ARIZONA MFA LOOK BOOK

2023

I am more than ever committed to creating spaces where other people can find their voices, where writers can find space and strength to tell the truth as they see it (even if this is in an imagined world). I'd say that writing powerful stories is more important now than it has been at any other point in my lifetime.

--Aurelie Sheehan

The University of Arizona MFA program in Creative Writing dedicates this year's Look Book in loving memory of colleague, teacher, mentor, and brilliant writer Aurelie Sheehan (1963 – 2023). Aurelie authored the novels *The Anxiety of Everyday Objects* and *History Lesson for Girls*, the short story collections *Jack Kerouac Is Pregnant* and *Demigods on Speedway*, the novella *This Blue*, and two books of genre-defying prose, *Jewelry Box: A Collection of Histories* and *Once into the Night*. Her legacy of writing, teaching, mentoring, and institutional leadership lives on in the works of the MFA graduates collected here.

The Aurelie Sheehan Memorial Scholarship supports undergraduate Creative Writing majors at the University of Arizona. If you would like to contribute to this scholarship, please visit: https://give.uafoundation.org/page.aspx?pid=948&id=a0c8d765-142a-4210-ae09-6e292709e6b2.

The University of Arizona offers a rigorous, small, fully-funded three-year MFA program in creative nonfiction, fiction, and poetry, with opportunities for interdisciplinary study and work with many literary magazines, small presses, and community organizations. It is also the home of Sonora Review, one of the oldest student-run literary journals in the country, and the international treasure of the University of Arizona Poetry Center. We offer workshops and craft classes taught by world-class faculty including Kate Bernheimer, Susan Briante, Francisco Cantú, Bojan Louis, Farid Matuk, Ander Monson, Manuel Muñoz, Sara Sams, and Johanna Skibsrud, among others.

The Arizona MFA Look Book is published every two years as a presentation of the best work by our graduating and recently graduated students. This is our 2023 edition. Enjoy. If you'd like to be in contact with any of these writers, email the program and we'll be happy to connect you to them.

Farid Matuk, Director
Stephanie Mao, Program Coordinator

For more information:
https://english.arizona.edu/mfa-creative-writing
https://twitter.com/ArizonaMFA

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wet-walled

Dure Ahmed

I

Today I am empty, fasting till sundown

returned to the God I often abandon.
Lilies on the dining table,
in the glass vase full of
water and light:

Vulgar and huge like open mouths
fuzzy and wet walled inside
Drip thick clear fluid from globular stigmas

Still alive, how warm scent throbs in the air:

almost sickly sweet
not even sweet without
performance: campy femininity
a touch of drag.

II

Some fetal vaginas turn
inside out like a sock and put their
nerve endings out in the world and
dangle. Sunflowers make seeds
way after their heads can't turn to the sun anymore
But I live like I do sit on my root
chakra all day blocking air
from what could be an open
mouth fuzzy and wet-
walled inside filling the room
with sickly sweet scent.

III

My mouth edges with soft drool

My hunger doesn't catalyze into
anger anymore but I fear
its sly home in the vellus hair
on the back of my neck.

I only want to be less alone.

Even hunger fills
empty space like I'm hollowed out
like my walls can meet my walls

So I also know stigmas I was named *aurat*
Urdu for woman Arabic for shame

IV

At some point I stopped

letting people tell me things lost my weak God
to weed then lost my shaky secularism to the aesthetic

a 16 hour fast a velvet prayer rug a printed silk Quran cover

It started with the cross sections of flowers I was shown

Even then fifth grader naïve I knew shame
Was I born a prude? but it was the sweet-scented necessity
perfunctory decoration natural purpose (fertility)
that threatened me

I resolve now also to stop watching the Kardashians.

V

I want, still. Fingers in the back of my throat
the smell of latex to manifest on my tongue
vaginas are built with a closed end
nothing passes through till it's pulled pulled out
against the walls their clench and drag
Unlike the other hole that came before everything
continues to the mouth empty but both ends
lined with tastebuds

A version of the poem, “Wet-Walled” appeared in Guernica in April 2023.

DURE AHMED is an immigrant, Muslim writer based in New Jersey. Their poetry has appeared in Guernica, Black Warrior Review, ANMLY, and Berkeley Poetry Review among other journals.

Room Tone

Kimberly Alidio

Through the open door and down the hallway, I hear a text-to-speech voice (American English, female), along with my mother's (Filipino English, female) reciting a text on the widescreen TV. My mother prays a novena by following a YouTube video. In my room, I view on my laptop the second hour of a sound art piece featuring a repetitive sequence of recorded speech. The litanies are simultaneous and adjacent. I listen to both rooms because I know when the novena is finished I will kiss my mother goodnight.

I get a holiday email from The Criterion Channel (where I watch Sofia Bohdanowicz's films) inviting me to watch a video compilation of the past year's interviewees sitting in silence while a camera crew records a minute of room tone. I too sit in silence for sixty seconds following a poetry reading Stacy Szymaszek records at the local NPR station for The Poetry Foundation's podcast. I listen in search of whatever is being recorded, and stiffen in fear of interfering with whatever is being recorded. Several commenters on the Criterion blog request a version of the video without accompanying music so they too can hear the room.

The brain, I read on the internet, filters out ambient sounds of room resonances. But we want a soundwave to bounce in a certain way or be absorbed in a certain way because each gives us crucial data. A reflection tells us a surface is hard, and not porous enough to take in light or sound. What breaks through inattention is absurdist information: for example, the walls, ceiling and floor are spongy dead zones, while the upholstered sofa is echoey. If voices aren't raised or strained enough on a recording of two people conversing from different rooms of a house, we don't believe the intimate contours of dialogue. Is there some device closing in the distance and cutting across rooms' various hums and reverbs, our brain might ask, or a clumsy mix of speech from different places and times? When room ambience stops being background, it begins to signify something relative to our sense of survival and precarity, which is perhaps our primal narrative. It is a sign grieving people might look for, or look for a way out of, in the ordinary.

Before ever hearing the phrase *room tone*, I encounter Adobe Audition's reverb effects simulating acoustic spaces. I try each effect on a sound file. Mourning doves inside an amphitheater, a church, a coat closet, a concert hall, in the club downstairs, an empty living room, a large bathroom, outside the club, in a tiled bathroom, in a warm room. A room *whose acoustics interacted*. Maryanne Amacher has studios at MIT and in Kingston, NY whose room acoustics interacted with the sonic frequencies of a pier in Boston Harbor, where she'd installed a microphone and set up a live transmission feed. I make a poem from one of her interviews: *I realized I'd begun to live in this tone*.

Criterion's interviewees remain seated in front of rolling cameras as room tone is recorded for one minute. No longer having to perform, their gaze falls. The ninety participants in Issue Project Room's marathon restaging of Alvin Lucier's *I Am Sitting in a Room* sit in concentration, listening to room tone taking over their speaking voice in successive recorded playbacks of their recitation of Alvin Lucier's 105-word text that begins, "I am sitting in a room different from the one you're in now." The sound art piece is relevant here, and I sit here, trying to sense the shape of its relevance.

By repeating the sequence of recording speech in a room and playing the recording back into the same room while recording the playback, the room's acoustical structure increasingly resonates whatever sonic frequencies it has in common with the speech recordings, and increasingly downplays others. Sonic pauses and phonemic borders blur. I think of asemic writing. The word *asemic* has one origin in Roland Barthes's reference to the visual space between words. This space makes it possible for words to be read, so it contributes to semantic meaning, but doesn't convey meaning itself. The units and connectors collapse, in one sense, but I feel them expand, too, into a field of orientation.

Amanda Lucier sits in a home studio, a stereo unit in the background, at a desk with a microphone, and speaks her father's text in a conversational style. At one moment, she closes her eyes. There is something about seeing her unmoving form while her vocal frequencies narrow and start to ring in rhythm. I watch her open her eyes in curiosity once the tonal pattern is more or less established. The camera focuses, Zoom-style, on the performer's upper torso and bust, each in their own room. To watch the three long videos on Issue Project Room's website is to hear the tones of ninety different rooms. It is also to watch ninety people listening to their speaking voices being transformed into tones.

Abigail Levine sits in an emptied, clean warehouse or garage, on a chair, at a standing microphone, and speaks with formal enunciation. While Amanda Lucier's recording goes through at least ten passes until her speech becomes more tonal than semantic, Abigail Levine's voice reverbs significantly on the third playback. Low frequencies begin to ring or reverberate. Something like a storefront security door slowly rolls up and down and a car horn blares intermittently. On the fourth playback, her speech smooths into a drone and a truck in reverse emits high-pitch beeps. On the fifth playback, Abigail Levine closes her eyes and becomes very still.

Akiko Hatakeyama reads Alvin Lucier's text from a book on a couch next to a lit fireplace, no microphone, a slow and formally literary reading style. Wood crackles at the end of her initial recording. Dry, low, again distant. The ringing is like static above the vocal, which gets quieter and quieter. There is a kind of bass rumbling, then a rhythm of bass notes, a pattern of low frequencies. Words have nearly disappeared. She continues to read silently by the fire. This offers somewhat of a contrast and somewhat of a complement to the sonic muffling. The living room begins to resemble a subway train with a commuter ignoring city noise to read a book. A loud crack from the fireplace startles her, and she sits up to look into it with the gestural emphasis of a silent film actor.

Aki Takahashi sits in a home studio, framed prints and photographs on the close wall behind her, at a table, no microphone, and speaks carefully with Japanese-language intonation and pronunciation. The room gives her words an echoic drag. She is very still in her facial expression and body. Her eyes begin to relax but remain alert and open as her words begin to sound more distant. The sound isn't tinny but a thicker metallic. The durational quality is enhanced by the stillness of her face while the sounds shift. Over time, I fall in love with her, as if we are staring into one another's eyes for almost ten minutes.

Tonality becomes more prominent but, either through memory or listening, her speech remains clear. Then, the intonation or melody contour flattens a bit, and fades. Toward the end of the utterance: ring, ring, ring. Aki Takahashi maintains a curious alertness: eyes wide open, eyebrows slightly raised, a slight smile. Tones muddle, overlap, and make what could be secondary and tertiary resonances. The message feels far away. Because the utterance has a distinct prosody, its dissolution feels alive. Her facial expression conveys a bit more delight. In ringing resonance, sentences enter the micro-phases of matter: a mass of sliding particles; a possibility of charged fields; a pairing; a hopping; a forced bonding in decay; a strange kind; a phony mass; a kind of drag and hook-up; a zero resistance; a hyper rigidity; a disordered spinning; a closed loop; a crystalized time-space; a high energy autonomy; a speculative phase; a cold state.

Online, I read, “Words become unrecognizable while other attributes like rhythm, cadence, and syntax persist in translucent states of a music no one could have imagined.” Language is neither itself nor music nor noise. Repetition makes recognition unnecessary because the phrase has become both inside and outside. As ambient resonance overtakes the speaking voice, spatial harmonizing transforms the speech’s semantic meaning, which represents the first-person I. Through resonant feedback, this deictic center blurs into the background as the background comes into focus. In transforming, the phrases enact a promise. We experience a performance of the sentence’s matter and form. The room speaks in the filtered, processed speech of a recorded speaker. The center, speaker of the sentence, passes back and forth.

I am sitting in a room writing this as a means of recording and then playing back the recording to record the playback successively until what's significant liquifies, vaporizes, congeals, and liquifies. I regard this activity not so much as derivative of Alvin Lucier's sound art or as destructive to any semblance of exposition but more as a way for a sound art piece, a film, or a rectangle of afternoon sun to reinforce certain resonant frequencies of my sensing and to downplay others. What gets subtracted is a prose of explanation, both descriptive and theoretical, from dimensions of absence. To ring a soup bowl with a spoon. To clap my hands upon entering a room for the first time.

IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

Daniel Reis, “Room Tone 2022.” *Current, Criterion*, 25 Dec 2022.

Stacy Szymaszek, “I Saw This Day Coming.” *Poetry Now | Poetry Foundation*, 23 Dec 2019.

Kimberly Alidio, *Teeter.* Nightboat Books, 2023.

Maryanne Amacher: Selected Writings and Interviews, edited by Amy Cimini & Bill Dietz. Blank Forms, 2021.

“I Am Sitting in a Room: Alvin Lucier’s 90th Birthday Celebration, Part 1,” *Issue Project Room*, 13 May 2021.

Peter Schwenger, *Asemic: The Art of Writing*. University of Minnesota Press, 2019.

Douglas Kahn, “Birds: Memories and Meditations on Alvin Lucier.” *Disclaimer.* 8 Dec 2021.

Originally published as Belladonna* Chaplet #297

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In The Absence Of Color

Aidan Avery

Once I start buying Kodachrome slides from eBay, it's hard to stop. Do I want a photo of a shirtless man in jean shorts and aviator sunglasses holding a three-paneled mirror to tan himself alone on a beach? I do. How about a candid shot of a pedestrian looking back over his shoulder at a car crashing through a storefront window? Definitely.

Part of my compulsion to buy comes from the joy of unearthing moments that have been crystallized in Kodachrome–the unfamiliar cars, the historical fashion, the sheer *candidness* of the scenes. I dig through eBay for Kodachrome slides as if the site is a bin at a second hand store.

But another part of the compulsion stems from the physicality of Kodachrome slides. Holding a Kodachrome in hand, I find, is unlike encountering Kodachrome images in books, and even unlike when I recently saw acclaimed *NatGeo* photographer, Steve McCurry's, prints from Kodachrome images exhibited here in Tucson.

The slides offer an interaction. They're tangible. The cardboard mounts fit well between my index finger and my thumb. Outside the glossy film, a mount's surface is smooth, and its edges are corrugated. I like to hold the slides up to the window to backlight their contents. When I illuminate them like this, these Kodachromes seem even more real, more *Kodachrome-esque,* than any image printed in a book.

But even holding a Kodachrome in hand is different from the ultimate Kodachrome experience that Kodak intended. A 1954 Kodak print ad promises me that home projection of my color slides will make my Kodachrome pictures "breathtakingly beautiful." Oh, right. Projection is what the Kodak chemists specifically invented Kodachrome for. It's the whole point of the slide transparency. And yet, in all my searching and researching, I have never once loaded a slide into a projector. Which is to say, I haven't experienced what Kodachrome is all about.

That's an oversight I must remedy.

PROCESSED BY KODAK
Kodak
Kodachrome
SLIDE

The Kodak Ektagraphic III A slide projector I source from Tucson's Craigslist is a beast. It's a miniature tank, with a central cannon of a lens that beams the projection. The carousel on my new Ektagraphic accommodates 80 slides. Not bad, though I learn that I can upgrade to a 140-slide carousel, which I will as soon as my slide collection warrants. That's imminent, given my collection rate.

I find more information about my Ektagraphic III A on a rental site, Rentabit.com. My Ektagraphic, it says, offers "brilliant performance" and is built "for presentations with maximum impact." Maximum impact sounds like something I want.

Digging for the operating manual I find instead a digital copy of a dated advertisement that proclaims the Ektagraphic III A "reliable beyond compare." It had better be, because mine came without the plastic ring that locks the carousel slide holder in place. The entire Craigslist interaction didn't inspire a ton of confidence. I bought the Ektagraphic for $25, which is somewhere between 1/5th to 1/10th the going rate. The eager seller never offered me his name. So I'll call him "Eddie."

I frequently buy and sell on Craigslist. I buy cameras, accessories, film, furniture. I found my home in Tucson for rent on Craigslist. I bought my '08 Jetta and faux-leather couch on Craigslist. I'm currently writing at a glass-top desk and sitting in a tall-backed vinyl chair, both of which I also purchased on Craigslist. Craigslist is, I've found, one of the few remaining hidden gems in America's secondhand economy. It gets a bad rap, probably rightfully, as an unsafe site. But (bearing in mind that I'm a somewhat tall white dude), in my hundreds of Craigslist interactions, I've never personally felt concerned for my own safety. That is, until it came time to meet with Eddie, one of the few times in my life that I felt, if I get robbed, I have it coming.

Before our meetup, Eddie texted me to ask if I wanted to buy the working Ektagraphic or save $10 and buy a non-functioning projector. He had two, apparently, and only one worked. The working one for me, please. Eddie had chosen our meeting point, an empty parking lot in one of Tucson's many notoriously dark neighborhoods, where streetlights are sparse or, in some cases, nonexistent.

I pulled into the eight-car parking lot in my Jetta. I sensed that I was still in a residential area, but in the extreme dark I couldn't make out any nearby homes. In fact, I didn't see a lot of human activity at all. This was not, I decided, a pedestrian-friendly part of town, especially at this time of night. Nor was it my typical Craigslist pickup spot. I heard distant sirens. I looked at my phone to see if Eddie had texted. The last message was from me: "Here."

I waited outside my car with my hand lingering by the driver's side door handle. Eventually, to my left, I heard a screen door open and close. Then Eddie emerged from the darkness on foot. His presence didn't relax me. He was thin, and he wore loose sweats and a stained white tank. His hair was greased up, unintentionally I think. Was he dodgy, or was I just jumpy because of the location? As Eddie got close, a sour smell reached me.

We said, "Hey." Eddie's eyes habitually darted around. He didn't look directly at me.

Maybe Eddie was going through a hard time. He was probably selling the projector for money to scrape by. Who knows? This was certainly not a situation I'd normally make a Craigslist transaction in, but I assumed his intentions were pure.

He put the projector in front of me and then accepted my money. Once I started fiddling with the

Ektagraphic, I noticed the missing ring lock, which I pointed out.

Without a word, Eddie walked back into the darkness, still with my $25 in hand. He'd presumably gone to look for the lock. After several minutes, I assured myself he was going to come back. He might have my money, sure. But, he'd agreed to meet me here. He'd shown up with the projector. Waiting alone in the empty lot at night wasn't calming my nerves, but why should I suspect Eddie would fleece me now?

I heard the screen door again. Eddie returned, no longer with my money in hand. He didn't have the missing piece either, it turned out. But at least he had looked for it, even if he knew he wouldn't find it.

He shrugged, "It always worked for me." His eyes bopped up to mine briefly, to gauge if I'd still take the projector.

Alright. It looks like my new projector–my tank that shoots Kodachrome images–is missing a ring lock. At least I've got something to work with. I thanked Eddie and loaded the Ektagraphic into the back seat, feeling like, somehow, this scrappy projector is going to help me out.


KODACHROME
TRANSPARENCY
PROCESSED BY KODAK
GORDON'S 3rd Anniversary
Celebrating with SPECIAL VALUES
KODACHROME
TRANSPARENCY
PROCESSED BY KODAK

At home, the slide projector becomes my central project. I situate it on a top shelf, aim it across the room, and realize I don't even have enough free wall space to use as a backdrop for the projections. I remove some decorations to make way. Which honored slide will I project first? Apparently, these Ektagraphics get pretty hot. The brilliant performance and all. Despite Kodachrome's renowned archival stability, prolonged exposure to the blistering projection bulb can be hazardous to the slides. With that in mind, and recalling that Eddie's definition of "functional" includes at least one missing part, I choose a slide I won't be devastated to lose. It's a candid family scene in a backyard. For all I know the Ektagraphic could eat, burn, or melt the first thing it has been asked to project in decades.

Pointing the projector at my emptied wall, I notice that the absent locking mechanism isn't the only issue. The circular wheel that focuses the projection lens doesn't work, so I have to force the lens—the tank's cannon—in and out of the front of the Ektagraphic by hand to focus. But it's too late to turn back. I'm too amped up at the thought of seeing my slides projected. I take the oversized donut-esque carousel off the Ektagraphic and load my slide into position "1," then click the carousel back into place. I can't lock it, but it sits atop the projector comfortably enough. I flick off the lights, then with my thumb on "FORWARD" ready to advance to the first slide, I toggle the projector from "OFF," to "FAN," (which purrs loudly) to "DIM," to "HI." Since my Ektagraphic was built for maximum brightness, I don't dare pussyfoot around with anything less. The projector beams across the room. Just before I advance the carousel to my slide, I see… an image. I'd planned on looking at my own slide first, but Eddie gave me more than just a janky projector; he'd forgotten to remove a slide from it too. Before me is a commercial image for a mining company, bordered by neon lettering that reads "ASARCO." I stare at this for a second, decide I'll come back to it, and *click*, I advance.


KODACHROME
TRANSPARENCY
KODACHROME
TRANSPARENCY

What is this feeling? I'm alone in my studio, with the lights off, standing next to my Ektagraphic slide projector. This is the first time I've let it rip. The machine's fan whirs loudly. It's so dark in here that I can't make out the doorknob on the door I closed behind me on my way in. The projector offers the only light, which beams through the lens just past my shoulder and fills the opposite wall with a forgotten, candid, family photo. I've seen a digital scan of this slide countless times, but now on the wall the image feels very alive. I mean not *alive*, but like there's a new life to it. The shadows grow long and recede into the scene. The people are sharper and more tangible. They feel present. There is depth, even three-dimensionality, to the scene. I remember that Kodachrome images actually *are* three-dimensional, since the tri-color dyes–red, yellow, and blue–live on three different film layers. If you hold a Kodachrome slide up to a light just right, you can see that the image surface isn't flat; edges are raised and lowered according to the subjects' colors. I imagine this helps induce the effect I'm seeing on the wall. It's arresting, really, to look at an image like this for the first time. Maximum impact indeed. And although I only thought to buy the projector last week, this moment feels like years in the making.

Part of what I'm feeling surely has to do with the presentation. How often do we experience non-digital home projection anymore? The movie theater's grandiosity with the home's intimacy. I curate the images. I slide them out of my binder and place them in the projector. And *this* one is a family snapshot after all. What could be more personal and intimate? I stare at the image a while longer. This experience is intense, more so than I expected. So much so that I have to turn the projector off to collect my thoughts.

I call my girlfriend, Kim, into the room, offer her a chair, then I repeat the process: position the slide, flick the lights off, turn the projector from OFF to HI, and then: Bam! Light on the wall.

"Woah," she stops. "It's breathtaking," We move to examine the projection up close.

Seen closeup, the projection is startlingly sharp. A 35mm slide is only 24 by 36 *millimeters*. I've blown it up to several feet tall and across. The colors are vibrant. I can't see *any* grain, which I imagine is something someone in a Kodachrome commercial would have probably said. What I see instead are many things I hadn't noticed in the scan. First, the subject's expressions are more, well, *expressive* now that I see them so clearly and up close. The woman on the frame's right edge is the only one looking into the camera. She wears a soft look. The boy in her arms sticks his tongue out in playful defiance. The kid in the center smiles in his Sunday best. It all feels very emotive, especially at this size, from this proximity. There are all kinds of other details too. The guy in the back's hair is thinning. The typography on the woman's paper bag indicates that the bag is from a yarn shop. The light gleams off her red heels, as if directly from the projector itself.

Admittedly, much of what I see is lost in digital-to-print reproduction here–i.e., in this chapter. At least it isn't as pressing. Then again, that's exactly what I'm talking about, the difference between seeing the image projected and not. If the complete Kodachrome experience could be bottled up into a digital or print reproduction, then it wouldn't be Kodachrome at all. I am talking about *the experience* of projection. And this is, apparently, something I feel I can declare, having only *experienced* projection for the first time a few minutes ago. I'm a convert and a bandwagoner. And you'll just have to take my word for it all, or else find your own sketchy Craigslist encounter and Kodachrome slides. Neither will disappoint.

I hadn't noticed before that the photographer's shadow is in the shot. Even as he crouched to shoot, the low sun betrayed him. He casts a long shadow from the foreground to the bag of yarn, making him the ninth person in the frame. It occurs to me that the exact strip of film in my Ektagraphic was present at this scene in the camera in the hands of the shadowcast photographer. The families in this scene likely gathered again to look at this image after it had been returned from the photo lab. I envision them nestling onto a couch, children on parents' laps, while the photographer slips the slide into the projector and beams it onto the wall like I am now. It's the type of image a family would want to revisit. Everyone is well dressed. There are lots of smiles, multiple hugs, and all around feel-goodery. Plus, the pleasant evening light almost blesses their fellowship.

That this slide is the exact film that the image was captured on–i.e., that this strip of Kodachrome itself was present for the scene it now contains–creates a feeling in me that's hard to describe. I'll experience the same feeling looking at all the other slides I've been collecting: the car crashing through the window, the confident man tanning on the beach, a rare Kodachrome of Marilyn I'll find on eBay. Each Kodachrome slide is an object that has been somewhere, some*time*, and has the ability to transport me there. Or, to transport there and then to me. I don't mean just the image. I include the dust and hairs, the dirt, the wear on the cardboard mount, the mount's typography and design, which I have gleaned varied depending on the era of its production. The people in this slide transparency handled the slide itself. Now I'm handling it.

I shut the projector off. Back in the present, I take some mindful breaths. I can breathe deeply again. Viewing the projection has a physical effect on me. It's euphoric, or nearly so. It's like jumping in a frigid lake, except there's something deeper here than an initial rush. Sure, this is a simple amateur family photograph. And yet, experiencing its projection affirms what I already felt on some level–namely, that this medium holds serious emotive and artistic potential.

After I minute, once I feel myself calm again, I take the carousel off the Ektagraphic and load up the rest of my slides. Lights off. Here we go. *Whirrr. Click!*


Kodachrome
SLIDE
Kodak
PROCESSED BY KODAK

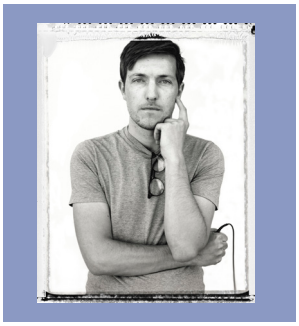
A serious question: Is family photo viewing *maybe* not as dreadful a tradition as we make it out to be? I admit the family photo album isn't the most thrilling object. All photos, good and bad, seem to make their way into the endless pages. And, at least for me, "Oh, I'll go grab the photo album!" sets off instinctive hostage-situation alarm bells. On the other hand, my new Ektagraphic is a force to be reckoned with. Just ten minutes after projecting my first slide, I hear myself telling Kim that we have to throw a slide viewing party.

Growing up, my family's photographer was my now-late Grandaddy Bruce, whose proclivity for wildflower photography was almost superhuman. It's difficult to estimate how many photographs of flowers Grandaddy Bruce took in his lifetime, but I'd wager the number is close to six figures. Grandaddy Bruce worked long days as a hematology/oncology cancer doctor. But whenever work would allow, he'd slip away into the Smokey Mountains to hunt flowers with his camera. In fact, when his own cancer had worsened, one of his last trips out of the house was into the mountains where he steadied himself on my Nana Shirley's arm and shot his last photos of wildflowers.

I keep a small book of Bruce's photos on my bedside table. But generally speaking, Grandaddy Bruce was more a shooter than a sharer. Bless him. I don't remember many viewing parties. He was also an early adopter of digital photography, which greatly reduced the physical footprint of his wildflower photography. In my earliest memories, Grandaddy Bruce carries a primitive, snapshot digital camera. The only physical photographs he made in my lifetime were the few digital prints that hung on my grandparents' walls. But had I grown up just a couple decades earlier, I might have known a garage full of boxes of Kodachrome slides instead.

I don't have a lot of personal experience to back the claim, but I'm convinced there's something romantic about gathering to look at images, especially physical ones. Whatever thrill the photo album lacks, the projector definitely offers. Kodachrome film democratized and popularized 35mm slide projection. It offered a way of viewing photos unlike the photo album or the framed print. Kodachrome projection was a physical, public experience. Or at least a familial one. Kodachrome's inventors designed the film's palette to cast slightly magenta in order to neutralize the incandescent projector bulb. Projection is what it was all about. So cut the lights, fire up the projector, and everybody grab a seat (willingly or otherwise) on the couch because we're all about to see Grandpa's most recent trip into the mountains–when he found that lone flower in a wild strawberry patch just off the side of the trail–be projected onto the wall.

End of second chapter excerpt



AIDAN AVERY is a photographer and writer currently writing a memoir about resurrecting dead photographic mediums. His photographs have been exhibited nationwide, and he's working on a series that explores the uncanny within performance. Aidan is also an award-winning documentary filmmaker who has worked on projects that have premiered at Sundance.

