EXPOSITION REVIEW

2017

VOLUME II
SURFACE

Exposition Review
is published annually as an
independent online journal.

DESIGN

Jessica June Rowe

Cover Artwork

Sarah Meyohas, *Sun Speculation,* 2015. Dye sublimation on aluminum. 50 x 37 ½ inches. Courtesy of the artist

COLOPHON

Exposition Review is set in Times New Roman. Titling is set in Filosofia and accent text is set in Oswald and Copperplate.

Contents by Form

Fiction

Nonfiction

Poetry

Stage & Screen

Experimental Narratives

Visual Art & Comics

Podcast

Each year, we strive to select a theme that not only lends itself to diverse inspiration by our contributors, but also gives insight into *Exposition Review*'s own stance in the world of literature, Los Angeles and beyond.

With Vol. I: "IX Lives," we were coming from a very different place: we were in the midst of transitioning our journal out of academia, focused on rolling with the seen and unforeseen punches that came with becoming a fully independent literary journal. After the dust settled and the issue was published, though, we had the opportunity to take a deep dive into how we wanted to define ourselves as *Exposition Review.*

What emerged was our desire to take Expo beyond just an annual publication; we wanted to engage more with our local community and offer more opportunities to writers to engage with us. To that end, we kicked off a season of Flash 405 contests and hosted a series of #ExpoPresents literary events, readings, and programs to connect with and promote our contributors and other local artists, and in turn make each issue of the journal stronger.

We posed the theme "Surface" as the reflection of that journey; of looking closely at how we wanted to grow and present ourselves to the world and at the endless possibilities ahead. As such, we were drawn to stories that explored possibility and perception. We wanted narratives that played with fact and fiction. We wanted to see work that evoked what it means to look beyond the surface—to push the boundaries, with words and genre and point of view.

Vol. II: "Surface" is the result: an issue bursting with narratives in all forms, full of stories that move us, make us laugh, and inspire us. This issue also encompasses our off-the-page activities. Two pieces submitted by flourishing young writers who attended our WriteGirl "Share Your Voice! How to Submit Your Work for Publication" workshop appear in this issue, and our podcast *Two Writers Walk Into a Bar* makes its debut in Vol. II.

"Surface" is shiny and bright new chapter for Expo, and it would not have come to life without our tried and true editors: section editors Lauren Gorski, Mellinda Hensley, Rebecca Luxton, and David L. Ulin; managing editors Annlee Ellingson and Laura Rensing; as well as our associate editors and readers. We cannot thank them enough for their hard work and dedication to bringing Expo to new stages and new heights.

We also thank the many people who supported and shared their voices and art in our #ExpoPresents and Flash 405 series, including Nan Cohen, Janet Fitch, Judith Freeman, Wes Gabrillo, Amy Gerstler, Sonia Greenfield, Jeffrey Lo, John Lucas, Kevin Staniec, Max Tachis, Vanessa Angelica Villarreal, Larry Wilson, the Chromolume Theater, and the WriteGirl organization. And to you, our writing community, we thank you. You make this work we do feel like a breeze and make it all worthwhile. We hope you enjoy taking the journey through this volume of multi-genre narratives as much we've enjoyed creating it.

Jessica June Rowe
Brianna J.L. Smyk
EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

The Blind Fisherman

AIMEE BENDER

The third cop was blind, but he still insisted on being a cop. His father had won cop-of-the-year two years in a row, and his grandfather had been the one to trace the word to its root (—"copper, one who cops"—), so number three had a history he wanted to honor. Born blind, the third cop insisted on training with the rest of them, scoring high on all the tests, explaining that his ears were so sensitive that he needed no vision to hear a crook's footsteps, to gauge the correct distance, to point the gun in the right direction, to shoot swift through the heart.

Of course he killed the wrong man. He killed his father, the double cop-of-the-year, who'd retired by then and was wearing a new pair of retirement shoes that shuffled and scraped the pavement. When the shoot-out hit, the father was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and the blind son, aiming at the slovenly sounding shoes, pulled the trigger and blew a hole through the clotting arteries of his paternal line. *Ka-blam*. Later, at the station, the blind cop's voice broke when he said how he'd heard something was off by the way the bullet cut through the skin; how he somehow felt, right away, that it was an honest heart he had killed; how he could tell, from the cadence of the slowing beats, that this heart was close to his own. That as soon as the bullet exited the other side, he'd known that he'd murdered his own father. He removed his badge and kicked it to the ground. *Plink*.

Even though the ambulance was loud and whirring, the blind former cop still heard the murmur of death descending; it was almost a comforting sound; it was a buzz nearly like the pre-break of orgasm, the distant murmur of a train approaching, but so final you wanted to plug your ears.

After the funeral, he put his gun in a drawer. Hung up his uniform, next to the whispering shiftings of other uniforms. His maternal grandfather had been a fisherman in Baja. He had caught the largest striped marlin of his time, over two hundred pounds, releasing it back into the ocean because, he'd said to the frustrated throngs, anything that large should not be eaten. Do we eat elephants? he asked, at the shoreline. No. Do we eat bears? No. Do we eat space?

With one suitcase and a bus ticket, the blind man waited until the night was deep, and then he left his brothers and his mother behind. They were trying very hard not to blame him, and yet he could hear it in every whooshy exhale. And who could blame them? He hated himself more than they ever could. He visited their sleeping beds and kissed their

warm faces goodbye, and then he tiptoed out the door and stumbled, with his cane, to the bus station.

From his cop grandfather, the blind man had learned precision. From his fisherman grandfather, he hoped to learn forgiveness.

* * *

The blind man rode the bus down the southern tip of California for many hours. When they crossed into Mexico, he finally got off in the middle of Baja, at a stop where the air smelled of fruit and flowers. He felt his way out of the bus and walked down the road, toward the ocean, entering a small sea village, where he tapped his way to a fishing store and asked to buy a rod.

No fish here, the saleswoman told him in Spanish, handing over the gear anyway, and ringing it up on the cash register.

At this beach?

Whole town, the saleswoman said, opening the cash drawer. *Jing.* Haven't you heard?

No fish at all?

Not for months.

Then why do you still have a fish store? the blind man asked, fingering the string on the fishing rod, how it tapered into the pole.

The saleswoman closed the cash drawer. Paused. A few bicycles with bells passed by outside. Hope, she said, with a grunt.

Esperanza.

And not unjustified. Because even there, from the storefront, many blocks from the seashore, the blind man could hear the fish in the water, swimming. Flush. Swish. There were plenty.

Bait, please, he asked the saleswoman who sighed and reached back to the small refrigerator.

While she packed everything up for the day, the saleswoman told the blind man how the village was soon to bankrupt itself without a fish industry and that families had started to leave to find work in the tourist economies of the larger resort towns. Lifelong fishermen stood on the rickety pier, staring at the horizon. Wives found their fisher husbands weeping in front of cold stoves. No tug on the line, was all they could say. They walked, unshaven, on the shoreline, searching for shadows in the water, but it seemed that all the fish had left, in a group, to swim to other parts of the ocean.

The blind man thanked the saleswoman and followed the smell of salt to the edge of the water. There, with help from the men on the pier, he settled into a fishing boat and pushed out to a shallow inlet of sea, listening. There were fish there, yes; he could almost feel their bodies, firm and strong, pushing through water. But most of them were lower

than usual. Something had shifted in the oceanic structure here, and the fish swam in layers, one two three, the third layer so deep they would never be caught. This third layer, the deepest layer, felt to him to be of the contented fish, who had figured something out and were dodging the traps. But they did not want to leave. They loved the water her; it was clear and flavorful. Not one of them had left.

The blind man listened for awhile to this distant happy swishing, to and fro, and a hunch formed in the back of his mind, so he stayed in his boat and waited. After about an hour, just above the swishing, he heard a subtle low note of pure pain lifting up from the water. He dribbled down the line, and within a minute, felt the seize and tug of a bite, and pulled on the line, dragging in a good-sized dorado. It thrashed for a little while, because its body insisted, but after a short time it gave up. Such is the way despair works, even in fish. The blind fisherman laid one steady hand on its side. He heard again the approaching sizzle of death, and bowed his head in respect.

He ate the fish that night on the shore, the fire spitting below him, snorting and cracking. The stars came out in quiet bass notes. He remembered his father's voice, and how it'd sounded when the smell of barbecue was in the air. The ripping joy in it. Give me the bloodiest steak! his father liked to yell on the Fourth of July, swirling his beer and laughing, and the blind cop had caught a whiff of the drippy glory on his father's plate the way a lion cub might bury into the chest of a dead gazelle. They said his father had been handsome, and even a blind man could tell.

He was busy picking bones out of his teeth when two other fishermen came by and in friendly voices asked if they could share his fish dinner—From how far away did you bring it? they asked, in pinched tones, and the blind man explained that it had been from about ten feet away. He pointed. He heard their breath slow. You mean here? they asked, and he said, Yes, here. He handed over cuts of filet, and he heard them eating with amazement, the path from hand to mouth longer than usual, the careful examining of the fish flesh.

You're sure it was here? they asked.

Yes, he said. Do I look like I get around easily?

Delicious, they marveled, as they chewed.

The blind man finished up, pushed ashes over the fish bones and the fire, and curled up on the sand, which shifted and groaned beneath him. He was tired. In the morning, he opened his eyes to darkness as usual, but he could feel them standing there, a small group, each fisherman straight and tall, guarding his hope with heart muskets. The blind man grunted a greeting, went out in a boat, listened carefully for pain, and caught seven in an hour.

Loud joyful prayers bubbled up from the shoreline, a banging of hands on sand.

They're here all right, the blind man called out, docking his boat on the shore, holding the fish up by their tails. You just have to listen closer.

The fishermen celebrated by stringing up a big sign over the rickety pier, which the blind man could not read, that said: *¡El Pez Regresa!* At the crack of dawn, they all returned to their boats, singing throatily into the water. The boats, side by side, lines cast, bows bobbing.

It wasn't easy for them, still, the catching of the despairing fish that the blind man seemed almost to pick out of the water with his bare hands. A whole new rhythm had to be learned. But hope generated patience, and in time, they, too, began adding the silvery bodies to their boats. The numbers were far lower than they'd been before, but everyone in town wanted to return to normal, and so they acted like all had been solved. Restaurants unpeeled the fish entree listings on their menus that had been covered with masking tape. Families, with boxes packed, prepping for jobs as tour guides and hotel help, unpacked. The store owner who had sold the blind man his fishing line held a renewal sale, all items twenty percent off.

The fish who swam closer to the surface had a slightly different taste, an edge of bitter, but good bitter.

* * *

The blind man slept on the sand, alone. Each night, he sent a prayer to his mother and brothers, to his dead father whose slowing heartbeat he heard behind every revving car, inside every steady footfall. Fish cut through the dark water, and the weather grew colder. Tired of seeing their friend buried up to his neck in the sand each morning, the local fishermen rented the blind man a cabin. They took turns sleeping at his door, holding a gutting knife in case anyone might try to come by and steal him. What about the town up the hill where, rumor had it, the trees were eaten by bugs from the inside out? What about the city near San Diego, several hours north, where the chickens were laying eggs without yolks?

I'm not going to leave, the blind man assured them. He was out of grandfather role models.

Throw the line. Listen.

Pain; pull.

Sizzle; pray.

* * *

One evening, after a long day of sitting in the boat, catching a few fish here and there, the blind man was having a *carne asada* plate at a local restaurant in the village when a woman came to his table. She was new to town; he knew pretty much everyone else by now. She came from a village in the mountains, and she smelled of wood musk. She asked, Are you the blind man? He said yes. She said, You're just who I need.

You're out of fish in the mountains?

No, she said, her voice smiling.

Are you deformed? he asked, and she said, Quite the contrary. May I?

He nodded, and she settled herself across from him, and the wood musk expanded to a forest. Something about her—the lilt to her voice, or the frank way she sat in the chair—felt wonderful to him, hopeful. Usually the only people who sat across from him just wanted advice on fishing techniques. The woman lowered her voice and leaned closer across the table and explained that her eyes were so unusually blue that people drowned in them. Once, she said, a man who'd loved her very much had looked so deeply into her eyes he had suffocated. Truly. In front of her. He had lost his breathing, fallen over, and died.

No one knew the cause of death, she said, but it's happened twice now, and I am certain it's me.

Maybe they had weak hearts, said the blind man, sipping his beer.

They were both athletes, she said. They built houses and played soccer.

Maybe they were old men, he said.

They were young and strong.

Must've been unbearable, said the blind man, considering it.

She let out a breath.

Well, I've never been in love, said the blind man, stirring his beans with a spoon. But you should know in advance that I killed my own father.

Why? she said, tapping a fork against a plate.

Because it's good to know these kinds of things about a person in advance, he said. Don't you think?

No, she said. I meant why did you kill him?

Oh, he said. Accident.

He put his napkin over his plate, to cover the food.

And you should know I'm a good fisherman, the blind man said, after a pause. Maybe the best in the history of the world.

She leaned forward and placed her hand on his, with fingers delicate and warm. Her breath touched with cilantro and white wine. The restaurant, clinking and clanking around them.

Over flan, the woman sat closer to the man and spoke quietly into his ear. She told him stories about the fresh mountain air; he told about his bus ride into town. The evening grew late. He had not been with a woman since the death of his father, but over a year had passed now, and she smelled of the future. He led her back to his cabin, his fingers linked with hers, and at the door, she nodded at the late-night guard while she smoothed the damp corners of the blind man's hair. They took off their clothes in the middle of the night, very slowly, and the man could hear the one second of pure silence that hits right between night and morning, right before darkness lifts and the sun climbs over the edge to begin its slow

move across the world. He heard that silence just as he was releasing inside her, just as she contracted against him, and it was one of the purest, simplest moments of his life.

They spent every day of the next many weeks together. It was like they'd planned it, or known. She reminded him of seven people he'd met before, plus herself. She explained how she'd heard news of him from the mountains and wanted to meet him as soon as she could. I thought you and I might get along, she said, as they walked along the sand. He took her out in his fishing boat and tried to teach her to hear the despair of the fish, which she could not, but in turn, she told him how the water rippled and lapped and glimmered and sparkled. He said he could hear the water, and hear the fish, and hear the sun, and hear the clouds overhead, but that words like *glimmer* and *sparkle* might as well be Norwegian to him.

Sparkle is like singing, she said, looking up. And you're right. There are clouds overhead.

They're foreboding too, he said, shrugging on a jacket.

They pulled the boat into dock just in time and sat inside the little fishing house holding each other while the rain pounded outside. He dotted little kisses all over the back of her neck until she was laughing from happiness.

The men who drowned, asked the blind man after awhile.

Yes?

Were they happy drowning?

I suppose it's possible, she said, holding onto his hand.

But you were not, he said.

She shook her head, then remembered he couldn't see her. No.

Your eyes are that blue? he asked, and she said, Yes. Bluer than water or sky.

He kissed her softly then, and heard the tear go down her cheek, very, very slowly, then fast at the end.

I don't know blue, he whispered into the warmth of her neck.

* * *

As they sat in their boats, lines cast, the fishermen swapped info on the new woman in town, the woman from the mountains. They worried she was a scout or a spy, trying to lure their good luck charm away. Maybe she had a secret agenda. Maybe there was a lake up there needing help. They found no unusual facts from her past, just two men dead from natural causes and a series of ordinary jobs. They questioned her as she walked around town, striding along in her low clicky heels, but no one could look into her eyes for very long without feeling queasy.

She's nice enough, said one, recasting his line. But she makes me hyperventilate.

They shrugged, stared out to sea. The days were shorter now, the air colder. They wore jackets.

What if he falls in love with her? asked one, as he hauled in a small tuna.

What if? they echoed.

* * *

The woman and the blind man ate green chile *tamales* for dinner, and *queso fresco* crumbled over deep black beans, and cool margaritas circled by chunks of sea salt. They wove their way back to his cabin, buzzed on beer and lime, back to his room where they had sloppy, gangly sex in the darkness, and then listened to old records they'd found at an old record store, recordings of singers who had never quite made it but were very good anyway. They slept all over the bed, like they were on a walk, during sleep—sleeping upside down, to the side, feet dangling off the edges, and they laughed about it in the morning, all the traversing, like they were going these far dreamy distances together. Every morning he fished, and some days she came with him, and other days she began looking for work in town. This all went on for several months in a row, through winter and into spring, fish arriving in restaurants and storefronts, fishermen grabbing their spouses and lovers around the waists with new lust, all things bountiful, in town and in private.

One afternoon, while the woman was out shopping for wine, one of the fishermen broke the line of protection and knocked briskly on the door of the cabin.

Yes? called the blind man. He was in the living room, sanding the edge of his coffee table to a fabric-smoothness. He had come across some sandpaper on sale at the hardware store.

The fishermen entered. He stood in the doorframe, fidgeting.

Yes? said the blind man again. He turned his head, toward the door.

The fish numbers are good, said the visitor.

Glad to hear it.

We caught double this week, he said.

The blind man wrinkled his nose. He wrapped sandpaper around a table corner. What a whole lot of miserable fish out there. He used the sandpaper like a dusting cloth, sweeping over the wood. The fisherman remained standing by the door.

Okay, said the blind man. Sounds fine. And? Anything else?

And your girlfriend flirts with all the men in town, blurted the fisherman.

The blind man stopped his hand. Excuse me?

We just thought you should know. She flirts and flirts. It's been even worse this week.

So? said the blind man.

The fisherman fidgeted in the doorframe. People can't look at her without feeling ill.

I can look at her no problem.

It's like there's this tug—

I feel no tug.

Like a pit.

I feel no pit.

We worry, said the fisherman.

The blind man put down his sandpaper. So, she's a flirt, he said. I don't care about that.

Her eyes are *dripping*, said the fisherman. You can't see it but just looking at her—

The blind man flicked his sandpaper to the floor. He pointed to the door. He knew just where the door was and his point was correct.

I'm sorry, said the fisherman. We weren't sure if we should say anything—

Go home, said the blind man. Get away from me. You're one man. You're no "we."

I'm the elected representative, said the fisherman, trembling. We're so sorry. It just seems like she's not doing well, or something's wrong with her, or she's asking for something—

Enough, said the blind man, harder.

The fisherman gave a short, useless bow, and left. Outside, at the window, he apologized again, but the blind man pushed the glass closed. The woman was away that day, buying more records, and after the man had paced the living room, he finished sanding the table, locked up the cabin, and walked out to the ocean. The air was cooling with evening, and at the shore, he listened as usual for the sounds of the fish. Sure enough, there were more. The breeze clear, spring new. The fish population, for some reason, was vaster, unhappier, multiplying. He no longer felt the same as them; before, they had felt like versions of him, made into fish. Now, he felt the difference—how they were doing something else under there, something fishlike, and unknowable.

Later that night, the woman came home, moving slowly, hanging up her coat for five minutes on the hook. She had no records. When he asked her what was wrong, she said, Nothing.

Not nothing, he said.

He sat down, pushed on the cushion next to him. She sat nearby but her hands were tentative in a way he had never heard before. What is it? he said. I can take it. Tell me. I don't care, he said. He imagined all the fishermen on their knees, asking for her, drowning in her.

I will hurt you, she said.

No, he said. Tell me. Is it someone else?

No, she said. She clenched her hands into the pillow, on the sofa.

I will drown you, she said.

But you aren't, he said. You aren't drowning me. He took in a deep breath, exhaled. See?

She was quiet, listening. Then, suddenly, she stood up. She flailed her arms around. Her mood changed, and the air made breezes from the movement of her arms. It's not working! she said. I mean, am I just another one of your fish? Her voice grew high. The words didn't fit the voice. I'm just one of your fish! she said. Why don't you care? she said. Do you really care?

She got out of bed and moved in paces around the room. He tried to keep up. What was happening? He said he did care, he did. She said some more big sentences, about how he didn't love her. The words came from nowhere. They'd had a wonderful night the evening before. They'd had many wonderful nights in a row. These were words to fit an exit, words made up. He shook his head, said, No, no, and his mind scrambled to understand, to flip the picture and see what she was saying, but he could not get a hold on any of it, and she just went into the bathroom for awhile and then came to bed. It's wrong, she said, mumbling into the pillow. Something is wrong. What is wrong? the blind man asked. I don't know, she said. Her reasoning had formed between them like the hard plastic wrapping on a toy. The blind man touched her hair, with the lightest possible hand, but she curled into herself, into the pillow.

Someone will drown, she said.

* * *

Sleep joined their bed for hours, and then sometime in the middle of the night, he awoke, alone. She'd been a weight in his bed and now the bed was light again, and he could not hear her footsteps or her breathing or the fast whirring of her brain on coffee.

Hello? he called out.

Hello? said that night's guard, just waking up.

She could not leave him a note as he could not read it. She had no tape recording equipment to record a goodbye. She disappeared at the turning point between night and day, right when he was the most sound asleep, and she left the front door open, so that she would not wake him with the sound of shutting.

Now, with the door open, the sounds outside were louder than usual. Waves settled, even though it was a windless morning. Someone was listening to news radio in a car. He dressed and went outside, listening for her voice, the *tap tap* of her walk, her sparkling laugh which was all he needed to know about light on water.

Hello? he called out. Hello? Did you see where she went? he asked the townsfolk.

I was not concentrating on someone *leaving* the cabin, said that night's guard, when his friends interrogated him later for poor watchdogging. The fishermen trailed the blind man worriedly, standing outside bathrooms as he peed, in case he might hitchhike out of town to find her.

As if he could.

All he could do was hear pain, and he had heard it on the first day, in the wreck of two deaths and other sadnesses as of yet unrevealed wafting off her shoulders, and he did understand how to not drown, for no one to drown, could feel, in itself, like a kind of drowning.

The blind man waited all day, and the next, and the next, and next, and his grief was fresh, like a new harvest of a heavy fruit. At dusk, the fishermen docked their boats and stood outside his home. They could hear him crying inside, and they formed a ring around his cabin, holding the wood with their fish-stained hands. They did not go inside. He cried more than anyone expected; he had cared for her very much even though he had not known her very long, but he knew, as he was crying, that this loss had also opened the door to the room called Loss inside of which there were many pieces of older furniture he had previously covered in burlap.

There was work to be done, called mourning.

No one spotted the woman around town, although there was a rumor that someone had seen her buying a soda two villages south.

* * *

The fish kept on coming, steady, faintly bitter, fish upon fish upon fish, and restaurants made up dishes to counteract bitterness, using more sugar and more fruit, and after many weeks, the blind man emerged from his cabin. He hadn't left much, and he was thinner, and smaller, and paler. The fishermen broke their ring of hands to let him pass and followed him down to the shoreline. It was morning, and the sun was rising with a whiteness, preparing for a hot day. No one said a word. The fishermen stood at the water's edge while the blind man untied his boat and took it to sea.

He did not take his fishing line, and he rowed out to a prime spot, out of hearing distance. The sun warmed his shoulders, and he placed his oars inside the boat and leaned over the edge. There, he listened, as usual, for despair, and when he felt a few fish had gathered beneath the boat, a group ready to be caught and eaten, he leaned close to the water and spoke to its surface in a whisper. He didn't want to eat or catch any today, and he told them, instead, to go see their fathers. Find your fathers, he told the drifting gray water. It was about to rain again, but this time he stayed in his boat, with the fishermen watching him from the distant shore, as the drops pelted his shoulders and filled up the bottom inch of the bow.

Go now, he whispered. Swim away.

* * *

Far below, in their layers, the fish listened. They could hear him, the voice above. They understood. They went to find their fathers. Fish fathers generally die early, but several

gatherings of yellowtail and bonito and bass wound their way to the family part of the sea, to the nestles of coral and kelp that had sheltered them when they were just little clusters of roe. They did not know which particular fish had birthed them—no fish could remember that—but in the depths they found a group, and all together, they swam for miles. With fish, it is the school swimming; like geese above, it is how good it feels to be part of the V. With fish, it was just swimming near each other, the flush of the water on their gills as they moved in rows through the currents. They swam and swam, in zigs and zags, and the blind man could hear the density of the water shifting below as the families rejoined, grouped together, and then separated. He bowed his head gently to the currents that moved beneath him.

Spring Ice

LAURA BONAZZOLI

You think, because I was his neighbor, I must know something. That I've got some theory as to why it happened. Well, I don't.

Maybe if it'd happened decades ago, before people started moving up here thinking Maine was some kind of paradise, if it'd happened then, when people knew their neighbors, caught up on each other in the general store buying coffee or soap, maybe then we'd all know the whole story. And you'd be out of a job. And incidentally I mean way before I moved here myself, which was forty years ago, after 'Nam and college on the GI Bill. Even then, that world was gone. And to be honest, I came here looking for paradise, too. I figured no way the jungle could follow me here.

Anyway, if people were neighbors the way neighbors used to be, then you wouldn't be here asking me about Abe. As it is, I can't tell you much beyond what most of your readers already know. Until a year ago, he seemed like a steady guy. Hearty even. You never know, though, what's beneath the surface, so you figure when some tragedy hits, like what happened to his son, well, that's the whole reason. Maybe it is, maybe it isn't.

But that's what folks think. Anybody who knew Abe even slightly—or his wife, Sieglinde—they figure it all started this same week last year. Maybe it did. For sure both deaths started with the same sound. Not that they know that. I guess I'm the only one who does, as I was their only neighbor this side of the pond.

It was after dusk when I heard it. I was fixing dinner. I figured it was the spring ice cracking, and I thought of Thoreau. Thirty-five years teaching American Lit, I made the kids read *Walden*. I still take out *The Maine Woods* every now and again when I feel my bearings start to slip. So when I heard the sound I thought of how Thoreau describes the spring ice cracking on Walden Pond: "Loud as artillery," he said, and sure enough, it sounded like gunshot, so I came out onto the back porch and listened some more. As I said, it was this same week, second week in March, but the winter had been so warm I thought, I'll be darned if the ice isn't breaking before spring even. And then I heard their voices, the boys, two or three of them, shouting, and I knew it wasn't spring ice breaking. Not breaking on its own, anyway.

I couldn't make out the words at first. And then I heard "Boris!" And I knew it was my neighbors' son, because nobody names their kid Boris, not around here, anyway. I'd had him in freshman comp, but I never had another kid named Boris in thirty-five years

teaching. His mother's Swedish, so there's that, but all those old-country names are gone and now everybody's Jake or Jack or Zach, none of those old, solid names. So when I heard "Boris!" I knew it was my neighbor's son, and I knew he was in trouble.

Their voices were bouncing around in the fog, and I couldn't see my hands in front of my face, so I didn't know, were they by his place or across the pond, so I came inside and called his parents. Had to look up the number because I hadn't called them enough these dozen years since they bought the land and built their place to know their number off the top of my head. Well, there's no answer. Sieglinde tells me later, sobbing to break your heart, that she was at work—she's a nurse at the hospital—and Abe was out at his AA meeting, so no one was home, though even if they were, it wouldn't have made any difference. Even the wardens—one of the boys had the sense to call 9-1-1 from his cell phone and they responded right away, but word is they had trouble finding the kids; they were off the road on one of the trails, so by the time they did, all they could do was search along the shore trying to see where in the hell he'd gone in and calling and calling and not hearing any answer.

The way I learned it from the old-timers is, you can only keep yourself afloat for fifteen, twenty minutes in icy water before your muscles give out and you drown. They must've known that, the wardens, that by the time they got there, he was already gone, because they didn't try some crazy TV-show rescue, calling in some helicopter or something. Poor kid. They came back in the morning with a boat and a diver and found the place he went in and pulled his body out. Seems the ice had held up nearly to the middle of the pond. Nobody knows why it broke there. The old-timers warn you that ice is never totally safe to cross, even mid-winter. Debris underwater can trap the sun, making the ice above it thin, or sometimes, like last winter, when the temperatures kept going up and then down again, the ice expands and contracts, making cracks in the deep structure that can't be seen from above.

Not that he was looking. Or even if he was, in that fog, he couldn't have seen a thing. As far as I know, nobody knows exactly what he was doing on the ice. Or if they do, they're not saying. My guess is the kids were high. That's not because I'm their neighbor and know it. It's just what anybody would think, given the circumstances. And it's not to judge. I fooled around too when I was their age. Only difference is I didn't wind up dead.

Looking back, I keep thinking I could have done more. More than just trying to phone his parents, I mean. When they didn't answer, I grabbed a flashlight and went down to the edge of the pond and listened again, trying to hear if they were across the water, or what. I couldn't tell. So I jumped in the truck and headed down the road. Less than a mile, I saw the Maine wardens' truck coming up behind me. So I pulled over and turned back around. I figured, leave it to the experts, you know? I didn't want it to seem like I was going to a fire for entertainment, as Thoreau put it. And I guess, too, I didn't want to know. Not first-hand anyway. Reading about it in the paper the next day, you can tell yourself it wasn't such a bad way to die. But seeing it, the ice all cracked, and for what? I guess that's

why, when I came back from 'Nam, I decided to teach the old stories. I told you already I had Boris in freshman comp. He didn't take my American lit. I wish he had. Not that it would've made any difference. I'm not saying it would. Just that when I moved here and got the teaching job at the high school, I thought maybe I could—I don't know—make amends, I guess. But life knows you, knows who you are. Follows you.

