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THE OFFICIAL LITERARY JOURNAL OF THE CITY COLLEGE OF NEW YORK

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“Vessel,” by Philip F. Clark

Contact the journal at prometheancitycollege@gmail.com

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Renata K. Miller, Interim Dean of Humanities and Arts
Mikhal Dekel, Interim Chair of the English Department
The Lippman Family

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Andras Kisery, Interim Faculty Advisor. We so appreciate how you stepped in, helped form a stellar editorial team, and provided encouragement and support at every turn.

From the Editors

Dear Readers,

In Promethean's forty-ninth issue, our group of gifted contributors interpret our theme, "connected and disconnected," by exploring meaning through broken connections, new connections, and reconnections. We experience many illustrations of togetherness and disunion, including someone whose closest companions may be the mice in their walls, culture and memory triggered by empathy, encountering majestic nature, being alone in a crowd, and love in the age of Zoom. The exploration takes us on a journey, from a post-apocalyptic world, to contemporary Houston and New York, to memories of Haiti and Bangladesh.

We hope you enjoy this collection: a meditation, reflection and documentation through the lens of a diverse group of artists and writers. It reminds us that despite the hardships life may bring us, the world is still a remarkable place and the human experience, no matter how difficult, is something worthy of celebration.

With Gratitude,

The Senior Editorial Team

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Migration

SHANKAR BISESSAR

A layer of defeat sits on the face
of Francisco as he treks to Del Rio.

Contaminated water seeps between
the crevices of his feet.

A dreary sky dims the last bit of hope
as flashing lights begin to dance.

Two overweight men in patrol uniforms
come to extend the wrath
of an oxidized chain-link fence.

The warm barrel of a bruised M-14
extinguishes his existence.

Sitting on a cold wooden bench at Baisley Pond Park.

SHANKAR BISESSAR

To my left,
 fireflies colonize the wide blades of coarse grass,
 their flashing orange glow a warning to passersby.
 Nearby, murky waters surrender—retreat without protest.

Ahead, a teen recites lullabies to her teething infant,
 the stroller sways side to side.
 A false smile is the choice of disguise.

To my right,
 a malnourished man lugs the stench of misery,
 shoulders drooped, loose change in a Styrofoam cup.
 Dark red ink from his makeshift cardboard sign runs,
 looking for an escape.

This Year, Next Year, Last Year

TESSA MILLER

I stay inside
 I brush my hair with a fork
 I keep the TV on
 I run the bath 'til it overflows
 I stop answering the phone
 I wash my face with salt
 I hide letters under the bed
 I dig my nails into my palm
 I dry the dishes with dirty laundry
 I wrap my body in tissue paper
 A dove sits on the windowsill
 Calling
 Away
 Away
 Away

The Lost Girl

NINA CAPILLE OPPENHEIM

I was walking through Fort Tryon Park and thought I saw a girl I used to know. She was standing on the stone steps by the Cloisters with a 25mm camera in her hands, head cocked to the side with short, wavy black hair, just like the last time I saw her there. Jeong-Yeon, my roommate in my first year at NYU, had been undiscoverable since she went back to Seoul more than twenty years ago. It couldn't have been her. It must have been my imagination.

Can it be possible not to be able to find someone on social media? Every few years I tap her name into Facebook. So many women come up, but none of them are her. I've asked Beth, our other roommate, if they've ever been in touch. "That cold bitch left us and never looked back!" A total mis-characterization, or was it?

Where did she go after we said goodbye at the Korean Air gate at JFK? Did she study abroad in London? Did she find an internship in Tokyo like she talked about? She seemed to have disappeared into the ether.

Jeong-Yeon was the first person I met in New York City. After my family dropped me off and I was alone in a tiny, gray, dorm room on East 27th St., she walked in the door. She smiled shyly and rolled in two huge suitcases. We sat at a small, worn wooden table—everything in the cramped room was dollhouse size—and said our hellos. "My name is Jeong-Yeon. I've just arrived from Seoul. Can you tell me where I can buy some bed linens?" The whole exchange took nearly an hour. She wrote some words on a piece of scrap paper as she said them, showing me to clarify her meaning. Our heads bowed over the paper, practically touching, and I said "yes!" at everything she showed me in an effort to let her know I understood her early attempts at English.

Four girls lived in our quad that year. Beth and I felt responsible for Jeong-Yeon as she got acclimated to New York. She became the glue between us. We agreed that we'd look out for her, learn the city together, make sure she wasn't out there alone.

New York at that time was all muted colors, soot and old graffiti. The East Village was still for goths and old-time residents and no one traveled from Manhattan to Brooklyn. Before the city's first Target opened in the village we ate weekday lunches exclusively on the corner of St. Marks and Third Avenue, where you could get a bagel and schmear for a dollar. Late at night the same block was sketchy with guys hocking used books, lamps, and tchotchkes that they spread out on blankets on the sidewalk.

You could feel the city's vibrancy through its gray canvas. There were still art galleries in SoHo. There were passionate sidewalk conversations about John Leguizamo and his show *Freak*. There were endlessly long lines of actors on Lafayette Street waiting to be seen for open calls for *Rent*, when the show was

new and still desperately seeking authentic grungy types.

Neither Beth nor I could be described as wide-eyed. We took on the job of showing Jeong-Yeon the city with a detached coolness. We took her to Dojo's and Yaffa Cafe for long cheap meals and Don Hills and Wetlands for late nights of sweaty dancing.

All our wherewithal didn't stop her from getting hit by a taxi on one of our first outings. We'd wandered into an open air fair on West 23rd Street and bought corn on the cob and giant containers of dried spices. When we got tired we thought we'd take the bus home. As soon as the traffic light turned green Jeong-Yeon ran to catch a bus across the street. At the same time a cab blew through the red light. I saw her body on the hood of the taxi and then on the ground. A tall man in daisy duke shorts yelled at the driver to stay put and then helped us get an ambulance. At Saint Vincent's emergency room Jeong-Yeon was given crutches, which she refused. She pointed to her left hip and said, "I have to help her get better," and limped along.

That year, each of the three of us took turns bringing each other to visit our respective hometowns. Mary took us to suburban Long Island, Beth to Washington D.C. and I brought the girls to what was then an economically booming Atlantic City. Without the veneer and freedom of New York, Jeong-Yeon saw a version of America—and of each of us—that she may not have expected.

I had the naivete to bring the girls home for a beauty pageant I was in. We got our nails done together and then they dropped me off at my middle school auditorium. I won a much-needed scholarship that night. Jeong-Yeon took pictures with her 25mm camera. Afterwards, we went back to the brokedown palace I grew up in and drank like co-eds. When I look back I can't believe the level of intimacy I shared with the girls on that trip. They could see where I came from and who I was—not just the self I was inventing in the city.

Our time together—odd hours found between our different course loads—was a blur of meals paid for with our collected single dollar bills and sometimes quarters: an all nighter at a diner on the East Side, take-out at Joe Hug Deli, rare fancy birthdays at Tribeca Grill and Hangawi.

On the way to lunch one day in the East Village, Jeong-Yeon silently took my hand in hers, not even looking at me as we walked down Third Avenue. I stared at her, confused. The last person I had held hands with was my mother, in kindergarten. Jeong-Yeon said, "In Seoul all girlfriends walk like this." As we went on, I regarded my left arm as a strange appendage, a disembodied limb until, without even noticing it, my self-consciousness was gone. We had gone Dutch all year long, but Jeong-Yeon picked up the tab that day. When I insisted on chipping in, she shushed me saying, "Even in Seoul I sometimes treat my girlfriends."

One night in May, we finally had to say goodbye. Beth, a pragmatic straight-shooter, was suddenly weepy saying, "We're never going to see you again," but Jeong-Yeon wouldn't allow tears. She'd wave her hands in the air and make silly faces, at dinner, in the taxi, walking through JFK. She wouldn't have a long

farewell, instead she hugged each of us then waved for a quick picture before she disappeared through the security gate.

Beth and I went back to the near-empty dorm room. It was just the two of us. Jeong-Yeon had been pitching mementos for days, tossing things she couldn't take halfway around the world. Beth rooted through the overflowing trash can. She pulled out a black and white contact sheet and then another and another. We looked at Jeong-Yeon's pictures from New Year's Eve in Times Square, a year-long study of NYPD mounted police and their horses (especially the nostrils which she found adorable), and a few pics from my beauty pageant. Like scavengers hoarding memories from our year together, we each kept a page.

More than twenty years on, the city has morphed with big-box stores and glass high-rise buildings in nearly every Manhattan neighborhood, but some things remain the same. You can still spin the cube at Astor Place. *Stomp* is still playing at the Orpheum Theater. Fort Tryon Park is still a wilderness in the middle of the city.

I can text Beth at any hour of the day and, regardless of where she is in the world, I can rely on a witty, acerbic response. We trade pics of our kids every few months and sit down for a catch up once a year. She is highly google-able because of her long-time photojournalism work at high profile New York magazines.

But our time with Jeong-Yeon resides before social media, and it lives solely in human memory: in a mind's eye picture of a girl running through Times Square after the Yankees won the World Series, jumping a barricade and high fiving locals just to get a photograph of a police horse; of a girl teaching the history of the Korean alphabet to my brother at a tiny dorm room table; of a girl taking pictures on the stone steps near a cathedral museum. What remains is preserved only in imagination and in a yearning attached to unanswerable questions. I wonder if she went on to have a good life, or did she die in those years after college.

Now I live next to the park that we walked through together in 1996. The mystery of her absence haunts me. Jeong-Yeon and our time together are vapors, ungraspable, along with answers to other related questions. How do you hold on to a memory, a city, a lost love, a friend? I see her ghost everywhere and I wonder.

Letting Go While Holding On

SUMAIYA SEEMEEN

I'm five years old and my world is you.

I take my chubby index finger and raise it from my side towards your head, drawing an imaginary circle around it—that's planet Earth and I'm happy to live here.

You wake me up extra early, even on weekends, running your hand through my curly hair that perfectly resembles a bird's nest.

"You're going to miss your cartoons," you say. I whine as I hurry out of bed, huffing and puffing as if I'm not grateful you woke me up for such a purpose. You playfully rush me into the bathroom, pretending to be a marching soldier. It's thrilling to have your tall build creating a shadow that follows after me. You stare as I brush my teeth with my Barbie-themed toothbrush, telling me to be gentle so my hurried, monstrous strokes don't make my gums bleed. Soon after, you're fixing my hair by putting it into a braid. It is messy and the three sections are unequal, but I find it perfect because I love you greatly. I end up cherishing the braid you carefully produced with your warm, worn-out hands.

Life's good because you're my father. On Saturday mornings you put food on the table and watch your children play and dance to the music coming from the decade-old television. The food isn't handmade because you're not the best chef, nor have you ever really tried cooking. But cereal is just as delicious when served by you.

On weekday evenings, I sit by the windowsill, waiting for you to make your way home from work. I stare at the sun setting, painting the sky in hues of pink and orange. I know that once the colors smooth out a bit, and welcome a hint of grayness, you'll walk out of the car and jog towards the entrance of our apartment building. I sit there for a few more minutes, waiting to hear the elevator doors open. When I do, I run towards you, anticipating the rush of the wind on my face when you pick me up and spin me around. You ask me how my day is, and I tell you about the new friend I made at school. Things are good; every day is just like this.

I believe in permanence and security. That's all you've ever provided me with. One of those evenings, you come in and don't say a word. There are lines decorating your forehead; the ends of your mouth stretching into a frown. You put your bag down and begin to massage your temples, the tips of your thumbs turning white. The distance from the window to you isn't so short, so when I begin to slowly take steps towards you, I understand that something is not right; you're upset. But midway to you, I feel as though if I run and hug your legs, it'll make you smile. I begin to dash, trying not to fall as I race towards you, the flimsy white rug beneath my feet moving side to side with every step. I'm almost

there as you're drawing out long sighs. I believe, somehow, that I can take your worries and throw them away—just like how you console me whenever I'm feeling down. And then I'm there, seconds away from wrapping my arms around you.

That's when I hear it: the deep resonance of your voice bouncing from wall to wall.

"I'm not in the mood," you say and turn around. The words sound cold, almost as though someone is standing behind you and speaking, while you're just moving your lips.

It's strange. I'm seeing you, my father. Yet, it feels like a foreign man has walked into our home.

The entirety of my life has been spoiled with your softness. Maybe that is why, when I observe even the slightest change in you for the first time, it makes me straighten my back and look up at you with wide eyes. I want to ask you what's wrong, but the pit of my stomach feels tight, and I stand there wishing you'd turn back around. But this moment of shock is brief. I step out of your way, watching you walk away, thinking this is just for today. One bad day cannot erase the fact that you love me. I'm sure of it.

Perhaps that was my mistake—thinking it was never going to be like that ever again. It began with distant words. Then were the days you'd come home after I'd fallen asleep at night, and a full week would pass before we would see and hear each other. I would read nighttime stories to myself and set an alarm to wake up so I could gently brush my teeth and watch cartoons while eating the milk and cereal I poured (and spilled a little). Alone in my activities, without your presence to help. Slowly, I was learning that the world was bigger than just you.

The times when you stayed home, the rooms filled with your screams.

When a pair of shoes wasn't perfectly parallel to one another, your face turned red.

"Is it so hard to position your shoes correctly? Can't you do anything right?" you'd ask.

"But—" I wanted to explain that the shoes were yours, and we hadn't been out near the shoe stand recently.

"What but?" you'd reply. We would remain quiet after that, wondering why the placing of your own shoes erased the work of all the chores my brother and I had completed.

Or when I had a fever, and it was entirely my fault. God forbid we were sick; being sick was such a taboo.

"If you listened to your father, you would never get sick," you'd cry out. It sounded irrational, but we agreed. I would rather hold on to my coughs and suffer than be yelled at. The bitterness in you grew and grew, until it was a gigantic, brutal monster. At the mere sight of this impossible beast, my body would freeze from fear of making it explode.

That was the new normal. I no longer expected to see you as you once were.

Even now that I'm older, I consciously try not to grow attached to a single

part of you.

One day I stand in front of the mirror, feeling pretty and different from the girl I usually am. The dazzling gown adorns my body, glowing in the low-lit room. I see my ancestors on my face and a touch of my mother. Familiar footsteps tell me you're walking into the room, and you make your way towards my direction, stopping a few feet behind me. I don't make much of it. There are a limited number of mirrors in our small home. Maybe you just want to admire yourself as well, because you and I—we don't do that often. We're so good at bringing ourselves down that praising ourselves is rare, and it can be good. But you continue to stare at the back of my head, and I can feel the heated rays burning holes through it. I anxiously await your voice because, after all this time, I still wish for you to say something that won't rip me apart.

"If only you were skinny," you say. I think it's come to a point where you believe I'm a robot with no emotions.

But even robots have their limits. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum once had an art installation named "Can't Help Myself" by Sun Yuan and Peng Yu. They presented a robotic arm that had a single task of keeping a blood-red liquid within set dimensions, not allowing it to spread too wide. But this was almost impossible because the robot wanted to interact with the visitors and show them its dance moves. Meanwhile, the liquid did not wait. It continued to move around freely. When the robot sensed this, it frantically tried to scoop it back in place, splashing the liquid on the walls surrounding it. It lost control, making no progress at all because the liquid moved rapidly, the mess was unavoidable, and the arm proceeded to exhaust itself—wishing it could hold it all together.

Much like the art piece, I'm trying to keep it all together when you say this. I stand there stunned, waiting to collect my thoughts, containing my emotions from spilling over and spreading too far. But that's when the unfortunate truth dawns on me:

Father, you're my first heartbreak.

My fingers grow numb, and my chest feels tight. The knot in my throat is so heavy that I want to reach through my mouth and rip it out with my hand. I can feel the tears threatening to fall, but I focus on my feet and stay silent. *If only I was. If only.* Would you have loved me again?

Something happened that changed us forever. I have never discovered the actual reason. Maybe a glitch in the matrix, or a warp in time—or whatever euphemistic blanket terms to name this devastation. And for so long, I refused to believe life had treated you so unfairly that you forgot how to be kind to me. I have to constantly remind myself:

It wasn't always like this. It wasn't always like this. It wasn't always like this.

Maybe you experienced such pain that it transformed you forever. The kind that comes all at once and builds a fence around the heart.

But the suffering you endured was yours solely because you didn't share it with anyone. Maybe if you did, it would've been easier for me to accept this distance that felt so foreign to me. In the beginning, we were so lush and full

of love that I wanted to hold onto that part of you forever. Your misery was so violent, it took you from me and put you in a faraway land, with no way for me to reach out to you.

Father, you're sitting across from me, brows furrowed, and lips pressed thinly. You're breathing so naturally.

How is it that I'm grieving you?

Sparrows

ANNA STEEGMANN

Writing at sunrise
I think of love lost
my husband, my best friend

I think of travel
summers in Venice,
walks on the Adriatic Sea
rides on the Vaporetto

Drinking espresso,
a sfogliatella for me,
a bombolone for you

In the small café
at the Campo Santa Margherita
with the brazen sparrows
fighting over the crumbs on our table

And now
no husband,
no travel companion,
no espresso, no pastry,
no sparrows fighting over our crumbs
in the small café
at the Campo Santa Margherita

In A Silent Way

ANNA STEEGMANN

Sitting by myself,
letting it sink in,
Myelodysplastic Syndromes,
my diagnosis

Sitting on a bench
in Central Park's Conservatory Garden,
a block from the doctor's office
where I received the devastating news

Comforted by the birds, the trees, the plants
They will still be there
when I'm gone,
when I'm gone

The only cure for MDS
is a bone marrow transplant
the doctor said
We start you on chemo first

I'm not ready
I want to sit here
in silence
as long as I can

Habseligkeiten

ANNA STEEGMANN

The dictionary translates
Habseligkeiten,
a beautiful 17th-century word
in the German language,
as belongings

But *Habseligkeiten*
means so much more
They are the blessed possessions,
pitiful possessions
of destitute people

The few things
refugees and migrants
take with them
on their treacherous journey

The few things
people salvage from their homes
after they were destroyed
by hurricane,
fire or earthquake

Whenever I see homeless people,
people beaten down by life,
people without music,
I wonder about their *Habseligkeiten*,
their blessed possessions

I wonder what they carry in their backpacks,
their shopping carts,
what's hiding in their cardboard box homes,
their makeshift tents

I worry that they no longer find joy
walking along the ocean,
that they will never experience

the beauty of Venice
or the companionship
of a loyal dog
or a loyal friend

i drove to houston

LEX MOHAMED

i drove to houston for two days straight,
and at every pit stop, i thought
about how i'd probably never find that ice cream shop
again;
places like that are transient.
when i get home, i won't even remember
where it was.
i stuck my palm out the window, felt
the rush of departure in real time
wheat brushing along fingertips, each strand
a hellogoodbye
and a swarm of tiny papercuts.
it'll be a couple days before the stinging stops
but when it does,
i'll forget they ever touched me.

i drove to florida four years ago,
knowing the route would never look
how it looked that day
again.
every day i'm gone,
there's more to learn about you. another girl
to know the favorite color of. another bruise
from gymnastics. another book
you want me to read aloud
full of things i didn't know
you loved.

do you still remember the way to meyer park? i don't.
at some point, i stopped being afraid of what it looked like in the dark.
i don't think i'll ever be that scared
again.

They Who Stole the Moon

LILY CHOI

We have plenty of time.

I want to say it out loud, reassuring and steady, but the wind catches my breath and plucks it from my throat. I can't cough, or else I'll choke. I keep my reassurances to myself.

If not for the cool, clammy flesh of a hand in my grip and her pounding footsteps in my ears, I might as well be alone. My speed works for the both of us, and she is half-running half-dragging along; I don't dare tear my eyes from our path, so I do not see her, but I can imagine her flushed face as she runs, her breaths running her throat dry, the fluctuations in her grip showing her struggling to stay with me. I cling to her harder, but I do not stop.

The path is pitch black, the trees like looming shadows in our wake. Even without them, the sky is black—no moon guides us tonight. It would have been bold to presume ourselves so lucky.

And yet, the only footsteps we hear are our own. Mine thick and heavy, stomping along the uneven grass, every leap over a tree root making my joints crack. Hers are lighter, weaker. Even with her stumbles, she could not disturb the creatures beneath the earth.

I do not know how long we have been running, but at some point it seems like long enough. I dare to take the backwards glance I had not done before, and I see her face, flushed white and red with fatigue and exertion. Her dark hair melts in with the backdrop, and her features seem to glow in the dark. No wonder the moon did not appear today; I had captured it.

I peer past her. No shadows shift among the dark. Silence had long ago replaced the clink and clatter of swords and armor. I slow, and I feel her relief immediately. Her grip, already so weak, wavers and eventually goes limp in my hand. I do not let go. With a sigh, coarse and heavy, she falls. Like instinct, I pull her towards me. My back hits the rough bark of a tree and slides, scratching me. But I do not mind; her head falls on my chest and her breath slows and evens. I can feel her blood pulsing beneath my grip, and after a time, our hearts beat as one, assuring what I had wanted to say with words.

I do not know how long we sat there. Too long. We did not speak; we did nothing but breathe. A millennium passes, ever silent, and eventually she shifts. The movement is a shock to me, who had grown, in minutes, so used to her shape.

She stands, and so do I, and without words, we continue on the path. The moon still walks with her hand in mine, but the sky appears brighter somehow. Daylight. We walk faster.

Like nymphs emerging from their domains, we cross the border of the forest

into civilization once more. Clinks and clatter re-emerge, but from merchants and common folk instead of those raging cannon-fodder. Nonetheless, her grip tightens in my hand. The people stare, not at us, as a whole, but at her and her torn and ragged silks. I pull her closer.

I have never seen the sea, but now was no time to revel in its beauty. I had something better, anyway. The ships undulate on the gentle tides, picturesque against the horizon, but the sight calms neither of us. I tip my head down, and she does the same, and we steal aboard a merchant ship, its owner not noticing rats with eyes that only see treasure.

I lift my eyes, if only to find a proper hiding place, but it is a mistake. Foolishly, I fail to mask the fear on my face, and a servant, so used to such expressions, catches my eye. It takes but a moment for him to call for the boss, and in that moment we are running again.

She squeals as I shove her back down the plank, but that is where the men are, raising their swords that glint in the dawn light. She screams at the sight and runs backwards, into the ship. Another mistake, but again, where else are we to go?

Like packs of dogs, they chase us, growling. She withdraws two steps but has nowhere else to run. Our backs hit the edge of the deck, and she shrieks as she peers down at the ocean, so deep and dark and foreign, she cannot comprehend it. I cannot either, but unlike her, I do not try.

A sword-tip finds its way to my throat, and I cling to her harder than ever. Her silks tear in my grip, and the cannon-fodder glare. Among my sins, they count that as one of many.

A guarded arm seizes her, trying to steal her from me. But such a thing as the moon cannot be taken by force. She yanks and screams and tears at the man. I snatch the weapon at my neck and it slices through my palm, but the pain is nothing anymore. I throw it aside, grasping for her.

Time, that omnipresent god, always loves to play with its pawns when it sees fit. The guards seem to float farther and farther away, the distance slowly stretching between us. Suddenly the deck of the ship rises and blocks them from our sight. We hit the water. Such a foreign thing, as I said. Unlike a forest, neither of us knows how to navigate it. She is still in my grasp, and I know I must let go, for both of us, but I don't.

She flounders harder than ever, beating against the waves. I force my eyes open, against the sting, just to see her face. The light of her features shines brighter than ever the deeper we sink; the reflection of the moon in a dawn ocean.

Her beatings cease; she's given up, as I had decided the moment we fell. Her soft hand clasps mine wrapped around her.

We have plenty of time now, I want to say, as my breath breaks from my lungs. Our hearts beat as one till the very end.

After all, we were never going to make it.

CALLING HOME

SEAMUS SCANLON

SCENE 1

August 14, 1977. Belfast, Ireland. 6pm.

Lights up. Terraced house. Upstairs child's bedroom. BOY enters cautiously. Looks around. Listens intently. He runs his hand along the wallpaper of American Indians hunting buffalos through the long grass on the plains. Walks to the window. Opens it. The Angelus bells are ringing from churches in the neighborhood. Hears the sound of children in the street playing and laughing. You can hear a British army helicopter hovering overhead. The BOY looks up cautiously to view it taking care not to be seen. He pulls back the curtains to their maximum. He moves from the window and trails his hand again along wallpaper until he gets to the bookcase and browses. He picks up a few books. There are model airplanes hanging from the ceiling. Now and again the warm summer breeze causes the lace curtains to billow inwards. The curtains slowly go back to their original position. The model planes gently swing back and forth. He sits down at the bottom of the bed facing the open window. He starts reading. He cocks his head now and again towards the open window to hear better.

MAN enters with a cake box and looks around cautiously. BOY looks up. MAN walks to the window and checks everything like the BOY did.

MAN:
How are things?

BOY:
Fine.

MAN throws him some snacks. BOY catches most of them and gathers up the rest.

MAN:
Those will keep you going.

BOY:
Okay. Thanks.

Scanlon

MAN:

This cake is for your birthday. (*MAN hands over the cake box*) You can have it later. Do not go near it yet! I will put it here for you. (*MAN puts the cake box down on the bed.*)

MAN:

(*gets ready to leave*) Okay—I will be in the other room if you need anything. (*long beat*) Do you need anything?

BOY:

No, no. I am fine.

MAN:

Good—that is what we like to hear. I will call in to you later.

BOY:

Okay.

BOY resumes reading. MAN exits but keeps the door open.

SCENE 2

Earlier the same day, 12pm.

Stage Left - Council house. Glasgow, Scotland. Radio is playing in the kitchen. MOTHER is seated at the kitchen table. She is drinking a cup of tea. She has two loaves of homemade bread cooling on cooling trays. Clock on the kitchen wall is ticking loudly. Hands moved past noon. MOTHER looks anxiously towards the phone.

Stage Right - Empty phone box brightly lit against surrounding black background. Two SOLDIERS enter and run towards the phone box.

SOLDIER 2:

Hurry up, will you?

SOLDIER 1 goes into the phone box, takes out coins, and lines them up on top of the black metal phone box. He inserts coins and dials on the rotary phone.

MOTHER:

Thank God!

MOTHER turns down the radio volume and rushes into the hallway to pick up the phone.

MOTHER:
Hello! Hello, you!

SOLDIER 1:
Hi, Ma.

MOTHER:
I was worried. You were late.

SOLDIER 1:
Only one minute!

MOTHER:
Every minute counts!

SOLDIER 1:
Okay Ma. It won't happen again! You are very strict!

MOTHER:
(laughs) Not really! How are things over there? I am worried.

SOLDIER 1:
It's fine Ma, you know? It is pretty quiet. Do not worry. Downtown Glasgow is more dangerous. We have safe jobs in the barracks. We never go out on patrol even!

MOTHER:
Okay. Do not take any chances. *(beat)* Has the food got any better?

SOLDIER 1:
(laughs) No! Full Irish breakfasts. Terrible. It's just like being at home really!

MOTHER:
(laughs) Are you trying to say I can't cook!

SOLDIER 1:
Yes!

MOTHER:
The cheek of you! You will be crying soon for my homemade bread.

SOLDIER 1:
Ha ha—yes—you are right. Maybe you can send some more over?

MOTHER:
You never know! Gough barracks—I have the address. I will do my best.

SOLDIER 1:
That would be great Ma!

MOTHER:
How is the other lad?

SOLDIER 2:
(crowding into the phone and shouting) I am here Ma!

MOTHER:
You never call me!

SOLDIER 2:
I know Ma, sorry—I'm not great on the phone really!

MOTHER:
I know. It is fine. It is great you are together at least. Are things any better?

SOLDIER 1:
Yes!

SOLDIER 2:
No!

MOTHER:
It was 800 years ago since they were invaded—they should be over it by now!

SOLDIER 1:
Not so far Ma! They keep talking about Cromwell. *(beat)* The girls like us anyway.

MOTHER:
It must be the uniforms!

SOLDIER 1:
I think it is my brain.

SOLDIER 2:
What brains?

SOLDIER 1:
Fuck off, you!

MOTHER:
Language please!

SOLDIER 1:
Sorry, Ma!

SOLDIER 2:
Sorry, Ma!

MOTHER:
You are two good-looking boys even if I say so myself.

SOLDIER 1:

I am anyway.

SOLDIER 1 punches SOLDIER 2 playfully. Beeps sound on the phone.

SOLDIER 1:

We have to go, Ma.

SOLDIER 2:

(shouts) Bye, Ma.

MOTHER:

Ok, boys. Be careful. You will be back home soon. Call me tonight at 11 as per usual!

Beeps increase in intensity.

MOTHER:

I love y...

Phone line goes dead. Both SOLDIERS leave the phone box. MOTHER slowly lowers the phone. Blesses herself with the sign of the Cross.

SCENE 3

Later that same day, 3pm.

Small bar in central Belfast. The two SOLDIERS, in civilian clothes, are drinking at a table. On the bar countertop there is a radio playing I'm in Love With a German Filmstar (I Once Saw in the Movies).

GIRL 1 and GIRL 2 in their late teens enter carrying shopping bags and purses and head straight towards where the two SOLDIERS are sitting. The SOLDIERS stop talking when they realize the GIRLS are there and with anticipation smile up at them.

SOLDIER 1:

Hello there, girls.

GIRL 1:

Are these seats free?

SOLDIER 1:

Not now they're not!

GIRL 1:

Great! We are not getting up from these seats now anyway. We are out shopping

all day—we are parched to fuck!

SOLDIER 1:

Does everyone drink in Belfast day and night?

GIRL 1:

Yes! It is the real Irish religion.

SOLDIER 1:

Can I get you something?

GIRL 1:

I thought you'd never ask, boyo. Sure, two black and tans.

SOLDIER 1:

Your wish is my command.

SOLDIER 1 gets up and walks to the bar and orders the drinks.

GIRL 1 (to SOLDIER 2):

Are you soldier boys? You have the haircuts anyway. Plus, not from around here with those accents.

SOLDIER 2:

Yeah. No. From Scotland.