Life and Breath

Sarah Ruth Bates

We breathe about 12 to 20 times a minute, without having to think. Inhale: and air flows through the mouth and nose, into the trachea. The bronchi stem out like a wishbone, and keep branching, dividing and dividing, and finally feeding out into the tiny air sacs of alveoli. Capillaries – blood vessels thinner than hairs – twine around each alveolus. Both the air sac and the blood vessel are tiny, delicate, one cell thick: portals where blood (the atmosphere of the body) meets air (atmosphere of the world). Oxygen passes from air to blood; carbon dioxide, from blood to air. Then, the exhale pushes that carbon dioxide back out the mouth and nose. Capillaries channel newly oxygenated blood back to the heart. That oxygen fuels the body. That's why we breathe.

Today, these basics of human respiration and metabolism feel obvious – and ventilators, the machines that breathe for sick people, do, too. We have so many medical devices, so of course we'd need, and have, machines that help us to breathe. But there's a strange, and deeply human, story behind how we learned to breathe for each other. It starts long ago, when we didn't understand breathing at all. When the body's failure to breathe was incomprehensible, incurable, and fatal. When we had no way of knowing how badly we needed ventilators to keep people alive through those moments of vulnerability, lest those moments be their last. Medical TV shows have accustomed us to the sight of doctors moving quickly to keep the sickest patients alive – but that link between hurry and success hasn't always existed. Up to 100-odd years ago, for most of human history, when doctors had a dying patient, they rushed to do what they knew, but the patient died anyway. It doesn't matter if you hurry or move slowly if your 'cures' don't work. Ventilation, the linchpin of critical care medicine, changed that. Doctors could save some of the dying. That new technology helped bring medicine from hopes and crossed fingers to saving lives.

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For thousands of years, living people breathed, dead people didn't, and no one knew why. The explanations that passed for medicine during that time sound absurd now. The early Greeks, most notably Homer, believed that humans had two souls – one immortal, in the head, and one mortal, in the chest

– and that a baby's first breath drew in that mortal soul. The last exhale released it. Later Greeks offered more logical, but still inaccurate, theories, grounded in the belief that breathing regulated a literal fire inside the body. Breathing cooled that fire, like a computer's fan. Aristotle wrote that we inhale because the heart's heat expands the lungs, and air from breathing would then reduce 'the excess of the fire'. This focus on body heat isn't so surprising. In those days, and for nearly 2,000 years after, few sources of warmth existed: sunlight, humans, animals, fire.

It is surprising, though, how long it took us to understand breathing. Through much of the 19th century, doctors believed that a lack of stimulation made patients lose consciousness. Methods of attempted resuscitation included rolling patients over barrels, hanging them upside down or cooling them on ice, throwing them onto a trotting horse, flagellation or using the fumigator, in which smoke was blown up the patient's rectum. The list sounds more like hazing for fraternity pledges than medical care.

When did we start getting it right? As usual with scientific progress, there's no one moment of absolute clarity, and moments of partial lucidity were misinterpreted or forgotten over the years. Take Galen, a physician to gladiators in the Roman Empire during the 2nd century CE. He studied anatomy and wrote the first correct depiction of how breathing works. It's a highly accurate description – a journal article notes that 'an up-to-date physiologist … would find nothing to disagree with' – but an unpleasant read, laden with jargon and detailing the dissection of several live pigs.

Galen's key discovery was the physiology – the very mechanism – of breathing. We think of lungs as the body part that breathes. The lungs receive the breath, yes, but they don't *breathe*, the verb, the action. Breathing takes muscle – specifically, the diaphragm, the thin dome of muscle nested at the base of the lungs.

Relaxed, the diaphragm forms two shallow upside-down bowls, one beneath each lung. To cue an inhale, the diaphragm contracts. The upside-down bowls flatten into upside-down plates. The diaphragm takes up less space in the chest cavity, leaving a void, and air rushes into the nose and mouth, filling that space. That expands the lungs, equalising the pressure in the chest. The diaphragm relaxes, the plates rise into bowls, and an exhale follows.

Galen described that system of anatomy accurately – but he also wrote an inaccurate explanation of the heart and the circulation of blood. His colleagues and successors, unfortunately, got things backwards: they canonised his inaccuracies about the heart, and discarded his accurate findings about breathing. Recognising his insights – and his errors – would take a millennium.

The 16th-century Flemish physician Andreas Vesalius corrected Galen's misconceptions about blood circulation by repeating Galen's live pig dissections as well as dissections of human corpses. It was the heyday of cowboy medicine, when researchers such as Vesalius stole bodies and dissected them to learn the ropes. Through such experiments Vesalius, often referenced as a father of anatomy, wrote about a pioneering experiment in the science of mechanical ventilation:

> [A]n opening must be attempted in the trunk of the *arteria aspera*, into which a tube of reed or cane should be put; you will then blow into this, so that the lung may rise again and the animal take in the air … the lung will swell to the full extent of the thoracic cavity, and the heart become strong and exhibit a wondrous variety of motions.

Vesalius had performed the first documented experiment in ventilation, but he didn't know it at the time. Scientists back then still didn't understand that breathing brought fuel into the body, let alone what that fuel, oxygen, did. The discovery of oxygen is a different long story, with its own stuttering progression, simultaneous discoveries and missteps. Their culmination: scientists grasped what oxygen is, and how the body uses it as fuel, in 1774. That knowledge gave doctors the last puzzle piece they needed to understand breathing – both its mechanism and its purpose – and to build machines that supported breathing when it failed.

In those days, breathing was life. We now have the concept of 'brain death': that someone can die of a lack of brain function, while a ventilator keeps the body breathing, animated, approximating life. Back then, though, whatever the cause of death – injury, or sickness, or simply old age – a dead person was a person who no longer breathed. So doctors searched for ways to keep patients breathing. In the 1800s, they finally understood human physiolo-

gy well enough to build machines that could work. They needed only to engineer them.

In 1838, the Scottish physician John Dalziel published an idea: he'd prototyped a machine that could push air in and out, much like the body itself. The patient squatted inside a sealed box, with only the head and neck sticking out. A device Dalziel called a 'piston' – it looked like a bike tyre pump – sucked air out of the box, making a vacuum. Air could get into the box only through the patient's mouth and nose. This was the first *mechanical* negative pressure ventilator, forcing the patient to inhale, just as the diaphragm does in a healthy person's body.

When Dalziel tried his machine on a healthy person, air 'rushed along the air-passages and distended the chest without effort'. Soon, fellow clinicians and inventors were trying to create designs that could keep the sick alive, but each attempt had flaws. One design literally required the sick patients to pump air in and out of the ventilator themselves. Finally, in 1929, a pair of Harvard doctors, Philip Drinker and Louis Agassiz Shaw, built a negative pressure mechanical ventilator that kept sick patients alive: the 'iron lung'. The patient lies inside the machine, with only the head exposed. Early versions required an operator to hand-pump air in and out; the later versions – the ones that still keep patients alive today – are automated. The machines use the same principle as Dalziel's. The nickname 'iron lung' is actually somewhat of a misnomer, because the machine replaces the functioning not of the lung but of the muscles that fill and empty it – but 'the iron diaphragm' doesn't have the same ring.

The machines worked – though far from perfectly. They were expensive, cumbersome and fussy. And, while some hospitals had plenty of iron lungs, others didn't. Doctors needed stockpiles of the machines, now called ventilators, in case of epidemics. They – doctors, hospitals, cities, countries, governments – weren't prepared for emergencies.

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Between August and December 1952, around 3,000 patients in Copenhagen were rushed to hospital. They had a constellation of similar symptoms. Some were sicker than others. The sickest couldn't breathe. There was no cure, and no prevention but the avoidance of the already sick. Doctors struggled to keep patients alive. Almost all of the sickest people died.
The story resounds to an earlier echo of Wuhan in 2019, but the disease in Copenhagen in 1952 was poliomyelitis (polio). Copenhagen had hosted an international conference of polio doctors in 1951. They'd come to learn from each other about the disease. There was so much they didn't know. They didn't know, for example, that many of them carried it.

The conference ended. The polio doctors left. The disease stayed and spread. The next year, sick patients came to the Blegdam Hospital: first some, then many, then too many.

In the first three weeks of what doctors later recognised as an epidemic, 31 patients with breathing and swallowing paralysis came to Blegdam; 27 of them died. It was the largest-ever polio epidemic in Europe to date. Henry Cai Alexander Lassen, the doctor in charge, called the situation a 'state of war'. New patients came in sick, got sicker, died. The doctors grew desperate for any possible cure.

A senior resident, Mogens Bjørneboe, thought he knew someone who could help: the anaesthesiologist Bjørn Ibsen, who arrived at Blegdam on a Monday morning. Lassen and Bjørneboe brought him to the autopsy room, where Ibsen examined a 12-year-old boy who had a high level of carbon dioxide in his blood. Ibsen had read about high levels of carbon dioxide in patients needing ventilation, and remembered a paper on polio patients in Los Angeles kept alive with the technique.

The Copenhagen hospital had a handful of negative pressure ventilators on hand. But the LA study described another sort of ventilation: positive pressure. It's like inflating a balloon. Negative pressure ventilators (the human body, the iron lung) enclose the balloon in an airtight box and suck the air out of the box. Air flows into the mouth of the balloon. With positive pressure, you blow air directly into the balloon.

The practice is used to this day. Anaesthesia medications administered so that patients go under also paralyse the diaphragm. Breathing goes out with consciousness, so doctors keep patients alive through positive pressure ventilation during surgery. They breathe for the patients, while the patients can't breathe for themselves.

Ibsen himself had done this during surgery. First, he

performed a tracheotomy: a slice into the patient's throat, with care not to nick the carotid artery. Then, he slid a tube through the cut, into the patient's windpipe. The other end of the tube either connected to an oxygen tank, or fed out into ambient air. Along the tube, between patient and air supply, was a squeezable rubber ball. Compressing the ball with a fist pushed air into the patient's lungs. Release, and the air moved back out. That was 'hand bagging', a method of ventilation so rudimentary that it's strange to call it a technology.

Ibsen asked for a chance to try the technique on the very sickest polio patients at Blegdam, those who would otherwise die. Despite grave reservations, Lassen picked Vivi, a 12-year-old girl who was almost gone. Vivi's sickness had started with fever, a headache and stiffness in her neck. The day she came to the hospital, doctors asked her to move her hands, maybe make a fist, or just wiggle her fingers. She couldn't. Soon, she gasped with each breath. She had liquid, her own secretions, in her lungs. She wasn't underwater, but she was drowning.

An ear, nose and throat specialist at Blegdam sliced open Vivi's throat and slid a tube into her windpipe. The records don't say who did it, maybe because it didn't go well; Ibsen later said: 'a colleague lost a lot of time during the Tracheotomy. When eventually it came to my turn, I got confronted with bronchospasm and panicking, making the intubation impossible.' As Vivi spasmed and bucked, Ibsen, the anaesthesiologist, administered phenobarbital, a short-term sedative. Vivi collapsed. She stopped moving, stopped breathing.

Blegdam's doctors left the room. Even Bjørneboe. Ibsen stood over Vivi's body, the two of them alone. He had to save this patient. He said later that 'a failure of a demonstration would probably confirm the epidemiologists' belief that the situation was hopeless'. One chance to help Vivi – and then, the hundreds of patients like her.

Ibsen kept working. He suctioned mucus from Vivi's lungs, then pumped the rubber ball, once, twice, three times, four. Each push forced air into her lungs. Her chest and belly lifted, sank, lifted, sank.

The Blegdam doctors walked back in – and got a shock. Vivi was 'warm, dry, and pink'. Remembering the day decades later, Ibsen said: 'That I could save the patient's life with such a simple method was one of the most incredible moments of my life.'

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Why did it work? The accumulated carbon dioxide had caused the patient's organs to fail. Breathing requires not just oxygen entering the lungs with each inhale, but also carbon dioxide exiting with each exhale. Blegdam's iron lung patients weren't exhaling fully, so the carbon dioxide couldn't escape. Doctors tried administering oxygen, but they really needed to find a way to facilitate the exhale of carbon dioxide. Ibsen's positive pressure ventilation did that, where the iron lung couldn't.

Blegdam now needed to ventilate an ever-rising number of polio patients with shortness of breath. Teams of clinicians would need to hand-bag them, day and night, until recovery. Blegdam had a solution, but also too many patients, and not enough hands.

In just a few days, the clinicians made and implemented a plan. Medical students became human 'ventilators', in the same way that NASA's mathematicians were human calculators. Some 1,500 students worked six- to eight-hour shifts, with a 10-minute smoke-break every hour. Students kept the same patient assignments day after day, until their patient either breathed alone, or died.

Students and patients formed close bonds, because their patients stayed conscious. Modern ventilator machines can work through intubation: a tube passing through the patient's mouth. It's less invasive than a tracheotomy. But the body rebels at a tube in the throat, so doctors keep intubated patients unconscious. Blegdam's patients were awake. Students and patients spent days and nights together. Adrenaline faded into monotony, then boredom. Students ventilating children often read to them or played games.

Uffe Kirk, a recent medical school graduate at the time of the epidemic, helped to coordinate the student ventilators. In a letter to another clinician, he recalled:

> The students invented ways to communicate with their patients. Some patients [held] a small stick in their mouths [and] point[ed] at letters on a poster, laboriously spelling what they wanted to say. The student learned to half-guess what the patient would say after only a few letters. The

> student would then say out loud what he or she thought the patient meant, and the patient would then wink in one way if the student had guessed right, and in another way if not. If the student was in no way near the correct answer, the patient could point at the word 'Idiot' written on the poster.

Laughter must have helped them survive.

'The intimate relation made the students very concerned about the wellbeing of their patients,' Kirk wrote. First-year medical students usually encountered patients only through textbooks and lectures. Now, they had their first human patients – and each student, alone, kept their patient alive. 'They were exhilarated at every positive sign but were also very sad when things went downhill.'

Many of the medical students burned out and quit. 'At worst,' Kirk writes, 'the patients died during the night.' In the dark, a student couldn't tell that their patient had died: as Vesalius had shown, a corpse's lungs still fill and empty. The student sat beside the patient all night, compelling their inhales, breathing air mixed with their exhales – sharing air, life, in such proximity – yet the patient could slip, unseen, into death. The sun rose, light spilled into the quiet hospital room, and the student saw that they had spent unknowable time ventilating a body. The student didn't have time to mourn the strange loss. There were always more patients who needed air.

Following the Copenhagen epidemic, another wave of clinicians and engineers designed new ventilators, with positive pressure this time. Some called the machines 'mechanical students'. Those ventilators replaced both student-ventilators and iron lungs in Europe, though they hadn't yet caught on in the United States.

Soon, motion begat motion. Blegdam gathered patients needing ventilation into one area, the first Intensive Care Unit (ICU). Ibsen started sending doctors to ride with medical transportation for critically ill patients, so that they could ventilate them during transport. In the midst of a terrifying epidemic, critical care medicine was born.

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'Inspiration' is a tired word. We overuse it, on refrigerator magnets and those depressing motivational posters on office walls. We forget its origins: it means getting a new urge or idea, yes, but it also meant inhalation. To inhale: to breathe motion into stasis. To animate. Animation is not sufficient for life – in the history of ventilation, so many doctors have ventilated the dead – but it is necessary. All the inventions in the world remain useless until we learn how to use them. In the chaotic muddle, as people fell ill and died, doctors had long had the tools to keep some of those people alive. They needed to animate their systems.

That was the obstacle to care then, but what about now? Ventilators have been automated for decades – but, in anticipating the COVID-19 pandemic, American doctors and ethicists wondered if they should plan for ventilation by hand, if they ran out of machines.

Robert Truog, who directs the Harvard Medical School Center for Bioethics, co-wrote the Massachusetts guidelines on rationing ventilators in April 2020. He and his colleagues considered giving the families of patients removed from ventilators the option to hand-ventilate their sick family member, as students had done with Blegdam's patients nearly 70 years before. The ethicists decided not to offer families that option, says Truog, citing three issues: burdening family members unrealistically; medical complications that would likely result from the efforts of untrained human 'ventilators' and, finally, the likelihood that those patients wouldn't survive anyway. 'It would be cruel to the family to put them in the position of having to squeeze the bag, when in all likelihood the patient wouldn't survive,' he said.

The first two complications applied to Ibsen's efforts at Blegdam, too: it was logistically difficult to muster a large enough group of volunteers to continuously ventilate so many patients, and Blegdam's untrained human 'ventilators' made mistakes.

The third complication did affect Ibsen's work, but he didn't know it, because there wasn't a name for it yet. Truog is referring to the concept of medical futility: moments when doctors decide not to offer certain interventions, because those interventions won't help the patient enough to justify the harms. Futility is the most common ethical dilemma in the modern ICU. The question guiding care becomes not just how to save lives, but when to allow deaths. Not just animating machines, but deciding when to use them, and when not to.

Before physicians understood how people

breathed, they couldn't help people to continue breathing. They tried anyway – and all of their efforts, though well-intended, constituted futile care: interventions not reasonably likely to bring more good than harm. The term 'futility' didn't exist not because the problem didn't yet exist, but because the problem was too big to see. Scientifically sound ventilation methods changed that.

Now, doctors can prolong life – but not always in a condition that patients would choose to live with. We have to ask: what quality of life would we consider worth living? If the best possible medical care can't give a patient a reasonable quality of life, patients and their physicians decide to withdraw or discontinue further treatment. We see it on medical shows – characters say: *Don't keep me on a machine*. They often mean a ventilator. The more advanced and effective the ventilator has become, the more questions of futility arise.

Today's ventilators have progressed so much from their rudimentary origins – 'they're night and day', Truog says, adding that 'they're getting more sophisticated all the time. The more we learn about respiratory failure in patients, the more we realise that different types of respiratory failure require different types of ventilation. The machines deliver an amazing array of ways of giving a breath.' Ventilators can also monitor patients' ever-changing vitals, and automatically adjust to their needs. But, the more sophisticated the ventilator, the more that could go wrong. 'You need to be an expert in order to manage [them],' he says.

Future ventilators will be even more complex. A journal article on the past, present and future of the ventilator declares: 'The key term that will be used to identify future ventilators will be *smart*!' The machine will assess its own performance and might even help to decide whether its use is futile or not.

How much can, or should, the ventilators of the future help doctors make decisions about when to turn off machines? The 'ventilator', once a caring human using arm muscles as proxy for patients' paralysed diaphragms, is now a programmed device – and that programming could some day make decisions of life and death. The machines that have extended life might, in time, help to determine when it ends.

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This Wild Abyss

Kim Bussing

Chapter One
Seven Years Before

Our mother always said that a bad hand was a woman's greatest advantage. The cards would flurry as she dealt them, her own controlled storm, a streak of images gone too fast to remember: one, two, at the top. Three, four at the bottom. And five in the center. X marked the spot. X was the cross Dorothy and I'd draw between each other's eyes in each other's blood to protect from witches, our faces so similar we were each other's reflections.

Before the other Alice died, the women came in reeking of rain. One at a time, their heels pounding mud into the green tile, nighttime sloughing off of fox, wool, vicuna, tweed coats. It was me and Dorothy's job to take wedding rings or car keys as collateral at the kitchen door, to make sure nobody ran. It was Joe's job to take the money, and he also liked to settle the rabbits if the noise made them upset.

The house was kept sloshed in darkness. It was the big house, and we were forbidden from doing anything in there but caretaking, but it wouldn't do to read these women's fortunes in the cabin, our mother explained. And because she said it, it made sense. Only once did we break something, and when I tried to slip the shards into my pockets, Dorothy made me dig a hole outside to bury them. The broken pieces could be haunted, she whispered, glancing over her shoulder, and we cut off a lock of our hair to bury, too, just in case.

The woman came, and my mother dredged up their fears, their losses, their terrors. She knitted tapestries crueler than most other fates, but this was good, she promised, as she flipped over the cards: fools and lovers and hermits and empresses. Everything was a symptom of the worst yet to come. The women liked it, at the end. It confirmed something for them. *This is your fortune,* my mother would say as they shivered and wept and anguished. *Now, defy it.*

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But that winter crawled up with claws, and my mother was not interested in her own bad hand. Snow fell in tiny, sharp, miserly flakes that turned to ice, and mornings sheathed everything in frost. Our mother anticipated roads closed early and barren as bellies, the card readings canceled, the only laughter the clattering of the rats that were brazen enough to roost beside the fire when Joe got it going.

But none of it mattered much, because Mrs.

Goodfellow was back. She never stayed at the big house in the winter, but here she was, and the card readings would have been killed anyways. My mother suckled at the looming cold like at a bone glistening with fat, and she grew temperamental, snapping at us with the kitchen towel, sometimes the frying pan.

Most days, I sat by the window, pretending to sew, usually stabbing the fleshy part of my thumb and worrying the holes in the wool. Even when it was cold, I cracked the pane open to smell the minty bitterness of the woods. I waited for Dorothy, to see her rust-colored cloak wind its way through the pines back from the big house.

I would bundle the twins in flannel and hats, tottle them out to greet her, but she would disintegrate inside, rubbing her knuckles with pig fat like our mother, sigh like she had grown in ways I couldn't imagine, crack her toes by the fire, if Joe had remembered to get firewood. Our mother's bad leg had gotten badder, and Dorothy had taken over tending to the big house.

I had tried to help Dorothy, but she had banned me. The last time, I had broken a vase and left fingerprints on the piano and stolen a dried hyacinth from the dead girl's bedroom, which I thought no one would notice.

The big house had thieved Dorothy of her laughter and brightness. She carried fatigue with her, smelled rancid with the vinegar used on the tile, and like hay, from the rabbits. All she would tolerate was for me to sit behind her, drag a brush through her thick tousle of red hair, like our mother's, like mine. Shine it to smoothness, weave it into a braid.

"Tell me a story," I whispered into her ear, a sort of prayer. Beneath the day, she smelled like baby powder and sweat. "Tell me if you saw the ghost," I begged.

In the big house, the other Alice had died last year. We hadn't seen Alice Goodfellow very much before. She only came for the summers, and she had died fast and tragically in a room that overlooked the rose gardens our mother pruned, and we spent the fall months sneaking through the halls, convinced she was there. And we did hear footsteps when ours were still. We did smell roses outside the rabbit room. We did hear chords stumble down the piano when we were in the kitchen.

"There are no such things as ghosts, Alice," Dorothy said disdainfully. She peeled off her stockings, began kneading the center of her foot. The skin of her hands was raw and cracking. Her eyes were punched purple and exhausted. She looked age close to her coffin.

Dorothy was my twin, but it was like she was working to unspool us like socks. Like the parts that I thought made us us were just that easily made into ghosts, too.

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I checked squirrel bones simmering on the stove, skimming off a layer of fat. Our mother reclined in her chair with a cold cloth over her eyes. She stayed up late, returned with morning headaches, and when wrestling with the worst of those, kept the curtains closed until mid-afternoon and hissed if any of us moved too loudly or too swiftly. It was a small cabin, only two rooms, and our mother filled up all of it.

Joe walked into the cabin on light footsteps; I didn't notice him until the gun's muzzle nudged my hip like a dog's nose. He had gotten stranger, going off and wandering and returning at odd hours. He was a scavenger of lost things, vanishing sometimes for days at a time and reappearing with nothing ever useful.

A cigarette dangled damply from the corner of his mouth, snow melting in his hair. Grease was smeared across his forehead, and there was a strange smell coming from him.

The oldest of us at sixteen, he was rangy, handsomeness skirting him and leaving him with a mouth that was a little too big and his teeth jumbled within it, as though they'd been punched out and put back in wrong. His nose was bent at an odd angle because it had been broken once or twice.

Catching my eye, Joe held up the gun, squinting down the barrel with one eye closed, pointing at our mother.

"Bang, bang," he whispered. I snorted, and our mother peeled the cloth off her brow, yawning.

"You can't bring that inside." Her hair was braided on top of her head like a crown or a crow's nest. In it, she tucked pre-rolled cigarettes that she made thin. When we were younger, Dorothy had convinced me they were skeleton fingers that she had ripped off herself. "You just encourage him, Alice. You only make it worse."

Nothing I did could please her. And maybe this was part of the reason that Dorothy wanted to get away from me, like our mother's disapproval was proof of a curse.

Our mother sloshed her feet in a tray of water. Her bunions had been acting up, and now she removed them and dried them with a towel, and began kneading pig fat into the joints.

The twins, at the sight of Joe and the gun, began to fuss. He stank like cordite, and they could smell him.

"I was going to take Al out hunting," he said.

“Really?” I asked. Joe rarely showed any interest in spending time with us; sometimes I forgot he lived here.

“No,” my mother said. “I don’t think so.” She was wearing a bathrobe and under that a man’s sweater. Once she had hunted. She had had to teach Joe how to hold a gun.

But with Joe some allegiance, a new bond that could be forged. “I’ll catch something.” Wanting to impress her was a physical ache.

“You will?” Her words slithered. “Is that a promise?”

I ignored her, dashing to put on boots and the closest jacket I could find. Joe didn’t wait for me, and I hurried after him. The air was rimed with frost, steeping everything in gray.

Joe and I tramped through the woods. Some of the aspens were stripped of their bark; when we were outside and hungry, we would gnaw on it. We had a taste for bitterness; we were children of these trees, and felt protected by them.

Joe carried the rifle slung over his shoulders and whistled. There was something about the foreshadowing of winter that maddened us, and we laughed and told jokes and weren’t bothered that we were warning away the squirrels. After a while, we reached a clearing where we often saw owls, but it was empty. The animals were used to us, but they weren’t stupid, and so our loudness meant there was nothing to hunt.

“Can we practice?” I asked.

Joe nodded, removed a bottle from an inside pocket of his jacket. He cracked it open against a tree trunk and it fizzed.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Beer.”

“Where’d you get it?”

“The big house.”

I glared at him. “You’re not supposed to take from the big house.”

“You gonna tell on me?”

I bounced from the ball of my feet to my heels and back. “Nah,” I said after a while.

We knew of Prohibition in the way we knew of God. That it was something that other people practiced.

He gave it to me, and I sniffed it, taking a small sip and gagging. I spat it out.

“That’s gross.”

“You’ve got your spit all over it now, Alice.”

He wiped the lip with his sleeve, downed it quickly, and lined up the empty bottle against the tree trunk.

“Here, Al? See?” He propped the gun against his armpit, stared down the barrel, fired. The bottle stood tall. I snorted, and Joe glared. He passed the gun to me. “I didn’t hit it on purpose,” he groused. “So you’d have something to aim at.”

Its weight shocked me, and I stumbled, its nose dragging against the damp ground.

“Jesus. You can’t even hold it. Give it back.”

“No.” I tightened my grip, inhaled sharply, and righted it, contorting my body so the butt lodged between my armpit and chest. “Now what?”

Joe huffed, torn between being annoyed at me and wanting to show off what he knew.

“First, well — you’re standing wrong,” he said. “And your hands are — what are you doing with your hands?”

Joe was enjoying this, picking on me, and frustration spat within me. I looked down the barrel and fired, the recoil rattling my bones. I yelped, the gun falling to the ground. Joe swore, and lunged, inspecting it. He lined it up, aiming at the beer bottle. Again, he missed.

“What’d you do?” He jiggled the gun.

“Me?” I was searching the distant woods, wondering where bullets went when they didn’t strike anything you could hear.

“I *said*, what’d you *do*, Al? It’s not shooting right no more.”

“I didn’t do anything.” I glared at him. “Maybe it’s your fault. Don’t *point* it at me!”

In looking for its new defection, Joe had angled the muzzle at my chest. Frowning, he spun it back around, rammed it against his shoulder again, fired. He swore. I memorized the words, tucking them underneath my tongue.

He spat on the ground. “Well, you’ve gone and ruined it. This is why girls shouldn’t do things like this.”

“Not like you’re any better,” I argued. “Not like you get anything.”

Joe turned on his heel and dragging the gun behind him, the end of the rifle carving a thin scar across the path.

“Where’re you going?”

“None of your business, Al.”

Lately, he had taken to disappearing into wherever people went who were on the brink of becoming older but childhood still nippes at their ankles. He might as well have carved doors from the air and stepped through them.

“Can I come?” I tagged after him as he sauntered towards the main house, towards the iron gate that reared up before it and beyond that, the road. And out. I’d never been out. It was hard to fathom an out.

“Knock it off, will ya, Alice? Just leave it.”

