

# RipRap

LITERARY JOURNAL

44

RipRap

# RipRap 44

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# Acknowledgments

RipRap is a literary journal designed and produced annually by students in the Master of Fine Arts, Creative Writing program at California State University Long Beach (CSULB). Since its inception in 1951, the journal has evolved from its original title, Hornspoon, until it was re-named Gambit and finally, in 1979, RipRap.

RipRap offers a humble invitation to talented and aspiring writers of all genres and is open to everyone. Specifically, RipRap publishes short fiction, flash fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, and art such as photography, illustration and comics.

This year, RipRap 44 contains local and global submissions of writing and art inspired by the kaleidoscopic composition of Southern California, the greater US, and abroad. As always with all our submissions, we seek out work that is innovative, forward-thinking, and as entertaining as it is thought-provoking

New editions of the journal are published each May.

RipRap Journal would like to express its sincere gratitude to all those who helped contribute to, edit, support, promote, and produce this year's issue. We could not have completed this issue without the help of you all, and we are deeply thankful.

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# RipRap Literary Journal

44th Edition

Spring 2022

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Department of English

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# POETRY

Kelsey Bryan-Zwick

### The Scolio-Sisters

*For TH*

We trade bones back and forth  
swapping ribs and hip bits  
like gossip. We whisper  
monster stiff as stone  
hard with metal, cut and  
scared over.

We scolio-sisters sift through  
each other's storm clouds of trauma  
for gold leaf and sapphire. A tin can  
telephone game across decades call  
back and forth from our cave  
of canary tongues.

We softly etch each other's  
bodies like gravestone, like  
sacred and scattered runes  
we predict wounds, curse,  
and cures. We henna-sketch  
in healing oils anoint each other  
in our own bloodied truth.

We bathe  
in the same water, stained  
in rust our marble legs  
melt to mermaid tails, glossy  
scales reevaluating our skin  
a myth, they say, so much pain  
we could only be legend.

Kelsey Bryan-Zwick

### Anima Mundi

Babbles mad in her corner, only she is seen in shadows  
cave where Plato locked her:  
damsel damaged. What was she thinking?  
Erased from the mind garden, this *wildwoman*.  
Forest freak of nature that  
guzzles-gush and goo-oozes primordial sludge sense  
hungry hag with all her ancient knowledge  
inviting wicked. Crave ideas, brain-soup & synapses that snap  
juicy-jiggle-jibe just so you jive  
know it all knowing divine egg cracked wide open  
like the start of a new book, smell of inky smudge print lingers.  
Mad was when they chased you from your home and burnt all your notes—  
now only necromancy can etch your name  
onto the  
pages.

Queasy-queer-quench-quirk.  
Rawboned  
salvage  
tempt-tempest-temptress-trespass  
underwater=undertaken=undertow. Undrowned  
void >>vortex in reverse  
wanton-wail-waking-want >>  
x-x chromosome >>  
you a  
zenith upended, spin like a top.



Nani Hurst

**another southern california species**

- *a series of tankas*

I.

dandelions sprout  
sleeps between heated concrete  
roots in narrow slits  
daring photosynthesis  
challenging soles of my shoes

II.

white garden roses  
alabaster wilts when cut  
often he plucks one  
petals half shaken off, browned  
before he hands it to me

III.

eucalyptus leaves  
suspend over my forehead  
blonde bangs draped in green  
she tells me under droop  
trees, they always smell like home

IV.

jacarandas bloom  
violet spatters suburb curbs  
late may, early june  
pavement baked in sap, spring slacks  
afternoon and evening blurs

Nani Hurst

**thought pollution**

a slimy incubus slips out of bed from the saint  
of purity, passes a sleepy martyr swinging frankincense  
praying for appraisal to an unruly celestial

equator colliding with disapproval, drowning  
people on land by oceans traveling in cyclones  
scheming mankind's collapse for man's kindled

rivers of concrete beds; mossy aqueducts pushing  
whatever is thrown from the overpass onto shores  
with pieces of styrofoam instead of seashells

beaches where bottlenecks stick out from the sand  
trip children over tides of gloomy water; scuffed knee  
& feet, exposed tendons coagulate with sea salt

season the common waning from evaporation; clouds  
clogged with clairvoyant downpour of acid rain, filling  
cracks in skin; crimped around sore eyes squinting

directly to the malevolent sun; to apollo giggling  
at mortal forlorn, at morals forgotten between pews  
empty with devastation, cowering before the altar

where a preacher lay slain; head upon the mantle  
toothless abscess for a mouth; trophies extracted  
as pendants on wire wavering along the collarbone

Nani Hurst

**deer-shaped**

clipped on her back  
haunches, a collision of mass;  
a terrifyingly entertaining  
encounter of powerful hips  
& the bumper of a mid-  
sized sport utility  
vehicle pushed in  
from the initial impact, cracks  
in iridescent paint spindle  
around the concave bubble

in nature of human  
slowness for The Sudden, we  
almost kept keeping on;  
pulling over yards ahead  
i take off from the still-  
moving ground, bounding  
down the road to her  
like a bicycle  
had fallen from its shaky  
place on top the roof

feeling so much  
smaller with my feet  
on the highway's cursed  
black tar only  
made to feel tread  
from giant rubber wheels  
& other car shapes;  
unsure, i looked back  
but the driver  
wasn't following

instead crouched  
in front of the deer  
shaped dent, caressing  
its chipped enamel  
like a sore knee  
so i was alone  
when she stood  
her instincts still  
whisper to my sprint  
for mangled venison

Alexis Ragan

### Passing by Shadows We Think We Must Know

what about the bird that won't move in the middle of the street must not see me wait I'll  
brake wouldn't want to dent your gauzy wing like the dove I once saw stunned underneath  
the inky overpass fast & light and click belt tight & traffic triggers treasure for the eyes  
which otherwise would be passed by familiar streets make for bold blueprints in the mind  
why haven't I noticed that before really why feathers still fly over forgotten trash piles & curt  
construction cones & careful the children are crossing Look at all those passers-by  
and that bench to your left Yes there's a man sad in the eyes matching mine locked in  
place they said *hello* to me I felt the urge to halt in cold motion pluck in P stop engine  
jump out walk over tell you I see you say *hi friend* you just told me something didn't  
you? cup his face tell him gently *you know me* don't you know me? you *could* know me  
but the light turned green and there was far too many please slow down can't you see moving  
metal is high-time to meet wandering souls watch them call-out reach-for hold-in & lose  
contact once again perusing past people painted blurry because who's watching who  
no one I know you have somewhere to be we all do and that clock's a bully you're just  
high strung cuz the sun's been cruel but I am sure this is no coincidence the light didn't stay  
red for that long on accident even I felt that sudden *thud thud* reap ripples underneath  
your wrinkled t-shirt the warm *hum hum* of blood rush-rhythm its way like aching waves  
inside those veins the very moment you decided to notice me but the light flashed green  
and when your key turned with a quick wrist I am afraid there was a hit and run only  
two waning winds in distant passing know about at the intersection where street paces  
elapse strangers we're sure we must have known someplace sometime  
in the dust of brewing bustles in the face of the familiar  
didn't you see me See you? I felt you too

Tony Wallin-Sato

### The first person I remember having sex with

led me through the labyrinth beneath  
the poplars of Cesar Vallejo, like an imprisoned  
poet whose blood finally circulates. She had soft  
features of Blanca Varela and danced  
the *supaypa wasin tusuq* between high Andes  
lit candles adorned with lily of the Incas  
and superstitious St. Rose of Lima.  
At 17 I knew nothing except for walking  
midnight streets alone, and her quarter  
of a century experience revealed  
an unblemished scent of alstroemerias  
I had only read about. She carried  
me home from a funeral, where her  
October earth complexion and Quechua  
acorn canvas kept my thoughts  
of the dead ambrosian. We lived  
in the squalor of dilapidation,  
like an adobe haunt of Mexico  
City, across from homicide park,  
where the late-night shrieks  
of bullet-fire and knife-sparks  
were drowned from the lavish  
of bath water. I had never posed  
nude before an angelic statue,  
or seen my true nakedness  
from the view of another, her  
golden eyes like quinoa displaced  
my flaws onto her corner shrine  
of our lady of Guadalupe - cloak  
enshrined chrysanthemums and gladiolus -  
reciting the same graveside vigil hymns  
across mahogany and jet jasper rosary beads.  
Every night I traced her stonework  
scars like windows and lost citadels  
of sun gods.

Galen Leonhardy

**Four Old Friends Drinking Pu-erh Tea**

Let us pledge this together:  
Though we have burnt  
A thousand fragrant incense sticks,  
We will not drink  
Rich men's tea, not just yet,  
For, this afternoon at least,  
We should praise  
Dayeh twigs and large brown leaves,  
A past summer season's picking.

Sleet sheets pounding the tin roof above us,  
Ancient ones, the gods themselves, attending,  
We old friends sit enchanted, chatting,  
Laughing on this porch's worn wooden benches,  
Sipping muddy-water's marinade,  
Damp worm-filled fermentation,  
Soggy leaves,  
Perfectly rotten, now revived,  
A brownish muck  
Swirled in our cups  
Warming hands.  
I say to you,  
Have we not spent our lives  
Searching for  
This very paucity?  
Can we not call this  
Our greatest clarity?

AJ Urquidi

**longue durée**

chemical gullet bubbles  
  usurp lower lip  
  dribbles down clad ribs  
  no one with belief to spare  
  
  build a white  
fence around your patch  
  forget a gate  
  no one presides  
the whittled balcony above  
  
  the moon  
  dirigi ble  
  in its station surveilling  
  gullible worms  
good game    good show    hand of your enemy  
  exhibits for shaking  
  
serve no sky but atmospheric guilt  
process logic in another  
circumstance                          mauve leaves on trail  
  shriveled little lungs discarded  
  wrappers of exhumed chocolate  
  
  convex screen crouches  
bars of fitting glitch                          a moth rerunning  
  the always unfamiliar zipper  
  
  you god over  
  the yard the street  
  blueprints of a blue world  
  seas and subjects  
  
your simmering sense is true  
it will never work  
  and never should

Paulina Abascal

### **Punta Pajaros**

We were there on a fluke.  
The right place and the right time.  
A sneaky email to the owner:  
    *"I write for a magazine."*  
I considered myself lucky,  
miles from anything and with you.  
In the morning they served us papaya  
dark like muscle, sticky in a wooden bowl.  
    *"I don't like papaya,"* I said.  
This was different.  
I wondered who else knew.  
    *"Everyone,"* you said.  
There are two things that have made me  
believe in God:  
    fruit and oysters.  
This was years ago  
back when I loved him.  
I compared it to the two:  
    untouched and raw,  
Discovered on a fluke  
by someone at the right place at the right time.  
    *"We have everything,"* I thought  
eating papaya by the ocean.  
A sign stood past where the sand was wet:  
*Non-swimmable beach*  
    God laughed. *"Not everything is for you."*

Paulina Abascal

### **Yard**

Some say my palm tree needs a haircut.  
He stands next to his taller, slimmer, brother  
who has taken some off the top and sides  
like boys often do.  
In lieu of a crew cut, he houses squirrels  
and like my dad says:  
    *Rats!*  
But when the wind threatens  
to move my house east of the county line  
or when the sky cries,  
Not sad but happy  
  
because the drought is over,  
he shakes off his coiled fronds  
faster than I remove my wet sweater  
tacky from a two minute walk from car to door.  
My once pixie was nothing magical  
and could not be wished away  
So I don't force a haircut on anyone else.

Patricia Scruggs

### Self Portrait with Snail, Seeds, Moon and Rainfall

I am the snail chewing the amaryllis,  
crawling so slowly I might be  
moving backwards.

I am that packet of wildflower seeds  
promising butterflies, birds and bees,  
huckstering the unsuspecting.

Only ordinary alyssum will pop up,  
white, fragrant suds overflowing  
the flowerbeds onto the lawn.

I am the pink supermoon  
heralding spring and new growth,  
unseen, hidden by rainclouds.

I am the rain, falling on the face  
of the world, bathing the tongues  
of philodendron, gnarled roots of trees,

flooding roads, towns and farms.  
Ruffled ears of cows twitch,  
tickled by my touch.

Patricia Scruggs

### Mowing the Lawn with Mondrian

Sunlight. Shade. Sunlight.  
Mowing the lawn is a solitary occupation.  
I am delighted when Mondrian stops by.

*Horizontal lines*, he says with a nod. *Good.*  
*Now, make vertical ones.* He gestures with  
slender hands flecked with paint.

Restarting the mower, I listen to his shouts of encouragement: *Keep  
the lines straight. Keep them parallel. Not too close, half an inch can  
make all the difference. Now try another horizontal line, about here.*

And Mondrian points with his shoe, a brown wingtip.

I follow orders, stop to view the results.  
He frowns, *Green is not pure, not primary.*  
*Why don't we try . . .*

From his suit jacket, Mondrian pulls three fabric swatches—yellow,  
red and blue. Placing the colors on the grid we have mown,  
he mutters, *The foundation.*

Adjusting his spectacles, he moves the  
colors again: *No. No. The equilibrium's  
wrong. It should be this way.*

Yellow gets moved to the upper left, red just edges the lower right.  
*Better*, Mondrian says, straightening. *Look at the grass.* He shifts  
his weight, wipes his forehead. *Still green.*

*All in all, nature is a damned wretched affair,  
I can hardly stand it.* Mondrian glares  
at the trees, adjusts his pocket square.

Brushing his hands together, he says, *I've done all I can do. I'm off to New York to catch some jazz.* Mondrian disappears, leaves me to my solitary task of mowing the lawn.

I separate shade from sunlight.  
Sunlight from shade.  
Green from everything else.

Marcela Sulak

### **Fairy Tale, a study of verb tenses**

Even before the baby was born she had been anti-social.

She is currently employed at an institution of higher learning, let's call it an ivory tower.

Even before the preposition shunted the verb, she was poking it with sticks to see it writhe.

She's not as anti-social as Isela, though, who once left the phone dead for two weeks without noticing.

Even before the ballrooms fill with mirrors and soiled slippers, the rain begins to slip between the teeth of the rake lying in the garden.

Once when the poppies were blooming she went rolling down a warm earth mound. That's when she got a sun in her belly.

She likes reading Edward Gorey to babies.

She prefers certain architecture with rain.

Her Hansel used to wear the tee-shirt that said "Dead girls don't say no" but would bring her Digestibles when she was ill.

She excels in handling iguanas and frogs, and cradeling the heads of calves before they are killed.

Even before the lawsuit her back would pinch nerves over her hips and beneath her left should blade. Breathless with the simulated knife thrusts, unstrung as a doll flopped over a stage, the verb would simply fall out of her mouth.

It should go without saying that her favorite form of entertainment was the Marionette theater. Followed closely by the carousel.

The miniature sunshine in her belly glew in the dark when she didn't smile.

She made that one up. Glew is not a word. But she knows you know what it means.

She prefers to travel the local forms of public transportation, carrying suitcases herself.

Once she went on vacation and the stack of coffee cups grew and grew, for the housemaid was wearing her second-hand mood.

She has green thumbs and eyes.

In her experience of the physical world, weather just signifies brooms.

Later she went back to watering the garden; it was exhausting how much feeding the personal narrative needed.