GIRL 1:

Sure. (beat) You are very young-looking fellas to be soldiers.

SOLDIER 2:

I suppose. I am 17. My brother there is 18. He is like the old guy!

GIRL 1:

(laughs) Good one. Yes, he is ancient alright! Wow 17. (hesitates) Fuck. How are you even in the army?

SOLDIER 1 returns with drinks.

SOLDIER 1:

Two black and tans there, girls. The barman burst out laughing when I ordered them for some reason—what's up with that?

GIRL 1:

(shrugs) No idea.

SOLDIER 2:

17 is the entry age. My brother joined up so I had to as well, you know?

GIRL 1:
(*subdued*) Sure.

SOLDIER 1:
Blood is thicker than water, you know?

GIRL 1:
(*subdued*) Sure. I have to make a phone call. I'll be back in a minute.

SOLDIER 1:
Sure.

GIRL 1:
Don't go away!

SOLDIER 1:
No fear!

GIRL 1 nods her head, gets up from the table and walks to the phone in the far corner of the pub. GIRL 2 looks over thoughtfully at GIRL 1 on the phone who is now talking and gesticulating.

GIRL 2 (To SOLDIERS 1 & 2):
She is probably ringing her boyfriend.

SOLDIER 1:
Fuck—I thought I had a chance with her there for a minute.

GIRL 2:
You never know—don't give up yet. Where there's a will there's a way (*in upper-class English accent*) old chap!

SOLDIER 1:
We are from Scotland. Not England. (*pause*) I prefer Belfast girls anyway, you know?

GIRL 2:
Sure. What's not to like? We love to dance and drink and party. And throw petrol bombs of course. What's up with your brother? He doesn't seem to like Belfast girls that much. Or maybe it's just me?

SOLDIER 1:
No! No! He is just quiet is all. He will barely talk to our Ma on the phone.

GIRL 2:
Okay—I thought I had BO or something?

SOLDIER 1:
(*laughs*) No. He can't actually smell anything.

GIRL 2:
(*laughs*) That is handy. How come?

SOLDIER 1:
Fell out of a tree when he was a kid. Landed on his head. Always like that since.

GIRL 2:
Okay! I thought I was losing my Irish charm there for a while.

SOLDIER 1:
No. Don't worry! (*after a pause*) Are you girls not afraid being out in Belfast—car bombs and all that?

GIRL 2:
Nah, we're only afraid of Loyalist fuckers.

SOLDIER 1:
What is a Loyalist?

GIRL 2:
You know, a Prod.

SOLDIER 1:
What is that?

GIRL 2:
Wow, you are in over your heads. So much for military intelligence. Prod equals Protestant.

SOLDIER 1:
Are you a Catholic?

GIRL 2:
Jesus, you can't be asking anyone that.

SOLDIER 1:
Why? Sure who cares?

GIRL 2:
Everyone in Northern Ireland basically.

SOLDIER 1:
I don't care. Anyway, I am a Catholic!

GIRL 2:
Good to know!

GIRL 2 looks over again at GIRL 1 on the phone. They catch each other's eyes. GIRL 1 gesticulates—shakes her head. After a while she nods a few times. Looks dispirited. Then hangs up. Walks back to the table. Puts on a happy face. Picks up her drink, downs it in one go and puts down the empty glass on the table with a loud bang.

GIRL 1:
Wow - I needed that. Who wants to go to a party?

GIRL 2 picks up her drink and drinks it slowly and finishes it. Puts her glass on the table.

SOLDIER 1:
Well....

GIRL 1:
Do you fancy me or not? Do you want a heavenly time or not?

SOLDIER 1:
Sure but...

GIRL 1:
I am going anyway. Suit yourself.

GIRLS stand up and gather their shopping bags.

SOLDIER 1:
Ha ha—jeez take it easy! Yes, we will come. I just have to make a phone call at 11 pm though.

GIRL 1:
So are you two-timing me already?

SOLDIER 1:
What? No no. *(laughs)* The Ma. You know? You know how they are? She worries all the time. She is a widow, you know? Our old man was killed a long time back at work.

GIRL 1:
(startled) Ah okay. Yes, sure—I get you—there is a phone there—do not worry.

SOLDIER 1:
Okay great so! If we don't she won't send us her homemade soda bread!

GIRL 1:
(rolls her eyes good naturedly) Well, we can't have that now, can we?

They all stand up and prepare to leave.

SOLDIER 1:
We have to be back in barracks by midnight. They are very strict.

GIRL 1:
I am very strict!

SOLDIER 1:
(saluting) Yes, Maam!

GIRL 1:
Ok, lads and lassies. Here we go!

They exit laughing and joyful. When the door closes the barman watches them closely. He heads toward the phone.

SCENE 4

Later that same day, 7pm.

Belfast, Ireland. Still bright. Same terraced house. Sitting room. Clock on the wall. The front door to the street opens. GIRLS and SOLDIERS enter—the sound of a helicopter and kids playing can be heard before the door closes. The SOLDIERS are carrying drinks. The GIRLS put down their shopping bags and flop down on the sofa. The SOLDIERS take cans of cider and beer and put them on the table.

GIRL 1 Goes to the record player. Puts on some disco music and returns to the sofa and takes off her shoes. GIRL 2 is chatting and laughing with SOLDIER 2.

GIRL 1:
(sighs) Jesus my legs are dead. Give us a drink before we fucken melt. *(takes off her denim jacket)*

SOLDIER 1:
(holds up a can of each) Beer or cider?

GIRL 1:
Cider of course!

GIRL 2:
Cider of course!

GIRL 1:
Cider is an instant buzz. Not warm Free State beer.

SOLDIER 1:
What's Free State?

GIRL 1:
Jesus, down the South! Don't you Brits know anything?

SOLDIER 1:
I am not a Brit. I am from Scotland.

GIRL 1:
Same difference.

SOLDIER 1:
How come?

GIRL 1:
I don't know. It just is.

SOLDIER 1:
We are off duty anyway, so that is fine I think?

GIRL 1:
We are never off duty.

SOLDIER 1:
(slightly alarmed) How do you mean?

GIRL 1:
You know Taigs—under the heel all the time—”of the imperial oppressor.” We can never relax.

SOLDIER 1:
What's a Taig?

GIRL 1:
Jesus. Us. *(gestures at herself and GIRL 2)* Catholics.

SOLDIER 1:
My Ma is a Catholic. Anyway we are only here to keep the peace.

GIRL 1:
It's not really working.

SOLDIER 1:
I know. We never know what is going on. We just joined up to learn a trade and be mechanics you know?

GIRL 1:
(sadly) My brother was a mechanic.

SOLDIER 1:
What type of cars did he like?

GIRL 1:
Opel Vectras. They packed a punch.

SOLDIER 1:
I love them too. See! We are all really one under the surface.

GIRL 1:
He is under the ground now.

SOLDIER 1:
(slightly alarmed again) What? Jesus. What happened?

GIRL 1:
Nothing. Wrong place, wrong time.

SOLDIER 1:
Okay—I am sure your Ma was sad.

GIRL 1:
Sad and mad.

SOLDIER 1:
(uneasily) You were more fun earlier. Am I boring you? *(gesture towards his brother)* Should we go, do you think?

GIRL 1:
No no, you are fine. Don't mind me. I get a bit morose when I drink.

SOLDIER 1:
You have a top-notch vocabulary.

GIRL 1:
I have a top-notch chest you mean? *(laughs)*

SOLDIER 1:
Yes. That too.

GIRL 1:
Drink up while you can!

SOLDIER 1:
We just want to go home to Scotland and open a garage. We hate the Brits as

well. They are stuck-up buggers. So we are on the same side really!

GIRL 1:
Dream on!

SOLDIER 1 points over at SOLDIER 2 and GIRL 2 who are still chatting away and laughing.

SOLDIER 1:
My brother is usually very quiet. That girl is taking him out of his shell.

GIRL 1:
She is a good trooper okay! Let's fucken dance!!

She stands up suddenly and grabs the hands of SOLDIER 1 and pulls him towards the middle of the floor—she puts up the volume of the music. She picks up her can of cider. They start dancing. GIRL 2 and SOLDIER 2 look over and nod at each other and get up and dance as well.

GIRL 1:
You dance well.

SOLDIER 1:
Thanks!

GIRL 1:
For a Brit!

They both laugh. SOLDIER 1 goes to kiss GIRL 1—she deftly evades him. He shrugs—dances more intensely. They both laugh. A slow song comes on and the two couples dance close together—all four holding cans of cider.

The door from the front room to the inside of the house opens slowly. The couples are dancing. The light is not as bright now from outside. The BOY walks in with a silver Colt held down by his side. In his other hand he carries the empty cake box. He runs his hand slowly against the wall of the room to savor the texture of the wall paper. He closes his eyes. He sways slightly to the music.

GIRL 2 grabs her handbag and rushes out. The front door bangs behind her. The glass in the doorway shakes as she leaves. You can hear the children laughing and the helicopter briefly.

SOLDIER 2 is a bit mystified and is looking at the front door as if for an answer.

GIRL 1 disengages from SOLDIER 1 who also looks mystified. GIRL 1 walks

away from SOLDIER 1 towards BOY. SOLDIER 1 looks around and sees her standing beside the BOY who slowly raises the Colt. The BOY turns down the volume of the record player.

BOY:
Great music I must say. Sorry, young lover boys—hands up!

The SOLDIERS respond slowly, look scared, drunk, but realize they are in danger. They raise their hands up awkwardly.

GIRL 1:
They are brothers.

BOY:
Okay.

SOLDIER 1:
Please. We are off duty. We are not Brits even.

GIRL 1:
Scotland!

BOY:
You are Crown Forces though?

SOLDIER 1:
Crown Forces—what is that?

BOY:
(exasperated) The Crown! Elizabeth Regina you know—the red post boxes, etc.—enemy forces.

SOLDIER 1:
But, listen, we are only mechanics. All we want to do is fix up cars when we get home.

BOY:
“WE” are at home *(gestures to himself and GIRL 1)*

Both SOLDIERS are crying quietly now.

SOLDIER 1:
We will do anything you want if you let us go.

BOY:
(hesitates) Maybe. Let me think. *(lowers Colt)*

SOLDIERS relax a bit and begin to lower their hands.

BOY:

Keep your fucken hands up!

SOLDIERS quickly raise their hands.

GIRL 1:

They are only kids. Like us. That one is only 17 (*points at SOLDIER 2*)

BOY:

(*gestures with the Colt*) Sit down on that sofa there. Keep your fucken hands up. Now, empty your pockets! One hand only.

SOLDIERS slowly do it although drunk. They sway slightly on the sofa. They drop all their belongings on the table.

BOY:

Go through their stuff.

GIRL 1:

Okay.

GIRL 1 goes through everything—reads info from ID cards

GIRL 1:

Yes, 17, 18, what now?

BOY:

(*shrugs*) I am 16 today. (*holds up the empty cake box then throws it away*)
Happy birthday to me!

MAN abruptly walks into the room.

MAN:

What's the fucken hold up?

BOY:

They are Scottish, they are teens, they are Catholics, they are brothers.

MAN:

They are Brits!

SOLDIERS are crying quietly.

MAN:

(*scowls at SOLDIERS then eases his facial expression*) Look lads, you will be okay. No panic. We didn't expect the wee girls to catch minnows. We will have to court-martial them obviously. (*GIRL 1 looks askance at MAN*)

SOLDIERS look more hopeful.

GIRL 1:

Can I go?

MAN:

(*angrily*) No! Get over here beside me.

SOLDIERS look up worried again. GIRL 1 moves reluctantly and stands beside the MAN.

SOLDIER 1:

We can leave Belfast tonight. We won't tell anyone.

SOLDIER 2:

Yes, please.

SOLDIER 1:

We hate it here anyway. We are Catholics you know, like all of you.

MAN:

I know.

SOLDIER 1:

Our ma.....

MAN suddenly pulls gun and fires two shots. GIRL 1 screams. The SOLDIERS moan and slouch forward on the sofa still sitting, arms hanging down. Blood hits the wall and drips onto the floor and sofa.

MAN:

(*To BOY*) You now! The hard part is done.

BOY:

There is no hard part.

The BOY raises the gun quickly without any hesitation and fires two shots. The SOLDIERS' bodies move from the bullet impacts.

MAN:

Welcome to the new Ireland. Now you! (*points at GIRL 1 and hands her his gun*)

BOY:

No!

MAN:
Keep out of this.

GIRL 1:
(shocked) I can't, I can't—please.

MAN:
The Brits killed your brother. Do it now!

GIRL 1:
I got them here. I did enough.

MAN:
There is never enough! Do this for your mother!

GIRL 1 levels gun, hands shaking, watches the groaning dying soldiers. She closes her eyes. Suddenly there are two loud gunshots. She opens her eyes. The BOY has fired the shots. The SOLDIERS on the sofa are dead.

MAN:
(To BOY) What is your fucken problem?

BOY:
She has been through enough already. Job is done, isn't it? *(gestures with gun towards the SOLDIERS)*

MAN:
Never do that again or you will be the one on that fucken sofa *(points at sofa)*.

GIRL 1 falls to her knees and throws up. BOY goes over to comfort her. He has the Colt in one hand.

BOY:
Are you okay?

GIRL:
(shocked) No. No. I will never be okay.

MAN:
You love birds better get a fucken grip. This is a war. No quarter. No surrender.

BOY:
That's what the Prods say.

MAN:
Fuck the Prods. *(points at GIRL 1 on her knees)* That one is useless.

MAN takes back his gun roughly.

MAN:
(points at vomit) That is a problem there forensic wise. Burn this place down.

MAN Leaves abruptly through the front door. Bangs the door loudly behind him. The glass panes vibrate. BOY and GIRL 1 stand there looking forlorn.

SCENE 5

Same day, 11pm.

Glasgow, Scotland. Kitchen. Night. Hands of the wall clock approaching 11:01 pm.

Radio playing. MOTHER is drinking a cup of tea.

RADIO NEWS READER: Earlier tonight in Belf..

The phone rings—MOTHER turns down the volume. She rushes out of the kitchen into the hallway. Picks up phone.

MOTHER:
Hello Jimmy boy. I didn't get to finish earlier, but I love you. *(after a pause she looks at the phone puzzled)* Hello? Hello? Is that

THE END

Collection: H

YIN TING

I am a Chan (Zen) Meditation practitioner. Photography is my meditation practice, and I hope my works can give a moment of peace. Stand with Freedom.







UNTITLED 3

UNTITLED 3



Our Hips Were Swinging

CARLA CHERRY

After “Flight” by Bianca Stone

Dear Bianca,

Of course I was skipping. I was holding
Daddy’s soft-strong hand,
coming home
after two days away.
I had a brand new baby sister to see.

Donna,
after my mother’s youngest brother, Don.
She was tawny. Cooing, kicking her legs,
checking us out
as we smiled down on her
black satin curls brushed
around her face like a halo.

We, now a family of four.
First steps, then she was running behind me,
her big sister by two years and eight months.
By my side, hanging red, blue, and green balls
with bells on their bottoms
from our six-foot Christmas tree.
Tearing wrapping paper and bows,
throwing them in the air,
finding dolls whose hair
resembled our maze of twists and turns.
We applied fake lipstick.
Made them pose.
Laid the girl dolls on Ken for giggles as we grew.

My bike was red, hers was blue.

We latchkey kids, rolling
through the living room and kitchen on our metal skates
while Mommy and Daddy worked.

Me, cooking scrambled eggs for us.
When I burned them, I told her the brown part
was special seasoning.

Books.

Donna dug Walter Dean Myers. I went for
Virginia Hamilton, Sharon Bell Mathis, and Nikki Giovanni,
and we both read Brenda Wilkinson’s *Ludell*
until the spine cracked like ice underfoot.
Hands in the air, our hips swinging to “Let’s Go Crazy”
at two Prince concerts.

My son tucked
in the crook of her arm for the first time.
Me sleeping on a makeshift bed next to hers
after she gave birth.

And you expect me
to stop thinking about
calling Donna
when I get good news
because somebody
told your mother

that it takes six months
to realize someone is no longer on the planet?

November 20th.
Three years to the day
since Donna’s heart stopped beating.

My grip on these memories is like
a toddler and its blankie,
or a chocolate chip cookie,
or a sourball,
that some grown-up wants
to snatch away,
because cavities.

A Likely Explanation for Why Black Women Disproportionately Suffer from Fibroids

CARLA CHERRY

Every time I ask my aunt,
who is about to turn 101,
how she is, she says,
I'm still here.
I just thank God,
thank Him that I have good food to eat
and somewhere to live.
Just glad I get to still open my eyes.

What a privilege it is to live long
and be afraid of a natural death,

because we Black women
have never been safe since
we arrived naked on these shores,
rice or seeds cornrowed into our hair,
if we were lucky.

400 years later,
like Anjanette Young,
who was undressing after a long day of helping people,
about to enjoy
her glass of wine
and an episode of *Grey's Anatomy*,
we can have our doors broken down in the middle of the night
by cops with the wrong address.

Just a second to grab a jacket.

Their guns pointed, screaming,
Put your hands in the air.
The jacket will fall.
Handcuffed.
Naked.
A blanket over her shoulders.

And the one officer, a woman, who is kind enough
to take her to her bedroom to get dressed,
is the one who gets killed
in the line of duty two years later
at a traffic stop.

Their error revealed,
no apology.
"\$0 to resolve this matter."
Black woman mayor
keeps the officers employed.

A social worker too traumatized to work,
needing her city to recognize the injustice done,
releases the video.
Her. Naked.

Goes viral.
Tweets from Bernice King, Tamron Hall.
Gayle King, Soledad O'Brien, Joy Reid air the story.

The officers go on desk duty.

December 2021, Chicago gives Ms. Young
a \$2.9 million settlement.

Ain't much different from the auction block.

I do not need to tell my aunt
how Fortune has smiled on her.

This woman
who flowed North
like the Nile,
to escape the whites-only signs,
strictures,
scepter of the noose.

Pampered

CARLA CHERRY

Rings of a stump whisper a tree's age.
The shop owner's head is down so he cannot see me
try to read the gap where his right middle finger used to be.

We often chat, but not enough to stoke the boldness to ask
if he is from China's Pearl River Delta Region where, in 2008,
40,000 fingers were reported broken or lost in factories each year.

He slathers my legs with lavender clay,
surrounds them in plastic wrap,
rubs away chipped red polish with a cotton ball
soaked in acetone polish remover,
clips, and buffs my toenails bright
like a shoeshine man and a soft cloth on a pair of Stacy Adams.

A cupful of apple cider vinegar,
ten drops of peppermint oil in a tub of warm water,
a stainless-steel callus rasp,
a bar of soap—in my hands—
do less than in his.

I lie back. The soles of my feet and toes in the path of spa jets
are pounded with a piston's force.
Vitamin E oil softens the impact of the cuticle pusher
to a gentle nudge.
Cascading dead skin from my heels, instep, and toes
are like curls of cheese falling from a grater.

My calves, now balls of dough in his hands.
A shake of his head. "So tight."
I begin to complain about the grocery trips,
the laundry, cooking and dishwashing,
hours at the head of a classroom leading to
these muscles like braided ropes,
but my eyes will not leave his stump.
His missing right middle finger has not diminished his grip.

Freedom

ISABELLA LEGRAND

I can feel the moss begin to crawl as I lay so still.
Creeping up my skin.
Cold.
Moist
I become its new home.
Seasons change
New plants grow
On top of where my body lays.
The bugs begin to find shelter in my hollow bones.
Tired skin feeds the mushrooms that grow atop.
My heart feels free.
My soul is no longer bound to its old corporeal needs.
Eyes only seeing blurs of yellows, reds, browns, and greens
Until one day the bugs claim them, too.
As my human form becomes one with nature again
I wonder
Is this freedom?

On Being Alone at the End of the World

LIANA DEMASI

Months ago, when the lights stopped coming on, I knew we were closer. No one had been at the energy plant for months. We realized we didn't need lights to see, or rather, that we weren't seeing either way.

My apartment used to be bohemian; at least that's what the spreads we were trying to emulate from the home magazines said. Now, it looks like a forgotten-about land because I can no longer see what I had intended. At a certain point, you realize that most of life is filled with forgotten intentions.

The apartment is not unclean, just without—empty, dark. The hardwood floors are now cement. Perhaps they had always been cement. It's hard to say what I remember now. The lights used to be the industrial kind where you could see the bulbs' inner workings. I shouldn't say "used to be"; I suppose they still are, even in their darkness.

I don't keep food in the fridge, but that goes without being said.

For years we heard about a new sanction, a new war, the worst-yet natural disaster. The thing is, over-saturated content has the effect of drowning: at a certain point, you accept your fate. At first, we took to the streets with signs and solutions, shouting profanities. Then, rather abruptly, we forgot who we were screaming at and started yelling at each other. It was then that we realized they had won, but it's hard to determine who was ever really in charge to begin with.

Now, the land is either flooded or drought stricken; the air, unbreathable. The fog assured everything soiled; thus, the earth began to yield disease rather than crops. Frozen landmasses melted, releasing dormant illnesses and secrets. After a while, we couldn't tell which was worse. We began to die in cataclysmic numbers, like sand through an hourglass. For those of us who remain, there is no survivor's guilt. Only rage.

We wait alone, together, for the end.

When The Visitors started coming, we still had that fear mixed with hope, the recipe for desperation. Now, they knock on my door because there's nothing else left. They started arriving the same day my wife walked out.

Ramona believed she could do something about The Outside, whereas I had become increasingly indifferent about it all. I couldn't stand to watch people try and pick up the pieces. To do something after it was too late felt like begging for repentance before meeting your maker.

Ramona wanted me to go with her. I still loved her, but I no longer recognized her. Our seven-year marriage had become ritualistic, even my reaching for her in the night. We would move mechanically together, like a machine following its programming, able to function in darkness, even once the operator turned in for the night. We lost sight of who we were, why we were together. Perhaps we had

never known.

On the day she left, she had soup cans stuffed into the pockets of her cargo pants, with a giant backpack and her favorite baseball cap on. She looked like an Eagle Scout that had crossed her fingers hoping for doomsday. We had both been politically informed, sometimes bordering on obsessive, but I never saw us as fighters. I assumed we would wait it out here together, die tragically in each other's arms. But this was no Pompeii. There would be no tourists left to come and see our bodies.

She pleaded with me, or perhaps she didn't. In any case, I was where tired had come to rest, and so I let her go.

Later that same day, I heard those first three knocks. Soft, unassuming. *Was she back?* I wondered about my wife, but I suppose I stopped having one when she left.

"Who is it?"

"My name is Maryann."

A fly buzzed by my head. My hand was too busy hovering over the doorknob to murder it.

"I don't understand."

"Yes you do."

The fly buzzed again. My apprehension in opening the door was an old effect I hung onto from the days when The Outside was just the outside: different, yet unsafe in a way that made sense, in a way that was simple. But the lock does nothing when danger seems to be everywhere—metamorphic, elusive. I might as well keep the door open. I've already burned my copy of *The Leviathan*.

"If you don't open up you'll never know."

The doorknob felt like hot coal against my hand. I turned it open.

On the other side of the threshold stood a petite, beautiful woman with cropped blonde hair and soft brown eyes. A scar on her right cheek traced its way down to her chin, just missing a set of full lips. The scar was thick, like it had once been angry. Her hands were tired-looking and older than any other part of her, as if she was wise and aged beyond her years. I could only imagine what her knees looked like.

She walked past me into the house, dumped her things onto the floor, and sauntered over to the stove.

"Matches?" she asked, pulling open drawers and cabinets.

"Center drawer. I think." I was dumbfounded by her comfortability, by my cordialness. Yet something about her felt familiar. Or safe, perhaps. In any case, I had no other plans.

She pulled out a box of matches, lit the stove, and filled the kettle with my water supply in the corner of the kitchen. I watched her make a pot of coffee.

She leaned against the counter, inspecting her nails for much too long a time, and then, remembering I was there, beckoned me toward her.

"I don't understand what's happening."

She looked at me, blinked several times. "We need each other."

"I don't even know you."

"You have never known anyone," she said. And then she put my hand between her legs and my mouth on hers as the water came to a boil on the stove.

She only stayed for two weeks. Some of the others stayed longer; few stayed for months. They don't warn me when they go, but I've taken to noticing the signs. After they leave, sometimes it's only a few hours before I hear another set of knocks.

The most recent woman left yesterday. Since then, I've taken to pacing the hall by the door, whether for the sound or for something to do, I'm not sure. They each come to me aged in some way and leave when they grow too old to stay. As I pace, I glance at my skin, trying to look for any signs of aging. But, I fear I am dying at a regular rate.

I had grown particularly fond of this last visitor, Clara. When she came to me her eyes were the oldest part of her body. Covered with wrinkles and extra skin, they would sometimes cry without her even realizing. By the fourth day, I had stopped wiping her tears away. *They will keep falling no matter how many times you try*, she said.

I traced her tear-stricken cheeks with my eyes, thinking of long-lost rivers, lakes, oceans. I wondered about the state of the world's waters now, if people were floating on misshapen rafts, singing sailor's songs, hanging onto hope, unable to see what was unfolding on land. Or instead, if they had all drowned quickly, leaving behind seas of empty boats rocking in perpetuity.

Clara could only cum when she was riding my fingers, her long brown hair covering her breasts. Afterwards, she would fall next to me and into my arms, embarrassed, shrouded, as if remembering how vulnerable we become when we forget ourselves.

"Can I tell you a story?" she asked me, a glass of water cradled in her hands. I nodded. Suddenly, feeling lightheaded, I leaned against the wall behind me.

She perched herself on the kitchen counter; her naked ass, unable to fit on the small space, spilled over into the kitchen sink. Tears streamed down her face and fell off her chin.

"Every year when I was little, my folks would take my sister and me to Cape Cod for a week. The last time we went was years before the outside became The Outside. On the last day of our trip, we were at the beach. It was that kind of partly cloudy day that gives you some relief from the sun."

She paused, taking a sip of water, swishing it around in her mouth before swallowing it.

"My sister was three years younger than I was, so about seven at this point. She and I were playing by the water, and she decided she wanted to go in. I was afraid of the ocean beyond putting my toes in because I couldn't see the bottom. How can you go into something where you can't see all the way through? I stayed on shore, playing with the sand. After a bit, I looked up and my parents were standing above me, looking out at the water. Then I heard the screams, small little ones a child would make. I jumped up, but I was so crippled by my

fear of the ocean that I couldn't move. I pushed and pulled and screamed at my parents to go get her, save her! But it was like everyone was frozen. The screaming stopped eventually. My mother looked so vacant, a shell of a person, like everything in her mind had been shut off."

"I—I don't understand. Your parents let your sister drown?"

"I used to think that for a long while. But now I think they knew. They let her drown, yeah, but it was, in many ways, a mercy killing."

The day she left, I had known it was coming. Slowly, the rest of her body caught up with her eyes. Her long, brown hair had gone gray, and her skin cascaded from her frame.

"Why don't I get older, too?" I asked her on the last day.

She bent down to kiss me, her mouth pursed like a grandmother's. I wondered if we would have still found each other had life fallen apart differently. But I didn't think of it for too long. I knew I wouldn't like the answer.

After a moment she stood up and walked from the room, turning to look back at me only once, tears streaming down her cheeks. The front door didn't open, and I didn't hear a thing, but I knew she was gone.

Ever since, I've been pacing, waiting for the next one. In between their departure and arrival, I hear The Outside more. I don't know how to be alone with it. It is completely silent except for the roaring sound of fire and the occasional scream from a woman who has finally been defeated by her inability to save us all.

Months ago I had a screamer. Francesca. She thrashed around, smacked at my sleeping body, and screamed. It only took three days for me to be able to sleep through the night.

Fran hadn't spoken much English, and in many ways, that made it better. We communicated like animals, our language reliant on body and pleasure. She hated coffee, which I only knew from the utter disdain on her face when she realized it wasn't tea. She had mousey bone structure and curly hair that touched her shoulders. Her eyes were soft, patient, and her mouth was worn and weathered from decades of being misunderstood but persistent. She liked to be fucked in missionary position only, and she would hold my face directly in line with hers for the duration of the act. *Mirá*. But with what? Humans were given the wrong organs for sight.

It only took her three weeks to disappear. Her last words to me were, *Si no es esto, entonces que?* I had no energy to translate it.

It's now so many women later. The flies are everywhere, in remarkable numbers. There is nothing for them to feast on, so I think they must be left behind. Signs from the departed.

I had been pacing for what felt like hours, pausing sporadically to catch my breath. My stamina seemed lesser than it once was. I supposed maybe I was fatigued from having so many visitors.

Finally, I heard three loud knocks. I caught the doorknob and swung the door open. The woman had long, full blonde hair. She looked at me with piercing

green eyes, her slim lips pushed to the side as she gnawed the inside of her cheek.

"I'm Sasha."

I eyed her, looking her up and down, not hiding my inquisitiveness, "Where's your Elder?"

"Where's yours?"

"I don't know. It hasn't revealed itself yet."

She shook her head. "You just haven't looked hard enough."

She pushed past me into the apartment, walked straight into the living room and sat down on the couch. We stared at each other in silence. As it goes when there is so much to say, we said nothing at all.

After a moment, she stood up and spun around. She took her shirt off, letting it fall to the floor next to her. She gently lifted her mane out of the way and held it up; her arms were covered with simple and likely meaningless tattoos. With her hair out of the way, I noticed her back. Skin fell from her spine, nearly detaching itself from her in thin strips. She was speckled with sun spots, scars, skin tags. Would her wrinkles transfer onto me? Where do they go when they leave? And why won't they take me with them?

We spent the rest of the day fucking in the living room. We left no area untouched, ravishing each other in every fillable space. She scratched at my back and begged. But to give her anything more would be to wear her.

After what felt like hours, we paused. She rolled over onto her side, cradling her head in the crook of her arm. It was striking to see her body perfectly split down the middle of youth and old age. It was as though I was staring at time on its head.

I moved toward her and started stroking her aching back. She pulled away from me, ashamed of it. "Please don't look at me." But what else is there? The mirrors have already been taken down.

