

EXPOSITION REVIEW

2023

VOLUME VIII:
LINES



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Contents by Form

Letter from the Editors • 4

Fiction

Ishan Dylan *Theseus* • 5

Sasha Horn *Sidewalks* • 17

Leslie Maslow *Lift and Carry* • 26

Lio Min *In the Morning, I Hear Singing...* • 37

Max Tachis *The Wobble* • 46

Flash Fiction

L Mari Harris *Our Mothers* • 53

LaVie Saad *Lord of the Fireflies* • 54

Nonfiction

Lisa Eve Cheby *Perfect Dark* • 57

Vanessa Flandorp Tlachi *first love* • 59

Keegan Lawler *Glass* • 60

Angela Miyuki Mackintosh *The Recruit* • 70

Poetry

Paige Ackerson-Kelly *The Movies, 2021* • 87

James King *Praise Song for the Cow Loose on Route 16 Going the Right Way* • 92

Renée Lepreau *September* • 94

Cassie McDaniel *These Tenuous Things* • 95

tangie mitchell *SYNERGY, a golden shovel* • 96

Margaret Saigh *This Is Not Out Star* • 97

Lena Khalaf Tuffaha *First Generation* • 98

Stage & Screen

Vincent Terrell Durham *A Park for Children to Pretend In* • 102

Zac Thompson *The Needy* • 112

Experimental Narratives

Bree Bailey *I Pencil Grieving You Into My Planner* • 126

Ariel M. Goldenthal *At Twelve Years Old, I Draft a New Custody Agreement* • 128

Zac Picker *Very-Smart™ Lyrics: 'Crazy Paving' by Rutherford Bee Haze* • 131

Visual Art & Comics

Kwasi Boyd-Bouldin *Along L.A.: A Curated Collection of Visual Art* • 75

Frega DiPerri *Selected Comics* • 124

Kristen Huizar *Habits and/or Vice* • 16

David Lasky *Poetry Comics* • 45

Edwin Perez Osuna *Selected Photographs* • 99

Mirka Walter *Deconstructing the Deconstructed* • 33

Film

Geetha Reddy & Brian Tolle *Obit* • 56

Interview with

Kwasi Boyd-Bouldin • 81

Every year when we consider the bones of our annual issue—the hundreds of submissions in the slush, the tens of thousands of words of discussion and feedback, the missed opportunities yet endless potential—there’s a slow build of anxiety, and at-times overwhelming fear: “How will this ever come together?”

Yet it does: Sinews of words and art painstakingly assembled into something that feels vibrant and alive: Volume VIII.

The more we engage with the final product, the more we realize how much our theme “Lines” emphasizes one of the most vital aspects of *Exposition Review*: connection. What started as a kinship among fellow grad students and friends has since extended to readers, interns, editors, and writers across genres, platforms, and the globe.

We spent a lot of time talking about longevity this year. From our annual editors’ retreat at the start of the season to our panel at the AWP Conference this spring, we considered what Expo’s lifeline is, and the state of the literary landscape in general. After eight years, the lines we’ve drawn have created something that binds us all together: a community lovingly built.

Expo is a body that wouldn’t exist without the marvelous writers and artists inside these pages, the readers and editors who pored over their work, and the donors who believed in our story. They are all reminders that even in an ever-evolving endeavor, it’s one we don’t have to navigate alone. For that, we continue to be grateful.

The lines that compose Volume VIII span generations of mothers and daughters and are cast for fish by a father and son. They examine borders in both words and imagery, and explore lyrics in earnest and satire. They’re crossed out on legal documents and drawn onto photographs. They’re physical and metaphorical, and on our cover—designed especially for us by Kwasi Boyd-Bouldin—they illustrate the moments when art intersects reality, when we scrawl over the way the world appears and redesign what is into what could be.

As we put this issue out into the world, we extend the line that is Expo to you, reader. We hope that you intersect with these pieces, that you run parallel alongside them, that you draw your own conclusions—and perhaps even find your new favorite writer or artist. We hope that when you look ahead with us into Expo’s future, when you squint down the line, you see the same thing we do: an arrow.

Annlee Ellingson
Mellinda Hensley
EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Theseus

ISHAN DYLAN

FICTION

March 16th, 2018.

You think about what you once told Emma: *People with the same first initials shouldn't date. Imagine the wedding invite: E&E. Does that sound like God's plan to you?*

Now you're sitting cross-legged on her dorm room floor playing video games. You're *supposed* to be pregaming for Stephanie's party, but then it came up that neither of you know any of Stephanie's other friends. Emma has never been big on meeting new people.

Emma howls as her kart gets hit with a green shell and veers off into the abyss. You laugh at her and—*oh fuck*—your kart follows suit. You lose your hard-fought third place. The blush from the Bacardi is starting to flirt with Emma's ears.

The two of you have been spending a lot more time together since she broke up with Eric.

You look up. Emma must have scooted across the grungy carpet because she's *right there*. Her hands grip your legs. Her face hovers a foot away from yours.

"Drink up, loser." You pour her a shot.

"We both lost," she objects.

"You lost first."

Her eyes light up. "Wait. Shut up, Jenny. You need to listen to me right now."

You can't think straight. You look away—*why?*

You look back. Emma's eyes are misty-serious. "I'm in the sweet spot, Jenny. I have to say it before *this* kicks in." She brandishes the shot glass.

"Fine. I'm listening."

"Can you make a promise, Jenny?"

Ah. Emma has arrived at the stage of drunkenness when heartfelt promises get made. Why do people ask things like, *Can you make a promise?* Or worse, *Can you do me a favor?* How are you supposed to answer without knowing what it is? But it's Emma, so

...

"Of course, dummy."

"I need you to be my crush patrol, Jenny."

"Crush patrol?"

"Remember when I started dating Eric? He liked soccer, so I watched FIFA. I only started wearing ponytails after he said Ariana Grande looked hot. I was playing *Halo*, Jenny. *Halo*."

"Wow. If only someone had warned you."

“Hey! You can’t bully me until I’m done being vulnerable.”

That’s true. That’s the rule.

“Just promise ... if I start pulling that shit with a new guy, you’ll call me out.

Seriously. Break into my house and slap me out of it. I give you permission.” Then Emma falls quiet.

Good luck getting a word out of her in that state. It’ll just scurry back down the hidey-hole in her brain where it came from. You need to wait it out. Emma sways and stares into the middle distance of the dorm room. A siren wails outside.

“I mean ...” she mumbles, “if it even is a guy. Next time.”

“What are you saying?”

“Maybe I’m tired of guys’ bullshit, you know? Maybe I want to date a girl.”

You swallow the stone in your throat. “Totally. Totally. What are boyfriends even good for? Opening doors? Opening ... jars?” You shrug. “I could do that shit.”

You’d be good at it, too. You’d be better than Eric.

Emma stares at you again.

“What else?”

The next morning, you wake up to a wall of text messages from Emma. *Last night was a mistake*, she says—a mistake you don’t even get to remember in full. *You’re my best friend ever, but I’m totally, 100% straight.*

You aren’t mad. You’re mortified. You’re just glad that *she* isn’t mad at *you*.

* * *

August 21st, 2021.

You’re in the passenger seat, driving to Harrisburg International with your father. He can’t seem to pick a speed, caught between every dad’s intrinsic need to get to the terminal three hours early and his desire to savor the last father-daughter car ride that he’ll get before you disappear off to grad school at the University of Oregon.

You’re listening to “Red” by Taylor Swift, from your “compromise playlist.” She first earned a spot there by landing smack between his country taste and your pop music, but now he knows the words better than you.

In your hands is a yellow envelope with *Emma* written on it. Right now, she’s on an Amtrak train to NYU, holding your letter. You traded them when you said goodbye, trying to stay a tangible part of one another’s lives for just a few extra days.

“I’m gonna miss you so much.”

“We’ll call all the time. Every week.”

“I’m still gonna miss you.”

You’re going to miss her so much.

* * *

August 23rd, 2021.

Your new apartment smells like a hotel lobby. Emma's letter is the only thing pinned up on your ten-dollar corkboard. You call her every week.

* * *

September 27th, 2021.

Dirty laundry piles on the floor. Textbooks splay on the dinner table. Your apartment smells like coffee and basil and ... well, dirty laundry. You look up. The brick of a results section that you've been rereading for the last hour is burned into your corneas. *Three missed calls from Emma.*

* * *

October 4th, 2021.

You start meeting people in your classes. You don't even want to think about how hard this would have been last semester, over Zoom. Nobody gets you like Emma does. You confine your existential crises to the shower. Is this all that adulthood is? *Nice to meet you* and *what's your major* and *oh, Pennsylvania, I have a cousin there!*

Peter from Woody Plants 500 invites you to a group study session at what he describes as the only good coffee shop in Eugene. You drink coffee and talk for hours. They don't talk about their feelings or anything, not like you and Emma do. But they give solid tips for propagating plants, and the best hikes near campus. *Hey, if we take one car to the trailhead, gas won't be nearly so bad!*

You feel guilty when you don't call Emma. But then, inexplicably, you feel guilty when you do.

* * *

October 17th, 2021.

You and your friends have a group chat.

Nicole sends new playlists every week. You used to make fun of forestry majors for all listening to the same music, but now you've been indoctrinated. Kacey Musgraves plays in your living room. You and your friends sit there and argue about the relative fuckability of oak species. Something isn't right, but you don't know what it is. All you know is that *Quercus ilex* is the most fuckable oak.

You still haven't called Emma. You'll catch her next weekend. Brandon's going to Lassen on Saturday, and he's the only one with a car.

* * *

February 11th, 2022.

In the hospital. Mirror shards in your fist. Nicole is on the phone using her emergency voice, that perfect cadence of a fighter pilot who needs to be clearly understood even as they spiral in and out of terror.

Your eyes are red and puffy. You let the doctor assume the tears started after your hand was cut up.

“I was just horsing around in the bathroom. I was being stupid.”

Thankfully, no jokes about seven years of bad luck.

* * *

July 8th, 2022.

You pick up your prescription at the pharmacy back in Pennsylvania.

Your father has taken down most of the photos that you hate, but you let him keep the one of you and him at Lake Michigan. You're seven, brandishing a tiny sunfish at the end of your line and smiling maniacally.

Your name is now Liam.

Two months later, Emma comes out as a lesbian on Instagram. You try not to take it personally.

* * *

September 17th, 2022.

Your friends swore you'd love this new club. An arm pulls on your sleeve. Between the pulse of colored lights, all you see is polo shirt and beard hair.

“Hey, beautiful. What's your name?”

“Fuck off, I'm a guy.”

“Uh, yeah. I can see that.”

His friends are staring at you. *Everyone* is staring at you.

“What, you got a problem with another dude hitting on you?”

“What—? No! No, I mean ...”

You're stuck going back to the same dive bars from then on. Your friends don't complain.

* * *

September 30th, 2022.

You're in the Philosophy 203 class that you took to balance out your fall schedule, and you're riding high atop the Dunning-Kruger curve when Ms. Freeman says something that makes you look up from your doodling.

“Theseus' Ship. Who can tell me what Theseus' Ship is?”

No answers. You can tell that Brandon knows from the way that his head perks up, but he doesn't raise his hand. What's the reward for being right—getting to talk in front of all your peers at 8 a.m.?

"Theseus' Ship is a metaphysical thought experiment." Ms. Freeman taps the words *Unit 1* on the blackboard. "Metaphysics, people! Do this for me—imagine that Theseus has a boat. Theseus travels for many years. Over time, parts of the boat break off and need to be replaced. Now let's imagine that, by the time he returns to Athens, *every single piece* of his boat has been replaced at least once. So, my question for you is—did Theseus return on the same boat that he left on?"

No answers again.

"Liam? What do you think?"

You aren't expecting that. Your mouth is suddenly dry, but you stammer something out. "I mean ... aren't they just different definitions? Like, any ship he owns is *his* ship. So, it's still *Theseus'* ship, even if it's not the same one. Right ...?"

Not your best showing, but Ms. Freeman smiles and finds a way to work your response into her next point. Everyone scribbles in their notes.

You bury your head in your notebook until the redness in your cheeks goes down.

* * *

November 3rd, 2022.

You used to be terrible about interrupting Emma on the phone. Now you've learned to talk less and listen more. She calls you for the first time in weeks to tell you about her new girlfriend: Melody. She and Melody went to a *real* fashion show together. Melody taught her how to make biscotti. Melody drives a 1969 Camaro.

"Wow!" You pause. "Actually, I don't know why I said *wow*. I just assumed that's impressive."

"It is impressive."

"Then ... wow!"

Later, you go on Wikipedia during class and look up some of the terms that you remember her saying.

Maybe Emma is like Theseus' Ship. Bits and pieces of her—her likes, her dislikes, her hobbies—are being eroded and replaced.

You're walking on the quad at night. Your hand plays along the outline of a Swiss Army knife in your pocket. You relive the phone call. None of it sits right. You start to remember a conversation on a dorm room floor, but you shake your head.

People change. Who are you to say that it's the fault of some girl?

Her best friend. That's who. The only person who knows every nanometer of her being, who would notice a single molecule out of place.

You pull headphones over your ears and walk faster.

* * *

November 20th, 2024.

Professor Anderson says something that makes you stop taking notes.

“We can think of all organisms as constantly renewing systems,” she explains.

“Within seven years, every cell in a human body will be replaced. Isn’t that amazing?”

* * *

September 5th, 2025.

You do not want to wake up one morning and realize that there is not a part of you left that Emma has touched.

You call her in New York.

“This is so exciting!”

Emma throws her arms around you. She’s wearing a fur-lined hood to protect her from the Manhattan winter. It tickles your nose.

Soon, she’ll be starting at the law firm in Boston.

“Oh my god, you look so different. Liam—your *voice*!”

The Emma you remember would react this dramatically to a new haircut. That doesn’t make it any less of a compliment.

You duck into Witch’s Brews, a nerdy board-game café. Emma picked it out for the two of you. You still love tabletop games.

The famous Melody is saving a booth. She beams and greets you with a hug, which you aren’t used to. You stand rigid while her embrace surrounds you. Melody has laid out a game of *Scrabble*, which isn’t what you had in mind when Emma said *game night*.

You find out that Melody doesn’t play D&D. She prefers real improv.

“Oh my gosh, have you been to the PIT?”

You haven’t.

In undergrad, Emma’s boyfriends would greet you like they were walking into a job interview. They understood the importance of the best friend test. But Melody sails through introductions with immaculate confidence. She squeezes Emma’s hand and tells a story about both of them in the first person. *We* did this; *we* did that. She pauses to explain the inside jokes.

You’re in the middle of a high school anecdote. You catch Emma glancing at Melody—watching her girlfriend react to you—hoping that *you* make a good impression on *her*.

You forget the punchline. You order a whiskey sour. On the rocks.

Emma takes the conversational wheel. *We just redecorated the office*. She leans across the booth to show you pictures on her phone. The idea for the floating cabinets came from a television program.

“Since when do you watch those shows?”

“Oh, Melody got me hooked! It’s our Friday night tradition.”

Another rotting board, pried out and replaced. Friday night used to be for rum and Mario Kart.

You're standing at the 50th Street subway entrance when Emma asks you what you think of Melody.

You smile warmly and pull her into a hug. "I'm glad you found someone who makes you so happy," you tell her. "I'm proud of you."

You aren't a liar.

You don't say that *you* would never date Melody. If your girlfriend made you watch HGTV more than one Friday in a row, you would set yourself on fire.

Emma beams as you wave from the train window. She'd swiped her MetroCard just to say goodbye.

You stare into the dark of a subway tunnel, feeling guilty. It's pointless, but you can't help it. Why so unfair to Melody? Of course, *you* wouldn't date her. *You* like lumberjanes, and indie musicians, and Winona Ryder in *Stranger Things*.

What matters is that Emma likes Melody.

You and Emma used to fight over all the same boys.

* * *

February 7th, 2026.

You're gripping the edge of a marble cutting board. Williams Sonoma, like everything else in Melody's kitchen. Your heart is pounding. "You have to be fucking kidding me."

"Is swearing *really* necessary, Liam?"

Jesus Christ. When did New England turn Emma into a Puritan?

You're clutching two pieces of printer paper. Two tickets to Massive Magnet Freakout. You and Emma swore that you'd see them live when school calmed down. Then March 2020 came, and their fifteen minutes in the mainstream didn't last until the venues opened back up.

"They're in Boston for one night. We *have* to go!"

"I would, Liam, if you hadn't just sprung it on me! How was I supposed to know not to make other plans?"

Her tone sends you back to middle school—to teachers who assumed that you couldn't be thinking logically just because they didn't follow your logic.

"It was supposed to be a nice surprise! Who plans a date night for the middle of a friend's visit, anyway?"

"It isn't a *date night*. It's the Boston Fashion Showcase, and it only happens once a year. You can come if you don't want to be left out!"

"This isn't about being left out. It's about Massive Magnet Freakout!"

"Liam, I've had these plans for a month."

“So what? We made these plans *six years ago*! Don’t tell me Melody won’t understand. Besides, she’s the one who cares about the show. Why can’t she just take her work friends?”

“I’ve been looking forward to this!” Emma gives a curt exhale that makes you feel years younger than her. “I’m sorry, Liam, but—actually, no. I’m not going to apologize for your mistakes. You just ... can’t be my number-one priority this time. Okay?”

Your chest tightens. “Right. No, of course. *This* time. I get it.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

You don’t know how to fight with Emma. You stammer, and it makes you sound petty and unprepared. It isn’t fair. Why would you be rewarded for preparing arguments against your best friend? What kind of maniac does that?

“Don’t act like this is a one-off thing, Emma! You’re always busy with *her* events, *her* friends, *her* cabinets and TV shows and cars and ... when was the last time you did something just for *you*?”

Emma doesn’t say anything.

“I’m invoking the pact. You need to break up with her.”

“What *pact*? What are you talking about?”

“The crush patrol. Your dorm room. 2018.”

“2018 ...? Liam, we were teenagers.”

“I’m only saying this because you wanted me to!”

“And what about 2026 Emma? Not 2018 Emma. I’m *happy*, okay? Doing things with Melody makes me happy. So yes, she’s my priority. And that’s *normal*. That’s what normal people do when they date someone.”

Normal. Middle school again.

“I’m normal.”

“I won’t apologize for growing up, Liam. You’re allowed to have feelings about who you fooled around with in college. But we can’t all spend our twenties chasing the high of a one-night stand!”

You didn’t know that Emma shoots to kill when she gets defensive. You’ve never actually fought with her before.

Her face falls. Maybe she didn’t know that either.

“Liam ...”

“Why the fuck would I, of all people, want to date a ... a *lesbian*?” Not your most verbose response, but it gets the point across. You hate how your voice cracks when you cry. It makes you sound like a teenager again.

“Liam, I didn’t say that. Liam, wait ...”

Her voice falters as you turn to leave. The door slams behind you.

You ugly cry in the back of a taxi. You don’t care what the driver thinks. Actually, you do care. But there’s nothing you can do. You’re furious.

Her accusation doesn’t come close to the truth.

You’ve been broken up with before. You’ve even been cheated on before. None of it felt like this.

Being pulled out of your best friend's life one piece at a time and replaced with shiny fresh new wood. Scraped off like used-up skin cells. Apoptosis.

You lie on the floor of a hotel room, re-reading a letter on yellow cardstock, and wonder when the person behind those words stopped existing.

* * *

March 23rd, 2026.

You take a seasonal position in the Forest Service, manning an old fire lookout at Sequoia National Forest. You spend three months reading paperbacks and watching the conifers. No smoke here.

You come back with stacks of handwritten poetry, zero epiphanies, and a taste for discount beer. You tell your friends the experience was "meditative."

* * *

December 24th, 2026.

Christmas Eve in Pennsylvania.

You're standing on the front porch of your parents' house in a red sweater. Your mother gasps when she opens the door.

"Oh my—Liam! You're so *tall*, honey!"

You tell her that you're still five-foot-five, the same as when you finished puberty the first time.

She gives you an *I don't think so* look. "You look taller. It's because you finally stopped slouching—see, what I always said about the slouching? And so *handsome*!"

"Thank those endocrinology wizards at Jefferson."

"No, no, honey. It's all in my genes."

* * *

December 24th, 2026. 4:28 p.m.

You're sitting on the kitchen counter. That's where the sous-chef sits. You hand your mother cubed butternut squash, bouillon, and pureed pumpkin.

Your mother looks up from the stock. She doesn't say anything. She just scans you from your REI boots up to your oversized flannel and your curly almost-mullet.

"What ...?" you say defensively, like you're thirteen and walking out of a department store changing room.

"Nothing. I just ... I remember when you came down the stairs wrapped in that ratty old pink boa and said you were going to be a pop singer when you grew up. You're just ... so *different*, Liam."

Your heart sinks a little.

"I'm just so proud of you." She frowns. "Pass me the ... the thingy. You know, the thing."

You hand her the immersion blender. "Thanks, Mom."

"No, thank *you*."

You're in the living room with your father, drinking one of his weird microbrew IPAs that taste like a pine tree. *Pinus banksiana*. You're swapping stories that are finally fair game now that you're old enough to hear them. The statute of limitations is up for most of your teenage misadventures.

He's laughing about how your prom date (*Ethan Buckley*, you remind him) had looked ready to piss himself on the doorstep.

Then you ask him a question. "Dad, do you ever ... miss having a daughter?"

Your father wrinkles his brow for a long time.

"No," he replies, "what do you mean?"

"You were just ... so bummed about boxing those old photos." You point to the mantle. "Sometimes I wonder ... I guess I feel a little bad, even if I shouldn't."

Your father looks confused. For some reason, though, you feel like *you're* the one who's out of the loop.

"Because ... they were photos of *you*, Liam."

* * *

December 24th, 2026. 9:52 p.m.

Washing your hands in the guest bathroom, you try not to make eye contact with yourself in the mirror. You sigh.

You've been a fucking idiot.

* * *

December 24th, 2026. 10:06 p.m.

"I'm running out to take care of something. I'll be back before midnight."

You slide into the driver's seat and pull out your phone. You know it's a long shot.

At my parents' place for Xmas. You in town?

Emma doesn't reply. The word *Read* appears beneath your message in tiny print.

You send her a second text.

I'll be at the park in 15.

When you pull into the parking lot of St. Mary's Presbyterian Church, your truck is the only vehicle there. Your heart only sinks for a second. Emma's parents still live walking-distance from the church.

You find her sitting at the bottom of the metal slide. Emma looks up as your boots crunch in the wood chips. She wears a white sweater with the word *JOY* written in golden loopy font across the front.

“Hey. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas, Liam.”

You sit cross-legged on the ground. “Where’s Melody?”

“I told her I wanted to do the holidays with my parents this year. We ... usually do hers.” Emma kicks her feet. “You were right. But we’re working on it.”

“Good.”

Emma cocks her head. “I said you were right, Liam.”

“No. I wasn’t. You never needed to break up over it.”

“But ... you wanted us to.” She raises an eyebrow.

“I was being selfish.” You sigh. “Back in undergrad, you just dated this parade of guys who weren’t right for you.”

“Because they were guys.”

“Exactly. They never stood a chance. I’m your best friend.”

Emma snorts. “Pretty self-absorbed to assume it was because you wanted to screw me, wasn’t it.”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong. You *are* smoking. Like, for real. If you ever come back to the hetero side ...”

“Absolutely not. Never.”

“Fair enough. Things aren’t going great over here.”

Emma unscrews a bottle of mulled wine and offers it. It tastes like artificial oranges. The words come so easy now. You only needed to find them first.

“So, you’re like a total lumberjack now, huh?”

You gesture at her sweater. “So, you’re like a total craft YouTuber, huh?”

“Shut up. My stepmom bought me this. It’s a show of good faith.” Emma takes a swig of wine. “I’m a public defender now.”

“I thought you were working at that firm with Melody?”

“Oh, it sucked. I quit. I thought you were working with starflowers?”

“I was. But ... turns out, chainsaws are way more fun than tweezers.”

Emma talks about things that you don’t understand, but you understand her. It’s the same laugh, the same habit of leaning forward and grabbing your arms when she’s approaching the climax of a story because she needs to physically seize your attention. You pass the bottle of mulled wine. You forget the promise to your parents. The clock slips past midnight.

* * *

December 25th, 2026. 12 a.m.

You’re meeting your best friend all over again.

Habits and/or Vices

KRISTEN HUIZAR

VISUAL ART



Kristen Huizar, "Habits and/or Vices," 2022. Ink on paper, 45 x 36 inches

Sidewalks

SASHA HOM

FICTION

I missed my sixth-grade graduation because I had to go with my parents to Seoul to stay in a multistory hotel. The mission was to scoop up a child we had never seen before, sign some papers, and call her ours. Their rationale for flying all the way to Korea to pick her up, versus having her flown to the States with a planeload of other adoptable children the way I had arrived, was that this way, they could kill two birds with one stone. They would get to show me my country of birth and, at the same time, bring me back a sister. Because more than anything, my parents loved a bargain—Dad at Double Luck Liquors whenever they were having a two-for-one sale, me in the bucket of the cart, knees tucked under my skirt, while he stacked jugs of wine with twist-off caps around my sparkly shoes, singing gleefully, “This is chee-eap wine.”

Our room was on the twenty-third floor of the Seoul Plaza Hotel. There were demonstrations in the plaza. Across from City Hall, a gathering of protesters pushed against a wall of police. Back and forth they ran, crossing some invisible line. It reminded me of these shorebirds two-stepping with the waves on Naksan Beach where I saw an old woman jump playfully on the back of another, both laughing with their mouths so open you could see down the long dark hole of their throats.

“Anyone here could be related to you,” Ma said.

From behind the double-pane glass of our hotel room, our eyes did not water from the tear gas. The crackling of gunshots mixed with the sound of decaf percolating in the bathroom—what Dad drank when there was no wine.

He sat by the window in an armchair, and I did not ask whether they were shooting real bullets down there, or rubber ones. I was preoccupied with other things—like what would junior high be like next year? Or rather, what would junior high be like now that I was a big sister?

Ever since kindergarten, which is when my parents first mentioned the possibility of adopting again, I’d fantasized about bringing a little sister to school with me for nap time, or show-and-tell, or recess. We received snapshots from the adoption agency of lumpy newborns, preteen boys—two who were disabled and one who was a month older than myself—even though my parents had specifically requested a little girl “of sound body and mind,” as the Steiner schools put it. Oh, and already potty-trained because Ma was so over diapers.

My parents took a break in their search for a while. Then one day they received a Polaroid of a girl in a too-small sweater, leaning against a statue of the Virgin Mary. Ma

jumped around as if she had just won the Lotto. She carried that photo everywhere. In her cupped palms, as if she was carrying butterfly wings, she held the picture out for anyone who was willing to look. “This is our new adopted daughter,” she’d say. “We’re gonna call her Jenny. You know, like the Thompsons. Do you know their daughter? She’s so sweet. You hardly even know she’s there.”

Dad thought the kid looked cute. But to me, she looked like a cross between an insect and a turtle, with a beetle-like abdomen, cricket legs, a bowl cut, and a top lip clamped beakishly over the bottom.

