

PONDER REVIEW

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PONDER REVIEW

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A NOTE TO READERS

At Ponder Review, we do not solicit works based on theme but find that each iteration of our magazine takes on a thematic life of its own. In this issue, we've discovered one word that touches on each piece: relate. In reviewing submissions, we said so many times: "I can relate." Moreover, the theme of relationships with lovers, family, society, the natural world, and even legislation permeates every page. We hope that each piece will make you ask the question: "How do I relate?"

Although you may not have experienced the situations our writers describe, these works inspire us to ponder every interaction we experience, whether these be physical, mental, spiritual, or superficial. In this era of "us-against-them" social and political discourse, we believe it is more important than ever to see the world through another's eyes. We encourage you to also nurture shared and empathetic experiences.

You may not literally pass by a memorial graffitied on a Paris wall ("My Jacqueline") or escape a pending loveless marriage in hopes to make it to 1930s Hollywood ("Moonlight Trolley"). Likewise, you may not come from a family so violently true to who they are ("heritage") or find yourself exhausted in a retail store ("Rest"). But, we hope you can feel the weight of these experiences along with our writers and artists and find a piece of yourself in each poem, narrative, play, and photo.

Sincerely,

The Editors

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NINA FRANCUS

MY JACQUELINE
OR
LIFE AND DEATH ON THE WALLS OF PARIS

Jacqueline lives on the wall, despite the fact that she is dead. I see her when I take the long way home from work, which isn't often, because the walk is fifteen minutes on a good day, eighteen when my bag or the air is heavy. But even that's not exactly true. I don't see Jacqueline. I see someone's memory of her. Someone's tribute.

Pass by the wall and you'll learn three things about Jacqueline. Her name, of course. That her life started in June 1929 and ended in July 2010. That she is dead, and missed. Missed enough for someone to spray thick black graffiti on a stretch of terracotta-colored wall that says so. Rest in peace, Jacqueline, it says. Followed by her dates.

It's neat graffiti. Clear handwriting. Simple letters. No tags or flourishes, no competing colors, no layers shouting to be heard over one another. A person's idea of graffiti, not an artist's. The medium is not the message. The message is the message.

I think that's why it sticks with me. You can tell that the person who picked up that spray can meant it. Rest in peace, Jacqueline. A wish. A plea?

And fair enough. 1929-2010. Anyone with those dates deserves a peaceful afterlife.

Jacqueline is French, I assume, and died in Paris, I assume, because that's where her wall is. She would've been eleven at the start of World War II. As if adolescence weren't already a sliding scale of bad to worse. For her sake, I hope Jacqueline spent a strategic five years with relatives in Switzerland.

On rainy days, or foggy ones, there's a version of Jacqueline from Belgium. I like to think that her father made instruments. Lutes. Violins. Jacqueline is a musical sort of name. It's in the clash of the 'q' and the 'l'. Like a clapper smashing into the side of a bell. Bong. That Jacqueline lived in Antwerp. Her war started even earlier.

When it's summer and everything is lighter and more generous, Jacqueline never sees war. That Jacqueline's parents left Europe after World War I. They immigrated, joining thousands who couldn't look at their native soil anymore. Jacqueline's mother couldn't walk by her son's bones each day. She couldn't bear the names of towns she knew, deformed by the weight of the dead. Ardennes. Dunkerque. Calais. She goes with Jacqueline in her arms and never looks back.

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That could explain a key feature of Jacqueline's wall. In a country where most people would rather sew their lips shut than speak the King's, someone has scrawled their grief in English. Rest in peace. Not repose en paix. Not paix à son âme. Somewhere in Paris, a committed anglophone loved Jacqueline.

A Canadian or a Brit. Not an American, because the dates are European style: Day-Month-Year. I'd like it to be an Australian, but that's a meet-cute that takes more than a fifteen-minute walk to work out. Messy logistics, hauling some poor Aussie halfway around the world, just for Jacqueline.

But maybe that's what she was like – the kind of woman you go halfway around the world for. Maybe that was the kind of man she attracted. Expansive. Adventurous. The big gesture type. Not 'I'll wait for you forever', but 'I can't wait'. He loves Jacqueline, and that's all there is to it. It's an avalanche of attraction. A whirlwind. He comes for Jacqueline like Zeus on a lightning bolt and carries her off.

Throughout their marriage, Jacqueline's husband cycles her through nicknames. Some she understands, some she doesn't. When they meet in 1947, he calls her Dot, for the navy blue dress with white polka dots she wears when they go dancing. In the 50s, he passes through a zoological phase – kitten, dove, honeybee – but none of it sits right, and their house is quickly pet-name-free. In the 60s, he calls her Jacky. He buys her a pillbox hat, which Jacqueline pitches far back on her head. He loves her enough to reinvent her. A new Jacqueline for each decade.

He's an engineer, reimagining and rebuilding life's broken things. A surgeon, cutting out cancerous subjects, trimming tendrils of sickness. He's a clockmaker, forever fiddling with the hour, making more time in his favor. He's a carpenter. An accountant. A lawyer.

Whatever he is, he is with gusto. He will close the business without warning, arrive home mid-afternoon, and sweep Jacqueline away for a week in the mountains. He will take her to Toronto. London. Perth. The outback, the highlands. Car, boat, plane. Jacqueline keeps a bag packed in the bedroom closet with doubles of all her cosmetics.

Once, stomping my way through romantic disappointment, I crossed the wall and turned on Jacqueline's husband. In an instant, his charm evaporated. Give her a lover! screamed my wounded pride. So Jacqueline gained a lover.

Not for maudlin reasons.

Jacqueline's lover comes from a place of familiarity. He reminds her of a home she thinks she remembers. Summers on the Breton coast. Autumn in the apple orchards. The towers of ancient churches and the music inside: the shushing robes of priests on flagstones, the flickering candles, the lingering tones of a choir, the thunderous joy of the organ, half wooden, half divine.

He's French like she is, and subtler than his more permanent counterpart.

He speaks their mother tongue without pauses, shortcuts, or estimations. He doesn't talk much, but when he does, words fall from his mouth in a hurrying of ideas. When the cloudburst calms, Jacqueline finds room for her thoughts, a byway where her voice can pass.

He plays the accordion. In the 60s, this is unfashionable. Old school. He doesn't play it often, nor – he will say – does he play it well. But his grandfather taught him when he was a child, his knobby knees buckling under the instrument's bulk. Like carrying an air conditioning unit, he tells Jacqueline, as he straps the accordion to his chest. He rarely plays anything new. Waltzes. A country air called *L'hirondelle tourne en rond*. A tune with no name that sounds like the Marseillaise in a minor key.

He is the opposite of Jacqueline's husband, as he should be, because who wants a lover who mirrors their husband? He is beautiful and remote, an island where ships wash up after a storm and which the navigator can never find again.

But when the mists part and the boat touches land, Jacqueline surges forward. She traces the lines of his face over and over, pressing her presence onto his skin. She likes that there is no mystery to his looks. He is handsome in the most straightforward way. High cheekbones. Strong jaw. Dark eyes that curve down at the edges. Thick eyelashes—

But wait. Why am I describing the lover, when you haven't even seen Jacqueline? Isn't that shameful? It's her story, after all. Leave the lover – you don't even know his name, so you shouldn't feel bad. Leave him with his perfect jaw and old accordion. See Jacqueline.

Jacqueline has beautiful dark hair which rolls down her back in inviting waves. It's the first thing most people notice, because it's impossible not to notice. Even when Jacqueline cuts her hair, to her shoulders, to her chin, she looks like a woman who's supposed to have long hair. Where soldiers have phantom limbs, Jacqueline has phantom follicles. Cut away, but still there.

The hair is the wow factor, but I can sketch the rest. Jacqueline's face is narrow, which makes her eyes (hazel, unremarkable) seem bigger than they are. Her nose is a little downturned and her mouth is small. At eighteen, she is slim and well-dressed. Not much of a figure, as her mother never hesitates to say, but nothing ruffles and a few layers of skirt can't overcome. And that waist! The very T in trim. Small enough to make everything around it look more ample.

Jacqueline spends her younger years doing this: appearing to be more than she is. More agreeable to her mother, more deferential toward her father. More attentive to her teachers, more excitable for her girlfriends, more robust for her wardrobe. More this, more that. Less Jacqueline.

The one person who knows the true measure of Jacqueline is Isabelle.

Isabelle meets Jacqueline in grade school. They bond over not being

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named Marie. Marie-Claire. Marie-Anne. Marie-Françoise. Marie-Jeanne. Marie, Marie, quite contrary, how does your kindergarten grow? With a pair of wildflowers at the end of the row.

Isabelle is all motion. A runner, a climber, a daring-doer. She never lets Jacqueline pantomime her more-is-less routine. She has an opinion about everything and expects Jacqueline to produce one, too. She's mad about cars and can't wait to finish high school and become a mechanic. When life roars at Isabelle, she roars back.

Jacqueline picks some of that up. She never roars, but she develops a solid growl.

Isabelle gets married, then divorced. Twice. No, three times. She never understands Jacqueline's skittering about with the lover. Isabelle wears men while they fit, wears them until they wear out. Then it's a month on her motorcycle in some exotic place. Italy. Mexico. Jacqueline gets postcards in fits and starts, signed with Isabellan whimsy.

Kisses and all that blubber, —I.

Wretchedly and wreckedly, —I.

Ecstatically yours, —I.

Poor Jacqueline. You know what she is to many people, who she is in relation to others. But what is Jacqueline to herself? What does Jacqueline amount to?

Here's the thing. Jacqueline is the hero of my story. So I want to like her, want to root for her, want her to enjoy the things I do: chocolate bonbons with caramel filling, the lung-numbing air of an Alpine hike, the vista-painting prose of a Bosco or a Pagnol. I want to press Jacqueline down under the weight of the world without ever letting her buckle.

The kind of woman you go halfway around the world for, remember?

I'd like to be that way. So I make Jacqueline that way.

Jacqueline has a soft spot for thrills. When the first amusement park opens within a two-hour drive of her house, Jacqueline is off, heading for the tallest roller coaster. While people shriek and scream around her, squeezing their eyes shut, Jacqueline leans forward. She hurdles along the tracks, staring squarely at the drops and turns, relishing the blood pounding in her ears.

When Jacqueline turns eighteen, she and Isabelle go parachuting. The swoop of her stomach makes Jacqueline giddy and she finds herself giggling all the way down. She and Isabelle float above the basin of the world, breathing in a patchwork of pine and ochre, myrtle and terracotta, azure and umber.

At home, Jacqueline's piano is an extension of her will. Growing up, she plays Beethoven to drown out her parents' arguments, to let them know that she can hear them bickering. When her husband refuses to listen, Jacqueline

hammers out Chopin, Brahms, Rachmaninoff until he pays attention. Schubert is always on the music desk before she sees her lover.

She loves a good thunderstorm. When her daughter is young – yes, this version of Jacqueline has a daughter – Jacqueline takes her outside during the most incredible storms. She stands on the porch, her daughter on her hip, and whispers gently as Nature performs. Jacqueline's daughter is three or four, but she doesn't cry. The two of them stand under a wooden overhang, watching lightning streak across the sky as though it were fireworks on New Year's Eve.

Jacqueline has a way of looking up at just the right angle. It makes her cascade of lovely hair flutter back, framing the curves of her cheeks. A natural gesture? A studied one?

Her mind is similar. There is always the suggestion that Jacqueline knows more. That she understands more, intuits more than is said aloud. Over time, she moves from a posture of more-is-less to less-is-more.

That's her way, I suppose. Where most people wear their hearts on their sleeves, Jacqueline's is tucked up in an inner pocket that not even the seamstress remembers sewing. Her husband, her lover, they peel away layers of Jacqueline, quickly or slowly, patiently or impatiently, morning or evening, and what have they uncovered?

I try to give Jacqueline a life of color. A woman of sky blue and cherry red. Of jade, lilac, lemon. A terrific pop of neon from time to time.

For all I know, Jacqueline would hate that. Some people are stubbornly gray about life. Same house, same husband, same routine. Tuesday is always fish night, and no one knows why. Art and music have been on sabbatical since that person's twenties, or worse, their parents' twenties. Travel means going to the same place every summer. Beige starts to look like a color.

I hate that the graffiti is black. I don't think Jacqueline would like it. She wouldn't want to be mourned in black.

Why not pink? Jacqueline looked right in pink. As a child, her mother wrapped her in a carnation pink dress with three flounces. At sixteen, her favorite pleated skirt was the shade of ripe watermelon. Her pillbox hat was pale pink and came with a matching handbag. In her fifties, Jacqueline prizes a rosy cashmere shawl and baby pink cape coat that shelter her from the Parisian drizzle.

So why black? Why graffiti?

Or maybe I'm wrong. Maybe the medium is the message.

What to make of it, though?

Take a drive through any major city and you'll marvel at the lengths graffiti artists go to. How did they get up there? you'll wonder, spotting tags on one inaccessible space after the next. Underpasses. Overpasses. Water towers. Bridges. Train tracks. Rooftops.

But there's a problem. How can something edgy and death-defying be everywhere? For every square inch graffiti conquers, it sacrifices some cool. The thrill of transgression, of imposing individual will on a public space, has diminishing returns. Yesterday, graffiti was a sting operation. A heist. Art as crime. Today, graffiti is more like... jaywalking?

So you, the person who grafted Jacqueline's life onto a sad Parisian wall, why graffiti? Were you trying to make her stand out? Trying to cross a boundary for Jacqueline? For yourself? There's always some of that in directing the public eye toward private pain. A demand for recognition. An implication.

And here we come full circle. Back to the plea.

Isabelle, the husband, the lover – our characters are a bit old for all this, aren't they? Graffiti is a young person's game. Don't get me wrong, I'm all for a grandma graffiti gang. But Isabelle has arthritis and bad knees. Men rarely outlive women, so fifty-fifty odds, let's knock out the husband or the lover. Swat him like a lazy kitchen fly.

Whack. He's down.

So it must be Helen. H  l  ne?

