

EXPOSITION REVIEW

2022

VOLUME VII:
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Exposition Review
is published annually as an
independent online journal.

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DESIGN

Jessica June Rowe

Cover Artwork

Lorna Simpson, *Ice 13*, 2018. Ink and screenprint
on gessoed fiberglass, 108 x 96 x 1 3/8 inches. ©
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Wirth. Photo: James Wang

COLOPHON

Exposition Review is set in Georgia. Titling is set
in Filosofia and accent text is set in Oswald and
Copperplate.

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Two years into a pandemic marked by continued social unrest and global turmoil, we find ourselves in a “new normal,” the fallout after a pang of unprecedented change. But then again, it seems like every year, every moment, feels unprecedented. Every day is another step into uncharted territory. Time still moves, still flows, and carries us with it. We exist in a perpetual state of flux, if you will. Given that, it only seemed right to make “Flux” the theme of Volume VII.

And yet, we had no idea how much this motif would reflect our personal lives, as the editors at *Exposition Review* experienced major moves, career changes, profound losses, and other left turns. We all feel—as individuals, as a society—the reverberations of change, and those echoes resonate throughout the issue.

This year, the pieces we published played off the theme *and* each other. From poetry and comics that laid bare the tender intimacy of pregnancy and birth, to the practice of ballet dancing across nonfiction and poetry, to the language of gesture speaking across fiction and art, the pieces in this issue spoke to us individually but also talked to each other, and we’re so grateful for the opportunity to eavesdrop.

Expo itself also grew and changed this year. We introduced new genres to our lineup: film broke off into a category alongside comics, and flash fiction got its own section, each with dedicated editors. Our masthead expanded and shifted, as did our reader pool, with staff logging in to our weekly reading meetings from Los Angeles and New York, San Francisco and Fayetteville, Canada and Singapore. We welcomed two brilliant interns with very different interests and exciting projects. And submissions swelled by more than forty percent—to every submitter, we feel so honored to be trusted with your words.

However, it also feels right to say that even with all this movement, amid the chaos of our lives, Expo remained a constant. It remains to us what it always has been: a community, a safe haven, a place to find inspiration. Every year, we strive to welcome as many into that community as possible. From those who first appeared in “IX Lives” to those we have yet to meet, you are all invaluable members of the Expo family.

The more we reflect on it, the more apropos this theme feels. Volume VII—and the journal itself—feels vibrant with flux, both fluid and choppy. Even at its most chaotic moments, we felt motivated and inspired: movement meant Expo survived—another issue, another season. But more than that, thanks to our entire team—from editors and readers to submitters and donors—we thrived.

Annlee Ellingson
Mellinda Hensley
EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Rule of Thumb: Discard Everything

LAURA FREUDIG

FICTION

“Is it—wrong?” She paused, scarlet in a scarlet chair, before the last, wrenching word.

The doctor, her husband’s neurologist, didn’t laugh, though he wanted to. He clicked the top of his ballpoint pen and feathered the pages of the chart in his lap. “How long have you been married?”

“Fifty-two years. I was seventeen. Hugh was twenty-four.” She sat up straighter and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. Coiled in a low knot on the back of her head, it was the same whitish-yellow of the hydrangea blossoms on the bush outside the office window.

The doctor smiled. “Older man.”

“Well, yes, a little. I was mature for my age.” Her bright blue eyes, like robin’s eggs in a nest of wrinkles, dared him to judge her.

“Fifty-two years? You go ahead. Hugh can take it.” He said that to make her laugh, but it didn’t, at least not right away.

She looked over at the tall man sitting next to her, the quiet one with the flat eyes who looked less and less like himself, as though his face were a balloon slowly deflating. The doctor saw two or three different women inhabit her face, flashing like cards in a rolodex (he’d never used one, although she probably had) or like faces in a photo album, distinct but clearly related—sisters maybe. The one that settled—practical but slightly embarrassed—met his gaze, which he tried to keep carefully neutral. It was, after all, a practical question she had come to settle.

“Thank you,” she said, then, “Come, Hugh.”

The very quiet man stood when she took his hand and followed her out of the office like a somnambulist.

The doctor sat at his desk for some moments, though he was needed elsewhere. A picture of his wife sat on the polished cherry. They had been married for eight years, and her skin was taut with muscle and memory.

* * *

They drove home through shimmering pools of heat.

Inside the house, she walked him slowly from room to room, putting his large, bony hand on the ship’s clock on the mantle, the stained glass shade of her reading lamp, the granite cutting board in the kitchen, the quilt on their bed, every door knob. Without

this ritual, he would sit in his chair all afternoon repeating in an airless voice, “Take me home. Take me home.”

He was a makeshift compass, a needle floating in a saucer of water, that would only point north if stroked carefully and deliberately with a magnet from top to bottom two dozen times. Then he could hold steady. Otherwise, he would waver and spin and panic, unable to settle on a direction.

The new house was strange to him. It was like a place he had lived briefly as a small child, dimly recalled in dreamlike smells, sounds, but essentially unknown. Every step, every object caused him to ask, *do I know this? have I seen this before? have I been here?* Their previous house—long, low, dim, paneled in darkened pine—which flooded when the Perrin River overflowed its banks five years ago, was gone, replaced with the brighter, higher, showier thing her daughters had talked her into. A few artifacts from the old house remained, and those anchored Hugh into whatever sort of present he inhabited. It was amazing how an inch of water could ruin everything: mildew groped up the walls, books curled and swelled, floors buckled, mud filled cracks like cement. No amount of bleach or air freshener could remove the memory of what came up from the bottom of the river.

This was Thursday, and Patty and Peggy would be over to spend the afternoon. (What had she been thinking to name them that? They weren’t even twins.) They saw it as their duty, but already she couldn’t wait for them to leave, for the long shadows of the pines behind the house to slide across the flat lawn to the river, for the house to fold in on itself in darkness.

* * *

“How was the doctor’s?” Peggy said.

Patty repeated the same question in her higher-pitched voice, adding, “Any changes?” as though the doctor would notice things that she, his wife who spent every day with him, did not. The girls had faith in experts; she realized that was probably her fault. She kept Dr. Spock within reach during their childhoods, not trusting her own intuition when it differed from his until it was too late to make any use of it. Her grandchildren (Patty and Peggy each had two; Bob, none) were all in college now, and even when they were younger, their days were packed with lessons, practices, performances, tutoring, and clubs. She never had with them the endless dim afternoons she remembered with her own children.

“Oh, fine,” she said. She realized she still needed expert opinions; that was why she asked the doctor for approval, instead of just going ahead. But she also just wanted someone else to know: she was going to try to make love with her husband for the first time in four years. She wondered what the girls would say if she told them. Actually, she knew what they would say, just not the exact tone and volume that their revulsion would take. She wished, a little, to hear it, to stand immobile in that onslaught.

Hugh squirmed in his chair. She held out her hand.

“Come, Hugh.”

The daughters looked after them with sharpish eyes. They were listening: to his shuffling steps, the door closing, the overloud sound of urine hitting still water, the

flushing, and the business of pulling up, zipping, and washing. She wondered why. Did they want to be the first to hear the sounds of incompetence? The stumble, the spill, the accident. They were ready to discard this man at the first provocation.

She resettled her husband in his chair and went for a walk.

* * *

When she came back in, the house was colder. Peggy always turned up the air conditioner. Both of them were sitting on the couch across from their father. They looked up, startled.

“How was your walk, Mom?” Patty asked.

The girls were only fourteen months apart, lived next door to each other, and were busy in the same social circles. She thought they were essentially interchangeable. There must have been a time in those long hallways of childhood when she could have helped each sister open a different door, when she might have noticed the same object reflecting light off their smooth faces in different ways, but it was easier to treat them as one child. They thrust their plastic people, their dolls, their crayons at her and said, *play*. And she either said *no* and busied herself with something else, or hopped a toy up and down while she thought about something else. By the time they were six and seven, they stopped asking. Their play—such as it was—became invisible and unknown, behind doors, locked away from her. There might have been nothing behind those doors, just pop music stretched thin over silence, paper dolls propped up, looking as though they listened.

Was it her fault they were as shallow as the river outside her back door? Being a mother doesn't make you God, thank goodness, and coloring and conversation and proper use of Fisher-Price people do not invest a body with a soul. Would she take those days back again, to live in them instead of regarding them as a waiting room to something larger?

Maybe very happily married people were always secretly disappointed by their children, she thought. She and Hugh had been so in love for so many years—and had enjoyed the creation of those children so much—that she was surprised by what they produced. Three kids who got acne, C's in algebra, never won races or scored goals or made speeches or performed solos at school concerts, all needed braces, and grew up to do conventional things not far from home. She thought that their love made flesh ought to look less—*ordinary*.

Peggy was a realtor; Patty did the books for her husband's plumbing business and sold things at house parties—kitchen gadgets, organizing totes, diet drinks. Bob moved around a lot, though he'd never left the state. Currently he lived an hour away, near the beach, with a woman who had long legs and a foreign accent. He owned a mobile computer consulting and repair business that he operated out of the back of his Lexus. They were busy; they seemed happy, though she couldn't imagine any of them being happy in quite the way she and Hugh had been.

She remembered how she would stand in the closet, surrounded by the soft shoulders of Hugh's shirts, breathing him in, even if he was just reading in the next room. She remembered making love on the beach in broad daylight, their bare legs and heads sticking out from behind the cover of a beach umbrella. She remembered the feeling she

got when she recognized his tall, narrow form in a crowd of people. Happy wasn't even the right word: she saw him each time with something like a shock of joy.

She remembered the night they'd had some of his old coworkers over for a dinner party, and she walked in on Hugh alone in the kitchen. He'd been forgetting things for months—names, directions, and quite ordinary words, which could stop conversations dead—and had seemed perpetually disoriented and irritated, like a man woken abruptly from a long nap on a hot afternoon, but she'd kept her concerns to herself. That night he'd held a wine bottle opener in his hand as though it were a postcard of an archaic tool, two-dimensional, not something that could be turned, understood, and manipulated by sensitive hands.

The look in his eyes made her feel as though she had walked into a room to find her two-year-old child dead on the floor.

She wanted to scream but instead reached for it with a laugh papered on top of panic.

"Let me do it," she'd said. He pushed her hand away and stabbed the opener into the cork, screwing it in with something approaching fury.

He'd planned that dinner party himself—that was a year after his final flight, Richmond to L.A. and back—and none of the other captains or their wives seemed to notice anything wrong. But he never mentioned them again; it was as if they had fallen off the edge of the Earth.

In the slowly dimming years after that night, things became lost between one room and the next: the glass of iced tea on the dining room table went missing as soon as he walked into the sitting room. The house vanished when he walked around the first curve of the lane and the thick stand of pines hid it from sight. The swallowtail on the rose bush fluttered to the crepe myrtle five feet away; his head no longer swiveled to follow its path—it was simply gone.

At first she'd said to herself, "He's losing his mind," as though it would become funnier and more ridiculous with each repetition—except it didn't. He'd looked out the window, and she'd asked, "What are you thinking, Hugh?"

"There is a perfect silence in my head." When she'd asked him what he meant, he was unable to elaborate.

* * *

Patty was watching her like a hen, head cocked to one side, and she realized she'd been asked a question, then followed the shiny pebbles of her thoughts back until she recognized it.

"Oh, fine. It's a bit hot out, though."

The girls nodded, their lips saying *hot* and their mouths turning down because *hot* was a grief they all had to bear. The weight of a Virginia summer lay across them like a feverish child who wouldn't be put down.

"See anybody to wave to?" Patty asked.

She shook her head. All the houses she passed looked the same: shades drawn, doors shut, garages closed. They were barricaded against the heat, against the metallic buzzing of a hidden army of cicadas, against the silent snakes.

She didn't tell them that most of the water in the shallow pond where the dirt road met Highway 87 had evaporated in the heat. At the deepest part was a squirming, jam-like mass of tadpoles stranded in mud. She wasn't quite sure why she kept silent—perhaps because it would horrify them; perhaps because it was something they would pass by a thousand times and never notice. She didn't tell them that she walked through the dappled shade of a beech tree only to look up and see instead a pine strangled in poison ivy. Her eyes traced the hairy vine back to the ground where tentacled fronds unfurled like whips.

“Daddy was fine,” Peggy said. “He seems to perk up when we're here.”

“Yes,” Patty said. “Definitely perks up.”

The girls looked at each other quickly, peripherally. She wondered what they'd been up to while she was gone.

“Did you take him to the commode?”

They looked at each other again.

“It's all right,” she said, then, “Come, Hugh.”

She took him to the toilet every hour, like a toddler fresh out of diapers. She laughed to herself—maybe it was a laugh—as she eased his trousers down over the wings of his hip bones and the bulk of his padded briefs. She'd had three babies, and they all progressed the same way: sitting up, crawling, pulling to a stand, walking, talking, potty training, running, going to kindergarten, and right out of the house into their own lives. Hugh was doing everything in reverse. It was the same long hallway all over again, an endless waiting for something to happen. *Can you really live here?* she thought.

She held him in her hands and looked around his side to aim for the bowl. The top of her head reached his shoulder.

* * *

“Anything you need help with today, Mom?” Patty asked.

“You could finish getting in the laundry,” she said. They ignored that, as she knew they would, because they were embarrassed that even after the new house had been built and a brand-new stainless steel dryer installed, she still used the clothesline that hung between beech trees in the side yard.

“We could help you go through some things, maybe,” Peggy said.

“Like what?” She wondered if this was related to their guilty looks.

“Oh, I don't know,” said Peggy. “Papers, clothes, jewelry?”

“Do you think I should get rid of some things?”

They both nodded and smiled like she had made a brilliant suggestion.

“What do you girls suggest I start with?”

Patty put her head to one side, thinking. She had always done that, even as a child: tipped her head to the left as if the answer was on a tiny slip of paper that would slowly sift down into her ear where she could pull it out and read it.

“Maybe jewelry?” She darted a glance at Peggy, as though looking to see if she’d chosen correctly.

“Is there something you want? You can just ask, you know. I don’t wear very much of it anyway.” There were few special occasions anymore.

“Oh, no!” They sounded shocked.

“Well, what about your dad? Should we bring him in there, too?”

“Sure, he can watch,” said Peggy. “It might bring back some memories.”

So Hugh lay on the bed, stiff and grim, rucked up in his khakis and blue polo, looking like he was staging a mute protest over being laid down in his clothes in the middle of the day.

“What’s this? It looks old,” said Patty, picking up a gold cross pendant, filigreed, flowered, with a red oval stone in the center.

“That was Grandmom’s,” she said, then turned it over and pointed with her thumbnail to the word written on its brushed, silvery back.

“Oh, Avon.” Patty put it back in the jewelry box.

“Tell you what, girls. I’ll just take out the things I really like, and you two can divvy up the rest.”

They nodded, but she could feel a change in the atmosphere. What they wanted, she knew, was for her to take each piece out of the box one by one and tell them where she had gotten it, the parties and special occasions where she had worn it, what it was made of, what it was worth. They wanted this to be an occasion. They still thought she had the power to make the toys come to life. And she did—even she knew that; she just didn’t want to. She knew it was a choice she could have made differently, even now.

The things in this box meant almost nothing to her anymore, and she was too tired to pretend otherwise. They were stone and metal; their history was poised on the edge of oblivion, and most of the time she felt like that was fine. Wasn’t it better to carry nothing, to snip all the trailing threads of memory and desire? These things mumbled and whispered; their murmurs interrupted the growing silence of her house.

The wooden cat on her bureau, for example, she had bought in Jamaica years before. It was black and white, carved wood with glossy paint, slightly cross-eyed, with an improbably long and erect tail. The last inch of tail had been glued back when it had fallen to the floor and been stepped on. But the little cat, silent as it was, called up a tumbling array of conversations and thoughts. It was more expensive than it looked; Hugh hadn’t wanted to buy it, but she had gone back down to the gift shop anyway the morning they flew out. The cat whispered about the feeling she’d had being waited on by smiling people whose cinderblock homes she’d driven past on the way from the airport to the resort where daiquiris and plates of melon appeared almost magically. It reminded her of arguing with her husband in paradise. It reminded her of how they continued arguing about that cat for a decade without saying a word, except for when she had broken it.

Hugh had said, “I told you that tail would snap off.”

“I’ll glue it,” she’d said. “You’ll never know it happened.”

He snorted. “Damn right.”

She knew if the cat was gone—if she finally conceded that argument—those feelings would be gone, too: they wouldn’t continually jostle with the peace she remembered on

that white sand beach, the cool dark room with its high bed where she and Hugh had made love every evening before dinner.

If she had a history, she didn't want it to be a history in trinkets. Everything in her house whispered to her of things that were gone; they could all draw blood. But what would be left when you had discarded everything?

She extracted three pairs of earrings and two necklaces, the only ones she ever wore, all things that she had either bought for herself or that Hugh had given her. He usually bought presents for her that were also things he wanted himself, so he had only ever given her one ring, which she was wearing atop her wedding ring, and one pair of earrings.

"What do you want us to do with the things if there's something neither of us wants?" asked Peggy, as they sorted the rest into Ziploc baggies.

"What about Mireya?" said Patty.

She thought Bob's latest would be able to spot a mail-order trinket without having to flip it over to check the back, but she shrugged.

"Sure, if you think she'd like anything."

She knew nothing would end up in Mireya's jewelry box; they both just liked saying her name. Perhaps they felt like its slightly exotic sound and the allure it carried of long, silky black hair and skin-tight capris rubbed off on them.

Iced coffee was part of their Thursday afternoon routine in the summer. She poured three cups with ice and one without. (Hugh could no longer navigate ice cubes without choking.) Peggy and Patty sat at the polished kitchen table and helped themselves to cream and sugar. While their spoons clinked against the glasses, she led Hugh to his chair at the head of the table and put his glass between his hands. He slumped. Bitterly, she thought that the man who used to fly airplanes would soon have to be tied into his chair. She got up and busied herself at the counter, putting breakable things away with perilous emphasis.

The girls left soon after, clutching their baggies of jewelry. At the door, she put her arms around Patty, who smelled of lemons. A brooch on Patty's blouse pricked her in the neck, a small bite that somehow felt like the chastisement she deserved. She gave a little yelp.

Patty squeezed her shoulder, pulling her closer, misunderstanding both the yelp and her resistance.

"It'll be okay, Mom," she said, then trotted down the brick walkway to catch up with her sister.

* * *

Bob had visited twice in the months after his father's Alzheimer's diagnosis and had asked questions his father couldn't answer until Hugh became confused and combative, reminded of his deficiencies. Soon, though, the blank spaces grew, and the fear and anger that his losses aroused were replaced with a stillness like the clearest blue sky on a winter's day. She imagined him wandering in empty woods, under that blank sky, lost.

The words people used made it seem that to be human was to be located in a particular spot. Bob would say, *He's too far gone*, as though his father had traveled to a terrible closed country bordered with barbed wire and an endless bureaucracy. And she would retort, *He is still in there*, as if the bright flame that was Hugh wandered bewildered through a labyrinth of joints, vessels, and muscles, his feet trapped by ghost tangles, choking on the dust of neurons. She longed to look into his eyes and see an answering blink and know that he had found a way out, that he was emerging, squinting, from long days in the darkness.

Later, she had just wanted him to say her name. Now she just wanted him to keep living, though she knew that a time might come when she wouldn't want that anymore.

* * *

She cooked dinner, chopping carrots, boiling pasta, popping open a jar of applesauce. In the pauses in her industry, she could hear Hugh humming from his chair, a low tuneless sound. She laid a tablecloth, lit a candle, and found herself running her hands across her collarbones and neck, then feeling foolish and swatting her own hands away like she was a teenage boy trying to get to second base.

After dinner, and the wiping and sweeping and washing, both of Hugh and of the kitchen, she read aloud in the living room. There was no way to tell if he heard, but the humming ceased, replaced with the cadences of the psalms. King David knew about waiting, about affliction, about wilderness and nights with no end. He cried, too: *Will you forget me forever?*

The rest of the evening was long in front of her and the night beckoned, almost terrified her. Maybe it would never come. Maybe it was too late for such things. She could always change her mind.

At dusk, she went out to the clothesline and tumbled the rest of the laundry into the basket waiting in the grass. Through the front door, she could see Hugh sitting in his chair. In daylight he was a bleached, shipwrecked thing, washed up on the sand, blinking at the glare and the strangeness. By lamplight the lines and shadows on his face seemed like they could contain thought.

The air, heavy and humid, clotted her mouth; she couldn't decide whether to breathe or swallow. The summer grass crunched under her feet. To her left, the river flowed thickly to the near ocean, sweet, salty, rotten. Maybe somewhere back in the mountains it was a quick bright stream throwing light into rills and pools, but here in the tidewater it was brown and thick, without noise or motion.

She hoisted the basket to her chest, breathing in the warm clean scent of the clothes, and carried it inside. She set it on the floor by her chair. They'd watch "Jeopardy," maybe something else, while she folded. Then bed. Her heart beat strangely. *Bed.*

First, she took Hugh to the commode again.

When they returned, he balked in the door to the living room. She pulled on his hand. Out of the corner of her eye, something stirred.

A thing brown and sinuous flowed without flowing out of the basket, up the side of the cushion, and coiled in the seat of her chair.

She and Hugh grappled in slow motion, each trying to hold the other back from entering the room, breathing hard. She didn't know where to look: at the snake or at her husband seeing the snake. The head was broad and copper-colored, the golden eyes slit by vertical black pupils. Its patterned skin stirred as though something alive lay under fallen beech leaves. It was altogether silent.

Sharply she twisted her hand from his and grabbed the broom beside the refrigerator. Pushing Hugh back into the hallway, she rushed at the snake. It drew up its head to strike, but she knocked it sideways with the broom and hit it, over and over, until it stopped thrashing and lay limp on the floor. She carried it draped over the handle to the trash, knotted the bag, and threw it into the garage. She heard raw, gulping sounds and wondered, *Who is crying?* She stood with one hand on the wall and the other on her chest, unable to get a breath. Tears fell off her nose to the varnished floor; through her hair, which had come loose, she could see the brown tips of Hugh's shoes, standing where she had left him.

After a few minutes, she tipped the basket of clothes on the floor and stirred it around with the end of the broom, then said, "Come, Hugh."

He followed her into the bedroom, willingly.

* * *

He stood at the end of the bed, his shed clothes wrinkled in a pile at his white feet. She turned off the light and opened the windows wide to catch the breeze. To her surprise, their bodies behaved in familiar ways, and the trammeling of her heart shifted from disaster to desire.

"Beloved," she thought as she came with a little bright quiver. Hugh made the same noise, *mmmmm*, in his throat that he always had, followed by a low chuckle. She gave back an answering laugh, haltingly. *Was this funny? Could it be?*

What was the alternative?

They clutched each other's bodies, bones draped in skin, laughing.

"Beautiful, beautiful," he said. "Beautiful."

She remembered suddenly that those were the words he had said on their wedding night, had breathed out, like she was some sort of miracle. Fifty years later she was new again, just glimpsed for the first time. He hadn't said her name for a year: that would be her name now.

* * *

Hugh slept beside her, his mouth open, jaw slack. Her hand brushed the silver stubble on his cheek, then rested on his chest. She'd shave him tomorrow, smoothing each wrinkle to get the bristles buried within. Outside, she could hear a breeze in the leaves of the crepe myrtle, a mockingbird off in the pines, distant cicadas. The air was the same temperature as skin, and somewhere under her hand, deep in his muscles, memory survived.

He had seen her.

Someday he would die. Maybe she would die first; that was always possible. Already, he floated, lighter, tethered by only a thin cord. But he was not gone yet. Not yet, not now.

It's Daphne

SARA LANDERS

FICTION

Vera stands in the corner of the room watching what people are doing with their hands. She sees them hanging loosely at sides, patting backs or shoulders, fingering crosses attached to thin gold chains around necks. The light in here is soft, coming from lamps on boxy side tables. She thinks it's meant to be comforting, but it's too dim; she feels she has to squint. Her eyes pick out the hands of the mothers in the room. These hands *look* like mothers' hands. They are veined, sturdy, soft. She thinks of her own mother's hands and has to push the thought away.

What she'd like to be able to do, right at this moment, is to be in a glass enclosure. She doesn't want to be invisible; she wants people to know that she's there. She likes the indignant feeling that jabs at her insides when people look at her with pity. But she doesn't want to be approachable. She doesn't want to have to talk to anyone or have them talk to her. She wishes she could chop their hands off, render their arms into bloody stumps that spurt and stain the thick carpet. But that wouldn't stop others here from articulating their opinions. Not all the people here need to talk with their hands.

Vera thinks of how her mother, Babe, can't (couldn't) articulate with her voice, because when Babe was five months old, her own mother (Vera's grandmother) noticed that Babe's fontanelle was protruding like a cartoon bump on her head. Vera's grandmother took the infant Babe to the doctor and they did some tests. They told Vera's grandmother that Babe had a bacteria in her blood that was causing swelling on her spinal cord and her brain. They told Vera's grandmother that this bacterial infection was called meningitis and they gave Babe antibiotics. Her life was saved but not before the infection had spread to her cochlea and damaged the hair cells that must vibrate in order for her to be able to hear. She was left with permanent deafness and so learned to talk with her hands.

