

Angel City Review



FOREWORD

Hello, friends. We here at Angel City Review extend to you our warmest greetings and our most heartfelt gratitude. To say that you all have persisted through trying times is an understatement, and we thank you for yet again sharing your time and energy and creativity and perspectives with us in ways that cannot help but facilitate our growth as people. What follows is Issue 10, a wonderful collection of art that digs into the essence of the human experience, celebrating its joys and speaking truth to its agonies. I do not think it hyperbole to suggest that we live in harlequin days, where each of our individual humanities are more recognized and validated than ever before, and where they are under constant attack from power structures that can only react with violence toward the threat of empathy. At the risk of sounding like a broken record, I believe literature is a vital and essential exchange and recognition of perspectives beyond our own, and I believe such a lifeline of communication is profoundly necessary in our era. Hopefully, this collection will play some small part in keeping that line open, in helping you make that connection to others that can feel and love as you do.

To all of the brilliant authors who submitted, thank you. We were blessed with an abundance of true quality, and have no doubt your talent should and will be recognized.

And to everyone, thank you for all your hard work, not just in terms of your literature, but especially with regards to the very act of persisting, of being a guiding light for someone, even if you have yet to realize it. Please stay safe and take care of yourselves. You deserve it.

- John

FEATURED ARTISTS

Julio Rodriguez is a visual artist whose paintings are the result of an urban experience. Using photographs he takes from daily explorations of the landscape, he makes paintings that are formed from the structures, textures, and colors of the city. His work uses these elements as a visual vocabulary to engage in a dialogue about the urban environment and identity. When not at work he can most likely be found biking throughout the Bay Area, consuming and digesting the visual landscape in order to produce translations of the spaces around.

<http://www.jcrart.com/>

Ig: [juliocrodriguez__](#)

Cover, [38](#), [63](#), [116](#)

Bridget Klappert

Originally from and currently living in Los Angeles, Bridget Klappert studied painting at Rhode Island School of Design and spent a number of years working as a studio assistant for several LA-based artists, including modern psychedelic icon Jen Stark. Abounding in optical effects, kaleidoscopic patterning and intricate geometric systems, Bridget Klappert's work uses drawing and painting as a method for investigating the mysterious realm of the mind and its relationship to reality, both as something it perceives and something it creates. Her practice employs cheap, readily available materials (pens, markers, unmixed paint colors) and techniques traditionally associated with "craft" as an intentional rejection of academic and institutional preconceptions about "fine art," eschewing slickness for an honest expression of the anxiety and messiness of the creative process.

<https://bklappert.myportfolio.com/>

IG [@bridgetklappert](#)

[26](#), [83](#), [128](#), [151](#)

Anthony Grant creates commercial design work for the masses. He spends his days crafting web pages, banner ads, print advertising etc., relying on acquired knowledge of the graphic arts and balancing those "rules" of design with his own intuition and style. While his professional work strives for perfection and or "solutions" in the commercial sense, his personal art work aims to be disruptive, while drawing on the familiar, using certain visual cues and symbols often found in advertising to question identity and cultural norms/expectations. Anthony's pieces are designed to seep into the viewers psyche; to wake dormant, inquisitive parts of the mind. As most advertising is tailored to condition the viewer (look better, be smarter, more likable, etc.) to align, purchase, and or profess their love of X brand, Anthony combats that notion with graphically disjointed fragmented symbols that can be reassembled, hence reinterpreted, by the viewer. In this assemblage, the viewer is meant to question the meaning of the piece, and the meaning of the cultural icons and symbols Anthony has appropriated.

Instagram: [@anthony.r.grant](#)

<https://www.argstudios.com/art-work>

<https://www.argstudios.com/linkinbio>

[6](#), [54](#), [93](#), [142](#)

Angel City Review Issue 10 2021

Zachary Jensen: Managing/Founding Editor

Janice Sapigao: Poetry Editor

Anahita Safarzadeh: Non-Fiction Editor

John Venegas: Fiction Editor

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Gabby Almendarez: Editor

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Believe Us

Anthony R Grant

What Happened in 2020, an inventory of self

BY CHRISTIAN SALDANA SANDS

I hate work but damn
 a new job with benefits where I feel respected? who would have thought
 I got to know czaerra's family and now luya is on line and czaerra is on board
 police beat me up beat us all up over a damn
 statue at least now I know how to deal with pepper spray new skills
 like how to jail support phone zap plan direct action be safe at direct action civil disobedience
 said no to pigs and romances that did not serve me
 sex as the world ends start a lover end another a few times safely
 didn't get the virus knock on wood pray on a nose swab
 abolition means everything abolition is difficult abolition needs
 so much hope as much as we are critical
 unlearn/ing/ed capitalism and relearn/ing/ed that deep personal relationships make
 or break movements
 I don't like organizing with people who aren't committed
 to something outside the belly of the beast
 I don't like organizing with people who aren't committed
 to their own people culture who aren't learning from their history
 of migration colonization imperialism
 performed poetry to my empty bedroom but so many zoom rooms
 depaul lavender grad interaction fundraiser luyaluyaluya bulosan center university of minne-
 sota
 poetry for mutual aid poetry for birthdays poetry for grieving
 my poetry idol bjr asked me to perform with her and it's fine if I never do anything else after
 that I'm happy

taught workshops went to workshops planned workshops
got published got rejected wrote edited sent hoped let go
got nominated what's a pushcart? they still use snail mail?
expanded awestruck transnational filipinx poet kaleidoscope
nasaan ang sala? kahit saan kase digital!
what's an MFA? grad school? for poems? I'm still scared
but at least I have people to look up to now like jason and rachel and hari
to my sibs i sent memes i broke down broke open
Ate is human too with her bad brain and they still love me even when i am not useful
i learned to drive i went outside i bought a wok weed
glass pipes to smoke with pink rolling papers an altar tray
really it's a rolling tray but with moon phases
gained weight and still have a nice ass
bitch

Chris is a queer, multiracial Filipina poet, teaching artist, and community organizer currently based in Chicago. She is the founder and Creative Director of Luya, a poetry organization that centers the voices of people of color. She believes deeply in using poetry to build community and to educate ourselves about history.

Her poetry has been published at *Injustice Watch* and *Marias* at Sampaguitas. Her performances have been featured at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Stony Island Arts Bank, Young Chicago Authors, on NPR's Worldview, and more.

When she's not poeming-around you can find her cooking in her PJs, tending to her Stardew Valley farm, or subtweeting the patriarchy.

Construction

BY PIA SIMONE GARBER

City birds beat their wings, direct the wind
back toward the East River.
Pigeons at my window beg for crumbs,
hop the gutter on stumps of severed toe,
roost in the steam vents.

Kaye thinks he's the Chrysler building.
I've seen him stretching up to scrape the sky,
pulling shreds of cloud from his fingernails.

Above us, the city is waiting to tell her love story;
it's almost the time of night when such things pass.
He buttons his vest and laces his boots
on the subway platform.
All these tunnels, he says, they all lead back up there.

The city is an amplifier, all crackle and wail.
Tonight I'm spinning the sound of the walls sagging.
Kaye says he's got to shake these birds off his spire.

City girls chase down that last note,
follow avenues to the best bars and best boys.
Up there every block is a construction zone:
plaster-bandaged with billboards
and splinted into lead-beam cocoons.

Kaye looks down from his perch and promises a sunburst;
when the city no longer sways with you, it's time to move.
As he speaks, I see the scaffold creeping up to him.

United Hebrew Cemetery, October

BY PIA SIMONE GARBER

Now that the shaking has stopped,
and the cold air jolts the last few
shudders into thin, aching shivers,
I can see treetops punctuated

with streaks of bloodshot leaves.
I am crouched in the soil, searching
for a gemstone I left here years ago,
when I thought I could find my father

beneath this damp, slate pillar.
Beyond the fence that separates
the edge of the funerary community
from the backyards, scattered

with toddler toys and fallen branches,
there are flowers growing rampant,
wild, emerald vacant lot weeds
and food wrappers left behind.

No one tends this garden.
The heirs of my father's neighbors
steal the seashells we leave at his grave
to place upon their own ancestral mounds.

You were like a window I sat for hours gazing through

BY PIA SIMONE GARBER

Street with a row of trees,
street with a fault line.

Rain against glass,
against wood,
against brick.

You stood there in your new suit
with old words still slick
on your lips,
a curling ribbon.

Stale on grocer's shelves,
old lovers and strangers' secrets,
a car with its engine running,
headlights dimmed.

I coil beneath the tallest tree,
its branches more real than this,
gold and solid
against shadowed sky.

Hillside licked by wet leaves,
wet leaves
stuck to car and sidewalk,
sidewalk splintering.

A brittle crumbling
where once a smirk turned a nerve,
pressed like a belt buckle
cold against the skin.

Tired of the clutter, I
twist the lock,
tilt the axis,
spilling your sorries out into the air.

Pia Simone Garber earned her MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Alabama. Some of her poems can be found in the Anthology *Tuscaloosa Runs This*. She currently lives in Staten Island, NY where she is working on her first chapbook.

Pharmaceutical Wonderland

BY EMILY JOY OOMEN

I had a dream, I got everything I wanted
I'm driving in greyscale past
Suburban houses that hold altars of pill bottles
Tribute to America's new best friend
I'm ok I'm ok I'm ok I'm ok
Nothing can hurt me now
Reign of health insurance dictating cap of life
The psychiatrist overprescribing with a Cheshire Cat's smile
Now I just stare out the windows of my glass house
I had a dream, I got everything I wanted

Emily Joy Oomen is a journalist and multimedia poet from the Pacific Northwest. Her work has been featured in BBC, The Wall Street Journal, the Athens International Video Poetry Festival, Vice, BuzzFeed, and many other publications. She has a B.A. in English from the University of Washington and helps curate videos for Button Poetry. You can find her on Instagram @poetic_espresso and on Twitter @emilyjoyoomen.

Piano Picks the Noise

BY SAMUEL MILLER

Light little licks tickle piano picks the noise
out in space
waiting in line
that no one was ever born without hearing
while they were still an alien
to get to spend forty or seventy years as a human
—a day's time for an everlasting alien who plays piano like
it won't be there forever.
It's the noise an alien hums to themselves while
everyone else in line is doing something that helps
them wait too. After waiting so long
here the noise is again and it reminds you
for just a little light moment that
this is a small part of what you've always meant.

FUNCTIONAL BY THELONIOUS MONK

BY SAMUEL MILLER

really though where did every bit of desire to get up out of bed go to this time. where did it go this time. on a bi-cycle riding home and clouds were lit up on top all yellow but their bellies were purple down below and I know contrast can be something nice but I can't keep keeping up because

sometimes it's like: why keep up just to keep keeping up is keeping up only gonna keep me kept in cycling around up and down and keeping and cycling around up and and keeping and down

really really really though what's the keeping up keeping me from.
keeping me from the

down

down

Up.

down. keep

Cool Train

BY SAMUEL MILLER

Orange is the ember we kindle between us. Up dances smoke – curling all blue. We curl too
From the speaker in the corner a saxophone breathes scratchy in the soft rain and it sounds
like a record. When you're around me my belly warms up. Your cool hands start to wander
on my skin, I wonder where I stop, where you begin. I tell you that you smell good and you
ask what like. I tell you it's nothing that different but I can't get enough. You're falling asleep
with your head on my shoulder. I'm breathing you deep and the train whistle blows. Your
sweat and your hair, they make me want to keep breathing if only just to smell them again.

Samuel Miller recently graduated from Portland State University with a BFA in Fiction. Since graduating, his goal is to get his work out into the world and to connect with a larger community of writers, publishers, and readers.

Obsessions

COREY J. BOREN

my mother gives me advice:
turn off the radio. let the world be quiet for a little.

how else can the holy ghost ever speak to me?
she insists that the flurrying of life,

and in this case, “22” by taylor swift
are smoke clouds that Godhood cannot navigate,

says the spirit is a still, small voice unable to fill a pollock canvas.
he must be laryngitic, i think, or hoarse

from a shouting match with lucifer
to be quieter than the synths i shuffle to.

she asks me why i am always plugged in,
always mumbling along to each song,

or otherwise reading, or watching movies.
she says its good to meditate, to pray, to allow

tranquility to carry you to the next good realization.
i haven't the heart to tell her that my mind

is never quiet. that when the notes settle,
the armadas deploy, and the missiles

start to fly. each idea becomes a war zone,
an endless army of thoughts i am forced to think,

to analyze, to repeat, to turn over and over again in my mind
like some crushed water bottle or fidget toy

that becomes my plaything as i explain this all.
i cannot stop my dancing, my writing, my motion.

if there is silence, my mind must fill it,
and there is no spirit less holy, no ghost more cruel,

no specter more painful than the one that whispers to me
when the world has stopped spinning.

Bumble Profile

COREY J. BOREN

make me a sinner.
make babylon feel like
my hometown.
if love is a sin,
baptize me in it.

make me a saint.
latter-day or catholic,
orthodox or anglican,
as long as i have a halo
and nobody can deny my light.

make me less nervous
as we get shakes
for the first time,
make me smile as you ask
me about my hobbies.

make me laugh
so hard i cry
at your witty jokes
or your stupid ones,
i'm not particularly picky.

make me dance
even though i won't want to,
make me rap the first verse
to super bass even though
my face is a wildfire.

make me a house
i can live in.
stained cabinets,
wrap-around porch,
cottonwood trees out back,

make me a home
where the floorboards know our names.
leave room for a nursery,

a tire swing,
an office with a typewriter.

make me forget
the last person who
climbed into my aorta,
took off their shoes
and looked around.

make me a sack lunch
on the dark days.
sweep the floors,
put on a movie,
let me fall asleep in your arms.

make me the one
you always hoped for
when you swiped right,
the one you waited up all night
just to get a text from,

make me feel certain
you're the calm after
a two-year storm.
just like how you'll be convinced
i am the shoreline to your shipwreck.

make me the answer
you've always wanted
on your lips.
if none of these,
at least

make me trust you
when you say you want
to go on a drive
up the canyon
or around town.

make me believe
that driving
is all we need to do,
hands holding over the gear shift,

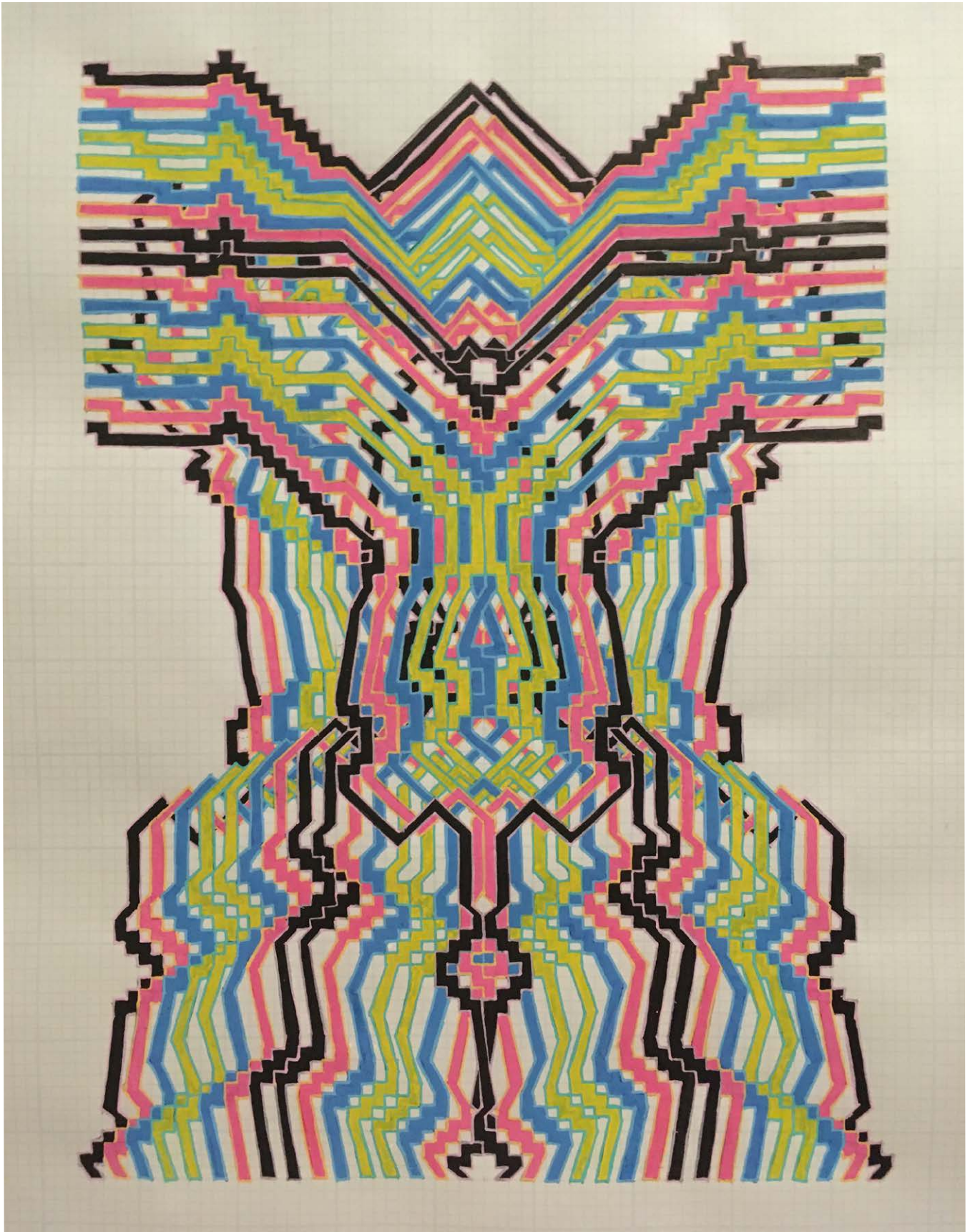
singing in time with the swaying pines.

make me think
you won't slide your hand
up my thigh, looking into my eyes
hoping to see anything there
but fear.

make me cry
when you drop me off at my house,
still glancing down at my jeans,
murmuring that we shouldn't
see each other anymore.

make me wonder
as your car peels away from the curb
if when you saw my face
framed by your phone,
you saw anything but a body to hold.