H  l  ne is the home aid worker who visits Jacqueline, helping her survive a turn-of-the-century apartment built with a lifespan of sixty in mind. H  l  ne brings bulging bags of groceries from the market. She is an amateur sous-chef taking instructions from an exacting boss. She peels potatoes and carrots, cuts cabbage and turnips, simmers stews and soups that Jacqueline remembers her husband liking. H  l  ne doesn't dwell on the fact that Jacqueline's husband seems to have been two different men. Two different names, two different faces. But the same tastes.

Helen is Jacqueline's granddaughter, the only daughter of an only daughter. She is a poet and a vagrant, and would be an anarchist if she were political. Instead, Helen slips through universities, jobs, and people's lives, whisking by like a breeze on windchimes. She talks Jacqueline into getting a cellphone. She scolds repairmen for overcharging her grandmother. Helen loves to hear Jacqueline talk about her history: wars, protests, music, art, love. Canada. France. Belgium. America. Vietnam. All the places Jacqueline has been, and lived, and grown up. All the people she has been.

H  l  ne is the little girl down the hall, who Jacqueline watches when her mother works late at the hospital. H  l  ne is very quiet. She does not like the dark and flinches when a door slams. She is terrified of thunder. When it rains hard and H  l  ne cowers, Jacqueline brings the girl to her apartment and plays the piano to drown out the noise. H  l  ne learns to play from Jacqueline. At the piano bench, she is talkative.

It could have been family. A friend. A neighbor. Or maybe a man with a perfect jaw and a sad accordion tucked into a booth at a corner caf  , who

picks up a newspaper and reads the obituaries over a very small, very black cup of coffee.

Maybe. Maybe.

That's why I make Jacqueline so hard to parse. An inner pocket of a person. I can't bear to pin her down. It's final enough being splashed across the walls of Paris, a permanent fixture in the background of a million busy lives.

That permanence nails Jacqueline to a certain life. Nails her like a butterfly pegged to a board. Beautiful, discernible, preserved – but absolutely, incontrovertibly dead. All that motion, all the flutterings of life, all the colors that overlap and blur and blend, all held down and separated. What a punishment for a girl who loves thunderstorms and roller coasters. Polka dots and dancing. Pink handbags, and shiny Steinways, and clocks with extra hours, and lovemaking on hidden islands.

The next time we meet, Jacqueline will be another woman. She will be an acrobat. An architect. An anarchist. An astronaut. An alcoholic.

I have to agitate her. I have to reinvent Jaqueline, pull her from the wall that both remembers her and ruins her. To be the living, thriving, growling, flushing, muddling, whirling, whispering, lingering, flickering woman that she was.

That I hope she was. That I make her be.

Rest in peace, Jacqueline, says the wall.

No. No, say I.

Don't rest, Jaqueline. Resound.

BALANCE



JOHN DORROH

UPON YOUR MOVE TO THE GREAT NORTHWEST

Before you pack your belongings & move to Seattle think long & hard about the fish they toss at Pike's Market, fat red fish that fly through the air at 35 mph. Think about getting finned across the face leaving grill marks on your cheeks for your first day at work. Think about the rain & all the clouds that convert your reserves of Vitamin D into ash that clogs your carotid arteries. Think about the high cost of living & the traffic that oozes across floating bridges. That's just not right. Think about how far you'll be from your lifelong friends & your parents who will need you close by as their lives begin to fade like exhausted stars. Think about the amount of coffee that you'll be required to drink & your proximity to volcanoes that will eventually spew their hot guts into your eyes. Wait until then to cook that fish.

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AMANDA DETTMANN

SUPERSTITION

Every time I see a pear I think of the man
Who offered me a bruised one seconds after

Sex, like an elevator stopping at a deceased's
Door and sniffing. I wish he'd done anything

But that: sending my shadow sweetness like green chalk
Drawn around the eyes of a dead cattail. From bed,

I could hear the wooden planes I used to hurl
With my dad on the front lawn before Christmas,

Wanting to floss my chattering jacks of teeth and spit
On the ground like doves do before giving birth.

You want? he'd said, sweating spearmint across sheets.
How does a candle resist; how do I brush salt

From my hair and not check who's been
Thrown over my left shoulder?

CREATIVE NONFICTION

CHRIS DREW

UNFADED SQUARES

I don't remember my parents together. They divorced when I was six years old, but I have plenty of memories before that age—being perched in the front seat of our Cutlass Supreme to watch Star Wars at the drive-in, seeing Dick Clark bring the ball down on 1981, or Dad setting my brothers and me down to tell us the dog had been walloped by a passing coal truck. All of these happened while my parents were still married, and it seems likely they were both present at such moments, but there isn't a single snapshot in my boyhood memories, or in our family photo albums, where they're both in the frame together. It's like the blind spot where our optic nerve attaches to our retina. No amount of focus will make anything appear there.

I usually chalk this absence of memory up to being too young, but the memories I listed above make me suspect this is an equivocation. Really, though, I'm not sure. Those events have all been kept in my mind through subsequent conversations, but my parents never talk about their time together raising three boys, and their respective families are equally complicit. They regale us with stories of the stupid and dangerous stunts we pulled as kids and why we're lucky to be alive—they'll even talk about individual moments when Mom or Dad did something memorable—but there's an unspoken moratorium on conjugal reminiscences. I can't remember anyone ever striking up a conversation by saying, "I remember the time your mom and dad...." It just doesn't happen.

For their part, my folks take different tacks in discussing each other. Dad simply refuses to talk about Mom. If my brothers and I bring her up, he'll either clam up altogether or offer a general bon mot such as, "That sounds like your mother." They were married for nine years—a substantial span in today's world of drive-thru divorce—and as far as I can tell, he's removed each one from his memory bank as fully as he's removed them from the family albums. He's not mean-spirited about it. I think it would reveal something if he was. To him, it just never quite happened.

Mom's the opposite. Sometimes I think the best days of her life ran from meeting Dad to finding out she was pregnant with my older brother. If you take Dazed and Confused and roll it up with The Wonder Years, that's pretty much Mom's version of life with Dad before they were married. It's one adventure after another: sneaking out to the fire tower at midnight, riding in the passenger seat of Dad's hot rod, or struggling mightily against their parents' disapproval (a battle they never quite won). It's romantic, in

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a sideburned '70s sort of way, and it's through Mom that I can imagine my parents with their best days still on the horizon.

But neither will let me see them as a family, with their boys tearing through the yard on a little Kawasaki motorbike or buried in piles of leaves. These pictures are in the photo album, but I want to see behind the camera. Which one of them snapped those photos, and where was the other one? Were they arm-in-arm? Holding hands? Or had the inevitable already begun? I could ask, but I'm not sure I want to. Or maybe I don't feel like I should have to. Most people have memories freely bestowed by their family or friends or co-workers, and it's a gift we usually don't contemplate.

I'm nearly fifty now, and I'm fortunate that Mom and Dad are still alive. They're both almost seventy, and though they move a little slower these days, they're doing well. They've each been remarried for decades, and mostly spend their time doting on their grandkids in retirement. While they still don't interact in any meaningful way, about five years ago I got the faintest glimpse of what might've filled those squares in the family albums. Mom's brother died suddenly of a heart attack, and his funeral was held in the same small town where half of Mom's family still lives, about ten minutes down the road from Dad's house. I spent most of the day at the visitation preceding the funeral, chatting with great-aunts and second cousins I'd forgotten about.

Around six that evening, as the sunlight illuminating the funeral home's stained-glass windows began to dim, I sat on one of the overstuffed sofas that lined the walls, chatting with someone. I can't remember who. The sharp scent of a dozen flower bouquets coated the room as piped-in hymns accompanied a wall-mounted slideshow that had been playing on a loop for hours. Mom stood in the back, near her remaining brothers. Then Dad walked in the rear entrance and made his way to the casket. This wasn't completely unexpected. Though they'd been divorced for almost forty years, they occasionally had to inhabit the same space for weddings and graduations, though they always seemed to glide around each other, never quite coming into direct contact. I expected the same at the funeral, as I watched Dad gaze at my uncle's waxy visage and talk for a minute with my aunt, who took her turn standing by the casket. The shape of the room led me to expect he'd turn and exit the same direction he'd entered from. Instead, he continued on the circular path through the room, and I saw that he'd walk directly past Mom.

I can't explain why, as a 42-year-old man with a family of my own, this trajectory made my chest suddenly tighten and a rush of white noise fill my ears. It felt like the movie scene where everyone suddenly realizes that the asteroid isn't going to miss Earth. Time stopped, or maybe hiccupped. The only light in the room fell on my parents, as Dad turned past the back row of chairs to face Mom. He didn't stop. Didn't move past her. Didn't turn at the last minute to chat with someone else. He stepped to her, put his hand

on her forearm, and spoke. I can't remember much of what they said, but they looked directly at each other, both smiling. I remember Dad's thumb caressing her jacket sleeve reflexively, his hand trembling a bit, as it has since I was a boy. The only words I remember him saying were "I'm sorry, baby," and that last word yanked me out of the present moment as surely as if a wormhole had opened in the funeral home. "Baby." That's not a word someone uses toward his ex-wife at sixty-four. It's what he must have called her for the nine years they were married. I could suddenly see the teenagers they once were, full of hope and love and uncertainty and recklessness, overlapping with these two gray retirees like double-exposed film. I didn't breathe. I couldn't. I just stared down the long hallway of my life, squinting at something at the farthest end of the passage: two figures in a small square of light, bright against the dark walls, their hands coming together.

Then it disappeared. Dad moved past Mom, having only stood with her for a handful of seconds. The room brightened, and the din of a dozen conversations filled my ears again. I leaned against the wall, awash in a sense of loss I couldn't have anticipated. I'd been given a glimpse of the life I didn't remember. A moment that probably didn't mean much, if anything, to my parents but would cast a hazy image over the empty squares in those photo albums for the rest of my life. A phantom memory as certain and maddening as the itch felt by an amputee.

That memory returns sometimes, not often but regularly, sketching itself faintly onto the unfaded squares of those album pages. Our memories are our own, though, independent from those around us, or the stories they tell, or the ones told by the photos and documents we carry from place to place. How often do we stop to consider the connections between those stories and the memories we carry? What happens when the stories are hidden from us? What memories are lost forever because someone buries the stories too deep to dig back up? I'm not scarred or anguished without childhood memories of my parents, but I wonder sometimes what I would see on the pages that've been lost to me. Would I see Dad's trembling hand on Mom's arm? Would I see his open mouth forming the word "baby?" Would I see them differently, or would it still only be my interpretation of unknowable moments? I don't know. Instead, I'm left to consider the unfaded squares between the remaining pictures in the album. To squint from time to time down the long hallway, trying to understand what I can barely see.

JALIYAH SNAER

STARRY SUNFLOWERS



ROBB KUNZ

SMALL GLIMPSE OF AMUN-RA



SELF PORTRAIT AS A HIPPOPOTAMUS

In an African folktale, the Creator designed the hippopotamus to live on land in the beginning. For the hippo, something was not quite right; it longed to be in the water and soothe its leathery skin. One day, the hippo asked the Creator to be allowed to live in the water, but the Creator feared the hippo would eat all the water animals with its enormous mouth. An entire ocean in one gulp, if it could. The hippo made a promise to only eat plants and never a single fish. The Creator agreed and granted the hippo permission to live in the water. To this day, hippos spread their dung with their feet to prove to the Creator there are no traces of fish bones and that they continue to keep the promise their ancestor made.

What message could I smear into the muck
that says I never fed from the words
of a good father? Never hashed on a good
time for a good girl? What can I curl
into the cream of me that hasn't already
been lost? You can boil my liver and wait
for the steam to scent you the proof.
Unstring my inner cords and they'll spell
the secrets of my sadness for you.
My jaws are wide, and I have a vicious snap,
it's true. But do I not still deserve the taste
of water when I dream of a sinless father?
I was raised by a predator to be a predator,
a cub in a wolf's den, the instinct of kill
and flight nurtured deep within me.
I'm forever waiting for the absolution
of water. When it rains, I ditch my DNA
harking me to hunt, and expose my scales
for the downpour. When we refer to water

we call it a body. What was that saying
about forgiveness? Something the Christians
like to say. We come from water,
we are baptized in water, we are reborn
in water. Angels of rain and shadow,
flick your magic my way and grant me passage
to the gates of your blessed pools, anoint me
like your soldiers clad in thunder-darkness.
Let me feast on something that doesn't cost
the life of another being, the meat
of another soul. When you're ready to open
your home, dowse for me with a forked antler
bone and come find me hiding beneath
all the land dwellers' noses, where I've
been taught to wait for the kill. Bring me back
to where I should have been born.

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SCOTT CARTER COOPER

MOONLIGHT TROLLEY

CHARACTERS:

LADY—A posh young woman, 15, wearing a sparkling white dress.

TRAMP—A young person, 17, riding the rails.

SETTING:

A trolley car, parked in a dark garage.

(The silhouette of a young woman carrying a carpet bag appears, and she sits in the front seat of the car. All in shadows. As she waits, she scratches her leg and raises her skirt to examine a run in her stocking. From a dark corner of the car, there's a wolf whistle.)

LADY: Who's there?

TRAMP: *(voice from the dark)* You know, breaking into a trolley is a federal offense.

LADY: Oh. I'll pay for the ride.

TRAMP: That's what everybody says when they get caught.

LADY: Golly.

TRAMP: The secret is to not get caught.

LADY: I really will pay for the ride.

(TRAMP lights a lantern and we discover that LADY is wearing a white dress with sequins or beads on it.)

TRAMP: What's with the get-up?

(LADY prepares to leave.)

TRAMP (CONT'D): Must be in a pretty big hurry.

LADY: Must be.

TRAMP: Where you going?

LADY: California.

TRAMP: You know a trolley isn't going to get you to California, don't you?

LADY: I'm told I can change trains in Boise.

TRAMP: This is a trolley, girlie.

LADY: Well, a trolley is a train, isn't it?

