

RIPRAP
LITERARY JOURNAL

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LITERARY JOURNAL

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Compression



Kevin Bodniza

Relationship Redacted

On a black glass boulevard,
we met like headlights
skipping through puddles.
You said *déjà vu*
is just time folding wrong.
I thought of all the instructions
I saved from IKEA and said
I believe you.

Love is:
a transmission that never lands,
a college boy yelling *get a room*,
his jeer stretched thin by the Doppler effect
as girls walk hand-in-hand.

Love is not:
static whispering its own name,
the same message looping,
a voice calling out to nothing.

Our hands slipped
because gravity likes to watch us fall,
because I like to watch me fall,
because fate is a rigged deck,
shuffled by a shady dealer,
palming the queen.

The moon blinks twice when you ask,
What if our names are already crossed out?
I flinch. Streetlights flicker when we laugh
too loud. I answer:
What if the sky forgets us first?

You think of the pigeons
that work for the government.
I think about the one on your windowsill—
the one that watches.
It knows: love is a broken line of code,
a skipped groove on a record,

a song the universe keeps trying to erase.
But here we are,
still playing.

Maudie Bryant

Masks

On a crowded F train, a woman applies mascara.
Her braid is complicated—the way my college
lover fixed my hair the year before
he died. As the train lurches and turns, I wonder
if she'll pause—or risk poking her eye.
She strokes the left set of lashes, then the right,
then left—four times each; now they're dark
and thick. I'm envious—my eyelid, surgically sliced
to remove a sty, can't take the cosmetic
while it heals. In Italian, the root of mascara
is mask, but on TikTok, to get around censorship,
it refers to a sexual partner. Someone broods
about her cheating man: My mascara stuck its wand
into another tube. A woman posts: My last mascara
was really bad, so I'm taking a break. Eyelid
healing is slow. A cut to the heart takes longer.

Susana Case

Winter Morning, London

Visiting a friend in her drafty flat, too cold to get up, to feed money into the radiator meter for warmth, I decide to lie in bed, maybe all day, or until I get hypothermia and die.

Ancient Romans, using an earlier Greek method, fire-heated air, then pushed that air through walls and floors.

No one tried this again for a thousand years and no one is trying it here.

The first machine to exchange money for commodity dispensed holy water for a temple in Alexandria, where the weather never goes below freezing, though back in 1950 it may have snowed once—even more unlikely than snow in London.

As I pray for heat, my friend, muttering *spoiled American*, gets up to feed the meter, make us tea.

But look, there are flakes coming down this morning, like the tease of confetti.

Here, even a little snow shuts down almost everything. It won't stick on the pavement for long. My tea is hot and the room now warm. Outside, laughing, two men in business suits, instead of rushing to work, throw small snowballs.

Susana Case

The Red String



Kiera Fisher

An Exhaustive But Complete Checklist On Washing Your Hair

1. Lift yourself up from your mattress on the floor (do not use your arms)
2. Open your bedroom door and wince when you lift your hand to do so
3. Make the harrowing journey to the bathroom door (three feet across the hall)
4. Lock the door behind you (you aren't supposed to lock it)
5. Turn on the fan (it doesn't work but it is muscle memory)
6. Go to turn on the faucet
7. Stop and look at yourself in the mirror (you look different, you look fat)
8. Look away (in shame) and actually go to turn on the faucet
9. Crouch at your knees to reach the knob (do NOT bend at the waist)
10. Turn it to cold
11. No, hot. Turn it to hot
12. Pull the plug to switch the water to the showerhead
13. Remember the state of yourself and that you can't do that, push the plug back down
14. Stick your hand in the water (still too cold)
15. Wish your parents would get a new water heater
16. Stick your hand in the water (it is hot, it hurts)
17. Untie your sweatpants drawstring
18. Remember the state of yourself and that there is no point in taking off your pants
19. Re-tie your sweatpants drawstring
20. Sit down (do NOT use your arms)
21. Shuffle your ass towards the tub
22. Wedge yourself in between the toilet and the ledge (this is the only way this will work)
23. Push the foam in your vest against yourself so you can fit
24. Gasp because you nicked your incisions on the corner of the tub
25. Heave yourself up just enough to slump your body over the ledge
26. Feel the tile's edge dig into your chest.
27. Remember the state of yourself
28. Squirm, or cry, or do whatever you do when you are in pain. Because you are in pain. So much pain
29. Play pretend, pretend you are anywhere else than on the ledge of a tub washing your hair
30. Drag your figurative self to a different bathroom where someone else is washing your hair. Or to a bathroom where you stand under the shower, bare and free and able to wash your hair without all of this
31. Go back because there is no point in daydreaming of this far away bathtub
32. Remember you need shampoo
33. Blindly grasp towards the corner where the shampoo resides (do not move your head or body, you will not will yourself back to this place)
34. Knock the shampoo onto the tile floor
35. Swear (curse word of your choice)
36. Wrap wet fingers around the bottle, death grip it so it will not slip
37. Squirt too much onto your hand and feel bad about being wasteful

38. Lather your hair
39. Wonder if you will go bald one day, just like your dad
40. Wish your Dad was here to help you
41. Wash the shampoo out, let the image of your Dad holding you wash away with it
42. Notice you left your towel hanging across the room
43. Dip your head out from under the faucet
44. Reach your left hand up to turn off the faucet, feel your stitches stretch
45. Take 10 minutes to slide your body off the ledge and inch away from the bathtub
46. Sit on the floor and bring your knees to your chest, or as close as you can before your knees hit the foam. Look at the comics on the wall and think of how your Dad used to make comics for your lunchbox everyday. Let the memory grasp at the edges of who you are now, because the man you are now will never get comics in his lunchbox. The man you are is stuck on the floor of a bathroom in a foam vest and stained sweatpants and wet hair. The man you are is hurt and healing, in between a starting point and a destination. The man you are is alone in all of this
47. Sit in defeat, stew in remembering the state of yourself. Slowly unhook each clasp of your vest and steal a glance at your newfound freedom. Quickly re-hook each clasp because everything is still swollen and your nipples being black is freaking you out even if it is normal
48. Breathe in the sentiment that at least you are of your own creation at the end of this all.
49. Pick yourself up and go back to your room
50. Wait for your hair to dry (and for yourself to change)

Finn Holmgren

FOUR SEPTUAGENARIANS, A '71 VW MICROBUS, AND A DOG NAMED CICERO

By David A. Fein

Cheraw, SC

I realized today that the four of us, showing unmistakable signs of age and varying degrees of damage, despite increasingly desperate attempts at compensation, concealment, and outright denial, are all actually, in some important sense, abject failures. At the moment, of course, you are arguably the one most damaged, but in no sense can I ever consider you a failure.

Even if the brainless drunk driver knew, a few seconds before impact, how many pins, screws, and rods would be needed to repair your broken body, the intolerable pain you would have to endure, days of lying flat on your back, I doubt that he would have cared enough to avoid the collision. But if he knew that he was about to deprive four of your best friends of your cherished companionship on a road trip fantasized for years, planned out in detail then canceled by Covid, replanned and then canceled again, this time by a family illness, resurrected one last time, the pathetic but incredibly meaningful recreation of the infamous 1969 spring break trip to New Orleans, and in all probability the last trip they will ever take together, if he knew all this, I would like to think that he would at least have considered, in a moment of generosity and compassion, the possibility of swerving at the last second. But back to the four failures . . .

I was shocked, and you would be too, by how much Jake has aged since the last time we all got together (how long has it been? maybe eight years?), carrying a good bit of extra weight on a weak knee that's long overdue for replacement. Still wearing what's left of his long hair in a bandana as he did during our days at Swarthmore. I can discern ruined remnants of the physique we used to enviously admire when he was on the wrestling team, but it's obvious that he's given up completely on all forms of exercise, and drinks way too much. It's also clear that he's given up on all forms of female companionship after three failed marriages, and, as you may know, a few disastrous experiments with online dating. He used to brag about how much money he was making in his lucrative law firm, but now he brags laughingly about how much money he's lost in a series of poorly advised investments in Vermont real estate, and seems to be finally developing a sense of self-deprecating humor, which makes him a little more tolerable.

And Alan. I could never understand why he would give up a promising academic career in classics after two years of grad school and move back to Cheraw, South Carolina to open an independent bookstore specializing in alternative lifestyles. With his tall, vegetarian-thin build, long white hair and close cropped beard, and his soft-spoken, cultivated southern delivery, I can easily imagine him before a small class of admiring classics majors, passionately reciting Horatian odes. What a waste. But what he probably regrets more than his aborted academic career is the series of unsuccessful experiments with local politics, his heroic but Sisyphean attempts at Town Council, County Commissioners, School Board, Zoning Board, State Representative. I remember when you jokingly urged him to run for County Coroner, a suggestion that he took seriously, coming from a doctor and learning that the only requirement for the office in South Carolina is a high school degree, until we all convinced him that co-ownership with a gay partner (business and personal) of an independent bookstore specializing in alternative lifestyles, strong leftist leanings including the proud display of large buttons from failed campaigns (I VOTED FOR MCGOVERN), and the ability to read the most difficult passages of Vergil in Latin without recourse to a dictionary are not necessarily considered valuable political assets for an aspirant to the office of County Coroner. Over the years, Alan has moved farther to the left, and Jake, farther to the right. We'll need to assiduously avoid political discussions on this trip.

You know that Yasha's parents always wanted him to be a doctor, right? They immigrated from Russia to give him a better education. And he certainly was smart enough to get into any of the best med schools in the country. He was definitely the most talented player in the Chess Club where we all met. And a perfect 800 on the math section of the SAT. But I think they were satisfied when he became a computer programmer. He was not, of course. He took early retirement – when? mid-thirties? He just had too much interest in too many things other than storing data on Fortran punch cards. And by then, of course, Amy was making

enough as a pharmacist to support him and the two kids so that Yasha could pursue his series of failed inventions.

You remember the bed shaped like the berth of a ship, equipped with a motor that gave it a gentle rocking motion and a sound machine generating the hum of a giant engine and a vibrating mattress and even a porthole with a video of ocean waves, the whole thing designed to simulate the pleasurable experience of falling asleep on an ocean liner? He made Amy spend a night in that wretched contraption, and she said it gave her the worst case of seasickness she'd ever experienced in her life. He was going to revolutionize the sleep industry just as Mark Twain was going to revolutionize the printing industry with the doomed Paige Compositor. And they both sank a fortune into their machines and struggled to perfect them for years before finally giving up.

You wouldn't find him much changed from the last time you saw him. He's put on a little more weight, but evenly distributed over his short stout stature, and he still has amazing energy. Now completely bald. Amy worries that she may be seeing signs of early dementia, but with Yasha's wildly fluctuating range of interests and his tendency to interrupt others, or even himself, with random facts from his encyclopedic store of trivia, it's really hard to tell. Last night when we were working out our route to New Orleans over a large map of the Southeastern states, he abruptly broke into Alan's explanation of a carefully planned network of secondary highways through central Alabama to ask if any of us remembered the capital of Estonia. Not in a challenging or boastful way, but rather out of simple curiosity, wondering whether any of us had retained this important fact that we surely must have learned as part of our basic early education. At the age of ten, let's say. Which is the age at which Yasha began to study a world atlas, eventually memorizing all the capitals. Maybe Amy is right, but it's not unusual for Yasha to move with the speed of light from central Alabama to Estonia. By the way, it's Tallinn, in case you've forgotten.

My travel companions would probably consider me, along with you, as the most successful, personally and professionally. A long and productive career in journalism, two books on the Civil War (including one that was almost chosen as one of three finalists for a regional nonfiction book award carrying a prize of \$250 and a plaque), married 71% of my life (I've worked it out) to a woman who appears to tolerate most of my annoying foibles and eccentricities, four children, all blessed with nice houses, decent-paying jobs and stable relationships, and perhaps the ultimate sign of my success, the brand new, high-tech Audi, which I still haven't figured out how to drive properly. But they would be wrong. There are deep disappointments in the professional, personal, and spiritual realms that I won't go into now, but would be willing to explain sometime, if you're interested, during a private conversation. Probably over a third scotch on the rocks. Although I doubt you still drink that poisonous stuff.

I'll try to keep you updated every evening as you requested, assuming that I'm able to get a connection for my laptop. I take solace in the hope that the considerable adversity we are almost certain to encounter on this trip will distract you a little from your own afflictions. Maybe you're better off missing this trip. Blessed are the broken in bone for they shall be spared the curse of traveling with those broken in mind and spirit. More tomorrow . . .

#

Barnwell, SC

The original plan, as you know, was to rent a large late-model SUV and ride comfortably, although perhaps a little tightly packed, all the way to New Orleans. It was a sensible plan. At the last moment, Alan offered the use of his 1971 red VW microbus with a large peace symbol painted on either side, not to economize, certainly not for comfort, but in honor of the VW bus we drove to the same destination on a much longer route in 1969. By this evening, the end of our first day on the road, we all (including Alan) are realizing that we should have given the offer a little more consideration.

The poorly padded seats, while marginally tolerable for twenty-year-old bodies, are incredibly uncomfortable under seventy-five-year-old butts. When Alan purchased the bus several years ago, the previous owner had installed, at considerable expense, a reasonably efficient air-conditioning system, which Alan immediately had removed since it violated "the integrity of the original design." So rather than be subjected to the unwelcome intrusion of anachronistic engineering, we are now encouraged, as we ride through central South Carolina in late July, to crank down all the windows and experience the glorious freedom and hot thrill of the open road, just as it would have been experienced by the original occupants of the vehicle.

With its pathetically underpowered 66-horsepower engine, and with four mostly overweight occupants

and their overstuffed travel bags, the bus struggles on any sort of incline. With few safe places to pass on many long stretches of secondary highway, we often find ourselves leading a parade of increasingly impatient and unhappy drivers, who, when they finally are able to pass, slow down for a moment to loudly express their speculations on our most intimate relations, our political affiliations, suggestions of various ob-scene acts in which they encourage us to engage, and occasionally disparaging remarks about our ancestry. I suspect that the large peace signs on either side of the bus, and the numerous bumper stickers advertising past democratic presidential candidates do little to inspire respect.

Alan and Jake share the driving. The bus is equipped with a cassette tape deck, an accessory that does not violate the integrity of the original design, and Joplin, Hendrix, Dylan, The Doors, The Band, and others blast at full volume for much of the ride, stressing our already impaired hearing with a good case of tinnitus by the end of the day. Jake keeps his left hand out the window while driving, ready to flip the bird at any passing driver who insults his manhood. Alan and Jake had a bit of a political dustup this afternoon when Jake mentioned government overreach, prompting Alan to mention fascist ideology, prompting Jake to testily inquire who the hell Alan was calling a fascist. This line of discussion fortunately led Yasha to innocently ask whether anyone remembered the exact date of the Hitler-Stalin nonaggression pact. I would like to think he was trying to defuse a potentially painful altercation, but I suspect that it came up as another random connection. I was able to convince the belligerents to temporarily agree to their own nonaggression pact, but I doubt it will be any more successful than the one signed on August 23, 1939.

When we stopped for gas this afternoon, I observed a small group of young men, one of them wearing a University of South Carolina t-shirt, admiring our bus from a distance in complete awe, as if it were a horse-drawn omnibus from the nineteenth century. One of them took a picture. At that moment they saw Jake limping heavily toward the driver's side door. "Must be the original owner. Or maybe the father of the original owner." Gen Z kids can be so cruel.

We've only traveled 150 miles today. A late start this morning, back roads, slow going with our 66-horsepower engine, and several stops to visit sites of minor historical importance at my unwelcome insistence. The mantra for the trip has been, "It's all about the journey, not the destination." I have a feeling that before the trip is half over, it will indeed be all about the destination, the sooner the better.

Tomorrow we invade Georgia.

#

Swainsboro, GA

We now have a new traveling companion. This morning when we stopped for gas at an isolated service station, we heard a dog barking from a large cardboard box behind the building. When we investigated, we found a small male dog of indeterminate ancestry, not a puppy but probably very young judging from his energy level, and a note taped to the outside of the box. "It brakes my heart that I can't care for this dog no more. Please find him a good home." Alan showed particular interest. It turns out that he and Ron, having recently lost their dog, were just beginning to consider a rescue adoption. They had already decided to search for a small male, and had even chosen a name.

Cicero is apparently a terrier mix, and I emphasize the word, "mix," for he is definitely descended from a long and distinguished line of mongrels. He seems quite cheerful and affectionate, and has proven a very good traveler, normally lying next to one of us or in somebody's lap. Alan immediately picked up all the canine care essentials-- a collar, leash, water and food dishes, dog waste bags, and 28-pound bag of Taste of the Wild Pacific Stream Smoke-Flavored Salmon Grain-Free Dry Dog Food that will probably last for the next three months, and which will be undoubtedly be generously supplemented with various healthy snacks. It seems unlikely that Cicero will have any regrets about leaving Georgia.