Corey J. Boren is a junior at Utah Valley University who enjoys decoding song lyrics and spending too much on Panda Express orange chicken. He has been previously published in *Blue Marble Review*, *Riggwelter*, and *30 North Review*, among other publications. To see more of his work, visit @coreyjborenpoetry on Instagram or @BorenPoetry on Twitter.



8-COLOR-ENMESHMENT

BRIDGET KLAPPERT

carri on the world carries on

BY VIVIAN IA

now that tomorrow
is a new
same day
without society

absence
makes
the heart despondent

pandora's box
a chronic haunt, really
malady's always open

how fast
can the worst
be sunken,
unleashed?

this time
hope
does not delude
it demolishes

& those
who souse
in infinite frequencies
shall be sages
among wage slaves
join
freer dolphins

this time
there is no permission
to be granted
you must claim
your new heart
from the sea

inclined
to future
with the poise
of a fiddle-head fern

our person of perpetual transformation

BY VIVIAN IA

the meaning of mutate?

i am here

what must die so i

can live

there is no such thing as native

they say

native to:

the earth's

stratification

unshakable

we, solid

have gone off to

bodies snatched—

oh but

what language is that,

sharp as a tack of rain?

sky pending

field permitting

i am here

by way of

extinction,

amnesia;

according to

whom, what is the weather

the weather?

attack-rain

mother asunder

the entrée to wealth

has always been rape

shame looked, did not touch

& the long line of those

who, ragged, raged & dragged

themselves around before you

got the cancers

your parents got

the surgeries

we begot
the planet begot
we got love

rhumb lines
amplified lambing
syndromes of abundance
the ringing of continental
church bells

farce & draconian
go together like
endings & exorcism

wrongdid done
exposed colonialists
grace welling up
across inner choke
distinguishable armored bodies
across billowing geography

dallying for a gist
of *survive*
that's what bodies do
as long as
injury penetrates
to the physical
here i am
this body
this time

as long as
cross, cross, bear
dead in the water
no reflexes
not anymore

quiet taper
at liquid junctures
the mouths of rivers,
fruitful places
to be undying, to
inspirit your godsource,

to have the fortune
to be spirit's prostheses
just when had finally stopped
departing & intrinsic value spun
around, started departing
again, time
slowly panting
how ancient is now

& sure as hell
that limitless deep
churned up
new york like atlantis

penurbia

BY VIVIAN IA

when gaia became property
of course there'd
be stealing

landscape for play
landscape for pay
grab
—gracious grove

these second peoples, et al.
do grasp the life-in-land,
but they don't get it;

it were yore-now
organic horizon
when the territory

strikes back
& we can
with these crop-fed brains
we shall

none other than steal away
from the pastoral
like herds
escaping their heft

heads or tails

BY VIVIAN IA

tale

wealth escapes to the country
from whence it was extracted
coin in its

became its
own element
its head
in the clouds

the elements' chief competitor

heed

here
the coin
is at it again
for the nature of the beast

is return,

to make heads
& tails
of everything

Vivian Ia lives in Berlin. Their poetry is Pushcart-nominated and has appeared in *Bone Bouquet*, *Tiny Seed*, *The Gravity of the Thing*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Berkeley Poetry Review*, *Call Me [Brackets]*, and *Under a Warm Green Linden*.

Fuck You, Catullus

BY RUTH THOMPSON

Catullus 75

*Lesbia, I am mad:
my brain is entirely warped
by this project of adoring and having you
and now it flies into fits
of hatred at the mere thought of your
doing well, and at the same time it can't help but seek what
is unimaginable—
your affection. This it will go on
hunting for, even if it
means my total and utter annihilation.*

Still at night sometimes the terror wakes me —
terror that I might by inadvertence
allow my eyes to pass across
another man's face, that I might
shake some man's hand —

me with my *little feminine hands*
which will arouse them
because you must want to arouse them —
and why would you wear clothes that fit
and why would you smile
and why would you
and why would you
and why would you
unless it is to draw them, attract them
to cheat to cheat to cheat to cheat?

Terror. Guilt. Guilt just as if
I had done those things, thought
those things.

So go fuck yourself, Catullus.
Fuck yourself and fuck what you call love.
Fuck your

*“I can never be at ease while you are alive
because while you are alive you are separate from me”*
love.

Fuck your
*“I hate your being happy you should
only be happy through and by and with me”*
love.

Fuck your
*“You are not loving me enough so you deserve to be
punished because you are evil “*
love.

I hope Lesbia keeps guards around her house.
I hope she moves far away, as I did,
and hides behind a different name, as I did.

I escaped with my life, Catullus, and my nightmares.
And every day I prayed for your total and utter annihilation.

Ruth Thompson is a poet and channel. Her first book of channels, *Quickwater Oracles*, will be published in 2021. Her most recent book of poems is *Whale Fall & Black Sage*. Ruth's poems have won New Millennium Writings, Chautauqua and other national awards and three Pushcart nominations. Her work has been performed by dancer Shizuno Nasu. She lives in Ithaca, NY.

See WWW.RUTHTHOMPSON.NET for poems & videos



Blur the Line
Julio Rodriguez

1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake

BY SAGE TYRTLE

Just as Punky Brewster is about
to save Cherie from the abandoned refrigerator
the floor starts shaking.
“Quit jumping on your bed,” I call to my little brother
“I’m NOT” he hollers back
and I watch as the fridge door opens on its own
and a yellow tub of margarine plops onto the floor.
My little brother wanders into the living room.
“Was that an earthquake?”
On the tv Punky Brewster is running running and then
she runs so fast she turns into a man in a tan suit
named Anchorman Mark who says
that the Silicon Valley has fallen into the Bay
and 1.2 million people are dead.
I walk over and put the margarine back in the fridge.
“Call the studio at this number,” Anchorman Mark says,
call us and *tell us what is happening to you*”
a helicopter flies over the Nimitz Freeway while
Mark says the Pacific Garden Mall has collapsed
and it’s actually 4,000 people who are dead
then he sits up straight - “We are talking to Dorothy
Eardley in Mountain View,” he pants, “*what is happening to you*”
Dorothy whispers, “All of my knick-knacks fell off the shelf.”
Anchorman Mark touches his ear, whispers back, “Mrs. Eardley, who’s hurt,
Who’s hurt at your house?”
“Just all my knick-knacks fell off the shelf and broke,” she says.
Anchorman Mark pants, “How much did you love
those knick-knacks, Dorothy? How many were
wedding presents?” There’s silence on the other end.
“It’s all right to cry,” he says, darting his tongue into the air.
“I’m not crying,” says Dorothy.
Mark says a brick facade fell down
and it’s actually 63 people who are dead
and to call the tv studio *right now*
but after Dorothy hangs up no one else calls.
The people Mark wants to hear from
do not have phone service anymore
or electricity or plumbing or walls.

Anchorman Mark climbs on top of his desk
and leans into the camera
caressing his nipples slowly.
“What did you lose?” he says and
licks his lips. “What did you lose?
What did you lose? What did you lose?”

Sage Tyrle is a professional storyteller. Her stories have been featured on NPR, CBC, and PBS. She is a Moth StorySLAM and GrandSLAM winner. She's also one of those Americans who swanned around saying, "If this gets any worse, I'M moving to CANADA," but then she really did. More: TYRTLE.COM.

The Pomegranate Is A Backup Ovary

BY ANNA SANDY-ELROD

My body is a split open pomegranate, fleshy & intricate, ripe.

Slice off a cross-
section of me & peek
at the weave

of my ovaries,
human & flowering,
burdened with seeds.

Take a bite;
I make the world
over when I'm eaten.

The kernels I held
spread across the earth
while I lie here,

pared, probed, tasted.

We Are Afraid of What Our Teeth Could Do

BY ANNA SANDY-ELROD

In Oregon, even our hotel room was wet. It rained less than we were warned. Still, water collected in drops on the ceiling, laid damply on the walls. The mirror blurred our bodies. Each time we dressed and undressed, everything stuck to our skin. I bit your shoulder to keep quiet, left a ring of teeth marks. How easily I could draw blood, if not for what is human in me. How easily we could push through the skin and bone of our own fingers, like the simple act of eating a raw carrot. When I was a child, I tried biting off my ring finger to see if I could, but never made it past the first break of skin, the flash of blank pain. I'm gentle with you. I don't let my teeth sink in, I graze.

Melusine

BY ANNA SANDY-ELROD

In the sun, I dream myself
a mermaid, slide my palm up

the curve of my calf, underside
of my knee, & watch my skin

flake & fall like pearlescent scales,
diaphanous. I could believe

I have no legs, no blistering burn,
no bind to earth. I ask not to be

looked at. I am at least half water.
I let salt crust on my skin & glint,

practice slipping from sand to sea.
I ate the sun & paled. I was seen.

Liquid bubbles on my arms, atop
my thighs. I shed it all. I dream

& dream the transformation,
this human body into luck.

Anna Sandy-Elrod is a PhD candidate at Georgia State University. She is the Editor and co-founder of *Birdcoat Quarterly* and *Ghost Peach Press*. Her work can be found in the *North American Review*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Threepenny Review*, *Iron Horse*, *Arkana*, *Fugue*, and others. She lives in Amsterdam, Netherlands and Georgia, USA.

Nature & Order

BY SOPHIA AMANDA MORALES

There's nature and order
and my grin resides
in the middle.

I bat my eyelashes
at four-cornered mountains
as they wag their
snowy egos
like flower sellers
at the side of the road.

There's only so much
one can take—
the tiered pressure
to be the things
your genitals
promised you'd be.
Such clamorous cry-outs
as you regress further
and further into
a cave-dwelling siren.
Lipstick is your religion now,
and it aprons you
like funeral garb.

O cherished woes,
to which dandy
did you sell
your bedeviled soul?
Which spiraled
visage meekly
hid the baby's bib?

Sparingly it rains,
and the dew
is your only
monetary relief,
so you gamble

smilingly,
rolling the dice
with paper-thin
skinned hands.

Girl

BY SOPHIA AMANDA MORALES

I know so little of rest.
Guilt-full sleep,
the stillness of 4 A.M. air,
the indefatigable nights
and their bony fingers.
Stay up late, wake up early,
eye holes
sickened with the stench
of holy worry.

I have been delivered
for the sake
of your sandwiched cares:
handmaiden,
expert sex worker,
virgin bride,
the 9 to 5 chef of shame,
smoking the smoke,
drinking the drink,
make-uping a face
of blame.

I Geisha you maniacally,
but the music
just doesn't ring
anymore.
A malfeasance
muddies the air
and it tastes
like drugstore cologne.
So I sleep
at the foot of the bed,
your dog-hound,
your princess,
your appurtenance:
deflowered and fragrant.

Cold

BY SOPHIA AMANDA MORALES

The cold infuriates me.
Her long veil, prickly hair,
the asininity she barks
until I shout back.

I argue with her every day.
She demands coin,
cotton, and excursions
to the equator.
She travels haphazardly.
She is ugly.

How then could she be
the heroine?
Invading countrymen's hearts
like a bee,
spitting in my face,
stealing my color,
draping her heavy arm
over my shoulders
as if I were her aunt.

I become gray
in her presence.
She,
thick with mass,
a snail lung,
dragging phonemes
to pretend she is alive.
I hate her.

This hate is my name,
my birthright,
my bag full of bats.
I rush away from her
and she follows
like an angel of death,
lapping up my sighs,

poking holes
with a slim needle.

She eats my bones.
She is my teacher.

There's a photograph

BY SOPHIA AMANDA MORALES

with burnt tips
and curling edges,
an image of me standing
naked,
turned away.

My hair falls over
my shoulders,
shadowing most of my body.
I am holding a joint.
Wisps of smoke
circle my head.
You insisted I stay still,
elbows propped up
on the half-open
Dutch door.

It was just the two of us,
in that cabin
that day,
high up on a mountain
that took all morning to find.

When we arrived,
we couldn't locate
the fake rock
with the hidden key
and had to break
the window to get in.

You called your grandfather
to apologize
as I de-clothed
and waited patiently,
shivering on the tweed couch.

I hadn't realized
the silly coincidence

until years later
when I stood outside
your apartment
for the last time,
knowing how hard
it had been
to get in
in the first place.

Sophia Amanda Morales was born in Long Beach, CA and earned her MFA from California State University, Long Beach. Her writing has been featured in *Cadence Collective*, *RipRap*, and *Verdad Magazine*. Her 2019 collection of poetry, *Letters from the Playa*, was an ode to Black Rock City and the wild people who populate it. She now lives in San Diego where she writes and teaches. Find her at the beach or on her yoga mat.

Cleopatra



Cleopatra
Anthony R Grant

A Dry Hot Season

BY ANGELA GAITO-LAGNESE

The bluffs near White Point are burning
multi-million-dollar mansions, postcard-photo sprawls
of lawnsapes, views of Catalina Islands.

Neighbors in San Pedro are outside making neighborly
conversation, watching the sky, the haze, the news breaking
all afternoon, the fire rioting.

Mary's eyes glint like limestone and we climb
into her truck, drive from Eighth Street to Gaffey, up
and down back roads, past the tracks, Sunken City,

black tar slabs straining through rocky cliffs to get a better view,
the motorcycle bar shuttered, empty. Between lighthouse and ocean,
the sky glows pink, the sun is orange.

Mary pulls on the shoulder, as close as we can get, her cheekbones
flushing neon-rose. The fire rips open before us, bursts into live-wire sparks.
Helicopters hover over the Pacific, swarm back over earth, let loose

red sands and salt water, in tandem, the fire raging.
Fire sprays grow into pylons, flame-arms flapping, flame-legs dancing
across sagebrush, juking over dirt and road, frames folding under roof beams

and trellis, fire-beings traipsing into palm trees, leaping over willows,
cartwheeling into carports, wind-crying.
Ash-snow lands on the windshield.

We both know we can't stay much longer, but we stay.
It's so beautiful, I say, thinking about parables and paintings,
slim fingers of smoke sliding in through the vents.

Angela Gaito-Lagnese is the author of the poetry chapbook, *Squalling (Main Street Rag*, Spring 2021). She has an MFA in fiction from the University of Pittsburgh and frequently attends Madwomen of the Attic Poetry Workshops at Carlow University. Angela has lived in San Pedro, California, but she now resides in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where she teaches English at Community College of Allegheny County.

Toes in a Mud Puddle

A.J. HUFFMAN

understand the urgency of rain,
feel the ravenous sucking of earth's desire
as it welcomes the droplets home. With every step,
they sink deeper into the pliable womb holding
the accumulation as if an infant waiting for final
delivery. Tomorrow, the same appendages will try
to retrace their path, will find only a slight
indentation, a minimal memorial, barely a scar.

Provoked by Quiet

A.J. HUFFMAN

Agony—
the interminable consort
lifted triumphantly over blood's
proclamation of inhabitation.
Translation: my heart
does not beat, but battles
fractal rivers of unnamed
memories that resound like thistle
scars—
minor but many. Look past
this skin. The visual
is measureless. Behold instead
the permanent force, the clinging
of invisible claws.

from Jellyfish this Acceptance

A.J. HUFFMAN

Nautical unnavigateables nod, their bodies
automatically agreeing with the waves motion.
Direction becomes meaningless, an intangible
momentum that does not need to be
known. Belief is their beauty.
They are soldiers of solidarity, obedient
 ly following
the god of their sea.

A.J. Huffman has published thirteen full-length poetry collections, fourteen solo poetry chapbooks and one joint poetry chapbook through various small presses. Her most recent releases, *The Pyre On Which Tomorrow Burns* (Scars Publications), *Degeneration* (Pink Girl Ink), *A Bizarre Burning of Bees* (Transcendent Zero Press), and *Familiar Illusions* (Flutter Press) are now available from their respective publishers. She is a five-time Pushcart Prize nominee, a two-time Best of Net nominee, and has published over 2600 poems in various national and international journals, including *Labletter*, *The James Dickey Review*, *The Bookends Review*, *Bone Orchard*, *Corvus Review*, *EgoPHobia*, and *Kritya*. She is the founding editor of *Kind of a Hurricane Press*. You can find more of her personal work here: [HTTPS://AJHUFFMANPOETRYSPOT.BLOGSPOT.COM/](https://ajhuffmanpoetryspot.blogspot.com/)

I Cannot Pass That Corner

DOROTHY CANTWELL

I cannot pass that corner
without looking up, my eyes searching
for that hollowed out bell tower
that must have stood
atop that building,
its darkness like a shattered heart

I was looking up in that moment
that obliterated all doubt,
the moment that exploded and turned
my last hope into fragments and ash

That was the moment of breaking.
That was the exact moment
when the girl in me died,
her winged cadaver flying out of me,
to perch like a bird of prey on the tower,
her future a disintegrating corpse,
while I went on.