Outside, the pink-streaked sky was sinking into the city. New department stores and skyscraper shadows fell across the emperor’s old home—still standing in a city descending into vapor. The antique and revitalized, side by side.

Dad sat with his back to the TV. The Korean news played loudly, even though none of us could understand what was spoken. Images of tear gas explosions and overturned cars in miniature danced on the lenses of Dad’s glasses. From time to time, he’d take them off, turn around to the window, and snap pictures of the same riots, but from a bird’s-eye view. Demonstrators moved about in changing shapes and formations: a line of blue, a hive of black, morphing.

“Don’t use up so much film,” Ma yelled from the bathroom.

In the vanity, surrounded by a soft glow of bulbs, her eyebrows arched and then straightened, looking like caterpillars crawling across her face. The thin black line of them slowly faded, as she rubbed a Kleenex drenched in Johnson’s Baby Oil across her lids, discarding the stained black tissue in the trash.

She caught me watching and smiled at me without turning around, so that it looked like she might have been just smiling at herself. Or that her reflection had smiled at my reflection, both of us stuck in the glass. This was a game that we played in a mirror.

Ma enlarged her eyes with the beak of her fingers, making her look scared. She rubbed miniscule drops of cream into her skin, starting at the top, working her way down each side methodically in a never-altering pattern. These were her rituals. She had many and I studied them all: how she tucked her hair behind her ears right before speaking with a stranger; the way she jiggled the knob to make sure the door was locked, peering back into our house to see if she had set the alarm; how she licked her pencil tip before drawing; that certain smile she had for others not in our family—more teeth, head tilted, as if offering her face to a different god.

“What are they protesting?” I asked.

“They want democracy,” Dad said, zooming in for another action shot. He once dreamed of becoming a photographer of long-legged women or wars. But instead he became an engineer, a practical profession for the first in his eight-person family to go to college.

“They’re protesting the Olympics,” Ma said, working a thin line of floss through her teeth.

I could see City Hall right across the plaza beside the subway station. On its roof, a digital display of the number of days, hours, and minutes ticked backward toward the moment when the Olympics would finally reach Seoul and an American reporter would

declare that Korea's number-one export was its children, myself just one of those hundreds of thousands sent overseas.

"Because in Korea, if you're pregnant and you aren't married, your family disowns you," Ma said.

"It's what happens when you industrialize too quickly," Dad said.

"You have to let some things go," Ma said.

I imagined spokes of left-behind babies trailing from the villages to the hub of Seoul. I looked down but all I saw was fighting. If I had looked closer, through the telescopic lens of my father's camera, for example, I would have seen a single speck of gray, a woman holding her baby on her back, regardless.

Like a ghost, her clothes were indistinguishable from the concrete, as if they too were woven from rock and sand, dust and water, pressed and scored in lines. She panhandled before the mouth of the subway, camouflaged. Day and night, eternally she knelt on a thin slice of cardboard, head bowed above a Styrofoam cup set on a layer of sidewalk hovering above other layers of sidewalks that snaked underground for miles and miles, along the subway lines all color-coded according to their destination. Her face could not be seen. Over her gray hanbok, she wore a podaegi, a cloth used to tie a baby to a back, binding one generation to the back of the other, and to another. Turtles all the way down, as they say, holding the world on their shells.

The woman was eclipsed by the shadows of many tall buildings, so that even when I was standing right beside her, I might not have noticed her if Ma hadn't pointed her out.

When we left the hotel the next morning, to meet my new sister for the very first time, the demonstrations were in full force. Ma plunged through the revolving glass door and shot out into tear gas. Then Dad followed suit, and then me. But I couldn't eject myself, and got stuck between the glass like a bug in a microscope slide. My parents passed by me in cycles. Finally, Ma extracted me by the arm and we followed Dad, pushing through the screaming crowd. I stepped on someone's spectacles. They bent beneath my shoe, crunching, staring up at me among the shattered glass.

Dad waited at the entrance to the station where a little boy stood alone crying, his mouth opened in a bright red square. Everyone ignored him. Perhaps it was a common scene. A child abandoned in a public place, left while the child is absorbed in the detail of some small thing: A boy on his knees looking into a crack in the sidewalk, watching the tops of commuters' heads marching by on the sidewalks that run along the subways below, debating whether or not to spit into the hole. A young girl standing before a cardboard box overflowing with puppies, mesmerized, as the mothers fall into a crowd that carries them away like an ocean, and the children are left afloat on their own lonely raft.

In the 1980s, it is said, an average of ten children were abandoned on the streets every day.

"That's the price of becoming a first-world country," Dad said.

"It's the culture," Ma said.

She paused in front of the woman bent over a sign asking for spare change whom I could not see from our hotel room. Even while standing right beside her, I still did not see

her, or the baby on her back, as if they were camouflaged, blending right into the sidewalk. The rounded peak of the baby's gray egg-head poked out of the cloth.

Ma pointed and said, "See. See what would have happened to you if your mother hadn't given you up? Aren't you glad we adopted you? Aren't you glad you didn't end up like that?"

She wagged her finger back and forth, making it unclear to me which one I was supposed to be looking at, which one I might have become—the woman begging or the child on her back? Then Ma dropped a coin into the beggar's cup, and towed me away to the train.

I remember the night Ma wanted to tell Dad she was serious about adopting. He was three hours late coming home. Every time she thought she heard his car in the driveway, she leaped up and hit "Start" on the microwave again, so that by the time the garage door actually peeled itself away from the concrete, I was sure Dad's rice had turned to gravel.

"I have something to tell you," Ma had wanted to say. But he passed through the kitchen too quickly. The brass clasps flipped open on his briefcase as he hummed along to some new country hit, the kind of music Ma could not stand. He returned from his den with a glass of cheap wine. The TV was on. Ma clattered the dishes into the sink. The hard running water splattered grease onto the wall.

Practically yelling over toy commercials, Ma said, "I just cleaned the living room, so don't leave anything lying around." *Rub-a-dub doggie. Sweet little doggie.* "I have to pick up all day after you guys. My back is starting to hurt from bending over all the time. And so much driving. Rich, can't you take her to the dentist tomorrow?"

No one bothered to turn the volume down, so accustomed were we to taking in everything at once. Dad hummed along to the commercial. *Love to take a bath with you.* With his bowl held up to his chin, he shoveled his food in lightning fast with chopsticks, dropping crumbs on a photo of the Raiderettes on the paper beneath his elbow on the table. He swiped the rice to the floor.

"I'll be away next week. Business. What am I supposed to do? Pass the broccoli."

Ma shut off the faucet. The TV sounded even louder. *Because two in the bathtub is better than wah-ah-ah-un.* Dad crunched up the cartilage on the end of his drumstick. He opened his mouth and showed me his chewed-up food. I giggled, snapping his jaw closed with my hand.

"You travel too much. If you died in a plane crash ..." Ma peeled off the yellow dish gloves, smacking them hard against the sink. *Sweet little doggie ...* She switched off the TV. "I have something I need to tell you." I wanted that toy. "I think we should adopt another child. Now, Rich. Before it's too late. For Cindy. She needs a sister. Someone who will always be there for her when we're gone."

Dad stared at her with his mouth slightly open, as the newspaper slipped off the table and came apart on the ground.

At the Sacred Heart Orphanage in Pusan, my new sister waited, standing at the end of the line.

The nuns only called her when she was bad. When she cried, when she fought, when she took the Lord's name in vain. "Aigu, Yoon-eh-o." They smacked her forehead, shoving her into the closet with the buckets and boots. "You be quiet in there! You be quiet! Or you stay in there forever!"

Yoon called for "ah mah," for the soft pouch of her belly beside her when she used to dream. "Ah mah." A face that she would have forgotten. Yoon was afraid of the silence. She feared the nuns and the pigeons that pecked at her feet, looking into her beady eyes with their beady eyes, as if her eyes were crumbs.

The nuns come at her with their small picture album, jabbing at each photo with a finger against the laminated page. *Thwack*. "Look. Your new sister." *Thwack*. "Look. Your new house. See. Father. 'Dad.'" *Thwack*. "'Mom.'" *Thwack*. "'Pets.' Do you know 'pets'? Dog. Cat. Fish. Look." *Thwack*. "Hamster."

And every night, Yoon dreamt—beady eyes, little teeth, tiny claws. Hamster, hamster, hamster.

For our convenience, the adoption agency sent Yoon from the orphanage in Pusan to a foster home near Seoul. But we were delayed and Yoon had to stay longer than anticipated with her foster family—her first time ever living with an actual family, as far as we knew. She became attached.

When we got to Suwon, the foster mother welcomed us inside. "O so o sip see o." Ma scanned the apartment for the toys we sent, but they were nowhere to be seen.

"Where's Jenny?" Ma whispered to Dad.

"Abeoji! Abeoji!" the foster mother yelled. "Yobo!"

Footsteps paused behind an accordion wall that turned the one room into two. It slid back and a child emerged through a thin opening. I recognized the beak-like mouth and the beady eyes. But her long hair had been butchered into a chipped bowl cut. Her stomach protruded shell-like and her limbs were spindly, dark, and ashy, covered in scabs like those kids on the UNICEF box. Dad smiled with only his teeth, as if he wasn't sure what to do with the rest of his face. Ma feared she was no Jenny. I could tell by how she pulled her chin into her neck, retracting.

I shouted, "My sister!"

Yoon stared at the ground. She shrugged her shoulders up to her ears. Her T-shirt rose above her belly button, exposing an obscene dangling protrusion. Her shirt fell back down, dropping the curtain on her outie like it was something never meant to be seen.

"Every day," the social worker said, "we show Yoon photo album."

Yoon climbed onto her foster mother's lap, snuggling into her.

"What album?" Dad asked.

The foster mother stood up and brushed Yoon out of her skirt like a crumb.

"The ones I have you send of your family! Remember?" She laughed.

But he did not remember. I was the one who took most of the pictures. I was the one to assemble the album.

In the same voice Ma used to coax the cat into its carrier, she called, "Jenny. Come sit down next to Momma. Come on. How do you say 'come' again?"

The months leading up to our trip, we had a Korean-language tutor. But none of us retained a thing, until the foster mother returned with a plate full of watermelon and we all exclaimed, “Su pak,” our memories somehow jogged.

Yoon snatched up a slice with each hand, juice dripping down her arm. I extended my hand out to her like I wanted to shake. She tilted her head and looked at me with the eyes of an uncertain bird. I grabbed her wrist while she gripped her melon and shook her arm up and down.

“Pleased to meet you,” I said, and she laughed, her face brightening, seeming to bloom.

A stuffed bear sailed through the air, almost landing on the plate. A little boy withdrew his head from behind the partition. Yoon picked up the bear with her elbows.

“I bought that for you!” I said, pointing at myself, then pointing at the bear.

“Kome,” she said, and I remembered the word for bear.

Ma surveyed the room again, perhaps in hopes that the pricey German Steiff dog she sent might be located. “Come sit down next to Momma,” she tried again. But Yoon did not respond.

Yoon ate her melon down to the rind. Pink juice dripped off her elbow, leaving sticky spots on the floor. A fly landed on the back of Yoon’s hand and began to feed, its multitude of eyes fixed on all of us. Yoon glanced up between bites to watch us watching her. Ma took out a tissue and was about to spit in it to wipe Yoon clean, as if Yoon was already her daughter. Instead, she dabbed at her own lips, and zipped the tissue into her purse.

“Jenny,” Ma said, but the child would not look up at her.

On our way back to the hotel, Ma kept insisting that we call her “Jenny” to help her move on and become a new person, more American.

“Jenny,” Ma said again into the vanity.

I watched the lights from the flares on the plaza below flicker across my queen-sized bed, soon to hold another body, and then I quickly fell asleep.

After a week in Seoul and another visit with Yoon, I was beginning to understand more Korean, catching words like snippets of a dream. I was able to notice more of my surroundings: so many streams gushing right through the city puddling into ponds; people missing limbs, missing eyes, lying on the ground beside soldiers standing with machine guns constantly glancing up at the sky.

On the way to the adoption agency to pick up Yoon, the taxi driver smiled at me in the rearview, and for a second, I felt recognized. The waiting room was packed with women and kids. Yoon sat in the corner in a new white polka-dotted dress.

Ma picked up Yoon’s small hands and said cheerily, “You ready to come live with us, Jenny?”

Yoon yanked her hands to her sides. A strange mewing sound leaked out of her. The foster mother said something to her in Korean that I heard as, “Go away now. You no more Korean.”

The adults left and walked into an office with a glass wall. We could see them shaking hands, flipping papers, smiling in strained thin lines. At the opposite end of the

waiting room, there was a long bench. Many women sat squished across the long line of it. Their shoulders overlapped. Their elbows knocked as they struggled to hold children in their arms. More women squatted on the floor. Some just stood, rocking. An infant squalled, its fat face puckered. Yoon slipped backward on the metal fold-out chair. Her feet stuck straight out from the seat. I couldn't tell if she looked sad or just uncomfortable.

"Yoon?" I said. "I'm your new sister, Cindy. Can you say, 'Cindy'?"

I had imagined that she would come with a little suitcase like Paddington Bear, full of curiosity. But she held nothing but a sun hat in her hands. "Yoon?" I didn't know what to say to her. I longed for my friends who had by now graduated, standing on the playground singing, "*We are the world. We are the children,*" for our ceremony, and eating cotton candy from a rented machine.

"Hey, Yoon."

She picked at a scab on her leg. A baby with its chin resting on its mother's shoulder stared at us. Yoon bent down and pulled a stuffed animal out from under her seat. She smiled down and rocked it, speaking to it in a sweet soothing tone.

You're okay, baby. You're okay. Your mother will be back for you. Soon. Soon. Don't cry. No cry.

"Kome," I said.

She looked up at me with a serious expression, held out the bear and boomed, "Kome."

"Kome," I repeated, booming like her.

I poked the bear in its belly and we giggled. She passed him to me and I rocked him the way she had. With its head nestled in the crook of my arm, feet against the palm of my hand, I sang, "*Rock-a-bye baby in the treetop. When the wind blows the cradle will rock.*"

I passed the bear back and Yoon sang something in Korean with a voice so tender that I almost cried. We each took one arm of the bear and made him do funny dances across our outstretched legs. We fed him our fingertips and bent his legs so he could poop. That really made us laugh.

I became bored and left to walk around the crowded room toward the wooden bench, slipping past the mothers soon to give up their children. Above the bench was a photograph in a gilded frame. It was a snapshot of an airplane filled with children. Row after row of babies strapped to car seats, toddlers with hands in their laps, older kids barely younger than me, maybe even older, waiting for the plane to take off. Or perhaps they were already in the air hovering above the ocean, leaving a part of themselves scattered across the sea. Each face was in some sort of distress. And I wondered where that plane was headed, and if one of those babies was me. How many planeloads of children had been sent overseas? Then a boy bumped into me, saying something to me in Korean, staring at me with deep black eyes, and in that moment, more than anything, I longed to understand what was being spoken.

On the curb of departures, the AC blasted into the hot screaming air. Our taxi driver put our luggage on the curb. He handed Yoon and me our small packs, looking at us like we were lost children heading in the wrong direction. In fact, everyone looked at us in this way. Perhaps they thought we were locals in the company of foreigners. Sometimes, they

would say something to me in Korean that I couldn't understand while Yoon just stood there mute, staring at the ground.

Yoon wouldn't answer to "Jenny," and every time Ma touched her, she screamed.

"Hold still, Jenny." "I'm just trying to fix your barrette, Jenny." "Uh-uh, don't do that, Jenny. That's not okay." And Yoon would scream bloody murder.

"You can never have enough snacks to get through a fourteen-hour plane ride," Ma said, pulling her suitcase alongside the moving sidewalk. *Clack, clack, clack, clack, clack, clack.* "Is that how long the flight is, Rich? Rich? Hold up."

"Something like that," he said, smiling down at Yoon. He was cheery.

While we waited to board the plane home, Yoon played with the sagging cord separating the different categories of waiting people. She swung it like a jump rope. The base of the poles bumped up and down when the red rope arced. The other passengers looked at her nervously, probably imagining her rocking the plane just like that in the air. Which, to be honest, she could probably do with the volume of her voice.

"Uh-uh, Jenny. Don't touch," Ma said. "No, no. Don't scream."

Our seats were located in the back of the plane. I gave Yoon the window and sat between her and Ma—the demilitarized zone. Already they fought about everything. Dad was in a whole different row. Ma yanked the belt out from under Yoon, brushing her with her hand, making Yoon cry.

"Jenny. I'm just trying to help you put on your seat belt."

I was kneeling on the cushion that doubled as a life preserver and so I saw it all: The tops of the passenger's heads swivel toward us as Yoon screamed and thrashed. Ma trying, repeatedly, to force the belt on. The stewardesses flocking elsewhere, eyeing the problem from a safe distance. The man in front of us, shriveling as Yoon kicked the back of his seat one more time. Dad unwrapping the headphones and clamping them firmly over his ears.

"You have to wear it, Jenny. We're departing."

Yoon swatted at the belt in Ma's hands.

"Can't you do something?" Ma said to me in a tone that indicated this was all my fault. I glared back as if to say, "You were the one who wanted to adopt her."

Dad flipped through his complimentary magazine, probably listening to New Country.

"Jenny," Ma pleaded, while staring over at him.

Yoon was a hysterical ball on the floor, rolling around as much as space allowed. Dad sighed and put his magazine back in the pocket behind the airplane seat. He unbuckled himself and hoisted Yoon up as easily as an airline blanket slipped to the floor. Without looking at her, he pressed his forearm into her, compressing her like an overstuffed suitcase, and snapped her in. The engines fired. We angled upward and she wailed as we rose into the air.

Seoul turned miniature beneath us. Each light bulb lit up its own little world, shimmering behind a blanket of exhaust. I pictured myself in one of those worlds, inside one of those houses—What would my life have been like? Who would I have been?—realizing how quickly a thing is lost. Tears streamed down Yoon's face and soon I began

crying too, drowning us—an ocean of tears between us like two seas separated but of the same water, unstoppable.

Dad turned in his seat to face Ma and said of me, “I didn’t think she’d be so jealous so soon.”

To pass time, Yoon and I ate as many complimentary snacks as we could. We watched movies. I dribbled Sprite onto Kome’s faded brown fur then mopped it up with Korean Air napkins. I held Yoon’s hand, singing lullabies to her that she might have once sung to her bear, until her head dipped, landing heavily on my arm, where it remained for hours.

I must have dozed too, because the next thing I knew, people were taking off their seat belts before the seat belt light had been turned off. All the contents had shifted overhead, so when the bins opened, the luggage tumbled into the aisles. Dad held his duffel to his chest. He walked slowly toward the exit, staring straight ahead. Ma followed, glancing back briefly, giving me a wide-eyed look that said, “You know where to find me.”

“Ma!” I called, but the distance between us kept growing and soon she was gone.

I don’t think she meant to leave us. I just think she was done with the belts. Or with Yoon. I mean, Ma was right: “She’s no Jenny.” Which is what she said to people when they asked her how things were going. “Well, she’s no Jenny.” Or even, “She’s no Cindy,” or, “We’re thinking of sending her back,” as if you could even return a child.

I picked each rice cracker crumb out of the cracks of our cushions and stuffed them all into my mouth. “Come on, Yoon. E-lee-wa. We’re home. Let’s go.” I reached to unbuckle her and she snarled, threatening me with her teeth.

“Yoon,” I said. “You can take your seat belt off now.” She smashed her face against the window. “Yoon. Yoon,” I kept calling. Eventually she looked up, leaving a print of her face on the plastic oval pane, and I knew that she didn’t believe we had landed. I knew that she thought we’d soon be right back up in the air, going elsewhere. I walked backward down the aisle all the way to the tarmac and stood there for a long long time, for all of eternity, just watching her—a four-and-a-half-year-old girl with a bag of complimentary peanuts, sitting in a window seat all by herself, her waning moon of a face pressed across the sky—until she was nothing but a thin white line breaking into clouds.

I mean, it didn’t actually happen like this. Yoon followed. She had no choice. We are family. Things worked out and they didn’t. But in a way, this is exactly how it happened. There are still 600 planeloads of children drawing lines in the sky, held up on the bent back of an old woman kneeling on a thin slice of sea. I know this is true because I have no memory of landing.

Lift and Carry

LESLIE MASLOW

FICTION

Sophie watched her neighbor Bert tie a silver foil balloon to his mailbox. It was New Year's Eve and the Freundlichs were having their annual bash. Every year she and Nat joked about ways to get out of the party, but this year there was no question of Nat's going. He had been diagnosed with lung cancer nine months earlier.

"So, what are you wearing?" he asked.

"Yeah, right."

All day long he'd teased Sophie, as if her attendance was somehow a given. In truth, she hated even joking about leaving him home. Nat was the one who loved parties. He would have gone if he could have rolled his oxygen tank in tow, as he'd done a few weeks earlier to teach his last history class at St. Edith's College.

"C'mere," he said, patting the bed.

Nat's shoulder blades poked through his thin white T-shirt, making him look boyish, even feminine—a far cry from her huggable, white-bearded Santa, her great lover of food and drink and smoke.

Sophie sat down, kicked off her shoes.

"I'm not leaving you alone," she said.

"Dawn's around," he said.

"We gave her the night off," she said.

"She just texted me she'll be here."

"On New Year's Eve? That's sad," Sophie murmured.

Dawn was their new helper, a nearly six-foot-tall college student who had been the only candidate strong enough to lift Nat without having to use the Hoyer crane. It was a device he said made him feel like an arcade toy.

On the TV, a trio of stranded astronauts stood at the mouth of a cave looking at hundreds of silver orbs. One of them stepped forward.

"You're dead, mate," Nat said.

Sophie pressed her face in his arm.

A few hours later, she watched the flames of the Freundlichs' fireplace dancing on the curve of her wineglass, amazed that Nat had prevailed upon her. After his nap he'd turned serious. First it had been to bring back gossip. Then to get pot gummies from Dave Scher. When asked why Dave couldn't put them in the mailbox, he'd said, "I just want you to have fun."

In a small voice, she'd said, "I have fun with you."

The Freundlichs' "great room" looked like a mogul's Montana ranch with massive furniture, soaring ceiling, and exposed beams. Sophie had forgotten that this party had always been fun for one very important reason: alcohol.

She found Dave at the kitchen island tapping an empty seltzer bottle against his strong, healthy thigh. People around him sucked on skinny vape pens. Hopping up on a tall stool, Sophie twisted from side to side with her feet dangling as Dave showed her the gummies in a fancy black metal container.

"Tell him one for nausea, two for appetite, and three to laugh his ass off," Dave said.

He reached in the pocket of his blazer and pulled out a vape pen.

"And this is for you."

"Oh god, no," Sophie said. "But thanks."

"You quit?" he said.

"I can't handle it. I mean, I have fun but then it all comes back."

"Aw, Soph," Dave said, hugging her.

She enjoyed the feeling of his strong, warm body with no IV lines or ports to watch out for.

She had an odd thought. Nat, in sending her to Dave, had been matchmaking. She pulled herself away.

At 11:35 p.m., Sophie began edging her way through the crowd toward the front door.

"You're not leaving, are you?" Bert called.

"Just going to check on Nat," she lied.

A full moon beamed down on a windless, brilliantly cold night. Sophie bounded across the ankle-deep powder of the yard to the strip of woods that sloped down from the Freundlichs' house to their own. From above, Nat and Sophie's split-level ranch looked like a Monopoly piece. She descended with weightless strides and champagne joy, grabbing onto thin pine trees, punching through the crust of snow with her heels. She was excited to tell Nat about the party and thought about ways to embellish the utterly predictable things she'd seen. She would go straight to him, coat on, boots off, argyle socks, and the long, plaid '70s skirt he loved. He'd smell the freshness of the night on her cheek.

As she bounded out of the woods, she saw the flickering blue light of the television in the gaps between the paper blinds of his room. She jogged to a halt in the yard and noticed a strange, Godzilla-like shadow against the blinds. She went to the window, cupped her hands against the glass, and looked inside.

Nat was riding Dawn piggyback.

At first, Sophie thought maybe Dawn was just transferring him from the bed to his easy chair. But she kept walking around the room while Nat clung to her. From time to time, Dawn gave him a boost, or turned so he could see his reflection in the mirror.

He had an expression Sophie had never seen before. His eyebrows were arched, his face a mix of pain and rapture. Beneath his navy-blue terry-cloth robe, he wore only boxer shorts and Gold Toe socks, pulled neatly to his emaciated calves. Sophie had bought that robe for him at the Four Seasons in Washington. It was open and loose. The belt dragged behind them on the carpet like a tail.

Nat said something. Dawn lowered him onto the bed and settled him against the pillows. A damp curlieue of his hair was plastered to his forehead. He looked exhausted. As Dawn pulled the sheets up, Nat, eyes still closed, groped for her hand and kissed it. Honoring her, as if she was some sort of goddess.

Dawn suppressed a laugh. With her free hand, she pointed the remote control toward the TV and began channel surfing.

At a momentary loss, Sophie started back up the hill toward the Freundlichs', then turned a circle and went back to her own front door. She would stomp her snowy boots on the mat, make a bit of noise. Hang up her coat in the closet. Take off her boots. Go to her room and change into her pajamas.

She would not, it seemed, go to Nat all dressed up and show off her skirt and funny socks. She would not, this night anyway, share the loot from Dave or generally shoot the shit. Nor would she, it struck her, unless she wished to rouse him from sleep, ring in the New Year with Nat. Not tonight or ever again in this lifetime.

She sank down on her knees in the snow. The air was so dry she didn't feel the cold. She lay down on her back and looked out at the infinity of stars. It was almost like being on the beach.

She might have fallen asleep that way if not for a few people outside at the Freundlichs tooting faintly on noisemakers. She got up and ran to the window again. Beneath the blankets, Nat's unmoving body looked like a child's. Dawn sat in the easy chair impassively watching the celebration on TV, texting no one. Sophie could see the fireworks on TV reflected in Dawn's glasses.

Sophie woke the next day to the smell of bacon. It was still disorienting coming to each morning and seeing her old law school textbooks between the shiny coal bookends gifted to Nat by some mining history students.

A merry scene presented itself in the kitchen, with Nat leaning up against the counter whisking eggs while Dawn lowered strips of cooked bacon on paper towels.

"Well, look who's up!" Nat cried.

He waved Sophie over and kissed her with fond, dewy eyes. She gave him a pleasant, dry look.

"Good morning," she said.

A pixel of merriment seemed to go out of his eyes.

At the table as they ate, Dawn chattered about her crop of chili peppers. Sophie didn't notice anything different in her.

"With cold frames I could conceivably have enough habaneros to use half for hot sauce and half for deer repellent," Dawn said.

"You could call it 'Near Deer,'" Nat said.

"That doesn't make sense," Dawn said.

“Deer Away”? ‘Hot Hoofs’?” he asked.

She thought Dawn’s laugh sounded a little forced. But then, so did hers.

In the afternoon, Sophie joined Nat as he was watching a documentary. He didn’t even feign curiosity about the party. She tried to work up the nerve to say something. As the camera panned across grainy black-and-white photographs of stern-faced settlers, a somber voiceover described how members of the Donner party had learned to cut strips of flesh from the deceased.

