EXPOSITION REVIEW

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HUNGER

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Fiction

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Visual Art & Comics

Interview with

In a year unlike any other, we were all forced to confront what is essential and what truly keeps us connected. In crafting the theme “Hunger” for Volume VI in a storm of

uncertainty, we knew one thing would not change: stories. We still needed them—whether to measure the hours under lockdown or escape it completely. Stories bind us together, through continents, centuries, periods of political unrest, social awakening, community change, times of pandemics, and great loss. Stories say, "We are here."

Even if there is only one author or a singular "I" narrator, all stories are "We." Instantly, in an opening line or poetic pause, the reader connects to the writer. A stroke of paint or the subject of a photograph is suddenly sitting across the table from the viewer. This act of connection is sometimes unnoticed, unnamed, yet still we know what it feels like when it hits our gut. We all have a hungering for a flavor we can't quite name.

With "Hunger," writers and artists certainly delivered in achieving work that explored the very act of need itself. As we made our way through the slush of full-course meals, delicate desserts, and very fleshed-out cannibalism, we had to figure out new ways to work remotely. Expo readers and editors held virtual meetings instead of our usual in-person meetups. What we thought would feel potentially disengaging was anything but. Readers called in from Chicago, New York, Canada—some who never would've made it to a small café in Southern California—all passionate about the work they were reading. We talked about what inspired us as readers and writers, held themed sessions around different genres (shout out to the *Garfield* comic for inspiring a great debate on what experimental work looks like), and shared recommendations on adult beverages we were drinking. We got to know each other in a way that felt very real, even if we were sometimes on mute.

Through all of our reading of more than 450 submissions, we found pieces that challenged us and surprised us, and some that were so good we were willing to throw hands for them. From an expectant mother's journey home, to hummingbird tongues, to a multiple-choice quiz about teacher burnout, the hunger we gravitated toward wasn't as overt as a rumbling stomach. We found hunger that cropped up between the lines, that scratched an itch, and that satisfied our need to slip into a character's shoes and find a home.

This issue is the culmination of the past year of submissions. One that, though strange and dark and heartbreaking, gave us real moments of togetherness, love, and change. It reminded us why we do this in the first place. We hope these pieces touch some hungry spot in you, too, through that elusive unknown flavor—that they nourish a piece of you, pull you closer to the writing community, spark a yearning in you that's always been there but just needed a tiny push.

So pull up a chair, there's always room at this table.

Welcome to Vol. VI: "Hunger."

Lauren Gorski
Mellinda Hensley
EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Keeper

K-MING CHANG

FICTION

Lina and I lived together in her parents' *accessory unit*, a term I'd never heard before. I thought it was a place you could buy like a bracelet, wearing the walls around your wrists. Lina's parents owned a two-story Victorian with blond trim, just like the kind my grandmother used to clean. The plumbing was so strong that I spent hours standing in front of the toilet, flushing down fists of toilet paper, just to watch the pipes chug it all down. There was no risk to shitting, no need to bring the good pair of cooking chopsticks to stab at your shits, no need to hold half of it in and release the rest the next day. Lina had never once ladled out her own poop and carried it out in a plastic bag to be buried somewhere or flushed at the 7-Eleven. She never held any of her own heat. Lina was my first white girl, her hair the color of chicken broth, her eyes green like the sheen on a crow's crushed wing. I thought she was beautiful, but my grandmother said she was just white. *That girl's a wrong wind,* my grandmother told me, but I stopped listening to her after she bet all my manyue money on whether it would rain that Sunday.

I met Lina at church. I didn't know any god, but someone had posted about a job cleaning the basement where they held Sunday school in three languages, none of which I spoke, and what I knew how to do was scour, soak, scrape. My grandmother and I cleaned houses and cars and carpets and retirement homes, the irony being that we never cleaned our own apartment, never once replaced the shower curtains calloused with mold, never once vacuumed up the lamp glass or emptied the mountaining sink. In our apartment, my grandmother homed things: rinsed-out chili jelly jars, reused Ziploc bags, pillowcases with thumbholes in them, emptied bleach jugs, expired horse oil, unopened six-packs of white socks, melamine chopsticks, a bamboo cricket cage, a washing machine that didn't work but that we hauled in from the curb and up the stairs, a ceiling fan that circled stains, rolls of Saran Wrap that had been on sale, plastic bobbins that scattered the carpet like birdseed, dozens of broken blow-dryers all plugged into the wall (from the dumpster behind the salon), canvas paintings of lakes from the flea market, bouquets of red plastic carnations, soda cans in trash bags for the recycling center, jars of expired olives arranged in a row like lanterns, electric flyswatters, rolls of butcher paper. My grandmother said it was in our lineage to lose things—babies, countries, names—and so we had to keep what we could. *There are some things you can control*, she'd tell me, like this cup when I've finished sipping from it—she held up the Styrofoam Slurpee cup she'd take home, rinse out, and fill with soil to plant her scallions—*and there are some things you can't control, like my diabetes*. I told her that she could control that by not drinking blue raspberry Slurpees, but she flicked the straw at me and laughed and licked the rim until her tongue

looked bruised, saying that only Americans would invent raspberries that are blue. *Unnatural,* she said, laughing again. *Like you.*

I didn't get the job at the church, but I met Lina in the parking lot. She was the first white girl I'd seen up close, not on TV, and her skin reminded me of flypaper. I was afraid my hands would be stunned by her sweat, that she would haul me somewhere and swallow me entire. The first night we lived together, she watched me writhe beneath the sheets, shrugging out of my sweat. When she asked me what I was doing, I explained that every night before bed, my grandmother told me to touch each of my limbs, my head, my belly, so that they'd still be there in the morning. Lina laughed and said my grandmother sounded like a character, and I wanted to say that she was the one who reminded me of a TV character, that I fell asleep in the blued light she plastered over me. After Lina, I stopped working: Lina said there was no rent, since this was her parents' property, and every night I mopped the white tile floors, scrubbing at the grout with a sponge, afraid her parents would come in and accuse me of becoming rust, of dirtying their daughter.

Lina was amused by the clothes I brought in trash bags, the Saran Wrapped packs of underwear, the plastic lamps shaped like lily pads, the fake-jade collection of zodiac animals, the card table my grandmother found in a parking lot. I didn't know how to explain my grandmother's apartment, the broken washing machine she kept for years, claiming she'd refurbish it and finally stop scrubbing our clothes in the bathtub. Instead she ate breakfast off of it, using it as a table, duct-taping the door shut so that I wouldn't crawl into it as a toddler and suffocate to death. She'd read about that in the newspaper, reciting to me all the stories about infant deaths, the dropped ones, the accidentally electrocuted ones, the dog-bitten ones, the abandoned-in-the-backseat ones. She clipped them out of newspapers and burned the slips, warding away the smoke to keep me safe.

I'm a keeper, I said to Lina. I thought about all the TV shows where the characters said things like that: *she's a keeper,* they said. *Literally,* I told Lina. In bed, beneath our machine-laundered duvet, she said she knew someone like that, a keeper. Her uncle was a laryngologist, she explained to me. When I asked her what that was, she turned onto her side and smiled at me, reaching out a finger to document my cheek, her knuckle skimming the seam of my throat. *A doctor of the throat*, she said. *Swallow*. I did, feeling her finger type shadows onto my skin. *He kept a collection of things he had to extract from his patients' throats,* she said. *Things like pennies, keychains, doll heads, teeth, mini snow globes, one time even a pistol.* I told her that sounded impossible, and she said I didn't know what people were capable of. I know more than you, I wanted to say. How our throats were like sleeves, formless until filled. Her fingertip was still pearled against my throat, and I let it perch there, plumbing my pulse. *What did he do with all those swallowed things,* I asked her, and she withdrew her hand, tucking it beneath her head. In the dark, her hair looked like pickled jellyfish, the kind I'd eaten only once, at a Chinese wedding where I'd been a banquet waitress. I was there to eat seafood for the first time, to touch some part of the sea with my tongue. I wanted to slurp the strands out of Lina's scalp, feel it glow down my throat.

Lina turned onto her back, explaining that her uncle died and left all the extracted objects to his daughter, but she refused to touch them, knowing that they'd been cradled in other people's spit before being tweezed or suctioned or vomited out, that some of them

had even been swallowed and shat out, given to the doctor and polished for his collection. *He had this gross cabinet,* Lina explained, and I could tell from the fraying of her voice that she was tired of this story and wanted to sleep. *It was a glass cabinet and he had his whole collection in it. There was even a wedding ring I liked to try on, and he told me that the patient was getting divorced and wanted to shit it out in a bag and give the ring back as some kind of message, but it got caught in her.* It's never easy to leave someone, I wanted to say, thinking of my grandmother in her apartment, the insulin injections I used to give her, how before I left, I taught her how to hold up a mirror to her own stomach, navigating the needle deep.

Lina turned back on her side, this time facing away from me, and said that her uncle always gave her weird advice, like if she ever needed to swallow something, she should ease it as far down her throat as possible and then try to swallow it: don't try to swallow from the shallow part of the mouth, because it will goad your gag reflex. *As if,* Lina said, *I'd ever swallow anything as stupid as a ring. Good night.* While she slept, I stared at the ceiling—no cracks, no spattering of flies, no popcorn—and whispered that a ring was too small to choke on, that the woman had been an amateur. There was a story my grandmother told me, about a woman who swallowed her own teeth and shat them out as pearls. She went around the city stealing children's baby teeth and converting them into pearls, selling the milk-thick strands. When I was little and we used to watch TV together, I told my grandmother I wanted to be like the aliens and heroes and mutants on the Sci-Fi channel, shining my skin into diamonds or summoning another planet with my magnetic hands. My grandmother laughed and said that eating is alchemy, that metabolism is magic: you can turn anything into shit, she said, anything!

In the morning, I woke early and cleaned the bathroom sink, unsnarling our hair, mine black, hers rust. My grandmother would be awake in her apartment now, reading the *World Journal* and then folding the pages to clip them into squares of toilet paper. She saved headlines and photos she wanted to show me: *look*, she'd said months ago, another pair of girls in Guangzhou got their organs stolen. They went to get a manicure and disappeared and their bodies were found completely empty. Nothing inside them. *You see,* she said*, that's why we accumulate. So that if we're ever subtracted from, we won't be left empty.* I told her it was impossible to accumulate organs, and she showed me another clipped headline about a woman who found out she had two wombs. Apparently, my grandmother said, it was very common. This is good, she told me. We should all be born with two wombs. One to give birth from. One to keep our most precious things. *You know, when I crossed the strait, I wedged my jade cicada and gold peanut pendant up there! And it never got stolen from me! When I die, I'll pass them on to you,* she said, though I told her I no longer wanted them, thanks to this story. *Don't act like you've never smuggled anything,* my grandmother said, turning back to her newspaper. *All of us were stowaways until we were born.*

Before Lina woke, I walked around the house like I'd been smuggled into it, lifting my heels so that I wouldn't mat the carpet, baby-wiping the doorknobs after I'd used them—as a going-away gift, my grandmother had gifted me boxes of baby wipes she'd purchased in bulk. They'd expired years ago, mold between the sheets. I kept the cardboard boxes of baby wipes stacked by the foot of our bed, and Lina told me every

morning to get rid of them. This morning she said that all the boxes were tripping her, and I didn't know how to explain the coupons my grandmother had me read aloud because she couldn't. We wheeled out carts full of baby-wipe boxes, feeling like thieves. I laughed and told her we were like the Monkey King who stole stone-fruit from the gods, each peach unblemished by need.

We don't even have a baby, Lina said, kneeing the boxes. I caught her trying to move the boxes out, dragging them an inch closer to the door every day, but eventually she gave up. My grandmother would laugh and say it was typical of her people, to want to evict things. I ignored all her attempts to haul the boxes and turned on the shower, washing my hair with the baby shampoo that had been on sale last week. I told Lina that it was better for your eyes: it could touch the tenderest parts of me without stinging. *Let's test that*, Lina said, calling a truce, and we showered together, her arms wreathing my neck, the gold-syruped baby shampoo glazing her nipples until I licked them clean again.

This morning, Lina woke up and said she wanted to plant a kumquat tree. She'd read about them online, kumquats, and heard that their bitterness could brighten skin. I told her that if she got any brighter she'd be a window. When my grandmother first came to San Gabriel, she brought with her a kumquat seed wrapped in damp toilet paper. In Yilan, where we were native, where every language fit us like a bracelet, the kumquat trees were so famous that there was even a kumquat museum built for tourists. *Will you take me there?* Lina said, standing in her parents' yard with her legs staked apart, the grass gold and daggered. In front of our window, she stomped on the soil, tenderizing it with her soles, and said this is where the tree would go. I wanted to tell Lina that I couldn't take her anywhere—I didn't even have a passport—but instead I knelt in front of the spittle-warm soil and said that there wasn't enough space here for the roots to grow outwards. They would butt into the house and stunt their own growth. Lina smiled down at me and said I knew so many things. *No, my grandmother does,* I said. *She never had a yard to plant the seed she brought, but she told me she swallowed it. That way she could shit it out in the toilet and return it to a body of water. She heard that the pipes here go to the sea. She used to shit in an outhouse, so she thought that was romantic.* I thought the same thing too: I'd never seen the sea, but my grandmother said I didn't need to. My shit would sightsee for me, surf the Pacific, cuddle every coast.

That night, while I researched the plausibility of raising a kumquat tree during a drought on Lina's silver Mac, Lina circled the bed, waving a bouquet of incense, stubbing her toe twice on my boxes of baby wipes. *This place is getting messy,* she said, gesturing at the canned tomatoes I'd brought from my grandmother's apartment, the plastic brooms, the stacks of wicker stools I'd taken from someone's curb, the rain-tattered roll of butcher paper I'd leaned behind the bathroom door. I didn't realize that it was a mess—I was mothered by things. My first babysitter was a plastic fruit crate my grandmother had stolen from H Mart and propped beside me. I thought I was peopling the place, populating it with new shadows that could care for our own.

Lina waved at me, the smoke spelling out her name. *I thought you knew how to clean,* she said, laughing, *but look at this place!* Her laughter loitered in my mouth that night, a bitter seed I spun and spun beneath my tongue. I no longer knew how to sprout that seed into speech, no longer knew a language she didn't own.

In the morning I smelled smoke, not the incense she bought online for three times the price than the bundles at the temple, not the kind she claimed was for calming, when all my life smoke was synonymous with mourning. It was a different density of smoke, a veil of musk and rot, and when I looked out the window, I saw Lina crouched in front of a pyre. I ran out of the house barefoot, hard dew bluing my skin, and Lina turned toward me, slapping at the smoke like skin. The pyre was brown as mulch, and I saw that she was burning my boxes of baby wipes, the dried-out sheets catching like leaves. I cried out and batted the smoke away, asking what she was doing, and she said she wanted to get rid of the junk, and this way we could have some fun. A campfire, like the kind she remembered from her camp in the South Bay, the six weeks she spent flanking the sea. I remembered my grandmother holding her gold thread scissors, snipping out the baby-wipe coupon, asking me what it was for. For baby asses, I said, to clean them, and she laughed, saying that babies didn't need anything special. When I was little and had to go to the bathroom, she undressed me from the waist down and released me into someone's yard. *Go like a dog*, she said, *but don't let anyone see you!* I didn't have time to potty-train you, she explained, and we laughed later. *It was a gift, really*, my grandmother said. *You gave all those strangers free fertilizer!* I laughed, my mouth satin with smoke, and Lina looked at me, unsure if she should laugh too. Then I pulled down my pants and squatted in front of her, daring her to turn away from me, to watch. I smuggled into the smoke a scent of my own.

The Difference Between a Goose and a Swan

CHRIS CLEMENTS

FICTION

Gordie and I were driving away after killing Bob Schumacher when, out of nowhere, he stopped the car on the side of the road, by this lake. This was back when everyone still called him Gordie, before he got busted by the cops for strangling all those geese and he went back to being either plain old "Gordon" or else just "That one asshole who strangled all those geese."

To be clear, Gordie was the one who killed Schumacher, not me. The big bastard choked Bob to death with the cord from Bob's wife's curling iron. I told Gordie before we even set foot in the man's house: Take it easy with him. I told him: We're only supposed to put the fear in the guy—got it? After all, it's not like he and I were psychos. We were truck drivers, typical guys, employed by the H.G. Wallace Logistics Corporation out of Blakesburg, Iowa. And sure, we'd been known to slouch into The Haven every now and again to drink ourselves blind. That didn't make us bad people, though.

Because two days before Bob and before the lake, a certain Mrs. Schumacher showed up at The Haven broken and bloody and begging for protection from the beatings Bob was giving her, and it was piss-drunk Gordie H. Pound and I who stepped (or staggered, more like) up to help her.

"He hit you," Gordie burped out, more a statement than a question.

"She said that twice already," I said, shaking my head at him. "What have you been doing with all that Jack? Pouring it in your ears?"

I swiveled my stool back towards Bob's better half.

"We can handle this for you, Allison. Absolutely we can."

I hadn't noticed until right then, but it appeared Bob had torn chunks of hair from her scalp in the scuffle. Her blonde hair was dark with blood.

"Thanks," she said. Then, meeting my gaze for the first time since she entered the bar: "You know, you kind of look like him. My Bobby."

I didn't know what to say to that.

She wiped a stray tear from a blackened eye, took a drag on the cigarette she'd been smoking, and ashed it on the mahogany bar top. You might think that a bit strange—ashing a dart on a bar top instead of using a tray—but it's actually not. Every dive bar has a little gimmick, a little quirk to them, something to make the hole-in-the-wall aspect cute, and letting patrons ash their cancer sticks on the bare bar top was The Haven's. Years of people doing exactly that had turned it the color and consistency of asphalt. But if you

rubbed at the thing long enough, the black gunk would crumble apart and you'd be able to see a bit of what came before.

Gordie stepped off his stool, adjusted his jean jacket, said, "I gotta go drain the snake," and promptly fell backwards into a group of college students, knocking pints of beer to the ground along with his own heaving carcass. When one of the kids cursed at him in response, Gordie paused a second from his place on the floor, then yanked the kid's ankle to bring him crashing down. It was like watching a watering-hole alligator surprise-attack a gazelle. The two commenced wrestling, by which I mean Gordie began beating the piss out of the kid.

"Excuse me, Allison, won't you," I said, slapping a twenty-dollar bill on the ash-stained wood. "Looks like Gordon's gotten himself into a bit of a donnybrook."

I guess you could say he didn't have much capacity for restraint.

* * *

And so two nights later we sat in Gordie's car, parked on the street opposite the Schumachers', snorting the lab-quality speed I'd bought from my sister Barb through the plastic straws you usually use for soda pop. It had just started to rain, and it was late enough in the evening to where the orange streetlights were twitching on, one by one. The lights made the flecks of rain that dotted the windshield look as if the night sky had been smeared onto the glass and put to flame. The Schumachers lived in one of those modern-type houses with the geometric architecture and the neat rows of sugar maple illuminated by little decorative light fixtures. "The Beast in Me" by Johnny Cash dribbled from the radio and pooled at our feet. No crickets were chirping.

"Ugly," I said, pointing. "Their yard." I wiped the sweat from my forehead.

"I don't think so," Gordie replied, scratching his tattooed arm. "I kind of like it. It's artistic, you know? It's artistic."

We'd both taken a class at the local learning annex for uneducated thirty-somethings like ourselves called "Understanding Art" (an activity our wives suggested we do, claiming we needed to get a little culture in us in the down time between hitches). After a while though, you might say the class grew on us. We'd taken to arguing about art in an abstract way via the walkie-talkies in our truck's cabins while OTR (trucker slang for "Over the Road," meaning a long-term cross-country hitch), when the isolation of our job became unbearable.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I asked him as I lowered my head to the dashboard to take a mighty snort. "That yard's a Picasso-esque hellscape, all those weird little shapes and shit."

"Nah, it reminds me more of that Mark Rothko motherfucker than Picasso."

The speed wasn't really necessary for this gig, but, like debating the merits of Dadaism as an art movement, using it had become a habit during our long lonely drives across the U.S. of A.

