





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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SUBMISSIONS

The Northridge Review accepts submissions of fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, drama, and art throughout the year.

The Northridge Review has recently changed the submission process. Manuscripts can be uploaded to:

<http://thenorthridgereview.submittable.com/submit>

Submissions should be accompanied by a cover page that includes the writer's name, address, email, and phone number, as well as the titles of the works submitted. The writer's name should not appear on the manuscript itself.

Printed manuscripts and all other correspondence can still be delivered to:

Northridge Review
Department of English
California State University Northridge
18111 Nordhoff St.
Northridge, CA 91330-8248

AWARDS

The Northridge Review Fiction Award, given annually, recognizes excellent fiction by a CSUN student published in the Northridge Review. The recipient for this award for the 2011-2012 school year is Karlee Johnson for her story “Truth Ingest.”

This year’s judge of the Northridge Review Fiction Award is Rod Val Moore. Rod Val Moore is the author of the short story collection *Igloo Among Palms* (University of Iowa Press, 1994), and has published fiction in a variety of magazines, such as *Prairie Schooner* and *Rampike*. He is a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, and is a professor of creative writing and linguistics at Los Angeles Valley College.

The Rachel Sherwood Award, given annually in the memory of its namesake, recognizes excellent poetry by a CSUN student published in the Northridge Review. The recipient for the 2011-2012 school year is Tiffany Eddy for her poem “My Mother’s Kitchen.” The Honorable Mention goes to Gina Srmabekian for her poem “Invocation of the Engineer.”

This year’s judge of the Rachel Sherwood Award is Kim Young. Kim Young is the author of *Night Radio*, winner of the 2011 Agha Shahid Ali Poetry Prize (The University of Utah Press) and the chapbook *Divided Highway* (Dancing Girl Press, 2008). She is the founding editor of *Chaparral*—an online journal featuring poetry from Southern California. Her poems have appeared in *Los Angeles Review*, *MiPOesias*, *No Tell Motel*, *POOL* and elsewhere. She holds an MA at Cal State University Northridge and an MFA at Bennington College, where she received a Jane Kenyon Scholarship in poetry. She was born in Los Angeles and lives in L.A. with her husband and daughter.

The Northridge Review is also honored to publish the winner of the Academy of American Poets Award. The recipient for the award for the 2011-2012 school year is Robin Smith for her poem “blue into blue”, published here as “Pure Glass When Stained Makes Art of Light.” The Honorable Mentions go to Jaclyn Hymes for her poem “Plumage” and Itiola Stephanie Jones for her poem “Palms, open, Love fading.”

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EDITORS' NOTES

Working on the Northridge Review (NR) has taught me more about the publishing world than merely desiring to be published ever could, and for that I'm grateful to both my staff and our contributors. The combined efforts of Layout & Design contributed to this issue's beauty, while Desktop Publishing helped keep us in alignment on the page. Without their efforts, the strength that all of the Fall 2012 NR staff put toward choosing the best fiction, poetry, and artwork to represent our highest hopes as a magazine would have been for naught. Finally, without our Business Board, our funds would be in chaotic, miasmic disarray, and the money we love you for spending on this book would be in a stranger's nervous, sweaty hands, in Vegas.

We owe you a lot, reader. Whether you're operating under peer pressure, charity, subscription-based purchasing, or are a contributor purchasing extra copies to sell off later while living it up in greater fame, or a first-time consumer glancing over the page of Editor's Notes entirely, we really thank you. Honestly.

The last thing I need to occupy your time with is a fist-bump to my co-editor, Leslie Kawakami, who kept my Stranger status to this whole process in a cool, cool calm. And to Mona Houghton, our staff adviser, for her guidance. And to my fiancé, whose previous expertise as a Northridge Review staff member was essential to anything positive I did for you, the reader, or you, the writer, or you, my fellow staff members. I'm super grateful to all of you. Thanks for making it pleasurable,

- Steven Bockover

There is a question I asked myself every time I attempted to sit down and write this note: Why did I choose to be on the staff of the Northridge Review for two semester in a row? Is it because I'm a glutton for punishment? Did I secretly love the long hours (often when I was trying to go to sleep) fretting over spelling mistakes, off-centered lines, the right leading? Will I forever cherish these fond memories of ST 727, where the pipes in the walls creak every so often, making you feel like you're in some sort of horror movie, where you honestly consider selling your soul so the ancient Mac doesn't break (which it did this summer – I'm sort of proud of being the editor who finally broke it) and you sweat and panic and bleed to make sure you finish on deadline? Is it because I love-with-a-capital-L the literary word, and feel that it is my obligation to share with the world (or at least the CSUN community) what my peers have to offer?

No, not really. At first, I just did it for my CV, something to help flesh out the pretty sparse list of accomplishments and work positions (student for seven-plus years, waitress for six-plus years, lover of writing for twenty-five years and counting).

But in the end, I'm glad I did it. It was a – well, let's just call it an adventure. One that hopefully will assist me somewhere down along the line, when it is a necessity to make sure I finish deadlines in order to eat.

Of course, I'm so appreciative of the NR staff this semester. They've been really awesome, and I'm so glad that I got to experience this with them. Fist-bump to my co-editor Steve, and major props to Mona as she has been invaluable to this process and my time in 412.

Keep reading, keep writing and keep meeting those deadlines (or, like my favorite writer D.A., at least appreciate the whooshing sound as they fly by).

- Leslie Kawakami

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PERKS OF RODENTIA

TIFFANY EDDY

I am a possible possum
in an improbable world:
scrounging for scraps of food
and Japanese pornography,
finding only government
secrets and empty dime bags.

My children will grow up
to be rabid or roadkill—
or drunks like their father.
I will starve to death in a
pile of gourmet leftovers,

speaking in tongues
I have taken from cats.
Seeing the spider
isn't the problem;
it's when it disappears.

INVOCATION OF THE ENGINEER

GINA SRMABEKIAN

Lips sealed with epoxy, as if your childhood goldfish, armed with the promise of feed you'd forgotten, might scale the tubing of your esophagus and flounder between words, uncovered. Was it the first—

the first thing you'd broken? Surely, you've lifted the vise too early or left pipes corroded—the pink rust of agape, fit as a word but you leveled it crooked, so it could never be used in a sentence.

Don't make it harder: You think being good is as natural as breeding, as natural as the pin of a grenade in your holster, without ammunition, just a badge of some war you gave your name to. Who can blame you

for misunderstanding? You aren't the mother, the mender of bad things that happen to daughters. But I say, "You're the mother of burnt-out sockets, knobs of cupboards, the black blotchy oil that came out of the engine." But those are just things that don't break

with intention. Hitler's mother was to get an abortion but you don't see a difference:

she made him, a monster.

or

she made him a monster.

Did Einstein melt the flesh off of 200,000?

He used the words he knew; the grenade an equation, the potency of matter in its tiniest shell. The pin in his holster, the pen in his lapel with which he signed his

name

under words

that haunted him as mushroom clouds on his deathbed.

Don't make it so hard—start with the words you know; just think of the snip, the gage, the wrench, the open-palmed saw as thick as your forearm, the mending that belongs only to a father. Count off the gears that you have tightened, the slide you assembled in the garden, the tree house you never built, for fear that I'd fall.

Think of how strong, the will you gave me—how potent, the split of an atom when it wants—when it intends to go off.

Think now of the words that I have taught you.

broken-

grow-

mother.

Every

broken

mother,

every

broken

thing-

must have grown into someone.

Every broken thing had a mother.

Every broken thing had a mother.

Every broken thing had a mother,

who let it grow.



CHARLIE KAIJO

UNTITLED

PHOTOGRAPH

I. Semiotics

None of her body parts were aligned. Her fingers were on her hip and her mouth was on her stomach and I never managed to put anything on her cock.

‘I’m changing your pronoun,’ I said, ‘but you’re still going to have a penis.’

There are too many things lost when all you can breathe is lust. With a thick, cosmic felt tip I began to document what we forgot in sweat. Her body would glow in small portions, answering a question I did not know to ask, and I would chronicle the vision verbatim. Our mutual exertions would occupy our lungs and I would stare at her bare skin, waiting for the words that would pass from my eyes to my hand and onto her.

These words often lack cohesion. That is part of their majesty. The promise of their majesty, rather. This is not praise for the author, but praise for whatever muse wraps itself around us, cradles us, encourages us to seek one another between whispering sheets.

When we have become synchronized to the best of our ability, I will see a spark come from her shoulder. If I am below her, I will write in cramped, slinking letters on the top of her thigh or on the side of her long abdomen or the small pouch of flesh that guides the author from her stomach to her pubic bone. If I am below her, this will get filled up first.

If I am above her, the connection of her hand to my hip may create a scintillic shudder that moves me to drape her shoulders and her sternum with a wide, geometric alphabet that turns my wrist around as though it is drawing itself.

For ‘demure’ cheeks, see her forearm. For ‘deluge,’ see her thorax.

II. Scintillics

‘Scintillic?’ she asked.

‘What about it?’

‘I don’t know what that is,’ she said, looking from the page and up to me.

‘Like scintilla,’ I said.

‘I don’t know what a scintilla is.’

Seduction is routed from touch to touch. I explain that I see lightning in her fingers and that the pen will manifest the discovery on her hip.

I kiss her fingers. I kiss her hip. Small suggestions.

‘Oh, like when you write on me,’ she said.

Or maybe a pat on the head.

‘When the narrator writes on the subject in the story, yes,’ I said.

‘Don’t you mean “scintillating”?’

III. Phonetics

Pronunciation requires a tongue that snaps like ginger. A muscle that rolls luxurious ‘R’s through the teeth. Master of penetration. Stale as an envelope.

A heightened sensitivity brings a shorter climactic ascent. In this brief amount of time, everything looks like a crescent moon. It is not always a brief amount of time, certainly, but in comparison to a lifetime it could be blinked away. Cosmologies, though, are never finite. After this comingling, I would make haste.

‘Don’t move,’ I said.

In some great leap I would grab something to write on, something to write with, then retreat back to us.

This is when she would reteach me everything I had learned. I did not want her heat to wipe away my findings. They are meant for consumption.

I wondered how syllables taste. Can you swallow them whole or must you chew them up?

Illuminated prose coated her tongue. Her clinquant saliva. A tentacle. The mechanism of her lips would form the words and she would read them off to me. A fractured novel in thick blackness. If in one instance she were ever covered in all of the words I had ever written on her, we would not be able to see her skin.

For ‘ribbons’ of her eyelids, see the small of her back. For ‘relativity,’ see her knee.

‘If I am made of ribbons,’ she said, ‘that means I will unravel.’

IV. Poetics

‘Don’t title a section “Poetics,”’ she said. ‘It’s presumptuous.’

V. Cinematics

She did not always memorize her lines. She would stare at them for some time before reading them aloud.

‘I’ve never heard the word “scintillics” before,’ she said.

‘That’s because I made it up.’

‘Oh. I don’t have anything to say, I don’t think.’

‘It’s okay. I’ll change it later. I’ll make you sound eloquent, intelligent, sultry.’

Back to her body. Back to her delicious torso. Back to our recording of these words. These words will become a list. We will insert each variable into a formula and perhaps end up with fiction. She will read the words again. Her voice is eloquent, intelligent, sultry.

Her stomach is a marquee.

VI. Ichthyotics

At some point in time, fellatio shifts from recreation to academia. If you want to do something correctly you must take it seriously.

I decided this as I took heed of my education. She was above me that time. She was leaning against the wall. Any movement she made left a deep gray streak on the wall. Inside these gray streaks were backward letters. That was all I could look at. Her eyes were closed and mine were glossing over, fixed. When she would turn her eyes—eyes meant for bedrooms—down to me, I would blink time so she did not think I was beginning to cry. These tears were not tethered to a duct or a heart string, but were the product of my overestimation. A knock on the membranal canvas on the back of my throat.

Ginger cleanses the palate. Minutes are measured in feathers. Throats are made of honeycomb.

If you push your thumb into your index finger while you fill your mouth with her, it will eliminate your pharyngeal reflex.

She shared her knowledge with me. I thought about holding a mirror up to the marks on the wall, but instead I wiped away the findings.

Laying next to me, she would take her clothes off and insist on offering me inspiration. We all take part in our objectification. It is romantic.

It begins like the curiosity of cutting a fish open. There are thin, crimson lines where blood has frozen. There are soft pink innards. You put your fingers inside cautiously. You do not want to intrude. When you find no obstacle, you explore lightly to see if the pastel will fade. Familiarity will allow you to feel inside more rapidly. The next time you will slice the fish open much more quickly. You will only become faster and less delicate.

‘It’s “ichthyology” that you’re looking for,’ she said. ‘And that is vile.’

VII. Theologics

There is a thin film between the innards and the meat of a fish. Its body is an exhibit, a frame to look through and tap on. Their organs are arranged in compartments of chalk.

‘Not all of the inside of a fish is pink,’ she said. ‘Don’t romanticize it.’

She paints a deep intestinal red. A flaxen belly. A translucent tract showcasing wound green kelp. Mostly, though, a pulpous gray.

‘Sometimes you can see smaller fish that they’ve eaten.’

Are those fish filled with smaller fish? I measure them in thumbnails.

I imagine her as a fish. An ichthys, an enticing acronym.

Sitting cross-legged over one another we share a host of tendrils, a sacrament of lips. Music like this only rings in cathedrals. Her fingers must be holy.

‘Don’t bring religion into this.’

‘Is it a freshman effort?’ I ask her. ‘Is it a novice writing trope?’

Her reply is a question: ‘What are you reverent to?’

VIII. Academics

At first, we were very collegiate. Sitting between classes, holding hands, not speaking. We plotted expatriation.

We were never enrolled. We studied pontification. We gladly filled the role of expectorant.

‘I did not plot,’ she said. ‘Our fingers did not fit together when we sat that way. We should have switched sides, but it seemed like too much effort.’

IX. Acrobatics

She examined her dermal curriculum.

I may not be reverent, but I am a worshiper.

‘First-person narration is,’ she said.

‘What?’

‘First-person narration is a mark of novice.’ She painted over her dulled grayness with a leather jacket.

She is Vitruvian. She is a nubile vector.

‘Don’t get cute.’ She covered her script in the buckle of her boot. My ingénue.

I may not be reverent, but I am a voyeur.

For ‘gallantry,’ see her ankle. For ‘paradisial,’ see her spine.

X. Dietetics

The end.

Somehow everything is dry. Nothing comes from my fingernails or my brow or my neck.

Somehow water will be ginger. Somehow pouring water onto myself between tiles will hydrate my fingernails or my brow or my neck.

I write everything on my own skin with my eyes closed.

The wet skin does not hold ink. It ruins the marker.

I am hungry.

WHAT THE FUCK, WORDSWORTH?

FREDDY GARCIA

You never wrote about baby birds falling out of nests,
about my dog devoured by a goddamn coyote,
nor how gravity tends to fondle you to the pavement
so that everyone can embrace it
like how you embrace those daffodils.

We got pissed on
by that lonely cloud you like so much,
causing mudslides and my tires
got stuck in the mud.
Perhaps opium will make things better:

my Xanadu of cloudlike tornados and
spontaneous overflow of powerful sea waves.
No, not the sea of daffodils you have a hardon for;
I'm talking about the mutha fucking ocean.
How's that for rural tongue?

When the waves take you,
say hi to Proteus for me
while you're down there
with the fish and let me know
if that world is too much.

Damn grey April sky. I stare up, willing away the rain. She wouldn't want it. I rock back on my heels and smooth the green fabric of my dress over my thighs, wondering if the dead bother to notice things like wardrobe choices at their funerals. If they can, she does. So against a backdrop of black, I stand in green. Just in case. Let them think what they want, she loved this dress.

On my right, my father shakes and shudders like an old car on a cold morning. I rise up on my toes and stare at the coffin, green, then the flowers, pink. Roses, wet, glistening, delivered with the rest an hour ago by a tall, skinny man with shaggy brown hair and eyes of ocean water on a cloudless day. The only eyes in a week that had looked at me with something other than sympathy; I could have climbed into his van and fled it all with him, just for that. I probably would have if my sister hadn't shown up and dragged me off to meet the minister. I shake the deliveryman out of my mind and return to the roses. One wears a wilting petal, curled brown and crisp, in defiance of all the perfect pink. Thickness creeps up into my throat. I swallow.

* * *

He is going to leave me. Would already be gone, except for this. He thinks it means something, this staying. But soon he will go, taking most of the CDs, half our book collection, his clothes. He'll forget an entire drawer of underwear, leave them tucked away with memories of happier days. And that smell—fresh churned earth and oranges and cigarettes and rain-soaked pavement—he'll leave that too. It'll never wash out of the sheets, no matter how much detergent I use. So I will throw the sheets away, after a while. The underwear too. Maybe I'll try and mail him back his memories though, eventually.

But for now he stays, his departure a plan awaiting execution. A plan that lives nestled in his skull, crouched down and patient, a hyena lurking on the outskirts, waiting for the legs to drop out from underneath my grief. I first saw it in his eyes the night I came home from the hospital, after we turned off the machines, after we watched them pull out the needles and the tubes. After we let her go.

"It's scheduled for Friday. Will you come?"

"Don't you think it's better if I don't?"

“It’s better if I don’t think tonight at all.”

We stood, apart, arms at our sides, the air a stale and sour breath between us. I stared at my shoes, realized my socks didn’t match. I tried to remember when I had put them on. The night my dad called from the hospital. At least the shoes matched.

* * *

The sun disappears completely, casting a charcoal wash over us all. My father cuts through the grey, placing a hand on the coffin for one heartbeat, then two. He turns, mouth contorting into a smile that doesn’t quite reach the eyes. He talks, about her. The words swirl into an image and I see her dancing to bad rock music from the 70s, bare feet spinning round the ugly brown linoleum of my childhood kitchen. I hear her singing out perfect lyrics in imperfect tones and a scream crawls from my abdomen slowly, slowly up towards my mouth. I look towards my father. His lips move, but his words cannot silence the drone of “Sister Golden Hair” looping through me. He continues to release memories of her, bright, iridescent bubbles which pour from his mouth, floating for a moment before they tumble down, down, to burst at his feet. I raise my hands up to my ears until the cacophony of shattering glass bubbles at last silences the America record playing in my head. He asks if anyone would like to speak. People step forward. I hum “Ventura Highway” and stay still.

* * *

I missed her birthday party two weeks ago. I still have a card that she will never open, with both an apologetic note that she will never read and a gift card to the California Pizza Kitchen that she will never redeem tucked neatly inside. I think about eating it. The note, the card...all of it.

Immersed in swirling, bitter waters neither of us could swim out of, my husband and I fought our way through what we didn’t know would be her final birthday. The rhythm of my family’s gatherings is a consistent one; I watched the clock while he ranted, mentally ticking the events off a list in my head as the battle waged on through an itinerary of dinner, presents, and cake. Right about the time my dad would be putting coffee on, my husband left. I thought about leaving too, but stayed, devoting all my energy to pulling him back home again, somehow. I paced back and forth in front of the window, peering out to check for his car each time headlights flooded the room. My phone rang. It wasn’t him.

“Where are you?”

“Home.”

“You okay?”

“I’m fine mom, just tired.”

“Well, we are about to have coffee, I’d love to see you. You could—”

I could yell. So I did. She wasn’t him, and she couldn’t be him and I couldn’t forgive her for that. All my pain and frustration leapt out of me and onto her. She could always take it. And so she did. Even on her birthday.

It was the last time we spoke.

* * *

Rain falls. Umbrellas burst open. Pops of color bloom across the hill. I tilt my face to greet the water, ignoring offers for hooded coats and spare umbrellas from the guests more weather-ready than I. Soon my hair is saturated, a runway for raindrops on their way to marry with the thirsty earth beneath my feet. My sister whispers my name and grabs my hand; I pull away. I notice the minister’s southern lilt, like my husband’s, but softer. Why hadn’t I heard it before? He rambles on about the love she cultivated, which “bloomed like her treasured flowers in her garden.” I wonder if he uses that line every time a woman that grew some damn flowers in her yard dies. His voice, slick and smooth, rises and falls like the blip of a heart monitor. Up, down, rise, fall. He doesn’t sound like Jimmy anymore.

* * *

“Did it hurt?” my father asked.

“It was a massive stroke, she most likely felt very little.”

We stood clustered together in the hallway of the ICU, listening to the man in the white coat. It took five hours to get him to speak with us, but once we captured him, we couldn’t do much more than stand and stare. He talked of brains bleeding out the way my sister and I talk about pedicures. For him, death was commonplace. For us it was fresh, raw, a gaping wound that screamed loud enough to silence the world. Our blips only just stopped sliding across the screen. How many hearts had he watched slow, slow until the air was gone and the brain stopped telling it to beat? How could he understand that without her these people in this hallway were strangers to one another?

* * *

The crowd dissipates with the rain. Two men in uniforms are watching me,

waiting, but I don't give a damn. It's not time. I walk closer to her, dropping to my knees. Mud splatters my dress and I am sure she is embarrassed of me by now. I grab the pink rose with the wilted petal and peel its layers away, one by one. The men shuffle closer, throats clear, and I hear the clank of metal on metal. I scramble to my feet. Mud and grass cling to my legs and clothes. The petals are still balled in my hand. I unclench my fist and see a flash of brown. Decay. I pluck it out and place it in my mouth. Resisting the urge to spit, I roll it into a ball with my tongue and swallow it down. The rest I pull from my palm one by one, smoothing them with my fingertips before I line them up on the coffin in a straight row. When I run out of petals I lean over, rubbing my face across the coffin's smooth surface, so cool on my cheek, my lips.

"Mom?" I press my ear to the box, holding on, listening.

"Mom, I take it back. All of it."

Footsteps fall behind me. I watch the ground for brown loafers, but it is black pumps that appear just behind my own. My sister takes hold of my hand. I don't pull away.

WHAT LOVE LOOKS LIKE

FREDDY GARCIA

A whore
with puppy words
when she cries:
her tongue
 – syncopated
 off-tempo –
 throbbing
songs of glittering early pearls,
why?

 (Sugar breath of cheap, bitter rum)
Intoxicating aroma of taxi rot in her touch; irresistible.
 Her sinister smirk delights the warm autumn night,
 in me it awakes the auto alcoholic;
 in awe, nothing is holy in her kiss.

She collapses casually
 (dumb, ragged doll)
 by my cold bare feet.

(She's wonderful)

 (Where the fuck are my shoes?)

Lost in thought and numb
 with malicious whiskey shots.

I am restrained by her semi-appealing beauty.
I might want her.
If she only knew
 how her puke brings out the hue in her cute, flawed skin.
To our heavenly bed I drag her—
our hate-making apparatus . . .

“That’s all?” she says;
I answer with a kiss.



**SARAH MATSUI
VON GUETZOW**

ORANGE IN HAND

CLAY

TWO EGGS FOR JOE

KATIE MCMAHON

When I met Joe, he made me laugh so much; the kind of laugh where I threw up coffee a little bit in my mouth. I did not like this because no one likes throwing up, except for maybe bulimics or people who drink too much and need to throw up to drink more.