Like it followed him. Abe. His was the Gulf War, though I never knew a thing about it until a few months ago. If I'd known he was a vet, maybe I'd have picked up on some things and could have—well—reached out. Helped somehow. At it was, I didn't have a clue.

And as I said, I didn't see much of them. In all those years, the only time I was invited over to their place was for Boris' graduation party the summer before last. It wasn't much, a barbecue on the deck. No relatives except Abe's sister and her husband drove up from Boston. Sieglinde's family is in Sweden, of course, and when she invited me she told me that Abe's parents weren't able to travel from Pennsylvania. Of course Boris's friends must have been throwing their own parties. So I guess they invited me to make it seem like a bigger deal, more festive. A neighbor and one of his teachers. Or maybe they knew I'd hear them out there and they felt sorry for me, living alone, though no need for that, it's always been my choice.

You know, looking back, I guess it was at that party it first occurred to me there might be something—I don't know—something running, deep inside him. I remember I'd asked Boris what his plans were, and he tells me he's going to study anthropology and Spanish at U Maine, wants to focus on Mesoamerican cultures. Tells me he's taking off in a few days for the Yucatán Peninsula, plans to visit Chichen Itza with some friends. Says he can't wait to see the Great Ballcourt. I tell him I don't know what he's talking about, so he fills me in, says they all played ball—the Mesoamericans, I mean—with balls made from rubber they got from trees, he said. But the Mayans didn't play it just for sport. For them it was a religious ritual—they had to play it for their culture to survive. He said they'd force their prisoners of war to play. When the game was over, they'd sacrifice the players on the losing team to their gods. Cut off their heads. Sometimes, he said, after they'd decapitated the captain of the losing team, they'd use his head for a ball. Gruesome, but I sort of recognized myself at eighteen in his fascination with it all. That's the way I was before I went to 'Nam. And I figured, maybe by studying it, he'd be able to keep it from happening again, or things like it, or at least that's what I wanted to say to him, something like that, but his mother came up to us just then and with this sweet smile, put her arm around her son, and said to me in her funny accent, "It's my fault."

"What's your fault?" I asked her.

"That he likes these awful things," she said. Then she said she thought it was because of the stories she used to tell him when he was a kid about the ancient Nordic kings and their battles and rituals and sacrifices.

I asked her what she meant by sacrifices.

Boris sort of leaned in at that point and told her to tell me about Edwin the Old, that he loved that story! But he said it almost in a whisper, and his mother, she looked around and I saw her eyes go to her husband. He was talking with his sister and brother-in-law, down by the edge of the pond. And then she said something about Abe not liking the story, getting upset when she told it. But Boris insisted, so she told it to me, this strange old story, about some Swedish king who made a deal with Odin, the god of war and death, that he could live ten years longer if he sacrificed one of his sons. He had ten sons, she told me, so he sacrificed them, one at a time, until there was only one son left. At that point he was so old he couldn't get out of bed and had to drink milk like a baby, but he would've sacrificed his tenth and last son, she said, if the people hadn't put a stop to it and insisted that the tenth son become their king. So the old man died.

I remember Boris was quiet the whole time his mother was telling the story, and when she finished, he said, sort of under his breath, "Brutal." Then one of his buddies drove up and he leapt off the deck—I'll never forget that, he just jumped over the railing and landed on the ground so light and so strong like a deer leaping over a downed tree—and the two of them gave each other this bear hug and walked off together into the woods.

I looked at Sieglinde, and she smiled and shrugged. "They'll smoke a little weed," she said. "But then they'll get hungry and come back in time for supper." And she was right. They did. That night.

Later I wondered why Abe didn't like his wife to tell the story of the old king. I figured, hell, it's just another crazy old legend. I'm not saying I gave it a lot of thought, though. Just every now and then. Like when Boris got back from his trip and I'm sitting on my back porch on a Sunday afternoon and I hear Abe light into him again. I mean, I'd heard him do it before, over the years. This time it was something about how he'd had to work his own way through college and how Boris was a no-good stoner—that was the way he put it. Anyway, it made me think of the graduation party, how Boris went off with his buddy after his mother told that old story she didn't want Abe to hear. But I guess I wondered about it even more after he lost his son.

Which everybody in town knows happened a year ago this week. Nearly everybody went to the memorial service, or knew someone who did. All the kids he'd gone to high school with, tears rolling down their faces watching the slide show—Boris at six and Boris at sixteen and Boris graduating high school—all his friends crying, the guys, too, except his best friend, Josh, who'd been out at the pond with him that night, he just stood in a corner like he was frozen stiff and didn't dare take anything in or he might crack up. I didn't stay long. Seemed like it was for the kids, mostly. Driving home, I guess I was feeling the weight of it, and maybe that's why, when I got out of the truck, I didn't go into the house straight away. Instead, I walked out back and stood at the edge of the pond, just looking. I don't know how long I stood there, but all of a sudden, this movement caught my eye, and I saw, just a few feet in front of me, a dragonfly nymph clearing the water's surface, climbing up a reed and then stopping there, inhaling the air—for the first time, I

guess. And then, while I watched, it sort of bent over and its shell came undone, as if it was ripping the seams of an old winter coat. And the dragonfly pushed itself out. Then it just rested there on the reed. I knew it'd take hours for its legs to harden and its wings to open and dry, and I was getting cold, so I went inside.

I poured myself a little blueberry port and sat for a while, everything that had happened fighting in my head. And I thought, I should write it all down, the stories from his graduation party, and his trip to the Mayan ruins, and his coming home on his spring break and dying like that. I thought I should try to make some sense of it. So I got out a notebook and pen. But then I just sat there watching the dark get darker. I never made a mark on the page. I guess I knew I didn't have it in me. Instead I read some poetry—Howard Nemerov, I think—until I got drowsy enough I knew I could sleep.

Next morning, I went back out to the pond and saw the dragonfly's empty casing, still stuck to the reed, and another not three feet away, empty like the first. And I knew then, the ice had to be out all the way across the pond, and Boris only five days dead.

Not that day, but no more than a couple of days after, I went into the village to pick up my mail, and I saw him, Abe I mean, walking alone up the street in a way like I hadn't seen a man walk for forty years.

After that, I tried to be a better neighbor, but without making a nuisance of myself. Summers I always walk down to the village to pick up my mail, except if it's a hard rain, and on my way past their place, if either of them were out on the deck or in the yard, I'd call out hello and sometimes stop if I could think of anything better than foolish to say. Mostly, though, there was no sign of life. Sieglinde probably at the hospital working, and Abe, well, I knew he was self-employed, something about investments, so maybe he was in an office he might have had in the house. I don't know. I've never been inside. But two, three times, when I went down to the village late afternoons, I did see him, out by the pond, sitting in a lawn chair, not reading or on the phone or anything, just sitting, looking. So I'd call out hello, and he'd call back or raise an arm, and I'd make myself cross the yard and try to think of some reason to say I was stopping, other than the truth, which was—I don't know what. Maybe I was trying to keep from happening what I knew—or some part of me knew—was happening and was going to keep on happening until it was over no matter what I or anybody else did in the meantime.

Well, one of those afternoons—it was past summer by then, late September at least and the sky over the pond was already streaked with red—I saw him sitting out there and I called out hello and he sort of waved me over to join him. So I crossed the yard and as soon as I got near him, I could smell the whiskey. That's how strong it was. The bottle was under his chair. He had a big glass half-full, and straight, by the color, and he was drinking it like it was Coca Cola. He asks me, would I like a drink, he'll go into the house and get me a glass. But I tell him no, I've got work waiting at home, which was true—I teach a lit class at the prison spring and fall and had their papers to grade—and trying to be neighborly, not to judge, I say, it must be damned hard since his son died, and I tell him I

leaned on the stuff for a while when I first got back from Vietnam. I thought for a minute I'd said the wrong thing, because he was quiet for a long time, both of us just staring out at the pond.

Then he said something that didn't really follow except, in an odd way, I guess it did. He told me the story of how he'd been in the Gulf War. Until that moment I had no idea he was a vet, but he told me he'd joined the Reserves to help pay his way through college—his father was a no-good drunk, he said, so he'd always worked for everything he got—and he stayed on, he said, after his first contract was up, as things were quiet in those days and the extra pay was good. Well, not long after his reenlistment, he's working for some bank when his unit gets called up. But he never saw combat. The way he put it, he was only in the Gulf a few days, but he saw enough death to last a lifetime.

I ask him how's that, and he tells me this story of how he'd befriended this new recruit, a young guy first year in, sort of took him under his wing and looked out for him, and one night, the kid was on duty outside the barracks, but Abe had set up to meet a local guy who was bringing him some liquor—totally illegal, of course, in Saudi Arabia, but the guy knew somebody who worked for an airline and could get those little bottles they serve on planes. So Abe's supposed to meet this guy so he tells the kid he'll relieve him, go on inside. Well, ten minutes later, Abe says, he sees this ball of fire in the sky heading straight at him, so he runs. He's not thinking, you know? Instinct takes over. So he runs. The light is so bright it blinds him and the explosion so hard it throws him to the ground. When he gets up, he's dazed, just standing there, watching the barracks go up in flames. And then he starts running back towards it, thinking he's going to somehow save somebody, but he doesn't get far because the building's an inferno and people are running everywhere screaming and he falls on the pavement and looks down and sees he's wounded. So as he's telling me this, he reaches down to his ankle and pulls up the leg of his pants. There's a scar on the side of his calf. "That's all I got," he says. "A slice out of my leg that I didn't even know at first I had. And the kid I sent back in, dead. A few women, too, and some guys married with kids at home." He says something like that, and takes another swig.

I just stood there a while, not knowing what to say. Or knowing there's nothing you can say. So you train your eye on the Canada geese rising up from the pond and you listen to their honking and when it dies down in the distance, you say something stupid like, I guess not long till winter. He doesn't answer, so you sigh maybe too loud and say you'd best be getting home as you've got those papers to grade, and then you say goodbye.

I'm walking away, with my back turned, and I'm nearly to the road, and I hear him say, like he's talking to himself, or maybe out to the pond, "They're headin' home to roost." I thought he must have meant the geese. And maybe he did.

Once the cold settles in, I take the truck down to the village, so my trips past their house stopped not long after that, and didn't start back again until last Friday. You remember how warm it was last Friday, almost like May. So I walked down to the village and, on my way back, there he was, sitting in his lawn chair by the pond. So I stopped and

crossed the yard and said hello. I hadn't seen him all winter. Even then, I didn't really see him full on, because I came up from behind him and the whole time we talked—well, I'd seen the bottle under the chair again and the glass in his hand, so I stood a few feet to his side, looking straight out at the pond. But then I made the fool mistake of asking him was he out there waiting for Sieglinde to get home from work and he told me no, Sieglinde had gone back to Sweden to look after her mother who was doing poorly. Then all of a sudden, like it didn't mean a thing to him, he says to me, I don't expect her back. Just like that, just that simple. "I don't expect her back."

What do you mean, I almost asked him. But I knew what he meant. So instead I asked him if he'd ever been to Sweden. He said he'd been there twice: once when they got engaged and once when Boris was three or four, before they'd moved here. So I asked him why they did. He shrugged. Said he really couldn't say for sure. That they were living outside Boston and looking for a slower pace, that Sieglinde didn't mind the cold, or the quiet, that she'd heard about a job for a critical care nurse at the local hospital, and he'd had enough of working for somebody else and wanted to take on clients of his own. Then, when they'd come looking around, he'd seen the ad for land on Consecration Pond and there was something about the name, he said. Though he'd never quite figured out what.

So I told him that I'd heard once from an old-timer that the man who bought the property—the pond and 300 acres surrounding—had fought in the Civil War and named it for a line from the Gettysburg Address. Then I quoted it: "'But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract.' That's what I've heard," I said, "though myself I've never liked the name."

He asked me why not.

I held off answering for a minute, but then decided to say it outright. I told him I figure nobody comes back from war believing there's anything consecrating about men shooting holes in each other's hearts or blowing each other's heads off. So, I said, "I just call it 'the pond.' It's water and soil and plants and animals, and none of them with the consciousness to care some fool gave it a name."

I guess talking about the pond made me angry, even though I know it's crazy to feel angry at a vet from the Civil War. So even though I could tell Abe was hurting, I said good afternoon and headed home. Once it's dark, I can't see his place from mine, but for some reason that night I did notice, all of a sudden, when a light in his house went on. It was nearly ten o'clock, and of course the night had cooled, and I don't recall he'd been wearing much more than a jacket sitting out there.

I should have stopped by to see him Saturday. Or yesterday. But after that one warm day we went right back to snow flurries, so I didn't walk by, didn't have any excuse to disturb him. I kept thinking, next week, if we get one day halfway decent, I'll walk on by, even if I don't go all the way down to the village and back, just to have a reason to check in. But I left it too late.

Last night, I'd been reading. It was gone ten. The moon's full, and I figure it'll be up past the trees over the pond, so I get up to have a look before I turn in. I step out onto the back porch and take it in. Well, I don't know. I get this feeling. I look over toward his place. His car's out in front but there's no light inside the house. Then I hear the sound, like I'd heard a year ago, like spring ice cracking. Or a gunshot. I grab my flashlight, go over to his place. He's sitting out there by the pond. Maybe he'd been there the whole day. The bottle was empty beneath his chair. A glass was on the ground. He was sitting upright, facing the pond, staring. The gun was dangling from his hand down by his side. I closed his eyes and called the police.

And that's all I know. You still want to, go ahead and write your story. Give the public their entertainment. But it's a fool's business. Nobody'll ever know anything more than what everybody thinks they already know. He lost his son. And it broke him.

Topography

DEBORAH STEVENSON

Deborah Stevenson, *Topography*, 2015. 8 ½ x 11 ½ inches, collage on paper. Courtesy of the artist

Cathy

CHRISTINA CRAIGO

Three months after my sister Cathy turned sixteen and emo, the snow settled in and stayed, and the school shut down, and the roads shut down, and the jobs shut down, and all of the usual ways we found to avoid each other wore themselves out, and there we were in the house together. I tried to get her to play cards, or board games, or hangman, or would-you-rather, but the, you know, angst was deeper than the snow those days. It freaked my parents out, but I didn't believe her histrionics for a minute.

Mom and Dad were bitching at each other about who would figure out what to do with the compost—since it was hard to even guess where the compost pile was under all of the snow—and Cathy and I were fighting about the way she'd thrown her crap all over our bedroom. This was a recurring conflict, right up there with my breathing, my chewing, and my having to pee in the night. I told her she really needed to pick up her stuff that day, because it was getting outrageous. She'd even started leaving things on my bed. I wanted Mom to see it, but while I was getting her, Cathy locked herself in.

Mom demanded that she come out, and then Dad demanded that she come out. Cathy kept answering, but not about the specific things they were saying. It was all irrelevant, unnecessary garbage: "You people never listen to me," "You don't care about me," "You look right past me," things like that.

Dad went off to look for a tiny screwdriver or something, after yelling at me for losing all of the little keys that open our inside doors when I played that game with my cousin when I was like seven. Mom and I walked away too, because we needed a break from it, and we thought she might come out on her own if we stopped giving her so much attention.

Finally Dad found something that he thought might work, and we all came back, and eventually the door swung open. We were all there to see her hanging from the ceiling fan. She was also—here's the kicker—sitting on her bed, fuming at us and feeling sorry for herself as usual. A translucent version of her, just like in the fucking movies. She, it, was sitting on her bed, saying things like, "You look right through me." It could almost be funny, except that I am so very, completely, profoundly pissed off at my sister for killing herself. And for sticking around. I can't even have the room to myself, even now. She still leaves her shit on my bed.

Courageous

DAVID CRIST

Alan pulled on his tall rubber boots. Although he'd grown four inches since Christmas, his older brother's boots were still far too big for him. He didn't complain. The boots would keep his feet warm and dry on the two-mile walk down to the docks from his parents' house. On a cold, dark March morning like today, he needed all the warmth he could get.

He wrapped a scarf around his neck, pulled on his gloves and hat, and moved toward the door of the room that he used to share with his two older brothers, Will and James. He opened the door as slowly and quietly as he could. He didn't dare risk waking his parents. They both had long days ahead of them and needed all the sleep they could get. Last night they had half-heartedly tried to convince him to stay home, but ever since his father got injured, the family needed every bit of food they could get. Some fresh fish for breakfast and maybe even a few to sell at the market might bring some cheer back into his home.

Alan had to cross from his room to the front door without making a sound. He tiptoed around the squeaky floorboards and traced a silent route across the room, just like his brothers had shown him. He crept up to the door, lifting it slightly while opening it to stop the hinges from groaning. Then he collected the lantern and matches waiting by the door and left without a noise. Once outside the house he struck a match and lit the lantern. A soft glow spilled out and formed a bubble of warm light around Alan as he walked through the pitch-black night toward Ramsgate, the port town where the family’s small boat was docked.

On his walk, Alan had no company but his own thoughts. He had taken the dirt trail too many times to remember, but this was his first time doing it alone. In all the years of his life, he had been accompanied by Will and James. James would heckle Will and Alan, and their joking made the walk seem short. Alone, it was a much longer journey.

As he came around a bend, Alan paused. Ahead of him lay Ramsgate, a pretty seaside town that drew tourists from all over during the summer. Right now, however, it was a city of shadows. He knew he was only a few hundred feet away from it, but he couldn't see a single sign of life. Since the war began six months earlier, the government had enacted a blackout. All the lights in seaside towns had to be extinguished at night, making it more difficult for German submarines to identify British ships by only their silhouettes. The thought of U-boats circling underwater like iron sharks prickled Alan’s

skin and tied his stomach into knots. He told himself to be rational, that he should be safe—the *Zephyr* was so small it would be a waste of a torpedo. Also, the seas here were full of underwater obstacles. It would be too dangerous, he hoped, for a submarine to navigate the numerous hazards. But being rational didn't stop his nightmares of becoming trapped underwater, frozen in darkness.

Alan strained his eyes trying to see Ramsgate ahead of him in the night. He was in full support of the blackout, but it meant he would have to snuff out the lantern before entering the town. He took a breath, pursed his lips, and blew out the wick. Night enveloped him. He knew he was safer without the light, but he didn't feel like it.

He entered the town, still silent at this early hour. Shadows glided by in the darkness. They were just townspeople getting an early start to their day, but there was something ominous about their indistinct faces. They could have been anyone—even Nazi soldiers in a secret invasion. Alan shook his head to clear it of such outlandish thoughts.

Dire fantasies like these had plagued Alan in recent months, ever since both of his brothers left home. James had joined the British Expeditionary Force, and in his letters from France, he complained that he spent all of his time digging trenches instead of fighting Nazis. As for Will…well, he didn't really know where Will was. Gone, his parents told him, but Alan didn't believe them. How could he be gone when Alan could hear him whispering in his ear, telling him to be brave? How could he be gone when Alan was sure that if he just reached out in the darkness, his hand would rest on the reassuring strength of his oldest brother's shoulders?

Alan made his way down to the marina, maneuvering through the alleys by touch and memory. He found his way to the slip where the *Zephyr* was tied up. He had spent the last week scrubbing the hull for barnacles, inspecting for leaks, and generally making sure the vessel was seaworthy. Now he untied the lines securing it to the dock, and in one fluid movement he stepped into the boat and pushed it clear of the slip. He settled the oars into their locks and plied the waters with gentle strokes. It was easier to row through the narrow confines of the marina. Alan waited until he approached the sea, then hoisted the main sail. The *Zephyr* pulled out of the Ramsgate docks and into open waters.

In the darkness before dawn, the sea and the sky blended into a seamless wall of black. Dread clung to the inside of Alan's chest. Years of these early morning fishing trips with his brothers had taught him which shoals were dangerous and how a surging tide could dash him against the rocks if he wasn't careful. He had learned to respect the ocean but not to fear it. Fear led to panic, and panic was a deadly waste of time when survival depended on quick decision-making. No, his unease had little to do with the normal dangers of the sea.

The first hints of day tinged the sky. To the south, the magnificent Dover cliffs glowed orange and pink with the sun's light. A cold gust blew down from the North Sea, over the stern of the boat, and into the outstretched sail of the *Zephyr* as it ran from the wind. Alan let it push him south and let out a line on his fishing rod.

He handled the small craft with ease, even without his brothers. The *Zephyr* was light and nimble, barely big enough for the three brothers when they used to scramble around hauling up lines or slicing up grub to bait the hooks. Alone in the boat, Alan felt like he was the last person on Earth, wandering through ruins.

Alan sailed right over where the Goodwin Sands lurked below. The same white chalk that formed the famous cliffs also jutted up, barely submerged, right off the coast of Ramsgate where the English Channel met the North Sea. The Goodwin Sands had claimed the lives of many sailors. Wrecked ships with their treasure littered the underwater precipice like ornaments on a Christmas tree. Two lighthouses flashed warning beacons to protect sailors from these perils. One stood to the south, near the big port of Dover. The other was perched on the northeast tip of the land, and it was home to Alan's best friend, Sara. Sara's father, Horace, operated the lighthouse and was one of the strangest, most interesting people Alan had ever met. Now that the blackout was in effect and the lighthouse's beacon no longer shone bright, Horace busied himself with his numerous hobbies, including helping Sara repair whatever mechanical contraption she had scavenged that week.

The Goodwin Sands were Alan's best defense against submarines, but there was also a chance that he might run aground himself. He dreaded hearing rocks grinding against the hull, but the *Zephyr* was a shallow-drafted boat that floated on top of the water instead of sinking in, and the terrible sound never came. Instead, there was the gentle swish of kelp slapping against the belly of the boat. It was an ordinary sound, but even the most ordinary things had begun to seem quite strange to Alan. One part of him knew that it was only kelp, but another part of him couldn't stop imagining the outstretched hands of dead sailors reaching upward and running their slimy, half-decayed fingers along the bottom of the boat as it sailed by. The water was still murky at this early hour, so Alan couldn't just look down and banish his fears. Maybe there were thousands of dead down there, clawing their way to the surface. Like the 519 sailors of the HMS *Courageous* who died when a U-boat torpedoed it. Like his brother, Will. The dark sea could be hiding anything.

The U-boats, now there was a real danger, Alan reminded himself. No point in making up ghosts when there were plenty of real, scary things lurking in the water. There could even be one out there right now—maybe the same one that sank the *Courageous* and killed Will.

Ten feet behind Alan, the water splashed. He jumped, turned midair, and landed in the bottom of the boat, gripping an oar like a cricket bat. He slowly lifted his head over the gunwale and peeked out over the ocean, fearing he'd find a periscope eye looking right back at him. To his relief, it was only a pelican. It must have dive-bombed out of the sky to pick up its morning meal. Alan loosened his fierce grip on the oar and felt his cheeks flush as he suddenly felt quite ridiculous. Just a pelican.

Alan decided that was good enough for his first time on the water alone. He turned the boat upwind and started tacking his way home.

Zenith, Missouri

ANGELA HE

WRITEGIRL CONTRIBUTOR

It was 3 a.m. The clothes were still spinning, tangling in pink detergent and lukewarm water. He sat on the dirty plastic bench, his back distorted like that of a weary blue-collar worker. His palm awkwardly cusped his chin, and his elbow nervously balanced on his thigh. There was no distinct moonbeam or heaving darkness. Thirty-two minutes remaining, said red. Around him, a mother wearily shepherded her children while half-engrossed in the glow of her smartphone. Top 100 Billboard played above. It was a lonely night, one for contemplating existential crises and the problems of humanity. It was a night you say you'll remember forever, but never do. Everything fades to a bright bleach in the morning—those thoughts are too much in the Clorox sunlight.

He worried about his ailing mother, his aching back, his interview tomorrow for graduate school. The desolate path of a classics major; half of his friends were working at an investment bank and the other half were making the same Burger King-and-change as he was without the onus of a fifty thousand dollar loan. At least he was *happy*, he told himself. One day, he would write a memoir in his lofty Scandinavian home, complete with chevron and cacti. One day, he would inspire students at his cozy liberal arts college.

He turned to psychoanalyze the mother in an attempt to resist the pulsing smartphone in his left pocket. Why did she bring her kids here at 3 a.m.? They have school tomorrow, he thought. And I have an interview tomorrow. Perhaps he should talk to them, but he was too tired, like usual. He's a brave soul, an outgoing, *empathetic* man. Just not today, maybe tomorrow.

He closed his eyes for a bit, cozying up on the cold bench. The clicking of zippers and buttons against the metal wringer and the woozy lavender sent him into a shallow stupor. He still felt the now-quiet children and woman, the blue glow of her phone, and the scent of *lavanderia.* (Not Greek, this time.)

Follicular Rivalry

ROBERT KERBECK

I would never have gotten the hair transplant if I'd known my brother was going to get married the same week. The whole reason for getting the transplant in the first place was so I'd look good for Marcus's one-thousand-person wedding later that fall. It embarrassed me that though I was barely thirty as well as seven years younger, we looked about the same age—and that was before my hair had started falling out. My girlfriend of six months, Ana, was spritzing my scalp with the follicle enhancement spray I was required to apply hourly when I got his phone call late one Thursday evening in March.

"Tommy, I hope you got your tux ready," Marcus said. "We're getting married Saturday morning, dude."

My brother spent an inordinate amount of time trying to sound like one of the surfers we'd grown up with in Santa Monica. He got off pretending he was still a regular guy, even though he worked on Wall Street and had millions in the bank.

Ana was dabbing the excess spray along with the beads of sweat that had begun popping out of my head, where, if things went as promised, there'd be hair in three to six months.

"Don't worry, we're still gonna do the big wedding," he continued, mistaking the reason for my silence. "But Rachel's dad is real sick. He's not gonna make it 'til then. We're doing a family thing down at their place in La Jolla. She wants her dad to give her away."

"I'm so sorry," I said, though I was really thinking something else. My big brother, who'd tricked me, beaten me, and humiliated me my entire life, had somehow done it again. How was I going to show up at his wedding when my head looked like a scene out of a horror film, with grafted freak show hairs poking out between blotchy red abrasions surrounded by purple scabs?

While I wasn't completely bald, I'd been heading in that direction. The hair doc said if I acted quickly, most people wouldn't even notice. Sure, they could tell I had a thicker head of hair, but, if pressed, I could say I used Rogaine. Nobody would expect a part-time hospital equipment salesman living in a shabby, rent-controlled apartment to spring for a fifteen-thousand-dollar hair transplant.

"Tommy, I need you to pick up Mom and Dad and bring them down," Marcus told me. "Rachel and I are flying in from New York on a private jet right to La Jolla."

"Uh, sure," I said, despite not being sure of anything. If I went to the ceremony, everyone would know. Worst of all, my brother would know.

He must have sensed my indecision because he said something nice, an infrequent occurrence in our relationship. "I want you to be the best man."

My brother hadn't bestowed that honor for his real wedding, instead choosing his managing-director boss. Being a natural salesman, however, he could tell whenever he was losing something—or someone—*before* he'd lost it. Growing up, he'd always been smarter—as well as faster, stronger, better-looking. The list went on and on. When Marcus started losing his hair, he didn't even bother faking it, as I'd done with my elaborate comb-overs. He simply shaved his head, after which he resembled Bruce Willis in his prime. Because he was so confident, being bald didn't seem to affect him. Certainly, it didn't stop him from getting beautiful women, nor did it appear to matter as he worked his way up to running the Goldman Sachs high-volatility trading desk. But in the back of my thinning skull, I knew that my having hair ate my brother up.

It was the one thing I had on him.

So when my mop of blond hair began to disappear, seemingly overnight, I rushed to have the surgery, complete with stitches in the back of my head from ear to ear, wider than the shit-eating grin on Marcus's face when he used to hold me down on our front lawn, drooling loogies onto me while my friends watched and laughed.

I'd taken the entire week off from work—well, the three days I was scheduled, which I could afford about as much as the transplant payments. I'd planned to hide out in my apartment. Now I had to go to my brother's wedding in less than forty-eight hours.

After I hung up, I paced around our tiny one-bedroom apartment, coming close to walls and furniture before I'd switch directions at the last second to avoid a collision and possibly dislodge some of the 2,675 grafts in my head.

"Baby, baby, sit," Ana said. I waved her off and told her the rest of the sob story, though I knew she'd heard everything.

"How can I go there? How can I let him see me like this?" I wanted to smash something, but there wasn't much in my place and, as of a month earlier, our place. For sure, breaking the futon I'd cracked once before wasn't going to give me any pleasure. I marched toward the flat-screen TV my brother bought for my birthday, but Ana beat me to it.