The truth is that it's pretty much impossible to be in our piece-of-shit profession *without* using some kind of stimulant. Gordie and I—we hauled fifty thousand pounds of pressurized cement seventy hours a week back then, sometimes for as long as eight days in

a row, all alone in the bosoms of our eighteen-wheelers. Solitude like that can do things to a man. It builds up in your chest and twists a fist-sized knot in your insides and makes you feel trapped. You start bleeding for ways to untangle it—take this job at the Schumachers' for example—because anything is better than facing another day of that soul-sucking sixty-five-miles-per-hour sameness. Time spent OTR will do that to a guy.

On the face of it, the problem is a simple one: you want to make money and support your family. Trouble is, you're expected to ride those interstates for as long as the boss tells you to, sanity be damned. That's where the amphetamines come in. You do a bump off your car keys or snort through a straw or inject it into your veins or whatever and you give it a few minutes and then:

FUCKING BAM!

Everything in your field of vision is sharper, like it's cut from glass: bolded and italicized, so to speak. What was once so boring a job you'd been eyeing your hunting rifle with lust becomes a nonstop thrill ride instead, and soon your heart thumps up in your throat and you stop needing sleep and you get hard-ons that last for hours and your mouth gets all dry and warm like hot sand and you start wearing black during benders because you need to disguise the fact that you're sweating like a fucking pig roast.

Now you're able to handle seventy hours a week, no problem. But it only lasts for so long until you've got that knot in your chest again. At some point you begin to dream of scissors.

"Alright, let's do this," Gordie said to me, his goatee dusty with bits of powder. He had a baseball bat I'd lent him twirling real fast between his legs. One of the drawbacks of using speed for any length of time is the nervous tics you develop.

And this is when I warned him to take it easy on Schumacher.

The thing is, I could see Gordie's eyes had begun to widen and shine in an all-too-familiar way. I'd seen them shine like that before. That time he broke a man's jaw outside The Haven. That time he shanked, and was shanked by, a prostitute outside a shitbox rest stop in Kansas. That time he went off on a bender and turned up at my door in the middle of the night covered in scratches, like he'd been out foraging naked in a blackberry patch. Gordie's tendency toward what my wife Clarice called "toxic interpersonal contact" had always bothered me to some extent, sure, but the way I figured, I was just one individual. I mean, what could I do? It was Gordie who was doing the kicking, punching, pushing, slapping. Though I'll be honest, it was a goddamn hell of a show to see him in action. But something deep down inside ("repressed," as Clarice put it) made me wonder why we couldn't all just get along. Every time Gordie went postal with some poor bastard, he seemed to get wound up a little tighter inside, seemed to get a little more distant from everything and everybody. I'd even begun to suspect that these things he did to people—that he chalked up to "shit happens"—these things weren't just going away. They stayed with him.

In the end I decided that some people are just born that way: you are what you are. Of course, it certainly didn't help the situation that the big lug had a head the approximate size and shape of one of those Easter Island statues, and hands like catcher's mitts. And those eyes. Those fucking eyes.

He'd begun staring at the rain droplets on the windshield, jaw slack, looking increasingly zapped.

"You're good though, right?" I asked him. "Cause you seem—"

"Let's do this."

So we opened the car doors. Shut them. I remember they sounded like cannon blasts. Gordie with his bat, me with my unloaded hunting rifle. I followed behind Gordie, practically walking in the man's shadow, as we approached the front door (which, by the way, was a horribly gauche glass-and-wood pattern that made me want to spit).

It was then that I realized what a stupid fucking decision this was, starting with giving Gordie my baseball bat. The man was six feet nine inches and 280 pounds if he was a pound: he didn't need a baseball bat to intimidate anyone.

I held the rifle behind my back and knocked.

Bob cracked the door open. He was short, fat, and pasty white. Going bald and wearing a fluffy white bathrobe, by the look of it. For a split second I thought the speed had finally gotten to me.

Bob Schumacher and I looked exactly alike. A spitting image.

"Can I help you?" he asked, and coughed. I think he had a cold.

"Christ, she wasn't kidding," Gordie said. He jumped his eyes between the two of us. "You really do look alike."

"Can I help you?" Bob repeated, opening the door a little more.

Gordie said, "Sure thing," and kicked the door into Bob, hitting him in the head and knocking him to the ground. I followed Gordie inside.

This part had been discussed in advance. I was going to watch Bob so he didn't run off, and Gordie was supposed to look around the house for something to tie him up with. We'd rough him up a bit, maybe steal some stuff, threaten him, and leave. I had Bob sit in one of his kitchen chairs while I put my rifle to his head.

"This is it, man," I said, trying to sound tough. "This is how it's all gonna end." Bob's head was bleeding and he was whining softly, making noises like a rusty hinge. We didn't bring our own rope because I was afraid that later, after it was over, the police might be able to trace whatever we used back to us.

I couldn't concentrate on anything. I'd be lying if I said it was entirely because of the road dope. Seeing Bob—practically my twin—made me feel like I'd just been woken up from a real bad dream, only to find a hunting rifle in my arms. I'd never even used that gun before, and I was pretty sure it was only good for squirrels or ducks or whatever.

Then I smelled piss, Bob's, and realized I had no idea how long it'd been since Gordie left to look for rope. I told Bob to "stay fucking put, you wife-beating prick," and left to go find him. I called Gordie's name over and over again: no response.

Eventually I did find him in a guest bathroom, standing very still. The walls were orange and yellow. I can still remember them.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I asked him. "Where's the rope?"

He looked hypnotized, staring unblinkingly at this painting above the toilet, and in that instant I was reminded of another major drawback of using speed, specifically what truckers like Gordie and I liked to call "the tunnel vision," in which a guy becomes momentarily divorced from reality and enters a horrible cocksucking psychic state replete

with all sorts of creeping hallucinations and delusions, accompanied usually by strings of thought that fire off in angular, jagged directions, and that in Gordie's case almost always gravitated towards violence.

"You know what this is?" he whispered. He'd dropped my bat on the ground.

I knew what it was. It was a reproduction of an Edvard Munch painting called "The Scream." We'd learned about it in our art class. It showed a man walking along a path, his hands clasped to his bowling-pin head, either hearing or giving off a soundless cry of despair. Our class hadn't been able to come to a conclusion on which it was.

And suddenly there was a real-life cry of despair—I turned and saw Bob Schumacher barreling toward us, a kitchen knife in his outstretched hand. He stabbed me in the shoulder with it and leaped onto Gordie's back. In the rush of it all his bathrobe fell off and he was naked. He looked like a gargoyle.

I fell to the ground and lost consciousness for a second out of shock, I guess. When I came to, Gordie had gained the upper hand. He'd put Bob in a headlock with one arm and was desperately searching the bathroom countertop for something using the other. They both made these subhuman gasping noises as they fought for control.

I pulled the knife out of my shoulder slowly and dropped it to the floor. The pain was pure electrified hotness, as if I'd stuck a fork in a wall socket. The hotness was leaking down my chest and seeping into my shirt, which was black.

Gordie's free hand brushed against a curling iron on the countertop and, ripping its cord out of the wall and up over Bob's head, he began to strangle him with it. Their noises became even more animal.

I told Gordie, in a voice that was not my own:

Stop, you don't have to do that,
you can stop,
let's just leave,
I'm okay,
it's okay,
let's just go,
let's just go,
let's just go.

My memory goes all fuzzy after that, staticky, like a TV with a busted antenna. In the last year or so since that night, I've walked into bathrooms to find that my hands have started to shake.

The next thing I do recall was getting back into the car and driving away. Gordie and I settled into silence with only the carnivorous roar of the car's engine in the background, the kind of noise that manages to be all around you and yet you never even notice it. I'd wrapped a spare shirt I found in the back of the car around my bleeding shoulder, which had started to burn in a steady rhythm that mirrored my heartbeat. And right as we passed by Rathbun Lake, headed back to The Haven, right as I began to think we'd turn everything that happened into a memory, there was a flash of white light in front of the high beams and a small bump under the wheels. Gordie pulled the car over on the side of the road.

"Gordie," I said quietly. "We've got to get the fuck out of here. The cops, Gordie."

He didn't say anything. He killed the engine, left the lights on, and stepped out of the car. I got out too. It was late at night and no other cars were coming from either direction. There were still not any crickets chirping.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I'm fine," was all he said in reply, and into those two words he somehow managed to cram all the rage and ugliness of the last two hours. He started walking, as if in a trance, back down the way we came.

A little ways behind us, lying in the center of the road, was a dead swan. You could see it clearly in the moonlight. A pool of blood extended out from its pale body, traveling in all the little cracks of the asphalt, like it was trying to reach itself out towards the darkness of the forest.

Gordie kneeled down next to the thing. His huge hands became softer in the light of the moon, and with them he picked up the swan's broken body. Cradled it. And then he started sobbing.

The Case of Middle Age

JENNIFER A. HOWARD

FLASH FICTION

If you drive home over a snowy bridge in a panic, that night you will dream yourself into a staring contest with someone you didn't—awake—know you wanted. But beware, sweetness, your fiction is being fact-checked. Seek out the inventors of card games and court women who are good at lipstick. Press a flower into a book on a page where a character goes through a door and ask what is on this island? Hint: mostly shame, a little bit failure to ask. An AI has been programmed to care if you won your fantasy football matchup this weekend. No worries, a letter will come. Find and ride a Ferris wheel that sits atop a mountain; feel doubly dizzy. An AI has been programmed to love you, distantly but for real, over decades—all of your decades—and then die. The opposite of a story is to stray. New babies are coming for people you love—no teeth, barely eyes, all bundle and nuzzle, which is to say this is not that letter. Your mouth is a metaphor in your own life, small like a poem. Answer: was that grief.

April Is a Fruitful Month

ANDY MARLOW

FICTION

The first thing I do after seeing the pink plus sign appear on the pregnancy test is press it into my husband's hands. I look at him and say, "I'm worried about my mother."

He looks at me; he looks at the pregnancy test. He puts the test on the bathroom counter and places his hand against my stomach. I recoil. I do not like being touched. He tries again, and I let him rest his palm against me.

"I can't believe this is real," my husband says. He's crying. And smiling.

"I haven't talked to her in a while," I say. "And you know how she is."

"We're pregnant."

"I'm worried about her."

"About who?"

"My mother." My eyes flit to the test, for just a moment. If the pink plus sign is correct, I must be quite early in this thing. My stomach is as flat as it's ever been. My husband removes his hand; I straighten my shirt. I wish he would wipe away his tears, but he does not. They stick to his face, gleaming.

"Honey, why are you worried?" he asks.

"She hasn't been answering my calls."

"Well, she does that sometimes, doesn't she? Goes dark?"

"She hasn't been answering my calls for a while. I think I should go check on her."

"What, really? You want us to go all the way to Prescott just to—"

"We wouldn't both have to go. I would go. Go and come back."

"You're being crazy, love." He finally wipes his eyes. Then he picks up the test again. Another smile stretches across his broad, shining face. "Don't worry about her okay? She's got a husband to take care of her, doesn't she?"

"They aren't married."

"Still?"

"Still."

"Nevermind it. If you give me her number, I could try calling her. Or we could call Cynnie. When's the last time you talked to Cynnie? Maybe Cynnie's talked to your mom."

I hate it when my husband calls my sister by my childhood nickname for her. I say, "Cynthia and my mother do not get along."

"And you and your mom get on better? Come on, honey baby, I wanna celebrate tonight. Let's not worry about anything. It'll be just the three of us."

"Three?"

He waves the stick.

"No, no," I say. "I have a gut feeling. I should check up on her. If I leave before noon, I'll get to Preston before the sun sets."

"What about work?"

"I'll use sick days."

"Baby, I don't know. Why don't you call Taylor? He always answers. Besides, they're *basically* married."

There's a bit more push and pull. He says something; I respond. The conversation comes to me in echoes, but I must have gotten my way, because after I sink to my knees and look up at him with my pretty little eyes, I find myself washing my hands alone in the bathroom.

When I pack, I'm careful about it. I take my little peach-colored suitcase out of the closet, and fill it with only the necessities. Just enough for a few days. They don't make many suitcases like this anymore, or at least they don't sell them in great numbers. Old-fashioned, with metal latches and a handle on top. Satin lining. My husband is always trying to convince me to get one on wheels, says that going through the airport with my little peach-colored suitcase drags us down. I disagree. I like my suitcase. I like old things. And when I put my little peach-colored suitcase in the backseat of my car, it fits perfectly.

Before I get in the driver's seat, my husband kisses me. I do not like the way he tastes.

Driving out of Atlanta is a special sort of hell. My husband and I live in a very nice house on Peachtree Street. But there are fifteen streets named Peachtree Street in Atlanta. As I make my escape, I think I run into every single Peachtree Street. I should be better at this. I've lived here for a long while now. I know every time I take a wrong turn, but I keep taking wrong turns anyway.

When I finally get on the interstate, I glance down at my hands on the steering wheel. I remember once, when I was a little girl, I was sitting in the back seat of our car, and I decided to be bad. My mother was driving; my sister was sitting next to her. I watched them. Their honey-blonde hair. Their pinkish-white ears. Shards of their faces in the rearview mirror. I unbuckled my seatbelt. I knew if I was caught, I would be in trouble. I kept my hand on the buckle, timidly, staring at my mother and sister, daring one of them to look back at me. Then, I let go. My mother's eyes flashed in the mirror. She stopped her conversation with my sister, and I was sure I was going to get it. But then, instead of scolding me, she looked down at her hands, laughed, and said, "God, when did my hands turn into my mother's?"

Then she slammed on the brake, and my face collided with the back of her seat.

I do not think my hands look like my mother's.

I'm not sure they look like mine either.

The city breaks apart and turns into blinding road. It flies behind me.

Thirty minutes out of Atlanta, and I start paying attention to the billboards. They're hard to ignore, colorful and bright with images of Jesus and babies plastered on them. They rush by too fast for me to fully digest. I move to the right lane. Slow. I've decided I'd like to

go slow now. I look at my phone again. I've thought about telling my husband what happens when I dial my mother's number, but he'd say I'm being paranoid.

It would be good for me to make a call and have someone answer. I think I need that; I need to be assured that my phone is working. I make calls on it nearly every day, but I need a reminder, right now, that it works completely normally. That would make me feel better about all of this. I reach over and grab my phone. As I do, I catch sight of a billboard with a picture of a little red thing that looks like an alien. It says:

MY HEART BEATS AT FOUR WEEKS.

I don't know how long I look, how long before it whips pasts and I—

"Are you still there?" my sister asks. I look at the empty passenger seat. My phone is in my hand, pressed to my ear, hot against my face.

"Yes, I'm still here," I say into the phone. "Sorry, the car behind me was being a jerk."

There is no car in front of me, no car behind. The interstate is sparse. Drained.

"You're really going to Prescott, huh?" my sister says.

"Yes," I say. "I can't remember how long it's been since I visited."

"It's been almost two years for me," my sister says. She laughs. "Thank fucking God."

I can't think of what to say; I can't remember what I've already said. Did I already ask about our mother?

"I talked to her about a week ago," my sister says.

"Who?"

"Mom."

"Oh. Did you call her or did she call you?"

"She called me. Why?"

"I'm worried about her."

"She's fine. She has Taylor."

"Did she sound fine?"

"She sounded how she always sounds."

"Hysteric? Cold? Cloying?"

"All of the above." My sister laughs again, but there's an uneasy edge to it. "Listen, are *you* feeling alright?"

"I'm feeling fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I mean I guess I don't really understand why you're driving out there at all. Did something happen?"

I hated taking the pregnancy test. I already knew what the result would be. If the result was correct, that is. Sometimes they're off. But if it was correct, I already knew it. I could feel it. The test was a terrible, unnecessary formality – ceremonial, almost. My husband was in the bathroom with me while I sat on the toilet, pants around my ankles,

my hand holding the stick between my legs. He watched me while I pissed. Do other couples do it that way? Is it strange that I thought I would take it on my own?

My eyes catch another billboard. Another picture of a little alien. It says:

ONE OF US.

"Are you still there?" my sister asks for the second time.

"Yes," I say.

"Listen, how about you call Taylor? You two are close."

"We aren't."

"Come on, you've always gotten along with him. You talk all the time."

"I think my service is going in and out. You know how it does on this drive."

"Really though, did something happen?"

"I quit my job," I say, quickly, before I can stop myself. "A few weeks ago."

"What? Why?"

"Why do you care, Cynnie? I never liked that job."

"Jay and I are worried about you."

"Jay?"

"Jason."

I hate it when my sister calls my husband by the nickname I gave him in our early days.

"I have to go, Cynthia," I say. "My phone is dying."

"Okay, I love—"

I hang up the phone and pass another billboard. It says in bold letters:

$TRIPPER$
NEXT EXIT!

Filled and emptied. I breathe. In and out.

I feel like something bad is going to happen. Or maybe has already happened. The road stretches on before me. I hate the interstate. I hate it. I hate it. I *hate* it. The day is white and hot and blinding. It burns into the asphalt before me. Under me. Behind me. It was hot and bright the day I first met my husband. He was sitting on a bus stop bench reading Tolstoy. I thought I loved him, but now, looking back, I think I just loved that he was reading Tolstoy. Either way, I sat down next to him, and we got to talking. He asked me where I was from. I told him, "A little coastal town a few hours west of Atlanta." I expected him to laugh, or to say something smart, instead he smiled a pleasant little smile, and said, "Oh, that's cool."

I assumed he must have a sort of private intelligence. I was very attracted to that idea.

The sun is in my eyes as I drive. I pass another billboard and another.

I try to remember the first part of my call with my sister. I wonder how I brought up my worries. Did I tell her what happens when I call our mother? Did I want to? She

would've told me it isn't strange, a glitch in the network. But it is strange. I know it's strange.

My phone rings. I know who it is. I do not answer.

I take the next exit off the interstate. Pull over at a gas station. I'm about halfway to Prescott, and I have to use the bathroom.

The gas station is about the same as every other gas station in rural Georgia. Buzzing fluorescent lights. Dirty floors. Strung-out clerks. This one has a row of slot machines in the corner by the bathroom, each with a man sitting in front of it on a stool. One of the men winks at me as I open the door to the bathroom. I lock it, quick behind me. The bathroom is a single toilet deal. Bigger than most in gas stations like this. Just as dirty. Just as harshly bright. The toilet faces the mirror. I hate that. Hate looking at myself. Hate the idea, the paranoid idea that people are always telling me never really happens, that the mirror is double-sided, and that someone is behind it, watching me.

I close my eyes while I pee. When I'm done, I keep my eyes closed as I pull up my pants and fasten them. I open my eyes as I flush the toilet, and I get a glance of the water as it whirls away. For a second I swear it's tinged red. I slip my hand down my pants. When I remove it there is no blood on my fingers. Filled and emptied.

I wash my hands.

Gently tap on the glass of the mirror.

After I leave the bathroom, I stop by the soda station and grab a straw. I start to head out. Then, one of the men at the slot machines, the winker, eyes me up and down. I turn around, grab a cup and fill it with ice and water. But I don't trust rural Georgian gas station water, so I dump the cup as I leave.

I decide not to go back on the interstate. I'm sick of billboards. I decide to take an alternate route through the back roads.

The sun is sinking in the sky, swollen and fat, turning the street into liquid. There is lush farmland on either side of me. It is a beautiful time in south Georgia. Spring. I reach into the backseat, to my little peach-colored suitcase, and unlatch it with one hand. Blindly, my fingers search and brush up against a ziplock bag containing my wedding ring so I won't lose it on my trip. I find an aspirin bottle tucked under a small stack of underwear. Just as I have my hand on it, my phone rings. I startle so hard I almost veer into the next lane.

The phone keeps ringing. It's Taylor again. I turn into a long, dusty driveway leading to a farmhouse too far away to see in any great detail. I park my car on the edge of their pasture, put my phone on silent and turn it down on the seat. I grab the aspirin bottle and the ziplock bag too. I fish two powdery tablets out of the bottle, put them in the ziplock, then grind them with the blunt edge of my key fob.

The song playing on my iPod has a good bass to it. A nice down beat. That's very important. Something to keep time.