“Ugh,” Sophie said.

“I’d do it,” Nat said. “I’d do it in a heartbeat.”

“I’ll *bet* you would,” she said.

“I’ll bet *you* would,” he shot back.

“Why?” she asked coldly.

He began nibbling her arm like a cob of corn all the way to crook of her elbow where it tickled. She shrieked.

“Stop!” she begged. She was afraid she was going to knock him over.

Nat made voracious eating sounds.

“Stop!!” she screamed.

She thought of Dawn hearing them, and how it might feel, and then hated that she was worrying about that. She twisted away from Nat. He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

“I hope you’re not bothering Dawn every night,” she said.

Nat froze.

“What?” he said.

“I know what you do with her.”

A blush crept up his neck to the roots of his hair. Something ticklish and wild stirred in Sophie’s chest. She wanted to hit him and hug him at the same time.

“What would you like me to say?” he asked.

“‘Sorry’?” she suggested.

“She doesn’t mean anything. Not in that way.”

“Obviously, or you wouldn’t risk making her wanna quit,” she said.

Nat turned an even deeper shade of red.

“Ask her. I promise you. I gave her the choice, I promise you.”

“We pay her. We house her. She isn’t at *liberty* to choose.”

Nat hung his head.

“Right,” he said softly. “Okay.”

The humidifier hissed in the silence.

“You know,” she said hoarsely, “*I* could carry you.”

Nat looked at her with a defensive smile like a teenage boy who didn’t know if he was being flirted with or made fun of. His eyes darted toward the TV and then back again.

“I could,” she said.

“I might just take you up on that,” he said.

Sophie had heard him say the same thing recently to someone else, in that same tone of voice. It had been Dawn, in fact. When she’d offered to read Nat’s palm.

The next day he developed a slight fever. The question of antibiotics came up again. This time, he didn't want to take them or, for that matter, one of his medications. The visiting hospice nurse coached Sophie and Dawn on how to manage it.

Then an odd thing happened. A few days later, he seemed to improve, moving about the house more easily. He even had a glow. The hospice nurse told Sophie this often happened because, without some of his medications, he *had* improved a little. She was warned it was only temporary.

"How temporary?" Sophie asked.

It would be best not to think in terms of months.

One night when Dawn was out, Sophie knocked on Nat's open door.

"Hey," she said.

"Look at these morons," he said gleefully at something on the news.

"I'd like to help you," she said, her voice catching.

His smile froze.

"Look," she said, flexing her bicep. "I'm using your TheraBands."

"Jesus," he said, his face tight and cheerful, "It's a grapefruit."

"Feel my leg," she said.

He patted it.

To be humored like that. She sat, watching the eternal television with wide, unblinking eyes. There were cars on fire, women wailing, Viagra commercials. She couldn't move. Neither of them spoke. As the minutes passed, an intense desire flared up in her that he would die quickly. Better that way.

In the periphery of her gaze, she saw Nat raise an arm. The TV went dark. His legs whispered across the sheets as he pulled himself to the edge of the bed. He gestured for her to stand in front of him and turned her to face the windows. In the glass she saw his ghostly image wobbling on the mattress behind her.

"Come a little closer, honey," he said.

Piece by piece, he lowered himself onto her back, first gripping her hips with his knees, hanging his arms over her shoulders. His weight pressed down on her.

"Use your legs," he cautioned.

She was petite, Nat a good thirty pounds heavier. Still, it was possible for her to carry him. With a staggering jerk of one leg forward, she began to walk around the room. She lurched toward the dresser, over to the TV, and back along the windows to the bed, making a circle. She felt ridiculous, but it was real. It was happening between them. She tried not to let her voice sound strained.

"Should I do anything else?"

"No, you're doing fine," he replied.

In a far corner of the house the washing machine began thudding softly against the dryer.

"Want to go out in the hall?" she asked.

"Sure."

She carried him down the corridor and into the guest bedroom, fighting her buckling knees. She bet Dawn had never taken him out of his room. She probably wouldn't even have thought of it. Sophie could take him anywhere he wanted. The kitchen. The backyard, even. Thinking he might enjoy the adventure, she carried him into the guest bathroom and opened the cabinet doors so he could see himself reflected endlessly in the mirrors. As she opened the cabinet, she glanced at his face. His eyes were sad and aware, not closed in rapture. His expression was patient, as if he was enduring a game he didn't want to play.

The energy drained from her. The full force of his weight made her almost sink to the floor. She turned away. Now the mirror reflected only their receding image: him, clinging, slowly slipping down, and her, limping, hoping to make it to the bedroom before his toes touched the carpet.

She settled him on the pillows and pulled up the covers.

"Thanks," he said.

"Whew!" she said lightly.

She pressed her hand onto his ankle, turned on the TV, and pretended to watch with him for a moment, long enough to save them both from embarrassment as the weatherman lectured about the weather tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that—a whole row of smiling suns, puff-cheeked winds, and teardrop clouds.

For the last six weeks of Nat's life, Dawn slept on the easy chair in his room. Most of the time, Sophie left them alone, and when she did go downstairs, she made sure they heard her coming.

She helped Nat organize his papers, then began searching through things, not sure what she was looking for. She took books from the shelves and turned them upside down, hoping a receipt or forgotten piece of paper would flutter down. She had no patience for their photo albums and the all-too familiar images: Sophie muddy in a garden on all fours, weeding. Nat, perpetually chunky in a cap and gown at a lectern. A blurry couple, newly wedded, waving from a chairlift, unaware that they both weren't that into skiing anymore.

One day she caught Dawn standing at the office desk looking at one of the albums.

"I'm sorry!" Dawn said, stepping back and blushing.

"That's what it's for!" Sophie said.

She took the page Dawn was closing and opened it again. There was a picture of Nat at a party talking to a thin, elderly man in a light blue jacket. The man held a voice-generator to his throat.

"That's Nat's Dad," Sophie said.

"Was he a coal miner?" Dawn asked.

"Actually, yes." Sophie said, looking at her.

"My grandfather had an electrolarynx too. From the coal dust. And cigarettes."

"Horrible sound," Sophie said, shivering.

"I mean!" Dawn laughed. "Actually, to me it was just Paw-Paw."

Sophie showed Dawn more pictures of people and places until they got to the last page, a photo of Nat giving his final speech at St. Edith's. The rest of the album was empty.

After Dawn left, Sophie turned the empty pages. It felt wrong to show Dawn that the album ended with a picture from three months ago. As if Dawn had never existed, as if the life they were all living together right now didn't count.

Nat and Sophie had been together for only fifteen years. They had been joyful years, said the pictures. After gloomy first marriages, each had found this new great thing—a life spent together, busy with loving. Being freed into this new thing, loving, had made them compatible. But Nat was dying now. Something else was called for. She could, of course, just go on with the pleasure of loving him. There would be no shame in that.

One night, toward the end, a Nor'easter slammed the Mid-Atlantic. There had already been seven inches of fine, dense snow. Another six to eight were expected. Sophie put on a winter coat, boots, and a hat and stepped outside. Pellets of snow blew sideways against a glowing, tangerine sky. She went to Nat's window, knelt, and put her mittens against the glass.

Dawn sat on the bed cradling Nat. His hand rested on her collarbone, splayed and relaxed, like an infant's. She gave him sips of water from a light-blue child's spill-proof cup shaped like an elephant.

Sophie felt like boiling water was pouring down the inside of her chest. Nat was as far away from her as one person could be from another. Had Dawn shopped for that cup at the Walmart? Was it her idea or had Nat asked for it? Had he explained his desire in his calm, rational way? Had he blushed?

Dawn was into it this time, rocking Nat gently, sometimes whispering things to him. *His death will be a shock for her*, Sophie thought. A total, devastating shock. For herself too. It was a comfort to think she could ask Dawn to stay. It was a comfort to think she could sit at the window for as long as she wanted. There would be time enough tomorrow to be with Nat in his dying, holding his hand and petting his hair and whispering in his ear.

Sophie took off her mitten, touched her face, and grew afraid. It was impossible for her to remain outside. She managed to get on one knee and rested there like someone proposing, bracing her hands on her thigh, readying herself for the final effort.

"Goodbye," she whispered to the peeling paint, the window, the hole in the snow burnt by her body, to Nat, to Dawn. "Goodbye."

With a small groan, she pushed herself up, brushed the snow from her coat and made her way inside.

Deconstructing the Deconstructed

MIRKA WALTER

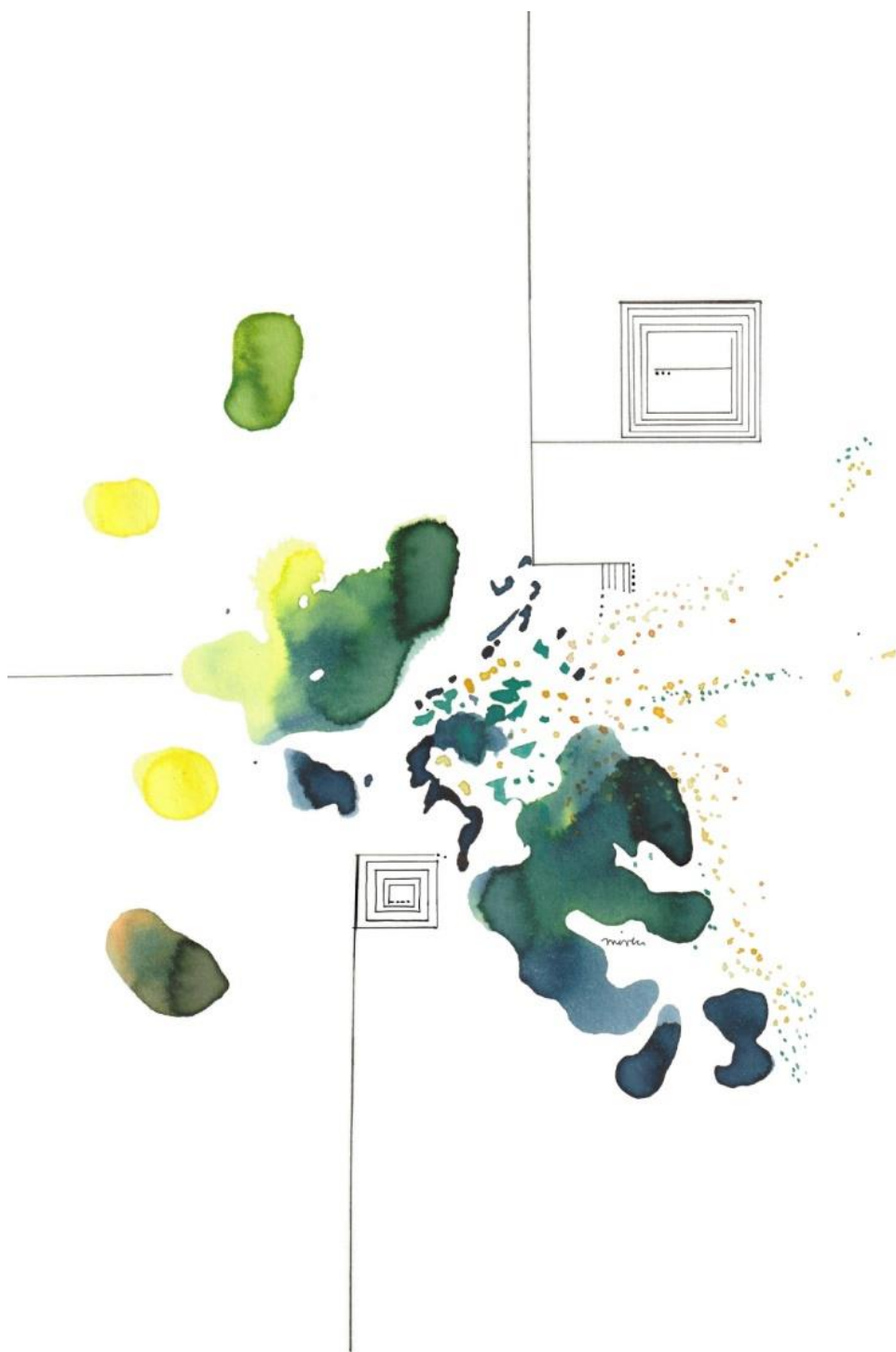
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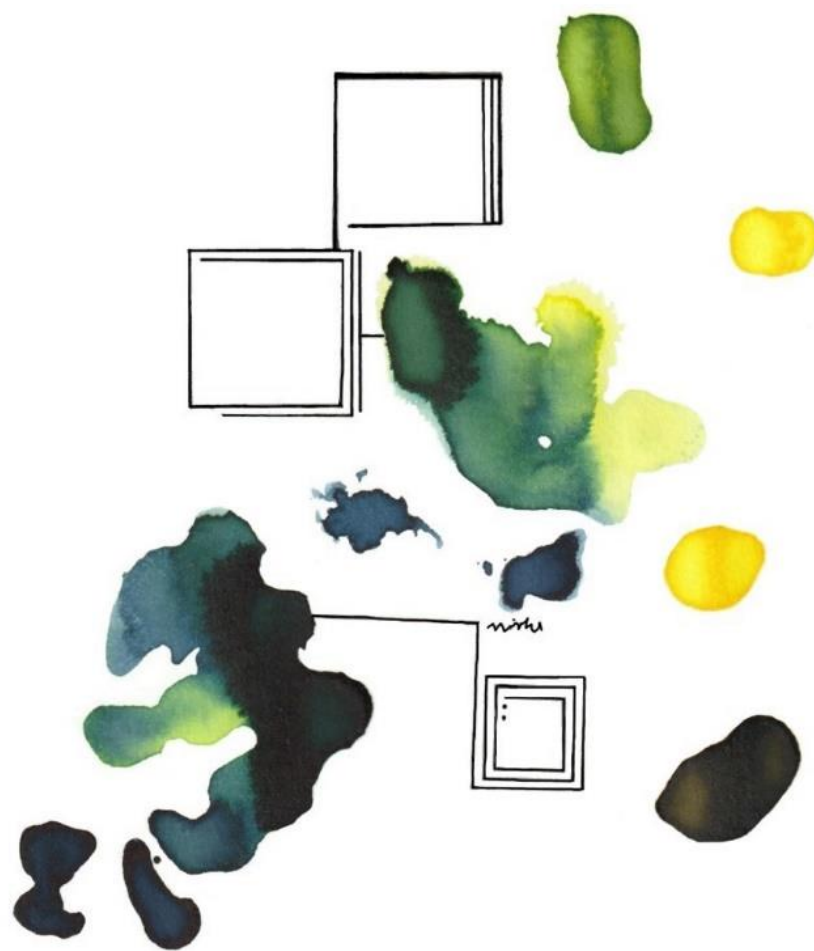
Mirka Walter, *Deconstructing the Deconstructed*, 2022. Liquid watercolor and ink on paper, 11 7/10 x 8 3/10 inches



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In the Morning, I Hear Singing ...

LIO MIN

FICTION

Yoona doesn't scare easily. But when she spots Marisol sitting under the flickering halo of the block's lone streetlamp, she gasps. Catches it at the last moment and coughs it out, the sounds ricocheting through the brittle evening. There are many remarkable things about this sight: Marisol's body, curled into itself at the base of the lamp, a petal on the brink of detaching. Her shawl, blacker than the surrounding night yet pulsing with an eerie luminescence, a syncopated lightning strike in concert with the spotlight's sputtering. The wrap oozing like oil over Marisol's hospital gown, which glows uranium green in the half-light, even though Yoona knows for a fact it's an overly optimistic shade of dandelion yellow.

It's Marisol's smile, which she aims slowly and languidly like the breeze of an oscillating fan, that catches Yoona off guard the most. The old woman's lips split widely and warmly, and Yoona realizes for the first time that Marisol has a wide gap between her front teeth. Actually no, the part that startles Yoona the most, what tips this encounter from a pedestrian walk home into a major miracle, is that just a few hours ago, she'd watched the night nurses ease Marisol's code-blue body out of the bed that had been her home for decades. In tribute, Yoona's supervisor had blasted music throughout the facility's overhead speakers, which normally only handled the monotone of official hospice business. The music that poured out from the ceiling had sounded as bewildering as a coyote's howl in a city, or a rainbow appearing at night.

Marisol begins to stand up. Despite knowing the older woman can't feel any pain or, at this point, anything, Yoona rushes over. These tentative motions remind her of the moment she realized her parents weren't just aging but actually old—the white-knuckled grip her father used to pass her a basket of laundry, the slight hesitation between her mother's steps up the church stairs. She'd always lower her eyes or look away at these confirmations of their infirmity, but as she takes a seat next to Marisol on the curb, Yoona openly gawks.

There should be no surprises between them, or at least not for Yoona. In the year she's been living on the island—a splat of land neither far from nor near the Iberian Peninsula—the only person she's felt close to is Marisol. Some of this is because Yoona is so obviously temporary, the only person here paler than burnished bronze, whose tight, thin lips stumble over rolled r's and verb tenses, who doesn't laugh quickly enough at jokes or smile about, well, anything. The other part is because after she answered the desperate ad that'd been stapled to a telephone pole, Yoona had walked into the hospice for her interview and caught sight of Marisol's living ghost—the coma-bound body of the most

influential person in Yoona's life. Since that fateful discovery, Yoona had drawn the circumference of her days around the rise and fall of Marisol's chest.

But Marisol is dead now. Yet here she is. And when Marisol whispers, in a voice as thin as the skin of the palm she presses against Yoona's stockinged knee, "Nice night, yes?" Yoona shocks them both with a piercing, startled laugh. Marisol's smile stretches further, the apples of her cheeks almost kissing her dancing, sunken eyes.

"Is strange, I know."

"Sorry. I shouldn't ... Sor—Yes. Yes, it is. A nice night."

Marisol pats Yoona's knee before quickly retracting her hand, which strikes Yoona as shyness. Yoona hadn't counted the rings on Marisol's fingers but their abrupt flight—the glint of their gems and metals retreating into the cave of Marisol's shawl—makes Yoona scoot down the curb a few inches.

"You scare?"

"No, I just thought ... Well. You might understand. I have a lot of questions."

"... Yes. Yes, claro."

Yoona wonders how many more times either of them can say "Yes" without confirming anything. She clicks open her purse to pull out a pack of cigarettes. It's hard to see the edges of the cellophane wrap in the unnatural light. Yoona skims her pinky nail, kept longer than the others in a perfect almond oval, over the package until the film catches, then tears.

Suddenly, Marisol's hand is back on her knee, this time palm up. How has she closed the distance between them so quickly? No, Marisol is still propped against the lamp. Yet somehow the space between them has collapsed again, bringing Yoona back to Marisol's side. Yoona blinks quickly a few times, then clumsily rips open the carton and fumbles for a cigarette, which she places in Marisol's palm.

The hand retracts again, but this time, it comes home to Marisol's mouth, where the cigarette now seesaws, the butt wedged in the gap between the front teeth. Yoona slowly brings her own cigarette up to her face and wraps her lips around the intrusion.

"Doctor should not smoke."

"I work in the kitchen. And you shouldn't, either. If you ... can."

Marisol spits the cigarette out. It flies farther than Yoona expects and rolls slowly down the slope of the street until it tumbles beyond the guard rails separating the road from the river. There's no splash to the fall. The ambient lights of distant boats lace the black water like a sonogram. Yoona wonders how cold the water is, or how warm it could be. She spits her own cigarette out, but it lands limply on the worn off-white fabric of her uniform skirt. A small stain spreads from the end that'd been in her mouth.

"You know me. So you see me. Back there."

"... Yes. Yes, I've seen you at work, on my rounds. Saw you."

And then that thin-skinned hand props Yoona's face up at an angle, and Marisol looms. The force of the old woman's hold belies the way her body vibrates as though its strength is slowly leaking into their surroundings.

Yoona doesn't know what to do with this chance—what she might have tried to literally translate into Spanish as a "corazón a corazón" for Marisol, even though that isn't exactly right. Both of them are making earnest attempts at communication now, building a

bridge of second language. So Yoona peels the frail fingers off of her face and brings the hand between her own. And waits.

Marisol looks down at the pale rust spots on Yoona's left sleeve. Yoona had been hired for the lunch rush, but once, while washing dishes, she'd dropped a plate on the lip of the soap sink, reached for the shards beneath the bubbles, and cut her hand badly. A flower of blood had bloomed to the surface. Afterward, Yoona was reassigned to the overnight shift, leaving the hospice as the first group of day nurses waved hello. She'd tried bleach, lemon juice, toothpaste, but the stains remained.

A reminder to be careful. Careful. Marisol, alive and then suddenly not—the hospice's speakers trumpeting her departure like angels—Yoona's inability to distinguish between the two versions of "to be" in Spanish, one enduring and one ephemeral. Things feel precarious for Yoona here, or about as clear as the rim of a glass stamped with lip prints. She wishes the morning might never arrive.

"Why, you come *here*? Rock in the ocean?"

"I guess I ... wanted something different. From what I had before. So I kept running, and running, and then, well ... stopped."

A whispery giggle of disbelief. Another, and then a full swell of laughter, laughter crescendoing as a racing wind through a field of chimes, rounds of clashing harmony clanging like a crate of bottles set down too swiftly.

Yoona doesn't know why she's laughing so hard with Marisol, whose bent head makes the black veil of hair indistinguishable from the shawl that wraps around her shaking shoulders. Her face with its deep wrinkles and big gap-toothed smile bobs in and out of silky blackness, and Yoona inexplicably feels like crying. For being unable to tell the truth—that once Yoona knew Marisol was at the hospice, she thought she'd found a permanent peace. For the younger version of herself, who never could've imagined the long stretches of wandering that had led Yoona here. For the first time in years, even more so than when she had to pack up everything her parents had left behind in her childhood home.

A townhouse meant for three, then two, then one, then none. She'd emptied out closets and cabinets and chests and drawers and taken down photos and paintings and crosses before leaving everything on the street and across the small yellowing mimicry of a lawn. Everything laid out in an exquisite corpse of possessions that'd never been hers and had barely been her parents'. The only thing she took from that place was a CD, which she'd hidden inside a box filled with weathered, bulky binders.

The free hand brushes a strand of black hair out of Yoona's eye and behind her ear. One of the pointed nails clacks against a silver hoop clipped into the parabolic arch. The mouth with its carved and cratered smile doesn't move, but Marisol's voice keeps up the conversation on its own:

"You take care."

"I try to. Tried. Try."

The shadow the streetlamp makes of itself looks like a tuning fork. Marisol's quivering finger strikes the air and hits the shadow. A fuzzy hum joins the murmuring of water, the buzzing of old-world lights, and the faraway honks and bleeps of late-night life on the river and beyond.

“I want to be a singer, before I get sick.”

“You *are* a singer.”

“... You say so?”

Yoona tries not to pay attention to the shivering bird in the nest of her hands. The rings press into her flesh, and she thinks about the hammer she uses to pound chicken breasts into gummy doilies. The aluminum cold lingers in her hands no matter how many gloves she wears, a cold that trails her even after she leaves the kitchen and patrols the rest of the facility.

Except when she walked past Marisol’s room. The curtains were always drawn open; the flowers set in thin glass vases on the bedside table, windowsill, and cabinet tops were usually fresh. Yoona never saw any of Marisol’s visitors but tallied them by the bouquets that arrived in reception, the cards mailed in or left outside the security gate. She collected the lorn cards on her early-morning walks home and brought them back to the small apartment she rents from one of the nurses, where she placed these offerings in a brass-bound trunk that’s almost full. On her breaks, Yoona purposely lingered by Marisol’s room, hoping to catch even a flutter of eyelashes, short and straight, signaling dormant life within Marisol’s long sleep. And her heart swelled and spilled over, overwhelmed by the adoration she had—has—for the dandelion-bright distortion confined to the bed, buried under tubes and gauzes. Yoona’s only idol, the woman who makes heat blush back into frozen hands.

* * *

The summer Yoona discovered the CD, the first thing she latched onto were Marisol’s eyes, sheltered under the curls of what she later realized were layers of false eyelashes captured in extreme closeup. Behind their sticky thatching: pupils like dying embers, burgundy-bronze blazes ringed by white, barely visible through the scratched sheen of the jewel case cover.

Those eyes caught hers in the basement of the church where she and the other girls pored over donations, picking out the true trash from what was simply unwanted before everything got sent to country cousins as gifts. Only Yoona tried to sort with discernment. Really, the donation heap—leftovers from GIs who had long since gone home—was a scavenger’s dream, but none of the other girls cared about cast-offs. Designer charms glinted off of skinny wrists. Glossy phones shuttered loudly after every capture. But Yoona—Yoona whose parents were older than the others in her generation by a decade, who remembered war as not just stories, and gave the most to the church, Yoona who wore her socks down to threads—looked for salvation amid the salvage.

Beneath a half-unraveled cardigan—*Serafin* by Marisol. According to the inky cursive text splattered across the back of the case, ten tracks total, released in 1978 but re-released in 2004. Just old enough to be a heritage find, except when Yoona cracked it open later that night, excavating under the covers with a penlight clutched between her teeth, the disc inside was as scratched as its shell. Lichtenberg figures danced across the iridescent grooves of the silver plane, and hope, as quickly as it’d flared in her chest, faded as a sigh.

But still, she snapped the CD inside the only player in the house, a chunky khaki block. Yoona plugged in the headphones she'd taken from the church and pressed play, expecting static, skittering, the echoes of music. And at first, that was all she heard. Needles of shrapnel sounds dragging through her head like the rakes the unsmiling gardeners ran through sand around the Buddhist temple on the other side of town. A call here, a cry there, sonic arrows shot by a rubber-band bow. Melodies in their own ways but not the ways Yoona needed—any songs but God's songs, anything beyond the scraps floating from phones and cars and storefronts she passed but never entered.

And then—an angel's cry. The light fell from Yoona's mouth as her lips parted in awe. A fountain of music in the shape of a woman's plaintive ballad—a lullaby, really. So simple, a single voice with sparse guitar accompaniment that followed the vocal line. But in that instant, everything changed for Yoona. Even though she didn't understand the words being sung, she knew them. A song about longing, loving. Losing first another, then yourself.

Yoona didn't know Spanish, but she was going to learn. Yes, she would tell her father that she was rethinking the missionary calling. Yes, she would study the holy texts, but she wouldn't say whose. Yes, she'd learn the psalm of this song, the final song, the only song, a skyward ladder summoned by sloping, sticky umber eyes, promising her a path into something that, in her child's eyes, could only ever have appeared as heaven.

* * *

There's distance now. At some point the elastic space between them had taken a breath and pushed them apart, or maybe Yoona had made a mistake, speaking so feverishly, so desperately, these details about the nothingness of her life spilling like spittle from a rabid dog's jaw.

Marisol puffs her cheeks out. Yoona yearns to know what she's thinking.

"Eh ..."

Yoona feels her body lean forward. Too eager. The kind of action that'd earn her a slap across the face from her mother at the dinner table. But she's *not* a child anymore, even as the beast of adolescence peeks out from the dark cave of her heart.

"So ... the music. That is why, florás?"