I had slowly taken the mirrors off the walls when The Outside noise got too loud for me to look at myself. I had taken all of them down, except for one. The woman here at the time was too vain to allow me to remove them all. "What if I forget what I look like?" she asked. Isn't that the point?

I hadn't even been the one to take the last mirror down. After the Vain Woman, there was The Mother. She came with her child, who she had blindfolded and made deaf, a brutal apology for what she had tried to stop on The Outside but couldn't. I had explained to her why the mirrors were all gone, yet when she went to take the last mirror down, I asked why. She answered, "I cannot look at what I have done." The mirror smashed to the ground as she dropped it from the wall. The silence, where a child's scared scream and a shout of *that's seven years of bad luck* should have been, enclosed me.

Days later, I woke up in the middle of my sleep to a pain in my chest. Lightheaded and dizzy, I clutched my shirt, clipping the skin underneath with my nails. I began to panic from the pain, shortening my breath, effectively making it worse.

"What is it?" she asked, awake, too. She flipped me over onto my back and

took my hand in hers. I noticed the wrinkles on her hands, the skin pooling together on her chest.

We both had our hands glued between my breasts, our fingers slightly intertwined.

She silenced my mouth with her other hand. "Feel. Listen."

We both held our breath and felt my heart beating in my chest. The thumps were quick and erratic, racing to a finish line. Every few beats it would skip one, exacerbated from keeping me alive. I envisioned my heart as gray, wrinkled, preparing for cobwebs.

I wept. Finally marked with scarlet, I released my exhaustion, my fear, my anger, my relief. Sasha leaned in and kissed the tears from my face. I was awestruck by her patience. I wanted her to say, *Why are you crying? Did you not expect this? Did you think that you would be the only one saved?*

I cried until I fell asleep in her arms. I woke up several hours, days, or lifetimes later. In my slumber, she had completely aged. I had no tears left to cry for her, having used them all up on myself.

She smiled at me. "It is only a matter of time."

"It is always a matter of time."

To make love in the instant when you know time is evading you is to sever all ties from solid ground. It serves as a reminder of the fact that we are not of this earth before we arrive, for in these moments we cry out in ways that surpass the capabilities of humans and animals. We are honest, transformative, viscerally see-through. What our bodies create because of other people is simply not of this world.

How deeply I'd miss her when she was gone.

The next morning I felt her crawl out of bed. Moments later she was gone. I heard buzzing in the kitchen, louder than ever. I crawled out of bed slowly, my body going as fast as my heart would allow.

When I reached the kitchen, flies were everywhere. They buzzed around me and the door handle, either waiting for another arrival or an escape, unaware that they would receive neither. I stood in the doorway, between the broken mirror from ages ago and where her body had stood. I closed my eyes and opened my mouth to scream. As sound emptied, flies entered me. I flailed around, thrashing as one does when attacked by bugs, my screams reverberating off the walls.

Finally, I stopped, no longer feeling buzzing in my throat, and opened my eyes to find I was alone in the room. No flies, no dust, no sound. I ripped open the cabinets and drawers, everything that would store energies-past, but it was all empty. I screamed, one final declaration of solitude into the abyss. And finally it screamed back with deafening silence: You're right. There's nothing here.

Talia and The Roach

LIBRADA MONTERO HANLEY

Her hand almost got cut from the rust in the door handle, but it wasn't something she cared about. The last rays of sun were penetrating through the broken windows. She took advantage of the light and started to look for Monica, her roach. She found her moving around the cardboard bed, collecting the dust from the squeaky floor.

"Monica, you wouldn't imagine the day I had," said Talia.

Of course, Monica didn't say anything because roaches don't talk, but Talia could imagine a million replies coming from her. Sometimes she even convinced herself that the roach could talk, and her voice was soft and understanding.

"Don't look at me like that, Monica. I'm not a prostitute...I think," Talia said with disbelief and maybe some kind of doubt.

Talia had a relationship, or something close to that, with Samantha, a woman twice Talia's age who opened her pantry and her bed, when she was feeling generous. She let Talia shower in her house twice a month, which is when her husband goes out to hunt squirrels, but he always comes home empty-handed. Talia showers before and after sex, as an exchange, and because Samantha wouldn't let a dirty woman in her king-size bed. Sometimes she would give her meals, too; she let her pick the cereal, except the cinnamon ones. Those belong to her son. Talia has never seen Samantha's son, or any pictures of him, around the house. His room is off-limits as well.

Talia was taking her second shower of the month, today at Samantha's place. Things went terribly wrong when the husband came back earlier than expected. He went hunting, and for the first time, a squirrel came home. He was on his way to the park to hunt some squirrels, but as usual, he went to the brothel and forgot all about hunting. The art of hunting has been long forgotten in the modern world, but this was part of his family tradition, and it was something Samantha wouldn't question out of respect for his ancestors. On his way back home, he ran over a squirrel with his car. It had the marks of the tires, so he stabbed it with the arrow to disguise it. Poor squirrel was still alive when he took the light out of its eyes. He placed it inside of his bag, his mouth watering in anticipation for the squirrel-bones soup he planned to make later.

The water was running down Talia's spine. She remembered her teenage years when she was the greatest swimmer in her school. She imagined herself falling into the deep of a pool and never coming back up. She wanted to dream about the ocean, but the ocean had too much trash already, or so she thought. But she wanted to swim until her whole body fell apart. Until the clear water was turned into all the shades of red. She wanted to swim, but she was banned from every pool. There was no clear reason, but she thought it was the way she looked.

The water fell on her face, and one or two tears escaped her brown eyes. They rolled down her cheeks and fell down the drain. Meanwhile, Samantha was lying in bed looking at the clock. Her husband would be home in one hour. She heard the water crashing into the bathtub as the steam inserted itself under the door, making the cold room feel a little warm. Samantha noticed that Talia had been in the shower for twenty-one minutes and five seconds.

"Come out." Bam. "Come out." Bam. "Come out, dammit."

Samantha's head was resting on the door.

Talia opened the bathroom door with care.

"Sorry, I didn't hear you."

"You know I don't like it when you take so long in the shower. I get worried."

Samantha was agitated.

Talia didn't understand why staying in the shower for longer than twenty minutes was a problem for Samantha. There was still enough time left before her husband was expected home, but she didn't ask why, because it was better to have this than to have nothing. After a few minutes, Samantha recovered her composure. Samantha hugged her tightly. She wished she could hug her son the same way. The last time she hugged him, his face was blue and water was coming out of his four-year-old body. He wanted to shower by himself. He was becoming a big boy after all. While rinsing himself, he slipped and hit his head on the edge of the tub. The doctor said he was under the water for twenty minutes. Samantha was going to call him to give him some of his favorite cereal, but her husband came home late again and a meaningless argument sparked. It was too late when they realized Samuel wasn't running around the house. That was twenty summers ago, and it's been exactly twenty summers since Talia was born.

"Let's get you something to eat, love." Talia and Samantha made their way to the kitchen.

"Pick a flavor," Samantha said, but there was only plain cereal or cinnamon, not much of a choice. Talia took the plain cereal and poured the milk into the bowl, and when she was about to add the cereal she heard...

"Honey, I'm home and I've brought a squirrel."

"Monica, are you listening to me? This is the best part." That wasn't even Monica she was talking to. That was a random roach. Frankly, Monica, the original one, has been dead for a long time. Talia stepped on her one day, but she didn't even notice. Since the roach wasn't listening, Talia decided to approach a different audience—the rat skulls. She had a collection of them. She didn't like talking to them much, but she thought doing so would make the roach jealous or interested. She proceeded to tell the skulls the rest of the story.

The husband had never seen Talia before, but she only had a towel around herself and his wife was half-naked. He thought about convincing himself that they were just friends doing friendly things. Talia was expecting some yelling or some plate smashing on the floor. That's what her dad did when he found out her mom was having an affair with her swim coach. He also assumed Talia knew and kicked her out of the house; she was only seventeen. The husband was calm,

almost glad. The only company his wife had was him and the constant memories of Samuel. Knowing that she had someone to help her pass the time was a relief. After all, he was doing the same thing.

“I brought a squirrel. I will put it on the table, make soup with the bones.” The husband made his way to the bathroom. Samantha didn’t know what to think or how to react. Certainly, she didn’t know what was going through her husband’s head.

“Love, can you put your clothes on? We can see each other in a few weeks. Don’t worry about him.” Samantha was trying to believe her own words, but she didn’t know if her husband was going to go hunting again after this—she could only hope.

Talia made her way home. To what she calls home. She couldn’t wait to tell Monica all about today. Her house wasn’t so far away from Samantha’s, maybe a ten- or fifteen-minute walk. The sun was almost setting behind her back. She reached her house and Monica was waiting for her inside, collecting the dust from the squeaky wooden floor.

“Monica, you wouldn’t imagine the day I had.”

Mice Muse

RAJEÉ NAPIER

“You’re it!”

Above my sunken head

Through the waking walls

Four a.m.

And mice play tag

Within the apartment walls

Squealing and scratching

With peanut butter flavored intentions

A grain of sand away from dreamland

I’m here, you know

Pissed because it’s not me

Me?

Eyebrows knitted

Resented holiday sweaters

Healthy frowns beneath my eyes

My tongue rubbing cerasee gums

Chest pangs of lost memories

The mice’s racket becomes bebop

Swaying my head to whatever bit that’s familiar

And that lasts a snap of the fingers

Or two

A snap

Or two

I'm Waiting Under the Orange Tree

LAUREN DE LA TORRE

If you fall in love with your coffee's heat,
and forget the snow's sweet tendrils,
remember I'm waiting under the orange tree.

I've only got a few more minutes free,
but I've frozen Time to a stand-still
if you fall in love with your coffee's heat.

I don't expect you to meet me or anything;
and there's no need to say you want to—or will—
just remember I'm waiting under the orange tree.

I hear your voice; it'll be measured, and steady:
(*come inside, you're crazy, you'll catch a chill!*)
if you fall in love with your coffee's heat.

I don't think the snow-roads will stay unpaved for me,
but I hope they will—I hope so, still.
Remember, I am waiting under the orange tree.

Out here, ice could kill; the frost is unforgiving—
a peek inside, and the world thinks we've done it ill—
but, maybe, if you fall in love with your coffee's...

No! I won't think of the coffee, I won't think of the tea,
Not even if you're inside waiting for me.
No. If you fall in love with your coffee's heat,
remember I'm waiting outside under the orange tree.

The Gumdrops Light Show

LAUREN DE LA TORRE

The gumdrop light show drips,
its wire string folded in sky,
but the lights are only plastic.

Gold speckles freckle the slits
of fire escapes who never cry
when the gumdrop light show drips.

My kitten tiptoes into the pit:
she dips her paws in pools of light,
but the lights are only plastic.

Reds, yellows, and blues flit,
her fur trembles, and I wave goodbye
to the light show as it drips.

She licks my ankle in a rhythmic tick,
she doesn't purr, but seems to sigh:
these lights are only plastic.

And midnight spits of magic,
teasing time for the way he lies,
And the gumdrop light show drips.
And drips...though the lights are only plastic.

I do believe in a speck of dust.

A Speck of Dust

LAUREN DE LA TORRE

I believe in a speck of dust
who swivels in a gust of wind
and dances 'round Cas and Vic.

My dust listens,
slips a secret straight to Vic,
and wills him to fly.

He floats,
zipping past cement-zits in the road,
missing a step and missing another—
but my speck of dust spasms,
and trips him as Cas turns onto the pavement.
And my speck of dust nets them together
with a string of wind.

I believe in a speck of dust
who knows two strangers just enough
to set them up.

I believe in a speck of dust
who covers the sun,
changes noon to dusk
just so Cas and Vic'll meet up
and whisper:
us us us us us...

I don't believe in much.
I don't believe in "should" or "must."
But then there's Cas and Vic:
who sit on the same chair,
live in curtains of cat hair,
and pull strands off each other's backs,
cackling because neither one knows where they come from.

I don't believe in much.
But when they whisper
strings of *us us us us us...*

Dear Sister: A Literacy Narrative

STEPHANIE ZLOTNICK

Dear Robin,

Do you know what a literacy sponsor is? I've spent the last year with this term floating around my head in different contexts in school and work. Deborah Brandt, a scholar in the literacy field, coined this term. She says literacy sponsors are "any agents...who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy." Essentially, they're the reasons we read the world the way we do. The more I think about my own literacies and how they were developed, I realize you're one of my most influential sponsors. Don't let it go to your head.

As my big sister, you're in the unique position of being my idol from the moment I was born. I remember growing up almost six years behind you and wanting to do everything you did. When you got braces, I wanted braces. When you played basketball, I wanted to play basketball. When you started the trombone, I wanted to pick it up too. (Unfortunately, I *literally* could not pick up the trombone because I was tiny, and it weighed more than I did.) Of course, as kids there were things I admired about our brother Dan, but gender tethered me to you in a way that it never did to him, and you had stepped into the role of teacher for both of us.

When you reached seventh grade, you took French, and though it would be another five years before I had to make the decision our school required us to, I knew then that I, too, would be taking French when it was my turn. At a time when I was still learning my multiplication tables and how to write in script, I sat next to you on the couch and watched you do French homework on a wooden snack table, jotting down funny-looking words and sentences in your Mead five-subject notebook. I always asked you to explain things to me. God, that must have been so annoying. But you patiently taught me to count to ten, to say *hello* and *please*, and to twist my mouth to get the perfect accent. By the time I got to seventh grade, you were preparing for the AP French exam, so our mini French lessons at home eventually turned into short conversations that always revealed the limit of my skills. Usually it was something like this:

You: "Bonjour!"

Me: "Bonjour! Comment ça va?"

You: "Ça va bien. Et tu?"

Me: "Comme ci, comme ça."

You: "Veux-tu faire une promenade avec les chiens et moi aujourd'hui?"

Me: "Huh?"

Just by checking "French" on the foreign language form at Somers Middle School, I achieved my goal of following in your footsteps. Mrs. Levine knew me as "Robin's little sister," and I was proud of that. Holding up your pristine reputation as a student propelled me to work as hard (or at least close to it) as you.

The best part of this is that French became one of my favorite subjects. Not only did you inspire me to choose it over Spanish or Italian, but you inspired me to learn an entirely new language and culture that I truly fell in love with. I continued to take French throughout high school, including the AP exam, just like you. When I finally had the chance to go to Paris in twelfth grade, even though you had been just a few years before as a study abroad college student, I just wished you could be there with me. I still hope that someday we can visit France together and stumble our way through the language after years and years of inactivity.

But French wasn't the only aspect of my literacy you influenced. Most nights after dinner, the five of us Zlotnicks would gather in the den, and you, Dan, and I would argue over who got the comfiest seat on the couch—usually the chair-and-a-half. Whatever sitcom we were obsessing over would begin, and we would spend a half hour as a family, laughing and laughing.

More than anyone else in the family, you became attached to tv and film in a way that went beyond entertainment. You stayed up late every week for *Saturday Night Live* while I dozed on the couch, eyes closed well before 11:30. And you and your best friend quoted stand-up comedians like they were your friends just joking around during school. Eventually, you became completely enthralled with a few comedians like Mitch Hedberg and Stephen Lynch, and this hobby of yours actually showed me what funny was, even when I didn't understand what we were laughing at. You were my north star of entertainment. You watched *Arrested Development* and laughed at the subtle play-on-words while I cracked up at the goofy image of Will Arnett's character on a Segway, always taking a mental note of what you found hilarious. As time went on, I became more aware of the world outside of our den, and the jokes we watched became clearer. I learned to stay up late and began to appreciate the wit of Amy Poehler and Tina Fey on *Weekend Update* and the political cynicism of Stephen Colbert. The best part was knowing I could bond with you over our shared sense of humor.

When you left for college, a whole three-hour drive from me, your role as my remote comedy compass became official. Your opinion became my truth. When you saw a new movie and gave it a bad review, I didn't go to see it. When you told me that I would enjoy this new NBC show called *Parks and Recreation*, I watched it. And guess what...you were right.

As kids, we grew up watching *The Princess Bride*, and to be honest, I used to hate watching it with you. You knew all the words and basically recited it the whole time. I didn't know all the words, and I wanted to hear the jokes out of the actors' mouths. No offense. Eventually I learned them and now have a deep appreciation for the wordplay that brightens the script. Comedy aside, the

language in that film is a beautiful example of how strong writing can bring a story to life, and you showed me that.

Our other favorite is *When Harry Met Sally*. We often watched it together when you were home for holidays, but my association of it is our Skype dates. You would curl up in your dorm bed with your MacBook on your lap, and I would be in the laundry room at the desktop computer, trying to find a comfortable position. We'd both have the movie ready with a split screen, so you could see me, and I could see you. "3 – 2 – 1, play!" We'd count down and try really, really hard to get them synced, at least to a level we could tolerate. It wasn't until this past summer after you moved to Connecticut after a decade in Los Angeles that we finally watched it in person together. We both knew all the words, and we both recited them the whole movie. "You're right, you're right. I know you're right." Our favorite line, said by the movie's queen of sass, Carrie Fisher. Not only are we both adults who live on the same side of the country now, but we lived through the year and a half of terrifying lockdown and social distancing, so sitting a few feet from each other without masks on made laughing at *When Harry Met Sally* with you extra sweet.

When someone asks me what my favorite movies are, these are the two I say. Without fail, I laugh every time I watch them, and I can confidently say I love them because you taught me to love them. Following your laughter showed me what funny was, and my love and understanding of comedy as an adult is because of that.

Being funny was important in our house. You were always subtly hilarious — quiet but witty. Dan's comedy was a bit louder, but equally funny. As the youngest child, all I wanted was to keep up. I wasn't as quick as you or as punchy as Dan, but I tried. The rare occasions that I did get laughs from everyone were always followed with me gleefully shouting, "I made a funny!" This constant desire to laugh and ignite laughter made me who I am today. Even in the most serious, most academic situations, I look for ways to use language creatively and joyfully.

I want to pause here and take a moment to explain why all of this matters. Do you remember last year when I wrote a paper for my Queer Literacies class about political literacy and how it's formed? I interviewed my childhood friend and investigated how her parents' conservative views dictated the first part of her life, but she ultimately formed her own — very liberal — opinions. To compare, I looked at how we grew up with Mom and Dad's extremely progressive views front and center and how they ultimately sponsored those same views within us to this day. Our parents were, without a doubt, my biggest literacy sponsors when it came to politics. All of that research got me thinking about our family, our childhood, and the values that have been ingrained in us from day one in the Zlotnick household. This is what inspired me to write this letter to you. I want to understand more about how I experience the world, and I think you'll agree that the best way to wrap your head around something is to write about it.

In addition to French and comedy, you've acted as an intellectual bible for me. When we were kids, Mom would hang her annual summer reading poster

in the kitchen, and each person had their own section to write down the names of books they read. By the end of each summer, Dad's would have two or three titles that he sleepily read on the Metro-North train to work, Dan's would just be whatever his assigned school reading books were that he skimmed between baseball games, Mom's would have nine or ten books that she dove into while lying out by the pool, and mine would have one or two in addition to my school requirements because I wanted to say I did more than was asked of me. Your space, though, was always full. You did all of your school readings, and then continued to fill it up — with small handwriting, I might add — until there wasn't any room left. I was in awe. Not only were you reading a lot of books, but they were long ones too. I didn't understand how you did it, and I wanted to get there too. You and Mom often read some of the same books and discussed your thoughts. I wanted to be part of those conversations so badly. That feeling, that FOMO, I think it pushed me to read more, which turned me into the reader I am today.

Now, when I need book recommendations, I trust you implicitly. I think in life we have people we trust for certain things but not others. I have friends who, if they recommend a book to me, I need to read the synopsis and other reviews before I touch it. But with you, I don't have to do that. Just like when you were in college, if you say I should read something, it probably means I should. Still, I don't read nearly as much as you do, but I guess compared to some others I do read quite a lot.

Your literary knowledge combined with your own writing talent makes our conversations about shared books fascinating. You have high standards for the writing you read, so when you point out that an author's writing seems elementary or repetitive or flowery, you help me become a better reader and, ultimately, a better writer. Not to mention you have an almost psychic ability to predict what happens in a story. Remember when we read *A Woman is No Man* by Etaf Rum for book club and you guessed (correctly) right away that the end would be a murder-suicide? I didn't see it coming, but you made a note of it on page 38, blowing my mind.

As adults, writing is central to both of our careers. When I write my own pieces, creative or academic, you are usually the first person I share them with. Your suggestions help me think through ideas that I assume everyone can understand until I figure out how to put them into words that actually make sense. You ask me to consider why I choose each word and what I want my reader to feel. I wish I could get your professional opinion on this letter, but you'll probably just start crying.

When I was accepted to present at a writing conference last October for the first time, I was so nervous. My presentation was on a Saturday, and the Wednesday before, you, Mom, and Dan's wife Melissa, got on a Zoom call with me so I could practice. I specifically wanted feedback from you three: Mom, a retired high school English teacher; Melissa, a high school ENL teacher; and you, a writer and a person who warrants this literacy narrative. You told me that I

needed to loosen up a bit and speak more casually. You said there were a few parts that I looked like I relaxed, and those were the most dynamic and interesting. The entire day leading up to my presentation, I replayed this comment in my head. I agreed with you; I had been feeling a little robotic during practices. But with your voice in my head, I forced my spine to release and smiled through my presentation. Now, I have no idea how I actually looked or sounded—maybe I was a complete robot—but I *felt* like I showed the audience who I am as a person, and I have your feedback to thank for that.

I feel lucky to have a big sister who continues to help me become a funnier, more intellectual, more worldly, and more thoughtful person. Your influence on my literacy from the day I was born to now is undeniable, and I look forward to all the learning we will do together in years to come. Thank you for being you.

Love always,
Steph

The Magic TV Box

AMINATA KANDE

Mariam had seen all the darkness the world had to offer
In just her few years of life, her light went dim
Her mother was angry and her father was gone

Sadness lurked throughout her home
Bills are overdue
Rent is late
Groceries aren't in the fridge
I hate I hate

Shouting danced her home night and day
Alcohol seeped through the walls
And drowned her mother's fate

Oh but lucky for Mariam
There was an escape
The Magic TV Box which took it all away

With its wand, life was not in disarray
It was what she wanted
It wasn't a crowd

It was free
It was a happy family
A mother proud

Adventure giggling around the trees
A life that lived for me, me, me

The crying house which was her home
Could not make her feel as alone
When the light in her life went dim
The sun and stars shined brighter in her magic thing

She could swim and swim
And run faster than the wind
Until the black roots in the house pulled at her feet
Ending her night

Dragging her screaming from her magic dream
And her happy life did more than flee

Her mother would shoo her away
Taking her Magic Box TV
The only place where she wanted to stay

But Mariam never once grew upset
Because then she could hear her mother's laughter
Instead of darkness clogging her airway

But a tear always slipped from her eyes
As she walked upstairs away from distant eyes
Because deep down she knew it was all pretend
And reality was no more than frown, fear, and descend

But tomorrow, once again
she'd live through the Magic TV
The only place where they could be happy
And in their favor, life bows and bends

cursed.

MARVENA M. BHAGRATEE

I'm cursed—I've failed.
I took everything from you
as you exhaled.

The danger of love
longing
bleeding hearts.

Your hope enabled weakness.

Forsake me—
and my abode of brokenness.

I'm cursed—I've failed.
I took everything from you
as you exhaled.

Our intertwining souls,
I fight, fight to surrender.
Infidelity after infidelities.
Why hold on to me?

You deserve everlasting thrills,
not unbearable cuts.
Still—you hold on to me.
Toxic love—unbreakable fix.

Collection: Life's Connection

MARVENA BHAGRATEE

I love to explore movement and meaning. Photography is capturing a moment and letting it live on forever. This collection is entitled *Life's Connection*: the man in the window symbolizes our search for purpose in life; the seagulls freely flying illustrate our need to be set free to truly live; and the branches represent that, no matter which way they grow or how far they go, they are all connected at the root. Same as life. We are all connected. We are the human race bound by life itself.







Jujubee + Bonbon Forever

from “Kiss of Life”

PHILIP THOMAS RUDICH

THE JEROME LOWELL DEJUR AWARD IN FICTION

I bumped a table by the backdoor too brusquely and a pair of wine glasses teetering on its edge fell, shattered, and announced an otherwise perfect, silent entrance. Four heads spun in time to watch me stumble and try to catch them. Thirteen more turned as the fragile goblets burst on the kitchen tile. Everybody rose. They moved toward me in small, tipsy, inefficient steps. I thought if I kept still enough they might pass me by and spill into the yard, but they circled up instead. Everybody touched my arms, back, and face. They scratched at the houndstooth pattern of my twill coat.

“This is new, I can tell,” said Uncle Geoff. “That’s very nice.”

“He’s not moisturizing,” Aunt Ellen told mom. They each rubbed at the dry ridges on their faces, Ellen her cheeks, mom her forehead, warnings of my wrinkled future. Ellen pinched my chin and said, “But still a beauty.”

“This haircut! Honestly brilliant,” said Shy.

“Sorry about the glass,” I said to my cousin Sammy.

“You didn’t miss it yet, we’re still on this pregame stuff,” said Sammy. He swept the debris aside with two kicks of his boots and dragged me deeper into the fray.

Expectations for Sammy’s new place were low. In these tough times... had become the catch-all slogan for coping with collapse, and I saw Sammy as its very embodiment. He’d lost his job in the city and moved back to the suburbs’ edge, renting at 37 and still alone. When I saw the pregame show playing on an 80” TV with surround sound in a space that could have comfortably fit four different living room setups in each corner, I had to work to keep my jaw off the floor. This beast of a Samsung sat roughly in the center, crowded by a mismatched collection of wooden chairs both plain and ornate, ten metal folding chairs, and two luxe yellow recliners. The space was otherwise undecorated.

Cords draped out the back of an IKEA-wood TV stand and coalesced into a braided tail. Against one wall, many various sizes of foil trays and takeout containers were lined up and stacked on one another. The room stank like buffalo sauce, cheesy pizza, heating oil, Shy’s potato salad with the chili mayo, dad’s incredible crispy fried chicken, sweat, and cigarettes.

I was encouraged by the smells all competing for my attention, but I still feared I wouldn’t be able to relate with these people anymore. I smiled back at

seventeen grinning faces. I could feel the desperation underneath, even if they wouldn’t cop to it.

Sammy had been laid off from his teaching gig.

Shy had been laid off from her salon.

Uncle Geoff had been laid off from the newspaper.

Jess, Paige, Ian, and Damon, all cooks and waiters, lost their jobs.

Sloane, Alison, Niki, and each of dad’s siblings—Aunt Ellen, Uncle Wes, Aunt Paula, Uncle Billy—I don’t know what they were doing, but they weren’t doing it anymore.

Mom’s corporation had downsized months ago.

Dad never stood a chance—if nobody’s buying, there’s nothing to sell.

Only Christopher, Ellen’s hospice nurse boyfriend, was working. There’d always be something left for him.

I wasn’t ashamed to have maintained employment, but I was one of the last. I held tight to a lowly desk job at a corporate law firm that seemed like it could’ve evaporated at any moment, when actually I’d just gotten a raise and a holiday bonus. I was even starting to look for a bigger apartment, my own one-bedroom. I didn’t plan to mention any of that.

“Happy Christmas, kid, we are so glad you could make it back,” said Uncle Wes, as he climbed into one of the recliners.

“Uncle Wes come on, let your long-lost nephew have the nice seat,” said Sammy.

Before I could object, Wes grumbled and retracted the footstand. Sammy grabbed me by the shoulders to push me into the chair. Velvet. Soft prickling against my skin immediately made me want to puke.

“Like sitting in a dream, right?” said Sammy. Bile knocking at my tonsils. “Let me get you a drink, stay right there.”

I peeled myself from the recliner and allowed Uncle Wes to reclaim it.

“Where’s dad?” I asked mom.

“He’s upstairs, he’s shaving,” she said.

“Now? Here?”

“Said he got itchy.”

“He told me he’d be too busy here to get me from the bus. Cab was like thirty bucks.”

“He’d been cooking all morning,” she said. I checked my watch to confirm it was after 4PM. “It takes him a lot of effort.”

A daytime fireworks display on the TV stole everyone’s attention. Sparks spelled out the word AMERICA in faint red. The message crackled with pride. A titanic boom graced the sky with a huge blue USA. A third blast in white couldn’t be read.

“It’s BLESS!” said Paige.

“That doesn’t make sense,” said my cousin Niki. “It’s just AMERICA again.”

“Oh, you don’t know,” Paige dismissed her sister.

My mom had tears in her eyes. “Feeling patriotic today?” I asked.

“Well it is a beautiful day, isn’t it?” she said.

My dad had a way of walking that announced his arrival nearly as violently as my smashed glass. Heavier than a simple stomp, he put his full weight into each step to inject them with jackhammer force. He looked like a pissed-off marcher angry he’d missed the parade. I couldn’t say how he hadn’t blown out both knees by now.

He came downstairs so aggressively Sammy yelled out, “Jesus!”

“Who the hell left this door open?” dad said. “Where are the dogs?” He slammed into the kitchen, mudroom, dining room, guest room, closets, he nearly busted through the hardwood.

“What dogs?” I said.

“Your dad got dogs,” said Damon.

“He brought them today,” said mom.

“How many dogs?” I asked.

“Just two,” she said. “Pretty big, though.”

“New pets? I can’t believe you’re okay with that.”

Mom raised her eyebrows and smiled.

“Aw, they’re sweeties, though. You see ‘em yet, Uncle Trent?” asked Niki.

“They’re gone!” said dad. His voice peaked in a boyish way I’d never heard before.

“I didn’t know about the dogs,” I said, in lieu of apologizing for not closing the door.

He put on shoes and left without a word, or his coat. I looked to the rest of the family to get a read on this behavior and found them all lacing up shoes and zipping up jackets and suddenly we were eighteen strong, walking a quarter-mile into the woods behind Sammy’s place after dad’s new dogs, Jujubee and Bonbon. Everybody was yelling. I couldn’t see anything like an animal trail. Seemed like they were all mad with me, save for Sammy walking beside me.