And a second unexpected event today . . . I'm guessing, and this is totally unfounded and probably irresponsible speculation, mind you, that very few 1971 VW microbuses are stopped for speeding in downtown Sylvania, Georgia (population, 2,628). The young officer, whose heavy build, ruddy complexion, and Georgia drawl would undoubtedly guarantee him a bit part in a low-budget film set in the South -- let's say, for example, the role of a police officer in Sylvania, Georgia, about to issue a traffic citation -- walked slowly around the bus before approaching Jake in the driver's seat, asking, "Is this thing safe to drive?" Alan reacted defensively, but it was actually a fair question, and one that I have frequently been tempted to ask ever

since the beginning of the trip. South Carolina is one of the few states that doesn't require vehicle safety inspections.

Respectfully but firmly instructed to remain in the vehicle (pronounced vee-hickle with the accent on the second syllable), we waited tensely until the officer had run his required check on the license plate. It was at this point that Yasha's quirky and unpredictable sense of humor, a source of frequent discomfort and embarrassment to friends and family, as you well know, decided to display itself. "I suppose you're not interested in the ten bricks of cocaine that we have hidden in the back of the bus."

You could see the young officer struggling to find a proper response. On one hand, if a resourceful drug cartel was looking for ideal mules to transport their merchandise, what better candidates than a group of befuddled septuagenarians traveling in a marginally driveable antique bus through rural Georgia? On the other hand, would a real mule voluntarily and without duress freely admit to carrying cocaine? But if he anticipated a vehicle search, might he not try humor as a diversionary tactic to allay suspicion? And what exactly, according to the long ago studied training manual, is the protocol for a suspect who confesses that he's transporting drugs across state lines?

When he stepped back and dropped a hand uncomfortably close to his holster, I intervened with an apology for the totally inappropriate joke, although the phrase, "unorthodox and somewhat aberrant sense of humor" may not have been the best choice of words. Still, it was an accurate characterization, and it seemed to finally convince him that he was dealing with a crazy but harmless bunch of old men whom he wanted to get rid of as quickly as possible. I doubt that Alan will ever be fully reimbursed for the \$175 speeding ticket.

#

Blakely, GA

If you ever find yourself passing through Hawkinsville in central Georgia, I highly recommend the Red Dog Cafe for lunch. You can't go wrong with the fried green tomatoes, the barbequed pork ribs, or the catfish filet. But be prepared for a clientele that's a little on the rough side. Like the group of . . . I don't want to say "rednecks" because that's a pejorative, judgmental, and even somewhat elitist term that I try to avoid . . . let's say a group of local young men on their lunch break from work seated at a table across the virtually empty room. At one point they began snickering and sending disdainful and challenging looks our way, and it was obvious that they were not making kind or complimentary comments about the strange group of old men on the other side of the room.

Jake got up, before he could be stopped, and hobbled over to their table, engaged them in brief but animated conversation, which we couldn't hear over the noise from the highway and the kitchen, and then hobbled back to our table. Chairs scraped on the other side of the room. From under the table where he had been happily chewing a pork rib, Cicero issued a menacing growl. We were about to be assaulted by a bunch of damn rednecks. Alan moved with surprising speed to intercept them. Sometimes there's something almost ecclesiastical about Alan – do you know what I mean? – and maybe they took him for a retired minister, and so stopped briefly to listen to him out of respect before beating the shit out of us. We only caught a few words, "Vietnam," "lost three of his buddies," "kneecap shot off," "PTSD."

One of the young men, the largest and probably the assumed leader of the group, walked over and reached for Jake's hand. "Sorry, Buddy. We had no idea. Didn't mean no disrespect. Thank you for your service." The others followed, each one shaking Jake's hand and thanking him with heartfelt sincerity and humility for his service.

Jake, you may recall, pulled a lucky lottery number of 328 in 1969, and was never drafted. This evening after a long day of driving, mostly done by our revered Vietnam vet, who almost lost a leg in the war and still struggles nearly every night with horrific nightmares, we lined up and shook his hand, thanking him warmly for his service, a tradition we intend to reverently maintain throughout the remainder of the trip.

#

Hurtsboro AL

Early this afternoon we heard an ominous thumping coming from under the front of the car. Alan pulled into the nearest gas station, actually a combination service station/garage offering vehicle repair as well as gas, something rapidly disappearing elsewhere, but frequently found in this part of the country. The owner pointed out a large, nasty screw protruding from the right front tire. He's one of those who likes to deliver service assessments in terms of good news and bad news.

Bad news: there's no spare tire (which Alan would have discovered, had he checked before buying the bus). More bad news: the tire can't be repaired. Good news: we've come to the only place in Hurtsboro that sells and installs tires, sparing us the inconvenience of shopping competitors for a better price. Bad news: the bus is equipped with 14-inch tires, which are hard to find. Good news: the 14-inch tire can be replaced with a 15-inch tire, which is much more readily available. Bad news: all four tires will have to be replaced, so that they will all be the same size. Good news: it's not too late to put the tires on the truck from the supplier for today's delivery. Bad news: the truck won't arrive until 4:30, and the installation will take two hours, so we're stuck in Hurtsboro (pop. 592) for tonight. I respectfully disagree with the criteria he uses for the good news classification, but we're obviously out of options.

So we take a seat on the long bench in front of the garage and make the acquaintance of a charming elderly gentleman (and I use the term, "elderly" advisedly, now that I've entered that demographic), Beau Birney, who claims that at the age of ninety-six he's the oldest resident of

Hurtsboro, and who spends every afternoon sitting on the bench in front of the garage where he used to work many years ago, drinking his Coca-Cola (his "Co-Cola"), a true treasure of oral history, regaling us with his stories and opinions, the changes he's seen in Hurtsboro during his long life, his strongly held views on politics, religion, race relations, stories of his great great grandfather who fought in the Civil War (probably embellished by generations of retelling, but still resonating with a certain authenticity, especially since not everything is to his ancestor's credit, like the time Great Great Grandad released a Yankee prisoner without authorization in exchange for a prized gold watch, only to lose it the next night in a poker game, only to be served with a court martial the next day as a result of bragging about how he acquired the watch).

Was the tire really damaged beyond repair? Was it really necessary to replace all four tires? Were we given a fair price? I have no idea. Between the four of us, we have a vast knowledge of the legal profession, investigative journalism, the Civil War, computer programming, Latin and Greek literature, but absolutely no knowledge of the nuances of tire replacement. All I know for certain is that, in all probability, Alan will never be fully reimbursed for the \$834 he just spent on new tires.

#

Monroeville, AL

Alan and I, the two most literate members of the group, insisted on adding to the itinerary the non-descript town of Monroesville, Alabama, the hometown of Truman Capote and Harper Lee. It wasn't meant to be a stopping point on the route, but a minor medical drama (which probably could have been avoided if you had been with us as the group doctor) kept us here overnight.

It started late in the afternoon when I began experiencing chest pain, especially if I took a deep breath, something I had noticed the previous day and ignored, but began feeling more acutely and regularly, and which I now felt obligated to mention to the others, although trying to downplay the symptoms. They insisted, despite my protest, that the situation required immediate medical attention, and we ended up in the small and almost empty Emergency Department waiting room of the Monroe County Hospital.

The young Filipino doctor who examined me diagnosed a bruised rib, resulting from a sudden jolt yesterday, when Jake abruptly braked to avoid a large turtle crossing the road, causing my seat belt to snap sharply across my chest and leaving a barely visible bruise, which the doctor pointed out as confirmation of his diagnosis.

But beforehand, while we sat somewhat tensely in the waiting room listening for someone to call my name, Yasha explained to me that 10% of all heart attack victims do not survive, and that, therefore, the odds were in my favor. After a brief pause, he added somberly, “On the other hand, 10% is not an insignificant statistical probability.” Jake, his legal experience kicking in, asked me whether Jenny knows where I file my will and other legal papers, and reprimanded me for not carrying my advanced directive, at my advanced age, whenever I travel. Alan told me that he found all hospitals morbidly depressing, that they always reminded him of the famous poem Catullus addressed to his dead brother, which he partially quoted in translation, but all I remember is “and talk with mute ash.” It was actually touching to see how each of them was trying, in his own gentle way, to prepare me for my impending death.

#

Oxford, MS

Why Oxford you ask? It certainly wasn’t included on any of the possible itineraries we sent for your feedback a few months ago. Last night in Waynesboro, MS (nothing of interest to report, so I skipped my nightly summary), we learned, to our complete astonishment, that Yasha is actually a big fan of Faulkner, working his way chronologically through all of his novels.

Amy even gave him an extravagantly expensive first edition of *As I Lay Dying* for his seventy-fifth birthday. Apparently, Yasha’s mother, who held a series of positions as Visiting

Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature at various universities, was passionately fond of Faulkner, and some of that enthusiasm must have been inherited by her otherwise non-literary son.

Looking at the map, we calculated that Oxford was less than four hours away, and Yasha asked us, somewhat hopefully, if we might be interested in the Faulkner house, Rowan Oak, which he’d always wanted to visit. During the guided tour, he was uncharacteristically quiet, I would even say reverently quiet. When Alan walked Cicero on the grounds of the estate, against the rules I’m sure, he discovered, at the very moment that Cicero decided to relieve himself under one of the tallest and most impressive oaks on the property, that he had forgotten to bring the poop bags. This prompted Jake, never an admirer of the academic world, which, as you know, he finds artificial, pretentious, and self-absorbed, to express his complete agreement with Cicero’s obviously low opinion of Faulkner. Then, after a reflective pause, he wondered aloud whether anyone had ever considered writing a doctoral dissertation on the scatological influence of Cicero on Faulkner.

This evening Yasha took me aside and with some hesitation and embarrassment told me that he was trying his hand at fiction, starting a long short story, maybe a short novel, and wondered if I, a published writer, would be willing to give my opinion on a short sample, handing me a folder with three handwritten pages. I agreed to read it closely after my return and send him a brief comment, sensing that it might be awkward to read and critique his effort during our trip. When I read it, or rather tried to decipher it after he left my room, I realized that I’d made the right call.

From what I can make out, the story is about an inventor who is facing a serious lawsuit related to one of his inventions, maybe involving a patent infringement or property damage or maybe even bodily harm caused by the invention. I suspect it may well be at least partially autobiographical. The initial presentation of the case is somewhat disjointed and difficult to piece together, maybe intentionally, but more concerning are signs that the writer may be struggling with some of the basic mechanics of written expression. The handwriting is abnormally shaky, several long words are crossed out and replaced with shorter, simpler words, “their” occurs twice in place of “there,” some words are randomly capitalized, there are occasional odd spaces between words, and a few of the sentences just don’t make any grammatical sense. And this from the guy who used to proofread our papers at Swarthmore and point out misplaced commas. Maybe Amy is right to worry.

#

Homer, LA

And so our odyssey ends not in New Orleans, but fittingly and ironically in Homer, Louisiana.

You may remember Jake's penchant for flipping the bird. A mild insult merits a one-handed gesture, while a more serious insult merits a double-handed response. I didn't hear the insult shouted by the passenger in the red pickup with a confederate flag decal on the rear window, but it evidently merited a two-handed response from our deeply offended driver as he leaned out the window.

Now the 1971 VW microbus, even one with a complete set of newly installed 15-inch tires, is not normally noted for its nimble handling. Especially in the rain. On a poorly maintained state highway. When under the control of a seventy-five-year-old driver. Who is concentrating 100% of his attention off the road. And whose hands are totally free of the steering wheel.

Our bus was hardly a match for the Chevy Suburban that slammed into the rear of our vehicle as we skidded sideways into its path. The engine compartment and rear of the bus were totally crumpled, but fortunately the only occupants of the rear seat were travel bags and Cicero, who briefly experienced the sensation of a flying squirrel before bouncing off a headrest into someone's lap. None of us had any significant injuries, although the paramedics were a little concerned about the bump on Jake's head. In the category of car accident injuries, none of us can even begin to compete with you.

We're flying home from Shreveport tomorrow, all except Alan, of course, who has to deal with the sad wreckage we are conveniently leaving in his capable hands. Whatever he gets from his insurance company will come nowhere close to reimbursing his investment in the bus.

I cannot tell you how much you were missed on this trip. You were always the one who kept us all grounded, who gently but effectively managed to neutralize the pernicious effects of our toxic male egos. I was always grateful that you decided to stay in our little group after you and I broke up. Rest and heal, Suzanne.

The End

Aging Gracefully



Joley Smith

Concerto No. 2 in E minor, Op. 67

The wind trills in my ear
as the pelican claps its wings,
fraying black and white

feathers into a rug of dust
decorating the edge of a riptide.
It gargles saltwater in its gullet

before paddling from sea to
silver stratuses veiling the shriveled

pier. I press my pink foam flip-
flops into its planks, and I

fold my ribs over the rail
like linen on a clothesline,

drying in the hidden heat
of an April sunset,
watching the live watercolor painting—

the burnt sienna and the forgiving
violet splattered across the sky.

With each silent brush stroke,
I meditate on if God is a maestro,
conducting concertos, if I am

a philharmonic pianist for Him
or spectator in the parterre peering
through my clouded opera glasses.

Maybe God isn't the virtuoso,
but the technicolor kitesurfers are

walking on water like a kid, and I, the scribe
recording it for Him. I could not tell
you if I am the composer, performer, or patron,
nor which I prefer. We all have our ways

of swimming toward sapidity, treading water,
remembering to look to the sun
bleached fog sinking over the shore.
What I could tell you is, the pelican
does not ask who he claps for.

Cierra Smith

Maid Woman (What in the world is going on in here?)

a Blues for Cardi B and for Lillian Randolph

They say that I'm low class
Cause I don't own a house
They say that I'm low class
Cause I just clean the house
They say that I'm low class
Apron over my blouse
I play second billing
To a cat and a mouse

They write me stupid
They write me thick
They write me stupid
They make me look thick
They write me stupid
Cause it gives them a kick
Like a woman like me
Can't see through all the tricks

The mouse done scares me
I jump up on a stool
The mouse done scares me
So I jump on the stool
The mouse done scares me
Drop some dice and a jewel
But I carry this razor
Cause masters are fools

They make fun of my accent
The way I walk in the room
They make fun of my accent
How I walk in the room
They make fun of my accent
Call me Mammy Two-Shoes
But I'm the only one human
In this fucking cartoon

JeFF Stumpo

John Donne Up in the Club

a villanelle for Usher, Lil Jon, and Ludacris

We did, yet didn't come to play.
It all depends on how you're asking.
Yeah! Okay!

You have the look that makes me say
"Lord above, how am I lasting?"
We did, yet didn't. Come to play,

Swing your sweet babes to sleep with the Rockaway.
Or let God's thunder clap, heavens blasting.
Yeah! Okay!

We all know that it's growing late
And morning break will soon be crashing.
We did, yet didn't come to play,

And my mouth be stuffed with marbles at the way
You remain in that masquerade fashion.
Yeah! Okay!

You just want an answer, like an arrow, straight,
And I hand you mine, with tautened passion.
We did, yet didn't come to play.
Yeah! Okay!

JeFF Stumpo

The Kite



Serge Lecomte

A Black Shirt That Doesn't Fit Over a Pair of Extra-Large Man Tits

By Daniel Garcia

The shirt that I was wearing was too tight, too baggy, too long. Nothing about it fit right on my body, that hung over the waist of my pants, down to the ground, jiggling with every step I took. I wanted it to stop, the shirt—my body—but it was the only black shirt that I had that still fit.

I had grown out of all the other black shirts that fit better after one too many 3 am cheesecakes, and the routine of subjecting myself to 5 or 6 slices of meat lover's pizza after doing a whole lot of nothing. So, I just had to pretend that this wrinkled black shirt wasn't holding my titties a little too tight and that the white buttons weren't screaming at me, begging me to stop.

If I could've, I would've just worn a large cardboard box with bold letters on the side that said "Please recycle" to hide myself within, which would've been perfect attire to throw myself away into the ocean to end up on the shores of another country that doesn't have the language to speak my name. But a large six-foot-two thick paper box isn't what you wear to your Tio's funeral which was held three months away from his 59th birthday.

When I arrived at Rose Hills, the cemetery known for having ghosts that spend their after-life pushing cars up Gravity Hill, I thought maybe my Tio would be one of them, and maybe he'd try to speak to me by smudging a ghostly message within the dirt on my windshield, "Suck it in, Mijo. I can see your chichis through your shirt. P.S. Tell my kids it was an accident."

When the message never came, I spent an hour fidgeting with my shirt in the car trying to get it to fit right, then another hour undoing everything I had tried. I didn't look in the mirror once. I couldn't risk being haunted by what I would've seen before going into a room that held every single person that's known me since I was small, plus one dead man.

Enough time had passed for me to feel guilty about not going in to say goodbye to my Tio's handlebar mustache yet. I forced myself out of the car and jiggled my way to the venue where a priest would perform God-rock in a tacky purple leather jumpsuit and would throw my Tio's body into the pews for him to crowdsurf his way into a God-shaped hole in the ground, before being sealed away with the worms for the rest of time.