"*Please*," I pleaded. "Please let me come, Joe."

I glanced back at the cabin. It looked so small. The forest wound around it, almost erasing it. I wanted to see what else a night might hold besides it.

"Jesus God, stop being such a damned pest, Ali." He stopped short, and thrust the gun into my arms. Its heaviness surprised me again and I stumbled, my toe catching on a rock. I hit the ground, and Joe's face twisted. He held out a hand, helped me up, brushed off my knees.

"Joe —" I began, but he was striding off again, his shoulders thrown back, his pace rapid.

"*Joe!"* I yelled, and it became unbearable, the thought of being lost and left behind.

The weight of the gun made my arms ache, and I half-cradled it. I followed the gravel back to the cabin, but when I tugged on the door, it wouldn't open. I crept around to the windows, propped the gun against the wall, hammered on the door with the side of my fist.

"It's Alice," I whispered through the crack. "It's freezing."

The window above the sink squeaked open, framing our mother. She sipped from a mug.

"And what have you brought back?" she asked.

"What?"

From within the house, one of the twins fussed.

"As I recall, you're old enough to catch something with your brother."

I jammed my fingers in my armpits. They were prickling with cold, and the tip of the middle one was going white. "We didn't get anything."

"Well." Our mother arched an eyebrow. "I can wait."

She drew back. The window closed and locked. The wind whistled and scraped against me. I had only grabbed a felt jacket, and it was light as a wish.

I kicked the door, managing only to make my toes throb. I had seen this face of our mother's before. She tipped past a point, and she was far away from us.

"Let me in!" I cried, slapping at the wood. "*Dory!"*

The window squeaked open. Dorothy, her hair braided and wrapped at the ends with cotton strips, picked at her lip.

"She says to get something." Her picking intensified. "To bring something back for dinner."

I stared at her. It was after dinner. It was freezing. If I couldn't get something with Joe, then it should have been clear that I couldn't get something alone.

"Just let me in," I pleaded. My fingers were growing numb with cold. And this was Dorothy. We did everything together. We were the shadow that followed the other's footsteps. We were, our mother had once said, two pianos played so in unison, you couldn't tell there was more than one of us. But that was becoming a long time ago.

Dorothy leaned forward a bit. Her eyes were puffy, and she smelled like milk.

"Do it," she whispered, almost begged, and the window closed. I blinked at it. I waited for her to come back. But if I was her shadow, she was trying to slash me away with scimitars and talons. No matter how much I yearned for her, how much I tried to burr to her, she was working to make us strangers.

I sniffed at the closed window. I wouldn't cry. Just months before, we had hunted vampires in the woods and looked for the witch who lived in a hollowed-out tree. We had stolen one of our mother's hairbrushes, to trade to the witch for a spell that would make us live forever.

The wind rattled me. I could die out here, in the cold.

I hoped I'd die, to spite them.

For a few minutes, I crouched by the door, shivering. My boots were too small, and my toes scrunched at the front, a few of them numbing. I was furious and frustrated because that was what I knew how to be, and I didn't want fear — fear meant there was something to be frightened of.

But soon the cold became impossible. No amount of defiance could get me to stay out there, and with the gun cradled in my arms like one of the twins, I hurried through the woods, until the path turned from packed dirt and pine needles to flagstone, and the big house slipped itself out of the trees.

I scrounged up the key my mother and Dorothy kept under the rock, entered softly, not knowing if ghosts watched out windows to see you coming. It was strange being in here all alone, and it wasn't much warmer. The shadows seethed and made the rooms too big.

I wandered. There was no smell of roses, no sound of footsteps or piano chords. Maybe Dorothy was right. Maybe there weren't such things as ghosts. The thought didn't make me feel better. I wanted the dead clamoring around me, leaving hints and traces, a maze of their once existence. I didn't want vanishing.

The only disturbance was the huff from the rabbit room. Dorothy and I usually avoided it. They had been for other Alice, before she was dead and when she was just sick. Her mother had gotten her one, and then two, to bribe her into getting better.

I inched the door open. I had never been allowed to see them before, not up close. Not close enough to pet them. I was strung with anger and loneliness and defiance. There were ten, at least, and they un-

nerved me; they paused, quivering, to stare. The smell of them was strong.

"Hello," I whispered. I held out my hand for them to sniff. One ventured close. It was large and white with black legs. Its nose twitched against my fingers. I stroked the space between its ears, digging into the soft fur, marveling, wanting to give it a name but nothing seemed right.

The house creaked. I froze. My blood pounded in my ears, so loudly and amid that loudness, something like the cascade of piano keys, poorly played. And maybe. Maybe a giggle.

I shivered. I glanced around at the rabbits. Most were resting, looking bored, but a few were erect, their ears twitching, like they could hear it, too. I knew it. I had known it, and I was right, but a lime wedged in my throat. Ghosts were more fun with Dorothy. Alone, fear was so bright it blinded, so scalding it took a moment to remember how to move, and when I moved, I grabbed the rabbit because it was warm and I was cold, because it was solid and the world seized, and I stuffed it under my arm and took off across the house, dashing across the ground lopsidedly, the gun's nose leaving a silvery trail in the grass.

The rabbit squealed and muttered, kicking at the air, but then grew silent. I didn't look back. Ghosts, I lied to myself, stayed where they were. They did not pursue. And that way, I didn't have to be scared.

"I got a rabbit!" I hollered when I reached the cabin, pausing, breathing heavily, gripping the rabbit tighter for its warmth.

The door opened. Our mother came out with a cigarette. She wore a pair of large rubber boots and mittens, like she'd been prepared for my return, maybe like she was preparing to go out and look for me.

"What is that?" She coughed into her palm.

"A rabbit."

"It's alive."

I looked at it. Of course it was.

The rabbit had started to tremble, and I stroked its head, which didn't make a difference.

My mother watched this change descend over me, and her eyes narrowed.

"What good's a live rabbit supposed to do us, Alice?"

"We can keep it. A pet." We had never had one.

"Another mouth to feed."

"Then it can live in the woods."

"Do you know what happens to rabbits like that in the woods?" She coughed again, drawing the blanket tighter at her throat.

"We can keep it," I said. I tightened my grip around it, and it squirmed.

My mother kept her gaze leveled on me. She reached into her pocket, took out a knife first, and then took the rabbit. In the light of the windows, its ears dimly glowed pink.

Suddenly I understood what I had brought back, what was supposed to happen, and I couldn't understand how I had gotten this so wrong.

She held it within the crook of her arm. It twitched a back leg and then stilled.

My mother walked into the yard and after a moment I joined her. I felt electric, full of bad dreams. She shook a cigarette loose from somewhere within her folds of fabric, clamped it between her teeth.

The cold made my nose run. I wiped it on my sleeve.

What happened, happened fast. Our mother raised the knife and the rabbit's foot was no longer connected and darkness oiled across the log and the rabbit screamed. Something in me wanted to scream, too, but I knew I couldn't, that this was a moment that mattered.

"Look down the barrel," our mother instructed, holding out her cigarette like a rifle. "Careful. Don't shoot me."

I steadied the rifle against my armpit. I didn't know why it had to be a moment like this. I wished I was like the dead girl, with her wallpaper of pink tulips, her big house.

"Move it to the right," our mother said. "Not on your collarbone."

I moved it and stared down the barrel and couldn't see anything but the nicked wood. I couldn't hear anything. My mouth had gone so dry it was hard to swallow.

I fired, and our mother swore. "Jesus," she said. "You're as bad a shot as him, aren't you?"

I tried to shoot again, but my finger slipped off the trigger.

"Shoot. Goddamnit, girl." Our mother had blanched slightly, looked as though she regretted it, wished, too, that we could stumble back into the minutes before this happened.

Snot swung down my chin. My vision was smeared by tears.

"Alice," our mother spat. "You're *torturing* it."

I fired. Smoke unfurled from my mother's mouth. The rabbit went silent. I had discovered something in myself, and I wanted to go back and never know it.

Dorothy stepped out of the cabin.

"What's going on?" She demanded, but when she saw the rabbit, she gagged, pressing the back of her wrist over her mouth.

Our mother put an arm around me. Relief clogged me. I could smell our mother's sweat and her hair, and my fingers hurt, half-frozen from the cold in the

shape it took to hold the gun.

But that night, we ate. My mother sent me and Dorothy inside to unscrew a tin of beans, heat them until they sizzled on the stove while she dealt with the rabbit. She returned and tossed dark things into the pan. Dorothy retreated to the fire, swishing and scowling at the rats. The twins sucked on pinecones; Joe was absent, entangled within the woods. My mother sat a plate in front of me, her head bent low over mine. Her lips were cracked; she smelled sour.

"You fed them," she whispered. "You did a good thing."

I ate all of it, dizzied by what had happened, the buttery sweetness slipping around my tongue, wondering what happened when you consumed a heart you'd taken, if it made your own bigger or made it vanish entirely.

When it was done, I wished for more.

End of Chapter One

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First Time With (Missed) Opportunities To Escape

Moisés Delgado

You are slouching. You keep looking out the glass door, out into the backyard, out at the bright midnight moon. Your teeth want to chatter. Your stomach is gurgling. Your palms are on your lap. Your knees are touching. Your right foot is shaking. All your clothes are on your body.

Before continuing, some rules:

For the duration of the game, you are me, you are Moisés.

You cannot escape until the game allows you to.

This game is broken up into ***opportunities for escape*** and un/successful escapes.

This is a game of anxiety / overthinking / irrationality / chance.

Player, grab a twelve-sided die and pray luck is on your side. Be gentle to us. Roll for our fate.

He doesn't understand why you are nervous. ***[Roll a D12 to escape. If you roll a 12, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [1]]*** Well, he does, he was the same, nervous, sort of, kind of, not really, the first time he was with a guy. Except that his first was a boyfriend, so, he says, it was different, there was more on

the line, but you came over to cuddle. Just cuddle. ***[Roll a D12 to escape. If you roll a 12, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [1]]*** Though, to be honest, it's kind of cute, he says, the way you shake. He is undressing you in his mind. ***[Roll a D12 to escape. If you roll a 12, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [1]]***

[1] [***If you didn't roll a 12*** for any of the above opportunities to escape, jump to the next unbracketed paragraph. You have not escaped. ***If you rolled a 12***: you stay home. You listen to your body—you let it imagine how nervous it would be, and you decide to be kind to yourself. Someday you'd like to go out with a guy, but when it happens, it will be better planned out. It will not be midnight. You will not do it after having only talked for an hour. You will go out because you want to. You will go out because you feel ready, and not because you feel like you need to prove something. You escaped.]

The basement is dark. His parents and siblings are asleep upstairs. ***[Roll a D12 to escape. If you roll a 12, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [2]]*** This is his space at night, no one will walk down, but anyway, he says, why are you so nervous? ***[Roll a D12 to escape. If you roll a 12, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [2]]*** Your therapist said it is generalized anxiety disorder. You are nervous, you tell him. Nervous all the time. Your hands shake, and your hands are cold. ***[Roll a D12 to escape. If you roll a 12, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [2]]*** He takes your hands to warm them, and you don't think you like it, but you let him anyway. ***[Roll a D12 to escape. If you roll a 12, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [2]]***

[2] [***If you didn't roll a 12*** for any of the above opportunities to escape, jump to the next unbracketed paragraph. You have not escaped. ***If you rolled a 12***: you come to your senses. You told the guy no over and over on Grindr. Then no again after you blocked him on Grindr, and he messaged you on Scruff. *No* because you had only talked for an hour, and you hardly knew what he looked like. He did not want to send pictures. *No* because you've never done this before. You've only recently accepted that you are gay. Only recently accepted that you'd like to one day date a man, but you want to take things slow. *No* because it's late. Your mom doesn't like when you are out of the house past midnight, and yes, you are twenty-two, but you still live with your parents, so you respect their wishes. *No* because you had said no. *No* because you don't want to cuddle. But he insisted. You're a grown adult, you can do whatever you want, he said. How are you going to be more comfortable seeing guys if you won't agree to see a guy? It's summer, he said. You don't need to be up early. Be a man. He's only nineteen and he's braver than you. Be a man and come over, so you lied to your mom saying you were afraid of what a friend might do. You pulled the depression card. You made your mom feel guilty. If she wouldn't let you be there for your friend during a low moment, then why should you have any hope that your mom will be there for you? You'll have to apologize to your mom for that one day.

For now, you stand up. You have nothing to prove. You listen to your nervous body, and you walk it out to your car, ignoring the guy calling you dramatic. You're not dramatic, you tell your body. You are afraid. You aren't ready for this. You apologize to your body, and you drive home. You escaped.]

It's cold outside, he says. It's colder in here because of the a/c. ***[Roll a D12 to escape. If you roll a 12, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [3]]*** He says your hands are soft, which is cute. You say, yes, it's a cold night, and it's cold in here, but you're nervous, so your hands are cold. ***[Roll a D12 to escape. If you roll a 12, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [3]]*** You're just being dramatic, he says, but you're fun to talk to, so it's okay. Most guys on Grindr don't know how to talk, but you do. You're funny. ***[Roll a D12 to escape. If you roll a 12, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [3]]*** You're not trying to be funny, you say. You are being serious. ***[Roll a D12 to escape. If you roll a 12, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [3]]*** He says he doesn't believe in therapy. ***[Roll a D12 to escape. If you roll a 12, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [3]]*** He lies on his back on the couch, slips a hand into his boxer shorts, scratches himself. ***[Roll a D12 to escape. If you roll a 12, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [3]]*** Like, he says, if you want to feel better, you can feel better. It's what he did, he says. He used to be depressed, but he got over it. ***[Roll a D12 to escape. If you roll a 12, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [3]]***

[3] [***If you didn't roll a 12*** for any of the above opportunities to escape, jump to the next unbracketed paragraph. You have not escaped. ***If you rolled a 12***: you stand and tell him he can go to Hell. Not for being gay, but for being an asshole. You have enough trouble believing yourself when it comes to your anxiety—you don't need no piece of shit to corner you into that hole again. You now understand why he is single. He's a self-centered, inconsiderate, manipulative, white man drowning in privilege. You let him sneak a worm into your head, but you're not letting that worm eat further into your brain. You *are* a man, you say. You *can* make decisions for yourself. So as the man he said you wouldn't be if you didn't show up to his place, you are leaving. And one more thing, you say as you walk out, don't forget your sunscreen in Hell. Those pasty little balls you keep scratching will burn right off. You escaped.]

He says, you know you can get comfortable. Take off your shoes. Take off your hoodie. ***[Roll a D12 to escape. If you roll a 12, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [4]]*** He's bigger and taller than you. Some weight to him, more than his profile suggested. A bear in the gay world. And you are shorter, slim-ish, mostly hairless other than for the beard, which he loves, he says. You are somewhere between a twink and an otter, maybe. Though you're not skinny enough to be just a twink, and you're not hairy enough to be an otter, so you're not too sure what you are in the gay world. He can't tell either. He would have to see more, he says. ***[Roll a D12 to escape. If you roll a 12, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [4]]***

[4] [***If you didn't roll a 12*** for any of the above opportunities to escape, jump to the next unbracketed paragraph. You have not escaped. ***If you rolled a 12***: you tighten your shoelaces, pull your socks up as high as they'll go, zip your hoodie all the way up, and put on your hood. You imagine that in his mind you walked in naked. His boxer shorts are tightening. You grab your car keys. You put on your gloves. You don't feel comfortable with him. You don't like the way he is making you feel small by denying all your nervousness. *Only small thing tonight,* you say, *is that tent you're pitching.* You walk out and tell him he can jack off to the rev of your car driving away. On the drive home, your body is numb, but you're on the phone with Eneris, and the both of you can't stop laughing at what you said. Maybe a bit too harsh, but it got you out of there. You escaped.]

You've never been with a guy? No kiss? No blowjobs? No boyfriend? Really? And you're twenty-two? But you're so hot, he says. And you're a virgin? ***[Roll a D12 to escape. If you roll a 12, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [5]]*** Never been with a girl either? When did you come out? You haven't, you tell him. A couple close friends know, but you're still down low. Your family doesn't know? They don't. He says he doesn't know why anyone is afraid to come out. ***[Roll a D12 to escape. If you roll a 12, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [5]]*** You tell him he's lucky to have always felt comfortable, and he says it's easy. ***[Roll a D12 to escape. If you roll a 12, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [5]]*** He says there's nothing to be afraid of. ***[Roll a D12 to escape. If you roll a 12, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [5]]*** He says being closeted is dumb. ***[Roll a D12 to escape. If you roll a 12, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [5]]*** He says you're a drama queen. ***[Roll a D12 to escape. If you roll a 12, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [5]]***

[5] [***If you didn't roll a 12*** for any of the above opportunities to escape, jump to the next unbracketed paragraph. You have not escaped. ***If you rolled a 12***: you've never even flirted with a guy in person, and tonight won't be the night. Not with him. Not with a guy who can't see how interlaced he is with privilege. He is a white man living in a very white neighborhood in a very white part of Omaha. Everyone in this neighborhood has money. Your used car out on the street might as well be surrounded by torches because it is no secret to anyone in this neighborhood that it doesn't belong. The last person you need to tell you how to feel is a white man. Good for him for not being afraid to be out, but his privileged white experience isn't universal. Sorry to pop your bubble. But of course, he doesn't understand what you're saying. Of course, he thinks you're still being dramatic. Here's a chance for drama, you tell him, if you're still horny, go upstairs and fuck the chicken your mom is making for dinner tomorrow. Give it some spice because God knows she won't be seasoning that shit. You walk out acting brave, but you can't feel your legs. You probably said too much, but you escaped.]

He says, come here. He wants to hug you. You don't know if you want to, but you walk over and lie next to

him. He says he'll warm you up. He says you smell good. He says you've teased him long enough. He knows he invited you to cuddle, but can he kiss you? You don't think you want him to, but you say yes. ***[Roll a D12 to escape. If you roll a 12, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [6]]***

> [6] [***If you didn't roll a 12*** for any of the above opportunities to escape, jump to the next unbracketed paragraph. You have not escaped. ***If you rolled a 12***: you plummet off the couch before his lips can touch yours. A shoe and maybe a cat's paw digs into your shoulder, but you stand and dust yourself off and run out of there. You don't know if love is real. You don't know if you'll ever find your one. You don't know if the next time someone asks to kiss you, you'll enjoy it, but you know this one is not it. You don't want him to take that from you. You don't want to be here. Not with him. You repeat that in your head over and over. Not him. Not him. Not him. It's not that you think being gay is a sin. You want to tell yourself it's not a sin. You don't want to think about the Devil. It was this one guy. It's not because you felt the Devil breathing in your throat. It's not because you are going to Hell. You drive home and ignore the Devil cackling behind every tree, streetlight, and cement barrier you could drive straight into. You barely escaped.]

He is the first person you ever kiss, and he kisses you aggressively. ***[Roll a D12 to escape. If you roll a 12, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [7]]*** It is slimy ***[Roll a D12 to escape. If you roll a 12, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [7]]***, too much tongue ***[Roll a D12 to escape. If you roll a 12, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [7]]***, too much pressing his lips into yours. ***[Roll a D12 to escape. If you roll a 12, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [7]]***

> [7] [***If you didn't roll a 12*** for any of the above opportunities to escape, jump to the next unbracketed paragraph. You have not escaped. ***If you rolled a 12***: you run out of the house, run to your car, and keep running until you trip, scrape your hands, and barf in some random person's front yard. You didn't want to kiss him, but you let him kiss you because you fooled yourself into thinking he meant it when he said he only wanted to cuddle. To think that he may have wanted more. Once back in your car, you grab napkins out of the glove box and scrape your lips until you draw blood. You escaped?]

He tells you to stand up, so you do. ***[Roll a D12 to*** [redacted] ***]***. He tells you to take off your hoodie and shirt, so you do. ***[Roll*** [redacted] ***]*** He tells you to take off your shoes, then your pants, so you do. ***[*** [redacted] ***]*** He tells you to take off your briefs ***[Roll two D12s to escape. If you roll a 24, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [8]]***,

> [8] [***If you didn't roll a 24***, jump to the next unbracketed paragraph. You have not escaped. ***If you***

rolled a 24: you trip out of his house in your briefs. It is freezing, goosebumps are riding up your arms, into your chest, stomach, and thighs, but you can't feel the cold because your entire body is screaming. Because you don't feel like yourself. Because your body is moving, and you are watching. Your body is clumsily dressing itself as it crashes into your car. Your shirt is inside out. Your socks are in your pockets. Your car is swerving as you drive without direction. Not home. Not yet. Your right hand is picking at your left forearm. Blood is rising from between your fingertips as you pick and pick and pick at your skin. All you can think of is everything you can drive your car into at 100 mph. All you can think of is the way his hands wanted to touch your body, and you think of your body—all its signs you ignored. You escaped?]

so you do ***[Roll two D12s to escape. If you roll a 24, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [9]]***, you take off your briefs and you are soft ***[Roll two D12s to escape. If you roll a 24, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [9]]***, but he says he can help with that. ***[Roll two D12s to escape. If you roll a 24, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [9]]*** You don't think you want him to ***[Roll two D12s to escape. If you roll a 24, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [9]]***, but you let him. ***[Roll two D12s to escape. If you roll a 24, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [9]]*** He takes you into his mouth ***[Roll two D12s to escape. If you roll a 24, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [9]]***, and he tries ***[Roll two D12s to*** [redacted] ***]***, and you tell him sorry ***[Roll*** [redacted] ***]***, you guess you're too nervous to get a boner. *[* [redacted] *]*

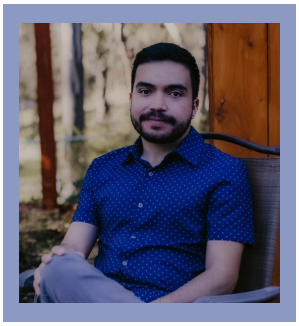
[9] [***If you didn't roll a 24*** for any of the above opportunities to escape, jump to the next unbracketed paragraph. You have not escaped. ***If you rolled a 24***: you shatter out of that house and run past house after house until you feel far enough, then you keep running until you find a house with a water hose. You dig up clumps of grass and lather your body with it. You know you must look insane. You hope everyone is asleep because there you are below the moon: naked, rubbing dirt, pebbles, and bugs onto your every inch of skin. You don't know what else to do. All you're thinking is how you want to lose control. Your body sent its warnings, your thoughts weren't in the right place, and yet you stayed and let that guy see and touch parts of you that you weren't ready to share. It's your fault, you could have left, but you can't accept it. You want to blame a spirit. You want to blame God. You are dressing your body in mud because maybe a Devil will listen. Call this a home remedy. Call this erasure. Call this anything you want—it won't change what happened. You escaped?]

He says it is your turn. He pulls down his boxers, waves his dick at you, and you don't think you want to ***[Roll three D12s to escape. If you roll a 36, jump down to the bracketed paragraph labeled: [10]]***,

[10] [***If you didn't roll a 36***, jump to the next unbracketed paragraph. You have not escaped. ***If you rolled a 36***: you don't think you want to, but you do. You have not escaped. Jump to the next next unbracketed paragraph.]

but you do it anyway. *[* [redacted] ***You didn't escape. Read the bracketed text below: [11]]***

[11] [You take him into your mouth. He moans the way you imagine you he wanted you to moan, but your body is shivering. Your body is hardly present. You sit off to the side, making yourself small again. Slouching, your knees touching, your hands hiding your dick. He wants you to watch, he says. You sit, shiver, and pretend to watch. There is no rush in leaving anymore. Your teeth are chattering. He is jacking off, looking you up and down, thinking of future positions he could have you in because, you don't yet know this, but he will message you again. You'll block him, and he'll make a new account to message you again. And then he'll do it again. And then he'll do it again. And then he'll do it again until he blocks you because you annoy him, he'll say. All your shit about not having wanted to do anything with him won't make sense to him. He won't understand why you feel gross about the entire experience. Of course, he won't remember all the times you said no before you gave up and drove over. You drove to his place, after all, he'll say, and it's true. You drove here. You stayed. He'll say you are the same drama queen that walked into his place. He'll tell you to get over it. But for now, he's groaning and cumming on his stomach, and all you're thinking of is how you are going to get in your car and punch your arm until it is as blue-black as the night. And maybe you'll go to Walmart to buy some razor blades. You will press them into your forearm. You will make yourself bleed because like always you will want to lose control. It wasn't you, you will tell yourself, it was all your body's doing, it was the Devil. You lost. Game over.]



MOISÉS R. DELGADO is a Latinx writer from the Midwest. His prose appears in Gulf Coast, SmokeLong Quarterly, Puerto del Sol, Passages North, Split Lip, and elsewhere. Moisés' favorite form of escape is eating anything sweet.

Beneath The Oil Rivers

Lucia Edafioka

Chapter One
Ebbing Tides, Flying Boys

On the day his life swerved off the neat, well-trimmed path he'd carved out for himself, Isio left home early long before the sun rose when all that could be seen in the blue-black sky was a dim moon. He was going to the British Consulate to defend his father, Governor Erewa of the Oil Rivers, who the British Consul had accused of "savagely murdering" six farmers in the hinterlands.

Isio went out of the family compound through the bamboo gates into the farm and came out to the path that led to the river. He took with him his father's flag — a white cotton fabric adorned with a leopard's head (the family's totem) and E R E W A written in thick bold letters — rolled under his armpit.

It was an unusually quiet morning: no croaking, hissing, buzzing came from within the tall bushes on either sides of the path. Even the ever-flickering fireflies were absent. Isio, fixated on what he'd say to the consul, didn't hear the still silence around him.

"If you fail to convince him," his father told him last night, "the consul could put a chain on you and lock you up. Do you understand?" Isio did not respond to his father; he understood well the implication and what it would cost his family, cost him. He was unable to sleep after he spoke to his father. He spent the night perfecting how he'd address the consul — every word, every gesture. Each time he thought he'd gotten it right, his mind would dart about flashing images of what could go wrong: the consul turning him away, arresting him, his father being forced to stand trial in the white man's court. What a disgrace that would bring to his family, to him. It was well past midnight before Isio's mind finally settled into sleep. And when he did, he slipped into a recurring childhood dream. In it, he was nine years old, barefooted, running along the path toward the river. The ground was soft, clumps of soil seeped into the spaces between his toes. As he ran, he jumped. When he jumped, he flew, dashing from tree to tree. There were people inside the bush, laughing and singing the old songs. He flew up a palm tree and beneath it was a shiny river calling out to him. He dove, and the river rose to embrace him. He woke up then, heart pounding, veins pulsing, and it was time to go to the consulate.

At the river, he met two of his father's slave

boys, Olli One and Olli Two, by the three-man paddler canoe they would travel in, tied to a lean guava tree, swaying gently on the dark river. Two cases of dry gin were stacked under the tree. The Ollis acknowledged Isio's presence with a nod, and then they began loading the gin into the canoe. Once done, all three climbed in, grabbed a pair of paddles and they began to row; the only sound that could be heard for miles was the swish, swish, swish of their paddles swiping through the dark waters.

A gentle sun was peeking out from the horizon when they arrived at the shores of the consulate. Isio flapped out the flag and tied it around his neck like a cape. Olli One went ahead, carrying the gin cases. Olli Two rowed the canoe to a discreet corner of the river. The consulate rose in front of Isio, exactly like his father had described it: a small bungalow with thick walls, rusty zinc roof, surrounded by a low wall of Ixora flowers; a blue, red and white flag stamped with a sad looking elephant hung on a long pole behind the flower wall; the windows were wide and fitted with thin slits of mint-green louvres etched with small leaves that, to Isio's surprise, were open. Who lives near a river and leaves their windows open so early in the day, he thought. It amused him, briefly. He comported himself and knocked on the door. An averagely tall lanky white man with hair the color of sand opened the door.

"Yes?" said the man, looking from Isio to Olli One.

"I am Isio Erewa," Isio said, in coastal Pidgin English. He stretched his hands out for a handshake.

The man looked down at Isio's hands, frowning. "Who?"

Isio repeated himself, this time speaking slowly, drawing out his surname, then turned around to show the man his father's flag.

"Oh, the governor. I am Colonel Hartley, come in."

"My father is sick. He sends his greetings," Isio said, as Olli One carefully lowered the gin cases and left.