Mom draped a heavy red blanket across dad’s broad back.

“I didn’t see your coat,” she told him.

“What, you didn’t chip ‘em, Trent?” Sammy said.

“They’re brand new dogs!” said dad.

“And? I chip everything, doesn’t matter when I got it or whatever.”

“I just didn’t get around to it yet, okay!” Dad charged forward.

“You’re still doing that, Sammy? Putting trackers in everything?” I asked.

“Never stopped. There’s not much left, but I still have it all.”

Cousin Sammy was obsessed with cataloging everything he ever owned; when he had to sell off a ton of stuff, he kept all the tracking chips in. They were tiny, a fraction of a pinky nail, undetectably glued into furniture frames, DVD cases, book bindings, electronics. I had no idea what that all cost, but the information was worth it for him. Only one item had totally disappeared, the Korg synthesizer he’d never quite learned to play. “I don’t understand, it must have been destroyed,” he told me, “which is a shame. That one I was definitely gonna buy back...”

Thankfully, Sammy wasn’t like his dad, who had been a prominent collector of 78RPM records, totally devoted day-and-night to hunting down the rarest singles ever pressed to shellac, to the naked detriment of his family. He once missed Thanksgiving so he could beat another collector to a flea market in Virginia.

Uncle Charley’s prize piece was Paramount 13125, King Solomon Hill’s “My Buddy Blind Papa Lemon” b/w “Times Has Done Got Hard,” from 1932. Charley’s was only the second known copy of this apparently legendary piece of American blues history. Some fellow collectors were suspicious, though, and when enough confronted Charley via several scathing posts on niche collector message boards, he finally admitted he’d worked up phony labels. He hadn’t even tried to get its potential \$2500+ value, he just sought the status of being one of the guys to nab it.

He passed away two years ago from some heart thing, still disgraced within the community. Sammy left a chair open for him at the table.

Sammy didn’t maintain a collection of any specific type of item. He just craved ownership. Nobody else in my life felt so strongly about their stuff. If he ever visited, my cousin would’ve been shocked to see my home was about as bare as his new place. To me a thing was just a thing, not a measure of personality.

“There was this other weird situation, this is really interesting—” he said, before my mom broke in.

“It wouldn’t kill you guys to try a little harder to look for Trent’s dogs, okay?” she said.

“Mom,” I said. When dad acted strange or foolish, there was a look we shared to make sure we were still on the same side. I was alone here.

She said, “Your father’s been having a bad time.”

“Everybody has!”

“Not everybody.”

“Mom,” I said again. I touched her arm. “He didn’t even say hello to me this time.”

“Why don’t you cut him some slack, Gabe?”

“Why’s it always on me?”

She walked off to join the choir of her nieces, nephews, and in-laws singing, “Juuuuuu-juuu-beeeee! Bonbon! Bonbon!”

I wanted to say something to her like, *Nice sweatpants*, because it sounded mean but vague. It matched the vagueness of my frustration.

Christopher sidled up to me. “You know your mom’s had a really hard year.”

I sighed at him. I knew what was coming, the reminder to respect my good fortune.

“We’ve actually gotten close lately, she’s over at your aunt and I’s a few times a week for lunch. I might be able to get her in at the hospice to help,” he said. “You should call her more.”

“I know, Christopher,” I said.

“Please, ‘Uncle Chris.’ It’s been like fifteen years!” Christopher looked to Sammy for support and recognition of his avuncularity, but Sammy had become

absorbed in a particularly handsome sunset nearing the horizon. He crouched to grab a photo through the bare oaks and hickories.

"I'm just saying," said Christopher, "let up on them sometimes. You're like me, Gabe, you're a lucky one here. And I know you know that because I know you're smart."

"Well if they want things easier, maybe they shouldn't be fucking around with new dogs right now! I'm not sending them money every month for new dogs," I seethed. Christopher's eyes dropped. "What, that never came up? You thought they were still running on savings?"

He sucked his cheeks. "Unemployment's a curse in the USA. But they're getting by, and they're still allowed to do what they want. So are you." Christopher snapped the top button of his coat and straightened his spine. "We're all damn grownups here."

Sammy slapped me on the back. He showed me the picture on his phone of the sun. "Nice right?" he said. I said I guessed it was.

"So I was saying, it's really interesting, I sold a bunch of old college books along with everything else, and back in like, August, this one guy bought five or six of them, all like Philosophy 101, Kant, Kierkegaard, all that shit."

"You took philosophy?"

"Man I was a philosophy major."

"I'm kidding, I'm kidding," I said. I don't think he believed me but he moved on.

"My tracker map had a handful of marks all the way over in Saudi Arabia, and it turned out to be those books. I had the guy's first name so I do some searching and find this article from the Times about a student up at the college, originally from Saudi Arabia, who got arrested on a hit-and-run in September, and the woman he hit actually died—and it was this guy! The lawyer for her family said the kid's a flight risk, but the judge set bail anyway. Somebody wired money, he makes bail, and poof. Gone. They can see him posting on Instagram and shit, they know where he is, but there's no extradition between us and the Saudis. The lawyer said something like, 'Nobody can touch him, he enjoys the protection of the Kingdom.'" Sammy exhaled and smiled at the sun as it dipped out of sight. "Wild. 'Protection of the Kingdom.' I can't even imagine it."

"Yeah, interesting."

So he was pro-monarchy? He liked feeling connected with a killer? I might've found something so morbid cool years ago, but now it left a sour taste in my throat.

"How do you have so much time to do all this research?" I asked.

"It's Google, man, it's not that time consuming."

"But I know you have other stuff to worry about," I told him.

Sammy bobbed his head and said, "I'm not worried dude," and left to catch up with my other cousins. Dad was further ahead, no longer leading the pack, though. He stood in a clearing. The red blanket over his shoulders soaked in the final rays of winter daylight. He raised his arms and waved everyone off. I heard

him call out, "Back to the house."

Everybody turned. They now faced me. I turned, too, to lead the quiet, painful retreat. I was ruminating on my hunger, and my disbelief that I had spent so long pursuing animals I might now never meet, as a rustling clump of leaves spooked me. I kicked the pile and a squirrel skittered up a tree trunk. It took a moment to turn a black eye on me. I stuck my tongue out.

There was more crunching and huffing behind me, and I spun in time to see a huge blond dog bolting toward me. It tackled me and barked into my face. I screamed. It must've weighed 100 pounds.

"Bonbon!" my dad shouted from the rear of the pack. He ran to us, and the rest picked up from a shuffle to a jog.

Bonbon's assault lasted only a few seconds but I was certain this animal could kill me. Its claws on my chest, dripping teeth at my neck, breath in my mouth. I was hyperventilating. In my final moments, I wished I hadn't used the rest of my vacation days for this.

I swung a desperate fist at Bonbon and connected with a broad flank, then punched again at the dog's tender abdomen, flabbier than I would've guessed. Bonbon hopped off, crooning, and disappeared back into the trees.

"Goddammit, Gabriel, she's like eleven years old! You might have hurt her!" said dad. He took off behind Bonbon.

"Trent!" my mom said. "Gabe, why didn't you just hold on to her! She's practically a kitten!"

"Not kitten-sized!" I said. For a moment, she was at a loss for words. She clasped her hands behind her head, looked at me on the ground, then at the army of cousins, aunts, uncles, sisters, brothers, fathers, mothers. She told them to keep heading back, while she kept on after dad. Everyone objected, but she silenced them with a single, stern, "Go."

The family stepped over and around and beyond me, kicked leaves my way for sure.

"Moves pretty good for an old girl..." I muttered as they went.

A large but slim brown dog was waiting at the top of the porch steps. They all took turns petting Jujubee as they walked inside the house. I limped up in time to hear Aunt Ellen say, "We'll get your sister back, buddy." Meanwhile, I had a cut on my cheek, messed up jeans, a sore shoulder, and no consolation. I sat beside Jujubee but we didn't touch.

From the other side of the dog, Christopher said, "They sure do make it hard for you," then went to see how much of the game they'd missed before I could ask if he meant pets or my parents.

I watched Jujubee's curly pink tongue flop around. His face twitched every time I jingled my keys or shifted. He was grey above the ears, like I had been since my twenties. Probably he wished there were more rodents to chase, or rabbits, or deer. He looked like a hunting dog, or what I figured hunting dogs ought to look like.

"You should maybe get out of here for real though," I told him. "You just

won't find what you need around here. And people are only ever taking care of themselves. Nobody's here to protect you. Not really."

Jujubee stepped off the porch and sat on the concrete.

I checked my phone and the nearest cab was over a half-hour away. I texted my mom: Any luck? Something exciting happened on the TV and the family erupted in cheer. As I crossed the threshold to join them, dad's chicken found my nose. I hovered over to it and plated a few pieces, perfectly greasy and seasoned with lemon and pepper and paprika and thyme and something else he refused to reveal. I decided I'd go back out for Bonbon, but first, a drumstick.

Haiti's Song

LEXI J. LEE

A warning forgotten,
and not for the first time,
the yellow fruit dropped to its death unpicked,
bleeding syrup as if from a violent crime.

Bruised skin from hot to cold,
robbed of the chance to grow old,
busted flesh like a mouth agape and unfed,
dripping, spilling its milk between the cracks to ancestors who lie dead.

The mountains watched the quake split the earth,
crumble homes, and snap feet.
Tufts of hair like outstretched fingers
forever left on the splintered street.

But where was the warning
that the sweet scent would not be enjoyed?
Where was the warning
that hundreds, thousands would be destroyed?

200th Street

LEXI J. LEE

Hands dappin',
With cash passin',
Fitted joggers held up by thighs
So tight you can't keep from laughin'.

Eyes slide to the left.
Women with small waists and big butts,
And hair down their backs,
Carrying their Dunkin Donuts.

"Smoke, Smoke," the boys shout.
Police creep by causing their voices to give out.
Empanadas and grease wafting down the block.
Rent skyrocketing to kick everyone out.

Reggaetón,
Traffic,
Lined-up beards.
Black bodega bags,
Loud voices,
And phones to ears.

"Smoke, Smoke," the boys shout,
Not caring that children and abuelas walk about.
An eighth for twenty dollars
Is sure to bring them clout.

Yankee fitted with white Jordans,
Laces tight to avoid wardens.
On the corner, backs to bricks,
Like brown statues broken and unfixed.

Hardly boys, barely men,
Hoping the next shift starts at ten.
On Dyckman a toddler cycles by,
Blessed,
Lucky,
Still thinking he can reach for the sky.

Dekabès!

LEXI J. LEE

Today,
Creole hugs the air,
leaving no space for silence.
I relearn how to play Haitian dominoes.
My cousin slaps the table,
fatherless and confident
he will win.
Generations of women shuffle around the kitchen
quicker than my pulse.
Others wither away in the living room
surrounded by candles and photos I've never seen.

The house is full
and I am losing.

I slide the ivory block across the rolling table
my cousin made for his mom, my aunt,
a widow slouched over a pot.
At the table we busy our hands
with the smooth pieces,
our mouths with smack talk,
our hearts wrapped away
for another day
as we count the black dots
to avoid counting the days
that forever lie buried.

The house is full
and I am slipping.

Tomorrow,
My uncle will rest face up like a wax figurine,
and my family will shatter
revealing the glass that was always there.
My grandmother will be helped out
of the chapel, my fingers will be intertwined
with my mother's, and faces will stain.
But today,

we eat rice, drink Cremas, and my cousin smacks
his domino down and shouts “Dekabès!”
Today he wins.

*Dedicated to my uncle Yves Lucien Coulanges,
February 15, 1963 - August 26, 2021*

Waking Up

PAMELA LASKIN

Lately
I’ve spent so much time
kvetching
about politics
cold
the masks

getting old

when the pandemic
is a shawl
chronically worn
never admired,

I forgot to tell you
I have a class;
cherished students
who smile
on Zoom
like they’re auditioning
for a life

I thought had passed me by.
They are radiant
because I told a joke
made them laugh
while my grandchildren
burrow in my skin
like summer
in October;

tomorrow is Halloween
some mean trick
to have a virus
that never heard
of social distancing
spread its venom
in every unmasked crevice

yet
there is still the treat
(small, it may seem)
of waking up
every day.

The Selkie

from "The Harmonies: A Collection of Short Stories"

KATELYN ROSE CONROY

THE DORIS LIPPMAN PRIZE IN CREATIVE WRITING

After the storm, Nicky wouldn't stop talking about the monster. Moira, his cousin, listened, trying to imagine it in the woods behind their house. Nicky said it didn't look exactly like a monster. It didn't have tentacles or knives or a scary face. It looked like a woman, a lost woman. Hair in thick brown twists, eyes that were so light grey they almost looked white, and her skin was slimy, not just wet. She was wearing an oversized t-shirt as a dress and a utility jacket. She had what looked like red scales scattered along her skin.

It was the day after the water receded and they could see land again that Nicky saw the monster. All eight of them—Moira, Nicky, Moira's parents, and all four of Moira's older brothers—were bone-tired, having stayed up in the attic as the water level rose and rose—first taking the basement, then the den, then the kitchen, and finally the stairs to the second floor.

The storm was actually a superstorm. This was important to Moira and Nicky because it wasn't just one storm that covered Long Island like a shore at high tide but three. They watched from the small window in the attic as the powerlines fell into the street and electrified the black water. It was not as cool as Moira thought it would be. She kept thinking about the electric water wrapping around their legs and holding them under the waves. Nicky had been scared from the start. He hated thunder; it was too loud. All night he watched the shadows move across the walls and held Moira's hand. For days, they all smelled of seaweed and muck.

Moira's brothers were picking up pieces of siding that had blown off a neighbor's pool, while Nicky and Moira poked around the back fence that separated their yard from the park woods. Moira was counting how many beer cans they found, so she wasn't paying attention when Nicky heard something moving around in the bushes behind the fence. The fence was metal and had gone around the whole backyard. Now there were only a few scraps of wiring and the thick metal posts that connected it. It was easy for Nicky to pull back some of the orphaned wires and step under the shade of the pine trees.

Moira and Nicky were not allowed to go into the woods behind their house alone.

Nicky stepped just a few feet into the tree line. Large cedars towered above him. The sun was already hidden by the clouds, and it was darker still under the arms of the trees. As his shoes settled into the mud, he heard the noise again and looked up. There the monster was, between two large cedar trees, 20 feet in front of him.

Nicky was too scared to speak. She was looking right at him. He was breathing heavily and could smell seawater as if he had his nose in it. He didn't move. Neither did she. Her grey eyes were wide, her hands shifty in her jacket. She opened her mouth to speak, but Moira called Nicky's name and pierced their silence.

"Nicky! We got lunch from some people. It's all wrapped up, and it's got candy!"

"What kind?" he asked, answering and turning on instinct. Quickly, he turned back to the monster, but she was gone, only the leaves spinning where she had stood.

That was fall. It was winter the next time Nicky saw the monster.

Moira and Nicky stared at their house from the small window next to their bunk bed. They could see their house and down the driveway next to it. They were living in a trailer in their backyard while their house was repaired. Their house currently stood on 13-foot stilts above a man-made crater. Moira and Nicky were not allowed to play in the space under their house while they waited for it to be filled with concrete.

Next to them, Matt, older only by five years, snored in his twin bed. Across the hallway, the three oldest boys slept in the same formation: a bunk bed and a twin pressed up against opposite walls. The trailer was a double-wide, with green carpets and walls that had the texture of sand. The front door opened into the living room. In front of the living room was the kitchen. To the left, Moira's parents' room. To the right, down a short hallway, the kids' bedrooms and the bathroom.

"I saw her again," Nicky said into the darkness of their bedroom.

Moira thought about how she and Nicky would find ants in the cereal Moira's mom put out for them, in the mornings before she and everyone else left for work and school. To two eight-year-olds, the thrill of daring each other to eat just one was greater than their fear of bugs. Still, there were some kinds of thrills and fears that scared Moira, but not Nicky. The monster was one of them, not that Moira would ever say.

She rolled over so she could see Nicky's face in the space between the bed and the wall. "Where?"

"In the woods by the treehouse."

Moira and Nicky were not allowed to go into the treehouse in the woods, not since the storm shook some of the boards loose and nature had stolen in. Green moss pushed through the walls, small brown branches reached in through gaps in the roof, flat white mushrooms sprouted from the mold on the windowsills, and black spiders spun homes in the corners.

"Where was I?" she asked.

"It was when Aunt Marie took you for a haircut. I didn't go in without you. I just wanted to look."

"Did she talk?"

"No, I don't think she can. Or if she could, it wouldn't be in our language."

"What did she do?"

"She was looking around and then left quickly. I didn't get a good look."

"We should catch her," Moira said.

"We should help her. I think she got washed up here during the storm," Nicky said.

Before Moira could answer, Matt spoke from the twin bed in the small room. They'd thought he was asleep. "If you two don't shut up, I'll pummel you."

They giggled and turned over. Moira fell asleep thinking of how Nicky said the monster wasn't scary, but she thought it would have to be, to be a monster. Nicky fell asleep thinking about what magic the monster could give him, then dreamed of different, scarier things.

Nicky had lived with his cousins for three years. He didn't have a dad, and his mom was sick. Moira and Nicky were too young to be told what kind of sick she was, so she just wasn't there. He had seen her a few times since. She would bring him toys from the dollar store that broke the same night and then would fall asleep on the couch.

Sometimes Nicky dreamt about his mom, about going to the beach with her or their old apartment. Those were nice dreams. Other times, he had dreams about the day she went to the store and left him alone. He slipped in the bathroom and hit his head. There was so much blood that Nicky worried it would stain his face red. When he knocked on the neighbor's door, she screamed. His mom didn't come back until he already lived with Moira, but it was one of those times when she was sleepy and half there.

Before she got sick, Nicky's mom was his best friend. Now Moira was. Nicky knew he could have two best friends if his mom ever came back for real, even if Moira would have to be convinced. Sometimes he dreamed of just that.

The next morning, Moira and Nicky talked about their plan over breakfast. Dad scooped eggs onto their plates, while Moira's mom argued with the bank on the phone. The older boys descended onto the table like rough waves, grabbing eggs, bacon, ketchup, coffee, toast, and orange juice, unaware of the space they were in or how much of it they took up.

This used to bother Moira. Being the youngest made her feel lonely. She stopped minding when Nicky came to live with them. It was a natural fit, a co-littlest to share everything with. They even looked alike: the same pug noses and curly brown hair.

"We could use some rope and then swoosh, catch her," Moira said.

"How do we tie a rope like that?" Nicky asked.

Moira shrugged, neither had finished Scouts.

"What are you two catching?" Matt asked while the three oldest boys talked about a party at Gia D'Amico's house that weekend.

Moria and Nicky didn't plan on telling anyone else about the monster, but they were out of ideas. And they trusted Matt.

Nicky whispered, "I saw a sea monster lady. I think she got stuck here during the storm."

“What did she look like?” Matt asked, scooping his eggs and bacon on toast and folding it like a slice of pizza, copying what one of his brothers was doing next to him. Nicky described what he saw the first time—the gray eyes, the smell, the sliminess.

Matt thought for a moment before answering. “Are you sure it was a ... creature,” he leaned in, checking that his parents weren’t listening and hoping one of his older brothers was, “and not someone you know?”

“She had scales. I don’t know anyone with scales,” Nicky said.

“Scales?”

“Yeah, like uhm round and bumpy, like scabs, but they were fish scales I think.”

Matt thought for a second, “Maybe she’s a selkie—”

“—A selkie!” Nicky interrupted. “I know those!”

“What’s that?” Moira asked.

“Like a seal, but they can take off their seal skin and become human,” Nicky told her. “Woah cool.”

“So,” Matt said, pulling their attention back to him, “That means if she’s stuck here, it’s because she lost her pelt. Her pelt is her seal skin. It would look like a seal and be like leathery, I think. You could start with the woods if that’s where you saw her.”

Nicky and Moira, eyes wide, jumped up and ran to put their plates in the sink.

“But be careful,” Matt yelled as they ran to get dressed, “It’s going to rain.”

Moira and Nicky stopped just past the fence to make a plan. The woods weren’t large, but they were long, and if they went too far, they could end up either in the cleared-out space where the older kids from the neighborhood hung out or the park.

There were lots of trees, and pine needles covered the ground. There were some small piles of snow from a storm weeks ago, and their breath came out as fog. They both had thick coats on with mittens and scarves—all hand-me-downs that settled oddly on their bodies. Moira and Nicky were not allowed to complain about having old clothes because some people didn’t have any at all.

“Where do you think the monster lost her pelt?” Moira asked, studying Nicky’s face—the freckles over his nose, his curly brown hair peeking out from under his hat. The scar through his left eyebrow was fresh when he came to live with them years ago but was faded now.

“I don’t know. She won’t know the woods as well as us,” he said.

“What if she likes it here now? Maybe she has a home now.”

“No, then she’d be there and not by our treehouse. She could be looking for her pelt too. Oh, you know, maybe if we help her, she’ll give us a wish or something.”

“You think she can do that?”

“Moira, they can turn into seals—they can probably do magic.”

“Fine, but I want a separate wish and it’ll be to have a slide in my *new* room. Race you to the creek,” she said and ran off laughing with Nicky close behind.

For the rest of the morning, they walked around in a large circle picking things up only to realize they were clots of mud or trash bags. Eventually, they circled back to their treehouse. Dad built it when the older boys were young, and it was still standing, though the branches were starting to lean under its weight.

“I want to go inside to see if there are any bugs,” Moira said, her tongue peeking out in concentration as she stood on her tippy toes to try and see inside.

“No, we have to keep looking,” Nicky yelled.

Moira could tell he was getting frustrated and maybe tired. She was too. She wanted to stop wandering through the woods looking for something she believed they wouldn’t find. It was starting to rain. She wanted to go home and finish their Lego city—before the light drizzle burst into a shower.

“We can keep looking for her pelt *after* I see the treehouse,” Moira said and started climbing the ladder.

“She needs us! She needs me to find it for her!”

“She doesn’t need anything because you made her up!”

Moira felt Nicky’s hands around her ankles. In a moment, she was air-born. Then she landed hard in the grass. She hadn’t been far up on the ladder, but it still hurt. She started to tear up. Moira and Nicky were not allowed to rough house with each other, especially on the treehouse ladder.

“That hurt, Nicky!”

“Take it back. She’s real!”

Moira rubbed her hand and came back with a bit of blood. She got angry all over again and couldn’t stop herself. “If she’s real then why are you the only one who saw her?”

“I don’t know,” Nicky said in a quieter voice with only a hint of the anger from before. He hung his head down. “My mom used to read me stories about selkies.”

“Oh,” Moira said.

“I’m sorry I pulled you down,” he said.

“Good. I mean thanks. I’m sorry I was mean. I believe you about the selkie.”

“You don’t have to,” Nicky said, then reached his hand out to help her up.

“I do. If I was lost, I’d want your help,” Moira said. They both smiled.

The rain swelled. Fatter droplets in larger clusters fell from the sky. Nicky knew they should get home, but rain—water—might lure the selkie out if they waited long enough. Nicky pointed to Moira’s hand and said, “There are band-aids in the treehouse. We can get one quick.”

Moira agreed, wanting to cover the stinging skin. They went up, Nicky before Moira. The treehouse looked mostly the same, drawings and posters, chairs, pillows, an old blanket, wood and small windows, except for a fishy smell they couldn’t place.

Moira sat on one of the lawn chairs while Nicky went to look in the cabinet on the other side for band-aids. Rain was coming through the windows and the holes in the wood. The sky opened up suddenly, like it had during the superstorm months ago. Moira thought she heard thunder and lightning. She hoped they

could get a band-aid fast, maybe some snacks for the walk, and then go home.

Nicky opened the cabinet, stopped, and in a shaky voice said, “Moira come here.”

“You better not be trying to scare me,” she said but crawled over to him anyway.

They sat so close to each other that their puffer jackets made sounds like crickets. Moira expected to see a bird or snake or mold or no snacks, but they could only see one thing inside. Nicky slowly pulled out a thick, blue-black, leathery object the size of a large animal. They touched it, grabbed it, and squeezed it silently. Moira examined the two holes that could be for eyes and the snout, and Nicky did the same to the tail at the end.

“Do you...do you think?” Nicky asked, still holding the thing in his lap.

“I don’t know,” Moira said, looking back inside the cabinet. Behind where the thing had sat was some bread, peanut butter, jelly, a deck of cards, and a Battleship game they didn’t remember putting there. “Maybe we should get out of here before she comes back.”

“I don’t think selkies are scary or anything,” Nicky said, interrupted by thunder and lightning coming from the sky above them. They both stared out the window with wide eyes and trembling lips. When the lightning stopped, Nicky said, “Okay—yeah—let’s go home.”

Moira went down first, then Nicky threw the pelt to her and came down himself. They could barely see in front of them there was so much rain, but the trailer had a tiny light and shone through the trees.

As they stood under the slight cover of the treehouse, Moira asked Nicky, “Do you think she’ll still give us a wish? You know, since we found her thing.”

Nicky smiled a bit. “Oh, I don’t know. I don’t know what I would wish for anyway.”

“You could take my wish, so that you could ask for a big one, like your mom not being sick anymore.”

“No,” he said, casting his eyes down then up to look at her. “I wouldn’t want to leave or anything.”

Moira chewed her lip before saying, “It’s okay if you want to live with your mom. I would miss mine too, a lot. If you did, we would still be best friends. Just farther apart.”

They smiled at each other, the clouds colored the sky grey, the rain poured around them. The woods felt like a cocoon.

They heard a noise behind them. They looked at each other, hoping it was in their heads, but then they heard it again. They heard trees and leaves rustling.

“No way, no way, no way, no way,” Moira said, holding the pelt tightly.

“Hello?” Nicky whispered shakily.

It called to them, a voice on the edge between deep and light and sounded like it was underwater. It was saying turn around or maybe something in a language they didn’t know.

They turned. The monster-woman stood in front of them, less than 10 feet

away. Her full figure was hidden by the trees and the rain, but they could see her eyes like stones smoothed by years of water and the leaves spinning around her. Her teeth seemed sharper than Nicky remembered. The air smelled like sea water.

The thunder and lightning clapped right behind the selkie’s head and she disappeared, leaving only the sound of her screech that was like three people whistling at the same time, like tires on ice, or the sound of deep ocean.

Nicky and Moira didn’t wait a beat. She threw the pelt down and ran as fast as she could. All of the hope left Nicky as fear took over.

They swore she was chasing them. They could hear mud, water, and leaves crunching under an extra pair of feet. They zagged through trees and puddles. All the way, they kept hearing her guttural screams. It was almost dark. Moira and Nicky were not allowed to be in the woods after dark.

When they could see their fence, they ran faster. To them, the trailer was home base, safe. They were terrified that the selkie was just about to catch up to them and they wouldn’t make it. They ran so fast they didn’t see the figure walking out of the trees to their right until they bumped into it.

In a second, they fell and lay in the dirt. Rain was coming down on them. They were afraid to look up.

“Where have you two been? I’ve been looking all over for you. Didn’t you hear me calling your names?” Matt asked.

Moira and Nicky got to their feet quickly.

“Thank god it’s you,” Moira said, hugging him.

Matt asked, “What’s going on?”

“We found her,” Nicky said.

“She mad mad mad,” Moira said.

“Wait you really saw someone?” Matt looked behind them, his face screwed up tight, then it softened. “Guys, there is no one there.”

At the same time, Moira and Nicky protested, telling Matt that they really had seen her.

“Look yourselves,” he said, pointing to the woods behind them.

Finally, Moira and Nicky turned around. All they could see was the storm, but no people, no selkies, nothing following them home. They didn’t say anything, just looked at the chasm of trees, straining their eyes for a hint of her.

Matt turned them both around. “You guys really are scared huh? Well, uh, it’s okay because you’re still following your rules. So, you’re safe.”

He was right, Moira and Nicky were not allowed to leave each other alone, especially with strangers. And they hadn’t.

“Let’s get inside,” Matt said, ushering them through the holes in the fence and up the path to the trailer door.

Matt opened the trailer door and yelled, “I found them, and they’ve gone nuts.”

Nicky and Moira rushed after him. They collapsed into the entryway all talking at once, screaming for their parents, pulling off their wet clothes, like

they themselves were a storm.

“The selkie—” Matt asked, pulling off his jacket.

“Is real and she’s going to eat us or give us an indoor slide—” Moira said, throwing a boot into the shoe pile.

Nicky, already pulling his socks off, cut in, “We found her pelt in the treehouse and—”

“Woah, guys take a breath,” Moria’s dad said, calling attention to the rest of the family sitting around the living room. Matt sat down on the recliner. His dad looked at Nicky and Moria, panting, wet, still talking, and added, “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Everyone laughed, but it was too loud, amplified by something Moira and Nicky couldn’t place. Their parents and the older boys were sitting on the couches. All of the lights were on, coloring the room a stark, unnatural white. There were six mugs on the table. Once the laughter died, the room was oddly quiet. To Matt, Nicky, and Moira, it felt like no one was talking or even had been, even though they all were a minute ago. The room was still, like they hadn’t interrupted anything at all.

“And say hi,” Moira’s mom finally broke the silence, gesturing to the person tucked into the farthest corner of the couch.

Moira and Nicky stood as still as mice caught by the light. Nicky’s breath hitched with excitement and fear. His mind raced, *if he had one wish...* They hadn’t noticed her when they came in, but now they did. Now, her presence was like a flash of lightning. She looked the same as they remembered, except she was bone dry.

Vessel

PHILIP F. CLARK

What breaks can be mended, they have said.
I think of the vessels of Japanese dishes
and cups, shards renewed and pieced together,
with gold seams. *Kintsugi* it is called,
“the golden repair.”

But the vessel of the body has neither gold
nor stitches, nor seams that it can renew
itself with. And it is often like this with love;
once torn, its threads pulled, ragged stitches
are a poor seamstress, a confounded tailor
for such labor.

Instead, we mend with words,
touches, to find an algorithm, an architecture
that might be that gold source. We reconstruct
forgiveness as a glue—such a minor ablution
for the crack and break of affection.