"Don't you dare." She took my hand and walked me to the futon.

"He'll never stop teasing me," I said, almost in tears. "Every email, every phone call, there'll be some snide comment about my hair."

I thought of my brother stuffing me down the laundry chute on the third-floor of our childhood home. I remember sliding and sliding in the dark, then falling, over ten feet it turned out, onto a pile of laundry that scarcely cushioned the impact. It felt that way again. The news of his moved-up wedding had knocked me loopy.

"Baby, I'm gonna fix it."

"How are you going to fix *this*?" I moaned, lowering my skull so that Ana, a foot shorter than me, could see its full gruesomeness. She took a half step back but, to her credit, stepped forward again.

"If you shut your mouth, I'll tell you."

I relented and plopped onto the futon, the cushion sliding off its frame as I did. The futon was too worn to stay in place any longer. Whenever Ana and I watched TV, we ended up reclined without ever really moving.

"Stay right there," she said, going into our bedroom.

When she returned, she was carrying Mr. Peeps. I'd had the bong since I was thirteen, when my best friend had stolen a new one and given me the hand-me-down. We'd then gone into my brother's room (empty, since he was in college at Wharton), taken down his beloved childhood teddy bear, and ripped its eyes out. With the stem and bowl acting as a nose, I'd glued the eyes onto the plastic outside of the bong. This was my revenge for Marcus having left me at a Red Hot Chili Peppers concert a week earlier, when he'd been home for spring break. Our parents had bought the tickets, hoping it would be a nice bonding experience for him to take me to my first concert—except he met a girl at the show and split, leaving me surrounded by seventeen thousand strangers. My big brother, and supposed protector, had given me a twenty-dollar bill to get a cab home, when it cost way more than that. Even now, it gave me great satisfaction to gaze into the gouged-out eyes of his mangled bear.

Ana set Mr. Peeps on the coffee table in front of me. She'd filled the bowl with what smelled like my most expensive weed, Psychological Damage.

"Take a hit," she said, joining me on the half-off futon.

Ana wasn't a fan of my pot smoking, partly because of the smell that permeated the apartment (and her nurse's assistant outfits), but mainly because the weed I purchased was on the pricey side. She accepted, however, that in times of crisis—especially those involving my brother—nothing else would stop me from breaking things or hurting myself. I pulled out my lighter and toked away. On and on I pulled, my mood changing with the speed of the exploding bubbles inside the bong. As the smoke filled me, my tension dissipated. To make sure it didn't come back, I held the smoke in as long as possible, all the while staring at Ana's long black hair and cute snub nose.

She gazed back at me. She could tell the inhalation had taken the edge off. I smiled and almost rested my head on her shoulder but remembered I needed to be careful not to knock out my grafts.

"I have the solution," she said. "You'll wear a hat."

I coughed out the hit. "I can't wear a *baseball hat*. It's black tie. Even last minute my brother's wedding is going to be first class."

"No, *estupido*, you'll wear a fancy hat. One that makes you look *muy guapo*. It'll be part of your outfit, so you'll keep it on. I'll borrow one from Rodrigo."

Ana's brother taught dancing and performed as well, usually dressed in white. He

wore a white fedora with black pinstripes as part of his routine. Rodrigo's big trick was to remove the fedora as though he was tipping his cap to his partner, but then he'd do a complete flip, ending up right under the hat again, which he'd return to his head with a flourish. While I wouldn't be doing any similar moves, Ana's idea was genius. Instead of the black tux I would've rented, I could get a white one to go with Rodrigo's fedora. I was so euphoric that Ana had saved me, and pretty high from the weed, that instead of thanking her or hugging her or even kissing her, I did something else entirely.

I asked her to marry me.

* * *

"You look like a gangster," my father said when Ana and I arrived to pick them up. "Or a pimp."

Normally, his dig would've bothered me—especially since I was chauffeuring my parents to the wedding and back—but as long as my head was covered, I was a happy camper. The slight bruising on my face had faded to the point of being almost unnoticeable, thanks to Ana's strict policy of icing fifteen minutes on and fifteen minutes off. It was painful but had achieved the desired result. Except for the monstrosity hidden by my hat, I looked like myself. As a matter of fact, I looked better. Rodrigo's hat somehow suited me, which I never would've guessed.

Once we were on the 405 South, bound for La Jolla, I even smiled over at my father, who sat next to me wearing the same black tuxedo he'd been married in. Ana sat behind him and next to my mother, who'd pulled herself forward so that her heavily made-up face was hovering over my right shoulder.

"Mom, be careful, I'm wearing white."

"I know what color it is. I'm old, not blind. I should mess it up and make you wear black like everyone else. It's called black tie for a reason."

"But he looks so handsome," Ana said.

In the rearview mirror I caught my mother giving a polite smile to my girlfriend, now fiancée. Ana and I had decided to keep that information under wraps. It wouldn't be right to upstage my brother on his wedding day.

"Thank you, baby," I said. "The white was my idea. I called Ana from the rental place and she told me to get black, but I didn't listen."

"He had to be *different*, didn't he?" my mother said.

"Always," my father said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

"It means you're not going to match in the pictures. That's what it means."

I turned toward my father, the top of the fedora brushing against the roof of the car, shooting pain across my scalp. "So? Marcus is lucky I'm going at all. It wasn't easy to get off work last minute, you know. It shouldn't matter what I'm wearing, like, what, it's not

good enough?"

"Nobody said a word about that," my mother said. "It just would've been nice if you'd followed the instructions."

I reached for the stereo. Anything not to chance my parents reviewing all my past failures to follow protocol: no college degree, no steady job, no three-bedroom house.

"Oh, please, none of that pot music," my mother said after my Phish CD had played for all of five seconds. She was waving her hand like the sound was polluting the inside of the car.

"It's not pot music," I said, though Phish did likely qualify.

"Pot music for a pot car," my father said, turning off the stereo. "I hope we're not getting one of those secondhand highs."

"It's called a contact high. And I don't smoke in the car. Ana won't allow it."

The lie seemed to take my parents by surprise. I observed them exchanging a look.

"It could be she's a good influence on you," my father said, sternly.

For an instant, I thought my mother was going to whack him. A road sign came up. We were 105 miles from San Diego.

I would've given anything for a hit of the weed stashed beneath my seat.

* * *

There was nowhere to park at Rachel's parents' house. Giant white trucks took up every available space. I shouldn't have been surprised that my brother's last-minute, family-only wedding would be catered like it was the event of the century. "Go big or go home" was his motto. He even had it listed under his picture on LinkedIn.

I dropped off my parents, but Ana stayed with me. I found a spot a block away, and together we walked back to the house. The sun was up now that it was past ten, and though it was March, it was turning into a warm and sunny day. I felt myself sweating under the hat and removed it to scratch my head.

"What are you doing?" Ana said.

"Huh?"

"You can't take off your hat. Not for a second. If you get hot, go into the bathroom to do it. But you're not supposed to be scratching anyway, so keep it on."

"Got it."

We arrived in front of Bob and Judy's house, a Spanish-style Mediterranean decorated entirely in white. There were stars hanging everywhere and snowflakes, too. The color scheme made me feel better about my outfit.

* * *

Marcus was inside waiting for me.

"Hey, bro," he said, pulling me away from Ana. It reminded me of scenes in bad sitcoms where people move two feet away, somehow signifying that no one can hear their conversation. "What's with the pimp-daddy look? Rachel's gonna throw a fit. This is supposed to be black tie formal."

"Actually, black tie is *semi*-formal," Ana said, stepping in to break Marcus's fourth wall. "If this is a formal event, Tommy is the one dressed correctly."

My brother seemed at a loss for words. He wasn't used to people standing up to him. I'd always been scared of him, and my parents worshipped at his feet—and why not? Marcus had paid off their house, given them money for clothes and trips, and now was getting married, no doubt soon providing them with grandkids.

"Forgive me," he said to Ana. "I'm Marcus. It's nice to meet you."

"I'm Ana, pimp daddy's girlfriend."

He laughed. "Funny. Pretty, too. Nice work, dude."

"Congratulations," she said.

"I'm not married yet. Let's see how the day goes first."

Marcus led us through the house to the backyard garden, where workers were putting the finishing touches on an open-air gazebo that appeared to have been installed for the event. People in white uniforms buzzed about, setting up food stations and carrying bags of ice and bottles of champagne. There were even photographers taking pictures of the preparations. Perhaps Rachel was planning to write a book on how to pull off a first-class wedding in less than forty-eight hours.

My mother and father were at the bar drinking champagne when we joined them.

"This is magnificent," my mother said, finishing her glass.

"It's Dom Perignon," Marcus said.

Did my brother think we couldn't read the label? There was a gleaming silver ice bucket sitting on the bar, filled with bottles of the stuff, each with the label conspicuously facing out.

"Perfect for a warm day like this," said my father.

"Drink up," said my brother, glaring at the bartender, who was organizing the bar and hadn't offered the rest of us a drink. There were unopened boxes of what I supposed was every type of liquor known to man. God forbid my brother just serve champagne and wine. No, he had to have a full bar for what was essentially a morning wedding.

"Oh, sorry," the bartender said, returning his attention to us. "You got a lot of booze here."

"I know," Marcus said. "Isn't it glorious?"

The bartender poured champagne for Ana but had to search to find a warmish beer for me. Apparently, beer wasn't the drink of choice for the Goldman Sachsers of the world, so it'd suffered from ice inequality. It didn't matter since I wasn't much of a drinker. I excused myself to use the bathroom inside the house, which Ana knew was code for getting high.

After opening the bathroom window, I detached the center of my custom-ordered belt, turning its buckle into a pipe. It took me less than half a minute to load a hit, this time a strain called Mr. Hyde, and toke away.

On my way out of the bathroom, I heard some coughing. Was someone else getting high? If they were, they weren't being as stealthy as I'd been. I followed the sound and found a man bent over in a wheelchair. It took me a moment to realize that it was Rachel's father, Bob. It took even longer to realize that he wasn't coughing. "It's all gone," he sobbed without looking up.

"Hey, Bob," I said, but he appeared unable to hear me. I wasn't sure what the signs of late-stage Parkinson's were, but he was half the size of the man I'd laughed with at Marcus and Rachel's engagement party a year earlier. Perhaps he was deaf, too.

"What's all gone?" I touched his shoulder. He turned his head to gaze up at me.

"Tommy?"

"Yeah, hey, Bob, how you doing?"

I couldn't believe that, even though he was this sick, he still remembered me. His head slumped like it was weighted, but his hand motioned for me to come lower. I dropped down to my knees so he could see my face.

"It's all gone," he said and pointed at the darkened glass door he was sitting in front of.

A voice came from behind us. "I should've known I'd find you here."

It was Judy, Bob's wife. Like her husband, she was in her mid-sixties, but she dressed like a younger woman, wearing a shimmering black leather dress.

"Where's Leticia?" she asked, giving me her cheek to kiss. She turned as I kissed her so that I ended up uncomfortably close to her lips.

"Uh, I don't know," I said. "I found him here."

"She's probably running some errand for Rachel and parked him here. Would you mind pushing him outside? I need a young man with muscles. We're going to start soon. My Rachel has organized a ceremony that's longer than half the marriages in California." Judy squeezed my bicep but seemed disappointed. She shrugged and took off, leaving me in charge of her husband.

"Okay, Bob, let's take a ride."

But he was shaking his head no.

"Don't you want to see your daughter get married?"

His head rose slowly. When he got to forty-five degrees, he waved a shaky finger at the door. "Look."

I opened the glass door. Inside was a room that had been converted into a wine cellar. On the walls were pictures of Bob smiling and holding wines at various wineries, usually larger bottles like magnums. But the pictures were the only things remaining in the room. The rest of the cellar was empty, though the cooling system was still on.

"What happened to your wines?"

"She sold them," he said.

"Why?"

"Money." Bob gave me a withering look. "Not even dead yet."

His head drooped, this time lower than when I first spotted him. I could tell our encounter had taken a lot out of him, so I let him be, though I wanted to know why Judy would sell the wines that obviously had sentimental value to him. Perhaps she wanted to spare him the torture of having wine around that, because of his disease, he was no longer allowed to drink. Whatever the case, it was a major buzzkill.

I rolled Bob out to the garden, and right away my brother came over.

"Dude, get high later. I need you. You're the best man."

"I wasn't getting high. I was helping Judy with Bob."

"Okay, good idea. You're in charge of him. You push him down the aisle with Rachel, then keep an eye on him during the ceremony. Get him whatever he needs."

"No problem."

Things happened quickly after that. At least it seemed that way to me, because the weed, combined with the heat of the day and the outfit I was wearing, was kicking my ass. The fedora was driving me batty, too, as it had no ventilation holes, creating an itchy greenhouse effect. A piano player started playing on a white Steinway I hadn't noticed, and the small crowd gathered around the open-air gazebo. No one looked happy to be wearing black and baking in the sun. I hung in the back with Bob where the house provided a bit of shade.

I know I'm supposed to say Rachel looked beautiful, but she looked as stressed as I'd ever seen another human being. She was thinner than usual and the cords of her neck were popping out. I couldn't blame her given the circumstances. I followed my brother's instructions and pushed Bob down the aisle alongside her. Everyone *ooh*ed and *ahh*ed at the poignant tableau. Everything would've been fine, too, if Rachel hadn't had more readings than in a church. At one point, the Bible was passed around so that each person could read a sentence or two, including me, stoned off my ass. But what caused the tumult was when Rachel insisted her father read as well.

Bob squinted at the Bible I held out for him. I could feel the sun on its pages as if the black book might spontaneously combust from the heat. "Love," he read.

There was a long pause as he fought the glare and the small print.

"Is."

Another longer pause.

I wanted to yell at Marcus and Rachel that it was too much for the man, but they were grinning like idiots and oblivious to how hot it'd become, not to mention that the man was dying, possibly during the service if it continued much longer.

"Patient."

"Marcus," I said from my knees. "It's too bright out here. He can't read it."

"Give him your hat," my brother said.

The crowd murmured and nodded in assent that this was an excellent suggestion. Anything that would move the proceedings along.

"What?" I felt wobbly, like I had that day Marcus tricked me into looking down the laundry chute and I ended up with a concussion.

"Let him wear your hat, bro."

I almost said, "But it's part of the outfit." Instead, I weakly corrected him. "It's a fedora."

"Whatever, dude. Just give it to him so he can see."

I looked at my parents, who were gesticulating like they were playing a game of charades, where the answer was *Give him your fucking hat.* And then it hit me. My brother had gotten me yet again. For this moment would live forever in the minds of my family. I would always be the selfish slacker, the loser of the family.

My brother, his head dripping with sweat, had a look I'd seen before. He was getting ready to go alpha male on me, storming off the gazebo to rip the fedora from my head. I shut my eyes, waiting for the laughter—or the screams—to begin.

But Ana moved before Marcus did, shouting in cacophonous *muy rapido* Spanish. I didn't speak the language other than the basics most gringos learned growing up in Southern California, but the gist of her tirade, which included Ana pointing at the sun directly over our heads and then down at Bob, dressed in a black tuxedo and practically falling out of his wheelchair, seemed quite clear: Marcus and Rachel were terrible for doing what they were doing. Ana grabbed the wheelchair and backed it up like the nurse's assistant she was, wheeling Bob into the shade and coolness of the house. Everyone was stunned, but I also suspected they were ecstatic that the ceremony could move forward, and, because Ana had done her ranting in Spanish, no one really knew what she said. Even my brother looked relieved. He gave me a wisp of a smile and a discreet thumbs-up. I doffed my hat to him, careful not to lift it very high.

After the ceremony ended, with Rachel and Marcus looking like they'd finished a game of pickup basketball, I grabbed a glass of champagne for Ana and headed off to find her. It took me a minute since they'd taken refuge inside the wine cellar, the coolest place in the house. Ana had removed Bob's jacket and bowtie, and unbuttoned his shirt as well. He was in better shape, though quiet and hunched over.

"Close the door," Ana said.

I did and handed her the champagne, which she took without drinking and placed on the wine-stained wooden counter.

"Give him a hit of your pot."

"What?"

"Just a small hit."

"Are you serious?" Normally, I was all in favor of sharing my weed, but getting my brother's dying father-in-law high seemed like a bad idea.

"It helps with the shaking," she said. "They've done studies that show THC can

counteract the effects of Parkinson's. It improves attitude, too."

The last part I knew for a fact. Pot enabled me to see the world and those in it, especially my brother, with less bitterness—and without seeking revenge for what had occurred. If it stopped me from wanting to kill him, or, more likely, vandalize his BMW, I could only imagine how it might help someone with an incurable disease.

"Okay," I said. "One hit."

As I unsnapped my buckle pipe, Bob was waving at me, as if to say, "Hurry up already." Far from being deaf or hard of hearing, he'd been listening to everything we said and was fully onboard with the pot therapy. I loaded a small amount of Mr. Hyde and got to my knees. He inhaled as I lit the bowl. At first, I worried he was toking too intensely, but he handled it well.

"Hold it in," I said as we stared into each other's eyes. I hardly knew Bob, yet I felt more love coming from him in that instant than I'd ever felt from my father or brother. That was the thing about pot that people didn't get. I wasn't just sharing my weed with Bob. We were sharing a connection, the kind most people were too busy for.

"Still a few left," he said, exhaling.

For a moment, I wasn't sure what he meant. Had he hidden a couple of bottles of wine somewhere in the cabinets underneath the empty racks? I got up to search, but Bob was shaking his head with a smile, the first I'd seen from him since Marcus and Rachel's engagement party.

"Not wines," he said. "Good people."

The cellar door flew open.

"Jesus Christ," Marcus said, half entering, since the room was pretty much at full capacity. "We thought you guys left."

"I brought him in here to cool off," Ana said.

My brother nodded. I could tell he wanted to argue, but he appeared to take note that, unlike me, my fiancée wasn't intimidated by him.

"What's that smell?" he asked, sniffing.

"Medical marijuana," Ana said. "We use it at my facility to treat a number of illnesses, including Parkinson's."

"You got him high? Who gave you the right to do that?"

"I did." Bob raised his head and sat erect in his chair. I'd like to think it was the Mr. Hyde, but the man seemed to have had enough of being told what to do. He lifted his arm and held it up. It wavered only slightly.

Ana gave my brother the kind of stare-down I'd dreamed of doing. She then gave me a disappointed look and wheeled Bob out of the cellar.

After they left, Marcus pointed at the belt pipe sitting on the wooden counter. "Must be nice to be high all the time."

I wasn't sure if I was coming down from the Mr. Hyde or had gotten a batch spiced with LSD, but being trapped with my brother blocking the cellar exit was giving me the

heebie-jeebies. It made me want to scratch.

"I'd definitely like to be high right now," he added.

Did my brother want me to get him stoned, too? I couldn't think of anyone I'd rather party with less.

"You remember the last time I did?" Marcus continued. "I threw up."

I recalled warning him not to smoke too much. Of course, he ignored me.

"Red wine and weed isn't a good combo," I said.

"Go big or go home, right? Like the floor seats I got us for that Chili Peppers concert."

"Mom and Dad got us."

"No, I bought those tickets. I wanted to take you to your first concert."

I doubted that was true, but even if it was, what did it matter? "You left me there." I slipped a finger under the fedora and rubbed.

"Yeah, and then I took you snowboarding at Mammoth to make up for it. Remember the place had that game room."

I'd forgotten, but instantly flashed to Marcus hammering me in game after game of ping pong. To make it fair, he played me with his right hand, though he was left-handed. Eventually, he beat me playing with his shoe.

"I want you to know I'm not pissed," Marcus said. "I don't know about Rachel. Maybe you can apologize later."

Even though, as usual, I hadn't done anything wrong. Nor had Ana. Both of my hands dug under the fedora, rooting.

"What a ballbuster you got," he added.

I lowered my hands. There was something on them, whether it was sweat or pus or blood, or a combination of the three, I wasn't sure. When I spotted the tiny hairs seemingly growing from my fingertips, I realized I'd scratched out some of the grafts. "What did you say?"

"Don't take it the wrong way, bro. They're all ballbusters. Rachel's still out there getting her picture taken. I mean, how many photos—"

I took off the fedora.

"Go ahead, make a joke. Call me names. But don't ever say anything about my fiancée again. You got that, *bro*?"

I wasn't sure which he was more shocked by: my festering scalp, my standing up to him, or the revelation that Ana and I were getting married. There was a long pause as Marcus took in the horror on my head, the hum of the condenser the only sound. When I moved to leave, he grabbed my elbow, "Wait." Instead of shoving my skull into one of the empty wine racks, he lowered his own, "I'm such a douche."

Was this my brother's attempt at an apology? Something he'd never done before. And what was more remarkable, he put his hand on the back of my stitched-together scalp, and pulled me close. "A hair transplant? Why didn't I think of that?"

Two Writers Walk Into a Bar

EPISODE 1: DAVID L. ULIN

LISTEN TO PODCAST

Two Writers Walk Into a Bar is a monthly podcast from *Exposition Review* where editor and host Mellinda Hensley brings an author to his or her favorite bar in L.A. to discuss liquor, L.A., and writing under the influence of both. This podcast, the very first in the series, is a conversation with author David L. Ulin about his book, *Sidewalking: Coming to Terms With Los Angeles.* He discusses travel, class tours, and the way our memories influence the view of our everyday landscape.

Yallaha Dreams

ASHLEY ROQUE

You can tell a diamondback rattlesnake's age by the number of bands on its tail. They shed a couple of times a year, and each time a new rattle is added. Unless the tail breaks. Then it's a guess.

After Mama killed one with nine rattle bands coiled under Miles and my bed she started using the word "safety." My safety. Our family's financial safety. When they think I'm sleeping, the word floats off her sharp tongue toward Daddy and then under my bedroom door.

Over dinner her tongue softens when she talks about my educational safety in schools across the bay. They are more competitive. I could play football. Earn a college scholarship.

"Don't be silly," Daddy responds. "The boy's only eight. You're not interested in college yet, right?" Sometimes he dabs a glob of buttery mashed potatoes or whipped cream on the tip of my nose when the subject comes up.

"'Sides, if we keep the groves they will be his. His safety net. He won't need to spend his time in college."

Mama has also been bringing up financial security at dinner a lot. If we sell the groves, we could move out from under the tin roof encircled with rattlers that could kill me at any moment, though I've only seen one. Mama leans back in her chair when she starts dreaming of a new house, tucking a cigarette between her lips while Daddy flips open his silver lighter and leans across the table. We could buy a new house in South Tampa, away from the rattlers. Daddy could rest his back or find some desk job. Does he want to die at sixty of a brain aneurysm like Bill?

I think Mama picked up all this "safety" and "security" talk from the Ties. They're a group of men in button-down shirts, neckties, and suspenders that started circling our place six months before the rattler appeared. Sometimes when I sit at the kitchen table watching Mama cook dinner, I can hear Daddy talking with the Ties on the back porch. While Mama's chopping carrots and leaning against the counter to watch the chicken plump brown in the oven, those two words float through the screen door and linger in the house like Florida's humid air.

* * *

As far as I can tell, my family has always been in the orange business. My Daddy's dad—I call him Bill 'cause he always said he was too damn young to be a grandpa—liked to talk about the great freeze of 1895 that sent his father from the Florida Panhandle south to the state's belly. On a map, the state looks like a bent finger, and we're smack dab in the center, far enough south from the hard freezes and far enough north from the Cubans in Miami. Right across the bay, though, you can find the best Cuban cigars and pressed Cuban sandwiches filled with pork, ham, and cheese in Ybor City cafes.

I'm not sure if Bill hated the Cubans more or the Sunkist jackasses. He'd spit on the ground every time he mentioned the jackasses—even in the house when Mama wasn't around—and would leave the last "s" vibrating on his tongue for two or three beats. He said they planted the Mediterranean fruit fly to help their own damn sales. Not enough humidity in California for their oranges to plump. Not enough juice. So they had to cheat, sent spies over with the nasty bugs to destroy the Florida groves.

Anyway, Bill taught Daddy the family's budding secrets. You know, you can't just plant seeds for the perfect orange gold. Seeds from sweet oranges can end up producing fruit that is too damn sour. Instead, you have to take a root from a perfect orange tree, cut a "t" into it and then insert a bud. That's the short version.

After Daddy learned all the family secrets, his draft number was picked and he was supposed to go to Europe. But the Army sent him home when he lost his balance on the obstacle course, landed on his back, and slipped some discs. When he got home, he met Mama and they married shortly after 'cause I was on the way. Bill was always adding the last part but glancing around to make sure Mama was out of earshot. He was always biting his tongue when Mama was around. When he didn't, she'd give him a certain look. It's the look she gives when Miles tracks in mud or I repeat some of Bill's favorite words like "damn." But she'd also threaten to pull Bill's tongue out of his mouth if he couldn't control it.

I just think Bill was not used to women—that, or just scared of Mama. Neither Mama nor I ever met my grandma. And since he was alone and getting older when my parents married, Bill gave them the tin-roof house and the groves as a wedding gift and moved under a smaller tin roof on the property. But he was over almost every day for dinner. After eating I'd squeeze next to him in his favorite chair, the soft brown leather pressing us tight. He'd tell me about the groves and how the land once belonged to a Seminole tribe; I collect their arrowheads from the creek behind the house. Or Bill would fill in holes, like how Miles came to be our dog.

* * *

On my first birthday, Mama and Daddy had their first big fight. Daddy showed up from the groves and pulled out a cardboard box with a sulfuric pee scent. Inside was a small gray Weimaraner puppy. My birthday gift.

Mama says she knew what was coming next. The scent of pee turned into puddles around the house and piles of poop were added. And the chewing. The front legs of our oak china cabinet—an heirloom from a grandma down the line—and all four legs of the wooden kitchen table. Then when the winds picked up speed and thunder shook the window frames, Miles started howling. Maybe that's why he began sneaking into my room at night.

Back then, Daddy got up at 5:30 a.m. to fill his belly with fried eggs, corn bread and bacon slabs popping from the cast iron skillet's heat. Before heading to the groves, he'd crack open my door and whistle for Miles, who'd lift his head and wait for the second call before moving one front paw to the floor at a time, then sliding his belly and back legs down the side of the bed with a yawn opening his mouth. They'd take the truck out to the groves, Miles in the back enjoying the cool breeze, his head wrapping around the driver's side and the air parting his lips into a smile. Daddy says that while he and the seasonal workers propped wooden ladders against the orange trees' leafy branches, climbed up, and tossed the fruit into burlap sacks, Miles rested below a vacant tree fending off the heat of the rising sun. By late morning when the sun hung high above, they'd head home for lunch before returning to the fruit.

When I was around two, though, Daddy's two morning calls for Miles turned to three, and then one day Miles up and left his spot under the orange tree to walk the mile home along the dirt road connecting the groves and our house. When he got home, he pawed the rusted screen door open and made his way over to his blanket between the kitchen and the living room. Mama remembers that she was frying chicken legs and draining the potatoes to mash.

Miles's first escape left Daddy relieved. He'd searched the groves for forty-five minutes before driving home and calling Miles's name out the window. He'd even made up a story about Miles staying with the pickers since he really was better as an outside dog. But when Daddy opened the kitchen door, Miles just stood up, stretched, and walked over to press his nose against Daddy's leg.

In the coming months, sometimes Miles would stick around for a ride home and other days Daddy would come home frustrated that the damn dog was too lazy to stay out of the house. Mama would laugh and drop her voice to impersonate his take on the lazy dog.

"It's payback for his selfish gift," she'd add. "That dog was never for you."

* * *

To me, Miles has always been mine…and old. A lot like Bill. When Daddy wasn't around, Miles would climb into his brown leather chair one paw at a time before sitting on his butt like a normal dog. But then he'd lean into the chair's back exposing his belly, splaying his legs open and slumping his head to the side. It's a position Bill would take after three plates of turkey and mashed potatoes on Thanksgiving. The year of the Mediterranean fruit fly invasion, Daddy was also in that position a lot. He'd come home, his jean overalls covered in mud, down several caramel-colored drinks with ice cubes bobbing at the top, and slump in the chair. Legs splaying open just like Miles.

* * *

Although Bill told me all about Miles's peeing and pooping in the house, his howling and even his escapes home, I don't remember most of it. I just remember him by my side.

Mornings are booger time. I pull Miles's floppy ears towards my face to kiss his wet, gray nose, studying the eye boogers that have collected in the corners of his eyes. Resting my palms on either side of Miles's face, I use my thumbs to dislodge the boogers and then flick them on the floor. Mama calls it gross but how could he see through all those boogers?

When I'm at school during the day, Miles might go to the groves with Daddy or just keep Mama company in the house. But then he waits for me at the end of the driveway, under the old oak tree ready with a big lick and a game of tag.

