EXPOSITION REVIEW

2024

VOLUME IX:
POP!

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George Townley, *Twin Palms Estate* [detail], 2023. Digital illustration, 18 x 24 inches. Limited edition

COLOPHON
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Contents by Form

Fiction

Flash Fiction

Nonfiction

Poetry

Stage & Screen

Experimental Narratives

Visual Art & Comics

Film

Interview with

When you publish across so many genres, the theme is the glue that holds the issue together. Deciding Expo's annual theme is a point of great excitement and pressure for the editors-in-chief as they seek something that will excite both our editors and our submitters, and will work for poetry as well as for stage & screen and art.

We also admit that after several years of being in "Flux," going through "Act/Break," and experiencing "Hunger," it was time for a more lighthearted theme. While most years the decision has been an arduous one, "POP!" came to us as conveniently as a soda delivered from a vending machine.

"POP!" was an invitation to our submitters to play—with expectations, with pop culture, and even with fads that only #LiteraryTwitter will recognize. We see Expo not only as a home for emerging writers, but as a space for writers of all experiences to push their limits, and this theme gave us all new ways to explore.

One of our favorite moments this season was when a writer submitted a revision after incorporating feedback from other sources, making their piece more traditional in form and voice. Our entire editorial crew enthusiastically preferred the original, more experimental version, and that's what you'll see published in this issue.

"POP!" is also a reminder to our team to continue to push *our* limits and experiment with new ways of keeping the journal relevant. We grappled with AI and its place in *Exposition Review*. We leveraged technology and invited editors onto Submittable, which allowed greater transparency and collaboration, but like all change has had its growing pains. We also ushered in many bright, new voices to our reading team, and their questions encouraged us to examine our practices.

This issue is the result of our contributors embracing our theme, and the efforts of our amazing editors and readers who support them in finding those fresh voices that snap, crackle and, well … you know.

Annlee Ellingson
Laura Rensing
EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

but then maybe just possibly in all that nothing

SOFIE DE SMYTER

FICTION

She's been pregnant for 665 days but she could easily pass for a woman in her fourth month. She's still full of beans, and perfectly comfortable, despite the now quite regular manifestations of the baby underneath her skin. Sometimes it'll use its feet to stretch her forehead, sometimes she'll find the imprint of its spine on her thigh, and other times she'll see its tiny fingers play the violin with the veins in her wrist.

The baby manifested for the first time when one evening, as her husband was getting himself ready for some mid-coital ear-biting, he noticed what looked like a small hand pressing out from the inside of his wife's left cheek. At first, he believed she was messing with him—they've always loved mocking the *Titanic* scene with the hand up against the window, but after checking all corners of her mouth, he had to agree she wasn't. The husband is a rational being most of the time, but at that moment he did believe his wife was possessed. She told him not to be daft. It was obvious the hand was the baby's. If it had been a demon, it would surely have hurt and she'd felt nothing but the slightest tickle.

To be on the safe side, they drove to the hospital, where they were given an intern who unearthed her patient file and, after a while, noticed the dates of their appointments: the woman had been pregnant for more than eleven months. Initially, the couple considered blaming themselves for not noticing, or their relatives for not caring enough, but soon decided it was the fault of their obstetrician. The man was geriatric and hadn't changed his methods much since he started out.

As the woman hadn't had any ultrasounds, she was carted off to radiology. Her husband was abandoned along the way: it was believed the woman had had intercourse with a species that required a longer process of gestation and nobody wanted to break the news. Bets were allowed until the monitor was switched on. The baby was human. Granted, it had taken more than one ultrasound image to capture it, but that was also the case for babies who respected conventional timetables.

A human being is, after all, a lot to take in.

After the bets were paid out, the woman was administered drugs to induce labor. Her husband, some lucky interns, several attendants and all consultants (including an ENT and a geriatrician) assembled to stare at the woman's cervix. As nothing happened, things

were inserted: a hook (for the membranes), a vacuum cup (for the baby's head), a hand and part of an arm, and then two different people's hands simultaneously (to rule out ineptitude). In the end, a curtain was installed to separate the woman's head from her body and she was cut open.

Nothing.

Her womb was so empty it filled the room the way a baby's silence might have. Several people threw up. Others crossed themselves. The woman was given another ultrasound and another one with a different machine. The baby still couldn't be captured in a single shot, but together, the pictures did add up to what was generally accepted a human being. The image wouldn't get fully set until after birth but there were feet and a belly and a head. Enough, for now, to prevent anyone from imagining anything wild, or different, or at all.

Another hand was inserted.

With the baby very much still inside of her, the woman was sent home. She Ubered as her husband was still in recovery—he'd thrown up so violently he'd fainted and fallen face-first onto the vacuum cup. In the back seat, the woman remembered how, before the C-section, he'd said that what with the world and its hands in her, an exorcism might have been a better choice. He'd pretended lightheartedness but she knew he would want to go and find a priest as soon as they got out.

She also knew she'd never see him again. As the woman realized this, the baby curled itself around her neck the way the sun would, and the husband never could.

Utterly, totally, selflessly.

After four weeks of going about her life, the woman had a visit from her mother-in-law. When she opened the door, she noticed that the older woman took a step back to check the house number, unsure if the woman she was looking at was the woman she'd looked at so many times before.

The woman wasn't so sure herself.

"Women have been popping out babies since forever," the mother-in-law said. "It's basic physics: it got in, so it has to come out."

To the woman, it sounded like something you might say to a child who's swallowed a Lego or something else unfit for consumption.

"I guess it just isn't ready yet," the woman said.

"Nonsense! You'll burst! Do you at least know its sex by now? And have you decided on a name?"

"No," the woman said, "but I've found a preschool and suitable friends. Bought the plot of land next to ours. It's all set. Everything's been decided."

The mother-in-law still wasn't looking at her. For fear she'd changed again? Or was she afraid she herself might change?

"You just have to let it go. It's not natural for a child to stay with its mother that long."

The woman felt like saying something about the husband. She also felt like saying she'd never felt more … loose. It was as if everything that had become fixed by her birth

had been set free. The woman had no memory, obviously, but she felt as if she hadn't been as *much* since before she was born.

As many.

She hadn't popped out a baby, no. But something had popped.

Like buttons on a jacket.

Day 666. According to the tabloids, at least. She feels like pointing out that every civilization has counted time differently. For all she knows, she's been expecting for minus 705. Or for fathoms and imploding stars. But after today, when the baby again doesn't come, they might finally realize she's not carrying the Antichrist. They might even find someone else who fails to deliver.

The woman has installed herself in the living room with the lights switched on and the curtains open. She wonders if the crowd outside appreciates the resemblance to a birthing room, and if they do, if they realize they're the ones in the delivery bed this time. The woman feels like she's earned the right to imagine their legs open wide. To picture their feet in stirrups, particularly those of her husband and the consultants, now trying to stare her and the baby into submission from her front lawn. But she doubts they've ever opened anything at all.

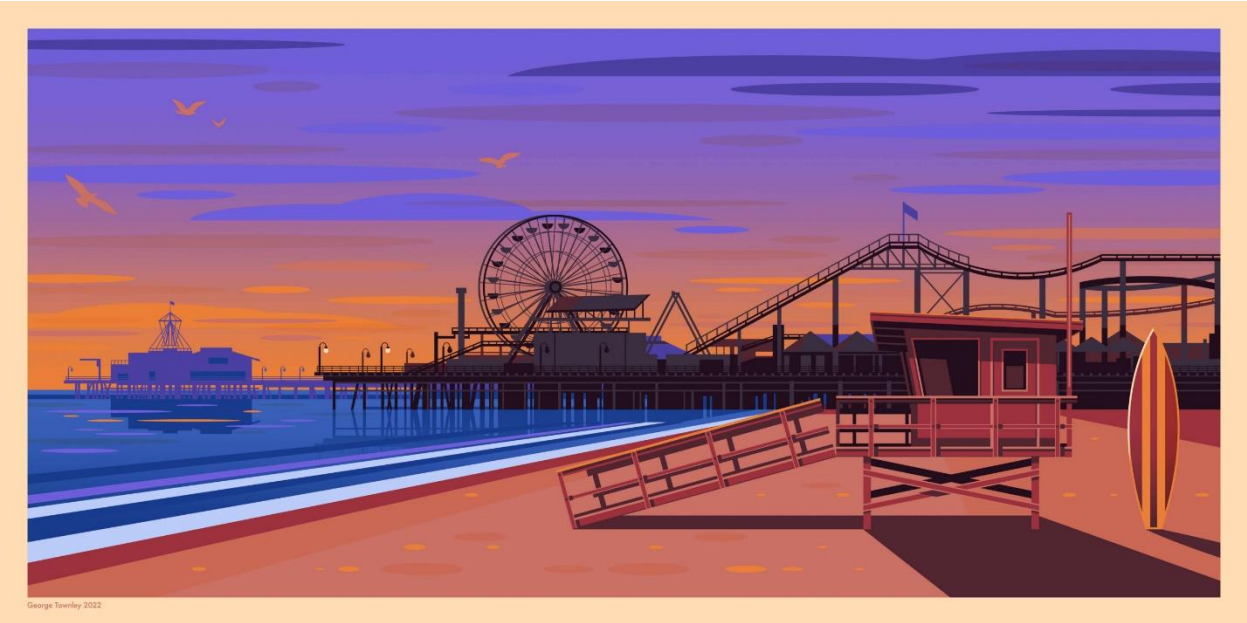
When it's dark enough outside, the woman switches off each lamp until the streetlights morph her window into a massive mirror. At first, she sees them see nothing—just the limits of their own reflections—but then, maybe, just possibly, in all that nothing, something finally seems to stir.

Escape to L.A.: Selected Artwork

GEORGE TOWNLEY

VISUAL ART

George Townley, *Theme Building*, 2018. Digital illustration, 16 x 23 inches. Open edition



George Townley, *Santa Monica Pier*, 2022. Digital illustration, 12 x 24 inches. Timed edition

George Townley, *Dingbat House in Mar Vista*, 2020. Digital illustration, 11 x 17 inches. Limited edition

George Townley, *Hollywood Bowl*, 2020. Digital illustration, 18 x 24 inches. Open edition

George Townley, *Cinerama Dome*, 2019. Digital illustration, 16 x 23 inches. Open edition

George Townley, *Dodger Stadium*, 2021. Digital illustration, 12 x 24 inches. Open edition

George Townley, *Echo Park (Sunset)*, 2022. Digital illustration, 18 x 24 inches. Limited edition

George Townley, *Union Station*, 2023. Digital illustration, 18 x 24 inches. Open edition

George Townley, *Twin Palms Estate*, 2023. Digital illustration, 18 x 24 inches. Limited edition

Mother Love

TINNA FLORES

FICTION

Suzie is lying sideways on the gray love seat so that her legs dangle over the armrest. She's a thin girl, all knees and elbows and long, thick dark hair. She's glued to her iPad, utterly absorbed, watching god knows what. Two years ago, it was unboxing videos on YouTube. Although there were no boxes, only these plastic egg things with bug-eyed little dolls that had cotton candy-colored hair. Laura watches Suzie's feet dangling at the bottom of those long limbs. She will grow into them, but right now, she's like a faun or baby giraffe.

"Mom! Oh-em-gee, you've got to see this!"

Suzie slides weirdly off the love seat, rolling down to the floor, wielding the iPad above her head as if she were holding it up out of water. Laura watches her cross the living room toward her like she's watching a nature show, full of amused curiosity. Suzie slides next to her on the large gray couch and moves a pillow to climb into Laura's lap. Suzie's always been a clinger. No regard for personal space.

"Oof, okay, what have I just got to see?"

"Look!"

Suzie holds her iPad and shows Laura a video on TikTok. The phone is angled down at the top of a flight of stairs. The volume is on high as different glass jars are dropped. Each one shatters and explodes. First, a jar of pickles. Then some red jam. Apple sauce, baby food, olive oil, banana peppers.

"I don't get it."

"It's ASMR."

"Do you even know what that means?"

"Yeah, it's like meditation except you don't have to close your eyes."

"It looks like a mess to me. They should show videos of themselves cleaning up after all that. And what a waste of food!"

"Look at this one!"

Another video. This time it's glass bottles. Jarritos, Fanta, kombucha, Coke. Then another one: mason jars filled with colorful beads. Another one: jumbo jars with colored liquids. It gets mesmerizing pretty quickly. Suzie looks up at Laura periodically to make sure she is still watching. Laura stares at the iPad but isn't paying attention anymore. She feels her daughter's warm, gangly limbs sticking against her skin and remembers the alien feeling of pregnancy. She's never told anyone about it, but when her children were growing inside her, she felt as though she had been invaded. The fetuses leaching nutrients from her food, siphoning calcium right out of her bones.

The sliding glass door behind them by the kitchen slides open and Leo, just two years older than Suzie, comes bounding in.

"MOM!! You gotta come see this!"

Laura pictures a day when they outgrow the show-and-tell and imagines the word "mom" coming from their grown-up mouths without so much need.

Leo holds a glass jelly jar in both hands. His grin is lopsided and his eyes are wide with pride.

"Stop right there, kiddo. Whatever is in that jar, you better leave it on the kitchen counter."

Leo is good with all kinds of creatures, and while he loves to catch them, he always lets them go unharmed. Lizards, beetles, spiders—he is curious and brave and gentle. She loves that about him, loves that he is like his father in that way. Laura's oldest brother, Ricky, was the exact opposite. He caught roaches and would douse them in lighter fluid, strike a match and set them on fire before setting them free. Crazed little balls of flame made crackling, popping sounds until they dropped dead, blackened and charred.

She and Suzie get up off the couch to see what treasure Leo has to show them. It's a scorpion. Small and mean-looking, stinging tail curved up above a hard carapace glistening and dotted with a few specks of dirt. Suzie squeals in the girl-child pitch Laura swears might break glass. She runs off and Laura hears the door to her bedroom slam shut. Leo is delighted.

He and Laura huddle shoulder to shoulder, inches from the glass, looking at the alien thing.

"Do you think it's more afraid of us, or we're more afraid of it?"

"I think Suzie's the most afraid!"

"You might be right, but do you think it's scared of us too?"

"I dunno, Mom. I think it would sting us if it got the chance."

"Yeah, but not on purpose."

Laura runs a hand through Leo's hair. The doorbell rings. She takes a deep breath, holds it while she counts to three in her head, then lets it out in a long, measured exhale.

Suzie appears in the hallway, poking her head around the wall, like a prairie dog looking toward the door.

"Is it Grammy?"

"I think it might be."

Her children follow closely behind her as she opens the door. Laura's mother is standing in the entrance, holding a bunch of balloons and a pastry box, which Laura takes from her.

"Hey, Ma."

"Where are my babies?!"

"Grammy!"

Laura gets out of the way and watches Suzie go in for a big hug. Laura's mother squats and wraps her arms around Suzie. Her mother's face relaxes and, when it does, the furrow at the center of her brow and the hard lines around her mouth soften. Her eyes close and she smiles. That smile. Large, straight teeth and full lips stretch into a grin that settles as an ache in the center of Laura's chest. Her mother stands to hug Leo, who is

affectionate, but slightly awkward about it. Laura watches her mother shapeshift into their Grammy as she takes Suzie and Leo by the hands and leads them to the couch. Suzie chatters on about ASMR and Leo's "totally gross" bug jar.

Laura enters the kitchen, places the pink pastry box on the table and looks for a spot to tie the big metallic balloons. One is in the shape of a unicorn and the other two are a number one and a zero. She fastens them to the back of a dining chair and takes a seat, watching her children and her mother, who is now their Grammy. Suzie has moved on to showing Grammy her Roblox character outfits. Leo has retreated to his room and likely a video game.

Laura watches her mother with Suzie. Her affection for her granddaughter oozes, but her patience is thin. Laura knows it won't take long for Grammy to tire of Suzie's attention. Laura remembers a picture of herself around Suzie's age. She was seated at the foot of her parents' bed, her long brown hair held back from her face in a headband. She thinks she wore a yellow shirt and jean shorts. Tied to her wrist was a single red balloon on a string. Her distant and pensive expression looked so serious, like she was far away inside herself.

"Why don't you go play with your brother for a while, until Dad comes home and we can eat your birthday cake?"

"Okay!"

Suzie bounds toward Leo's room as Laura unloads the dishwasher. Grammy's transformation back into Laura's mother happens like she's kicking off a too-tight shoe.

"I don't understand why you even use that thing. You should wash them by hand, otherwise they won't get clean."

"Okay, Ma. Next time."

"You should get Suzie into ballet. She has too much energy and she needs to put it somewhere ladylike. Also, tell Leo to stop playing with all these creatures. Those reptiles carry salmonella, and this thing he brought inside could have stung him."

Laura's mother taps the side of the glass jar, sending the scorpion into a defensive stance, backing toward the opposite side of its temporary prison.

"Don't tap the glass—I don't think it likes that."

"Awful things. When I was a little girl, your uncle Tomas used to trap them in jars, too. Sometimes he would feed them to a junkyard dog down the street, to keep him mean. Other times, he'd drop tequila on them to watch them sting themselves to death."

What is it with the men in our family? Laura almost lets the thought out, but thinks better of it and says instead, "Leo's just curious. He would never hurt them. And he's cautious. Besides, even if he did get stung, these aren't lethal."

Laura watches the expression on her mother's face and starts talking again before she can open her mouth.

"Scorpions can't sting themselves to death. They're immune to their own venom. They're no more awful than we are. Matter of fact, we are definitely more awful. They are creatures of instinct. We, on the other hand, are creatures of malicious intent."

"Well, what are you trying to say to me?"

"Nothing, Ma. I'll get rid of it."

Laura's phone dings and she picks it up. Her husband, Marcus, is on his way home from work. Laura feels relieved; Marcus is a peacekeeper. He charms his mother-in-law by smiling and laughing at everything she says and deflects all her comments away from Laura. He is as solid and reliable a shield as she could hope for. When Laura looks up from her phone, her mother has emptied the dishwasher into the sink and is handwashing the already clean dishes.

