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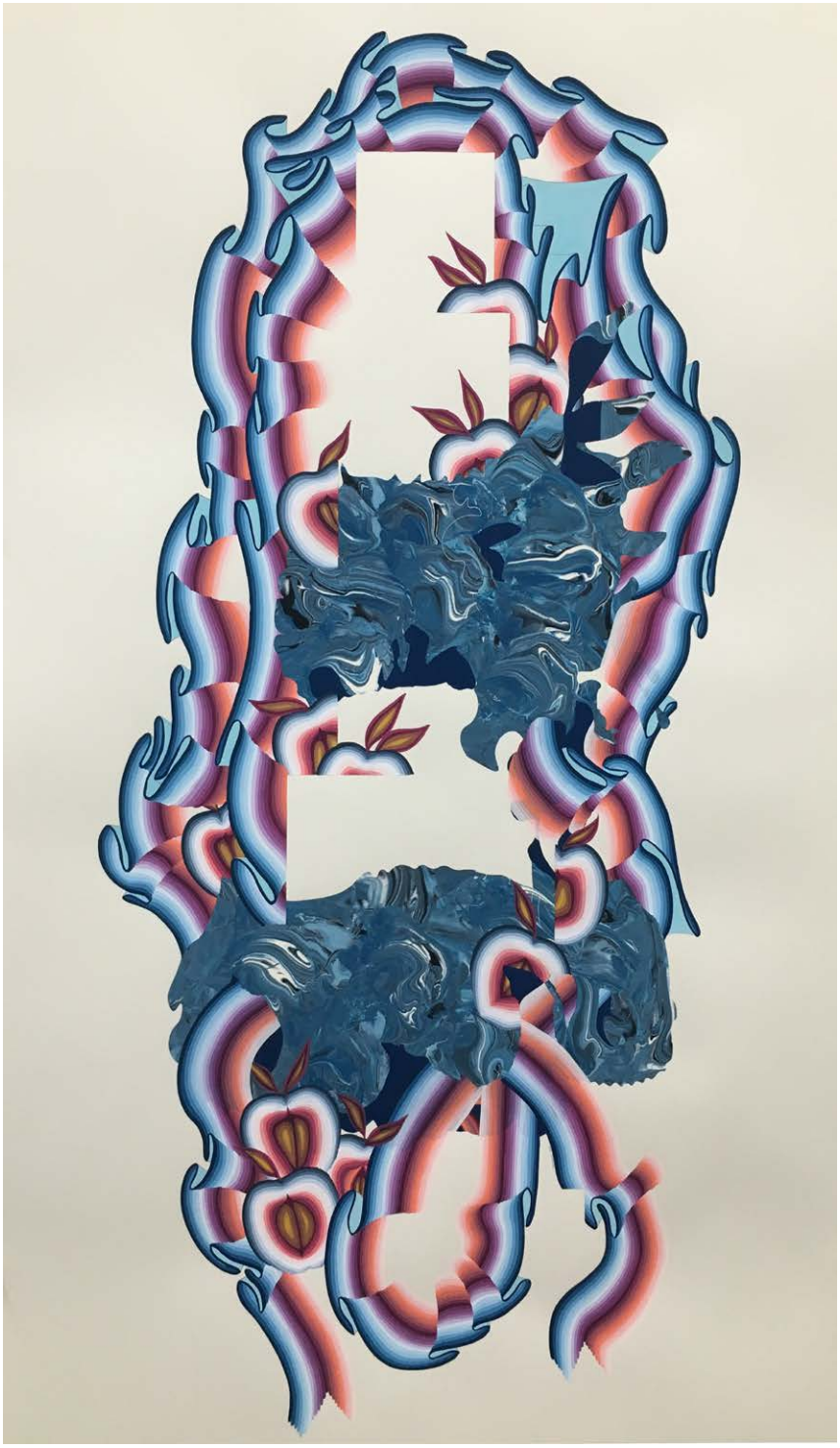
Angel City Review



Foreword

2020… Those four numbers hold so much weight and meaning for any person alive today. The effects of this year will reverberate for many years to come as it is imprinted into the collective histories of the world. Despite everything though, I see so many people persisting and continuing on in their own way. Through losses of loved ones, jobs, homes, food security, emotional support systems, health, and so much more, people are striving to make life work. Others are dealing with all of that and continuing to live and fight against racial, social, gender, economic, and political injustices that are not new to society and are just as bad as any viral pandemic that sweeps across the globe. This issue is dedicated to all of you ¬– to the people who are continuing to live despite everything. To the people who continue to create works of beauty, to the people who are caring for others, to the people who holed up in their homes for the past four months and binge watched shows or bought a Nintendo Switch, to the students who had to deal with haphazard transitions to online learning, to the teachers that transitioned to digital learning environments with little to no support from their schools, to the medical professionals and essential workers who keep things running despite so many people who will not or cannot take precautions, to everyone out there living in a world that continuously challenges your existence, we thank you.

- Zachary Jensen

Featured Artists

jen stract is a small-time artist living and working in Northern California. While attending UC Berkeley jen left small written requests around town asking strangers to send photos of the washing machines they use to erase their memories. This evolved into her current project – placing small, ceramic washing machines and the memories they contain for others to find on her travels near and far. Instagram: @jenstract

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Monica Valdez was born in San Jose, California, and received her BFA from San Jose State University. She has taught at SJSU and is also currently working on her MFA. Monica curated an exhibition at Art Ark Gallery and also co-curated an exhibition at Works Gallery. Monica's work has a focus on color value transitions. Her work is created mainly through serigraphy monotypes and painting with liner brushes. Many of her pieces are inspired by plants, shapes, pattern, color attraction, food, clothing, and the idea of objects in the process of becoming. http://www.monidez.com
Cover Photo Naturaleza y Muerta

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Brea Weinreb is an Oakland-based painter and writer. Her large scale figurative paintings celebrate queer bodies while probing and illuminating historically-informed LGBTQ social dynamics. Weinreb's practice is deeply embedded in mysticism, mythology, literature, color theory, and the art historical tradition of portraiture. Weinreb frequently collaborates with friends, many of whom are also artists, as the subjects for her paintings. She makes their playful behind-the-scenes encounters transparent to viewers by inviting her collaborators to perform alongside the paintings of themselves during exhibition openings. Weinreb holds a dual B.A. in Art Practice and English from the University of California, Berkeley. Her work has been exhibited in galleries across Northern and Southern California as well as Massachusetts and New York. She is currently an Alternate candidate for a Fulbright scholarship to Berlin, Germany. http://www.breaweinreb.com/

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Calvi & Leo / Androgyna's Galaxy: Oil and Acrylic on Canvas

Brea Weinreb - 2018

Poem to Parting

By Soleil Davíd

It's that I woke wanting
different desperately.

After that last embrace,
my lashes not quite fitting

the nape of your neck,
I confess

I turned the sheets over
trying to find your scent.

For nights, I asked the body
to forget, create new skin,

wrists that have never known
your grip,

vocal cords unable to find
the pitch of keening.

Maintenance

By Soleil Davíd

My mother's
kitchen floor
is clean enough
to eat from.

Her labor
so spent
it's invisible,
detectable only

in a whiff of bleach,
or was that
her perfume?
Van Cleef & Arpels

had never meant
so much domesticity.
The floral notes,
the citrus finish,

the musk that must
be under. Early
morning's bearable
yet. She'll find time

to write
later. Later
and later and
later.

Soleil Davíd's work has appeared or is forthcoming in Arkansas International, *MARY: A Journal of New Writing*, *Post No Ills and The Margins*, among others. Davíd was born and raised in the Philippines and received her B.A. from the University of California, Berkeley. A VONA/Voices alumna, she has received fellowships from PEN America, Bread Loaf Translators' Conference, and from Indiana University, Bloomington, where she is currently an MFA candidate in poetry. She is the current Poetry Editor of *Indiana Review.*

Swamped

By Mud Howard

when we think of rage, we summon our mother.
unsullied memories of her barefoot & bloated,
knifing the air beneath our father's scruffy face.
"there was a time when sexual harassment was a
compliment," our mother says, brushing the blue
out of her eyes. how provocative. how unpunished
those men must still be. they tip orange buckets of
lust on us & somehow make it home untouched.
ask yourself where you were when you first felt the
frothing bite of his eyes locked on your body. ask
yourself, how old you were when you watched your
first porno gangbang & trembled under the
twitching motor of your left hand doused in oil.
who did you imagine yourself to be? I was sixteen.
sometimes we sleep for days after walking outside
for an hour. we unwrap our hair from the sticky
cocoon of bed & suck lychee jelly off the tips of our
fingers. we are drawn toward and repulsed by that
which electrifies us, a neon rash of pixels crawls
over my body and slips out the window. I lay in the
sauna of my terror, dripping, moonless. after he left,
I cellophaned my nipples to a hunk of flesh &
couldn't be fucked for two years. when we squeeze
citrus into the pitcher, all our wounds light up and a
deep, ancient sting rises to the surface. do we know
how to outlive the onslaught of gender? how long
can we stay tied to our mothers, who are tied to
their fathers, who are tied to the men who hunt us
down? you should hear the unbroken sound of our
rage creeping through the house, an airbrushed
howl. he might forget, but we, we remember.

cruising in the gym showers

By Mud Howard

i was seventeen
performing oral sex on boys who would push me in front of oncoming traffic
just to pull me back and save my life

i was a fool to think i ever knew myself
listening to Sharon Van Etten
while the darkness was eating its way out of me

i was riding shotgun up highways in 18-wheelers
just to punish my mother
for forgetting my birthday

i lived my life in hopes of becoming
the phone call my brother would make
when ended up in jail

he would get down on every knee he ever had
a grove of trees cut in half
i'm everything i haven't done yet

better with the lights turned on

By Mud Howard

my sex life is
a remote control flipping through adult channels
saying no at a volume only I can here
milking the ancient process of reclaimed misogyny
sober as a hand in the dark
skinning a rabbit without crying
hooking up with a good friend
hot-blooded and full of rain
telling you what to do to me
I miss the boy who assaulted me
you can't give me what he took away
but

in your arms I am a lemon
in your arm I rot
into a new blue planet
one I can live on
where many-bodied people speak in light and color
where a subterranean gentleness gathers in the spaces left empty by life's plunder
in which grows
an arcade of love
an ancestral cure
one minute the size of a lifetime

Mud Howard (they/them) is a non-binary trans writer, performer, and activist from the states. Mud creates work that explores the intimacy and isolation between queer and trans bodies. mud is a Pushcart Prize nominee and has been published in *Foglifter*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *THEM lit*, *Cleaver Magazine* and *The Lifted Brow*. they are currently working on their first full-length novel: a queer and trans memoir full of lies and magic.

Venice, after dark

By Marie Targonski-O'Brien

His body
c u r l e d
toward mine
as we sat on a chartreuse
loveseat
under dim lights.
Monotonous, pop music echoed
through the crowd

while the mass of his hand
fell heavy on my thigh.

He leaned in-
I leaned back

"What's your problem?" he demanded.

like I had done something to insult him
by not surrendering
my body
to his cursory, unfocused desires.

but before I could
find the words to respond
his eyes darted across the room
directing me to
"look at the ass on that one"

I only came over because you said you'd make me spaghetti

By Marie Targonski-O'Brien

In the morning I hopped out of the bed
and stood in the middle of the kitchen floor
naked

You're very slim,
I told him.

His pale torso poked out from under off-white sheets
in a studio apartment in El Porto.

"It's because I'm vegan"

Vegan? You never said-

"Well I try-"

he turned on me.
"You're not even vegetarian- you eat eggs."

But I love eggs.

"I know
you told me last night.
You love eggs."

I did?

I grabbed my pants from the floor
and hopped up and down,
pulling them up
Sweeping up my shirt and purse in one hand
from the chair.

Before I shut the door,
I peaked my head back in smiling.
Thanks for the sex.

And slammed it behind me.

The last time I saw him
he looked at me, crinkling his brow-

"I told you I was vegan?
I had brisket for lunch."

Marie Targonski-O'Brien is an emerging writer living in Redondo Beach, California. She holds a Master's in Journalism from University of Southern California and a BA in Philosophy from Rowan University. Her writing presents glimpses into the everyday experiences of women; exploring the exceptional within the mundane. When she's lucky, she manages to find humor where it's least expected. You can find her on Instagram @MarieTargonskiOBrien.

Conquistador

By Manuela Williams

You must have been so proud
when you dominated the half-eaten landscape
no longer majestic in its great swooping valleys
but overcome by the gaseous colors of a plague.

I sense an infuriating smirk in the way you pose.
It's the way liars look when they know they'll never be
caught, and I know your god's work smells sweet now,
but trust me, even a god must decompose eventually.

I wish you could be part of my blasphemous erasure.
I would adjust the focus, blur out the future of
factories both spewing and devouring their ash
and strike out the cinders.

I would finger mountaintops not yet yellowed and dare to kiss
the fish scraping their bellies at the bottom of an unmarked
ocean. You have your old, rotting gods and this is how I embrace
mine between borders not yet drawn and named.

If I could commit the act of altering this landscape, I am sure the
tainted flowers would bloom and the valley beasts would
become fearsome again, flashing their freshly sharpened teeth.
I am sure you would be terrified, for once.

Manuela Williams lives and writes in Reno, Nevada. She is the author of two poetry chapbooks: *Witch* (*dancing girl press*) and *Ghost in Girl Costume* (originally published as part of the 2017 Hard to Swallow Chapbook Contest). Her work has appeared in *Bone Bouquet*, *wicked alice zine*, and other magazines. She serves on *Carve Magazine*'s Resident Reading Committee and is the author of the "Build Your Brand" column at DIY MFA. She is currently pursuing an MFA in Poetry at the University of Nevada, Reno.

my mother's hands

By Mei Mei Sun

my mother's hands are wrinkled like satin,

crisscrossed from scars of oars and homelands,

they bruise in their easy tenderness, caressing

yellow carnations and lillies of the valley.

as a young child, i worked them over for hours,

before apathy and age locked away the openness

the rustle of her tires on the driveway gravel

still remind me of those tiny valleys blooming on her palms.

her tinted-ivory skin, once so dewy and coveted

are marred decades of cyclical unemployment and unyielding sun

i now look for women with the same sunken eyes and bulging veins,

injuries from a motherland ripped open by curettage and olive slacks.

her tongue, working over syllables like rusted tin / in

an uneasy accent that drew my childish resentment at

having a mother with a strength diluted by impatient translation.

my father withdrew into his boiling rage and fresher women; my mother bore the insult because

her upbringing necessitated she could never bring up those subjects.

her fingerprints, worn down by decades of clorox and bleach, have dissipated

her identity beaten into a set of terms ready for ugly 12-point black typefont.

i can still see glimpses of her, in between the morning talk-shows and online psychics,

of the young woman who once wandered through tall, virgin grasses with her skirts held up high, working their silk between her fingers.

Mei Mei Sun lives in Los Angeles. Find her at meimeisun.org

Liminal Object 2: acrylic and Gouache on paper

Monica Valdez - 2020

We Are There

BY CHELSEA BAYOUTH

After they pried Dad's chest open
like a Tomales Bay oyster
to cut the cancer out
doctors gave instructions
to clap on his back with little rubber things.

Every half hour he braces himself
on the kitchen island of his loft,
Mama and I roll his shirt up,
careful of the stiches
and *pack-pack-pack* on his back.

Sounds like an old jalopy, he says,
and Mama laughs. Three years ago,
just before their divorce,
he demanded we stand
in the kitchen where he screamed,
Your mother is a frigid bitch

so loudly, I wet the bed again.
We soup and tuck. Talk
about getting sweatshirts
that zip up the front
so he doesn't have to raise his arms.
Medication at 2 to move the bowel.
A pan of Mama's enchiladas,
packed the hour drive with towels
to keep them hot.

When our family was young we had a nasty calico
who wouldn't be held and vomited vindictively.
Who, if you got too close, would spit a curled claw
into the tender tips of your fingers. Who we

mourned when we found
her fallen fur
like leaves
across the lawn.

Chelsea Bayouth is a writer and Emmy Award Winning visual artist from Los Angeles California. Her poetry, essays, and short stories have been published in *BOAAT, CALYX, Roanoke Review, BlazeVOX, The Rattling Wall/PEN Center USA, Lunch Ticket, Heavy Feather Review, Borderlands* and many others. She is currently a semi-finalist in the YesYes Books 2020 Pamet River Prize for her manuscript Fruit for the Living. More of her work can be found on her website www.chelseabayouth.com

Miscible

By Sean Carrero

My face is all breath. This thick black
crown absorbs plantain aroma. My tongue
is a different geography from Abuelo.
Either I would tremble, or the house would rumble
when my grandpa spoke. Things become more real-motion.
Couch fibers wilt against flesh.
Plantain aroma saturates the room,
this corduroy couch. I possess
smoke in this realm
between his home
and his origin, his
life and his death.

Ode to Green Onions

By Sean Carrero

Green onions crowd a corner of a window-
sill, still, blend into the light, thin, vegetable
paper, green stalk, white roots sprout in water; it
emits delicious

color from smoothies. Oblivious, receptive
rebirth radical. Dim diamond
reflects fire from millions of miles away,
quiet, oblivious, and redundant.

The next transformation, browner at the
top. Stuck in this shot glass, a makeshift
vase for green onions. Not for chocolate
or any other dessert.

No vase can contain them,
contain them they will grow.

Sean Carrero teaches 6th-grade language arts. He recently graduated from the Creative Writing Workshop at the University of New Orleans with his MFA in Poetry. His work received Honorable Mention for the Vassar Miller Poetry Award in 2018 and 2019. In 2019 his poetry received Honorable Mention for the Academy of American Poets Award. He now lives and works near Hollywood, FL.

Pepper Sweet

By Paul Ilechko

Halved flesh
dripping with shape

the clumsy blade as desire bleeds
roasted in the savory flame

somewhere between
delicacy and sweat
the razor cuts
the shape unfolds

somewhere between
the final gasping of the rose bush
and the golden shedding
of the maple tree …

show me your sweet
pepper taste your pungency

your lasting glow
of autumn.

Paul Ilechko is the author of the chapbooks "Bartok in Winter" (*Flutter Press*, 2018) and "Graph of Life" (*Finishing Line Press*, 2018). His work has appeared in a variety of journals, including *Manhattanville Review*, *West Trade Review*, *Yes Poetry*, *Night Music Journal* and *Rock & Sling*. He lives with his partner in Lambertville, NJ.

Today

Sarah Marquez

Today, mom told me
not to say a word to the doctor
about the hollow in my breast.
Or the scars carved from porcelain,
streaming down my arm.
She said tell him
how normal you are–
a straight-A student,
4.0 GPA. Smile, like the city
is a happy place,
not overrun with homeless
living out of tents
set up under freeways.
You remember yesterday–
the old woman crossing
the street while the cars were coming?
Forget her. She was sick & you aren't.

What about the shopping carts
collecting in the corner of the block?
What do I say about them?

Nothing. Say nothing at all.

*

They are picked up over the weekend,
& our view of the bougainvillea tree is restored.
I focus on the pink egg-shaped flowers
enticing the bees outside the walls.
Soon, the hive will empty & we won't hear
their loud buzzing anymore.
Silence is the key to ending our suffering.

*

But there's more. The gardener & his sons
forget their footprints in the dirt.
Mom complains how they leave their trash–

greasy Styrofoam boxes, milk cartons, two pairs of gloves.
From my bedroom window, I see them,
hiding in the tall grass; & the broken branch
of the lemon tree– still hanging on.
It might survive if the weather stays warm
for another season, if the birds sing to it,
if no one notices & leaves it alone.

Stray cats prowl the neighborhood
at night. Their glowing eyes see everything.
But who would they tell?
They are also just trying to get by.

*

The Bombay cat stalks me every time
I step outside to check the mail.
Mom reminds me he's only interested
in the small opening between the wall
& the front door. The mice run through
when we aren't watching.

*

One day, I ask: didn't someone die here?
She nods *yes*. One of the neighbors–
a man with white papier-mâché skin.
He used to call to the crows, nesting
in the pines. Now, his wife lives alone
in their one-story home. She sits up
at night, thinking how a little bird pecked
the window for two days the week before.

*

We struggle to pay next month's rent.
I suppose we will move this month.
It's too much– two thousand, four hundred.

Mom is at the hospital overnight,
bent over a patient's bed,
listening for a breath that won't come.
She's never needed anyone.

*

I'm seeing the doctor on Monday,

the first day of fall.
All the leaves are shedding their green suits
for orange, yellow, brown, and red ones.
They work hard too.
Changing is never easy.

*

In the morning, mom appears at the edge of my bed–
a shadow sucking in light. She says, *listen to me M*.

When he asks are you allergic to anything, say nothing.
Hide your pill bottles & tissues in your bag.

When he asks what surgeries you've had, say none.
A gallbladder extraction isn't a big deal. I know the staples
sinking into your skin were awful, but they came out.

When he asks are you depressed, say no.
Conceal those dark circles as best you can.

When he asks are you anxious, don't say I don't know.
Keep your hands to yourself and let the panic rest inside.
It's only one hour of your life.

Sarah Marquez (she/her) is based in Los Angeles and has work published and forthcoming in various magazines and journals, including *Human/Kind*, *Kissing Dynamite*, *The River* and *Twist in Time Magazine*. When not writing, she can be found reading for *The Winnow* and *Random Sample Review,* sipping coffee, or tweeting @Sarahmarissa338.

CHARACTER FLAW

By Stephanie Valente

plot device: an ancient stone.

[it's easy:

rough
diamonds

turn

blue

spell-cast a

siren's song

don't

forget

the
blood.]

Stephanie Athena Valente lives in Brooklyn, NY. Her published works include *Hotel Ghost*, *waiting for the end of the world*, and *Little Fang* (Bottlecap Press, 2015-2019). She has work included in *Reality Hands*, *TL;DR*, and *Cosmonauts Avenue*. She is the associate editor at *Yes, Poetry.* Sometimes, she feels human.

Photograph

jen stract

Grief

By Lorraine Whelan

I felt it in my body
Months before I knew
My mother's fatal diagnosis.
Something was wrong.

The pain grew in my foot.
From heel to ball
It would not move forward
Into the oncoming grief.

Knowing what lay ahead,
Both feet rebelled
And refused to take me there.

After the funeral
The pain in my chest grew –
A series of respiratory malfunctions,
Bronchitis, tracheitis, sinusitis,
The common cold.
A plague on my house.
Constant coughing,
Chest tight, heart palpitating –
A permanent heart ache.

This grief is cellular.
Pain moves in and out,
Osmotic, changing density
Till every pore weeps.
The sadness of my body
Cannot recover that
Which is forever lost,
Yet stumbles on.

My feet still hurt.
Often I am numb.
My limp is barely perceptible
To unaware strangers
These days as I
Wheeze forward slowly
One tiny step at a time.

TOC

Trio

By Lorraine Whelan

I saw their photograph
and remembered the pose;
they stood as one person
delicately holding small glasses
of liqueur or sweet wine.

Three voices spoke in unison
through reddened unmoving lips:
the speech of angels, perhaps,
but I couldn't recall the words.

I saw them in a dream
maintaining the pose
in a flooded room:
motionless, undrowned bodies.

I watched their silence
beneath the water
until the liquid drained away.

Moving closer I perceived
three painted clay statues,
colour salt-faded and dripping,
mud oozing at their feet.

Lorraine Whelan is a Canadian writer and visual artist based in Ireland. Her published writing takes the form of poetry, memoir & fiction (USA, Ireland, Canada & online) and art criticism & commentary (Ireland, Luxembourg & online). As a visual artist, she has exhibited both in solo (Ireland) and group shows (Ireland, Canada, China & France). Her artwork is included in public, corporate and private collections in Ireland, Canada, USA, UK, Belgium & Australia. Her writing has previously appeared in *New Irish Writing, The Salmon, Canadian Author & Bookman, Cyphers, Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme, The Examined Life Journal, CIRCA* and others. In addition, since earlier this year, she has been included on the international Poetry Sound Map, reading one of her published poems. https://poetrysoundlibrary.weebly.com/

Pregnant at 42

Kim Jacobs-Beck

The unheard beat of the moon.
A jot grows, then fails,
falls.

I leave him childless. Our last chance.
Snapped off at the stem.

All over but the bleeding, the doctor prodding,
a test awaits in Hematology.

The one with the needle—I say, tiny veins, hard to find but
she says. I got this. Stabs. Again. Again. Gets her blood
to prove I'm barren.

After. Purple doughnut swelling
in my elbow crease where
a baby's head should be.

words fail

Kim Jacobs-Beck

me. fail. words.
thief cheater liar drunk
a bruise a gun target practice
dead doe tied to the bumper Grandpa so proud venison
tastes like dirt like a perfect shot
so lucky

so lucky
dead doe tied to the bumper Grandpa so proud venison
tastes like twigs like brutal luck
cheater liar target practice
a bruise a case of Stroh's
words fail I don't
believe the things I'm seeing

Kim Jacobs-Beck is the author of a chapbook, *Torch* (Wolfson Press). Her poems can be found in *Nixes Mate*, *Gyroscope*, *Apple Valley Review*, *SWWIM Every Day*, *roam literature*, and *Peach Velvet Mag*; a full list can be found at kimjacobsbeck.com. She is the founder of *Milk & Cake Press* and teaches at the University of Cincinnati Clermont College.

HOPE IS A THING THAT SHEDS

By Michael Carter

As if nodding in agreement
Omar watches my toast
as I eat it, lifting it from plate
to mouth, then setting it
back down. Birdie watches Omar
watch me. Both are drooling
sitting perfectly still
as the toast disappears
bite by bite into my big maw,
impatient for the end
when they get to lick
the butter off my fingers.

Michael J Carter is a poet and clinical social worker. A graduate of Sarah Lawrence College he holds an MFA from Vermont College and an MSW from Smith. Poems of his have appeared in such journals as *Boulevard*, *Ploughshares*, *Provincetown Arts Magazine*, *Western Humanities Review*, among many others. He lives with his two hounds and spends his time swimming and knitting.

Insomnia Fugue

By Zoe Canner

Sometimes I think my
husband's faded black
jeans folded on the floor
is the cat sleeping &then
I'm like wait I don't have
a husband & I press my
eyelids into a wet cloth.
It's drafty in here now
that you're gone. Nine
eleven is a teenager
already &I remember
all that flag shit. The
grasping when you feel
like you can't do anything
else. Forced long walk
&lung corruption. I press
my mouth into the wet
cloth &blow hot air,
making sound. Your
memory is my
middle name.

Rage

By Zoe Canner

I just murdered someone
with my hands. In my

mind. When women kill
we do it with our hands.

My greatest weapons are
my hands, my mind, my

laughter, & my memory.
I murdered one of these

hate-filled idiots. With
my hands. When

Holocaust descendants
kill we do it with our

eyes. I'm always on edge.
Always ready for a fight.