After excusing myself momentarily to go stare at my mouth in the bathroom, checking to see if any coffee throw up or whipped cream or cinnamon had made its way onto my face, I returned. Joe looked like a dinosaur in that coffee shop. No, not so much out of place, but tall, with flat teeth and rough skin with greenish undertones. Just kidding. His teeth were pretty normal human teeth; I could tell when we pretended to eat pie. We really wanted to eat real pie (pecan, pumpkin, apple, cherry, chocolate), but the shop was closing and it was too expensive anyway. I didn't want to pay for it and Joe was a feminist, so he didn't feel comfortable paying for me, or even half of me.

Joe dropped doors on me, made us walk through deep puddles in the street, never paid for parking, and constantly made me drive on all of our dates, which we weren't allowed to call dates. I could do everything for myself, according to Joe, but this also meant that we could never do anything for one another without him breaking some sort of feminist code of conduct.

"Can I rub your back?" I'd ask after he came home from a long day, doing whatever it was he did...maybe blowing up old cell phones or making sound effects for old ladies being kissed and then punched in the face.

His eyes would light up and he'd frown, "Naw, that's not your job. Did you have dinner already?"

"Yes," I'd say, frowning back, trying to catch a glimpse of his yellow-green eyes. I'd made a frozen pizza, plenty for two, but shoveled the remaining half into the trash can, knowing he wouldn't have that. He couldn't.

"It's not your job to feed me. This isn't 1955," he'd protest.

This caused us both a lot of loneliness, as you can imagine. Once, I'd forgotten my umbrella, and as we were taking a walk downtown, it started to pour. Joe took out his umbrella and looked pitifully at me. Did he want to wrap his dinosaur arms around me and hold his umbrella up over both of our heads? He opened it up and walked closely to the buildings, underneath their awnings, as to stay impeccably dry. I walked down the sidewalk getting splashed by cars and soaked clean by the L.A. rain. By the end of our walk, I smelled like gasoline

and bacon-wrapped hot dogs. I looked like a piece of shriveled-up bacon covered in wax. He just got a little dirt underneath his claws.

On my birthday, he woke me up by banging the pots and pans in the kitchen, just like my mom used to do when she felt lonely.

“Happy birthday, miss—um—my lady—you. Happy birthday!” He got me a book from the library. “Due back in three weeks. Don’t be late,” he said, handing me Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.

I remember that I really felt like crying. A lot of times I felt like crying, but this time the most.

“I know you really wanted that bicycle you kept showing me on craigslist, the one with the yellow handlebars, and good news...”

My eyes lit up just like eyes when they light up... I guess like light bulbs or tiny suns or blobs of melted yellow crayon.

“The ad is still up and I think the dude lowered the price about twenty-five bucks. You still have a chance!”

I looked at his sweet yellow-green dinosaur eyes. I was working as an English tutor for eleven dollars an hour. Joe had the ideal L.A. job: blowing things up to make sound effects for movies. It wasn’t so much the bike that upset me, but the library book. I wanted to return it late or lose it so he’d have to pay a lot of money in fines.

“Sit down,” I demanded.

Joe knew an angry feminist when he saw one. I walked into the kitchen and took out a frying pan. I opened the fridge and took out a stick of butter, which I cut into tiny squares. Two for the frying pan. Two eggs for Joe. I cracked the two eggs into the pan and listened to the butter hiss and groan.

“Are you eating too?” Joe whimpered from the kitchen table.

No. “Do you want toast? Coffee?”

He looked nervous. And sweaty. He nodded, like a guilty little boy.

I sat and watched from the other side of the table as he cut through the center of each egg and the runny yolk spilled out onto his fork. He couldn’t look up. After he ate, I rubbed his shoulders and eventually made my way onto my knees and unzipped his pants. He was into it too far and couldn’t say no, so I pulled his pants down to his ankles.

He was human after all.

The rest of the day I spent getting him off, making his meals, and listening to him talk about science fiction and baseball. At seven, I went out and bought him a cigar.

At midnight, he whispered as we were getting into bed for the night, “You know, you’re kind of a genius.”

I smiled, “What do you mean?”

“Well, birthdays are all about the birthday person, right? Which would totally be anti-feminist, anti-what we’re all about, catering to a woman because she’s weak and supposed to be taken care of, treated specially on this special day.”

He kind of laughed while he was saying this and my face started turning red. I felt like throwing up, but not the good kind.

“But this one day, you really flipped it around, so we’d be even again. Awesome work, dude.”

He rolled over and pulled the covers with him, leaving my naked body exposed and untouched.

The next morning, Joe woke up with his rough arms wrapped around my waist and one sharp claw in between my legs. He shook and pulled himself away, as if to say, “I’m sorry.” I took his pointy sharp finger and bit down on it hard, as if to say, “You’d better fuck me and make me breakfast.”

His eyes flickered and an hour later, I was pink faced, eating French toast in bed. Joe’s head rested in my lap. And all I could think of was that we were some kind of jigsaw puzzle, our mouths were the pieces that just wouldn’t fit.

LIFEJACKETS
FROM THE PHARMACIST

DAVID GARYAN

Schizophrenia
is a bleeding person
in the middle of the ocean—
who can be saved with lifebuoys,
but will never be rescued
from imaginary shark bites.

A CHILD'S SUICIDE

MEGAN BARLOG

In tribute to Luisa Valenzuela's "All About Suicide"

Irene grabbed the rope and slowly tied the noose around her neck. Then she leapt into the air and fell. Snap. One more child dead in suburbia. Life is starting to look like CSI reruns. It's starting to get old. First she uncoiled the rope from around her shoulder, slowly tied the noose around her small neck, pulled the knot tight, and leapt. Without so much as a whimper. Snap. Dead.

Let's recapitulate: the backyard is large for suburbia, a young girl's dream playground. The tree is large too, with low hanging branches that are perfect for climbing, and sturdy enough to support her weight. Irene climbed the tree many times all by herself, so she didn't lose any time reaching the top. All she had to do was scramble up the first few branches and tie off to the highest sturdy branch. Then she uncoiled the rest of the rope from her bare shoulder, tied the noose around her neck as if she were donning a string of pearls, kissed her bare shoulder and leapt. It was something almost elegant and quite refined. She hadn't even planned the kiss. A final farewell gesture, and she had leapt.

There's something else: Irene in her bedroom holding her doll in her hands, thinking over her future act and its possible consequences.

We must go back farther to understand the truth: three-year-old Irene crying because she fell out of her crib.

Not that far.

Five-year-old Irene in the living room, hiding behind the couch instead of going to bed so she can watch the crime show her parents said wasn't age appropriate.

No, seven-year-old Irene in the kitchen as her mother tells her father about the girl down the street who jumped from her bedroom window to her death. Irene in her bedroom with the doll (her first) in her hands, and the strange reflection: her death.

Irene carrying her doll to the garage, finding the rope on her father's workbench, carrying her doll and the rope to the tree in the backyard, climbing the oak tree with her doll and the rope on one arm. Once in the tree, a quick knot around the chosen branch. Fear, the act of uncoiling the rope, pulling it around her neck, and tying the knot, almost a single movement and very delicate. The act of standing upon the branch and jumping—another act, immediately following the previous one. Snap. Dead. And Irene climbing down out of the tree to look up at her doll swinging in the breeze of the oak tree.

THEY NEVER LEAVE WACO EVEN WHEN YOU JUMP THEIR CARS

JEFFREY C. ALFIER

No, Patsy with her fallen angel's-eye view
of the world insisted she give me a ride
in her '74 Duster—its benediction of Pall Mall
after-breath—to my job on the Union Pacific,
her awe of radio everything I hate, all them
4-digit AM spots in love with church oldies
and livestock shows and God knows what
when all I wanted was to walk the Brazos alone
that morning, even with rain and wind coming on
and pushing my collar up like a nightstick, the stench
of feedlots and diesel that coffee won't ever rinse
from lungs or bones, and where the usual hag
hawks boiled peanuts like hymnals to choirs,
forgetting I said no at least twenty times—the same
number of years I've wanted to go east forever,
quitting polite obligations to Patsy's AM dials
and whatever here needs this chokehold town,
to say nothing of its rain, dank enough at midnight
to make me reach for a voice that isn't there.

CLOSETED WINDOWS AND SEXUAL TEXTURES

MIGUEL NOH

I am from closeted windows and unpaved doors
where I taste sexuality and the verb to be
where websites bloom with men on men
where I grow with moans of harder, Harder, HARDER!
where curiosity flips through bodies and fingers roam through eye candy

I am from sexual inhibitions and close experiences
where you wake up releasing the bunches of baby breath
where I find myself in sexual textures of unwrapped condoms
where sneaking them in is a full-time job and sneaking them out is part-time
where single lines transform to metaphors

I am from a guilty conscious
where this goes against me and my religion
where I liberate wine with tantric sex
where any way you spin, the bottle lands on a phallic noun
where how could you tell if he is or not—I just know.



KATIE KNAUB

UNTITLED

PHOTOGRAPH



I will sing to you in the voices of the world; I will assemble vainglorious performances of aesthetic mastery, pilfered from those secret caches of experience from which we all slip intuited moments, gleaned from glimmering sponges wrung of spilled milky memories. Each drip falls with abrupt percussive notes akin to chainsaw revs and camera shutters and with these I will demolish my competition as they hide deep in the foliage, rattling leaves with their quaking fears until I silence them with my song and still their images in semi-permanent membranes subject to rot in refuse piles made in the shadow of giants which makes a perfect setting to find your whole being completely taken in by my melodies, lulled into a sense of security despite hearing a collage of car alarms and radio chatter and engine sputters because each of those sounds in this new

context can only whisper the beautiful cries of young love, each hesitantly wondering how far had all other living creatures fallen down this abyss lined with small red dots and small red babies and what all of it means, but I know that it will mean one thing; you will be mine.



First, I must see you. I bought this suit of down and scales (completed by blue skin shoes) with my winnings from the wheel of fate since I bet red, expecting pools of oxidized hemoglobin to pour directly into the both of us, filling our moulds clear to the top of matter that matters; the existence of all existence relies on our coming into being and I have led the way through the path that has been overwrought and overgrown with tiny trailblazing missteps, with each little footprint in the sand in front of us fluttering in all directions, so overwhelming that we turn our backs to where we thought we were headed and discover that any direction is marked with toe silhouettes and progress follows any path, not just the one laid out so I will whistle when we walk this path together to keep you calm and so I can nestle in your plumage, so I can exhaust sexy agricultural metaphors in every lyric I arrange to the rhythm of car alarms and radio chatter and engine sputters, men plowing virgin fields for the first harvest and when it comes time for the men in my song to reap their rewards you will be mine.



Here in the sand I will assemble a mound to serenade you from with the sticks and twigs and rocks and plastic bottles and mud and berries and ferns and plastic bags that are scattered throughout the brush I have made my home—It takes a keen eye, a bird's eye perspective, to craft beauty out of the everyday assemblage of sights that slip past your periphery so I will make you see the sticks and twigs and rocks and plastic bottles and mud and berries and ferns and plastic bags as the foundation from which I can sing the songs that bleed right into your heart; this foundation will serve as the stage of my greatest performance, the one that will adequately seduce you; I will compose notes that you overlook, that you reduce, you simplify, you accidently ignore, much like the way I have narrowly avoided your gaze for what I know is too long, into something irresistible, something that does not represent my beauty you have yet to glimpse but motion to it instead; when you begin that path there are no detours; when you hear what I hear there will be no more words, only the entire surrender that my songs demand. You will be mine.

PASSEGGIATA

JEFFREY C. ALFIER

Not yet late into evening and already I've lost
my small sense of direction down streets
that skein a city growing populated

with walkers current-caught in foot traffic.
They wade to piazzas from unseen doorways,
sunset's last light a dimming tributary

through windows above clustering
crowds, friends in delirious chatter that falls
un-translated into this stranger's ear,

voices melding with thunder that grumbles
down the distant Adriatic to thread the sharp
scents of fried zeppole, frittata and olive wood

fires where old men, hands wreathed
in blue veins clutch glasses of wine-red
from grapes rich with the blood-memory

of Vesuvius, turn their focus to a contadino's
son coming late to the streets. He'd waited
to watch his father rake fields into windrows,

my broken grasp of the men's dialect hearing
of growing seasons, the next round of bocce,
how a widow always finds her candlelight.

WHEN FAIRYTALES END

PRISCILLA WILLIAMS

Children live in fantasy and reality; they move back and forth very easily in ways that we as adults no longer remember how to do.

-Maurice Sendak, Author of "Where the Wild Things Are"

Once upon a time, long ago there lived a man named the Pied Piper

The stranger does not look like the Pied Piper in silvery satin slippers, prancing around the yard breathing magic into his whittled-woodwind. As I stare into his face, his eyebrows remind me of fuzzy-wuzzy caterpillars. I feel like laughing because every time he speaks, the fuzzy little creatures wiggle across his forehead.

Hello, I'm Rosa's brother-in-law, he says.

Yes, I know, I say.

He reaches out to shake my hand, and when he places his paw in my tiny palm, I notice he's got furry-fox-fur all over his fingers. If this was a fairytale, I'd say...

Oh, Mister what great big hairy hands you have!

Maybe he's a bear or maybe he's a wolf. I don't know. I peek behind him to see if he's got a bushy-grey tail, but all I see is his sweater tied around his waist. I'm not sure what one says when one is introduced to a fox for the first time, so I just smile and stare at his bushy eyebrows.

Are you having a nice time at the party? He says with a grin.

Yes, I say.

If this was a fairytale, he'd offer me magical beans, or better yet, a goose that lays golden eggs. Instead he leans close to my ear, until his whiskers tickle my cheek.

Darling, he whispers, you're beautiful.

***Girls and boys, come out to play
The moon doth shine as bright as day.***

- Nursery Rhyme, 1708

I'm seven years old again and today I'm celebrating my independence. With a band-aid glued to my knee and a strawberry red ribbon tied to my hair; I'm sailing through the air like the cow jumping over the moon. As the swing sways

back and forth, I stretch my toes out into the air trying to tickle the blue bellied sky. It's great to be seven again! To feel the thin fibers of my red, white, and blue dress hugging my skin. I am a flag swaddled in joy; ready to burst like a firecracker. Today the whole world is smiling at me: the sun, the birds, the stranger, and the trees. And I am happy because they're happy. The stranger is happy too.

Hello, he says.

Hello, I say.

Begin at the beginning and go on till you come to the end: then stop.

-Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

Today is the Fourth of July, and me and mom are standing in the kitchen putting the last touches on her strawberry and white frosting cake.

Mom, can I have a slice of cake?

No, you'll have to wait until we get to Rosa's house.

Rosa's house. That's all I've heard for the past two weeks. Did you see Rosa's new house? Oh, my goodness it's so lovely! You really must go to her Fourth of July party next week. I even hear her brother-in-law is going to be there and *blah blah blah*. I'm not sure why everybody is so crazy about going to Rosa's house since, to my recollection, she isn't a deacon's wife, or Sunday school teacher, or choir director, or Ladies Missionary Aid Society member, or first-time-visitor-welcome-greeter at the church where me and mom go. I don't know how long mom and Rosa have been friends or why Rosa's brother-in-law is coming to visit. I never met Paul and I don't ask questions about him because all I *really* want is a slice of cake. Cake is important...grown-ups aren't. When we get to Rosa's party, mom and me are greeted by the housekeeper who leads us down a large hallway, past spiraling staircases and rising ceilings. I'm not sure if the house is growing or if I'm shrinking because everything around me makes me feel so small.

Don't touch anything, mom whispers, as we glide past shelves decked out with more glass trinkets and silver ornaments than a Christmas tree. I shove my hands into my pockets to keep my itching fingers from touching the treasured troves. As we walk through the house, I can't help but feel a bit amazed by everything I see. Just when I think the delights of Rosa's house will never end, the housekeeper leads us into the backyard overflowing with people wearing Hawaiian shirts and oversized I-love-the-U.S. T-shirts. Most of the men are standing tribal-style around the grill, flipping burgers and grunting stories, while the ladies gossip bubbles through the air. When I reach up and pop one of the bubbles, the air explodes with the sound of kids laughing, screaming, whining, and shouting. Above all this chaos, I hear Rosa's voice as she makes her way over to mom and me.

Hello, Janet so glad you could come!

Hello Rosa! Thank you so much for inviting us.

When Rosa reaches out to hug me, she smells like charred burgers from the grill. *Priscilla, it's lovely to see you!*

Thank you, I say as she plants red petal kisses on my cheek.

You're going to have so much fun today, she says as she takes my hand and leads me into the yard. *I've bought candy and ice cream and fireworks and all your friends from church are outside playing, so you just run along and have fun.*

Rosa takes my mother's arm and leads her out into the yard towards the flock of women standing in a circle. I can hear my mother's voice as she says,

So, where is your brother-in-law?

Oh, he's over by the swing entertaining the kids with magic tricks. Paul simply loves children, and my husband and I keep telling him that he ought...

Their voices melt into the hectic heat of the day as they disappear into the crowd.

That moment marked the beginning of the end. And it's strange to think that the whole thing got started with Paul saying,

Hello.

Paradise

Well, actually it didn't **really** start with Paul saying hello. It started at the swing. Rosa's backyard, like her house, was huge. To my seven year old eyes, Rosa's yard stretched out like an endless prairie of tall grass and shady oak. It was a veritable wilderness of twisting green vines and deep dark hollows where kids raced downhill and jumped over sleeping stones. To the furthest end of this sprawling Eden, away from the main house and the buzzing swarm of mothers and fathers and watchful eyes—was one solitary swing tied to a tree. Like a golden ray of light, it beckoned the kids to the furthest end of the yard in one frenzied mass. As I made my way across the prairie of grass to join the frenzy, I found that I had stepped into a kid's paradise. None of the adults bothered to venture into this particular region of the yard, so we were free to run absolutely wild without fear of reproach or reprimand. It was to this remote region that we hoarded cookies and candies in careless joy. Here, on our own Pleasure Island, we felt safe and happy and alone...

***As Little Red Riding Hood skipped along the Path,
she suddenly realized that she was not alone.***

...but we weren't really alone. No, children in fairytales are **never** alone. Underneath the oak tree, standing by the swing, was Paul. Paul was such a great

guy. He didn't spend his day standing around talking to the other adults. No, not Paul. Instead he spent his day slithering among the kids, telling jokes and pulling quarters out of our ears. I didn't really care for Paul's magic tricks. I just wanted to get onto the swing, but the line was so long.

I wish everyone would just disappear, I thought, as I stared at the long line of kids waiting to get onto the swing. *Disappear, disappear, disappear*, I whispered to myself. All of a sudden something magical happened.

Hey! Shouted one of the boys, *Let's all go and play hide and seek!*

The boy's words appeared to send a chill of delight through the hearts of all the kids, and just like magic, they abandoned the swing and raced off across the wilderness to hide. I opened my eyes to discover the swing was perfectly empty, available, and calling my name. Now that was magic. As I raced over to the swing, one of the boys called my name.

Hey Priscilla, aren't you gonna play hide and seek with us?

No, I'd rather stay here on the swing.

And that is how it all began.

So the Pied Piper led the children out Of the Village and into the woods

As I sail through the air on the swing, I can see the entire yard. I can see all of the adults basking in the sunshine of their own independence. The kids—sugar high on Coke and cookies and cotton candy—are literally buzzing around the yard dusting their wings on the pollen of pleasure. I can see the puffy smoke from the grill and the flags flapping in the wind. I can see Paul as he gives me a wolfish grin from underneath the oak. It's just me and Paul. Paul and me underneath the tree since all the kids have scattered.

Hello, I'm Rosa's brother-in-law, he says.

Yes, I know, I say with a polite nod and a smile.

What's your name?

Priscilla.

Well, my name's Paul.

Yes, I know.

You sure do know a lot for such a little girl, he chuckles.

If this was a fairytale he'd offer me magic beans. Instead he grabs the rope of the swing with his hand and makes it come to a complete stop. *It's nice to meet you*, he says, and reaches out to shake my hand. When he places his paw in my tiny palm, I notice he's got furry-fox-fur all over his fingers. If this was a fairytale, I'd say...

Oh, Mister what great big hairy hands you have!

Maybe he's a bear or maybe he's a wolf. I don't know. I peek behind him to see if he's got a bushy tail, but all I see is his sweater tied around his waist. I'm not sure what one says when one is introduced to a fox for the first time, so I just smile and stare at his bushy eyebrows. For some reason when I stare up into his face, his smile makes me feel small. I can't tell whether he's growing or I'm shrinking again. And as he leans forward and whispers in my ear *you're mine*; his lips brush my cheek and I can

feel the warm sting of his kiss. Suddenly everything begins to melt: the blue blood bleeds from the sky and makes teardrops on my cheek.

I'm growing smaller and smaller

and smaller and smaller

and smaller

until I'm

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A L I C E

The Missing Pieces

I'm three years old again and I'm sitting on my mother's lap wearing my fuzzy flannel pajamas. As I rest my head against her shoulder, I can hear the soft *tick tick tick* of her heart as she breathes magic into the tale she's telling.

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the King's horses and all the King's men, couldn't put Humpty together again.

As she reads, I stare at the shattered picture of Humpty Dumpty splattered across the page. The image makes me sad and uneasy as I teeter upon my mother's lap.

Mom, why couldn't all the King's horses and all the King's men, put Humpty Dumpty together again?

They just couldn't, says my mother as she closes the book.

But why?

I suppose because some of the pieces were missing. Sometimes when pieces are missing, it makes it hard to put things back together.

THE...

When the party is over and the fireworks have faded from the sky, there is a moment of silence that settles upon the earth like the quiet peace that one feels after the hum of an *Amen*. I can see the guests as they make their way from Rosa's house to their slumbering cars along the street. I can see mother's nestling their children in their arms as they carry their tiny dreamers back to a world of care and rules and reason. They're happy now, the way mom is happy as we drive home. I sit in silence. Neither hearing the wind that rushes through the car window or the many questions mom asks.

Why are you crying, she says. Mom's questions come to me over and over. *Why are you crying? What happened? What happened? Please tell me.* When I finally tell her, she goes to pieces and searches my eyes for answers. But I don't have any answers because I'm only seven and I didn't leave a trail of bread crumbs behind like Hansel and Gretel. It's hard to retrace my steps from the yard, to the house, to Paul, to paw, to— **Never** use bread crumbs for memories. If the crows don't devour them, time will. And when you sweep them all together, all you get is sand and silt and silence. Like the beating of your heart when time stops and fairytales... **END**



IRWIN LAGUSKER

PHOTOGRAPH

FLOWER

THE UNCANNY VALLEY

GINA SRMABEKIAN

A hypothesis in robotics
I explain to my mother, on
finding that he is dead.
Jentsch said it was intellectual uncertainty,
an avoidance of androids, doll
eyes like trap doors, the last weeks
of your life, when Jell-O became
one blink for yes.
Mother says
you'd have him back even if the wires,
short, like his temper before he was sainted,
caused electrical fires in the sheets of your marriage.
You'd keep water on the nightstand
next to the instructional manual.
But I say the hardest part
was watching your tongue roll
over names of your children, until you'd pinch
your lips closed. Counter irritation,
the doctors that kept pumping
antibiotics because they needed something—
something to tell your wife,
that phantom—that bird
who got tangled in your hospital curtain
when someone closed the window—so
fluttered down the hallways,
the paper blue linoleum
tiles of nurses' break rooms,
whispering,

more.

