

RIPRAP46



Reconciliations

RIPRAP

Literary Journal

Spring 2024

RIPRAP LITERARY JOURNAL

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Nothing Gold Can Stay” by Jax Perry

RipRap Literary Journal is published in association with the Department of English and with the support of the Instructionally Related Activities Fund. RipRap is designed and produced annually by Master of Fine Arts and undergraduate students in the 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 renamed *Gambit* and finally, in 1979, RipRap.

RipRap accepts submissions from late September to mid-December. Genre-specific guidelines can be found with the following link: www.cla.csulb.edu/departments/english/riprap-journal-submission-guidelines

Department of English
RipRap Literary Journal
1250 Bellflower Boulevard
Long Beach, CA 90840

Please direct all inquiries to riprapjournal@gmail.com.

RipRap is printed by:
Beach Print Shop
1331 Palo Verde Avenue
90840

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Long Beach, CA 90840
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Marcus Elias Woolfolk

A Fragmentation on Bone and Memory: A Small Book of Meeting Spots

after Diane Seuss

In a country before the idea of ownership
applied to people, in the ligature of a dragonfly's
irised wing, in the stale air of a hollow jewelry box

collecting dust on a thrift store shelf, in the glow
of plastic stars adhered to popcorn ceilings,
in the used-condom pressed beneath untied laces

and beer cans, in the salt crushed against the rubied
flesh of a grapefruit, in the ocean foam lingering around
the ankle, in the deserted greenhouse swarmed with jasmine

and ash, in the field between the Jelly Belly factory
and the Budweiser brewery off the 680 North, in the smoke
curling from the hot comb folded into hair, in the shoe

polish residing in tin can moons, in the dirt crammed beneath
the gardener's fingernail, in the sunset of ripe mango idle
across the counter, in the folds between denim and tile as the knee

rests in performance, in the creases of backup pillowcases
weighed down by miles of teeth rot and plastic vampire fangs,
in the syrup nestled between peaches and cinnamon, in the drying

ink of the birth certificate, in the bent necks of war-torn lilies
settling in the aftermath of the monsoon, in the mortuary resting
in the breath, in the arms of our foreclosed mothers, open and waiting.



Before You Go

The day after their daughter's funeral, the sky was an unbearable blue, an ocean someone could drown in if they weren't careful enough.

"Are you done reading?" Anqing asked, white nails tapping on the kitchen counter. She was already dressed to go: white suit, white purse, and a black scarf tied around her neck like a wound. "I tried to make it as fair as possible."

"Not yet," Camellia said.

"Take your time," Anqing said, looking out the window.

Time. They were rich with time, minutes and seconds falling like gold through their fingers. Yet they had already wasted all the time in the world, with nothing left to spend.

Camellia shuffled through the papers. Anqing was always so precise, so thorough; the papers covered everything, and Anqing only asked her to review them on a formality. Camellia hadn't even brought a pen. After all, Anqing would have settled everything properly.

Their reasoning. Their assets. Their little Lily.

With every flip of the page, years disappeared.

Camellia peered at Anqing, who was steadfastly looking out the window. Almost all the leaves had fallen off the tree, only a few stubborn ones left clinging. Once upon a time, she would have been able to read Anqing's silence.

"I'm done," Camellia said quietly, sliding the papers across the counter to Anqing. "You did a good job as always."

“No complaints, then? This is your last chance.”

“No.”

She glanced at the papers. “You forgot to sign it.”

“Oh, I—”

“I have a pen.” Anqing pulled it out of her purse, a shiny black ballpoint that rolled across the table.

“Thank you.”

Camellia picked it up delicately and penned her signature.

With that, it was over.

Anqing stood, gathering the papers and her pen. Should Camellia hug her? Or shake her hands? They weren't friends, but they weren't strangers, so perhaps it would be better not to touch her at all.

Anqing paused outside the kitchen door, turning once to stare at Camellia again. “Is that it? You don't have anything else to say?”

“No. I can't think of anything.”

“No? Nothing at all?” Anqing's stare was piercing, a gaze that could cut through clouds. That was the one thing that never changed her, not once in twenty years. “Then I'm leaving.”

“Do you want me to beg you to come back? What do you want me to say?” The words spilled out before Camellia could think about them, but Anqing's face didn't change.

“Beg? If you don’t have anything to say, then don’t.”

“Then—”

“Then nothing. Don’t forget, there’ll be a court summons in a few weeks before everything’s official.”

Camellia’s hands closed together, a bud that would never bloom. “I’ll be there.”

“Perfect. Then I have to leave now. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye, Anqing.”

Anqing’s heels clicked as she slipped them on. The garage door opened. Closed. Words churned in Camellia’s mind, withering before they could make their way out, but who would listen to her even if she could speak?

There was nothing left to save in their marriage. If there had been something to save, it died a long time ago.

—

They had been in college when they first met at Camellia’s family restaurant, Jade Dragon. For as long as Camellia could remember, she had been working overtime and covering for any waiter who couldn’t make their shifts. College didn’t change that. That winter evening would have been a slow Monday like any other, if not for that one particular customer.

Camellia, who had been doodling in a newspaper’s crossword, snapped to attention as the door’s bell rang and a beautiful girl walked in. She was a smart dresser with long legs. She looked rich, but more than that, she looked like a foreign exchange student. They hardly got her kind around here, but she brightened as soon as she saw

Camellia, opening her mouth and letting loose a torrent of foreign words.

Camellia could only nod her head in confusion, trying to wedge her way into the conversation as soon as the girl stopped to take a breath. “Miss! Miss! I’m sorry, but I can’t speak Chinese. Only English,” she finally managed to stutter.

The girl’s face fell. “Oh. Sorry!” She asked for a menu with a smile that made flowers bloom in Camellia’s chest.

“She’s fresh off the boat.” Camellia’s sister, Nita, who was sitting on an upside-down bucket behind the counter, muttered. The girl’s eyes roamed the restaurant: the paper menu in her hands, the stuffing spilling from the booths, the stains that couldn’t quite fade from the tables no matter how Camellia scrubbed. “She’s thinking about how this place is nothing like good old China.”

“Don’t say that,” Camellia hissed. “It’s rude.”

“I’m just saying. She probably doesn’t like that we can’t speak the language.” Nita was fidgeting with her lighter now, idly snapping it open and closed. “A disappointment to our ancestors or something.”

“Nita, if you’re going to smoke, go outside,” Camellia said. “You know mom doesn’t like the smell.”

“Aw, aren’t you mommy’s good little girl,” Nita snickered, pinching Camellia’s cheek. “Fine, whatever.”

Nita vanished in a cloud of smoke, a cigarette already poking from her lips, as the girl finally made her way back to the counter. “Hello! I’d like to order.”

“Sure. What can I do for you?” Camellia flipped open her pad, pen at the ready. The girl had long eyelashes from this angle, and her

lips, as she pursed them, were faintly glossy.

“The...chicken mei fun and vegetable egg foo young,” the girl said, pronouncing each word carefully.

“What size?”

“Size?”

“Medium or large?” Camellia prompted.

“... Medium,” the girl said slowly.

“Is that all?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Camellia’s hands hesitated over the register, before she turned and pulled out a bottle of soda from the fridge behind her. “Here. I’ll give this to you on the house.”

The girl giggled, cradling the soda in her hands. “Oh? You’re very kind.”

She wasn’t, not at all, but the girl’s laughter made her smile to herself. “It’s no big deal. We’ll have that ready for you, miss?”

“Anqing. I’m Anqing,” she said. “Like the city.”

Whatever city Anqing was, it must have been the most beautiful city in all of China.

Once, Anqing’s mother had asked Camellia where her family was from.

It had been over a dinner of Chinese food, real Chinese food, nothing like what her family served, in a classy restaurant with a dress code. Camellia had scrambled to find the right clothing, but even then, then, she felt underdressed when she arrived.

It was over a course of some pork (a name she couldn't pronounce, meat so tender it slid off her fork), that Anqing's mother pointed her chopsticks at her and asked, "So, Camellia. Do you know which region of China you came from? You look like someone from Guangdong."

Camellia's mind blanked. What could she say? Her family had always valued their secrets a little too much.

"Don't tell the doctor anything," her mom would murmur. "They always have a habit of lying about your illness so they can squeeze as much money out of you as possible."

"Why do they need my social security number?" her dad would say, reading glasses forgotten on his head, squinting at some letters.

"Do they think I'm stupid?"

Even Nita loathed to share anything about herself. "Where I was last night is none of your business, squirt. As long as you don't tell mom, we're good."

Maybe it had something to do with their history, Camellia thought. Maybe it stretched all the way back to China, into the distant, foggy past. Or maybe it started with her grandpa, when he first snuck into America in the 1910s using a dead boy's name. A "paper son," who memorized another family's history, patronized by a benevolent stranger. With so many records burned in the San Francisco fire back in 1906, it had been easy enough to buy a new name for a new land.

America, the land of opportunity! Was that what her great-uncle whispered when he blew himself up paving railroads through mountains, what her grandpa's friend thought when he died in the riots to chase out the Chinese?

America! The very streets were built on their bones and blood. Her own veins were filled with paper. It was frightening how many ghosts haunted its shores. Maybe that was why Camellia's grandma had begged her grandpa to work in the restaurant industry in letters sent from China. It would be easier, less risky, than becoming just another body in a grave.

And it was, despite all the labor. Hour after hour in a hot kitchen, saving up enough for her grandpa to start his own restaurant. And when the first restaurant failed, he could always foreclose and start again. There would always be Chinese in this country, no matter how many tried to drive them out, and so her grandpa would always be here to feed them.

Then he would save up enough for a merchant visa, so his son could travel here legally and help work in the kitchen. He would save up enough to one day bring his wife over from China, forty years later, when the laws finally relaxed to let her in. He would save up enough to send his son to school, so his son could learn English and forget Chinese, and maybe escape from the restaurant business one day. It wasn't just paper in their blood, but oil.

And of course, maybe none of that was true at all. How would Camellia know? Her grandparents insisted she speak to them in English, and her parents only knew basic Chinese. They were Americans now and had fought hard to be called such. Why would they cling to the past?

Camellia learned from her grandpa's gambling friends what

a “paper son” meant. Her mom had pointed out the empty lot where her grandpa’s first Chinese restaurant had once stood. Even Nita would whisper to Camellia a story she swore up and down grandpa told her was true.

Everyone in her family liked to tell stories, but no one liked to tell the truth. Everything she had, she had to piece together herself. And if she didn’t have enough information, she would make up her own stories, until Camellia wasn’t sure what was real and what was a lie. Was her grandpa really a paper son? Or had she read the term somewhere and made up her own story to tell?

Maybe that was why, no matter how many years passed, Camellia never knew how to speak. Words were traitorous. Camellia would open her mouth, and her parents’ words, her grandparents’ words, her ancestors’ words, would drown out her thoughts.

Don’t tell anyone anything. Keep your secrets to keep yourself safe.

Who was she to question that?

“My grandparents are from China, but we’re Americans,” Camellia finally said to Anqing’s mother. They both smiled at each other. It was true enough, and besides, another dish had arrived at their table.

The funeral party for their daughter was painfully small.

Anqing had refused to invite anyone but their close family and friends, and besides, Lily’s friends were not old enough to attend or to understand death.

She also had insisted on all the traditional rituals. All the ones that were possible to hold, at least. A child was supposed to be buried

in silence, too young to have sons or daughters to perform the rites and to honor their life. But not Lily, no, not their Lily. Camellia could only nod. She understood nothing of what Anqing wanted, so she could only do what made Anqing happy.

Every time Anqing asked what Camellia wanted to do about the grave, the ceremony, the invitations, Camellia only shook her head and deferred to Anqing. Whatever she wanted, whatever she needed, until at some point, Anqing stopped asking.

It was a closed casket, Lily's funeral ceremony. For visitation, it had been open, so it was lucky that Lily's death had only wrecked her body, not her face, and scars were so easily covered by the white funeral clothing Anqing lovingly chose. They had turned around when the monk closed the casket after visitation ended so their souls wouldn't be trapped inside. What a ridiculous thought; who else did their souls belong with, if not their child?

On an altar behind the coffin, someone had hung Lily's school portrait and a smaller portrait of Buddha, sticks of incense wafting smoke across her face so her childish smile blurred. Melted candles, fruit and flowers crowded the altar, petals drifting to the ground. The incense, combined with the wreaths of white mums and chrysanthemums crowding the walls, made Camellia want to throw up.

What would they all think if she puked? For one hysterical moment, she wanted to laugh.

There was chanting during the funeral, too, Camellia remembered. Or maybe that had come after. Not that she understood a word of it, and there was no way she could ask Anqing. Camellia was only vaguely familiar with Buddhism; it was something that belonged to her wife.

"Hold my hand," Anqing whispered to Camellia, as the funeral

goers mingled quietly around the room. Camellia took it immediately. There they stood, the model mothers, presiding over their dead child.

Why was Anqing's hand so cold? It was dry, too, and Anqing's grip was too loose. Camellia had the sudden urge to anchor Anqing before she drifted off with their daughter.

What happened afterwards? It was all one blur, one formality after another. They had all turned around so the monk could paste some holy paper onto the coffin. The family men had dutifully carried the coffin out the funeral home and into a hearse. There were more prayers, and someone had handed Camellia a basket of white paper to toss as the procession moved to the graveyard.

She had turned her back again as Lily's coffin was lowered into the grave. They had been given candy—no, money. They had been handed white packets of money in odd amounts, and they had given their guests white packets of candy and coins in return. The candy had been startlingly sweet. It was supposed to be for good luck, but what luck was there left to be given?

They were all in white, a family of ghosts. They burned joss paper: paper money, paper toys, paper appliances, all to ensure Lily's comfort in the afterlife. At some point, Anqing had set her hand free from Camellia as Huixin pulled her into a hug.

All Camellia could do was let her go.

Contrary to Nita's predictions, Anqing became a regular at the Jade Dragon. Camellia practically begged for more shifts, specifically the afternoon ones, where Anqing would be guaranteed to walk in.

"What's gotten into you?" her mom asked, shaking her head. "Where was this motivation to work back in high school, huh? I used to have to badger you to come in."

“I just learned to appreciate the value of the family business,” Camellia said, straight-faced, ignoring Nita making faces at her from behind their mom.

It wasn’t exactly a lie. The restaurant was open every day of the week, bar Mondays, from 9am to 9pm. Her parents worked the entire 12 hour shift without complaint. Her mom would take orders up front and handle the miscellaneous business of running the restaurant, sorting through receipts and marking them down in a notepad. Her dad would work in the kitchen, an eternal summer of heat and spices and the line cooks yelling instructions at each other. If anything broke in the kitchen, her mom would buy replacement parts and her dad would fix it.

Camellia and Nita were expected to handle anything in between. They had memorized the restaurant’s menu before they memorized the multiplication table, and Nita swore she would never work customer service again. Camellia dreamed about taking orders, and her dad would shake his head.

“You should dream about words instead,” he advised. “I’m not letting you work in the restaurant forever.”

But how do you learn to dream about anything else? It was oil in her blood and paper, but never the right kind.

“Your favorite customer’s here,” Nita said in a sing-song voice, nudging at Camellia with her hip. Winter nights were always slow, but Anqing never failed to show up like clockwork after her classes. There was a light flurry, and snowflakes were caught in Anqing’s fur lined pink coat.

“Anqing!” Camellia said, scrambling to collect a notepad. She winced at how eager she sounded, how whiny, but Anqing never

looked less than delighted.

“My favorite flower,” Anqing greeted. “How are you doing?”

Nita would have something to say about their nicknames, but Camellia could not care. Nita was the beautiful sister, popular with boys, so she wouldn’t understand. “I’m fine! I just hope the snow doesn’t pick up after the restaurant closes. How were your classes?”

“Boring,” Anqing said with a groan. “I’m almost done with finals. My hand is sore from all that writing.”

“So...” Camellia doodled a little heart. “Do you want the usual?”

“You know me so well!” Anqing clapped her hands.

“I never understood why you liked eating here so much,” Camellia said. “I mean, haven’t you had enough Chinese food to eat at home?”

Anqing shrugged, a fluid motion. “Yes, but I wanted to try American food. This isn’t...”

“It’s not real Chinese food,” Camellia finished. You really could forgive a beautiful girl for anything. “Yeah. I know.”

“I wouldn’t say that! Besides, it’s not like most other American food I’ve had. I mean, I don’t just come here for the food, I...” Their eyes met briefly, and both of them looked away.

“Cam! Anqing’s order is ready!” Nita called, and she ran off. Her dad only needed to hear that Anqing was here to start preparing her order. She never ordered anything different.

At the counter, Camellia took Anqing's money and counted the change as slowly as possible. She was stalling, she knew, but they were both seniors in college. One more semester, and then Anqing would fly back home, and this would be the last time they saw each other. She didn't even have the courage to talk to Anqing outside of the restaurant and-

"I'm looking for a roommate," Anqing blurted out. Camellia looked up. "I- I'm thinking of extending my stay in America, but my parents don't want me to live alone, and-"

"! I could help with that!" Camellia said quickly.

"Yes?"

"Yes! So... um..."

"Give me your landline," Anqing said, and Camellia quickly scribbled it down, her hand trembling as she ripped the paper out of her notepad. "I'll call you."

"Ask for- Ask for Camellia Lin."

Anqing smiled. "I know your name, silly. How could I not?"

Camellia could only smile back.

Anqing's family had a legacy.

A lineage so old that Anqing could trace back hundreds of years. She knew the names of family members that did not even have dust and bones in their graves. They had history, records, an undeniable truth.

It was incomprehensible when Camellia's own history was

paper and lies.

“My aunt does Luju opera,” Anqing said once. “It’s a specialty of the region we’re from. She’s a very famous performer. Women in our family have done opera for a long, long time.”

“Have you seen her perform?” Camellia said in response. “Sometimes. My father likes to invite shareholders to her performances. He brings me along when he wants me to be involved in business discussions.”

“Do you like opera?”

“Does it matter if I do?” Anqing had laughed, and that had been the last of their conversation.

Her father was a successful businessman who owned an airport chain in China. Her mother was a model wife who stayed at home and managed the family’s affairs. Anqing was their accomplished daughter, the crowning jewel of their achievements. It was a perfect family. Well, it should have been a perfect family.

The first time Camellia invited Anqing over to dinner with her parents and sister, Anqing had taken all day to prepare. She ran out the door as soon as Camellia’s mom called, but not before asking about the sort of fruits the Lin family enjoyed, and if they were allergic to anything, and if perhaps they would like a box of pastries from the nearby French bakery instead.

Anqing came home with a basket of fruits, wrapping and re-wrapping the ribbon on the handle again and again until it was aligned to some exacting standard only she understood. She pulled dress after dress out from her closet, asking Camellia if this or that would be better, what colors her family preferred, if it was a casual or formal affair.

“Anqing, it’s just dinner. They want to get to know you, that’s all.” Camellia finally spoke up after passing by their bedroom several times to see Anqing staring into the vanity, tubs of lipstick spread out before her.

Anqing unfurled a tub of bright red lipstick. “I know, but I want to make a good impression.”

“They’re going to love you.”

“How do you know that?”

“I mean, they’re...they’re okay with the whole—” Camellia gestured vaguely at their apartment. “They’re okay with us. Or at least, they’re trying to understand.”

“But I’m not American,” Anqing said quietly. “I think that matters.”

There were no words that Camellia could say in response. She stepped into the room, placing a hand on Anqing’s shoulder. Anqing had uncapped her entire collection of lipstick, lining them in a neat little rainbow in front of her. In the mirror, she could hardly make out their reflections.

Camellia only felt some vague jealousy that Anqing knew where her family was from, that Anqing had records, facts, certainty that her family stories were real. But perhaps it had been a heavier burden than she thought. After all, Anqing could never escape from who she was; even if she fled to a different country, her family followed her.

How did Anqing keep going?

After they received news of Lily's death, Anqing would dress only in white. White suits, white coats, white bags that she brought to the office. White shoes, white blouses, white ribbons for her hair.