Laura grabs the jar with the scorpion off the counter and makes her way outside through the sliding glass door. The desert behind their house stretches toward mountains the color of dull rust. The back patio gravel crunches beneath her feet. It's late afternoon and the sun throws deep shadows across the folds in the mountain face. The dry, spindly branches of creosote bushes stick up and out as far as she can see. She kneels near a small pile of rocks and stares at the scorpion through the glass, trying to imagine what it might be like, to live on thoughtless instinct. No motives, pure survival. Memory for this creature is … what? Genetically encoded behavioral expression? No regret, no longing to be better or different, just one precious infinite now. *Sure, and then some kid comes along and traps you in a jar for a while, if you're lucky. Feeds you to a dog, if you're not.*

Laura gives the glass jar a few hard shakes, sending the scorpion careening and clicking against the glass, before opening the lid and letting it out into the center of her upturned hand. She can only project a sense of panic onto the small thing and watches, enthralled, by how fast it scrambles upright to strike its venomed tail into the thumb pad of her palm. Laura winces, letting the scorpion fall and scurry away. She holds her wrist and looks at the tiny puncture wound, already ringed in red, searing pain running along her nerves. She turns toward the house and starts to walk back inside, pressing a thumb, hard, into the wound and feeling a tingling numbness creep into her tongue.

Our Best Days

KABUBU MUTUA

FICTION

Even now I remember the first time I saw him, a beautiful boy cycling through Uhuru Street as if he'd done it his entire life. How I envied him. How by that week's end I had convinced Mama to buy me a bicycle—what better way to beat my morning tardiness, to seize my days, than cycle to school by myself? In any case, Mama deplored my apathy for academia, and thought that gifting me a bicycle would somehow rouse my interest in school. Cycling was easy, and soon I coasted through Uhuru Street with an ease I'd never imagined. And so my friendship with Kauli began. His family lived in the house opposite, a small brick house lined with lantanas. Sometimes in April bees flitted in that compound, and once they stung me when I went over to cycle with him. Over the following days I wore my sting with pride, and Mama asked if she could blow my hand with her lips rounded into an O.

We were seven or eight then, Kauli and I. Age doesn't matter, anyway, if you come to think of it. What matters is how Kauli began losing his hearing that July, so our English teacher, Madam Okola, when asking Kauli a question, had to repeat herself, saying, "Are you deaf?" even though it was obvious. It was of great interest, then, to see Kauli's place in the class unoccupied in the days that followed as rumors spread about what had happened. Someone said he'd transferred because his mother disliked our head teacher, Madam Musa. I knew this was untrue because I'd seen Kauli at their house, cycling around the jacaranda in their yard. When I waved at him he ignored me. In the end, when he was tired he stopped to wave through their wrought iron gate, then began to cycle so fast I thought he would spin and fall. But Kauli was an expert cyclist, more skillful than I ever was in the way he maneuvered his curves. Sometimes he let me in, and we cycled around their compound—he was not allowed to leave on account of his sickness.

Kauli was a strange boy. He trapped birds in upturned water basins and tortured them. Often, I set them free. He said mercy made me weak, like a girl, and reminded me that he was older (one year, seven months). I said it was stupid to compare ages when we attended the same standard. Besides, I was taller than him: who was he to question me on matters of maturity? His mother said he was sick, but that he would recover and no longer trap birds in upturned water basins.

I began to sketch him, tracing his form with my graphite pencils. I suppose I thought I would make him better, freeze him into perpetual happiness. I still have those sketches in my drawer: Kauli in flight, racing against the wind; Kauli dancing; Kauli swinging through the grove of banyans that touched their compound; Kauli gliding

through the community pool. And yet his face is never complete. Perhaps a part of him would forever remain lacking.

And so my love for painting began—all these years I've tried to quantify life, to frame lives on canvases, yet each attempt has left me wanting. Yesterday my lover cupped my chin in his hands, said, "In all your paintings, there's a lone subject, not a girl or boy—I mean one can't tell. Is this someone from your past?" I laughed, said, "Is that so?"

I wonder now: is it so obvious that Kauli has clung to me after all these years?

* * *

When Kauli got better, we cycled into the trails that left our estate and parked outside our house for glasses of mango juice. We coursed through that age with a purity of mischief, blasting music when Kauli said he wanted to dance or screaming as we scaled the walls until Mama said we were making her go mad. The house was out of bounds, she said, directing us to the yard where we could scream all we wanted.

Looking back on those days, I can see that Kauli's loss of hearing fascinated me. I suppose I wished to be like him. I stuck cotton pads in my ears and imagined what it felt like to be half-deaf. At the community swimming pool, I sank to the bottom and listened to the vacuous silence of the water around me, opening my eyes to the clear iridescence of the refracted light. I never told Kauli about my fantasies.

That January, at the beginning of the new term, Kauli acquired a hearing aid. I was floored and asked if I could touch it. I ran my fingers over the pink plastic, feeling its smoothness. Kauli said it had cost his mother a fortune. Now, he wore it with delight. I suppose I envied him, so I lied to Mama that I had begun to lose my hearing too.

"You can't hear?" she asked.

I nodded.

"—what a liar I've raised," she said, lining her lips with gloss.

In the end I never saw the inside of an ear specialist's office.

* * *

Aged twelve I kissed Kauli. I suppose I'd wanted to do it all along—what with the way boys in our class spoke of girls, I imagined Kauli, now a teenager, sticking his lips against mine. He must have imagined it too, because he said he liked it. We kissed in class during PE, in an empty, dusty classroom that smelled of chalk and spilled biro pen ink and open exercise books. It was a hot, humid afternoon, and when I stared out the window, all I saw were our classmates chasing the ball in a haze of red dust. Kauli let me trace the line of muscles on his chest and stomach, let me dig my fingers into his bulge. He stopped me when I began to stroke him. Afterwards, he dug into my shorts.

The thing with Kauli is, he never made up his mind sometimes, and it drove me crazy that I had to make certain decisions for him. If we walked to the ice cream stand in the market and there were three flavors, he wouldn't make up his mind about the flavor he wanted and I had to choose for him. Always it was vanilla and he said it tasted like toothpaste.

* * *

That September my grades plummeted and Madam Musa summoned Mama to her office. The cramped space had a portrait of the Lord on the wall and smelled of hair pomade—the rumors were true, then, that she locked herself in there at lunchtime to fix her hairdo.

I was not trying enough at school, Madam Musa told Mama, who looked bored throughout and kept yawning.

I could not see the chalkboard correctly, I lied.

Madam Musa tapped her acrylic nails on her mahogany desk and said she knew someone. A volunteer American organization was visiting her church to test eyes and donate free spectacles. Was Mama willing for me to come down for the tests?

Mama nodded yes. I was delighted, and followed through with my fraud—at the testing tent I pretended not to see the letters, and said that my eyes watered in intense light, and squinted throughout the ordeal with my dear mother by my side. By the end of the week, I had new spectacles that pulled the light in all the right ways. Now I had a disability of my own, and my classmates respected me. They thought I was a type of genius. Kauli observed me for a long time and said, "You are not eye-sick, are you?" I laughed. Kauli saw me for what I was, a lying child. I adored him for that. My grades improved. Perhaps there's a connection between wearing glasses and academic success. Cliché, I know. But I felt it whenever I touched my textbooks to study: the clarity of formed ideas, the desire to be good, to impress those who'd given me so much. Mama said I might join the best high schools in the country.

After school Kauli and I often cycled to his house, where we flipped through his *Supa Strikas* comics. I loved Shakes for his dreadlocks. I said I would let mine stand like that. Kauli said it was impossible for locks to be so stiff. We blasted songs by Miriam Makeba and Brenda Fassie. We kissed again and again. We agreed we would run away, paint mustaches on our faces, wear hats, take the next bus out.

"And money—we will need money to survive, no?" I asked.

"You will paint strangers for a price."

"And you?"

"I will cheer you on, and lie in bed all day playing music and smoking cigarettes, and listen to you complain about your customers."

We laughed. I adored that idea, of a life untouched by rules.

It was Kauli who, on a rainy November day, informed me that Brenda Fassie was a lesbian. She liked girls the way we liked each other. "What were we, boys who like each other?" I asked him. He flipped through a glossy gossip magazine and said, "Homosexuals," casually, as though it did not matter, such a big word. I thought about that word for days. For the record, I had seen whatever we were doing—touching, stroking each other, kissing—as acts of service and yet Kauli had found a word. Now I had a name, such a dirty-sounding name, even though Kauli seemed not to care. I maintained we were just friends.

* * *

A month after my seventeenth birthday, we tried sex. Kauli said it was highly likely that it would backfire. Our school days were ending. We stripped naked and checked his door lock twice. Down the corridor Kadzo the maid was frying samosas. Rumba soared gently from a stereo system. The act was painful, and Kauli covered my mouth with his palm. I liked the idea of him being in control. In hindsight, I should have done things differently—I should have eaten less that morning. Perhaps I should have said no. Kauli stopped midway because I couldn't stop crying. "We will try next time," he said, wiping me, then himself with a towel. I dreaded each memory of that time. Yet, as the months gradually passed, I touched myself when I thought about him.

Looking back now I like to think that Kauli was in love with danger. He was pulled to things flaming with precarity. Take for instance when he began smoking. On the foil-lined pack of his Marlboros, a warning regarding the health implications of smoking—*cigarettes cause cancer*—screamed in black print, and yet he gulped through a pack a week. I thought he looked sexy, holding those cigarettes, his parents none the wiser. I adored the fact that he knew he looked sexy. I owned him, and pictured that he would stay that way forever, holding that cigarette with the light hitting his face at all the right angles.

In the days when we were having sex, it was common for Kauli to be seen fighting with boys from Uhuru Street. Mama said it was a pity that he'd grown to be that kind of boy. I pitied her for thinking I was an innocent—I who never missed Sunday Mass. I was an effeminate boy, and hated it. I stole half-tubs of lipstick from Mama's drawer, dashed them on my lips, and pretended I was a girl. I admired my handiwork before the mirror, and prayed no one ever saw me like that. It's shameful to want to be something else when condemned to be one thing. You might say I was a confused child, who'd gotten in with the wrong person, but I've often thought that he was my baby, someone who needed taking care of. Through the years I have fallen for strong men with different disabilities and ailments—a former soldier with missing legs whom I had to help in the bathroom, another with a life-ending blood cancer, and another with a missing eye (a fake sheep's eye in its place). It is strange to think about it. That I fell in love to take care of them, to make them feel better.

Kauli and I committed several crimes and got away with all of them. We set fire to the principal's Volvo because he called half our class *a bunch of nitwits* and detested our mothers. We skipped Friday afternoon classes to watch banned films projected behind the town bar. I was always scared, and Kauli pulled my hand through the fence saying, "Don't be a girl." Part of me pulsed with fear and I felt I might vomit from the adrenaline. Those were our best days. Sometimes as the credits rolled Kauli would cry, recalling an emotional scene or mourning an actor he thought should have survived a shootout.

* * *

The last term of high school, Kauli began taking out his uncle's Honda for rides on the roads that forked away from our town. He honked at our gate twice, a signal that I should come out. I climbed behind him and we rode out into the hills. When we had parked on the peak of a ridge, he told me he despised his father and the rest of his family for thinking

that they owned him. I said he was lucky to have a father. We sat next to each other, and a cold wind cut our faces. We opened Tusker lagers and drank ourselves into a stupor. An approaching rain pulled us into sobriety. We huddled under the branches of a giant fig tree. Then, as the rainwater cut the air in silver lines, I wondered about our future. Who were we fooling, staying together, lying to each other as if we had infinite time? Already, some girls had made passes at me, and I dreaded seeing them at school. I asked Kauli what he thought about us, now that our high school days were ending. Someone had to ask. No one can blame me for caring. Not that I had answers myself. Kauli's face suddenly furrowed, and he stammered something along the lines of, "Thinking too much will end us." Then he jumped on the Honda and rode away without me. I had to hitch a ride back home in a country bus filled with passengers cradling chickens and baskets of fresh fruit.

At home Mama was frying beef. She popped her head from the kitchen to ask where I had been. I said watching a football game. She guessed that I had been out with girls. Those girls, where would they take me? she wanted to know. I removed my coat, threw it on the couch. Those girls, Mama said, would have sex with me and leave me dry; girls were clever these days. The game was inverted now, she added. I suppose she thought she was handing me some life-changing advice. Still, a part of her statement was true. Look at me and Kauli—clueless, loving each other with so much passion we were unaware it was love. Who could have imagined?

* * *

Kauli honked at our gate four days after leaving me in the hills. When I refused to come out, he walked up to our house, let himself in, and walked down the corridor to my room. I was sketching cartoons. He came in, sat on my bed. He had shaved the sides of his head in the style of an American pop star and smelled of cigarettes. He lit one. He was lucky that Mama was at the market.

He said he had been thinking and thought it was necessary to care about our future. In addition, he said, scratching his forehead, he was sorry that he had left me strung out in the hills; there was nothing he could do to show he was sorry. I thought he was pretty, like a baby, apologizing with his innocent eyes.

That evening we went out together. We had completed our high school examinations. I thought all of the history questions on Kenya's independence from the British were bogus: *Explain the benefits of colonialism*. Parts of me were opening up to the world, like a flower to sunlight. Kauli thought it was a matter of routine, answering those questions. I had skipped them, scribbling my answers to questions that made sense: *Describe the course of the first liberation*.

He suggested we ride to the neighboring town. It was larger than our own. More roads, more bars, more shops, more people. It was already nighttime and the sky called to mind a black canvas sprinkled with white ink. We parked outside a bar whose name I don't remember. Inside, lights bled into each other, blinking reds and blues. I had never attended a party, but I had often fantasized about blacking out in one.

Kauli nodded at a man by the entrance and we went inside. A crowd bumped and swayed to thumping music. A girl made eyes with me; I avoided her. Kauli took me by the

hand through the crowd to the end of the hall. There was another door, another guard. Kauli nodded and he let us through. A blast of tobacco smoke hit my face. The music was different, faster; I could feel it. I wanted to move. We ordered gins. Kauli knew a lot of people, nodded to everyone his eyes met with an easy familiarity. There were only men. Kauli pulled me to the dance floor and said, "Dance." Someone blew a plume of smoke from pouted lips. I began to dance. "What is this place?" I asked. Kauli laughed. "You don't like it? We could go somewhere else." Kauli was like this, always returning questions with questions. I guess he thought it made him mysterious. Somehow, it worked. But sometimes it drove me crazy—it felt needy that I should require certain things from him.

"Drink," he said, pressing my cheeks with his fingers so my mouth opened. He poured gin into my mouth. "I know people," he said finally, swigging from a glass. His throat bobbed like a second animal. I loved the music. My head was soft, mellowed. It felt like swimming.

His hand slipped from mine. The crowd oscillated in the music, swallowed him. Someone leaned into my face, called me *good boy*, I looked so innocent, and was I lost? I said no, and the music drowned my voice. I looked around: painted faces, a mirrorball spilling shards of colored light on swaying bodies, glass bottles, cigarette smoke curling in hazy lines. Everyone, a stranger. Kauli had disappeared. My head began to swirl. I fell in with the crowd's swelling, a wavelike force that pushed me on and on and then, finally, spat me into the cold air outside.

In the soft darkness, I saw an impression of Kauli's silver necklace glinting in the pale moonlight. He sat on a Peugeot's bonnet, trousers pulled down. Someone knelt before him, moving fast. I froze momentarily before walking away. Kauli called my name. And although his voice was as familiar as ever, it was now an echo, a pleading from a billion light-years away.

* * *

I have often wondered if, over the following days, I should have acted differently. If I should have let whatever I had with Kauli run its course, let it slide with time's passing so I would remain blameless for its ending. Perhaps that afternoon, I shouldn't have announced to him, as he repaired his uncle's Honda, that I was finally leaving for the city. That my mother's aunt, a famous city lawyer, wanted me to apprentice in her firm. What choice did I have anyway, I who lived under the auspices of my mother?

"I was drunk," he said, then proceeded to turn a screw. The entire time he avoided my eyes.

No, no, all of that was forgiven, I said, aware of my lie (I who'd cried when the alcohol finally wore off the morning after, the night at the bar infused with a blinding clarity). Yet I was ashamed to say that I now detested him. After all, I'd seen him for who he was—who was to say he hadn't sought pleasure elsewhere while we were together? I was young, you might say. But he owed me the truth.

"Do you hate me?" he wanted to know. I dug my fingernails into my palms and looked away. Soon September would end, and the long, foggy days would disappear. The scent of fresh lemons from the grove curled into my face. I walked away, sensing his form

frozen behind me. Jumping on my bicycle, I realized that I preferred the possibility of what could be. I pedaled away, directionless, towards tracks I'd never explored.

* * *

The day Kauli crashed the Honda into a culvert, I was at home preparing for my journey to the city. I did not know until that evening, when Mama informed me she had seen his crumpled motorcycle being towed to the police station. It's funny how the memory of love shifts the largest borders. I remember cycling out to the town hospital, rushing through wards thick with the smell of medicine. How my breath steadied. He lay asleep, limbs in bandages, legs strung to a frame. At least he was alive.

I spent days beside him, opening windows, changing flowers, chatting with the old man who lay on the other side of the screen. His family was dead, he told me, and he had no one. I thought about the old man often, in the days that followed, picturing myself fifty years hence, nursing the grief of departed family and friends. It was harrowing, to experience all that loneliness in imagination.

Someone once told me that a gravely injured person is granted the choice of returning or leaving. If they return, they should lead an uncompromised life. The memory of that pact is scraped away so the life they lead is a continuation of the life they led before their injury. If they leave, they return as a newborn and continue as above. If they've served their sentence on earth, they join the primordial soup and become one with creation. I thought about Kauli's choice in the days that followed. Would he return for me? Perhaps I was selfish to require that from him, but you must understand he is the only person I ever loved selfishly.