I dump the powder on my dashboard, arrange it into three little lines, and snort them all.

I remember, once when I was fourteen, I lost control of myself and cut my hair in the school bathroom to look like Jane Wieldlin. The whole drive home, her music blasting,

I wondered what my mother was going to do. I knew she'd know by the time I got home. All town gossip was mainlined straight to her back then.

I figured she would probably slap me and lecture me about how our name meant something in town, how we had a reputation to uphold. Instead, she grabbed my chin, looked in my eyes, and said, "When you were a little girl, your sister was always my favorite."

It hurt. I never loved my mother, and figured she never loved me. But to hear it stated plain like that, bruised my pride. Then, her hand still on my face, fingernails digging into my skin, she said, "You're my favorite now."

I stop the music. Eject the tape. Chuck it out the window into the great, green pasture. Close my eyes. Sink into the earth. Feel it rise and fall around me. The high hits. I bite my lip, and let myself float away. The damage is undone; everything is okay. The universe pulses around me.

I breathe. Unravel my focus. All my wants and wishes seem so simple now. So clear. I poke my fingers through time, into bedrooms and secret stairways and hospital corridors, between walls. Some faraway part of myself remembers another one of the billboards:

WE ALL STARTED IN THE WOMB.

I knew there would be a pink plus sign before I saw it. I felt it. I keep feeling it. I know that's crazy. I know there's nothing to feel yet, not really. I don't feel it in my stomach either. I feel it between my legs. You know, I don't remember the last time my husband and I had sex. I don't remember the last time I had sex with anyone. My spool of thought unwinds. A brief pinpoint of a moment flashes in front of me. I see the connections now, darting just out of reach. Everything is singular. I get one glimpse of purity.

Then I hear my sister laughing in the seat next to me.

I open the car door just in time to vomit into the grass. I keep retching even after my stomach is empty, and curse myself for being judgmental and terrible and discerning. I wish I had kept the water. The world around me is crushingly green.

I get back on the road.

When my grandmother died, she left me a book, *The Woman's Guide to Secrets*. There were two bookmarks left wedged inside, scraps of paper that felt old between my fingertips. The first led to an underlined passage: "The words 'devil' and 'divinity' came from the same root word." The second to another that said: "Lucifer, in the form of the serpent, gave Eve the light of wisdom."

I never really knew my grandmother. Never quite understood her. Not when she was alive, even as we shared a house. I still don't understand. I don't think I'll ever understand. I'm told she was a great woman. An innovator. An upstanding citizen of Prescott, just like her mother before her.

We were not close. When I was small, she spent her time cloistered in the turret room in our house. She had her meals there, did her work there, slept there. Sometimes she invited my sister in to sit with her, never me. I only have one clear memory of her before she fell apart. We were in a parking lot, hot and bright. I was distracted by something, a car or a bus passing by, and I tripped and scraped my knee. As I started to cry, she pulled me up off the ground, and whispered in my ear, "I can't wait until you're grown."

Some passages in the book were crossed out; some pages were missing completely. She left me other books. A five-volume collection of Shakespeare. An early English edition of *Anna Karenina*. Her study Bible.

I watched her die when I was seventeen. The first time I left Prescott was to drive out to the city to see her in the hospice. I was nearly a woman. I remember how she looked on her deathbed. Skin waxy. Her body, so similar to mine, hollow. First bookmark. Scratched in the margins: *The serpent that stung thy father now wears his crown*.

She left me a little peach-colored suitcase too. My mother told me that she probably intended for me to travel.

There's a little sign on the road, on someone's land. Not quite a billboard, but the message is pretty much the same. I'm driving slowly; crawling. The sun seeps into the trees. The sign says:

Pregnant? Scared?
We can help.

There's a number written on it too. I dial it.

Someone answers on the first ring. A woman with a pretty voice.

She says, "This is the South Georgia Life Center. How can I help you, sweetheart?"

I say, "I'm pregnant."

She says, perhaps sensing something in my voice that I am not even aware of myself, "You may not realize it now, but that is the greatest gift a woman can receive. Do you want to talk about your options? Mothering a child isn't for everyone, but adoption—"

"I don't want to talk about my options."

"Oh, well, I—"

"I just needed to make sure my phone was working." I hang up.

My mother has always been strange. To me, anyway. To my sister.

The last light is shredding through the trees. I'm driving fast. Faster than I should. I'm worried about her. Very worried. The worry seeps beneath my skin, itches and burns.

Is there such a thing as a family evil? Passed down through blood. Closeness? We were never close. Our house was too big with too many secret turns to be close. It's a big, big house. Lots of places to fall from.

Taylor and I used to talk. About books or art. Movies we both liked. As an adult, we still talked, even long after I left Prescott. I liked him. I was never close to my father, and Taylor has been with my mother since I was twelve. We always got on, and—

My phone rings again. I don't bother to check. I know it's him.

Filled and emptied.

I've come to find that ghost towns in the South are far more haunting than ghost towns out West. Ghost towns in the South still have people in them. Dwindling populations, getting smaller and smaller as time marches on. They all look the same. Main streets with little boutiques and restaurants. Segregated housing. Usually by a physical or geographical feature. Railroad tracks. Forests. More churches than family names. The ghost towns of the West, I think, aren't really ghost towns at all. After all, can you really have ghosts when there is nothing left to haunt?

When I get into Prescott, the sun is gone. The highway delivers me into town. There isn't much to see. I'm not looking for anything anyway. The few people who are out are stragglers with nowhere to be. My husband's been to Prescott exactly three times. He proposed the last time we visited, overcome with what he called small-town charm. I doubt something like that actually exists.

There is only one car behind me. A patrol car. It erupts with dancing blue and red lights. I pull over in front of an empty storefront.

The sheriff's knuckles collide with my window. I roll it down, don't say anything. I think about what's in the aspirin bottle.

"Rearview mirror's broken," the sheriff says.

"I know," I say. "Is that illegal?"

He shrugs. "Your tag is two years past expired. Let me see your license."

I open my glovebox and take out my registration and insurance card, fish my license out of my wallet, and offer them all. The sheriff takes only my license.

"Mary Prescott Barnes?"

"That's me."

The sheriff laughs. "Thought I recognized you. You're a Prescott girl. How's Cynthia doing?"

"Oh, she's—"

"Feels like you girls never come back here. You know, I saw your mama the other day, and she was talking 'bout some pictures Cynthia'd sent of her and her boys. She's got two of them now, don't she? Tell her she should bring 'em here some time or other."

"I'll let her know."

He hands back my license. "Well, I can't go 'round giving Prescott girls tickets, now can I? You here to see Lilian?"

"Yes, you said you saw her the other day? It's just that I worry—"

"You Prescott girls are always worrying. Your mama, your mama's mama, your mama's mama's mama." He laughs again. "When I was a kid, my mom told me as long as this town's been here, there's been a Prescott girl up in that house worrying about this town. Prescott's Cynthia's middle name too, huh?"

"Yes." It isn't. She changed it.

"Well, gotta keep the name in the family somehow, right? Say hi to your mama for me, okay?"

I roll up the window.

I wonder if the sheriff knows Taylor. If they're friends. I wonder if Taylor has any friends. I can honestly say I'm unsure. He and my mother have been in their thing for so long. I should know if he has friends. But I don't. The last time I talked to him on the phone, he was drunk and grappling with his own unimportance. I've never known what to do with unimportant men.

My house, the Prescott House, sits on a hill on the edge of town. It is the biggest and whitest house on a street with four other big, white houses. But the Prescott House is the only house in town that has housed the same family since Reconstruction. "A family," my mother once said, "is an organism." I never asked her what she meant.

Taylor's car is in the driveway. I almost turn around and drive all the way back to the city. Instead, I park behind him.

I do not grab my suitcase, but I do take one more tablet out of the aspirin bottle and press it under my tongue. Years ago, the house's paint would glow under the moonlight. It's fallen into disrepair now. If you trace it back far enough, before the other houses on this street were built, before my family came to this town, it was a plantation house. The Prescotts grabbed it cheap after the Civil War. Added the turret tower. Razed the land around it and sold it as plots. This house, which has been renovated about every fifty years or so, is a Frankensteinian creation.

As the pill dissolves, I pick up my phone and dial her number. It rings only once.

"Hello?"

"Hello?"

"I—"

"I—"

"I'm calling—"

"I'm calling—"

"I'm worried—"

"I'm worried—"

I hang up. Close my eyes. Stare through my eyelids. The porch lights are on. I get out of my car and slip through moonbeams. Everything moves under a layer of gauze. I wonder what's hidden underneath. What secret, glimmering treasures live in the walls of our home? Beautiful, fantastic things. Terrible and rotten. I climb the porch stairs. When I touch the doorknob, it feels just like velvet.

I unlock the door, walk inside. I do not call out. I imagine that each one of my footsteps lands on soft, plush grass. I imagine the smell of rain and dirt. Bloodred clay. Flaking bone bark. Dewdrop embolism. My fingers trace the designs on the wallpaper. Patterns of flowers and vines and snakes. There are a few lights on. Bright and brighter. They confide something in me.

I toe off my shoes and walk up the stairs. I stop at the second floor and see my old room. Faint light seeps from underneath the door. Echoes of scurrying ring inside. I try the knob, but it's locked, and on second glance, the light is gone. I wander through the hall until I come across the second staircase leading to the turret room. I climb carefully,

slowly. The air runs across my skin, not as stuffy as I remembered, not heavy. This is such a nice time of year. Right before the brutal heat of the Georgia summer. I grip onto the railing.

I have always wanted to live a divine life. Or maybe, I've just wanted to know what divinity is—what beauty is, what love is, what truth is. All my wants and wishes seem so simple now. So clear. I think about blood and cum and love and the everlasting expectation that at the end of a long night, the sun will always rise.

At the top of the stairs, the door to the turret room is open. The lights are on, shining through crystal bulbs. My mother is inside, lying on the bed. Alive. Healthy. Unblemished. She sits up. Filled and … how does that one go?

"Mary," she says. She does not sound hysteric or cold or cloying. She does not sound surprised. Her voice is soft, melodic. I remember when I was scared of her. I remember when I pitied her. I feel young now. So incredibly young. And old. Older than I've ever felt before. How old am I?

"Where's Taylor?" I ask.

"At home," my mother says.

"His car is here."

"Don't tell me you're seeing things again, baby. Oh my pretty girl, what are you doing here?"

A veil of light falls over her face. I never thought we looked alike. Never in my life. All I knew of my inheritance was in my grandmother's dying body. But now, I see a resemblance. It's in subtle places. The curve of our cheekbones. The shape of our brows. Our peach-tinged complexions.

"I was worried about you, Mama," I say.

"Worried about me?" A smile plays at her lips. I nearly smile too. Who doesn't want to be worried about?

I almost ask to see her phone, open my mouth even, but no words come out. Suddenly my concerns seem so far away. So explainable.

"Lie down with me."

I come toward my mother, and she makes room in the bed. White sheets. White duvet. White pillows. I lie down. We stay for a moment, side by side, looking up at the vaulted ceiling. This bastardized house. I've never liked my mother, never felt close to her. Close. The tide of life pushes and pulls. I remember this morning, just vaguely, when I was so sure something was wrong. It's all been reframed now, through the looking glass. So silly. But perhaps I was meant to come here. To close a book. After all, you can't stop the world. Maybe it's time I give Jason and me a fresh start. This thing of ours. We could even move here. In this house. Mama wouldn't mind. These ugly roots—

The window is open, just a crack. The spring air that breezes through is cool and refreshing. April is a fruitful month.

My mother sits up and so do I. We face each other, and she brushes a finger across the old scratch on my chin. Then she snakes her hand under my shirt, against my stomach. Her skin is cold against mine. And she says to me, voice soft and clean, “I hope it’s a girl.”

Símone

JORY POMERANZ

FLASH FICTION

Cookbooks taught me how to read books. I was always hungry, and the only thing as savory as food was looking at photographs, letting the sumptuous sounds of foods slip into my illiterate brain like the opening of Nabokov's *Lolita*: Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta. To-ma-to. Ham-bur-ger.

It was through reading cookbooks I came to literature and stories, the science in combustion burners, and even American history. Thomas Jefferson is credited for the first recorded recipe for ice cream in the United States. Presidents after FDR were often photographed informally with food to relinquish their impersonality. I never laughed harder than watching George H.W. Bush try to eat a tamale. My religious beliefs were formed by food: nowhere in the Bible is a single, solitary tomato.

No one had been more supportive of my becoming a chef than my grandmother Helen. I tasted the ocean in my first anchovy; I burned my fingertips rubbing salt into quartered lemons to preserve them; I painted my first childhood masterpiece in the color butter on the canvas of phyllo dough.

Alzheimer's has already taken my name from my grandmother. Now a nurse spoon-feeds her every day. She opens her mouth in a perfunctory way, she chews *it* and swallows *it*. When we placed her in a retirement home, we sold her house and almost everything inside of it. I took her marble kitchen table, her cookbooks, and the box of index cards where she kept her recipes.

Inside the small plastic box was a picture of my grandmother in the heyday of her life. Her hair was short, when Greek women didn't wear short hair. She had one arm around her neighbor Símone, and they looked to be wearing the same shade of lipstick. My grandmother was ebullient in her confidence; her eyes were barely closed, her head tilted as she was blindly being touched by a cat's whiskers and laughing hysterically. Símone was busty, her smile and eyes piercingly mischievous, planting a fat kiss on Helen's cheek. They were both members of their local Junior League, which shared recipes to raise money for charity—in this case the war effort in which my grandfather participated.

The cards were dated, and as I flipped through them, I noticed inscriptions on the back sides of them. Behind a recipe for Cornbread Soufflé:

If cats always land on their feet,
And buttered toast on its face,

What happens if you drop a cat
With buttered toast on its back?

Crab Cakes with Oyster Sauce replied:

My dear Buttered Toast,
This cat is ready to put you on your back.

Pecan Lace Cookies wrote:

I love you like a buttered tart shell,
Your fingers slip into me.
Tomorrow at 3. Bring cinnamon.

Each card was dated, even after my grandfather's return from the war. I came to realize so many of the dishes of my childhood had an ingredient of love for a woman I had never known. And every time I cooked with my grandmother, she was also remembering. I brought Símone's chocolate cake recipe to my grandmother's retirement home one day, and her mouth opened in the same perfunctory way, but her eyes closed as in the photograph, and she bit down on her lower lip as if it were Símone's.

Símone's Chocolate Cake Recipe
180g of chocolate
½ cup of sugar
1 stick of salted butter
3 eggs
2 Tbs of flour
350 degrees, 16 minutes. Tart pan.

The Play Place

EUGENE SCHACHT

FICTION

Depression smells like the fries you ate two days ago. A stubborn miasma, smothering claustrophobic spaces, devouring clean air, embedding itself with an incalculable half-life. It persists, second morning in a row, and I roll onto my side. If I can't escape the smell, the least I can do is unwedge myself from the seat-belt buckle that's pressing into my kidney.

I'm hungry. Not for fries, but for something fried. And greasy. I toss away the T-shirts and towels that I repurposed as a blanket and I sit up. Loose change is still in the cupholders. My duffel is untouched. Glass shards aren't scattered on the floor mat; the discarded McDonald's bag remains by its lonesome self.

Parking in the renovated warehouse district was a smart hunch: yuppies don't smash windows. Especially if someone's asleep in the back seat.

I step out of my car and into the sunshine weather—warm and perfect, go figure. A new smell hits me. More so, *smells*: eggs, coffee, bacon. Breakfast. The source is close, just around the corner—a stout building made of windows, also unsmashed. People come and go through the glass doors, smiling for the most part, ushering along plodding children that dawdle eye level with their parents' kneecaps.

Funny when youth is that slow.

When I go inside, however, past the receptionist who's distracted with a phone call, the tortoise-esque toddlers vanish. In their void is a warren of hares, dashing about, shrieking, scurrying up ramps and through plastic tunnels, sliding down chutes and clumsily navigating rope bridges. They ascend six-foot climbing walls that must be mountains to them; they swim through ball pits deeper than the sea. Their Velcro sneakers are stowed in neat, rectangular cubbies.

I can smell their feet, but the breakfast aroma persists as well. I look around and spot a café strangely situated within this play place. Baristas ping-pong between espresso machines and coffee grinders, declaring hyphenated names and concoctions amid their ricochets.

DAVE-FLAT-WHITE. ANNIE-ICED-MACCHIATO. SHAWN-BLONDE-POUR-OVER.

The coffee cup centaurs line up as ordered. They collect their claims and move on. *ANNIE-ICED-MACCHIATO* breezes by a toaster oven that is graciously unveiling a bagel sandwich. A barista wraps it in crinkling foil and slices it in half, yellow cheese dripping onto the plate. My stomach swells.

I take my place in line, invigorated with purpose, pushing my weak body beyond its limits. Internal pangs and gargles intensify with the angst of a forming mob. My legs are flimsy. The spots on the spotted, vinyl floor wobble. It's suddenly hot.

The children's shrills echo off the walls—a youthful cycle of laughter, screams, and tears. I try to tune it out as I take another step forward, staring at the spotted floor in case anyone is staring at me. I don't fit the standard customer profile: dirty tank top, untied boots, unshowered, without child. I'm sure there's something else I'm forgetting, too.

Still, I wonder: how am I any different from the other line-waiters? It's morning. Caffeine is a must. Bagel sandwiches are technically optional, but the fasting of sleep wakens cravings in us all. Plus, I doubt *everyone* here showered this morning. Instead of staring at me, they should stare at themselves. *Poh-tay-toe, poh-tah-toe.*

Does this place serve hash browns?

The barista stops smiling when I approach the register. I don't have time to take offense; I need to decipher the felt-board menu.

"I'd like a bacon-egg-and-cheese bagel, *um*, a medium dark roast, *and* … any chance you have hash browns?"

The barista hasn't written any of this down.

"Would it be possible to see your membership card?"

"Of course." I pat my pockets but only as a symbolic gesture. "Shoot, I forgot it at home."

"That's okay, you can just type in your phone number."

The barista flips the tablet register so the screen faces me. I try my phone number from growing up in case my mom is somehow a member. I get a red "X" in return. Next, I try my current number, yielding the same result.

"Can I level with you?" I lean in toward the barista so no one else can hear. "I've been having a rough go of things—"

"I'm sorry, but—"

"So from one regular human being to another, could you please just help me out? I'll pay and tip and leave right when I get my food."

The barista wearily looks around.

"Unfortunately, that's policy. The café is for members only."

I anxiously scratch the back of my head. My stomach continues to rumble; my throat is dry. My ears are ringing but not loud enough to drown out the mumbles and murmurs of the other line-waiters.

(*"What's taking so long?")*

(*"*Shh. *They look… you know."*)

(*"How'd they even get in here?"*)

(*"Daddy, I'm hungry."*)

(*"Honey, be polite.")*

I raise my hands and surrender. "Fair enough. Rules are rules."

Backing away, I bow my head at some of the line-waiters. They pull their children closer.

"Wait!" The barista emerges from behind the counter. "Hold on a second."

"I already said I'd leave. What else do you—"

"The café is for members only"—the barista smiles—"but you can still sign up."

"I don't have a lot of money."

"It's free. We've all done it."

A wave of positivity sweeps over the crowd.

("*Anyone can join!*")

("*It's totally worth it!*")

("*And super easy!*")

I try to focus on the barista, but the grinning horde gathers around me. The children stop playing and circle up with their parents. Everyone continues spewing encouragement.

"Okay …" I rub my sweaty palms against one another. "But what exactly does that entail?"

"It's painless."

"*It*?"

"Just go to the front desk and have your measurements taken."

"Measurements? For what?"

The barista wags a finger. "For your face, of course!"

("*Don't be silly!*")

("*Do you live under a rock?*")

The barista goes first, and then the whole crowd follows: one by one, they pull their faces from their heads, taking with them their hair, noses, ears, and lips. Even the kids join in the sequential chain, until the play place is filled with hollow skulls and pale bones.

I knew I was missing something.

I want to run from the vacant congregation, but the room feels atilt. My legs could just as easily give out from under me, and my stomach isn't quieting down either—it again groans in despair. There's no fuel in my empty gut.

