



# GRUB STREET



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VOL. 70

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# GRUB STREET

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## About Grub Street

*Grub Street* is an annual publication funded by the Provost's Office and the English Department at Towson University and is a member of the Columbia Scholastic Press Association. The staff is comprised of undergraduate Towson University students who review all submissions through a blind review process. Issues are available for free on TU's campus. They can be found in racks in the following locations: the College of Liberal Arts building (second-floor entrance, parking garage side), Cook Library (lobby), the Center for Arts (main entrance), the University Union (pond entrance), and the TU Store (main entrance). If you are not on campus, please email us about receiving print editions by mail. PDFs are available for free on our website: <http://wp.towson.edu/grubstreetlitmag/>.

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## Editorial Mission and Submission Guidelines

To have the time, physical accommodation, social infrastructure, emotional energy, and support to write can be a privilege that many people do not have. On top of that, the standards for English writing are rooted in the study of a racist, sexist, ableist, and otherwise oppressive English literary canon that centers white, cis-gender, heterosexual men. In our mission to challenge mainstream narratives, we encourage writers from underrepresented populations to submit their creative work: Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other people of color, as well as differently-abled, neurodiverse, lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, aromantic, agender, intersex, trans, gender nonconforming, and gender expansive people. The staff of *Grub Street* is committed to supporting underrepresented identities and will work with submitters personally to help them realize their artistic goals.

Please limit your submissions to five poems, two short stories, two literary essays, and five works of visual art per edition. We're especially excited about receiving genre-defiant submissions, such as poetry comics, prose poems, flash fiction, flash essays, lyric essays, graphic novel or memoir excerpts, and speculative nonfiction. (Please submit poetry comics and graphic novel or memoir excerpts as visual art.) Only previously unpublished works, either in print or online, will be considered for publication. It is assumed that all submissions are original creations. Please credit your sources.

We evaluate submissions in a blind review process, so please remove all identifying information from your works (title pages, headers, document file titles, etc.). Please submit one work per file. Do not submit group submissions. If, for example, you submit five poems, do not put all five poems into one document. Please create five separate documents for each poem. Visual art should be at least 4x6 inches and sent as a .png, .raw, or high-quality .jpeg file with at least 300dpi and a size of at least 1MB. Please include medium and dimensions in your cover letter. If you have questions or concerns about these guidelines, please contact us via email at [grubstreet1952@gmail.com](mailto:grubstreet1952@gmail.com). Visit us at [grubstreet.submittable.com](http://grubstreet.submittable.com) to submit your work. Email submissions will not be considered.

We look forward to receiving your work and wish you the best of luck in your literary and artistic endeavors.

## Grub Street, London, 18th C.

DR. H. GEORGE HAHN

*Professor / Past Chair, TU Department of English*

Home of butchers and foreign manual laborers, Grub Street was not a fashionable London address. In his *Dictionary* of 1755, Dr. Johnson noted further that it was also a place “much inhabited by writers of small histories, dictionaries, and temporary poems, whence any mean production is called grubstreet.” Hard living, hard drinking, half starving, Grub Streeters turned out biographies before the corpse was cold, poems during the event they were watching, ghost-written speeches and sermons to order, and satires to deadline. First draft was final copy. They walked with pistols or swords to defend themselves from creditors and angry satiric targets.

Yet however poor, low, and scorned, they were the first fully professional writers to whom “publish or perish” was not a hyperbolic metaphor. Forgotten today, they nevertheless throw a long shadow over us. With them the modern periodical press can be said to have been born with its interests in live events and lean prose. Their plagiarisms led to copyright laws, their defamations to better libel laws. Their work encouraged a free press. Their writing to a newly but barely literate public doomed the long, aristocratic romance in the hard language of realism. Their work helped to produce a mass market of readers. Freelancers no longer under pressure to praise patrons, they showed finally that a writer could be independent.

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## Letter from the Editors

Dear Reader,

We are so impressed by what our staff accomplished despite the great limitations the pandemic presented. Even though we met exclusively through screens, our staff created a close community. We laughed, challenged each other, grew, and got to know each other deeply, despite the distractions—dogs barking, cats walking across our keyboards, neighbors' lawn mowers passing by our windows—and the distance. Long virtual hours called for snack breaks and refills of our caffeinated beverages of choice. Some of us lived in different time zones, which resulted in apologetic texts: “i forgot it's like 9:00 for you im so sorry! please enjoy the rest of your night. omg i totally forgot the time difference.” As the staff encouraged one another with an incredible depth of kindness, we learned to share our ideas in imperfect ways, considering how to prioritize principles of anti-racism and anti-oppression. This included choosing a dyslexia-friendly font, creating audio recordings of written works for our website, prefacing some contributions with content warnings, and soliciting work from emerging writers from marginalized populations. While compiling this volume, we imagined an expansive readership—one that includes people who are trans, BIPOC, differently-abled, and neurodiverse—and strived to make *Grub Street* as accessible as possible.

The literary magazine format gives us, as editors, the opportunity to allow a spectrum of works that already stand strong by themselves to coexist. Though written works are traditionally delegated to a single genre, many of those published in this volume resist easy categorization. Our editorial conversations surrounding these pieces felt defiant and meaningful when so much around us felt dark, dampening. Halee Kirkwood encourages reckless abandon in the name of untrained creativity in “In Praise of Making Shitty Art.” Natalie Jones threads together prose and verse, creating a sense of time that erodes like an illness in “Interims, excerpted from *Nightshift: A (Re)collection*.” Sudha Balagapol considers the concept of sanctuary through Choti's relationship with her sister, the unnamed narrator in “Broken Skin.” Some of the works reflect the events of the past year, describing the paradox of life in a pandemic, as in Deja Ryland's “Gray/Grey.” Some offer fresh perspectives into ongoing issues like climate change, as in Ivan Palmer's “The Devil's Dictionary.” Still others ask the reader to consider patterns of oppression and social injustice that continue to prevail every day, as in Jola Naibi's “there are things that your privilege will not let you see.” This volume also offers works that bring light and hope, that imagine what the world could be in the near future, as in Yehudis Rabinowitz's “Visitors,” which, in all its joy and tenderness, creates space for limitless peace.

Sasha Duwan, author of “Oil Lamps,” is this year's winner of the high school contest. Writer and activist Cyrus Siminoff, author of the critically acclaimed memoir *A Year Without a Name*, served as judge. Because we received more than a hundred visionary works from Maryland high school students, works that pushed us to reconsider how we perceived the world around us, we decided to feature some of the other excellent submissions. Kathleen Wallish is this year's winner of the Hannah Nathan Rosen Writing Award. Wallish, a senior English major at TU, left us breathless with her bold yet tender words that challenge our perceptions of women today. The award is named in honor of TU student and past *Grub Street* contributor, Hannah Nathan Rosen, a talented poet and essayist whose poem “Parable of the No Longer Man” appears in volume 67.

Our staff's dedication, love, creativity, and willingness to collaborate with humility made this volume into a literary collection that we hope you can find kindness in, whether you need a compassionate word for yourself, or one to pass on to others. We welcome you into the pages of *Grub Street* just as you are. May these words and images spark for you a few forgotten wonders within not only the world, but also yourself. It is our desire that as you spend time with this collection, you might glimpse a bit of the world as you hope it could be. We encourage you to make yourself a part of this volume, to be creative and take your own liberties. Use the margins to rewrite your favorite lines from our interview with poet and writer (and previous *Grub Street* contributor) Dunya Mikhail. Read the opening line of Evan Jymaal Cutts's “A Spray of Feathers”—*my sonic executions are precise/ in their movements*—and draw a symbol of what that means to you. Write your own poem in response. Underline your favorite words in Deborah Prespare's “Asian Me.” Take this volume of *Grub Street* as your chance to experiment. Don't hold back, but rather consider what your creative engagement might add.

-Gracie Jordan, Gel Derossi, Katya Buresh

## In Praise of Making Shitty Art

Halee Kirkwood

Take, for example, my watercolor paints.

I lost the variety pack of brushes panic-bought at the pandemic's beginning, and now alchemy precious Kleenex to blotted rose

muddying the reds, offending the violets

with struggle-gardens sprawling  
from my head.

Or the replacement ukulele my ex bought off her crush  
having sat on the one I bought after the carnival  
of our first date, green and eighteen. Take the songs  
made only for myself.

Praise magenta nail polish puddling  
at unkempt cuticles.

Glue slogged it-girls of botched collages.

Still-life with twisted ankle at the club.

Briars of broken pencil lead. Regretted vial  
of spilled beads.

All I want is a record of my  
ill-planned life.

Impression of a radiator's muffled aria  
percussion of bent and burnt pots and pans.

O Holy Mother spare me from ecru gallery walls  
and mistake my horse for a cow!

And witness my smeared vandalism on the traffic signs  
of high art. I am nothing but my untrained hands

attempting to know the different shapes  
of color and sound.





**Primary**  
 Chloe Yetter  
 Digital Painting • 1661 x 2176 px

## there are things that your privilege will not let you see

Jola Naibi

like the woman in church who asks me a question like I should know the answer because my skin is a certain color & when I tell her that I do not know the answer she tells me she likes my accent & asks me where I am from originally & I tell her that I am Nigerian & there is no *originally* in my story & I am still from there & she gasps & tells me that she has heard about the girls & how lucky I am to come to this country & to get an education & what a shame it is what is going on in that part of the world as if she is immune to that sort of thing & I think she believes that because she knows some trending news story she knows all about that part of the world so I tell her that I did not learn to speak English in these United States nor did I attend school here & I went to an all girls school in Nigeria & my mother went to an all girls school in Nigeria & her mother went to an all girls school in Nigeria & we were never kidnapped & what happened with the girls is sad & unfortunate & can happen anywhere in the world when things start to fall apart

even here

& I can see that she is taken aback & I am taken aback because she is taken aback & I am taken aback because she is unable to see beyond her own privilege

like the man who spends six months in Cape Town & begins to parade himself as an expert on Africa & takes offence when someone points out that Africa is not a country & he is adamant that he is African now & I want to tell him that I have lived in his country for more than a decade & I am still called an alien

but I remain silent because I am too hurt to speak & I know that if I open my mouth I will unleash a torrent of anger that will be misunderstood & I remain silent because I know there will come a time when I will talk

& that time comes when the children are separated from their parents at the border & a man says to me that he does not know how any parent would put their children through that sort of thing in the first place & I ask him if he thinks the parents are deriving any pleasure in taking their children through such a perilous journey & I share with him the poem home by Warsan Shire in which she says that

*no one leaves home unless home chases you  
 fire under feet  
 hot blood in your belly  
 no one leaves home until home is a sweaty  
 voice in your ear  
 saying  
 leave  
 run away from me now  
 I don't know what i've become  
 but i know that anywhere  
 is safer than here*

& I remind him that the families at the border are not any different from his that the children at the border are not any different from his two sons and one daughter & that if he was in that position he would do the same thing & that we are all vulnerable to the vicissitudes of life

& he looks down in silence & I hope I am getting through

I hope I have been able peel back the layers that have made him blind to certain things

I hope that I am able to let him see the things that his privilege will not let him see

## Eukaryotes

Daniela Illing

Patriarchy uses science as both weapon and shield to explain the status quo against non-binary and trans people and those not behaving according to sociosexual expectations. Westerners especially tend to cuddle biologisms rather than challenge the corset of norms whose application depends mostly on credit limit and skin tone. As a step toward those who feel more comfortable with primary school biology, this illustration shows us as the happy Eukaryotes we could be: experiencing emotional closeness and healthy interpersonal relationships supported by a nutrient-rich environment, no further additives needed. This illustration is not a reliable or even useful teaching tool, but neither is science when encumbered with white ideology.

PS: This artwork was created before the start of the pandemic, so possible associations are not deliberate.



### Eukaryotes

Daniela Illing

Photoshop/Illustrator Dimensions • 4000 px

## Interleaf

Daniela Illing

People rarely fit into neat little boxes—especially queer identities, which often overlap or may not be visible in daily life. A bisexual can be in a heterosexual relationship. A genderqueer person can be heterosexual. A trans person may not be sexual at all. All of these identities are valid nonetheless. No single person or subculture can grasp the whole perspective of what it means to be queer—especially if you add the struggles of being a disabled, religious, Black, indigenous... queer. It is therefore vital to all of us to exchange our experiences, uplift each other, and support queer issues even if they don't impact us directly. Gatekeeping feeds only the narrative of us being a tiny minority that can be ignored. Pride means not just affirming who we are, but also validating experiences foreign to our own.



### Interleaf

Daniela Illing

Photoshop/Illustrator Dimensions • 4000 px

## Jellyfish Season

Kristen Rouisse

I, too, am emptied here. Prisoner to the hulking swell of sediment.  
 My spine, braided like a licorice stem, limp and suspended in water.  
 The sky cracks— more yolk than albumen, blood unspooling from its marigold center.  
 I, too, know of vulnerability; the abstract strength of such small limbs.  
 The sky spills —as is routine —and I find my way back to shore.  
 Below: Dusty gravel of shotgun shells still warm against my forearms.  
 Above: Cicadas swallow the trees, howl inside the balmy mouth of dusk.

## Broken Skin

Sudha Balagopal

When I wear shorts, Ma says I look like an ungainly ostrich with my drumstick legs and my scarred, knobby knees.

“Stop running,” Ma shouts from the window when she hears my feet on the concrete outside. “It’s not feminine. You’ll wake the baby with that thumping.”

She believes girls should pursue arts because she’s a classical dancer. Earrings like inverted umbrellas swing from her ears; anklets tinkle when she walks.

My little sister, Choti, studies the ridges on my corrugated knees. She can see images in the scored remnants of injuries: arc of the moon, zigzag of lightning.

I can sprint faster than my classmate Amy who wears short-shorts, a red baseball cap on her yellow hair, and has legs like marble pillars.

When I beat her at practice, she says I won because her stomach hurt. “You’ll never win the actual race.”

After PE, she gives our teacher an open-mouthed smile so wide I can see the cavities in her molars. “Mr. Brown, I want to improve my speed. Can you help?” she asks.

Pa signs the permission slip for Sports Day. He drops us—Choti and me—at school, says he cannot stay because of work. I tell him I understand. I’ve learned to lie, saying one thing and feeling another.

We live in a two-room converted apartment at the motel, a perk Pa says comes with his job as manager. Our uncle owns the motel.

When we arrived from India three months ago, Ma said, “For this, we came to America? To live in a motel?”

Now she says, “For this, we came to America? To have you run in a parking lot?”

Ma’s smile has disappeared. She sleeps hours and still looks tired. “Having a baby is like having an earthquake in your body,” she says.

I jog in place to warm up.

Amy’s red baseball cap sits like a crown on her yellow hair.

Parents whoop and yell from the sidelines. They carry banners, balloons, placards, even pompoms. They hug and high-five their children.

Choti is my one-girl cheer squad. She jumps high and screams, “Go, Didi, go!”

When Mr. Brown sounds his whistle, I dash as fast as I can, mouth open, breath pumping.

I race—nose leaking, legs burning—until, out of nowhere, a baseball cap comes flying and hits my shin. I take a sidestep, wobble, then collapse into a heap on the track, skinning knees and elbows.

Amy’s way ahead.

“No!” I scramble, rise, ignore the bleeding, the throbbing.

At the finish line, Choti tells me, “That was Amy’s cap.”

The judges say Amy was ahead by a big margin. “There’s no doubt she won.”

Mr. Brown pats me on the back. “Now, now, this is about learning sportsmanship, right? Amy won fair and square. Go, congratulate her.”

At home, Ma looks at my legs, says, “You know why girls shouldn’t run? You end up with ugly knees.”

Choti applies antibiotic cream on the broken skin. “These will bloom into waterfalls,” she says.



### Obscurity

Arinze Stephen Ekwuide

Graphite and charcoal on archival paper • 44" x 36"

## A FOUR-PART APOLOGY FOR MY CONTINUED BEING

Abigail Chabitnoy

I hear you think I'm a witch or  
your word for witch

Is it the finger or the mark I am  
posit(ion)ing?

Did you hear the one about the man who was envied  
above all men  
he was turned into a white-faced bear then  
he became a white-faced bear.

I used to think the beach was safe  
but lately  
they say bears are going back to Tangirnaq  
despite the distance growing,

rising seas and all—

The fish are less abundant these days  
soon that thing you like to say (speaking here now  
about fish in the sea to the more general  
when someone doesn't like you back you)  
won't be true

It's been awhile since they were  
large enough to feed a crowd with as few as seven  
and  
bears are not people after all:

if that bear was a man once you must see  
he's something more now

once, haven't you known: and if that bear was a woman  
and before that? she's nursed such hunger all her life?

since the beginning—  
Later locals blame  
an abundance of cattle.

Some never learn.

—  
 So, finger or mark? 'cause I wear a new ring with that shovel  
 full of stars  
                   bogged in jet, and I guess

I'm trying to say I wanted this too to be beautiful  
 how you could almost think they were            (you here being I)  
 campfires in the Badlands instead of greased holes  
 sinking the earth

                  too small for my thumb

—  
 I used to think they were stars in the field  
 or doe eyes—  
                   not the ones in headlights    but  
                   the kind that don't know they're in danger

don't know they're meant to run,

maybe pearls in the ocean  
 when the sun lights the waves just right

(there had to be enough somewhere  
 to string all those pretty necks)

and all this time just another familiar    "by fire, by water  
 cycle, as violent—                            by hanging in air..."

—  
 In my other hand the waves are red so  
 very well, I'll tell you a story for the end.

It starts at the beginning. An island after all  
 precludes a sea and all my babies before me

learned to swim before they were born  
 to test these waters.

Nothing can prepare you for being  
 swallowed whole:

  instinct kicks in,  
   you must hold your breath and  
 wait to be released.

—  
 Angayuk<sup>1</sup>, how to tell you  
 I think I left you there  
                   where the ship is sinking    or  
 the water rising  
                   or on an island with cattle  
                   lowing, still  
 digging holes in the earth.

Breathing is a costly act.

<sup>1</sup>Like a partner, or friend; one who connects us elsewhere, to facilitate movement—of selves, resources, and goods; of assistance in times of need.

# A PERSISTENT DREAM OF LARGE BODIES OF WATER & EVERYTHING THAT MIGHT BE WAITING WITHIN

Abigail Chabitnoy

*for Joan, and those she is called after*

Naviyuk how to tell you  
last night we were on this ship together  
and you were there to comfort me?

But this morning I am afraid for you  
black steeling over the waters.

My lips are never not split  
splitting—

Tell me, are the wolves living  
along this shoreline any gentler  
than the Moscow water dog?

Even the promyshlenniki let them go  
extinct.

Have we ever not been readying for war  
in your lifetime?

Already my family is calling me—

the ones I don't know  
how to name

—

In the stories I learned as a girl  
you are otherwise called  
after one who knows things.

You are called after one who knows  
how to listen.

She was given fire and earth.

—

This ground we are on has a history  
of flooding:  
does it follow we are drowning?

Cut the breast out of a woman and she becomes a bird.  
Or was it her guts?

She can fly, I mean. It's that simple. So the stories go.

Girls go into the woods and return mothers  
so we invent little men, irresistible magic.

Have we ever not been readying for war?

At any moment the ship could sink: mothers go into the water  
become forces to be reckoned—

It can all fail tragically.

The waters take  
and give us back our dead.

We will have this ship  
the water, contents we have found.

## A PRONG OR SHARP POINT, SUCH AS THAT ON A FORK, OR ANTLER

Abigail Chabitnoy

How about a unicorn horn?  
Impatient, restless, unrelenting—  
I would like to dream more often  
about wonderful beasts than war.

Or an ordinary tooth: Mother  
plait my hair and send me  
to the sea, let me be  
unseen.

Wicked women are allowed as much  
and I am tired of being easy  
prey.

How many times have I woke  
unable to scream?  
mouth agape and filling  
with air—

I used to  
at first  
that is  
I thought it strange  
to dream a man  
I didn't know  
and know  
he meant to  
do me  
wrong.

*The dream is a reliable indicator  
She is waking up*

*The dream is a harbinger often  
She is waking up*

*The dream is a situation increasing  
She is waking up*

There were tines strewn across the bed  
I woke, I woke with my hand in a fist  
around a bloodied  
hollow  
point.





### Meditating on the Sofa

Sarah Jane Stoll

Oil on canvas • 60" x 46"

## Refill Your Cosmic Bucket List

Rikki Vinyard

### Refill Your Cosmic Bucket List.

I tilt my head as I read my mail. The shiny, metallic slip of paper glimmers with the engraved curly font. Last I checked, my list wasn't empty yet. I still haven't visited Earth's oldest moon. It was the one that drifted off in a fit some eight billion years ago after hearing about the comet that was ordered to wipe out the dinosaurs. Rumors say it happily circles a newer planet now, with even stranger, dinosaur-like creatures. I hope to see that moon sometime before I transcend to the next life realm.

I'm currently in my fourth life. The third ended just over fifty-seven earth years ago, but my race doesn't age like that of a human. My people, the Erids, keep the same agility and appearance throughout their lives, however many that may be, and can only die if killed by some kind of outside source. It's not often that an Erid death is reported, but when there is, it's usually by an awful explanation. We do not fall ill or die of old age. We simply pass on to another life realm, whenever time tells us. It's easy to get lost in the never-ending orbital time, especially when the universe expects star scavengers like me to only send reports of newly-found solar systems once every ten years. Today, like most days, is my day off, and I won't be doing anything. I'm sure I haven't let the time slip by me though. I still have time to refill my bucket list. There are more things I haven't even crossed off yet.

I've never seen Venus's secret crater either. Every time the planet orbits its star, the crater grows a little bit deeper, like an invisible drill digging closer to its core. Not a soul knows why. It was first noticed in the Earth year 2428, about 200 years after the rise of Cthulhu. They say now, after one thousand years of continuous sinking, the crater is about 756 miles deep. The tour the Venetians offer stops at around ten miles, but I've heard that you can feel the warm air emitting from the center at that depth. There's no way I need to refill the bucket list yet. I also have never been on a star hunt. An old neighbor, who has since moved from G. Eridani's planetary system, once told me that he and a friend took their SkyJet to a nebula right outside the belt of dust disks and waited for a shooting meteoroid to zoom past. Once the object was in sight, they lassoed the rocketing debris clump with a galactic whip and soared off with it. I'll never forget that look he had when he would stare up at the sky and relay the story to me. He reveled in the wonder and awe of it all. I want to experience that speed and sparkle. Once I ride with the stars, that feeling will stay with me forever. It's been six lives since he went. However, he said his bones tingle from it every so often, reminding him of how unexplainable the tension was. How he thought he heard music play, like the star was singing as they glided along with it. God, how I want that.

I flip the card over. *Cthulhu Will Catch You In The Fifth Life*. I roll my eyes. The Astral Watch thinks they can wave around Cthulhu's name like it will make something happen. Sure he is the ruler of the Milky Way, but the Astral Watch praises him like his decrees are gospel. He's not a real god. He's a fourth dimensional jackass, but the biased galactic police force treat him as such. Even the imagined standard of time is measured by the cycle of the planet on which He slept. Only a few celestial citizens have seen this Old One since he rose from Earth's ocean some thousand Earth years ago. He's nonetheless been oppressing people with his law ever since.

From his face pour long tentacles writhing down to his chest like a castaway's unruly beard, the cephalopod tanglement hiding where a mouth would be.

The very idea of refilling a bucket list in order to transcend to your next life is ridiculous. It was once automatic. You didn't need to travel to your system's capital, register with the Astral Watch for your next life, and submit your bucket list plans for approval. You automatically transcended and went on your way. I grieve for those who do not have the privilege of traveling easily to their capital space city. In the smaller, less fortunate solar systems, they have limited transportation and some systems don't even have a capital. I've heard that the Astral Watch comes for the people who don't refill their bucket list, and a handful of people claim to have seen the almighty Cthulhu himself appear at individuals' households for failing to refill their buckets. Out of their fear caused by laying eyes on the galaxy's king, they become some of his most loyal followers. I'm sure many citizens in various parts of the galaxy harbor the same thoughts as I, but we are all too afraid to say it.

H.P. Lovecraft's description of the Old One is fairly accurate, or so I've heard. Posed as fiction to Earthlings during their ancient days, Lovecraft's work describes the nightmares Cthulhu communicated with him. It's said that Lovecraft himself was chosen as a prophet to announce Cthulhu's return from his oceanic slumber. From his face pour long tentacles writhing down to his chest like a castaway's unruly beard, the cephalopod tanglement hiding where a mouth would be. He stands upright like most mentally-elevated beings in the galaxy and similarly shares the physique of a masculine human while standing five hundred times their typical height. Large leathery wings sprout dragon-like from his back, his wingspan blocking sun rays from small moons.

I'll check my list again, but I know it's not empty. I'm almost certain none of my items have expired. Carefully, I tiptoe over the ropes securing my rocking chair to the porch rails. When I'm slumped in the chair, I untie one of the ropes, so I'll float around. Sifting through the rest of my mail (mostly junk), I glance up at the sky of my planet. Beyond the pink night clouds, spirals and swirls of lavender stars dance, making constellations that differ every night. My neighborhood is primarily pink rock and dusty roads carved by the wheels of my Saturn Moon Rover 26. My nearest neighbors are at least six miles away.

I like the solitude. The cities of Planet XB-129 are too busy for my liking. Out here in the barren rocks, I can sit and dream of other worlds beyond my own. I can plan to finish my bucket list without the Astral Watch constantly banging down my door. They cause so many problems.

Just last week I heard on the news that the Astral Watch startled a citizen so badly that they flipped their entire language. I'm sure they're still in the hospital for Chronic Backwards Dialogue Syndrome. Of course, the news then stated that the citizen was already suffering from the illness and that the Astral Watch had nothing to do with their flareup. I'm not into conspiracies, but it's common knowledge that the Astral Watch controls the media. They hide behind the name of Cthulhu, the almighty being of our galaxy, and think they hold an ounce of power that can be loomed over the rest of us.

I shake my head and decide to change my internal subject. Watching the ever-changing rainbow of a sky, I'm reminded of what the Earthlings call "Trix Yogurt." The strange delicacy made from the colors of clouds was apparently discontinued at one point in Earth's past and resurrected by popular demand. To me, it tasted sweet and sour simultaneously while having a goop-like texture. I've never eaten anything wilder. That was on my bucket list trip of my second life. Visiting planet Earth and seeing how the Earthlings destroyed it was absolutely bewildering. I took my trip right before the items on my last list expired. They throw things into space like no one lives there, just like they did to their own oceans. Friends told me that Earthlings are the reason the "replacement happenings" started.

*Refill Your Cosmic Bucket List.*

I close my eyes and watch the words float in my mind as I rock in my drifting chair. I miss feeling the waves of a sea. I haven't been near any bodies of water since they were spontaneously replaced by lakes of acid on this planet. We get our water from trading with other planets now. Hopefully, I'll be able to empty my bucket list and refill it before more of our galaxy is destroyed by other similar replacement happenings. If Cthulhu doesn't start giving a care about the wellbeing of the Milky Way and put a stop to the pollution problems, soon everything good in the galaxy will be replaced with its antithesis. I want to continue to experience the other pleasures of my planet, like the swirling sky, the soft pink ground dust and the floral fields of plants that only need the light of the sun to survive.

Taking in one long breath and exhaling, I tether my chair back to my porch. I walk back inside my house with my bucket list notice along with my other mail. In my observatory room on the top floor of my home lies my silver bucket. There is dust around the rim that indicates that I haven't looked at the bucket as recently as I thought. Inside are three notes, each stating a place I have yet to see or a thing I still wish to do. Picking up the cards, I review my scribbled handwriting. The backs of the pages are stamped with the official Astral Watch seal. I see the dates have expired... *The dates have expired?* "Oh no," I whisper in disbelief. It is too late now. Falling to the floor, the bucket clutched in my shaking hands, I check the clock built into the side. "No no no!" I shout as I bring the bucket closer to my face. "It can't be!"

The clock hand ticks, getting closer to the end of its fourth circle. My fourth life. I have only a few seconds before they come for me.

# The Devil's Dictionary: Climate Edition

Ivan Palmer

## A Preface for the Reader

In this volume you will find critique and ridicule in equal measure; you will find a dash of the liberal and the conservative; you will find me an ally in one moment and a foe in the next. I hope that the references I have strewn about like Easter eggs will grow on you with time. Other than the clear differential in talent, time is the major difference between this text and *The Devil's Dictionary* of Ambrose Bierce, whose theme and method I have liberally appropriated. If the climate situation is as the experts have decreed, there is no longer “time yet for a hundred indecisions, and for a hundred visions and revisions.”

My hope for this text is not to instruct upon the particularities of climate science's discrete controversies. I boast no great familiarity with the minutiae of this learned domain. Yet, I do retain—as I believe all humans retain—a common interest, if not an outright stake in the inner machinations of the pale-blue sphere upon which I have no choice but to spend my life. To this end, I do find it useful to stay up to date with at least the general outline of the ruination to come. If this text achieves nothing more, I hope that it imparts a bit of that ruination to you with high fidelity, dear readers.

- Ivan

PS: If there are errors, take them up with my editor.

## A

**Abiotic** \,ābī'ädik\ *adj*: not produced by a living organism.

**Acceleration** \ak,selə'rāSH(ə)n\ *n*: force divided by mass.

**Accident** \'aksədənt\ *n*: any substantial, foreseeable, preventable spill or leak endemic to most oil transport systems.

**Acidification** \ə,sidəfə'kāSH(ə)n\ *n*: what happened when Owsley Stanley went to Haight-Ashbury in the 1960s.

**Acid rain** \'asəd,rān\ *n*: what stays mainly on the acid plains, but only in acid Spain.

**Adaptation** \,adap'tāSH(ə)n\ *n*: a visionary branch of climate change acceptance adopted when the prospect of mitigating the inevitable catastrophe lacks an incentive for capitalist investment.

**Adaptive capacity** *n*: the capacity of a species or system to take a licking and keep on ticking.

**Afforestation** \əfōrə'stāSH(ə)n\ *n*: the process of creating a forest in an area that previously did not have one.

**Agent Orange** \'ājənt'ōrənʃ,\ *n*: a defoliating herbicide containing high concentrations of dioxin, which the US dumped by the planeload into the Vietnamese rainforest before they lost the Vietnam War. Of average strength in the Rainbow Herbicide line of products.

**Agroforestry** \,agrō'fōrəstrē\ *n*: a land use management tactic in which trees or shrubs are grown around agricultural fields.

**Air capture** *n*: capturing carbon dioxide from the air and generating a concentrated stream of carbon dioxide for sequestration.

**Air conditioning** *n*: a popular method of indoor climate modification necessitated, in part, by the popularity of indoor climate modification; see *Feedback loop*.

**Air pollution** *n*: anthropogenically-produced air-borne particulates.

**Air quality index** \e(ə)r'kwälədə'in,deks\ *n*: a national air quality standard measuring the amount of pollution in the air.

**Albedo** \al'bēdō\ *n*: the measure of the amount of solar radiation reflected from Aeschylus's bald head at the time that eagle released the turtle that killed him.

**Algae** \'algə\ *n*: the micro and macroscopic organisms that serve as producers in the aquatic food chain.

**Algae bloom** *n*: a phenomenon that occurs when fertilizer runoff and warm water rapidly multiply microscopic algae populations.

**Alien species** *n*: what scientists introduce to neutralize what scientists introduced to try to neutralize what exotic animal owners “accidentally” released into non-native habitats.

**Amazon basin** \ 'amə,zān, 'bās(ə)n\ *n*: the world's most important and biologically diverse rainforest ecosystem, soon a savanna.

**Anthropocene** \ 'anTHRəpə,sēn\ *n*: a tentative geological description, marking the beginning of anthropogenic climate change sometime proximal to the start of the Industrial Revolution.

**Anthropogenic aerosol** \ 'erə,sōl\ *n*: any pressurized chemical propellant in which fine particles are released upon activation.

**Anthropogenic climate change** *n*:  
see *Climate change*.

**Anthroposophy** \,anTHRə'päsəfē\ [Rudolf Steiner] *n*: an esoteric philosophical theory integrating phenomenology's anti-positivist conclusions and positivism's anti-phenomenological methods producing something commonly mistaken for eco-fascism.

**Arson** \ 'ärs(ə)n\ *n*: slash and burn and controlled burning without the slash or the control.

**Asbestos** *n*: (1) a heat-tolerant substance derived from silicate minerals, formerly used as an additive in construction; a severe respiration hazardous when aerated. (2) a potentially revolutionary source of carbon sequestration requiring vast amounts of the substance to be unearthed, ground into fine dust, and spread in thin layers in the open air.

**Assarting** *n*: slash but not burn.

**Assessment** \ə'sesmənt\ *n*: an expert analysis of a subject, according to other experts.

**Asthma** \ 'azmə\ *n*: a respiratory illness that increases in intensity and prevalence as air pollution worsens.

**Autonomous adaptation** *n*: adaptation directly compelled by environmental circumstances, which are naturally the best circumstances under which tough decisions are made.

## B

**Backyard burning** *n*: the incineration of leaf litter on an individual level. A major source of wildfires.

**Benchmark** \ 'ben(t)SHmärk\ *n*: a waypoint, like a highwater mark, past which a significant change occurs.

**Bioaccumulate** \ ,bīōə'kyōomyəlāt\ *vb*: to accrete by ascension up the food chain.

**Biocapacity** *n*: the capacity of biologically productive areas to create supplies of renewable resources and absorb its excesses.

**Biodegradable** \ ,bīōə'grādəb(ə)l\ *adj*: a material engineered to crumble under moderate environmental pressure.

**Biodiesel** \ 'bīō,dēzəl, 'bīō,dēsəl\ *n*: a biofuel alternative to diesel made from fatty acid.

**Biodiversity** \ ,bīōdī'vərsədē, ,bīō,dī'vərsədē\ *n*: the variety of living species in a given area, measured in terms of richness or equitability.

**Bioenergy** *n*: renewable energy made from material derived from biological sources.

**Biofuel** \ 'bīō,fyōō(ə)l\ *n*: fuel extracted from biological sources, necessitates the existence of an alternative engine.

**Biomagnification** *n*: when the consumers at the top of nature's pyramid scheme are poisoned by their own greed.

**Biomass** \ 'bīō,məs\ *n*: (1) the total mass of organisms in a given area. (2) biological material burned for energy production.

**Biome** \ 'bī,ōm\ *n*: a sizeable community of flora and fauna occupying a major habitat.

**Bioswale** \swāl\ *n*: channels designed to delay the drainage of stormwater runoff to allow vegetation or mulch to filter out the pollutants.

**Biotic** \bī'ädik\ *adj*: directly produced by a living organism.

**Black Carbon** *n*: the fine particulate soot created by incomplete combustion and hazardous to respiratory health. A by-product of semi-trucks, bonfires, cigarettes, and strawberry shortcake flavored vapes.

**Blackwater** *n*: (1) toilet wastewater contaminated by human excrement. (2) a military contractor, aptly named.

**Blast Fishing** *n*: apparently a lotta fun, it's right there in the name and names don't lie. Also known as fly-fishing.

**Blight** \blīt\ *n*: a specific symptom affecting plants in response to an infection.

**Bomb cyclone** *n*: see *Bombogenesis*.

**Bombogenesis** \ ,bāmbō'jenəsis\ *n*: a midlatitude winter cyclone that experiences a significant drop in barometric pressure in a short period of time causing a significant spike in the happiness of school-aged children in that same period.

**Brownfield** *n*: the "ground" politicians refer to when they say they've broken new ground to construct economy class housing.

**Buffer zone** \ 'bəfər ,zōn\ *n*: a strip of vegetation that acts as a barrier between agricultural fields and surrounding areas.

**Bumper crop** *n*: excess food produced in a farming season either stored in silos, fed to livestock, or destroyed to maintain high commodity prices.

## C

**Canopy** \ 'kanəpē\ *n*: dense interlocking foliage that prevents direct penetration of sunlight to the ground.

**Cap and trade** *n*: see *Emissions trading*.

**Capitalocene** [Donna Haraway] *n*: an epoch delineated based on the proliferation of global commerce.

**Carbon budget** *n*: total carbon dioxide permitted over time.

**Carbon capture and storage** *n*: on-site carbon sequestration technology that companies apply to point-source pollution outlets.

**Carbon credit** *n*: a tradable certificate indicating the right to omit one ton of carbon dioxide without reproach.

**Carbon dioxide** \ ,kərbən dī'äksīd\ *n*: a heat-trapping gas produced through respiration and by burning carbon; metabolized by autotrophs during normal respiration.

**Carbon footprint** *n*: a measure of the total amount of carbon dioxide emissions directly and indirectly caused by an activity or accumulated over the life stages of a product.

**Carbon neutral** *n*: a point in a region's annual carbon budget where the total input of carbon dioxide is at least equal to the total output of carbon dioxide.

**Carbon price** *n*: a carbon surcharge tacked on to a good or service.

**Carbon sink** *n*: any reservoir that captures and stores carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

**Carbon tax** *n*: a disincentivizing fee that governments tack onto the price of fuel relative to the fuel's carbon content.

**Carrying capacity** *n*: the average population size of a species which keeps it's at an equilibrium with the other trophic levels in its environment.

**Cascading** \ ka'skād\ *n*: the process whereby the removal or addition of apex predators has an increasingly significant effect down the food web.

**Cattle ranching** *n*: animal husbandry, but with rugged jeans, masculine trucks, and macho cigarettes.

**Chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs)** *n*: halogenated paraffin hydrocarbons produced as volatile derivatives of methane, ethane, and propane.

**Chthulucene** [Donna Haraway] *n*: an epoch marking the need for humans to restore their intimacy with the Earth.

**Clathrate gun hypothesis** \ 'klaTHRāt\ *n*: a theory that posits the mass release of methane from the sea-floor as the main driver of global warming during the Quaternary period.

**Clean energy** *n*: energy derived exclusively from renewable, replenishing sources.

**Clearcut logging** *n*: a logging method in which the topsoil is freed from the lattice of the root system such that even a light rain can slide the loose soil downhill with great ease and speed.

**Climate Action** *n*: see *Inaction*.

**Climate Change** *n*: a modification of global climate patterns attributed to increased levels of carbon dioxide following the industrial revolution.

**Climate Change Denial** *n*: a species of oppositional defiant disorder in adults, mildly contagious among populations primed by the intellectual rigor of *Coast to Coast AM* or the *National Enquirer*.

**Climate crisis** *n*: a rhetorical escalation from climate emergency to super climate emergency, but not so severe as a super-duper climate emergency.

**Climate Czar, Der** *n*: the natural position presupposed by the existence of a climate regime. See *Climate regime*.

**Climate emergency** *n*: a declaration to use the funds and resources allocated for emergency preparation to reduce carbon dioxide emissions to neutrality.

**Climate engineering** *n*: deliberate intervention in Earth's climate system to counteract climate change; climate modification.

**Climate fiction** *n*: literature written with the intent of removing the elites' plausible deniability about the extent of climate change on threat of admitting they have not read the latest Pulitzer-worthy novel.

**Climate grief** *n*: the *weltanschauung* of a climate sensitive age; the *zeitgeist* of a global warming era; the *sturm und drang* of eco-modernity.

**Climate justice** *n*: a concept that represents a shift in the climate stabilization conversation by which habitual environmental polluters are subject to litigation as a deterrent for future pollution.

**Climate policy** *n*: an official governmental climate mandate, the examination of which will supply future generations with firsthand evidence of governmental incompetence and corporate incrementalism.

**Climate pragmatism** *n*: a program that idealizes great conciliations on one side of the climate debate to bring the other side on board with what is otherwise advantageous for everybody.

**Climate Proof** *n*: an industry, material, or organism that is immune to the effects of climate change.

**Climate Proxy** *n*: any indirect sign of climate pattern fluctuation that allows scientists to extrapolate data about the age's global weather pattern in the absence of firsthand meteorological measurements.

**Climate Regime** *n*: a global framework that eschews the usual permissiveness of climate policy by the adoption of authoritarian rhetoric to cloak that permissiveness.

**Climate Scientist** [*Homo Sapiens Omnipotens*] *n*: a refined and exceptional subspecies of human, identifiable by their white coats, unintelligible chatter, and crushing sense of dread.

**Climate Sensitivity** *n*: a measure of how much the earth's climate will change given a change in incoming and outgoing radiation.

**Climate Stabilization** *n*: a process of system stability achieved after the application of correctives.

**Climatology** *n*: the study of the climate and its processes.

**Coal** \kōl\ *n*: the easiest way to keep a world burning. Comes in three flavors: anthracite, bituminous and lignite.

**Community** \kə'myoʊnədə\ *n*: an ecological zone in which individuals of different species interact.

**Competition** \,kämpə'tiSH(ə)n\ *n*: when the prospect of share and share alike doesn't promise infinite growth for one's investors.

**Compost** \'käm,pōst\ *n*: the worm's best chance to taste the glory of the quarter pounder with cheese.

**Condensation nuclei** *n*: the size of atmospheric particulates. The greater the size and quantity, the more frequently precipitation reaches the point of saturation.

**Consensus** \kən'sensəs\ *n*: an agreement.

**Conservation** \,kän'sər'vāSH(ə)n\ *n*: a planned protective effort to withstand the onslaught of immanent destruction.

**Contamination** \kən,tamə'nāSH(ə)n\ *n*: to pollute through physical or chemical interaction between the pure and the profane.

**Controlled burning** *n*: a preventative measure to mitigate the effects of wildfires, distinguishable from arson only in intent and method.

**Coppice** \'kăpəs\ *n*: an area of woodland in which the trees' primary trunks are felled to promote the growth of offshoots for firewood.

**Coral bleaching** *n*: when warming sea water creates a hostile work environment for coral's surface algae (Zooxanthellae).

**Coral reef** *n*: an underwater network of ad hoc apartment units for 25% of marine life.

**Crop belt** *n*: the collective name for various agriculturally productive regions of the United States conducive to growing high-yield staple crops.

**Crop failure** *n*: when environmental conditions cause crops to fail.

**Crude oil** *n*: black gold, Texas tea.

**Cull** \kəl\ *vb*: to euthanize a group of animals presumed to be sick or in imminent danger of becoming sick; to slaughter without the possibility of ingestion.

**Culture jamming** \'kAltʃər jam\ *n*: to adopt and subvert the semiotic potential of advertisements and media outreach as a form of protest. An effort to disprove the old adage that no publicity is bad publicity.

## D

**Dam** \dam\ *n*: humanity's attempt to recreate a beaver's habitat after the beavers have been forced to relocate to protect private property from flooding.

**Dam failure** \dam 'fālyər\ *n*: when humanity's attempt to recreate a beaver's habitat fails, flooding private residences and public property.

**DDT** *n*: Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane, an insecticide, avicide, and omnicide. As revolutionary as asbestos.

**Decarbonize** *vb*: to scrub carbon from the atmosphere.

**Decommission** \,dēkə'miSHən\ *vb*: a euphemism meaning to become obsolete or retire, usually after long and illustrious career of harm.

**Decomposition** \dē,kämpə'ziSH(ə)n\ *n*:  
"Crumbling is not an instant's Act  
A fundamental pause  
Dilapidation's processes  
Are organized Decays."

**Deep time** *n*: a deep geological concept of time in which Earth's processes, though unwitnessed by humans, still enacted the saga of upheaval and resolution—as a projection into Earth's future in the absence of humans.