My friend said *Remember
when you flipped that guy*

*in a bar in Toronto? Some
guy touched me & you*

*flipped him & threw him
hard into a wall*. I said

No, no, I don't. & I still don't
remember this incident, but

I do remember my friend
recounting the story. & I

do believe her. I do believe
that I did that. Second

generation was guilt, my
dad, sweating sweet son

stalled out. Me, I'm full,
third generation is all rage.

glare

By Zoe Canner

drinking sherry
through a straw
with a fat lip
i'm the type of
freesia
make you
kiss me
with a
herpe if i
love you

if not rescuing the damned, damning

By Zoe Canner

michael died ten years ago & yes i
know where i was & yes i remember
the helicopters the traffic the sirens
& yes i remember the nonstop
marathons on every station &the
windows down & communing with
other feelers feeling. collective
grieving. i also remember seven
months ago when the documentary
came out & there was a cancel
michael wave the backlash wave
was stronger & i heard michael
played on what felt like every
station tho having lived thru the
feeling of him actually being played
on every station i knew it just felt
that way. some were boycotting
& others said boycotting?? ha!
we're playing him ALL weekend.
even after we've given up all
of our earthly possessions even
if we live as modest monks
if we are not rescuing all of the
damned, then we are damning.

Zoe Canner is an angry, anti-racist, 3rd Generation Holocaust Survivor. Her writing has appeared in *The Laurel Review*, *Arcturus of the Chicago Review of Books*, *Naugatuck River Review*, *Maudlin House*, *SUSAN / The Journal*, *Storm Cellar*, *Occulum*, *Pouch*, *Matter*, *High Shelf Press*, *Chaleur Magazine*, *Nailed Magazine*, *Indolent Books' What Rough Beast*, and elsewhere. She lives in Los Angeles where she indulges in hilly walks at dusk when the night-blooming jasmine is at its peak fragrance. zoecanner.com

Mosquito & Soul

By Eugene Stevenson

Music flows out open doors
to night's dark stillness. In
the mosquito comes
flying circles, ovals, dashes until
its sharp needle finds the mark:
the sweet white flesh of
a soul exposed.

Three concerti:
the rise, the triumph, the fall.
Strings cease their vibrations,
yet chords echo against
streetlamps & thinning clouds.
Too late the door slides shut,
a spirit's sleep disturbed.

Eugene Stevenson is the son of immigrants, the father of expatriates. He writes to make some semblance of order out of disorder, to make sense of the unthinkable, to make still photographs out of daily rushes. His poems have appeared in *Adelaide Literary Magazine, Chicago Tribune Magazine, DASH Literary Journal, Dime Show Review, Gravel Literary Magazine, The Hudson Review, Icarus,* & *Swamp Ape Review*. His prose has appeared in the *Los Angeles Times & The New York Times.*

T.V.C. #5: Acrylic & Gouache on Paper

Monica Valdez - 2018

Music Appreciation

By Carol Hamilton

My parents started my piano lessons
before we owned a piano,
and I practiced on a cardboard keyboard,
an early lesson in misplaced confidence,
errors soon enough revealed.
Later, on an old upright,
though tinny, my sound grew
more accurate. When a grownup asked
my favorite composers, I said,
"Batch and Choppin'." I knew
their august faces from the white plaster busts
on my teacher's piano. Such errors
have cheerfully followed my days,
and now my arthritic fingers
try out the old compositions I once
blithely flew through,
my piano a non-recipient of the yearly tuning
for some time … perhaps a decade.
Sundays I listen to the young geniuses
on "From the Top" and still love
my tiny additions to music's magic,
a voice which sings for both Prince and Pauper.

Taking Flight

By Carol Hamilton

" 'Til I can see so wide,"
"The Swing," Robert Louis Stevenson

"Bag of Bones," they called him,
and I learned why
in an Arkansas museum, a painting
of him, so tall and skeletal
beside his seated wife. I met him
in my daughter's childhood,
Judith Anderson's reading of his verse,
he with me from then on,
heels flying at blue and kicking
at the backsweep. "How do you like
to go up in a swing" sang inside me.
Such a hopeful man
with so little to hope for.
He even returned to Scotland,
of all places, seeking healthful air.
Harsh, damp, bone-chilling air
I found it in my year there.
Yet, today, listening
to that scratchy record,
now in the last days of my life,
I find the lift and hope of his verse
again take me sailing with him.
In time, Bag of Bones becomes
literal, but how his words sail,
how his hope still lifts.

Music

By Carol Hamilton

She writes of Orpheus
and I know how
that tale slipped off my tongue
and entered the children.
    I told them how the poet's art
    ripped the trees out of rich soil
    so that they hobbled after him
    trying to join his song.
    Leaves and branches gave
    air song, but what, what
in all this varied earth
    will ever give you voice?
    I now turn my song to ink
and my trees are tightly tethered.
    Even so, sing,
            sing as if ecstasy, once loosed,
            cries out and cries out
despite all our tangled
and weary tongues.

Carol Hamilton has recent and upcoming publications in *Louisiana Literature, Southwest American Literature, Birmingham Literary Journal, San Pedro River Review, Dryland, Pinyon, Pour Vida, Lunch Ticket, Adirondack Review, Commonweal, U.S.1 Worksheet, Broad River Review, Fire Poetry Review, Gingerbread House, Shot Glass Journal, Poem, Haight Ashbury Poetry Journal, Sandy River Review, I-70 Review, Blue Unicorn, former people Journal, The Sea Letter, Poetica Review, Zingara Review, Broad River Review, Burningwood Literary Review, Abbey, Main Street Rag, Free Lunch, Poetry Leaves* and others. She has published 17 books: children's novels, legends and poetry. She is a former Poet Laureate of Oklahoma.

collector's edition

By Rachel Warshaw

I think I am afraid of naming a thing.
A name gives me something to mourn,
something to pin to the board where I collect
all the winged things I thought I loved.

Something about a name implies being caught
and there is nothing like tying down that makes me
get that itch in the soles of my feet,
like I have to run. A name implies love.

Love is not a foreign word, though the want
sometimes feels far-off, as if viewed through seven veils,
or from a lighthouse, or fire lookout—
I built my own Desolation Peak, the better to see from.

What if I write every name I've almost held
on little slips of paper, and I tack them to the trees?
What if I wait for the coming fires to burnish them black?
What if it sets me free?

on rosh hashanah, sometimes bread is not offering enough

By Rachel Warshaw

Did you know, when you were growing,
that all the evil things you've done accumulate?
Some people wear their cruelties like chains around their ankles,
others, a mantle over their shoulders—
heavy, heavy, heavy, regardless.

Your transgressions got washed up on the shore,
I saw, knocking against the other rocks,
suffering the stones, skipping one and two and three into the sea.
It is time for the gathering, I believe.

Fill full, my dear one, fill full
your overcoat, and your underthings
with guilt, let the longing wash over you, and dive the fuck in.

Let he who is without a stone
cast the first sin.
Heavy pockets, darling!
How they weigh you down.

Rachel Warshaw splits her time between St. Paul and Seattle. Her poetry has appeared in *Chanter Literary Magazine*, *Hu Magazine* (Gainesville), and *Mercury Magazine* (Seattle). Her plays have been performed by the 14/48 Projects and Annex Theatre, among others.

Waiting

By January Pearson

His hip replacement
failed, sick bones split
under the metal
weight, my father's
in the recliner
day and night,
leg stone
still. He listens
to the news
loop, pencils
crosswords, waits
for the doctors
to count
his heartbeats,
take samples
to test if his body
can bear another
surgery. Each
morning, when
the dog wakes him,
he marks
his crumpled
calendar with an x.
Every day
from September
to June filled.
He runs his finger
along them.
It's a road, he tells me

The Swarm

By January Pearson

My friend lugs
the canteen past
tangled wood roses.
I haul the loaded
backpack up
the needled-slope.
We speak in single-
syllable utterances,
believe our legs
may turn to flame,
lungs to ice, when
a breeze swoops
toward us, its current
netted with wings
upon wings
of ladybugs, hundreds
of them blinking
in the wind, circling us
in a pointillism,
red as ripe pomegranate
seeds, flittering past
our cheeks, thread-
thin legs catch
our stringy ponytails,
my friend swipes
the air, I duck
to dodge them
as the swarm
spirals us
in the halo
of its buzz.

Caught Between a Window

By January Pearson

and wooden blinds,
a bee spins and bobs
along the pane,
his gold-black body
pelts the glass wall,
legs scramble
to push through
to peach roses
and wild lavender,
nothing hindering
his wings
a small engine,
limbs clawing
for the light.

Ghosts

By January Pearson

White cleats dig into loose gravel,
metal bat points to home plate,
my dad poker-faced on the pitcher's mound,
his body perched in a Fernando Valenzuela pose.
He pretends to fire me a fastball,
then lobs one underhand pitch after another,
catches pop-ups, hustles for grounders.
In the outfield, my younger sister twirls her mitt,
shouts dramatically she's still dying of thirst.
Across the field in the schoolyard, newly painted
hopscotch squares gleam on the black asphalt,
bright tetherballs clink silver poles.

I smack the ball clear out into centerfield.
It soars over my sister's head like a dove.
Dad runs after it
through the field of dandelions,
beyond a chain-link fence,
past a row of ash trees, disappears
into a seam in the street.
Wind kicks up dust around my cleats.
My sister's ponytail twists and falls
while tetherball ropes in the schoolyard
swirl like ghosts.

January Pearson's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Notre Dame Review*, *Rust + Moth*, *Atlanta Review*, *Rayleigh Review*, *Borderlands*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Pittsburgh Poetry Review*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *The Cape Rock Review*, and other publications.

Barber Shop: Things A Boy Should Do

By Chris Abbate

Wait quietly, flipping through a sports magazine until the barber calls his name.

Remember to keep his head still each time the barber grunts and forces it into place.

Watch clippings fall like quotation marks over his cape and think how he will always be growing.

Ponder how God could possibly know the number of hairs on his head.

Pity the adults who told him this because they don't understand metaphor.

Appreciate the barber's humming because work can be both enjoyable and monotonous.

Tighten his temples against the straight blade the barber uses to even his sideburns.

Connect the red stripe in the barber pole to the blood flowing like rivers inside of him.

Relax his face under a warm towel as if he too, needs time to unwind like his father after work.

Tip for good service because the boy has always been the beneficiary of kindness.

Don't look up when the barber pretends to toss him a piece of gum, but instead keeps it in his hand.

Ask politely if he can use the bathroom in back because the walk home is too far.

Survey the glossy poster on the bathroom door of a bare-chested woman leering back at him.

Safeguard the innocence the woman seems to be drawing out of him.

Try to dismiss the image of the woman he now carries as he nods goodbye to the barber.

Don't tell his parents about the woman for fear they think he is vulnerable, or complicit.

Never speak of his desires because it will take years before he will own his emotions.

Never speak of his desires.

Never speak.

Odd Camaraderie

By Chris Abbate

It was a gesture of irony,
a universal directive
among the crude space of men
huddled inside a conference room,
learning a new software
that had no syntax for
busting another's chops
about a co-worker's advancing age,
and with the air still damp with satire,
the instructor's back turned,
as if on cue,
the flash of a middle finger
from the perpetrated to the perpetrator,
a ripple of laughter
at the shock of retribution,
a juxtaposition of denotation and connotation
upsetting this field of certainty –
ifs and thens, dos and ends –
with the unspoken language of boys
who twist insults into arrows,
meld barbs into shields –
our everyday armaments
and a consummation
of odd camaraderie.

TOC

Drawing the Tree

By Chris Abbate

The picture
she drew
of her childhood
was the maple
she climbed;
a respite
from the turmoil
on the ground –
the broken machines
of the day
and the father
who beat
a path
to the garage
searching
for the tools
to fix them.

He took the tree
down one day
without warning,
or explanation.
The earthen heart
of its upturned stump
and dismembered
limbs strewn
across the yard
like dead soldiers.

As she aged,
the tree became
one more thing
she was deprived of;
an object
of her father's
combustion.
How little
he knew about her;

all the climbing
she still had to do –
to look down
from above her house
wearing a crown
of leaves,
depths of sky
to fathom.

Smash It Up

By Chris Abbate

Gonna scream and shout to my dying breath
Gonna smash it up 'til there's nothing left

~ The Damned

Tommy is taking out his father again
in the form of a long-handle sledgehammer
through the windshield and doors
of his Ford Pinto.

Maple trees stand watch,
stiffly, silently in the yard
while Tommy, bare-chested,
in cut-off jeans, hoists the metal block
above his head like a god.

I understand how his father
could make you feel like
smashing something;
the way he scolded me
if I hadn't delivered his morning
newspaper by five-thirty.

Most fathers have a way
of guiding their sons along,
but Tommy's had been to war
and seemed to have filled
his son's head with explosives.

Once, Tommy used his slingshot
to fire a hex nut at my brother
as he sat on the stone wall along our driveway.
Perhaps it was giving a warning
about what boys like Tommy
were capable of, because,
until the moment the nut lodged in his thigh,
my brother swore it made a sound like a scream.

Chris Abbate's poems have appeared in *Connecticut River Review, Chagrin River Review*, and *Comstock Review*, among other journals. He has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and a Best of the Net award and has received awards in the Nazim Hikmet and the North Carolina Poetry Society's poetry contests. Chris' first book of poetry, *Talk About God*, was published by Main Street Rag in September 2017.

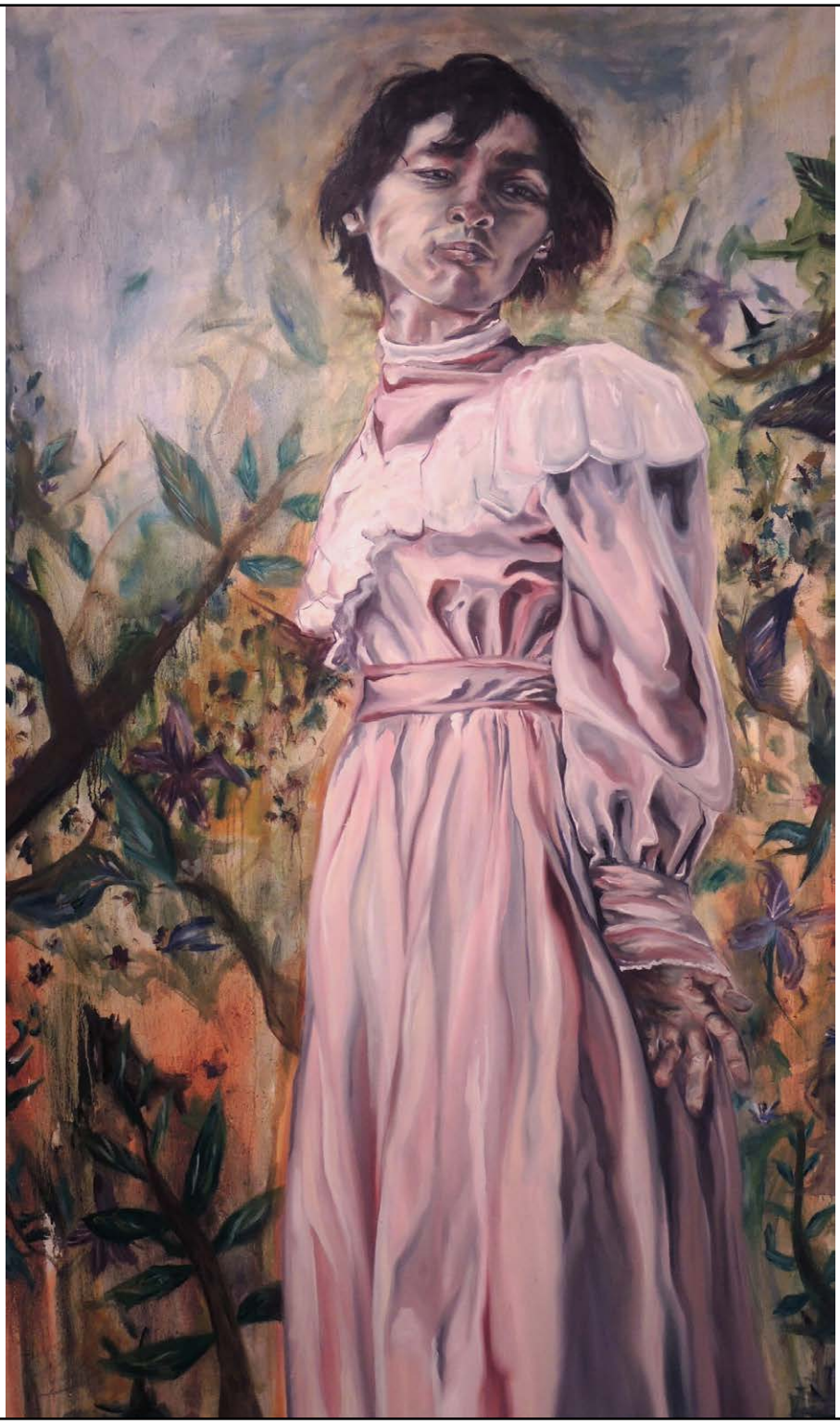
TOC

Kodak Moment

By Kevin Ridgeway

Whenever he got high,
Dad would trip out
on the fact that
he created me
from out of his scrotum
while we passed
the tin foil of heroin
between each other.
He shook his head
and intoned in a deep,
scary voice that he was
my demented master.

Kevin Ridgeway lives and writes in Long Beach, CA. He is the author of several chapbooks of poetry, including *Grandma Goes to Rehab (Analog Submission Press*, Yorkshire, England). His debut poetry collection, *Too Young to Know*, is now available from Stubborn Mule Press. Recent work has appeared in *Slipstream, Chiron Review, Nerve Cowboy, Main Street Rag, The American Journal of Poetry, San Pedro River Review, Plainsongs, South Broadway Ghost Society, Cultural Weekly, Gasconade Review* and *So it Goes*: The Literary Journal of the Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library.



Genesis (Alfred): Oil on Canvas

Brea Weinreb

The Swimmer

By Don Raymond

sometimes a swimmer, mistaking
blue for blue goes

bottom seeking - downward diving
with swift, determined strokes

neither looking back, nor turning
arms grasping emptiness -

lungs hungry for the finding,
of a different kind of freedom

Don Raymond lives in the tiny, cow-haunted hamlet of Alturas, CA, where he works as an accountant for the county, because nobody questions a man with a spreadsheet. You can read more of his poetry at *Amarillo Bay, Arsenic Lobster*, and *filling station*. He also once didn't make a left turn at Albuquerque, but at this point, who hasn't?

Dandelion

By Anne Marie Wells

This body carries the mood
ring bruises. Green means

they're healing. I'm
heeling - pretending

I'm a plant rooted in the murk.
Still

in the dirt.
Dare me to take in

sun, absorb the mud. Watch me
bloom below this skin sprouting

through the surface a dandelion
so beautiful, you'll forget

you were taught to want
me dead.

Anne Marie (She/Her) of Hoback Junction, Wyoming is a queer poet, playwright, and storyteller navigating the world with a chronic illness. Anne Marie's poems have appeared or will appear in *The Alchemy Literary Journal, Brain Mill Press, Changing Womxn Collective, In Parentheses, Lucky Jefferson, Meniscus Journal, Muddy River Poetry Review, Other Worldly Women's Press, Poets' Choice, Passengers Journal, Soliloquies Anthology, Unlimited Literature, Variant Literature*, and *The Voices Project*. She was selected as a 2020 Brain Mill Press National Poetry Month Editors' Pick poet. Finishing Line Press recently accepted her poetry chapbook, *Prelude in Ursa Minor*, for publication. She recently earned the Milestone Award presented by Wyoming Writers, Inc.

ANOTHER GRIEF POEM, DEAR READER

By Jean Prokott

There are many things I want to write poems about
and none of them are grief. But here we are again,

dear reader, lying in bed, watching the star projector
circle its fuzzy shapes across the ceiling. It is a toy meant

for a toddler. I bought it after another death,
and still two years later, when I know the bad news,

I wipe its dust, plug it in, and follow the crescent moon,
shaped like a banana, as it disappears and circles back.

Here comes the banana, I say. Sometimes, to be funny, my father
says, I have a good memory, but it's short. I wonder if I too suffer

from this affliction. All you can hope for is a highlight reel
as you lay dying. Until then, hold your grief in your hand

like a quivering, hot star. Grief, hand, banana, star.
The projector turns, turns, muffled heartbeat

waves. Banana, fear, star, grief. May I be alone?
Reader, could you be a dear, could you give me a minute?

Jean Prokott has poetry and nonfiction published or forthcoming in *Arts & Letters, Midwest Gothic, Quarterly West, RHINO, Red Wheelbarrow, and Sierra Nevada Review*, among other journals; she is a recipient of an AWP Intro Journals Award and of the Joan Ramseyer Poetry Award. She holds an MFA from Minnesota State University, Mankato, an M.S. in Education from Winona State University, and she currently lives in Rochester, Minnesota and online at jeanprokott.com

(From 'Mustard')

By Raul Ruiz

I was a bookseller but also I was a longish dance of awkward gravities, so I never arrived anywhere in full. And I was a twisty bread of old sugar quivering on my bed alone. I could feel you all breathing in your sleep, dreaming of boats.

I counted exact change from the drawer every morning and said softly a tiny wood for the coins, the children receding. I swept the long width of the wooden floors and danced with the swirls of dust and knew the apple roundness of the world. I priced used books in pencil. I displayed what I liked, what I thought I would want if I were hungry. It was fine work, keeping the ink of the world from saying goodbye.

*

That's when I knew we're all meant for heaven, the first time her and I kissed and a long rain of leaves was brought into the earth. The first breath between us. The rosewater laughter of your eyes. We were the moon and the lopsided stanza, the jumpy blood of children a little scared. The first poet who walked to find sugar for all the lonely mouths, and we were her poem of sadness.

*

I stuffed the world in my pockets when I was reading, away in communion with the seas of each life (whoever sits with my words knows forever how to breathe underwater). And after? I'd come home and name my tired eyes after new forms of ink I am very sure the world is a dictionary of forgiveness and aching all in one breath

*

I wanted to write you a letter, but love is the only page that lives happily in the rain. My dear Electrolyte, those days are gone now, but they are still my favorite candy. Have you ever sold a book of poems to a stranger? What is really given in that moment of exchange? You're never going to be a ghost in the sweet eyes of my sadness, love. But these days I feel like I'm disappearing, and what if all the yellow flowers in the world follow me to the stars and leave forever? Please please don't forget my name, my mustard voice.

Raul Ruiz is a poet and bookseller currently living in San Francisco. His latest publication is a mail-order single poem zine through the good offices of *Mondo Bummer.* He is at work on a manuscript titled "Mustard."

Frog Song

By Matilda Young

Did I bury enough
water
part of me
the mud smells of spring
the tadpoles gem
surfaces – drought then
the busy work of
do they end up saved?
I know a singing
all the tiny frogs
foundation out of marsh
over hollow
I don't know
I try to open
but mostly
pause
each person
will live
the skunk

self in the dark
where nothing is satisfied
is never satisfied
crocus and good rot
the small disappearing
flood – inaction then
apocalypse
does it matter?
arch to remember
paved over to get
you run a finger
over hollow
if it really sings
my heart's center
breathe over
I gamble
I love
forever
weed

seemed happy

unbothered by

rain over

did I bury them

the raging

greedy waters

over my poor

mouth?

last year

rain over

rain

deep enough

jealous

why do they spill

wet

Nothing Is Certain But

By Matilda Young

I know a commuter – friend of a friend's
uncle– killed by a southbound train
outside of Red Bank when he jumped
onto the tracks to grab his phone.

I guess if you didn't know him
or know someone who knew him
you could write this off as just a fuck
up you would never make. But just past

Metropark on my commute there's
a children's tricycle red & sturdy &
abandoned behind a lamppost
in the rain. & then there's Alex,
my favorite functional drunk,

one drink too many driving
his teenager to basketball at 7
then driving his compact car
off the road. & then there's this guy,

family friend, somebody's almost
forgotten coach, aging dad,
embarrassed, smiling at his own
foolishness, cuffs frayed, texts

from his kids, photos of his dead
dog, the sun on that cold morning
an almost promise that everything
can still be hustled into reach,

just grateful that there's no one
there watch, and then the panic of fuck
not making it oh god oh god oh fuck

– and I guess we've all of us jumped
even when we knew it could end badly,
even when we knew that we must not.

Pleased To Meet You

By Matilda Young

When I was ancient I pulled
out all the stops – wore the white
gown of shrouds and miracles,

turned ravens' scavengings
into omens one misplaced
bloody eyeball at a time.

I rode the dark lanes tits out –
My dark hair burning,
Silent and calamitous

as contagion. I never flinched.
I dipped my claws in silver
and my wings in lead

And haunted the edges
of scenic battlefields,
passed along prophesies

of glory that never turned
out so great, but what did they
want from me? A happy ending?

What did they want from me,
clay of my clay, my yellow eyes,
my provenance of thorns.

What did they want from me
who they would burn if they
could catch? A wicked thing.

Shrill and insistent, soaring
above their destinies with
only the truths they were afraid

to say. Night hag. Nightjar.
Brown feathered, loud in bed.
Speaker of the ineffable name

who would not give God
and Adam the obedience
that was asked of me.

Not my scene.

No – I gave them what they asked for
and perhaps what they really wanted
– a distant ex, a vengeful explanation.

I gave them song and swagger,
hair woven into wreaths,
meteors like tennis balls

on inauspicious Thursday
afternoons. I gave them hidden
tombs where they could dig

into the grindled reckoning
of immortality and find my left hand
reaching out for them.

I gave them guttered sunsets
and sloppy tongue.
I gave them all the fears they spoke of.

I gave them all the fears they hoped
to die with and never tell a soul.
I don't regret it.

Power has its razzle dazzle
for a while. I lived radiant
with uncanny punishments.

I ate the raw heart of opportunity.

But I got tired. Not of the blood
or vengeance. But the burning.
The deaths I never feared

but found profoundly dull.
So much mansplaining.

So much ash in my mouth.

These days, I'm young enough
to remember the gentle menace
of not smiling or holding a glance

for several beats too long.
I wear suits as black as destiny
and sneakers tracked with glory

and slivers of indifference
in the silver shadows chasing
the corners of my eyes.

I run for office. I anchor evening news.
I talk and talk and talk and talk
and talk. And I'm always listening.

I apologize concisely and move on.
I am everywhere in every room
and you'll never miss me now.

I'm inescapable as death
and powerpoint. And
I'm smiling at you

as I take back my hand.