On the seventh day he stirred. His eyes opened as slits.

"You crashed your bike," I said.

"I'm going to die?"

I must have said no, partly to soothe him, and partly to grant myself a measure of grace. What did I know anyway? He'd broken a few bones is all. In hindsight, I had feared the worst.

I enjoyed taking care of him, walking with him on Uhuru Street and helping with his bandages.

Once, Mama said, "It's that Kauli, isn't it: the reason you don't want to go to the city?"

I nodded. Had she known? She'd never said it, but I felt the ease with which she spoke about him, as if he were my brother. And yet her softness only offered me temporary reprieve; soon it would become untenable for me to stay. I now know that she was merciful.

That December the lantanas touching our house burst into a bright pink, and the sunlight curled in whorls against the white of our compound walls. Often, I cycled alone—Kauli's legs would take months, perhaps a year, to get accustomed to pedals. Gradually, taking the bicycle out became a chore, and a pang of melancholy surged through me when I raced down that street. Eventually, I gave it up.

* * *

On Jamhuri Day, we went to the square for the fireworks. Kauli's plaster cast was now browned the shade of old ivory. Strangers patted his shoulder, smiled at us as we broke the crowd.

"I feel like a god, people blessing me every time," he said.

"Everywhere you go you are loved," I said, helping him to a wooden bench under a tamarind. The night sky was clear, the sharp December wind spilling into our faces. A group of middle-aged men sipped White Caps from the bottle on the back of a pickup truck. Someone grilled slabs of goat near the wooden benches. Music blared from a portable speaker.

"When I was in the hospital I dreamed you were married," he said, lighting a cigarette.

"It's strange, the things we see in dreams."

He sucked the burning cigarette until his cheeks hollowed. We were silent for a while before he exhaled and said, "It's a large beautiful world. Go stake it out. When you return–"

"You sound like an ancient king sending spies to enemy territory," I said.

We laughed. I caught the scent of warm cigarette smoke mingled with the aroma of roast goat. Before us, the fireworks came, elaborate fractals of red, green, and blue. I laid my hand on his. Everyone around us was cheering, whistling to another year free from Britain.

Poison

ERICA ENG

FILM

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Four Husbands

G.G. SILVERMAN

FICTION

1.

I made my first husband from feathers, wanting a soft and yielding love. I gathered some as they fell from the sky, when birds flitted from trees. I grew impatient; wild ones did not shed their gifts quickly enough, so I went to the slaughterhouse, where men slit the throats of birds to be eaten and peeled back their soft coats. I wore an apron and gloves to shield myself from the blood, and filled a large sack with slick, crimson feathers, imagining their downy touch when clean and dry, their wild colors, their iridescent sheen.

I carried the pieces of my lover home, and dumped them in the wash basin, blending them with what I'd gathered myself. Then I let the water carry away the dirt and blood, swirling in the drain. I placed the feathers to dry in the sun on that windless day, and they came to bright softness once more. I sewed a skin of fine mesh in the shape of a man, then I filled him up and closed the hole with stitches, forward and backward and forward, capturing his soul forever.

I placed him in bed beside me, where he came alive and took his first breath, sighing in the dark. I held him close, wondering if his making would be our undoing. I wondered how long before the pieces of him remembered their origin, attached to small warm bodies in flight, wind propelling them aloft. I wondered how long it would be before he remembered the sun, before he remembered migration, soaring over land embedded in memory, trajectories driven by hunger and survival. I rose and closed the windows, shutting out the breeze. After that, I hid him away in our home. When I left to gather food, I tied his wrists to a chair with satin ribbons and kept the blinds drawn. I shut out the sky and the trees. Out of respect for my husband, I never brought home birds to be eaten; I ate only nuts and seeds. He never asked to be fed. He never whistled or chirped, never pecked, strutted, or sang. I read him stories to pass the time, though never ones that might trigger a memory. Soon, I stopped reading aloud at all, preferring to hear the words in my skull.

One day, we sat in our parlor, and I read to myself soundlessly, while he remained in his usual solitude. Sunlight filtered through drawn blinds and cast narrow beams and shadows on the carpet—light, dark, and light. The shape of a large bird with outspread wings darted through the beams. My husband flinched, his soul shuddering softly.

He said, "I remember."

I wasted no time. I slipped a shear in my pocket and slung him over my shoulder, then I carried his weeping form outside. I poked a hole through his fine mesh skin, slitting his belly, freeing his soul to scatter on the wind.

2.

I made a second husband of stone, wanting a love that lasted. At the quarry, I gathered piles of gravel, easier than hauling a heft of granite. Still, the buckets were heavy—I fought the urge to collapse as I trudged back and forth to my home. Bullets of sweat stung my eyes and my shoulders burned, arms slipping their sockets. Too weak to carry as much as I desired, I toiled until nightfall, limping over hard earth beneath thin shoes. I hadn't anticipated the weight, the effort, the strain. I poured the gravel on my bed, forming a long torso, then arms, legs, and head. The mattress sagged under my new husband's weight. Panting, I closed myself in the washroom to bathe the sweat and dust from my skin, then I dried myself, and slipped on a cool satin nightgown fit for a new bride.

I emerged from the washroom and presented myself as his wife, climbing in bed beside him. Gravity pulled me into the pit formed by his body. Rolling sideways, my face smacked against his, teeth clashing on his jagged mouth. Our first kiss was sharp, gritty, tasting of salt and dirt. I tore my lip, and a bead of blood seeped, bright as a jewel. My husband came alive and spoke, his voice coming out in a rumble. He began to tell stories of his origin, of the forces that made mountains, the hot lava that once roiled on the surface of the earth in thick red rivers until it cooled. He told me of the minerals that returned to the rock bed year after year from the blood and bones of ancestors at war. *Because of this*, he said, *through the eons, stone craves death to replenish itself*. To rebuild his strength, he would need sacrifice, the way his father did, and his father's father, and his father's father's father. In ages past, virgins would be flung from cliffs, giving their lives willingly. When stone hadn't been fed in too long, mountains shook, and behemoth plates of rock beneath the soil lurched in violence, sending entire cities tumbling, swallowed by gaping mouths that formed in the earth.

"I'm not a virgin," I said.

It doesn't matter, he said. *Death is death.*

I shrugged. I did not take a husband to hasten my own end. "What are you afraid of?" I asked.

Water, he said. *I am afraid of water.*

Water, over years, over centuries, had the power to wear stone. Lashing waves smoothed sharp edges, reduced columns to mere pebbles. Swollen rivers and streams fresh from thunderstorms could carry stone for miles, grinding it to a fine silt—fleeting, insubstantial, washing away with the ocean.

I stood, and made my way to the washroom, where I twisted the cold metal knob on the bath spigot, running the water at full force. The tub filled in a matter of minutes, then the water cascaded over white porcelain walls, forming a river. I rushed away from that home, my feet sloshing under the sopping length of my nightgown. My husband's voice grumbled behind me, growing distant, like weak thunder.

3.
Craving lightness, I made my next husband of air. I made a man-shaped balloon of discarded parachutes, cutting them into strips and stitching them back together, but leaving an air hole at the top of his head with a drawstring closure. I held the balloon open, running down a grassy hill on a summer day, catching the breeze inside him. I stumbled at the bottom, flattening my balloon-husband with my flailing body. I repeated the attempt, starting at the top again, running until his form puffed out. I clenched my fist around the opening to seal the air, then tugged the strings shut, capturing my husband's essence. I carried him home, dodging children and dogs who thought he was a toy, someone to punch or wrestle between teeth. At home safely, I rested him against the wall, and nestled against his form, wanting only to be held, to be cushioned, to have a buffer against the world. He deflated immediately, wind whining from his seams.

4.
I made my next husband of silk, first collecting hundreds of worms. Before they would spin, they needed feeding, so I stripped a tree of its leaves. I placed the leaves in the worms' box and they gorged for weeks, until only shreds remained. The creatures grew and grew, molting skin after skin. Plump and satisfied, they yawned and strung silk from their bodies, writhing and flailing their heads. They worked for two sunsets, enclosing themselves in soft white tombs. Once they slept, I scooped the pods into boiling water to kill them, preventing transformation. I covered my ears, counting the minutes, then I lifted out the pods, and brushed the silk off the dead in smooth single strands. I popped the worms' cooked flesh into my mouth like meat, gagging at the taste but thanking them for their sacrifice.

I sang to the silk: soon, the strands would make a fine husband, a smooth shining one. I imagined the places we'd go together, and all the other jealous wives. I imagined my pride, how I'd beam, and how I'd make love to his soft body. I spun, wove, sewed, and soon had the shape of a man, though he was flat and needed to be stuffed, so I filled him with more silk—raw, unwoven, cast-off cocoons. Once complete, my new husband shimmered in the light.

I carried him everywhere, and women cooed, demanding to know where I'd found him. I didn't reveal my secret. I only nodded, pretending I'd found him this way, perfectly made. They smiled and caressed and I became jealous of their touching. So I whisked him away, preferring to be alone. They followed, trailing us through the woods to get close. I ran him home where it was safe, and we would stay indefinitely.

Over time, he began to change. Day by day, something swelled inside and he grew dense, seams about to burst. I could no longer carry him. I laid him in bed, afraid of what was to come. I joined him there, weeping softly. He began writhing again. I begged him to be still, yet he wouldn't. I couldn't stop thinking of where I'd gone wrong. I'd eaten all the worms, preventing transformation, or so I thought. Had I made a mistake?

Worn by emotion, I fell into a dreamless sleep, and was startled hours later by a sound. My husband's skin tore open. Enormous, tattered wings pushed through the break,

weakened from struggling. His shimmering skin slipped backward, revealing a moth the size of a man.

"This can't be," I said. "I had eaten all of you, leaving only silk behind."

Not all, the moth said without speaking. He had no mouth and couldn't feed, and would be dead in days.

He was beautiful and terrifying all at once, cream-colored with a soft thorax and legs, pleasurable to touch, like fur. His bulbous black eyes shone. I saw myself reflected inside them, falling in love with my own face the way Narcissus did. I lifted up my nightgown and pulled him on top of me, and his fragile wings tore.

He was destined for death, regardless.

I stared at myself in his eyes, seeing only love. He stung my belly. In the searing knives of pain, I felt only ecstasy. I felt truly alive.

A Second Chance

SOPHIA LEE

FLASH FICTION • WRITEGIRL CONTRIBUTOR

We sit in the small ramen restaurant. It's a little run-down, but the food is always delicious and that is what matters. I feel like I'm at home whenever I come here.

My gaze shifts to the table, finding anything and everything else more important than the conversation I'm about to face. I straighten my place mat, fold my napkin, trace circles on the table with the condensation left behind by my water glass. After we order, I hear her small, soft voice. I look up.

"I … I'm really sorry, Lily. I'll never forgive myself for walking out that day," she says. I can tell she's sincere. "I don't want to make up excuses for what happened, and I know that nothing I say or do now will change the fact that you had to live without a mom for so many years. I can only beg for your forgiveness. I hope that we can make new cherishable memories together from now on."

She uses a napkin to wipe away her tears. I give her a small smile.

The waitress places steaming hot bowls of ramen in front of us. The soup glistens and I inhale that savory smell I'll never tire of. Warmth fills my body. I can never be in a bad mood here.

I look up at her, at my mom whom I thought hated me. I'm not sure if I'm ready to let her completely back into my life, but I'm willing to try. The birthday gifts, the countless letters, and calls—she's been making an effort to be a part of my life again, and I think in my heart that I'm ready to forgive her.

"Mom, it's OK …"

I pause and take a sip of mouthwatering soup. The thick, creamy broth, with all of its complex flavors, disperses in my mouth. Usually, this is my comfort food. But this time, I notice something different. There is a tinge of sourness in the broth—I don't remember it ever tasting this way before.

I was going to tell her that I forgive her, that I look forward to making new memories together. That I want to put the past behind us.

But something goes wrong, very wrong. As soon as I taste the ramen, a wave of anger and resentment washes over me. I scrunch my eyebrows and shoot up from the table, towering over my mom who looks at me confused and terrified.

For some reason, I feel this unbearable resentment I can't contain. I find myself banging my fists on the table, screaming, "I … I hate you! I can't believe you left for all those years! In the most important years of my life, I had to live without a mom. Thinking to myself how my mom walked out on me, how she doesn't love me! I don't wanna see you ever again!"

I am shocked that these words just came out of my mouth. I would never say that to her! I was ready to forgive her and accept her back into my life. But deep down, do I really hate her?

Suddenly a chef bursts out of the kitchen and stomps into the dining area screaming. His eyebrows scrunch together and sweat drips down his cheeks, red with anger. As he passes our table, he yells into his phone, "If you just communicated with me, I wouldn't be so infuriated with you! But no! I absolutely cannot believe you sent OUR kid to that boarding school. Our kid. What's wrong with you?!"

He pushes the door open and slams it shut as he storms off into the night. The restaurant is silent for a moment before talking and eating resume.

I twirl noodles around my chopsticks and slurp them as I look angrily at my mom. "I … I just … I can't believe you have the audacity to try and enter my life years later, the audacity to ask for my forgiveness. I … I hate people like you—"

Suddenly a man at the table next to us shoots up from his seat and shouts at the woman across from him. "Why'd you bring me here? I would NEVER go out with you!"

At another table, a young girl screams unintelligibly at another. Everyone in the restaurant is yelling at this point, so I don't catch what she's saying—something about a swing set.

Across the room, a young man is arguing vehemently with the older man he is sitting with. As he waves his arms around in anger, a ramen bowl gets tipped over, spilling its contents out onto the table. They don't even seem to notice.

I look wide-eyed at the tables around me. People who had calmly been enjoying their ramen moments before are screaming at each other and storming out of the restaurant.

I don't have time to process what is going on before my mom grabs her purse and stands with wide teary eyes.

"You … you really feel that way?" she asks.

"I … no, I—" Then I yell, "Well, yeah! You left me, an eight-year-old girl, to fend for herself. No note, no goodbye, nothing! I've lived this long without you. I don't need you in my life!"

Tears stream down her cheeks. She brings her purse close to her chest and makes an expression so deeply sad that my anger subsides.

"OK," she says, "I'll … I'll leave, but I love you, Lily. And I hope in a couple years you can find it in your heart to forgive me."

All I do is watch as she leaves. Her ramen remains on the table untouched.

"No … don't leave …" I call out quietly, but she's gone.

I look down at my ramen and suddenly everything clicks. In horror, I push it away.

I've lost my mom a second time.

All Those Years Ago

DANA JEAN RIDER

FLASH FICTION

She asks her partner if she can sleep with her ex.

Her partner replies, “Why?” like most partners would.

So she tells her some of the reasons: Well, he has cancer. We haven’t talked much in the intervening years between our relationship and now, but he reached out last week, and he’s in town, and he has cancer. He says he’s aching for that kind of connection before … y’know, the end. And I have a toothachey fondness for the memory of him. I want to help.

She doesn’t tell her some of the other reasons: We never had sex when we dated because we were just little college students, unsure how our parts worked individually, let alone together, impressing each other instead with witty remarks about the readings assigned by that one cool English professor. And, domestic bliss is unending and his request is the first time I’ve felt the twist of desire in the dormant parts of me in so, so long. And usually that’s okay and I’m happy—I’m kept quite sane by the mason jar canning and garden tending and quiet reading time and Sunday morning walks—but now the singular remaining iota of my youth is dying of cancer and it’s making me horny.

“Do you think he really has cancer?” the partner asks. She isn’t against it, necessarily—they used to swing with other couples when they were younger. Usually female couples, but she has always adored her partner’s sentimentality.

“Who lies about that?”

Men who want sex, they both think to themselves. But in the end, the partner agrees, barring the usual constraints of before-and-after testing and full communication.

The ex isn’t lying. He *is* dying of cancer. He’ll beat it for a while, and she will feel a swoon of anger and embarrassment that will subside with his death about a year later. She won’t attend the funeral.

They meet at a coffee shop near the hotel where he’s staying. He looks largely the same. He kept the twiggy elements of his youth tucked in tight beneath a thinning blanket of hair. The anticipation is sweaty and fills her with the pleasing shiver she first felt when they held hands and traded kisses all those years ago. She thinks to herself that she’s wanted this for a long time, for forever—she recalls that she was ready to sleep with him when they dated, but she didn’t know how to ask and he seemed a little scared.

They kiss outside his hotel room door before she leads him to the bed. He touches her with a precious sort of uncertainty.

He’s inside her for the first time in the whole twenty-five years, four months, two days, and ten hours that they’ve known each other.

Then, he starts crying.

He slumps over so his face is on her shoulder, and he cries and cries and cries and tries to apologize for something he said or did at the end of their relationship over a quarter-century ago, and she tries to keep her voice a bit sexy when she tells him it's okay, but then he just cries some more, and she thinks about her partner and the meditation music that's always playing in the study and how the fiddle leaf fig probably needs to be pruned, and she thinks about how when she and the ex broke up all those years ago, she felt very sad for a very long time, and her friends told her that he was probably going to stay a virgin forever and get a long greasy ponytail and work as a bookshop wage slave, condescending to each customer he deigned to answer questions for, and she had felt strange and awkward trying to defend him from her friends' assertions based on his likes, dislikes, the way he treated her, the way they kept hanging out after they broke up and it made her sadder, and she thinks about how sweet and lovely and unique she found him, those things no one else ever seemed to see, and she wonders how his life has gone since then, which she doesn't know because part of her being able to get better and move on and build a cozy, happy life for herself was never checking in on him, and she wonders why she didn't think to ask about the rest of his life before this, whether he had a wife, children, pets, a job, ailments besides the cancer, whether he still reads as religiously as they had together as nubile coeds, and she thinks again about how she'd like to be home now sitting on the sunporch, remembering him differently, that this was maybe, perhaps, potentially, poorly considered on her part.