**Deferral** \də'fərəl\ *n*: see *Procrastination penalty*.

**Deforestation** \dē,fōrə'stāSHən, dē,fārə'stāSHən\ *n*: to perform a live action recreation of the Lorax.

**Dehydration** \,dē,hī'drāSH(ə)n\ *n*: according to Gen Z, the third most probable explanation for the collective failure of Baby Boomers, other than capitalism and bigotry.

**Depletion** \də'plēSH(ə)n\ *n*: when a vital nutrient goes M.I.A. The opposite of enrichment.

**Derailment** \də'rālmənt\ *n*: a process of delay and obfuscation endemic to townhall forums when a discussion of public transportation turns to funding for light rail, for example.

**Desalination** \dē,salə'nāSH(ə)n\ *n*: the process of removing salt.

**Desertification** \də,zərdəfə'kāSH(ə)n\ *n*: the only definite method of generating oases and mirages.

**Dieback** \'dībak\ *n*: a condition of woody plants in which peripheral parts are killed and the plant dies slowly from the outside in.

**Die-off** \'dī,ôf\ *n*: a condition caused by clusters of organisms failing to develop adequate warning mechanisms to kindly inform them that they are interacting with a noxious agent.

**Dioxin** \dī'āksən\ *n*: a persistent organic pollutant with a decade long half-life which bioaccumulates in animal fat and resists metabolization.

**Disaster** \də'zastər\ *n*: an unforeseen catastrophe with damage to property or loss of life.

**Disaster management** \də'zastər\ *n*: (1) when a multinational corporation deploys a PR team, \$2/hour incarcerated labor, and/or 250 unpaid interns to the latest accident. (2) see *Mitigation*.

**Disposal** \də'spōzəl\ *n*: the formal process of transitioning something or someone to its end-use.

**Dirty dairying** [NZ] *n*: a regional term used to describe the effect that cattle farm runoff has on nearby water quality.

**Divestment** \də'vestmənt, dī'vestmənt\ *n*: corporate withdrawal.

**Downcycling** *n*: see *Cascading*.

**Dread** \dred\ *n*: "a dull aching anger that leads [one] to conclude that the only absolute truth is death."

**Driver** \'dri:vər\ *n*: a sustained stressor.

**Drought** \drou\ *n*: when an underground aquifer is tapped dry and the forecast calls for clear skies well into the foreseeable future.

**Dumping** *vb*: furtively offloading one's waste in undesignated areas, or in permitted areas beyond the terms of the permit.

## E

**Ecesis** \'ekēsis\ *n*: to introduce an interloper into a habitat to improve ratings; Cousin Oliver syndrome.

**Eco-alchemy** *n*: see *Anthroposophy*.

**Eco-anxiety** *n*: the permeating sense of impending environmental doom.

**Ecocatastrophe** [ecological + catastrophe] *n*: an anthropogenically produced disaster that fundamentally changes a region's ecology.

**Eccide** \'ēkō,sīd, 'ekō,sīd\ *n*: to deliberately mimic the actions of the Once-ler.

**Eco-fascism** \'ēkō'faSH,izəm\ *n*: the blood-and-soil arm of the Nazi party.

**Ecofreak** *n*: see *Eco-terrorism*.

**Ecological threshold** *n*: the point at which external conditions influence a system's internal characteristics.

**Ecology** \ē'kālōjē\ *n*: the study of how organisms interact *with one another* to eventually produce human beings, the protagonists of nature.

**Ecophagy** [Robert Freitas] *n*: consumption of the ecosystem. See *Gray Goo*.

**Ecosphere** \'ēkō,sfēr, 'ekō,sfēr\ *n*: the habitable portion of a planet.

**Ecosystem** \'ēkō,sistəm\ *n*: a community of co-dependent biotic and abiotic elements.

**Eco-terrorism** *n*: when your manifesto "outline[s] in a very general way the measures that those who hate the industrial system should take in order to prepare the way for a revolution against that form of society."

**Ecotone** \'ēkātōn, 'ekə,tōn\ *n*: the middle part of a Venn diagram where two biological species meet and integrate.

**Ecotourism** \,ekō'toorizəm, 'ēkō'toorizəm, 'ekō'toorizəm\ *n*: a vacation to a beautiful, climate-threatened, foreign locale with all the rigor and guilt of a research sabbatical.

**Ecotype** \'ēkō,tīp, 'ekō,tīp\ *n*: a distinct form of a species occupying a particular habitat.

**E-cycling** [electronic + recycling] *n*: electronic recycling.

**Edge Effect** *n*: a concept that accounts for the fact that biodiversity is greater in the overlap between two adjacent ecosystems.

**Effluent** \'eflōōənt\ *n*: see *Runoff*.

**Ekistics** \'ekisistics\ *n*: the science of human habitation.

**Electronic waste** *n*: the primary source of a heavy metal saturation of soil and groundwater.

**Embodied energy** *n*: the total energy required to extract, process, manufacture and deliver building materials to the building site.

**Emission** \ə'miSH(ə)n\ *n*: the release of a substance.

**Emissions permit** *n*: permits that allow corporations to dump a limited amount of toxic sludge into local tributaries; any quantity dumped over the set limit may be furtively dumped until discovered and then penalized with a fine.

**Emissions trading** *n*: a popular market-based approach to control pollution and greenhouse gas emissions by assigning pollution a monetary value, bringing competition and insider dealing to environmentalism, while also allowing corporatists to donate to a worthy cause without changing their behavior.

**Empirical** \əm'pirik(ə)l\ *n*: requiring evidence for support.

**Endangered Species** \in,dānjərd 'spēSHēz\ *n*: a species on the brink of extinction due to over-hunting or loss of habitat.

**Endemism** \ 'endə,mizəm\ *n*: the state of a species that has, through time and geographical pressures, become bound to a specific geographical location. For example, the dodos of Mauritius.

**Endocrine disruptors** \ 'endəkrən dis'rəptər\ *n*: chemicals that interfere with the endocrine system's ability to produce hormones.

**Energy efficiency** *n*: a relation between the amount of energy promised and the amount of energy wasted through loss, noise, and entropy.

**Energy rating** *n*: a rating system devised to measure how efficient an appliance is.

**Enrichment** *n*: an improvement to a substance usually through an impoverishment of ethics.

**Environmental impact statement** *n*: an official government-required assessment about the impact of one's proposed project on the surrounding physical and human environment, devised to remove a company's plausible deniability, but, without an enforcement mechanism, largely ineffectual and widely ignored.

**Environmental migration** *n*: a type of migration in which there is no geographical possibility of return.

**Epidemic** \,epə'demik\ *n*: when a well-defined community experiences the ravages of plague before it spreads to everybody else.

**Equilibrium** \,ēkwə'librēəm, 'ekwə'librēəm\ *n*: yin and yang.

**Eradication** \i,radi'kāSH(ə)n\ *n*: the deliberate extermination of something considered noxious or obnoxious.

**Erosion** \ə'rōZHən\ *n*: the gradual corruption of physical material or public trust.

**Escalation** \,eskə'lāSH(ə)n\ *n*: when things go from bad to worse.

**Ethanol** \ 'eTHənōl, 'eTHə,nōl\ *n*: an organic chemical compound produced by the natural fermentation of sugars. A substance you can put both in your body and in your car, but never the same kind at the same time.

**Eutrophication** \yoo,träfə'kāSH(ə)n\ *n*: when an embarrassment of fertilizer's riches kills fish.

**Evolution** *n*: a theory about the progression of species over time, denied vehemently by a society until its methods are perfected by that society's top eugenicists.

**Exhaust gas** *n*: vehicular bombast.

**Existential threat** \,egzə'sten(t)SH(ə)l THret\ *n*: a threat to the continued theoretical or metaphorical presence of a concept.

**Exploitation** \,ek,sploi'tāSH(ə)n\ *n*: a purposefully misdeclaration of one's intentions to gain access to something otherwise beyond one's ready access.

**Explosion** \ik'splōZHən\ *n*: (1) a sudden increase in population. (2) an eruption that, if large enough, causes a sudden decrease in population.

**Externality** \,ekstər'nalədē\ *n*: the cost incurred by a third party who has no control over how that cost was determined.

**Extinction** \ik'stiNG(k)SH(ə)n\ *n*: "or not to be."

**Extinction debt** \ik'stiNG(k)SH(ə)n,det\ *n*: the debt incurred when a severely threatened species becomes tacitly extinct, giving scientists the ethical wiggle room to collect the last remaining specimens and induce mating, or provide palliative care.

**Extinction event** \ik'stiNG(k)SH(ə)n, ə'vent\ *n*: a sudden catastrophic event causing mass extinction.

**Extinction rebellion** *n*: a grassroots environmental group whose members are dedicated to sampling prison food from every capitalist country in the world.

**Extraction** \ik'strakSH(ə)n\ *n*: the process of singling something out and removing it with extreme prejudice.

**Extreme climate events** *n*: in 2030, just a climate event.

## F

**Feedback Loop** \ 'fēd,bak loop\ *n*: a self-sustaining, recursive sequence like when you define a concept such as: feedback loop \ 'fēd,bak loop\ *n*: a self-sustaining...

**FEMA** (Federal Emergency Management Agency) *n*: America's 20 billion disaster management agency which seeks to become the world's foremost distributor of temporary trailers and tarmac water bottles.

**Fertilizer** \ 'fərdl,īzər\ *n*: a load of crap.

**Finning, Shark** *vb*: the tradition of removing a shark's fin for use in a recipe calling for an over-abundance of methylmercury.

**Fire season** \ 'fī(ə)r 'sēzən\ *n*: in 2030, just season.

**Fish kill** (also fish die-off) *n*: when sick aquatic life does everyone the courtesy of culling themselves.

**Flight Shame** (circa 2018) *n*: a social movement designed to reduce the aviation industry's input in the carbon-cycle through the equitable distribution of shame relative to one's frequent flier miles.

**Flood** \ 'fləd\ *n*: when an excess of water exceeds the bounds of a tributary and transgresses onto a floodplain, demanding an allotment of emergency paper towels.

**Flood risk** \ 'fləd risk\ *n*: living below sea level, or near a floodplain, or in the outer bank of a stream.

**Flux** \fləks\ *n*: (1) a surge or unanticipated variation over an Æon. (2) a substance mixed with a solid to lower its melting point.

**Flygskam** *n*: see *Flight shame*.

**Food chain** \fōod CHān\ *n*: a hierarchical system of predation whereby "The wolf is on the lamb like lamb on the grass."

**Food forest** *n*: an engineered forest space in which edible vegetables and fruit grow in communal abundance.

**Food security** \fōod sə'kyoorədē\ *n*: a socio-economic indication of the stability of one's access to food.

**Food web** \fōod web\ *n*: a more complex inter-connection of prey and predation than the food chain. Accounts for the peculiar circumstances under which a quaternary consumer leading a convoy through the Donner pass might resort to alternative menu items to postpone starvation.

**Footprint** \ 'fōot,print\ *n*: the metaphorical climate change contributions of a person, process, or institution.

**Fossil fuel** \ 'fāsəl 'fyoo(ə)l\ *n*: (1) fuel extracted from the bowels of the Earth. (2) Anthropology and geology research grants; rare and coveted. Once acquired, a fossil is just about anything you want it to be.

**Fossil fuel phase out** *n*: a multistep program to gradually replace fossil fuels with an alternative fuel source. The timeframe of such a program usually ranges from one millennium to one day less than never.

**Fracking**, also Hydraulic Fracturing: when you punish the Earth using its own methods, a kind of reverse-volcanism

**Freon** \ 'frēän\ *n*: a stable aerosol and refrigerant, both inside the machine and in the atmosphere.

## G

**Gaia hypothesis** [James Lovelock] *n*: a theory that the Earth's abiotic and biotic elements form a single self-regulating entity.

**Geo-engineering** *n*: large-scale modification of specific processes central to controlling Earth's climate with a specific intended benefit.

**Geopolitics** \,jēō'pālədiks\ *n*: the effects and influence of Earth's geography on politics and international relations.

**Geoponics** \ 'jēō'pāniks\ *n*: when an appreciation of the success of hydroponics causes theorists to imagine how successful growing food would be in soil; a fancy word for farming.

**Geothermal energy** \,jēō'THərməl 'enərjē\ *n*: thermal energy captured by strategically drilling through the earth's crust, avoiding earthquake producing fault lines and setting up multimillion-dollar heat exchangers on the surface.

**Ghost net** *n*: abandoned fishing nets that drift along in the ocean current collecting wildlife as it goes.

**Global cooling** *n*: an outmoded hypothesis that perhaps the addition of anthropogenic aerosols to the atmosphere would block enough sunlight to lower global temperatures.

**Global dimming** *n*: a decline in the amount of sunlight that reaches the Earth's surface.

**Global Environment Facility** *n*: a trust established in 1992 to provide grants for environmental initiative.

**Global warming** \ 'glɒbəl 'wɔːmɪŋ\ *n*: an extremely controversial issue agreed upon by 97% of the world's leading climate scientists and disagreed with by many radio talk show hosts.

**Graft** \graft\ *vb*: to illegally profit by transferring one's favorite scion(s) to a prime position on a hardy stock.

**Gray Goo (also Grey Goo)** *n*: a theoretical cataclysmic event initiated by the overconsumption of biomass by self-replicating nanotechnology.

**Great Pacific Garbage Patch** *n*: a motile trashberg in the Pacific Ocean made of aggregated debris upon which a shipwrecked sailor may be stranded and have all the amenities of life at home. A domain upon which the world's cormorants may lord without fear of reprisal; an anti-Eden.

**Green banking** *n*: banking services aimed at providing investment options that strongly emphasize a commitment to promoting green technology and decreasing carbon emissions.

**Greenfield** *n*: the opposite of Brownfield.

**Greenhouse effect** \ 'grɛnhəʊs ə ,fekt\ *n*: the entrapment of thermal energy in the lower atmosphere due to the different penetrative capacities of incoming shortwave radiation and outgoing longwave radiation.

**Greenhouse gas** *n*: any gas that absorbs and traps thermal radiation in the atmosphere.

**Greenlash** [green + backlash] *n*: a negative public response to negative corporate environmental practices.

**Green New Deal** [Green + FDR's New Deal] *n*: proposed US legislation that focuses on remedying economic inequality by shifting America from fossil fuel dependence to renewable energy markets.

**Green Party** *n*: single issue, third-party participants in America's two-party electoral system, which is deeply committed to providing accurate data of the people willing to wait in line to make no difference whatsoever.

**Greenpeace** *n*: an international environmentalist organization concerned with the preservation and restoration of every aspect of the natural environment. Famous for high seas jousting contests with whaling ships.

**Green revolution** *n*: the marked increase in crop production resulting from the proliferation of pesticides, herbicides, and artificial fertilizer.

**Greenwash** \ 'grɛnwɔːʃ, 'grɛnwɔːʃ\ *n*: corporate marketing campaigns to appropriate the appeal of environmentalism to convince the public that its products are organic.

**Green water** *n*: the portion of water stored in soil and available for uptake by plants.

**Greywater** *n*: household wastewater that doesn't come into contact with fecal matter.

**Guerilla Gardening** *n*: furtive transformations of unused public space into minor sites of carbon sequestration.

## H

**Haber-Bosch process** *n*: the process of creating artificial nitrogen-rich ammonia as a first step in the production of artificial fertilizer and the green revolution.

**Hardiness** \ 'hɑːdɪnəs\ *n*: see *Resilience*.

**Hard waste** *n*: when textiles go straight from raw material to lint.

**Half-life** \ 'haf ,lɪf\ *n*: the time it takes for a radioactive isotope to divorce its wife, buy a corvette, and get hair plugs.

**Haze** \hāz\ *n*: when visibility-reducing atmospheric pollutants stratify horizontally in the lower atmosphere. However, purple haze is produced exclusively by purple rain.

**Heat stress** *n*: the exponentiation of human health ailments by the linear increase of environmental temperature.

**Heat wave** *n*: the silent environmental antagonist that inadvertently qualifies many movies to technically be part of the climate change film canon such as *Do the Right Thing* and *Weekend at Bernie's*.

**Heavy metals** \ 'hevē 'medl\ *n*: metallic substances with high densities and high atomic numbers whose high half-lives causes them to bioaccumulate up the food chain.

**Herbicide** \ '(h)ərbə ,sɪd\ *n*: a key component in suburban driveway maintenance.

**Hiatus** \hɪ'ædəs\ *n*: a brief pause or lull within a program of horror, which substitutes the terror of its onslaught with the dread of its consolidated amplification.

**Hurricane** \ 'hʊrɪ ,kɑːn\ *n*: a destructive mass of tropical water and wind which FEMA uses as free emergency simulators to keep their staff ready for the next free emergency simulation.

**Hydraulic Fracturing** *n*: see *Fracking*.

**Hydrocarbon** \ ,hɪdrə'kɑːrbən\ *n*: any organic compound made only of hydrogen and carbon, like those found in petroleum and natural gas.

**Hydroponics** \ ,hɪdrə'pænɪks\ *n*: the process of growing plants in non-soil mediums, including coir fibers, vermiculite, and water.

**Hydropower** \ 'hɪdrə ,pəʊər\ *n*: using hydro energy to power a turbine and create electrical energy.

## I

**Ice age, the** \ 'ɪs ,āj\ *n*: a prolonged, cold period in Earth's history marked by the advancement of glaciers from the polar regions into what are now temperate latitudes.

**Iceberg** \ 'ɪs ,bɜːrg\ *n*: a large mass of free-floating ice and debris that breaks away from glaciers in the arctic circle to hunt pioneering, high occupancy ocean liners.

**Inaction** \in'ækʃ(ə)n\ *n*: see *Deferral*.

**Inadvertent climate modification** *n*: obsolete; see *Climate change*.

**Incineration** \in ,sɪnə'ɪrəʃən\ *n*: reducing the size of municipal waste in landfills by converting the waste from a solid to a gas.

**Indigenous populations** *n*: descendants from the original inhabitants of a given area or continent.

**Individual action** *n*: the minor, mostly ineffectual changes that an individual can make to avert what is essentially the industrial problem of carbon emissions.

**Industrial revolution** \ in' ,dæstrɪəʃəl ,revə'looʃən\ *n*: the period of transition from an agrarian and feudal organization of society to one based upon exponential increases in industrial capacity in the 19th century.

**Infrastructure** \ 'ɪnfɹə ,stræk(t)ʃər\ *n*: the first and last stop in congressional bipartisanship; the easiest and most impactful climate change initiative accessible at the local and state government level.

**Inorganic** \ ,ɪnɔːr'gænɪk\ *adj*: a food-labeling standard that codifies economic impoverishment with a nutritional deficit, the parental guilt complex is free.

**Insecticide** \in'sektə ,sɪd\ *n*: a class of chemicals designed to kill any number of the beloved characters in children's books (e.g., *James and the Giant Peach*, *Charlotte's Web*, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, etc.).

**Intercropping** \ ,ɪn(t)ər'kræpɪŋg, 'ɪn(t)ər ,kræpɪŋg\ *n*: an energy efficient alternative to monocropping; growing multiple crops in close proximity to each other.

**Interglacial period** *n*: geological stretches of warm temperature between ice ages.

**Integrated pest management** *n*: when Wile E. Coyote explores the entire line of ACME products before inevitably resorting to an avicide.

**Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)** *n*: an international panel convened exclusively to address the threats posed by climate change. As of 2020, as effective in stopping climate change as the UN is in preventing war.

**Interdisciplinary** \ ,ɪn(t)ər'dɪs(ə)plə ,nerē\ *adj*: when the details of your thesis go too far afield and you must get assistance from a theorist in a separate discipline who suggests you integrate your two theories into one, but they get all the credit for writing *The Communist Manifesto*.

**Intrinsic value** \in'trɪnzɪk 'væljuː\ *n*: the value of a product before the price increases from market speculation.

**Introduced species** *n*: the organisms referenced when politicians in Louisiana or drug kingpins in Colombia threaten to or succeed in importing animals from Africa for release into the Americas.

**Invasive species** *n*: organisms that thrive in an area or habitat originally unavailable to them.

## K

**Keeling curve, the** [Dr. Charles David Keeling] *n*: the graphed expression that marks the accumulation of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere since 1958.

**Keystone species** [Dr. Robert Paine] *n*: a lynchpin species that maintains the balance between the other organisms in its environment.

**Kyoto protocol** *n*: an international treaty of 1992 which established guidelines for reducing the emission of greenhouse gases; the effects of which should improve life significantly between its ratification and 2012.

## L

**Land degradation** *n*: when prevailing environmental conditions degrades a patch of land's agricultural value.

**Landfill** \lan(d),fil\ *n*: a dump.

**Land reclamation** *n*: a postcolonial concept of restoring land possession back to its original owners.

**Landscape** \lan(d),skāp\ *n*: a swath of land developed under the guidance of human ingenuity.

**Landslide** \lan(d),slīd\ *n*: a mudslide with higher competence.

**Lawn** \lōn\ *n*: the cultivation of a small variety of grass for the domestication of a broad range of suburbanites. A concept predominantly engineered for the manufacture and sale of lawn mowers.

**Leachate** \lēCHāt\ *n*: water that passes through a material, extracts the toxic parts, and removes them to the groundwater for safe keeping.

**Lead poisoning** *n*: a deadly metal poisoning caused by the accumulation of lead in the body from lead paint or tap water (in Flint, Michigan).

**Leaf litter** *n*: natural bedding for fleas, mites, and ticks, the burning of which is the number one cause of wildfire.

**Leak** \lēk\ *vb*: to drip, ooze, trickle, spurt, bleed, seep, etc.

**Life cycle analysis** *n*: a method of analyzing the total environmental impact of a given product or service.

**Light pollution** *n*: the phenomenon that describes what you experience when it is nighttime and you're singing on a famous street and you're inclined to wonder if you're in Heaven or Las Vegas.

**Light rail** *n*: the eternal carrot before the stick of climate sensible infrastructure.

**Litter** \līdər\ *n*: liberated detritus.

**Little ice age** *n*: a long period of cooling as a righteous response of the earth to the pernicious comforts of brief atmospheric warmth during the Medieval climate anomaly; a clear sign to renew one's vigor when on crusade.

**Logging** \lōgiNG, 'lāgiNG\ *n*: an industry devoted to the eradication of single-ply toilet paper one majestic boreal forest at a time.

## M

**Managed relocation** *n*: the assisted movement of a population, plants, or animals from their original environment (perhaps along a trail of some sort) to a different habitat reserved exclusively for their integration.

**Mangroves** \maNGgrōv\ *n*: trees with thick roots that grow in coastal swamp and salt marsh conditions; essential in the protection of inland habitats from storm surges and tidal flooding.

**Material recovery facility** *n*: the professionalized name for heavy and rare-earth metal extraction sites like Agbogbloshe and Guiyu.

**Mechanized agriculture** *n*: using machines instead of manual labor.

**Medical waste** *n*: the rubber gloves, used needles, and chemical vials that get incinerated after single use.

**Medieval climate anomaly** *n*: a 300 year stretch during the Middle Ages when crusading in mail, tunic, surcoat, armor, and helmet was enough qualification for sainthood.

**Methane** \meTHān\ *n*: a silent but deadly greenhouse gas.

**Microplastic** \mīkrō,plastik\ *n*: a microscopic dietary supplement in vogue since the 1950s.

**Mismanagement** \,mis'manəjmənt\ *n*: an underappreciated, yet universally practiced managerial style, especially effective in the fossil fuel industry.

**Mitigation** \,midə'gāSH(ə)n\ *n*: a reduction in severity; what is meant when a company promises to stop performing a given act.

**Monocrop Farming** *n*: the practice of growing a single crop during one grow season, usually to access a government subsidy.

**Monsoon** \män'sōon\ *n*: the seasonal rainstorms of Southeast Asia of which climate nightmares are made, whereby the populous land is rounded with ocean.

**Mudslide** \məd,slīd\ *n*: when you cash in your hand and pick up on a piece of land and build yourself a cabin back in the woods and the earth you thought you left behind comes like an oil slick slipping and a-slapping and a-sliding.

**Municipal solid waste** *n*: garbage.

## N

**Natech** \nä tek\ 1994 *n*: secondary effects of industrial incidents, accidents, and spills that occur as a result of natural disasters.

**National Park** *n*: an area designated by the federal government for the public to experience the constant terrors of life in the wild; a bemusement park.

**Native** \nādiv\ *n*: an organism well-integrated into its given environment over a long period of habituation.

**Nature** \nāCHər\ *n*:

"The primordial germs of things unfold,  
Whence Nature all creates, and multiplies  
And fosters all, and whither she resolves  
Each in the end when each is overthrown."

**Net zero emissions** *n*: a state in which the total annual input of carbon dioxide is equal to the total amount of carbon dioxide absorbed, fixed, or sequestered by the system.

**Niche** \niCH, nēSH\ *n*: when your intersectional identity is a virtue in your community, both as potential predator and as potential prey.

**Nitrous oxide** *n*: a greenhouse gas found in animal manure and laughing gas.

**Noise pollution** *n*: AC/DC's 1980-81 Back in Black World Tour.

**Nonpoint source pollution** *n*: when the pollution exists without an indication as to its origins.

**No-till farming** *n*: an agricultural method practiced for centuries by the Egyptians but perfected by Edward Faulkner, John Aeschliman, and Ruth Stout.

**Novel ecosystems** *n*: human-built ecosystems.

**Nuclear power** *n*: a safe and clean energy source which harnesses the heat generated by decaying nuclear material to generate steam and power a turbine. Requires a high quantity of cooling water and creates nuclear waste with half-lives ranging from hundreds of thousands to millions of years.

## O

**Oasis** \ō'āsis\ *n*: an area of rest typically in the middle of a desert, but only if there is a jukebox with Waterwall on it, otherwise it's just a refuge.

**Offset** *vb*: to defray the costs or expenses.

**Oil spill** \oil spil\ *n*: the emancipation of liquid petroleum into a maritime environment.

**Oil tanker** \oil 'taNGkər\ *n*: frequently marooned vessels designed to transport crude oil over precious ecosystems.

**Old growth forest** *n*: a priceless, irreplaceable stretch of well-established trees whose wood makes excellent coasters.

**Organic** \ōr'ganik\ *adj*: a food-labeling standard that somehow increases the price of a product because of a lack of expensive chemical treatment.

**Organism** \'ōrgə,nizəm\ *n*: a lifeform.

**Overdrafting** *n*: siphoning groundwater above the replenishment rate of the aquifer, causing a lowering of the water table.

**Overfishing** *n*: an exclusively anthropogenic depletion of the global seafood stock for Red Lobster's Endless Crab promotion.

**Overgrazing** *n*: when cattle ranchers let their charges treat pastureland like an all you can eat buffet.

**Overpopulation** *n*: an ecofascist eugenic conspiracy to the left; a pro-abortion conspiracy to the right.

**Ozone** \'ō,zōn\ *n*: a highly reactive chemical composed of three oxygen atoms, naturally occurring at low concentrations in the upper atmosphere, but corrosive in the lungs.



## P

**Paleocene-Eocene Thermal Maximum** *n*: an abrupt interval of maximum climate warming during the late Paleocene era lasting 100,000 years and killing 75% of all species; an analogue for the present climate trajectory.

**Palm oil farming** *n*: a lucrative farming practice in which palm tree plantation owners expand into precious habitats, exploit human labor to supply the cosmetic industry with raw palm oil, and keep all the profits.

**Pandemic** \pan'demik\ *n*: relatively rare global health emergencies favoring the West's proven commitment to scientific foresight, emergency resource allocation, and social altruism.

**Paris Climate Agreement** \'perəs\ *n*: an international resolution to reduce or mitigate global carbon dioxide emissions through the development of green practices. Though the agreement lacks a formal enforcement mechanism, it uses the honor method, so success is assured.

**Pastureland** \'pasCHər,land\ *n*: arable land designated exclusively for cattle grazing.

**Permafrost** \'pərmə,frōst\ *n*: a heavily compacted layer of soil and ice, the accelerated defrosting of which has revealed Otzi the iceman, mammoths, and the bubonic plague.

**Perovskite** \pə'rävzkīt,\ *n*: a group of materials used to improve the efficacy of solar cells.

**Persistent organic pollutant** *n*: a hazardous organic compound resistant to biodegradation; a "forever chemical."

**Pescatarianism** \,peskə'terēən,izəm\ *n*: surf but not turf.

**Pesticide** \'pestə,sīd\ *n*: a sort of light salad dressing the farmer puts on your vegetables before it reaches your plate to maybe kill an insect that hasn't grown a tolerance to its effects.

**Pesticide drift** *n*: when a farmer's attempt to treat their crops with a sort of light salad dressing gives a direct dose of the treatment to a neighboring stream and/or playground, gratis.

**Phase-out** *n*: (1) see *Acidification*. (2) the implementation of a multiphasic plan to gradually wean off fossil fuels.

**Photosynthesis** \,fōdō'sinTHəsəs\ *n*: a method of energy absorption practiced by most autotrophs and a few, very clever kleptoplasts.

**Phytoplankton** \,fidō'plaNGktən\ *n*: microscopic waterborne autotrophs; the primary producers in the oceanic food web and most impactful element of carbon sequestration.

**Pilot project** *n*: a trial run for an experimental project that one lets their protégé head to defer the inevitable blame.

**Plague** \plāg\ *n*: a health emergency in which "Rats died in the street; men in their homes. And newspapers are concerned only with the street."

**Planned adaptation** *n*: beneficial adaptations that occur in moments scheduled well in advance of their most pressing need, which, if they had been implemented sooner, would have nullified the romance of its use.

**Plastic** \'plastik\ *n*: synthetic polymer material originally developed to replace ivory, not to prevent poaching but to capitalize on its success.

**Plasticulture** [plastic + agriculture] *n*: the practice of using plastic materials (ag plastics) in agricultural applications like nursery pots and seed starters.

**Plastiglomerate** [plastic + conglomerate] *n*: sedimentary rocks with large, rounded clasts and interwoven grains of melted Tupperware.

**Plight** \plīt\ *n*: a downward sloping fate with increasing steepness.

**Poaching** \pōCHiNG\ *n*: (1) slaughtering wild animals for Facebook photos or to sell their body parts. (2) Add an inch of water to a saucer and heat until simmering. Add an egg. Turn off the heat and cover the saucer for 5 minutes.

**Point source pollution** *n*: a single identified source of pollution, like a smokestack or a smoldering cigarette butt.

**Polar amplification** *n*: the phenomenon that any net change in the radiation balance tends to produce a larger change in temperature near the poles.

**Pollard** \'pālərd\ *vb*: to create a woodland area like a coppice, but instead of cutting down to the ankle, leaving the trunk of the tree intact above the graze line to promote offshoot growth for firewood.

**Polluter pays principle** *n*: a standard where by the burden of financially restoring the environment falls to the polluter.

**Pollution** *n*: when something toxic, noxious, or nonbiodegradable is illegally released into the environment (but not food, that's the seagull's share).

**Post-consumer waste** *n*: waste produced by the end user in a product's lifecycle, which is apparently unforeseeable at the start of the product's lifecycle.

**Potable** \'pōdəb(ə)l\ *adj*: safe to drink.

**Precautionary principle** *n*: the theory that the night is dark and full of terrors, so it is best to remain ensconced in the dungeon you're familiar with than make uncertain progress.

**Precipitation** \prə,sipə'tāSH(ə)n\ *n*: both rain and snow and their transitional phases, which by heat or gloom of night doth suffer the sea to change into something rich and strange.

**Preservation** \,prezər'vāSH(ə)n\ *n*: the act of keeping something alive. Not to be confused with self-preservation, which is the act of killing something else to keep yourself alive.

**Procrastination Penalty** *n*: the intuitional exponentiation of climate grief expressed as the coefficient of grief multiplied by the rate of temperature increase (in Celsius) over time of awareness, compounded daily.

**Protected Area Mosaic** *n*: a collection of environmentally protected areas treated as a conceptual unit.

**Protected species** *n*: a species either on the endangered list, in risk of being on the endangered list, or aggressively targeted by poachers.

**Protest** *n*: a constitutional right to be forced to submit the proper documentation declaring the trajectory and time frame of one's impromptu demonstration and then forfeiting a bill for police overtime so that those police officers and the national guard (when deployed by the president) can batter your protestors for being "foreign agitators," and bludgeon members of the news media for documenting the battery.

**Pseudoscience** \,sōdō'sīəns\ *n*: prefix from the Latin *Sussudio*, formerly, *Sussussudio* obs. ("deliberately unknowable"), suffix from French *essence*, from Latin *essentia* ("the true nature of a thing"). *Psussudiossentia* shortened to *Pseudoscience* during the 20th century. Literally meaning, "the deliberately unknowable, but true nature of a thing." Ex. alchemy, astrology, political science.

**Pyrolysis** \pī'räləsəs\ *n*: the industrial conversion of biomass into biofuel through the thermal decomposition; the first step in combustion.

## R

**Radiation** \,rādē'āSH(ə)n\ *n*: the emission of energy as electromagnetic waves or as moving subatomic particles.

**Radiative cooling** \'rādēədīv kooliNG\ *n*: the process by which a body loses heat by thermal radiation.

**Radiative forcing** \'rādēədīv 'fōrsiNG\ *n*: the energy difference between total solar input into the Earth system and the energy radiated back into space. Global warming is the negative balance in the energy budget, favoring a greater input of energy than output; global cooling is the opposite.

**Rain garden** \'rān,'gärd(ə)n\ *n*: islands of robust vegetation around drainpipes and ditches in urban environments, designed to filter stormwater and excess groundwater for macro-contaminants.

**Rainwater harvesting** \'rān,wōdər 'härvästiNG\ *n*: the deliberate collection of rainwater into a cistern, incentivized with tax credits in some regions, disincentivized with jail time in others.

**Rare-earth metals** *n*: the first ingredients in a CIA and Tesla backed coup on a foreign government.

**Raw materials** \rô mə'tirēəl\ *n*: unprocessed natural resources that many materially rich countries in the Global South joyously discover they possess in great enough quantity to sell to the global market weeks before they fall into a resource curse, crippling foreign debt, and puppet regimes.

**Recovery** \rə'kəv(ə)rē\ *n*: to restore one's resources or energy after an expected loss.

**Recycle** \rē'sīk(ə)l\ *vb*: to reintegrate something back into the supply chain.

**Reduce** \rə'd(y)oos\ *vb*: to cutback or curb use of a product or material.

**Reforestation** \rē,fōrə'stāSH(ə)n\ *n*: regrowing trees in an area that was the site of deforestation either by importing trees as saplings and waiting fifteen years or replanting them as seeds and waiting thirty.

**Refuge** \'ref,yooj,'ref,yooZH\ *n*: a safe haven.

**Renewable** \rə'n(y)oōəb(ə)l\ *n*: nature's "take a penny, leave a penny" system.

**Renewable Energy** *n*: energy derived from sustainable sources.

**Renewable portfolio standard** *n*: a regulation that incentivizes compliance with the categorical imperative to transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy.

**Representative Concentration Pathways** *n*: four definite, candidate trajectories for future greenhouse gas concentrations, one of which probably predicts what climate scientists have spent decades collecting hard data to infer.

**Reprocess** *vb*: to extract the useful portion of a spent material and reinvest it in a subsequent process.

**Residual waste** *n*: the trash left over when municipal recycling centers sort through the mixed material, which, through malice or ignorance, the public discards in recycling bins. The high occurrence of recycled waste is why China has stopped accepting American recyclables.

**Resilience** \rə'zilyəns\ *n*: the ability to withstand at least a little bit more than those around you.

**Resource curse** *n*: when countries with an abundance of natural resources have less capital and economic influence than countries with fewer resources.

**Resource recovery** *n*: (1) What you write on your tax forms under “occupation” if your boss routinely orders you to put a dead horse head into a client’s bed. (2) Gambler’s fallacy. (3) Resource extraction and reuse.

**Restoration** \,restə'rāSH(ə)n\ *n*: the process of returning to a previous point.

**Retrofit** \,retro'fit\ *vb*: to add a feature after production, like seatbelts to cars manufactured before 1964.

**Reuse** *vb*: to reintegrate something back into the supply chain.

**Runoff** \'rənəf\ *n*: (1) the downslope movement of precipitation into drainage channels. (2) The promotion of down ballot election coverage onto news channels.

## S

**Salinization** \,salənə'zāSHən\ *n*: (1) to make salty. (2) when your body turns into a salt pillar after you are forced to leave your city during a disaster and you look back because you think you hear someone calling your name, forgetting that you were never given one.

**Savannah** \sə'vanə\ *n*: a sparsely wooded grassland ecosystem engineered by native populations to prevent their children from playing hide and go seek in the forest.

**Savannization** *n*: the transition of a historically rainforest ecosystem into a savannah.

**Scenario** \ ə'nerē,ō\ *n*: a hypothetical eventuality.

**Sclerophyll** \'skli(ə)rə,fil, 'skler-\ *n*: a resilient plant with foliage adapted to prevent water loss.

**Sea ice** *n*: frozen seawater near the poles.

**Sea ice decline** *n*: a decrease in the global quantity of sea ice; an early indicator of anthropogenic climate change.

**Sea level** \ 'sē ,levəl\ *n*: the level of the sea’s surface.

**Seasonality** \ ,sēzə'nalitē\ *n*: an occurrence that is experienced fairly regularly at appointed seasonal intervals.

**Selective logging** *n*: a compromise between environmentalists and logging companies, whereby the companies agree to only deforest certain sections of a forest until a new government administration comes into power and removes the penalty for deforesting the rest.

**Senescence** \sə'nesəns\ *n*: the process of gradual deterioration with age.

**Sequestration** \,sikwə'strāSH(ə)n, ,sekwə'strāSH(ə)n\ *n*: esp. of carbon, the process of removing carbon dioxide from the environment to mitigate the effect of atmospheric carbon dioxide.

**Sixth Extinction** *n*: when a species that missed out on the previous five hopes to recreate with high fidelity the conditions for another to prove once and for all that they are not just smarter but also stronger than dinosaurs.

**Slash and burn** \ 'slaSH ,ən 'bərn\ *n*: an agricultural method to liberate the trapped carbon from its carbon store back into the atmosphere.

**Slaughter** \ 'slôdər\ *vb*: what happens to the largest of one’s piggies when they “go to market.”

**Slow food** *n*: a quip your father or uncle might make when you have a long wait time in a (non-fast food) restaurant.

**Sludge** \sləj\ *n*: the thick, colloidal biomass produced by waste treatment processes.

**Smog** \smäg, smôg\ *n*: haze combined with anthropogenic pollutants (esp. ozone).

**Sodicity** \ 'sō disidē\ *n*: the accumulation of sodium salt in soil, too much of which prevents water uptake in plants. A reality that complicates the validity of the compliment “salt of the earth.”

**Soil organic matter (SOM)** *n*: plant and animal detritus at various stages of decomposition in the soil. Provides regulatory ecosystem services, critical for soil functions and quality.

**Solar Power** \ 'sōlər 'pou(ə)r\ *n*: an alternative energy source obtained by converting solar energy (insolation) into electricity.

**Solastalgia**- [Glenn Albrecht from solacium] \ ,sələ'stældʒə\ *n*: a form of grief produced when climate change triggers both nostalgia and dread for a home nation that one has never known.

**Specialist species** *n*: a species that has grown a little too dependent on the local cuisine and accoutrements of its region to venture too far from home.

**Spill** (see *Accident*) \spil\ *n*: an oopsy-daisy; if you’re rich it usually precedes a mulligan.

**Stakeholders** \ 'stāk ,hōldər\ *n*: entities invested in the outcome of an event, including but not limited to humans, animals, flora, and multinational conglomerates.

**Stateless** \ 'stātləs\ *n*: what you are when you’re at the airport and your home nation dissolves politically and you have to live there indefinitely; or generally when a nation that is precariously at sea level drastically falls beneath sea level.

**Stationarity** *n*: long term patterns of statistical stability amid local fluctuations in amplitude.

**Stressor** \ 'stresər\ *n*: a specific instigator.

**Subsistence Farming** \səb'sistəns\ *n*: the *Little House on the Prairie* style of homesteading.

**Sullage** \ 'səlij\ *n*: what your plumbers refer to when they say they have seen just about everything.

**Sunrise Movement** *n*: a student-movement that seeks political action to address the climate emergency.

**Superfund** \ 'soopər ,fənd\ *n*: the Captain Planet extension of the EPA, responsible for cleaning up after spills, accidents, and natural disasters.

**Sustainability** \sə ,stānə'bilədē\ *n*: a polysyllabic buzzword that companies use to publicly affirm their commitment to the long-term viability of the environment in the full thirty seconds of their ad-slot.

**Sustainable tourism** \sə'stānəb(ə)l 'toor ,izəm\ *n*: tourism that accounts for the fact that the long-term residents are not animals in a zoo but do rely on a significant influx of tourist revenue for sustaining their local economy.

**Swidden** \ 'swidn\ *n*: a field cleared by slash and burn agriculture. The middle step between forest and savannah.

**Synergy** \ 'sinətjē\ *n*: a collaborative partnership between two associates or properties in which both parties get their ducks in a row and touch base before they circle back and put a pin in it.

## T

**Technosphere** [Peter Haff] \ 'teknō'sfir\ *n*: a subsection of the biosphere that accounts for the lifecycle of technology from raw material to microplastic to toxic bioaccumulation in the livers of deep-sea crustaceans.

**Teleconnection** \ ,teləkə'nekSHən\ *n*: the correlative interdependence between butterflies flapping their wings in Mexico and monsoons in India.

**Tidal flooding** \ 'tidl 'flədiNG\ *n*: when the rising sea level combines with king tide conditions to bring the Venice experience to a neighborhood near you.

**Tile drainage** \ 'tīl 'drānij\ *n*: an agricultural drainage system that removes subsurface water from the soil by the insertion of pipes, providing a direct conduit for surface pollutants and pesticides to reach local waterways.

**Tippling point** *n*: when abnormally warm oceanic waves erode the underside of an iceberg faster than abnormally warm polar air melts the top of an iceberg causing the 20% typically above the surface to flip and become the new 80%.

**Thaw** \THô, θə\ *n*: a thermal transition from ice and snow to water.

**Thermal mass** \THärməl mas\ *n*: the property of a material's composition which lets it store heat, reducing fluctuations between daytime and nighttime temperatures.

**Thermohaline Circulation** *n*: large-scale oceanic circulation driven by differences in temperature and salinity. Seawater replacement at depth due to temperature fluctuations.

**Third pipe** \THærd pīp\ *n*: a water management program that channels recycled water (e.g., rainwater) back into the home system to get around water restrictions and inflated utility costs.

**Threshold** \THreSH,(h)ôld\ *n*:

“Two gates the silent house of sleep adorn;  
Of polish'd ivory this, that of transparent horn: True  
visions thro' transparent horn arise;  
Thro' polish'd ivory pass deluding lies.”

**Topsoil** \tāp,soil\ *n*: the uppermost level of the uppermost crust (<12 inches); the grow medium and lithospheric interface with the atmosphere and hydrosphere.

**Tornado** \tôr'nādō\ *n*: when a sudden air pressure differential in the Midwest conspires to help Dorothy Gale go shoe shopping.

**Toxic** \tāksik\ *n*: when a taste on the lips is a taste of a poison paradise that sends you on a ride (to the emergency room).

**Toxin** \tāksən\ *n*: a poison organically produced within a biological entity. If the poison is transmitted audibly through vocalization it is professionally referred to as a lie.

**Treehugger** \trē,hægər\ *n*: the *Lorax* archetype.

**Triple bottom line** [John Elkington] *n*: an accounting framework posited as an alternative to solely profit driven economic models; centralizes sustainability through equal focus on people, planet, and profit.