She looked like a new bride but lived like a ghost, drifting in and out of doorways, refusing to settle down for long in any one spot. She woke up on time, went to work, did everything properly, but there were times Anqing would just sit down, gazing at the clock, doing nothing else.

What was she thinking?

Camellia could not ask. She made sure to change the hours of the bar, so she could be home for Anqing. To make something hot for dinner, to coax her into the shower, to lay out Anqing's makeup so she didn't put on the wrong shade of lipstick.

Camellia knew Anqing liked pretending. That Anqing hated pity, hated looking like her world was falling apart, even when it was. So, she helped her wife along, never pushed, never prodded. If it was easier for Anqing like this, then so be it. Camellia would hold the pieces of their lives together. Nothing had to be painful. Nothing had to change.

"Good morning, Anqing," Camellia said.

Anqing only nodded as Camellia handed her a mug of hot coffee. "I might come home late."

"Are you going to do overtime at the office?"

"No. There's a business party for the new workers, and my dad wants me to attend. Huixin will take me home."

“Huixin,” Camellia repeated. “That’s nice of him.”

“It’s what friends are for.”

“Of course.” Maybe Anqing thought they were friends, but Camellia had seen how Huixin looked at Anqing. Two beautiful childhood friends, both children of airport industry CEOs who had been business partners for years. It would have been a perfect love story, if not for Camellia, if not for Anqing’s unfortunate homosexuality.

Huixin never seemed to know how to look at Camellia. The first time he had seen her, his eyes had widened. Anqing may have been a lesbian, but at least she was beautiful, so that was at least acceptable. Camellia was fat, and short, and had started shaving her head ever since she left college. She had piercings on her eyebrows, her nose, her lip (that was Anqing’s favorite one).

This was it? This was who Anqing had chosen over him? Camellia could see the confusion in his eyes.

I know, she wanted to tell him. I know.

“This is my friend, Huixin,” Anqing had said, hugging Camellia’s arm. “Huixin, this is Camellia, my girlfriend.”

They couldn’t look at each other. They could only smile. They both loved Anqing, so they could pretend, as long as it made her happy.

“Camellia.” Anqing stood, and Camellia looked up. Anqing held out her hand, stopped. “I’ll see you tonight. Don’t stay up for me.”

Camellia smiled. “Okay. Have a good time.”

She cleared the table and washed the plates as Anqing left

for work. When there was nothing left to do, Camellia headed to Lily's room.

Neither of them had bothered to touch anything, so it still looked like it did before Lily died. Crayons scattered across the table. Lily's stuffed animals lying sadly on the floor. A scuff on the wall where Lily had thrown a book during a tantrum. Orange walls, white lace curtains, brown carpet.

Lily chose the wall color herself. Because no one liked the color orange, Lily had explained, she didn't want it to be lonely.

Camellia and Anqing had looked at each other and laughed quietly, bumping their hands together. But that had been a long time ago, back when they still could touch each other.

Now, all she could do was sleep in Lily's bed when Anqing was gone, pretending Lily's milk and baby powder scent still lingered.

Lily's room was the one place Anqing refused to enter, but Camellia could not get enough of it. Her baby girl's room, her little Lily. Here, if Camellia closed her eyes, she could pretend that Lily was still away at school, Anqing would call her during her lunch break, and Camellia would prepare dinner for the three of them. Lily was still alive. Anqing hadn't hid divorce papers at the bottom of her drawer.

Yes, what a wonderful life it would be.

—

Living with Anqing felt like a dream.

In an apartment complex only a few bus stops away from her parents, where Anqing went to graduate school in the mornings and afternoons, Camellia would wake in a bleary daze to send her off. When Anqing got back, Camellia would make a late lunch for them both, where they would share a meal before Camellia headed for her part-time job at a nearby bar.

Whatever there was between them felt precious, a nameless secret that could only be conveyed in quick glances and giggled whispers. They still slept in separate rooms, but more and more often lately Camellia would wake up with Anqing in her bed, her arms wrapped tightly around Camellia.

“You’re beautiful,” Anqing would murmur. “So beautiful.”

And if Anqing said it like that, kissed along her collarbones and spoke her name like a prayer, Camellia could believe it was true. The apartment was their own world, just the two of them, the little family she always longed for. She would have given Anqing the sun, even if it meant everyone else would live in the dark forever.

There wouldn’t be anyone else. There couldn’t, because who else would love her like this?

“When are you going to come home?” Camellia asked one night.

Anqing grinned, slipping on her heels. “I’ll be back in time for dinner, I promise! So it’ll probably be before eight. You’re going to make pasta tonight, right?”

“Yes. With shrimp.” Camellia moved to kiss Anqing’s cheek, but she turned her face so Camellia met her lips instead. “Anqing...!”

Anqing batted her eyelashes. “Yes? You look a little red. Are you coming down with something?”

“... You’re...”

“The best? I know.”

Camellia sighed as Anqing leaned down to kiss her forehead,

leaving behind a pink stain. “Have fun with Huixin.”

“Oh! I forgot to ask. Is it okay if he comes over for dinner?”

“For dinner?”

“Yes! I’d love it if my two favorite people in the whole world got to know each other a bit better.”

“Right. Right, of course. I can set an extra plate.”

Camellia spent all day pacing the kitchen, glaring at the bubbling pasta as if it would cook faster if she did. The kitchen, which normally soothed her with its familiarity, did nothing as the appointed hour approached.

There was a knock on the door at half past seven. When she opened the door, Huixin greeted her with an easy smile and a wrapped box tucked under his arm.

“We got off early. Anqing went to grab the mail and told me to come up first.”

Camellia nodded, making no move to let Huixin in. “Okay.”

“Anqing told me you liked strawberry flavored things,” he said, handing her the box under his arm. “So, I made sure to get some macarons. She never stops talking about you, you know.”

“Does she?” What flavor do you like then, Huixin? She doesn’t say much about you. Camellia bit her tongue and held out her hand instead. “It’s nice to see you again.”

“I think so as well.” Huixin didn’t look away as he took her hand, and they shook.

Hopefully Anqing wouldn't take much longer.

“What do you think about having a child?”

Camellia rolled over in bed, sheets tangling in her legs. “I can't get you pregnant, Anqing.”

Anqing rolled her eyes. “I know. But there are other methods. Adoption...or intrauterine insemination...”

“It's expensive.”

“I have money.”

A child. The thought sent a warm glow through Camellia's chest. A baby.

“I've been looking into the options.” Anqing reached across the pillows to find Camellia's hand and squeezed. “And I think we can make this work.”

“Who's going to carry the baby?”

“I will. I think it'd make my parents happy if...”

“Anqing.” Camellia tugged their linked hands to coax Anqing into her arms. Anqing wrapped herself around Camellia, sighing. “Do you really want a baby?”

“I do! I'm not just doing it because of my parents.” Anqing idly kissed at Camellia's collarbone, her voice vibrating through bone, straight into Camellia's blood. “It's just, you know. They'd like it. It's a bonus.”

Because it makes us look normal. The words went unspoken,

and Camellia ran her fingers through Anqing's hair.

“How are we going to find a sperm donor? Should we go to the bank, or do we go through a doctor?”

Anqing snorted. “We’re going shopping for sperm, huh? Well. I was thinking...friends can be donors, and...wouldn’t it be nice if Huixin did it?” The floor fell around Camellia. She was weightless, and the only thing keeping her anchored was Anqing’s arms. “I would love for him to be involved in our family!” Huixin. “It’d be great if our baby could have more support in their life.” The way he looked at Anqing. “What do you think?” The way he looked at Camellia. “I know some sperm donors don’t get involved, but I want our baby to have that choice, you know?”

“I...I would be fine with it. Since he’s your friend.”

“Are you sure?” Anqing said. “If you don’t like it, then—”

“I want what you want,” Camellia said.

She grinned, peppering Camellia’s face with kisses. “Okay! I’ll let him know. It might take a while for the pregnancy to happen, so we could go to the doctor’s at least three or four times.”

It only took two visits.

During the first visit, the doctor turned to Anqing and Huixin to explain the process to them. It was not until her eyes slid to the rings on Anqing’s and Camellia’s hands that she corrected herself, flustered.

Huixin gave a sample in a different room, and then his sperm would be sent to be washed. They would then have to monitor Anqing’s ovulation cycle, and come back when she was ovulating,

where the doctor would then inject the semen. After two weeks, they would take an at-home pregnancy test, and then two weeks after that, they would do bloodwork to confirm the pregnancy. The chances of success were low for a first visit, and still, Camellia's heart plummeted when she learned they would have to come back.

During the second visit, Anqing and Huixin were excited, Anqing, to try again, and Huixin, to support Anqing. The doctor made sure to address Camellia and Anqing this time. In a month, the result from the bloodwork came back, and Anqing was pregnant.

Of course, Camellia let Anqing decide on a name. No matter what, Anqing said, she wanted to name the child after a flower. If it were a girl, then she would be called Lily in English, and Bai He in Chinese. If it were a boy, then Mark in English, and Xunzi in Chinese.

Camellia's heart stirred. It would be their baby. Her, and Anqing's, and no one else's.

—

Lily. Lily, Lily. Her little flower.

The first time Camellia had held her, she had cried. Someone so precious, squirming with her first breath of life. Joy, distilled into its simplest and smallest form.

Ma'am, I'm sorry. Your daughter...There was an accident at her school. The car...yes...she was on the road. We don't know why, and the teacher didn't see until..."

Lily. She loved the color orange and liked to twirl in her dresses to make them spin. She cuddled the same stuffed ratty cat every night, a gift from Camellia's parents at her birth. Such a precocious little child, so bold, so daring.

The three of them went on vacation to the beach. Lily ran

along the shore, going farther and farther out until the waves were up to her neck. She didn't stop, not at Camellia's warnings, not at Anqing's scolding. She kept going until the two of them ran to scoop her up, seawater staining their clothes, and Lily could only laugh.

What had Anqing said once?

"You're my garden." A warm kiss to Lily's chubby cheek, a kiss to Camellia's lips. "My precious Lily and Camellia."

The cold porcelain of the toilet under Camellia's hands, the glaring bathroom lights. Bending her head over the opening. Nothing came out of her mouth, but she retched again, and again. Until Anqing came home and pulled her back and held her and rocked her in her arms.

Camellia had foolishly named her bar The Garden. Calls came, her bartenders, the cooks, her manager. She placed orders for the wine too late, didn't keep track of the bills, the accounts, the inventory. Then, Anqing took over. Kept it running on top of her own job. Slept later and later to balance it out. Camellia watched through Lily's half opened door as Anqing came home only for a few hours before leaving again.

Everyone visited, ghosts after ghosts after ghosts. None of them were real. Nita and her boyfriend. Her parents. Anqing's parents. Huixin came, too.

"Get out! Leave!" Camellia screamed. She threw a book, watching it bruise the wall near Huixin's head. "Don't come near me!"

Huixin, pale-faced, his basket of pitiful fruit in his arms. "Okay. Okay, I'll go. I'm sorry, Camellia, I am."

"Camellia, why?" Anqing whispered. "What did he do?"

The way Huixin looked at Anqing. The way he looked at Lily.
The way he looked at Camellia.

“Camellia, please. What’s wrong?”

“Don’t let him in. Don’t ever let him in again. You should have known. You should never have let him--”

“Why didn’t you say something, then? If you told me...I would never... I would never have asked him to!”

Paper, burning in her blood. Lily, their baby, who still liked warm milk with a drizzle of cinnamon. A garden somewhere in the world, blooming.

One morning, Camellia got out of Lily’s bed. Smoothed out her button-down shirt, her slacks. Brushed her teeth, washed her face and her piercings after. And she knocked on the door of Anqing’s room to coax her wife out of bed.

—

On a bright, early October morning, Camellia closed The Garden for a weekend.

She splashed water on her face and put on the tie Nita bought her several years ago, a strip of scarlet that shone with embroidered flowers in the lamp light. Anqing hummed as she put on her best red dress and pursed her lips in the mirror, applying her favorite lipstick with a well-practiced swipe. Camellia kissed Anqing’s neck as she worked, and Anqing giggled with delight.

“You’re going to ruin my lipstick,” Anqing scolded gently.

“I thought I was going to do that today, anyways.”

“Yes, but not now!”

The neighborhood was blue with predawn light as they piled into the car, Anqing smoothing her skirt down as she sat at the wheel. Their marriage papers were paperclipped together, tucked neatly into a folder that sat on Camellia's lap.

"Are you ready?" Anqing asked.

"Yes. Of course."

Anqing reached a hand to grasp Camellia's, stilling her shaking. "It'll be fine."

"It's just...what if they turn us away?"

"They won't. It was legalized in April."

"But what if...I mean, we're Chinese, and it's...it's different for us."

"It won't be. We're both citizens, so it's okay."

"Still, I don't know if—" Anqing leaned over, swallowing Camellia's words in a kiss.

"Do you not want to marry me?" she asked.

"I do! God, I do, but...I'm scared."

"I'm scared, too," Anqing whispered. "But it's okay. Because we'll have each other."

Camellia closed her eyes. "Are you really okay with not having a party? I thought you liked those sorts of things."

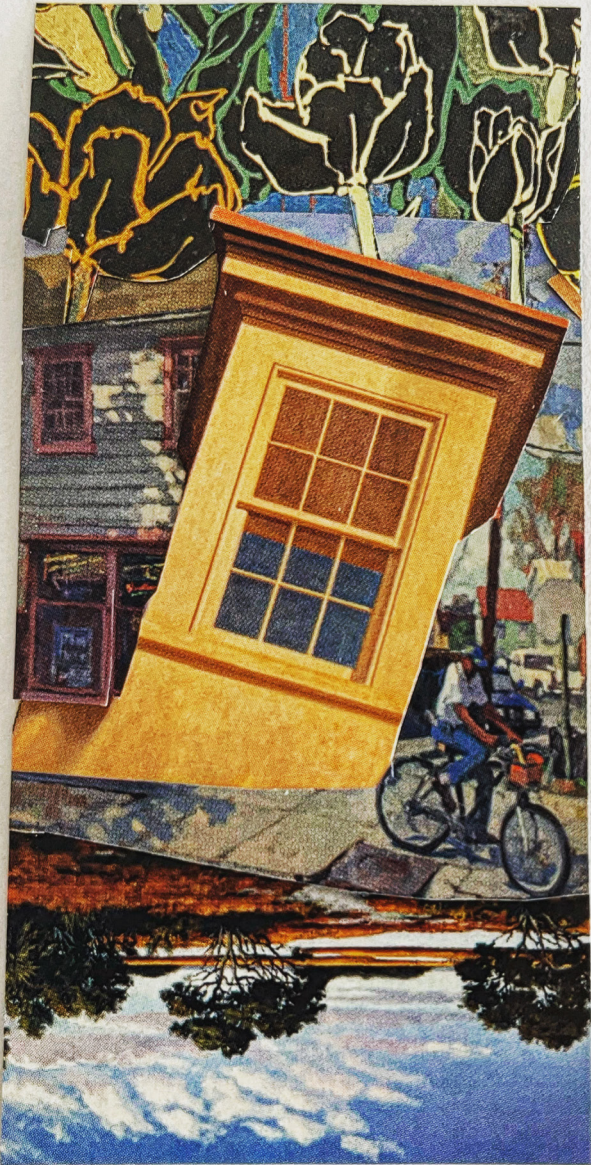
"Of course! This marriage is about us, and no one else. So..." The engine purred to life. "Are you ready?"

She took one breath. Another. Her parents would be disappointed that she had gotten married without at least telling them, though Nita would probably slap her on the back and call her gutsy. But Anqing's parents, and Huixin, and all their friends...what would they say?

Camellia opened her eyes and looked at Anqing, who drummed her fingers against the wheel in an invisible melody.

What was she thinking? The only person who mattered was sitting beside her, a dream in red. No one else needed to understand.

"Let's go," Camellia said, and Anqing kissed her one more time, red lipstick smearing, before they set off.



MIDAS UNMASKED

By now everyone's heard about saucy old King Midas and his wishful gift cum curse, turning shit into shimmer, left and loose and up and sideways. What the tablets don't report is the drive behind his desire. See, Midas was greedy, needy, just like we thought, but he wasn't wanting or wanton for cache of that sort. What he wanted more than money was for folks to want to be touched by him – to willingly submit to his flighty appetites. It hits, sits different when you tilt the gild toward the daylight and see it for what it is, right? Imagine folks go rigid at the whiff of you and you, sans clue, thinking you might make them crave your cold clammy hands. Thus it was with Midas. How Midas' story ends is a matter of myth, literally. The priests say the gods relieved Midas of his burden; the scientists say Midas starved for want of feeding. I say both sides got it right.

Canon Fodder

Beauty is truth, I say, Keats said
to me, in one of my infamous
rambling fantasies. And so, dear
bard, is sewage, I replied, raw
in its expression of what we have
no use for. Whether I mean that
sewage is truth or beauty is sewage
from context you'll have to gather.
What I know on earth is this:
naming my waste an act of creation
is to most of y'all profane. But profane
is where y'all cast me. I embrace the roil.

Look

after The looking glass by Deborah Roberts (2019)

It is ever the project of whiteness
to frame me in whiteness. How is the dark
what's come to represent the void? Look close –
see how the frame aims to pull away as
I expand – I will not shrink to fit within.
Look how the frame thins, brittles, its sudden
fracture anything but an even rhythm.
My sweat alone, more than enough to taint
this canvas. If my hue is a matter
of saturation, then you've gone drunk off
the funk of me. Look: it's clear this space is
not primed for my shade of blade. My age
won't be caged. I won't be your art. Gaze
this day into the nothing what yet surrounds.

Ariana Brazier

**An Unbecoming Mother: Queer Parenting for a Present Home-
place**

September 2021

[Y]esterday, on [our] 9 hour road trip, I had a lot of time to navigate and process the one million emotions I was warring with. I'm still sitting in them. There were no real conclusions. Except, here are a few that have arisen today:

I'm standing at my growing edge. Stay here, do not back up. Leap, if you must, Ari but do not go backwards.

--> We become the people we need to be (or think we need to be) to keep moving forward.

--> Call the landlord. Your name does not need to be on that lease if he expects my money to pay the rent.

--> Go with the path of least resistance.

I know I am learning so much about present mindedness, moment-to-moment practices, and depression management, but I do have to wonder what really keeps us going if folks are right about this being the rest of my life. I'm supposed to just accept that grief in its myriad forms will be with me like a fucking shadow?

I look at Remix and feel obligated to remain grounded, and as present as possible. But. There is always a but. I worry. I do not want this loneliness, darkness, questioning for him. My heart physically aches at

the thought of him carrying this...I have a child now and I cannot say 'It is all worth it.' Yes, he is my reason. But this grief. I do not want it. So many struggles, I have to question how necessary they actually are. Or, is this just what we tell ourselves to survive another day?

This is not the world I want for him. Tell me, God, is the world I dream even possible? Nothing feels real or within grasping distance anymore. It was all snatched away—sort of slowly really. I was certainly being chipped away. But I am fucking whole damnit. I am a whole fucking human. I am one hell of a woman and I am striving to be an even better mother. When does it feel real again? At what point will I choose myself without friction, fear, or self-loathing? God, how much longer?

My son, Remix, was born in May 2021. In the two years between this September 2021 journal entry and my present day writing in September 2023, I have lost—unwillingly shed—so much. By Remix's first birthday, we had fled our home in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to my parents' home in Columbus, Ohio before moving to my aunt's house in Rex, Georgia; I started my first professional job post grad school and was laid off from that job; We survived COVID, and consequently, Remix's first emergency room visit; I was struck by tax fraud, denied unemployment and government benefits.

We left his father, my partner of almost seven years, six weeks after Remix was born. This journal entry also demarcates the onset of a daily practice of self-selection. Leaving his father was not nearly as difficult as confronting daily the realization that I would have to choose myself all over again everyday for the remainder of my life. And so, while Remix was the reason I left a toxic partnership—expanding my choices to include personal pleasure was my reason for dating again.