And once repaired, there is something
new, the body always showing a light
through the spaces the gold could not fill.

Collection: Untitled

ADAM BUBROW

I became interested in photography eight years ago when I inherited a DSLR camera with a decent lens. Since, it's made me look at the world differently in terms of magnitude, perspective, light. I don't have a title for this collection because it's not a unified collection, just random photos submitted at the same time. If there is a unifying theme, I guess it's looking for beauty, whether here or abroad, at the micro or macro levels, finding it in structure, either natural or man-made. So, if you need to call it something, I guess call it Beauty.





GEOMETRY (BLUE CUBES)





THE BLACK CHURCH OF BUDIR

The Drain

MIKE MONTALI

With a bucket and sweat
I fought the flood
That filled the basement
In grandma's house
again.

She bought the place
for \$38,000
in 1962.

Now it's worth
what I can't afford.

And yet when the city storms
the drain backs up
and the basement floods,
which lately
has been always.

Maybe out west
it will be dry.

The filthy flood
won't spiral
into the pipes
through the sewer
clogging the drain.

We can always sell the house,
buy bitcoin.
I could get a job as a teacher,
you could start a business.

I'm tired of bucketing
gutter water
constantly
soaked
wet from more than sweat

and dirty
muddy.

This water will rise.
I will only age.

I fought the flood
That filled the basement
In grandma's house
with a bucket and heart.

I lost.

mr. washington

MIKE MONTALI

space jazz
caresses the sky
as kamasi flows,

telling truths with
his saxophone
that screams,

wails,

and begs you *not*
to keep your eyes
open

in african garb
the two drummers
smash
the upright bass
stings

california chaos
collides
and thumps
the funk

i crawl through this astral sonic
special spatial
vortex,
feeling,
like i never have before

Meat Counter

ISAAC RYSDAHL

Mom and I would go to church every Sunday at ten a.m. because she didn't like the nine a.m. service. She said the hymns felt cold. I think it's because no one else raised their arms while they sang, and she always had her hands up like she was getting robbed for Christ. The routine was: wake at seven, eat breakfast at eight, and then walk the mile down to First United Methodist Church for worship. Mom would push through the big wooden doors and hug the greeters while I stood in the entry. She organized the prayer chain and knew about everyone's lives. They swarmed her like she was selling half-off brats to ask her to spread the word of a sick cousin or failing marriage. I'd follow her into church, shake hands, and look at the men's ties.

The Sunday after I trained Becky, Bill Day's tie barely reached his belly button and his white shirt had jam on it.

"How's work going?" he asked. I shook his hand and my knuckles cracked. Mom cut in.

"Isaiah is such a hard worker, he just got promoted at the deli. He's training the new hires now." It was true I'd just been promoted. Mom led me to our pew in the front, below the big stained-glass window of Jesus holding a lamb.

"What did you think of the message today?" she asked on the walk home.

I bent over to retie my shoe laces while she waited for an answer. She'd ask that question every week and I rarely knew what to say. That day I'd spent the entire service looking at the glass windows around the church. On our left was Mother Mary holding Jesus after they took him from the cross. In the window Mary looked to be my age and I'd been thinking about her touching my lifeless body until we had to stand to say the Our Father. I had to lean up against the pew until I calmed down enough to go wash my hands in the bathroom.

"Well, what did you think?" she asked again.

"I don't know, it was hard to follow."

"Hmm." She walked ahead.

I'd also been thinking about my new coworker, Becky, at the Cash Wise. She'd started the week before and although we'd gone to high school together, she didn't learn my name until I trained her at the meat counter. I was two years older and she was in the farmer crew, since her dad owned a dairy farm north of town. Her mom died from MS while Becky was in high school.

"Your mom was in the wheelchair, right?" I asked on her first day at work. She looked at me. "I saw her at your volleyball games," I said.

"Just at the end. She had a cane before that," she said. I spent the rest of the day showing her how to wrap and weigh the meat and sanitize the stainless

counters in between customers.

"It's real important to get every surface and make sure the bleach sits for two minutes," I explained. That was my personal procedure. The year before I'd gotten sick, and I no longer trusted Doug to come up with safe food handling procedures since he was constantly scratching his ass. Doug was our manager, but I was hoping for his job. He'd been there for close to twenty years but still didn't know where we stored the extra paper.

"You get a look at the new girl?" Doug asked after Becky's first training day. He didn't even know I'd been the one training her all morning.

"You should hit that, man. She's in your league. You weirdos would get along," Doug said as I sprayed bleach on the countertop. "Pretty great body, but it's tough to tell what's under the uniform."

"Yeah, I don't know," I said. I kept cleaning. Becky was pretty with her dark black bangs, and worked hard, but I hated when Doug talked about women. He'd always look at me with raised eyebrows and a dirty smirk anytime a woman in my age range came to the counter. One time he caught my eyes following a woman walking away.

"Oh, hell yeah, man," he'd said. He'd tried to fist bump me without taking his gloves off even though he'd been cutting ribeyes.

The night after training Becky, I dreamt I was weighing her breasts on the meat scales. I sprayed the stainless scale tops down and put on nitrile gloves before gently lifting each breast onto its own scale. Two pounds each. I woke when I came. The lights were out in the hall, which meant Mom was probably sleeping. I lay still for ten minutes listening for movement from her bedroom. She'd often wake in the middle of the night to pray. I went to the bathroom to clean up. I took off my underwear and scrubbed my groin with soap and a towel. Mom still did my laundry, so when I was really messy, I had to rip my underwear up and flush the pieces down the toilet so she wouldn't think I was masturbating. I wanted to shower but mom would hear, so I did my best with toilet paper.

I knew about masturbation because we'd talked about it at youth group. That and mom would check on me if I took too long in the bath because she was worried I was touching myself. She said I needed to fight temptation. So when I first started getting wet dreams my freshman year of high school, I was terrified. I'd try and stay awake praying so I wouldn't have the dreams. When they kept happening, I had to pray for forgiveness so I could fall asleep. Luckily, I could pick up more underwear at Cash Wise after work.

I'd already been working at the meat counter for five years. I started during my senior year and ended up going full time right after graduation. It was easy and the pay was decent because it's an employee-owned company. We even got to sit in on company meetings. I started at twelve an hour and by the time Becky was hired I was making fourteen.

"How long until I should ask for a raise?" Becky asked after we'd been regularly working the same shifts for a few months. I think Doug was intentionally scheduling us together because he kept laughing when I'd clock in.

"Um, I don't think you ask. They schedule raises after you work a certain number of hours."

"Seriously? You've never asked for a raise? How much are you making now?"

"I just got bumped up to fourteen an hour, plus some weeks I'll get a few hours of overtime," I said. "Like when I stay late to clean the employee bathrooms."

"Oh Isaiah! They started me at fourteen. No way I'd work for less. And you're worth so much more than that too! No wonder you get the pitcher deal." We'd gone out a few times for drinks at Applebee's. The first time she asked I said I was busy. She asked again.

A year later we were still going to Applebee's together and she'd started calling us "workplace spouses." We were sharing pitchers of Genuine Draft by then too and she let me pour the beer. Becky didn't like most of our coworkers so usually it was just the two of us. We talked about lots of things. Sometimes she told me about her mom. Before the MS they'd travel up to Minneapolis to go Contra dancing. I didn't know what it was and she made me stand up in the Applebees to show me. Mostly though, we talked comics or about new music she liked.

"You have to check out King Gizzard and the Lizard Wizard. They are insane. They do this funky metal mashup," she said after work one April.

"Oh cool. I'll check them out," I replied, since I liked her music.

"Actually, they're playing a show next weekend in Duluth! We have to go. You can use some of your vacation time. Don't you have like a hundred hours saved?"

We drove up the Friday morning before the show. I snuck my backpack into the car the night before and didn't tell mom I was leaving town for the night. She was usually in bed by the time I got home anyways so I hoped she wouldn't notice. I picked Becky up wearing my normal white button up shirt and black pants, the same outfit I wore every day to work. She bounced into the car wearing torn dark jeans and a denim jacket covered in patches from other bands she'd seen. Becky organized the entire night. She booked a hotel room downtown so we could walk to the show and not worry about driving. I didn't ask if we were getting one or two beds in the room. She noticed my shirt right away.

"It looks weird without the name tag!" she laughed and ran back inside. A second later she was back in the car with a black denim jacket that smelled of smoke and cologne. "It'll probably be a little big, but you'll look badass with that white shirt under." We pulled out of the driveway.

She played music on the drive north and talked about different shows she'd seen while we passed farms and small towns with grain silos and gas stations side by side. We stopped for lunch in Minneapolis so we wouldn't have to eat in the car.

"I'm going to move up here soon," she said while we ate. "I love all the people. It's so crowded and no one knows your business." I didn't like that we were sharing a table with another couple at the Chipotle. The woman kept wiping

her hands on her jeans instead of her napkin. The staff probably didn't clean the tables as well if people were still sitting there.

"I can't wait for you to see this band. You're going to love them," she said.

"Me either," I replied. "It's actually been a while since I've left New Ulm."

"I don't know, I need to leave every few months. It drives me crazy that everyone knows about my mom, but no one talks about it."

Back on 35 W she rolled the window down and used her right arm to ride the spring wind up and down. I did the same on my side.

Becky checked us in at the hotel front desk in Duluth under Mr. and Mrs. Richards.

"We're here for our anniversary," she said. It was true. We'd been working together for a year by then. "Can you send up some champagne? We're celebrating." We showed our IDs and the woman didn't comment that neither of us was named Richards. She was probably used to rural kids coming up, pretending to be wealthy or sophisticated. I didn't ask what the room cost, but I bet it was close to two hundred dollars for the night. Becky had saved up. It was her treat.

The room was beautiful and looked spotless. I was expecting thin gray carpet but instead the floors were a beautiful dark wood. I don't know what kind, maybe oak or walnut. In the center of the room was a huge plush rug with a full couch sitting at the edge. It seemed strange that they would spend the money on the floors and then cover it with a rug. If Mom and I had those floors we wouldn't have anything covering them. It was the first time I'd felt uncomfortable in my work clothes since starting at Cash Wise. The crisp white shirt and clean black pants felt lame compared to the room. There wasn't even dust on top of the tv. I kept Becky's jacket on even though it was warm. We sipped our champagne and dangled our feet off the side of the only bed in the room. We could see out over the harbor and Lake Superior as it stretched out like a huge glass table. We were sitting so close that our thighs were touching. Touching her body warmed mine and my hands began to sweat like they did inside my gloves while I mixed up the ground beef at work. We'd left town early and still had hours to go before the concert. That was the first time we kissed. She leaned over and kissed my cheek and laughed when she noticed my pants starting to rise. "Isaiah, you're such a middle schooler!"

The concert was loud. I didn't know to bring ear plugs, so Becky took me to the bathroom where she wetted paper towels and put them gently in my ears. It felt like the paper was wiggling into my ears until Becky's warm hand touched my back. It was my first time in a women's bathroom and things weren't as clean as I expected. The trash was overflowing and "fuck the police" was scratched into the mirror. The sound wasn't much better when we went back out to the concert. I stood behind Becky as she danced in front of me. It was easy for me to see the stage over her head. It took until the last few songs for me to finally put my arms around her. We stood with our heads nodding to the music while everyone danced around us.

We left the concert, our ears ringing, and tipsily walked towards the lake. "What did you think of your first concert?" Becky asked.

"Honestly, I didn't expect to like it, but it was fun. I thought it would be like dances in high school. Like everyone grouped off." Becky's hand found mine.

We walked along the boardwalk and under the huge metal lift bridge that would open and close to welcome ships into the harbor. The lake was so dark, it looked like if you stepped off the boardwalk you'd fall forever. The sound of the waves crashing on the rocks was the only thing that broke the fear of falling. The bars were closing and we could hear the drunken yells of a Saturday night as people stumbled to their trucks and cars to take the curvy drive home. We'd been drinking whiskey from a flask she'd kept hidden in her waistband at the concert. I normally stuck to beer so on my first pull I coughed hard. She laughed and pulled me in for our first real kiss. She tasted like leather and smoke and I pulled close trying to breathe more of her in.

Becky and I walked all night in the wind, cold coming off the lake. I tried to give her back the jacket.

"No babe, you keep it. It looks so good on you," she said. I don't remember what time it was when we noticed a few lights glowing out on the lake. It looked like there was a small town nestled above the water. It had been years since I last thought of it, but in that moment The Cremation of Sam McGee came flooding back into my memory. I recited the first part for her:

*There are strange things done in the midnight sun
By the men who toil for gold;
The Arctic trails have their secret tales
That make the blood run cold;
The Northern Lights have seen queer sights,
But the queerest they ever did see
Was that night on the marge of Lake Labarge
I cremated Sam McGee.*

Becky didn't laugh. She stood watching and listening to me.

"My little baby boy, that was beautiful," she said as she reached up and we kissed again.

"Have fun you two," the front desk worker said when we slipped past him on our way up to our hotel room. It was 4 a.m. and I was exhausted and drunk and horny. We'd been kissing all night and I had a wet spot over my crotch from the excitement. I tried to hide it with the jacket.

When we got up to the room Becky turned on Spotify and popped another bottle of champagne. She jumped on the bed and some champagne spilled on the floor.

"To your first concert," she said as we toasted. The mix of bubbles and nerves made my nose itch.

"I loved it. And the walk too," I said.

She laughed. "I know you did. It was the sweetest date I've been on," she said. Before that moment I still wasn't sure it was a date. We kissed again and were soon on the bed. We took off our shirts and kept kissing as we ground into each other. She ran her hand up my arm and squeezed my bicep. I mimicked her. Her elbow fit in my palm and I used my nails to scratch her softly. We held each other gently while we kissed and ran our tongues together. Then she pushed me down so I was laying on my back on the scratchy hotel comforter. I lay there looking up at her until she pulled my hands up to her bra. Compared to the blanket it felt like silk. I came. I wasn't expecting how good it would feel. Becky didn't seem to notice though. She leaned down to keep kissing me. She'd think I was a pervert. I knew it. I could smell the semen and took my hands off her. She was still on top of me. I couldn't breathe. It was strong and sudden. I could smell it. She had to. Like the cleaner we used on the floor drains at work that always burned my nose.

"Wait, wait. I have to go to the bathroom," I said as I pushed her off. I tried to cover myself and get away before she could smell my semen. I closed the bathroom door. I took off my pants, and my underwear was a mess. I tried washing them in the sink, but the hotel bar of soap wouldn't get the semen out of the fabric and I had to rip them up. I didn't want Becky to see.

"Isaiah, are you okay?" Becky asked from behind the door.

"Give me a moment." I was still a little drunk and wasn't as careful as I should have been as I ripped the underwear into pieces. I threw them in the toilet, but when I tried to flush, it clogged. I tried again but the bowl started overflowing. There wasn't a plunger and the floor was getting wet. I grabbed an empty garbage bag to use as a glove and reached in to pull the clog of underwear out, but it was stuck in the bottom of the toilet. I pulled hard and the soiled cloth gave way as I slipped back. The fucking bag ripped and I got toilet water all over my arm. I was terrified she heard me. I grabbed a towel off the top of the toilet and tried to clean the water off myself and the floor.

"Isaiah, what the hell are you doing in there? Get back here, baby!" Becky called.

My face was flushed. I was sweating, standing naked in that beautiful bathroom.

"I'll be out in a second," I yelled. She had to have heard the panic in my voice. I tried to dry my pants off for probably ten minutes before I came out of the bathroom.

"What were you doing? Is everything okay?" she asked as she looked at me. She was sitting on the edge of the bed with her shirt back on. I'd been gone for close to thirty minutes. My face still felt flushed.

"What happened to your pants? Why are they wet?" she asked.

"I'm sorry Becky. I had to clean them off," I said. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I don't know what happened."

She looked at me and touched my wet arm. "What happened?" she asked.

"I came in my pants," I said as I started crying. "I'm sorry. I fucked this whole night up."

"Take a breath, Isaiah," she said. I was trying not to sob.

"I'm so sorry, but can we get out of here?" I asked.

"Wait, what? You want to leave now?"

"We have to go. I need to get out of here."

"Isaiah, calm down. It's not a big deal."

"Becky, I need to go!" I yelled.

"Fine. Of course, we can leave. You'll need to drive though," she said.

I was still a little drunk, but I drove anyway. Inside the dark car I could calm my breathing. I tried to act normal as we left Duluth and was relieved when Becky fell asleep. I turned the radio off and drove straight home going eighty.

I dropped Becky off at her place.

"Isaiah, I want you to know that I had a nice time. What happened was no big deal," she said.

"Thanks, see you at work," I replied.

She looked at me. "I'm serious. You hear me? It was a great night." I watched her walk up to the house. She forgot the jacket; I still have it. When I got home, mom was just getting in the shower; I had to wait before I could get clean.

Becky and I still see each other a few times a year, but we never talked about that night again. She tried a few times the week after we got back, but I changed the subject to work. She hadn't been mixing the cleaner accurately. We went out a few more times to Applebee's before she moved up to Minneapolis. She'd saved enough by then to find an apartment and I knew she was pretty lonely in New Ulm. Sometimes she comes back to visit, or I make the drive to Minneapolis for lunch or drinks at the restaurant where she works. She's a server now and makes great money from tips. It's a busy place and the tables are usually pretty sticky from spilled beer. Lately she's been trying to get me to try a dating app, but I'm not sure I'm ready.

The Fire Lanterns

JOSEPH HELMREICH

This is the night of the year
 When lovers toast in dimly lit booths.
 Floating candles illuminate smiling eyes
 While bellies swell with warmth.

But the cafes are booked!
 So we stroll down Riverside
 Arms entwined beneath a new moon.
 You scold me for peering into windows,
 Trying to read the book spines.

Then the pier calls at 70th Street,
 Invites us deep into the Hudson
 Where we move among
 The shimmering black

And gaze up at stars, which move!
 Hundreds, in fact,
 That seem suspended
 Between Heaven and here.

“Fire lanterns,” a woman explains
 From amidst a crowd gathered on the docks
 That’s setting these flaming couriers aloft.
 “A memorial for our friend, Florsheim.”
 We don’t ask if he’s related to the shoe.

The magic feels stolen.
 We didn’t know this man;
 To reside in the glow of his mourning,
 Even a whimsical, beautiful mourning,
 Feels a violation, a trespass.

But as the untethered stars return to their source
 And their bright reflections sprinkle the sea
 Resistance seems cold.
 We kiss beneath the fire lanterns
 And the dead man silently forgives.

SULLIVAN COUNTY

JOSEPH HELMREICH

I don’t like to be followed;
 I can feel your eyes,
 The same ones
 That clinked with mine
 Joyfully over poached eggs
 And baked cheese
 In Kutcher’s main dining room.

So other am I to you now,
 Misty under street lamps,
 Glimpsed as I round a corner,
 Shadow on the brickwork
 Or a moving silhouette
 Behind venetian blinds.

Crane your neck!
 And all the rest of you.

But my consciousness pounds
 Too loudly in my skull
 And I’m nauseous
 With my own scent.
 Lust and hunger
 Leave no room for mystique
 Or any other
 Illusions of other.

Stop the Train

YUANQING WANG

A railroad wandered through the heart of the village like a gray, rusty river. It was a narrow gauge, built decades ago to ship coal out of the village and out of the mountains. When the coal was no more, the trains carried lemons; when it was not lemon-harvesting seasons, they carried people out and returned with empty carriages.

The children of the village used to play this silly game called *stop the train*. We would find a spot, a few hundred yards after where the railroad cut through a corner and where the conductor's line of sight, a bald man with a beer belly, would likely be hindered. We lay there, on the track, waiting for the train to come. When it did come, the kids, suddenly scared, would jump up and run from the track, one by one. The last one who stayed won. As if to challenge or to cheer, the train would whistle. But it never slowed down. Not even once.

Ms. L had ridden that train to the village two years ago, just when I started high school. It was a clear day in late September, when cool winds were just about to blow. The entire class, as well as the entire village, went to the station to greet her. We carried her coat and luggage and would have happily carried her if she would so indulge us.

The village had raised enough money to renovate a wooden barn house by the field, which had been used to store lemons, for Ms. L to stay in. They repainted the outside wall to be fire-brick red and installed new glass windows looking out to the misty mountains. Dried corns and peppers were hung on either side of the door as these, explained the villagers, signify harvest, abundance, and in general, good luck. Ms. L thanked the villagers for their good heart, directed them to put her luggage anywhere on the floor, and departed for the school. A sigh was let out on her way out, but not heard by anyone.

Upon entering the classroom in her mud-covered high heels, she wrote down her name with a tiny piece of chalk, the letter L whirling and flowing, making one forget the roughness of that mottled blackboard. She wore a white lace blouse and a skirt. The skirt was shorter than everyone else's in the village, revealing her fleshy thighs, which were about to get less fleshy and less smooth over time. The color of that skirt was vibrant with floral patterns of bright yellow, a contrast to the navy and olive drab green of our clothing.

In a soft, timid voice, she introduced herself. She told us that she had just received a master's degree in comparative literature from an institute named after a murderer, in some distant city that never sleeps. She also said that to teach English in the remotest part of her home country, where a grand revolution was ongoing, was the only way to make that degree somewhat useful.

"It's more than just a language that I'm trying to teach you," she said. "Once

you know the language, you can read so much more."

During that first class, she talked about the history of the village that we had never heard, as if she had been here forever and we were the passersby. According to her, it was a group of missionaries who had brought the lemons. The villagers didn't like the missionaries; they called the dark-skinned ones monkeys and the pale-skinned ones ghosts. They killed and expelled them, as well as many of the new things the missionaries brought. Apart from the railroad, the lemons were the only thing that had survived. Magically, they bloomed in the lean soil that almost never grew anything, under the thick clouds that everlastingly shrouded the hills.

She stopped from time to time to write down English words that we might find unfamiliar: *Missionary* (noun) one who went on a mission to promote a religion; *Religion* (noun) the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power; *Capitalism* (noun) a system based on the private ownership of the means of production.

She would have written down more big words, certainly, if she was aware of the fact that none of us in that classroom had ever tasted lemon, not properly. We didn't have lemon in our cuisine, and we didn't put lemon in our tea, nor did we know what a gin and tonic was. We had only consumed lemon in a way it shouldn't be, which was to eat it whole, unsliced, unpeeled, and unwashed, when it ripened and fell before the scheduled train and we couldn't bear the idea of watching it rot.

For months, everyone in the school was crazy about Ms. L's class. We entered the classroom long before the class started and familiarized ourselves with the chapters in the textbooks that she was scheduled to discuss. But she never talked a lot about the materials in the textbooks. She too often deviated from them to talk, in big and confusing words, about this movement or that, this group of activists or another, how they were no more than groups of cowards or hypocrites. She also spent a good deal of time recounting her life before she had entered the village. There was always an amazing spot at the corner of one numbered street and another, and she would spend her nights among other intellectuals hopping from cafes to bars to clubs, raising their glasses to the grand revolution, how they could and should devote themselves to it, with their feet and hands, not just shouting slogans at each other.

At this point, we, sons and daughters of the village, were lost. Some boys stared at her, but only to contemplate her slender figure, while others were ready to doze off. She never seemed to mind and always carried on.

I was perhaps the only one who had been constantly interested in her class. I loved all the details she gave about her previous life. Those details confirmed the existence of another world, a completely different world, outside these mountains. If I took this train, I told myself, and transferred to another train and another, I, too, theoretically, could reach that never-sleeping city, where everybody wore colorful short skirts.

Ms. L was always by herself. After class, she would head out of the school alone, warmly smiling at and nodding to someone's sister or aunt, but not participating in their small talks. What was there to talk about, anyway? The topics of conversation in this village were limited—the eternally sullen sky, the lemon trees under it, the everyday miseries among the villagers, and the sorrow, when the villagers waved goodbye to their children, one by one.

Of course, the village talked about Ms. L as well. The women wondered how L could have such a delicate waist and ankles smooth as pork lard. “Has she ever spent one day on a farm?” one would ask, but they couldn't comprehend or imagine, no matter how hard they tried, a life that didn't entail farm work and labor.

They also figured that none of the young men in the village would be good enough for her, not even the burliest young man in the production brigade who had wrestled an ox, not even the son of the head of the village council. Not even those two together, and the rest of the men as male concubines, taking turns by the calendar to take care of her, preparing her tea and washing her feet and all that. Not even that.

So she is going to leave, isn't she? Like all of them.

After about one year of her living in the village, she walked into the classroom in that same pair of mud-covered high heels and announced, rather seriously, that she was going to let the students in the class, or anybody in the village, freely borrow books from her. Since everybody had cheered, I was expecting a crowd in front of her doorstep, but it was just me. She didn't appear to be surprised or disappointed by this fact and proceeded to welcome me in. She wore a loose T-shirt that allowed me to see the contour of her small breasts and child-like nipples. “Would you like some hot water?” she asked, and I shook my head timidly.

The inside of the barn house looked emptier than when nobody had lived here. Much of the space was simply left untouched, and no furniture had been acquired except for the bamboo chair, table, and bed, which were all crippled in one way or another, that the village provided for her. With her suitcases laid on the ground containing volumes of books, it looked like she had either just unpacked or was about to leave tomorrow.

Without asking me which book I would like to read, she handed me *How Steel was Tempered* by Ostrovsky. “It's the first book every revolutionist should read,” she said. As I thanked her and walked towards the door, she gripped my waist and asked me to stay. “So that I can know for sure that you understand every word,” she said.

She asked me to sit after occupying the only chair in the room. I looked around. The cement floor seemed cold and damp. “You can sit on the bed,” she looked at me and the bed, which squeaked as I carefully transferred my weight from my legs to it inch by inch.

And then I started reading the book to her, from “those of you who came to my house to be examined” to “he went back to Kiev where his work was awaiting him,” word for word, all in one setting. She would stop from time to time to question me on the meaning of the words or to correct my pronunciation.

When I walked out of the barn house, it was already dark. The puddles on that muddy road were many and irregular. So, I gave up avoiding them and walked at my usual pace. Through the moonlight-permeated mist, I saw hundreds and thousands of tiny points, scattered through the lemon trees, shining, but very dimly. They were not lemons, I knew it all along. They were eyes. They were the eyes of the village.

Gradually, it became a habit—for two or three days a week—to go to Ms. L's barn house after class, where she would hand me a book without asking me to choose, and I would read it aloud to her. After Gorky it was Sholokhov. After Sholokhov it was Sartre. Before long I was reading *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* with her quizzing me about the difference between a coup d'état and a revolution.

When I got the answers right, she rewarded me, calling me a good kid. She would let me sit right next to her and explain to me what the characters would do after candles were blown out and curtains closed up, and what do weapons and houses, respectively, always mean in literature.

For a few moments, I forgot the age difference between us. We were just chatting—from big words and ideas, to her past, to the weather, the damning mists, and the harvest of the lemons. Before long, one could not tell our conversations from the small talks around the village she refused to participate in.

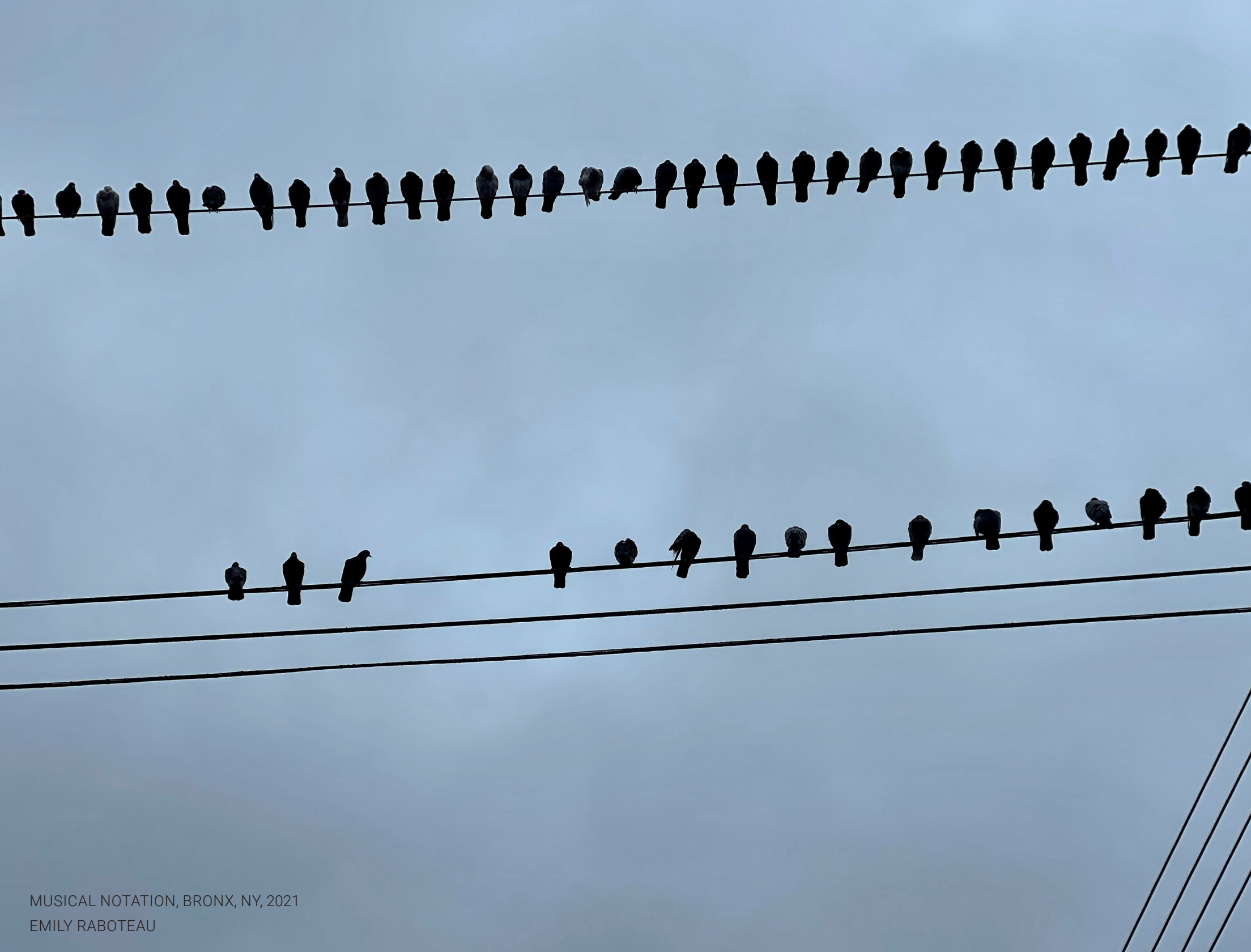
I told her about our game, *stop the train*, and she asked if I was a good player, to which I answered that I was not. I was always among the first to retreat.