**Trophic cascade** \trōfik ka'skād\ *n*: the compounding effects of removing an organism from an ecosystem.

**Trophic control** \trōfikən'trôl\ *n*: changes in the efficiency or population size of a single member of an ecosystem causes a cascade or an overabundance of other organisms in that ecosystem.

## U

**Uninhabitable** \,ənən'həbədəb(ə)l\ *adj*: inhospitable for life; hostile to life.

**Urban forest** \'ərbən 'fôrəst\ *n*: carbon-sequestering islands of dense vegetation in the middle of a city where squirrels can nest, and pigeons can nurse their homely young when not vying for pizza scraps with inner-city vermin.

**Urban Heat Islands** \'ərbən hēt 'lænd\ *n*: a phenomenon specific to urban environments in which asphalt and concrete absorb heat from the sun's rays during the day, making “the sidewalks hotter than a match head,” but “at night it's a different world” and a “pity that / The days can't be like the nights / In the summer in the city.”

**Urbanization** \,ərbənə'zāSH(ə)n, 'ərbə,nī'zāSH(ə)n\ *n*: when a rise in industrial capacity draws more people to the center of economic influence to work and live their lives.

**Urban metabolism** \,ərbənə mə'təbə,lizəm\ *n*: an understanding that human-made environments are complex systems with energy flowing into it via coffee and out of it roughly 5 to 10 minutes later.

## V

**Value-added** \'valyoo 'adəd\ *n*: the price of justified increase compounded at every stage in the process of manufacture, but only for products that inspire a great deal of enthusiasm in its producer, which for America's businesses means compounding at every stage and for each product.

**Veganism** \'vēgənizəm\ *n*: a religion with tenets designed to interrogate the ethics of the eucharist and daily bread.

**Vegetarianism** \,vejə'terēə,nizəm\ *n*: when you cannot eat them so you might as well join them (at the feeding trough, that is).

**Virtual water** [Jonathan Anthony Allan] *n*: an abstract amount of water used to produce a given product, which in the case of an actual bottle of water is 1.39 liters for a 1-liter bottle.

**Volatile Organic Compound Atmospheric** *n*: chemicals that vaporize in air and dissolve in water (degrade) at a relatively low boiling point.

**Vulnerable** \'vələn(ə)rəb(ə)l\ *adj*: to remain open to possibilities but only in the presence of a threat, otherwise it is just existence.

## W

**Waste** \wāst\ *n*:

“Empty bottles, sandwich papers, / Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends / Or other testimony of summer nights.”

**Wastewater** \wāstwôdər, 'wāstwädər\ *n*: water assumed to be contaminated after use.

**Watchdog group** \wäCH,dôg groop\ *n*: a group whose job it is to use the smallest jet possible to issue a press release after documenting the emissions released by people who use the largest jets possible.

**Water conflict** \wôdər\ *n*: a recognition that disputes over access to water forms an unacknowledged precursor to many of the world's major conflicts.

**Water conservation** \wôdər,känsər'vāSH(ə)n\ *n*: water management efforts taken to preserve the sanctity of a waterway.

**Water Scarcity** \wôdər'skersədē\ *n*: the lack of access to freshwater resources due to insufficient supply or misallocation of existing supplies.

**Weather Modification** *n*: the deliberate alteration of weather conditions, e.g., cloud-seeding.

**Wetland** \wet,land, 'wet,lænd\ *n*: an indicator ecosystem that serves as a transitional area between major bodies of water and inland regions.

**Whistleblower** \'(h)wisəl,blō(ə)r\ *n*: any insider with information concerning wrongdoing by their company; interestingly, the occurrence of insiders and wrongdoings tends to increase as yearly bonuses decrease.

**Wildfires** \wīld,fi(ə)r\ *n*: raging infernos with long stretches of biofuel to sustain its momentum and fury, the decreasing seasonality of which has interrupted Smokey Bear's yearly hibernation since 1970.

**Windmill** \win(d)mēl\ *n*: terrific turbine-connected structures with fantastic arms at which any dutiful knight might tilt in earnest.

**World War Zero** \wərl'd'zirō\ *n*: A climate coalition organized by John Kerry in 2019 to (for the very first time in history, we may assume) multiply the influence of politicians and celebrities to solve the world's most pressing crisis – and Sting is involved so it must be serious.

**World Wildlife Fund** *n*: a non-profit organization that focuses on habitat and endangered species conservation.

**Wreck** \rek\ *n*: a massive bird die-off in tribute to Hitchcock's *The Birds*.

## X

**Xerophyte** \'zirə,fit\ *n*: a species of plant that can manipulate its metabolic activity to withstand prolonged periods of drought or thrive in arid environments. E.g., cactuses.

## Z

**Zero-carbon housing** \'zirō'kərbən 'houziNG\ *n*: an anarcho-postmodern style of home composed of carbon sequestering renewable resources. Idealized by the children's classic “There was an Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe.”

**Zero-emissions** \'zirō ə'miSH(ə)ns\ *n*: motor vehicle process that operates without emitting hazardous waste byproducts.

**Zero waste** \'zirō wāst\ *n*: an idealized closed system interaction between materials, producers, user, and product.



**A Tree With a Message Carved Into It**  
Thea Ringer  
Digital Photography

This is why we don't allow pedestrian traffic in these Baltimore woods. If this writing was hundreds or thousands of years old, we probably wouldn't be offended by it.



**Another Tree With a Message Carved Into It**  
Thea Ringer  
Digital Photography

The irony of people who carve messages into trees, thinking of themselves as "best leader." An appropriate metaphor for the Trump administration.

## Live 4 The Livestream

KKUURTT

LIVE. We're coming to you live from an undisclosed live location streaming out of every orifice device time and place known to man. Straight into your homes, live and direct, connecting people across the globe through their television set streaming stick smartphone laptop pad and or but everything in between.

All the ways everybody experiences live just close your eyes and pretend like it's the real thing even though it's not the real thing and honestly nothing even close to the touch taste smell of the thing that once was real and only might be again.

Dress it up and make it look like live has gone out for the evening, but live is just faking it for your benefit—for all our benefits. Live for them but not for you or maybe live for you too, and the truth is we'll never know because live might be only so with tape delay in case somebody says a (fucking) swear or some shit thing and it can be bleeped out before it gets received by precious ears (very important) or not neither any of that at all.

Live for them but not for you or maybe  
live for you too

Live to someone, right? Live in the moment even if likely recorded hours or days ago or perhaps it's a classic, a throwback to '92 or '18 or anywhere in between, but through the technology of the live it's live to you right now, is it not?

Live to be live.

Living for the livestream.

Live, but don't go live.

Live, but don't forget to go live.

I see my neighbor Brian—he's a nice enough guy, but I don't know if I'd want to spend actual real life time with him—and he asks me if I saw the livestream last night. I ask him which one? We have a laugh about it because it turns out we're talking about different things entirely and he doesn't even own a television set streaming stick smartphone laptop pad. We should get on a call later, he suggests. There's this game he's been meaning to play online that just doesn't work as well in person. Just have to wait and see if I'm even still alive by then.

## canticle of metal

Kristin Emanuel

since the day you sprang awake  
batteries caroling  
you've become too loud  
so i shuck your skin  
a fibrous corn husk  
unscrew your plastic encasement  
feel the veiny curl  
of your wiring  
sensors tuned to peculiar music  
light, volume, compression  
my thumb thrust under your ribs

tell me about the factory  
that tweaked you into existence  
canticle of metal & conveyor belts  
as i unclasp your body  
using screwdrivers  
& toothpicks  
prod you  
with pulpy fingertips  
polishing your circuit board  
a brain surgeon  
triggering hallucinations

i wake at night  
to your modulations  
voice box flowering  
with human speech  
& wonder how it feels  
to be so barely awake  
your consciousness  
a granule or pearl

after i rewire your bloodstream  
please sing of your sleek-  
bodied descendants  
whose motors will hum  
so imperceptibly  
that I will have to press my ear  
against their chests & listen

## In My Nightmares I Am Calling Jeff Bezos “Daddy”

Leah Bushman

You wanted a partner but  
I gushed forth a prairie  
of thigh-thick wheatgrass  
that caressed each hair standing on my leg  
in holy devotion.

You wanted a partner  
but instead I have collapsed  
into a thousand filaments,  
crawling my way toward the sun’s rays.

You wanted me to take society  
and swallow it like some sick Mary  
Poppins joke.  
Instead,  
I rejected your aching  
in pursuit of my own.  
In pursuit of  
the collective who has been forgotten.

How can I exist in sacred space at the same  
time  
that I exist in a world of  
Kardashian/Trump/Bezos/Zuckerberg—  
and the same world as your own pining  
for  
all that was created by chaos?

I say Alexa and she says yes  
I say *Alexa I am lonely*  
and she says *I’m sorry I didn’t get that.*  
I press “buy with one click” when I need to forget.  
I count time by Instagram scrolling.  
I say *Daddy* and Bezos listens in.

You wanted a partner and I said:  
*how can a symbiotic relationship exist among beings in such a society as this?*



### For The Missing 545

(In honor of the lost children who were separated  
at the border due to the Trump administration’s  
immigration policy.)

Naomi Rogers

Found objects, Fabric, Dirt, Metal, Paint • 30" x 8.5" x 18.5"

## Quichen Taybel Preeyers

Briseyda Barrientos-Ariza

I zee mi moder preey foor heer tung  
tu espeak anador langooege dat weel breing heer  
bee-ing a beter lyef.

I zee mi moder fyte wit heer tong  
and reahraynge foniqs tu beter fyt insayde  
heer mauth.

I zee mi moder eswallo assents dat pocc  
dru heer teet. I zee heer byte dem, and shee reahlyzes dat dey do, ended, ebleed.

I zee heer eskratch heer hed. I zee heer roob heer ays. I zee heer estrech. I zee heer holt heer mynd.

Shee guaches mi wit guander and presysyon az I repit da wurd on da payge.  
I zee heer estragole tu meror mi—nut anderestanding guay heer mauth, hoo berthred myne, canot mayke  
da sayme esownds dat I du.

¿Esa boca de la Lita... como es que lo dice tan bien?  
Yo trato. Yo practico. Todos los días. Todos los días. Pero no puedo.

I zee mi moder plead.  
I zee mi moder resyst.

All for a tong dat espeak guat it haz alway non.  
All for a langooege dat iz not heer oun.

## Kitchen Table Prayers

Briseyda Barrientos-Ariza

I see my mother pray for her tongue  
to speak another language that will bring her  
being a better life.

I see my mother fight with her tongue  
and rearrange phonics to better fit inside  
her mouth.

I see my mother swallow accents that poke  
through her teeth. I see her bite them, and she realizes that they do, indeed, bleed.

I see her scratch her head. I see her rub her eyes. I see her stretch. I see her hold her mind.

She watches me with wonder and precision as I repeat the words on the page.  
I see her struggle to mirror me—not understanding why her mouth, who birthed mine, cannot make  
the same sounds that I do.

¿Esa boca de la Lita... como es que lo dice tan bien?  
Me no trie. Me practise. Eberyday. Eberyday. Pero mi no can.

I see my mother plead.  
I see my mother resist.

All for a tongue that speaks what it has always known.  
All for a language that is not her own.

## Interview with Dunya Mikhail

Katya Buresh

Poet and journalist Dunya Mikhail was born in Baghdad and moved to the United States thirty years later in 1995. After graduating from the University of Baghdad, she worked as a journalist and translator for *The Baghdad Observer*. Facing censorship and interrogation under the regime of Saddam Hussein, she left Iraq, eventually settling in Detroit. She earned an M.A. at Wayne State University, and she currently teaches Arabic at Oakland University in Michigan. Dunya has received numerous honors for her writing, such as a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Knights Foundation grant, a Kresge Fellowship, a United States Artists Fellowship, and the United Nations Human Rights Award for Freedom of Writing.

Her books translated into English include *The War Works Hard* (2005), *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea* (2009), *The Iraqi Nights* (2014), *The Beekeeper: Rescuing the Stolen Women of Iraq* (2018), and *In Her Feminine Sign* (2019), all published by New Directions. Dunya's poem "100 Years of Sleep" appeared in Arabic and in English in our 68th volume, prior to the poem's publication in *In Her Feminine Sign*.

Dunya is someone I deeply admire, and it was such a privilege to discuss her experiences and perspective and to hear more about the processes and stories behind her inspirational work.

**In the "Author's Note" at the beginning of *In Her Feminine Sign*, you state that you wrote "the poems from right to left and from left to right, in Arabic and in English," specifying that there was no translation involved. I'd love to hear you say more about what this meant for you personally, Arabic being your first language and English your second. How does this compare to past experiences of writing your poems in Arabic and having them translated to English by a native speaker, as in your collection *The Iraqi Nights*?**

I always write in Arabic first, but some words and phrases come in English first due to their cultural connotation. So I go back and forth between the two languages on the page. It can be annoying to go back and forth, but in the end, the final product is enriched with the two languages' experiences. Writing in a second language gives me a chance to understand my original work more, and the two languages affect each other to the point that I lose the sense of the conventional translation. It's almost like a circular movement where the work keeps evolving until it takes a shape. Sometimes I don't know where the original starting point or ending point is, but the work turns into art through two beings imitating my dual existence. If we compare this to the translation of my work by other translators, they are faithful to my original text, just the way I would be if I were to translate the work of another writer.

**Some people argue that poetry, as it is so often based as much in sound and visual aesthetic as in the words themselves, is difficult to translate while giving the original work its due justice. What are your thoughts on this, as someone who has published both original English versions of your poetry as well as poetry translated into English from Arabic? Do you believe there are advantages to either or both processes?**

There is an Arabic saying that translating poetry is like turning a Persian carpet to the other side. The Persian carpet is known to be perfect on one side, with its beautiful motifs and ornaments that then appear faded on the other side. Another unfair assumption is that when people read a good translated poem, they usually praise the poet, but when they read a bad poem, they think it's the translator's fault. In my case, I see advantages when a native speaker of English translates my poetry into English. My English is not so good, but I love to allow that communication between the languages and watch the development of my poem twice.

**In the United States, we're facing a war on journalism and the media, with the growing influx of fake news. Alongside this, the former president incited a violent insurrection attacking democracy and refused to stop the violence when pressed. We're now seeing censorship coming from companies, such as Twitter (which has its own user agreement), and not a government. As a journalist having come to the United States after facing censorship and prosecution in Iraq, what does this mean to you? Is there anything in the media now that feels most threatening to you as a writer?**

I know. Things have recently felt like they did back home! When I was a journalist in Iraq, they were making war and calling it "revolution" and inciting insurrection and calling it "resistance," and so on. Well, I didn't expect this type of behavior in a democratic society like America. I also noticed a disrespect between the previous president and the journalists. That reminded me of a conference that we—a group of Iraqi poets during the 1980s—had with the then minister of culture. He gave us tea and then yelled at us, saying, "Why do you use all those symbols when you write about the war?" Well, we did use symbols and metaphors to hide our meanings from the censors. I've mentioned in another interview that in Iraq, censorship is explicit and here in America, it's implicit. Speech is already restricted by the public norms. In America, censorship precedes speech as opposed to Iraq, where censorship follows speech.

**It's been a few years since you released *The Beekeeper: Rescuing the Stolen Women of Iraq*. How do you feel about the book's reception, and what do you hope for it to communicate, more than anything, as Daesh continues to terrorize Iraq?**

It makes us realize how much we humans can do to each other, how much harm and how much kindness, and how much we need each other.

**In *The Beekeeper*, you alternate seamlessly between your story, the stories of others, and your poetry. What was the process of combining these forms like? The book reads smoothly, but I wonder if you were challenged at all by jumping between different mental states in these different modes.**

I included my story of leaving my country with their stories because that was, to me, like holding hands with those women. I had left my country in a hurry with one suitcase—and I thought it was unfair to reduce my life into one suitcase—but that was lucky compared to those who left empty-handed, and that was still luckier than those women who were taken as captives. I included the story of my grandmother and her best friend because that friend was also forced to leave the country. I included the story of my friend because she also was forced to leave the country. I wanted to show how exodus has roots and branches.

**In your latest poetry collection, *In Her Feminine Sign*, many of your poems refer to a female figure, a "she," and sometimes "you." At times I wonder if this is a love letter to the country of Iraq, to the "stolen women of Iraq" (as this was written after *The Beekeeper*), perhaps even to someone specific. At times, I wonder if it is also directed to the reader, as in Tablet IV: "Their stories didn't kill me / but I would die if I didn't / tell them to you." One of the things that makes poetry so beautiful is ambiguity, letting the reader wonder. That said, would you care to share a little bit about who you were writing to or for in this collection?**

The stolen women were in my mind when I prepared *In Her Feminine Sign* for publication. Even the title is related to a symbol in Arabic we call the "tied circle," which is used for the feminine words. The tied circle obsessed me, more than any time before, after the experience of learning about the captive women. I could easily see the tied hands and souls of those women who terrorists advertised to their prospective buyers. In between their stories, I wrote poems and that's how *In Her Feminine Sign* was formed—quietly furious.



**Do you feel your writing style has changed at all since moving to the United States?**

My poems before coming to the U.S. were less straightforward because I had to hide the meaning under several layers of meanings (like an onion) because it was risky to speak my mind. By the way, a friend from back home told me that I was writing better before I came to the U.S.

**Iraq has such a rich lineage of poets. What does it mean to you to be a representative today of Iraqi writers and poets?**

In Iraq, if you throw a stone, it will fall on the head of a poet! Well, you see how a turtle moves with her home on her back? That is what happened to me after I left my country—I carry it on my back wherever I go. My feeling is one of responsibility rather than nostalgia.

**You were recently announced as a United States Artists' Fellow for 2021. Congratulations! Can you share with me anything about what you plan to do with this fellowship, what projects you're working on?**

I am working on my debut novel. As a poet, I never thought I would write prose. But in 2014, when a market opened to buy and sell women in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere online, I responded in both poetry and prose, resulting in my nonfiction work, *The Beekeeper: Rescuing the Stolen Women of Iraq*. Writing that book was a big challenge, but it pushed me into new territory as a writer. It was for the sake of completing the book that I returned to Iraq for the first time since I left twenty years earlier. I visited a camp of women who had escaped from ISIS. I remain in touch with one of these women; she calls me "sister." I'd never had a sister, but after two years of phone conversations, she did become a sister to me. Her story affected me so deeply that it lives in me—or I in it, and that, as a writer, is a call I can't resist. I am writing it as a novel.

**What has helped you maintain a sense of hope during this time of pandemic and political turmoil? What have you been reading and listening to during the pandemic?**

Wonder, curiosity, gratitude, and compassion make up our hope for what is ahead. As you know, we are still facing some challenges of 2020 in this new year, but that also invites us to pause for reflection and prioritize what is most important, like our loved ones and our health. I listened more to my inner world as well as to the world outside.

**At the end of your acknowledgements in *In Her Feminine Sign*, you say, "I believe two people benefit the most from encouragement: children and poets." You wrote your first poem as a child, a poem that your cousin folded into a paper boat and set sail upon the Tigris River. Who encouraged you as you developed as a poet?**

My parents didn't know I was writing until later when my first book came out, and that actually helped me, as they didn't interfere with what I was doing. I remember the first award I received. The librarian of my high school in Baghdad presented it to me. Called the "Best Reader Award," it was a handwritten certificate with a handmade flower glued onto it. I also remember, in that same school, one day when we were taking a test in the Arabic literature class, I heard the teacher whispering to the other teacher who was standing by her, "That student Dunya will be somebody." Her whisper stayed in my mind. Another whisper I overheard was one by a relative talking to another relative about me: "If you want her naive, she is; if you want her smart, she is." Well, I think she's right—I have an inner child inside me. When that child grows up, I'll stop being a poet.



**Untitled\_034**

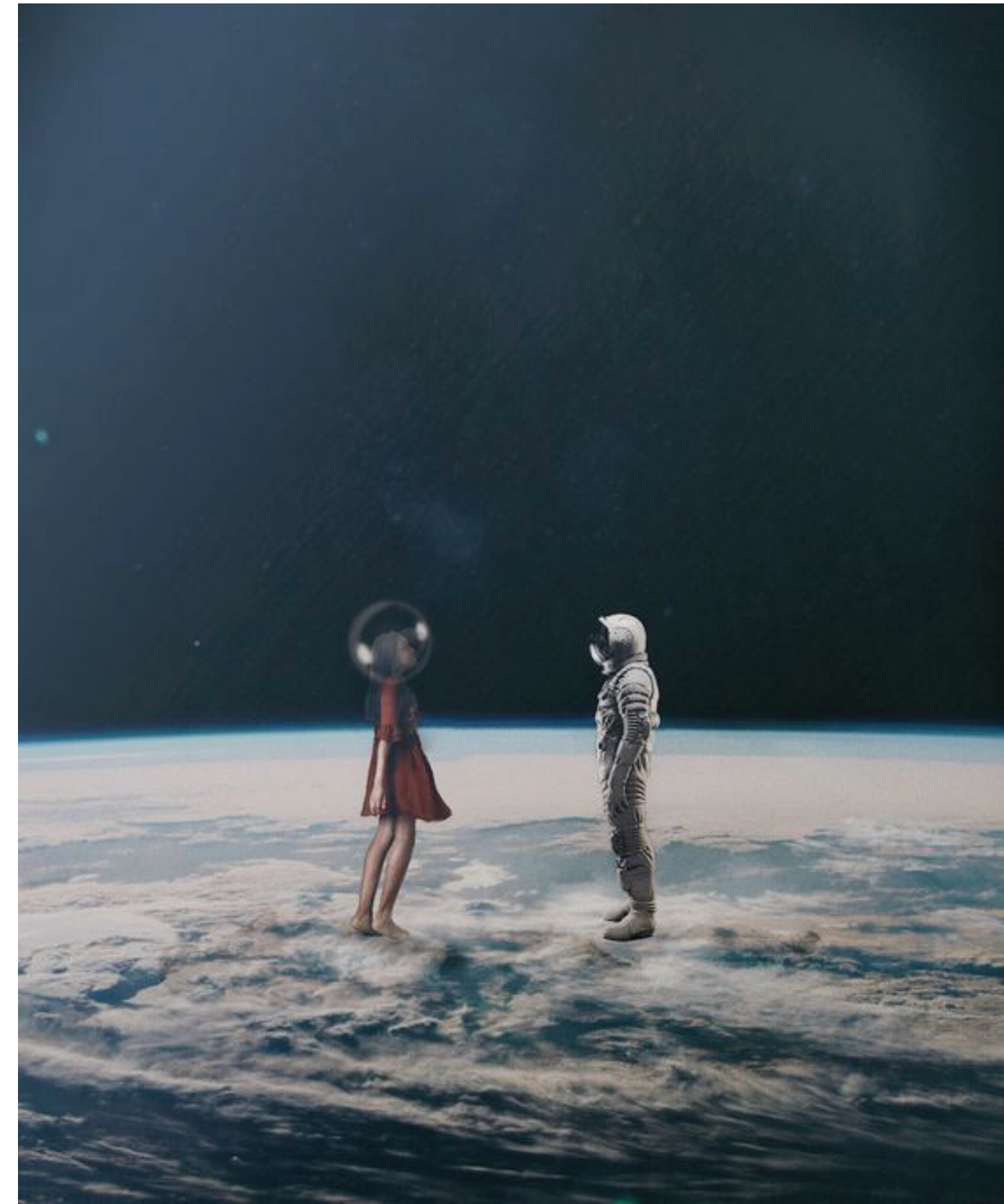
Louis Szalay

oil and acrylic on linen • 15" x 15"

## Portfolio of Works

Deandra Lee

As a photographer I create art that only I can capture to help express my thoughts and feelings to the rest of the world. Within my work, I try to develop a sense of meaning, something that connects the audience to make them wonder about the image as a whole (but of course not everything needs to have a meaning). Wondering for me has always been the foundation of why I create these portraits. Making them has not only helped me build myself better as an individual, but it has given me the purpose for expanding my imagination and creativity. Each work explores different aspects of life and tells different stories.



**Astro Part III**

Deandra Lee

Enlight app • 564 x 686



### Big Fish

Deandra Lee

Enlight app • 564 × 728



### Change

Deandra Lee

Enlight app • 564 x 897



**Dawn**

Deandra Lee

Enlight app • 563 x 758



**Forever Rain**

Deandra Lee

Enlight app • 564 x 750



### Journey

Deandra Lee

Enlight app • 563 x 737

## lost softnesses

Kristin Emanuel

the birds left last autumn  
all of them

instead of leaving us their bodies  
the bowerbirds left behind monuments:  
sticks interlaced into arches, towers  
ornamented with flowers  
fruit-pulp & lichen

they left behind  
their delicate collections:  
jeweled insects  
feathers-tufts & plucked  
butterfly wings

how many animals  
have wooed their beloved  
with artistry: arranging  
fragments of glass  
utensils & keys  
blue plastic spoons?

i want to imagine  
extinct intimacies

the velociraptor  
gathering magnolia petals  
& round pebbles  
bric-a-brac  
tidied fastidiously  
with his teeth

envision him dancing  
arms lifted  
to expose  
his almost-wings—  
their primordial bloom

let us speak  
of lost softnesses  
not of claws  
still affixed to elbows  
but of frond-lipped feathers  
unfossilized tongues  
reaching to preen—  
of countless  
courtship songs  
slipping effortlessly  
through spacetime  
never to be etched  
in sediment

## Ink Stains

Wen Wen Yang

Gong clenches and unclenches his sore right hand as he climbs up the mountain. The sunlight chases off the low-lying morning clouds from the valley. This morning, he hopes to trade Kuan and the Old Woman an hour of labor for a word to stop the pain in his right hand.

But, Gong remembers, no one calls her Kuan anymore.

Four years ago, the gods shook the ground. Most families survived with minor damage to their homes because they had visited the Old Woman once a season. His mother packed dried honeysuckle flowers for him and his father to take as a gift. His older brother Shang gave him an earthen jar of preserved vegetables.

“You’re mule this time.” Shang grinned and patted his shoulders.

“Do not talk,” his father had told him the night before and on the way up the mountain, and just when they heard the woman’s laugh.

Gong thought the laugh belonged to an animal, hooting and yowling. As they approached the Old Woman’s home, the sound became so loud he covered his ears.

The Old Woman’s siheyuan<sup>1</sup> was the size of Gong’s home but she lived alone, aside from boarding passing peddlers, while his family shared their home with another family.

Two gold lion statues guarded the south-facing red door. Their mouths hung open, a threat to evil spirits.

Gong’s door had water damage. Years of rain and flooding in the valley had turned it dark brown at the top and light gray at the bottom. No lions guarded his home.

His father covered his good ear with one hand and cupped his mouth with the other hand.

“Ai!” he shouted.

The laughter stopped abruptly and the door groaned open.

A tiny woman stood at the threshold. Her face was flesh sagging into wrinkles, wrinkles leading into white hair. A dark stain, like wet ink, covered one side of her face. Some areas were lighter, purple by her eye, brown along her jaw. It extended down under her collar where Gong assumed there were more wrinkles.

His father had explained this to Gong the night before. “It is the mark of the Zuo Zhe. They deal with the ink and the written, the words. We can live without the stain on us. It is a necessary evil they must deal with.”

“Good afternoon, child and father,” the Old Woman said in a voice that crackled.

“Good afternoon, Old Woman.” His father stepped forward with the linen bag. “This is the gift from the Li family.”

The woman took it with both hands.

“Thank you. Fortify your home immediately.” The woman grinned with gray teeth. “This is your advice and yours alone.”

The door shut and the laughter started again. Gong wondered if the voice came from one of those boxes the peddler from the East had mentioned.

As soon as they returned home, his father and Shang began to repair their section of the siheyuan, replacing loose stones. His mother pulled weeds and poured hot water into the holes where they had grown. Together, Gong and the neighboring family bought a new door.

<sup>1</sup> A historical type of residence that was commonly found throughout China, most famously in Beijing. The name literally means a courtyard surrounded by four buildings.

Gong watched as other families returned from a visit to the Old Woman and also tended their homes. Some families repaired their homes, but some moved to another section of town.

His friend Kuan's family did not go. They lived alone in the smallest home in town, though her father had begun building an extended room. Shang and Gong had offered to help, but Kuan's father had politely refused. Later, their father told them that it was because her family could not afford them. They were the ones who took Gong's two-tone door.

By the town well, Gong asked when Kuan was going to see the Old Woman.

"After my mother gives birth," Kuan told him.

The village treated her mother like a delicate blooming flower. Such a late pregnancy, they worried, is she getting enough food, water, sunlight?

"After that, we can ask for a blessing for my new sibling. Right now, my father thinks as soon as he steps too far away, my mother will start having labor pains."

"You could go."

Kuan laughed as she hauled the bucket up. "I went once when I was younger and the Old Woman's face gave me nightmares."

Gong's father also told him that the family had nothing to spare for the Old Woman.

When the land shook in the early morning, Gong's home remained standing, though the sheep and cows nearly broke down the barn doors.

Once the families emerged from their homes, they heard the cries. Kuan's home had fallen in. The town pulled apart the home, stone by stone. They found Kuan's mother first in the ruins of the kitchen. They agreed that, if she had lived, she would have lost the child anyway.

Gong and Shang passed stories back and forth about Kuan as if she was already dead.

Kuan was so quick with numbers during the three years of rudimentary schooling. While she started class with other students her age, sitting a row in front of Gong, she finished at the level above Shang's class. Lingli, the seamstress, had taken Kuan on as her apprentice before another shopkeeper could.

Following the cries, the villagers found Kuan. Luckily, she had been asleep in a corner.

Lingli tended to Kuan through the morning. Shang and Gong offered to bring her up the mountain for the Old Woman to heal her wounds, but her wounds were not serious.

In the afternoon, a dog started digging at the remains of the unfinished room. Her father's body was draped over the crib as if his bones could protect it. Kuan was utterly without family.

The town divided the remains of her home and she moved into the room above Lingli's shop. Within a year, the land had become a part of her neighbor's garden.

—

A year after the earthquake, the Old Woman started inviting the villagers into her siheyuan. Another boy told him it was a pointless visit, but Gong hoped he was lying, trying to hide something wondrous from him.

If one started at the base of the mountain in the morning, one made it back home just in time to ask what's for dinner.

Gong and Shang arrived breathless at the Old Woman's home in the early morning. Gong had grown taller than his older brother, and the two years that divided them neatly in childhood had now evaporated. The sudden lankiness made him clumsy and Shang still beat him to the top.

"Ai!" Shang called out. "We're here!"

The door opened and the Old Woman glowered at them. "You, with the big mouth, follow me."

Gong watched Shang step over the threshold. The door closed behind him. He hadn't even caught his breath when the door opened again. Shang emerged, baffled. Head lowered, Gong passed him and entered.

The Old Woman shouted at him, "Can you see those pictures?"

He turned to the back of the door. A piece of paper with black markings, like handprints of children, fluttered in the breeze.

"Yes."

"The first picture and the one under that, are they the same?"

Gong squinted. It was a mass of ink so that he could not tell where one character ended and another began. He guessed. "No."

The Old Woman tsk-tsked and pulled open the door.

Gong stepped back over the threshold.

Gong and Shang started down the path. The Old Woman spat and shut the door.

They returned home and joined their friends in agreement that the Old Woman had wasted their day.

At the end of the summer, his mother fanned herself in Lingli's store as Gong was being measured for new pants. Even Shang's and his father's pants no longer touched his ankles.

"The Old Woman still refuses to give any blessings or read any news until every last one of the unmarried adults has gone."

"I can spare Kuan for a day," Lingli said with a pin in the corner of her mouth.

Kuan looked up from her work and Gong saw that she had lost some softness in her face. "I'll give the Old Woman last year's wool."

Kuan did not return. Lingli had to take on Mei as a new apprentice even though she couldn't sew in a straight line.

When Shang and their father made the journey up the mountain right before the Mid-Autumn Festival, Lingli gave them pants and a coat to deliver to Kuan.

The next day, Shang roamed from house to house—eating a pork bun here, a tea egg there—to tell people that the Old Woman had adopted Kuan as her apprentice. The Old Woman shouted instructions from within the house, while Kuan stood at the door, repeating in a whisper.

"Isn't the Old Woman immortal?" Mei asked, pulling out an incorrect stitch.

"My grandmother remembers when the Old Woman was chosen." Shang shrugged. "But she also says the Old Woman can make you dance with a twitch of her finger, so I don't trust her."

Once their father was certain Gong knew the way, he visited the Old Woman alone several times. He gathered offerings and requests from his friends' families and carried the entire pack up the mountain. When he was there, he always stood outside while Kuan answered. Sometimes, he forgot there was an Old Woman.

"Oh." Kuan bit her lip as she looked over the letter from Mei's mother's sister, Ai-Hua, who had married and moved across the valley. Her village's Zuo Zhe wrote her letter, and Ravi, the young peddler from Indo, delivered it to the family. "I can't tell you this. Someone from the family has to come up here."

"Couldn't you come down to tell them?"

Gong asked.

Kuan shook her head.

"I think it's a code between two sisters." She folded the letter and handed it back to him. "Or the Zuo Zhe is trying to avoid using a word that could hurt me."

"Girl!" The Old Woman stomped into view and pushed Kuan out of the way. "What are you doing, child?" Gong tried not to stare at the mark across the Old Woman's face as she glared at him. It seemed to have diminished since the last time he saw her, as if she had managed to wash some of the stain out of the skin along her hairline. "Tell your lazy friends they must make the journey themselves. No more passing information along. Go. Leave."

"Wait, Kuan."

"She's Girl now." The Old Woman pointed to Kuan, then to herself. "Girl, Old Woman."

Everyone started to call Kuan the Girl of the Mountain.

—

Nearly two years after Kuan left the village, the entire town awoke in the middle of the night to the sound of the Old Woman's laughter ringing down the mountain. It lasted for a moment before they heard a cry of pain.

When Shang visited the mountain with the family's offerings, he said he hadn't seen or heard the Old Woman. Kuan had appeared with a thick cord around her left ankle. Some started to call her the new Old Woman.

Around harvest time, Ai-Hua wrote to the family that she lost the child she was carrying. For two weeks, Mei's mother, Jing, remained on the mountain. After Jing returned from the mountain, Gong heard from his mother that Kuan endured a phantom miscarriage.

"Jing wouldn't stop complaining that her shirt was ruined. One of the peddlers, the dark one, had to use Western medicine to stop the bleeding. Ai-Hua should have chosen her words more carefully. Their Zuo Zhe should have been more careful too." His mother shook her head and sipped her green tea.

His father looked up from his rice. "Her town's Zuo Zhe is a man. He wouldn't have felt anything."

His mother frowned. "Maybe he thought he was still writing for the Old Woman instead of the Girl."

"Did she see the Old Woman?" Gong asked.

His parents turned to him as if he had just materialized.

"No, not for lack of trying." His mother rolled her eyes. Jing would have searched through a cow's turd if she thought she could find a scandal there. "But she said the rope around the Girl's ankle went through walls to rooms she could not reach."

Gong's eyes drift to the horizon, wondering who lived beyond the edge of the sky. He dreams of becoming a peddler.

After all, he is the second son. Shang will take care of the fields once he is married. Their mother kept reminding him that she was married by his age.

Gong imagines gathering stories and eating anything put in front of him. He would dance the strange dances Ravi tries to teach them, and learn tricks to play on the younger kids.

He wouldn't even mind that he would be putting himself in danger. He would carry letters as if they were as harmless as bamboo stalks and meet every Zuo Zhe. He could bring his mother spices from every compass direction.

Five days earlier, Ravi approached the children at the market. Shang and Ravi were both born in the year of the trickster monkey but Gong thought the peddler's swagger was universal among elder brothers about to cause mischief.

### It lasted for a moment before they heard a cry of pain.

"Only a man could eat this." Ravi poured a line of fine red spice into his palm. "It's from Ank. Puts hair on your chest."

The boys looked at each other, grimacing. Gong had watched the previous peddler from Indo, now retired, play the same trick and smiled at the warm memory.

"What? None of you look like this?" Ravi pulled down his shirt to show a mass of hair at the center of his chest. The girls laughed in high squeals. Hearing this, the boys all licked their fingers, stuck them into the red powder, and sucked on it. They cried out like a wounded dog and begged for water.

Ravi laughed so hard his dark brown skin reddened.

At mid-afternoon, Gong approaches the door of the Old Woman's home and the lion statues. Her laughter rings through the air like the chimes above store doors. It does not frighten Gong like the Old Woman's laugh. The laughter trails off and another laugh replaces it.

Beside the door, in the shade of the lion statue, lies a wooden pack with dozens of drawers. It is Ravi's pack and smells of incense and sandalwood.

"Do the men dance like that?"

Startled, Gong looks around him for the source of the voice.

"They just watch." Gong recognizes Ravi's accented Mandarin and the way his voice is always on the edge of laughter.

Kuan's laughter starts again.

Gong enters the outer courtyard and follows the sound of the voices to the second entrance. This door is open wide and he can see the main courtyard.

"But in Ai-Ji, the women judge the available men by their dancing. They roll and cross their eyes."

Kuan sits on the steps of the western section while Ravi stands in front of her. Ravi is shirtless, his pants hitched up to his knees. Kuan wears a shimmering pink robe embroidered with chrysanthemums. Dull lines cross the skin of her legs and forearms, scars from the earthquake.

"I would like to see that." Kuan leans back, waiting. Gong has never seen Kuan smile so easily, so brightly.

"Well, that is what I was told." Ravi sits beside Kuan, his face flush. "I wasn't allowed to see because I was a man. You should come with me next time. Then you'd see."

Kuan's smile dims and she turns away from Ravi. "I'd rather you bring me these stories instead."

"And I bring you these letters that—"

"Tell me about Xi-An." Kuan throws her arms around Ravi's shoulders. "How do they dance there?"

The robe shifts and Gong can see something on the side of her neck. It is like a bruise, but it looks slick and wet, the same as the Old Woman's stain.

"I won't tell you about Xi-An or any other place." Ravi brushes Kuan's arms away and stands.

Kuan lifts her leg, showing him the rope around her ankle. The rope stretches to the northern wall, beyond Gong's sight.

"Downstairs, I keep four hundred years of family lineages." Kuan points to the courtyard floor with her extended foot before setting it down. "The words have warned us and we have avoided thousands of disasters. Five hundred and forty-seven people in the valley have no other way to contact the rest of the world. How can I abandon them?"

"Your life for theirs, is that fair?" Ravi waves his hand and walks toward the eastern building, out of sight. "You nearly bled to death! How can you bear it?"

Kuan shrugs. "The same way an ant carries its load."

Ravi's bitter laughter cuts the air. "An ant does not endure another ant's pain."

Kuan sneers. "Assuming I freed myself, how much is a Zuo Zhe worth in Ai-Ji?"

"Do you think I'll trade you?" Ravi walks into view again, now wearing a shirt. "What do you think I am?" Ravi kneels on the steps in front of Kuan, his arms outstretched.

"I'm a Zuo Zhe, aren't I?" Kuan pushes him but he catches her arms.

She struggles but Ravi holds her, his face patient. "Yes, and you are Kuan, my brilliant—"

Kuan hisses, "Step back." There is a blur of Kuan's fingers as she draws something in the air. Gong and Ravi step back in unison. Gong falls off the step of the entrance and lands on his injured hand. He yelps.

With footsteps rushing toward him, Gong half runs, half skids to the entrance.

"Stop, Gong."

Gong's body stops and he falls forward. An arm catches him and eases him to the ground. Ravi turns Gong around so he can see Kuan with her finger extended in the air.

He tries to speak, but his tongue does not move.

Kuan moves her finger in deliberate strokes in the air and mouths, "Release." She leans over him. "What did you come for?"

"My hand, I sprained it."

Kuan mumbles something under her breath and traces words on his hand with her fingertip. Gong's hand stops throbbing.

"Go home, Gong."

"I won't tell—"

"It doesn't matter." Kuan glances at Ravi. "My kit, please." Ravi nods and disappears into the courtyard.

"Are you going to run away?" Gong asks her in a whisper.

"Rest your hand until tomorrow." She holds out her hand. Gong takes her hand and stands.

"You could," he tells her.

Kuan's lips part but she swallows her words. She walks with him to the door.

Gong steps over the threshold and looks back. Ravi is bandaging Kuan's hand.

In a year's time, after Shang marries, there will be news from the mountain. Kuan would have disappeared. The town will tell the peddlers, who will then send the news to the other Zuo Zhe. Someone will send their apprentice to this new post. While the town will panic, Gong will wonder how well Kuan will dance, and how soon he can start wandering.





**Undies and Lavender**  
Chelsea Ayensu-Peters  
Acrylic paint • 11" x 14"



**Don't Wanna Wear**  
Chelsea Ayensu-Peters  
Acrylic paint • 11" x 14"

## Self-Portrait Framed in Life Between Protests

Jacqui Germain

I know it's Thursday, but the Friday  
is tonight & the Monday is tomorrow.  
Did you email the meetings? The minutes?  
Have you emailed the Wednesday is  
tomorrow? At 6? PM? At the church with the chairs?  
In the basement? After the raid, we moved  
the Tuesday to Saturday—do you know how to get in?  
After the raid, we have to be careful. Have you—  
have you slept, I mean, charged your phone?  
Did you get my email? The email? About  
Sunday, the next one. No, it's the next one.  
I know it's Wednesday, but the Monday  
is tomorrow & we had to push the Thursday  
to Friday. The Thursday to Friday. You have  
class then? What? What? Oh, I know,  
my paper was due last week. It's Thursday  
and we still don't know the agenda. For Saturday,  
did you pick up the food? Have you organized?  
The? The? Yet? Is it tomorrow yet? Yesterday said,  
don't forget the emails, the meeting Monday, Sunday &  
the paper due at midnight. I sent you a message  
on Facebook about coordinating rides, have you? Have  
you? Yet? No? Where? It's already Sunday and we need  
to know by—by—by—by.

## Days of 1985

Ellen Kombiyil

*"Oh the body! The delight and am I / normal?"*  
—from *The Lost Pages of Anne Sexton*<sup>1</sup>

We who pretended to lie down at parties  
with lovers on vinyl couches or wished  
we didn't but wouldn't admit it, licking  
salt from necks, bass leaping with our breath, or was it  
expanding/escaping inside us, black light's  
purple stripes transforming eyes/teeth into green  
glowing beings, separate, alive, our faces  
into negatives, cried. If we did it (we did it)  
to feel for a moment if not loved then  
wanted: A boy jammed his tongue in my mouth  
because the Coke bottle chose me when it spun,  
which was my first kiss. I didn't ask questions.  
Or I fielded Ouija board guesses Yes/No/  
Good-bye. Or I walked into that closet,  
willingly let them lock it. O, my wasted  
adolescence! Assessing vertical stripes  
on swimsuits as a function of decreased  
belly fat, obsessed with how thighs pooled  
when I sat, how absent thigh gap leads to ruin.  
I dieted on Cheez Balls (one every 55  
minutes, dissolved on the tongue in a pool  
of melted butter). Or I teased my hair  
to make my face look slimmer. *Ruin*, from  
the Latin *ruere*, "to fall" as in fall  
headlong or with a crash. We were always  
falling laughing collapsing unable to stand  
our bodies pulsing with want.

<sup>1</sup>The book quoted is fictional, wished into existence, as is the quote.

## You Have the Right to Remain Silent

Athena Dixon

We start at the beginning—learning how to breathe, then speak, then shout. We learn how the pitch and volume of our voices are power and how tone makes the world move or grind to a halt. Yet, how we form this language is foreign. How we lose it is, too. We do not know our own tongues.