Marcela Sulak

### Foreign Worker

The gatekeeper has somehow acquired the bear that was my magic coat, of garbage cloth suggestively distressed--I mean the glamour

of it. For now before him I've emptied my hands, the token he's demanded is not one I have. Though technically, I have

an identity, and it will open secret doors. I can even get into the larder with it. It resembles a flat square wand, so I wave it

over a little box on the wall. That is how it works. I am new, I say. No, you—he says—you are not

new. You have been coming three weeks now. Now I glow a little he noticed. You are the one on the third floor, your office is next

to the kitchen, he states. And yes, I am I say. He says I must go and demand a card. Or he tells me I must pick up

my coat, or else I must feed and groom my bear or sprinkle flowers on my carpet, and yes, I say you are right, yes I will, and I am, and yes indeed, and in lost

and indeed the corridor turns into eels and weeds and leaky reeds I keep chasing keep chasing the silver I think fish surely to catch next river.



Samantha Sartre

### 100% Colonizer

There is an ambiguity you don't expect with DNA tests.  
How tracing ethnicity is a guessing game with percentages

that really mean nothing. Except when you've been told  
that a glimmer of 'other' peaked through your kaleidoscope

of chromosomes. That there may be hope that some part of you  
does not have to claim the blood-stained mirror of genocide.

That a crumb can understand the plight of the other side. When  
you desperately want to absolve yourself of this guilt

the color of milk. The best I had was a mystic maiden –  
my grandmother – descended of Spanish royalty, born

in Cuba, died in Miami. What ship did her family board?  
Was it the skeleton of a Galleon that brought conquistadors, ready

to mutilate any land they docked upon? Stealing is in my genes.  
It is in my hips, the ones I stole from that maiden. The ones

I can move without my shifting my feet, the ones I shape  
into the sign of infinity. They show I can be something

else – that the pain ends with me. I cannot forget, though,  
that thousands of graves lay within the marrow of my bones.

Jeffrey MacLachlan

### Live Like a Human Being

Soviet poster, 1934

laughter door rec den

father laughter

mother laughter child

laughter

never clumsy pauses

record needle laughter brass

father stares right

laughter mother stares

at other planets laughter

child peers within you

accent window detonates fairy dust

vamps red vamps red vamps red onesie laughter

books family laughter vinyl collective farm

kempt red curls peasant arranged

left late summer evenings rec den

Jane Medved

### **Girlhood**

No bowl-cut hairdo over reversible jacket,  
no white Go-Go boots on first day back,  
no settle of tanbark evening, swarm and whirl  
of cricket wings. It's been years since I saw  
fireflies. We sold the house. No wine jugs  
hundred years of basement, attic of golden  
picture frames. I found the combination to  
the last owner's safe. No lake sliver from eastern  
window. No rag doll left behind accusing,  
painted flowers, burst of forsythia on the sidewalk,  
mulberry stains. Nana Clare's photographs turned  
up in the garage. Anything paper was shredded.  
The medical antiques sold at auction. The respirator  
lip went first. No ghost under trap door,  
where we used to sit on Halloween, passing bowls  
of peeled grapes, cold spaghetti, as my father whispered,  
"These are the eyeballs. These are the leftover guts."  
And we giggled and screamed, afraid of nothing.

rain smoke lisp breath  
child applauds palms sting mean stress  
mating laughter wait wait  
mother's dress sizzle petals peach flame  
they rise together charred ring ruby chain  
exposed snake daggers hour to feed  
candelabra wattage fireflies x-ray  
every eyeball and mouth ajar  
thorax blood tart crust  
laughter hiccup laughter

Jane Medved

**After we cut off the roots**

of the orange tree, moved it to a bucket, then another corner of the yard; after we stripped dirt for cement, in the four hottest days of Ramadan, when nobody could even pretend to work; after the smallest of the men climbed into the hole, brushed it with tar, then wished me luck; after the last cloud disappeared and it was impossible to escape the sky; after the birds made a pond out of the dog's water bowl, and August lured them inside to beat their small bones against the glass; after my fingers turned the color of stone, which is to say, became sand and dust, winter came back, heavy and low, leaking right into the basement again.

Konstantinos Patrinos

**Sonnet Locked in Its Head**

We children with tunnel-vision. Cluttered hair, minds like shaken snow globes.  
We get rocked by the g-forces of mood swings,

scratch scabs off knuckles after fist fights  
with bedroom walls. Synapses misfire  
at odd angles. Always absorbed

by toy trains and numbers. Our ears ignore  
our slackly attached names when called. Inter-  
acting like we are dancing along muted

songs. Swaying our torsos back and forth like mantras.  
Scanned expressions with broken eyes. De-  
scending from outer planets. Earth, to us

nothing but theater stage. We act and applaud  
and every time the curtains fall.

# FLASH FICTION

Karen Lethlean

## Togetherhness

I left home at seventeen. Ended up working in a factory kitchen. Real struggle to convince the boss to hire me.

‘You’re a stick of a thing, how will you manage heavy trays, and big pots?’

Proved it, arms hurt for two days after. Knew other kitchen ladies would ease me into those heavy lifting tasks. Taking a little beige packet of money shopping, paying rent, felt so good, hardly wipe my smile off, and look pay-day serious. Before I’d brought bread, eggs and milk, most of those meagre funds were gone.

Met a man at Town hotel. You know, old place, Main Street, half-way downhill. Heard tell once upon a time it used to have iron lace balconies but now, they’re long gone. Fresh paint job just before I got to town, battleship grey an apt description. All of us women gathered for a quick drink before heading home. Some hopeful our shared bottle wouldn’t register on whatever breath-test scales husbands applied. Me? I shuffled back to an empty flat, rented for a sum I could almost afford.

‘Why don’t you get yourself a cat, or little rescue dog for company, Ruth?’ A few of my workmates used to say.

A companion, that’s how I justified spending time with Tom, a travelling salesman, just like my father, although he sold industrial chemicals, whereas dear old, creepy dad carried lines of haberdashery. At least my hair ribbons were best in my entire school. Felt kind of snug when Tom left a toothbrush, spare business-logo shirt and greasy hair brush behind when he vanished on client visits. He’d give me crisp notes, out of his brief case, ‘for bills, love. And buy yourself something nice too.’

More times than I care to think about, stared at his little case where he left it, behind the front door, thinking, *Tom won’t notice if I take more*. Convinced myself thievery is never a solution. Instead scarpred by, used extra vegetables from work, and took home more than my share of leftovers. Secure with a mindset of another person sharing my home spaces spilt over into finding out I’d gotten pregnant. By the time I’d given birth to Louise, my workmates put on a rowdy baby sprinkle-shower and factory management offered me a handy maternity leave package, as well as chance to come back after-

wards. Provided, of course, 'worry about your little one doesn't mess with productivity.' I guess small towns want to ensure schools, day care and sundry children's services stay open. Maybe bosses can afford staff loyalty too, being limited for replacement workers. Whatever reasons felt right comfy, those little clothes, baby rugs, teddy bears and a baby filling up my life's gaps. Before Louise turned eight, Tom found a new woman and left us alone. Took his shirts and sundries. Didn't really notice empty spaces he'd left, because they were filled with little girl things. My sleep habits did suffer, not from desires for Tom's warmth under bedcovers, but due to worry about paying bills, having enough money for Louise's school things. Not nice when you tell a little kid, 'We can't go to the town show, because we need this money for food.' Never one complaint, even when classmates skited about rides, treats and side shows. We lived on our own, mum and daughter. Sometimes Louise acted more like a friend.

'I don't think you should work a double shift, no matter how much they are paying you.'

Agreed. Shifts weren't just about making sure products got packed. Six hours, long enough, twelve meant injuries, or at least risks. Still my supervisor role made it difficult to refuse.

'That Brenda, she's no good. Keep away from her.'

Already noticed how often Brenda needed to take smoke breaks, and it's not just tobacco.

That's how things were for a few years, just Louise and me. Ate a lot of soup, learn to cook with lentils, beans and sneak a few treats from local gardens. Then I met a new man, just like my mother. So, we moved into his house by the canal. Frankly speaking, a ditch doubling as a storm water drain. But at least my daughter got her own room. We made a special trip to Walmart and picked out bedspreads and curtains. Paul converted his office for Louise, guess he thought this meant unlimited access. My little girl never said anything. Blamed her whole stand-off thing on teenage angst. Thought if I stepped back a tad, Louise would find her own space, and chat when she needed mum as a sounding board. Honestly thought this whole moody situation about school bullies or a boy's attention. Wonder why my little girl didn't talk about these goings-on. We'd been living with Paul for three years when I found out what he'd been doing at night, where he put cold hands, what he did to her body. How? Well, one of those windy nights when I thought noises were to do with summer storms. Got up without putting lights on, heard mumbled

voices. As I got closer heard Paul whisper, 'you're my best Lou-Lou. God. Your tits are perfect.'

On and on he went. Knew from one sided words, including strains of, 'mustn't tell your mum.' Louise wasn't enjoying Paul's romance, if possible, to call such a sickening thing that. Can't blame her, poor kid in her own private hell. Knew we had to go. Didn't let Paul go unpunished. Hit him on the head with a saucepan, made sure he'd never get up again, either his dick or head. We waited all night in rain at the bus stop, Louise and I. Both cold and shivering. Told her, 'no matter what she thought, this wasn't her fault. I'd stand by her, we'd always be together, no matter what.' While we huddled together dark overhanging bushes and low trees branches turned into memories, pure evil silhouetted against streetlights and ignored flashing police cars.

Daniela Pacheco

## Traffic Lanes

Shit. Shit. Okay, it's 7:04. I have six more minutes before the traffic begins to creep up. Backpack, laptop, charger, phone, keys, and oh yeah can't forget my wallet again. I think I still have that picture of my license on my phone... no just go get it from your purse. Not all cops are going to be charmed by your portrayal of naiveté and helplessness. Should I pick up coffee? No, it's 7:08, shit, I don't have time.

Driving down my street I ignore all the signs. Screw you school zone sign. Who brings their kids this early to school? Is twenty mph even reasonable? It's 7:10 in the morning. Nobody I know brings their kids this early to school, and if they do forget about the speed limit, they deserve to get hit by a car. It's a cruel world. 7:12, could this light take any longer?

I put my visor down to look at myself. Maybe some mascara today? Wouldn't hurt. Lipliner, blush, and some gloss. The car behind begins to honk. I try to keep my cool, it's only seven in the morning, I can't get pissed off yet, I haven't even met traffic. I continue applying the mascara through the tiny mirror. I'll either look like a racoon or slightly improved.

Suddenly I realize the car is tailgating me. I begin to feel the itch, could it be the world is always out to get me? I hear the engine begin to roar, I feel the release towards my car, I could hear the tires drag and then a screech as it begins to stop right behind my car. Oh, I can't help it. My heart sinks down to my ass, I turn, and he stops right on time.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, asshole?" I spit out of my car, my head morphing out, I'm the third eye to my car. He freaks, both me and my car are cherry red. I pop back into my seat reminding myself of people with guns, especially those not scared to use them. On a lighter note, I wish the car did hit me, my car's a mess. I could use a carwash or an entirely new car while we're at it. With mascara in one hand and a Q-tip in another I grab my steering wheel with the remaining fingers I have, before I'm even more late.

We are time zombies you, and me. I mean it couldn't be worse than the woman in the lane next to me. BMW and all I still feel bad for her. She has one of those Bluetooth earpieces. Her updo allows

me to see the pearl earrings peeking through that huge piece of black plastic wrapped around her ear. She looks at some papers as she drives along. Even after office hours, she's stuck with that file in her hands. She's one of those. I'd keep my '98 Toyota any day to avoid emerging with my electronics. The vein on her neck bursts out of her skin as she begins to yell in her car. The crispness of her leather, the backlight of the mid-console, the brand-new black paint, I see her in high resolution. She merges onto the 10 freeway, poor woman, she's literally on a highway to hell. I turn on the A/C. I raise my armpits and allow the air to freshen me.

I move alongside the underground railroad and can't help but wonder of all the space that could be given to the road. That or there would have been more businesses built within the space. A concrete village, pyramids filled with victims of the city, the concrete jungle. If time is money, then the pharaohs would make more space, but if that's money for you and me, then more warehouses it is. As I drive along this two-lane street, the city caves into my thoughts, I feel it spying and mocking me. Buildings and towers hovering over me, left feeling small, molecular.

I feel my cheek hot and tingly. Feeling I know for a fact that someone's staring. Who does this guy think he is? His truck moves whenever my car does. I turn and he tells me to lower my window, hand flopping up and down, like an idiot. *Fucking weirdo*, I mouth at him. I can't help but sweat more. I feel so much pressure to put my arms down, but I can't get to the office sweaty before I clock in. My white-collar shirt is beginning to damp. *Just look forward*. California license plates, dented bumpers, minor scratches, dog mom stickers stare back at me, comforting my nerves despite the time slipping through my mind. A construction worker in a dirty pickup truck, ugh I hate those, looks over at me. These guys think they're the man with their windows down, arm out, and loud music playing. He decides not to look away, but insistently keeps his eyes on me airing my pits. I try not to shy away.

Traffic speeds up as the lanes increase along with the disappearance of the railroad. The truck driver maintains his position next to my car. This time I see a wedding ring on his finger. I hope he crashes; I hope he loses his balls; I hope he gets a cramp at night; I hope that his morning is shitty every day of his life.

Finally, I see the light. I passed Soto and I'm at one of my last streets I cross. I take my phone and text my coworker to clock me in

just in case I'm a couple minutes late. All the drivers pay attention to the signal lights, which ones are turning yellow to tell how much longer until ours turn green. Instantaneously as the other turns red the ones I'm facing say go. We all rush to the next light even if it might be red but whoever gets there first feels like they are getting there quicker. Red lights begin to congest the lanes before we meet where we already calculated to be. A huge trailer comes out of one of the garages on the side of street. The trailer driver takes his hat off to ask for a chance to get through. All connected by some traffic bond, some refuse to let him in all the way. Like some cult, there's a refusal to let someone cut through the sacrificial initiation. Beeps and honks, tiny stops, eager attempts to go forward even though there will be less space to move forward. I stay still and suddenly, he's there.

A young man in front of my car. *What the hell?* I search him to check if he's okay, maybe he's trying to cross? Is he high? Maybe he's asking for change.

Immediately he picks up an elongated wiper squeegee. He doesn't say a thing. He finishes to wipe down my windshield. He moves to the back in one swift move. I notice he's wearing some Jordans. I contemplate, are they real or are they fake? He has some huge headphones on. He's obviously having a good time. He washes my rear windshield; I see the gunk drip down the window. Now it's crystal clear.

I try to say thank you and give him some change but the guy behind me is about to throw a tantrum, hands up and everything. Moving along I check for him through my rearview mirror and he's moving along with the long stick. He doesn't even attempt to locate me; he just moves along. Tall and slim, wearing headphones and large skiing glasses pretending to shoot down the moving cars. Like walking on air, he finds his next customer. Locate, aim, shoot.

Cars continue to move down with the traffic, and he remains there. He stays behind as everyone else goes with the flow of time, the flow of life, with all the artificial significance given to the urgency of getting to the next place. No smile, no frown, no high energy or even a low one. He begins to get smaller and smaller as I drive further away, but he's still the long slim man that's on the now straight line in the middle of traffic.