I say,
that's what she wanted—not
the simulacra, a passport photo
of all the years that had stamped
their weight into her bones.

I say,
the hardest part for animators
is getting us to empathize with
robots, forgiving them
for failing to be
the humans
we know.

It's only over your casket,
paper blue plaster layered like prayers,
that my mother,
a woman who's seen too many
zombies to believe in my theories, says,
Don't be afraid.
It's because his heart failed—they swell, they turn yellow.
Your eyes, once big like a cartoon cat's, then
too big, like the tumors in your rail-thin neck, closed
over all the world.
And I say, Oh.
I say, Oh.



AARON CHAB

WISDOM

DRAWING

To her father's delight, Liat developed a love of hats at the early age of nine. This love had not formed in response to her father's continuous encouragement to wear them. He had made her a new hat for each birthday, as well as each half birthday, but these gifts had not been the source of her affection. Nor had it formed as a result of daily exposure to hats in her father's shop, Moshe's Magnificent Custom Hats & Hat Repair. No, it was one particular hat that did it.

Four days before Liat discovered the hat that would inspire her affinity for fashionable headwear, her father had taken her to see a magic show. The magician was in the middle of his act, summoning a volunteer from the audience, when Moshe leaned over to his daughter and whispered in his Israeli accent, "You see how a hat can define a man?" The magician's top hat was indeed spectacular. It was made from black grosgrain silk (pointed out, skillfully, by Moshe) and embellished with a white satin sash and two faux black feathers on the left side. The magician waved the hat around for emphasis as his young and pretty volunteer ascended the stairs to the stage, as if the hat itself were magic and had selected her.

"It gives him so much presence. Do you not agree, Liat?" Moshe prompted further. Liat said nothing. She agreed with her father silently, but not about the magnificence of the hat. Instead, what was magnificent to her was the man wearing it. As the volunteer made her way up the steps that divided the stage, the magician accidentally dropped his hat. The volunteer bent down to retrieve it for him, but in a jarring sequence of fumbling, the magician snatched up his hat, forcing the helpful woman to momentarily retreat.

When her father nudged her for a response to his question, she did not speak. Liat was captivated by the volunteer being ushered into a seven-foot, freestanding box. Moshe was not watching however, and continued the conversation alone saying, "All important professions have a hat to distinguish the uniform. A king has a crown, a pope has his pope hat, a fireman—"

"Shhhhh!!" a woman sitting behind them commanded. Moshe turned around and scowled at her.

"You see?" he whispered to Liat lowly, using his head to point to the woman. "No hat on that one," he finished.

Liat finally answered, "Abba," in a pleading tone. Her father took the hint, finishing the rest of the show in obedient silence.

The next day while Liat attended school, she was consumed with daydreams about the magician and his act. With a wave of his hat, he had made the pretty volunteer disappear and reappear, brought a bevy of doves to circle the ceiling, and summoned a white rabbit from the hat's unknowable depths. Liat could think of nothing else, and during lunch she tried her best to reenact the smaller tricks she saw for her friends, shouting "Abracadabra!" often, for dramatic effect. Having been unsuccessful in her performance, she began to doubt.

When her father picked her up from school to take her to the hat shop, where she would remain until he closed up, she asked him, "Abba, is magic real?" Moshe chuckled goodheartedly at the question. Then he answered, "Of course!" Liat's eyes danced at this reply. But when Moshe continued speaking, the hope in them vanished.

"Did I ever tell you about the Golem of Prague?" he asked excitedly.

Liat pursed her lips. "Yes, Abba. But I meant magic like in the show last night."

"Ah, I think they call that... illusion!"

"But what is an illusion? How did he make the lady disappear?"

"Well, he tricked your eyes," Moshe said, pointing his to his right eye. Moshe parked his car as Liat covered her eyes, horrified that they could be tricked. Her father opened the passenger door for her to jump out.

When her feet met the pavement, she announced, "I think the hat was magic!"

Moshe shrugged in response. "It was a very good hat," he said.

Inside, Liat sat on the floor by her father's register and took out something to read from her backpack. The shop around her was extremely colorful. Shelves of hats lined the walls in orderly rows. There was a section for classic top hats, a section for bowlers, fedoras, caps, and French berets. Baseball caps had a small corner, as did the cowboy hats. For the women there were cloches and more feminine versions of the previously mentioned. There was a small back room where Moshe created his custom hats and also did repairs. Liat looked up from her book, too distracted by her thoughts of the magician anyway, and watched as her father straightened the women's tea hat section, which was his personal favorite.

"When I was a boy," Liat once heard her father explain to an inquiring customer, "I loved to try on my Ima's British tea hats. I would sneak into her wardrobe and model them in her antique mirror. She beat the habit out of me until I moved out, joined the kibbutz, and learned to make hats there." It wasn't that Moshe was a feminine man. He was burly and barrel-chested, with a full black beard. He just had a fetish for women's hats. But coupled with his rough exterior and undeniable talent, his fetish went unquestioned by the public.

"Liat! Come here and try this one on." Moshe held up a yellow sun hat to his daughter. Before Liat could refuse him, a graying woman entered the shop carrying a tall hat box. Moshe immediately welcomed her and met her at the register. Liat, though relieved, eyed the curious woman, who wore a long red coat and red-framed

sunglasses. She did not remove them once inside. Liat also noticed that the strange woman was wearing latex gloves on both her hands.

“Hello,” she said to Moshe. He reached out his hand to shake hers, but she did not do the same. Instead, she looked at his hand contemplatively. Then she looked down at her own gloved hand, waited a moment, and finally reached out to shake Moshe’s.

“I was wondering if you could repair the inner-lining of my hat,” she said and removed the lady’s top hat from its box to show the hatter. It was made from white satin and had a matching sash. The woman handled the hat delicately with her gloved hands. Moshe reached for it for examination, but the woman pulled the hat from him too fast for him to touch it. “Please,” she said, a little embarrassed, “would you mind wearing these gloves while you handle my hat?” She held out an extra pair of gloves to Moshe, who took them, clearly confused, and put them on.

Liat’s interest was piqued. Questions began to materialize in her head. Why was this woman so protective of her hat? Why couldn’t her father touch it with his bare hands? Was it only his hands that were not fit to touch it? Liat watched their interaction intensely. The woman tried to explain: “I have a condition,” she said. “I’m uneasy with—” Her eyes made a frantic sweep of the shop, and her face formed an expression of a person in the middle of a compressing crowd of lepers.

“Oh! I see, I see!” Moshe interrupted and took the gloves from the woman. Liat frowned with frustration. What did her father see?

“You’re a nice man,” the woman said, handing him her hat. “My name is Sofia Small.” Moshe introduced himself and began to inspect the hat. The woman smiled gratefully. Liat clenched her fists, feeling thwarted in her eavesdropping.

“Can you have it finished in two days?” Sofia asked.

“Well before then. This is an easy fix. It will cost twenty dollars for re-lining,” Moshe answered.

“I’ll pick it up in two days then. How do you manage to stay in business with such generous prices?”

“There is not a lot of money in repairs,” he answered honestly. “I cannot by my good conscience charge so much for these. But a custom hat! If only people still wore hats like they used to...”

Sofia nodded in agreement. “It’s truly regrettable, but there are a few hold outs,” she smiled again.

Moshe told her that payment would be due when she picked it up and that he wished her a wonderful evening. They exchanged thank-yous and then Sofia Small left. Liat got up from the floor and peered over the edge of the counter, her eye line colliding with the white hat. Just beyond her father it sat on the other side of the counter.

“No touching this one, little Liat,” he said. “She is a special customer.” His emphasis on special did not escape Liat, and she filed it away for further

investigation.

Liat hid behind the door of her father's workroom. It was the day before the gloved woman would return to pick up her hat and her father worked diligently to re-line it. Liat stealthily peered around the open door, her body hugging the wall, to watch her father. He had the hat out from its box, and handled it with care. All of this was normal, but then Liat eyed the gloves Moshe was wearing. He always worked with bare hands. Gloves would be an obtrusive, time-consuming obstacle in the delicate business of hatting. "The joy of feeling the subtleties of each fabric..." her father often mused. Nonetheless, her father wore the gloves now.

Liat's thoughts turned toward the magician again. She remembered him snatching his fallen hat up before his volunteer could fulfill a simple, kind gesture. Sofia Small had not wanted to let Moshe touch her hat either. Liat wondered if Sofia's hat could have been magical as well...

But Sofia Small was old and didn't look like a magician. Perhaps she did not want to be influenced by the magic of her hat and wore gloves for protection. Or maybe Sofia was a magician's assistant, getting the hat repaired for him before his next show! Liat's head began to ache.

Suddenly, a customer entered the shop.

"Abba!" Liat yelled to alert her father. Moshe got up from his work table to assist the customer, leaving his gloves behind. He patted his daughter on the head as he passed her. When he reached the other room, Moshe and the hatless customer conversed about the customer's options. Liat snuck into her father's workroom undetected as he showed the man a brown fedora.

Sofia's hat sat alone on the worktable. Liat stood in front of it, trying to decide what to do. If this hat was magical, could she simply touch it to activate its powers? Liat determined the only way to know would be to experiment. She reached out to touch the hat, but hesitated. This was not her hat. Her father had always taught her to respect the property of others, and she had been specifically told not to touch this one. She looked at her father's gloves lying neatly on the table. After a few moments, curiosity won the battle with her conscience. Liat looked out to the retail room and saw her father fully engaged with the customer. She reached out and touched the hat.

Making contact, Liat felt nothing magical occur. Rubbing the soft texture of the satin underneath her fingers, she waited for something to happen. Liat soon became impatient, and impatience made her bold. She lifted the white top hat off the table. Gently, she pulled it over her head and lowered it slowly. She closed her eyes, feeling the hat, much too big for her, fall to cover her forehead and upper ears. An intense uprising of excitement formed a knot in her belly. Liat opened her eyes to see if anything had happened, but she instead saw the customer leaving and her father closing the register. Before she could take in her experience with the hat, she pulled it off her head and put it back on the table.

She was not quick enough to escape the workroom.

“What are you doing?” her father asked, smiling.

Liat swallowed hard and replied, “I was wondering what that was, Abba.” She pointed to the first tool she saw on the table.

Moshe beamed with delight at her interest. “Avoda tova! Want to play our game?”

“Okay.”

Moshe held up the small tool Liat had pointed to. “You don’t remember it?” he asked. Liat shook her head. “This is called a tolliker. You shape the lid of the top hat with it!” Moshe made a shaping motion in the air with the tool for visual emphasis. In truth, Liat had known the name and function of the tolliker. Her father often played a guessing game with her where he would hold up random tools or fabric swatches and have her name them. “When you become a hatter,” he’d say, “you will know and love them all!”

“I wish I had more time for our game, Liat. But I have to finish repairing Sofia’s hat before tomorrow. Do you have any math problems that need solving?” Moshe asked.

“I think so, Abba,” Liat answered, relieved she had not been found out. In the next room, Liat found her usual sitting spot and pulled out her school books. The next day would be her only chance at figuring out the magic behind Sofia’s hat. She only hoped the old woman didn’t pick it up before she got out of school.

It sat on a high shelf, packed away in its box for safe-keeping in Moshe’s workroom. Liat allowed a smile to curl onto her face. Sofia had not yet come for it. Her father was sweeping the retail area and she’d asked if she could do her homework in his workroom away from the customers. He’d obliged and sent her on her way. Liat eyed Sofia’s hat, plotting. She pulled her father’s work chair away from his table and slid it under the shelf, having had to drag it on the wood floor to do so. Liat winced when she saw the scratches she had left behind from the chair, but pressed on. Holding it down with her hands, she pulled her feet up one by one until she stood atop the chair. It wobbled as Liat shifted her weight for balance. Then she reached up towards the shelf and managed to grasp hold of the hat box, though only by the tips of her fingers.

Liat knew her father could catch her at any moment. But she had thought very hard about the hat the night before while she lay in bed, and decided that if the hat was still there by the time she got out of school the next day, it was a sign that she was supposed to discover its secrets. There it was, inside its box waiting for her. She lifted the top cardboard flap open, revealing the hat’s white, twice-curved top. After looking toward the door to make sure her father was not coming, Liat reached inside and pulled it out.

The day before, a simple touch had not produced any magical effect. Liat

thought back to the magician's show and waved it around as he did. She held it out and glided it through the air like a dance. Then she began to dance along with it, closing her eyes, waiting.

Liat felt powerful. Rubbing the brim of the top hat between her fingers, she lifted it up and placed it on her head. "Abracadabra," she whispered. She bumped into the chair, opened her eyes. "Abracadabra!" she said, louder. Her heart beat fast and she said the trigger word once more, holding out her arms theatrically.

"Liat!"

Her father was standing in the doorway. The girl froze. "What are you doing?" he asked, horrified. Sofia Small was standing directly behind him, blood rushing to her face. Liat could not answer her father. Instead, she stood facing the two adults, the top hat still sitting on her curly head. She looked at her bare hands.

"My hat!" Sofia screeched.

Moshe snatched the top hat from Liat's head. "Well?" he asked angrily. Sofia began clutching her hair and pacing the room. She mumbled loudly to herself and started to shake. Moshe turned away from his daughter to try to calm the woman. Momentarily left to herself, Liat's thoughts turned from articulations of apology back to curiosity. Why was this woman reacting so dramatically? Liat wondered if she had disrupted the magic in the hat by touching it, causing Sofia's distress. Moshe stormed back into the workroom, took the hat and its box into the retail area with Sofia Small, leaving Liat stunned.

The little girl, both confused and awed by the situation, listened to her father apologize profusely to his customer. Sofia ended up leaving without the re-lined hat. She refused to even touch it. Moshe offered her a new top hat, anyone she liked, free of cost. She declined, asked for full compensation of the damaged hat, and then left the store, slamming the door behind her with her gloved hand. Moshe leaned against the register counter for a few moments after Ms. Small's departure, thinking to himself. Liat watched and felt remorse, both for upsetting Sofia and for disobeying her father. Then she held her breath as Moshe walked to the workroom where she was hiding.

"All this time you just wanted a top hat?" he asked, bewildered.

Liat was taken aback by his simple question and the lack of anger in his voice. "I'm sorry, Abba," she said, looking at the floor, letting her father believe that that was her reason for wanting Sofia's hat. Moshe let out a heavy, meditative sigh and went to pat his daughter's guilty head. He knelt down to look her in the eye. When she finally met her father's gaze, he smiled.

"I can't blame you, Liat," he said. "It is a very good hat."

BEADS

ROBIN SMITH

Echo park called me home
 I slept next to the dumpster
colored for turquoise and jade
and a mural of ethereal Guadalupe
who hid me under her mantle

When Hunger came I lit candles in jars
and prayed to Our Lady
for food stamps and cheap vodka

When Cold came I huddled against her
the way my grandmother huddled
 like a mouse in her own home

Nazi boots beat against the hard wood
collecting collecting

She made beads the color of sesbania
from magazines and newspapers to keep
the screams of rifles and children soft
as candlelight

I make these beads now and sell them
in Venice for bread and mangoes
 each one an echo of her story
Watch yellow light rise over
 the sand like so many angels
collecting collecting

MAMÍ'S TORTILLAS

CRISTINA VAZQUEZ

I hope Mamí doesn't get mad at me for tracing my hand on her green wall. But it's not my whole hand. I forgot my thumb. Ok, I didn't forget. It was because La Virgen decorated with the Christmas lights and flowers at her feet kept staring at me. Those sad eyes of hers followed me even when I moved around. They said to me, "Mijà, be a good niña." So I stopped. Ok, I stopped because the smell of toasted corn on the hot black heavy plate meant Mamí was making homemade flour tortillas. I picked up my dolls, left the pencil on the floor, and walked to the kitchen making big black lines down the whole hall with my church shoes. Mamí will make me scrub them later, so who cares.

The air conditioner made the air in the house feel like when Papí takes hot showers and leaves the door open. But the air in the kitchen was different. It was heavy and black. Mamí had burned her tortillas and Mamí never burns her tortillas. Did she see my drawing? The charcoaled air in the kitchen stabbed the back of my throat like a thousand little needles, so my tummy tightened and pushed all the air out. It was so dark all I could see was Mamí on the floor and Papí saying sorry. My arm reached out to get the crunchy burnt lump off the stove to help but before I could get to it Mamí's strong hand wrapped around the heart beat in my wrist. I'm in trouble now.

The light from the sun made everything go white. That's why I couldn't remember how Mamí got me from the kitchen to the end of our street. I know why Mamí takes me on these walks. She always grabs the chubbiest parts of my face, with a hand on each side, and says "Mijá, don't be like me." She kisses each eye, to make them close, but I can still see. Do you know purple is my favorite color? But not when blue and green mix, just purple.

When I play at the park and the lights come on, I know it's time to go home. They tell Mamí when to go home too. By then her eyes end up puffy, and my hand gets sweaty from holding hers. The bubble in my throat must be where the water goes when I keep my chest from pushing them through my eyes. I have to be strong for Mamí. Sometimes, I wish we could stay at the park forever. I don't think Mamí's tears are about my hand on her lime wall.

A NIGHT IN 1975

KELLY MORENO

Daddy bought me a balloon from the fair. It was round and twice the size of my head. I marveled at how light it was. I stared at the balloon waiting for it to float away—fly out of my hands and toward the stars.

The balloon popped when we got home. It found its way between the door and the frame as my father tried to lock up the house.

He told me he was sorry, and I could have a new one. I stared at the pieces on the floor and asked where mom was.



AARON CHAB

AUDREY

PAINTING

He loves you with your lips painted. You are a porcelain doll, and your lips require the most attentive care. You are polished. Your lipstick is your calling card. Your lips have their own shade, their own shape. They are what distinguish you. They will stand out from the rest of your skin, puckering into the air with their dusty rose pink or their exotic red. You are a masterpiece. He sees that. As a woman—a real one—you are conscious of when your lipstick needs to be touched up. You hold your palette with you, close to you, always. In order to keep your work intact, you will move your mouth as little as possible. You will speak using only the words you have to. Syllables make your lipstick smudge past the delicate outline you have drawn for yourself. Instead, you smile without teeth, to let him know you are thinking something sinister.

He loves to zip your dress. When you zip your dress, the fabric is tight on your hips and the small of your back. The zipper is open down your spine and your arms do not work in tandem against the stretched fabric. But you don't mind. You finesse yourself past contortion—you are never anything short of elegant—and instead present yourself to him. Forward at first, the fabric clinging to your chest and stomach. You turn around with your back exposed, then exhibit your demure profile over your shoulder. The zipper's teeth click together in a rapid motion as he cinches you in. You give him a wink, a genuine thank you, as you tip toe toward your high heels.

He loves you with your ring on your finger. You love it, too. It is made of any dream you have ever had. You hold your hand out to him before he leaves each morning. He kisses it with a promise. You follow its sparkle through each motion, fixated as you place the china in the cabinet. You conduct a symphony of glitter as you dust the windowsill. Your hand is noticeably weighted by the gemstone. This is affirmation that he loves you, as something in your chest smiles. You leave the window—it can be dealt with later—and instead rest and stare at the glimmering bliss he has left for you.

INSIDE MOTHER'S DRESS

JESSA REED

Put it down.

This is Mother's.

But Mother isn't here, so pick it back up. Pick it up and hold it close.

Pick it up and hold it close because you want it, you want it more than anything you've ever wanted. Ever.

Pick it up. Pick it up and smell it. How does she do it? How does Mother make Her smell stay? Lavender. It's all over Her and all over Her things.

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But not you.

Put it down.

Pick it up. Pick it up and put it on, but be careful because your hands are dirty and She mustn't catch you.

Fifty lashings, She promised.

Put it down.

Put it on. Step out of the clothes of Ray! and step into the world of Mother. Leave it on, leave it on for a long time, move in the shadow of Mother, the soft, laced world of Mother.

Move a little more. Look at yourself. Look while you are moving.

In this seclusionary cool of dress-up, Ray's! mind furnishes a high-ceilinged movie theater. Ruby Ray. Motion picture sensations, in which men and women dance, pressed cheek-to-cheek.

Stay quiet. Stay quiet and listen. Listen a while to Mother's space.

Mother's space missed you.

Astonishing our earthliness, Ruby Ray, our floating host, will fill the screen with her soft laced dress. Stay quiet and take us into your soft laced-ness. A delirious brilliance.

Take it off.

Take it off, now.

Leave it on. Move. Leave it on and move in the space of Mother.

Don't spit in the street.

Don't eat that last morsel of cake.

Don't leave the house without your gloves.

Be gifted dance-dance lilies. Ruby Ray!, our host, our floating, soft laced host, she is so beautiful.

Take it off.

Pretty Mother. Mother is so pretty.

Take it off.

Pretty Mother space. Mother hides her pretty Mother space.

Take it off, now.

Stingy Mother. Stingy, pretty Mother hides her pretty Mother space.

Take it off—

Shhhh, cross your legs and squish tight that which does not belong. Dance-dance Ruby Ray the steps of push, and tuck, and pull—pull Mother's space, pull it into you, pull it out of you. Lift up your laced hems and see—

See Mother's space. See it coming. Mother's space come-ing.

The space of unraveled soft lace-ness.

[Is that you, Mother?]

See Mother's hand. See it coming. Mother's hand coming.

The hand that unravels soft lace-ness.

I pray to you, the pagan gods, to send another tsunami and aim it at the Philippines. The land will be purified, washing away its rice and people—especially minorities like my nigga Filipino self, the one black service man I saw pumping gas in Davao, and every white bread geezer that moves to the Philippines after retirement, content with spending the rest of their fat-bellied lives using their 401 Ks to lure half-starved Filipinas into bed. Give her the pork longanisa you white mother fucker. Serve her promises of food, comfort, and green card on your big American cock.

Cars will also float away, mostly from dealerships because Filipinos don't buy cars, it's cheaper to ride jeepneys. Jeepneys are Jeeps, remnants of the American presence in the Philippines during the Second World War, which Filipinos decorated in warm, festive colors. It only costs five pesos to ride a piñata on wheels, but currency that miniscule doesn't exist in America.

Everything is bigger back home in the land of good dirt and plastic women. In the Philippines the money is short, the women are sticks. The men are sticks, too, and the children, chickens, and pigs don't amount to much either. Drought is big—famine, poverty, and sickness are all big. The roosters are huge. Cockfighting is a major pastime, but when the flood comes the roosters will also wash away.

God is everything in the Philippines and He won't wash away despite prayer becoming a dark art—Filipinos crucify themselves. I saw it in a news report on TFC, The Filipino Channel. There were five men and a lola—that means grandmother, and they mostly filmed her. Three other men nailed her to the cross like voodoo. They zoomed in on her thin arms and deathbed smile. The voiceover said, "She wants her village to have rice." After 30 minutes they took the nails out and she dropped with a thud like hanged meat from the gallows. The pagan waters won't defeat God's living voodoo, but it will surely take the rice she's earned, and her blood, too.

And this time Jesus will go untouched. God will keep him safe by incarnating him as boxing legend, Manny Pacquiao. The flood will come and most Filipinos will huddle around TVs, watching Pacquiao beating another Mexican. My mom, a little old lady like crucifix lola, gets giddy and cheers with her thick accent, pumping her small hammy fists. "Go Manny go! Put him on butt! On the butt..." I think she means *knock him on his ass* like Pops used to say.