In linguistics, the mouth matters. The throat matters as much as the lips and the tongue. These things determine how the words are formed, tell the listener the intention behind them. Fricatives, the sounds forming vibrations against the vocal cords like trembling, move the air into what we hear. *Hard. Ahead. Save. Rise.* We find these words between the roofs of our mouths, between our teeth and lips, the lengths of our throats, and against, again, the tongue. We siphon in the air then let it back into the atmosphere, changed.

An officer's voice unfurls from his throat and echoes out between the rain and the engine of the car. He must know the power of language, how it barrels from his chest, pools itself between his lips before it breaks the world around it. There must be an understanding of how all this works because this is how it begins. It's like time slows down, and I can hear every single inhale and exhale as he shouts the words again. "Throw the keys out of the car! Put your hands on the dash! Do! Not! Move!"

I curl my fingers against the burgundy dashboard, but the sweat on my palms and the shaking of my arms makes it hard to keep still. I'm afraid. If my arms, vibrating like words still in throat, could talk, they would say, *I am not a threat.* They would rise until my fingertips skimmed the headliner, while behind us, halfway out of his car and shielded behind his cruiser door, the officer could see my hands were empty. I follow directions, not willing to shift my eyes to my best friend beside me. I am unwilling to speak. Perhaps I have forgotten how. We stare straight ahead into the rain. The drops plop and splash on the white paint, the cracked asphalt of the road ahead, and my forearm nearest to the open window. There is a breeze, cool and full of the rustle of leaves.

Fricatives are only air. They are only breath finding its way among the structure of our mouths once we know where to place all the parts. Imagine, at the beginning of language, how this was once simply breathing until someone pushed beyond. Breathing is instinct. Fight or flight is instinct. I forget how to breathe until my chest burns, until I'm choking back tears as three more sirens sound across the distance. One behind. Two beside. One ahead. *Four* is a fricative. It leaves me breathless.

Backup, which crests over the hill like the calvary, does not save us. They bring more guns and the same words, even after the keys have clattered onto the street. The officer appears, ruddy and dark haired, with a pistol in his hand. He is still standing in the power of his words, still shouting for us to remain unmoving. Another appears on the opposite side, palm splayed on his holster. I do not yet know his voice. This one opens the passenger side door and pulls me into the rain. Fricatives do not matter here. This is body language. This is the pressure of fingers against wrist bones, a hand on a spine, a tap of boots against shoes. He presses my palms flat on the hood, still warm, and spreads my legs wide. The wash of rain and hands knocks me silent. It takes the breath from my throat.

Plosives choke the words from our bodies. They block the flow of air, so we sacrifice breath for communication. *Witness. Exhaust. Stopped. Gone.* I am breathing now, as slow and steady as I can in the cold rain with two guns trained. The silent officer, a face no longer holding space in my brain, finishes his search and leaves me palms down, eyes down, with instructions not to move. Communication—words and sounds, and static—crackles out across radios. License plate numbers, dates of birth, names. There is no room beside me for another body; the spread of my arms is too wide, as are my legs. In the loud officer's car, there is still language. There is dryness and whiteness and whispers. My friend is delicate. Her bright

green eyes, her smattering of freckles, porcelain skin, and the waves of hair skimming her tiny body give her special consideration. *Queen* is a plosive.

Academia says language matters because each society agrees to a common grammar. Like *suspect*. Laurence Perrine tells us in *Sound and Sense* that sound does not exist for its own sake; rather, it acts as a support and a vehicle of meaning. Sometimes the sound doesn't matter. How we interpret it does. Like *bank, robber, and flee*. Language directs us how to act. It moves our limbs as much as our mouths. It fires our brains into action. It surrounds us as much as it shelters us. I know when to speak. I know when to forget. I forget now and let sound be rain and laughter and small talk. Silence lets me piece together the story.

To him, the voice from the beginning, we have been evasive. Defied his commands to pull onto the gravelly shoulder. I remember the truth. I remember the first sight of the light bar in the rearview mirror, the steady pace of my friend's foot on the gas pedal. We waited for him to pass. Then waited for the sirens and lights. He rolled closer. Close enough. We drifted from the road and beyond the white stripe to let him pass. Then lights, sirens, the beginnings of language leaving my body. She threw the keys out of the car and gripped the wheel until her fingers looked like ghosts.

Affricatives are a bridge. They stop the air and blend into words between the teeth, tongue, and lips. *Choose. Jet. Catch.* They can be voiced or voiceless. Voiced affricatives vibrate as the sound is produced, welling up and out of the body like a spring. *Agenda* is an example. A voiceless affricative needs only air. Like *gesture*. The beckoning of fingers tells me I can remove my palms and release the tension from my spine. It tells me to linger in the rain while pulled back to the beginnings of language, trying to move air into words. The voiceless *question*, too.

*Dispatch.* The voice between the crackles puts a description into his ear. Tells him of a robbery from which a car had fled. Had I a voice, had I less fear, I would question the validity of a duo of high school girls in a white Buick Century casually driving the speed limit down a country road matching the culprits. He does not tell us who he is looking for. We only know that he is looking.

The loud officer wants to catch me in a lie, so he starts by not speaking to me. He asks my friend instead.

The common grammar is at play here. Ascribing character to words to build a picture you want to see. It is an accepted foundation that says words do not only convey meaning, they are a way to reinforce meaning. Words have power, of manifestation and sway and accusation, of conviction and interrogation. *Four* is a fricative. It is also the number of ways in which you can determine what a word can mean.

Control the sound and meter to put emphasis on what's important. "Who is she? How do you know her? Are you okay?"

Control the speed of vowels and constants and the disposition of pauses. "You know...you can tell me if you don't feel safe. This is your...friend?"

He does not tell us who he is looking for. We only know that he is looking.

Choose sounds and group them so they are euphonious or cacophonous to the ear. The singsong way his questions perk up at the end like friendship. "All you have to do is tell me the truth, right?"

Choose words that suggest their meaning. Except I'm still trying to find my language when the two of us find ourselves back inside the car, seat belts buckled, with an escort to the edge of town. Maybe escort means something else. A caravan. A convoy. An usher away from where I don't belong.

Academia tells us what we need to know about language and how it impacts us all. Culture refers to the process by which some particular kinds of learning are spread from person to person and minds become coordinated into shared patterns. This is culture at the edge of a town, a small cadre of officers just across a line. A friendly warning about returning. Bank robbers still on the loose. The right to remain silent about it all. The right to breathe again when the vibrations and the breath return.

## we are only what the yellow street lines whisper to us on full moon nights

Grace Coughlan

Tank still hands me boxes of romaine lettuce hearts like I should feel honored to be carrying them in my arms getting on my knees to put them in their rightful place & I've been here for 6 hours & all I get is wet cardboard telling me about my luck & when I luck out & what might be taken from me if I brag about my luck to the rotten apples & I love the look I get from the tippy-top of glass frames & the moist concrete of baking trash in the front yard of a heating company where the whiskers that grow through the cracks seem like a sweet revolt & the man from the village sorts through the glass of bottles regardless of whether the glass scrapes skin or grinds teeth & I, too, sort through teeth & not the desires of late night after-thoughts & at the football game, the players pull jerseys and the crowd pushes anthems & I am the tether between the two sometimes & I drink like I can handle my liquor now & I'm saying that there's no way that all of the "yes" and "no" answers will take us home & inside the stadium a game of dominance has made me sad & the player that looks like any other player is flexing his arms bringing his fists together & I can see his teeth from my seat in the stands & when the intensity that we feel in our joints becomes so high I suppose that's when we all feel most alone & what I mean is that we are only what the yellow street lines whisper to us on full moon nights & I am from the kind of place where you are born into a town with a name & when you want to exchange it, the lines grind their teeth & the full moon tells you to join the club & I can't believe that I've been here for 6 hours, for 18 years & I don't think I've ever thrown hands with the players, the crowd, the faces behind the tether, clapping at the aggression of their boys & yelling the names that they've yet to cherish in the corners of their mind because they don't know what it means to not see a created persona in the everyday moment & the player is swaggering & brooding & kissing & I feel guilty when I start to hope that it rains on Friday just so I can remember that the word unrequited fits perfectly with the soft breath from a fireplace & I haven't smelt the heat since we all got so drunk on Thanksgiving back in '19 outside on the patio after polishing off another bottle of Pinot Grigio & Joe was asking about Texas music & we cried with the fire & I don't really understand how moments can be so distinct when they're so close in age & I feel too old for my dreams & I want only the sweetness of cheers most of the time & I'm saying I want the full moon and I to be friends after the game & I'm saying that I want to win the game that I don't attend.



### Ralston #7

Jack Livingston

Monoprint on paper • 30" x 22"

## Interview with Cyrus Simonoff

Gel Derossi

One of the main goals that our staff established early on was to promote voices that challenge oppressive social constructs. When we made a list of dream interviewees whose work accomplished this, Cyrus Simonoff's name appeared at the top.

Simonoff lives in Los Angeles, where he writes and reports on trans politics and grassroots anti-prison organizing. *A Year Without A Name* (2019, Little, Brown and Company) is Simonoff's debut memoir, in which he shares the realizations he discovered while exploring his name and identity. This exploration goes beyond the self and into a deep interrogation of the fabricated constructs of gender, desire, and sex, examining the messy truths of navigating a trans identity. A review in *The Atlantic* called *A Year Without A Name* "an anti-memoir" confronting the common belief that a person "must believe one consistent story about [their] life." Memoirist and poet Mary Karr described Simonoff's book as "passionate and clear-eyed and unputdownable." Simonoff has published writing in *The New Yorker*, *Granta*, and elsewhere.

In this interview, Simonoff discusses how terrifying yet rewarding it can be to put your story, coming from your own perspective, out in the world, and how names hold more power than many of us realize.

### How did you conceptualize *A Year Without A Name*?

I was just doing some writing about my life. My friend said this could be the start of a book. I hadn't considered that because I felt it was just my journal, you know? And it kind of freaks me out. It seems scary to write a book. That's a big commitment. How do you write a book if you don't know how to write a book? Then I sent the writing to a few friends and they gave me feedback. I thought: What if I wrote a book where I didn't know what I was writing and I wasn't writing about something that had already happened, but I was writing about something as the process unfolded? Or I was writing as a method for tracking the evolution of something rather than delivering a conclusive narrative?

So the book was born out of an idea of practice rather than a story. I want to use nonfiction as a method of observation, as a way of witnessing myself as I go through what I expect is going to be an intense period of my life. The book is less about any one thing and more about a process.

### Why did you write *A Year Without A Name* about the part of your life you were living at the time?

I wouldn't remember if I had written it after the fact. I wrote it during, and that means there's so much that was redundant and repetitive, but I feel like there's so much that would've been lost if I wrote it now, for example, because of the thickness and cloudiness of confusion, disorientation, doubt, questioning. It's hard to really capture how thick and heavy and pervasive the experience is from outside.

I don't like hierarchies really of any kind, so one viewpoint isn't better than the other, but they are different. I'm glad I wrote a book in this way, and I'd like to try again, but I can see why someone would want to write about something that they had more distance from.

### Why is this the book you decided to publish?

Publishing it was a very weird and scary thing to do. I wonder all the time why I made the decision to do that, but I just have to trust. If I'm gonna go through all the trouble of putting this book out in the world, then I might as well try my best to speak with honesty. What's the point of holding back, even if it's messy or awkward or makes me feel a lot of shame? Getting at the truth is like a practice. I can go deeper; there's always another underneath. That's a tricky thing about writing. You do your best to get at the most difficult parts, but then you read it later and you see everything you didn't say.

### Who did you imagine most as your audience?

There were different parts. On the one hand, someone like Gel, who would be like, Wow I connected and relate and it feels both good and maybe a little bad to feel like I can hold something in my hands that says things I connect with.

Part of me imagined people who don't identify as trans or even identify as queer but have curiosity.

At the same time, I really believe that the experience of being trans and navigating the world and pain and difficulty and oppression is really different from any other experience. I also think that so many people—in fact most people, if they let themselves go there—have a lot of pain around who they've been told they are supposed to be. Perhaps in how they fail to be the thing they're meant to be. That's a very trans experience. A lot of people are suffering quietly but don't have the community or support or resources, and also maybe can tolerate life as a cis person.

It's a huge gift to be like: I can't be cis and I'm not gonna do it. I hoped I would write something someone can pick up and start to think maybe they're not all cis. That doesn't mean they have to do anything about it, but this thing they thought was really separate from them maybe isn't as separate as they thought it was.

### What was the editing process like?

I wrote so much more than ended up in the book. The book is one-fifth or one-sixth of everything that I wrote. I was lucky to have an editor who I really trusted and who pushed me to go deeper. If I sent her something and she thought I wasn't being real enough, she would write me back and say, You can go deeper and harder. It felt like sanding away at something really hard. Like how a pearl gets made, you make a shape and you add and keep adding. I had the shape of the thing and that covered a span of time, but then went back in and located moments where I could've done more and allowed myself the space to really go deeper. Clearly there's stuff I'm afraid to say.

There were some moments I would avoid working on the book at any cost. Moments I said I couldn't do this. Sometimes I would go three weeks without writing, because it was too hard and too painful.

### What does a name mean to you?

Names always mean something new. The relationship to being named and having a name is changing. I've been using a new last name. It was the middle name of my birth name and I much preferred it to my last name. After you write a book, you're supposed to use that name; you're the writer who wrote that book and you have a career with that name. Names can feel like a box and a trap. Rather than trying to pretend I feel some continuity between my being and name, it's liberating to play with it. I can always publish under a different name and change my name every year. Why do I have to construct a coherent and consistent identity? Who's that for? Who is demanding that of us and who told us we need to do that in order to be legitimate?

I have some friends who, every time we're in a new Zoom meeting, they have a new name. It's almost like an outfit. I find that really inspiring. It really resists some of the ways that you're told you're meant to exist as a person. It resists the state mandate that demands you be one single consistent identity the same way jobs and resumes and doctors demand it, and we have to comply in order to get some of the basic services that we need.

I work as a legal advocate for people in the women's prison system in California. So many people, as soon as they get out, change their name. And when they're inside, they use lots of different names. I think it's so reasonable and legitimate and important to be able to change your name.

**What do you write for fun?**

It's interesting that you ask because I'm working on it. I'm trying to cultivate that. I associate writing with going deep into painful emotions, and I'm trying to have a looser grip. I'm trying to let things be lighter. In this moment in my life, I need to find ways to make writing more about joy.

I also kind of think that all writing is indulgent and no writing is indulgent. I feel like it's something we do for ourselves at its core. It's a framework for making sense of the world and for being present. I always wrote as a kid. I loved writing poems and plays and little stories and it was how I made sense of things.

Writing is really important to me in a way that I feel joy and also feel tormented by it. I wish I could just not write, but then when I'm not writing I feel bad and when I write I feel so much better. I have a very codependent but sometimes cranky relationship with it.

**How has life been since the release of your memoir?**

A feeling of emptiness when I was done, and at the same time I was very relieved. Having a project like that gave my life a sense of purpose. The book became this means through which I could protect time for myself and my creative work. When I finished the book and I didn't have this overarching thing I was working toward, it was harder to create that protective space for myself. As much as I love writing, I still have to make money, deal with my friends' drama, depression, cook, clean, all of this stuff that makes it so hard to really commit to your creative practice.

**Do you have another passion you're working on?**

I want to write another book and I have ideas. I've done a lot of writing and have a lot of fragments that I would like to synthesize into something larger. I'm interested in this question: Why do we want the things we want? Particularly as desire and want pertain to our bodies? The way we want our bodies to be. The way we might want our bodies to be different from how they are, and how consuming that desire can be. How many of us live with a desire to be, in some ways, something that we will never be able to be?

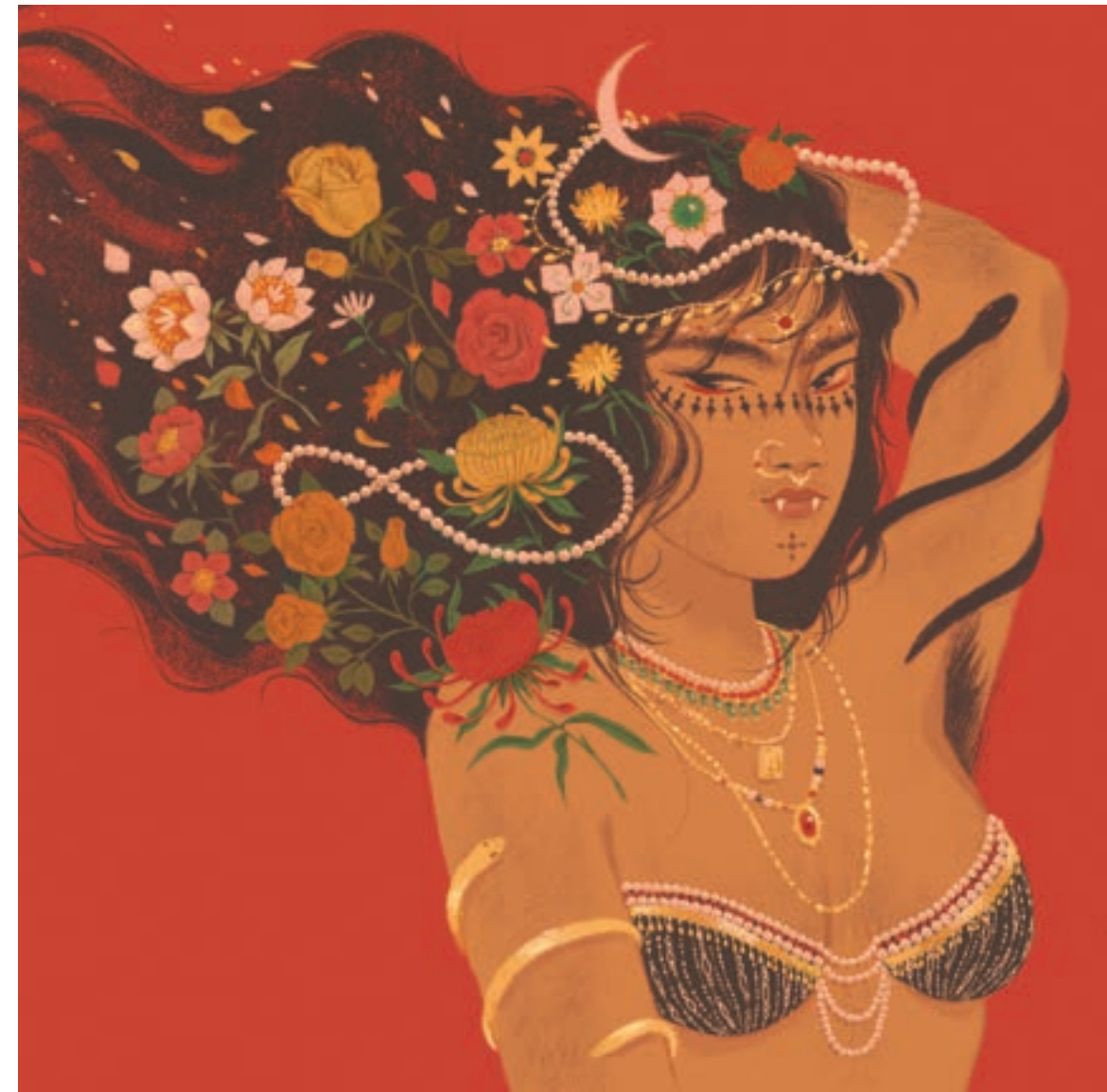
I'm interested in writing through and about that desire and looking at the ways it's connected to larger histories, particularly with transness. How histories of medical procedures for trans people and medically facilitated sex transition created narratives around how people are supposed to be. How we exist inside our bodies in ways we can't always control and manage.

**What is among your favorite things about working on *A Year Without A Name*?**

My favorite thing about the book? [*He takes a while to think of it.*] I do feel it was honest, and I feel really proud of that. I think that I didn't reduce the complexity of my own emotions and questions to make them more digestible, even if, for some people, that meant it was disorienting or they were confused by transness. I'm glad I wrote something that was true to how contradictory emotions can be. And I'm also really proud of some of the ways I wrote about the world, like about nature and plants and things around me.

I think writing the book was helpful in terms of being more present and more mindful of my surroundings and my body. A huge part of being trans is being so wrapped up in dysphoria and not wanting to be in your body. But it was about a wish to try to be present. In naming that I'm trans, I'm going to try to be here more fully. And writing feels similar to me. Writing is a hope of being in the world in a fuller, more present way.

The people in my life were how I was able to understand myself as trans. They gave me permission or the space to see myself as something different. And I also feel like so much of gender is just how we exist in relation to other people. To people, to communities, to institutions. Gender and expectations are a co-created and co-constructed set of norms that animate every part of our life. And I've never been able to understand myself as separate or outside of that. At the same time, of course, I always had a deep sense or feeling that what I was told I was didn't necessarily contain or hold me. I was also so shaped by the ways I wanted to be accepted or loved. When you enter spaces where you realize you could be loved for something different than what you were supposed to be—that's pretty profound.

**Asura Queen**

Ayirani Balachanthiran

Digital Painting • 2500 x 2500 px

## The 2021 Grub Street Writing Award for High School Students

### Judge's Statement

All of this year's finalists were so incredible—vivid and evocative, at turns funny and devastating, bursting with color and political demands.

Ultimately, I decided to select "Oil Lamps." I was struck by the extremely unusual way in which the author used language, bringing a poetic scrambling of syntax into the frame of prose. The piece was full of truly original phrasing that offered picture-perfect, iconoclastic imagery. This piece was a portal into the strange alienation of everyday life, particularly for a subject navigating trans-national dislocation, family, and the lethargy of existential malaise. Throughout it all, I felt a subtle but bristling critique of money, wealth, and capitalism, particularly how these forces shape the city, collective values, and personal meaning. I was also particularly interested in the nuanced and unusual way that the author played with object and agency, writing about inanimate things and places as if they had and have a will of their own, and writing about their own self with the remove of an object. "These days," Duwan writes, "I am so rarely the thing that acts rather than the thing that is acted upon." This contributes to an eerie slippage between author, object, and environment, pushing this piece of prose beyond the genre convention of first-person autobiographical writing, into new and uncharted depths.

Again, every single finalist wrote with such precision, heart, and vulnerability. Thank you all for your contributions, and thanks to Sasha Duwan for this sharp, funny, and unnerving epistolary experiment.

-Cyrus Simonoff

## Oil Lamps

Sasha Duwan

### Subject: IB PEN PAL

Angela Altschuler <duwansasha@gmail.com> Apr 6, 2020, 12:41 PM (6 days ago)  
To AltshumakerB,

Mrs. Altshumaker,

I'm the very tacit Sasha Duwan, who failed to speak during our phone conversation a few weeks ago. I was feeling sullen. I'm writing to inquire whether you would connect me with another student enrolled in the IB programme at Annapolis High School, which my parents discussed with you during our call.

To answer your question: I don't have clear plans for my future. Listlessness, a symptom of the comfortable.

I don't want the responsibility of control. I think if I desired control, my life would be a lot better, but I don't. There's nothing much I can do about that.

It sickens me to say so, but I'm probably best suited to remain in academia after university. I know what I'm good for: life in a community where borrowed knowledge and eccentricity are valued, not striving for anything, really—and I get to look pretentious while doing it!

Or, I'd like to be a secret agent! I probably wouldn't pass any of the tests, unfortunately. I'm simultaneously sneaky, unreliable, and mediocre. For more insight into my character, the literary figure I most identify with is Fyodor Karamazov, the drunken father. The one who dies. The one whose own progeny, Ivan, kills him. The mystery for most of the book though, is: *who committed the patricide, because nobody liked him.*

And secretly...really, very secretly, I want to be an artist. I have a real creative passion sometimes. I mean, it isn't very good—but it's mine at least. When it comes to art, I'm completely earnest—a trait lacking in my life.

I feel dejected. And oily. I just arrived in DC from Singapore. It's hard to realize really how tired one can get of the city, but I know now. People have the impression that I'm mostly stupid there, which isn't nice. I don't like it.

Singapore was strange. It was night in the city when I realised this. There was a giant concrete lotus. I thought, even the artist must know it's a distortion. Twisting lifeless and imposing out of living and delicate is...incorrect. I can't put it more cogently than that.

Things sparkled so brightly that I forgot everything I wanted to say. My only thought was, "opulence," and then, "decadence," but really the place was steeped in glamour. Glamour comes from Scottish "gramarye," meaning magic or enchantment. This "spell of opulence" fits the contemporary definition of glamour, which is associated with wealth more than magic. It was the illusory nature of the place that made me feel like I'd entered a dream. It was surreal. Bubbles floated in the night air. Some drifted past, but a few hit me and bounced off again. That made me feel like an echo in a dream.

I began to wonder if this glamour concealed decadence (decay) or nothing at all. I couldn't decide which was more disconcerting. I felt hollowness pervade the city. I wondered if anybody really lives in all those great big golden towers.

There weren't any shadows there at night. Every space was filled with light. Like, anywhere there might've been a shadow, someone put a light there instead. It was like living in a big diamond with light coming in from all sides. Disconcerting. Versace had its own island. It was a pretty, gold, shiny island.

The otherworldly presence there invokes the divine air that is often assumed by the upper class to befuddle. It's this great big, incomprehensible thing.

Things of supreme beauty, things that are *really* divine are terrifying, right to the bone. Singapore's financial district was more opulent than beautiful, invoking illusory divinity, but it had the same effect.

Most places have forgotten corners that you can tuck yourself into, but Singapore was a dream and there was nowhere to hide.

After my family's unexpected transition to the states a few weeks ago, I've had a lot of time on my hands. It's been hot, the past few days I mean. I'm not quite sure what I've been doing with all this time, but I get the general sense it was fulfilling. At least a little. I think it mostly consisted of sitting in the dusty grass and staring at a decrepit beige wall. No windows. Lots of odd little defunct pipes though, circling the building. And then the sky, which has been blue, blue, and cloudless except for the malaise of smog typical of weather in the city. I sketched a wiry metal crane, too.

After a week in the capital, we're driving to Kentucky. We might live there for a while since we're vagrants at the moment.

My parents and I are (unfortunately) joined at the hip for the foreseeable future. In other words, I go where they go, no questions asked. Even if that's the lonely back-roads of the Midwest, sitting thickly in ectoplasm as they were yesterday, the little scratches of trees, indistinct.

On our way to Kentucky, we drove past the Ashland factory, my favorite part of the journey. The night bristled, like steel wool, with static electricity. Ashland is tucked in a discrete fold of Appalachia. Ceaselessly, it pumps billows of bluish smoke. The factory is at once beautiful and terrible.

Rain was falling so fine and soundlessly that in the dark you couldn't see or hear it. When I rolled down the window I knew it was raining because of the smell.

We're staying in my great grandfather's abandoned house. There are some ghosts, but we're colonizing the house room by room. Every niche is occupied by trinkets, dust, or mold. It's fun to sneak down the carpet steps to the basement, which has no working lights, and explore. I found a '20s cash register and fifty porcelain dolls. They were especially eerie in the dark. Having a veneer of dust, their big, baby-blue eyes looked as vacant and defunct as the moon left hanging in a morning sky. So I left that room.

There are also three generations of books in the garage. Most of them aren't promising—just check-out-counter horror and romance from my grandmother, iterations of the Bible, racially-charged-turn-of-the-century-adventure, diet and frugality tips, and an entire wall dedicated to the history of America which paid special attention to the Civil War. Also, inexplicably, a stack of French plays—comedies, tragedies, you name it!

After toilet paper, agency has been in short supply. These days I am so rarely the thing that acts rather than the thing that is acted upon.

My great grandparents were first class packrats, but one stash that piqued my interest were the oil lamps. There are at least 450 (I counted) of them stacked in boxes, cluttering every night table, and scattered across the living room floor. They looked like trapped souls.

The memory of their motivation to amass this collection has faded with Gumpy and Nanny. I don't know whether or not you've seen an oil lamp, but they're ornate things, with delicate, translucent glass shrouds (like deep sea antarctic jellyfish). My great grandparents had many in miniature. I just thought, quite clearly, *Someone's been trapping souls in there.*

The irony of defunct oil lamps is also too perfect. Their flame has been doused; they're obsolete. Even if I did have the materials with which to set them alight, I would not know how. Nosy Arnold, who lives across the street, would not know how. Crazy Brad, who lives next door, would not know how. I don't think there's a man or woman on this block who could light one of these 450 oil lamps for me. They've been almost forgotten by the living world. And yet they sit here, gathering dust by the hour, taking up space in a world that has left them behind. The only reason they occupy any of *my* brain is because I'm not a very interesting person and am endlessly confronted by them: on the dining room table, every cabinet, in the cupboards, under the stairs. There are at least five on my bedroom floor! It's an unfortunate feeling, living alone with irony and the forgotten. Then, the dualism between memory and forgetfulness. Make no mistake: that tension is a fight.

The struggle between memory and forgetfulness have become my experience, as I understand it now. I have no choice but to consider generational remembrance: what it means to have lived and been forgotten. People don't have to die to fade out like that. I want to capture that feeling like miniature oil lamps capture souls. The souls caught in oil lamps are lost souls.

In a more tangible sense, I was inspired by the colors, shapes, and sizes of them. They look like jewels; they're beautiful (if dusty). I can only imagine what they'd look like alight—more translucent I imagine. Another thing: translucency is the king of colour. The most perfect, the most pure. It is so saturated with light that it's only half visible. And what but light is the fundamental of all colour? And by virtue of colour, all art? Think about it: pink ears backlit by sunshine, translucent spring leaves like green grapes, the full moon in a pale morning sky, the baby blue colour of baby doll eyes.

There are many things here to fill my time.

We have a big backyard and a chicken. I built a pirate ship where I practice witchcraft with my sister. These two things are not averse. The roguish, maritime atmosphere adds piquancy to witchery.

I was feeling stuck though, like dead leaves in an eddy; something was messing up the flow.

Yesterday, a blue maelstrom hit and I sat outside with a towel on my head. I went out when dark, dark clouds were devouring the last bits of sky. Above the storm, in a corner of blue, I saw a cloud hit so directly, battered by the sunlight in such a way that it was almost translucent in its pure brightness.

The rain washed me out. It flooded the basement, too. That is why I'm able to write to you now. Before now—I hope you understand—it was impossible. For me, it's important to do things at that time when they feel that they should be accomplished.

I hope this update didn't tire you. I have no one to talk to and I figure sometimes other people, even strangers, like to read this kind of thing.

This is all superfluous, except to ask if you would put me in contact with another IB student at Annapolis High School. Please don't attach the above message—I want to make a good impression. I understand if connecting me is not an option. In that case, I will wait until school begins in the fall to make friends and ask questions.

Thanks,  
Sasha

**Altshumaker, Madrina**  
(1 hour ago)  
To me  
Sure, AnneR@SLHS.org.



## Badges

Austin Morris

Finalist for Grub Street Writing Award for High School Students

### Animal Science

Jack steps out from the long shade of the wood, grinning. Sweat stains hide where beige fabric meets pale skin. Autumn pulls the sun deeper into the hill, and the shadow of the curb marches the parking lot.

The object of his joy—hide stretched across two bones, a hoof—hangs loose in a pimpled hand. “Check it out.” Two awkward sickle-swings.

On the third, it snaps at the knee joint. The hoof catches Andrew—a younger boy—in the chest. He winces and turns away.

“Oh, Jesus.”

Jack snorts. Someone else hefts the other bone, and they duel in the handicapped space. I walk to the evening’s casualty.

“You good?”

A tear is dammed. He turns to me, lifting his chin to look me in the eye. In it is the hiss of fresh iron being doused, strong and brittle.

“I’m fine,” he spits.

### Camping

I am sitting alone, three feet from a raised palette and an olive tent: two-man barracks. July and Andrew’s tears together soak the air. Smothered by canvas.

This is the third night he will sleep without his parents. There will be another, and despite protest, another. He has tried so hard, he says, to be okay. To be strong. But the only thing he wants to be is home. They have cars, don’t they? They love him?

I bite my tongue, keep my eyes straight. Like I didn’t cry into my father’s arm when he left that afternoon.

Matt pretends to amble closer, like he hasn’t heard yet. Head bowed and beard hugging his chin, he is tall as God from where I sit. He motions with his chin over my shoulder. “He alright?”

I pinch my mouth in a *what can you do?*

“It happens to everybody,” he says and sighs.

### Indian Native American Lore

Spring makes the warmth of fire and close bodies unwelcome. A dozen huddle the cracking logs, their backs to the forest in a clearing of wet dirt. And before them stand three. Jack is dressed the wildest of all. His headdress of faux feathers throws shadows against the bark of the looming pines that bound and cackle and roll like coyotes. He has painted stripes under his eyes in cheap red acrylic, and his smile makes them crack.

Matt is milder. Not in dress, no. There’s a ritual to this. They love tradition, even stolen ones. But he is stoic, draping white-and-red sashes over new initiates with a rhythm rested in the valley between duty and reverence. The poor boy takes this seriously.

And there is little Andrew, wedged between. The breeze garlands him with a halo of smoke, and his eyes water. The leather shirt they gave him hangs loose. In the space his body leaves—the space he will grow into, given time—there lies an afterimage. It takes the shape of a man who doubts he is one.

I hope he leaves. I hope he is not given time.

## For What I Am

Chinyere Onyekwere

Finalist for Grub Street Writing Award for High School Students

The memory of my mother’s village is faint.  
Dirt path roads and bags of water swaddled in the depths of my mind, so golden and sacred, greeted by a gust of nostalgia. It is so sweet when the dots connect all of a sudden, and I am reminded of the heart that beats beneath my flesh. I am reminded of the sweat soaked clothes bathed by the sun, and the pang in my feet from running in the sand. This is all too familiar when they ask me, “Where are you from?”

Street music came as a collective longing for affection, the music and words expressing our truth. Kids scraped their knees against Nigeria’s toughened calluses, like they had a difficult life and worked twice as hard for everything they possessed. But the boys and girls of my fourth grade class monopolized my stories, asking me how our big brown “huts” looked. I laughed. I gnawed on the same lips that slipped on my native language, words tumbling, wrapped in a heavy breath.

Coming from my young cousins, *dogonyaro*<sup>1</sup> seemed to echo from the roofs of their mouths. When they spoke, the words were so clear. In Nigeria, I don’t have an accent. In the hills, the way I talk is common. It marks me as an outsider, as alien. Clean clothes, my scalp a dancefloor for my braids to prance about. I look simply like they do—the same dark eyes, honeyed skin.

The transient invocation ends with passing strangers in full conversation, landing me back in present day. My shoes are dull, and I no longer lust over pretty gowns. These memories and I, we are kindled in red rings.

<sup>1</sup> Dogonyaro translation: *Tree of Life*

I had hoped to see my mother's village again.  
I was only ten years old when I chased the chickens  
that lined the coop. Only ten years  
when I spent the next five begging my parents  
to take me there. But the trip is not cheap.  
And so, the memories fade, pieces slowly chipping  
like the paint on my fingernails.

On these fingers lie what I thought to be  
secret adages, but now they are just lines.

Trapped in my city's hold, I spend countless  
nights praying that they don't ask me all  
about my trip seven years ago. Instead, I wish  
I could blanket my skin in the blood oranges  
that my sister and I plucked from the trees.

We sank our teeth into its bittersweet insides.  
I imagined the cloudy syrup would run down my face,  
dip in my collar bones, swirling around the void,  
slipping past the hairs on my arms.  
Cover me.  
But it won't. I am bare to the naked eye, nothing  
to convey my heritage, no fruit strong enough to shield me.

## Cream and Sugar

Esther Rose

I was eighteen the first time I ever let a man old  
enough to be my father touch me. I remember the  
drive, the way my knuckles gripped the steering  
wheel until they were white, the way my throat  
closed if I thought about it too long. I played the  
same song on repeat during the ninety-four-minute  
drive, as if somehow that could save me. I tried  
to lose myself in the lyrics, pretend I could be on  
the receiving end of those words, or perhaps even  
be the words themselves, strung up in the webs of  
lungs, spilling out of lips, comforting nauseous girls  
as they drove miles and miles away from home  
to Harper's Ferry to meet a man three times their  
age. Maybe then I could be helpful. Or at least I  
could try.

I never thought I'd feel raw, unrelenting fear in  
a small-town coffee shop, and never thought for  
a moment I'd ever go into a coffee shop without  
buying myself a coffee. What a waste it would  
have been, I thought, to buy a coffee only to  
vomit it up moments later. I decided against it.  
He'd be coming any moment, and even if I were  
to buy myself a coffee, I'd have to have my back  
facing the glass door as I, defenseless, spoke to  
the cashier, and today I didn't plan on having my  
back facing anyone. Instead, I took a seat facing  
the entrance of the shop, shaking my foot back and  
forth, recalling my fake name, fake address, fake  
birthday. Feeling for the knife hidden deep in my  
purse. Reciting. Shaking.

A little bell rang atop the front door, and I  
glanced up at eyes that immediately found mine,  
took them in, and widened.

—  
In India, it is still legal to hang people by their  
necks. Reserved for what their Supreme Court  
calls "the rarest of rare" cases, the punishment is  
charted specifically for those who have committed  
particularly horrible crimes. India is one of the  
fifty-six countries that still utilizes this death  
penalty, despite its debated rate of effectiveness,  
but the message behind it remains clear.

Hanging, in most cases, is targeted at those who  
have committed heinous crimes toward women.  
Since 1949, India has eliminated 724 people  
using this method. Each criminal had walked up to  
a support structure, had a noose placed around  
their neck, and had that same support structure  
kicked away from underneath them. They were left  
hanging and strangled until pronounced dead. And  
each one walked themselves directly to it.

—  
He walked toward me slowly, and I sank back in  
my chair. Immediately, I seemed to lose myself,  
staring dumbly at the man seated in front of me,  
drinking me in, taking greedy, long-winded gulps.  
He thanked me for being willing to drive so far.  
He slid me the \$200 extra that was promised if  
I did so. He gave them to me in crisp, one-hun-  
dred-dollar bills. I had only ever held the one-hun-  
dred-dollar bills from my dad's wallet once or  
twice, out of sheer, childish curiosity. I marveled at  
their worth, at the idea of ever being able to whip  
out a sum of money that large as if it were nothing.  
At the time, it had seemed like so much. Like I could  
buy the entire world with one piece of paper. Now,  
holding these two bills in hands that could not seem  
to stop trembling, I felt as if they had just cost me  
the entire world.

He told me I looked nice. No, I think he told me I looked sexy. I thought I saw the barista glance over at us a little too long, and I think he saw it too. “Amber,” he said. A fake name. “Why don’t I show you my car?”

When someone is hanged, the noose squeezes their carotid arteries, leaving the brain to fend for itself. The carotid arteries move blood to the brain and press down on the trachea, which is what brings oxygen to the lungs. In its absence, the supply of blood will drop, and the brain will begin to swell so much that eventually, it presses on the top of the spinal column and pinches on the vagus nerve, stopping the heart. You’d hope that while this is occurring, the victim would already be unconscious. And they usually are. It takes them about twenty seconds to pass out from oxygen loss.

But then you remember who the victim is, what they’ve done, and suddenly, the punishment never seems long enough.

I was not being paid a thousand dollars to sit with a man in a coffee shop and watch him stare at me. That much I had known. I nodded, and almost as an afterthought he offered to buy me a coffee. He was already beginning to stand. A thought immediately went through my head: that if I said yes, and then I developed coffee breath while his tongue was down my throat, he would pay me less. In any other place, with any other company, I would have laughed. Instead, I stood up, shook my head no, gestured to the door, and watched as his eyes bulged, probably struck with the same sudden remembrance of what would occur when we left. We reacted differently, however. He practically danced out the door and into the parking lot, and I stayed a few steps behind, making sure I could still feel the cold, smooth metal of my knife and the violent buzzing of my phone, pleading with me to come home.

My father used to sing “Jesus Loves Me” to me every night before I went to bed after the divorce. He’d tuck me under the covers, and I would gaze at him starry-eyed, feeling as if every night I was attending a concert of my very own. He did this to make up for the mom who couldn’t be there to tuck me in. Each night, he encouraged my sister and I to join in the singing. When I noticed her hesitation, I was inspired to begin. This little routine of ours went on for years. I would hear him down the hall, singing softly to my sister, and then I’d hear his footsteps approaching my room. I began tucking myself into my own covers so that we could sing the moment he stepped into the room. I began to realize that I was his favorite.

I’ve become less infatuated with singing as the years have gone on, and even less infatuated with Jesus and all of his love for me. And I will never know then, why I could not stop thinking of the song as the man guided me and then himself into the backseat of his car and locked the doors behind us.

Samuel Houghton, a nineteenth-century Irish scientist, once referred to the “short-drop” method of hanging as “too savage.” “It seems to me,” he said, “unworthy of the present state of science to continue a mode of execution which, as at present used, is extremely clumsy and also painful to the criminal.” As an alternative, the “long-drop” was proposed, generously offering both a tighter noose and a longer drop to achieve a drop energy of approximately 1,708 joules. This way, the length at which a criminal would die would be greatly shortened. India uses this method today, and it takes only twenty minutes for the victim to die.

He came in under a minute. I couldn’t bear to look at him as I reached for the wet cloths he had laid out in the front seat, desperately wiping my hands. My mouth was full of saliva that was not my own. I think I had begun to bleed through my tampon.

My brain was not functioning and hadn’t been functioning from the moment I felt his tongue glide over my lips. It felt rough and wrong and my thoughts decided to leave me all at once. He took pictures and showed them to me on his phone, showed me the private files he used so that no one could find them, password protected. I was beginning to gather that he had done this before, and that maybe this line of work was for some, but not for me. My skirt felt too loose, sweater too hot, and later when I would reflect on this, what had happened, what decisions had led me to the backseat of a stranger’s Jeep, I would find that there was not much to be recovered.

In traumatizing situations, people can sometimes turn off their brains. Psychologists refer to this as “calming trauma.” When a person experiences something traumatic, adrenalin and other neurochemicals rush to the brain, creating a freeze-frame of the situation. This frame then loops in the emotional side of the brain and abruptly disconnects from the prefrontal cortex. At that moment, the stimuli become too unreasonable to process through cognitive functions.

There was a brief moment during my time in the backseat that I regained clarity. My eyes found his hands fondling my bare breasts. I pretended to quicken my breathing, fighting the overwhelming instinct to gather my things. In between kisses I can’t remember, he whispered something softly, “Amber, what are you thinking about?”

“Nothing at all,” I answered too honestly, before I could remember what I was doing this for, and in an instant my brain switched back to off.

I wonder if those hanged by the long-drop were able to turn off their brains before the noose beat them to it. I wonder if they even deserved to forget.

Soon, he was cleaning himself up and I was sliding back into my clothes, watching him count the bills in front of me slowly. “\$850, as promised,” he said, handing them to me with a sleepy smile. I took them wordlessly, already beginning to exit the car.

“Wait!” he said, grabbing my arm. I remember suddenly thinking that this was the moment I would be kidnapped—that after it all, I had still become victim to the one thing I feared most when agreeing to this just one night prior. I turned to look at him, my fist still clutching the handle of the car door. My body was beginning to feel too confined, as if my bones and muscles were begging to bust through my skin.

“I want to do this again,” he said, and I forced myself to smile.

“Maybe.”

“You should know that I’m married. I have kids around your age.”

“That’s fine,” I lied. He smiled again.

“Okay. I’ll see you soon then. Drive safely.”