Treme

By Matilda Young

For Kirsten

In Louis Armstrong Park, the wind comes up,
but it still won't rain. The blonde with
the canary coat laughs at her partner trying

to take a memory of them on that bench
with that sky with Louis in the background
blessing the daiquiris and hand grenades

and hurricanes and camera after camera after
camera. Every pen's a camera more and less,
although I can't tell you the green of that small

southern pine – almost like ferns walking –
and farther off the thick dark gloss
of magnolia like a turning bruise.

On this bench, you are happily reading
beside me while the earnest painters of light
try to capture the statue of Buddy Bolden

facing down his last first note – street
artists taking the same shot over and over
like generations of clarinetists taking

the A train down a sinking cobble street.
In this square plot of cruelty and joy,
it's beautiful at the turn of spring,

with your hair gold and burnt sugar
brown and your kindness the arc of a bass
line echoed, the sun coming out for me.

No parks for us but plenty
of benediction, and Louis smiling
like he could be playing us in.

Matilda Young is a writer working for a civil rights nonprofit with an M.F.A. in Poetry from the University of Maryland. She lives in DC with a poet, an environmental lawyer, and an angry ginger cat. She has been published in several journals, including *Sakura Review, the Golden Key*, and *Entropy Magazine's Blackcackle*.

Savage Love

By Alison Minami

Jake was a kleptomaniac. He loved to take things from stores, unlocked cars, and other people's bedrooms. He couldn't jimmy a lock on anything big like a house, but he did know how to get into other kids' lockers, and also a way to enter the high school after it was all locked up through the girls' bathroom window, which made the locker thing so much more useful and interesting.

"It's our school, so it's not trespassing," he said, lacing his hands and lowering them before me as though he were miming a gorilla. We were standing on the North side of the building, in the middle of a flowerbed dedicated to Mark Harris—known as Gunner to his teammates, a kid who'd died from a car crash in his Senior year, when we were Freshmen—the arrangement of pinks, yellows, and whites already flattened beneath our rubber soles. It was no secret that Mark had been drinking heavily with friends after some championship lacrosse game, down at the Minotaur, a downtown locale where underage teens could palm small bills at the door and drink as much beer as they could pay for at the bar. The garden seemed less a memorial than a tradeoff made by the school for using his name to make an example out of *a good student, with a promising future, who made a mistake he couldn't take back.* His parents bought in, returning every year to sit in folding chairs on the auditorium stage and stare blankly out into the vast adolescent idiocy—kids stringing their earphones through hooded sweatshirts, grabbing some shuteye or stifling squeals of laughter, while Mr. Kraft punctuated the air with his index finger and talked at the podium of the ills of drunk driving, a power point projected behind him with stats on B.A.C. levels and photos of Gunner as a kid, on birthdays and on a tricycle, and later, with his lacrosse team having lunch in the Quad. I felt sorry for Gunner, clean-cut, handsome, and definitely textbook definition popular, the kind of boy who tossed his head and laughed circles around gaggles of girls, the kind of boy I would've secretly swooned after in the confines of my bedroom. I felt sorry that his life had been reduced to this paltry cliché of a lesson, and I was sure that the garden itself would have offended him.

"Maggie, C'mon."

Jake's face, bug-eyed and sweaty, rattled wildly, a cartoon character of himself.

"For Gunner," I said, and Jake rolled his eyes.

I stepped into his hands, hoisting myself up, and palming his skull as though it were a bowling ball. I steadied myself, straightening slowly, my freshly shaven legs, wobbly and uneven, pressed against the side of his face so that I could feel his warm breath crawling up the back of my thighs. A siren blared in the distance and immediately I jerked, skinning my knee against the cold, red brick, and grabbing at Jake's hair—what there was of it, short, brown and greased up with gel—as my body nearly crumpled over.

"Relax, can you just relax?" He squeezed my calves tighter, anchoring his feet wider apart, and instructed me to step onto his shoulders so that I could reach my hand through the window and grasp the sill. I did as he said, quietly, determined not to disappoint, though I wanted to stop, seeing the demise of such antics flash before me—cops at my front door, hours

of work at my parents' store, pastor meetings, community service, the whole nine yards.

The lockers, emanating the moldy smell of abandonment and disuse, were mostly filled with trash—half empty Snapple bottles, pairs of dilapidated gym shoes, tons of forgotten loose leaf with the lazy scrawl of someone's notes, reams of handouts jammed between the pages of books and binders or crumpled into balls. But there were some prizes among the rubble, a Suisse army knife for Jake, a silver chain with a pendant of a four-leaf clover dimpled with a small diamond, likely fake, for me. I was never one of those girls who collected talismans or charms, never wore anything vaguely feminine, instead opting for oversized flannels and pilfered shirts and ties from my father's closet. But I was in need of luck—or in need of something outside of myself, an external force, to prove that the order of my life was fateful, and that hitting the books as hard as I had and withstanding all the bullshit at home hadn't been in vain, and that, in every trivial, negligible sacrifice or negotiation I'd made thus far, I'd chosen correctly. Glittering yet discreet, the pendant felt like both permission and approval; I didn't show it to Jake, just put it on, using one of the locker mirrors to assist me. Instead, I presented him with nude pictures of Rebecca Stone, a quiet, nerdy girl the year below us, kneeling on all fours like a cheetah, puckering red-smeared lips and shoving her boobs together with her biceps to create a dark shadowy line of cleavage for the camera.

The Polaroids of her fell out of the pages of an old math textbook. There was no way Rebecca Stone, the regional winner of the high school chemistry competition had taken remedial mathematics her junior year. Secondly, though there was a magnetized mirror on the inside of the locker—usually a sign of female occupancy, also a Victoria Secret spread ripped out of a catalogue taped to the metal grates.

After fanning the photos in front of Jake, and him grabbing them for a closer look, I instantly regretted it. He stared at them a little too long for my taste, as though a studied analysis would morph his understanding of Rebecca the Nerd with the fact of her bare, buxom body in glossy photo finish. "Finger lickin' guh-ud," he hooted, slipping them in his back pocket, and cocking his head back in a manner that said *we got work to do*.

"What the hell are you going to do with those?" I asked, my cheeks turning hot.

"I'm sure I'll figure something out."

"Give them back. I found them."

"What do you want 'em for?"

"I don't want them."

I was dragging the pendant back and forth along its chain, seeing if Jake might notice, and catching the whiff of his greasy hair still on the palm of my hand. "I just don't think Rebecca would appreciate you jacking off to them."

"I think she'd like it very much," he said, already with his back turned away from me.

Jake and I didn't move in the same social circles at school. We both had friends, but his were into smoking pot and hanging out at record stores. Mine all spent the summer on a kibbutz, tutored SAT math, or took community college classes to get a head start for university. More than a few people inhabited both worlds imperceptibly. You could say that's what we were doing, crossing the divide.

We were off to college in the Fall. He was going to Haverford and I was going to Vassar. We weren't exactly the abandoned, misunderstood kids we thought we were. Or, for accuracy's sake, we weren't suffering an injustice greater than any other teenager. It was true that my father beat up on my brother when things were going badly for him at the store, but we were a church going family, fortunately, because I knew three other girls who had the same thing happen to their brothers and even their moms sometimes, taking a hit once in awhile for themselves. My father never laid a hand on me, though my mom had boxed the side of my head in front of my seventh-grade teacher because she'd found out that I copied half of Lisa Nagel's history paper and put my own name on it. Ms. Ellis, her face abruptly stricken and twisted, had relinquished from her harsh tone, muttering softly that I must've misunderstood the assignment.

And Jake, who I had always thought lived a pristine upper-middle class life, simply because he was white, and his family sat down to dinner every night together, and his parents drove Volvos and had gone to college, in reality was struggling with something far more complicated than myself. His father had, in Jake's words, "decided to be gay," and you could tell that Jake found this to be unacceptable.

"Stay cool," Jake hissed, whipping his head back around as he clomped forward on the linoleum. We were walking down a dank aisle of the Indian grocery, between shelves stacked with rice, lentils, mung beans, packets of earth colored spices. The pungent smell of saffron, turmeric and coriander filled my head up with a cloud of fog, and I had to pinch my breath to stop the intake before the nausea dug its way down into my belly. Jake fingered a cellophane-wrapped cake of rose-petal infused soap. The bar slid perfectly into his pocket the way a mouse squeezes its way down the lozenge of a snake.

We looked around some more, sliding the glass doors open and shut to feel the surge of cool air on our faces, feigning indecision over frozen *roti* versus *naan*. We browsed the titles of the VHS tapes lined along the back shelf, reading them aloud in our accented version of Vikram's father, a counselor at school, who always cornered us with a lengthy interview about where we were applying to college and how we intended to use our degrees. The lady behind the register, dressed in a green and yellow sari, fanning herself with a paper accordion folded out of a cigarette carton, eyed us with lazy suspicion, before returning to her small box television—on the screen, a bevy of belly baring actresses, singing and dancing in choreographed unison, jangling their jewelry as they bounced along.

That night at the park, we sat on the swings, burrowing tracks in the woodchips beneath our feet. We twisted ourselves in the chain link, rotating as far as we could before releasing ourselves in a dreidel spin. The humidity, thick and full of languor, settled around our bodies like invisible cloaks.

"This," Jake said, unveiling the bar of soap, "is for you." I almost thought it was a question like being asked to be his girl or promise away my virginity, and I didn't know what to say. I took it into my hand; it felt waxy and hot from being in his pocket, from rubbing against his thigh. I brought the bar up to my nose, and the milky scent of soap and flower laced with the spice that had earlier repulsed me, flared my nostrils and tingled my spine.

I pulled my arm back deliberately, as if I were a pitcher on the mound, and threw it as far as I could toward the forest of trees a few hundred feet ahead. He asked the question; I answered

it.

Jake's bouncing, brown eyes surveyed me strangely. I could tell he was pinning down the exact emotion, deciding finally, on a wild laugh.

"That's what I like about you," he said.

Whenever he spoke his tongue sloshed around his mouth clumsily, and he always had to suck back excess saliva, so it didn't drool out of the corner. He had a long jaw and a slight under-bite. All his movements lacked coordination as if he struggled within the boundaries of his own physicality, his skin too tight and the air around him too thin. I thought he looked like a caveman, every part of his bone and muscle jutting, angular and shadowed. We sat there suspended and hovering, looking out into the darkness toward the place where the soap might've landed, the way you watch the ocean's horizon swallow the sun, with an unblinking intensity so as not to miss a single part.

The first time I only played along because I felt I had something to prove, not because I thought it was normal or even acceptable.

"Get the fuck away from me," Jake said, shoving me hard in the shoulder.
We were in line at CVS. I needed to pick up my mom's medication, and Jake was loading up on our favorite junk food staples—Doritos and gummy worms.

I pulled back, astonished. At first, I thought I'd done something, but his face revealed a pleading pleasure. His eyes, shiny marbles, popped out of him like Wild Coyote.

"What the hell are you doing?" I slammed the heel of my palms evenly into his chest.

"I work all day and all night! Quit it! Quit harassing me!"

"Drunk bastard!" I didn't know what we were fighting about but I'd heard this launch against my father enough times to pull it out neatly.

Jake grabbed a box of ribbed condoms, not because we were having sex but because it was, I guess, the thing that he thought was the most illicit, drew the most attention. I hadn't even kissed him, though he'd tried to put his lips on mine once, managing the corner of my tightly locked mouth. That time The Police were playing on the radio, the refrain *Don't stand so close to me,* buzzing through my ears like it meant something, like it were a warning from God, and not just a coincidence. I remember thinking how gross his thick, wet lips felt, like fat leeches looking for a place to lodge. But I can't say I despised it enough to make him stop; I just sort of sat there on his bed like a stone statue, unflinching, observing with intensity the speckled bits of white lint that dotted the deep blue of his comforter.

By the time we were standing at the front of the line, we were throwing around cuss words loudly, and I'd managed to spit on his shoes.

"It ain't your money." Jake liked to pepper his speech with street vernacular to toughen his suburban upbringing.

"Fuck you," I said, completely unpracticed.

The chick behind the register, pushing out her red apron with her thumbs like a shield, widened her eyes into discs. I recognized her as a girl in my printmaking class from sophomore year. I knew she thought of me as some mousy, Asian girl nerd, and the startle in her eyes sent a surge of adrenalin through me.

The man waiting in line behind us shook a bag of pistachios as if it were a maraca.

"C'mon," he said.

The mother behind him called over her daughter who was standing next to Jake, eyeing the bubble tape. "Get over here, Sara!" she yelled.

Sara turned around, caught between temptation and authority.

"I'll get it for you," Jake said throwing the plastic tire-like capsule onto the counter.

"Get over here," again her mother hissed.

"Let the girl have some gum!" Jake yelled, the veins in his neck bulging.

"Mind your business," retorted the mother. By this time, Sara was obediently by her mother's side, with wild curiosity in her eyes. I could see Jake's anger transform from affectation to something cold and real like a shadow slipping over him, chameleon-like and flash lightning fast.

"Fuck you," she said.

"Fuck me?!?! I know you want to lady, but I already got me a woman." He grabbed my wrist and tugged. We ran out without paying, Jake, shaking the box of condoms high in the air, "That's what these are for!"

Our first time was amateur. We didn't have a real premise, and our attacks were childish, without motivation, the profanity, simple and immature. We got better though. We staged a raucous fight in the middle of the movie theater lobby. "Nah, nah, nah. If that ever happened in real life, you'd be dead!" Jake crowed. That time he grabbed my arms so hard, I had black and blue marks for days. I, in turn, discovered that kicking his shins could send him keeling over if I got them dead center. Security started to circle around us, and we knew they were going to call the on-duty cops that sat around at the Dunkin' Donuts around the corner, manhandling—when they felt like doing their jobs—the crowds of drunk teenagers that gathered in the parking lot and at the doors of the two bars nearby. We ran out into the darkness, sprinting at first, though they'd only chased us about twenty feet to give us a good scare. We knew it, but we pumped our legs anyway, as though they were on our tails, a hare's breath away from pinning us down, locking us up, destroying us.

We finally stopped at the reservoir, parking ourselves on a bench overlooking the lonely, slinking, black body of water. Jake pulled out a beer bottle wrapped in a wet paper bag from his backpack.

"This is the theater of the absurd," he said proudly, snapping the cap off with his bare hand and tipping it back towards his lips. I watched the smooth curve of his Adam's apple rise and fall in his throat; it looked like the hard shell of a bulging beetle. I put my hand out to touch it but changed my mind midair.

"Yeah, no kidding." I agreed because it sounded right. He passed me the bottle. I took a generous gulp of the warm fizz, gagging on the sour residue in my mouth.

As the summer wore on, Jake wasn't always the first to get violent, sometimes I'd initiate the first blow because I'd get impatient with his verbal attacks, which I had secretly thought were getting stale and unoriginal. I wanted to kick him in the balls, but I never had the balls. Just like he never touched me anywhere on the face, though he did put his hands to my throat once, leaving thumb marks like olives at the base of my collarbone.

Jake would always say to onlookers, "Keep on walking! Keep on walking! Ain't nothing to see here."

It was that look that got us off. We mistook disdain for fear and even sometimes, for envy. Other people's disapproval propelled us to the stage. The more offended our audience, the greater license to orchestrate our heinous behavior. Both of us were buying time, waiting out the relentless summer, beating out the days with our own fervently erratic behavior. We'd managed correctness and achievement our whole lives, and now, we believed a free pass our right.

Once, in the mall, a lady pushing a baby carriage tried to offer me help. "Sweetheart are you okay?" she asked. I was on my bottom, leaning against an indoor planter box of fake trees, re-grouping, catching my breath and strategizing my next move. There was only a small window in which to act before mall security would seize upon us and we'd need to jet. Jake had shoved me onto the ground, lightly, but hard enough for me to take myself down. The lady stopped, standing with her free hand on her hip, the way exasperated mothers look when they've asked a question and are just daring you to give the wrong answer. Still, I felt genuine concern in her voice, and in the way she looked at me and waited, almost as if I could've said, *help*, and she'd have been at my side instantly. I shrugged her off, despite feeling touched by her concern. But then she asked, "Where are your parents?"

I felt that clenching feeling in my throat that always happened when I wanted to cry. For a brief moment there was an imbalance, a kind of fuzziness to the scene. It occurred to me that we looked exactly like what we were: kids. This woman, with her stupid perm and her lacquered fingernails, her tote bag and her bumbling baby, was unafraid to expose me, and it left me feeling embarrassed, humiliated even. What kind of stupid ass question was that? Who cares where my parents were? What did they have to do with anything? I was quick to churn the feeling right back into what I knew best.

"What the fuck do you know?" I yelled, turning the heads of the mall walkers. "You miserable mommy wench!"

Jake paused with a raise of his brow that indicated he was impressed; rarely did I turn on the people around us. That was more his style. The lady didn't even get angry with me. Instead she said coolly, "I know a lot more than you think you do." Later when I was going over it in my head, I guessed that she'd probably been a trained therapist, maybe a high school teacher.

Jake was strumming on a guitar, and I was concentrating on a Rolling Stones article on Tom Morello.

"Maggot, do you really want to go to school?"

"Who does?" I lied.

"We don't have to go," he said.

"Maybe *you* don't. But I do."

"You're such a robot."

"My parents care about my future."

"Bullshit. They care about their future. You are by extension, their future. But they don't care about what you want. Your Dad didn't even go to college."

I wanted to tell him to fuck off, to tell him that my parents didn't want me to have to work every day like dogs the way they did, but I couldn't muster the explanation, and it wasn't

his business anyway.

"You have everything," I said in that petty way that people compete their injuries. "So what about your Dad? Get over it." I heard a steady rise in my voice, and I would've kept going, would've told Jake how selfish he was and how boring his self-pity was getting, if not for the interruption. A shy knock at the door.

"Everything okay?" Jake's mother's voice sounded thinly. Jake rolled his eyes and jumped up to open the door. She was wearing waist high jeans and a knit tank top that exposed the flabby flesh of her underarms. Her hair extended in a frizzy poof of white and grey that made her look distracted and unkempt. We shared an awkward silence as each of us surveyed the other two faces of this unlikely triangulation.

"You got some mail from school." She held out a thick white envelope with printed fall maple leaves bordering its edges. Jake snatched it out of her hands and threw it on his mattress.

"Thanks."

She stood there caressing her hand in the fold of the other as if she'd been electrically shocked from the exchange, shifting her weight onto one foot to lean against the doorframe.

"When do you start school Maggie?"

"Two weeks. Same time as Jake, I think."

I shifted easily under the gaze of adults. She asked me more questions, while Jake huffed with impatience. I told her that I wanted to study psychology and thought I'd like being a researcher someday. I wasn't quite sure what that meant, but it was specific enough to reflect ambition and confidence, while being vague and lofty enough to impress my parents' friends without too many follow-up questions.

"Well, I'm glad to know Jake spends time with such a sweet girl."

If Jake loathed his father for what he'd done, he harbored against his mother something far more complicated for having been duped, for having suffered so vulnerably.

"Mom are you done?" he whispered.

"What?" She asked, a turn in her pitch.

"Leave us alone." A little more temerity in his voice.

"This is *my* house," she hissed before pivoting out the room. I felt sorry for her; I really did. After she left, Jake picked up as if she'd never entered. "Let's just not go to college. Let's drive across the country. I'll buy a VW."

"Yeah okay, whatever."

"You're such a chicken, Maggot."

"You're such a loser," I said and meant it.

On the night of the concert, our last night together, we planned for an outrageous scene. Jake promised that it would be a surprise and warned me that we might get arrested. I didn't believe him, of course, which provided the safety for my growing excitement. We were going with a group of his friends. I had done a fairly good job of keeping my relations with Jake under wraps from my own friends, instead telling them that my Dad needed me at the store whenever I chose Jake over their movie nights and ice cream runs. They knew I spent time with him, but mostly honored my need for separation.

Towards the end of the concert, when the band was finishing their second set, and our

shirts clung to our backs from all the sweat, Jake walked over to me and flicked his tongue in my ear. "You better do as I say."

I waited.

"In a few minutes, we're going to go to the bathroom, you're going to take all your clothes off."

I felt a stirring in my belly. Smiling, I put my head on his chest and ran my fingers in circles around the cottony surface of his t-shirt before grabbing at his nipple and twisting it as hard as I could.

Jake winced and matched my coquettish grin with a glassy-eyed sternness that both shrank and exhilarated me. He locked his fingers around my wrist and began leading me out of the auditorium, commandeering himself through the throngs of people.

The downstairs men's room, the farthest from the mainstage, was empty and carried the putrid odor of urine and hospital antiseptic.

"Okay, do it," he said.

"Do what?"

"Take your clothes off."

"There's nobody in here."

"Exactly."

"C'mon it's better outside by the concession stand. You want me to go for the nuts tonight?"

"I think we should do it, Mag."

"Do what?"

"Stop fighting," he said softly. I couldn't tell if this was an order. He slipped his hand beneath my shirt and stroked my backside clumsily. He pulled his fingers gently down my cheek. He leaned his forehead into mine and I could smell the fries we'd had earlier on his breath.

"Stop it!" I said loudly, trying to stay in the game. I heard the echo of my voice bounce against the sweaty walls, but without an audience, I felt confined. I wriggled beneath his pressing body as he yanked at the strap of my bra. Someone entered the bathroom and looked at us suspiciously. We were breathing loud and heavy but fell obligingly silent until he left.

"Let's not fight anymore, okay?" Jake whispered in a throaty insistence, trying to will his clunky limbs into gentle, seamless form.

I tried to shove him off. Jake didn't fight back; he just pressed in closer, a solid wall against me. His lips were on my neck and my chin and he kept telling me that he loved me. It was the first time he'd said anything like that, but it sounded more desperate than sincere. I felt my head pounding with vibration. Jake was trying to unbutton my shirt with one hand, but his fingers couldn't work the holes. He was using his words, spinning them around like a whip in the air. It occurred to me slowly—the tingling sensation of fear. I knew that no one outside could hear above the noise. I opened my mouth to scream, but no sound came out. I lifted my arms in defense, but when I looked down, they were still at my sides.

"What are you trying to prove?" I managed in a hideous whisper.

Before I knew it, he'd slapped me across the face. And it saved my life. I held my palm to my cheek. Jake appeared equally stunned at his violation, and he backed away toward the sink. He was gripping its sides, bent over with his head slumped as if he were waiting to vomit. From

this angle, I knew I could kick him hard enough to make him fall, and I did. I kicked him behind the knees, and he buckled. I kicked him in the spine. I kicked his ribs and the side of his head. He could've stood up; he was bigger and stronger than me. He could've grabbed my ankles and pulled me down, but he let me kick him, as if to welcome his own penance, and I didn't stop until I saw blood on his face, until I felt winded and dizzy and no longer afraid. I left him on the tile, but there was only one way back to the concert and people were hanging out everywhere. I knew he'd turn up behind me in minutes, and he did. He didn't look at me or say anything. He didn't come too close, either. He just kept wiping at his swelling cheek with the back of his hand. When we resurfaced to the auditorium, the band was playing so loudly that no one paid us any attention. The crowd faced the stage in one lumped swaying mass, everyone's hands in the air, like a cumbersome, wild beast, lonesome and lost, making its way toward the promise of water.

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Photograph

jen stract

The Skiff

By Sylvan Lebrun

Because it was her birthday, May's father let her use the large scaling knife. It had a dark wooden handle carved with swirling lines, like a child's drawing of wind, and a long thin blade that needed sharpening nearly once a week. It was so beautiful because she wasn't allowed to touch it. For years, she had seen it resting on the top of her father's stool or hanging from his belt. Watched as he took it in his cracked and sun-browned hands, wiping the sides clean on his shirt, then lining it up parallel with the spine of a trout or red-eyed bass. As much as May had begged her father, she hadn't even held the knife until today.

The sun had barely risen, still lying in wait behind the distant treeline. May sat with her legs crossed on the floor of the workshed, peering into a bucket of fat silver fish. Her father's knife felt light as air in her hand, skin tingling where it touched the wood of the handle. Deny anyone something long enough, and it's like God when they get it. As the shed filled with the smell of salt and death and the cold March morning, May took fish after fish into her awkward young hands and pulled the blade against them. Glittering scales went flying with each stroke. Her father stood over her, humming some lilting melody under his breath. What had made him change his mind? Her older sister had never touched the knife, never even stepped foot into the damp and bristling shed where their father was king and undertaker, merchant and priest. But May had always been drawn to this work.

As she flicked the blade along the underside of a trout, down its soft belly, her father leaned over her. "A regular tradesman, aren't you?" He laughed. "After my own heart."

May looked up at him, trying to look serious and unafraid as her cheeks flushed with pride. It was in that moment that the knife shifted in her grip and nicked the tip of her index finger. Not going deep, but tearing the skin in a long line which soon beaded with drops of blood. May dropped the fish to the dusty floor as she brought her damaged finger to her mouth. She watched her father's face crease as he picked the fish back up, and took the knife from her clenched hand.

"Don't worry, baby," he said as he finished the job, the silver scales flying out like confetti around him. "Go and take care of that finger. I'll do the rest."

So May stepped back out into the chill of the day, feeling her pulse in her index finger she cradled her hand to her chest. The sun sat idle in the sky, as if it had been there all along, fixed in place since the beginning of time.

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They went out in the skiff for lunch, with a basket of breads and dried meats that May's mother had put together for them. There was a ripe red plum in there as well, which May ate before anything else, sweet juice dripping down her chin and hands as her father rowed them out into the center of the lake. Cold and bright, the water still but for the ripples coming out from where the oar struck.

"Those damned birds are so loud today, must be fighting," May's father said, grimacing as

another round of squawks echoed out from the trees.

"Maybe they know it's my birthday," May said, tossing the pit of the plum into the lake. "And they're singing."

Her father chuckled, stopping his rowing and letting the boat glide with the momentum. The birds kept screaming, and May wiped her sticky hands on the legs of her pants, staring off at the perimeter of the lake. "Hey, there she is again!" she shouted, straightening up suddenly and almost tipping the skiff.

Across on the opposite shore, a tall pale lady was tending her garden, in front of a wooden cabin with loose boards and shuttered windows. At first glance, she looked as real as anything else, as real as the placid blue sky or the plum pit sinking in the lake or the dead fish sitting in a bucket back in the scaling shed. She wore a thick knitted shawl, ducking her blonde head as she plunged her shovel into the earth. Her cheeks were flushed red from the cold. May knew better though, knew that there was no blood running in her veins, because she was a ghost. So she would never get to eat the turnips in her garden, whose leaves poked up green and sprawling out of the black dirt every spring. Dead people didn't eat — but was she dead? Had she ever even lived? On some nights, as they sat by the fireplace, May's mother would braid her hair with careful fingers and tell her many different stories. Stories about spirits from purgatory, fairy queens, and the trickster apparitions that pop out of holes in tree trunks and drag naughty children into an endless round dance.

"Is she dead?" May asked her father, who had dipped his hand into the water and was now slicking his hair back with it, letting droplets run down into his eyes.