The total number of thrusts is somewhere between twelve and fifteen, as far as she can tell, which is plenty. He has at least stopped crying now. He says he'd like to call her sometime, so they can talk—about them, all those years ago, if she wants, but maybe also about the weather or whatever she's reading now. She says okay, but he never calls.

She crawls into bed next to her partner that night and says, "I love you," and her partner kisses her on the forehead and says it back, and she is very lucky.

Tell the Bees

VARSHA VENKATESH

FLASH FICTION

Hey there, lover. I know you'd rather be doing anything else, but it will fall to you to tell the bees I'm gone. Before they play "Angels" at my funeral because I didn't think to pick out a song, before the kid with the busted lip wails, "Why do I have to be here?" speaking for us all, before Osiris weighs my heart in a balance and finds me wanting, it will fall to you to knock on their hives, shroud them in black, and tell them I'm gone.

Time's running out, but I still have days left. Days where I wish you could watch me: my life playing out like a movie on your screen. Days I no longer have to join your Weller bourbon hunt while the Miller Lite cans languish into distant memory, no longer have to stuff my mouth with unspellable charcuterie when we both know you like the chili dogs from the hot-chick deli. The wine seminars you signed us up for are consigned to the dust heap of our history. Imagine a world, lover, where there is no need to stalk my timeline for clues or innocently ask a friend what I'm up to. There's no need to trim that beard, clip that hair, or groom with an ex-lover's care. There's no need to pretend to run into me somewhere with a twentysomething on your arm (fancy seeing you here!) to see if there is still something there. You can turn on the TV—dressed in the shorts you last washed Wednesday, the day's dust congealed on your face, relish smeared into your beard, mustard running down your chubby fingers—and switch the channel to me.

Don't gawp because it's me reading *Wuthering Heights* and listening to Miley; drinking boxed wine in slacks; yelling "I knew you were trouble …" at the TV. This is no longer the woman who convinced herself to be more *you* than she needed to be. That woman was nothing but grateful to keep you with her: grateful enough to laugh at your boss's jokes and not complain about friends who stand too close; grateful enough to laugh off your drive-by cruelty; grateful enough to understand the rules—I'm supposed to like you as you are, and you're supposed to like me as I am not.

Lover, don't you worry—I didn't kill all that was us. I kept the bees (the bees you wanted, whom I ended up mothering). They are the only good we brought into this world: simple, unknowing, thriving. They're all that will remain of you and me and our commonplace tragedy.

But bear with me as I break the rules, for while there is time left, I have to be me, not who I was pretending to be. I've got to get it right in the end: hunched over a pot, music blaring from the speakers, foot tapping to the beat. There's joy in the air as "Hung Up" shuffles up next on the playlist. Buckle up because I should've let loose two years ago when I stood in the kitchen, blasting "Material Girl" from the speakers, desperately wanting to dance but never did. It was the look on your face I imagined—the same look

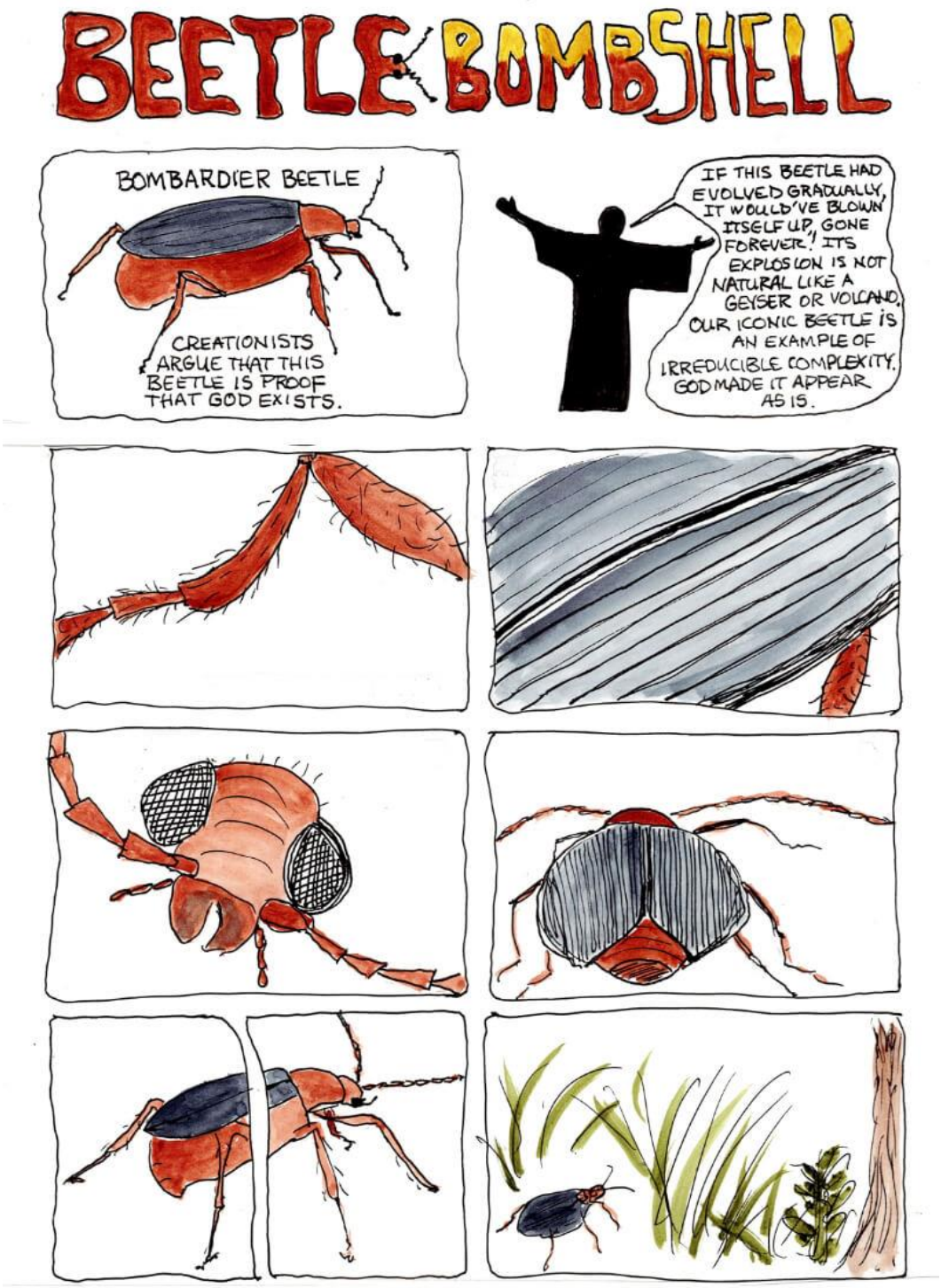
you are wearing now—that stopped me from twirling on the floor and sliding up and down an imaginary stripper pole. *Time goes by so slowly, so slowly …* Madonna croons, and lover, that's a damn lie because there isn't time enough for me. Had I known, I'd have gotten my act together sooner than I did. *Tick tick tock, it's a quarter to two*, we twirl to ABBA's "Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!" hook. Endure the embarrassment because it's revenge for the time we watched "In the Mood for Love," and you slid your hand under my waistband as I wept to "Yumeji's Theme"; it's revenge for the time you said we ought to tell the bees when one of us is gone so we are not alone in our mourning, and I was fool enough to believe you'd miss me. *You'll wake up one day, but it'll be too late*, Madonna says, and I can't help but wish that someday you'll regret never knowing me. *So slowly, so slowly …* the song picks up—I sway my hands in the air, Woodstock-style, and wonder why I'm spending what's left of time caring what you think of me.

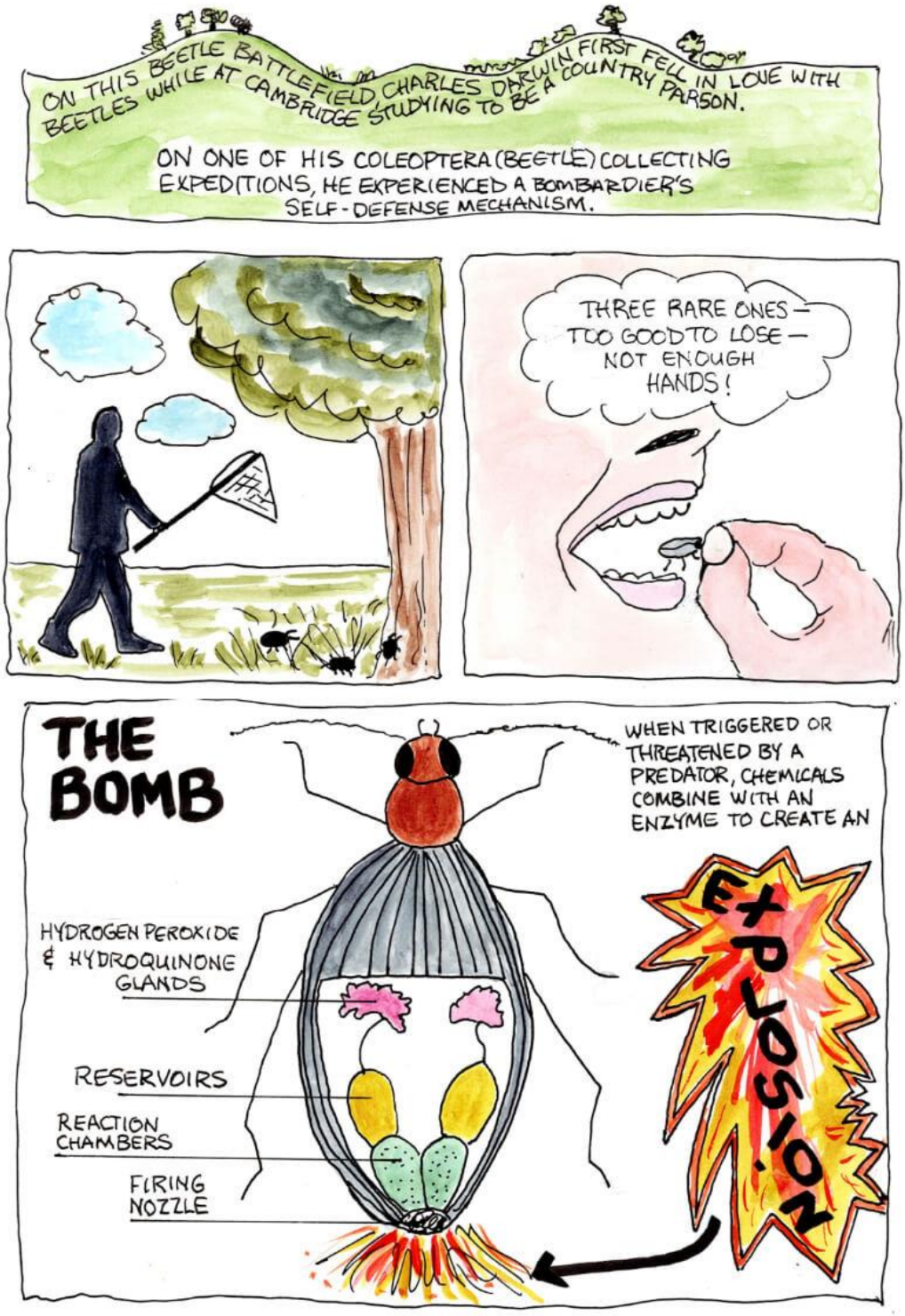
What will you wear? That twill suit you wore for Mom's, maybe. It's okay to recycle funeral wear. You aren't made of money. We weren't close. We didn't talk about death, except when we talked about bees and how people felt the need to announce their going. The hive frames are full of honey, but neither you nor I will witness the first harvest. I'm sorry it has to be you, but I'll be cold in my bed, and I need someone to care if I'm dead. Even if it's just the bees. Promise me you will find yourself a hive and a tale to tell. Tell them who I was. The version you didn't know. The version I didn't have long to be. Lie if you need to. Lie if you care. Until then, if you are watching, hide your disdain because although it's a little late in the day, I'll be damned if I let anything snuff out joy again.

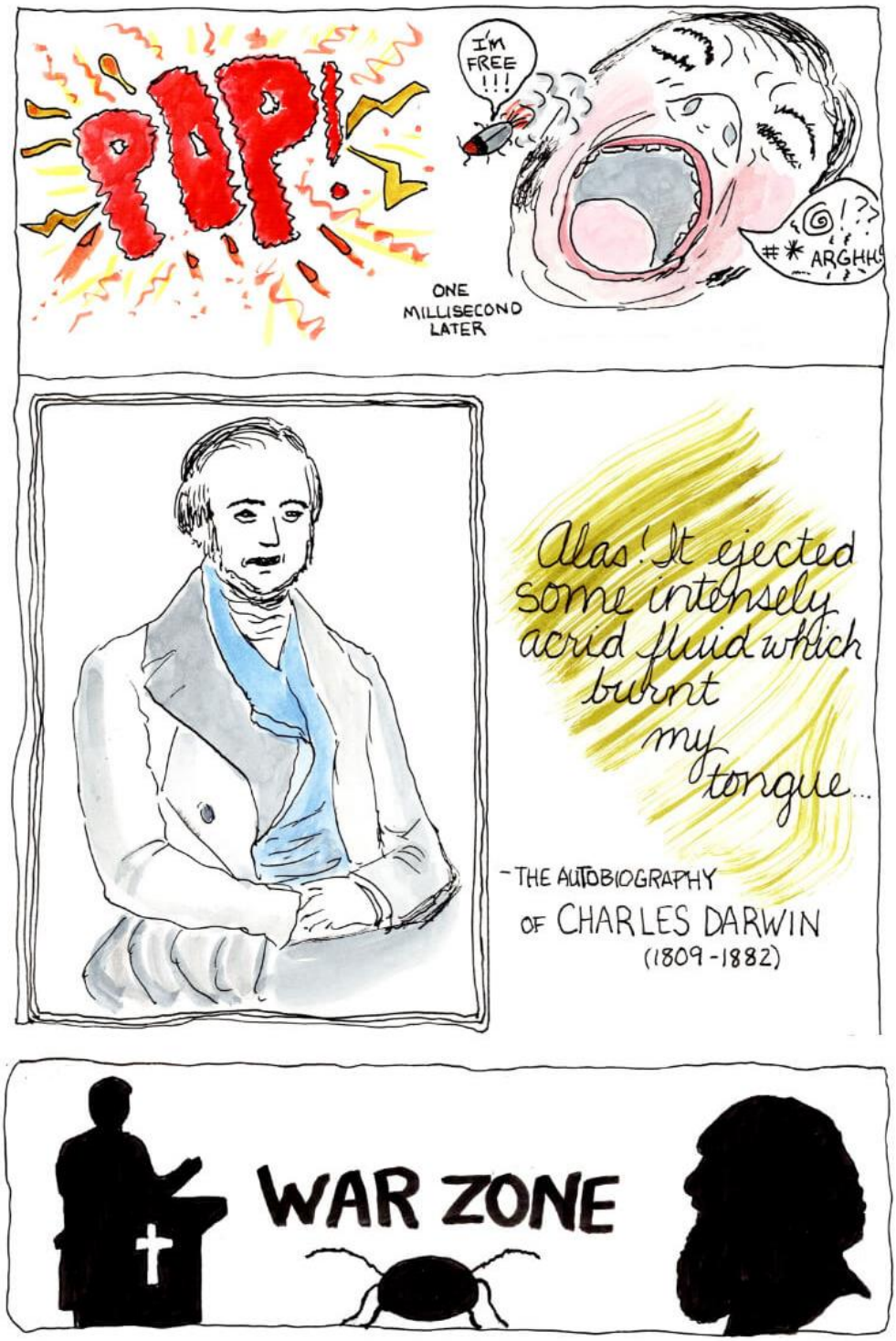
Beetle Bombshell

JARI THYMIAN

COMIC




ON THIS BEETLE BATTLEFIELD, CHARLES DARWIN FIRST FELL IN LOVE WITH BEETLES WHILE AT CAMBRIDGE STUDYING TO BE A COUNTRY PARSON.
ON ONE OF HIS COLEOPTERA (BEETLE) COLLECTING EXPEDITIONS, HE EXPERIENCED A BOMBARDIER'S SELF-DEFENSE MECHANISM.
THREE RARE ONES — TOO GOOD TO LOSE — NOT ENOUGH HANDS!
THE BOMB
WHEN TRIGGERED OR THREATENED BY A PREDATOR, CHEMICALS COMBINE WITH AN ENZYME TO CREATE AN
EXPLOSION.
HYDROGEN PEROXIDE & HYDROQUINONE GLANDS
RESERVOIRS
REACTION CHAMBERS
FIRING NOZZLE


POP!
I'M FREE!!!
#*ARGHH!?
ONE MILLISECOND LATER
Alas! It ejected some intensely acrid fluid which burnt my tongue...
-THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF CHARLES DARWIN (1809-1882)
WAR ZONE


THE BOMBARDIER DEFIES EVOLUTION!
212°F
500-1000 CHEMICAL PULSES PER SECOND
TOO INCREDIBLE TO HAPPEN WITHOUT GOD'S DIRECT HAND
REACTION CONTROLS ITSELF WITH CHEMICALS AND CELLULAR MECHANISMS
ALL PARTS HAD TO BE CREATED AT THE SAME TIME OR IT WOULDN'T WORK
DEFENSE DEVELOPED IN SLOW, GRADUAL DEGREES
NOT POSSIBLE FOR A BEETLE TO AIM THAT ACCURATELY ON ITS OWN
THIS BEETLE IS NOT GOING TO BRING DOWN EVOLUTION
500+ SPECIES OF THESE BEETLES HAVE A WIDE VARIETY OF DEFENSES
SCIENTISTS HAVEN'T FOUND A SPECIFIC ANCESTOR
SPRAY IS AIMED BY SWIVELING THE FIRING NOZZLE
DARWIN HIMSELF SAID IRREDUCIBLE COMPLEXITY WOULD TUMBLE HIS THEORY
"FOR DECADES, CREATIONISTS HAVE OWNED THE BOMBARDIER BEETLE AS THEIR OWN ICON."
- David F. Coppedge
MANY OTHER SPECIES IN THE NATURAL WORLD HAVE DEVELOPED FEATURES AS INTRICATE AND POWERFUL
THAT DAY, ALL THREE SPECIMENS ESCAPED DARWIN'S GRASP THANKS TO THIS INSECT'S BOMBING SKILLS.
CAN THIS BEETLE EVER BE OWNED?
©2024

Windows Open

SAM BRIGHTON

NONFICTION

The voices outside my bedroom window were what woke me, before the explosion. With the advent of May's warm breeze, before bedtime I had wiggled the locks loose from winter and slid open all the windows. I rent the upstairs of a duplex in the outer reaches of Portland and sleep half the year with windows wide open without concern for someone crawling inside. The air drifted in, cool and earthy, and lifted my curtains, then dropped them. I fell asleep that night feeling the wind glide through my hair and listening to all the sounds of cityscape: traffic on the freeway, distant music, the occasional hot-rodding jackass with some machine-gun engine, a chorus of dogs yipping, the neighbor then barking at them to shut the fuck up. The voices outside my bedroom window that woke me grew talkative, like benign chatter—not worried or excited, no one voice louder than another, but from where and why, at this hour, somewhere deep in the nighttime, I could not imagine the likely explanation, though maybe this was a dream. I let the current carry me back to sleep.