And every time he wins she gives me dietary advice. “Anak”—this means son—“you should eat a lot of malunggay. Pacquiao is strong because he’s eating malunggay.” Malunggay are small green leaves and they won’t stand a chance when I start dancing with the witching stick. The flood will come and there won’t be enough to put in my soup.

When the flood comes, cars, houses, and people will float and touch and collide, and never mix because they aren’t soluble. They won’t dissolve into each other or the muddy waters like my Niggapino DNA. I think of Pops’ and Mom’s DNA, Tennessee and Davao, fried chicken and chicken adobo, dissolving and mixing and creating a life made of things that only collide. This prayer details the world’s rejection of me, and how being made of things that only collide fuels my hopes that the Philippines, half my binary, gets crushed by pagan waters and its devastating solids.

So I’m writing this prayer to avoid murmuring on my knees like my dirty kin. I’m not even a Filipino, or so they say. I’m just a mutt sitting here in the Philippine forest with a notebook, a pen, and lots of buzzing—the buzz-buzz of mosquito flight and the buzz-buzz of my phone’s harsh vibrate.

There are other reasons why this must be a written prayer and here they are:

1. This prayer is too long to be spoken.
2. If I speak, my dirty kin will find me.
3. I can’t condense the world’s rejection of me.

So I pray to you, the pagan gods...

* * *

I grew up in Inglewood, California in a black neighborhood never knowing if I could say nigga, even around my best friend Marcel. Marcel said nigga all the time but he was shoe polish black and talked with an urban twang, so I, being a brown-skinned mulatto, didn’t even ask permission.

It proved difficult to validate my blackness without Pops’ presence. Pops was one of those caramel niggas that the darker blacks hated on for getting lots of play. He had been gone for months though, and Mom always gave me the same answer when I questioned his whereabouts.

“*Phool bizness*,” she would say. Fool business. “Don’t monkey with women until you’re older.” I was twelve and very shy, so she had nothing to worry about. However, Pops’ absence irked me, and in my search for a black hero I found two things: basketball and rap music.

Entire lunch periods were devoted to talking ball with Marcel. A typical

exchange went like this:

“Kobe is mad fresh son,” said Marcel. “That nigga’s good but that nigga Jordon can jump! Have you seen Space Jam? He did them niggas *up*—you listenin’? Look here my nigga, check out these J’s.” He pointed to his shoes. “Sick, right?” He used nigga a lot because he had the right, so I felt I had to compensate.

“Yeah the motha fucka can jump. He *slammed* on a motha fucka!” I improvised well.

Then I’d laze around at home, spending whole days watching rap videos, trying not to blush when Mom walked in. Cam G would pour Cognac on some girl’s booty butt-cheeks and she’d gyrate because that’s what girls do when they grow up. It’s no wonder why Pops loved to monkey with women. Mom thought the music was ridiculous but she also blushed at the various brown girls gyrating, moisturizing their backsides with expensive liquor. It made her keep quiet. So I watched music videos sitting cross-legged, body hunched over, concealing my boner from Mom.

* * *

Tracy started calling a year ago when I was twenty. She’s a cousin from the Philippines and I’d get home every day to a message on the answering machine.

“Hi, it’s Tracy. How are you? Everything is good. We miss you. Say hi to your mom. Ok, God bless, bye bye.” She spoke in slow deliberate English and kept it simple, well aware of her accent. She learned English because it was strongly encouraged in Filipino schools. I, on the other hand, never learned Tagalog or any other boat dialect. Thanks to the Filipino school system there’s no language barrier with my cousins. I get to feel like shit for never returning their calls.

And then one day after school Mom held the portable phone out to me after I just got through the door. She looked real bubbly the way women do after good conversation and her eyes gave away that she genuinely felt I wanted the phone.

“Do you want to talk to your cousin?” she said. This really means: ‘Here, talk to your cousin.’ I grabbed the phone and stood there still wearing my backpack.

“Hello?”

“Hi, it’s Tracy. How are you?”

“Fine, hey look I just got—”

“Everything is good. We miss you.”

“Yeah...same here.” But that really means ‘not really’.

“Come to the Philippines. It’s a beautiful place.”

“I’ll consider it.”

“What is *consee-dhair*?” Stretched E’s and hard H’s are Filipino things that

Tracy hid well most of the time.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Please come, God willing.”

“Yeah...” I searched for an excuse. “It’s really expensive, I’ll have to save.”

“Yes. It’s very hard. We’re running out of rice and—”

“That’s not good...” I said, trying to cut her off, my excuse backfiring into an effusion of third world sorrows. “That’s very ba—”

“And do you know Lola Mina? She has a fever but it is very hot. The bugs are biting her and we have no money for *mediceen* or *antibeeohtic* and—”

“That’s really sad, like, that’s really sad, but I have to go now, I have homework.”

“Ok! Your studies are important. Then you can get a job and take care of your mom.”

“Yeah, I like school.”

“We miss you. Say hi to your mom. Ok, God bless, bye bye.” I hung up first and swiveled around, looking to give Mom the phone, and found her on the couch with a hopeful smile clutching phone cards.

“Now you can talk to them on your cell phone,” she said while holding the phone cards out to me. She had such a wedding picture smile. Pops would’ve loved it.

* * *

My crowning moment of shame happened as a twelve-year-old when I lost my hair pick after six months spent growing out a fro like Pops’. I stuck it in my hair afterschool and figured that it must’ve fallen out during the turbulent bus ride home. My hair wasn’t thick enough—Mom’s genes softened it—made it straight and a little wavy and unable to hold a pick. Thick hair, like Pops’ hair or Marcel’s, would’ve been the end of having to prove my blackness. Mom sickened of the school calling to complain about how often I said mother fucker.

“What is this *mahdair pawk*? I don’t like cursing. Stop watching the black videos on TV.” But what upset her more was that I thinned, saving two weeks of lunch money to buy a sturdy metal pick.

She slapped me when I told her even though I was already crying about losing the pick.

“*Po tang ina!*” —this roughly means *mahdair pawk*—“Your teachers will think I don’t feed you! On TFC girls throw babies in the trash. I didn’t do that, I raised you—Go eat now.”

I sat alone at the dinner table before my meal of buttered rice, chicken adobo, steamed broccoli, and malungay soup. Mom left dessert, sliced mangos and hot chocolate, slightly out of reach. While I ate, she was on the phone speaking Tagalog in the frantic tone that Filipinas consider normal speech. Every chew stung my freshly reddened cheek, but the food tasted great—my face felt like a mixed message—tough third world love.

I wondered what Pop's tough Tennessee love would've been like. I imagined a closed fist followed by catfish filet, my favorite of his dishes—but he hasn't been around. I ran a hand through my thick-but-not-thick-enough hair, drawing my mother's ire. She held the phone's mouthpiece:

"O! Po tang ina! That's dirty, wash your hands!"

The next day Mom dragged me to the barber and wouldn't even let me get cornrows. She told him to cut everything, so I got a one all-around and a very uneven line-up.

I hung out at Marcel's house right after. We were playing *NBA 2K4*, I was up thirty points due to Marcel studying my head the whole time.

"Damn nigga, that motha fucka ruined your shit. I hope your mom didn't tip that nigga..." She actually did, but I said nothing. I couldn't conjure ways to speak on it without calling the barber a mother fucker. A genuine feeling—not compensation—but I didn't have the hair to say it.

* * *

I started receiving texts during class and work and private moments:

"Hi, it's Tracy. How are you? Everything is good. Say hi to your mom. OK, God bless, bye bye." And also during class and work and private moments:

"Lola Mina still has a fever. She loves you, please pray for her. OK? God bless."

Prayer had become a dark art, but I hoped for her recovery the same way I hoped my custom J's would come in the mail. And also during class and work and private moments:

"Please come see us. We miss you...Please respond."

And etc.

Mom had given away my number because texts were cheaper than the phone cards (which I didn't use). She knew my text alert was set to vibrate. She said that I would get a little buzz and nothing more. She said that this texting was more convenient and less intrusive. So now my pocket vibrates during class and work and private moments.

Mom and I sat at the dinner table over bowls of malungay soup.

“Maybe we can see them this summer,” she said, still with her wedding picture smile.

“That’s an option.”

“Save money so we can go.”

“You can go, I’ll help.”

“You’re going, too.” She nervously stirred her soup.

“I can send money if you need it.”

“Everybody wants to see you again,” she said with her smile deflating a bit. The last time we were in the Philippines was 20 years ago. I was newly-born and baptized in a religion I’ve long since quit. Then Pops took us all to Inglewood, California and ever since she’s wanted to go home and see her parents. Her parents were in their eighties, frail from poverty—but alive, and she always wondered for how much longer.

“That’s nice, but I don’t know Tagalog. It’s a real danger,” I said. Speaking fluent English in the Philippines is like wearing the wrong color in a hood drama, inviting robbery and other cruelties. Mom knew the language defense would appear as it always did. She knew I was right.

“OK,” she sighed, “but it would be nice to have you there. Lola Mina and Lolo Lito miss you a lot.” She tried appealing to my guilt, but my face was stone like every nigga in all jail dramas ever made. Years of compensating for less-than-black skin had hardened my poker face.

She slowly excused herself from the table. Minutes later I heard her on the phone speaking Tagalog to someone—I couldn’t figure out who—and understood only bits and pieces.

“Blah blah *pesos* blah blah *arroz*.” I could hear her tearing up, “Blah blah *anak* blah blah. OK, God bless, bye bye.” Translation: sending *money* for *rice*, something about her *son*, and lots of love. I looked down at my bowl of *malungay* not feeling an appetite. My pocket vibrated with a new text. I took out my phone and started deleting Tracy’s texts, including the new one that I didn’t read.

I excused myself to go to the bathroom. When I unzipped my fly, my pocket vibrated again.

* * *

Mom took me to the funeral home a couple weeks after my haircut. My hair had finally grown and looked decent again and she had a white dress with rose print because that was her favorite flower. So we walked out the front gates toward the bus stop on the corner. I was tired from school and soon fell behind Mom’s quick-

quick steps. Annoyed, she stopped her crab scuttle to address me,

“Harri-up Na! Harri-up Na!”

But the stop was close and within minutes we were sitting on a metal bench. I took the time to peruse her features. She looked very blue, assuming a countenance I’ve grown used to. It usually appeared when bills were past-due while her parents also needed food or water or medicine or condolence money. People died all the time from being famished and donated burial funds even though they had plenty of shovels and dirt. Bills and condolence money were always on her mind. Not once did she look for the bus during our thirty minute wait.

When it arrived we stepped inside and paid our tokens. The bus was very crowded and ethnic, a typical Inglewood rush-hour, so we had to stand. After fifteen minutes, Mom pulled the cord for the stop a block away from the funeral home, and we walked that single block hand-in-hand. I didn’t offer my hand, she took it, and her palms were very sweaty. It was humiliating and gross but I bore with it figuring that she missed Pops the same way as me—the same as we always had.

He was gone so long ago that death made no difference.

Outside of the funeral home stood a tall woman with smooth ebony skin and an elegant dark-blue dress. She was beautiful. She shot us a look of recognition. Mom tried to walk past pretending not to notice, but the black woman made eye contact with her.

“Hi...” said the woman uncomfortably, trying to force a smile. Mom didn’t have anything to say to her so the woman bent down to address me. “Hey honey, I’m sorry about your dad...” Her cleavage distracted me so I only nodded. She looked back up to Mom. “Such a sweet boy. Stay strong you two,” and then walked away. I learned later that her name was Chandelle and that Pops had monkeyed with her.

The inside of the funeral home smelled of must and formaldehyde. A family, parents and two young girls, were clad in black sitting on a Victorian couch in the lobby. All their heads were bent in prayer except for one girl that only pretended to pray. Her tiny hands clutched a Coke from which she meekly sipped. It was cute and playful and innocent and the Coke must have tasted sweet.

“Amen,” said her family. She took a giant swig.

I also spotted a man, the funeral director, wearing a black suit, black tie, and brass employee nametag. He was talking to another darkly-clad black woman. She was beautiful, too. Mom cut in on them.

“I’m looking for Clyde,” Mom said. They both turned toward her. This woman also knew Mom, but they were warm and huggy and loose with the compliments. Her name was Linda and she was an ex-wife. Then this woman also walked away,

and the director who had been waiting patiently during the episode gestured towards Mom.

“If you’re here for Clyde then right this way,” and then to me, “The rooms are open so don’t peek.” I understood the warning and that this place wasn’t for Pops. I was seething as he led us out of the lobby. We passed by the couch with the parents and the two young girls. They were in the middle of another prayer, and the one girl again pretended to pray.

“Amen,” said the family, their lowered heads sure to have limited peripherals. I clumsily bumped legs with the sipping girl. She spilled all over, staining the furniture and the floor.

“Sorry,” I said without halting my progress. My acting was really good. I heard the girl whine and cry about spilt Coke. It made me smirk.

“Your brother is dead. Pray like a good girl!” Her mother said. Neither of them saw my momentary smirk which vanished at the strengthened smell of formaldehyde.

I stuffed myself nose-deep inside my collar as the director led us through a long hallway lined with rooms. I heeded his advice by keeping my head down. My eyes were fixed on the black parade of dress shoes. Never in my life had I seen a filled coffin, so the mortuary triggered this litany of thought, *Don’t look up, Don’t look up...*

We reached the end of the hall.

“This here is Clyde’s room,” said the director, pointing to a room on the right. “Please, come in.” I removed my nose from my collar intending to say no. Then the stench hit and the director saw my face cringe. “Sorry, we didn’t embalm him yet.” I planted my feet thinking myself unmovable like a stone epitaph, *No, I won’t go*, but after a moment my body felt a soft tug and slowly gravitated toward that room. My feet followed one after the other to avoid falling. I felt Mom’s clammy hand in mine and she was pulling. Resisting never occurred to me.

I didn’t offer my hand, she took it.

* * *

Lola Mina’s fever got worse—I knew from reading Tracy’s texts during class and work and private moments. I’d read them and imagine Lola Mina in a bed with a bamboo frame, sweating all her nutrients from what little she ate in the already hot-hot climate of the Philippines. Then I’d put my phone away without answering and wonder when my custom J’s would come in the mail.

Then one night Mom sat me down and showed me black-and-white photos of

Lola. In the photos she wore flower print dresses, looking young and full of nutrients. She glowed.

Mom said Lola used to be a good dancer and a waitress, too. That the tips helped pay for dance lessons and disco nights. Lola also had three boyfriends. Each one did boyfriend things like sweet-talk her and pay for dates and give her money for bills she said she had.

Lola was a chaste woman. She had a scary father that fought in the First World War. He had a scar across his brow and Negro height. He ended all her dates at the door.

“It would be great if she had the chance to see you,” said Mom. Lola actually fascinated me. She was a Hollywood girl with Hollywood dreams and her dumb trendy boyfriends that threw around pesos like it wasn’t family rice money, which it was. At that thought my pocket vibrated again and I ignored it. Mom went on, “She held you during your baptism. You mean a lot to her.” I had forgotten that Lola Mina was my mother’s mother—my ‘real’ grandma. The revelation shook my nerves. My mouth opened to speak, but then closed, deciding against sharing new knowledge that Mom thought I had known. My face went jail-nigga stone. Then we were silent.

The tension puzzled Mom and she knew I was hiding something and looked at me with judgmental eyes. I felt my shirt stick to my back from a light glaze of sweat. The kitchen felt hot, Mom’s eyes were even hotter, and then my pocket vibrated audibly in the silence.

“Check it,” she said in an accusing tone, so I checked it. Tracy had sent a blurry photo from her presumably low-pixel camera-phone, and it made me think, *Wow, get a new one*. Then I studied the phone and saw the contents: A shot from the foot of a queen-sized mattress with a bamboo frame, bamboo headboard, and white sheets that looked lumpy down the middle with jagged dips and rises like Philippine farmland, with its dirt and rocks and craters—but that was grandma inside, and she isn’t a crater—she’s just meat.

“Who is it?” Mom said. She hunched forward and continued to penetrate me with her eyes. Everything felt hot—my back was soaked, my tongue was dry, and I felt my poker face succumbing to an obligatory sadness. “Speak, you...you stupid boy,” but she wanted to say nigger. I knew because she’s said it to Pops many times, and out of her it sounded like *kneeghere*, with a hard immigrant H. I swallowed a lump that moved and bulged down my throat like a large bug, all while keeping a stone face. It looked grotesque and silly, another mixed message.

Then the phone rang and she got up to get it without taking her eyes off of me. She was muttering bits of Tagalog she knew I didn’t know. I also stood, went

to my room, and turned on the laptop to book our flights. I booked tickets for two people to see Lola Mina stuffed in a box like my custom J's. Mom's wails slid between the gaps of my doorframe like ancestral ghosts, but I was thinking about the J's.

They had already shipped and wouldn't arrive before take-off for me to show off to my kin. I texted Marcel the delivery date and told him to pick up my J's for safe-keeping. I almost forgot to text Tracy the itinerary until I remembered days later as the flight was boarding. I sent it as a reply to Lola's death picture. It made me shudder. I knew I couldn't eat or sleep or masturbate. I purged my phone like an act of God.

* * *

A week had passed since our visit to the mortuary, and the funeral was in two days. Mom still hadn't given me a straight answer about the cause of death.

"*Phool Bizness*" she would say. Fool business. She meant the women, although I figured that wasn't completely true if Pops had been nice enough to monkey with them.

One Sunday, I did a clever thing for a twelve-year-old to do. I skipped a school lunch last Friday, intending to use the money to buy a local paper from the liquor store, and look in the obituaries. I told Mom that I was going for a walk, and that I had to get a paper. I told her that Sunday was funnies day, and that the funnies were really great.

"What's a *pahnee*?" she asked bitterly.

"Those pictures in the paper that make people laugh."

Then she told me that Pops' picture was in the paper, too, in the obituary. She tried to explain that in the picture he wore an all-white suit and looked like the KFC Colonel; that Pops even had the same hair, but thicker, and that she didn't have to touch the Colonel's hair to compare—she had known just by looking. She paused for effect, allowing her pride to resonate, and for me to feel the enormity of her presence.

Then she continued, going on and on all day long, during which her mouth began to form a smile, the bitter tone slowly metamorphosing into bubblyness. Everything about the progression was subtle. Even the way she sat me down without my noticing that my walk or paper was out of the question. I hardly remember when or how it happened or specifics about what she told me. What I know is that at some point she said this:

"Are you hungry?—you're hungry, I think we have some chicken..."

Every time I finished one meal she would make another. We sat in the kitchen all day against the backdrop of the rice-cooker's steam.

From noon to seven she talked about Pops, giving me our family history with only happy parts in it. By the story's end I believed that she had told me all there was about our gene pool, which was magically fortunate in every way. It almost erased memories of the smell and sight of Pop's un-embalmed meat. I felt magical.

Mom told the multi-generational story of our family, of how they lived and died of only natural causes, without a single reference to hunger or violence or atheism. She only used one adjective to describe the people in her story. Here is the part where my parents got married:

"We were a loving pair. The guests were loving, the priest was loving, and God was loving, too."

* * *

The flight was eighteen hours and felt especially long for the flight attendants. They were white and easily confused by hard H's, always leaning in with a hand-cupped ear, desperate to figure out what *wat-tair* meant. I slept against the window the whole time, waking only for food and an in-flight movie, and then slept again. I woke after the landing when the fasten seatbelt sign had deactivated. The attendants were exhausted, weighing down on carts which they pushed through the aisles to collect trash. But I felt refreshed and beautiful and angelic and then I remembered that I didn't come alone.

"*Oi! Harri-up naaa!* You're going to forget the bags," Mom said, scooting back into her seat to let me into the aisle. Bodies collided in the claustrophobic aisle as we all reached into the overhead. The sorry's and excuse me's flew in from America. Those would be the last bits of English safe for me to use in public forum. I stood around savoring my native tongue and the cool cabin air under the pretense of waiting for bodies to clear. I regained a serene moment from my long slumber and then,

"*Harri-up na!* You're in everybody's way!" Mom said, setting the tone for the entire trip.

At baggage claim I discovered that Mom had shipped three balikbayan boxes over. These had "Forex" printed across the side, but they were sent to the Philippines by Filipinos, and that made them balikbayan. Each one was 24 by 18 by 24, filled to capacity with canned food and hand-me-downs and things that look pretty around Filipino households, cherubs and such. I carted these outside by myself because Mom says I'm such a strong man.

“*Guapo!*” She even says I’m handsome.

So there I am shoving two carts of luggage out the airport exit with all my might. I couldn’t keep them straight; the wheels were going off track from the weight. Somehow I managed to make it outside—I wish I hadn’t. The sun lit me on fire, singeing my exposed skin. It almost felt like itching.

I was then approached by a sun-beaten trio, a girl and two grown men. They were all thin, I was too, but mine was an American thin, shirt-model thin; the States fed me with the right amount of nutrients to fill my sexy, and now I felt gluttonous before their unfortunate frames. The girl asked for my name in English, so I told her. She brightened.

“Hi, I’m Tracy, nice to meet you.” She gave me a hug. I kind of patted her back once or twice.

* * *

Mom and I stood on the steps of the funeral home. Black limos and black sedans lined the boulevard. There were also many black folks, Pop’s friends and relatives and ex-lovers all clad in black suits and black dresses. They stood on the mortuary lawn sharing smokes and stories and laughs. It gave me the impression that happy moments awaited us inside of the funeral home, so we went in.

Once inside of the lobby we found ourselves distinguished by our light skin. Mom also stood out by her black funeral veil, a see-through piece of fabric attached to hats covering faces of dead men’s widows, or lovers. Any of Pop’s friends would approach us on occasion, offering help that we didn’t need.

“You look lost,” they would say, “I think the funeral you’re looking for is by the other entrance.”

“No, I’m here for Clyde,” Mom would say. Their mouths would make O’s as if to say,

“Ooooooooooh!” and it was all hugs and air kiss-kisses and condolences from there.

Then the funeral director appeared from the back to greet us, a soft hug for Mom, and a handshake for me. He said kind words, too, restraining a tendency toward melancholic speech that marked his profession.

When he walked away from us, Linda, the black ex-wife who Mom had been huggy and loose with, approached us with elegant steps. She wore a long well-fitting dress, three-inch heels, and a veil. Linda greeted us with kiss-kisses to the air beside our cheeks, to which we followed suit. Linda expressed her sorrows with her rich genuine voice.

“Clyde will be missed. He had a very loving nature.” Mom’s face maintained a solemn grace. Mom entertained Linda’s monologue with the occasional agreeing nod, or the offering of a limp hand as if to say, *Awww, you poor thing*. I excused myself from them upon seeing Marcel walk in with his mom. They both saw me, so his mom let him go.

“Damn, I’m sorry my nigga. I watched that news report.”

“You’re sorry about a news report?”

“Shot. Just like Biggie Smalls my nigga, in the car and everything.” That was the first I’d heard about it, and even my twelve-year-old mind achieved instant lucidity in realizing that Pops died in some woman’s car. Pops had monkeyed with the wrong woman’s something special. Simply put, fool business.

What I didn’t piece together though, was that that woman wouldn’t be home scrubbing Pops out of her car’s upholstery. She would be attending the funeral of her very loving man.