At night we listen to the sharp pinnings of rain on the roof. The sound helps us sleep, but when it's raining really hard, shaking the roof, I pull the green blanket tighter over us, roll to my right side, and bury my head in Miles's short fur that smells like freshly cut grass and sugary orange blooms.

In the summer, though—when thick, sticky air engulfs the farm and the orange trees look like they've caught fire by the setting sun—Miles gets in a tizzy when streaks of lightning and clapping booms rattle Mama's oak china cabinet. He'll sit on our bed and turn his giant Weimaraner front paw into an affection-seeking hook that leaves scratches behind.

He loves his hook, though, and uses it during thunderstorms or any time he feels scared.

* * *

Miles is the one who found Bill sound asleep in the leather chair, his pipe resting on top of the wooden side table and the smell of cherry tree tobacco still hovering in the air.

We'd come in from the yard, Miles and I, and he'd gone up to lick Bill "hello." Before I knew it, his hook was out, pulling Bill's left leg closer and softly whining. Miles stayed by his side until Mama sent us to our room so they could get Bill out of the house.

Mama said Bill never felt any pain. Just a quick pop in his brain, like a balloon, and then he was gone.

When you get old you start falling apart. It's why Bill's brain popped and why Daddy is always complaining about his back. It even happens to dogs. Miles's back legs aren't as stable as they use to be. He never complains but sometimes they just slip out from under him and he face plants into the wood floor.

* * *

After Bill died, it was only a few months before the rattler appeared. School was almost out for the summer, and Miles and I came inside after a game of chase. Miles was already slowing down by then. We'd taken a few rounds back and forth to the old oak tree. I'd start by running after Miles to the tree's base, and he'd trail me to the back porch and repeat until he sat down, slumming sideways onto his side.

After a few rounds in the yard and a rest in the prickly grass, we headed inside—past Mama in the kitchen and Bill's leather chair and into my bedroom. We were on the bed before the shaking started. It sounded like the maracas I sometimes play in music class, except these were steady bursts. A constant rattling instead of the choppy sounds I make during class.

Miles and I held our breath to listen. After three starts and breaks, I leaned over the edge of the bed to peek under. There he was. Fat and coiled up with the rattle sticking up between one of his body loops. His fat triangle head was sticking up, too, but facing the opposite side of the bed, and his skinny black tongue was poking out, the tip split into a V and curling up to touch the tip of his nose. He didn't have diamonds on his back, though. They were more like hearts, light greenish-brown hearts in the middle, with black scales outlining the shape.

As soon as his tail started rattling again, I shot back up onto the bed, grabbed Miles by the neck to protect him, and hollered for Mama to come. My scream only made the snake madder, his tail shook faster, and I swear he hissed.

Mama's bare footsteps plopped along the wood floors as she ran to my room.

"What is it?" Her voice trailed when she got to the doorway, the brown bun on the back of her head cocking to the side to listen. It's something Miles does when I teach him a new trick like dancing on his back legs or how to speak.

"It's under the bed Mama. A big rattler," I said.

I'll never forget her eyes. They squinted so tight together I almost couldn't see the green anymore and then sprung wide open with her mouth, sort of like a firecracker bursting.

Within a split second she dropped to her knees to check out the coiled rattler's split tongue.

During all this, Miles stayed calm. Like I said, even then he was getting old. He just lay on the bed cocking his head back and forth to watch. Mama picked herself up from the floor and steadied her voice into a whisper.

"You need to stay real quiet. And don't move," she said while backing herself out of the room. She must have headed to the outdoor shed 'cause I heard the creak of the porch screen door open and slowly shut before it was opened again and Mama was back in the doorway with a flat-tipped shovel in her right hand.

She walked on the balls of her feet and in a hushed voice ordered Miles and me over to the foot of the bed.

"You go first. Quietly. Miles will follow behind," she said while standing at the bed's end. The veins in her hands were pulsing as she gripped the wooden handle, the shovel's head hovering a foot above the floorboards.

"If the rattler moves, I have him."

I inched down the bed, my butt sliding along the green blanket.

The snake was silent, even as I plopped one foot on the floor, then the second, and ran to the doorway. But the sound of my feet on the wood must have startled him and his tail was going again.

"Further back," Mama said, the quiver gone from her voice. "I don't want him striking at you when Miles runs."

She clicked her tongue on the roof of her mouth and called Miles to the end of the bed, the shovel still ready to snap the snake's head if he lunged.

Miles slowly stood up, hopped off the edge and walked towards me. That's when Mama sighed, and she ordered me to close the door.

"You don't need to see this, and I don't need either of you getting bit," she said.

I didn't want to shut it, but I needed to keep Miles safe. Mama must have been in there five or ten minutes coaxing the rattler out—tapping the shovel on the ground to get the snake mad or just to get him from under the bed. Miles and I also heard the rattle start and stop several times till there was one loud bang on the floor, then another and another. There are still dents on the floor where the shovel went through the snake's neck.

By the time Mama opened the door, his head was off but his body was still jerking around. Then she used the shovel to protect herself from the head as she stepped around and ordered us to stay out.

"Your Daddy will clean this up when he gets home. We can't do anything right now. He can still bite for a while."

Decapitated snakes are a lot like zombies, technically dead but they can still bite and kill you.

* * *

In the Seminole language, there are three names for oranges based on how they taste. Yallaha is for sweet ones, Yallahasempa is for the sour fruit, and Yallahoochena for the ones that leave a bitter flavor in your mouth.

A few weeks after the rattler, when the Ties convinced the Smiths to sell off their groves to make way for the Yankee housing development, Daddy took to calling it the bitter Yallahoochena deal. But Mama lingers over the dinner table forking her mashed potatoes with one hand, a thin, white cigarette in the other, telling him to "shoosh." For her, it is a sweet dream, her Yallaha dream.

The battle of the Ys has been going on all summer now. Daddy says the Ties just want to take a bulldozer to the house and groves so that they can put up new houses that will all look the same. Our towering oak trees will be replaced with sidewalks, maybe Bill's old house destroyed and a swimming pool put in its place. Our long dirt driveway and the groves will be replaced with black tar.

But Mama likes to remind him that this is what happens. Does he want to trade in his truck for a horse and cart? Besides, moving means financial security, plus a U-shaped kitchen and air conditioning in a new house.

Every time their voices grow louder discussing the decision, Miles just digs his hook into my thigh so he can nuzzle up.

"It's okay boy," I tell him. "They're just talking."

Real fights are saved for hushed voices when we go to bed.

To tell you the truth, I'm not sure which Y camp I'm in.

The creamy, sweet scent of orange blossoms and the chatter of pickers during season are home. Like the ping of the rain on our tin roof; they are both givens. Both lingering in the sticky air before sinking into your pores. They make summer summer. Plus, I don't know if Miles would be happy on the big city streets.

But a new house with cold air and kids my age seems good too.

* * *

I think Miles would really miss the sweet scent of orange blooms in spring.

"Better than a big glass of whisky," Bill used to say.

Miles and I can spend hours under an orange tree staring up at the blue sky while elephants turn into tigers in the cotton candy clouds. White blossoms above decorate the tree branches. Here and there the white petals rain onto our faces before settling between the fat blades of Bermuda grass.

It's probably a bit like snow, except not cold. Plus we haven't been able to build a snowman with the petals, though we've tried—Miles pushing the piles together with his nose while I try to form a ball with my hands. My snow angel attempts are a bit better, but the flowery scent lingers in my hair for two days, even after a good scrubbing.

Although Miles almost never goes to the groves with Daddy anymore, I'm afraid leaving here means he'd miss the clouds and the remaining scent of Bill's pipe that still lingers in the house.

We'd also miss the water since the good beach would be too far away for a Friday-night swim. When it's not picking season, some Fridays Mama fries up some chicken and packs it up in a wicker basket along with potato salad. We pile into the truck, Mama and Daddy in the cab, Miles and I in the back, and drive to where the road ends and the white sand starts.

I strip down to my trunks, racing Miles past the green bushes and the few spiky palm trees, and into the greenish-blue waves. We can spend hours bobbing up and down, while the red sky sinks the sun into the waves.

Bill said some people can't swim. Never learned how. But once you've learned, I figure you shouldn't have to do without.

Dress-Up Is a Wishful Game

PHOEBE YEOH

Jia-li is two smells away from home. Her eyes are always shut tight by this point in the ride to abate the motion sickness caused by the lurch of her bus and the titter of her classmates, but she can tell that they have just passed the untrustworthy *sate* vendor, who is grilling rancid meat again. The fragrance of fresh *kway teow* drifts by, and she opens her eyes, pulling her nose away from the slit in the window.

"*Jalan Ikan*!"

She jerks her schoolbag over her shoulder and shifts to a half-standing position at the edge of her seat. Her body lurches, and she stumbles down the aisle, catching her balance just as the whining of the brakes dies away.

The bus driver, a fat middle-aged Hindu who spits out the window, glares up at her from beneath his eyebrows. Jia-li ignores him, shoving herself off the bus before her classmates can do it for her. Tonight she starts working the evening shift from 19:00 to midnight, taking beverage orders at her father's *kopitiam*. Her eldest brother, who previously held the post, has been forced into retirement by their parents so that he can study for his upcoming O-levels.

Leaping up the tile steps of the *kopitiam*, she weaves through the food vendors setting up for the evening rush. She wants to take off the itchy skirt of her school uniform and study as much as she can before work. If she wants to beat her younger brother, who is currently competing with her to be the Child Who Shall Be Sent Overseas, she absolutely has to up her scores in Mandarin. The U.K. or U.S. is too expensive a stretch, but her parents have said that they can afford Taiwan.

Her mother, who runs the *kway teow* stand at the back, casts a handful of dried shrimp into her wok in preparation for the next batch. Jia-li veers towards the stairs. A large spatula, dripping lightly with oil and bits of noodle, swings out to block her path.

Jia-li exhales harshly. "*Ma*."

"Your skirt will flip up! If you run so fast." Her mother jerks the spatula for emphasis, spraying bits of oil onto Jia-li's uniform. Two seconds later, she uses the same spatula to scoop a heap of *kway teow* onto an orange melamine plate. The fragrant steam of hot fried noodles envelops Jia-li's face, almost as good as a hug.

"*Jiak*." Her mother shoves the plate towards her and turns back to her work. Jia-li tugs the irritating skirt further down her waist and rushes to the private family table, where

they linger to do homework or watch TV during slow periods. Jia-li's elder sister perches on the edge of a plastic stool, separating ringget into denomination-defined stacks.

Jia-li pulls some chopsticks from a container and begins tossing noodles into her mouth, exhaling harshly whenever she needs to prevent the hot oil from burning her tongue. Her sister begins slamming the ringget down a bit harder.

"Stupid *koko* is still not home. Don't know *why* they make me do his work when he don't even bother to study!"

Jia-li shrugs sympathetically. "Probably out with his friends again." Their parents have already decided that their oldest daughter is best suited to take over the *tiam* when they retire. *Koko,* as per his right as firstborn son, will hopefully gain entrance to a local university and become a clerk somewhere, working long hours that will keep him too busy for silly thoughts.

"*Ji*!"

Jia-li turns to see her younger brother rushing towards them with his own plate of noodles and his slightly moldy copy of *Great Expectations*. He nudges Jia-li hard.

"Ba says you should go see him."

Jia-li is already irritated with him for having a bony elbow and for finding the copy of *Great Expectations*, which she had hidden in her underthings. He is becoming too smart for comfort—she will have to start working harder.

"*Ha mi ah*?" She slides off her chair with her empty plate, purposely shoving into her brother a bit as she brings her dish to the back room. Her father is checking inventory off a yellow paper pad. When he sees her, he pulls a grape Fanta from one of the boxes. Jia-li twists it open, pausing in between gulps as the bubbles sear her throat. Her father watches silently, and she glares up at him.

"What?"

"You bring the drinks tonight?"

"Yeah?"

"Got lots of *pai lang*. Different from daytime people. Most okay, but some not. Anyone fishy comes, you ask whether you can serve or not, *hah?*"

Jia-li's frustration with her skirt is bordering hatred, but she manages to bob her head up and down. After receiving her head-pat of dismissal, she tosses the empty Fanta bottle into the rubbish bin, rinses off her plate, and runs upstairs.

Skirts have always made her feel overly exposed, and the uncomfortable feeling she has when wearing them has deepened recently, though she cannot explain why. Stripping off the uniform, she changes into *koko*'s old clothes: a comfortable old T-shirt and shorts. Exhaling harshly, she starts pulling books out of her schoolbag. Her few silent hours of intense study, when she can wear whatever she wants and be alone to read and dream of leaving Malaysia, are the only times when she feels at ease.

* * *

Jia-li flings her rag down on the counter and pours herself a cup of cold barley water. The evening crowd is busier than she is used to. Young adults, still wearing their thin office polos, have come in for their dinners and subsequent midnight snacks. At the request of a table of die-hard fans, a football game is playing on the wall-mounted flat screen. Nobody else is paying particular attention, now that Malaysia has been cut from this year's championship.

A woman in a pink dress emerges from the humid night air, hair teased into a towering beehive on top of her head. She ascends the steps, illuminated by the fluorescent lights, and Jia-li chokes on her last gulp of barley. The woman's facial features, heavily accentuated with makeup, are unmistakably those of a middle-aged man.

Pondan. Jia-li is used to seeing the Malay versions, who don *tudongs* in the marketplace to mask their distinctly male voices or linger too long in the alleyways, clad in scanty western clothing. This person, however, pulls up a stool in a prominent corner, arranging his long skirt gracefully around him.

"*Shht*! *Ba-ba*!"

Her father glances up from his coconuts. Jia-li jerks her head in the direction of the *pondan*. The last time she saw one in the market, her mother had grabbed her hand and led her the long way around.

After a long look at the *pondan*, her father glances back at Jia-li, giving a slow, cautious nod. She stalls for extra time by weaving around tables the long way. Her parents are busy preparing noodles and drinks for the 10:00 p.m. crowd, so they don't stop, as they normally would, to chastise her sluggishness by yelling across the room. Three steps before she reaches the *pondan* she takes a deep breath, preparing her most professional voice.

"Order?"

*"*Some *kway teow*, please. Do you still have fresh *kopi*?"

His accent is textbook British, identical to the audiotapes she listens to in her advanced English class. Jia-li swallows hard. "*Kopi* got."

As soon as she says it, she knows she has blundered in more ways than one. Her father typically doesn't make fresh *kopi* this late at night, and they have just run out of instant Nescafé. Then she blunders again.

"Name?"

The *pondan* tilts his head sideways. He looks up at Jia-li for a few seconds, makeup sweating off the creases of his eyelids, the false hair of his beehive slumping over. Suddenly, he pulls his lips back to reveal a dazzling smile. His teeth are white and completely genuine.

"*Zara*."

Jia-li nods and scurries back to her father. Her family has told her never to get involved in personal matters with customers, but she had just been wondering whether she

should address the *pondan* as *ma'am* or *sir*. Clothes and name aside, Zara was still biologically a *he*. That was the way things were.

When she names the last order, her father blanches.

"Fresh *kopi* cannot! Already finished. *Siu di*!" Her little brother glares up from his book. "Go get some Nescafé at the next door market. *Di chi*, take care of the customer."

Jia-li runs to her mother's stall and carries a plate of *kway teow* to Zara's table. Normally when she gets herself into these sorts of ruts, she finds some way to blame the customer. *So soh-lee Sir, couldn't understand your Western-style English.* She sets the plate down, picturing Zara's polite, dazzling smile fading.

"We're out of *kopi*. My brother is fetching Nescafé for you. Sorry for the inconvenience."

She runs over the sentences; everything had been grammatically correct. Though it lingers on the tip of her tongue, she does not add on the word *Sir*.

Zara pulls the plate across the table. As he chews, his mouth twists in pleasure. "*Sedap*! My god. Just what I needed." He inserts a manicured hand into the neckline of his dress, prodding his padded breasts. The table of football fans screams as Australia scores a goal. Paper flutters against her hand. It is a ten-ringget note.

"Regarding the *kopi*, it's not a problem at all." Zara withdraws a manicured hand, his eyeshadow creasing as he smiles again. "You're a good girl."

"*Jia-li kam meh lai pang*!"

Jia-li blinks and whirls around quickly, stuffing the ringget in her pocket. As she starts work on the large pile of dishes that her mother needs washed, she makes a mental note to spit in Zara's Nescafé once it is made.

She hates being called *girl.*

* * *

The *pondan* returns on one of the hottest nights of the year. Ceiling fans whir at top speed. Customers' tempers have crept up with the humidity, causing them to order after-supper suppers and badmouth Malay politics, bosses and mothers-in-law to whomever will listen.

Jia-li is scouring tables when she sees the beehive hairdo. A cold sensation flashes through her torso. She wipes her sweat away with her rag and begins making her rounds, glancing at Zara's face. He seems calm, his smile unperturbed. Perhaps the wad of phlegm she left in the bottom of his cup had dissolved, undetected.

As she comes closer, she notices that Zara is playing with a small assortment of containers on the table in front of him. Of all things, the *pondan* is reapplying his makeup in public. Clearing her throat, she approaches his table.

"What you want?"

Zara flicks a mascara wand through his lashes. "Nescafé, same as last time except for the spittle."

His British accent cuts through the din of the *kopitiam*, ringing louder than an argument being held several feet away. Stiffly, Jia-li retreats to the back of the room. Her father alternates between refrigerators, breathing heavily as he locates cans of soymilk and chrysanthemum tea. Jia-li begins scooping ice into cups to help him along, sneaking occasional looks at Zara. Why has he come back? Is he going to lash out, call the *polis*?

When her father finishes loading up the drink tray, Jia-li serves them in a different order than she normally would, so that she can end the route at Zara's table and buy a bit of time to apologize. After handing off her last pair of coconuts, she sets a mug of hot water down in front of Zara, tucking a Nescafé package and small steel spoon onto the side of the saucer.

"So sorry for last time," she murmurs, turning her head so that her parents will not see any incriminating emotions on her face, should they glance her way. "Was not thinking straight."

She holds her breath as Zara peers into the clear, steaming water. At last, he rips open the package, delicately pouring the Nescafé powder into his mug and swirling the mixture with his spoon. He looks up at Jia-li.

"*Ais*, please."

Jia-li runs to scoop some ice into a bowl. When she returns, Zara begins dissolving the cubes, one by one, in his Nescafé, stirring carefully after each addition. Jia-li shoves her hands into her pockets. Perhaps she should just leave. There are other customers to attend to, and the *pondan* may not come again—

"I was just like you when I was a boy."

When I was a boy. She jerks her head up.

"Didn't respect others 'cause I didn't respect myself. But I felt much better after I went overseas. That's when I started doing the things I wanted to."

Jia-li sounds out the impeccable English in her head, trying to imagine what this *pondan* had looked like when he was younger. Had he chosen to dress like a woman because he, as a boy, had felt the frustration she feels every day as a girl? Every time she puts on her uniform in the morning and notices her hips growing rounder and wider, flesh erupting out from the comfortably flat chest she used to have, she suddenly wants to kick things, destroy things, hurl them against the wall. But she holds back, because she knows her mother will not treat her like her brothers, will punish her more harshly, because she is a girl.

"So why come back?"

Zara removes the spoon from the mug, watching the Nescafé swirl before lifting the cup to his lips. Across the room, a man in a red shirt bangs his mug against the table, yelling for a refill. Jia-li squeezes her hands into fists. She watches Zara drink, waiting for a response.

At last Zara sets his mug back down on the saucer, sighing deeply. "To prove that I could make it as a performer and businessperson, in my own hometown." He focuses his

gaze intensely on the bit of Nescafé left in the cup. "Things here don't change unless you make them change."

"*Jia-li*!"

Her mother thrusts her spatula in the direction of the angry customer. The glazed look leaves Zara's eyes and he pushes his stool back, yawning as he rises. "Time for *madame* to depart!" From his padded breasts, he produces a crisp five-ringget bill and hands it to Jia-li. "Keep the extra. Next time I'll bring my friends. Your *kway teow* was very good."

The angry customer begins yelling obscenities at Jia-li once she arrives, but after picking out the fact that he wants more barley water, she tunes out the rest of what he is saying. Her father has heard the obscenities and shoots her warning glances, but she ignores his gaze.

She starts scooping more barley into the cup. *Things don't change unless you make them change.* The noise of the *kopitiam* has become a distant buzz, and she can feel her heart beating rapidly in her chest.

* * *

Jia-li closes her bedroom door, muffling the sounds of scraping woks and gossip, and lays her books open on her desk. The chair scrapes as she pulls it out. If anyone comes up, she will be able to drop into it and immediately feign studying.

In the corner of the room are some trunks containing her sister's old clothes, packed away for her to grow into. Jia-li opens the one on top, looking for anything that appears distinctly female. Near the bottom of the stack she finds a pink *cheongsam*, which Jia-li last remembers from last Chinese New Year.

She lays the *cheongsam* over the back of the chair. The room she shares with her sister, a repurposed closet with no air conditioning, is one of the hottest in the house. Still, she shivers as the pink silk grazes her skin. Her fingers fumble to secure the button of the high neck, and she holds her breath as fabric wraps around her throat.

She rotates to face the floor-length mirror, scanning her reflection. Her face burns. Despite the heavy, awkward bumps her body has developed and the visible tenseness of her shoulder muscles, the *cheongsam* fits perfectly. She can imagine her family telling her that she looks beautiful, her mother and sister encouraging her to wear it for their next big occasion.

She grabs at her throat and pulls. The button pops off and falls to the floor. Hands shaking, she jerks the *cheongsam* down and off her ankles, running to her dresser to find a clean pair of her elder brother's old clothes. His T-shirt is baggy, masking the shape of her body, and the pants hit right below the knee. They are faded and comfortable and do not carry the murky, effeminate smell that all of her own clothes have developed. As she pulls

a woven belt tight around her waist, however, her sense of comfort does not return as it normally does when she changes after school.

In the back of her mind, she knows that she had been hoping for some sort of miracle, that maybe wearing the dress would magically transform her and make her feel normal in her body again. Now she wishes she had never tried it. Zara is lucky. He can choose to live life as a female, whereas she is stuck in a body she doesn't want, having to wear things she doesn't want to wear. She wants a flat, lean chest like she used to have, not the tender lumpy breasts that now weigh her down. She wishes she could be stronger and faster, not slower and rounder. She wishes her body wasn't changing in the way that it is now.

She whirls around, scrutinizes her reflection again. Limp from sweat, tousled from changing clothes, her hair is getting too long. Most girls wait till their hair is barely compliant with school regulation before reluctantly cutting it again, using every opportunity to accessorize with clips or headbands. Jia-li wants her hair trimmed close to her head, like her brothers, but her mother claims that her face is too broad for it to look attractive.

She glances over at the top drawer of her desk where the sewing supplies are kept. In two quick steps, she pulls it open and locates a large pair of iron scissors. She last used them when helping her mother to cut out cloth for curtains, and they are easier to wield than she remembers.

Scooting her chair and rubbish bin up to the mirror, she measures out a length of hair with her fingers. Drawing it between the blades, she snips. The pieces fall neatly into the rubbish bin. She exhales, blowing stray bits off her face, and sections off more. Another piece, another piece. She almost forgets to breathe as more bits of hair flutter to the floor.

Someone pounds on the door. Jia-li catches her own reflection in the mirror. Half of her hair now falls in jagged pieces across her scalp, while the rest hangs limply on the other side of her head. It looks horrible. She grabs what remains of her longer hair and shears it off in two quick snips, tossing the hanks into the rubbish bin.

"Jia-li?"

Her father's voice echoes from outside the room. The scissors fall to the floor, one blade narrowly missing her foot. She runs to the door and opens it a tiny bit, positioning herself so that only her eyes are visible through the crack. Her father taps his wrist impatiently.

"Did you not hear your mother? Got lots of dishes to wash."

"Cannot."

"*Aiya,* no time for dilly-dally! Come down."

"No." She tries to push the door closed, but her father is stronger. The door swings open, and she stumbles backwards, feet slipping on the wooden floor. Her father enters, making a sound as though he is about to yell. Then he sees her. The noise from his throat

dies away. Jia-li follows his gaze around the room, from the ripped *cheongsam* to the fluffy black piles scattered in front of the mirror.

"Where are the cutters?" he asks at last.

Dumbly, she fetches them from the floor. Her father slips his fingers through the handles and grasps her shoulder. As he reaches out, blades pointed towards her, she braces herself, tensing her thighs in case something makes impact and she has to run. The cold iron hovers near her face, but does not contact skin. Soon, she hears the gentle clipping of the scissors at the nape of her neck, the blades tugging gently at her scalp.

She blinks hard and swallows back tears.

Hair continues to flutter down from her head. Briefly, she fights back panic as she realizes that she might have just lost her chance at university. However, there is no anger in her father's motions. The rhythm of his cuts is even and quiet.

"Still not very good. But better than before."

He turns away, picking stray hairs off the blades. Cautiously, Jia-li examines herself in the mirror. To even out the jagged pieces, her father has trimmed her hair to be only several centimeters long, much shorter than what she had originally wanted. In some patches the hair sticks in humid clumps. In others it juts out like the pinfeathers of a newly hatched bird. With her brother's clothes on, she barely looks like a girl at all. She bites down on the insides of her lip. No matter what, she cannot let her father see her smile.

"Tell Ma you couldn't stand the weight. Rainy season so hot." He fans his hand loosely in emphasis, but his voice is drawn tight. He fetches the broom and dustpan from the corner of the room. Jia-li scrambles onto her feet, but whenever she tries to reach for them he angles away.

"You are smart girl," he says, as he collects her fallen hair into a neat pile. "But you talk too long with that *pondan*. Stop, *hah*? That man no good."

Her name is Zara, Jia-li wants to shout, but her father's voice sounds sad. She nods instead. Her father dumps the hair into the rubbish bin, pats her stubbly head.

"Will tell *siu di* to do dishes. You, stay here until dinner."

Jia-li shuts the door behind him. The *cheongsam* is still lying in a crumpled heap, and she shakes off the stray hairs and puts it back into the trunk, tossing the button in next to it. She closes the lid, hiding the *cheongsam* from view, and feels a strange sense of relief.

It will still be terrible, wearing her uniform skirt to school and being forced to wear dresses. But at least her hair is lighter, and even though she is still at unease with her body, she is beginning to understand. Now, she can sense what Zara had meant by *change,* and what she needs to do about it.

* * *

The sky threatens rain. Jia-li's uniform skirt clings to her legs as she ducks into the *kopitiam*. At least her hair is not sticking to her neck, and she no longer has to sweep it out of her eyes.

Her mother hates her new haircut. She forced Jia-li to pin little butterfly clips in before leaving for school to de-emphasize the broadness of her face. Her classmates gave her contemptuous looks throughout the day, but she no longer cares. If she leaves Malaysia behind, with all her classmates, she can dress however she wants, be the person she wants to be, and won't have to worry about what anybody says.

The television is set to a Hindi soap opera, but the wailing of the runny-eyed lead actress has been muted. Her mother is furiously frying an unusually large batch of *kway teow*, and does not even look up as Jia-li passes. Next to her wok are the red and white china plates, reserved for special instances.

"Jia-li!" Her father snaps his fingers, beckoning her over. Emptying a bottle of water into a glass, he places it onto an overloaded tray and shoves it at her.

"Quick, quick, got VIPs. First *kopi* goes to the short-leg-long-jaw in the grey suit."

"*Kopi*? But it's after—"

"*–Aiya*! Just *go*!" He spins around and begins frothing another *kopi*. Jia-li carefully adjusts the tray, scanning the room. The businessmen are clustered at one of the large tables in the back, which has been draped over with a red tablecloth.

A woman bumps past Jia-li, splashing liquid from the drinks onto her uniform. "Shit!" Jia-li sets the tray down on an empty table and grabs a rag from the counter, scrubbing at the front of her shirt. The woman frowns, stopping to stare at Jia-li for a few moments, and continues walking towards the businessmen's table. She settles down next to a middle-aged man wearing a gray suit and pink tie.

The man turns towards Jia-li's general direction, laughing at something his companions have said. His eyes crinkle, and suddenly she notices—or maybe imagines—the traces of sparkling eyeshadow.

"*Zara*?"

The businessman slings an arm around the woman's shoulder and shouts out a playful response to whatever joke he had been laughing at. Jia-li cannot make out what he says, but she recognizes the British accent.

Somewhere across the room, one of her parents hisses at her to *kah meh*, hurry up and serve before the ice melts and the *kopi* grows cold. Reluctantly, she picks out the short-leg-long-jaw and begins setting down beverages in order. Zara has ordered *kopi*, freshly made this time. She picks up the saucer, willing herself not to tremble. As she makes the arc from tray to table, however, her wrist weakens, and a small puddle of *kopi* splashes onto Zara's lap. The woman in the blue dress makes a clucking sound, pulling back as though she has been burned.