“So, the train really never slowed down?” asked Ms. L.

“No, it really never slowed down.”

Ms. L left the verse, “Let the tempest come strike harder” in large letters on the blackboard the day the villagers delivered the letter containing the order from the leader of the revolution that no teaching of foreign languages was allowed anymore. The same group who greeted her from the station two years ago escorted her, in total silence, to the train station.

In the meantime, I found myself lying on the train tracks, waiting for the train that would carry Ms. L away, to come.



MUSICAL NOTATION, BRONX, NY, 2021
EMILY RABOTEAU

HARRIET LOXBY: A Feature Film (an excerpt)

BERYL FRISHTICK

THE DAVID DORTORT PRIZE IN CREATIVE WRITING

EXT. ANCIENT TROY/BEACH - DAY

The sun beats down on the beaches of Troy as the Trojan War rages on.
Hundreds of GREEK WARRIORS are amassing outside the city's walls.

The men are sweaty and covered in grime. Most have olive skin and dark hair.
Some are sharpening their weapons while others cook over open fires. They are all waiting.

KING MENELAUS (mid-40s, regal), leader of the Greeks, approaches his men on horseback. He holds up a hand to silence the army, which immediately obeys him.

MENELAUS

Warriors of Greece: How many years have we
toiled outside these walls? Our battles have left
us broken. We no longer resemble the men we
once were.

The army roars their agreement.

MENELAUS (CONT'D)

But today, everything changes.
Today, the wait is over.

The men hum with excitement. RANDOM WARRIOR 1 hits RANDOM WARRIOR 2 in the arm, as if to say, "Did you hear that?"

MENELAUS (CONT'D)

It is my honor to introduce a new ally. A warrior
of such ferocity, such intelligence, such renown,
that they will change the course of this war.

(raises sword)

Victory is ours!

GREEK ARMY

Victory is ours!

Frishtick

MENELAUS

I present to you the one, the only... Miss
Harriet Loxby!

Menelaus gestures off-screen.

HARRIET LOXBY (17, striking, non-white, with curly black hair) makes her grand entrance on a dappled mare, holding a sword in her outstretched hand.

She is an English girl from the 1840s, wearing a period-appropriate dress.

We begin to realize we may not be in the time period we thought we were.

The army roars with approval, happy and shocked to be graced with Harriet's presence.

In the VIP area, PRINCE ACHILLES (early 20s, blond) nods, impressed. He considers himself a huge deal and it takes one to know one.

Next to Achilles, KING ODYSSEUS (mid-30s, dark and bearded) squints and smiles into the sunlight. Obviously he has heard of this newcomer and approves of Menelaus' choice.

Achilles clasps Odysseus' shoulder, similar to the pair of warriors from earlier, and the two men look at each other in relief. The end of the war is within reach.

The din of the army dies down as Harriet begins to speak. She yells so everyone can hear.

HARRIET

I heard you needed a hero.

The army roars again.

Harriet meets Achilles' eyes over the crowd. He seems transfixed by her. She looks pleased and tosses her hair, but quickly returns to business.

HARRIET (CONT'D)

Now is the time for action. Follow me into
battle and victory is ours!

She raises her sword even higher. It looks heavy but she holds it steady.

HARRIET (CONT'D)

Troy will fall at our feet!

(beat)
For Greece!

The men raise their swords in response.

GREEK ARMY
For Greece! For Miss Harriet Loxby!

Menelaus, Odysseus, and Achilles join Harriet at the front of the column. Achilles takes the spot on Harriet's right. They share another glance and a smile.

Led by Harriet on her noble steed, the army begins moving towards the walls of Troy.

Harriet holds out her sword in front of her as she rides. On her face is a look of fanatical determination. She will win the war for Greece.

MRS. LOXBY (O.S.)
Not so high, dear.
(beat)
Harriet, lower your arm.

END DAYDREAM.

INT. LOXBY HOUSE/SITTING ROOM - DAY

Harriet, the same English teenager we just watched lead the Greek army into battle, is jolted out of her daydream by her mother's voice.

She is perched on a chair in her family's sitting room next to her mother, MRS. ABIGAIL LOXBY (early 40s), and her little sister, EVIE LOXBY (13, glasses, non-white, small for her age).

Theirs is a well-appointed 1840s rural English home. Comfortable but not showy. This family clearly has money but doesn't like to waste it.

As Harriet comes out of her daydream, we see she is holding up her hands in front of her, about a foot apart, so her mother can use them to wrap yarn.

Per her mother's comment, Harriet has been holding up her hands too high, slightly above her head, at the same height she held her sword in her daydream.

Frishtick

CLOSE UP: A copy of *The Iliad* on the side table next to Harriet. A bookmark is stuck somewhere in the second half.

Harriet's sister, Evie, is concentrating on the open calculus workbook in front of her. Every now and then Evie glances out of the window towards the Loxbys' backyard.

As Harriet realizes she is not in Ancient Troy leading the Greeks into battle, but instead right where she always is, she grimaces and flings back her head in disappointment.

HARRIET
(wailing obnoxiously)
Ugh!

CUT.

EXT. ENGLISH COUNTRYSIDE - THE NEXT MORNING

Harriet and Evie take a sunrise walk along a local sheep path. Glorious green hills, dotted with trees and shrubs, unfold before them.

Both girls look happy to be out in this delightful dawn, but also a bit sleepy.

They pass sheep munching on purple clover.

HARRIET
I don't know how you talk me into these walks.
(joking)
It's abnormally early. And you're supposed to be the delicate one, anyhow.

EVIE
Can we say hello to the horses on the way back?
I have a carrot for Flora.

HARRIET
What's so special about Flora? She's the same as all the others.

EVIE
(thinking)
She's different. She's the most intelligent one.
But she's quiet, she doesn't like to show off.

HARRIET

How would she show off? She's a horse.

Another few sheep walk by the girls. Harriet follows one with her eyes.

HARRIET (CONT'D)

These sheep, now, they're impressive.
Have you ever noticed how fluffy they are?
But when their wool is shorn they look shrunken,
like a completely different animal. Very enigmatic.

EVIE

I think horses are smarter. They're bigger, for one.

HARRIET

Since when does that matter? You're the smallest
13-year-old in Marwood.

Evie nods, sadly.

HARRIET (CONT'D)

And the smartest.
(as if reciting titles at the entrance
to a ball)

"Lady Evie Loxby: Tiny Genius!"

(beat)

See? There's no correlation. Anyway, it's boring
how we're supposed to love horses, just because
we're girls.

(motions to the sheep)

What about them? The poor, lowly sheep.

Harriet doesn't seem to realize she's kind of obsessed with the sheep. She
glances at a few others nearby. They appear to be sleeping.

HARRIET (CONT'D)

You know they only sleep four hours each night?
They have to remain vigilant, so a few will sleep
while the others stay awake.

EVIE

I didn't know that.

HARRIET

They keep to themselves. They're not heart-on-
their-sleeve creatures. You really need to get to
know them.

Evie looks at Harriet, surprised.

EVIE

How do you know that?

Harriet shrugs.

HARRIET

Read it somewhere. Cousin Francis has been
leaving his agricultural pamphlets around.

EVIE

Why are you reading Francis's pamphlets
when we have books?

HARRIET

(offhand)

I've read all the books.

EVIE

(turns to Harriet)

You've read all the books in the house? Even
the ones in Mother and Father's room?

Harriet shrugs.

HARRIET

Yes. So I moved onto pamphlets. I'm too lazy
to go to the library.

EVIE

You mean you're too scared of Miss Timms.

HARRIET

No I'm not!

(beat)

The point is sheep are smart, just like horses.
But they're misunderstood creatures.

EVIE

I understand horses. And dogs. If there was
another Flood and I could only save two kinds
of animals, those are the ones I'd choose.

HARRIET

I'd choose only sheep. But I'd bring twice as many.
(beat)

I wonder if I could create a sheep army...

EVIE

Hattie...

HARRIET

If it came to that.

Evie points to the sun breaking over the horizon.

EVIE

Look!

The sun has finally crested the hills and shines full-force on the girls.
Everything glows in the fresh light. The sisters stand together, transfixed.

After a moment, Harriet turns to a flock of sheep in the distance. She begins to run towards them.

HARRIET

(yelling to sheep)

Wake up, sheep! Evie and I are saying good morning! It's going to be a beautiful day!

Evie laughs and shakes her head. She runs after Harriet and catches up with her.

EVIE

Can we see the horses now?

HARRIET

(fake-bored)

Yes, Evie-kins. Lead the way.

They start heading in the other direction. As they walk, Harriet puts her arm around Evie's waist and Evie leans her head on Harriet's shoulder.

INT. LOXBY HOUSE/STAIRCASE - LATER THAT MORNING

The Loxby household is in upheaval. Harriet runs up the stairs wearing her casual house dress and slippers as her (fully-dressed) mother follows closely behind.

HARRIET

I'm not going!

Harriet stops at the top of the stairs, spins around, and looks at her mother.

MRS. LOXBY

This isn't optional, Harriet.

HARRIET

Church is BORING. I'm staying home.

(beat)

I need my rest! Evie and I were out early.

MRS. LOXBY

That was your choice, dear. You still need to come to church.

HARRIET

Not happening.

MRS. LOXBY

Don't make things difficult. You must come.
Today is the new curate's first service.

HARRIET

Who?

MRS. LOXBY

I will not have an empty seat in our pew—the neighbors might ask questions. We need to make a good impression.

HARRIET

What about what I want? Do you even care about me?

MRS. LOXBY

Darling, of course I care about you. But this family is going to church.

(beat)

Get. Dressed. Now.

Harriet runs down the stairs, past her mother. Mrs. Loxby follows.

INT. LOXBY HOUSE/BREAKFAST ROOM - CONTINUOUS

In the empty breakfast room, Harriet opens a cabinet and takes out a delicate-looking floral teacup. She holds it above her head: a threat.

MRS. LOXBY

Don't you dare.

HARRIET

FREEDOM!

Harriet dashes the teacup to the floor. It shatters. Mrs. Loxby yelps. Harriet looks a little shocked at herself.

MRS. LOXBY

Harriet Felicity Loxby, get dressed this instant or you'll be spending next summer with your grandparents.

HARRIET

(incredulous)

In WALES?!

MRS. LOXBY

In Wales.

HARRIET

You wouldn't.

MRS. LOXBY

Wouldn't I?

Harriet knows when she's been bested. The combined threat of Wales plus her middle name is too much to overcome.

HARRIET

Fine.

Harriet storms off to get ready for church. Mrs. Loxby leans on the breakfast table and closes her eyes, exhausted. She takes a deep breath.

MRS. LOXBY

Martha!

MARTHA (late 30s, plump, tanned skin, harried but kind), the family's maid, enters the breakfast room with a broom and dustpan and begins sweeping up the bits of broken teacup.

Martha looks up and gives Mrs. Loxby a comforting smile.

MARTHA

It'll be alright, My Lady. Miss Harriet will come around.

MRS. LOXBY

Thank you, Martha.

EXT. VARIOUS MARWOOD LOCATIONS – ONE HOUR LATER

Sunshine. Birdsong. Harriet, Evie, Mrs. Loxby, and MR. THOMAS LOXBY (late 40s), Harriet's father, ride to church in a carriage. This ride introduces us to the village, Marwood.

The Loxbys' home is situated a short ride from the town center, and we follow the carriage as the surroundings become less rural and more bustling.

The vibe is a mix of Belle's "Bonjour!" intro from *Beauty and the Beast* and Hallie's "There She Goes" London cab ride montage in *The Parent Trap*, sans joyful protagonist.

Harriet sulks throughout the ride, resolutely looking out the window and refusing to speak to her parents.

Evie looks back and forth between Harriet and her parents, concerned.

En route to church, the carriage passes:

- Marwood's primary school
- Marwood's general store
- Loxby Buttons Factory (the family business)

The carriage continues down Marwood's High Street, introducing us to a few specific villagers setting out for church from their homes:

- MR. HERMAN (45) leaving his home, which adjoins his bakery
- MISS TIMMS (40) leaving her home, located across the street from the library
- MR. MUFFINS (55) leaving the funeral home he runs and lives above
- MAYOR ROGERS (50) and his FAMILY leaving their fancy home in the center of town

We get an AERIAL SHOT of the picturesque village and the surrounding countryside: rolling hills, fields of purple heather and bright yellow rapeseed, sheep, birds, etc.

The carriage arrives at its destination: Marwood's church, a clean white structure with a tall steeple. The Loxbys dismount and walk inside.

INT. MARWOOD CHURCH - CONTINUOUS

Light streams in through the church's stained-glass windows, illuminating a few hundred VILLAGERS (half of whom are women) waiting for the service to begin.

Note: Some of the villagers are white but most are not. The diversity should feel a bit *A Personal History of David Copperfield*, a bit *Bridgerton*. No Marwoodians are blond.

Most have brown or black hair (or gray, if age- appropriate).

The Loxbys are one of the last families to arrive. They take their seats towards the front of the church.

Harriet positions herself next to Evie, away from her parents. She opens her prayer book and immediately begins doodling tiny sheep in the margins.

Evie opens her calculus workbook and hides it in her prayer book, but unlike Harriet she is still paying partial attention to her surroundings.

A moment passes this way, punctuated by the quiet background conversation of the congregation. Harriet's sheep doodles become larger and more ornate.

JAMES CROFT (mid-20s), the new curate, walks out from the wings of the church and ascends the pulpit. He is traditionally handsome and blond (the only blond in Marwood), dressed in a black and white curate's robe.

Mr. Croft looks out over the congregation. He takes a moment to collect himself. The congregation stares back, sans Harriet, who is still doodling.

MR. CROFT

Good people of Marwood, welcome to this house of God.

Harriet looks up from her prayer book. She notices there is a new person in the pulpit. He is... different. Handsome. And there seems to be a heavenly glow emanating from him.

Harriet's mouth drops open as she stares at Mr. Croft. He's... perfect.

HARRIET

(slowly)

Wow.

MR. CROFT

(audible only to Harriet)

My name is Jesus Christ.

Harriet looks shocked and impressed.

MR. CROFT (CONT'D)

(audible to everyone)

I have come here to bring the true meaning of God's love to this village.

(beat)

I entreat you: Open your hearts to me, and allow me into your lives.

Harriet is nodding in agreement. She is very susceptible, when the mood is right. She turns her head towards Evie but does not take her eyes off Mr. Croft.

HARRIET

Mercy, that man is fine.

Evie gently bats her sister's shoulder. Harriet continues to concentrate on the curate.

HARRIET (CONT'D)

Who is he?

EVIE

James Croft.

HARRIET

(tasting the words)

James Croft...

EVIE

Our new curate. Mr. Dumfries retired last month, remember?

HARRIET

(dreamily, still staring at Mr. Croft)

I do not.

Evie shakes her head, but lovingly.

EVIE

You never pay attention in church.

HARRIET

I do now.

EVIE

Mr. Dumfries said they were choosing someone with missionary experience this time. A stronger constitution.

Evie returns to her calculus workbook.

Harriet keeps staring at Mr. Croft. She takes a small hand fan from her dress pocket and begins to fan herself, a gesture that is too slow and dramatic to look natural.

MR. CROFT

God desires nothing more than for you to love and be loved. Only this love can set you free from your earthly burdens.

Mr. Croft looks pointedly at those parishioners in the first few rows, including the Loxbys, presumably Marwood's elite.

Harriet stops fanning herself and slowly closes the prayer book on her lap, her eyes never leaving the curate's face.

HARRIET

(to herself)

I shall call him JC. My own JC.

MR. CROFT

How many of you are truly virtuous of heart? Who here loves your fellow man as yourself?

HARRIET

(tentative)

Me? I do!

Harriet raises her hand to head-height and waves it. Evie lightly kicks Harriet's ankles.

MR. CROFT

Or have you sunk into uncharitable habits and cruel judgments while God's back was turned?

Harriet shakes her head, aghast, like she would never even dream of doing that. (But of course she has, many times.)

Some RANDOM PARISHIONERS look away, avoiding eye contact with the curate. They are definitely guilty of this.

MR. CROFT (CONT'D)

Mr. Dumfries warned me the mood here could be... relaxed. But that's good.

(smiling)

I have come to improve you. To build upon Mr. Dumfries' great work.

There are a few good-natured chuckles from the audience.

MR. CROFT (CONT'D)

Remember, God cares nothing for wealth. Isn't that what Jesus' life teaches us?

HARRIET

(to Evie, actually curious)

Does it?

Evie raises her eyebrow.

HARRIET (CONT'D)

Yes it does. It does teach us that!

(serious)

Does it, though?

(beat)

Yes, it must. It must!

Harriet looks around and tries to start a slow clap. She is unsuccessful, and a few people turn to see where the noise is coming from. Mr. Croft doesn't notice.

MAYOR ROGERS (50) turns to his friend MR. MUFFINS (55), Marwood's undertaker, and raises an eyebrow.

MAYOR ROGERS

(whispers)

I miss Mr. Dumfries.

MR. MUFFINS

(whispers)

His sermons on beekeeping were always so relaxing.

They both sigh wistfully.

MAYOR ROGERS

You could almost hear the drone of the bees...

MR. MUFFINS

And he'd wear his bee veil sometimes, that was

certainly different.

MAYOR ROGERS

A unique soul.

MR. MUFFINS

Remember when he would fall asleep, draped
over the pulpit?

MAYOR ROGERS

Then we would get out early. Sometimes.
(beat)

A man of the people.

Mr. Muffins jerks his head towards Mr. Croft.

MR. MUFFINS

I don't think this one will let us out early.

Mr. Muffins sighs. The Mayor swallows loudly.

The Mayor and Mr. Muffins were seated too close to the front to get away with
it; Mr. Croft has overheard the end of their conversation. He gestures towards
them.

MR. CROFT

Good Sirs, allow me to assure you, and
the rest of the congregation, you will not be
getting out early.

The Mayor and Mr. Muffins are chastened. A few congregants giggle. The
Mayor puffs himself up, trying to look serious.

MR. CROFT (CONT'D)

But I digress.

A few more chuckles and murmurs from the congregation.

MR. CROFT (CONT'D)

How should you show this love for God of
which I speak?

Silence.

MR. CROFT (CONT'D)

Through service. By serving God.

(beat)

But how? How can we make a difference?

Take me as an example.

HARRIET

(emphatically, to herself)

Yes. Yes I will.

MR. CROFT

I serve God, every day. It is my calling.
(beat)

I think back to my time as a missionary, before
I came to Marwood.

Harriet grabs Evie's silver-rimmed spectacles, dons them, and moves them up
and down in silent appreciation. Evie giggles.

MR. CROFT (CONT'D)

I came here from a faraway land called Singapore.
A goodly land where the rivers run crystal blue
and the people are honest and humble. Once
enlightened, the natives heed His word. Do you?

Mr. Croft raises his hand to push back a blond lock that has broken free of his
cap, giving the congregation a glimpse of surprisingly strong arm muscles. For
a curate, at least.

Harriet whistles, she just can't help herself. Evie buries her head in her book.
Mrs. Loxby turns to her daughter, incensed, as everyone looks around, trying to
find the whistler. Harriet pretends to be absorbed in her Bible.

She takes a moment to think about what Mr. Croft just said.

HARRIET

(mouthing slowly to herself)

SING-a-pore... Sing-a-PORE... Sing-A-pore...

(to Evie)

What's Sing-a-pore?

EVIE

I think it's near Russia?

Evie takes back her glasses from Harriet.

HARRIET

It sounds like the perfect place for me. I deserve
a crystal blue river.

EVIE

(agreeing)

Our River Trent is muddy brown on a good day.

HARRIET

I need to see this place. With such a man, ideally.

Harriet shivers and refocuses her attention on Mr. Croft. She sits forward, resting her head in her hands.

MR. CROFT

The people of Singapore opened their hearts and homes to me. Would Marwoodians act in such a manner? I worry that we have moved away from our purpose here. We are too comfortable, too concerned with earthly distractions.

Evie nods, this seems true to her. It's the first time she's directly engaged with Mr. Croft's sermon.

MR. CROFT (CONT'D)

Most of us cannot travel to the far reaches of the Empire. But we can do our part here, at home, by embracing the less fortunate in our community. For you yourselves were strangers in a strange land.
(beat)

Love the stranger, and love yourself.

(audible only to Harriet)

And I love you, Miss Harriet Loxby. For you are my most faithful servant. Prepare yourself: You and I will go forward into eternity together.

HARRIET

Yes, a thousand times yes!

(to Evie)

FINALLY. Someone who knows what it's like to be a stranger in a strange land.

(martyr-like)

Just... like... me...

MR. CROFT

I have selected today's passage from the Book of Job. What does Job's story teach us? The Lord took Job's clothing, his home, his children. He covered his body in painful boils. Yet Job would not give up faith.

Harriet nods, entranced.

MR. CROFT (CONT'D)

"My righteousness I hold fast and will not let it go... Let mine enemy be as the wicked, and he that riseth up against me as the unrighteous."

Mr. Croft looks directly at Harriet.

MR. CROFT (CONT'D)

(audible only to Harriet)

And you, Harriet Loxby of the Marwood Loxbys: I call upon you to keep faith in me, even when tempted by the darkness, for the Kingdom of Light will prevail. Use your strength to follow where I lead—and I shall be your reward.

Harriet's mouth hangs open. This is a girl who has been waiting a long time to be The Chosen One.

MR. CROFT (CONT'D)

Let faith guide your life, just like Job. It is this kind of devotion that God seeks. As do I.

HARRIET

(dreamy)

As does he...

(beat)

It all makes sense. Who am I to quibble with God's Word?

MR. CROFT

I implore all of you to continue down Job's light-filled path. By opening our hearts to our fellow men, we shall find the Godliness in every creature on His earth. Live a life of service and humility and you will be rewarded. Not just in this life, but the next.

Mr. Croft bows his head. The sermon is over.

He turns to the stunned CHOIR (10-15 villagers), which begins an unusually stirring rendition of Marwood's favorite hymn, "Jesus is Nigh, Put the Kettle On."

Harriet smiles, with teeth.

Musical note: "Jesus is Nigh, Put the Kettle On" resembles a southern spiritual

but the choir keeps their arms hanging weakly by their sides in true Church of England fashion.

Sample lyrics:

Our Lord Jesus is nigh
He is indeed very nigh
But where is the tea?
Yes, where is that tea?

We cannot have our Savior
Going thirsty as he saves us
How could we risk it?
He's come all this way

So light the stove
Turn on the spigot
Pass the oolong leaves
and put the kettle on:

Halleluja!
Halleluja!
Halleluja!

EXT. MARWOOD CHURCH/ENTRYWAY - LATER

After the sermon, Harriet's family stands in line to be introduced to Mr. Croft.

Mr. Croft greets Mr. Loxby and they clasp hands. Mr. Croft bows slightly to Mrs. Loxby, Harriet, and Evie. Harriet has not stopped staring at Mr. Croft.

Harriet's parents engage in indistinct conversation with Mr. Croft.

Evie runs outside to join the other younger children in the churchyard. She's a little old for this but she's small for her age so it doesn't seem odd.

Harriet takes a deep breath, gathering her courage. She is 100% certain this is the beginning of the rest of her life, and she is determined to meet the challenge head-on.

HARRIET
(interrupting)

Mr. Croft, I was quite taken with your sermon.
You speak very well.

MR. CROFT
Thank you, Miss Loxby, you are kind to say so.

Harriet looks nervous enough to be in pain. But she's going for it. Must. Impress. This Man.

HARRIET
But I wonder... what might be your opinion of
Job's poor children? Particularly his daughters?

Mrs. Loxby gives Mr. Loxby a look.

HARRIET (CONT'D)
Torn so mercilessly from their father, only to be
reinstated when Job earns God's blessings. Perhaps
they deserved better? They did not ask for any of
that chicanery.

MRS. LOXBY
(laughing nervously)
Harriet, really! I think Mr. Croft knows a bit more
about the subject than you, dear. Why don't you go
find Evie—I think she got lost among the grave-
stones again.

Mrs. Loxby puts a hand on her daughter's shoulder. Harriet shrugs it off and glares at her mother.

MR. CROFT
(sensing tension)
But Mrs. Loxby, every community needs intelli-
gent and interested parishioners like your daughter.
It is what makes a curate's job so rewarding.

Harriet's whole body relaxes. He stood up for her!

MR. CROFT (CONT'D)
I agree with Miss Loxby that Job's children are
ill-used. But perhaps the end justifies the means,
in this particular situation—if I may be so bold
to suggest.

Harriet nods deeply.

MR. CROFT (CONT'D)

Job's lessons about Godly love are timeless. We would be thoroughly lost without them. I know I would be.

Harriet smiles sweetly at Mr. Croft, then turns and smirks at her mother.

The Loxbys bid Mr. Croft goodbye.

As she leaves the church behind her parents, Harriet pumps a triumphant fist into the air.

Mrs. Loxby looks worriedly at Mr. Loxby.

EXT. COUNTRY LANE - LATER

Harriet and Evie walk home from church along an overgrown country lane. Wildflowers dot the roadside.

EVIE

I think Mother and Father wanted us to take the carriage with them

HARRIET

The fresh air is much healthier. Good for thinking.

Harriet makes a dismissive motion with her hand.

HARRIET (CONT'D)

Carriages just interfere.

EVIE

They'll have more room to stretch out without us there.

Harriet isn't listening. She looks like she just won the lottery.

HARRIET

Don't you think he looks like Achilles? I think it's a very close comparison. Such a fair complexion and royal bearing.

EVIE

You mean... Mr. Croft?

HARRIET

Of course.

EVIE

I suppose...

HARRIET

And those arms!

EVIE

Well.

HARRIET

(with resolve)

I must fight for him.

EVIE

(returning to Harriet's previous comment)

I don't know what you ever saw in Achilles. You're completely misreading *The Iliad*. Hector is the better man by far. Are you up to the scene with his baby son? It's the best one.

HARRIET

To each their own, I suppose.

EVIE

You brought it up.

HARRIET

He's had such a full life, filled with adventure and danger and exotic locales.

EVIE

And Jesus.

HARRIET

(ignoring Evie)

Doesn't hearing him speak make you think there might be more to life than sitting on settees, embroidering pillows?

EVIE

I already knew that.

Evie switches her calculus workbook from one arm to the other.

HARRIET

There's work to be done, Evie, out there in the world. And if not work to be done, then at least things to see. Different things.

(beat)

This is my ticket out of here.

EVIE

(gently)

I think we've had this conversation before, Hattie.

Harriet turns to Evie, incredulous.

HARRIET

No, this is special.

Evie gives her sister a "Really?" look.

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

EXT./INT. EVIE'S TREEHOUSE - DUSK

TITLE CARD: Three Months Ago

Evie's treehouse is an impressive structure overlooking the Loxbys' backyard and pond.

Inside, math books and dog drawings are strewn about the floor. The walls are decorated with cutouts from old periodicals featuring era-appropriate mathematical and scientific achievements. And some dog drawings.

Harriet and Evie lie on colorful pillows staring at the ceiling. Harriet is mid-sentence:

HARRIET

...And I ran into him again in Percival's bookshop. And again in Mr. Herman's bakery. Almost as if he were following me?! But I was the one following him. Obviously.

Evie tears her eyes away from a dog drawing.

EVIE

Which one is this again?

Harriet reaches out and nudges Evie.

HARRIET

Frederic, Evie-kins. Frederic.

EVIE

The doctor?

HARRIET

The linguist! How could you forget?

EVIE

(contrite)

Sorry.

HARRIET

He's leaving for China in three weeks. Studying the Hakka dialect. He says it's very popular over there.

EVIE

Mmhmm.

HARRIET

Frederic is everything. This is the one. Imagine, all of China at your fingertips. The Red Dragon! We will see the world together.

Evie props herself up on one elbow.

EVIE

But Mother and Father will never let you go to China. You're needed here.

HARRIET

I can't stay here. I'm not like them.

Evie doesn't dispute this.

HARRIET (CONT'D)

I've always known I was different. Special.

EVIE

You have.

(beat)

And you are. At least I think so.

Evie reaches out to take Harriet's hand. Harriet turns to her sister, smiling. They both look up at the ceiling again.

HARRIET

(resolved)

Then to China I must go!

END FLASHBACK.

EXT. COUNTRY LANE - DAY

We return to Harriet and Evie's conversation on the way home from church.

Evie is giving Harriet the same incredulous look as before. Harriet bristles, then calmly explains.

HARRIET

It's actually very simple. That was nonsense, and this is real. It's ludicrous that you can't see the difference.

EVIE

I just want you to be happy. And not get in trouble. Again.

Harriet's face darkens. She kicks at a clump of dandelions.

EVIE (CONT'D)

(quiet)

Mother was livid when she found your note.

HARRIET

I hadn't even sent it! It was just for practice!

(calming down)

Anyway, that's all over now.

Both sisters walk in silence.

EVIE

When will you see Mr. Croft again? Next week's service?

HARRIET

It must be before that. There's no time to waste.

(beat)

He'll probably be at the Harvest festival on Saturday.

EVIE

I'll come with you.

Evie spots a colorful patch of wildflowers by the side of the lane and exclaims in joy. She stops to frolic in the flowers and picks a few.

Harriet clasps her hands together and begins to pray. She keeps looking around, not quite sure where God is located.

HARRIET

(praying)

Dear Lord, give me the strength to join this man in holy matrimony so he may take me away from this dumb village and show me the world. That is all. Sincerely, your Most Dutiful Daughter in Christ, Harriet Felicity Loxby.