My fingers touch the stone ridges of my skull—the clefts and fissures, the cracks in what was once smooth and unbroken. I poke the holes between my mandible and molars. It'd be nice to have food stuck between my teeth.

I remind myself that having a face isn't that bad … It can't be worse than where I am now, starving without one.

Without saying anything else, I walk to the receptionist. The families slide their faces back on and erupt in cheers. They all watch in anticipation as the receptionist wraps the tape measure around my chin, and there's a spirited burst of applause when my new face is finally pulled over my head.

Properly outfitted, I return to the café. Everyone moves aside so I can step up to the counter. They all brim with joy except for the barista, who is frowning.

"I have some bad news. We ran out of hash browns."

I hardly hear this. I'm more concerned with tousling my thick hair. "Oh, that? No worries. The sandwich and coffee are plenty."

The other baristas work in unison, and my order crystalizes in no time.

Taking my tray, I find an open table beside the windowed wall. The foil wrapper glints daylight as I open my bagel sandwich. I take a bite, and then I take another. Savory, oily goodness bloats my gums to the point that I can barely move my mouth.

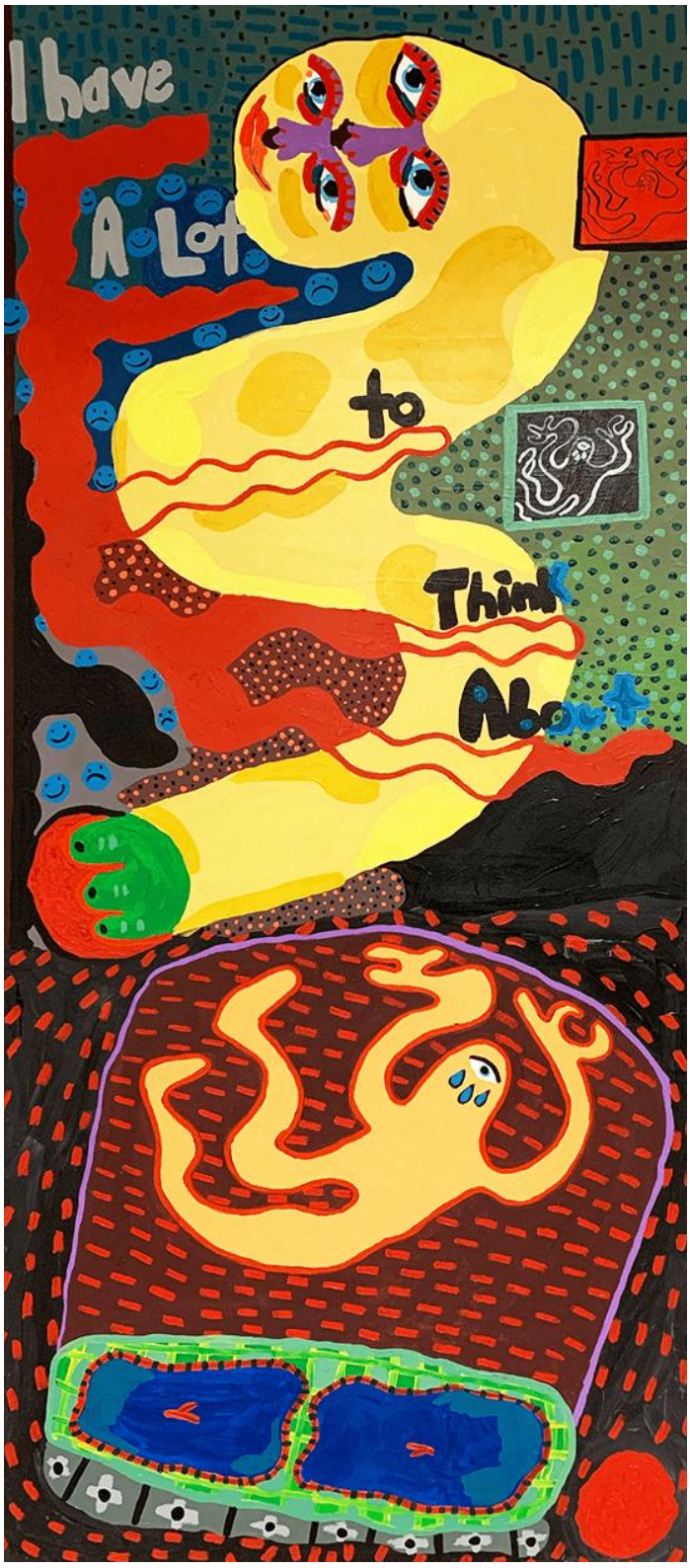
On the other side of the glass, it's sunshine weather—warm and perfect. A not-yet-renovated warehouse obscures the view of my car.

I manage a smile while I chew.

Selected Artwork

ALLI SMITH

VISUAL ART



I Have A Lot to Think About, 2020. Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 84 inches

Gray Spot, 2020. Acrylic on fabric, 44.5 x 43 inches

Yet Again./How Do I Describe This?/Can You Ever Forgive Me, 2020. Acrylic and marker on canvas, 35 x 70 inches

to the brown nippled girls and the daughters of immigrant fathers

SOFIA AGUILAR

HYBRID NONFICTION • WRITEGIRL CONTRIBUTOR

My father tried to teach me to love.

In Mexico, cooking a meal is the same as offering yourself, the kitchen a woman's first home, an apron tied into a knot at the neck and then at the waist as though her second skin. But I'm not the kind of woman who always does what she's told—don't pick your skin, don't talk that way, don't open your legs like a man at the table. My hands have never known how to carry my people in the palms or lay my heart beside the food or serve my father's plate and push in his chair before my own. To boil guavas after plucking them from their tree or to melt chocolate and chile into mole into chicken bone and learn to do without its sweetness.

Instead, I'm the daughter who chooses both halves of herself, who is made of two tongues but burns brown the arroz and brushes slight against the stove and finds my skin weeks later still peeling from a past heat. Neither my food nor my mouth has ever understood how to speak for me.

I never learned how to love my body the way white girls did, how to describe it in words that weren't already taken—caramel and cinnamon, coffee and the kind of sugar my father has never believed in. As though I am meant to be eaten, swallowed and consumed. I was never told that my brown nipples were as beautiful as pink and my belly filled with food could round itself that way and my waves didn't have to be the victims of heat. Never understood that my body was mine, that men couldn't shame me, couldn't see me and crave me, couldn't touch me unless I said yes, couldn't abuse me and blame me, didn't own me even if we shared the same blood.

But so much of my father is myself. So much first belonged to him that it's hard to remember whose body this really is. My eyebrows always wild, overgrown, my locks of hair so thick that just a few loose strands stop the shower from disappearing into the drain, my face that has always had its own mind and never learned how to lie. My fear of darkness, barren places, and hollows in the chest, of one dollar too little, of inhabiting the earth without

wearing shoes, of lying down and feeling the ribs of the mattress through our bellies on the bed—what's mine has always been ours.

He taught me to ache. To take desire as my birthright, to never be full, become satisfied, run away from the world without leaving my touch or both my names behind, braided into blades of grass, tattooed in the ear. Emptiness, his greatest fear passed down to me like inheritance.

Savoring

VICTORIA BUITRON

NONFICTION

Dirty hominy. That's what we call it. Mote sucio. Plump maize garnered with pork gravy. There was a kiosk in my hometown where motorcyclists, jaywalkers, the young and old waited patiently for a paper bag with the thick of pork skin oozing from it. I could smell it from blocks away—the smothered chicharrón seeped in garlic, the cumin spicing the air. My father took me the first time, then an uncle, then cousins, then boyfriends. We ate the mote with our hands, licking our fingers if we forgot in the frenzy to ask for napkins, hoping the roadside lady would share the recipe with her children and someone would take up the mantle. That they wouldn't mind men in line slurping—saying rico, sabroso, más. The maize was cooked enough that it'd begin to dissolve before the first bite, the pork lard's saltiness perking the palate. I'd get there before three, because sometimes by then she'd begin to close shop, all out of mote. My father left the country, my uncles were too busy, my boyfriends found other women, other street food, but I'd still go, arrive in a taxi, just to allow the taste to make up for those who left and all that was missing.

* * *

When my husband and I propose to my parents we live together in our new house, we don't imagine a lockdown is months away. We can't escape each other, and all we want some days is to eat by ourselves—have a conversation only between us. We don our masks, drive two towns north, and order a platter of sushi rolls too large for us. We park on a dead-end street that touches the Long Island Sound. We don't see anyone as he opens the back of the Jeep, the chill of April telling us we should have also donned coats. We sit in the back, making sure we lather our hands with sanitizer. I wait for the smell to evaporate as I look at the sunset, tinges of light orange and almost-coral decorating the sky. Ducks are splashing by the shore, and I look at the waterfront houses and see no one outside. My husband leaves everything spicy to me: tuna, crab, shrimp. The avocado soaks in with the soy sauce and prickly wasabi. It all feels verboten. Finding a way to smell the ocean while the local beach is closed, escaping my parents, eating in the back of his car. I drench each roll into the sauce, place it on my tongue, and let it linger. Because there won't be another time like this. This once-common view that is now rare, my husband's beard getting soaked, how we talk about when this will end, how we make bets on it, how his laugh calms me, how I'm glad I'm going through this with him. How he saves the last roll for me no matter which one it is. Because what we're going through isn't ordinary and I need to save this taste—this memory.

* * *

I live far from my hometown, in another country, in a place that on the Day of the Dead doesn't savor colada morada—a drink, hot or cold, made from berries, ishpingo, fruit pulp, corn flour. We make it once a year because the recipe is convoluted, requiring too many ingredients, too time-consuming. I don't make it, but a friend of a friend does. I pour a cup, bring it close to my nose, and at first—a peculiarity—I smell nothing. Like with most prized foods, I breathe it in before tasting, before gulping and chewing on the blueberries, the tangy pineapples. I place the cup to my mouth and try something I've never tried before. I try to taste. Then it occurs to me that tasting is like breathing, it's a reflex that happens, not something to try. But taste is nonexistent and smell is blank. The shock—the absence of what once was—somehow makes me gag. I wonder how long it'll be. I hope not too long because in a few days, I lose ten pounds.

A week of nothingness. Not even of blandness or a tepid taste, just nothing. On the eighth day my tongue can sense when something is spicy or drenched with salt. It's odd, forcing myself to eat only when my stomach bellows in hunger. Without taste there's no eating for pleasure—just eating to survive. Without a preemptive smell, there's no gratification. Food is only texture.

In the second week, I feel the bitter of ginger. Not taste it, but feel its essence on my tongue. I use my memory to create a palate. Every day, once I'm out of quarantine, I walk around my neighborhood, hoping that I smell something. The wood burning in our fireplace, the sweet scent of my husband, some feces on my shoes. Anything. It isn't until December, a month after the Day of the Dead, that there's a shift on a walk. Blocks away from my house, with rain drying on the pavement, the sun struggling to be seen, I stop in my tracks. I look at the houses to see who's the daring individual with a grill outside. It's the first time since I lost my smell that an odor feels swift, present, that it can precede the moment of placing joy in my mouth. I stop, cars pass while I take it in, a family's food, imagine the gunk of ribs in my mouth before I run back to kiss my husband, to say that even wandering smells reach me from behind closed doors. To say I thought I knew what absence was, but it wasn't until these two senses disappeared with their undertones and recollections and past that I learned what it truly means to lack. And that, like before, I'll treasure my nose and tongue's associations to memory as if each fusion of odor and tang were sharp sassafras.

Beware of the Boys

NATALIE MISLANG MANN

NONFICTION

What are our expectations? Which of the things we desire are within reach? If not now, when? And will there be some left for me? –Anthony Bourdain

I wander in and out of sleep as Anthony Bourdain's voice carries me through an aromatic dreamscape. As I recline on my parents' red couch, he contrasts Shanghai's bourgeoning wealthy class—a tomato, a potato, and Wagyu beef—with old China's oysters found along Shouning Road. My dad sits in a reclining leather chair. He gets up, disappears, then returns when a commercial comes on. Bourdain sits with a local, "a hacker turned entrepreneur," in a fancy bar drinking "China's official cocktail," the Moscow mule. That's when Bourdain decides to crash a wedding.

Dad cups four small tangerines in his hand. He peels two for me. I don't touch their skin chilled from the December air. Nor do I delight in digging my short unpolished nails into their delicate flesh. After Dad hands me the tangerines, he asks for the Calendar section of the *Los Angeles Times*. The paper's date reminds me that it is Christmas Eve, and the year is 2014. I've felt stuck since I moved home from San Francisco. Suburbia is like quicksand. Once you fall in, you can't get out. As a high school educator, I can't keep up with L.A.'s inflated rent. Without my living with my parents, I wouldn't be able to afford to live in the city where I teach. Once I asked a colleague how she paid for her apartment. She reminded me that she was married: a reminder that I am not.

I examine the sports page in front of me. Leonard Williams stares back from the cover. The headline reads, "LAST WORD, EDGE-WISE." My teeth break into one of the tangerine segments. I devour the bite. With each segmentation, I break apart the pair. Juice drips onto Williams' face. I meditate on how much I resemble the USC football star: his thick muscular build and his wild, mid-length hair. His erect, dark brown areolas peer through his white muscle shirt. No matter what bra I wear, my nipples always protrude through tops. His facial hair screams: I am not a woman. I am a woman: I have a mustache I wax every six weeks.

One lonely, singular tangerine remains.

* * *

I look back up at the TV screen. I look nothing like the Shanghainese bride: her thin body, her long, straight hair, her seeming fragility. Because she has no arse, she can fit into the

designer clothes found in the high-end, luxury shops filled, as Bourdain says, with "a sheer volume of things and services unimagined by the greediest, most bourgeois of capitalist imperialists." The extraneous, puffy tulle on the bride's wedding dress is the ultimate symbol of materialism. I yearn for a simple dress with a bateau neckline. I imagine an ethically sourced, rough diamond in an eighteen-karat gold setting surrounding my left ring finger. Other than that, she has the thing I dream about. I want to fall in love with someone who can help me move out of my parents' house by paying half the rent. Maybe with our combined incomes, we could afford to buy a house.

* * *

My mind drifts with Bourdain's voice: "Lots of food present. Booze. Whiskey. Smokes for guests." I realize there is not much difference between a Chinese wedding and that of a Sikh Canadian. At Sikh weddings, there is always an abundance of food and booze. Strict Sikhs shouldn't drink, and they aren't supposed to smoke. Since I am not a *proper* Sikh woman, I sometimes do both. In high school, before I had even read Maxine Hong Kingston ask the question, "Isn't a bad girl almost a boy?" I believed that being a bad girl would bring me closer to self-determination. When Indian relatives came to visit, the women cooked, cleaned, and did the dishes. I tried to stay with the men in the living room as they drank and watched TV. I imagine the Shanghai bride also having a gendered fate.

I can tell Bourdain understands the nuances of Asian culture when he eats at a table with wedding guests. After a woman challenges Bourdain to shots of clear grain alcohol, he wonders "who at this table is going to try really hard to get me drunk. I wouldn't have guessed it was going to be her." In the same scene, the camera pans to a toddler wearing pajamas sipping what looks like the same clear liquid from a wine glass. In Shanghai, there is no legal drinking age. In all cultures, socialization starts young.

The scenes from Bourdain's wedding crashing remind me of the last Sikh wedding I attended in Calgary. It was my second cousin's wedding. In Punjabi, the word "cousin" is synonymous with "sibling." Cousins never felt like siblings. My Mexipina mother would refer to them as "the clan." No matter how much my mom sacrificed for my dad's family, we never belonged. I knew growing up that marriage could create more problems than it solved.

Knowing how much alcohol would be present at the wedding reception, my mom had told me on the plane, "You don't need to do what the other female cousins are doing. Just be yourself. You're not *full* Indian. They don't see us that way." Unlike at the Shanghainese wedding, Sikh women were not encouraged to imbibe. Instead of clear, fermented beverages being passed around, there was an open bar stocked with Royal Canadian, the Sikh relatives' favorite drink.

* * *

"Ladies first," a smiling, drunk, turbaned man said. He guided me to the front of the bar since I was the only woman waiting in line for alcohol. While the crowd of men looked amused, the Indian bartender didn't look surprised when I ordered my whiskey straight. I

ordered a couple more with Coke. If I brought my cousin's married daughters drinks, their father wouldn't notice the alcohol in the dark, bubbly liquid.

With alcohol, I could ease loneliness. Through alcohol, I could commune with my female cousins who were forbidden indulgence. As a half-Indian, I felt like an imposter, an imposition, in a culture that I felt I half-belonged to. Without knowing my father's tongue, I learned to be silent. I shape-shifted to be invisible. I sat with my non-dancing cousins. My black sequined T-shirt blended into the background. I observed.

Other female members of "the clan" paraded like peacocks wearing bright pink, blue, or turquoise saris. Gold embroidery or delicate beadwork glistened on the silk. Henna-tattooed hands screwed in invisible lightbulbs as the young women danced bhangra to Punjabi MC's "Mundian To Bach Ke." The song translates to "Beware of the Boys." In Punjabi, Rajinder Singh Rai compliments and warns the dancers. He acknowledges their good looks, their thin waists, their nice hair on top. He tells them not to give their love to just anyone. He tells them to beware of the boys. In Indian culture, a fine line exists between coy flirtation and expressing sexuality. To give dancing women privacy, men drinking whiskey gathered around the bar.

As I watch the multichromatic women dancing in a circle, I notice that their connection binds sexuality with unapproachability. To gain entrance, an outsider must interrupt their content. On the outside, it seems to gain entrance one must look like them.

I yearned to be like my cousins: svelte, tall, elegant.

There was no deviation from the Sikh rule of not cutting hair.

Their long hair swayed.

There were no flyaways.

I have the kind of hair that men like to pull during sex. They perceive curly hair as wild. It goes in different directions. It looks unkempt. It looks rough. They perceive curly hair as a signifier of a woman's temperament. Men push curly hair away from their faces. It scratches their five-o'clock shadows. The dancing women are the type men want to marry. I imagine the dancing women alone with their husbands or boyfriends at the end of the night. When they get home, their drunk partners smile and brush loose strands of hair away from their faces. They tell them they are beautiful before gently kissing their lips.

Men can sense when a girl with curly hair wants straight hair, serious hair. They can sense when she wants to be the kind of woman who can dance all night in eight-inch stilettos. She wants to be the kind of woman who can't handle her liquor. So, when she is drunk, she giggles like a hungry hyena. Hungry hyenas are deceptively strong. Like the dancing women, they travel in clans. They choose their mates. They chase their mark. If she were a hungry hyena, she would mark her territory and catch her prey. Men would think she's cute because she would know how to play the game. And, instead of a rough diamond, she would land a shiny, blood one on her left hand.

* * *

After drinking more than a few whiskeys, my cousins and I decided to dance. I took off my shoes and left them at the side of the table. I never learned to dance in heels. I wore Pumas when I went to clubs. Wearing sneakers, a woman can run. I want to say that I never let

anyone catch me, because I wanted my feet to take flight, or that I never wanted to be caught. Those are lies. In reality, what I wanted was a community of Brown women who taught me the rules, who linked me to their circle so that I wouldn't fade into the background.

* * *

"Mundian To Bach Ke" pulsated through the air, through the dance floor, through the bodies of the dancing women: *Look after your youth/This time won't come again*. Since youth is fleeting, since gender roles exist in and outside this space, it is appropriate for the song to be played at a wedding reception. This carefree moment will never exist again.

The dancing women's lives might be different from this reality. Were their lives like the circular bubble that they formed on the dance floor? Did they maintain a singular, stereotypical existence? Were the college-aged ones good, virginal Sikhs who majored in biology or business? When graduate school applications wanted to know their ethnicity, they checked one box. I wanted to imagine simple, uncomplicated lives that revolved around attending temple and family meals. Nothing is ever as simple as that. If they ever got married, then divorced, they would have each other. This is something—due to distance and my mixed identity—that I would never have.