# ART

**Blessed Flowers** Phyllis Green

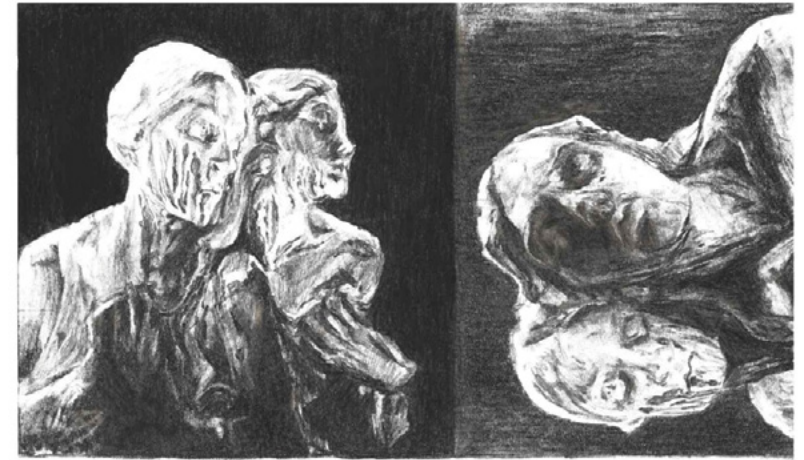


**Gorgonzola** Phyllis Green





**Three Flower Garden** Taylor Rose



**Cimiterio Monumentale di Staglieno** Joy Iriye

Meticulously Fatal Madison Hoiby



Painter's Wallet Lisa Braden



Emilia Getzinger

**SPRING CLEANING**

A Play in One Act

PLAY

Cast of Characters

MAN Mid 20s. Acquired forehead wrinkles and gray hairs during his lifetime but not much else.

WORKER Late 40s. Female. Robotic.

REPRESENTATIVE Mid 20s. Got a flattering haircut, drank free coffee, and went on an awesome date, all within the past 12 hours.

YOUNG WOMAN Late teens. Exhausted.

Place

The dome that leads to the entrance to the Threshold. Somewhere in New Jersey or New York.

Time

2034

Setting: A white room. One door, presumably leading to an employees-only back room. Customers seemed to have entered through a passageway downstage. A standing desk, empty except for a futuristic-looking laptop.

At Rise: A WORKER positions HERSELF behind her standing desk. A MAN, clearly a customer, stands in front of it.

WORKER

Your brain doesn't fit. I'm afraid we'll have to downsize.

MAN

What have you got in there?

WORKER

Let's see...

MAN

Any phone numbers, addresses?

WORKER

A couple.

MAN

You can clear those. If I'm moving to a new place, I won't need them.

(The WORKER is about to swipe something on her computer.)

Wait! Keep the ones from New Jersey. I might find people that way.

(The WORKER presses a few buttons, then swipes.)

Uhhhhh...my parents' middle names.

(The WORKER swipes.)

And my siblings'. They can just tell me theirs. That's the way it works, right? I can acquire new knowledge?

WORKER

Yes. But we may have to limit how much new information you can acquire. Just to ensure that there isn't too much brain power.

MAN

How d'you do that?

WORKER

Spring Cleaning. At the end of every month. You choose which memories to wipe, we wipe them. Just like we're doing now.

MAN

Once a month seems...often.

WORKER

Think of it as a reset. New month, better version of yourself. One without all the trauma and mistakes. It's like deleting apps off your phone.

MAN

Okay.

WORKER

What else would you like me to swipe? We still have a lot of space to clear.

MAN

Uhhh, the taste of sushi.

(The WORKER swipes.)

It's always been overrated.

The taste of cooked spinach drenched in too much olive oil. The way my dad used to make. He was a horrible cook. All of Dad's cooking, actually, I don't need any of it.

(The WORKER swipes.)

Oh! There was this girl, Rebekah, I liked her in sixth grade? Keep Avery, she was my first crush, but get rid of Rebekah and Allison. And this kid Kevin Truman who dated both of them.

(The WORKER swipes.)

D'you know what else? The slurping sound my dad made when eating his cereal. And the way the milk looked in the spoon. I'm gonna throw up. Okay.

(The WORKER swipes.)

I don't know... What other kinds of memories do people get rid of?

WORKER

Medical information, finances, class schedules--

MAN

Medical information?

WORKER

All medical information will be kept on file.

MAN

People just...delete it? From their minds?

WORKER

Yes, it is no longer necessary to hold onto those memories once you pass through the Threshold.

MAN

What if I eat a peanut by mistake?

WORKER

The system will alert you whenever you see food you're allergic to, warning you not to eat it.

MAN

What if the system ever...malfunctions?

WORKER

The system is too complicated for a complete malfunction; the possibility of that happening is essentially zero. But we do have several efficient back-up systems.

MAN

Alright, clear the allergies.

(The WORKER swipes.)

I haven't gone to church in years. You could probably get rid of those Sunday school lessons. And the time Mrs. Nestle told me I was going to Hell for reading Harry Potter.

(The WORKER swipes.)

Vomiting. Make me forget the feeling of vomiting. And all the times I've made my mother cry.

(The WORKER swipes twice. The MAN thinks.)

Take away her funeral. And the family fights over her property.

(The WORKER swipes.)

Take away my mom's side of the family. Wait! Not yet. Let me think about that one.

The clothes I don't wear anymore. And the music I don't listen to. Except for Christmas music and the music I listened to in college. Most of that I'll probably get back into. Oh, but take away every song I've heard at a frat party except for the ones on my playlists.

(The WORKER swipes. A realization.)

Take away every frat party. And when I realized I couldn't join a frat because I couldn't choose between dues and rent.

(The WORKER swipes.)

Take away every time I've been stressed about money or seen my family stressed about it.

(The WORKER swipes.)

How much more have we got?

WORKER

We've cleared up about 18 percent of what we needed to.

Many travellers get rid of deja vu, mental illness, loss--

MAN

Deja vu. Clear all the deja vu. And take away all memories of therapy.

(The WORKER swipes. A realization.)

Can you take away depression?

(The WORKER nods.)

Really?

(The WORKER nods. THEY stare at one another. The MAN nods.)

Take away my depression, please.  
 (The WORKER swipes.)

That worked?  
 (The WORKER nods. A moment passes. HE realizes HE is invincible.)

Delete the nights I spent drinking alone or with people I didn't like.  
 (The WORKER swipes.)

Texting girls who only responded 'cause they felt bad.  
 (The WORKER swipes.)

Kissing girls who only kissed me back 'cause they felt bad.  
 (The WORKER swipes.)

Girls who didn't wanna kiss me.  
 (The WORKER swipes.)

Or talk to me.  
 (The WORKER swipes.)

Or look at me.  
 (The WORKER swipes.)

Bad art projects.  
 (The WORKER swipes.)

Bad songs I've written.  
 (The WORKER swipes.)

Friends I didn't actually like.  
 (The WORKER swipes.)

Friends who didn't actually like me.  
 (The WORKER swipes.)

My college grades.  
 (The WORKER swipes.)

And everyone who made me feel bad about them.  
 (The WORKER swipes.)

Dead grass because my parents never watered it.  
 (The WORKER swipes.)

Slush left over from snow days.  
 (The WORKER swipes.)

The smell of cucumber vapes.  
 (The WORKER swipes.)

I've been waiting to get rid of that one. Oh! Clothes I don't wear.

WORKER

I did that already.

MAN

I forgot.  
 (Beat.)

Movies with less than a 60% Rotten Tomatoes rating. Except *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Dog Days*.  
 It has sentimental value.

(The WORKER swipes.)

SparkNotes for *The Great Gatsby*.  
 (The WORKER swipes.)

SparkNotes in general.  
 (The WORKER swipes.)

These are getting a bit specific.

WORKER

Think about pets, jobs, cars, houses.

MAN

I guess accidentally killing my sister's guinea pig. And the memory of her crying after it died. I thought it was ugly--I've never been big on animals--but I hated to see her cry. She didn't talk to me for weeks after.  
 (The WORKER swipes.)

What were the other things you've mentioned?

WORKER

Jobs, cars, houses.

MAN

Um...work is boring. You can wipe out all the boring stuff and the commute.  
 (The WORKER swipes.)

My house is pretty boring too. All the days I've wasted, TV shows I didn't care for, and time spent sleeping and swiping through my phone.  
 (The WORKER swipes.)

What else...

WORKER

A lot of people take away memories of insignificant jobs.

MAN

Insignificant...  
 (A realization.)

All my jobs have been really dead end. I want a fresh start.  
 Yeah. Erase all my jobs!  
 (The WORKER swipes.)

Erase everyone who criticized my jobs.  
 (The WORKER moves to swipe.)

Wait! Who would that be?

WORKER

I don't know. It's all the machine.

MAN

How much more do we have to clear?

WORKER

54 percent.

MAN

(HE thinks, then reaches a decision.)

Erase my mom's side of my family.

(The WORKER swipes. The MAN is hurt. HE puts on this business-like swagger, or tries to.)

How much more?

WORKER

41 percent.

(A death sentence.)

MAN

I've already lost so much.

WORKER

The second half is always the easiest. Pets--

MAN

Erase the goldfish Eliza got me in college. But not Eliza!

(The WORKER swipes.)

She was my first love.

Not my first love. But the first one to love me back. I think.

Can you erase doubt?

WORKER

I can erase anything that resides within the mind.

MAN

Erase all doubt that Eliza loved me. Do it.

(The WORKER swipes. The MAN thinks for a moment.)

Why can I still remember the things you erased?

WORKER

It takes a few minutes for the machine to complete the effect. You should forget everything in a matter of minutes, starting with the first memories you chose to erase.

MAN

Hm.

Would I be able to un-delete a memory, if I wanted to?

WORKER

Once I swipe away a memory, there's no way to retrieve it.

Is there something you're concerned about deleting?

MAN

--it's hard to part with certain ones.

WORKER

You can always acquire new knowledge once you pass through the Threshold.

MAN

Not the same knowledge. Not what's important.

WORKER

That is the merit in letting go. You discover what is of true importance.

MAN

I got this feeling, a kind of stinging in my chest; I wonder if getting rid of these memories is right.

WORKER

It is the only way to pass through the Threshold.

MAN

I know--

WORKER

Don't you want to pass through?

MAN

I had this thought.

WORKER

Would you like me to delete it?

MAN

No, I'd like to express it. Alright?

WORKER

Okay.

MAN

What if, instead of passing through, I swiped away the memories I didn't want and went back to living my life as is?

WORKER  
 You signed the contract agreeing to pass through the Threshold.

MAN  
 Only if I gave up the memories I'd need to pass.

WORKER  
 You will give up the memories and pass through the Threshold.

MAN  
 I don't want to give up this many memories.

WORKER  
 You agreed to go through the Threshold.

MAN  
 Not at this price.

WORKER  
 You wanted to give up your memories.

MAN  
 I didn't think I'd want them. And now that they're going, I've realized...  
 (HE stops, deep in thought.)

WORKER  
 What was your realization?

MAN  
 I was beginning to be almost happy.

WORKER  
 Happiness deleted.  
 (The WORKER begins to swipe. The MAN tries to stop it, but is too late.)

MAN  
 What did you just do?

WORKER  
 Adversity deleted.

MAN  
 You can't do that.

WORKER  
 Defiance deleted.  
 (The WORKER begins to swipe. The MAN tries to stop it, but is too late. HE walks to the downstage passageway through which he entered and begins to shout to anyone who might hear HIM.)

MAN  
 The machine is malfunctioning! Someone help!

WORKER  
 Panic deleted.  
 (The WORKER swipes. The MAN continues pounding on the door.)

MAN  
 Panic is not a memory!

WORKER  
 Neither was doubt; neither was depression.

MAN  
 Bring back both of them; I don't care! Just bring back my memories.

WORKER  
 No.

MAN  
 Please. Bring back my family.

WORKER  
 That is not my job.

MAN  
 What is your job?

WORKER  
 Clearing all experiences and emotions which prevent you from passing through the Threshold.

MAN  
 Get me outta here.

WORKER  
 Too late for that.



MAN  
 No, I wanna speak to a person.

WORKER  
 You are speaking to me.

MAN  
 Not a robot! An actual human person.

WORKER  
 Would you like to speak with a representative?

MAN  
 Yes, I would like to speak with a representative! Bring me one now.

WORKER  
 There are no available representatives at the moment. I can place you on hold until one is available.

MAN  
 No, I need a person now!

WORKER  
 Deleting impatience.  
 (The WORKER swipes.)

MAN  
 Stop! Okay, okay. Put me on hold. Can't believe this.  
 (Music begins playing. RE: the music.)

What are you doing?

WORKER  
 You are on hold. This is the music we play with people on hold.

MAN  
 Make it stop.

WORKER  
 Deleting music.  
 (The WORKER swipes. The music stops.)

MAN  
 Nooo! I told you not to do that. Keep my college and Christmas music.

WORKER

Deleting Christmas.  
 (The WORKER swipes.)

MAN  
 Stop it! I love Christmas.

WORKER  
 Deleting love.  
 (The WORKER swipes.)

MAN  
 This has got to be a joke.  
 (To whoever HE thinks is out there, watching HIM.)

Very funny!

WORKER  
 Sufficient memories deleted.

MAN  
 What?

WORKER  
 Sufficient memories deleted. You may pass through the Threshold.

MAN  
 I wanna speak to a representative!

WORKER  
 You are on hold.

MAN  
 I'm speaking to somebody. Now!

WORKER  
 Please wait for the next available representative.

MAN  
 I'll make you wait--

REPRESENTATIVE (entering.)  
 Is everything okay over here?

MAN  
 That deleted my memories, my emotions, without my consent!

REPRESENTATIVE  
I'm sorry you're upset, sir. Would you like a complementary coffee or herbal tea?

MAN  
I don't want your fucking coffee! I want out.

REPRESENTATIVE  
What do you mean, sir--?

MAN  
Out of this whole thing. Get back to my own life. With my memories.

REPRESENTATIVE  
You want to...cancel?  
(The WORKER begins pressing buttons. The OTHERS don't notice HER.)

MAN  
Yes!

REPRESENTATIVE  
Alright! You'll just need to log into your portal and sign the Cancellation Agreement. You're, unfortunately, ineligible for a refund this late in the / procedure--

MAN  
I don't care. Just get me back my memories.  
(The WORKER finishes typing and exits, unnoticed by the others.)

REPRESENTATIVE  
All the memories that haven't been permanently deleted will be fully restored. Which should be all of them, except for maybe a couple at the beginning of the session.  
(Presenting the MAN with a tablet.)  
If you'd just log in here...

MAN  
(HE types in something, prepares to type something else, then stares at the tablet for a moment.)  
I forgot my password.

REPRESENTATIVE  
There's a "Forgot Password" option right--  
(HE clicks on the tablet.)  
Here.  
(The page loads. The MAN stares at it, dumbstruck.)

Is something the matter, sir?

MAN  
I don't know these questions.

REPRESENTATIVE  
You set them, sir--

MAN  
I don't know the answer to these questions.  
I don't remember my father's middle name. Is there a way you can access that?

REPRESENTATIVE  
We can only access the memories you give us before they delete.

MAN  
Find my father's middle name.  
(The REPRESENTATIVE searches the WORKER's computer.)

REPRESENTATIVE  
I'm sorry; it deleted.

MAN  
The street where I grew up.

REPRESENTATIVE  
(Searching.)  
Where did you grow up?

MAN  
I don't know. I don't remember anything before moving to Jersey.

REPRESENTATIVE  
Try to think.

MAN  
Try to think? You deleted it! It's your job to get it back!

REPRESENTATIVE  
Once the system deletes it, there's no way to get it back. It's gone forever.

MAN  
You can't do that. You took my memories from me.

REPRESENTATIVE

Please remain calm--

MAN

You took everything from me! You took / emotions I never knew I had!

REPRESENTATIVE

Sir, be calm or I will call security.

MAN

You took my life!

REPRESENTATIVE

You consented to the procedure--

MAN

Give me my life back!

(HE breaks down.)

I miss my mom.

REPRESENTATIVE

(HE sighs and takes out a piece of paper, presenting it to the MAN.)

We can't return your memories to you, but we're developing tech that can do that. Sign here and we'll freeze as many as we can and return them to you as soon as it's developed.

(The MAN grabs the paper out of the REPRESENTATIVE's hand and begins signing it. HE looks up.)

MAN

Who are you?

REPRESENTATIVE

I'm Sandy. I oversee the company.