Isio glanced around the consulate, then at Hartley. Red spots dotted Hartley's arms, his forehead; Isio thought to tell him to shut his window early in the evening before the mosquitoes woke up and to open it at sunrise the next day when they had retired, but that was none of his business. He cleared his throat and was about to launch into his speech when Hartley pointed at a bench, told him to sit, and went out of the bungalow through the back door. The room was sparsely furnished. There was a large table in the middle and two benches on either side of the room. A picture of a woman Isio had seen several times on the British merchants' ships hung on the wall behind the table; the Queen Victoria they called her: a pale, round-faced woman with flat lines for lips, wearing a small crown atop her head. Besides the Queen was a large, noisy clock which Isio watched until Hartley returned with two soldiers dressed in dark-brown khaki trousers and short-sleeved shirts. One of the soldiers had a rusty handcuff hanging from his trousers; a gun slung lazily on the shoulder on the other. Isio stood up.

"This is the governor's son," said Hartley to the men. "One of his many sons." Then, Hartley said something in a language Isio did not quite understand. He caught a few words - children, wives, village. They were speaking English, he was sure just not the coastal pidgin he understood. Whatever Hartley said tickled the soldiers. They laughed, loud, hard, slapping their thighs and the bench, then stopped just as abruptly. The presence of the soldiers, their chains, gun and laughter, unnerved Isio, threw him off balance. He stood straighter, smoothened the flag over his shoulders.

"So, tell me boy, what happened to those farmers?" Hartley asked, returning to the pidgin English.

"It was an accident," Isio began. "The farmers owed us fifty drums of palm oil and refused to pay or give a time when they would pay. My father sent our boys to chop them."

"Ah, chopping," said Hartley to the soldiers. "It means they cut down their debtors, they raid them," he explained, proud that he understood what chopping meant. "So, the chiefs died because your father chopped their village?"

"No, they argued with our boys and tried to stop the raid. They fought back. Our boys had to shoot them," Isio responded, locking eyes with Hartley. If Hartley did not believe him, his father might never send him out on important errands anymore; for Isio, that was worse than being arrested. In an instant, he veered off what he'd rehearsed with his father.

"If you find out what I have said is not the truth, I'll stand trial on behalf of my father."

Hartley thought for a moment, conversed with his soldiers, then pointed his forefinger at Isio, wagging it in his face.

"Okay then but warn your father: We don't want any riots in the hinterlands, anything at all that will disrupt oil flow. Warn your father. He must not arrest or kill any farmer again. Whatever problems you have with the farmers must be resolved amicably. Do you hear me, boy?"

Isio flashed a smile, bowed to Hartley, and

left the consulate. He swung his arms back and forth. He whistled one of the old tunes he'd learned from his mother. He was in the most exhilarated spirit. He couldn't wait to tell his father about the meeting. Near the river, Olli One and Two ran towards him. The Ollis were so called because no one knew their names. A slave raider had brought them to the governor when they were thin toddlers with rusty-brown hair and bulging eyes, too sickly for Governor Erewa to sell to the white men at the coast. Now, the white men no longer bought people; they bought palm oil — thousands and thousands of drums. What they did with all that oil, nobody knew.

"How'd it go? What did the consul say?" they asked. Isio and the Ollis were about the same age. All three of them, slaves and son, had grown up playing together in Erewa's compound.

Isio could barely contain his joy. He wanted everyone to know how he had convinced Hartley, put his neck on the line for his father's honour but he had learned to be tight-lipped about details of official business even among his siblings. "I told him the farmers caused their deaths with their own hands."

"And he believed you?"

"What else is he going to believe? My father is governor," Isio replied, conveniently forgetting to mention that Hartley had wagged a finger in his face and called him a boy. He didn't tell them how Hartley had looked down at him like he was nothing. Instead, he told them about Hartley's windows. "Wide open, so early in the morning!"

"You should have seen the sores on his arms," Olli One said. At that, all three of them began to laugh as they climbed into the canoe.

#

On their way back, Isio didn't row with the boys. He sat back, savouring his victory. But despite his relief, a feeling of unease crept up his stomach, and his joy flowed out of him. It was then he noticed that just like the morning moon, the sun was dim too, hiding behind grey clouds as if in protest, spreading gloom down to the river. To shake off his growing unease, Isio replayed the interrogation line by line, and as he scrutinized it against the moodiness of the sun his spirit dropped low, wrapping him in a blanket of overwhelming sadness. If he hadn't been fast to shut his mouth and his eyes, a whimper and tears would have escaped from him. He drew his knees up to his chest and hid his face from the Ollis, and then a fog rose in the river, inside the fog he saw himself in the middle of a large grand canoe, like his father's, only it had his name written on it. At the bow of the canoe, on a short pole, there was a flag that bore his name stamped with his family's totem. He was dressed in regal clothes, surrounded by six white soldiers, thick metal loops were clamped on his neck and arms. Isio jerked and forced his eyes open, his heart pounding in his ears. In the distance, the village shoreline formed. Two tall coconut trees with drooping branches stood on either side of the village entrance like sentries. He was home. He was home.

Home was the four long bungalows facing each other in a square that Isio's father built in Koko. Isio shared one bungalow with his siblings. His father's wives had one, the slave boys shared another, and his father had one to himself. Behind the wives' bungalow was a large open kitchen. A cluster of plantain trees gathered in the middle of the compound. Several were bent to the side, heavy with fruit. Erewa's parlour was the largest room in the compound. Floor to ceiling shelves that housed an array of gin, wine, and thick greenish glass mugs engraved with hearts and leaf patterns were on the right side of the parlour. Wooden figurines stood at the corner of the shelves, and hanging on a wall facing the shelves was a large mask, the head of the leopard, the guardian spirit of the family. Erewa waited for Isio in the parlour, he smiled when he saw his son, a smile that turned his face into a saggy oval. Isio, shaken by the vision he had seen on the river, could not return his father's smile. He delivered the consul's message flatly, with none his planned enthusiasm.

"Hartley told you to warn me?"

"Yes, he said we must not arrest any farmer again, that nothing must stop the flow of oil."

Isio loosened the flag from his neck, folded and returned it to his father. He left his father's parlour, crossed the court yard and went to his mother's room. Isio's mother, Desiri, hugged him, holding him tight against her slender body, and for an entire minute Isio rested on her. He wanted to remain there; he wanted to tell her what he saw on the river; he wanted her to touch his neck and wrists and replace the eerie vision of cold steel with her warmth. But tears had gathered at the back of his eyes, and Isio would rather endure captivity than cry in his mother's arms.

"It's hunger, Mama," he replied to the question on Desiri's face.

"What type of hunger has made you so sad?" Desiri wanted to ask him, but she bite her tongue. She went to the kitchen and returned with a bowl of soft-boiled plantain and roasted fish soaked in palm oil.

"Thank you, Mama," Isio said, taking the bowl from her.

#

Shortly after Isio returned, Desiri picked up her basin and set off for the mangrove swamps at the southern end of the village. It was late in the afternoon, not the ideal time to go foraging, but she was almost out of cooking salt, and in a couple of weeks she wouldn't have a grain to sell at the market. She had planned to go in the morning; in fact she had just left the compound and was walking fast to catch up with the women ahead of her when she heard Isio's name. Three of the governor's slave boys were talking about him and mentioned something about the chief of the white man. Isio hadn't said anything about the chief of the white man; he told her he was only going to deliver a message at the coast. At the time, she had suspected he was lying but it was only a light feeling that slightly brushed over her face, not concrete enough for her to prod him. So, she held his hands and prayed for him like she always does before he left home.

"Wya ya, wu re; may you go, may you return," she prayed for him in her dialect, Okpe.

Isio promised he'd be back. But the feeling, however flighty it was, sank into Desiri, scratching the walls of her stomach. And it was that feeling that pushed her to go to the boys, demanding answers. They told her what had happened with the farmers, that Isio might return, or not.

"Or not? Or not?" She'd asked them, her voice rising, temper climbing. She abandoned her trip to the swamp. What good would salt bring if her son, the one eye she used to see in the world, might return or not. Her future and that of his sister, Beji, rested firmly on his hands. What would become of them if he did not return?

Desiri spent the rest of the morning by the slim window in her bedroom, anxiously watching the bamboo gates. What struck her as she waited was that Isio's lie had flown over her head. Truly, the fact of that shocked Desiri, for she had a special, unusual, connection to Isio. She heard his thoughts. She felt his feelings — his joys and fears, his deceit and mischief, his raging anger and intense sadness. She sensed him even if he was hundreds of miles away from her. When Isio was a child, he was fond of staying out late into the evening playing with his friends. Desiri would let him play until she prepared his dinner, then would go stand by the window and whisper, "Isio, Isio," and the wind would carry her voice to him wherever he was, tap him on the shoulder and say, "Your mother is calling you." Then, Isio would sigh, bid his friends goodbye and return home. He was an extension of her, a part of her soul that lived outside her body. So, as Desiri stood by the window waiting for him, she stumbled into a realization: "My son has grown into himself," she whispered, taking care to lower her voice, as if fearing someone might hear that her connection to Isio had weakened and frayed like an old tattered cloth. She'd held on to him tightly all these years; he was the eye with which she saw the world. She conjured up Isio's face, and in her mind's eye she began to call him to return home. She prayed, too, that the chief of the white man should believe him, must believe him. She did all that for him, and what does he do when he returns? Lied to her. He'd looked her in the eye and lied.

There were two women at the swamp when Desiri arrived. She'd not expected to meet anyone there at that time of the day. She exchanged greetings with them, inquiring about their health and their children and their husbands. Then, she went straight to her tree. It was further inside the mangrove, in an area where the trees had matted together, blocking most of the day's light. Many women did not venture in there, but from the time Desiri learnt how to collect salt she always went to this one tree; it had called out to her, invited her to pluck its stems. Her tree was unusually short and wide, the only one in the swamp that was just below her eye level. Desiri stepped into the water, threading gently to the tree as the water grazed her ankles, calves, knees and stopped just below her lower thighs. When she reached her tree, she placed her head on the lean trunk, greeted it and listened. Her mother, Titi, had taught her to listen because if the tree doesn't want to be disturbed, you leave it alone, come back another day. A small vibration ran through the trunk, the leaves fluttered, and spread out before her like offerings.

"Thank you," said Desiri to the tree.

She began brushing crystalized grains of salt off each leaf, starting with the smaller fresher leaves at the top and then moving on to the swollen stems at the base. As she worked, she sang the song of the salt tree:

#

The salt tree is not beautiful, hmm hmm not beautiful.

The salt tree is not admirable, hmm hmm not admirable.

They drove the salt tree away, hmm hmm they drove her away.

The salt tree had nowhere to go, hmm hmm she had nowhere to go.

She came to the hard water, hmm hmm the very hard water.

The salt tree lived there alone, hmm hmm she lived alone.

The salt tree soaked the hard water, hmm hmm

she soaked the hard water.
The salt tree made salt for the people, hmm hmm it made salt for the people.
All the people praise the salt tree, hmm hmm we praise the salt tree.

#

Desiri sang and hmmed under her breath, but as she worked she couldn't focus on the song. Her thoughts drifted off, wandered to Isio. He'd looked very different — gone was the bounce in his steps, the determined radiance of his eyes, the ever-permanent sly smile on his face. And yet, he wouldn't tell her what the problem was. He'd been that way for a while, changing faster than a chameleon right before her eyes. And it wasn't just him growing into a man. No, it was something else, Desiri thought. She had sensed it, had seen it. There was an unfamiliar shadow in his eyes. Whenever he returned from a trading trip or an errand for his father, the shadow seemed closer, looming large around him; its presence threatened her, pricked the fine hairs on her neck and arms. And she had no one else to blame but herself, for with her own hands she had gathered the twigs and kindled the fire that birthed that shadow.

One day, when Isio was about ten years old, he ran to her room and told her he wanted to become the head of clan and a governor like his father. Governor Erewa had just returned from a long travel to Bonny, where he'd met with the big chief of the white man. The clan threw a party to celebrate his return. Erewa's compound was full; men from within and outside the village came to see the governor, shaking his hands, laughing at everything he said, listening to every word he spoke. Isio had watched it all. He saw something in the eyes of the men who crowded around his father, how they lowered their heads when speaking. He'd seen it, too, in the eyes of the white men when they had visited his father long ago, how they knelt before him, presented him with cartons of gin. Although Isio did not know what the thing in the men's eyes was, he wanted it, wanted people to look at him like that, to bow and kneel before him. The welcome ceremony was like a chunk of roasted goat meat, he desperately craved a bite. It was then he ran to his mother, shouting, "I want to be head of clan, Mama! I want to be governor, too!"

Desiri knew that because there was a hierarchy and pattern to their lives, Isio would never become the next head of clan or governor. He'd be a big man, of that she was certain. But he'd never be his father. In fact, he'd inherit less than a drop of his father's wealth since he was the last of twenty-six children: eight sons, eighteen daughters. Desiri knew all that, but she did what mothers do; she cut a slice of hope and placed it on his tongue.

"If you want to be like your father, follow Abela everywhere, learn the trade from him."

"What if Abela says I should not follow him?"

"Then you come and tell me," she replied, patting his head.

Since then, he had worked tirelessly for his father — sleeping on canoes with slave boys, carrying loads on his head and back — so much that people began to whisper, asking if he was really his father's son or a slave. The questioning whispers eventually floated into Desiri's ears, and she decided to put an end to it. One evening, when Isio returned from an errand, she called him into her room. He was sixteen at the time, all bones and head.

"When a small tree stands under a big tree, the small tree will not receive plenty sunlight or rain; the small tree will only get leftovers from the big tree," Desiri said, holding Isio's hands. "Do you understand what I am saying to you?"

Isio's reply was a curt nod.

"I have saved everything I made from my salt and pepper market. I have bought many cartons of white man goods for you — they are in my mother's house," she added, anticipating his next question.

Isio slowly withdrew his hands from hers and stood up.

"I am going to be the big tree, Mama."

That was the first time Desiri saw the shadow. Four years had since passed but she had never forgotten that day, never forgotten the prickly cold she felt when his hands left hers.

Now, she understood that it was on that day she lost her son. The realization struck her like a slap, stung her eyes. She blinked back the tears, picked up the song. *The salt tree was not beautiful, hmm hmm not beautiful.* When her basin was full of salt and swollen stems, she stood straight, rested her head on the lean tree trunk and said, "thank you" to the tree.

She returned home. Inside her room, she met a hard decision, sitting on her bed, waiting.

"You have to let him go," the decision said.

"I know," said Desiri. "I know."

The acceptance of her loss weighed on her. It pulled and squeezed her heart, and when the pain abated it settled into a type of sadness only a mother could feel.

* * *

Excerpt from Chapter One

LUCIA EDAFIOKA writes stories and personal narrative essays. Her work has been published in Boston Review, Catapult, Popula, and the Lagos to Limbe Anthology. She is working on her debut novel.

The Reunions, a novel

Nicolas Gschwendtner

Opening chapter of *The Reunions*, a novel

Back in the early 90s, the five diversely talented Sadorien children (Cece, Mads, Emmet, Lonnie, and Leo) were just about sure that the wiseman of the family—their *favorite* wiseman, it ought to be stressed, as well as their go-to explainer, their banzaing confidant, and the only truly dependable clown they'd ever met—happened to be in possession of nothing grander, nothing more *minute* than the secret of, well, the universe.

It's a conviction, maybe, that quite a few children have felt about their parents at one point or another, and, in the case of the Sadorien Five, one that could be traced back to their father's unusual but rather wonderful belief that certain animals could attain Buddhahood; Sterling had apparently met dozens of these exceptional beings during his time on this pretty flimsy excuse for a planet, including one unmistakably enlightened dog who'd been incarnated right here in the neighborhood where the Sardoriens lived. *Which* of the myriad local dogs it was exactly he wouldn't say, thereby setting the five pint-sized residents of 272 Hollingsworth Drive on a full-pelt search through Westacre's very green, flat, tree-lined streets. It was a search they'd return home in the evenings from each with their own personal suspicions about what dog it was out there roaming around knowing how to moksha. (Incidentally, the family joke about Sterling is he'd spent about six of his past lives being a fairly superlative dog himself—although Leo, the youngest (and most opinionated of the siblings) privately believed that his father, ultimately, was an ex-wounded man turned clinician of the spirit, an airtight *mélange* of healer, shaman, and bodhisattva in disguise—a belief Leo could back up with a buttload of evidence, if you asked him to).

In any case, re this secret of the universe Sterling supposedly had: the children, led by Cece (the kindest, gentlest, and most senior member of the team), came to Sterling in the living room one afternoon just before dinner to ask him, quite casually, if he wouldn't mind spilling the beans about what he knew and everything like that, seeing as it was only the *most* important thing in the world. Behind Cece, the other four children were making a big deal out of trying to seem nonchalant about the whole business, but Mads was joggling one of her legs like crazy, and Emmet was hitching his pants up in a very determined way. Leo looked just about ready to cry.

And Lonnie, all too familiar with the significance of his older brother's pant-hitching, was trying, with a subtle one-handed technique, to gently lower Emmet's pants back down.

Sterling lifted himself slightly off the couch to check if Lyra was out of earshot. She was in the kitchen, for sure with a cigarette going, banging at some unseen thing with what everyone recognised immediately, thanks to the particular cadence of the bangs, as her personal ball peen hammer. She was also swearing at it, the unseen thing, and in a tone that made you really feel for the poor whatever-it-was; she could put you in a very compassionate mood, Lyra. She'd pretty obviously been a public executioner in *at least* two of *her* past lives, probably in the medieval period, everyone agreed. There was also a full consensus amongst the children that their mother could read minds. Exclusively *their* minds, sure, but there was zero doubt that she *could* read them. It was a product, the mind reading, of the unstoppable, even endless worrying she did about her five-member troupe, and it was with some regularity that she'd call out one of their names and ask, 'Is everything alright? Because I just had the frightening sensation that something was making you low.' The queer thing is she was *always* right. Whoever she called out to always *was* in the middle of some bad thought or moment, and they'd trundle down to whichever part of the house she was doing her latest repair job in and sit and watch her work and tell her what was wrong.

Sterling now lowered himself back down and, with a whole lot of hammed-up worry, asked the room's attentive faces if they thought their mother might somehow be aware of this impromptu get-together. Cece palmed some hair out of her face and gave one of her sincere eye rolls. 'This isn't an appropriate time to be acting *silly*, Dad.' Sterling nodded as if this had been a terribly sensible thing to say, and, after a moment's reflection, asked if Cece and co. would possibly meet him on the back porch after dinner, once their dearest Lyra had gone to bed? It would be the best time to explain, he said.

The dinner table that night vibrated with an anxious near-silence unusual for the Sadorien domicile, a three-story, whitewood-planked colonial affair with a huge tree-cluttered garden (where a good deal of barefoot extra-curricular forms of play had taken place over the years, as well as several important late night talks and the resolution of one terrifying incident (all of which gave the garden, at least to the minds of this particular US family, the air of holy land)); it came across, the house—and this is maybe a little strange—a lot like a meditation hall whose inhabitants happened to be a set of rather unruly, amateur monks engaged, for the most part, in a communal character development that was more full of blast and noise than *traditional* one-pointed concentration.

Not that this meant a stunning silence didn't routinely fall over the premises. The kind of silence during which, for instance, old-world tomes were read assiduously and navels gazed into with phenomenal seriousness and dinners, such as tonight's, occasionally took place, with the children all on their best behavior, politely saying to one another things like, would you be interested in more water? please, let *me* pass *you* the green beans on this occasion; by the way, the potatoes are marvellous—how long did you microwave them for? And then, postprandially, after they'd cleared the table and Lyra had gone to bed—she got up and went to bed several hours earlier than anyone in the family—and after they'd torn up the stairs two at a time in a breathless rush and burst into Lyra's and Sterling's room on the second floor to give their good old mom a much quicker and fidgetier goodnight kiss than usual, they found themselves, due to some unplanned nervousness, slowing down as they neared the back porch's propped open screen door.

It was the middle of summer, and the air was humid and warm and the sky that profound, dark blue of midnight and just totally flocked with stars, and the moon was a rotund thing, fatly aglow. There were about a million crickets chirring too, and it sort of made it feel like the stars were breathing, the chirring. Sterling was by the porch steps, facing the garden. He looked so right standing there, tall and lithe and well-balanced, backlit by the house-lights, staring into the starred distance with his hands in his pockets. There was a terrific pause as the children took him in, and to that pause was added the satisfaction that this man was their father. Leo remembers not being sure if it was okay to exhale. Mads, who'd always been totally clueless patience-wise, cleared her little throat and in a cross-armed tone of voice, said, 'Well?'

Sterling turned around, slowly, and gave Mads one of his very distinctive grins, and then, as if in a great hurry, ran off into the garden and started to stride from point to point in the darkness, checking the sky and stroking his chin and occasionally stamping the nightcolored grass with his foot in a testing way until, satisfied that he'd found the right spot, he waved his five spectators over.

They were just about ready to burst with wanting to know what was going on at this point, but they were under some sort of spell and none spoke.

When they reached Sterling, he was lying on his back with his slender legs crossed at the ankle and his hands intertwined behind his head, his gaze quietly starwards; and it seemed only appropriate to the five standing Sadoriens that they do the same. There was a good deal of settling in and repositioning and 'excuse mes' and several minor elbow collisions, and then they lay there together for a while, all still, listening to the night-sounds, and to the rhythm of their breathing. An eternity may have passed. Then, Sterling informed them that he thought they were ready. The children leaned a little towards him. The sky seemed to bring itself closer to the earth, and the breeze dropped, and even the crickets stilled, listening. Everyone waited.

But Sterling didn't say anything. He just stayed quiet, just like he was. After a short, strained interval, Mads huffed, and still supine, beat her heel once into the ground, and said, 'Oh for god's *sake*, what's the stupid secret?' Sterling smiled at her and took her small hand in his and, with his free hand, pointed upwards. 'Look how bright that one is,' he whispered, 'and how bright those ones over there.'

And you know what? No one could have agreed more with that than those five little bodies did on the grass in the night with their dad.

NICOLAS GSCHWENDTNER was born and raised in London. He received his MFA in Fiction from The University of Arizona in 2023. He is working on a novel, The Reunions.

Selections from Halo-Halo // (Mix-Mix)

Geramee Hensley

Ode to My Family in Key of Fried Chicken & Fried Rice
February 23rd, 2020

the sun doesn't persist / it's just like us / does what it does / 'til it can't any longer / joy has been asking for fresh ways to enter our bodies / no measure

past mouths / flocked w/ feathers / we're all breathless really / astonished another day has arrived

unasked / & sometimes stamped return-to-sender / makes clockwork look obnoxious / the cadmium of a bruise / pooling dead-

center in a day's fat wet return / what used to bring me comfort / now bloats my belly & anxiety / I have changed

& won't apologize / I'm sorry—the most Filipino meal to me / is KFC extra crispy / broken over swards of garlic fried rice / then irrigated w/ a mixture

of spiced vinegar & fish sauce / this meal is so Filipino / I won't even tempt a sound / from my ma's homeland / to try & prove

I can pronounce them through the jutted doors of my lips / won't colonize one part of me / w/ another / I'm so

disjointed / you could call me / a republic / I'm so song / you can call me / warbling / O Lord / make of me your most unwoke child / so stoked / I'm a boat

on fire / & also who ignited the sails / being muscled by music & water / is the only way I know how to let the wind in my mouth

w/o naming it invader / I am always the translator / of my own worst enemy / but I'm past that / when someone you love / really love

gives you their dying words / they give you a new name

it can be spoken only once before it becomes a part of your body / how you move / & breathe

it becomes a soundless thing / they say take this fried chicken thigh & go on / you hear? / you gotta eat this thing w/o me for a minute / but you won't be you

as you know you / as I know you / the last time I heard my ma say / *I want that* / we unboxed multi-colored hopia / & her eyes / widened like a tributary

flowing into some bigger version of itself / & her belly grunted want / & although she could barely chew or swallow / she took down half a piece

just by virtue of desire / & now I think about this / staring into my bowl of chicken & rice / how as I eat / I swallow every memory of it too

how many meals like this / have met the farrow of my mouth / how many times have I said / *I want that* / how many times / will I choose / to utter it again

my new name is a silence / in my body / plugged w/ feathers / & spent lungs / I have more than memories / & more than want / but less than all you / always

but / what you gave me / what you gave me / I will give to myself / have it / a fried chicken thigh at the center of our swirling galaxy / all the cream

pools in the lowest pits / so sip so slowly / what doesn't kill you / saves you for later / sometimes the future / just mean another meal

bruises, too, fill w/ the most astonishing light / I am so Pinoy I will never stop dancing / I am so my mother's child / I will never be satisfied until my hands resemble

vases choked by what can make them more beautiful / I will never be more beautiful / never be more named / never claimed this way again / unseeded / unpotted / unheld

un-amen I say to you / the organ unbelieving pain / into a memory / un-goodbye I say to the day which rises / I have all this light in me / & nowhere else to go

The Last Dance

we used to dance like this:
the stereo speaker's allegro bump
the unmastered bamboleo my limbs conjure mid-air
which is swept into a shade of control under
your guidance
quick whisk twist turn then tuck in
our stumbling glissade

i am pivoting on my heels
i am sprinting back to the memory / to put my mouth / to its mouth

two dances end on the same second step 20 years a part
where I am holding your whole body & dragging you
to the bathroom, your stroked leg trailing
behind rhythmically with our shuffle

you're drooling on my shirt i can feel it pooling
on my chest

this is not what i wanted from our last dance
but i'm thinking of our swings

when you could just barely lift me

i am aestheticizing the moment already
imagining the poem to come from our sterile hugs
i cannot be totally present, need the fantasy of lyric
to anesthetize me out our two step
especially when i cannot be right here & i really can't

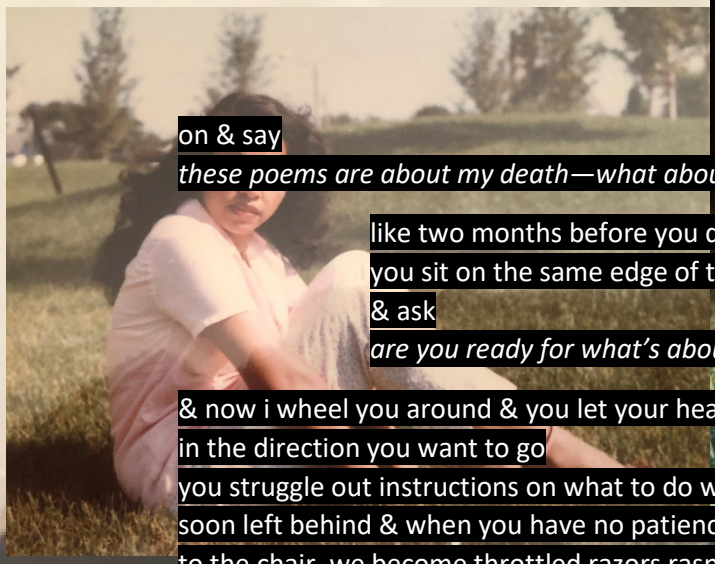
i want to drop you and pray you shatter
into a healthier version of yourself

i want you to sink into me
so i can return the favor of pregnancy

you can pilot my limbs & eyes
i'll mind the mind & man the heart

until you die in me but there i go
inventing choices where i have none

like four months before you die
you ask to read what i'm working



on & say
these poems are about my death—what about my joy?

like two months before you die
you sit on the same edge of the mattress
& ask
are you ready for what's about to happen?