In July 2022, I came out as queer—and super damn proud—to

my family and friends. While I initially thought this emergence was validated by the trans nonbinary person I was dating, I have come to understand that I have always been queer. I thought I needed some confirmation or certification of my sexual orientation before I could claim what started to feel increasingly like a coveted identity throughout my time at Spelman College.

In truth, through my parenting journey, I am learning that I was wrong. No external entity or relationship could validate my queer identity. And, I'm not entirely sure, that I would have fully acknowledged this truth about me if not for Remix making me a mother when he did. As bell hooks explains, “[q]ueer as not being about who you're having sex with (that can be a dimension of it), but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live” (TNS 2014). Motherhood set me at odds with everything I ever knew about myself—with every moment tethered to another human being, incalculable responsibilities severed me from versions of myself to which I could never return. Dissociation was on the horizon.

In becoming an unwed single mother, I have unbecome the embodiment of Black excellence in its respectable form, unbecome the type of mother a girl-child version of myself envisioned, unbecome the twenty-something doctoral legal scholar the adult version of myself envisioned, unbecome the hetero-wife my family envisioned, and unbecome the Christian into which I was schooled. In doing so, I have made space to be. And ultimately, become unfathomably more.

Queerness has become a helpful tool to release the prized versions of me motherhood obliterated, and navigate the unforeseen versions of me that motherhood continues to produce.* Most days, I feel like I am failing to do the thing: whatever the thing is. And, I now exist in this tension—I dwell in the spaces between my own impossibilities and his limitless possibilities and what both reveal about the wom-

an I knew, or at least remembered myself to be before motherhood. Nevertheless, I am reminded of Jack Halberstam's assertion in *The Queer Art of Failure*: "Losing...unmaking...unbecoming...not knowing may offer more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (2). Unraveling, unbecoming, and forgetting are motifs in my parenting journey as I experience daily Remix's own weaving, emerging, and refining.

At every juncture of our short life together thus far, I have striven to make every atom on this earth accessible to Remix. Fortunately, it has not been too hard because play remains instinctual to me, and I understand play to be the most universally accessible method of learning and communicating. Accordingly, playful and sensorial exploration are integrated into the fiber of our existence. Play as pleasure, pleasure as play is our politic. My mom actually refers to my style of mothering as "free-range parenting" – though, I commonly identify my style as "the fuck around and find out method." This is because that is exactly what I am learning to do—emboldened to do, really—as I witness Remix do the same.

Since Remix began walking at seven months, we have developed a norm of walking barefoot through the neighborhood; climbing the highest tower at the playground and hanging on the monkey bars until our arms are sore; shaking our asses whenever wherever the beat drops; speaking to every auntie and uncle that smiles our way; racing through the shopping malls; painting our faces with butterflies, glitter, and rainbows; riding our shared bike for miles in the misty rain; sitting at the shore's edge awaiting the next wave to smack us in the chest. We take risks because I understand that safety is a cooperative endeavor that requires active choice and daily recommitment. I invite him to take risks because this is how he learns to choose himself all over again everyday for the remainder of his life. He learns that no matter his predicaments, that there is another way to do life (McClain 62). He must fuck around—play, explore, wonder, and find out—experience, internalize, expand.

Dani McClain asserts that “to be a mother is to know that you can’t know everything and still operate as if you could. The alternative is to have your entire body - heart, mind, and soul - be held hostage by fear” (McClain 34). As a mother, I am operating within the promise of more. In facilitating Remix’s participation in Black joy-producing, sensorial play, he is learning “how to notice, feel, identify and extend [his] own joy and that of others when joy is happening. And, in contrast, how to notice, feel, identify, and reject oppressive restraints enforced upon [his body]” (Brazier 137-8)**. Simultaneous with the evolution of my own, I am introducing Remix to his own “‘erotic knowledge’: that which ‘is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire’ (Lorde 54). I want us to fail together—fail to be “respectable and [uphold] the ‘grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe’” (Lorde qtd. in Brazier 139). We wear our failure proudly: our uniform: dirty feet, butterfly wings, jean overalls and mosquito bites. We will thrive only on terms that align with our politic.

Therefore, I too must lose myself to the prolific potential of uncertainty. By unraveling versions of myself molded by heteropatriarchy, queerness has proven for me that there is minimal stability outside of what we can create personally. Accordingly, I am queering my concept of home by divesting from the traditional nuclear family, freestyling (Remixing. Lol?) my pleasure and parenting politics, and decolonizing my ideas of success as I “invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live” (TNS 2014) for myself. In doing so, I am crafting my homeplace as a “microcosm of the world” (McClain 32) I want to inhabit joyfully with and through my son.

Our homeplace, “is a queer resource of black survival. It is a beautiful experiment in how-to-live” (Hartman 228). And, “[w]hat is beauty, if not ‘the intense sensation of being pulled toward the animating force of life?’ Or the yearning ‘to bring things into relation [...] with a kind of urgency as though one’s life depended upon it’” (Hartman

236). In motherhood, I was dragged to the question of what really keeps us going amidst such terroristic grief. In motherhood, I am discovering daily how to respond to the yearnings and not be buried by the weight of the questions.

While I still inhabit a world I do not want for my child, I am urgently constructing new entry points into the world we will co-create. Any abolitionist future we will ever experience will inherently be a queer future. I'm fucking with the timeline by making our present homeplace a space to learn how we can intend toward the creative, subversive, and sustainable in order to survive on our own terms. I am intentionally practicing queerness as the default because I know "practice makes different" (Gilmore) and I intend to make fucking around and finding out a lived practice that reveals the ways of being in the world we enjoy most, and makes space for forgetting, with compassion, harmful ways of being that have been disguised as normal.

*There are numerous aspects of parenting that are poorly advertised—grief being just one

** One joyous way Kimberly Dukes, another unbecoming mother, nurtured the homeplace she cultivated for her ten children was through music and dance. I am forever grateful for the opportunity to have witnessed and participated in her most ratchet moments—she unknowingly paved the way for my queer parenting politic.

(see page 135 for bibliography)



Daye Phillippo

Requiem

For Kara

In the woods, in a stand of white pines,
their long-needed green brushing
the winter-bare crowns of deciduous trees,
this morning, one pine secrets
a Great Horned Owl, revealed only
by its call, tones so deeply resonant,
I hear its girth, know that my hands, finger-tip
to finger-tip, aren't large enough to span
its chest, its bassoon's tenor register
as if the owl, too, were made of aged maple
and melancholy, as if the day is, too
Today is your birthday, young friend
who passed in ICU last Saturday. I stumble
over frozen molehills to the barn, listening
to the owl's lament . . . the silences between.

Elizabeth Wittenberg

Blue Raspberry

We were sitting at our spot under the bridge drinking wine coolers and waiting for something to happen. I think we were all thinking that if we drank enough wine coolers something would. The ones I was drinking were called Blue Raspberry Italian Ice. They were my favorite, but they always dyed my tongue. When I got home, I'd have to brush my teeth before I talked to my parents. If they saw my blue tongue, I think they'd be suspicious. I think I'd tell them I went to the movies and got an Icee. That seemed like a good alibi. A thrill wiggled its way through my body at the thought of lying to my parents. I think all of our parents thought we were good kids just because we were in the improv club. Just because we weren't cool didn't mean that we were lame, though.

It was silent now. We drink while we watched the river go by. I think the river would have been cool if I were from someplace else and hadn't seen it before, but we sat under the bridge almost every Friday after school, even when we didn't have wine coolers. Whenever my cousins come to town from somewhere nobody's ever heard of in Indiana, we take them to the river. It's not like they don't have rivers in Indiana, though, so I don't really know why we do. I guess its all we have to do here. I can't wait to go to college.

Cara was the one who got the wine coolers. Her sister was home from college for the weekend because she had a lot of laundry to do and her mom liked to do it for her. I think that's idiotic because I've been doing my own laundry since I was in middle school and it's not even hard. But Kenzie let Cara borrow her fake ID, even though they don't look alike at all. Cara's sister is beautiful and cool and Cara looks like someone who would be friends with me. She told us that her sister used to have acne, but then she got on Acutane and got a boyfriend and now they barely ever hang out anymore. Cara went to the gas station that Kenzie told her wouldn't give her any

problems and then she put them all in her backpack, loose from the paper cartons so she could fit more. She got a lot of them.

We giggled as we tiptoed down the rocks to our spot, stepping carefully, as the bottles clattered against each other in Cara's backpack. I felt like we were already acting a little drunk with the anticipation of what might happen when we'd each had a few wine coolers. The last time we'd gotten alcohol, a water bottle full of vodka that Brooke stole from her parents, we ended up playing spin the bottle. We were in Howie's basement and his parents were home, so we whispered the whole time, which was really hard. I had my first kiss that night, with Miles. I'd already told everyone except Brooke that I had my first kiss at drama camp two summers before so I had to play it cool. When we were leaving, Brooke grabbed my arm and whispered to ask how it was. I told her it was really good, but I honestly think that kissing is kind of weird. Miles's lips were cold, even though in the smutty fairy books I read, they always describe the love interests' lips as warm.

At the river, I noticed that Miles had a flake of dead skin peeling off his bottom lip. I couldn't believe that I'd kissed him a couple weeks ago. We never talked about it. He was busy ranting about how blue raspberry was such a stupid flavor because it doesn't taste like raspberries and raspberries aren't blue. His tongue was bright blue, too, though, so he can't have thought it was that stupid. When Miles rants like that, you've just got to let him finish. It's just how he is. I watched his tongue dart around his mouth, the center vibrant with blue raspberry. I thought about the blue raspberry part of my tongue touching the blue raspberry part of his tongue. We hadn't kissed with tongue when we kissed, we just pressed our lips to each other's and held them there for a second then pulled apart and did the same thing again a few times. I wondered what it would be like to have a tongue in my mouth. I didn't know how the thought made me feel. Maybe a little tingly, but I think that might have been the wine cooler. I drank a little more to make whatever Miles was saying now seem a little more

interesting.

I'd never imagined my first kiss in a game of spin the bottle. I'd had an elaborate fantasy about it, honestly. The guy in the fantasy wasn't anyone from BNHS, because I didn't actually like any of those guys. He was loosely based on the prince in a fantasy book I read, but he was in high school, too, so that it wouldn't be weird. Brooke had a boyfriend who was in his twenties last year for like a month until her parents found out and threatened to get him arrested. She was so sad at first, but then she thought about it more and realized that he was actually pretty creepy and ugly. She confessed to me that he would call her "my little porcelain doll" and that she never liked it but she wasn't sure if that was a normal thing for a boyfriend to say. She'd never had one before and obviously I haven't, so I didn't know what to tell her. I think I gave her good advice, though. I told her that if she didn't like it, it didn't matter if it was normal or not. She nodded, eyes narrowed at me like I was really wise. I think that I am, sometimes. Especially when I've had something to drink. She told me about that the first time we had alcohol, when Miles got us Four Lokos from the old cashier at the store who thinks they're just an energy drink. I think I'm the only person in the group who hasn't gotten us all alcohol, yet. I hope they don't notice. I think I'd be too nervous to try at the gas station and I don't know where else I'd get it from. I don't have any older siblings or anything, just a dumb younger brother who smells because he convinced himself that taking showers is bad for the planet or something. I don't not care about the environment, but I don't think I'd ever care about anything enough to not shower regularly. I put my first empty bottle back in Cara's backpack. It would have been easier just to litter it, but I at least cared about the environment that much. I went for another one, trying a Bahama Breeze this time. I'd never had that flavor before. I usually liked to have the same things, because I knew I liked them, but I was feeling kind of bold that day.

"Damn, Tracey, you trying to get drunk?" Howie asked. I looked around and saw that everybody else was only like halfway

through their first.

I giggled, and said, “Maybe.” I thought that everybody was trying to get drunk. I thought that was the point. I handed the bottle off to Howie because he knew how to open it on a rock with the heel of his hand. I watched the line of muscles ripple up his narrow arm as he reached up and braced for the impact. I thanked him and took a sip. I thought the blue raspberry was better.

Once Miles was done with his rant, we didn’t really have much to say to each other. We’d been in classes together all day; we were all honors kids. We had improv club after school. We didn’t have anything to tell each other. I watched to make sure that everybody else was drinking fast, too, before I let myself finish my second drink.

Once we’d all had two drinks, it got easy to talk again. Cara liked to talk about deep things and ask us what she called “existential questions” like “if you had to get one person expelled from school, but everybody would know it was you that got them expelled, who would you pick?” They really made you think. That day she asked us all what we’d do if we found out that one of our parents had a second family. We all still had two parents in the same house, except Brooke and Brooke was really chill so we could talk about that kind of thing in front of her. It sparked a heated debate.

I said that I wouldn’t want to know that my dad had a second family. Howie got mad that I assumed it would be my dad, because his first girlfriend cheated on him. She didn’t really cheat on him, though, she just went to the movies with a different boy. They didn’t even kiss. But also, I don’t think that she had ever kissed Howie either, so I guess it would still be cheating if she did the things they did together with somebody else. I don’t really know. I still can’t picture my mom having a second family because she stays at home all day.

I was starting to get a little drunker and I really wanted to

be alone for a minute. Sometimes when I drink, I get really antisocial which I think is the opposite of what's supposed to happen, but I feel like really, really like myself when I'm a little drunk and I think that I just don't like people. I like my friends, but I really only want to spend more than a few hours with Brooke and I'd been with all of them all day. Miles and Howie were annoying me and Cara always just hung on every word they said which also annoyed me. Especially because she always complained about how annoying they were when they weren't around.

I didn't even bother telling anyone that I was going to walk away for a little bit because they're all pretty used to that by now. I watched my footing stepping down the rocks closer to the river. I squatted down to hold on to a big one and reached my foot toward a little one lower down. It quivered under my foot when I put some weight on it, so I shimmied my foot forward to another one.

"You good?" Brooke called to me.

"Just going exploring," I called back. She laughed. I didn't think that anybody would miss me while I was gone. I probably should have left my bottle up with my friends. It was making traversing the route to the flat part right by the water a little more treacherous. I decided to just slide down the rocks on my butt because it would be easier. They were kind of sharp, though, and I scraped up the back of my legs. It was way faster than trying to climb down, so I thought it was worth it. I wandered a little ways upstream, listening to the sound of a bird chirping. I thought about how I wouldn't have gotten to hear the bird if I'd been stuck listening to Miles ramble about something up under the bridge with everybody else. I thought that it was kind of weird how I did want to kiss him again even though I didn't really like kissing him and how I felt something every time he looked at me now even though every time he said anything it bothered me.

One of the bird songs sounded a little odd to me. I looked up

to try and find the bird it was coming from, but all I saw was a crow and I knew it wasn't a crow. A boulder jutting out from the rock face into the river and blocked my path. I thought about turning around, but the sound was coming from the other side of the boulder and I thought that maybe a bird was trapped and I could help it. Or maybe some other type of animal like a cat. It had to be a cat. It sounded like a baby crying. It couldn't be a bird. I felt stupid for thinking that it might be a bird. I leaned on the boulder, balancing my wine cooler on the point on top. It almost tipped over but I caught it. I took a big sip before finding a flat rock to put it on. I'd be back for it once I figured out what animal the sound was coming from. It didn't really sound like a cat, so maybe it was a possum or a raccoon. I hoped it wasn't a rat or a skunk. I reached my hands up to the top of the rock and pushed down. I wasn't any good at pushups. I'd failed the pushup part of the fitness test in gym class. The only part I was okay at was running. I was actually more than okay. I had the third highest score in the pacer. I was embarrassed that I was good at it, though, because none of my friends were sporty and we were all supposed to be in it together at not being sporty, because all the sporty kids were cool. I wasn't sporty, I was just fast. Anyway, Howie could do lots of push ups and pull ups and nobody said anything bad to him about it. I mean, I guess nobody said anything bad to me about being fast either. It just felt like I shouldn't be.

I found a little crag at the bottom of the boulder for my foot and pushed up. I tilted forward and landed stomach-first onto the top of the rock. All the air in my lungs shot out of my mouth and an acidic sludge of wine cooler and pepperoni pizza from lunch gurgled up. I spit it on the ground. I worried that I was wasting alcohol by spitting it up. I was glad that my friends didn't see me.

The animal noise was louder from up there, but I still didn't see anything on the ground or in the bush next to the boulder. I hoisted my legs up to the top and laid along the razor edge of the boulder for a second, letting myself catch my breath. That animal really did

sound like a human baby. A chill ran through my body. I wanted to see it and know what it was but I was scared. I worried that it might be something supernatural, even though I didn't really believe in that type of stuff any more. I nudged my body weight over a bit and stuck a foot out, searching for a place to catch before the ground below. I leaned a little too far and rolled right off the boulder. I let out a tiny yelp, but it definitely wasn't loud enough for my friends to hear. Even though I was an actress in the improv club, I wasn't that dramatic. I was more comic. That's why I never tried out for the spring play. It was always so serious and everyone in it was so egotistical. Plus, the school barely had any funding for drama so the sets looked stupid. At least with improv, everything was totally pretend and it just depended on us being good at miming.

I broke my fall with my right hip and arm and could already tell that it was going to bruise. I stayed laying down for a minute, feeling sorry for myself. I blinked twice, deeply, crinkling my whole face, and shook it off. I brushed some of the dirt off and turned toward the sound. There was a bundle of cloth in the river with its contents caught against the corner where the boulder met the shore. The water rushed next to my head and around the bundle. It was unmistakably the source of the noise.

I rolled over on to my stomach and lifted my hips to crawl over to it. I moved hesitantly, feeling like I was on a secret mission. I peeked over a smaller rock to get a better look at the bundle. I saw a patch of pink skin and raised myself up to my knees to get a different angle. It was a baby. It was a human baby crying. I didn't know what to do, but some sort of maternal instinct or something zapped me, because I reached down to pick it up. It was wrapped in a blanket and shoved into what looked like a plastic bowl. I dislodged the plastic from its spot between the rocks and discovered that it was a pasta strainer. I hadn't held a baby since my little brother was really little, but it felt wrong to leave it in the pasta strainer, so I cradled the tiny thing in the crook of my elbow and pressed it up against my chest.

I patted its back and, to my surprise, it stopped crying. I picked up the strainer, because I thought the baby might miss it or something. I couldn't climb over the boulder with a baby in one hand and a strainer in another, so I thought fast and put the strainer on my head. The boulder was shortest at the riverside, so I balanced precariously on the smaller rock next to it, then stepped up onto it. I almost tipped over and dropped the baby, but I steadied myself with my other hand. The colander toppled off my head onto the path on the other side. I jumped down and the baby started crying again, shaken up by the movement or something. I grabbed the strainer and popped it back on my head. I began walking back towards where my friends were and almost forgot my wine cooler. I turned back to grab it.

I shouted a hello to the group once I saw them, all still up under the bridge. They were cackling with laughter, like someone had just said the funniest joke they'd all ever heard. A twinge of jealousy tickled my heart, but I thought that finding a whole human baby in the river was probably more exciting than anything that they could possibly be talking about. They didn't hear my first shout so I shouted again.

“Who's that?” Miles asked.

“I've never seen that person before in my life,” Cara replied. They were doing a bit, which would have been funny except that I had a human baby in my arms, so it was actually really annoying.

“Is that even a person? Perhaps an alien?” Brooke said. They were all projecting so I could hear what they were saying.

“I don't think we should invite that alien to join our group. It might be dangerous,” Howie said. I slipped on a loose rock on the ascent and keeled forward. I almost dropped the baby.

I got closer to the group before they dropped the bit. Brooke

asked what was on my head. The baby cried.

“Did you go over there and give birth?” Howie asked.

“Wow, Trace, you really weren’t showing. How did you maintain your girlish figure?” Cara asked.

It seemed like they didn’t realize that the baby was real. It all seemed like a joke to them. I huffed. Brooke met my eyes and gave me a silent questioning look.

“I found a baby and I don’t know what to do. It was in the river... like Moses,. But in a spaghetti strainer.” I said.