My cousin, Julie, was sitting outside the venue on a bench, in the shade, away from the setting sun. She was just sitting there staring at her shoes: a clean pair of white Converse. In the time it took me to jiggle my way from the car to her, the sun had fallen, then risen, then fallen again. And she never stopped looking at her shoes despite the world changing around her. When she heard me, she lifted her head from the ground and smiled as if I was the only person in the world that she wanted to see at that moment, but her glossy blue eyes couldn't hide the fact that she missed her dad.

She stood up from the bench and opened her arms wide. I only opened my arms a little bit because the buttons on my shirt were already fighting for their lives. She hugged me like I was a part of her life. I hugged her knowing I had let more than a year slip by since last seeing her. The last time I saw her, she and her dad were doing a daddy-daughter dance on her 16th birthday. She was 17 now, almost 18, and her dad was being crowdsurfed inside.

"How are you doing?" I asked, like a fucking idiot.

"I'm doing alright," she lied, for the thousandth time that day.

"I like your shoes," I said.

"Thank you. My parents got them for me. I only wear them on special days."

Heavy metal was being played from inside the venue. A crowd of people wearing all black opened up a mosh pit and were lobbing the dead body around. The priest was praying on the mic for everyone to tear down the venue. My shirt fit a little too tight

"I'm sorry I haven't called or texted. I guess I didn't know what to say. I still don't, actually. I don't think there's anything I could say to make anything better."

"It's okay," she said. "I've had my phone off all week, anyway. It got hard to pretend."

"I don't like that I haven't seen you for so long. I think I just lost track of time. I didn't think we'd

see each other again like this. I guess it's wrong of me to assume that there's always a next time."

"It's fine," she said. "I haven't reached out to you either. It's been just as long."

"Y'know, I just really appreciated the way your dad talked to me growing up. It felt like he was the only one who cared. I mean truly, really, the only one who cared."

"We're not kids anymore," she said. "And everybody cares differently. I don't know what you need to under--"

The music inside grew silent. The sun had finally stopped setting, suspended just above the graveyard, refusing to go down. As my cousin spoke to me, telling me how poorly my shirt fit, I watched a Jeep with nobody in it roll up and over the hill behind her. On the dirty windshield, it read, "You look good, Mijo. It fits just right. P.S. Don't forget to mention it."

"Nobody electrocutes themselves on purpose," I said. My cousin Julie looked at me, then down to her clean white shoes, then nodded her head before wiping her eyes, careful not to smear her makeup.

"I know," she said.

"I'm gonna go look at your dad now—that's not what I meant. I just--"

"I know what you mean," she chuckled.

"Sorry," I said. "Do you want to come with?"

She shook her head no and decided to stay behind to comfort the Sun, since it was scared of setting too soon. I jiggled my way into the venue where I danced to disco music with my Tio's body for the rest of time.

The City Beach

Dinner has come, the plates carousel,
snow is heaping upon Whitney Park, Maine
is a settlement for winter, the bloodshot eyes
of a writer seeping into American idealism
stampeding over springtime bloom, where beauty
is snapped by a camera and left wilted
under designer shoes, the gregarious heart tipped
to the waiter's back pocket. Taking a dirty fork
and knife to the buttery bulge, syrupy spritz
tantalizing the farmer's tough tongue, sentimentality
exposed by a rush of sugar that reminds him
of pink dolls, romantic movies, stage plays on Broadway,
then comes the black coffee with no sugar or cream,
bacon wafting like petrol and lifted trucks.
Onto the ocean the oil rigs dump their waste
and the boulevard smells of sulfur,
the child behind me has travelled across country,
looking through the glass eye of a ketchup bottle
prancing around, Galileo discovering
stars like sand knotted between toes.
I have been a cruel traveler, a living case of Rigor mortis,
a tired knot holding the world above orphanages,
kneeling before beggars on traveled streets,
they have found me on the furthest docks,
in the darkest bilges, atop hills where Quixote
learned chivalry did not reside in books.
Inhale the mountains, and waves;
I won't let you die.

Hopi Dosela

Octopus



Bristol Christelman

We'll Always Have Syria

By Tommy Cheis

* * *

A dog and a most-wanted terrorist walk into a bar.

Not in the mood, Tyr. It's a dumb joke. Beneath your standards as a purebred Maltese.

I'm trying to help you forget Sarah.

Who?

She was drunk.

Her body, her choice, her problem, mutt. Sorry, no biscuit. Get your claws off the bartop.

And drugged.

She can take that up with her shrink or her sex therapist.

What if—

There's no possible if that if it were true it would make any difference.

Stay open to the possibility of another explanation.

CLANG! You stole that line from Les.

No. It's not from your foster father, although the FBI Metro Las Vegas chief is eloquent. I purloined it from you. I listen when you talk. Do me the same favor. Hey, I'm a thirteen years old— 91 in human terms—ethanol virgin. Gimme what you're having.

How are you here with me? I saw you headless, nailed to my kitchen cabinet courtesy of the worst member of my cell—Abu Tbilisawi.

Dogs have nineteen lives. Nice threads. Tommy Bahama shirt, tight Levi's, shoes by Ralph Lauren.

Where'd I get clean clothes?

From your closet.

Did I shower first?

You scrubbed and shaved, then grabbed everything important from your fleabag dump y and stuffed it in the carrier on your FatBoy.

My gun and Miriam's ashes, too?

Yes. You snagged the old bag's urn, some money, and Chloe's art. Someday your foster sister's work will be appreciated.

Give her time. She's only six. For me it has sentimental value. What next?

We blew out of your apartment like the place was on fire, because it was. Remember?

That's why I'm singed. But that's water over the dam. Get the pun?

"What can I get you, hun?" McKinley is the name on the plate on the shirt that wears the vivacious bartender.

I wink, then point out a display bottle. With a wire cage around its neck and a locking cap, the bottle is engineered and lethal. “Grolsch sounds like what you do when you’ve had too many or you need a new liver, sister,” I tell her.

Eyebrows clown-painted, she sets a sweaty green flagon on a Rhythm and Riffs Mandalay Bay coaster. Her hand foreplays with mine. She whispers a secret so I’ll make love to her.

“Happy Hour’s two for seven, stud.”

“Deal.” I slip her Al Hamilton’s picture in lieu of the intercourse she hankers for. She’s disappointed but smiles anyway.

Tyr and I clink beers. “*Nasdaroviya*.” We chug. Nothing happens. I order two more. “Cheers,” I tell my little Maltese reincarnate.

We gulp, then take in a jazz quartet competing with drunk-talk and slot-noise. The casino floor gags on a glop of tourists and U.S. Army soldiers, in civvies but identifiable by buzz cuts and muscles, on a pass from Fort Huachuca, which was our secondary target. On a screen the U.S., blaming Palestine for the bloodbath roiling Gaza, has imposed a naval blockade and gifted billions to Israel. The strategy’s working. The Palestinian death-toll has rocketed. Over ninety- nine thousand civilians. The Israeli count’s nineteen soldiers. The beers are duds.

Tyr burps. *Another, MJ.*

After you read this page in my pocket, dog. Just the gist.

It’s a Notice to Appear before DOJ and USCIS. You’re charged with “violation of 8 U.S.C.

§1227(a)(1)(A) and Section 237 of the Nationality Act because you were, at time of entry, an inadmissible alien who provided false information on your application. Specifically—

Skip to the juicy part.

Your resident status has been revoked. You’re an illegal facing—

Deportation. Can they do it in under forty-eight hours?

Yes. Hop a flight to anywhere before Immigration freezes your passport, brother.

A Nashville country-blues band cranks up. The first song’s a story. A guy lost his job, his dog ran away, and his wife abandoned him, but it’s OK because his gun and his booze are captive to the power of his will.

I’m stuck, Tyr. I promised Chloe she wouldn’t die.

You made an oath you can’t keep. It’s your habit.

I’ll break it by donating a segment.

What are you, the Liver Fairy?

Stop the verbal bombardment. Chill the bombast. I promised her.

Then invoke the doctrine of rebus sic stantibus. That was then, this is now.

F that. Chloe’s constant. Everyone betrayed me but you and she.

If you don’t do the mission, Abu Zil will kill her, then you. Do it, and you die in the blast. Either way, your liver’s toast. Chloe’s dead. Accept it. The sooner you tell her the better.

That’s a bombshell. I’m thundering mad. But if I bang my head on yours, we’ll have a blast, eh?

You’ll get no fission from that trick. Here’s a joke for you: A suicide bomber, a Maltese, and the devil

walk into a bar.

Two beers and you're bombed, Tyr.

No. Look behind you.

The Voice sounds. "One minute you're there," says Abu Zil, the charismatic ISIS psychopath who trained me in Syria and tasked me to nuke Las Vegas. "The next? Gone like you'd never existed, as the devil is my witness." He slips onto an adjacent stool and hoists my Grolsch. He looks like I might if I were to live another twenty-five years. "This is poison, Muhammad Jihad."

"I worry naught about my health anymore. Have one or a dozen. I'm buying."

Zil clears his throat and waxes poetic. "*Behold, a boy of beckoning glances and chaste tongue proffers me wine of hope mixed with despair.*"

"Spare me the drunken spew of the medieval pederast, Abu Nuwas. Least you can do, lover."

I wave McKinley over. Two more of her shirt-buttons pop open. She's desperate. "Twosies for me, my hound, and Zil. Total of six."

She blinks like the Jeanie I dream of, then returns in a flash with a tripod of bottles hung dead by their necks from each ringless hand. She sets them deftly before us, left to right—Tyr Jihad, Muhammad Jihad, Abu Zil *ne* God.

I hand her pics of Al Hamiltonblender and Andy Jackass. "Keep the change, gorgeous."

She grimaces. "If it gets crowded..."

"We'll vanish."

"You're weird but handsome. Tell me you're not driving," I laugh.

Tyr, seething, turns away and scratches himself.

I skol-toast Zil. "What's the plan, boss?"

Zil coughs beer-foam into his goatee. "Plan?!"

"The bomb. Let's get it on, hoss."

"You're joking."

"I'm for real as best I can tell."

"The Americans are closing in. Surveillance on you is constant."

"Has been from the moment I snuck-crossed the Jordan."

"Now it's worse. Nuclear Emergency Support teams are in Vegas, hunting for the device."

"Nice, but it's a bomb, Zil. Don't mince words."

He picks up his beer with long tapered fingers. "Time's run out. Gamma sensors are active. Once you drive it out of its mountain hiding place, the device will go hot in nanoseconds. Tubes along highways will triangulate your location."

"So they'll triangulate the awop-bomb-alooobop-alop-bam-BOOM. I'm not scared."

"If they discover an attack is imminent, the Army will deploy Stryker WMD recon vehicles to destroy the ordnance."

"You mean they'll destroy the *bibimbomb* with a side-effect of seaweed salad."

"Remote detonation is impossible, boy. America will jam cell phone frequency bands soon." He removes

his jacket.

McKinley drools. The Palestinian madman Abu Zil is as jacked as I am.

But then he whispers, to me, “We’d have to use a timer.”

“Ti-i-i-mer is on my side. Yes, it is.”

“Strike that. We have no intel capacity. I won’t send you to die senselessly.”

“Then send me to die in a sensible pair of shoes. Let’s be *Getting to Yes*.”

“Options are limited. Facts are stubborn. You can’t wish them away. I’ve aborted the mission.”

Tyr taps my head.

I ignore him. “Rebirth it, Zil. Vaginally or by C-section.”

Zil snaps his fingers.

McKinley sashays over to me, not him, and I slip Ulysses’s picture into her décolletage.

She shudders and drops four more beer-bombs.

Tyr refuses his. Zil too. I pound them all. Still no buzz. Beer’s broken. “Give me a time and a place, Zil.”

“Why?”

“I look like a person, but I’m a monster? Every mass murderer needs a reliable sponsor? Or we’re as one?”

“I have no further power over you. Even if I did, I’m no dictator. You can’t make decisions about your future in your condition.”

“I’ve never thought as clearly as I do now. Tell that ape-shaped Georgian, Abu Tblisawi, to wire it up, gimme the trigger, and split. The mission’s on.”

I turn to get Tyr’s input on the *tete-a-tete*, but on his stool a pickled man smelling of liniment with hands full of nickels sits, brooding over a tumbler of BombBay gin.

I laugh so loud I spin heads. Dozens.

“For years I attacked you via psychological warfare,” Zil admits. “Only then did I dangle the usual suspects before you. Revenge. Power. Fame. Money. Women. Yet you spurned them all. Why?”

“I’m homosexual, remember? And how do you entice the man who has everything?”

“But I dismantled the perfect life you built brick-by-brick, *sic per ordinem*: Your loyal dog. Your slutty sister. Your pastoral hypocrite. Your Olympic swimming dream. Columbia Med. Your so-called family. Your legal residency. Now Chloe’s liver transplant, scotched. Still you’re recalcitrant.”

“And you’re a failure. I told my foster family I’m a lying terrorist sent to kill them and others. Guess what? They didn’t care.”

“You did nothing of the kind.” “I did, mas o menos.”

“They heard what they wanted to. They didn’t listen, if the whole truth is told.”

“The truth abides in whole or in part. As you taught me, Zil, truth’s subjective.”

He snarls. His green-blue eyes gleam. “The truth is objective if it’s to have power,” he mumbles without conviction.

“Truth depends on past, position, and perspective, professor. Like souls, everyone has one.”

“Pah!” He slams his empty Grolsch on the bar top. “You twist my words, boy. It’s my habit to say what I mean. There’s one truth and you’re afraid to embrace it.”

“‘There is only my truth which, with all its power, lives in me.’ *Also sprach Abu Zil.*”

“You’re experiencing psychosis. This is a fever dream. At best this is surreal and fueled by alcohol. Don’t you agree, MJ?”

“Arguendo, yes. New topic. What of the past? Mine’s too much with me. But is it real?”

“Hardly. We only experience the past through memories. Are memories true representations or selective? Are they not the result of editorial decisions about what to include and exclude from our consciousness? Or the result of a self-serving process of embellishment, minimization, projection, even delusion? Are they not eroded by time, altered by recollection, even entirely forgotten? If memories are at least part-fiction, malleable, and perishable, how can we truly know what’s gone before except for evolution?”

“Don’t make me grope in the dark, Zil. Say what you want to say.”

“We know so many things that aren’t so. You know nothing of your past or future. Only your present is real, but even that drifts into fantasylands. You’re detached, like a retina.”

“I know what I lived and what people told me.”

“But everyone lies. Most people can’t get through a day without fibbing thrice. The truth’s a fearful monster and a dreadful burden. Ignorance keeps many from going mad but it’s cold comfort. Self-delusion’s the worst abuse. The truth will come to light eventually. You’ll see.”

“When it’s revealed, Zil, I’ll protect it from its assassins, of whom you’re the best.”

“It will be good for you to know yourself better and in full. You didn’t tell Mom and Pop about your prison boyfriend, I’ll venture.”

“I gave no consent to being forcibly sodomized, so whatever. Go post your video footage to your favorite Russian rape-porn site.”

Abu Zil scrunches his oval face. “What video?”

“From the jail cell camera. Ah. You lied. There’s no footage.”

“Never said there was, kiddo.”

“When you’re around, I’m in the dark. You twist things and lay traps.”

“I have a disorienting effect and I sow confusion, but those who make incredibly faulty inferences and assumptions are their own worst enemies. I challenge them, but I’ve no real power over facts.”

“Here’s a fact. I’ve loved others.”

“Sarah? Please. What a tramp. You should never have slavered over your sister.”

“Foster. Not blood. And don’t forget Chloe.”

“Pah. Sarah’s appendage? A dying child’s no consequence in this context. Revealing Sarah’s sluttery when she serviced a fraternity entire wasn’t strategy. It was honor and decency. I was sure it would cost me the battle over you.”

“That’s not what you implied previously. You branded yourself all-powerful and me your slave. Not your equal.”

“I lied but never mind. You might’ve pissed yourself away over a whore and a cripple. They were all I had to leverage you until you assimilated Sarah’s true nature. But now, when the bomb’s a mission-impossible, what point in nondisclosure?” He looks at me as if I mean to steal his valise. “Something rankles my craw. Your nouveau blood-lust is fishy. Rather than tuck and run for your life from the insurmountable, you posture as an Athenian zealot before a helpless Melos, eager to firebomb noncompliant civilians. Your

military and moral recursion centers on Sarah, but how?”

“I don’t give a good goddamn what happens to that cow.”

“Ah!” He grabs my face. “Then why so eager to kill now? I never could make you do anything. I’ve sworn I’d lay no finger on the girls and I won’t. What’s the point? You have free will.” He slaps my shoulder and sits back.

“I’m just keeping my end of our bargain.”

“Poppycock. You’re as metamorphosed as Kafka’s Gregor. The etiology’s simple. Events A and B are related. Did B occur by chance or did A’s occurrence bring B, by causal process, into fruition? The reason for your change-of-heart’s clear. Rejection, not sex with a girl, unlocks your inner demon. Now that you control the ultimate weapon, you ache to teach the bitch a lesson about your worth in ways heretofore impossible. Lemonade from lemons.”

