Soviet Union. Be aware of this fact. Feel it has nothing to do with you. Have little interest in finding out.

Get a little interested. Join UC San Diego's Armenian Club. Go to two meetings—one at a Middle Eastern restaurant and one at a member's parents' enormous house in Poway where you enjoy eating louleh kebab like you've had at Carousel Restaurant in Hollywood and tabouli the way your medz mama makes it. Don't relate to any of the members, who all speak Armenian, grew up with Armenians, went to Armenian schools, will marry Armenians, know the history of Armenia, understand their roles as propagators of Armenian genes. You? You're as American as a Kansas farm girl.

*Study literature*, your mother will say. *Write the next great American novel*.

Study theater. Know you will be an actor after you graduate. Believe, at first, that being vaguely foreign-looking is a plus for a career in theater, TV, and film.

*I'm so lucky—I can play a bunch of different ethnicities!* you will think.

Come to understand the downside of this. Why cast you instead of a person of who is actually of a certain ethnicity? When they are looking for a white woman, why cast someone who looks vaguely foreign?

Move to Hollywood. Find a manager who believes in you and can send you out for real acting jobs. Stand firm when he suggests you consider changing your unpronounceable Armenian last name. You think of all of the Italian actors' names and think: *This is how it gets normalized*. Let them figure out how to pronounce it. Has it stopped Elizabeth Mastrantonio? Chloë Sevigny?

Say to him: *Besides, casting directors find it unique and always ask me about it. It's a conversation starter!*

Start to get acting work: bit parts in famous TV shows and in movies. Get cast easily as cops, detectives, school principals: your serious face, dark eyes, and wide hips easily imbuing you with a sense of maturity, authority. Learn to mumble and whisper your lines, *throw them away*, so on camera it will seem small, like real life, though what you always loved about acting was the heightened sense of reality, its ability to transport through the beauty of language. You will feel conflicted about making things small and just *throwing the words away*.

Master the art of knowing how you'll be seen in the only profession where it's perfectly OK— required really—to hire someone based on their ethnicity, and height, weight, hair color, eye color, bust size, etc.

Remember that Judy Garland got hooked on diet pills during the filming of *The Wizard of Oz*.

Spend casting sessions saying: *Yup, that's really my name*.

Realize the whole thing's racist.

Keep auditioning.

Perform in interesting new plays in dingy black box theater on the fifth floor of a crumbling building in a seedy part of downtown Los Angeles where you only cancel that night's performance if there are fewer than five people in the audience. That night's performance will get canceled from time to time.

Live with your mother and your medz mama the first year out of acting graduate school to save on rent in Los Angeles. Get to know the rhythms of their life together.

Be with them on New Year's Eve. Learn that your medz mama puts out walnuts and dried fruit to celebrate the coming year. At Easter, watch her boil onion skins to dye the eggshells red. Learn to say what Armenians say: *Christos hayav ee mere lotz*—Christ has risen from the dead. The other person says: *Tezi Mezi medz ava dees*—to you and to us much happiness.

Move out, to a tiny, dark studio in Silver Lake.

Keep auditioning. In each waiting room, in the interminable time you wait to get into the room and *throw the words away*, imagine yourself in the same waiting room in ten, twenty, thirty years, the yellow brick road leading you in one giant circle, back to the start.

Be thirty-one when your mother wakes up one day with back pain. Try to ignore the dark funnel clouds gathering speed in the distance.

The clouds will be unignorable when the storm rips right through you, when, at thirty-two, your mom dies a shockingly quick death—two weeks from diagnosis to buried—unexpectedly leveling whatever you've managed to build, leaving you tether-less,

like a hot air balloon let loose. Begin to wonder if you really knew her: *Who was she? Who are you?*

Feel untethered in other ways. Wonder: Why am I doing theater on the fifth floor of a crumbling building in a seedy part of downtown Los Angeles where the people onstage outnumber the audience? Why do I go on TV auditions, waiting for hours sometimes, just to *throw my lines away* and be assessed on my face, my height, judged always on my genetics and not on what I can contribute, achieve?

Feel a vague feeling creeping at the corners of your consciousness, like you've woken up in a life you don't want. Remember in college how funny you thought the T-shirts that fellow theater majors would sometimes wear that said "I can't. I have rehearsal." were. Find it less funny. Wonder what you would do with all your time if you weren't an actor. Maybe you'd see the world, go river rafting, bake desserts, date! See that you might be at the end of a kind of a (yellow brick) road. Vow to wait a year before quitting acting.

When the year is up, quit.

Quit all of it.

In this contextless, now motherless, fatherless life (dad will have died years ago), you will be no one's child, nothing will anchor you, you will belong nowhere but where you decide to, with your people who are ... who?

To find them, go over the rainbow and land in another world.

In other words, move to Glendale.

When you find the perfect, spacious one-bedroom apartment—for just about the same monthly rent as your tiny, dark Silver Lake studio—call your tall, redheaded best friend and say: *Let's just be clear: I am not moving here because I'm Armenian, OK?*

Move to Glendale somewhat because you're Armenian.

Get a job, a regular job in an office in the communications department of a nonprofit that helps people in need, where they issue you a laptop and you get promoted within six months.

Sign up for HyeSingles, an Armenian dating website—"hye" is short for "hayeren" which means Armenian in Armenian. When the site asks for your fluency level, check the box that says: *I speak no Armenian*. When it asks how important it is that your future children speak Armenian, check: *Not important*.

Get few Hye dates.

Still, through the site, meet a nice Armenian guy who wears dress shoes, slacks, and a belt for your coffee date at Starbucks in Burbank. It will not be a match—for either of you. He will be lovely, though, and will invite you to become a mentor like he is to at-risk Armenian youth in Glendale.

The day you show up to the first mentor meeting, the first person you meet will be the Armenian man you fall for: a man-child with sad, foreign eyes and a reckless smile named Vartan who, at 40, is proud of all he has not committed to. Later you'll remember you should have listened to your uncle—who married into your family—who said: never trust a man with a name like Vartan. Your one hundred percent Armenian uncle's name will be Dennis.

For the first time in your life, make good friends who are Armenian: global citizen Mariam who grew up in Glendale after coming to the U.S. from Iran in 1979 after the fall of the Shah, with an MBA from Cornell and an interest in Myers-Briggs personality assessments; good-hearted Lisa from Fresno, California, whose parents run a fruit farm and who dreams of opening a spa and being free to marry anyone she pleases; community-minded Armen who was born in Armenia but grew up in Glendale and runs the mentorship program, still in touch with what it's like to be young and feel like a stranger in a strange land; soulful Lusine whom you will meet when she's fourteen and you're thirty-four. She will be from Armenia. You will be Lusine's mentor, her Big Sister for four years, and you will show her another way to be a woman in the world, a way she likely would never have seen. She will teach you how to be someone's ally even when you think they are wrong. The last time you see her she will have just gotten an equal-sign tattoo on her ring finger, and you will coax her into feeling safe enough to come out to you, and you will nearly die of pride, feel acutely the privilege of having played a small part in someone else's becoming.

The Armenians you meet will be from everywhere.

You will come to understand there are "kinds" of Armenians. Armenians from Egypt are called Yegipta-hyes. Armenians from Iran are called Barska-hyes. Armenians from Armenia are called Haystansis. You will be christened an Amerigya-hye.

There are Dashnaks—short for Dashnaksutyun, a political party affiliation from the old country, which means you send your kids to the Armenian Youth Federation. If you're not a Dashnak, you associate yourself with the Armenian General Benevolent Union.

Marvel at the insularity, the shortsightedness of this way of thinking. There are maybe five million Armenians in the world, and it makes sense to divide ourselves into factions? No wonder we can't get a U.S. President to use the word genocide when commemorating the Armenian Genocide every April 24th when the rest of the world (except Turkey) acknowledges the truth: that 1.5 million of us were killed by the Ottoman Turks in an attempt to annihilate the Armenian race.