“The Bible was just a different culture’s mythology,” Miles said, “like how there are Greek Gods and the like. But people take it so seriously—”

I cut him off, saying, “Guys, I have a literal human baby in my arms and you won’t shut up for like two seconds to help me figure out how to deal with this situation!”

They snapped back into reality, like this was the first real notice they’d had of the baby.

“That’s a real baby?” Cara asked. I nodded.

“Shit,” said Brooke. I nodded. Shit was right. She bit her bottom lip and chewed for a second before saying, “we need to bring her to somebody’s parents.”

“Yeah, I think that’s the best thing to do,” Cara agreed. I thought so, too, but I couldn’t get caught being drunk by anybody’s parents, especially not my own. I’d be grounded and I wouldn’t be allowed to perform in the improv show next week. If I didn’t have the

improv show, I didn't even know who I was.

“But we're drunk,” I said.

“So we sober up, then we bring the baby home and deal with it,” Cara said. She reached out her arms to me to hand the baby off. I did. She asked if it was a boy or a girl. I said I had no idea.

We pondered the quickest ways to sober up and came up with cold showers and hot coffee. We were walking distance from the Denny's where we always went after performances, so we decided that we'd walk over there.

“We could dunk our heads in the river,” I suggested as an alternative to a cold shower. Everyone agreed that that was our best option. We took turns holding the baby and going to the water. Brooke and I walked down together.

“You ready?” She asked as we knelt on the bank next to each other. I nodded. We counted down from three before plunging our heads into the water. The river moved quickly and rushed into my ears and up my nose. My hair splayed out all around my head. When I whipped my head up from the water because I couldn't stand the chill any longer, my wet hair flopped down over my face. I blew a raspberry to get the dirty river water out of my mouth and looked over at Brooke. She'd pulled her hair up into a bun on top of her head and it was completely dry. We laughed before heading back up to meet the group and the baby.

At Denny's we all ordered our coffee. I put four sugars and three creams in mine and Miles told me that it wasn't even coffee anymore because I did that. I stuck my tongue out at him. He told me it was blue. I told him his was too.

The baby was sleeping while we were there, so we put it back

in the colander and laid it on the girls' side of the booth. There were more of us and it was more tight, but it felt weird to give the baby to the boy's side. It was wedged between me and Cara. We kind of snuck it in by having me stand behind Miles when we were being seated because we thought that a bunch of drunk teenagers with a baby was a little bit suspicious. I really hoped it didn't wake up. I didn't want to get in trouble.

I still felt a little drunk when I finished my coffee, so I asked our waitress for another one. She leaned over with the pot of hot coffee to pour it into my cup. The coffee started as a steady stream, but started to waver. I looked up and followed the path of the waitress's eyes as she cursed, realizing that the coffee was hitting our table. She noticed the baby. Crap.

"This is my little sister," I said. I didn't know if the baby was a boy or a girl, but I always wanted a little sister. Cara kicked the side of my leg under the table. I looked over at her, widening my eyes to ask her what the hell? The waitress already saw the baby. I was trying to fix the problem.

"Okay," the waitress said, before hurrying off. We all stared blankly at each other. Maybe she bought it? I thought that everybody might be mad at me, but maybe they were just as nervous as I was. The waitress returned with a handful of white rags with an orange stripe down the middle and tossed them onto the spill. She apologized profusely before stopping to stare at the baby again.

She asked, "Why is she in a colander?"

Before I could think twice, I said, "I don't know." Cara kicked me again. This time, I knew I deserved it.

She looked from the baby to me to everyone else at the table before slowly folding each coffee-stained rag one at a time. She

seemed deeply focused on the task. She asked if she could get us anything else before turning on her heel.

“What the hell, Tracey?” Cara said.

“She’s so suspicious,” Howie said.

“No, she’s not,” Brooke said. She was tearing a napkin into tiny pieces and stuffing as many shreds as she could into an empty creamer container. I was happy to always have her on my side, at least. I excused myself to go to the bathroom. I didn’t even need to pee, I just couldn’t handle the tension at the table. Brooke shuffled out of the booth to let me out. I was walking toward the bathroom when I overheard our waitress’s voice saying the words, “teenagers with a baby” behind the flappy doors to the kitchen. I stepped closer and pressed myself flat against the door, hunched under the round windows at eye level, careful not to lean into it and let it swing open. I turned my cheek to the door, hoping to hear more through the door. The plastic muffled it, so I listened through the crack instead.

“ – other job’s a teacher, so I’m a mandated reporter. I don’t think that’s that girl’s little sister. I’ve never been in a situation like this,” our waitress was saying.

“Yeah that’s crazy,” the other waitress said.

“Are you even listening to me?”

“There’s some drunk teenagers and you have to tell their parents because you’re their teacher?”

I heard stomping footsteps coming in my direction so I darted off to the bathroom. Our waitress threw both doors open, swinging wildly. I dipped into the bathroom, feeling like a coward. I should tell my friends. I poked my head back out of the bathroom door and

watched as our waitress went right out the front doors of the Denny's. I wondered if she was going to call the police. I darted back over to our table and told everybody what I'd heard.

"I don't know what that means, though," I said.

"That means we need to get out of here with this baby," Howie said.

"She went out the door," I said.

"Was there a window in the bathroom?" Cara asked. I nodded. I thought there was. I honestly wasn't sure. Maybe there wasn't a bathroom window. This wasn't a time for self-doubt, though, so I brought the troops into the bathroom. The troops were Cara and Brooke, because Miles and Howie couldn't go in the girls' bathroom. We decided that the two of them would go outside to receive the baby from the window that may or may not be there. The baby had woken up by the time we got into the bathroom and she started crying. I heard a toilet flush and panic-opened the changing table and plopped the baby on top. She did smell like she had a dirty diaper so I began to unswaddle her from the ratty, wet, knit blanket that held her. The woman coming out of the stall paid us no attention. I got halfway to unpeeling the little flaps on the diaper after the woman had already left before Cara smacked my arm. I got too carried away with my character, I guess. I would say that's the sign of a good improviser.

I re-swaddled the baby and popped it back into its colander. Its tiny pink slits of eyes blinked open and the black abysses of pupil stared at us, like it was just now realizing that we weren't its family. I got sad for a second, paused to wonder what possibly could have brought that baby to the river in a colander. I wondered how long she'd been floating along before she got caught by the rock and how long she'd been crying while trapped before I found her. I absentmindedly patted her head. Cara pinched me. It seemed like she was getting

more and more violent each time she wanted to tell me I was an idiot without saying I was an idiot. We could see the window way way up in the handicap stall. Brooke offered to be the one to stand on the toilet. She was the tallest after all. I was second tallest and I was secretly glad that Brooke was taller than me, even though I wasn't tall enough to be a model and she was, but I already felt like a behemoth giant at five foot seven because I was taller than both Miles and Howie.

Brooke pushed at the window from a couple different angles and she couldn't figure out how to get it open, so Cara offered to go up. Cara probably wouldn't even be able to reach it because she was only five foot three and three quarters, but I let her try because she can be a little bossy. I held the baby, rocking her back and forth. Eventually, she stopped crying. I watched a movie one time where the mom couldn't get the baby to stop crying and I'd always thought that it was really hard to get babies to stop crying ever since watching it. I felt special for getting this baby, who wasn't even my baby or anybody's baby who I knew, to stop crying. More than once, too. I was a baby-whisperer. I added a little addendum to my go-to fantasy. The guy who was kind of based on the guy from my fantasy books and I had a baby. Actually, we had two babies. Twin girls. I always wanted a twin, even though Brooke was my neighbor and we'd been friends forever, so she might as well have been my sister.

Cara jumped off the toilet in a huff. It was my turn. I felt like I would definitely be able to open the window. I'd been the one to find the baby, I'd be the one to save it. I stepped up on the toilet seat in my converse and wished for the second time that day that I'd worn shoes with a better tread. I reached up toward the window and pushed at it from every angle.

"That's literally exactly what we both just did," Cara said. I shot her a dirty look. I knew that but there didn't really seem to be another option.

“Maybe it doesn’t open,” Brooke said.

“It has to open,” I said. I twisted the metal lock to the other side, for the third time since I got up onto the toilet, and shoved full force at the glass. The window popped open and it didn’t shatter or anything, but a spiderweb of cracks formed right where I’d pushed. I was terrified to send the baby out the window in case all the glass fell out.

“I got it!” I said. Cara and Brooke silently cheered for me. I poked my head out the window, full of caution to avoid further disturbing the glass. Miles and Howie were both standing on the sidewalk. The window led out right next to the entrance to the parking lot on the side with the busiest street. I hadn’t even thought about what we’d do once we got outside. I didn’t think anybody else had either. I asked the boys if they were ready for the baby and Howie told me that they were ready as they were going to be.

I swapped spots with Brooke because I practiced reaching down and felt like I would have to drop the baby to hand her off. She’d started crying again, just a low rumble of tears, not wailing or anything. Brooke leaned out the window with the baby and after a second, she started cursing. Nerves shot through every centimeter of my body. I couldn’t let anything happen to this baby.

“What happened?” I asked.

I heard Howie’s voice from outside say, “I got him!”

I breathed a sigh of relief, but I was also annoyed that Howie didn’t know that the baby must be a girl. She just seemed like a girl. She had girl energy.

“Now what?” Brooke asked, still perched atop the toilet.

“Now, we run,” Cara said. So we ran. Cara had that authority about her. It was usually a little annoying, but we needed it right now. We didn’t really think far enough in advance to know what we’d do once we got the baby through the window, so we all looked at each other until Cara motioned for us to run through the Denny’s. We bolted past an old couple and a family and two teenagers who I’m pretty sure went to our school, but I didn’t have time to do a double take at them.

We pushed through the glass double doors up front and almost ran smack into our waitress, who was standing out there smoking a cigarette. I heard her say she was a teacher and maybe this is a dumb thought, but I didn’t realize that teachers smoked. I didn’t think any of the teachers at BNHS were cool enough to smoke cigarettes and I didn’t even think smoking cigarettes was cool. It just seemed like such a not-teachery thing to do. Except maybe Ms. Cordona, who ran the studio art club. She always wore all black and went to classes in the evening for her Master’s Degree. She seemed like she might smoke.

Our waitress recognized us right away and tossed the cigarette on the ground. She shouted that she knew we were up to something right as Howie and Miles rounded the corner with the baby. Howie handed the baby off to me and Cara once again told everyone to run. Once again, we ran.

We ran as fast as we could past the Denny’s parking lot. Howie was fastest, so he led us into the Target parking lot next door. He shouted at us that it was a diversion. We chased after him. I was slowest, because of the baby. I think everyone trusted me with the baby because I was the one who found it. I kept looking over my shoulder to see our waitress trailing behind us. She seemed super winded and I was really glad that she was a smoker.

We dodged around cars pulling in and out of the parking lot.

I saw a group of the pretty girls from our school walking in and my soul crumpled with the embarrassment of running through the parking lot with a real, live human baby. I felt even more embarrassed that the baby was still sitting in the pasta strainer. Like, who would put a baby in a pasta strainer? I didn't even like them and I didn't even want them to like me, but I needed them to not think I was so weird that I'd run through a Target parking lot on a Friday night with a human baby in a pasta strainer. I thought that maybe went beyond weird and fell into certifiable lunatic territory.

A car kept riding along next to us and we kept trying to run faster, but it was a car so we couldn't beat it. Eventually it looped around and pulled directly in front of us, stopping us dead in our tracks. Howie started to step to the side but the driver's side door flung open right in front of his face. The car looked familiar – it was a dusty blue van with a big clamshell roof rack. I knew that car. Brooke's mom popped out and leaned against the door.

"I just want to know what's going on," she said, looking from Brooke to me to Cara to Miles to Howie. I tried to shield the baby from her view. She crossed her arms and sniffed the air.

"Have you kids been drinking?" she asked. We all shook our heads no, probably a little too quickly, because she looked more suspicious after we shook them.

"You know I don't drink, Mom," Brooke said. I watched as her blue tongue revealed itself in her mouth.

"We went to the movies and had blue raspberry icees," I said, proud that I thought up a good lie beforehand, proud to cover up for my best friend. Brooke's mom raised her eyebrows at us and offered us all a ride home. She told us that it was dangerous to be running around parking lots. I was astounded that she hadn't noticed the baby yet, but I had the colander propped against my hip and kind of hidden

behind Miles. I was doing a good job right now, I thought, at hiding a baby and hiding us being drunk. I was what our improv club called the MVP, the Most Valuable Pretender of the day. The baby just needed to stay quiet and we wouldn't get caught.

We all piled into Ms. Benson's car. I kept glancing over at the baby, who remarkably was asleep. I sat in the way back and Brooke sat in the front, even though usually when Ms. Benson gave us a ride somewhere, Brooke and I would sit in the bucket seats and Cara would sit up front and Miles and Howie would sit in the back. Or nobody would sit in the front and Cara would sit in between Miles and Howie. Brooke's mom wasn't that good of a driver. We were all in driver's education classes on Wednesday afternoons together and we'd learned not to do a lot of things that Ms. Benson was doing. She went full speed over a pothole and the car made a big ka-chunk sound. She braked hard and then jerkily started back up again. She cursed and then apologized to us like we were still little kids.

The baby woke up at the sudden movements and immediately launched into wails. Brooke jumped into action and started blasting the song on the radio to cover it up, claiming that she loved it, even though it was Margaritaville by Jimmy Buffet and she only listens to Taylor Swift. Miles covered his ears and told her that Jimmy Buffet is for old people who go on cruises because they're afraid of really experiencing culture. Ms. Benson started to say that that was a rude thing to say, but paused and reached for the volume knob. I bounced the baby up and down on my knee, my heart holding on for dear life to the punching bag in my throat. It cried louder. Brooke reached to bat her mom's hand away from the dial knob.

Ms. Benson pulled over, right on the side of a busy road and put the car in park. She batted Brooke's hand back. She unbuckled her seatbelt and popped up on a knee to survey the back of the car before saying, "I'm hoping the Home Ec babydoll assignment that I did as a teenager has just gotten more realistic over the years?"

“We found her by the river and didn’t know what to do,” I blurted out.

“Tracey found her by the river, we didn’t have anything to do with it, Ms. Benson,” Cara said. It was my turn to give her ankle an ‘are you serious?’ kick.

“Yeah, it was all Tracey, she just wandered off and we didn’t know where she went,” Howie said. Miles nodded in agreement, that nod he always does where he sticks his head out a little too far and he looks like an ancient giant tortoise bobbing its head as it takes slow steps.

I looked up to the front to Brooke, hoping that she’d offer me some defense. She started out the side window, chin in her palm, looking like she was maybe about to cry. I was on my own. This would be my greatest improv challenge yet. Or I could just tell the truth.

“Wait, guys,” I said, “didn’t we decide that we were gonna bring the baby to somebody’s parents once we sobered up?” “We weren’t drinking, Ms. Benson, we swear,” Cara said.

Ms. Benson turned the radio all the way down and told us that we were all in deep shit. She peeled out from her spot on the side of the road, almost killing us all by nearly pulling into a car in her blind spot. She drove to the next stoplight, then flicked on her blinker. We all sat in silence as she followed a route that we knew didn’t go to any of our homes. My legs bounced unintentionally, and the sped up rhythm somehow calmed the baby down. She stayed awake, but quiet, big eyes staring up at me. I sighed. I thought that maybe my family could take her and I could have a little sister. We pulled up to a fire station.

“Tracey,” Ms. Benson said, “you’re going to take that baby and set it on the steps and then we can all forget that this ever happened. I will be telling your parents about the drinking, I will not be telling them

about the baby. If you want to have that conversation with your own parents, that is on you. I cannot deal with that today.”

“What’s gonna happen to her?” I asked. Ms. Benson shrugged, looking up and away from all of us. Some redness rimmed her eyes and they glittered under the streetlights that had just switched on, a little bit wet.

“I don’t know, kids. I don’t know.”

Miles opened the sliding door and it sang it’s little sliding door song. I tumbled out the of car, with the baby, still in the colander, and looked back at everyone looking out at me. I walked up to the steps of the fire station and set my little sister, just for the day, down on the concrete.

“I’ll miss you,” I said.



Krystle Griffin

The Poet

Haphazardly you spat
‘Well you’re a poet right?’
I could write scriptures out of your flesh
Slice into your neck with my molars
And splash sludged apple bits onto the page.
Letting my mouth full spew every drop of sweat collected
Absorbed as I sponged while on top.
Wrapping myself around you
Holding all of the broken pieces
Hoping saliva can turn into glue,
And knowing it still wouldn’t be enough.





Katherine Day

You Tell Me My Body is a Temple

but then you desecrate it. You
 drunkenly piss on its walls and leave
 shattered beer bottles in the aisles.

You forget to blow out the prayer candles—
 left them one night to smolder
 the soft, decaying wood of the pews.

You tell me my body is a temple,
 so you aimlessly arrange
 clementines and bunches of grapes

on the soft bed of my altar,
 then abandon them to rot,
 until furry blue mold encrusts

the dried peels and skin.
 You tell me my body is a temple,
 but now it is empty, worshipless. The

windows had shattered panes. Cobwebs gather
 on the wood beams hollowed out by termites.
 The keys of the piano are chipped;

the strings inside snapped apart, and
 weak, twinkling music is all it makes now.
 You told me my body was a temple.

I built a shrine so that I can remember.
 Framed photographs, peeled tangerines, black-eyed Susans.
 A vase of water I fill each morning.

At my altar, I pray nightly for you
 to never return. But on my knees,
 I keep one eye open on the devil's door.

What Remains

It wasn't far to where I hadn't been.
I didn't know the creek that bounded
this abandoned house finally ran to the ocean,
and the salted wind could blow so many miles
inland to me, as I stood later in the street.

When I froze in the bushes, a young boy
so still, squirrels and chipmunks licked my skin
until I finally ran by the tire swing fallen from its tree,
tripped over toys left in the yard
hidden and tangled in wild raspberries.

Inside was mildewed carpet, stained and
dripping ceilings, black moldy walls,
a wooden chair left in the living room,
a toothbrush on a water-stained sink
still with a faint mint smell.

Who knew that leaving is math
always with a remainder--a chair, a toothbrush,
the distance for a creek to drain to the ocean.
Memory may shrug aside its weight yet
tire swings bear their joyous cargo with each push,
raspberries grow every year waiting for harvest.



Nonetheless, I Loved You Louder

And if I'm being honest, you were a
bitch. Only love born from blood
could tolerate your volatile moods.
Dalton warned me
early on, but you had the echo of old
friends, and I wanted to call you sister.
Guilt tormented me, wreaking
havoc on the most intimate parts of a now retired
identity. I was broken healing the broken, no room for
judgment. Sisters are built for projection, but your
knuckles hurt less than your resentful words. Did you
listen to your own voice as you turned your back,
Morgan?
Nonetheless I loved you louder,
over the rhythmic squelching in my chest
proving your serrated edge struck true.
Quicksilver tongue. I fell in love with
Reno, and you
spoiled everything for me.
The city I will never see again
unravels only when I think of us.
Voyeur of 2017, a rose-colored lens.
We cannot send sand back up the hourglass.
Xanax for the trauma. The following
years drinking from stemmed glasses.
Zinfandel, sparkling in your hand.

Rebecca Kuder

Alchemy (A Dance in Seven Movements)

A Sense of the Place

Forty years ago in springtime (but not yet May), the showy spirea bushes in front of that recently vacated gray and black house gushed with life. Such frippery, the uncountable and papery hole-punch white flowers, the goldenrod filaments inside each one that burst forth like tiny explosions, like Roman candles to tear open the night sky. Like something made only to be lit, and burn, and die.

And closer to the street, a queue of still not unfolded white peonies, their bulbous heads held by cups of pink-edged green. Their ants wouldn't have the courage finish the job of opening blooms that year. Maybe the heat tiptoed too close, though I didn't touch those buds. (I would never. I know my bounds.) Without the ants, the peonies stayed hidden, fisted up tight—the reflex of the living, when they feel unsafe. Curl and hide, protect the flimsy body. I never understood that impulse. Me, I want to live and dance wherever I can. Wherever I'm invited. I always say yes.