Vera makes fists at her sides and attempts a smile as some condolence-giver sidles up to her and offers some voice sympathy. His cologne is so strong that Vera feels the edges of her nostrils flare. She looks just to the right of his face as he talks to her, and she wonders if she'll ever care about anything anyone ever says again, regardless of whether they speak it or sign it. Her mother's name tumbles from this man's mouth, and Vera wants to reach out and catch it, to cup it in her hand and bring it up to her lips and just rest them against it. He is reaching out to touch Vera's shoulder and she physically recoils from him. She doesn't miss the hurt look of surprise on his face that quickly turns to indignation as she swivels away from him and his grasping hands.

She heads into the crowd without knowing where she is going and is stopped again by someone who is signing to her and making the short *ahk ahk* sounds that often come from the mouths of deaf people as they sign. It sounds like home to her, and she sags under the comfort of it. It's someone from her mother's work. Penny or Pammy or some *P* name with a *y*. PennyPammy's eyebrows are smooshed in, giving her the look of a baleful dog, and Vera wants to be embraced by this woman. Vera moves a tiny bit closer and PennyPammy reaches out and pats Vera on the cheek. Her hand is cool and Vera presses her face into it. She wants to ask PennyPammy if maybe she could come and live with her. She wants to tell PennyPammy that nineteen is too young to be on her own, even though she said the very opposite to Babe not two weeks ago.

As PennyPammy drifts away, Vera thinks of how tired she is (was) of being under Babe's overprotective clutches. She thinks of their last argument, when she, for the millionth time, told her mother that she didn't want to commute to college anymore. She wanted to go and live on campus with other kids her age and stay up studying and drinking and making out with strange boys in hallways. But Babe was terrified of what might happen to Vera and begged her to continue to stay home and commute. Babe was leery of late-night studying, underage drinking, and boys in hallways. To Babe, the world was full of hidden dangers that she couldn't hear. To Vera, Babe was stifling and irrationally overprotective. A small, sad moan involuntarily slips from Vera's lips as she thinks of this and she looks around to see if anyone has heard.

More people are approaching her and Vera feels the sudden need to be sitting down. She wonders what would happen if she simply dropped to the floor and sat with her legs outstretched like a small child, forcing everyone to stand around looking down on her, shaking their heads at the orphaned girl. She is on the verge of lowering herself to the ground and can see by the concerned looks on her mother's friends' faces that they are worried about her.

They sign frantically to her.

Are you okay?

You don't look well.

Do you need some water?

Vera reaches her hand up to her forehead and touches her fingers to it, then flicks her wrist away, pushing her flat palm away from herself. *I don't know.*

There is a hand on the small of her back, pushing, and she lets herself be guided to the bank of chairs against the wall. She sits down and after a few moments, someone hands her a cup of water. She looks at the hand that passes it to her. It is her Auntie Peg. Auntie Peg is no relation of hers but is (was) Babe's best friend in the whole world. Chunky turquoise and sterling silver rings adorn many of her fingers and her long brown hair is frizzy and banded with strands of silvery-gray, like tinsel. Vera drinks her water and looks away from Peg. Peg reaches out and pets Vera like a cat and Vera feels a burning tidal wave of choking emotions rising up her chest that she's not ready to face. She shakes her head at Peg who doesn't understand and pulls her into a hug.

Vera thinks wildly of something to distract herself and insanely settles on masturbating clowns. She wonders what is wrong with her but is relieved to feel a breathless hysteria replacing the threat of tears. Auntie Peg pulls away and sees Vera

laughing. Vera signs to her that she is picturing clowns with rainbow jizz arcing across the gladiolus. Not only does Auntie Peg look stricken, but as Vera makes the extremely well-known sign for male masturbation, she sees horrified looks from faces around the room. As she tries to make eye contact with people, they look away and she feels powerful. Emboldened, she signs to Auntie Peg, *I'm ready*. Auntie Peg cocks her head and her eyebrows become a zigzag.

Vera stands up and smooths her skirt with both hands. She walks through the throng of people straight toward the dais. She needs to see her mother's hands one more time. Even if they are clasped together over her middle as she lies in a wooden box. She rushes up to the casket where someone she doesn't recognize is kneeling on the cushioned footstool. It is an old woman clutching a rosary. It is threaded through her fingers and the beads that dangle are swaying slightly as if in a breeze.

* * *

Vera doesn't know how to get her grief out of her. At home she has shut her mother's bedroom door and will not enter. She sits for days in the window seat that overlooks tar-blackened roofs with pigeons fluttering and their heads bobbing in time to the sounds of honking taxis and wheezing buses.

She is becoming obsessed with hands. She wanders around the Village and Washington Square Park looking at people's hands. She sees the man with the piano and his tattooed hands as they dazzle on the keys. She watches little kids holding plastic bubble sticks in their small and sticky hands then clapping them together to burst the bubbles with wet smacks. She sees hands in the air showing that their owners just don't care. Hailing cabs and giving the finger. She sits on the edge of the fountain wall and thinks of how hands are used to hit. To pleasure. To pray. She pictures painted nails, ripped cuticles, and fingers bent with arthritis. She notices mothers standing on curbs, reaching their hands down, fingers outstretched, waiting for small hands to slip inside to be guided across streets.

This is when Vera has to look away. The thoughts come anyway. She thinks of her mother's hands and how she watched them knead bread. Delicately hook a necklace. Press Band-Aids onto bleeding scrapes. Vera sits on her hands and hangs her head and tears drip from the end of her nose onto her corduroys.

She stops going to school but doesn't stop her mother's subscription to *Birds and Blooms*. When the magazine comes, she opens it randomly to a page with a large glossy picture of a vibrant red hibiscus on one side and a delicate hummingbird with an iridescent green throat on the other and she wonders how these things can still exist in the world. She picks the magazine up and hurls it at the wall as hard as she can. It makes a smacking sound that is so satisfying that she rushes over, takes it from the floor, and does it again.

She looks wildly around for other things that might shatter or burst with even louder sounds, but her possessions are saved when Auntie Peg comes in the door. Auntie Peg comes by almost every day, throwing open curtains and bringing food that smells like nothing. She puts toothpaste on Vera's toothbrush and holds it right up to Vera's face but

Vera turns her head. With her hands down at her sides she closes her thumb, pointer finger and middle finger together over and over. *No. No. No.*

The days are getting shorter and darkness comes sooner. Vera knows that her money will soon run out and she must face the world again but she has no idea how to go about doing it. She's angry at her mind. She wants to *want* to get out of bed, but she stays in it until past noon, one, two. She wants to return the texts from her friends Violet and Danny and Jamel but her fingers slide across the screen and delete the messages before her eyes have the chance to do more than glance at the words. Every time she attempts to go into her mother's room to clean it out, she is overcome with nausea and she shakes so badly that she has to grip the sides of the sink or the toilet bowl or whatever fixed object she can get to.

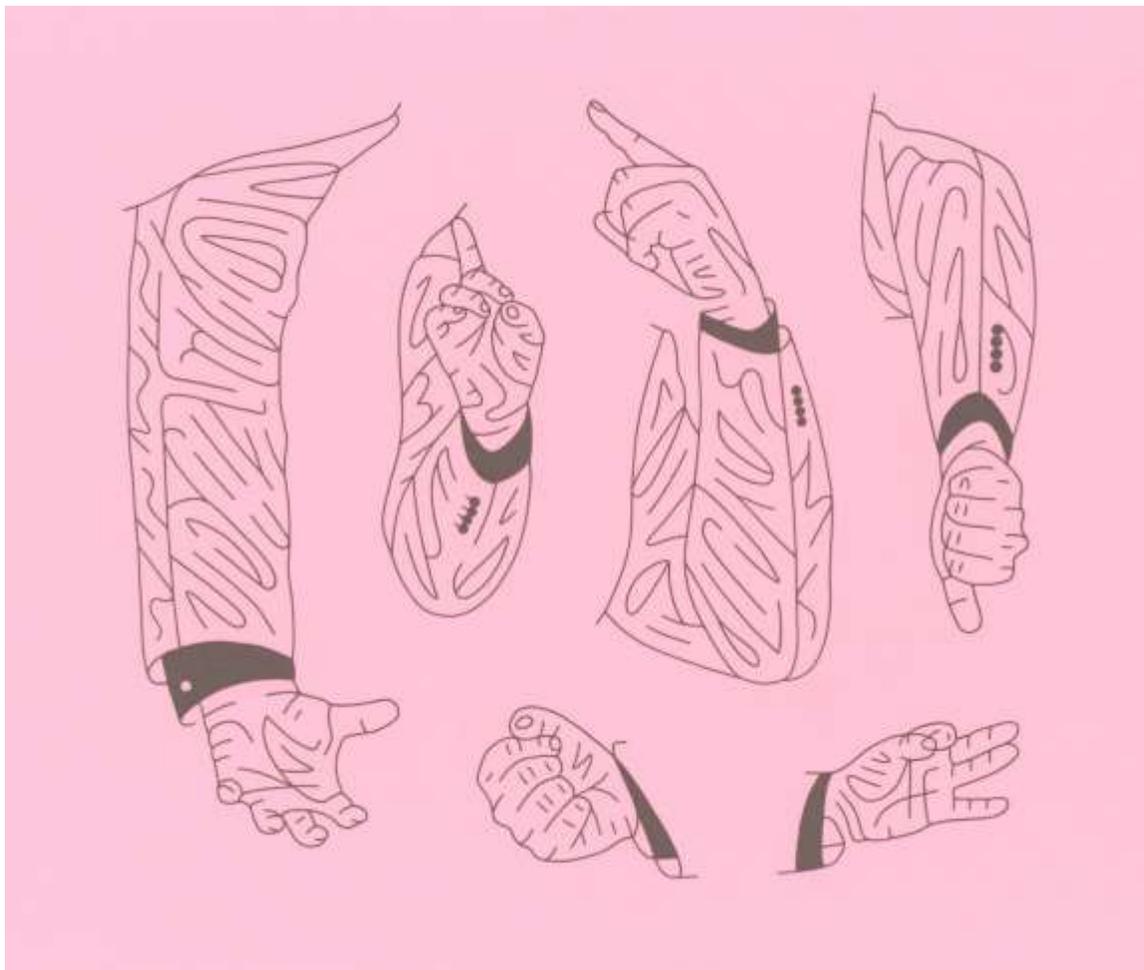
She stops crying in the park and starts running instead. She takes the train up to Columbus Circle and gets off and runs through Central Park. She pounds her feet hard into the pavement and doesn't look at people's hands. The squirrels are getting fatter and braver as they stockpile for winter and she envies their animal instinct. Auntie Peg brings her a pot of mums and a bag of pears from her co-op. She reminds Vera that pears always look the same, that they ripen from the inside out, and so to test them Vera should press on one and see if it gives. When Peg leaves, Vera sits in the apartment staring at the door until it gets dark. She expects Babe to pop in signing, *I'm back. Why do you look so sad?*

One day in early December, she is sitting in her window seat looking through her reflection in the glass. She has her legs tucked up under her and she has a book in her lap. It's the same book she has been pretending to read for months and still hasn't made it through the first few pages. Auntie Peg was over earlier and talked to Vera about trying to move up even one rung on the ladder to being okay again. Just one. Vera pretended that she's been trying but the truth is that she doesn't even know what trying looks like. She worries that she has some internal failure that makes her simply unable to climb out of her grief. And as she thinks about it, her grief—this awful thing that she associates with a dark mass of ugly purple swirling blood clots—she remembers the ridiculous images of clowns she conjured at the viewing. She remembers this as though through a backwards telescope. The memory seems small and far away and then it comes to her. She remembers PennyPammy's name. It's Daphne. Daphne!

Untitled Series

DMITRY BORSHCH

VISUAL ART



Untitled 1, 2016. Ink on paper, 14 x 11 inches



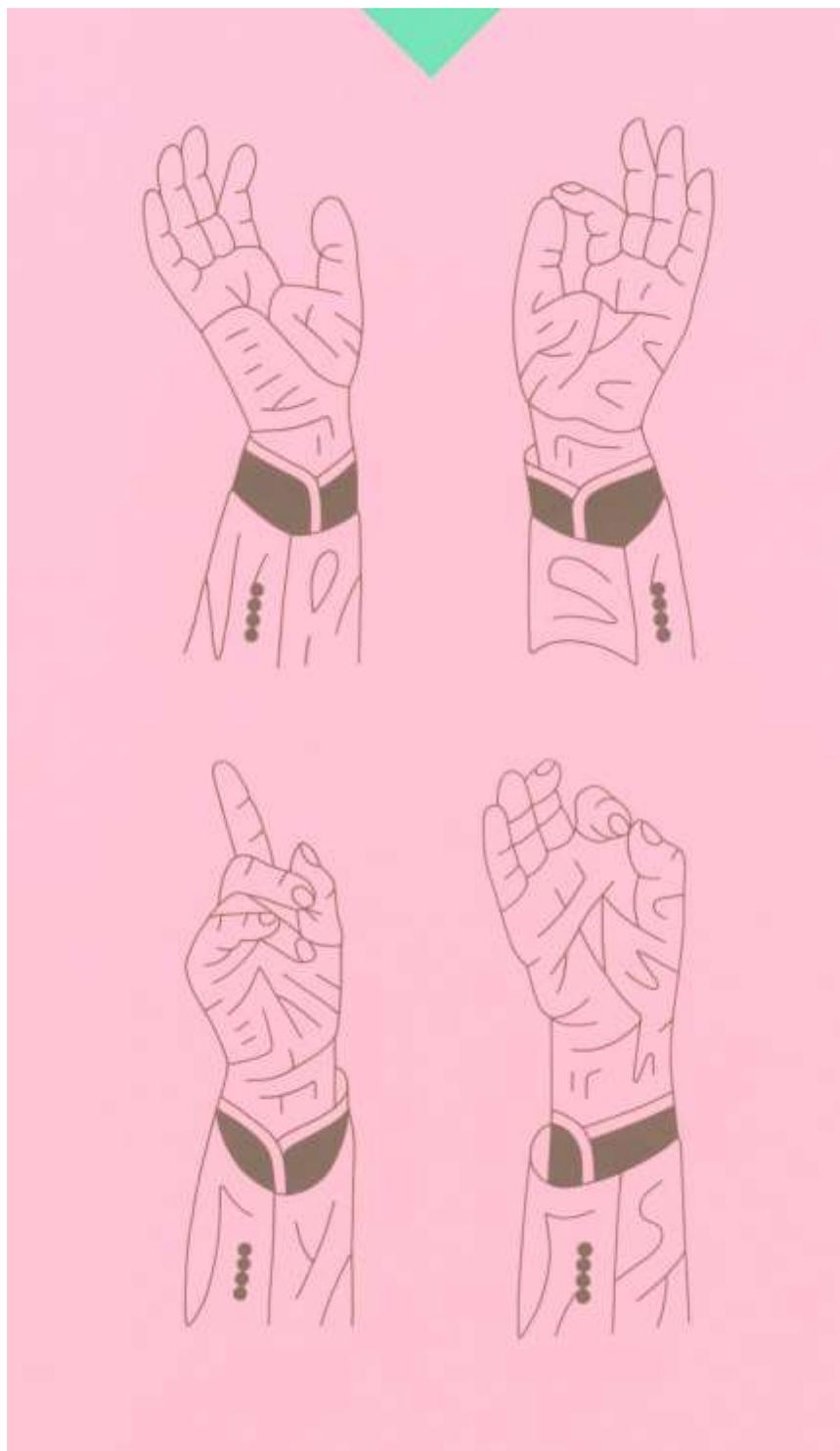
Untitled 2, 2016. Ink on paper and collage, 11 x 11 inches



Untitled 3, 2016. Ink on paper, 18 x 10 inches



Untitled 4, 2016. Ink on paper and collage, 11 x 11 inches



Untitled 5, 2017. Ink on paper and collage, 8 x 13 inches

Holler General

MANDY SHUNNARAH

FICTION

Sitting on the edge of the old concrete dock where folks tied up boats in the days when people other than tourists had boats to be tied, Tiger and Millie stared across the river at West Virginia.

“I think I see someone,” Tiger said, rising off her elbows.

They squinted hard against the sun and could barely make out a woman dragging a lawn chair to the middle of a backyard.

“Enjoying the view?” Tiger asked as the woman removed her shawl to reveal a bikini.

“Nah, she’s like ... such a *mom*,” Millie said.

“How do you know she’s not a lesbian MILF?”

“Don’t know, don’t care,” Millie shuddered.

On the other side of the river was suburban West Virginia. If you thought only hillbillies lived in these hills, you haven’t seen the houses along the Ohio River. But Tiger and Millie lived on the Ohio side, miles from the riverfront. They’d only come downtown—if you could call five mostly empty blocks “downtown”—in the hopes of getting summer jobs. The old single-screen movie theater had closed three years ago; they were too young to work at the bank or take a swing shift at the bar; too clumsy for the one-time tourist haven of an antique mall; too impatient for the daycare; and too cool to work at the Jesus coffee shop that felt more like a front for kidnapping teens than a café. And their parents had been burned too many times by the cash-advance place for them to ever consider working there. They tried seeing if the food pantry, where they’d both gotten food from now and then when things were tight at the end of the month, would pay them to bag groceries. But the food pantry folks only took volunteers. The irony that perhaps if folks were paid to bag the groceries, they might be able to afford to buy food was apparently lost on them.

Tiger and Millie tried the Dollar General, knowing the manager Carl used to work with their dads at the potato chip factory before it got shut down. He looked pityingly at them.

“I’m going to level with you, girls. There are too many adults, like your daddies, who need the few jobs we got in this town. It’s nothing against you, but I can’t be bringing on teenagers in these conditions.”

They tried McDonald’s, remembering Taralynne was their age when she got a job there last summer and kept it through the school year. She even skipped class when her coworkers called in sick so she could take their shifts. She looked sharp in her uniform: the

black visor trimmed in red and the black polo shirt, both embroidered with the golden arches logo, the tip of her ponytail swishing the edges of her drive-thru headset. But there was a sign on the door, crudely handwritten, stating “We r NOT hiring!!!!!! Dont ask!!!” Every one of their fifty-eight classmates must have thought to go there first.

“Carp!” Millie hollered, jerking her feet out of the river. Tiger followed suit.

“They’re *toes*, not food!” Tiger yelled pointlessly at their gaping mouths, tentatively opening and closing.

“Like creatures from the deep,” Millie said under her breath. “Swimming in the koi pond of hell.”

A while back, Millie’s dad thought he’d catch fresh fish for dinner, making it sound like a luxury and not a product of his injury at the potato chip factory where his arm had been nearly ripped off and his worker’s comp claim denied because the foreman said he was “behaving negligently with what he knew to be dangerous machinery.” His disability check was late and the food pantry wouldn’t open for a few more days. It wasn’t hard to catch the carp—the tourists threw them bread, which meant they’d come right up to the riverbank when they saw you standing at it. Millie’s dad scooped a long, fat carp out of the water with a net and brought it home. He skinned off the fish’s many tumors as though they were regular fins and scales, ignored the green tinge of the flesh, and cooked it anyway, only to be laid out sick in bed for the better part of a week.

“Can’t trust anything that can survive in this pollution,” Tiger added, shaking her head.

“Well,” Millie sighed, standing up and unrolling the cuffs of her capri pants. “I guess we could try the diner.”

“Why bother?” Tiger said, dusting off the front of her cutoff shorts. “The coffee is seventy-nine cents and a plate of biscuits and gravy is two dollars. The tips have to be shit.”

“Yeah ... and the old men always get snippy when their waitress doesn’t bring them a saucer with their coffee so they can spoon out each little sip to cool down before they drink it like little babies,” Millie added, folding her hands under her chin mockingly.

“The barber shop?”

“No good. Chet’s grandson is six now and likes to ‘help’ so he’s got the runt sweeping for free.”

“Stupid kid. Can’t compete with that.”

They knew better than to even consider the arts collective. It was started with a bunch of grant money to “bring exquisite culture and art into a deprived region.” The people who worked there lived in the college town nearly an hour away and commuted to work. They spent the majority of the grant money bringing in other hippies from out of town to do “botanical interpretive dance” and “galaxy sound baths” and “blindfolded culinary experiences with foraged local morsels.” They put on plays in old English and Latin that no one could understand and made sculptures out of trash collected from the river with little plaques that read: *River Pollution II: Meditation on Red Solo Cups and Camel Menthols*. They sold paintings that cost a third or more of the yearly income of anyone in the town. The only people who came to the exhibits and performances—“innovative artistic experiences,” they were called—were from out of town. As far as Tiger

and Millie could tell, the only thing that appealed to the arts collective organizers about Martinette, Ohio, was the cheap rent.

Two weeks into summer vacation and already things felt hopeless. No job means no money. No money meant two long months of boredom. There were only so many times they could sing along to the same scratched CDs. Only so many times they could buzz each other's hair with the clippers. Only so much PBS they could stand because they didn't have cable and the video rental place had closed along with most everything else. Only so many stray mama cats they could lure to their porches and only so many squealing kittens whose bellies they could stroke. They'd grown out of folding themselves inside tires to roll down hills and become too disgusted with the river to swim in it. The swing sets in their backyards had rusted and long ago tipped over in a storm. They'd gotten too tall for their bikes and their buckled knees jutting outward made them inefficient vessels.

They made their way home, approaching City Hall, a building whose grandiosity now mocked the town. Martinette was founded in 1845 and at one time was a port city, bustling and thriving despite the Civil War. There were safe houses throughout the town since it was, for many enslaved people crossing the river from West Virginia, the first stop on the Underground Railroad. That was mostly what tourists came to see. In the century and a half that followed, Martinette prospered. Factories moved in, drawn by the convenient proximity to a port, and the factories drew families, and families drew more business. Then the factories left, taking their operations overseas. Everything else left too.

"What do you think's in there?" Tiger asked, toeing the edge of a bronze plaque set into the ground that read:

Time Capsule

To be opened 75 years from now, on March 25, 2048

Presented by The Junior League of Martinette,

The Rotary Club of Martinette,

The Martinette Elks Lodge

"Probably some Victorian snot rags," Millie scoffed. The walls of her living room were covered not in family photos but in daintily embroidered vintage handkerchiefs bearing the initials of everyone in her immediate family. Like a sick and sad family tree.

They arrived at Tiger's house where they'd spend the night. They lived at opposite ends of the same street and alternated between houses. Tiger's bedroom was in the attic, small with a slanting ceiling, so you had to watch your head. The room was painted a deep purple, and one of the sloping halves of the ceiling was entirely collaged with cutouts of Hot Topic ads and pop punk bands—From First to Last, Death Cab for Cutie, My Chemical Romance, Green Day, Paramore, Taking Back Sunday, Alkaline Trio, and Linkin Park. They'd stolen all the magazines from the Dollar General, slipping a couple of magazines under their hoodies and buying a small bottle of Pepto Bismol or tube of Alka-Seltzer tablets so they could clutch their stomachs without arousing suspicion. When that gag got old, they started buying Midol. No one questioned why they were sick all the time and whether they'd seen a doctor. They got the money for their decoy purchases by roughing up the drink machines at their high school. They were the old kind of drink machines—the

kind that wouldn't even take dollar bills. Millie had strong arms, and Tiger was good with a pocket knife.

"So ... let's assume we're not gonna find jobs," Millie began.

"We're not. We're dead. We might as well sleep the summer away, stay up until three a.m. and sleep till noon. Try to make friends with someone who has cable so we can watch MTV in the meantime."

"That's it? There's got to be more to our last summer than this."

Millie said it, the words they'd been trying not to think. At seventeen, this was their last summer. After their senior year of high school they'd be forced to get jobs—full-time jobs, not part-time summer gigs—commuting several towns over with cars they didn't have, expected to take care of themselves.

"I mean ... we could collage my wall some more?"

"No offense, but if I have to cut out Sonny Moore and Gerard Way's faces one more time I'm going to puke."

"You can cut out Hayley Williams's face!"

"I'm sick of that skinny bitch too."

Tiger gave Millie a half-hearted hiss. They lay on the bedroom floor, feeling the joints of the plywood under the cheap carpet, elbowing each other for prime real estate next to the box fan. Tiger's black lipstick chapped her lips and lines of pink peeked through. Millie dabbed at the sweat under her boobs.

"I've got it!" Tiger shouted. "It's going to be a long night, Mills. We better sleep now."

They told Tiger's mom they were taking a nap after dinner because they got so worn out walking around in the sun all day looking for work. She nodded sympathetically and wished them better luck tomorrow.

Around two a.m. Tiger nudged Millie awake.

"What are we even doing?" Millie asked, yawning.

"You'll see when we get there."

"Get *where*?"

"Just trust me," Tiger said, exasperated.

"Look, if you want to go to the barge, that's cool. No judgment. I don't even care what loser you want to bang."

"Ew, no!"

The old coal barge had crashed into the riverbank in the 1950s. It was too beat up to be worth saving and they stopped using steam-powered coal barges on the river, so it was left there, half-sunk. With all the cabins where sailors once slept, it became the local makeout spot. Sometimes you could even hear moans carried downriver, howls of the teenage mating call that small children mistook for ghosts.

"I know I owe you one from that time you covered for me with Stella," Millie said. "If you want to sneak out and have me cover for you, I got you. Or if you want me to go and make sure no one gives you shit about being there, I will but ..."