"Clumsy girl! Watch your clothes, Richard!"

Zara is already using a pocket-size pack of tissues to mop up the spill. When he finishes, he deposits the saturated paper onto the side of Jia-li's tray and looks up at her.

"*Aiya*! It's you! You look different." He ruffles Jia-li's hair with a damp hand. "A good girl, this one," he explains. "Her family makes very good *kway teow* for this part of town."

"She looks like boy-one," one of the men observes.

Zara laughs. "Got a haircut since the last time I saw her. Looks like I have a terrible influence on the youth."

"*Zah-lah* so funny you! Always making jokes!" The men laugh and slap their hands down on the tables. The drinks tremble, and thunder rumbles, followed by the rapid patter of rain.

Man-who-looks-like-Zara says something about a new performance venue, but Jia-li doesn't wait to hear the rest. She goes back to her place at the family table. From time to time she pinches the flesh of her wrist and watches it turn white, then red as she releases it.

"Jia-li." Her father places a hand on her shoulder. His voice is concerned, but when Jia-li searches his face she does not sense sympathy. He has not recognized Zara.

"Go rest. *Siu di* can help for now."

Her younger brother passes by, balancing dishes of soy sauce and fried anchovies on his arms. "Great *ah*? Customer pre-paid everything by card." He flashes a smug grin and waltzes over to the tables, asking each and every one of the businessmen if he could assist them with anything else. Jia-li turns away, fetching her schoolbag. From the corner of her eye, she spots the businessmen's tab lying next to the card machine. The receipt has been signed by a Mr. Richard Koh.

She retreats to the back room, weaving through the boxes of drinks, and unlocks the door to the alleyway behind her house. The smell of gutter and wet mud diffuses into the room. Taking off her shoes, she lowers herself onto the doorstep, splashing in the puddles with her bare feet. For some reason she no longer cares that her uniform will get dirty, or that her mother will beat her for ruining it, or that she will be forced to give up Fanta for a month to pay for a new one.

Her vision blurs, and she smears her arm across her eyes. She opens her schoolbag where her brother's copy of *Great Expectations* is buried alongside her homework. The cover has a stylized depiction of the main character, Pip. Rain splashes onto his suit as she pulls the book out, and she wipes the droplets away. She has read as far as the part where he inherits money and goes to London and had been dreaming of herself in that situation, as Pip, wearing a suit, leaving his old life behind.

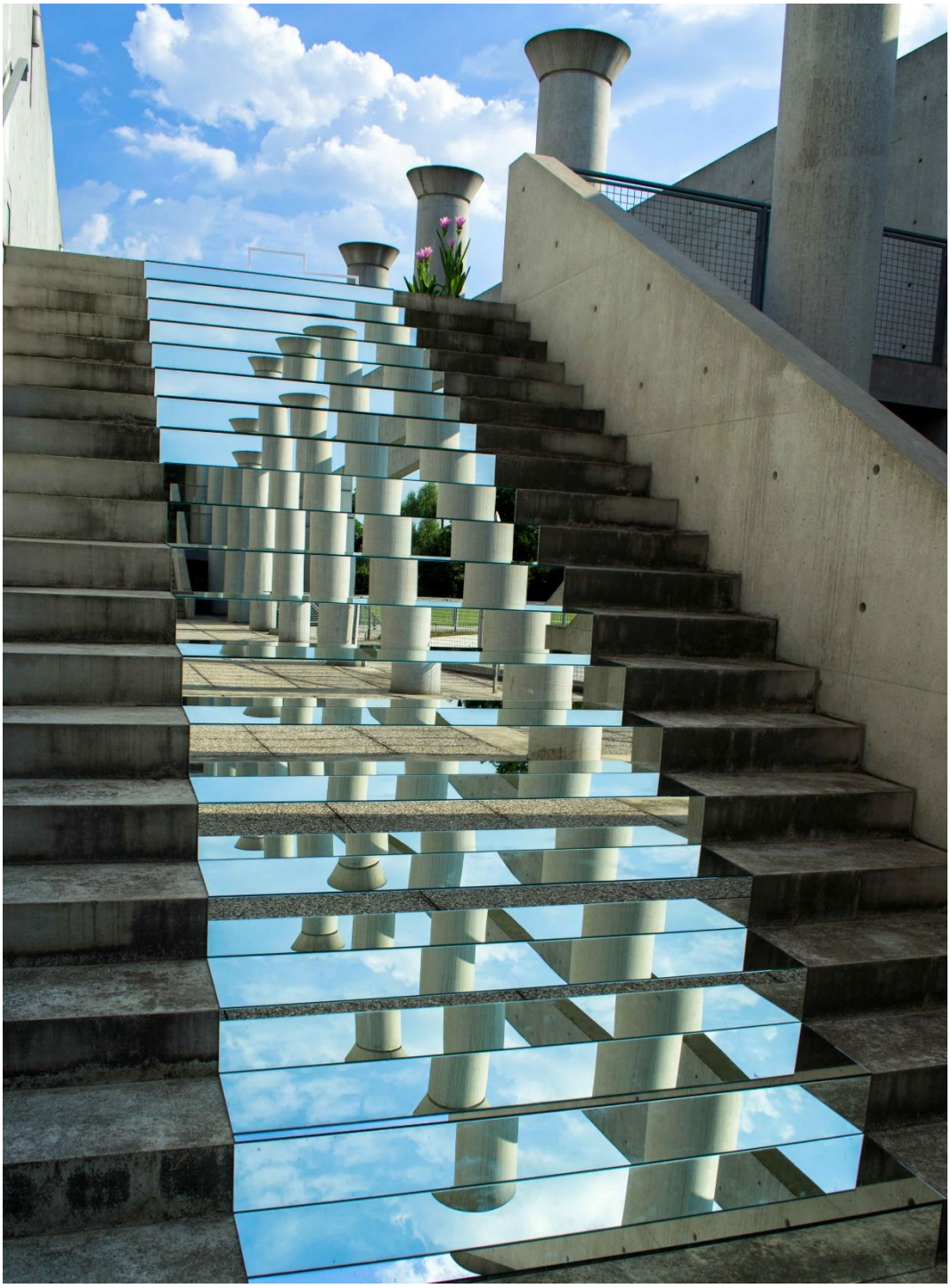
Using her big toe as a stylus, she writes the characters of her name in the wet sediment. *Jia-li.* Then, very slowly, carefully, she toes the name *Pip* next to it. She re-reads the two names, toying with the way they sound in her head. *Jia-li*. *Pip*. *Jia-li Pip*.

Zara.

Zara was not a woman. He was a man playing dress-up, and she was still Jia-li. Why had she thought she could be anything but a girl named Jia-li? She smears the ball of her foot across the names, scrubbing them into the ground until she feels the sting of raw skin against sand.

Heaven on Earth

SHIRIN ABEDINIRAD



Shirin Abedinirad, *Heaven on Earth*, 2014. Site-specific mirror installation in Trevizo, Italy. Courtesy of the artist. Photo © Shirin Abedinirad

Shirin Abedinirad, *Heaven on Earth*, 2014. Site-specific mirror installation in Trevizo, Italy. Courtesy of the artist. Photo © Shirin Abedinirad

Shirin Abedinirad, *Heaven on Earth*, 2014. Site-specific mirror installation in Trevizo, Italy. Courtesy of the artist. Photo © Shirin Abedinirad

WATCH VIDEO

Artifacts

MARYANN AITA

This morning, my freelance boyfriend told me he found a full-time girlfriend.

He wrote me a Facebook message. It was the same way our relationship had begun. Our casual arrangement unfolded into a two-year span of roughly once-a-month dates, varying from dinner and a movie to museum visits to the Philharmonic in Central Park.

It occurs to me that this was the most serious relationship I've ever had.

As I read this message, I am downloading Phil Collins songs and playing them on repeat. I hate Phil Collins. I hate Phil Collins, but he seems to be articulating something I cannot: why I feel like all the blood, air, and water has been sucked from my body.

When I saw Neil six weeks ago, I told him, "I've been calling you my 'freelance boyfriend.'"

"I like that," he said.

"It's good, right? We're not exclusive, but kind of consistent. We have no, um, 'contractual' obligation to each other, but if I needed you for, say, a wedding, I feel like I could call you."

"Yeah. I even have a tux. Let's do it!"

"You know," I admitted, "I'd been wondering if I should stop seeing you." Neil had told me he didn't want a girlfriend, and I wasn't the woman to change his mind. "But," I continued, "I listed all the pros and cons, and I'd either be sad now or sad later. So, I decided to stop worrying about it and just enjoy what we are. Whatever that is."

"You should understand: no matter how much I like you and I like spending time with you and no matter how much I may even love you, I'm…I'm looking for something perfect. I'm looking…" he fumbled for an example, "for the…Taj Mahal."

I wish I'd pointed out that the Taj Mahal is a mausoleum.

I also wish I'd said something about the "may even love you" comment, but I worried he'd meant it hypothetically. As a kid, I liked answers, even bad ones. I curated an acute pessimism, always assuming the worst outcome, as if to get a head start on disappointment. I was unwilling to exist in possibility or ambivalence—but I had never been faced with an "I love you," even a "may even love you." So, I chose to live in the possibility that he did love me—that we could continue endlessly like this.

In my silence he said, more to himself than to me, "I've had it twice before and that might be all I get. I'm just not sure it's even out there."

He was looking for the kind of love that he wasn't sure existed—the kind of love I am almost certain doesn't exist for me.

"You make me happy," I said.

"You make me happy, too."

With him, my insecurity and anxiety evaporated, condensing into an easy vulnerability. In his absence, I felt something new—an exquisite longing, a desire without urgency or anguish—I missed him. Together we were happy. Apart, we were human.

Our conversation that night shifted to a book about U.S. history, which ignited both our libidos, and as we moved to his bedroom, he told me he hadn't jerked off to anyone other than me in months. I said the same went for me, but, you know, with him.

"Well, except Chris Pratt, occasionally," I said. He laughed.

"Oh yeah, me too," he said. I laughed as he kissed my neck.

The next afternoon, he left for a two-week trip to Italy; I left letting myself be comfortable with the unknown. After all, he had a tux waiting for me.

We made plans to go to the ballet a few weeks after he returned. His birthday passed in that time, and he hinted at wanting nude pictures, a recurrent conversation of ours. When a man tells you he's masturbated to you exclusively for months, well…you know. I sent a pastiche of photos including one where I put birthday bows on my breasts.

He cancelled our ballet plans because he was going out of town but told me he wanted to reschedule. We texted winky faces and slightly dirty things, and I thought we were going to see each other soon…

But a week later, I'm reading a Facebook message informing me he has a girlfriend.

As soon as I'd chosen to embrace ambivalence, I got a finite answer. Like the sudden shift from Halloween to Christmas-all-the-time that happens every year—that I know happens every year—yet am never ready for. I wake up each November 1 surprised by the bomb of holiday joy and love that has exploded all over New York City. It is Christmas, and I knew it was coming, but holy shit it was Halloween yesterday, and now it's Christmas. What happened to Thanksgiving? What happened to November? It's not even that Halloween means so much, but it's gone now, and I don't have time to mourn it. I am assailed by Santa heads and cranberry garlands and Salvation Army bell-ringers, and I am alone again, completely.

I have lost a person that meant something to me. I have lost possibly the first person that I wanted to mean something to me.

I am not ready for this. But I am supposed to be ready for this.

Perhaps years of vigilant pessimism have exhausted my defense mechanisms. When you grow up as the youngest of four children, two of them sick with physical and mental illness, you are the bottom of the family triage. You learn to pull yourself together, to improvise in solitude, because there won't be time to grieve.

A key rule of improvisational theater is to always say, "Yes, and…" This is how my mother catered to my siblings. Her days were spent running between nutritionist appointments for my anorexic sister, Valerie, and chemotherapy for my nineteen-year-old brother, Vick. In improv, if your scene partner puts you on a sinking ship, you go with it while the audience laughs. My fourth-grade self was a willing and silent observer of my brother's and sister's impending disasters. Behind the scenes, though, I crafted my own theatrics, inventing personalities, relationships, and unscripted lives for my Barbies. Through them, I tried to understand what love might be like if it was allowed to run wild, unchained by meal plans and chemo sessions. I played director to inanimate objects, testing scenarios like an emotional algorithm.

INT. UPSTAIRS PLAY AREA – DAY

SISTER'S BARBIE (played by VALERIE, age 13), wears a floor-length glittery blue evening gown, looks at herself in an invisible mirror in an invisible house.

MARYANN'S BARBIE (played by MARYANN, age 6), dressed in something boring, bounces over to Sister's Barbie with imaginary cookies.

MARYANN'S BARBIE
I just baked cookies.
Do you want some?

SISTER'S BARBIE
No thanks, I'm on a diet.

Maryann's Barbie lies down.

"What's a diet?" I asked.

"Oh, it's where you eat just good stuff, like a lot of vegetables."

"Oh," I considered this and dismissed the concept as being irrelevant to me. "Can my Barbie wear the blue dress now?"

"No. My Barbie has to go to a party," Valerie said.

"Can my Barbie come to the party?"

"I guess," my sister shrugged.

We set our Barbies aside to save the effort of scripting the party and watch TV instead.

Playing Barbies became a solitary activity after that, myself the omniscient narrator of my own curiosities. When Valerie got sick and stopped playing with me entirely a year or two later, I exerted supreme control over Barbiewood.

My inventory included dozens of Barbies but only two Kens: Blond Ken and Brunette Ken. Blond Ken was the real catch, though. Each came packaged with a bathing suit, but my sister's hand-me-down toys included one faded tuxedo that didn't fit either plastic man.

INT. 10-YEAR-OLD MARYANN'S BEDROOM FLOOR – DAY

BARBIE wears a silver evening gown and ponytail. She greets THERESA (Hispanic Barbie) — wearing the glittery blue dress — SKIPPER, STACY, and BRUNETTE KEN. All sit at a table made from an upside-down shoebox.

BARBIE
Stacy, how was school today?

STACY
Great! I got As on all my tests and I'm going to do some extra credit!

THERESA
Congratulations! **Made-up Spanish congratulations**

SKIPPER
And *I* got into Harvard!

INT. NEXT TO SHOEBOX – LATER

BARBIE and BRUNETTE KEN stand millimeters away from each other, gaze into each other's giant cartoon eyes.

BRUNETTE KEN
You're so beautiful.

BARBIE
I know. Tell me more things
about how great I am.

BRUNETTE KEN
You are as pretty as the stars
and smarter than Einstein.

Barbie smiles, tilts her head.

Ken lifts his arm up into the air to hold Barbie.
He smashes his face into hers.

They rub genitals together and fall asleep.

INT. MARYANN'S BEDROOM FLOOR – DAY

Barbie and Brunette Ken come home from work.

BRUNETTE KEN
I'm in love with Theresa.

Maryann smashes Brunette Ken with Barbie.

Barbie calls BLOND KEN.

My dialogue may have improved over the years, but the story arc was generally the same. Improvised from my assumptions of my siblings' eventual absence, these play sessions always resulted in the same script: one in which love was impermanent.

When my friends came over and wanted to play with Barbie, Skipper, and the gang, I'd steer them away from these storylines and try to impress them with sexual absurdism instead. I'd incite my friends' laughter as we posited sex positions that no adults could possibly perform. We made Barbie have sex with one of her horses; we made the horses have sex with other; we made Barbie have sex with Barbie; and Barbie with Barbie with Ken. Once, I slammed together Barbie and Ken into the adventurous 69, unaware that it was an actual sexual position. It was repulsive and fascinating and resulted in giggle fits

tapered by our mutual embarrassment. When I tried this with Neil a decade and a half later, my reaction wasn't much different, although I grasped the logic behind it. He was my Blond Ken. We spent our time together being naked—shedding our clothes, our inhibitions, our outer layers—and giving equally of ourselves. Most of the time.

I inherited objects from my sister and used them as agents of my fantasies, a way to fulfill my desires without drawing attention from the more pressing concerns of my family. I could hide in the walls of Barbie's dream house, which were constructed from my brothers' series of thin hardcover books about dinosaurs. I tented each volume, aligning them to build bedroom walls so Barbie could cry, or write novels, or have sex with Blond Ken. Sometimes, I would sit in her house with her, crying in front of extinct creatures. There, in front of Archaeopteryx, we had some privacy. I was alone, free to command love by making it up as I went along. As I aged, and my siblings still had not passed away, I lay to rest my dolls. My interest in animate people, however, also waned, leaving me with the only great constant in my life: myself.

In psychoanalysis, it's a common exercise to think of people as objects and what those things represent in your life. My inner circle has been repeatedly recycled, like my childhood dolls. I've never met anyone outside of my immediate family whom I thought I would know more than two or three years. Even my siblings, parents, and I are spread across five states and two coasts, connected by infrequent phone calls and even rarer visits. My parents once remodeled a portion of their house in the time that passed between conversations. I try not to be seen as an object. But I compare people to toys.

I thought Neil would be no different; I assumed I would grow bored of him in the way I grow bored of everyone—but he knew how to draft my play scripts along with me.

INT. NEIL'S LIVING ROOM – 2:30 A.M.

NEIL and MARYANN face each other on the couch, their faces two inches apart.

NEIL
Is it weird that I'm really turned on by intellectual discussions with you?

Neil leans closer to Maryann.

MARYANN
(rapid, excited)

No! Actually, it's kind
of a relief to hear you
say that because I've
thought exactly the same
thing. When we tried to
watch *Star Trek* that one
time, you paused it to
talk about split
infinitives, and I
thought you were so sexy
I just started making
out with you.

Neil smiles. They smash faces together.

I spent my life awaiting disappointment—waiting for my brothers to rip my dolls' heads off; waiting for the news that my sister was back in the hospital; waiting for my brother's cancer to return—but I thought I'd have the chance to have more conversations with Neil, to hear him talk about constellations and how he used to know the capitals of every country.

Instead of absorbing the moments I had with my brother and sister, I loved my siblings because I was told to. I withheld from myself all the joy that loving another person might include. My memories of Vick and Valerie were collected at the end of each day, passing through short-term memory in the prefrontal cortex, stopping briefly in the frontal lobe—where emotions are processed—and perhaps skimming the fear and aggression center in the amygdala on their way to be filed in the hippocampus; from there, these memories could be recalled as fragmented fact. I only knew how to love as I loved the toys I would eventually dispose of, the artifacts of my childhood. We can admire and value artifacts—enjoy and cherish them even—but we cannot love them.

I cannot be loved because I do not know how to give it.

Encoded as memory, love existed for me to be reviewed and applied in case of the unfamiliar. It was purely logical; I could preempt death and tragedy. I prepared for loss as I would a hurricane: sandbags, food stores, and a feeling of superiority. That, or evacuation. Though no amount of preparedness can prevent a natural disaster. We collectively bawled at the end of *Titanic*, knowing the ship sank before the trailers played. I know that Romeo and Juliet die, but does that make Baz Luhrmann's version any less tragic when Leo drinks the poison? I've watched Leonardo DiCaprio die dozens of times; by this point, I've come to expect it, but am I any less distraught every time it happens? I hate Phil Collins but am still unburdening every tear in my body at the sentiments in his numerous pop hits.

All my insecurities and anxieties have returned in a waterfall of despair—the waterfall that started yesterday when I was trapped in a dress that shrunk in the wash, but I was determined to squeeze into anyway. I had the zipper halfway up, but then it wouldn't move. I struggled for ten minutes, thinking it would suffocate me in the process. Because I loved that dress. I will always love that dress. Even though it almost killed me.

If only I had died. If only it had killed me, and I had never seen that message. He would have wondered what happened to me. Maybe he'd post one of those creepy messages that people leave on dead people's Facebook walls. Or maybe he wouldn't have said anything.

INT. NEIL'S LIVING ROOM – 3:14 A.M.

Maryann sits on Neil's lap on the couch.

MARYANN
When I was, like, three, I would beg my mom to bring home the Kevin Costner version of *Robin Hood* from my dad's video store. And she let me watch it *every day*.

NEIL
Ooh, should I play the song?

Maryann shifts; Neil leaps to the keyboard in his living room. He plays something, but stops.

NEIL (CONT'D)
That's not right.

MARYANN
I watched it when I was a teenager and I was like "Mom, why would you let me watch this?" She asked if I remembered any of it, which I didn't.

Neil plays *Everything I Do.* Both smile.

NEIL
That’s it!

MARYANN
(sighing)
I know I’m going to be really sad when this ends... But I’m glad I’m here right now.

NEIL
You don’t have to be sad.

I smiled and kissed him, even though he was wrong, because I didn’t know how to say what I really wanted to say.

Although, I’m beginning to believe I can learn.

Merda di Scrittrice

MELANIE KACHADOORIAN

The story he told was that his father called his work shit, so Italian artist Piero Manzoni turned his own excrement into gold. In 1961, he sealed ninety cans of his feces, mounted each one to a plaque, and labeled them. The labels, written in Italian, English, German, and French, read: "*Merda d'artista* (*Artist's Shit*) / contents, 30 gr net / freshly preserved / produced and tinned / in May 1961." The number of each can, along with Manzoni's signature, was also printed on the labels.

In August of that year, he placed the cans on exhibit for the first time at the Galleria Pescetto of Albisola Marina and offered them to buyers at a price equal to the value of their weight in gold. Based on the price of gold in 1961, the average can in the series cost $37. In 1991, a can of *Merda d'artista* ostensibly was worth $395, but one was sold at auction for an unbelievable $67,000. Thus, a can of Manzoni's shit had become more than 70 times more valuable than gold.

Manzoni intended for the artwork to make several statements. First, he wanted to expose the gullibility of the art-buying public and hypothesized that art buyers would buy anything—even shit—as long as it had the artist's signature on it. Secondly, he wanted to make a comment about consumerism and the blind trust people had in purchasing items whose actual contents were unknown, like the canned meat manufactured in the cannery his father owned at the time. Manzoni was disgusted with the things people were willing to purchase—most of it crap, as far as he was concerned.

* * *

One year after moving us to California from Texas, away from any of our other family or friends, my father divorced my mother. When he left, my mom asked him if he wanted to go through the photo albums and picture boxes so he could take with him any pictures of my sister and me that he wanted. He declined.

When he moved out, he left the knob from the shifter of his 1982 Camaro on my older sister's bed and the Z28 emblem from the center of the steering wheel on mine. My dad, sister, and I loved that car, but for different reasons. Alicia and I loved it because Dad would take us out with the glass T-top sections off and the windows down. If I'd been faster than Alicia at yelling "shotgun," I'd sit in the front seat with my hand on the shifter

so each time he had to change gears, he'd have to place his hand over mine. I'd feel like I was helping him drive. The three of us would cruise with the *Ghostbusters* theme song blaring from the speakers, as Alicia and I screamed out, "Ghostbusters!" every time the song asked, "Who you gonna call?" As soon as the song ended, we'd make him rewind the tape and play it again. But, my dad loved that car because he loves sporty cars. I think more than anything, my dad loved that car because in some way, the Camaro made him impressive to other people, and he needed that.

* * *

Aside from the touching, obsessive hand-washing and cleanup, most people's concern with canning shit—whether one's own or anyone else's—is that the cans might explode. Feces are made up of mostly water and bacteria. Once contained, the anaerobic bacteria begin to build up in the liquid, making methane. Over time, enough methane gas can be produced to cause an explosion. One way to avoid this is to heat up the poop so that the anaerobic bacteria are killed. The other way is to dry out the excrement so there isn't any liquid to produce the gas. In 1963, Manzoni wrote to a friend and said, "I hope these cans explode in the vitrines of the collectors."

Sometime around 2002, an email began circulating that claimed to explain from where the word "shit" came. It read: "Certain types of manure used to be transported by ship. In dry form, it weighed a lot less, but once water (like sea water) hit it, it not only became heavier, but the process of fermentation began, producing methane gas. Since the manure was stored below decks, the methane would build up. One night, a man came below deck with a lantern, and the ship exploded. Several ships were destroyed before people figured out what was causing the explosions. After that, any cargo containing manure was stamped with the acronym S.H.I.T. (Store High In Transit), so that water would not come into contact with the poop and produce methane."

The email provides a fantastic story and even has the ring of truth to it, but the word "shit" goes back much earlier. It dates back to at least the fourteenth century, well before the use of acronyms. Acronyms were not commonly used until the twentieth century, and the word "acronym" itself only dates back to 1943. The noun "shit" derives from the verb, not the other way around. The word shit comes from Old English "scite" (evolving into Middle English "shite). "Scite" derives from the Proto-Germanic root "skit," which gives way to Dutch "schijten," Swedish "skita," German "scheissen," and Danish "skide." "Skit" comes from the Indo-European root "skei"—to split, divide, or separate. The verb "shit" is, therefore, closely related to the verb "shed"—the notion of separating oneself from waste. The noun "shit" appears in the sixteenth century as a description for both excrement and obnoxious or contemptible people.

* * *

One of the stories my dad tells is of his father slapping him. In this story, my dad is young, maybe sixteen and seventeen. The infraction is minor—disproportionate to the consequence—perhaps he has come home later than expected. His father, my grandfather, wears a mason ring and turns it around, pulls back his hand, and slaps my dad, splitting open his face. My father says nothing. He turns, wipes the blood off his cheek, and flings it onto the wall as he walks up the stairs to his room. As an adult, he smiles remembering that his parents had to repaint that wall. Ever since I can remember, my dad has referred to himself as the black sheep of his family. He is not wrong in that description.

As the third out of four children, my dad is neither the firstborn, the first son, nor the youngest. He's shorter than the other three, and until much later, his career choice didn't provide him with as much money as his siblings' choices had. I don't think he ever felt as though his parents or his siblings considered him worth much, genetically or otherwise. Marrying my mom had been the most remarkable thing he'd done. She was a nurse: smart, funny, thin, and beautiful.

They worked hard to start a family, buy a house, and buy themselves each a car. My dad's dream car had always been a Corvette, but he loved that white Z28. And, while not exceedingly luxurious to his family, it was quite impressive to my parents' friends and the people who resided in our middle-class neighborhood. We all referred to that car as "the son he never had."

When I am 13, my dad picks me up from a voice lesson. I get in the car, and he tells me that Alicia has been in a car accident. She totaled the Camaro. We have lived in California for less than a year, and he had given it to her for Christmas. He assures me that she is okay. When I tell him I'm sorry about the car, he says that Alicia is the most important. The car is just a thing; things can be replaced. But, he has it towed to our house. He lets it sit in the garage for weeks. Every day, my sister has to walk past it and be reminded of what she has done. A few months later, the Z28 emblem and the knob shifter he leaves come with a note saying that he loves us and that we are still a family. For a long time, I think those pieces of the Camaro are the two most difficult things for him to leave behind.

* * *

Manzoni neither heated his shit nor dried it. Forty-five cans of *Merda d'artista* have exploded, making the remaining cans even more valuable. In 2000, the Tate Gallery spent £22,350, or about $32,000, of taxpayers' money to purchase can number four. After receiving criticism for the purchase, the Tate made a statement: "The Manzoni was a very important purchase for an extremely small amount of money: nobody can deny that. He was an incredibly important international artist. What he was doing with his work was

looking at a lot of issues that are pertinent to 20th-century art [sic], like authorship and the production of art. It was a seminal work."

During an auction in 2007, a collector purchased a can for £81,000, or roughly $161,000. In June 2007, one of Manzoni's collaborators, Agostino Bonalumi, revealed that the cans were not full of feces, but of plaster. The art world exploded.

* * *

My dad bought a hat with a plastic turd in the shape of a pretzel that sat on the bill. Where most hats say the name of a beer company or a sports team, it said "shit-head." He used to wear it to the lake. Each summer we made many trips to Lake Tenkiller in Oklahoma, launched our boat, spent all day on the water: skiing, ski-bobbing, swimming, driving the boat over other boats' wakes so we could fly. I spent hours in the water with my father while he tried to teach me to ski, unable to hide his frustration with me because I couldn't get the hang of it. My mom wanted to wear swimsuits that she picked herself—one-pieces that covered the parts of her body about which she was insecure. He bought her string bikinis and harangued her about wearing them until she gave in and wore them, uncomfortable and embarrassed.

A couple of months after my parents separated, my dad announced to my sister and me that he had a girlfriend. The two of them celebrated their engagement before the divorce papers had been drafted, and they were married weeks after it was finalized. When my aunt Nancy found out how quickly he'd moved on from her sister and her nieces, she left my father a voicemail informing him that he was a piece of shit. He did not return her call.