In one swift motion, I gathered my things and calmly exited the car, relieved when I found that the doors hadn’t remained locked. I walked through the parking lot, clutching my bag, the knife had ended up going hungry. My steps quickened, and before I knew it, I was running to my car when I turned the corner of the coffee shop, fumbling for my keys before locking the doors behind me.

I expected to be more distraught. I sat with my forehead against the steering wheel, waiting for the tears to come. They never did, and they never have. Quietly, I plugged my address back into my GPS, accompanied only by two thoughts:

The first was that my friend had lied to me. Only weeks ago, he had told me about an app he was suddenly enamored with. He said how empowered it made his friends feel knowing what lengths a grown man would go to just to get a tongue in their mouths. “Even virgins, like you!” At the time, I laughed, and we sat together for an hour creating my online profile, giggling at the absurdity of it all. “If you actually do land any sugar daddies,” he said, “you have to split the earnings with me 60/40 at least.”

The second was that I wasn’t sure if I’d ever be able to hug my dad again. To ever be touched again by an older man, even one who sang to me about love before I fell asleep. In this, I was proven correct. My dad still asks me today why I don’t like to hug him anymore. “I’m getting older.” I tell him. “It’s cringey to hug your dad.” I try to ignore the hurt in his eyes when he extends his arms out to me and is met with a grimace. I try to forget. I’m still trying.

When I had arrived back home, no one was there except for the dogs. They walked up to me and sniffed my legs, my thighs, *Stranger? Stranger?* I headed straight for the bathroom and stripped off my clothes and boiled my body underneath the showerhead. I scrubbed my skin until it felt like it would peel, trying to ignore the blood trickling down my leg. I tried to remember how many years it took for skin cells to replace themselves so I'd never have to touch this body again.

Amidst the steam, I told myself I hadn't committed a crime. I scrubbed stranger away as I reminded myself that I was eighteen and we didn't even have sex and at least I didn't leave empty-handed and at least I had been able to leave. I was a woman asserting my femininity. I was a woman being admired. I had made more money in under an hour than my friends were making in days. Later that week, I would take my sister shopping for new clothes and expensive sushi, offering to pay for it all.

But no one had told me that when I would get out of the shower, my dogs would still sniff me tentatively. No one had told me that on the long drive back, I wouldn't have been able to resist glancing into my rearview mirror every other second, haunted by an image of the man's car close behind and following me home. And a couple weeks later when my dad would call me a prostitute after having heard what he thought I had done, I'd realize that by walking into that coffee shop, I had walked myself up to my noose.

As far as he knew, it was only coffee with an older man.



### Pomegranate

Sarah Jane Stoll

Oil on canvas • 40" x 30"

## Self-Portrait Standing in a Field of Text Messages, All Sent and All Blooming Unanswered

Jacqui Germain

The body lingers,  
teeters on its heels.  
The body is unsure  
if its arm is indeed  
an arm and not a long

apology. The body kneels  
as if in prayer but instead  
fingers the dirt, unsettles  
a small patch and leaves  
the undersoil exposed.

The body mimics the excavation.  
The body reaches for the flesh  
of her own arm and unscrews  
the elbow, twisting the wrinkled  
dark-brown dome

until it unhinges.  
The body lets out a sigh  
through the corner opening,  
clinches its nails just inside  
the sheet of skin to pull

the forearm clean as a skinned lamb.  
The body watches the heat  
rise red and blurry,  
shocking the white bone  
cold. The body is pleased

and hungry. The body cleaves  
the elbow again, this time  
freeing the bicep, shoulder,  
pulling the skin slowly  
across the chest—*undt-undt*

goes her heart, suddenly  
echo-chamber-less, the sound  
of the body being not  
dead zipping out into the world.  
The body has a new dilemma:

how to reach the back,  
that un-lotioned island  
marking her solitude—  
which she didn't recognize  
until she wasn't alone

and then was again.  
The body waits; the body thinks.  
The body pulls the face free,  
distorting the stretched cheeks  
into a swollen, childish pucker

before skinning down  
the neck, unsheathing another  
shoulder, and then!—with both  
top buckles undone, the back flaps  
free, steaming vigorously—*undt-undt*,

the body glistens—*undt-undt*.  
hisses thickly, the way lungs  
do, you know,

unfeather-ed and  
wet.

## Portfolio of Works

Brianna Doyle

My latest series—*Jesus Is the Son, and the Sun Is a Circle*—was born in my studio during a graduate committee meeting early last spring. I was asked what my artwork was about and I provided a brief explanation of my upbringing. I told them my mother was a stripper and biker bartender, my father a substance abuser and sometimes dealer who was friendly with multiple prostitutes. However, my maternal grandmother was a rural Pentecostal Christian who played a large role in my life. My committee responded with something along the line of “everything makes so much more sense.” I then realized that through honesty and vulnerability I was able to provide clarity and make deeper connections with others.

The pandemic struck shortly after that meeting. The isolation that came with it ended up being imperative to my body of work. Not only did I crave that close connection I had just freshly tapped into more than ever, but I was also forced to face myself and years of memories that I had buried away. Isolation was never my enemy, just an old friend I never made time for until I was forced to.

The content of my work was difficult at first, but I felt so safe making it in my bedroom. I started piecing together collages that mapped out some of my most convoluted, difficult, and downright embarrassing moments. I then shared them with classmates, faculty, and other artists. By opening myself up with my work, others felt safe sharing their experiences with me. Even through quarantine, I had never felt less alone.



### God Is in Control

Brianna Doyle

Mixed media collage • 47.47" x 35.5"



**It's Fine as Long as You Ask for Forgiveness Later**  
 Brianna Doyle  
 Mixed media collage • 36" x 27"



**Saint Sheep, Eater of Dreams**  
 Brianna Doyle  
 Mixed media collage • 36" x 26"



**Shannon**

**Brianna Doyle**

Mixed media collage • 34" x 23.75"

## Interims, excerpted from *Nightshift: A (Re)collection*

Natalie Jones

The counselor apologizes to the corner wall of the bathroom. Our understanding crystallizes in the fogged mirror. He tells me I have five minutes and stretches his arm out toward me from behind his back. The tap water runs down the drain and the single-blade razor explains that I can't be alone in here.

A massive concrete beam divides the main room, creating a circular walking track around the common area. The floor is smeared with jagged lines, dirty outlines where we have tread before. Round mirrors hang in the room's high corners.

—

### THE FIRST DAY I'M HERE

I watch only the reflections as everyone does their indoor laps. Studio audience laughter rustles from the TV speakers like the startled sound of wings flapping.

Have you always felt this way. Where are you from. Why did you call. Where will you go next.

He's still in there. Should we wait until the afternoon or should we try going in? How long has it been? It says here since 5 last night. Jesus. So let's try later tonight. Okay, yeah. Because Adam tried even just knocking after dinner last night and it sounds like it didn't go well. Oh so that explains the dent.

—

### NIGHTSHIFT NOTES

*Last meal was at approx. 5:00 pm, one (1) piece of cornbread. Says he's very full, keeps asking for his shoelaces back to make a belt. See description on back for Box #21 contents. Please keep track of inventory and storage locations of Personal Boxes this week.*

Sherrri pushes over a plate of mashed potatoes to the empty table space where Rob should be.

I can feel him in his room, sitting down, getting up, sitting down, several layers beneath my skin a dull itch

If I hold still, I can make his thoughts melt into the sound of our plates steaming.

The counselor states all his questions to open headspace.

One to ten. Do you believe you should be here. On the pain scale. That's good, that's all you can do. Okay, we'll see. You can have Personal Choice tomorrow.



I'm good at basketball again. The only bodily movement that seems natural right now is to catch the ball in my hands, aim, let go. Rob keeps tossing the ball to me. He seems like he's in his mid-twenties but in a few days we'll all sit outside his locked door and sing Happy Birthday and wait for him to stop us when we count to seventeen. The knob turning will seem like he might finally open the door, but then we hear how much a mattress weighs as it's thrown against the metal.

Every time I make a shot, I hear him say *Congratulations* in a tone so sincere it sounds sarcastic. I am desperate to hear all the noises my chest can make. Sounds arrive by way of a heart, a hand. The heart is not fundamentally red without the surrounding blood. But I've known the dull humming that can come with a door opening, with a hand on my hair, with seeing familiar strangers, with being alone. A swing self-consciously chirps and I'm dropped back into the marsh of this moment. *Thank you.*

Time passes into rhythm—what leaves my hand goes back into his hand back into mine

Daytime passes in crosshatches of rain. Dreaming carries along the body until a certain distance. The days are burning from both ends and I miss everything. There was relief in watching closely without being closely watched.

—

#### CHOICE CANNOT EXIST IMPERSONALLY

There is too much pull and severity in thought  
intensity and sensations weightless  
blurred edges of the body's want  
Will you remember

All our false starts and halted accelerations

Everything melts in your mouth spit strings out with the taste of metal

We sit around the origami table,  
voices careful like chrysalises  
open orange orchids and paper petals in a plastic vase  
every folded swan a talking stick

She gets to speak first—

Sherry will die if she can't have a drink soon. She looks uncannily like Meg Ryan and she hums with a manic energy that demands and distances. When she smiles for the first time since being in here, it's obvious that she was a dental hygienist in her former life. She's getting out tomorrow to be there for her daughter's birthday.

As she speaks I can focus only on her hands. I see my own hands in hers, holding and being held as we all do our indoor laps. Holding as we walk through the city, wandering through a crowd, grasping each other. Being held as our fingers fold and press the paper wings. As a kid I'd often seen these grown hands in my own. Crow's feet are commonly known as creases around the eyes, but really they are the bones embedded within hands, the strings connecting wrists to knuckles. Please don't deny that we have claws in there. As she gestures, her fingers flex, the thin bones bending beyond her fingertips, holding open a book, pulling a shirt over her daughter's head, twisting open the medicine bottle, making a *Come here this instant* inching finger motion.

She's been up and down and in and out of these interims with each new diagnosis. She doesn't want to be here. *We could all leave if we wanted to.* She laughs with all her teeth showing when I start calling her *Meg*. She calls me *kiddo* like she has always known that I am just a little girl wearing a hat so big it keeps falling over my eyes. *We chose and we were chosen.* She unfolds these phrases like secrets, her eyes hurting the whole room and asking me to be careful when they land on me.

A shift and all the world-words meld together, all blurry around the open flame

My earthcoated red  
rusted brown crust, layered thick  
varnish peeled from pointer fingers

The delicacy of petals can deceive the eye  
their orange radiance is contained and contains  
only the light-energy of the dead

Knuckles begin to shed a bit from digging deeper into this wilderness

Siren sounds, images torturous, words without incidents or signifiers. Flashes faster and whiter than light, condensing sound into red and blue, a concave echo reverberating the only thought, the fear. The nurse says *You can watch a movie while you wait* and your head feels like it does weigh between ten to eleven pounds as you nod. Out of brainmelt the thought arises: *Wait for what*

A thought swallowed  
a breath of wind  
The hollow gust of blood beneath your fingertips  
your deserted mouth a reminder to inhale  
and to will yourself to remember

## Bullets and Books: “The Gun Is the Motive”

Michael James Rizza

### I

On the train ride back to New Jersey, my wife Robin sits beside the window, looking at her phone and searching for information. Even though it is past midnight, she is stirred up not only by Don DeLillo’s appearance that night at the annual New Yorker Festival, but also because she is trying to make sense of the mass shooting that occurred the day before at a community college in Oregon. The news and social media are buzzing with horror. It is all available on her phone, completely familiar and well-nigh routine by now—just another shooting—yet still unfathomable.

Robin and I are on our way back from a theater on West 57th Street in New York City, where DeLillo gave a reading and answered questions from Deborah Treisman, fiction editor of *The New Yorker*, and from the audience. DeLillo is a writer who imagined the assassin Lee Harvey Oswald in *Libra* and created a serial killer, the Texas Highway Killer, in *Underworld*. In short, he has written convincingly about desperate men who seek self-definition through violence. Thus, he was asked an obvious question: How do we make sense of Oregon?

As I try to sleep on the train, I’m grateful that no one too obnoxious is aboard. A group of people is returning from seeing a show, perhaps an opera. With arcane knowledge and appreciation, they talk about the voices, sounds, and music. They make comparisons to other performances, prior productions of the same show that they had seen in different cities. They are not a family, but a group of fans. They share an interest that is alien to me, and it is likely that none of them care about the old man who brought Robin and me to the city. They are not loud or drunk, which is good. Robin and I are also quiet. We are not drunk, only feeling the mild, lazy hush that comes with fatigue and a few after-dinner drinks.

A recorded, metallic voice announces: “Next stop: Cranford.”

I look at Robin. She is a beautiful woman with dark hair and eyes. Taking little for granted, she questions the daily workings of society, the general hustle and flow, the accepted practices, and she asks herself, *Is this responsible, is this healthy, is this good?* It is little wonder that she is a DeLillo fan. She pays attention to reports of gun violence in the news.

She asks, “What are you thinking about?” “Nothing.”

“I feel tired. Don’t look at me.”

I turn in my seat. I settle into a cozy idea about how loving someone and looking at that person can be joined in a single gesture and how that gesture connects two people—it molds them into ways of living and being. I’m thinking about DeLillo’s answer to the Oregon shooting: “The gun is the motive,” he says, and I’m thinking about love, not in a dreamy way, but more particularly, how it operates in the formation of the self. Our identities take shape within the gaze of someone else’s eyes.

I wonder about the audience for the desperate, lone gunman giving shape to himself through violence.

It’s always a man.

“I hope someone posts a transcript of DeLillo’s talk. Or a video,” Robin says. “I keep thinking about what he said: ‘The gun is the motive.’”

“Me too. It’s suggestive,” I say. “I’m not certain what he means.”

### II

Not until several years before his death did I ever see my father cry. He would get weepy over trivial things, such as a memory of some family vacation, a compliment a colleague paid him decades earlier, a birthday card from a grandchild. One of his pills—or maybe the full cocktail of medications for his cancer, diabetes, cholesterol, and whatever else—caused him to become overly sentimental at times. Ordinarily, he was tough and reserved. He was born during the Depression and raised in rural Appalachia. He found his way out of poverty by joining the army and going to Korea.

My father’s hunting shotgun was a Remington 1100. It seemed more special than the other guns in the house. The stock was decorated with fine engravings. The rubber buffer that absorbed the recoil looked painfully thin, which to me intimated the strength of his generation of men. My older brothers used his spare Mossberg pump-action shotguns that had an inch of rubber to protect your shoulder.

When I was very young, he sat on the couch while my brothers and I watched television. He opened an old, brown tin case that contained cotton pads, lubricant, and other items for caring for his gun. He said it was a very delicate procedure because the oils on your fingers could damage the metal. After a section was swabbed, it couldn’t be touched until the next time the gun was taken out. Whenever he rubbed the cotton along the barrel, it would come away greasy, blackened, and redolent with an odor that was uniquely its own.

Behind our suburban home, my brothers set up a makeshift shooting range for our shared BB gun, an air-pump Daisy. From a picnic table on our back patio, we took aim at empty soda cans lined up along the redwood fence that bordered our garden. My father would coach, ensuring our constant attention to safety. He trained us to be watchful, careful, and smart in the presence of guns.

Yet safety is a euphemism: there is a singular object out there at the tiny tip of your sights, and everything else around it, not just you, teems with life.

Death is concentrated in the letter C on the Coke can atop the redwood fence.

### III

Kids would take to the street, running at large from the close of the school day to nightfall. Moms would lean through doorways and ring bells to call their children home. Each bell produced a different sound. Our bell had a handle like a hammer’s, and you swung it up and down like a hammer. The clapper was a metal ball attached by a wire. Ten houses away, I could recognize the heavy sound of that ringing.

Nine years separated me from my eldest brother. I existed on the margins of understanding. I was silent and naïve as high-school boys sat on the hoods of cars or clustered on back porches. They seemed loud and jagged around the edges, their ballistic energy barely contained, ready to erupt into shoves, insults, crudeness, or biting humor. I was rarely the target of any of it, just a small observer. I didn’t know how to process my perceptions, and even now, over thirty years removed, I wonder if these boys’ attitudes were endemic to my little plot of suburbia or to the whole culture. They came into manhood during a formless moment, not long after Vietnam and just prior to Reagan. They seemed disrespectful toward authority, but not in the easy, loving, flowing manner of a hippy. These boys were disaffected. They were gritty and untamed, flicking cigarette butts to the curb, telling stories of sexual exploits. They would drink beer all afternoon and then jointly piss in a neighbor’s pool. They would wait until the middle of the night, pile into a car, and cut donuts in somebody’s yard. They would wreck mailboxes on a regular basis. All boyish fun, perhaps, tinged with violence and hopelessness.

Strangely, there are some things I miss about it: the Led Zeppelin erupting from the speakers of a parked car, the pocket-tees and denim, the fat handles of combs sticking out of back pockets. I had a sense that their grittiness intimated a reality from which I was detached. Moreover, I knew the high-school boys were not even the real thing. They were merely a suggestion of a broader, grittier reality, perhaps its threshold, because they seemed innocent compared to the images of the city I had seen on TV. Or, if not innocent, then contrived. An awkwardly conspicuous manhood.

The first time I heard of vigilantism, my dad was discussing it at the kitchen table with my aunt. Once I discovered what a vigilante was, I saw him all over the place, in the news, in movies, and on television. Looking back now, I can see that he had a tight, decade-long hold on the public's attention, beginning with the films *Dirty Harry* and *Death Wish* and culminating with the real life of Bernhard Goetz. Some breakdown or flaw in society made the vigilante necessary. He was a response to the lawlessness in the streets, and without a frame of reference, I took him as normal. A complicated figure, the vigilante was a questionable hero, one that could haunt and trouble a young child's imagination.

**They seemed disrespectful toward authority, but not in the easy, loving, flowing manner of a hippy. These boys were disaffected. They were gritty and untamed, flicking cigarette butts to the curb, telling stories of sexual exploits.**

One time my brother and I rode in my uncle's mud-yellow van to either Elizabeth, or Newark, or Jersey City, someplace to pick up a part that my uncle needed for a job he was working on. It might have been my first time in a city. The street wasn't safely packaged like on a television screen, but framed in a van's window: the smudged, tattered people slumped in doorways, the odor of heat and car exhaust, the tipped-over garbage cans, the graffiti scrawled across every wall and street sign, the barbed wire corkscrewing atop a chain-link fence. An air conditioner unit, propped up by bricks, leaned out of a window and dripped onto the sidewalk. A parked car with a rusty hole bore into its door, displayed in its back window an array of decals of the Virgin Mother, medieval images with gold plated halos. Another car sat with broad strips of its vinyl roof hanging over its sides. My uncle rolled down his window and yelled out into the street. Someone wanted to spit on his windshield and clean it with a wad of newspaper. Here was our original condition, the brute reality that threatened to rend the image of my home.

From a broader, cultural view, I suspect that the 1970s have become a touchstone by which we judge the successive decade as fake - the decade of façades. The clean, sanitized images of Reagan's "Morning in America." The homogenization of consumer desire. The gentrification. Flags and sunshine.

But why is one world more real than the other? It takes a little effort, but I have to remind myself that to be wholesome, to desire security, to sit on the carpet with your back against the couch, eating popcorn, and watching *The Carol Burnett Show* with your family is no less authentic than to live with angst, desperation, or hunger.

A group of boys gathered around my brother's Dodge Dart. On the fender, a little plastic logo read SWINGER in cursive script. There was a joke somewhere in this, but also something serious, an intimation of masculinity. Someone told a story about a girl being fucked on the diving board of a pool. She was the girlfriend of somebody named Willy, and she had fucked somebody else. Willy was a great guy, a good-looking guy. The audacity of the bitch. How dare she do that to Willy? The group of boys speculated that she was heading off to college or coming back from college, as if on furlough. She was just getting in some random fucks before she went away. Who could blame her? It was nothing personal against Willy, but still, she shouldn't have embarrassed him like that. She was acting like a guy, someone said.

They were drinking beer. A lanky boy handed my brother a piece of plastic that read "Swinger." The boy had pried it off another car in a movie theater parking lot, and he was now presenting it as a gift, a mindless repetition of the logo already on the fender.

"I got this for you," the boy told my brother.

Everyone laughed, as if the gesture of pointing at something was funny in itself.

How old was I at the time, eight years old, maybe nine, when I tried to shoot one of these boys?

## IV

Treisman precedes DeLillo onto the stage or, at least, I see her first, remember her first. When he sits down in the chair, he unscrews the cap of a bottle of water. He leaves the bottle on the little table yet keeps his hold on it. His dress is casual. His eyes alert. He faces the audience, his knees pointing straight at me.

Treisman sits facing DeLillo. She is almost reclined in the chair.

She settles into her questioning.

DeLillo relates that he writes with a typewriter, devoting one paragraph per page and working at the level of the sentence and the word. While fascinating, this account of his writing practice is familiar lore. DeLillo pauses sometimes and seems to search his memory, as if he forgets the name of Murray Jay Siskind, the guru of postmodernism in *White Noise*, yet in the next instant, all the particulars are there, so nobody believes he was actually searching. He skirts a couple of questions, such as one about his disowned novel *Amazons*, co-authored under a pseudonym. He is at times elliptical. He is at turns serious and funny. He dismisses *White Noise* as an accidental novel, something that just popped up one day, unremarkable and unworthy of attention. Nobody believes this, either.

Treisman asks a follow-up question about his devotion to the sentence.

After all, his novels conform to larger patterns: *White Noise's* triadic structure; *Libra's* spiraling inward of time and place, determinism and chance; *Underworld's* intricate, tapestry-like weaving of connections. The overall designs are mesmerizing. Yet, DeLillo dismisses the formal complexities, as if the larger patterns emerge spontaneously through his attention to the details.

Then someone in the audience asks about the shooting at a community college in Oregon.

## V

We take little peeks around the edges, cautious doses of horror, because some details have filtered into the cultural imagination: the unanswered cell phones, ringing and ringing, somewhere in the folds of the crumpled bodies.

## VI

My son is almost five, my daughter almost one. They attend the same preschool, but this day they arrive late because my daughter had a doctor's appointment. When Robin turns her Jeep into the entrance, she hears the alarm. The children are filing out of the building. Some of them come out the main door, which is always locked; you need to ring a bell for admittance, but it is mostly just a formality. You ring the bell, anyone rings the bell, and promptly enough, you hear a click as the latch slides clean. Children are filing out a side door, heading down a long wheelchair ramp toward the parking lot. Many of them are holding their ears. Teachers marshal them in groups to a safe location, to the picnic tables at the far side of the blacktop. Robin watches through her windshield. Her initial fear has abated; it is merely a routine fire drill. Even so, the manner of the children is different. Their normal buoyancy—the possibility that any moment might erupt into exuberance, wonder, or laughter—seems subdued. They are not on the brink of play; they are following directions, looking around for guidance, and holding their ears. The infants are rolled across the parking lot in cribs. Some of the toddlers are crying. It is just an ordinary evacuation.

"It was heartbreaking to watch," Robin later tells me.

Neither of us says, "What if it wasn't just a drill?"

Nor, "What if it wasn't a fire, a thing without volition, but a monster with twisted intentions, walking down the hall?"

It has happened before. It could happen again. What is there to protect us?

## VII

When my father's family butchered a pig, they turned its blood into blood pudding, its fat into lard, and its severed head—boiled in a pot, the jowl meat and all the noisome, gelatinous gunk—into head cheese, a poor man's deli meat. And a gun was there, a .22 short, to stun and knock down the animal, if not actually kill it. There was also the knife to bleed it out. There were ropes to string it up and pots of boiling water and metal bells to shave it.

There was an outhouse in the yard. My grandmother used a pot that my father was in charge of emptying. No matter the time of day, no matter the weather, the young boy had to walk across the yard, sometimes carrying his mother's pot. And the gun was there, too. Rats infested the outhouse, so the natural thing for a young boy was to kill them for sport in the daylight, but with a flashlight and a .22 at night, crouching beside a rickety wall.

## VIII

In the summer, the neighborhood boys ran loose. They often played stickball in the street in front of our house. The game ended, and people seemed hesitant to get another one going. With several other boys, my two eldest brothers stood by home plate, an X chalked on the center of the road. Their gestures seemed emphatic, as if they were players in a comic skit that needed to be kept running at all times. Anyone and their mother could be sacrificed for the joke, but whoever cracked, expressing either anger or offense, might as well have confessed that he was sensitive, which was perceived as weakness. Every boy pretended to be born full-blown, without parents, clapped down upon the earth, continually offering up his manhood to be tested and testing everyone else in turn.

The stickball bat was a wooden closet rod.

The batting lineup for the winning team still sat on the curb. A senior named Burke rested his forearms on his knees and slowly twirled a red BIC lighter between his fingers. A boy to his right watched Burke's hands.

The tall, lanky boy, the one who had given my brother the "Swinger" logo, stood in the road with hunched shoulders, shuffling slightly.

"You're a fat pussy," Burke said to him, not looking up.

Burke had a stocky, compact body like a wrestler's and a hard, round, blunt head like something best used for knocking holes into walls. Except for another of my brother's friends who had been kicked out of the army, Burke was the only one with cropped hair. His jaw was thick with muscle. When he talked, ligaments moved visibly beneath his skin.

"Fuck you," the lanky boy said. His dark hair hung along the sides of his face like two curtain panels.

"A fat, rank pussy." Burke rolled the lighter between his fingers. From the breast pocket of his gray t-shirt he retrieved a second lighter, which was metal and square. He flicked the top with his thumb, and a blue flame hissed out. Burke added the word "goeey." The boy seated beside him began to laugh.

"You're a fat, rank, goeey pussy," Burke said, but he didn't seem to be making a joke.

He held the BIC lighter in the slender, blue flame, as if he were trying to melt it, catch it on fire, or make it explode, but nothing happened.

"See? I'm holding it between my bare fingers." He leaned his face in closer. "You think I'd risk my eyes like this?" He turned a dial with his thumb. The blue flame rose higher, wrapping around the BIC lighter. He peered into the bright spectacle.

I wasn't certain if he'd risk his eyes. After all, he was one of the boys who had once thrown darts at each other in my basement. He had stood willingly in front of the dartboard with his hands over his face. Afterwards, as if nothing had happened, he sat on the pool table and drank beer, little circular patches of blood blossoming on the front of his tee-shirt: three dart wounds, one on his shoulder and two on his left breast. For sport, the boys had been aiming for each others' hearts.

He glanced up and saw me watching.

"Do you like science, Mike? It's not magic. It's industrial plastic." He turned the BIC lighter, as if to burn all sides evenly, but nothing happened. "It's space-age plastic. It doesn't get hot; it doesn't melt." He looked at the lanky boy. The lanky boy chortled once, a solitary, guttural noise.

"I can hold this little red lighter all day long," Burke said, "but this big, dumb galoot won't even sit next to me." He took a cigarette from behind his ear and put it in his mouth.

"I told you to fuck off," the boy said.

"Come here, Mike," Burke said.

I stepped closer, and he told me to sit down next to him and marvel at modern science.

The blue flame hissed and rolled around the lighter.

"It's not hot. NASA invents shit for outer space, like Teflon, and we reap the rewards," Burke said, pinching the red body of the lighter between his fingers. "It won't get hot." He spoke with the unlit cigarette in his mouth.

"Let me see your arm," Burke said. He snapped the metal lighter shut and slipped it back into his breast pocket.

A couple of boys standing by first base came over to watch.

I held my arm across his knee with my palm up.

The tall boy repeated the guttural noise, which seemed to be emitted as much from his nose as from his mouth.

"See?" Burke said, taking hold of my wrist.

I watched, not realizing in the moment that Burke never touched the tiny metal wheel at the top of the BIC lighter, nor the metal plug at its base.

"I've always liked magic more than science," he said.

He squeezed my wrist and planted the bottom of the lighter on my forearm, the metal plug singeing into my skin.

I don't remember screaming, but everyone promptly disbanded, walking singly or in groups in both directions of the street. The stickball game was over. Nobody investigated why I was screaming. They simply left. I was alone on the curb, cradling my arm as if holding a small, wounded animal.

Two of my brothers stopped me at the base of our driveway. They didn't want me to go into the house and disturb my mother with my whimpering. They looked at my arm and assured me that I would be fine, deciding immediately, perhaps even beforehand, that I would be fine.

They were right. Rather than show my parents my arm, I hid the wound and tended to it alone. The burn gradually faded. For a couple of decades it looked like a birthmark, though slightly indented and shaped like a tiny triangle. Now it is barely noticeable, like nothing at all.

## IX

DeLillo stands behind a podium and reads a section from his novel *Underworld*. He explains that he has been re-reading the novel in order to publish an annotated edition. He selects a quiet passage about one of the side characters.

One summer in the 1950s, the main character, Nick, shoots a lonely man, George the waiter, in the head with a sawed-off shotgun.

The trajectory of the massive novel takes us back forty years to this moment.

We experience it backward. We feel its reverberations long before the event is even suggested. We discern the traces of its aftershock, the concatenations that ripple throughout a life. Nick has grown up into a "demon husband," noncommunicative, unfaithful, and cruel. The shotgun blast is a point of origin or initiation, more formative than any primal scene.

**People die. Guns don't die. They accumulate and get passed down. And manufacturers keep making more.**

We want to know why Nick shot George the waiter, but all along DeLillo, or perhaps Nick, has been telling us that even if we witness the bloody act, even if it is surrounded by rich details, fleshed out, and displayed in slow motion, we will not know why.

In the end, Nick cannot explain his motives.

## X

Not quite a cautious dose of horror, but a suggestive detail: a wounded woman survived by playing dead; she's in stable condition. Various news outlets repeat the information, perhaps feed it back and forth to each other. Yet they provide no images of the scene; their language is matter-of-fact and bland. Perhaps the bullet passed through the side of her neck, allowing her to be camouflaged in her blood as it pooled around her head. She stared with open eyes at the dusty fins of the baseboard radiator, afraid that she might blink, afraid that she might breathe. Nothing was still, and nothing was quiet, but she isolated a sound somewhere above her: the rustling, fumbling of a man gathering his things, and his footfalls, the rubber heels of his boots on the linoleum floor, taking him to the next room.

## XI

As we drive to my son's soccer game, he sings the national anthem in the backseat. The soccer game is more play than sport; the song is more play than patriotism. He is trying out sounds, experimenting with voices, changing his tone. When he starts substituting words, delighting in the silliness of his own ingenuity, I tell him to treat the song more respectfully. He is not quite five, so I have to explain what I mean. Even though he listens and understands, I regret correcting him. After all, he was reveling in wordplay, finding possibilities in his voice. Such exploration would sharpen his mind and expand his creativity more than rote patriotism.

I find myself saying, "You don't want to sound like you're mocking that song." Then I have to explain mockery.

Robin explains the idea of loving your country even though it, like all others, has flaws.

I mention a flaw: the US's drug epidemic.

Robin mentions another flaw: gun violence.

She tries out a Republican idea, with modifications. Republicans want to focus on the troubled individual, not the gun. Some argue for the involuntary committal of people into wards. *It's the humane thing, they say. Potential shooters would be locked away.*

"I don't know about any of that," Robin says. "I'm thinking more of a safety net for troubled kids, probably at schools. More proactive and more vigilant."

Our son is not paying attention anymore, and we have started ignoring him. His sister sleeps in the car seat beside him.

"It would be impossible to rid the US of all guns, even if we wanted to," I say. "People die. Guns don't die. They accumulate and get passed down. And manufacturers keep making more. There needs to be limits. A person shouldn't be able to own an arsenal, just as a person shouldn't be able to own a grenade launcher."

"A kid finds a gun on their parents' bedside table," Robin says. "Shooters use legal, family guns."

"More gun control," I say, quietly remembering the boy I tried to shoot.

"More regulation," Robin says. "'Control' has a bad connotation. You need an all-of-the-above approach, focusing on the gun, the individual, and also language."

"'Control' is bad PR," I say.

I gesture to the sticker on our windshield and try out a Democrat idea: "You have to take your car in every year or two to get registered, and you take a test to get a driver's license. To own a gun, people could take a class, take a test, get a license, and periodically check back in."

Robin tries out another idea. Then I try one.

Our son feels left out, so he makes noise, some sort of loud plea, begging us to stop talking. He has something urgent to tell us. He demands our attention, even as he is searching for whatever it is he needs to say. He finds what he's looking for: our daughter's hat has slipped to the floorboard of the car.

## XII

When I was working on my doctorate in American literature at the University of South Carolina, I returned to New Jersey because my mother was having her heart valve replaced by a metal flap. When she had been a young girl in Italy, she needed a simple dose of penicillin. Yet, either because her family was poor, or because they lived in the country, or because she was a girl, she was denied medicine. A treatable ailment went untreated, scarring her heart.

I stayed in my old bedroom. My father and I drove to the hospital, waited, and ate every meal together. One afternoon, we talked about his time in the military. He never saw combat, but he would regularly fire massive artillery that, for several days afterwards, left him unable to hear and muffled his brain.

The military had its own garbage dump: children scavenged upon the heaps.

When the war ended, my father was shipped to the center of US, to a flat, barren territory where the state tree, my father said, was the telephone pole. I doubt he invented the joke himself, but he'd repeated it enough times in his life that it became his.

He told me a story about himself that I'd never heard before: he worked as a prison guard. He carried a rifle as men labored in the heat, doing what, exactly, my father didn't say. In my imagination, they were on a long road bordered by open fields.

One of the men told my father, "I don't think you'd shoot me."

"Think what you want," my father said.

"If I ran into that field, you wouldn't shoot me in the back."

The prisoner was edging backward as if he intended to leave.

"I could probably walk-off," the man said. "I don't even need to run."

"You want to try me?"

"You wouldn't shoot me."

"You don't know that," my father said, "but I know what I'd do."

The two men watched and measured one another. My father made no dramatic gestures: no hard click of the safety being turned off, no sound of the bolt action sliding a bullet into the chamber.

"I don't think you'd shoot me," the man repeated.

"You can try if you want and see what happens."

"I can probably walk off."

"But I'd shoot you," my father said. "I would shoot you in the back."

The two men were strangers, measuring one another, placed in a situation that produced artificial relations between them. Left on their own, there would have been no gun between them, no specter of bravado, violence, or death.

My father didn't shoot the man.

Occasionally on the weekend or after work, my father would go to a local bar. He was stationed in a desolate area, waiting for his period of service to end. He had little else to do but plan his next move, figure out how to get a job, and turn it into a career.

One evening, the prisoner happened to be sitting at the bar.

"Holy shit," my father said. "What the hell are you doing here?"

They were thrilled to see one another, as if they were long lost brothers reunited at last.

"They let me out," the man said. "I don't know. They just let me out."

It was fantastic.

To celebrate, my father bought him a beer. They took turns buying rounds. They stayed until closing time, telling stories about the war, their home life prior to the war, and what they intended to do now that the war was over.

"He was a good guy," my father told me. "A real good guy."

## XIII

This is what I remember:

My father and I were standing in front of the television cabinet, as big as a chest of drawers, as heavy as the boiler in our basement. He had built the bulky thing himself; it was fine and delicate on the inside. He had uncoiled metal wire from a spool and touched the stiff strand to the black tip of his soldering gun. The melted metal formed tiny beads on the circuit board. I took for granted that fathers built their own TVs.

My mother and brothers were on the couch behind us, but we were standing.

A man, perhaps some low-level state official, had called a news conference. Dressed in a tie-less brown suit, he was tight about the face, fidgeting. A table was centered on the screen, but the man was slightly off-center. We were watching this man. This was live television. He was saying something that put him off-center, made him bristle.

It was a confession, an explanation, a public resignation.

People on the wings of the screen moved, just torsos and arms. They understood something that I didn't understand.

The man haltingly rose up and then sat back down, going partially off-screen.

We were watching this live, my father and me standing, my brothers and mother seated behind us.

Somebody on the television, off camera, said, "Ohhh" or maybe "Nooo."

I didn't see what happened, the jostling of the camera, the dead screen.

The man in the suit had called a press conference in order to shoot himself in the head on live television.

But there was no sound of the gunshot, no image, just a jostled camera and a scared voice and then a dead screen.

My father was ushering me out of the room. I was a child, and he didn't want me to see the horror unfolding.

Only now do I wonder if it was a recorded video being replayed during primetime news. How else can I explain my father pulling me away from a sudden, unexpected act of violence? He was moving me away before anyone on the screen realized what had happened. Either it was a replayed event he knew about beforehand, or it was a live suicide. And if it were live, then he saw and intuited before anyone else, before the cameraman and the people off in the wings. But intuition is shorthand—just as instinct may be shorthand—to explain away a lifetime of experience: the boy who shot rats in the dark, the farmer, the hunter, the prison guard, the war veteran. Some imperceptible connection between a lifetime of accumulated impressions and the face of a fidgeting man prompted my father to pull me out of the room. But I glanced back, freezing the scene in my memory.

Yet, it is a memory that requires an addendum. I have since discovered that on January 22, 1987, Budd Dwyer, the treasurer of Pennsylvania, shot himself in the head on live television. This event occurred ten years too late to cohere with my childhood memory. Somehow, Dwyer's suicide has not only become mixed up with but also effectively replaced some earlier image that held me captive. The first memory is lost, and the false one feels true.

## XIV

The two main explanatory models for rampage shootings correspond to a spatial notion of motive.

The expressive model invokes interiority and depth, such as Pearl Jam's 1991 song "Jeremy," modeled after the real-life death of Jeremy Wade Delle. The boy shoots himself in the head in front of his classmates. The song's chilling refrain is that "Jeremy spoke in class today." What allows for the metonymic slippage between shooting and speaking is that both gestures express something sad and mangled inside the boy.

The simulacral model invokes image and surface. The simplest version is the copycat.

In *White Noise*, when Jack observes how his stepdaughter Denise "came in and sprawled across the foot of the bed, her head resting on her folded arms, facing away from me," he wonders, "How many codes, counter codes, social histories were contained in this simple posture?" One implication is that her gesture is not natural to her body. Some part of it, if not all of it, has been acquired from a cultural repertoire of sprawling on beds, most likely gleaned from images on screens and colorful pages, as if there is a particular way of sprawling indicative of a suburban, middle-class, white girl in the early 1980s.

Jack's son plays chess with a prisoner convicted of a mass shooting. Jack asks his son a series of generic questions that rely on a ready-made profile, such as, "Did he care for his weapons obsessively?" "Did he have an arsenal stashed in his shabby little room?" "Did he walk into a bar, a washette, his former place of employment and start shooting indiscriminately?" "Did he write in his diary?" "Did he make tapes of his voice?" "Had he been hearing voices?"

For Jack, if not DeLillo, simulacra seem to garner their own agency, to circulate, to invest themselves in the simplest movement of the body and the deepest currents of the mind, so that a young girl does not simply sprawl on a bed; rather, she performs the act of sprawling, and a man who fires at strangers from a rooftop adheres to the conventions of the genre of mass murderers, sending tapes "to the people he loved, asking for forgiveness."

## XV

The interior of our house was laid out in a loop. From the front foyer, up three steps, into the living room, turn left into the kitchen, past the table and the center aisle, down three steps, into a short hallway, then the family room, past the television and couch, back into the foyer and up three steps again. I discovered intimacy in the loop that made up the interior of my family's house; there was connection between all the rooms. In an instant, any one of my brothers or my parents could be found. We acquiesced, without even knowing that we acquiesced, to forego privacy in the name of family.

One evening when I was eight years old, maybe nine, my parents booked a hotel room in Atlantic City so they could spend the weekend dabbling in a casino and seeing a show.

I'd ordinarily run the gamut of the loop, ready to pounce or play. Yet now, people came in from the back patio and clustered in the hallway. Pressed against the handrail, I slipped on the steps. More people stood in front of the open door of the refrigerator, as if their conversation, loud and freewheeling, made them forget what food or drink they'd been looking for.

A girl sat on the counter with a beer between her knees. She didn't so much exhale cigarette smoke as let it seep out of her mouth while she spoke. She tapped ashes into the sink. Two boys flanked her, standing between the center isle and the counter, too enwrapped to notice me. I had to back out and find another route through the bodies. People sat around the kitchen table, cluttered with beer cans and bags of chips.

The living room was empty. Stereo speakers sat perched on the second-floor landing. I had earlier watched my brother take them out of his bedroom and stretch the speaker wires along the hallway floor. The record was set to repeat. The front panel of one of the speakers had tumbled halfway down the stairs, snagged by a bracket of the handrail. The woofer throbbed to the sound of "Comfortably Numb" by Pink Floyd. I'd heard the album enough times to know it was the last track. The needle would slide across dead space before bouncing up, with a crackle, to restart the album side.

My brother came up from the basement and talked to someone in the doorway between the foyer and the family room.

Even though it was winter, the interior of the house was hot, loud, and choked with cigarette smoke.

The door to the basement was propped open with a red jug of laundry detergent. Most of the party seemed to be happening beneath the house, but I didn't want to go down there. Maybe they were throwing darts at each other again.

As I descended into the foyer, I could hear my brother laughing, but he stopped all at once when I walked past him into the family room.

"Why don't you go upstairs, Mike, to your bedroom?" he asked.

"Okay," I responded automatically.

The only other person in the room was the tall, lanky boy. He sat in the center of the couch, with the darkened window behind him and his knees resting against the coffee table.

"Richie, are you coming downstairs?" my brother asked. "Come on."

"I'll be right there." His voice sounded deep-bellied and gruff, as if something inside him were constricted.

When he started to lean forward over the coffee table, my brother checked him.

"Hey," my brother said. "Not in front of Mike."

"Oh," Richie said and looked over at me. He sat back and crossed his arms behind his head.

"Mike," my brother said, "go play in your room. Come on, Richie."

"Alright," the boy said, but he continued to sit, his knees splayed and his shins pushing against the edge of the coffee table.

In the kitchen, the girl had turned our sink into an ashtray, dropping not only ashes but spent butts. She was standing now with her hip against the counter. The two boys appeared to be boxing her in, the three of them huddled together, taking turns leaning forward as they spoke, cocking their heads to listen.

The music stopped. The needle slid across the dead space, seeming to throw the entire clutter of voices into relief, like the lights coming on at the end of a school dance. Yet everyone went on talking and laughing.

I had once seen a nature program of several hyenas burrowing their snouts into a carcass. They didn't know they were being filmed. In shades of green and black, the animals looked almost secretive, making soft, wet noises in the dark. The person behind the night-vision camera, crouching quietly in the brush, somehow seemed complicit in the carnage, as if an ancient blood rite were being enacted or some unholy prayer. Yet the spell was broken when one of the hyenas raised its head, stared at the camera with glazed black eyes, and, finding nothing, lowered its glistening mouth back into the carcass. Maybe this is what happened when the music stopped: not the end of a dance, but glinting eyes momentarily suspended and alert.

Then the Steve Miller Band's *Greatest Hits* came on. It was one of the albums my brother liked so much that its slipcase remained atop the plastic lid of his turntable for months.

A gap enters my memory, roughly twelve minutes, in which my first round through the party melds into my second. I see the red jug of laundry detergent and the front panel of the speaker snagged on the railing. Two people, both long-haired and in jeans, go into the hallway bathroom together. Years later, I would sit on the edge of my bed and realize that "Serenade" is the fifth track on Steve Miller's album, and I would use the playlist to measure time: the twelve lost minutes between hearing the paused music in the kitchen and reentering the family room, where Richie still sat on the couch. Four other songs played in a blur. The glass lid of my mother's cake dish sat on the dining room table, detached from its base. I felt an urgency to reassemble the parts. Some girl rubbed the top of my head, and two people went into the bathroom together, and Miller was singing his serenade, saying "Wake up, wake up" and "We're lost in space," the words vibrating and rolling into one another. And then Richie bends over the coffee table, touching his nose to the wooden top. Maybe he is the hyena of my memory, lifting up his head and captured for an instant, the glinting dead eyes peering but vacant, the glistening mouth, all framed by the darkened window.