“It’s not about fucking Sarah.”

“A Freudian slip. There’s the crux. I wish I’d staged my revelation of her character when it might’ve mattered. Hark, Muhammad Jihad’s Manifesto! Make war, not love!”

I fight to keep my composure. “No, Zil. Promises are sacred, on my *bayat*.”

He shakes his head like I’m stupid. “Too dangerous. Les must know all about you, soup to nuts.”

“So what? ‘*I must do my duty lest the larger operation of which I am but a small part fails.*’”

Zil chuckles. “You recite me verbatim. What a memory. Nevertheless, I release you from your pledge. You’re free. Stay away from politics, guns, and bombs. Be a doctor. Find a good beard or a husband. Have a family.”

“So I was told by an Israeli soldier. Your recall is superb, too, but *ego odi, ergo sum. I hate, therefore I am*. Is it not the same for you, Zil? Let’s spread fear and loathing in Las Vegas, then die like Horatio Nelson in battle.”

“*Oy vey iz mit*. This is maddening.”

“‘*Save the world by bringing hate to America and restoring its love-hate balance.*’ Your words, Zil. Let’s start with Sarah and end with a bang. Why so abashed?”

“Pah. It was braggadocio. Only a dummkopf meshuggene could believe that puffery.”

“Am I stupid or crazy?”

“You’re a genius. But have you ever been told you have a mental disorder?”

“‘*Every Pheidippides gets called nuts or a liar when his message threatens established order.*’ I’ve memorized your teachings. Let’s get ready to rumble ala Michael Buffer.”

“Nix. If your world has run out of love, and hate’s what remains, learn to love very hard, starting with yourself. Love saves, boy. It’s good medicine.”

“You’re not the Zil I know. ‘*We’ll kill women and kids. Embed fear in America. Bring Great Satan to its knees. Free Palestine. Be cruel to be kind.*’ I quote you.”

“I was blowing smoke.” “I got high.”

“Rumors of wars relieve boredom. I was chewing the fat with you, boy.”

“Liar. Nor were you shooting shit or faking funk. You were dead-serious.”

“This attack would be a suicide mission, chump.”

“Not quite. Although I’m twenty-one with no interest in turning twenty-two, this will be *amaliyyat*

fida'iyya. An act of self-sacrifice.”

“Semantics.” He stands. “You’ve no prayer.”

“I have a tiny chance of survival, Zil.”

“One in a million are beastly odds.”

“What have I got to lose?”

He shrugs. “That riddle only you can solve. Do, or devour yourself. The answer’s within.”

“And now it’s jumping out like a Mexican bean. Let’s gogogogogogogogogo!!!”

Zil sits. “I’m shocked. You’re so far down the road. Your mind works faster than mine. Let me catch up.” He buries his face in his hands.

I disappear the last beer. Finally, it works! I’m blitzed.

“The chance to attack America may never present again,” Zil says through fanned fingers, “but other cells hide worldwide. If you fail here and now the device is lost. With it, the war.”

“I won’t let the enemy bend my will or defeat the plan.”

“More smoke. Clouds of it. Those words have nothing behind them but hot humid bathroom air spiced by that Yazidi whore, Zara, whom by loving you assassinated even if another squeezed the trigger.”

“Bullshit. Words mean things. The bomb’s in the mountain. The Americans will find it if we abort. Let’s go for it strenuously.”

“No, by Allah. The device is hidden deeply and well-shielded. If we abort, then after a cooling-off period we’ll retrieve and deploy it elsewhere.”

“What are the odds you can sneak a nuke out of the cave?”

“Better than the odds of sneaking it in, MJ.”

“Truly?”

“No. I’m lying. The odds are nil. But if we abort and nullify the device, at least you’ll live to secure my lineage as heir and cell commander.”

“This grand mission has devolved into a matter of patrimony? Focus.”

Zil stalls. “The FBI could grab us any minute.”

“Not if we leave instantly. And I think not. The time for Jihad has arrived.”

“According to you, boy, jihad is love.”

“To you, Zil, jihad’s hate. Why can’t it be both, like chocolate and peanutbutter in the Reese’s ad? When I say it’s time for Jihad, I speak not of jihad as a struggle but of Muhammad Jihad who’s decided. Let’s roll.”

Abu Zil claps, then hugs me. “Bravo! Part of America’s pathology is the belief that alphabet-soup agencies prevent terrorism. They can pull off a Deep State coup and preen like entitled frat boys, but they lack the aptitude to check motivated minds like ours. They’re Beltway clowns at a sad-sack circus.”

“Don’t underestimate the Puzzle Palace. Especially my dad, Les. He’s a mastermind.”

“Pearl Harbor. Tet. The Soviet Collapse. 9/11. None predicted, let alone thwarted, by the million Americans sworn to prevent them. Men learn nothing. History repeats. So, to make a rational decision, I’ll calculate the product of the probability of your success at the mission and its estimated value. Then do the same using the probability of recovering the device and the estimated value of its future use. Then, to that second

product, add the product of the probability of your living to fight another day and the future value of your service. Then discount the second number for inflation. Then pick the option yielding the greatest payoff.” He holds out his hand. “Happen to have a calculator?”

“Don’t be fastidious, Zil. Be irrational like your buddy Bombaparte Napoleon. Say *Fuck it!*, and let her rip!”

“Ha! You think you’re the only warrior on earth who can win this battle?”

“*Na’am.*”

“Are you certain?”

“Is your dick broken? I’m exercising choice a/k/a free will, per you.”

“What? Harvest your ear-potatoes and sell them. I never said you had wiggle room. All roads lead to something you were predestined to do.”

“Wrong, doc. I’m in charge. There’s no destiny because in this anarchy there are no gods.”

“Ha. Every scene in your life-story, from one bloody roadblock to the next, has been published, you divine plagiarist.”

“Then be cool, Zil. I’m a victim of fell circumstance. I’ll do what fate wants regardless.”

“Fine. You’re a natural-born killer with quite a book of business to your name. Let’s count. Two mothers. One fiancée, Zara, and soon another—Sarah. A famous pilot, Chloe, and our cell entire save for me and T. Who’s next? I’d drone on but why bother? I lied when I said you had no prayer. In fact, you have Jude’s. I wash my hands of this. But.” He squints like Clint. “Do you feel lucky?”

“As an albatross.” I hold my arms out in flight.

He guffaws. “A decadent Hellene friend said, ‘A man who glories in his luck may be overthrown by destiny.’” He bends, then comes up toting a familiar briefcase. “Follow me.”

We sail across a rainbow sea of flashing aliens and mood-swinging button-pressers, across a great plain-of-chance, up an elevator into a no-limit salon, and over to a blackjack table. Zil rests his valise on his lap, pops it open, and flashes one thousand pictures of Benjy to the mousy dealer.

Her pit boss appears. Two red-vested worker-bees whisper. Eyes in the sky flicker open. A waitress takes our drink orders—Arran, neat.

Zil sips.

I guzzle.

A fat guy in a sharp suit flanked by guards sets a chip-rack loaded with \$1000 gold markers on the green felt.

“Here’s the game.” Zil pushes the lot forward. “A man’s bet. Everything on one hand. You win? Walk away. The cash is a parting gift. Start life over elsewhere. I’ll hire a cleanup crew. You lose? You can proceed with our plan.”

“Deal. I’m game, but you have the payoffs backwards. Lose, and I win. Win, and I lose.”

The dealer deals

I draw two tens. Dealer’s up card’s an ace. She offers insurance, meaning if I cough up a side bet of fifty K and her down card’s a 10, I lose the original hundred K bet but win double on the side bet, breaking even.

“No, lady. I’ll stand.”

Dealer flips her down card. 6. Aces are 1 or 11. One, because the dealer must hit on soft seventeen. She draws another. 3. Then another. 6. Sixteen total. The only way I can lose is if she draws a 5 and scores twenty-one.

Of course, that's what she does. I'm ecstatic. "Where and when, Zil?" Zil nods at the dealer's cards. "Look again."

The 5's now a 6. "Twenty-two," he cackles. "Dealer busts. You win. boy. Play again."

I try to mind-load the deck like he did, but to draw junk and lose. The first hand works. I draw 9 and 5. Fourteen. Putrid.

But Zil forces me take a hit. 7. Twenty-one.

Dealer busts again.

The next hand's worse. I draw the Ace and Jack of Clubs. Blackjack.

The dealer has zilch.

Onlookers shuffle over like Emperor penguins.

"A lucky dog can't lose," Zil tells them.

I scoff. "Not when you alter the cards."

"I did no such thing."

"I saw you cheat. You turned what was into what you needed it to be. The pit boss missed it."

A management guy comes over and jabbars about free rooms, dining, shows, and other whocky. Then he gives me a platinum plaque. *Mandalay Bay* and \$1,000,000 are etched on it. The radio-frequency ID chip buzzes, recording my whereabouts like a pretrial ankle-monitor.

Zil tosses dealer and pit boss a golden chip each. "Let's decamp before we're presented tax forms," he whispers, then leads me through a flickering mass of people and robots.

My head smokes.

He parks me on a slimy slot machine stool.

I point at the eyes-in-the-sky. "*Hic speculatores*, Zil."

"Yes, spies are everywhere, so speak without moving your lips." He models the technique, then sticks a card in the machine. It comes to life, shows a thousand-dollar balance, and announces its name—*Bombs Away*—to the rumble of simulated ordnance. "Yes, I cheated, for giggles and shits," he admits. "The appointed hour's quarter-of-seven Sunday evening.

Detonation point's the Clark County Library parking lot. My bud Goebbels will be doubly- pleased. You'll bring books to a fire and a fire to books. Exhilarating!"

"Nice parallel structure, but no one reads these days."

"Then consider the symbology."

"No one cares unless it's worked into *manga* or video games."

"Eisenstein and Riefenstahl proved otherwise. Also Capra."

"Ninety-nine years ago, Zil. The world's changed."

Jackpot! Video of Japanese planes bombing the *USS Arizona* plays. I get \$99 for doing Pearl Harbor.

"Consider the likelihood the Clark County BookMobile would fall under suspicion returning to home-

base,” Zil says. “No law enforcement officer would dare detain you.”

“I don’t have access to the BookMobile, remember? You got me fired.”

“So? Beneath the mountain, Abu T and crew have loaded the device into a BookMobile identical to the one you drove for your summer job. She’s a perfect reproduction down to paint and decals.”

The Germans bomb Warsaw. Synagogues, churches, neighborhoods berubbled. I’m paid \$999 then given another mission.

My B-52s carpet-bomb Hanoi. I get richer.

“Senators Olaf and Gunn have a presidential debate tomorrow night,” Zil says. “Nineteen thousand souls in the Thomas and Mack Center within fireball and blast radii. You’ll convert them into hot gas. Doesn’t that send a thrill down your leg?”

Israel bombs Gaza. I cash in to the tune of ten grand.

“But that’s not all.” Zil’s a voice-over guy on late-night TV pushing two pieces of consumer junk for \$19.99. “The Las Vegas Raiders will be playing the Kansas City Native Americans. Eighty thousand skins roasted red. Allegiant Stadium the world’s largest crematorium.”

“And Children’s Hospital, where Chloe lies dying for want of transplantation?”

“Fifty percent probability of third-degree burns out to three clicks. Many blinded by the light. Radiation and fallout will claim what skyfire doesn’t. Las Vegas uninhabitable for ages, save by cockroaches, used car salesmen, and journalists. How does that sit?”

“It’s lit.”

“Wellerstein’s Nukemap Model predicts nine-hundred-ninety-nine-thousand-nine-hundred- ninety-nine casualties.”

“Plus one makes a cool million.”

“No. Suicide’s for failures in business or love. Not you. While you’re in final approach, sympathizers will attack underprivileged kids at an African-American community center. Simultaneously, neo-Nazis will hit the JCC and take hostages. A third crew will seize a ten- wheeled super-armored truck ferrying \$100 million from Las Vegas Federal Reserve to Bank of Los Angeles. These diversions will crash law enforcement. None will notice you or your payload. Your mission’s a milk run. Once you park the BookMobile, walk away. Then mind the timer. Get south of Henderson or north of Nellis Air Force Base before detonation. Abu Tbilisawi will brief the rest. But take heed: his legendary temper’s worsening.”

“A dead man walking prostrates before no man.”

“*Ausgezeichnet*. Terrible’s Roadhouse. Pahrump. Sunday. Noon. Tbilisawi will give you a passport. A reservation for Rio awaits at Phoenix SkyHarbor. One year hence, we’ll meet in Uruguay to transfer command.”

“Tonight’s been for show then. You knew I’d do the mission.”

“No. I predicted it.”

“Come on.”

“OK. I was certain.” Abu Zil chortles into his hand, then shoots the cuffs of his Armani suit.

“We’ll share the guilt, Zil. As before, we’re as one.”

“Not so. Whereas I think, you do. I’m one. You’re two. I’m the brain. You’re the gun.”

The keys to the BookMobile fall into my hand. I slide my thumb over familiar grooves and notches. “Zil, I need the junk you gave us pre-battle in Syria.”

“Captagon? Why? You’re a naturally unforgiving killing machine.”

“And a death purveyor. Whatever. Gimme power and courage in a bottle.” “No questions about dosage or side effects?”

“Nope.”

A bottle filled with blue-and-white 42 milligram capsules shakes before my eyes.

I request scopolamine too.

Zil flashes surprise. “Whom will you strip of volition and memory so as to secure his obedience?”

“Myself.”

“Shit. Don’t skip doses.”

Another bottle of white pills shakes with its cousin like maracas.

I pocket both and pull the slot.

“I’ll be glued to my television, boy.”

“Should I make you popcorn?”

“Ha. I mean I’ll watch your jihad in anticipation. You’re so literal I must unpack my metaphors.”

“I hate idiom, too.”

“I diagnose autism on top of schizophrenia. I’d suggest you sing your swan song now, but—”

“Are you joking? My voice sucks. My handle on ornithological music is worse. How goes the *cri de couer* of *cygnus olor*? I thought they were mute. Maybe if you hum a few bars, I can give it a try?”

“No need. Farewell, boy. We’ll meet again in Montevideo.”

“Not if I see you first.”

“Ah. Well. We’ll always have Syria.”

“I’m sad this is the end of us, Zil. I feel deflated.”

“Me too.” He salutes and disappears.

Thus, through guile, palaver, and luck, I’ve tricked Abu Zil, secured the nuke, given Chloe a future, and saved one million people.

But I waver, for I’m nuts.

I’m piloting a B-29. Clouds part. The bomb falls. I’m flash-blinded and thunder-tossed. Everyone’s dead but a nude Sarah doppelganger bomb-shorn of all but feminine wiles, a Hamas-green martyr-garter, and the diamond I gave her. Explosion-flashes cast shadows from her flesh mountains to her crinkly meadow. She dances over on fire, pressing her southlips into my hooknose. My heart-marrow melts. She’s calm, groomed for prom, reads psalms, and speaks Hiroshima dialect. Spouse material.

“I’m your temporary wife,” she says, her eyes vacant. “Did you like my dance?” She starts, gasps, covers her mouth. “My God! It’s Muhammad Jihad! You. Are. The. BOMB!”

No longer. If I can’t edit my past, I can write a better tomorrow. “Sweetheart, you’re beautiful, but beautifully mistaken. I’ll call the police myself.”

I kiss her down there, fish my phone out, then dial Les.

When my foster father answers from FBI Headquarters, I sing mellifluously.

House on the Hillside



J.C. Henderson

Nopales

If you so much as surfed the air wafting from the anatomy, you would understand that to call a home a kitchen would be to reduce a sink to the waste of hands rather than a strawberry washbasin for infants, or further, a fountain of life. Standing idle to the mead is some woman on the washboard – something bare and shaven – ready to disperse herself into shelves of spines. It should not smell so pleasant to those who prefer chalky legumes, nail brush vegetables, and wheat with no meaning. Of course, even kissing cacti before they unravel at the sink's lip is steep, but hers – and ours – is something of a tradition that asks for your observations rather than academic criticisms. Now, she should remember, you are a young ceiling – all milky and curdled and hungry for her genuine, rustic practices, and she should know that you see her impassive hand like a machete, something to strike you with – but you will be tortured when she is not there, shaving her nopales.

Esénia Bañuelos

6 am in Jalisco

The streets of Tlaquepaque are choirs
singing to endless indigo skylines.
We try our best. We play music and dance.
To not sink into the deep purple sea
of our helpless disposition, instead
We cook in yellow-walled kitchens for all:
little red birds, white cat in the garden,
black-eyed elephant in the room, who gives
the sign of the cross with blue fingertips
and then kisses me, leaving an imprint
of her lips on my cheek a final time.
(It pulsates within me like a heartbeat,
or a wound, something to heal from.)