Learn the language. Discover that there are two main dialects: Western Armenian, that your family speaks, and Eastern Armenian, which is spoken by Armenians in Armenia now (which is a lot like Iranian Armenian, which is a little bit its own thing). The alphabet is thirty-six letters. It was invented by Mesrop Mashtots in 405 AD to translate the bible. It has enabled Armenians to survive as a minority, without a country, for so long. That, and the Church.

Take an Armenian language class at Los Angeles City College. It will be full of twenty-year-old Armenians who live at home. You will think they are taking it just for the easy A. But someone will explain to you that, though they've grown up speaking it, it's likely that they don't know how to read and write it.

The girls will all sit in front, on time, notebooks out, eyes forward. The boys will roll in late, sit in the back, fuck around, make jokes about the teacher. Many of them—someone will tell you—will be rabiz, a derogatory term, a Glendale term, referring to that group of young Armenian men in Glendale who wear tracksuits and sunglasses, drive ostentatious cars, are known for speaking a Russian/Armenian slang mash-up and wearing shiny, pointy dress shoes.

The instructor will spend lots of class time lecturing the boys in an attempt to save the Armenian race.

*Look at these girls!* He will say, gesturing to the front row. *They will become pharmacists, lawyers, medical technicians. You think these girls are going to marry you?!*

Date Vartan. Be compelled by his Armenian-ness, attracted to his self-destructive nature, his need to be saved from himself. Six months into it, you will still never have met his father nor any other members of his family nor any of his friends, besides the ones you have in common.

One day, while shopping with him in Pasadena, you will run into a coworker of yours. She will greet him warmly and express pleasure at finally getting to meet him. He will offer a smile (without teeth) and shake her hand—but he won't take off his sunglasses.

You will know he just doesn't love you when while breaking up with you he can't bring himself to tell you the truth: that he just doesn't see himself with you, that after trying you on for a bit he's realized you're simply not Armenian enough for him. Instead, he will attempt a metaphor, something about closing drawers. In the driver's seat of his parked car, he will literally mime closing little drawers, as if the steering wheel is a miniature armoire, as he strains to explain to you something about his emotional life. It will come across as overwrought and improbable.

Heartbroken, seek the wizard, soaring up, up, up into the sky—careful to evade the flying monkeys—on your way to the Emerald City, the homeland: Armenia. Be shocked at its bracing beauty, like a splash of cold water on your face. Feel strangely like you belong, even though everything's very Russified and you don't speak the language and you definitely don't belong at all. Still, your eyes look like theirs.

The women will be beautiful, faces fully made up while walking through the streets of Yerevan in artfully styled jeans and stilettos. Some of the men you see will be leather-jacketed, two-by-two, coming out of dark-windowed SUVs, performing their shakedown rounds. But most of the men you see will be young friends, holding hands, affectionate with each other—or men out partying with their families in the open-air plaza, young and old, matriarch and toddler, on warm summer nights, drinking, eating, dancing, celebrating the longer days, the not-winter.

Kids will follow your tour group of young Armenian professionals from America like groupies, wanting to take photos with you. A hot priest will give you a tour of Tatev Monastery, all the ladies of the group smiling at each other and swooning. Schoolchildren will perform instruments for you—the violin, the duduk, the oud—while a young woman performs an interpretative dance as a tree. Old women will try to sell you trinkets—ceramic pomegranates, keychains shaped like miniature Khachkars (intricately carved stone crosses that will be everywhere)—at the entrances of the churches you will visit.

You will be treated to a home-cooked Armenian meal in a woman's house in rural Dilijan, which you will eat by a babbling brook of beautiful crystal clear water that you will wade in afterward, jeans rolled up. The whole group will be shocked when at the end of the meal, the host and her daughter throw everything into the brook: the leftover food scraps, paper napkins, empty Pepsi cans. You will all want to intervene—whispering to each other,

*Should we say something?*—but you will not want to look like asshole Americans crying over a fucking brook, especially after visiting Gyumri, the epicenter of the 1988 earthquake, where piles of rubble still stand as if it just happened, where you visited a soup kitchen where old women talked of neighbors who died because they couldn't afford heat in the winter, and you didn't protest then.

You will dance, drink cognac, sip pomegranate wine; swim in Lake Sevan; visit the orphanage where your mother's in-lieu-of-flowers donations will have gone toward building a room (there will be a plaque with her name on it); visit a bombed-out church in Shushi in the disputed territory of the Republic of Artsakh where the war with Azerbaijan has been going on since the 1980s; see the words "System of a Down" spray-painted onto a low stone wall in a field; visit Khor Virap and feel too claustrophobic to climb down into the deep pit where Gregory the Illuminator was imprisoned; go on a hair-bending trip through the hills at night on your way to the Republic of Artsakh from Goris where the cab driver—a grizzled soldier, survivor of war, who drives like he's already lived nine lives and expects to live nine more—will tell stories while a cigarette dangles from one corner of his downturned mouth, which will only turn up when he laughs at you and your fellow travelers sucking in your breath around each hairpin turn; solemnly lay roses at the Genocide Memorial admiring the woman who sweeps there, keeping it spotless, her way of honoring the many dead; light a candle at Saghmosavank, a thirteenth-century monastery.

You will be processing many losses. You will be depressed.

Nevertheless, on the last night the group will elect you to represent them at the final dinner toast. You will be dressed in a casual, strapless, brown summer dress with embroidered trim. Your hair will cascade down your shoulders in brown curls. You will look scrubbed and shiny. You will remember it as one of your happiest, most complete moments. They chose you.

You will know that Armenia—yes, the landlocked, stone-covered, shitty piece of the Caucasus that the Armenians were bequeathed by the Allies and the Ottoman Empire via the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres; but, also, its soul—does not belong only to Mariam, to the lady who squeezed your wrist, to the tracksuited rabiz, to the members of the UC San Diego Armenian Club, to the "riff raff," to the people on HyeSingles, to your cousins who speak Armenian, to Lusine who was born there, to the young people who take Armenian language class at Los Angeles City College, to the young professionals who went on the tour, to the women in high heels and jeans, to the children who sang for you, to Vartan.

It's yours.

Return home. Time will pass. You'll evolve.

After some river rafting, baking, dating, and seeing the world, wonder if you are still an actor. Flirt with a return to the theater. Reconnect with a former theater colleague. Consider joining the theater company to which he belongs.

One night, go see a photo exhibit about poverty in Armenia with your friend Mariam. The photographs will be life-size depictions of families digging for scraps at the dump, a medz mama darning socks in a chair by a stove, sweeping the floor of a spotless shanty.

After the exhibit, drop by your former colleague's theater—where there's a party to celebrate the opening of the new space—to say hi.

Without realizing it, step your (ruby-slippered) toe on the start of a new road. Meet your future (non-Armenian) husband at the party. He will be a friend of your former theater colleague's. Chat with him by the table of cookies, noting your unborn children gleaming in his eyes. Feel the rules about who you are and could be melt like a water-splattered witch.

Later, after you have largely resolved in your own heart how your Armenian family—whose loved ones were slaughtered or starved, their homes and lands stolen, their dreams smashed, histories erased—now live on through you, as you become the Armenian that you are, born where you were born, speaking what you speak, loving who and what you love—be amazed at the storybook-journey arc of it all: how you had to leave home to find it, to understand that, like Dorothy and those damn ruby slippers, the power to survive a genocide was with you the whole time.

# Baby

PRECIOUS ARINZE

POETRY

The night brings down its moon to dance in the windows. My father sits on a bed, under the heaving umbrella of whiskey or dying & declares himself innocent in every story. & because it is expected of me, I am trying to believe pain becomes temporary after the wound closes. The way every break in the weather erases the season before it, despite the tree's insistence on remaining where it was planted. I don't know who we are or what I am. There should be a word for that. Not estranged, but something equally capable of reflecting blood. I no longer believe in a God that could watch his hunger arrive each day like an efficient train and do nothing. Still, I try to pray sometimes because I need things explained to me. Maybe if I chewed up pages of the Bible we could manufacture forgiveness. An amnesty of braided tongue. A history rewritten and bruiseless. When memory is broken into like a safe, does the body ever stop ringing? When can I hear *baby* spill like sunshine through a gargle of rain from my lover's mouth & have it be just soft & kind & not the wound I came out of. *Baby baby baby*. Put that everywhere where my name should be & may it never again dissolve in my ears. Soon the earth will hide something of ours in her bosom again. When that happens, my name will be all I know of myself. Given the evidence of history and bloodlines, I will come to forget that too. & if I am not a lover or child to anyone, what will become of me then?