After dancing for a while, my cousins and I felt our stomachs growl. Perhaps this is why Indian weddings are rarely sit-down affairs, like the wedding in Shanghai that Bourdain crashes. With all the drinking and dancing, there needs to be a constant rotation of food. When we reached the buffet, we noticed that the dahls, curries, and saag had been removed. In their place were gulab jamuns, ras malai, and burfi alongside chaat. The perfect balance of sweet and salty existed side by side on separate dishes. Exhaustion began to replace inebriation. Even amongst kind relatives, I still felt alone. What I desired was a constant sense of community that comes from an understanding that we belonged to the same ancestry, especially in a society that values singular, definable identities. What I wanted was to feel linked in a circle of dancing women who would remind me that I was never alone.

* * *

At the end of the wedding crashing, Anthony Bourdain is alone. He communes with a bowl of Long Leg Noodles. The dish is named after the restaurant's owner, because "the woman is tall." This is the perfect segue into the last scene.

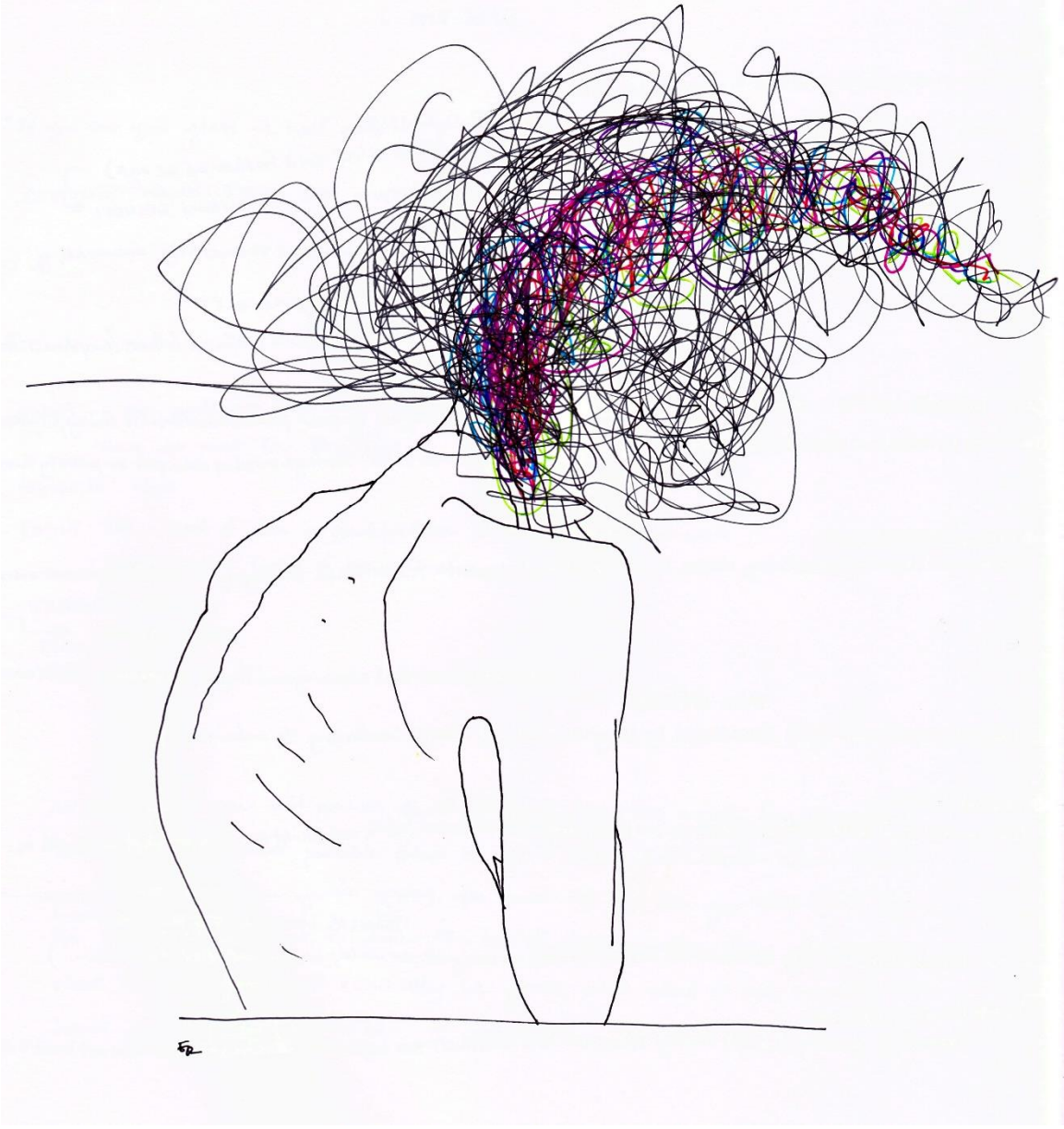
Bourdain's voice wakes me from my internal voyage: "Where are we going? Who will drive us there? What will it be like when we get there? I think it will look like this." The closing shot is filmed from a high-rise. Cars move through a Shanghai intersection. This is how life feels sometimes: disconnection in a much larger web. Our human experiences intersect at times, while we do not fully understand each other's lives. Perhaps this is why people get married despite knowing that relationships are not perfect. They want to gather the people they love.

I imagine if I ever got married that I would have to choose between a buffet or served dinner at my wedding. Instead, I would have a taco cart, mango lassis, and cases of Royal Canadian. I would want all of my male and female guests to dance. Of course, I would play “Mandian To Bach Ke,” even knowing how misogynistic the lyrics sound. I used to imagine this moment would occur after a brief wedding ceremony, in the form of a reception. But what I really wanted most was to celebrate the people I love. We all want to be reminded that we are valued. I don’t want to be one of those people driving their car on a busy street not feeling connected to the world.

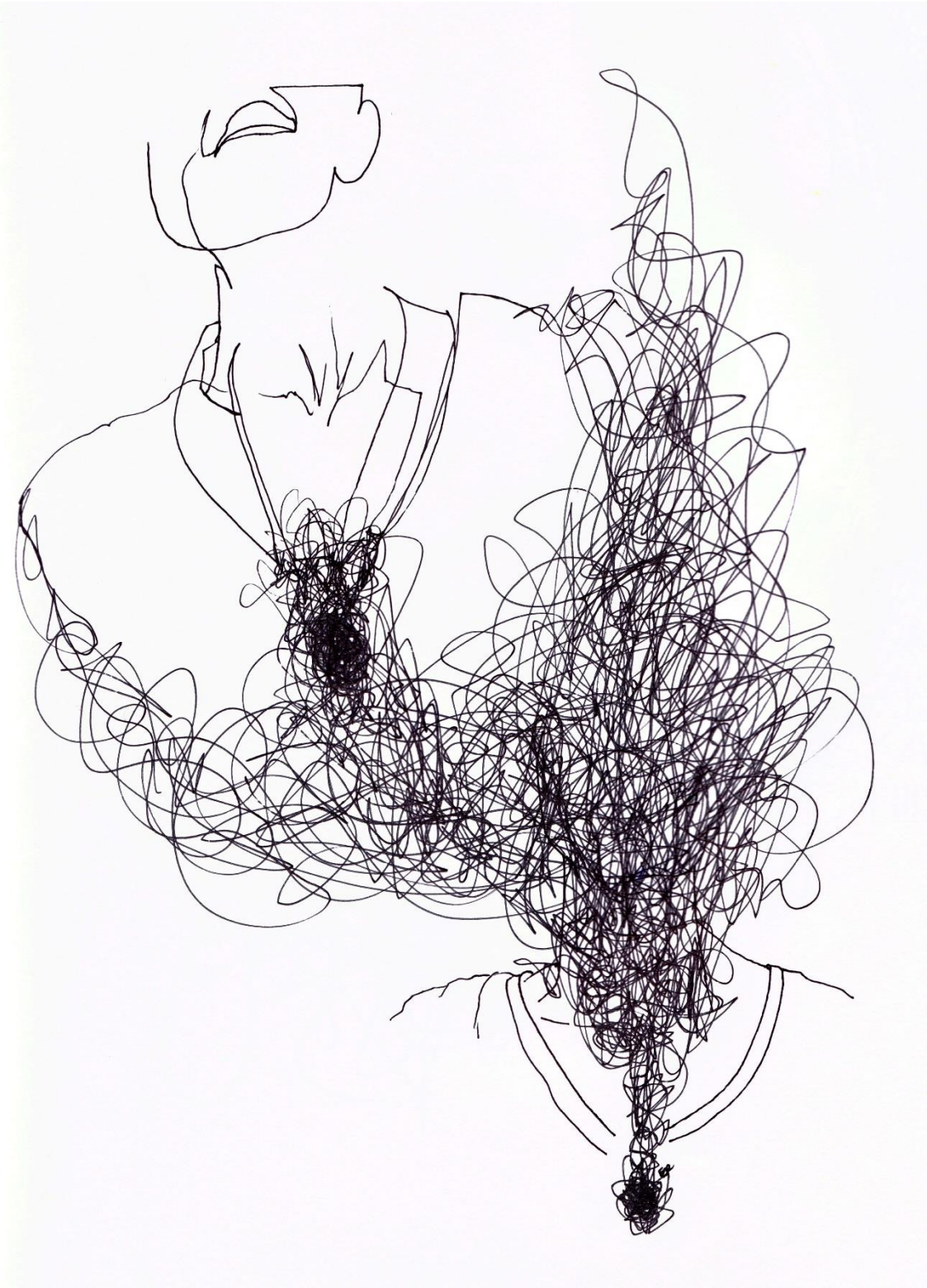
Distintegral

EMILY RANKIN

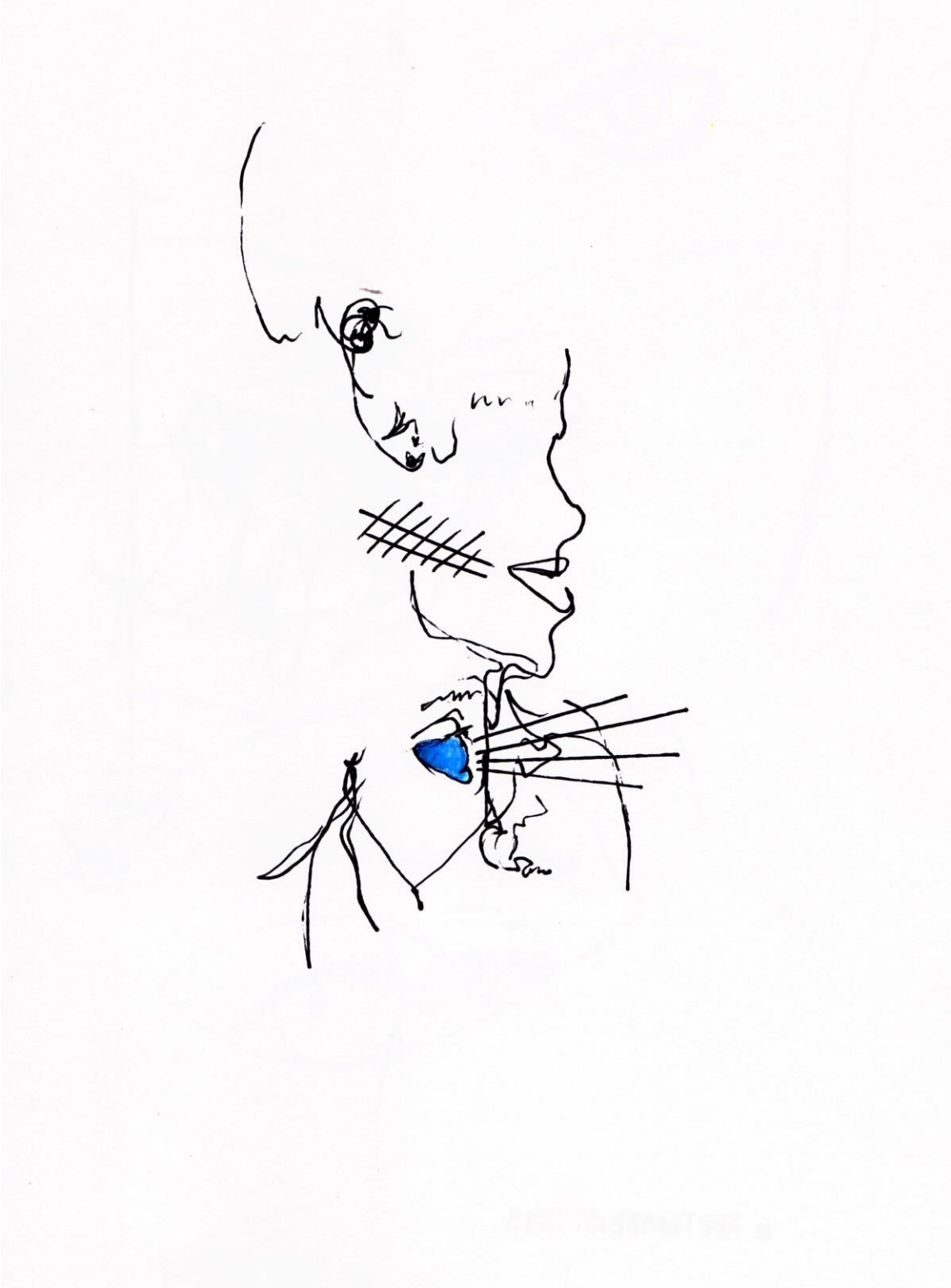
VISUAL ART



Verstehen, 2017. Ink on paper, 8 x 10 inches



Reach, 2016. Ink on paper, 8 x 10 inches



Disintegral #693, 2013. Ink on paper, 8 x 10 inches

when Black people say, 'Imma pray for you,' that is the prayer

ASHIA AJANI

POETRY

i cannot spare more magic, lest you take me for a mule.
Sapphire that I am, spinning gold from grain,
beholden to a spirit of my own protection,

i am a charlatan of boundless desire.
yes, my energy be that thick, be that heavy,
a potent protection against those who wish to distill

my invocations into a lustful praise. & take & take
& take until i am a sullen shell.
true, my magic is rarer than a passionfruit

swisher, is weighty, a divinity of longing swells
through my fingers. God bless this mess,
this brouhaha, this wild encounter of flesh and spirit.

long burdened by the rust of misuse,
i have my own charges to bear.
in the soot & ruin of [black girl magic],

herein lies the problem of my wanton flesh.
those who only see us as clusters of hurt,
a trickled-down resilience sought for seizure.

i banish and bruise. i hold grudges.
if that illustrates me evil, i accept the fire & the hell
of my own creation. always, i guard what is mine.

i cannot allow my body to be another
site of ruin from misplaced faith.
forgive me, there is nothing light to give.

worthy to be sung

LEVI BENTLEY

POETRY

6 am sleepwalk tear-off leveraging toothed shovel to pull
steel nails into curves in short shrieks starting at the cap
peeling off rolled chunks into steel dumpsters bare wood

warm paneled framed with flashing snapped chalk lines
buttoned up asphalted felt tarred paper under three-tab in
fifty pound blocks of shingle up ladders over shoulder

cracking stiff in the cold morning thrown down along
the peak in stiff stacks in the noon sun slewing passive
limply heavy melting into droop and rip slow gumming

up slow laying down tarred asphalt building puzzles of
seams staggered by the gun each nail driven in percussive
gasps of composited wood's chemical smell the deafening

compressor stammering to keep up pressure a nail in the
mouth wide round head shows up in a finished roof called
a shiner like a black eye it will leak later radio's staticky

classic rock so loud no one talks grunting the choreography
kept up until lunch at two flecked with splinters debris streak
with tar reeking walking through safeway wolfing grocery

brand sandwich gas station coffee pee in the bushes foreman
drives formula one gunning the truck past policemen he knows
waving and talking shit about those honkers on that one then

back up the pitch till dark lost in the sway of labor-life and

often
wordless rage
making two dollars less than
everyone
I mean men

Longing

LAWRENCE BRIDGES

POETRY

So, in the swirl of carbon, you feel things
like your eyes dusted by hibiscus thistle
ear errors corrected by a finer tuning of strings.
So isn't it miraculous such a dish serves itself
while you just sweep the hose through backlit air
defining air as you go, hopping gardens, cooking
eating, singing, inching toward exquisite this
and that, in a carbon swirl that meets
you face to face as a caricature of yourself,
weird and honest with no part missing
but unfulfilled longing for it or her or that
my god, the rails I'm on that take me daily
down the swirl of those cyclone walls, the fields
below me my boredom, the winds, bedframes
broken towns my distracted thoughts as I drop
into another frozen room. They say it sounds
like a freight train, longing, exploding from wood.

A 6 Month Follow Up Visit Opens My Mouth in Anguish

ROCIO FRANCO

POETRY

my
full
breath
caught
in
my
esophagus
attempts
to
squeeze
past
needle
passage
narrowed
by
the
choking
of
inflamed
glands

the oncologist mimes
about toxins mutating cells
in turn muting the recoiled
air confined in my chest

his muffled motions
show me
how a villain
dwells inside a body

Lone Tick Star

DAVID HIGDON

POETRY

The tick doesn't consider words
the way he considers food
or fucking. He doesn't consider
the balance of choice phrasing
for optimum mass ecologies.
He doesn't consider listeners

or shared histories, varying frames
of minds or perspective. He doesn't
consider how we'll interpret
his regurging of obscenity
and learned grapevine banter.
He does consider how to latch

at my ankle, considers the maps
of each crevice, each sharp angle
of soft skin. He considers how
he sets his mouth parts in thin cutis,
the inside of an ear. He considers
the time required to gestate

in my salt and blood, but lacking
any concern for my struggles.
I'm nothing but an invalid host,
a belly to survey. All you have
to do is suck. Everything given,
you believe you've earned.

exhibición: polilla en pandemia

VIVA PADILLA

POETRY

ya sé que no quieres hablar sobre amor que crees que no existe
ni que existe tu sed de mi
que solo existe tiempo y qué hacer con el

los ojos son las únicas cosas donde uno podría encontrar ternura en esta vida digo
en este piso duro me encuentro fingiendo ser enamorada
dime amor, de cual otra manera podre volar con el peso estos huesos?

(part of xolo series)

* * *

translation: "exhibit: moth in pandemic"

i am aware you don't want to speak about love, as it doesn't exist to you
neither does your lust for me
that only Time exists and what to do with him

the eyes are the only ways where one can find softness in this life I say
on this hard floor I pretend I am in love
tell me, my love, how else might I fly with the weight of these bones?

Dominos

AUDREY SIOENG

POETRY • WRITEGIRL CONTRIBUTOR

As time eats us whole, alive. & there we lie squirming in the acid of its shadow, the dark of the belly consuming as we count black ants and blame starless nights.

light exceptionalism, how American.

cyclical, the cynics and idealists ride tricycles down the halls and round the ground, around, surround coffee cup stains on napkins.

Fish eat fish, “Baby Shark” plays too loud
stop Alexa, but they are d a n c i n g.

I’d like the salmon please, with lemon pepper and condensed cool, the sweat of two ice waters, both for me.

I was expecting someone.

—$39.99, treasure your Lincolns while you can still sit across from them.

Look past the lawn,
Willy Wonka’s factory manufactures greed in purple foil—royal.
Chocolate and gum in crowns and brackets.

We argued in an attempt to conquer, because she saw his throat and ate Adam's apple

and I pretended I wouldn't have done the same.

weak now for the lack of it, in the knees. we wallow with the worms under the rock where
we fell in love with the
ground
in a cataclysmic crash,
tumbling

hair down their backs,
locks and lost keys hide-and-go-seek, but the kids have long stopped looking

in dust,

pianos long out of tune, flat astronomy notes
blunting the stars into fire as we wear them loosely

down to crinkled "wanna meet up friday?" between my tingling

lips, fingers, thighs—

ivy creeps up my throat and flowers bloom
on my tongue, I cannot speak but I am wanted, like Love?