(TRAMP steps out of the shadows, dressed in trousers, boots, a sturdy coat, and a knit cap.)

TRAMP: Well, you got me there.

LADY: What's your name?

TRAMP: No names. First rule when you're riding a trolley. Safer that way.

LADY: Well. At the risk of getting too personal, do you shave your legs or your face before you go to a party on Saturday night?

TRAMP: How'd you come up with a question like that?

LADY: You're wearing...you're wearing trousers.

TRAMP: Yeah?

LADY: Everyone knows respectable ladies who wear pants get a reputation. And it's against the law.

TRAMP: Let's just say when you're traveling as the guest of the B&O Railroad, you get in a lot less trouble dressed like this.

LADY: This isn't the B&O. This is a trolley.

TRAMP: Well, you got me again. But this trolley will take me to the railyards. So... nyah!

(LADY moves further away from TRAMP.)

TRAMP (CONT'D): You running away?

(LADY does not respond.)

TRAMP (CONT'D): All right. Listen, you never know what you'll find riding a trolley at this hour. You ever even been on a trolley before?

LADY: Of course I have. Loads of time.

TRAMP takes a seat and LADY relaxes a bit.

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TRAMP: What's in California?

LADY: I'm going to be in the movies.

TRAMP: Oh, you are, are you?

LADY: Where are you going once you get to the railyard?

TRAMP: I work fishing boats. Just finished the season on Lake Michigan. Sea fishing's better. The best is out east. Maine. New Hampshire.

LADY: They let someone like you work a fishing boat?

TRAMP: I'm wearing pants, ain't I? If you keep your head down and your mouth shut, that's all you need to get on a boat. But you gotta have skill if you want to stay on that boat. First time you hit some rough weather, don't nobody care which parts of your body you shave when you're getting ready for a Saturday night.

(LADY is silent.)

TRAMP: How old are you?

LADY: How old do I look?

TRAMP: I don't know. Forty?

LADY: Excuse me!

TRAMP: Movies are a tough business. You think you got what it takes?

LADY: I'm as pretty as Greta Garbo, aren't I?

TRAMP: You're all right. Say, you got any warmer clothes?

LADY: I don't need warmer clothes in California. It's always warm out there.

TRAMP: But we're not in California, are we? A lot of cold territory between here and there. You planning to take a sleeper car?

LADY: No.

TRAMP: Well. You're going to need warmer clothes. You got a mink in that there suitcase?

LADY: No. My father shipped it to Niagara Falls with all my other clothes. I begged him not to, but...

TRAMP: I see. Well, what have you got?

LADY: Don't you worry about what I've got.

TRAMP: I'm just trying to be helpful.

LADY: I don't need your help.

TRAMP: You got anything to eat?

LADY: No.

TRAMP: Pocket knife? Gin?

LADY: I can't drink yet.

TRAMP: Oh. Got any money?

(LADY pointedly does not respond and begins to leave.)

TRAMP: Well, in the movies, classy dames like you and Greta usually hide some cash in their...you know...their...

(LADY clutches her bosom.)

LADY: You never mind where I might have my money.

(LADY again begins to leave.)

TRAMP: You know, I hide out here at night because this isn't a safe neighborhood. But if you think you can handle yourself. Alone. On the streets of Chicago. At night. You go ahead. Good luck to you. But before you go, you know anyone in California? I mean, besides your pal Greta?

(TRAMP grabs LADY'S carpetbag.)

LADY: Say!

(TRAMP opens the bag and pulls out a fancy dress and a pair of very high heels.)

LADY (CONT'D): Give that back!

(TRAMP tosses the dress and shoes aside. Shakes the carpetbag, but only some lingerie falls out. TRAMP holds up the nightgown. Despite LADY'S attempt to prevent it, TRAMP smells the nightgown. Then LADY snatches the nightgown away, but after a moment's thought decides to toss it aside herself.)

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TRAMP: Those things are going to get you killed in this part of town. You understand me? Tell you what. I can change my plans. I know how to work the rails.

LADY: I'm not working the rails.

TRAMP: Well, why buy a ticket when you can be a guest of the B&O? I can show you all the tricks. Save you some dough.

LADY: I thought you were going to go fishing in New Hampshire?

TRAMP: They got an ocean in California, don't they? That ocean's got fish. What's the difference? Safer if we travel together. When we get to Omaha, I know a place you can trade in that dress for something more sensible. If we're not getting along by then, I'll hop a barge down the Missouri and catch a fishing boat in New Orleans, and you can be on your way. How's that sound?

LADY: Oh, I could never dress like you.

TRAMP: If you don't mind my saying, it doesn't look like you planned this trip real good. Your clothes are headed in one direction, you're going in the other. I'm betting you don't have more than three dollars on you, and that ain't going to buy you a ticket to California. Am I close?

(LADY refuses to answer.)

TRAMP (CONT'D): You even got the price of a trolley ticket?

(Again, LADY won't answer.)

TRAMP: Sister, listen to me. This ain't like the movies, see? There are some bad men, hard men, doing what they've got to do to survive riding the rails. And most of them don't care how old you are. Old enough to wear that dress, old enough for them. You're OK until Omaha because you're with me, but even with me, that white dress is nothing but a flashing neon sign begging for trouble.

LADY: But...trousers!

TRAMP: Katharine Hepburn wears trousers, don't she?

LADY: Yes.

TRAMP: And she's an elegant lady, just like you. Right?

LADY: I suppose.

TRAMP: I can gosh-darn guar-an-tee you, if old Kate was here right now, she'd be telling you to ditch them dresses and get into a pair of dungarees, toot sweet. Do you understand what I'm telling you? Girl, what are you even doing in a wedding dress?

LADY: Daddy married mother when she was fifteen. He says what's good enough for her –

TRAMP: Aw, horse feathers! He lined up some doughy rich guy for you, didn't he? Told you you'd learn to love him too, I bet.

(A beat.)

LADY: Do you really think Katharine Hepburn would –

TRAMP: Sure! She's a smart dame, that one.

LADY: All right. But just to Omaha. Do you hear me? Omaha.

TRAMP: Good. You look cold. Are you cold?

LADY: No.

TRAMP: Well...if you get cold –

(TRAMP disappears to their dark corner and appears with a blanket a minute later.)

TRAMP (CONT'D): Just in case.

TRAMP drapes the blanket around LADY.

LADY: Isn't it a pretty night?

TRAMP: Not bad.

LADY: Getting married on a night like this would be a waste if you're not really in love, don't you think?

TRAMP: If you believe in that sort of thing.

LADY: Don't you believe in love?

TRAMP: That's just something they tell pretty girls to get them into dresses like that one.

LADY: Well... I believe in it.

TRAMP: Have you ever seen anyone who's in love?

LADY: The way Greta Garbo looks at Ramon Navarro. That's what love looks

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like.

TRAMP: Oh, I look like that too, every time I get ahold of a bad oyster. Come on, Sister, that's just the movies.

LADY: Of course, it's the movies.

TRAMP: Movies ain't no more real than those sparkly things on your dress are real diamonds. No more than this trolley is a train that will get you to Hollywood.

LADY: How do you know love isn't real if you've never even tried to find it?

TRAMP: Why am I going to try to find something I already know doesn't exist?

LADY: You just haven't met the right fella.

TRAMP: I meet loads of fellas. All of 'em got square jaws and twinkling eyes. Not one of them's got the gumption you showed tonight bolting from your own wedding to seek your fortune in the movies.

LADY: Oh, now you're just making fun of me.

TRAMP: No, I'm not. I think what you've done is darn-near the most heroic thing I've ever heard, seen, or dreamed about.

LADY: You think I could really be a movie star?

TRAMP: Sure! If it takes guts and looks, you're a shoe-in.

LADY: Harriet says I have a better profile than Garbo.

TRAMP: Who's Harriet?

LADY: A ... friend.

TRAMP: I see. Well, Harriet's right.

LADY: You look like you might be a little cold. Do you have another blanket?

TRAMP: Nope.

LADY: Here.

(LADY extends her blanket-draped arm and wraps it around TRAMP. Then, she withdraws it.)

LADY (CONT'D): Wait. I think you should tell me your name now.

TRAMP: Well...What's your name going to be? In the movies? Greta Garbo's taken.

LADY: I was thinking of Monique LaFleur.

TRAMP: Well, Monique, you can call me Sal.

(TRAMP sits next to LADY, who drapes the blanket around them.)

LADY: There. That should keep us warm all the way to Omaha. Don't you think?

TRAMP: I do. You know these trolleys in here are all broken down, don't you?

LADY: I do. Now.

(Lights fade to black.)

End of Play

DIASPORA

A man with words
is good for nothing,
and if I believed
this, I would not
love you so well on
paper, I would not
slit my tongue
on sentences
beginning with
hear me,
the oldest thing
in your body
is your name
it is the closest
thing I have
to scripture
and to say it
is to hear
your father,
the language
of his country,
your father
crossing oceans
to get

here, where
so much is made
by closing the road
between two pairs
of lips, where
across the table
I reach for you
and with so little
distance, abandon
my motherland
my allegiance
to it.

JESSICA RECHNER

AS I GRIEVE



BONE STRUCTURE

Beautiful bone structure, such
a strong jawline, strangers say.

They don't know about
my predisposition to calcify
everything. I've grown my own

Corinthian helmet from the tusks
of the wild boars loping
in my blood.

Torus mandibularis, bull jaw
the dentist calls it. My jawbone
will grow forever. A genetic trait

I've exacerbated by grinding
my teeth in sleep. My molars
are pinstriped with fractures.

Some morning, I will wake
to discover my teeth shattered,
my mouth a ruin of grit and blood.

It has taken these thirty-four
generations to turn Viking
appetite into diagnosis.
My skeleton persists.
The terror is in the seething
that reveals itself in the band
of muscle that runs cheek to mandible.

I work all night
to blunt my teeth

like those of the herbivore.
I am tired and want to lie down
in my blood-soaked field.

JONATHAN FLETCHER

ENOUGH OF LOVE, GIVE ME BLOOD

who to blame for the separation
of blood from boy

you to blame
you to thank you to bless
you to love

a drop of me
needs to know
inside my veins
who am I

O mother please don't weep

I know that I can needle
I know I sound ungrateful
don't misunderstand

there's love and then there's blood
adoption and apheresis
though what we share is-
n't crimson

inside me, pints of you

JOHN W. BATEMAN

CYCLE COUNT

Cycle Count				
Item	Date	Location	Time	Item Description
1				Fuck pretty poetry.
2				()
3				I sat to write a poem.
4				()
5				I came to read that poem.
6				()
7				I feel no
8				thing but the anesthetic strangulation of sanity.
9				()
10				()
11				The following is an inventory of events taken from police records.
12				Murder victims never get trigger warnings.
13				()
14				()
15				The following is an inventory of legislation passed in various states.
16				This occurred in a land named United. This occurred in a land known as We The People.
17				The following is an inventory.
18				
19	3/22/2023	Georgia		GA SB140 bans all medical care done for transition purposes for minors.
20	7/8/2022	MS	5:17 AM	Jay Lee responds to Timothy Herrington on Snapchat: "Now you're just trying to get me over to beat my ass or something."
21	3/21/2023	Arkansas		AR HB1156 restricts the use of restrooms and sleeping quarters in schools "for the exclusive use by the male sex" or "for the exclusive use by the female sex" defined as "the physical condition of being male or female based on genetics and physiology," as listed on their original birth certificate.
22	7/8/2022	MS	5:54 AM	Snapchat message: Lee said that he was headed to Herrington's apartment.
23	3/16/2023	Arkansas		AR SB199 bans all medical care done for transition purposes for minors unless two independent healthcare providers have documented that a minor's perception of their own gender does not align with their gender assigned at birth for two years.
24	7/8/2022	MS	5:56 AM	Herrington googles "How long does it take to strangle someone?"
25	3/14/2023	Arkansas		AR SB294 states that the Department of Education should review policies, materials, and communications that would promote the teaching and learning of "ideologies, such as Critical Race Theory," which the state contends is at odds with equal protection under the law. Prohibits public school teachers from teaching about gender identity or sexual orientation to students before grade 5.
26	7/8/2022	MS	5:58 AM	Lee's last location identified at 5:58 a.m.
27	3/11/2023	West Virginia		WV HB2007 bans all medical care done for transition purposes for minors.
28	7/8/2022	MS	6:49 AM	Herrington purchases a roll of duct tape after seen looking at large rolling garbage cans.
29	3/3/2023	West Virginia		WV HB3042 establishes an equal protection for religion and religious conduct, allowing people to discriminate against queer people under religious grounds.
30	7/8/2022	MS	7:25 AM	Lee's car seen pulling into Molly Barr Trail Apartments. It is later found here.
31	3/2/2023	Tennessee		TN SB0001 bans all medical care done for transition purposes for minors.
32	7/8/2022	MS	7:34 AM	Jogger wearing a gray hoodie is seen on camera running from the apartment complex who flags down a white Kia to get ride. Oxford police pull over the Kia two minutes later for speeding. Herrington later identified as the passenger, wearing a gray hoodie.
33	3/2/2023	Tennessee		TN SB0003 bans any "adult cabaret performances" on public property or in any location where the performance could be viewed by a child. This includes drag performers
34	7/8/2022	MS	10:45 AM	Herrington, who co-owns a small moving company, picks up a company box truck and drives to his parents' house in Grenada. A security camera shows Herrington loading a long-handled shovel and a wheelbarrow into the truck and leaving.
35	3/1/2023	Wyoming		WY SF0133 requires schools to classify all of their sports as being for "males, men, or boys", "females, women, or girls", or "coed or mixed." It bans students whose "biological sex" is male from participating in sports teams designated for females. "Biological sex" is as determined at birth in an unchanged birth certificate.
36	7/8/2022	MS	8:30 PM	University of Mississippi Police Department receives a call from Stephanie Lee (Lee's mother), requesting a wellness check because her son's location isn't showing up on her iPhone.
37	2/28/2023	Mississippi		MS HB1125, called the "Regulate Experimental Adolescent Procedures" Act, bans all medical care done for transition purposes for minors.
38	7/8/2022	MS	8:45 PM	An officer checks on Lee's apartment at Campus Walk, a university-owned student housing complex. The door is slightly ajar, and Lee's dog is inside.
39	2/27/2023	Arkansas		AR SB43 categorizes any venue that hosts drag performances as an "adult-oriented business." Therefore, any regulations governing "adult-oriented businesses" also apply to venues hosting drag performances.