My life right now affords no loss of sleep. Every Sunday night, sometimes Friday and Saturday nights too when my kids stay with their other mom, I work night shift in a detox facility, in part to pay for my graduate nursing program, and on my more noble days, because direct patient care feeds my soul. When I clock out on Monday mornings, as the birds whistle and the crows scream from the power lines and splatter our cars with shit, I pass the crowd that has gathered outside the facility, many still intoxicated, hoping for admission to an open bed. I race home to shower, fling my scrubs in the laundry basket, change into the business casual attire befitting of a nurse administrator, then jam on over to my day job at the neurology clinic. If my day is scheduled full of meetings that carry the threat of making me talk, or if I triage symptom calls, a mixture of caffeine and adrenaline keeps me functional. By midmorning, I scavenge the break room and eat to stay awake—I'm trying to knock that shit off. The Cup O' Noodles available to me for free at 3 a.m. is resistible, but by 10 a.m. I'm Venmo-ing a dollar to the Snack Shack for the same damn thing—it makes no good financial sense, not to mention nutritional. Whenever a sensation of doom arises on Mondays, I remind myself that I haven't yet slept, best defer this hand-wringing until Tuesday when I'm equipped to handle the weight of the world.

As soon as my midafternoon clinic operations meeting ends, I zoom out of the parking garage. (I work nine- or ten-hour days the rest of the week, so those with opinions around cutting Mondays short can bemoan the injustice to my boss.) On my way home, I call my mom to share whatever recent adventures. I started calling my parents daily on my way home from work during the pandemic, when it occurred to me that my parents—or

even I—could die. From there I sleep a cool fourteen hours and wake up at 7 a.m. for an AA meeting, and then life as a regular daytime worker resumes. To keep these shenanigans rolling, I must protect my sleep.

Until BOOM!

My eyes open. A gunshot probably. Fireworks, maybe, big ones. Voices and the clopping of footsteps rise as they pass my window and then fade—I imagine—out of the streetlamp glow and into the night. I stay put. Nobody has cried out in agony. I'm not trying to peek outside and catch a bullet in my face.

Rarely I hear gunshots. In Oakland, back when I was married, the crack of gunshots woke me sometimes several nights per week. What chills me most is the light whistle of a bullet whizzing through the air near my window, only a screen protecting me from the world.

Eventually my bladder drags me out of bed. I peek out the window on my way to the bathroom. Black smoke roils up into the dark night. Just as I reach for my phone to dial 911, blue and red lights dance in silence off the houses. A fire truck pulls up; a few voices casually call out to each other. Nobody sounds alarmed or in distress. The hose activates and the fire sizzles as water meets flames. I crawl back in bed, turn on a stand-up comedy show, and before the comedian can utter five words, I'm back to sleep. The next day I spend the day indoors until I drive the kids to their other mom's house at six in the evening and then head to detox for my overnight. It's not until two days later that I notice the black charred fence, the grass below it bald and scorched.

A tent had been there. A person lived there. I don't pay attention to who is living at the end of the street. It changes regularly—sometimes an RV, or a van with flat tires, an old Buick with a busted-out back window, sometimes a tent or two. Given the minimal fanfare, possibly a propane tank blew but nobody got hurt.

At detox, many of my patients live without homes. Some couch surf or move in with family members. Maybe half have no jobs, according to their histories, which baffles me how they juggle the costs of addiction. (My own alcoholism from twenty years ago emptied my savings account.) Rather, I'm certain that I don't want to know how that works.

Fentanyl is measured in "blues"—blue pills that apparently are smoked, not swallowed—or in grams of powder. Meth is measured in eight balls or daily dollar amounts—five dollars a day, or twenty. Alcohol is measured in fifths or gallons or cans of specific brands—White Claws, High Noons. I've been away from drinking so long I no longer recognize the newfangled drinks sold from the cooler at 7-Eleven. Cigarettes—really the least of anyone's problems in the scheme of the opioid crisis—are measured in packs per day.

I used to monitor the sales in the grocery mailers delivered every Tuesday afternoon for thirty packs of beer. Sometimes I drove well out of my way for cheap beer, with the bonus of anonymity. On Tuesday of Thanksgiving week, the clerk asked me how long it'll take me to finish my sixty cans on the counter. I don't remember how I responded, but it was a lie. That beer was not the only alcohol I drank over a four-day weekend, by far, but it was all gone by Sunday. That's when I began rotating liquor stores.

Eighteen years ago, I began my own recovery in a detox facility. Caught brooding in the dayroom, a nurse summoned me to the nurses' station. Life as I knew it had suddenly unraveled, and apparently I wore it on my face. The nurse said consoling and empowering things to me. She prompted me as she spoke, over and over, to look at her, to look her in the eyes. "Keep your chin up, hon. You're in the right place. You're doing this for yourself. Hold your head high."

That was back when nurses used terms of endearment, before it was considered inappropriate. Sometimes I wish that still worked, to show professional affection in that way.

While my detox stay wasn't the reason I eventually became a nurse, it was the reason I wanted to work at detox once I became one. Mostly my patients just want to sleep, and I let them, so long as they keep breathing. If they want to talk to me about their recovery, I listen and encourage them, but I let them lead. As the night nurse, my role is to make them comfortable and make them sleep, the doctor reminds us at nurse meetings.

"You know they call this place the candy shop," a nurse once retorted. "They come here to get our good drugs."

The doctor shrugged. "Better they sleep at the candy shop than die in the street."

The job doesn't pay enough to live on. Occasionally, I get a keep-your-chin-up moment with a patient, which fuels double-shift Mondays far better than caffeine and Cup O' Noodles.

As I turn onto our street, I review with the kids what's going to happen—while I make dinner, they'll fold and put away their clean laundry, showers tonight, dinner, TV and cuddling, then lights out at 8:30 sharp. If the TV interferes with the evening chores, it's going off and we'll listen to music, and I'm in an Indigo Girls kind of mood. They groan even though they know the lyrics to "Closer to Fine" as well as I do. Their other mom lets them stay up past nine and doesn't manipulate them by withholding screens to the extent that I do, and, I'm told, doesn't make them hassle with laundry, but when they're young adults maybe they won't set multiple washing machines on fire as I once did.

"What happened there?" my son says. "Why is that in the grass?"

"Why is the what in the who now? Baby, I don't know what you're talking about."

"There's a cross at the end of the street? Did somebody die or something?"

Holy shit.

I didn't see a cross, but I know what he's talking about. I want him to be wrong.

As we unload the car, I give him permission to go up the street and investigate.

"Come here, quick," he shouts.

He leads me down the sidewalk to show me. A white cross reads *R.I.P.*, planted on the seared earth before the charbroiled fence, a pile of sunflowers on the ground at its base.

Holy fuck.

No commotion had unfolded, no police tape marked off the scene, nobody in uniforms had knocked on my front door with questions. No chalk outline of a human. Just a nonchalant hosing down of fire, noises fading into the depths of sleep.

The crowd. There had been a crowd of people, their voices and footsteps, unless that was a dream. Was this death a homicide?

I spend cuddle time distracted, searching online for a newsclip, the police log, neighborhood gossip, anything. Nothing.

I'm on a smoking jag, even though I goddamn well know better. Every week when I look at brain scans with the neurologist to evaluate for signs of dementia, I see what smoking does to the tiny blood vessels—not to mention to one's lungs, all the albuterol inhalers at the bedsides of my sleeping alcoholics and addicts. Just this one pack, just to get through this day or week or spell, when the future is so far away, makes for such easy justification. As I lean against my car, I can see the charred fence, the white cross in the gray evening dusk. The blackened wood looks so brittle, so easy to snap. As I study the cross, the "R.I.P.," I try to contemplate the human life that ended there—why and how, the loss of a life to tragedy just half a block away.

On the corner of the main road is a plasma donation center. A series of worn-out RVs line the back of the building: roofs thatched with blue tarp and duct tape, a tangle of twisted bicycles mounted to back bumpers. Sometimes jangled vertical blinds mask the windows, or tightly stuffed belongings obscure the view inside. Then suddenly the RVs disappear. New ones replace them weeks later. During the pandemic, I donated plasma there. Twenty to sixty bucks in cash for ninety minutes of quiet time that I was going to use studying for school anyway was a nice way to generate grocery cash. In those days I shopped for groceries only with my plasma cash to teach my kids about sales and making choices. *Is the pudding really more important than milk?* I stopped donating only when my new psoriasis medication disqualified me, lest parting with my plasma cause me harm. So pissed at those fuckers.

During the pandemic, tents multiplied on grassy strips alongside the roads and across city parking lots. Admittedly I had paused picking up food from my favorite Thai restaurant because of anxiety around parking my car inside a tent city with my kids for hot fragrant chicken pad see ew. One day all the tents had vanished. Giant immovable rocks materialized in their place, a hard and cruel "… and don't come back" gesture from the city. I wish I knew the solution, given current realities, because this isn't it, but I don't. Seems nobody does.

A thumping bass from an approaching car crescendoes down the street. The headlights bob on the houses ahead of us, near the charred fence, as the car jumps the speed bumps. I ignore the car and pretend to scroll through my phone, just to engage the universal language of I'm-not-paying-attention-to-you. The car screeches to a slow roll right next to me. "Fat bitch," a man's voice calls out. Laughter spills from the windows as the car zooms away.

It takes me a moment to process what I just heard. Fat? Actually, I'm more ashamed of the smoking.

The people who live outside a half block away, those who reside in the RVs behind the plasma donation center, make no spectacles aside from the piles of trash nearby—a given since there's no infrastructure for public trash disposal. I've never personally felt threatened. My greater concern is these fools, cruelty dispensed at random, unprovoked,

for apparent recreation. What I find most shocking, though, is that they actually gendered me correctly.

I idle beneath the overpass on my way to detox, waiting to turn left onto the freeway entrance. A woman, the same woman every week, walks the median, holding a cardboard sign. Usually the sign declares her need for propane, sometimes her need for food. Anything helps. Though I see her at least weekly, I never think about her being there as I pack up for detox. So easily, I could make an extra sandwich or assemble a quesadilla, grab one of the dozens of blankets that drift between the kids' beds and the couch. It's not until I see her, hair pulled back in a ponytail with a gaunt face and sunken eyes that make their eyebrow ridge look prominent, that I remember she's usually there on weekend nights. Rarely do I carry cash, only when I've paid for lunch at work and someone wants to give me something to cover their portion. The woman always wears shoes, shorts in the summer, a jacket during the cooler months. When it rains, she stands dry beneath the overpass. This reassures me, or is possibly something I tell myself to justify how, most of the time, I give her nothing of me.

I wonder about her story, her life before this underpass, what she was like as a second grader—assuming she went to school—what brought her here, will she find housing and live a more conventional life. Will she be among the people who freeze to death outside every time there's a blizzard. Sometimes I want to invite her to detox—a guarantee of a shower, three meals, warm dry clothes, a bed with industrially sanitized sheets, and all-you-can-eat dense carbohydrate snacks under the supervision of nurses. But not knowing her life, her affairs, I never do. Some women use meth to stay awake all night because sleeping at night makes them vulnerable to assault. The shelters can only offer a waiting list, and some people prefer to sleep outside to keep their pets, or to avoid trouble at the shelter—theft and interpersonal conflict. At detox, I've taken care of stab wounds and assessed bruises that occurred right outside shelters. When I pass with my kids in the car, they're apt to round up loose change lying around the back seat, or I give them a dollar whenever I have one to hand to her from the window. Last winter, on my way to detox, I gave her a twenty. It had been raining and that day her hair was wet, and a twenty was all I had. She started crying. But tonight, and most nights that I pass her, I don't have any cash.

A couple months pass. I look for the charred fence and the cross every time I drive by, until the day they vanish. The four or five fence panels have been replaced, factory fresh, not yet weathered like their neighboring panels, and no more cross.

It's time to move on.

I still look at that spot, every time I drive by.

A new tent has established itself there. I wonder if they know.

Every so often, I sift through the local news online, looking for stories of fires that involve homeless people in Southeast. Usually I avoid local news, a catalog of local violence and carnage. Violent deaths and assaults, deaths of despair. In the national news, there's the war going on on the other side of the world, now two. Floods killed more than

1,700 people in Pakistan, more than 1,300 civilians perished in a surprise attack, a hundred swift deaths in a fire that raged across Lahaina, twenty-two people in Mississippi killed by tornados. Almost sixty fucking thousand people in Turkey and Syria dead from an earthquake. All this year.

Nothing mentions the fire in Southeast, the death of a person in a tent, half a block away.

What will my turn look like, I wonder.

Maybe I'd be lucky to live long enough to die from my smoking.

The stoplights at the intersection are unlit, and a trail of cars bumble their way through what we've collectively agreed upon should be a four-way stop, even though none of these Portland motherfuckers follow the rules of four-way stops. Portland drivers so consistently fail at this concept that I looked up Oregon's driving laws to see if I was the mistaken one, if the people driving forward through the intersection are *supposed to* yield to those turning left. Nope.

"Come on, drive that motherfuckin' Prius, go," I holler. My window is rolled up; I'm in my safe space. I have to watch myself sometimes because people can hear me when my windows are down, and I don't intend for people to actually hear me. I never honk or extend my middle finger. I'm not even that asshole who darts between lanes of crowded freeways. I just yell inside my car when the sensation of stagnancy feels intolerable.

"Your car insurance is watching you," my nine-year-old says from the back seat. It's true, they are, and they've jacked up my rates because I agreed to this monitoring to finagle a discount. They ding me for hard braking, though it would be far more costly to just plow into whatever thing in my way.

"I know, honey." I take a deep breath. "Thank you for the reminder. Jesus H., have you nowhere to be? Step on the goddamn gas."

Crossing town at a leisurely pace is a privilege. Oh to go somewhere, anywhere, and not be in a hurry.

We roar up the city streets to the skating rink for roller derby practice, a four-hour affair on Saturday mornings—one hour of practice, one hour of scrimmage, one hour break, and then one hour of travel team practice.

Resigned to the red light, I sit back and drink coffee from my thermos.

"Sorry, I'm sorry for being an asshole. I'll try to cool it."

"Oh, you're not an asshole, Mom, you're just crabby."

Yes.

I reach my arm to the back seat and we hold hands for a moment.

"One day, I'll teach you how to drive and you'll know, you'll understand."

I turn on the radio and we sing.

Somewhere after the fourth time I mop up vomit, I lose count. I've slung everything I have at this patient's ailing receptors. I pin the phone receiver against my shoulder so I can type the doctor's instructions into the computer, a series of if/then scenarios, proactive planning to prevent me from calling and waking her and whomever she sleeps with during

the overnight hours. Already, I've interrupted her at a concert—it's Saturday night. Girl punk music fades with each "Hello? Wait, can't hear you. Hello?" The aide next to me opens yogurt. A stink of strawberries and sour cultures billows, too similar to the scent of digestive fluids. Through the window, my patient leans over the side of his bed, rears his head up and then down. Another slop of liquid silently splashes to the floor. "Goddamnit. He doesn't even try to aim for the bucket," I say, mostly to myself. "Gross."

I push the mop under his bed. Clear viscous fluid has oozed underneath and toward his neighbor's bed. He's curled up, his knees to his chest. I bump the mop stick against the bed. "Oh, sorry," I whisper. He opens his eyes and watches me. Perhaps scooping this pile of partially digested noodles and carrot squares with a paper towel will break me of this relationship with Cup O' Noodles.

He asks me for another blanket. "A heavy one? Like this one?" I pick up the corner of his comforter. He nods. In the linen room, I grab the ugliest blanket off the shelf—solid tan. Let him barf on something ugly. He snores as I return, his head now at the foot of his bed. I unfold the comforter for him, pull the end over the mounds of his feet and tuck the other side under his shoulders. He opens his eyes and watches me. "Hope that helps," I say. He stares at me. Dick.

Sometimes I wonder what's the point—why am I doing this, any of this.

This is despair speaking, or sleep deprivation, maybe both, in this moment. Don't grab onto this, don't let it swirl, just let it pass on through.

I don't feel like this most of the time.

To stay out of my head, between barfings, I chitchat with the aide. I ask about her plans for Disneyland, her dreams about someday becoming a nurse. Let me bask vicariously in hope.