# Humiliation

ACE BOGGESS

POETRY

How many times I stood exposed before my jailers  
as they checked for contraband, infections,  
new tattoos. They doused me with delousing ooze.  
They did their best to see inside me.  
Some watched me squirm while I filled a cup  
like a backseat child whose dad won't stop  
during trips. I danced the Broken Robot,  
danced the Barber Pole. I swayed to rhythms  
of the silence of laughter that never happened,  
never stopped. I was more ashamed of my gut  
than shriveled prick. We have these hang-ups:  
spiders, tight spaces, frolicking naked around a fire.  
Prison makes us humbled exhibitionists.  
I danced the Quiet Listener. I danced the Frog Parade.  
I could've pirouetted in the chill-rich Stone Suite  
as guards stared in my direction & saw nothing,  
no one, nada, not a disembodied human face.

# PA(IN): CONTRACTION AND EXPANSION

ADESINA BROWN

POETRY • WRITEGIRL CONTRIBUTOR

unbearable, incomprehensible, irreproducible—  
shrink in its return

/ and the breath is

/ embraced

# Panacea

JACOB FOWLER

POETRY

My uncle who is in a cult is coming for thanksgiving again this year. He has been in a cult for thirteen years and this is the third thanksgiving in a row that he's made. This, according to my dad, is a new record for him and, also according to my dad, my uncle who is in a cult was taking lithium last year but it didn't work and just made him feel cloudy. My uncle who is in a cult is going to sleep on the couch and I'll sleep on the floor and we'll all pretend not to notice that my dad has moved all his stuff into the guest room. Last thanksgiving my mom, perhaps unconsciously, made a vegetable medley that was too spicy and my uncle who is in a cult accidentally touched his right eye and a chili flake made his right eye leak tears and he said that was the first good cry he's had in years and he told a story of how his last dog died and he was on lithium and he was absolutely fucking torn up but couldn't cry and we all listened politely, as if we were sitting with our hands folded, as if the world flat under our feet was still there, as if the dog was in the room, as if it would have mattered if the dog was in the room—

## .233 Remington

LUKAS RAY HALL

POETRY

Brother, you are no longer human  
in my mind.

I think of you, bullet.  
I think of you, death.

At home I roll between  
my fingers

& wood table,  
a bullet you lent me

to write a poem.  
So I could witness

the gaudy brass jacket,  
the red lipstick tip.

You are the Remington  
under my thumb,

saying *I did not ask*  
*for this name,*

*I did not ask*  
*for skin or muscle.*

*I do not want*  
*to be some proxy,*

*some stand-in*  
*for all that you deem wrong.*

## 12 Movements: looking for love da, da, da

DONNA ISAAC

POETRY

### trust

almost happened as scary as happened  
 drive-in *m\*a\*s\*h* boone's farm  
 pushing me down blue-jean  
 groin in face door handle in back  
 falling out boys laughing  
 at failure brushing off favorite shirt  
 with pink satin star hitching ride home  
 OR freshmen partying frat house  
 tall blonde drink of beer i loved  
 swooping up top bunk trying to  
 no no no roommate crashing in carrying  
 me out crying dark greystone  
 OR the cabooze club leaving with dancer  
 reefer (secretly laced pcg) forcing up  
 against wall purple squares running  
 to plate glass window minneapolis  
 screaming to be let out to go away  
 bad summer reruns control taken

### interloper

back of van "whole lotta love"  
 paper cup mateus promising cuddling  
 you're so sweet let's on mattress stroking hair  
 bleached by lemon juice pulling down jeans  
 fingering beneath so hot wet  
 soft kisses galen like greek physician  
 knows anatomy bile phlegm blood  
 knock upon van's back door ceasing groping  
 pulling on pants in dark innocence  
 opening to campus cop  
 flashlight in hand blinking eyes saying nothing  
 is going on officer checking license plate  
 smirking says get going  
 seeing galen wearing my jeans  
 bell bottoms I wear slouchy

grunge          denims          laughing          laughing  
 exchanging    them    undone          unconsummated  
 somehow      very    satisfying

### hello, cowgirl

giving          it          away          to          townie  
 hippie          hair    guitar          in hand  
 in    dorm    room    hurting          silence  
 blood          on    sheet          not          noticing  
 he    was    first  
 balling          up    linens          stuffing  
 into    hamper    staring    onto          commons  
 leaving    tossing    brown hair    striding    into    hall  
 final    glimpse    of *the*          first          (no orpheus, he)

### deep sea

pretty much          anywhere          everywhere  
 not understanding    this liking    licking  
 doing    nothing    for me          arising  
 like pearl diver    wiping    triumph  
 kissing    mouth    tasting    sea salt  
 thighs    then wanting    diving  
 bidding    fond farewell    never  
 understanding    dismissal    since daring  
 to go where    few    c/dare to

### rocketing 2x

first crush    high school boy    hardwood floor    body  
 moving    moving    within    on top of  
 hair    tumble    hyacinth curls    adoring  
 meeting    stroke    arching up    up    up  
 ecstasy    like burst orange    sunrise  
 crying    loving him    knowing  
 going    away    forever    good-bye  
 second time:    one-night-stand    fargo salesman  
 you betcha    hardware convention    st. paul  
 fu manchu    radisson    top floor  
 not length    but girth    sliding    on  
 black dress    thigh-high    slit    finding  
 falcon    taking off    smiling    flying over the mississippi

### biker

boy more like man wearing leather chaps  
 black leather jacket harley riding behind him  
 holding tight slim midriff  
 called it *balling* kept asking me want *to ball*?  
 in his house well behaved irish setter  
 lying nearby watching us or cheap hotel in mountains  
 squeaky bed springs parking lot filled with truckers  
 babes coming going having a ball

### sperryville

every other word *fuck or fuckin'* getting to me  
 trying sticking wrong place not working  
 no magic at all in trailer park  
 where father mayor little town  
 parents tolerating college princess  
 dating smalltownboy their son baptist  
 wanting to play hearts to say *f* word constantly  
 trying not working mountain boy

### sealing

door-to-door salesman on porch  
 making way into efficiency mattress on floor  
 hi-fi on *the court of the crimson king*  
 jars of tomatoes suspended in juices  
 on folded tea towel out of hot water  
 spiel about education program  
 glass of rosé puff of grass tryst upon mattress  
 leaving promising to return returning rapping  
 on screen door latched hook and eye  
 hiding in bathroom listening pop pop pop! cooling jars  
 heart in throat finally walking upstairs  
 another sale another seduction could have  
 been serial killer

### gamekeepers

country boy wrapping me in sheepskin sleeping bag  
 roaring fire in cabin sweet kisses  
 not like *very* first time boy gave  
 real kisses me shivering all night after seeing him  
 at municipal swimming pool red trunks water  
 droplets lingering on edges chestnut hair  
 kisses on bottom bunk making me believe in love boys  
 wanting attention spaghetti straps nail polish basking in  
 warmth tender looks tender touch thanking young boy

country boy      gentle      kind      generous  
teaching      love      desire      so human

### plunge

lake superior      quick      breathtaking      plunge  
naked cold      crashing      water tumble      onshore  
ruffled indentation      legs moving      like snow angel's      marking place  
near bobbing      gulls      clacking      agates  
churned-up      white water      watching      lakers      salties  
entering      harbor      horns blasting      stirring sea birds  
light sparking      swells      glints      eyes  
looking      distance      horizon      black      unknown  
hoping      like stupid      pandora  
staring      zenith      outskirts      duluth