* * *

So far, none of the collectors whose cans burst have reported on the contents. The collectors whose cans have not exploded will not open them, as that would destroy the meaning of the art. For those who believe in Manzoni's art, whether or not the cans are full of shit or plaster does not matter. Again, the Tate issued a statement: "Keeping the viewer in suspense is part of the work's subversive humor." However, they did do some scientific testing: they held the can (it wasn't as heavy as they thought it would be), they shook the can (it sounded like there was something in there; it made a rattling noise, like something dry), and they put it under an ultraviolet light to see if there were any fecal remnants on the lid or lip of the can. There weren't.

Still, people seem obsessed with Manzoni's *Merda d'artista*. Not because of the mystery surrounding the contents of the cans, and not because the cans might contain shit. Everybody shits. What we are obsessed with is the idea that we purge ourselves of ourselves, and we find what comes out disgusting. The notion that someone would pay for

a can of someone else's shit seems unreal, but as Manzoni pointed out, people invest in crap every day. Although, sometimes for the best of reasons.

For example, people invest in scientific studies that revolve around shit in the form of fossilized feces, or coprolites. In 2008, archaeologists found 14,300-year-old coprolites in a cave in Oregon. DNA results revealed the coprolites to be from humans, and the scientific world went aflutter. The ancient coprolites changed previous theories about the time period during which people were thought to have populated North America and how they got here. Originally, the Clovis culture was thought to be the earliest people on the continent, and supposedly, they got here by crossing the Bering Land Bridge to Alaska, migrating south through ice-free corridors. The Oregon excrement is one thousand years older than anything from the Clovis culture, and the ice-free corridors weren't open 14,300 years ago. The Centre for Ancient Genetics concluded that the feces were probably from ancestors of some Native Americans living on the continent now.

However, there are other reasons for investing in or valuing fecal matter besides geography and anthropology, or even art. A person's poop says a lot about him or her. As a research coordinator for a gastroenterology medical practice, my mom could determine a lot about the health of a patient depending on the color and consistency of his or her poop, what was in it, and how it smelled. When Alicia and I talked to my mom about her day, the topic almost always revolved around shit. We talked about it at the dinner table. We talked about it a lot.

* * *

We obsessed over my dad. We tried analyzing his reasons for leaving, for acting in ways that the three of us couldn't understand. For example, he refused to call my sister and me at any other time besides early in the morning, after we repeatedly told him we couldn't talk then because we were getting ready to go to school. We wondered about why, after he first left, he always said, "No," whenever I called to ask if I could spend the night at his new apartment. The way everything needed to be on his terms. The way he talked to us and made us feel guilty for hurting, for being angry with him and the situation, for not understanding that we didn't care what anyone thought; we needed time to reconcile the way our lives had been disrupted, and sometimes we needed to have him hug us and say, "I'm sorry," or, "I'm sorry you are hurting." Period. Without a "but." Without then going on to explain how we made the situation worse, pointing out how we hurt him, or saying, "It's time to move past this," after it had only been a few months. We obsessed over his inability to do that. We couldn't understand why he didn't seem to realize and accept that we acted in the ways we did because we were children, and our immaturity wasn't something to hold over our heads but something, as the parent, he needed to help us work through.

* * *

In 1978, French psychoanalyst Dominique Laporte wrote *Histoire de la merda* in which he examines how cultural values and priorities are revealed through civilization's techniques for dealing with excrement. Laporte cites two edicts passed down by the French monarchy in the sixteenth century. The first states that the French language must be free of all impurities, and the second requires that each household must collect its own waste and dispose of it in order to keep the streets clean. He goes on to explain how modern sanitation practices impacted individuality. He argues that the different ways in which a person involves himself or herself in things like feces is what defines the subject. For example, turning it into fertilizer or using it as a product that enhances beauty makes it valuable. If we employ it, instead of hiding it, then we can turn our shit into gold, just like Manzoni did.

In 1993, when Nadia Benabid and Rodolphe el-Khoury translated the book into English, they summarized the work this way: "*History of Shit* suggests that the management of human waste is crucial to our identities as modern individuals… Laporte argues, we are thoroughly mired in it, particularly when we appear our most clean and hygienic." Laporte says that civilization wallows in filth, and because we naturally wallow in it, those who appear the cleanest and most proper are the most entrenched in it. His argument becomes a metaphor for how society and individuals deal with all things unpleasant. In order to know who we are and to better ourselves, we have to look at and analyze the parts not only of ourselves, but also of others that we would rather conceal or even shed. He writes:

> This little pile of shit, heaped here before my door, is mine, and I challenge any to malign its form. This little heap is my thing, my badge, a tangible sign of that which distinguishes me from, or likens me to, my neighbor. It is also what distinguishes him from me. His heap will never be mine. Whether he be friend or foe, this alone will allow me to recognize if we are alike: neat, clean, negligent, disgusting, or obviously rotten.

In other words, it's the crap we wade through, and the way we deal with it that defines us and distinguishes us from one another. We all have different adversities to overcome, both internal and external, but it isn't the challenges themselves that separate or unite us; it's our willingness to overcome them, and how we choose to do so, that speak to our individuality. Those who embrace shit head-on can learn from the crap others have gone through more so than those who attempt to cover it, let it build and fester, because eventually the shit will runneth over.

* * *

Piero Manzoni died at the age of twenty-nine. I want to believe that his father was proud of him, or at least appreciated the impact his son made on the art world. I don't know if Manzoni's father ever wound up appreciating his work, or if the two of them ever understood each other.

At the age of thirty-four, I still don't understand my father. In my head, he is two different people. There's the Daddy from when I was a little girl, who nicknamed me Pooh because I was so cuddly; the Daddy who, as far as I was concerned, could fix anything. I have this image of him carrying me to the car after I split open my knee. His hands, strong and capable, swoop me up, and they feel like security. I want to preserve that. But, also, there's the Dad who left parts of a car on my bed and then walked out the door, the Dad who is oftentimes insensitive and distant.

He comes to visit me. It's been three years since I've seen him. He doesn't stay at a hotel; he doesn't rent a car. He leaves himself at the mercy of our visit. For the first time, he leaves himself vulnerable. Not long after he arrives, I realize that I don't know much about him: what he likes to eat, what kind of coffee he drinks, and in turn, he doesn't know much about me. His first night at my house, I lie on my couch, curl up and cry into a pillow for an hour after he goes to bed. For four days I try to make him see me as more than a hanger-on from his past. Mostly, we engage in small talk: we discuss the drought in California; we drive around town and I show him parts of Fresno and the campus where I teach. In the mornings, he sits at my kitchen table and works on his laptop. He plays with my kids and smiles a warm, patient smile when my son can't remember to call him "Grandpa."

On the last day of his stay, I show him some of the work I did in graduate school. I read him a part of my writing, and I look up to see that he is teary-eyed. I don't know if it's because for the first time he sees value in my work—in me—and mostly, he's missed it. But, maybe, he gets teary-eyed because it's breathtakingly bad. He once said to me, "Well, if your intention was for people to not get it, then mission accomplished."

When I take him to the airport, he hugs me and says he wishes we could do this more often. He texts me when he reaches the gate and says he is proud. My eyes burn, and I blink back tears. Nothing much changes after he gets home. We text each other, occasionally, and I know we will call each other on birthdays and holidays. But, he is proud via text message. If I'm being honest, I'm proud of him, too. I don't know what that means, really, nor do I know where we go from here. But, that's where we are, for whatever it's worth.

Speculations

SARAH MEYOHAS

Sarah Meyohas, *Blue Speculation*, 2015. Dye sublimation on aluminum, 50 x 37 ½ inches. Courtesy of the artist

Sarah Meyohas, *Speculation*, 2015. C-print, 90 x 60 inches. Courtesy of the artist

Sarah Meyohas, *Canvas Speculation*, 2015. C-print, 90 x 60 inches. Courtesy of the artist

In Darkness with the Ramirez Sisters

ALESSANDRA R. CASTELLANOS

Aged thirteen and whispers of spaghetti straps
and overalls cut at the thigh. Chlorine burned
skin. Our one-piece blue-gray
Venice Dolphins swimsuits hung up to dry
and the darkness swallowing the room.
Smacked girls at the window of a Culver City apartment.

On occasion people would say that I looked like them
like I was a part of their family
the third sister the middle sister
the boyish sister the harmless sister.
Something about our similar-looking
Guatemalan noses, crème sugar to my ears.

If you looked in on us you'd find
three pubescent jaguars
stretched out at eventide.

We'd stay up in darkness, *More Bounce to the Ounce*
or *To Live and Die in L.A.* playing in the background
and our bodies growing in the tongue
of darkness, smooth as suede. Laughing
and clawing each other's legs as we danced
in darkness our silhouettes ripened like that of squeezed blackberries.

If you looked in on us in their shared room you'd see
flannel pajama bottoms, ripped T's, chancletas,
period stained shorts and the taste of lip balm smeared across pillowcases.

Me gliding from one bed to the other, our heartbeats
chasing the tread of darkness and then down to the floor I'd drip
my body, purring against the carpet. They'd sketch
onto the walls the saliva and teeth from each first kiss
they took from Ritchie, Benny, Purple and Ulysses.
I wove the word nena onto our skins,

the ticklish feel of Manolo, the half Guatemalan
half Jamaican lifeguard's breath rolling
over us as he tried to lick my ear.
The smell of vultures and wolves, us pussycats
blushing and giggling, the room growing darker
with each black pearl of laughter.

At dusk if you looked in on us you'd find three pubescent
sisters asleep. Dreaming in potions and chlorine cut hair
hunting in darkness.

500 Days: Prelude

IRIS JAMAHL DUNKLE

When you walk the streets of Pithole
dust and mud will cover you.
It will pour into every part of you until
you no longer recognize whom you have become.
At first, we were a town of settlers. Small,
army-issued tents freckling a green field
near the derrick on Thomas Holden’s farm.
Those were the days when Mrs. Holden still cooked
three meals a day for the workers
and served them in her sunlit kitchen.
We'd sit, a dozen, then two or three, at tables,
or on the wide front porch. Our meals pitched on
our laps. She always made something warm.
She only asked for a dollar a meal.
We were grateful. We, who had begun to live the derrick life.
The up at dawn to the rhythm of oil’s passage.
The field was wide and all around it the trees crowded.
These were the early days, when we believed
everything was temporary. When we believed
we would leave with our pockets stuffed
with fortunes. Mrs. Holden's dinner bell
would ring and mark the passage of time.
At seven a.m., at noon, then again at six p.m.
We carried out our tasks while still thinking of the homes we’d left behind.
Still haunted by the battlefields many of us had just left.
But the oil was relentless—poured and poured out of the well.
And the more that it poured, the more the Oil Company executives
smiled and visited. Soon, the blueprints for the next well
were made and circulated. With the expansion,
more manpower was needed. So, the Oil Companies put ads
in all the major city papers, luring young Civil War vets,

with promises of *OIL! RICHES!*
Within two weeks of the second well, the place was overrun
with the new prospectors. There were tents everywhere.
And those who didn't have tents, used blankets, or broken barrels;
whatever they could find to craft a structure they could sleep under.
Poor Mrs. Holden couldn't keep up with the demand for food in her small kitchen
(even after hiring a few young girls to help her cook, serve).
So, a wagon started serving beans and stew twice a day.
Soon, there were men everywhere. The lush trees
began to be chopped down and split into lumber while they were still green.
When Prather came to town he hired a few men to rope off lots
across the bare muddy field just over the ridge from the Holden farm.
Then, he sold off leases to the lots.
Buildings rose in what felt like hours.
Still green, dripping sap.
They quickly became what we needed:
hotels, general stores, bars. We didn't care.
We were grateful to have shelter. Straws beds
were rented out. A restaurant went in. Trees
receded farther and farther back. Streets
were thick with oil and mud. There was never
enough water. Every well we sunk filled
with oil. We were so thirsty. We were
so lonely. More streets were carved out. More wells
were dug. More men came to town. The teamsters
took over the oil shipments making us
pay outrageous amounts for hauling oil
out of town and down to the river
where the barrels could be floated down to Pittsburgh
and sold on the open market.
No one had ever seen this much oil come so fast.
No one believed it would ever stop.
Not the oil executives. More and more would visit each week.
They stuck out like sore thumbs—
dressed to the nines in white, crisped pressed shirts.
When the girls started arriving in town
we were so grateful. It had been so long
since we'd seen anything except dirty young men,
desperate to make it rich, that we lined up to visit them,
that we'd pay any price. But just as there wasn't enough food,

or water, there weren't enough girls to go around.
The only thing Pithole seemed to have enough of was oil and mud.
It stuck to everything. Even after plank sidewalks were thrown down
to make walking easier, the mud would seep through.
So, when the girls began to become younger and younger, we didn't care.
We kept fucking them when it was our turn.
We wrote letters ferociously. *Dear—All is well here in Pithole.*
I've been working hard to earn enough money so that we can buy our own farm when we get married.
We lived in-between our lives. We drank insatiably.
The bars were always full, day and night. Young men sat
on wooden stools, some slumped in corners unable to stand up.
Almost every night there would be fights in the streets.
One man stole a whore, or a beer, or a bed from another.
The world was ten by ten blocks long.
Oxen and horses pulled sleds laden
with barrels of oil that were being
brought to the Teamsters' wagons, then carried
down the hill for sale. Those animals were
by now hairless from being overworked
and constantly coated in oil and mud.
They walked and shied down the streets like animals
being driven to hell. Each week, the stage coaches
and the open wagons would pour
into town filled with more and more men
and more and more niceties they'd begun to desire.
The hotels were built and lined with carpets,
their windows filled with velvet red curtains.
Those who struck it rich, or those who were rich
and were just visiting their investments in Pithole
filled the lavish hotels. Ate lobster or roasted duck and drank champagne.
Inside the hotels they'd dress in starched cleaned clothes,
and sit at white table clothed tables. They'd hold grand balls
and dance with women (not our whores, but other women
they'd brought in from neighboring cities and towns)
dressed in floor-length gowns. We could see them
through the cracks. As we sat across the street
in the muddy-floored bar, or as we lay down
next door with a child whore on a straw-stuffed bed.
We'd write false letters home about the comfort, about counting days

until we'd see our girlfriend, or our wife,
or our children who by now must look so different.
And the days would pile on our chest thick as stones.
Until we hardly knew ourselves.
And winter burned off into summer.
Summer swelled into the fall. Then,
snow started to fall again on lean-tos and derricks.
Snow that would fall through the cracks
of the buildings built of green wood.
Soon, we'd been lost in Pithole for over a year.
When we looked in the mirror hung behind
French Kate's salon we saw men who were no longer ourselves.
We saw men who no longer came from small towns in New York State
or down the river in Beaver. We saw what could be carved out and drained out
just like the land we sat on. We saw the eyes of those hairless horses
as they trudged down the muddy streets carrying too many barrels of oil.
We saw the distant faces of the girls we fucked.
We saw no way to get back home.

My Way to Respire

VIVIAN ENRIQUEZ

WRITEGIRL CONTRIBUTOR

I inhale a precious concept
That my ancestors chose to survive for me
Overcoming cultural theft, marginalization, oppression
And more
Just for my sisters, brothers, and me.

That they chose me as their successor.

I inherit their will to resist
Allowing me to become another
Layer of soil,
Becoming an addition to the loam
containing their wisdom.

They are the minerals in me that
Make me hustle
Up the scintillating stairs made of the most expensive texture
That are experiences.
The staircase that leads me to liberate
Not only myself
But everyone before me as well.

Knowledge is my diaphragm
Pushing up against my lungs.
It is my hope and payment method,
To make Mother and Father proud

Imagine weaving opportunity into the tapestry for successors like me,

Imagine how my successor will thrive
In the foundation my grandparent's grandparents
Toiled all their lives

I swoon over this exquisite thought.
And as I hold my breath, I know in my mind and heart
Education is my chance to exhale.

Storm-Light

ROB GRIFFITH

Daughter, at times like these, when all the light
that's left is fish-kill gray; when cities lean
in tumbled, blackened piles, their shattered heights
pulled down by bombs and fire; when refugees

form lines at every border, the children chilled
by fear and grief, their parents eyeing fences;
when oceans rise and pipelines burst, I'm filled
with dreams as dark and still as a poisoned well.

But often in this gloom, I imagine you,
long grown, standing in a field of gold.
Your back is straight, rigid as a pew
in church, your clear eyes fixed on the horizon.

There, in roiling clouds that eat the day,
the world's malevolence and hate, its pain
and discord shroud the sky. And yet you stay,
unbowed and brave in this bitter storm-light.

Behind you in the dust, I sit and write
a chronicle of these baffling hurts. I hope
to eat the sin, to keep you safe at night.

Why I Shouldn't Have Read My Daughter *The Shining*

ROB GRIFFITH

"You know the old saying, 'Milk goes with cookies, and blood goes with love.'"
—Evie, age six

Perhaps it's bad we read so much to you
when you were small. We'd turn the lamp down low,
a gibbous moon to light the page, then fold
the blankets back beneath your chin and hands.

And as you dozed, Odysseus the cold
plied empty seas, then slipped back home and strung
his bow. The suitors fled, but not before
he feathered spines and hearts, washed floors in blood.

And still we read to you—the Trojan War,
the star-crossed trysts, Medea's bloody plans.
The ghosts, the poisoned ears and severed tongues,
and pain, there's always pain. And you will know
that love is something fierce, a hatchet thud
upon your door, a madman breaking through.

GALAXYS FOR HIRE

SHAWN DEPASQUALE, SHERARD JACKSON & WHITNEY COOK


DEEP DEEP
OXYGEN LEVEL: 0%
!
!!
PRESS
WOOOSH
WOOOSH
SURFACE
Story by
Shawn DePasquale
Art by
Sherard Jackson
Color by
Whitney Cook

Everything Must Go

BRAD JOHNSON

I thought my job as father was to protect
my kids from pain so when my grandmother died
we didn't bring my daughter to the funeral.
We didn't tell her about my uncles dying until she asked
almost two years later when she was on the raft
with my cousins in the middle of an Ohio pond.

So I blame myself for her expression now: caught
in that shocked pause before hysteria
in the parking lot of Sports Authority three days
before it closes for good. She's almost nine and this
only the second time we've shopped here.
Last month, everything was half off. We bought
a Rawlings catcher's mitt for $30 to give her brother
and a pair Under Armour soccer cleats for $25.

Now, three days before the liquidation ends
everything's slashed. Socks for a quarter.
Titanium lacrosse poles and Louisville bats, light
as toothpicks, cut to ten and forty bucks respectively.
Elbow pads for four bucks. The racks themselves
for sale. The shelving. Mirrors stripped off dressing-room walls.

But I wonder if I've done more harm than good
by shielding my daughter from loss as we watch
other scavengers picking at this free-market carcass, skinning
it clean like starved cannibals as the store's automatic doors chomp
open and closed and a couple loads their flatbed truck
with mannequin parts: arms, legs, and headless torsos.

Distances

KONSTANTIN KULAKOV

I.

Tula, Russia

Exiting the hospital tower, turning from
the terror of bloodwork and shots, we whisk home

the sled with supple milk bags marked
МОЛОКО through the slush, a sheet of

deadly snow—kicked adrift by wind. Moving
beside me, there are worlds mother, womb-

like, a Marian-blue light, circling-out
from the grocery:

The oscillating memory, Your Presence Lord.

II.

Oxford

It was never sense, but the
Singing of light. At six, I abandoned
the fraught letters of scrabble strewn
before our family of four

to color the ambulances smudged
blue and green through a window in rain:
a poet dizzied by the bilingual
burdened by the weight of sprouting

word-wings.

Praise

III.

And my father, Oxford-educated, returning
with us to Russia, not a penny but

indebtedness writ to his leg. This was a
long-winter, brutalized homeland, tipping over

from KGB & Socialism to The New Oligarchs
& Oprichniksi: But in my village of birth,

there were mud roads blanketed
in snow. Hot baths in the quiet and

the oratory of courage, filling the churches:

a grandfather smuggling scriptures
into his prison cell, and a father, setting

plays at a base in Vladivostok, waking
with money hidden in his chest.

"He is holy," they said.

Selah

IV.

New York

To inherit the opulence, the progress of
empire is to inherit the weight of the

the underbelly, richly textured:
the toil, the toil, the toil of black and brown

bodies exploited, abandoned, pressed against walls, jailed, killed,
invisibilized—but resisting with raised fist. Here, to be born

is to find a foot, shifting, in the geography of color
and class: othered by immigrant Russianness,

privileged by male whiteness, where bullets
are not new to graze her Brooklyn projects and where,

reaching your voicemail, I call your trendy uptown office, and you
call back: "dear wolf, they aren't shocked *that* you called,

but by the weekly *fact* of gunshots."

V.

Now, stretched by digital
distances, disfigured by

Time's compromise, I walk
coarse Manhattan Island,

haunted by flashes of
fatherhood in decay, thirsty

for power and fame. At home,
I light a tree and inhale, my hand

pressed to the heat of your thigh.

VI.

"And they, for a moment, felt
The truth.
And for that moment came
Into the world, & like most

Of the rest of us
In the world.

They were actually, crying."

—"Oklahoma Enters the Third World,"
Amiri Baraka

Where
is the continuity, what word,
what image will string the Marian-blue

songs of innocence to Baraka's
"money-dick slavery" of experience,

the thrownness into the world: a torn-heart
pain to be carried
into the night…

VII.

"…the secret silence,
outshining all brilliance with the intensity of their darkness."
—Dionysius the Areopagite

But when the truth emerges, roughened, a
flickering icon, a gold-peeling talisman

carried gracefully into the battlefield of
the everyday, it will not be what is locked

into lone words, but it will be the dark-light, li-ark, emanating,
reflecting between faces, the iris

meeting the iris. And there, at the site of pain, I will lift it all
to You, Lord:

this is to the Soviets who violated my kin
and the Marxism that graces my way, this is to

the capitalists who exploit our poor,

and the religious liberty, the American free speech
that grants my family home, I lift it all:

the Image of God, roughened,
but irrevocable in us,

the Marian-blue light, circling-out,
and in the light,

the darkness.

there are two worlds

JACK LISKIN

in one of them
a bear shits in the woods
the woman picking flowers sees the bear
and the bear ambles away turning over rocks to find ants
and the creek runs over the rocks and the aspens grow by the creek
the clouds form and darken and spill rain on the rocks and creek and aspens

in the other world dutch citizens board a malaysian plane and are shot down
by russian separatists battling ukrainians for control of the country
and vice media reports on it for youtube while fox media
reports outrage by international leaders and president
obama makes a statement and there are dead
bodies on a field of sunflowers

L.A. Three Way

MICHAEL McLAUGHLIN

3:00 a.m. My private Idaho.
Where the 405 curves.
—Ten east.
My favorite overpass in the world.

You'd make a great cop.
You got more Wrong things
right than anyone I know.

She never have a man before.
"You very lucky," Mr. Gypsy Cabbie says.

The absolute has no door into it.
Emptiness, no exit hatch.

Self and Lust and the Higher I.
An L.A. three way.
Of all things.

Fine Fellows

MK PUNKY

These fine fellows with their wattles and their medals
Their jiggling jowls and joyless eyes
Broadcasting breaking news from the feeding trough
Where these fine fellows congregate and cogitate
These *Alphamen* oozing oleaginous charm
Any cute ambitious telegenic girl with a healthy appetite for achievement
Could hardly resist
How unpleasant and unkind and unthinkable really
For men so animally attractive and magnetically handsome as
These fine fellows with their wattles and their medals
To be accursed and accused of "sexual harassment"
Sexual harassment
SEXUAL HARASSMENT
When every watcher in the world knows
These fine fellows with their wattles and their medals
Are more or less
Irresistible

Jar

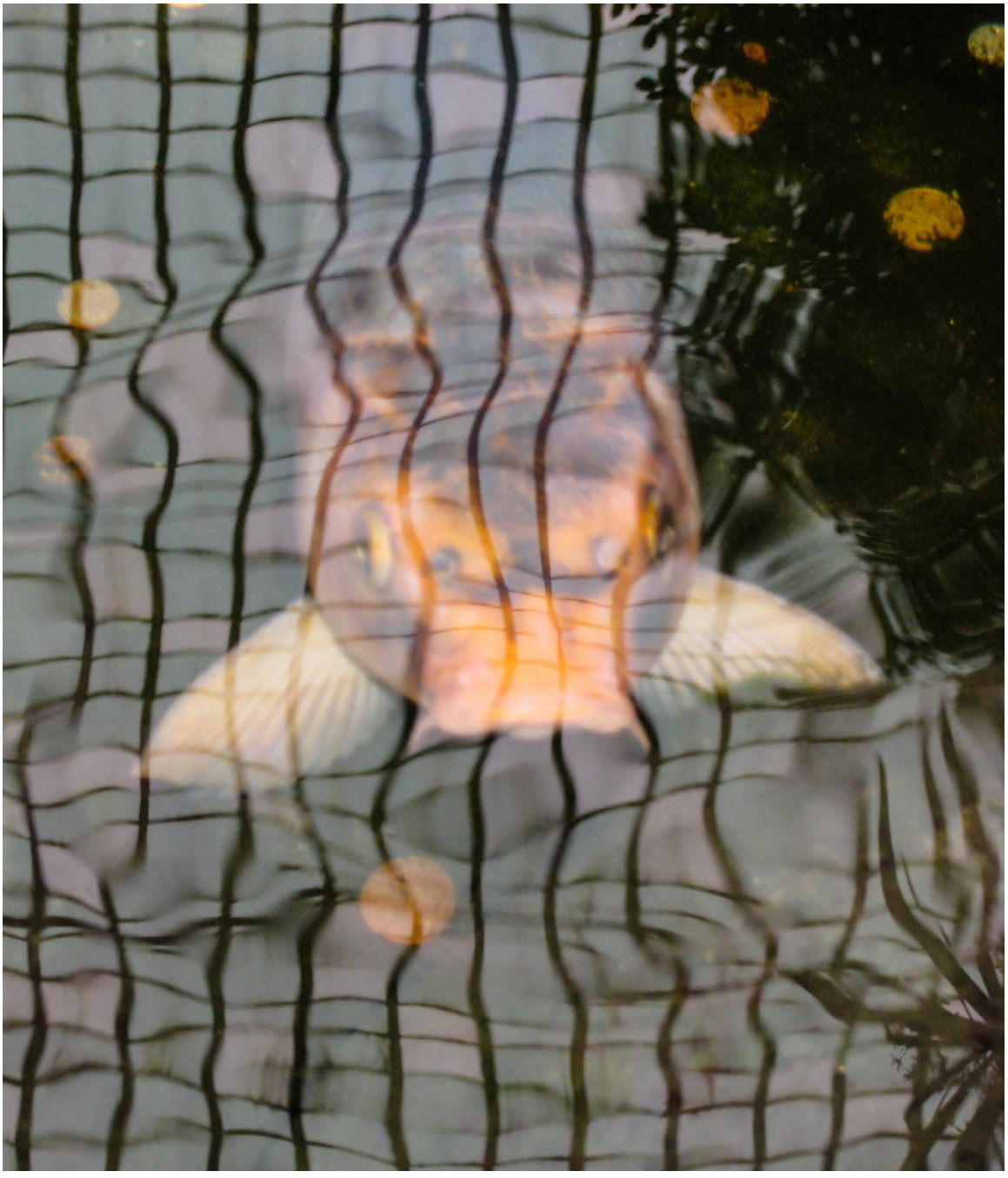
WOODY WOODGER

My childhood bedroom
is a graveyard
for flies, the windowsill
their Arlington. Where
the carpet and wall
meet is a small town
plot, already too full
up. A rendition of Taps
slumps around the exposed
drywall Dad always meant
to paint. I'm six.
And I think the dust
and pollen that appear
in the afternoon blinds
are flies. I don’t know
them from Adam. They all came
from me. I shook them out
from the trench coat
pockets of my comforter,
their souls confettied
into this jar with me.
Now the jar’s heavy
with bodies, with the smell
of all our lungs,
with the faint knowledge
we all exist off this one breath.

Selected photographs

NICHOLAS J.J. SMITH

Nicholas J.J. Smith, *untitled* (from the series *Reflections on Passage*), 2016. Courtesy the artist. Photo © Nicholas J.J. Smith



Nicholas J.J. Smith, *untitled* (from the series *Reflections on Passage*), 2009. Courtesy the artist. Photo © Nicholas J.J. Smith

Nicholas J.J. Smith, *untitled* (from the series *Inside Outside*), 2016. Courtesy the artist. Photo © Nicholas J.J. Smith

The Newlywed

LENA FORD

STAGEPLAY

CHARACTERS:

GERALD — Age 45, the town bachelor looking to change his life by marrying a younger woman in need of a new home.

ALICE — Age 22, youngest of seven children from a small town excited to have a home of her own and not tending to her family's needs.

SETTING: Farmhouse on the outskirts of a town far removed from other homes.

*** * ***

A small farmhouse nestled in a vast cornfield in the country. The house is old, but well kempt.