The door slam next door wakes me. Muffled voices scream at each other.

"Just leave me alone you fucking bitch," a man yells. "You always do this, telling me what to do, and you know what? Fuck you."

"No. Fuck you," the lady screams.

Their voices soften for a moment, until "Get the fuck away from me."

I wait, tighten my grip around my pillow, wait for the sound of injury, wait for a gunshot. I want to flee to my living room couch, but I stay. Maybe I need to call the police.

Often the man dumps pails of rocks into the yard below my window and then hoses them down. I don't know why. They've parked a couch in the grass strip between their house and mine, right below my bedroom window. At night, their weed smoke drifts inside my room. Last month, I found an empty box with my name on the label stuffed beneath a bush, my $8,000-per-dose psoriasis medication gone. My intuition wants to blame them, but I have no proof.

Earlier this summer when out smoking, I overheard them arguing about buprenorphine injections, long-term treatment for opioid addiction. I don't wish to tangle with those neighbors.

"Go to hell, you damn dirty goddamn bitch."

Another door slams. Moments later, music fills the silence, so loud it could be broadcast from my own speaker on the bookshelf. It takes me a moment to place the song. It's "Never" by Heart. I listen to the lyrics for clues.

Anything you want, we can make it happen. Stand up and turn around, never let them shoot us down.

I don't know what that song is about, what Heart meant by singing it, or why that song is now at full volume during a domestic conflict, and is that woman being bludgeoned to death to its tune, but as I listen, I consider all the pain that boils over in the house next door, the pain that steams through the neighborhood, across the dead grass and hallowed ground of that homeless person's death, among the people in beds at detox, all the hurt in the world—the power of my reach, to add to it, or to seek its counterbalance.

When the song ends, the music stops. A dog barks in the distance. Cars pass on the freeway. Minutes later, the woman flings open the front screen door—apparently on the phone—and chatters and laughs through a one-way conversation. She shuts the car door, turns the engine, and drives out of their yard and away down the street. Maybe it's the man who's dead. I turn on lesbian stand-up comedy and wait through the set, feel the breeze in my hair, waiting to fall asleep, until I hear the clatter of rocks fall from a bucket, the spray of a hose.

I need cigarettes. Tonight is my third detox overnight in a row, and I have to work at the clinic tomorrow. Weekends without my kids feel so lonely and quiet, it's a blessing to have somewhere to be, a job to do. As I wait at the stoplight outside 7-Eleven, a woman hobbles across the street. She wears one shoe, one sock on the other foot. Her arms dangle from her shoulders. She walks a little sideways. Whether she's on something or experiences neurological dysfunction, I cannot tell. I roll up my window and lock the car doors, aware that I'm an asshole. I'm not on the clock.

Outside 7-Eleven, I peel off the cellophane encasing my cigarettes and stuff it in the trash can outside the store. It would be better if I didn't light up wearing my scrubs, lest the smoke stink linger on my clothes. People at detox aren't allowed to smoke cigarettes and as consolation, we issue nicotine patches. Some nurses won't hand them out before bedtime because they cause nightmares. If the patient understands the risk, I don't fight that battle—these people are adults. But I'm on my way to work, I need a cigarette, so the scrubs will have to do.

I lean against my car as I smoke. The woman with one shoe staggers across the sidewalk in front of the 7-Eleven entrance. She peers into the garbage can, reaches inside, shuffles some things around, and then moves on. She turns and looks at me. I hold her eye contact and smile. Not because I want to engage, Jesus I really don't, but I want her to know that I see her, a person.

She steps into the parking lot, toward me.

"Hey honey, you got a cigarette I can buy?"

"Sure," I say. "You don't have to pay me—I'll just give you one."

I pull out four cigarettes and hand them over. The more I give out, the less I smoke.

"Thank you," she says. "Thank you so much."

"Need a light?" I say.

She nods and I flick my lighter. She cups her hands close to mine to block the wind.

"Are you okay?" I say. What a stupid thing to say. The woman has one shoe.

"I'm ass out right now," she sniffles. "Shit out of luck." I watch her as she cries. I don't have any cash. I really need to get going to work in a minute.

"Seems like you're having a hard time," I say. "Can I get you anything? Something to eat?" I point to the store.

She turns and looks to follow my hand. "No, I'll be okay, but thank you."

We stand in silence. She wipes her tears off her cheeks with the sleeve of her sweatshirt.

"Here, take my whole pack, and here's a lighter."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I have another pack in the car."

We smoke.

"How are you doing?" the woman wearing a single shoe asks me.

"Doing okay," I say. "Heading to work in a minute."

"Do you, sorry if this is weird, do you think I could get a hug?" she says.

My fear tells me to stay away from her.

What if she stabs you in the kidney with scissors?

But she's a person. Somebody made her, and held her as a baby, and talked to her—at least some, that much at least is true. Maybe someone misses her, wants to hear from her, keeps something of hers, thinks about her before they fall asleep. She's a person, and she needs a hug.

Plus, I can probably run faster than her.

"Sure" I say. "Sure I'll give you a hug."

Certainly 7-Eleven is getting this on camera, should I be assaulted.

I approach her. We both hold our lit cigarettes away and hug with the other arm. I aim my chin toward the deltoid side of her shoulder, in case her hair has lice. Not a close solid hug with full bodies pressed together, but not a half-assed side hug either. A standard hug.

We pull away. "Thank you," she says.

"There's a pay phone inside 7-Eleven. If you dial 211, it's a resource line—they might be able to help you get what you need, maybe some shoes," I say. "Hang in there, friend."

She nods. "I will."

She shuffles back across the parking lot. By the time I buckle my seatbelt and check my mirrors to back out of my parking space, she's gone.

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Razing History

MARY SENTER

COMIC

Mary Senter, *Razing History*, 2024. Pen and ink, 14 x 5 inches

Al-Nasser Street

CLARE BAYARD

POETRY

At dusk, you hear the first tap down the block. The phone, disconnected last year, rings. Echoes off the white tile. You know the only call that can come through a dead line in Gaza City so you let it ring, handle in cradle. No bread crumbs in your clean kitchen. The dry empty sink reflects the last red sun. You pick up the baby's things and open the front door to the hallway. The next door opens itself.

My Work Here Is Done

LUCY BIEDERMAN

POETRY

A monstera in everybody's
picture window.
Everybody looking into everybody
else's picture window.
That used to be my house,
my dad bought it for me. One night
shortly after I learned to drive
I went into my parents' bedroom.
"I hardly have any clothes,"
I said. "I'm like a poor person!"
My mom was folding
my youngest brother's cloth diapers
and my dad was looking at a brief
and scribbling on a legal pad.
There was a Lorrie Moore book
on the floor next to his chair.
He had put it there as
a prize to be claimed
when he was done with his work.
Tears filled my eyes. "Give me
a hundred dollars, now!"
My dad walked out of the room.
"Lucy …" my mom said.
The Gap was empty
an hour before closing on a weeknight.
My dad ordered some of his books
on a website. He mailed a check
to an address in Seattle
and after a few weeks
the books arrived. The website came
to swallow the mall
that held the Gap
glowing like a treasure in a cave
at the edge of a village

I came to plunder.
I bought a silver sweater with sparkles,
silver pants that matched but had no sparkles,
and a cream-colored fitted T-shirt.
My dad was still too angry to yell at me
when I got home.
My mom had to do it,
standing on the landing in her flannel nightgown.
“Daddy is furious,” she began.
I had everything, and I called it nothing.
Daddy was in the basement looking at a brief
and scribbling on a legal pad.
The Lorrie Moore book
was now on the basement floor.
Sometimes being that angry is kind of fun.
It feels like being high, humming
on top of yourself,
your heart in a different shape. I might
go around back
and jiggle that loose lock until it opens.
I’ll walk into the living room,
pick up their monstera,
and throw it through the window.
That’s my house.

Things I did to live

JOSEPH BYRD

POETRY

Stopped talking about things that turned tin-can too quick. Hid my eyeballs in your loving paws. Took a turn around the corner called Undone. Repurposed our former fears over high tea. Got a factory recall on my automatic tensions. Found the button that said hunh-uh. Learned my true middle name and hid it in a graveyard. Told my mama I had no idea. Correctly guessed how many rainbows I'd need to get my luck alive again. Looked into that property on the edge of jiggy. Found my way through all the haunt holes. Realized what cheese can do at the right moment. Untucked my bedclothes. Dug around in somebody else's basement till I recognized my own dirt. Chucked my gewgaw. Grew only peonies in that little box beneath my brain. Trusted that a single phylactery would do. Opened an account at a bank called This Belongs to Everybody. DM'd somebody who DM'd me first because I'm too damn shy to DM. Found a bottle of art syrup. Knew the magic called moneylessness. Took my trip to that place called Look-See without worrying about nothing. Firsted myself in waking up to wonder, and not freaking out about the dawn again. Told my baby bro that he was a good right reverend. Found a little coincidence called you, too.

Selected Collages

BASGA

TRADITIONAL COLLAGE

Basga, *recuerdo de días lluviosos*, 2022. Traditional collage, 28 x 38 centimeters

Basga, *mujer gecko*, 2022. Traditional collage, 28 x 38 centimeters

Basga, *abraso*, 2021. Traditional collage, 28 x 38 centimeters

Basga, *naufragio*, 2021. Traditional collage, 28 x 38 centimeters

Random Moons

MARK LEIDNER

POETRY

The moon writing a poem about you.
A harpoon in the side of the moon.
A mad moon that hunts other moons.
The moon in the mouth of a roasted boar.
God sketching the moon on a napkin.
A shovel that only works on the moon.
A celestial dolphin overleaping the moon.
A lawyer cross-examining the moon at trial.
A hot air balloon where the balloon is the moon.
A crescent moon resting in a bassinet.
Two moons in the back of a pickup truck.
A moon with wind.
A monsoon on the moon.
A moon you don't know is behind you.
A superyacht blocking the moon from view.
A moon in the bell of a saxophone.
A therapist hurling the moon at you.
The moon whacked with a cosmic broom.
The moon before the moon was called the moon.

July at the End of the World

KAIT QUINN

POETRY

July's throat roars open, and my thighs are back
on that concrete, dandelion spine, fingers working

the shredded cuffs of my jeans. I always needed
something to busy my hands with when I sat across
from him:

braids of indigo denim thread, stale tortilla chips
cracked to shards, the Sprite tab before it snaps

off the fidget-worn hinge. Lemon-lime is the raw
kiss of first love. Two tongues wrapped in carbonated secrecy

and power-line sizzle. His coffee eyes, flat-ironed fringe,
teeth that have never cracked the jawbreaker of a promise.

He captures me in patient hands, tells me I remind him
of corvids—how I always come home

but never stay.

I once hated myself so much, I gave up

cherry-limeade pit stops on Texas country road trips for
cramped limbs in the backseat of a Honda; traded blooming onion
and molten

lava cake at Chili's for a deserted AMC parking lot, surrendered
I love you for *fuck me,*

gooey heart for bruised groin—god forgive me.

Cut your body out of the photos of the boy
who loves you—really loves you—bury them in a grave,

and you will live with a flower bed of memories stuck to your
eyelids: fast-food meet-cute; *good morning, Starshine* texts; my back

against his chest on my cousin's twin bed; hushed
late-night phone sex; making out in refrigerator light,
up against

the pickup; the picture he sent me in sunglasses and a gray beanie,
his pink tongue lunged between two splayed fingers—I still dig

through my Google Drive to look at when it's June and grief
scuffs at the boots of my sanity.

In the moments before the world ends, I'll search my history
for him, lick his name off my lips like a last meal, repent:

O lord,

> what a summer. What a beautiful chaos.
> What a tangle of saltwater knots in my hair.

The Full Report

GEORGIA SAN LI

POETRY

For DHP & MP

one morning we thought of
the more we write construing
this more in slow lightning
        slow light and what is more—
        more release, more content more
        nonsense into more
discovery more invention
more unfolding gently hidden joys
more adventure more bursts
        of starry delight more still
        trees along the block we are walking
        on Erie after lime
lemonade in September to
celebrate healing more in writing
memoir in the aftermath
        of his wife's infidelity
        with a man in Morocco more
        to-and-fro more waving
at a Subaru you thought was
your husband but it was red
not blue under shadows
        by the streetlamp more
        he dashed from work with no time
        to eat more to be with you
after all day in emergencies
more grasping your hand in
the heat more gulps of water
        more you learn reporters would
        rather make friends and read
        poetry than write about how
technology affects our lives
because they have to more

punctuated conversation in the
        humidity of night more in this
        clean well-lit space near MIT
        under the steep staircase more
chandelier of broken plates
and cups and saucers
suspended in the shape
        of a tulip upside down more calling
        our friend in Washington, D.C., from
        the street on the spur of a wish

pop, pop, pop

RHIANN SHEFFIE

POETRY • WRITEGIRL CONTRIBUTOR

Hot corn crackles in the oiled pot
As thug clots tie knots in my stomach

The TV in Granny's room never stops
Background noise of politics and hot goss
MSNBC is its latest beat
Another Black boys defeat

Caught on the 911 call
The dash cam
The revolution won't be televised
But the deaths can

Another stepping into my white school
With my white friends
Girls with gel tips and spray tans
Pretending they know blood thoughts

Kendrick blasting in the Jeep
Paid for with generational green
Generations of being looked at funny
For the helmet of hair
Protection from summer heat

Low porosity, black soap foam
Straightened. Braided. Permed.
Each burning pop of the hot comb

Now a symbol of pride
Stars and symbols etched into scalps
Baby hairs laid like curly vines

Designs that popped off
Black heads to hair ill-equipped

For the tug of burdens
Or the pop of whips

So you change cornrows
To “boxer braids”
And say you did it first
And mumble in disgust
At our outbursts

It’s hard not to exhale n-words
When the phonetics of Trayvon weren’t taught in classes
Or how the lashes became tattoos
How Compton isn’t the only hood
That produces children with dark hues

Cuties

THEO W. SCOTT

FILM

CLICK TO WATCH

The Scorpion Dance

JON HALLER

STAGEPLAY

CAST: ZADIE: Female, 30s-40s, Black.

EVAN: Male, 40s-60s, any race.

* * *

A rehearsal studio in the not-too-distant future.

A table, a glass pitcher full of water, two glasses.

ZADIE walks around the room making a rhythmic clicking sound with her tongue.

EVAN enters in a slick, bespoke suit.

EVAN
Miss Freeman? Evan Sharv. Pleasure to meet you.

ZADIE
Hello. Did you find the place alright?

EVAN
I haven't been to this part of town in a while. It's really, uh …

ZADIE
Changed?

EVAN
Third fucking world. Outside I saw a woman shitting in the street. I've seen men do that in the street. Dogs, of course. The occasional horse. But a grown woman?!

ZADIE
Would you like a glass of water?

EVAN

(A beat. He looks at her.) Have we met before?

ZADIE

No.

EVAN

You sure? You seem ...

ZADIE

I'm told I have one of those faces. Shall we get started?

EVAN

Terry says you're top-notch. And if Terry says that, it means you're good. And expensive.

ZADIE

He's right on both counts.

EVAN

I wasn't sure what to wear. The email said comfortable clothing.

ZADIE

A suit is a little unorthodox.

EVAN

If people see me in sweatpants they'll think I've given up.

ZADIE

It'll work for today. Do you have any questions before—

EVAN

How exactly does someone like you get into this line of work?

ZADIE

Someone like me?

EVAN

Beautiful young woman. How did you become a, uh ... I don't know what to call you.

ZADIE

Witness preparation coach. I used to be an actress.

EVAN

Ah. That's it. I must've seen you in something. Something my company maybe—

ZADIE

Nothing lately.

EVAN

This is a tough town. *(Looking around)* Is this your whole setup? I was expecting cameras, computers, facial analysis software.

ZADIE

There are other witness coaches who use those, but I prefer a more internal approach.

EVAN

Old school.

ZADIE

Something like that.

EVAN

You're not going to ask me about my childhood, are you? Peek into the cupboards?

ZADIE

I'm not a psychologist, Mr. Sharv.

EVAN

Evan. I'll call you Zadie.

ZADIE

Sure. Now if you don't mind taking a seat, I'd like to start with a breathing exercise.

EVAN

I need to pace. Stimulates the mind. You exercise?

ZADIE

I run.

EVAN

If I lived in this neighborhood, I'd run, too.

ZADIE

I don't live here. Terry suggested we work somewhere … discreet.

EVAN

How'd you go from actress to witness coach?

ZADIE
Mr. Sharv, we don't have much time together. I'd prefer to focus on you.

EVAN
I'm paying you. *(He smiles.)* Indulge me.

ZADIE
(A beat) A few years ago my brother got arrested for robbery. He was innocent. Wrong place, wrong time. A White woman picked him out of a lineup. Probably because of his face. He has an angry face. His shitty lawyer couldn't convince him to cop a plea, the case went to trial, and I knew no jury was going to look at Stephen and believe he was innocent. So I used the only weapon we had. My training.

EVAN
You got him to *act* innocent?

ZADIE
Hung the jury. His lawyer was so impressed he asked me to coach another client. And another. I never saw it as a career, but by then, a lot of acting jobs had been … replaced.

EVAN
(A beat) Do I have an angry face?

ZADIE
It's not an innocent one, Mr. Sharv.

EVAN
I told you to call me Evan.

ZADIE
I'd like you to take a seat now. Terry sent over some questions for us, questions the jury will most likely hear in cross—

EVAN
How did you get him to act innocent? Your brother.

ZADIE
You ever take a theater class in school?

EVAN
They frowned upon that at Harvard.

ZADIE
If you're going to talk to the jury, maybe don't mention Harvard.

EVAN
Terry said I shouldn't mention my yacht either.

ZADIE
It's good advice.

EVAN
Don't you think some jurors might look up to me?

ZADIE
You don't need them to look up to you. You need them to believe you.

EVAN
How did you get Stephen to look innocent?