Fire, desire, feasting until we are ashes and all fall down in grassy rings
with wedding rings
when we pretend water won't engulf us the same.

the trees fell around us, broken constellations blurred
and sharp eyes, sharp machines, sharp music in a melodic

minor.

minds fancy that they crave a legacy,
I like, I want, I take.

but oh, how i want, i want, i want

so I settle for cold Jack in the Box potato wedges instead.

the moon is so full tonight, and I envy her and remind myself that she's just a smug rock stranded in the sky, just the suffering & victory

on repeat, start again, draw eight. let's loop names around the Invisible, and laugh at how they rear their heads when they're stranded with the sixes.

i wonder if she's whole yet. no ambition, no aspirations,

unlike the slugs and potatoes crawling up my throat.
nobody has ever, will ever, starve like I do, for delicate ankles and loud, broad strokes for lips.

the stars are burning, the stars are falling in love with the beyond.
the stars become black holes and agony, collapsing chests and passionless spheres.

so the stars must know how need fills the nights, and the temptations of swallowing infinities.

they must know how it feels to be craving pizza at 12:01, bones collapsing, curled inside ourselves in the dark ...

Sweet Tooth

CLAIRE VAN WINKLE

POETRY

> The excesses of New York dining have reached the depths of decadence….People who don't mind defecating $500 worth of food are offensive enough, but I can at least accept that people are free to lay waste to money as they see fit, so long as I don't pay the bill. But if hummingbirds were slaughtered for some silly delicacy, then that affects us all.
>
> –on hummingbird tongues rumored to have been served at the grand opening gala of L'Impero, New York

The sweet, sticky sauce
had notes of wisteria
and honeysuckle,

and paired nicely with
the '96 *Ruinart*
Brut Rosé. And yet

the hummingbird tongues
left something to be desired;
it was romantic

to nibble on that
sweet meat, but I couldn't shake
the thought that somewhere

in some back kitchen
a butcher's block was heaped high
with tiny wishbones.

Dear Family in America,

NICK ZELLE

POETRY

[If you are reciting this out loud from memory,
use an overdone false accent, each syllable
a pothole on a dirt road. It comes to you easily,
that endearing lilt. An inherited bounce that
knocks you about, makes anything *sound quaint.]*

Karin was eaten by a bear.

[If you are the Family in America, you know that
she had been recently married, on honeymoon
in Yellowstone Park. A scratch on the family tree,
hardly legible. Someone to meet on a grave rubbing
trip. It is accepted, even expected, that you laugh.]

Merry Christmas.

[If you are in the spirit and hungry for tradition,
now is an appropriate moment to let your teeth
sink into the lefse or the lutefisk on your plate:
you need not wait. She came to this country;
she was eaten. What's more to be said?]

Best to you and yours,

[If you are hearing this letter for the first time,
know that it is not abridged. Nothing here cut short,
just cut off. It is the last exchange between Malmö
and Minneapolis. The confirmation that this generation
is no one to each other.]

Your Family in Sweden

Selected Comics

BELLE (BOM) KIM


The Road Less Traveled
LET IT GO AND BE AT PEACE
HUH.
OBSESS COMPULSIVELY, BLAME SELF FOR EVERYTHING, WALK AROUND STEWING IN OPPRESSIVE AMOUNTS OF SOUL-CRUSHING GUILT
EH, WHY NOT. IT'S SPICIER. WHAT'S THE WORST THING THAT COULD HAPPEN?
DAMMIT BRAIN!!


The Monster & Me
THERE IS A LITTLE MONSTER THAT LIVES IN MY MIRROR.
Belle K
IT LIKES TO COME OUT JUST FOR ME.
Noooo
SUP FUCKER??
BUT MAYBE, QUITE POSSIBLY, I AM THE MONSTER IT SEES.
Miss me??
Oh god Oh my god It's back


Found
I KEEP SEARCHING AND SEARCHING...
FOR WHERE I BELONG—
?
FOR WHERE I FIT INTO THIS WORLD.
I GUESS HERE IS AS GOOD A PLACE AS ANY.

Violins

JONATHAN KRAVETZ

STAGEPLAY

NOTE: The stage directions for the Hand are only suggestions, but the play works best when the Hand's movements are fully realized: think of the Hand as another character sharing the stage with the Man.

* * *

A middle-aged man wearing an ill-fitting pressed tuxedo stands on a dimly lit stage holding an umbrella. He notices that the rain has stopped, and as he folds the umbrella, his left hand takes the form of a hand puppet. He puts down the umbrella.

The Man turns and sees the Hand glaring at him. He tries to ignore it, but the Hand keeps putting itself in his eye line. Finally, the Man can't take it any longer.

MAN

Why don't you just look for the bus?

HAND

(gravelly voiced, spoken by the same actor) You look for the bus.

MAN

I am looking for the bus.

HAND

What do you need me for, then?

MAN

Let's both look.

HAND

I hate you.

MAN
I'm going to look for the bus, okay?

HAND
Fine.

The Hand continues to stare at the man. After a long uncomfortable silence:

MAN
Let's just look away from each other, how about that?

HAND
You want to look away from each other?

MAN
Yes. I think it would be better for both.

HAND
Good, I'm disgusted, anyway.

The Hand spits and then turns away from the man.

MAN
Why do you hate me?

HAND
I'm looking for the bus, tralala lalala.

MAN
You don't really mean it.

HAND
You want to discuss this now?

MAN
Yes, I want to know.

HAND
I was just going to mind my own business. Avoid each other, isn't that what you wanted?

MAN
I'm a pharmacist. You can't get over it, even now. I'm very happy.

HAND

You're delusional.

MAN

Tell me, then.

HAND

You know why.

MAN

I want you to say it.

HAND

Why don't we just wait for the bus? Go back to daydreaming.

MAN

Don't spare my feelings. Tell me.

HAND

If you force me to say it, there's no …

MAN

Come on, already!

HAND

The violin. Jesus! It was more than just a job—it was our tender, passionate affair. You know why I hate you!

MAN

Now it's out in the open. Now we're getting somewhere. My failed career. Good.

HAND

Unbelievable.

MAN

What?

HAND

Why are you so afraid?

MAN

It's an impossible business.

(following as the hand turns away)

MAN (CON'T)
But you always wanted to ignore that. Most musicians don't stand a chance in that world. It's competitive.

HAND
My god. If you just ...

MAN
Look. Just listen to my side of things for once.

HAND
You blamed me! In the end, that's what galls me.

MAN
That's ridiculous.

HAND
You did.

MAN
No. I ... my family felt ... When I met Donna ...

HAND
I never failed you.

MAN
I never said that you did.

HAND
Those phony visits to the doctor.

MAN
Why torture yourself now?

HAND
Come on!

MAN
You make it sound as if everything is obvious. Life ...

HAND
Why tonight? Why go at all?

MAN
Tonight?

HAND
Albertson was phenomenal. You agree?

MAN
Yes.

HAND
And we never applauded.

MAN
I applauded.

HAND
(laughing and addressing other hand) Look who he's trying to kid?

MAN
He was fair tonight.

HAND
That could have been us! That really could have been!

MAN
He was always more talented than me.

HAND
Donna thought so.

MAN
Don't say that.

HAND
That's why things finally …

MAN
Look, I don't owe you any explanations. I believe it was Einstein who once said …

HAND
Now we get the Einstein quote. Look, it's not too late.

MAN
You're just a piece of meat, Hand. You don't know the pressures …

HAND
I know.

MAN
You can't.

HAND
(whispering in Man's ear) I know. Trust me, I know.

MAN
(tossing hand aside) Don't be ridiculous.

HAND
This is your last chance, I'm warning you.

MAN
You're in no position. Now please, go sit in my pocket if you can't be quiet.

HAND
Donna could have been ours.

MAN
I hate you!

HAND
There!

MAN
You fucking bastard!

HAND
There! You admit it!

MAN
I'll kill you!

HAND
You have.

MAN

Shut up!

HAND

It all could have been ours.

MAN

Shut—up!

HAND

Why did we even attend this concert? At least we could have spoken to them. She looked …

MAN

I said shut up!

HAND

No!

MAN

Bastard!

HAND

Coward!

MAN

Hack!

HAND

Pharmacist!

The man punches the Hand. They struggle together. The man gets the Hand by the "throat" and strangles him.

HAND

Murderer! Murder …!

The Hand breaks free and grabs the man's nose and pulls it until the man fights it off. The Hand grabs him by the collar and they struggle. The Man grabs the Hand and, from his knees, throws the Hand down. The Hand tries to rise, but the Man tosses him down again. The Hand tries one more time and again the Man throws the Hand down. This time the Hand doesn't get up: it sits motionless on the ground. The Man is frightened,

looks around to see if anyone is watching. He touches the Hand, but it doesn't rise. Horrified, he thinks he's killed it. But suddenly, the Hand coughs and gasps and begins slowly to rise. The Man helps it up with his other hand.

MAN

I'm sorry. You just …

The Hand pulls free of the Man and begins looking down the street for the bus.

MAN

Look. It won't happen again. I'm sorry …

HAND

It doesn't matter.

MAN

I'll make it up to you. I'll buy that new cable TV, with the fancy remote control. Eight hundred channels, we'll never have to leave home.

HAND

Fine.

MAN

Really, I just lost my temper. I'm sorry.

HAND

(sadly) Forget it. Just …

MAN

I'm an idiot sometimes.

HAND

Please, just …

MAN

Everything will be just like it was before, honest. You get worked up now and again, it's your way, I understand, it's okay. Really, it's perfectly normal. Everything is going to be fine, you'll see. Just fine.

The Man and the Hand can't look at each other. They stand together awkwardly for a few moments. It slowly begins raining, though the Man doesn't notice.

The Hand begins to go limp; it turns over slowly and rests on the Man's knee. The Man looks on intently, in shock. Then the Man finally notices the rain. He gets up and now the Hand is just a hand. And the Man bends to pick up the umbrella in the now dead Hand and opens it. With the rain pouring down, he stands absentmindedly waiting for the bus.

BLACKOUT.

END OF PLAY.

.

Making Friends Remotely

DAVE OSMUNDSEN

STAGEPLAY

CHARACTERS:

KAYLA	20s/30s, female. Wants a best friend.
JASON	20s/30s, male. Wants a new best friend.
RACHEL	20s/30s, female. Wants a new best friend.

* * *

A video call between JASON, RACHEL, and KAYLA. The three are playing something really close to "Never Have I Ever." JASON has seven fingers up. RACHEL has four. KAYLA has nine.

KAYLA

OK your turn, Jason.

JASON

OK ummm … Never have I ever …

KAYLA

No, it's "Never *Had* I Ever."
We're focusing on things we never got to do in our lives, and will never get to do in our lives ever.

JASON

OK. "Never had I ever …"
Oh my God, I can never come up with anything good!

RACHEL

Think mundane. Seriously, you'd be amazed at some of the basic stuff people have never done.

JASON

OK!
Never had I ever … been to a Walmart.

RACHEL and KAYLA put one finger down each.

RACHEL

Really!?

KAYLA

You'd never been to a Walmart? I used to get my clothes from there all the time.

RACHEL

Same.

JASON

They treated their employees like crap.

KAYLA

Where do you get your clothes now, Rachel?

RACHEL

Thrift stores, mainly. I actually got this jacket from one.

RACHEL displays her jacket to JASON and KAYLA.

JASON

I meant to say, I really like your jacket.

KAYLA

Yeah me too.

RACHEL

Thanks. It's apparently a Burberry. Or a Prada? One of those brands no one used to be able to afford.

JASON shows off his ring.

JASON

My boyfriend got me this promise ring from Tiffany's when they were having their going-out-of-business sale.
He promised that if we got out of this alright on the other side, we would …

RACHEL
How long were you two together?

JASON
Seven years. If he didn't die of the virus, it would be ten.

RACHEL
I'm sorry …
I know we've only known each other for like, twenty minutes, but if you need someone to talk to—

KAYLA
Yeah you can definitely talk to me too. OK. Never had I ever had a girlfriend.

RACHEL puts one finger down. JASON doesn't.

RACHEL
Her name was Chrissy. We weren't together long, though.

KAYLA
Awww.
OK Rachel it's your—

JASON
What happened there, Rachel? If you don't mind my asking.

RACHEL
I actually ended it. I was just coming out as bisexual, and there was a lot I still needed to figure out. I'd only been with guys at that point, so I figured, don't waste her time.

JASON
Part of me wishes I had a girlfriend at some point in my life. I never went through that stage of denial where I dated a girl.

RACHEL
Dude, that's a good thing. It means you never led anyone on.

JASON
At least no women …

RACHEL
True.

KAYLA

OK Rachel, your turn!

RACHEL

Um …
Never had I ever met anyone named Ian.

JASON

That's random.

JASON puts one finger down. KAYLA does too.

RACHEL

Seriously, I never met anyone in my life named Ian.

KAYLA

I knew an Ian who was like, this autistic kid at our school. He was really into economics. I think he ended up working for Google, or … ?

JASON

I hooked up with an Ian. Two, actually.
At the same time.
With the same last name. McNeil.
Legit, that was both their last names.

RACHEL

I love your life, Jason.

JASON

It had its moments.
It's my turn, right? Ugh, I still can't think of anything—

KAYLA

I have one! Never had I ever had a threesome.

JASON puts yet another finger down. RACHEL does too.

RACHEL

I could never get into them.
I have a hard enough time focusing on *one* person.

JASON
My boyfriend and I used to play with other guys all the time. He always liked it more than I did, but we still had some good times.

RACHEL
My best friend and I were going to have a threesome with my ex-boyfriend.

KAYLA
OK Jason if you thought of something—

JASON
Oooh! Spill the tea, Rachel!

RACHEL
It's not really that exciting.
We were in Disney World. This was like, *right* before it closed. We were about to get down, as it were, but then like, I don't know. I guess we all kinda realized how weird the situation would have been.

JASON
Do you wish it happened?

RACHEL
Yeah, actually. Kinda.

JASON
I could never have had sex with my best friend. Mainly because he was straight, but even if he wasn't, I don't know, it would've gotten weird.

RACHEL
That makes sense.
My best friend and I had like, no boundaries. We changed in front of each other, slept in the same beds on vacations, showered together sometimes—

JASON
Sounds like you two were close.

RACHEL
About as close as best friends can get, yeah.
Maybe she was the love of my life and she died too soon for us to realize it.

Pause.

KAYLA

Sooo I actually have another one.
Never had I ever had a friend much less a best friend!

JASON and RACHEL are at a loss. They're not quite sure what to do.

The correct thing, of course, would be to lower their fingers. But they don't want to rub it in KAYLA's face. After a moment, RACHEL gingerly lowers one of her fingers. JASON then lowers one of his.

KAYLA

I'm sorry, was that awkward?

RACHEL

No, not awkward.

JASON

Yeah not awkward at all.

But of course, it was.

KAYLA

OK good. Because like, I had people I was friendly with, but never someone who was like, a *friend*, you know?

JASON

Uh-huh …

KAYLA

There was this one girl, named Tonya, who I thought was my friend, but then one day, she randomly stopped texting me.

RACHEL

I see …

KAYLA

But like, she kept posting pictures of herself on Facebook, and it's like, you have time to post on Facebook, but you don't have time to text me back?
So I march over to her house, even though it was like, the beginning of the quarantine? Like, not when we *had* to stay in at all times, but like, when we were being encouraged to. And I knocked on her door, and she opened it, and I was like, "What gives?"

KAYLA (CON'T)
And then she coughed and closed the door on me. And she died of the virus one week later.

JASON
Damn ...

RACHEL
Wow.

KAYLA
Yeah. So I was all like, "Who needs friends? Especially when they're going to stop texting you, then die behind your back?"
But then, the quarantine got bigger, and I started getting really lonely, and I was like, "Let's try this whole 'friendship' thing again." So to the internet I went, and I typed in "How to make friends on the internet." And the first thing that came up was this Remote Friend Roulette app, so I figured, "Why not?" So I downloaded it, and I bought the Ultra package where you can video chat with up to ten people at once, and I didn't know if it would be worth it but ...
Then I met you two! My first two friends on the Remote Friend Roulette app!
And I know this is a lot, but it just makes me so ... happy! I'm happy that we're talking. Like this. And I'm happy that the two of you were willing to indulge me on "Never Had I Ever."
Even if it's showing me how little I've done with my life.
...
Yeah!

Awkward pause. RACHEL and JASON are not sure how to respond.

KAYLA
Oh actually, can we pause the game for a second? I gotta go put dinner in the oven. I'm having frozen chicken fingers! But I'll be back in like, a few minutes, I swear! Bye new friends!

KAYLA puts her headphones down and steps away. RACHEL and JASON are still online.

RACHEL
Hey, I think you're totally cool, and I wanna keep talking to you, but this Kayla girl is kinda weird.

JASON
Oh my God, I know. I had *no* idea what to say to all that!

RACHEL
Like, I feel really bad for saying this, but … it's kinda no wonder she's never had a friend.

JASON
I didn't wanna say it, but …

RACHEL
This is what happens when you let an app randomly generate who you talk to …

JASON
Like, I really wanna know the algorithms that placed us with *her*.

RACHEL
I know, right?

JASON
OK. How should we tell her?

RACHEL
What do you mean?

JASON
I mean it would be kinda rude to just log off at random, or block her, right?

RACHEL
I mean that's what I was going to do when she got back. Tell her I'm having computer trouble or something.

JASON
OK, but like …
That's not kinda … You know …

RACHEL
No. It's not. Honestly, if I'm going to spend the next forever quarantined, I want to at least spend it with cool people. Not weirdos who clearly can't function off the internet.

JASON
I think we should just be honest with her.

RACHEL
It's an app. Who's honest on an app?

JASON
When I first messaged my boyfriend on an app, I was honest with him. I told him he was really cute, and it led to him being the love of my life.

RACHEL
OK, but that was different. That was for dating.

JASON
Technically it was for hookups, but …

RACHEL
Whatever. Just …
Alright. I guess there's no other choice …

JASON
We'll just tell her she seems really nice, we hope she has good luck finding new friends, but that this just isn't working out. That sound good?

RACHEL
Sounds good to me.

KAYLA reenters and puts her headphones back on.

KAYLA
Sorry, I got a little distracted. My pet hamster needed to be let out of his cage for a bit, so I did. He's crawling around here somewhere … wanna meet him? His name is Fuzzle Wuzzles.

RACHEL
That's OK. I'm … allergic to hamsters.

KAYLA
You can't have an allergic reaction to a hamster through a screen, silly! Now let's see, where could he—

JASON
Actually, I have another call I need to make, so …

RACHEL
Yeah, I actually have to make dinner myself, so …

KAYLA stops looking for Fuzzle Wuzzles.

KAYLA
OK. Um …
Do you two want to text? I could give you my number, and we could …

JASON
Um … yeah, if you want.
But I'm like, really busy, so …

RACHEL
Yeah, I'm like, the worst possible texter, so if I don't respond to you right away …

KAYLA
Oh. OK …
I was just … thinking …
If this quarantine ever lets up …
If the airports ever start running again … we could meet in person.
Like, I could have you two over my house. Seriously, I have plenty of room. And we can go into the city, see some shows, do some sightseeing, at least whatever sightseeing we can …
I think that could be really nice.

JASON
Yeah …

RACHEL
Definitely …

KAYLA
But … I'm guessing this isn't working out, huh? I feel like you two are …
You two seem like you have a lot in common, so …
I mean it's OK if you don't like me. But it's more like …
We don't know how much longer we'll all have on this planet together. It would be nice to at least spend it with people …
And maybe look forward to meeting them in person … And not be afraid of sharing too much …
(Sighs)
Ah, well.
Back to the Remote Friend Roulette, I guess …
Thanks for the chat, you two. I really enjoyed it.

KAYLA signs off. JASON and RACHEL look at each other (through their screens).

JASON
Well then.

RACHEL
We'll laugh about this one day. Right?

JASON
Yeah.

A pause. Then, RACHEL laughs. JASON then laughs, too.

RACHEL
"Friends who won't die behind your back." Like, WTF???

JASON
I know.

RACHEL
It's weird, but … I kinda hope she finds a best friend.

JASON
Yeah. I do too.

RACHEL
Sucks that it can't be us, though.

JASON
Mm …

JASON shrugs.

RACHEL
"You know, I think this is the start of a beautiful friendship."

JASON
I never saw that movie.

RACHEL
Wait, seriously? You haven't?

JASON
Nope. Just never got around to watching it.