We don't discuss what the doctors say
about my great aunt, instead we all
take turns at the 4-seat dining table.
The best meal of my life never to be
made again by her cold, shaking hands. They
grow colder and weaker by the minute. I'm
grateful, and sorry. I give a hug

at every single opportunity.

I have held many hands in my lifetime, none
as gripping as hers. White knuckled as hope
streamed out and into my own palms. I kissed
every one. Whispered, "I love you." And it
was the last thing I said to her. at every single
opportunity.

We get up before the sun and wave away the
stench of death with my favorite stale blue
kitchen cloth. Loss is an empty dining room. It
is 6am when I hold my grandmother
as she wails, so loud the cat runs away.
There's nothing else I can do.
Everything is covered in cool, white aching

Bri Virrueta

Mongolian Grassland



J.C. Henderson

Lab Versus Natural

By Olivia Hunt

One of our competitors ran a recent ad campaign that *size does matter*, superimposed in all caps over a woman with her fingers on her face, she's *shyyy*, stacked with more eternity bands than could fit the crystal phallus of a ring dish. She cringes gleefully at her own excess on the subway, big glossy 2x2's. Same company ran a parallel campaign sprawled across the subway banners overhead, *stop acting like a child, buy her diamonds*, downward gaze on its target market who could barely afford the looming jump from \$2.90 to \$3 per ride, much less rarity. A woman's hand, draped in paper clip chains and tennis bracelets, plunges its thumb into the plump of a little girl's cheek. A multi-carat oval solitaire sits high on her wispy-thin pavé band, screaming, *I can afford to be delicate*. Reddit responds to the campaign:

There are factories in China making diamonds literally by the bucketful.

>> *The irony of those diamonds being made by children.*

>> *Tag line: For us by us, children*

>> ***Stop acting like a** nice to your child.*

Buy-Sell her to mine diamonds.

When clients ask the difference between lab and natural diamonds on a sourcing level, I tell them that labs risk environmental impact and naturals, human impact. Environmental cost, I weigh my open palms like a set of scales, Lady Justice, versus human cost. I am trained to say that all ethically sourced stones are ethical, which sounds too general to be true. Our vendors follow the Kimberley process, created in response to the Blood Diamond crisis to invoke a baseline level of parcel tracking. This is how I paraphrase it. They are uncomfortable to hear the phrase human cost, so I backtrack to describe what the Kimberley process is, really: a preventative against doing business with suppliers who use their profits to fund violent government uprisings. But who is rising up against whom?

The Kimberley Process defines *conflict diamonds* as roughs used by *rebel movements or their allies to finance armed conflicts aimed at undermining legitimate governments*. And how do we know that legitimacy is synonymous with goodness? One look around and all that is established feels wrong, needs resistance, undoing. Picture a room of men with vested interests in Kimberley, South Africa making decisions about who we trust and pay and who we don't. There's born the Kimberley Process, which sounds like it is named after a young girl in danger like an Amber Alert, and its feminization makes us trust that Kimberley needs our protection all the more. One click over to a webpage of the *Industry and Civil Society* groups that keep participating countries in check and I see the photographed faces of the men and many women whom I assume make up the council and the initiative, the association and the coalition of thirteen advocacy groups that work to make things right, to reduce industry harm. Their peacekeeping expressions render my second guessing a shallow insult even if the words have, to a client, never left my mouth.

When you describe *conflict diamonds* in so many words, the couple across the small marble display table stiffens, the corners of their mouths droop and gape in tandem, their ribs resist like magnets in repulsion, and you realize that they asked only to ask. To clear their fastly conjoining conscience— this is a union, this is what marriage looks like.

x

August. There are three natural diamonds on Vanessa's flight. Emeralds fifteen to twenty thousand. She doesn't flinch at the \$ but would like to see something smaller. I pull an owned stone from the casket, our little black coffin of stones that lives in the showroom, one that was returned and so is deeply discounted. We want to get it out of here. A wink over one carat it's a J, soft yellow tint not too visible. Thin, more like a baguette than an emerald, skinny like it might snap in setting. \$4k. It's a deal and she loves it she's endeared by its size. *Can you send an email to my boyfriend?* I give him options, small cheap natural, bigger natural, \$15k, bigger lab, \$4k like the small cheap natural. I give him her ring size and the setting she picked out, I give him the deadline to buy one of these stones (3 days), and I tell him I'll return the stones if I don't hear from him before then. No answer.

I forward Vanessa the thread— show her what I wrote to him, on her request. It feels messy but I want to please her. Three days later I check in, email again, *Hi Simon, just checking in here*. No response, so I email Vanessa. *I will need to return the stones*. No response.

The next day Simon emails, he wants to see the little natural. Great, I say, great news is that we still have it on hand. Yes you can come by when would you want to come by and then he doesn't respond for two days

and I am on my weekend. Headache. I say book on my link, please find a time on my calendar link he says the link brings me to an error page *so sorry for the faulty link* I say and how about Sunday the 8th. Simon responds on Sunday at five and asks when we close and I tell him six, *I have availability tomorrow*, he can't come in now I will never get him out of here and it's been a long day, on any given weekend day it has been a long day. We're busted and exhausted and tomorrow is only my Wednesday. The middle is the hardest place to be.

The next I hear from Simon is in January, *may I see the 3 ring options* and of course they are all but one unavailable, all but the \$15k natural he doesn't want to spend \$15k on. *We can pull it in for you*, I say knowing he won't want it. He wants the cheap baby we sold, likely months ago. *That's unfortunate* no period, no punctuation.

That's unfortunate

Yes, it is.

The diamonds are on a live market, I explain for the third time but we would be happy to pull in more stones for you. Book an appointment. *If you can recreate as close as possible this one*, please book an appointment on my calendar. He does not. Vanessa books a virtual appointment with one of our designers in D.C., I think, because she is embarrassed to meet with me. She should not be embarrassed. Simon should be embarrassed. Vanessa meets with Arabella on video chat and Arabella tells her the same thing that I have told Simon over many emails, that the stone has sold, that we will have to source some new ones and they will be more expensive. Simon has a lab budget but a hard on for the *real thing*—I sense that if I were to mention the human cost he would nod assuredly, the facts of life. **Every consumer good has implications, right?** Another thing I say to anxious clients. On the long, I know that this is insufficient.

Two new stones—\$5k; \$6.5k. Bonkers, they're so cheap. *Do not pull the stones in yet*, I comment on the booking. Do not pull them in until he books a fucking appointment on my calendar link. Simon, look. Simon they're so cheap. They look like the one she fell in love with. Simon I'm just following up here to remind you that the stones are on an active market. They will sell Simon when can you come in Simon and the next day Simon emails me, *Hi, yes can I come see them tomorrow* which is a Saturday, so, no. The stones aren't here, the District is closed on weekends, no one in the industry is working but me (sales) and I really just need you to book an appointment on *this link*. *Right here. I would recommend as soon as possible.*

I will swing in tomorrow

No.

How about Wednesday 8am?

Hours 10-6.

I'd like to see all three, and he copies and pastes my email from August, of the stones that have already sold, all but the \$15k natural. *Particularly these 2 which are ~\$4k*. Simon I told you that those stones have already sold. I really wish that you would read my emails with a keener eye, I spend a lot of time emailing you, our correspondence is a complimentary service and a constant one I take no pleasure in. You email me so many times a day you ask me so many questions but you never want the answers, not really.

Can you pull two stones more like the original ones

Simon's Google Suite profile picture is the digital image of a golden, laurel wreath adorned #1. Just to remind himself that he comes first. Before Vanessa, before his mother. Before his sister and his tiny newborn niece. Before the elderly woman who asked him to switch seats on his flight to Chicago for a conference, what else, because she wanted to sit next to her husband of 51 years, *congratulations* Simon says *but I don't think so*, he paid to spread his legs into the aisle and no one could take that away from him. Simon put himself before that brainless woman at the bank with her dangly earrings who denied him a loan for the ring on account of his very bad credit, shiny rotating things had always distracted him, he put himself before that female neighbor of his that was always consternating him for neglecting to peel the paper labels off his apple Snapple bottles, which were glass, he put himself before the office siren with a B.F.A. and no math skills, she was always asking him questions about tax that she could just as easily Google, he put himself

before his spotted hound Lany and his female best friend Marissa and his couples therapist Ann, a woman he paid to appease Vanessa but secretly despised and made great effort to evade the emotional assignments she gave him. Most of all, Simon assures himself that he comes far before the deftly ignorant sales lady at the diamond store who thinks that she can over-charge him for some measly bit of carbon that cooks and compresses in the mantle of the earth over billions of years and we send people down there to get it, we say dig it out and cut it clean and give it to me colorless, I name the price, she thinks she can spit in my face with her markup well I say *fuck her*, I say, *ptooey*, I say remember bitch that I am #1. Often, Simon puts himself before women. Of course, this is fiction. A bit.

Simon explains that I am holding up the process, his union. He needs a cheap stone and *this is the only thing remaining for a proposal*.

I loop in Boss. She sends him another owned stone, even cheaper. Color is L, the golden hue that dances on your chin when you hover it over an open buttercup flower, spinning the stem between your index finger and thumb. Clarity is VS2, crystals and needles puncture the table and pavilion. Here you go Simon, \$1.7k.

Was hoping for closer to he copy pastes the sold stone, wants it so badly I am beginning to believe he will ask us the name of its owner, *can you put me in contact with them* as believable as I will come in tomorrow when I told him we were booked. *I'm #1. I'm #1*. The mental refrain hypes him up enough to *applnew type of pressure, vulnerability crudité, raw on raw on— Am getting significant pressure from her and she may move back to Ecuador if a ring doesn't come soon*. This is what marriage looks like.

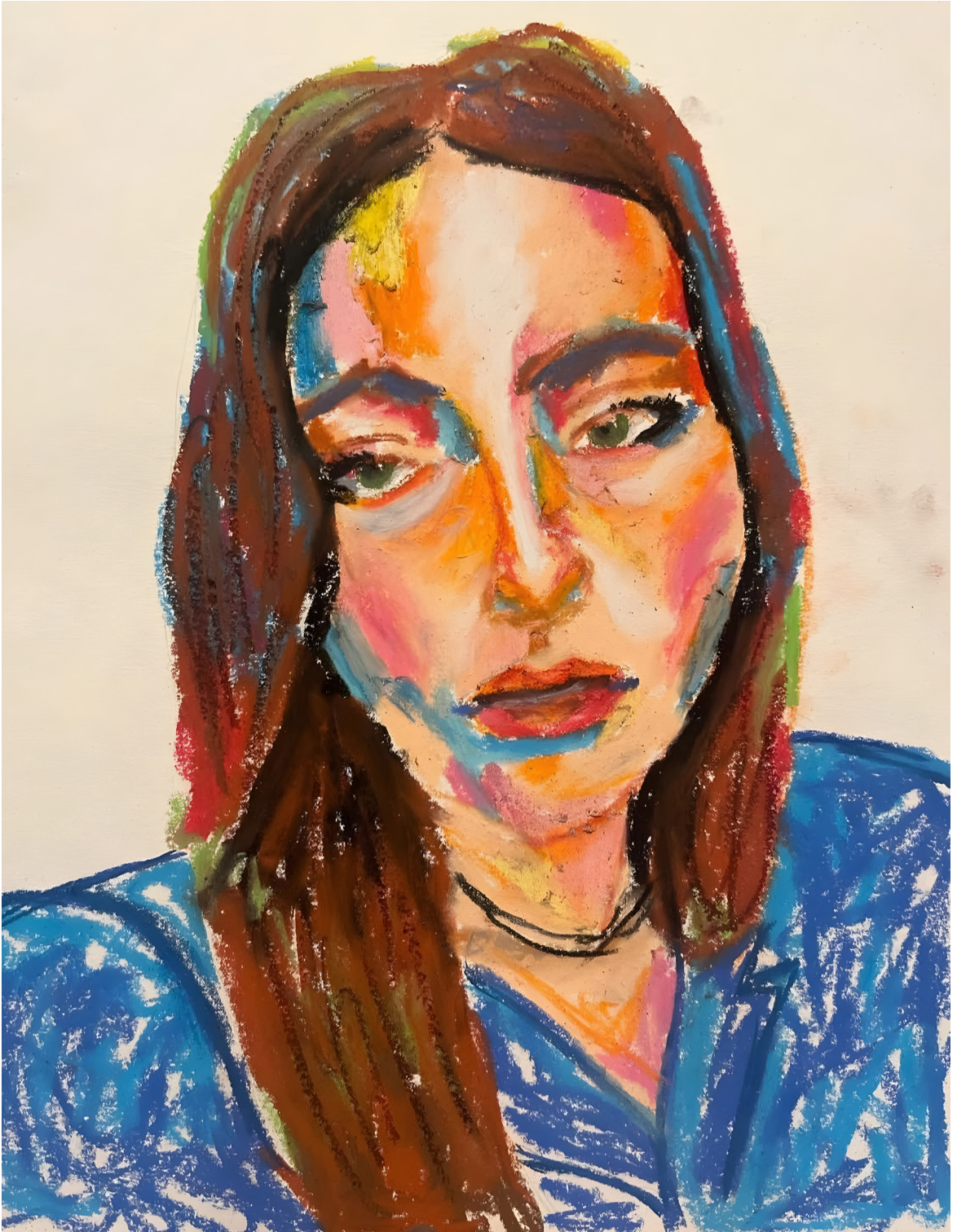
Dumb Cane

after Mosab Abu Toha and Fara Tucker

I am nothing, I am a universe. I
wish you knew to taste poison on a stroll.
I could take you. We'd walk down—
could you, would you hold my hand? The
wakeful eyes see the sugarcane, on the street
up from the trolley. Let's taste it and—
and throats burning, we know nothing, see,
find no sugarcane, no, none.
The false cane leads to throats of
electricity, saliva pumping through my
Onchidiidae tongue. Such dumb friends,
all willing to try, the best kind. Today, or
day after, you could be my family.
Long live us. I love you. I'm not lying.
I do not wish to be dead—
wish all could be solved by ice cream. In
I'd take it like a pill, it fixes the—
could everything poison be so solved? This road,
hear me, it isn't hard. Take my hand. No,
the road is wide, room for your body,
birds, poisonous plants, sweet fixes. Our parts
sing pain, rejoice in relief, only
again, we make stupid choices. But, blossoms.
No flower in sight, apricot aroma wafting. I,
shooting glances everywhere, what do I deserve
and- there, found it. We all deserve none,
no, none of this and all of this. Sound of
buzzing hummingbird near my ear, this
drone's like a bee but bigger, so close by
I'm startled and magic-filled—which
wish can I fulfill? If I could. Can I?
My wishes don't mean much. I mean,
desk chair swiveling so fast, this is life. We
would be better for tasting it all.
Call poison control, it's worth it. You deserve
me and all my love. It's all I can offer, this.

Stina Pederson

Self Portrait



Bristol Christelman

Shoe Horn

The former state-ranked runner
keeps the laces of her sneakers

double tied so she can slip them on
easily with a scratched shoe horn,

which once hung on the rack next to
the front door, until the shelf fell down

into a toppling pile she now picks
through every time she needs to leave,

except this morning, already late for
work, she slides toes into peeling flats

and lets the heels drag, holding a bag
of red grapes she bought last week,

when she had tried them and found
them sour, and so placed them in

the fridge drawer, waiting, not knowing
that grapes do not ripen off the vine.

Cat Chen

What Makes a Father?

By Shams Alkamil

I.

1,459. 1,459 days until I reach the age my father was when he had me.

II.

Like my father, I pack a memoir in my suitcase. Unlike my father, I've read about the Motherland more times than I've dipped a sole toe into the Nile. After his annual trips to Sudan, I felt resentment boil in the lining of my stomach. My mother would pick him up during the school day, his joy waffed a musky scent throughout the empty minivan. And yet, my resentment grew gnarlier and sour the moment I saw his red plaid sweater draped over the stair post. At the time, I pegged this hollow anger to be the byproduct of teenage hormones. Now? I think it was the grief of being away from him: *my only father*, sprawled across the world for weeks at a time.

III.

I think of where we are now. Most days, he spends his day driving from Waco back to Dallas after a shift as a rotating pharmacist. When he arrives home, what welcomes him? The Casio keyboard stickered with beginner chords, an empty box of Malboros, the knitted sajadah folded in the corner, or the empty silence of his children being a mile down the road? In those moments, alone in a one bedroom apartment, does he question if he is still a father?

IV.