### trust?

boy      loved enough to wed      giving up  
most essential being      essential needs  
hiding      rubber gag balls      porno      fancy condoms  
clamps      crotchless      things      paper bags  
secret stash      knowing nothing      photo  
bj on a pool table      picture      with hooker  
las vegas      hotel room      always blonde      swinger      ads  
circled      still here      dragging      wounded      wings  
through      underbrush      staring at fashion  
photos      ralph lauren      models      near      sports cars  
mark ruffalo      tight blue jeans      my eyes only  
wanting      remembering      touching deepest      softest      places  
strong urgency      wishing for      carrie bradshaw      throw down

### wine-dark sea

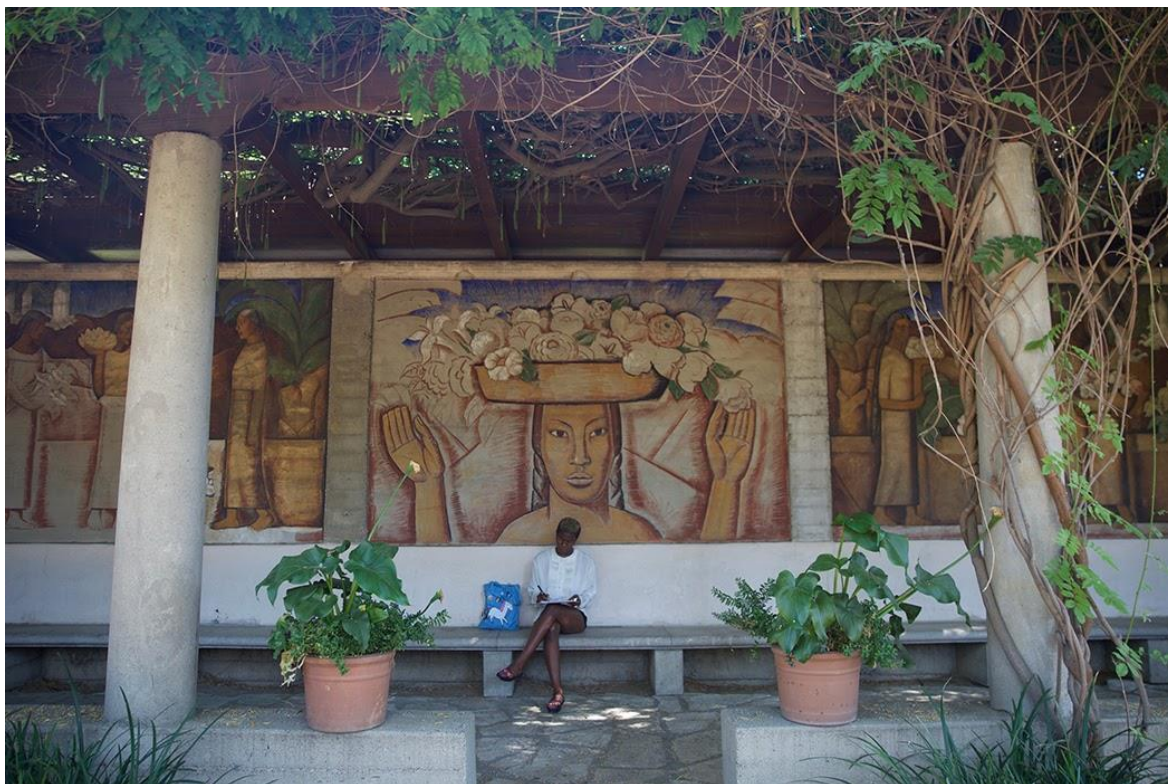
purple waters      moonlight      gazing out      balcony  
from behind      mediterranean      coming  
consenting      wrapping      muscles      of chest  
voyeur      italian      heat      alabaster      white  
watching      or      cupid  
night      love      making      fantastical  
silent      edges      of leaves      etched      sky  
becoming      and coming      like      high tide  
rolling      undulations      deepest      secrets      letting      go  
sharing      sighs      halleluiah      halleluiah      moonbeam  
lifting      resurrection      crescendo  
stillness      still      dreaming



# The Flower Vendors

CHLOE MARTINEZ

POETRY



*Photo courtesy of Scripps College*

*Alfredo Ramos Martínez, "Fresco (unfinished)," 1946.  
Margaret Fowler Memorial Garden, Scripps College, Claremont, California.*

The baby caterwauls, who knows why. You snap  
at husband, growl at kitchen mess, can't think of who  
to complain to about your lucky life. Complain

to the mountains, then, they don't judge. They have actual  
snow shining on their heads, and you can see them from this  
little street where it never snows. It's almost cold.

Wrangle her into the tiny coat et cetera. Grab the notebook

and two books you won't get to read. Carry them like charms, like a memory  
of freedom. Get out out out among the sky and the winter citrus alive

yellow on the trees, push the stroller past the construction workers  
who step aside and even attempt to wave their cigarette smoke  
away as you pass. By the time you reach the secret walled garden

she is asleep. Two bubbling fountains. Piles of wisteria.  
Along one wall the mural you came for: the women  
like Amazon queens, hauling huge baskets of flowers on their backs

and balanced on their heads: zinnia and hibiscus and armfuls of  
white calla lilies, and corn, and fruit, and aloe leaves like spears.  
The trumpets of *floripondio* blossoms dangle behind them,

sweet-scented, heavy. Don't eat their seeds, for though hallucinogenic,  
they can be fatal. The woman at the center wears a crown  
of her own braided hair and stares out over your whole life.

Sit where she can see you. Breathe. Watch the green leaves and the bright blue sky  
peter out at the end of the wall, the part left uncolored when the artist  
died young: umber sketches of desert hills, outlined armadillo

and coyote lurking among them. The women with their long black braids  
have a powerful quietness about them. Their eyes like almonds, their hands  
monumental and strong. Martínez came to California for his daughter,

Maria, born with a bone disease, a warm, dry climate prescribed  
by the best doctors he could find. She grew into health here, and he  
did his greatest work, painting prayers of recovery for her:

Madonnas with their round babies, mythic Mexican goddesses,  
La Malinche who either helped or betrayed her people (enslaved  
by Cortés, then married to him; finally his translator and confidante).

Martínez painted women on the walls of chapels, hotels, cafés,  
Beverly Hills mansions, and this garden that echoes Eden.  
In this way father and child saved and raised each other.

Your baby keeps sleeping, lulled by the sound  
of moving water. What you would not do to keep her  
in this world. What worlds you would not keep making

for her survival and your own, even to the point of leaving them unfinished. You cannot imagine. You can. You are sitting among undone umber hills, growing cold. Red squirrels hurl themselves

through the loaded lemon trees. Look up. You are inside a walled patch of sky, really. The blue is framed to show you its value.

# Gender Reveal Party

M. McDONOUGH

POETRY

I threw myself a gender reveal party.  
It was over brunch.  
My parents & my person were the only ones in attendance.  
My mom & dad came to see me a few days after my friend died.

They wanted to have a meal.  
I wanted to eat with them.  
I wanted to taste something

other than over-salted grief.  
So, we sipped coffee & chatted.  
Never looked at each other for too long.

I said I am not a woman or a man.  
(confetti cannon)

My mom said Why couldn't you wait until I was dead?  
I said I didn't want to wait until I was dead.

My friend threw themselves a gender reveal party;

everyone called it a funeral.

# Etymology

DARE WILLIAMS

POETRY

it starts in  
phoenix  
growing  
in the dark  
moves its way to you  
then leaves me  
breathless

in hollywood  
where we  
laid our heads  
there was a break  
& I said ok  
let you drive  
even took the  
seatbelt off  
& moved to the floor

I was  
half-animal  
lying in the grass  
when it  
surprised me  
I was  
soaking the bed  
not taking calls  
after the first result  
I blew it off  
put the secret into  
some flowers &  
had them  
sent to you.