"Huh?"

"Your lady. See, she's over there now."

"Right." Her father looked then at the shore, at the cabin with the garden and the woman in the shawl. "Yes, she died long ago. Didn't I tell you? The daughter of a woodcutter who lived two hundred years ago, got a nasty cough one winter and…"

"Why isn't her family there with her?" May reached into the basket and grabbed a piece of bread, ripping it in two and giving her father the other half.

"I don't know."

"Will you ask her the next time you see her?"

"Sure, I will."

They ate their bread in silence then, as a sharp wind came in from the west and made the skiff rock to one side, move further from the shore.

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May was lucky because she had caught her father with the ghost — otherwise, he said, he would have kept it a secret from everybody. It was some months before, on a hot night when May was too restless to sleep and went outside barefoot in her nightgown to wade in the water. As she rubbed her eyes and stared off into the moonlit lake, she noticed two figures on the shore, standing outside of a wood cabin. She knew her father by his flannel jacket and the scaling knife hanging from his waist. But the woman was new to her, at the time. May hadn't been able to see her clearly, as the trees were casting strange shadows down. Only the milky white circle of her

face, and the fluid way she held herself as she led May's father closer to the water. There, they stood facing each other, and the lady brought both hands up to his face, placing them below his chin and then tracing up his cheeks. She then lightly brushed the tips of her fingers across his eyelids — he had closed his eyes the minute she began to touch him, it seemed. It all looked like an ancient ritual, movements choreographed, nothing random or erratic. Like it had to have meaning.

May went back inside when she saw her father step into the skiff, as she would have been scolded for being out so late. But the next morning, as they scaled fish together, she asked him about the lady. And then he told her the story.

"She's a spirit, and she's decided to guide me. Speaks to me in the language of ghosts, which sounds something like running water and the humming of machines. I have to visit her every night, to keep her from getting lonely. In exchange, she tells me secrets. Secrets about the universe, and what happens when we sleep — but mostly about how I can protect my family from evil things. She is keeping us safe. So you can't tell anyone."

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May and her father finished the food, and he began to row the skiff back to shore, humming the same song as earlier that morning. The birds continued to rustle and call in the fir trees. The skin of May's index finger was going purple around the cut, so she showed it to her father, who said it would be all fine. She didn't think about it again after that.

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Just like every year before, May expected to spend the evening playing card games and singing, eating her mother's apple spice cake with her hands. But when she got back to the house, the air was hot and thick, and the blankets were gone from the living room. Her older sister lay in bed tucked under them all, yet shivering still.

Her father soon ran to fetch a basin of water and a towel, and spoke with her mother in hushed tones. May wasn't allowed into her sister's room, so she sat on her knees in the hallway in front of the closed door, pushing her nails back and forth across the carpeting.

"Fever, came on quick around noon." She could make out her mother's voice, tense and high. "Poor girl fainted while walking to the bathroom, I barely kept her head from cracking open on the floor."

An hour passed after that, May knocking on the door but getting no answer. Finally her mother stepped out, eyes wild. She nodded at May, forcing a smile before walking off down the hall. The door was left open behind her, and May stood to look in. Her sister's face was a deep red, her dark curls sticky with sweat against her forehead. She had kicked the blankets off, and they lay scattered on the floor as she clutched a single pillow to her chest.

May wanted to speak to her, but her mother was back in moments, tapping her soft on the shoulder. She held a bottle in her hands that smelled sweet and strong with herbs. The door closed again, then, and May called after her mother, desperate.

"Why is this happening?" she wailed. "I wanted today. She can have the rest of the week,

or the whole month, but you promised me today!"

May knew how awful she was being, how childish. But she couldn't stop it. Soon she gave up, though, and walked away from that airless room where she could still hear her sister gasping. As the sun set outside and the living room grew darker, dim bars of light coming through the slats in the window shade, May lay on the floor and circled her feet in the air, making lists of all the countries she could remember. Alphabetical order. Then she ate another plum, threw herself across the couch and slid to the ground in a strange gymnastic pose, like she and her sister would do in this game they used to play. Still no one came to check on her. After eating a handful of stale nuts, a piece of bread that she sloppily covered with some soft cheese, and a third plum, May decided to go outside.

It was dark and the winds were coming in stronger now. With her sister's yellow windbreaker on, May walked a circle around their house, kicking a pebble in front of her. It was quiet, so quiet that May felt as if she hadn't heard a human voice in years. And it was her birthday, she didn't want to feel like this. She wanted to feel like her heart was fat and alive in her chest, she wanted to feel light. May walked over towards the water's edge, where the skiff sat beached on the rocky shore, oar balanced across the top.

Then the idea came — she didn't know why it had taken her so long to think of it. Tonight, why not speak the language of ghosts? Why not have her eyes closed by the lady who had nothing to give but secrets and time?

It took only a few pushes to get the skiff into the water, and when she hopped inside, the bench was still damp from earlier that day. She hadn't ever taken it out alone, but it was a day of firsts. That morning, she had held her father's scaling knife and watched for a perfect minute as it moved with her as if it had been hers all along. And she wasn't afraid of water. Unlike her sister, who lay prone and heaving in that horrible bedroom, needing her mother and father to wipe her head and pour tonics down her throat — unlike her, May was tough. May didn't stay inside and May liked the smell of rotting fish, she couldn't sew and had chapped lips that peeled with the cold. She was the spitting image of her father, that's what everyone said. So she deserved to know the things that he did, about the universe and danger. She deserved to speak to his spirit.

The oar cut into the water, and May's arms burned as she worked to move herself forward, forward to the house with the shuttered windows and impossibly well-kept garden. Drops of water flew into her eyes, and she blinked them out as the skiff rocked and twisted. The lake roiled beneath her. As the wind grew stronger, May continued to row, her cheeks feeling as if they were being skinned raw. Was she even moving at all anymore? Her father must do it differently — May tried to turn the oar around in her hands. Then suddenly it was dark around her, every bone in her body turned to ice, as she was thrown violently into the freezing lake.

Water poured down her throat, into her eyes and nose, as she thrashed around, not knowing which way she should even swim to meet the air again. She felt like a ragdoll, arms and legs being pulled either way by some controlling child. When she broke the surface once, a wave brought her under again, choking and shaking. She stared into the blackness of the lake and thought she saw a woman's face below her, watching with pursed lips.

But then there were arms grabbing at her back, looping around her shoulders and dragging her up into the night air. Voices, shouting, someone throwing a thick blanket over her.

A fist beat into a spot below her ribcage rhythmically, until she was coughing up water and bile. She shivered like a pathetic cat as her parents took her back to shore in the fishing boat, leaving the empty skiff to spiral on the surface of the lake. Like some horrible joke.

May was so angry that she couldn't speak, even as they dressed her up in warm clothes and fed her bread and honey in front of the fireplace, singing songs of celebration. Her father kept looking at her funny — he must have known where May tried to go. But from that day on, he never mentioned anything of the kind again, and it was only her mother who would tell stories of magic.

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That night, May dreamed about the dead daughter of the woodcutter, her father's guiding spirit. In the dream, she stood with the lady in her garden, stepping on the sprouts and flowers of early spring. Birds swarmed above their heads, black and red and tawny, circling like vultures over a corpse. The lady kissed May's closed eyes with her soft white lips, and then placed her hands into her hair. As she dug her fingernails into May's scalp — sharp like ten scaling knives, drawing blood and leaving marks — she began to whisper something glorious into her ear.

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WEDDING CAKE

By Stephanie Valente

It began with a pair of limoncello-colored shoes. Every Thursday, I went to church with my black-honey hair of sin, my summer dress skimming with eyes and curiosity. The air flashed thick and pulpy, and I only walked to the church through a ring of women in rosaries dotting along restaurants and cafes. On some days, I felt like a statue. A warrior missing an arm. Or, a small fawn looking up at a god. Instead, I wore gold ankle bracelets. I prayed on Thursdays. I visited the Father, all in with red glass candles, my perfume oil, my sunglasses. My darkness. We fell in love with the air of lemons. My limoncello shoes. We turned to passion under the lemon groves, never oranges. Your hair was pure incense: murky, smokey, sacrosanct secrets. I started wearing only white lace. Your fingers were instruments of power or death. I never really knew. I prayed in church. To my father. The Father. I culled my bodices tight. Love hurt. It was smooth and made my skin red. Wine and laughter always. I became the Italian word for doll. The lemon trees whispered about you, there was something sinister in you. I smelled only citrus. And the fish. I only cooked white flakey meat. I kissed your gold chain neck every night. We walked and walked and walked around the Riviera. Cigarettes and rosaries. Prayers for the future. Saints for success. You swore up and down to love me more than any Father. You asked me to marry you under the lemon tree. I said, yes. Only if I could wear a veil. You asked Father first. You kissed his ring. Priest-daughter bride. My breasts were full. My belly was empty. I wore the limoncello-colored shoes with white lace at the lemon trees. You, the lover. You, the bad husband. You put your fingers in my mouth, stronger than any vow. That night I dreamed about dead women and men without legs. They showed me missing teeth and ripped earlobes. I knelt the next morning in the church, choking on incense. I bled. I thought about your fingers in my mouth. I didn't care that you slipped out at night without a whisper or line of poetry masked as excuses. Lemon tree promises. The ghosts told me their names. A woman without any fingernails said a prayer and told me to look for St. Anthony. There was something sinister under the lemon trees. But lover. You love me, you love me, you love me. Merchant marine apparitions. I didn't ask about the man under the trees. I wandered in a circle, dotting around the cafes filled with cappuccinos and wine. My love ran in circles in an old car. I kept thinking about the airy sweetness. The white frosting tastes so good against my lips. It tasted even better with wine. The rest was smashed against your cheek.

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THE NOPALES WAR

By Bruno Figueroa
Translated from Spanish by Jorge Chino

I want to be buried in the Sierra
right under some nopales
let the soil cover my body
this land that is the cradle of true men
(traditional song)

Que me entierren en la sierra
al pie de unos nopales
y que me cubra esta tierra
que es cuna de hombres cabales

An ancient Persian poet once wrote that war is a cruel game that's only paid for with blood. But there hasn't been a war as cruel, as ludicrous and useless, as the Nopales War. This is the only war that, when it comes to mind, brings tears to my eyes.

History sometimes erupts through the back door. A shot in the fog, a flag to which proper honors were not given, or the pick striking a shimmering gem in a desert can awaken the worst passions in human beings.

I'm going to tell this story because nobody lived it like I did. It all started in a neglected backyard of a California city called Santa Rosa. Anyone who speaks about Santa Rosa with admiration or exaggerates or is a resident of that bland community. So says a person like me who lives in Sacramento, another city located in the Golden State, known only because it's the seat of the state government. Fifty miles northeast of San Francisco, inland, Santa Rosa can be a burning hell during the summer, and cold and damp in the winter. The only thing old are the tombs in the rural cemetery; earthquakes and fires have destroyed the rest.

It was a wide backyard, covered with yellow grass and, in various spots, a hard reddish soil, fenced off by large scrub and a fence of crumbling wood that marked its boundary with a wasteland populated by patch of prickly pear cactus, the nopal plant.. That Sunday, Freddy Jimnez was preparing a steak to share with his friends Steve, Larry and their families at a big barbecue. Tall and burly, with a stubborn beer belly, beard and an unruly blonde mane, Freddy was a perfect "redneck." A perfect idiot. He had difficulty finishing high school, preferring to spend time with his girlfriend and his Harley Davidson instead of his studies. He enlisted in the Army and fought during the first Iraq War as a marksman, shooting at targets from inside a tank. From this experience, his passionate patriotic fervor was born. He became a devotee of the flag of stars and stripes, of the anthem 'O say, can you see,' and of the armed forces. When he lost his footing in an argument, he threw the final, unappeasable argument: "Have you read the Constitution?" He weighed his surname of Spanish origin, which – thank God – an ancestor

had slightly modified by removing an "e" from Jiménez, and had a fit when a government employee asked him, while filling out a form, if he was Hispanic. No Sir! His name was Freddy Jim-ness, Jim-ness! He was a real American!

Twenty times a day he cursed Mexicans as he cruised the city streets wearing his postman's uniform in a tiny vehicle with no doors, handing out envelopes and packages. Dirty and illiterate, they can't even write, he stammered disdainfully as he slipped letters with addresses written awkwardly and incorrectly into mailboxes. Why don't you go back to where you came from and leave us alone? he asked angrily, and the redness spread to his ears, even as he was unaware that numerous Santa Rosa residents, like his neighbor John Padilla, owner of an acre of land, were descendants of Mexicans who settled in that valley before 1847.

That summer Sunday, beer in hand, while his friends listened to his usual jokes, Freddy was grilling steaks and the women were chatting around a table. His two-year-old son, Jason, in diapers and wearing a large cloth hat over his head and tiny sandals, was chasing the nervous German shepherd. The dog, perhaps fed up with being tormented by the annoying child, fled to the back of the property but the boy did not give up and trotted after him with all the strength of his short little legs.

Why didn't his mother stop him then and thus prevent a tragedy of incalculable consequences? Why is fate so unfair? Jason had disappeared from sight and into the bushes for just a few moments when they heard it, worse than a cry, a horrendous child's scream. The mother, of course, was the first to arrive. The boy had stumbled and lay face down on several nopal cacti that had sprouted from the ground. The boy didn't use his hands to protect his face. Several long and dark thorns pierced his delicate skin. As his mother lifted him, she discovered with horror that one had penetrated his left eyelid and his eye was bleeding. The thorn was immediately taken out and the little one rushed to hospital. A few hours later, the doctors' verdict was brutal: the boy was going to heal from his wounds, but he had lost sight in his left eye forever. For endless minutes, Freddy sobbed loudly. Why? Why? He kept moaning. His wife, in contrast, was quiet and seemed far away as she embraced her son.

Back home, the woman broke her silence and barked with anger to Freddy: "I asked you a long time ago to cut those damn plants and fix the fence! Now it's too late!" Indeed, the nopales from the empty lot next door had invaded part of their garden. He had never paid any attention to the cacti. Each nopal plant was more than six feet tall, and from its pads emerged countless menacing thorns at least one inch long. As an act of contrition and to unleash his rage, Freddy Jimnez massacred the nopales with a machete and burned the plants in a makeshift bonfire. It wasn't much consolation for a father who loved his son like no one else on earth!

A couple days later, in a bar in Santa Rosa, he was drowning his grief with Steve and Larry. The three friends went over and over the terrible incident. "And, to begin with,' Freddy said, "why does this dangerous plant even exist here? Why did it have to grow up in my backyard? Isn't it Mexican?" That's right, his friends answered. "The Mexicans even eat the cactus." "We should

ban it!" Larry exclaimed, pounding on the table.

They decided the next day to visit the mayor who, aware of the tragedy, received them immediately. After hearing the obligatory comforting words, Freddy Jimnez came to the point: the accident would not have happened if those dangerous alien plants had not invaded our gardens. Can't the plants be eradicated from the city limits? The mayor understood the reasoning and asked for time to consult the city council. The council met a few days later, and its members unleashed their disdain for the plants: the nopales were indeed useless pests. Anecdotes circulated about injuries caused by those nopal thorns, but none as terrible as the wounds little Jason had suffered. In addition, the plant had a propensity to multiply in the blink of an eye, and it was difficult to pull them from the ground.

A couple of weeks had passed when postman Freddy appeared before a city council meeting where a proclamation was passed that firstly, declared the nopal — the opuntia plant commonly known as prickly pear or cactus —harmful to society and the city's economy. Second, the city council instructed the Santa Rosa Parks and Recreation Department to eradicate the cactus from public spaces within the perimeter of the city; and finally, the council invited the public to pull the plant from their properties. They went as far as setting up a telephone line for those who did not know how to deal with the cacti. Several Latino city council members, aware of the racial connotations, opposed the measure but could not stop the decision that would set off this infamous episode — yet another — in the history of the United States.

The Santa Rosa Gazette published a brief report the next day: "The Santa Rosa City Council orders the eradication of nopal cacti after a terrible incident in which an infant lost an eye when he fell on one of the thorn-covered plants that have invaded the city."

As soon as the proposal was announced, an outcry of outraged voices surfaced in Santa Rosa. University-educated people, teachers from public schools and the local college called it absurd, radical and exaggerated: "It's like trying to kill a fly with a bullet," one commented. The Santa Rosa Horticulture Society, named after Luther A. Burbank, the city's prodigal son and celebrated botanist who died in 1926, held a stormy session that lasted several hours. At first, its members, as lovers of plants and rational thinkers, agreed the measure was wrong and bogus: Why blame the cacti? Men and plants can live together in harmony, but it is up to society to take proper precautions. However, some noted that nopal cactus can become a pest, and many plants considered as pests are eradicated. Someone recalled that the revered Luther Burbank had, in the early twentieth century, bred a harmless, thornless cactus, Burbank Spineless Opuntia, which on some of Sonoma farms served as a feed for livestock. Examples of this variety were displayed a few feet from the society's headquarters. The mayor had therefore made the right decision. Tempers flared and peaceful botanists began to fling insults like wrestling fans; no one could remember an incident in the town's history that divided the people as this one had. Frustrated, the society's members left the meeting in the middle of the night without having resolved the thorny issue one way or the other.

On the other hand, La Raza Center in Santa Rosa, an organization of self-proclaimed Latinos, mostly descendants of Mexicans, did not have to deliberate for long to pass a strong manifesto of repudiation. The center proclaimed the city council was biased, racist and violated legal and long-standing healthy Latino traditions, such as cultivating and consuming nopales. Dozens of Latino groups from all over the country, alerted by La Raza, flooded the City of Santa Rosa with messages of outrage. The legislative Latino Caucus in Sacramento even filed a lawsuit to invalidate the despicable measure in Santa Rosa, and they alerted MALDEF as well as the ACLU.

The Washington Post shed a different light on the news, recalling absurd decisions like the one by Carmel's City Council, when the famous actor Clint Eastwood was mayor of the city, that forbade women from wearing high heels when walking on the cobblestone streets.

Elections for California's governor were coming soon. Among the impromptu candidates who never fail to appear, one stood out for being bold and talkative, a candidate whose ignorance was surpassed only by his arrogance. His name was Bob H. Rose, a Newport Beach billionaire who'd decided to throw his hat into the ring despite his political inexperience. Clearly, he had some well-established sectarian and classist ideas. His motto was "For a True and Strong California." For "True," it was understood "a California of white people for white people." A fixture of the National Rifle Association, Rose had also coined the easy and effective motto of "Guns and Rose."

A man of great political intuition, Rose appreciated the nascent controversy over the nopal cactuses and perceived a terrific opportunity at hand. "For God's sake," he exclaimed. "What voter is going to defend a useless plant that's not even American?" He received the Jimnez family in front of reporters, and paraded little Jason before the cameras as he pointed to the disgraceful black patch over his left eye. This child, he declared, was a victim of the criminal negligence of our elected officials, who have been too lax with the plagues that come from outside. "Not one more Jason," he thundered, and invited all California city councils to pass regulations similar to the one in Santa Rosa. If elected, he promised to issue a very tough law to eradicate "that and other scum that don't represent the real California."

The candidate made the "The JJ Case," as it was starting to be called, his cause, and he took the Jimnezes, father and son, to every political rally he held, just as a circus always has dwarfs.

"Prickly pear" was an unpronounceable word. "Cactus," impersonal and even pedantic. He discovered that in Spanish it was called nopal: NO-PAL! No-friend! It was the perfect word. He created a couple of new campaign slogans:

BURN THE NOPAL ROSE VS NOPAL

In his rallies, he displayed the child and asked, rhetorically and euphorically "AND WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO WITH THE NOPAL?" And his followers would chant: "BURN IT!"

And then they all would chant together: "BURN-NO-PAL! BURN-NO-PAL!"

Rose's opponents had the ill-advised strategy of summoning scientists who demonstrated the absurdity of blaming a plant as Californian as the sequoia, or the Vitis californica, for the state's many evils. Rose ignored them and would simply show up in a town and, among growing numbers of followers, set fire to a mound of nopal cactuses. More city councils voted to eradicate the cacti, except, of course, those cities where Latinos were a majority. "You will see," Rose threatened "Someday, sooner than you can imagine, I'll make every county in the state end that plague, because California is one and indivisible!"

In an interview by a national news outlet, Rose asked insidiously, "And that plant, isn't it on the flag of a country somewhere? Don't tell me the plant is not alien. Let them keep it!" An amateur expert in international affairs, he pontificated: "We keep our plants. Let them keep theirs. Respect for this principle means peace."

From that night on, anonymous donors and powerful conservative groups in the country deposited millions of dollars into his campaign account. A few months later, Rose had won the election and moved to Sacramento. He had his first legislation ready: the Alien Noxious and Invasive Plants Act. To avoid targeting a single plant, his astute advisers dusted off a list of California plants harmful to the interests of farmers and selected some with foreign names, such as the Imperata brasiliensis or Brazilian satintail, the Genista monspessulana known as French broom, and a plant of menacing name, the Lycium ferocissimum or African boxthorn. They added them to his bill.

In the state Assembly, anger grew. The Latino caucus represented half the chamber, and no legislator in that group was willing to pass such a sinister law. Rose blackmailed and threatened to again take away drivers' licenses for the undocumented and to veto budgets for projects in opposing legislators' districts. The latter worked better than the former. After an intense battle, the Assembly relented, because, after all, there didn't seem to be any foreseeable financial burden. Rose held in his hands the tool that allowed him to force state employees at all levels to annihilate the target of his anger and instrument of his victory. Freddy Jimnez was appointed State Coordinator for the Eradication of Noxious Plants, and began touring California, jaunty in a large new van embellished with official seals on both sides.

Enforcement of the law was handed to the Department of Food and Agriculture. Fate forced me, a second-generation Latino, an agronomist and employee at the DFA, to prepare detailed instructions for all the state's counties. Why didn't I ask for a job in another department, why didn't I quit? I must admit: I chickened out and betrayed my own people. I only thought about my comfortable job and my home mortgage. I'm ashamed to say it: I wrote those directives.

I felt a stab in the heart when my own mother asked me if I knew about the terrible measure: "Mijo, this is so bad! Remember your papito. He loved so much his huevos con nopales!" In every town, all the nopales had to be cleared away. Squads of state and municipal agents were

trained in the use of electric saws, machetes and flamethrowers. Thousands of gloves were distributed so the thorns wouldn't hurt anyone. Those thorns that had half blinded the little Jimnez boy. The picturesque nopal cactuses disappeared from Balboa Park and all California Jesuit Missions.

One night, on television, I sat frozen watching the governors of California, Arizona and Texas together. I remembered a photograph from my high school history book, watching Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt dividing up the world. The governors talked about the nopales and made a pact. A pact! The pact to eradicate the nopal plants from their respective states. Rose was elated. He stated he had already fulfilled 30 percent of the eradication plan in his own state. This campaign, he thought, handled skillfully, could take him — why not? — to the White House...

Then the resistance was born.

Thousands of anonymous, humble, rough and calloused hands, mostly women's, began to work in silence to save the plants that had accompanied them all their lives, just like the brightly colored sodas and the Virgins of Guadalupe in their living rooms. Freshly cut nopal pads were planted in old buckets, large tin cans and, at the very least, in clay pots, and sheltered out of public view in backyards. Because you must know, the nopal, like all cacti — nature is so wise! — reproduces from cuttings; roots grow quickly from the pads and a new plant is born. It was an unconscious collective action, from Salinas to Fresno, from Yuba City to Temecula, born of ancestral wisdom and a deep sense of preservation.

Small activist groups emerged to bring attention to the issue. Out of the blue, one morning in front of the governor's mansion in Sacramento, a trash can appeared with a nopal plant more than six feet tall with the following message stuck amongst the plants' thorns: THE NOPAL BELONGS TO CALIFORNIA. An anonymous phone call had alerted television stations, and it made headlines for a whole day. Rose chose not to pay any attention to the matter.

In a crowded stadium; a few steps from the legendary seventh hole of Pebble Beach; during a Hollywood film premier; facing the Union Square Christmas tree in San Francisco; at the Otay Port of Entry, nopal plants appeared with similar messages and were all removed promptly. Walls and pillars across California were painted with images of nopales of all sizes and shades of green.

The governor didn't laugh when he, the California Assembly, the members of his cabinet, and the state's Supreme Court justices all received a small prickly pear plant on the same day in a flirtatious pot displaying a card with the inscription: "From the resistance with love."

The governor demanded to find the perpetrators immediately. They had broken the law of harmful foreign plants by disseminating prohibited species throughout the state.

It wasn't hard to find the culprits through the delivery company's tracking system. The guilty party was a group of well-to-do students at Pitzer College, Claremont, in East L.A., a group of youngsters encouraged by their Chicano history teacher.

"These Latino preppies will get what they deserve," declared the governor, who had been nicknamed by the resistance as nopalhater or Enemy of the Nopal. Later the nickname mutated as the Nopalator, similar to that of his predecessor, the Governator.

The youths were arrested and quickly released after paying a modest fine. But Rose demanded the dismissal of the university professor from his job and an investigation into the origin of the plants. Things started to get complicated. The professor was a friend of the President of the State Assembly, who had graduated from the same college.

There was a heated controversy between those who saw the youths' actions as an act of free expression and those who demanded strict enforcement of the law. Hurried, pressured, and timid, the Pitzer Board decided to punish the professor. Students blocked the university's entrances and began a sit-in, an act that had not been seen since the Vietnam War era.

State investigators found the clandestine nurseries that sold nopales to the Pitzer boys in East L.A. neighborhoods, and a relentless raid was launched. My cousin Maurilio told me how ten men in black, armed and hooded, knocked down the door of one of his friends and slipped into the plastic-protected yard. They carelessly trampled over countless marijuana plants and took the evidence they were looking for: a couple dozen nopales. "The plants weren't even profitable," my cousin sighed. "We had them out of solidarity."

The chase became a hunt. Dozens of people were arrested all over the state, including a poor blind grandmother because a defiant nopal grew by her door. Jinmez officiated as an improvised solicitor, displaying the thorny prickly pears, wearing an absurd bulletproof vest in front of the cameras.

"Why doesn't the Mexican government do something? Why doesn't it move? What about its ten consulates in the state?" asked numerous outraged Latino leaders and community members. In Mexico City, finally, a lukewarm statement from the Foreign Affairs Department "expressed concern," "deplored excesses," urged to "ensure unrestricted respect for human rights," "made a call for restraint" and — oh, such forcefulness! — invited Governor Rose to a "serene, objective and inclusive" dialogue. The Nopalator ignored the message and the invitation.