& now i wheel you around & you let your head dip
in the direction you want to go
you struggle out instructions on what to do with clothes
soon left behind & when you have no patience to be transferred
to the chair, we become throttled razors rasping along the hard wood

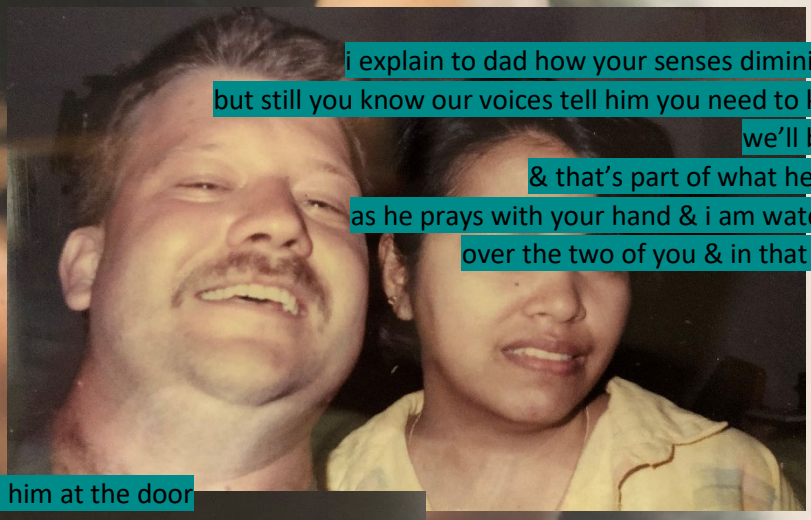
i feed you soup
dad has just panicked out the living room, where you have
selected to place your deathbed
i think i'm gonna disappear for a few days he weeps to me
you won't see me for awhile—he invents a choice where
there is none, where my face is all somber storm
& leaky roof, an undone patch work
heaving half-hearted whimpers into a new alone i will cradle
for the remainder of all grave light & knife fall

& your face facing mine channels what's left
of its neuromuscular agency & distresses
into distress, though your eyes can no longer track me
all of your last words are picked over carefully:
your father,
he lives in another world,

but me, i am of this place
where i am your laughter stitched to bone
like a good child, i am seeing you off so well
mixing powdered pills into thick water
& talking you through holding it down

the last dose hardly keeps, half of it hocked
up reflexively & we are all pained
call the nurse & 15 minutes later in our living room
they explain your loosened looking,
the rustling about *terminal restlessness*
& limb mottling—
do you want to know
what the next few hours will look like?

the eldest & i, we listen
think we ought to know

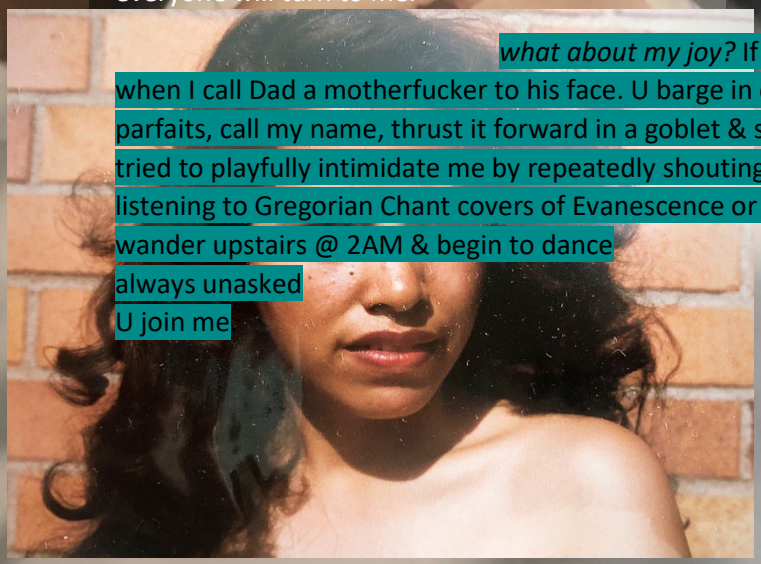


i explain to dad how your senses diminished
but still you know our voices tell him you need to know
we'll be ok
& that's part of what he says
as he prays with your hand & i am watching
over the two of you & in that hour

you go

the middle born arrives & i stop him at the door
she's gone
his face turns into nothing
as the rest of him crash-lands into me

we make phone calls. we stay up.
kiss your skull out the door. begin to
rearrange furniture. there's pizza. a movie on.
tomorrow the most absurd thing will happen:
tomorrow. we will go to the funeral home
& a person in a suit will ask us many questions,
apologize for the state of things, how you were too young.
& when making arrangements for the service he'll ask
what did she want then
everyone will turn to me.



what about my joy? If U laugh hard enough, U snort like when I call Dad a motherfucker to his face. U barge in on me in the basement with parfaits, call my name, thrust it forward in a goblet & shout *try that, suckerrrr!* U once tried to playfully intimidate me by repeatedly shouting *suck my dick.* U stay up too late listening to Gregorian Chant covers of Evanescence or slow danceable music & when I wander upstairs @ 2AM & begin to dance
always unasked
U join me

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Feelers

Julie Lunde

II. No, we don't have them. Something, to be honest, I'm glad about. A few reasons for that, but primarily it's because they gross me out.

II. You can imagine it though, the spasmodic oculus of a submarine periscope searching through the darkness, only this appendage is stuck on a bug head, appears as a pair of fleshless twitchers. And not just bugs: chelicerates and proturans may not have them, but all other arthropods do, and this includes insects, arachnids, butterflies, crustaceans—a whopping 75% of the world's population! Even that oblong pockmark on my cement floor yesterday had two red wires protruding from one end. That was the giveaway, yes, the moment when I discovered the shadow was in fact a roach, and my deepest suspicions were confirmed; antennae almost always trace back to a body. The only thing I do like about them is the name, or the nickname, really: *feelers.*

II. Yet listen: haven't you ever stuck your index fingers up near your ears and bent both knuckles? Done a little dance and wriggled those fingers around like you were sensing the air? Surely, if you've not played this game, you at least recognize it, the alien moonlight in which you can claim the antennae as your own. It's a performance just like all other acts of false possession, only in this version of the game what you're doing is showing off your innate ability to sense, to *feel;* similar, though distinctive, from that index-middle-finger vee game, pointing at your own eyes first, and then at the object. *Yeah, you, I can see you.* Another common and popular variation on these games is the simultaneous combo, self-reflexive sensing and seeing, in which the rules are simple; park yourself in front of a mirror and count the minutes passed before you start to cry.

II. Only recently did I learn that it's weird, and possibly uncool, to enjoy holding hands as much as I do. But I think of holding hands and think of a night in the dead of winter when my bare hand flapped around outside my jacket pocket the whole walk home until I said *goodnight* and felt his hand grab mine at last.

What's not to like about a night like that?

II. When I haven't held hands with someone in too long, I trace swirled patterns on the insides of my palms for a feeling like someone's getting handsy with me, which might seem like it'd be doubly-satisfying as that version engages both hands in the action, yet it turns out empty; the good of the game is in its anticipation, its unpredictability. Without the element of surprise, it's not even half as satisfying.

II. We must crack open crustaceans to access their soft parts. Their hard outer shells are made of chitin, which is the primary ingredient of several other wonders: octopi beaks, fish scales, wings of leafhopper and walls of caterpillar. Chitin means *chiton*, *chiton* means *covering,* covering really means protection. Chitinous structures seem built to resist sympathy. This rigidity combined with the absence of a central nervous system in many crustaceans has produced a webpage titled *Pain in Crustaceans* on which the final determination reads: *the presence of pain cannot be determined unambiguously.* Chitin also composes crop fertilizer, mushroom cell walls, sponges, tampons, and, of course, antennae. In this last case, the armor's function is not only protection but feeling. Antennae are lined with *sensilla*, *sensilla* means sensory receptors, receptors mean sensitivity. Feelers are made not only of armor then but of *amor,* their typo. The Latin word for love feels closer to the landscape I'm longing to describe today.

II. As a child I would look up *hypersensitivity, how to stop being so sensitive,* trying to understand how a body could fit so much feeling in. I read yesterday about a scientist who removed the feelers from a few antagonistic ant species and came to see that, instead of fighting, the amputees now peacefully coexisted. Without feelers, the ants were no longer able to suss out the difference between friend or foe.

II. Or was it more that they'd lost their central sensory mechanism and so their enmity simply had a new home? Either way, the cut made room in absence. Something grew out of the snip. These days, older and dumber than ever, I place pride in my vulnerability as if it were a child of mine. But I try not to prize my sensitivity over others, do not applaud its superlative nature; instead, only awe at the great *feeler* capacity of every other body I know and encounter.

II. On Halloween once my therapist suggested I wear a costume as a way to become a new character. I interpreted 'character' there to mean a new temperament. In the costume pop-up shops near me I tried out several variations on a theme, *headbands with pom-poms*; brown or green, organized and labeled by color, butterfly or Martian.

II. Aliens of popular science-fiction depiction reliably differ from humans in that they are green and possesses insectoid feelers. Otherwise they are rendered with traditionally humanoid traits, eyes, noses, mouths, hands, and so on. Like us, the traditional alien walks, is single-headed, bi-ped. The green genre of alien is both a fantastical imagining of the Other and an anthropomorphized imagining of ourselves. I want to believe this alienation is our attempt at feeler ownership, an empath's subversion of organ envy.

II. To *antennate* is to touch another body, put someone in contact with your feelers. There's a hint at extension and inquiry in this language; to *put out feelers* is to make a limited effort, broach a difficult question, suggest a possible answer. Hermit crabs have two pairs of antennae, and when they get together they'll sometimes have *feeler fights,* a frantic flicking against one another. Watching videos of these fights online gives me low-level anxiety; the vibrations resemble nothing more than a futile attempt to scratch an itch, over and over and over again. Most hermit crab owners agree these fights are non-aggressive, just a way for these creatures to get acquainted. It's called a fight, I guess, because, even friendly, this antennation looks intense, difficult. The last video I watch shows a hermit crab outside its shell. The body looks like a naked hand, a shriveled wrist.

II. The truth is that it has been a few years since I've held hands with anyone I'd describe as a lover, long enough that I've grown accustomed to this.

II. Some bend like knees while others are segmented like fingers. Flabellate and pectinate feelers are

like curved combs, a tool that could brush your entire head at once, while plumose, fittingly, look like feathers. Serrate are fanged like saws and capitate have the round club ending kids draw on butterflies. Though my jealousy gravitates more naturally to the orange flit of wings, the butterfly's two clubbed extensions are, miraculously, made to tell time. A permanent watch! I can envy that. Other feelers have all sorts of uses—navigation, balance, stability, mating—and they can possess smell receptors, taste receptors, even light receptors. Larval crustaceans use their feelers to swim during nauplius, a kind of puberty. This knowledge upends what I'd always thought I'd known, that antennae are for touching, for physical sensation. But science isn't personal though I want it to be, though I always try to make it so. For myself, I'd choose the stylate variety, long and pointed like a pen.

II. Crying can be a comfort, each tear a new thread; I weave a velvet covering and enclose myself in my own blanket of *amor,* a wall of my self-care. Yet sensing is not all, or always, about pain, suffering, or sadness (though rarely is someone accused of being too sensitive because they were feeling too much delight). Sadness and happiness are not opposite ends of a spectrum, I should say, but more like pairs, each one next to the other—moved, even, by the same apparatus, the same set of muscles, located, usually, somewhere between the eyes.

II. There was a trick the boys used to play on girls in our gym class, middle school nonsense. They would offer to teach you a new handshake, you'd say yes, and then they'd grasp your hand. Normal at first, but midway through they'd let loose a middle finger to tickle the inside of your palm, then pull away as they leaned in and whispered: *that's how aliens have sex.* Or yell this to the crowded hallway. You'd know it was nonsense even then, but you'd blush all the same: panic, a breach, you did not agree to this. But in some ways, you'd think, yes, you did, you shook his hand and he's only just changed the name. Then you'd retreat quickly to the locker room as they'd shout *slut, you're alien, pregnant...* An annagramatic *refeel,* I remember this, too, each time a new man touches my hand with his.

II. Still, I can't deny a certain appeal in the associated motion, that little signature quiver a feeler makes. This motion gives off the perception of sensation in action, a kind of mind-reading but for the heart, a transliteration of feeling into flutters. Yet the motion of the antennae is most notable because of its isolation, the stillness of sensilla's surroundings as the bug considers all things calmly; the most visible shaking limb is the one that's attached to the head of a statue. Sometimes when I read in front of a crowd my hands shake so hard the paper's rattle covers up the silence of my throat's stuck sound (a public chiton). But the human desire for a feeler's shaking to signify sensing in action is nothing more than a projection; the act of sensing, of true sensation, is invisible across all creatures, or tucked inside. The tremors are more akin to a search for a feeling, not its proof.

II. Yet: if the heart keeps us pumping, and the head thinking, why have feelers at all but for feeling? And if we had them, just imagine what might constitute the new emotional iconography: an | | to replace our less-than-threes, | | for the tilted hearts I text everyone else who is lonely on New Year's. Consider it, | |'s visual takeover, a new emoticon to prove how we're doing: | | Hallmark cards, | | stickers, | | celebrity wrist tattoos.

II. And every hat would have sleeves! Each updo, a fancier ending. Scrunchies could line rings up and down the shaft, and on fancy occasions we'd all wear necklaces vining around the stalks, scarves when it got cold outside. It could be practical, too: a bendy one used as a back-scratcher, or a ring-toss game played on a friend's head at a party. Dance moves would be more complex, and at stadium games we wouldn't need our arms to do 'the wave.' Each pair of fence posts would be salvaged as a new announcement, a celebration of feelings instead of boundaries, and the yellow lines in the center of the road would read like an unbroken stretch of poetry. If you were excited and walking in a rush I'd look at you and see / /, and on nights you drove me with my head out the window, my hair flying a tangled mass in its tunnel of wind, we'd both consider the stream of strands and quietly think to ourselves \ \.

II. But we'd need some changes, it wouldn't all be smooth, not at first; the shower head would have to be higher up, and the doorways too. New inventions would need to be thought up to prevent all the punc-

ture wounds in our pillows.

ll. Then I'd walk outside on one dead winter night and, passing you, wonder if they lay hidden there: feelers alien under your blanket of hair. I'd run a hand across my own skull. Unseen, something would buzz alive. I'd twitch a glitter into the darkness and you would or wouldn't look away. Listen: I will always | |. I am | | | | | | | | | | | | | | to stay. I will wait as long as it takes or even forever for your hand to meet mine, stroke my head, and discover them there.

This essay was selected by Susan Neville as the winner of Western Humanities Review's 2022 prose contest.

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Julie is represented by Aemilia Phillips at Stuart Krichevsky Literary Agency.

Shudder and Quake

Joi Massat

Dragon, eagle, fierce and fair

Must bend a knee to the godwits' lair,

For they may run and ride the air,

And ramble 'round the forest there,

But men may travel anywhere.

- children's rhyme

Chapter 1

The rain was pounding, and the world became a shimmering series of grey-blue veils. Most of Lettie's family had left the beach in a hurry, their blood-red clothes blackening, then fading behind so many curtains.

Lettie and her father were the only ones left. Yet Father grumbled about "how they would let the weather get this way." He stood with one hand raised to hold a thin, broad plain of slate that served as an umbrella. It hadn't come from the beach or barracks of the city-state's outskirts; he had made it himself. The other hand held Lettie's. She was six years old.

They went exploring. It was a rare thing, and it lasted minutes. Father led her to a place in the sand-choked grass with eggs the size of her palms. "The mother couldn't be far," he said, with clear excitement. Lettie, squatting by his side, watched him look around like an adventurer surveying the land, like there was more to this than a wet beach and an incredibly large, ring-shaped wall.

"We didn't have anything," he said suddenly. "Did you know that? When we got here, we felt as if we'd been walking forever."

The rain moaned low, a chorus for his story. But for Lettie, it didn't connect to anything. It wasn't a full story. She merely felt haunted.

"And we still didn't have anything."

That night she dreamed that the rain never stopped, and that she was no longer on the island of Greater Harmon but instead on the shore of a tropical place no bigger than a cloud. Ferns and palm trees bent under the fearsome water and wind. The shadows of this place haunted her, and not for the last time either.

Egg on top of Ignis head

If he should fall, the world crack dead

- children’s rhyme

Chapter 2

Lettie Redstripe was six years old, slightly short, and already stocky. She wore crimson because her family always did. She had wavy, easily tangled hair that ran untied down her back and almost to her feet. She was quiet in a way that many interpreted as scheming. She moved like she was about to explode.

Lettie was never without books. Her family, especially Aunt Harriet, made doubly, triply sure of that. The right book could have told her most everything about what Father had been talking about on the day of the big rain. (That book, to be precise, was the *Curious Historie of the Re-Generation of Harmon into the Greater, with Commentary*.) Lettie, though, was just a kid, and not an outwardly precocious one. Her mind was not a secretary but a fluttering bird.

Her life, itself, was a fluttering bird. Scenes stuck out like flowers from the stems. Days in dark offices. Brief minutes in parlors. Times when she found herself sandwiched between her father and aunt in an apartment cottage with the same shape, same size, almost the same rooms as her home, only with its own furniture—and its own family, and a single child front and center, here to play with Lettie, and her just standing with no recollection of how she'd gotten there. Or had they teleported? Another time dazzled by streams of fabric brushing, pushing past in every direction, leaving a rainbow impression. She had been the center of the pinwheel until Father pulled her into his arms. Where and how this had happened, and whether it had been magic or mundane or a dream, she couldn't guess. And she refused to.

Some things were stable. Father and Mother's apartment cottage, for instance, which was as red-grey-brown as her own frock. The wood-panel walls were bare and the furniture was simple. A phoenix, also wood and unpainted, stood valiantly on the kitchen mantelpiece, bordered by decorative dishes engraved with red leaves and tigers.

It was one apartment out of thousands—no, tens of thousands—an uncountable amount. Look out the window and you would see, through a veil of chimney smoke, an entire wall of them. Thirty-two tiers of cottages joined tight as bricks, subtly curving backward like the planet's horizon, far enough away that their windows were mere winking stars. Far enough to reveal a strip of sky.

For Lettie this was too familiar to be special. What excited her about it was the land behind. Greater Harmon contained eight rings, and hers was the Seventh, and what marvels could hide beyond that?

Father and Mother and the rest were stable too. The Redstripes were earth mages, most of them. That didn't make them special, but her Father did take a certain pride in their element. He would mention their "hardy stock" and that earth magic was the city-state's backbone, its blood.

On some Bloodday mornings, all the dozen-or-so Redstripes would flock to the beach, which rimmed the enormous round wall of the Eighth Ring, the barracks. Other families would be there, and they wore

crimson too. That was where the grown-ups taught the children all the magic they knew, or at least all that could fit in a day. Often it wouldn't be a day; men who dressed in colors muted almost to grey would appear suddenly and harass the grown-ups, which would be the beginning of the end.

The worst was when Father had to fight back. He'd been holding her older sister Bonnica's hand, keeping two fingers bent and the whole hand steady. Dust had just begun to whirl above her fingertips—merging into a kind of earthen stick—when a grey soldier laid a hand on his shoulder. Father let go, studded his arm with stone, and whipped the patroller's face. A literal Bloodday.

Later at family dinner, Bonnica and Dashing wiped away tears, Father cheerfully rattled off insults for the patroller, and Aunt Harriet looked him in the eye and scowled.

Her Father's real name was Marlon. He liked Lettie more than Lettie liked him. He also liked Lettie more than her older siblings; he thought the twins Dashing and Bonnica were suck-ups (his exact words to Lettie) and managed Rathcliffe with a heavy hand. But Lettie was his pet. He liked having her by his side and telling her unprompted secrets. If the mood caught him, he'd open her hand and slip in a piece of candy. Lettie knew she should have been delighted by these gestures, and that knowledge came with a reek of guilt. She felt it was all done for himself, an unburdening.

Lettie also had a Mother. People tended to forget that. Newt was very short and there were many names for that; the strangest was "Felwir-born," meaning "child of the wind god," but the right one, Aunt Harriet was careful to instruct, was "little person." Lettie's Mother was dutiful, active in the home, and mild. She was loving, and Dashing, Bonnica, and Rathcliffe certainly loved her back, repaying her hugs in full.

Lettie hugged her mechanically. It wasn't Mother herself that made Lettie uneasy, but the way her Father and the other two Redstripe households treated her, seemed to look over or past her. Even at a young age, it disturbed Lettie that her mother showed deference to them all, yet was the favorite of no one.

Aunt Harriet may as well have been her mother. She was a force.

For one thing, she was the clear leader of the three Redstripe houses, and she would hardly be told what to do. Outside she wore the family blood, but in her own cottage she added a broad straw hat with its fibers dyed pink and a paper poinsettia on the ribbon. She was a heat mage, and she would make them remember even if the world didn't.

For another, it was she who'd flooded the family with books. They were stowed anyplace she considered unobtrusive, including underneath the living room table and in kitchen cabinet gaps. The children's room in particular was fortified, with a brick book wall separating the two beds. Some were quite dusty. Here and there, like mineral deposits between flat rocks, were folded-up, crumbling newspapers and booklets. And there must have been even more books stuffed in the backrooms of Aunt Harriet's, the seat of weekly family dinners; she only had the one child.

Every week, Aunt Harriet would come to the cottage, sit on the couch with the children, pull out any book at all, and teach them to read. First with Dashing and Bonnica, who were seven years older than Lettie. Then with Rathcliffe, who was four years older. Lettie was last and probably worst—she never heard Aunt Harriet raise her voice with the others the way she did to her.

Lettie retained almost nothing from these meetings except for Aunt Harriet's constant guidance: "Read slower. No, not that slow. Don't stop, you know that word. You read it last week, you know you did. Come on, girl, speak up," she'd say, snapping her fingers—

She slapped the book closed, turned to Lettie with phoenix eyes, and said, "Listen, Lettie. I'm the teacher and you're the student. I got this whole family to read, and I'll be damned if you're falling through the cracks."

Lettie howled and cried. Aunt Harriet slapped her across the face. Then she grabbed her by the ear, marched her back to the children's room, shoved her in, and slammed the door. Rathcliffe was sitting balled up on the bed he shared with Lettie, Bonnica and Dashing on theirs; they blinked up at her, less blaming than wondering. Lettie threw herself into the blankets and sulked. Lettie was seven years old, and this was the first time that she'd been hit.

An uproar started in the living room. It was three book-layers and a wall away, so Lettie heard everything, though muffled. It was Aunt Harriet and Father barking at each other. To her surprise, her Mother joined the fight, and she could bark too. The shouting grew louder. If it got any worse, maybe earth would fly.

Lettie liked reading alone.

Report on the Condition of the Godwits in the Year 1500, Presented by the Ecological Club of Greater Harmon by ECGH Representative Daw Shrubsbury

A handful of my readers stand convinced of the truth of the old tales of Harmonism even to this day, and they, I am sure, need no convincing of the importance of the godwit, spiritually if not environmentally. In my family it was long taught that the godwit was Thior's first gift to mankind. While this was not true, and we have long observed evidence of creatures born millions of years before the godwit, this belief is a salutary one that raises our awareness of all those creatures on the land that we, as custodians, tend.

Many of you are skeptical. Most of you, however, remain clinging to your belief in Harmonism as children cling to blankets, though by degrees you are sure to come out of it. In short, you all are on the path to atheism. While I am eager to welcome *you*, I concede that you are the ones who must be convinced of the godwit's importance beyond mere fantasy.

I write this five days after the first edition of the Greater Harmon Almanac released to the general public, Outer Ring gentry included. It is argued that the perfection of the weather control system, combined with the almanac's similarly perfect forecasts (that is, foretellings or fortunes), makes ecological study superfluous. Moreover, the only animals we *must* preserve—those domesticated for wood, wool, etc.—are already cultivated underground, and so prodigiously that in a few short years Greater Harmon will be able to cease imports from "friendly rivals" entirely, nourish and clothe itself, and continue the global march.

Admittedly, ecological preservation has become a novelty. (I hesitate to even say "has become," for no sooner had the science sprang up in the tumult of the Revolution than parliamentary disinterest effectively killed it.) I contend that it is a novelty worth studying, and not merely for the sake of prettying up the First Ring and repairing the coast. This is an age not of expanding frontiers, but shrinking ones. Anyone who looks at the horizon will realize that the oceans are not endless, and the more we know about the world out there, there less there is to know. Yet the mysteries of the wildlife and climates of other regions truly are fathomless, and they will prove pleasurable to curious minds for centuries to come. While a conquered people may be uncooperative, a conquered land lies forever open.

The public does not know that we are losing the very symbol of our kind. The Outer Rings have some conception, certainly those in the barracks called the Eighth. If the Inner Rings knew, I assure you that no matter their religious disposition, they would riot. If ecology has become a distraction, then distraction, I argue, is a great pacifier—and so are symbols, when they maintain the national pride. When the gods themselves are in flux, what matters is the physical, tactile, and therefore inarguable. Let us not allow the godwit, living

thing that it is, to pass into extinction and myth. It would be cruel not only for the birds, but for the nation. The heart is logic, here; the godwit has as much price stamped onto its wings as any of our landholdings. Surely we would not depart from Helk any more than we would leave our nation's soul to die.

The fact is, a decreasing amount of godwits has laid their eggs on our shore year by year; their numbers now hover in the single digits. Autumn is no longer announced by their cries. I say this not to sound romantic, but to remind you of what Old Harmon—in effect our own primordial state—was like. I assure you these are different goals. It is pure logic that in order to preserve godwits as they were, we must *revive certain elements* as they were in the time of untouched wilderness. The reason for the godwits' disappearance, our club has concluded, are as follows:

The military practice drills conducted on the shoreline and within the Eighth Ring barracks, whose noises upset godwit chicks and whose boots trample godwit nests.

The extension to the "Right of Men" bill which, by allowing nobles to freely stroll and hunt along the beach at any hour, and to leave all manner of trash, disturbs the local habitat.

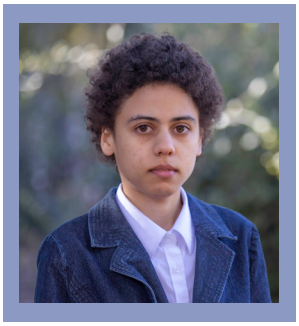
The illegal trespass of earth, water, and wind mages from the Outer Rings on the shore (on Bloodays, Bluedays, and Whitedays respectively), whose magical activities deplete the soil and kill beach grasses.

Alongside campaigns for species conservation, the ECGH is working with the Board of Domestication to secure permits for the raising of godwits in the First Ring. This population, however, will never replace the one we are losing. They may not have an instinct to migrate. Surely they will not carry the same history, the savage lineage. They will better serve as pets and exhibits—in other words, they, like the entire branch of ecology, will become a novelty.

The godwits' once-routine migration to Greater Harmon is no longer guaranteed, and admittedly it is possible that their habit can never recover. Additionally, I have been evasive on one point: whether the godwits are dying or simply leaving. The evidence available to us does not definitively say. Due to decreasing interest in the bird among our government's higher echelons, nobody is tracking its current migration patterns. This, if nothing else, must be corrected; it requires no great policy change and does not disrupt the expansion of empire.

It is likely, moreover—though our nation is ashamed to confirm it—that the godwits are not dying at all, and we, Great as we are, have simply lost their favor. Based on reports of godwits spotted by merchant and military ships, in journals and the incidental lines of published news, the ECGH has found reason to believe that they have rejected Greater Harmon in favor of—Helk.

End of Excerpt



JOI MASSAT (any pronouns) is fascinated by speculative fiction, satire, games, cultures, tangled histories, and the weirdness of living. They currently edit for Aethon Books.

Parisa

Samiha Matin

Because Najeeb knows it's necessary for him to work, he starts looking for a job as early as the first semester of his first year at the University of Michigan, Go Blue!

While FAFSA and a diversity scholarship have guaranteed him reduced tuition for the upcoming year, he still needs a job to cover university fees, living expenses, and textbook prices, a growing list of worries, including socializing and making friends, that persists in his mind even before he has moved into his double in Bursley during the second week of August. Quickly he bookmarks the university's website on student employment so that every time he opens Google, the page is the first thing to appear, prompting him to continue customizing cover letters and start uploading them to each posting. Something he's never done before but which every job he applies to now requires him to do. When the semester starts, he heads to the library straight after his back-to-back classes that end at four in the afternoon, not wasting a minute if he can.

There he looks up places on and off campus, aiming for lab positions, science tutoring, and sports management, things he loves and thereby can prioritize over the rest of his applications. He cannot believe how time-consuming it turns out to be, looking up various websites and converting them into bullet points, which ends up taking more than an hour each, followed by the tailoring of his cover letter to their particular goals, storing them in specific folders in his laptop, which, too, end up becoming a lot and quite disorganized, and lastly sending out numerous private emails to introduce himself and further express his interest to the managers. He is hopeful, though — his roommate from Troy, a business major about to graduate, says he's gotten a head start on the competition.