MAN

Where are we?

REPRESENTATIVE

This is where you work.

MAN

Who am I?

REPRESENTATIVE

Says here you're...

(HE takes the paper and reads it.)

Oh no. You didn't finish signing your name. I'm afraid I don't know who you are.

(HE stops for a moment, as if to despair, then has a lightbulb idea.)

Wait. Your memories are stored in our master computer. We can access them and let you know who you are.

MAN

You can do that?

REPRESENTATIVE

Sure! It'll take a lot of energy though.

MAN

Whatever it takes.

REPRESENTATIVE

That's the spirit! She let you keep resilience.

MAN

What?

REPRESENTATIVE

We're gonna need a lot more energy to access your life information. That means harvesting brain power. Come here.

(The MAN follows the REPRESENTATIVE to another computer, just like the WORKER's.)

One week of working here and you'll have more than enough to get your memories back!

MAN

What do I have to do?

REPRESENTATIVE

It's easy! I'll train you. Have you ever had a job before?

MAN

I don't think so...

(Everything moves in fast motion. The REPRESENTATIVE talks with the MAN, training HIM, and then leaves. A YOUNG WOMAN approaches the MAN. THEY talk inaudibly for a few moments. HE checks the laptop in front of HIM. Then:)

Your brain doesn't fit. I'm afraid we'll have to downsize.

End of play.

Paulina Abascal

### Same As It Ever Was

I was inside a bodega in South Williamsburg when he called me. The deli man had seen me at highs and lows, on iced coffee days and chopped cheese nights, frost bitten Ben and Jerrys shortly after cardboard tampons that only came in boxes of eight. But most of the time, I was ordering turkey and cheese on a roll. That night was one of those times.

I had spent the summer in Brooklyn in a sublet near the Hewes Street J train that quickly took me to my job at a startup in the Lower East Side. I worked out of an industrial space that the punk band Rancid had shot a music video in years before. The now-coworking space had no sign and no other women. But I liked the job. Everyday after work I walked to SoHo where I went to a hot yoga class done in complete darkness. On my walk back to the train, I would order a salad off an app on my phone, pick it up on the Bowery, and eat it on the train even if I didn't have a seat. It was a simple familiarity that came from the consistent schedule and paycheck I had always dreamed of having in New York, a place I only knew as spontaneous and both eternally fun and hard.

But New York was no longer my home. I had moved to Los Angeles nearly two years prior from an apartment four train stops and three hundred dollars east of my current sublet in pursuit of a higher quality of life. A place where my boyfriend, The Writer, and I could afford our own one bedroom apartment. Now, I wouldn't suggest leaving New York until you hate it. Even that might be too fast.

My summertime stint in the city had started with a time limit: one month while The Writer headed back home to North Carolina to help his dad on a once in a lifetime hail mary run for congress. If I left LA too, we could rent out our bungalow to fund future trips or spend at the flea market on new furniture. The company I was working for was based in New York and had been begging me with no avail to move back. It seemed like kismet. But the night in the deli marked the end of my fourth month in the sublet. Every time he would extend his trip, so

## CREATIVE NON FICTION

would I. Not because I wanted to stay in New York, but because I wanted to be supportive. That and I didn't want to go back to our LA apartment alone.

When I first met The Writer, I was working as a receptionist at a spa that did most of its business via Groupon. He was an editor at the most beloved magazine-turned-website in Brooklyn, writing about hip-hop. We met at a block party in Bushwick, where I was wearing a Selena Quintanilla inspired bra top emblazoned with pearls and sipped an entire bottle of cheap champagne out of an emptied Dunkin Donuts cup. He was dressed equally as loud, but his actual voice was quiet. As we continued to drink, more of his southern accent would peek out. This was it, I thought. This is him.

In the 1981 song "Once in a Lifetime" David Byrne, vocalist and lead guitarist of The Talking Heads, poses a variety of scenarios that recall a middle school game of M.A.S.H. (mansion, apartment, shack, house, respectively). Life can take you to strange, unexpected places, good and bad: *"You may find yourself in a shotgun shack. You may find yourself in another part of the world."* I knew this, I heard similar questions in my own inner voice that narrated my life. Sometimes I said what it said out loud. Sometimes I sat there quietly and listened. Other times, I tried too hard to ignore it.

"You're really not as New York as you look," I thought as he ordered a Cheerwine to wash down his burger.

When the sun set after the block party, I played hooky from my second job, working the t-shirt booth at a famous East Village concert venue and made out with him at a comic book themed bar. We slept together on the first night. Later I wondered if I had embellished the night to create a rom-com narrative, but I was sure it was true.

For a while, our life together was like that night. Long hot days into nights into mornings. Shot and beer combos that were cheaper than cocktails. Asking for extra packets of Blackened Ranch at Popeyes Chicken. Concerts in basements and Barclays Center, both always courtesy of a guest list. We were young enough that for a small discount, my friends agreed to let him move into the apartment we shared after he and I had been dating for only five months. Two dressers in our shoebox bedroom made an impossibly tiny path for us to walk to the

bathroom we shared with five people. Our lives were the kind that made New York winters worth it.

When we moved to Los Angeles, things changed the way I'd hoped they would. We had more space, more money, we ate Trader Joe's meals at home and quickly got a dog who we named Nora Ephron, after the queen of happily-ever-afters.

The chorus of "Once in a Lifetime" was written to reflect a sermon, with a call and response structure emulating a preacher and a congregation. It talks about life passing by day after day, not in a particularly daunting way, but just in the way where suddenly it's your birthday again. Things are good enough to not question. When you never thought you'd have any of what you have, this isn't just a relief but feels like success.

Things in Los Angeles with The Writer were great. Not perfect, but consistently great. Looking back, maybe it should have scared me. Now, I know love is not defined by the absence of conflict. I had started working in marketing, making good money for the first time in my life. He had burnt out writing about music, so much so that he had given up all alcohol, including the So-Co and Coke he had named the "joke juice" that fueled his creative voice. With a sober mind he shifted to writing more serious political and news pieces, and eventually went freelance. Every few weekends, we'd stay at my parents or grandmother's house and rent our apartment to make some extra cash. We had a savings account, a lot of passport stamps, and photos from three anniversaries on our fridge.

When I looked at our life, I felt a stillness I hadn't felt before. I was proud to answer questions about my weekend plans with, "probably just the same." I was a person who had a usual. All I wanted was more of it.

Sometimes, my inner monolog would post questions at me like the ones in "Once in a Lifetime." How have you found yourself in New York for another month? How do you think this will end up? Why are you extending the inevitable for yourself? Like the song's sermon, I assumed these were rhetorical questions, but they begged to be answered. The chorus refused to stop until I answered it.

The Writer was depressed. Not the run-of-the-mill clinical depression I shared a diagnosis with. He was bedridden. He hadn't written anything in months and I doubted if he was still

helping his dad with the election his entire trip was centered around. I knew he had been eating away at his portion of the money we had saved. The portion I had assumed would go towards buying a beautiful house together. The only thing that would get him off of his parent's couch was fast food and playing golf alone at a cheap course nearby. Sometimes even when I had nothing left to say on our phone calls, I'd fight when he wanted to hang up, making problems out of nothing just to run us around in circles so we'd stay on the phone for another twenty minutes. It was never enough for me. I wanted to melt on top of him like the butter oil at Waffle House. Starting in the middle and then pouring down the sides, stopping at each ledge of the stack, eventually pooling at their bottom, available to be sopped up, too good to not use every drop of.

"How's everything?" my friends would ask. My mom would ask. My boss in New York would ask.

"The same," I would lie.

The phone call I got that night in the bodega was planned. A friend who worked as a therapist had suggested I make a list of what I wanted my life to look like in one year and five years. She said this was a good way to remind ourselves what we were working towards. The list was easy for me. I suggested he make one too. We picked a random Wednesday to show each other our lists. I had been excited to tell him I wanted to take Spanish lessons, maybe go back to school one day. As I wrote my list, his participation implied, it was as if I had forgotten that things between us were no longer great. That they were actively bad. I had to fight to get him on the phone. For our fourth anniversary, he sent me a paperweight that looked like it was from an airport gift shop. I was prepared to extend my sublet yet again. In a mix of delusional hope and the drama of the writer I'd become, I refused to do anything about it first. The only role I could play in it was the scorned; the victim. Like I had for the last three months, I ignored the questions of my inner monolog and waited.

"I'm just getting a sandwich, is it list time?" I asked when he called, half joking as I paid my \$4.50.

He told me he wasn't going to be sharing his list. That the activity had made it blaringly obvious to him that he did not want the same things as me: Los Angeles, the house, the whole life. I

cried and pleaded, saying that those were just examples, that I would be happy doing anything being anywhere with him. But he wanted to break up. He said it matter of factly like he had been practicing out loud all day. His inability to explain why he wanted to end a four year long relationship over the phone from states away frustrated list-loving me to no end. I was in such shock that I didn't even argue when he said he was keeping the dog.

I left the bodega and carried the phone conversation up the stairs of my walk up into my sublet. When I pushed harder on the why, he finally replied "I woke up one day, and I didn't recognize my own life."

There are two perspectives in "Once in a Lifetime." The first is when the narrator realizes the beautiful, aspirational life he is living: "*You may find yourself behind the wheel of a large automobile. You may find yourself in a beautiful house, with a beautiful wife.*" These things he has are presented not as choices but as things that were randomly assigned to him by the game of life. He remains neutral, but without answers. He asks himself "*how did I get here?*" If you do the same thing over and over enough times, that becomes your life. There is no declaration, no fork in the road.

In the second perspective, the narrator looks at the life that he has, that was assigned to him, predisposed in the way that normal life, capitalism, American—whatever you want to blame it on—encourages, and doesn't feel at home. The sameness is overwhelming and must be rejected:

*"You may tell yourself, this is not my beautiful house. You may tell yourself, this is not my beautiful wife."* Maybe he is too depressed to realize what he has, I told myself about The Writer. Maybe if we moved to a different city, or got a different job, he would want this.

In 2000, Bryne spoke to NPR's "All Things Considered" about the song after it was included on the NPR 100, a list of the most important pieces of American music of the 20th century. While some listeners and critics assumed the song was a deep response to the materialism of the 1980s, Bryne insisted it was exactly what it sounds like. "We're largely unconscious. You know, we operate half awake or on autopilot and end up, whatever, with a house and family and job and everything else. We haven't really stopped to ask ourselves, 'How did I get here?'" he said.

I never saw The Writer again. While I was wrapping up loose

ends in New York, he rushed to Los Angeles to pack his stuff and arrange for his car to be shipped across the country. He flew back using his mom's credit card points with Nora Ephron under his seat. When I got back to the house a week later, it looked nearly the exact same. He had left trash from takeout pizza but all of my beautiful things were in their place, my beautiful house ready to welcome me back. All of the items we had selected together, even the ones he had paid for were there. He didn't want or need any of it. This was not his life.

The ethereal synthesizer that loops throughout "Once in a Lifetime" reminds me of *The Twilight Zone*. Putting listeners in a trance like state as they are disoriented, nodding along to the declarations not realizing they are questions that need to be answered. In the final verse, the song moves away from the visual of the house, the car, the wife, as the narrator begins panicking over the life he has passively participated in: "*You may ask yourself, 'Where does that highway go to?' And you may ask yourself, 'Am I right? Am I wrong?' And you may say to yourself, 'My God! What have I done?'*" I asked myself these questions for two years.

The writer and I do not speak. Like he had said he wanted, he began living in North Carolina, living only off the writing he wanted to do. I heard he still lives there, with a second dog, a new girlfriend, and an old convertible. This year marks the sixth year since our conversation in the bodega. Sometimes I look at the list I had written that I never shared with him. When I read it—nearly everything done, some beyond what I had imagined at the time—I do not recognize my own life.

Marline Olin

## Hello, Vagina!

For nearly forty years, the pounds piled on. Ten with my first pregnancy. Then after the second, providence intervened. It was like God took a tire pump and blew me up. First my newborn daughter needed neurosurgery on her spine. Five pounds right there. Then a suture popped out three months later. Add another five.

With each flip of the calendar, my waist lost more definition. I'd linger in the store aisles searching for slimming clothes. I started wearing girdles and Spanx. Then one fateful day a salesperson shrugged her shoulders and sent me marching to the rear. That's where they hide the plus-sized clothes. Salon Z. Encore. No matter what name you call it, that's the department for women who are fat.

We all have crutches, I suppose. Booze. Cigarettes. A life of excess. But no one's really prepared for a child who's disabled. An autism diagnosis. Language therapy. Occupational therapy. Shrinks. They say that it takes a village. I say it takes a village and a bag of pretzels, too.

I'm not a tall person, probably 5'3" in my stockinged feet. And having a certain heft had advantages. In a crowd, my feet stayed anchored to the ground. Outside, I took up space. At parties, I loomed like a celebrity, my size alone a presence in the room.

Being overweight defined me. It's like your sex or ethnicity. It's like that box you check on questionnaires. Because anyone's who is overweight sees the world through a distinct lens.

Basically there two kinds of people: those who are thinner and those who are fatter. And there's never a moment where that distinction doesn't whisper in your ear. Skinny people always outnumber the fat. And the fat are reminded of that fact every day. The world's fitness obsession. The whole diet industry. The relentless advertisements.

*People who are thin: Your saleslady. Your dental hygienist. Your flight attendant.*

*People who are fat: The guy who rides the garbage truck.*

I suppose I could have lived in denial. But whenever words failed, whenever someone stumbled for my name, out blurted the truth. Wacky old ladies. Kids. I've been called everything from "my large daughter-in-law" to "Fat Grandma." Being heavy was a label I

got used to. I eat therefore I am.

*Famous people who are thin: Jesus. Prince. David Bowie.*

*Famous people who are fat: Fatty Arbuckle. John Belushi. Mama Cass.*

Then Covid struck with its graphs and predictions. People who were morbidly obese played with a losing hand. And those pictures on TV! The ventilators. The teary phone calls. The pathetic iPads with their final goodbyes. Sequestered with my husband and daughter, I lost my appetite.

*Fake people who are thin: Barbie. Brenda Starr. Wonder Woman.*

*Fake people who are fat: Mr. Potato Head. Jabba The Hut. Uncle Buck.*

Eighteen months later, I'm down sixty pounds. I've dumped a truckload of fat clothes at the Goodwill trailer. And the UPS guy brings some spiffy new duds every day. But the human body is not like a balloon. It doesn't deflate to its original shape.

Take my upper arms. Please! When I lift an arm, it waddles like a turkey neck. When I walk, my thighs vibrate. It's like that dinosaur movie where you feel the ground shake. Boom boom boom.

*Literary people who are thin: Every heroine.*

*Literary people who are fat: Every heroine's best friend.*

Meanwhile the men in my life are thrilled. My gynecologist, for one, nearly fell off his stool. Laptop in hand, he punched the keys while I spoke.

"I can look down and see it," I tell him. "It's been years since I've seen it." Then whispering, I slide my ass forward. I can hear the paper crunch while he waits. "Believe me, it's not a pretty sight."

*Screen people who are thin: Every leading lady.*

*Screen people who are fat: Every leading lady's best friend.*

Remember when you were in high school, glanced at your reflection, and winced? Looking back, we were so ashamed of our bodies, wishing we could be anyone else. Here's a news flash, people. You can't roll back time. Stocky or slender. Pimply or pale. Frizzy-haired or straight. It doesn't matter! Young is beautiful. Embrace those good years while you can.

Meanwhile I'm being showered with compliments. Neighbors gawk. Strangers stare. My husband, for one, has never been happier. He's almost seventy and after forty-nine years of marriage, he's finally landed a trophy wife. In bed, his hands traverse the topography of my new body, enjoying the dips and curves.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," I tell him.