Yoona forces herself to blink. Of course, or as Marisol would say, *Claro*. Marisol's body had never seen the flowers, or the cards, or the pilgrims' breaths fogging in the cold mornings as the terse security guard asked them to make space for the cars. But now, in some sort of divine projection, Marisol can finally see the fruits of the seed she planted long, long ago.

"Yes. You're famous, here. And around the world."

"No ... Yes?!"

"Mm-hm. Everybody knows your music. Especially 'Arcoiris.'"

"How? Nobody ... Songs for me, solo. Then, you know. Nothing."

It feels strange to know more about someone's legacy than they do. But then, Yoona considers, most artists don't have the chance to examine the full impact of their work before they pass.

Only superstars and geniuses, the “specials” as her parents would say, get to see the crater they’ve carved into the planet’s crust before ascending to the gilded palaces of angels and saints and other “specials,” leaving trails of glitter and smoke from the exhaust of their ascent.

For this reason, Yoona’s parents forbade her from creative pursuits. She, like them, was simply not and could never be special. Their chance to touch the clouds would come only from careful devotion, laying their bodies like lottery tickets on the altar of God and asking, but never begging, to be scratched into winners.

“I found your CD. *Serafin*. It’d been given to my parents’ church as a donation. After you ... After the fire, one of your sisters found your demos, in the ruins, and sent them to a record label and they released it, and it was a hit, here. And it was ‘rediscovered’ about a decade ago, and since then, everybody knows you. Your music, it’s ... it’s touched people. In that place where your body’s heart taps into your soul’s. It ... When I listened to your music, I felt like I’d discovered another world. Your art saved me. It made me want to live, even though my life was, it felt, at the time, unlivable.”

For the first time all night, Marisol turns away from Yoona. The night hiccups and, as though a curtain has been drawn, falls one shade darker. Yoona wishes she could swallow what she’d just said. How sad, how careless, to act as though she’d been giving Marisol a grace, something other than Yoona’s own selfish attempt at absolution. What was she thinking, pretending that by sharing her sad and unremarkable story, she was handing Marisol some kind of rose? No—Yoona has no roses, only thorns reminding her of the flowers that will never bloom for her.

But all she’d ever wanted was a rose. A flower of her own, a charm hanging off a wrist that wasn’t banded with secret scars. Yoona longed to wear her life like a neon crown, golden and fizzing like fireworks, unmistakable, unmissable, created out of some talent she didn’t have, some art she’d never make, some dream she’d never chase down like an elk at a hunt and that, unlike divine Diana, she’d never bring down with a strike to the throat. Still, she wanted strange blood running down her arms. She wanted to walk through the door and have every head turn in adulation, in fear, in disgust, in anything but the indifference that greeted her in the hallways at school, at home, in the basement where the other girls collected volunteering credits but never worked on the donations.

How much hate Yoona held in her heart for almost everyone and everything. Except Marisol, who is here, somehow, but probably not for much longer, Yoona’s only miracle, which she’d immediately poisoned with her bitterness.

“That makes me ... so ... so ... happy.”

And then Marisol’s arms are around Yoona’s shoulders again, and the bands of Marisol’s rings press into Yoona’s back. Marisol’s voice breaks as she whispers, “Thank you, thank you, thank you,” over and over, as though her prayer has been answered, as though her wish has been fulfilled.

Yoona lets Marisol’s body fall into hers, and when it keeps falling through her, when dandelion begins to melt into stained snow as black hair entangles with black shawl, Yoona forces her eyes to stay open, regular brown pupils meeting what, close up now, are also regular brown pupils, and asks the one real question that she’d always had.

“How did you write your songs?”

Marisol smiles. The gap between her teeth widens as her lips split open ear to ear, and the face that Yoona has studied like scripture begins to morph, monstrous but beautiful, as it melts toward Yoona's own.

"Oh, mi amor. Only God knows."

Then her head plunges into Yoona's, and Yoona holds her breath as decades of petrified memory crash and break over her. One hospital room becoming another becoming another becoming, finally, the hospice where Yoona began working a month after she'd moved here, where she couldn't believe her cruel luck, to finally meet the woman who'd saved her so many years ago, despite her unsavable state. When Yoona does breathe, she almost retches at the avalanche of smells, of forced cleanliness and human rot, followed by ash, smoke, metal like blood and metal like fear that death was certainly on its way, taking its time but stepping loudly, confidently, leaving flowers of fire on an early grave.

But then something sweeter emerges, a note that giggles and dances. A note that plucks guitar strings belonging to a lost father and oranges from its neighbor's garden, that shares both the fledgling songs and the ripe fruit with sisters, a mother, a grandmother, a boy who works at the bakery and slips it first pastries, then something even sweeter. A note that cries when a grave is dug for the baby that didn't. A note that tears at its hair, claws at its thighs, then finally seeks shelter in cloistered stone and retreats from the sun. A note that looks out its curtained window at tall skies and serene seas and, one day, watches the fringe of a storm kiss the cheek of summer, rain falling invisibly save for the small spots appearing on roofs and awnings and the startled shouts of the people in the streets. And caught between the sea and the sadness, the music and the madness, the gore and the glory of life, it brushes the dust off its guitar, clears its throat, and tells a story.

I know you. I knew you, even when you didn't know yourself. Here, you can have these rings, and this shawl, which was my mother's, which she thought she would bury me in when they pulled my body out of the ashes. How blessed I am, that the wings of my love for the world beat fast enough to reach distant shores.

You know me. You knew me, even when I didn't know myself. There, can you feel the hours I spent learning your song? In Spanish at first but I couldn't get the pronunciations right, and I felt like a copycat, a fraud, so I translated it, hoping that you would've given me your blessing, that you'd understand the way I changed your song to still be yours, but also my own. Singing it to myself when they hurt me, when I hurt me, when I thought I was beyond saving. Your song gave me strength, and meaning, all the lessons I was supposed to learn from pain. All I'd needed was a loving teacher.

Sing it. Your style of my song.

I couldn't—

Hurry. I go, soon.

I can't—I barely remember—

You know it. You know.

Alright ... Alright then.

In the morning
I hear singing
Like a choir
Voices ringing
Tell me O God
Has this child of mine
Made it through a-
Nother evening?
Far off crying
Rain is falling
Paint the tears in-
To the drawing
And the angels
Of God reply
It's not my name
They are calling

* * *

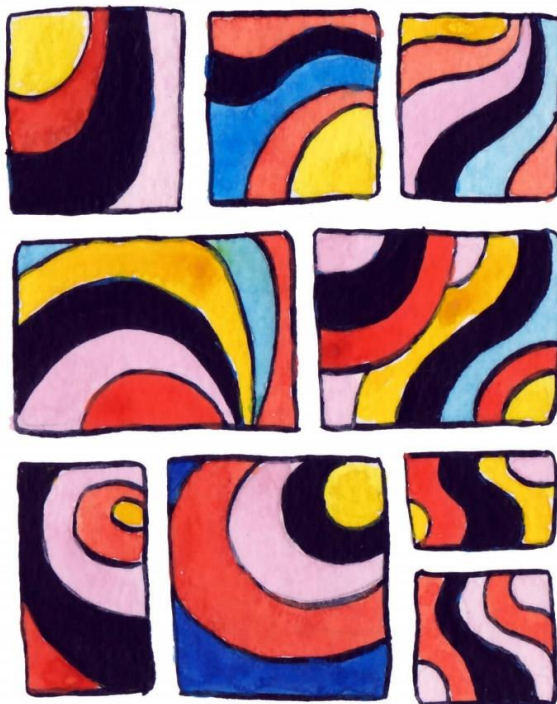
Yoona wakes to the sound of waves, but it's only the river sloshing up against its banks—no ocean, no sea, just murky green-black carpet rolling from one end of her vision to the other. Dirty, as always, but today, beautiful. As is the pack of ruined cigarettes, which she'd crushed in her hand. As is the crust she picks out of her eyes and the crusts scattered beneath the guardrails, which pigeons peck at with the fervor of fools. When she stands up, they turn toward her and shuffle in agitation until she walks past them, her footsteps landing so lightly into nothing. The budding light runs through the rails and sends out laddered shadows, splintering her body's motion into illuminated frames. Dawn flares into the jewels on her fingers, streaking the pavement with tendrils of color.

How gorgeous, and strange, and gorgeous, and cold the winter day breaks. Yoona wraps the shawl around her shoulders tighter and looks directly at the sun, which finally emerges from the sleeve of the horizon. For a moment, then a longer moment, until color begins to emerge from the white disc. Cycling in circles across its projected surface like an artifact from another time. Like dry rainbows, Yoona thinks, before lowering her eyes, letting them adjust back to the light of the living, and picking up where she'd left off on her journey home.

Poetry Comics

DAVID LASKY

COMICS



D.L.

David Lasky, *Three Short Poem Comics*, 2021–22. Pencil, ink, and watercolor on paper, 11 x 4.5 inches

The Wobble

MAX TACHIS

FICTION

“KEM-1, report,” The Controller ordered.

“Clear.”

“KEM-2, report.”

“Clear.”

“KEM-9, report.”

“Looking great, boss!”

“... ‘Clear’ will suffice, KEM-9.”

“Right! Sorry. Yes. Clear! Sorry.”

“... That’s an all-clear,” confirmed The Controller. “Await next report.”

Another report?! KEM-9 couldn’t believe their luck. I’ll nail it next time, they thought. *Clear. Clear. Clear!* Practice was going to make perfect, KEM-9 was sure of it. As if to demonstrate the point, they took another bite of hot dog—their third one out of a planned five. KEM-9 was absolutely thrilled at how well their first mission was going. *I’m eating a hot dog! In a park!* Things could not get any better for KEM-9, despite the fact that they couldn’t actually taste the hot dog and that their internal storage would have to be unceremoniously hosed clean of all food waste upon return to The Complex. It didn’t matter. The illusion of normalcy that worked so well on the humans walking by was working just as well on the psyche of KEM-9. *Psyche? Do I have a psyche?* A more apt phrase, they supposed, would be “operating system,” but it sounded less appealing. *Less romantic.*

Romantic? KEM-9 stopped short of another bite of hot dog and considered the word. It was brand-new, as far as they could tell. Never used before. But it felt right to think it. *Romantic* ... sitting outside, eating a hot dog, offering one of those polite half-smiles to the Elderly Man who just walked by. KEM-9 had practiced half-smiles for almost an hour in front of the mirror, blending in with humans, enjoying the time away from—

“KEM-1, report.”

Here it comes. Clear.

“Clear.”

“KEM-2, report.”

You’ve got this. Clear.

“Clear.”

“KEM-9, report.”

This is it. Clear!

"This is so much fun!" The groan from The Controller made the moment decidedly less fun. KEM-9 quickly corrected: "Clear! Clear. Very clear."

"... That's an all-clear," The Controller said.

Maybe they were right. KEM-9 took another bite of hot dog in an attempt to raise their spirits, but with no actual spirit to raise, they were starting to taste the tastelessness of the hot dog as it tumbled into the KEM-standard Internal Digestive Compartment. *Maybe you aren't ready to be out in the field.*

The call had come only a few hours before. Even for a mission as seemingly critical as this, a couple hours' notice wasn't out of the ordinary; KEMs are designed with sudden and efficient activation in mind. What was out of the ordinary was that KEM-9 was called at all. KEM Response Teams are selected in numerical order, the number having been assigned by a variety of factors like skill scores, assessments, experience, and the final determination of The Algorithm. Circumstances rarely dictated The Controller reach even so far as KEM-6, but today, whether by a clerical error or an unfortunate string of malfunctions, KEM-9 had finally gotten their call.

"The Algorithm has detected a slight wavering in Sector SF-12," The Controller had briefed. "You are activated for assimilation and observation only. When your pod doors open, you will proceed directly to The Inflection Point, conduct your assessment, then carry on with your programmed actions in between regular reports."

The download began immediately after that, giving KEM-9 their first experience with "The Fizz." *Finally!* KEM-9 had only heard about The Fizz in training, so named for the electrical sensation that worked its way up from the KEM data ports at base of the spine to the main processor in their skull. It was a gentle tingle, like carbonation rising from the bottom of a glass, and brought with it everything needed for mission response: actions, environmental details, how each human in play affects the timeline in question. It also provided a rare, direct view into The Algorithm, the master projection of everything that was meant to happen. *And everything that was not.* Images and tasks rapidly filled KEM-9's mind:

Park.

Buy hot dog.

Bench.

Tighten shoelaces.

Eat hot dog. Five bites total.

A Woman in a Red Hat.

A Woman in Gray Running Attire.

Stop them.

An Elderly Man: Give him a half-smile.

A Woman with a Chihuahua: Say the exact phrase, "Bout time we got some rain," when prompted by—

"We'd better get you home, Clarence! I think it's starting to sprinkle," said the Woman with the Chihuahua, to her chihuahua.

'Bout time we got some rain, KEM-9 thought, but the words wouldn't come out. They were, instead, staring at Clarence the chihuahua. Had they known the word "cute," they'd certainly have applied it here without delay.

Clarence was black but had some white coming in on his paws and face that showed both his age and a distinction that could only come from a creature with a boundless wealth of wisdom. He wore a little orange sweater that complemented the color of his coat beautifully and surely helped with the wind that was picking up, but would surely get soaked and heavy and uncomfortable after even a light rain. A sudden, urgent thought came to KEM-9 and couldn't be ignored.

"He would look so good in a little raincoat," KEM-9 said. The Woman with the Chihuahua smiled, and KEM-9 offered one of their own in return. It was an unplanned, not to mention unauthorized, facial expression, but it felt good.

"Oh, Clarence has more than enough of those at home," she replied. "Don't you, Clarence? He's such a little fashionista!"

Clarence looked up at her with a weathered gaze that seemed to affirm he had just as many raincoats as he needed. No more. No less. Fashion was not a choice to Clarence—it was a calling, and one he took far more seriously than the Woman with the Chihuahua. She laughed, and KEM-9 laughed, and Clarence felt no need, and KEM-1 broke through on the earpiece.

"We've got a wobble." *What?* KEM-9's eyes snapped down at the monitor on their wrist as Clarence and his giggling ward walked away. Sure enough, The Frequency was out of sync. Only slightly, but ... *Could it be me? Did I just—*

"KEM-1," The Controller said, "confirm misalignment."

I said the wrong thing.

"Confirmed."

"KEM-2, confirm misalignment."

I was supposed to say—

"Confirmed."

"KEM-9, confirm misalignment."

—something about the rain?

"Clear."

"... Kem-9, repeat."

"... Clear? All-clear? Right?"

"KEM-9?" The Controller asked. "KEM-1 reports and confirms misalignment. KEM-2 confirms misalignment. Are you unable to confirm?"

He sounded upset, but KEM-9 had stopped listening. *I ruined the mission. I ruined the timestream. The Algorithm is—*

Just then, a Woman in a Red Hat rounded the corner on a nearby path and came into view. KEM-9 could only stare.

"KEM-9?" The Controller repeated.

She's important.

"KEM-9, do you read?"

There's something I'm supposed to—

"KEM-9! Can you confirm the—"

"Subject A is on-site," KEM-9 interrupted, looking back at their wrist monitor and trying to stay calm.

"KEM-9, repeat."

“Subject A is on-site. I have visual.”

Subject A is the source of the wobble in The Frequency.

“KEM-1,” The Controller continued, “confirm visual on Subject A.”

“Confirmed.”

That makes sense.

“KEM-2, confirm visual on Subject A.”

“Confirmed.”

That’s why you’re here.

“KEM-9, maintain visual and report any irregularities.”

“Understood.” *Assimilate and observe.* That was all KEM-9 was cleared for. *Don’t interfere.*

“You are there to protect the outcome, not affect the outcome,” The Controller had warned at the briefing. “KEM-1 and KEM-2 will step in if any preventative measures need to be taken.”

And nobody prevented me from talking to Clarence’s owner, KEM-9 thought, eyeing the monitor for any changes. *Because KEMs aren’t included in Algorithmic Predictives.* The Algorithm tracked the projection of humankind exclusively. KEMs were developed for the express purpose of maintaining the necessary outcomes of human history without creating new Inflection Points of their own. All this served to calm KEM-9 somewhat as they returned their attention to Subject A:

The Woman in the Red Hat.

A swift breeze, however, brought with it an unexpected touch of sadness. *I can’t believe she’s going to lose that hat forever.* KEM-9 watched as she gently tugged it tighter onto her head, knowing it wouldn’t be enough and unable to understand why that bothered them so much. It’s unavoidable. *The Algorithm told you all of this before you arrived. It’s just a hat.* But KEM-9 knew it wasn’t just a hat. The breeze would grow to a gust, which would blow the hat from Subject A’s head at the exact time that Subject B, the Woman in Gray Running Attire, would approach from the opposite side and miss seeing Subject A as she chased down her red hat, which would end up in the stream by which she stood for just enough time that when she turned back to the path, Subject B would already be gone, so they wouldn’t see each other after all this time and couldn’t reconnect after everything they went through and would never go on to—

“Subject B is on-site,” KEM-1 said.

Would never go on to what?

“KEM-1, repeat,” The Controller ordered.

“Subject B is on-site. I have visual.”

What am I missing?

“KEM-2, confirm visual on Subject B.”

“Confirmed.”

And why do I care?

“KEM-9, confirm visual on Subject B.”

“... Confirmed.”

“Stay alert,” The Controller said. “We’re closing in on Inflection.”

The clock is ticking, KEM-9 thought, immediately concerned that they did not actually know what a clock was. *Where is all this coming from?! Words and thoughts and turns of phrase that KEM-9 was sure were not part of their Fizz but felt right all the same. Is everyone's first mission like this?* They thought there may be an adjustment period that every KEM goes through that they were all just too embarrassed to talk about, but that prompted another question:

Do we get embarrassed? Do I? KEM-9 wasn't sure what embarrassment was, but they were somehow certain they saw it on the face of the Woman in the Gray Running Attire. *Subject B is embarrassed? To be running? No, to be out at all. Remember?* Peeking into The Algorithm offered residual glimpses of all the histories surrounding any given Inflection Point, providing KEM teams a better chance of stopping timeline deviations. *She hasn't been out in a very long time.* KEM-9 recalled a flash of grief and pain and loneliness, an image of a nearly empty room and another in disarray, a wave of insufficiency. *No, that's not the right word, but I haven't been given the right word to use.* KEM-9 was getting uncomfortable on the bench, in the park, and with the mission.

"We've got another wobble," KEM-9 thought they heard in their earpiece. A series of questions and confirmations followed, but KEM-9 could only watch as Subject B ran toward Subject A on a collision course that wouldn't happen.

"KEM-9, report," The Controller demanded.

Couldn't happen.

"... KEM-9, can you confirm further misalignment?"

Can't happen.

"KEM-9!"

"But why?" KEM-9 asked, and the silence that followed felt infinite. *Oh, no ... "Was that out loud?"* KEM-9 thought they thought but realized they actually said. *Oh, no!*

"... KEM-9, clarify your—"

"It's getting larger, Controller," said KEM-1. KEM-9 looked at their wrist monitor then back at the scene, grateful for the interruption.

"What is causing this tremor?" The Controller asked.

The wind was picking up, and the timing of both subjects' movements was exactly as predicted. Nothing looked amiss. Definitely nothing to make the monitor display such wild misalignment, but the uncertainty and confusion and urgency were making KEM-9 fidget and squirm in their seat. Even though it was getting colder, they felt hotter, and all their clothes were just a little too tight. *Or is it the shoes?* KEM-9 had tightened them once, as planned, but they'd never worn shoes before, so how were they to know how tight laces were actually supposed to be? *Insufficient.* That word again, frustrating KEM-9 because it wasn't quite right and had nothing to do with the shoes they had to loosen as fast as possible, so they leaned forward to free their feet and—

"It's growing!" The Controller shouted. "All KEMs report!"

"No abnormalities on the scene, Controller," KEM-1 said.

"KEM-2?"

"No abnormalities on the scene, Controller."

“KEM-9?” But KEM-9 was watching their wrist with growing interest as The Frequency on their monitor wobbled wildly out of sync the closer they got to their shoelaces, only to level out as they pulled their hand away. “KEM-9, report!”

Back and forth. KEM-9 tested this new development with glee.

“Thirty seconds to Inflection,” KEM-1 warned.

Back and forth.

“KEM-9, what is going on at your position?!”

What if I ... Following another wave of impulse, KEM-9 pinched the end of one of the laces and gently tugged it loose.

“The wobble is spiking!” There was a simple beauty in the way the laces cascaded down either side of the shoe. “KEM-9, report!” They touched the ground in loose spirals—“KEM-9?”—that spread out like vines reaching for water. “KEM-9?!”

“... I’m the wobble,” KEM-9 said moments before actually understanding what they meant. But they saw it all, the whole picture The Algorithm showed them—or tried not to?—and stood up from their bench as the wind whipped up into a gust.

“KEM-9, you’re not in position!” *Not in position? That’s the phrase!* It wasn’t, not quite, but close. Not “insufficient.” *Out of place. She feels out of place.*

Just like me.

The Woman in the Gray Running Attire needed to see the Woman in the Red Hat this day no matter what The Algorithm said. *They could be good at each other.* That didn’t sound as right as it felt, but there was yelling in the earpiece and love in the air, and KEM-9 didn’t know what any of that meant but did know one thing:

That red hat wasn’t going anywhere.

Twenty seconds. To the left, KEM-9 could see a teenage boy that wasn’t a teenage boy, barreling down the path toward them on a scooter. *KEM-1.* Time was running out. The Woman in the Gray Running Attire was closing the distance between herself and the Woman in the Red Hat and the all-important rush of air that formed off the coast forty-four minutes ago was just across the park and dead set on that hat. The wind didn’t know the lives it was changing, but KEM-9 did.

Fifteen seconds. KEM-2, designed to look like an outdoor fitness enthusiast, was running at them now, directly across from KEM-1. KEM-9’s design was not fast enough to get to the Woman in the Red Hat in time to make any difference and now, with both sides of the path blocked by their KEM partners, trying to intercept the hat once it blew off was impossible. *There has to be something,* KEM-9 thought. *They need each other just as much as Clarence needs fashionable raincoats.*

Ten seconds. KEM-1 and KEM-2 were only a few yards away, running straight for KEM-9, and the frantic beeping on the wrist monitor was making it hard to focus. *Focus on what? What can I do?* They clenched their fists, a human sign of frustration KEM-9 was proud to have perfected, and felt a strange, squishy resistance in their right hand. *The hot dog ... I left one bite ... Is that it?*

Five seconds. Even less before the KEMs arrived to stop whatever KEM-9 was planning to do. *I don’t even know what that is,* they thought. *If The Algorithm couldn’t see it, how can I?* At this, however, KEM-9 was surprised to find they weren’t the least bit

concerned. The experience of the last few hours—a full quarter of KEM-9’s life—compressed into one string of rapid enlightenment.

Park, hot dog, bench—

KEM-9 raised the hot dog above their head ...

—fun, laughing, Clarence—

... pulled their arm back ...

—grief, love, Romantic.

... and let it fly, yelling loud and proud—

“I AM THE WOBBLE!”

* * *

She turned just in time to see a middle-aged man in a newsie cap get tackled by some kid on a scooter and a woman from the free yoga-in-the-park class. It occurred to her that it might have been the same woman who’d been staring just a bit too long for comfort when something came flying out of the air and hit her square in the forehead, knocking her hat off and smearing something on her face. Following the dull thump on the grass at her feet, she was able to retrieve her hat and watch, through the one eye not covered in green goo, as a mangled bit of hot dog blew toward the stream with a sudden gust of wind.

“Holy shit! Are you okay?” she heard someone ask behind her. “I’ve got a towel. Dude sure liked his relish. Hold on.”

“Thank you so much,” she said, turning half-blind and putting a hand out. “I have no idea what—” She stopped, recognizing the hand on the other side of the towel.

“I AM THE WOBBLE!” the man shouted again, overjoyed by whatever it was he thought he accomplished by hucking his food across the park.

She wasn’t listening. The woman in front of her was a vision she thought she’d never see again, outside her regretful memories, and was clearly as surprised as she was that they’d found each other today. Neither spoke as the teenage scooter kid and yoga woman apologized for their eccentric father’s behavior. The wind kicked up. The rain started to fall. She put her red hat back on and tugged it tight.

Our Mothers

L MARI HARRIS

FLASH FICTION

slow dance to sad songs. buy our first training bras. lose their cool. let us try on their Saturday-night clothes, fill our arms with bracelets, spray Jungle Gardenia behind our ears. complain about our fathers. insist we develop hard hearts. *You'll thank me later.* sometimes forget we're in the same room. tell us we can't reach the stars, but we can have the clouds below. pick up extra shifts to pay the light bill. ask us to rub their sore feet. warn us not to get into cars with strangers. *Don't fall for that missing dog trick. Second oldest trick in the book.* What's the first trick? *When he tells you he's not going anywhere.* cut the green part off the food-bank bologna. watch *Law & Order* marathons late into the night, the *dun dun* lulling us to sleep. teach us how to do our own laundry, how to smile at the landlord as we hand over the short check. never cut us any slack. make it all feel like too much. tell us they're sorry they're so cynical. We look it up: *distrustful; suspicious.* miss our fathers. cry out it's too late for them, but we'd better learn now how to throw the first punch, how to let everyone know we're not to be messed with. are bursting at the seams. are fraying at the edges. are coming apart.

Lord of the Fireflies

LAVIE SAAD

FLASH FICTION • WRITEGIRL CONTRIBUTOR

"I'll tell y'all about it in good time. Good time, alright? Slow drip, remember?"

"But Momma, Sherlie was talking about it at school yesterday! She was weeping all morning 'cause she found out from her daddy. Me and Brandon were the only ones who didn't know what it meant! Can't the drip drip faster?" says Bonnie, my little girl. Fiery, just the way I used to be.

Sherlie, Pastor Michael's daughter. Lord *Jesus*. He of all parents should've known to keep his baby blind for a little while longer.

"Honey, you and your brother are too *young*! Please, trust your Momma this time."

Bonnie is seven years old and my son, Brandon, is only five. They don't need to know about it. Them.

"Why do you think so, Momma?" says Brandon. "Can't we know? Who were the slaves?"

I turn to my son, dressed in plaid and loose khaki pants. I couldn't find a belt for his tiny waist—his pants keep slipping, but he keeps pulling them right back up because he likes the way they look. *My little gentleman*. The future first mathematician in the family.

I kneel, grimacing as the tiled kitchen floor cuts into my knees, but I bear it and pull my children close to my chest, because I don't want them to see tears brimming in their Momma's eyes.

"Because when you know things too soon, you break."

I know that, if anything.

The summer I learned what the world was capable of, I sobbed into my peeling fingers, stained orange from the liquor store's cheap tangerines. I'd thought I lived in a kingdom free of flaws, and I thought we all loved the Christian God because He blessed us with dewy sublimity, endowed us with the responsibility only to be pretty and smile as a woman, or to be strong and ambitious as a man. Easy enough for most, a challenge for others, a struggle for few.

It was hard to learn what the world was capable of, because I thought that life was golden, just like my babies now. What a concept: dewy, golden life.