Cycle Count				
Item	Date	Location	Time	Item Description
40	7/10/2022	MS		Oxford Police Department receives call from one of Lee's friends who says they talked over Snapchat early in the morning on July 8. This person tells OPD that Lee was on the way to meet someone "he had previously hooked up with."
41	2/13/2023	South Dakota		SD HB1080 bans all medical care done for transition purposes for minors.
42	7/21/2022	MS		OPD receives Lee's Snapchat data – including his messages and blocked contacts – and identifies Herrington as a person of interest. This data corroborates the tip given to OPD on July 10.
43	2/9/2023	Utah		UT SB0100 prohibits schools from affirming a student's gender that is different from the student's "biological sex" without written parent permission.
44	7/22/2022	MS		During police questioning, Herrington admits to a relationship with Lee and having an argument on morning of 7/8
45	1/27/2023	Utah		UT SB0016 bans all medical care done for transition purposes for minors.
46	7/22/2022	MS		Timmy Herrington arrested.
47	9/29/2022	Oklahoma		OK SB3 specifies that funds devoted to expanding behavioral health care for children cannot be given to facilities that provide medical care to minors for transition purposes.
48	7/22/2022	MS		In a search of Herrington's apartment, a cadaver dog from the DeSoto County Sheriff's Office reportedly alerts four times to the smell of decaying flesh — three times in the bedroom and once in the kitchen-living room area.
49	6/15/2022	South Carolina		SC H4776 carves out allowances for discrimination based on "sincerely held religious beliefs or moral convictions."
50	7/27/2022	MS		OPD receives a forensic copy of Herrington's MacBook that shows his Google search history.
51	5/25/2022	Louisiana		LA SB44 requires schools to classify all of their sports as being for "males, men, or boys", "females, women, or girls", or "coed or mixed". It bans athletes whose "biological sex" is male from participating in female, women, or girls sports. "Biological sex" is to be defined by the student's official birth certificate issued at or near the date of birth.
52	8/9/2022	MS		Lafayette County Circuit Court Judge orders Herrington held without bond
53	5/17/2022	Oklahoma		OK SB615 prohibits classroom discussions about sexual orientation or gender identity in primary grade levels or "in a manner that is not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students."
54	8/16/2022	MS		Jay Lee's body is still missing.
55	5/16/2022	South Carolina		SC HB4608 requires schools to classify all of their sports as being for "males, men, or boys", "females, women, or girls", or "coed or mixed". It bans athletes whose sex assigned at birth is male from participating in female, women, or girls sports. Sex is based on the student's official birth certificate if the certificate was filed at or near the time of the student's birth.
56	12/1/2022	MS		Jay Lee's body is still missing.
57	5/4/2022	Arizona		AZ HB2161 expands parental authority over their child by requiring that all medical records and all school records must be made available to the parents or legal guardians of a minor. Schools must gain written permission from parents or legal guardians before teaching students about sex, sexuality, or gender.
58	12/1/2022	MS		Herrington released on \$250,000 bond
59	5/2/2022	Tennessee		TN HB1895 withholds funding from schools that do not separate students on the basis of "biological sex" for school sports. It does not clarify how this is to be defined.
60	2/27/2023	MS		Herrington did not appear for arraignment
61	5/2/2022	Tennessee		TN HB2153 bans students whose "biological sex" is male from participating in female, women, or girls sports. According to this bill, "biological sex" is to be defined by the student's birth certificate as long as that birth certificate was filed at or near the date of birth.
62	3/24/2023	MS		Jay Lee's body is still missing. It has been 259 days.
63	4/26/2022	Oklahoma		OK SB1100 prevents birth certificates from having any sex /gender designation other than male or female. A nonbinary or "X" designation is not allowed.
64	3/29/2023	MS		Grand jury indicts Herrington for capital murder in the disappearance of Jay Lee.
65	3/29/2023	MS		Jay Lee's body is still missing. It has been 264 days.
66	5/4/2023	MS		300 days.
67	7/8/2023	MS		365 days.
68				()
69				This inventory is incomplete.
70				()
71				Jay Lee's body is still missing.
72				()
73				Fuck pretty poetry.
74				()
75				Bleed so I can hear you.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

DANIELLE HAYDEN

CONCESSIONS

Getting pregnant the same month I'd decided to be sterilized was a new low even for me, a girl who had spent the better part of her twenties making mistakes. I'd been compiling a short list of doctors in Washington State with a rumored willingness to tie the tubes of women who had not quite reached thirty. I had my spreadsheet open and a reply at the ready for family members who had begun to ask, with irritating frequency, about my plans for reproduction.

"I don't think I want kids," I always said.

Whenever I saw parents out with their children it was pity—not longing—that I felt. Relatives laughed off my statements or assured me, with a verbal pat on the head, that I'd change my mind. Or they started rattling off a litany of reasons why I should have a baby. The dismissiveness was frustrating.

I suppose I couldn't fault them entirely for not taking me seriously. Anyone would think that I wanted to be a mother. Nurturing and patient, I had worked with students in kindergarten all the way to high school seniors. Most of my volunteer work, since I was a teenager myself, had been with youth in some capacity. I'd written two children's books and was a regular contributor to a local parenting magazine. But I did not want that life—at least, not anymore. Raising kids had been a goal of mine until I was twenty-three, when I stepped into the classroom to teach and the first of many doubts began to show itself. With every subsequent season, I became less and less drawn to the prospect of parenthood until it became a wholly undesirable pursuit.

I was casually sipping rosé one afternoon when a little voice inside my head told me not to have a second glass. Somehow, I intuitively knew why, despite not even being late yet. I walked to Walgreens that evening and wondered what the cashier was thinking as she rang up the pair of pregnancy tests I'd gingerly placed on the counter. As I returned home, I recalled my horoscope from earlier that week: On Wednesday you will receive difficult news that you must accept.

It took several minutes to compose myself. This was not only in the nascent stages of seeking tubal ligation, but also mere weeks after I had told my husband that I was contemplating divorce. Soon after that, I was laid off from a job that delivered a steady paycheck even if it couldn't deliver fulfilment. Though I knew circumstances could be more dire, and I was better off than many other people who found themselves unexpectedly with

child, it felt like the absolute worst time.

At the first appointment with my OB/GYN, I hoped that this was some sort of mistake. Surely the test had been wrong; false positives do happen, after all. I fantasized that after a brief and pleasant visit, we'd all go home, and I could laugh about this with a sigh of relief and a sincere promise to fuck more carefully in the future. I knew I could never terminate the pregnancy, but I had been hoping for some sort of *deus ex machina*. Instead, there on the ultrasound was my daughter, a tiny mark signifying colossal change. We could hear a faint heartbeat, that irrefutable evidence of life echoing my own death knell. Having a child would mean an end to freedom, to flexibility, an obliteration of the possibility of leaving my spouse. I felt trapped, in more ways than one, for the next eighteen years. I did not hide this sentiment.

In hindsight, I see that I was too honest throughout my pregnancy. Truthful in other dealings, I felt no need to make an exception in this instance. When people asked how I was feeling or how excited I must be I disclosed that this reality had not been part of my plan and I was in despair about the upheaval a child would cause. "But you'll be a great mom!" was a common response. I appreciated the compliment, but they were missing the point. Being a good parent was not a concern—I knew that any baby I brought into the world would be loved well and raised with tenderness; an offer of anything other than my full self to this role was not something I had considered. The glaring point that they all willfully disregarded was that I did not desire this. Especially not at that juncture, when the rest of my world seemed to be falling apart. Others were quick to blame my woe on hormones, insisting that they would regulate, and I'd be ecstatic about motherhood soon—even after I explained multiple times that estrogen was not, in fact, the source of my bleak outlook. Once again, people were not listening. It felt like I was screaming at the top of my lungs, but no one was hearing me. A few condemned me for daring to admit that I was less-than-thrilled about the baby, which was no surprise either. It is so often the case that women's feelings are either pathologized or demonized.

They'd been right about my maternal instincts: I started eating better (no more ten-cent packets of ramen noodles; Cinnabons were out too); I took my prenatal vitamins. I read parenting manuals; I registered for a pregnancy, childbirth and lactation class. I compared cribs and bassinets and decorated the nursery; I bought books and bottles and blankets and so much other stuff. I spoke gentle and kind words to my womb, rubbing my belly all the while. Some people suspended their harshness when they realized that I actually gave a shit, but this unintentionally gave legitimacy to their belief that my despondency was just a phase. Folks were altogether unable to understand the complexity of the expectant mother: I could be sad about what was happening while holding no resentment towards my daughter. I

could lament an end—or in the best case, a delay—of my aspirations while still knowing that the child was blameless and deserved only love.

Aside from having to deal with outsiders—rarely is motherhood permitted to be a private enterprise—there were other things that I was dreading. Being a mom meant parent-teacher conferences and loose teeth, fixing meals when I hated to cook. It meant birthday parties with even more kids. It meant homework help and science fair projects. It meant taking her to the park often, because that’s what good moms do, and the obligatory chit chat with other parents as we all push our kids on the swings in resigned unison, arms tiring all the while. It meant getting on all fours and voicing characters. It meant finger painting and finger puppets, singing stupid songs and braving temper tantrums. It meant arts & crafts, dodging scattered Legos and Goldfish crackers embedded in the carpet. It meant not applying for my dream job because I would be staying home from now on. It meant all these things and more, for years to come.

When she was a year old, I walked into my bedroom one afternoon to find my vision board destroyed. I had stepped out to run the rare errand, asking my husband to watch our daughter for a bit. I returned to find him on the bed, face buried in his cell phone and facing away from our daughter as she sat on the floor. It was the first vision board I had ever made, and I’d spent a lot of time on it, scouring the internet for just the right images; cutting and pasting and organizing them just so. “You were supposed to be watching her!” I cried.

My husband barely looked up, eyes still fixated on a scrolling screen. Then, glancing over, he realized what had occurred under his pseudo-watch. “You shouldn’t have left it out,” he answered matter-of-factly.

“I worked really hard on that,” I muttered as I cleaned the mess, holding back tears and avoiding my daughter’s quizzical expression.

My husband repeated himself, with an added shrug for good measure. The metaphor was not lost on me: my daughter, without malice and just by virtue of being a little kid, had torn down my dreams, one by one in rapid succession.

Sure, there were some other moms who complained about motherhood or even claimed to regret it. Whether they were deemed brave or evil depended on the audience. Facebook groups, Reddit threads, articles on Scary Mommy all helped me feel less alone. But as soon as I’d feel like we were all part of the same shameful coterie, time and time again I’d read more of their work or glance at their profiles, and it would say something like “proud mom of two [or more].” And away went the camaraderie. I’m all on my own, I thought. Because if they really hated it as much as they said, there was no way they would have had a second one. I was the real deal; “one and done,” as they say. I did eventually have my surgery and ignored people who insisted I was

doing my daughter a disservice by not giving her a sibling (there is a such thing as a well-adjusted only child, and plenty of people with siblings are estranged from them or acrimonious).

Several people suggested that I befriend more moms to help me feel better, but the last thing I wanted was a gaggle of postpartum pals. No thanks. I'll admit a prejudice, but I'd been burned before. Whenever I was around new moms in my peer group, they were always comparing and competing; I'd never been competitive at all, let alone about something so absurd as my baby being able to hold a bigger bottle than the other baby there (True story. Great Thanksgiving conversation). I hated the word "kiddos," yet it was an inescapable utterance. And while the idea of surrounding myself with others facing similar challenges held some appeal, I was turned off by their myopic focus on children and childrearing in discussions. I didn't mind talking about children, and in fact there were things I loved to share about my daughter, but I didn't want to talk only about things related to offspring (and in the case of some topics, like bowel movement consistency, I didn't wish to visit the matter at all). Surely there must be room for additional subject matter. I was a mother now and unmoored, but underneath that was still a person who loved books and art and music and Kierkegaard.

I much preferred the company of childless friends (and not for vicarious escapism—or rather, not just for that), but even those friends seemed just as determined to limit the conversation. We'd start off talking about my daughter for a while and then after some time had passed, I'd try to redirect the conversation. I just wanted a reprieve, a detour from being asked for the thousandth time if (or how well) she was sleeping through the night. Time and time again my attempts would fail. They'd offer a cursory response to my alternate line of inquiry if they didn't outright ignore it, and I'd conceal my frustration at having to adhere to a single point of dialogue, like the melodic masterpiece that is "Baby Shark." The rules of motherhood were not always clear, but one thing that was apparent was that I was not expected to mention other interests.

Even before my daughter had arrived, people had offered unsolicited opinions, and seemed to relish in doling out negative ones. They didn't like her name or her bedroom's color scheme; others were horrified that I didn't want a baby shower; a couple folks had a tough time accepting that some pieces of her wardrobe were sourced from the boys' clothing department. I also have the comical misfortune of having a father-in-law who specializes in obstetrics, and he yelled at me for being depressed and all but ordered me to go on medication, roaring about the impact of stress on fetal development (ironically ignoring the fact that his bellowing was causing me greater stress than anything else at that point).

Family and strangers alike were quick to tell me what they thought and what I should be doing better. A woman I'd never met once walked several yards across a parking lot to knock on my car window and tell me how I should comfort my baby, who had started to get slightly fussy after her first time on an airplane—a flight, I might add, during which I'd kept her angelically quiet the whole way. Despite the tenderness with which I cradled and kissed her, rubbed my nose against hers, showered her with love, people couldn't just focus on that. They also had to tell me that a different kind of bib would be better or that I should just let her cry it out instead of soothe her. Some communicated that allowing screen time, even a little bit, was a Terrible, Unforgivable Thing, while another person urged me to let her watch more shows. For one family friend, serving any juice at all was another Awful Thing (because fructose bad. Fructose real bad), but then I got mom-shamed by someone else when I said my daughter could only drink water for the rest of the day because she'd already had juice earlier. It was bad enough that I wasn't getting any rest and my nipples were dry and cracked and bleeding and I wasn't producing enough milk (my tits had disappointed me my whole life; why should they come through for me now?). But the judgments had increased too.