During the Cinco de Mayo parade in Santa Ana, as the Mexican consul waved from a Plymouth Belvedere convertible that slowly crossed 4th Street, just six feet from the car a Mexican man whispered a repulsive "puto" (sissy) to him, without moving a muscle on his face. The man's neighbor heard it and repeated the word with a bit more courage. Fifty yards ahead, the interjection had become clamor. The consul chose a shameful escape to dishonor without defense and jumped from the vehicle and disappeared into the crowd. Countless smart phones

recorded the scene, and social media destroyed the consul's reputation in a few hours.

In this unequal struggle, the suffering people once again decided to take justice into their own hands. Underground, tons of fresh nopales took the northern road. At the border, entire bales were found hidden in Mexican trucks behind various goods such as piñatas with Rose's effigy. The governor demanded the federal government close the border with Mexico and threatened to mobilize the National Guard. In Washington, the president discussed the nature of the threat in a session of the National Security Council. The decision was delayed.

The consumption of nopal could not be prohibited, as it did not present a health risk. It became fashionable to feature it on the menu of restaurants in Beverly Hills and Malibu, on top of the lasagna or chopped and cold as snow. A small pin in the form of a green nopal was the most exquisite form of resistance seen on a lapel or a blouse.

The underground production of nopal grew. Could another result really be expected? I warned my superiors: This war can't be won. They didn't listen.

The Los Angeles Times reported the following news on July 28:

In Los Padres National Forest, park rangers supported by officials from the Department of Food and Agriculture wiped out an illegal farm of approximately 240 acres of nopal plants. On the site, which was hard to reach due to its location in the middle of a mountain, they found only abandoned tarps, picks, shovels and forklifts, and a pile of approximately 500 pounds of nopales ready to be planted. "These plants certainly come from Mexico," said the Santa Barbara Sheriff, who had been assigned to the criminal investigation, "and as in so many other similar cases, you see the hand of that country's organized crime."

Music is the comfort and sanctuary of the oppressed. At my mother's house, in the traditional Christmas gathering, after tequilas and atole, the elders pulled out their guitars and improvised a melancholy "corrido" in homage to the great musician Lalo Guerrero. I then wrote down their words:

I am the nopal, gentlemen,
I was born on the American side.
Timid and full of fear,
Because I'm straight from Mexico.

The gringos discriminate against me
As if I were a foreigner.
Even though this land
was first part of Mexico.

I am pure nopal,

my sap is medicine.
My pads are great to roast on a comal
And I am protected by thorns.

It's not my fault to be born
On the other side of the Río Bravo.
This nopal says goodbye,
See ya later and ¡Allí los wacho!

Hip hop, scream rap, grime, reaggaeton — all these rhythms helped young people express in their own way their outrage, anger and helplessness. With ringed and tattooed fingers in front of hundreds of entranced followers, Rapper Lil Fuego, fired off the lyrics of his Californopal manifesto, which began as follows:

Hey you, perro, loco chacal,
Leave the calles of my barrio,
Listen: My people will use lethal force
If you keep exterminating my sacred nopal!

Easter came and neither the struggles for justice nor the repression by Rose's henchmen had subsided. In the Church of Our Lady the Queen of Los Angeles, as on every Resurrection Sunday, the parish priest led a Procession of Joy. As they walked by the Placita Olvera, behind him were girls and boys in white coat and gloves, pious women of all ages and two images, the Resurrected Christ and the Virgin of Triumph carried on strong shoulders.

No one noticed when Nazario showed up at the end of the procession. He wore Franciscan sandals, a white robe and carried a large cross lined with dark nopales nailed to the wood on all sides. He was the reincarnation of the Penitent Christ, magnificent and terrible, with a flourishing beard and his long hair bearing a crown of thorns. He moved slowly without complaining. Before him, the people, overwhelmed, gradually yielded their space until he found himself behind the Virgin Mary. The long nopal thorns pierced his skin and blood ran down his arms and broad back, inking in red the thin fragile cloth that covered parts of his body and resembled the very shroud of the Son of God.

A woman screamed at such an unbearable vision. The crowd alerted the priest, who went over to argue with the incongruous crucified man in his procession about the risen Lord, messenger of peace and happiness. "Son," he called out at close range, but his voice broke. Nazario's gaze radiated infinite mercy and at the same time relentless will, as if he did not feel the pain produced by every thorn that lacerated his skin, as if he were atoning, alone, for all the evil that had brought on the Nopales War. His judgment shaken, the priest without a word took the lead of the procession, which followed down Alameda Street. People began to incessantly photograph and film Nazario. The news spread like lit gunpowder. Television cameras arrived and the slow

walk of the crucified man of Los Angeles appeared live on the news. People were stunned. Journalists tried unsuccessfully to get a word out of the penitent who glided along in his pain, entranced, above the earthly noise.

Now a crowd had joined the procession, which eventually returned to the parish by Father Serra Park. Mexican merchandise vendors on Olvera Street had left their stalls to check out the miraculous apparition. No one dared touch him but more than a few impassioned believers kneeled before him, begging forgiveness.

Several bystanders, not understanding the value of purification through sacrifice, dialed 911 and demanded the intervention of law enforcement to stop the atrocity, a barbaric and cruel act that has no place in a country like the United States.

What followed was confusing. No doubt Nazario had acolytes, because how do you explain the fact that he exited the procession so quickly when the police were nearby? He entered Pico House and the doors of the historic building were closed behind him. He reappeared on the roof, without his cross, standing on the parapet, inches away from the precipice. The crowd stood below, many feet down. The crowd screamed at first but then became silent. Firemen stood a short distance from him. A helicopter flew over and the noise became deafening. Suddenly, the Penitent Christ plummeted downward.

Nazario was my brother. The brother I loved the most, the one who always guided my footsteps. Acting was his passion, and when he was young he joined the Valdez brothers' Teatro Campesino. Unlike me, he learned value our culture, to convey to our people in California pride in the Aztecs and La Raza, and the Mexican Revolution and the injustices and the struggle of César Chávez. For many years he ran through the nave of the San Juan Bautista Mission dressed as an angel and as a demon in the Christmas pastorela play, and he was Juan Diego in a play about the apparitions of the Virgin of Tepeyac. Embodying the Son of God was his last and most supreme performance, the one that made him great forever, and the one that also separated us from him forever.

When I saw on a screen, my eyes clouded with tears, his tragic Stations of the Cross and the fatal outcome, I was the first to decipher the importance of his message. I remembered the Virgin of Guadalupe's words Juan Diego uttered before Bishop Zumárraga in their second conversation centuries ago, which nearly caused him to be flogged. The Virgin asked for a temple to be built and dedicated to her. My brother, in the old Mission of San Juan, where the echoes of the struggles for dominance of these Californian lands still resonated, and where the Mexican, son of Spanish and Indian, was today the oppressed, repeated every year:

In this way I will teach the Spaniards to see the Indian as his other self, and thus put an end to the injustices being committed in the name of Jesus Christ.

Nazario's sacrifice was not vain. The persecution of the nopal ceased abruptly, and which, in

the end, had caused no deaths but my brother's. The people who had protected the plant came out of the prisons. In Sacramento, Governor Rose, the Nopalator, declared a "total victory" and ended the exterminating campaign. But no one was fooled: the war he had waged was unsustainable and absurdly costly. The state assembly repealed the infamous law.

And Freddy Jimnez? He was photographed in Lake Tahoe with two voluptuous blondes inside his official state van. For months he had disguised countless payments made in bars, casinos and brothels as official expenses, and he ended up in prison as everyone lost interest. Little Jason lives with his mother in another state.

* * * * *

I find myself cleaning the tomb of Nazario at the foot of the Rocky Mountains. His tombstone is tall, guarded by two Opuntia ficus-indica that are growing quickly. They had come back to life behind a wall at San Juan Mission and I carefully transported them from there. We also placed a statue of our Virgin and, kneeling before her, another of San Juan Diego. Soon, the first bus will arrive with pilgrims seeking favors from the Christ of the Nopales. Some already want to erect a chapel. Many come all the way from Mexico to ask for miracles. They say he's the Christ of Hope for those who suffer from a tyrannical father, an arrogant boss or a despotic authority.

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Jorge Chino is a dedicated English-Spanish translator with many years of experience recreating texts and producing translations with the same quality as the original creations. He currently spends his time writing and working in Santa Cruz California and the mountains of the Sierra Madre Oriental in Mexico.

Dark Wooden Slabs

By Mei Mei Sun

There is another house we own in my dreams, all dark-wooden slabs and gold-flaked marble. It used to belong to one of our family friends, the ones who moved to El Paso when the going got tough for an aunt and she went to jail for any dice's throw of years on racketeering charges. Wasn't her fault, her brother always reassured us with the hangdog look he always wore when we saw him afterwards, any decent person would've done the same in those kind of times. She, in another show of irresponsibility so overt it bewildered my ten-year-old mind, passed on the inculcated shame to her family, who subsequently left the city and its complementary threat of ostracization months afterwards, taking the deep cuts to their mortgage and reputation as necessary collateral against a city that never forgot a lapse in one's saving graces.

And so we got their house, the one with the brick façade that resembled some weak distillation of Art Nouveau. A parting present, the dad had insisted with the shameless desperation of used car salesmen. A real bargain for the price, he jabbed at some line on a handwritten contract with rudely perforated edges, and besides, my parents weren't the type to put much stock in architectural integrity. And so my parents gripped the ballpoint pen, still attached to its silver umbilical cord signifying its past as a bank teller's daily manipulation, and signed above a dotted line so crooked it would've made a low-grade metaphor for a more-skilled writer.

My parents designate it the 'entertaining' house, but we only host ourselves once a year or so— the other times, it sits unused on a stone sidewalk of linoleum until one of my dad's marginal buddies calls because his WiFi got jammed, you see, and did he know of a place?

My dad, ever the charismatic host, agrees: what's the point of having a house when it's never used?

My mother sees the property value in the neighborhood's zoned schools, and suggests that we rent it out.

Nonsense, my dad replies, a house can never feel like home again after someone else lives there during the interim.

It's never felt like ours to begin with, I want to interject, but know much better than to do so when he's in one of these rarely impassioned moods.

And so the house sits with its high beam ceilings, unforgivingly stoic save for one sole helium welcome-home! balloon caving in on itself under the immense pressure of its surroundings, an eyesore amongst the cream-colored crowns where the walls meet together. I look at the virgin corners, teeming with the pristine reservation of a remote still wrapped in plastic, and think, this house could never feel like home.

Born in Yokohama, Japan; Chinese-American Mei Mei Sun now resides in Los Angeles, California. Read more about her at meimeisun.org.

T.V.C. #8: Acrylic & Gouache on Paper

Monica Valdez 2018

L Finds Heaven

By L Scully

L finds heaven in the lap of an older woman. They awaken burrowed in the folds of her dress, gauzy from dreamland. L feels no pang at the thought of their death, perfect and genderless, divine and self-inflicted. All that led them here. There is no blood in heaven. The woman is stroking L's sideburns piously, and L feels on top of the world. L is on top of the world, here in heaven. The woman's face floats above theirs and they feel their body cleansed of the toxins they breathed in Below. The woman smiles and they feel their heart pull itself back together. The woman wears bracelets up her arm and L wants to climb them like rungs of a ladder to her lips. L doesn't know quite who she is but knows she is the knower of all things. Their fingertips brush and L transfers the memory of the chaos of Below to the woman, and she cries silver tears for the people still suffering down there. L spends every ageless day with the woman, being stroked and petted, tended to delightedly. One day the woman carves L out of marble, cutting L's edges and sinewing L's curves into a masterpiece of a gravemarker. L takes the woman's hand, her tool still in it, and vows to stay with her forever. The woman speaks but no words come out and L remembers to breathe. The woman places her long fingers over L's eye sockets and blocks out all the light. L wakes up.

L Scully (they/them) is a queer writer and double Capricorn currently based in Madrid. They are the cofounder and prose editor at Stone of Madness Press. Find them in the ether @ LRScully.

The Blue Butterflies

BY MEHREEN AHMED

The war ate the 14-year-olds. Such were the days, when young boys wielded swords and died in these dusts. Politicians, drunk in the revelry of power and greed, sent more and more elderly and the young to join the army to fight senseless battles in the name of the King. Not knowing whose wars they fought, these soldiers were a perfect cannon fodder. Wars, which took place some many moons ago, under hot suns and rising sands of the desert Gulaag.

The Gulaag, was vast and dry. It was hard to spot an oasis anywhere. This was an empty space made up of rippled sand dunes and sporadic barrel cacti. Kings thought this arid land was ideal for battle.

At a time like this, a baby boy was born. His name was Hajji. His mother named him in his father's absence, because the imperial force took the father long before his birth. He grew up without opulence with his mother in this small town in eastern Gulaag on the border between two warring kingdoms.

The wars were far from over. This godforsaken land Gulaag, couldn't be appeased any time soon. Royal armies fed on the vulnerable, as did their sinful paymasters. This ever-hungry beast; no number of humans, camels, or horses was enough to satisfy the bottomless pit of this stunning desert.

Hajji's mother, Jainab, had no other place to go. This was where she must stay, on this little patch of land her husband had left for her. Her fate was tied up with the Gulaag. But she lived in constant fear, like every other mother on the land. They were afraid that the army would come after their sons. Hajji had just turned twelve. Jainab surveilled him around the clock and kept him close. Sometimes she would send him to tend the sheep far out into the desert.

Today, in the first light of morning, Hajji took off. Before the sun rose, he took his flock from the shed at the back of their mud house and headed towards the Gulaag. Those were the quietest moments; the army slept at these hours. He walked nearly a quarter of a mile into the desert, when he saw a great number of tents strewn across. Soldiers rested in those tents from a long nights shift. The Gulaag, slept like a giant at their feet. Hajji walked over the placid sands ahead of his herd. Then he heard a small cry beyond one of the rippled dunes. Hajji stopped. It was a feeble cry, almost a whimper. It didn't sound like a human voice. He began to follow the sound. It was a human voice after all. It came from a boy, about his age, crawling over sand slides. He appeared wounded. Many cuts and bruises beset his little body. Hajji ran over and sat down by his side.

"Are you hurt?" Hajji asked.

The boy looked at him wide-eyed and nodded.

"Who did this to you?" Hajji asked again.

"Enemy," he said. "Water, water, may I have some?"

Hajji looked around. Through serendipity, he found some prickly pears by the dunes. Under and over the sand he searched for something sharp. He found one; a flat pebble.

"Hang in there, okay?"

Hajji cut some pulp with the sharp edge of the pebble. He took the prickles out carefully. He pouched the pulp into the corner of his long shirt and came back to the boy. He asked him to open his mouth. As he did so, Hajji squeezed the pulp over his mouth. Droplets filtered through straight into the boy's mouth.

"I'll have to piggyback you home with me if I can't find a camel. It is too dangerous to steal from them, the army there," Hajji told the boy.

The boy felt too weak. His wounds were fresh. He said nothing, but waited for Hajji to make arrangements. Hajji walked across the wide dune to look for a camel. He found one near the army tents. The beast of the desert stood aloof, tied to a tent's hook. When Hajji peeked through one of the tent's openings, his eyes fell on several men sleeping. Too close for comfort, some of them were child warriors.

They slept huddled together, dead to the world. Hajji walked behind a tent. He saw a few guards drowning in sleep. He walked past them unnoticed and went up to the camel. He hid behind its hind legs, moved his lithe body between the camel's four lanky legs. At a snail's pace, he got to the hook, where the camel was tied with a rope. He untied it and got the camel off the hook. He held it by its rein and brought it over. The army slept heavily.

Jainab sat on the threshold of her house. Hajji was late today. She boiled some chickpeas over a clay stove. "Where is my boy? I hope soldiers haven't taken him!" A shiver ran right through her spine at the thought. This brought her memory back to when her husband lived with her. Some were happy memories. Others were not, but unforgettable all the same.

This was not where she had met him, not in this house, but someplace else on the Gulaag. She had been travelling with her nomadic tribe for days on end. One day, when evening fell, the cavalcade stopped to camp in the middle of nowhere. They anchored the tents into the sand. A cold blast blew. They lit a fire. Men and women sat around it. A man played a moon song on his fiddle. Others rose to perform a dance. The mesmerising song and the fire dance caused a moonlight slide on the open desert. The moon poured out its lights. They gushed like a silver stream of frozen waterfalls. Floodlights touched the dunes.

There he was, a stranger. Only heavens knew where he had come from. He was a lad of twenty; she, barely eighteen. They had sat across the desert fire. She thought of him as a rare breed. She had gazed at him in the campfire. Caught off-guard in an enchantment, she couldn't take her eyes off him, as one couldn't, if struck by a host of blue butterflies resting on the trunk of a giant kapok in the sun.

He had smiled and she shot him a shy glance. After that they both knew that there were no retreats. At midnight, when the tribe went to bed, she had come out to wait under a starry sky. He was there. His long shadow loomed on the calm sand by a pile of dying firewood. She saw a shadow move, towering over her. He held her hand and pulled her towards him away from the stationary cavalcade. They stumbled on the sand and rolled over, one on top of the other in the satin glow of silver: the moon, the stars, and all the constellations.

The next day the sun rose over the dunes, gleaming in sparkled gold. He had walked over to Jainab's father with a marriage proposal. Jainab's father liked him too, but he had questions.

Where was he from? What did he do? He said he was a farmer. Jainab didn't care what he did or where he lived. She was just happy to be with him. A wedding soon ensued and it took place in the desert. The man gave Jainab a gold coin. The short ceremony concluded in the presence of the tribe.

That night, there was a feast in the open-air. Wild dances and songs of the heart took place. On this sand sea, an island of small fire burned. The women cooked up a storm. But there was another storm. A sand storm was unleashed towards the late night. It blew russet particles everywhere, darkening the world to blindness. Everyone took cover within their own tents. While people lay low, only the stoic camels stood their ground. A new tent was set up for the newlyweds.

The storm yielded. It took some time. People came out of their tents. They sat down in the same place and began to sing again under the desert moon. The newlywed remained indoors. The night passed and a new sun rose. Time to move on. Jainab and her man packed their luggage. They said farewell to the tribe. There were no tears of separation. This was the nomadic way. Tears were unnecessary, because they believed that on life's resolute journey, people were bound to meet again.

His name was Hashimuddin. Jainab looked at him and softly asked where they were going. He told her they were going east. There was a desert tavern along the way. She could rest here if she needed to. But she said she was okay. Uncertainty didn't bother her. That was her nomadic upbringing. In the evening, they arrived at the destination. A mellowed sun had been hurled over to the western sky. Jainab could see a border between this kingdom and that; the enemy territory, with whom they were perpetually at war. Along the border, she also saw a big patch of greenery and a row of red mud houses. Hashimuddin veered the camel towards one and pulled its reins to a stop in the front of a house. He helped Jainab to get off.

After Jainab and Hashimuddin had departed, the nomads sat around. They were enjoying a cup of tea and making preparations to get the cavalcade back on the road. Just as well they heard horses. The Gulaag was a hostile place. Sporadic wars broke out in a blink. Not surprisingly, a situation emerged out of the blue. The tribe found themselves amidst a volatile army, who held them captive at razor's edge. Sharp blades pierced their hearts and slashed their necks like butchered chickens. The gold sand dunes turned scarlet with slain heads scattered all over. A total anarchy descended. Their camels were taken. Children and women became spoils of war to be turned into murderous soldiers and sex slaves overnight.

Hashimuddin and Jainab escaped all this just by a few hours. They were on the edge of the eastern Gulaag when this happened; cries couldn't be heard from here. Jainab reached her new home feeling safe and warm in love, without any knowledge of the massacre.

Such horrendous breakouts were common. A divine selection that was cut out for the people of this land alone. Religion, morality, philosophy, or any known wisdom proved to be futile. A place riddled with greed, corruption, and a complete disregard for any life, human or animal.

Jainab's son was still not home. It was evening. She sat by the fire and kindled it to cook a meal. She looked out intermittently, and saw a mirage. It was all blurry; visions of

indecipherable outlines across the space; she continued to look earnestly. The visions became more defined. They were small but clearer. She saw them, walking through the mirage. She stood up in excitement: it was her son, Hajji. But Hajji was not alone. There was a camel and body laying over it. She rushed out to meet them.

Her thoughts bended the day when the soldiers had come to take Hashimuddin. That morning, the sun streamed low through the cracks of the mud house windows. Hashimuddin and Jainab, deep in embrace on the threshold of the door. She was on her way to the kitchen. Hashimuddin held her back. He grabbed her right arm and pulled her towards his chest.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Oh those sweet, sweet words hummed music to her ears. "To make breakfast."

"No. I have to tie you to my long shirt to stop you running away."

She had laughed. Hashim gazed at her beautiful smile. "If you keep smiling like that I may never be able to let you go."

He had whispered, and kissed her henna-fragrant hair, losing his face in its mass. She laughed again. Hashim pulled her to his muscular chest.

"C'mon, you have to let me go sometime."

"And do you think it's fair to ask me to let you go? Hmm?" he asked.

"Gosh, you're crazy, you know that?"

"Am I crazy? If you say so, then I am. Completely nuts, because I'm in love with you, my pretty one," he said huskily.

Jainab could smell the hukkah in his breath. He whispered. "Oh, I could never, ever let you go."

He pressed all of her softness with his gentle hands. She lay on his chest like a rag-doll. She let him kiss her. He caressed her. She kissed him back; a million love hearts soared within her. Her high laughter jingled a crescendo note. Hashimuddin, her blue butterfly, was a rarity. Who had crossed her path on an evening of munificence? Her romance had bloomed like an open sunflower in the wilderness.

A few days on; she realised that she was with a child. She hadn't told him yet. She didn't have to, because her soft blushes and smiles revealed the secrets of her heart. She resided in the reverie of her own coloured world. As each day went by, Hashim watched her across the courtyard and wondered. Then one morning, she took a bath and stood on the doorway of the red mud house, where Hashim could see her. Her wet hair cascaded down to her waist. Hashim couldn't resist. He walked over and picked her up. A tremor ran right through her.

"What's up? Why do you look so radiant?" he asked.

"Do you want to know? Do you really, really want to know?" she smiled.

"The shy smiles. The sidelong glances, You're doing it again," he said.

"What? What am I doing?"

"Crazy, you're making me crazy again, to fall head over heels in love with you."

He held her narrow waist, and lifted her up. He could look into her kohl-black eyes. At this moment, his pretty Jainab was the dark-kohl enchantress.

"You're going to be a daddy soon," she said gently, and lowered her blushing face.

"Whaaat? Oh dear God, when did you find out?"

He didn't even wait for an answer, but carried her straight into the bedroom and laid

her down on the bed. She looked at him. Dark sparkles danced in her eyes. He closed his eyes and kissed her forehead; he kissed each piece of her body, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, one at a time, savouring, lingering, locking his wet lips into hers, then unlocking them soundingly, smooching to move on to her neck and down.

She felt euphoric. She had a vision. She saw millions of blue butterflies pasted on a tree trunk in the depths of the Amazon. A noise broke her spell. She heard hooves near her doorstep. They came closer. They were the army. The soldiers barged into the house through the flimsy door. The army of death wielded sharp swords. Hashim had already seen them first through the window. He picked her up and said, "Run, run to the neighbours."

"What? What about you? Aren't you coming?"

"No, God willing, I'll see you again one day. No goodbyes. Run along, now."

Fear paralysed her senses. She shook like a petrified rabbit at midnight before bright lights on a mountain pass. Hashim continued to scream. He backed off from her. She hid there on the outside, nailed to the wall. She heard scuffles inside the room. Then the noises of the hooves faded. She saw them across the desert, Hashim's back on a horse. He had been taken. That was the last of it. The end of her blue butterfly, which flew into the dusk in a flicker of a flutter.

Hajji and this other boy were much closer. But a dust rose and covered them. The obedient herd was right behind. Jainab ran towards them. She fell on the shifty sands and waited.

Her baby, Hajji, had come at the stroke of midnight. He was born nine months after her husband had been taken. Neighbours assisted in the delivery. Her neighbours were like siblings, who tilled her land and helped her out. They sold her chickpeas in the market and brought money home to Jainab. Jainab paid them their dues. The day they took Hashim, other men in the neighbourhood were out to the market. They found Hashim at home and took him. It was her fault that her kohl beauty, this dark spell kept him indoors. She blamed no one but herself in futile pursuit. Twelve years now, Hashim has been missing.

She sat a nervous wreck on the sand. Hajji and his companion were home at last. He ran up to her and picked her up from the sand. She kissed him and she hugged him.

"Oh! What's this? Why were you so late? I thought they'd taken you," she said exasperated.

"No, but I found someone on the edge of the Gulaag. He's a wounded child soldier."

"Right. Let's bring him in, then, shall we?"

Both Jainab and Hajji walked up to the animal and slid the boy off the camel's back. They carried him into the house, just the way Hashimuddin had carried her as a bride over the threshold of the mud house. The boy had many injuries, she noted, as she laid him down in bed. It was a huge task fixing his wounds. He was a cog in their home, another mouth to feed. But her motherly instincts egged her on to nurse him and to protect this child. Jainab knelt before

him and rubbed off his blood with a loincloth soaked in warm water. His wounds were deep. She applied herbal medicines and put a bandage across his arms and waist. Towards dawn, the boy opened his eyes and asked for water. Hajji ran out to the closest well into the desert through the backdoor and brought back a jar of water. Jainab poured some into the boy's dry lips. She dressed the wounds and thought that this would take some time to recover.

Jainab rose to brew some tea and organise a breakfast in the kitchen. She made falafel. She asked Hajji to come outside. Hajji's eyes were bloodshot from sleeplessness. She gave him red tea in a glass and some falafel with dry dates on a platter.

"These are really nice," he said. "I have been so hungry and tired since last night. I don't think I can tend the sheep today."

"That's okay. You don't need to go anywhere. After breakfast, go sleep with the boy. Do you know his name?" Jainab asked.

"No, he was too weak to talk. I was lucky to even bring him home. I don't even know if he's a friend or foe."

"Don't worry about that. It's not our place to judge the wounded. We do our best to heal them so he can go back to his parents. You took a great risk stealing that camel from the soldiers' camp, though. Where was the herd?"

"Oh! They were around, chewing cactus flowers," Hajji said with a smile and rose to go into his room.

Jainab had just finished in the kitchen when she heard the familiar sounds; the sound of hooves. The horses were back. The soldiers were back. She rushed into the room and carried the boy, asking Hajji to come with her. She went through the backdoor into the desert, straight to the well. She put Hajji in one bucket and the boy in another. The long-roped buckets were knotted up on a pole over the well. Hajji had a few tricks up his sleeves, too. With his nimble fingers, he tied two more tight knots to make a shorter rope for buckets to remain afloat just above the water. Jainab lowered them into the well. She saw the men looking for them inside the house. She slipped behind the well and sat there stuck to its side like a fallen wallflower, not even daring to breathe. Hajji and the boy sat quietly in the tad darkness of the well.