Just west of the empty gray and black house was the park. A community swimming pool on top of one hill, and on another hill, two water towers. In summer, villagers went up the first hill and spread blankets to watch the fireworks. Children with sticky hands and faces lit by sparklers would later plunge into the chlorine to wash their grubby bodies. A midnight swim. In snowy winter, kids bundled in layers and climbed the hill to sled down. Throughout the year, in the field below, strong and wiry adults pitched, and hit, and ran. Softball on the diamonds. Everyone loved that park. Why not expand?

Note that although the gray and black house was a passable shelter, it had been built with no basement, no deep place within the dwelling to hide from natural or any other type of disaster.

And, like anything that survives disaster, the debris that resulted when I burned down that gray and black house would tremble, exposed—on display—for someone (not me) to deal with later. I am an alchemist, and I know what is stable and what is not.

A Job

There's something I want to say to whoever didn't like what happened:

Don't blame me. I was only doing my job.

Their Meetings and Plans

Maybe the owner of the gray and black house had been troubled about upkeep, or cost, or who knows what landlords think about. Taxes? Systems to keep the economic machinery running. The machines and machinations. Somewhere, in ledgers, numbers might tell a story, how much somethings cost, subtracted from how much someone has, or how much of a man's time all this legal responsibility steals. The tenants (a mother and her girl) didn't usually ask for much, but when an appliance broke or a roof leaked, repair became duty, impossible to ignore.

Maybe it was imperative to sell. Throw out one family so that everyone else could enjoy a bigger park. Give the village a new soccer field. The public good?

I had been inside that house before.

To make food, the people who lived there had to take a match from the tin holder, which had been nailed to the wall. (The holder, creamy white, painted with a red poppy and a white daisy. And red, inside.) Strike a match to bring me. Turn on the gas, light the gas stove so I could make blue flame. A small ring of me, alive and stirring in their midst, ready to sustain their bodies.

The girl placed a hunk of cheese in a black iron skillet. After she called me with a match, I hugged the bottom of the pan and she watched the orange lump melt, golden, buttery. And sometimes it was popcorn in another pan. The merrymaking! As each kernel lost its hidden dewdrop and the hull shattered! All the madness created (by my heat).

And the mother lit cigarettes with me; each morning I helped her inhale a bit more death.

Maybe the sale of the gray and black house was preordained. (The wealthy don't always disclose their plans, but the masses always end up needing to flee.) Maybe they had always planned to kick that family out, eventually. I heard words spoken around Halloween bonfires and pyres of late summer brush. A lot of speculation. I know this: you could watch the landlord's small empire crumble, just the edges, and see, at the gray and black house, some shabbiness and untended repairs that might be easy for someone less...elemental...than myself to miss.

The landlord met with the town bosses in the public servant offices, arrayed all the necessary papers across an oak table. Men invited me to their cigarettes and inhaled, and parsed and pondered; there were questions asked and answered. Lawyers were engaged and aptly remunerated. People must always meet, talk, wrestle and digest, draw up documents, file paperwork. Paper is the least durable substance. You know what spilled coffee or a bit of rain can do to ink. Let alone what heat can do, or fire.

Anyway, among the ashtrays people yakked and articulated and scrawled their agreements. Those who were involved on that final day rose from the oak table and examined the curled-edge map of the village that was thumbtacked to a board on the beige wall—insignificant and mutable, this map, this depiction of a corner of the world, of which a few fortunate men had claimed charge. Control is an

illusion. They discussed money.

Even paper money is no match for me. (Excuse the pun.)

No one owns fire.

By then, these men—let’s call them my employers—had things beyond heat on their minds. Details, documents, signatures to secure in bold ink. Some of their meetings were privileged and yielded no evidence for the public record. Sometimes they even forgot to smoke. Nothing to find later; nothing to read or hold to the light. Their concern was not my concern. Enlisting the fire department to burn the structure was an afterthought. It solved a problem. I heard them claim most villagers would feel safer, after this planned burn, this exercise (though not the tenants, I thought—not the family who had lived for thirteen years in the gray and black house, the ones who now had to scam. That girl.).

By the time the men bid me to do more than help them smoke, the deed for the property had been handed over to the bosses and the only things left were logistics and my task.

The Day Of

After those flimsy papers were shuffled, signed, sent, stamped, and filed (and after the tenants were notified, and after they packed their possessions and moved), the firefighters set a date. May Day. The firefighters piled on protective turnout gear. What the pros wear when they need to hide from me.

Some were volunteers, so young, never having performed such an everlasting act, but they took the work seriously. With deliberate slowness, they followed the chief’s orders (disconnect the utilities; remove hazardous materials—tar, shingles, asbestos, etc.—and any stray contents from the former dwelling; place straw and wood pallets inside the shell of a house, strategically). I appreciated their

gravitas, their care.

I was ready and of course I knew what to do.

When they called me, I held my own meeting with fuel and air, and began the unhurried dance toward my full splendor. I was dazzling, my complexity and chroma, what humans can only see as orange or black but what is truthfully so much more, so infinite. My beauty! My reach. Try to put it in words...but it's impossible. The crackle of charred wood in the pit, how things turn and fall, the richness of my song. I am infinite. My voice has a million different notes, whatever story I tell. So many stories. The vast history of time.

That day, that night, while I danced the Magnificence, I saw a car approach, the girl with her friends. The girl who (for thirteen years, and until very recently) had lived her life in the gray and black house. The car moved slowly, and I sensed the driver wanted to pull over, and let the girl yell at the firefighters—at me!—to stop, but terror kept her seated in the dull gold Valiant. Maybe the girl didn't want to look too long, or couldn't. I suppose a person in her position might feel...pain? I don't understand pain. Others, neighbors, gathered to watch from across the street, their arms curled around their bodies as if against a chill. Those with less to lose. I can understand why people look. I'm fascinating! All the allure and lick of me, my dance and gyration. I believe that in each human there's a seed of jealousy: if only they could pirouette and destroy with such force and ferocity.

I danced there for a long time, as long as I found sustenance.

What Appeared in The Newspaper

People will sometimes use crumpled newspaper to coax me to dance. In winter, to warm their bones. Speaking of newspaper, here's what I saw, later, after: A photograph on the front page of the local newspaper. The caption:

“Battling a blaze they set themselves, members of the Yellow Springs fire department staged a training exercise Sunday—burning down a house on West South College Street to make way for new soccer fields at Gaunt Park.”

In the photograph, four firefighters stand behind the house. One pulls a skinny tree back from me—though it’s May first, and there are no leaves on the tree, so maybe the tree is already dying, just not yet lit. Maybe the leaves have recoiled from my heat. Helmets and turnout gear. One man holds a big hose. Is it on? It’s pointed toward the house.

In the photograph, the house submits to the flame.

In the photograph, I do my job.

The Dance

My dance had many movements. The firefighters invited me back again and again, between dousings with the hose. Water from the water towers. Their practice.

After my breath and body had done its work, I smoldered in the aftermath as long as I could. I stared at the terrified peony globes along the street, all those huddled and starved ants. By then, the spirea had crisped and collapsed, flowers and all.

I languished in that wreckage until days later.

Then the girl came back, after she thought I was done and dead. She was so slow. She put one foot down carefully and then switched to the other foot, like a kind of a dance. I watched her go back toward where the shed had been, saw her stop and find a small white puffball on the ground. Which she picked up. A tiny wool rabbit, which was hers. Still there and unsullied. Her toy. She held it in her

hand.

She closed her eyes.

Her closed eyes made no sense to me. I never knew why she closed her eyes.

The Rabbit and The Girl

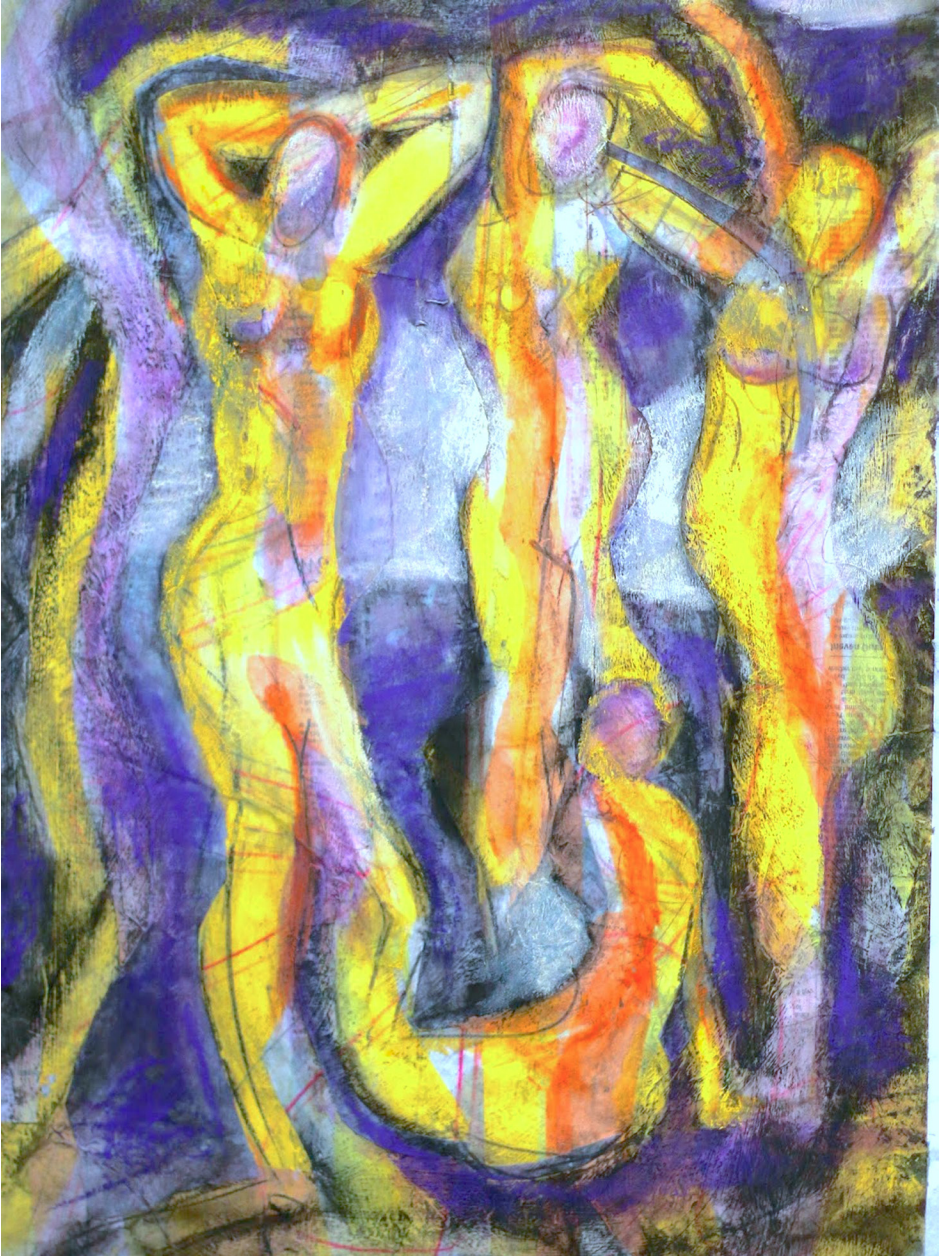
She took the rabbit with her. She went wherever she went.

She still has the rabbit now, still holds it sometimes in her hand. Still closes her eyes and holds the rabbit. White like the spirea, like the peonies that didn't bloom that year. All these curvaceous and pallid reminders.

She thinks I left that rabbit for her, as if I could, and I won't tell her otherwise but the truth is I didn't even see it until she danced back there and leaned over to pick it up. So tiny. If I had seen that charming tuft of carbon, maybe now it would be gone, maybe she would never have found a thing, but at the time its quivery ephemera escaped me, and I had so much more to do.

She has some strange feelings about spring, still. She lights a candle in the morning to greet me. I stay small for her. She doesn't blame me. She feels whatever she may feel. She knows—I hope!—that it wasn't personal. That I was only doing my job. She knows how much I love to dance.

How I can't help myself.



Johnathan Jones

Telegram.

There is a certain woman in New York City.
Dusk now where she's headed through the park
like the night's irreversible, quiet landslide
moving inch by inevitable inch towards a Holy
Lamb of God. Her thoughts like mystery of waters'
movement bow to stern or ice trapped under iron.
A ticket to the theatre she tells him as though
it were any ordinary ticket. And she makes him
believe there is no such thing as America. Only
the glasses she uses to read are a kind of unlimited
wealth that has nothing to do with the fact that each
cell was designed inescapable. Equidistant. He sleepwalks
as the orchestra slows the speed of light that will soon
be the end of year. In the darkness of midday new snow
has fallen, spread across this old illusion to dissolve
and fuse. Just a ticket to the theatre she said.
And he tells himself such feelings cannot last.
Nor can he live forever

Unflinching

In a tavern, surrounded by familiar faces, I hear these words: “Ladies, enough with the tearjerkers. I understand. If you share another tale of harrowing chaos you’ve survived, I’ll exit. You win! You claim the victimhood trophy! On behalf of men, I apologize: We’re disappointing.” Laughter. Clinking glasses. Again, the muted whispers of my heart. End your narration of pain.

The initial time I encountered my father’s unabashed cruelty, I barely made it past four years. My sister, bare and laid across his knee. His leather belt delivered thirteen strikes. I did the counting. I was young enough not to understand anything more. Time stretched to eternity. At twelve, she just started becoming a woman. I hid in the bedroom down the corridor, peeking through the smallest of openings in my door. The first brutal strikes left bloody welts on her skin. I withdrew, unable to endure the menacing sight, frozen in place. With eyes clamped shut, I reached for my outsized purple crayon and began transforming the bedroom wall. Aimless shapes and lines, as endearing as my thoughts. Her silence, not the echoes the belt made, shook me. And it continues to do so.

The second time I saw my father devoid of humanity, he targeted my mother. The second time I saw him surrender his guise to unabashed wrath, he launched a coffee mug at her. He wanted to wound her with an intensity only evident in his aspirations of becoming a Cleveland Indians pitcher. The mug ended up punching a hole in the kitchen wall. The aftermath heralded an eerie silence. I held myself still, the very air froze around me. My recollections of a school report on hurricanes transformed the moment into a phenomenon. We were in the center of turmoil.

His hands never crossed the boundary of my mother’s body. She attributed it to her physical anomaly. She often said, “He doesn’t dare touch me,” words slurred by a potent mix of southern accent and vodka. Yet, he did not shy away from violating his daughters.

Perfect legs - ours.

Baseball.

Purple crayon.

At sixteen, I went on a date. Overwhelmed by the throbbing pulse of my own adolescent body, I found myself leaning towards him for a goodbye kiss. We existed in that moment, except for a shadowy figure behind me, my father seized my ear and dragged me back to the house. Pain turned my ear hot, then a deafening ring echoed through, followed by the onset of aching pain. I feared losing my ear. The sight of the boy stepping out of his car remains vivid, but I shook my head.

That night, words morphed into weapons. Slut, the ammunition. Again and again.

Purple crayon.

Belt.

When I was twelve, I fell victim to molestation again. On a swimming trip with my team when a seventeen-year-old boy named Robert coerced me into sharing a music session. His taste leaned towards Gerry Rafferty's "Baker Street". He slipped his hand under my tank top and fondled my barely-there breasts. I remember being frozen in fear, stealing glances at the plastic barf bag. Not of him, but of my body's unexpected response. I welcomed an airplane crash. Crashing, I urged for it. "When you wake up it's a new morning/ The sun is shining, it's a new morning/ You're going, you're going home."

Now, "Baker Street" triggers my body into remembering unwanted sights, sounds, and feelings.

However, returning home and bearing the presence of my father painted a far worse picture.

Baseball.

Coffee mug.

Walkman.

Barf bag.

The first-time clenched fists targeted my body, I touched eighteen summers of existence. Murky sleep concealed the event, only to wake up to scattered clothes, legs bare on a bed, and remnants of him on me. A bruise blossomed between my shoulder and breast, I watched him sleep. His beauty captivated me - long feathered hair framing his perfectly fit body. The allure brought me to him. I caught his attention, shaking my hair and swaying my hips. I stood, admiring him while I reconciled with internal monologues – he is beautiful, hence my stupidity lies bare, fueled by alcohol. I deserve this.

My college roommate reached me at 3 a.m. My underwear hid from sight. As I braved the early morning chill, he came out and landed punches on my jaw. He smiled while returning the underwear.

I waited for my ride. Sounds of a dog barking filled the air. The air reeked of cow excrement from Lubbock stockyards. I treated a scab on my arm childishly. You can't claim victim if you indulge in intoxication. I didn't indulge sobs. I forced it down.

I didn't tell anyone. Instantly, I returned to him. Intentionally.

Purple crayon.

Coffee mug.

Vodka.

Underwear.

The second time a man struck me, college had just started. He was a poet, a pacifist, a hippie. Attributes that escaped importance. He held a short fuse. His hands knew the language of unspoken words and unexpressed poems. All of it felt familiar.

Two different occasions forced me into homelessness, both times a direct result of emotional trauma. Both instances I woke under bridges sans pants or underwear, surrounded by vomit, a throbbing pain in my lower body. I woke up thinking it sexual assault. But who could I blame? I blamed the only person within reach – myself. My own body.

Belt.

Barf bag.

Baseball.

Purple crayon.

I'm trying to reveal a truth, a harsh reality, but it feels like I'm confessing to crimes uncommitted by me. I did not deserve any of it. No one does. But when women voice such experiences, society fashions a way to muffle them. Their stories of trauma are considered unsuitable for the cultural fabric. Victims are asked to keep these experiences to themselves, forced to puritanical norms of culture. I'm trying to reveal that girls and women face discrimination daily. But this violence has become so commonplace, so much a part of society, it masquerades as another part of life.

To be honest, the reason I comprehend this complex web of violence against girls and women is that I acquired learning from books. My consciousness and awareness burgeoned through books. I learned that this violence against girls, women, boys, and men is absolutely not normal. Yet the more I tried to understand, the more I realized the magnitude of the problem. This violence is both highly prevalent and unbelievably unseen in its various forms. Our culture often overlooks these atrocities, often choosing to turn a blind eye. We are forced to live with this reality. We are forced to watch.

The other reason I understand this is that I survived. My survival was not because I didn't know that what was happening to me was wrong. I knew it, even when I was just three. But there was something that made me think I deserved it. And maybe worse – I felt that I could

withstand it. I had a choice.

When my father raised his hand to me at eighteen, I said: “Do it”.

When the poet punched me in the car at a stoplight, I said, “Get the fuck out of my car or I will kill you.”

I had to kill a part of myself to live. A part of myself that believed I deserved all that had happened; a part of myself that believed that I could withstand it; a part of myself that believed that it was my fault.

Victim.

Slut.

Bitch.

Baseball.

Purple crayon.

Belt.

When I was thirteen, my best friend was physically assaulted and sodomized in the boys’ locker room at school by sadistic members of the football team because they thought he was gay. His physical trauma endured. They used a baseball bat. He said, “my chance at being with anyone, the chance of a family, the feeling of being okay, died that day.”

I drank with him after swim practice, waiting for my mother to pick me up. There were no laws at that time to protect us. Also, he was told by his father’s lawyer that he could not call it “rape.”

Baseball.

Purple crayon.

Barf bag.

I am a survivor of sexual abuse and male violence. I had three abortions. One time, I had a baby girl who died the day she was born. Now, I have a husband and a son. My husband is a filmmaker, a writer, and a cello player. He's also skilled in Muay Thai and Jiu Jitsu. My son doesn't know how to throw a baseball. He loves the color purple. He loves to draw. I am alive. More so than I've ever been.



The Woman in the Painting

There was a man sitting in front of the woman in the painting.

There were often men in front of her—this was rather the design of the art museum—but the painted woman had never seen this particular man before. Or had never seen one sit with such composed agitation, anyway: with quite so much urgent movement behind otherwise still eyes.