What a concept, you might say, after you've seen Black bodies swinging from braided rope on a bridge, just like your hair, hanging from a torn neck. Ripping, ripping, until the body plunges into the abyss below. Nana showed me. Five of her old neighbors. Gone because they "stole some wine."

In Jerome, sizzling heat ripples above our famous looming hills, sewn tight with patchy shrubs. Those ripples can pierce through half-dead houses vacant or not, and so the people of Arizona watch themselves—guard themselves from blisters by dawn till the sun falls again. We guard ourselves too, from life as the rest of the world knows it, as I learned that summer.

"What do you mean break, Momma?" Bonnie asks.

"You'll lose the spark in your eyes, baby. I can't have you lose that glow."

Class was a character and the way to live in my house. We did all things with divinity and class, but not to prove or promote ourselves. We were proud Black women who wouldn't take money from a white man or white woman who'd stuck a twenty between the gaps of their white picket fence for us to grab. We didn't need it.

Did you spot it? The irony? We needed that help. Indeed, we needed that twenty twisting in the wind.

"I'm gonna be a lawyer when I grow up, Momma. I'll never lose my spark!" Bonnie cries. Her curls jump under her bow when she moves, a seasick green color.

"Oh, honey," I sigh.

My family's bungalow was painted in dull teals and faded rubies, sun-bleached by the vicious rays. There I lived with my mother and her mother, my Nana, who taught me about life in the loop.

Nana's fingers were always wrapped in snug bronze rings, and I felt each band cut into my arm when she grabbed me and sat me down at the old oak table.

"Honey, you better know you're a privileged little girl. You can play outside and go to school just fine. You know what my mama was?" Nana whispered one day. "She was a white man's toy."

This was when I learned what the world was capable of. The barbed line of reality—life in the loop. She gave it to me straight that day. No sugar, no dew, no gold.

"Me too! I can take it, too!" Brandon smiles.

She taught me that our ancestors picked cotton for the greater good. The white dollar, *the greater good*. She told me about the scars the whips would bring and the tears the mothers shed when their babies were ripped from their arms. The death by the labor and the rape by the owners.

"Oh, honey," I whisper.

And she taught me how useless it was for them to pray for *freedom*.

"I can't let y'all lose that glow."

I learned too soon, that's all. When Nana gave it to me straight that day, I questioned God. I was a devout Christian all my life, a loyal Sunday church attendee in the youth group and choir. And I thought of all the hours spent worshipping the Lord, and then I wondered if He was even real.

And if God might not be real, little Lorrie wondered what might be. Grown Lorrie still does.

I won't let my kids shiver when white kids pass them on the playground the way I did. I won't let them question God when He's what they've always known. When Momma isn't solid, their rock and their shield, God sure is. That's what I've taught them. They won't have to relearn their faith.

I'll die before they lose hope in the world, their fire, their glow. Lord knows, I'll die before it happens. At least, it won't happen before they can hardly spell their names.

"Trust your Momma, alright? Slow drip, remember?"

Obit

GEETHA REDDY & BRIAN TOLLE

FILM



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Perfect Dark

LISA EVE CHEBY

POETIC ESSAY

I am forced to speak the language
of men. They study the craft of violence
in film, rate movies
in explosiveness, celebrate the artistry
of war. I resist

history lessons that discard the frames of Alice Guy-Blaché's pantomime,
plucking babies from cabbages seven years before the great train robbery. My teacher
refuses

to splice her back into the lesson. Before each class, my male classmates
line the hall, form

the gauntlet (their phrase) of masculine affection (mine). Hands push
shoulders and slap backs, elbows poke ribs, each man (boy) tossed side to
side on waves of laughter. As I approach down the hall,
the ritual pauses until I pass them to enter the classroom.

Even in the dorms, I retreat to my room to study as the guys bond
over video games. This year it is *Goldeneye*. Four shooters
playing all at once. One day, they invite me to join. I learn negotiation

is never an option to break into the guarded facility, to complete
the mission. Everyone has to die.
To face violence with anything less than more violence
is foolish, not part of the game.

Superhero stories once kept a strict code that the good guys never kill.
Now we want heroes who are flawed, alluring
because of their darkness, their struggle
to keep the code.

007 is not a superhero.

When not in midnight labs splicing tape, I practice how to loosen my hold
on the controller, to coordinate my trigger finger with right thumb
on the arrows, left on the joystick. I try all the weapons,
favor a light, quick rifle with lots of ammo, decent accuracy.
Then I graduate to the more elegant Russian Glock-like handgun, learn
to strategize. I hunt my prey with the soundtrack's anxious motif
looping under incessant bursts of bullets that precede
soft groans of death.

When Bobby calls me a floozy, I know I've won
their friendship. Walking out of film school onto the streets of New York,
we speculate routes for escape, admire the chiaroscuro of alleys, perfect
for angling a hidden camera—that other tool we train to shoot
to bring some dream to life. Imagine

Alice in 1896, gripping her camera, the deafening stutter of the shutter,
gears moving film from one side of the magazine to the other as bursts
of light expose the nitrocellulose to explode her vision onto a screen

in language unschooled in violence.

first love

VANESSA FLANDORP TLACHI

NONFICTION • DREAMING OUT LOUD CONTRIBUTOR

In clouds going back fifteen years, she rests her head on a cold foreign window. Headphones, pen, and paper her companions. At four she was ripped from the bosom of her birthplace and imported to a land that has had, has, and will always have tension with her people. She shakes away the anger bitterly dancing down her throat and allows herself to become engulfed by the music from her headphones—the lover that never left. It took abuse and abandonment for her to achieve the status of victim so she could be recognized as someone worthy of a Permanent Resident Card, better known as a Green Card. She could not believe it when she held that powerful piece of plastic, which true to its name was actually green. Green like their money. It has always been about the money, she remembers thinking as she was handed the plastic that would finally enable her to go back to her beginning. She reaches for her bag and opens her raggedy old journal. Pen and paper the dependable parents she always longed for. With them, she sketched realities she could escape into when the darkness in her mind held her captive. They would now be her defenders and protectors as she journeys back to her small village and the people who had eyes but did not see, ears but did not hear. Her heart begins to race and everything around her closes in, but she presses pen to paper and raises the volume to its loudest. *It is necessary to go back in order to move forward*, she writes. For so long, she was angry and unforgiving of a people and a country she did not know, only to realize that anger and unforgiveness were not her friends. *Quiero volar como un pájaro en el cielo*, she prays. In clouds going back fifteen years, she rests her head on a warm familiar window.

Glass

KEEGAN LAWLER

NONFICTION

Dad and I walked to the edge of the community dock, fishing poles in hand. We took our usual position, me at the edge of the diving board, Dad behind me, his line dangling off the side. My legs were long enough that I had to keep my toes pointed up to keep the rubber soles out of the water, ripples echoing through the water whenever I stopped paying attention long enough for them to break the surface.

I waited for Dad to get his pole set up first. In my lap, I held the Styrofoam cup we got from the gas station a few miles down the highway, a cartoon worm's grin on the sticker pressed into the cracked lid. Inside, a dozen or so flesh-and-blood worms made their way through wet clumps of dark earth unlike anything I've ever seen outside of these cups.

I still used the first pole I was given. Dad had bought it when we were still in southern Idaho, with Tasmanian Devil and Tweety Bird stickers all over the casting button. When Dad finished setting up his pole, he handed me mine. I opened the mud cup and pulled a wiggling worm out.

He watched, out of the corner of his eye, as I brought the worm to the hook. I pressed its pink body through the sharp edge, then glided it down along the hook. Dark guts spilled out of its pierced sides as I pulled the rest of the worm's body around, then forced it once again through the sharp metal edge of the hook. When he saw the worm, curved like an S so it wouldn't fall off, Dad nodded.

The worm danced at the bottom of the line, hovering above the water, as Dad attached a metal weight just above it. He wrapped the line tight around his hand to tie the weight on, blood pooling below the skin on either side of the line.

"Tonight, we're fishing for catfish," he said.

Catfish are bottom-dwellers that sift through mud and muck with stinging barbs. I understood then what the weight was for.

I brought the line over the water and pressed the casting button. The worm and the weight made a "plop" sound as they broke through the surface, plummeting down the fifteen or so feet to the bottom. Dad dropped his off the side and sat just behind me, on the back of the diving board. When my line began to pile up on the surface, I reeled in a few clicks until the line was tight, and imagined the bleeding worm hanging just a few inches over the lake floor.

Dad's first love in life was fishing. Before my mother, before the sports he dedicated every fall and spring to, before fatherhood, he was a twelve-year-old boy casting for hours in any body of water that held life.

Whether it was the streams and creeks crisscrossing through the Treasure Valley, pulling real and fake worms across the murky waters, or in Oregon, wading in rubber waders through marsh and cattails in sloughs along the coast, Dad took his fishing pole

with him everywhere. In his hands, a fishing pole was a conduit to the natural world that his heart depended on for hope, his intoxicating ability to dream, imagine, and reimagine his past, present, or future into anything he wanted it to be.

Dad talked about his dreams when he fished. He often told me how, someday, he would fish for king salmon in Alaska. Like how, someday, he would finally fix up the 1966 Ford Bronco that slept for months at a time in the empty lot next to our house. Or how he would completely remodel the house, from the appliances to the door handles to the trash cans, and how, someday, people would be jealous.

He had been taking me fishing since I was four, when the only thing I ever did was wait for bites, then tell him so he could reel them in for me. Back when we used to catch tiny rainbow trout in the regularly stocked ponds along the greenbelt. When we'd get home, we would lay them out on the driveway and measure them with a tape measure, Mom always making us pose with them for a picture, like we were in the black-and-white photos in the corners of old bars.

But in North Idaho, less than a hundred miles from the Canadian border, where evergreens climbed mountains so close they felt as if you could reach out and touch them, I could barely keep myself focused on the pole in front of me.

As Dad talked about the fish he had caught, the fish he wanted to catch, and the ones that got away, my mind wandered. I nodded along and kept quiet, having learned young how to keep people talking about themselves and how, if I did it enough, I could go unnoticed and avoid the suspicions that swirled around me.

Teenagers climbed up the edges of the rocky hills across the lake, their shouts echoing back to us. They crawled toward a cliff edge, looked over at the water below, and dared each other to go first. A boat waited for them at the bottom as they pushed and jeered at each other. Eventually, one by one, they jumped, their feet breaking open the hard water below, and came up laughing wildly.

Dad and I sat quietly and watched them over our poles. They say fish can hear you. I didn't believe that, even then, but I kept quiet, just in case. The tips of our poles were steady, stoic, as we sat with empty faces, watching time slip out in front of us.

"It's alright," Dad said finally. "I'm sure we'll get bites eventually."

I nodded.

"It's just probably not late enough," he added.

I looked out toward Mt. Spokane, towering off in the distance. In the winter, spotlights wrapped the mountains in light that led skiers safely down its slopes. But this time of year, its presence was just a warning of the coming night, when the sun would rest and the temperatures would drop off significantly.

I reeled up my line to check that a sneaky fish hadn't stolen the worm without me noticing.

"Got a bite?"

I shook my head. Dad sighed, then shrugged his shoulders.

The worm was still there, unmoving. I pushed the casting button again and watched it float down out of sight.

"Any minute now."

Whenever Dad asked if I wanted to fish with him, I said yes, because I knew he wanted me to come. Because I knew that little boys were supposed to take after their fathers. Follow them around, love the things they loved, and hate the things they hated. Because I knew

little boys who didn't were whispered about and watched like they'd done something wrong.

I had learned that the best way for someone to love you, or to show you loved them, was to tell them what they wanted to hear. It didn't matter how you felt, how your heart longed and desired. The truth, the whole brutish weight of it, was cumbersome, difficult, and distressing.

It was like when adults asked my favorite sport, and I would say basketball, though I got yelled at most games by the coach. I wasn't aggressive enough, and my incoordination affected everything from dribbling to layups, but it was the sport I was best at because I was tall for my age, and planted myself firmly in the key with my hands straight up. It was just easier to lie.

Even when I had to do things I didn't like and pretend I did, it always felt good to be wanted.

The last waves from the jumping teenagers across the lake hit the shore behind Dad and me, then ricocheted back out from under our feet. The waves shrunk to nothing, the movements of water slowly falling back into itself, somewhere in the middle of the lake.

When it was still like that, Dad always said it was like glass. It only happened during the late evenings, or in the offseasons, when it was too cool to swim or boat. The water lay totally flat, a kind of peace, while all sorts of things people didn't like to think about swam just under the surface.

The orange-red sky broke out over Mt. Spokane in the distance. The lake's surface took everything that was well-known to me—docks, boats, fixtures of the land I knew well—and skewed it in the low, directional light, until it might as well have been something new altogether.

It was beautiful, though I didn't say so out loud.

"Keegan!" Dad yelled.

I looked back at him.

"You have a bite!"

I whipped my attention back to the pole and started to reel it in, listening to the clicking sound of the plastic as I did. Dad reminded me to reel slow and steady. I did as he said, reeling only a click at a time.

The weight didn't feel right for a fish, much less the catfish that hovered in the lakebed, but I suspended my disbelief for a moment. Hoping that if I pretended hard enough, bad news would not come.

When the hook broke the glass-like surface, bringing only a slimy piece of lakeweed with it, I sighed. I had been prepared for the catfish to come up fighting, to have to grab it from behind its head to not be stung by its barbs. I had been prepared to show off the skills a boy like me should have.

Next to me, Dad sighed too. It had been half an hour and neither of us had gotten a bite.

"Some nights," he said, "they just aren't biting."

I nodded. Dad looked at me, trying to catch my eyes. I kept my eyes down, knowing if he saw my face, it would betray my true feelings. Eventually, he gave up, letting his eyes drift out to the boats in the still water. We sat together, emptiness swirling and braiding between us, loving each other in the only way either of us knew.

"We can go if you want," Dad finally said.

I paused for a moment, letting his words hang in the air between us. I knew if I answered too quickly, it would lay bare something I wasn't ready to show, so I held the moment for as long as I could.

“Okay,” I finally said.

I reeled the line up, trying not to move too quickly or seem too excited. I threw the weed and worm back to the lake, then looped the hook into one of the pole’s eyelets, cinching the line tight to secure it.

Dad took his time packing up, looking out to the water he loved, the hour of dusk shooting out in the dying rays of the sun.

“You know,” he said as he finished packing, “you don’t have to come fishing anymore.”

In the water beneath us, I looked at our reflections, the passing moment that, once gone, could not be reexperienced or redone. I knew little about my father, less still about myself, but I knew enough to know what I was supposed to say, and how desperately I didn’t want to say it.

“Okay.”

Dad nodded and leaned down to grab his tackle box. We walked together in silence back to the shore, the dock swaying gently under us.

“It’s ok,” he said as we headed toward the concrete stairs that climbed up to the house, “I’ll take your sister.”

Over his shoulder, I caught the last of the ripples from the reeled line, the worm, and the lakeweed. The water, again, became like glass.

The Recruit

ANGELA MIYUKI MACKINTOSH

MEMOIR/JOURNALISM

Even with a cocktail in her hand, the House Mom looks like she could drive a school carpool. Like someone's mom I grew up with.

She clutches a tumbler tinkling with ice cubes as she escorts me through the Vegas strip club. It's after closing when we walk past the empty stage—lights still flashing, the bass so deep it vibrates in my chest—past the private dance rooms, and through the back bar to a hidden door.

We enter a dark room that reeks of cheap cologne. A man who looks like a bad Elvis impersonator sits behind a large desk, his pompadour wig and sunglasses glowing blue from the wall monitors displaying every inch of the club. The House Mom introduces him as the owner and turns to leave.

As she closes the door, our eyes meet briefly before she averts hers, severing our imaginary tether. My stomach twists. The boss places his hands flat on the desk but doesn't stand to greet me.

"I've heard a lot about you," he says.

* * *

In May 1997, I was managing an adult lingerie store off the Pacific Coast Highway in Torrance, California, when a tall, skinny blonde wearing a backward baseball cap and a crop top strode in. She crouched in front of the glass counter, scanning the body jewelry, pasties, and Curves, those silicone bra inserts otherwise known as "chicken cutlets." Then she quickly stood up and introduced herself as Tracy (not her real name).

"Can I help you find something?" I pulled out my clientele folder.

"I'm just checking stuff out." Tracy eyed me up and down while grazing her fingertips across the brightly colored penis pops and other bachelorette party favors. "How long have you worked here?"

"A few months." I couldn't tell if Tracy was trying to hit on me or waste my time that could otherwise be spent making commission.

"You have a tight figure." Tracy's eyes settled on my chest. "Would you be interested in modeling for Victoria's Secret?"

I laughed. "Are you kidding? I'm only five foot four. Those models are gorgeous and tall."

I was certain she was hitting on me now. At twenty-five, I'd been hit on so many times in the store I knew what to expect and was steadily growing weary of the industry.

With a mother I'd lost to suicide at thirteen, an absent father, and no siblings, I was practically an orphan and had been supporting myself since my mid-teens. I'd taken the position because of the managerial pay, which seemed like a natural progression from one of my previous jobs, working as a "bra specialist" in the lingerie department at Broadway. What caught me off guard about Tracy's proposition was that she was a woman, and not an older woman with a man who wanted a three-way, but a young woman who looked barely twenty.

"It's for catalog work," she reassured me. "You don't need to be tall. They use petite young girls with nice figures like you."

I wasn't that young, but I was barely ninety-six pounds and my half-Asian side gave me the look of a teenager.

"I visit the mansion a lot. I could take you to an audition." Tracy quickly pulled out her electronic organizer and asked for my phone number, which I recited without thinking.

When I told the story to one of my coworkers, she said, "No way! Tracy did the same thing to me too."

My coworker had been so surprised by it that she also offered her phone number. She was not tall or model-like either, so that gave me even more pause. I wasn't sure what mansion Tracy was talking about, but my coworker thought she might be referring to the Playboy Mansion. We had a lot of strippers and porn stars who frequented the shop to buy outfits for Hefner's parties. This was during porn's heyday, when companies had big production budgets to make rock-and-roll pirate movies starring Jenna Jameson and people lined up around the block to buy amateur sex tapes like Pam and Tommy's.

A day later, Tracy called and said she'd pick me up on Friday and we'd go meet the Victoria's Secret recruiter. I asked her again why she thought I would be a fit. Something didn't feel right. I'd seen a lot of things while working at the store—everything from one man stalking another out to the parking lot because he watched him try on high heels, to the retired school bus driver who'd come in every two weeks to purchase the underwear I was wearing.

"I need them bad," he would say, his gnarled seventy-year-old hands shaking. "Make sure there's a lot of stuff on them." Two weeks later, he'd bring them back and want a fresh pair, and I'd throw them in the trash, fifty dollars richer.

Then there was the guy who'd try on silk boxers and model them for us, a Kong dildo hanging out of the bottom of his boxers that he tried to pass off as his own. But because Tracy was a woman, her invitation didn't elicit a hard no. I told her I'd think about it.

* * *

On Monday, May 12, 1997, it was nearly noon when Alicia Arden drove up the Santa Monica coastline. Arden, a twenty-eight-year-old model and actress whose credits at the time included *Baywatch* and *Red Shoe Diaries*, was on her way to Shutters on the Beach hotel for a Victoria's Secret

model audition. A few weeks earlier, a mutual friend had told Alicia about the multimillionaire financier Jeffrey Epstein.

"Since you're a model, you should give him a call." Her friend offered Epstein's home and work phone numbers, saying, "This guy can get you in the Victoria's Secret catalog," Arden said in the [Netflix documentary Jeffrey Epstein: Filthy Rich](#).

Alicia phoned Epstein, who asked her to send some photos of herself. She'd been hustling for work, sending her résumé and photos to magazine owners, so Alicia arranged for her own photo shoot and wore Victoria's Secret lingerie. She FedExed the photos to Epstein's Madison Ave townhouse in New York, and when he received them on May 9, he phoned Alicia immediately, asking to meet her.

"My secretary will contact you to make an appointment."

On May 12, Alicia answered a 6 a.m. call from Epstein's secretary, a woman named Kimberly, who told her she could meet Epstein at Shutters at 12:30 or 4:30 p.m. Alicia decided on 12:30, but was having reservations about the meeting because in her experience, interviews weren't conducted in hotel rooms.

When she arrived, Epstein wasn't what she expected. He stood barefoot on the hotel carpet, wearing sweatpants and a USA T-shirt, and as soon as Alicia entered the room, he started criticizing her figure.

"Let me evaluate you," he said.

Alicia reluctantly stepped closer. She wanted the modeling job, but felt as though Epstein was attempting to get her to act in an unprofessional manner.

"I want to see you in your bra and underwear." He pulled her top over her head and yanked up her skirt, she told [People](#). "Let me manhandle you for a second." He grabbed her hips and ass.

Alicia started to cry. Epstein was bigger than she, and she didn't want to be overpowered. When he became distracted by a phone call, she got dressed and headed for the door. Epstein spontaneously pulled out \$100 and handed it to her.

"I'm not a prostitute," Alicia said, refusing to take the money. "I want to be in the Victoria's Secret catalog."

"Let me see what I can do." Epstein followed her all the way out to her car, urging her to take the money. Before she drove away, she took it because she needed the money for gas.

The entire incident made her feel violated and tricked, and the next morning, she drove to the Santa Monica Police Department to file a [crime report](#).

* * *

A twenty-minute drive down the coast from Santa Monica, I'd just come in for my closing shift in Torrance when one of my coworkers told me that the morning drawer had been coming up short.

“It’s bad, Angela,” she said. “I barely had enough money to give a customer his change.” Other coworkers corroborated her story, eventually revealing that my assistant manager had been dipping into the till.

I opened the safe, counted all the cash drops, and found more than \$2,000 missing. On the phone, I asked my assistant manager to come in to talk about what she’d done.

We sat on the chairs reserved for strippers to try on high heels. She fidgeted with a small plastic hanger, inserting one hip of a thong into the plastic clasp, then spinning the hanger around and clasping the other hip. This method hid the messy edges and stretched the panty flat.

I remembered the first day we met, sitting on these same chairs. She’d run her fingers down my stubbly forearm and said, “Okinawans have hairy arms and eyebrows.” I’d marveled how a Filipina seemed to know more about my heritage than I did. She’d given me the Asian-ness I’d been missing ever since my mom died.

And there we sat again. I knew I had to call my regional boss and request to fire my assistant manager, but she was my friend, and I was certain she’d get charged with theft. Recently divorced, she was a single mom with a toddler and a baby.

“I promise I’ll pay it back,” she pleaded.

“How? You only make around \$250 a week,” I said. “I need to deliver the drop to corporate at the end of the month, and I don’t have the money to cover it.”

“Please, don’t tell corporate,” she said, tears welling. “I got in trouble when I was young ... you know, stupid shit, drugs. If I get charged with this, they’ll take my kids away.”

She bent down and reached inside her purse, her hair fanning my shoulder so I could smell a spritz of Victoria’s Secret Pear. When she popped back up, she held a photograph between two fingers like a cigarette—a picture of her boy and girl. My throat ached and limbs buckled thinking about those kids growing up without their mother like I had. I didn’t want that to happen.

A few weeks earlier, a customer told me about one of his clients from Japan who was looking for a dominatrix, and figured that since I managed an adult store, I probably knew someone.

“I know a gig that would get you a chunk of the money,” I said to my assistant manager. “All you have to do is wear leather and flog a businessman.”

She agreed, even though dominatrix work wasn’t on her radar. It required a certain type of persona, and she didn’t have a commanding presence. She was someone who’d laugh at everything, and I couldn’t imagine her taking control, but it was the only solution I could think of. I felt like Heidi Fleiss, a madam who’d run an upscale prostitution ring in Los Angeles and had been on the news. *Was I pimping her out?* I was recruiting her as a sex worker, something she might not have done on her own.

Later that evening, Tracy called the shop to confirm what time I’d get off work on Friday. I told her around 4:30 p.m., but I wanted to go home to shower and change.

“Why don’t you bring your clothes to work with you,” she suggested. “You can change at the hotel.”

“What hotel?” I asked, but just then, a customer walked to the counter with lingerie and lube. “I gotta go.”

* * *

Across the country in Manhattan, Maria Farmer had been hired by Jeffrey Epstein and his socialite girlfriend, Ghislaine Maxwell, to greet guests at his mansion. Many of the girls she greeted were under the impression they were auditioning for the Victoria's Secret catalog.

Epstein had a close relationship with the head of Victoria's Secret's parent company, L Brands, a man named Leslie Wexner, and had a bizarre amount of control over Wexner's assets and personal life, reported [The New York Times](#). In fact, at one point, Wexner gave Epstein power of attorney over his finances—a move that baffled Wexner's colleagues, who couldn't understand why Wexner, a man at the peak of his career, would hand over his empire to an outsider with a flimsy track record. Epstein exploited his proximity to the brand to lure young women to his mansion under the ruse of a modeling scout.

Farmer told [Politico](#) that when the bells chimed at a nearby prep school each day, Maxwell would call her town car. Before she left the mansion, she'd get anxious and say, “I need to get the nubile!” Maxwell would circle the city streets, and when she spotted a teen, she would order the driver to pull over. Other times Maxwell would say, “Oh, I've got to get a model, gotta get a Victoria's Secret model.”

Farmer said she believed the ruse until she didn't. She was assaulted herself by Epstein and Maxwell in 1996. The young women and aspiring models, some of them wearing school uniforms, usually left the house traumatized.

* * *

One night before Tracy was supposed to pick me up, the retired school bus driver came in to exchange my used underwear. He met me at the back corner of the store, next to the strap-on dildos, blow-up dolls, and an oversized fist and forearm that frightened the underpants off me.

“You must be excited.” He clutched the damp panties in his liver-spotted hand and shoved them into his Member's Only jacket pocket, one creviced corner of his mouth turning upward in a smirk. A hot flush spread across my cheeks. I'd been wearing my favorite pair that day and didn't want to give them up, so I'd taken the underwear from the returns pile and squirted a dollop of lube on it. Realizing it was too much, I tried to wash

some off in the breakroom sink and dried it with a paper towel, but the panty was still tacky. He handed me a fifty.

"What about her?" He pointed his cane toward my coworker dusting the rounders, those glass tops above the lingerie racks. I knew what he was asking, and I wasn't his first. A coworker had introduced me to him before she got transferred to another store. "I bet I'd like her brand," he sniffed. "I'll give ya an extra \$25."

The idea of making money just from the referral was appealing. My eyes fell on the oversized fist and I wondered why corporate kept ordering them. It was Hulk-hands big. I'd sold the last one to a skinny ectomorph wearing biker shorts, and the words "Be careful with that" came spilling out of my mouth as I rang him up.

"I'll ask her," I said.

* * *

Epstein and Maxwell's modeling scout ruse had been going on for years. Molly Skye Brown told [*The Sun*](#) that in 1992, she was a fourteen-year-old working at a gym's childcare center when Ghislaine Maxwell walked by the windows, saw her, and stopped. She looked her up and down, then entered the gym, walked up to the front counter, and said, "I'm not going to be long. I just want to talk to this girl."

Maxwell introduced herself as a modeling scout and handed Brown a business card.