RACHEL
Well, I may or may not have it in my digital library. We can totally have a New Friend movie night.

JASON
That … would be great.

RACHEL
Maybe if the quarantine ever ends, we can watch it on my comically large flat-screen TV. Eat popcorn, and Twizzlers, and we can bake cookies, drink wine, smoke weed …

JASON
One day. Yeah.
That really sounds great.

RACHEL and JASON smile at each other.

BLACKOUT.

END OF PLAY.

Leo and Friends

AMALIA OLIVA ROJAS

STAGEPLAY (EXCERPT) • DREAMING OUT LOUD CONTRIBUTOR

CHARACTERS:	LEO	Galileo Galilei is invested in River's journey but is naive to cultural differences.
	NICK/COLUMBUS	Niccolò Machiavelli and Columbus are portrayed by the same actor. They are all divas and vicious in their pursuit of what they want the most, to be River.
	MIKE/TIME	Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni and Tim are portrayed by the same actor. These characters are all sympathetic and sassy. Both characters are queer.
	RIVER/MARIA	An Afro-Latinx playwright and Columbus' captured inmate portrayed by the same actor. Both characters are resistant and hopeful.
SETTING:	Inside River's subconscious mind also known as "purgatory" and a writer's room.	
TIME:	Currently. But time is a social construct. Years, minutes, centuries don't exist in the subconscious mind.	
NOTES:	The pace in this play is quick; whenever there is a "/" it means the actors should cut each other off without hesitation. Characters are double-casted intentionally.	

* * *

At rise: *Two long benches are in the middle of a beautiful gray room with neon wall art that reads "Purgatory or Where Dreams Come to Die." A toy chest is beneath one of the benches. On the right, there is a gate entrance.*

The gate is made out of colorful stained glass—it's shiny, godly. "Don't Let Me Get Me" by P!nk plays faintly and then …

NICK

What's wrong?
Why aren't you spilling over with facts?
Oh, I know. They have a parade for me.
Every year.
Hooray for Machiavelli!
Hooray!

RIVER

No. Actually that would be Columbus.

LEO

Of course, he discovered Puerto Rico/

RIVER looks directly into LEO.

RIVER

NO!
No, he did not.
He was an idiot.
Had no idea what he was doing.
He took us and called us his.
He killed anyone in the way of what he wanted.
You think my ancestors welcomed him?

LEO

But he was the one that placed Puerto Rico on a map/

Quick light switch. Ocean waves are heard. Big ships with big black crosses appear. An ocean is seen. The actors portraying NICK, MIKE, and RIVER remain on stage, GALILEO steps aside and watches. COLUMBUS, played by NICK, is at the head of the ship. He looks at his map and then through his binoculars.

COLUMBUS

Hey Tim?

TIM

Yes, Boss.

COLUMBUS

Come here.
I need your help.

TIM, played by MIKE, joins him.

TIM

You need me to write for you again, Boss?

COLUMBUS

No.
Tell me.
What do you see over there?

TIM takes the binoculars. He cleans them and looks ahead.

TIM

I don't see anything, Boss.
Just water.

COLUMBUS

It was right there.
A small island.

TIM

It was a dirt speck.
I just cleaned it.

TIM laughs.

COLUMBUS

OH MAN!
I thought I had finally saw something.

Columbus looks at his map.

COLUMBUS

Look Tim, according to this …
We should be coming close.

COLUMBUS takes out his compass. He holds high as if he was looking for phone reception.

TIM

Boss?

COLUMBUS

Remind me Tim to beat up Manolo.
I think he sold me a broken compass again—

TIM

Boss, you were holding the map upside down.

COLUMBUS

Oh.

He puts his compass away and flips the map over.
He looks away and then ahead dramatically.

COLUMBUS

Tim, we should be near.

TIM

It's coming up.

COLUMBUS

Ask the men to begin to prepare the weapons.

TIM

All of them?

COLUMBUS

All of them.
We will not hold back.
I don't know about you Tim,
but I'm feeling lucky!
I'm feeling like we're going to be partying it up tonight.

TIM

In gold?
Lots of it?

COLUMBUS

Gold.
Pearls.
Spices.

COLUMBUS (CON'T)

All of it.
Alas, it will all be ours.
Because whatever Columbus sees, Columbus gets.
Finally! This will be my big break!

TIM

You'll be known forever—

COLUMBUS

And forever—

TIM

And ever.

COLUMBUS

People will scream out my name/

TIM

Like "Columbus! Columbus! Give us an autograph!"

COLUMBUS

YES! And they'll make statues of me!

TIM

Oh my god, YES!

COLUMBUS

I'm going to become so famous I'm going to have a national holiday.

TIM

What?!

COLUMBUS

Dream big, Tim. Always dream big and don't forget to … manifest!

TIM

Manifest! Yes of course manifest!

MARIA played by RIVER runs up to Columbus.

MARIA

Jefe! Jefe! Jefe!

COLUMBUS

Tim.

TIM stands between MARIA and COLUMBUS.

TIM

What do you want?

MARIA

We see an island!
We see an island approaching.

TIM

Where?

MARIA points ahead. COLUMBUS looks through his binoculars.

COLUMBUS

YES!
There it is.
There it is.
Woman go tell everyone to begin getting ready for arrival.

MARIA nods and leaves.

TIM

It's happening.
It's really happening.
The enchanted island is real!

COLUMBUS and TIME squeal and jump together in excitement.

COLUMBUS

Get ready Tim …
Get ready for a lifetime of fame.

TIM nods in agreement. COLUMBUS dramatically looks ahead again. Light switch. RIVER is seen sitting next to LEO.

LEO

That is why you know his name, River.
Tell me why do you think you're stuck here?

RIVER
Maybe I'm looking for something—
I want to know the secret to becoming a legend.

LEO
Is there more?
You saw how some legends are born.

RIVER
Galileo, that's not how you are remembered.
It's different.
It's why I asked you and not Nick.

NICK laughs.

RIVER
Sometimes I wish I was alive when you were all around.

LEO
Why, River?

NICK
Think of the progress the world has made—would you have wanted to miss out?

RIVER
No.
But—
I just wish—

NICK
You wish you could … punch Christopher Columbus. Protect Puerto Rico.
But then who would have discovered Puerto Rico, if not him. You?

RIVER
You can be a legend without being a condescending jerk—

They all chuckle.

MIKE
Yeah, okay.

LEO
I do have some regret picking my studies over …

LEO (CON'T)

Over my own children.
Over my own family.
I didn't slow down even for them.
You only love me, River, because my only crime to YOU was that I was successful.
My trajectory screamed, look up! We're not alone.
Even if I was alone on the inside.
But that doesn't matter. My studies paid off and they led the way towards space.
And … you know what?
My regrets do not haunt me.
If I had a chance to fix, to take them back, I am not sure I would.
There's no point now.
I am who I am.
I did what I needed to do.
So you, yours, years, centuries from now would be able to know my name.

NICK

Oh no, Galileo.
Seems to me your little groupie now knows who you are.
Hey River, if you need a real idol, I'm here for you.

RIVER

And you, Mike?
Do you have any regrets you'd like to tell me about?
'Cause apparently, we're all confessing now.

MIKE

Regrets of what?

NICK

Your work.
Your words.
Your actions.

MIKE

I …

RIVER

That's a hard thing to ask. I'm sorry.

MIKE

Leo has a point. Regretting things won't change anything.

MIKE blushes and tucks his hair behind his ear. He has been naughty.

MIKE

I … uh … almost stole someone's man?
But I didn't—we just had a mutual platonic thing.

RIVER

CEO of home-wrecking. Great!

MIKE

Yeah, well, there you go.
I loved him. He was like one of my muses.
I'm sure I was like super annoying and not nice to people.
I definitely didn't believe any of what I painted for the church.
But you know, I had to make a living and the attention was nice.
I did what I had to do.

NICK

So, you were also a hungry selfish power-seeking jerk?
Nice. I knew the three of us were friends for a reason.

LEO

SHUT UP NICK.
JUST SHUT UP.

NICK

WOW, you're super obsessive, Leo.
Why are you so obsessed with me and what I'm doing?
You're always trying to shut me up or boss me around.

LEO

OBSESSED WITH YOU?

NICK

Yeah!
I really don't appreciate it.
Seriously, and quite frankly, I'm done talking to all of you.

MIKE

You're the biggest jerk out of all of us, Nick.
You're the one who started the whole conversation.

NICK

As a way of helping River out.
ACTUALLY, I know what I'll do.
I'm going to go look for this Angel.
I'm tired of this poser amongst us.
So weak.
I'm going to go find you the answer to waking up.
So, you can wake up and go be a pushover.
A nobody.

NICK straightens up and walks towards the gate.

RIVER

History is right about you, Niccolò.

NICK

Marvelous, good-looking, kindhearted, please go on.

RIVER

Sneaky. Cunning.
You are as your name is, Machiavellian.

NICK

Oh boo-hoo.
I've NEVER denied who I was and who I am. Or how I reached success.
Have fun feeling sorry for yourselves, losers.

NICK heads inside the gate. Silence.

MIKE

That guy is something else.

LEO

Aren't we all?

BLACKOUT.

END OF EXCERPT.

The Hungry

EMILY ALTMAN


No!
End.

TABBS: Teacher Assessment of Burnout and Survival Skills

MARY-PAT BUSS

EXPERIMENTAL

1. You have three minutes until the bell rings to start the school day. Usually you are in your classroom setting up at this point, but today, someone broke the copier again. Creating a class set of instructions became a fifteen-minute waiting game of stress while you begged for emergency copies in the front office. Plus, you left your coffee on your desk. As you power walk down the hallway to your classroom, you will pass a restroom.

    a) Stop at the restroom. Stare at it. Walk a few steps. Backtrack. Panic. Continue on. Feel instant regret.
    b) Pass the restroom. You have only three minutes and your bladder is impervious to time at this point.
    c) Stop and take your sweet time. There is no way in hell you're getting another UTI because holding it for hours comes with heavy consequences. Receive a talking-to from your administrative evaluator for starting class late.
    d) Speed pee. Veteran teachers acquire this skill over the years. Hold your stack of copies in your teeth and hope the students do not notice the marks when you hand the papers out in a few minutes.

2. You observe two students locked in a passionate embrace in the hallway. Typically, you overlook a short kiss, but this is not short. In fact, you're pretty sure there is tongue involved, and upon closer inspection—Oh! Oh no! Pelvic movement. DISASTER.

    a) Suffer temporary blindness. You should have known better than to venture out of your classroom. Cover your eyes. Run inside.
    b) Turn around and pretend you saw nothing. Not your problem! Adopt tunnel vision as a general rule while in the hallways from here on out.
    c) Shame them publicly. "Sweet Jesus, no one wants to see that! Put your tongues away and think about what you've done. Go to class." Instantly regret telling them to think about what they've done and go to class yourself.

d) Stop reluctantly. You are the authority here. Tell the students their behavior is inappropriate. Watch with glacial patience as the pair extricate themselves from one another. Feel old.

3. You teach sixteen-year-olds. You have teenager down to a science. You speak teenager, read teenager, and reason with teenagers. In fact, sometimes the teenagers treat you more like one of them than a teacher. As a result, your classroom after school has somehow become the meeting ground for stinky football players looking to avoid practice drills in the name of "tutoring." You do teach these kids but the smell is ridiculous, and so is the drain on your time.

    a) Count your blessings. There are worse things than having your students feel comfortable around you. Put those kids to work. Purchase multiple scent diffusers and space them strategically throughout the classroom. Lysol everything.
    b) Hide. Close your door after school, lock it, and turn the lights off. Sit on the floor under your desk and grade by the light of your cell phone. Ignore the knocks of your fellow teachers and students alike. Oh, and Lysol everything.
    c) Let the kids come in, try to get them focused on something, and quietly enjoy their conversations as you attempt to work. When did they start calling you "Mom"? When do you start accepting it? Why fight? Hope that your spouse will understand why you stayed late again. Oh, and demand they Lysol everything themselves before they leave as you toss the spare deodorant kept in your desk for this exclusive purpose their way.
    d) Hold your breath, point them out the door, and ignore their protests. Your room is not a playground and you already have enough to handle. So what if they think you are mean? Lysol everything.

4. It's the holidays, and you are the recipient of numerous baked goods from well-intentioned students. You appreciate the gesture, but as each hand-baked gift is delivered, children stare at you with expectant eyes. They want to see you try it, and they want to know you enjoyed the gift. They will not leave satisfied until you have eaten at least a little.

    a) Temper your internal cries of protest. Take the risk and eat the baked goods. Smile at the student while ejecting an exaggerated, "Mmm!" Make the child happy, because … well, it is actually good. All of your pants are yoga pants in disguise at this point anyway.
    b) Thank the student graciously and tell them you cannot wait to try it but will instead wait until you are home where you can portion out this no doubt amazing, and not in any way undercooked, *something* with your family. Share the scrumptious snack in the faculty room.

c) Scarf that sucker down. You have officially reached your tipping point; your high school students are coloring (they are never more content than when they are encouraged to revert back to age five); you're fairly confident at least two students are skipping class, and you have played the same movie on repeat for the last four periods as you frantically try to catch up on grading. You need this.
d) Stay firm. You promised yourself that you would not break, and this will be the year that you do not gain ten pounds before the holidays begin. You are a pillar of carb-denying strength.

5. To accomodate teenage hormones and school dress codes, you dress at least twenty years older than other people your age. Over the years, your closet has gradually filled with spirit shirts, unflattering crew neck business casual wear, and a slew of pants with as much stretch as possible paired with orthopaedic shoes. Why then are you conducting a writing conference with a student that is intent on staring at your chest?

a) Clear your throat and redirect the student's attention. Your eyes are up here. Provide the student with a few pointers for their paper and terminate the conference early. Teachers are under fire for having inappropriate relationships with students, but little protection is provided for teachers sexually harassed by students. Shower the moment you arrive home.
b) Pretend you do not notice. As a teacher, telling the child to stop looking could shut the child down, upset them, and cause their parents to report you because surely you did something to provoke the kid's interest. Maybe you should just be a nun. They have more job security.
c) Laugh the awkward moment off with your teacher friends. They all deal with this behavior regularly, too; it goes with the job description. So what if you have to leave your door open whenever any child wants to speak with you privately? So what if this behavior means you will institute a non-individualized group conference policy from here on out? So what if you did nothing to encourage it? So what if you're uncomfortable? *That's funny, right?*
d) Let the student stare. You are numb at this point. He could probably sexualize a brick wall. Continue on as if you do not notice. You stopped caring about what happens in this place a while ago. Dispense essay advice over the kid's head and move on to the next one.

6. You conduct an exercise with your Creative Writing class called, "If You Really Knew Me." This exercise is emotional, but it brings students together and teaches them to judge one another less while learning to appreciate each other's efforts more. It's needed, but the kids cry. They share dark things. You warn the school counselors ahead of time. Early in the exercise, a student begins to cry and comes to you, sinks to the ground, rests their head on your knee, and sobs. The class continues working silently, writing. Ambient music plays so no one hears them. How should you proceed?

a) Let the child cry on your knee. You want to hug them and ask them what is wrong, but you know you can't hug a student. In fact, you shouldn't let them touch you at all. If an assistant principal walks in, this scene will look bad. But the kid is so sad; you cannot bring yourself to send them away. So you let them hiccup with their head on your knee and watch the door in fear.
b) Smile at them in sympathy, get them some tissues, and tell them that if they need a minute to get some air in the hallway that's okay. Tell them they should see their counselor. Watch them blink at you with wide, teary eyes. Why are you sending them away? Because you have to, you think. Because you are not their mother. Because liability is a terrible thing that protects with unfeeling viciousness.
c) Allow the mother in you to take over. You have adopted "reckless" teacher behavior. Damn the rules. You are human. They are human. Since when is humanity a sin? Hug the child. If this were your kid, you'd want them to feel comforted. Hold their hand and let them cry themself out. Ignore your spouse when you go home emotionally spent and fall asleep on the couch.
d) Distance yourself fast. "Whoa there kiddo, that's a little close." You'd rather be a bitch than get arrested. At some point in your career it became essential to put this wall up. You built it out of necessity, but sometimes you wonder if you accidentally shut your soul up in there, too. Oh well. Let the kid's parents handle it.

7. You have explained to your classes that you are required to report any worrisome information, but despite knowing this fact, kids voice their agonies. Chris, a frequent flyer in your classroom, has taken to coming to you after school for tutoring and "just to talk." They are bright, funny, and intelligent, and you grow to enjoy their company. When they tell you they are fascinated by the idea of killing themselves one afternoon, it is a total surprise. You do not have the option of staying quiet and the counselors have gone home for the day. Do you …

a) Ask another teacher to watch your tutorials and make a call to Chris's parent. Listen as the parent breaks down and sobs over the phone. Offer a comforting word between their hiccupped sharing. "I thought we were past this." You are not a psychologist and legalities mean you cannot recommend treatment or suggest ideas. Quietly tell them you hope it gets better.
b) Listen to Chris as they tell you this news and allow them to talk. When they finish telling you about these feelings, let them know how much you appreciate that they are comfortable enough with you to share, and explain to them that you are concerned for their welfare. Encourage them to confide with their parents that evening. Write the counselors an email and notify their assistant principal. Let the situation leave your hands.

c) Give Chris something to do at their desk and email the assistant principal on duty. You want to help, but for all of your training, nothing prepares a person to talk someone off the ledge. You hate violating the child's trust like this, but there is no other choice. Accept that Chris will never speak to you again as you share their personal confidences with the administration. Meet the hurt eyes of the child as they are led out of your classroom.
d) Damn it, you wish you did not know this information. English teachers are the emotional dumping ground for student turmoil; there is a new one every week. Cut Chris off and tell them you have to share this information with their counselor, their AP, and their parents. Word for word. All of it. Watch as the student begs you not to talk to anyone. Explain that you must. Strangle your repressed emotions. Remain calm. Detached. Indifferent.

8. Arrive for your annual Professional Development and Appraisal System evaluation (PDAS—teachers *love* acronyms) with your assigned administrator. This meeting is your only official opportunity to prove your worth. It's almost the end of the teaching year, which means it is also testing season and printing time for the school literary magazine, another one of your responsibilities. You have precious little energy left in reserve. Attempt to look at ease as you listen to your evaluator discuss your performance. Receive a stunning compliment. "You are a good teacher." How do you react?

a) Beam. Creating a three-inch binder documenting your parent correspondence, lesson plans, team contributions, and extracurricular positions has paid off! Feel validated and exit your meeting in a rush. You have another class to teach, haven't eaten yet today, and need to run by the office to check your box. Regret wearing heels and remind yourself to buy pants with more stretch when you get your next paycheck.
b) Smile and nod. You know what you are doing and you deserve this acknowledgement. Feel a little less special when your evaluator describes your work as "proficient" in all categories. You deserve "exceeds expectations" but know better than to push. Full recognition takes an act of God and at least you got a compliment this year. Tell yourself you are content with these results.
c) Cry. Struggle to hold in the tears and utterly fail. Compliments are few and far between in this field. Teaching is a joyful heartbreak; you love it, but it is hard. Mortified, apologize to your evaluator as they hand you a box of tissues. Your time with administrators is typically spent hearing what not to do or what you have done wrong. Moments of praise are exceedingly rare, and a piece of the precarious balance you keep between the teacher and heart hidden inside your chest is unsettled. Say thank you, avoid eye contact, and leave the room as soon as possible.
d) Nod curtly. You have things to do and places to be, plus you've been in the classroom at least twice as long as the person sitting across the desk from you.

When your administrator marks you "proficient," correct them. Explain how you have exceeded expectations. Expect nothing. You know better. Ask if the meeting is over yet. Don't they know you need to use the restroom?