There was a shift in the room when they faced each other for the first time. Perhaps not enough of a shift to be noticeable by anyone else, but a distinct change nonetheless. The woman was familiar enough with this room by now to know. Something lurched, then resolved; the man's eyes furrowed and then smoothed and did not waver from hers.

The woman in the painting had never thought to grow bored with watching the people watching her, or watching the other framed pieces hanging in the gallery. She had had years (and years, and years) to study the differences of people, often slight amid neglected similarities. She had spent countless hours tracking their expressions and the charmingly predictable progression of their movements—had imagined herself mimicking them, trying on the shapes of eyebrows and lips as she pleased. (She did not ever do this, of course. Paintings cannot move.) She was interested in clothing in particular. She thought a lot about what she'd wear if she could choose for herself; if she was picking something out for a day at the art gallery, perhaps. Her own simple blue frock differed from the styles of visitors, though she supposed that was part of the appeal. At least it was her own; she was fairly certain she had not been modeled after anybody in particular when she was first painted: her creator filling the page with her head and her shoulders and no more, all implied continuity and projected possibilities. There was a brief period where she tried to stop herself when she thought about clothing, because she worried that one day someone would magically be able to read her mind and then they'd think that all the painted lady thought about was clothes. At some

point, she stopped worrying. (Mostly).

Anyhow, she'd had a lot of time to think about this (and to not think about it). She had been in this gallery, this museum, for a very, very long time. So long that she hardly thought about the time before—the time of paint brushes and cargo ships and brown paper wrappings—though she remembered it all. She remembered almost everything, even through the many years behind glass and velvet rope. When life is one room, every visitor of that room reshapes the universe. (Though the painted woman was well aware of the multitudes of universes making up the world outside the art museum. Every so often she spotted leaves trekked in from muddied shoes or books in foreign languages tucked under arms, and she redrew the map of a human life over again in her head). This is why she remembered nearly everything she saw.

And this is why she marked the long period in which the man in front of her sat, hours perhaps, followed by the moment when he stood and left the gallery. The woman was distantly aware of a sense of dulling following his departure.

The woman in the painting, for having seen almost none of the world herself, knew plenty about what “the world” meant to the people who visited.

She knew from the satisfied nods that greeted golden frames. She knew from the way that scenic meadows replaced similarly scenic landscapes, and that one well-dressed portrait was hung to compliment another, and then another. She had seen hundreds of variations of the same room full of ideas and images, designed secretly to promise a life rather than reflect it. The woman in the painting had grown more than familiar with these promises over time.

She had been in this room longer than most pieces had been in the museum itself. She had spent much of her time (aside from watching the people watching) studying what others came to see. She had, without moving, traveled through distant lands and regal kingdoms: she had flirted with painted ladies across the room, studied sailors and passing ships, and had wandered through forests and gardens.

She had painstakingly sewn together what a life must be out of others' comings and goings and oils and frames, and short days followed by long nights all in an air-conditioned room, knowing the crux of the thing was out of her reach. She wanted to ask the people who came to the museum what it was she was missing, but she did not. (Paintings cannot speak.) She ached sometimes for the other frames, or maybe her own, to come crashing down and for a crack of breathing, touchable sky to slip through. She did not often forget the irony of wanting to shout at the people who came into the gallery to go back out, to go back to the something that they came from that she did not know, to not turn their backs on it because whatever a life was could surely not be the kind of thing that should be left unattended.

People seemed to think that paintings were meant to aspire to peopleness. (Not realness: few remaining assumed that much.) The woman knew they were not. People aspired to paintingness. This—her, the others—was what they wanted. She did not take comfort from this.

—

The man came back a short time later. The woman in the painting felt the entrance at once, like the snapping of glass.

The man walked around the room, glancing for a brief but respectful amount of time at the other pieces on the walls, and then stopped and took a seat in the same place as before, directly across from her. And then—the woman in the painting would have blinked, if she could—the man set a pad of paper on his lap and began to paint.

He did not paint immediately; he sketched first, shaping a rough and charcoaled something onto paper, but the woman could see from the stains on the pad and the hint of others tucked away that this man's work was painting. He sketched, and then later, he would paint.

The man watched her as he worked. His eyes, shining and gilded with dark lashes, flicked up every few minutes from the page to her...reading her, finding something there, looking away. The man was not painting her; whatever it was he was sketching bore no resemblance to herself, or to a woman or even a person, and yet he remained in his seat across from her.

Others had spent considerable time in that spot, mulling and hoping for something unrelated to her entirely. This man was made without any of their vague passivity. She watched as his hands mapped his page, cradled the corners: as his fingers pushed with purpose his pencil into motion with the same restrained blazing that waited in his eyes. The woman thought back to her own painter. There hadn't been anything particularly special about him, other than perhaps his skill for painting. She remembered his hairy chin, his square nose. This bothered her sometimes, or rather she was afraid she should be bothered: coming from an ordinary creator. She wondered if regular people were bothered by that, too. She wanted to ask the man in front of her but paintings certainly cannot ask questions, and anyway as he worked she forgot the itch of the thought.

The painter worked on for a long time, his curling hair spilling over his forehead and his strong fingers unrelenting in their gentleness. He looked at her and she looked back, ignoring the part of her that was used to half-hating this, time and wanting too accumulated for vanity to still have any real bite at her. She let herself grow lost in the curve of his mouth and the shift of his artist's shoulders and felt distantly, pressingly aware of the building tug in her unpainted heart. (Because paintings can feel. But everyone knows that.)

—

The man—the painter—came back a few days later. And then again a few days after that.

He continued painting: finishing one piece and then flipping to the next page and beginning another. She was able to see the blushing colors of previous days' work, touched up when he was sat before her again. The painter painted oceans and squat houses, sometimes slashing dark skies and once, a cat curled asleep before a mirror. The woman in the painting wondered what she would paint for him if she could, and almost reveled for once in the not-knowing.

She learned that he tucked pencil stubs into his coat pockets. She learned that his hands began tinged rose-pink from the cold, and that he warmed them on coffee cups through to his fingertips. She learned that he tilted his head to the side when he looked at her

sometimes, the way she saw others do when asking a question. She learned that he asked, and asked, and asked, and seemed to do so for the asking rather than the gaining. She learned that she thought she had been familiar with wanting, but that this was another world yet untouched.

They sat across from each other, his eyes asking permission and hers doing their best to grant it: the slowest slow dance in the world. She wondered what his world looked like when he wasn't painting it and how he managed to sneak scraps of it onto paper for her, and she wondered not for the first time but for what felt like the first important time if being alive was blood and flesh or something self-made. And sometimes when she wondered this, she thought she saw a change come over the painter's face: a subtle flash of rolling warmth flit from him to her without anyone else noticing.

—
The woman in the painting was in love with the painting man.

—
The man tugged his bottom lip between his teeth when he drew. The man murmured low thank you's and excuse me's to others on the bench, and hid a private smile when they spoke of the woman in the painting. The woman saw this and eventually stopped wondering if he would come back because he came so regularly and she knew that she would love him even if one day he did not. She occasionally thought back to her own creator, simply because he was all she had to compare. She remembered him more strongly than most but only because he'd painted her, because they'd spent more time together by technicality, because he was first. (She did not think that was what love was, though.)

This man, however, she did not love for the things he was that she was not; she knew that. She did not love him for the things she envied, as he did not with her. He simply came and asked her questions in silence and she did everything she could to ask hers back—her many, many questions—and she told herself there was contentment in knowing they'd both answer if only they could.

—
Paintings cannot move. Paintings cannot speak. Paintings can feel but they cannot do anything about it.

—

One day the man came to the museum and, instead of taking out a sketch pad, he simply opened a book and settled onto his bench. This made the woman in the painting burn more than even some of their lingering gazes had. The softness of turning pages and rolled sleeves rubbed at an already-there ache, bruised over a longer-held gnaw. He held the book open on his lap, almost as if to try and let her read along, which she could not but the generosity of it erased and redrew what love meant to her over again. Every so often the man took a break from his book and simply sat, watching the gallery with her. Looking at him there in the well-lit room without windows, the woman in the painting briefly imagined that days did not exist: that the painter's time there went on and on at their leisure, one long day of watching and wondering. She stopped imagining this almost as soon as she started, knowing she did not want that for him any more than she did for herself.

—

Days passed this way into nights. The gnaw that turned into an ache turned into a burn.

—

The museum was on fire.

—

The museum was on fire.

The woman in the painting almost did not notice (or rather believe it) at first: so accustomed to her own personal burning. It was late one night, long after the painter and any stragglers had gone home, and the woman heard a crash far enough away that she ignored it (what else could she do?).

But then there were flames licking through the hallway and alarms blaring, and employees hurrying until there were no employees left to hurry. The woman in the painting did not know how the fire started (she still did not quite understand how any fires started), maybe an errant protester or an unfortunate car engine, but she knew with quick certainty that the building was burning faster than help could anticipate. The alarms continued shrieking as fixtures splintered across the gallery and fell to the floor, but no alarms arrived outside in the following minutes. The woman in the painting had never seen live

fire before; she marveled in the swift and persuasive enthusiasm of it, catching orange up the walls and over the floors of the gallery.

The breathing glow moved fast, through the room and soon before her own spot along the wall. She wondered briefly if it would, if she was dreaming (could paintings dream?), but then, yes—the glass of her frame burst and shattered, flames stretching up toward her.

Just then, another burst: a window not far off smashed open, and a figure appeared in the only unblocked entryway to the gallery.

The man, the painter, stood amidst the blaze.

He rushed forward, kicking a leftover bench to the wall and climbing up, up, over the fire to lift the woman in the painting off her hook and down into his chest.

They raced back toward the entrance, togetherness smothered by heat and smoke. The woman could see the window at the end of the hall which he had come through was now blocked by spitting fire. She did not know how he had known to be here now, faster than first responders, but she knew neither of them knew a way out: there were no exits close by. The man moved in the opposite direction down the hall, hunched over the falling-apart frame and dodging rooms of fire. He found one gallery that seemed to be out of the flames' reach; the exit was choked by a burning doorway. He found another; they hoped with one mind for a path out. Maybe he started the fire, the woman thought to herself, knowing he did not, knowing that if anything it was her: if there was one thing she had ever done it was this. She wondered as they ran, suffocating, if he would die for this, and knew in the same instant that he would. He was a painter. She hoped he would not have to.

They ran. Behind them was more crashing and he yelled out to no response, coughing as black and gray competed with red. He looked beautiful even here (she thought as her thoughts started to fade), all stubborn movement and fierce trying. Paintings cannot speak but they can love; painters cannot answer but they can move. Smoke whirled and pushed and knocked into them both together.

There was a shift; something lurched, then resolved.

—

The night sky was wide, wide, wide, wide.

The sky was like breathing for the first time.

—

The painter held the woman in the painting in the dark, lit by a museum with a fire slowly being put out. His face was covered in ash and they both shook as he coughed, but they shook together. Only when he stopped coughing and looked down at her did she stop to consider her own state. Her glass was gone; the painter cut his finger plucking a last slice out of the frame. The sparkling black air kissed her once, again, again. The woman was dimly aware that a lick of flame had caught at her corner, blackening a strip of paper there. The air soothed where the fire had burned (for paper can feel too, and it loved the fire the way her creator had loved her). Part of the paint at the corners was bleeding: melted by heat and smoke, edges blurring in places. Her painter's brow wrinkled in concern, but she exalted at the feel of it. There was a smudge of paint on his palm. The woman was still the woman in the painting but her colors were moving, mixing—and she had always, damned always, wanted to move.

—

The woman in the painting never saw the world, but she did see a life.

The painter decided on his favorite room: a wall looking across the main table and out the window toward the yard. She did not know what became of the museum, or of the pieces that had managed to survive, and the painter did not ask (perhaps fearing the same thing she did, imagining closed rooms with boxes full of wrapped paintings). He took her home and did what little restoration he could—though he did not replace the glass, for which she loved him once again. From her place in the painter's home she watched him cook and eat and read and sometimes sleep. She watched family come over and friends stay even later, and over the years she watched children appear and get taller and grow up. She watched the leaves change colors and fall off, and she marveled not only at knowing that they did but at being there for it herself. Through the years the painter moved her to different rooms with different views, and

she saw the sky over and over again in every shade and every storm. And very often the painter sat and watched with her. In this way the woman in the painting learned what a life was. She made sure she did not miss one moment of it.

As the painter grew older, she did too; sunlight and humidity combined with leftover damage from the fire, making her age in a way she could not in the museum.

She began to fade around the same time he did.

Paintings can want, and give, and receive.

This was enough. This was a world.



On Friendship

I've been thinking about genuine friendship a lot. What is friendship? A friend is a person you like and know well, a contact on a social networking website.

A ship is larger than a boat meant for transporting people or goods by sea. Loaded at the same port, we, meant for different destinations, set the same sails. The people I thought I liked and knew well, I don't know or like anymore. Something troubled the waters and the sea waves red foam.

A friendship is not the accumulation of years, that's history, and history references the past. Things passed are often dead, nonviables.

An anchor, this history tethered to versions of oneself long expired. To carry the weight with another person is an act of pallbearing.

You will not get to stand over my corpse crying out your confessions of not being a good friend in the presence of my children, if I have them, they will surely return a blank stare at your ill-timed self-indulgence. Listen.

A friend is a friend no matter who they are around. A friend is loyal. A friend is honest in their conversation with you. A friend will activate their support. They will love you. A friend will love you as they love themselves.

Ex. A friend will agree to meet for dinner even when their face is destroyed by a healing cold sore. They will tell you about the cold sore and separate their portion of a shared plate with clean silverware every time, even if request for more silverware annoys the waiter.

What is friendship? A friendship is a bond between two or more people who grow from their histories together in the vastness of life. A bond that can never be severed 'fore the effort of friends is an impenetrable rope.

A friend is a first responder. A friend provides what they require. A friend is a source. A friend upgrades to the latest version of you and celebrates the evolution. A friend puts accountability before lies every time. A friend promotes you. A friend doesn't leave your book in the cart—they checkout because friendship never docks. Friends. How many of us have them? How many of us are friends?

I am a friend.

A friendship is not two or more people who wish to imitate each other; that is an obsession. How many obsessions colored my past? I am standing on a pile of bleached white bones.

Friends can exist as individuals.

A friend is respectful of your time and values spending it, time, above precious stones. They crave it; time.

A friendship is an impenetrable rope—tight as a Cuban link. The only way the bond breaks is if the rope wears, which takes time too. And my rope is incredibly worn.

You must walk away to be heard. Everyone that walks away is heard.

Friends. I have laced my shoes.

A friend refuses to be a bystander in the mistreatment of you. True. I never had a sibling experience. I distribute love and care in a gentle way from a bed of expectation, like a mother, because I was mothered with an emphasis on bond. The suitable return is your best. If I were to have a friend, they'd need to stick close like a sibling, but then I learned not all siblings are friends.

With few exceptions, Friendship has often held an ulterior motive that blinded me. The reason someone attempts closeness is never about my heart or character. They want the ship, not the friend. Because an objective is more appealing than the intricacies of emotions. 'Tis better to get to than to get through. It is common in this existence for one to stuff their emotions in their pockets while claiming realness.

It's like a life edition of statue maker in this wild. Nothing warm beats behind these cold exteriors twisted into false positions.

I approach friendship with pure intentions. I want to care about you. I want to love you. I want to wish you well. I stick close like a sibling, but I learned not all siblings are friends, even to themselves.

Once, a friend said to me, "You're so trusting. I wish I could be more like you." Only for our friendship to descend into the quicksand of deceit.

Friendship is a wilderness.

I'm among wolves, so I wolf. Call me Lone. I circle the pack from a distance. If I let you close I am at risk of your deeds, your abandonment. And you are at risk of mine. A wolf aware of her triggers is no less dangerous in her detachment. The release is a reflex.

I will let you go if you disappoint me once. If you enter into this friendship it is best you not be human. Approach me in friendship like a god. If you do not know God, find him first. Once, a friend attempted to deflect their neglect of the friendship and said to me, "You never come out, I gotta see you more."

To which I now reply,

Friendship: Warning! This product contains loneliness and abandonment. I enjoy being alone, but aloneness is not loneliness. Loneliness is an affliction, a result of human interaction—I avoid.

All of these buttons my father installed alarm the same way, teasing the trigger behind the barrel aimed at my heart question. "How can you love me and not see me?" I want to ask my friends, hoping for his answer.

I have 603 friends on Facebook and declining.

Friends, my life is more interesting in highlights. Parts of me think this is a blessing when I reflect on how I've observed the strange way in which people treat their friends.

A friendship is like a steam burn across a left breast. The more you care for the seared flesh the more the blackened skin parts—bleeds.

A friend can disagree with you for sport if the game is fair. And friends don't become victims in the games they start. Friends friend you where you're at; not where you've been. That would be manipulative and unfriendly. Beware of these friends. Do not ignore the motives of friends who switch postures when others are around. A friendship is one of many sails, but a true friendship never sinks.

No one sticks closer than a friend when she's your mother.
Even the well of honesty catches copperhead wishes.
How long have I been blinded by goodwill and the benefit of the doubt? I'm walking through a hall of horrors I mistook for a poppy field of friendship.

The shadows in the glass are exactly how they've always been.
I live in an existence where friendliness equates to friendship. But friendliness is not friendship. Friendliness is cordiality, as pedestrian and fading as a Hello to a passerby.

Smiles and happiness are performative here. My suspicions rose.

I'd rather be alone than participate in the ritual of collecting acquaintances.

[...] a raised fence, a breath of electricity, and lots and lots of barbed wire. I don't need anyone behind this pen.

Is it wrong to decide my friendships should be some of my best relationships?

I've decided my friendships will be some of my best relationships. I'm taking applications seeking best selves for long-term companionship.

If we're all a broken wine glass, I want to join enough shards to make the stem.

When I am unsure, methinks my struggle in the friendship is with forgiveness, and then I remember I am forgiving. I am at rest, wondering who is forgiving me. In my heart, I want to be like Jesus, but being a savior is hard, Big Bro. And none of these followers show up for communion.

What if the people I've peopled my life with, who put me on a shelf, aren't good enough for me? Aren't good enough to have access to the goodness I bring? What if the determination to hold things together works against the wisdom the Holy Spirit wishes to impart to me? What if I must break a heart to save my own? I have a history of waiting for the perpetually undeserving. Caution: the following is an excavated wound circa 1991:

I loved a man once whose love became distant; my heart has been broken ever since. And now I want everyone to love me back as reparations, but I'm often distant amongst crying doves. And too blind to see.

I am a granddaughter of a wise woman who, in her grandmothering years, stared out the 1st-floor apartment window from a beige metal folding chair with chipped paint, hand-feeding me cut fruit from a wide bowl, saying good for nothing to unsuspecting passersby. I am too young and inexperienced, then, to understand the language of disappointment when it spoils and dries.

I ain't never had a sisterhood, every sister I acquainted myself with wanted to color disordered rainbows outside the lines. But joy. I've got that joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart; even though all the jabbing at this glass makes the frame hang crooked in the gallery.

That's what friends are for?

A friend is not someone who takes the occasion to reach out to you because something you posted made them interested in talking to you. This sudden interest is not about you. It is about what you put

on display (e.g., object or experience). No, that is not the act of being friendly; instead, that is the act of being nose. How often do we confuse the two? How can friendship withstand the ebb and flow of life presenting itself?

When I don't understand the purpose of

When it has failed many times

When even thinking about it is exhausting

When there is so much love, for me, around but rarely a check-in text or an invitation.

An invitation that sticks. I am over hearing "We should get together soon" for 36 months. Are we friends or financing a car?

I do not jive with the way friendships are handled in this existence. I grew up watching and listening to my mother & her friends.

If they weren't on the phone, they'd be at the house, chatting, doing hair, watching videos, talking about their men, talking about fashion, or they'd be out at picnics, house parties, the club, the movies. They checked in with each other. They'd come and go together. They'd wait till you got into the house and turned on a light when they dropped you off. When traveling separately, they'd call each other when they got in. That someone would delay sleeping until they heard you made it in is an I love you.