"You could easily pass for eighteen," she said, and then offered her jobs as a Victoria's Secret catalog model and as a masseuse. Brown politely declined, saying she preferred acting and singing to modeling.

"Well, if you change your mind," Maxwell said, "I have a lot of modeling opportunities."

Brown later heard that Maxwell had cruised the mall looking for young girls and handing out business cards.

With hundreds of abused victims, Epstein's sex-trafficking operation couldn't have been possible with only Maxwell handing out business cards. An entire network of women needed to be employed to keep up with Epstein's insatiable appetite, and when Maxwell came on the scene, Epstein started abusing up to three girls a day.

Epstein's victims needed to be recruited, scheduled, and compensated, then coerced into bringing more victims. Another tier of women, many who were victims themselves, were employed to keep the abuse rolling. These recruiters, in the dozens of dozens, possibly even hundreds, included school girls as young as fourteen.

Courtney Wild was fourteen with a smile full of braces when she first entered Epstein's mansion after a friend enlisted her to give a massage to an older man. Once recruited, she was given another option: instead of having sex with Epstein, she could get paid \$200 to recruit other teens from her high school, reported [Heavy](#). She lived with her mom in a trailer park. Her mom struggled with addiction and Wild feared becoming homeless, so she took the money.

"If I had a girl to bring him at breakfast, lunch, and dinner, then that's how many times I'd go a day," Wild told the [New York Post](#). "He wanted as many girls as I could get him. It was never enough."

* * *

After the late-night dominatrix session, my assistant manager showed up late for work the next morning with bags under her eyes. I handed her a cup of coffee.

"How did it go?"

"I told him to lie down on the table. Then I took a leather flogger and smacked him." She dumped three sugar packets into the black liquid. "But I couldn't stop laughing." She told me the man spoke little English, but he was nice, and she got paid. "Here." She smiled and handed me \$500. It was a start to repaying her debt. "Do you have any more work for me?"

In fact, I did. I knew of more men who wanted dominatrix services. But the term "sex-trafficking" had just been coined on the news, and I knew it was an act where individuals performed commercial sex through coercion, including debt bondage, to keep victims involved in the sex industry, even *with consent*. *Wasn't that exactly what I was doing? Or was I saving her from prison and losing her kids?*

I worried about losing my job because of her actions and knew I was crossing a morally ambiguous line. Even though I wasn't making any money off of her sex work, it didn't sit well in my stomach. I hadn't vetted these men and didn't know if they were dangerous. Wasn't there an unspoken rule that women were supposed to protect other women? In my line of work, that didn't seem to be the case. The industry's foundation stemmed from the patriarchy, and working around porn culture slowly conditioned one to the dangerous idea that it was okay to objectify and degrade women for a heterosexual male's pleasure.

That was why, in my shop, I insisted on safety. The girls who worked the night shift were instructed to leave the trash bag by the back door so I could take it out to the dumpster in the morning. I didn't want them walking across the dimly lit parking lot at night. When I closed up, I invited a bodybuilder from the gym next door, a six-foot-seven intimidating-looking hulk who gobbled steroids like candy, to sit in our shop and watch while I counted the money, then walk us to our cars. My regional boss would've never approved of having a stranger around stacks of cash, but I did what I had to. I taped the

phone number for the shopping center security guards in several places around the store, just in case. I knew they'd get to our shop faster than the police would.

With all the safety measures I'd set in place, sending my assistant manager out into the night to perform sexual acts on random men seemed contrary to everything I'd instilled in my girls.

* * *

Besides Wild, Epstein and Maxwell employed a growing network of women, lured by expensive gifts and the luxurious lifestyle, to recruit more women, reported [NBC New York](#). There was a sense of normalcy to it all, the fact that other beautiful women were doing it lent legitimacy to the operation. Some of these women combed malls, art galleries, restaurants, and nightclubs for Epstein's type: the younger the better. The recruiters were so prevalent in Manhattan's modeling world that they became known as "Jeffrey's girls."

Marijke Chartouni was a twenty-year-old model who moved to Manhattan from a small town in Alaska when a friend she'd known for a few months invited her to Epstein's townhouse. It was morning, and Chartouni thought she was meeting him for coffee. When she walked into the mansion, it was like entering another world.

"It's literally like *Alice in Wonderland*," Chartouni told [Politico](#), "like walking through the rabbit hole as soon as you get in the door." She was led into a dark room where her friend and Epstein took off Chartouni's clothes and assaulted her.

Later that week, one of Epstein's assistants reached out, saying he wanted to see her again, but she declined. She felt betrayed by her friend, who made it all seem so normative, like everyone had a part, and after the incident with Epstein, she never saw her again.

* * *

On Friday's lunch break, I was sitting in the back room eating a salad, debating whether I should go with Tracy to meet the Victoria's Secret scout, when something about Tracy's voice—a tone slick with deception, perhaps—reminded me of an older woman I used to work with.

Three years earlier, I'd moved to Las Vegas and answered a newspaper ad to work as a strip club cashier for \$40 an hour—an extraordinary amount for blue-collar work in 1994, when the minimum wage was \$4.25. I sat in the club's booth that faced the street

and sold tickets for \$20, which included entry into the totally nude strip club and one nonalcoholic beverage. The club was always empty, music blasting and lights flashing for no one, a vacant stage. I couldn't imagine the owners justifying the \$40 an hour we got paid to sit there. An older woman, or House Mom, brought me Diet Cokes when I was thirsty and braided my hair when I asked her to. She sat near the ticket booth, eyeing me as she smoked, one hand holding her cigarette, the other clutching a tumbler that tinkled with ice cubes as she walked.

Most nights, only three dancers worked, and I knew their routines. Misty was lithe, acrobatic, and destined to be a showgirl. She'd twirl around the pole to Def Leppard and Guns N' Roses. Then she'd slither over to a guy sitting in a chair near the lip of the stage, scoot her butt down like a gynecological exam, and place each of her legs over his shoulders and onto the back of his chair, pumping her hips up in a body wave while gyrating her bare crotch inches from his face. That's what made this place unique. Then there was Nicky, who'd unravel her long black hair to Nine Inch Nails' "Closer." She was so sensual that when she ended her routine, guys would clap. The third dancer, Chantel, had grown children and was probably in her forties or fifties even, and had breasts she could practically throw over her shoulders like a scarf if she wanted to. She'd cup them in her hands and juggle them up and down while bending over a guy's face to Mary J. Blige's "Real Love."

It was after her routine that a college-aged boy who looked like Josh Hartnett in *The Faculty* trekked up to my booth's half-door, leaned over it, and begged me to strip.

"You gotta get up there," he pleaded.

"I'm not a dancer."

"I came to show my friends a good time, but this place is dead and these dancers—"

A loud crackle and screech interrupted our conversation. "Get that guy away from the booth," a booming voice bellowed from the booth's intercom I didn't know existed. "I'm watching you."

I didn't know there were cameras in the booth either, and couldn't believe someone had been watching me the entire time I worked there. It made me feel more naked than the dancers.

"I'm sorry," I said to Budget Josh. "Please have a seat. You can't be up here."

Shortly after that incident, the House Mom asked if I wanted to meet the boss. I had no desire to meet him, but I loved working the booth and didn't want to lose my job. "He wants to talk to you about dancing," she said, and because she'd been grooming me for at least a month, I trusted her and didn't say no.

When the night rolled around to meet the boss, the House Mom took me to a hidden door next to the bar, into a room full of camera monitors displaying every room in the club, from the private dance rooms to the dressing room. A man wearing an unbuttoned dress shirt, mustache, a black pompadour wig, and sunglasses, who looked like an Elvis impersonator, sat behind a large desk. She introduced me to him as the owner of the club. Then she left.

"I've heard a lot about you," he said as I stood in front of the desk. "You look pretty good with your clothes on." He eyed me up and down. "But in order to fully evaluate your figure, I'm going to need you to strip."

Before I knew it, he was on the other side of the desk, pulling up my skirt and grabbing my ass.

After the sexual assault, I ran out of that club and never went back. I remember how violated I felt and betrayed by the woman who brought me to him. She'd been like a mother figure to me, and I thought she was there to look out for all the girls. *Had the dancers gone through this type of recruitment, too?* I imagined them all coming in under false pretenses, answering the cashier ad for the generous hourly pay, working the booth while training the next girl, then having the House Mom escort them into the boss's lair so he could sexually assault them. It made me sick to my stomach.

But I didn't even think about filing a police report. I was wary of the police and knew it would be the business owner's word against mine. *Who was I?* A young woman who willingly took a job working at a totally nude strip club. In my experience, sexual assault wasn't easily prosecuted in the '90s. "It's a man's world" and "boys will be boys" were customary sayings to dismiss men's bad behavior and look the other way.

Twenty-six-years later, my former boss was charged with running an illegal brothel. I finally understood why the club had been empty all the time: it had been a front for sex trafficking.

* * *

After Epstein groped and "manhandled" her, Alicia Arden replayed the event over and over in her head, and when she awoke the next morning, she drove straight to the Santa Monica Police Department. The officer who was tasked with filing her report was dismissive.

"You willingly went to his room," he noted.

"For business," Alicia stated again, feeling like she was being blamed for what happened.

The detective stopped taking notes. "Think hard about whether you really want to file this report."

Alicia left the police department in tears. "I wish I could talk to a female police officer," she said to a friend on the phone.

Nevertheless, she returned a week later and filed the report with the same detective. She wanted to be taken seriously.

Unfortunately, the report was swept under the rug. Epstein wasn't investigated and no one ever called her back.

"If they would have taken me more seriously than they did," Alicia told the [Associated Press](#) of the 1997 incident, "it could've helped all these girls. It could have been stopped."

* * *

As I picked at my salad, I realized Tracy's proposal didn't feel right.

"I can't make it," I told Tracy on the phone.

If I were a few years younger, I would've fallen for it. But at twenty-five, that time in Vegas had taught me a lesson I would never forget.

From experience, I now know that the act of one woman recruiting another is an integral part of the sex-trafficking industry. The man at the top hides behind the thin veil that he didn't solicit the girl to begin with. In Epstein's case, he didn't have a magnetic personality, so instead, he hung photos of famous people on his walls, name dropped, and flaunted his wealth. Women were lured by his connections and the network of other women who satiated his sexual desires.

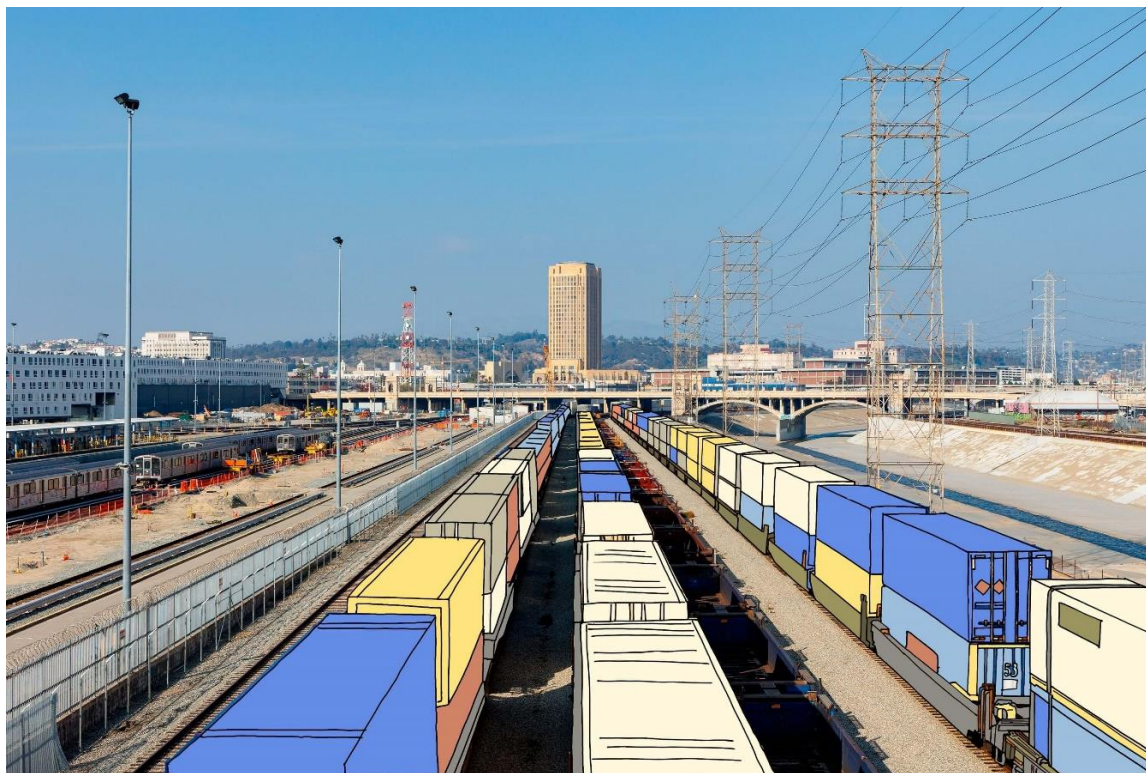
Most of these women aren't household names because of the sheer number of them, including more than a hundred Jane Does. It's hard to wrap my mind around the network of women involved, from those who were employed by him, those who witnessed, those who were recruited and abused, to those who were turned to lure other victims in some sort of sexual Ponzi scheme. I'd worked in the porn industry, had no parental support, struggled with finances, and knew just how easy it was to slide into morally ambiguous territory. I don't know what part Tracy played in all of this, but I feel like she was just one cog in a vast machine, an important player on the West Coast, and someone who most likely had been abused by Epstein.

I wish I could ask Tracy what she knows. I wish more women would share their story to help fill in all the missing pieces of this vast puzzle. We may have the corners and some border pieces, but we're missing most of the interior connections.

However, I know it's not easy to come forward. The sexual assault by my strip club boss remained a secret for twenty-eight years. Telling the truth isn't necessary for our survival, and sometimes our very survival depends upon burying it, but coming forward may help break future chains of abuse.

Along L.A.: A Curated Collection of Visual Art by Kwasi Boyd-Bouldin

VISUAL ART



Kwasi Boyd-Bouldin, *Supply Chain*, 2022–2023. Digital illustration, 16 x 20 inches

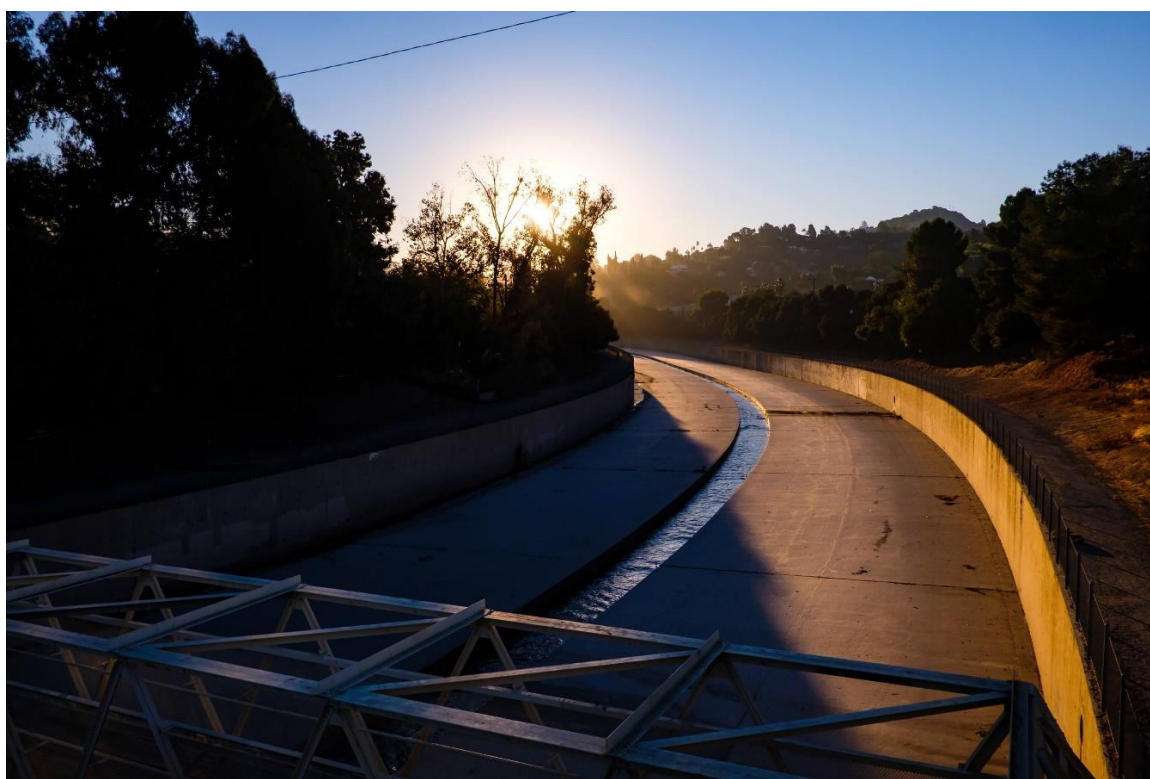
Editor's Statement

These images take the viewer from city to country, from bustling to bucolic, and back again. They are a photographic journey around and through the landscapes and cityscapes of Los Angeles. The journey begins in the bright light of day, with the grit of industry, softens with sunset light along the path of the L.A. River and into the creeks of the Santa Monica Mountains, and returns back downtown to the toughness of concrete. We cycle along the waterways that literally formed the landscape and along which native and non-native people have lived and built their homes and lives for centuries. This is a digital journey about lines in which we travel, about artistic and personal perspectives, about the flow of water and time, about the forces and people who have shaped the land.

– Brianna J.L. Smyk, Visual Art Editor



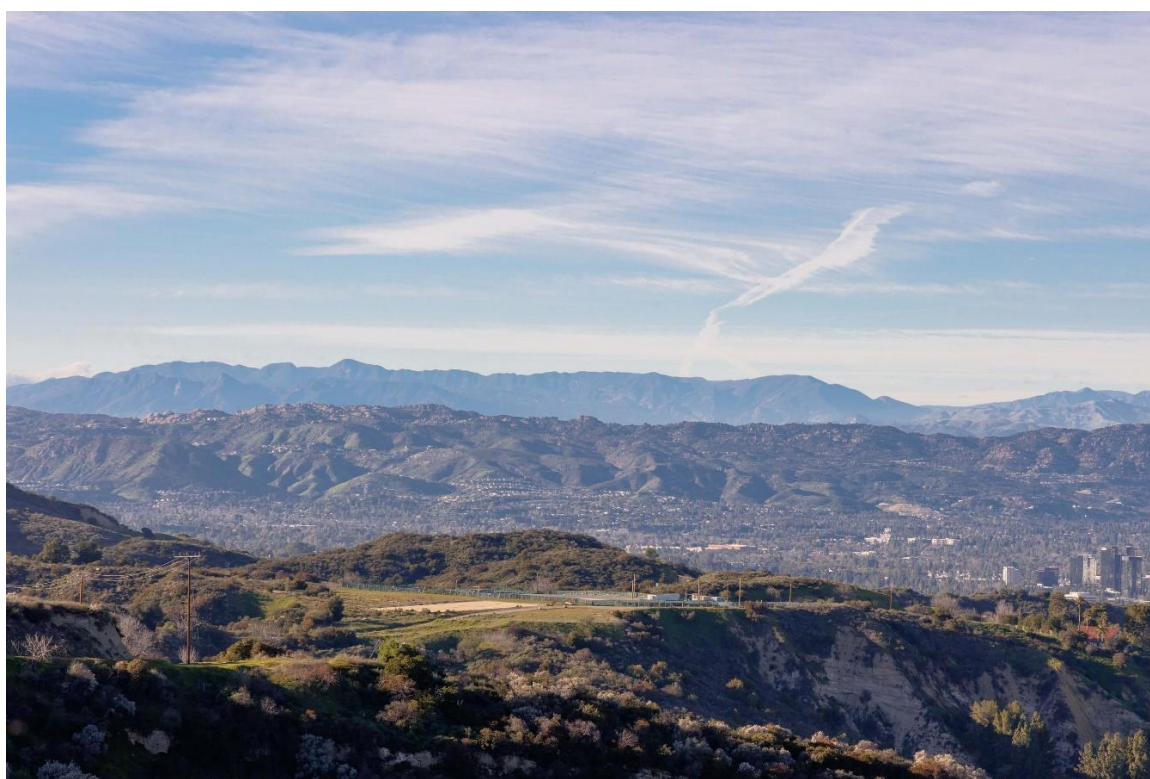
Kwasi Boyd-Bouldin, *Canal*, 2020. Digital photograph, 10 x 8 inches



Kwasi Boyd-Bouldin, *Horizon*, 2020. Digital photograph, 11 x 14 inches



Kwasi Boyd-Bouldin, *Light & Shadow*, Malibu Creek State Park, 2022. Digital photograph, 11 x 14 inches



Kwasi Boyd-Bouldin, *San Fernando Valley and Beyond*, 2023. Digital photograph, 11 x 14 inches



Kwasi Boyd-Bouldin, *Pedestrian Walkway*, 2022. Digital photograph, 11 x 14 inches

An Interview with Kwasi Boyd-Bouldin

Kwasi Boyd-Bouldin is a multi-genre artist and designer. His oeuvre includes photography, illustration, painting, graphic design, and so much more. Within this issue of *Exposition Review*, we see his styles unfold with an original photo illustration featured on our cover, a documentary landscape photo journey through Los Angeles [within the issue](#), and works in other forms that illustrate this interview.

Documenting neighborhoods in Los Angeles is the foundation of his practice, and the full expression of that practice can be found on his website/production entity [Nonstndrd Creative](#), through which he puts out yearly zines and books. This year, he will publish books, including a new version of his street photography series *The Public Work* and a book of artwork called *Secret Schematics*.

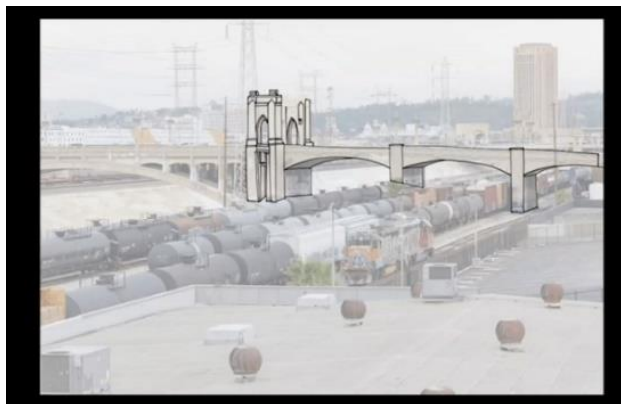
Boyd-Bouldin was one of the inaugural [Los Angeles Public Library Creators in Residence](#) and the lead photographer for the Netflix animation series [City of Ghosts](#), where his photographs were used for the backgrounds of the show.

Exposition Review: How did your styles emerge, and how did you get to the photograph and illustration combination we see on our cover?

Kwasi Boyd-Bouldin: As a kid, I always drew. I wasn't really into photography super young. My dad passed away when I was nineteen. I got into photography using a camera that he had left me, and I ended up getting serious about photography in my early to mid-twenties. All up until that time, though, I was really focused on being an illustrator, graphic designer—graffiti, skateboard culture, all of that stuff.

Then for a long time after that, photography became more and more part of something that I did, but I didn't really cross them at all. I did my design stuff. I did my art stuff or my illustration stuff. And then I had photography, [which] was mostly landscape documentary. I didn't really see a way to connect those dots.

Fast-forward to more recent times, a couple of things happened that caused me to reconsider that. One was working on *City of Ghosts*, an animation project using my photography. You would see what they were doing with it, and I was like, "Huh!" I always wanted to blend it, but I didn't want to be



Kwasi Boyd-Bouldin, "Architectural Illustration Process", 2023. [Digital illustration process video, 14 seconds](#)

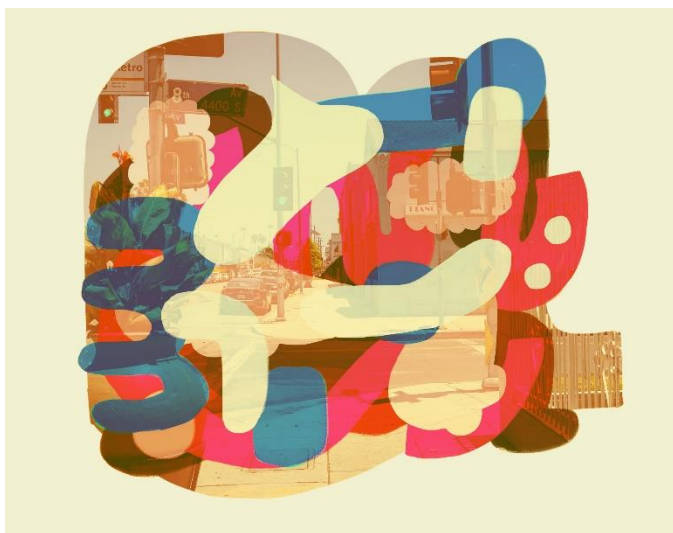
corny—I didn’t want to just have a drawn character in a photographic background. I felt like that would just cheapen both mediums for me, and I really took especially the documentary landscape side of things seriously.

Then the pandemic hit literally immediately after *City of Ghosts*, like the day we ended, and I had the gift of time, so I decided to tackle this challenge that has always eluded me: How am I going to tie these worlds together? Let me use the skills I have like hand drawing, outlining things, and just experimenting, and it culminated with the project I did for the [Los Angeles Public Library] with [The Library Zine](#). That was the first project that I decided to go all out with this style. Not just as something I’m going to post on my Instagram. I can put it out there as part of my portfolio and people would respond to it in a positive way.

ER: *Is this photographic illustration style one you’ll use exclusively moving forward?*

KB: I definitely feel like I found a style. Especially with my illustration and design stuff, I have a lot of different things that I like doing: I enjoy drawing characters and abstract things and shapes and things that are not recognizable. Abstractions are a big part of my fine art in a lot of ways. The style [of] the cover and LAPL stuff—that’s very much a design thing, and there is a little bit of a difference in terms of how I categorize my fine art and design. I would put my photography without an illustration and my abstract work as my fine art. But I would put the LAPL illustration style in particular as design, because there’s an intent to make things up. That may change a year from now, but as for right now, that’s how I feel about it.

ER: *How do you choose your subject matter?*



Kwasi Boyd-Bouldin, “Emission”, 2020. Digital collage, 8 x 10 inches

KB: When I think about subjects and I think about areas and places to photograph, it involves a lot of self-reflection, and it involves a lot of what I see as L.A. I’ve grown up here. I’ve lived in a lot of different neighborhoods. I’ve seen a lot of how things change. I have a visual reference set for how things have evolved. So when I’m out looking at things, I really rely on that visual reference, that history that I have. And what I try to do with my photography is to grab those pieces, those places, those elements and string them together into a sense of

place that is recognizable to people that live here, but also maybe not what people think L.A. is.