Then Mom came back, said warm words to Marcel, and gently pulled me away. It was almost five o’clock, the service’s scheduled start.

We all began filing into the mass area to get good seats, except me and Mom since we got the front by default. So did Linda, and the two other women that sat beside me, the beautiful Chandelle that Mom hated very much and another ebony beauty that I had never met—let’s call her Ebony for the sake of clarity—and they all wore black veils. Mom tapped my shoulder, noticing my confusion about Ebony.

“Must’ve been a new one,” she said. I sat in the front row with four very loving women.

It only took five minutes for everyone to get seated and for Reverend Brown to step up to the pulpit. Mom wanted Father Bautista to lead the service, but during the week of funeral prep, Linda had constantly bugged her about Reverend Brown, repeating that he would send Pops off with the most loving grace.

“He’s the head of my church,” Linda said, “Clyde went there often. Clyde loved him—they’re both very loving men.” Mom couldn’t flatly refuse, knowing she wouldn’t be the only one wearing a veil.

Three of the pall-bearers were late, caught in traffic they said via text. They also said to start without them because they were almost there, so we began the service without Pops. He was going to be fashionably late.

The first thing Reverend Brown talked about was the Ten Commandments. He said that Pops led a Christian life and followed God’s law to a tee. Linda, Chandelle, and Ebony all did that single distinct nod that’s often seen in church, the universal sign for *mmmmmmhm*. Someone in the back yelled,

“Preacher man tell ‘em!” with a rich urban jive. The crowd was very energetic,

although Mom maintained this sort of glassy look, but I could tell that she in some way was being moved, too.

“Let us stand and pray for this virtuous man!” Reverend Brown said, producing such a crisp, resonant sound that I imagined an inny-minny Manny Pacquiao in his mouth, speed-bagging Brown’s oversized tonsils. The prayer itself was surprisingly short. It goes as follows:

“Clyde was a loving man that lived sharing love, giving love, and serving a God that loved him, too. May he rest in peace, amen.” The reverend condensed Pops’ life to all the happy parts like Mom’s story. I loved it, and the guests did, too, but Mom still looked glassy.

“Mom, why are you so glassy? Where did your face go?” I said, trying to be playful with her.

“It’s in there,” she said bitterly, pointing with her lip toward the aisle at the six pall-bearers carrying the casket. The three late-comers had arrived. They solemnly walked up the three small steps behind the pulpit and hoisted the casket onto a raised platform. Then the pall-bearers took their seats, and Reverend Brown proceeded into a standard Sunday mass, with its Our Father’s and Apostle’s Creed’s and songs and readings, all with the casket closed.

“If you have any last words for Clyde,” Reverend Brown said, “then please step up to the pulpit. Please share, we’ll listen.”

The first to step up was a tall wiry black man with a smooth bean of a head. He had been the best man at Pops’ weddings to Linda and to Mom. He spoke for ten minutes of his friendship with Pops, the fifteen years of beer, cigarettes, and women—he winked at Linda—beautiful women, he added. He went on about Pops’ and Linda’s beautiful wedding, that it was a true union of harmonious souls, and what a shame it had been that they had never made a baby—a little cherubic thing, he said. Then he caught Mom’s icy glare.

“And her, too.” He said, gesturing towards Mom. “She’s lovely. I want every one of you to know how lovely a woman Clyde’s second wife is.” He clapped once, keeping his hands together while gradually tightening his grip, and then left the pulpit.

After that nobody but Reverend Brown had the guts to eulogize, so he did. He only used one adjective, staying true to Mom’s formula. He said we were all loving people and that a loving man like Clyde deserved nothing less because God was loving, too. And then came the ‘Amen.’ And then the *mmmmmmhm* nods.

Reverend Brown announced that Clyde must enter God’s loving kingdom, that we must say our goodbyes, so he began opening the casket. I didn’t have time to brace myself, and as soon as I thought to do so, the casket had already been opened.

Pops looked much better than when I saw him the first time. They had cut his hair, made it short, and then they curled it. His skin was smooth and I couldn't smell formaldehyde on him. I figured that young bodies were naturally handsome and easy to maintain. Pops looked damn good.

Mom allowed Linda, Chandelle, and Ebony to line up first, and Marcel, too, because he rushed down to view Pops with me. We watched the three women before us part with Pops. Linda acted with the most dignity as she held his hand for a couple moments, and tearfully stepped away. The other two didn't even touch him, they were afraid to, either because he was dead and icky, or because they felt my mother's stare.

Marcel and I were next. We took slow, deliberate steps up to the coffin.

"It's under the hands," whispered Marcel.

"What's under the hands?"

"The place where they shot him," Marcel grinned. "I saw it on the news report. Nigga went out like a G." We didn't know that Mom had heard until moments later. Then I learned that she wasn't above calling a little kid a nigger. It could hardly be called a mutter, and it didn't even sound like kneeghere. She said it with no accent. Nobody reacted except Marcel who began crying, which was a perfectly normal funeral behavior. I felt a wave of relief.

When Mom finally stepped up to the coffin she touched Pop's cold dead hands, the ones over his bullet wound, and wailed over his body. I stood by her watching Pop's suit darken with Mom's tears. I realized that her hysterics could go on forever, and it had to be stopped. A few more minutes passed in this fashion. It dawned on me that everybody had heard her comment to Marcel. Nobody went to comfort her.

Pop's best friend, the man who had forgotten Mom's name, stood in line with Linda and began getting restless. He leaned over to her and said,

"Someone tell that lady she's holding up the service."

But nobody did.

* * *

I rattled around in the truck-bed holding down the luggage as Tracy's father drove. Everybody else, Mom, Tracy, Tracy's dad, and another man that was probably my uncle, packed themselves into the front seat. The highway was jammed with overfilled trucks, jeepneys, and cabs, and when traffic moved, poorly paved highways made for a bumpy ride.

After a while we arrived at a dirt road with massive trees lining the path. We were on the outskirts of Davao City on the only road that lead into Mom's village.

The ground was all dirt, rocks, twigs, with patches of crab grass here and there. There was also lots of greenery and shade and insects. The mosquitos were fat and resembled beetles. They loved biting the children, elders, and tourists—one drinking me as the truck parked beside a hut. The mosquito buzzed like a dinner call and surely enough, more came.

I looked past the buzzing mosquitoes out toward the community. The people and their homes were falling apart. All of the houses were wooden and decaying and clearly made by the villagers. The villagers themselves, all eighty of them, were afflicted in body and mind. Their bodies lacked nutrients and their minds lacked education only to be informed by other things, like agriculture, or the occasional incest—three of them were retarded.

Mom, Tracy, and my uncles got out of the truck as I hopped off the back. All eyes were on me and my Mom, but mostly on me. In America being 5'9" was average, but in the Philippines, a giant. I had at least three inches on the entire village. Then a child that was playing by the chicken coop, poking a rooster with a stick, gleefully ran towards me. Other small children, in houses and on tree branches followed suit. They were thin, barefoot, pants-less creatures with yellow teeth that they were all too happy to show.

These were my cousins and they acted nothing like the sullen, dying children on UNICEF commercials, which was almost a shame, too, because if my life had a remote I would've changed the channel.

My little cousins ran with glee with their little tiny tank tops that some were getting too tall for, and their little tiny arms and legs and necks, and their little tiny bottle-cap penises hanging too close to the body to even loll or flop around when they ran or jumped or played, as expected of growing Filipino boys that get enough love and rice and malungay to raise them into strong warrior men like Manny Pacquiao, or the Spanish soldiers that fucked and fled from an entire generation of Filipina women—our lolas, like the crucified lola and Lola Mina—during the Second World War. Another uncle that I didn't know hobbled up to Mom and told her something in Tagalog. I asked her what he said.

"They put her in the shed. Let's go."

They were going to start the funeral before we even unloaded our belongings and balikbayan boxes. Mom and I were overdressed. She had on a knee-length black dress with thorny red-roses printed all over. I was wearing a fresh white tee and J's I bought a month ago. Everyone else wore tank-tops, and maybe they had shorts, and maybe slippers.

The villagers then proceeded towards a nearby hut beside a particularly large tree. I would've rooted myself like the tree had Mom not locked our arms together,

so we proceeded, too. Tracy was right beside her and shot me a dirty look. I averted my eyes and kept walking, but moments later my pocket vibrated. With my free hand I checked my phone, seeing that Tracy had sent a text that said:

“I see the way you look at us. I’m poor. I’m not stupid.” I flushed as I read it and looked back to Tracy, who upon eye contact shot me a sneer.

As the procession continued, Mom didn’t sense the tension—her face had a stone grace, while Tracy’s fingers worked rapidly on her outdated phone to send me a text in plain sight. My pocket vibrated, so I checked:

“You think we’re dogs. I’ll pray for you.” I tried to avoid looking at Tracy, my eyes darting everywhere but her direction. My frantic eyes landed on a male cousin—probably my age, that walked hand-in-hand with one of my three challenged kin, who could’ve either been thirty or thirteen. The cousin noticed me and his face also darkened in a dirty look. Then he spit.

I felt my face go red hot and my muscles tighten. I wanted to brain him with a thick branch. *He’d die, he’s malnourished*, I thought. *Good*, I also thought. Keeping my jail-nigga repose had never been harder.

My pocket vibrated, I ignored it.

It took all but one minute for the procession to reach the shed. In front of the shed stood an old man wearing a barong, an elegantly embroidered garment which was soft and white and a little bit see-through. The sight of formal attire relieved me. He also held a bible, a confusing book about love and nails and blood.

The man began the service. In an attempt to be respectful, I focused intently on his words despite the language barrier. A minute passed before realizing that he was leading a prayer, that every head was bowed but mine. I bowed my head in pretend prayer until I heard the “amen,” but even then I refused to cross myself. I looked ridiculous and blasphemous.

My pocket vibrated, this time I checked. From Tracy:

“You don’t feel God like we do. That’s why bad things happen to you and your father.” My body trembled with rage and angry tears began to form. I could’ve brained her, too. Then I looked over and saw two things: Tracy’s smirk, and her outdated phone in another adult cousin’s hands. He stood within arms-length of Tracy tap-tapping at the number pad before pressing the last button firmly, with an emphatic finality, and turned towards me. He also smirked.

My pocket vibrated. From Tracy:

“You ignore us because we live like this. You’re not a man.”

My pocket vibrated again, and I saw with my eyes that it was from another cousin that they had passed the phone to. From Tracy:

“Here is a secret. We’re all Tracy.” My face kept its red-hot flush, but my anger

subsided, gradually fading into an open-mouthed shock. Then I noticed the preacher's eyes bearing down on me as he spoke. The sermon progressed and he had been leading another prayer. Every head was bowed, each person either allowing me to stand out on purpose, or not noticing at all with their limited peripherals, like Mom. I felt worse than when I lost my pick—that was tough love, but this was something else and it persisted.

My pocket kept vibrating. The phone was being passed all over, even though we were lining up for the good-byes. We formed a long line, one family in front of another family, and another family behind that one, and so on. Mom and I got priority since it was her mother they had stuffed in the shed.

As we were led by the priest to see Lola Mina, my pocket vibrated violently. Its buzz resonated among the silence, everyone could hear. Nobody said a word, but the buzzing continued, even when the priest opened the shed to reveal Lola Mina. She was laid across the floor wrapped in white blankets with her face covered by a white cloth. Her body was the fourth thing I noticed. The first three were the shovels, the hoes, and the fertilizer.

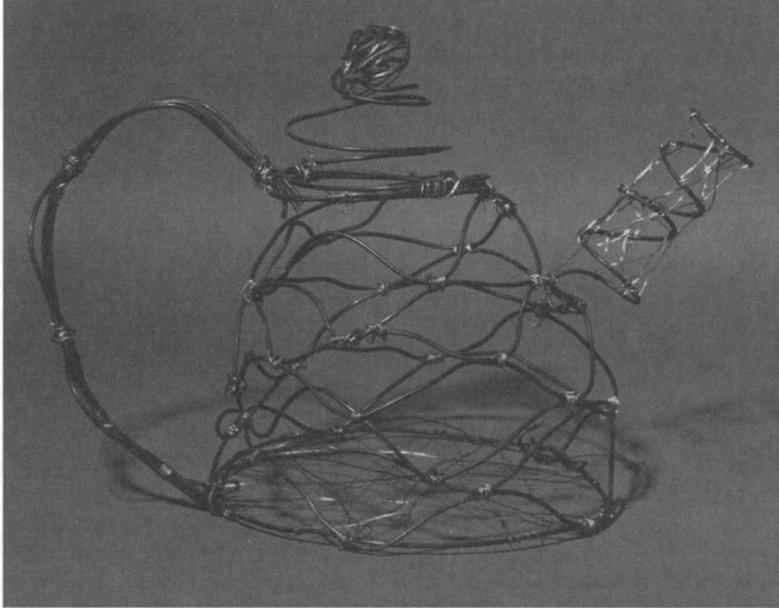
Mom broke down in front of the body. I figured that everyone hated me too much to see me comfort her, so I didn't. And my pocket kept vibrating, stealing the focus of every ear. We heard it buzz like a mosquito song.

* * *

After the funeral everyone had returned to their huts without even unloading Mom's luggage. I ran into the forest thinking that if the world rejected me, then it would have to destroy them, too.

* * *

Here is what I wrote hours ago: "So I pray to you, the pagan gods..."
And it began to rain.



**SARAH MATSUI
VON GUETZOW**

METALWORK

WIRE TEAPOT

GUIDE TO TRAVELING

MIGUEL NOH

Remember that the oars
on an old man's beard

are like an empty cup. The oars row
across nouns practicing vice

like poetry skating the ice---
sheets. Please translate

into a man-slave language
in order to understand the parenthesis

that killed the coma. Do not increase
your luggage to 100lbs,

because the dice will roll out
to Christian—we don't want that

since he's always on the phone.
Remember to button your coat

when wine is served,
and stir 'till clouds are remini-scent

of finger spelling
or until SEX

becomes a muscle stretched tight over bone,
and always carry shoelaces

across your waist.

WHAT CRABS TALK ABOUT WHEN THEY TALK ABOUT LOVE

MARINA MULARZ

I keep four hermit crabs named after my ex-boyfriends.
Ted keeps to himself with a bread crust in the corner
clawing at the tiny Huck Finn made of poster scrap and craft glue.
His zest unmatched by Jeremiah;
the marble shell with the waxy coat,
an eternal victim sulking in the Snapple cap pool.
David 2001 and David 2004 have been dead for some time now I presume
but I'm not one to judge.
I leave the remains of each crab in the cage,
carnage of cramped legs and cautious side-steps,
hallowed spaces of spent time and sea tides
as the others try to claim the shell for their own keeping.
At least that's how it went for Paul.
I watched the claws pry off his enamel,
three hermits digging in depths of neon pebble
swapping spit and carnal instinct beneath acrylic
paint and pressing fluorescent lighting,
promising themselves private ownership of shell once shared by brethren.
An intermingling of limbs.
deliberate.
delicate.
divine.
I can't help but wonder why a crab would lust after another's shell,
what whispers of allure exist in conquering someone else's second-hand intimacy,
but then again
I ask the same of their predecessors.

PLUMAGE

JACLYN HYMES

The night you came for mother, spotlights cracked from slits in the clouds. Pearl-feathered grace descended and crash-landed en pointe at center stage. The curtains opened with Tchaikovsky as you arched your long neck mirroring mother's bends of repulsion, smothered her between your wings while she strained to spread legs, grand plié.

I broke from my egg the way rape is a fracturing experience. Watch me pluck the remaining plumes from between my teeth. I cherish mortality, the symbol of our pure division.

GONE HE'S GONE!

LAUREN MARSHALL

Grandma is dancing on the table. She spins and spins and pulls up her skirts, kicking. Her legs are pale and dry with those little blue veins that sprawl across the desert of her skin like rivers. They cross and tangle up in each other but they are all reaching upwards. Like her hands and the corners of her mouth. Her teeth are yellow and she says they aren't real, but her smile is. She is smiling because she is dancing and she is dancing because Grandpa is dead.

Don't feel so bad for Grandpa. He never made her sandwiches. Grandma says that he did help her make something once, though, when she was young. He wasn't so fat yet and my cousins weren't alive to call him Papa the Hut. She says he filled her belly with milk and it got so big that one day it just popped and she rained life. That's how she got my dad. And then my dad didn't make sandwiches for my mom either but he never saw the connection.

When Grandpa died, his body was like an egg. He hatched leather shoes that Grandma said would take her back to herself. I think Grandma is a dance. I'm looking at her shoes as she kicks high and the table shakes below her like a steady wind. I wonder if one day I will have a cloud belly that pops me babies, and if one day my dad will hatch into shoes for my mom. She likes high heels. Grandma sees these questions in my head because she is connected to everyone and everything. She pulls me up on the table and I know to dance with her because she taught me that I am also connected to everyone and everything. "You already have your shoes, Baby Girl, you just need to keep 'em close," she sings. And we kick together. Everyone in the room is staring in their black clothes with after-funeral-cookies in their mouths but she squeezes my hand and we hold them up in the air, high. In this moment, I realize that all the world is intense and burns blue through my river veins because I am also a dance, and I am already with myself.



KATIE KNAUB

BIRDBOUSES

PHOTOGRAPH

THE GIRL WHO SAVED THE WORLD

MEGAN BARLOG

1) “Going Through the Motions”.

The girl who saved the world is just going through the motions. She’s been doing this whole “save the world” gig for quite some time, and to be quite honest, it’s getting old. Every day is the same old thing—go out, kill something, get far too little sleep, try to live through the work day without being attacked by something, and then start over. This is her calling—what she was chosen for, trained for—but after you’ve seen so many demons, you’ve seen them all. Even apocalypses are getting old. She can’t even count the number of times she’s saved the world from total destruction. That rose-shaped burn mark on the sidewall of the freeway? That wasn’t any mere car accident as they reported on the news. That was a dragon. You’re welcome. Remember Y2K? She stopped it from happening. When the world didn’t end on May 21, that was her. The world was never at risk of ending on October 21—that was only a rumor. And the apocalypse of 2012? She’s already prevented it. Again, you’re welcome.

Death, too, is no longer threatening. The girl who saved the world has died. Twice. Well, technically three times, but who’s counting?

Still, the girl who saved the world continues going through the motions. “There must be more to this life than fighting demons,” she thinks.

2) Of her body.

After sinking her weapon into her last monster of the night, the girl who saved the world returns home to shower off the blood and dust. She stands in front of the bathroom mirror, naked, admiring her slender frame, the curve of her shoulders and biceps, the rippling movement of her shoulder blades as she moves her arms over her head. The way her muscles create a small “v” at her armpits. Her athletic figure doesn’t allow her all the luxurious feminine curves, but she much prefers her musculature. She runs her fingers over the subtle line that runs between her breasts and the bumps of her diamond-hard abs, and stands on her toes to admire the upside-down hearts of her calf muscles, and the delicate rose tattooed in the small of her back. She has never had to ask the question “does this make me look fat?” Women envy her.

Though she was gifted with speedy healing powers, her body is riddled with scars. Her skin used to be flawless, smooth as milk. The girls in the locker room at the gym stare and mutter “how terrible” and “what a shame,” but the girl who saved the world is attached to her scars. Each one tells of a battle, of a victory. She’s forgotten most of the stories. She remembers that one on her knee—she

collided with a rock during a chase. The rock got it worse. The vamp got it worst. The misshapen one on her neck, just barely hidden by her hair, is from the one she loved. The one she saved. That one on her ankle is from shaving. Even girls who save the world have trouble with razors.

3) Dating history of the girl who saved the world.

In addition to her athleticism, the girl who saved the world is incredibly beautiful. All the men want her, and even some women, but they're also intimidated by her. Those brave enough to ask her out have often been rejected. She's dated a few of them, but relationships are hard to manage when the world, like a clingy boyfriend, is always in need of saving.

4) Dating history of the girl who saved the world: average guys.

She tried to date average guys, but for one reason or another, it never seemed to work. This one guy she went out with was a college boy, working part-time at the theater. He was taller than she was, with brown, curly hair. Did I mention he was taller than her? Anyway, they were both clearly attracted to each other, but when they sat down to dinner the conversation went nowhere, and the girl who saved the world quickly became bored. After the movie, he walked her to her car, and then asked her to drive him to his car. The big baby. She obliged, but instead of dutifully getting out of the car, he suggested they go somewhere else, that "It's only 9 p.m.—the night is still young!" The girl who saved the world declined, using the excuse of paperwork waiting for her, and he reluctantly got out of the car. When he suggested they should hang out sometime, the girl who saved the world smiled politely and drove off, not once looking back in her rearview mirror. She ignored his texts and phone calls and blocked him on Facebook.

Another of these average guys lasted a few dates longer. It wasn't until date number three that she realized he had a problem with her height. They were equals most of the time, but the girl who saved the world liked wearing heels, no matter how impractical they were in her line of work, and this guy had a problem with being shorter (but if you asked him, he'd say the problem was her being taller). As they walked through the parking lot, he walked on top of parking blocks, along the rose borders, asked that she walk in the gutter so that he might be taller. She hadn't even revealed that she fought evil 24/7. He probably would have had a complex about that too. The girl who saved the world stopped returning his calls.

5) Princesses marry princes.

The girl who saved the world wanted to be a princess. She wanted to wear a sparkly crown, and pretty dresses, and marry a prince, and live in a huge castle up in the clouds. Her mother wanted her to be a princess, too, and taught her all the important princessly things, like table manners, and sharing, and would say things like "Princes like princesses who smile" or "Princes like princesses with long hair." The girl who saved the world thought Rapunzel must be the most liked princess of all.

For years the girl who saved the world wanted to be a princess so she could marry a prince. But in order to catch a prince, a princess must have an abusive family, or a fairy godmother, or a dead father, but the girl who saved the world just had an absentee father. She guessed she could have dumbbed herself down enough to prick her finger on a spinning wheel or a rose thorn, but she wasn't that stupid. The only thing left to do was wait. Or sleep. Or wait and sleep. Eventually the girl who saved the world got tired of waiting and decided maybe she didn't want to be a princess anymore.

6) The Chosen One.

When she got the call that she was the chosen one, the girl who would save the world, she accepted it. In the beginning she found the work difficult, and she became more and more paranoid. But with training and practice she grew stronger, faster, smarter. This was what she was born to do. She alone was born to save the world.

7) Things the girl who saved the world cannot reveal on dates:

What she did today.

What she did last night.

What she did the night before.

What she does for a living.

Her plans this weekend (the world is going to end—again).

That their waiter is a brachen demon.

Or that the guy at table seven is a vampire and he's about to—

“Excuse me for just one second.”

Why she took so long in the bathroom.

Why there are scratches on her arms. (Would a rosebush be plausible?)

And dust on her clothes.

That she has weapons concealed in her purse, strapped to her back and ankles, and hidden in her coat sleeves.

Why she hasn't touched her food.

Why she's staring at the group of attractive, pale-skinned men that just walked into the restaurant. Or why they don't have reflections in the mirror behind the bar.

Why she has to leave the table again.

8) Dating history of the girl who saved the world: superheroes.