But not that girl
She still looks down on me
with tearless, gouged out eyes, her bones
covered in dust as black, brittle as a dead rose.

She sits there, still, in the wreckage,
but I can do nothing for her.

Dorothy Cantwell lives in NYC and has worked as an educator, actor and playwright. She's been a featured poet in Great Weather for Media Sunday Series, Su Polo's Saturn Series, Brownstone Poets, and the Huntington Poetry Barn. Her work has been published in the *Long Island Literary Journal*, *Brownstone Poets Anthology*, *Constellate Literary Journal*, *Flash Boulevard*, *Assisi: An Online Journal of Arts & Letters* and *River and South Review*. She is currently working on a chapbook, *Awaiting Solace*.



Alarm Clock Installation
Julio Rodriguez

Hallándote

BY YESSIKA MARÍA RENGIFO CASTILLO

Te he hallado. ¡Que dulce y amoroso hallazgo!
Una búsqueda incansable en fotografías del ayer,
Las rosas que cuidamos los dos, se han marchitado
 Como nuestros días de sol.
 Te has ido y mi alma duele
 Como las tardes de invierno,
Pensando en tus labios como el suave de tu piel,
 Que lacera mi corazón sin ti.
 ¡Hallándote! ¡Cielo mío!
 Y las hojas de los sauces
 Se roban nuestra historia
Y entre lágrimas susurro tu nombre
 Hallándote se me va
 La vida, amor mío.

Finding you

BY YESSIKA MARÍA RENGIFO CASTILLO

I have found you. What a sweet and loving find!
A tireless search in yesterday's photographs,
The roses that we both take care of, have withered
Like our sunny days.
You are gone and my soul hurts
Like winter afternoons
afternoons
Thinking of your lips as the soft of your skin,
That lacerates my heart without you.
Finding you! My heaven!

And the leaves of the willows
They steal our history
And between tears I whisper your name

Finding you leaves me
Life, my love.

No llegaste

BY YESSIKA MARÍA RENGIFO CASTILLO

Las rosas se marchitaron
tus dulces manos
se perdieron en la ausencia.
Los chocolates se derritieron
en mis fríos bolsillos
del abandono que no lleno
el recuerdo de tu sonrisa.
No llegaste
los hijos
las cartas
y los versos de tus labios
son reminiscencias de mi vida.

You did not arrive

BY YESSIKA MARÍA RENGIFO CASTILLO

The roses faded
your sweet hands
they were lost in the absence.
The chocolates melted
in my cold pockets
of abandonment that I do not fill
the memory of your smile.
You did not arrive
Children
letters
and the verses from your lips
they are reminiscences of my life.

Invierno

BY YESSIKA MARÍA RENGIFO CASTILLO

La decepción toca mi puerta.
Las fotografías queman mi alma.
Las violetas, marchitas y ausentes, himnos de mi vida.
Invierno,
eco de mi existencia
desde que te fuiste
estrella mía.

Winter

BY YESSIKA MARÍA RENGIFO CASTILLO

Disappointment knocks on my door.
Photographs burn my soul.
The violets, withered and absent, hymns of my life.
Winter,
echo of my existence
since you left
my star.

Llamándote

BY YESSIKA MARÍA RENGIFO CASTILLO

Recuerdo tu cara angelical
los últimos días de verano.
Eras la luna
que calmaba mi atormentado corazón.
Tus ojos celestes
borraban historias que congelaron mis manos.
Llamándote
viven mis labios que se niegan a perderte.

Calling you

BY YESSIKA MARÍA RENGIFO CASTILLO

I remember your angelic face
the last days of summer.
You were the moon
that calmed my tormented heart.
Your celestial eyes
erased stories that froze my hands.
Calling you
live my lips that refuse to lose you.

Existen días

BY YESSIKA MARÍA RENGIFO CASTILLO

Existen días que se roban
el juego de los niños en las calles
de la desolación.

Existen días
que la vida pierde sentido
con la ausencia de los sueños
que alegran el alma.

Existen días
que los rayos del sol
son caminos de paz
en medio del caos
del corazón.

Existen días
que somos compañeros
de viajes inciertos
recobrando sentido en
los ojos de la ilusión.

Y solamente
existen días...

There are days

BY YESSIKA MARÍA RENGIFO CASTILLO

There are days that are stolen
children play in the streets
of desolation.

There are days
that life loses meaning
with the absence of dreams
that gladden the soul.

There are days
that the sun's rays
they are paths of peace
in the middle of the chaos
from the heart.

There are days
that we are companions
of uncertain travel
regaining sense in
the eyes of illusion.

And only
there are days ...

El país que soñamos

BY YESSIKA MARÍA RENGIFO CASTILLO

Sin ríos de sangre
sin cantos de seres que se aniquilan
en días de odio.

Sin hambre
sin chiquillos buscando en las calles
amor que se esfuma en casa.

Sin escuelas vacías
sin cuadernos ajados en el tiempo
sin maestros perdidos
en el miedo y la angustia de contar.

El país que soñamos
manos de hombres y mujeres
que sueñan caminos
de primavera.

The country we dream of

BY YESSIKA MARÍA RENGIFO CASTILLO

Without rivers of blood
without songs of beings that are annihilated
in days of hate
No hunger
no kids searching the streets
love that vanishes at home.
No empty schools
without notebooks worn out in time
no lost teachers
in fear and anguish to tell.
The country we dream of
men's and women's hands
that dream roads
of spring.

Encantos

BY YESSIKA MARÍA RENGIFO CASTILLO

Todo en ella era un encanto,
todo en ella era un sueño,
sus manos de seda, sus ojos verdes y su mirada triste.

Encantos

Era ella en días
que mi vida perdía sentido
entre melancolías y nostalgias del ayer
que se roban latidos
de mi corazón.

Charms

BY YESSIKA MARÍA RENGIFO CASTILLO

Everything about her was charming
everything in her was a dream,
her silk hands, her green eyes and her sad look.

Charms

It was her in days
that my life lost meaning
between melancholy and nostalgia for yesterday
that steals beats
from my heart.

Y la escuela

BY YESSIKA MARÍA RENGIFO CASTILLO

Era los sueños de los niños
en el horizonte del mañana.
Los ecos de la historia
que se escribiría con amor.
Y la escuela
era el juego de polifonías
del invierno
la primavera y el verano
y el lejano otoño.

And the school

BY YESSIKA MARÍA RENGIFO CASTILLO

It was the dreams of children
on the horizon of tomorrow.
The echoes of history
that would be written with love.
And the school
it was the polyphony game
of winter
spring and summer
and the distant autumn.

Esas violetas en la mañana

BY YESSIKA MARÍA RENGIFO CASTILLO

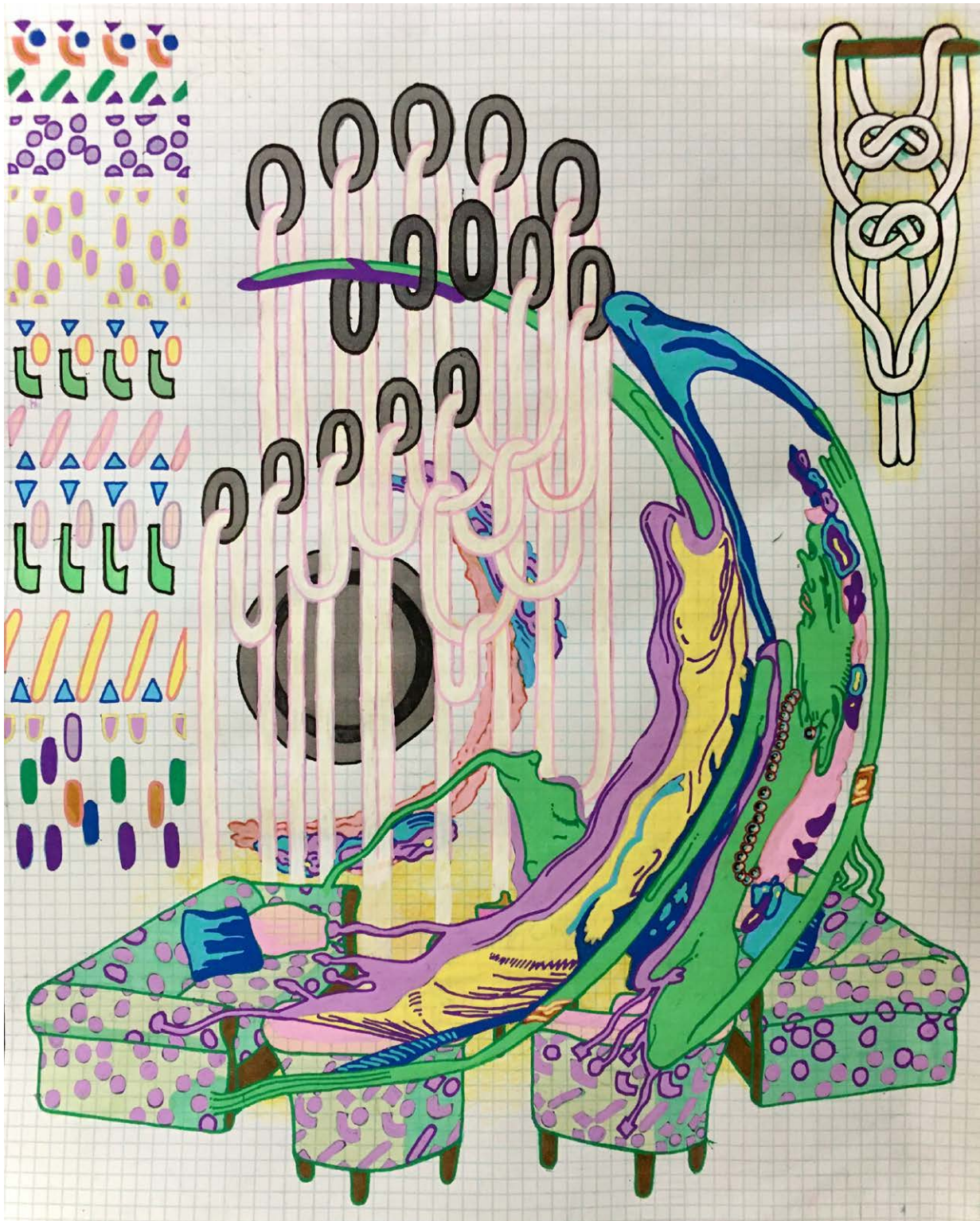
Hay días
que veo en mis ventanas
el canto del ruiseñor
que trajo mi abuelo
para alegrar mi corazón
en días sin sol.
Quizás en las tardes
las mariposas que juegan
con mis tristes ventanas
del alma.
Esas violetas en las mañanas
son mi abuelo
recordando que jamás se fueron
sus encantadores ojos marrones
y sus historias de la vida.

Those violets in the morning

BY YESSIKA MARÍA RENGIFO CASTILLO

There are days
what i see in my windows
the song of the nightingale
What did my grandfather bring?
to brighten my heart
on days without sun.
Maybe in the afternoons
the butterflies that play
with my sad windows
of the soul.
Those violets in the mornings
they are my grandfather
remembering that they never left
his lovely brown eyes
and their life stories

Yessika María Rengifo Castillo is a Colombian Poet, storyteller, columnist, and researcher, teacher. Degree in Humanities and Spanish Language, specialist in Childhood, Culture and Development, and Master in Childhood and Culture from the Francisco José De Caldas District University, Bogotá, Colombia. Since she was a child, she has been passionate about the reading-writing processes, she has published for the magazines *Infancias Imagines*, *Plumilla Educativa*, *Interamericana De Investigación*, *Education*, *Pedagogy*, *Notary Public*, *Proyecto Sherezade*, among others. Author of the collection of poems: *Words in the distance* (2015), the books *The silence and outros histories*, and *Luciana y algo más que tal*. She has recently published her third and fourth books: *The Wait* under the publishing label *Histories Pulp* and *Between Causes and Other Causes* in the *Letroides* publishing house. In addition, he recently published under the *Gazeta* label the book: *To the Children's they count*. Winner of the I International Literary Contest of Minipoemas Remember, 2017 with the work: *I don't remember you, Amanda*.



Wierdness
Bridget Klappert

Old Age Noir

BY CHRIS BULLARD

You have to be careful when you drink alone.
People might think you're alone.

I don't want to present myself as a loser
sopping up martinis until the bartender sends me home
with my coat sloping off my shoulders,

the hapless mark for some sharper
who'll pitch drugs, cheap land or just a crowbar
and a semi full of goods parked under the El.

So I try to camouflage myself, pretending
to be something I'm not,
sober, for instance, or saving a seat for someone

I made up: a solicitous old pal
nodding with my complaints, a businessman
sage, who's about to cut me a break,

or a girlfriend, elegant as a champagne cocktail,
who gives the movie a happy ending.
God, I even bore my fantasies.

Whatever reality really is, it isn't really real.
I read that on my cell phone.
Maybe, some other self will take the next barstool:

a tough guy who's done his share of time,
someone to understudy, as I learn to imitate
the moves a leading man makes,

the masculinity he shows while tossing back
his straight scotch, no chaser.
I want to read for the part of the marquee hero

instead of the stunt double,
or the body whispered to by the 2nd unit director
"Don't let them see you breathe."

Chris Bullard is a native of Jacksonville, FL, who lives in Philadelphia. He received his B.A. in English from the University of Pennsylvania and his M.F.A. from Wilkes University. *Kattywompus Press* published *High Pulp*, a collection of his flash fiction, in 2017 and *Grey Book Press* published *Continued*, a poetry chapbook, this year. His work has appeared in recent issues of *Nimrod*, *Muse/A Journal*, *The Woven Tale*, *Red Coyote*, *Cutthroat* and *The Offbeat*.

Shattered Moons

JULIA KOOI TALEN

After Ada Limón

Some days when it's cool and the fog hangs so low I can taste it
I go to the water and close my eyes.
I tilt my face towards the bright grey and
my eyelids are windows misted red and purple.
There are shattered moons.
There are the forgotten star clusters.
All this beyond the heavy wet
the scattered sun particles blued through,
the lucid blaze seeping into my eyes.
And I remember how small the pulse in my chest feels to the earth.
I want to peel back the thin tissue and see to the plutos
Feel all the misfit heartbeats at once
and then rupture into nothing but a blink.

A Youth in Letters & Sounds

JULIA KOOI TALEN

for Julie

When I pen your name
the ink blots wet stones
curved with reveries
that curl
like the u at the center of my tongue.

As we duet in pinky promises
honey laces our hums
another Missouri summer
pearls soft on your temple.

One drip scatters the blot
while we lean back on our wrists
under the maple in Laumeier Park
the crows' angst clicks with the jeweled leaves
echoing that middle name at the cheek
the one mothers dragged into your dusk,

a crown of false shamrocks
lavender pits
miles in seconds between
multi-cell thunder.

Shade shivers on our fingers
in the pine moss where we
watch the sun quiver clouds
 into a thin sheet I
stitched with pangs where we
sing songs into our cracks tell
each other secrets until

we lose

our breath

and we

our names are just

so young.

Now the letters are translucent strokes
in the pools of my eyes
I try to wipe up and retrace
your yellowing socks and that light blue fleece
a haze of freckles and all of the faces you had
into the i-e and the double f

the loops and tips
in my lips now cold.

The blue forks
in the mess
the Y
of your father
at the back of my palate
a pocket of puddles

blank, dry
and crisp, I sign you into my throat
blowing on each letter
your full name in my gums.

I'm so sorry

I hope

tonight

to meet you under the maple
where I'll remember each line in you
and I'll see you again
in your syllables

a pinky promise
in the moss
with the crows
the sunlight filling everything.

speak

JULIA KOOI TALEN

notice the ghost of your mother at the lip of the lake / gather her in your palms / ripple /
catch her cries marry your pulse.

use lake water to make a mud nest in the backyard / coil your fingers into the haven / add
daffodil seeds / pine cone pieces / pat the edges / hear women hush.

place the finished nest over your breast / wait for the blue fire crackles / the soft thunder in
your lap / the drizzle.

watch sky become dusk / see a lightning bug / pinch it / thumb the murmur around your
throat / see your thyroid throbbing chartreuse.

then rest your ear on a lover's chest / enter their heart / hear yourself / forget your body /
become a hum in a rib.

light a cigarette / trace the ghosts in clouds you exhale / try to whisper to them /
speak in seeds /
speak in crests /
speak in
ash /

after, lie down with yourself / bouquet / the space in your teeth /

iterate in shadows / hold them in your mouth / try to anticipate another

found: Francesca Woodman's Letters

JULIA KOOI TALEN

thank you for being so nice to me the last of winter
time seems to be just trickling by this moon soon season
if i were less of a goose i'd stick out this hand
instead of this long silence
an elbow for the rib

i was just an enigmatic elbow macaroni the other time
they say talking to me is like walking on eggs
really francesca should be put put away someplace long from june to september
i have been mostly marinated in them for months

i work i walk i read i sulk i try to sleep i worry i

started painting one wall of the kitchen white
to shuffle women around out of the past of people
i think the lady on the front has a body like a cello
with rubberbands instead of strings

my images again
they are getting too terrifying even for my taste
subterraneous seepings still trying to squint
people with their facial muscles waxed

i suppose we should meet for ice cream today
i'm lazy in the library--come get me. xo cesca

Julia Kooi Talen (she/her) is a writer living in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. She's currently an MFA candidate in creative writing at Northern Michigan University where she teaches college composition and reads for *Passages North*.