One Monday morning that's part of the Fall Break, which has stripped half the campus of its students and steered them towards Chicago, Najeeb is in the laundry room trying to find a dryer that's working when an array of emails appears in his inbox. He opens them to discover one after another as if they'd been predestined in some way to arrive all at the same time, various offices informing him in blunt professional tones that they have found somebody else. Or they're not looking for anyone at the moment but have forgotten to remove their postings. No apologies on any one of their ends, as he's quick to notice, for wasting his time. There are a few short

replies when he asks for a follow-up about how he is too young and inexperienced. And only one manager from the University's Office of Student Conflict and Conduct Resolution, whose last name is Ahmed, the same as his, reaches out and recommends that he tries the Job fair instead, which is happening at the Student Union in a month. Before he can decide whether to go or not, his heart suddenly speeds up so he decides to look up the schedule on the website instead. As he scrolls down the list of companies that will have booths there, a realization dawns on him that the jobs that draw him the most are the ones that demand years of expertise and recognition — internships over the summer, recommendations from university professors, and awards and grants bestowed by renowned labs. It's a guarantee that he wouldn't get them at this point in his life, even if he tried. Plus he would have also needed dress pants, blazers, and a good solid shirt, but a thrifting pick-up event at the Student Union was planned for much later in the semester.

In the back of his mind, as clear as glass, there arises the thought that he can always start working at the dining halls or one of the several cafes sprouting around campus. But because he's already done all of that since he was fifteen, at McDonald's or his parent's grocery store, a squat one-floored building sandwiched between a FreshCutz and a USPS office, its planked door with a large doorknob painted bottle-green and red, respectively, in honor of the Bangladeshi flag, he finds himself unwilling to lift a finger for what feels like another lifetime of menial work. The fact that it's college where better things are supposed to await him is another key factor why he keeps looking.

But the job-hunting is so tedious and tough, hogging all his free time without there seeming to be any discernible end to it, that at some point in November, Najeeb starts to believe he's not made for college after all. That he graduated with honors and had been a handful of students handpicked from his school in Kalamazoo to attend the University escapes his mind then as if they'd never been true. In his dorm's required class for the first-years, when they're asked to share their concerns about adjusting to college life, he brings up his unsuccessful search for jobs, how he's starting to feel like he doesn't belong here. Immediately data-laced affirmations which invoke university pride bellow out from all corners of the room: he is a Wolverine, a permanent member of the UMich family that boasts around 640,000 living alums, one out of several thousands of bright minds plucked out of the country at a staggering admissions rate of below 5%, monikers synonymous with intelligence and grit, meaning he has nothing to worry about, he'll get a job in two seconds. Instead, he remains jobless for the next two months.

At the beginning of next year, as soon the temperature plummets to negatives and snow starts gathering in huge piles just off the cleared paths, a position opens up in the AskwithMedia lab in the Undergraduate Library, advertising for a student worker who can work fifteen to twenty hours at their front office with an added bonus of working full time over the summer, a rare exception to many places on campus that automatically dwindle to half-days and Fridays off during the heat. Najeeb sends out his resume without expecting anything—jobs like these, with their free hours and their relative ease of operation, are highly sought after, the first ones to get filled up. Sure enough, nearly a month later, he gets called in for an interview. An evening where the snow is falling rapidly from the dark skies like cotton confetti so that his sunken footprints, the only ones for miles, are quickly packed in and erased, not a single shape existing on the stretch of the moonlit landscape when he glances behind, and where sometime in a blue moon a group of students passes him by in Canadian goose jackets, saying "hello" or nothing at all, he wears a navy-blue puffer coat, the only proper winter garment he has, from TJ Maxx, and makes the trek to the library where a scatterbrained old white lady named Debbie lords over the interview like a bird over its nest, asking him questions about his experiences with stacking, keeping an inventory, being on time, all of which he has in significant amount, thanks to the long summer hours spent at Modern Bengal Grocery. It must've been his desperation—or the early window he'd managed to jump through—because he gets hired on the spot.

Predictably the job turns out to be very easy, almost a breeze when he started that January. His tasks require sitting quietly by himself at the front desk and looking up, now and then, a couple of requested movies on ALEPH, a surprisingly non-glitchy database, retrieving them from any one of the twenty large bookcases snaking around the office space and docked into the backroom, each row on the shelf marked alphabetically by scotch-taped squares of paper, and then storing them in the reserved section of the shelf next to his desk before handing them over to the patrons when they arrived. Before midnight he has to take out the DVDs from the drop-in boxes at the front of the office and put them back into their original places. The rest of the hours, he can do whatever he wants to. He chats with his friends online and sometimes finishes his homework.

Tonight, a newbie is joining him. The AskwithMedia lab has had quite a few student workers come and go since he joined nearly two years ago, who'd never stuck as long as he did, some even leaving after a semester. During a meeting last week, Debbie mentioned that the new student worker is a sophomore, a year younger than him, but nothing else, not even her name.

Najeeb is finishing his dinner, a Café Shapiro egg salad and tuna sandwich alongside a small cup of Sabra hummus with pretzels, alone, in the backroom when he hears voices. One of them is Debbie's, the other unrecognizable. He rubs the crumbs on his finger against his khaki and emerges from the backroom, almost like a shadow. It's nine o'clock, and the ceiling-length windows all around him are dark and foggy, so he can barely see anyone down below. They're near the sliding doors separating the bookcases from the entrance: Debbie is leaning down towards the new student worker with a giant smile on her face while she's looking up, no smile, her head covered by a loose, peach-silky hijab. She is tiny and slender, nearly seven inches shorter than him, and Najeeb detects an odd sly look on her face as he watches her—she is looking very pretty and chic, too. Her outfit is an assemblage of perfectly coordinated colors: a long peach pleated skirt is paired with a billowy ivory tunic and two off-white pump heels, a white leather tote bag dangling precariously from her shoulder like a picture that has slowly started to unnail itself from the wall.

So there is less chance of drawing attention to himself, Najeeb decides to wait for Debbie to finish her introduction before walking over to his desk. One of the first things he hears, as he waits and counts minutes on his hands, is something she has always dispensed, in her characteristically tingling tone, to new student workers like a mantra: the ease with which anyone can find any DVD in the library, no matter whichever high shelf or bottom row or corner it's hiding in, because the system, brainstormed and spearheaded by her, is claimed to be that efficient. Perhaps even better than the Dewey Decimal System, she reckons.

A lie, of course, that he has become all too familiar with and had to learn the hard way over the years, tasked alone with smoothing over the disgruntled, impatient expressions on the patrons' faces as he returned to the front desk long past what was appropriate because the DVDs were found missing, misplaced, even mislabeled, and don't get him started on the mess in the Foreign Language Section that was a room away, always locked, gathering dust. But one that he has never had the guts to refute openly. As if to further irritate him, while he stands half-hidden by the door leading to the backroom, recollecting some of the more strenuous parts of the job, Debbie's speech seems to take longer than usual today, coming across as droning rather than informative, not to mention the new student worker asking questions—unnecessary ones if you'd ask him— that Debbie decides to answer with equally unnecessary and winding anecdotes.

"Does that often happen, Debbie?" she asks. "It sounds dangerous."

She has an interesting voice, a bridge between husky and smooth that is also somehow deep and loud at the same time. Like there's a permanent cough stuck to her throat, but she'll always sound assertive whenever she talks.

"Sometimes." Debbie shudders theatrically. "We had to call the UMDP a few years ago because someone was camping out here for three days. He wouldn't leave. Such an ordeal."

They continue talking while the thought of the pile of homework awaiting him at his desk starts jabbing at Najeeb like pins and needles. He's taking a 400-level Computer Science class and an Economics and Entrepreneurship seminar to fulfill his Upper-Level Writing Requirement. It's a lot of reading and coding compressed into seven weeks. So when Debbie gestures at the in-house viewing stations to their right—a vast, poorly lit space with a panoply of MACs and X boxes—and accompanies it with the same old joke about nudging stragglers after closing hours, he decides to snap close the backroom door with his feet. The noise catches their attention.

"Oh, hello, Najeeb!" Debbie cries out, looking very surprised.

"Hi, Debbie," Najeeb says tonelessly.

"Najeeb has been working with us for three years," Debbie says, turning to Parisa. "If you have any questions and I'm not in the office, he is the first person you should ask. He is fantastic! Najeeb, this is Parisa. Parisa, Najeeb."

They approach the front desk together, making no noise on the beige carpet covering the floor. It's Parisa that he looks at, slightly curiously, and she senses that, for she looks straight back at him, smiling, her smile exaggerating the slyness on her face, so she begins looking foxlike.

"Hi, Najeeb," she says and extends a hand. He takes it, a little confused. Her hand is slippery and warm.

"Hello, Parisa."

"Ok, hippoty-hop, let's go!" Debbie suddenly chirps before they can say anything else. "Time for the rest of the tour!" They look at each other for a

split second before Debbie noisily slides open the door that seals the shelves from the rest of the library, and then into the labyrinth with their millions of DVDs, she and Parisa disappear like a plop.

Najeeb opens C-tools, clicks on the link that sends him to the unofficial course page (EECs 483) and glances at the time on the bottom right corner of his screen. Almost nine-twenty. But he has enough time: the homework's not due until midnight. As he works through the assignment instructions, shuffling lines of codes, looking at his notes out of the corner of his eye, he can hear them touring the office, talking, and laughing, before finally heading off to Debbie's office that is shared with two other librarians. Parisa croons over the Smurfs that have been sitting robin-blue and mischievous-looking on Debbie's desk for years. Najeeb cracks his knuckles and goes back to checking and rewriting his codes.

When they come out, he looks up and immediately catches Parisa's eyes. She gives a sly look at Debbie's back, flashing him a conspiratorial smile behind where she stands, which causes him to raise his eyebrows in surprise.

"Let me show you how to use ALEPH, the brainpower of our operation," Debbie says, pulling the keyboard next to his across the desk and bending over it like a hunched question mark. Then, with a slow, steady hand, she starts typing random titles into the Find bar, carefully jotting down their shelf numbers on a stray post-it before handing it over to Parisa with a sudden, alert gesture as if to make up for the slowness. Parisa takes it in stride, leaving within a second. She returns from her test run very quickly, her skirts making a soft rustling noise as she returns. In her arms is a small column of DVDs, Adam Sandler's Happy Gilmore the first one.

"It's very easy," Parisa declares, setting them on the desk with a confident rap. "I'm sure I'll be fine."

"Of course, of course."

Debbie beams and nods in their general direction, clearly pleased by the addition of Parisa and her efficiency. In a sudden movement, which is very characteristic of her but always awkward to witness because of how abrupt it is, she returns to her office, leaving them standing still and glancing at one another, only to turn away when their eyes meet. As Najeeb returns to work, and Parisa wipes at the office chair next to his with a Kleenex, he hears Debbie rummaging through her drawers in the office and packing up her things, turning off the lights and humming loudly about having had another long night. She comes out at last, the handle of her blue faux-velvet bag slipping from her shoulder as she stops and asks him, quite absent-mindedly, if he is planning to stay till the library closes at midnight. Even though he chalks it up to her age—for it's common knowledge by now that he's the only one signed up for the last shifts—he is still compelled to confirm in a loud voice that, yes, Debbie, he is staying till the library closes at midnight. Next to him, now seated, Parisa pipes up that she'll also be staying behind, which makes her receive a very pointed beam from Debbie.

"Talk to one another when you're bored," she trills, almost tripping as she trots towards the exit. "Bye!"

When Debbie is gone, Parisa twirls her chair and faces him. She starts snapping.

"She is *so* neurotic. This is such an easy job."

Najeeb looks up from his keyboard.

"I was late for two seconds today, and she started going on and on about it," Parisa says. "Does she always act like that?"

"Best to be early," Najeeb advises quietly. He remembers arriving a few minutes late the first couple of weeks (not his intention: bike mishaps; bus delays; forgetting to tie his shoelaces properly, and then landing on his butt on an icy patch one morning — thankfully, he didn't break his legs) and Debbie turning passive-aggressive every time despite his numerous apologies. He didn't blame her, though — the opening shifts he had signed up for were the busiest, not to mention the importance of protocol. So he made sure to start leaving his apartment twenty minutes early, never staying past midnight the nights before his shifts, setting his alarm to five in the morning so he has enough time for a quick morning run and a hot shower, his roommate's coffee-machine percolating while he has his usual breakfast of Pop-tarts or a granola bar.

"Thanks."

This is the only word she says as she turns away, but it's drawn out and simultaneously touched with a hiss of sarcasm and something of what seems like coyness. When he looks around, she's already facing the computer before her, yanking furiously at its keyboard plugged into a socket under the table. It skates over the desk and bumps against her phone. Making an irritated noise through her nose, she places the phone quickly out of reach into her tote bag, leaning against her chair on the ground. Najeeb scratches his head and begins untangling his earphones. As soon as he finishes, a student walks through the door.

But it's Parisa who takes charge and runs off to the backroom as soon as the student names the movie; Najeeb notices she hasn't asked to look at

the student's Mcard, the first thing to do, a requirement of their job.

When she comes back carrying the DVD of *LA 'Aventura*, he cocks his head and asks her under his breath, "Did you check his card?"

Parisa furrows her eyebrows for a few seconds. Then she jumps up, shrieking, "No, I forgot."

The student hands over the Mcard but Parisa hesitate, too, at this, biting warily at her lips.

"I don't think Debbie told me what to do."

That's not true, but Najeeb doesn't argue. Instead, he turns to her computer, pulls the tab, and types the student's ID into the Find Bar. Parisa hovers over his shoulder, trying to see, and inadvertently he smells her fruity perfume. He frowns, forcing himself to focus. On the bottom right-hand corner, an overdue fee of eighteen dollars has been posted to the student's account. Now comes the most awkward part of his job—Najeeb leans towards the student over the desk and says he cannot hand over the DVD until the amount's paid. The student, a buff white guy in a grey sweatshirt emblazoned with three large Greek letters in scarlet, kicks up an argument at once. But Najeeb is too used to such reactions from angry patrons to be able to dispel it with just a few words and a bit of curtness to his voice. Rolling his eyes, the student struts away, DVD-less, and as he leaves her side, too, and goes back to his desk, Najeeb glances at Parisa, noticing that she's watching him with an amused smile. When he sits down, she slides her chair towards his and declares that she's forgotten half of what Debbie's said because she was talking so much, could he blame her for not knowing that she had to ask for the Mcard before handing over any library stuff?

Najeeb jams his earphones tightly into his ears and resumes his work. From the corner of his right eye, he sees Parisa fishing a MacBook Pro, an IPAD, Sennheiser headphones, an Apple Airpods case, and a white Kindle from her bag. She places them like centerpieces on the desk, sits down, and turns on her Kindle, reading from it while a smirk grows on her face. Then, when she takes a bathroom break, she walks out of the exit without stashing any of her stuff in her bag and taking them with her. Najeeb takes out his flip phone from his pocket, thinking he will never treat it, amounting to less than a quarter of her belongings, so carelessly.

When it's eleven-thirty, Parisa starts yawning loudly.

"Oh Allah, I am so tired!" she exclaims. Then, hastily, she backtracks, "I mean, sorry, sorry, I mean, oh God."

Najeeb wonders at her panic; he is visibly brown and has a very Muslim-sounding name.

"Do we have to stay till midnight?" Parisa says, scrunching her nose. "Nobody has come here in the last two hours."

Then she smirks at him and says, "We can close up early. She'll never know."

Her tone suggests that while she knows he won't agree to it, she won't stop herself from saying it as if to coax him to change his mind.

Najeeb wonders if the irritation he starts feeling is a little unexpected and out of proportion, but he can't stop himself from saying what he's about to say, in quite a firm voice, too, which is that he doesn't want to stay here any more than she does; still, because students always stop by at the last minute, someone might email Debbie and complain if they find the library closed. He doesn't say the obvious, though, that he'll suffer more than her if the worst happens, which is losing the job and not being to pay his rent on time or at all.

The smirk on Parisa's face suddenly disappears. Instead, she's staring at the flip phone he's forgotten to put back into his pocket. It shamelessly lies beside his keyboard, pinging suddenly with a message notification, probably spam. He pockets it and, glancing at Parisa, sees her turned from him, putting her electronics one by one in silence into her tote bag.

After midnight, they split up in opposite directions to turn off the lights across the office, the backroom, and the in-house viewing stations. Parisa finishes first and waits by the elevator, which is going up instead of down, as he takes his bag and walks down the stairs. They're on the second floor. Downstairs it's completely empty except for the front-desk receptionist, a white-haired man, whom he nods at as he circles him to head out. Across the first floor, the rows of empty tables and chairs look green under the fluorescent lights. Najeeb catches his reflection in one of the windows, and he can't help but feel, a little bleakly, that it looks like someone from a movie, the expression on its face tired to the point of hypnotic. Outside, the bike rack has only his bike, and as he unlocks it and puts on his helmet, Parisa walks out the front doors, the Airpods under her hijab blasting music. He starts to avert his eyes and fiddle with the straps under his chin, but she straightaway notices him and yells, "Good night, Najeeb!" Her face is blank for the first time tonight, deprived of any traces of sly or smug expressions. He gives her a little wave as he fastens his helmet strap, holding the bike stable with his other hand. Parisa smiles and starts walking away from him very briskly, a trail of rock music following her. Soon she's disappeared under the shadows of

the trees lining the sidewalk.

Najeeb gets on his bike, feeling his feet pedal off their own accord. Even without traffic, reaching his house from the library takes roughly around fifteen minutes. It's on the South campus, near the stadium, shared with three other people from his department. As he speeds through the empty lanes, the cold wind messing his hair, silence everywhere, he wonders if he should've offered to walk her to her place. Immediately, he dismisses the thought. He remembers how Muslim girls, especially hijabis, in Kalamazoo's masjid, even the ones on campus, traveled in tight-knit groups whenever he saw them, always coming and leaving prayers and potlucks with dozens of sisters dressed identically to one another, all giggling and laughing at the top of their lungs. Parisa most definitely met up with a pack and reached her home — two minutes or two miles away — at the same time he did. He carries his bike over the stoop of his porch, unlocks the door, and walks straight into the darkness of his house.

"Parisa" is the first long short story of an interconnected short story collection (or campus novel) called *Limerence*.

SAMIHA MATIN is a disabled writer from Bangladesh. A Michigan alum, where she has held more than 15 jobs over four years, she obtained her MFA in fiction from Arizona in 2022 and is currently working, besides fiction projects, on an academic book about Bengali/Bangladeshi female/femme activists and writers from 1903-2022. In addition to writing in English, she likes to read Bangladeshi literature, translate, research history and politics, and practice singing. Soon she'll be volunteering for a non-profit for hijras in Bangladesh and running a South Asian Literature Book Club.

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Mordent

Sara McKinney

Part 1:
"Love will have its sacrifices. No sacrifice without blood."—Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, *Carmilla*

Overture – Andy

We met in college, which is to say, Ohio. A small liberal arts school you've probably heard of and regard with either approval or suspicion, depending on your politics. Me, enrolled in the music conservatory, and her, history, although really, her heart was set on baking. It was a coffee shop sort of thing, then a dinner-and-movie thing, and then a shared apartment. We moved fast but, the world being what it is now, can you blame us?

Before Mina, I had a vague idea of my romantic future as a perpetual bachelorhood, myself the center of a microcosm of lovers that passed through and briefly illuminated some intimation of a Parisian *pied-a-terre* or Roman *pensione*. The eager student, the opera dilettante, the businesswoman (a taste for whips and leather), the disaffected housewife (requiring young, virile rejuvenation), each a faceless iteration of womanhood that strutted and moued her way through my dreams, lounging at the piano or studying naked on the chaise lounge, legs up and twiddling behind her. For the most part, these lovers presented themselves to me separately, blissfully ignorant of the others, although I did not rule out the possibility of orgy. (I was nineteen: please don't hold it against me).

I asked Mina out because she put cayenne in my coffee, twice. My fault, maybe, for requesting the barista's favorite at the campus café but I was sleep-deprived, addled, my fingers throbbing from interminable hours at the piano, where I had been working the third theme in Liszt's *Funerailles* in anticipation of my second-year examination. And a cayenne-infused mocha is a cruel thing to do to a Midwesterner, really, without proper warning, which is, I suppose, why I liked her: cruelty, tempered with sweetness.

Mina, four letters. Sugar, then bite; first on the lips, then hard palate, tongue. She'd tell me later, after we'd moved to Minneapolis together for the sake of my soloist career, that sweetness has to be cut with something to really taste it. Thus, lemon juice, espresso, sea salt, nuts and their various butters. Thus, (and with increasingly devilish intent) chili powder, chiltepin, and habanero sprinkled lovingly

over truffles and currants, left on the kitchen counter with a note reading "Taste me." Her sweet cut with sour, with bitter, with salt, with spice.

I think she enjoyed that, spoiling me when I was home. Leftovers and test batches from the bakery where she worked, as well as her own, at-home experimentation: lopsided tarts and éclairs, cracked fondant roses, uneven macarons. *It's like you're bribing me to stay,* I told her once, savoring a mini lemon meringue pie that had failed to crisp. She smiled, a glint of that familiar mischief in her eye, *So, what if I am?* I liked to treat her, too: Chopin and cheesecake, Debussy and baked brie, but I wasn't home that often, even after the engagement.

The week that everything went wrong started with a fight. This is what you expect me to say, *what I wish I could say* because saying it would give everything that followed a neat logic, the sort usually reserved for movies and books, but if there is a logic here it is obscured, elusive, self-effacing. It was summer, hot, the plant life run to riot and overspilling the city's modest planters, the sky low and pregnant with rain. I had a 6AM flight for a soloist performance in Miami, and she drove me to the airport with the usual orchestral *accoutrement*—suitcase, tux (still in the bag from the dry cleaners), keyboard and stand for practice in the hotel room. Starbucks. Mild hangover. (I had been out late, playing the bar at the Radisson, which I never did sober if I could avoid it).

What I don't understand, Mina kept saying as she eased the Sentra between two vaguely phallic charter busses filled with red shirts and protest signs, *is why they have to come here. Minneapolis is a stronghold; they know they aren't going to win the vote.*

I took a sip of coffee and massaged my throbbing temples. *I don't think it's about winning the vote.*

What the hell is it about then?

I don't know, power? Intimidation? Sucking corporate dick?

Wow, she said. *Homophobia, so eloquent.*

You know what I mean. She shot me a look, and I held up my hands in surrender. *Okay, sorry, sorry.*

We parked. Outside, the air tasted like gasoline. A crowd of red shirts formed a froth on the pavement as they collected their luggage from the undercarriage of the buses. A pair of pasty men in camo shorts and Confederate flag hats stood aside from the group, watching us. As I unloaded the trunk, I kept a hand on Mina's elbow and angled myself to stay between her and them. The one on the left had reflective yellow shades, a gray-streaked beard that skimmed his chest; the one on the right, hipster glasses and a high-top fade. I lifted the keyboard out and slung the carrying case across my back, grabbed tux and suitcase in my freehand and leaned in to kiss Mina goodbye, hoping to get her back in the car and away from dumb and dumber as quickly as possible, but she slipped under my arm and onto the sidewalk, where she would be in clear view. She was always doing that to me—disappearing one place, reappearing another—a deeply unsettling trick since she was at once so small and so striking, her body compact and muscular through the arms, but soft and curving elsewhere, black hair cresting her brown shoulders like a thunderhead.

My expression must have been some combination of *what are you thinking?* and *come on, let's go,* because she didn't give me a moment to react before grabbing my shirt collar and pulling my face to hers. Her kiss was full of hunger, tongue. Her hand groping my crotch, and then it was over.

Hey, I whispered, *what the fuck?* But she ignored me, smoothing the wrinkles out of my collar.

"Good luck with the performances. Don't do anything stupid." She turned to go, tipping dumb and dumber a curt nod as she went.

#

Board Minneapolis, land Miami.

Taxi to hotel. Sleep two hours, call agent to discuss social media videos and why I need more of them to grow my audience, then meet with conductor, talk shop over drinks and tapas. Saint-Saens. *Le Carnaval des Animaux*. Five shows this time: three evenings, two matinees (Saturday, Sunday) and *love to have you back next season if it goes well*. Toast whiskey sours with the understanding that *if* is a word devoid of legal tender. My soloist career occupying a space called almost: almost regular, almost international, almost enough to pay rent. Well, half of it.

After, call Mina with intent of: *I understand PDA for the sake Loving v. Virginia, but groping me? Really?* Straight to voicemail. Guess I'll try again later.

Practice with orchestra. Violins keep coming in fast, trumpets too brassy. In the dressing room, take: aspirin for headache, Inderal for stage fright, bump of coke for luck.

And then evening when, for two hours and thirty minutes, with the spots blazing and the piano's lower register pouring out like darkest honey, I am not myself but someone else. A second, aural body

hovering dissolute above the audience, between vibrating atoms of oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen. I am tremolo, glissando, high and strutting ostinato. *L'intouchable.* A menagerie: lion and rooster and donkey and tortoise. Aquarium—a wall of blue-cast and shimmering reflections, silver darting through dark green curtains—then aviary: trills and calls and chromatic warbling, a bright flute ascending, weightless as feathers. All leading to a last and ringing C Major.

Bow, then bow, then exit stage left.

Backstage and still soaring, it's more coke (but not *that* much coke, no room to get messy) and then champagne, champagne, champagne just to get through dinner with donors, philanthropists, board members who care less about the music than they do the cultural cache and massive tax incentives from their charitable donation. We're dining in some sort of centennial hall, the ceiling above us lofted, gilt and glass as a Gatsby-era greenhouse, the night sky framed for moneyed edification but muddied by light pollution so there are no stars anymore, only a navy brown churning. My table full of men with sagging jowls and crepe necks talking over wives who have been nipped, tucked, botoxed, fillered into ageless Insta-women. When the conversation turns to composers, or venues, or *kids these days* and *dwindling interest in classical music*, I'm expected to give pat answers about community outreach, or audience involvement, and say absolutely nothing about cuts to public arts and education funding. Inevitably someone mentions *hip-hop* or *cell phones* or *radical, socialist agendas* and among the exclamations of agreement, my job is to shut up and stuff my face with canapés. After all, what do I know? I'm just another dancing bear to these people—watch me wave down the waiter for a second plate of salmon roe and a Sazerac with extra sugar, please.

Hours pass. Days. In the rush between venue and hotel room, the restaurants and bars and airports all blur together, streaking with velocity, color, until finally you're allowed to stagger home, radiant with applause, bloated with liquor and salt. In a state like that, you can't help but forget things. Important things.

Board Miami, land Minneapolis.

I called Mina again at the airport, after my return flight landed, but I wound up in her voicemail again and well, *it's Monday morning*, *she's probably on her way to work*. I left baggage claim to catch the shuttle, elbowing my way past commuters to get out at the right stop, and then rode the elevator to the twelfth floor, still suspecting nothing, jamming the key into the lock and jiggling the handle to get it unstuck (both maintenance and WD-40 had proved equally useless) and then, once the door was open, I smelled it. Smelled *her*.

The noose around the kitchen fan. The brown puddle dripping, half-clotted, onto the table under dangling calves that didn't looked less like calves than spoiled zucchini, half-liquid flesh bursting through an off-color rind. At the end each foot, five mottled toenails peeling off the skin like stickers on a balloon.

I closed the door. Sat, hard on the industrial hallway carpet. My suitcase thumped down beside me and rocked there until finding a balance point on its bulging front compartment. I'm not sure how long. All I know is that when the police showed up, the suitcase was still on the ground and I was standing, a Styrofoam cup someone had given me clutched with both hands because the shaking was so bad that if I tried to hold it in one, I was going to spill coffee everywhere. This feeling like I'd just been shot in the chest at close range, nothing but pulp and fluid and a gaping hole where Mina used to be and some faceless cop asking *where was I on the night of July 28th?* and *did she ever say she had a plan?* and *no, officer, our wedding is in six months. She bought her dress last week*.

And if I could just stand there, turn my head far enough in the opposite direction, I wouldn't have to look at *that thing* again when they wheeled it out on the stretcher. Not *her,* not Mina, and not really human, either, just some form of organic matter, of what was left after.