"We're *not* going to the barge," Tiger insisted.

"Well, at least tell me how I'm supposed to dress for this adventure."

"All black," Tiger said, grinning.

They crawled out Tiger's small attic window, Millie cursing the whole time, and shimmied down until they reached the near-flat roof of the garage. Tiger climbed down the ladder propped up against the eaves and held the ladder for Millie. Tiger took off toward the back of the house and came back with two shovels, one for each of them.

"Are we going grave-robbing? I assumed at some point in your gothness you'd need some ingredients for spells, but this is a fucking leap," Millie whispered, frantic.

"Shhh!" Tiger hissed. "We're not messing with the dead."

They walked silently down the sidewalks, not bothering to hide because there wasn't anyone out and there were no streetlights. If they took the long way around the bar and dodged any cars, no one would see them.

The shovels—full-sized, not small garden trowels—weighed on their biceps, the uneven distribution of weight making them difficult to carry. Once, Tiger let the metal end of her shovel clang on the sidewalk and Millie whisper-yelled a rebuke. They wound their way around Martinette for the better part of an hour before Tiger led them to City Hall.

"You want to break into City Hall?" Millie said, incredulous. "I mean, I'm kind of into it."

"No," Tiger replied. "We're going to dig up the time capsule."

The moon was a hangnail sliver, barely a crescent, and there wasn't much light to see by. Tiger and Millie jabbed their shovels blindly around the bronze plaque, approaching from an angle so as not to clang the shovel against the surface.

"What are we going to do with the time capsule anyway?" Millie asked, shaking the stiffness from her arms.

"Sell the shit on eBay."

"And do what with the money? I swear to Jesus goddamn Christ if you say buy magazines ..."

"You know I ain't ever *bought* a magazine. We're gonna get us a car," Tiger huffed, flinging a shovelful of dirt. "One to share."

"I like the way you think. Somebody's always got an old Ford with a 'for sale' sign along the side of the road. I could go for a truck."

"Then we're gonna get the hell out of here."

Millie and Tiger didn't despise Martinette, though they were tired of living in the shadow of the town's past. Tourists came every summer for the museums on the river, to relive the bustling days of the port, but nobody had any plans to hire their daddies, and Tiger's had gotten so eaten up with the rejection that he skipped town. Now she only saw him twice a year: on Christmas and her birthday.

"You got a name for the eBay store?" Millie asked, slinging dirt.

"Yeah, Holler General," Tiger replied, breathing heavily.

They had to run for the bushes alongside City Hall when two cars drove through, but otherwise only the crickets and owls made their presence known.

Around four thirty in the morning, they'd dug down far enough to loosen the corner of a copper box, its patina glinting in the weak moonlight. Millie wedged the tip of her shovel behind the box and jumped on the handle to pry it loose. A brief but echoing wrenching sound bounced off the stone walls of City Hall—a sound like when Millie's dad

had pounded a dent from the door of his pickup where it'd been kicked in one night at the bar—and the box was free.

Tiger leapt upon it, hands roving for a clasp.

“Fuck, I think it’s rusted shut.”

“We’d better get it back to your place before Martinette wakes up.”

They hoisted the box from the hole with their shovels and bent to pick it up. It was heavy, with sharp stabbing corners, and the copper made holding the box aloft with sweaty hands difficult.

“Shit, it’s heavy!” Tiger grunted, the weaker of the two.

“Better be something good in here,” Millie barked, trying to scratch an itch on her nose with the inside of her arm.

“Wait,” Tiger said, stopping suddenly and causing Millie to heave the box into her ribs. “We have to take the shovels.”

“We can barely carry the box!”

“What if the five-O dust for fingerprints?”

“You in a database I don’t know about?” Millie asked, readjusting her grip on their ill-gotten gains.

“I don’t know, we had those Ident-A-Kid IDs made in like third grade. You don’t remember smudging the ink on your face?”

“We’ll have to come back for them. Now, *move*,” Millie urged.

They took the most direct route on their return trip, keeping to the alleys as much as possible, their footsteps echoing on the old cobblestone streets. Aching and exhausted, they made it back to Tiger’s house, pulling back the white plastic lattice under the front porch to stash the box.

As they crept up the ladder to the flat roof over the garage, they heard Tiger’s mom’s radio clock turn on—her morning alarm. They froze on the roof, counting to a thousand, figuring that would give Tiger’s mom time to get in the shower, where she wouldn’t be able to hear them creaking and scuttling across the shingles. Tiger pushed open the window for them to crawl inside.

“The shovels ...” Tiger whined.

“We can’t go back.”

They took off their soil-covered shoes and collapsed into Tiger’s bed, still wearing their all-black getups. When they woke at nearly three in the afternoon, they felt clumps of dirt in the sheets, clots pressed into the thin jersey knit. They left their dirt-flecked clothes in a pile on the floor and changed into old county fair T-shirts and ratty denim shorts, the crotches worn nearly through.

Still groggy, they raided the fridge for Go-Gurt tubes, cheese in a can, and sliced cheese so they could squeeze the canned cheese onto the cheese slice and make a cheese-on-cheese rollup. Millie had read somewhere that pre-sliced cheese had so many chemicals in it that it wouldn’t melt. Tiger took her mom’s lighter from the ashtray on the kitchen table and clicked on the butane flame. The corner of the slice turned black and bubbled from the heat, but it didn’t melt.

Filled with sustenance, they plodded down the rickety front steps and crawled under the front porch where the box was concealed. Enough sunlight pulsed through the

lattice that they could see, and Mille and Tiger hacked away at the edges of the box with their pocket knives.

“It was supposed to be buried for 75 years and they were going to open it in 2048 ...”

“1973,” Tiger answered, anticipating Millie’s question just as the tip of her pocket knife lodged in the box and broke off. “Shit.”

Millie, with her freshly sharpened switchblade, hacked for nearly an hour until the lid popped free.

Their spoils revealed themselves: A stack of love letters from WWI. A retirement pocket watch from the steel plant, long gone. A bag of locally made potato chips from Rivertown Potato Chip where their dads used to work, the husk of the factory now a glorified birdhouse. A T-shirt with “1973 State Champs” emblazoned on the back, from a time when the high school had more than fifty-eight kids and a team that could compete at the state level instead of bombing in their county division. A Coca-Cola and a Budweiser, each in a glass bottle that had somehow exploded, staining the T-shirt, ruining the pocket watch, and disintegrating the copy of *The Martinette Times* from the day the time capsule was buried. Two old wheat pennies and the bag of potato chips survived.

With each item they removed, their faces fell. Worthless. Nothing sellable. The good stuff ruined, the boring stuff, well, boring.

An envelope with “PREDICTIONS” typed on it was taped to the inside of the lid and was unmolested by carbonation.

We the Martinette High School Class of 1973 have the following predictions for what life will be like in 2048:

- Flying cars
- Little green Martians living on Earth
- JFK will be successfully cloned and he’ll be President again
- Erich Segal will be the most famous author in the world
- Holograms and robots everywhere
- Janet Greene and Barbara Douglass will have married Dick Coker and Bill True
- Food will be grown in labs, not on farms
- The second coming of Christ will have already happened so anyone that’s left to read this didn’t get Raptured (except for Kennedy)
- Everyone will own their own rocketship
- Martinette will be even bigger and more prosperous than Cleveland and Cincinnati put together

“Ha!” cackled Millie, jabbing her finger at the last bullet point. “They were doing alright till then.”

Janet had married Dick and Barbara had married Bill. They own the diner together and are all still best friends.

“At least we’ve got time for the rest of the stuff. Here’s to hoping,” Tiger said, raising the bag of potato chips in a toast.

She popped the bag open and tossed a chip in her mouth as Millie watched, wincing.

“How is it?” Millie asked, but Tiger only held out the bag to her.

They weren’t thinking about how that morning in downtown Martinette must have gone. The employees of City Hall arriving at their posts at seven a.m. to see the bronze plaque knocked cattywampus and the time capsule gone. The cops called over their walkie-talkies, slow to report to the scene because they hadn’t finished their breakfast at the diner. Officer Bobby toeing the broken handle of the shovel, as if it would reveal its secrets. Officer George, when asked by the mayor if there was anything special about the shovels that might lead to the apprehension of the perpetrators, responding with the joke that the shovels are “garden variety.”

Millie took a chip, surprised that the salt and vinegar had preserved them as well as they had.

“Well?” Tiger prompted.

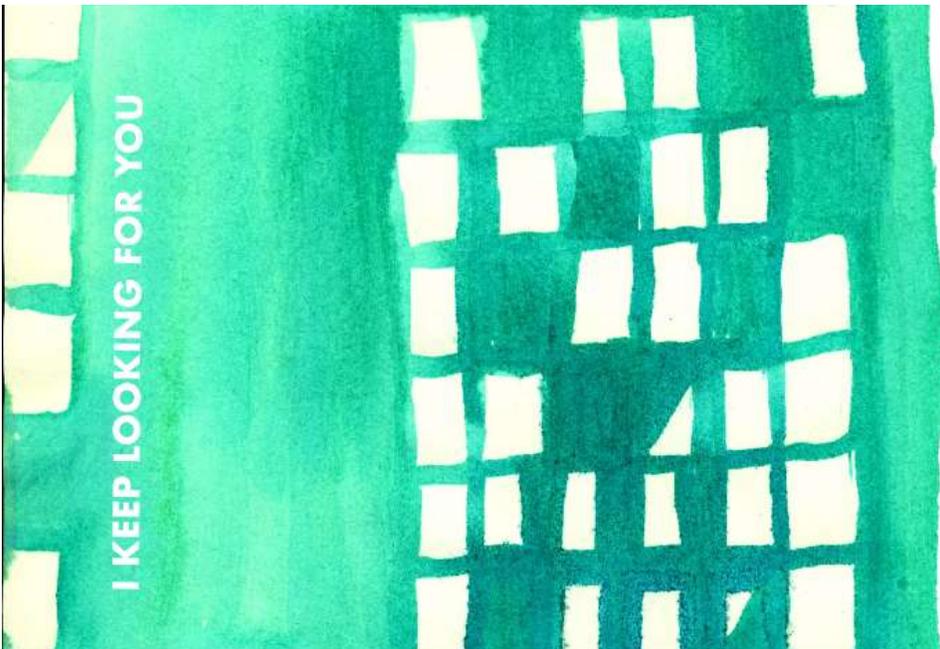
“Not half bad,” Millie shrugged, reaching her hand into the bag again.

For once Tiger and Millie weren’t looking forward, only looking back.

I Keep Looking for You

ARTARIANICA

ANIMATED COMIC



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I Keep Looking for You, 2022
Words and animation by Briget Heidmous
Drawing by Jessy Randall
Watercolor painting, digital animation, and type, .mp4

Little Star

BERNARD STEEDS

FICTION

Bonny throws her jacket to the ground takes off running far away far off from the mommy the daddy the gam-gam. Grass sun-drunk warms the soles of her feet makes them tingle makes the skin smile with each footfall. Heat gathers solid around her like a hug. Air is bright glass. She comes to the pond and stops sees the pale green water the light-glint shadows of reeds. Jumps in splashing stamping up to her ankles her shins her knees kicking up spray arcing and falling. Bonny, the daddy calls. Ambling down the slope of the lawn, big slow steady animal ready to hold catch throw whatever she chooses. The daddy wades into the pond and she leans down scoops the water tosses it all over his shirt his jacket his face. Woh, he cries, leaning down himself dipping his fingers splashing a little on her. No, says Bonny. No splash. No no, no it won't.

On the other side of the pond a dog is barking. Mow mow says Bonny, moving to it with hand out. It comes to her licking her hand waggling its little tail she pets its scrinchy wiry fur. Good doggo, she says. Mow mow. You like Bonny, she says. Good doggo. She fills her hand with water holds it to the dog's chin and the dog drinks and Bonny squeals. Oooh, she says. Tickle. Shakes her hand. Fills it with water holds it up. Dog laps hand little pink tongue splashes water tickles. Princess, says her father. Do you see the doggie? Bonny laughs. See the doggie yes course!

Hello, says a girl. Tall kid blue shirt. This is my doggy, she says. His name is Jasper. Yaspool, says Bonny. Mow mow. Bonny pets the dog again looks up at the girl blue eyes yellow hair big smile. Bye, says Bonny.

Daddy looks at the girl shrugs like a big gorilla laughs. Bonny runs to the pond edge stands jumps in splash one two three then runs runs across the lawn water feet on the grass to the rose garden stopping there. Lovely rose pink soft like lace like a nice soft shirt just washed. Lovely smell like pink sweet like sugar in the air like rose. Nice little bee sings to the flowers mmm mmm lands on the rose walks round round round does little bee butt dance. Bonny grabs stem pulls closer look closer at the bee ouch drop of blood on tip of finger smearing on the rose Bonny crying. Woh woh says the daddy standing behind her, no crying little star no crying let's go find mummy.

All the way long long way up the slope across the lawn past playground up with the white horses seesaws and swings past buttercups on grass past big whisper grandad trees. The

mommy sits on a blanket gam-gam on a little fold-up chair the ground too much for her hips says gam-gam too much. Run to the mommy run to gam-gam.

What have we here says the mommy oh dear show me show me. Little finger like a twig red dry now all gone nearly. Bonny brings it to her mouth and sucks on it salt sweet sticky now red all gone. Does it need a bandaid. Yeah, says Bonny, kiss better mommy yes please. So the mommy fishes things from her big black bag snack bar bottle water paper purse bandaid. Kiss better now tickle again then peel push wrap around the finger all better all nice. Hugs, says the mommy and wraps little Bonny in her big arms smelling of egg sandwich and coffee leather skin softness.

Gam-gam talks, what does that Jim Walsh think he is doing coming round their home threatening her like that rent will get paid when it's paid no use complaining about it. Shush little baby says the mommy rocking in her arms. I'll give that Jim Walsh something to think about that snotty little boy I'll smack his skinny ass so hard he'll jump from here to China. Shush shush shush rocking in the softness the leather rocking on the pillow of a sweet mommy's arms. Rest here long time nice cosy. Shall we go says the daddy and he picks her now out of the cocoon of soft swings her up so high over his head she is flying up up over the world. Bonny squeals and wriggles she swings like a windmill and drops on daddy shoulders up high in this other world sky.

* * *

Walking along Bill Rayner Street, Cynthia talks on about her landlord. Little tight-ass, she says. Three months, was that so long to wait when he knew the Kwik Mart had closed down and she had no job? Was a little leniency too much to ask?

'Don't think of it,' says Jade. 'We'll take you in, won't we hon?' She looks at Terry who nods, just a little, while the baby wriggles and writhes on his shoulders.

'I just don't see why a child like that thinks he has the right,' says Cynthia.

'He's an asshole,' says Jade. 'We all know it. But what can we do about it?'

'Calls himself James now,' says Cynthia.

They walk on past the Latter Day Saints, past the Fried Chick'n, past the Fire Department.

'Woo woo,' sings the baby.

'Woo woo,' agrees Terry. 'Do you see that? Do you see the fire truck?'

'Jesus Christ,' says Cynthia.

They stop, watching a train pass, the once-a-day ride into the city.

‘Woop,’ says the baby. Terry lifts the baby and adjusts her, making sure she is tight against his neck.

‘She’s a happy one,’ says Cynthia, smiling now, suddenly forgetting the whole thing. ‘Always looking round, always smiling.’

‘Little star,’ says Terry. ‘That’s what she is. Shining her light.’

‘Who needs money,’ says Jade, and then, thinking better of it: ‘Terry’s got work. We’ll fit you in.’

And Cynthia starts to laugh.

‘On your sofa?’

‘If we have to.’

‘Or on the floor in baby’s room?’

They cross the tracks and walk on, past Leamington Tavern and Sahara Indian, past the Kwik Mart on the corner, boarded up now since Sal Weston shut the door and went on welfare.

Cynthia says, ‘Why’d we come this way?’

Jade says nothing. Terry knows better too. They walk on in silence now, into Burns, past the retirement home and the holiday park. On the corner of Raleigh a dog rushes past, barking.

‘Mow mow,’ says the baby.

‘Mow mow,’ says Jade.

* * *

‘Get up,’ says Uncle James. ‘We’re going on a drive. Get off the couch.’

‘In a minute,’ says Sam. Fuck, killed. ‘One player to go.’

‘Get off the screen,’ says his uncle. ‘Come do some real work.’

‘In a minute,’ says Sam. Jesus. Killed again. Okay, fuck it, done.

He drops the controller, unfurls his long legs, and gets to his feet, swaying a little, still groggy from the night before. Good night, one too many. Got myself home though.

‘Snap to it,’ says Uncle James. Jesus, impatient? Always on my case Uncle James, always on my case.

‘Where are we going?’ Sam asks.

‘Proper work,’ says Uncle James.

Three months Sam has lived with Uncle James, sent here to sort himself out, that’s what his mom said, though how you sort yourself out on a shit farm by a shit town with a shit uncle Sam did not know. Sure, he took those tools—who had money to buy things? He wanted to learn, he wanted to build things, make something of himself. Uncle James did not build things. He sat on his ass watching reruns of *Friends* and *Top Gear* while the cash rolled in. Every other sucker worked so Uncle James didn’t have to. Yet it was Uncle James who was angry at the world. Here he is again.

‘No one thinks of the landlords any more,’ he says. ‘Listen to me. It’s a public service what I do. I put a roof over their heads, your head for that matter. And what do I get for it?’

He has one hand on the wheel, a cigarette in the other, and with each sentence he punches the air between them. Sam feels the heat as it passes by his face.

‘I’ll tell you what,’ says James. ‘I’ll tell you what. Here’s what I get. Taxes.’

Sam laughs.

‘Do you hear me, smartass?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Do you hear me?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Taxes and fucking regulations, that’s what. Insulate this, heat that. It’s theft, that’s what it is. It’s the government stealing from working men like me.’

‘Yes, sir, it’s the government,’ says Sam. His uncle needs his head read.

They pull onto Parallel Road, coasting on past the nurseries and gravel stores, the fertiliser factory.

‘I’m sick of these people,’ says James. ‘Never pay on time, put holes in the wall. I bet the place stinks.’

Sam rolls his eyes.

‘What did you say?’ says Uncle James, stabbing his cigarette in the air. ‘Little prick.’

‘Bigger prick than you, Uncle James—that’s why I’m here, isn’t it?’

Uncle James makes a sound like a tyre going down, shakes his head.

‘I take you in, help you make something of yourself. See what I mean? Nobody’s grateful, nobody gives a fuck.’

‘I didn’t ask for your help,’ says Sam.

‘Fuck you,’ says James.

‘Thanks, Uncle,’ says Sam.

The town itself is a dump. Houses with paint peeling, cars sitting on blocks on yellowing lawns, no hedges, no flowers, no pride. On Lamb Street they’re overtaken by some boys in a souped-up old Fairlane, air-horning through the chicanes.

‘Fuck them and their little dicks,’ says Uncle James.

They turn onto Burn Street, coasting past more old houses, boarded-up shops. No videos anymore, no post office, not even a Kwik Mart. What do you do around here but sell drugs and steal other people’s welfare money? Three more minutes, then onto Raleigh, past the doctor, past the Christian Centre. That’s what you do: stay poor and give your misery to God.

‘No thanks,’ says Sam. His uncle looks at him funny, and he kicks himself for speaking out loud.

‘Son, did you know you’re insane?’ says Uncle James.

He stops the truck, suddenly reverses into a driveway, taking out the letterbox.

‘Fuck,’ says Uncle James.

He climbs out, focused now, pulling keys from his pocket, sorting them. They’re at a little bungalow, painted black and white. One of those low-to-the-ground, low-roof kinda of places. The door swings open and Sam follows his uncle inside. It’s tiny: small rooms, low

soft-board ceilings. Little table, little sofa, little cabinet with glass ornaments and crockery. Just the place for a tiny life.

‘Well,’ says Uncle James. ‘Get to it.’

Sam looks at his uncle.

‘Lift,’ says his uncle. ‘Carry. Clean it out.’

Sam laughs, and his uncle looks like he’s going to explode.

‘Christ,’ says Sam. ‘You’re serious.’

* * *

Cynthia is yelling and screaming, Jade too. They’re running and screaming towards the truck, towards the man carrying furniture out of Cynthia’s house. I hold Bonny tighter and quicken my stride, trying to keep up, trying to catch them before it’s too late. The front door is open and there are men coming out, carrying Cynthia’s dining table, the one she and Harry got right after their wedding. I reach for my phone but it’s not in my pocket—I left it at home. Shit. I should go into a house, call the police, report a burglary in progress, but it’s too late, Cynthia is there, yelling, ‘Stop right there Little Jimmy Walsh. You put that back!’ The man is carrying the table from Cynthia’s front room. It’s old, scratched mahogany, not beautiful, but hers. This Jimmy Walsh keeps moving towards the truck. ‘You had three months,’ he says. Cynthia pushes at him, grabs a leg of the table. Walsh wrenches it from her, throws it in the truck. It slides along the metal deck, clattering. Walsh turns and walks back towards the house where another man is waiting, standing on the porch—a boy, sixteen, seventeen maybe. ‘What are you waiting for,’ says Jimmy Walsh. ‘Give me a fucking hand.’ The boy shrugs. ‘You’re on your own with this one, Uncle James,’ he says. ‘I’m calling Mom, I’m going home.’ He walks down from the porch, stopping in front of Cynthia. ‘I’m so sorry,’ he says.

As he leaves, Walsh appears again through the front door, carrying a small sofa over his shoulders. Cynthia rushes to him and grabs it and he swings it at her and pushes her off. She staggers back and Jade rushes up to help, catching her. They’re both grabbing at the sofa, trying to pull it from his grip. This Walsh is wiry but strong, he swings it again, pushes both of them off. I put Bonny down and ask her to wait. Walsh throws the sofa into his truck.

‘Three months,’ he says. ‘Nine hundred dollars—you think I’m made of money?’

‘I think you fucking are,’ says Jade.

Walsh is running now, inside and out again with a chair in each arm. Jade is in the truck, pulling the sofa out, lowering it onto the lawn. Then she goes for the table.

Cynthia rushes for Walsh and he takes a swing at her, knocking her away. Then he keeps turning, swinging, not looking what he is doing. As he turns, his leg knocks into Bonny, sending her toppling onto the lawn. She's down and then up again in a second, not hurt but shaken. Her bottom lip sticks out and she starts to whimper, then stops—she can't catch her breath.

In a second I'm on him, on Walsh. He's swinging at me with the chairs, but I grab him under the arms and pick him up and throw him—I really throw him. Everything is slow. He seems to hang in the air, looking around, seeing the ground beneath him, wondering what the fuck, then he crashes, one chair on top of him and one underneath, all smashed up. Shit, what did I do?

I turn to Bonny, wanting to go to her, hold her, check she is okay—but she's standing there looking at me, smiling the biggest smile I ever saw. As I move towards her she claps her hands together, once, twice, and giggles, then claps again once, twice. Wooo, she says. Dada, wooo. 'I'll get you for this,' says Jimmy Walsh. Jade picks up the table and carries it inside.

* * *

Bonny hug the daddy walk along. Houses pink white blue grass green some flowers some no flowers some trees birds singing car go past. Hug daddy walk faster jump bounce walk fast jump fun. Mommy yell gam-gam yell too. Big truck at gam-gam house white with big wheel door open man there. Gam-gam yell bee fly past. Bee say zzzp zzzp bee small with big mind two bees three all see same big eye. Hug daddy. Daddy shirt feel soft smell nice. What you say, says mommy. Yeezil Krice what you do. Mommy grab man grab his arm sleeve grab big table. Man swing table swing swing weeee momma grab smack. Bee say this way petal this way all big air sky big mind.

Down now on ground daddy say stay here Bonny stay little star. Bonny good look at grass look at flower hold petal where bee is. Come on bee come on? Woh look now look man swing swing swing his arms swing big chair man funny. Bonny swing too swing round round round round swing swing big storm big wind lots fun. Man come close with big shoe knock Bonny. Bonny fall get up get up fast all good man funny. Daddy jump now jump high run to man push him saying no no. Man push daddy. Bonny say no push Bonny say be little star Bonny fly fly. Daddy pick up big man throw him throw him fly through air make him land on ground ouch. Bonny fly up up little star fly up into big light fly up with bird look down at daddy look down at man at mommy at gam-gam down there at house truck bird bee all down there. Bonny fly Bonny shine big light. Big light grow bright gold like bee mind.

Big light shine all shine Bonny float in sky super happy super good say Bonny. Good good good good daddy good mommy good gam-gam good man squash flat good chair on man's head good Bonny. Bonny back now feet on ground clap daddy clap say woo woo daddy clap clap all good. Stay now Bonny stay safe calm big bubble light. Bee fly around say mmm

mmm. Happy bird fly around singing song. Light glint on bird's neck it sings song all time. World all little star, world all here, world all here. Mommy good daddy good gam-gam good safe. Man on ground get up man get up go now man get truck go go. Bonny good bonny little star Bonny shine and clap say Yeezil Krice.