Out Muscled Hustle
Anthony R Grant

Kansas City

BY JAMES MILLER

For a while you worked the conference circuit,
a sharpie behind podiums, wishing the papers
were poems. Ducked out after questions/no
questions to cruise the cafes, ice-less cokacola
sloshing in your belly. Thrummed through free-
zines to see what warmed over in Columbus.
Pere Ubu played a past-prime set across the street,
but you were (as always) two weeks late.

On the flight back to KC it was time to admit
you'd never finish Spectres of Marx. In a sense
you had never started. Banking towards the runway,
you played out an alternate timeline: let's say your parents
worked for the revolution with the New Masses
in redgold days, so squeezed you out over lunch,
glistening and bitter like pretzel-mustard.

After baggage claim you boarded the long-term
parking shuttle, one of twenty-seven beautied
sleepers shuffling to smeared seats at 1:14 AM.
The bus shook awake and nosed for the lots.
Its rumble shafted your suffering glutes.

But a hand reached out from the berth
across the aisle, lightly brushed your jeans.
Beat of silence as you checked out
his grey temples, rumpled travel flannels.
He said: I had to make sure you were real.
Just left my son, in Moscow, waved him
to work and flew round the round.

Yet here you are with my son's acne
hidden by my son's thin blond beard
and my son's blued wrists and my
son's surgery-scar across his jugular.
It wasn't cancer, not that time.

James Miller won the Connecticut Poet Award in 2020. His poems have appeared in *Cold Mountain Review*, *The Maine Review*, *Lunch Ticket*, *2River*, *Juked*, *Meat for Tea*, *Main Street Rag*, *Plain-songs*, *The Atlanta Review*, *Sheila-Na-Gig*, *Rogue Agent*, *Sweet Tree Review*, *Thin Air*, *The Inflectionist Review*, *Panoply*, *Typehouse* and elsewhere.

Four Fish

BY ANU POHANI

In old times, when wishing was still effective, there lived a fisherwoman. She relished fishing at the stream by her cottage, catching brown trout and grayling. Brown trout sold better at the market stall she ran, but the grayling was far more fun to catch, requiring particular skill. Her husband was equally skilled with a bow. From the feathers of the pheasants he caught, the woman made beautiful flies with which to catch grayling. You might have thought the fisherwoman would have used effective wishing to have a beautiful young child, but she and the huntsman were happy and could wish for nothing more. They loved one another deeply, physically, wholly.

Each dawn, the huntsman left their cottage in the forest in search of prey. While he hunted, she spent her days at the stream fishing, first for the trout to sell, then the grayling for her own joy. In the afternoons, the couple occupied side-by-side stalls in the marketplace of a nearby town. At night, they would return to their cottage and appreciate each other slowly with no care, for they were safe in each other's embrace, knowing no pain or longing.

One day at the market, a new fisherwoman appeared with an exceptional catch: large rainbow trout and striped bass, clearly not from a nearby stream or river. Our fisherwoman was enthralled, "Where have you found such species?"

"I have travelled from the next kingdom. There, the river bears fruit worthy of your skill," the woman replied eyeing our fisherwoman's goods, "Your husband too will find plenty to occupy his bow were you to travel there." The foreigner continued, telling her of the most beautiful beasts, the variety of fish, and a detailed account of how to travel there.

Upon seeing the reception, the foreigner received, the urge to try her hand in another river swept over her like a strange wind. Having nothing to tie them to their home, she and the huntsman rented out their market stalls and set out. They had never been far from home or routine. Over many days of travel, the fisherwoman grew exhilarated, enchanted by different trees, the lakes they passed, the rivers teeming with new sights. The stranger's directions were straightforward, but they met no one on the journey.

At the inn, the stranger advised of, the couple sought a meal and a night's rest. At the evening meal, by the pleasant fire, they inquired after a cottage they may rent for their expedition, near a stream with good hunting prospects.

'The best place is within the lands of the king, within his walls, but you need special permission, for trapping and fishing. Alas, it is only granted once a year. You are too late. The season ended yesterday,' the innkeeper said. Perhaps our fisherwoman had not asked about the seasons. Perhaps, the stranger had forgot to mention the limitation. Either way, having seen the abundance of creatures, having peered into the waters at the rainbow-hued fish, they could not

turn back now, empty-handed.

“Let’s go back a way. I think we passed an abandoned cottage. We can make it habitable for a while. We can stay there. Avoid the rules entirely. I am sure that your catch will be as good. The hunting is certainly better than at home. We can sell our wares when we return, just as we planned,” the husband said.

The fisherwoman agreed. They had skill and they had each other. “Tell us, innkeeper. We passed a cottage along the way. Is it inhabited? Would the owner consider letting it to us for a short spell?” she asked.

“No one has lived there in my memory. I do not know who owns it. I would think you would be safer to stay here for a night or two. Return next year. But you know best your business. I’ll lead you to your chamber.”

The couple retired to a bedroom, resolved to inhabit the cottage the next night, leaving in the morning. They found the cottage abandoned but well-built, watertight with ample firewood. The man and woman set about cleaning, filling it with their tools and few belongings. The next day, the woman took her rod to the stream. There she caught a large bass for dinner and a stunning rainbow trout to cure in the salt she brought. Her husband caught a deer, enough meat for a week, to cure for sale as well as the softest pelt they had ever felt under their fingertips. The couple hung it next to the fire, stretched on a rack, anticipating how beautiful it would look in his stall, how it would sell for a fortune. In the firelight, the tan pelt shone like engraved gold, sparkles of light reflecting off their skin as they kissed.

The next day, the fisherwoman caught a striped bass and another rainbow trout, each one over two metres long. She stored these in the trough outside the cottage door, to cure the next day. The huntsman caught a fox. She helped him stretch the fox skin on a smaller rack, near the deer pelt by the fire. The fur shone like brushed silver and would fetch the price of many ordinary pelts found in their wood. As they met in their nightly embrace, they agreed to stay for one more night, the catch so large more time would not be needed. With the wares they had and the free accommodation, they resolved to return year after year. The quality of the catch was worth the journey. They would tell no one where they had found such riches, nor that they were available year-round without special permission.

On the final day, the woman stayed behind to prepare their riches so each piece of fish, each cut of game would be at their peak when they returned to their stalls. She whistled a tune as she butchered the hung meat of the deer. That day, the husband caught two pheasants. He hung them whole for the night. The feathers would make exceptional flies for the grayling at home. In the light of their treasures, the golden deer, the silver fox, and the bronze jewelled bodies of the pheasants the cottage resembled an enchanted cave, filled with every hope and desire. Though their life had been a happy one, this cottage with the surrounding wood, had given them a glimpse of what the wider world offered. With renewed vigour, she caressed her husband, feeling him with boundless desire.

Suddenly, a small movement caught her attention. The fisherwoman glanced over the huntsman's shoulder. The fox pelt had come off its pegs. It slithered, elongating into a magnificent silver gown, the doubtless form of a woman. The deer pelt freed itself, draping atop the gown, morphing into golden hair, skimming the waist of the silver gown. The pheasants flew, joining beaks to form a jewelled mask, framing a bronze face with glittering black eyes. The beautiful creature drew all light in the room towards it.

"You have taken of my hospitality," said the creature, "you have enjoyed the riches of my land and as you intend to leave tomorrow, it is time for you to settle your payment."

The couple dressed in haste. The fisherwoman went to her purse and emptied its contents onto the table. "Here, please take this. It ought to be enough."

"You know well it is not. When you sell what you have taken, you will earn much more than this. Still, it is a start." The money disappeared.

"That is all we have, unless we are permitted to leave and sell what we have gathered," the huntsman said.

"You have killed. You have taken blood from me. It is only through blood that I will be repaid."

"We can leave your land, hunt and fish and bring you back our catch," the wife said, shivering as the voice echoed in her heart.

"You are skilled, it is true, but no land, not even the king's has such beasts as mine."

The husband grew emboldened, "You have a price in mind. State it."

"I will have you," the creature said looking at the huntsman, "you have other skills that interest me immeasurably." It licked its lips and took his hand fiercely, pressing his palm to its breasts. "I will have you and with the money your wife earns from my animals' death, every day she will drop a single silver coin into the well at your cottage. From each coin, one scale from one fish will be reformed, reanimated, returning to my stream. When all have returned, you may be reunited."

With that, the fisherwoman found herself in an empty room, luggage packed, including neat parcels of their wares on the floor. Outside, a mare was saddled. Heartbroken, she reached out to it and mounted.

"Go. Pay in blood. This mare will hasten your journey home."

The woman returned alone and re-opened their stalls. Over the course of weeks, she sold the meat, cured fish and as many products as she could make with the bodies and skins of what they had gathered. She worked quickly, through each night, sewing the pelts into the finest coats, gloves, and bags. Her fame grew, and the price she could demand exceeded her dreams. Over the course of months, she dropped a single silver coin into the wishing well. She grew weary and thin, saving every coin she could for the safe return of her love. She knew that she lived in

a time when wishes were effective. She could not know how many scales the fish had worn. She could not know if the apparition would even be true to its word.

She had not fished since her return, fearful of ensnaring one of the four fish intended for the return to the enchanted wood, she had also run out of materials. Uncertain how many wishes were necessary, the fisherwoman sat in her cottage, alone, barely warmed by the fire. That night, she dropped her last coin in the fountain and fell into a fitful sleep. She would need to do something soon to continue to meet her end of the bargain.

In the morning, she woke to find the mare had reappeared and her heart filled with joy. The mare carried her back to the enchanted cottage. Believing the mare's arrival signalled the end of the ordeal she opened the door, longing for warmth, but the cottage was empty. The woman thought to light a fire, the fire had animated the creature, but again, nothing happened. She would wait until nightfall. It was in darkness that he had disappeared. It could be darkness that was needed again. When night came, she stared at the flames, willing for him to return, but he did not.

The next morning, having no other option, the woman returned to the inn. Perhaps they would have some clue of her husband. Perhaps he had escaped long ago and had been lost. The woman pushed through a crowd to the bar, scanning each face for his. Behind the bar, she saw her husband. He looked at her without any recognition in his eyes. He continued to polish glasses while chatting to patrons. He asked, "Dear lady, welcome. You look long travelled. Would you care for an ale or perhaps a meal? We serve a fine game pie." The woman shook her head, disappearing behind the next layer of customers pressing towards the bar.

A realisation struck her. It was their staying at the cottage that had freed the old innkeeper, and it would only be another couple, deeply in love, that would free him. Otherwise, her husband would return on an unknown day in the future at an unknown force's behest, its satisfaction unquantifiable, months or even years. The only way to hasten her husband's return, would be to trap another pair.

The woman rode back quickly to the cottage. Having not brought her rod, she reached for the bow mounted at the entrance and ventured into the forest. Resolute with anger, she took aim at a handsome stag. She was not as skilled as her husband, but the stag looked straight at her, willing her to shoot, signalling he would not bolt. A strange wind blew through the wood, and the fisherwoman lowered the bow. She would have taken the pelt to any marketplace and used it to lure another like her. She thought of the pain of a faceless woman, enduring an interminable separation that would tear at her from the inside each day. She could not consign another to this fate, even if doing so would bring back her husband. She could not kill even one more cursed creature from this wood.

Returning to the enchanted cottage, into the darkness, she spoke, "I saw what you intended me to see. You tire of my husband. You wish me to trap you another as they have done for ages, but I will not. I have no one left and would not wish my fate upon any other. You are bound by all my wishes, all the silver coins in the well. You are bound by your words. Return him to me."

Without another word, the woman left the cottage to find the mare, hoping it would be tethered still. She rode home by the light of the moon, energy spent, hope still burning. She clung to the mare's mane and felt something under her fingers. A silver coin. A blessing.

Arriving home, the woman took the coin and dropped it in the well, a last wish. She willed it as such. The wish to end all wishes. The mare shimmered into a dark cloud, down the well. At the bottom, four graylings glimmered in the moonlight. She lowered her line into the well and gently brought up one of the silvery bodies. One at a time, she lowered a grayling into the bucket, ran to her stream and dropped it in, each time whispering a blessing, "Go, pay in blood, until blood is returned," until all four had been released. When the fourth swam away from view, she turned to her cottage to see a familiar form.

She ran into the huntsman's arms. He had no memory of their journey nor any time away from the cottage. Sometimes, the fisherwoman thought to return to the enchanted cottage to see if she had broken the spell, to fish once more, to make love under brilliant colours, but she never did. Every day, she fished in her small stream, leaving the grayling whose brethren had saved them. She never spoke of what had happened, and they lived happily ever after.

Anu Pohani is an Asian-American writer living in London with their family and Alfie, the Tibetan terrier. Her essays and short stories have appeared in *Entropy*, *Off Menu Press*, and *Fudoki*. She is currently working on her first novel. She can be found on Twitter @AnuPohani.

Wilted Flowers

BY CALLIE ROWLAND

He stands on the dock, the white muslin of his wife's dress buffeting in the morning wind as the ship's prow rises above them, casting them in its shadow. On the deck, the sailors he employs ready the ship for departure. He will join them in minutes, but for now, he takes her delicate hand in his own and asks her the same question he does before every voyage: "What is it you want from me?"

He has brought her silkworms from China, statues from Greece, sage from Russia, and still, she does not love him. But he asks her again, anyway, because maybe she will this time.

She watches the sails thwap against the mast. Above them, the sky is a bruised purple-blue, and he knows this means storms, but he has already delayed departure for nearly a month due to the spring rains, and to wait any longer would be to allow his trading competitors to make off with all the goods before he has arrived.

"Pearls," she answers. "From the darkest depths of the sea."

"And?" he asks, for he knows there will be more. His wife always asks in three's. For luck, she says, but he can never tell which sort of luck it is.

"And a song," she tells him, "one that can be understood by any ear. And, lastly, stardust, from the uttermost reaches of the sky."

The ship's captain is calling him--the boat is readied. He squeezes her hand, the words catching in his throat, "And you will love me, at last?"

Her smile is like a kept secret. "Bring me these, and I will love you, as surely as I breathe."

Townsend, England

Monday, 28th May, 1804

Dear Husband,

I swore I would not do this. The Vicar Fredrickson suggested it weeks ago, when the house still reeked of the florist shop's worth of flowers that blanketed the parlor and whispered with the self-conscious shuffle of feet. I was draped in dreaded black bombazine—bombazine,

which is sturdy as a starched board, which is drab as dirt, and with which the only jewelry I was permitted to wear was that of jet beads and black glass, ugh!

Cane thumping against the rug, the Vicar Fredrickson approached me, head gleaming like a polished apple and triple chins choked beneath the collar of his black cassock. He patted my hand--you know how he does, stroking all us women as though we are churchyard kittens--and rasped that this act, writing letters to you, would help me overcome my grief.

Well, of course I told him I would consider it, but I so wanted to laugh! I would never write letters to you--after all, it was *you* who pined for *me* in our relationship, not the other way around. Indeed, Neffi Nicholls (whom you may recall has been my dearest friend ever since my arrival at this dreadful seaside village) and I shared a good many laughs over the prospect as we sat in the drawing room during our Friday games of backgammon.

So, naturally, I cannot tell her of this act to which I have now put myself. Naturally, I cannot permit anyone to know. Which is why I am penning this letter under the cover of night, as the shameful secret that it is. I have tried my best to not write it at all, but today a chain of events took place that cannot be coincidence--not after the conversation we had on the dock before your departure--and I feel I shall not rest until I tell them to you:

It was just coming on four o'clock when I heard the knock at the door. As you know, on the average day Albert would have answered it, but as it was, today our graying butler was out in the village purchasing a new cask of wine, so it was up to me to do the deed.

As I set down my cup of tea and dragged my feet to the front door, I expected the sort of call to which I have grown accustomed in this past month: village women with baskets of food and offerings of their company. But when I turned the brass knob, the door swung inward to reveal the form of an unfamiliar young woman dressed in a crimson gown embroidered with ebony teardrop impressions and white silk gloves up to her elbows. But it was her necklace that stopped me short: trio strings of black pearls, clasped high around her collar and trailing toward the swell of her chest, some of the orbs as large as the nails of my thumbs.

"Good afternoon," she smiled. She was a handsome woman, but I could not pry my gaze from that necklace. "Would you mind if I joined you for tea?"

"Forgive me," I frowned. "But do I know you?"

She told me no, I wouldn't, for she had only just arrived from London to stay the summer with Mrs. Faulkner--who was her aunt--at the Faulkner wheat farm down the lane. She said she had been coming away from the docks when she overheard a group of sailors lamenting your death and--barbaric men they are--worrying over how being alone might "addle my mind". So, she came to keep me company.