The men went into the shed. Her neighbour had left piles of shearer's sheepskin a couple of weeks ago. They took a pitchfork and poked at the edge and around the shearer's pile. They even forked some out of the depths into the corner of the pile. The men gazed at the well, but thought nothing of it. After a while, they left. Jainab, let out a sigh of relief. She came out of hiding, and saw hoof marks on the sand's outbound trail. She stood and rolled the children back up. They were sweating from fear and heat. Dust rose from the horses' gallops and caused irritation in their throats. "The dust should settle down soon," she told them and brought them inside. She laid them down on the kilim, spread out on the floor. She grabbed a hand fan, fanning them until Hajji and the boy fell asleep. The wounded boy opened his eyes a fraction to take a slit-look at Jainab. After that he lost consciousness. Jainab sprinkled water on his little pale face. He opened his eyes again. He smiled, and went back to sleep. Jainab lay down by her children and fell asleep.

Like an hourglass, the sands slid as time passed. It had been nearly seven days since Hajji brought the boy home. On the morning of the seventh day, she woke up next to Hajji and the boy. The boy showed clear signs of improvement. He curled up in bed and ate for the first time

in seven days. He didn't feel hot or cold. The hooves had not returned. They left them in peace today, to fight another day. The boys sat together outside on the yard, drinking red hot tea which Jainab poured out of a vaporous kettle. She placed it back on the hot clay stove. A neighbour pushed in through the doors.

"I came for my wool," he said.

"Sure, pick them up from the shed," she said.

"Who is this?" he asked, looking at the new boy.

"Oh! This is Hajji's cousin, come here to spend a few days with us."

"I didn't know you had any relatives left."

"Why would you think that?"

"Didn't your tribe get wiped out on the Gulaag some twelve years ago?"

"Did they? What are you saying?" she asked.

"Twelve years have passed and you didn't know?"

"Know what? Why would you think it's us?"

"Because I was there, at your wedding."

"What? And it took you twelve years to tell me this?" she was shocked.

"Well, you know how it is. The army took me the day they butchered your tribe. But I proved not much of a soldier. One dark night, when they lay drunk in the arms of women from your tribe, I took a camel and escaped. It took me days to get home, but when I did, I saw you with Hashimuddin in this house. I was afraid. I hid for many days and didn't speak to anyone."

"Stop! Please stop. Say no more!" Jainab began to cry.

Jainab didn't know what had happened to her tribe. No news travelled thus far. In her heart, she had cherished the idea that her tribe was safe somewhere within the four corners of the world. Back in the day, nomads always didn't exchange news or meet for many years. But this, this distressing news turned her world inside out; she wished these ill tidings never reached her doors. She wished this quiet neighbour had remained so. Her grief swelled like a dust cloud, moments of unsettled thoughts and opaque visions. Grief would settle down surely one day the dust often did. But now it lumped a corner of her stricken heart.

Days went by, Jainab grew paler. She took to bed. Hajji and the boy did what they could to nurse her, but Jainab didn't improve. One day, the boy, now strong enough to move, suggested to Hajji.

"Why don't I go home and bring my parents here so they could take care of your mother?"

"What? Are you crazy? The army will take you back if they find you," Hajji said.

"Well, I'll just have to take my chances. If we don't take care of your mother, she will die," he said. "I shall go tonight."

"Where do you even live?" Hajji asked.

"Across the border, however, I am from the enemy camp, so you know. But we are brothers now, so it doesn't matter. You've saved me, Hajji."

Hajji kept quiet. "Can you go alone? Because I can't leave my mother like this in her present condition. I wish that neighbour had never opened his mouth."

"I know. I also wish that he hadn't," the boy said.

"It's good, though, that mother told him you were my cousin. But, I don't think he

believed her," Hajji said.

The boy nodded. "No. Your mother is really good; she tried to protect me in case he turned out to be a dobber."

"Yeah, she's good," Hajji agreed.

"Okay, then, I'll set out tonight and bring my father back."

"You don't need to because our neighbours will help my mother get better," suggested Hajji.

"Still, I need to go now. I miss my Parents. And the border is just here; I can even see it."

"Well, okay, if you want to, you can go. I hope I won't see you on the Gulaag again."

"I hope not."

That night, Hajji and the boy sneaked out. They ran over dense sand; the little footsteps etched on them. Hajji took him as far as the border. The boys hugged each other and kissed on the cheeks. Just when they turned to go, they saw men marching straight towards them. They ambushed them under their naked sword, which glimmered in the moonlight. The desert air reeked of blood and sweat. The boys began to tremble from the suddenness of it all. They didn't even get a chance to run. They began to cry. It didn't matter whether these were foes or friends. In the end, all became decomposed bodies dumped on Gulaag's tail-road just the same.

Jainab, delirious from grief, called out, "Hajji! Hajji!" But Hajji was nowhere. She forced herself to get out of bed to search for him. She saw the nearly gone little footprints on the sand in the direction of the border. Jainab feared the worst. She dragged herself to her quiet neighbour's house and knocked on the door. She told him about the footprints on the sand.

"If the army has taken them, then I may have a clue as to where they may have been taken."

"Can you help, brother? As you know, I have no one in this world except Hajji."

"I know, sister, Jainab. I am sorry; I brought you such ill tidings. But I thought in twelve years you may have heard something. If I had known…"

"These past twelve years have passed like a dream. I don't even think I saw the rising of the moons or the setting of the suns. My days have been long, as have been my nights. Now, I'm really afraid."

"Please, do not worry. Although I have never had enough courage to face up to the army, I must own up to you, for putting you through this. I am not bad, but I'm also not brave."

Jainab had to leave. She went back to her house while her quiet neighbour figured out what to do. He knew soldiers' behaviour like the back of his hand. He knew exactly what they did and when. All he had to do was muster the courage. Towards late night, he set out in the direction of the footprints. With some measure of precision, these footprints led to army tents tethered along the western front. He proceeded with caution. He even stumbled a few times on the sand. His breathing short and shallow, he approached the army tents. He drew closer. He heard the obnoxious clamour of drunkenness. In the quiet of the night, such sounds only meant they were rapt in sordid pleasure. Stealthily, he continued on his tract to look for the boys. On the southern point, suppressed cries wafted through the air. He opened a tent and found the boys, perched up on tenterhooks. They didn't see him at first. In the dying torch, he walked towards them and whispered.

"I am your Uncle Abdallah, your neighbour, I've come to rescue you."

The boys went very quiet for some time. They couldn't believe their eyes. Then Hajji said, "I saw them put a sword, there, in that corner."

"Is that Hajji?" Abdallah asked.

"Yes."

"I'm here too," whispered the other boy.

"What's your name, boy?" Abdallah asked.

"Hussain."

"Okay, I'm going to unhook you both and get you out of here, okay?"

Then they heard someone cough outside the tent. Abdallah hid away in a dark corner. A man peeked through and saw the boys' straight faces. He went away. Abdallah crawled towards the boys and brought them down to the floor. The suspension caused some trepidation. They sat on the floor to catch a breath and then tiptoed to egress. Once they were out, they ran in the opposite direction. The sands slowed them down and served mostly as impediment. But resilience saved them in the end. They crossed the border into the next kingdom.

Hajji's enemy kingdom was Hussain's homeland. The sun was up. But Hussain couldn't remember the long way to his village. He knew a name: Kundi. They stopped by and asked for directions to get to Kundi. It took them another full day. By the time they had arrived there, they were famished. They found a tea stall on the outskirts of a lush village. The three sat down to eat breakfast. An errand boy served them a platter of yoghurt sauce with dried fruits, falafel, wild chickpea salad, flatbreads, and fried eggs. They could see Kundi from here. The manager of the restaurant had his back towards them. He grabbed a glass of piping red-hot tea and turned around. Hussain saw him first. He screamed, "father, father."

The man heard Hussain and ran towards him. Abdallah saw him, too. A chill ran through him.

"Hashimuddin?" he cried out.

"Who's that?" the man asked and came running to pick up his Hussain. "My name is Hassan Karemi, not Hashimuddin?"

"But that's impossible. I was at your wedding. I am your neighbour. I saw you and sister Jainab together all the time before our army took you," Abdallah had to say.

"Shush! Speak softly," he looked around timidly, then said in a whisper. "What are you saying? Anyway, you brought my son back. I would like to welcome you to my house as my guest tonight."

This was extraordinary. In his wildest dreams, Abdallah couldn't believe this. He accepted the invitation. He had to find out more for sister Jainab. This betrayal was too much to be condone____ Hashimuddin was living a dual life under a different name with a wife present.

At night, a party was held at Hashimuddin's place. Among others, there were his in-laws: his father and uncles-in-law, the entire clan. Abdallah sat down with the father-in-law. They exchanged greetings, then talks turned to politics and war. He told Abdallah how Hussain was abducted while playing with friends. Abdallah asked, "How did you meet Hussain's father?"

"Oh! That is another long story. We found him at Gulaag's edge. He was unconscious and wounded. My brother was passing through one midnight. He found him under the lantern and brought him home. We revived him. But he couldn't remember anything. He was as good as dead. After six months, when he was well again, he started to go out, but he was very weak.

He still walks with a limp, as you can see. He is only fit to do desk work. The army lost interest in him, but they took his son instead. We're grateful to you for bringing him back. We need to be careful next time."

Abdallah didn't say much after that. But he watched Hajji playing with the kid. Technically, they were in the enemy camp, but surprisingly, no one asked where they were from. The party ended. Everyone went to bed. At daybreak, Abdallah woke up. He saw the white crack of light run through the sky. When he came out, he saw Hashimuddin at the gate. They exchanged greetings.

"What my father-in-law told you is incorrect. My memory has always been intact. I always remembered Jainab. My name is not Hashimuddin but Hassan Karemi. As much as I wanted to tell Jainab the truth, I couldn't. I couldn't tell her that I was from across the border, Kundi, the enemy land. Because I was afraid to lose her. Here, I could not tell anyone about her because of severe punishments for marrying an enemy," he stopped. "If I had told them the entire truth, I would be hanging low from the spikes by now, like many in the market square," he asked after a pause. "My Jainab was with a child. Have you seen the child?"

"Yes, little Hajji there? That's him, your little boy. Why do you not leave, leave now with us? People leave all the time, no?" Abdallah asked.

"They do. War is crazy. It does crazy things to people. I do believe that my in-laws would send an army after me if I left. There's Hussain now as well as Hajji, my two boys. The hunt for me would go on. They'll take my sons," he said. "Where could I hide them on the open Gulaag?" Anyhow, to go back to my story, when I got better, my in-laws forced me into this marriage with their daughter. A girl whom no man would have because of her scarred face from fire burns. They had already shackled me, made me a prisoner of their whim. They reminded me of how I owed them my life."

"That's nonsense, you could've tried to leave. Did you at least try? Your sons could be taken anytime, regardless?" Abdallah persisted.

"No, I couldn't. They kept a close watch. This place is full of spies. No one trusts anyone."

"What do you want me to tell sister Jainab, then?"

"It's complicated. The war is upon us. Hussain here, Hajji over in the enemy land, a life in fragments. Jainab my love, magic…all this… a mirage," he murmured.

Hashimuddin went up to Hajji and picked him up. He gave him a tight hug and a kiss. He gave them a camel to cross the formidable border and saw them get reduced to a dot; an apparition along the far side of the horizon. The days of the hummingbirds and the blue butterflies were numbered; the fire-dances and the full moon songs.

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This Melancholic House

By Oguma Hideo
Translated from Japanese by Marissa Skeels

Resigned, I looked up toward the sounds on the roof, lolling as they were. A large murder of crows was flapping about, as brazen as vultures scraping, constantly digging at one another atop my house. I listened to them cantering about on the rooftop, shut up inside the silent room.

Knowing those ominous birds with their black-soled feet were jumping around, I was seized with revulsion. Then, next, came noise from the doorway. The sight of the local dog also made me sick to my stomach. As always, his gait of dragging his hips was such that I couldn't tell at a glance if he was sitting or standing while he used all the effort in him to scrape his body to my door, susurrating like dried grass. I watched him turn tail; his retreating, speckled figure with swathes of missing fur looking just like a baby, and though his neck and limbs were pitifully emaciated, his stomach was swollen like a large flagon of something or other.

The sounds which came to my suburban house were, more than any other, that of those ominous birds and the bald-patched dog. A snowstorm raged for days over snowy fields as wide open as the sea, such that the calm of that day's particular quiet was a silence which was as ruthlessly still as death. Just how bored must my wife have been when she was left alone in that house in the dusting snow after I went to work?

#

She hung Bontaro's swaddling clothes on hemp rope strung across and around the room, and added flecks of coal to the fire one after the other, economizing black, white and yellow bits of them to dry sheets; bouncing our boy on her back as she paced around and around the room's perimeter, ruminating; washing yet again our only two bowls in a basin; bustling about, smoothing down anything and everything.

Bundled-up Bontaro was often abandoned in the center of the room, drawing circles around where he sat plucking straw scraps from the tatami and popping them in his mouth at will along with dried grains of boiled rice, tiny lumps of coal, torn scraps of newspaper, candle stubs, and more. He put what he could into his mouth, swallowed what he could, and spat out what he couldn't. His caregiving mother was slow on the uptake and usually wouldn't notice. Once in a while, she found things he'd spit out.

"Bontaro, what's this? That you had in your mouth just now? Well, what a surprise. It's what's left of the coal, isn't it? Such a silly child, aren't you? Do you think you can just eat anything you can put in your mouth?"

She'd face Bontaro, who couldn't yet walk, and scold him exaggeratedly. At those times, he'd eagerly move his pink lips, his little mouth the apparent conduit for all his summoned energy when he'd issue a meaningless, "Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah."

"You'll be talking soon, won't you, Bontaro?" She would flush with joy.

#

I too was inordinately interested and invested in the matter of his first word. Feeling that his fate could hinge on what he said, we awaited the good or bad fortune it would foretell.

"Bontaro. I'll be just as amazed if you suddenly start speaking in full sentences as I will be if they're lines from the New Testament." If they were the latter, his value would be settled. His impious father detested red caps even more than centipedes, they who roam around selling God via their marching band, their hair close-cropped in the Western style. If Bontaro were to become a member of the Salvation Army, his worth would be cemented.

"Bontaro. Don't give yourself just in service of the Lord."

I reflected on my own infancy. Despite the fact that one's first word is, at first instance, dribbled out as baby prattle, it has to be "pure". Fearing that Bontaro's might be one which is disliked and condemned as taboo by the world, such as "thief", "prostitute", "thug", or "pick-pocket", I strove to make him comprehend words to which society ascribes the greatest beauty, like "flower", "sun", "butterfly", or "star". But which would he remember? Among all the visitors who might have dropped in to our house, only two ever came. Caw, caw, caw, caw, called the crows on the roof, and several days later at the front door, Yip, yip, yip, yip, barked the sick dog with its susurrating skin and missing fur. I fell despondent.

"It's like these blasted crows are trying to tell him something." My wife looked up at the ceiling, toward the shrieking of the nomadic crows on the roof which was so rough it might have peeled back at any moment.

As if in agreement, Bontaro began to mimic them. "Caw, caw, caw, caw." He kept imitating them for ten days, and the sick dog too. Anxiety roiled in me that perhaps he was speech impaired, but not long afterward, he started repeating strange cries. "Marh, marh, marh, marh."

#

Until now, nearby cattle had been kept in barns to shield them from the frigid cold, but once the weather fined up they were put out to stroll atop the snow and so sung daily in joy—Mrrh, mrrh, mrrh, mrrh, mrrh. What Bontaro was inclined to recall was the braying of these cows. Whenever I closed my eyes to think, the knowledge that what he remembered was their voices crying out as if in torment, my idealistic hopes sank as if to the bottom of a ravine.

Neither the sick, vagrant dog, the sinister crows, nor shit served on a plate to an ass could ever remember words such as "flower", "Mr. Sun", "star", or "butterfly". Yet, like them, maybe Bontaro could memorize everything said by an expressionless herd of cattle.

"It's not far-fetched when you think about it," I said, recasting the matter. I'd been trying to instill him into concepts like "flower" in the dead of winter when he couldn't possibly see or touch them. The "sun" hid behind clouds and never so much as peeked out, and light that reached the ground wasn't glow from it, but rather the shining of snow reflecting back on itself.

The season in which butterflies and such danced amid shimmering heat haze was still five months away. During the height of winter's gloom, everything is like a still life. It barely lights up its immediate surrounds with its own illuminations, focused as it is on its need to survive. It is a season without mercy. Why was Bontaro so young? He hadn't seen the arrival of a single spring since he was born. "Flowers", "butterflies", and "sun" require experience and an awareness of beauty, don't they? It was only natural for him to parrot the words of the unique visitors to our house: a dog, crows, and cows.

"As long as he keeps copying all these things he's heard, it's a sign he won't turn out to be mute, isn't it?"

"That's right," I answered my wife, nodding hard, hoping. "He'll definitely remember a

human word next."

Several days quietly passed. Thick fog enshrouded our house, besieging us. As the days were swallowed by it, my feelings seemed to change.

The thin fog of those pretty evenings might have been showing us phantoms in the distance, like secrets, and I took pleasure in wondering what sweet things were out there. I went out the front door and held up Bontaro so that his small mouth could imbibe his fill of it until, in the end, he had a sneezing fit. It was truly amazing how the fog thickened at night, like a heavy, saturated curtain that drew dread over the house like a hood. Although the morning brushed it aside over and over, it always crept back to rest its belly on the roof like a white beast. While it was there, we couldn't see so much as inch into the mist beyond our glass window panes.

Some days, I was menaced by the idea that someone hidden in it might suddenly leap out, or that a bullet would come hurtling toward us out of the gray. Other than beasts and crows, each Saturday brought with it chimney sweeps, their heads as dark as if they were born black, and passers-by with the vocal range of postmen. One day brought two Marxists.

#

If you live in the suburbs and come across as naïve to saleswomen and children, they'll frequently, forcefully, and extortionately spread out their goods at your door and not budge until you buy something, anything. People who pressure you hard to buy Buddhist artefacts anger me more than anyone else. Given that I loathe Buddha and other divinities, I'd long since coached my wife on how to refuse them.

"We don't have a Shinto shrine nor a Buddhist altar here, so not do I not have anywhere to put any amulet (or paper money) that you give me, on the contrary, it'd be a waste of your wares if I took one." I'd taught my wife these kinds of lines. Peddlers of Tenshoukoutai shrines, Inari shrines, and Jesus Christ alike would all stick up their noses and leave, their tongues clicking.

When the two young men we called Marxists came to our front door, my wife delivered the usual lines to drive them away, but they'd come prepared to attack and swept past her, rabbiting away as they strode inside. One of them was so emaciated that he was hollowed out. The other was fat, his chest as swollen as a pregnant woman's. He pulled from his pocket the thing that had inflated him so: chinng, chinng, chinng, chinng, a tambourine.

While he beat it hard, making its bells ring, the other took out a poster from a worn-ragged leather bag and slathered paste onto the wall in the middle of the room to stick it up, putting its poisonously garish color pictures and datasets on display.

"What bold people," my wife thought, of course, at the odd situation.

By the time they left, I was tired from arguing too, and for a fleeting moment the things they'd said really did seem true. But after they'd departed into darkness, their heads being battered with hail, each and every aspect of their visit turned absurd. Everything resumed its calm composure and settled back into melancholy.

However, the two continued their ambushes the following day and the one after, trying to wear me down with their fiery zeal. Crows, dogs, cattle, and two Marxists. These were all that visited our quiet house.

Before I knew it, Bontaro had grown completely chummy with them. He smiled when they held him, eventually dashing urine over on the top of one of their knees.

"Our sacred father, Marx," they kept calling their leader, enthusiastically. Bontaro's eyes were wide and glued to the animated mouths of the young, arguing men. Time after time, they stamped their feet and returned into darkness, their heads being knocked with hail. What role could Marxism play in

our actual marriage? For our household, it would be more useless a thing than a side dish for delicacies or a daikon grater. Theirs was a faith which couldn't grasp how ridiculous it was.

I broke and burst out laughing, only to be slammed with an absurd fear which was no laughing matter. Bontaro's first word. What a thing it would be if he were to suddenly come out with something like "Marx".

In that instance, the only thing I'd feel would be a sense of duty to place him in an empty mandarin box and send him down a river.

###

Oguma Hideo (1901-1940) was a renowned socialist poet, journalist, artist, and critic from Hokkaido, Japan, who was the backbone of several Tokyo artist collectives in the 1930s before his death from tuberculosis. Uniquely, he resisted censorship despite being jailed several times for his involvement in communism. Some of his poetry has been published in English, and translations of his short stories have appeared in *Inkwell* (January 2019) and *The Airgonaut* (August 2019).

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Sisters

By Amber Foster

"Your sister called me today," my mother says. When my face doesn't change expression, she adds, "You'll find this interesting. She mentioned you."

"By name?"

"By name."

The Skype window on my laptop is a tiny window to another world. Over my mother's shoulder, sunlight streams through the open windows of my parents' Oahu condo complex. Beyond that bright rectangle, the shadow of a palm tree, outlined by a sun that has already set, on my side of the Pacific. My mother's hair is a white cloud around a sun-browned face, creased with smile lines; I'm reminded that we are all getting old.

The last time my sister and I had a conversation was around 1998—before the silent treatment began. People outside our family inevitably ask: what happened? They mean: what did you do?

It's strange that she mentioned me by name, even in casual conversation. For decades, my sister has referred to me only as she or her. If I were in a J.K. Rowling novel, I'd be She-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

At nearly every family gathering, we become amateur archaeologists, brushing away the sediment of our shared past, attempting to trace back my sister's hostility towards me to some familial catastrophe—a fire, a flood. But there are slow catastrophes—the kind that emerge out of a thousand tiny mishaps, like the accumulating ash of Pompeii.

"She called about Lottie," Mom continues. "She's on her deathbed again, apparently, and she actually said, 'you're always on my case about not talking to Amber, and you won't even talk to your own mother.'"

"And?"

Her chair squeaks as she shifts position. "And I said I was surprised Lottie wasn't dead yet."

The silence between my sister and I is not the first such dispute in our family; the Jewish side of our family contains rich veins of eccentricity. Lottie, my maternal grandmother, was never particularly good at being a grandmother, or a mother. Years ago, she and my mother had a falling out, and their conversation was restricted to brief, clipped phone conversations, conducted in the tone you might use when talking to a telemarketer.

"I said to her, 'I tried for years,'" Mom continues. "I gave and gave, and all she did was take. I told your sister, 'at least I tried with my mom. When did you ever do that with Amber? When did you ever reach out, and even try to be civil?'"

That word: civil. Is it civility, if you say thank you and please, but only if others are watching?

"What did she say?"

"She didn't say anything, of course. What could she say?"

#

On TV sitcoms, one sister is inevitably prettier, smarter, and more favored by teachers and peers. "Every time they turn around, they hand her a blue ribbon or something," exclaims Jan Brady in "Her Sister's Shadow," the classic 1971 episode of The Brady Bunch. Jan's frustrated outcry would later become synonymous with sister rivalry: "Marcia, Marcia, Marcia!"

#

Liz is ten; I'm seven. She's the pretty one, delicate and fair. Strangers coo over her on the street. Look at those freckles! Like a nineteenth-century damsel, the sun gives her headaches. As a result, we mostly play indoors, creating Barbie universes out of Kleenex boxes and scotch tape.

Her imagination is unparalleled, so I'm content to play secondary characters: Ken, Skipper, My Little Pony. We create Barbie cities on every surface of the living room, our shared story going on for days, the dolls left each night in the position of their latest cliffhanger.

We have few friends. Dad's career with the Air Force has turned us into perpetual newcomers, the kind of kids who never quite manage to wear the right clothes or use the right slang. Liz isn't in my grade, so she can't protect me from the mean girls who sneak up from behind and push me off the swings. Later, I'll learn from Mom that the bullies got to Liz, too, although we never spoke of it then, or ever.

"We're running away," she says, one summer afternoon. For six months, we've lived in a single-family home in San Bernadino, California. Our neighborhood is a suburban wasteland surrounded by rolling brown hills.

After we run away, my sister tells me, we'll be wild girls, roaming the hills and drinking water from streams and stealing food to survive. We won't need anyone, except each other. I see the potential problems with this plan, but say nothing; Liz's favor is like being chosen to join a secret club.

In the kitchen, she lowers bologna onto slices of wonder bread, as we'd watched our mother do countless times. The sandwiches go into her school backpack, along with a few juice boxes and snacks. She determines that we'll climb to the top of the hill at the end of our cul-de-sac, as we had with Dad, before he left again. The military took him away from us for weeks at a time, sometimes months; he'd bring back apologies in the form of trinkets: a kimono from Japan, a bamboo jewelry box from the Philippines. He'd try to cram weeks of fatherhood into the intervals between missions, spoiling us with ice cream, bowling, board games, trips to the movies.

The hike was on one of the good days. We climbed and climbed, and when I got tired, Dad lifted me up onto his shoulders. From that height, the sky was the perfect blue of a swimming pool, while below, endless rows of single-family homes were spread over the landscape like doll's houses.

No one stops us as we slip out the front door. Mom is in the living room, watching her soaps, my little brother curled up on the sofa next to her, too little for our games. On the street, the beige houses are locked up tight to keep out the summer heat, their air conditioners buzzing like swarms of bees. The asphalt wavers; heat radiates up through the soles of my Keds.

The hill looms over us, a wilderness not yet corrupted by suburban blight. Ominous, without our father's comforting presence. I suspect Liz doesn't want to run away so much as recapture that feeling of rightness, our family whole, the bullies far away and below us, as insubstantial as one of our made-up stories.

Sweat trickles down my back. The closer we get to the base of the hill, the more plodding my footsteps become. I think of the cool interior of my bedroom, the half-finished fantasy novel steepled on my bedside table.

Liz takes my hand, pulls. "Come on." The ground rises up, a motionless wave of brown, dead grass.

I dig in my heels. "I don't want to."

"But we're almost there!"

"You go." I hate the quavering in my voice.

Liz glares at me with her landmine look; I flee.

Half an hour later, I hear the front door open from where I sit on the living room floor. I expect her to pick a fight, but she doesn't. All the rest of that day, and the day after, she plays alone in her room, her door closed. She ignores my knocks and entreaties. This is the most powerful weapon in her arsenal—pretending I don't exist. It's worse than shoving or hitting or throwing things. By not acknowledging me, I am rendered insignificant.

#

In the Book of Genesis, sisters Leah and Rachel are both married to Jacob, their first cousin. The two sisters' rivalry centers on who can bear Jacob the most sons: And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, give me children, or else I die (Genesis 30:1). After Rachel had a son, Joseph, her rivalry with Leah isn't mentioned again. Rachel would later die giving birth to a second son.