I missed my old life, ungrateful as I had been for it. Though I had gained a wonderful human being, I mourned what I had lost. I played my part pretty well, but inside I was crumbling. I was blowing balloons and blowing bubbles, and blowing my husband because I was always too...too something to have actual intercourse: too tired, too sad, and too resentful of the way he parented. After all, he had wanted kids all along. I hadn't, yet I was doing more than my fair share. The least he could do was not throw away the breastmilk I'd so achingly pumped. Sadness was something I had known intimately, and acutely, for quite some time. Anger was a feeling that was altogether new to me, but I began to feel it quite often once I found myself coparenting. For a long time, I did not trust my husband to make sound decisions, and I often disagreed with his methods. I still do. I missed a friend's wedding because I couldn't risk leaving her with him even for a weekend, and it wasn't because I had attachment issues. My partner had not proven to me that our daughter would be in good hands. It made my desire to leave him stronger, but far less possible. I had to protect her.

I was a stay-at-home mom for the first year (or should I say, the first "12 months" of her life, in the parlance of parentspeak) and with her daily. I wanted a break but didn't want to feel like someone else was essentially raising her, so daycare was out of the question at the beginning. Once she was older, we introduced a caregiver we trusted. But this was not every day, and I limited it to four hours at a time, maximum—despite the sitter's available hours being 6-6, and despite the fact that we could afford this and

more. I knew no one would take care of her as well as I did, and I did not wish to feel as though I was shirking my responsibilities. So, she and I would dance or build blocks, practice her letters or bake cupcakes together. And I was always singing to her: making up tunes for the bathtub, chanting the cleanup song when we put her toys away, humming and smiling at her even as I wiped her shit.

Being a black mother offered another tier of difficulty to everything else. Biases and assumptions that were repeatedly made by default—for instance, that I was a single mom and that the father of my child wasn't in the picture—were annoying and tiresome. If my daughter and I were out without my spouse, I'd sometimes bring my left hand up to my face as if to look pensive, or like I had an itch, so people would see my wedding ring and maybe stop judging me. There were days when I forgot to put back on my ring after applying lotion to my hands or doing my daughter's hair, leaving myself vulnerable to those stereotypes. I'd find a way to name-drop my husband into a conversation so I wouldn't be seen as another statistic. It was on more than one occasion that I saw a noticeable shift in attitude once people saw I was married. I hated myself for caring so much.

And of the dozens of parks we visited over the years, there were a couple I never returned to again after our presence was met with hostile looks. I didn't mind curiosity or even stares—there isn't a lot of brown skin where we live—but I can still picture the unfriendly faces in one wealthy Seattle suburb as they watched my daughter run and play gaily. What a sad state of affairs that even an innocent child's mirth could cause such grave offense in the wrong part of town.

Even with other black people it was hard to be a black mom. My daughter's hair was frequently the object of critique. I cannot count how many passive-aggressive comments I got urging me to style it differently. I preferred to let it be free, clean and (usually) combed but in a 'fro or poufs so as not to cause her more pain than was necessary. I didn't like the look of fear on her face when she saw me coming toward her with brush in hand; I can still remember sitting between my own mother's legs with tears in my eyes almost every time my hair was detangled. I didn't like having to chase my daughter around to catch and then practically restrain her only to tell her that the reason mommy is hurting her scalp is because it will “make her pretty.” Instead, I wanted her to think about playing and learning and having fun. She has the rest of her life to start hating her physical appearance. Society will see to that; for women, it is our birthright. This would not start in my house. It was easier for both of us to just let her hair be what it wanted to be.

The whole liberation concept was a thing with me. When she was a baby, I didn't even snap her onesies at the bottom. This embarrassed everyone else,

but I found onesies constricting. I wouldn't want to wear the equivalent of a leotard every day; why should she? Her clothes were stylish, but I made sure she was comfortable in them—the way kids' clothes should be. After some outcry, I made a concession and started tucking the dangling onesie flaps if we went out in public but, in a tiny act of defiance, I still left them unsnapped—a secret triumph. As someone who had lived most of her life caring about what people thought, I was proud to discover that my daughter's sartorial comfort was more important to me than public opinion—by a longshot. She was well taken care of (emotionally and physically); kind and clever and polite; well-rounded and well-traveled. And everyone, even in between criticisms, declared that she was the happiest kid they'd ever known. So, I didn't give a shit that her hair wasn't always sleek or that her onesie wasn't tight enough on the crotch for other people's delicate sensibilities.

I was busy cleaning Play-Doh out of the printer and syrup off her face, getting a head start on researching preschools, taking her to museums and to the dentist and to the beach and children's theater, making valentines and decorating Easter eggs, potty training and building forts and making sure she took her vitamins. It was I who bought her new shoes just before she outgrew her current size. It was I who clipped her nails and cleaned the wax from her ears, who took her to library story time circles and bought her a microscope, who paid close attention to detail and tailored activities and purchases to her latest fascinations. It was I who was trying to teach her to read, who took her out rock collecting and made sure she was hydrated and flossing and saying her pleases and thank yous (or lately, her no thank yous). I could name different points in my life where I had been a shitty wife, a lousy friend, a bad daughter. But I was killing this mom thing (this essay notwithstanding). I sound like a braggart here, but I'm really coming from a place of defensiveness, because some cannot seem to comprehend that individuals—specifically mothers—can operate with multiple feelings at once, even conflicting ones.

I hate having to be “on” so much, but parenting demands more performativity than I bargained for. My daughter is not like I was as a child. Quiet and introverted, she is not. Shy, she is most assuredly not. She is gradually getting better at quiet time, but in general she likes to perform and to play, to run around and do a lot of other physical activities. She prefers not to be alone, and I want to nurture her extroversion and gregarious personality, not stifle it. I, on the other hand, have always been pretty comfortable with solitude, and in fact, welcome it.

The truth is, I am just...getting by. And maybe that's all I can do. To be sure, there are some moments of joy, but after four years of this, there is still that dread every morning when I wake up—or am woken up—to face another long day in my cage. Sleep is elusive, as is finding time to write or

to make myself resemble something other than a haggard shell of my former self. Sometimes I want to crawl back under the blanket and hide. Or weep. Each day is a paradox: simultaneously unpredictable yet repetitive.

Repetitive. Repetitive. Repetitive.

I am supposed to say that I cannot imagine my life any other way, but I can, and often do. I do this less as time passes, tethered more closely to reality by the futility of daydreams. But I still long for a freedom that I will never taste, an existence without the duty of caring for and worrying about a human being who is almost entirely dependent on me.

I believe that my daughter was meant to be here, and I could not have asked for a better child. She is as close to perfect as a kid can get and a favorite of all who cross her path; I am very fortunate in this regard. And though this is not at all why I love her, she is also a stunning creature. It is adorable how she follows me around, announcing “I’m coming too!” even as I make journeys to such distant places as the fridge; how she misses me and asks about my whereabouts on occasions that I am away or even merely out of sight. And she tells me, “I love you, Mama. You’re the best, Mama.” And more recently, “You’re a good mama, Mama” and “You’re my hero!” Those heartwarming displays of affection do not negate the fact that this is the hardest thing I have ever done, nor do I stop thinking about the time I have left (as of now, I’m about 22% done raising her). But hearing her sweet little voice softens the blow.

MEDUSAE

Ask a Greek and he will tell—
strong women belong on shields,
to make the fears of enemies swell;
or an amphora that one day yields
inspiration to a muse.

On an urn, yes, but not the fora,
where young minds we might abuse.

Goddess or oracle, in our aura
quail, so removed are we;
but as a peer? Too soft, too frail
we're all supposed to be.

Far too weak to prevail
against the heavy press
of feathers in the night,
or cause spear to stress
and sag by whispered slight.

Such strong women could only exist
as part of some monstrous regiment,
punished for their will to resist,
banished to shadow, a shameful sediment.

The vipers writhing from my crown
are thoughts unafraid to bite;
my serpentine skin that makes you frown,
scaled because you have no right
to touch it at your leisure.

I, unbowed, am proud and bold,
and for this I induce seizure,
turning blood from hot to cold?

And so by men the tales are spun
of my piercing sight; how my dire gaze
can be averted, my mystique undone—
forced to face my wrongful ways.

You show a mirror to my face,
and now I'm fleshed in stone.

But you, long blind to my grace,
remain to your follies prone.

JALIAH SNAER

MY BLUE GREEN THUMB



MADINA TUHBATULLINA

WHEN I GO HOME

Without verb subjugations
or hospital wristbands
or broken wine glasses
or broken cars,

I will bring a suitcase
festering familiar DNA
will fill ceramics with
six years with some
change or seven
without

I will hide pepper, turn aloe,
hoard on laughter, diplomas,
and promises of thereafter
smoothed over the pinches
in y(our) kitchen oilcloth

Without adaptive strategies
or any estranging thing,
seven years
without change
at the table is your
aloe daughter.

CURT STRICKLAND

SPEED DATING

CHARACTRS:

JESSE—Around 65 years old, any ethnicity, tastefully dressed, with an easy-going manner and a kind smile. He is holding a water bottle.

SARA—Around 60 years old, any ethnicity, attractive, her outfit is indicative of a sense of style. She is holding a drink.

They both have name tags with their names on.

SETTING:

The conference room of a Holiday Inn that is hosting a speed dating event for seniors, with a meet and greet prelude. There is a fold-out table stacked with water bottles and brochures.

(JESSE walks over to SARA, standing alone, nursing a drink.)

JESSE: Hi, my name's Jesse.

SARA: I know.

JESSE: You know? Are you clairvoyant?

SARA: No, just able to read. I see your dog tag.

JESSE: Dog tag?

SARA: Yeah, your sticker.

JESSE: Oh.

(A beat.)

SARA: So tell me about yourself. We got ten minutes apparently.

JESSE: Well, I was recently widowed.

SARA: I'm sorry, how recent?

JESSE: *(Straight face)* Couple of days.

SARA: So you're at the end of your grieving process. You seem to be holding up well.

JESSE: Hour thirteen was rough, but I got through it.

SARA: Is your wife actually in the ground, or did you blow off the burial?

JESSE: I'm not sure if they have tossed the dirt back in, not privy to the grave diggers timetable on that, but for all intents and purposes, we can put a fork in that relationship...

SARA: OK, to recap: officially single, wife's body may or may not be in the ground.

JESSE: I think we can label her the ex-wife.

SARA: OK. Well, tell me more about yourself. Are you still able to perform sexually?

JESSE: Whoa! Is that a first date question?

SARA: Perhaps not. But at my age, I'm way beyond the court and spark stage.

JESSE: Fair enough. But you should know I recently had a double lung transplant.

SARA: . . . OK, I'm not sure I would have opened with that.

JESSE: Cards on the table. And if we end up getting married, you should know that my end of life scenario will not be romantic. I will slowly lose control of my faculties as well as well as my bowels. How do you feel about bowel clean-up on an aging husband?

(A beat.)

SARA: You haven't dated much have you?

JESSE: First date in forty-five years.

SARA: No judgement here, but have you ever heard the concept "best foot forward?" Your end of life scenario, you might wanna keep that on the down low, especially on the first date. But that's just me.

JESSE: So you're saying I have no game?

SARA: I've seen worse. You might wanna rethink the subject matters you bring up for conversation.

JESSE: Like the bowel scenario?

SARA: Not a good visual. Now, just to confirm: your wife is dead, but not quite buried.

JESSE: Is that some kinda deal breaker for you?

SARA: Well, I do have standards. I generally insist that the men I date have their dead spouses in the ground, covered with dirt. But hey, that's just me.

JESSE: She should be in the ground by now—just didn't want to be late for

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the speed date.

SARA: Let's review your pitch: you've been a widower for two days.

JESSE: Two and a half.

SARA: Huge difference. At some point you will lose control of your bowels which, if I was your wife, I would be expected to clean up.

JESSE: Well, no. At the first sign of a cold, you should immediately file divorce papers.

SARA: OK, silver lining, exit strategy. I like that. So in our marriage vows, we will replace "till death do us part" with "at the first sign of a cold."

JESSE: Bingo.

SARA: Anything else you wanna add?

JESSE: I'm not sure how set up I am financially. I might be relying on the kindness of strangers, or on my future wife.

SARA: The hits keep on coming. OK, let's review your pitch: a wife who has been dead for two days.

JESSE: Two and a half.

SARA: Changes everything. OK. In the future, you may have lung complications, bowel issues, a shaky financial future, and a former wife whose body may or may not still be warm.

JESSE: What's not to love?

SARA: I guess you are a player.

JESSE: Thank you. So tell me about yourself.

SARA: Well, I lost my husband yesterday.

JESSE: Whoa! Nice you could fit this into your schedule.

SARA: Time management.

JESSE: On steroids. What else?

SARA: I may be a schizophrenic.

JESSE: Huge selling point with guys. It's like dating a different woman every night.

SARA: Wasn't sure.

JESSE: Men love that. Keeps the relationship fresh.

SARA: Good to know. And I'm ambivalent about sex.

JESSE: Guys love to hear that. Another huge selling point.

SARA: And I'm not sure if I like men, now, or women.

JESSE: Sexual ambivalence. Guys take that as a personal challenge. I shouldn't be telling you this, but men think that after one night with us, lesbians will march right back to the home team.

SARA: Well, I think the evangelicals would be very interested in this super power. I don't think they are having much success with conversion therapy and this sounds like a quick, effective, and economical solution to the lesbian outbreak.

JESSE: Absolutely. This could be my side hustle, and I'd be doing God's work. Evangelicals are gonna love me.