"Your house is so much more beautiful than the bare wood hovels in the village proper,"

she sighed, running her hand along the door frame. “I almost feel as though I am back home. Please, may I come in, if only for a few moments? I promise my aunt will not miss me, for my visit is to be a surprise.”

I drummed my fingers against my lips. It was clear she was well brought up, and--if her necklace was any indication--that she had a taste for finery, as so few of these village people do. I must say my pride got the best of me, for I found myself inviting her in for tea.

She exclaimed her gratefulness and floated into the house, expressing admiration for the foyer’s peacock-patterned wallpaper and the lion’s heads carved out of the marble on either side of the drawing room fireplace.

As, along with Albert, the servants had all ventured into the village, I left her in the drawing room and went down to the kitchens, where I prepared a second pot of tea myself. On Cook’s work table there was a bundle of my favorite flowers--foxglove and nightshade--their leaves half-shriveled. Deciding they had sat there long enough, I swept them into my hand before pouring the tea from the kettle to the tea pot. Then I returned, and we sat together, speaking of society in the village--or lack thereof--as she sipped her fill. It was only then that I realized I had not yet learned her name.

I asked her what it was, but before she could answer she gasped, dropped her teacup, and collapsed to the floor in a seizing fit. It all happened so quickly that I cannot say for certain, but I must have screamed as I sat there, watching, as she began choking, foaming at her mouth and making these awful gurgling noises. Her eyes rolled up in her head, white as fresh snow. Minutes passed, and her twitching began to slow, until she lay there on the rug, dead. Her teacup lay beside her, its umber contents soaking into the pink of the rug’s flowers and turning them the color of dried blood.

I panicked. I feared what the servants would think if they came home to see the evidence—they would imagine me a killer, and what then? I would be hanged! I was forced to dispose of the body myself, dragging it to the cliffs at the edge of the estate and dumping it over the edge, but before doing so I unclasped the pearls from its throat and tucked them away in my jewelry chest. Though I felt the villain in doing so, I felt a knowing—akin to a cool brush on the back of my neck—that I should take them. Those pearls, they were meant for me. They were the gift I asked for from you on the dock. And now those same pearls, black as the darkest depths of the sea, sit in my jewelry chest.

Perhaps I am mad for entertaining the possibility of you coming to me from beyond the grave. After all, I have taken all the proper precautions to ensure your safe passage to the Father’s house: on the day of your funeral, all the clocks were stopped, all the mirrors were turned down, and, yes, all *three* of the estate’s beehives were veiled in black fabric so that the bees could mourn your passing.

But still, I must wonder if it could be true, and if it is, then why have you waited twenty-

eight days to make your appearance? Twenty-eight days exactly, as, as I sit in your library, behind this mahogany bulwark of a desk, the ivory face of your silver pocket watch--the one with the ship etched into its case, you know the one--reads twelve o'clock midnight.

I am at once excited and upset by the possibility of you. For, in these weeks of your absence, I have been quite content. I leave the library windows open, and the chandelier's crystals tinkle like a faerie's laugh in the breeze as the golden apple paperweight shines in the sunlight as though Hercules only just snatched it from the Hesperides' garden. In the mornings, I have taken to opening the French doors of the balcony and enjoying my morning tea in your once-private conservatory (I must say I am enthralled by the pepper-sweet aroma of your Passion Flowers).

I *would* read the thousands of books that once lined the shelves, but I cannot, for you built that new library for the local schoolhouse last year and donated our own collection to fill its shelves. Do you recall how, even then, I told you no, do not give the books away, I want to keep them, and you shook your head and told me you had already promised them to the children? I do, and it will not be soon forgotten.

But it is late, and I am rambling now, my mind avid with the wonder of when the other gifts I asked for will arrive. I wonder, too, of the young woman, whose body is now adrift in the sea, and what will become of her mother. But that I must put out of my mind, for she is not mine to worry over. Or, perhaps she is, and I shall wake in the morning and throw out the pearls, appalled at my actions. A part of me hopes I do.

Signed,

Bel

The waves lap at his flesh. His eyes are sealed with the memory: thunder, lightning, salt spray and screams—*crack* of the mast, *whoosh* of the wind, and wet. He cannot say how long ago it happened. Time is lost to him. He floats alone, fingers blistered beneath the sun as he grips the plank of splintered wood, the taste of brine filling his mouth.

Townsend, England

Thursday, 31st May, 1804

My Dear Husband,

I decided to give up the pearls. The morning after writing my letter to you I strode to the cliffs at the estate edge and held them over the white froth of the waters, prepared to let them flow back to the woman who wore them. But then I felt that *knowing*--that cool brush on the back of my neck--and I thought I must keep them, and see whether or not the other gifts would follow.

Still, in the evenings of these past two days I have stood at my bedroom balcony, fingers curled around the railing as I watch the cliffs, thinking of the woman and her pearls. I see her while sleeping and in waking, her face, purple and pinched as a dried plum in her last moments, screaming for help that I cannot give.

It is unbearable, and I have slept not more than a handful of hours. Indeed, when I awoke this morning I was determined to be rid of her. Quietly, as not to wake the servants, I tied my mother's blue silk shawl around my shoulders, clasped the pearls around my neck, and slipped out of the house.

At first, I kept to the gravel pathway that leads directly to the cliffs, but, as my nursemaid always said, I have a wild soul, and my gaze lingered on the woods at the estate's inland edge. As a cool breeze brushed the back of my neck, I found myself plodding across the moor as my hair whipped against my face, barring my vision and twisting through my lips. Nose filled with the sweetness of lavender and honeysuckle, I plucked bouquets of my favorite flowers, and though my nightdress snagged on the forest brambles, I did not care. I became lost in the early morning beauty of the place, the horror of the woman growing distant.

I must not have been there more than half an hour when I heard a nightingale, singing high in the boughs of the chestnut and hornbeam trees. I stilled, my gathered foxglove and nightshade clutched to my chest, and closed my eyes, cradled by her melody. Just then, I felt a delicate weight on my shoulder, and flung open my eyes to find the nightingale there, head cocked and chest fluttering with her rapid heartbeat. Her plumage, like a swirl of tea and cream, shined in the shafts of sunlight that punctured the foliage, and as I watched, so still I scarcely dared to breathe, she opened her beak and sang.

It was then that I realized: she was my second gift from you. She was my song to be understood by any ear.

Clutching my hand to my pearls around my throat, I whooped with excitement and raced back to our home, dancing into the library, where I placed her inside that decorative birdcage of yours, with its rusted iron bars and tresses of faux ivy. She sits there even now, content to watch

me inscribe these words to you as she sings her evening tune.

Now that I know without doubt that these pearls were meant for me, the nightmares will surely leave. Tonight, I will sleep straight through, and for that, I thank you.

Signed,

Bel

The night sky ribbons above him, uninterrupted by stars or moon. Beneath the waves, he feels the brush of the shore against his toes, but he is too weak to move. Far off, he hears cries of pain and laughter, music and the lap of water. He flattens his cheek against the land, the grit of sand between his teeth, and prepares to die. It is then that the flower lands in his palm. His eyes creak open, and in the darkness its white petals glow silver, streaks of brown slicing down their centers as its seven stamens reach for him. It reminds him of flower vases on tables, and this reminds him of home.

The memory snaps at his mind like a sail caught in a violent wind. He is suddenly back on the dock with his wife, her promise in his ears: *bring me these things, and I will love you, as surely as I breathe.*

Grimacing, he lifts his face to see a meadow of flowers just like the one in his hand, blanketing the ground until it disappears into a grey horizon. Their stems are tall and thick, the blossoms like heads of corn at their tips. In absence of any breeze, they stand in perfect stillness.

I must return to her, he thinks.

“Is that truly what you desire?” The voice is like the scrape of dried leaves on the road, whose movements sound only vaguely like words he knows. He looks up to find a figure, robed and hooded in grey, that is only half-there, like a portrait faded by the sun. Its face is a pool of darkness that looks much deeper than the back of its head. He is sure it was not there moments ago.

“She will not love you,” it tells him. “She is all you want, but you will never be enough for her. Let me take you away, to peace.” The figure points to the water behind it, where a black row boat without oars now sways on the current.

“No.” The word rips at his throat. “I need her.”

The water laps at the row boat. “You have nothing to give her.”

He displays the flower in his palm. “Then I will give her these.”

The figure makes a sound like a breeze rushing through a tree hollow, which he thinks must be a sigh. “Then you must travel that way.” It points out across the meadow. “The journey will be long and hard, and you must run the whole way and never stumble, and once you have reached her you will be trapped with her always...”

But he has stopped listening. Muscles tearing with effort, he forces himself to stand. His legs wobble like those of a newborn foal, but he manages one step, and another, until he is walking again. He plucks the flowers, and does not notice if the figure goes silent, if it vanishes or if it was ever there at all. He only knows that he is walking, he is running to her, a bouquet of the flowers clutched in his hands.

Townsend, England

Friday, 1st June, 1804

My Dear Husband,

Tragedy! Betrayal, of the highest order, has struck me. This afternoon, when Neffi arrived for our usual Friday backgammon game, the nightingale—I have named her Calliope, after the Greek muse—unleashed herself in a lyrical tirade of such intensity that it was audible even from the drawing room.

Neffi froze in the act of rolling the dice. “What in heaven?”

I stared at the game board and told her it must be coming from one of the trees near the house, but her neck swanned toward the drawing room doorway, her eyes piqued with concern. “Something must have flown in,” she said. “We ought to go and find it. The poor little bird may have got itself trapped!”

Before I could dissuade her, she rose from her place on the sofa and disappeared around the corner. By the time I crossed the threshold to the library she was leant over the birdcage, watching Calliope flit about as she burst with song.

I gripped the doorframe and eyed the desk, upon which my previous letters to you rested in plain view. I explained to Neffi how I found Calliope, hoping to coax her back to the drawing room, but you know how enamored Neffi is by little live things--whether it be animals or babies--and this only served to further enrapture her. She leant in close to the birdcage and spoke to

Calliope in the voice I have heard women use with newborn babies. “You are such a pretty bird. Yes, you are. Come here. Come here.” But Calliope did not come, and when Neffi still would not leave, my anxiety worsened into frustration, and I threw up my hands and stalked back to the drawing room.

This was my fatal mistake. For now, Neffi has gone home, and my letters to you have disappeared. She has taken them, I know it. She will see what I have written--will see that I have entertained the possibility of you coming to me, and what has become of the woman with her pearls, and she will think me mad, or of the devil. I will be either hanged or shipped off to an institution. I fear this is my last letter to you, for they will surely come for me on the morrow.

Goodbye,

Bel

Townsend, England

Saturday, 2nd June, 1804

Husband, Husband, Husband!

My pen rushes across the paper, blotting ink and mussing my penmanship--and I am sorry for that, but I have news, the grandest news you will ever hear. Neffi has not declared me mad or evil; no, Neffi believes! Neffi, who is always the Vicar Fredrickson's favorite because she sings in the church choir and can recite entire books of scripture without pause, arrived at the front door this morning, letters in tow. Throwing her arms around me, she lamented, “Keeping it all a secret must have weighed so heavily on you. The image of that woman--and how you had to take her to the cliffs all alone! I am sure the pearls are magnificent, but why would your husband do such a thing, making you watch her die like that? And her poor mother, waiting for a daughter who will never come home!”

I assured her that, while it was a terrible ordeal, my nightmares were quite over, and that the woman's mother would surely recover--after all, she would have known of the dangers of sea travel when she sent her daughter away. She would have been prepared for the consequences.

Neffi nodded her head and dried her tears, and I invited her into the drawing room,

where we were soon talking about you. When would I receive your third gift, and how would it happen? Neffi became positively apoplectic with excitement. She leant near to me, her voice so low I could scarcely hear it, and told me we ought to hold a seance!

“We could do it tomorrow,” she said, “instead of going to the service. You have told me yourself--that the time of worship is best for this sort of thing, when God and heaven are closest to earth.”

Well, of course I was hesitant. Though I desperately wanted to receive your third gift, I have held seances before, and knew that speaking to the newly departed was ill-advised. I told her this, and warned her of the possible ramifications of her involvement.

“If someone were to find out,” I said, “your spotless reputation would be forever tarnished.” I cautioned her to think about what this would mean, especially now, with her recent engagement to that Lord Bennington from a few towns over, when she is about ready to leave this place--to leave *me*--forever. If anyone heard of her involvement, it would surely be revoked--not to mention the possibility of our being hanged for witchcraft.

But to all of this she merely dropped her head into her hands and groaned, “I never commit any wrongs, Jezie. Never. And now I am to be married to a Lord, and there will be no chance of doing anything like this then, not with a whole Abbey’s worth of servants watching me.” She gripped both my hands in hers. “Please, permit me to have this bit of fun.”

In the end, I could not deny her. So it is happening, dear husband. The seance is happening tomorrow!

In anxious anticipation,

Bel

Townsend, England

Sunday, 3rd June, 1804

Husband,

I fear I have been a fool. The seance was disastrous. Neffi arrived at dawn, before even

the servants awoke, and the two of us set to work in the drawing room, burning the last of my cedar and spritzing the room with my homemade holy water. For the conduit through which you would speak, I chose the yellow aventurine pendulum that you brought back to me from your trip to India. I hooked it on the fireplace between the lion's heads, and entreated my ancestors to make a path for you to me.

Then we sat. We sat in front of the hearth and we waited for you, for that chill on the back of my neck, but it did not come. When I asked if you were with us, Neffi promises she saw the pendulum swing towards the right (which we had decided would mean yes), but I know better. You were not there; you have never been. My third gift will never come, for how can it? The first two were mere coincidences, and now I feel truly evil, to have tossed that poor woman to the waves without ever mourning her.

I shall go to the Vicar Fredrickson tonight and confess. I shall repent of my sins. I shall throw out my materials--the cedar and the holy water and the pendulum--and never again attempt to commune with the departed. I shall go back to entertaining guests--I will need to make new friends, anyway, with Neffi going away. The next woman to come to the front door with an offer of companionship--I will invite her.

Townsend, England

Thursday, 7th June, 1804

My Faithful Husband,

I should not have doubted you. I should have known, of course you would not display yourself for Neffi, for you want me, and me alone. I should not have listened to the Vicar Fredrickson, who said to burn the letters I wrote you, who said he is sorry to have ever suggested such a pagan thing, who instructed me to free Calliope and to toss the pearls to the waves. I should not have done these things, but I did, and I am flooded with regret for it.

Yesterday morning, I found Calliope strangled in the Passion Flowers in the conservatory--dead, only for trying to return to me. And the pearls, they will not stay away. The servant girl Mary found some on the billiards table. Cook found some in the dough of her pie crusts. Stable Hand Joseph found some in the horses' feed sacks. And I have found them everywhere--on the library shelves, in my jewelry chest, in the centers of the flowers on the drawing room rug. I have begun collecting them in an old face powder tin, and they clatter like mouse bones each time I sit down at my vanity.

Despite all of this, I promised myself I was mistaken, that I was mad for entertaining notions of your presence. But I can deny you no longer, not after today.

I know why it happened this way: you wanted to punish me for my unbelief. That is why the stars were brought down upon the very schoolhouse you helped to build. I watched them fall, burning like diminutive suns as they arced across the heavens. The smoke was visible from my window, rising in great black talons that ripped apart the sky, and the moans rose with it. The wracking sobs of the village mothers and fathers as they learn to live without their children, as they cradle tiny blackened bodies to their chests and scream at the Lord, *why?*

But I know this is not the Lord's doing. It is yours. You have stricken thirty-seven innocent lives. You have stolen away this village's future, all for me. For, despite the violent manner in which you did it, you brought me the stars today. I went down to the schoolhouse ruins and blackened my fingers scraping their dust into a mason jar, which now sits on my bedside table. It is the third gift I asked of you, but its cost was great.

For the Vicar Fredrickson knows about you, and he does not blame the Lord for the schoolhouse's destruction; he blames you--*us*. He came to me tonight, chins jiggling as he howled for me to put an end to it.

"But you swore to me," I pleaded. "You swore to me he was not real."

"I was mistaken!" He gripped one of the library bookcases for support, face red as radish skin. "And now the children have paid for it! Families are distraught. This village believes the Lord has forsaken them. But you and I know, Mrs. Flora. You and I know the *truth*. You must put your husband to rest before he can wreak any more havoc."

I cried that I had repented, that had rid myself of your gifts, that I had taken all the proper precautions. What more was there to be done?

"Repent again!" he yowled. "As many times as necessary. Find a way to end it, Mrs. Flora." He shrugged on his coat. "Or the village will have to know the truth, and when they do, they will come for you. They may claim to be Christians, but you have taken their children, and they will show you no mercy."

I chased him into the entryway. "But you will stop them. You will explain that the fault is not mine."

He put his hand on the knob, gaze softening. "My dear, one man cannot hold back an army."

He left hours ago, and now it is the middle of the night, and I have still not left the library. I am awash in guilt and fear--and yet, I am grateful. For the stardust, yes, but more for the undeniable proof that you have never left me. I asked much of you, and you have given it, and I love what you have given me. I only wish that you might have given it before your death, so that we might have had a more peaceful time together on this earth.