Of all the titles in the world, what makes a father? I first thought I knew the answer to this question when we vacationed in Syria, circa 2002. My parents, seasoned newlyweds, rented a small home right off the shore of the Mediterranean Sea. I don't remember much, except for voracious colors bursting in every direction. During the first week, we hiked up a small mountain in lieu of homemade kibbeh. As we approached the restaurant, my father looked younger. Suddenly, he was no longer an orphan or even a father: he was a boy marveling at the turquoise and scarlet tiled floors. Like monkey saw, monkey did. I joined along with him, quick to grasp his calloused hand and squeeze a "thank you" and an "I love you." Decades later, I'm not sure he felt the latter. After we satiated our freshly-lined stomachs, my mother suggested we make our way to the beach. She laid out a cotton towel and lined native rocks along its edges. "I'm drawing", she responded when my sister shot her a puzzled look. My father lit a cigarette while admiring the corniche concealing secrets of an older time. And me? I jumped straight into the water, eager to play with new aquatic friends. In just a short instant, I felt a sharp prick in my left toe. I screamed. And screamed. Then I cried. Again, I ask: what makes a father? Was it the moment my father flicked his cigarette into an ashed cup and leapt into the waters, quick to aid? Or was it hours later, when he still insisted on placing a cool compress on my foot?

V.

After our trip to Syria, my parents decided to finish the summer off in Sudan. As a child, I never understood the painful history of Sudan. We landed in Khartoum then took a short boat ride to the island of Tuti. Like before, my father gazed off along the corniche. This time, he held a solemn mood which occupied the filling of his beady eyes. As the boat neared the port line, he told me about our tribe. Back then, it meant little. Now, I hold this title proudly—I am from Mahas, the original Nubians who planted their food into the fertile land before Arabization rotted our roots. We were greeted by our father's sister, one of six. Being the youngest and only brother, my father was deeply loved by his sisters, especially after his father died when he was in graduate school. We ate aseeda, an East African take on fufu, and drenched it in stews of all kinds. After dinnertime, the saccharin taste of ka'k and unspoken love filled the room.

Following a few days on the island, we trekked back to Khartoum to see a living legend: Mahmoud Abulaziz. In the makeshift jazz club, he walked slowly onto the dimmed stage. Behind him were a plethora of instruments: violins, saxes, and drums. Each instrument greeted Abdulaziz with open crescendos as his dulcet voice roared throughout the club. I was mesmerized. My father was an avid musician, playing

'ud and electric guitar throughout his college years. Like him, I felt music speak for me when my voice trembled with fear. After the second or third song, I remember not being able to hold it in any longer: my excitement, my love for his mystery man who occasionally appeared on our TV back home. I jumped out of my chair and slid onto the stage. Abdulaziz glanced in my direction but continued spewing melodies of the folklore hit, "Al-Safar". During his chorus, I weaved through the violinists. How tenderly they played, so in-synch, yet to each their own, living in their personal musical heaven. After finishing the lap, I made my way to Abdulaziz and reached for his hand. Without question, he accepted it, and together we danced.

As the song came to an end, I grew afraid my father would reprimand me for disrupting a live concert. Is this what makes a father: endless shouting or the critique of a child failing to locksafe their whimsical nature? If so, my father failed this test.

VI.

11 Loden Lane. This was our new home, placed in the brittle winters of Western New York. My father continued to work long nights, filling prescriptions and dosing vaccinations at the downtown Rite-Aid. In this foreign country, my mother felt stifled, no rocks to draw up creative inspiration. She decided she needed a change, so she signed up for English classes at the local community college. Being a fresh American girl, I was relieved. No longer would my mother risk embarrassing me in a crowded grocery line as she implored me to translate. Before the classes, I remember accepting the job begrudgingly, yet my heart couldn't accurately translate the acidic stench of xenophobia seeping out of the cashier's mouth. On the weekends, my father decided to give my mother a break from raising us. His primary love language was an act of service, prompting him to bust out a whiteboard after we prayed Maghrib. Each weekend carried a different topic: listening to seerah, tracing Arabic letters, memorizing surahs. "In this country, Islam and family are all you have", he declared. We didn't respond. We didn't have to because there was nothing to say. The reality brashly punched the static of the air: one day, Islam will be all that we have. One day, we too will be without a father.

Out of all the stories, one stuck out in particular. My father told us about when the Prophet's (PBUH) father, Abdullah ibn Abd al-Muttalib, was a young man, a warm light shone from his forehead. Scholars say this light was God's way of sending a promise to al-Muttalib, one where his child would become a Prophet (PBUH). Yet again, I ask you: is this what makes a father? If I could go back in time, I'd peer into my father's eyes. Softly holding his gaze in mine, I'd muster the courage to ask, "Did a light radiate from your forehead when we were born?"

The answer rings unanswered. In retrospect, I wanted to know, not because my siblings and I were anything more than mere mortals, but because I wanted to desperately understand: Did my father choose us? Before we all embarked on this treacherous journey of the dunya, did he choose to be our father?

VII.

Perhaps, I'll ask him this question in 1,459 days. Until then, I'll answer for myself. *Yes.* Undoubtedly, I chose my father to be mine.

Jewels



Maureen Shields

Bounty

—with a line from “Lenoir” by Jericho Brown

Alemany Farmer’s Market bursts with babies and strawberries this morning. The first blueberries and free-sia. I flirt with a four-month-old on his first trip to the market, his mama tells me. I buy gorgeous eggs from Anthony. Sweet carrots from Rose’s daughters. And I carry weight. How do I rise in the morning, brush my teeth, eat blueberries? Once, I believed in the Holy Land. Lived on a kibbutz. Scrubbed pots, picked grapefruit. Believed in sanctity. In refuge. I refused to see blood and barriers. Barbed wire. Cold in desert light. No water. *No grave deep enough*. And yet I rise, I eat, I brush. Here I am, my bags stuffed with mint and parsley, lettuce and leeks.

Angie Minkin

I'll Write Sorrow on the Bosom of the Earth

By
Edwyn Choi

My house was small. It was white. It was indistinguishable from the rest of the houses on the row: gray, triangle rooftops, white walls, and polished windows. Easy to break into, the type of houses movie monsters loudly step on because they're so common. The living room interior was commonplace, too: TV, carpet, leather sofa. White walls, white ceiling, white doors. Under-insulated.

It smelled like instant ramen when I returned from rehearsal—spicy, with a hint of egg. I left my boots on the newspapers laid out in the doorway to dry. There was a Peloton bike in the middle of the living room, Amazon boxes laid all over the couches, and plastic wrappers littered on the floor; my foot caught one of them. An episode of some TV show I didn't recognize played in the background, and I sank into the sofa. The light and sound were hurting my head. The toilet upstairs flushed. The stairs creaked as my mother climbed down, taking one careful step at a time. Her expression changed when she saw me at the foot of the staircase. A stern look, one carved with years of anticipation. She hobbled over to the wrappers and began cleaning them up.

"Your grandfather passed away, you," she said in Korean. "The one up in Canada." Her voice was monotone. She didn't look up at me.

I answered in her mother tongue. "The one on your side?"

She nodded. "You don't remember him?" I didn't.

"Does dad know?" I asked.

She waved the idea away and continued picking up the wrappers. "Later." I watched her in silence. The TV show continued on in the background, filling the room with noise.

"Why is there a bike here?" I asked.

She frowned. "Your grandfather passed away and you ask about the bike?"

"I thought you didn't want to talk about him." My head throbbed.

My mother stared at the bike. "It's for your dad. Haven't you noticed he's getting too fat now? He'll have a heart attack before you even get married." She shook her head, and then her face lit up. She looked up at the wall clock. "Carnegie Mellon?" she asked me in English with a thick, Korean accent. It became "Cah-neggy Meh-lun" to my ears.

I shook my head. She stared at something beyond for a moment, before she continued picking up the wrappers. I braced myself. She could weep but scold a small army at the same time.

"Let me tell you, Eun-soo, you," she said in Korean, shaking her head. "Didn't I remind you Carnegie Mellon was too difficult? Your grades are too low for an Asian person, I told you, and your dad makes too much money for you to be considered as low-income. Maybe if I married a—a black husband you would've gotten in; then these universities would've looked at you. But didn't I tell you acting is a waste of time anyway? Who are you, you? Clint Eastwood? Meryl Streep? Americans, they, they don't take Korean people in Hollywood—they only like the Chinese, even if the only Asian shows they make are about samurai. So how can you expect these universities to accept you, you? It's a waste of time, I told you, a waste of time. Why didn't I raise my daughter to be an engineer or a doctor or a lawyer like Daniel's mother did, you—do you know if he got into Princeton? You should try Princeton, dear, they take many people from our church." She leaned back on her arm in a dramatic pose, as though she'd just lost a terrible battle. "Ah, this is what the Lord punishes me for, I'm sorry. Through my fault, through my fault," she said as she tapped her chest with a fist, "through my most grievous fault; I bear the burden for raising you incorrectly."

I stared at the ceiling. "I'm sorry."

“Look at me, Eun-soo, you.” I faced her. “I didn’t raise you all these years just so you could starve and forget about your family. All you do is think about yourself nowadays—no, you always have, you. How could I raise you like this?” She looked up at the nipple light, mottled on the inside with the outlines of dead insects, hands clasped together. “Lord, lift thy curses off my family, oh Lord. We will pray to you every night.” She turned to me again, armed with plastic wrappers and cardboard boxes, leaning on the Peloton bike. Her eyes settled on the thin manuscript I was holding. “Tell me, Eun-soo, you. Are you still in that play?”

“We have a few weeks until our opening night,” I said, staring off into space.

“Is it so hard to look at your own mother while she’s talking? There you are, you. Don’t give me that look. It hurts. But you’re still acting in that play, you?”

I nodded. “Shakespeare. *Richard II*.”

“Shakespeare! Will my daughter steal a white man’s work because YoungArts wouldn’t take her? Whose child are you? How did I birth someone like you?”

“It’s my senior project; is that so much to ask for?” I neglected to remind her my adaptation was an *Asian* adaptation: to have everyone dress up in dragon robes instead of tunics and fight with katanas instead of longswords. I’d wear one of those square-topped hats with chained beads ancient Chinese emperors wore in my history textbooks instead of the \$3.00 Party City plastic crowns. I’d sit in one of those antique, wooden thrones adorned with a red cushion and golden flowers—bought entirely with the school’s taxpayer money—instead of the old, plastic prop sitting in the back of the storage room. The last idea I had was that the entire cast would be Asian, bowing down to an Asian girl playing King Richard II, but I was the only Asian person in the whole troupe. No matter.

My mother nodded. “You’ve asked the Lord for many things already, you: shoes, desks, pencils, socks, and nail polish.”

“I don’t even use nail polish that much,” I said.

“All the girls your age do. I know I did. Your generation, all of you; you all want so much attention. Especially *you*, you.” She shook her head.

“I apologize for being such a terrible daughter,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“I made too many mistakes when you were little.” She scrutinized the Peloton and blew on it.

My voice trembled. I hesitated a little. “Why are you so mean all the time?”

“Do you think *my* parents were nice, dear?” She stood up and limped to the kitchen to prepare dinner. I could still hear her. “They worked long days, long, long, long days, longer than I or your father have. You should be glad I’m nicer than your grandparents; they yelled at me, cussed me out, and I still have one of the scars they gave me long ago.”

I didn’t answer and sank even deeper into the sofa. I wanted to sleep, but it was too loud. The frying pan fizzed with meat.

#

The auditorium was empty, but I could almost see it filled with faces. The troupe smiled at me. Act 3, scene 2: King Richard II returned from an overseas expedition in Ireland and found that Henry Bolingbroke, whom he had banished some three scenes prior, had returned to England and taken control of Richard’s army. Distaught, Richard kneeled to the ground and wept. The script in my hand was my scepter, the actors around me were soldiers and servants, and the black flooring was the shores of England: “For God’s sake, let us sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings,” I lamented, “how some have been deposed, some slain in war, some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed. Some poisoned by their wives, some sleeping killed. All murdered. For within the hollow crown—”

The auditorium door swung open. A man with a purple-white checkered button-down; thick, black glass-

es; and a goatee marched through the aisle. Sitting in the front row, John, who played Bolingbroke and was revising his notes, stood up and greeted Principal Davids. He smiled at John but said nothing and marched all the way up to the front of the stage, where I was gloomily sitting, hunched over like a bent willow tree. “Can I talk to you, Grace? In my office?” I glanced at the rest of the actors. They shrugged.

His office was right next to the auditorium. It was filled with paper stacks, staplers, and family photos. There was a small bookshelf, I squinted at the titles. They were all old, white names: Dostoyevsky, Joyce, Hemingway. Principal Davids smiled. He was wasting my time.

“Why did you want to see me?” I asked.

He nodded, his hands forming a little cage, and leaned forward. “Are you familiar with the school’s equity and inclusion policies, Grace?”

I nodded.

“Do you know a girl named Stella Petrov?” he asked me.

“She sounds familiar.”

He squinted at a piece of paper on the side of his desk. “She auditioned for your play as...Richard’s Queen.”

I nodded again, this time with a clear image in my mind. “She was biracial.”

Principal Davids scrunched his face, as though he was regretting something from the past. “I wanted to talk about that.” He stared at his hand-cage. “She told me you said she wasn’t Korean.”

“She’s...you know—what people think they are doesn’t always correlate to what they actually are. Wouldn’t you agree?” He raised an eyebrow.

“Her dad’s Russian, and only her mother’s Korean,” I elaborated.

“Did you reject her because of that?”

I leaned back in my chair. “Is that what this is about? No, of course not—I just thought I had better cohesion with some of the other actors. You understand, right? You know how hard I’ve worked to get this production running. The first student-directed play in a decade. And it’s my senior year, too. I couldn’t risk anything.”

“Yes,” Principal Davids said, staring at his desk, “sure.”

“The whole discussion about race or whatever was brought up after the audition,” I continued, looking at the photo of his family. He had two kids, a boy and a girl. “I didn’t reject her because she wasn’t Korean.”

He stared at me. “Go on.”

“After the audition she said she liked my idea of making an Asian adaptation of Shakespeare’s play, and that as a Korean person she was glad to see more representation, even if I was the only Asian person in the cast.”

Principal Davids nodded.

“So I chuckled a little and told her that she wasn’t *actually* Korean, because I knew her father was Russian, and that he had met Stella’s mother after being stationed in Korea. I mean, you correct people when they’re wrong, right?” I scratched my nose. “I’m just pointing out that she’s not *Korean* Korean because she’s, you know...”

“Because she’s half-Russian?”

I looked off to the side, back to the line of books. “Yeah.”

Principal Davids shifted his glasses up. “But you realize these comments are exclusionary, right?”

I shrugged. “If a Nigerian person tells me I’m not Nigerian, I won’t cry about that.”

“My point being,” Principal Davids said, pinching his nose bridge, “do you realize you hurt Stella with these comments?”

“I do now,” I said. “But those are my beliefs. You can’t tell me what to believe.”

He folded his arms. “But you can tell others who and what *they* are? And how can you be sure you’re so *Korean* Korean? Who’s to say you aren’t part European, too?”

“You can tell, can you?” I answered. “I mean, just look at Stella. She’s got a double eyelid and the Greek nose—we usually have button noses—and she’s, she’s...” Principal Davids’ face was so twisted I stopped talking. “I’m sorry,” I said, glancing at the photo again. “You should try talking to the rest of my family.”

He took a deep breath. “I’m not here to punish you; Stella doesn’t want to think about it any further, either. She knows you’re on a tight schedule. But I’m warning you that if this happens again I’ll have to pursue disciplinary action.” He paused, and it seemed like he wanted to say something but wasn’t sure if he should. “Be aware that this type of thinking is dangerous, Grace.” He pointed to himself. “I’m German; I of all people should know.”

He let me leave after that, but not without another question. He was cleaning his glasses with a red handkerchief. His glasses had left dark crescents under his eyes. “Grace, do you know what the one-drop rule is?”

I thought about all the authors on his bookshelf. “Is that a painting term?”

He shook his head and put his glasses back on. “Another day, another day. But read up on that.” He smiled again, but this time it was just stretched muscles and strained skin under tired eyes. “Please.”

I smiled at him and returned to the auditorium. My footsteps were loud in the empty hallway. There were faint voices coming from behind the auditorium door.

“What happened?” John asked as I climbed back onto stage.

I shrugged, and we continued as though nothing had happened. Throughout the rest of rehearsal, we skipped around to a few key scenes. We ended the evening on the fourth act, which only required a single scene.

“Are you contented to resign the crown?” Bolingbroke asked me.

“I know no I, for I must nothing be,” I answered.

Bolingbroke blinked. He was John now. “I think you answer me too quickly.”

“What do you mean?” The rest of the actors checked the time and sat on the floor, listening. Some lay on their backs and closed their eyes.

“There should be a pause between the first two words,” John explained. “It’s ‘ay, no; no, ay,’ not ay-no-no-ay.”

I shook my head. “I’m interpreting it differently. It’s *I* know no I,” I said, pointing to myself. “I don’t know who I am without my crown.”

“But the script says ‘ay—’”

I waved him away. “I know. But I’m interpreting it *my* way.”

A few people turned their heads. John stared at me for a couple seconds and then back at the script. He said the words back to himself, *my* way, and shook his head in disbelief. We continued on with the scene: “I give this heavy weight from off my head and this unwieldy scepter from my hand, the pride of kingly sway from out my heart. With mine own tears I wash away my balm...”