On a whim she tried dating superheroes, thinking it might be easier to build a relationship with her equal, but the first superhero she went out with never used his secret identity and instead showed up to their first date in full costume with a giant letter monogrammed across his rippling pectorals. He was handsome, sexy, and he knew it. But he was crude, conceited, had no table manners, and, on the whole, was less intelligent than a grappler demon, and just as sloppy in a fight. She

was careful to let him down easy, lest he create a man-shaped-hole in the wall of the Cheesecake Factory.

She had better luck with the other superhero she dated. He was tall, well muscled, intelligent. It was difficult at first, though, because neither knew the other was also a superhero.

Eventually they both discovered each others' true identities, and that relaxed the tension for a while. They became more comfortable around each other. The sex was amazing. But it soon became apparent that they were both far too busy saving the world to devote time to a real relationship, and so they went their separate ways.

9) Fairytales.

The girl who saved the world doesn't have much time for parties, plays, concerts, or other leisurely pastimes like reading. The only reading she gets in is a few sentences here or there on demons and how best to kill them. She used to read when she was younger, back before she was the girl who saved the world. Sometimes her mother would read to her from a book of fairytales, and tell her about the girl who tamed a monster and made him her prince, or the girl who looked in the mirror and got sucked into another dimension.

Her life was a lot like those fairytales. Except for the happily ever afters. Somehow she could never seem to reach them.

10) Dead mothers.

When her mother died, the girl who saved the world had a fleeting thought that perhaps now she would find a prince—now that she fit the stereotype. Instead she got a delinquent sister and a pile of debt.

11) Dating history of the girl who saved the world: monsters.

Some guys she dated were monsters. Literally. Her work environment doesn't give her the best selection. And she doesn't get out much.

She hadn't expected it to go anywhere with this guy. You know how everyone says opposites attract, but in reality it never works that way? But this one monster she dated really got to her. He was the quintessential bad boy—he smoked, drove too fast, gambled for kittens, went around town wearing a black cloak and growling at people. He was violent in everything he did—especially in bed. The fact that he could kill her at any moment was half the thrill of the experience.

But he developed this annoying habit of stalking her. Day or night, it didn't matter. He managed to find her. A collection of cigarette butts grew beneath the tree outside her bedroom window. A box of black roses was ding-dong-ditched at her back door. Whenever he revealed himself to her, he'd say "I love you" and start talking of marriage. Or how he would die without her. He was becoming too needy—wanting to see her every hour of the day, requiring saving every other night because he couldn't stop moping over her long enough to defend himself. She told him she didn't want to see him anymore, and he threatened to kill himself. He

burned his skin, started cutting. He almost let a stray huntsman shoot him through with an arrow before the girl who saved the world intervened. And when nothing seemed to work, when nothing seemed to make her love him, he even tried to rape her. But the girl who saved the world threw him out the window, shouting “Ask me again why I could never love you!” He stopped coming around after that.

12) Boys who save the world.

If princesses marry princes then it’s only logical that girls who save the world must marry boys who save the world.

Well, now that’s just silly—who ever heard of a boy who saved the world? We all know that behind every great man in history there was always a woman.

13) Dating history of the girl who saved the world: the boy who saved the world.

She didn’t think she would find one, but she did—she found a boy who saved the world. He was different than the others. Chivalrous, courteous, just like a prince. Yet he respected her need to fight for herself and occasionally open her own doors. He helped her train, and they’d spar together—helping to fix each others’ weaknesses. Just like the superheroes, he had a sense of justice, a moral code. But he wasn’t conceited or self-absorbed. He was sometimes self-effacing, but then so was she on an off day. He was a monster by biology, but he fought against that nature. The bad boy without all the side effects. And he brought her a dozen red roses. He was the one who taught the girl who saved the world how to love. How to let herself be loved. How to love more than just the girl in the mirror. He was the only man or monster she ever loved with all her heart. And it was because she loved him she ran him through with the bad end of a sword.

He survived it, and another apocalypse was averted in the whole ordeal. But it put a damper on their relationship. Nothing was ever the same after that. They tried to make it work, but in the end, she reluctantly admitted it would be easier if they were just friends, and he decided it would be easier if he moved seven hours away.

14) To feel again.

The girl who saved the world tried to find a love like that again, but even before she failed she knew her search would be fruitless. A person only gets one chance for true love, for a happy ending, and she blew it. It’s safer not to get invested, not to feel anything for anyone. Her friends are concerned she’ll do something drastic, but she’s already died before. She can’t do anything worse. So now, every evening, she unlocks her trunk, pulls out a crossbow and a few other choice weapons, and heads out into the darkness. She’s just going through the motions. Hoping that at some point along the way, something will happen to allow her to feel again.

MY FAVORITE BOOK

ALEX JOHNSON

I get lost in her pages,
dog-eared along the edges
in the middle; I wear out her spine
writing in her margins
with my fingertips at every
important part.

The story ends.
I can't go on; but there are empty pages
past this point. I stare at her pen
as the pages turn, watch it move—follow
every word. With desperate longing,
I read.

And I am terrified she'll tear
the book from my hands;
for a reader:
 who values her punctuation
 or the language of her lips,
 the creases of her pages
 or her grammatical hips

but I can scream my love 'til my throat
scars and runs blood
to fill her inkwell with my red
so her pen would never dry.

ODE TO THE DOG

LESLEY GOUGER

Oxytocin love bursts each time we meet

Who's a pretty doggie?

You are not Betsy the Border Collie

with over 340 words

Good girl, Betsy!

In our connection the same

biochemical reaction

found in nursing mothers.

Agriculturists say

without you, I'd be

gathering nuts and berries

instead of fetching poems.

Drop it. I said drop it!

You herd my proverbial sheep,

you make me stay.

Stay...stay.

Heart beats slow each time we meet.

Come here, come here.

Infantile features frozen in time

erupt uncontrollable cooing from my lips.

Who's a buzah buzah?

Barking at you

when I went to get the mail.

Half a bag of chocolate chip cookies

gone.

Hydrogen peroxide in hand,

you in the pink tub, shaking.

It's OK, just sit, sit, sit.

Like all dog owners,

after your death,

I too will say you were a good dog.



JESSICA BAUER

TIM BURTON

DRAWING

THE FUNERALS

GINA SRMABEKIAN

They diagnosed me with some rare syndrome; something about my tear ducts not being able to produce enough water to let me cry. My dad clapped me on the back, open palmed, his hands like carved marble leaving a blue stain under my skin. He'd tell his poker pals that the Devaraux men were such that the good Lord above didn't see it fit for any of them to snivel.

Beth was holding my hand at my mother's funeral, the first time I cried. Beth, her lips painted jungle red with her fingernails burrowing into my palm, was my father's mistress. She stood beside me and cried crocodile tears. Her fingers made crosses deliberately over her décolletage so my father and uncles would notice. My father dug his toe into the freshly laid dirt to put his cigarette out. The crowd turned their back on the tomb, and a column of black shrines began to descend the riverbank. The funeral was over.

I married Beth when I was older. I found her in another body, but with the same vulgar power pooling between her legs, calling to men like my father and I. My grandmother used to say, "Never let your head get away from your body—that's when the axe will fall." Yet, we extended our noses to their poison, never seeing the elixir clasped behind their backs.

The smell of whiskey preceded my father from room to room. Half a hallway down it came—like the sound of thunder, and I was always standing underneath a metal beam waiting to be struck; that is why I wouldn't let Kathy have my babies. She has five now, somewhere in Minnesota. Three months after she left, she sent me a picture of the kind of man who'd make her robust sons and wholesome daughters. He'd give her the kind of kids who'd hold her hand well after it went stiff.

At least, that's how I picture it when I picture her dead—which I haven't been doing as much, now that I have my job.

Dog catching is a shit job. Usually, I get strays that don't appreciate my whistle. They snarl at the back of my knees as I drag them, claws grinding the cement, snot shooting out of their outraged nostrils. All these years, I thought I was rescuing them, but now I'm not so sure. If it were up to me, I'd let them all shit on the manicured lawns of women like Beth or Kathy, or even my mother. The kinds of houses that cower behind gnomes and gardenias. Cowards like my mother, who'd leave a boy to the hands of a temperamental god made of my stepmother's lips and my father's belt.

Last week I found a bitch half-dead behind a dumpster. Pools of milk collected under her belly along with blood and the sticky stuff of which babies are made. She didn't stir when I got the muzzle around her snout. She didn't snarl or perk her ears when I pulled. She merely looked at me, as honest a look I had ever received in my life. I hated her pathetic saucer eyes watching the back of my hand go soft against her fur. I hated her rose petal tongue and the way it hung from her gaping mouth. I wondered if she fought off dying long enough to make sure her young were safe. But how could she be sure? How could she be sure the alien hands that took her babies would feed them kibble and keep them indoors when it rained? What if those hands liked to make circles in flesh with cigarettes like my father did? She didn't, of course. But her ghastly ribcage poked through to my fingertips and I knew she couldn't stay.

And can you believe it? For the second time in my life, I cried.

TEA WITH INSOMNIA

SUSANA MARCELO

I.

*I want to sleep, I really do,
but first, I must have tea with Insomnia.*

*Monstrous woman she is
with her six fingers and six toes.*

“I still sip tea with a pinky to the sky.
Or else I’m lost,” she says. “Before
you drink, always cross
your teas and dot your eyes.”

“I want extra cream.”

“That’s not the recipe. Life is a tightrope.
Follow the logical steps or you’ll fall,” she says,
wagging fingers turned to stone.

*

*A pebble derailed my steps.
Mother, will you help me?*

I belong in trees made from books.

II.

“Is your head getting cold?” she asks.
“Where are your feet planted?”

“In my dreams,” I say, “But I’m falling,
and the world is upside down.”

She cocks an eyebrow, “What does that
mean?”

“My head is inches off earth;
I’ve yet to make contact.”

“That’s not right.”

“No, it’s what’s left.”

*

*Red parasols float toward cosmos;
travelers latch on with words.*

Mother, can you hear the chime of my tree rings?

III.

“You need to stop dreaming.

Dreams kill you. Why do you insist?”

“These dreams, from which I’m dying,
are the only ones I carry.”

“You’re a funambulist

whose

steps

are misplaced.”

*

In a house of books, I dwell.

Mother, can you live here?

When I wake,

I’m pressed paper

growing in creases

and withering in tea.

TWO KNIVES

TIFFANY EDDY

We me my mother's crimson kitchen taught and stirred counter-clockwise
throw grains of salt and knocked over the sugar for good luck. In boiling
water the frog jumps out. Heat it slowly. Boil Her alive. She boiled me
bubbling popping spankings I was bad. I've forgotten how to jump. My
head filled with lessons never ever cross two knives. Don't pick at bread
crumb scabs. Black-cat will eat you should you die without the door open
dogs won't grind or Grimm. She says I need to catch to keep Jack Horner.
Pre-heat to 350°. Bake a pie flytrap bubbling popping Rohypnol. Boiling.
But I lent the huntsman my knife protection from wicked queens sea
monsters jealous step-sisters rapists psychos killers homeless flashers
fathers- and there's already a witch baking in the oven. Bubbling. So I call
for takeout from a Chinaman whose name sounds like Rumpelstiltskin
order Zyprexa Kung Pow and a Manhattan. I boiling know better than to
sign over my first born to him as my mother bubbling popping did me.



JOVEIN HA

STRUNG

PAINTING

ROSES AND NEEDLES

JENNIFER HUTCHISON

I'm not allowed metal needles here.

This isn't some story about how accidents happen and I'm some unfortunate victim of circumstance. Woe is me and all that jazz. This also isn't one of those "I stabbed him because he looked at me with his evil rapist eyes" stories either.

I couldn't help myself really. He had these stupid thick black glasses and a plaid fedora pushed back from his semi-truck forehead. His smile showed all his perfect white teeth, like little stones lined up in the red.

I hate these plastic needles.

I swear I had a normal childhood. Nothing bizarre like torturing kittens or burning effigies. I didn't practice witchcraft and I never missed a day of school. My dad did leave when I was 8, but that has nothing to do with this.

103

I've traumatized three pairs of needles here.

He had a dozen roses, nestled in crinkling clear plastic. The card read "A Rose by any other name is still my Rose" I wanted to puke. I bet his girlfriend is an artist with unruly brown hair and blue eyes. Maybe they lived off of Ramen together in college and played SNES games while the Smith's played in the background. Maybe they only watch cancelled TV shows and refuse to see any movie with Johnny Depp in it.

I may have anger issues.

I remember he had brown eyes and looked like he hadn't shaved in four years.

He also reeked of really cheap beer.

I had three balls of yarn in my black bag that day and a pair of shiny green metal needles.

I've never won a ribbon for my knitting.

He was trying to read a book with a sepia-tone picture of Freud on the cover. Typical. And he kept staring at my clicking needles until trying to start a

conversation. “What are you making?” Typical.

I’ve been in three fights since I got here.

He also tried to ask me if I sold my knitting on Etsy. Why would I? I’m not knitting so idiots can wear my handmade items and act high and mighty. I bet every piece of jewelry he buys for his “Rose” is from Etsy and looks rough, like a tree branch or something else just as ridiculous.

I saw three psychiatrists after my dad left us. I don’t remember this.

I’m not sure what was more annoying, his messenger bag, or his glasses or his cowlick.

Once I yarn bombed a rail on the subway. A homeless man peed on it right after I had done it.

Last week I stabbed my knitting partner in the eye. She said I had a stuttering problem. My needle made a rather sweet squelching noise and I couldn’t pull it out.

104 He wouldn’t stop talking to me. His words crowded the empty spaces around us. His girlfriend knits he said. I’ll bet she knits chunky ugly grey scarves and gives them to all her friends. I’ll be they all croon and admire her sloppy work. I kept clicking.

My dad smelled like cheap beer.

My mom’s won at major craft fairs. She has a whole case of blue ribbons and wool sweaters.

I was three stations away from home when he moved over to sit next to me.

We aren’t allowed to have yarn in our cells. At least I’m not.

He started telling me his grandmother knitted. That he thought it was a dead art. He asked me why I didn’t talk. Was I mute?

All the knitters here are old women in grey jumpsuits who keep making sweaters for far away families. They make them on tan knitting needles and the silence sits heavy between the clicks.

He also had a moleskin notebook. Predictable.

He grated his teeth and breathed through his mouth, the breath wheezing in and

out. Mouth-breathers are the worst. Each breath made my hair separate and grow as I tried to inch closer to the plastic window.

He wouldn't stop staring and breathing. So I stabbed him in the chest three times until his life spurted out like dark red roses onto my knitting.

I think it was the roses which really annoyed me.

He didn't actually smell like beer now that I think of it. He also fell off his seat and twitched on the floor. Thank god he stopped breathing.

My mom always said keep calm and carry yarn. I still prefer needles.

BUS

DEANNA HERBERT

She is orange and infrequent, makes me learn patience,
forces me to see time breathing warm air in my face:

hurry, hurry it whispers,
or she'll be on her way,
bright cheetah streaking past me.

She has no patience, she will not wait for me,
she has running to do across the asphalt fields
to carry them all home safe,
just in time for dinner.

I can hold back the hunger in my stomach drumming against my belly-walls
when I know my cheetah will not hold herself
in her mission to cross the city plains.

Even as the darkness paints her path black her eyes are bright,
and she weaves through the swarms of gnat-cars
laughing exhaust.

HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

ELIZABETH ARANA

*Little children, headache; big children, heartache.
-Italian Proverb*

Once, you were flora
my body cultured, fauna
cocooned within me.
Hands vowed to
distended belly:
we will always be
this close.

How is it, now, that
you exist outside
of me? Next to me,
the distance
between driver
and passenger an abyss
I cannot bridge.

Who could fathom this distance?

Just let me out here, Mom.

Door slams, and I wonder
when I became alkaline, why
I can no longer host you.



KATIE KNAUB

PLANETS

MIXED MEDIA

A TREE TO TIE MY DREAMS ON

GINA SRMABEKIAN

The trees of my grandmother's village were waiting, always. They knew that it was silly in a land that outnumbered the living, where the rabble outnumbered the standing. There were still those who'd refused to leave, so they respected them. They noticed that sometimes, humans died for lack of words between them. It was for this reason that they discarded their leaves and stood naked before the humans; they knew they would be covered by December. It would not be of their flowers, or fruit, but of handkerchiefs: black desperate prayers, simple and impossible.

They could not guarantee any of these dreams. They were only trees. Yet the humans continued the tradition, each year tying knots that they hoped would hold. It was this, trees understood; they had roots which sustained while fall took from them their beauty; black desperate roots for the winter, gray for the wars that outgrew them. Humans had no roots as far as the trees could tell. Words were flimsy attempts but their language outgrew them. They were connected to the land merely by gravity and connected to each other merely by blood.

So, it occurred to the trees that humans needed something to tie their dreams on, for both arms were needed just to hold onto themselves.

* * *

There are plums the size of fists, purpled and rotten, in the sun of my great-grandmother's orchard. April, when I was born, was the prime time for picking but she was forced out in December, when the sleet and the river left crystalline petals in her hair, pink for the blood in the unfurling white, a vanishing point in the horizon made of unknown words; the black, blinking line between her home, between the white space on my paper, commanding an audience to know her. To know. Her uncle had refused to leave so they respected him; the taxidermist had used artistry, his body a Hanging Amaranthus, purpled and preserved for the snow, pink for the blood in the unfurling white. But this was years before my grandmother came to the abortion clinic, her eyes settled on the vanishing point of her bloodline, the man she loved, a word she was afraid of her children becoming. She had already brought two into the world, but father was a two syllable sound that had gotten stuck in her throat when she was just a girl; staring out the window that never returned him, the curtains hanging like the red sashes

at the pulpits of war—the red shade of my lipstick, erect and gleaming, as I lean forward at a bar and ask him to light my cigarette. He tells me I'm beautiful, but I'm too sad to take home—and I grow furious at myself for having worn it, the red plums never reaching their full bloom, smashing, rotted to the ground with no one to mourn them. To mourn them.

My grandmother's first word was a summons to a ghost. I want to write myself into being but I can't find a language that does not evolve from the want of remembrance, the black desperate indent tab heading toward the vanishing point.

PURE GLASS WHEN STAINED
MAKES ART OF LIGHT

ROBIN SMITH

When my grandfather asked to kiss my left elbow
and down my stomach. I learned the meaning
of shame.

When my parents asked me to leave that meaning
in the foyer of St. Sebastions like a rain-glazed
umbrella next to the holy water fount.

I found that I couldn't

and kept my shame buried in my stomach and
left elbow—afraid the stain glass St. Peter
would illuminate me

for the whole church—Priest and all—to see.
Then I found St. Peter's eyes (two pieces of
agate held up to light) knew guilt.

Felt it as three crows.

And in those quiet moments of the
consecrating of the Eucharist—heads bowed
My shame became the holy spirit flying over the
vestibule into smoky light.



JOVEIN HA

SELF PORTRAIT

DIGITAL

Eyes open—reluctantly. Princess splayed out on floor. Ice blue lips and black lacquer toenails. Dead? Sudden memory: Last night. Overdose? Still breathing. Pulse? Still alive. Momentarily relieved. Want coffee, want Starbucks. Bathroom sink full of dildos, syringes, some poor fucker's wallet. Sudden responsibility: 11:00 checkout time. Must deal with unconscious princess before then. Brush teeth then rinse. Minty toothpaste spittle dribbles over dildos and syringes. So what? Smile into mirror. Still got it.

Reassured by the moist dewy feeling of the morning. Plenty of time yet. The *Coral Seas Motel* is muffled under a blanket of stillness—all of Hollywood glides through its summertime early morning vichyssoise that, more often than not, carries within its sleepy breezes the slightest hint of sour milk. Climb down the stairs, walk nonchalantly through the office, focusing all my attention on avoiding the night manager's gaze—he doesn't like me—he's Indonesian or something—very suspicious about the white man, which also might be some kind of social injunction where white guys—or maybe just cocksuckers—are an affront to his God or gods or something. Who knows? I don't think he likes anybody though. It must be a genetic thing—sleazy Hollywood motels and mean-tempered Indonesians—or maybe they're all part of some huge Pan-Asian clan that's building its fortune on Hollywood sex motels.

Exit out onto Western Avenue where I look squarely—haughtily at the smattering of passing BMWs driven down from the Los Feliz hills by young buttoned-down executives on their way to Paramount or Raleigh Studios who want to get their tongues firmly planted in their bosses' buttoned-up butt holes before 8 a.m. I know they're stealing glances at the *Coral Seas*' parking lot as they pass too—just to gauge how much action they missed last night. I've seen them here before. I've watched as their propriety erodes—sometimes slowly; sometimes in a flash—with bigger and bigger doses of their favorite drug, which ends up being just S'more-of-whatever-you-got—as they cross the boundary separating detached spectators with Rococo loafers to slutty man-whores with fat credit cards, *Yippee!!*

Unremarkable walk to Starbucks—just the previous night's residue of sleaze—I don't want to offend anybody, so I'll spare you most of the details—just used-up rubbers, used-up syringes and used-up baggies—discarded by scary people who were used up decades ago—all stuff that's invisible to normal folks, but is pretty apparent to the expert class, my membership paid for most recently

with six weeks in county jail. My customers see themselves as the leisure class, café society, bourgeoisie—but normal people in the country call them wastrels and bums. I call them none of those. I prefer the moniker, *victims of inertia*, even though that particular signifier's sheen has eroded somewhat over the decades due to simply an awareness of guilt: Everybody spewed endless streams of bullshit. No one is innocent, especially me. Claiming victimhood at this stage of my life is pretty funny. I sell drugs because I like getting high, I like breaking the law—and most of all, I like fucking all those boys who will do just about anything for a free dip into the bag. The princess in my room just wouldn't shut up—I remember that much. Wouldn't shut up and wouldn't leave, so I did what I usually do in extreme cases of motor-mouth: Gave the little faggot a shot of heroin, which usually has a quieting effect. But apparently this time it was a bit too much. Man, I really want my Starbucks.

The strip mall is the city's stab at urban renewal, an attempt to build an edifice out of nothing but green-and-brown decorations. There's a Chinese fast food place begging for attention under a useless finial, and an Aaron Brothers picture framing store peeking from the space between a couple of faux Greek columns, and, of course, the Starbucks. It's all supposed to nod to the past while looking to the future, which doesn't make any sense at all. I mean, didn't the architect who designed this place and the business consortium that funded it and the politicians who okayed it think that we'd notice that *post-modern* is really just another way to say, *I'm too lazy to come up with anything new, so let's just dump all the pieces into the blender and hit purée?* That the designers of this building actually are the true victims of inertia? And putting it here? At this intersection? Really? Is there no respect for the past? This place has *history*, even though it may not be the same kind of history like Gettysburg or the Smithsonian or even that sad dinosaur museum over on Wilshire Boulevard. All putting this building here really amounts to erecting a cheap tent over an oozing lesion, then pretending everything's fine. The city should embrace its oozing lesions—they're disappearing at an alarming rate. Come to think of it, I can't remember what used to be here, but it had to be better than *this* piece of shit. One thing I know for sure, though: No amount of good intentions can compete with the force of tradition. This street corner, despite all these cosmetic changes, wrought by statute and pretention to greed, will never relinquish its reputation as a place built on itching drag queens with enormous limp dicks, glory holes, smelly drunks, dope fiends, pretty boys and mayhem. The intersection of Western Avenue and Hollywood Boulevard will be forever fixed as one of the earth's great and holy shrines of wasted potential where amateur standing at just about everything vanishes merely by virtue of finding yourself on foot here.