It is early evening and GERALD, a tall middle-aged, balding man with an easy smile, wearing his Sunday-best black suit and white shirt and tie, is carrying his new bride ALICE, wearing a long white lace wedding gown, over the threshold.

ALICE is only twenty-two years old, but has the countenance and manner of a woman much older. She has a smile on her face, but it is easy to discern her uncertainty behind it.

GERALD I hope you don't mind. I'm a man of tradition.

ALICE No… Not at all.

GERALD It is after all, our wedding night.

GERALD gingerly sets her down. ALICE looks around inspecting every crevice of the house.

GERALD It's not much, but it's mine.

ALICE I see.

GERALD The kitchen is over there.

He points to a small corner with a tiny old stove and battered wooden farm table with two high-back wooden chairs.

His eyes stare into ALICE's for approval. She notices and responds in kind.

ALICE It's…nice.

GERALD Aw…I'm not one to spend time in the kitchen.

(Beat)

Miss Mable down the road used to bring me my meals.

ALICE I see.

GERALD Do you like to cook?

ALICE I do.

GERALD Sounds funny to hear you say that again.

He laughs, notices she's not appreciating his humor and stops.

ALICE I didn't—

GERALD —I understand. It'll take a while.

ALICE Don't mean any harm.

GERALD Just glad to hear you like to cook.

(Beat)

Once Miss Mable heard I was getting married, she stopped coming around.

(Beat)

Been going to the local diner for my meals.

(Beat)

But ain't nothing like home cooking.

ALICE stands still staring at him.

GERALD Well, I guess you should make yourself comfortable.

ALICE lifts up her wedding gown ever slightly and walks past the kitchen slowly, her low heels making a clacking sound on the hardwood floors.

She peers into the first room.

GERALD I always thought that would make a good baby's room.

ALICE flinches.

GERALD But I'm getting ahead of myself.

(Beat)

Go on in.

ALICE walks inside and looks up at the ceiling and notices a big smiling sun painted in the center.

ALICE Did you paint that?

GERALD nods. ALICE relaxes.

ALICE It's nice.

GERALD Just a little something I like to do in my spare time.

(Beat)

Good to plan ahead.

ALICE Oh…

GERALD You like children, don't you?

ALICE They're okay.

GERALD Something you're wanting now.

ALICE I guess.

GERALD Hmm.

(Beat)

Heard your sisters have them a whole bunch of kids.

ALICE Yes…

GERALD And you help them out. I mean, with them busy working and all.

ALICE I thought coming here, I'd—

Pause.

GERALD —I see, you wanting to get away from all that.

ALICE Nothing wrong with wanting.

GERALD As long as we wanting the same thing.

ALICE pauses.

GERALD You right.

(Beat)

We got time.

ALICE I mean, if it's okay with you.

GERALD Come, let me show you the other room.

GERALD extends his large hand and ALICE lowly places hers into his. He holds it tightly forcing her simple gold wedding band to press on her middle and pinky fingers.

GERALD leads her into the next room.

ALICE pauses.

The room is empty except for a big oversized bed.

GERALD I figure you'll want to put your womanly touch in fixing up this room.

ALICE It's okay.

GERALD Now we're going to be spending an awfully long time together. Better we start being real honest with one another.

ALICE It's not that bad.

GERALD Uh-huh. But not to your liking now is it?

ALICE hesitates out of politeness. GERALD looks deeply into her eyes. ALICE stares at him and feels something moving in her heart. This frightens and comforts her at the same time.

ALICE Not really.

GERALD lets out a hearty laugh.

GERALD What you suppose we do with it?

ALICE I like bright colors.

GERALD Fine by me.

ALICE And throw rugs.

GERALD Uh-huh.

ALICE And some pretty end tables.

GERALD Of course you do.

(Beat)

You're young.

ALICE I'm not that young.

GERALD You're right.

(Beat)

You're perfect.

GERALD extends his long arms and unabashedly wraps them around ALICE. She closes her eyes waiting for him to finish and when he does, awkwardly stands in the same spot unsure of what to do next.

GERALD It'll take some time.

ALICE drops her head down.

GERALD There's another room down the hall. Let's say you stay there tonight.

ALICE keeps her head down.

GERALD That alright with you?

ALICE shrugs.

GERALD You hungry?

ALICE turns her head from left to right.

GERALD I figured such.

(Beat)

Folks sure brought a lot of food today. I guess they waited an awfully long time to see ol' Gerald tie the knot.

ALICE stands there awkwardly.

GERALD Now you'll find I'm a patient man, but you're going to have to help me out here,Alice. When your auntie wrote me, asking me to bring

you here, she said you were lively and easygoing. I know we just met and gone and got married, but I'd hope you'd feel more comfortable once—

ALICE —Would you mind very much if I changed out of this dress.

GERALD Of course not.

(Beat)

It's time I got out of this suit. Got me all stiff. Not feeling like myself.

ALICE Me too.

GERALD You go on in the back room and make yourself comfortable. I'll bring your suitcase.

ALICE Gerald.

GERALD Yes.

ALICE walks up to him, plants a kiss on his cheek and pinches his behind.

GERALD laughs.

GERALD Well, I'll be.

ALICE smiles, then walks away.

End of Play.

Forced Position

ARTHUR KENG

STAGEPLAY

CHARACTERS:

MOIRA A — Female – Age 30s to 40s – Any race – Damaged, but on her way back. Doing what she can to help herself, even yoga.

MOIRA B — Female – Age 30s to 40s – Moira A in the past. The truth can't find her. She can't find the truth. Possibly played by the same actress as Moira A.

JOHN — Male – Age 30s to 40s – Any race – Moira's husband. He loves her, but there's only so much pain one person can handle.

TOM/DR. BLANKENSHIP — Male – Age over 40 – Any race – A divorce lawyer and a therapist.

* * *

MOIRA A is doing yoga. She stands in Mountain Pose (standing straight, feet together, hands in a prayer position, eyes closed). Three deep, cleansing breaths. Slowly, she transitions into Tree Pose (arms in air, bottom of right or left foot on the inside of the opposite thigh, knee of lifted leg pointed outwards). Eyes still closed, exuding calm and centeredness. Three more deep breaths.

Beat.

MOIRA A Motherfucker.

Beat.

MOIRA A Fifteen seconds. I can never hold it for longer than fifteen seconds before I get dizzy and—

She wobbles and has to drop her lifted foot to regain her balance.

MOIRA A Yup.

She goes into a Sun Salutation and transitions into and holds various poses throughout the following.

MOIRA A I always get the image of being at the top of a building and then, whoop, down I go. I'd like to think that, were I actually at the top of a building, that I wouldn't get all disoriented and take the tumble. Or that I'd have the sense to keep the hell away from the edge. But. I dunno. Not gonna test it.

Pose transition.

MOIRA A I should, though. I should find myself at the top of more buildings. Should travel more. Whole big world out there and all that. All these things people say I should be doing. You're free now! Take a vacation! Go kayaking! Fuck that barista!

(Beat)

Do yoga. Well, this I don't mind. Mind and heart coming together. That stuff's okay. Useful.

JOHN and MOIRA B at home. There's a packed piece of luggage.

JOHN That was delicious, Em. Just…fantastic. Thank you.

MOIRA B Better than last year, eh?

JOHN Edible. So, yes.

MOIRA B I didn't burn it that badly last time.

JOHN Yeah, you did. Last year was arson, not cooking.

MOIRA B Screw you.

JOHN No, but, this was great. You did great. And I'm really glad it was…that it was just us. That we had this time to…

MOIRA B Yeah. Well, glad I could add something nice to the world's worst Valentine's Day.

JOHN Em, don't.

MOIRA B What?

Beat.

JOHN So, you're flying out Saturday?

MOIRA B Flying out?

JOHN To see your parents in Vancouver. You said you were going to—

MOIRA B Oh yeah, no. We were, but Phillip got sick you know and—

JOHN Em—

MOIRA B I don't want to travel with him all fevery, will probably make it worse—

JOHN Em—

MOIRA B I'll plan something for when he recovers and—

JOHN EM!

MOIRA B What?

Beat.

JOHN I can't.

MOIRA B I know. That's why you're leaving.

JOHN That's NOT why…goddammit.

Beat.

JOHN Nope. Not gonna do this.

Beat.

MOIRA B You still love me, John.

JOHN Yeah.

JOHN takes out a wrapped gift.

JOHN I was going to leave it for you to open after I…but I need you to open it now.

MOIRA B Okay.

JOHN Happy Valentine's Day.

MOIRA B takes the present, unwraps a framed photo.

MOIRA B New York.

JOHN The selfie we took after you said, "Yes."

MOIRA B *(Laughing)*
So stupid.

JOHN Yeah.

MOIRA B We do look beautiful, though.

JOHN Can we go back, Em? Back to this? It wasn't so long ago.

Beat.

MOIRA B That'd be great. But, John, it's not just us anymore.

JOHN sinks. Defeated.

JOHN I guess you're right.

JOHN starts for his luggage.

JOHN I don't know what I'm going to do out there without you, Em. It's going to kill me.

MOIRA B Then why—

JOHN takes his luggage and heads for the door.

MOIRA B Wait!

JOHN stops.

MOIRA B You can't leave without seeing Phillip! I'll wake him up. You can't leave without saying goodbye to your son, John!

MOIRA B runs offstage. JOHN, completely wrecked, takes off his wedding ring and sets it on the table.

JOHN Goodbye.

JOHN leaves.

Pose transition.

MOIRA A I'm centered. I'm present. I'm at one with the universe and all she has to offer.

(Beat)

I'm not good at lying to myself. But maybe it's true and I just don't realize it. That…it's certainly possible.

Lawyer's office. JOHN and MOIRA B across the table from TOM, the lawyer. This has been going on for a while. JOHN is exhausted, on the edge. Tom is equally tired but being patient.

MOIRA B I don't understand. He has to see you, John. You have to take him a few days a week. That's how divorce works, right? Sharing custody. John, Phillip needs his father. It's not like you can't afford—

JOHN STOP! Fine! Fine! Put it in, Tom! Put it in the agreement! I take Phillip Tuesday, Wednesday, and Saturday! Does that work for you, Em?!

MOIRA B That…that would be fine, John. But I don't know why you're yelling.

JOHN I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Good, I'm good with that. Put it in, Tom.

TOM John, you know we can't legally do that.

MOIRA B What? Why not?

Silence.

TOM Moira, maybe we can deal with something else first.

MOIRA B We've spent all day dealing with other things. The house, the car, the bikes, the furniture, the TV, the TV *stand*. We've dealt with everything except what's most important. Our *son*, John. We need to decide how we're going to raise our son.

TOM There must be…*something* else.

MOIRA B Well, there is one thing.

TOM Yes?

MOIRA B I was thinking, we should probably keep some of Phillip's things at your new place, John. Toys and things. So that when he's with you, he won't feel like he's in a completely foreign—

JOHN grabs MOIRA B and looks her directly in the eye. Not violent, but desperate.

JOHN Em. Moira. I need you to listen to me.

TOM John, we've already—

JOHN Are you listening to me?

MOIRA B Yes.

JOHN Phillip. Is. Gone. I was there next to you. You saw his body. The police, the hospital, you were there for *everything*.

No response.

JOHN Em.

No response.

JOHN EM! Say something, dammit! Say something! SaysomethingSaysomethingSaysomething*Saysomething*SAYSOMETHING!...

JOHN collapses in MOIRA B's lap. MOIRA B lays a hand on JOHN's head.

Silence.

MOIRA B Just a few things, John. So he doesn't get scared.

JOHN leaves the office.

TOM Maybe…maybe we can try this again in a few weeks.

Pose transition into Downward Dog.

MOIRA A Who named these poses, anyway? Do people ever really think of dogs as being downward? A dog doesn't think, "I'm downward." If

anything, he just thinks, “I got my ass in the air.” Humans need so much more to hold onto, don’t we?

Therapist’s office. MOIRA B on the couch. DR. BLANKENSHIP seated next to or behind her.

BLANKENSHIP And where was it you thought you saw Phillip this morning?

Silence.

BLANKENSHIP Moira?

MOIRA B I can’t talk to you.

BLANKENSHIP Why not?

MOIRA B Because you’re crazy.

BLANKENSHIP Am I?

MOIRA B They make me come see you, but *you’re* obviously the one who needs the help. At first I thought you just weren’t listening to me, that you were asking me questions from a list, like a tech support guy. But that’s not it. I say things and you actually hear different things. I saw my son in his bed this morning as I walked by his room.

BLANKENSHIP And where do you think you saw him next?

MOIRA B See! I didn’t say, “I think.” I said, “I SAW.” I SAW. Why do you keep changing it?

BLANKENSHIP Why do you think I keep changing it?

MOIRA B I told you. Because you’re crazy. Because you need help.

BLANKENSHIP Well, since you’re being ordered to be here for the length of our sessions, maybe we can use this time to help me AND you.

MOIRA B How?

BLANKENSHIP What if you start saying things the way I think you're saying them? Then we can try to work our way back to how you think—

MOIRA B There! Again!

BLANKENSHIP It might just help the both of us.

MOIRA B *I* don't need help.

Beat.

MOIRA B I *think* I saw him in the hallway bathroom while I was brushing his teeth.

BLANKENSHIP Okay. Now, do you remember hearing the water running?

Beat.

MOIRA B …What?

Pose transition into Crane Pose.

MOIRA A Crane Pose! How is it that I find it easier to balance on my hands than on my feet? Doesn't seem right. That's not how people work. Bi-PED-al, right? Like, feet. It's not bi…bi…bi-MAN-al. MAN-i-al. Maybe being upright just isn't for me. Maybe I'm better all twisted and upside-down.

A knock at the door.

MOIRA A WHO DISTURBS MY SERENITY?

She opens the door. JOHN enters.

JOHN Hi.

MOIRA A Yeah, I'm fine.

JOHN Okay. Are you? You're fine?

MOIRA A Doing yoga.

JOHN Oh, yeah, good. You like it?

MOIRA A Happy Valentine's Day.

JOHN You too. Yeah, that's why. Um. I wanted to drop this off.

JOHN takes out a gift.

JOHN It's not anything, you know, crazy—sorry, not crazy, I didn't mean—

MOIRA A Okay.

JOHN You can open it later.

JOHN sets the gift down.

JOHN I heard you're starting a new job. That's fantastic.

MOIRA A Sure.

Beat.

JOHN And…Phillip?

MOIRA A Phillip's dead.

Beat.

JOHN Oh God, Em, I don't know what I was thinking asking…like…I'm such an idiot…like I was testing you or—

MOIRA A It's okay.

(Beat)

Dr. Blankenship is pretty good at his job.

Beat.

MOIRA A I'm almost there, John.

JOHN Em, I'm sorry.

MOIRA A Is there someone new?

JOHN No.

MOIRA A Sit down. Please.

JOHN Yeah.

JOHN sits. MOIRA A sits next to him. Silence.

JOHN I still don't know how to not be with you. This whole year has been… I'm a fucking mess. Em. Do you think we could…maybe…

MOIRA A Please. Let's not talk right now. Let's just. Let's just be here at the top of this building.

End of Play.

All That We See or Seem

JONATHAN KUHN

STAGEPLAY

CHARACTERS:

HARRIET	Late 40s, a therapist, professional and calm under pressure.
JUSTINE	20s, a patient, timid but hiding a secret.
FRANK	Late 40s, Harriet's husband, unimposing and prone to panic.

SETTING A home office.

* * *

The stage is dark. We hear the sound of a tape recorder starting. Lights come up on a home office. Desk in the corner, family portrait on the wall. Two women sit across from each other, one in a chair and one on a small couch, a coffee table between them. A tape recorder is on the table, along with a strange device that looks like a helmet with several wires protruding from it. HARRIET stares at JUSTINE, who avoids eye contact.

Beat.

JUSTINE *(Looks at the portrait)*
You have a lovely family.

HARRIET Thank you.

JUSTINE Your husband reminds me of someone.

HARRIET Everyone says that.

JUSTINE So who is it?

HARRIET No, not anyone in particular. They just all say he looks familiar. He has one of those faces.

(Beat)

You don't have to do it.

JUSTINE But I won't make any progress in my therapy if I don't.

HARRIET That's not what I said. But it is my professional opinion that this is the best treatment for you. I created the device for cases like yours. That's why you were referred to me.

JUSTINE I don't want to go through it again.

HARRIET It will help you process it. But it doesn't have to be all at once. I'll pull you out if you get overwhelmed.

JUSTINE How?

HARRIET It's perfectly safe.

JUSTINE *(Points at the device)*

It's already in there?

HARRIET All the information you've told me. There are gaps, but your brain will fill those in. It will save that information, and the next time it will be more vivid and fill in more holes. Then eventually—

JUSTINE I want to get it all over with the first time.

HARRIET It doesn't work that. We have to handle this delicately.

JUSTINE Okay. I'm ready to try it.

HARRIET places the helmet onto JUSTINE. Attaches electrodes to her head.

HARRIET I'm going to activate it now. You might feel some slight tension in your temples, but it should pass quickly.

JUSTINE Okay.

HARRIET flips a switch. Sits back down.

HARRIET Are you in the room?

JUSTINE Yes. And so are you.

HARRIET I'm here to keep you calm. It's more effective than just hearing a voice. Is the room the way you remember it?

JUSTINE Mostly. But the walls weren't white, they were—now they're blue.

HARRIET Good. Any other details out of place?

JUSTINE The closet was over…there it is. And I was lying down.

HARRIET Go ahead.

JUSTINE lies down.

JUSTINE Lily said I could sleep it off for a little bit then come back to the party. The room was blurry—now I can't see well. I feel sick.

HARRIET You don't have to feel nauseous. You're not drunk right now. Repeat that in your head. "I'm not drunk right now."

JUSTINE *(Beat)*
I feel okay now.

HARRIET You can keep it blurry if you want, so it's more like that night, or you can make it clear.

JUSTINE I don't want to see his face.

HARRIET That's fine. But he'll be here soon. Do you want to continue?

JUSTINE Will he be able to hear me?

HARRIET Not this time. We can try that in a future session.

JUSTINE The door's opening. Bastard's checking to make sure no one saw him come in. I don't remember that.

HARRIET It might be a memory or you might be creating it.

JUSTINE So this isn't what happened?

HARRIET It's more about your emotions. The details don't have to be exact replications.

JUSTINE He's looking at me. Like he's trying to decide if I have enough energy to scream. Now his shoes are off. He's on the bed, on top of me, weighing me down. He's reaching for my—I can feel him. Stop him.

HARRIET I'm sorry. I can't stop him. It happened.

JUSTINE It *is* happening, right now! Help me!

HARRIET I can't help you. I wasn't there.

JUSTINE HELP ME!

HARRIET moves to JUSTINE. Deactivates the device and slips it off her head. Places it on the table and sits.

HARRIET How do you feel?

JUSTINE Like shit. I never wanted to see that again.

HARRIET You told me you see it all the time.

JUSTINE Not like that. Why would that help me?

HARRIET It won't be easy. You'll have to get all the way through it at least once. But then I can give you control of the scenario. You can talk to him. You can fight him. You can beat the shit out of him. Whatever helps you process it.

JUSTINE It was so real. And you pulled me right out of it. How?

HARRIET It's nothing to worry about.

JUSTINE But I need to know.

HARRIET Why?

JUSTINE It's the one part we haven't figured out yet.

FRANK enters. He's the man from the portrait. He's panicked, unable to breath.

HARRIET Frank?! Where's your medication?!

FRANK falls to his knees.

HARRIET Frank!

HARRIET rushes to him. Speaks to JUSTINE.

HARRIET Look in the top left drawer of my desk. Get his asthma medication.

JUSTINE opens the drawer. While HARRIET is distracted, JUSTINE slips the medication into her pocket.

JUSTINE I don't see anything.

HARRIET It's there!

JUSTINE pretends to look for it. HARRIET pushes her out of the way.

HARRIET Where is it?

She pulls out the drawer and empties the contents. Picks up the phone.

HARRIET Why isn't it working?! We have to get him to the hospital!

JUSTINE It's too late for that.

HARRIET rushes to the door. It won't open.

HARRIET What's happening?!

FRANK wheezes. She kneels next to him.

HARRIET In annnnnd out. In annnnd out.

FRANK's breathing grows more frantic and reaches a crescendo before coming to an abrupt halt. He dies.

JUSTINE Is this what you were looking for?

She holds up the medication. HARRIET grabs the chair and charges at her. JUSTINE pulls out a gun. HARRIET stops.

JUSTINE Using the chair. That's a new one.

(Beat)

This can be all over if you tell me how to wake people up.

HARRIET My husband is dead and you—

JUSTINE No he's not. Or he doesn't have to be. Repeat that in your head. "He doesn't have to be dead."

Beat. HARRIET looks at FRANK's body.

HARRIET He's still there.

JUSTINE You're not trying hard enough. Of course, you have watched him die a lot now. Maybe you can't see the truth anymore.

HARRIET How long have I been like this? It wasn't designed for long-term exposure. If you leave me under I could—

JUSTINE Then tell me how to wake you up.

HARRIET Why are you doing this?

JUSTINE To gather information from people who don't want to give it. We've already prevented several attacks.

HARRIET You're using my therapy device to torture people?

JUSTINE That's such an unfortunate word. But they keep dying when we try to wake them up. We don't want that. And we don't want that to happen to you.

HARRIET I'm not going to help you.

JUSTINE You really want to go through this again?

(Beat)

The next time will be worse. They'll always be worse.

HARRIET I'm going to kill you.

JUSTINE Go ahead. I'm not really here.

JUSTINE gives HARRIET the gun. She fires. BLACKOUT. When the lights come back up, JUSTINE is gone. So is FRANK. HARRIET hesitates, then shoots herself. BLACKOUT. The sound of a tape recorder rewinding. But it's distorted. Almost demonic. The sound stops. Then the click of the tape recorder starting again. The lights come back up. Everything is as it was when the scene began.

JUSTINE *(Looks at the portrait)*

You have a lovely family.

HARRIET Thank you.

JUSTINE And such beautiful children.

The lights fade out.

End of Play.

Last Chance

GWEN GOODKIN

There I was, elbow-deep into hosting my eighteenth motherloving Pampered Chef® party, when I drew a line in the sand and walked straight out. My own house. Luanne was up there hawking the pizza stone again—always the frigging pizza stone, I mean these women all *had* the pizza stone. Try something new!—when I set down my serving tray and left the house. I must have walked for over an hour. I could not stop moving 'til the anger grew small enough to stuff back in its cage.

The cars were all gone when I came back. All except hers. I exhaled, pinched the bridge of my nose, said, "Might as well get it over with." Went inside like nothing, like I'd just stepped out to haul the trash.

"What in God's green earth happened to you, May?" said Luanne. "I had to handle everything here by myself. The service, the pitch, the orders, the cleanup."

"Luanne? My only response to that is: it's about time."

I will say, I could host the pants off a party. The kitchen was where I worked best, and Luanne knew it, which is why I hosted all the parties, and I'm talking *all* the parties. Even those Luanne was on the ticket to run, meaning she got paid, not me. My paltry take was a few free items I already owned, so I turned around and sold them at discount. Even then, it didn't make up for the money spent on the party. As you may have already guessed, this dynamic had nowhere to go but *pop*.

Let me back up and fill you in. Luanne and I had been friends on and off for decades. On? Kids. Off? High school. On again? Kids in high school. Our daughters ended up twirling together as majorettes and became fast friends. Luanne and I had no choice but to sidestep back toward each other.

Childhood friendships are strange. There's no wool to pull, because the person knows you, whether you like it or not. She understands what makes you great—why you were friends in the first place. She also remembers the unsavory bits. But, the happy part of reviving a lost friendship is that you push all those annoying traits aside. At first. Then the frustrations creep in, a little at a time, and you're both back to being plain. old. you. *Take me or toss me*, you both eventually say, in so many words. Sometimes, that's when the

friendship truly begins. When you both no longer give a holy hoot. And sometimes that's when the friendship breaks forever.

Can you indulge me for a minute? Would you just look at the invitation she sent?

MESSAGE FROM HOST

DO NOT MISS this Party, ladies!!!! Last chance to get your Order's in by Xmas!!!!! All the newest Product's will be demonstrated.

Scrumptious, gourmet food made by Your's Truly.

****FIRST 5 TO RSVP = 10% OFF ONE ITEM!!!!!!+****

+ item must be under $50

Who's Coming? Search

Party Down :-D (6)

Flip Flopper :-/ (0)

Party Pooper :-((1)

Not Yet Replied (6)

I'd like to receive party secrets, gift ideas, special offers and more.

Reply

Where can I possibly start? I mean, are we German now, capitalizing nouns? The apostrophes. The font. The reply options. What really popped my cork, though, was the "gourmet food made by Your's Truly." First of all, everyone knows *I'm* the one cooking the food. That's what they come for! Not the gadgets. No one wants them anymore. They want the dang free lunch! To top it all off, I'm an English teacher. Run the invitation by me, so I can at least proofread. And right there, I hit the nail on the head. That's exactly why she didn't want me to proof the invite. Because she didn't want me correcting her. Because I graduated from college and she didn't. Because somewhere along the line, we switched income brackets.

* * *

Oh, that May, I'd like to wring her goddamned neck for walking out on me in the middle of a party. Of course, she blamed her meltdown on me.

"You never help," she whined. "I do everything and you take all the credit. And the money."

"Oh, please," I said. "Go lie to someone who'll believe you."

I'm sure she told anyone who'd listen that she was the one who threw all the parties, *wah wah wah*. And, in that she's telling the truth. But she *wanted* to throw all the parties. Volunteered. So much so that I stopped asking and just slapped her address on the invite every time. Don't be fooled, she puts on a good show. *I have to be careful about how I present myself around town. I'm a teacher. I'm judged for what I do outside the classroom, too.*

That's what she wanted. To be judged. She wanted everyone to see her big, fancy house and decide that she was just as fancy. But there's no fooling me. I know she came from dirt. I know everything.

May practically lived at my house as a kid. To the point where my parents joked about adopting her, and yet, it wasn't far off. I went inside her house trailer exactly one time, when she was sick and my mom brought me over to deliver a meatloaf. My mom, always the class act, said she'd stay in the car while I ran the food in. Though I think Mom really wanted to see her, make sure she was okay. But she knew. It wasn't her place.

Just as I left the car, Mom said, "I should have taken that meatloaf out of the pan and put it on a plate. That pan's an heirloom, you know." I agreed. The pan didn't belong in that slump of a house. The aluminum was rusting from the ground up. The sides sagged. No driveway to speak of, just a few hops from the ditch. It looked like it fell off the side of a semi and was left for scrap.

I knocked on the door—barely—and saw May's dad on the couch.

"Come in," he said.

"Hi, Mr. Trame. My mom made some dinner for you."

"Why?"

"Well, I guess because May's sick."

He swiped an inhale off his cigarette and pointed at the kitchen with his head. "Put it over there." He wasn't watching TV or doing anything, really, besides smoking.

"How's May?" I asked.

"Same."

"Okay, well. Goodbye."

He nodded and I left, never so happy to get through a door in my whole life.

"How's she look?" asked Mom.

"Sick," I said.

"Well, of course, but—"

"She'll be better soon. Her dad said thank you for the food." Anything to get us off and away as fast as possible.

Mom looked relieved and started the car.

Not long after, May's dad shot and killed her mom. We never got our pan back.

You would think that after everything that happened with May, what with her dad being in prison and all, she'd've grown quieter and more withdrawn at school. But no. It was just the opposite.

After she moved in with her aunt, her hair got bigger, her clothes brighter, her laugh louder.

"If I'm going to be the town cautionary tale, I might as well fucking embrace it." She lit a cigarette for me. She'd convinced me no one would notice us out back behind the cafeteria dumpster. She was right. We went there every day at lunch. "Besides they all want to get close to me. Like I have a wild gene they want to be the first to discover, see if they recognize it in themselves."

It was true, I'd been her only friend for years and now she had more friends than she knew what to do with. But I was the girl she talked to one-on-one. Everyone always wanted to find out where she went at lunch. She told them she walked home. Her aunt's yard bordered the school parking lot. No one asked me where I went.

For the longest time, May had been my secret. Sure, we were friends, but I didn't exactly announce it. She came over to my house and we kept a distance at school. But then, after the murder, our friendship flipped somehow, and I became her secret.

Me. A secret.

No, I'm not the type of girl anybody needs to hide.

"What's that supposed to mean, *it's about time*?"

"You know what exactly what I mean. Why am I the only one throwing the parties here?"

"Because you *want* to throw the parties. You want everyone to see your expensive furniture and your 'custom' house. '*We built the house ourselves. It was a labor of love, but it was worth it.*' Barf."

"You're so transparent. Could you be any more jealous?"

I dropped a dish in the sink mid-scrub. What the hell did I care about cleaning up? "You wish I was jealous. At least I got my first choice for a husband. Unlike you, who reminds poor Roger every day he'll never live up to the god who was Michael."