SARA: With God on your side.

JESSE: But I do have reservations on your big reveal. Not sure if all that comes under the heading, "best foot forward."

SARA: Wasn't sure.

JESSE: Well, you're shaping up to be quite the catch.

SARA: What can I say?

JESSE: Ambivalence about sex: can't emphasize enough what a winning hand that is with the guys.

SARA: Gives men a challenge.

JESSE: We love challenges. What else?

SARA: Well, I may have killed my husband.

JESSE: Whoa! Cards on the table! But wait, doesn't that mean you will be doing jail time?

SARA: They can't prove a thing—covered my tracks really well.

JESSE: But if you didn't cover your tracks, the only sex I'll be having is through conjugal visits.

SARA: How romantic would that be? I'll even rustle up some prison candles for your visits.

JESSE: What a romantic you are.

SARA: Well, I might have to have sex with the guards to set that up.

JESSE: And that would increase the odds I get some kind of STD after my conjugal visits.

SARA: Living on the edge.

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JESSE: Question: will you be having sex with anyone else—just so I can give a heads up to my doctor.

SARA: (*Indignant*) Oh my god. I'm not some kind of whore if that's what you're implying. I do have standards; I would only have sex with prison personnel, no other profession.

JESSE: You reek of integrity.

SARA: Thank you.

JESSE: Let's review, make sure we check all the boxes. One: ambivalent about sex. Two: may be carrying a STD. Three: might be a lesbian—you may wanna keep that on the down low. Four: may or may not have murder charges to deal with. That about cover it?

SARA: I think it's very clear; I won't be single very long.

JESSE: You'll be married before your husband's body turns cold.

SARA: Now, if we do get married, we'll have what is commonly referred to as an open marriage: I sleep with prison personnel, and you sleep with lesbians.

JESSE: All-American couple right there.

(Long pause as they gather their breaths, staring at each other.)

SARA: (*serious*) Can I ask you a question?

JESSE: Sure.

SARA: When did your wife pass?

JESSE: Four years ago.

SARA: Tell me about her.

JESSE: Well, she was the most giving, loving person you'd ever want to meet. The love she gave out on a daily basis to me, our kids, our grandkids, the people she worked with, our friends . . . I was blessed and humbled by her. I adored her, was in awe of her. She conducted her life as an art form. She breathed love into any action she was doing. And she always saw the best in people and insisted I be the best I could be. She refused to let me settle, or the ones around her settle. I'm a better man for it. I think of her every day and how blessed I was to have spent forty-five years with this angel from heaven. God graced me with this woman. She made my life full.

SARA: She sounds wonderful.

JESSE: She was. How about yours? When did he pass?

SARA: Three years ago. He was my rock. No matter what was happening, he was always so calm and optimistic. He never let me go to the dark side. And he worshipped me . . . which I could never understand. He saw the goodness in me that I couldn't see. I was blessed with a daily dose of unconditional love. It filled and nourished my soul, made me feel I could do anything. How do you replace someone like that?

JESSE: . . . I guess you don't. How many years?

SARA: Thirty-five years. I got a hole in my heart bigger than the Grand Canyon.

JESSE: We were both blessed.

SARA: Heaven was kind to us.

(A beat.)

JESSE: Hey, you wanna go for a drink?

SARA: And miss meeting all these men with pacemakers and oxygen pumps?

JESSE: If you can tear yourself away.

SARA: You buying?

JESSE: Well, if you may recall, until my lesbian side hustle kicks in, I'm on very shaky financial grounds.

SARA: I guess you're buying.

JESSE: I guess I am. OK, our first drink together. Have to take a picture and put it in our scrapbook, maybe include one of your mug shots .

SARA: Oh, we got a scrapbook already?

JESSE: Absolutely. I know a good one when I see one.

(He holds out his hand. She looks at it for a few beats and then takes it. They exit.)

End of Play

LAUREN CRAWFORD

REVERSE ABUSE

Pools of water drag soot into a swirl up
from the shower drain. Each clear droplet
blackens before scaling the slopes

of my mother's calves like twenty baby water
moccasins for boots, then pants,
then a body suit. Mom scrubs ash

into her hair. When my father comes back
home, his tires wipe clean their dark tracks
on the driveway, he unslams the front door

and hurries inside. As I flail in my crib,
my shrieks slowly lull me back to sleep,
and my mother realizes he's not abusive.

She loves him. My father ungrits his teeth
and pulls Mom out of the fireplace.
He caresses her cheek, cups the pleats

of her frown lines digging into the seams of his
knuckles. He unslaps her and the sound of her scream
collects around her teeth. The chimney inhales

the massive black cloud that surrounds her,
sucking away the smudges on her arms.
My father's spit leaps back onto his tongue

before he swallows it. Mom cooks supper
for us while the chicken unburns on the stove
and the last specks of ash burrow beneath the flames.

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SARAH BAEK

ILLUMINATION FANTASY



STILL LIFE WITH FRONT PORCH AND YELLOW SKY

We resemble the day, limp
with August heat. Above the street,
elm leaves droop. My mother rocks
in the green wicker chair.

Already I've outgrown my hand-me-down
shorts. My bare legs stick to the porch floor
where I pick at the chipped paint.

A car slides by, low-slung. We look up.
"There go the Stevensons," she says,
the first words spoken.

My mother fans herself
with the hem of her apron.

I wonder where they're all going.
I wonder, even packed in like that,
if the kids are lonely.

ELLEN JUNE WRIGHT

INVISIBLE ME

Forty years ago,
 the only professor
who looked like me
 in the art history dept.
where I work-studied
 never spoke.
I watched him pass me
 each time as though
I were a still life
 with empty chair.

IRAKLI MIRZASHVILI

UNDER THE SUN



CREATIVE NONFICTION

JENNIFER RIPLEY

LEGACY

Did I ever tell you what his mother did to him as a baby?” Mom asks.
Yes, a few times.

Mom’s eighty-one and repeating herself a little bit nowadays; but I don’t want her to feel self-conscious and it’s what I’m here for anyway.

“There was a parade of nannies,” Mom says. “They kept quitting or were fired because none were allowed to pick him up when he cried. The only way he got attention was when he was quiet. Can you imagine? She was a real monster.”

I study the black and white photo. Dad’s about thirteen or fourteen, wearing fifties fashion: boat shoes, a pair of wide-legged trousers, a short-sleeved button down. His mother is sitting beside him on the couch and they’re holding a book. Her arm is around his shoulder, her hand oddly positioned: three long-nailed fingers out, two tucked under. Like a bird’s claw. My dad is tilted in, as if he might rest his cheek against hers, but he doesn’t.

Grandma Kit does look a bit diabolical. Chin down, eyes up, smile pinched and knowing. Her eyebrows are straight lines slashing outward. She looks mannish and cruel. A real monster, I think uncharitably, because the Grandma Kit I had known was a sweet little old lady who walked with a cane and who thought five-year-olds liked buttermilk on their Cheerios.

Everything about this photo is staged, from Dad’s forced smile to the book in their lap. As if we’re meant to believe Time or Look magazine happened to drop by and caught them in a private moment, reading a titleless hardback yanked from a set reference books. “At Home with Katherine Godfrey and Son.”

Like her brother, Arthur Godfrey, Grandma was the host of various radio and TV programs in the fifties. My dad made a few appearances, mostly posing a sponsor, Huffy Radiobikes. Unlike Arthur’s wildly successful career, Grandma’s had fits and starts— she’d been side-lined by polio and by the fact she was a woman in the nineteen-fifties.

Mom tells me the polio made Grandma bitter. Maybe that’s why she ignored her crying son; the virus invaded her nerves and deadened more than her legs. Or maybe she simply subscribed to the old ways of parenting where children should be seen and not heard until they were old enough to be useful and make appearances on your TV show.

The author Glennon Doyle writes, “Boys who learn that pain is weakness

will die before they ask for help.”

My dad learned that lesson as an infant. It was set down in the coils and synapses of his growing brain, wound so tightly it would never be unwound. Never unlearned. In October of 2020, he sat on the back porch of his house, smoked a final cigar, and shot himself in the head.

“Your grandpa died today,” Dad says in the kitchen of his big house by the lake in Victorville, a town whose biggest claim to fame is being on the way to Vegas. The house is one of a chain of rentals, each one bigger or smaller than the last depending on how Dad’s law firm is doing. I’m twenty, visiting from Los Angeles and this house is huge. Business is good.

“Today?” I ask. “Grandpa Tom died a long time ago.”

“I’m talking about my dad, Robert Sr.”

He says it matter-of-factly. As if his father’s sudden appearance and then disappearance in the space of one sentence is only that, a fact devoid of attachments or connective tissues.

“I’m...sorry. I had no idea,” I stammer, wanting to support my father in his bereavement, if there is any, while demanding why I’m only just now hearing about Robert Sr now. All this time I’d thought Grandma Kit’s husband, Tom McCann, was my grandfather because when you’re a kid and told a certain man is your grandfather, you tend to believe them. If Dad is sad to have lost his father—and he must be—he doesn’t tell me. And I don’t ask. Asking is not something we do in this family.

But I should have put it together myself, anyway. Dad was proudly Robert Ripley Jr—not a McCann—and my brother is the third. Because Dad was the keeper of lineages, the curator of our family history. He preserved the relics of the past and displayed them in the museums of his big houses. Grandma Kit’s huge furniture, his famous Uncle Arthur’s memorabilia, the Edwardian chairs that moved with us from house to house but that no one was allowed to sit on.

“You’re related to William the Conqueror and Alexander Graham Bell,” Dad would tell me, as if the connections were a form of currency I could someday spend. Legacy was my father’s love language. Having no way to navigate his interior landscape, he worked hard at his business to make his outer landscape grand and befitting his family in its glory days of old. To be worthy of fitting in among them. To be heard.

Then 2020 arrived with Covid. Dad’s unethical-verging-on-criminal office manager didn’t keep finances in order enough to qualify for PPP loans, but my father refused to lay off a single employee. To save the business, he downsized himself.

In March of 2020 he moved into a small house two doors down from his last big one. I was there a few days after he died. The small house had no room for his knickknacks and antiques; the rooms were overstuffed with furniture. Artwork covered every available wall space. As soon as I stepped inside, I knew exactly why he chose to leave. The house had no air. His legacy had been tucked away and suffocating, and then had come the text from the office manager warning Dad (falsely) he was going to be disbarred. The business he'd built from scratch—"Best of the High Desert!" ten years in a row—was gone and so he went with it.

The photo of mother and son not-reading together is from Dad's memorial booklet. Aside from photos, there's an obituary, a program of speakers, and a poem by Rudyard Kipling. I wrote the obituary. Not only because I've made a career out of words, but because I have prior experience in the planning of memorials, the details of cremation, choosing the urn. I had to write at the bottom of my dad's obit, "Bob is preceded by his loving granddaughter, Isabel."

My daughter was ten when she died in 2018, and Dad didn't come to her memorial. He and my brothers arrived a day after Izzy was taken off life support. A Monday. Dad said, "Can we have the memorial on Friday?"

I knew then he wasn't going to make a second trip. Impossible for my father to sit amid a crowd of sobbing people, his own daughter chief among them, and not only have the permission to express grief, but an expectation to do so.

I visit in August of that year, two months after Izzy left us. My nephews and littlest daughter are racing around, the adults cleaning up dinner. I'm still at the table, always in slow motion now amidst the hubbub. Dad quietly moves to stand beside me. I can feel the tension vibrating off him. The grief. Guilt. Regret. Above all, fear. My father is scared and working up the courage to pull me aside and talk to me about missing Isabel's memorial because talking about it is harder than missing it.

I quietly slip my hand into his and rest my cheek against his warm skin. I tell him I love him, so he knows it's okay. I understand. Because I don't have the words either. They were never passed down, all of us with volumes left unopened. He was a book in his mother's lap she never bothered to read but so were we.

Dad squeezes my hand with a small, grateful smile, then lets go and walks away.

DIEGO LLERENA

REST



JACK STEWART

MORE THAN IT SEEMS

Hardly bigger than the ash tapped off
A cigarette, this fledgling
Sparrow still pushes to the edge
Of the nest and opens its mouth to consume
The planet.
God bless
Anything that reminds us
There are unrecognized powers
In this life.
The barbed-wire of the gorse
Will flame into gold,
Fingerprints of lichen velvet
The entire headstone.
And after a dull
Rain, a drop
Of water hangs from the tip
Of a leaf,
Bud of an icicle
That will lengthen,
Inch by inch, until
It is heavy enough
To break the stem.

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ROBB KUNZ

HECATE CAST THE FIRST SPELL



CIARAN PIERCE

WHAT THE WATER GAVE ME

We caught no fish that summer—my father and I,
knee-deep in the river's mouth, waiting for
the day's blessing to kiss down on the silver hook.
We went for forever, stayed for the water.
Our bread and honey for lunch. Our moon-pale
shoulders loved too long by the sun.
There are things worth waiting for, he told
me, a wad of chewing tobacco tucked into the
womb of his cheek. I was human enough
to believe him—human enough to let prayer fail.
Father of pine bark and tobacco spit,
Father of hollow buckets and empty hands,
I regret nothing. Only that I cried.
Only that I hated you, my fish-less dad.
Ask me for the good ending
and I'll give you this:
The boy. And his father. And the river
running through them.

ELLE CANTWELL

POSTPARTUM

the prince of colic shrieks on my shoulder
my inadequate translations start at four
each afternoon his braeburn cheeks steam tears
along my collarbone a streaming watercourse
i try to soothe this milk-filled-eight-pound-
beast in powder blue i'm a failure drumming
daily as april freezing rain i walk him to our second
story window narrate the scene below
hydrant spaniel puddle relentless grey
chicago spring we hit the two hour
mark for continual howling *squirrel*
sidewalk flying leap reflection beautiful
boy mommy wants to climb the lamppost.
and swan dive. or sleep.