Evie looks up from the wildflowers and watches Harriet pray. We can't tell what she's thinking.

A Single Lemon.

from "You Had to Be There & You Had to Be Me"

SADIA TASNIM

THE GOODMAN FUND POETRY AWARD

"You'll live," my grandmother says, to what is an obviously dying lemon tree.
Cataract-clouded eyes inspect a browning, curling, crisping leaf, barely hanging from its stem.
"Alhamdulillah," she praises, when her tiny lemon tree dies.
Eyes shining, she holds up a single lemon, a little too small and a little too green.

"You'll live," my grandmother says to me, on the first day of Ramadan.
Bleary-eyed and barely aware, I try to focus on mouthing the supplications she had taught me.
"Alhamdulillah," I said without conviction, repeating it senselessly,
counting all the rewards I would receive from the One whose praises I sang insincerely.

"I lived," she says when I ask her what happened that night.
Cataract-clouded eyes focus on a time before me, to when a storm ripped through her island.
"Alhamdulillah," she had wept; at sixteen years old she had to bury a second son.
With a fond laugh, she tells me her sons are waiting for her in the gardens above, playing.

"I lived," she says when I asked her how she dealt with the pain.
Three months, the doctor had said. Three months of using my arms to walk.
"Alhamdulillah," she told me to say, reminding me that this life is merely two days.
In the span of a lifetime, this healing would only take a few seconds.

"He died," she says to me, when I ask her why she is running.
Cataract-clouded eyes blink back unshed grief, staying strong for he who no longer needs her.
"Alhamdulillah," she manages to say, watching her brother race past her to the grave.
Tenderly, she remembers that she had never outrun him when they were kids, either.

"He...will die," I tell her, when she meets me outside the waiting room.
Another son she would have to bury, the only father I would ever have to bury.
"Alhamdulillah," I say for the both of us, knowing that there is good to come from this.
But this time I am not the only one who has a hard time finding it.

"He'll live," my grandmother says, looking away from the sickbed of her son.
Cataract-clouded eyes flit around the room, looking for anywhere to rest that isn't him.
"Alhamdulillah," she praises, when he wakes and recovers.
Eyes shining, she holds his right hand with both of hers, his skin hanging loose on his bones.

"He'll live!" I say to her, the day we arrive to bring him home.
Looking paper thin, but alive nonetheless, my father steps out of the hospital.
"Alhamdulillah," he praises, drawing us near.
Eyes shining, I hold my father, who looks a little too small and a little too lean.

"I see it in everything," my grandmother says,
as if she were picking a single gold thread from an entirely cotton fabric, she pulls
"Alhamdulillah," from her tongue and means it,
never once thinking of the reward she will receive from the One whose praises she sings.

"I wish I could see what you see," I say to her one day.
Searching the air for the hidden matrix of mercy only she seems to be able to see.
"Alhamdulillah," she says.
"That is all you need."

Note: "Alhamdulillah" is an Arabic phrase meaning "Praise be to God" or "Thank God" in some contexts; it is used mainly by Muslims but can also be used by non-Muslim people who speak Arabic. It can be used both in times of joy and times of struggle, when a person wants to find the good or find the reasoning behind a hardship and rely on God.

[51:55]

from “*You Had to Be There & You Had to Be Me*”

SADIA TASNIM

THE GOODMAN FUND POETRY AWARD

The sounds of coins ringing
as they are thrown against each other
will always remind me of the boys
that dance on moving trains
saying a smile will do, if change isn't possible.

The sound of silverware clinking
in any kitchen drawer anywhere
will always remind me of Bangladesh, of the women
that live in the worst corners of the best houses
saying let me do that for you, I am already dirty.

The sound of tires on asphalt
as the car pulls into the driveway
will always remind me of my uncles, orphaned too soon.
They made cars of mud with rocks for wheels,
saying look at mine, I'll have the real thing one day.

The sound of a hammer hitting a nail
ringing just far enough away to be imagined
will always remind me of Bangladesh, of the brown-skinned babies
that burn under the sun as their mothers break their backs breaking bricks
saying I'm doing this for you, you piece of my heart.

The sound of a million shuffling leaves like brittle cards
in the weed-scented breeze
will always remind me of afternoon prayers in the park
led by boys with too-good hearts
saying we could be doing anything else, but we chose to be here today.

The sound of long nails clicking
against a wooden desk
will always remind me of my kindergarten teacher
who asked me who I prayed to and I wavered
saying I prayed to her because that's what I thought she wanted to hear.

These sounds usher me to remembrance
like little hummingbirds whirring by my earlobes
flitting through the ghostly flora of my memory
drinking from the sweetest of them
and leaving me parched.

Note: Qur'an [51:55] is the 55th verse of the 51st chapter which translates as, “And keep reminding, because reminding benefits the believers.” The chapter is called Surah Dhariyat or “The Winnowing Winds.”

Collection: Between Us

JIA LIN CHEN

Between Us captures people's lives in New York City during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some came together, connected by difficult times, while others fell out of place. In the two years stolen away from us, the pandemic has made the best of us struggle to adapt. Whether it is the time, the love, or the people stolen away from us, it feels as if our minds have been put on pause. Yet the world beat on, and time slowly slipped away from the grasp of our fingers just like sand.



THE OTHER SIDE







The Girl with Mashed Potatoes in her Hair

KATHERINE RAMIREZ

My goodness. It's almost 6 o'clock. I have to wash the dishes and cook dinner. I have to give Lola a bath, help her with her homework and then finish my homework. Jesus, I haven't even started peeling the potatoes. It's 5:15.

I quickly stand up from my kitchen table, leaving my psychology homework to the side; *I'll finish it later*, and scurry to the sink to start peeling the potatoes. I feel my hand shivering as I nick my knuckle with the peeler. *Relax*. I take a deep breath and continue peeling the potatoes and quickly dump them inside the pot of water on the stove.

As I begin to wash the dishes, I look up at the wooden clock on the wall above my kitchen table. 5:35. *Shit*.

"Lola! Take off your clothes. It's time to take a bath."

"No! I'm watching Clifford."

"Please, Lola. You know how daddy gets when he knows you haven't had your bath when he gets home."

I finish scrubbing the last plate on the sink and dry my hands, disregarding the slight burn I have from the nick on my knuckle. I walk to the living room to see my curly-haired daughter, still in her uniform, sitting centimeters away from the television, giggling.

"Lola, please!" I grab her arm and begin unbuttoning her white blouse, smeared in chocolate milk and Crayola markers.

Starting to fill the bathtub with warm water and bubbles, I look at my silver watch on my wrist. 5:45.

"Lola, I think it's better to take a shower instead of a bubble bath today."

She looks at me with her large brown eyes and pouts her thin pink lips slightly. *Why is she doing this to me?*

"Lola, please. Just shower quickly. You know how Daddy gets."

She looks down at her naked toes and nods her head. "Okay Mommy," her soft voice whispers from underneath her disappointed breath.

"Okay honey. Scrub fast, okay? Your pajamas are on top of your bed. I'm going to the kitchen. Just yell for me if you need anything, okay?"

I hear the mahogany floor squeak and moan as I rush through the narrow hallway. I go to the kitchen and take the potatoes out of the boiling pot. I put them into the orange plastic bowl with the broccoli pictures on it that my mother gave me for Christmas. The hot steam hits my face as I look at my watch. 6:03. *Oh my God, he must be near*. Taking the masher and mashing the potatoes, I feel some hard parts in between mashes. *Fuck, they aren't fully done*. Pounding harder on the potatoes, I hope that my small hands are strong enough to make the potatoes smoother. *I hope the train got delayed today*. My palms are sweating.

Adding butter to the potatoes and some half and half, I hear keys from outside the door. My heart sinks to my stomach. I feel numbness in my head. *Dinner isn't done and Lola isn't out of the shower yet*. Before Peter fully opens the door, I quickly drop the masher in the sink and rush to the bathroom without him noticing and close the bathroom door behind me. Lola is still standing under the shower with her small naked body and soap on her face.

"Baby, Daddy is here. Let's wash that face, and run to your room, okay?"

I lean over and rub her face with my hands to take off the soap and carry her out of the shower. I take her Winnie the Pooh towel and wrap it around her body. Kissing her wet forehead, I tap her back as she goes to her room.

I stand in the bathroom for a minute with nerves rushing through my spine. I feel my breath tremble as it oozes out of my nostrils, and I stare at my brown eyes in the foggy mirror. My dark circles have gotten darker and so has the bruise on my neck. I see the white tiles on the wall with the crack from the time Peter smashed my head into it when I was pregnant. *I should really change the tiles in this bathroom*.

"Belle! Where are you?" Peter yells.

"I'm in the bathroom. Give me a minute."

I inhale the musty bathroom air into my lungs and exhale as I open the door and see Peter sitting on the black leather couch with Lola on his lap, still wet in her towel. He has a smile on his face and slightly glares at me with his hazel eyes, sending shivers down my legs.

"Hey," I mumble.

"Lola, have you done your homework yet?" he asks as he rubs his rough hands through Lola's wet curly hair.

Lola shakes her head from side to side.

"Have you eaten?"

She shakes her head again.

"Did you just get out of the shower?"

She nods her head and locks eyes with me in worry.

"It's okay," I whisper to Lola. "I'm going to finish dinner now." I walk out of the living room, to the hallway, to the kitchen, where the bowl of potatoes is no longer smoking with steam. *God help me*.

A few minutes pass and I continue mashing the potatoes. Peter walks through the kitchen door, still wearing his gray suit and blue tie.

"How was work?" I ask Peter, avoiding eye contact while continuously mashing the potatoes.

"Good."

I feel his stare piercing through me, even though I'm not looking at him.

"That's good." I grab a plate from the cabinet, put a scoop of potatoes on it and place it on the kitchen table next to my psychology books. Peter is still standing in the kitchen doorway staring straight at me. I scoop a spoonful of potatoes on Lola's plastic Winnie the Pooh plate and place it on the kitchen table. I grab my plate from the cabinet and pour a scoop of mashed potatoes on it. As

I'm walking to the kitchen table, I feel Peter's hard hands grab my arm and pull me towards him.

"Do you think it is okay to make me wait to have my dinner on the table after I've been working all day?" His sour spit touches my lips slightly.

"I'm sorry. When I came home from school, I started studying. I have an exam tomorrow." I feel the words shake out of my mouth, holding onto the pain as he grabs my arm tighter.

"Lola hasn't even started her homework."

"Please, Peter!" I cry as I try to shimmy out of his hand, "Why are you like this?"

"Because I expect you to be a wife and a good mother while I slave at work and pay for your little school."

He grabs the plate of mashed potatoes from my hand, scoops it with his fingers and slaps me in the face with it. *God, make it stop.* Pieces of potato lay on my eyelashes as tears drip down from my eyes. Peter takes another handful of mashed potatoes and rubs it in my hair, like he is roughly shampooing my scalp. I don't fight back because I know what he is capable of. I just stand, looking down at my dirty black and white Converse as he takes another handful and slaps my face again. He hits my ear in that last blow, and I feel a sudden ringing and an echo in my brain as Peter continues to yell.

He walks out of the kitchen, and I spot a shadow under the kitchen table. Lola is on her knees looking directly at me with wide eyes. *My daughter just witnessed this.* I wipe the tears off my cheeks, along with some mashed potato, and sit on the kitchen table as Lola crawls from under the table. She grabs a piece of Bounty paper towel from the counter and gently wipes my face with it. I say nothing. Looking down into my psychology book, I begin to read chapter seven for my exam tomorrow, as my daughter wipes the mashed potatoes off my hair.

Underneath every tree lies its roots

HEDAYAT REDA

Some are gnarly
Some withered
Some intertwined, like roads on a map
Some love to play
(and poke their heads out)
Some flow freely, like the water they consume

Some are deep but appear shallow
Some are shallow but appear deep
Some only have one

Some are nasty and rotting
Some are stuck
(like earth)
Some crave sunlight but know they can't have it
(it harms them)
Some still think it's their job to do more than drink
Some got lost and wandered over to another tree
(to see if there's more water there)

Some are brown with bits of green
Some are covered in grass or sand
Some have been torn up by an animal
(chewed up, devoured, and left to wilt in the sun)
Some tap dance to the sound of birds
Some are so dense you wonder how the tree gets any water

Some are selfish
(and won't share with their brothers)
Some only take one sip
Some are obsessed with their growth

Some are patient
Some consume
Some are so steady if you walk over them you feel you are being carried

The tree loves all its roots

Bamberg

HEDAYAT REDA

My mind runs on neon lights
And bright fixtures
Heavy down comforter rattles to mom
We want to go home

Tied my shoelaces too tight
This morning
Apfelstrudelchocolate slurs
Hello in my belly

Salamualaikum the Arab waiter
Heralds from
A confectionery store
Of Coffeecream.

I sleep all days
In Pink my
Headrush necksqueezes
Grey Grey Grey

Diary of
a thousand steps
I write to you
...

Ohne Kohlensäure
Bitte.

Don't Hang Up Yet

CEDAR ECKER

David, at some point, lost total control of his day. He reflected on this as he swung a broom handle at another blob of black slime, flinging it through the air when it tried to lunge at his head from the kitchen counter. Around him, the dim duplex apartment was in ruin. A whole shelf's worth of commemorative mugs from various US capitals were shattered onto the already sticky and smoke-stained carpet. The couch was torn, notebook paper and conspicuous red yarn mixed with white stuffing across the cushions and floor. In what might actually have been an improvement from the dirty dishes and coffee grounds that previously took up residence in it, the sink was now a nest of writhing black slime. And, of course, the front window was broken—but that part was from when David's jacket-wrapped fist had punched through it some ten minutes ago to unlock the door from the inside.

When David chose breaking and entering as his activity of the night, it was with the assumption that he might find something troubling. A drug overdose, maybe. Psychosis, or mild violence, or maybe even less-than-mild violence, which was why he had entered with his phone out in one hand and 911 already typed in.

What he did not expect was the slime. The slime that seeped out of the kitchen sink drain, and now was trying to eat his eyeballs with tiny, rubbery mouths.

Another blob of goo lunged, this one with a hiss like the angry possum he'd had to forcefully remove from his sister's garage a week ago. This time when he smacked it aside, the thing slammed into the wall and left a comical splatter mark on the faded damask wallpaper. The plastic devil's horns on his head slipped over his eyes, and he pushed them back up with his free hand.

Thankfully, it wasn't David's apartment.

Less thankfully, he didn't think Theodore Sargent was home.

—

Halloween afternoon at the WVHU, West Virginia's smallest talk radio station, was exactly as quiet as it always was. Kira, outside at the soundboard, was festively decked out in a bright red dress, demonic tail, heels, and a pair of out-of-place black cat ears. A series of increasingly colorful gourds and little paper ghosts decorated the top of the recording equipment. It wasn't clear who this pageantry was directed at; unless it was fire inspection day. It was only ever the five of them in the studio.

"And now to our listeners: homemade cake pops for trick or treaters, delicious treats or easy avenue for the criminal element to drug our children?" David held

in a sigh as he spoke, stopped only by the fact that Kira would glare if he made the mic fill with static. He flipped a plastic switch and tried to imagine himself at home in bed, rather than waiting to hear the opinion of a half-dozen soccer moms about the risk of someone wasting good drugs on random neighborhood kids. “WVHU, this is David Nash. Caller, you are on the air.”

A burst of noise, and an odd *beep beep* sound echoed over the line. David squeezed his eyes shut and pinched the bridge of his nose. *Nooo. Please don't.*

“Nash?” A staticky voice came over the line. David covered his face with one hand, and didn’t hold back the sigh this time. The only thing worse than a call-in from an overprotective PTA member was a call-in from—

“It’s Teddy, Teddy Sargent! Hiya Nash. Listen, about the candy—”

“About the cake pops.” David recalled tiredly.

“Right right, the, uh, pops, for trick or treaters... Well, it is about the trick or treaters, really! You see, everyone needs to hear this! There’s this factory up river—and, well, first of all, you know how in the Cold War, corn syrup...”

“Mr. Sargent.”

“...and in the 1970s a Japanese researcher developed an enzyme that—oh, I actually prefer Teddy—”

“Teddy, the cake pops. Specifically.”

“Right, right, I’m getting there! The thing is, the candy from that factory—”

A loud crash echoed over the line. David blinked and wondered if the other man had knocked over his phone. It wouldn’t be the first time.

“Ah, they’re, just a secon—”

Another crash, a strange hissing sound, and a cry of pain. David blinked again and straightened up in his seat. There was a muffled noise coming over the line that he couldn’t identify.

“Mr. Sargent? Is everything alright?”

Dial tone.

David stared into his microphone, as if it held any answers.

“...Teddy?” He asked the silent studio. He looked behind him, to Kira at the soundboard. She looked back and blinked, then shrugged at him. David looked at his own panel of dials and switches, hesitating. He took a deep breath and pulled back out his radio-voice.

“A bit of excitement for Halloween, then. Alright listeners, let’s break for some seasonally appropriate tunes and when we return we’ll discuss the zoning of the new theater parking lot—many community members say, isn’t it too close to The Country’s Best Yogurt?”

He reached down and quickly switched them over to music, wincing as *Monster Mash* started to play through his headphones. When he stood to head out of the studio, Kira was already waiting curiously by the door.

“Decided to change up the program, Nash?” She asked when he pushed out through the glass door. He frowned.

“Didn’t that call from Theodore Sargent sound off to you?”

She wrinkled her nose. “You mean him wrestling with his corded phone? Honestly, it didn’t phase me. Also ‘Theodore’? Who are you, his dad?”

David shook his head. “It sounded like something was going on.”

She shrugged and shot him a sympathetic look.

“David... you know he’s kind of... off. In the head?” She pointed at her own forehead in emphasis. “Teddy Sargent is a nuisance to every publication in Point Pleasant. He sent UFO and BigFoot photos to the *Pleasant Day* a month ago, he’s called in *at least* weekly to our station because you always let him go on and on, and every once in a while I see him standing around City Hall holding up a sign about JFK or the ‘hollow earth,’ whatever that means.”

David rubbed at his forehead. “I know, but that’s *why* I think we should be nervous. He could hurt himself.” He scowled. “And I don’t *let* him do anything. I’m *polite*.”

Kira crossed her arms. “You do! That’s why he calls so much you know. Anyone else would hang up on him or block his number, but you always let him talk.”

David shrugged, feeling tired. “It’s not like there’s anything more exciting going on. Last week we had three separate segments about winter pool-care. I don’t even know who in town *has* a pool.”

He heard Kira sigh, and when he looked back at her she had a look on her face that was hard to read. One part exasperated, one part pensive. She reached under a large decorative gourd and produced a pair of plastic devil horns, presumably the ones replaced by cat ears for her own costume. She smiled and dropped them on David’s head, ignoring his glare.

“Cheer up, worry-wort. If you’re that freaked out, why don’t you call the police or the fire department to check up on him.”

David sighed and nodded. “Yeah. I’ll try that.”

—

An hour later, David slammed the office phone back down onto its receiver.

Both fire department and precinct had been unimpressed with any call concerning their local tin-hatter. Apparently, Sargent had himself called a dozen times that morning trying to tell them that they needed to use the fire-hoses to wash everyone’s halloween candy into the river. David had been none-too-gently informed that he could come back if he had real proof that the lunatic was in any sort of danger, and they wouldn’t be wasting any more time on him a moment sooner.

Assholes.

David didn’t particularly like Sargent. He wouldn’t say he knew the man well outside of whatever he had to say week-by-week about Area 51 or Mothman. But his gut was telling him something was wrong. He wasn’t a man who was particularly in touch with what his gut had to say most of the time, so he figured this had to be pretty big to set off those alarm bells.

Kira was in the booth with Jake on sound, moving to the next phase of their

programming. David looked them over, then scanned his own desk thoughtfully.

Well. No help from the police, that was fine. He didn't have a degree in journalism from Three Rivers Community College for nothing. It was time to do a little investigating.

Under his desk, left by some hopeful previous host, David dug out an old and slightly rotting copy of the Yellow Pages. A distinctive name, easy-to-find phone number, and ancient landline made finding the address all too easy.

David wrote himself directions on a pad of paper, tore it out, and put on his coat. If the police were out, he would just have to pay Sargent a visit. Just to make sure everything really was okay.

—

Yeah. David thought. *Okay.*

This was definitely *not* okay.

No injured man in the grips of some sort of paranoid psychosis, at least. No man at all, likely on either side of the house since no neighbors had come running.

The slime seemed to be expanding out of the sink and onto the counters. David stood still for a few seconds, just watching it seep over the linoleum in black droplets. It looked like particularly vicious black paint, until the moment the whole mess shuddered and another blob of it came apart and began moving independently.

Then the blob jumped at him again, and David decided to stop gaping like a sorority girl about to be killed off in a bad horror movie. He deflected it once again with his broom, but this time the—substance? Creature? Whatever the hell it was—*thing*—didn't break apart from the impact. It bounced off the counter and back into motion, and David decided that discretion really was the better part of valor. He turned to beat a hasty retreat and, too late, felt something slam into his back.

A cold, goopy rush ran over his spine, abruptly stealing the breath from his lungs. He tried to reach the broom around and over his back but didn't get there in time before sharp pain burst on the back of his neck, over his left shoulder.

"Mother f—" The thing bit him! With its horrible slime mouth!

He started to flip himself over on the ground before the goo creature could get its proverbial chompers back in but was cut off by the abrupt sound of a door slamming open. That was all the warning David got before he was suddenly being doused in a stream of pressurized water.

Having a slime monster blasted off his back with a hose was not in the list of top 10 sensations David would have liked to experience in his life. Unfortunately, it seemed like this was to be his lot. In the doorway to the duplex stood, at last, Teddy Sargent. Teddy Sargent who was holding a garden hose with an industrial-looking nozzle attached to the end. The goo creature went flying and David coughed, sputtering under the sudden rush of water.

"What—" David managed, "—the actual hell?"

Teddy stumbled into the room, still dragging the hose and drenching his own

floor. He was, as usual, dressed in a mish-mash of formality and eclectic disaster. His shoes were oversized sneakers, his pants pinstripe slacks, his shirt once maybe a crisp white but now yellowed with age and use, complemented by some sort of Halloween-themed necktie. It was strange for David to see his face in person. The last time he'd seen anything of the man besides a voice on the other side of the radio call-phone was when they'd run into each other at the grocery store. Teddy had said: "Hey, Nash! So-o, peanut butter huh?" and then skittered away when David looked at him for a moment too long.

Just like he had been in the Piggly-Wiggly, David was struck by how boyish Teddy looked. Clean shaven, moppy hair a bit lighter than David's own tucked under an old newsboy cap. His wide-blown blue eyes made him look slightly manic, intense enough to make David feel pinned when their gazes met. He shook off the thought, because now was *not* the time.

"Nash!" Teddy cried. "You came!"

He kept the hose spraying on high power, and pointed it at the kitchen sink. The remaining goo hissed and spat, tried to rise and perhaps attack, and then was finally pushed back by the jet. Sargent didn't let up for a minute, but when he seemed satisfied that the goo wasn't going to re-surge he stopped the stream of water and turned back to David.

Sargent approached and reached down, hauling him up to his feet with surprising strength. Apparently, he wasn't as twiggy as his baggy clothing made him look. David re-oriented himself to his new vertical world, then zeroed in on traces of the slime-monster conglomeration still in the sink.

"What the *hell* is happening here?" he asked, relieved to finally have someone to ask loud and incredulous questions to in this situation. He was sorely in need of both answers and an outlet.

"Halloween candy!" Sargent cried, absolutely, undeservedly enthusiastic. "I was trying to tell you! That factory in the next town over, local supply—it's all like this, and it's gonna be happening around town soon enough!"

David stared at him. "Are you on drugs?" he asked, voice high. Then, after a pause. "Am I on drugs?!"

Teddy laughed, and David felt deep offense join the mixture of fear and disbelief churning in his stomach. Biting slime was not a laughing matter.

"No, I told you!" Teddy said insistently. "I think it's the corn syrup! New manufacturer, new import, y'know?"

David did not know. Teddy patted him on the arm.

"Come on. Let's walk and talk. I have some ideas for how to get rid of all these, but the fire department won't let me use any of their hoses..."

Teddy started to dart around his apartment, grabbing papers and throwing around random items, like shoes and what David was pretty sure was the beginning stages of a molotov cocktail.

"I'm sure you've noticed, but these things seem both drawn to water and easily hurt by it. It makes sense if they really are related to corn syrup, right? Too little water and they'll dry out, too much and they'll dissolve! I knew there was

something off, especially listening to what you were saying on the radio, about trick-or-treaters? It didn't get really crazy till it had that extra water, but I think we can probably get them back out the same way..."

David stared at him. He looked around the ruined apartment. The floor was soaked and any semblance of style or decoration the place might have once had was completely wrecked by slime and hosing, but David didn't see any more of the black goo. Whatever Sargent had done was apparently effective. If it wasn't for the pain in his shoulder, now almost grounding, David would think it really was a hallucination. He sat down in a chair at the kitchen table, legs feeling like jelly. He tried to think hard, to put all the pieces together. He opened his mouth to ask some sort of intelligent question about what the plan was to deal with all of this. What came out instead was:

"Does that mean it's all real? The UFOs and Bigfeet and the...the American banks controlled by Lizard Men?"

Teddy looked up from where he was gathering red yarn from the floor. In one hand, he was holding what looked like a *Star Trek: First Contact* movie poster. He frowned.

"Actually, I'm pretty sure that last one is just an antisemitic stereotype."

David was going to lose it. His voice raised to a high pitch he had not previously thought himself capable of.

"That is not the point!"

Teddy paused, then came over to the kitchen to drop a handful of broken ceramic mug shards in the trash. When he looked up at David, his expression was uncharacteristically somber.

He came over to the table where David was sitting and removed his hat, started to set it down on the table.

David pointed at it, eyes frantic.

"If there is tin foil anywhere on that thing I am going to freak out right now, so help me God."

Teddy blinked. Sheepishly, he took the hat off the table and put it back on.

"Ahaha, yes, nothing to see here. *Anyways*, It's like I've been telling you all along! Well, not all of it, but this! This specifically!" He gestured to the destroyed kitchen and living room. "We have to get the candy away from the rest of the town, before someone else puts it in water and gets attacked."

David leaned forward and put his face in his hands, wondering if he could muffle a scream. "Why can't we call the *police*?"

"It's Halloween night! Who's gonna believe two guys who tell them that the candy is haunted on Halloween, when they're already getting about a thousand prank calls and 'drunk and disorderly' warnings for teenagers. Besides, I tried earlier, and they were not into it."

David sucked in a deep breath. He looked up at the man in front of him who he was *really* hoping was not wearing a real tin hat.

"Okay, so we— what? Steal a fire truck to wash all the candy away?"

Teddy grinned, wild and amused.

"That's as good a start as any! Let's go."

David groaned, loudly, and then stood. He gave Teddy a critical once over.

"God, I guess I should at least come along to make sure you don't kill anyone." He sighed.

Teddy whooped. "That's the Halloween spirit, Nash! Let's go kill some evil candy."

—

Later, the two of them laid on the banks of the river, damp grass cool under their backs and the dark sky speckled with stars spanning above. David dropped there, laughing and pulled Teddy down with him, arms coated in watery black goo and heart pounding with adrenaline.

"That's—that's one way to spend a holiday!" He gasped, and next to him Teddy snickered.

In the distance, David could hear sirens. Someone was hopefully picking up the fire truck where they left it closer to town. Here and now there was just the buzz of frogs and dragonflies, the last shrieks of slime monsters dissolving in the water, and both of them breathing hard. Teddy knocked his elbow against David's, and David swatted at him out of instinct. Their eyes met in the dark, and Teddy laughed again.

"Still a non-believer?"

David breathed out. "I guess I'm kind of an idiot if I don't believe it now. That was *a lot*— just a lot, you know." He paused. "I'll need more proof for the aliens and Mothman though."

"Hey, Mothman is a West Virginia classic! Our native son!"

"We'll see."

Teddy quieted and looked back up at the sky. They laid in silence for another moment, before he spoke again.

"Hey, Nash?"

"Hm?"

"Why did you come? If you didn't believe me about the candy, why show up at all?"

David felt Teddy turn to look at him again, but he stayed looking up at the stars. He thought about just not answering again, or deflecting like he had at the station with Kira. There was something about grand larceny and the fighting of strange monsters that made you want to be honest, though.

"Someone should, you know?" he said. Teddy made an inquisitive sound.

"Everyone should have someone show up for them. I've needed that before— needed someone to just show up no matter how crazy you sound. I had my sister then, and maybe it wasn't *slime monsters* or whatever, but I still needed help. And it didn't seem like you had anyone else. So I came."

Teddy was silent for a long minute. David breathed in the autumn air and ignored the cold of the wind and the water on his clothes.

"Thanks," Teddy finally said.

“No problem. Besides, I’ve been in Point Pleasant my whole life and I plan to stay here. Work. Report on local missing cats for the next 50 years. Monsters and aliens and all that, that’s a lot more exciting.”

Teddy laughed and rolled over. “Hey, stick with me and I’ll find even more excitement than cursed corn syrup. Have you heard of the Loveland Frogmen? Because—”

Definitely more interesting, David thought. He pulled up his arms to fold behind his head and settled in to stay on the grassy bank for a while longer, listening to Teddy ramble and the sirens fade away.

Admitting the Ocean

CORINNE H. SHEARER

her fingers, like dancers, tumble
into the clean yarn
content to repeat
soft, springing
popcorn stitches,
the way they must drop the loop
but trust the hook can reel it back

my grandmother shakes her head,
she lifts the patchwork net
each time is the last time;
she cannot mend what refuses
her

in the afternoon
we watch the light
pressing its face to the window,
wandering away

the last thing I want is to speak
the obvious:
this current is strong
and moving away—
even so, I cannot name it;
to do this would be to admit
the ocean

capsized, her shoulders buoy
to the surface again,
again, terrible
resignation, then without fanfare:
floating

I watch from the shore
until the water touches
only then
will I swim

Common Tongue

CORINNE H. SHEARER

late basil speaks in pepper
the language of time lost

common tongue to the cicadas' swell
dry hymns that wreath the air in August

I tell myself first frost is a habit
that even mint can be beaten into expression

the soil will intimate flowers by May
intuitive as a mother tongue

there are many ways to fall
each begs definition

it is natural to look upwards for explanation
not at the awkward bird with crumpled feathers

and spilled jewels which disturb
the dirt where I mark circles

dragging a stick behind me
so I remember where Spring should go

La Rancha de Frutas

MANNY MINAYA

A rooster summons the slaps of chancletas,
spoons clink the insides of ceramic mugs—
un trabajador en motocicleta.