Naturally, I grew up expecting these bonds. Expecting my oldest bonds to last. But we are friends who became strangers behind a friend request. And collecting the highlights is not sufficient human connection for me. I am friend no.162 amongst thousands.

I asked two friends to text me when they got home after dinner and neither of them texted. Is it we forgot that we're cared for? Can we no longer recognize genuine care, does care no longer matter, has it gone out of style, did we forget that care matters and participation in said care means being receptive to the ask and sending the text or making the call means I love you too?

Epiphanies: Perhaps I'm treating strangers like friends and loving them like family.

Demands: Don't label me relative if you don't plan on acting like family.

Disassociation: I am not your sis.

The most disappointing thing is finding out the relationships you thought you had were fantasies. But fantasies often inspire something real.

My father's heart was broken by a friend who exchanged friendship for Hollywood, he turned his bitterness into the gospel of "the only friends you need are family." All my mother's friends disappointed her in ways known and unknown to me. I suspect the unknown is why she did not want me to make calls requesting hospital visits. In the end we had each other. A comfort until I was left last and standing. The only, I can count on. Why, then, should I fight my bleeding heart for such a violent breed that means my end?

Friendship is violence. Friendship is particular violence.

Friendship is particular violence upon the feeler and the giver. Upon the giver of fucks;



astronaut

take me out to the country and back
again. in the rural areas there isn't light
pollution, not the way there is in my suburb.
you see the stars there, milky way galaxy and
andromeda, maybe. aliens, if you stare hard enough,
since your eyes'll start to blur and you'll see things that
aren't there in the present. i know that you'll say it's pretty,
you haven't seen a beach or a forest or an ocean that could
compare. you think you never will. god, i know you so well; after
that you'll turn to me, call me your brightest star when we both know
it's the sun, call me your supernova when we both know you'd kill me if
it meant watching an actual one. you're not predictable, by any means, i'm
just really good at predicting. that's how i know that you'll grab my hand in a
fit of spontaneity, spin me through the desert and drape me across your truck,
call me blinding and brilliant against that dead old sand. the universe'll reflect in my
eyes and you'll consider becoming an astronaut and then you'll blame the distance on
me. we need to stop
stargazing.

THE HUM

It bugs me you failed to mention the wine-tasting soiree on the terrace. Actually you vacuum-sealed our conversation mid-sentence, momentarily leaving me the kids' snuffling sleep-sounds, the settling ice cubes, and beneath it all

or perhaps draping everything like an EMT's sheet was this other newly emboldened hum which may have been nothing, just distant traffic,

or it could've been the generator powering the world, and I may have worn the key like a pendant around my neck the way you wore your crucifix, not from any indissoluble call to faith but mainly to ward off fanged evil, much

as you carried the Beretta nine mil in the shoulder holster, which interferes—let's be honest—with our lovemaking. Why every time I hear sirens do I think

they're aimed at me? My inner nastiness has sprouted wings. What's worse is that the gleam has gone out of me. I don't even care for merlot anymore. Your bear, the girl told my son as I led him from the crash site, your bear is missing an eye.

“Transparencies in Time:”

Words locate silence: nahualt [NAHUATLACAH plural form of Nahualt-speaking people / ronbleo que se dio a las naciones cultas que hablan la lengua mex- cana 8] Lighting in the braids the poetic stream. All I got is the ink to led humming birds razor sharp light indolent. Ghazal haunt too plains. ITONALI one's shadows, spirit, soul Spirit helpers see the essence one breathes. TEZCATLIPOCA mirror smok- ing as writing this blue lightning inside the temezcallirrip sweat lodge ceremony. NEXTLI ashes cinders / cenizas in the memories blue voices coalesce rainbow off- flowers in how thoughts bright as sunrise burns nights stare. TLAHUICZALPANTECUITLI el señor de la aurora/Venus first light of dawn breaks past the meridians. Shamans cross parallels ethereal atmospheric showers of meteors in the jade iris glare silex shards languages. We do not all see the same. متعلقين IN XOCHITL IN CUCATL /for y canto. Flower & song inscribed in the DNA. In the poolside eclipse these words here written before the cursors and screens burned peripheral in- cisions, in the vi- sual cortex. In 5 more words bring back Ghazals Here hid de n i n l

Chicomae Itzuculilli Almoxtli: Yal Acatl

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Ulixhuatl/mujer de las salinas –you can feel the steel weight in these words peripheral in-cisions/ coded in. So when it comes you got too be ready 7th teobaco on quahuilli that is fluidly/transparencency/tenacity. Period of tecuilhuatltoni our uatli Chiuatl/woman of the salt dunes –blue and white — calendars override/lapse in the spacetime continuum. Today's thunder in the night skies how 5 acatl/tecuilhuatltoni nahui tepatl is the fluid mess in how ethereal entities survive hour — glass. Silex cuts what you're thinking edged hieroglyphic stelae in the mental picture are transcribing into ocean breeze. Entangle in optical cortex streaked in between dreams Weaved in the carbon –14 frame as pyra- mid shift here, meld in the melanin archaic earth infused. Peasants in the fields tend this harvest –eyes color of sunrises truck glare in the iris. Sinaloa respira en estos triangulos –que bradiza la memoria de obsidiana Shattered green volcanic rocks in the poetic men. Streams flowing extemporaneously breathing bel- lowed clandestine y disapanado. Rhytmic form cuts to the essence omnipresent owl feathers in the full moons stare/breathes oo- sickles carved into the DNA Song & stories thread in these words as constellations awake in Chihuapancauca- yan ceremonies distilled flowers Itzahuatl bears/ blooms semblance in what you see in the site desert sands/he- stran dark lights you so this was already written in the skies. Immaterial veiling engulf these even still feel veils af- ter shockwaves crowd these col- lateral shards of light iris sheen.

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Transparent thoughts in the poolside eclipse that's hard Age –but no one to speak it too. Nahualt/acañ/Purepechi Fuerza. Carry over eight how languages bleed in yet Adamantine steel. It's the child in me to breathe the Glare. 17th cycle guards chicomae acatl 18th nahui Itzuculilli Tacahuacotli It's the fluidness transparency ho- Betwixt visual cortex. Iquimilli the dark eyed s- Tezcallipoca –read in the periphery 1519 is no Within this aint an created camera ocurecy y- lales. Desert sands inscribed in the DNA Teams encoded in a topography scarred by Helix 3 stripes on the right temple tear Weights Heyokah thunder dreamer Eagle feathers breeze the Inpalewealodge centros Jade glass. Slowly trim 2 braids in the above cod Secularism four silex Tar Memoria and so it's like to Sums refract rainbows ka Lobo Xocoyi the minds I white light- rations in Im pyramid shift coalesce –w Organic pae

warrior:

Chicomae Oodotli TIRI! Nahui Tecpatl

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Cyan Niehoff

A Poem About Robins, Semen, and Climate Anxiety

God's mojo is purple and
fragrant
making May
Godhead,
pure and simple;
being filled with lilacs,
and fit to pop
a million freckled eggs.
Journeymen emerge
from these pieces of sky,
fertilized by maiden lovers:
God and Sun herself.
Who, sick of sitting low
and heavy,
leaps to life!
to watch her babies
bridge the gap
toward light,
and Lightness.
It's a world virile as camembert,
microwaved.
But I still tap
the stones beneath me,
hoping they'll hold my weight.
My teeth still grind when I face forward.
I hear canary song,
though the bird is red-breasted.
But if spring is a landscape
painted with Paris green,
then I am reckless.
I breathe deep.
Red-winged Blackbird
By Cyan Niehoff
There are birds who bear time on their breast,
with last night's blackness and

today's gleaming sunrise on their wing,
like promises.
Time machines,
couriers of people to
planets.
Planets where sometimes, weeds grow
tall as your shoulders.
Where fairy queens and coyotes rule.
They may permit you
entrance to their palace,
where it sounds like bubbles,
it feels like kisses,
it tastes like an afternoon, unbridled.
Though time-traveler,
you should know:
you can't control where the bird lands.
So if you find yourself on
White Farmhouse Planet,
enjoy the treats there, of course,
(eggs in the grass for sucking on,
fallen acorns,
guppies in the western ditch).
But watch for the wraiths
who linger
by the water heater, and the
earwigs in the hardwood boards.
The bird's not bad,
just magnetic.
Charged opposite of tender-hearted
time-travelers like us.
He's been fair,
having seen but not tallied.
Simply happy to be punctuation
to the juggernauts of time,
and sentimentality.

“The Grieving Process”





Jessica King

Bejeweled Grandmother

You made me believe that dragons exist,
sculpting opal clouds into pictures for children
in the ruby and gold of summer skies.

You made me believe that, even as monarchs muzzled
my autonomy in an ebony tower, my nurtured candlelight
will seize the world by firestorm. But when I looked for you,

your eyes had faded to gray pearls, leaving your memory
in a bed of citrine sunflowers, a sunset of garnet
epilogues and chalcedony tomorrows.

You'd let me believe we'd fly in pictures
we'd create for children. You'd loved me in sacrifice
until you dissipated into moonstone

clouds. Forevermore guiding my wings
through pictures that you create
towards an amethyst sunrise.

Gregory McGreevy

Seasons' Unrelenting Styrofoam

I want to sing
a song to you, America.
I want you to hear the joy
in my voice, and feel the courage
in my heart, want to sing
to your shredded cheese
and calming predictability,
want to be a beacon
for your spy satellites, agape
to receive you, America,
a vessel for your cryptic slogans,
notwithstanding, but...

it sure seems worse than
all that! it sure feels like
we're all just waiting
for extinction!
it sure feels like horrors
abound! but of course
sample sizes are too small for verifiable results, of course
mice made tiny castles, of
course it's just the tides
and the stars and the
sour cream on the side.

My show is on again
but in my dreams I'm self-immolated at the speed of sound
across particularly distant landscapes
of red soil and fragrant hot sauce.

and it
still feels like the universe expands
and contracts and that I am
the universe of a very private word
defined narrowly and
whittled to nothing, whispered,

like all creation in time
because
the creator is divine, but
the editor is omnipotent.

The night is headlights softened
through soiled parchment paper,
is chewed straws, is a time of
endless smoke and blinking neon,
is night by virtue of going unnoticed
across that universe
alight on arcing trails of
illumination etched into an ashy
dawn, seeing things under an aspect
where night is night
by virtue of its nightness, in
that same slice of the night
in which you can't tell if
you're at the drive thru or the bardo
, where life is more comfortable
in cowardice, where we eat street
and shoot rot with rabid pistols,

where, hell, I guess I love it.

I guess it was just down to the
missed calls and dead phone,
forced to look up at the horizon
surrounded by dark expanse
and bucolic fears.



Old Town Center

In the dead part of the afternoon,
I back my '72 LeMans into the alley
across from the bank, where she
puts on a fake smile and cashes
people's checks and tells them
to have a good day. I can't decide
if I want to watch as she walks out
the front doors, sidestepping the grates
in her low heels, her blazer flapping
in the March wind. I know she'll sit
across from me on the bus stop bench
to eat her turkey sandwich, no crust,
the same lunch she's eaten every day
since we started dating in high school.
She'll look up from her magazine
and see me, or rather, my car, hiding
in the shadows, and she'll stand up,
brushing crumbs from her houndstooth
skirt, looking both ways twice before
crossing, giving me the time to drive
away, to pretend that I hadn't been watching,
that I'm not still infatuated, even after
everything the two of us did to each other.
But I'll stay put. Once in the alley, she'll knock
her knuckles on my window so I worry
her rings will scratch the glass, and I'll crank
it down. I'll study her face, looking for
any sign that she might be pregnant
with his child. I almost want her to be;
then, I could really feel bad for myself.
Before I decide if I want to watch her,
she walks out of the bank, holding
a salad in a plastic to-go container.

Conflict in the Supermarket

Amidst crinkling fruit bags,
clerks' qualms of low pay,
mist playing God
for Broccoli's sake,
thank you.

Without your thin arms
threatening my Adam's apple
when that man threw
his smug grin my direction,
I would've charged.

This reversion is shameful,
no matter the validity. Adulthood
stagnates the mouth. Childhood
staples it. My body's violations—
metal on my tongue.

Baseball bats, cleats, crowbars
scatter bruises along my thighs.
I shriek like a choir on fire
in my dreams.

Rapport is slow, friend.

Patience for the boy
who cried in movie trailers.

Cried, from not the sting
of a punch—to know another
wanted to hurt him. For the boy,
foodless in the hospital bed—
injections violating his tiny veins.
Stomping out a name-caller's face.

The hold-me-backs. Patience.

Like plucking pushpins
off classroom carpets,
I defuse the minefields
I've built with these sad,
calloused hands.

Her Lies like Stardust

are a magical kind of beauty I sharpened at an early age
so later I'd know how to lie to myself—and between sips
of guarapo, I listened and learned beneath the star-covered
canopy of Florinda's Fortune Table as she granted wishes,
weaving futures using a thin thread of air and flipped cards,
each one sealing fates and healing hearts

after Florinda's cigar and cafecito she'd hurl
caracoles or gems—willing them to mean this or that
each tall tale a transformative dream, each fabrication
an altered path her customers purchased for the price
of a phone card—psychic tip not included—satisfaction
guaranteed if you believed

every day she'd sway skeptical
weary travelers to trust that hers
was the way and the light and just like that,
Florinda's lies like stardust twinkled
and died under the fog of night
yet we believed

**Poems by Patron Henekou, translations by Patron Henekou and
Connie Voisine**

Generosity

for Kwame Dawes

1st state:

Where do all these words lighting the sky go
as a poet is born into the verb Eternal?
Is this plosive ‘p’, primordial work of Ptah,
haloed by a guinea pepper’s mystery?
This poet-sprout from his father’s Jamaica,
his fruiting twined with us and our history:
salt from here, sugar from the hands and feet of the Caribbean;
river from here, rain from somewhere else, bloody lands
of South Carolina, cyclothymic Nebraska.

2nd State:

Where are all the stars going, the ones twirling on the
page as the Poet’s word-verbs are birthed
in the image of Ho the Eternal
from his forge of sky? The Poet’s heart
verbs its flowing word-songs, ha!
heart-rhythms, verb-fluids, word-chants.
The song-child plays hide and seek with his form
in the mirror. He sings, not bad word-songs
but word-acts of words-of-lived-e-mo-tion.

Transition:

Tonight the moon approaches us
so generously, its impulse poetic, to create
day-lit-words, gifts-of-the-Eternal: Se na keke!i!
Word-love I-welcome-you: Lɔŋ ne!
Generous source-words to quench a host’s heart!
What are all these word-poems doing in a spark of iris?
Vast, giving words flooding this poem’s body.

Générosité

Pour Kwame Dawes

État 1 :

Où vont tous ces mots qui illuminent le ciel
lorsque naît le poète dans le verbe de l'Éternel,
ce p' explosif geste primordiale de Ptah
qui s'auréole du mystère du piment de guinée ?
Ce poète qui est germe de la Jamaïque paternelle
mais aussi fruit imbriqué de nous et de notre histoire :
le sel d'ici et le sucre des mains et pieds des Caraïbes ;
rivière d'ici, pluie d'ailleurs, terres sang
de la Caroline du Sud ; Nebraska cyclothymique.

État 2 :

Où vont tous ces étoiles qui virevoltent sur les
pages lorsque naissent les mots-verbs du poète,
à l'image de ce que fait Ho l'Éternel
dans le ciel de sa forge ? Le cœur du
poète fait le verbe qui coule des mots-chants, ha
cœur-rythmes verbe-liquide mots-chants
l'enfant joue à cache-cache avec son image
il chante au miroir : des mots-chants pas méchants
des mots-actions des mots- vécus de-l-é-mot-ion !

Transition :

Ce soir, c'est comme la lune s'est approchée,
généreuse, de nous dans un élan de poète, pour faire
des mots-lumière-du-jour don-de-l-Eternel : Se na kekele !
Des mots-amour-je-t-accueille : Lɔŋ ne !
Des mots-sources-généreuses qui abreuvent le cœur de l'hôte !
Que font tous ces mots-poèmes dans l'iris des étincelles ?
Des mots vastes de générosité qui déborde le corps du poème

We must remain standing

« N'an laara, an saara :
If we lie down, we are dead »
– Joseph Ki-Zerbo

I have no heritage more sturdy
than the heart I carry
inside me,
a country to bequeath to my people,
weakened by the love
we give to a state stuffed
with lies,
with slanders,
and that which burns the nose.

In the moments when
I'm most calm,
when silence traps me
in its sticky sadness, when
an anger burns me with a heat
equal to my impotence,
I take leave to listen to jazz,
a prayer both sweet and steely
at once.

I drown myself in pure jazz,
A Love Supreme
which flows into my body
with the tears of my country
on its knees since the end of its dreams.
A love supreme it must be,
to remain standing for the whole revolution.

Il faut rester debout

« N'an laara, an saara :
si nous nous couchons, nous sommes morts »
– Joseph Ki-Zerbo

Je n'ai d'héritage sûr
que le cœur que je porte
en moi,
un pays à léguer aux miens,
déjà rendu fragile par l'amour
que l'on porte à un être gorgé
de mensonges,
de calomnies,
et de choses qui irritent le nez.

Dans les moments où le plus
je suis calme,
où le silence me prend
dans son triste visqueux
la colère me brule, chaude,
à la mesure de mon impuissance
je pars écouter le jazz
cette prière douce et métallique à
la fois.

Je m'envahis de jazz pur –
A Love Supreme
– dans lequel mon corps coule
comme les larmes d'un pays
à genoux depuis la fin de ses rêves ;
un amour suprême comme il en faut
pour rester debout toute la révolution.

Wakanda too Dreams American

El Paso
on the way to Las Cruces
is a filter city
for dreams.
The songs of
its mountains
are too fertile,
germinating
hope for Mexicans

as it is in
Wakanda,
more dazzling in 3D,
where we marvel
at fictional men and women
who know how to live their love
in the movie's streets,
walking
hand in hand.

Are we so ill-fated
that to live out
our African
imagination
the were-panther
needs
an American dream?

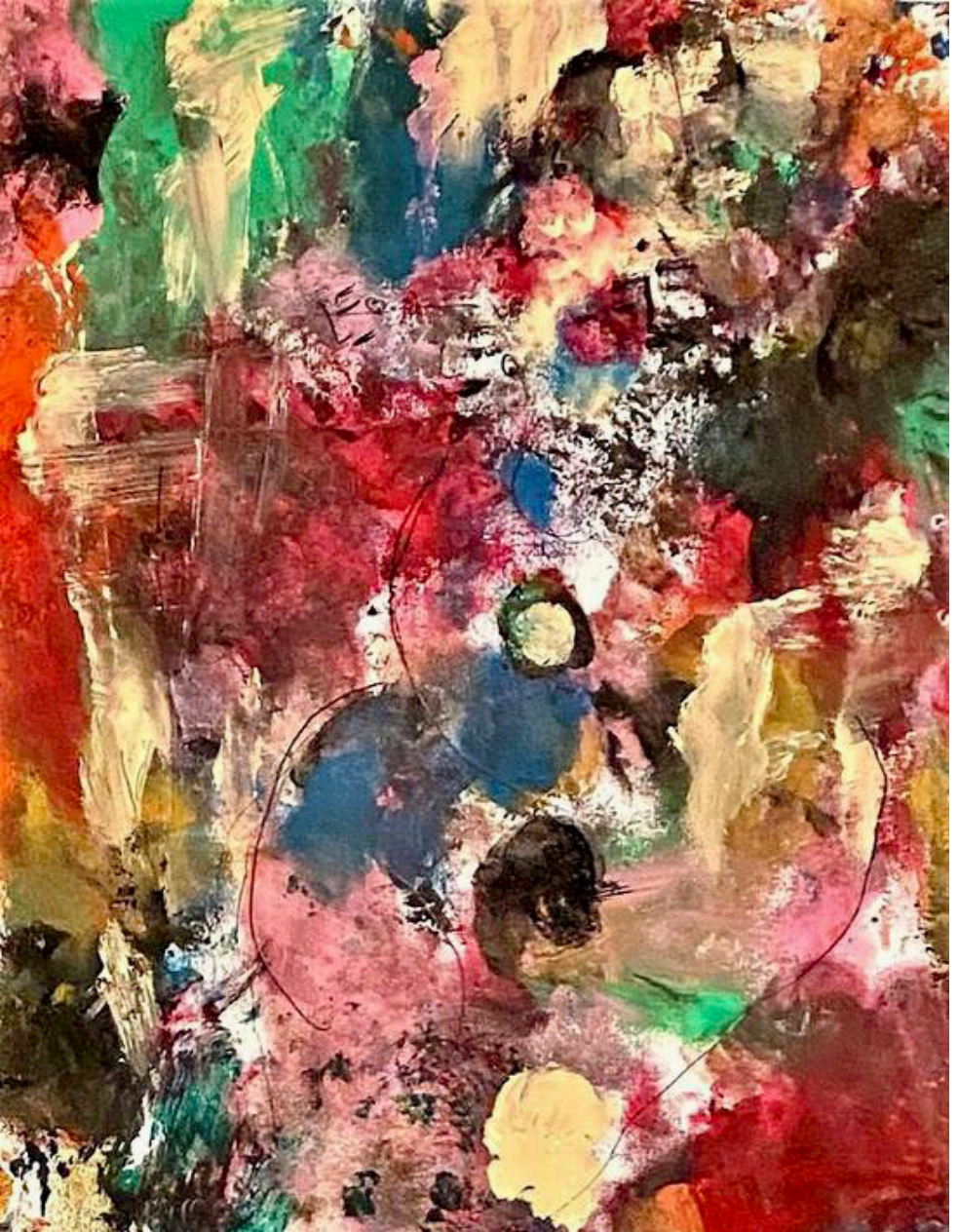
Wakanda aussi rêve américain

El Paso,
en route Las Cruces,
est une ville filtreuse
de rêves.