The Dance

KYLEE WEBB

FICTION

Bottle-red hair curtains across my face as she undulates on top of my lap. I reluctantly came to Rocky's Cabaret to celebrate Mikey's birthday, and now here I am receiving what seems to be a quality lap dance. I wouldn't know—this is my first one. The corner of her lip turns up like it's suddenly waking. I'm trembling, gripping onto the round smoothness of the leather booth.

I keep telling myself that I need to seem less awkward. So I try to make conversation, ask her something interesting while trying to scream over "Doing It to Death" by The Kills blaring over the speakers.

"So what's the weirdest thing that's ever happened to you here?" I ask.

"Well, one time a man pulled out my tampon."

"Oh."

I wonder whether it happened on accident or on purpose. I instinctually take a peep at her crotch area to see if there are any strings loose. There are not. This whole situation makes me ponder the strings loose about me. I wonder if people can actively see me fraying like the peeling wallpaper or a child's worn blanket. Can they tell that I'm threadbare goods? Maybe she can, and that's why she's smirking so much. Or, she's doing that because it's considered sexy.

Sexy must be the way she manipulates her body like a snake in heat. In a way, it's enchanting. Everyone else thinks so too. Mikey is looking at the scene with an enraptured expression.

"Damn, Sylvia, it's nice to see you out like this! I mean, who would've thought Sylvia from accounting would be at a strip club? I sure as hell didn't think you would come!"

He doesn't stop saying remarks like that all night. He says something to that effect again as I get lightly slapped in the face with one of her bare breasts. My brain immediately jumps to feeding. It's the one-year anniversary of the day of when I picked up my greatest love only to find him to be ice cold. That solid little block of ice became like my ex-husband, who was a glacier himself.

"If you want another, that'll be twenty dollars more," she tells me.

I snap out of my trance. Mikey looks at me with his eyebrows raised and his teeth bared like a chimpanzee. The other guys look just as ravenous, licking their lips like pack animals. But I find myself unable to speak. Everything feels so sudden, so raw and present. I'm the opposite of present, always have been.

"I'll buy you another, Sylvie. I'm having too much fun watching this."

I knew Mikey was a pervert. He has the worst HR record in the office, according to Rebecca in HR. But I didn't know he was this blatant about it. Still, I don't have the wherewithal to refuse. By "refuse," I mean refuse anything. I didn't refuse his invitation (which he may have given as a joke), nor am I going to refuse the inevitable fingering in the bathroom later. So I nod my head and say "Okay" to both him and the stripper whose fake name is "Scarlet."

She commences her next dance. I realize I'm still clutching the edge of the booth. I loosen my grip and wipe my sweaty palms onto it, slickening the black leather. As her hips gyrate in precise circles, I trace my fingers along the raised studs on the side of the booth with one hand. I used to trace circles around my engorged belly button during the pregnancy. It all looked so alien, but my body executed it naturally, as if I was simply made to expand. She moves like she was made for expansion too. She's everywhere at once and yet so concentrated.

I feel a foreign object come into the mix. Something utterly unbelonging. It turns out to be a hand. It grasps my thigh and kneads it. I don't say no but I want it to end. Lucky for me, it does end. But then, it reaches up and changes its trajectory to her ass. He grabs it like a baby crushes play dough. Scarlet immediately whips around and halts what she's doing.

"Touch me again and you lose your fucking hand, got it?" she tells Mikey in a frighteningly calm voice.

Mikey raises his hands jokingly like he's being accosted by the police. He laughs a greasy little laugh. I don't laugh along. She narrows her shark-like eyes at him, then picks up her orange juice and storms off. I get up too.

"Hey, where you going?" he calls after me.

I look toward anywhere. I see poles and the bar with all the chipped wood, curves on the women and flatness on the men. I feel the Moscow mules kicking around in my stomach and inching up my throat.

"I'm going to the bathroom," I say.

I bet he gives me a look that suggests that he will follow suit any moment now, but I don't look behind to check. I barrel through a door littered with rock-show fliers and find myself in a bathroom so poorly lit it's blue-hued. There's also only one stall. I bolt toward it, lurching from intoxication. I end up having to stop myself, holding onto both sides of the doorway with a grip that could choke someone to death.

The door is open but the stall appears to be occupied. I want to groan out loud, but then I notice a crimson head retching into the toilet. It's a sound I'm all too familiar with from my first trimester. There is no way she's drunk—she was drinking only orange juice from a can, and I don't think the club allows the dancers to drink on the job. I swallow burgeoning vomit then bend down next to her. I sweep away scarlet hair from the side of her face and hold it with one hand at the back of her head as she spills her guts out into the porcelain bowl.

I don't have much to do but wait. So I look at her—really look at her. She has scattered tattoos of horror movie characters down her back. I heard her mention to one of the guys that she sometimes gives herself tattoos. I use my other hand to lightly stroke her

back, just like my mother used to do when I would sleep on her lap. I run my hand along a hyper-detailed rendering of Ghostface from *Scream* as she coughs up more chunks. Nice.

She slowly lifts her head out of the bowl and looks at me. Her hair is still clutched in my hand.

She clears her throat and says, “Thanks for that, but you weren’t supposed to touch me.”

I immediately let go of her hair and woozily stand up. She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand and stands up herself. With heeled boots on, she’s easily a foot taller than me. If she wanted to, she could probably snap me in half. She pulls me into an embrace and begins to lightly cry. I allow it to happen. Her tears seep into my hairline and I swear that they are burrowing into my brain. They plant into my head one question that I’ve been aching to ask.

“When are you due?”

She grips me tighter and I feel acrylics digging into my back.

“July 24th,” she whispers.

A Leo baby. My ex-husband was a Leo. Proud and arrogant. Losing Gabe hurt him because he was losing a part of himself. We had a blowout fight after the SIDS swept Gabe away from us. He kept on screaming several “me” and “my” phrases. It may seem like I’m being too harsh on him—after all, when we grieve, we mostly think of ourselves. But Jonathan was another beast altogether. After we discovered Gabe freezing in his crib, Jonathan’s eyes bore into mine with the clearest message he had ever sent me: I had killed “his” son. That’s when the frostbite set in. Soon, we were amputated from each other. Sort of like how I want to amputate Mikey’s hand.

“I’m really sorry about my friend back there. He actually really isn’t a friend, but anyway, I’m just incredibly sorry.”

She releases me from the hug and then wipes away the tears and smudged mascara from under her eyes, except it makes the smudging worse.

“You’re all good. I’ve dealt with assholes much worse than him. Like, you should see what goes on in VIP.”

“There’s a VIP section?”

“Yeah, you want me to show you?”

She gives me a half-smile. I return it sloppily. She then grabs my hand and leads me out of the bathroom. I sincerely hope she’s not repulsed by my damp hands. Judging by her now full smile, she doesn’t seem to mind. She leads me past gawking drunken vultures and other dancers looking to make their next buck. I briefly make eye contact across the room with Mikey, who is being danced upon. His look implies that he wants me next. I immediately look away and allow myself to be tugged along by Scarlet. We go past a ruby-colored velvet rope into what appears to be the birthing canal of Rocky’s Cabaret. The lighting is soft and pink; it shines lovingly on the walls littered with old band posters. I feel like I am being enveloped by the building. The walls appear to be closing in. We make a right and it becomes even more labyrinthine. We finally dip into one of the smaller rooms, which opens up and swallows us whole.

I begin to sway to the muffled music. The alcohol that once felt offensive now feels like a warm hug. She tells me to sit down on the booth against the wall. I obey. Then she

tells me something I barely understand but I hand her four hundred dollars anyway. She takes the money and counts it with a hungry grin. A security guard comes skulking by and she hands him a twenty. She then slips the rest of the money into a tiny, glittery purse.

“So, you get thirty minutes in here. You’re allowed to touch anywhere but here.” She gestures to between her legs. “And no mouth stuff. Make sense?”

I nod and then gulp loudly, my mouth suddenly as dry as my hands aren’t. She nods back and then does some light stretches. I feel the need to make conversation again even though my dehydrated mouth protests.

“How did you get your start doing this?”

She cracks her neck a couple of times then sits on my lap with a flourish.

“My ex-husband hated strippers, so I became one.”

Jonathan pops into my mind like an annoying jack-in-the-box. I think about whether or not he hated strippers. I suppose he would’ve looked down on them like he did with most people. I remember the first time we met, he made a negging comment about my name. Something about how I should also stick my head in an oven. I bet he thought it was clever. At the time, maybe I did too. I thought he was the smartest man I had ever met. I felt privileged that he wanted to spend even a millisecond with me.

She turns her back to me and then places my hands on her hips. She grinds on top of my lap at a measured pace. My hands migrate to hold her stomach. Her dancing gradually halts. We just sit there for a moment while I lay against her back, holding her tummy like it’s a priceless glass egg. Within this moment, I feel the kicking of a tiny bloom of life. The fetus isn’t nearly developed enough to kick yet, but something kicks for me. The belly expands underneath my hands and I realize I know the gender. I know she—we—are going to have a bouncing baby boy. His name is going to be Caspian, and he will have blond curls and a giggle that sounds like the canned children’s laughter on TV shows. I picture us all walking—Scarlet and I each holding one of his hands as we cross the street going god knows where. We will love him even when he litters the floor with Cheerios and they crunch underneath Scarlet’s eight-inch heels. Caspian. The universe will open up before him and he will possess the keys to the world. Maybe even Gabe will be completely a thing of the past, his tiny ghost no longer haunting me. Jonathan will barely even register in my memory. They will both be faint blips on my radar until they fade into obscurity.

“Our time is up.”

Nobody knew that I didn’t actually want to be a mother. Maybe that’s why Jonathan blamed me for Gabe’s death. Maybe he thought that I willed it to happen. Perhaps I did. Who knows anymore? All I know is that when I did become a mother, I’ve never felt a more intense love in my life. So fuck Jonathan! If only they both could see how fantastic a mother I will be to little Caspian.

“Hey, our time is up.”

Her stomach is flattened again. Her back is soaked from what seems to be my tears. She disembarks from my lap and I am left feeling frigid. But I let go. I flit my eyes back up to her and she looks back at me expectantly. I feel as if she is telepathically willing me to get up and leave. Once again, I obey, following her out of the room and back into the club.

"I'll catch up with you later," she tells me and then disappears into the crowd of polo shirts and cheap cologne.

The musk of it all begins to choke me and dulls my buzz. I realize I need some fresh air immediately. I dodge my way around men who have their eyes tucked in the G-string of the dancer on stage. When I finally make it out to the parking lot, I empty the contents of my stomach. I hear the bouncer groan in disgust, but I ignore it. I ignore it all. I feel a hand sweeping my hair away from my face and then holding it back while I vomit my guts out. I look to the side and see the generic khakis I'd recognize anywhere.

"That's right, Sylvie, let it all out. Then we can have some fun."

I decide to change trajectory and heave all over his shoes.

"What the fuck, Sylvie?" He yelps then hops away from the growing pile of puke.

I take a deep breath and watch him worm away back into the club. I glance at the empty street before me and note all the fancy cars in the parking lot. It is littered with Teslas and broken glass. I crunch a piece beneath my work heels. I imagine I'm crushing the whole world beneath me and that it becomes teeny-tiny clear pieces of nothing. I think about what had once been the whole world to me. I wonder if Gabe's father really was the love of my life. Can such a loveless man be capable of receiving all the love I gave? It's been a while since the divorce, and yet it still pains me that I'm going to be going back to my sarcophagus of an apartment.

I step toward the street, hoping to be recognizable for the Uber. I immediately stumble and nearly fall on my face after tripping on a beer can. The clunking aluminum taunts me as the can skitters away.

I hear childlike laughter behind me and whip my head around.

"Caspian?" I call out.

"Who the fuck is Caspian?" a familiar voice replies coolly.

I realize that I am face-to-face with Scarlet smoking a cigarette.

"Virginia," she utters after taking a long drag, the tip as red as her hair.

"What?"

"Virginia. That's my real name."

I nod. I didn't expect that, but then again, I don't know what I was expecting. Out of the blue, I get hit with a wave of recollection. Embarrassment grows from my pores like a fungus.

"Sorry about what happened in there. I have no idea what came over me."

She shrugs. I realize that she is wearing normal clothes. Well, whatever "normal" is.

"You apologize a lot."

I find myself wanting to apologize for that too.

"I guess so."

She laughs lightly then drops the cigarette and crushes it with her boot.

"I'm quitting tomorrow," she remarks.

"Sounds good."

"Hey," she leans in closer to me, her smoky breath dancing across my nose, "can I ask you something?"

I look up and try to appear as confident as possible even though I am visibly shaking.

“Yeah, ask me anything,” I cough out.

That was certainly confident enough.

She looks around to see if anyone is listening and then she leans back in.

“Can you please co-sign the loan on my car?”

The audacity of it all makes my brain halt like a record scratch. Could she be serious? I hear the Uber driver honk at me and I almost turn around to go. But then I notice her hand and where it’s placed. I look down at it then into algae-colored eyes. I give her an answer.

One thing leads to another and I find myself laughing in an Uber while she plays with her two-inch-long nails. I laugh out the window and I wheeze at the stoplights that change to green just for me. The sublimity of it all burrows within my chest and impregnates my heart. Thick tears spring from my eyes like amniotic fluid. A cough begins to infiltrate my throat, but I don’t give a damn if I choke. I’ll have the entire world shoved down my throat. I’ll swallow the whole thing and then birth it anew. I look at her mid-cough. She looks back and gives me a faint smile then stares back out the window. I catch both of us reflected in that window and see a third face. My smile grows wider and I allow myself to drift away as the passing streetlights bathe my skin.

Malinchista

FLORA REES-ARREDONDO

FILM



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Rings

CAROLYN OLIVER

FLASH FICTION

This one time I explained to him that huorns are massive introverts with selective mutism and space issues. Who doesn't love them, overlooked trees taking back their shadows. But the movie version got it wrong. I mean, there was no way it could get at the rage. The way it lives in the viscera, slow-honed. He wasn't really listening. The trail was looping back and the moon should have been rising. *Do you think somewhere there's a depressed tree that's, like, boozing on its own decomposing fruit and just fucking up its tree neighborhood?* He had some good moments but no sense of sinew. I didn't stop him when he carved our names in the bark. I didn't run when the tree spit the letters right back through his guts. I grinned back at the roots, the mirror system dripping fungi. Not a single branch waved in the air.

A Different Kind of Smoke

CATHY ULRICH

FLASH FICTION

It is the spring of spontaneous human combustion, the spring of burning things. Mothers pace, worriedly, before bay windows in soft-pink nightgowns, dangling bathrobes. Their hands are birdlike things, fluttering, fluttering. Fathers sit at kitchen tables with glasses of Black Velvet, neat, say, *In my day*. Daughters are sent off to school with dripping bags of ice in their hands.

Think of glaciers, their mothers say. Think of the North Pole.

Girls in our classes sucking on ice cubes while we work quadratic equations. Girls lingering at water fountains, girls wetting towels at bathroom sinks and pressing them to their foreheads.

Girls at night stealing beers from basement refrigerators, garage shelves, popping the tabs and grimacing at the taste. Girls howling with mopey-faced dogs moon-baying in fenced backyards, girls tipsy on their stolen beers, turning over onto their backs on new spring grass, girls looking up at the smile of the moon, girls waiting, waiting for the burn.

Girls with billowing smoke mouths, dragon-flare eyes. Girls with ice melting in their dewy mouths. Girls saying to us as we pass in the hallways at school, *Oh, spring is finally here!*

Fall had been crisping leaves raked into fat orange bags with jack-o'-lantern smiles, barbecue grills covered by tarps, full moons and hoarfrost winds. Winter had been freeze and frost and the bump-bump-bump of our cars caught in snow ruts. Spring is grass greening and flowers sprouting and the smell of smoke and skin-char and girls we have known bursting into flame, girls we have known, for a flaring moment, shining like the stars.

Spring is grieving brothers dragging on ember-ended cigarettes for the taste of a different kind of smoke, stubbing them out on cold concrete blocks. Fathers in stiff black suits with ties they'll never wear again and mothers watching the nightly news (*Warning: Graphic Content*), holding their unanswered phones in their hands, wondering if that small, burning thing on the screen had once been their daughter.

Unstable Relationship

LUCY ZHANG

FLASH FICTION

We're making papier-mâché birds in art class, ripping strips of newspaper and smearing glue over our fingers. Albatross females lay only one egg, and those whose eggs don't hatch end up in bird divorce. The more efficient of us have time to make eggs, although it's too hard to maintain the round shape with crinkled paper, and they end up lopsided and lumpy, like tier-three fruits rejected by Whole Foods and sold at \$0.29/lb. at the local farmers' market, but the surfaces dry smooth and clean and sit nicely by the birds' legs—stones of separation, we call them as we project the chick's hypothetical lifeline, its probability of death during every step from embryo to hatchling. The funny thing is female albatrosses in successful breeding pairs are more likely to suffer from global warming than those who failed to breed, which we think is terribly romantic—sacrificing livelihood in the name of love. But our birds will be together for life, their feet glued to cardboard platforms, cardboard platforms fixed to a table, us fixed to our spots adhering layer over layer until the wire legs and masking tape and wadded balls of magazines disappear, our falsified organs, veins, toothpick bones providing an imaginary foundation, because without organs, there's no need for nutrients, colder waters bringing nitrogen from the deep end of the ocean, kelp seeping it up, females breeding to die or dying to breed and instead riding the breeze with their wings locked and extended, though we haven't figured out how to get the paper to dry beyond stiffness yet.

Selected Works

LORNA SIMPSON

VISUAL ART



Ice 13, 2018. Ink and screenprint on gessoed fiberglass, 108 x 96 x 1 3/8 inches. © Lorna Simpson.
Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: James Wang



Source Notes, 2019. Ink and screenprint on gessoed fiberglass, 144 x 102 x 1 3/8 inches. © Lorna Simpson. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: James Wang



Wind Blown, 2014. Collage and ink on paper, 29 1/2 x 21 5/8 inches, framed: 31 x 24 x 1 5/8 inches. © Lorna Simpson. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth



Curl & Ice, 2017. Ink and acrylic on gessoed wood, 67 x 50 x 1 3/8 inches. © Lorna Simpson. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: James Wang

Her Hypothetical

JODI SCOTT ELLIOTT

NONFICTION

I could measure her sorrow by counting the units of relief in her laughter (wild, devious laughter), but as an eighteen-year-old girl who had yet to know such a complicated loneliness, I could only find a vague understanding through my limited approximations. (She had nine years, ten months, and twenty-nine days on me. Also, a husband. A son (diagnosed with autism). And a daughter.)

I occupied hypotheticals, but she was well-studied in practical application.

We met in the alto section for a summertime community-college musical. Some crumbling old man plucked out our parts on the piano, and, sure, I could manage when we were the only ones singing, but once the whole chorus sang together, I lost the harmony. (All I could hear were the damn sopranos.)

“It’s like I’ve always said: If you want to be a musician, sing with the altos. They really have to learn their harmonies,” my uncle said once (though not to me directly).

First I asked her to sing our part again on breaks. And when the old man pointed one crooked finger at the altos and another at the sopranos, I leaned in close to her mouth. Finally she just sang the harmonies directly in my ear. I later learned I could hold up any sheet of music, ask her *how does this go?*, and she could sing the right notes as reliably as a piano. (The phenomena astonished me every time.)

She double majored at Brigham Young University (in concert piano and chemical engineering).

“I used to have to ask my roommates to turn off the music when I went to bed,” she told me, “because I couldn’t stop myself from transcribing it: ‘F, E-flat, G, C, C-major-7, C7.’ I couldn’t fall asleep if they had anything playing.”

Whenever our laughter collided, nothing could counteract the combustion. (The rest of the cast just had to wait till it moved through us (and we let them wait)).

I noticed garment lines underneath her pants. (Latter-day Saints require members to wear garments of the holy priesthood underneath all their clothing). I didn’t grow up Mormon, but my uncle converted and married a devoted member of the church. I often thought of their six children more like additional siblings than cousins (an affinity I had conflated with the religion). If only the missionaries acknowledged that my dog had a soul, I might have converted in high school (and married a few years later (and birthed my first child nine months after that)), but now I realize that they were not authorized to make those sorts of negotiations.

Why didn’t she just leave the dark little house that made her so sad?

She had tight curls, but the individual hairs were so soft and fine that my fingers never met resistance. Over and over, I ran my hands through. Her eyes fluttered shut and her lips twisted into an asymmetric smile (such a delicate expression). I could balance the weight of her troubles in my two hands and hold it a short distance from her scalp. ((Relief.) At least for a while.)

“I was told to marry a good Mormon man. (Nobody told me to want anything more),” she confessed. Her family warned if she were to divorce her husband, he would be welcome to family gatherings (and she would not).

Sometimes I remember what happened, but other times the continuum of years and decades and disappointments obscure my perspective—like an electron particle collapsing itself between two wavelengths of visible light. So I have to build a theory on vague traces and speculation. I touched her face, but did I hold her hand? What is the probability that I held her in my arms? We cuddled in a hammock one ephemeral afternoon, the sun scattering its shimmering spectrum through the distant branches and leaves, and we were touching (so comfortably). That must have meant something, but this was well before I started my studies in intimacy. (So what would I have known of meaning?)

What I wanted held little consequence (I hardly even knew). Only her relief (laughter (joy (relief again))) concerned me. If she wanted to be held, I held her. And if she didn't, so what.

I never understood why my phone calls started going to voicemail. Why she was busy (but (I knew better) not busy). I had believed there were rights and wrongs, and it just took strength to navigate around the wrongs. But some wrong must have led me to this end of an unanswered phone. I would have veered away from it if I could see it, (but I couldn't fix something in some hypothetical future I never got to see).

Psychological Thriller

from *Splice of Life: A Memoir in 13 Film Genres*

CHARLES JENSEN

NONFICTION

2012

I'm already drunk when he takes me by the arm and says hello. We're at a bar; it's crowded. Men in twos and threes fuck each other on several televisions mounted high on the walls. There's music—something forgettable. We introduce ourselves. He offers me a shot of something, and I drink it. We talk, but I won't remember this conversation. Nothing sticks in my memory until I realize I'm kissing him in the parking lot after last call. His friends have shoved themselves into a yellow Ford Fiesta and idle a few feet from us. The horn bleats with insistence.

He invites me to join them, but I know when my hourglass has run out. We exchange information. I'll hear from him again. What happens next will unlace everything about my life: Where I live. Who I am. Who my boyfriend is. How much I want to live.

* * *

BLACKOUT

Black Swan is the story of a woman trying to keep it together during a period of intense turmoil, scrutiny, and uncertainty. Set against the backdrop of the prestigious New York City Ballet at Lincoln Center, the film, directed by Darren Aronofsky, leverages the excruciating physical demands of ballet—exacting technique, the punishment of repetitive movement, the crushing expectations of bodily perfection—against the pliable psyches of the dancers, the artistic director, and the people they orbit.

* * *

2015

I study a much-photocopied sheet of instructions, the type gray and faded, before the first meeting of my adult beginning ballet class. It instructs me to buy shoes, and to wear comfortable clothing to class. I should be prepared to move. I find the nearest dance supply store and after trying on what feels like every shoe in their back room, I find the pair that hugs my feet without strangling them. "When you get home, attach the elastics so that the slipper fits snugly but not uncomfortably," the salesperson tells me, showing me

with her finger where I should sew it with thread. I go home, pull out the sewing kit I have never used before, and do my best.

The studio is a large square space with high ceilings and a wall of windows looking onto Los Angeles's new Broad museum. It stares back at us with its architectural "oculus," a window bulging through the concrete of the museum's façade. The room gets a lot of natural light and feels spacious.

The teacher, Amy, is in her forties with shoulder-length dirty blonde hair and a petite frame covered from head to toe with a light jacket, long pants, and leg warmers. She has a direct demeanor and speaks with an occasional accent that I can't pin down. We all help pulling out the barres and placing them in straight lines around the room. She asks us our names and memorizes them almost immediately, then launches quickly into a series of steps at the barre. Her nylon pants rustle like dry leaves while her feet become blurs near the floor, flicking, pointing, tapping. Her arms swoop up over her head and trail back down in graceful arcs that are so perfect they seem robotic.

I try as best I can to repeat these movements with my own limbs, with varying results. At six feet four, I tower over my petite classmates. They wear leotards and sheer wrap skirts and look much better prepared than I do in my striped tank top and gym shorts.

Though I am barely moving, I break a sweat. Then a hard sweat.

I see myself in the mirror, a praying mantis among swans.

* * *

BLACK MAGIC

There's a lot of mirror imagery in *Black Swan*. This makes sense: mirrors line the walls of every ballet studio. The dancer must observe herself to assess her movements, make corrections, understand her placement on the stage, how she travels through space. But the obsession with reflection threads deeper. In one of the first shots of Nina (Natalie Portman), she rides a subway train, staring into the glass, where her own face is a ghostly reflection in the darkness outside the car. Then she sees a different image: a woman in the adjoining car, dressed similarly to her, hair in the same kind of bun. Nina strains to watch this figure exit the car and push through a crowd. We learn later this is the company's new dancer Lily (Mila Kunis).