I returned home later that night to find my dad back from work early, arguing with someone on the phone. My mother was shaking her head.

“Eun-soo, you. We’re going to your grandfather’s funeral next Tuesday, which your father apparently doesn’t want to attend.” That was the night before the premiere. My final rehearsal.

“There’s an important project at the office,” he answered, turning the phone away from him.

“Will you guys be back for my show?” I asked.

“You’re coming, too.”

#

The stage was small on my Macbook. The lighting was too harsh, and I couldn’t make out anybody’s faces. The room stank of old perfume and dried fruit, and the flooring felt like someone had merely pasted laminated strips of wood onto stone. It was cramped with two closets, a bed, and a full-body mirror propped against the wall farthest from the door. Someone argued on the TV in the living room. Reception was terrible.

The cast and crew were surprisingly receptive, even after I told them I would have to miss the final rehearsal. They could continue rehearsing because of an understudy they picked out last minute. And while nobody knew what it was like rehearsing online, everyone seemed amicable to the idea.

“All of you, backstage,” I shouted at the screen, watching the actors teleport across the screen in stop motion frames, “you’re supposed to be surprised when Bolingbroke orders Northumberland to negotiate with me, even though I’ve lost all my power.” The actors ignored me. “Hello?”

“Guys,” someone from behind the camera said, “Grace is say—ing something ag—ain.” I could barely understand his voice through all the bandwidth lag. They all snapped their heads towards what was probably an incredibly tiny face floating in a phone screen.

“Act surprised when John says his line in this scene,” I said. “You all are at the cusp of overturning centuries of royal tradition. You guys don’t want to be nice to me. Also, whoever’s standing next to the understudy should move just a little bit closer to the stage.”

“That—s hard to do, Gra—ce,” someone from the stage whom I couldn’t recognize answered, “when we. Can’t see you.”

“That’s why the understudy’s there,” I said, squinting my eyes, “whoever that is. Go again.”

Everyone stared at me, as though they were still waiting for me to say something. Suddenly, they were teleported to their positions and six lines in.

“It would beseem the Lord North—umberland,” the Duke of York said, “To say, ‘King Richard.’ Al—ack. The heavy day. When such. A sacr—ed. King. Should hide. Hide. his head.”

The door behind me swung open. My mother was a thin shadow in the mirror’s reflection. “Get ready, Eun-soo. Everyone else is getting dressed.”

I nodded.

“You, Eun-soo, you, what did I tell you? You’re always idling. Why won’t you look at me?”

“I’m working, mother.”

It was a miracle I understood what was happening in the scene: “The hea—vaans. Are. Are. Over our—heads.” People teleported across the stage, and it was as though I were watching a stop motion movie, frame by frame.

“Working! Did I raise a daughter, Lord, who thinks sitting behind a computer all day counts as working?” She shut the door behind her. Her hands were akimbo. “Your late grandfather would have hit me if he caught me wasting time like this. Your late grandfather...”

“That’s abuse,” I say. The computer became quiet. The actors were frozen now.

“Abuse? Who taught you that word?” She fell silent. “Don’t you know dogs bite hard because they’re afraid to let go?”

“Yes, of course,” I droned. The screen still wouldn’t unfreeze. She stepped out of view for a moment, and the bed mattress crinkled next to me. I could only see the reflection of her legs at the foot of the bed now.

The actors were suddenly moving again: “Show—ers. Of. B—blood. Rained from. From. The wounds of slaughter—ed. Slaughtered. English—men.”

“Eun-soo, you. Won’t you look at me?” Her voice was timid. “Soon, mother. I’m directing right now.”

“Eun-soo! Look at me!” she growled. I looked up at her. She had tears in her bloodshot eyes. She was a pale face floating in a black dress, a white fruit growing from dark trunks rooted on the bed. Her makeup was melting from her tears, washed away and flowing down her cheeks and neck.

“Are you okay?” I asked her.

Richard’s usurper answered me: “Let—s march with. With. Out the noise. Noise. Of threat—ning drum. That—”

“Are you looking at the screen again?” The river had stopped flowing out of her eyes; now it flowed out of her mouth. But I never learned to swim. “Since when is a tiny computer more important to you than your family? Don’t you think we want to see your face? Think about your grandfather, think about your family—think about how seldom you ever see them.”

In the chinks of silence Bolingbroke’s soliloquy still went on: “Whilst on the earth I rain. My waters. Waters. On. The earth and not on him. March on and mark King. Richard. How he looks.” Even through all the lag I could tell John’s delivery was off. The screen froze for a moment, and then everyone was suddenly staring straight at the camera, straight at me. Someone was asking if everything was okay. I shut the laptop, and now I was staring straight at the mirror—straight at myself. I was tiny.

“Do you hate me, Eun-soo, you?” my mother cried. She shook her head and snot sank out of her nose. “I don’t have anybody else but you, dear. Your father doesn’t cry and chatter like women do. Like I do. Your grandfather was silent, too. But silence is the way men love, even if listening to it hurts. I have just you, Eun-soo, you.” She buried her face in her hands and shuddered with tears. “I’m. I’m lonely.”

I sat with her. We sat in silence for some time, listening to the cars honk and screech three stories below us. She stared at the floor. Her breath was beginning to slow down. I wanted to tell her I hurt, too, but I couldn’t make it about myself. I didn’t want to be yelled at again. I didn’t want to be chastised and insulted and told I was wasting my time again. Again and again and again, short on time but having so much of it to spend, spending it all on people’s ears.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I didn’t know why I was apologizing.

She stood up, and I was staring at a black wall of cloth now. Her voice was mellow and far, far away, far above me. “You’re busy. I shouldn’t be meddling.” She sniffled. “We’re leaving soon.” Before I could respond, the door shut behind her. I was alone again. I punched the bed and buried my face in the bedsheets. The front door clicked open and footsteps softly thumped across the room. Someone called for me from the living room. I wiped my eyes on the mattress and got dressed.

The funeral wasn’t bad; it was the after party that hurt. Uncles and aunts and cousins and second cousins, all of whom I couldn’t remember and still didn’t afterward. We all sat together but were separated by a 20-foot long white table filled with lobsters and tuna and other food from the buffet. Before I even noticed, I was talking to an old man sitting across from me whom my mother said was a distant uncle and my grandfather’s coworker. He was so old his sagging skin looked like it’d melt off his face. He was in a beige suit

with an orange-striped tie, and round glasses sat on his nose.

“Yes, the plane ride from Seoul was long, as always.” He shifted the conversation in a new direction. “You’re a senior now, you? Do you know what you want to be?”

I hesitate a little. “I don’t know.”

My mother chimed in, “She wants to be an actress.”

“An actress!” the old man said. “Like Tom Cruise?”

I shook my head. “More like Antony Sher.” When his face scrunched up in confusion, I elaborated. “King Lear? Falstaff?” His expression didn’t change. “Shakespeare?”

His face lit up in recognition. Then it soured. “Shakespeare? Do they even take Asian people for his plays?” he asked me.

My mother interjected, nodding. “I wondered that, too—they don’t really care about us that much.”

The question was so foreign it took me a couple seconds to answer. “Yes.” “How will you make money for your children?” he asked me.

“I don’t plan to have any.” I smiled.

He turned to my mother, chewing. “You—do you approve of this?”

I paid attention to the plate of salmon before me. My mother didn’t move.

“We’ve been thinking of moving back,” she muttered. My neck snapped like a pulled magnet. She stared at her plate of salad. “It’s a little lonely, just the three of us in the states. We thought about moving up here to join everyone else who wasn’t in Korea anymore, but it seems like they’re moving back after father’s funeral. We’ve been trying to make it work for 20 years now, but...”

“Since when did you think about moving back?” I asked.

“Speak English,” my mother snapped in Korean.

I ignored her. “Since when did you think about moving back?”

The old man clinked his chopsticks on his plate. He looked at my mother. “You should discipline her better. How do you plan to move back when she’s so American already? They’ve already corrupted her.”

His complaint wasn’t uncommon: That Americans were too liberal with their immigration policies and gender-neutral restrooms, and that in order to protect myself I should be more modest. Be more respectful. But modesty is just another word for being a pushover, respect another word for letting people shove their boots in your mouth. I answered him in his language. “What do you mean?”

He leaned back and shook his head. “Ah, nevermind. You wouldn’t get it, you.”

“Tell me, please,” I said, my head pounding. “I think I could assimilate well. I think I would do fine if we moved back.”

The old man laughed and coughed. He smiled at me, a yellow smile that reminded me of Bruce from *Finding Nemo*. My mother placed her hand on my thigh. Her voice was a gentle whisper I hadn’t heard in a while. She spoke in English, a quiet English that almost hid her accent: “Grace, please.” I waited for her to scold me or start begging for the old man to forgive me for being such an insolent child, but she didn’t say anything. Her hand was warm.

The old man laughed. His eyes mocked me. He spoke in English. “You, you, eh? People like you, ‘Korean-American’ not just ‘Korean.’ A-meri-can, eh?” He pronounced them Cory-ahn and a-merry-Kahn. “You understand? ‘Korean-American.’ You, you,” he pointed at his wrist, “you Korean *pi* (피), eh? Ah—blood, blood. Korean blood. But you no Korean. You too much American. You, eh, Seoul? Busan? No, no. They...they no take you. Your Korean too American. You clothing too American.” He turned to my mother and spoke in his native tongue. “Can she even read and write Hangul?” She shook her head. She was right

“You...” the old man spoke to me in English again, but he ran out of words and instead sipped from his glass.

My mother finally spoke with a stern but quiet voice. “I apologize on her behalf.”

“You, Eun-soo’s mother, you,” the old man said, “You don’t know what it was like living back then either, do you?” He pointed at me but didn’t look in my direction. “Her. She, she wasn’t there when they started taking down the makeshift tents to pave roads and build apartments, was she? She, she, doesn’t know what it’s like growing up without her father because he, because—she wasn’t there when having just a shirt and pair of socks meant you were lucky, was she?” His lip was twitching. I glanced at his plate of half-finished lobster. My mother squeezed my thigh. I didn’t look at her.

An aunt sitting next to him was rubbing his shoulder now and asking him questions. I’d seen her in family photos but this was the first time I was seeing her in person. She glared at the two of us. I touched my mother’s hand, but she quickly pulled away. The spot where it had rested on my thigh suddenly felt cold. I held tightly onto the fabric, but it didn’t feel warm anymore.

“You should discipline her better,” the woman said. “How old is she now? 17? 18?” “I’m sorry,” my mother said. She was looking down at her pants.

“Look at him when you apologize.” The woman turned to me and spoke in English. “You...don’t you know he sensitive? You need to be careful what word you say. They don’t teach you that in American school? Yeui (예의)? Mantle? Matter?” She paused for a second. “You, manner? No manner?”

I answered in Korean, pointing at the old man, who was now staring blankly at me. I scoffed. “Are you saying he’s not mature enough to control his own manners? Are you saying *I’m* more mature than he is?” But what came out instead was an incoherent jumble of language, a foreign tongue mistranslated and misplaced in my mouth.

The old man laughed again, alone. His face became serious, and he turned to my mother again. “How can you raise your daughter like this?” His voice grew louder. “What is this? Is she mentally retarded? Is she one of those kids who needs extra time on her tests?”

“Talk to *me*,” I said.

He shook his head. “This, *this* is what you get for raising your child in the states.”

“I’m sorry,” my mother whispered. I couldn’t tell who she was talking to.

“Please, *please* talk to me,” I said.

“They raise their children too softly here, didn’t everyone tell you that?” he said. He placed his hand on his heart. “They grow up ignorant of the past. They grow up selfish. They—”

“Talk to me!” I shouted, slamming my fist on the table. Cups fell and utensils clattered. A nearby waitress carrying a plate of food jumped a little and dropped her dishes. The sound hurt. The whole table fell silent, and they were all looking at me now. The old man’s lip was twitching again. I suddenly ran out of words. I was stripped naked on stage, curled up in a fetal position, the lights burning halos into my skin. My mother’s eyes were shut, and her hands were grasping her dress. Wet beads grew on my legs, and everything began to blur.

“Why won’t you all look at me? And why do you all keep talking to me in English? I’m speaking your language, aren’t I?” I looked up at the silent, blurry faces. They were all still. “Is it because of my accent? Is it not enough for you all? I’m sorry. I’m sorry I am who I am. But tell me, any of you, all of you, what am I if I’m not Korean? American? Look at my eyes. Did Tennessee Williams have these? Did Herman Melville? Have any of the presidents? No. So how can you say I’m Korean-American if I’m neither Korean nor American? If I’m nothing? But do you think I wanted this? Don’t you think I would’ve been something else—someone else—if I could have? Do you think I *chose* to be here, listening to you all berate me and my mother, wasting *my* short time just because some old man I never knew died?” I took a deep breath. My heart was speeding. The table was silent. “So what if I’m not Meryl Streep or Clint Eastwood? I’ll do whatever I want to do, even if you tell me I can’t. You all would’ve chastised the Wright Brothers for making engines fly anyway. You all just don’t understand what it’s like to finally control something in your life only

to lose it all, do you? You all, you..."

I imagined what their expressions actually looked like behind the blurry veil: disappointed, furious, hateful. A blend of generations all disgusted at their progeny. The ventilation above me continued humming, and a table not too far from us was laughing together. I clenched the fabric again and again and again with my sweaty hands, hoping to squeeze out something warm, anything, but it was all cold now.

I closed my eyes and fell. I fell into darkness.

#

I woke up in the back seat to the car's quiet hum. We were on a bridge, and the sea blanketed everything above and below the horizon, a navy sea and navy sky. It was as though there was nothing else but the floating highway. My mother was in the passenger seat talking to my father.

"He always said those terrible things," my mother said, looking at the ocean. "I never understood why my father liked him so much. Did you know him well, dear?"

The GPS answered for my father, something about a right turn at the end of the bridge.

"Why do you never answer me?" she asked.

"I should've been there," he said. I could only see the back of his head. "I should've sat with you guys."

"You didn't do anything wrong," she answered. She was staring at him now. Her eyes were puffy.

"Just tell me: What was she saying? Were you listening to her?" My father was staring at her now; his eyes were hidden under the flash in his glasses. "I was too far away."

The car's hum was loud in her silence. My mother shook her head, glancing at the side window again. "I wasn't listening to anything. All I remember was apologizing."

My father sighed. He struck the steering wheel; there was a quick jerk as the car accelerated. "She'll hate us."

"Don't say that."

"Can't you see? If we can't understand her, then who will? She'll die hating us. Do you want that?"

"No," my mother mumbled.

"It's just—I know I don't see you two as often anymore, and it, it—it hurts so much to not know what she's thinking."

My mother gasped. There was a jerk as the car's hum weakened. Honks and sirens rang all around us, and red lights flashed through the window. I stayed still. The car's momentum dwindled to a roll. Both my father and mother were leaning forward and scanning the area, as though they were exaggerating every motion for a road test.

"It feels like everyday you hear about or see another accident," my mother said, staring at the side window. "You should drive slower." My father didn't answer. Neither of them said anything for a while; I listened to the sirens and the engine's hum, watching the lights flash between shades of blue and red above me through the side windows. It wasn't until the car started accelerating again that my father said something.

"I should drive slower."

"Didn't I tell you?" my mother chided.

"No, no," he started, his voice shaking, "we can't live forever. What are we if we can't be her parents? We're not directors or presidents or CEOs, dear. And that's our fault. That's *my* fault."

"Are you okay, honey?" my mother asked. Her voice was soft.

“The best we can be are her parents,” my father said, his voice shaking. “We—we’re her parents. That’s all we are and ever will be.” He let out a deep sigh. “What good are we if we won’t be there to catch her when she falls?”

My mother pulled a packet of tissues from the glove box. She was frantically tearing at the plastic. “Don’t cry. Don’t cry. Please.”

“No, I’m—aren’t you worried about her?” my father asked, shaking his head. “Not her college or job or whether or not the rest of the family will like her, but just her?”

I closed my eyes. I didn’t listen for a response. I let myself drift away as the car sang its gentle hum, sailing down the asphalt river.

#

The first person I met when I returned was John, who was sitting outside of the auditorium, eating a sandwich. We both had lunch breaks then. The hallway curved around the auditorium so that it looked like we were on the parabolic curve of the letter ‘u.’ The floor was marble, and there were tall glass panes that gave a stunning view over the hill and the flat suburb: the football, soccer, and baseball fields; the roads that cut into the earth and up the hill and into the school’s parking lot and roundabout; and the cloudless, blue sky that sat above the horizon.

I asked him about production; his breath smelled like tuna. He nodded and stared at the window. “Great. The understudy’s really good.” He checked my expression and smiled. “But not as good as you are.”

“Who was it again?”

John didn’t look at me. But he was still smiling.

“John?”

He took a deep breath. “Stella.”

“Stella?”

“Petrov,” John answered, looking at the floor. “Stella Petrov.”

I angled my head. “I thought—didn’t I reject her?”