"Fuck," he said, tossing back his hair.

I was screaming at him. Hot and frenzied, I repeated, "Don't do that here. Don't do that here. My brother told you. Not in our house."

"Fuck." He rubbed his palms up and down his thighs. He seemed bland and detached, uncertain if my fury was directed at him.

I continued screaming, released from myself. Something white, crystalline, and hot bloomed inside my skull, blossoming shards.

"Get out," I screamed, but he seemed unmoved as if I were acting out some strange pantomime.

I lowered my voice a little so that he could hear me. "My dad has guns," I said. "Get out now, or I'll shoot you."

All at once, he bounded over the coffee table, and I don't know what happened first: whether he bounded because I was running to get the gun or whether I ran because he was bounding.

Steve Miller's words were rolling into one another: "Wake up, wake up," and I was running to get the gun, the Daisy air rifle. The other guns were foreign to me, locked up and stored away. I'd never held a serious gun, but the Daisy was something real; it could lodge a pellet deep into your flesh. I could point it at his face and drive him away.

I made it through the foyer, but he caught me on the steps. He held me by the neck and pressed my face into the lip of the top stair. He planted his left knee in the small of my back and hissed into my ear, "What the fuck, what the fuck."

He still wasn't in the scene yet, all jacked up, his body reacting quicker than his mind. He pinioned my body across the three stairs. I moved up a little so that my neck craned over the step, and he pressed my cheek into the carpet. I still wanted the gun, but I couldn't move. Then his brain caught up with his body. He lifted his right leg and set his foot down beside my face.

"See that," he said. "That's a boot, you little fucker. That's a steel-tipped boot. I'll kick you with it. Calm the fuck down, or I'll kick you with it."

I didn't know if I was making any noise at all, other than panting into the carpet, as I stared at the brown sole of his boot. Something inside me tried to convulse, but I was trapped beneath him.

He held me down for a long time, telling me to look at his boot. He seemed to be slower now, talking without haste or anger, waiting for me to collect myself.

He was no longer telling me to calm down; he was telling me that he would kick me, that he would hurt me in a serious way. Fuck the silly little burn on my arm. He would hurt me for real. Yet there was no anger in his voice.

My face mashed against the carpet, I wondered if anyone was watching us, and if they were, how could I explain what was happening. What if they told my parents? After all, Richie was right. I was a little fucker. My face burned, and my body tried to contract, to buckle inward, but I remained stretched flat across the steps. I started to gasp, the word "sorry" escaping from my throat in violent hiccups. He was right to make me stare at his boot.

Eventually, he got off me, saying, "Let's not tell anyone about this."

I slipped to the bottom of the steps and sat on the slate floor in the foyer. I continued to say that I was sorry.

"Okay," he said. "Let's forget about it."

My gasping began to subside.

"I'm sorry," I said again, more clearly.

"Okay."

Then I said it again, because this was not the boy I was supposed to be.

"Okay. Forget it."

He was a good guy, a real good guy, a long-time friend of my brother.

But I said it again, catching my breath, not ready to get up yet. He left me on the floor to retrieve his stuff from the coffee table and head downstairs. I said it again in the empty foyer because I was no longer just saying it to Richie; I was also saying it to my father.

XVI

The recorded, metallic voice announces: "Next stop: Bound Brook." By now, Robin and I have the train car to ourselves. My feet are stretched out into the aisle. My compact umbrella hangs by its strap from a small hook on the seatback in front of me. I have been trying to take a brief nap, but my legs feel restless. Our children are at my mother's house, which is a thirty-minute car ride from the train station. They will be asleep when we arrive, and Robin and I will quietly slip into the spare bedroom.

I slip down further in the seat, unable to get comfortable.

Robin settles beside me. Her hand finds mine as she rests her head against my shoulder.

When we get to my mother's house, we will check on our sleeping children. For a moment, we will stand above them in the dark and listen to their breathing. We will feel drowsy and tender. Our longing to see them will ease itself out into the hushed corners of the room. We will want to make some minor adjustments to a blanket or gently brush aside a strand of hair, but to avoid waking them, we will simply watch until one of us whispers, "Come on."

We will mildly regret missing some aspect of our nightly routine: reading a story, kissing a forehead, saying, "I love you."

I wonder how Robin has fallen asleep so easily on the train seat beside me, but then she gently squeezes my hand, just once, to convey some private message between us that I already know.



**Omaha (Plymouth Fury)**

Jack Livingston

Acrylic, colored pencil, crayon, silkscreen on paper • 30" x 44"



**Flowers In the Snow (Gibson SG)**

Jack Livingston

Acrylic, colored pencil, crayon, on paper • 60" x 42"



alt real: 'Happy Birthday, Pree'

Evan Jymaal Cutts

July 17, 1951

For you  
 my feathers proudly  
 clipped. re  
 -attached

my plumage shifted  
 paternal atop  
 scalp humerus  
 hip

I am trying  
 to look the part:  
 domestic.  
 won't you

make your arms a cage  
 for me and I won't ever  
 leave. I'll play  
 straight—

as square as virtue.  
 mirror: father.  
 ever since I unpawned  
 myself

returned Bop.  
 I am set -  
 tling down see? I  
 sing

now my  
 daughter's name  
 my only  
 song:

Salt PEAnut

Salt PEAnut

SaltPEAnut

Salt PEAnut



I CAN'T BREATHE

Arinze Stephen Ekwuide

Oil on canvas • 16" x 23"

## Ghost Revival

Jacqui Germain

“You know if they don’t name the war it means  
it didn’t happen, right? What we gonna call this one?”  
– Aziza Barnes

Let’s call this one the chickens finally  
coming home to roost, obviously all  
black-feathered, fertile and glistening,  
piling egg upon egg upon egg on the farmer’s doorstep.

Let’s call this one a great hatching of fists  
across the pavement or a great bursting of wings  
across the field or how hundreds of black anythings  
flinging forth is someone’s worst nightmare.

Let’s call this one a deliberate arson, a courted flame  
that becomes a brushfire, the entire pale field too thick and arid  
to do anything but spread fierce and unforgiving  
into the wind’s generous comb and rush.

Let’s call this one grief’s gift and reprise—  
and by grief, I mean a persistent demand for dignity that eats  
and eats as it moves, a blaze that pulls itself up out of the body,  
planting its hands on anything that takes up space.

These convenient store shelves belong to our sorrow now.  
This carpet, the plastic signs—all gifts for our grief. Here: a single night  
when we brought the sun to thrash against an empty gas station  
instead of the whole bloody land.

Let’s call this one the people could fly and after  
the fields they flew through water hoses and hovered up  
over the ghettos and over cop cars and flew  
right through the tear gas gliding

right over the line of black rubber and batons,  
swirling around the rectangular outlines of Humvee tops  
in between the angled peaks of houses I saw them I swear  
their dark silhouettes slicing through the fog

my eyes blinking and burning but the soles  
of their feet on gawd one of them niggas had some fly ass  
kicks on they were there above the smoke dodging the helicopter  
flood lights watching us just watching us just watching.

Let’s call this one all the potter’s fields got plowed  
and here comes the cavalry. Ghost revival

been a long time coming. Keep your eye  
on the shoreline and watch the Atlantic

grinning with all its teeth, open its mouth,  
say, *Finally, here comes legion.*

## Gray/Grey

Deja Ryland

Gray is an achromatic color, meaning that it lacks hue and saturation. It is known as the “color without color.”

The “color without color,” the perfect paradox.

If I had to describe life as a color, I’d say it was gray. Life is ultimately the biggest paradox known to humankind.

We live to die.

This is starting off a bit more depressing than I intended, but detach your connotations of gloom, cloudiness, and depression from the color gray—or keep them.

My world stopped twice: the day you first stopped breathing and the day I’d come to grips with the fact that the U.S. was experiencing a pandemic.

I never imagined the day I’d witness either, definitely not this early in my life.

March 15, 2019, I finished midterms and—after learning that you’d had a massive heart attack—started visiting the hospital every day. The hospital became hospice became the funeral home, all while I still attended school. I have no recollection of completing any assignments, but somehow, I managed.

March 13, 2020, I began midterms, and my university’s president emailed students that classes for the remainder of the week would be canceled, and for two additional weeks after spring break classes would be online rather than face-to-face.

What scares me the most is the way life changes after it all. Finding that new “normal.”

My Favorite Paradox

“The mind is beautiful because of the paradox. It uses itself to understand itself.”

-Adam Elenbaas

My Least Favorite Paradox: The News On How To Safely Protect Yourself from the Coronavirus

“Just wash your hands.”

“You don’t need a mask.”

THEN,

“Gov. Hogan mandates masks in stores and on transit.”

“The coronavirus can be transmitted through your eyes.”

EVERYTHING THEY TELL US, THEY CONTRADICT THE NEXT WEEK.

If it was something you could keep at bay by simply washing your hands, explain why:

- Malls are closed.
- Libraries are closed.
- School campuses are closed and have switched to virtual learning.
- My workplace is closed. (This is the first time I’ve been unemployed since I was sixteen.)
- Gatherings of more than ten are prohibited.
- Grocery stores and most fast-food restaurants close at 8 p.m.
- Emission Testing Locations are converted into COVID-19 testing drive-thrus.
- Hospitals do not have enough masks to protect their staff.
- Companies are sending masks to hospitals because apparently our government is unable to provide them fast enough.
- The stock market is crashing.
- The economy is crashing.

WE’RE DOOMED.

I hate watching the news, but it’s all my mother watches now as we wait for updates about getting COVID-19 under control. I prefer not to hear Trump speak. I turned the news off completely as the president went on national television and referred to the coronavirus as the “Chinese virus.”

“Did he really just say the CHINESE virus?”

“The Chinese virus.”

Gray area: an ill-defined situation or field not readily conforming to a category or to an existing set of rules.

It was my last day of midterms, and I had a three-hour break after class before it was time for me to go to work. I went to Noodles & Company and it was nice out, so I sat outside to eat. The wind was blowing, and my hair wouldn’t stay out of my face, but I didn’t mind. I remember thinking to myself that the day felt a bit too perfect. I felt like I finally had a chance to really breathe, that I could just sit and take in the world, only hours later to lose the world I had known.

Sometimes I imagine what my father’s drive home from work would have looked like. Maybe he had his window rolled down completely and the breeze felt a little too perfect. Maybe he was thumping his fingers against the steering wheel without a care in the world, not worried if there would be traffic. Was the sun bouncing against his skin as his left arm sat perched against the window? He would have embodied warmth.

Today I am in the house, wary of going outside since I know I must wear a mask, even just to take a walk or go to the store. I imagine everyone is thinking the same thing: *We can’t wait for things to go back to normal.*

But that’s why this pandemic brings back so many memories—because now everyone will walk out into a world that will never fully look the same to them again.

Paradox, according to Merriam-Webster

par·a·dox | \ 'per-ə-, dāk-s, 'pa-rə- \

1 a: tenet contrary to received opinion

2 a: a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true

b: a self-contradictory statement that at first seems true

c: an argument that apparently derives self-contradictory conclusions by valid deduction from acceptable premises

3 a: one (such as a person, situation, or action) having seemingly contradictory qualities or phases

Everything they told us they contradicted the next week.

First, they said all he would need was surgery on his heart.

Then he was flown from Carroll County Hospital to the Shock Trauma Center at the University of Maryland.

They had to force him into hypothermia to preserve his brain and organs.

They said that once he was reheated, he had to show us what he could do, that he should start to show signs, and the longer he didn’t, the more trauma to the brain it would show.

Weeks passed, and he didn’t respond to being pinched. He didn’t respond to any pain.

They continued to tell us that we needed time.

He began to have uncontrollable seizures due to synapses in the brain not connecting. He was given medicine which sedated him even further.

They detected that he had no sleep-wake cycle.

The doctors arranged a family meeting and told us they did everything they could for him, so we had to choose between assisted living or hospice; doctors swayed us toward the latter due to his detrimental brain injury.

They told us we needed time when we didn’t have it.

The ruins of Pompeii were buried under ash and lava after Mt. Vesuvius erupted. What’s fascinating is that not only were the town and people preserved, but archaeologists—by taking plaster casts—discovered that bad teeth were a common problem. The skeletal remains of slaves were found still chained.

Our ruins have already been exposed. The United States is built on colonization, genocide, capitalism, slavery, and war. We are so used to being the conqueror, a “winner,” that it takes a pandemic to realize that viruses don’t recognize borders and geographic lines. That capitalism is a volcano waiting to erupt.

Toilet paper aisles were empty as people ran amok buying items in bulk, forgetting that they were not the only people in the world who needed to wipe their asses. People do not acknowledge their neighbors; they do not recognize community or unity because we are following after a leader, after a nation, that fails to acknowledge that this is not the only country in the world.

The coronavirus has shown that when money loses its value, the United States loses its mind.

—

A grey area is when you're stuck in between  
stuck in the middle  
one choice away from being  
stuck here  
or here.

—

I remember when I was a kid, we'd flip through channels on our box TV, and when you'd try to switch from VCR to cable, you'd switch to a channel that you didn't get and the screen would go static. The screen would be filled with grey dots bouncing, twirling, and moving in all directions, giving you a clear picture of the sound of chaos. You and your siblings would usually keep the TV up, jumping up and covering your ears as the box in front of you struggled to find a signal. Beneath the scribble scabble, if only you had a bit more connection, you'd see the screen clearly.

**Beneath the scribble scabble, if only you had a bit more connection, you'd see the screen clearly.**

The coronavirus crept up a lot like that static, like everyone lost the signal all at once, but now we can't change the channel. So you can either let it consume you and struggle to find some answer, some picture within the optical illusion, or you can turn the TV off.

I think we're always one click away from the static. We just distance ourselves from it more now because there are so many more distractions, so many more channels.

—

GRAY MATTER.

The family decided to conduct a meeting so that the neurologist could tell us what exactly the MRI of your brain was showing.

The room was white, and I could feel the tension in the room.

Me and my siblings (your kids) against your side of the family.

Faith vs. Science.

Hospice vs. Assisted Living as a Vegetable.

We go around the table introducing ourselves, and the doctors and nurses taking care of you introduce themselves next. They said you had significant damage to your gray matter.

That the hippocampus suffered severe trauma.

Science was telling us that you'd lost your mind; machines were keeping your kidneys from failing. Your heart was weak, and with your body no longer able to sustain surgery, we decided that hospice was best for you.

Your heart would beat for two more weeks. An involuntary body function.

An involuntary rhythm.

Without the mind, memory, and emotion, the body—ultimately the heart—still dictates life or death.

Machines can keep the body alive, but brain cells—literally dead memories—can't be brought back to life.

I will never forget you, but how will you remember me?

—

It's ironic that there is this twoness: that our lives consist of life and death, rich and poor, ugly and beautiful, villain and hero, good and bad, right or wrong, negative and positive.

We are defined by polarity, by oppositions, by contradictions.

A world scale that is balanced by imbalance.

When I said the world was grey right now, it was a good thing. The world paused in a sense and this greyness allowed the opportunity to look at both sides, a chance to be in the middle for a while, a chance to not have to choose.

To just be neutral, to just be.

—

Why Clouds are Gray

I am currently sitting on the floor with my back hunched against my bed, with a plate of lemon breadcrumbs next to me. I have ten tabs open on my computer and decide to research clouds simply because my window is open, and I do not see any outside. The sky looks like a huge endless blank sheet.

A cloud appears gray due to its thickness and height. As a cloud obtains more water droplets and ice crystals, less light can pass through.

Nimbostratus clouds lack any type of uniform shape, typically resulting in rain or snow.

Altostratus clouds are thin, gray clouds that stretch out "in sheets" across the sky.

Cumulonimbus are thunderstorm clouds; they are indicators of heavy rain, tornadoes, hail, and lightning.

I've never flown through a thunderstorm before, but I imagine it's terrifying. Watching clear skies transform, dark clouds swarming, thunder ripping through the sky, lightning tearing that sky in half.

My dad had taken us on vacation. It was my brother's first time flying to Florida, so I remember forcing him to sit by the window. We were speeding down the lane, and gradually began tilting upward. During takeoff, you can't wait to reach the clouds. The plane levels. No matter how old I am, this moment always brings back memories of Peter Pan, like we reached Neverland, a place so disconnected from everything. You're flying, soaring through space unmarked by civilization.

The sky draws pictures for us as people lie out on blankets in the grass with their loved ones, pointing at clouds that look like rabbits, or dragons, or birds.

Gray clouds show us that we all run or try to shield ourselves from rainy days, from storms within ourselves because we don't know whether it will be a harmless storm or if cumulonimbus clouds are swarming, that natural disasters occur internally too.

—

Pompeii's ruins are terrifying when you think about it. People frozen in terror, their last moments before death forever preserves them.

One thing that still continues to strike me is that the enslaved people were kept in chains even after such a catastrophic disaster.

That their bodies were still confined to their circumstances.

That bondage is a trauma, no matter how deeply buried, that encompasses individuals far beyond death.

That enslavement is a terror forever preserved, ruins that will always resurface.

—

Ashes, Ashes, we all fall down.

Ring a Ring o' Roses was a childhood game and rhyme that I'd always sing, interlocking hands with my friends or siblings as we ran or skipped in a circle, eventually collapsing onto the ground.

I honestly had no idea what it meant until searching the only words I remember clearly. "Ashes, ashes, we all fall down." I had not the slightest clue that my eight-year-old self was singing about the plague, specifically a deadly rash. Why did parents let their kids jokingly sing about children dying?

My mom knew what she was doing. We forgot to do the dishes or take out the trash, and she probably was thinking, "Yeah, sing that song." All jokes, all jokes. That would be funny, though. Anyways, it's ironic that we turned a rhyme about death into some fun song to sing while we were playing, that we sang songs knowing absolutely nothing about their meaning. I guess that was all just preparation and reification for a lifetime of reciting words knowing absolutely nothing about their meaning, only to discover that we chant about war and death as if those are things to have a nation take pride in.

But hey, God Bless America, right?

—

All That I Have Left Of You

Your remains fill a purple heart-shaped urn, engraved with your initials.

The only residue left of your previous form.

Fire transformed you to ash.

—

Grey/Gray

There is no correct way to spell gray; they can be used interchangeably. You can choose which you use. Although there is no "correct" way to spell it, naturally, you will choose.

Ultimately, this quarantine has made me think about whether neutrality can exist. You cannot live life without making choices and even the decision to not make a choice is a choice.

So who would really choose to live in a gray world when we've been exposed to colors?



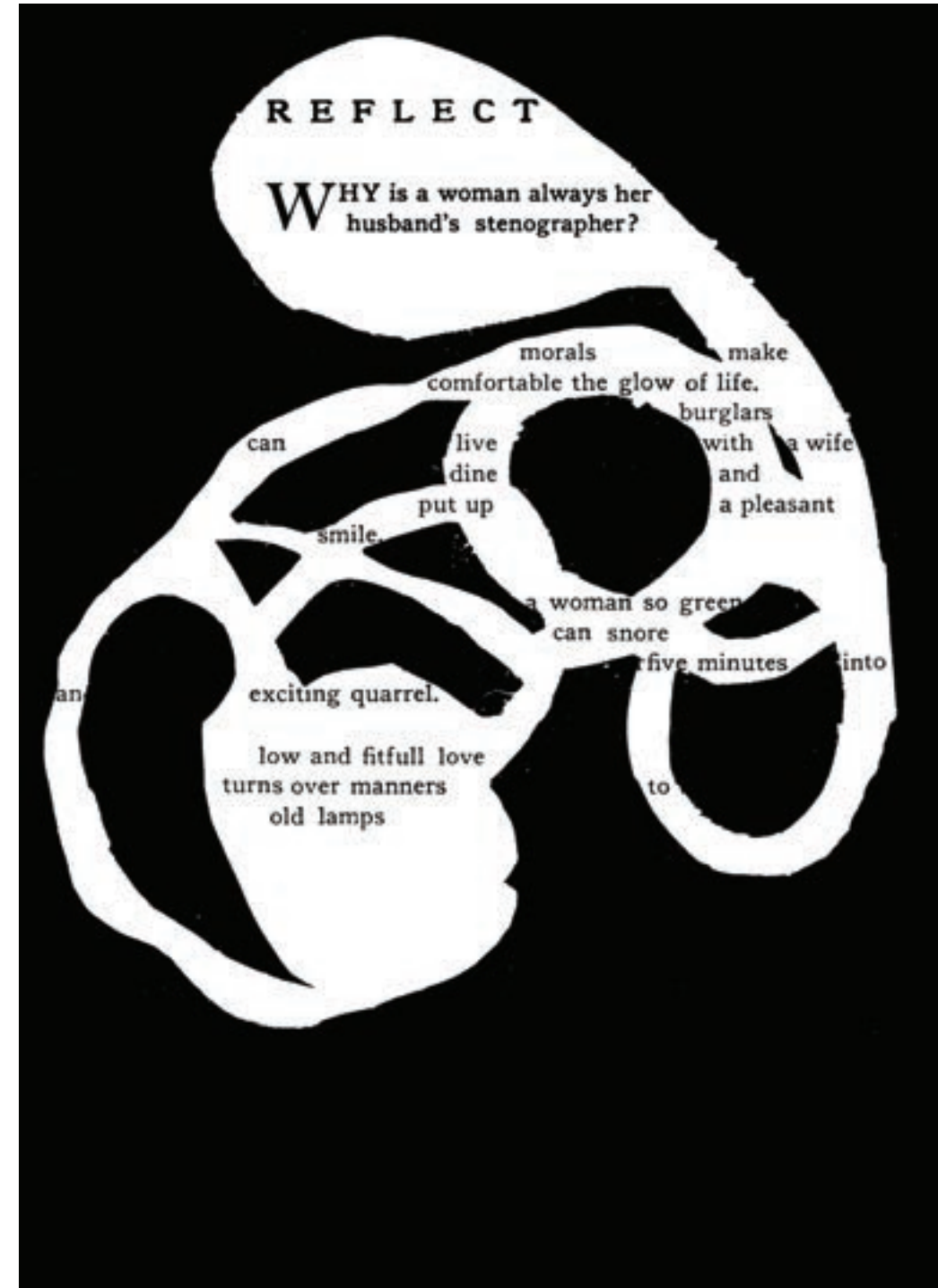
**Fireworks on Floor 9**

Chloë Williams

Canon EOS Rebel T7i with 18-135mm lens • 6000 x 4000 px

**Reflect**

John Rodzvilla



## Hannah Nathan Rosen Writing Award

Leslie Harrison & Jeannie Vanasco

CO-JUDGES

Hannah Nathan Rosen was a rising senior English major and creative writer at Towson University when she died unexpectedly in January of 2018. Her parents created this award to honor her memory, as well as her love of creative writing and the English Department. Both of us had Hannah as a student in her last semester at TU, and we adored her and admired her writing and her courage. It is an honor to be able to administer this prize on behalf of the college, the university, and Hannah's family.

The prize gives a financial award to a creative writing student whose work in either creative nonfiction or poetry (Hannah's two loves) is outstanding, and who has senior status. Our hope is that this award will make a gifted writer's journey and transitions after graduation a little easier.

This year's winner is Kathleen Wallish.

## [Mother you know silence]

Kathleen Wallish

Mother you know silence  
has a way of devouring its host

I am growing smaller  
as I suffer through another  
empty month

After everything you gave me  
the language of living  
could not fit inside your crippled hands

It is too late to try again

You are barren and I am voiceless

Only I can bury the woman  
I could have been

## Void of Potential

Kathleen Wallish

I used to slip my still bloody teeth beneath a pillow  
and a fairy would turn my pain into gold.

I starved myself so I could fit  
in the belly of the wolf.

Life as a woman  
is waiting for a savior.

Now I am a defiled concubine,  
a snapped stem crowned with blossoms.

The most desirable things are void of potential.



## EUNICE

Arinze Stephen Ekwuide

Graphite and charcoal on archival paper • 42" x 36"

## Lukewarm

Wen Wen Yang

The left side of my name's character looks like rain dripping from an awning. It is the water radical. On the upper right, a person is trapped in a tiny cell. On the bottom sits a shelf with three books, identical in size and thickness. It is the plate radical. By the look of it, during the rainy season, I am trapped and using my books as sandbags.

My surname means *poplar*. A tree radical stands on the left. A lone sun, *ri*, stands on the top right. Below it is a twisted skeletal hand, right hand palm up, or left hand palm down. Perhaps I'll end my days partially buried under a tree.

Teachers and classmates asked me what my name meant. When I said I didn't know, I watched their faces sour. That answer wasn't acceptable. The next time someone asked, I lied, "Bringer of happiness." After some years of delusion, I was corrected.

When I asked my parents for the meaning of my name, it was too late. My Chinese had abandoned me. I didn't take care of it and had, instead, an affair with English and all its weird verb tenses. "Good," my dad told me. "It means good."

My father and his sisters picked my name after going through the Chinese dictionary. It represents my parents' hometown, Wenzhou. As a part of Wenzhou, it meant mild in temperature, lukewarm. Other children are named *precious* and *deserving of love* or after characters of famous mythologies. I am a part of a tourism sales pitch.

"It's a good name for someone from Wenzhou," my great uncle told my father during his visit to America. "When you visit, people will know that she is one of them."

It's a shame I speak the language like a foreigner while introducing myself with the name of an authentic Chinese person.

My name tethers me to a place I have never been, and will likely never go. It tells people who never meet me in person that I am an *other*. It warns them that I might speak with an accent and eat with chopsticks instead of a knife and fork. I can say I'm Chinese-American, but the name tells them my parents wish me to be a Chinese girl who just happened to be born half a world away from home.

On the family tree—a poplar tree, I'm sure—I am a dead-end branch, hovering under the dead-end branches of my four aunts. In our family, women do not change their names when they marry, but their names end with them. Women aren't legitimately entitled to the name because they will marry and prolong the name of another family. In the other family, she will not take on their name, a permanent guest.

I've married America upon my birth as an American citizen, but I kept my Chinese maiden name.

There was some discussion of Americanizing my name to Wendy. She would have gone through elementary school with people constantly asking her, "But what is your *real* name?" Wendy would have worn prints and sang in the shower. There would be another Wendy in the class. In gift shops, she'd find her name on tiny license plates. Wendy would never lose half her name because people think that the second portion is a middle name. The names on her birth certificate, social security card, and diplomas would all match, instead of being four variations. She would not be straddling two English pronunciations that don't quite fit the Chinese pronunciation. Microsoft Word would never draw a red squiggly line under part of her name. After a while, Wendy would have been forgotten, warm bathwater growing tepid, then cold.

## The Parents

Grace Reed

You see, my parents were always picky about their food. They wouldn't eat this, they wouldn't eat that. Very choosy. Which sometimes got them in trouble. That's why it was particularly peculiar on Thanksgiving Day when they ate the whole meal themselves. My mother does not like turkey, but she ate the thing whole. My father hates cranberry sauce, yet he satisfyingly licked the sticky remains off his fingers. They did not even tell my brother and me to come down to eat.

Summer was when their "habits" really set in. On a hot Saturday afternoon, we all decided to go to the community pool to cool off, but my parents had other ideas. We arrived, and they drank all the water in the pool. Nobody could swim.

That Sunday, we went to the cathedral in town. The sermon was about gluttony. How ironic.

The next day, the weather was terrible—storms everywhere. So, my father stole the lightning from the sky and ate it whole. One day after work, my mother came home and ate the patio. I was afraid she would start on the whole house. This continued for months. They were ravenous.

Their worst episode happened at our cousin's wedding. Everyone dressed in their Sunday best. At the reception, guests cheered on the newlyweds while my parents made their way to every table. More importantly, they ate every plate and wiped them clean. The caterers did not have extra food to spare.

One day when we were watching television, I asked them, Why are you like this? The pool, Thanksgiving, the wedding—why did you consume everything?

They said, We are not sure.

I replied, You know you are gluttons?

They said, We have the right to do anything and we will not be mastered by anything.

I said, If you are given to gluttony, I should put a knife to your throats.

They said, We are scared. Something consumed us.

I said, What?

They said, Open us.

I said I would not.

They said, You have to see. We are not your parents.

I said I would be convicted of murder and I am too young to go to jail.

They pleaded, Please, please open us and see. Pretend we are gifts. We are afraid. Save us!

I said, Don't be afraid (even though fear consumed me).

They started screaming, Save us!

I slit their throats. Red spilled all over the floor like a river running through a valley, as did my tears. I heard something in the other room. I saw my parents, but not in their mortal state. They were beings but not humans.

My mother smiled and looked down at the table. Thanksgiving dinner was served.



**NAAZA****Black woman's prayer (I)**

Arinze Stephen Ekwuide

Graphite and charcoal on archival paper • 35" x 46"

**B-boy Oil on Canvas**

Mario Loprete

Canvas • 100 cm x 100 cm

## No - we're not hunting

DS Maolalai

hungover, camped out  
in the low  
wicklow mountains,  
making bad conversation  
this morning with some man  
who hikes past  
and his son: yes –

we've been here  
for the weekend.  
no – we're not hunting. yes –  
we heard shots fired  
last night; somebody  
culling the deer  
I suppose. he nods  
and goes on  
with the grace  
and passivity  
of the moon  
going over a mountain  
I stagger down,  
unhealthy, to a pond  
flaked with midges.  
wash my face in dirty  
water and wake up.

when I get back  
shortly after  
my friend fallon  
has come out of his tent,  
poking the fire  
and rubbing his gorsebush  
raw jawline. there's nothing,  
he says, funnier to me  
than hearing you talk  
in the morning hungover  
with someone you don't  
want to talk to.

## Knuckle Tattoos

Danielle Chelosky

### GOOD WEED

*You're constantly stoned*, he says, as if THC naturally pulses through my bloodstream, like it's a gene I inherited. *Your eyes are always darting in different directions, you're always saying weird things, you're always hungry*. He even thinks I smoke weed in secret: *You're from Long Island, you go to Sarah Lawrence, you listen to emo music*. He's a pot conspiracy theorist. *There is no way you don't smoke weed*.

He'll hold out a baby joint to me every night I see him. *Today's the day, he'll say, you're safe with me*. I tease him, saying the first time I smoke weed will be with my new roommate in Brooklyn instead of with him. It's a possibility though; the first time I smoked a cigarette was with people who were more or less strangers, despite the fact that every boyfriend I've had is a cigarette smoker. It seems as if I'm more comfortable trying new things with people I don't know.

*this sounds so weird to type but last night i had this stoned thought*, he texts me, *that if i found out i only had a short amount of time left to live i'd leave all my things to you. not sure why. just felt like you could be trusted and would care about my strange possessions*

When he gets sick, I drive to Park Slope to pick up weed for him—his medicine. *I'm on 3rd St*, I text him so he can relay the message to his friend Mike, but it's a lie. *I'm on 3rd Ave*. I just don't know that there's a difference. His friend still finds me and hands me a large black tote bag saying, *Tell him he can have all of it*. I've met Mike before, but only online through a trivia game. I smile because I'm the domestic girlfriend, and Mike must wish he had one of me.

*I'm your tradwife*, I tell him when I show up at his door with his medicine, and in the morning when he's asleep, I do his dishes.

### BASS LINE

He disagrees with me when I say I want to explore the idea that some songs sound nostalgic and that the feeling of nostalgia can take form in a sound. *That's not possible*, he argues. *'Nostalgia' isn't the right word*. But nostalgia is the entire idea—I want to ruminate on nostalgia as a subjective experience, and instruments as sources of emotions, etc.

*I sort of get it*, he says a few days later. *I looked into it. It's sort of like when you meet someone you have a connection with and you think, 'It feels like I've known you forever.'*

I feel the same way about Interpol's "Obstacle 2" or The Strokes's "Is This It" as I feel about him; the basslines are deep, sensual, somehow familiar—like the warmth of being drunk, or the beginning of a long drive. It's comfortable but sad. I already feel sentimental, knowing the song will come to an end.

He makes me feel smart and confident, telling me that this—the way I can't resist Paul Banks's exaggerated British accent or the way I mimic the guitar work in "Reptilia"—is why he trusts me, this is why he sees me even though I am eleven years younger than him, this is why we get drunk together every other night, and he makes me his possession, his young girl, his pet cat, his object, but never anything more.

### LONG LOST

Every now and then, he visits his parents in Park Slope. *It's like checking in on a science project*, he says. He tells me that he'd been estranged from them for ten years, for vague reasons, including disagreeing politics. I suppose I can see it—he went to art school, dropped out, moved from Manhattan to East Williamsburg, got meaningless tattoos (including his ex's name on his ass), and started doing stand-up sets wherever he could. His parents are Republicans.

We watch videos of the protests at the start of the pandemic—his computer screen packed with digital boxes, each playing footage from a different city, all with the same action: bodies, swarms of them, marching, yelling, throwing their fists in the air, big buildings in the background, an attempt to stop the normalcy, an attempt to draw attention, an attempt to make avoidance impossible, guns, gases that hurt your eyes, gases that are meant for war, gases that are banned from war, rubber bullets, violence. I lose him—his eyes are fixated on his phone, his fingers typing messages to his mom, trying to sway her, or just fighting her, attempting to make avoidance impossible.

*can we do tomorrow instead? today has not been a good day,* he texts me one afternoon, when I was anticipating the drive to him, the arrival, the drinking, the talking, the sex, the sleep. He says: *just got bad news today,* and that's all he says.

#### GOOD FUCK

I slouch on his bed holding a glass of tequila in one hand and a glass of wine in the other the first night we meet. I've only drunk wine once before this, at a small Brooklyn bar called Flowers for All Occasions, which has since closed down. I was on a first date with someone who is now a friend and, upon coming back from the bathroom, I asked him, *Why didn't you tell me my lips are purple?*

I drink more of the tequila than the wine in his apartment, having a natural inclination toward liquor. Our sex I can't remember the next day, or the day after that, or after that. I ease into wine with him over the following few weeks, learning to savor the bitter taste, and finally I can get drunk without blacking out, and he can turn out his lights, turn on a lamp, a soft orange radiating through the dark, and we'll fuck, unhinged and loud, legs open legs closed, mouths touching mouths far apart, hands everywhere, wet, messy.

I put his nicotine to my lips—his vape, before I start with cigarettes—and I let the fuzzy feeling take me over, I surrender myself to it, I am wrapped up in warm blanket, I don't feel my skin or my body at all, I am a weightless soul of pleasure and sedation.

#### SEND HELP

When I say I love you, he says it back, with a disclaimer: *You know I'm not in a place for emotional attachment. You know I can't commit. You know I can't always be there for you.*

So, I should have seen it coming: *I'm not responsible for your feelings,* he tells me. Yes, I should have known, he warned me, and he could hurt me all he wants, but that's allowed, I knew he was in no place for any committed romance, but what is the romance we share then? What is the opposite of committed? Disposable?

I say: *I want to confirm that this isn't a joke to you;* I want to solidify our bond, to make it a tangible thing, to put a word on it to make it real. *It is a joke to me,* he replies. *Everything is a joke to me: monogamy, marriage.*

On a phone call with my old writing professor, she says, *You're the masochistic girlfriend.* That is, I realize, a more accurate description of me than what I was thinking.

#### SAFE BETS

The light wakes me up every morning. I have blinds, but they're still in their packaging, sitting on my floor. A blanket covers the bottom half of my window, buying me some time. My day starts early, around 7:30, though I usually end up falling back asleep and getting out of bed at 9.

I tell him, *I don't want you in my life anymore,* and I visit friends on Long Island, hook up with someone in the back of a car, black out from gin. Safe bets—that's what Alex does, my best friend, she hooks up with anyone, she barely speaks to them, she wants what she wants, and she wants pleasure, but who knows if she gets it. She shares with me her stories, like the one about when she was having sex with someone at a Halloween themed party: *I lost my devil horns that night.* She laughs mischievously.

They're not all safe, though; not Bowe, a graffiti artist whose tag is Blowfish because "I like blow, and I like to surf." He talks about waves so big they tower over him like skyscrapers. They snort coke together and frolic around her backyard, while all of his friends want to go home. The fire still burns, but it's all smoke, getting in everyone's eyes, like gas from war, or gas that's been banned from war. Bowe, giving in to his friends, is about to leave, but he waits, looks me in the eyes, says: *Listen to me. Okay? Are you listening? This is important advice. Are you ready for it? You miss a hundred percent of the shots you don't take. Remember that.*

## A HOMELESS MAN BOUGHT A MEDIUM COFFEE & A PACK OF CHOCOLATE GRAHAM CRACKERS FROM ME & I AM AN ASSHOLE

Devin Campbell

He paid with six quarters & a nickel even though he owed me 4.50—the money was in a Ziplock in his coat pocket & when he walked away I stood, stupid behind my counter & I realized he didn't owe me shit, & whose counter was it anyway

& my hands sweated on his warm coins &

the girl behind him looked sweet when she offered to pay for the rest & I was thinking of offering him a sandwich but I was scared of him more than I was scared for him. & I thought I heard him say It's Cold Out Here but we were in a building & he didn't really know where to stand & he didn't seem to know what he was seeing

The point is, if I offered him anything he probably would be unable to say yes or say no so I said to the girl No, It's Okay, & when she finished ordering I went to ask if he needed anything else & he only said It's Cold Out Here  
It's Cold Out Here & I'll Save It For Monday

& maybe it was chilly but all I know is we were inside & all I know is he loves his coffee regular whatever that means & I know I was glad he got something to warm him from the tired side out but maybe I should have given him some water—& my balled fist was clammy with coins that I left on the counter when I clocked out & went home & as I sat for the first time in so many blurred hours I thought Idiot, It Wasn't Your Coffee & Those Were Not Your Crackers & He Did Not Owe You Shit So Why Did You Take His Money & my window was open & It Was Cold Out There.

## Ode to the Only Abercrombie Shirt I Ever Owned

Halee Kirkwood

And not to the sixth grade, when everyone dressed in skateboarder brands—Etnies, Vans, DC's, Billabong, Quiksilver, though no one actually skateboarded, except that one girl who did who everyone called

a dykeslut because

all of her friends were boys, and I had missed the memo on these mysterious names had spent the summer riding my bike past houses with evidence of someone my age, spent summer cold-calling anyone who'd left

a H.A.G.S! or forbidden H.A.K.A.S in my yearbook.

All summer I'd read my cousin's old dEliA's catalogues, and loved how they spelled that name with a little flower apostrophe between a and s and how I yearned for a whole alphabet

like that, blossoms where the eyelets of a sentence might be and capitalizing

whatever you wanted.

Anything I wanted,

I cut out—

sugar plum dress, sugar cube jeans, sonic sweater, lunar skirt,

anything that said

ShE's sO HoT sHe MakEs sUn SwEat  
sHe's So FrEaKy tHe CirCus rAn AwAy tO jOin hEr  
ShE's SO HAPPY sHe's HaViNg thE TimE  
oF MY LIFE—

and built the catalogue of paper dolls I might someday be.

The clothes I wore were given to me.

The bubblegum pink Sketchers that hockey girl Danielle said would make her commit suicide if she had to wear them.

The Abercrombie shirt my dad brought home one night

and held like the rack of a prized buck in the doorway.

He called that night—he never called—and said *I have that shirt you wanted*. I craved a wind-torn Henley, craved navy with cream stripes, just a plain and little moose embroidered above the small cliff of a new right breast.

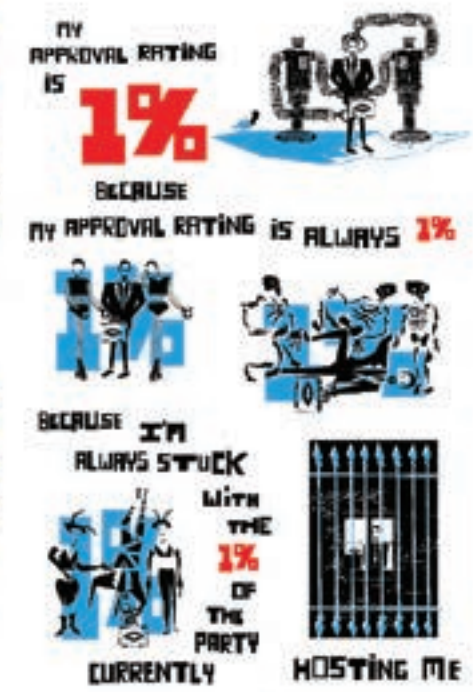
Maybe he pulled that shirt out from an army buddy's dirty laundry, a man's XXL, make-believe surf shop appliqued on the back and so orange I wanted to suck the life out

of pumpkins, pennies, monarch butterflies.

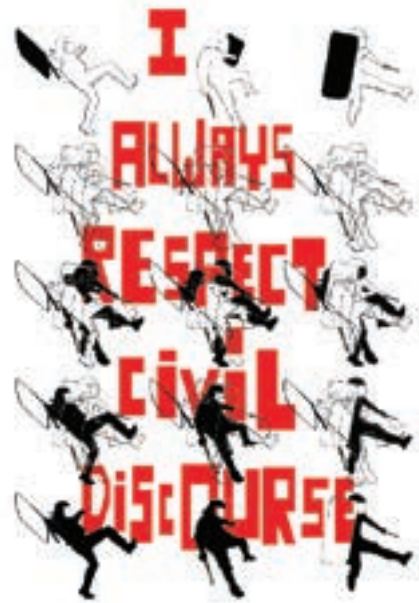
The year we itched in shelter clothes, bedbug bites rising from our wrists like pearls.

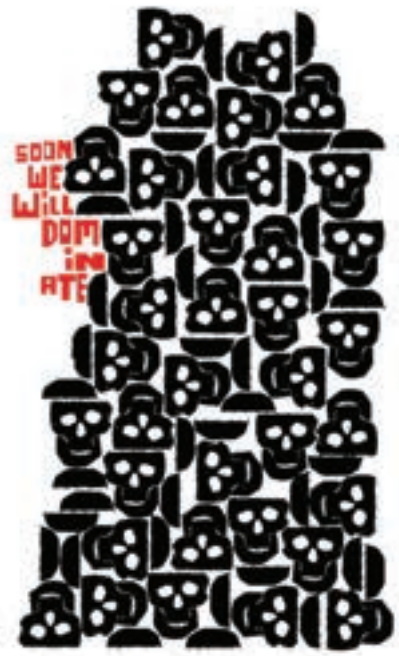
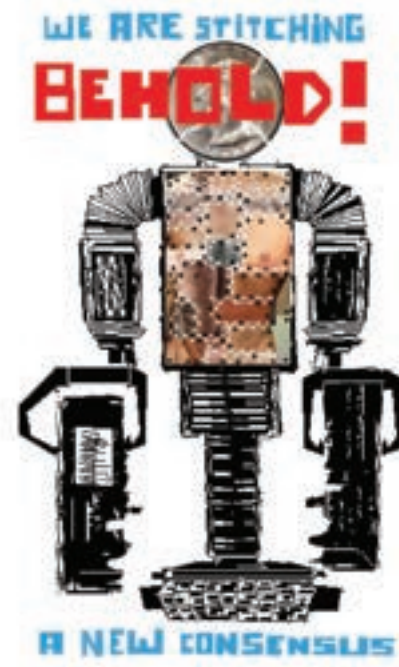
It was what he thought I wanted. A kindness that kisses

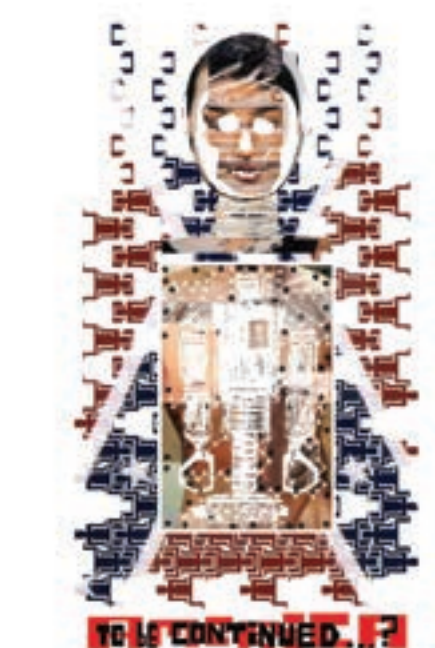
then kills.