## Selected Collages

ALLISON STRAUSS

COLLAGE



Allison Strauss, *The Movie Palace*, 2016. Collage, 11 1/2" x 16 1/4"





Allison Strauss, *Greed*, 2019. Collage on aluminum foil, 12" x 8 1/4"





Allison Strauss, *Gluttony*, 2019. Collage, 12 1/2" x 12 1/2"





Allison Strauss, *The Finer Things*, 2018. Collage on aluminum foil, 12" x 24"

# Spinning the Record

A.J. BERMUDEZ

STAGEPLAY

**CHARACTERS:**    ELIE                    25, in the way that scotch is 25.

                         CAMERON            24, full of hope, possibly hopeless.

                         ADAM                28, very bright, a looter.

**SETTING:**        Two adjacent flats, nine stories above a post-catastrophic shell of contemporary London.

**TIME:**             The day after tomorrow, 28 days later, or something of the sort.  
                         The present, but worse.

\*   \*   \*

*Darkness. Over the course of ten minutes, gray-orange light gradually rises to give the impression of looming sunrise.*

*Visually, the stage is divided roughly in half, with ELIE's flat occupying one half and CAMERON's occupying the other. A crude dividing wall (or the insinuation of one) separates them. Upstage, each flat has one window, revealing a too-still, too-silent city view beyond.*

*In the dim light, the silhouette of ELIE, curled beneath a sheet, is barely visible. Next door, CAMERON is wide awake, propped against the wall that separates them, phone to his ear.*

*Silence.*

CAMERON    (softly)  
                  What are you doing?

*ELIE shifts in bed. The new angle reveals that she is cradling a mobile phone to her ear.*

ELIE                      It's 4:30.

CAMERON              Right.

ELIE                      I'm in bed.

CAMERON              Sleeping?

ELIE                      Masturbating, of course. To you, *obviously*.

CAMERON              Really?

ELIE                      No. Not really.

*Through dim light, the ironic motion of ELIE's hand sliding down her body beneath the sheet is barely discernible.*

CAMERON              I can't shake you, you know.

ELIE                      Yes, I know.

*Her head tilts backward, her hand circling gently.*

CAMERON              And—damn it, Elie ...  
(*tortured*)  
I can't sleep. I *really* can't sleep. People say that, but I *actually* can't sleep. How long do you think this will last?

ELIE                      Until the electricity finally goes, I suppose.

CAMERON              Come over.

ELIE                      What?

CAMERON              Please. Please come ...

ELIE                      (*stifling an audible gasp*)  
No.

CAMERON              Then ... I'll come to you.

ELIE                      No. I'm busy.

CAMERON     *(miserable)*  
Right. Not masturbating.

ELIE           *(deeply facetious)*  
No, I am ... I'm cleaning the rifle.

CAMERON        You don't have a rifle.

ELIE               Hitchhiking to heaven.

CAMERON        Double-clicking the mouse?

ELIE              *(her voice getting rough, excited again)*  
Spinning the record.

*Suddenly, a metallic clang on the fire escape outside ELIE's window. She bolts upright.*

ELIE               Was that you?

CAMERON        Was what me?

*ELIE throws down the phone and leaps from the bed. As she grabs a carving knife from the nightstand, ANDY climbs through the window, looking extremely normal, dressed in the bland, nondescript aesthetic of a university TA. ELIE brandishes the knife.*

ANDY              Oh ... shit.

ELIE               Who the fuck are you?

ANDY              I'm—um, I'm Andy.

ELIE               Andy. You're a fucking Peeping Tom?

ANDY              No! No—I'm not a Peeping Tom ...

ELIE               What did you see?

ANDY              Nothing! I saw nothing! I mean, I came in; OK, I saw you were on the bed—

*(ELIE moves the knife toward his throat.)*

I'm a looter! I'm just a looter!

*ELIE eases off with the knife.*

ELIE                    You're a looter?

ANDY                  Yes, obviously!

*(ELIE examines his clean-cut attire. She does not feel this is obvious.)*

Why not? Most people are gone, or dead, or whatever ... I mean I—I am fucking surprised. I mean you—

*(ANDY notices her, half-undressed, for the first time.)*

I mean—hello.

ELIE                    I will kill you, remorselessly.

*(ELIE's phone rings. A tense moment. She answers it.)*

Cameron, I'll call you back.

CAMERON            Wait.

ELIE                    What?

CAMERON            You can get back to sleep, I won't call you again, but ... Do you love me?

ELIE                    No. Go back to bed.

*(She hangs up. To ANDY:)*

You're a dedicated looter, Andy. We're nine stories up.

ANDY                  Well, every crowbar in the city is on the floor of a department store right now. But the money—money's always in the sky.

ELIE                    I have no money.

ANDY                  *(smiles)*

Maybe it's on the tenth.

*(ANDY takes a step toward her, slowly.)*

Are you afraid of me?

ELIE                    Of course not. I have a weapon. You don't.

*(ANDY takes another slow step forward. Nervously:)*

I wish you were armed. I've been jonesing to take someone's gun.

ANDY                    Greedy girl.  
                          *(switches gears, moves toward the pantry)*  
                          May I have some food?

ELIE                    No.

*ANDY opens a cabinet, retrieves a box of breakfast cereal.*

ANDY                    What were you fanning the fur to when I came in?

ELIE                    Come again?

ANDY                    What were you jilling off about?

ELIE                    I *knew* you saw! Fuck. Nothing ...

ANDY                    *(eating cereal)*  
                          Come on. I'm about to be stabbed and stripped for parts. Humor me.

ELIE                    Taking a hot shower. Going to the grocery store. The dull, petty for-granted-ness of forty-eight hours ago. And the neighbor boy, marginally.

ANDY                    Really?

ELIE                    Yes.  
                          *(A moment.)*  
                          Take your charity cereal and fuck off. Good luck on the tenth.

ANDY                    *(smiles)*  
                          Thank you.

*ANDY eases out of the open window, back onto the fire escape.*  
                          *ELIE exhales. Her phone rings; she answers.*

CAMERON                You up?

ELIE                    Clearly.

*From outside ELIE's window, ANDY makes his way to CAMERON's window, adjacent.*

CAMERON            You *do* love me.

ELIE                You have girl-next-door syndrome.

*She hangs up. ANDY climbs through CAMERON's window.*

CAMERON           Hello?

ANDY                Shit! Again?

CAMERON           Who are you?

ANDY                Andy. Sorry, this is a very populated building ... Didn't mean to bother you ...

CAMERON           It's okay. I'm Cameron.

*They shake hands, guardedly. It's a bit weird.*

ANDY                You're the guy on the phone? With the girl next door?

CAMERON           Yeah ... I'm in love with her.

ANDY                *(nods, sympathetically)*  
                      Cereal?

CAMERON           Yes, thank you.  
*(CAMERON takes a large handful from the box of cereal. They eat for a moment.)*  
                      So. How is it out there in the wide world?

ANDY                *(grim)*  
                      It's getting less wide.

*CAMERON nods, looks around.*

CAMERON           I don't have much cash or anything, but do you want a credit card?  
                      You never know.

ANDY                Sure. Thanks, man.

*CAMERON retrieves a credit card from his wallet, hands it to ANDY.*

CAMERON      Look, maybe this is weird, but ... Do you want to hear a record, before you go?

ANDY            Yes!

*CAMERON quickly locates a record, puts it on the turntable, clearly excited.*

CAMERON      Cool! Yeah, it's just—who knows with the power, right? And it's so quiet... And—you're pretty cool for a looter.

ANDY            You're pretty cool for a lootee.

CAMERON      Thanks. So, this is from 1972; nothing new, obviously, but ... If you've never heard it on vinyl ...

*CAMERON lets out a low whistle, sets up the needle. Next door, ELIE lies on her bed, wide awake, soberly contemplative. Through the wall, she hears the sound of something retro, oddly elegiac, in the vein of David Bowie's "Starman." She presses her ear to the wall. ANDY and CAMERON dance, lip-sync, share a cigarette as the song plays. The song ends. A moment. ANDY climbs through the window with his box of cereal. He and CAMERON shake hands.*

CAMERON      Good luck, brother.