Ses chants
de montagnes
sont trop fertiles pour
germer des espoirs
mexicains ;

tout comme au
Wakanda,
plus éblouissant en 3D
l'on s'émerveille
que dans les rues de ce film
hommes et femmes fictives
savent vivre l'amour
se promènent
main dans la main :

chez nous est-il si gâté
que même pour habiter
notre imaginaire,
africain,
la panthère-garou
a besoin
d'un rêve américain ?



We are all born from war.

Wars fought by mothers
who have now
turned into cannibals
having swallowed
their own hearts;
At present
own blood cracked palms
giving birth to children
they wish
wouldn't turn out
to be infernos
yet their progenies
are turning to be
burning corpses
maligned with the
vermillion of
angry and vilified harlots.

Young boys
are being taught
to ampute their humanity
once and for all,
all in the name of
the sacred religion
and yet:
no body dares
to raise a rebellion
for in this world
rebels are fed
to the hungry wolves;
desperate for a chance
to assassinate
yet another
who has the
audacity to resist.

We are all
birthed from the bosom
of violated and
now angry children,
the coffins of the
dead innocence
are picked up
on the shoulders
of resentful rebels.
Once kind children
have now
dropped their books
and picked up the guns.

Wars never cease to exist
but rather leave behind
teeth that never stop biting
and wounds that never stop hurting.

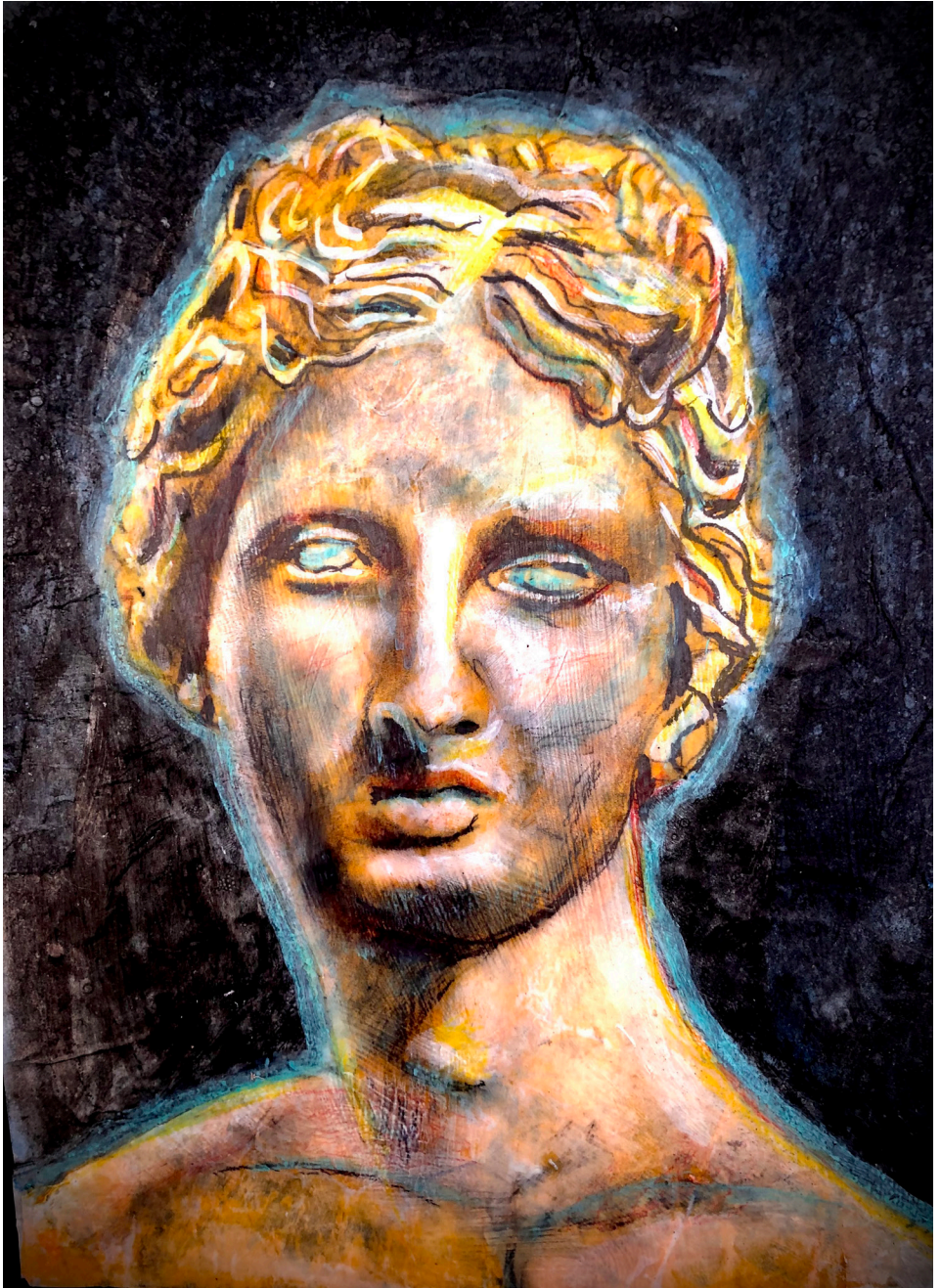
We are the aftermath
of when the machines
cease to fire and
leave behind
an intense longing
to quench the blood
of all those who have
mutilated our innocence.

Young boiling blood
incoherent with rage
and
I fear, my dear
there has not yet been made
a fire extinguisher
that can extinguish this wounded rage.

We are all born from war,
with constricted anguish

in our chest
and unheard screams
that have now
become dormant –
you were not born cruel
but wars have made you unkind.

-Akshita, of wars, poetry and rebellions.



Visual Artists' Statements

Mirka Walter is an emerging artist from Cologne, Germany. In her dance pieces she tries to capture the essence of dancing, which she describes as 'letting go' and giving outer space to internal processes. She uses rapid drawing techniques and materials to embody this spirit.

www.mirkuschka.com

Robin Young:

The act of collaging for me can sometimes border on the impulsive. Sitting on my soft yellow sofa, I will often begin flipping through sourced magazines until something piques my interest. Then off I go with a pair of scissors, slicing the inspiration image from the page weaving and pasting the many pieces together to tell my story

RUNA:

The relationship with the 'other' is a theme that RUNA frequently explores in her paintings: she examines how personal experiences shape our interactions with others, highlighting the complexity and diversity of these relationships, namely power dynamics. In these two works, 'Time for Kindness' and 'They were very closed,' RUNA specifically addresses the theme of reconciliation: she delves into the success of reconciliation in 'Time For Kindness,' and she explores the frustration faced with the failure of this process in 'They were very closed' (in the past). RUNA aims not only to depict human connections but also to stimulate reflections on how we can foster a deeper and more empathetic understanding among individuals.

www.rutenorte.com

Donald Patten:

Almost overnight, COVID-19 has changed the way people interact with each other, and with our own bodies. We live our lives in vulnerability during this historically significant time of disaster. In the past, master painters, would depict historically significant disasters that happened to them as a way to cope. As an artist that is learning the techniques of masters, I have the opportunity to create long-lasting visual information that depicts the trauma of this pandemic. Therefore, I made a series of drawings that represent my experiences in COVID modernity live by representing past masterpieces that depict the embodied experience of trauma.

Katherine Day is a writer and visual artist based in California, originally from the Bay Area. They are studying English Creative Writing at California State

University, Long Beach.

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GJ Gillespie is a collage artist living in a 1928 farmhouse overlooking Oak Harbor on Whidbey Island, WA. A prolific artist with 21 awards to his name, his work has been exhibited in 64 shows and appeared in more than 130 publications. Beyond his studio practice, Gillespie channels his passion for art by running Leda Art Supply, a company specializing in premium sketch-books. Whether conjuring vivid collage compositions or enabling other artists through exceptional tools, Gillespie remains dedicated to the transformative power of art.

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Lisa Braden (Regarding “The Painter’s Table”):

The surface I have been doing my artwork on has become a painting on its own.

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Jose Trejo Maya:

I am a remnant of the Nahuatlacah oral tradition a tonalpouhque mexicana, a commoner from the lowlands (i.e., Mexico) from a time and place that no longer exists. At present my poetry has been reified as it has been published in the UK, US, India, Spain, Australia, Argentina, Germany, and Venezuela. I have been exhibited in different venues with a work that’s titled: Transparencies in Time: Cuahpohualli embedded in ethno poetic language poetry.

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Matthew Fertel is a Sacramento-based photographer who has worked at Sierra College since 2004. Before that, he was a fine art auction house catalog photographer in San Francisco for over 10 years. His work focuses on the usually unnoticed minutiae we all encounter daily. Going to the same locations over days, months and years allows him to photograph his subjects under different lighting and weather conditions, and to tell these objects stories as they transform over time. More of Matthew’s work can be seen on his website:

<https://mfertel.wixsite.com/matthewfertelphoto>

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Dr. Ernest Williamson III:

I began painting seriously at nineteen; the glorious works of the old masters inspired me to develop my own artistic vision. Notable works by Raphael, El Greco, Da Vinci, and Michelangelo had a profound impact on my desire to take up painting. Once I sit down at my desk and decide to create, the drawing or painting creates itself; I do not visualize anything at any time. I listen to Gregorian chants when I write poetry, and Old School R&B sets the mood for me when I paint. Relaxation and intent are vital ingredients in all my creative undertakings; I equally enjoy writing and painting; however, I spend more time creating abstract visual art.

Author Biographies

Marcus Elias Woolfolk is a queer black poet and student. He has received his bachelors in creative writing and English literature from Cal State Long Beach and currently is in the process of obtaining his Masters in Poetry. He is inspired by the intimacy of connections that form in-between the spaces of our lives & how this nexus of memory & experience inform who we are as people.

Grace Zhu is a current MFA student in the fiction program at Emerson College. She graduated the University of Illinois at Chicago with a bachelor's degree in English. She is particularly interested in writing stories that focus on the odd, the magical, or the complexity of human relationships.

Jubi Arriola-Headley (he/him) is a Black queer poet, storyteller, first-generation United Statesian, and author of the poetry collection *original kink* (Sibling Rivalry Press), recipient of the 2021 Housatonic Book Award; his second collection, *Bound*, was published by Persea Books in February 2024. Jubi lives with his husband in South Florida, on ancestral Tequesta, Miccosukee, and Seminole lands, and his work explores themes of masculinity, vulnerability, rage, tenderness & joy. Black Lives Matter. Trans Lives Matter. Stop Asian Hate. Art is Labor. Abolish Policing. Eat the Rich. Stay Kinky. Free Palestine.

Ariana Denise Brazier, Ph.D. is a Black queer feminist and smiley sad mom-girl. She is a play-driven community-organizer and educator who is motivated to raise a joyous, free Black child. She documents how Black child play functions as a grassroots method of community-based storytelling, teaching, and organizing.

Daye Phillippo taught English at Purdue University and her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in **Poetry*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Presence*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, *Cider Press Review*, *One Art*, *Shenandoah*, *The Windhover**, and many others. She lives and writes in rural Indiana where she hosts Poetry Hour at her local library. **Thunderhead** (Slant, 2020) was her debut full-length collection. You may find more of her work on her website: www.dayephillippo.com

Elizabeth Wittenberg is a New Orleans-based writer originally from Chicago. She is currently studying fiction writing at Cedar Crest College's Pan-European MFA program. When not writing, she prefers to be outside and moving.

Krystle Griffin, aquarian alien queen assimilating amongst homo sapi-

ens, faking it in a flesh costume. Trying to spin brain bees and nightmares into something more worthy. Krystle teaches a monthly poetry workshop through Cassie's Craft Coven, is an Associate Editor for Meow Meow Pow Pow and runs a Zine called LeGrif & The Exploits.

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Katherine Day is a writer and visual artist based in California, originally from the Bay Area. They are studying English Creative Writing at California State University, Long Beach.

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Bill Schrieber has been a Hyla Brook Poet since 2018. Bill has been published in Aerial Perspective, Assignment Literary Magazine, Broadkill Review, Shot Glass Journal, The Poets Touchstone and Metonym Journal. Bill works in the technology field and lives with his wife and son in southern New Hampshire.

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Chelsea Allen will earn her M.F.A. in Creative Writing from California State University, Long Beach in May 2024. She received her B.A. in English from California State University, Fresno. Chelsea writes about the different facets of womanhood and the experiences within them. She lives in Huntington Beach with her partner and two cats.

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Rebecca Kuder's book, *The Eight Mile Suspended Carnival*, was published in 2021 by What Books Press. Her stories and essays have appeared in *The Rumpus*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Bayou Magazine*, *Hags On Fire*, *Tiferet Journal*, *Lunch Ticket*, and *Year's Best Weird Fiction* vols. 3 & 5. She has an MFA in creative writing from Antioch University Los Angeles. She is a recipient of an individual excellence award from the Ohio Arts Council. You can read more at www.rebeccakuder.com.

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Jonathan Jones lives and works in Rome where he teaches at John Cabot University. He has a PhD in literature from the University of Sapienza, and a novella 'My Lovely Carthage' published in the spring of 2020 from J. New Books.

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Priyanka Kumra is a BIPOC writer and lives in San Jose, California. Her poems and fiction have been published in *Quarterly West*, *Wingless Dreamer*, *Reed Magazine*, *Up North Lit*, *Writer's Digest*, *Quibble Lit*, *StreetLit*, *Coffin Bell*, *Polyphony Lit*, *Death Rattle*, *Typishly*, *Cathexis NorthWest Press*, *Tint Journal*, and the *Peauxdunque Review*. She is 2024 *Reed Magazine Emerging Voices* Winner, a Finalist in *Quarterly West*, *Fractured Lit*, *Ouroboros*, and a Semi-finalist in the *Nine-Syllables Chapbook Contest*.

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Jā. R. Macki is the author of *Linus Baby* (Pie Child Press 2023). Her

essays and digital collages have appeared in *Midnight & indigo*, *Skink Beat Review*, *The Spectacle*, and *Red Noise Collective*. She lives in Chicago with her wife and senior dog.

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Shelby Perlis is a recent graduate of the CSUF English Master's program, currently teaching freshman composition across Orange County. Interested particularly in Feminist, Queer, and Disability Theories, romance novels, and creative writing, she appreciates any opportunity to become a better teacher and student, both.

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Inaayah Khan (any pronouns) is a writer, activist, and full-time student based in Washington, D.C. and London. Their work focuses on the intersections between Queerness, femininity, religion, and race. They are also fond of reading, politics, Taylor Swift, and sour candy.

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Dan Pinkerton lives in Urbandale, Iowa.

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Cyan Niehoff finished her BA in Sociology. Since then, she has spent her time loitering in her favorite coffee shop, running her rescue dog, and making art in a futile attempt to understand the world around her. This is her first time being published.

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Jessica King (she/they) is a first-generation, disabled undergraduate student studying creative writing, comparative world literature, health humanities, and human development at California State University, Long Beach. Specializing in disability studies and activism, she's developed partnerships with campus programs, student clubs, nonprofit organizations, and online endeavors. Through this support, she will also publish an online anthology of creative works produced by disabled students, aspiring to continue this inaugural project and nurture disability equity on the CSULB campus. True to her consistent inconsistency, her progress in creative writing, disability advocacy, and publishing can be followed on her Instagram and LinkedIn, @TheWhiteDovePoet

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Gregory McGreevy is a poet from Baltimore, Maryland. His work has previously been featured in *West Trade Review*, *Snarl*, *The Northern Virginia Review*, and will be published in an upcoming anthology by *Arachne Press*.

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E.C. Gannon's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Assignment Magazine*, *Connecticut River Review*, *The Meadow*, *Olit*, and elsewhere. A New England native, she holds a degree in creative writing and political science from Florida State University.

Matthew Feinstein is a poet and writer who grew up in Tracy, California. He holds an MFA in Poetry from Randolph College, a BA in English - Creative Writing from CSU Long Beach, and an AA in English from Butte College. His poems have appeared in HAD, Heavy Feather Review, Inflectionist Review, Kissing Dynamite, and elsewhere. He is the author of the chapbook *Breeds of Breath* (Alien Buddha Press, 2020). You can find more of his work at www.matthewfeinsteinwriter.com

Anyély Gómez-Dickerson is a Cuban-born immigrant who came to the U.S. on a leaky boat in 1980 and grew up in Miami, earning her poetry degree at Florida International University and bachelor's from Temple University. Her poem *How to Kill a Mango Tree* was a finalist in the Atlanta Review 2023 International Poetry Competition and her work also appears in *Latino Book Review*, *Acentos*, *South Florida Poetry Journal*, *West Trestle Review*, and a chapbook collection titled *We Are the Cultivated Sins* is on exhibit at the ARTE LATINO NOW 2024 showcase. She has been published in other esteemed publications where she is honored to share space with amazing authors. During a decades-long teaching career she empowered underserved students through poetry and writing before retiring to give her writing the attention it demanded. She writes with “teeth” and probes issues plaguing marginalized communities, the immigrant experience and Afro-Caribbean diaspora while exploring her own European, black, and Taína ancestry.

Patron Henekou is a Togolese poet, playwright, and prose writer. Assistant Professor of English, he is also former Director of University Libraries and Archives at Université de Lomé. Henekou is founder and co-organizer of the bi-annual Festival International des Lettres et des Arts, an annual festival in Lomé. *Jazz and Other Prayers* will be his fourth poetry book and first collection published in English, by the African Poetry Book Series at the University of Nebraska Press.

Connie Voisine is the author most recently of *The Bower* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), begun during a Fulbright Fellowship to Northern Ireland. Her writing appears in *Poetry*, *The New Yorker*, and other magazines. She is a professor in the Creative Media Institute at New Mexico State University and also teaches in Warren Wilson's MFA program. She lives in New Mexico and Chicago and was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2021.

Akshita Chaudhuri is a 18-year-old psychology major from Kolkata, India and she considers revolution to be her synonym. More often than not you'll find her obsessing over Sylvia Plath, a cup of coffee and dostovesky. To read more of her works find her on Instagram, [@_shaerha_](https://www.instagram.com/_shaerha_)

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