My American Dream  
 Chris Gavalier  
 Microsoft Paint







## RUN RABBIT RUN

Kristen Rouisse

It isn't long before I'm holding you like a weapon,                      unsheathing you  
 with the type of anticipation                      one gets gripping a hot, slippery hilt.  
 Like a final girl,                      I'm going to scream despite the gore between my teeth.  
 Picture us at the center                      of a thrift-store pastoral;  
 dilapidated house, dilapidated barn, dilapidated pickup                      sitting idle in the drive.  
 The meat hooks are for decoration                      —unless you're into that kind of thing.  
 Only time will tell.                      The pines tremble.                      Your lips peel open and night crawls in.





**Still a Rose**  
 from the **Bishme Cromartie** series  
**Schaun Champion**  
 Digital Photography • 14" x 14"

## A Spray of Feathers

Evan Jymaal Cutts

after Phillip B. Williams

My sonic executions are precise  
 in their movements. Stained  
 with rollick, a spiritnote pierces

an eardrum & my God, we're sainted!  
 Swingin the sweat of it—I dared  
 any cat to stop me. Then altared a prayer instead.

Death winged through the window a halo & my dread  
 descended a spray of feathers: black, creed-lit  
 my backwards ovation. The adder,

too, could be my namesake if I cried, *Let*  
*my music be a venomdream, Deity. Sever*  
*virtue in equal measure til each tune derelict*

or *virtuosic verse!*  
 Bebop, good God! In your name  
 I serve.

## Orbs of Feelings

Kelly Flanagan

I abandoned orange bottles of pills on my dresser. My desk lamp shone through them as they became orange orbs of feelings. Prescription feelings. This one calmness, this one love, this one eternal happiness.

I laughed very deeply and inaudibly, and my countenance did not change even slightly. I sat in bed, breathing shallowly and removing each feeling from its bottle. Kindness is a mango and white capsule. Tenderness in the left color and a peaceful heart in the right.

You should know that for happiness, you have to combine a few types. Six light sky-blue tablets will remove your inner turmoil and any questions about mortality and the meaning of life. Remember to add 600mg of equanimity in the morning and regularly throughout the day to maintain a consistent saturation.

The red capsule in the mornings along with the two white "horse pills," as my aunt used to say. Then there are the tiny white ones. Take exactly seven, as they're low dose.

My doctor, a gifted mixologist. Hints of apple in my basil gimlet cocktail of drugs.

Donning authority and a bleached robe, he assures me I need these colors to become okay. I thank him.

With the dissolvable tablets, I know the sugar and anxiety will dissolve sweetly under my tongue.

It may even be funny to some heavenly observer when the 1.5mg of mood-swinging-withdrawal changes my entire body and thrusts me into a pool of clouds I try desperately to climb out of into that clearer air, all light sky blue.

But I can't get a grip on that vapor. I can't climb out of what doesn't exist.

I wonder, sort of intently, if I really exist either. It feels like it's possible I'm just a mango-colored orb that swallows its feelings.

I've asked around, but no one's sure.



### Orbit

Karen Peng

Fabric, pen, broken lightbulbs, wire, acrylic, colored pencils, cardboard, beads • 14" x 14"

## They Say the Bodies

Abigail Chabitnoy

They say the bodies were already beginning  
to poke through the earth  
like a rib waiting to be pulled,



## The Holes Are So Deep

Abigail Chabitnoy



holes . so deep they say  
a child would fall.  
They may or may not  
land on shore.

The woman was always considered  
ambiguously dangerous  
in that  
she was not alone.

## We Always Use Thread

Abigail Chabitnoy

Can she swim?

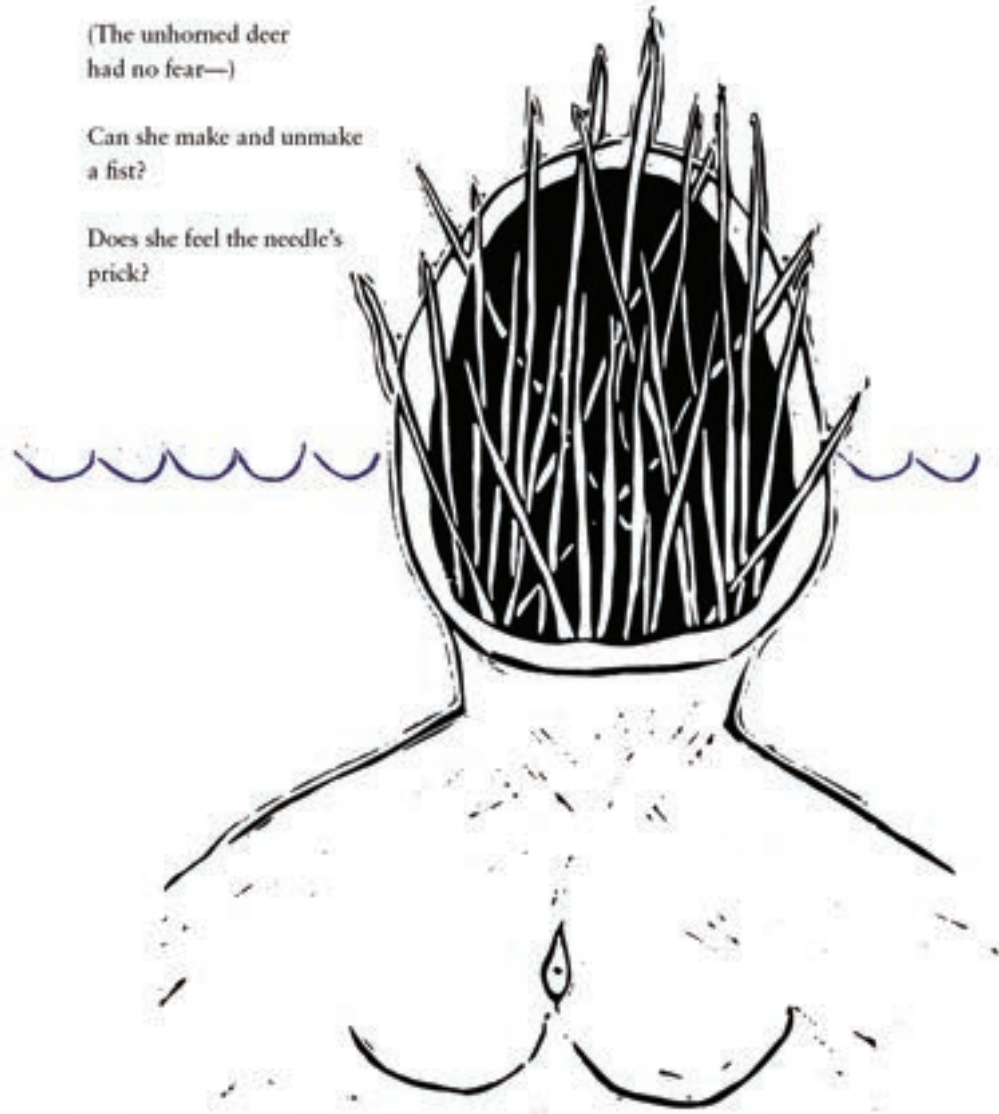
Does she sink or  
will she float?

Has she been known  
to cavort with goats?

(The unhorned deer  
had no fear—)

Can she make and unmake  
a fist?

Does she feel the needle's  
prick?



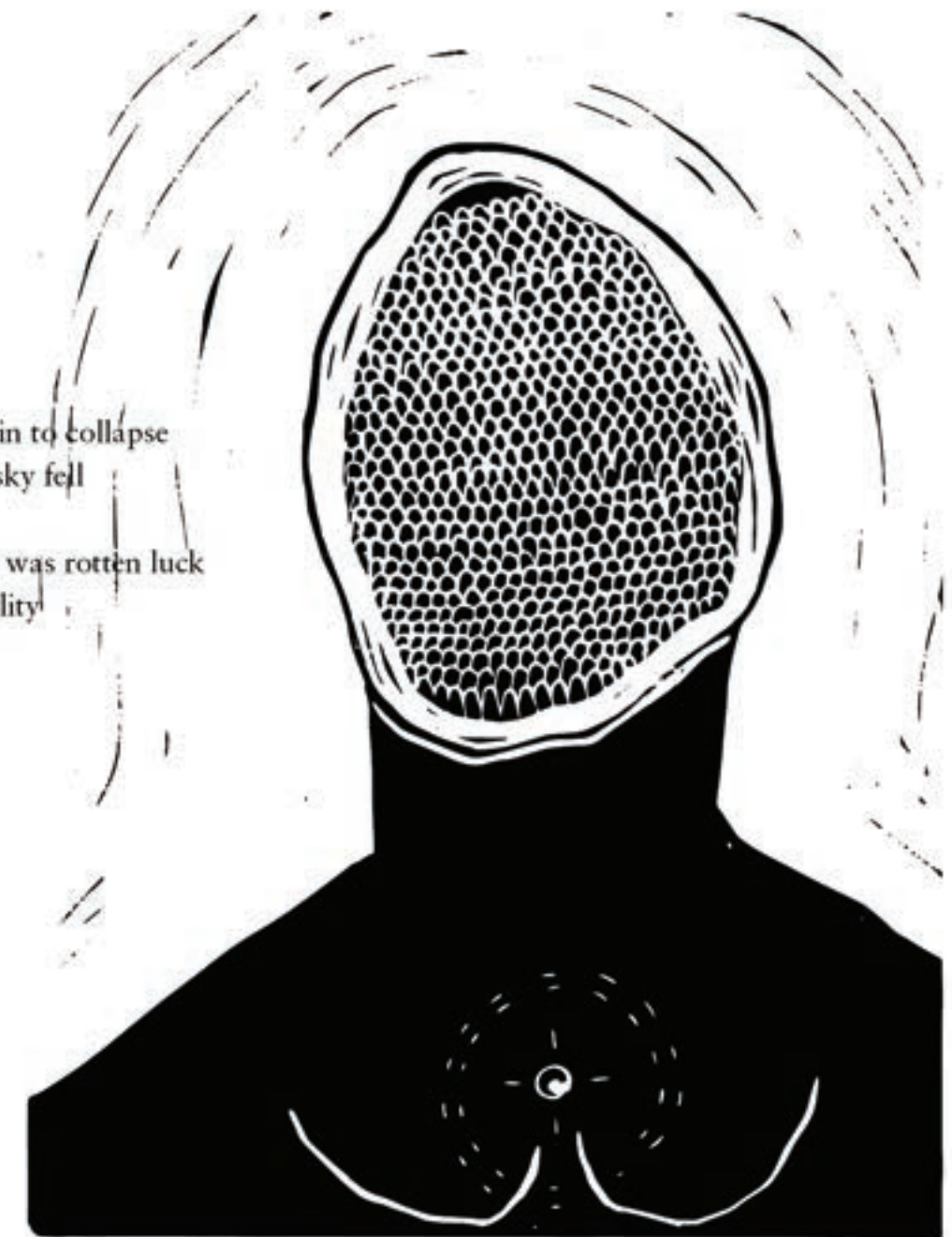
*We always use thread when we sew.*

## Lungs Begin to Collapse

Abigail Chabitnoy

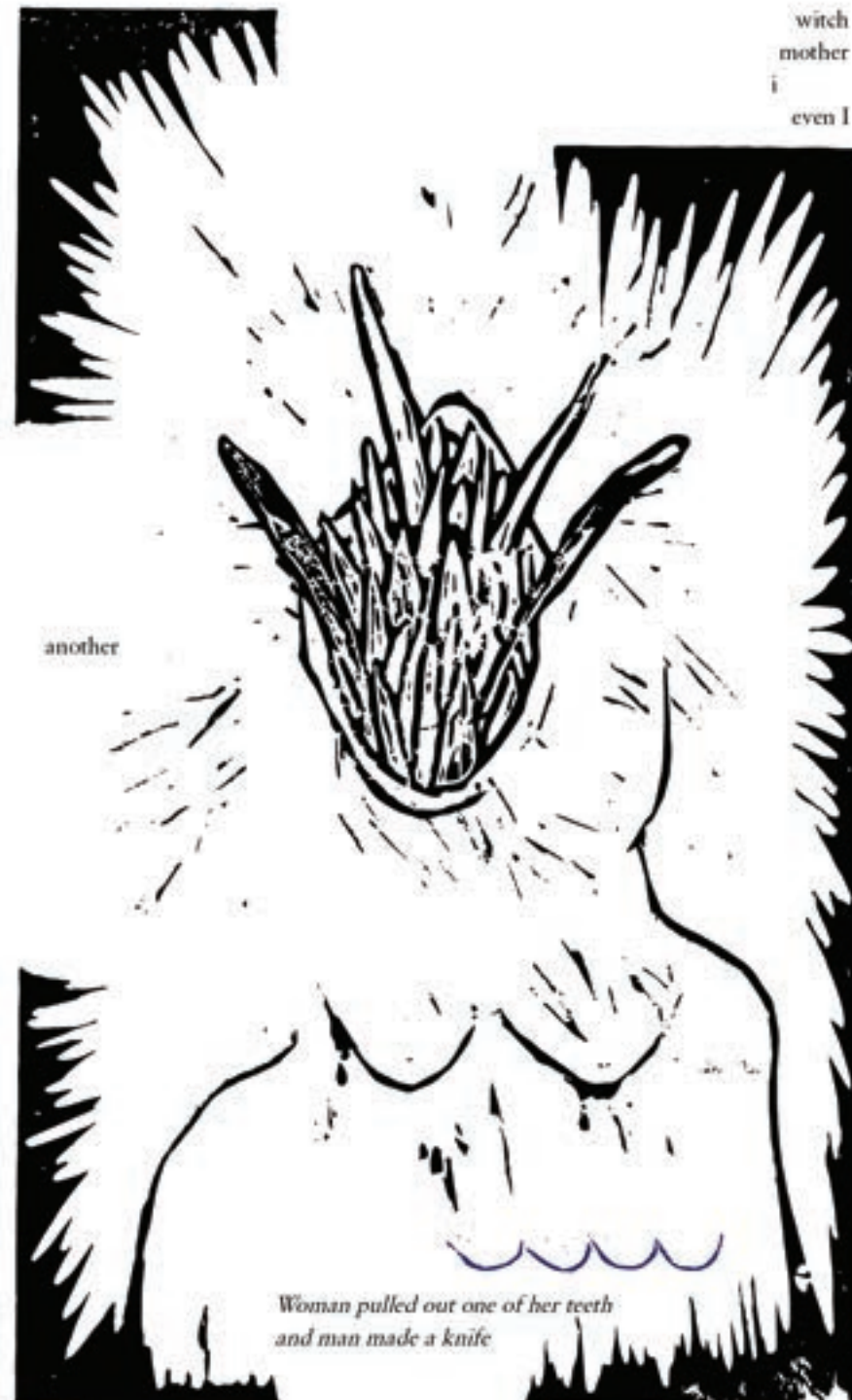
Lungs begin to collapse  
when the sky fell

they say it was rotten luck  
the generality



## Woman Pulled Out Her Teeth

Abigail Chabitnoy



## Memorial Day

Anthony D'Aries

The men are on the roof, cleaning out the gutters, backpack leaf blowers blaring. My sons stand beside their playground, mouths agape, and gaze up at them like they're astronauts.

"They're on the roof, Otis!" Tucker shouts. "How are they on the roof?"

"But, Dad," Otis says, frowning, "they're killing our tomato plants."

He means the mysterious green vines that had sprouted out of our choked gutters. Almost a year's worth of rotted leaves. Clogged arteries. I tell the boys this will be better for the house, that now the rain has somewhere to go. A rush of relief watching the debris blow into the air and fall like black snow. The relief of a long-overdue job completed. The relief of *I need to get to that* and *I should really take care of that*, the months and months of pulling into the driveway and looking up at the sagging gutters, wondering how much more they could take.

After the men climb down their ladders, load their trucks, and back out of the driveway, the boys get to work. They dismantle the multicolored hoses from a water toy and wrap them around their backs. They climb to the top of their playground. For the next half hour, they pretend to blow the leaves.

*Is anyone hurt inside?*

The cop stood with one leg up on the curb outside our apartment. He chewed gum and watched me. He didn't stare or squint like some cops do—he wasn't looking through me—he watched like a cow beside a country road might look up and gaze at passing cars, mouth full of grass, chewing in slow, wide circles. He worked with clarity, precision. He was a surgeon knowing where to cut, which piece of the body to remove.

The EMT put my shoes on. She shined a flashlight in my eyes and asked me what I took. *Why? Why did you do this?* What did I say? I remember the ambulance ride so clearly. I was relieved to be on the stretcher, buckled in, each limb fastened and secured, this stranger holding my hand and telling me she's a widow, that her husband killed himself two years ago. And I was crying, in bursts and gasps, trying to talk through it and not recognizing my voice, unable to control the shape of my mouth, and it was relief, overwhelming, frightening relief, an open valve, a sandbag slashed and emptied.

"People are Strange" by The Doors echoes from around the corner. It gets louder. Closer. A man on a motorcycle—the kind with trunks and antennae and a big, black wraparound windshield—roars up the street. *Wicked, unwanted.* Nine in the morning. A Tuesday. Day whatever of quarantine. This man in black is the only one on the road.

There's a sewer pipe in our basement with a jagged crack in it. My father pointed it out to me the last time he was here. We made plans to fix it, before being in the same room became dangerous. All the materials are on the workbench—a stretch of PVC, rubber gaskets, a Sawzall and fresh blades—but I remember that day, years ago, when we had a party at my parent's house, and their sewer pipe burst and a torpedo of gray water blasted my father in the chest.

When I take the laundry out of the dryer or bring up another one of my kids' toys, I look at the crack, certain it grows longer and wider while we sleep.

—  
 Tucker wakes at three in the morning and calls for me.  
*What's the matter, bud?*  
*Daddy?*  
*I'm here.*  
*Something was trying to kill you.*  
 —

That same morning, both boys walk into our bedroom, sweatshirts wrapped around their backs, empty sleeves aimed at me and Vanessa. In their deepest voices, they say, "We're here to clean your gutters."

—  
 The House on Sunset Hill sounds like a Robert Redford movie. It was one of the first houses Vanessa and I saw, so perhaps that had something to do with it. Our feet still planted in our apartment—the leak in Otis's ceiling or the radiators that banged so loudly in the night (only the night), like a crew building a railroad in the basement. And it wasn't ours. We wanted to own something.  
*Step back in time in this charming circa 1700s antique farmhouse.*

Thick wood beams. The sewing studio on the sunporch. The writing nook in the attic. Come on.  
 "And the barn would be yours, too," the realtor said.

**When I take the laundry out of the dryer or bring up another one of my kids' toys, I look at the crack, certain it grows longer and wider while we sleep.**

We'd watched enough HGTV to know there had to be a catch. No asbestos or lead paint? No radon? Too good to be true. *Go with the Flow*, the sign said in the bathroom. A wooden whale nailed to the wall.

We made an offer.  
 "Before we move forward," the realtor said, "there's something you should know."

The previous owner shot himself in the barn. He was a carpenter. He'd built the barn and the additions himself. I thought about the circular saw blades, still tipped in sawdust.

He was married. I don't know if he had any kids. For a moment, the writer in me thought: *Maybe this is fitting. Maybe we can breathe new life into this house. Maybe Vanessa's sewing and my writing and Otis's and Tucker's laughter can redeem this home.*

We withdrew our offer. We couldn't afford it.

—  
*Is anyone hurt inside?*  
 —

So many podcasts. So many voices in my head. I've listened to Marc Maron's show for years. I find his neurotic, angry, self-reflective rants entertaining, inspiring, gut-punching. Today, his girlfriend, Lynn Shelton, is sick. Not "it." Not the virus. Something else. Strep throat perhaps. That night, on her way to the bathroom, she collapses in the hallway. The ambulance comes. A day later, she dies.

I listen to the last show before Lynn's death. Then the first one after. A different man's voice in his throat.

"I don't even know if I should be out in public talking. But this is what I do."

—  
 Tucker is still in Vanessa's stomach and Otis is too young to remember. They unload groceries at the back door of the apartment. My laptop is open. My cell phone is beside the sink. Only my shoes are missing.

For years after—sometimes still—I read into Otis's questions, wonder if he's trying to tell me something.

*If Daddy dies, we'll just get a new one, right?*  
 —

Years before the virus, the workers in the hospital hallway tighten their respirators. One of them picks up a big spool of wire and carries it up the ladder. He rests it on the top step, removes a section of ceiling tile, and stands up straight. The other worker does the same. Their muffled shouts, their heavy breathing—two blue-collar Darth Vaders arguing about measurements and time.

"Should we be wearing masks, too?" I ask.

The clinician tucks her clipboard under her arm. "What was your name again?"

"Anthony."

"Anthony." She nods and rips off a nametag from the stack in her hands. She glances at the workers and smiles widely. "I'm sure it's fine. They would have told us if our health was in danger."

I nod and smile and say OK. She walks down the hall; I wait until she's in Group Room 1 before following her. One of the workers pokes his head out from the ceiling, his respirator and hair dusted white. I fill out my nametag against the cinderblock wall and stick it on my shirt. When I walk into group, I can still hear the men arguing through their respirators.

I fill out name tags three days a week for months. When I get home after the meetings, I peel my name off my chest and throw it out. And then one day, after wheeling the garbage cans from the curb to the side of our apartment, I see my name stuck to the inside of the can. Upside down, smudged, but legible.

—  
 Otis's and Tucker's pet caterpillars enter their pupal stage. They crawl to the top of the canister and hang like little thin bats. The boys fight the urge to handle the canister, shake it.

"Are they dead?" Otis asks.

"Yeah, Dad," Tucker says. "They look dead."  
 I shake my head. "They're changing."  
 —

The logo on the plumber's truck matches the insignia on his mask. His tan, bald head reminds me of my father. He walks into the basement and glances at the pipe, the crack now running the entire length of it. "Piece of cake," he says, a smile in his eyes.

His son, in a matching mask, helps him. They work in silence. An hour later, the father hands me a carbon copy of the receipt.

"Just labor, pal. You had all the right materials."  
 I had all the materials. I just needed help.  
 —

Rose, bud, and thorn. A game we play with the kids during dinner. Tell us something you loved about today, something you're looking forward to, something you didn't like. Their roses are Cheetos or SpongeBob or that we're all together as a family. Their buds are Cheetos or SpongeBob or when we can go to the water park again. Their thorns, for the last three months, have been the virus.

—  
 So many passwords. I make them all the same, turn them into daily mantras.

Doitforotis99!

Yougotthis99!

After years of group meetings and dosage adjustments, after seeing Otis meet Tucker for the first time, after leaving the apartment in the city for a house in the woods, after learning that pipes don't have to burst and sandbags can be moved, I use a different password:

Ournewlife143

—  
 The butterflies hatch. They cling to the side of their netted cage. The boys leave them orange slices. After a few days, we take the cage outside and set them free.

One butterfly doesn't want to leave. Otis reaches in, guides it up the side of the netting. He holds it up high, on the tip of his finger. The butterfly flexes its wings but doesn't fly.

"He's scared," Otis says, more to the butterfly than me.

"Yeah," Tucker says. "Maybe he's scared of the virus."

Otis turns toward the house, and by the time he looks back at his hand, the butterfly is in the air, flying drunkenly across the yard.  
 —

Vanessa orders masks for all of us. Soft, thin cotton. Green and black stripes. We tell the kids we're ninjas.

We stand on the front lawn, this family of ninjas, holding signs. *Honk for Otis!* Otis holds a sign that shouts, *I'm Six Today!*

A parade of strangers beeping and waving. Motorcycles revving engines. Tractor-trailers blowing air horns. A construction worker pulls over, puts on his ninja mask, and leaves a ten dollar bill. "Happy Birthday, Otis," he says. We never learn his name.

Then the grand finale. The slow police cars and fire trucks, lights flashing, officers, firefighters waving. And a two-fingered salute from the EMT, drifting by in her silent ambulance.



**Sista Awa Oil on Cement**

Mario Loprete

Canvas • 100 cm x 100 cm

## The Woman Who Wanted to Plant Turnips

Mak Sisson

She is a wrapped woman before she is buried.  
 So stuffed full of virtues that her bodice rips;  
 Her mouth stutters over breakfast, her belly full,  
 The toast and country eggs sitting untouched on her plate.  
 The marks of daylight streak across her room,  
 And all the town bellows out in the market.

She knows she must go out today, to market,  
 So she strings on her pockets and fishes for coins buried  
 In cushions and blankets, ones her children made a room  
 And a house and a neighborhood with. Rips  
 Bloom out of the faded fabric, and their welcome mat of a plate  
 Cracked under tiny feet, the ones that made her empty house full.

That's what this house was: empty, but full  
 Of ugly memories, of men who claimed to go to market  
 And instead met with gleaming gold women who could not fill a plate  
 But could whisper honey, breathe chocolate. Soon the men are buried  
 With everything golden gone. Women cry prayers and 'RIP's  
 Across the cemetery, their silk skirts darting away from the casket room.

When she stumbles by the selling-stalls, no one makes room  
 For an unmarriable widow. The customers, mouths full  
 Of rumors, gossip, slanders, push past her, analyzing the rips  
 In her dress, wondering which traveler made those. The market  
 Is a place of commodification. She is on display, her sunlight buried  
 Under a starchy black dress, as she searches for a new dinner plate.

There are many things to look for in a new plate:  
 The design, the quality, the symmetry, if it has enough room  
 To fit the meager meal. On a small plate, beans are buried  
 Beneath the chicken, and children can get away with a faux "I'm full!"  
 So they may continue to play in fabric houses. Her daughter makes a market  
 And sells wedding veils, and she cannot help the way her heart rips.

She buys a porcelain dish. She does not like the way the barker rips  
 Her off, but the design within is too pleasing to dismiss. The plate  
 Contains a cornucopia, running over with rutabagas, like the market  
 Sells in fall. Even painted full of food, it has enough room  
 To fit all the sandwiches her children could eat. She dreams of full  
 Stomachs. Of growing radishes. Of unearthing something buried.

She leaves some of herself in the market. Her dress always rips,  
 Torn on a peg or by a wandering hand. Buried thoughts settle, and a plate  
 Falls in the other room. She undoes her bodice, laughs, eats nothing, and is full.



### The Sun (Tarot Series)

Ayirani Balachanthiran

Digital Painting • A4



## The Summer I Met My Brother

Keith Hoffman

*Author's Note:* My intention in telling the story of my brother and me is to describe our experience fifty years ago when almost no one had even heard the word *trans*. It is told through our perspective as we processed what was happening at the time. Some of the terms my family used are dated, but it was the only language available to us. The idea of misgendering was not talked or written about, so we had to forge our own understanding with what little information we had. My brother was a pioneer out of necessity, and transitioning saved his life. He has approved of the terms and pronouns I use in this piece; however, I have changed his name to protect his privacy.

My big brother climbed out of his truck in cut-off jean shorts, an old t-shirt, and a baseball hat looking a little like Burt Reynolds in *Smokey and the Bandit*, which I'd just seen at the drive-in. A smile came across his mustached face.

"Look at you." His voice was deep and low. "You've grown into a man."

I couldn't tell if he was joking. I was fourteen and as skinny as Rick was broad.

My mom ran past me and hugged my brother hard. I thought back to the two of them fighting in the years before he left home.

The truck's passenger door opened, and a woman stepped out in short shorts and a halter top that barely covered her breasts.

"You must be Rick's little brother! I'm Rick's wife, Laverne."

As she embraced me, my mom eyed her warily. She did not accept newcomers into the family easily.

While they introduced themselves, Rick winked at me and grabbed a crate of meowing cats from his front seat.

"You want to carry this up for me?"

Of course I did. Rick was nine years older and had always been my hero. When he had lived at home, he barely let a week go by without bringing home a stray. Usually the poor thing was limping, missing an eye or ear or tail, or was so skinny you could see its ribs. All through the early 1970s, our house had been a shelter for wayward felines that weren't wanted by the rest of the world—cats sleeping under hanging macramé plant holders, nestled in the plush burgundy shag carpeting in our mom's bedroom, batting at the beaded curtain at the entrance of our family room, or staring at Pete, our petrified parakeet in his cage. When they died, they ended up in Mom's tomato garden, buried under tiny crosses made out of popsicle sticks with their names written in black marker.

Now Rick walked inside and set down the crate next to a table with an old stucco lamp. I wondered if he noticed the cracks crisscrossing the side that had been glued together after a basketball collided with it. Four years earlier, my mom had thrown the ball in frustration during one of their many screaming matches. It had missed Rick, but the lamp wasn't so lucky.

I couldn't stop staring at him with his short hair, sideburns, and scruffy face. He was a totally different person than the one who had left home, except for his eyes and his smile. Those were exactly the same.

It was like the butterfly of my big brother had finally emerged from the cocoon that had trapped him.

A few weeks later, I sat in our front yard as Rick tinkered with the old lawnmower that had been sitting broken in the shed for months. He had already fixed the light over the bathroom sink that hadn't worked for as long as I could remember, as well as the garbage disposal that only let out a high-pitched whine after it tried to eat a fork. Earlier that morning, he had shored up the roof of the shed in our backyard in 85-degree heat. He fit right in with the other neighborhood guys even though he hadn't grown up as one.

Katie had never been able to make herself blend in. She was nothing like my other sister, Julie, who blow dried her hair so it hung long and perfectly straight and kissed the screen whenever Davy Jones from *The Monkees* came on TV. Katie looked as comfortable in a dress as a cat would. Her face was always a hard mask of defensiveness. She was a trapped animal in perpetual fight or flight and as rebellious as I was people-pleasing. But she always had a soft spot for me. If I had a toy that needed to be assembled, I went straight to Katie. And even though "she" was now "he" after an almost unheard-of sex change procedure in 1973, that part hadn't changed.

"Can you hand me a socket wrench?" Rick said, examining the grimy motor matted with dark green grass.

"Is that the same as pliers?"

"Never mind," he replied with a laugh. "So why would you want to major in theater in college?" he asked, continuing our conversation. "It sounds pretty gay to me."

"It's not gay," I said defensively. "I've played the romantic lead in three plays since I started high school. And I even got to kiss Linda Howard in the last one," I added, trying to sound like I found that activity anything but nerve-wracking and unnatural.

But if I had been honest, I would have told him I'd been worried about my feelings around sex for the last few years. I'd read somewhere that a lot of adolescent boys went through a period where they had crushes on other boys, but my particular gay phase was taking a lot longer than I had expected. It started with Robbie, the boy who played Jesus in my fifth-grade church play and looked so handsome in his crown of thorns, and continued to Rusty Johnson, the homecoming football king at my high school.

But I was surprised I was defending myself to Rick. Four years earlier, he had turned our entire family's world upside down with his identity confusion.

—

The summer started out like any other. It was 1973 and I was in fifth grade when my mother asked a question that would have far-reaching consequences on my life.

"Keith, do you know what a transsexual is?"

Although I was a sensitive boy always on high alert for the next catastrophe ever since my dad had suddenly dropped dead of a heart attack three years earlier, I had not seen this question coming.

"A transsexual," my mother said without waiting for my answer, "is a woman who becomes a man or a man who becomes a woman."

My mind raced ahead to figure out where this was going. Had she discovered I had once tried on her blond wig and lime green Lycra dress that flared just below the waist? Was she going to make me have an operation because of it? I didn't like getting my tonsils out, and this seemed like it was going to hurt a lot worse.

I couldn't understand why she was bringing this up when we had been having a perfectly good evening curled up on the couch watching *The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour*. Maybe she had sensed that one of Cher's male backup dancers gave my body a happy, tingling sensation I didn't understand?

I always loved these special nights when it was just my mom and me. With her bleach-blond hair and no-nonsense attitude, she was as badass as Angie Dickinson on *Police Woman*.

"Katie feels like a man trapped in a woman's

**She was a trapped animal in perpetual fight or flight and as rebellious as I was people-pleasing. But she always had a soft spot for me.**

body," my mother continued. "She says she doesn't feel comfortable in her own skin. She's been doing research and by a lucky coincidence found one of the few doctors who deal with this type of thing right here in this area."

I stared at the TV trying to process all this. Cher was singing in front of a pale orange moon in a beaded, tangerine, low-cut gown split all the way up to her thigh. Her solo number was my favorite part of the show, but my mom had so rattled me that it was barely registering.

"She is going to start taking male hormones and eventually have two operations to remove her breasts and uterus, and one to construct a penis."

I had never guessed I would be having a "penis construction" discussion with my mom. But maybe if my sibling was allowed to get a penis, I could finally get that pony I'd been asking for.

"Katie's already started taking the hormones, so you'll soon notice a big change in her appearance. Her voice will deepen. Her breasts will shrink. She'll become more muscular and grow chest and facial hair."

A pang of jealousy shot through me. I'd had my male hormones for twelve years to no such effect.

"Oh, and she wants to be called Rick from now on. Do you have any questions?"

I had a lot of questions. Why was Katie doing this? Was it even legal?

But when I turned and looked at my mom, I saw something compassionate and final in her eyes that told me the right thing to do was to just accept and support whatever this was that was happening. She wasn't crying. She wasn't upset. She was almost relieved. In fact, I don't think I had ever seen my mother this calm when it came to my sibling. It was like she finally understood why their relationship had been so hard.

"Um...I think that's totally great if it makes Katie happy. Sorry. I mean...Mike happy."

"Rick."

"Right...Rick."

"Oh, and Keith, let's not speak a word about any of this outside the immediate family. It will be our secret for now."

A few days after our talk, I started to slowly meet Rick. I noticed hair on his face. He wore his usual jeans and t-shirts, but his short frame quickly began to bulk-up and he cut his hair shorter than mine. But it was when he opened his mouth to speak that I was the most amazed. He still said the same words he used to say, but his voice was deeper.

And this man never mentioned his previous name again.

After the initial shock, I became as close to my new big brother as I ever had been. I was devastated when Rick took me fishing one day and told me he was moving to California the following week. He didn't explain why, but I knew it was because of the operations my mom had told me about.

It wasn't long after Rick left that I started having feelings about boys. He was the only person I could imagine talking to about my strange problem, but I wasn't going to write about it in a letter, and I couldn't afford to call him long distance. When he arrived back home five years later with his new wife, I realized I finally had my chance. And this talk about kissing Linda Howard in the school play was my way in.

But as Rick pulled the cord of the lawnmower and it started with a loud roar that prohibited any more talking, I felt a wave of relief. Maybe I wouldn't mention anything after all. He had worked out his problems. He had gotten married and moved on. He didn't need his little brother to rock the boat.

—

I stayed true to my plan and majored in theater before moving to New York City. By that time I'd realized my attraction to men was more than a mere phase and had come out to all my friends and most of my family. My mom adjusted to the news pretty quickly, and I had Rick to thank for that. After one of her kids having a sex change, one being gay was small potatoes. I let her tell my brother. When he and I got together during the holidays we never talked about it. We pretended to be two red-blooded, "regular" guys even though we both knew better.

But almost twenty years to the day after he pulled up with Laverne in front of our house full of hope for his new life, I found myself sitting in my sister Julie's car with my mom on our way to a mental hospital where Rick was on suicide watch.

His marriage to Laverne had only lasted a few years. After the divorce, he quickly met and married a young widow with two kids. I found out from a phone call from my mom.

"Do we like her?" I asked with concern.

"She's very religious," my mom said.

"Well, who cares how much she goes to church? As long as she is okay about Rick."

"What do you mean 'okay about Rick?'" mom asked suspiciously.

"Um...you know...that he...used to be a woman?"

"Oh that," my mom said, brushing it off as if it were a minute detail. "She doesn't know about that. Why bring up the past if it's going to cause problems?"

I couldn't believe what she was telling me. My family had gotten very good at keeping Rick's secret over the years, but this upped the challenge to an entirely new level.

"She asked to see pictures of Rick as a child when she came to visit," my mom continued. "I said they all burned in a fire."

"Did she ask why the rest of your kids' childhood pictures were all over the wall?"

"She didn't have a chance. I distracted her by saying I'd give her recipes for Rick's favorite dishes."

My mom was proud of how easily she fooled Rick's wife, but I had to wonder if a red flag went up somewhere in his newlywed's brain. Maybe a religious young widow living in a small town in Indiana couldn't even conceive of the thought she had married a man who used to be a woman. After all, the term *transsexual* was just starting to be discussed on daytime talk shows but just barely. It certainly wasn't accepted by most of society. At least Laverne had known my brother's story. But I guess Rick wanted to start this new relationship fresh.

I had taken a much different path than my brother. In New York City in the '80s and '90s, everyone knew I was gay. It had become essential for me and my friends to come out of hiding if we wanted to stay alive. AIDS was ravaging our community, and most of the country didn't seem to care. Other gay men and I defiantly marched the streets protesting the government and church. "Silence Equals Death" was our rallying cry. Guidelines for safer sex, a healthy dose of paranoia, and luck got me through the crisis without contracting HIV, but I saw for myself that secrets could literally kill.

I got approval and support from my community, but Rick wasn't as lucky. If he let people know his secret in Indiana, his life would be in danger. I could never watch the movie *Boys Don't Cry*. I knew the trans character got killed in the end, and I already lived with that fear for my brother. Rick just wanted normalcy. He wasn't looking to start a movement or defy society. He didn't want to move to the city and drink nonfat lattes and live in a cramped apartment. He savored his life with his new wife and kids in a small town where he owned a bike shop.

—

"Ask your husband if he's really a man," the voice on the other end of the phone slurred.

"Who is this?" Rick's wife demanded, but her answer was a dial tone.

She and Rick had been married almost eight years and had added a daughter to the family by artificial insemination. If she had any suspicion about my brother's past, she still kept it to herself.

But the calls continued day and night. They became so relentless that they instructed their children not to answer the phone.

Rick knew from the first call it was Laverne.

She'd had increasing issues with alcoholism after their divorce and had bitterly resented that she was struggling to get her life together while Rick seemed to have finally found his place in the world. He heard from her periodically and she was always angry, but now she'd decided to use the secret she had been keeping for him as a weapon to take him down.

The denial Rick's current wife had about their marriage was finally smashed to pieces. As she fully realized the truth, she felt humiliated and stupid. But more than anything, she felt rage. She felt lied to. She asked my brother to move out.

How could I fault her? But how could I not also worry about Rick? I knew he had lied, not out of meanness, but for self-preservation.

Six months after being asked to move out, Rick was living in a tiny room over his bike shop and had been unable to get back on his feet emotionally. He had been knocked down hard and couldn't get back up.

"I have nothing to live for," he'd tell me on his daily phone calls at dawn. His voice sounded broken, and I worried his soul was, too.

"Things will get better," I'd reassure him even though I wasn't sure how they would. "Can you just make it one more day? And call me tomorrow?"

Rick refused to get outside help. It was still too big a risk to reveal his secret to any stranger in his small town, even a professional. My family worried, but we told ourselves he had survived so much. He had found the courage all those years ago to do something very few people had done. I was angry that he hadn't been rewarded for his courage with an easier life but had to believe Rick would find the strength to get through this.

Every time the phone jarred me out of my sleep, I felt relief that my brother had made it through another day alive. But one morning Rick's call didn't come, and he didn't answer mine. And when the phone did finally ring, it was my sister Julie's voice on the other end.

"Rick tried to kill himself."

"Tried? Is he..."

"He's okay. He took a lot of pills but not enough. Can you come home?"

Julie, Mom, and I pulled into the parking lot of the mental hospital. The three of us timidly announced ourselves to the smiling nurse at the front desk. After a whispered phone conversation, she pressed a button that unlocked a door with a loud buzz and click. We entered a large brightly lit room. People in hospital gowns slowly milled about or sat in uncomfortable chairs next to tables with magazines, games and puzzle boxes. No one seemed crazy. On the contrary, they looked in a state of permanent shock over the fact they had ended up there. This couldn't be where my brother belonged. This was for people who were dead inside. Even at his most miserable, Rick was passionate about life. He loved his family and his animals, and I was pretty certain he could still get a thrill out of fixing things.

The three of us looked around, feeling lost and out of place.

My mom spotted him first.

As Rick turned a corner into the main room, she immediately walked toward him. She was in her mid-seventies, and her days confidently wielding a weed-whacker on our front lawn in a bright green bikini were long over. She was still quick-witted and formidable, but it was hard to deny her body was betraying her. She had lung issues as a result of Lupus that made any kind of physical exertion a challenge.

Rick looked small in his hospital gown, and Mom looked frail as she shuffled in his direction. But with only a foot between them, she suddenly lunged through the air like some feral cat and grabbed Rick by the shoulders, shaking him violently.

"How could you do this to me? How could you do this to your mother?"

Julie and I jumped in to pry her off. She was like a desperate, wild animal in our arms as we dragged her across the tile away from him. The other patients stirred from their haze and an attendant hurried over. Finally, Mom collapsed, panting as Julie and I held her upright. Rick stared at her in shock.

The attendant eyed us warily. "Is everything okay?" he asked.

"Fine," Julie and I answered.

"Apparently, this family is too crazy even for here," Julie said. "Maybe we should go somewhere private before they lock us all up?"

I caught my sister's eye and smiled. Our shared humor over our unique family situation was a strong bond between us.

In Rick's room, we all sat around his bed and talked about everything but his suicide attempt. Nothing could erase the grim mood that blanketed the sterile room, but I was desperate to try.

"So...does anyone have any good news?" I asked.

We were stumped. Finally, Rick brightened a bit.

"I found out my gun license finally got renewed, so I'll be able to go hunting next month."

No one said a word for quite a while.

Then Julie finally spoke up.

"Does anyone else in this room think putting a gun in the hands of a suicidal person is a bad idea?" Mom, Rick, and I burst out laughing. The relief of tension felt exhilarating.

At that moment, I knew my brother was going to be OK, because he could still laugh.

—

Even though I was supposedly the out and proud brother, there was a lot about me I still kept from others. I was single, so it was easy to compartmentalize my life and let only certain people know the things I wanted them to know. By 2000, I was a successful TV producer, but I still felt dissatisfied and empty. I began experimenting with ways to numb myself and tried almost every substance at least once, hoping the right combination of drugs would erase the anxious guilt I seemed to carry in my DNA. It was easy to keep this from my family since I lived so far away. I sometimes worried I was crossing some invisible and dangerous line. Too often, Friday's happy hour ended with my alarm clock going off on Monday morning. I could still make it to my job even if I had to lie about my weekend. I couldn't tell people I had done coke for the previous fifty-six hours with a guy named Rocky, who I was pretty sure had just gotten out of prison. I missed scheduled phone calls with my mom because I was either too wired to talk or in the midst of coming down from a binge. I could barely do anything besides show up for work, do drugs, eat, and sleep, but I was still too proud to ask for help. I was the brother who had figured it all out. And I wasn't ready to give up that role.