It's easy to say Lily is Nina's enemy in *Black Swan*. The vivacious, carefree dancer is in almost every way her opposite. Nina would certainly agree. But Nina's enemies are more complex than just the woman who poses the greatest threat to her achievement in the role of the white and black swans. Thomas (Vincent Cassel), her artistic director, who sexually assaults her as she begs for the role and whose intermittent reinforcement of his approval keeps Nina subservient, is also an enemy. Her mother (Barbara Hershey), who both lives through her and tries to stop her from succeeding so she can never leave her, is an enemy. Beth (Winona Ryder), the prima donna she replaces, is an enemy who suggests Nina's ascent is due only to fucking Thomas, not her talent or passion.

In another scene, walking alone through a construction corridor, Nina passes a figure who for a moment has her own face, a Cheshire smile blooming there, unnerving

the real Nina. Her ultimate enemy is herself, her own distrust in her abilities, her own fears. She learned this: to doubt everything, except her own ambition.

* * *

2012–2014

The man I met at the bar becomes a regular hookup. I keep his identity, and the identities of all my hookups, secret from the rest of the people in my life. Except for my partner of seven years, whose blessing I have to participate in this ethical nonmonogamy.

For a while, it was good. And then, all of a sudden, it wasn't. Bar guy tells me one night at a bar he's not in it for the long haul if he has to share me. When he leaves my house that night, he leaves for good, wrecking me. In the aftermath of that heartbreak, I split from my partner. All of this exposes fundamental flaws in our design. And even though my partner and I love each other more than anything else in this world, we don't work. I lose a passionate love, a domesticated love, a best friend, a companion in the course of a few weeks. I no longer know who I am.

A few months later, bar guy reaches out to me. I let him back in. Just us.

* * *

THE BLACK SWAN

Lily doesn't understand why Nina is so serious. Why she can't let loose, have fun, live a little. Lily is free, liberated. She chases experiences more than achievements. It's what Thomas loves about her, the way she loses herself in life and in dancing. Nina is a perfectionist; her self-awareness overpowers all her other desires. She knows when she is being watched, and she knows she is always being watched.

But Nina wants to be like Lily, though the closer she gets, the more she realizes she can't have it both ways. She can't be the technically proficient and demure white swan if it also means being the dark, seductive, calculating black swan. The white swan, like Nina, is aware men are watching her and so she performs for them. The black swan, like Lily, performs so that men will watch her. It's a subtle difference, but ultimately the one that defines them both. The difference is who controls the performance.

* * *

[SIDEBAR]

What strikes me about ballet in the beginning isn't necessarily how hard it is. I once took a break in the work day to watch New York City Ballet alum Wendy Whelan teach the advanced students of my school's Dance Academy, my first real peek behind the curtain of what goes into a ballet performance. Wendy's body, made of only muscle and bone, swam through space calculated to be perfect yet graceful—precise but effortless. I watched the students follow her instruction, her adjustments, having no clear idea what was happening within their bodies to make these steps come to life.

And that, for me, is the struggle in ballet. The carriage of the body, even its placement at rest, requires muscles I've never thought about before. To stand in first position—heels together, feet turned just above nine and three o'clock—engages the thigh and hip. Fifth position, the most challenging one in which to feel comfortable, looks almost comically difficult, feet stacked and pointed in opposite directions. To stand in this position is a feat; to stand with grace, to seem natural, is athleticism.

* * *

BLACK AND WHITE

Those around Nina convince her she's not good enough to be both white and black swans. Nina knows they're wrong; after all, she's smart enough to do the work to get her to the top of the company. The face she presents to the world—uncertain, flappable—invites them to underestimate her, but we the audience know with greater certainty what lurks within.

However, their words resonate in her. Her psyche splits. She feels pulled taut between mastery and misery. Rather than battling her critics and her rivals, she fights herself. She stabs Lily, only to discover she didn't stab Lily; Nina stabbed herself with a shard of broken mirror—an object in which she sees herself the way others do. It all becomes very bloated with metaphor.

Black Swan suggests that psychological dismantling is necessary for artists to reach their full potential. Nina dances both swans, and expertly. She embodies the allure and violence of Odile and the fragility and pleading of Odette. *Swan Lake* is almost happening within her. At the climax of the performance, when she, as Odette, leaps off the peak and we see her plummet through an overlay of mirror shards, her face is pure ecstasy. She's done it. She defied all the expectations, her own included, and earned stardom. Yet, when she lands on the mat backstage, we realize her self-inflicted stab wound is extensive, perhaps even fatal. And cruelly, the film withholds her fate from us.

Earlier in the film, Thomas, pacing around the rehearsal room, waxes poetic about Odette's tragic fate. "In death," he says, "she finds freedom." The film campaigns for us to believe the art transcends its maker. Art trumps life. Nina fulfilled her purpose. Nothing else about her matters.

Thomas fails to add that Odile, the black swan, was already free.

* * *

2014–2015

It starts off with little things.

Getting ready to go out to a bar for a second, third, or fourth time that week, I pull off my shirt and reach for a new one. My boyfriend steps into his jeans. My chest, a glass-smooth sea mostly unbroken by hair, catches his eye. He says, "You know I'm really only attracted to hairy guys, right?"

Playing a round of *Settlers of Catan* with another couple, when he senses I'm going to win the game, he targets me and me alone. He places roads and settlements to stunt the

growth of my empire, leaving me to languish and lose, even as his focus on me has allowed one of our friends to take and hold the lead until the end of the game. His pursuit of me is punishing, and personal. I am not allowed to beat him, even if destroying me means destroying himself.

Another night, a bar night like most of our nights, he leaves me waiting for the karaoke DJ to call me up. Maybe he's smoking outside. Maybe he's chatting with friends in the back. But then he's standing in front of me. I see his eyes bobbing on whisky's choppy waves. The dread rushes into me. He puts his arm around a short man next to him who can't be more than twenty-six years old. "This is Sam," my boyfriend says. Sam's face has a dog's eagerness all over it. As I shake Sam's hand, my boyfriend leans toward my ear. "Let's take him home with us."

We've never spoken about this kind of thing—what it means to us, what it might do to us. I've learned to stay sober no matter how late the night gets to stop mistakes like this from happening. "No."

He doesn't say a word. Just turns and storms out of the bar. Sam stands there, reading me with his optimism. He holds up his phone. "Can I give you my number?"

Another night, a neighbor pounds on our door at four in the morning. It yanks me out of a deep sleep. My first thought: police. A crisis. An accident. Still mostly asleep, I answer the door naked, hiding my body behind the wood. The neighbor points to a rideshare service idling in the street. The back door yawns open and the interior light reveals my boyfriend, cradled in the back seat, passed out, unresponsive.

I drag him back.

Over time, it becomes a kind of dance. I work hard not to be noticed, to anticipate what will set him off or open myself up for criticism, and correct it before he can comment.

And the undermining. Well. Eventually I hit bottom.

The exhaustion I feel pulls me toward the earth with its own gravity. I pass out before ten almost every night, usually in front of the TV while he struggles through ADD to complete his graduate school coursework.

I go into therapy for depression. Between the complexities of my work environment and the needling at home, I have no peace.

We explode. Shouting from one end of the apartment to the other. Me screaming (again) that it's over. My body filling up with despair like a cistern in a hurricane. Then I'm crying. I'm telling him how much he's hurting me. I ask him to help me feel better. He tells me he just can't with me, that I need too much, ask too much, that I'm draining him dry, that I'm holding him back, that he can't anymore.

I remember saying the words, "Maybe I shouldn't even be alive anymore."

He locks himself in the other bedroom.

I don't recognize myself. The saying those words.

I have been shrinking and shrinking for months, but now I can feel how close I am to blinking out.

BLACK AND BLUE

Nina's body weathers aggression throughout *Black Swan*, both as a dancer and as victim of self-harm. In an early scene, her mother notices a rashy patch of skin on her back. Nina doesn't know what it is and shrugs it off. It's the last injury she'll ignore in the film. Later, that area on her back bleeds, reveals a deep scratch. Her toenail snaps in half while she practices *pirouettes en pointe*, and she yanks a hangnail from her finger during a celebratory gala. All of these wounds manifest the stress Nina is under; as viewers, we worry both that they are real, and that they are imagined. Because a ballet dancer's body is the tool of their art, it is sacred. Nina cares for hers like a priceless violin. When it begins to break down, she's stressed and concerned.

Yet the physical harm can't compare to the self-harm she endures at the film's climax. Or is the self-harm the inevitable evolution of the harm she endures from others? Beth's slut-shaming. Thomas's psychological abuse. Her mother's overprotective and volatile attention. Lily's constant glittering on the periphery of her vision. The ire of her company members. The being-a-woman in a world where everything about her—her body, her sexuality, her interiority—are owned by everyone else around her.

By the end of the film, Nina resolves to defy everyone's expectations and embody herself and her opposite. She thinks she is doing this for herself, but it is actually the outcome everyone has been pushing her to realize. And it (probably) kills her. And perhaps, in death, she'll find freedom.

* * *

The moment I walk in, I know something is wrong. Off. Hollow. The way the sound of the door opening echoes when it should absorb. The click of my steps on bare tile.

The realization swoops into me with a breath I feel all the way in my gut.

I look in the bedroom. The closet gapes, the bare hangers there dangling like teeth in a broken grin. I rip open a dresser drawer: disemboweled. The master bath, his bath, empty; even the shower curtain gone.

I call him. It rings and rings.

I call him. It rings and rings.

I call him. It rings and rings.

I feel like a conduit. Electric. Things are rushing into me (air, panic, images) and rushing out of me (breath, sweat, anger).

I text him. *You moved out?*

I see the bubble with three dots pull up on the screen. I don't wait. I call him again. He declines the call.

Then the message appears: *I do not want to talk right now.*

I text back that he can go fuck himself.

The phone shaking in my hand.

The emptiness of the rooms, how hollow and dead they feel. A discarded cocoon.

The fear and panic and anger and devastation washing over me in waves, taking turns.

Was this freedom?

* * *

2015–2016

There are weeks when being a failure in the ballet studio is the very best thing I can do for myself. The fall ballet teacher, Lucy, is Amy's opposite in almost every way. She has red hair, is maybe ten years older than Amy, and has a Southern accent that fades in and out depending on how informal she's being. She's loose, casual, funny, loves chatting throughout class, and laughs loudly and often.

I attempt one of the *valse* combinations Lucy demonstrates. It's a delicate waltz-based step with a PUM-pum-pum rhythm and combinations of steps forward and pauses. I just can't do it; I get so deep in my head about what each foot is supposed to do and how my arms are supposed to wave and swan around me.

Lucy stops me and gestures to stop the music. "Why don't we do this." She presses my arms to my chest. "Let's not worry about these. Just step to the music." She claps out the waltz rhythm with her hands and demonstrates for me a significantly dumbed-down version of the footwork. I've been assigned ballet for babies. I don't protest. I follow her instructions.

I'm grateful for the opportunity to actually do something, and do it right.

Then there is the day Lucy asks us to spin across the room with our arms up, bent at the elbows, fingers touching our shoulders. This, she says, is to force us to spot, which in turn prevents us from becoming dizzy, which in turn allows us to spin and spin and spin. To spot, you choose something on the wall ahead of you and hold your gaze there as your body turns, your head stationary, until the very last second when you whip your head around and snap back to that same spot, over and over. Unless you are me, in which case you reel around until the floor rises up to catch you.

I am awful at ballet, and yet I find myself leaving each class in high spirits, smiling even, ready to try again the next week. There are weeks the drive home from ballet is the only time I feel any joy at all.

* * *

BLACK SHEEP

Black Swan does a great job of keeping Lily elusive from the audience. We are so forced inside Nina's perspective—even experiencing Nina's delusions and fantasies with her, unable to discern what is real and what isn't—and Lily is always just outside our view. Her role in this film, and in Nina's psyche, is to always be just out of reach. This is the dance of the black swan: to be available, but unattainable.

We don't know why Lily is so free and confident. She's just a company dancer, and she doesn't even seem to take it that seriously. Nina, who is practiced and technically perfect, lives in constant fear and doubt, yet of all the characters in this film, it is she who should be confident.

But successful women in our culture don't get to be the objects of desire. More often, they're the hurdles for others to clear. Take Beth, who in this film is as accomplished

and flawless as Nina. But she's also ancient in ballet years. This, too, is a distinctly female problem. But why is this film, in which we occupy a woman's psyche, blind to this double standard? We know Beth is aware of what's happening, and Nina, for what it's worth, seems to agree it's time for Beth to step aside, that it's her time to rise. Yet Nina cannot ignore Lily, who is years behind her and, with her work ethic, will never reach Nina's level of success.

Lily is no threat to Nina on the stage—only in life, where she has learned to live, while Nina has learned to succeed.

* * *

2016

In the winter when I'm out at a bar with friends, my now-ex-boyfriend leaps out of nowhere, lands in front of me, and says, "Hi." Before I even know what my body is doing, I turn on my heels and scurry away, heart pounding. I'm not ready to see him. He has been engaged to a man for several months. The insult and injury are inseparable from one another. Rather than deal, I don't.

I walk into the room with the dance floor. The Boulet Brothers, dressed in their trademark twin drag looks, have just announced they need three volunteers. They clutch their mics with taloned fingers painted blood red. I don't know what they're looking for, but I raise my hand anyway. They choose two young men and then, straining through the crowd, they say, "You, the daddy with the mustache, come on up."

I climb up onto the stage, joining the others. Below me, the crowd is packed shoulder-to-shoulder with men: Men in tank tops. Men with glitter beards. Men holding beers. Men as far as the eye can see.

"Now what we're doing here is a dance contest," the taller Brother says.

"You have one minute to strip down to your underwear. Make it sexy. Make the crowd love you," the shorter Brother says.

"We'll choose the winner by audience vote."

"Gentlemen, are you ready?"

My hands start to sweat. The other guys are in their twenties. I see triceps popping on one of them, groomed eyebrows and a flat tummy under the tight shirt of the other. They nod at each other with respect, but I'm off to the side, maybe not even registering to them.

"DJ, music!"

The beat drops, hard and loud and demanding. I don't waste time. I tear my shirt right off. The crowd cheers for us, hollers. I hear an encouraging "Yes, daddy!" bubble up through the music. I unbuckle my belt, but I have never felt less sexy in my whole life. I unbutton my pants. I lower the zipper, grateful in the moment I had the foresight to wear cute underwear. I slide the denim down my thighs, rippling with the muscles ballet class has earned for me. I show them my ballet butt, bouncing my hips to the music. Eventually I forget the other men onstage. I forget about the men in the crowd. All I hear is the music, the breath flowing in and out of my body.

When the audience votes, cheering loudest for me, I win a crisp \$100 bill and what feels like some dignity.

* * *

2016

Amy returns to lead the class for summer. Now her style feels radically different after my year with Lucy. Amy's teaching asks us to focus our bodies on activating the right muscles. She wants precision in movements and positions. I stand in *sous-sus* on the balls of my feet, one heel crossed over the top of the other foot, trying to maintain balance as I raise my arms over my head in fifth position. She wants us to keep our legs "sewn shut" using the inside thigh muscles we mostly don't use for any other reason. "Charlie!" she calls across the room. "Keep your legs closed. I can see light through them."

But Amy's insistent methods come at precisely the right time. Now that I'm more or less familiar with the positions, the names of our movements, and a bit of the technique, I can address skill. And Amy's astute eye sees all. At one point, seeing my struggle to balance on my *demi-pointes*, she hunkers down to the floor and tilts my foot away from balancing on the four small toes to planting from the big toe and the second toe. The shift is fortifying. I stop struggling to stand straight. She gets up, looks me in the eye. "That's easier, right?"

In the next class, she corrects my *chaîné* turns. "You're keeping your arms too low," she says. "When your arms are low, you lean forward. When you lean forward, you don't make complete turns, and then you don't cross the room in a straight line." She demonstrates my movements through exaggeration. She stops, comes back, and pushes her shoulders back. "Keep your arms here." She makes a perfect oval and raises it just shy of perpendicular to her body. "Then when you turn through," she goes on, sweeping her right leg and her right arm open and slamming closed again by pulling her left leg and arm toward the right, "everything stays connected." I try the turns again, keeping my arms elevated. Now instead of nearly toppling over, I'm turning—maybe a little too fast. "Good!" Amy says as I move. When I walk back toward her, she looks me in the eye again. "That's easier, right?"

* * *

BLACK BOX

Natalie Portman took a year of intensive ballet prior to filming *Black Swan*. During production, she fell in love with her ballet teacher, Benjamin Millepied, who would go on to serve as the artistic advisor to the preprofessional Dance Academy where I worked.

There's a moment where all these lives and stories converge. A happier time. A few weeks after meeting him in the bar, I snag free tickets for my future ex-boyfriend and I to see Millepied dance in the galleries at MOCA. We stand in the crowd, watching Millepied leap and turn in an empty room, surrounded by art and two floodlights pushed into the corners.

I am falling in love, though I don't know it. Before the year is out, my life will be unrecognizable to me in this moment.

As Millepied dances, I look to my left. There, beside me, stands Natalie Portman, her eyes fixed on her husband, drinking in his performance with an eagerness that is equal parts love, pride, and learning.

I hold the hand of a man who will never look at me like that.

* * *

2017

When spring semester begins, ending our holiday hiatus, Lucy joins us again in the studio. She wears her all-black leotard, her red hair pulled back into a low ponytail. "I know some of you have been away from the barre for a few weeks, so we'll ease back into it," she says. We start with *tendus*, our backs to the barre, to warm up the feet and ankles, then move into *pliés* from each position, and then into *fondus*. It feels good to be back again.

Near the end of the barre exercises, Lucy waxes poetic for a moment. "Ballet is a process," she says. "We come into the studio each day and our goal is to be better than we were the last time." She nods to Kathy, our accompanist at the back of the room. "Just like with piano. There's a layering of experience. We just want to get better. We just want to be better."

We move to center floor and *chaîné* turns. You can see shoulders slump on everyone when Lucy announces it; no one likes these. But we do them. I do them. In fact, I do them well. My feet feel stable. I even spot successfully. We move into a combination that ends with a *jeté*, a full leap into the air with legs extended in either direction. Lucy instructs us to throw our arms over our head as we launch into the air to direct all the energy in our bodies straight up. The move takes power, confidence, and complete coordination of mind and body.

I complete the first steps across the floor correctly and then, my feet landing on the floor in perfect time, on the correct beat, I leap like taking a giant step. My legs extend. My arms rise over me with the authority of an exclamation. I feel so light. My body hovers over the ground. And then the floor and my feet meet again, softly, gently, and I'm done.

Lucy gives me loud praise, "Great work, Charlie." She claps enthusiastically. I blush. "This is going to be your year," she tells me. I believe her.

The Ambush

ACHIRO PATRICIA OLWOCH

NONFICTION • DREAMING OUT LOUD CONTRIBUTOR

I cannot help but smile at the shock on people's faces when I tell them the story about how my family and I escaped a rebel ambush. I am talking about a real ambush—the kind where people are abducted and/or killed. I realize it is no laughing matter, so maybe the smile on my face is my way to cope with the idea that I might have become some rebel's wife or even dead, and my story would have been told by someone else.

Let me start from the very beginning.

We had just lost my mom and gone home to Gulu to lay her to rest beside my dad. She had asked me not to take her to Gulu, but there was nothing I could do. When a woman dies, she is supposed to be buried on her husband's homeland, as long as he had married her or at least paid all her bride price. I told my mom's brother her dying wish, and I could see that my uncle would have been delighted to take her home to their land, but he respected tradition: "She has to be buried next to her husband."

We would bury her in Gulu.

In 2002, the war in Northern Uganda was still raging between the Lord's Resistance Army rebels and the government. The war had been going on for more than ten years and seemed only to be getting worse. More and more people were abducted, ambushed on the roads, and displaced.

My mom had a brother in the army who had organized protection for us both to and from the burial. The condition was that it was a one-day trip: go bury her and come back the same day.

Now, as anyone familiar with anything about African burial traditions knows, regardless the tribe, the family of the deceased cannot just go dump the body and come back the same day. They are required to stay a couple of days and perform some rituals before they return to their normal lives. Alas, this was not going to be the case.

There were no huts for miles around. There were no homesteads or villages. They had all been destroyed by the rebels over the years. The people of Northern Uganda were set up in camps in designated spaces guarded by the army. The few people who did attend the burial were close family members on my father's side who were escorted to and from the camp. The whole area had been overrun by bushes, but a spot had been cleared for a grave for my mother. The saddest part was that we would not be able to cement her grave—not

properly anyway. There was no time. We were literally just abandoning her in a place that she did not want to be in the first place.

The ambush happened when I went with my cousin to ease ourselves in the bush. We were surrounded by soldiers so we felt safe enough. But while I waited for my cousin, I saw movement in the trees about one hundred meters from us. Then I saw a couple of people in the bushes in dark green uniforms different from the ones the soldiers wore. I saw them and they saw me looking at them. Then as silently as they had appeared, they disappeared into the bushes.

A soldier looked in my direction and gestured for me to be quiet, but also to head back toward the rest of the group. I knew then that I had seen rebels. He had seen them too but did not want to start a shoot-out.

The rebels were outnumbered—at least I like to think they were. From the stories I had heard, they had come to rob “the people from Kampala.” They listened to the radio and knew when a procession would be coming up north for a burial so they could waylay the mourners. They assumed that people from Kampala had money they could steal to help their cause. This time though, they probably changed their minds because of all the military power around us.

I did not tell my cousin anything at that point. I did not know what to tell her. I think I was still dazed by the fact that I was burying my mother. I was burying my best friend.

After the burial, we immediately boarded buses and cars to head back to Kampala. This was the most abnormal thing about the funeral. We did not even get to share a meal afterward. There was no time. We all needed to leave the area.

It was now six p.m. This was the time that people stopped moving. Even the night commuters were already on their journey to town. No one wanted to be out and about when nightfall came. I could see that even the soldiers were getting fidgety. They too were afraid of the rebels. They might have had better guns, but they also lost their lives in numbers each time there was a shoot-out.

We had to travel in a convoy complete with an army truck at the front and one at the rear with more soldiers in the buses and cars that made up the caravan. The journey started with all the cars driving at breakneck speed until they got through the “danger zone.” The whole road was a danger zone, but there was a particular section that was very prone to ambushes. That was the real danger zone.

There was no life on this segment. The cars moved extra fast. Anyone who broke down or could not keep up was left behind—no matter who was in that vehicle. This was the sad truth: better a few people were sacrificed than the whole convoy.

When we got to the other side, when we were in a safe zone, we settled down to eat something. It was at this point that news started to go around that the last three cars had been hit by rebels. Everyone tried to remember who might have been in those last three cars, including the army truck.

While everyone was whispering and taking count of their parties, I decided to tell my cousin what I had seen when we went to pee. She almost dropped dead. She asked me why I did not say anything. I was twenty at this time; she was almost forty. Like any grown-up, she would have expected to be alerted when such an incident happened. Now she was shaking like a leaf. If I hadn't known what she'd just learned, I would have thought she was shivering with malaria. I did not know what to say or do. I just told her that the soldiers had also seen them and instructed me to be quiet.

She said that maybe if I had told someone, our convoy might have escaped the attack, but I was not going to let her lay that guilt on me. I said that if I had told anyone, there would have been chaos, and that would have indeed started a shoot-out.

She thought about what I said and sat still for a minute. She stopped shaking but was now looking around. She wanted to make sure that we had not lost any relatives in the ambush.

Word came to us that the last three cars were independent vehicles. They had not even been a part of the convoy that came for my mom's funeral. We just happened to be part of the convoy that was leaving the same time as they were. They had been put at the rear because our vehicles were priority.

My cousin sighed with relief. I did too. There was a belief that if there was an accident before, during, or even after a funeral, the person who had died was taking people with them to the land of the dead. Then more rituals would have to be done to appease the spirit of the dead person so that they would leave the living be.

My mother had been a very peaceful and peace-loving woman. I did not want to think that in death she was vindictive. May her soul rest in peace.

That is how we survived the ambush. The more I tell this story, the more I believe my mother's spirit was looking out for us that day. This is probably the reason I always have a smile on my face when I tell it.

Papi and I Have the Same Eyebrows

TANIA PEREZ OSUNA

NONFICTION

Step 1: Turn on the cold water and cup it in your hands.

It doesn't make sense. Someone saw your grandfather and father at a bank together and now they have questions. "What is your relationship to this man? Are you authorized to help him with banking?" Which translates to: We think you're taking advantage of this old man who is your father and shares no blood with you. Why would a white man choose a brown son?

Step 2: Splash the water across your face.

Now that Adult Protective Services has been called, it is time for the eyeliner, the heels, the dress. You iron your dress carefully, make sure to glide over the wrinkle that is your barrio accent. You hold your rough edges taut, pass over the seams again and again. You have Googled and researched and effectively found that you are up against another institution that is meant to protect but just might fail you.

Step 3: Take a towel and dry off your skin.

Now it is time to explain to this white woman caseworker what is and what is not. You've done this before. You know that in order to be effective you must walk a balance beam. You need to inspire respect with your appearance but present yourself in a way that does not threaten her ego in the process. You must work into conversations that you have just graduated from UCLA with a master's degree, a coded way of saying: You can trust me. I am telling the truth. Don't take my father to jail.

Step 4: Pick up your tweezers and grasp your stray eyebrow hair.