Then I reposition myself like those sluts you see in the movies.

Only there are a lot of things to rearrange. The tricky knee. The creaky neck.

But the hubby, God bless, is undeterred. "Ahoy!" he growls under the covers. The captain of our ship, he's discovered buried treasure. All he needs is an eye patch and a blousy shirt.

"Arrh!"

Then I look under the covers, too. It's another big mistake.

*People who are thin: Marlene on a good day.*

*People who are fat: Marlene on all the others.*

At least the good days seem to be happening more often. When my mood's up and the light's right, I paint on some lipstick. Then sporting my new wardrobe, I prance around the house. For a few precious seconds, I feel slim. Gray-haired and graceful! A montage of Diane Keaton and Meryl Streep.

But on bad days, on days when thoughts intrude and worries pulsate, when clouds cover every bit of sky--I retreat into my closet. For a good five minutes I forage around. Then braving the universe, I brace myself in a full set of armor. Long sleeves. A long skirt. A cowl neckline in the ninety degree heat. And though it looks like I've joined a religious cult-- --don't worry! Hidden beneath the surface, I'm still me.



## Lava

Cruising down the 10 with me in my humid Fiat was Masha, a skinny brunette with a wicked bone structure and a very busy schedule. It was the first time a date had started in the car, at least for me. I was going on two years single. Instead of \$200 a month I was paying \$230 for the Fiat I had just leased; poor credit. HBO's *Girls* was about to start its 4th season. To get us in the mood I was playing songs off the War on Drugs album. We were on the way to a War on Drugs concert.

When I first started listening to The War on Drugs I was in the beginning of a gnarly break up from Cary Jane. *My* painful. During this period having sex came in fits and starts. Thank goodness it existed, because there had been stretches in my 20's when on hiatus I became a withered weed.

I won't pretend I was having sex on the regular, but every so often it would happen, and when it did it was memorable. In between the pretty blonde painter who looked twenty, but was older than I, and the Cuban daddy's girl whose sexual appetite was more than she or I could handle, there were deep swells of loneliness and questioning. Mostly loneliness. On every date, I was extremely horny.

The last time Cary Jane and I saw each other was in Hawaii. On the island of Kauai. I had been there twice as a child, but for some reason had no recollection of all the chickens I saw there when I went with my grandparents. Kauai is an island of chickens. Instead of stray dogs, hens and roosters. The locals bred them to fight off the evil spirits emanating from the volcanoes.

In Kauai, I was also a kind of chicken. Cary Jane transformed me into one to fight off the evil spirits, or at least that's what it felt like. I somehow lost the ability to have an erection there, and when we tried to have sex, on several occasions I actually cried.

On my way home to Los Angeles, we said toodles to each other, tears wetting each others' skin. Cary Jane was going on a trip around the world, a trip that I had inspired her to go on. No more job. She was a free man. A few weeks in she sent me a photograph that said "143" in seashells. Told me in the email she had collected them all morning. That was the high point of Cary Jane's trip, at least for me. A few weeks after that she was in India. Last time we spoke as boyfriend and girlfriend. During hours of silent meditation, she said,

is when she realized it.

So much for the seashells.

The War on Drugs were my sole companion for the months that followed. The musical interludes on the "Lost in a Dream" album, especially. Those in-between moments when there are no voices, or lyrics; just instruments, were the hardest to listen to. To me they sounded like tiny goldfish gasping for air.

The lead singer of The War on Drugs, Adam Granduciel, has spoken extensively about his recording process for "Lost in a Dream." About the anxiety and paranoia he felt while writing the album. He has also called "Lost in a Dream" a solo record.

Two years after first hearing "Lost in a Dream," I had the good fortune of nabbing two tickets to the band's show in Pomona, CA. Pomona is about 30 miles inland from Los Angeles, and the Glass House is a perfect venue to watch a rock show. I'd seen one or two bands there in the past. The beauty of the Glass House is the limited size of the venue and the fact that the shows are twice as cheap as shows in Los Angeles.

I was dating regularly by this point, slowly but surely having pulled myself out of the volcano Cary Jane had pushed me into. Tinder, at the time, was the newest dating app on the market; it was full of surprises.

I was a little disappointed when my date to the concert, Masha, told me that she had sampled a few War on Drugs songs on Spotify earlier that day, and had thought they were *pretty* good. I had obviously misunderstood her taste. Instead of letting me introduce her to the powerful sound of Adam Granduciel on the way to the show, she preferred to talk about a late-blooming fashion career. I would have taken her to the show even if she had never heard of the band. It was part of the deal I made when I purchased the pair of tickets nine months before the concert. I would have a new lover by then, I predicted, and if I didn't I would obtain one in the moment. She was as cute in the flesh as she was on her Tinder profile, and that was more than enough for me.

Believe me, getting to know someone in traffic is not the way to put yourself out there for the first time, or flirt. Still, with one hand never off the steering wheel, I led us to the Glass House.

The opening act, Cass McCombs, was a drowsy musician who'd probably had a little too much cough medicine before getting on stage that night. A playwright I knew from Beverly Hills had

introduced me to his music when we were both living in the East Village in 2010. The East Village was kind of a dead zone by then.

The flavor of the early 2000's - the Strokes, White Stripes, and Yeah Yeah Yeahs period, had been replaced by trendy boutiques such as the John Varvatos store that famously took over C.B.G.B. When I first lived in the East Village during the early 2000's, I was managing bands, or I should say a band, since it was only one. The Izzys were a blues-rock band that I had been introduced to after my good friend Blaze, who became their bassist, mailed me a demo. He thought I'd be a good hype man, and he was right. I did everything for that band, setting up shows at the city's most prestigious venues, like the Mercury Lounge and Joe's Pub.

Cary Jane and I met way after those days, during my second stint in the East Village, the wack period when I was pushing thirty and underemployed. She had a vigorous mind, educated through the California public school system, a soul-sucking marketing job, and a colorful family. Cary Jane's father had a workshop in the back of their home in the Palisades, ran the local marathon, and had stopped working professionally decades ago. The similarities between her father and me terrified Cary Jane. I loved her father and admired his marriage to Cary Jane's mother, whose hair, like Cary Jane's, had the tint of a Monet watercolor.

The Glass House in Pomona was packed by the time Cass McCombs stepped off stage, a full hour before The War on Drugs were scheduled to play. The audience of mostly Converse-clad couples was relaxed now. A little make-out outside before the headliner was what I had in mind, but my date Masha was more interested in showing off her sketches from fashion school. So far all my questions had come back in grey outline. Over and over, and as kindly as I could, I tried to steer the conversation toward something we both cared about, but it made no difference. Her neediness only multiplied as it got closer to showtime. She complained about a lot of stuff, but mostly the inferior students at her competitive program who got all the internships because they were younger than her. Before long, Masha was in tears at the bar without me.

I stared quizzically at the grim lights on stage, thinking back to a memorable night at the East Village apartment that had lit the path to the end of my relationship with Cary Jane.

A curtain separated the bedroom from the kitchen where the chicken Kiev was marinating in the oven. I had just set the table and

a breeze from the window was making the windchimes dance. Cary Jane's necklaces were draped on nails above my head. "So," Cary Jane said, "you know how we've been using the pull-out method and kind of fucking up sometimes?"

Needless to say, we never got to the salad that night.

After declaring ourselves unfit to parent, things were never good in the East Village again between Cary Jane and me. I was a stranger in her home and the brick walls of the apartment wouldn't let me forget it.

The facts around the terminated pregnancy are still contested, but here are the important details: One late summer night while I was working as a busboy to pay my share of the rent, Cary Jane had to go to the hospital. I got the impression that she was fine and would be home to meet me afterward.

"You sure you don't want me to come?" I said.

"No, Maren is here.

"Are you sure?"

"Don't worry, Allen, I'll be home before you."

In my mind, there was no doubt about what she wanted, but when I floated in after work, Cary Jane still wasn't home. Hours of discomfort passed before she finally showed. According to Cary Jane, I had revealed my true colors by not showing up to the hospital, the way a real man would.

By the start of the War on Drugs' set I was more than a little stoned, and Masha was standing at the bar isolating herself from the crowd. With clammy hands I excused myself to the bathroom to control my rising insecurity. Four years later, here I was again with a human being who I couldn't read. The experience with Cary Jane was haunting me, aided by the indica in my nervous system.

"I'm not avoiding you," Cary Jane said to me a few months after the pregnancy was terminated. Now, every tension around the house could explode into an argument over *my* lack of financial prudence. It chipped away at our relationship, the important part, the part that made it fun. Only transactions were left, and eventually every transaction boiled down to the same thing, that there was something wrong with me because I had not yet learned, after three decades of existence, how to take care of myself. Worse, I would never be able to take care of her. I was Half-Man, the kind that her father was, the kind who could never take care of a woman, because he needed the opposite, a woman to take care of him.

As the stage went midnight blue and a familiar riff vibrated

through my bones, I was stuck next to my date, Masha. The opening bars to “Under Pressure,” a song Granduciel said did not necessarily reflect the emotional state he was in when writing its morbid lyrics, were blaring, and a haze of smoke covered the stage. Yellow and red lights were flashing, and before I knew it, there they were, The War on Drugs, with lead singer Adam Granduciel center stage. Clearly, I was on a date. But could this really count as a “date-date,” if the person who I was escorting had been a complete stranger to me before the sun went down. She was still a stranger. I had a forty minute Cass McCombs set and the 10 freeway as my evidence. On one hand, I owed it to The War on Drugs, the band that had carried me through the hardest breakup of my life, to be in a good mood. On the other, I had a responsibility to Masha, to make her feel important. To assist with my decision, I did what I normally do. I texted my friend Rich. Most likely, Rich’s advice would be awful. Yet somehow clarity manifested whenever I spoke to Rich. Listening to Rich was like being hypnotized.

*Imagine you’re on the freeway on the way back from a road trip, and suddenly you’re confronted with a thick fog that makes it impossible to see three feet ahead of you,* Rich texted. *Driving around aimlessly, you really have no idea where you’re going, right? You’re about to give up when out of nowhere a miracle happens, the exit on the freeway ramp is right in front of you.* It made no sense but it gave me the confidence to bum-rush the front of the stage just hard enough for a wave of super fans to give up on their stampede. Soon, I was at the very edge of the stage, right next to a giant speaker, snapping pictures of lead singer Adam Granduciel himself.

Before volcanoes erupt, they rumble. That’s what happened for eighteen months to Cary Jane and me - post hospital incident. It wasn’t the incident itself that led to our breakup, it was that I had abdicated, that I went home instead of to the hospital, that I hadn’t been there when I was needed most.

“What kind of coward would leave his bleeding girlfriend in the hospital? I could have died,” Cary Jane said over Thanksgiving in the Palisades, “I could have bled to death.”

“I was at work and I... when we spoke you said I should stay there.”

“It doesn’t matter what I said, Allen, it’s your job to show up. It’s your job to take care of me.”

I wish I had said something, anything, instead of nodding my head like a clown.

After six songs I turned and found my date. Masha was crouching against the bar with a blue look on her face while Granduciel howled the opening lyrics to “Eyes to the Wind,” a song I first heard on Jason Bentley’s KCRW morning show. A song that, time and time again, allowed me to live. A song that I sang out loud with my windows down while on Mulholland Drive in my overpriced Fiat. Shout out to KCRW. One of these days I swear I’m going to become a member. But in the meantime keep doing your pledge drives.

To say that I had the best night of my life would be less than fact, but not by a lot. I jammed, I sweated, I air-guitared center stage alongside the confused and lonely-hearted until my arms were heavy and my voice was hoarse. Singing all the lyrics with other human beings right next to me who needed it as much as I did, all the way through the encore. After two full years of listening to The War on Drugs, I had those lyrics on lock. It was, and still is, one of the best rock shows I have ever seen.

Had it been any other night, I probably would have tried to invest myself in Masha’s woes. Probably would have listened to her talks about fashion and feminism. Would have told her that I’m a feminist. Would have explained exactly how, being specific as I can about it. Instead, I ditched her for the entire show.

The car ride home was a lot easier as a result. Still feeling the buzz, I had The War on Drugs playing the whole way down the 10 freeway. I was free from caring what my date thought about me, and plenty of gas was in the tank.

“Thanks for coming with me,” I said. “I told myself when I bought the tickets nine months ago that I was going to go no matter what.”

“In nine months I could produce a child,” she said.

“We should have been going nuts up front together,” I said, right before dropping her off. “We should have been there together.”

As she sank into the shadows, I added, “I hope you can forgive me.” But I don’t think she heard.

Kimberly Esslinger

### The Disasters

Aiden kept pressing return over and over. Trying to schedule a vaccine was like trying to find toilet paper a year ago. Persistence was key but ultimately futile. Yet there was something satisfying in the disappointment. *Please try again.* like a taunt from a slot machine.

At first, they had not been in a hurry to get vaccinated. They had managed to sequester in their little house since the first lockdown. They were high risk. They learned to use Instacart and to wipe down their purchases. She double-masked and wore face shields to grab the paper. Delia, her wife ventured out when it felt too important not to be in community: the protests, the election, the marches, the vigils. It all seemed worth the risk at the time. And here they were, proof, they could manage these slight incursions into danger. They knew they were fortunate on many counts.

Most of their friends had been vaccinated now. Even the most reluctant of them had somehow found their way to the jab. And everyone had information about the vaccine. They were informed, thoughtful, CNN scientific and everyone had opinions.

Delia popped her head in the doorway. "Any luck?"

"Not yet. Not unless you want to go out of state."

Delia groaned. "Nothing? What about Moderna?"

"Nope"

"Jansen?"

"Also, nope"

Delia sighed and padded away barefoot to her makeshift office in their living room.

"What do you want to do for dinner?" Aiden called out after her. Everything seemed to center around dinner.

Sometimes she would marvel at how well they had managed through lockdown. The two of them had become domestic in a way that Aiden had always wanted. Before the pandemic, she would complain Delia was never home. Delia was a people person, she was a busy person. She thrived on being in the world. And she was going to squeeze every last drop out of an experience that she could. It was one of those things that Aiden loved about her but found equally irritating as they got older.

They had settled into this new pandemic routine that felt quaint

## SHORT FICTION

even after 25 years together. They had built a bubble. They would have coffee together in the late morning on the back porch. They would discuss the current Covid stats, the state of affairs in the world, and in their lives while scrolling through their messages.

“What’s on your schedule today?” Aiden asked.

“I have yoga at 11. A meeting with students at 2. At 4 I’m teaching, and at 7 I’m having Zoom cocktails with Sonya. After that, I may go to the dog beach or walk three times around the neighborhood. What about you?”

Aiden shrugged, the days had started to run together since she lost her freelance design gig due to the lockdown. If no one is selling widgets, there is no reason to market them. Which is how her boss put it when he gave her the talk. She knew the economics were more complicated than that. These were unprecedented times but she could really use a break. The workload had been brutal for the last several years. Delia had urged her to slow down, take a vacation, take a long weekend, or at least take the weekend off. But Aiden was always trying to “make hay while there was sunshine.” Now she missed her virtual coworkers, she virtually had friends, and she missed the work that had filled her days, her weeks, her bank account.

At first, she enjoyed waking up with nothing to do. She luxuriated in it. When she woke up, instead of bounding out, she would just stare at the walls in her bedroom and watch the light creep across the mottled stucco until her need for coffee kicked in. Then one morning she began to see the cobwebs, the dust on the ceiling fan, the tumble of clothes in the closet and made a mental note to deep clean their bedroom. Sitting on the toilet in the bathroom she saw the calcium deposits on the showerhead, the dust under the vanity. How had she not seen any of this before?