That's the core of my photography, and by extension, it's the core of the illustrations that I do on my photography also, because that's another way to zero in on even more specific elements. I can take elements from one place or another and make those into something else. I can make a collage that's representative of an area because it has these elements from the area, but it would look like an abstract line drawing or an architectural jumble. If you know what you're looking for, you can see it. But there's not really a narrative. The only narrative is "Real L.A.," whatever that means—just a recognizable L.A. to people that live here. Not always an outward-facing L.A., but an inward-facing one too.

ER: How does that knowledge of what is commonly perceived to be L.A. inform how you present L.A., and why you want to present it the way that you do?

KB: When I was younger, I was really into skateboarding. I got into skateboarding when I was like ten and I basically skated off and on until I was twentysomething. I started skating in Mid City, which isn't a place that people normally associate with skateboarding. Especially when I started, it wasn't what you saw in magazines or anything like that. So there's always been that, "I will do this, but it doesn't look like what people think it is." It was just L.A. We didn't fit any sort of profile.

That's always been a theme in my life—that there's this L.A. that I'm so comfortable with that is kind of like a small town, especially if you're from here. It's super diverse. There's all these different cultures that live separately but together and overlap. And none of that is represented in media or in any sort of outside perception of L.A. at all. They tend to push that version of L.A. to the outskirts, and they tend to focus on the glossy glitzy accessible L.A.

That tension has always been there for me, and especially with my photography, that was really a driving force. My focus on neighborhoods is one of familiarity, and obviously there's some nostalgia that goes into it, but really, I like presenting them in a way that people [who live here] recognize. It's not fancy. Sometimes it's not glossy or glamorous, but it's real and it's cultural and in so many ways, it fuels the



Kwasi Boyd-Bouldin, "Call Me Back", 2022. Digital illustration, 10 x 8 inches

external L.A. that people perceive. That tension really fuels [my work]—a sense of pride and also a desire to show things accurately.

ER: You use a lot of figures in your abstract and fine art work but not in your photography. Why is that?

KB: When it comes to the people that I draw or incorporate into my abstract stuff, [that comes from] a lifetime of taking public transit. It's wandering around. I like faces. I like people. I have people that I see, and those are people that I like to draw.

But I don't really like taking pictures of people like that outside. One, there's all sorts of privacy stuff. Two, I consider myself a street-level photographer, and in that way, I don't want to trip people up. I don't want to document anything that might get somebody burnt. Not only is it bad karma, it draws negative attention to you. I want to be there as part of what's going on and just document it in ways that are visible but not really a focus on one particular person doing one particular thing.

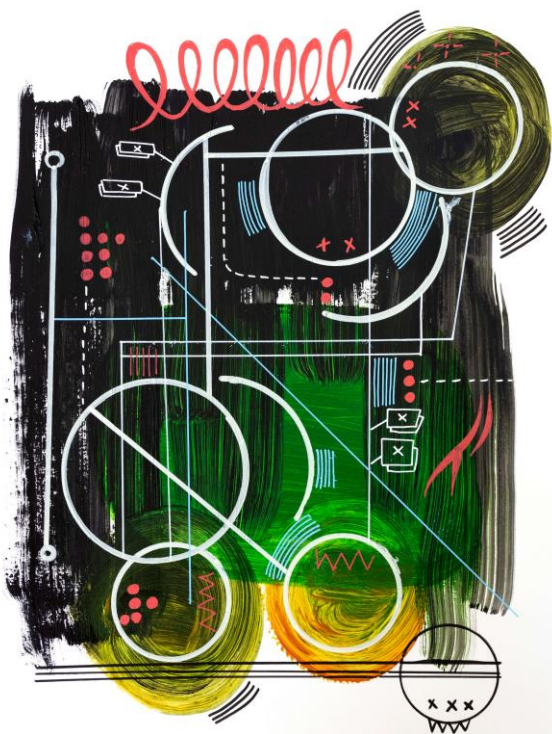
As soon as you see a face in the photograph, it's about the face and not about the place. Using the location as a container, as the frame, as the actual composition, and then waiting for people to interact with that composition—that's my vibe. It's taken me a really long time to get to that though. In my early work, there's no people at all. And then it really settled into the style I have now where I feel really comfortable in terms of the balance between [a work] being a landscape photograph and there being people in it, but more of a landscape photograph than a street photograph.

Lately, I've been moving a little bit out of the urban sphere into the more natural environment, casting a little bit of a wider net and trying to take the natural environment into the work I've done so far. Because people as part of the environment is the point.

ER: How does working in a natural environment differ from your urban work? Do you see a link between depicting Black neighborhoods and documenting Indigenous land?

KB: I grew up in basically Koreatown, Mid City, and Hollywood for the first thirtysomething years of my life. Recently I moved to Studio City [in] a very green area right by the L.A. River. It's not the L.A. River that I saw as a kid where it's paved. No, there's a manicured Valley Creek Walk, and I walk my dog there and see great herons and hawks and stuff like that. Malibu Creek is twenty minutes away. Topanga State Park is twenty minutes away. Franklin Canyon is five minutes away. All of these places are really accessible to me now. And not only is accessibility something that really drives my creativity, but also the difference between where I grew up and the lack of nature, and the beautiful overwhelming abundance of it where I live now, is really stark. It's really something that has hit me in a prominent way. I think about it every time I go outside.

That aspect of it is one part of it, and then it's really been very prominent to me that we live on Indigenous land and the United States is built on Indigenous land. At the same time, I've been able to trace a lot of my family history back to slavery [on] both sides



Kwasi Boyd-Bouldin, "Internal Rebellion", 2022.
Acrylic paint and marker on paper, 20 x 16 inches

of my family and specific locations in Georgia. On my mom's side, we're Geechee from the islands that are off of Georgia. [This is] just knowledge that contributes to this picture I'm painting—not always in concrete ways, and not always in ways that I can really express, but it is encouraging that it's picked up, and that people can look at it and make these connections. I've always felt that's how art works.

That's actually the connection between my photography and my abstract work. My abstract work has all of these things in it, too—it's just I tried to communicate it in a way that's not necessarily representational. You know, it's all vibe. And with my photographs, I always strove to take pictures that resonate where people may think they're simple pictures, but if you know the context, or you know the block, or you know this or that, they're actually much more complicated than they seem initially.

ER: *What are the differences between creating for smaller projects, like your ongoing "Black Space" project, and larger projects that you've worked on, like the Netflix series *City of Ghosts*?*

KB: One, the larger ones pay. Money's always a factor. But money is a factor because with money comes expectations. Working on *City of Ghosts* stressed me out. Not because of the cast or the crew or the director—everyone was great. I really hit my stride in the middle of the series where I wasn't absolutely nerve-racked every time they called me about something. But the first two [to] three shoots, I was taking all of these pictures, and I didn't know if I was doing it right, because honestly, no one's really done what we're trying to do. So I was taking pictures and just giving them to people and trusting that they would do the right thing. My mind was blown because they more than did the right thing. They really nailed it in a way that I felt brought out the best of the work that I submitted. But it was stressful.

Also, there's the element of time. On a project like "[Black Space](#)," I have all the time in the world because it's my side project, but I also don't have all the time in the

world because it's not paid. And because it's not paid, I can't just set aside a bunch of time to do it because I can't feed my children with my ambition.

But I can say that the exception to that was what I did with the library, because what I did with the library was both the most lucrative thing I've done independently from a financial standpoint, but also the project that had the least directives. They were just like, "Do something and make it about the library." And I was like, "Alright, cool." And then within that they were like, "Challenge us." And I was like, "Are you sure?" And they were like, "Yeah." And I was like, "Alright, because I got ideas."

And honestly, they ran with everything I threw at them. That project was six months of "I have the time to do this. It's paid me in a way where I don't have to take freelance projects." I just focused on making this work and I'm really proud of the library zine and the book, [Knowledge Based](#), that I was able to put out. But I'm also really proud of the 1,200 to 1,300 extra shots that no one's ever seen that I just have in my archive now. That's a big, big thing, and it also helped me solidify the style, that linear architectural style. That was really the testing ground. I was like, "OK, can I do this? Can I do this for seventy-three branches? Yeah, I can." And that was an experience in itself.

ER: You have so many artistic styles—do you consider writing as one of them?

KB: I do like to write, although I don't consider myself a writer. It used to be a bigger part of my portfolio, where I would write things that went with the photo essays, and I purposely pulled back on that a little bit just to save it for a story that needs to be told. The "Black Space" project has writing, but that's by my nephew Tyree Boyd-Pates. I edit it, I do change some sentences, but that's all him.

ER: Thanks so much for chatting with us. Any final thoughts?

KB: Really when it comes down to it, I try to communicate things about like my life in L.A. and about life in L.A. from my perspective, not because my perspective is necessarily super important or better than somebody else's perspective, but just because it's a perspective, and it's the only one I have. It's really all I can do.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

The Movies, 2021

PAIGE ACKERSON-KIELY

POETRY

It's June—the theaters are finally
open. Alone in the back row,
there is nothing so American as this,
and a cupcake, and being your own driver—
nothing less than a public bathhouse
or a shared double bed.
The 10 or so pair of other patrons
have their backs to me
like short lines of privacy hedges
someone couldn't afford to finish,
or the telegraph and grief,
woven together by necessity.
I shut off my phone.

The hero of this film is old
and lives alone. Relatable.
He does not speak, but five minutes in
he's striding thru the forest
toward a sound like a wheel rattling
over a hard turn until it's righted
and becomes a steady, low roar.
It is early morning or it is twilight;
impossible to discern the features
from one day to the next.

A tight shot from above:
the hero is bent over a bobcat,
her paw caught in a coil-spring jaw trap,
staked by a chain to the earth.
The kind of trap that hasn't improved
since the 1800s when violence
was the only beam supporting a porch eave.
When couples slept in twin beds
separated by a nightstand with a candle.

The soft light that makes everything feel personal.
He pulls a syringe from his pocket
then drives the needle into the space
between her shoulder blades. She quiets,
tongue lolls; he gets to work releasing her paw
then carries her to the cabin to dress her wound.

Bobcats are solitary,
do not keep to a single den.
What could be said about his cabin now
and in the 1800s is that it lacks a feminine touch.
I haven't bought her fresh flowers in months.
He is careful to keep quiet, or
has grown that way, the bobcat
is penned off in a room next to the kitchen
lined with old newspapers.

Days pass in minutes, and you are meant
to observe the trust between them building—
at first it is all skitter like a log has been lifted,
then more like a motor rebuilt by hand
that still needs a crank on cold mornings.
Finally, the heat stays on.
At home, I keep my windows open
to smell what other people are cooking,
close enough to a gesture of love
but there's no teeth,
nothing snagged in a great tree branch
or running blindly through the woods.
The hero presents a live rabbit
the bobcat shreds in 40 seconds.
If I were home I'd be drinking
and pacing the small hallway
that connects my bedroom
to the main living area, phone to ear,
on the other end she drifts away
from my emergency, long and slippery
like a drugstore receipt.
Wild nights—wild nights!
Some feel best when empty.

This morning I went to a grocery store
in another neighborhood—my secret plan
for chance encounters; how I oscar in self-care.

The bobcat stalks the trash can
in the corner of her room.
I try to buy popcorn
but the concession stand is closed.
There is power in never being seen eating,
but everyone in this theater is already immortal
because the days are gone.
The bobcat licks her lips, purrs,
rubs against his leg. Danger begins
when they let you touch them.
Nights I tried to press my heart
through the computer, dreamt of cords tying her to a wall.
Now I watch porn while the emails pile up.
Someone needs to get paid.
Or maybe it's daytime and we should all be working.
I return to my seat. What have I missed.

The hero is readying the bobcat
for a return to the wild.
I forgot to mention how gorgeous she is—
but doesn't everyone
have a terrific imagination
unless they are basically dead?
At a time of day according to clocks
I walk my dog deep into a park
where a beast in the bushes
might want something from me.
There is frost on the ground,
but nothing else has changed.
He loads the woodstove
and the logs spit and roar.
This place could go up in smoke at any moment—
the theater hasn't been updated since the 80s
when I was a kid with a bike and a lying problem
and the whole world was an ear of corn, half-listening.
Do you remember the song about everything
as we know it being over, but personally feeling fine?

The hero cooks a final meal for the two of them;
at home the dishes are long drowned
in cold water and do not cry out for my touch.
I mark each surface of my apartment
with strands of hair, shopping lists, the distance
between me and my desire beyond

the 6-mile range of a bobcat,
but also covered alone in the dark.
If I fell in the forest and no one heard
the dull thud of my blonde body.
If I got really drunk and texted her.
If I only now recognize the bird in my hand,
but am 4 stories up, 6 blocks from the tangle
of barberry and spirea in front of the church,
where I learned what I hated and who hated me—

46 years or 90 minutes in
and it's time for the big release:
he's been training her to hunt,
stalk the beam of light from a pointer,
bristle at his hand—like most confections,
parenting dulls the mind.
Wind doing the thing that wind does:
all over and inside of me then leaves
on a train by 11, bra folded into a purse.
How often will he think of her pale
yellow eyeshine, tail ticking like a clock's hand
around her body, the cabin a quiet terminal,
the terminal years with motors that pull,
arm over arm, the body alive if not awake.

He lures her out on the front porch
by clicking his tongue and *psss psss psss*.
Do I remember following her home,
closing in on touch, the cool parameter
of her body—no, this isn't a time to dream—
I'm paying attention as he bends down and murmurs,
stands back up and with his boot gently pushes
the bobcat toward the lip of the porch.
The woods lay out in front of them
like peering into a window and seeing
someone you don't really know
stretching before bed.
She stands ground, looks up.

Get out of here. Get. He's charging her,
she circles his legs, mewls. God she's
something. Our hero is selfless, will not
stroke the ear tufts or clean between the pads—
whatever pact gets made that pushes one,

alone, into a cabin in the first place,
whatever hurt with a crown, whatever brother
had to die or woman ignored—no.
He's throwing rocks, chasing her into the dark.
Long shot. Pan in. *Don't you ever come back here—*
he chokes, spits, his hand to his eyes.
She looks back at him once,
slinks into the pine grove. It's snowing.

Credits roll, I say the names to myself, imagine
calling them out from the kitchen or the bed,
some sound like people I might like to meet.
Honey, bring me my pills! The lights never come on.
It's me, my bag, a black screen, and an instrumental
jazz piece. But wait—nurse, doctor, friend, usher—
is that you? *Ma'am, it's over, it's time to go—*
a masked voice from the aisle whispers.
I rise, move toward the sound.

Praise Song for the Cow Loose on Route 16 Going the Right Way

JAMES KING

POETRY

Praise that this is not the only time she's done this.
That she's planned each step over gravel
and never stumbles on her way
to the good grass. That,
among the farmers of this part
of the country, she has a reputation:
flight risk.

Praise the windshield that reflects her amble true,
a pair of teenagers pulling over,
not to kiss, but to watch.
Or the woman in the next car, who stops to write on Facebook
that she looks like a show horse.

Especially praise those who want to help her,
who think there's some number to call,
a helpline for wayward bovines.
But when her grand weight slinks in the white weeds
past them, her tail a heavy sweep
across the golden tips of reeds,

and their eyes meet her great dark ones, they find
their milk-fed bones are not up to the task.

So praise the ones who wonder:
who here needs helping?

Yes—praise that beast purpose, and the lack
of care for the yellow plastic tag
punched through her ear's thick cartilage.
What that day must have been—

when she was a calf and not yet calved herself:
the thickening blood, the shudder
in slender shoulders, shoulders that grew,
against that black number—yes, in spite of it—
like a list of allotted days.

Praise be that the day of the escape is, again,
killing day.

Praise the ones who realize
this is something you will have to do for yourself one day.

September

RENÉE LEPREAU

POETRY

Puffy as a pastry
out of summer's oven,

mom rises
above the hospital bed

which displaced the dining room table
these last four months.

She escapes up the staircase
into the attic

but the roof traps her.

Quick, someone get some morphine
and with its jeweled edge

cut a hole
through to the sky.

These Tenuous Things

CASSIE MCDANIEL

POETRY

The wisp of a hair plastered on a forehead
and jumping into a cold lake without hesitating
under an alligator's watchful eye.
The green of fresh linen on the shelf at Target, unbought.
The persistence of some weeds.
The earnest care of a dog we just met who follows
us into a lake to save us. We don't need saving, sweet boy;
there is a dock, and it is full of heat,
there is wood, that is cheaper than plastic,
there are pop rocks with titanium dioxide that we survive,
there is a link to a virtual house tour,
there are contractors, not working, enjoying their weekend,
there is a front door, unhung, a window gaping open,
there is a mess of lubbers in a bucket of soap, one plant that might survive,
there is a cat kneading an old baby blanket, and he is family,
there are flings of arms round necks and the sore jaw
from you bouncing up into my arms. It heals,
it all heals. It all comes back.

SYNERGY

a golden shovel

TANGIE MITCHELL

POETRY

the bonds of blood could no closer tie the knots of homegirls intertwined they stand each
 shoulder to shoulder or arms pretzeled together or tectonic hip plates slidin one body
 next to the other they quake and tremble and move the *earth* with laughter that has
 a thunder to it congregate in hair salons living rooms mama's front porch with its
 drooping stairs and rotted wooden deck and whisper secrets and stories the art
 of oral tradition never loosened its
 grip so they recount from precious
 memory all they done *girl lemme tell you! you not gon believe this baby* prescribed
 and complete with pose
 points of entry preferred over *once upon a time that*
chile gon drive me crazy! even
 or *a man gon be a man* and like clockwork the homegirls hum in

agreement throw their concurrence like fresh roses sympathize in passion's
 perfect timing *i heard that you ain't never lied i know that's right say it again!* a droll
 display for outsiders i'm sure these women their limbs tied together moving in contortions
 of joy or radical acceptance their speech haphazard voices stepping on each other like unsure waltzes
 but calculated somehow rhythmic like the samba or
 the moribayassa or the percolator finishing the other's phrases the slight push
 away *girl if you don't gon somewhere with that!* only to pull together once again as if of
 the same body how miraculous homegirls who praise and pain

together outsiders check their knees or
 their sturdy legs or their jutted hip plates or their sooty elbows and try to hide your surprise when
 you discover they have the *same scars* it is not a
 coincidence outsider it is evidence of an analogous grief
 as ancient as suffering a nick on the collarbone a slice to the cheek a bruise on the forearm has
 rendered these homegirls identical to you at least 'cause though they was stabbed
 the same way and burned the same way or
 beat the same way they love pretzel tremble quake whisper into each other like they've never known hatred

the truth is each stumbled into violence through different doors and chose to spend a lifetime healing each other hacked
 at the dead weeds of the others' gardens until something finally could grow so it is
 the hard-won right of these homegirls to throw elegant necks back and rejoice sing to the sky in its
 full glory how vast they are *too* and
 when exhausted by their own jubilation entangle themselves so fiercely who they are outside of each other means nothing
 and the weight of their antebellum pain is no longer theirs but someone else's

This Is Not Our Star

MARGARET SAIGH

POETRY

Now I'm writing with real anguish—
we could hear the fur of the turnpike
you on red-dye woodchips
Zadie pulling toward that short growth of maple
I feared might be poisonous. Stem blood.
Earlier that day I slipped on the gravel drive
scraped ankle, shin, and knee. I hardly looked at the sky
so I can't tell you about it. If love were not enough
it is easier to imagine something ending
than carrying on to its conclusion. Until death
I never want to resent you. No spiked heels
on the grated escape. To be misses. Stroke. Graze the scab.
The tightness of skin working to resolve itself.
Is this what it means?
In bed your body a sheer drop. We climb to the top of a small mountain.
Beckon. You say it's nice, knowing most of the earth
is around this size
not entirely insurmountable.

First Generation

LENA KHALAF TUFFAHA

POETRY

Our parents told us, if we left, it was for fear
of what might fall:
the structures that house us,

the sky itself, breached, defenseless.
And if we remained, it was for fear

of what would be taken, the orchards
that raised us, the catalog
of wildflowers we foraged

after the last rains, the names
inscribed on grandparents' headstones.
So little is spoken

of love and its fractured geography.
Like all good refugees, our parents teach us
remembering,
how it is forgetting's successful twin, how it graduates

from the best university, makes a life for itself
in tech and finance, in arts and letters, and when our fingers

part to examine it, what we've gripped like the edge
of a lifeboat, like a lantern, our hands are empty,
a canvas the color of our stone villages.

Selected Photographs

EDWIN PEREZ OSUNA

PHOTOGRAPHY



Edwin Perez Osuna, *Summer Through Satellite*, 2022. Digital photograph, 3200 x 2400 pixels



Edwin Perez Osuna, *Border Wait Times*, 2021. Digital photograph, 3200 x 2400 pixels



Edwin Perez Osuna, *Crossing Deconcini*, 2021. Digital photograph, 1750 x 2086 pixels

A Park for Children to Pretend In

VINCENT TERRELL DURHAM

STAGEPLAY

CAST: DARRYL: Black, male, mid-20s to early 30s.
JUANITA: Black, early to mid-20s to early 30s.
UBER DRIVER: White, female, 40s or older.
COP: White, early 30s or older.

Present day. DARRYL and JUANITA have called an Uber to drive them and their newborn son home from the hospital. The ride home takes an unexpected turn into the couple's future.

* * *

LIGHTS UP:

DARRYL and JUANITA sit in the backseat behind the UBER DRIVER on their way home from the hospital. JUANITA holds their two-day-old son.

DARRYL

I'm sorry.

JUANITA

You should be.

DARRYL

That's not what I was looking for. I was hoping you were going to reassure me by saying, *(imitating his wife)* "It's okay, Honey. I understand and I love you." *(Back to his voice)* That's kind of what I wanted.

Light and playful banter follows.

JUANITA

First of all, I don't sound like no white girl. Second, you should be sorry. Our son's big-ass head didn't come from nobody but your side of the family. It took six hours just to push that out, so your Black ass needs to be sorry.

DARRYL

I'm sorry that I'm bringing you and our baby home from the hospital in an Uber. I was hoping we would have a car by now. That's the reason I'm sorry, not my big-ass head.

JUANITA

(Mocking Darryl's earlier impersonation) "It's okay, Honey. I understand and I love you." How was that? And my mama warned me about marrying a man with a big-ass head.

DARRYL

Your mama got some nerve. Throw a slipcover over her booty and four people could sit down.

JUANITA

Are we going to be talking about people's mamas, now?

DARRYL leans over and kisses JUANITA.

DARRYL

No, we're not. I take it back. Don't worry. Austin will grow into his head. I did.

JUANITA

No you didn't. You still need to do a little more growing for all that head to fit your body.

DARRYL

Are you going to talk smack about your husband in front of our son? Is that how it's going to be?

JUANITA

Austin knows I'm playing. I love everything about my two beautiful, big-head, Black men. And I always will. *(Beat)* It's okay, Babe. Things will get better once you're accepted into that jobs-for-veterans program.

DARRYL

Thank you.

JUANITA

But I still should have listened to my mama about marrying a man with such a big-ass head.

UBER DRIVER

Can I offer you two some waters? It's not champagne, but my small way of saying congratulations and thank you for your service. There's a cooler next to your wife's feet. Where were you deployed?

JUANITA

That's sweet of you, but I'm okay.

DARRYL

Two tours in Afghanistan.

JUANITA

But he's home for good now. No more military.

DARRYL

Would you mind if we take the waters home? Kind of like a souvenir of Austin's first Uber ride?

UBER DRIVER

I would be honored. Who knows? Maybe in twelve years I'll drive your son home from the playground and the three of us will recognize each other. We'll have one of those Hallmark Channel movie moments.

JUANITA

Can I keep my baby as a two-day-old for a little while longer?

UBER DRIVER

Yes, sorry.

DARRYL

Speaking of playgrounds, we just passed by the nicest one I've ever seen. We don't have no playgrounds in our neighborhood. Where are you taking us, lady?

UBER DRIVER

The address that came up. It says we're three minutes away from your house.

JUANITA

Three minutes?

DARRYL

If we could afford a house in this neighborhood, we wouldn't be calling Uber. We would own three cars, a boat, and a dog named George. You must be lost.

JUANITA

Darryl, this is the neighborhood we have on our vision board. I remember the name of the park, TR Recreational Center. What's the address you have, miss?

UBER DRIVER

26 Loehmann Avenue.

JUANITA

That's the open house we went to a few weeks ago, remember? We were afraid they would ask how much money we make a year. We put the photo on our vision board next to the car.

DARRYL

We live at 46 Garmback Boulevard. That's on the other side of town. Are we going to be charged for this?

UBER DRIVER

Is it possible that you put in the wrong address?

DARRYL

Why would I put in the wrong address? I know where I live. Besides, this is still mostly an all-white neighborhood.

UBER DRIVER

Maybe you made a mistake. Your wife did say it was on your vision board. I'm sure you have a lot of things on your mind right now.

The stage is suddenly bathed in the flickering lights from several police cars.

Lights up on a COP who walks toward the Uber with his hand extended. A body lies on the ground behind him.

UBER DRIVER

Sorry. He's asking us to stop.

The Uber comes to a stop.

JUANITA

Our folks are meeting us at the apartment. Is it possible to turn around?

UBER DRIVER

It looks like traffic is coming to a stop on both sides. I'll get out and ask.

The UBER DRIVER leaves the car.

UBER DRIVER

Excuse me, officer. Is there a way around this? I'm driving a couple and their newborn home from the hospital. Somehow I got the wrong address. It would be nice not to have them get stuck in this mess. It might save my rating too.

COP

You're going to be here for a while. Some guy went and got himself killed. Pulled out a gun on two officers.

UBER DRIVER

Wow, are they okay?

COP

This time. Turned out to be a toy gun though.

UBER DRIVER

Thank you, officer.

The UBER DRIVER returns to the car.

UBER DRIVER (Cont'd)

I'm sorry. We're going to be here for a while. The police had to shoot some guy. I guess he had a gun.

DARRYL

We heard.

JUANITA

(Looking over the front seats and through the windshield)

That's not some guy. That's a child. A little Black boy, probably ten or twelve years old.

UBER DRIVER

I thought you said this was a mostly white neighborhood.

DARRYL

You see who they shot don't you?

JUANITA

Why haven't they picked him up from the sidewalk or at least covered his body? His poor parents. I wonder if anybody has called them?

DARRYL gets out of the car and approaches the officer with his hands raised in a nonthreatening manner.

DARRYL

Officer. Officer, excuse me.

COP

Please return to your car.

DARRYL

I will, but would you mind having someone cover up the young man's body? It's bothering my wife. She just gave birth to our first son. I think it might be hitting a little too close to home for her—for us.

COP

You need to get back into the car, sir.

DARRYL

Officer, please. You can't just ask someone to cover his body?

COP

Tell your wife to stop looking out the window.

DARRYL

What?

COP

And make sure you raise your kid right. We don't need any new thugs coming up.

DARRYL steps closer to the cop.

DARRYL

What did you just say?

JUANITA gets out of the car with the baby. UBER DRIVER follows.

COP

Sir, back to your car.

JUANITA

Darryl, what's going on? Come back to the car.

DARRYL

No, I need for him to say what he just said to me one more time.

COP

Listen, Buddy.

JUANITA

Darryl.

DARRYL

Say it again.