#

I'm fifteen, Liz is eighteen. I watch her slip out into the back yard, and follow. She leans against the stucco wall, out of eyeshot of the kitchen window. She's wearing her prized possession, an oversized black leather jacket, although it is too warm out for a coat. When she sees me, she straightens, then relaxes, as if saying, *it's only you*.

At school, we're strangers. She's a senior, and, according to Mom, hanging with a bad crowd. For the first time in her life, her grades are dropping. Between classes, she walks past me with her coterie of friends, her gaze fixed on some point above my head.

"Hey, isn't that your sister?" one of her friends once asked.

"Her? Nah, I don't have a sister," she'd said, and kept walking.

I haven't told anyone about the smoking. To our parents, smoking is a sin on par with murder, even though we all know both of them used to smoke, in their younger, wilder days.

Now, a cigarette is perched between two of Liz's pale fingers. She takes a long drag, the way people do on TV. Without speaking, we watch the marine shape of the Ray Vac as it meanders along the bottom of the pool, sucking up dead bugs and cypress needles. Its hoses gurgle, and a jet of water splashes the surface of the water. She exhales slowly, the smoke drifting out over chlorine-scented water.

"Can you get me some of those?" I ask. I extinguish my restless hands by shoving them in my pockets.

She squints at me. "You smoke?"

I feign nonchalance. "Sure, sometimes."

Although I will never be a smoker, I'm smart enough to know that bumming a smoke is an all-access pass to an exclusive social sphere. You learn everything in the smoker's circle, like

who's having sex and who's doing hard drugs and who's pregnant and who's dropping out.

"What do you smoke?" Liz asks, trying to catch me in a lie.

"Marlboro Reds." Reds are the cigarettes favored by boys, stronger and more masculine than menthols or cloves.

Liz gives me an appraising look, then extends the hand with the cigarette, her gaze never leaving my face. A test.

I take the lit cigarette and put it to my lips. The line of ash is almost to the filter, still damp from Liz's saliva. I take in the last, bitter drag and turn my head to blow the smoke out of the side of my mouth, as I'd seen real smokers do. I force myself not to cough, although my eyes water.

I pass it back. Liz stubs the butt out on a rock, then places the rock back on the ground upside-down, concealing the black smear. The butt goes back into the pack, which disappears into the inside breast pocket of her jacket.

"Okay," she says. "I'll get you some. Bring me the money tomorrow."

I'm triumphant. As a teenager, Liz' aloofness has only increased. Our parents work evenings and weekends, so we rarely have family dinners. Instead, we prepare grilled cheese sandwiches or chicken nuggets and fries, then retreat into our respective rooms. My brother, the popular one, is usually away at some friend's house, playing basketball or video games.

The more she withdraws, the more I crave her attention. I've become an adept liar, knocking on her door, pretending I need advice about bras or periods or boys, things I learned years ago from eavesdropping on other girls at school. The right question, phrased the right way, will grant me access into her inner sanctum.

Sometimes, when she isn't home, I sneak into her room and snoop in her drawers. Looking for secrets, finding none. Instead, her room is a museum of childhood. There are baseball cards, stuffed animals, board games—each item collected and stored and never, ever played with. In the closet, her childhood Barbie dolls stand in their original boxes, their arms and legs fixed back in place with wires.

A week after she gives me the cigarettes, I'm caught with them.

"You won't get in trouble if you tell me who gave them to you," Dad says. I can lie to my mother, but never to him.

Liz and I are both grounded. She says: I'll never trust you again. I don't believe her then, although, eventually, I will.

Years later, friends will say: *It's nothing*! The tattling of sisters—*we all do it, we've all done it*. Was that it?

Maybe, I say, my mind still counting a lifetime of trivial betrayals. Ash, piling up, the people of Pompeii sweeping it away, thinking, it will pass.

#

Sisters who band together in the face of austerity or oppression is a common theme in films, books, and TV. In the classic novel, Little Women, the four March girls are united by their lack of wealth, the absence of their father. They are, Alcott writes, "a bright little band of sisters," and the novel traces their trials and tribulations. At seven points in the novel, Alcott uses the term sister as an adverb, as in: sisterly zeal, sisterly adoration, sisterly devotion, sisterly confidences. The four siblings confide in each other, congratulate their successes, and critique their failures with kindness. The great tragedy of the book is when one of the sisters becomes ill and dies.

#

It's 2010, Christmas. Our family celebrates in the fashion of atheists and agnostics: lots of Santa, no Jesus. It is also the last Christmas my sister and I will spend under one roof.

Liz lives in Oregon now, working as an administrator for an electric company. After a few years of drifting around after high school, she went back to school, got her degree, got a good job. I imagine her getting dressed every morning before dark, driving to work, sitting at a desk. Smiling and chatting with co-workers. Drinking coffee out of a mug with Got Coffee? written in bold, black letters. Through the family grapevine, I know she has a house, a cat, a 401k, health insurance. I know that, like me, she plays computer games. She likes sci-fi and fantasy. I imagine us being like real sisters, who pick up the phone, who talk about *A Princess Bride* or *The Labyrinth*, two films I know we both love.

Her fiancé has a receding hairline and a well-paying office job. In his spare time, he paints miniatures: tiny, sword-bearing figurines from Dungeons and Dragons. My mother calls him good husband material. In our conversations, Mom gushes about how happy she is to see one of her daughters "settled": code for partnered up, gainfully employed, living in a house with a mortgage.

I'm thirty-two years old. I live at home, working various part-time jobs, including substitute teaching and handing out menus and rolled-up crayon packs at Mimi's Café and Restaurant. I'm applying to Ph.D. programs, where I will eventually find refuge from a post-recession economy.

"This has to stop," Dad announces.

The three of us have converged in the upstairs bedroom, where we won't be overheard. The rooms in this house look like display rooms in furniture stores—beige sofas with colorful throw-pillows, the walls adorned with framed art prints bought at cruise ship auctions. Even after Dad retired from the military to work as a property manager for Mom's real estate business, my parents continue to move every three or four years, as if they can't kick the habit. The walls of my temporary room, a former guest room, are bare and white except for a framed print of Betty Boop, Mom's favorite cartoon.

Dad sits in the folding chair at the folding table I use as a desk, the only furniture besides the bed. I perch myself on the edge of the mattress, my back straight, my heart fluttering like a trapped bird. Liz stands near the door, her arms crossed over her chest, frowning.

Since the silent war began, my parents have maintained the delicate truce. Conflict is to be avoided at all costs. Every once in a while, Grandma Lily, my paternal grandmother, will give a dramatic sigh and claim it's her "dying wish" that my sister and I reconcile. Nothing changes; Grandma Lily doesn't die.

My sister intimidates me, although I'll never say this aloud. We were typical latchkey kids, unsupervised and little wild, given to violent outbursts if pushed over the edge. I once punched my little brother in the gut so hard he doubled over and turned eggplant purple. "You could damage his kidneys!" my mother had screamed. During junior high, I refused to get out of Liz's way, and she hit me over the head with a frying pan. I remember, with vivid clarity, the resonant *dong*! of metal striking my skull, the bright flecks that danced across my vision. My own revenge was informed by childhood bullies: the key was to wait until she was looking the other way before shoving, running away.

We're well past such petty violence now, but there's a stillness to the way she stands in the doorway, the way a cat might glare at the hand of a stranger, ears back, ready to strike.

She'll talk to you, Mom had insisted. Negotiations had occurred behind closed doors, as they had for years. Thus far, Liz had managed a "Hello," while glaring at me with an expression that willed me to an early grave. At Christmas Eve dinner, we sat around the table and feigned polite chitchat, but the conversation fell flat when she elbowed her fiancé under the table for speaking to me.

"All we want is for you to be civil to each other," Dad says. He runs a hand over his bald pate. His fingers ridged with arthritis, a reminder that my parents are getting older, that we all are.

"I am being civil," she insists, immediately seeing through Dad's placating each other.

Dad looks at me with a pleading expression; I'm not following the script. It's been so easy, over the years, to reply to silence with silence.

I say: "Why do you hate me?"

Liz' gaze remains fixed on Dad, as if I haven't spoken. "I don't care about her enough to hate her," she says, her voice flat.

"That's unacceptable," Dad says.

"I don't care," she shoots back, leaving the room. The intro music to *It's a Wonderful Life* begins to blare from the TV speakers downstairs, the volume high enough for Grandma Lily to hear.

"Unacceptable," Dad repeats, more to himself than to me. He gives a slow shake of his head, but there is an unfamiliar resignation in his expression.

The following Christmas, Liz isn't invited. Our door is open, but only if you can be civil. My parents have drawn a line in the sand. Civility isn't silence; civility is filling the air hellos and goodbyes and all the bullshit politeness that comes between. Being civil to people you hate is what keeps families together, I think now.

Liz rejects their offer and tries to negotiate, as if we are two parties in a divorce: I'll come this year, and She can come next year. When that doesn't work, she asks why things can't go back to the way they were before.

I expect my parents to capitulate, but they hold firm. One Christmas passes, and another, and another. I selfishly revel in conflict-free holidays; it is a relief, this not-caring, this not-having-to-care. I've won the war, but as with all wars, victory comes at a cost. There are the lamentations, the dissections of our family history, Grandma Lilly's endless deathbed wishes.

I don't see my sister again.

#

Considerable media attention also goes to sisters who commit murder. In 2015, sisters Mary-Beth Tomaselli and Linda Roberts killed their elderly, ailing father. Their secret wouldn't come to light until three years later, in 2018, after Linda confided in the man both women were sleeping with. The Washington Post referred to it as "the perfect murder," foiled only years later by their love for a man. The story was reprinted in nearly every major news outlet. In 2018, famous sister Khloé Kardashian produced a crime series called "Twisted Sisters," which recounts true crime stories of murderous sisters. The show is currently in its second season.

#

"My sister said my name in conversation yesterday. My mom practically had a heart

attack." On the other end of the line, I can hear the sound of running water, the clink of dishes.

"That whole situation is so weird," Laura says. "I mean, I may not always get along with my brothers, but that's a whole other level."

I met Laura during grad school in Texas, eight years ago. We live in different states now—she went South, I went West—but we still chat most Saturdays by phone, while doing our respective household chores.

"You know, you're more like a sister to me than she is," I tell Laura, pushing a broom across my living room floor. "Not just anyone would drive two hours to the Houston airport, after midnight, to pick me up after I got stranded by American Airlines."

"Oh, you mean the night before I had to run a marathon?"

"You passed the friendship test, for sure," I say, and we laugh. When we hang up, I will think: *there shouldn't be a test*. Even now, in my 40's, a part of me always assumes that, if I ask for help, no one will come.

In my 20's, I monopolized girlfriends' attention and time, envious of their partners and other friends.

I can't be your friend any more, a former college friend told me, before a cutting off all contact. *It's too much work*. Since then, I've learned to suppress my clingier impulses. Or hide them better.

Through the family grape vine, I learn that Liz got divorced, lost her job, got another one, moved to a new house. She has housemates, a cat. Like me, she never had children. Like me, she moves through the world alone.

My parents worry about what will happen after they die. *We don't think she'll cut you out of the will, but you never know*, Mom says. They've made contingency plans, because, with Liz, you never know.

We may never stop asking why. Some stories have no ending; we can only brush aside the ash, weave together a narrative from what is left. The missing pieces take on a life of their own, like tiny splinters dug so deep into your skin they become a part of you.

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Ein Mann ist weg

By Dayna Gross

When I woke up with the black cat on my chest, I intrinsically understood how the day would unfold. I raised myself from the bed, before sunrise, to light up the stove and brew my ritualistic coffee of silence and dream world. Come to think of it, the hour could have been after sunrise, but in a ground floor apartment in Berlin, in Autumn, one could never be too sure if the sun did rise that day. Berlin's customary army of shoulder-to-shoulder clouds often made it difficult to reach any absolute conclusions over the cycles of nature.

I was committed to traveling for his birthday, to carry on his tradition now that he couldn't. I planned the trip too late to buy an affordable ticket anywhere adventurous, so I decided to roll out to Liepnitzsee, a supposed crystal-blue lake among the Brandenburg bush. It seemed fitting to make my way towards water and forest, though perhaps I should have considered how close it was to the Day of the Dead, to Halloween, or what the forest symbolized for a woman. After my dark coffee infiltration and releasing my dream-world onto the page, I dressed while side-stepping the black cat, who so frequently attacked bare ankles for no earthly reason.

Besides for grey mist, I don't remember much of the way to the Gesundbrunnen station. From there I caught the regional train, which pulled its passengers outside the populated city-ring. Everything seemed to run on schedule, eventhough I wasn't committed much to a schedule until the train stopped in Karow and refused to transit any further. Karow was hauntingly recognizable. It was the stop before Buch, before Palliative Care, where he went for his dialysis treatments, October of the prior year. There were signs pitched like capital 'A's by the tail end of the wet platform, directing the remaining passengers to the bus that would take them closer to their desired destination. Though German's are famous for their precision, I had difficulty finding the haltestelle.

A working man, commonly attractive, middle-aged, was the only other passenger who exited the train with me. We stood for a brief moment in front of the sign together. He lit a cigarette while stoically reading the 'A' sign with his eyes, said something to me in German with an Eastern accent, and we simultaneously trotted down the stairs. He went off to find a Späti for more cigarettes, or so I thought I heard him say. I went wandering around the wet Karow searching for the bus stop, for something more than foliage and silence. The trees were hanging on to their dripping autumnal garments, the dim houses were packed in, wall to wall, one connected to the other, as if to preserve the heat as coolly as possibly. When I found the laminated sign hanging around the bus pole, I saw the workingman approaching with a similar distressed expression. We were similarly confused as to which side of the street to wait on. I wasn't going to give up now, though the temptation was there, watering my doubt beyond my determination. A bus arrived on the opposite side of the street and we ran for it.

He asked the driver to confirm the direction and we separately took our seats, me by the front of the bus, the worker somewhere towards the back. When the bus arrived further down the train line, we stepped down from the bus and began the usual dialogue, offering the other a

brief background check. Mid-conversation, we heard the rolling wheels of an approaching train and ran for our lives. He threw a lit cigarette flying behind him, I eyed it like a missile descending from a Junkers Ju 87. I tried to keep up with his long steps up the ramp leading to the platform. We jumped through the train's open doors, looked for an enlightening screen and confirmed we were going further away from the city and not on a miscarried return.

He asked me where I was going. When I answered Liepnitzsee he was impressed. He must have imagined my body swimming courageously against the cold lake and I let him imagine. He said he was on his way to a construction job, though he missed his last job and was running late for this one. He blamed his delay on the transportation. He had a soft polish face, the typical round dumpling nose, round blue eyes, darker than usual, and the dirt left behind by a five-o'clock shadow, though this one was more like a 48-hour shadow. He wore a one-piece dark blue uniform with grey reflector lines over the pockets and two lines fastened close to each hip. He spoke in a slow low voice like a man who smokes a cigarette under the awning and waits for the rain to pass. Having to talk in German forced me to think before speaking and withhold information. I found myself laughing along with this stranger on the quiet train, our joy colliding overhead, something beautiful was unfolding. I spoke low to match his rhythm, until his destination arrived. I didn't want him to go, we were in this thing together now. A quick panic pierced through me. He looked at me with a pair of apologetic eyes, perhaps he's used to disappointing women, and he exited the train to fulfill his duties.

Left alone for two more stops, I suppressed the feelings of love that could chase a stranger for months. I was traveling for something else. I unfolded a piece of scrap paper with black ink, directions in my own handwriting, thin lines indicating change, and stepped off the train at Wandlitz, Wandlitzsee Bhf. I was the only passenger who left the one-track train. I walked into a cabin connected to the platform and asked an elderly Eastern German woman tucked inside selling postcards, magnets and maps for directions to the lake. I crossed the track and followed white and blue painted symbols on damp trees to guide me along. The streets were lined with frigid, untrusting Eastern German homes. Some of the houses had pumpkins or scarecrows on their front lawn which looked more haunting than treating. When I finally saw humans in the flesh, they were two men sawing wood in their driveway, which was of little comfort. The only sound that was missing to accompany the 'jjjjj-ing' chainsaw was a piercing shriek of a single woman full of doubt and fear. I continued to deny the feeling that followed me for hours, possibly for months.

Germans, I thought and walked down the forlorn streets until I reached the forest. I looked around for soothing signs and only found autumn foliage, though beautiful, certainly dying. The forest floor was bedded in oranges, reds and yellows lifting the earth into a sort of glow, as if they were the last signs of life already seeping into the underworld. I shifted my heavy backpack filled with water, notebooks, cameras, an extra sweater and stepped into the forest brush. The cool earth rushed in through my nostrils, against my chest and out through my mouth. At first, the glow stressed something clandestine which felt like a reassuring hand luring me in. I obediently followed. I was doing this for him, I couldn't turn away now. It was him daring me to accomplish my goal, to confront, to acknowledge what lies beneath.

Once I stepped further under the awning of the forest, I removed my backpack and jacket, set my camera to a slow shutter on self-timer and moved through the mystical aura like a

vanishing figure among the departed. The sudden silence of the scene infused me with warmth and I walked on, too confidently. Then I saw a tree, which must have plunged forward from old age, with its face buried into the edge of a small muddy pond. Its dark roots and security were dangling in the air like rotting umbilical cords. I stepped closer to the tree to investigate its shape and a feverish chill ran through my body. I felt like turning around and returning to the safety of human activity, which only seemed imaginary now. The tree was flaunting death, testing my will as if my will was something whole. Something inside of me cried, *turn around, leave this place, death, death, death*. But I forebodingly walked on.

There were piles of logs, hints of human activity, and a decomposing bench covered in lush moss further down the path. The foliage clung to my boots coated my footsteps. I considered taking a seat when I began to hear a terribly loud sound ricocheting through the dense air. The sound trembled through my thoughts, but my eyes begged me to confirm the source. I moved forward, closer to that horribly loud sound booming through the forest's solitude, and though I was fervently shaking, I continued. I finally reached a clearing which could only mean one thing. There were three or four houses and a steep path leading down to the lake with a modest symbol for the ferry nailed to a log.

Relieved, I walked down to the water. Yes, I would go to the restaurant on the island in the middle of the lake and order potatoes and a German pizza, any vegetarian options that were available and indulge. That's what he would have done. I would enjoy a hearty meal to celebrate his birth, his life. The noise grew unbearably loud, I looked up to the clearing over the lake and was shocked against the soaring beats of a helicopter coming right towards me. It descended and hovered before me like a beast in flight. The helicopter neared my small figure and inspected my existence. Two men looked through me and drifted away. I saw POLIZEI written in white across the side of the black copter. I backed away, turned around and ran up the hill.

At the top of the hill was a man in a tight plaid shirt looking up at the helicopter, then down at me.

"Was hast passiert?" I tried asking in German.

"Ein man ist weg." [Pause] "Bist du alien?"

Naturally, the last question a woman wants to hear while in a forest alone, especially from a putrid man like that. Just as I thought it couldn't get any worse, he asked, "Hast du angst?" *Aren't you afraid*?

At first, I tried to neutralize the situation by asking him if I could throw my coffee cup in the black trash container at the end of his gravel driveway. When he nodded yes, I opened the trash and found a thick array of shattered woodchips packed tightly inside the container. I looked up at him again, knowing how strict Germans are with their separated trash. He nodded his red swollen face dry with white flakes encouragingly and I laid my cup inside the bin. He smiled, revealing the thick yellow plaque coating his teeth like scrambled eggs and that's when I decided to run for it.

I ran as fast as I could. I felt as if a part of me would have broken through my body if it could have, just to gain speed. The only thing holding me back was gravity and my body's limitations. My backpack was cutting into my back from all sides as it jumped with my flight. I imagined the large hobbit calling the other young men, who occupied the three quiet homes, to come out and have a little fun. There was no way back to the train but through the dense autumn forest. I imagined Mark now laughing from above, or behind, revealing his dark Scorpio humor and smoker's teeth stained black between his molars.

As the adrenaline pumped through my veins I thought, *this is real fear. This is what fear feels like when you're trembling for your life. This is what he wants me to feel. Though death from an illness must not make you feel as alive as this.* Death from an illness is a slow release, of disbelief, with a feeling that must not activate the adrenaline gland, but somewhere deeper, somewhere harder to locate and identify when the doctors tell

you that you have an incurable disease, giving you a maximum of two more years to live. That sudden shift is nothing like running through a forest terrified of rape and a powerful beating, it's quieter, softer and moves with a sort of grace. I must have ran for 30 minutes through the forest, the sound of the booming helicopter faded in the sullen distance. I could feel the trees thinning and I knew I was close to the town, away from the forest's mischief.

As I cut through the empty paved streets, I found the Halloween decorations more disturbing, they were in sync with the two or three wobbling women, walking their small dogs, with downcast eyes. They were filled with a surreal bitterness I had no interest in penetrating. I found myself holding my breath as if I could inhale the rotten feeling deteriorating within the space where their winter souls were meant to mourn for closeted centuries. I felt the haunting energy remove itself from my outer layers as I crossed the train track.

While I waited for the train to arrive, I thought about what it could imply. *Was someone murdered and the police were looking for his body? Or, was there a criminal out there, hiding in the forest*? I knocked my heals against the wet pavement, shook the dirt from my soiled boots and entered the machine that would take me back to the security of strangers, storefronts and traffic lights.

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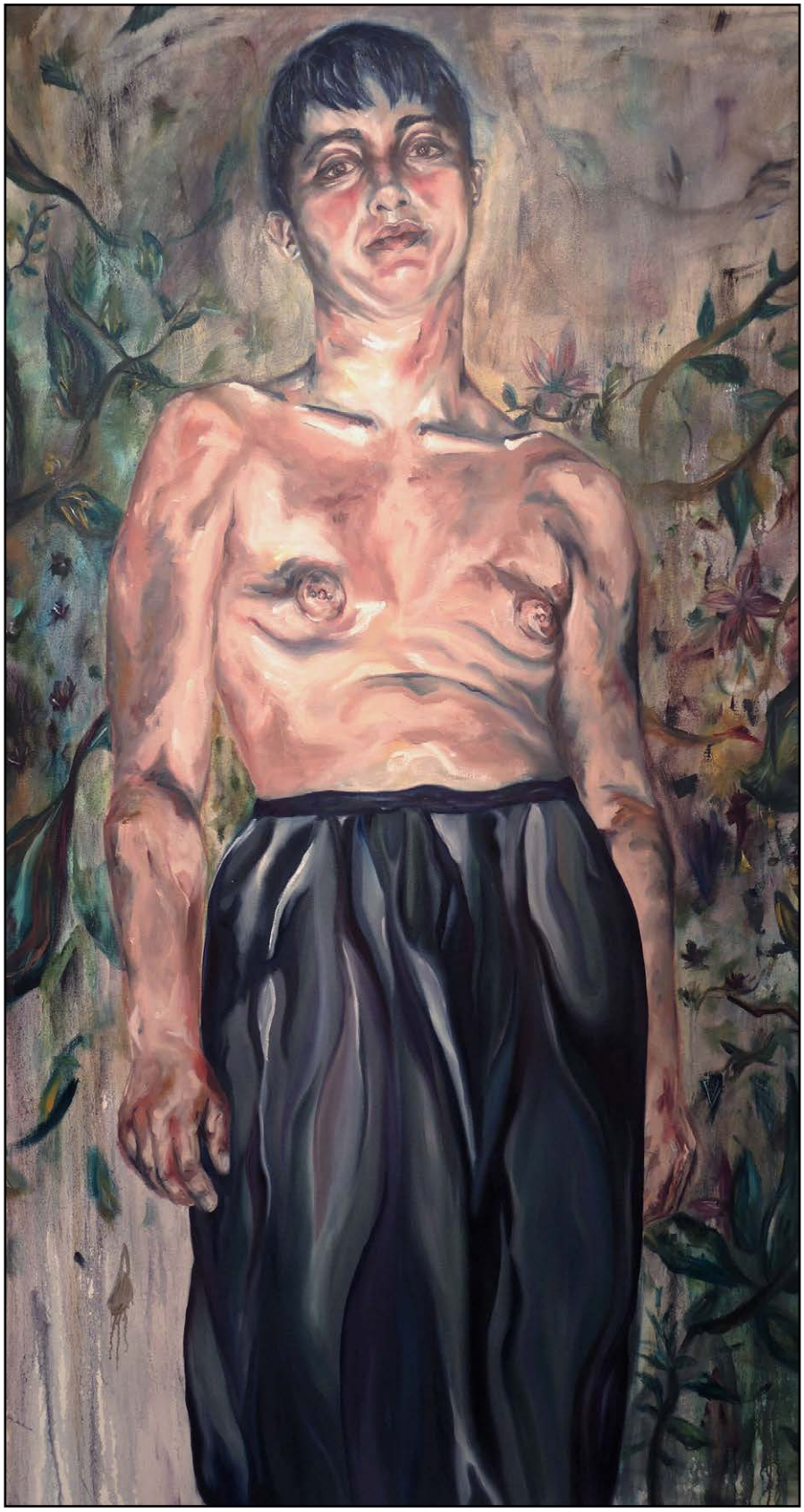

Genesis (Molly): Oil on canvas

Brea Weinreb

Rose-Red City Half as Old as Time

By Liz Rose

The desert mountains were beige and gray and huge and looked like the moon. It appeared as though they were moving alongside our bus, just more slowly--guarding us, perhaps, from something larger and unbeknownst to us at the time--but of course it was us, not the mountains, that were in motion. We were zigzagging our way at 40 miles an hour through the windy roads of the Negev desert from the inside of an air-conditioned bus. Scott, my ex-boyfriend, had been dozing pretty much the whole ride from Jerusalem down to Eilat, the southern tip of Israel that sits on the Red Sea. I took breaks from reading my *Lonely Planet* guidebook to stare out the window. At one point I tilted my head to try to see the tops of the mountains, almost bumping into Scott's shoulder--a pool of drool had accumulated at the side of his open mouth as he slept--but I couldn't see their peaks. Others were sleeping on the bus, too. Except for a baby who cried on and off, it was mostly quiet. I was pretty sure a young couple was fooling around in the back of the bus, alternating between giggling and moaning. I looked at Scott. I was angry he was missing the desert view. "I'm just along for the ride," he'd said an hour earlier. For a few seconds I watched him sleep and knew I'd never love him.

We were on our way to Amman, Jordan, then Petra, then back down to Egypt before returning to Jerusalem. Once we arrived to Eilat, we crossed over to Aqaba, then took another bus back up north to Amman. I had been living in Jerusalem for a few years as a graduate student at Hebrew University when I received Scott's letter saying he was coming to Israel. I wasn't excited about the trip; which is to say, I was looking forward to traveling to two countries I'd never visited before, but not necessarily with Scott. We had dated for a year several years back when I was a junior in college in Madison, Wisconsin. It was an anti-climatic breakup. I just didn't really like him. He annoyed and bored me.