The days went by, her to-do list grew longer. Walking past Delia at her sprawling command center in the middle of their once livable living room, she saw more things. She was at a loss for where to begin. So, she turned her focus inward and retreated to her office with her laptop and her friend Google. It was like it knew her. All of a sudden ads started popping up about household products and organizing tools. She saw articles about the 10 best ways to clean a ceiling fan, how to make the only cleaning solution you will ever need. What never to do, what only to buy. It all inspired her. She felt like *this* she could do. She began by cleaning out the kitchen tool drawer, then the other drawers and the cabinets. She created new and improved

systems. She ordered books from Amazon--on Scandinavian death cleaning (too grim) and the Marie Kondo method (extreme!)

One Thursday after their organic Imperfect produce box came again, Aiden rinsed and dried the items as she had done as instructed by the internet since the start of the pandemic. Delia loved getting these boxes, and she did in theory. They were always something of a surprise. There was always something they would never eat. Some items in the box were already starting to go bad; overripe bananas and avocados, an acorn squash with teeth marks from some small rodent, a too tiny single apple with bruises. The imperfections were annoying, a little infuriating, but mostly Aiden felt sad. Sad that food would be wasted, sad that she didn’t do something with it sooner. She felt guilty. But Delia wanted the boxes and so the boxes continued. When Aiden went to put away the cleaned produce, she noticed a chemical odor from the apples. They were beginning to rot. The bananas had turned black, the broccoli heads were yellow with rubbery stalks. *This is a disaster* she thought.

So she began pulling out all the bad fruit, the expired milk and old eggs, the lethargic vegetables that she might have discarded. She was going to challenge herself. No this was not a challenge, this was survival. This was disaster cooking. This was catching things before they become a disaster.

Delia came in for more coffee. “Oh, you’re cleaning again. How nice.” On any given day, Aiden could have answered, “No, I am making kale stem pickles and farmers cheese.” or “No, I am making banana bread and vegetable pulp crackers.” She saved any odd pieces for stock later on and considered using some purple cabbage to dye some old t-shirts. They were too stained to wear and too soft to throw out.

This disaster cooking made her feel like her kitchen could be a zero-waste zone. It helped with the helplessness of being confined to her home. She was making a difference, in control, and her world did not seem so small.

She continued her research and was now watching videos and following blogs on survivalism. She was chatting with other followers. Delia would tease her that she was becoming a prepper and she thought, that wasn’t so bad. Being able to survive a pandemic seemed rather healthy at this point. Her thirst for knowledge was growing and branching out. It felt like a philosophical shift.

So when Delia would ask, “What are you doing?” Aiden would

think *Everything...I am trying to keep us alive* but said “Oh you know, the usual!”

Aiden’s attention began to spill into the yard. It had come to look like an abandoned lot. But Aiden liked it that way. It looked wild to her. And it was. She wondered if there were snakes out there now. She hoped not but thought it would be safe to get snakeboots from Amason. She knew there were raccoons and possums which she didn’t mind. Things she had planted in her planter box before the pandemic had seeded the entire small backyard like magic. She was growing mustard now, dandelions, mint, swiss chard, and kale. Even an odd piece of turmeric and a forgotten bulb of ginger had sprouted up in clumps. The fig trees had doubled, and the fruit was even sweeter. The overripe fruit dripped from the branches. Everything had come to thrive during the pandemic but it was excessive.

This new growth worried Aiden, it was thriving but all this came at the expense of increased resources, like water. However, zero waste was her goal and she aimed to achieve it.

“Honey, do you mind if I reroute the gray water on the washing machine?” Aiden asked.

“Umm, I don’t even know what that means but if you think we need to do that, go ahead.”

She gloated as each rinse cycle watered a different sector of her yard—vibrant, green, plump with fresh laundry water. Well, this was her kind of zero scaping. She thought, *All my disasters have come together*. Of course, there were other improvements that needed to be made. She still had the garage in her future. But in a sense, she had achieved a rare moment of home improvement organizational nirvana.

One morning after spring had come again, they sat in the back sipping their coffee scanning the wild garden fresh with dew, smelling rich of mulch and grass.

Looking up and around the yard, Delia says, “Honey, I am so proud of what you’ve done out here. Everything looks amazing.”

“Thank you.” Smiling and still looking down at her phone. She was reading an article on how to set up an outdoor soaking tub made from a livestock tank with a wood-burning stove to heat the water. But maybe she would be better off with propane.

“Hey, Kat has gotten the vaccine. Where are you with setting up our appointments?”

“Uh, still working on it.”

“Do you want me to try? I know you’ve been busy here.”

“Nope! I’ve got a system.”

“Everyone should be vaccinated by the end of this month. Don’t you want to get out?”

Aiden looked around the yard and at her wife and had this overwhelming feeling of lushness. She thought about all the disasters that had been averted and all that had been survived.

Staring off at the garage she took Delia’s hand. “Of course,” she lied.

Wayne Broadway

## Home & Garden

The thing that kills me about LA is you can really only grow a few types of plants unless you're into seeing them die. It's the climate, you see: not an inch of rain. Of course, I make do with what I'm given: what else can you do? Gotta play the hand you're dealt.

For instance, I don't have the money to leave my little Mid-Wilshire home. This home—an egg-white, clapboard, single-story, two-bedroom bungalow—was bequeathed to me by my parents. My hardworking parents, I should say. Hell, “hardworking” doesn't even describe it. My father had paid the mortgage in full by the time he had owned the house twenty-six years. The home—built in 1905, and purchased by my parents some time after that—became my home after their passing, and I could never see leaving it. It just holds too much that's important to me. Besides that, I have little above just enough in terms of money. My job, satisfactory though it is, provides a decent living, and nothing more. Bills, property taxes, and groceries, then I'm back to square one. And roommates, or, dare I say, a partner, are out, because I only have that superficial likability about me, the type that's good for seeming—but not being—good enough for companionship. Hell, I don't even have the minor depth to net a months-long fling. I'm a loner, in short. Good with people, bad with persons.

But that's why I have my garden, a child in my loving care.

Don't get me wrong: it's a simple, low-effort affair, but it's rewarding nonetheless. A six planter affair making up most of what would be my front lawn, the garden is populated with the brightest organisms LA's smoggy desert permits. Thriving in Southern California's inhospitality, these flowers have a hardiness I don't. But, regardless, let me tell you about it.

At the garden's fore, just behind the woefully Americana white picket fence and resting in raised redwood planters placed, like all the rest, parallel to one another and on either side of the cement walkway, are my lilacs (*Ceanothus*), Heart's Desire.

Now, I know they're imposters (god himself couldn't maintain *Syringa* here), but, *god*, those explosions! That extravagant vanguard of violet and green leading the procession of six well-loved, meticu-

lously (and, of course, expensively) curated planters projecting from the feet of my home. Were it a painting made from the street's point of view, the sidewalk and fence would be the foreground, followed by the six planters, the center walkway, and the gravel in which the planters sit making a squat trapezoid topped by the prism of my home with its rectangular and triangular parts. The painting would show the California sun setting behind my east-facing home, darkening my raised porch, rising just above the garden planters, and the small crawl space they obscure looking especially shadowed and sinister.

But I was telling you about my lilacs.

They, like all the flora I chose after some beginner's some trial-and-error, have a fierce staying power. “Come, sun!” they say as they rise out of the mottled loam and spill over the edges of their weather-proofed home. “Come, and see if we shrink at your visage!” These young Davids sling stones at bright Goliath. And, while they certainly don't defeat him, they stand adamant, fortified against his attempts to smoke them out.

These lilacs, my true blue Desires, blossom redolent of better days. Their oil's scent travels from the petals, through the nostrils, and to the brain. Once there, the scent descends from parietal lobe to temporal, transmuting physical sense into nostalgia.

I smell them, and then I see him, my father.

Diligent, stern as a god, adrift in the reverie inherent to manual labor, he hunches in the garden with wide shoulders connected to broad arms connected to sturdy hands connected to calloused fingers touching young sprouts ever so tenderly, checking them for bugs or sickness. Even as a former Marine still insistent on maintaining military bearing, he allowed himself this minor display of affection. I see my mother, ten years his junior, ten times as loving, coming to greet him with homemade lemonade, holding an already condensating pitcher in one hand and a glass of half-oval ice cubes in another. She pours him a glass, then sets pitcher and glass down next to him, but mindful to keep it far enough away on the planter's edge that he won't knock it over inadvertently. He looks up from his work, sees the pitcher, sees her, then grunts his thanks as he returns to work. She smiles, pats him on the back, and walks back into the house humming, her tiny hand probably covered with his sweat.

I see me on our porch swing, shaded from the mid-afternoon sun by our low front eave and gable roof, taking in this tableau of content domesticity. I see a roly poly on the bench swing's right arm, and I see me play with it. It unfurls from its shell and retreats into it when I touch its exposed belly. I see its exoskeleton give it a suit of plated armor and dub it a knight nigh impervious to little boys' prodding fingers and thumbs. I see me see this. I see me contemplate it. And I see me crush this bug to death.

Behind the lilacs are my poppies (*Eschscholzia californica*), planted to show my patriotic side. Marvelous, brilliant golden bells! I've heard it's an actual crime to pick them, and what kind of madman would? You should see it, the Poppy Reserve up in Lancaster. You should go there just to see them defying the western Mojave's mid-February lows, showing the desert even his caprices can't dominate all god's creatures. Have you seen them? Have you seen them reseeding, recreating, and reconstituting themselves season after season? If Noah is synecdochic of man's germinal nature, poppies are his floral reduplicate. They procreate for existence's sake, not the narcissism of needing a legacy. They seed, then die. That they won't be there to raise their seeds "right" doesn't concern them. Poppies have no need to instruct—and construct—children in their traditions and ideology. What need do poppies have for family rituals? For the tedium of near-silent father-son camping trips invoked in the name of "bonding?" Poppies exist a generation apart from their progeny, the Creators and their Created granted limitless space to imagine what could have transpired between them rather than concrete knowledge of what really did.

But, I digress.

At the end of my garden, in planters bordering either side of the porch steps, nuzzling against the crawl space walls and at the foot of the porch's white wooden railing, lie the blue morning glories (*Ipomoea indica*), and glory be unto them. Morning glories need the poppies' lawyer, because it should be a crime to term these fountains of indigo, deepest purple, and exorbitant white "weeds" as some wayward botanists have. The state should focus all its ire on that lordly taxonomist that wielded his pen against them, constituting their will towards existence a nuisance. You can keep all your talk of "invasive" species, your gnashing about "choking" other lifeforms, eroding slopes, or

causing wildfires. If their crime is bringing concurrent beauty and destruction wherever they go, I posit man as their co-defendant.

My mother, St. Jude that she was, loved these lost-cause blossoms the most. While my father tended to seed what he wanted when he reigned over the garden, she maintained at least one planter for these bursts of cold light. God bless her, she saw potential where others saw problems.

Take my father.

She saw past his grizzled mien, his doom-and-gloom determinism, his semper-fi-do-or-die, a-man-is-a-man-is-a-man machismo. She saw some sapling of love in him I had never seen take root. Like the best victims, she knew somewhere, deep down, there was good in him. To her, he wasn't a "jarhead asshole" (as I had said) treating his own family like a two-man squad. No, he was a man horrified of showing his sensitivity, a man from the old school who simply didn't understand women's (or his wife's) crying spells, and who certainly couldn't fathom his son's introversion. In her opinion, he really was trying his best to bridge his old world values—passed down over myriad manly generations—to my New World sentiments. I should see him in the garden, she'd say, I really should. Maybe there I'd finally understand him.

And so, from birth to my thirty-fourth year, she defended his excesses. If, at fifteen, he shoved me down over missing curfew because I'd gotten caught up reading at a downtown café and would rather walk two hours than risk the headache of phoning him for a ride, it was because his father had done the same—sometimes worse; if, at eighteen, he spat on my first college report card because I deigned to get less than an "A," she assured me it was only because he wanted me to surpass even our middle-class lifestyle, and only perfect grades made this possible; and, if, at thirty-four, still living with them, still perplexingly single, still doing things to inadvertently set him off like turning on the AC in springtime, he called me "a fucking loser," a "goddamned nothing," a "stupid faggot," she defended him to the very end.

She defended him as I heard bells and whistles in my head and went to the garage where he kept his old war *materiel* and medals. She defended him as I returned with a KA-BAR, one he kept oiled and sharpened as a relic to his youth. She screamed bloody murder as I put seven inches of SAE 1095 carbon steel in his ribcage after



he laughed and asked “What are you gonna do with that? Clean your nails?” She pleaded for him, *begged* for him, when I stabbed him six more times. She threw all of her four-foot-eleven frame between myself and his drooping body before I shoved her out of the way. She crawled in his blood and cried (*cried!*) over his body as he lay on the kitchen’s recently waxed maple hardwood. She kept asking me “Why,” and, years later, I thought about how funny it was that such a tiny little word always required such a litany of answers—at least as far as human interactions are concerned.

She told me to stay away as I let rage do the walking. She pushed herself up from the floor, green dress turned a sickly maroon, as rage lifted the knife. She made the face probably seen in every matricide—confusion, anguish, betrayal beyond language’s scope—as rage closed the distance between us. She lifted her arms in defense as rage...

But this is not that type of story.

This is a story about my simple, yet well-maintained, Southern California garden of six near-perfectly parallel varnished redwood raised planters. This is not a story about how I murdered my parents in a rage built over decades of abuse and resentment; about how, when you kill two retirees, and you yourself can opt to work from home at times, you can do so during mid-day, when fewer neighbors and passers-by are likely to hear; about how, when a husband is a known brute and his wife is considered a glorified slave, few people find it hard to believe that their car was driven off a Palos Verdes cliff in a joint suicide; about how, when you’re as meek as I am—and equally meticulous in cleaning, bleaching, and sanitizing—it’s easy to avoid suspicion, even if one lousy detective thinks my shoulder injury is suspicious, like I jumped out of a car before it careened over an escarpment; about how, thanks to that evening’s wind and tide charts, police got a simple explanation as to their bodies could have drifted out to sea; about how an overburdened police department is always happy to close a case; about how Los Angeles has a limitless supply of junkies and burnouts willing buy you chemical lime and a new trowel for cash in hand.

If you think this is a story about how I killed my parents and buried their bodies in the crawl space, you’re woefully mistaken.

No, this is a story about my home and its garden. About its poppies, lilacs, morning glories, and loam. This, dear reader, is a story of flora, seed, sun, mulch, LA, the suburbs, the joys, the rage, the fury, the woe, the godly transcendence of gardening.

And if I can do it, so can you.

## She Knew

Your tía Rosario was such a beautiful girl! If only you could have seen her, maybe I can find a picture to show you later, ¡que hermosa! She was sixteen when she fell in love con un hombre casado, pero she didn't know he was married; she didn't find out until she was already pregnant. She told that man that she was having his baby expecting him to marry her; he said he would not leave his wife. Pobrecita tu tía, she must have been heart broken. Many expected her to live in shame after that, pero Élla tenía algo, there was something about her, something different, something that kept even the mere thought of being ashamed from ever entering her mind. Maybe she thought only of the child she carried and not of herself, that *really is* what mothers do after all. Pero yo no creo, como que Élla entendía algo más de la vida que nosotros nunca vamos a entender, ¿sabes? She understood something in life that we'll never understand.