#

My brother picked me up from the overpriced coffee shop/boutique across the street. The cops said it would take the biohazard people at least a week to clean everything up and I needed to find somewhere else to stay while they did. James' was the only phone number I could remember, so I called him. My ears were ringing the entire time we talked, as if my body, unsure how to process the shock, had decided to interpret it as an exterior explosion. I could barely hear myself and I couldn't hear him at all, so I just kept on apologizing: "I'm sorry? Repeat that? It's too loud here."

"I'm coming!" He bellowed. "Where are you?"

"I don't know," I said, staring blankly at a table full of owl-shaped tea towels, pink sloganized coffee mugs: #GirlBoss, #ProudBitch, #Wake&Bake.

“Some goddamn place. Hell, I think.”

“Just stay on the line,” he said, a car door slamming somewhere in the background.

When he arrived, it wasn’t enough to just pop the trunk and wave me over; he parked and hugged me on the sidewalk, where the two of us blocked foot traffic. His cheek was wet, but mine wasn’t because I wasn’t crying. Why wasn’t I crying?

My god, James kept saying, and *she seemed so happy,* and *Andy, I’m so sorry,* squeezing me tighter each time he paused for breath, his arms twin snakes of vein and muscle around my soft midsection. The rest of him, leaned out and carb-deficient for summer, felt like hugging a protein bar. I squeezed him back, hardly aware I was doing it.

For most of the ride, I sat pushing buttons on the car radio, scanning randomly from station to station, so I caught a guitar solo here, an R&B vocal there, a brrrzzz of distorted downbeat that might be trapwave or synthhop or any number of increasingly niche electronic genres.

When it became clear that the strange grinding noise I was hearing had nothing to do with the speakers and everything to do with my brother’s back molars, I settled for people watching. The Camry stopped at a red light, and the crosswalk ahead of us filled. Business-suited executives toting umbrellas and briefcases, harried mothers tugging children, joggers pearlescent with sweat and mid-morning sun—all of these strangers going about their day, unaware and uncaring that the world had ended days ago in an apartment five blocks north. Did they not know that in most cases, hanging doesn’t kill you instantly but is instead a long, drawn-out process of kicking, struggling, gasping? Minutes, hours, sometimes days of burning lungs, scissoring feet, desperate hands fumbling at the knot and *someone, please, someone, please*.

Help me. Help me. Help me.

The lights changed again, and the Camry started forward with a small jolt that lodged somewhere just north of my navel.

“Hey James?” My eyes were still dry, but my voice sounded husky in a way that was barely audible over the sound of the engine. “Stop the car, maybe?”

“Hang on,” James said, his eyes fixed on the traffic ahead. “Let me get out of this intersection. There should be parking up—”

“No.” The vowel lurched on me, turning into a belch. I was already unbuckling my seatbelt. “Now.”

“Andy, I can’t—”

But it was coming. I couldn’t stop it.

I opened the passenger door and leaned my head out, my nostrils full of hot tar, then stomach acid as I vomited a neon stream of free continental breakfast onto the pavement.

“Oh thank god,” I said, wiping my mouth clean on my sleeve. “That feels better.”

#

August 18th, *Dallas Daily Herald* : “Eschewing the melodrama and sentimentality often favored by young virtuosi, Mr. Mayne approaches Mozart with the satiric attitude of the postmodernist with mixed success. One notes a sloppy personal appearance reflected in flabby technical execution far different from his stirring performance of Bach last season. Classical music fans need not regret missing this particular performance series.”

December 1st, *Chicago Music Monitor*: “One can’t help but come away from last night’s showcase feeling that this is an altogether different performer than the playful young pianist who opened the fall season with a witty but ultimately forgettable rendition of Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 21. Now, offering a selection of Liszt’s Transcendental Etudes after a brief absence, a much slimmer and more subdued Mayne thrills his audience with a performance worthy of the composer himself.”

February 20th, *Cincinnati Arts Enquirer*: “There’s an eerie, lunatic edge to his articulation that demands attention. ‘It’s unnerving,’ said Alexander Crumpacker, stage manager for the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. ‘Like listening to someone spiral into insanity. Truly magnificent.’

Asked about his new sound and stage persona, Mr. Mayne responded in his familiar irreverent style. ‘My technique is the same, but the preparation is a bit different. So, instead of trying to relax and center myself right before I go on, I just down two cups of coffee on an empty stomach and then spend most of the performance praying I don’t get the sh*ts. It also helps if I stare directly at the front row and imagine myself naked.’”

May 3rd, *Seattle Music Review*:”Gaunt, imperious, and married to the sort of ramrod posture that will have piano teachers fawning over him for years to come, the new Mayne cuts a striking figure on stage.

‘Admittedly, it was a bit of a shock,’ joked Eleanor Van, the Symphonic’s conductor. ‘I mean, the first day of rehearsal we all expected to see

the same chubby, goofy, sort of hipster-looking guy who's been our go-to piano soloist for the past two years. Instead, Andy comes in for the January kick-off and our stage manager won't even let him in the auditorium because she doesn't recognize him. He's lost fifty pounds. He's lost the beard. None of his clothes fit…[but] he looks fantastic, like one of those pianists you see in avant-garde films from the 20's.'

As for the recent rumors that the young pianist's extreme weight loss is negatively impacting his health, Mrs. Van had this to say:

'Concert musicians take their health very seriously. It's a bit like being an Olympic athlete; you have to be in top-form year-round. [Mayne] isn't an exception to that. If anything, I think the weight loss shows how committed he is to taking care of himself, which wasn't necessarily the case when he headlined for us in September. You'll notice that his sound has changed dramatically since then. There's a lot more energy in what he's doing now, more depth, more complexity, and I don't think it would be wrong to connect some of that change to adjustments he's made in his lifestyle. He runs. He eats clean. He's cut down on the drinking. And it's paying off in a lot of ways. '"

June 16th, *Boston Post*: "Boston, MA: Concert Pianist Andrew Mayne collapsed from dehydration last night during the Boston Philharmonic's opening performance of Rachmaninov Variations, an arrangement of the composer's most famous concertos. According to attendees, Mayne lost consciousness during a violin sonata and was revived off-stage.

'There are very few things that will make us stop in the middle of a performance,' says Brandon Heinz, longtime conductor for the Philharmonic. 'But an unconscious soloist is one of them. These performers don't have understudies and, for pianists, there isn't a first or even a second chair who can jump in to take your place.' The Philharmonic offered last night's audience refunds or replacement tickets for a Sunday matinee on June 18th."

June 17th, *Classical Music Magazine*: "This fainting fit comes at a delicate time for Mayne, 24, who has become both an audience favorite and a controversial figure in the American classical music scene. We spoke to Evan Lohengrin, a former bassoonist and Music critic at the *New York Times*.

CMM: We often hear people describe Mayne as 'an unconventional soloist.' You've covered a lot of up-and-coming soloists in their early careers, would you say that description fits?

EV: I don't know if 'unconventional' is the word I'd use, but people like Mayne because he's an outsider. He's not a prodigy like Lang Lang and Evgeny Kissin. He lacks the Juilliard pedigree. He's coming out of the Midwest. He hasn't been handled and groomed for the stage since he was 4, 5, 6 years old like many of his peers. Most virtuosi his age have been on the national stage since they were 10, but he made his debut at 18. So, there's a bit of an imbalance there.

CMM: What about his performance style?

EV: Well, there's performance style and then there's stage persona: Mayne isn't the type of performer you bring in for Schubert or Brahms. Not because he can't play it—I saw him do a lovely Brahms sonata in LA a few months ago, but it only worked for him as a virtuosic piece because his delivery was entirely cynical. Where Mayne thrives, where he really does best, is when he's allowed to be humorous and brash and (more recently) neurotic in his delivery. So, people want him for Liszt, for Wagner, for Bach, for Beethoven. The Luhrman brothers with Chicago's King's Theatre actually had him do Philip Glass's Heroes Symphony in a Bowie wig and full Ziggy facepaint and both Mayne and the audience absolutely loved it. He's able to cross that culture divide that so many of us in the classical music world have been moaning about since the 80's. The problem is, a lot of the old guard directors, promoters, and conductors look at stuff like that and think it's gimmicky, because, well, it is. But it also opens the door a little for audience members who might be new to classical music.

CMM: He's not the only one doing that, though. Why do you think Mayne in particular seems to ruffle feathers?

EV: No, he's absolutely not the only one doing it. I think we're seeing that kind of openness more and more from this new generation of soloists. But the other side of that coin, with Mayne in particular, is a certain disregard for the afterhours pomp and circumstance, and that causes trouble because it can interfere with funding. No one wants to bring in a soloist who is going to perform *Tristan and Isolde* and then skip the stakeholder's dinner to play "Teenage Wasteland" at a bar somewhere—which he's done. Or show up drunk to a private performance, which he's also done.

CMM: What about his health? Would you say that is a major concern?

EV: Normally, I'd say that's between Mayne and his doctor, but at a certain point, yes, it is a concern. Take Boston. Imagine you're Brandon Heinz

and you hire a healthy rising soloist in October and then in March he shows up emaciated and faints during the second movement. You aren't going to make that mistake again.

CMM: But whatever is going on with him, he does seem to be capitalizing on it. Last month, Stephanie Buttry at *Seattle Music Review* ran a profile on what she called the Andy Mayne aesthetic, which I understand has been divisive. What are your thoughts on it?

EV: Look, I understand there's a certain Romantic image of the tortured artist pounding desperately away at the keys, which is great for marketing and I'm sure both Mayne and his agent know that. But really—and I've said this about album covers with scantily-clad female artists, too—it should be about the music. We are talking, ultimately, about the lives and bodies of human beings. If Mayne chooses to present himself this way, and it gives him an edge in the classical music 'marketplace' so to speak (which, I believe it's still too early to tell), there will be imitators. And I'm not sure what happens to us as a culture when we are no longer selling art but are forced to sell ourselves instead."

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The No Longer

Matthew Morris

Once, only once, my family traveled with the Farrells to North Carolina for a week at the beach. Jack, the oldest of three sons, had become a close friend, or Jack and I were close for little kids. His father, Brian, had pitched for Creighton, and my parents played college tennis. The families could have been close, but at the beach, my sister and I got sick, feverish, a distancing dynamic. My parents let us wander about, did not worry though school would soon again begin, though the Farrell boys could catch our bug. Brian never came to the beach, tumbling Atlantic over shell-pocked sand, only stayed in the house, the living room, in the dark. I remember only what my parents say. (Sometimes, yes, we must all relive the past.) The Farrells, Irish and mixedly blond, lasted with us in that house for three days and then said, *We're leaving*, but did not explain why. After, the families were not close; when Brian accepted a job in Hartford, we lost touch wholly.

This is the apologia, a recurring device in the literatures of the formerly enslaved, she, my Af-Am Lit professor, says to the five of us. I doubt she's shut the door; anyone could hear us, speaking. We haven't said anything risqué, though, and I rarely say anything. We're all black in this room, but it is hard for me to assert this, my skin light as Walter White's—White, early leader of the NAACP, not descending madman of *Breaking Bad*. She's been in the Army, is from Philadelphia proper, used to teach white students in the South, Georgia or Mississippi. She's said of the biracial kids she knew when young: *They were loved, protected, but never accepted*. I never know how to get my voice out into this narrow room, take note after note and remain alert, looking here and there as Bryan or Maddie or J. speaks. All of this *will* get better, but for now it is tricky, the race game which is not really a game, because sometimes it threatens to shatter me. *This is the apologia*, she says, and we study together the lines—but now I read what precedes, the brief letter to Parliament, the apologia before the apologia: *I am sensible I ought to entreat your pardon*. Yes, the author writes *I ought to entreat your pardon*, asking forgiveness, not yet having begun. *The apologia*, she says—she wears her hair short, sometimes produces a box of Raisinettes—*is about getting the reader to listen*. The white reader who might discount, disdainfully, all of what remains unsaid. *I ought to entreat your pardon for addressing to*

you a work so wholly devoid of literary merit. She scans our faces, our youthful bodies; we're graduate students, have never served; it is her job, she's said, to tell us what it means to be a black (mixed?) intellectual in white spaces. This is why she sometimes shuts the door: her colleagues sit in adjacent rooms, walk the hallways, use the copy machine. The closing of the door makes of our classroom a bunker and of the department a (soft) warzone. *This is the apologia*, but the epistle comes first: *… as the production of an unlettered African, who is actuated by the hope of becoming an instrument toward the relief of his suffering countrymen…* We understand: the apologia entices a reader to keep moving. Yes, *this is the* (pre-)*apologia*: *I trust that such a man, pleading in such a case, will be acquitted of boldness and presumption*.

We had nothing, my oldest friend's father says. *We were very poor and the town was divided, East Cary and West. Susan lived on the other side of the tracks, the wealthier side.* We're sitting in the lobby of a hotel in Phoenix. Wayne's a self-made man, a structural engineer, the president of his firm. He coached me in youth basketball, is short and skinny and white with long arms, big hands. *Susan's father taught at NC State. We met in grade school.* Their youngest, Allie, sits beside him; the lobby hums; she is here for an international science fair. Wayne no doubt helped with the project, happily. I sit on the other side of our low, silver table. I'm studying writing in Tucson, am twenty-six. He's never spoken to me about his youth in North Carolina, but I just explained to him about my father's bound ancestors. Sharing begets sharing, or he is saying, *We also had it hard*. This is certain. I take a picture of him and Allie, send the image to my oldest friend, Justin, say, *Look who I found*. Later I shake Wayne's hand, exit the lobby, drive home in the dark. Came up to Phoenix to see them and to visit my father's then-living mom—arthritic, wheelchair-bound, in assisted living on the city's affluent northside. Back on the freeway, I play hip-hop without pause, set my Corolla to cruise control, don't rush or dally. Late, most everything past the road is in shadow, mountains neatly invisible above vanished line of horizon.

This is the apologia, a recurring device in the literatures of the formerly enslaved. Please: listen. I want to take you on a trip through Tobacco Road. I don't want to be *vain*—only *vain* enough to write, to chase *this* life, which I hope is *not* vanity; *vain* enough to speak, and for you to hear.

UNC misses in the lane in the closing seconds against Duke; the Tar Heels take a loss at the Dean Dome; we switch off Tom's TV. Tom, six-foot-four, is from Greensboro, plays basketball with me at the Rec sometimes, and transferred to U.Va. from a private school. Claudia's the same: a transfer and a North Carolinian; her family's from Charlotte, though she went to boarding school in Delaware, spent summers working at a ranch in Wyoming, doesn't consider North Carolina *home*. *Can I get a ride back?* I ask her, and she says, *Of course*. We get into her white SUV and she says, in mobile darkness, that it has *been a long day*. She still hasn't studied for her Stats test, doesn't have a calculator. Classic Claudia, but I'm enamored of her, never knew how to say it right. Tried to that very morning on the Corner and she blushed very hot, said, *That was very brave*. At least she still wants to hang out. She has long brown hair and freckles and speaks in this proper, lightly accented style that must've come from the boarding school. She fly-fishes lots. With Tom and I, she plays intramural basketball. First times sharing a court with her, I played smooth and free. She brings it out of me, except for the paralysis and this late way of speaking: I mean, in three months, we'll graduate. We've never more than hugged.

This is the apologia, a recurring device: *I wish I were more competent to the task I have undertaken. But I trust my readers will excuse deficiencies in consideration of circumstances. I was born and reared in slavery*. Listen to me. I don't believe *this* author believes, truly, that she does not write well; I believe that writing an apologia is something you would *never* do unless compelled by society, by forces without. Like when I say that I'm gonna write about Afro-American experience, but please forgive me, because I'm not what you're expecting—can almost guarantee you that. Used to get quesadillas from this Mexican place back home and they didn't cut it like normal, filled up the tortillas thicker than I was used to, but it was still a quesadilla. I'd go with my father. Black folks sure don't all look the same—excuse the metaphor.

Late night in the backyard, during a pandemic that kills and kills, thousands daily, *many thousands gone* (*No more peck of corn for me / No more, no more*; *No more children stole from me* / *No more, no more*). Our friends have come over for board games, food and drink, company, this last in shortest supply when to see someone outside your "bubble" is to risk everything. We lean forward

as we speak in lawn chairs our landlord's painted black, padded with red cushions. Next to me is EJ, my lovely housemate who moved to Tucson from Raleigh. She isn't a North Carolinian, just passed through. She's loudish, smiles almost always, has dark hair down to her shoulders. She's drinking and flirts with me in a friendly, funny way. Everywhere I go there's someone who's lived in NC and with whom I vibe. Is this because I'm a southerner, specifically of the Carolinas, if one goes far enough back? EJ texts me before bed, saying she's deduced something about me. I decide to be straightup and say, *You're almost right*. Then, lights out.

I never had a name, my first months in Tucson, for what I was doing when I wrote about my family's history in slavery or of my light, black grandfather's law professorship in Phoenix. Once, only once, but the occurrence roiled in me like a rip current through shallow waters or a heat wave against summer asphalt, up from desert dirt, a colleague said, *You seem like you want to establish credentials. You don't have to do that. You're a black writer*, she was saying. *Own it.*

I leaf through a heavy black book on songwriting for the guitar, given to me by my sister years ago, and come to a section on *false intros* in the chapter "Song Structures." I'm in Virginia over Christmas, in my room, and she's in hers, just down the hall. We haven't seen each other since the pandemic began nine months ago: sudden closures, grounded planes. And soon, I'll return to Tucson, Erin to Boston in the white Acura that our father's gone mother drove until she couldn't.

I read, anyway, in the songbook: *We assume that an intro leads to what follows. But an interesting effect can be created by having an intro that does not dovetail with the rest of the song...* I wanted to tell you of the folks I've known and loved from North Carolina. So, I did.

*

The tragic mulatto is a figure, writes the gone poet Sterling Allen Brown, consigned to *a divided inheritance*. The tragic mulatto, I read again and again, is a stereotype: an *image* of the mixed woman, mixed man. The professor who curates the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia,
David Pilgrim, writes of *the tragic mulatto myth* and states, such that something small shifts beneath this confounding mixed-kid-skin (small because I've felt this before, shifting because it is *true*, true as God's word resounding, as ball arcing through nylon): *The mulatto was made tragic in the minds of whites who reasoned that the greatest tragedy was to be nearly-white: so close, yet a racial gulf away*. I am not myself tragic and, anyway, all that was a long time ago.

No. Let me tell you this: my father's mother died in 2020. It was a stroke but my father says the virus sometimes kills you that way, so who can say. In January, she turned eighty-seven and my father and I sat with her at a restaurant in Phoenix. She ate barbecued ribs, cleaned her light skin with a hot washcloth after setting down the bones. We pushed her wheelchair up close against the table, to make it easy. Nothing was easy. She said, *I don't see any black people here*. Trying, it seemed, to give her a lift, my father said, *I saw someone when we came in*. This was our last lunch out with his mother: in April, we got the phone call. *All that* was a long time ago but all that was not, and if all that was not, then all this does still smell. Reek—sea of white faces, though this family moneyed enough to sit in that restaurant. She made a big deal about the washcloth when the white server didn't replace it fast enough. (What's it mean to wait your whole damn life for something?) Pilgrim continues, and my heart does a little slide around my picked-clean chest (all the men pass of heart attacks in this family, my mother's side, my father's): *The real tragedy was the way race was used to limit the chances of people of color*, whatever the tinge of a person's skin. Here we agree. (We agree, I suppose, on most everything.)

Do you see what Pilgrim means? I am not myself tragic but *the racial gulf* is.

My father asks me, as we eat lunch over the winter holidays with my sister, if I saw the 2021 calendar that came in the mail from the Equal Justice Initiative. As I answer *yes*, he brings the large, beige envelope over, pulls the calendar out. The EJI calendar, large and red-yellow-black and with piercing black-white photographs, is not a remember-this-and-that scheduler: there is almost no space to record your plans for a day, a week. Whoever made the calendar breaks me, *every* day marked as the anniversary of a past skin-atrocity, my father's birthday the day anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells lost three friends in a Memphis lynching, my mother's birthday falling on Selma's Bloody Sunday, my sister's the day an officer pilfered life from George Floyd, and my own, the twenty-seventh of November, the day Ivy League sociologist John Dilulio described inner-city African American boys as "brutally

remorseless," as "super-predators"—beastly, prone to violence. Every day's a widening, or was.

(Later, Dilulio would admit that *demography is not fate*.

That he'd let the idea get away from him, a big fish, such that he couldn't *reel it in*.

My father and his older cousins, Bege, Clark, and Pat, were once brown-skinned kids in the city, Chicago's Hyde Park.)

There are twin entries for January 29, nobody's birthday whom I know: *1883: In Pace v. Alabama, U.S. Supreme Court upholds law criminalizing interracial sex and marriage*; *1908: Federal court bars "mixed blood" Alaskan students from white schools unless they assimilate*.

We had a swim unit during high school. Changed in the locker room, slimy wet floor—bring something for your feet—and blue day-use lockers. Thick wash of chlorine, a set of metal bleachers, sharply cold against your bare skin. Two pools, the first a small rectangle with a maximum depth of perhaps five feet and with a basketball hoop affixed to the edge for easy dunking. This is where they took the non-swimmers, the kids who couldn't master a stroke, like the backstroke for me. Maybe we all want to graduate from the kiddie pool, especially when we're used to feeling athletic, to quietly showing out? We all wanna get somewhere new. A barrier wall separated the kiddie pool from the lap pool, the lap pool up to twenty feet deep, so that you could close your eyes and feel pressure build in your ears as you descended to pool's floor, hard concrete, just to touch the bottom and then come up for air, to know you did that. A light-blue diving board, but the colors here are speculative, pulled from memory. More bleachers against the walls, for teammates and for coaches and for parents and friends and lovers attending the meets. Blue-white dividers between the lanes like that barrier wall between the pools.

I still can't do the backstroke, float and skim on water's wavy surface, dimpled face and thin torso pointing to ceiling or to sky.

(In New York City, before moneyed black families started summering at Sag Harbor, lots of kids didn't have a place to swim: segregated facilities, nowhere to dip your toes in, submerge.)

I'm not trying to tell you I'm *unlettered*, as in the 1789 letter to Parliament, or asking you to *excuse my deficiencies*. No. An apologia is a *defense of an action*, a preemption, what you say to explain yourself before somebody gets the wrong impression. (It's what I think I should say when I go on dates: *I lack experience*.) When I told my professor from the Army that I was the child of a white mother and an African American father, she opened her mouth in surprise and did not, for what felt like a while, say anything; she just let me keep talking. I said, *Sometimes I don't know how to speak in your class, because I get read as a white person. I don't want to take up space.* She said *you have to speak*. Because *you're a person* and *you do have the experience*, do know about skin, largest organ in the human body. That's when I felt like she understood me, could *love* and *protect* me like any black student passing through the department. That's when I felt like I understood her, I suppose I mean. Knew that she would accept me. That she would.

Justin is my best friend, but so is James. Once, in summer, I swam at a club pool with James, his mother and first girlfriend also there. James and I played basketball in the water, one on one. Hot in Virginia, and the whole time we played, I thought about his girlfriend, Jean, up on the brown concrete, comfy in a white pool chair. It wasn't that I was attracted to her, but she could see our bodies, my body and James's, sun beating down on our bare skin, mine somewhat tanner than his. I don't like being looked at without proper coverage. We got out of the pool and sat at a table in the snack bar and Jean mentioned my writing, which James had told her about, and this, I recognized right off, was a kindness. Another time, Jean borrowed my Epiphone electric guitar, orange-brown, and left behind a brown Fender pick, medium weight. She was a singer in a band.

My grandmother painted: soft still-lives and black-white collagraphs and purple torn tissue. I am to return to Tucson on New Year's Day of 2021 and a painting of hers, "Woman in Thought," should be there already, or on the way, a loving remembrance. And I just want to be like the figure in that painting: alone in a room and pensive and dressed in vibrant colors, reds and blues. I want to be that way for my gone grandmother—to think with care and to speak with precision.

Which is to say that I write for her, for my family, the living and the no longer.

*

What is tragic in *the racial gulf* is tragic for you and for me, for the mixed and the white and the black person. Pilgrim, yes, writes of closed-down *chances for people of color*, but everyone's made less

than whole. The mulatto, *made tragic* by the gulf, was—*is*—just the figure whose body gets stretched widest, splayed. I could make an angel in the desert dirt or slushed snow and sometimes when no one is looking do spread my arms like the wings of a plane.

Peola is among the best known, according to Pilgrim, of film's tragic mulattos. *Imitation of Life*, 1934; then, the remake, 1959: Peola is the only and almost white daughter of Delilah, a black housekeeper and cook and single mother, Delilah herself a stereotype, a *mammy* accepting of her lot, her character a riff, Pilgrim writes, on the *contented slave*, a trope considered, as with the *tragic mulatto*, by Brown in his 1933 essay "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors." Peola *won't* be *that* caricature when she sees a way out, so at nineteen she abandons her mother, living as a white woman. Only when Delilah dies, heartsick, does Peola return, for the funeral, to the life she once lived, consumed by regret. She made a choice, you know, made her exit, left behind the woman who birthed her and loved her without condition. Now Peola must face all that with the face, the blue-grey eyes and brown hair and very light skin, she let take her somewhere new.

I want to pull my *pale beige* arms in tight against my chest, want to place my hands over my thrumming heart, do not want to feel splayed, pointing here and there out over the gulf. The dream we nurse, EJ and I and others in the desert during a pandemic that kills *through* the breath, through the opening and closing of our mouths in quiet prayer, is of a trip north, though not far: the Grand Canyon. We would camp beneath stars and walk among red rock and stand before the Colorado, watching the water move. My mother's parents met at the Canyon's North Rim in the late 40s. Yes, they divorced, but her mother wants her ashes scattered there, so they will be.

Love, I want to say, breaches the gulf. Tries to and maybe does—midway, as canyons stretch ever wider, softest rain and slowest rivers eroding firmest earth.

I begin to feel confused about what I learn from Pilgrim and what I just *know*. I know and have known that my life and my sister's life are not clichés, reducible to *tragic myth*. No. We are not ourselves *tragic* mulattos. But the language of the *gulf* unveils something new, lifts a shroud past which I see. I think often of the ocean, of pools and of swimming even as we flounder, even as we tread—of our bodies as what Rankine calls *strange beaches*. The gulf moves in like direction.

The night I return to Tucson from Virginia—January 1, 2021—EJ tells me that she wants to swim outdoors again. She is missing a vertebra in her back; gliding through the water, though, doesn't strain it. *The pool is supposed to be safe*, she says. *The chlorine kills the virus*. We are in the car, moving through dark desert streets, EJ steering, takeout—Indian—on the backseat. We can both smell the food and we say we're *so hungry*. I tell her my mother swam over the summer and that she *felt safe*. EJ can't do the backstroke either.

I do not intend, when I write about North Carolina, to issue an *apologia*, to make you see me as African American through the blood if you can't through the skin, in this way to *credential* myself—or I don't do this *only* for *myself*. I want you to see me but I also want you to *see*, see? See these white-mixed-black bodies stretched out across the gulf and see the gulf *itself*—wide as the Canyon from North Rim to South, wide as the sky when you look up, body flat against earth, but covered over in talk, in the meeting of (your) eyes with (my) eyes at a table in the backyard, in the hushed-close space of a car moving through night. Why the *false intro* does *dovetail*, here: I have known so many white people from North Carolina and did love them, still do.

*

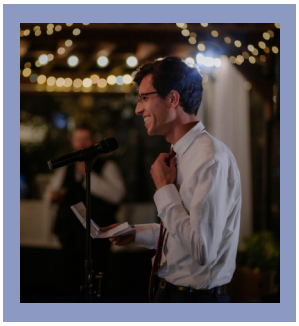
Pools've long made me self-conscious, like I told you. Not just that day with James and Jean. Used to sometimes think because of my skinny midsection, the ribs showing through. Maybe what I thought that day, too, but not just. Not only the ribs but also the skin, and the question of how I should feel about *that*—to state the obvious, the already stated, to say *this* again and again.

Ours was a family emancipated, yet later swept back in: ebb tide, then the swell. Another family upended. Generations of Carolina bondage, North and South. *How*, I meant to ask through my writing, *could you doubt my blackness?* What I could not say with my voice, skin this *pale beige*, like in Larsen's *Passing*. I *won't* tell you that history now, except to say that I don't get what happened. First set free, issued papers of manumission, but then impoverished, made chattel in rural Caswell County—rolling fields of tobacco, up against the Virginia border.