EMILY RANKIN

CROCODILE TEARS



MY SISTER IS THE PATRON SAINT OF HAPPY HOUR

because she has remembered the corkscrew, and hands me a Styrofoam cup of cabernet from where she slumps against the wall of our mother's now empty apartment. We've hauled the garbage to the dumpster, the final load of donated furniture to the freight elevator, the last fragments of her privacy, to the small room across campus where now she sleeps. We'd like to sleep. Instead we sprawl on the carpet, lift our cups in a feeble toast. We've been working all day and there's nothing to show for it but what's missing. Mom is cross with us because she is no longer in charge. She thinks we are. Our brothers, absent, think we are heroic, well-suited to manage the practical matters of what doctors predict will be precipitous decline. It benefits them to think this. It steadies us, too, to believe we can muscle our way through. But don't we already see? We're wet clay thrown on a potter's wheel, to be spun, shaped, and fired into a vessel strong enough to carry water for a long time. My sister passes the bottle to me. You know what? she says, "precipitous decline" would be a great name for a heavy metal band. We sputter, laughing, then crying, too. You might call it helpless laughter. You might say we dissolve in laughter.

ALICE MCCORMICK

THE SALE

In early April, I stood in the rain by Lake Seneca, number eleven out of who knew how many people—at least fifty. The organizers of these estate sales handed out numbers to civilize the line, to ensure we didn't trample each other, though we were mostly civilized without them. Most of the time, nobody wanted the same things. I was on the hunt for a wingback chair for my library, the perfect chair with no hints of modernity, with shiny mahogany legs and an almost ugly fabric pattern, something with pizzazz and paisley. My library was just a couple bookcases in the corner of my minuscule apartment in Manchester, but that wasn't how I imagined it.

The doors opened at nine and we shuffled onto the covered porch, handed over our tickets and disappeared into the house. The early Victorian had been upgraded at whim—a sunroom here, a garage there, a rental unit on the back. The rooms were cramped, covered in oriental rugs with years of dirt trod into the fibers. The windows were small and awkwardly placed, the sills rotted from rainwater. The cold light petered out before reaching the corners.

One room brimmed with Chanel suits, Raggedy Ann dolls, Loony Toons glassware, metal trashcans, cow slippers, macrame doilies. Another held a cardboard cutout of Donald Trump, an uninspiring seaside landscape, and a collection of white wicker baskets. People became so attached to these small, old things. Nick-knacks, my mother called them. They collected trinkets like bowerbirds, carried them back to their nests, then danced around their value.

The sale announcement said the owner, a widowed doctor, had recently passed away, which was upsetting in a vague, abstract sort of way. I creaked through the house wondering, was that the chair he died in? Did he sit there on a Tuesday evening, stare at a crack in the ceiling and take his last breath? If he did, it wasn't in a wingback. I found none. Instead, I came across a set of demitasse Aynsley teacups with saucers. In the dull light, the gold detailing on the bone handles glowed against the deep navy luster of the saucers. The curved fluting rose to the edges, the inside a stark white. A superior trinket. I scooped them into a cardboard box and joined the line behind the card table checkout.

The man in front of me smelled of wood smoke. In his left hand, he held a top hat. Of all the things in the house—the handmade quilts, the wrought iron bed frames, the solid wood dressers—he chose a top hat. And even more perplexing, the hat was remarkably tattered, the circular top partially detached, an oily stain on the brim. Frayed thread stuck out from its sides. I

wondered what type of person would come all the way to an estate sale, stand in line in the rain and leave with a mostly worthless anachronistic item.

The man drew two dollars from the breast pocket of his coat.

“Just the hat?” I said. Leaden circles hung under his eyes. He was hard to place; he could have been thirty-five or fifty-five.

“Do I need more?” He set his money on the table.

“Maybe you missed the nested avocado-colored casserole dishes or the decorative porcelain roosters?”

His eyes wandered over my armful of teacups. “You only got one thing.”

“But they’re a set. And useful! In pristine condition.” The teacups rattled as I set them down and took out my checkbook.

He shrugged as if he didn’t have the energy to disagree and popped the hat on his head. He wore no ring. His fingers resting on the brim were pale and thin. Blue veins swelled under the skin by his knuckles. I’ve always felt you can tell a lot about people through their hands. These hands looked intelligent and dexterous like they might know their way around a Liszt concerto on the piano.

I wrote my check and exchanged a few words of amiable envy with the checkout lady over my teacups. I was in no hurry to drive back to my apartment and look at the disappointing contents of my fridge. Maybe I’d order a takeout panini for dinner. Though lately, they’d been limp and soggy. At twenty-eight, I thought I’d be living somewhere with a real library, maybe a garden and a pool. Harry had been the third one to leave in the past four years. I mean, I asked him to leave. He began to irritate me, the snuffling of his breath in the night, the clinking of his spoon on the cereal bowl, his shampoo just sitting there in the shower, goo running down the sides.

The man still stood near the table. In the dim light, he looked a little like Gene Wilder.

“You look so familiar,” he said. “Do I know you from somewhere?”

“I don’t think so. Another sale?”

“The Ohio State. Class of ’93?”

“I went to Brown.”

An old woman towing a thin man pushed past us out the door.

“I could have sworn I know you.”

“I have a generic face. A lot of people think they know me.”

“At sales?”

“Everywhere. I have to convince people we aren’t acquainted. That I wasn’t their daughter’s therapist. That I’m not on the select board. That I didn’t hook up with them at a John Denver concert years ago.” My sister said it was my inane smile.

“You like John Denver?”

“Not really. He’s too earnest. No edge. I need a minor chord every now

and then.”

“He’s not just country roads and rocky mountain highs. You must have heard ‘Amsterdam?’”

I shook my head.

He straightened and started to sing in a rich baritone, “In the port of Amsterdam there’s a sailor who dies, full of beer, full of cries...” He adjusted his top hat. “Everyone has a little angst.”

This man was so ravishingly odd.

“For angst I go to Stravinsky.” I arranged my bangs, aware they looked best swept to the right, like a Victorian lady riding my forehead side-saddle. “The Rite of Spring.”

“Oh, the bassoons at the beginning. Every time I listen, they make me cry.”

“Yes! Out of nowhere. I’m not even sure I’m sad.”

“No, no. It’s more like this welling up of life, of spirit, of the rage of being.”

“And then when the timpani starts—” My laughter sounded high and piping. “It lights me up, sets my brain on fire.”

“Exactly. The crackling warmth of a well-laid intermezzo.” The flesh of his cheeks folded when he smiled. His lips were wide and soft.

Talking with him was like reading Walden. Halfway through the book, I realized I’d fallen in love with Thoreau. Was it love? A sort of intellectual love, a mental lust that penetrated directly to the spirit. A gentle, mutual exploration of the intimate, pre-conscious valleys of the mind. The murmuring and shuffling of the other browsers faded. I ceased to hear the ticks of the many antique clocks. We went through Stravinsky and then wandered to Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, then the English Gothic. An hour or more passed.

I picked up my teacups again. There were few people left in the house.

“Were you looking for a top hat?”

“No, Smokey the Bear paraphernalia. I collect all sorts of things. Mostly it ends up in boxes on my porch.”

So he was one of the bowerbirds. “Any chairs?”

“Nothing bigger than a breadbox.”

“What will you do with your top hat then—nothing?”

He didn’t answer right away. I wondered if I’d offended him.

“Fall in love,” he said.

What an odd thing to say. “With the top hat?”

He touched my elbow, drawing me toward an unclaimed Barcalounger.

“Look at this. Look at the dirt on it, how it’s falling apart at the headrest. All these small imperfections that accumulate. You can imagine how someone sat in it day after day wearing the fabric thin.” He ran his broad hand over

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the curves of the chair. “And this side table here.” He tapped the surface. “Someone set down a glass, maybe a Tom Collins, time and time again on the same stained spot. Almost concentrically. The table is imprinted with so many forgettable, routine moments.”

“What does that have to do with love?”

“That is love.” He swallowed. “Repetitive, voluntary proximity.”

I leaned back, lips warm. I wanted him to touch more furniture. “You make it seem so dull.”

He laughed. “I suppose in a way, it is. The wear accumulates. You’re left with something familiar and old.”

I was left with many familiar, old things—the detritus of past relationships. I had a whole collection of CDs, shapeless red t-shirts, stray striped socks, fad self-help books, nail clippers, ineffective blenders. I could paw through memories, dismember them, take what I wanted. Like some sort of love scavenger. Familiarity was the problem.

“I like these teacups. They’re fresh. Like new. They haven’t had time to disappoint me.”

“What do you mean?”

I continued in the way I often did with strangers, hoping someone who didn’t know me at all would be able to tell me who I really was.

“Do you ever reach that point where you realize something—or someone—isn’t the better version you imagined?”

He watched me loop my fingers through the end of my braid. His eyes, round and soft, made him look younger, bashful almost. I stared at him with a drifting disconnection, a small kindling of fear. What did I really know about other people? I had a series of unsuccessful relationships and bought useless anachronistic items at estate sales.

“There was this guy I dated. And I assumed, under the cloak of daily life, that he brimmed with unrealized, wild sensitivity. A handsome Byronic brooding. I saw hints here and there. A certain way of creasing the forehead and looking down. A searching comment about constellations. The flowering of a repressed childhood memory. I waited for months, but he turned out smooth and homogeneous. Like yogurt without any fruit on the bottom.” Five months with Harry was enough for that. “At the beginning, there are so many possibilities.”

He picked at a frayed thread on his top hat. Perhaps he had no idea what I was talking about.

“Sometimes people disappoint me. That’s all I meant,” I said.

He nodded. “They’ve disappointed me too.”

He must be a bachelor.

The checkout lady folded her card table and clanked the gray cash box, looking at us from the corner of her eye.

The man glanced at the exit. “Where are you parked?”

“Just a little way from the house.” He held open the door for me.

The rain had stopped but a deep, quiet cloud bank remained. The gray pallor of his germinating stubble was more noticeable in the natural light. I shifted the tea cups to my other arm. They seemed like something he should offer to carry. Harry at least had done that.

“May I?” He picked off a smudge of feather down that had adhered to the shoulder of my red velour coat. Perhaps it was irritating him. Maybe he was divorced.

“I bet you’d like my rare books,” he said. “I’ve got a 1910 copy of *Jane Eyre*.”

It seemed like a veiled invitation. “I love the smell of old bindings.” I glanced at him. “The older the better.”

He looked away. “It’s just the glue.”

“But also—the older the book, the closer I am to the author’s pen.” Why did I mention a pen? I was digging myself deeper. “I can trace back each word, each letter, each movement of their hand to understand who they really were. Maybe not who they were in reality. But when I’m possessed by a book, I feel that kernel of meaning inside the person who wrote it.”

He removed his hat briefly to smooth a brown curl. His strides were long and languid. “The only way I’ve understood someone is by living with them. Daily. For a long time.”

“Did you?”

“I did.”

Maybe he was widowed.

He lifted his chin and scanned the gray froth of Lake Seneca. His jaw clenched, lean and angular. He seemed to be building up a long thought, deciding how much he wanted to divulge.

“I don’t think you can understand much at all about an author. What you see in another person, even the person you love—it’s not who they really are. That’s something much too difficult to pin down. You see a reflection of yourself. Your own thoughts, experiences, dreams.”

I examined the catkins in the sidewalk cracks and wondered if that was true. I wasn’t entirely sure what he meant. In the pure reflection of light that summer I met Harry, before I knew him at all, we spoke for hours, interrupting each other in a breathless frenzy. Everything I saw was an extension of him, everything I heard was an allusion to him. He broke me apart, possessed me, erased me.

But the closer I got to Harry, the more irritating he became. When he moved in, he began to take up space, occupy rooms. He was no longer a feeling, but a presence, something that needed tending. His baritone humming and soft, muscular hands, our nights of Barolo and Wagner

over 1000-piece puzzles—these were eclipsed by a sticky spoon left on the counter. Smearing, spreading, uncontrollable.

Perhaps my irritation had nothing to do with the flagrantly haphazard places he left his shoes or the suffocating scent of his single-origin, mail-order coffee. I didn't like who I was in his reflection.

We reached my beige Corolla. I opened the back door, set the teacups inside, and draped my hand over the frame of the door. The man's face looked smooth and boyish now like we'd been frolicking at the edge of the ocean in the Hebrides, bellowing Wordsworth to each other. How magnetizing.

"I like this idea of reflections," I said. "What do you see in me?"

He exhaled, the hum of a laugh barely perceptible. "I don't know."

I smiled, mouth closed. "You do. Go on. Hit me."

"You're searching. Forming yourself."

I was, wasn't I. "Like Elizabeth Bennet."

"Who?"

"Jane Austen. *Pride and Prejudice*."

"Ah." He massaged the door frame with the dexterous muscles of his hand. "The thing I never understood about Elizabeth was that she changed her mind about Darcy immediately after touring his giant mansion."

"It had nothing to do with that. It was hearing the piano." I sighed. "She was looking for something expansive. Wild and fresh. A love that overtakes and never leaves."

He shifted. His broad chest loomed like a passing cloud. I could feel the warmth radiating off his woolen suit.

"I can understand that," he said.

He leaned toward me, inclining his head, his breath warm. I softened. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that the underside of the brim of the top hat was covered in a thin white mold. I drew back and leaned on the car.

A robin hopped up the sidewalk. A forsythia glowed in the cloud light. Repetitive, voluntary proximity. An unease drained my stomach. It was the obsession, that blush of vast, wild energy I didn't know how to sustain. It transformed, dissipated, shrank in proximity. It was reality that irritated me.

The robin darted forward and clasped a worm. The man patted his right pocket and turned his oxfords up the sidewalk.

"I've got a long drive back," he said.

I nodded.

He took a step and then turned back. "I never asked—why did you come to the sale?"

"For the perfect chair."

The folds of his cheeks cast shadows. He looked older than he had the whole afternoon. Perhaps it was only the change in light. The sun was burning through the clouds.

“You’ll know it when you see it.”

“I’m not sure I will.”