Por eso se fue, she left. Al otro lado. To Los Ángeles. I must have been 8 or 9 years old when she left Tijuana, and I was so worried about her, but she came here to work. She was a costurera—a seamstress—all of my mom's sisters were costureras, and she worked at a fábrica sewing, making dresses, curtains, uniforms, she could do all of those things. Her first son, el Pancho, was born en el Hospital General en el este de Los Ángeles in 1960. One time, when Pancho was almost 18 months, she was visiting us en Tijuana, y el hombre la convenció yo creo porque she ended up pregnant again. As far as I know, she never saw or spoke to him after that. I bet he never knew she was pregnant a second time. It wasn't too long after that that she got married con el Foquitos. They had Naty when I was about twelve, and I came to Los Ángeles to babysit. Es que tu tía tenía que trabajar so she needed someone to help her. My mom pulled me aside before I left to Los Ángeles, “Ten cuidado con el Foquitos,” she said, to be careful with her husband. “Es mañoso,” she warned me with a whisper, “don't go into his bedroom alone, not even to get the baby.” I only spent a few weeks there before I had to come back to Tijuana because school was starting again.

Tu papá y yo, we got married in Tijuana in December of 1972, cuando nació tu hermano. Naty was already a little lady and going to school. When Lulú was born, tu tía Rosario asked me, “Why do don't

you and el Flaco come to Los Ángeles? You can live with Foquitos and me. I need your help babysitting Lulú when I'm at work.” The bar in Tijuana where you dad worked had just closed and the timing for us to come seemed to be perfect. Es que en los 70s no había mucho trabajo, and we didn't know what we were going to do for money. Tu tía ya sabía, and she knew exactly how we would do it. She planned it out for us and we listened to her. Pues, we didn't have much of a choice.

I left Tijuana with your brother early in 1973, y otra vez tu abuela warned me, “Be careful con el Foquitos. Don't go into the room alone with him, not even to get Lulú.” Coming to Los Ángeles was easy for me, I had a passport and back then anyone with a passport could cross la línea, it wasn't a big deal the way it is now. They asked me if the baby was mine, les dije que sí and that was enough. By the time I got here, Naty looked very sad and distant, she didn't talk very much and never looked you in the eye; but in a few days, Naty became really attached to me, she never left my side, como chicle. It was like I was her security blanket. Two weeks after me, tu papá came to live with us.

It was a lot harder for him: he didn't have a passport. Él tuvo que caminar, cruzar el cerro. There was not much of a real fence like there is now, it was more a matter of making the long hike to get across. Nixon's war on the southern border had just started and it wasn't until mucho después que they started building the fence that is there now y creo que fué el Reagan who really added a lot of border patrol. De todos modos duró un día entero para cruzar, it took him a full day to get across; y también tuvo suerte, he didn't have any problems. Once he hiked over the hills and crossed over, his prima picked him up and drove him to Los Ángeles.

Yo le hice caso a mi amá, and I never went into the bedroom with el Foquitos if tu tía Rosario wasn't in there with him. He would call me and call me to get Lulú, but I never went in. Once tu papá was there, el Foquitos blamed him, ¡puro pretexto! And he kicked us out of the house. I knew what he was doing to Naty and he knew I knew. Tu tía también sabía, she knew a lot of things, pero es que you couldn't say anything back then without causing so many problems for the family. He was just mad that I wouldn't go into his room. But then we didn't know what we were going to do. We didn't speak any English, tu papá no tenía trabajo, we couldn't pay rent anywhere. Otra vez, tu tía, she helped us. She found an apartment for us about

10 minutes from her house, furnished ¡con todo! Colectó dinero from her brothers y primos and helped us pay the rent. She knew. Convenció a sus hermanos, que Dios la bendiga, somehow she talked them into giving up a day of work each at the Original Pantry, the restaurant where they worked, so we can have money to pay the rent. Tu papá has always been a hard worker and they ended up hiring him there. Ese restaurante, it's there todavía.

Even though we didn't live with her anymore, I could always count on tu tía, siempre pude contar con ella. On some days when we didn't have enough money to buy food she would bring us dinner, somehow she knew. She was also the one who kept the family connected, if you needed a phone number or wanted to know how someone in the family who was sick was doing, tu tía sabía, she knew. For some reason, everyone, yo también, went to her with the good and the bad. She knew when her dad got cancer and would drive to his house every day to make sure he was taking his medication. She cared so much for all of us.

We still lived on la Eastman, tú no te acuerdas, pero that's where we lived when you were born; I was pregnant and it was Halloween so we went trick or treating con tu hermano y el Chacho. El Chacho era un bebito todavía, he was only about 6 months old, in your tía's arms the whole time. I was eating candy when we got back to the house, sentada, relaxing, when she asked me, "Are you ok?"

"Sí tía, I'm fine."

"Are you sure? What's wrong?"

"Nada tía, I feel fine."

"I know there's something wrong. You don't feel good."

"No tía, de veras, there's nothing wrong."

I thought it was really strange because I really did feel fine.

Cuando tu papá got out of work, he picked me up and we went back to our apartment. I made dinner, put your brother to bed. Todo normal. I fell asleep like any other day. It was almost midnight cuando me desperté, I was awakened by a strong pain, y no te miento, immediately the phone rang, I'm not kidding you.

"I knew something was wrong! I'm on my way," she said with nervously.

I was in a room y tu tía was in the waiting room; I heard her arguing with the nurses, she learned to say bad words in English before she learned anything else, and she knew how to use them. She came running in with nurse de tras de Élla and the nurse looked at me and

forgot all about her.

¿Cómo sabía? I'll never know how she knew, just that she knew things. She drove me to the General Hospital and you were born at 4:30 that morning.

Laurel Payton

## Good Bones

The winter had been harsh, its ivory teeth sinking deep into our hunched shoulders and woolen sweaters. As the snow melted, it revealed a fresh layer of moist earth. Once we had finished jumping in the slush and sliding in the thick mud, hand-me-down boots providing no traction, the kids of my neighborhood set out to do their annual catalog. The winters of my hometown weren't much different than any other winter. The trees would temporarily wither, the wind would howl with its ancient sorrow. The children remained resilient against it all, retreating into firelit living rooms when the cold overtook them. But it held one particular characteristic that delighted our young minds. The only factor that set our winters apart, was the leeching effect it had on the animals that were unfortunate enough to be trapped in it. As it snowed, small rodents or birds would get weighed down by the snow and the powder became their deathbeds. But instead of their flesh persevering till spring, the snow would melt and so would everything but their skeletons. They would be clean, their bones glinting in the sun.

Us children felt burdened with the task of recording the dead. We would choose a day when the sun had the strength to protect us and we would travel from yard to yard. The preserved skeletons were then moved from the lawn to the forest where we carefully lay them side by side. We then marked each miniature grave with small pebbles. This way, their family could pay respects. The rabbits that never made it to their burrows could be remembered and the sparrows that never flew home to their nests, commemorated. This way, their preservation would mean something. This way, their death would have purpose.

Over the years the animal skeletons created a maze, a large spiral of rabbits and sparrows, and one small fawn, and so on. The sprawling meadow of the deceased was our greatest accomplishment, our life's work. In giving the dead animal's purpose, we gave it to ourselves. It allowed us to feel as if nature was calling us to serve it. We were so willing. For what kid doesn't want to be a part of something larger than themselves? What person doesn't want to be a part of something larger than themselves?

I haven't been to that town in years. Instead, I live in a city of

a blue wash of neon and a foul stench of pollution. I live in a city where machine constantly cries out and the winter can't taste you unless you seek it out yourself. Yet no matter what, you're always just a little bit cold. There's always a reminder of the sinister season. I live in a city where the only comfort I find is filling my bath with steaming water and submerging myself as much as the small tub allows. I let the quickly cooling water sting my skin and I try to avoid thinking about the maze. Try to avoid the way it calls to my tired heart. Said heart trips over itself when it thinks of the horribly beautiful spiral. I wish I hadn't left it, wish I had just been content with the role I had been given. But instead, I was greedy, I wanted more. More to do, more recognition for doing whatever it may be. I left my hometown of scalding hot chocolate and hazy forest scenery for angry men with unkind faces and an apartment with walls the thickness of birch tree bark.

While almost every child participated; there were two that led the operation, the most passionate and diligent of the group. Myself, and a boy a year older than me. Together we decided on the placement of the skeletons, we decided the songs we sang while placing them, we decided which pebbles marked which souls. The boy had a serious brow and a gentle hand, he was talented with both dead and living animals. When he sang he would forget to pronounce his Rs, they'd allude his gap-toothed mouth. Myself, his female counterpart in the endeavor, had an innocent profile but feral gaze. I would pull his hair if he ignored me, and when he did pay attention I handed him a small field mouse to keep warm in his pocket. I was good at catching animals, he was good at caring for them. Apart, we were strange kids that would probably grow up to work good jobs but be ultimately socially unsuccessful. But together, we were the small god and goddess of the forest. We were the king and queen of a small army comprised of soldiers sticky with jam leftover from lunch. A proud pair we were, wrapped in clothes from thrift stores and our heads crowned with moss.

The boy occupies my mind just as much as the maze itself. But I deny it far more. The boy grew into a man and I into a woman and we grew in different directions. He grew toward the sun and I retreated beneath a rock. In the back of my dresser, there's a sprig of pine that has become hard and withered with time, a reminder of him. He always smelled faintly of the tree's needles. If my heart trips when I think of the maze, it completely falters at the thought of

him. In another city, probably looking out a window with eyes that peel back all falsehood, probably still called to some higher purpose. Probably grounded in his work, in the people he's surrounded himself with. I'm envious of this idea of him, for I haven't felt a part of anything in so long.

I am only myself and it makes every day last forever, I am only myself and it makes time thick and syrupy. I've sampled other substitutes, careers and education, and so on. But nothing is so potent, nothing is so powerful as the forest's call. So now I lay here, looking at my ceiling with its many dents in its sewer green paint, and I sigh far too many times. I turn over and over on my pillow, hoping I'll dislodge an answer from the recesses of my mind. Of course, nothing falls out.

What a strange activity, my parents often said at dinner, what an odd hobby. Our older siblings would sneer and scowl, our foolish endeavors below their lofty ones. They told us we would turn out to be freaks, psychopaths. Sometimes we'd arrive at the meadow to find the maze kicked around by our teenage enemies, hours of work undone. Nevertheless, we would meticulously put the pieces back together. One large, haunting puzzle. They said there was no way we would grow up to be normal, I can't say I disagree. But their unkind words fueled our determination to commemorate.

I wish for an inciting incident, a push to move me forward. Even a tragedy would be appreciated. I spend most of the day staring out the window, only to pause to retrieve the last of a wilting lettuce head and some sour dressing to makeshift a meal. This small effort takes everything from me, and I find myself once again in the tub. Surrounded by soapy water and steam, I ignore another hard truth and draw a face in the glass. It stares back at me with lifeless eyes, I mistake it for a reflection of myself. I know what will move me forward, I know what will allow me to live, truly, once more. But if it doesn't work, if it's not a cure-all, I will have nothing. And I will be no one.

I will no longer have even myself.

I look over at where my phone sits, on the side of the tub, begging to be used. I wipe my pruney fingers on my towel and hold my breath as I make my decision. My own inciting incident.

The phone rings once, then again, then-

"Hello?" The boy, well, man now but, the boy asks. His voice is the same in a lot of ways, the cadence just slightly more worn than

before. I can imagine his lips, maybe less chapped but still the same.

"Um," I falter, twisting my lips in a way to search for the words I wish for. Should I apologize? For the years between our communication? Was it my fault or his? Maybe I should make excuse for why now is the moment, out of all moments, to give him a call.

"Wow," He intercedes before I can come with a reason. A reason I'm calling, a reason for conversation, "You're the last person I'd expect to call, is everything ok?"

"Um, yes, I just-" I think of summers spent catching spiders in hopes they'd weave us a blanket, of springs spent dancing in the sticky air filled with blossoms. My bones ache to return to that, to the truly wild being I once was, how unburdened I used to be, "Do you remember the animal grave uh, thing we made?"

"How could I forget," Here I lost him, here he sounded far more like my patronizing parents than the boy I remembered, "We were real weirdos then, I'm surprised we turned out so normal." "Right," I let out a half-laugh, playing along, counting seconds till I can hang up the phone. I had made a mistake in calling him, he was not confirming but instead denying all of the hopes I had. Hopes to return to my throne, to my royalty of a past life, with my parallel by my side. "Right, super freaks."

"Was that all you needed?" His voice isn't the same, I spoke too soon. Now it's like his older brother's, mocking and unkind. Now it's like my father's, exasperated and confused. "Um, yes. Just wanted to make sure I didn't dream that," Another compensating half-laugh, and I clear my throat, a performance made for the screen, "I'll talk to you later, thanks for the help."

Then I hang up, my hands shaking. It didn't matter to him anymore. It didn't mean anything. It was just bones and rocks to him. Did he not feel the hollowness I felt? Did he find some way to sustain his heart, his soul without the promise of something greater? How did each day not drag on for him? What was his secret to living life without the desperate pang for something, other?

I pulled myself out of the now lukewarm water and once again crawled into bed, a new resolve in my stomach. I had to prove him wrong. I had to go back, to make sure I wasn't unfairly hating him. I had to go back, to make sure I was right.

I set an alarm and sleep came quickly, for now, I had reason. I had reason to wake up, to start my day.

The drive wasn't horribly long. Just a blur of yellow lines and

acidic gas station coffee. In the past, it felt like lifetimes but time was starting to wiggle out of its molasses-like state and it felt like light speed. I raced down the highway and for once I allowed the radio to bleed out its noise. At one point, when the song was right, I mumbled along and the lyrics carried my resolve. Up and over the mountains, singing echoes of my eventual arrival. The morning fog never dissipated but its presence felt fitting. Felt like a friend, nearby and ready to come to my aid. I let it take my worry, my fear, and while it wasn't strong enough to carry it all. It took enough away to make my shoulders stand taller.

I drove past old stores that used to carry my favorite foods, now their aisles are empty save for the spiders that escaped my previous self's grasp. I drove past houses of accomplices of the animal maze, either empty or only their fathers and mothers remained. Their only job to await the return of their sons and daughters from the great beyond. I didn't tell my parents I was coming, I didn't want to stay for long. For the town acted similar to the snow, bleeding you till all that was left was your bones.

My phone buzzed and the harsh light bled a message from itself. The boy had texted, *it was nice to hear your voice. You should call more often.*

I shut off my phone, his text burned into the back of my mind, strengthening my resolve, and pulled up to my destination. The maze was a little ways away from the main road. I relished at the noise of crunching leaves as the fog swirled around my ankles. It whispered comforts to me, memories, and visions of the future. A future where I mattered, and because of that, a future where I was happy. The air was rich, the smell of soil and moss coating my lungs, replacing the smog that had settled there once before. I counted my steps, worried I would miss it. Worried that years of neglect would result in the landmark being covered by the landscape that the wind carried. But the fear was misplaced.

For there, among the wet leaves and the snapped branches, was the maze. The perfectly designed spiral of animal skeletons. Of perfect perseverance. I had to remind myself to breathe once more for here it was, practically untouched. My greatest piece of art, lying perfectly still in all its glory.

The middle of the spiral held nothing, it all led to nothing. We had agreed to put the mightiest of beasts there. Maybe one day a bear or wolf would fall prey to the snow and it would be our job to honor them. But it never happened, instead, it lay empty, awaiting its crown

jewel. The epitome of anticlimactic. I am the last protector, the last curator. Everyone else has given up, abandoned the cause. Even my equivalent has abandoned me, lured away by the shining lights of the city, and kept distracted by its empty promises. Everyone else has lost the purpose that life has given them. Only I remain.

I am not only myself, I am myself as well as this purpose. As well as this promise. I took another deep breath and followed the trail from the beginning to the very middle, the end. I lowered myself onto the forest floor and I took my rightful place. As queen, as a goddess. I took my place and curled up in the middle of this maze of skeletons. But instead of melting away, instead of turning to bone. I was renewed, fulfilled. I was granted fullness of heart and peace of mind. I was given all that the forest had bled dry from all the living creatures trapped in winter's icy maw. The foundation of skeletal geometry giving me hope for the days to come.