Beside you, your father is nervous. He is wearing khakis and a long-sleeve white shirt instead of paint-stained clothing. His usually messy hair is nicely combed—he is also performing. He is twisting a napkin over and over between his fingers, watching it slowly disintegrate. "Papi, you haven't done anything wrong," you whisper in an effort to convince you both. At times it feels like existing is the actual crime. Papi doesn't look up or respond; he just keeps twisting.

Step 5: Pull with force and at an angle until the hair comes out.

The caseworker shows up late in a wrinkled pink T-shirt and faded jeans. She doesn't need the armor like you do; she knows the power she yields. You explain to her how your grandfather and father met forty years ago. You show her pictures of your grandfather the day that your parents married, and pictures of every birthday since then. "He was his only wedding guest. They met here in Tucson. My father lived on the same street. My father invited him to eat at the restaurant where he worked as a cook, and they became each other's family." The story sounds unlikely even to you sometimes, but it is the truth. They were two unlikely planets that entered each other's orbits, braced for collision or to pass by unscathed, but neither happened. You explain to her that your grandfather has helped raise you, how he picked you up from the bus stop after school, how he played tag with you and your brother, how you were his second chance. How despite not having a document to prove it, you are his family.

Step 6: Examine your face in the mirror and see your ancestors.

You explain how he never married or had children, but that your father was his son. You think about him telling you, "A day before I met your daddy, I thought about not being alive anymore. Silly, huh? Then I would have never met you, the sweetest girl in the world." You think of this legality that defines what is family. How his distant nieces and nephews who never visit will always be more family than you, bound by bloodlines and last names. How when he passes, you will never be able to prove that you were his granddaughter. How "he taught me how to ride a bike" doesn't hold up in a courtroom. Papi has shrunk in size. At this moment, he is three feet tall. You have carefully gathered the loose inches of height he has lost and piece by piece added them to yourself.

Step 7: Repeat with the next stray hair.

You smile often even though your mind is racing. You have an answer for every question, and an insightful question for every lull. "I'm happy to answer any further questions. I have pictures if you would like to see them. Any documents that you need, I can get them for you. I just want to clear up this misunderstanding," you say with a gentle smile. She wants to speak to your grandfather. "Really it's none of your business, and certainly not the government's business how I live my life, who I call my family," he says sternly. You stare at him wide-eyed, wanting to yell. She laughs, thinks he's charming. He continues to answer her questions begrudgingly, the only member of our family who can show how angry he is. Anger does not suit brown skin in the presence of white folks. She asks to speak to him privately. "Anything I got to say to you I can say in front of them." He nods in your direction. You look down at him sitting in his wheelchair with pleading eyes. You telepathically say, "Please, Grandpa, don't make this harder." He looks at you and sighs, "Fine, shut the door."

Step 8: As you pull out hair, reinforce the arches that frame your face.

You sit on the patio while your father continues to twist the napkin again and again. Part of you wants to reach over and take the napkin from him because to white folks

it may make him look guilty. Part of you wants to bring him a hundred more. The white napkin frays more and more with every twist, launching pieces of itself into the air, contrasting against his skin the color of the desert. She comes back out after questioning your grandfather alone. “Mr. Fisher sure is funny.” Grandpa shoots her a sharp look. “He is also extremely well taken care of and happy with all of you.” All of you, as if you were his staff under audit.

Step 9: Remember a time when you hated your eyebrows. You don’t anymore.

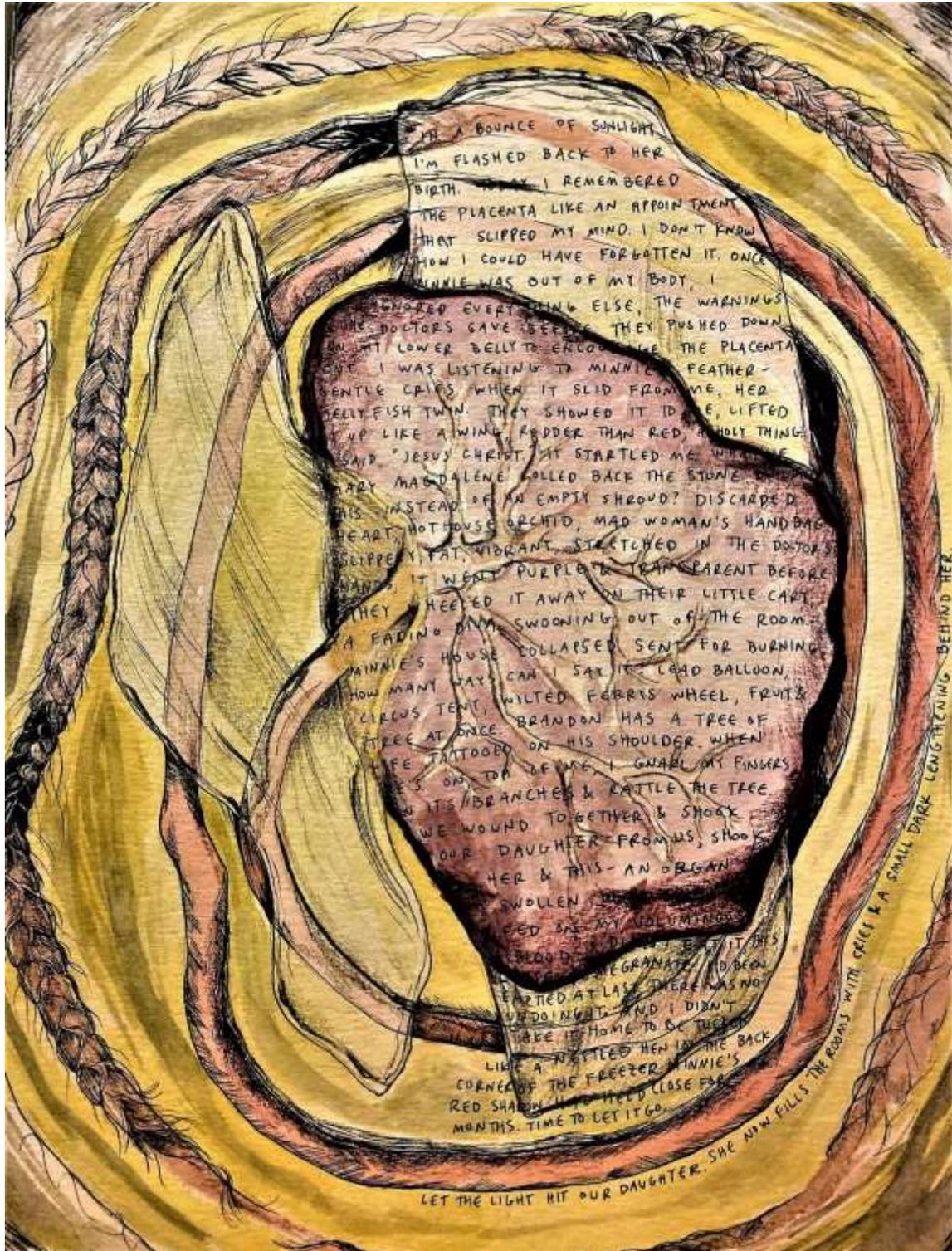
You thank her for her time, you give her a brief compliment on her work because you can’t find one for her outfit, and lead her out of the driveway. You slowly walk back to the porch where your father and grandfather are talking about lunch. You sit and breathe for what feels like the first time in weeks. “You will receive paperwork closing this case in a month.”

Step 10: Dust off any stray hairs and admire your work.

Selected Comics

MEG REYNOLDS

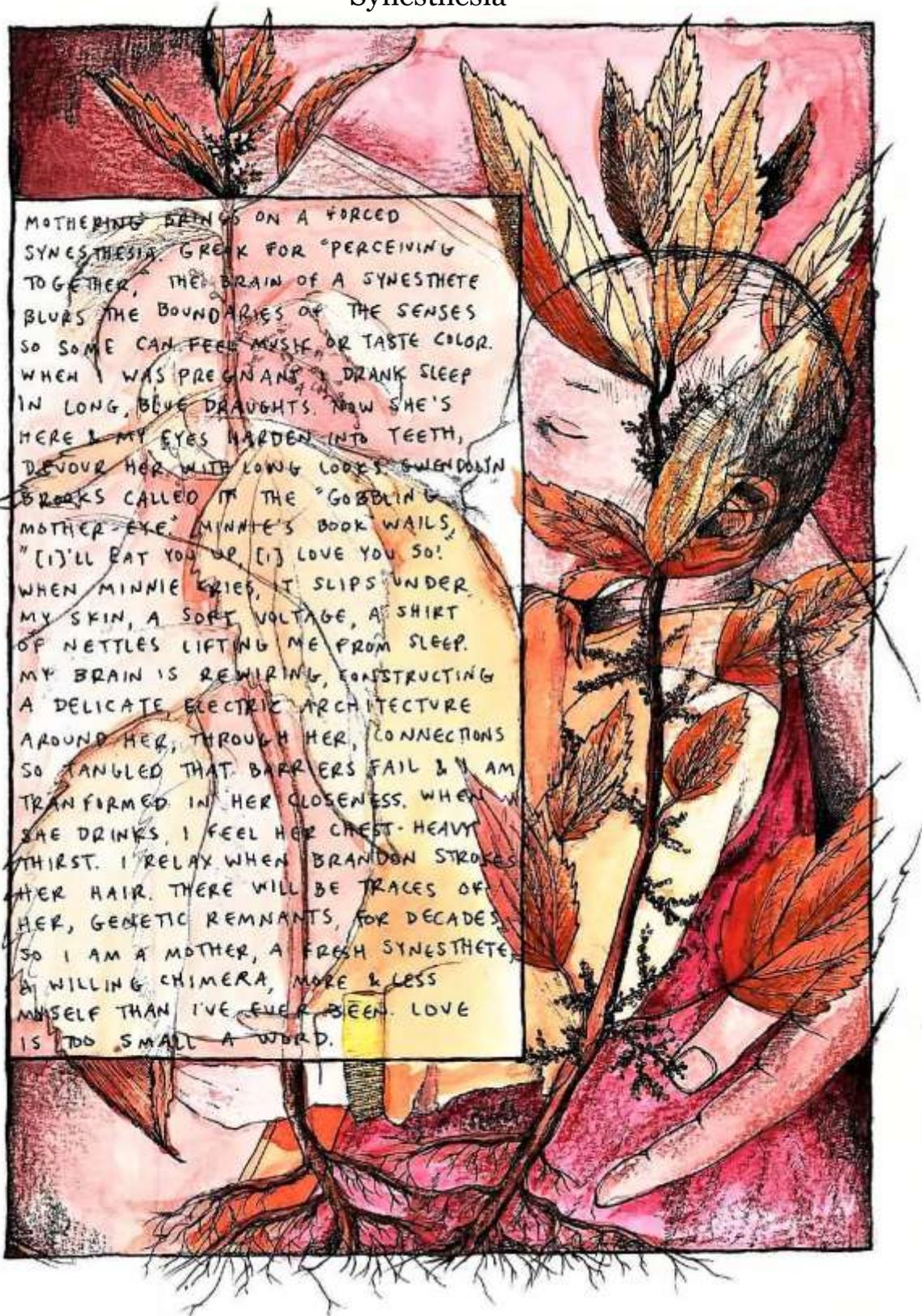
Placenta



Stay



Synesthesia



Touching Myself While Pregnant

MARIANNE CHAN

POETRY

He and I already did it once, earlier this afternoon,
a swift romp on the mattress that left me light-

headed muttering *I need to do more cardio* before
promptly dozing off. But after dinner, as he relaxes

for the night in front of his competitive cooking
show, I go to bed alone, stay awake stirring

my own cup. I assumed that in pregnancy I'd lose
some desire, but along with the body, Desire has grown

bulkier. I see Desire's fuller tits, expansive belly,
pursed and darkened nipples. Even with my child

inside, a constant audience, I feel through the folds
of my skin, remind myself that along with the fetus,

I am inside my body's deep grooves, continuing
to expand, develop. There are moments of regret

tonight as there have always been during my private
periods of sexual desire, bits of shame leftover

from darker times, a fear that my sex will result
in the destruction of my soul or myself. But I'm learning

to ignore these thoughts. I wish to grow inside me
a healthy brazen love for the self, for a pleasure

whose pulse I can hear through the doctor's
doppler—its beats are a whirring like the flapping

of giant wings—a life bereft of shame. I want
my watching child to see me, a body that loves

the body, that can hear its voice and listen.

If I keep saying flowers in enough poems, I wonder if they'll ever finally bloom

JASON B CRAWFORD

POETRY

My manager speaks to me about manifestations, about how to make money grow from beneath the wilted fingers of dead men. She talks prayer and candles and bay leaves while I'm here still daydreaming about the marigolds I tuck behind my bottom lip. The dirt

grows from beneath the wilted fingers of dead men. She talks of my gums that don't seed these flowers well, no matter how hard I try to marigold dry leaves I tuck behind my bottom lip. The dirt spit bouquet. Maybe it is time to acknowledge that

my gums don't seed these flowers well, no matter how hard I try. She is right about the water in the wording. I start to speak spit bouquets. Start to acknowledge the dahlias and of course they appear everywhere, like an incantation,

she is right about the water in the wording. I start to speak encyclopedias of blossoming faith rested upon the grease of my arms. Dahlias appearing everywhere, without explanation, I say daffodil and become a florist carving out my loves' shapes in an open field.

Encyclopedia of blossoming faith rested upon the grease of my yellow slick. I say iris and let its petals crawl down my throat; I say daffodil and become a florist carving out my loves' shapes in the bed of my soiled lungs; sludging my esophagus;

yellow-born silt. I say iris and let its petals crawl down my throat; expand a silvery purple leaflet on my tongue. I say this all to bed bois in my soiled lungs; sludge the equator of my esophagus; Black boi, Queer boi, Flower boi

expand a silvery purple leaflet on my tongue. I say

their names

and just like a handful of sunflower seeds

they sprout from my mouth

Ballet Is Never Enough

LYNDA V. E. CRAWFORD

POETRY

For Caribbean girls who want to point toes
tighten, lessen their backsides into the unnatural
stretch to strings of violins—having lost the kora

For Caribbean girls who strain to keep arms above heads
pirouetting away from ancestral earth skin

Be wise

Listen to your mothers who laugh with teeth and tongue
watch them grabble flared poplin dresses
above their knees; gyrate hips into a curved spoon-bowl
a cycle of earth life, circle of star life

Be carefree

Follow *Mudda Sally*, caress fertility ripples blue/green
clear from across the ocean
of your future, your past, your present musk life
look askance at small-bone-breaking dances
that bend and bleed phalanges

Be swift

Push past advents: Spain, Portugal, England, France
push past interims: kompa, kalenda, bele, kaiso
wuk down into deep dance—a dingolay
on a sea path to reclaim your original womb

Mudda Sally is a Barbadian fertility character traditionally performed by a male in mask but today performed by unmasked women with stuffed sacks to exaggerate bosoms and bottoms.

Unrequited

STEPHANIE KAYLOR

POETRY

Even the birds are quiet at this hour.
I gargle with saltwater to preserve my song.
There is a part of me that believes
in silence, in all its holiness—or tries to—
that does not argue with the part of me
that is wrong. The part of me that took our love
to the ocean more often than you know:
a red kite flying above the shore, oblivious
to the roaring, dependent upon the winds
of its origin. In my clutch, I watched it go.
I wouldn't let go.

tectonic

ALEJANDRA MEDINA

POETRY • WRITEGIRL CONTRIBUTOR

<p>I was born earthquake-like: tremors seized my mother who ruptured, a tsunami of tears dry in the throat, body in bloom & I emerging a genetic map of fault lines in constant motion, shifting between the unstable, ever on the brink of a self-destruction all too familiar to the mountains eroding on the coasts & a violence reserved for the crashing ocean</p>	<p>between tectonic plates, right at the wound that moves as chaotic as its people, as confused as those canyons & valleys split by the earth, spasmodic stretching of soil, of souls, here, we all carry a bit of the quake a cataclysmic urge to ruin all, even our own here we are metamorphic shifting with each tick of the clock, people with hollow hands that grip for ghosts, we're intertwined, lost within dreamscapes that leave us hungry & realities too close to those fissures along our hearts forged by a seismic urge to mimic our home, the hills & ravines now forced apart by time, evolution of soil alive, & the erratic tides that remind us we belong to the land</p>
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Metamorphosis

STELLA REED

POETRY

I could tell you there were days I faded
into the sheets, scent of my unwashed hair
exuding from every stuffed animal manning
the perimeter of the bed, their paws remaining
behind the lines I'd drawn with chalk and string.
I kept an arsenal of pop beads
beneath my pillow near a wishing stone
that didn't work and a few uncollected teeth.

I can tell you how the sun pearled
through the window and found me waiting,
how the light shone on the rubber
toes of my Keds and lit them with escape.
Out the window I flew to the wild birds.
I grew and grew and changed form. I became
a *musette* replete with accordion
and the bright liquid of trees.
I met a man in a bar who said
You should show off your shape more often.
So I stuck it in a department store window
naked, nipple-less, hairless. The sun lit
my bald head like a moon jelly.

It's possible, right, to change again?
I mean, look at the frog. It starts out spermish
in water, grows feet and a tail. Loses the tail,
hops onto dry land, grows eyes and a tongue.
So it was possible for me, from my storefront window,
to become sun-faded cloth, a white flag
that flapped soundlessly against the glass.
Surrendered, I lost my hands at the table
eyes in the palms. Lost the taste of irony
on the spoon near the plate of regret.

What next?

They say to tame a wild bird do not swallow,
lest it believe you want to devour it.

If you're still listening, I want to hear that sound,
see your throat rise and drop.

Go on, it's automatic. Like when your ears fill
while descending in a plane. Like you're thirsty
beyond belief and all that's left is your own fluid body.

Stasha

STELLA REED

POETRY

Stasha, our little fox tails twitched beneath blankets. Mine was auburn ringed in black. Yours red, with a tip of white. We were born for these things: yellow cherries, a melon-backed mandolin, eggs of the Clarión wren. We touched tongues and laughed hysterically. In winter our scissors whispered through paper snowflakes. In summer we dug a grave for the blind pelican, littered the sand covering its body with tiny white flowers, confused a funeral for a wedding, flower girls to the bride of death.

The beak of our mother's nose poked through the keyhole of her round glasses. She taught us skylarks sing only while in flight. When they rest they are quiet. An angel with cigarette in hand, she traced patterns of light from the dark doorway of our bedroom. Through the thin wall we heard her count our father's scars, the bumps on his body where shrapnel entered. Like a fish, he slept with eyes open, dreamt of things on fire, babies, bunkers, sand. The whole world exploding into blood and coins, heart tattooing his chest black and blue. He was a trip wire, a live wire, a leaky valve, skip in the record, piston, crank. Toadstool with gunpowder spores.

Before we migrated, our feathers dropped, lessening the burden of flight. Mother pocketed them in her apron, sewed them shut with the strings of her violin. Father. Feather. So much weight in one vowel. We wrapped our fox tails in blouses stained with summer salt. We were born for goodbyes.

Not Made to Last

REBEKAH SCOTLAND

VISUAL ART



Three Generations, 2021. Collage with original photos printed on seed paper, 9 x 12 inches



Two Horizons, 2021. Collage with original photos printed on seed paper, 9 x 12 inches



Parched Little Town, 2021. Collage with newspaper printed on seed paper, 9 x 12 inches

Words to That Effect

F.J. HARTLAND

STAGEPLAY

CHARACTERS: LAVINIA: a Southern socialite from a previous generation.

NEELEY: 30s. LAVINIA's son. A drag performer.

CORNELIUS: 9 or 10. NEELEY as a child, played by the same actor as NEELEY.

SETTING: NEELEY's dressing table.

NOTE: NEELEY and CORNELIUS are played by the same actor. When the actor faces the mirror, he is NEELEY and addresses his mother's reflection. When he is his young self, CORNELIUS, he turns and faces his mother directly.

* * *

AT RISE: NEELEY, a drag performer, is at a dressing table. He is adding some finishing makeup touches. His fancy cocktail dress is unzipped and off his shoulders. Standing behind him is LAVINIA, his mother, a Southern socialite from a past generation. She is dressed to the nines. In one hand she has a cocktail. In the other, perhaps, a lit cigarette. She watches him for a moment, then—

LAVINIA

(watching NEELEY finishing makeup)

You do that perfectly. I'm impressed.

NEELEY

I had the best teacher.

LAVINIA

I will agree with you. To quote Mr. Oscar Wilde, "Arguments are extremely vulgar." Or words to that effect.

NEELEY

You and Daddy argued all the time.

LAVINIA

That's because he was a vulgar man.

NEELEY

Zip me up?

LAVINIA

Only fair after all the years you did the same for me.

LAVINIA zips up NEELEY's dress.

NEELEY

When all the other boys were playing football, I was watching you put on your makeup.

LAVINIA

Not the football again ...

NEELEY turns and transforms into the boy CORNELIUS.

CORNELIUS

But, Mama, why can't I play football?

LAVINIA

Football? And destroy that beautiful face? In the words of Mr. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Beauty is God's handwriting." Or words to that effect.

CORNELIUS

Boys aren't supposed to be beautiful.

LAVINIA

Of course they can!

CORNELIUS

But I want to play football like all the other boys.

LAVINIA

Cornelius, football is a game for brutes.

CORNELIUS

Daddy wants me to play football.

LAVINIA

That's because your father is a brute.

CORNELIUS transitions back to NEELEY.

NEELEY

Then why did you marry him?

LAVINIA

In the words of Mr. Robert Frost, "Love is an irresistible desire to be irresistibly desired." Or words to that effect. I was young ... and foolish. I didn't realize he was a brute until it was too late. There were so many things I didn't realize at the time.

NEELEY

Like what?

LAVINIA

You've heard of a "marriage of convenience"? I had a "marriage of commerce."

NEELEY

What?

LAVINIA

His father owned a lumber yard. My father owned thousands of acres of trees.

NEELEY

You never loved him?

LAVINIA

At first I did. He was so handsome in his dress uniform, so sweet and such a gentleman. Too late I saw his true nature.

NEELEY

He beat you, didn't he?

A pause.

LAVINIA

Yes. I was forever at old Doc Willard's office. Black eyes, wrenched shoulder, broken ribs. I always made up some story. Said I fell or ran into a doorjamb.

NEELEY

What did Doc Willard say?

LAVINIA

He said I must be the clumsiest girl in the whole county and that I should be more careful.

NEELEY becomes CORNELIUS, who takes his mother's hand.

CORNELIUS

Why do you paint your nails, Mama?

LAVINIA

To make my hands pretty.

CORNELIUS

Make my hands pretty, too!

LAVINIA

All right. But be sure to take the polish off before your father gets home.

CORNELIUS

Why?

LAVINIA

I don't think he'd understand. Now pick a color.

CORNELIUS

Red. Like yours, Mama.

LAVINIA

Then red it is!

CORNELIUS

I love you, Mama.

LAVINIA

I will always love you, baby.

CORNELIUS transforms into NEELEY.

NEELEY

He beat me too.

LAVINIA

Only once.

NEELEY

It was my fault. I forgot to remove the nail polish.

LAVINIA

Don't say that. It was not your fault. And I made damn sure it was the last time he laid a hand on you. My marriage was over, but you were safe.

NEELEY

Thank you.

LAVINIA

Now put on your perfume—the way I taught you. The way French women do. Two dabs behind the ears.

NEELEY does so.

NEELEY

Two dabs on the wrist.

LAVINIA

Two dabs behind the knees.

NEELEY becomes CORNELIUS.

CORNELIUS

Mama, why do French women put perfume behind their knees?

LAVINIA

In Paris there are outdoor cafes everywhere. As a lady passes, she wants the men to catch a whiff of her fragrance. But remember: only just a dab. And never Chanel #5.

CORNELIUS

But the TV says, "Everyone woman alive wants Chanel #5."

LAVINIA

Not this woman. Your Aunt Honey used to wallow in the stuff. She thought it took the place of regular bathing. You can put perfume on a pig, but—

CORNELIUS

—it's still a pig!

LAVINIA

And, honey, lipstick don't help either!

CORNELIUS becomes NEELEY.

NEELEY

Now to gild the lily.

LAVINIA

My favorite part! I don't understand these people who say "Less is more." Less is less and—

NEELEY

—more is better.

NEELEY holds up a Chinese takeout box.

LAVINIA

You remembered.

NEELEY turns and transforms into CORNELIUS.

CORNELIUS

(Handing LAVINIA the box)

Mama, why do you keep your good jewelry in a takeout box? Daddy says you have a perfectly good jewelry box.

LAVINIA

A jewelry box is fine for costume junk. If a burglar breaks in, what's he going to take first?

CORNELIUS

A jewelry box.

LAVINIA

Right! But no burglar is going to waste time opening takeout boxes of what could be moldy moo goo gai pan!

From the box LAVINIA removes an ornate necklace and matching earrings.

CORNELIUS

So beautiful!

LAVINIA

They belonged to my mother. When you get married, I'll give them to your wife.

CORNELIUS

What if I don't get married?

LAVINIA

Don't be silly! What woman wouldn't want my beautiful boy?

CORNELIUS

I mean ... well ... what if it's a man I marry?

LAVINIA

Then I will give the necklace to you. But let me give you some advice ...

CORNELIUS

Yes?