With love,

Your Bel

Townsend, England

Friday, 15th June, 1804

My Beloved Husband,

They have taken Neffi. Awash with guilt, she confessed her involvement with the seance to the Vicar Fredrickson. One of the church groundskeepers was nearby, and he overheard and spewed his knowledge to the village, who turned on Neffi like a pack of wolves. She ran to me, begging that I protect her, that I hide her away from them, but of course I could not do so. That would have only made the villagers come for me as well.

She was still banging on the front door when the mob arrived. They carted her through the streets and tied her to a stake, burning her alive as they jeered.

My dreams are haunted by her last moments, joined by those of the woman with the pearls. They scream for my help, but I cannot give it. I hear the roar of fire and the mouse-clatter of pearls against tin and the shattering of teacups. It is so terrible that I hardly dare to sleep. Instead I lie awake, longing for that coolness at the back of my neck, that promise that you are here. I stare at the place on the mattress where your body once lay and want you so badly I imagine I might burst and scatter about the room.

The Vicar Fredrickson has not yet told the village of my involvement, but he has been to our home twice now, threatening to do so unless I convince him that your spirit has been extinguished. I fear for my life should he tell them, but how can I attempt to banish you now, when I must cling to you more than ever? I know not what to do.

Your loving wife,

Bel

He arrives home to find it on fire. Flames lap from the windows. Black smoke spills from the front door. The roof has collapsed. At the sight, he feels something concave within him, but more alarming is the mob that encircles the conflagration, jeering his wife's name.

He races across the moor's hills and jostles through their midst. Ash nestles in his hair and the bitter smell of burning wood fills his nose.

"Where is she?" he moans. "Where is she?" he grips a man by the shoulders and shakes him. "What have you done with my wife?"

"Jezebel Flora!" the man spits, and the saliva sticks to his face. "Child-killer! Witch!"

Witch, he thinks, and his horror expands. "Where is my wife?"

A woman sees him and screams, "It is him, the one she summoned. He has come to kill us now that we have burned her!"

They gasp and shriek and charge at him. He flees over the moor and into the forest, and though they try to follow, they brush is too thick, and they cannot. They return to his home to watch it burn, and he is left alone, clutching his bouquet of flowers as he tiptoes through the underbrush, feeling his wife's closeness like a heartbeat. He has been without her for so long, but the feeling of her is vivid: soft and lilting, like the Lily of the Valley.

He finds her crouched beside the stream, her hand skimming the water as her hair falls in ivy tresses down her back. She wears nothing but a black nightdress that smells of smoke. Though she is turned away from him, he is frozen by her beauty. He reaches out his hand and just barely brushes the back of her neck with his fingertips. "Bel," he whispers. "My Bel, I am home."

She whirls, staring at him with shattered eyes as tears cascade down her cheeks. Her throat is clogged with disbelief. *How?*

Defeated by her silence, he drops to his knees. "My ship wrecked shortly after our departure, and though my journey has been long, I have last found my way back to you, and I offer you these." He holds out to her the bundle of flowers, wilted as they are, and pleads to her with his eyes. "I love you, Bel, as surely as I breathe. It has always been so. Will you love me likewise, at last?"

She takes the flowers--Asphodel flowers, she knows, which are useless and smell of nothing--and turns them over in her hands, wrinkling her nose as they crinkle, shriveled petals falling to the forest floor. "You and these wilted flowers are not enough," she says, and drops the flowers into the stream. He is trapped with her, but she does not look at him again.

Callie Rowland is a writer based in Louisville, Kentucky, where she is currently pursuing a BFA in Creative Writing at Spalding University. In addition to serving as a fiction editor for her school's undergraduate literary magazine, Raptor Lit, she is in the process of editing her first novel, which she hopes to complete within the next few weeks. For senseless banter and the occasional unnecessarily earnest caption, follow her on Instagram @_callierowland. You can also subscribe to her on YouTube, where she uploads book reviews under the username GreenTeaAndPaper.



Buff

Photographed by Julio Rodriguez

A Girl Like You

BY HEATHER IVERSON

Libby woke up drenched in sweat, the sound of Lynyrd Skynyrd singing *Curtis Loew* filling the Pontiac. Her brother was driving while her mom smoked Dorals in the passenger seat. They had stopped at a light in a town both larger and scrubbier than theirs. Alabama probably. Outside her window she could see an old man pushing a mostly empty cart out of a grocery store across a crumbly concrete parking lot. Libby had studied the map before they left, in case anyone asked her to navigate. Her third-grade teacher two years ago had loved maps and shown the class how their state was special because it bordered so many others. Libby hadn't bought it. She'd been across the state line in Georgia and North Carolina, and they were both exactly the same as Tennessee. The thought of this trip had filled her with both excitement and dread since her mother had surprised them with the news last week.

"We're going somewhere," her mom, Ronnie, had said. She didn't call it a vacation, though Libby knew the point was, indeed, to vacate. July 5, 1992 was coming up, and none of them wanted to be in their town, in that house, on the first anniversary of the day Libby's father had dropped dead.

Libby had been furious with her dad. The night before, Libby had wanted to go see the fireworks in town or at least light sparklers in their backyard, but her dad had been too tired. Libby had skulked and went to bed without saying goodnight, while her parents watched Cheers. They had just closed on a new house, and her father had been working over there since daybreak, getting it ready for the family to move in. Libby would miss their old house, a rambling, hundred-year-old place with no hallways, but she understood why they had to leave. Their longtime neighbors' house had burned, and a new family had put a trailer on the spot. Then came the junk cars. Half-dressed kids would run around the debris in the yard while the older boys would fight and swear. One night, Libby saw the oldest son disappear into a police car. As she brought in groceries, Libby's mom would look up at the place and purse her lips. "No 'count," Libby heard her mom say to her dad in the evenings.

In the new house, she would still have to share a room with Anna, but at least the room was bigger. Her parents would have a real walk-in closet and their own bathroom. The half-bath was completely blue, the color of baby boy clothes. Libby wondered where on Earth they found a blue toilet. The house had been a deal because the previous family had very nearly wrecked it. Nothing had been cleaned in years, and the floors were almost rotted with moisture. The four sons had carved their names into the doors with pocketknives, and the thick carpet of Libby's new room was musty with boy sweat. Regardless, the house was on a quiet street. Nothing trashy as far as the eye could see.

On the morning after the Fourth, Libby's dad had been moving a mattress down from her brother's attic room when he fell down the stairs. Libby had been packing up her Barbie dolls into a frayed red duffel bag when she heard something hit the floor in the next room. Anna

pulled the phone out of the wall trying to call 911 while their mother screamed over and over again, “Robert! Get up, Robert! Open your eyes!” Her dad’s face had already grown slack when Libby ran to him, and she thought, “He’s dead. It’s over,” though what “it” was she couldn’t say.

Those first days, she kept making mistakes. People brought all kinds of food. Casseroles, cakes and fried chicken covered their table, but when Libby got a plate, Anna glared at her and pinched her arm. Libby dumped the cake in the trash and fed the chicken to her dog. At the funeral, someone gave her an orange tic tac, and when she asked for another, the lady started crying and gave Libby the whole box. One of her grandmother’s sisters told Libby she should kiss her father’s face. Horrified, Libby shook her head. Her great aunt insisted and pulled Libby gently to the side of the casket. She started to lift Libby up when Anna came running over. She pushed Libby behind her and told the old lady exactly where she ought to go for trying to make a little girl kiss a corpse.

Mostly, Libby worried about her mom. Ronnie would stay in her room, her own mother’s meaty arm around her, while her sisters stood by in a cloud of smoke, shaking their heads. Libby tried to join them, but her grandma shook her head and pushed Libby gently back to the kitchen. Anna and Reed generally stayed out of the house, with friends or at part-time jobs. When it was just the two of them, Libby would hug her mom, but Ronnie seemed to be looking past her.

The Pontiac’s air conditioner was broken, and the black paint sealed in the heat like an electric blanket. There was a cooler in the back, near Libby’s feet, the held the ham sandwiches and Cokes her mama had packed that morning, and beside it a Piggly Wiggly bag of Little Debbie’s. Libby grabbed a nut brownie, gooey from the heat, and ate it silently, absently wiping her fingers on the faded black interior. Her sister was staring out the window, headphones on her ears and Metallica blasting just loud enough for Libby to hear. Anna was seventeen, and Libby openly envied her womanly figure. Libby herself was gangly and sharp, from her long nose and her pin-straight bowl haircut to her hatchling legs. Anna looked like their mother but with a Botticelli voluptuousness that she tried to disguise as best she could with boxy band t-shirts and indiscriminate scowls.

Reed drove fast with one hand on the wheel, but Ronnie hummed in the passenger seat, calling out exits and road signs. Reed had complained about leaving town when he had a new girlfriend, but Ronnie had shut him down with a look. He was the only one Ronnie would engage in conversation.

“You should have seen it,” said Ronnie. “That man ran back to his car like his pants was on fire.” She laughed, explaining how an insurance salesman had been nearly bitten by their part-pit bull mutt Bell. Over the last year, a kind of partnership had blossomed between Ronnie and Reed. The new house required a lot of work, and Reed learned quickly. He had fixed cabinets and the plumbing in the main bathroom, calling Libby in to hand him tools. He was only nineteen, though. A month after they’d moved in, Libby’s great-uncle Junior had driven by

in his old white Ford Ranger. Junior wore a short-sleeved plaid shirt with a pocket and the thin framed gold glasses of an old union boss.

“Heard ye need a roof on the new house,” said Junior as he stood in the yard with Ronnie.

Ronnie swatted at a wasp and sighed. “Reed will get to it one of these days.”

“That boy cain’t do a roof! I’ll round up some that’ll help him.”

Sure enough the next Saturday, an assortment of uncles, cousins and men from the community were sprawled on the roof of the new house, pulling off shingles while Libby stayed in the kitchen at their old house, helping her aunts to make endless pans of sausage biscuits. Ronnie had taught Libby to make biscuits when she was five, using only her hands instead of a rolling pin. Handle them lightly, Ronnie had said. Otherwise, they’ll be tough. Libby bent herself to the task as if she could resurrect her father through row after row of perfectly round circles of dough. When Libby returned to the old house, the men were finished, spent and sweating, crouched on the concrete car port and the meager grass, cigarettes gently bobbing on their dry lips.

“Reckon we’re through. I wouldn’t dance up there, though,” said Junior, smiling at her mother.

Ronnie laughed and put her hand on his arm, as he pulled her to his chest. Libby watched her mother’s thin, sweat-stained back rise and fall as her laughter mixed with low sobs.

They arrived in Panama City near suppertime, with the sun glaring off the asphalt and the buildings that made up the commercial strip, as they made their way slowly through a parade of stoplights. The road was lined with souvenir shops showcasing neon airbrushed t-shirts and seafood shacks with names like Wet Willy’s. Libby had never seen a real live woman in a bikini except her cousin Brandy who everyone knew was fast.

They stayed at Panama Dunes, a six-story motel the color of canned salmon. Their room had two double beds, and the first thing Libby did was pull off her shoes and stretch out on the fern-print bedspread.

“Libby!” Ronnie said, “Pull the comforter down first. Lord knows what germs are on that spread.” Ronnie knew what she was talking about. Before Robert died, Ronnie had worked part-time at the school cafeteria, but now she cleaned rooms five days a week at the local motel.

Libby thrummed with excitement as she pulled on her bathing suit. She’d never been to the beach before and had barely glimpsed the ocean as they’d pulled into the parking lot. Everything she knew about the sea she’d learned from her best friend Brit who went to places like Charleston and Myrtle Beach during summers.

What struck her the most wasn’t the waves, lapping rhythmically at her feet. It was the sand. Millions, billions of grains sifting out to sea and back, over and over, moving beneath her

feet as if she were nothing, incapable of interrupting for a second the vital work of the tides. Ronnie sat on a towel in her skirted swimsuit, much more suited to an elderly woman than a forty-something widow and watched while Libby splashed and her siblings swam out until their heads were little brown dots and Ronnie called them back.

“Why don’t you come in, Mama?” Libby said, as her mother spread more sunscreen on her back.

“Oh,” said Ronnie, “The ocean’s not for old women like me.”

“You’re not old, Mama!”

“Well, I’ve been to the ocean before. I don’t need to get back in.”

“When?”

“Let’s see,” said Ronnie. “Saint Augustine when I was a teenager. I helped Marjorie with her kids. Then I went to Virginia Beach once with Laurel.”

“Did you wear a bikini?” asked Libby, shy.

Ronnie threw her head back and laughed. “You bet I did.”

On Tuesday, it rained all morning, turning the waves violent, even after the storm passed.

“Let’s go to that amusement park,” said Reed. “The one we passed on the way in. Miracle something or other.”

They walked the half block to Miracle Strip in the dank humidity of the post-storm.

“Want me to take you on the Tidal Express?” said Reed, evenly to Libby.

Libby couldn’t believe her luck that her brother actually wanted to take her on the biggest roller coaster in the park. They got in line together, Reed’s big hand encircling hers, as he told quiet jokes and shared his Coke with her.

When they got up to the start, a boy no older than Reed checked their harnesses, a large wad of tobacco in his gum. The seatbelt gaped around her thin frame.

“She thirteen?” the boy asked Reed, jerking his head toward Libby.

“Yep,” said Reed. “Just turned in June.”

Reed winked at Libby and checked her seatbelt himself as the cart clattered slowly down the track. Libby looked over the edge, and the people below seemed like particles under a microscope, endlessly moving with terrible urgency but never reaching beyond the confines of the asphalt park. The coaster picked up speed with a lurch, and she dug her nails into Reed’s muscled arm. As they descended the first hill, Libby wanted to scream, but Reed was smiling. She felt herself go weightless, and she clung to Reed, the wind whipping through her hair and

her throat like a demon, and she gave herself over to it. She closed her eyes and wondered if this is what it feels like to die. To know that something significant is happening to you, but you are not able to stop it. Libby kept her eyes shut tight, all the way to the end of the ride.

Ronnie splurged on hot dogs and lemonade for lunch at the park's Snack Shack. Libby ate her hot dog and most of Anna's. Her older sister had recently pronounced meat as "disgusting," and pushed her meal away in favor of visiting the gift shop near the park entrance with Reed for shot glasses for her two best friends at home, Lisa and Trinni.

After lunch, Libby begged to go to the souvenir shop with Anna.

"You're sure you know to find it," said Ronnie. "I need to use the ladies."

Libby began walking the opposite way of her mother, toward the park entrance. The place was thick with bodies, each smelling like the strip itself, hot, sweaty and with a tinge of garbage. Libby approached the teal and orange building she had been walking toward but was surprised to read the sign stating, "Park Office." She wandered back the way she thought she'd come, though the rides looked different. She was pretty sure she'd never seen the log flume ride. Ronnie had prohibited all water rides because she didn't want to get wet. Libby walked through the maze of people in fanny packs and tee shirts with neon logos.

Suddenly she was so very tired, and her feet burned in her thin jelly sandals. She sat down on a bench to scan the crowd for Reed and Anna, but her vision seemed to sizzle and quiver before her eyes, as if the mass of people were eggs in a frying pan. A man was sitting on the other end of the bench, overweight and of late middle age, a tuft of gray hair protruding between the undone buttons of his shirt. He was eating a bratwurst, heavily laced with dripping onions. "You lost, sweetie?" he said, turning to her. "You need some help?" Libby looked at his red face sweating profusely in the heat, and she started to scream. She screamed until her voice melded with the whines and bells and nauseating sing-song of the music pulsating in the park. When the attendant sat down beside her, Libby's screams turned into whimpers.

The attendant led Libby to the Park Office. "Where's your family, hon?" said the skinny, red haired woman with a nametag that read Hazel. Libby could not bring herself to name Ronnie, or Reed or Anna. She buried her face in her dirty palm and said, "I don't know." Hazel gave her a Hershey's chocolate bar and a Dixie cup of water from the fountain. "You shouldn't be wandering around alone," she said. "A young girl like you."

Libby sat on the rust-colored sofa and tried to pay attention to the Andy Griffith rerun on the little tv behind the desk. She was just watching Opie cover for Barney when her mom walked in. Ronnie grabbed Libby's arm and pulled her up and toward the door. She didn't look at her until they got outside.

"Everything I do from the minute I wake up until I fall asleep at night, all I do is for you. Do you understand that? Everything. I've given everything to you," Ronnie said, with clenched teeth. "I do not need you going off, you *scaring* me."

Libby hugged her mother and said a muffled sorry into her shirt. Ronnie pulled Libby's face back and knelt down to look her in the eye. "What do you want me to do, Libby? Stay with you all the time to make sure you're safe? I can't! There's nobody else to help! It's just us," said Ronnie, tears welling in her eyes. "It's just me."

Libby clung to her mother, and Ronnie gripped her tightly with her strong arms. Eventually, she couldn't feel whose arms were whose. Together they walked to the parking lot, where Anna and Reed waited outside the Pontiac.

The next morning dawned early. The Florida sun streamed liberally through the windows as Libby awoke and saw her mother leaning over her. Anna was sprawled luxuriously over most of the other bed, while Reed snored from a sleeping bag in the floor.

"Let's get some breakfast," whispered Ronnie.

Libby dressed quickly and followed her mother outside into the steamy coastal morning. The sun beat down on them as they crossed the street to a restaurant called, "The Blue Sandal." Libby had never been in such a place. Her favorite restaurant was Long John Silver's.