## Interview with Ashton Politanoff

by Jason Swick

December 2021

# AUTHOR INTERVIEW



*Ashton Politanoff (2022)*

*Ashton Politanoff's writing has appeared frequently in NOON, as well as New York Tyrant, Conjunctions, Egress, and other print and digital journals. Several of his stories have been anthologized, and he is a full-time English Instructor at Cypress College. He earned his M.F.A. in Creative Writing from California State University Long Beach in May of 2016. His first novel, You'll Like it Here will be released August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2022.*

You'll Like it Here is a haunting bricolage, divided into three parts, that excavates the forgotten history of Redondo Beach in the early 1900's through old news clippings, advertisements, recipes and other ephemera that speak to the ills of male stoicism, industrialization and capitalism, and environmental displacement. Ashton used digital archives from the Redondo Reflex and other city adjacent newspapers as the basis for his surrealist account, masterfully tracing this larger shift away from coastal maritime repose in the wake of the Spanish Flu, the Great Depression, and World War II through momentary fragments that feel as real and palpable as they do transient, mythological, and strangely reminiscent of our current times.

**RipRap:** Let's start by talking about your upcoming novel, *You'll Like it Here*.

**Ashton Politanoff:** Sure, so my upcoming novel is a hybrid work, I would say, of collage, curation, fiction, set in Redondo Beach in the early 1900s. I've always wanted to write about the South Bay. That's where I'm from. And initially I thought it would be about surfing. Whether it's more of a period piece in the 1960s with like surfboard shapers or something more contemporary, and I was sort of just browsing around the digital archives of various documents and started stumbling on these old news articles that I saw, that with some editing and perhaps some fictionalization, the possibility for some really interesting work, and so I just started.

I followed my instinct with that and I started just playing with these texts, not knowing what it was going to turn out to be.

I started off with like 15 or so and was playing around with them. I really liked it, but I didn't really know what it was building towards, and I just kept on working on it.

I kept on pulling, you know, newspaper clippings from the *Redondo Reflex*. That was one of the newspapers that I worked off of. I would work on one to two of them every morning, and as I said, sort of editing them. Compressing, getting rid of characters and sometimes extending the narrative further, or sometimes just paring it down and trying to find the poetry that was hidden in some of the clutter.

And then COVID hit, and while I was working on these clippings it was building towards the Spanish Flu. I saw a natural dramatic structure. I come from a screen writing background a little bit as well. My father worked in television, and I initially worked in TV, so I studied screen writing and I was initially writing some screenplays. So I saw a natural dramatic structure building.

And I just went with it and that's kind of how I really started building momentum with the project and finished it that first summer when COVID hit... and then I sent it to an editor that I work with from this literary journal, *NOON*, and I sent her a very rough draft of it.

And I really trust her, she's brutal with her honesty, but I appreciate that, and she's rejected a lot of work of mine in the past and also accepted some short stories.

But she really liked this project and I loved it, but when she liked it too, it gave me, it made me feel like, there's something potentially here.

I could maybe send this out, you know?

**RR:** When you were going through those newspaper clippings, how much of those are directly from newspaper?

How much of those are fixed, completely fictional-wise, and is there anything in-between or hybrids of that?

**AP:** Yeah, so when I was going through the process of editing and curating and writing, I really just responded to each one individually, which is to say they all had different treatment. You know some... I took a line and added a lot. Others, it was a matter of compression. It was like a three-page article that I synthesized down to one paragraph. So, it just varied from each.

I would say for the most part in terms of the excerpt that you read, most, I think all of those are based off of clippings in terms of the book itself. There's several entries that are first person sort of diary, like entries, which are ones that I completely wrote from scratch... based off of some research from the era. I was just sort of responding



to what I thought each article needed. So, some, there is more heavy editing involved, others compression, others it was adding onto others. There's more fictionalization. So, it just depended on the clipping.

**RR:** How did you find the process of going about writing in that early 20th century, old-timey style and language?

**AP:** I loved it, you know. The project in terms of my approach of poetics and its aesthetics, I've learned through working with Diane Williams, my editor at *NOON*, and the things that she really cherishes include high drama and language objects. So I saw the potential for all that in this project in terms of bringing back forgotten language; words that aren't used, objects that don't exist anymore. I added a lot of details to the clippings by... I found an old Sears Roebuck catalog from that era and is another like, 1000-page document. But there's all these remarkable objects with incredible names and even the names in the text too. Every name that I used is one that was not in the original clipping, so I actually found old databases and names from the era. Last names and first names and so I would use ones that appeal to me, or I felt fit the narrative of that particular clipping, the best.

So yeah, I had a lot of fun with that.

I almost viewed it as a genre, you know, like how there might be a certain language used in sci-fi or fantasy. So, when I was approaching this, you know period piece, so to speak, I viewed it in a way as a kind of genre and I was learning the language, with that, genre or the rules of that genre and playing with it.

**RR:** Interesting. Going through your writing, you do have a sense of style when it comes to objects. It seems you give them significance right away. Very direct. Those objects that had significance then, but aren't necessarily around or are taken for granted now, could really create a narrative in language that is special.

Did you realize that right away or did you learn it while you were going along?

**AP:** I just was really charmed by some of it, and I think when I saw that first clipping or two, and I'm I don't even really recall which clip-

ping it was, but I was just really charmed by the language that I saw in the article, and again, I saw the potential to if it was edited, you know, for fiction, good fiction writing, so...

I think I just noticed it and I was intrigued and that's kind of how it built and it kind of reminds me of what one of my favorite writers, Christine Scott, she talks about that. You know, you often don't know that you're working on a novel until you're deep into it and, and that's sort of what I discovered with this project.

I didn't really know where it was going. I just knew that I was really interested in it and felt compelled to keep doing it.

**RR:** The book jacket for *You'll Like it Here* references Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*, Amina Cain's *Indelicacy*, and Kathryn Scanlan's *Aug 9 Fog*. Did any of these works influence the direction you wanted to take *You'll Like it Here*?

**AP:** I really love [Ondattje's] work and I think looking at that book and *Coming Through Slaughter* gave me permission to do something different with the form. Because honestly, the notion of writing a traditional narrative, that goes from point A to B to C, you know, I love books like that and I really admire them, but I it's tough for me to write something like that. At least now, and so looking at his book, Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* and the fragmented quality of that... Catherine Scanlon's *Dog 9 Fog*, which... plays with diary material that Catherine Scanlon found, all of those gave me permission, in terms of feeling like this project was a possibility. I definitely feel influenced by them.

**RR:** How do you sit down and start writing? Can you describe your writing process?

**AP:** A lot of times I just get ideas, or I'll hear a line in my head while I'm driving, and I'll just notate it. I'll use Siri and speak into my phone. A lot of it now is research driven. You know, like what am I interested in?

Before, it was surfing and then I kind of stumbled on this kind of Victorian era, Redondo Beach. And so, a lot of it's research driven now. But yeah, I generally don't write all the time. I've always been that way even when I was working on screen writing. It would come in bursts. I might have a really busy summer where I wrote a couple projects, but then I might not write for three to six months, but, I'm reading scripts, taking notes... and now reading, you know, trying to read books in between grading papers.

I find that that process works for me. I feel like I have a lot of stored up energy. Then at that point, when I do sit down and write, I feel fresh.

Also, too I need to kind of work-out again and last week when I was writing those stories, it felt like, I was sort of, you know, working-out again for the first time in a while and the first few attempts it's like, yeah, little rusty here, but it also feels good and so I also think about what Robert Towne says. The screenwriter. You know each project, it doesn't become easier, and I feel that way, but I think there's excitement in that, in the struggle and the challenge.

**RR:** I forget that the writing process never gets easier but you do learn every time you write.

How do you feel about your development over the years?

**AP:** I think I have a better knowledge for what's working and what isn't while I'm working on something. I think I'm more honest with myself and I try to stay closer. You know, what's motivating me in terms of an authentic place, am I driven by something because I'm trying to seek publication? Or am I driven by it because I'm genuinely passionate about this or intrigued or interested in it?

I also feel like I've become a better reader, if anything. I look at a lot of non-traditional texts. I have like this loose biography of Hermosa Beach as a city that was written by a librarian. You know, only like 500 copies out there. But it's just written in a very charming way, with no real goal of commercial goals, but I think there's a beauty in the language and the project, in terms of someone who just loved the city or Hermosa Beach and is giving this history of it.

I stumbled on some abnormal psychology books in terms of case studies, from the 60s and I've been finding those really interesting in terms of just the drama that's in this language of the case studies, in this cold manner, in a clinical manner in which it's written about its subjects. I find that really interesting, so I think I'm seeing the potential for what is good writing in other forms, that's not really trying to be good writing, you know?

My reading habits have changed a little bit in terms of my approach to writing. I think I'm more patient.

I think also with kids you [are] sort of resigned to [say], hey, things might also take a while to work and that's OK.

When it comes to writing though, I still hold on to wanting to get it out quickly though. And I think I really like that approach. Even if I go back and edit it for a while and let it sit for a while.

**RR:** Are you working on anything in particular right now that you're excited about?

**AP:** Yeah, so I've just been researching, various things. Looking at, [the] case studies in psychology that I found fascinating in terms of... studying their structure and the way in which these case studies were written and why they were so compelling to read.

I think some of the things that I noticed was it was just like one crisis after another and that was interesting to me.

I am very much still interested in the South Bay community and researching aspects of that in California and the West as a whole. I've just kind of been looking at different time periods there as well, but yeah, nothing concrete, I'm just excited to keep researching and see what I strike upon.

IN MEMORY  
OF  
DR. GERALD LOCKLIN

*With permission from Dr. David Cherin and the Locklin Literary Estate*

**The Iceberg Theory**

all the food critics hate iceberg lettuce.  
you'd think romaine was descended from  
orpheus's laurel wreath,  
you'd think raw spinach had all the nutritional  
benefits attributed to it by popeye,  
not to mention aesthetic subtleties worthy of  
verlaine and debussy.  
they'll even salivate over chopped red cabbage  
just to disparage poor old mr. iceberg lettuce.

I guess the problem is  
it's just too common for them.  
It doesn't matter that it tastes good,  
has a satisfying crunchy texture,  
holds its freshness  
and has crevices for the dressing,  
whereas the darker, leafier varieties  
are often bitter, gritty, and flat.  
It just isn't different enough and  
it's too goddamn american.

of course a critic has to criticize;  
a critic has to have something to say  
perhaps that's why literary critics  
purport to find interesting  
so much contemporary poetry  
that just bores the shit out of me.

at any rate, I really enjoy a salad  
with plenty of chunky iceberg lettuce,  
the more the merrier,  
drenched in an Italian or roquefort dressing.  
and the poems I enjoy are those I don't have  
to pretend that I'm enjoying.

From *The Iceberg Theory and Other Poems*

## The Walden/Woodstock Apartments

thoreau was right about the  
majority of mankind leading lives  
of quiet desperation.

the problem with my neighbors  
is that they are not even  
quiet about it.

From *Children of a Lesser Demagogue*

## BEER

It takes a lot to get you there, but it won't  
kill you either.

Kids like it. The foam makes a fine mustache.  
When they go to sleep they dream of goofy  
pink dragons and slippery little smiling  
fish.

To the adolescent it is the first taste of the  
earth's bitterness. He has to pretend it gets him high.  
He is afraid it will give him zits, and maybe it will.  
He gives it to his girl and thinks it is because of it  
she gives herself to him.

She doesn't like the taste of it and never will.  
She doesn't have the thirst for it. She  
is afraid it will give her a gut, and  
maybe it will. Eventually she'll be a  
little insulted when it's offered her.  
And probably should be.

But the best of friendships are formed over  
it. It helps men to speak to each other,  
a difficult thing these days. It lets  
men sing without embarrassment of auld  
lang syne and of the sheep that went astray  
somewhere along the line. It goes excellently  
with pool and pickled eggs, beef jerky and  
baseball games. Contrary to popular opinion,  
it is good for the kidneys, affords them exercise.  
It is good for all appetites.

We all go beyond it; we always come back to it.  
It is the friend who eases us through  
our philosophies. It is the friend we talk  
to about our women, the one who agrees  
with us that they are not all that  
important. It restores our courage in the

face of cowardly sobrieties. It laughs  
with us at our most serious poems, weeps  
at our pratfalls. It remembers us; it  
takes us back.

Finally, this blessed beer, it eases us towards  
sleep.

From *Poop, and Other Poems*

## **poop**

my daughter, blake, is in kindergarten. They are teaching her to be a docile  
citizen and, incidentally to read. concurrently, like many of us, she  
has become a trifle anal compulsive. complications ensue.

i ask her what she has learned today. she says, “i learned the pledge of  
allegiance.” “how does it go?” i ask. “it goes,” she says, “i poop  
allegiance to the poop of the united poops of ameripoop.”

“that’s good,” i say, “that’s very good. what else?” “o say can you poop,  
by the dawn’s early poop, what so proudly we pooped...”

for christmas, she improvises, “away in a pooper, all covered with poop, the  
little lord poopus lay pooping his poop.”

she has personalized other traditional favorites as well. someone, perhaps  
her grandmother, tried to teach her the “our father.” her version goes,  
“our pooper, who art in poopland, hallowed be thy poop. thy poopdom  
poop, they poop be pooped, on earth as it is in poopland.”

surely hemingway would feel one-upped. surely the second pooping is at hand.

a fortune teller told us blake would be our greatest sorrow and our greatest  
joy. already, it is true.

From *Poop, and Other Poems*

## at midnight

at midnight, i look up  
from the gilberto sorrentino book  
that i've been reading under flashlight

and i notice that the dipper and north star  
have moved across the sky

and for the first time in my life  
i *feel* the fact that i am in motion  
that everything is,

and simultaneously for the first time in my life  
i do not want to die,  
i remember how sad for years it left my daughter  
when her grandfather died,

and i don't want to leave her with  
a second sadness,

and for the first time in my life  
i understand why anyone would want  
to believe in reincarnation,  
and would want to come back  
to this world.

From *The Firebird Poems*

**FICTION  
SUPERLATIVES  
2022**



LINA ABASCAL -  
MOST LIKELY TO WRITE THE NEXT  
STAR WARS/NICOLAS SPARKS ADAPTATION



TINA THOMPSON -  
MOST LIKELY TO BE  
ID'D AT 75



LUPITA BARRAGAN -  
MOST INVOLVED



DANIEL HAMPTON -  
MOST LIKELY TO QUIETLY TAKE  
OVER THE WORLD



CHRISTINA GARCIA -  
MOST LIKELY TO START A TRUE-CRIME  
PODCAST/MOST LIKELY TO REVEAL  
THEY ALREADY HAVE ONE

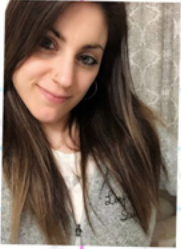


MADELINE DUGAN -  
MOST LIKELY TO EAT  
THE FORTUNE BEFORE THE COOKIE



JASON SWICK -  
MOST LIKELY TO RUN  
OFF WITH THE CIRCUS

# MFA Poet Superlatives



Jacaline Intravaia:  
Beauty and Brains



Tony Wallin-Sato:  
Most Likely to  
Succeed



Chris Bickley: Class Clown



John Mroch:  
Biggest Heart



Kevin Vu:  
Most Likely to  
Eat During Workshop



John Tovar:  
Most Encouraging



Hannah Schultz:  
Best Dressed



Kiana Shaley Martin:  
Best Friend



Kimberly Esslinger:  
Most Magical