LAVINIA

Marry a man with a full bottom lip. It is my experience that men with full bottom lips make the best kissers.

CORNELIUS transforms into NEELEY.

NEELEY

Do you want to do the honors?

LAVINIA places the necklace on NEELEY, who then adds the earrings.

LAVINIA

You are a beautiful woman.

NEELEY

But I am not beautiful. And I am not a woman. You are a beautiful woman. I am just an illusion.

LAVINIA

All beautiful women are an illusion. To quote Mr. John Keats, "What the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth." Or words to that effect.

NEELEY

Truth? Then tell me the truth. Why did you leave me?

LAVINIA

Remember when I told you the meaning of the word "grace"?

(NEELEY transforms into CORNELIUS.)

Grace means knowing when to leave the party.

CORNELIUS

What does that mean, Mama?

LAVINIA

Parties are so much fun. But you want to leave before they turn off the music and turn up the lights. Then you see it's all cheap party decorations, lipstick-smearred cocktail glasses, and dirty ashtrays.

CORNELIUS

Yuck!

LAVINIA

That's right. Yuck.

CORNELIUS transforms into NEELEY.

NEELEY

So you left me because it was "time to leave the party"?

LAVINIA

You were grown and off to college. I was a lonely divorced ex-debutant whose beauty was rapidly failing.

NEELEY

So you killed yourself out of vanity?

LAVINIA

In a manner of speaking. It was ... cancer.

NEELEY

You had cancer? I didn't know ...

LAVINIA

No one did—oh, except me and old Doc Willard. Cancer. I didn't want to be around when that party ended, so I made ... a graceful exit.

NEELEY

The day after your funeral, I needed to feel your presence so badly. I went into your room and sat at your dressing table. Before I knew it, I was painting my nails with your polish, putting your rouge on my face, applying your mascara. And when I looked up, there in the mirror was a new person who was the best of me and the best of you.

LAVINIA

But you violated the cardinal rule of drag names: The name of your first pet—

NEELEY

—with the name of the first street you lived on. But I didn't think "Fido State Route Three" was going to work, so I named her "Neeley O'Tara" for—

LAVINIA

From my two favorite novels. "Tara" was Scarlett's home in *Gone with the Wind* and—

NEELEY

"Neeley" from *Valley of the Dolls*.

LAVINIA

In the South, *Gone with the Wind* was required reading—like the Bible. But my mother said that *Valley of the Dolls* was filth that no proper lady would be caught dead reading.

NEELEY

I'll bet you ran right out and got a copy.

LAVINIA

You know me so well.

(They laugh, then LAVINIA places her hands on NEELEY's shoulders and looks at the reflection of the two of them in the mirror.)

Look at us. Why, we could pass for sisters!

NEELEY

Beautiful sisters.

LAVINIA

Like the Gabors.

NEELEY

Who?

LAVINIA

Never mind. Don't you see? I may be gone, but I am always with you. Every time you pick up a lipstick or powder your nose or the emcee says, "Now ladies and gentlemen, here she is ... Miss Neeley O'Tara," I am with you. Always. You don't take a breath that I'm not right there beside you.

NEELEY

Thank you, Mama.

LAVINIA

Now, come on.

(Music is heard from offstage. LAVINIA with a flourish ...)

It's time for us to go on.

NEELEY

Us?

LAVINIA

Didn't I just tell you I am always with you?

NEELEY

But how?

LAVINIA

To quote Mr. Sammy Davis Jr., "Part of show business is magic. You don't know how it happens."

NEELEY / LAVINIA

(Together)

Or words to that effect.

They laugh. NEELEY rises, turns, and looks at LAVINIA face-to-face for the first time in the play. They embrace, then exit hand-in-hand as the offstage music swells and the lights fade to black.

BLACKOUT.

END OF PLAY.

The Vault

UMA INCROCCI

STAGEPLAY

CHARACTERS: MOLY 20s; any ethnicity.

LIV 20s; any ethnicity.

CHARACTERS: An apartment.

* * *

An apartment. An argument in progress.

Seeds. MOLLY

Yes. LIV

Seeds. MOLLY

Yes. LIV

I'm losing you to seeds. MOLLY

Not losing— LIV

In Norway. MOLLY

Yes. Svalbard. LIV

MOLLY

I don't know where that is.

LIV

North. Way north. It's, uh ... the farthest north you can travel on a commercial flight.

MOLLY

Sounds convenient.

LIV

That's part of why they picked it.

MOLLY

And it's a seed *bank*?

LIV

A vault, technically.

MOLLY

(still confused)

Okay ... More specificity in language please.

LIV

I'm sorry?

MOLLY

It's something my mom used to say when she didn't understand what the hell I was talking about.

LIV

It's a vault. To preserve the world's agricultural seeds. It's like a big backup. Like Noah's Ark. But for plants.

MOLLY

So you're talking ... doomsday stuff?

LIV

Well, it's built into the permafrost, so it can stay cold no matter what.
It's high up enough that it won't be affected by rising sea water.
It's remote enough that it should be out of any war zone.
If anything happens, anywhere—well, humans need to grow food to live.

MOLLY

So: super far, super cold, super noble—this is one fucked-up way to break your girlfriend's heart.

A beat as LIV takes this in.

LIV

... Now you'll say girlfriend?

MOLLY

Yeah. I will.

LIV

But ... like two weeks ago ... you said, "who needs labels?"

MOLLY

I was trying to be cool! Everybody told me to play it cool. I usually don't. But you know what else is cool ... and not like rad cool, but fucking cold as ice? An underground vault in the goddamn Arctic circle!

LIV

You want to be my girlfriend?

MOLLY

Of course I do. Can't you tell by how mad I am about this?

LIV

You are pretty mad.

MOLLY

Exactly! I did want to be your girlfriend. That's all I wanted.

LIV

Me too.

MOLLY

But now I don't.

LIV

What? Why?

MOLLY

Because of seeds! You're choosing seeds over me!

That's not fair.

LIV

I know I should breathe and smile and say, "Congratulations on getting your dream job,"
But—this is a lot. This is like sci-fi shit.

MOLLY

It's just a year.

LIV

A year??!!

MOLLY

You can come with me.

LIV

I have eight shows a week.

MOLLY

I know.

LIV

I can't leave. I worked too hard to get this show.

MOLLY

I know. But I want you to know: you're invited.

LIV

I'm not coming.

MOLLY

I know.

LIV

A long beat.

Dammit. I hate this!
Haven't I given up enough? I do all the things. I carry a metal straw in my purse! I buy carbon offsets! I worry! I protest! I vote! And I have to give you up? Because we're so sure we've fucked up the planet that we need something as insane as a giant freezer to make sure we don't all starve to death?

MOLLY

LIV
You don't have to give me up.

MOLLY
I do.

LIV
There's Facetime.

MOLLY
Ugh. Long distance—it's the worst. I swore I would never do that again.

LIV
We could try.

MOLLY
Why am I not dating an Instagram model? Why do you have to be so smart, and amazing, and altruistic—

LIV
I'm not amazing. I'm boring. I'm willing to supervise a vault in the side of a glacier. For science.

MOLLY
Why do you even like me? You're like Greta, saving the world, and I'm—

LIV
Of course I like you!

MOLLY
Why?

LIV
First of all: you're magic.

MOLLY
What?

LIV
My job: it's facts, data. You? They say: go into that room and pretend to be another person and make me believe that person and their story—and you do. You can do that. I'm in awe of that. Sure, we need seeds—but we also need stories. Plus you're pretty hot when you're angry. So yeah: I like you.

MOLLY

I really like you too.

LIV

Look, I actually thought about turning down the job.

MOLLY

You did?

LIV

I mean, I finally meet someone awesome and—I don't want to lose you. But in the end—

MOLLY

I get it. You should go. I can't stand in the way of that. You really think this could happen though? That one day some lone survivor would have to trek to Norway for seeds to save the human race?

LIV

Let's hope it doesn't come to that.

MOLLY

But you honestly think that day might come?

LIV

There's no way to know. But for some reason, the idea of the vault, and being a part of that—it gives me comfort.

MOLLY

Now that I think about it, you do always have an alarming amount of canned food in your pantry.

LIV

I've always liked a backup.

A long beat.

LIV

I know you don't want to do long distance. But I hope you'll think about it. I'm not leaving for a few more weeks but ... I made you this.

She gives MOLLY a box. A beat as MOLLY opens it, looks in: she isn't sure what's in there.

LIV

It's our own seed vault.

MOLLY

What?

LIV

A seed vault. For us. Put it in your freezer. It's—well ... On our first date we went to the botanical garden to see the cherry blossoms, and then to that old-school diner for cherry pie—so there's a cherry pit in there.

You taught me how to make your mom's zucchini bread—so there's a zucchini seed.

And pumpkin seeds—I know how much you love Halloween.

And a coffee bean from the Treehouse Café.

And potato, kale, and cauliflower seeds. And some instructions. Just in case.

MOLLY

In case of what?

LIV

If the world goes cuckoo, you won't starve.

MOLLY can't help but smile.

MOLLY

That is one heck of a love language.

So we're just gonna put this—us—on ice?

LIV

If you want to.

MOLLY

This sucks.

LIV

I know.

But maybe ... maybe—on the other side of this—we can plant these seeds together. And start over?

MOLLY takes her in. A long beat as she decides:

MOLLY

I'd like that.

END OF PLAY.

Selected Photographs

ROGER CAMP

PHOTOGRAPHS



Irish Cottage at Night, 1998. Archival pigment print, 16 x 20 inches



Last House at Land's End, 2010. Archival pigment print, 16 x 20 inches

MaryAnne Pataki, of Allegheny County, Fits Inside a Box Now

ALEC SILBERBLATT

STAGEPLAY

LIGHTS UP on LOU and MARYANNE's house.

DEBRA stands in the dining room next to the dining-room table.

The table has some clutter on it (papers, crumb-filled plates, a pizza box), but sitting in the middle of the table is a small white cardboard box, a printed name on the side.

DEBRA stares at this box.

LOU calls from offstage:

LOU

(from off)

Ran out of cream—you want milk?

DEBRA

Huh?

LOU

(from off)

I'm out of cream, but I got milk.

DEBRA

You know, it's fine, Lou. Let's just go.

LOU

(from off)

It's fresh, Deb. Just brewed it. I'm having a cup. You want milk?

DEBRA

Lou, I'm not in the mood for this, honestly. Let's just go down to the river, okay?

Beat.

LOU

(from off)

Okay.

DEBRA looks around, standing awkwardly until LOU enters with two mugs of coffee, one of which he hands DEBRA.

LOU

There you go—gave you some milk.

DEBRA

What'd I say?

LOU

You can sit if you want.

He sits.

DEBRA

Lou.

LOU

What're you gonna do, Deb? Knock my teeth out like that woman in the parking lot?

DEBRA

I knocked her crown out, not her teeth.

LOU

Didn't know there was a difference—can you handle another assault charge on your record?

DEBRA

What is this?

LOU

When you don't get your way, you lash out.

DEBRA

No, what is this? Sitting. Coffee.

LOU

Just just just—can you sit and enjoy the ... you're so eager to get rid of her.

I'm not ...

Beat.

DEBRA
(*pointing to the box*)
That's her, huh?

LOU
Yeah. Sidddown.

DEBRA
Amazing she fits in there.

LOU
She wasn't *that* big, Deb, c'mon.

DEBRA
Not saying it like that, Lou ...

LOU
She was a big woman, but not *that* big. Not big enough to warrant making fun of her like that.

DEBRA
Not making fun of her, Lou, c'mon, jeez—what do you think I am? Amazing anyone fits in a box like that, that's how I'm saying it. I can't fit into a box like that, can I?

LOU
Well, when you ...

DEBRA
Must, right?

LOU
It's 'cause of the water.

DEBRA
Huh?

LOU
Water. We're mostly water. If that's gone then ... not much left.

DEBRA

But there's bones and stuff.

LOU

Sure, but it's *mostly* water, all that stuff, mostly water. The water goes away, you can fit in a thing like that.

DEBRA

Hard to believe ...

LOU

Just water, Deb.

DEBRA

(looking into her coffee mug)

Maybe, yeah—this is hot.

LOU

Don't believe me then.

DEBRA

I'm just thinking about the bones and stuff.

LOU

That's what it is, water, but if you don't wanna listen to me—don't wanna believe me, then I can't help ya.

DEBRA

Alright, Lou, jeez. Water, we're water.

LOU

Are you gonna sit down or what?

DEBRA

Are we gonna go ... ?

LOU

You don't wanna enjoy your coffee? It's fresh.

She sits.

DEBRA

Mrs. Popodop-whatever-her-name-is, my neighbor—know who I'm talking about?

DEBRA

Uh-huh.

LOU

And—last night—I was sitting on the couch last night. Had my decaf. Drinking it on the couch watching the news like any other night, and I couldn't fall asleep 'cause I haven't been sleeping since MaryAnne went to the hospital. Need her next to me to fall asleep. Been that way since ... before we were married, you know, long time been like that. So I'm up watching infomercials and—it's late now—and I hear this knock on the door. Who's knocking on the door that late, you know? Answer the door ... thinking—thinking it's gonna be them fucking kids from around the corner or something—ding-dong ditch or something. But it wasn't. It was MaryAnne standing there. Little bit of light around her, smiling like she did when she was being goofy. Swear to God. And she came in and sat with me and told me she didn't wanna go in the river. Wanted to stay here with me 'cause that's how she was able to come see me n'at—knock on the door and all that. 'Cause her ashes were in the house. If they weren't, she wouldn't be able to come see me. And she sat there with me until I fell asleep on the couch. Can't fall asleep without her. Woke up and she wasn't there, but I remember everything. Wasn't like I blacked out and it was a dream or something. I don't remember my dreams, Deb, so don't even start on saying it was a dream. I wouldn't remember it if it was a dream. It really happened. She doesn't wanna go in the river, you understand? So, like ... yeah, she's gonna stay here with me.

Beat.

DEBRA

Um, well ... uh ...

LOU

I was thinking purple.

DEBRA

What?

LOU

A purple urn. She likes purple.

DEBRA

Okay, Lou, but ... she said she wanted to be put in the river.

LOU

Did you not hear what I just said?

DEBRA

No, I heard ya, Lou, but like—

LOU

Why you acting like you didn't hear what I said then?

DEBRA

Well, 'cause, I dunno. I don't know that *that* happened, Lou. That all *that* happened.

Beat.

LOU

Saying it was a dream?

DEBRA

Well, I'm saying that—what am I saying? I'm saying I don't believe in ghosts, Lou. So, I'm having trouble ... so, like, I have to go on what her will says 'cause I don't believe in ghosts.

LOU

You think I'm crazy or something?

DEBRA

I think you're sad, Lou. I think you're sad and you haven't been sleeping—you said you haven't been sleeping. Grief does things to people, Lou. I think you're sad and you don't want to let her go. I'm still—you know, I don't wanna say goodbye. I miss her so much already, it's only been what? A few days? And it's not like I saw her every day of the week or anything. But I miss her. I miss my sister. I miss her being here in the world. But, you know what? We have to let her go. You have to let her go, Lou. She's gone and we have to let her go. And this thing of spreading her ashes in the river is a way of doing that. And I think that's why she wanted it. That, and she loved the river down there—going out on the river. We'd go out there with Dad every summer and she loved it. Great memories out there. You know that. You know I'm right.

Beat.

LOU

When I was about twelve, in the summer, my best friend Tommy O'Connell drowned in the swimming pool they got just up the hill there. He and his brother Stan snuck in after hours, climbed the fence, and were horsing around the way kids do, and Tommy dove in, hit his head on the bottom, and drowned while Stan was off pissing in the deep end. That's why they got barbed wire on top of the fence up there now making it look like a prison yard up there. My parents didn't want me going to the funeral 'cause it was open casket and they thought it would traumatize me seeing my best friend dead and all made up the way they do for viewings. I sat in my room crying for three days straight cause Tommy was my best friend, you know? And after those three days, I rode my bike up to the cemetery off Brinton where Tommy was laid to rest next to his grandma and grampa. And I stood at his grave looking at it and reading the headstone over and over: "Thomas Bartholomew

O'Connell, 1956–1968, 'May Flights of Angels Sing Thee to Thy Rest.'" And I'm standing there, memorizing the inscription, and I look up at one point to wipe the tears from my eyes, and standing there in front of me was my friend Tommy dressed up in the suit his mother got him for going to church. And there was a little light around him, and his face looked like he'd been to the beauty parlor. And he's standing there, clear as day, and he tells me that I gotta go talk to his brother Stan. I was angry as hell at Stan 'cause I blamed him for his little brother's death, but the way Tommy told it, Stan blamed himself as well. And Tommy told me that I had to forgive Stan, and tell him that it wasn't his fault. And I did. I went right then, on my bike. Went to the O'Connell house and forced my way up to see Stan. He was in his room crying like I had been. And when I forgave him and told him it wasn't his fault, he let loose a wail I've never heard before. It was what he needed to hear. And I never woulda done it had Tommy not told me to.

(beat)

So, when you say you don't believe in ghosts n'at, and when you talk about death, about letting go of MaryAnne—talking to me like I don't know about it. Like I don't know what death is. What death does. I know what death does. I know about letting go. And I know about listening to the dead.

(beat)

She don't want her ashes going in the river. I'm getting her a purple urn and she'll be sitting over there on the mantle for you to visit anytime you'd like.

Silence.

DEBRA

She's my sister, Lou.

LOU

She's my wife.

Silence.

DEBRA

Okay, Lou. Okay.

LOU

So, let's sit here, enjoy the coffee, and talk about our fond memories of—

SUDDENLY ...

DEBRA whips her mug forward and splashes its hot contents into LOU's face.

LOU shrieks in surprise and pain, his hands going to protect his eyes.

DEBRA grabs the cardboard box filled with MARYANNE and makes for the door ...

LOU (CONT'D)

MaryAnne!

LOU scrambles to his feet to follow her, while DEBRA bolts out the door and into the sunlight.

LOU follows her outside and we hear his shouts:

LOU (CONT'D)

(from off)

STOP! DEB, BRING HER BACK! BRING HER BACK! BRING MY MARYANNE BACK!

His voice fades as he chases after DEBRA.

BLACKOUT.

END OF PLAY.

What Are You Looking For?

ZACHARY GUERRA

EXPERIMENTAL

CONTENT WARNING: SUICIDE, DRUG ABUSE, DEPRESSION

Woodside Newspaper

Woodside, MI Obituaries May 2019

Maxwell Barjas Woodside, MI

Maxwell Barjas Woodside, MI Obituaries 5/12/19

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Instagram.com

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Conversation barjas.max96 October 5th 2018

“hey”

“whatsup dude been a while”

“how is school”

“good! Miss u guys back home”

Seen

Clear search

What happens to people when they die?

Clear search

Opioid epidemic death toll

Opioid epidemic michigan 2019

overdose deaths 2019

Suicide and drug addiction statistics

Cope with friend dying?

Friend committed suicide what do I do?

askreddit.com/offmychest/my_friend_killed_himself_we_lost_contact_what_do_I_do?

What do I do friend is dead?

What do I do friend killed self?

What do I do?

Can you stop people from killing themselves?

What do I do?

Could we have stopped it?

Why did we stop talking?

Why didn't I reach out?

What do I do?

Was it my fault?

What do I do?

	GO!
--	-----

Author's note: This piece is based on true events. Names, locations, and dates have been changed to maintain the privacy of the affected parties.

Edible Letters

KATHRYN STAM

EXPERIMENTAL



Edible Letters: Use for Negation of Negative Thoughts Caused by Vow Infringement, Infectious Disease, and All Manner of Thievery

Your wisdom will blaze like fire!

Abstract — Based on translated 8-11 C. texts and informal participant-observation of contemporary cultural practices from Tibet, this article introduces the concept of edible letters and reviews their characteristics. The author shares details of her foray into tantric methods and methodologies, including the preparation and implementation of a happiness ritual outside of the typical field setting (such as Tibet and Nepal). Triangulation was accomplished through a balance of analysis of written documents, investigation of magical myths, and visualization related to letter swallowing.

Follow-up interviews were conducted with cultural experts (namely, shamans). The results of the study revealed that edible letters, although distasteful, are highly likely to have efficacy in the resolution of negative psychological states such as anguish and anxiety. In addition, it was found that the edible letter protocol described in this paper can be used for protecting oneself

and all sentient beings from evil demons, knife wounds, drought, contagious fevers, and jealousy. They are also effective for winning arguments and finding peace in otherwise hollow or emotionally fraught moments of contemporary life.

Keywords — edible letters, gossip, transgressions, mind treasure, magic ink

1. Introduction

I ask you to understand why I write ceaselessly about the same few things, windswept Tibetan steppes I've never seen, and magic that I claim not to believe.

The term “edible letters” (also called “elixirs of wisdom”) refers to tantric letters written in herbal and magic ink, made of various local and extremely local (i.e., internal) ingredients. The amorphous figures start

out as fluid, devoid of meaning, but then turn into Tibetan letters such as *Ah, Bam, Dhi, Hum, Kam, Ram, Tam, Yam*. The ancient priests taught village folk how to create the magic ink and empower the alphabet with their minds.

What is magical about the letters (yig) is the letters! (Garrett, 2009)

2. Background

Edible letters are good for the following scenarios:

When to the vows, infringement has befallen.

When to the woman, infertility has befallen.

When to the argument, loss has befallen.

When to a behind, a dog bite has befallen. (Sarkozi, 1999)

Eat [the edible letters] when your life is in danger.

Eat [them] when your head is dizzy.

Eat [them] when you have bad dreams.

Eat [them] when the earth quakes.

Eat [them] when gossip surrounds you.

Eat [them] in case of yellow fever.

Eat [them] to catch government officials and other robbers in their tracks! (Garrett, 2009)

3. Methods

I (the author) learn about the edible letters through extensive use of Interlibrary Loan. I read letters as pixels and gather timeworn poetry about demon-slaying like one might gather mustard flowers—seeing the blooms exploding toward the sun, knowing each one is unique, each one powerful and resonant. The ancient texts that were

buried and later unearthed dance and sing their poetry. I print copies at the print shop and take the articles to bed with me, circling symbols and otherworldly instructions for inner peace.

I stumble across the edible letters in other ways too, once I am attuned to them. While visiting Nepal, my homestay brother Uttamdai wears a tantric amulet around his neck for protection, and, when I ask him, he tells me a bit about the edible letters, but says I'm not ready to know more about Tantra yet. My Nepali sister Menuka wears a necklace too, to get a baby faster, but she is shy to talk about it. Meanwhile, I want to infuse my memoir with magical energy that will make the reader tingle.

I Google Tibetan Bön and find a temple in Pittsburgh that is going to perform a *chöd* (ego-cutting) ritual. The public is invited, and so without even checking my calendar, I register and pay the \$50 fee using PayPal. I drive to Pittsburgh. The next thing I know, I am lying down on a row of yoga mats with a group of fifty practitioners. As the drums beat and thigh-bone trumpets blow, we visualize ourselves cutting our bodies into pieces, feeding the hungry demons until satisfied. At first, the only Tibetan person there is the *lama* (teacher), and then a group of Bhutanese-Nepalis who come late and leave early. As a farewell, the *lama* hits me over the head and shoulders with a soft holy book. He tells me to study.

Closer to home in Rhinebeck, I go to a *phurpa* (devil's dagger) compassion-building retreat and talk with more practitioners as we eat rice and curry, and brush our teeth together in the retreat center dormitories. Their

responses to my questions surprise me. They are there to alleviate physical pain or illness. Their practice focuses on personal healing. They come to retreats to consult with their gurus: to have surgery or not, how to manage their back pain, how to manage depression. Some are there to fulfill promises they have made. Others want to help all sentient beings. Several practitioners brought *phurpas* to be blessed. I meet no one who had learned Tibetan.

Online, I start to watch live-streamed “cybersangha” sessions in which a well-known Bön monk in California teaches (in English) how to release anger, deal with negative emotions, and practice forgiveness. After chanting together in Tibetan (which I never learn how to do), Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche leads us in a guided meditation to a clear blue cloudless desert sky where we (the four hundred-plus people present from all over the world) give ourselves the gift of spaciousness, or “room to heal.” That time, I have visions of two people in my life who hurt me, and I bring the pain close as I am instructed. With my mind, I give the pain a warm hug like a mother would give a hurting child. With my eyes closed, I see the two pain-producers float away together on a puff of wind, and with them years of pain that I had been carrying like a loaded *doko* basket on my back, its head strap compressing my spine downward. When I stream the sessions from my phone, I tidy up the kitchen and listen to the mantras—healing through the sound of letters. The ancient and contemporary tango together in my house, my computer, and my dreams.

It’s August 2019. His Holiness Menri Trizin is doing his first North

American teaching tour since becoming the new spiritual leader of Bön. I receive an email inviting me (as a former retreat attendee) to welcome His Holiness at Bön Shen Ling temple. I register right away, even though I had thought I was finished with the research for my book, tentatively titled *108 Ways to Slay an Enemy*—in which I realize that my enemy is not the Thai man who was my husband, my ex, and the father of my son, nor his next wife whom I hated for twenty years, but myself.