The waitress came by and put a large, steaming cup of coffee in front of Ronnie. She smiled and drank deeply from what must have been a boiling drink. Libby read the menu as if it were a novel.

"What are you getting, Mama?"

"Hmm," said Ronnie. "Definitely . . . pancakes."

"Yes!" said Libby.

"I like mine plain," said Ronnie, "But I noticed they have some with strawberries. And even whipped cream. Sounds good, huh?"

Libby's eyes widened. "You mean I can order that?"

"It's a vacation after all," said Ronnie, grinning at her youngest.

Libby ate everything on her plate and used all the different syrups the waitress put on the table, while Ronnie told funny stories about the other cleaning ladies at the motel. Ronnie's laughter sang in her daughter's ears like a hymn, and Libby was carried away by the sound, over the lapping ocean waves and far away from the shifting sand.

Heather Iverson is an attorney and lives in Nashville with her husband and children. She grew up in East Tennessee and will always think of the mountains as home.

The Face Painter

BY KIRA HOUSTON

Tremore never paints the finest faces, but each week he always paints some, and these they load up in steam wagons and carry around to the hospitals. It's a demanding job, not the kind he pictured himself taking up as an artist, but it does a good to the world. With all the old machines broken down, it is good of him to provide his labor in maintaining the slim surplus.

A moral qualm about it keeps him up at night. He knows his work is not top quality. Better to have a baby with an amateur face than none at all, right? This is what he hopes the parents say to the wagon-men when they bring in the selections.

It is rare to meet one of his own creations, but he has suffered such an encounter on occasion. It takes a second look to recognize them, though he is never mistaken. He does not go up to them, talk to them; they are twenty or fifty years younger than him at best, and it would make an odd conversation. When he watches them he feels a peculiar sense of culpability, like watching a dish towel you'd gifted a friend being used to wipe up spittle. The people, his creations, they always notice the look in his eyes. They stare at him, their lopsided, stretched faces unmoving, taken aback. Then Tremore parts ways with the strangers, but every time he knows he has revealed himself.

He labors over the faces most hours of the day. His apartment is barren and musty, dappled with paint smears and smelling of mineral spirits. He stations a tall mirror next to his easel where he checks his own features for the placement of highlights and creases. Painting a face is a balancing act: this eye gets smaller, that lid needs to be taken down, that eyebrow needs to be lowered, and now that widow's peak seems too high. His work has gotten better with years of practice, but it will never be photorealistic. Photorealism is not expected in his line of work.

Some face painters with especially distinct styles make it big. They paint faces with bold lines or rosy cheeks or a specific Nordic glint in the eyes. These famous painters are the only ones the industry talks about, the only ones the tabloids get a hold of. The nameless, no-talent face painters like Tremore produce work all similar and dull in quality. There is a supply in demand, though, and the nameless do their jobs well enough. The children their uneven faces adorn blend into the adult world without trouble.

There are some tricks to the discipline. Nameless painters like Tremore learn the rules and never break them; to do so would be a cruelty to the clients. The nameless paint a variety of features and skin tones, because it is essential to produce at least a dozen different-looking masks in a week to give parents a semblance of choice. It is expected, though, to stray close to one's own features when a lack of skill presents itself. One is never to "invent features," never to paint a nose no human has ever worn. The painter's own face is referenced in all steps of the process. Of course the painter learns proportion and studies a multitude of examples, but for a low-talent like Tremore, one's own face is the only trustworthy library. It is a guaranteed human example, a free copy of the natural original the painters seek to emulate. To reference another artist's work is to

stray dangerously from the source material. If you keep copying and copying, say the experts, one day all the faces will end up like old Egyptian cartoons.

Only one artist is known to make the best, most photorealistic faces. It is said that his faces cannot be distinguished from natural ones. He takes rich commissions, never giving to ordinary hospitals. Still, he is beloved, and they call him Tintofacto. Tremore has never met him, and of course is dissuaded from using his art as reference. He doesn't want to end up with Egyptian cartoons, no matter how disproportionate and uninspired his own sad faces look.

At the end of this month there quickly approaches the annual Face Painter's Convention, which Tremore always attends with his friend Garavach. Garavach lives down in the Back Bay and makes twice as many faces as Tremore does in a week, though his apartment is always filled with smog and sea-smell. Garavach has a wife who works in travel management for a big meat cartel, so he can devote more time to painting without worry for finances. Tremore barely makes enough to get by in his old apartment. He would live completely alone if not for Garavach's visits, and for the old boyfriends who stop by to bring him lunch and compliment his work, showing off their wedding rings.

At the Face Painter's Convention, the low-talent nameless painters and the stars and the fans all converge. The scientists are there, too, but Tremore and Garavach agree that the scientists aren't all that interesting. They stand around in a big room with poster-boards announcing things like, "Cure for infant facial loss may be possible with new epigenetic serum," or "Infants with facial loss found at high risk for bullying and juvenile justice involvement." Tremore and Garavach never spend much time in the science room, instead wandering between the workshops, the interviews, and the shows from the big stars.

The workshops are informative, sometimes. An artisan will present a technique for skin texturing, and Tremore will incorporate it into his own work. The interviews are usually useless, if not entertaining, because the advice about freedom and creative flow does not apply to Tremore and Garavach in their old age and no-talent positions. The shows always entice them, though they are of little working value, because the two old men would never think to imitate the paint-splattered, pattern-gilded faces hung proudly on the walls.

This year Tremore and Garavach stand in the hall looking over the program booklet, their lanyards slung lazily around their thick necks.

"There's bone structurin' at three," mutters Garavach. "We could go see that. Hasn't been a workshop on bones in a damn minute."

"I wanted to see the short film at three," says Tremore.

Garavach shrugs. "Fine with me. What about this show at six tonight..."

They both lean into the program in disbelief.

"Holy," says Garavach, "they really got a Tintofacto show here? I thought he was too stuck

up.”

“It’s right here on the page,” Tremore gapes.

After the short film at three, which goes slowly and makes Tremore melancholy, the two friends make their way to the larger conference rooms. The shows from the big stars always take up the fancy, well-lit business halls while the films and workshops huddle in the forgotten, 20-person occupancy closet-rooms. The men approach the banner announcing the Tintofacto show, peering inside at the endless displays of wondrous faces.

They walk through the rows, slowly dragging their eyes over each perfect painting. It would unsettle them, had they not already been in the profession. Garavach comments on the eerie realism, makes some off-color joke about slicing real human faces and passing them off as art. Tremore dismisses him with a wave of his hand; it is possible, if you look close, to see the sheen of varnish on the finished faces. Still, he would never be able to point them out in a crowd of naturals.

In his periphery Tremore spots a tall man in a gaudy trench coat, the kind only an artist could wear to his own show. The man is talking coolly with a pair of stout women whose clean hands and expensive bracelets indicate their likely position as clients.

“You think that’s him?” Tremore asks Garavach, pointing to the tall man.

Garavach shrugs. “You could ask.”

Before Tremore can move to approach, the man finishes his conversation and starts down the room in Tremore’s direction. For a brief moment they make eye contact. A peculiar look of recognition passes over Tintofacto’s face, an unmissable pride and guilt and slight sense of nausea. Like watching a dish towel you’d gifted a friend being used to mop up spittle.

Then they part ways, and Tremore continues through the convention with his friend, but he knows what he saw. He will need to take down the mirror in his studio.

Kira Houston is a digital & traditional artist, writer, and transgender advocate. He attends Clark University where he is pursuing an undergraduate degree in Art History and Spanish, with a minor in Creative Writing. In his free time he likes to write D&D campaigns. You can find his work at <https://kiyye.com/>



Visiting
Bridget Klappert

Moth Dreams

NANDINI BHATTACHARYA

These loves were not of this world that blackened after the makers of jetty smoke tore apart rocks and earth, making themselves masters. These loves were bright butterflies that never heard of Armageddon. They were young and beautiful — like your usual love-story lovers — but also were and felt sun-doused, joy-drenched. Their silkscreen wings were things of aching beauty and they knowingly, laughing, ran into each other just to make the soft gold down from their wings float, scatter, and mingle. A mating. There's fossil evidence that they were flesh and blood.

But in their later days they too were growing black and white, ghosts moving and mouthing, silent movie stars playing lovers, on silver screens in murky theatres, never at a loss for loss.

But a day came when one wouldn't listen to the other's wingbeats. They grieved and raged against the dying of beauty. Their wings didn't lift them anymore, their feet carried less pollen than wreckage. They looked at each other. They couldn't help each other because they were forgetting how. Smoke was getting in their eyes. Then they grew angry with each other, decided to stop playing. They went to corners where they slept and brooded, brooded and dreamed, at a loss.

That's how bright butterflies became moths. One pale and one cloudy, dreaming or asleep for the next few hours their lives had to give, in separate corners.

Moths also dream. Dreams don't go extinct without remainder. Not even because of factory soot.

Finally the blackness ended. The room and corners imploded. The moths-once-butterflies, though ancient, couldn't fathom Armageddon. They were not wise in that way. It took milli-seconds to cripple them. No rescue, no Second Coming.

Still, music came from the dead world. The music from when the moths had been butterflies in love. Singing voices. Singing of love. A creature without wings — now dead — used to have a projector and home theater. At the world's end, the projector had sprung to life and the movie was now playing without theater, silver screen or eyes. Because life can't turn into dream without remainder. The singing reminded the moths of butterflies dreaming the world, lovers birthing the dream. In that time when the light wasn't dying and they were sure that outside them and their dreams there

was nothing. When voices sang that all you need is love. What reality, without dreams?

One crept toward the other, dragging injured limbs and wings. Tried, did his best, to stretch one broken wing out over the shattered body of the other one. The other one knew, though it was blind now.

“Why didn’t you come before?” the blind one said.

“Because you didn’t ask.”

“Don’t you go away again,” she said.

He moved closer, doing his best to cover both her wings with his broken pair. “I am with you till the end of the world, am I not?”

Nandini Bhattacharya is currently working on a second novel about minorities and Hindutva politics in Narendra Modi's India, and love, racism, xenophobic mentalities and other mysteries in Donald Trump's America, titled *Homeland Blues*.

They have published short stories in *Storyscape Journal*, *Raising Mothers*, *Ozone Park Journal*, *Bangalore Review*, *Bacon Review*, *Meat for Tea: The Valley Review*, and *OyeDrum*. I've held residencies and fellowships at the Bread Loaf Writers' Workshop, the Sarah Lawrence Summer Writers' Workshop, the Southampton Summer Writers' Conference, The Voices of Our Nation Arts Writing Workshop, the Cambridge Writers' Workshop in Paris, and the Vermont Studio Center. they also accepted at the Centrum Artist Residency, the Craigardan Writer's Residency, and the Ragdale Artist Residency (forthcoming). Also, in January 2021 they will begin attending the Warren Wilson College MFA program with a Holden Opportunity Grant from the Friends of Writers.

Their awards include first runner-up for the Los Angeles Review Flash Fiction contest (2017-2018), a finalist for the Fourth River Folio Contest for Prose Prize (2018), long-listed for the Disquiet International Literary Prize (2019 and 2020), and a finalist for the Reynolds-Price International Women's Literary Award (2019).

One Thousand Dollars

BY RACHAEL BIGGS

I parked a couple of blocks away where it was free after ten. As I teetered up to the lights of the hotel in my highest heels, a salty breeze blew my hair back and I felt edgy and cool, like someone might make a movie about me.

The doorman smiled and graciously opened the glass door for me to slip through and I hoped no one and everyone saw me.

He looked like his picture. I was grateful, not because he was handsome, but because I was able to recognize him instantly, sparing me potential embarrassment. He recognized me too and stood to greet me.

A suit-clad employee pulled out my chair and I thanked him, wanting to whisper that the tag was still on this dress and that I would return it tomorrow.

“I’m not this girl!” I shouted inside myself.

He took my hand and kissed it just as casually as someone else might shake it. “You are as breathtaking as your pictures.”

Was I supposed to say the same?

“Would you like something to drink?”

As if the servers had bionic hearing, one was at our table before he got the final word out.

“I’ll have an Amaretto Sour, please.”

The waiter walked away and I wondered what the hell to talk about.

“Have you been here before?” he asked.

“No, it’s lovely though.”

“Yeah, it’s got a mellow vibe.”

My drink was deliciously sweet and tart and so was the next one and the two after that.

“I’ve never done this before,” I confessed. “I bet everyone says that right?”

“I believe you.”

He paused and smiled. He seemed comfortable. Maybe he actually was attractive.

“Can I be your first?” he asked taking my hand.

I felt shy but exhilarated. "It's a thousand dollars."

He nodded and got up to go to the cash machine.

The waiter came by again. Had he heard us?

He was gone a long time and I reached for my phone--a video message from the babysitter of Sampson sleeping soundly in his crib. I felt a lump in my throat and chased it off by crunching an ice cube, hoping it might freeze my heart for the next hour.

The elevator was full of mirrors and when I saw my reflection from every angle I wondered if it was really me.

The room was stylish and hip, like it had been designed that week in the interest of staying current. The scent of dried eucalyptus emanated from vases so delicate they seemed to hover above the raw edged wooden tables. A couch as wide as my bed was stacked with fluffy pillows each with artistic designs and I wanted to spend twenty minutes appreciating each one of them, but I wasn't being paid for that.

He led me to the bedroom, with a luxurious four post bed surrounded by candles that had already been lit and smelled like lilacs and jasmine and the most romantic of smells. Was he wooing me?

He sat on the bed and I stood in front of him, slipping my dress off my hips and letting it fall to the floor. I left my shoes and lingerie on because it seemed like something a professional would do.

He unhooked my bra and I knelt before him, so he wouldn't see how much the undergarment had deceived him.

I gave him oral sex and then knelt on the bed while he slipped into a condom and then me.

The duvet was a luxuriously high thread count and the downy pillows nicely cushioned my palms as I made noises that implied he was in charge.

His cock was big, but not too big and he kept a good pace as his hand moved up and down my back and squeezed my ass confidently. My body relaxed and fell into being turned on, as if it knew no difference between this man and one that wasn't paying for the privilege of my time.

He finished and dressed.

I started to dress too.

"You can keep the room," he said. "Order room service if you like."

He left 10 one hundred dollar bills on the dresser and quietly exited.

I thought about staying. Ordering lobster and chocolate truffles, but the room smelled more like sex than candles now and I wanted to go home and brush my cheek against my baby's head.

His name was Mark. Just Mark. He was an architect. Lived in Brentwood. I assumed he was married by the ring he didn't bother to remove, but I wouldn't ask about that. With the money came his freedom from questions and my disinterest in asking them.

We met at the same hotel. The familiarity put me at ease and hopeful that the staff who recognized me would think that I was the one who had placed the ring on his finger in spite of my not baring my own. I silently willed them to think it was at the jewelers for a cleaning and that the next time we came I'd have a very shiny diamond as a symbol of my husband Mark's devotion to me.

"Amaretto Sour?" my make-believe husband asked me as the waiter neared.

I thought back to the hangover I'd nursed from the sugary drink, but I wouldn't need so many this time.

"Please."

The drinks arrived and Mark looked at me. Like, really looked at me.

"You're back."

"I enjoyed your company." I said, with a slight raise in my voice at the end, as though I might be asking a question, but not quite.

He smiled. "Did you?"

"I didn't not enjoy it."

"I like honesty. Thank you."

"Why are you back? I'm sure there are no shortage of options on those sites."

"There's something about you."

"What?"

"Hmmm, good question. An innocence?"

"This isn't innocent."

"No, so I guess I appreciate the honesty of that. When you said it was your first time it turned me on. I felt honored to be your 'first'."

"You want me to wear pigtails next time?"

He looked at me again. I'd gone too far. Shit.

"We're deciding on next time already?"

"No, I...was just kidding."

"You're funny."

"Why don't you laugh then?"

His eyes laughed.

"My wife was my first, but I wasn't hers."

"Did you get married young?"

"Twenty-six."

"That's young."

"We were in love and we had been for so long at that point that there seemed no reason not to."

"And now?"

"And now, what?"

"Are you in love?"

"These are deep questions for a second date."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I like depth."

"Are we on a date? Is that what this is?"

"What would you call it?"

"A date is fine. I believe the correct term is arrangement though; according to the site, we were both seeking 'arrangements'."

"Do you believe in fate?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure."

"I believe that's what this is. Fate. That you and I met because we were meant to."

"Okay, now it feels like a date because you sound like you are trying to seduce me."

"Would it work? If I were?"

“The thousand bucks makes it a sure thing. We don’t need to talk about the stars aligning and all that jazz.”

He laughed. It was a nice sound. Like waves lapping at the the sandy Californian shore.

“Excuse me for a moment.”

I scanned the room properly in his absence. A couple in their early seventies sat watching the pianist intently with the fire softly flickering behind them. An elegant woman sat at the bar sipping from a champagne flute. Was she waiting for her arrangement or was she a business traveler eager to get out of her room?

Mark came back and took my purse confidently from the chair, opening it with the surety that only a married man could.

He swiftly placed an envelope in it, snapped it shut in under 23 seconds and sat a little closer this time. His efficiency combined with how much easier this money would make my life was terribly endearing and I felt a tingle of appreciation surge through my underwear, grateful he’d sat closer.