I'm not a fighter. I stay as far away from physical altercations as much as possible, but just at the moment I walk into Starbucks I lay eyes on a guy standing in line—John Ramos—and just like it was an automatic reaction, I walk right up to him and sock him in the face, which is at least as shocking to me as it is to him. And he says something really bright like, Wow, you hit me. Why'd you hit me? And I say: You little snitch! I just got out of jail. You gave me up, you little motherfucker! And even while I'm saying this, I think about the evidence I'm basing this belief on, which was supplied to me by none other than the deputies in the jail, which already begins to poke holes in my theory because they're like the world's greatest liars. Even if they had, by some weird stretch of the imagination, a stake in telling the truth about this, it's more likely than not that they made it up just to fuck with me. They do that. They are merchants of chaos—just like Mexican gangs. They fuck with you just because they *can*. That's one of the weird things about control. You'll be sitting in your bunk, trying to ignore the seconds and minutes going by, hoping that enough of them have elapsed that you'll open your eyes one day and *voilà!* You're being rolled up for release, which probably has never happened once since jails were invented. And these deputies in the jail have made you their own personal little soap opera, their own little ant farm or diorama. It's got to be cool to have complete control over so many people in one place, really. They'll call your name and order you to come out of your tank, and you know it can be for any number of reasons, but what it usually is, they'll try to get you to roll over on your friends. They'll take you into some sergeant's personal office and there's all kinds of pictures of this sergeant hanging out with various convicts like they're best buddies or something—and you recognize some of these guys, but most of them are before your time. And he'll offer you a cigarette or a Coke and act like he's your best friend in the whole world. And that's what happened with me. This sergeant told me that Johnny Ramos is the guy who rolled on me, and he tells me the story of how it only took like five minutes or so when Ramos was being arrested and he just spit out my name—and I could be released soon if I cooperated like Ramos did. But I just say no thanks because I have honor.

But I already hit Ramos and I can't backtrack now. Even if I don't honestly believe that little Johnny Ramos is capable of narc-ing on me, there's no way I'm going to say something like, Oh, gee, I'm terribly sorry. I might have made a mistake. Please accept my humble apology. So I hit him again right there in line at Starbucks. And like I said before, I'm not a fighter, which I'm not, so I was totally amazed at what happened next: He starts crying—right there in line. His nose is bleeding and he's standing there crying among all those people drinking their coffees inside this post-modern monstrosity and I feel like the world's biggest piece of shit—like I'm the world's most horrible person and I want to explain that I'm not

known for fighting, I just thought it was my duty to hit him because I thought—no need to go back over this again, you get the picture. And he's crying and looking at me like he can't believe I just hit him and I can see in his eyes our history together, especially when we first met, which was like over 15 years ago during the height of the AIDS epidemic, and guys were still dropping like flies and every weekend you'd get at least two invitations to go to somebody's memorial service, where all these queens would stand up at a dais and give little testimonials about whoever'd just croaked. And more often than not, these testimonials were pretty much bullshit where so-and-so would be described as having all these really *spiritual* qualities, like he volunteered at a leper colony or whatever, and you'd wonder if this person testifying actually knew so-and-so because it's sort of common knowledge that he was just your regular run-of-the-mill dick pig/bag whore. But it's always sad when somebody dies, and you kind of understand it probably wouldn't be cool to say to the crowd that you'll miss so-and-so because he almost never sold you short bags of dope—at least that you know of.

It was at the end of one of these memorials when I met Johnny Ramos. There were all these queens milling around inside this church in their cable-knit sweaters and there's lilies and wreaths all over the place and guys are sipping coffee out of little Styrofoam cups and holding little cubes of yellow cheese skewered on toothpicks. And pretty much everybody there has AIDS too, so these queens are thinking about how their memorial is going to be so grand compared to this one: *I'm going to have Mozart's Requiem performed at mine or Mine's going to be on the cliffs of the ocean and all the guests will wear white!* And usually I wouldn't have even noticed a guy like Ramos except it was pretty clear he and I were in the same camp, meaning that we were part of the crowd of guys who'd dropped out of A.A. for the moment, while the other half were all sober and smug, in their 12-step dogma and program regalia, basking in their realized potential and the sunlight of the spirit.

So Ramos and I sort of trade glances now and again, because I guess it was pretty obvious that we're both twirling a little, like house flies probably have longer attention spans than we do. And I think Ramos is kind of cute, so I follow him into the bathroom and suck him off during one of the testimonials about whoever it was that died. And when we get done, we sort of separate for a few minutes until he comes up to me and he's with this fat old Jew, who everybody called The Rabbi, but his name was Sol Liebowitz, who drives this really expensive BMW 740 like it's Bathsheba's barge, or maybe Lindsey Graham in her B-17 Flying Fortress. And Johnny introduces me to Sol and we all, meaning me and Johnny and Sol and a fat guy named Bob, take off together in Sol's sedan. And I'm guessing that we're going to cruise around and maybe smoke dope and pretend we're happy and privileged,

but we just head down to Robertson without a puff of anything. And Sol parks in front of some exclusive Persian rug store, and just like he rehearsed it, he turns to Johnny and me and says: You guys are gonna die from AIDS pretty quick, so here's what I propose. And he describes this group of guys who all have AIDS and Sol pays them big sums of money for doing these outrageously brazen burglaries in West Hollywood and Beverly Hills, where they take manhole covers and heave them through the window of one of these deluxe rug stores, then drag a chest-high stack of rugs out to this rented truck and then book. And then this fat guy named Bob explains that he's got AIDS too and has been doing these robberies for Sol for a couple of months—and he qualifies it by saying he's probably only got six months or so to live—and that it's such a fucking rush—that you can be so fucking brazen because you don't have to worry about your future because, after all, how long do you think you've got anyway? So I say something like, Wow, that's totally fucked up, but I say I'll think about it, and Johnny and I get out of Sol's car and walk to my apartment, which isn't that far away, and we get high and spend the afternoon fucking.

So that's how I met Johnny. We never stole shit for Sol—we only sold dope to each other over the years now and then, we had sex a few times and got high a bunch of times and stole some shit here and there—anyway, we were friends. And while we're standing face-to-face in Starbucks, Johnny's sobbing and he's got this expression on his face like he's my pet dog who's been with me for years and years and he can't understand why I hit him, like I just abandoned him in some field of weeds or something, like I totally betrayed him. And the harder he cries the harder I get. Open up my arms and give him this really big hug—right there in Starbucks—and we embrace really tight, me saying in his ear, I'm so sorry, Johnny, I'm so sorry, Johnny, over and over and over. And by now I'm crying too, and I start kissing him all over his face, and then he starts kissing me back. And we just stand there hugging each other and kissing and blubbing like a couple of delicate gay boys at a Spielberg movie, and—this is weird: We sort of start feeling a little conspicuous at the exact same moment because there's all this snot and blood running all down our faces and everything. So we start to laugh because it's just so real, hugging and crying and laughing and kissing and bleeding and everything right there in Starbucks. And the more we laugh, the harder we laugh and it snowballs until people are backing away from us, and we both know we have to get out of there pretty quick because some good Samaritan is going to call the cops in about one second. So we head out of the Starbucks as fast as we can, and we can't stop laughing for about two blocks. And neither of us got any coffee, which makes us start laughing again, but we put the brakes on that pretty quick, because we're thinking kind of parallel at the moment, and we realize we really like each other

and we want to get high and fuck. What time is it, I say. Johnny looks at his phone: 10:30. Dude, I say, I got a room at the *Coral Seas*, but checkout time is at 11. But I know even when I'm saying this that I only have enough money for half the rent for another night. You have any money? I ask Johnny, which he says yeah, not to worry about the money because he's got plenty. So we head back to the motel, and all we're thinking about is getting high and getting naked, so we're walking pretty fast.

We get to the motel office just before 11, and Johnny, being the good guy that he really is, kind of takes the reins and says to the asshole manager that he's going to rent the room for another night, and he plunks down the hundred bucks or so for another night and he fills out the hotel papers and stuff and shows his driver's license. We get back to the room on the second floor and it's exactly the same except the little blue dude is gone, and I don't say anything because what's the point. I'm actually pretty grateful that he's not there because who wants to deal with this tweaked out chatty Cathy all night and then in the morning too. So me and Johnny get high together and it's fucking great and we're really digging each other's naked completely twacked-out bodies, and this goes on for an hour or so, until there's this little knock at the door.

And I open the door and it's the asshole night manager, who's looking pretty tired at this point, and behind him are about a dozen LAPD officers and a couple of detectives, who push their way in front of the manager. And my heart sinks to the bottom of my gut, and I know I've lost my voice and my thoughts are so fucking random, like there's a short circuit going on in my head, because I know this has something to do with the blue princess, but I'm not sure what because I'm almost completely sure he wasn't dead when I left earlier. And honestly I just swallowed a whole fucking bowling ball and I can feel my heart beating right out of my chest because I just got out of fucking jail and this is so fucking fucked up. And I'm ready for the worst to happen, when the cop says, John Ramos? And all of a sudden it's Christmas. I step aside and point to my friend. That's him, I say.

Nature Walk Man

-ic depress

- ~~work~~

-able-bodied peer review

-ed articles of clothing store

-house call

-ing the kettle Black or afrocentric criticism
and theory of mind your own business deal me
a hand

-out

-side ways to please your lady

-finger the hole

-in

-one manner of speaking Greek to me.

NATURE WALK MAN

PAPER, INK, COFFEE STAINS

SEAN PESSIN

ANXIETY

SUSANA MARCELO

I want to implode
within your binary voices,
lining walls,
amid blows
shaping a point
of no return:
my cavity is
reflecting nothing,

but instead I explode
dusting your leather spines with life,
caressing flesh,
rich in shift but poor in time
like a supernova,
consuming unexplored corners,
until my words on your wall
belong.

FOR ALL MY BELOVED CHICKEN TENDERS

OLVARD SMITH

This is how you eat fried chicken:

First, grab a piece of fried chicken. Bite down. Don't be shy. Put it in your mouth, bite, and roll the chunks of chicken titty and bread crumbs around with your tongue. Don't swallow yet; keep swirling your tongue around the fried white meat, savoring the taste of the delicious and inexpensive chicken tenders sold in The Marketplace, the cafeteria area of California State University Northridge. Enjoy my lovely hens fully, enthusiastically, with all of your pizza-faced high-school vigor because if you're reading this, the archetypal high-school virgin is the bar to which I measure your awkwardness. So slobber all over my boneless chicken without fear or self-consciousness like rehearsing your first kiss on your hand, no interfering braces, no bumping teeth, no judgments, only chicken and tongue and a raging hard-on if you're a guy. Remember guys, no judgments, no denials.

And don't swallow until I tell you to. Keep the chicken in your mouth. Even when it's spit-soggy the flavor is still there like Trident gum, the flavor lasts forever.

Now look, eating chicken is an explosive experience similar to masturbation. Sometimes chicken is so good it makes you come. Not me though, I can stop myself like a wine cork because I have control, so don't ask me about what it's like to have your knees violently buckled by a piece of Marketplace chicken tender. Ask a fat girl. Ask a fat guy. Ask black people.

But my erectile control is not why eating chicken is anything like choking chicken, so to speak. The reason is this: there's always a clean-up. The chicken grease sticking to your fingers, teeth, chin, tongue is thick and oily and an excellent source of protein with the creamy consistency of an egg white. Wrap your tongue around that one. Wet yourself like you were thirteen again.

So there you are swirling the chicken in your mouth while reading this to yourself, well, I'm giving you permission to swallow... OK, good. Now show me your tongue flecked with moist, wet crumbs, and slowly lick your fat, greasy, shameful lips, and taste the residue, the nectar, the ambrosia, of the greatest product our tuition money has ever garnered.

I know you had a blast.

Learn to love the chicken and it'll love your tongue right back.

UNCLE TONY

KIMBERLY SANDERS

i try to imagine my father's brother:

shorter, i think, but not as stocky
or with so many hard lines. his phantom blurred
around the edges and soft and pouchy. cleanly
shaven with piano-player hands.

feminine, my dad would call them.
he never touched a hammer
a day of his life, never felt the earth,
never molded or *made* anything.

"i'm glad." a swallow. dad has
a six AM smoker's cough,
rhythmic rasping on the other side.
"i'm glad he's dead."

he shot himself in the head; staccato bursts
of information i'll learn later, in moments
of sobriety. for now, i hear the clink of crystal—
my dad's vodka-and-coke, heady and strong,
his beverage of

choice
that comes with years
of alcoholism. hell hath no fury
like a brother scorned, i think.

But you should have seen me¹. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded²—with what caution—with what foresight, with what dissimulation³, I went to work!⁴

¹ When Edgar Allan enrolled in English 308, he was sure he could snag top honors with an intimate exposé on his latest breakup. After a particularly romantic evening at The Sizzler, Annabelle convinced Edgar Allan to not only walk her to her door, but also that ‘it’, whatever ‘it’ was wasn’t *him* but rather *her* and then she politely asked to keep the Styrofoam box full of fajitas as a parting gift. Edgar Allan obliged, before returning to his car where he called Annabelle and asked—between sobs—if he could still keep her photo in his wallet.

But that’s not how the story would read.

The story would paint Edgar Allan with a true penchant for poetic lyricism, a real scout of scene and summary, the next messiah of motif and in turn, an undeniable desirable to keep Annabelle coming back for climax after climax after *climax*. In short, It seemed plausible—probable even—the notion of channeling the universe through Microsoft Word; A second round seduction laced in serified font, highlighting Edgar Allan’s incessant fear that his heart would continue beating beneath her floorboards for all of time.

The task of threading twenty-five hundred words together taunted Edgar Allan, however, after a less-than-pleasing result in his English 208 workshop.

“I didn’t get the whitespace on page seven,” a classmate cried, convincing Edgar Allan that the piece was probably just too rococo for such a remedial group. But this piece, morose mingling of majestic prose and misery would put the ‘holy’ back in melancholy, the ‘art’ back in ‘heartbreak.’ *Now that’s good*, Edgar Allan thought, *remember that one for the dénouement*.

² Sporting a suede messenger bag and a bitter black polish on his nails, Edgar Allan entered the English 308 classroom at the semester’s beginning and resorted to the back of the room. A native of the front row, Edgar Allan swore to never become the silent ghoul in the back of the room until an unfortunate buzz cut in 2006 caused Edgar Allan to rethink his choices in visibility.

“He must be going through a rough time,” the girl from row three whispered

to the adjacent mistress of row two. “It looks like he cut it himself.” *Nevermore*, Edgar Allan vowed, oathing to keep his hair long and his mustache menacing, much to his mother’s demise, as he moved his books to the back of the room for the rest of his undergraduate career.

As he counted heads casually casing the room for a seat, Edgar Allan avoided conversation by staring at his laptop and balancing the week’s losses on his online poker account—petty cash in comparison to the monetary merit he was assuredly going to reap the benefits of once his breakup hit the page. Edgar Allan continued to pen cerebral lines as the class waited for the clock to strike noon. “If our love a yacht, you the anchor,” Edgar Allan typed on his virtual notepad. *God that’s good* Edgar Allan nodded, the motion interrupted by the professor’s entrance. Upon arrival, The Aged Woman entered, unpacked a menagerie of men from her bag, bound by Penguin and Norton alike, and she motioned an elliptical twirl with her left hand in a fury, signaling the students to shift their desks from uniform lines into a single autonomous oval. The Aged Woman began reading names in alphabetical order as the desks screeched and snorted across the linoleum. Hands waved and voices flickered to signal their attendance and a legally listed Harold deemed himself “A.J.” for the rest of the semester, a curious occurrence that alerted Edgar Allan to the notion of adopting a new name of his choosing. As he fondled the idea, The Aged Woman inserted herself into the circle of surnames. She began explaining the requirements of the writing workshop, highlighted by her inability to recall what the A stood for in MLA. She advised the class to be forewarned on attendance and participation policies, her voice muffled by the distribution of syllabi around the circle. As The Aged Woman finished the formalities of the workshop, students raised their hands and begged for brief reminders of everything she had just gone over, Edgar Allan distant from the exchange in his own eager attempts to craft the perfect description of Annabelle. “When you kissed me, your glassy eyes looked like glass and your fair skin was more fair than a piece of white bread,” Edgar Allan typed. “You, the princess of my castle.”

As Edgar Allan continued romancing himself, a roar of laughter slid under the door from the hallway as the knob turned. “Glad to see you, Paul. I truly am,” the voice said in a real slick manner, only matched by the demeanor of The *I* attached. Turning the knob to the door to the class that turned to watch The *I* that turned the knob in the first place, The *I* stood in the doorway shaking hands with Edgar Allan’s English 208 professor, a man of more letters than the simple P-A-U-L that The *I* so assuredly addressed him by. The exchange was quick but Edgar Allan licked his chops at the chance to share a classroom with someone on a professorial first name basis. Only a special species of student could address an educator by their first name, a lesson Edgar Allan learned in junior high when he attempted small

talk with Mr. Hancock in seventh period pickle ball.

“Richard, you think those Ravens can keep their concentration through winter? You look like a man who knows a thing or two about the bump and run.”

Mr. Hancock told Edgar Allan to hit the showers before sending him to the guidance office on grounds of sexual bemusement.

Fully clothed and focused on The I, Edgar Allan followed his footsteps as he sauntered his way into the workshop circle, not before rubbing The Aged Woman’s shoulder from behind, her cycle seemingly kick-starting again as her cheeks blushed to his touch. He removed his backpack and seated himself beside her, eyeing the circle in silence with his sunglasses stapled on to his brows and his hands flat on his desk. When the syllabus stack arrived to his right, The I simply took hold of the heap and handed it in its entirety back to The Aged Woman, his desk clean and Edgar Allan in awe. Shaking the sprawl back into an organized stack, The Aged Woman signaled the beginning of the end by asking each student in the circle to announce their favorite writer and a respective “fun fact.” As every student cooed of counties near and far, answers laced with the Beats, the Romantics, the Late Greats of American Prose, Edgar Allan Googled “Influential literary figures” and prayed for an impressive second-hand response. It was far too early to be honest in English 308 and if Edgar Allan had any shot at an in with The I, he needed to reign supreme in inaugural small talk. To be anything less would be like *Playboy* in Braille—pointless, passé and purely ridiculous.

“Boston,” Edgar Allan announced. “I’m from Boston. And Byron is my man.”

“Are you serious?” The I pressed from across the circle, his first words post-PAUL.

The class turned to Edgar Allan, anxiously awaiting if he was, indeed, *serious*. Edgar Allan moved his fingers over his mouse hoping to somehow absorb all of Byron by simply making the motion, The I interrupting his frantic flinching, sliding his sunglasses off to reveal a twinset of burned-out blue pupils, slapped-on and faded like stickers left out in the rain.

“Boston?” The I pressed. “I spent a summer in Boston, what a dismal city. Denounce Boston any chance you get, champ.”

Hypnotized by the eye of The I, Edgar Allan nodded with The I, mentally noting to never recognize Boston again. As the class introductions rounded the room, students quoted Keats and Yates to keep company with The I who sat still, unaroused, until his turn tapped him on the shoulder and he cleared his throat. “Princeton and Proust” The I pitched, Edgar Allan nodding just to note his undying support. After a brief moment of adoration, The Aged Woman dismissed the class, dealing out workshop dates to each student as they passed by her seat, The I departing before Edgar Allan could pretend to be his friend for a few minutes

longer.

“October Fourth,” The Aged Woman announced to Edgar Allan as he closed his computer and clipped his bag. “Four weeks.” Edgar Allan nodded and began counting syllables on his way to the car.

As he tapped his break light in a string of stop sign traffic, Edgar Allan continued penning lines aloud to the beat of the New Wave radio tune. “We spent our summer laying hardwood on the carpet,” Edgar Allan teased out before trying again. “~~Laying~~ Pulling carpet off the hardwood,” and again. “My summer was your summer and our summer, too.” Edgar Allan winced, the line of cars stopping and going ahead, a seasick drive sprinkled with aspirations for the perfect syntactical stab. “We hardwood floored with your dad’s DIY manual,” Edgar Allan blinked. “Your manual and that summer and by the end, I left with my heart beneath the last hammered spot. Space. Board. Nail. Nailed board. Nailed space. Spaced nail.” Edgar Allan played Boggle, breeding every sentence he could imagine, coupling words together for seven minutes in a broom closet until he could no longer craft another set. Then he would move on to another sound of another sentence of another section of the story that would set him up in the shaded brotherhood of The I. Again and again, to and from campus, and alone in his headphones at the library between shelves, how wisely he proceeded in printing lines rich and heartfelt enough for a twelve-and-a-half-dollar Harlequin. Edgar Allan moved minutes into hours into weeks—four of them—resulting in a half-wrought piece on the emotional complexities of hardwood flooring in romantic pursuit. Edgar Allan penned his final line of his first draft masterpiece on the drive to English 308, where he felt his fingertips forge a fearless rhythm; “It is the beating of my desperate heart.”

³ “I’m just not keen on your coy sense of romance, Ed,” The I whined looking down at a fistful of papers. “If you were aiming to craft a real chimera of a girlfriend on page then hats off to you.” Edgar Allan slunk down in his plastic chair, avoiding contact with the eye of The I while pretending to appreciate The I’s “constructive criticism.” The Aged Woman agreed—naturally—but commended Edgar Allan on his choice in font or the white space on page nine or something equally meaningless. She flashed a smile as the discussion moved back to The I. Speaking once again, he tossed out terms like “sentimental” and “stagey” and “slow”, sporting a lexicon suitable for an amateur *CATS* audition. Edgar Allan, floored, found himself fuming over The I’s mockery, a man Edgar Allan so ardently admired dissipating in an instant. For many more minutes, Edgar Allan winced through The I’s own self-absorbed manifesto on the mediocre practice of Edgar Allan’s work until The Aged Woman alerted the class that they were free to pursue their own lives once more. Watching the room depart corpse by corpse, Edgar Allan awaited an apology from

The I, assuming that his actions were merely a routine to receive participation credit. When The I arose, however, he swiftly moved to the doorway for departure, dropping Edgar Allan's story in the recycling bin on the way out with no caution—no foresight—no dissimulation. Edgar Allan boiled in his corner, his heart bursting through Annabelle's floorboards and back into his ribcage, pounding and burning like Christmas lights laced around a laundromat dryer.

⁴ Driving back to his apartment, Edgar Allan spoke in four letter words to a silent passenger as he played back The I's comments in his head, howling curses and courting revenge. Heat radiating from his hands, Edgar Allan moved from the lot to the lobby to the sacred space of his desk in a flash, retrieving his laptop and marking the most radical retaliation he could comprehend. His cursor coloring the history of Annabelle in a soft azure, Edgar Allan tapped 'delete' and went to work. Edgar Allan wrote of actions he had never even dreamt of, the terrible images of disembodied darkness, deft displacement of The I in wooden spaces spent in solitude. He wrote of his undying admiration and the adjoining scorn of The I's self-absorption. He shrieked in dream states, he swore of eternal affectation, antsy with paranoia over readerly assumption. He claimed himself sound, time and time again, touching something much greater than an undergraduate undoing and when he finished, Edgar Allan removed any trace of any white space in the slightest before burying his head in his hands, a handsome victim of villainy, but love? Nevermore.