ANDY            Thanks. Oh—the girl from earlier, next door. When you were on the phone, she was ... how do I put this? ... Masturbating. I thought you should know.

*ANDY ascends the fire escape, or simply disappears from view. CAMERON enjoys a silent moment of pure, unrestrained joy. His phone rings; he scrambles to answer it.*

CAMERON      YES!

ELIE             What is going on?

CAMERON      You tell me, baby!



ELIE                    I heard a—  
*(Suddenly, an all-consuming flash of blinding light fills the space; it is followed milliseconds later by a deafening boom. ELIE and CAMERON react, then after a moment, cross together to their respective windows.)*  
Hello?

*The phone is dead. ELIE hangs up. CAMERON climbs out his window and cautiously moves toward hers, still eating a bit of cereal from his hand.*

CAMERON            You love me.

ELIE                    Is that my cereal?

CAMERON    *(smiles bleakly, indicates the city beyond)*  
I'm moving up the list. Last man.

ELIE                    Don't be gruesome.

CAMERON            It's not so bad. We're in love.  
*(Beat.)*  
The looter told me.

ELIE                    That fucking Peeping tom! Damn it, I can't believe I *fed* him! And that is *not* love ...

CAMERON            It's not nothing.  
  
*A moment. They are very close.*

ELIE                    Were you crying?

CAMERON            It was the record.  
  
*She kisses him. Another blinding flash of light, followed by darkness.*  
  
*Blackout.*  
  
*End of Play.*

# Take a Bow

GARRET JON GROENVELD

STAGEPLAY

**CHARACTERS:**    ONE                      Male—can be older, early fifties, but basically the playwright remembering an afternoon in January 1995.

                         BRIAN                      My friend Brian—early thirties but not handsome. He’s sick in the shadows but cute when he steps into the light.

\*   \*   \*

*Lights up on ONE—he’s center stage in an overhead spot. He talks to the audience the whole time.*

*BRIAN is onstage too. But not lit. In the shadows. In a chair off to the side.*

ONE                      I get a call from Brian. He says,

BRIAN                      I’m hungry.

ONE                      “That’s great!” I say. He says,

BRIAN                      Can you go to King Foot Subs, get my usual. You know how I like it.

ONE                      “Sure, I’ll be over in a bit,” I say.  
I go to King Foot. It’s a block or so from Brian’s apartment.  
I order the warm turkey avocado with the sauce.  
I get the foot size. We’ll split. He won’t finish his half.  
King Foot isn’t there anymore. It’s now a boutique shaved ice place.  
Brian’s not there anymore. He lived a few more years, but it wasn’t looking good then. Not in January 1995.  
When I get to his place, he’s in the other room.  
He’s in the other room.

BRIAN I'm sorry.

ONE He says I'm sorry through the door to the other room. When you say "The Other Room," it could be somewhere fancy, like a velvet parlor, or a sex dungeon, not a cold tile-floored bathroom with a hard toilet bowl. He's on an opium tincture to stop the dia— To stop the thing you need to be in the other room for. "It's fine." I say. "How's it going?" I say. He says,

BRIAN Rough!

ONE "I got your sandwich. I'll get a plate."

BRIAN My kitchen is a mess.

ONE "It is. I'll do the dishes."

BRIAN You don't have to.

ONE "I know," I say. I put on the rubber gloves and sort out the sink. Stack the plates and the bowls, do the pans. Gather the rest from the studio slash bedroom. I take his mother's Danish Christmas plates, which he uses as ashtrays and clean those too. From the other room, he says,

BRIAN Don't do the dishes.

ONE "I can't hear you." I say. I ignore him. He says,

BRIAN No, I need help.

ONE "OK," I say as I go to the door of the other room. He says,

BRIAN I'm sorry, I need help to get up. The tinctures worked too well, nothing's happening.

ONE "You want me to come in there?" I ask.

BRIAN I'm naked.

ONE "You're not my type," I say.

BRIAN It stinks in here.

ONE "It's not much better out here," I say. "You need a housekeeper."

BRIAN Why do you think I invite you over?

ONE "Open the door," I say.  
He does.  
He is so skinny. He's naked and ...  
People say that AIDS made people look like skin and bones, but that's not quite right.  
It's right, but not exactly the same. There was something else.  
A pride.  
A resistance.  
A defeat.  
A withering.  
A ... I honestly don't know how to describe it exactly.  
He's looking up at me. His eyes are sunken and fighting back tears.  
And he tries to smile.  
I will never forget the look on his face. The way he tried to smile.  
This is the man who taught me so much. How to read when a guy was cruising me. When to buy the good candles when they were on sale at I. Magnin's. The right way to exfoliate.  
He gave me such confidence. His encouragement in chasing down what I wanted gave me the strength to try to love, to move past the everyday heartache that can puncture a young optimist.  
He had my back.  
And here he is. So skinny and naked and helpless.  
He says,

BRIAN I don't ever want to be a burden.

ONE "You're not," I say.  
"Can you stand?" I ask.

BRIAN No. I don't think so.

ONE "I can't carry you. I'm a weakling," I say.

BRIAN                    You need to go to a gym.

ONE                    He's right. He's still right.  
(*A pause.*)  
                          Oh well.  
(*A pause.*)  
                          He says,

BRIAN                    Help me stand.

ONE                    I try to pull him up. It doesn't work.  
                          We laugh.  
                          He says,

BRIAN                    You're a weakling.

ONE                    "Let's try this," I say.  
                          And I lean down, next to him.  
                          "Put your arm around my shoulder," I tell him.  
                          He does.  
                          I put my arm around his rib cage and pull him up. He exclaims.

BRIAN                    I'm up!

ONE                    I get him to his bed. It's a mess, but clean enough.  
                          He lights a cigarette. He says,

BRIAN                    Where's my ashtray?

ONE                    "I emptied it and cleaned it," I say.  
                          "I'll go get it," I say.  
                          I go to the kitchen and bring us two plates, and one of his mother's  
                          Danish Christmas plates.  
                          He says,

BRIAN                    Where's that sandwich?

ONE                    "Right here," I say. And I unwrap it. It's still warm. And I can still  
                          smell the melted cheese and the sauce and I'm so very hungry right  
                          now, remembering how good those sandwiches were, all toasty and  
                          wet.  
                          I break it apart and hand him his half on a plate.

He takes a long whiff of that sandwich. Like he's breathing it in.  
He says,

BRIAN                   It smells so good.

ONE                    He can't eat very much. But while we eat, we talk.  
"You know," I remark, "my mother has Danish Christmas plates too.  
It was a special gift my father would get her. We've mounted them  
onto the wall around the living room. A few years ago, my mother  
said, "We've run out of room. I love them, but don't get me  
anymore."  
He says,

BRIAN                   That's nice. You have a nice family.

ONE                    "So I'm always surprised that you use yours for ashtrays. Because I  
always thought they were so valuable."

BRIAN                   Are they valuable?

ONE                    "I don't know," I say.  
"Why do you use them for ashtrays?" I ask.  
He says,

BRIAN                   Because my mother smoked. So when I smoke, I think of her.

ONE                    And then it was one o'clock, and we watched *One Life to Live*. I  
think this was the period when one Erika Slezak was giving us life as  
her character Viki Lord donned new alter egos due to her multiple  
personality disorder.  
Brian nodded off a few times in the middle, but he turned to me  
after the show was over.  
And he says,

BRIAN                   When are you going to write a part for me?

ONE                    "I don't know. What kind of part would you like to play?" I ask.  
He thinks a while and says,

BRIAN                   I don't know. That's your job. Just make sure I look cute.

ONE                    "OK," I say.

“I’ll be sure to do just that,” I say.  
“Get some rest. Michael is coming in a couple of hours. I’ll just finish the dishes. You need a housekeeper!” I say.  
He says,

BRIAN                      Why do you think I have you?

*In the shadows, the actor playing BRIAN closes his script, stands and shuffles a bit.*

ONE                      I finish the dishes and check in on him before I leave. He’s asleep.  
And I quietly walk out the door. So ...  
Here he is. I’ve written him a part.