John nodded. He leaned back on the wall and stared at the ceiling. “Principal Davids forced her in. And since you were gone, we figured we could use her as the understudy. We were surprised you didn’t recognize her online.”

I shook my head. “No. You all were all so blurry.”

“Right.”

I sighed. “He wanted it done in secret?” John nodded. I leaned on the wall with him. “Am I that bad?”

He stared straight ahead. “You chastised Stella a lot that day. You made her cry, remember?” I followed his gaze. There was a gym class climbing its way back up the hill. “I didn’t want to tell you,” John said, “but some people in the crew were mad at you for talking to her like that.”

“Do they all hate me?” I asked.

John laughed. “Only for a few days.”

“Do you think I’m so terrible, John?”

He shook his head. “But I wish you would stop saying those things.” He faced me. “That was the first time the crew heard you say all that; I’ve heard it for a while now.”

When I didn’t answer he frowned. I stared at the marble floor mottled with black flakes. “I just—what am I if she’s the same as me?” My heart was beating faster.

“What has she ever done to you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know.” I stared at my fingers. The nails were serrated from being chewed on so much. “I just don’t feel comfortable around people like her.”

“People like her”? Grace, do you hear yourself?”

“Yes. No.” My head hung low. “I don’t know.”

“Is what she is really so important?” John asked. He pointed to himself. “Nobody calls me half-French even though my dad’s Italian.”

“But you’re white,” I said. “That’s different.”

He stared at me for a couple seconds. “Whatever. But you’re aware it’s a problem?”

“Yes.”

“Yes?” John narrowed his eyes.

“Yes.”

The bell rang, and John stood. “Then I trust you, Grace.” He waited before adding, “Tonight’s production will be terrific.”

#

My face is spotless in the handheld mirror: the square hat, the beads, the elaborate dragon robe, the white makeup. There’s the smell of the old seats. The dusty aisle floors. The creaky stairs and shaky handrails. The cold, matte-black flooring. Years of petitions and months of tears, sweat, and pain. The lights, the blinding stage lights.

“O flatt’ring glass,” I proclaim, staring at my reflection, “like to my followers in prosperity, thou dost beguile me. Was this face the face that every day under his household roof did keep ten thousand men? Was this the face that like the sun did make beholders wink? Is this the face which faced so many follies, that was at last outfaced by Bolingbroke?”

A red sea stares back at me, floating with hundreds of silent faces. Some are old, and others are young; some of them are my classmates. I stare at the control booth I used to operate years ago, beyond the lights and above the rows of seats: three computer screens and a film camera. Hundreds of random buttons I still don’t know how to use.

I scrutinize my face again. But it’s not me who stares back. No. This face, all of her, all of me, is suddenly ugly. She isn’t a face but a horrifying arrangement of eyebags, an overbite and protruding bottom lip, monolids half an inch too thick, puffy cheeks, a button nose that makes her nostrils too big, all of her gilded with too much makeup. Crooked teeth. No dimples. Too much peach fuzz. A jawline too big, a face too flat, and a faint mustache I’m too embarrassed to shave—all out for the audience to see.

My line is automatic at this point: “A brittle glory shineth in this face, as brittle as the glory is the face. Mark—mark how soon my sorrow hath destroyed my face.” My stomach brews, and my head is nauseous. I can’t bear to stare at the auditorium, to meet all those probing eyes. But I can’t look at the mirror anymore, either. At her. At me. My reflection is not myself but something so incomprehensibly disgusting the cheap plastic handle burns in my hand. “No. No. No, no, no.” I dash the mirror onto the ground, and it shatters.

Bolingbroke’s face is grim. “The shadow of your sorrow hath destroyed the shadow of your face.”

He waits for me to mock him with my speech, but I don’t answer. I fall before the glass shards on all fours. I can feel the audience’s gaze piercing through my body like bullets—cold, painful bullets. I tuck my head in between my knees. It’s dark and warm. Snot drips out of my nose and I hiccup. But it’s warm. My back is cold, but my chest is warm. My nose is warm. My heart, my face, and my neck—everything is warm inside this darkness. For a moment the loudest thing I can hear is my heartbeat. My breath, my sniffles, my hiccups. A century passes.

Then someone claps. Just one. Then another. And another. Three and four and five. A few are offbeat. Six and seven and eight, and soon the whole auditorium erupts in clapping, all at different paces and tempos, a thousand vibrations like knives jammed into my ears, each subsequent clap and echo a piercing typhoon, like white waves bounding back and back and back over my head. But it's quiet under the white crests, in the storm's eye. Someone places their hand on my back, and whispers something; I don't leave my cocoon. The room still roars, and the hand gives me a series of gentle pats. I hear more and more whispers, but I can't make them out. The hand pats me again, and I raise my head. John is kneeling before me and offers his hand. He whispers a compliment as I rise, brushing the glass off my robe.

"But why?" I ask him. "What did I do?"

He shakes his head, smirking, and faces the audience: a full crowd, every seat filled, hundreds of hands. It's the loudest I've ever seen the auditorium, the loudest it's been in a long time. Principal Davids stands and cheers; the rest of the room follows, rising and cheering, like one final wave growing taller and taller. The pressure in my head and chest and eyes flushes out all at once: a shuddering, black torrent streaming with dreams, staining my cheeks and neck and robe. I sit on the ground with wet branches tattooed across my body, paralyzed yet shuddering with hiccups and snot. John places his hand on my shoulder. In the far back my parents are there, too, clapping. They're smiling.

The Christmas the Cops Were Called

My grandmother's lemongrass eyes
like a cat who sees more than it speaks
used to be hazel like my mother's –
eucalyptus – that used to be hazel like mine –
olive branch. A reflection muddled
down the genetic line.

.
I used to dream about my grandmother's closet.
Mirror doors opening – two accordions
to see six versions of myself.
Concealed behind her clothes
there is another door.
I remember crawling
up narrow, indigo stairs
leading to a room full of thimbles
and fabrics, wrapping paper folded
from Christmas past to be used again.
At the far end is a rose-colored window
I have not looked through in years.

.
My sister's eyes are bourbon
light refracting
through a cross hatch glass
revealing a tempest on the rocks.

.
I have few real memories
of my grandmother's bedroom,
her purple grapevine bedding.
The Christmas the cops were called.
She stood there with us afterward,

I don't know what happened to them.
You have to stick together.
Sisters are so important.
She grabbed us,
her now adult granddaughters,
Promise me.

Chelsea Allen

Artists' Statements

Shams Alkamil is a Sudanese-American poet and educator based in Texas. She first began writing as a mode of self-expression to then being a three-time Pushcart Prize nominee. Alkamil's first poetry collection, "West 24th Street", highlighted the anchor a physical location has on lived experiences. Her work has been featured in Mizna, Kalahari Review, Torch Literary Arts, Ghost City Press, and more. Alkamil's second poetry collection, "When Time is Circular", was published in June 2024.

Chelsea Allen was born in Fresno, California where she earned her B.A. in English with a minor in creative writing from California State University, Fresno. Chelsea moved to Huntington Beach in 2021 and attended California State University, Long Beach where she received her M.F.A. in Creative Writing, Poetry. She currently works at Santa Monica College and CSULB teaching English composition. She lives with her partner and two cats.

Esénia Bañuelos is a Mexican-American and mixed Indigenous Huichol prose poet and short fiction author. Born in La Villita and soon hauled off to an apartment off 91st on the East Side, it is Mexican Chicago she calls home. She is now an undergraduate at Bryn Mawr College majoring in Linguistics and Literatures of English. Her work has been nominated for the Best of the Net Award in Fiction, and can be read in MANTIS, The Allegheny Review, The Saranac Review, and The Maine Review.

Kevin Bodniza was born in South Florida, where the vibrant contrasts of his surroundings shaped his artistic voice. A self-taught artist with no formal education in art, creativity has always been instinctual to him—a raw, unfiltered need to express. Through collage, he builds textures and worlds, layering fragments of life into something entirely new. His work is an explosion of emotion, challenging viewers to question their own reactions, whether joy, discomfort, or nostalgia. Unbound by traditional rules, Kevin embraces the unpre-dictability of his process, allowing his art to exist as a full, unapologetic expression of life itself.

Maudie Bryant (she/her) is a Pushcart-nominated poet, multidisciplinary artist, and educator based in Shreveport, Louisiana. A graduate of the University of Louisiana Monroe (M.A. in English) and a mother, Maudie surveys the complexities of memory and identity through her work. Her poetry has been featured or is forthcoming in *Apricity Magazine*, *Welter*, and *Rathalla Review*. She explores the layers of human experience, uncovering the disquiet that lies just beneath the surface. Connect with her on Instagram at @maudiemichelle and Bluesky at @maudiemichelle.com.

Susana H. Case is the award-winning author of nine books of poetry, most recently, *If This Isn't Love*, Broadstone Books, and co-editor with Margo Taft Stever of *I Wanna Be Loved by You: Poems on Marilyn Monroe*, Milk & Cake Press. The first of her five chapbooks, *The Scottish Café*, Slapering Hol Press, was re-released in an English-Polish version, *Kawiarnia Szkocka* by Opole University Press and as an English-Ukrainian edition, *Шотландська Кав'ярня* by Slapering Hol Press. <https://www.susanahcase.com>

Cat S. Chen lives in Minnesota. Her poems have appeared in *Mid-American Review*, *Poetry East*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, *ellipsis... literature and art*, and *Kissing Dynamite*, among other publications.

Tommy Cheis is a Chiricahua guide, diyyin, and Cochise descendant. After traveling extensively through distant lands and meeting interesting people, he resides in southwest New Mexico and near the Cochise Stronghold with his horses. His stories (will) appear in *Yellow Medicine Review*, *Rome Review*, *After Din-ner Conversation*, *NonBinary Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Invisible City*, *University of New Mexico Look to the Mountains Anthology*, and more than twenty other publications. He is the winner of the Colonel Darren L. Wright Memorial Writing Award, and his work appears in the CLMP Reading List for Native American Her-itage Month November 2024. He has been nominated for a PEN Short Story Award and a Pushcart Prize. His first novel, *RARE EARTH*, is on auction; his second, *CHILD OF WATER*, is on submission.

Edwyn Choi is a student at Amherst College. His work has been published in Amherst's student-run literary magazine, *The Indicator*. In his free time he likes to watch movies and read anything from Shakespeare to Ishiguro.

Bristol Christelman is a multi-media artist who attends Cal State San Bernardino and is a Studio Art major. Accolades include first place at the Corona Art Association and having a temporary installing at RAFFMA at Cal State San Bernardino. With a huge passion for ceramic and glass blowing work, she can be found most days in the studio or finding inspiration outdoors watching the world go by.

Hopi Dosela is an ornithologist and avid birder. Originally from San Antonio, Texas, she now resides in Southern California.

David A. Fein served forty years on the French faculty (PhD, Cornell) of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, including four years as Head of the Department of Romance Languages. I have published six scholarly books with various academic presses, and have written two novels, not yet published.

Kiera Fisher is a Columbus-based Muralist and Mixed Media Artist who embraces bold, brilliant, and vibrant colors, patterns, and imagery to create art that makes you think, and makes your inner child jump for joy. She draws inspiration from her surroundings, incorporating her lived experiences into her work, which frequently depicts figures and their relationship to people, places, and things. She works with a variety of media and materials, including anything from illustration, to textiles, to fine arts. You can find her work @ Rainbowfish.art on Instagram!

Daniel Garcia is a student and writer here at CSULB who is interested in exploring how surreal mundane life experiences can be. Though his work borders between the absurd and non-fiction, his writings are grounded in reality, focusing on the experiences he has had throughout his 26 years of life. Garcia is an aspiring writer who has previously published poetry through the ¡Pa'lante! literary magazine.

J.C. Henderson was originally a medical biologist. In the last two decades, her vocation has been dedicated to art. Henderson's works have appeared in numerous art and literary magazines. She has sold hundreds of her original paintings. Her artworks focus on nature as well as the human psyche.

Olivia Hunt's nonfiction has appeared in Action, Spectacle, ANGLES Magazine, Confluence Art & Re-search Journal, and Roots.Wounds.Words x Carnegie Hall. My plays have been produced Off-Broadway at HERE Arts Center and Rattlestick Theater, and developed by La Mama, Playwrights' Center, The Tank, and IRT Theater. I am proud to have co-founded the bicoastal collective Cheers to 40, for femme writers and producers across media under 40.

Finn Holmgren is a third year student double majoring in Theatre Performance and English Creative Writ-ing. He aims to create work that highlights the experience of the queer community, specifically trans men such as himself. His pieces often dip into the conceptual or lean towards body horror as a literary outlet for conveying not only self-perception, but societal-perception of queer bodies.

Serge Lecomte was born in Belgium in 1946. He came to the States where he spent his teens in South Philly and then Brooklyn. After graduating from Tilden H. S. he joined the Medical Corps in the Air Force. He earned an MA and Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University in Russian Literature with a minor in French Literature. He worked as a Green Beret language instructor at Fort Bragg, NC from 1975-78. In 1988 he received a B.A. from the University of Alaska Fairbanks in Spanish Literature. He worked as a language teacher at the University of Alaska (1978-1997). He worked as a house builder, pipe-fitter, orderly in a hospital, gardener, landscaper, driller for an assaying company, bartender and painter.

Angie Minkin is a Pushcart-Prize nominated, award-winning San Francisco poet who loves making chicken soup and fantasizes about baking wedding cakes. She is a volunteer poetry reader for The MacGuffin and her work has been published in that journal, Birdy, Loch Raven Review, Persimmon Tree, Rattle, Stirring, Swamp Ape Review, SWWIM Every Day, Westchester Review, and elsewhere. She is the co-author of *Sea-son Lightly With Salt* (Raven & Wren Press, 2024) and *Dreams and Blessings: Six Visionary Poets* (Blue Light Press, 2020). Her chapbook, *Balm for the Living*, was published in 2023 (Finishing Line Press). www.angieminkin.com.

Stina Pederson, she/her, is a writer who believes in a world beyond capitalism and that we start creating that world now. She's fulfilling a long-held dream by going back to school for her MFA in poetry.

Maureen Shields was born and raised in Southern California. She earned a BFA in Drawing and Painting from California State University Long Beach and a MFA from New York University. She makes mixed media works on wood that combine paint, collage, handmade stickers, gold leaf, and glitter. Her printed matter and source material range from vintage LIFE magazines from the 1950s to vintage Playboy magazines from the 1970s and 80s. She has shown work from California to New York: de Young Museum (CA), Mothbelly Gallery (CA), Ink Blot Gallery (CA), Cummings Art Gallery/Mercyhurst University (PA), The Bedford Gallery (CA), Fleet Wood (CA), Collector (CA), Rare Device (CA), Luna Rienne Gallery (CA), The AG Gallery (NY), Rosalux Gallery (MN), The Huntington Beach Art Center (CA), Swallow Gallery (CA), Studio Gallery (CA), Roy G Biv Gallery (OH), The Mushroom Gallery (NY), and 3rd Ward (NY). Her collage work was featured on the cover of Drink Me magazine in 2012 and Tape Op Magazine in May 2020. Her work is on permanent view at Red Zebra Restaurant in Sleepy Hollow, NY. Her work is also part of the Capitol One Investing permanent collection in their San Francisco offices (via Heidi McBride art services). She sits on the Board of Directors for the City Art Co-Operative Gallery in San Francisco, CA.

Cierra Smith is a 20-year-old poet and senior in California State University's English Creative Writing program. She holds an Associate of Arts in English from Great Basin College, which she earned at eighteen in her hometown Las Vegas. Cierra has been published twice by the American Library of Poetry as a young poet, and will be featured in the upcoming issue of *Intraminutia* this March. Her writing often centers on heritage, religion and culture, and human relations to natural landscapes. When not writing poetry, Cierra enjoys crocheting, crafting, reading Mary Oliver, and exploring new beaches and bookstores.

Joley Smith is a practicing artist and art education student based in Northridge, California. She focuses her creativity on exploring memory, relationships of all kinds, and generally, the human experience. Drifting between many styles and mediums, she aims to communicate one unified message: the unfiltered experience of being alive. Her work has been displayed in the CSUN Main Gallery, Ann Foxworthy gallery, and for sale at Barclays Coffee Shop. She is also a recipient of the TAG art scholarship, Orcutt Children's Art Foundation Scholarship, and the Ian M. Hassett Foundation Scholarship.

JeFF Stumpo is the author of five chapbooks of poetry, most through Seven Kitchens Press, and a spoken word album. He has won the Subnivean Award for Poetry, placed second for the Joy Harjo Prize, and been shortlisted for the Plaza Prose Poetry Prize, with other poems recently published or forthcoming in such journals as DMQ Review, The Journal, RHINO, and Puerto del Sol. He has a (poor) website at www.JeFF-Stumpo.com.

Bri Virrueta is a 20-year-old writer who resides in Long Beach, California. While attending CSULB for creative writing, they spend pockets of time reading and writing nonfiction and poetry. More of their work can be found online under the instagram handle @nowoundsforever.

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