When I pack my things for the retreat, I resist the impulse to bring along the Bön T-shirt that I got on Amazon for \$20.85 with Prime free shipping. The design is square with geometric shapes in primary colors. At first glance, it wouldn’t be obvious that the rectangles form a left-facing swastika, meaning “eternal wellbeing.” I bring academic dress instead, and sweat in a cotton skirt as I stand in line to welcome His Holiness. There are about twenty other American women wearing Tibetan dress: fitted silky blouses and long skirts with aprons flowing down the front, with rainbow trim. The men—also middle-aged white people—are adorned in colorful yak-wool tunics. The Tibetan monks dress up a few men in full ceremonial garb—silk patches in primary colors—and give each of them an instrument: a long horn, a gyaling (Tibetan oboe), a cymbal, a drum. As the oldest monk puts on his pointed yellow *Gelugpa* cap, he says, “Don’t play them, though, if you don’t know how” (which none of them do). Another monk distributes Tibetan flags and tries to space out our line so it looks more impressive. We try to obey.

His Holiness arrives in a black Mercedes driven by the abbot of the temple. A young Tibetan woman is responsible for playing the processional song over her cell phone speaker, holding it up in the air like a prayer flag while His Holiness receives our greetings. We hold out white *khata* scarves (figure 1).



Figure 1. White *khata* scarf.

His Holiness takes the scarves and puts them over our heads, quickly, one by one, smiling as he goes. The monk at the rear wrangles us to follow him up the hill to the temple, past some chalk drawings (figure 2) and a pile of smoking juniper incense.



Figure 2. Chalk drawings of auspicious symbols line the entrance to the temple.

His Holiness stops at the temple porch and says a few words of thanks, then goes for a quick rest upstairs while we shuffle into the air-conditioned *gompa* (meditation room) to await his teachings. The healing mantras emerging from that room in Dutchess County are the same chants that echo across the Kathmandu Valley, the same sounds that vibrate from the throat of a silk weaver in Upper Mustang to the Kali Gandaki River and back over to Dolpo. Like mantras printed on the prayer flags (figure 3), the heart mantras *A Kat Ah Me Dhu Tru Su Nap Po* connect and heal those who chant and those who listen.



Figure 3. Tibetan Prayer Flags of Bön origin hanging at the Rubin Museum in New York City.

3.1. Research questions:

1. Do the chanting sounds and the blessings from prayer wheels and printed flags intertwine or fly in parallel along the slipstream?
2. Are the blessings that blow off of prayer flags edible? If so, in what way?
3. Which negative emotions emerge when someone steals your husband? How would the author feel if she pierced her enemy with the antlers of a deer?

Giddy at the opportunity to meet His Holiness in person, I had requested one of the brief private meetings that His Holiness would grant to practitioners. I thought I would tell him about my book, but in the minutes I sit waiting in the

hallway for him to finish with another person, my mind empties of intelligible thought and is replaced with insecurities. A tall Nyima monk asks me if I have a *khata* (scarf). I do not, so he gets one for me from a cardboard box in his room. I remove it from its plastic sleeve. Invited inside the room, I bow my head and present the *khata*, and His Holiness puts it over my head as a scarf. With my bad knees, I kneel on the rug in front of where His Holiness is sitting in a chair next to the abbot's king-sized bed. The translator—another *lama*—paces next to him.

I tell them that I am writing a book about how Bön helped me to deal with negative emotions. His Holiness nods. I say it's about letting go of anger. His Holiness nods. I show him the mock cover I had in mind—it is a photo of a tenth-century cave painting of a Bön monk, with a top hat (in which Bön priests wrapped their long dreadlocks) and fangs dripping with blood, and a left-turning *zungdrung* (swastika) to the side (Bellezza, 2017, 25). His Holiness gives me a sideways look. “Mmm,” he says. Through the translator, He says I should write the book, and He gives me his blessing. But the picture is not good for the cover. Not good for the front cover, not good for the back cover. “It's okay ... but it is not good for Bön,” he says, referring to their reputation as black magicians and history of discrimination. “You can put the picture inside. No problem.”

His Holiness gazes out the window. I tell Him how grateful I am to have met Him. He nods. I ask if there are any questions I can answer. His Holiness nods with a little smile, and says nothing. I can't tell if he is bored or uncomfortable

or neither. He reaches into a box and hands me two yellow protective cords and an eight-by-ten glossy picture of Sherab Gyeltsen, the founder of Menri monastery in India and abbot from 1405–1415. He says in Tibetan, “Stick to the real Bön, the texts. Not the rumors. Use the real thing,” and his translator smiles. “Only inside, okay?” “Okay,” I say. “Thank you, thank you.” I accept the gifts. I start to get up and he tells me to wait. I kneel back down on the rug while the translator goes into a closet and takes out a red envelope with Mendrup medicine inside (figure 4). His Holiness places it gently into my waiting hand and looks me in the eye for the first time. “Good,” he says. With another nod, I am dismissed. I get up and walk backward out of the room, bent in a pose of clumsy respect.



Figure 4. *Men Drup Woe Zer Bar Wa*; (mendrup medicine for nourishing and healing the body).

The next day’s teaching is on the Empowerment of Compassion, and His Holiness reminds us that we are all connected. The ambrosia that His Holiness pours is based on a recipe from old texts, and it was just prepared in the garage. The barley balls He consecrates and shares for us are connected all the way back to the founder of the religion, Tonpa Shenrap, 18,000 years ago. When His Holiness leaves the room, the practitioners who are able prostrate towards a *thangka* (Tibetan scroll painting) of Tonpa Shenrab. I stand there trying to be invisible.

After our group has received the first day of teachings, Chongtul Rinpoche says to me, “You are the luckiest person in the world. You cannot pay to get this kind of experience.” I think to myself, Well, I did pay for this experience. It was \$475 for two nights at the Four Points Sheraton, all meals provided. But I know what he means.

When it’s time to leave, we have a special ceremony of dedication and thanks. We are asked to bring a *khata* and go up to His Holiness in a line. I am in the front row, so I am third. I choose a *khata* out of my bag that was given to me by a sweet huckster tour guide in Nepal who said it was blessed by the Dalai Lama. I am elated. It seems poetic to have a *khata* that was “double-blessed” by two Dalai Lamas of different sects.

As the line to the shrine shifts forward, I realize that we are supposed to drop the *khata* on a table in front of His Holiness, and that we’re supposed to leave it there. The *khata* that I covet is destined for burial under this growing pile of identical white scarves. Forty-seven more people stand in line behind

me. They will drop their *khatas* on the pile. It will become a snowy mountain for His Holiness. I place mine on the table. It is buried.

Sitting back in my seat, I realize that even if I could reach forward and get my *khata* back, I would hardly be able to recognize which one it is. All of the *khatas* are blessed, but we are not getting them back. It doesn't matter which one I brought back from Nepal. They are all the same. They are all blessed and none are blessed. Maybe it's a fitting lesson: grasping leads to suffering, while letting go of grasping leads to profound and enduring wellbeing. Although some small part of me, for a few deep breaths into my belly, still wants my double-blessed *khata* back.

4. Materials

And now, let us bring back our focus to the concoction of edible letters, and how they connect to the author at this moment in time. I gently remind the reader that this sect of Buddhism, Bön, comes from the barley farmers, hunters, and shamans who lived in the foothills of the Himalayas a millennium ago and longer. From a monk who felt the teachings were threatened and so painted the recipes for the wisdom letters on *rejak* paper made from a poisonous root. From his auntie who helped roll and tie them into a scroll. From the helpers who hid the scroll libraries when invaders came. From the hill folk who lived generation after generation without knowing that the treasures were there, tucked into crevices in the rocky cliffs and shady valleys.

Here I snap my fingers and skip ahead six hundred years, or seven or

eight hundred. To the bats whose smelly guano kept people from visiting the caves. To the rainbows that delivered signs when it was time to find the treasures. To the monks who established temples and libraries. To the scholars who learned how to read ancient Tibetan and translated the texts. To my librarian, Allison, who emailed me dozens of times to say, "An article you requested has been received. The article will be available for twenty-eight days from today; it will automatically be deleted after that. Please read, copy, or print the article before the deadline."

The articles contain recipes for edible letters, and the methods for their use. Some ingredients for the recipes are no longer available or socially acceptable. Some are merely odiferous. The mixtures commonly contain *falcon blood and vulture meat*, and less commonly *vermillion, saffron, musk, and camphor, turmeric, cinnamon, frankincense, crystal, wood, or pig fat, ... human flesh, [and] the bones of someone killed by lightning*" (Garrett, 2009, 88).

Follow these instructions without deviation: *Stop eating onions and garlic immediately*. Store the letters in a clean jar. *Rub the letters with the juices of a cow's stomach*. Mix the plants and other items into a paste for writing. Note that some of the "materials" are already pasty upon collection. *Write the letters in [the collected] excrement* (your own or that of others) mixed with the other ingredients from the recipe. *Swallow the letters (on the tenth day of the waning moon) without touching any part with the teeth*.

Write the letters.

Stack them vertically on a piece of paper.
Write in harmony with the victory star!
The letters must be written carefully,
with no mistakes.

Roll them up and put them to your heart
and hold the paper tight.

Eat the letters every day like food.

Eat them at noon and midnight.

Chant mantras. *Imagine yourself as
powerful!*

You may go into the battlefield now.

5. Results

Participants who ate the edible letters and then *visualized themselves holding a club and a noose* were able to chase away bad spirits with their minds. Picturing themselves *as dark blue and holding a bell* resulted in success in *subduing the aggressor*. The subjects reported that using their minds to *fill their bodies with five golden lights ... as they swallowed the letters* was found to be effective. *For creating wisdom*, the method of *visualizing the letters as a shiny orange in color, and radiating outward* was statistically significant, with p-values off the charts.

Participants ate the edible letters when their heads were confused. They ate the edible letters to return the curses to their owners. They ate the edible letters when their horses had diseases, and they had the horses eat them too. They ate the edible letters when they had the flu. They stuck the letters on tweens. They wore the letters in an amulet when a baby wouldn't enter the belly. Then stuck the letters on their shoulders when the baby was finally coming.

Imagining the seed syllable at the heart and its light radiating outward, one

participant became the syllable. Their wisdom blazed like fire!

Participants who did not eat edible letters or visualize themselves as the Tibetan letter A were still able to benefit from the ritual concept through a process we have named "Embracing the Metaphor." Recalling their own role in thievery and betrayal was significant for the subjects in creating increased empathy and decreased levels of blood-boiling anger. In most cases, the targets of the participants' wrath were unaffected by the treatment.

6. Discussion

The concept of "embodying the alphabet" that is presented here is interesting on several points. But if you did not already see that, I am not sure how else to explain. There seems to be a never-ending desire in human beings to fix problems, to find escape clauses, to discover the Fountain of Youth. While I reserve judgment on the efficacy of the ingredients presented in this article, I vouch for the process of continuing to learn things that grab hold of you and won't let go. I state that Tibetan indigenous insights are applicable to real-life problems that we face in today's society. One may argue that they are magic, that the ingredients are impossible (or unpleasant) to assemble. One might get lost in arguments about historical events. I choose to believe in the power of metaphors to release the mind from suffering. Statistical significance is irrelevant in this instance.

I heard some additional Buddhist wisdom today on Facebook, from that guy who asked Katie Perry for a divorce by text. What's his name again? Russell

Brand, whose expertise on the subject is not certified, yet it is pertinent here: Non-Buddhists say that when things are out of their control, they tend to worry. Buddhists say that when things are out of their control, why worry?

7. Further study

They say it takes 10,000 hours to master a new skill or knowledge area. My calculations tell me that I may be getting close to investing that much time over the past five years. I have attended five retreats and spent approximately two thousand dollars, plus more on books, ritual objects, and the act of sponsoring prayers. And I would do it all over again if I had the chance. But you may agree that I have been a highly suspect narrator so please judge for yourself. I make no promises about the future. There is only here and now. The author plans to take a walk outside and bake some chocolate chip cookies using a browned butter recipe from *Bon Appetit*.

8. Conclusion

As I was finishing up this mock scholarly article, I received a precious packet in the post. It is a Bön amulet (figure 5), a plastic rolled-up image of the goddess Sipe Gyalmo.



Figure 5. Amulet of Yeshe Walmo, Sun-khor, for repelling hostile energy.

The Queen of the World is in her wrathful form: blue with an angry face, Sipe Gyalmo wears a tiara of skulls and frightens the evil ones who intend harm. The amulet “has the power to protect and cut all epidemics, illnesses ... produced by a hostile and unfriendly energy.” I wonder if it will protect me from well-meaning and hurtful criticism. I think of Amy Winehouse’s song lyrics, “I told you I was trouble. You know that I’m no good.”

The amulet packet came by FedEx, and with it arrived a healing mantra—*Om A Bhi Ya Nak Po Be Sö So Ha*—that should be chanted “one hundred, one thousand, or one hundred thousand times.” Obstacles, obliterated. The small treasure included DIY instructions: “Apply saffron to the front of clean Chinese paper. Write the seal of Sipe Gyalmo in the symbolic letters. ... Tie this around the neck. It will be a supreme, universal protection from contagious illnesses” (Wood, 2020). It will protect as far as one or two “calling distances.” The protection may expand to 1,000 kilometers. May all beings benefit! “Your wisdom will blaze like fire.”

9. Epilogue

My mother has minor surgery tomorrow, a catheter ablation for her heart. I am tempted to make her wear the amulet, for safety from a contagious illness while she is in the hospital. But then I wouldn't have it to wear to the grocery store, and to protect me from the myriad of other ill fates that could befall me. This week from his home in Queens, New York, Chongtul Rinpoche is offering the following to the goddess Sipe Gyalmo, Goddess of the Universe: *100 of red torma* (barley balls), *100 candy items*, *100 cookies*, *100 apples*, *100 oranges*, *100 small nuts*, *100 flowers*, *100 banana*, *100 glass[es] of wine*, *100 candle light[s]*, and *100 incense [sticks]*. The *chong tsok* (inner fire offering) ritual will help heal the small puncture in Mother Earth from which small poison winds are escaping and causing damage to the element of the earth's lung (Bon Shen Ling, 3-28-2020).

I attend the first day's Zoom session. Chongtul Rinpoche (2020) blows a conch and clangs a hand cymbal, and the screen freezes. Chongtul Rinpoche teaches about compassion from his temple in Queens, New York. Chongtul Rinpoche "returns" and says very quickly, his words having been stored up in a satellite, "The more times the mantra is recited, the faster the arrogant spirits will be defeated. We will all be protected from COVID-19." *As with a baby and the mother, the cry of the baby reaches the mother and the mother takes care of all solutions.*

Note: The material that is italicized is not my original writing. It comes from the translations and explanations of edible letters from the Tibetan scholars and practitioners listed below.

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Scene Study

NATE HAPKE

FILM



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An Interview with Justin Chang

Justin Chang is that rare creature who didn't fall into film criticism as much as he pursued it.

He chose Expo's own alma mater, the University of Southern California, in part to take a class from the *Los Angeles Times*' longtime lead film critic Kenneth Turan. After graduating with a degree in journalism, Chang first interned, then reviewed movies at Hollywood trade paper *Variety* before joining his former teacher at the *Times*. He also reviews movies on NPR's *Fresh Air*; wrote a book called *FilmCraft: Editing*; and serves as chair of the National Society of Film Critics and secretary of the Los Angeles Film Critics Association.

Perhaps most notably he is Film Twitter's resident Pun Master. (His [all-time favorite pun](#) is a very inside-baseball play on the ambitious, free-spending independent production company Annapurna Pictures, Oracle co-founder Larry Ellison, and the Cate Blanchett movie *Where'd You Go, Bernadette*.)

Chang chatted with Expo about his path to film criticism, how he approaches movies and his role as a reviewer, and what delights him about being the "film critic dad joker of Twitter."

Exposition Review: When did you know you wanted to be a film critic? How did you get into the field?

Justin Chang: I actually didn't watch too many movies growing up, or too many different ones. I loved movies, of course, but it was a very narrow range of them. And then at a certain point, especially when I hit high school years, I started getting more interested, started watching Hitchcock, started watching older films.

My dad actually was formative in this way. Once I expressed, "Oh, I'm kind of interested in movies," my dad was really supportive, and he had been steeped in old Hollywood. He'd watched these movies even in China and Hong Kong when he was growing up, and so he knew all the movie stars like Cary Grant and Robert Taylor and Barbara Stanwyck, and he would just love rattling off names.

And then around this time I started reading film critics, started reading Kenneth Turan, who was the *L.A. Times* critic. I grew up in Orange County, and Kenny was our hometown critic. I went to USC for a couple reasons, but I had heard he taught there. He taught in the journalism school, and I was a journalism major, and I thought, "Oh, maybe I'll get to take his class." And sure enough, I did.

Then years later, after a bunch of other things, I actually wound up getting to be his colleague as well as his student. And now to come full circle, I'm now teaching that class.

ER: How does teaching a class on film criticism inform your own work?

JC: It's so interesting because I can barely articulate how I do what I do as a writer. I think it's really hard to talk about, so how do I even begin to tell other people how they should write? But at the same time, it is that saying: if you don't know how to do something, it's actually a really good idea to teach it to somebody and then you'll get better at it and learn the mechanics of it. And that's been the case.

[The class is] basically a pure writing workshop. We just watch a movie every week. This past semester, I gave them stuff as different as *The Power of the Dog* and *Licorice Pizza* and *Moonfall* just to throw them something kind of fun.

And it's really great. They're wonderful students. It's this weird thing: Sometimes giving feedback, even as a critic, it's harder to give feedback to people to their face than it is to weigh in on the movies. It's obviously a much more personal, direct experience. I hope the feedback is helpful and encouraging, but really it also just becomes about talking about the movies, which is fun, and a lot of the students would never have thought to see this movie or seek this movie out. So I'm also just trying to help them see a more diverse range of movies.

ER: You mentioned that it's hard to describe how you do your work. So we're going to ask you: What is your process? Do you take notes during screenings? Do you do a lot of research? How do you approach the review itself? How do you balance plot summary? Are there points you try to hit?

JC: Like most critics, I take notes at screenings, more to focus my attention than necessarily go back and read my extremely illegible notes. And every assignment entails a different amount of research. Sometimes, yes, it does entail knowing a director's filmography. If I'm reviewing something that's based on a book, deadlines are such that I don't always have time to read it. Maybe I've read it already, but chances are I haven't. So sometimes I'll really quickly do some cramming. Maybe I'll read halfway through because I'll let the movie do the rest of the work.

As far as the process, the actual writing, sometimes depending on the deadline I might be writing literally in my head as I go home—you know, just already piecing words together. A lot of times—and I actually have gotten better at articulating this for my students' sake—it's a cliché, but actually maybe it's a useful convention: Try thinking of a scene from the movie that you really like, that you think sticks out to you, that really perhaps even encapsulates something of the whole movie in miniature. I'm big fan of scene-setting ledes just because the lede is often the hardest part in all journalism.

Just start writing. Write about a scene from the movie. It lets you offload some plot summary, which is great because reviews should not have too much plot. I always tell [my students] if you can make a sentence or a paragraph do two things at once, or even three

things at once, that's always good. It's economical. Try to interweave plot and analysis together. Try to have as few standalones as possible, at least in terms of plot summary.

ER: It feels like we're getting a masterclass in film criticism right now. Along those lines, how do you approach writing about films that may not necessarily feel like they were made for you?

JC: I have very mixed feelings about it, to be honest. I've wrestled with it. This gets into issues of diversity and inclusion in criticism, and in the entertainment industry, because "Is this movie for me?" often becomes "Is this movie for my gender, my age, my race, my sexual orientation?" These are of course questions that are very prominent in discourse right now. These are questions that you do think about as a critic, and that you think about as a moviegoer too, in terms of the whole politics of the entertainment industry and what stories get told [and] who's critiquing these stories.

In terms of myself, just sitting down with a movie, I have this maybe naive utopian idea that every kind of movie could be for me. If you can relate to a movie, that's great. It's wonderful. But the point for me is that if I required relatability in order to like or appreciate a movie, or in order for me to feel like it was *for me*, well, you know, most of the movies I saw growing up were not about people who looked like me.

I really do like to think that I could like this movie. Usually I am just thinking, is this movie good or bad? But I'm always looking for those entry points.

ER: What role do these questions play in how you approach your job as a film critic?

JC: I'm always trying to encourage audiences to try things that they may not think is *for them*. I write a fair amount about art cinema and films that maybe are more challenging or a little slower than your typical mainstream film. [Some] people maybe have felt burned by me enough times [that] they see my byline and like, "Oh, I'm not gonna see that. You know, Justin's recommending it." But I keep at it because to me it actually is part of nourishing the audience and I think it's just important to try new things.

Growing up, starting to watch a lot of movies that were not Hollywood American movies, I often felt this isn't *for me*. This moves a different way. I don't know what this country is and what their culture is. We all start off from a place of ignorance about a lot of things that we see depicted. But to me, it's always just like, dive in, try it, you might like it. Sometimes it takes a little work. People are very offended by this idea that movies should be work. I mean, they should be fun, too. But sometimes you do work at art, and it can be more fun as a result. I don't see fun and work as mutually exclusive.

ER: When you read a Justin Chang review, a lot of times you're going to see references to other filmmakers, and a signature Justin move is the [year-end best-of list in themed pairings](#). Do you feel that this catalog of film history is necessary, or at least helps you in your job?

How do you translate that to readers who may not have as much of that background?

JC: I do think it's necessary and important, and I always feel like my own catalog could always be better. I think every critic feels that. There are a lot of critics—you know, that line about who've forgotten more about film history than I will ever know. That's just true, and I have to make my peace with it. So I'm always just trying to catch up with older things, and older can mean something a few months ago that I didn't see, and it can mean some classic I've always been meaning to get around to.

I recently reviewed *After Yang*, Kogonada's movie starring Colin Farrell. It's a movie I really liked a lot. And Kogonada is a filmmaker who is deliberately referencing other movies through his technique. He's made [video essays](#) about Kubrick and other great filmmakers who inspired him. He comes from a critical essayistic background to begin with, and then he's become this really interesting filmmaker.

I referenced [Yasujirō] Ozu in my review of *After Yang*. That's not some obscure reach at all. Ozu is one of the most famous filmmakers in the world. Hello, he directed *Tokyo Story*. So this is like a very basic elementary thing. And [someone wrote a letter to *The Times*] taking issue with the fact that I'd referenced Ozu, saying—I'm paraphrasing—“How about writing for people who might be interested in seeing the movie rather than for other critics.” This whole accusation happens sometimes: writing to impress your colleagues more than you're writing for the benefit of the audience. The truth is, that is something to be aware of. It's something to be conscious of, but I found that just a little sad.”

ER: How does it feel when readers react to one of your reviews that way?

JC: It just kind of saddened me. First off, the implicit soft racism of thinking that a reference to Ozu—a very famous Japanese filmmaker—is obscure, when if I had referenced someone like Kubrick or an American filmmaker, this writer I doubt would have found that such a reach. Ozu is really famous. If you don't know him, now you do. Why are you offended by getting new knowledge? Why are you reading a movie review? People really think—and I don't think that they would have this objection with literary criticism or music criticism—that movies should be a thought-free zone. And that is so annoying and offensive to me, frankly. You pick up a review in the *L.A. Times*, you should expect to learn something.

What is the fear of putting movies in conversation with each other? Because they are. That's what art is all about. It's this great bazaar where we can compare and contrast, and say, “Oh, have you seen this? Have you tried this?”

So it's very interesting to me that people have this idea that they just want to read about this movie, and all they want is the takeaway—you know, two thumbs up or one thumb down. I'm sorry, I'm not interested in doing that. Yeah, sure, if you want a recommendation, yeah, go see *After Yang*. It's really good. But that is not the end of the job for me, and some people really, really think it should be.

ER: Justin, can we talk about puns?

JC: We can.

ER: How did your reputation as a pun master develop? How do puns come to you, and what delights you about wordplay?

JC: I read *The Phantom Tollbooth* at an early age. It's formative. Still one of my favorite books ever. There's so much wordplay, and I just remember a whole chapter where Norton Juster is just unleashing pun after pun. It's just amazing. It's still one of my favorite books ever.

Probably why I wanted to be a writer is because—I don't wanna make too big a deal of this, but you aren't sometimes cognizant of the fact that as an Asian American, we're not often encouraged to go into jobs that have to do with writing, that have to do with the arts and everything. I didn't do it just because, "I'm going to show them." No, it's just that was where my interests were.

Loving the English language and being able to write, hopefully, well in it—that just became a natural passion. Can I do this? Can I do this as well as somebody else? And puns come into that not in any just conscious way, but you just start making connections like, "Oh, why does this word sound like this but mean something different?" And maybe that occurs to you more if you're just thinking about it more because you're trying to figure out how language works because you don't feel entirely at home with the language. English is my first language, by the way, but I just started studying words and sounds with a little more intensity.

There is something about punning that, even as silly as it seems, actually does wire my brain in the same way that analyzing a movie does. I don't know how to make sense of that. Maybe it's just as simple as when you watch a movie and sometimes when you're analyzing and maybe you're really into it, you are looking for, like, rhymes. You look for symbolism and you look for metaphor. There's something about the way wordplay works that I think actually does reflect the way images work with the way we find meanings and double meanings. I haven't thought really in-depth about this, but at a certain point there's something there. They go hand in hand.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.