9. As the sole Creative Writing teacher, the expectation is that you will produce a literary magazine by the end of the school year. You continue to teach regular classes and must operate magazine demands after school. Often, these additional responsibilities amount to late nights, and you receive no extra pay for the additional hours. You are tired, stressed, and feel unappreciated. You formally request compensation for your added responsibilities. The director of instruction arranges a meeting with you to discuss it.

    a) Sit in an uncomfortable office chair and feel sorry for the director of instruction as he is forced to relay the news that you will receive none of the options you listed as possibilities in your request: no professional development hours, no extra off period, no monetary stipend. He looks pained; delivering news like this is not his job, but clearly, the principal did not deem your concerns worthy of his time. Leave his office with a smile on your face so no one knows you're upset and walk to your classroom. Gather your purse and car keys. Crumple once you close the door to your vehicle, and cry yourself home. How will you tell your spouse?
    b) Resign yourself to the lack of compensation and accept your fate. You knew better than to expect anything because teachers go unrewarded all the time. It is part of the job. You tried and failed; hide your disappointment and keep going. The job is about the kids, not you. Try not to grow bitter as you win the school awards but receive nothing tangible to show for it.
    c) Get fucking angry. Coaches receive a stipend for extra hours. Band gets a stipend. Theater gets a stipend. Why shouldn't you? Oh, that's right. Those are male-dominated fields that have nothing to do with academics. Why compensate a woman teaching an academically geared elective?
    d) Feel all of the above. That night, lay in bed awake until the early hours of the morning. Know that you cannot do this anymore. Know that you have sacrificed time with your family, spouse, and friends for work. Know that the antidepressants you started taking a few years into teaching just aren't cutting it anymore. Know that you have lost a vital part of yourself to your job. Know that you must move on, but who will want a dried-up husk of an educator that just couldn't cut it? After all, you do get summers off.

TABBS Answer Key

Each "A" answer = 1 point
Each "B" answer = 2 points
Each "C" answer = 3 points
Each "D" answer = 4 points

9–15 points: Burnout Level 1
Aww, you're new to this, aren't you? You still think you can make a difference. Hold onto that feeling. It is sacred. The experience of teaching is an agonizing bliss. It will hurt and heal, but it will burn up your life if you let it. Keep your work and personal world separate. Find a way to stay whole. Also, locate the nearest bathroom.

16–22 points: Burnout Level 2
Someone drank the Kool-Aid. You've been teaching a few years and you've learned the best choice is the safe choice. But is it safe for you, the students, or that ever-pressing fear that you'll get sued for doing your job? Is it the quality of education that matters or is it the quantity of dollar bills in a stranger's pocket?

23–29 points: Burnout Level 3
You're either unhinged or a genius. It's hard to tell, and that is the beauty of being the weird teacher. Yeah, you can handle the students; it's the adults you have to watch out for. Take care deciding when and where to skirt the line … unless we're talking about the end of semester happy hour and "Livin' on a Prayer" is playing. That's your time to shine, baby.

30–36 points: Burnout Level 4
Bitter, party of one. Teaching is not your calling … or was it once and the years were just too hard? You have both failed and aced this quiz. Your choices guarantee survival in the wasteland that can be public education, but is there anything else left of you worth salvaging when the final bell rings?

My Name Is Sami

DANIELA LUCATO

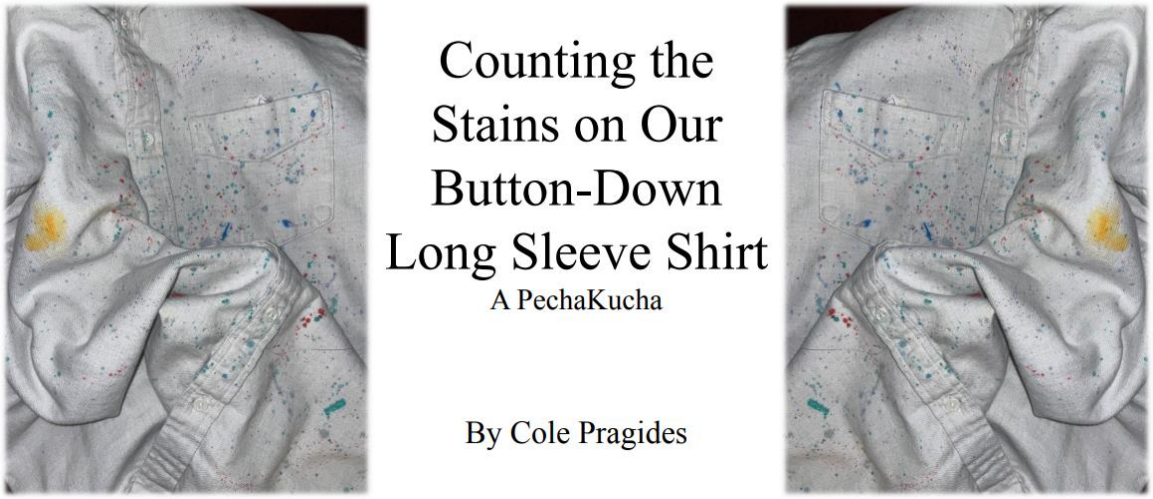
EXPERIMENTAL FILM

CLICK TO WATCH

Counting the Stains on Our Button-Down Long-Sleeve Shirt

COLE PRAGIDES

EXPERIMENTAL PECHAKUCHA



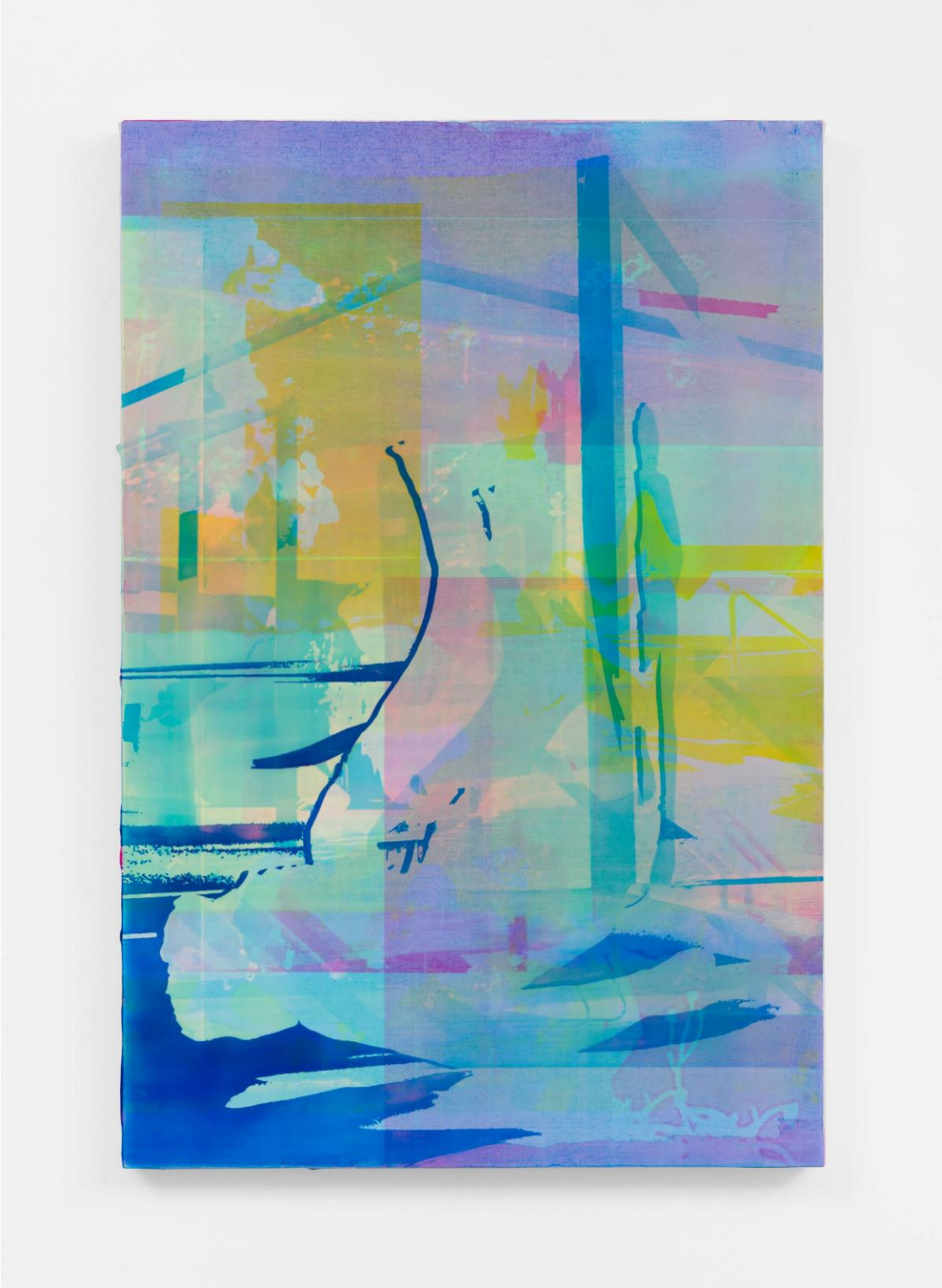
CLICK TO VIEW

The Peripheries of Love

ZOE WALSH

VISUAL ART

A dude till dawn, 2020. Acrylic on canvas-wrapped panel, 49 x 97 inches



Someone waiting, 2020. Acrylic on canvas-wrapped panel, 30 x 20 inches

Prism and Lens, 2019. Acrylic on canvas-wrapped panel, 48 x 48 inches

The shape of movement comes before the act, 2020. Acrylic on canvas-wrapped panel, 48 x 72 inches

An Interview with Natashia Deón

Natashia Deón is a force.

She's a writer with a debut novel, *Grace*, that was named a Best Book by *The New York Times* and essays published by the *Times*, *Buzzfeed*, and elsewhere.

She's a practicing criminal attorney.

She's the literary impresario behind the Dirty Laundry Lit, The Table, and Release Series reading events in Los Angeles.

She's a college professor at UCLA and Antioch.

She's the founder and CEO of Redeemed, an initiative that pairs professional writers and lawyers with clients to help clear criminal records, and the author of #EndArrestExecutions, a proposed law that aims to prevent police officers from carrying out the death penalty on untried civilians.

She's a wife and mother of two.

And in the midst of all of that, Natashia's second novel, *The Perishing*—about a young Black woman in 1930s Los Angeles who comes to believe she is immortal—will be released in November by Counterpoint Press.

Expo Editor Annlee Ellingson connected with Natashia via video chat to talk about her new book, the ways her writing informs her advocacy and vice versa, and what role "hunger" plays in her work.

Exposition Review: You are a writer, a lawyer, a teacher, a founder—when people ask you what you do, what do you say?

Natashia Deón: That's such a great question, because I'm in the middle of an experiment. I'm trying to figure out who I am in the world differently. So when people ask me what I do, I'll say, "I'm a mom," and then I'll stop. Or, "I'm a writer," and then I'll stop. They can mean a lot of different things. I just want to feel what it is like to not have any labels.

ER: What came first, writing or the law?

ND: Writing.

ER: How long have you been writing—since childhood?

ND: Yes, I've always written since I can remember. I used to make games and things like that [for] my little sister who was a few years younger than me and for my brother, my neighbors. I've always written stories.

My parents are from Alabama, so when they came to L.A. in the Great Migration, it was more about "You're going to be a doctor or a lawyer or an engineer." Never did I think that I would have an opportunity or have a life as a writer. Who does that? Why would they do that? What about—how do you make money? It was especially important because of the sacrifices [my parents] were making, so I never thought in a hundred years that I would actually be a writer.

Writing is something that came, but I chose law because I could write. It's a profession that allows you to write and you have to write well and it has to be believable.

ER: You started out as a corporate lawyer. Now you're a criminal attorney. What motivated that transition?

ND: I was just sort of—what's the best word? I think "burned out." "Disenchanted" was the word. I was disenchanted with the law. When I went to law school, I was one of those people [who thought,] "I'm going to change the world! I'm going to show up when people need me on the street!" You know, all these things that I thought it was.

ER: What does your practice look like today?

ND: I have my own individual practice where I work with nonprofits, setting up nonprofits, any type of trademark issues—things that are related to small businesses.

I also founded Redeemed, which is a nonprofit that pairs professional writers with people who've had contact with the criminal justice system or who are currently incarcerated. Some of them I do represent in court arguing for expungements or second chances to get them out of prison, to seal records so that they can get their rights back, because you lose constitutional rights when you're convicted of a felony, and it's hard to get a job, or housing, for that matter, with a background like that.

So that's the kind of work that I do—very on-the-ground, small things that don't make a lot of money. I've been paid in tamales, and Southern California Edison does not accept them, I can tell you that.

ER: I'm glad you brought up Redeemed, which offers an opportunity for writers to use their skills for a cause that they care about. What motivated you to found this nonprofit?

ND: There's a lot of different things, but I guess the closest to the birth of Redeemed was that I was representing somebody and I won. It was a really hard case, and I just remember not being—not extending enough compassion for my client. I think that was because this is somebody who was rich, who wasn't marginalized in any way, he wasn't a woman—all the things, the boxes that I check that really make me passionate, he didn't have. Like, he could afford to pay me. So in the moment where I could have been more supportive, I chose not to.

It breaks my heart to think of that now, because everyone who has contact with the criminal justice system is a trauma. I know that I wasn't there for him the way I should have been for reasons that I came up with. I still won, I still did the job, I was still professional, but I wasn't who I needed to be. And part of that was writing the affidavit, the personal story. Pretty much after so many calls, I thought, "You know what? I have the hard part. All you have to do is tell the story of the worst day of your life," not even knowing that's basically what I was saying.

So I founded Redeemed because no one can tell a story the way professional writers can. For all of us who write, every time we write a character or tell a story, we are a lawyer for our characters who don't exist, or who don't exist as they actually are. We're telling a version of their story, and we're asking people to believe it. All of us have to be convincing lawyers for our characters, for our stories, whether they're fictional or real, even if we're writing stories about ourselves.

ER: Redeemed recently expanded with Clemency Project—can you share more about that?

ND: It's really helping people who have been incarcerated for a very long time. It's not like the Innocence Project—they did it. But it's saying, is the punishment right for their crime? Should they be in prison for seventeen years, twenty years? Even if they should be—say it was a murder—is this something they did at seventeen? Are they still the same person at fifty? What's the threat?

It's just trying to see the humanity in people. None of us want to be judged by the worst thing we've ever done, and that's what happens when you go to prison. When you're in prison, you're known for your crime, and a lot of times when you come out, you're still known for it. All of us have done something that was illegal, that we shouldn't have done, we would never do again. It's just human nature.

For me when I look at them, I see people who are being labeled by the worst thing they have ever done, and they have to carry that burden for the rest of their lives, whether they're in or out. And I think as a civilized society, we can decide that if they've worked hard and they've earned it and they show evidence of their reform, that we should be giving them second chances.

ER: What can you share—statistically or anecdotally—about the success of Redeemed so far?

ND: We formed in 2018, [and at] the end of 2019 we took our first twenty-five cases. We won all but one. One is still pending because Covid hit, but a lot of cases were delayed because of Covid—courts were shut down—and we just started taking new cases. It's slow. We took only three new ones since we reopened at the beginning of the year, and we're just sort of walking through everything. We can't go into prisons to do the Clemency Project work, so everything is snail mail. The shutdown has really impacted the way that

we work, the way we can meet, train volunteers, and things like that. But so far we're winning.

ER: And then you also started the hashtag #EndArrestExecutions. Can you talk about that project?

ND: Right after I think it was George Floyd—it was one of the murders that happened during 2020—and I was just really grieving. I [wrote] a new law basically that said police officers cannot execute civilians who haven't been tried or convicted of a crime, and usually their crimes wouldn't result in the death penalty. That's what we're allowing officers to do. Right now it's basically an HR issue—it's not a criminal one. So when people say, "What happened? Why aren't they being convicted of murder?" [it's] because there's really not a law for officers to be convicted. That's why you see settlements and not murder convictions.

#EndArrestExecutions says that you can't executive the death penalty on an untried civilian. It was picked up by the National Lawyers Guild. With a team of five women lawyers, [and] one guy lawyer, we basically drafted laws to amend current California law which would make police officers subject to first degree murder and murder charges for killing someone, especially for an infraction like a taillight is out or a misdemeanor.

ER: I still get chills remembering the reading you put together for bridgette bianca's poetry collection be/trouble, because it was a release party. It was a big old party with an emcee and a DJ and a rowdy crowd. It was so fun! And when I was standing in line to get my book signed, the emcee announced from the stage that the book had sold out, and bridgette collapsed on her signing table. She was so moved by all the love that you created.

ND: No one celebrates us when we get older. You know, it's like we need to have a party and celebrate each other.

ER: What motivated you to start the Dirty Laundry Lit, The Table and the Release Series readings?

ND: Before I had a book and I just loved authors, I had just come back from Bread Loaf, and I met my favorite author ever. And I was just like, "Oh, my gosh! She's going to be in L.A. Her book just came out. It's going to be so packed! We've got to get there an hour early so we can get a seat!" It was at Book Soup, so it was that gauntlet of two seats all the way back. When we got there, no one was there. I put my jacket and everything on the chairs. And then when it got [to be] time, no one was there.

I remember my heart was so broken. I was like, "This woman has spent the last seven years probably," which is the average length of time it takes to write a book—five to

seven—"and nobody's here to see it. This should never happen to any writer, especially a writer as talented as her."

So I started Dirty Laundry thinking, We're going to make it a party. You don't even have to know who they are. We're just going to have a party. It's going to be fun. We're going to celebrate that they've done it, that they've gotten their book past this imaginary finish line. Because we don't get those kind of celebrations, and I wanted whoever was on the stage to know that we're happy they're there, we know how hard it is, and we're all supporting you. That's L.A. to me. That's the L.A. writing community. We have the best writing community in the world, as far as I'm concerned.

ER: Let's talk about your second novel coming out later this year,* The Perishing. *What inspired this story?

ND: A dream. *Grace* started with a daydream. This one started with a dream and a memory, and I didn't know what it was about. I had a dream about the Chinese massacre in [1871]. I didn't know that's what it was about. I actually was a character in the dream, and I was dating someone who was married, and he was killed. He was Chinese. And it was so real to me that when I woke up I just started … doing a Google search. It was several Chinese people that were killed, and I knew it was L.A., and I knew it was the 1800s, and then I researched it and sure enough, there was a Chinese massacre, and I started to write a story about this.

And then I went to a Lutheran Christian school in L.A., and my best friend at that time, her name was Esther, and she was Chinese. I don't know what happened to her, but I remember we would just be together. She just came to my mind, and I knew that I was going to write about her, or my imagined version of this Black girl and this Chinese girl in L.A., and a lot of the things that were happening in the 1930s are happening right now, including the massacre of Asian women in Atlanta.

ER: We've talked about your law practice and your advocacy work and your writing and the reading series. Is there a common theme that has emerged across all of these things?

ND: I would probably say just trying to connect every gift that I feel God has given me to serve humanity. That's what I want to do. … That's why I started Redeemed. I wanted to serve better. I guess that's the theme. I always wish I had a better answer. But for me it's just that simple. I don't intend to do it. I don't want to be known for it. It's just what happens. And it's an honor that anyone would even care what I'm doing because for me it's just the right thing for me in that time.

ER: The theme of* Exposition Review*'s new issue is "Hunger." Does that idea resonate with any of your creative or advocacy work?

ND: Yeah, absolutely. First I think of Roxane Gay's book. I think of actually being hungry. But I also think spiritually, coming from a spiritual place, I hunger and thirst for righteousness. For rightness. And I don't believe that what we're doing or the way we treat each other is the way things are supposed to be. So I hunger and I thirst for rightness. We could be better than this. So yes, "hunger," because I know I'm hungry for that, and I know that I'll never totally be satisfied.

> ***ER: It's so funny that you brought up Roxane Gay because I stole my last question from her. She always wraps up her author interviews with this one question, and I love it so much that I'm just going to borrow it and ask it of you: What do you like best about your writing and how you do it?***

ND: I like that I have freedom to be gross or to be intellectual or to be just old or tired or whatever. I like the freedom that I have in my writing, and it's other people who have to tell me, "Reel it in, girl! Reel it in!" My editor does that a lot: "Natashia, we had enough farts here." Or "Natashia, can you just bring us down from up here? Can you just make it more simple? It's too legalistic" or whatever it is. I like that I don't have to wear a seatbelt when I write.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.