*ONE looks to BRIAN who enters into the light, alive and vital. And cute.*

ONE                      (To BRIAN)  
Go ahead. Take a bow.

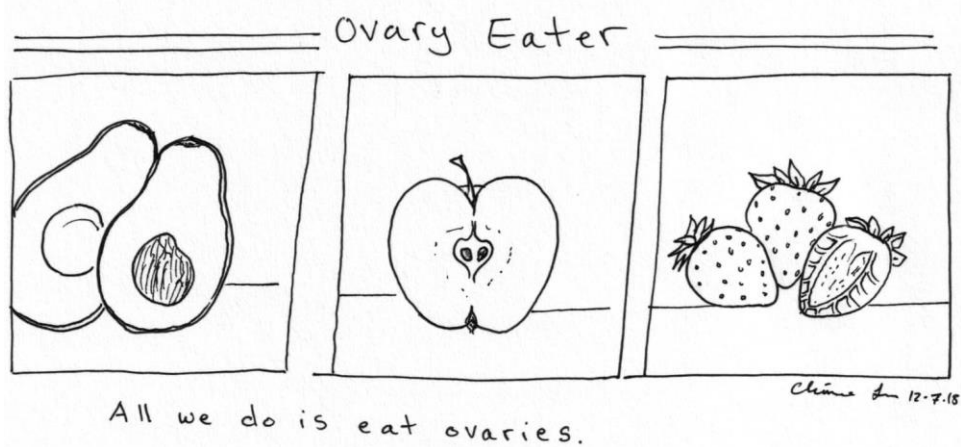
*BRIAN takes a full bow and then exits as ONE watches him leave—*

*Lights fade to BLACK.*

*End of Play.*

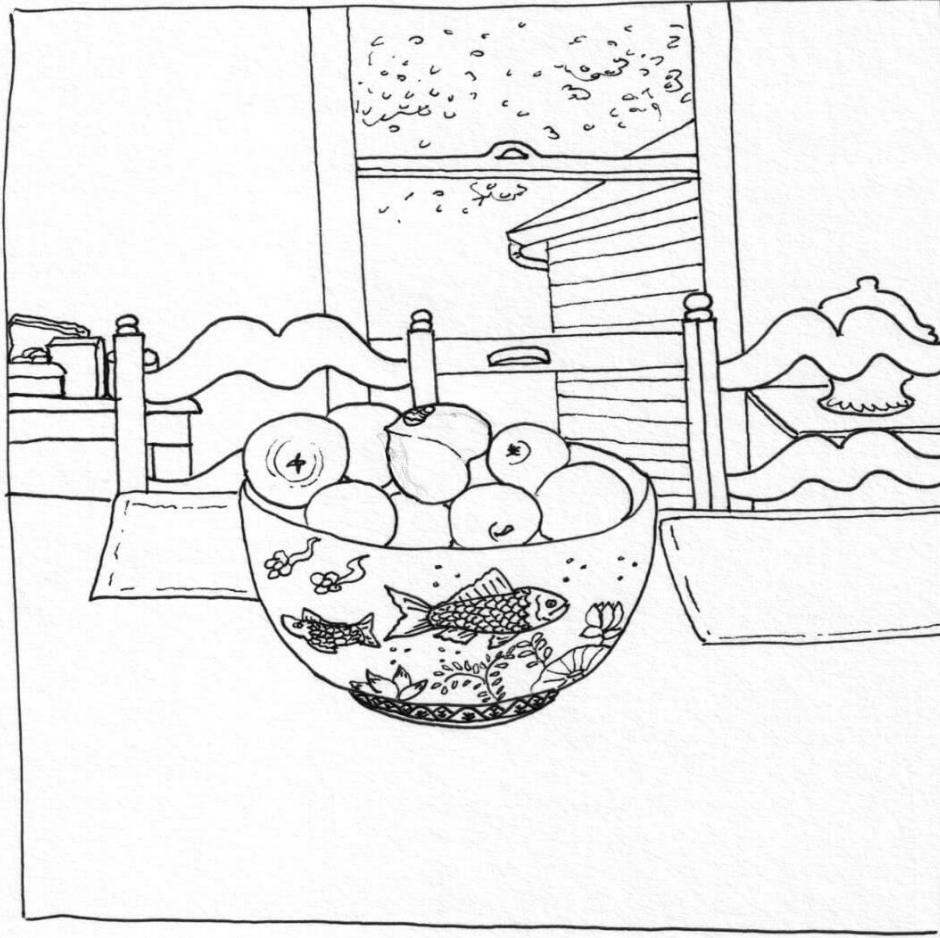
## Selected Comics

CHIME LARA





== Fill in the Blank ==



When I'm in the kitchen and I see  
someone eating the groceries I bought  
I feel \_\_\_\_\_.

A. angry

C. happy

B. resentful

D. proud

Chine Lame 627.17

## Self Oversight



Chloe from 4.6.17



# Starling

KEVIN M. FLANAGAN

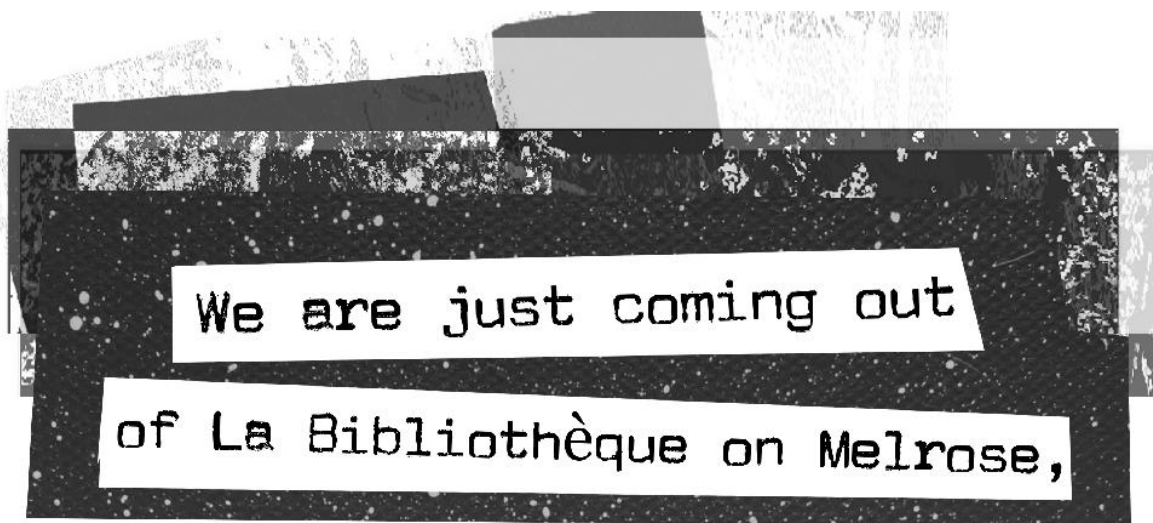
HYPERLITERARY EXPERIENCE



# Girls Like Us

ANGELA MIYUKI MACKINTOSH

EXPERIMENTAL



where we sipped fluffy lattes in thick mugs and ate chocolate biscotti surrounded by floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, where you quoted Chaucer when you saw that boy at the counter and said, *He was as fresh as is the month of May*, and I groaned because it reminded me of English, but it is May and he is beautiful and we are bright, and seventeen, and it is night, and we are two girls alone in Hollywood, so we cross the street to walk back to your red Jeep Cherokee parked in a residential neighborhood, and you're talking, but I'm drifting away from your voice into the ambient map—the buzzing streetlight overhead, swooshing cars behind us, and sharp honks at the intersection a few blocks away, clinking cups and murmuring voices from the corner café we just left, with Thomas Dolby or Peter Gabriel or Sting still in my head, which they had on a loop—and we take twenty-eight steps across the street and I'm wearing all white, a white crop top and white jeans, carrying a black velvet purse with three hundred dollars inside from my Tower Records paycheck I cashed that morning, and we stroll past a brick wall flanking a closed business, past a patch of green grass too verdant for night, the boxy neighborhood darkening, collapsing as we walk, and I spot a black Pontiac pulling up