Three years later after no contact, I received the letter from Scott saying he was coming to Israel to visit family. "If you're free when I'm there," he wrote, "maybe we can go somewhere together." He happened to be arriving during my semester break from the university--later, I'd wonder if this had been on purpose since he knew I'd be on break. I had been wanting to visit Jordan and Egypt so I suggested we go together. It was 1994, just six months after Israel and Jordan signed the peace treaty--people could finally enter from Israel. I watched the signing on Israeli TV. I was doing some editing and translating work for an elderly man in Jerusalem's Katamon neighborhood the day of the treaty and we watched it together in his living room and drank mint tea. My boss lived on Palmach Street, a short walk from my apartment which was across the street from the Jerusalem Theatre on Chopin Street. The day after the signing, I cut out pictures of Prime Minister Rabin and King Hussein in the newspaper. In one of the photos, Rabin lit Hussein's cigarette--the photo caption read, "Peace Pipe."

We had not been able to take a linear route from Jerusalem to Amman because the Allenby Bridge, which we would have taken from Israel into Jordan, hadn't yet reopened. It was December, and Jordan and Israel had only signed the peace treaty in October. We called the bridge *Gesher Allenby* because that's what Israelis call it. In Arabic it's called *Al-Karameh*, the bridge Palestinians use to leave the West Bank. Jordanians call it the King Hussein Bridge. Shortly after the peace treaty, a new modern crossing was built next to the older one with help from the Japanese Government. The distance between Amman and Jerusalem is only 157 miles, but because we couldn't use the bridge, we had to take a bus from Jerusalem 192 miles down south to Eilat, cross over into Aqaba, and then take another bus back up north 202 miles back to Amman.

I didn't plan the trip well. It made sense for me to go during my semester break, of course, but I didn't realize until we were already on the bus that it was Ramadan, the Muslim holiday where strict fasting is observed from sunrise to sunset for about a month. In certain cities, eating and drinking in public is forbidden. Jordan is roughy 94 percent Muslim and about 70 percent Palestinian. Most of the two million Palestinians who live in Jordan came as refugees, or from families of refugees, from Israel, between 1947 and 1967. About 370,000 live in refugee camps inside Jordan.

We left Jerusalem at 7:00am and had been traveling the whole day, so by the time we had crossed over into Aqaba and headed back up north towards Amman, it was just after sundown. We were the only Americans on the bus. All of a sudden, everyone around us started drinking water out of gallon-sized milk cartons and lighting cigarettes. They'd take a long swig with their eyes closed, the cold water rushing down their throat, deep into their organs as though it contained a special life-force, then would pass the cartons to the next person. When one came to me, I smiled graciously, stupidly, trying to pretend I was familiar with this ritual. They deeply inhaled their cigarettes, too. As a young twenty-something living abroad, I had no problem joining them in this ritual, though when I smoked, it was with bravado. Then I wondered how we were going to find food during the day on this trip.

We arrived at the youth hostel in Amman in the early evening, and we crashed from the long day of travel. In the morning, I woke up before Scott did, and I read about the ancient Roman amphitheatre, our first stop in the city, in my *Lonely Planet* book. We drank some instant coffee in the hostel lobby, which wasn't really a lobby, more like a couple of beaten-down brown chairs in a small room with peeling teal and orange paint, a black kettle on a counter for hot water. The instant coffee seemed an attempt by the hotel owners to keep the tourists happy but not coddled. They'd hydrate us, they figured, even during Ramadan, but our search for food wasn't their problem. Luckily I hadn't thrown away the bruised tangerine and crusty bread I had brought with me from Jerusalem the day before. I shared some with Scott and we got a taxi.

I read that Amman's old Roman amphitheatre is cut into the northern part of a hill so that the sun doesn't disturb the spectators. It sits low and rises up as you near it, which I could see from the cab as we got closer. I tried not to look at Scott when we were in the taxi because he looked bored again--he had just yawned loudly enough for the cab driver to hear--and it made me angry.

Scott had two ways of being, it seemed--either he hated something or he was apathetic. The side of his mouth was pinched, like he was about to contradict you, his lips always on the verge of saying, "But…" or, "So?" But beyond these things that annoyed me, Scott was a normal guy, and for some reason I wasn't aware of at the time, this irritated me too. He wanted--someday, "down the road," he'd say--to get married and buy a house and have kids. I was sure that on the weekends he'd want to invite other couples over with their kids for dinner--a BBQ in the backyard, of course, with red-checkered plastic tablecloths--that you make with all the cutlery you got as gifts from your wedding registry, and take family road trips and have spontaneous teachable moments where your kids learn some lesson like that bad people exist in the world but you always want to still try to be good nonetheless, or some such nonsense like that where you feel really self-satisfied about your parenting when you put your kids to sleep that night, though you'd never say so. You just do all the things that normal people do. I was raised in a family that taught me I should strive for such normalcy, too, but something about it made me feel claustrophobic and restless. Or perhaps I was simply aggravated by Scott and might have wanted those things with someone else--I can't remember now. What I had called normal was simply another way of saying it was just what the majority of people did, what the girls I knew dreamt about from an early age. For whatever reason, I just didn't want it. So on a Thursday afternoon in Madison after watching *All My Children*, I told Scott we should break up. He got upset, and moved rather quickly, it seemed at the time, from anger to detached indifference. We left my apartment together and then walked down State Street in opposite directions. I went to Pizza Hut and ate greasy breadsticks with an extra side of tomato sauce. That evening, I called my mother crying, worried that I'd always be alone. She didn't know what to say, so instead she asked me if I had caught the split-infinitive on that day's episode of *All My Children*--resorting, as she often did as an English teacher, to her joy of finding grammar mistakes on television shows. "It was a good one," she chuckled.

Boxy white Arab-style houses dotted the hills around the amphitheatre. Built in the 2nd century when the area was called Philadelphia, the amphitheatre seats 6000 and is built on three tiers. The acoustics are supposed to be so good that if you stand towards the top rows, it's believed, you can hear the people on stage, even if they whisper. As soon as we got there, I made my way down the steep stairs towards the stage. Scott sat on one of the rows towards the top, looking like a detached tourist watching a basketball game. As I walked down the sharp steps of the amphitheatre, my mind flashed back to a memory of the stairs in Anne Frank's house in Amsterdam when my father brought me in 1985. My parents couldn't afford for our family of five to travel abroad together, so he took turns bringing one of us three kids at a time when he went for work. He had a conference in Brussels and we took the train to Amsterdam for the day. I got the chills as we walked up the stairs just behind the bookcase that hid the stairway. A few minutes before, we had stood on the corner of Rozengracht and Keizersgracht Streets, not far from Anne Frank's house on Prinsengracht. He gave me the map and said, "Figure out how we get there." He was patient as I found our way. We walked up Rozengracht, a left on Prinsengracht and down a few blocks--a small walk, for sure, but that afternoon, I learned to use a map.

The highest rows in the amphitheatre, though farthest from the stage, not only have great acoustics, but also have excellent sightlines of both the stage and the city of Amman. It seemed to be a place where people come to hang out, like a park--a quiet respite in a big city. A man read a book lying down on one of the rows, his backpack under his head like a pillow. Two women sat together looking down at the stage, not talking. A boy walked up and down the stairs several times methodically and determined while his father talked to a friend. A group of tourists followed a man who held a pink umbrella. Sitting on the top rows, I felt lifted out of the busy bustle of the everyday. The morning light was soft and pink, and the sun spread itself over the ancient rock as it made its way around the amphitheatre. I was overwhelmed with how the light hit the stone and I walked up and down the steps a couple times, like the little boy I had watched earlier. Then I stood on the stage trying to absorb the theatre's massivity.

"By chance, are you headed to Petra?" someone asked me on the stage. His name was Diego, and as he spoke, he adjusted his silver wiry glasses behind his thick black hair to make sure he could see. He had a round beer belly, his gray The Who t-shirt tight around his midsection.

"By chance, I am!" I answered sprightly, awkwardly, more eager than I would have liked to have sounded. Diego was from Peru--he was studying in Boston and visiting the Middle East and Africa during his break. He seemed to possess an appropriate amount of nerdiness, which I was immediately drawn to.

"We should go together," he suggested. He had a confidence that indicated he knew the rules of travel. It was OK to ask a stranger, even a female, to travel together because it was under the guise of simply getting where you needed to go. "It'll be cheaper," he said, tucking his hair behind his ears, scanning the magnificence of the ampitheatre.

This is what is supposed to happen when you travel, I'm sure I thought at the time. You meet cool people and the next thing you know, you're traveling with them across a foreign country. Travel allowed me to pretend I was someone else. I could imagine I was easy-going, carefree, one of those hippie girls I envied in high school who wore long prairie skirts they found at second-hand stores. Just like the Dylan song, they wore silver bracelets on their wrists and flowers in their hair. They had an intentionally messy side braid and somehow the flowers didn't fall out. They were light and airy, flitting down the hallway with their Birkenstock sandals and thick mix-matched socks. You know girls like these, don't you? They have perfect skin and a wet, pouty bottom lip that never requires lipgloss and they don't need glasses. They might have a sexy brown mole on their cheek. They make large dinners for their friends. Their glassware is random, also from second-hand stores, but all of it together preciously just seems to match. They spend hours at the farmer's market buying just the right kind of baby bok choy--full, not too skinny--for their dinner. They provide shelter from the storm for their men. Years later, when I described these girls to my husband, he knew what I was talking about. "Yeah, but they all have daddy issues," he said. At the time, I couldn't really explain the heaviness I felt I carried around with me, and when I was around those girls, I just felt myself fall short.

"Why not?" I answered Diego. And just like that, I had another travel partner and could pretend, briefly, I was one of those girls.

When you travel, you connect with people more quickly than in your everyday life. I met someone while eating alone in a restaurant in Ljubljana, watching the sunset on the beach in Tel-Aviv, in line for a ticket at the train station in Paris, standing on a bridge in Venice. That just didn't happen to me in Chicago. So meeting someone standing on a stage in a Roman amphitheatre in Jordan became no big deal; by which I mean, I could act like it wasn't a big deal. And when it does occur, you step outside yourself for a moment, and you think what a great, enviable story it will be when you tell your friends that you met someone standing on a stage in a Roman amphitheatre in Jordan--but you don't show it. And for just that moment, when I met Diego, I believed that I was living an envious life, that for a few days I was the kind of person who easily just met people. Light and breezy.

Living abroad in Jerusalem allowed me to live in two worlds--I could be a tourist, but I also was working and studying in another country I could call home. I scoffed with superiority at the travelers who came for just a week. The little green piece of paper stuck inside my passport was all the proof I needed: I was more than a tourist but not a citizen--a faux expat on a student visa. Though I was living in Israel, I didn't know what it was like to work full time, serve in the army, pay taxes. I was just another well-educated, upper middle-class Jew, a good liberal Zionist who had dreamed of living in Israel. Most of my friends at the time, other Zionists studying in Israel, returned to the U.S. a few years later, got full time jobs, bought cars and property, moved to the suburbs--surely held their BBQ dinners in their backyard with the red-checkered tablecloths--had kids and got fat. They were good at small talk at parties. They represented some kind of upper middle-class post-college success in the U.S. that I just didn't want, or wasn't good at. But Scott wanted this kind of life, and for some reason, he wanted it with me.

As Diego and I made our way up to where Scott was sitting--he hadn't moved from the upper row--I introduced them and told Scott Diego's idea for the three of us to go to Petra together. Scott said, "Sure," and shook Diego's hand like he had just made a corporate business deal. I couldn't tell if he was annoyed or just didn't care. Diego reached into his bag and offered us some bread. Of course, I thought to myself, unlike Scott and me, he had prepared for Ramadan. It was late morning. We agreed to get our stuff from the hostel and meet in the center of town in a couple hours to catch a taxi to Petra.

The taxi driver, Ahmed, chain-smoked as he drove, even though it was in the middle of the afternoon. He spoke a little English, and told us you're not supposed to smoke during the day when it's Ramadan, which we knew. But we soon understood he was telling us because he would need our help if the police happened to drive by. If he was caught smoking during the day, he said, he could be fined, or worse, thrown in jail for the remainder of Ramadan. In a short while a police car did pass by, and Ahmed tossed his cigarette over his shoulder to where we sat in the back seat. I was in the middle between Diego and Scott. I caught the cigarette and

held it down between my knees until the police passed.

Ahmed had taken Desert Highway route 15 from Amman to Petra, a road that like its name, cuts right through the hilly desert. The windows were open during the three-hour drive and the sound of the wind cutting through the glass at times made it too loud to talk--which I didn't mind. The sand-colored hills in the distance juxtaposed with the power lines that lined the road. We were hungry, but we didn't want to tell Ahmed. Although he was smoking, we didn't want to assume he was also eating. But after about an hour and a half--midway to Petra--Ahmed pulled off the road onto a gravel driveway near a gas station. I assumed he needed to fill the car with gas. He parked and motioned for us to get out. Diego and I looked at each other. Scott shrugged. We entered a small room with low ceilings just behind the gas station. About ten people sat on the floor around a low table. Ahmed seemed to know them all and hugged a few of the men. Everyone was smoking cigarettes. Along with the nicotine, smells of lemon and garlic and mint filled the room. An orange and yellow tablecloth covered the wood table. At least twenty different small plates were on the table: fresh hummus, smoked baba ganoush, tahini with parsley, tahini with tomatoes and cucumbers, falafel, yogurt and garlic, tomatoes and garlic, olive oil and zaatar, olives, radishes, grape leaves, tabbouleh, all on tiny plates covering the table. Our host tossed warm pita to each person like a frisbee, throwing them as soon as they were warm and crispy on the heater. Someone offered us cigarettes. "What a way to subvert Ramadan," Diego whispered closely in my ear as we ate and smoked with the others. I ignored Scott, who had joined the others in a cigarette. On his exhale, he blew the smoke out of the side of his mouth that was pinched. When we left, our hosts packed us some pita bread and hummus. Back in the taxi, Ahmed, satisfied, tossed the toothpick he had been using to clean his teeth out the window.

By the time we arrived to Petra, it was too late to walk around. We found a youth hostel nearby but it was expensive. Jordan was seeing a large increase in Israeli tourism since the peace treaty. Diego asked if we three could share the room to save money. Scott was annoyed but agreed. Our room had three single beds. Diego asked to read my *Lonely Planet* book--"to make sure I am prepared for Petra tomorrow"--and soon was engrossed in his reading. Scott joined me in my bed and we fooled around. When Scott kissed my neck, I looked over at Diego, who by then had fallen asleep, the book on his round belly, his glasses resting low on his nose. Scott was the most excited I'd seen him all day. I feigned interest--a pathetic attempt at solicitude. I felt bad he'd come all this way. He should get something out of being here, I thought at the time. It wasn't his fault I didn't love him. We were quiet so Diego wouldn't hear us.

The next morning we finished the pita and hummus our hosts had given us the day before at the secret lunch and walked to Petra. "Part of the continuing allure of the 'rose-red city,'" Diego read aloud from the book as we entered the town, adjusting his glasses as he read, "is that Petra still has many secrets yet to be discovered." Petra is also called the "Pink City," he told us enthusiastically, because of the rose-colored rock. Later, he asked me if he could borrow the book after we left Petra. He was going to continue traveling around Jordan before heading to Af-

rica, he said. He promised to send it back to me when he returned to Boston. In Petra, we were early enough to see the morning light reflect the sandstone buildings as we entered.

The limestone buildings in Jerusalem turn a rosy color when the afternoon sun hits the rock but the sandstone in Petra is a deep pink rose streaked with orange and brown. It reminded me of when I was younger, and my mother had just had back surgery for her spinal stenosis. Once she was in recovery, the surgeon described the image of the blood rushing into places where it had been restricted for years. "When the blood started flowing into these gray areas," he said, "it looked like a vibrant sunset swirling in her spine." In Petra, speechless, we stood in silent awe at the streaked rosy rock. There are about 800 sights to see, and we only got to a few: The Siq, the 1.2 kilometer entrance to Petra which is like a long narrow gorge; Al Khazneh, the Treasury, the best preserved building in Petra; the Ad-Deir monastery. Depending on the time of the day, the stone looks peach, rose, blood-orange red. Later, the yellow sun became more diluted with each minute as it fell quickly behind the mountains, west, towards Israel. In a few minutes, I remember thinking, the sun would glisten on the Mediterranean as it dipped into the sea.

As it turned dark, we headed back to the hostel to collect our things. We said goodbye to Diego. He headed North as we headed South, back towards Egypt. Six months later, as promised, I received a small package in the mail. It was from Diego who was back in Boston. I would never hear from him again. On the inside flap of the *Lonely Planet* book, he had written a note of thanks. On another page, he had copied a sonnet by hand, written by John Burgon in 1845, titled "Petra":

> It seems no work of Man's creative hand,
> by labour wrought as wavering fancy planned;
> But from the rock as if by magic grown,
> eternal, silent, beautiful, alone!
> Not virgin-white like that old Doric shrine,
> where erst Athena held her rites divine;
> Not saintly-grey, like many a minster fane,
> that crowns the hill and consecrates the plain;
> But rose-red as if the blush of dawn,
> that first beheld them were not yet withdrawn;
> The hues of youth upon a brow of woe,
> which Man deemed old two thousand years ago,
> match me such marvel save in Eastern clime,
> a rose-red city half as old as time.

By the time I received the book, I had moved apartments and was living on Palmach Street, just around the corner from my former apartment on Chopin. I had met Tavit, an Armenian-Christian who lived in Jerusalem's Old City. I'd soon fall deeply in love with him. Later, I'd reject my Zionism, and would remain in love during the next two years I'd be finishing my studies in Jerusalem.

After another frustrating day of travel we arrived in Cairo. When we got to the hotel, I told Scott I wanted to walk around by myself. I was annoyed that it was just the two of us again--Diego had been a nice distraction. Scott seemed clingy but perhaps it was me who was just frustrated. I told him I needed some time to myself, and I went for a walk along the Nile River. Later, once I returned to the hotel, I suggested we walk through the Khan El-Khalili market--believed to be the oldest open-air market in the Middle East. Small boys carried large trays of fresh pita bread that smelled like za'atar on their heads. Shop owners stood outside their stores trying to sell sweet perfume. By the time we got back to the hotel, I had decided to cut the trip short. I had no reason to give Scott. It was just time to go. We agreed to see the Sphinx and pyramids before heading to the bus station to go back to Jerusalem. We checked out of the hotel and took a taxi the 13 kilometers to Giza.

As I looked in front of us in the cab, all of a sudden I saw three tiny triangles in the distance that grew as we got closer. Soon I saw the Sphinx, too. The scene looked more like a photo than the real thing. When we exited the taxi, boys on donkeys swarmed us, trying to sell us pictures and bracelets. They were like gnats, these boys, following us, their mouths drooling over the tourists. I was unaware of the extent of these kids' poverty and of our privilege. I blamed Scott they'd bothered us since he looked like an American tourist more than I did. It was windy as we walked around. The three pyramids, Khufu, Khafre, and Menkaure, each have square bases, representing the four directions. The temples inside the pyramids face east. The Sphinx faces east, too, and is oriented, accordingly, with the sunrise. You can pay for a ticket to enter the pyramids, but we didn't. I'm not sure now why, but I'm assuming we both were just ready to leave. You can touch the Pyramids, but not the Sphinx. We got as close as we could. My neck cracked as I bent my head to look up.

Before we left Giza to head back to Israel, Scott touched my shoulders and turned me to him, away from the Sphinx. I was surprised by his intensity.

"Come home from Israel as soon as you finish your degree," he said, pulling me closer. "Move in with me. Let's get married." He'd been building to this. The sand shifted between my toes in my brown sandals. The wind was hot, dry. The few tourists I saw seemed to keep to themselves. The light had begun to fade, and all I saw was beige--the sand, the stone of the ancient bedrock buildings, Scott's khaki pants. I took it personally when the sand whipped at my cheeks and stung my eyes. My insignificance among these buildings, most of them nearly five thousand years old, was palpable. The scene was far too spectacular--it made what was happen-

ing between Scott and me all the more trivial.

It took me less than a minute to know how I would respond to Scott, but the moment lingered and hovered above us. I felt heavy, the opposite of an easy-going hippie girl. I knew it was going to be a terribly long trip back to Jerusalem, that I'd never hear from Scott again once he returned to the U.S. My mind began to drift. My desire to escape what was expected of me back home had created a restlessness in me. I wondered if one day in the future this moment would become meaningful to me, if I'd look back on it with nostalgia, if I was capable, ultimately, of experiencing real love, for how many chances, I wondered, does a person get in a lifetime? Scott looked at me waiting for my answer. I tried to think about the meaning of this trip, indeed the meaning of my life, of the potential future trips I might make with other men, perhaps in other places and in other times, but I came up short. I didn't know.

"I don't think so," I winced. Scott's lips pinched. He couldn't have been surprised, I thought. I hadn't treated him well. My eyes started to burn from the sand and then began to water. I looked towards the pyramids and the Sphinx. Scott was blocking my view. I wanted to see them in their entirety again before we left. But the scene of everything around me was warped, skewed. I rubbed my eyes and blinked, and took another look before we left.

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Photograph

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On Monsoon in Mumbai

By Shaista Vaishnav

There's something about the way the light falls. Cloudy but not gloomy, bright but not sunny, light that's full of hope and memories from decades ago.

Every monsoon, I look out from the window of my rain-soaked Uber, thinking, this is the season for yearning. I picture my face looking serious and dreamy all at once. The way one is meant to appear while looking out at rain. Rain-soaked windows invoke emotion even where there is none. And you suddenly find yourself humming Adele.

On rainy nights, it feels cosy - to the point of guilt. Where you feel compelled to think about the homeless, with no walls to withstand the lashing, and no blankets to hold them hostage when morning and its chores force you to wake up.

In the monsoon, fixed meal times disappear and portions almost always double. One usual helping of rice becomes two. One bite of chocolate pudding becomes four. And two bhajiyas become 20. It's the season to eat junk and laze around. Because the rains hold you down with their weight, glued to a couch, or bed, or an old and comfortable armchair that belongs only to you. An armchair that has felt your weight shifting while you absorb words and form thoughts that will never quite leave you.

Some say the rain depresses them. I feel quite the opposite. It's scientific, they say the lack of sunlight affects one's brain. I for one, associate the sun with a glare. The glare in my eyes from the Olympic-sized swimming pool I was forced to go to at age 7 to learn. The glare on board exam days. The glare on the sand when you realise you've come to the beach 30 minutes earlier than usual for your evening walk. The sun is one big glare.

But the monsoon mutes that glare, diffuses it, bringing the rest of the world into technicolour. Mumbai's overwhelming green and black colours look vivid, freshly washed. Birds seem happier, though they may not be. And if you look carefully, you can see sky-lines in puddles, especially the large ones. The breeze is definitely cooler. Drives are longer. Shoes are muddier. And insect and rodent families are out and thriving, while human ones tidy closets, catch up on reading and play Scrabble.

Floods are the great leveller, especially in Mumbai. Because who hasn't rolled their trousers or leggings up till their knees and waded through sewage? Everybody has mud speckled on their clothes, a damp towel somewhere in their bags and a cold virus brewing in their chests.

The monsoon makes small joys seem more joyful. Sitting at your desk, sipping on warm coffee and picking a show to watch, knowing that you have nothing pressing to do that evening is an

underrated feeling. And the steady sound of rain outside makes it that much more comforting. Bringing the radio into the bathroom and turning up the volume over the showers outside is that much more fun. And standing in front of your bookshelf in wonder, picking out a book you would like to start, with a long rainy day stretched out ahead of you like a soft picnic mat? I've found very few moments to top that one. Rains for me bring contentment.

And it's not just me. Have you heard the playlists made by pluviophiles? Rain songs are a thing - heightening emotions with the heady combination of music and clouds. Clouds go well with so much: silver linings, hot beverages, steamy sex. Which is why the feeling of being single monsoon after monsoon, is perhaps the most desolate one ever. Being single in sunshine is easier on the soul.

It's not all rainbows in the rain though. Specially not in a city that receives the choicest of lashings year after year - unprepared - like the same deer caught in the headlights multiple times. Death by manholes, death by tree falls, death by flooding, it's all too real and too close to home. It makes the chill of wet clothes in an AC office that much colder - where you shiver thinking - it could have been me. Or when you close your eyes, hoping for the best, as your rickshaw groans and sputters through floods like an oddly-shaped motor boat while you get sprayed from both sides. Sometimes your cars float away, but you feel less bad when you hear that your security guard's house floated away. And of course, who hasn't been stuck in snaking traffic, or a stalled train, hoping and praying they don't have to pee anytime soon.

A typical monsoon in Mumbai will always have those 3-4 days where you just know school / college / office / life will be cancelled. It has poured all night and well into the morning and is still pouring when you draw the curtains open. The water levels have risen way past the gutter in front of your home, part of your house is leaking and WhatsApp is flooded with videos and messages to stay home. When the relatives from Chennai, Pune and Delhi start calling - then you know it's made national news. Yet, the only people who seem like they're not aware of what's going on are your bosses / HR heads. The message only goes out AFTER you've set out for work because you can't afford another day of leave. Because the law of working in an office insists that unexpected holidays too need to be paid for with wet feet and worry.

Travelling while it's raining is probably the most satisfying. Grey roads and skies merging into each other - distinguished only by sleets of rain. Bits of green passing you by, as if smudged by a child drawing with crayons. T-shirts swinging in the wind like an enthusiastic dance group. It's all as fascinating as it was the previous year - and will continue to be the year after.

I've often heard that Nature moves even the sternest individuals. Something inside them shifts when they experience its power and take in its expanse and majestic beauty. Whether it's the rolling ocean or mountains that make you catch your breath. But the Nature one witnesses in the monsoon is a touch mischievous. Playful gusts of wind, clouds that resemble giggly schoolgirls chasing each other, and palm trees swaying like rock music fans at a concert. The monsoon is Nature's free period. It's not expansive, calm and shimmery like the summer sea, or

towering, massive and awe-inducing like snow-capped mountains. Nor is it blushing with every colour imaginable, some of which we have no name for yet, like in spring, or in some countries, autumn. The monsoon is grey.

But from that grey, colours of the soul emerge. The warmth of romance, the yearning to share this skip in the weather's step with someone, the camaraderie one can only devel-op with fellow-waders and delayed passengers. The onslaught of the social media oohs and aahs the first few days of the monsoon brings. And the sudden expression of sur-prise you exchange with your companion at the surround-sound thunder.

Perhaps it's the heaviness of the year that the monsoon is finally letting go, which is what makes it light and playful, irreverent even, sprinkling you with a drizzle and then allowing the sun to make an appearance before letting it pour; filling puddles and potholes, fraying tempers and encouraging fungus, even as some, like me, wait for this time of year and welcome it with open arms.

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