“What do you like to do?”

“Let’s go upstairs, I’ll show you.”

“I mean when you’re not here.”

I felt myself blush.

I surf, badly, but I surf. I uh, like to cook. I’m going to culinary school on weekends.”

In truth, the majority of time was spent changing diapers and laundering clothes Sampson had spit up on, but discussion of my son was off limits. Maybe because motherhood didn’t feel sexy and the bulk of my culinary skills were spent blending baby food, but also because my love for my squishy-faced, toothless son had to remain tucked away in the most sanctified ventricles of my heart and separate from this.

“Do you want to open your own restaurant?”

“More of a bed and breakfast type of thing. A magnificent ocean front guest house where honeymooners might come to stay for the week and be catered to like royalty.”

“You like to take care of people.”

“I guess.”

“That’s a beautiful trait in today’s narcissistic world.”

We listened to the piano for a song or two, mesmerized by its loveliness.

He reached for my hand. "I have to go. Would you be willing to see me again?"

What? Leaving? But we hadn't even...what the hell?!

"I would."

"I'll message you."

I nodded trying to hide my disappointment behind a smile and then got up, maybe a little too quickly.

"Goodnight."

I walked out, swinging my hips in hopes he was watching. I tried to think of an imaginary reason I might be leaving without my husband. Going to pick up my ring from being cleaned perhaps. At this hour the bellman would wonder? Sure, it's Los Angeles, everything is 24-7.

Standing at the sink, I rinse the nipples of the formula I've recently switched to. My breasts have finally dried up and shrunk back to more or less their original proportions. I worked hard to get my body back in shape, but the memory of the past year would always be with it. No amount of pilates would remove the trauma of what I knew my body was capable of. The physical horrors that appeared one after another seemed like they would never end. Oh, look my shoes don't fit anymore, my vagina is turning the color of an eggplant and is that hair on my knuckles?

Joe left and I wasn't surprised. What did surprise me was how little I cared. I wish I could care that little about my phone dinging.

It was possible I'd never hear from Mark again. Maybe he didn't fuck me last time because he didn't want to. That's what I was there for after all. I mean, he had a wife for company, right?

The baby monitor brought me back to reality as my boy softly spoke his poetic non-words.

I wasn't mad at Joe for leaving. I was too soft for anger, too in love with my baby. It was vastly different than anything I'd ever felt. It wasn't even a feeling so much as a ubiquitous light coloring everything in my life. Sampson was the clearing in the forest and the beam of sunlight that shone through. I thought about him like he was a crush. What was he thinking? Was his love as deep as mine? What would his voice be like? At barely a year old, he was still a mystery to be unravelled and I could not wait.

Making money for my love so he could sleep on a lamb skin or we could go to Mommy and Me swim class and I could buy all organic ingredients to put in the most expensive blender was something that worried me in the first weeks after Joe left. I quit my job at the health food

store in my seventh month and relied on Joe from then on because he'd assured me I could, but he broke his word and that was that.

I picked my boy up from his crib, more for me than for him. He would've been content to lay uttering sweet nothings for hours. It was as though crying never occurred to him. He never had reason to.

We sat on the couch, him laying in my lap kicking his strong little legs, fists submerged in his drool-filled mouth. Teeth would be coming soon and then maybe he'd have something to cry about. If I'd have been able to have sharp little teeth piercing my gums instead I would have.

And then, it happened. My phone's ding cut the peace like Sampson's teeth soon would, and it was a number I recognized even before seeing the name. Maybe one day I would memorize it.

"What are you doing Thursday?" the screen said.

Should I wait to answer I wondered? Were there rules to this or was it much more straightforward than that?

I'd get Mrs. Hill's niece to come over. I'd tell her I had another date and she would be happy for me.

I left that evening with a bounce in my step in spite of the uncomfortable shoes. As I parked in what was now my usual spot, I smiled thinking that this was our third date; traditionally the one in which a relationship is consummated. We'd fast tracked that though.

The doorman recognized me and said hello in a professional but friendly tone. What did he think I was doing here and did he care?

Mark's body visibly relaxed when he saw me and it made me feel like we were old friends, but still sexy new friends too.

His lips brushed within a millimeter of mine as we hugged and the warmth of his breath leaked delicately from within reminding me he was alive just like me.

We only had one drink before heading to the elevators. He reached for my hand once we were inside, bolder now, not caring about the bellman who stared at the doors. His fingers danced flirtatiously with mine and when we got to our floor he stepped ahead confidently leading the way to an equally hip, but entirely different room.

I followed him in, exhilarated with each step.

He strode across the room and opened the sliding door, then stepped out as if a magnet to the shore. I joined him and we stood quietly, listening to the sound of the waves for nearly a minute before he reached up and cupped the nape of my neck, holding me close to his face looking at me inch by inch. I closed my eyes, comfortable with this intimacy before he kissed me hard

and deep, penetrating my mouth with his soft tongue.

He ran his fingers through my hair, and then grabbed a handful of it turning me around to face the ocean. I stretched and arched my back, thirsting for him impatiently.

“Do you know how sexy you are?”

I turned to look at him. “Am I?” I asked coyly.

“I’ve been thinking about you.”

“What have you been thinking?”

“About your skin, how soft it is. How I couldn’t wait to touch it again.”

He reached up under my dress to my inner thigh and brushed it with his fingers, delicately at first, but then with an unmistakable desire.

“Shall we go inside?”

“I can’t wait that long.”

He lifted me onto the railing and knelt before me, taking me in his mouth urgently, but with finesse, as the succulents in the planter behind us looked on. I came quickly, without hesitation because there was no performance required of my genitalia. My softening lent itself to more intense pleasure unlike a man’s.

“Are you comfortable?” he asked.

I nodded and smiled. A single man would not think to ask that.

“Can I get you anything?”

“Liiike...?”

“A foot rub? A pillow for that beautiful ass of yours?”

I shook my head as my eyes dropped down to his zipper.

“Is this what you want?” he asked, grabbing his hard cock sideways, reminding me of its girth.

He fucked me softly at first while I exhaled and let him deeper inside. I wrapped my legs around his waist and unbuttoned his shirt, eager for his skin on mine. He had soft brown hair covering his chest and abdomen and I thanked God for my heterosexuality.

When I felt the throb of his upcoming climax, I took him in my mouth and gulped his salty sweet cum. I thought for a moment of Sampson lusting for my breast when he was nursing hungrily and enjoyed the camaraderie for a split second.

I stood, and Mark wrapped his arms firmly around me before kissing me on the forehead, almost paternally, as though he were proud of me. I heard myself giggle.

“I can’t stay.”

“Okay.”

“You can though. Why don’t you go mess up the bed? Make housekeeping work for their money.”

Money. The word hung in the air for a moment before he took out his wallet and handed me cash that felt so fresh it must’ve been come directly from the mint. I didn’t count it. Was that the difference between me and a real prostitute?

And he was gone. And I was in a stunningly beautiful suite, alone.

I walked through the rooms, marveling at the decor. I thought about stealing towels or the beautiful blown glass bowl that sat elegantly on the entrance table, but the embarrassment of being caught made me blush.

I took a long bath with so many bubbles they rose a full foot above the edge of the tub. I ran my hands over my naked body. Gently, deliberating on places that hadn’t felt like my own since before Sampson. I lifted my legs and looked at them. I wiggled my toes and held onto my wrists individually, feeling flesh and bone underneath and the weight of being human.

At least an hour later I got out and stepped into easily the most plush robe I’ve ever felt. It was long enough to cover my ankles entirely and I felt like a woman of considerable means.

I flopped on the bed and rolled over and back again thinking about the housekeepers. Should I leave a note saying there was no need to change the sheets? I had been a chambermaid as a teenager and would’ve appreciated that.

I could’ve stayed. I could’ve asked Mrs. Hill’s niece to spend the night, but this was the land of make believe. I didn’t want to get lost here.

Rachael Biggs is an author whose memoir *Yearning for Nothings and Nobodies* published in 2012. She studied creative writing at UCLA and holds a screenwriting diploma from Vancouver Film School. Her short fiction has appeared in *Dalhousie Reviews*, *Door is a Jar*, *Horror Sleaze Trash*, *Blotter*, *Charge*, *5 on the Fifth*, *Cliterature*, *Adelaide*, *Defunkt* and *Waymark Magazines* as well as Train River Publishing's 2020 Anthology. Her collection of short stories *Delightful & Deluded* will be published in November 2021 by Adelaide Books.



Barry (#loveonthedownload)
Anthony R Grant

from yerba santa, after the fire

BY ROBIN ROSENTHAL

Here in this liminal space where you live, between the mountains and the desert, you dismissed me. My springtime bloom did not delight like the glowing purple sage, or the rainbow of wildflowers spreading beneath your feet. You thought I looked greasy, my thick green leaves sticky with resin, my smell antiseptic. You thought someday you might make a respiratory tea from my leaves, but you never did.

And now, to your eyes, I am gone. Incinerated. Reduced to dark, jagged snags in a vast rubble of blackened earth dotted with piles of slivered white ash like fallen petals. But don't underestimate me. I have been waiting for this moment.

I belong to a world that is not your world.

You can enter. But we have different plans, different agendas. My time is of a different scale than yours. Longer. Slower. There is no end. There is no beginning. All is process.

My time is measured not in decades, but in centuries. I have been waiting a hundred years for the fire. The fire the people here before you once brought to me. I need this harsh disruption for my renewal. My buried seeds felt the fire's heat, and cracked open. My traumatized underground rhizomes released my purpose, which is to grow.

What seems to you like an end, a total annihilation—this silent, barren landscape of nothingness—is really a continuation. Things are happening below the surface that you can't see or understand. Delicate things. Subtle things. Things that you can't fix, that don't need your help. We know what to do. We've been doing it for thousands of years.

Some of my larger brothers and sisters you won't see again in your time. But I will see them. And while I wait for them I will spread my roots and hold on to the land. Did you notice I didn't even need the rain to sprout these perfect new leaves, with their finely serrated edges and the first hints of stickiness on their backs, brilliant green against the charred ground?

Maybe now you will pick some of my perfect leaves and make some respiratory tea. Maybe when you drink, and breathe in my sweet scent, you will dwell for a few minutes in my time—an ageless time without end.

Robin Rosenthal is an artist and documentary filmmaker. Her writing has appeared in *Grain*, *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, and *WEAD* magazine. She lives on a small ranch in the foothills above the Antelope Valley floor, where she runs the creative place-keeping project, Real93543. Mariposas del Campo, her latest documentary with husband Bill Yahraus, will be out in 2021.

On Friendship & Healing

BY KATE SWISHER

We take turns swimming in the pool. It's a hot August afternoon in Sacramento. I'm sitting on the sidelines, dangling my feet over the pool's edge, while I listen to Becca slice her arms through the turquoise water. After she swims a few laps, we swap places. Together, we're learning how not to love relationships that took more from us than we gave to them. We both find our situations difficult to process, so we take turns.

I take my turn in the deep end, diving in head first, churning up water, and kicking it away, while Becca takes her seat on the edge of the pool to listen, watch, and wait. We switch places again. It is in these reciprocal cycles that we heal.

* * *

I met Becca when I was at my lowest low. She found me one Friday night sitting at a beer stained table, drawing cartoons by candlelight. Everyone else in the college house was taking their final rounds of shots in preparation for the night's festivities. The cartoons I drew depicted myself at the time: depressed, insecure, anxious, and angry. Though I hardly knew her, Becca sat down across from me, looked me in the eyes, and asked

"What will it take to convince you to go out tonight?"

To her surprise I responded "Not very much."

Becca gleefully jumped up, pulled me down to my cavernous room in the basement, and picked out an outfit for me to wear. Before that night I was a shell of a person, empty of joy. Becca filled me with the first drop.

I had spent the last few months alone in my room, unable to move. I thought I had driven two people I loved away due to sadness and anxiety. My boyfriend left me for a more accomplished musician and generally bubblier person, and my best friend stopped coming over because she was sick of my complaints and tears. In short, I was a massive, emotional burden that neither wanted to carry anymore. I figured it was my fault and didn't reach out to any other friend for fear of driving them away too. I thought I was incapable of healthy friendships and relationships. Therefore I'd isolate myself until I felt better and was no longer a burden to others.

Loneliness sucks you into yourself. The days inside my room added up, my art became

self-involved and obsessive, and I became increasingly nervous about getting up and going out. One day I was so anxious to go to class that I threw up on the basketball player's lawn during my walk to campus. I promptly turned back around and headed straight for bed. I didn't want to ask for help because I thought others deserved it more, I didn't want to eat because I had no appetite, and I didn't want to be seen because I was scared to watch my ex in public with his new girlfriend and my best friend out socializing with people I'd never even met.

* * *

Becca sits on the edge of the pool, smiling down at me encouragingly. She watches patiently as my legs churn up water and mind churns up memories. After a while, she relieves me to swim her laps and process. Becca is going through a heartbreak of her own, except we're in opposite positions. She left her girlfriend and is tired of feeling guilty about it. As the sentient person she is, she's absorbing too much of her ex's pain. I sense she wants her autonomy back.

We swim together for our final lap. Under the surface of the water, we hear our rhythms blend. It is a moment of synchrony, but by now we both know that pure synchrony cannot last. We make it to the end of the pool as one, then break away from each other to get out of the water.

The sun dries our shoulders. I breathe in the scent of chlorine as Becca joins me on one of those plastic, poolside lounge chairs. She looks down at her body. It is slender with clean edges. Beautiful, though in this moment she doesn't think so. She asks me about sex. Though I don't remember clearly, I believe I talk about body-positivity, communication, and creativity. I ask her about sexuality. I have more experience with the physical act of sex but Becca has more experience with the mental act of it. She is far more in tune with her sexual identity and expression than I am. We learn from each other until our shoulders and faces are pink from exposure.

As the summer draws to a close we continue our reciprocal friendship. When it gets too hot to go outside, we sit in her air conditioned room. She plays ukulele while I sing. She buys me iced coffee, I buy her beer. I lean into her to cry, she provides a shoulder, then we switch. I climb, she belays. She climbs, I spot her.

"You came into my life at a time when I needed someone exactly like you," Becca writes in a letter to me. "Someone with a capacity to love, hold, share, and support. I was feeling so lost, then you slid into the picture equally lost."

* * *

Lostness does not have to mean loneliness. I didn't have to wait to feel better to form healthy friendships or relationships. A healthy friendship was the very thing that healed me. With

clearer eyes I'm happy to see that the same was true for my ex. It seems he foraged a healthy friendship that then blossomed into a reciprocal, romantic relationship. Now when I see them exchange bluegrass riffs, I smile instead of sneering.

Over time I realized what I was learning that summer, swimming in Sacramento's community pool with Becca, wasn't exactly what I thought I was learning. I wasn't learning how not to love a relationship that took more from me than I from it. I was learning about the nature of relationships themselves. Specifically what relationships are like when they're reciprocal and what they're like when they're consuming.

My ex and I had been in a romantic relationship that consumed us. I was complicit in this consumption and in fact, encouraged it. I wanted to consume him just as much as I wanted to be consumed by him. I wanted to feel what it was to embody him and also highlighted parts of my identity I thought he enjoyed the most—the parts of me I thought he wanted to embody. I learned that if we were swimming in a pool, we would have dived in at the same moment, intertwined our bodies, and eventually sunk, neither of us really taking the time to listen, reflect, or take space from one another. It was good he got out of the water when he did.

Becca and I were both lost in the deep end but she called out to me, and together, we helped each other move forward and find our ways out.

* * *

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, there are days I wish Becca could come over and drag me out of my house like she did the first night we met. Then I remember I'm really not supposed to leave my house due to health regulations. I still have moments when I fear reaching out to people because I'm nervous I'll consume them with sadness or scare them away with anxiety. My current partner, who by the way, was a good friend first, reminds me that my friends want to hear from me because, to put it simply, they love me. He talks about how, sometimes, he'll cold call his friends out of the blue just to talk.

"It's usually great for both of us," he says, taking my hand.

"Okay, then I'll have to try it."

So yesterday I did. The fire smoke combined with COVID regulations were making me feel incredibly low. My dad stood in front of me defeated, while I sat, frozen on the couch crying. I couldn't think. I couldn't move. All I could do was envision everything that was wrong and everything I couldn't do. He dragged me out to the beach to get us fresh air. Once outside, I was able to remember the whole network of people who are part of a reciprocal bond of love and friendship waiting to support me, and I them. I've always had this network of support in some

way and it's only grown larger overtime. How lucky am I?

Like Becca did for me more than a year ago now, I realize I can reach out to a friend, asking them to join me in a conversation. Who knows, I just might help heal them too or help them along with their day, maybe even their year.

Last night I called up my friend, Kate (Yes, we have the same name. No we're not the same person). Over the course of an hour, my tears dried. All she did was ask a few questions and tell me to run a bath while eating chocolate and streaming Netflix.

There are people who want to take you (virtually) out to the party even when you don't think that's the case. It's easy to underestimate the power of reciprocity in friendships and relationships and difficult to realize that even in times of sadness, you can be both the giver and the receiver. I have fondly come to understand that both positions, giver and receiver, offer plenty of joy and healing.

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Ancient Prophets
Bridget Klappert