Empanadas de queso sweat oil
pop like the motorcycle on the eighth kick—
a rooster summons the slaps of chancletas.

Tio left the house, shirt sin plancha',
the Caribbean heat straightens it before lunch—
un trabajador en motocicleta.

Primo sells water by the botella
overnight, he pumps gas until morning—
a rooster summons the slaps of chancletas.

Unpicked avocados blacken la loma
six feet below the swinging hammock—
un trabajador en motocicleta.

At Rancha la Fruta, we sing Cuatro Cuarenta
under a passing rain. Though only for a bit—
a rooster summons the slaps of chancletas;
un trabajador en motocicleta.

Cooking Rice

MANNY MINAYA

I learned how to cook rice
without pressure,
under mami's vigilant eyes,
water and oil burn together.
My hands understand
rice takes about as long
as a Pokémon episode
and constant questions
of when it'll be done,
I'm hungry,
and mami yells from the kitchen,
!La comida casi esta;
but both A/C's on full blast
drown her words.
Is it even rice
if the bottom does not crisp?
Is it concón if the oil and water
do not bond?
Almost. Almost.
To forget is to burn
a dish to perfection.

Eat yo Veggies

MANNY MINAYA

Visited by mami's
mangu encellobado y salchichón
every morning, her Tres Golpes
beat me into the toilet bowl before school.

Fish bones hooked into the gums
of cousin Pucho. The fish's dead eye
winked, its gaping mouth smirked.

Billy the Goat bleated and bled
over the birch tree outside the ranch,
grasped the edges of the heated
cauldron with his hooves.

My boss said I can take home
the 34 left-over veggie wraps
after the staff meeting.

I cracked an oyster
and found no pearls
but a string of reasons
to try my luck beyond the sea.

Popeye the Sailor's diet packed
a bigger punch than Popeye's
3-piece tender combo.

Three days out
from Thanksgiving.
They called me crazy to do it so close.
I'm grateful for less groggy days.

Tofu tastes just about the same
with proper seasoning,
though I wonder:
do my plants cower when I eat my vegetables?

For a Sickle Shielded

MANNY MINAYA

With wild time and the gadding flesh over-sojourned,
 hotel rooms across the road
 dare to visit the family function.
 There is a cousin, there is a daughter,
 both illegitimate,
 200 count thread sheets borne,
 pushed against bare backs.
 Grunts of pleasure pushed past
 the bedpost into a mausoleum.
 The casket carried by a cuckolded neighbor.

Hotel rooms next to the family cemetery,
 with wild thyme overgrown on a plaque.
 Whispered goodbyes drowned by salsa
 from the hotel lobby, a dirge underscore
 we dance to, drink, debate
 if Fulano is ours. We figured yes, Fulano is ours.

Fulano, arms chiseled cacao trunks,
 sweet like cacao seeds;
 planted not in hotel rooms
 but on acres tended by thee.
 With wild weeds and gadding boots wandered,
 tended land like loved tender women.
 Sickled time caught up to the minute secrecies
 hidden in the hotel rooms across the road.

Hidden at the rear of the land, a hut,
 erected to hide the shame,
 near a gadding river rich with crabs.
Tio took solace here,
 and the rest of the family
 a shield at the land's entrance.
 Across the hotel rooms,
 weeds pulled out and scrutinized.

With love, Tio, for the land worked to the dirt.
 With wild times and the gadding boots soiled.

Las Delicias

LIBRADA MONTERO HANLEY

Farmacia Las Flores sells Kola Real,
 Faces the neon-green sign, overflowing Picapollon.
 Miguelo's famous Tostones Con Chicharrón,
 Taste the best with Brugal. Mariela's serving Locrio de Arenque,
 Has long forgotten about the fish bone stuck in my throat,
 From the first time I ate Yaniqueque.
 Tia Yaque bought me Dulce de Leche;
Pa' que te lo lleve a Nueva Yol.

In Queens I found the Chicken Lollipop,
 My brother's imitation DominicanLop,
 Stays in the barracks. *Stick with the Tres Leches next time.*
 Salty Arroz Con Huevo burns my cut lips,
 I swallow Chile Picante Con Presidente.

Rosalía's Pastelitos falls inside de Coquito,
 Luana's red lipstick prints on the borders of the Pão de Queijo.
 Teresa passed Taco-Bell in her Impala, *Los de México son mejores.*

Roger asked me for ten bucks for Burger King,
 Dique porque, *He doesn't like la comida que cocinan aquí.*

The Seashell Collective

MORGAN SANGUEDOLCE

At the Housing Works on West 96th street, I found an orange trinket dish shaped like a sunflower and immediately knew the perfect thing to fill it with: a handful of seashells. The images of shells surrounded by the radiant bloom of petals stitched together perfectly in my mind. I had a fresh assortment that I'd collected while on vacation in Myrtle Beach. My mother had laughed at the sight of me walking back to our shared spot in the sand with shells literally spilling out of my hands and pockets. How many seashells does one need?

I admit, my collection is rather expansive. I would even dare to call it impressive.

You'll find many in my home—painted, turned over holding jewelry and bobby pins, strung up on wire as a garland, or hanging from my window catching sunlight, displayed on my altar or on my bookshelf. Surf clams are the most common in my personal trove, but if they have a small hole from a hungry moon snail, I always take it home to gloss and string up or hook onto an earring. I wear them like protective talismans. I gift them to friends. I haven't thought about selling them.

My hoard is priceless, evidence of a lifetime of hours spent joyfully at the beach. But, if you can believe it, what I have to show is only a fraction of my full collection. I don't believe the full accrual would fit in my house.

Many are back in the ocean, taken by the waves like hands snaking out of the surf to snatch what I found and humbly return. Even more I'm sure are in trash dumps waiting to outlive all the plastic and sink back to the ground, through the Earth, to be fossilized maybe—those are from my younger years. I would fill my Princess Ariel bag with them, take them back to my family's beach house to wash them clean of sand grains, and leave them on the sunny windowsill to dry.

Some don't understand the innate need to continue a childhood endeavor, but I enjoy being a seashell collector as an adult. My collection has not only grown but remains seen, cherished, defended. It's an endless satisfaction, continuous gratification. Over the years, I've gotten quite good at finding them. The key is low tide.

As the sun sets and families pack their belongings, fold their umbrellas, flip flop through the sand back to their homes or their rentals or their cars, as couples walk hand in hand along the lowering tide, as lifeguards tip over their chairs, I walk with my head lowered, scanning the sand, filling my pockets, then my bikini top, and then my hands until I can carry no more, not even a teensy coquina clam.

I still get excited when I find a really nice one. A scallop or any sort of cockle or ark—ponderous, transverse, blood—with lots of ridges and ribs, knobbed

whelk with their spiral crowns, coquinas with a splattering of colors, or entirely one color, abalones, mudsnails, cross-hatched lucines, Eastern augers, Atlantic razors, jingle shells, shark eyes, oysters. They all possess an old, earthly beauty. Some say we're made of the same stuff of stars, but I think I'm made of the same stuff of shells. Hard substrate, buried in the mud for thousands of years until we break through the surface and, finally, bask in the sunlight.

We're all seeking that warmth in our own ways.

Why, as an adult, am I so insistent on continuing this hobby? Why do I fill my trinket dishes with shells instead of coins? Of what value are they, anyway? The value doesn't lie in the shell. It never did. The value, for me, has always been in seeking the shell. Like the shell protects the mushy creature cooped up inside, I must protect that inner child's desire to seek joy, to find fulfillment. I spend all my minutes, hours, days I have in service to her, that child cooped up inside.

There is no other pastime where I feel utterly myself, totally at peace with my own company, or the company of others, comfortable—rather than embarrassed—to get excited when I spot something shiny or pretty or colorful on the ground.

I know I'm one of few adults among dozens of children also seeking the same treasures. In my mind, we're in this together. Members of a collective. I can't lie and claim I don't feel a little jealous when a child finds a *really* nice shell before I get to it. But washing over that jealousy is a wave of pride, second-hand excitement. It could be their first find or their tenth or their hundredth. It's always exciting. Their delight is palpable as they turn to their parent to show off the finding, but to most adults, of course, a shell is just a shell. Nothing special.

I've seen this play out as many times as I've turned a shell over in the sand. It could be amusing for its predictability, if I didn't feel such sympathy. Only a few seconds will pass before I've moved on, but I hear the bits and piece them together, knowing how it goes.

A child finds a seashell. A tale as old as time. It always starts there.

The child is like me. They worship the ocean, wear their swimsuit like a uniform and crave to not only play or walk or swim but do everything the sand and water have to offer. And the sand and water have so much to offer.

They find the shell by digging for it. They're really getting their tiny hands dirty, their short arms wet and mucked up all the way past the elbows. The plastic shovel their parents bought for them along with a playset lies discarded on the dry sand.

They dig close to the waterline, a good spot to work, and directly in my walking path. It's not so close that the hole gets filled up every time the water ripples in, but close enough that the sand is wet and easy to mold. I used to take that wet sand and dribble it over itself in heaps to make a weirdly shaped castle with uneven spikes and towers. The child builds a castle of their own. There isn't a moat, but rather a large abyss at the center of a small kingdom where a great merciless ruler might dump their enemies to drown. A bottomless pit.

It takes a while to dig a bottomless pit, and the child fears this one endeavor

will swallow their entire day. I remember that feeling, like I was racing against the day to do everything I possibly could before the sun set.

Deep down, something ragged sticks out of the side of the pit. The child pulls it out, glad to have spotted the object lest they accidentally scrape their arm. Out from deep in the wet sand their hand pulls a shell.

Immediately, the shell has to be soaked. The child runs down to the water, buries the shell under the oncoming wave, bracing against the push of the tide. Their thumbs glide over the surface, getting all the grains off the shell's surface to reveal its face.

As they lift it out of the water, the child's eyes are bright, huge saucers like full moons, taking in the most beautiful, fully rounded, unbroken, vibrant orange cockle shell the child has ever seen in their young life. Perfectly spaced ridges curve up meeting at a thick swirl at its rounded point. The underside is creamy white like a whale's underbelly.

A miracle of an object, an impossible find. The child thinks there couldn't be any other shell in the world like it, which is true. Seashells are summer's snowflakes in that way. Instead of falling down from the sky, fluttering to be caught, they come up from the earth to be found. Gifts from the sea itself, small evidence of life older than any of us, promises of life remaining.

Do seashells even come in shades like this? The child wonders. So do I, every time. Like the sky seconds before dusk, like the residue on your fingers after enjoying a bag of cheese puffs, like the rust on that old truck off the side of the road forever for sale. It seems like the most improbable thing, like nature decided to shake things up and show off her skills in the making of this shell.

The child, grinning ear to ear, runs up to the circle of chairs where their family is seated for the day. I nod to the other adults in passing, just to be courteous and friendly, smiling as the child runs across my path.

"Look! Look at what I found!" Small hands outstretch towards the circle of parents, displaying the shell like a priest offering the Eucharist. A blessing.

The child's parent turns their head, but wearing sunglasses, it's unclear if their eyes can even see the shell, if they are taking in the beauty. "Very pretty, honey." Parents always say these words. The tone differs.

"I'm going to take it home and wash it and keep it by my bedside," the child declares. I've said these exact words myself. It's as instinctual as climbing a tree or looking out the window of a moving car.

The child wants to wake up every morning and have this shell be the first thing they see. They want to introduce the briny seashore environment to their daily living space. The child feels like this small difference in decor will forever change their life.

"You're not taking it home," says the parent. I've heard this too many times. I wish I'd stop hearing it.

It's baffling. Confusion wracks the child's head, their heart. They didn't ask permission, didn't think they needed to.

"Why?" The child dares. They want the shell that badly.

The parent looks disgruntled. "Because it's dirty."

"But—"

And then the parent says something so outrageous to the child that they don't know how to argue against it. The parent, in a tone that seems defeated, as if the child might be happy with this proposition, says, "I'll just *buy* you a seashell."

Buy a seashell? This statement always perplexes me, but it perplexes the child more. What a strange thing to spend money on. Like purchasing river stones, or rain, or leaves from a tree, crisp in autumn or brightest green in summer, the price going up or down depending on the season. And what would that price be? The child doesn't have much of a grasp on monetary value, and honestly I still don't either. Adults suggest they can purchase a seashell with such flippancy, like it's an easy thing. The only burden is in carrying out the transaction to satiate the child's want, rather than any worry on the wallet. What is a seashell worth? A dollar? Five? Ten? A hundred? All of those arbitrary numbers seem at the same time too much and far too little.

The child decides it's worth arguing. "I don't want to buy a seashell. I already found one. I want to keep this one." It's a good argument. How could a dry, potentially fake, plastic, manufactured seashell, bought from a store and origins unknown, compare to one personally discovered, freshly plucked from the sand?

No matter how well crafted the child's argument is though, the parent is a parent and the child is a child. What could a child accomplish by chucking meager words against something as all-powerful as parental authority? The parent gives the child the *look* and dons a tone of voice that is familiar and threatening.

"You're not taking that thing home and that's final so *drop* it," and so the child drops it. They do not throw the seashell back into the ocean or back into the bottomless pit they'd dug with their own two hands. The child drops the seashell right where they stand, and the seashell lands orange side up, bright against the beige, between the child's bare muddy feet. I walk on.

The sun yawns behind the skyline. Teenagers roll up their towels. Families pack up their chairs and lower their umbrellas, bring toys and sandals to the water one last time to rinse clean before marching through the sand back to their rental homes or hot cars. The child follows the procession, mourning the loss of such a grand discovery. The fact that they found it at all was akin to magic in the child's mind. But despite the disappointing turn of events, orange will be their new favorite color from here on out. They'll return to the beach, maybe tomorrow or next year or in ten years, and something shiny or colorful will catch their eye again.

The families all leave for the day and I continue walking, relieved to have an open empty beach free to roam during sunset. Shells spill out of my pockets, fill my hands. I occasionally toss one back into the water like it's a coin flipped into a fountain in exchange for a wish. My wish is that another collector will find it in the morning.

In all honesty, the shells I've collected over the years are too many for one person to own. I can't keep them all. Some are back in the ocean, many in trash

dumps, but most, and I would say the large majority of my collection, are dropped.

They are dropped here and there, during my long walks on the beach where, scattered up and down the shore, I have come across many colorful plastic buckets, sinkholes, castles. The castle builders never look up. Their heads are down, hands at work, eyes intent and focused. And somewhere in the small kingdoms, there nearly always lies a small pile of shells, usually small or broken ones.

I reserve the finest of my findings for topping off these smaller collections. I do try to be discreet, of course. I usually drop it somewhere just near the edge of the castle borders. Or sometimes I like to drop it right on top of their pile, so it seems like some sea fairy magically appeared and placed it there while they weren't looking. When the kingdom's ruler notices, if I'm still in range to catch it, their excitement pulses in the air thick and potent as the salted wind.

It's a trade, a balance. Take a shell, give a shell. Don't take too many, and always check for inhabitants before separating a creature from its environment. The whole ones are pretty, but rare. Most are already broken, but the broken ones are interesting in their own right. If a broken shell in the sand has a sharp point sticking up, turn it over to save someone's foot. These are rules that are just understood.

It's not a business of monetary value, until one thinks of some way to transform the shell, making it even more unique than it already was, infused with the collector's creativity. But at its most natural, original form, the value can't be quantified.

As a child, it's easier to discover things, to experiment, to create. That's what children are supposed to do. But adults are supposed to work, not discover, to profit, not experiment, to produce, not create. Adults are supposed to know, not wonder. But I'm learning, as many other adults are too, that time spent productively can take many forms. True value lives in the sting of sunshine raw on your back, sand wedged deep under your fingernails, the slow trek along the coast, the satisfaction of a good find, seeing other collectors at work.

I drop one of my findings in a pool of water at the edge of a sand kingdom, knowing that the ruler will spot the bright orange pop of color. I hope they get to keep it, that it'll sit on their bedside dresser and spark a little wonder every day. And in turn, they keep up the search.

Neighborhood Children at the Water Hydrant

MELISA JN. PIERRE

Sidewalk

Always on our good side

goads us to fall

hydrated

in love

Where we live

wet and drenched

the slap of a little girl's feet

gaily flying in style, a butterfly dance

escaping easily

her little brother's attempt to hose her

down with his laughter and hydrant water and palms

open-handed

the sneaky trickery of sibling love in summer

Sidewalk and water calling in unison

open season on tomorrow's fallen angels

who dare all things

alive

that any day

above

cold ground without the undertaker policing

the first and last shovel-ful of dirt

is

a neighborhood spewing promise

let the water

run

let the water

walk

from sidewalk to pavement

to park bench and hopscotch and skipping rope and foolish giggles

for tomorrow

maybe

the undercurrent of hydrant water running still

forcing an unintended meeting place

where Jamaica Bay assaults the Atlantic ocean

is

the neighborhood forcing forgiveness from our lips!

Contributors

MARVENA BHAGRATEE is currently a student at City College majoring in childhood education and English. Originally from the countryside of Berbice, Guyana, she moved to NYC when she was in the 4th grade. She is passionate about children, photography, antiques, exploring, and her family. She plans to graduate from City College in spring 2022 and hopes to pursue a career in teaching.

SHANKAR BISESSAR is currently a junior at The City College of New York as an English major. He is a volunteer within his community and an avid runner that enjoys exploring. Bisessar is also a native New Yorker whose work often stems from observations of the city's atmosphere. He strives to amplify his voice through writing.

ADAM BUBROW is an adjunct lecturer in the English department at CCNY. He is also an alumnus of the department's Master of Arts in Language & Literacy program.

NINA CAPILLE OPPENHEIM lives in New York City. She is the director of cultural programming at the Stella Adler Studio and is an MFA candidate in CUNY City College's creative writing/fiction program.

JIA LIN CHEN is a recent graduate of The City College of New York. She majored in English with a concentration in literature and a minor in art. She moved to New York City with her family when she was five years old and discovered her passion for photography during high school after joining the photography club at her school. During her college career at City College, she took two black and white film photography courses with Professor Randy Matusow and fell in love with the feeling of having a film camera in her hands and going around the city to explore places in this familiar yet strange city, discovering a new love for the city of New York.

CARLA M. CHERRY is a native New Yorker and veteran English teacher who will complete her MFA in Creative Writing at The City College of New York in spring 2022. Her poetry has appeared in publications such as *Random Sample Review*, *MemoryHouse*, *Bop Dead City*, *Anti-Heroine Chic*, *433*, and *The Racket*. She has written five books of poetry: *Gnat Feathers and Butterfly Wings*, *Thirty*

Dollars and a Bowl of Soup, *Honeysuckle Me*, *These Pearls Are Real*, and *Stardust and Skin* (iiPublishing). She is an avid Chicago-style stepper, a vegan, and looks forward to traveling the world.

LILY CHOI is currently an English major in a friend group full of STEM majors. While her friends are out being smart and learning important, world-changing things, she enjoys avoiding sunlight and watching the same YouTube videos she's seen a hundred times. Her current toxic trait is saying she'll write every day, and (spoiler), she doesn't.

PHILIP F. CLARK is the author of *The Carnival of Affection*, [Sibling Rivalry Press, 2017]. He is an adjunct assistant professor at The City College of New York where he received his MFA in Creative Writing in 2016 and has been teaching since 2015. He is also the poetry editor of *A&U Magazine*. His poetry and writing have been recently published by *Tampa Review*, *Tiferet Journal*, and *The Marsh Hawk Press*, among other publications. He was a guest poet for the Emily Dickinson Museum's 2021 Phosphorescence Poetry Reading Series. He teaches poetry workshops at The Hudson Valley Writers Center and is completing his second collection of poetry.

KATELYN ROSE CONROY is a writer from Long Island, New York, who currently resides in New York City. She recently completed her MFA from CUNY City College. She has been published in *The Bridge*: Bluffton University Literary Magazine and *Manhattan Magazine*. She has won the Doris Lippman Prize in Creative Writing and received an honorable mention for the Nyman Family Project Award for her short stories.

LIANA DEMASI is a queer writer and MFA fiction student at CCNY. They're passionate about film, literature, long walks through Greenwood Cemetery, and their dog, Kid. She plans to graduate in the fall of 2023, after which she hopes to teach and continue writing.

CEDAR ECKER is a creative writer and multimedia artist. Raised in Chattanooga, TN, she is currently attending CCNY for creative writing and film and hopes to pursue a career as a scriptwriter for comics and animation. Her art and writing aim to provoke the wonder, curiosity, and desire for closeness with those around us that often fall away at the advent of adulthood. In her off time, she can be found on a farm in rural Connecticut playing with her dog Willow and running Dungeons and Dragons games for her friends.

BERYL FRISHTICK is a Vermont-bred writer, editor, and pickle fanatic pursuing

an MFA in creative writing through the City College of New York. She currently lives in Venice, Italy.

JOSEPH HELMREICH received his MFA from City College in 2022. He is the author of the science fiction novel *The Return* (St. Martin's Press, 2017), as well as *Warring Parents*, *Wounded Children*, and the *Wretched World of Child Custody* (Praeger, 2007). He currently teaches creative writing at Pace University.

MELISA JN. PIERRE is currently a graduate student in The City College of New York's MFA in Creative Writing program. Willing to write in the context of what she calls her Caribbean and American "clay & glasshouses enterprise," she enjoys an unceasing comfort for the quiet intrusion of poetry's disruptions on life. Her poetry is a reminder that grace finds work where unique opportunities go unnoticed, so go put grace to work! A tea lover with never enough mugs, Melisa's journey continues in its unfolding.

AMINATA KANDE is a current sophomore at City College majoring in sociology. She is a writer and poet based in the Bronx, New York. She identifies as Muslim, black, and West African, which serves as an inspiration for some of her work. A lover of art amongst writing, she hopes to further pursue her creative side while working towards a career in social work.

PAMELA LASKIN is a lecturer at The City College of New York where she directs The Poetry Outreach Center. She is the published author of five books of poetry and three young adult novels, *THE LOST LANGUAGE OF CRAZY* (Atmosphere Press, 2021) is the most recent. She is the winner of the 2018 Leapfrog International Fiction contest for her book, *Why No Goodbye?* published in 2019.

LEXI J. LEE is a NY-based writer, lawyer, and recent City College MFA (creative writing) graduate. Her fiction has appeared in *Apricity Magazine*, *Writer's Digest*, and *The Cincinnati Review*. When she isn't binge-watching Netflix, she is working on her debut novel, which may or may not be inspired by her time at Duke University. She can be reached on Twitter @LexiJLee.

ISABELLA LEGRAND is an undergrad at City College who is currently majoring in Sociology. Originally from Queens, New York, she moved upstate at 12 to live with her grandparent. They are passionate about creating things like art and poetry, activism, and learning about mushrooms. They plan to graduate from City College in spring, 2023.

TESSA MILLER is a health and science journalist whose work focuses on chronic illness and disability. Her writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *New York Magazine*, *Self*, *Medium*, *Health*, *Refinery 29*, and *Wired*, among others. She was a senior editor at *Lifehacker* and *The Daily Beast*. Tessa's acclaimed debut book, *What Doesn't Kill You: A Life with Chronic Illness—Lessons from a Body in Revolt*, was released in February by Macmillan. She is pursuing a master's in language and literacy at CCNY.

MANNY MINAYA is a Latinx writer born and raised in Washington Heights and recently graduated (December 2021) from City College with a creative writing major and sociology minor. Manny's status as a hard-of-hearing person informs his writing. He is an avid reader of speculative fiction and magical realism. After graduating, Manny aims to continue practicing his craft with the intention of publishing his WIP fantasy novel. Manny's ReConnection pieces were written after visiting the Dominican Republic after 15 years. The pieces aim to show Manny's reconnection with his ancestral land.

LEX MOHAMED is currently a student at City College majoring in creative writing. Born in Houston, Texas, they moved to Astoria, New York at the age of 9. They are passionate about any and all forms of art and performance, *Doctor Who*, and niche 80s animation. They hope to pursue a career, but that's about all they have planned at the moment. Lex is 19 and uses they/them pronouns.

MIKE MONTALI is a published songwriter and poet, born and raised in New York City to Italian immigrants. He is the lead singer and founding member of the prolific rock & roll band, Hollis Brown. Known for their exuberant, deftly curated performances and epic international tours, the must-see live act boasts a devoted global fanbase. Currently enrolled as an MFA candidate for creative writing at The City College of New York, he resides in Queens with his wife Andrea and dog, Otis.

LIBRADA MONTERO HANLEY is currently a student at City College, majoring in English creative writing with a psychology minor. Originally from the Dominican Republic, she moved to NYC when she was in the 9th grade. She's an English and Spanish writer. She has been writing since 2016. She is a poet and a photographer; occasionally she writes short stories. She plans to graduate from City College in spring 2022.

RAJEÉ NAPIER is an undeclared sophomore at City College. He was raised in Jamaica and moved to NYC four years ago. He writes poetry and short stories, draws and anything else he may find interest in.

EMILY RABOTEAU is a professor of creative writing in the English Department, and a street photographer.

KATHERINE RAMIREZ is an adjunct in the English department in CCNY. She got a BA in English creative writing and an MFA from CCNY in 2016 and 2020. Originally from Washington Heights, Ramirez now lives in New Jersey where she teaches middle school English in an Urban area. Her passions include writing, painting, traveling and cooking. Ramirez plans to get a doctorate in College Leadership in hopes of joining the CCNY administration team.

HEDAYAT REDA is an Egyptian experimental writer who dabbles in different genres and styles. She uses writing as a way to figure out the world and give voice to the voiceless. Hedayat is pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing at City College. Her work has been published in 433.

PHILIP THOMAS RUDICH is a New York City-based writer, currently studying in City College's MFA in Creative Writing program. He will graduate in spring 2022. He was awarded the 2021 DeJur Prize in Fiction by the CCNY English Department.

ISAAC RYSDAHL is pursuing his MFA in Creative Writing from The City College of New York. Originally from New Ulm, MN, he currently lives in New York City where he helps care for the NYC woods as a volunteer Super Steward with the New York City Parks Department.

MORGAN SANGUEDOLCE is a fiction-writing MFA candidate at CCNY. A New Jersey native, Morgan studied English literature and filmmaking at Rutgers University-New Brunswick. She works as a full-time video producer and lives in Manhattan with her plants.

SEAMUS SCANLON is a writer of fiction, drama and film scripts from Ireland who works at City College Downtown as a librarian. Recent achievements include a collaboration with the Japanese dancer Akiko Kitamura in *Echoes of Calling*, the radio play version of *The Long Wet Grass* at the Cell Theater, an NYFA grant for the performance of the bilingual version of *The Long Wet Grass*, and the short film *The Butterfly Love Song* (USA/Ireland, 2019). More info at www.seamusscanlon.com and www.mcgowantrilogy.com.

SUMAIYA SEEMEEN is currently a senior at City College. They originally majored in biology but discovered their passion for English literature during

junior year. They moved to America from Bangladesh at age 6 without knowing a single English word. Reading books became their safe haven and helped to learn the language. They have an interest in trying new foods from different cuisines, horror films, and museums. They plan to graduate in spring 2022 and pursue a career in teaching.

CORINNE H. SHEARER is a graduate student in the English department at City College, pursuing a master's degree in literature. Originally from a tiny town in eastern PA, she has been living and working in New York City in dance and theatre since 2016 as a teacher, performer, and choreographer. She is really not very good at painting, but loves to push the colors around anyway. She lives in Brooklyn with one very chatty, drooling cat named Thelma Lou.

ANNA STEEGMANN, a native of Germany, is a bilingual writer based in New York City. She has been teaching writing at The City College of New York since 2005 and is a staff writer for *The New York City Jazz Record*. She has published essays, short stories, features and poetry in both English and German. Her essay "Mein Harlem" was selected Notable Essay of 2007 for The Best American Essays 2008.

SADIA TASNIM is currently a student at City College, majoring in English literature, minoring in history and studio art, and participating in the Publishing Certificate Program. A Bengali American Muslim from Brooklyn, Sadia is also a City College Fellow, researching contemporary Muslim women poets. She is passionate about all forms of creative expression, namely writing and painting. She plans to graduate in the spring of 2022 and hopes to pursue a career in academia.

YIN LI TING is a Chan Meditation practitioner. Photography is his/her Chan (Zen) Meditation practice. Having just graduated in fall 2021 with a major in psychology and a minor in art, Ting hopes to finish his/her first and final book in the spring of 2022 and pursue a career that can feed her/his family with a casual life.

LAUREN DE LA TORRE is a literary lass who likes alliteration a little too much. Assonance, too. She loves to write, read, and play piano, and she will graduate from The City College of New York with a B.A. in English in 2023.

YUANQING WANG is an MFA student at City College. Originally from Nanjing, P.R. China, he moved to the United States to study at the University of Michigan, graduating with a degree in comparative literature. He is also the recipient of

the Stark Short Fiction Award. When he is not writing, he uses machine learning methods to develop cancer therapeutics at Cornell and Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center.

STEPHANIE ZLOTNICK is currently a graduate student at City College getting her MA in language and literacy. Originally from Westchester County, Stephanie moved to NYC nine years ago to attend the Fashion Institute of Technology for her undergraduate degree. She is passionate about writing, tutoring, baking, and taking lots of photos of her dog, Phoebe. Stephanie plans to graduate from City College in 2022 and hopes to pursue a career in writing center administration.

And once repaired, there is something
new, the body always showing a light
through the spaces the gold could not fill.

- Philip F. Clark