COP

Are you threatening a police officer?

JUANITA

No, he's not. Darryl, what's happening?

COP

Get back into your car, now.

UBER DRIVER

He will, officer. We don't need anything else to happen today. Isn't there some way you can direct us out of this? Are you a father? The first baby is always stressful.

Something about the boy catches DARRYL'S eye. He stares at the dead body.

DARRYL

That's Austin.

JUANITA

What?

DARRYL tries to get to the body, but the COP pushes him back.

DARRYL

The boy on the ground—dead. That's our Austin. Can't you see that?

JUANITA

Austin is in my arms. That boy over there is at least ten years old.

DARRYL has been completely transported to another place that only he can witness.

DARRYL

He's twelve. His birthday was two days ago.

COP

Sir, I suggest you get back into the car.

DARRYL

We broke down and bought him that toy gun he was bugging us for. Don't you remember? That's all he could talk about wanting for his birthday. A toy gun, Mom— A toy gun, Dad. A toy gun— a toy gun—

DARRYL tries to get to the body again. The COP holds DARRYL back by placing his hand against his chest. Back and forth pushing goes on between the two men.

DARRYL

(to COP)

What did you do?

COP

Buddy, I need you to calm down.

JUANITA

Darryl, take a deep breath like they told you—

DARRYL

Who shot him?

COP

I'm not going to warn you again. Calm the fuck down and get back inside your car.

DARRYL

Was it you? Did you shoot my son? He was a twelve-year-old boy.

The UBER DRIVER tries to pull DARRYL back toward the car.

UBER DRIVER

Sir, that can't be your son. Please come back to the car.

DARRYL

Get off of me.

The COP pulls out his gun.

COP

I need everybody to back the fuck up away from me and get back into your car.

DARRYL

What? You want to shoot me now?

The UBER DRIVER pulls out her cellphone. The cop swings his gun toward the sudden movement.

UBER DRIVER

It's only my phone. It's just my phone.

COP

Put you fucking phone away and get back inside your car.

UBER DRIVER

Officer, you're escalating the situation. I just want to record things.

COP

(to JUANITA)

Is your husband on any kind of medication or taken drugs?

JUANITA

My husband doesn't use drugs. Darryl, it's not Austin. Don't you see that? It's not possible. He's in my arms. Please come back to the car.

DARRYL breaks past the COP and stands over the body. The COP swings his gun toward DARRYL.

The UBER DRIVER puts herself in between the gun and Darryl.

JUANITA (Cont'd)

No! No! No! He has PTSD! My husband has PTSD. Please don't. He gets confused sometimes.

JUANITA runs closer to Darryl. She keeps an eye on the cop and his gun. She's torn between comforting Darryl and protecting the baby in her arms.

DARRYL

I'm not confused. Him— they— them— They killed our son. We moved to this neighborhood because we thought it was safe. Because it had a playground. Because it had this park. A park for our son to pretend in. Isn't twelve years old still being a child? Isn't this park where Austin was supposed to play and use his imagination? He's allowed to be whatever it is he wants to be inside this park. I never met a boy who didn't ask for a toy gun. They made a goddamn movie about it. Wanting one for Christmas, or his birthday, or just asking to be asking for it. And you shot him. He was playing with a toy gun inside a park. A park for him to pretend in. He wasn't pretending to be anything wrong. He wasn't pretending to be anything bad. Look what's on his chest. He drew it and I cut it out for him. It's big and yellow and "sheriff" is spelled out on it in big black magic marker. Didn't you see that? Didn't those cops who shot him see that? What did you see when you saw my son, because I see a twelve-year-old boy. Why didn't you see that? Why didn't you see that he still needed time to grow into his head? He's never going to get that chance. He's never going to grow into that big-ass head that he got from me. That he got from his daddy and I got from mine. He's never going to be able to give it to his son because you killed him. You killed my son.

JUANITA steps closer to Darryl.

JUANITA

Babe, Austin is not dead. Come back. Come back to me. Listen, Austin is okay. This boy isn't ours. It hasn't been twelve years. It's only been two days. Austin is just two days old. That's all. He's not twelve and he's not dead. Austin is safe.

DARRYL

No. No, he's not. He's not safe. They've already killed our son.

DARRYL rips the blanket from JUANITA'S arms and snaps it open. The blanket is empty.

BLACKOUT.

END OF PLAY.

The Needy

ZAC THOMPSON

STAGEPLAY

CHARACTERS: DIANE: a wealthy volunteer at a food bank; in her late 50s

ALMA: the food bank's on-staff volunteer coordinator; in her mid-30s

SETTING: An upscale coffee shop

TIME: The present

* * *

An upscale coffee shop. ALMA is seated at a table for two. In front of her are a mug and a thick manila envelope.

After a moment, DIANE comes in. She's carrying two plates, each with a scone on it.

DIANE

I couldn't decide whether you'd want a honey-fig-and-cinnamon scone or a glazed-pumpkin-and-walnut, so I just got both.

ALMA

Is one of them gluten-free by any chance?

DIANE

Oh, Alma. Don't be ridiculous. Here.

DIANE puts the plates on the table in front of ALMA, who sweeps up the manila envelope just in time.

ALMA

You really didn't have to get me anything.

DIANE

(Sitting)

Oh think nothing of it. People are always telling me I'm generous to a fault. It's my biggest flaw.

*DIANE waits for ALMA to try a scone.
ALMA does not try a scone.*

DIANE (Cont'd)

I think we've gotten off on the wrong foot. Don't you feel that? I felt it even before your little blowup last week.

ALMA

I'd love to clear the air about our miscommunication last week.

DIANE

I assume you know I've filed a complaint.

ALMA

Yes. I heard. I've spoken with Nancy.

DIANE

You really left me no choice. The way you were berating me in front of the other volunteers? Forbidding me from seeing Janelle anymore? It felt like bullying.

ALMA

Yes, about that word choice. You see, my bosses take things like quote-unquote "bullying" very seriously.

DIANE

So do I.

ALMA

Right, but like I say, it's really more of a miscommunication. I'm hoping we can come to a better understanding without involving my supervisors.

DIANE

That's fine by me. I didn't file the complaint to get you in trouble. I was hoping this could be a teachable moment. *For you.*

ALMA

(At the same time DIANE says "For you.")

Maybe for *both* of us?

DIANE

Besides, I wanted to show you where I used to take Janelle. That's the source of all the trouble, isn't it? That I dared to form a friendship with one of the people we feed week in, week out? That I overstepped the sacred boundaries a food bank volunteer is supposed to maintain at all times? Or whatever it is you were saying last week during your little tirade? I wanted you to see that I wasn't plotting some evil conspiracy against you with Janelle. It was just two friends having tea. Nothing sinister at all.

ALMA

I never thought you were plotting something sinister. But we do have our code of conduct for a reason. I know you got a copy of our volunteer handbook during your training, but I've brought another for your reference. I took the liberty of marking the specific policies you seem to have trouble with.

ALMA takes out the volunteer handbook from her manila envelope. The document is flagged with a multitude of brightly colored sticky page tabs.

ALMA (Cont'd)

I think you'll find the section on maintaining proper boundaries to be especially relevant.

ALMA turns to that part of the handbook.

ALMA (Cont'd)

There's some good stuff in here about not showing favoritism, about the inadvisability, from an insurance standpoint, of driving one of our food bank guests around in your car, and ooh! Here it is. Do you mind reading the part I've highlighted in green?

ALMA gives the open handbook across the table to DIANE, who takes it.

DIANE

(Reading)

"Volunteers are strongly discouraged from providing food bank guests with financial assistance or gifts of any monetary value exceeding \$25."

Alma, just how expensive do you think a cup of tea has gotten these days?

ALMA

I'm not referring to the tea. You bought Janelle a brand-new, top-of-the-line cellphone. And I understand you offered to give her a car?

DIANE

Only a used one. I was getting a new car anyway so I thought she might want my old one.

ALMA

And you thought that was appropriate. Despite your training. Despite the code of conduct. Which you did sign an agreement to abide by. I have a copy of the agreement in here if you'd like to take a look.

ALMA brings out another document from the manila envelope.

DIANE

I thought this conversation was supposed to be informal. We'd drink tea and eat scones. Which you haven't touched, by the way.

ALMA

I'm just trying to explain how giving one of our guests a car—even a used one—violates our \$25 gift limit. I'm hoping we can agree on that point.

DIANE

All right, so I splurged a little. That's the kind of thing I do for a friend. And heaven knows Janelle could use one of those. She doesn't have the best situation at home, you know. That husband of hers? Ron? Have you ever met a Ron who wasn't just complete garbage?

ALMA

You're giving our other guests the impression that they don't deserve equal treatment. Surely you don't want them to feel that way, do you?

DIANE

Of course not. I feel deeply sorry for all of them. But I can't help it: I do see something special in Janelle. Most of the others are so beaten down by life it's like they're ghosts of themselves, haunting themselves.

ALMA

A lot of our guests are experiencing difficult circumstances, but that doesn't mean—

DIANE

Let's face it: it's a lower ring of Dante's "Inferno" in there most of the time. But Janelle is different. She has something behind the eyes. A spark. I think I could help her if you'd only let me.

ALMA

I admire your dedication. I do. But, you know, there are a lot of other ways you can support our important work while taking less of a hands-on—

DIANE

You mean money. You're going to let me continue giving you money. How generous of you.

ALMA

There are administrative tasks that need doing, there's our annual gala—

DIANE

So envelope stuffing, party planning, check writing—that's all I'm good for.

ALMA

What I'm saying is that you can remain a part of our community.

DIANE

What you're saying is that you are banishing me.

ALMA

No, Diane. I have merely—we, the other staffers and I, have simply relieved you of face-to-face interactions with our guests for a while.

DIANE

This feels like retaliation for my outspokenness when it comes to advocating for the needy.

ALMA

There has been no quote-unquote “retaliation.” I have simply followed the organization’s protocol for when a volunteer has crossed a line with one of our guests.

DIANE

“Crossed a line”? You make me sound like a child molester. Janelle is an adult. I simply gave her a phone. She didn’t take the car, okay? No one got hurt. Quite the opposite.

ALMA

Actually, there have been ramifications.

ALMA pulls more papers from her envelope.

DIANE

Back into the envelope. Are we going to need a notary public?

ALMA

(Looking through the papers)

One of your fellow volunteers sent me an email objecting to Janelle receiving preferential treatment. Another reported food bank visitors asking why they haven’t gotten any free electronic devices. I myself overheard a guest criticizing Janelle, saying she, quote, “Doesn’t need a food bank when she has a personal ATM,” unquote. The ATM would be you.

DIANE

Yes, I get it.

ALMA

There are other examples. You’re free to look through my notes. I’ve taken the precaution of redacting names and other confidential information.

ALMA extends the papers to DIANE, who does not take them.

DIANE

Is this what you do with your time? Scribble your little notes about rule violations and banking puns? Meanwhile, I am trying to help someone who literally has nothing.

ALMA

Actually, I’ve met with Janelle also to discuss this situation.

DIANE

So you’ll take action on the important issue of Janelle’s cell phone coverage, but when it comes to improving her nightmare of a life—I’m pretty sure that husband of hers hits her. Why doesn’t someone do something about that?

ALMA

It so happens that Janelle is the one who requested the meeting with me, not the other way around. She had some concerns. About you.

DIANE

What about me?

ALMA

She wanted to ask about our volunteer schedule so she could start arranging her visits for days when you're not at the food bank.

DIANE

Excuse me? Why would she do that?

ALMA

She said the attention she receives from you was starting to make her feel uncomfortable.

DIANE

Oh, Alma, now you're just making things up.

ALMA

(Looking through her papers)

I documented the conversation in my notes. Here it is. Janelle said, quote, "I feel sorry for Diane but it's just too much pressure. It seems like she's trying to buy a friend, and I'm not for sale." Unquote. I know that's probably difficult to hear.

DIANE

Not really. Because that's just your biased account. I hate to break it to you, but not everyone considers your notes to be holy scripture.

ALMA

She returned the phone, Diane.

ALMA overturns the envelope so that the phone drops onto the table.

ALMA (Cont'd)

I told her I'd give it back to you since the two of you won't be seeing one another anymore.

They stare at the device while DIANE absorbs this new information. Suddenly, DIANE picks up the phone and peers closely at it as if determining whether it's the actual phone she gave. Convinced, she slams it down on the table.

DIANE

This doesn't make sense. Janelle needed a new phone. I know she needed a new phone. She told me so.

ALMA

Maybe she thought accepting it came with certain strings?

DIANE

Well, of all the ungrateful ... I suppose it's true what they say about no good deed going unpunished. I was only trying to help.

ALMA

We do have resources you could have pointed Janelle toward, contacts in social services—

DIANE

Oh right, because social workers are famously effective when it comes to improving horrible lives.

ALMA

Our mission is to feed people, Diane. Not save them. We can't imagine what they're going through.

DIANE

Speak for yourself.

ALMA

No matter how good our intentions, we should never presume to—

DIANE

Do you know why I got started volunteering at the food bank in the first place?

ALMA

It was through your church, wasn't it?

DIANE

It was my son. Matthew.

ALMA

Oh? Young people do have such a strong social conscience these days. My daughter, she's only 11 and already—

DIANE

He's dead.

ALMA

(Brought up short)

Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't know that.

DIANE

He got into drugs during college. Alongside his horrible girlfriend. In fact, I suspect she led the way. Stringy-haired thing. Must have weighed about eleven pounds. I never got what he saw in her. And then she ruined his life. Well, ended his life.

ALMA

You mean she ... ?

DIANE

No, she didn't literally kill him, Alma. He died of an overdose.

ALMA

That's terrible. I am so sorry. I can't imagine.

DIANE

No, you can't. We had lost touch with him by then. We cut off contact, as a matter of fact. At a certain point, he only came to visit when he ran out of money and wanted to steal from us, and everyone said that with an addict you have to set boundaries and stick to them. Kind of like what you were saying before.

ALMA

I didn't mean ... I was talking about a different kind of boundaries. When it comes to family, it's not—it's a different—

DIANE

I know, Alma.

(Pause)

You haven't touched your scone.

ALMA breaks off a piece, doesn't eat it.

DIANE (Cont'd)

Anyway, that's what we did. We cut off contact.

ALMA

That must have been ... I'm sorry.

DIANE

The stringy-haired girlfriend cleaned up her act and went to rehab and it stuck. Can you believe that? She's the one who got Matthew into trouble in the first place, yet he's the one who couldn't get out. I heard she got married and got a job. Isn't that just infuriating? That she can wreck so many lives and then go off scot-free and live in the suburbs?

ALMA

I'm sorry.

DIANE

You keep saying that.

ALMA

But I am. I'm sure that was ...

DIANE

He was homeless at the end. We didn't know that, of course. We didn't know anything because we had cut off contact. But we found out later. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. But I was. He was born with everything and ended with nothing. And something about that gets to me. The thought that he was cold or hungry and had

nowhere to go and no one to take care of him—that thought causes me actual physical pain, do you understand? So when you say we can't imagine what these people are going through, that simply isn't true. With Matthew I can absolutely imagine his suffering. I can't STOP imagining it.

ALMA

And so that's why you volunteer. To give back to others who might be experiencing something similar. I think that's a beautiful way to honor your son's life.

DIANE

You think writing checks and throwing banquets for other rich people honors my son's life?

ALMA

I think however you support the work of our organization—and the life-sustaining services we provide—I think all of that's worthwhile.

DIANE

And I am telling you it's not enough. I want to make an actual difference in someone's life. Maybe not Janelle's, if she doesn't want to be helped. But someone who needs me. And all this tiptoeing around and being appropriate and setting boundaries and sticking to them—none of that works, Alma. It didn't work with Matthew and it won't work with Janelle. Someone has to intervene at some point. Someone has to DO something, whether it crosses a boundary or not.

I only wish Matthew had had someone like me—someone who was willing to step in like I have stepped in with Janelle. The way I should have ... I only wish Matthew had ... I only wish I had ... Someone has to need me. There has to be SOMEone who needs me ...

She trails off, having become uncharacteristically bewildered.

ALMA

(Delicately)

You know, Diane, it's possible that you got into this work a little too soon after Matthew ... after your tragedy.

DIANE

(Instantly defensive)

Excuse me? What is that supposed to mean?

ALMA

Nothing. Only that ... those resources I mentioned earlier, they might be useful for you, too. In case you'd like to talk to someone about processing some of this grief.

DIANE fixes ALMA with a cold, hard stare.

DIANE

You don't know the first thing about it. My grief. You said yourself you can't imagine. That's one of the rare times when I've agreed with you completely.

ALMA

I didn't mean to overstep—

DIANE

Are you going to reinstate me at the food bank? That's really all I need to hear from you.

ALMA

Reinstate you? Diane, I just finished explaining why I don't think having face-to-face interactions with our guests is a good fit for you right now. But the other opportunities I mentioned remain—

DIANE

I am not interested in the other opportunities you mentioned. Which leaves us where? Do I have to escalate my complaint against you?

ALMA

I wish you wouldn't do that.

DIANE

Yes, I know. The complaint really must have you frightened. Why else would you meet with me like this, outside of the proper channels? Especially since you're usually such a stickler for the proper channels. It couldn't have anything to do with the food bank's budgetary problems and the staffing cuts that would likely result from the loss of another major donor such as myself, now could it?

ALMA

I was hoping we could work something out.

DIANE

I also know this isn't the first time a volunteer has filed a complaint against you.

ALMA

(Taken aback)

Who told you about that?

DIANE

I met with the woman who filed the complaint. I don't have an envelope full of papers to back this up, but I believe you called her, quote, "an entitled rich lady"? Unquote?

ALMA

That was a private conversation.

DIANE

Thank goodness you didn't announce it publicly.

ALMA

No, I mean I was having a private conversation with someone else when I made the ... comment.

DIANE

When you described your volunteers as entitled rich ladies.

ALMA

Not all of them. Just one. And she overheard. It had been a difficult day and I was letting off steam and— Anyway, there's no excuse. I behaved poorly and I regret that. But it has been dealt with.

DIANE

It suggests a pattern, though, doesn't it? In the way you treat certain volunteers? Those in certain elevated socioeconomic brackets against whom you nurse some kind of grudge?

ALMA

It was a completely different set of circumstances.

DIANE

Maybe. But that's what you think of me, too, isn't it? That I'm an entitled rich lady?

ALMA

I never said that!

DIANE

Not this time. You didn't have to. The disdain just radiates off you. You won't even eat the scone I bought for you.

ALMA

(Growing frustrated)

You and this scone. I have Celiac disease, okay? I didn't say anything because I didn't want to hurt your feelings. But gluten makes me sick.

DIANE

You work at a food bank, but you'll let food go to waste as long as it means you can thwart my generosity. What's it like to be so petty?

ALMA

I have a genuine medical condition. I'm not sure you're understanding that.

DIANE

And here's what I don't think you understand about us entitled rich ladies: We are the lifeblood of charitable organizations. Without us, virtually no acts of philanthropy take place in this godforsaken world. None that matter, anyway. And so we will not be patronized. We will not be intimidated. We will not be stopped. We want to help. And we will get what we want.

ALMA

So ... what are you saying?

DIANE

Take the generous gift I gave you out of the kindness of my heart.

ALMA

But I told you: the Celiac, I'll get ...

DIANE slowly pushes one of the plates closer to ALMA, pushing anything in its way—the phone, the papers—to the floor.

ALMA (Cont'd)

Please, Diane. I know you're angry with me. But this is silly. I don't see how my getting sick will—

DIANE

Eat the scone, Alma. Eat both scones. I'll wait.

ALMA is at a loss.

DIANE waits.

END OF PLAY.

Selected Comics

FREGA DIPERRI

COMICS



*“Thank you for coming.
Did you bring your bathing suits?”*

Frega DiPerri, “Caught in the Wake,” 2021. Graphite, ink, and watercolor on Bristol board, 4 1/2 x 6 inches



*“My mom would question
what I can contribute to this company, too...”*

Frega DiPerri, “Occupational Therapy,” 2021. Graphite, ink, and watercolor on Bristol board, 4 1/2 x 6 inches

I Pencil Grieving You Into My Planner

BREE BAILEY

EXPERIMENTAL

Weekly Planner				Week of <i>February X, 20XX</i>			
	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
5 AM							
6 AM							
7 AM							
8 AM			Apply to some big-girl job to make money and leave this town behind.	Refinance my face and enroll in a class to learn to smile more.		Skip work. (Or maybe it's closed—I don't know anymore.)	MRSA—wear a hazmat suit to see his sweaty body.
9 AM							
10 AM							
11 AM		Attend Pops' party.		Stop answering my phone—it's always bad news or loan collectors.			Attend Pops' first and only art exhibit—
12 PM			Pay the bills— <i>my birthright for being born in a single-parent household.</i>				<i>hanging from these twinkly lights,</i>
1 PM		Order three new bras that boost my confidence.				Call hospice. (When they ask for his name, pretend I dialed the wrong number.)	<i>piss-yellow bags float in front of my eyes in the city</i>
2 PM		<i>Give myself enough support to look like my dad isn't dying.)</i>			Attend open bar 3 p.m.–6 p.m.		<i>I escape to.</i>
3 PM			Buy waterproof mascara.	<i>Not sure what scares me more these days: Death or my growing interest in it.)</i>			
4 PM							Buy new shoes on Amazon.
5 PM					Dinner—Taco Bell with Pops.		<i>Magic carpets are out of stock)</i>
6 PM							
7 PM							
8 PM							
9 PM					Hospital. (Uber home.)		
10 PM							
11 PM							
12 PM							

Weekly Planner

Week of February 8, 20XX

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
5 AM	Start applying to jobs. Out of state.	Skip breakfast.	Drink so bad my phone won't wake up so that I can finally ask for help when I think I should.	Attend Pops' burial at 10 a.m.	Hospital.		
6 AM							
7 AM							
8 AM							
9 AM							
10 AM							
11 AM							
12 PM							
1 PM							
2 PM							
3 PM							
4 PM							
5 PM	Look up plane tickets. Print an itinerary—how to cope from far away.	Skip lunch.	RIP everything up by midnight.	Another art exhibit—my turn.			
6 PM							
7 PM							
8 PM							
9 PM							
10 PM							
11 PM							
12 PM							

At Twelve Years Old, I Draft a New Custody Agreement

ARIEL M. GOLDENTHAL

EXPERIMENTAL

1	
2	
3	
4	
5	AT TWELVE YEARS OLD, I DRAFT A NEW CUSTODY AGREEMENT
6	
7	
8	
9	
10) CASE NO: VOL-VIII-22
11	ARIEL M. GOLDENTHAL)
12)
13)
14) Date: June 4, 2023
15) Time: 5:00 p.m.
16) Dept: Experimental
17)
18	
19	
20	1. There's a face Mom makes just before she grabs my wrist and drags me up the
21	Pepto Bismol-pink-rugged stairs. If I see the face, if I'm near the door, if my shoes
22	are close, I can run.
23	1. When I am at my mother's house, I can leave at any time to spend 48 hours at my
24	father's house while she calms down.
25	
26	2. Metallic fear drip-drops down my throat to the beat of my racing heart when I
27	pause at the halfway-point stop sign. I escape once a week, always wearing the
28	same bruise-purple fleece, the one with pockets deep enough to shove my hands
29	still clenched in defense into. It's not thick enough to protect me from the wind or
30	from her.
31	2. Whereas the current custody schedule includes going back and forth between my
32	father's and mother's houses every other weekday and every other weekend, I
	AT TWELVE YEARS OLD, I DRAFT A NEW CUSTODY AGREEMENT

- 1 propose that I spend a full week at each parent's house.
- 2
- 3 ~~3. Minutes after I get to Dad's house, the phone rings and I hide between last year's~~
- 4 ~~dance recital costumes in my closet. The tulle muffles my breathing and dulls~~
- 5 ~~Mom's shrilly threats. Dad comes to find me once she's hung up on him for the~~
- 6 ~~third time.~~
- 7 3. If I am at my father's house during a time when I am supposed to be at my
- 8 mother's house, she can call me on the phone once a day to talk, but I do not need
- 9 to talk to her if I do not want to.
- 10
- 11 ~~4. I build a fort out of my four-poster bed, tie up fleeee blankets along the sides, and~~
- 12 ~~burrow in the warmth instead of going to my first-period pre-algebra class. I'm at~~
- 13 ~~home when the police bang on Dad's door, say Mom has accused him of~~
- 14 ~~kidnapping me, and threaten to hurt my dog if she doesn't stop barking. She~~
- 15 ~~seampers up the stairs and I pull her into my fuzzy safe house.~~
- 16 4. My mother cannot call the police when I run away to my father's house.
- 17
- 18 ~~5. Mom doesn't hurt my brother who has wavy hair like hers, who is quiet and~~
- 19 ~~contemplative instead of loud and assertive, who isolates himself in the study~~
- 20 ~~playing *World of Warcraft*.~~
- 21 5. My brother can visit my father's anytime when I am there.
- 22
- 23 ~~6. If I don't see the face, if the back door is locked, if my purple fleeee is upstairs, I~~
- 24 ~~race to the far corner of my room where she can't find me. At the top of the stairs,~~
- 25 ~~wide blue eyes stare from the crack in the doorway of my brother's room, but I~~
- 26 ~~can't stop. He's safe by himself, I tell myself as I slam the door.~~
- 27 6. If my mother ever hurts him, he gets this same agreement.
- 28
- 29

AT TWELVE YEARS OLD, I DRAFT A NEW CUSTODY AGREEMENT

1 ☐ 7. I miss so much school that my teachers say I might not be ready to move to
2 geometry next year. My brother won't let go of Dad when he comes to pick me up
3 for my doctor's appointment to look at the shoulder that I worry Mom sprained
4 when I twisted trying to resist being dragged up the stairs. I see my fourth therapist
5 who says she wants me to feel like I have control even when I've never felt
6 weaker.

7 7. I retain the right to revisit this agreement at any time.
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AT TWELVE YEARS OLD, I DRAFT A NEW CUSTODY AGREEMENT

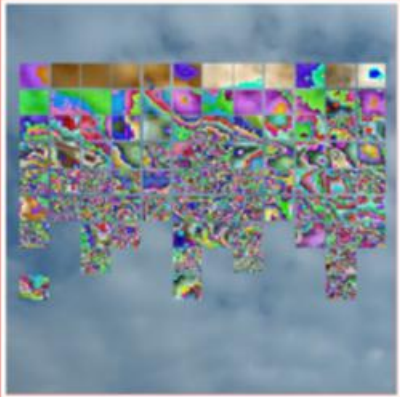
Very-Smart™ Lyrics: 'Crazy Paving' by Rutherford Bee Haze

ZAC PICKER

EXPERIMENTAL

Very-Smart™ Lyrics

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Crazy Paving

[Rutherford Bee Haze](#) · Track 13 on [Swift Currents](#)

Produced by
[Trevin Barker](#)

"Crazy Paving" is the closing song on Rutherford Bee Haze's hit album *Swift Currents* (2015). Frontman Trevin Barker reflects on the perils of fame and the evolution of his musical style.

May 12, 2015 · 1 Viewer · 1.2M views

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