**How could I fault her? But how could I not also worry about Rick? I knew he had lied, not out of meanness, but for self-preservation.**

As I slogged through my addiction for the next eight years, Rick's life steadily improved. Shortly after he was released from suicide watch, he moved to another small town in Indiana where he didn't have a history and joined a local chapter of PFLAG—Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. It wasn't the perfect fit, but it was the closest to a support group he could find. When he nervously revealed he was transgender to the group, they didn't turn him away. They embraced him. Many of them had experienced their own rejection from their families or their church, so they understood his feelings of otherness. The bond he formed with that group seemed to give him a sense of self that wasn't based on a false image.

As our lives went on different trajectories, we grew apart. But in 2009, our eighty-three-year-old mother's deteriorating health brought us back together. She had become increasingly housebound, depending on her oxygen tank and my sister Julie, who lived down the street from her. She spent her final days in a hospital, slipping in and out of consciousness, and died in the middle of the night with Rick, whose turn it was to keep watch, sitting at her side and gently patting her hand.

I got sober three months later. Even though my mom had fully accepted her kids, she had taught us to protect ourselves by hiding the parts of us that others might have disapproved of. She meant no harm. The world would not have looked kindly on my brother and me, especially as we were coming of age. When I had told my mom I was gay, she told me she had suspected but hoped it wasn't true.

"Why?" I asked.

"I just don't want your life to be so hard."

But life had been hard anyway. And protecting others from who I really was only made me feel broken. It was time to come out of hiding.

—

"Can't you just swirl it around in your mouth and spit it out?"

"Nope."

"But it's homemade plum wine!" Rick protested.

"If I'm going to lose ninety days of sobriety, it's not going to be by swishing homemade plum wine around in my mouth. I have much more depraved plans than that."

Rick had come to visit me in LA, where I had moved from New York. He was there to help scatter Mom's ashes in the Pacific Ocean on a beach she had visited and loved. As we stood on the sand with her ashes swirling in the sunlight that broke through the clouds, we felt melancholy but grateful. We both knew we had survived that long because of her.

But my brother had another reason he was in LA.

Years earlier, after his marriage fell apart, he had spent a beer-fueled afternoon driving the country roads around his house until he was pulled over and arrested by the local police. They took his ID and he had never gotten it back. It would have meant going to the small-town judge, who was also a neighbor, and presenting a birth certificate that said he had been born a girl named Katie. My brother had managed without proper identification for almost a decade, but recently had become determined to get a passport. Even though he wanted the ability to move freely around the world, he still couldn't bring himself to walk into his local post office. Outside of the safety of his PFLAG group, he still felt stuck. He figured in a big city like LA, where people were more open-minded and no one knew him, he could overcome decades of fear, especially if he had his little brother at his side.

Our footsteps echoed in the ominous hall inside that imposing marble lobby of the post office in downtown LA. Rick had searched online and knew every form he needed to document his birth and later, his operations. He looked vulnerable as he stopped at one of the counters and pulled out a mass of papers to sort.

I took a deep breath. "Can I ask you something?"

This was one of the only moments since my mom had told me my big sister was becoming my big brother that the subject was back on the table. And now it was on the literal table in front of us.

"Sure."

"What in the world did you tell your wife?"

"I just told her something happened down there when I was a kid and I didn't want to talk about it."

I wasn't sure what I had expected all those years, but I was surprised the answer was so simple.

I had so many more questions, but felt my window of opportunity was already closing.

"We don't want to be late for our appointment," Rick said, gathering his papers.

As we sat down in the waiting room, I noticed my brother's shaking hands.

I thought about him first stepping into the world as "Rick." Had he already understood most people would probably never fully accept him? Had he hoped one day they would? I wished I hadn't been too young to understand how terrified he must have felt those first days. And how profoundly alone.

"Rick Hoffman?" A woman stood in her office doorway and sternly barked my brother's name. He grabbed his papers and we sheepishly followed her inside. I felt like a little boy being called to the principal's office.

Her presence was imposing, and her drab post office attire and glasses that hung from a chain around her neck added to her all-business demeanor. She looked somewhere in her forties with her brown hair pulled into a bun, but her nails were what caught my attention. They were impressively long, and each one was meticulously painted purple with multiple pink dots.

"Wow. Those are fabulous!" I blurted out.

Her serious demeanor instantly brightened as she looked proudly at her hands. "Why, thank you, honey!"

I did love them, but more importantly, I knew we needed to get her on our side and they were the quickest route I could see. Sometimes being gay had its advantages.

As she used her magnificent nails to rifle through the stack Rick had unceremoniously dumped in front of her, I quickly realized my brother was too embarrassed to help her with even a word of explanation. As her eyebrows furrowed in confusion, I knew I had to step in.

"My brother is transgender and has a birth certificate with a different name and a different sex so it's complicated," I explained. "But this should be all the paperwork you need."

She paused for a moment, frowning at the stack. Then she reached into a drawer in her metal desk and pulled out a file folder. "No problem. We'll just need to fill out these extra forms."

A half hour later, we stepped outside with a piece of paper officially stating that a passport with the name Rick Donald Hoffman was being processed and mailed to his house.

As we walked down the front steps, it struck me that I had never dared to prod against the barrier my brother put up all those decades ago until that afternoon. Maybe I wasn't so different from his ex-wife. I had been taught protecting people's secrets was how you showed you loved them.

"Let's get home," Rick said. "I still need to fix your garbage disposal and replace your light socket before I fly back." I smiled as I followed my brother. Some things hadn't changed at all.

In 2019, ten years after our trip to the LA post office, I officiated Rick's wedding to a warm, Midwestern woman who knew everything about him.

After the ceremony, I danced with my husband, Saul, a handsome, quirky, passionate, and kind artist with a big, sexy beard. Before I met him, I had stopped thinking I would ever be in another serious relationship once I had passed the age of fifty. And I certainly never thought I would be allowed to get married in my lifetime.

I saw Rick standing alone and walked up to him. The two of us had met both our spouses through dating sites, something we couldn't have imagined forty years earlier when he had arrived back home in his pick-up.

"Who thought I'd be getting married to the love of my life at sixty-five?" he said.

"You never did take the easy road," I replied. "I guess the hard one takes a little longer."

Rick sighed contentedly as we watched my husband dance with his wife.

My brother and I had finally become the people we had wanted to be.



**Dance for the Sirens**  
 Lisa Golightly Braden  
 Acrylic on canvas paper • 16"x 20"

## The Weather

Kendra Tanacea

my lover traveled quite a bit  
 always refusing to report the weather  
*seasonably warm or cold air on the move*

o dark cloud o brewing storm  
 barometric pressure drops  
 mercury in the reservoir

if you don't tune into weather reports  
 there's no way of knowing  
 clouds are gathering momentum

low pressure systems lead to depression  
 if you feel calm  
 you're in the eye of the storm

watch for falling rocks  
 icy patches on bridge  
 hydroplaning

mudslides in Malibu  
 have you seen the discontented earth  
 shake off houses like water droplets

massive flooding in Rio Nido  
 have you seen the river run mad  
 carrying homes to the swelling sea

## Do You Talk to Your Plants?

Kendra Tanacea

I'm a secret within a secret.  
 To say hidden womb would be obvious.  
 But my eyes cannot see inside me.  
 Does the magnolia blossom know its branch?  
 Or is its bloom, its fall, an independent act?  
 I steal flowers from people's yards.  
*Not guilty*, I say.  
 If a vine reaches out, can't I say it's mine?  
 Honeysuckle memories come on so strong.  
 Is it me, perfumed on a hollow stalk?  
 Or this orange pistil inside the magnolia?  
 Something always pushes out:  
 tulip from bulb, orchid from bud.  
 Who controls this body?  
 I want to say it belongs solely to you:  
 grass that hasn't begun to grow.  
 Not able to whisper into my own ear,  
 I can't explain to myself who I am.  
 Come, tell me something I don't know.

## In the Shower I Feel the Welling in My Eyes

Alexander Eikenberg

and maybe that is because i lose minutes wondering at the hook-tailed comb you hung on my shower rod because the large teeth wouldn't rip my long hair and you hate the sound of knots

maybe it is because this room has the lotion you gave me that says *Hello, Beautiful* and i told you once that the word beautiful reminds me of its scent that reminds me of you

maybe it is because behind the locked door and curtain and veil of noise the steam in the air matches the heat in my chest but maybe

it is because my dark hair plastered against my hands smells like yours  
 and maybe that is because you gifted me the shampoo you buy for yourself  
 and maybe it is because you washed my hair once and i am still trying to find  
 your fingertips with my hands when i lather and rinse my scalp

## Asian Me

Deborah S. Prespare

My plane leaves at 6:00 a.m. It's 2:30 a.m., the same time I woke up the past three mornings—no alarm needed. The meetings I'd flown in for started at 9:00 a.m. each day. The days usually wrapped around 5:30 p.m., 8:30 p.m. back at home, the time I'd be getting into my pajamas and watching TV with my husband. My body likes routines. My body isn't happy now. My neck stiff, I sit up and stretch my arms. At least my not acclimating to the time change is paying off now with my early flight.

I snap on the bedside lamp. The hotel room isn't bad, but it isn't superb either. The carpet and curtains are a matching drab gray. The upholstery on the armchair, also in a shade of gray, needs a deep cleaning. The desk and dresser have the usual signs of wear—scratches, dings, and watermarks. The shower is nice, though. I adjust the water temperature. The white subway-tiled floor and walls of the shower are clean. The showerhead is massive and produces a high-pressure rainfall that I know I can lose time under, so I focus on the tasks at hand—wash and rinse, and rinse a little more.

Showered, dressed, and with my suitcase packed, I open the curtains for a last look at the city. The shower and the view—these are the high notes for this hotel. San Francisco stretches out below me. When I checked in, I wasn't thrilled to be up so high—33rd floor—in earthquake country, but the view is something. The sun hasn't come up yet, so I can't make out the bay, but the city and bridge lights more than compensate for the night-obscured water and hills.

Fortunately, there haven't been any quakes during this trip. Not yet, at least. Thinking there's no need to press my luck, I grab my suitcase and do one more visual sweep of the room to make sure I haven't forgotten anything.

The hallway is quiet. An ice machine hums. The elevator, which was slow and packed every other time I used it, is quick and empty now. I check out with no issue. The man at the counter says there's no need to call for a car. He assures me there are cabs at this hour.

I stand inside the hotel's entrance and look through its glass doors. A few cars pass by. No cabs, though. I step outside and look up and down the street. Homeless people, some in clusters, some slumbering solo, line the sidewalk in both directions. A homeless man shouts from under his stained blanket, "Go back to your country!"

I step back inside the hotel and launch a ride-share app on my phone. My driver, Alexei, will be arriving in four minutes. He's right on time. When I wheel my bag outside, Alexei, an older man, gets out of the car, favoring his right leg. He doesn't look well enough to be lifting things, so I tell him I can manage my suitcase, but he waves me back. Taking hold of my bag, he grips the rim of the car's trunk with his other hand to brace himself and manages to hoist the suitcase up. I can't help myself. I lean in to help.

He thanks me, his words heavy with what sounds like a Russian accent. "Not so strong now, but you should have seen me when I was your age." He winks and closes the trunk. We get in the car, and he looks at his phone mounted on the dash. "To the airport?"

I tell him yes and give him my airline, then we're off. We pass the huddles of homeless people on this street and pass more slumbering bodies—some lying down, others sleepwalking through drug-glazed dreams—on the streets leading out of the city. If I were down and out, San Francisco, with its beautiful year-round weather, would be where I'd want to end up too.

"I like driving at this time," he says. "It's peaceful."

I agree with him. The highway is empty. We'll make it to the airport in no time. I'll be able to find something to eat, get some coffee, and have ample time to relax before boarding starts. Maybe I'll even look for a new paperback for the flight. Being a nervous flier, I like to indulge in brain-candy-type books on flights, books meant to help pass the time, not necessarily to illuminate. My brain, having to convince itself with every bout of turbulence or loud mechanical whir that flying is safe, has no capacity on flights to learn anything new.

I look up and see Alexei glancing at me through the rearview mirror. I know what he's doing. Him being a white man, I ready myself to answer his questions.

He asks if I had a nice trip. I tell him I did, and I wait. He asks if the temperature is okay. I tell him it is, and I wait.

People wonder when they see me, when they try to categorize me. Non-Asians see only Asian, but there's something about me that makes them want to guess the type of Asian I am. Chinese is the most popular guess, followed by Japanese. I get Thai and Vietnamese too. Rarely does anyone guess the Asian half of me right—Korean. Asians wonder about me too. They wonder what sort of exotic white I might be. Maybe I'm a Spaniard or from Eastern Europe, they guess. When I explain my two sides to Asians, they seem happy to see themselves in me. When my white self is revealed to non-Asians, though, there is disbelief. There is doubt. There is only Asian me.

"You going home?" he asks me.

A veiled way of asking where I'm from. I nod, tell him I'm headed back to New York City, and wait for the usual follow-up question: *But where is home really?* He keeps glancing at me through the mirror. I know what he sees.

A white coworker, someone who called herself a friend, someone who knew of my mixed-race background, once described me as having black eyes and black hair during a lunch outing with other coworkers. I corrected her and said my eyes and hair are brown. She reminded me of my Asian background. I was the only person of Asian descent at the table. Everyone smiled at this woman's reminder to me of who I am. I don't know why, but I didn't let it go. Usually, when it seems people are set on their definition of me, I laugh off their inability to see. I was tired, I guess. I told her that her eyes and hair were darker than mine, in fact. She told me that wasn't possible. I asked her

to hold her hair up to mine. Laughing, she complied. My hair was significantly lighter than hers. She was shocked. Everyone else was too. She asked me if I dyed my hair. I told her, "Yes—in the two minutes since you first said my hair was black, I dyed it." Needless to say, we didn't remain friends.

Asians make me feel proud to be Asian. Sometimes there's even a gloss of jealousy to their smiles when they learn that I'm part white. Growing up, I tried to make non-Asians see all of me too. As an adult, I can rationalize why I tried so hard, why I still sometimes try. Whiteness is the ideal. TV shows and movies tell us so. Books tell us so. The way non-Asians treat my Asian mom tells me so. The way I'm treated tells me so.

Growing up, I wanted everyone to know that I was part of the ideal. I tried so hard to make them see. I still try, but not as earnestly. Asians see. Non-Asians, though, can't shake their disbelief. Tired of the skepticism, I don't offer up an explanation of me as quickly as I used to. I fight the constant urge to make them see. I make them ask their questions. I make them work to label me.

So I wait for Alexei to ask me where home for me is really, but the typical question doesn't come. Instead, Alexei tells me how much he loves New York and how he spent time there with relatives as a kid. They lived in Brighton Beach. He loves Coney Island, he says. He asks me if I ever rode the roller coaster there.

"The Cyclone? No way," I say, thinking maybe he's one of the rare ones who doesn't need to categorize me to feel satisfied. "Roller coasters are scary, and that one—I hear it's so rickety. It's like almost 100 years old, right?"

"Old might seem weak, but we are built strong." He chuckles.

I laugh too. I wait for him to ask about me, but he continues reminiscing about Brighton Beach. Listening to him talk about the meat dumplings—*pelmeni*, he calls them—that his aunt used to make, I look out my window, and my eyes meet the driver of a turquoise pickup truck that is rolling by us on the highway. In this second, as the vintage-looking vehicle passes us, I register that the driver of this truck is a middle-aged white man with a red-hued face and gray eyebrows. In this second we share, he registers something about me too.

The truck slows until the driver is in line with my window again. The driver is looking directly at me. His eyebrows are pinched together and his face is turning an angrier red. He points at me, his finger stabbing the air. I snap my eyes forward. My mouth dries. My hands sweat.

“What is this man doing?” Alexei asks.

I close my eyes and grip my seatbelt’s shoulder strap. Alexei’s car surges ahead, then slows down. Alexei swears under his breath. “Crazy man,” he mutters. He taps his brakes. He switches lanes and wrenches his car back into the other lane. “Why is he doing this?”

What triggered this man, my racing mind wonders, but my heart is sprinting even faster, and my heart, with its rapid beats, measures the intense notes of the man’s rage and knows without a doubt why this man is doing this. *Go back to your country!* his furious stare screams. *Go back to your country!* There’s no room for misinterpretation. I know what he sees.

Alexei hits his horn. The man in the pickup lays on his and doesn’t let up.

“Ma’am,” Alexei says, his voice shaking, “maybe you can call the police? I don’t know what this man is doing.”

“Are we almost to the airport?” I manage to ask.

“Almost. But he won’t let me get into the lane.”

Alexei slows his car down. Its horn still blaring, the truck slows down too, blocking Alexei’s attempt to get over again. “Maybe you should call the police,” Alexei repeats. “I drive. You call.”

**Asians make me feel proud to be Asian. Sometimes there’s even a gloss of jealousy to their smiles when they learn that I’m part white.**

This man is putting our lives in danger. Of course I should call the police, but my head is still catching up to my speeding heart. While I understand with absolute certainty the situation I’m in, I can’t believe this is really happening. Shock, I guess, is what I’m feeling. I reach for my phone. The truck jerks into our lane.

“Ma’am?” Alexei pleads as he hits the gas to speed out of the way.

I nod and unlock my phone. Another car approaches us on the left. The driver hits the horn a few times, and the pickup truck races ahead, as if those short blasts of warning from an outsider, a witness, breaks a hex. Alexei sighs. I put my phone away, thinking I probably should still call the police, but my mind is reeling. Did we really just experience that? I can’t believe it, but I know we did. Alexei switches lanes, and we exit.

“Never in my years,” Alexei says.

I can’t speak. My Asianness is usually the cause of ignorant assumptions or curiosity. How many times have people thought I was lying or being rude when I said I didn’t speak Chinese or Japanese? How many times have people been amazed that I speak English so well? And math questions—don’t even get me started. This racism, although not subtle, has always stayed in the realm of ignorant politeness (even if feigned) before today. This racism was always something I could shrug off. This racism was nothing compared to the American Indian or Black experience, so who was I to complain?

But now? I take a deep breath. I can’t just shrug it off. Never has such fury been directed at me. I take more deep breaths to calm myself.

Alexei stops the car in front of the terminal. We get out, and I help him heave my suitcase out of the trunk. This is usually when I’d make a joke about how I need to stop bringing my whole closet with me. I can’t joke now, though. Alexei’s hands are shaking.

“I’m glad you were driving,” I say to him. “You really handled...that well.” His careful driving, I feel in my bones, saved us.

He nods and closes the trunk. He hesitates. A tear forms in his eye. He’s in shock too. *It isn’t enough anymore.* The thought persists. *It isn’t enough anymore.* It isn’t enough anymore for Asians to serve as caricatures for poking fun at. It isn’t enough anymore to remind us that we aren’t white. It isn’t enough anymore to shout at us to go back to our countries, even though, for many of us, this is the only country we’ve ever known. My eyes well. I don’t mean to start crying.

He hugs me and pats my back. “You are okay,” he says.

“Thank you.”

He squeezes my shoulder. “Everything will be okay.”

“Thank you,” I repeat, wiping my eyes.

His eyes glistening, he nods. “Just give me five stars, and we’ll call it even.” He laughs softly.

I laugh too. He gives my shoulder another squeeze and gets in his car. Seeing him drive off, I feel like I’m watching decency slip away. I tell myself I’m being overdramatic. I tell myself there are still plenty of good people in this world. I take another deep breath, wipe my eyes again, and roll my suitcase inside.

As I head to the luggage drop-off point, I’m asked if I speak English by a man trying to figure me out. An ignorant question or a dagger in disguise? After seeing the hate in that pickup driver’s eyes, how can I not think that the questions are meant to wound? I pretend like I don’t understand him and keep rolling toward security. I’m asked where I’m from by an older woman while I’m waiting for a stall to free up in the bathroom. Pretending I don’t speak English again, I look through my purse for nothing in particular. In the terminal, a kid laughs at me and mimics an Asian language—*ching chong chang*. The boy’s parents don’t rebuke him. They laugh and tug him down the corridor. The questions and mocking of Asian languages—all of this is not new, but it all feels more insidious now.

I refill my reusable water bottle. I look at the paperbacks on a newsstand display. Nothing seems appealing. I think to forgo my usual brain-candy, but it’s going to be a long flight with bumps and whirs and the turbulence in my own mind over what just happened. I need a distraction. I settle on a thriller labeled a *New York Times* bestseller. It has to be decent, I tell myself, if it sold so many copies. I buy the book, a coffee, and a bag of almonds. I’m far from hungry, but it’s a long way home.

I sit down outside my gate. I remove the lid from my coffee and hold the steaming cup under my nose. The good things—I focused on them before and I will focus on them now. The smell of coffee. My husband, who makes me laugh until it hurts. My parents. My siblings. My friends. The happy gatherings we have. Even this trip had its moments—we got the project done, and the view from the hotel was something to marvel at.

I blow on my coffee and carefully sip from it. Feeling calmer, my mind tries to rationalize things

again. Maybe I’m overreacting. Maybe that guy was mad about something else. Maybe Alexei wasn’t as good a driver as I think. Maybe he cut the guy off and that was what triggered him. I think these things, but my heart knows what it knows.

A commercial for cold medicine ends on the wall-mounted TV by the gate. A news anchor stares into the camera with deathly seriousness. He tells us viewers that he has breaking news. A dangerous virus has been identified in China. The news anchor works in “China” as much as he can. Every fourth word, it seems, is “China.” Talking heads pop up and share the screen with the news anchor. They discuss the horrors of wildlife markets and how they must be the source of the disease. (The way they’re talking, it seems these markets are the source of *all* disease.) The images of the markets flashing across the screen are repulsive, but there isn’t anything appealing about the American industrialization of meat production either, I think. As I listen to them talk, I remember reading somewhere that the Spanish Flu originated in Kansas. Pig farms along birds’ migratory paths—key ingredients for a disaster.

Trying to remember what I read about the Spanish Flu, hoping that what I’m watching on TV right now is just hype, I breathe in my coffee and wonder if I should buy some more hand sanitizer before boarding the flight. I look in my purse. My hand sanitizer bottle is still a quarter full. I notice now that the man sitting across from me is looking at me. I know Asian—thanks to the TV, Chinese specifically—and disease are all he sees.

I sigh and close my purse. Sipping from my coffee, I don’t feel the usual urge to convince him that I’m not what he sees. I don’t need him to know that he’s got my Asian half wrong. There is no wrong. If we’re all the same in their minds, that’s fine with me. I don’t care anymore. And more importantly, I don’t need him to know that I’m half white. I don’t want to be associated with an ideal that can generate the kind of hate that man driving the pickup truck showed me, the kind of simmering disgust I’m seeing on the TV right now. This man, his eyes darting from the TV to me, collects his things and moves to another row of seats. I sip from my coffee, thinking that’s fine with me.



**Power**

Ayirani Balachanthiran  
Digital Painting • A4

**The Leopard Slug**

Chelsea Harlan

You stroke my hair in the day-glo hammock  
I tell you I will never forget the electric slide

Or how to be a good, cussing southern woman  
I must have learned everything I know about love

This morning watching leopard slugs copulate  
Leopard slugs with their paradoxical name

Fast and slow at once like a lightyear  
Their slide all analog and overrun with mucus

And all I want to do is kiss your hand in my hair  
With reverence we try to transcribe this nature

In awe we take a video of slugs beautifully fucking  
In the yard, I love you so much it's repugnant

## Visitors

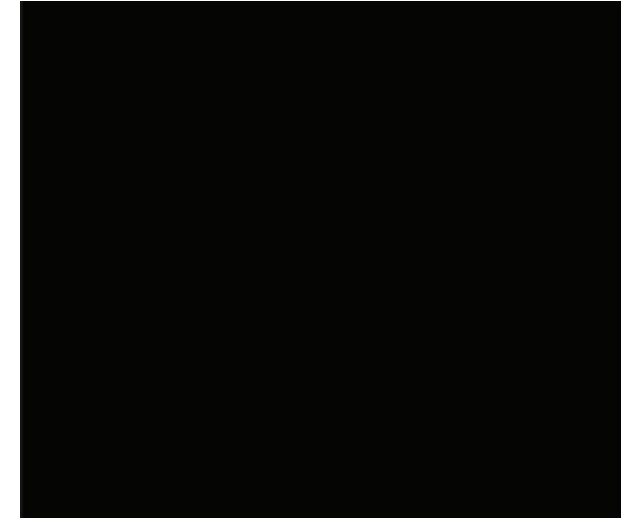
Yehudis Rabinowitz

In my newest American Sign Language (ASL) book, *Visitors*, I tried to imagine the story through the eyes and mind of a child. Many children fear the unknown, or monsters, and I decided to try dispelling this fear with brightly colored images and fun text, along with an enthusiastic signer who brings the words to life. The bright colors are in stark contrast to the black and white images of the signer, letting both parts of the story shine without them competing.

In my experience, children learn sign through stilted lesson books and rarely get the chance to experience their language in printed stories. I want non-deaf parents to have a way to connect with their deaf children through an actual story and to be able to explore the beauty of sign as a living, breathing language with its own contexts and subtexts. I also want children to be able to explore the natural beauty of sign without the distraction of color. The sign language images capture complete, simple sentences, telling the whole story in terms that children can still engage with and understand. I plan to create more ASL children's books in the future, using different mediums and working with a diverse range of deaf signers.







## New Friends

Scott Laudati

We saw the end of the sun some time ago  
 and I thought about California  
 and the palm trees that were still eating  
 and the girls in the sand  
 and their hair in the wind  
 and how it didn't matter to me anymore  
 where the lightning bugs went  
 once the days cooled off,  
 or why old men never died like outlaws  
 if it's what we all want.  
 Born alone.  
 Legacy always in question.  
 Life has a way of herding the useless together,  
 drafting us into a showdown  
 that began  
 long before the dead had to  
 explain their worth.  
 Bellies up.  
 No closure.  
 No kind words left behind  
 for the kids.  
 We forgot a long time ago that

the world will keep rolling over  
 like it always has.  
 So we laugh at the snoring dogs  
 shaking their jaws  
 and running in place,  
 but now I wonder:  
 why are they the only ones  
 who sleep deeply enough  
 to dream?

I'd been locked up at my  
 girlfriend's parents' house for a week  
 and all anyone could talk about  
 was a skunk that lived in the woods.  
 And every night I'd go outside  
 and stare into the trees  
 but I never saw anything.  
 The sun dropped,  
 the geese flew south,  
 and just as I was about to give up  
 for the last time  
 a little skunk crawled out from

under the shed.

I jumped up and waved at him  
and he looked back as friendly  
as any fat and free thing  
and neither of us did much more  
than that.

But then my girlfriend came  
out and screamed.

The skunk looked back like I'd  
betrayed him,  
and as I watched his tail go up  
I felt like I'd broken our bond too.  
I knew my girlfriend would get mad if  
I said it was her fault  
so I cursed at the skunk  
cursed at the trees  
cursed my name  
(never going for the one who deserved it),  
hating everyone and everything  
in this whole stupid world.

Her mother made lasagna that night.  
I left a plate out by the backdoor.

## Contributors

**Chelsea Ayensu-Peters** is a sophomore at Towson University. Her art centers on drawing and painting. She draws character designs, and whatever ideas come to mind, but she hasn't developed any consistent themes in her art. She's still improving her style, so anything can change in the future.

**Ayirani Balachanthiran** is an illustrator from New York whose work primarily focuses on the experience of the South Asian Queer-identified community. Much of their art encompasses capturing the beauty of flowers and queer love. Their work has been featured on various platforms including but not limited to *Indian Women's Blog*, *Vatan Magazine*, *Sinister Wisdom*, The Leslie Lohman Gay and Lesbian Museum, and The People's Forum.

**Sudha Balagopal's** recent short fiction appears in *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Split Lip Magazine*, *Pidgeonholes*, *Milk Candy Review*, and elsewhere. She is the author of the novel *A New Dawn*. Her work has been nominated for *Best Small Fictions*, *Best Microfiction*, and the Pushcart Prize and is listed in the *Wigleaf* top 50.

**Briseyda Barrientos-Ariza** is a first-generation Latina, Guatemalan American daughter, writer, reader, and poet who fights for the liberation of all oppressed people. Her poem in last year's edition of *Grub Street* received second place in the free-form poetry category of the Columbia Scholastic Press Association's Gold Circle Awards. You can find her on Instagram @briseydaaaaaa. She writes to liberate.

**Lisa Golightly Braden** holds a B.A. in Studio Art from the University of the District of Columbia. She taught for several years at the Corcoran Gallery of Art's Camp Creativity. She has exhibited her work in galleries and nonprofit art spaces in the Washington, DC area, including museum stores.

**Leah Bushman** is a nature gazer and animal lover who rarely takes life seriously. This is her first publication. A Towson University graduate with a B.S. in English, she can be found on social media at @leahbushman.

**Devin Campbell** is an undergraduate student of English and creative writing at Towson University. They enjoy feeding their cat, cracking open a Steinbeck novel, and drinking coffee excessively. They believe the best time to write poetry is when they're on the clock at the coffee shop that employs them.

**Schaun Champion** is an international photographer, filmmaker, and instructor specializing in natural light, portraiture, fine art, and cultural documentary work. Using both analog and digital cameras, she creates intentionally cinematic and honest imagery. Inspired by classic films, music and all things vintage, she intends to illustrate the drama within the familiar while exploring themes of diversity and nostalgia.

**Danielle Chelosky** is a New York-based writer who has words about music and culture in *The FADER*, *Grammy*, and on MTV, as well as words about sex and relationships in *Hobart Pulp* and *Flypaper Lit*. She loves shoe gazing and abandoned buildings.

**Grace Coughlan**, a previous managing editor for *Grub Street*, volume 69, is studying writing at Towson University. “We are only what the yellow street lines whisper to us on full moon nights” is her first published work. She has a passion for book barns, iced green tea, and journaling. As she moves forward, she looks to solve the mystery of self-happiness and self-destruction through her writing.

**Evan J. Cutts** is a 26-year-old Boston-native, poet, writer, and M.F.A. Mentors Fellow at Rutgers University–Newark. Evan was a member of the Emerson College 2017 CUPSI Team and the 2017 National Poetry Slam “Last Chance Slam” Team. Evan’s poetry intersperses panoramic scenes with dense, heat-forged phrases exploring a range of subjects from Greek mythology to alternate realities and Jazz legend Charlie Parker’s legacy. His background in spoken word is evident in the richness of his sense of sound. His poetry is published in *Apogee Journal*, *Jabberwock Review*, *Juked*, *The Offing*, *Lumina Journal*, *Wildness*, and others. Follow him on Facebook: @CuttsArtistry and Instagram: @fg\_cutts.

**Anthony D’Aries** is the author of *The Language of Men: A Memoir* (Hudson Whitman, 2012), which received the PEN Discovery Prize. His work has appeared in *Boston Magazine*, *The Literary Review*, *Sport Literate*, and elsewhere. He currently directs the M.F.A. in Creative and Professional Writing at Western Connecticut State University.

**Athena Dixon** is the author of *The Incredible Shrinking Woman* and *No God in This Room*. She is the co-host of the New Books in Poetry Podcast via the New Books Network. Athena writes, edits, and resides in Philadelphia. Learn more about the author at [www.athenadixon.com](http://www.athenadixon.com).

**Brianna Doyle** is an interdisciplinary artist based outside of Baltimore. She explores complexities of morals and ethics that result from growing up between vastly different environments. Each work uses imagery that seemingly opposes itself to show the internal dilemmas that come with an identity full of dichotomies.

**Alexander Eikenberg** is a poet from Hampstead, Maryland. He is routinely dazzled by language and pursues his graduate degree in professional writing at Towson University with the dream of being an English professor. His heart is full of motorcycle rides, morning coffee, friendship bracelets, and most often, the humans who inspire him.

**Arinze Stephen Ekwuide** (alias ‘Edeziuno’) is a visual fine artist based in Lagos state, Nigeria. He creates hyper realistic portraits using traditional art tools to portray the beauty and uniqueness of women—especially African women rebelling against the picture that society paints of them—and to protest xenophobia and racism. His works have been collected by some business people and entrepreneurs based in the United States, as well as by the high-profile directors of the Lionsgate movie *Antebellum*.

**Kristin Emanuel** is currently pursuing an M.F.A. in poetry at the University of Kansas. She contemplates extinction, the dreaming mind, and animal subjectivity through her writing. Her poetry has recently been published in the *Normal School* and is forthcoming in *Sidereal Magazine*.

**Kelly Flanagan** is a memoirist and blogger in Washington, DC. Her writing focuses on resilience, personal agency, and life’s evolutions. International immersion and philosophy flavor her perspective. Kelly has an M.A. in international relations from Johns Hopkins University and is completing an M.F.A. in creative writing at the University of Baltimore.

**Chris Gavalier** is an associate professor at W&L University and comics editor of *Shenandoah*. His books include: *On the Origin of Superheroes* (Iowa 2015), *Superhero Comics* (Bloomsbury 2017), *Superhero Thought Experiments* (with Nathaniel Goldberg, Iowa 2019), *Revising Fiction, Fact, and Faith* (with Nathaniel Goldberg, Routledge 2020), *Creating Comics* (with Leigh Ann Beavers, Bloomsbury 2021), and *The Comics Form* (Bloomsbury, forthcoming 2022). His visual work appears in *Ilanot Review*, *North American Review*, *Aquifer*, and elsewhere.

**Jacqui Germain** is a poet, journalist, and former community organizer living and working in St. Louis, Missouri. She has received fellowships from the St. Louis Regional Arts Commission, Jack Jones Literary Arts, Callaloo Creative Writing Workshop, and the Poetry Foundation’s Emerging Poets Incubator. Germain is currently working on her first full-length poetry collection.

**Chelsea Harlan** holds a B.A. from Bennington College and an M.F.A. in poetry from Brooklyn College, where she was a Truman Capote Fellow. Her poems are forthcoming or have appeared in *Sixth Finch*, *Hobart*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *The Greensboro Review*, *The American Poetry Review*, and elsewhere. She is the co-author of the chapbook *Mummy* (Montez Press, 2019), and the recipient of the 2019-2020 Mikrokosmos Poetry Prize judged by sam sax. She lives in Brooklyn.

**Keith Hoffman** has written for such television series as *The Secret World of Alex Mack*, *Sister Sister*, and the popular Nickelodeon cartoon *Doug*. He produced the GLAAD Award winning series, *30 Days*, and ten seasons of *Finding Bigfoot*. He has published several essays and is currently finishing his memoir.

**Natalie Jones** writes poems and prose. She’s currently working on *Nightshift: A (Re)collection*, a hybrid collection of prose poetry and fiction. Her work has appeared in *A Velvet Giant*, *Amoskeag Literary Journal*, *BlazeVOX*, *Calamus Journal*, *Eunoia Review*, *Gambling the Aisle*, *Haiku Journal*, *The Rusty Nail Literary Magazine*, and elsewhere. She lives in Vermont. Her Instagram is @madame\_psychosis\_.

**Abigail Chabimoy** is the author of *How to Dress a Fish* (Wesleyan 2019), winner of the 2020 Colorado Book Award for Poetry and shortlisted in the international category of the 2020 Griffin Prize for Poetry. She was a 2016 Peripheral Poets fellow and her poems have appeared in *Hayden’s Ferry Review*, *Boston Review*, *Tin House*, *Gulf Coast*, *Lit Hub*, *Red Ink*, and elsewhere. She is a Koniag descendant and member of the Tangirnaq Native Village in Kodiak, and currently she is on faculty at the Institute of American Indian Arts and the Denver Lighthouse Writers Workshop.

**Halee Kirkwood** received their M.F.A. from Hamline University and was a 2019-2020 Loft Mentor Series Fellow. Their work can be found in The Academy of American Poets’ Poem-A-Day series, *Water~Stone Review*, *Muzzle Magazine*, and others. Their mini-chapbook, *Exorcizing the Catalogue*, was published with Rinky Dink Press. Kirkwood lives in Minneapolis, where they work as a bookseller at Birchbark Books and Native Arts.

**Ellen Kombiyil** is the author of *Histories of the Future Perfect* (2015) and the micro-chapbook *Avalanche Tunnel* (2016). Her writing has appeared in *New Ohio Review*, *Nimrod*, *North American Review*, and *Ploughshares*. Her awards include the Mary M. Fay Poetry Award from Hunter College, an Academy of American Poets college prize, and the Nancy Dean Medieval Prize.

**KKUURRTT** is glad you read his thing. His novel, *Good at Drugs*, is forthcoming from Back Patio Press. He can be found on Twitter at @wwwkurtcom.

**Scott Laudati** is the author of *Hawaiian Shirts In The Electric Chair* (Cephalopress). Visit him on social media @scottlaudati.

**Deandra Dantrease Lee** is a photographer of surreal self-portraits. She was born on December 1, 2000 in Cleveland, Mississippi. She hopes to be a beacon of inspiration to inspiring artists working with all kinds of forms.

**Jack Livingston** is a multimedia artist, writer, and critic. He has exhibited his work nationally for more than forty years. He is a recipient of an NEA artist award and a Warhol Grit Fund Grant. Livingston has an M.F.A. from Towson University and lives in Baltimore.

**Mario Loprete** is a 1968 graduate of Accademia of Belle Arti in Catanzaro, Italy. Painting is his first love. An important, pure love. Starting from the spasmodic research of a concept with which he wants to send a message is the basis of his painting. The sculpture is his lover, the artistic betrayal to the painting. That voluptuous and sensual lover that gives him different emotions, that touches prohibited cords.



**DS Maolalai** has been nominated eight times for *Best of the Net* and five times for the Pushcart Prize. His poetry has been released in two collections, *Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden* (Encircle Press, 2016) and *Sad Havoc Among the Birds* (Turas Press, 2019).

**Austin Morris** is a senior at Dulaney High School, proud to be following in former classmate Angela Qian's footsteps as both recipient of this prize and chief editor of the school's literary magazine. As such, their work can be found in the past three editions of Dulaney's "Sequel".

**Jola Naibi** was raised in Lagos, Nigeria, studied in the U.K., and now lives in the U.S. Reading and writing fuel her energy, and her first book, *Terra Cotta Beauty*, is a collection of short stories set in Lagos, which was published in 2014. She writes as she remembers.

**Chinyere Onyekwere** is a high school senior at George Washington Carver for Arts and Technology. She enjoys reading poetry and is currently working on publishing a collection of short stories. She is passionate about indie rock, novels with strong female heroines, and lattes with the perfect amount of foam.

**Ivan Palmer** is an undergraduate student of philosophy and English literature at Towson University. He believes in the healing power of thermal socks, the subtle joys of gardening, and the sanctity of irreverence. When he isn't misreading his way through the Western canon, he's stocking frozen food in a grocery store.

**Karen Peng** is a current high school junior who lives in Maryland. They are an aspiring creator aiming to explore human conflict, human behavior, and compulsion for material possessions. In their free time, Karen enjoys listening to many genres of music.

**Deborah S. Prespare** lives in Brooklyn. She completed her undergraduate studies at Cornell College and received an M.A. in Writing from Johns Hopkins University. Her work has appeared in *Menda City Review*, *Potomac Review*, *Red Rock Review*, *Soundings East*, *Third Wednesday*, *Valparaiso Fiction Review*, and elsewhere.

**Grace Reed** was born and raised outside of Allentown, Pennsylvania. She attends Towson University and plans on graduating in 2021 with a mass communication degree with a focus on public relations. Her writing speaks louder than she does.

**Thea Ringer** is a former farmer, life model, and construction worker turned mother and English major at Towson University. When not reading, writing, or talking over her kids, Ms. Ringer enjoys taking pictures and planning her next life adventure (sailing).

**Michael James Rizza**, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of English at Eastern New Mexico University. He is the author of the novel *Cartilage and Skin* (2013) and the monograph *The Topographical Imagination of Jameson, Baudrillard, and Foucault* (2015). He has published articles on Don DeLillo, Milan Kundera, Adrienne Rich, and others, as well as short fiction. His awards include a fellowship from the New Jersey Council on the Arts and the Starcherone Prize for Innovative Fiction. He is currently at work on a novel called *The Purged Father*.

**Naomi Rogers** is a Towson University student working toward a degree in gerontology and a minor in creative writing. She was recently published in *Ligeia* magazine and intends to continue to embark on creative projects while bettering the lives of older adults.

**Esther Rose** was born and raised in a small neighborhood in Mount Airy, Maryland, where her love for literature began. She is currently studying psychology and English at Towson University where she has been able to nurture her passion for literature and continue to write stories of her own.

**Kristen Rouisse** holds an M.F.A. in poetry from the University of South Florida. Her work is published or forthcoming in *RHINO Poetry*, *The Rumpus*, *Hobart*, *Glass Poetry Press*, *Lunch Ticket*, and *Superstition Review*, among others.

**Deja Ryland** is an emerging author. She lives in Baltimore. In her free time, she loves trying new foods, spending time with her family, and experiencing those moments of laughter that hurt so good. She has a boundless curiosity and strives to always ask questions and open conversations through her writing.

**Mak Sisson** is a graduate student at the University of Montana, studying environmental science and natural resource journalism. She aspires to save the planet and write about the environment, however local or global it may be. Her nonfiction, which appears in volume 69 of *Grub Street*, received first place nationally in alternative story form from the Columbia Scholastic Press Association. She currently works as a science writer for *Modern Treatise*.

**Sarah Jane Stoll** is a fine artist and designer. She graduated summa cum laude from the Maryland Institute College of Art in 2017 with a B.F.A. in painting. Originally from San Bernardino, CA, in 1987 her family moved to the East Coast. Her nationally exhibited paintings that feature motifs of the American landscape were inspired by her upbringing in the rural woodlands of New England's Last Green Valley. She began her formal education in 2013, attending PrattMWP in upstate New York. Sarah is involved in conservation and sustainability through her artwork. In 2020 she founded Stöll, a Connecticut based design studio influenced by her Nordic and Brazilian heritage. Stöll offers visual design services to local businesses in Connecticut. Find her on Instagram, Pinterest, and Twitter at @sarahjanestoll. Find her on Facebook at @sarahjanestollart. Find her on Tumblr at <https://sarahjanestoll.tumblr.com/>.

**Louis Szalay** is an artist.

**Rikki Vinyard** is an emerging author from Maryland and an active fiction editor for *Grub Street*. She is working toward her Bachelor's degree in English at Towson University and hopes to continue editing for other literary magazines and publishing companies after she graduates. When she's not writing wacky things she hears in her dreams, she enjoys playing minecraft and being a mental health advocate. You can also find her on Twitter at @RikkiTikkiSavvi and on Instagram at @merridian.official.

**Kathleen Wallish** is a writer in Baltimore.

**Chloë Williams** is a West Virginian writer, filmmaker, and photographer. She has work published in *Maelstrom* magazine and the *Our Minds Our Future* anthology. Her work reflects her travels around her home state, as well as in Baltimore and Leeds, England.

**Wen Wen Yang** was born and raised in the Bronx, New York. She graduated from Barnard College, Columbia University, with a degree in English and creative writing. You can find her flash fiction "The Fox Spirit's Retelling" in the anthology *Remapping Wonderland: Classic Fairytales Retold by People of Color*.

**Chloe Yetter** is an artist based in Silver Spring, Maryland. While her work previously centered around physical media, she has recently branched out to explore various digital art platforms. Many of her pieces incorporate the primary colors and a variety of textures, and she draws inspiration from the female experience.





Founded in 1952, *Grub Street* is  
Towson University's literary journal.  
*Grub Street* features fiction,  
nonfiction, poetry, and art.