ZADIE
We're skipping ahead.

EVAN
You're a runner. Catch up.

ZADIE
(A beat) Animal work. It's a theater game.

EVAN
Oh god.

ZADIE
You pick an animal—monkey, cow, leopard—and walk around the room as that animal.

EVAN
If you think I'm paying you a small fortune to have me mewl like a kitten—

ZADIE
Animal work is good to loosen your body, but what it actually reveals is the animal you already are. Every person—if you look close, their mannerisms, how they move their eyes, how they walk—already has an inner animal. Stevie was a chicken. Skinny, shifty, darty movements. Avoided eye contact. He looked untrustworthy. So I worked with him. Every day. And got him to become—

EVAN
A different animal. Clever. Which one?

ZADIE
We're here to work on you.

EVAN
Owl? Kangaroo? Komodo fucking dragon?

ZADIE
A sloth.

EVAN
Why? Slow and inept?

ZADIE
Harmless and innocent.

EVAN sits, scratches at his arm.

EVAN
So, Zadie, what's my inner animal?

ZADIE
We're kind of speeding through my process here. I'd like to start—

EVAN
—with a breathing exercise, I know. But my trial is in a month. So let's skip past the yoga bullshit and get to the part where you tell me a courtroom is like a zoo and I'm the animal in the cage everyone is there to watch.

ZADIE
You're right. They will be examining you. How you blink, how you yawn …

Evan checks his watch.

ZADIE (Cont'd)
How you check your watch.

EVAN
You think I'm guilty. *(A beat)* Why would Terry hire someone who already thinks I'm guilty?

ZADIE
Maybe he knows what I know—if you can get me to believe you, maybe you can get the jury, too.

EVAN

I swear I recognize you.

ZADIE

Can we start with a breathing exercise?

EVAN

I know we didn't fuck. I would've remembered that.

ZADIE

(A beat) I was in *Super Bugs*. I was Scorpion Girl.

EVAN

No! What? Wait, that show was entirely AI. There were no actors. In fact, that was the first slate of our shows to … Oh. You were in the live-action one.

ZADIE

The first one. The one you shelved.

EVAN

I didn't shelve it. I was running the company. Someone ten steps below me shelved it.

ZADIE

Well, someone at your company kept it from airing to save money on taxes. Then used our faces for the CGI show.

EVAN

I hate to break it to you, but—

ZADIE

Our bodies, too.

EVAN

Show business. People always forget about the "business" part.

ZADIE

I didn't forget. *(A beat)* After the strike, after your company's legal … maneuvering, I was tending bar and the show was on in the background. My friends who were on it had agreed we'd never watch the sim version, but I couldn't look away. It was the love scene with Scorpion Girl and Cicada Man. And just before they kiss, Scorpion Girl does this little dance. This … *(She demonstrates.)* I know that move because I created it. When I was researching the role, I read that scorpions dance before mating, so I added that little move when we filmed our version. A couple years later it's an algorithm of pixels on a TV in a bar in a bad part of town. You know what it's like trying to make rent and see an avatar

steal your move? Whoever made that show, *whatever* made that show, took it from me. That's not show business, Evan. It's piracy.

EVAN pours himself a glass of water.

EVAN
You should have some water. You must be exhausted from grinding that axe.

ZADIE
Snake.

EVAN
Excuse me?

ZADIE
You asked what your inner animal is. It's a snake. A boa constrictor.

EVAN
Hm. I figured a shark. Maybe a lion. Something with teeth.

ZADIE
You appear large and threatening, but you're a simple predator. You have only one weapon. Slowly suffocate something that's already there.

EVAN
Oh, is the money I'm paying you right now suffocating?

ZADIE
You need to know what you are before I can turn you into something else.

EVAN
And what do you want to turn me into?

ZADIE
I need to ask you a question the jury will want to hear.

EVAN
Then get to it.

ZADIE
It's a little delicate. Something I'd planned for a later session—

EVAN
Ask the fucking question, Scorpion Girl.

ZADIE
(A beat, then calmly) Did you murder your wife?

EVAN
(A beat) Now who's skipping ahead?

ZADIE
Did you murder—

EVAN
No. Next question.

ZADIE
(A beat) That is how a snake answers. Try saying it aloud.

EVAN
Is this how you coach people?

ZADIE
Can you even say it?

EVAN
I didn't murder my wife.

ZADIE
Again.

EVAN
How many times do you want me to—

ZADIE
Close your eyes. Trust me. Say it again.

EVAN
(A beat. He closes his eyes.) I did not—

ZADIE
Quietly. You're not a snake anymore. You're something else. Your body is shifting.

EVAN
Okay, sure, my body is shifting.

ZADIE
You're a dog.

EVAN

I'm a ... dog?

ZADIE

A golden retriever.

EVAN

Fucking Lassie?

ZADIE

Evan, if we're doing this, if we're really doing this, you can't be a snake with me. When your driver brings you over the hill, when you cross into the third world, past women shitting in the street, and walk into this room, you have to shed that skin and become an attentive, loyal, loving dog. You don't bark, you don't bare your teeth. You wait for my command.

EVAN

(A beat. Then, in a cartoonish dog voice) "I didn't murder my wife."

ZADIE

Funny. And Lassie was a border collie.

EVAN

What a spectacular waste of my time. Terry can pay you for the rest of the week.

As EVAN heads to the door, ZADIE picks up his chair and positions it in the center of the room.

ZADIE

A courtroom isn't like a zoo. It's more like a stage. The walk to the witness stand is your grand entrance. It should be smooth, direct, purposeful. *(She demonstrates.)* As you sit, gently smooth your tie. *(She demonstrates.)* You want to look professional, but not vain. Slowly look at the jury first, then the prosecutor, then Terry. Do not smile. Keep your chin up. This isn't an interrogation, it's an aria. When the questions come, you soften your eyes. *(She demonstrates.)* You slow your breath. *(She demonstrates.)* Make one small movement with your hand. *(She demonstrates.)* And embellish. "I did not murder my wife. I love my wife. I'd never hurt her. She was the world to me. I need you all to know this. She was the world to me. The world."

A beat. EVAN is impressed.

ZADIE stands and pours herself a glass of water.

EVAN

Where did you learn to do that?

ZADIE

Show business. You forgot about the “show.”

EVAN

Shall we start again?

EVAN holds his hand out to shake.

ZADIE looks at it.

BLACKOUT.

END OF PLAY.

Four Things I Never Ask About

CHRISTIAN ST. CROIX

STAGEPLAY

CAST: A LOVER, 20s-30s, dressed as if braving an apocalypse.

* * *

LOVER

One: The Tupac poster you've hung on the wall. It's old, wrinkled, straight out of the '90s. It's been taped up and taken down again many times. I wonder how Susan felt about it. You'll never tell me.

Two: Why you cry in your sleep.

Three: Where you were when it happened.

I was a singer with New York City dreams, staying with a buddy until I could save up for the move. He was the first I saw turn. He tried to …

(A moment)

I locked him in the bathroom and ran for my life.

I'll never make it to New York City. I'll never be a star. There's too many of … them. At least I get to sing for you. Not as loud as I could. We do everything in a hush now. We speak in hushed whispers, make love in grunts and moans. We can't let them hear us. They'll kill us if they hear us.

You like it when I sing for you. It stops the shaking. You melt like ice cream beneath my voice.

(Closes eyes)

I sing with my face on your chest, my ear to your heartbeat.

A moment. They open their eyes, compose themselves.

We're down to our last can of peaches, so we'll have to leave soon. The Tupac poster will be coming down again. South. Always South.

This is no longer a world for lovers. Love can get you killed. We know the time may come where we may have to leave the other. But I have you here now. Well, some of you. Part of you will always belong to Susan. You wanted to let her turn you too. But you didn't. You ran.

Your heart can never be fully mine. Part of you is enough of you. For now. This is no longer a world for lovers.

A long, long moment. This is hard.

Four: Your children. You never found them. You won't even say their names.

END OF PLAY.

One Hundred and Twenty-Four Details on the Curious and Likely Inevitable Transformation of Martín Ojeda

TOMÁS BAIZA

EXPERIMENTAL

1. The night before his son died, Martín Ojeda dreamed of hummingbirds.
2. That frightened Martín, because his family had a recent history of turning into hummingbirds—this according to his Tío Chencho.
3. Poor old Tío Chencho was adamant that his daughter had returned to him as a rufous hummingbird after her car accident.
4. Everyone knew Martín's uncle was crazy—in part because he called hummingbirds by their old Aztec name, huitzitzilin.
5. Some even believed that crazy ran in the extended Ojeda clan.

* * *

6. Martín regretted that he had not been able to bring his son into the world, as that was his wife's gift and burden.
7. He would do his best to make up for that.
8. When informed of his son's impending death, Martín Ojeda would tell the surgeons that if they didn't let him into the operating room none of them would go home alive.
9. It had been a long time since Martín was angry enough to kill someone.
10. Martín's wife melted into her mother's bosom, lost in rage and grief.

* * *

11. Martín pushed away unbidden images of blurred wings as he held his son for the last time.
12. He thought that the beeping of the ECMO machine was not unlike chirping.
13. Martín hated the machine and everything it represented, but thought that maybe his son would find some comfort in leaving the world to the music of electronic birdsong.

* * *

14. Martín always thought it a miracle that he left the children's hospital having refrained from throwing the head surgeon headfirst out the eleventh-floor window.
15. Martín was pretty sure that even world-renowned pediatric cardiothoracic surgeons are not so fucking amazing that they can fly when properly defenestrated.
16. In the hospital parking lot, clutching his son's responsibly priced receptacle, Martín perseverated on the word "defenestration"—which he had learned in a writing class he took at SJCC the semester before he dropped out to paint cars.

* * *

17. The airbrush whispered over the candy apple red lowrider and Martín tried and tried and tried to not think of his son.
18. Martín's failure to not think of his son showed in his work.
19. Even though the paint shop employed three airbrush artists, there was a two-month waiting list just for Martín.
20. Martín's designs had begun to take on an avian quality, and one old-school vato customer swore on his blessed mother's grave that his '64 Impala Super Sport would fly away once Martín was done with the hood.

* * *

21. As he worked, Martín thought about how he and his wife hadn't spoken to one another much since the hospital.
22. The now three-month waiting list for Martín's airbrushing meant he worked long hours.
23. Martín used the tip he got from the old-school vato customer to take his wife to dinner.
24. Martín and his wife had an okay time, all things considered.
25. They did not talk about their son.

* * *

26. The morning after the dinner date with his wife, Martín saw a hummingbird in the backyard garden.
27. The hummingbird asked Martín what he was waiting for and Martín said, The fuck you talking about—chingao, now I'm fucking talking to hummingbirds.
28. The bird laughed.
29. It did not mind being mocked.
30. Martín's wife watched her husband talking to the red-breasted hummingbird and then fumbled for her phone.
31. Martín's wife cried on the phone to her mother while Martín argued with the hummingbird.
32. The hummingbird informed Martín that it would happen, sooner or later.

33. Martín went about his yard work, trying and trying and trying to ignore the terrifying message in the obnoxious little bastard's strident chirps.

* * *

34. At work, the old-school vato customer called to report that his '64 Impala Super Sport with Martín's exquisite paint job had gone missing from his driveway.
35. Another painter, jealous of Martín's newfound notoriety, joked into the phone that maybe the car had up and flown away, what with all of the wings and feathers and bird-kinda-shit Martín had put on it.
36. Martín's colleague hung up when the old-school vato customer called him a punk-ass bitch and threatened to come down to the shop and cut his fool ass.

* * *

37. That night, Martín frowned as an Acura TLX Type S pulled away from the curb in front of his house.
38. Martín loved cars, but he did not love strange cars pulling away from his curb when he got home.
39. Martín's wife said she had no idea what he was talking about and then took a long shower with the door locked.
40. In the bedroom, Martín tried to jerk off but was distracted by an itching between his shoulder blades.
41. It had been getting worse lately.
42. Martín could not allow himself to consider the possibility that the itch—a savage burning sensation that spread outward and across his shoulders—had anything to do with his son, or the hummingbird with whom he occasionally argued in the backyard.
43. Or the Acura TLX Type S.
44. Martín might be a community college dropout, but he wasn't stupid.

* * *

45. That night, he watched his wife's chest rise and fall as she slept.
46. It had been a while since Martín had touched that chest.
47. It occurred to Martín, there, in the dark, that his wife had been waxing her face and wearing more makeup lately.
48. He thought about the Acura TLX Type S.
49. Martín was not stupid.

* * *

50. On Sundays, when even Martín's greedy boss wouldn't make him work, Martín's wife would watch from the kitchen sink as her husband crisscrossed the backyard,

waving his hands and talking with the hummingbird that patrolled the Oregon sunshines, dianthus, Mexican hats, and purple penstemons he had planted in the exciting, anxious weeks before their son was due.

51. She watched Martín stop and point at one especially persistent hummingbird with a bright red chin.
52. She thought about how many times she'd opened the laptop to find that Martín had not, in fact, been looking at porn, but researching hummingbirds and eco-friendly hummingbird feeders and the best flowers for garden pollinators.
53. She watched as Martín engaged in a long and animated discussion with the bird.
54. She watched as her husband grimaced and rubbed his back against the trunk of the mugo pine tree that he always complained grew too close to the house.
55. She watched as her husband fell to his knees and began to cry to the hummingbird that he wasn't ready.
56. She fumbled for her phone.
57. Ya es tiempo, Martín's wife said to her mother.
58. *It's time.*

* * *

59. A week later, Martín's boss was on the phone all morning with customers complaining that their cars were missing.
60. Martín's coworkers all stared at him.
61. Martín had painted all of the cars that had gone missing.
62. Martín had trouble caring.
63. Martín was preoccupied because his wife thought he hadn't noticed her belongings beginning to disappear from the house.
64. Martín had been struggling with the urge to firebomb every Acura TLX Type S he saw parked anywhere near the East Side, but he loved cars too much.
65. Martín was also very clear on the matter that he never wanted to go back to jail.

* * *

66. Word spread throughout East San Jo about the crazy-good paint detailer whose work honored eagles and hawks and ospreys and peacocks and owls and quetzals and even hummingbirds.
67. The barrio cognoscenti opined about the airbrush artist whose paintwork made it look as if the feathers shivered and wings flapped, how those cars were now the most disappeared cars in all the West Coast, hotter even than untraceable catalytic converters on the black market.
68. Martín's boss began to charge triple for Martín's airbrush work, even as fewer customers booked time because no way did they want their cars to go missing, no matter how firme they looked, ese.

* * *

69. Martín's boss, distressed over the loss of business, asked Martín if maybe he was getting *too* good at painting bird motifs on customers' cars and couldn't he maybe stick to the regular shit like: Mexican and American flags, 3-D geometric patterns, and Aztec princesses with round hips and big tits.
70. Martín tried and tried and tried, but could not keep his hand from crossing that threshold separating regular designs from fluttering plumage.
71. Martín was having trouble focusing on his work because his wife had left him.
72. He hoped that his wife and the driver of the Acura TLX Type S would fuck and screw and rail one another so often and so good that maybe his wife would find some happiness, and if the sex was good enough, maybe she'd forget about him, which would mean that she could not compare him to the driver of the Acura TLX Type S.

* * *

73. Then one morning the news reported that a '69 Chevrolet Caprice, black vinyl top, metallic blue with exquisite airbrush work, had invaded Class B airspace.
74. Class B airspace is measured from 0 to 10,000 feet above airport elevation.
75. Cars violating Class B airspace was not normal.
76. Cars violating Class B airspace means that cars were fucking flying.
77. Upon hearing this news, the shop phone began to ring and all of Martín's coworkers turned to stare at him.
78. Martín's boss side-eyed him and said, Homie, tenemos un problema, wey.

* * *

79. Martín drove home, wifeless, jobless, and very likely, soon to be homeless.
80. Mortgages didn't just pay themselves—and Medi-Cal didn't pay every penny of a dead child's hospital bills, no matter how shitty the circumstances were.
81. Martín stood in the garage of the home he suddenly could no longer afford, and which no longer felt like home, and hadn't felt like home since the moment he and the woman who had been his wife returned holding a receptacle and not a baby.
82. Martín stood in that garage and shook with a fury he thought could only end in fire and annihilation.
83. In the corner of the garage was a five-gallon gas container of 93 octane unleaded that he kept for the backup generator, the lawnmower, and the leaf blower.
84. Martín cackled at how the woman who until recently was his wife but would always be the mother of his son would tease him when he used that leaf blower.
85. A Mexican with a leaf blower …
86. Martín grabbed the five-gallon container of 93 octane unleaded and a triple-flint spark lighter and walked slowly to the backyard.

* * *

87. The hummingbird drew close to the red gas can and recoiled at the fumes.
88. The fuck you gonna do with that? the bird said.
89. Martín uncapped the container and stared at the spark lighter in his right hand.
90. The hummingbird hovered a safe distance away.
91. Hay otro camino, the bird said.
92. A better way, you know this.
93. Martín, who'd always considered himself something of a coward, stood above the five-gallon container of 93 octane unleaded and began to cry.
94. Through watery eyes, Martín watched a '57 Ford F-100, outfitted with a full Fatboy hydraulic system and 0.75-inch NorCal redwood truck bed, fly west, towards the setting sun.
95. To the hummingbird, Martín said, Tell me again.

* * *

96. The hummingbird perched atop Martín's dashboard all the way back to the paint shop, occasionally glancing at the sensibly priced receptacle that Martín had placed on the passenger seat.
97. Martín fidgeted behind the wheel, barely able to withstand the itching between his shoulder blades.
98. Martín had been ignoring the itching for weeks.
99. Holding the box under one arm, Martín let himself in through the back door and turned on the shop lights.
100. Prop the door open, the hummingbird warned.