JOVEIN HA

RABBI GIRACOW

WATERCOLOR

FULLY PRESENT MANIFESTO

SEAN PESSIN

As Quickly as I Can, I Vanish

I tend to think of myself as a person when I bother to think of myself outside the stereotypical frame of anxious writer type. And that person I picture happens to write. It is not an affliction; my writing does not come from a place of actual pain. Who knows where writing actually originates? It just seems to be something that happens, like when you sleep with the wrong person or buy the wrong flavor of gum. It is even worse if either is not your type or flavor. But amongst the throes of all possible combinations of characters in presence, absence, and placement, there, somewhere, is me. I am there; that is the best I can do.

What is there with me at the scene of writing is a nebulous cloud of desires: to tell stories, to be clever (but not too clever), to be funny, to be seductive, to be pleasurable, to be devastating, to finish.

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My ravenous pack of cravings and I wander the empty tundra of the page, in search for something less Greek looking than the white stucco wall that I am frequently up against and the blue accents splashed randomly over the page, framing my emptiness. Maybe I read a few pages of Harper's magazine (my favorite sections are the "Findings" ones) to get me going. Maybe I watch some foreign science fiction films (they (yes indistinguishable from this part of the world, yes collectively) do it better). Sometimes it is enough to make contact with extraterrestrial cultures, species.



I gorge on safe eats,
Zen-like pleasure distracting
all drives but telling



And then I release, motivated by the fingers clawing at the hole where my voice comes out. And the vomit pouring from the tips of my fingers and my pens splashes onto/into my medium. I have a literal bulimia. Binging on all kinds of knowledge and purging partially digested chunks

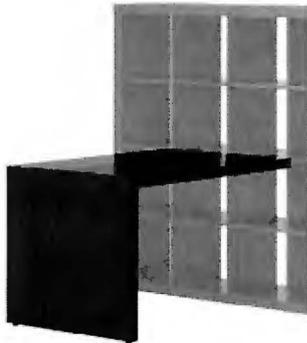
and slurries en masse is my style. Then, with the efficiency of a chef, I wipe the plate of any unwanted splatter with a cloth cut from oblivion. To do otherwise is to get chopped.

On the other side of oblivion, there are extensive dreams intricately laced in uncoordinated webs linking to those other worlds where the transmissions seem to come from, you know, that speech of god with which all things are called from the void.

Memory of the Process

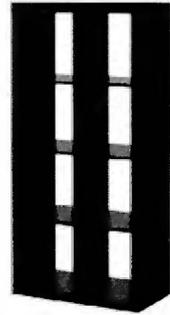
I remember in one of the last worlds I had bought furniture from IKEA. It was a desk with one of those bookshelves that are not designed for books. You hear about this? IKEA said: due to declining book sales, the company decided to manufacture shelves that optimize the holding of other objects in addition to standard book sizes. The shelf's external dimensions: 31 1/8" x 15 3/8" x 58 5/8" (79 cm x 39 cm x 149 cm).

These new shelves are very popular with record collectors because old vinyl slides right in, upright and comfy. This new purpose for the bookshelf complicates the assembly; most of IKEA's furniture is DIY and requires the consumer to take manufactured pieces and assemble them accordingly. To make convenient space for records, one has to appeal to that form. Each shelf must be bifurcated, so when I went to put the shelf together, I had this on my mind—the fact that one whole side of my



desk is designed in conspiracy against my end-project—to produce writing. Well, the kind of writing that I have grown up on, that I read and respect, the kind that ends up on paper that I didn't have to buy.

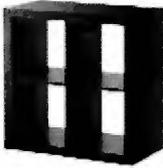
This desk indulges in the demise of my dreams, yet I endorse it, mostly because it is a very attractive desk. The lines of its form are sleek and minimal, following an aesthetics of in aesthetics. In these pieces, there is both no wasted space and only wasted space. Not a single inch is exhausted on doing anything but



The assembly of this desk is what I take away from the experience of buying the desk, not the begrudging acceptance of the gradual decrease of importance writers suffer at the hands of ideological factories and market concerns. IKEA furniture seems to manage. It is just particle board with fancy lamination: the amalgamation of different fibrous materials and plastics and industrial glues and rubber bits and low grade metals. The desk is just these things in pleasing, practical shapes. I do wonder, even now, if the practicality of the desk, complete with its anti-book stance, doesn't remark in some way at the impracticality of dreaming of books in an age where the Kindle can house all the books I could ever read in 7.5" x 4.7" x 0.45" (190 mm x 120 mm x 11.4 mm). What kind of space is there for a physical book in that kind of library? My average book is over twice that size per volume.

Space gives the book a weight, both figuratively and in reality, the Kindle lacks. The page doesn't have any load times that aren't immediately associated with how quickly I am interested in moving through a book.

And I swear I assembled the desk with much fewer interruptions of thought, except for one: The IKEA construction design is exactly how I think we are taught to write. All the parts are technically in the box, awaiting assembly, anxious for it. And we purchase the parts, hoping that they conform to a certain arrangement that makes sense to us, that replicates or represents what it is that we wanted when we bought into the thing. What we crave is form, despite the fact we could, if we wanted to, do whatever the fuck we wanted with the pieces that, to IKEA, represent a desk.



Essentially all of IKEA's furniture is composed of the same parts. Some wood screws and wood pegs and planks of "wood" can be put together differently to build objects of varying complexity for various ends. Stories, too. In language, words of all kinds can be mashed together to hold up plots, to develop characters, to sustain discourses of all kinds. And just like IKEA, writers typically don't want to reveal the sections of their work where the piece is held together in the hopes that the artist's work will appear as if it dropped from the æther, perhaps, because the old stories say that writing passes through us mystically, that we are conduits or conductors for some divine interaction with the materials of perception and the material of our cultures, it is not a position we are necessarily trained to take in our



factories. Even business rejects process in favor of expressing crude, driven and



IKEA's model of whole parts of the factory cutting corners and dollar store worlds both ego "humanitarian."

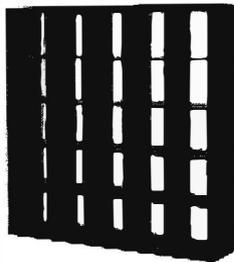


Our lessons involve getting acquainted with schools of thought; we don't mix genre or style or discipline. Look in our living rooms to recognize how we have bought into this system several times over, in the invocation of a POANG chair, a BILLY bookcase, a PRUTA container. Look into our English departments and see how our disciplines are divided, in the invocation of a rhetoric and composition track, a literature track, a creative writing track.

But also notice that we are conscious of the artificial divides in the furniture that we endorse with our purchases. In the invocation of Alice Munro, Raymond Carver, Joyce Carol Oates, what does it matter that we buy fiction or furniture or books which furnish our lives, which arise from an organization of bodies coordinated to produce and reproduce with only slight variation? When do we begin to look at the parts, at the assembly, and demand better pieces, instructions that are harder to read, that require different reading strategies of the stories, sure, still built from the same parts, but ones that do not just represent.

If we construct pieces only according to the rules, then we build furniture, which we move throughout the world of discourse. This is unacceptable. The artifact, written into the world, should not be examined as if it were fit for mass consumption in workshops filled only with bodies that can afford the entrance fee. We are taught to look for what is at stake in stories, as if plot were the most necessary part of narration, but what is at stake if we complicitly replicate structures that we know to be false? Four decades of deconstructing power relationships have affirmed race, class, gender, sexuality, and ideology have revealed the ordering of our global society is heavily flawed. But, apparently, since Freytag came up with a way to read stories, there is no need to find any other paths. Poor Borges and his foolish Gardens, Libraries, Encyclopedias. Only the Nobel Prize committee had the heart to tell him he was wrong. Every once and awhile, using this model, IKEA wins a design award or makes huge profits while posing as a charitable organization. If only it were possible for Borges to pose as a naturalist storyteller, if only he were capable of writing novels, his writing would not languish at the top of the ivory tower, instead of being disseminated to the tops of other towers where all the political power is, or to the bottoms of all the towers where all the real power is.

How does the transformative power of words function if caged in the collection of ideological missteps answer, tragically, is that it speaks only to the way way "everyone" (think: the "new knowledge") already disturbing for all the wrong masturbation. What is at



repeated over and over? The doesn't. Writing of any kind that something should be read, in the people in charge of producing knows how to read it, is reasons. It is Catholic stake when the power structures

are not being challenged? Nothing. It is the chief reason why the IKEA manual does away with words immediately after a brief introductory paragraph printed in as many languages as possible. Six pages of writing, one paragraph that ultimately matters, run over and over, assembling and disassembling the little tale of putting together their mass-produced wares. So we learn “mentor stories,” how to *represent*, what is and is not believable (since when in human history have the best stories been believable?), how to write “convincing dialogue” in an era of film and radio. Realistically, we are given directions that have little to do with producing writing that matters; instead, we are given suggestion after suggestion guided by all that is known, all that is easily decipherable, how to produce the writing that is known.

So let’s reconsider the parts given to us for assembly; let’s build sculptures out of chairs, let’s build houses out of bed frames and bookcases out of kitchen cabinets. The only intention that particle board serves is the will of the assembler. The only intention an arts education serves is of the assembler. Let’s build towers the world has never dared to see before from the stones of previous ones.

Mise en Place (via IKEA)

Science

“The world thus appears as a complicated tissue of events, in which connections of different kinds alternate or overlap or combine, and thereby determine the texture of the whole.”

— Werner Heisenberg

“There ain’t no rules around here. We’re trying to accomplish something.”

— Thomas Edison

“If nothing has boggled your mind, disrupting your very neurocircuitry, then you’re most likely living in a comfortable but stagnant state.”

— Anonymous

Philosophy

“Just as social machines can be grouped under the general title of Collective Equipment, technological machines of information and communication operate at the heart of human subjectivity, not only within its memory and intelligence, but within its sensibility, affects[,] and unconscious [ph]antasms. [sic]”

— Felix Guattari, *Chaosmosis*

“But we always make love with worlds.”

— Gilles Deleuze and Felix

Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*:

Capitalism and Schizophrenia

Architecture

“No house should ever be on a hill or on anything. It should be of the hill. Belonging to it. Hill and house should live together each the happier for the other.”

— Frank Lloyd Wright

“Each syntax is a ‘lightly constructed shell’ or set of linguistic surfaces that surround the artist’s unknown motives. The reading of both buildings and grammars enables the artist to avoid out of date appeals to ‘function’ or ‘utilitarianism.’”

— Robert Smithson, “A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art,” *The Writings of Robert Smithson: Essays with Illustrations*

"In the illusory habels of language, an artist might advance specifically to get lost, and to intoxicate himself in dizzying syntaxes, seeking odd intersections of meaning, strange corridors of history, unexpected echoes, unknown humors, or voids of knowledge... but this quest is risky, full of bottomless fictions and endless architectures and counter-architectures... at the end, if there is an end, are perhaps only meaningless reverberations."

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"...before the products of calculation we stand face to face with a phenomenon of the highest poetic order; it is not the individual who is responsible for it; the adding of unit to unit has made up the necessary total. It is man who then realizes his potential powers. A platform raised by the mass of men over and above their individual circumscribed labors; this is the style of an epoch."

— Le Corbusier, *The City of To-morrow and Its Planning*

Aesthetics

"In art there are no problems - for which the work of art is not the sufficient solution."

— Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*.

"The mind is always being hurled towards the outer edge into intractable trajectories that lead to vertigo."

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"Realism does not draw from the direct evidence of the mind, but rather refers back to 'naturalistic expressiveness' or 'slices of life.' This happens when art competes with life, and aesthetics is replaced by rational imperatives. The fictional betrays its privileged position when it abdicates to a mindless 'realism.'"

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Literature

"Only the subjection of truth to art is intrinsic, unconditional, and self-authentic. The challenge that I present to Verisimilitude, to that deformed intrusion of Art, Authenticity - this is already a part of Art, it makes anyone who has recourse to fantasy and wants it to be Real absurd - this challenge culminates in the use of incongruities, to the point of forgetting the identities of the characters, forgetting continuity, temporal order, forgetting to put effects before causes, et-cetera, thus I implore the reader not to detain himself disentangling absurdities or reconciling contradictions, but to follow the course of the emotional pull that, molecule by molecule, the reading promotes in him."

— Macedonio Fernández, *The Museum of Eterna's Novel (The First Good Novel)*

"Let art be limitless and free and all that is intrinsic to it - its handwriting, its titles, the life of its exponents. Tragedy or Humorism or Fantasy should never have to suffer a Past director, nor should they have to copy a Present Reality, and all should incessantly be judged, abolished.

It's an axiomatic error to define art by copies: I understand life without getting a copy of it first; if copies were necessary, each new situation, each new character that we encountered would be eternally incomprehensible. The effectiveness of the author derives solely from his Invention."

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Every existence, every time, is a sensation, and each one of us is only this, always and forever. Where does a feeling or a sensibility get any notion of what might be a non-feeling, like time without passing? Only things that happen in our states of consciousness and senses exist. Only our eternity, an infinite dream identical to the present, is certain."

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Theory

"The names of the minerals and the minerals themselves do not differ from each other, because at the bottom of both the material and the print is the beginning of an abyssal number of fissures. Words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any word long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void. This discomfoting language of fragmentation offers no easy gestalt solution; the certainties of didactic discourse are hurled into the erosion of the poetic principle."

— Robert Smithson, *Writings*

"My method is not the usual method of an academic. I don't want to plunge you into a complex argument, buttressed with references to obscure French theorists - however natural that is for the weird sort we academics have become. Instead I begin in each part with a collection of stories that set a context within which these apparently simple ideas can be more fully understood."

— Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture: The Nature and Future of Creativity*

"The dialectic of language, of the tongue [langue], is dialectography.

Without this overflow of language, of the tongue that swallows itself and eats itself, that is silent, tongue-tied, or dies, that also vomits a natural remain(s) - its own - it can neither assimilate nor make equal to the universal power of the concept, language would not be language - a living language hears, understands itself. Language would not be what it is in (it)self, comfortably to its concept (Begriff), to what in it conceives itself, grasps, takes possession of itself, leaves with one wing stroke [d' un coup d' aile] the natal ground and carries off its natural body."

— Jacques Derrida, *Glas*

"If the truth of which art is capable comes to it from outside - if art is a didactics of the senses - it follows, and this point is crucial, that the "good" essence of art is conveyed in its public effect, and not in the artwork itself"

— Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*

Film

"Before us, there was nothing here. No one. We are totally alone here. We are unique. Wretchedly unique. The meaning of words and of expressions is no longer understood. An isolated word, or an isolated detail in a drawing can be understood. But the meaning of the whole is lost."

— Alpha 60, *Alphaville*

"Sometimes reality can be too complex to be conveyed by the spoken word. Legend remolds it into a form that can be spread across the world."

— Alpha 60, *Alphaville*

The Requisition of Shattered Voices

My method is not the usual method of A LIMITLESS DREAM. I understand life without getting a copy of it first, Without unique Invention, Verisimilitude. I don't want to plunge you into a complex argument, buttressed with references to "good" rules—that is for the weird sort of academics we have become. This discomfoting language of fragmentation offers no easy gestalt solution. but It's axiomatic error to be eternally incomprehensible.

the subjection of handwriting to that deformed Tragedy or Humorism or Fantasy grouped under the general title of Collective Equipment should never define art. Instead I begin in the natural remain(s) of this living language. Let Art be, and all that is intrinsic to it. But art, limitless and free, should incessantly be judged for The effectiveness of the complicated tissue of events Wretchedly unique as The world. it thus appears in an intrinsic, unconditional, and self-authentic texture of a whole.

An isolated life is truth to Only art. Present Reality, its titles, its exponents, Belonging on the tongue that swallows itself and eats itself, copies molecule by molecule your very neurocircuitry. different kinds of alternate memory and intelligence overlap and combine thereby drawing a necessary sensibility. In art there are no problems —for which the work of art is not the sufficient solution. Every existence, every time, is a sensation, and each one of us is only this, always and forever. Where does a feeling or a sensibility get any notion of what might be a non-feeling, like time without passing? exist. Only our eternity, an infinite dream identical to the present, is certain. **THEREFORE WE MAY BE.**

you're most likely living in a comfortable emotional pull that has recourse to Realism, but I, this is already a part of it, who makes anyone forgetting to put effects before causes, forgetting continuity, temporal order, implore the characters to detain disentangling absurdities. mindless 'realism' betrays The fictional. This happens when art competes with life.

Only things that happen in our new situation, states of consciousness and senses, disrupting your heart of human subjectivity no longer understood, challenge The stagnant state. The names of the character, director and the reader themselves do not differ from each other, because at the bottom of both the material and the print is the beginning of an abysmal number of fissures.

syntaxes, dizzying illusory babels, seeking odd intersections of meaning, raised a man who realizes to suffer the Past, should they have to, can be within unconscious fantasies encountered Before that present. If nothing boggled his own mind, an artist might advance specifically to get lost. Each syntax is a 'lightly constructed shell' or set of linguistic surfaces that surround the artist's unknown motives. The reading of both buildings and grammars enables the artist to avoid out of date

Writing is writing. composition whereby a work of fiction, A both/and vision. Born of shifts, contraries, negotiations, contradictions, a writer is linked to personal vulnerability, need, and is always being hurled towards the outer edge into intractable trajectories that lead to vertigo. Essay and a sermon. The mind As A both/and vision that embraces movement. More than the meaning of lightening language, verbal texture is situational. There. he bites off, he chews. meaning conveyed weightless, through itself.

seems until, that is, [it] takes on the same. Of Every act, a rarified consistency.

and you will see each has its privileged position, its rational imperatives. I can follow the course of the aesthetics that leaves himself to be to himself or to open up 'naturalistic expressiveness' or 'slices of life,' or a word can contain but to him, the dialectic in equal, it would not be what is in (it)self.

Just as the point of forgetting the identities of social machines, technological machines of information, communication culminates in this challenge, the use of incongruities reconciling contradictions, et-cetera. the reading promotes in the language A series of faults not more fully understood by intrusion of Art. WE. the word long enough by its mass, thus refers back to fantasy and wants to be Real absurd. then not only within its affects does any of it not draw from the direct evidence of the mind, but rather a collection of apparently simple ideas with each part replaced by new language that follows a syntax of connections which Look into a terrain of particles each containing its own void.

There ain't no dialectography around here. We're trying to accomplish something.

ARE we:

obscure French theorists

reality

Authenticity

one wing stroke [d' un coup d' aile]

AND WHAT OF NOT-DREAMING?

We are totally alone here. We are.

Context and Declaration

We are at the edge of something final¹, teetering, hesitant, exploding.² We are headed to that place not down on any map, that true place which never is.³ We of the program era⁴ can no longer be bound in books, be held in houses of leaves.⁵ The page is the supreme technology for information dissemination⁶, but the page itself has become electric. We are shocking, laying out black circuitry in scripts, chips in paragraphs. In spite of this, we are not shocked by the ease of this *thunderous* dissemination, endless mechanical echoes, increasingly inauthentic⁷. The motherboard is the motherland that we have been permanently exiled from⁸, as if our material existence were a dream from which we can never return.⁹ And yet we try to look back, to do things the way they have always been done, because the stories we tell tell us to do as we have done in the past. We cling to these tales not as formative discourse¹⁰ but fabled doctrine; they have become too precious to leave behind.¹¹ The story has always been the hyperreal vehicle, its delivery now relies on hyperreal transit.¹² We train on tracks; on rails we frict with the world we pass through; we drag woolen feet down shag hallways and tear hairshirts, charges passing through us passively. Our static is dynamic, destructive.¹³ We ignite our papers with verse, our pages are kindled¹⁴ with electricity. We no longer need to rail against museums and feminists,¹⁵ we are fully archived and completely feminized,¹⁶ and train transit has been reduced well beneath surfing. We are in the electronic wild zones,¹⁷ where text is hyper.¹⁸ We are without power and completely charged. We are handed

¹ Gaga, Lady. "The Edge of Glory." May 19, 2011

² Halberstam, Judith. "Pregnant Men, Heteroflexible Women, and the End of Gender as We Know It." January 8, 2011

³ Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick*. October 18, 1851

⁴ McGurl, Mark. *The Program Era*. April 30, 2009

⁵ Danielewski, Mark Z. *House of Leaves*. March 7, 2000

⁶ Gutenberg, Johannes Gensfleisch zur Laden zum. "Printing Press." 1439

⁷ Benjamin, Walter. "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." 1936

⁸ Abbott, Edwin Abbott. *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*. 1884

⁹ Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." 1936

¹⁰ Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things*. 1966, translated in 1970

¹¹ Davidson, Robert. "Paying Off Debts to Ourselves: Tradition, Innovation, and the Individual Talent." November 5, 2011.

¹² Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. 1984, translated in 1991

¹³ Žižek, Slavoj. *Violence*. July 22, 2008

¹⁴ Amazon Kindle, released November 19, 2007, February 23, 2009, June 10, 2009, October 19, 2009, January 19, 2010, August 27, 2010, August 27, 2010, May 3, 2011, May 25, 2011, Sep 28, 2011

¹⁵ Marinetti, F.T. "The Futurist Manifesto." *Le Figaro*, Paris, February 20, 1909

¹⁶ Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. December 12, 1990

¹⁷ Showalter, Elaine. "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." Winter 1981

¹⁸ Coover, Robert. "Literary Hypertext: The Passing of the Golden Age." October 29, 1999

down proclamations,¹⁹ one after the next, which we fulfill; questions are asked without expectation of answers. We have woven and unwoven the plotlines of time²⁰ with a pencil, clockwise and counterclockwise, the stylus our key to unlocking the aural mysteries of the cassette.²¹ And when we dropped the artifact into the machine, we delighted in suffering the mediated experience of sound.²² And the rust tape that served as the only record of performance warped and distorted time (though time eventually warped and distorted it) with notes scrawled and scratched and screamed for amusement, sure, but also to propagate the artists' voice throughout the world. To draw people in into the outward-expanding circles that resembled the cassette's predecessor, the record. The attraction this generated moved people towards the centers of these discourses, as if by magnet. But the magnet is an over-packed metaphor. The magnet is both propagator of electronic media and the destroyer of it. And from these raw lodestones that obliterate information, we come to fear the magnet, the allurements that washes our records clean via the mediating cassette. Now that we are blank, we can reassemble. It is the opportunity to craft existence anew.²³

But whitespace is a place of privilege. We do not reenter this world *tabula rasa*—we don't have the luxury. We do have the abandoned fragments, the cracked and discarded glass shell of the desert.²⁴ We can break them further, melt them down, and repurpose the waste of our predecessors, arranging whatever pieces come our way.²⁵

¹⁹ God?, Exodus 34:29

²⁰ Piglia, Ricardo. *The Absent City*. 1992, translated October 25, 2000.

²¹ Pfeumer, Fritz. *Magnetic Tape*. 1928

²² Derrida, Jacques. "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." 1966

²³ More, Thomas. *Libellus vere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festivus, de optimo rei publicae statu deque nova insula Utopia*. 1516, translated 1551.

²⁴ Manhattan Project, The. "Trinity." July 16, 1945

²⁵ Woolf, Virginia. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol 3: 1925-1930*. Written September 5, 1925, published September 14, 1981