"See, there you're wrong. Michael *was* your first choice."

"Until you stole him!"

"I didn't steal him. He ran to me. Couldn't wait to get away from you."

"I was your only friend for *years*. Years! And what do you do to repay me? Steal my boyfriend."

"*He* broke up with *you*. I didn't steal him."

"You did. You orchestrated the whole thing. And you know what else you stole? My mom's loaf pan! That was an heirloom. My mom cooked, and I brought the food in to that hellhole, and you never thanked us and never returned the pan."

"I have no clue what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do. You ate banana bread out of that pan all the time. It was green with scalloped edges!"

"Can you even hear yourself? You're not making any sense. Take control."

"Oh, I'm taking control. Right now. I don't ever want to see your face again."

"Good luck with that. We have a pair of majorettes, remember?"

"Even that you had to steal! I couldn't be a majorette without you elbowing your way onto the squad. *I'm going to twirl with fire! It'll be a hit!"*

"And there you were, being your usual bore self, wondering why you weren't the star. Blubbering about Michael breaking up with you, twirling the same routine. Do something shocking! Amaze people!"

"Yeah, well, I'd rather be a good person than an entertaining one."

"Maybe that's your problem."

"Maybe that's yours."

* * *

My whole adult life, I've driven the long route skirting town to avoid that trailer. It's still there—boarded up, rotting from the inside out. But a couple months after my fight with Luanne, I got lost in thought and found myself fifty feet from it. I slammed on the brakes and vacillated between turning around or driving past. I finally decided I'd seen the place, what difference did it make to keep going?

And, can you believe, as I looked at that rusted dumpster of a house, my first thought wasn't about my poor mom or my shitty dad, it was about that damn loaf pan?

How the meatloaf had sat on our counter for days, festering, drawing flies. It was the pan that'd started the fight.

I was sick with mono, which in itself had set my dad off. "That's the kissing sickness," he said. "Who'd you kiss?"

"No one," I said.

"You're a bad liar," he said. "At least you didn't inherit that from your mom. She's a world-class liar." He ran a hand over his stubble. "Just don't turn into a whore like her."

I was in bed for days, didn't even know Luanne had stopped in, when Mom came back after being gone for nearly a week. She up and left the second day I was terribly sick.

"I can't take this anymore," she said. "I was meant for bigger things than living on the side of a ditch."

She came in like nothing, like she'd gone out for cigarettes and forgotten our address, and went right to the meatloaf. Dad sat on the couch smoking like he was blind and hadn't seen her step through the door.

"Disgusting! Who the hell leaves meat on the counter to rot? Are those maggots?"

Dad jumped up and raged and the fight started, which was my cue to go to my room. I stared at a picture of myself in a fancy dress and white gloves and wished I was that girl. Then there was the gunshot and the smell of gunpowder and me alone with my mom while she bled to death, frantic.

"May. Baby. Help me." The shaking started from her hands and moved up her arms. Her mouth turned white. That's where death begins. In the lips.

"Always look smart, May," my Aunt Helen said. We were crossing the street to the portrait studio. The fabric of our gloved hands grew hot from the friction of such a tight grip. "We're outsiders in this town. A spinster and her orphan niece. So you must always look smart."

Every year, from as far back as I could remember, Helen had taken me to sit for pictures. Before, it'd been a treat, getting dolled up in a pretty dress, but, after everything that happened with Mom and Dad, I didn't want to look at pictures of myself. Before, the smile had been real, because I got to pretend for a day that I was the girl in the picture. A real smile on a pretend girl. But the pictures had become a chore because the smile was no longer real.

I had dragged my feet getting ready for the pictures. Earlier that day, I'd been exploring the creek with my friend Roger. He said he'd found worms the size of his thumb there and had caught a huge catfish with one. If Helen knew about the mud and the worms I'd never be able to see Roger again, so Roger and I rinsed our arms and legs at his house.

"Little May," said the photographer. "Not so little anymore." He bent to my height, licked his thumb and cleared a mud streak I'd missed from my hairline.

Michael died in a car accident. “Decapitated,” people whispered. A few weeks after the accident, Aunt Helen rushed into my bedroom before church.

“Get out of bed.” She scurried around the room picking up tissues and gathering clothes.

I hugged my pillow and hoped she’d leave.

“You’re a single mother now,” she said. “A threat.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re a threat to the women in this town. They’ll get ideas in their heads that you live solely to seduce their men.” She threw the pile of clothes into the hamper. “You’re a threat to men, too. They don’t like to see a woman making it on her own. They like to feel needed.”

I propped myself up on my pillows. Tiffany stood in the doorway in a blue ruffled dress. She had the smoothest blonde hair—so silky it often unwound when I tried to braid it. Helen had twisted it into two tight braids and bound them with ribbons.

It was Tiffany’s white gloves that got me out of bed.

We never had any kids, Roger and I. We tried. For a long time we tried, but it just didn’t happen. So we built the house instead.

I can’t help but feel I failed him. Some days I want to say, go off and find yourself a new wife. A younger one. Have a family. And other days I’m selfish and think, *Don’t leave us. Not twice. We can’t be left twice.* Tiffany calls him “Dad” and maybe that’s enough. He says I’m silly, that he’s perfectly happy with our daughter. See? He calls her “our daughter.” But I know there’s a place deep inside he won’t show me where the flame burns for a child of his own.

All of a sudden, I was in Luanne’s driveway. How’d I get there from the trailer? I had no memory of the drive. The garage was open; her truck was inside. I went to her front door. It had been a couple months since we spoke, and I was sure she’d slam the door in my face, if she even opened it at all. I rang the bell and moved to the corner where she couldn’t see me.

“What,” she said when she opened the door.

“I remember the loaf pan.”

“Good for you. Go get yourself a cookie.” She almost closed the door but I stopped her.

“The pan—it might still be in the trailer.”

“I don’t care about the goddamn pan.”

“Yes, you do.”

"It's been twenty-five years. The pan's long gone, May."

"The trailer's been boarded up ever since what happened. There's a chance."

She puffed a laugh. "That place would fall down on our heads as soon as we stepped inside."

"Maybe," I said. "Maybe not."

"Why do you want me to go? Bring Roger."

"I can't bring Roger."

"Oh, baloney."

"You're the only one."

"The only one what?"

"Who's seen that part of me."

"So go show Roger."

"I can't."

She folded her arms. "He's your husband. Show him who you really are."

"Okay," I said. "But I need you to go with me first."

"What—why am I even talking to you?" She flicked up her hands. "I'm mad at you."

"Because you can't help yourself. And neither can I. So let's get this over with already."

I turned and walked to my car. I was sure she'd follow me. She was too curious not to. I knew the pan was in there. I could feel its pull.

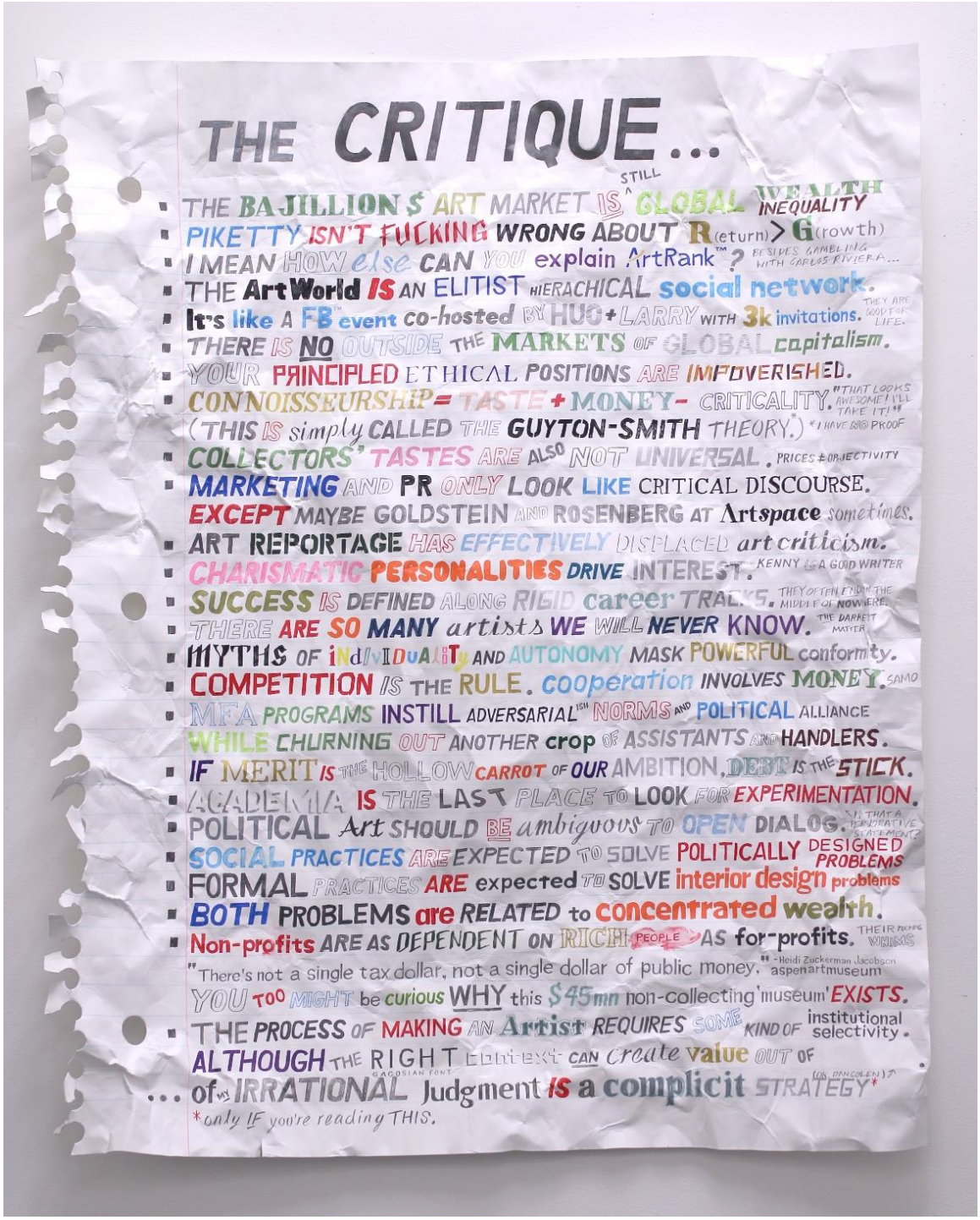
When we crawled through the kitchen window, we saw the pan still there, on its side, dropped like yesterday's fortune. There was a chip where it came to rest on the ground during the argument all those years ago.

What I hadn't expected to see was the studio portrait. Luanne found it in my old bedroom after shoving open the warped door. The photo was weather-damaged and had curled in on itself.

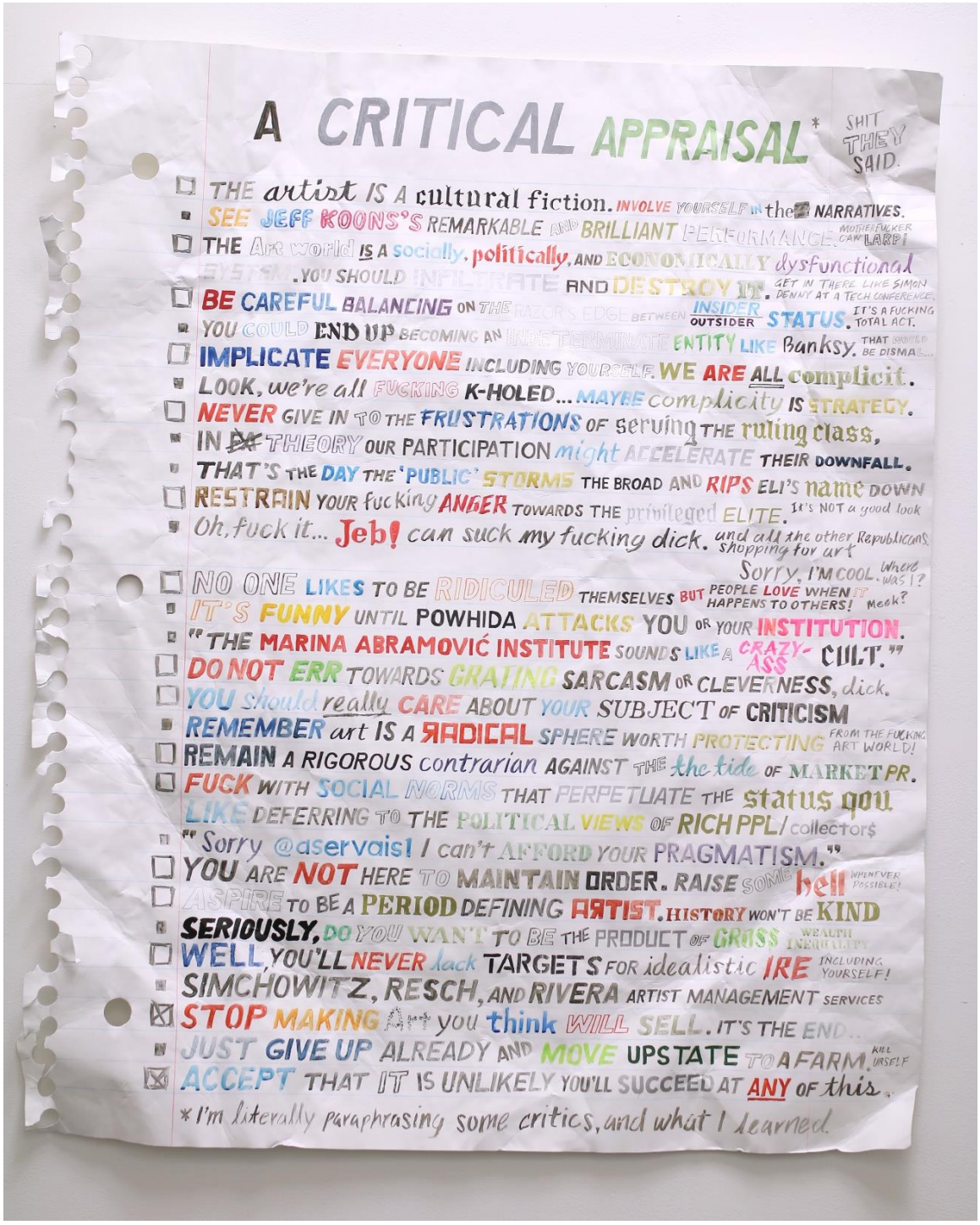
"Toss it," I told Luanne when she showed it to me. But she tucked it in her purse, flattened it at home, and returned it to me in a silver frame.

The Critique & Critical Appraisal

WILLIAM POWHIDA



William Powhida, *The Critique*, 2015. Acrylic and graphite on paper mounted on aluminum, 45 x 55 inches. Courtesy of the artist



William Powhida, *Critical Appraisal*, 2015. Watercolor, colored pencil, and graphite on paper mounted on aluminum, 45 x 55 inches. Courtesy of the artist

Contributors

Fiction

Aimee Bender • Aimee Bender is the author of five books: including most recently the bestseller *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* and *The Color Master,* a *New York Times* Notable Book for 2013. Her short fiction has been published in *Granta, The Paris Review*, *Tin House,* and more, as well as heard on *This American Life* and *Selected Shorts*. She teaches creative writing at USC.

Laura Bonazzoli • Laura Bonazzoli is a freelance writer and editor, mainly in the health sciences. Her poetry and short fiction has appeared in *Epiphany, Free Inquiry, Reed Magazine, The Sandy River Review, Third Wednesday, Viking Review*, and other publications. She currently lives in MidCoast Maine, within walking distance of two harbors, a river, a lake, and several ponds.

Christina Craigo • Originally from West Virginia, Christina Craigo was educated in Pennsylvania and New York. She holds an MFA in Fine Arts from the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan. She currently lives in Colorado, where she works as a contract grant writer for nonprofits and devotes an increasing portion of her time to fiction.

David Crist • Born and raised in Los Angeles, David Crist was a writer, educator, and traveler. He taught at USC, Crossroads School for the Arts, and beyond. In 2015 he received a Master in Professional Writing with a focus in Fiction from USC. He died in a traffic accident in December 2016. His memory lives on in his writing, his students, and his family and friends.

Angela He • Angela He is an LA native and an incoming student in writing and literature at UCSB's College of Creative Studies. Her work has appeared on *The Huffington Post*, and she has been recognized as a LA Youth Poet Finalist.

Robert Kerbeck • Based on his short stories, fifteen of which have been published in the last year, Robert Kerbeck was selected for mentorship by the managing editor of *Tin House*. His work has most recently appeared in *Word Riot, Cream City Review, Cortland Review*, and *Drunk Monkeys* with stories forthcoming in *Gargoyle* and *The MacGuffin*. Robert was the recipient of the *upstreet* short fiction scholarship at the 2016 VCFA Postgraduate writers' conference and he was a finalist for the 2016 Writers@Work fellowship. His first play, *Putin and the Snowman*, opened Off-

Broadway this past July. One of his short stories was acquired by Tica Productions and adapted into the film, *Connected*, opening in 2017.

Ashley Roque • Currently living in Switzerland, Ashley Roque is a U.S. journalist with a BA in creative writing from Florida State University. Although she has published hundreds of nonfiction articles, this is her first fictional story to find a home.

Phoebe Yeoh • Phoebe Yeoh is an engineering graduate student living in Pittsburgh, PA, doing research on emerging memory materials and devices. Although she loves her scientific "day job," she has always found balance in enjoying the arts. Through her work, she hopes to connect herself and fellow readers to someone else's reality, perspectives and experiences. This is her first publication.

Nonfiction

Maryann Aita • Maryann Aita is a writer and educator in Brooklyn, N.Y. She writes creative nonfiction, poetry, screenplays, and hybrid forms. In addition to *Exposition Review*, her work is forthcoming in *Big Muddy*. Her teleplay, *The Matchbreaker*, won the Best Original Comedy Pilot at the 12th Annual Broad Humor Film Festival. Although she never believed in soulmates, she thinks she might have had something close to one in her cat, Marzipan, who unexpectedly passed away shortly before this publication.

Melanie Kachadoorian • Melanie Kachadoorian has an MFA in Creative Nonfiction and teaches at Fresno State. Her work has appeared in *Monkey Puzzle* and *If and Only If.*

Poetry

Alessandra R. Castellanos • A Los Angeles native, Alessandra R. Castellanos writes poetry, fiction and memoir that draw upon her vibrant and tenacious ancestral heritage in Guatemala and California. Her conjured worlds encompass feral spirits, otherworldly legends, and the disconcerting realities of domestic workers in Hollywood celebrity homes. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Offing, Drunken Boat, Lunch Ticket, RipRap Journal, Chaparral, Duende,* and *The Round* among others. Castellanos is a student of the Method Writing Approach taught by Jack Grapes, a member of the Los Angeles Poets and Writers Collective, and a graduate of California State University, Northridge. For more please visit alessandracastellanos.com.

Iris Jamahl Dunkle • Iris Jamahl Dunkle is Poet Laureate of Sonoma County, California. Her latest book is *There's a Ghost in this Machine of Air* (2015). Her debut collection, *Gold Passage*, won the

2012 Trio Award. In 2017 Trio House Press will publish her third collection *Interrupted Geographies*. Dunkle teaches at Napa Valley College.

Vivian Enriquez • Vivian Enriquez is a Latina high school senior residing in Los Angeles County. She is part of a mentoring program called WriteGirl where she has cultivated her passion for poetry. She enjoys writing about the human experiences along with a variety of concepts. On her free time she likes to help her community from participating in charity drives and walks to volunteering at her local elementary. A dream of hers is to one day publish her own collection of poetry.

Rob Griffith • Rob Griffith's latest book, *The Moon from Every Window* (David Robert Books, 2011), was nominated for the 2013 Poets' Prize; and his previous book, *A Matinee in Plato's Cave*, was the winner of the 2009 Best Book of Indiana Award. His work has appeared in *PN Review, Poetry, The North American Review, Poems & Plays, The Oxford American*, and many others. He is the editor of the journal *Measure* and is chair of the Creative Writing Program at the University of Evansville, Indiana.

Brad Johnson • Brad Johnson's first full-length poetry collection *The Happiness Theory* (Main Street, 2013) is available here. Work of his has also been accepted by *Hayden's Ferry Review, J Journal, Meridian, Poet Lore, Salamander, Southern Indiana Review, Tar River Poetry*, and others.

Konstantin Kulakov • Konstantin Kulakov is an award-winning Russian-American poet born in Zaoksky, Soviet Russia in 1989. He is the recipient of the Greg Grummer Poetry Award, judged by Brian Teare. Kulakov's debut collection of poems, *Excavating the Sky*, was published by Dialogue Foundation Books on December 4, 2015, and lauded by *Kirkus*, Cornel West, and David Rosenberg. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Phoebe, Tule Review, The Christian Century, Harvard Journal of African American Public Policy,* and *Tidal Basin Review*. Select poems have been translated into Russian, including a forthcoming translation into German. He lives in New York.

Jack Liskin • Jack Liskin is a California poet, the immigrant son of a Holocaust survivor, who in previous manifestations directed USC's Physician Assistant Program as a faculty member of the School of Medicine; established a Trager practice in the Department of Family Medicine's clinic (a form of hands-on bodywork which he described in *Moving Medicine*, his biography of its founder, Milton Trager, MD); completed apprenticeships with the Huichol Indians of Mexico at two of their sacred sites; and farmed and sold his produce at Southern California farmer's markets. His poetry examines the heads and tails of experience and imagination, distilled through love of language and motivated by a desire to leave behind something beautiful and useful. He received a BA in Latin American Studies and an MA in Cultural Anthropology, both at UCLA, and Paramedic and Physician Assistant training at L.A. County Hospital and USC. His recent poems have appeared in *The Interpreters House, Slant, Earth's Daughters, 3rd Wednesday, Stoneboat, Plainsongs*, and *Iconoclast*.

Michael McLaughlin • Victim of enthusiasms, Michael McLaughlin has worked for over twenty-five years as a Poet-in-Residence at Atascadero State Hospital, a maximum-security forensic facility, as a Contract Artist with the California Department of Corrections and with California Poets in the Schools. A graduate of USC's Master of Professional Writing program and founding editor of *The Southern California Anthology*, McLaughlin's most recent collection of poetry is *Countless Cinemas* (University of Hell Press, Portland, Oregon 2016). Selected Poet Laureate of San Luis Obispo County in 2003, McLaughlin curates Santa Maria, California's *Live from the CORE* poetry/performance series, is a Poet-in-Residence at Pleasant Valley State Prison in Coalinga, California and currently resides with his beautiful wife and nine indoor cats on California's Central Coast.

MK Punky • MK Punky was a founding member of the '80's hardcore band The Clitboys. The author of many books, most recently the novel *The Termite Squad*, and the winner of the 2016 Barrelhouse Prize for fiction, he serves as poet laureate of Vista Street Community Library in Los Angeles.

Woody Woodger • Woody Woodger is a New England poet whose first chapbook, *postcards from glasshouse drive*, is currently forthcoming from Finishing Line Press. His other works have previously appeared in *Barely South*, *Soundings East*, and *(b)OINK*, among others, and are currently forthcoming in *Descansos Anthology* and *Postcards Poems & Prose*.

Stage & Screen

Lena Ford • Lena Ford is a Los Angeles-based playwright. Her short play, *Date Night*, was recently performed at the Zephyr Theatre as part of Playground-LA. She is Head of Seedlings New Play Development Reading Committee at Theatricum Botanicum. A recent graduate of USC's MFA Dramatic Writing Program, her plays tackle social issues and their effect on families and the community.

Arthur Keng • Arthur Keng is a Los Angeles-based playwright and actor whose written work has been extensively featured in PlayGround-LA's Monday Night PlayGround staged reading series. Short plays presented through Monday Night PlayGround include *Forced Position* (selected for this year's edition of *Exposition Review*), *Antic Resolutions* (selected for *PlayGround-LA's Best of Playground 2016), Dream Enforcement*, *Over the Falls*, and more. As an actor, Arthur has performed at theaters across the country including TheatreWorks, Berkeley Rep, B Street Theatre, Merrimack Rep, among many others. Television appearances include roles on *Silicon Valley, Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, *Criminal Minds*, and others. Arthur received his MFA in Acting from the University of Southern California. www.arthurkeng.com

Jonathan Kuhn • Jonathan Kuhn was born and raised in Selma, Alabama. He moved to Los Angeles to attend the University of Southern California, where he received both his BFA in Writing for Screen and Television and his Master of Professional Writing degree, during which he studied under playwright Prince Gomolvilas. He has performed multiple times at The Moth, including one LA GrandSLAM. In 2015, Jonathan's play *Ex Communication* (which he also directed) was performed at the Underground Theatre as part of the Hollywood Fringe Festival. Last year, his short play *Looking Forward* was performed at the Stella Adler Theatre as part of the first annual A Light In Dark Places: A Collection Of Plays For Hope festival; each play addressed suicide awareness, and the proceeds were donated to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. He has been a member of PlayGround-LA for the past two years, and last October his play *Not All Men* received the People's Choice Award for that month's staged reading series.

Experimental Narratives

Gwen Goodkin • Gwen Goodkin's writing has been published by *Fiction, Witness, The Dublin Review, The Carolina Quarterly, Atticus Review, jmww, The Rumpus, Reed Magazine,* and others. She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has won the Black Fox Literary Magazine Contest as well as the John Steinbeck Award for Fiction. She lives in Encinitas, just north of San Diego.

William Powhida • William Powhida makes fun of the art world to highlight the paradoxes and absurdities of economic and social value systems that keep the sphere of visual art afloat on a tide of inequality. His work relies on research and participation to diagram, list, perform, and critique the forces that shape perceptions of value. He is responsible or partly responsible for exhibitions including *After the Contemporary* at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, *Overculture* at Postmaster Gallery, *Bill by Bill* at Charlie James Gallery, and *#class* at Winkleman Gallery.

Visual Art & Comics

Shirin Abedinirad • Shirin Abedinirad was born in 1986, in Tabriz, Iran. In 2002, she began her artistic activities with painting. She studied graphic design and fashion design at Dr. Shariaty University in Tehran, where her research focused on conceptual art and the way in which it overlaps with fashion design. While studying fashion design, she began working as a model. In 2010, Shirin was chosen as the face of United Color Benetton F/W International Campaign. As part of the campaign, she was invited to work with Benetton's research center, Fabrica, in Treviso, Italy. Around this time, she started engaging in performance art pieces around Iran, confronting issues of gender, sexuality, and human compassion. She has also put on public shows in Spain, Turkey, and India. Since 2012, Shirin has been making video art, exploring the notion of self and identity with moving images. She studied under critically acclaimed Iranian director Abbas

Kiarostami. In both her performance pieces and videos, she designs her own costumes, props, and sets. In March 2014, Shirin was selected for a one-year scholarship with United Colors of Benetton's Fabrica research center. During her time in Italy, Shirin worked in Fabrica's editorial department and published an original book *Fashion & Conceptual Art* (Nazar Publication). Currently based in Tehran, Shirin has continued focusing on her performance, installation, and video art.

Shawn DePasquale, Sherard Jackson, & Whitney Cook • The GALAXYS FOR HIRE team is comprised of writer Shawn DePasquale, artist Sherard Jackson, and colorist Whitney Cook. They know each other's darkest secrets and plan on working as a team for many years to come. Sherard has worked for DC Comics, IDW, Image, and more. Shawn has written six graphic novels, one of which was turned into the animated feature film *PIXIES*. Whitney is the best colorist in the world and loves Wolverine. Please buy their book.

Sarah Meyohas • In her work across media, Sarah Meyohas (French-American, born 1991) uses networks of information, power, value, and communication. Most spaces are shaped by the flow of desire through matrices of thought; this is the site of her work. Her 2015 cryptocurrency *Bitchcoin* and recent *Stock Performance* at 303 Gallery in New York have been featured in *The New York Times, Time Magazine, Wired, Vice, Fortune, Artspace,* and *The Atlantic,* and she has appeared on CNBC, PBS, and CBC. She recently was selected for the *Forbes* 30 Under 30 list. Meyohas holds a BA in international relations from the University of Pennsylvania and a BS in finance from the Wharton School and in 2015 received an MFA from Yale University. Her home in New York is her eponymously named gallery.

Nicholas J.J. Smith • Nicholas J.J. Smith is a photographer and philosopher from Sydney, Australia.

Deborah Stevenson • Deborah Stevenson was born in Washington, D.C. She grew up in Tokyo, went to high school in Baltimore, and got her BA from Sarah Lawrence College in New York. She lived for many years on the West Coast and returned to the East Coast, where she lived in Brooklyn, New York, until 2015, when she relocated to the coastal town of Belfast, Maine.