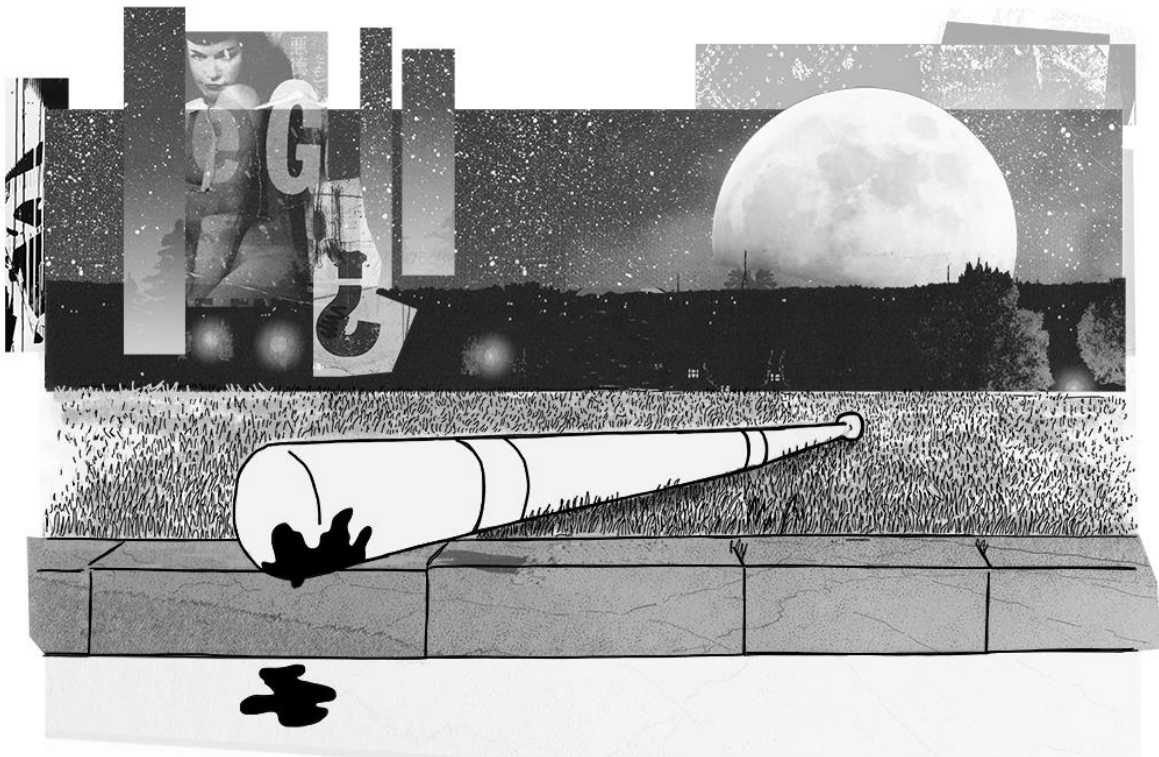
in the alley behind the café and watch two young girls get out, girls like us, and they get out and slam the door, but you don't notice them because you're talking, and I'm watching these two girls stride across the street with purpose, the driver looking over his shoulder, the reversing Pontiac's headlights blazing their legs, and when they cross the street and start to breeze past us, I notice my girl, no more than fifteen, her tight poodle curls pulled back, the scent of coconut shampoo drifting from her damp hair, acid-wash jean shorts and white Reeboks, her arms behind her back, the glimmer of metal she's hiding behind her, and I say *hi* as they pass, but the corners of their eyes don't turn up when they smile—they remain fixed, wide, piercing, like a cat when it's locked onto its prey—and a cold spike rockets through my body, but it's too late because the second they walk past us they turn



back around and yell, *Gimme your purse, bitch!*, in unison like they've practiced it at home in the mirror, and when I start to turn, the squeak of my sneakers pivoting like those on a basketball court, I'm beat in the head with a metal baseball bat, my ears pitching, my head underwater unable to surface, but I remember the three hundred dollars and I grip my purse handle tight with both hands and use my body weight to pull myself down onto the patch of grass, scraping my white jean ass across the green, and my girl towers over me, the streetlight catching the curled fringes of her hair, her eyebrows arched and face darkened as she swings her arm up and brings the bat down again on my head, cracking my skull near my left temple, and with that booming thud, I release my grip, freeing the purse from my hands, blood splattering and streaming down onto my white outfit, into my white jeans and underwear, and I hear you screaming, *Help!*, so I crane toward your voice, and you're running down the sidewalk across the street, your girl chasing after you holding your purse, which you'd given up instantly, unlike me, and she's beating the back of your head with her bat as you run back into La Bibliothèque on the corner, and when you step through the doorway into safety, your girl retreats with my girl, and they race back to the



alley, back to the black Pontiac that has reappeared and is waiting for them, and all I can think about is how young they are, how they're girls like us, and as I enter the café with blood gushing from my head all over my white outfit like Carrie at prom, and the barista yells, *Oh my god!*, and presses a dishcloth to my scalp, and when the police arrive and we recount the events, and later, when I'm getting fifteen stitches from the handsome doctor who wears fuzzy leopard print creepers at Cedars-Sinai, and even though I already know the answer to this question, I can't help but think about how young they are, how they're girls like us, and wonder what makes us turn on each other like that.



# Carried

ANTHONY R. WESTENKIRCHNER

EXPERIMENTAL

The best sex inevitably occurs fifteen minutes before in-laws are expected. Efficient ecstasy balances passion with prayers to silence screaming bedsprings in hopes they don't wake the baby or camouflage the click of the front door because use the prospects of facing mother and father-in-law red-faced with boxer briefs twisted around one leg is humorous on a severely sloping scale. Every second is a gamble and every gamble another indecorous giggle. Shirts tucked seconds before the car door slams in the driveway prove risk incubates reward. But every pleasure has a price and every price must be paid. Biological fairness requires wider perspective than humanly possible. Even as we toasted—smiling—I remember what she said. The least pleasurable cuts sink deft and dexterous. Witnessed wounds slip deepest inside the one you love. Disasters are born on rainy Mondays but it was a sunny Friday. Anticipation withered with tilt-shift-time-lapse descent until only the husk remained. The sun doesn't know how offensive its shine was that day. Gather the blank smiles, "Don't worry." teary-eyed with every embrace, but they don't know. "It'll be okay." teary-eyed with each embrace. But they know. Everyone knows. We know. Clinicians don't cry. No euphemisms, no coddling, just sterile honesty incapable of the comparable injuries inflicted by compassion. Fluorescent lights humming are an odd comfort against genuine loving embraces. The well-meaning and earnest—this day—it blackens, sears and breaks. Joy begets confusion forgets sadness begets rage like stepped-in excrement leaving foul footprints; everywhere follows the horrific stench of anger and outrage and impotent fury neatly compressed behind you into tidy tread designs. They forget first. After all, "You should be over it by now." except it's never over. After all, "God has a plan for a new little angel." but Gods are appalling monuments to empty explanation and lax accountability. After all, "The human body is an incredible biological mechanism." except for those moments when it's not. A brilliant explanation of death to a dying man tends to lose its luster. It never goes away but it just gets better—incrementally speaking. A good-conscience perpetrator who slowly separates the metal from flesh—micrometer by micrometer—in nanoscale with cells and tissue, minds and hearts and feet and hands and bodies knitting back together. Raw, rare, and rotten emotions reluctantly emulsified into tender knotted scar; mournful gray gloom eddied around the subconscious; an infinitesimal yet immovable marble pressed beneath your heel. Flowing aimlessly into being but lost your path, I worry you can't find the way back. I mourn the stupid things you'll never do. I miss the moments you'll never frustrate and puzzle me, which stings far greater than the first time you won't say, "I hate you." So I carry your heart—buried—in mine; I only think of you when I'm awake. Please tell me that you're still here.

Come back for just a moment and whisper, "I passed painlessly and was never alone."