He smiled, but it was a pale cousin to the light in his face when we spoke of ‘The Rite of Spring’. I watched him saunter up the sidewalk until he turned the corner by the forsythia and disappeared.

I slipped into the muffled warmth of my Corolla and pulled down the driver’s side shade. I slid open the mirror and studied the blush of my cheeks, the white intensity of my eyes. You see a reflection of yourself. Your spirit in someone else. The immense kernel deep inside you resonating in another.

I started the car, rolled down the window, and turned at the forsythia.

DIEGO LLERENA

MANNEQUIN



M. BENJAMIN THORNE

SPINE APPEAL

It's such simple serendipity,
what draws a book into my palm:
the mix of color or style of font,
how it sits amidst its shelf-mates,
perhaps even the way each letter
flits across the spine.
It's like the first time I beheld you, not
as the friend I'd known, but the lover
I yearned to discover, the light
shimmering as it swam down
the dark currents of your hair.
On that day you said my bandaged
hand looked like a wounded bird;
when I took you in my arms,
my palm made a nest
in the small of your back.
You asked me how I felt,
and I whispered, home.

ELLE CANTWELL

HERITAGE

i come from the blood of bootleggers and their wives
who hid liquor in their underthings when the police
got too close. once when i was four i took a handful
of sixlets at woolworth's and hid them in my pockets.
my nonna made me go to the cashier and pay. my zio
drank drano to quiet his fevered brain. my zia crushed
a glass with her bare hands and didn't bleed. my parents
said i was born after the worst lightning strike they'd ever
heard. stormy, they called me. my blood is the songs
of a trumpet front man from nebraska. when i was two
my parents took me to see the sound of music. i stood
on my chair and started singing. a lady hushed me.
my mother told her to move if she didn't like it.
she moved. i kept singing. when did i stop?

CONTRIBUTORS

Born in Korea, **Sarah Baek** graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in design in 1994 and worked as a designer at an advertising agency. She has been active as an artist since moving to the United States in 1999. Her work is a reflection of an individual's loss of self in modern society and the inner emptiness that deepens with a changing external environment, exploring the complex relationship between the visible and the invisible, the inner self, and the external world. Baek aims to give viewers a freedom of interpretation and the space to explore a conversation with oneself, giving viewers the time and space to consider one's position and meaning of life through inner dialogue.

John W. Bateman writes and looks for stories hiding in plain sight. His work has appeared in places like *Salvation South*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *Electric Literature*, as well as on the silver screen. He has a not-so-secret addiction to glitter and, contrary to his southern roots, does not like sweet tea. John has an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and is a 2023-24 Watson-Brown Fellow in the Southern Studies Fellowship in Arts & Letters. Although he misses his Mississippi unicorn lumberjack shack, John is currently living near the third star to the left.

Elle Cantwell is a graduate of the MFA in Writing program at the University of San Francisco. Her poems have appeared in *Ponder Review*, *December*, *Welter*, *HAD* and *Barrelhouse*, among other publications. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee and is a winner of the Jeff Marks Memorial Poetry Prize. A freelance theatre director, educator, and editorial specialist, she lives in Santa Monica, California.

Scott Carter Cooper is a Chicago-based playwright whose work is tailored to small professional companies with diverse ensembles looking for economical plays to produce. His short-form pieces have been successful with several local companies including American Blues, The Artistic Home, Chicago Dramatists, and The Lightbulb Factory, as well as nationally and beyond. Cooper holds a BFA in Theatre from Drake University and an MA in Writing from DePaul University.

Lauren Crawford holds an MFA in poetry from Southern Illinois University, Carbondale where she served as an associate editor for *Crab Orchard Review*. A native of Houston, Texas, she is the recipient of the 2023 Willie Morris Award for Southern Poetry and the second place winner of the 2020 Louisiana State Poetry Society Award, and her poetry has either appeared or is forthcoming in *Poet Lore*, *Passengers Journal*, *The Appalachian Review*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, *THIMBLE Lit Mag*, *The Worcester Review*, *The Spectacle* and elsewhere. Lauren currently teaches writing at the University of New Haven and serves as the assistant poetry editor for Alan Squire Publishing. Connect with her on Twitter @LaurenCraw4d.

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Amanda Dettmann is a queer poet, performer, and educator who is the author of *Untranslatable Honeyed Bruises*. She earned her MFA in Poetry from New York University and was one of two finalists for the 2022 Action, Spectacle contest judged by Mary Jo Bang, as well as the winner of the 2023 Peseroff Prize in Poetry selected by Jake Skeets. Her work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize by The Emerson Review and has appeared or is forthcoming in *FENCE*, *The Oakland Review*, *Portland Review*, *The Adroit Journal*, *Stanford's Poetry Journal Mantis*, and *The National Poetry Quarterly*, among others.

John Dorroh has never fallen into an active volcano, nor has he ever caught a hummingbird. He did however manage to bake bread with Austrian monks and drink a healthy portion of their beer. Five of his poems were nominated for Best of the Net. Others appeared in over 100 journals, including *Feral*, *Kissing Dynamite*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, and *River Heron*. Dorroh once won Editor's Choice Award in a regional journal contest and received as a prize enough money for a sushi dinner for two. Living in Southwest Illinois near St. Louis, his home is Columbus, Mississippi, birthplace of Tennessee Williams.

Chris Drew is an Associate Professor of English at Indiana State University, where he teaches creative writing and English teaching methods courses. His writing has appeared in a variety of publications, including *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Quarterly West*, *Concho River Review*, *Mad River Review*, *The Sycamore Review*, *Red Wheelbarrow*, and *Big Muddy*. When he's not teaching or writing, Chris likes to watch random streaming documentaries with his wife, play music at the local farmers market, let his daughter fill him in on the latest Taylor Swift news, and play *Dungeons & Dragons* online with his high school pals.

Sarah Elkins lives in southern West Virginia. Her work is forthcoming from or has appeared in *Cimarron Review*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Quarterly West*, *Baltimore Review*, *West Trestle Review*, *Porter House Review*, and elsewhere. Featured in *Verse Daily* and nominated for a Pushcart Prize, Sarah holds an MFA from Pacific University. Find her at SarahElkins.com.

Jonathan Fletcher holds a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing (Poetry) from Columbia University School of the Arts. He has been published in *Acropolis Journal*, *The Adroit Journal*, *Arts Alive San Antonio*, *The Bayou Review*, *The BeZine*, *BigCityLit*, *Book of Matches Literary Journal*, *Catch the Next: Journal of Ideas and Pedagogy*, *Colossus Press*, *Curio Cabinet*, *Door is a Jar*, *DoubleSpeak*, *Emerge Literary Journal*, *-ette review*, *Five South*, *Flora Fiction*, *FlowerSong Press*, *fws: a journal of literature & art*, *Glassworks*, *Half Hour to Kill*, *Heimat Review*, *The Hemlock: A Literary Arts Journal*, and *The Hooghly Review*.

Raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Nina Francus studied creative

writing and English literature at Columbia University, before moving to Paris, France for six years. A lover of culture, Nina can be found admiring art and architecture, attending plays, operas, and musicals, traveling whenever possible, and diving down literary rabbit holes. Her work has been featured by the *Liar's League*, the *Bramley*, and the *New York Times*.

Danielle Hayden is completing a writers' residency at the Seattle Public Library and is part of the Writers in the Schools (WITS) program. Her work has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Huffington Post*, and elsewhere. She has received fellowships from Anaphora Arts, the Jack Straw Cultural Center, and the Martha's Vineyard Institute of Creative Writing as well as a literary grant from Artist Trust. Danielle is an alumna of writers' workshops at Tin House, Yale, and the Kenyon Review.

Robb Kunz hails from Teton Valley, Idaho. He received his MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Idaho. He currently teaches writing at Utah State University. His art has been published in *Peatsmoke Journal*, *Wild Roof*, *Hole in the Head Review*, and *Fatal Flaw Literary Magazine*. His work is forthcoming in *Beyond Words Literary Magazine*, *Third Street Review*, and *Glassworks Magazine*.

As an artist embracing painting and photography, Diego Llerena explores moments that mirror nature, capture beauty, and raise questions on our humanity. He creates scenes that emphasize the power of the subject and picture. Art has haunted him all his life with guilt for the reason that he did not dedicate proper energy or time to it until last year. He put a break on his career and made art his priority. He was born in Lima, Peru and moved to the Washington, D.C. area in 1997.

Alice McCormick is a writer and veterinarian based in northern Vermont. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Cagibi*, *The Dodge*, *The Maine Review* and elsewhere. She has received support from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference and the Vermont Studio Center. She also enjoys vegetable gardening, books from the 19th century, coffee, and endurance sports.

Irakli Mirzashvili grew up in a family of visual artists in Tbilisi, country of Georgia, and enjoys working in oil pastels, creating collages, and photography. His artwork has been exhibited in the United States and Georgia, and he most recently had a collage published in *Phoebe: A Journal of Literature and Art*. After living in rural Alaska, the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, and the great plains of Kansas, Irakli resides in the Austin, Texas area. He earned degrees in political science and law.

Ciaran Pierce is an undergraduate studying literature and theatre arts at California State University, Long Beach. He was born and raised along California's central coast. In his spare time, he collects candle holders,

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postcards, and too many second-hand books to read. (Maybe he'll build a fort with them.) His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Fever Dream Zine*, *Runestone*, and *Sky Island Journal*. You can find him serving boba at his local teahouse when he's not at his desk. If curious, go to @ciaranpierce.

Emily Rankin was born in Riverside, California and attended university in Texas, where she received a BFA in 2011. Her body of work deals with the tangles of human emotion and understanding, the intuitive messages of dreaming and subconscious exploration. Her work has appeared in such publications as *Gasher*, *Wild Roof Journal*, *Meat for Tea*, *Black Fox*, and *Rattle*. She is currently based in New Mexico.

Jessica Rechner is a visual artist and vocalist living in Queens, New York. She sings classical, some jazz, and a little pop. Her mixed media art examines, considers, and challenges concepts of body, autonomy, emotionality, family, memory, and belonging. Jessica's work has been shown with the collective LIC-Artists at the Factory and at Culture Lab LIC. Online, her work has been shown by *Denise Bibro Fine Arts*, *Site:Brooklyn*, *Art Gallery 118*, and *The Salt*. She created a picto-memoir titled *Into the Ears of Babes*, exploring familial scripts. You can see Jessica's art on her instagram page @sendit. keepit

Jennifer Ripley lives with her husband and daughter in the San Francisco Bay Area. She's an award-winning *USA Today* and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author of romantic fiction under the pen name, Emma Scott. Her work has been translated into eight languages and featured in the *Huffington Post*, *New York Daily News*, and *USA Today's Happy Ever After*. She's a graduate of San Francisco State and is currently taking classes at Stanford University to improve her nonfiction voice while writing a memoir about the death of her first daughter at the age of ten due to a rare heart defect.

Jalayah Snaer is currently a Junior at Mississippi State University pursuing a Bachelor of Fine Arts with a Concentration in Graphic Design and a Minor in Entrepreneurship. Her artwork style consists of illustrated elements and custom typeface designs, though she is exploring using more realistic and textural elements in future works. She has dabbled in creating t-shirt and logo designs in the past and hopes to develop packaging and advertising designs in the near future. With these skills, she aspires to pursue and expand *I.D.E.A.S* by Jay, her own unofficial business, after she completes her college education.

Jack Stewart was educated at the University of Alabama and Emory University and was a Brittain Fellow at The Georgia Institute of Technology. His first book, *No Reason*, was published by the Poema Poetry Series in 2020, and his work has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, including *Poetry*, *The American Literary Review*, *Nimrod*, *Image*, and others. He currently works at Pine Crest School in Fort Lauderdale, Florida,

where he directs the Talented Writers Program.

Curt Strickland is a playwright who recently received a masters degree in playwriting from Lesley University's graduate program. Inspired by August Wilson, Curt is finishing up his 5th play in a ten play opus on America, each play set in a different decade. Curt believes that Art should serve to heal, inspire, provoke, challenge and to offer hope—but most of all to connect, to remind us of our common humanity. In 2020, Curt received a double lung transplant, an event that had profound effects on both his writing and his life. This experience is the basis of a new play he is developing entitled “Double Lung.” You can view other plays by Curt at newplayexchange.org/users/68843/curt-strickland and view his political and cultural essays at curtsview.com

M. Benjamin Thorne teaches History at Wingate University. His poems appear or are forthcoming in *Autumn Sky Poetry*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *Sky Island Journal*, *Cathexis Northwest*, and *The Westchester Review*, among others. He writes and sometimes sleeps in Charlotte, NC.

Madina Tuhbatullina is a poet from Turkmenistan, whose work has been published or is forthcoming in *Anacapa Review*, *Perceptions*, *The Indianapolis Review*, and elsewhere. Madina is an alumna of the Los Angeles Review of Books Publishing Workshop and Tupelo Press Manuscript Workshop. Currently, she is a Creative Writing MFA candidate at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Madina is interested in poetics of exile and writing on migration.

Marg Walker lives in St. Paul, Minnesota, where she pursues her abiding interest in the human voice through poetry and music. Many of her poems have become texts for new music written for solo voice or chorus; she also collaborates with choral artists on programs of music and poetry. Marg returned to her love of poetry after retiring from a career in philanthropy. Her poems have appeared in *Hole in the Head Review*, *The Banyan Review*, *Minnesota Monthly*, and elsewhere. Her full-length poetry collection, *Sitting in Lawn Chairs After a Complicated Day*, was published by Nodin Press in February 2020.

Ellen June Wright is an American poet with British and Caribbean roots. Her work has been published in national and international online and print journals including the *New York Quarterly*, *Plume*, *Atlanta Review*, *Solstice*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *Gordon Square Review*, *The South Carolina Review*, *Obsidian*, *Caribbean Writer*, *Tulsa Review* and *Verse Daily*. She is a Cave Canem and Hurston/Wright alumna who hosts a weekly virtual poetry workshop for Black women writers. She is a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee. Follow her on X @EllenJuneWrites and instagram @ellenjunewrites