* * *

101. The hummingbird hovered over Martín's shoulder as he examined the colors on the paint booth rack.
102. Red, of course, the hummingbird chirped, and green and gold and yellow!
103. Save the black for last.
104. Martín set out the paints and turned on the electric compressor.
105. Martín removed his clothes and laughed when he realized he was self-conscious about dropping trow in front of a hummingbird.
106. The hummingbird was nonplussed by Martín's nakedness.

* * *

107. Martín began with the stomach and flanks, his airbrush hand moving in practiced swirls across his body.
108. The hummingbird whistled in approval as the man's torso sprouted the first delicate traces of feathers.
109. You were born for this, the hummingbird said.

110. Martín closed his eyes as he worked, the itching in his shoulders now a flame that burned down to his core and made him want to scream.
111. He held his breath as the metallic red paint breathed across his chin.
112. Stunning! whistled the hummingbird.
113. Martín looked the hummingbird in the eye.
114. Ya es tiempo, the hummingbird assured Martín, and Martín knew the bird was right.
115. Martín loaded the paint cup with black mixed with a hint of pearlescent pink.
116. That was a bold touch, the hummingbird said. Your son would be proud.
117. Martín started just below his left ear, working downward past his trapezius and deltoid and tricep and then forearm.
118. Before it was too late, Martín tucked the receptacle beneath his right arm and began work on the second wing.
119. I'm sorry, Martín said, his new voice echoing across the deserted paint shop.
120. We're all sorry for something, the hummingbird answered, leading Martín to the open shop door.

* * *

121. Outside the air was cool and carried a hint of rain.
122. Far above their heads, several cars flitted in and out of clouds fat with moisture.
123. The cars Martín had transformed did not give a flying fuck about Class B airspace.
124. In the empty parking lot, Martín stretched his wings, gazed upward, and wondered whether he would find a home in such a vast purple sky.

Riding the Wild Railroad

DAVE SIMS

VISUAL ART

Dave Sims, *Granny got a little souvenir*, 2023. Marker on paper, 9 x 12 inches

Dave Sims, *One tough fella with a popgun*, 2023. Watercolor and marker on paper, 12 x 9 inches

Dave Sims, *Kiddies sure dig the ride*, 2022. Watercolor on canvas board, 9 x 6 inches

Space Planning Proposal for My Brain

JESSICA BALDANZI

EXPERIMENTAL

December 27, 2023

To: My brain

Re: Space planning proposal

Dear Brain,

Thank you so much for your generally effective functioning. I remain grateful for your instrumental role in the success of my career, my family, and my general happiness.

The purpose of this memo is to inquire about, and perhaps suggest a revised organization of, your memory banks. As I can gather from my general recall ability, most of your space appears to be used quite well, especially for someone our age. I commend you in particular for your efficient and productive functioning in recalling the names of my students, the intricate web of toy and television character names important to my kids when they were small, and (usually) what day of the week it is.

One area of concern, however, is the music archive, particularly the section that was formed

a) in the 1980s, and

b) when I possessed limited powers of discernment.

Case in point, a song from the Classic Rewind satellite station, to which I flipped in a moment of weakness and desperation when falling asleep at the end of a car trip last week. Artist: Asia. Track: "Only Time Will Tell." I discovered, with dismay, that I recalled every word and note and minute modulation of said song with little to no prompting.

My dismay extends to the present. While the song served its purpose in the moment——I belted out every word, which terrified my children, but did keep me awake——it refuses to recede to the background now that it is no longer needed. The song is stuck on repeat in my head.

It feels as if you have latched onto this song like a rodent to a questionable nut, your little paws spinning and spinning the nut as you examine and reexamine this flawed specimen from every possible angle, hoping to find an acceptable spot to eat.

There is no acceptable spot in said song.

It feels as if I am, as they say, losing my mind, despite the reality that you are not only not lost, but very close—nay, inescapable.

Questions of artistic merit aside, I believe this song is actively dangerous. The sheer illogic of the lyrics poses a threat to the integrity of the surrounding brain data.

If such flawed content is allowed to stand unquestioned, future incoming information might likewise fail to be reviewed. As we soon head into our "golden years" with

a) limited capacity, and

b) increased potential for instability within our archived content, how will the surrounding interstices be protected from such corrosive illogic?

Proposal for alternate use of space: rezone for multipurpose use, including, among other information:

1) Names and ages of my friends' kids and pets, so they don't think I'm an asshole.

2) Correct names of current video games and the characters contained within, so that I can retain the crumb of credibility I hold with my kids as they head into teenagerdom.

3) Shopping list recall, so I don't have to stand frozen in aisle three like a twit, staring at the plasticware while trying to remember that one thing I left the house for in the first place, and looking so desperate as to prompt a fellow shopper turning the corner to ask, her face paused in concern, "Are you okay?"

4) Material from my undergraduate philosophy class, so I can develop a more coherent response to that conservative Hobbesian menace whose office is three doors down from mine, and who remains gleefully invested in the idea that there is no real hope left in the world, and we're all destined to battle each other back into the prehistoric muck.

Likely, I am sending this memo in too much haste. I have lost my capacity for restraint.

In short, that song is driving me bananas. Please make it stop.

Sincerely,

Jessica

* * *

December 29, 2023

To: Jessica

From: Your brain

Re: Space planning proposal

Thank you for your memo, and for the kind words about our effective functioning.

We have reviewed your proposal and are sorry to say that we must reject it. Our reasons extend beyond the reach of the English language, but we hope the following example can aid in your understanding.

Recall when your grandfather died. Recall, as well, the old diary your mother returned to you when you all came home from the funeral. Years earlier, you had thrown it in the trash because it mortified you. However, it contained memories of your grandfather that you had forgotten.

For example: "Grandpa and I watched a magishen. Grandpa laffed with me. He is graet. He smells like creen soda. He always has candy. I love him."

You were six when you wrote that. Your hypercritical ten-year-old self, embarrassed by the diary's misspellings, rickety handwriting, and simple, clumsy representation of your world, threw the book into your Minnie Mouse wastebasket. Your mother retrieved it from its nest of used tissues on trash day.

When your mother showed you this entry, you cried. You both cried. You had forgotten about the magician until you read the words of your earlier self. This memory was precious to you. It brought even the body of your grandfather back to you, because you recalled his proximity——the details of his face in profile next to you, his smell (not just the "creen" soda, but an additional rich smell of deep understanding and connection)— —and felt him next to you again.

You make a compelling case to remove the clichéd and shoddily constructed song from your memory. We only ask that you note how well it served you when you needed it. The song, the whole of it——not just the music and admittedly substandard lyrics, but also the time in your life to which the song remains attached——may likewise serve you again in ways you cannot yet predict.

We know that it is disappointing to have a proposal rejected. We are sorry that we cannot entertain it at this time.

Sincerely,

Brain

P.S. We assure you that we are not rodential, and do not fall prey to the facile attractions of ham-handed ’80s lyrics. Our cranial capacity far exceeds that of the squirrel to which you so casually compare us.

An Interview with Annie Wong, aka Headexplodie

Annie Wong, or Headexplodie, is a dynamic mixed-media artist who creates popping, eye-catching illustrations, stop-motion animations, and sculptures.

Since graduating from the Academy of Arts University in San Francisco with an MFA in 2D/traditional animation and stop motion, she has continued to produce works in various media. Her playful GIFs earned her the title of Giphy Featured Artist with more than 28 billion views. Her illustrations, which are often made in collaboration with works from other creatives, resulted in her being recognized by the New York Times in 2019 in its "The Best of Illustration." Her stop-motion animations, which often contain inspirational, politically conscious messages, earned her the Excellence in Journalism Award from the Society of Professional Journalists.

via @headexplodie

Recently, Annie has also been engaging speaking events where she teaches the public about the importance of self-care. Her multi-genre expertise, bubbly artistic style, and passion for helping emerging artists made her a perfect interviewee for *Exposition Review*'s "POP!" issue.

Annie talked with Expo Comics & Film Editor Lauren Gorski and intern Michael Ahn about how she discovered her love of puppetry and stop-motion animation, what is the right medium for her work, and the importance of self-care.

Exposition Review: How would you describe your beginnings as an artist and how you came to find the artist's life?

Annie Wong: I was one of those kids that always loved drawing and any kind of craft projects, and I just never grew out of it. That's the short answer. I grew up as an only child for the first thirteen years of my life until my sister was born. So I had a lot of time alone in my bedroom with craft supplies and playing imaginary games in my backyard. I just have always really enjoyed creativity. It was my favorite way to process my emotions and express myself, especially as a shy kid who didn't enjoy using words as much because I was very shy around other people. So after graduating from high school, I chose art as a major to focus on. I went to art school in the Bay Area in California. Ever since then, I have been

trying out a lot of different mediums and ways to be creative, as well as pursuing the business side of creativity.

ER: How did the community you found in the Bay Area differ from the one you experienced in Texas?

AW: In the Bay Area, there are a lot more creatives. It's a lot easier to run into someone who's also doing some form of creative work. I grew up in San Antonio in Texas. It was a pretty big metropolitan city, so there was definitely an art scene, a pretty decent network of galleries and museums and art walks. But it was still weird to be an artist in South Texas. I don't think it was the default or what was expected. But out here I think it's a little less weird. I think people maybe even expect it a little bit.

ER: As a student at the Academy of Art University, you switched from visual development to stop-motion. Did that pivot come naturally?

AW: Yeah, that switch came really naturally to me. Before I went to grad school to study visual development, which is basically illustration for animation, I was working as an art director at Children's Fairyland, which is the local storybook children's park here. I worked in the puppet theater. That's what planted the seed for miniature storytelling and performance through puppetry.

I was aware of stop-motion animation as an option at Academy of Art, but it was kind of underground, sort of hidden. Most animation majors go into 3D animation or 2D hand-drawn. I was somewhere in the middle of my studies [when I thought], "Let me just take one class because I just really want to," and I finally in the program had an elective where I could [take a stop-motion class.] It was with Norm DeCarlo, who worked on *Nightmare Before Christmas*. The class was really small. It was only me and three other grad students, and we worked on a very, very short film together that summer. It's like I got bit by the bug. I was like, "Oh, this is what I'm meant to do."

ER: Which is a nice transition to thinking about how stop-motion and puppetry focus on character design. As an artist, how do you see your relationship to the characters you create?

AW: I love characters so much. I got a taste of what it's like to be an actor and a performer through my experience with the puppet theater, and stop-motion animation—or maybe any kind of character animation—is like a slow-motion version of puppetry. I really have to put myself in the place of the character. I've thought about things like a character's intentions and motivations or their story arc. If I'm not feeling that, then the performance is not going to feel authentic. It's just also a fun vehicle to explore, like, what are the different flavors of happy or sadness or any relatable human emotion.

ER: Do you have a favorite medium for your work, whether it's a still, GIF, short film, maybe even an in-person gallery exhibit?

AW: It changes from project to project. What I've been enjoying lately is just being able to have conversations about something that I make. Sometimes that can happen easier if it's an animation that I posted online because there's a comment section. People can share their thoughts about it.

I've been having a lot of fun lately with live storytelling and public speaking. I've had the opportunity to do a few slideshow presentations where I get to share my work and talk about the work in a different way than just seeing an animated GIF. Then to be able to do a Q&A or have people come up to me afterwards and talk about how they related to something I said. I've been finding that super fun, getting that kind of back-and-forth engagement.

Annie built a 3x3" miniature replica of the NPR Tiny Desk office for an art show! Watch her give a little tour of some of the pieces inside on YouTube.

ER: When you're in the beginning phase of your projects, how do you decide which material is the right one to use?

AW: My work is very much about different materials. What I like about that is I always have a phase I call R&D, where I'm just allowing myself at least a day to experiment and try different things. [In my studio,] I have shelves full of so many different things: paint and paper, and clay and wire, and wood and foam. So when I'm coming up with an idea, I might have initial inklings of maybe I'll try this in clay, or maybe I'll try this in wood. I have to touch it, I have to feel the weight of it, I have to see if it's going to work with gravity in the way that I want [it] to. So there's a lot of problem-solving, like engineering problem-solving, that has to be done. And then there's also the aesthetics of it—is this material going to give me the look that I want, depending on what the tone is. It becomes a conversation with the material. And then it's magical when the thing clicks and you're like, "Oh, this combination of materials works very well." I have to go through that process

first, and I have to look at it. And then when it looks back at me and we're happy with each other, I'm like, "All right, let's do this."

ER: You often collaborate with artists from different media, such as musicians, while also working with writers to create illustrations for their works. What are some of your takeaways from working with artists from different backgrounds and skill sets?

AW: It's a fun excuse to get to know different people. That's how I like to learn about people. If I have a project to work on with them, especially if it's not a medium that I specialize in, I get to learn more about, like, my partner who I've collaborated with who works in audio. I've learned a lot about things like microphones and Foley, sound effects, and things like that.

Ultimately, though, what I love about it is, especially in the field of animation, it's very, very collaborative because just to do all of the parts on your own would take forever, and I don't have that time. So I love working with other people that are specialized in actual visual effects and video editing or audio or hand lettering—just all of these other things.

ER: Your works often contain messages of political and social consciousness, such as "Ovary Actions," which is a great pun, or GIFs like the one you made for the 2016 election. When did you decide to use your art to spread awareness of important social concerns?

AW: A lot of the art that I make is very autobiographical. For example, I've been doing a lot of self-portraits lately. Because a lot of times these are topics that I care about, it's just going to come out in some form or another in the things that I make.

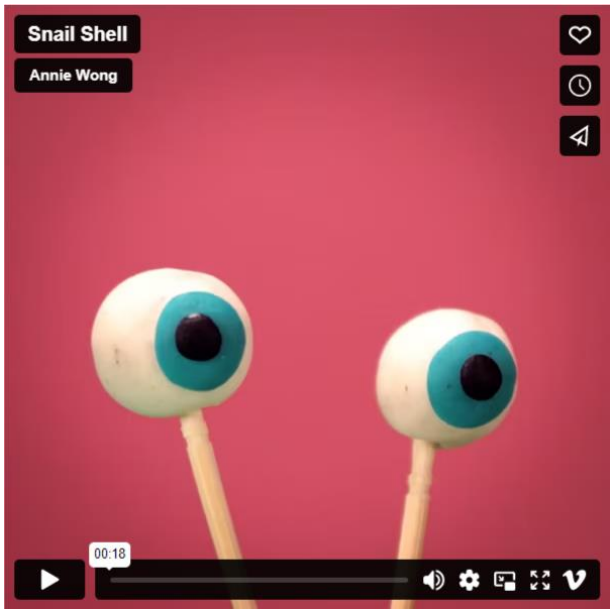
Art is a great way to process your feelings around contentious issues, or just things you care about. It's also kind of just a part of my Aquarius Sun being naturally invested and interested in things that affect humanity. That's just how I process it and how I want to open up conversation about things hopefully in a way that is accessible, especially through humor. Sometimes it's easier to laugh at something than dive into what might feel like a very aggressive dialogue.

via GIPHY

ER: There's also a lot of your recent work that focuses on self-care. What advice do you have for other artists who may need that reminder to take care of themselves?

AW: It's hard for a lot of people to feel like they can take a break. But as someone who's lived the art life for a while, it just becomes a sort of health maintenance thing to do to do things like get an adequate amount of sleep, exercise, go to therapy when I need to—that's just mental hygiene. Most importantly, having self-compassion. Because ultimately for me, I want to have fun with what I'm doing, and I can't do that if I am super stressed out all the time.

Also, because I love so many artists, what you do is really valuable, even if the culture doesn't recognize it. All you do is special and unique, and only you can do it because it's coming out of you. So you have to take care of yourself so that you continue to do it because other people like me need to hear or see or consume the thing that you're making.



via Vimeo

ER: I think Wayne White also uses the term "art life." You've mentioned the documentary Beauty Is Embarrassing about artist Wayne White in interviews in the past, so I know that his work, along with* Pee-wee's Playhouse*, has been a source of influence for you.

AW: I think about in that documentary, how he's, like, playing the banjo or something like that. And in his talk, the camera is following him through all of the different things he does. I think about that a lot, about how what's been healthy for me is to just proclaim I am an artist, and I'm living this art life. To just think about how that permeates into all these other areas of life. It's a holistic thing. [For] a lot of the artists that I admire, it's a way of looking at life. So I've been trying to play around with multiple forms of expression, trying to find ways that everything can be a little bit more fun or a little bit more magical or a little bit more surreal and playful.

ER: Are you, for example, bringing more music into your life?

AW: So for Christmas, I gifted myself this electric ukulele. When I was in high school, probably like a lot of teenagers or people coming of age, music can become a part of their identity or like a really, really exciting thing. I think I kind of lost that for a little while, and

over the past few years, I've been trying to bring that back and remember I used to have so much fun playing guitar with my high school best friend. I used to just lay in bed, listening to records and reading the lyrics. How can I make time for that and try to enjoy music as an active experience and not just put it on in the background to pass the time. Also trying to do it myself, just as a hobby, helps me to be more empathetic to those artists and get into their mindset.

> ***ER: That reminds me of something that I saw on the internet: The Oatmeal's "Creativity Is Like Breathing." It talked about how, as an artist, it's important to inhale and exhale. As a creative, you can't just create and create and exhale all the time without also inhaling other work from other artists.***

AW: It's also just a great way to take a break from yourself. So much of my work is about "How can I convey this message?" and "How's the audience going to receive it?" and I'm making all these decisions. So when I start jamming with my friends, I don't think about any of that stuff at all. It's just a totally different way to engage that gives me a break from myself.

> ***ER: Is there any advice you would give your students or other emerging artists?***

AW: The biggest realization that I've had is the importance of trying to be part of a community, especially when you are in the beginning trying to build your body of work or your career. There was a time in my life where I didn't prioritize spending time nurturing my relationships. That made it harder to endure the challenges of living that art life. But now that I am a little bit better at that, and I'm surrounded now by more artists, it feels really nice to not feel alone in this difficult endeavor.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.