I'm up above this very old canyon, see, and looking straight down. A mentor told me I'm *straddling the fault line*, but either way it's geography, geologies, stuff of the earth for these bodies stationed on this revolving blue-green ball. Nauseous, like my father gets at the tops of Ferris wheels, and my brown eyes fixed on ancient rock, the reddish striations. This mixed heart doesn't know fullest peace; has it ever, since I first became conscious of skin? (How young?)

Maybe, if I went swimming in the right places for long enough and with the right person, let this skin just be skin and no more, no less, I could wash the *myth* and *tragedy* right off this body—off me, off you, off us. Just imagine, if only for a titch, a touch: all these bodies mid-stroke, mid-splash; backstroking, bobbing lane lines half-hidden if never out of view.

"The No Longer" was printed in the fall 2021 issue of Seneca Review: Volume 51, No. 2.



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Several People I Never Saw Again

(excerpts from a book-length manuscript)

Kevin Mosby

Several people

I saw a man once who claimed his grandfather invented the fruit cocktail. I researched it on the spot and told him he was entirely incorrect and provided the proof, but he insisted.

I saw a child who couldn't, for the life of him, differentiate between ice cream and soft serve.

I saw a woman who calls herself a Wiccan priestess. I know her, quite well in fact. She's my aunt by marriage and not blood. But one Thanksgiving she stopped appearing, likely on account of grandma's pointed prayer.

I've seen several doctors, none of whom I have gotten to know on a personal level.

I saw a person who sold fruit from a fruit cart and the fruit was generally very good, but the papayas were always mushy.

I saw a man whose bare ass I remember more than his face. Not in a sexual way.

I saw Steven Spielberg. At a poetry reading I stumbled and stepped just slightly on his shoe, but he didn't seem even remotely bothered. He had a much longer gait than I thought he would have.

I saw most of the surviving Kennedy's in a dream and all I could think about was how disappointed I was that Gore Vidal wasn't in attendance.

There are several people I've seen, but haven't met, and don't know. Some I feel like I've met, some I feel like I know.

I've seen Carlos Santana at least half a dozen times at concerts and fundraisers. In fact I may have met him at one such fundraiser, but still I don't know him at all.

There is vegan cheese and there is regular cheese, he thought. There is camembert and ricotta and mozzarella. There is cheddar and jack and Swiss and colby jack. Velveeta is a subset of regular cheese, but is nonetheless housed under the umbrella of cheese, regular. He had never paid much consideration to the cheese of goats and ewe. So there was, just, regular cheese. Vegan cheese is not regular cheese, and therefore vegan cheese has its own umbrella, a very small and lavish and overpriced umbrella.

The Chinese don't seem to use much cheese. The last time I saw him was in the banquet hall of a Chinese restaurant after a mass celebrating the holy convalidation of his parents' marriage, held on the 30th anniversary of their courthouse civil ceremony. He was 30. (They had quickly gotten to work.)

At the Chinese restaurant with no cheese he toasted his parents' marital success and referred wryly to his own lack of relational luck. He had thrice been left for a woman, all civilly. One took their shared child but later apologized and returned him. She had gone on to marry a woman named Liz. At first he thought this pattern emasculated him, then he realized it indicated his kindness and sensitivity, both traits he admired.

Then he became a vegan and ate primarily at vegan restaurants. The last time I saw my friend, as I've said, he was eating dumplings at a Chinese restaurant, but the last time anyone at all saw him or he saw them was at a vegan diner. He almost always ordered a cheeseburger with *soy cheese* clearly marked on the menu. Today he ordered a chick'n taco with many *fix'ns* and an insufficient list of ingredients.

The day after, and many days after that, his parents and siblings read and reread the Wikipedia article "Vegan cheese." From the article they learned that "Non-dairy cheese originated from China in the 16th century, made with fermented tofu or whole soy." Perhaps he too had read the first part of this article but stopped at tofu and soy. He had always loved tofu and soy and he had never particularly cared for regular cheese, which were two reasons he so loved Chinese restaurants.

But this was not a Chinese restaurant. This was a vegan diner, specializing in the sale of food items made to resemble other food items.

He thought, mistakenly, that the cheddar-like cheese atop the chicken-like chick'n was made of soy, as it was in the cheeseburger. Had he scrolled further down the article he would have learned that the commonest ingredient in vegan cheese today is the nut. Various nuts. Almonds and the like. This nut was a cashew. Cashew vegan cheese that closed his throat. And he'd forgotten his Epi-pen.

The medics were called but it was rush hour in a busy city. His parents were called an hour after that. They opted not to see the body. They had the new wife of his child's mother do it. Liz said he looked fine but I know he looked inflated.

I lied, I've just realized. I did see him once more. He looked much less inflated. Serene, really.

Five years ago, I had 300 more miles because I took what I thought would be a scenic route, but these desert cities are just California brown. I was at a Chevron in Palmdale and Linda Manz, child star of the film *Days of Heaven* (1978), pumped her gas next to mine. She looked at me once because I held my gaze on her too long and her eyes looked dead already.

Or I thought it was her, at least, because she looked about the same, plus a mess of drugs, scars, and haircuts. Although, I had seen the film just the night prior at the apartment of a friend in Los Angeles, so I could have just been seeing things, and it may not have been Linda Manz at all. Like when you go to the zoo and your child is a zebra for a week, or when you ride bumper cars and then, on the drive home, keep forgetting that your car cannot do any bumping or veering across many lanes on the highway.

It might have been a woman either much younger or much older than Linda, actually.

I couldn't watch *Days of Heaven* the first four times I tried because I found child actor Linda Manz' voice both grating and saccharine, and her eyes too black. I thought, this is either a very untalented actress acting well or a very talented actress acting poorly. She later appeared in a small handful of gritty films, but nothing in this century.

Why did director Terrence Malick not give Linda Manz money late in her life? And why did co-star Richard Gere not give Linda Manz money?

When Linda Manz died 42 years after the film that made her short and stagnant career a career, she died in or near her lower-middle class tract home in, yes, Palmdale, so it *must* have been Linda Manz and her Civic five years ago.

Linda, then 15, chain-smoked on set, so unsurprisingly she died of lung cancer, according to her son. Later in life she smoked in the house but usually she attempted, at least, to blow in the direction of the open front door, through a white metal security door. Maybe this young smoking caused the syrupy gravel in the voice of the film's precocious narrator.

When the Google Maps camera car appeared on Linda Manz' street around the time of her death, dollar store Halloween decorations adorned her home — a purple ghost, a paper witch who crashed into the garage door, and several limbs groping air, growing up from the brown lawn.

I doubt Richard Gere even once visited Linda at this house.

I don't expect director Terrence Malick did either. But as the likely impetus of any subsequent recklessness in her, Mr. Malick could have at least, in Linda's later life, given her another job in the business, unless he doesn't do favors for people like that.

Sam Shepard may have stopped by to visit Linda whenever he was passing through. He's someone who probably had to divorce Jessica Lange because he didn't like her friends.

I find it unlikely that any of these named persons attended Linda Manz' funeral.

One day, my cat will be a dead cat, my grandfather will be a dead grandfather, and my history teacher will be a dead history teacher. Oddly I've had no teachers whose first names I can't remember, but several whose last names I can't remember.

These Michaels taught Physical Education, Hawthorne and Irving, and the physical sciences.

Michael was Italian twice and maybe thrice — certainly three times olive-complected — but never very tall.

Michael always had at least one ex-wife.

Michael is very short. More short, even, than the two other Michaels. But he has revealed himself, through frequent talk of his new girlfriend during analyses of *Geoffrey Crayon*, to have clearly always been a "man's man." In a hoary way.

Frank hated Michael.

Esther was so neutral about Michael that she thought Michael was Frank, despite their shared wall in building C, which was then the science wing.

Margarita told me she thought Michael was very sexy and was glad their surnames touched.

Michael formerly taught at Cornell, but after they uncovered funny stuff, he hopped a train to LA, but his wife didn't.

Margarita once told me, "do you know just how Endowed my Michael is of his Chairship in American Literature?" "You're Michael?" I inquired.

Michael's employment was terminated shortly thereafter.

No, wrong Michael. That should be science Michael, who lived in a doublewide with a cat and hid his tattoos from the girls in the front row near the never-used eyewash station.

The daughter of a dean who I think was a plant.

A man whose boots, Italian, never missed a day of class.

And one whose last name was Banana, but that could have been someone else's student and I'm misremembering.

An entire memorable row:

The student whose thesis statement was, "Being cultural does nothing but make me less cultural."

His seatmate, a girl who wrote all over her pastel pants and inevitably complained to her seatmates about having ink all over hands.

Next to her, two students who reeked simultaneously.

And lastly the libertarian. *Don't tread on me* sticker on his Dell. Ardent fan of current policing tactics in Tehran and Juarez. He sent me a video a week after finals that suggested Nancy Pelosi governed from a DC bunker a loosely organized coterie of child-peddling businessmen.

There was one whose cornucopia of nose hairs you just wanted to pluck from the bounty yourself.

I think there was a second one like that in the very same class.

One I don't remember. I tried very hard to, when months after the semester he asked me for a letter of recommendation for a Knights of Columbus scholarship. His grades in my class, I discovered, were excellent, but neither his name nor the face on his email thumbnail conjured any memories whatsoever. Maybe he had always worn a face-concealing hat in class.

The knitter. A habit to combat anxiety. Every once in a while she scribbled something in her notebook, but mostly she made very small mittens.

The gloomy one who left her long shadow behind every day.

One who brought a small desktop PC and monitor to class daily, and I would have felt bad for him but it was surely very expensive and he was clearly from one of those families that invests very early in something that later catches on, like a certain microchip, and then produces mediocrity after mediocrity until the whole line dies off.

The bisexual who typed their phone number in the heading of the essay, between their name and mine.

The altogether outright misfit.

The nephew of a very famous person. He wrote about his uncle's cars, about his dad's third wife having attended her own prom within the last half-decade, about his collection of Bob Marley-themed coasters.

The student I regularly mistook for another student on days the other one was absent and never on the day the other was there.

The various children of cops.

The ones who wanted to join the military, and might drop out at any moment to do so.

Boorish in his dress, boorish in his conduct, boorish in his speech, the one who said he'd never enjoyed a class so much in his life.

The one who cried on the last day, perhaps too aware of her own social ineptitude or mortality (she had a dying uncle and a dead chihuahua). She told all her classmates as she packed her bag, "Isn't it sad that in all likelihood I'll never speak to any of you ever again?"

who poked my dog so she'd stop seizing in the room with a sign that explained the assuaging concept of the "Rainbow Bridge" to Animal Heaven had the largest real nose I'd ever seen. Even larger than any nose I'd seen on screen, any screen. If you typed "largest human nose" into a Google image search, the first hundred results would contain noses smaller than this man's nose. A nose clearly made by two people with averagely sized and altogether unremarkable noses, that both sniffed too hard, so God made the nose of their child enormous.

Does God reign over the land on the other side of the Rainbow Bridge? When an animal dies it goes into an incinerator and then into a small wooden box, or into the ground. I've loved animals so much I wanted to give them a funeral more elaborate than that of Joan Rivers, who surely had quite an elaborate and well-attended funeral. A fortunate truth is that the funeral of Bill Cosby will be significantly less well-attended when he dies than if he had died a decade ago.

The man with the needle had the most unusual way of consoling me. He said that he is convinced that the materials used to build the bridge to Human Heaven are dependent on how that human was perceived by other humans to have lived. For instance, he said, did you know that the bridge to heaven that Antonin Scalia walked on was made of literal shit? Antonin Scalia did not go to hell, but his trip to heaven was slogging through shit. I don't know if the separate bridges walked on by Antonin Scalia and my poodle lead to the same place, but if so she is clawing his polyester divan to ruination.

A divorcee & her children (The Heaven of Peaches)

Social psychologists Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski posit that a unique trait of humanity — an awareness that one day "sooner or later we will lose the battle against death" — has, over the course of human existence, caused us to develop certain cultural worldviews ["humanly constructed beliefs about reality shared by individuals in a group that serve to 'manage' the potentially paralyzing terror resulting from the awareness of death"] which allow us humans to view ourselves as more than "breathing pieces of defecating meat no more significant or enduring than porcupines or peaches."

⤷⤷⤷⤷

Peaches do not, given their taxonomy — large woody membrane as pit, not brain — consider their afterlife. Never once has a peach considered how it will die. Tragically, often: its flesh torn from its pericarp by ravenous incisors.

Tragically, no one has ever — with any great success, at least — proposed a heaven for fruit. The heaven of animals does not welcome peaches. Peaches have no eyes and they require exterior sources for mobility.

⤷⤷⤷⤷

Last summer on a plane my row-mate Mrs. Fleishman cut up with a plastic knife one plump peach for her two children sitting across the aisle. Two well-behaved boys, Django and Huckleberry [Django for Reinhardt (guitarist) and Huckleberry for berry (*not* Finn), I discovered. As Django and Huckleberry sat watching their twin tablets in 23A & B, their mother, far too young to be doing it unironically, knitted them scarves.

— Hello, I'm Mrs. Fleishman, said Mrs. Fleishman.

I respondents sans surname.

— My husband fucked me over, said Mrs. Fleishman, to uninquisitive me, attempting a nap.

— Oh. I'm sorry, I said.

— Tried to take these two to LA but I told him my lawyer father (my father never liked that fucker), I told him that my father would *bleed* him dry.

— Seems like a smart move.

— Fucker. That fucker. Wouldn't even touch me near the end. Would you like a peach?

Mrs. Fleishman's knitting needle, too close to my flesh and to that of the peach for my comfort, prompted my frequent trips to the lavatory.

[— Do you need a laxative? asked Mrs. Fleishman once. I have many.

— No thank you.]

Mrs. Fleishman insisted again that I eat her second peach.

— The boys don’t want it and it’ll go bad soon and I can’t throw away a peach. How sad for this peach!

I ate the peach, then, said Django:

— I’ll have another peach. The whole thing.

But it was gone.

There was suddenly great turbulence and Mrs. Fleishman crossed herself, which greatly surprised me.

⤷⤷⤷⤷

A friend I've never seen

A drunk holy man I met in a house not my own asked me if I'd ever had a friend I'd never seen.

Yes, I said, we've exchanged countless emails but have never met in person. Our relationship was entirely professional but then one day she asked for my number in case she needed me or I needed her at an off hour, and then we began to discuss our mutual distaste for the use of the word "map" as a verb (she said it's used only by academic blowhards, of which she was one). I suggested a phone call ("my thumbs are tired") and she said in her time zone it was lunchtime and boy was she hungry. I should have known then, but instead I told her, the next time you're visiting my university we should grab lunch, and by 3:30 we returned strictly and exclusively to email exchanges.

My new acquaintance said this was indeed a sad story but that he'd meant "a friend you've never seen" in a more poetical sense. He'd meant God, of course, which I had known the moment he asked the question.

KEVIN MOSBY is a writer and educator living in Berkeley, CA. He is a Contributing Editor of Essay Daily's "The Malcontent."

5 Poems

Aria Pahari

Ambient Freeze

When a hand splays itself on you
note a temperature interaction:
palm ablaze, trailed by arm—

the shooting tail.
Small bodies of ice smolder
as they careen past the sun.

From my place between stars
I watch you recoil.
I beam a wish your way:

May your expanse be attuned to, not annihilated.

As for me—even with countless
sources of heat, the temperature
in space lingers at absolute

zero. This is not coldness,
but the vast presence of absence
not even fire can outlast.

I touch you and you turn into a pile of leaves
I cannot tell where you start and the begins

On the bed, a pile of leaves past.

A gradual smother of certainty when I say I cannot breathe.

Therapists' bewilderment in my certainty

A structure not built to handle wind will not wind.

A structure not built to handle wind will withstand wind.

A structure not built to handle wind will not handle wind.

Bass Note

Crimped inside me lived the negation. It hummed, dissonant, dissident and untranslated. One evening, it sensed I was safe: my sister a wall away, mother in meditation, father strumming his guitar. The expansion began where I had the smallest room. After dark I would sit and scroll at my tight window desk. My face hovered before me, reflection alit, the negation sounding as I pressed *enter.*

Welcome[1]

to visibility

as archive

to open is a choice

an intrinsic part

of forming

intimate

speaking may be undergoing

maintenance

please visit

please

go

1 https://www.asexuality.org/

First Time

with a line from Don't You Wonder, Sometimes? *by Tracy K. Smith*

I scroll and click. No one stops me.
My window looks into other rooms.
I overhear murmurs syncopating
with what I can only utter in sleep.
I could esc but instead I shift
into a self-glimpsing unblinkered
by pathology. *Ace* is the abbreviation
for *asexual.* My body absorbs the word
with a swiftness that recalls when I watched

my ashy knees drink lotion for the first
time. Do I wish to belong? Some do not
ever have to wonder. The comment sections
ablaze. Comets. Each *a cosmic ace hovering,*
swaying, aching to make us see. I fantasize
about people from this planet inhabiting
the gradient of attraction as we do.
The dividing line harbors an underbelly—
a mosaical repulsion you pretend not to know.

The poem "i touch you" on
page 2 was previously published in
Waxwing, Issue 23, Spring 2021

ARIA PAHARI is a poet based in Tucson. Her teaching, writing, and editing experiences include a Kenyon Young Writers Workshop Teaching Fellowship, residencies from Monson Arts and Hambidge, and a Summer Reading Fellowship at RHINO. Her poems can be found in The Georgia Review, The Margins, Inverted Syntax, and Waxwing.

Reckon

Logan Phillips

youngmother&youngfather cashed out of tucson
bought in a busted town a set of almost ruins on

OLD CHARLESTON ROAD

a woodhouse &a mudhouse both sliding down an arroyo
filled with historic trash glittered purple glass

couldnt leave a marble on the kitchen table without it rolling off
to the corner of the room something in the earth pulling

everybody to it some metal some law some greed
down there buried in the mineral rights

but understand even youngfather was prospecting prospects looking
to strike it middleclass assay a paycheck &see what shook out

he took a job at the ***COURTHOUSE MUSEUM***
because story was the onlything that paid anything

while over at the ***OK CORRAL*** ***EARP*** still circled
in ***GUNFIGHTS GUNFIGHTS GUNFIGHTS*** for

another ambuscade of tourists gawking a shooting
gobbling a steak ogling sepia performing a postcard

look youngmother&youngfather tried forever before babyme
everything was bust back before their little babyboom

&then they did what newparents do repeated what theyd been told
&acted out the roles of the drama they found themselves in

pretended to know before they knew &learned to know
what they felt they shouldve already knew

put babyme on the back of a bike &rode :

down ***TOUGHNUT*** to the ***COURTHOUSE MUSEUM***
over to ***ALLEN*** past the ***BIRDCAGE THEATER***

&on back to the ***MUDHOUSE*** in circles&circles

{ the sun ***SETS***

shooting shimmer
through bruised sky
rain curtains closing }

*

was youngfather an ***EARP*** was youngmother a ***BIRDCAGE***
will I ever ***RINGO*** is it all courthouse or all dicethrow

was I born ***OK*** a toughnut was I born ***OK*** a huckleberry
a lucky cuss another bird of passage all shuffled up
a bird of paradise yellow lipped epitaphed in caliche

was I boy born sixshooters for fingers
born deputized a silvermine directors chair marquee marked man
already ***EARP***ed in iteration born prospected &claimed acacia
scarlet corralled heir circling cyclical highnoon practicing the dieslow

understand
I couldve been born in a pitmine I couldve been born a saguaro scar ***OK***
born in a singlewide acre of asphalt under the ***SUPERSTITIONS***
born in another tongue querencia fronteriza ocotillo espina ***SONORA***
born born nacido ***OK*** but instead born into florescent efflorescence
of a cochise county hospital &a rash of ***GUNFIGHTS***

*

was it ***18*** or ***19*** born in ***'83*** or in ***'83*** ***TOMB STONE*** tell me
whats a century when learning to walk
whats a horse bound to springs to do
but gallop toyhorse squeak gallop gallop
surrounded by sunsets sunset sunset

flooded mineshaft whats your version of events was I foolish gold
thinking I could getaway from this mannequin masculinity
this möbius reenactment this mutoscope gunfight

truth is I was born a gambels quail plumed of last light
alive vociferous fouquieria florescence in my flourish

{ the sun ***SETS***

leaving the sky smalt

punctuated by the first twinkling
bulletholes

from pistols pointed up

holding up
the night }

*

cant say I know how to unbuckaroo el vaquero
aun hablando español y así it aint a quick assay
to sort vámanos from vamoose its been aggregate

cowboys were Black&Mexican until they hit the silver screen
y la época de oro was all charro too overexposed celluloid
black&white more white than black whats new ?

not this : the cochise county sheriff wearing his ten gallon
cameras rolling reading the script claiming invasion

not this : border patrol on horseback
whipping at Haitians on the riverbank

what century is this anyway ? the twenty first

have yever seen a circle spin so fast seeming
endless intoxicating conquista cocktail
truth&consequence miraged in whiteness ? well

siendo complicado esto de amarrar un lasso pa agarrar una verdad sola
where the word rodeo comes from the words colorado condado cochise
nevada santa cruz sierra vista ¿ y yo qué ? ¿ cómo es que

I aint entered the poem yet tomando por dado que hablo así
talking as if I wasnt part of it ? well I want tell you
this is just how we talk in ***TOMBSTONE ARIZONA*** except it aint

yo luchaba pa esta lengua trying to see more than I was shown
y aun así horizon recedes as I write my horse
toward destination &there aint no horse aint no absolution

just kidme at the kitchen table spinning spirograph
tangle to pattern speak&spell borderlands AM radio
accordeons swirling from static desperado from desesperado

at the ***MUSEUM*** kidme kerplunks a coin into the ol MUTOSCOPE
puts face to viewer cranks the handle gears turn fotos flip flip
flipflipflip so fast pictures motion an early motion picture

the scene is a ***GUNFIGHT*** big surprise when the end comes
the bodies pop back up &gunsmoke eachother again
&again until the quarter runs out &the audience goes broke

violence is how the stakes are set in tombstone
the opening scene tropes massacre of a Mexican wedding
to say ***LOOK*** these cowboys are ***BAD*** they even shoot the padre

&drag the bride into darkness while kidme watches bigscreen
learning to see desposible brown characters a blockbuster &no Black actors
renegade from renegado cinch from cincho nada from nothing

so whats a ***YEEEHAW*** to a ***HOWDY DO***
whats a ***HOOOME*** home on the ***RANGE***
whats a hobby rancher shooting a migrant in the back

years after writing a shitty novel about a hero rancher shooting a Mexican *?*
a headline ripped from a drama a diorama a rodeo break *?*
a cinch a steal a snitch a stache a novelization a fiction made fact *?*

fuck this it aint where Im from except it is

*

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Pig

Brian Randall

After his parents have been still for two days the pigs come in and eat their bodies. He tries to stop them at first, leans into their bulk and pushes, but they barely even notice him.

The stillness inside the little farmhouse becomes unbearable. He takes to sleeping on the dirt outside. The pigs are never far away, rooting and wallowing in the muddy ground.

He hates them. Hates them for taking away what remained of his parents. But in the ensuing days—in the long, empty nights—he is comforted to know they are there. He wakes alone and shivering, but they are always nearby, the shapes of their backs a series of gentle slopes in the darkness, their snuffling a familiar accompaniment in the night.

He sits separate from them for the first few days. Watches them root and wallow. Watches the piglets swarm around their mother, scramble over one another to reach her teats. Sometimes he cries thinking of his mother and father. Of himself, alone now in the world. The piglets come over and sniff his face, their nostrils tickling the air around him.

He follows the pigs when they leave the farm for the forest, climbing the valley's slope into the trees. There they root the undergrowth. Insects. Acorns. Truffles. Their mouths churn everything into food.

His hunger grows and grows, smoldering inside him. He feels it with every movement, gnawing at the edges of every thought. He begins to feel weak, light, like he is losing his grasp on himself.

Finally, he pushes his way in with the piglets. Searches out a teat, puts it into his mouth and pulls. Fills his belly with the thin, grainy milk. Lays his cheek against the velvet sand paper of the sow's belly. Lets himself be shouldered aside by another squirming piglet, a gentle, greedy game of tug-of-war. He learns the way. First me. Then you. Then me. Then me. Then me. The milk washes through him, delivers life back to his limbs.

He and the piglets sleep in a bundle in the soft duff beneath the trees. He feels their warmth near him. Their small movements as they tremble in dreams. The sky above is open and all around him the larger pigs sleep, washed in moonlight, their shapes forming a close horizon that keeps the rest of the world at bay.

He watches the pigs change. Their hair grows out into coarse bristles. Their teeth push out from the sides of their mouths and curl upward. Their smell changes, taking on the damp aromas of the soil.

He roots with them. Turns over rocks and breaks apart rotten logs. Unearths translucent larvae. Finds food in all the hidden corners of the forest.

He comes to understand the simple pleasures of warm dirt, of a gentle breeze, of sunlight filtered through leaves.

When the dogs come they are a blur of blacks and browns. They move in streaks around him, the air a roil of growls and snaps and barks and grunts and squeals. High piercing airless screams. Screams of panic and pain. The pigs scatter and turn and are pushed back into a tight ring. The big boars are cut off from the rest and cornered and try to fight, lowering their curved tusks and shearing the air in a threatening arc but wherever they turn the dogs come from behind and catch at their flanks and the thin tendons of their legs. They bleed and tremble from a dozen wounds and gunshots crack the air apart and pigs tumble kicking into the dust, fall mid-run end over end. He cowers amidst it all, presses into the dirt, carves out a shallow indent with the panicked rocking of his body, tries to go deeper and deeper, presses his face into the ground until the dirt clots in his ears and over his eyes. This death is nothing like that other death he knows, nothing like the quiet stillness, quiet coldness of his parents. This death is alive and hot with the smell of animal and blood, with the screaming and the guttural growling. This death builds and builds into a crescendo until he has to shut it out, close himself off from it, burrow deeper and deeper into himself.

When it is all over—the guns quiet and the dogs brought to heel—they drag him up from the ground. He resists but they are not gentle and set him standing. They brush the dirt away from his face and one of them kneels in front to look at him.

"Who are you, boy? What are you doing out here?"

He doesn't speak, but they know him all the same.

"He's from that family down in the valley."

"The dead ones?"

"What's his name?" One asks the other, who shrugs.

"What's your name, pig boy?"

He finds that he can't bring himself to speak, that the words won't come out. They are scattered and hiding somewhere inside.

They stare at him and shake their heads. They take him with them.

At the orphanage he is given a uniform, rough and scratchy and gray. He receives porridge in the morning, which he eats greedily, abandoning the spoon until he is slapped in the back of the head and reminded of his manners.

They give him a biblical name, because he still won't speak to tell them the name his parents had given him. He is sequestered with the young children—children even younger than him—because they perceived his silence, his blankness, as slowness.

The other boys whisper about him, call him "pig boy." They shape a history for him. His father was a man, his mother a pig. He spoke only in squeals and grunts. They corner him in the hallway with weighted socks and tightly rolled newspaper. He sinks to the floor and curls up under the blows. They tell him they ate his mother, his brothers and sisters. They will eat him too, taste the tender flesh of his haunches, his ribs, his cheeks. The squeals and grunts come just like they had hoped, escaping his throat, spilling out of his mouth.

When he begins to speak again it is quietly, privately, to other children, the other quiet ones. The ones who flinch at a suggestion of movement, that stay always at the periphery. He is more comfortable among the younger children. The simpleness of their wants—warmth and safety and food—mirror his own. With the older boys and the adults he will speak only when spoken to, but not otherwise, and then only in simple, soft noises.

Mealtimes he is most animated, eating whatever is in reach. He never takes to using a knife and fork, still his hands, still his teeth do most of the work. He hardly notices the slaps of the nuns—minor annoyances—not enough to interrupt his eating. Orphanage fare is all gruel of some variety—porridges, gravies, stews. Meat and vegetables all congealed together into a slop. He never knows what he is eating, only that it is food.

As he gets older, he grows too large to be cornered by the other boys. Though he is gentle and slow, they steer around him, making space for him to pass. He hears the whispers that follow him down the halls. Pig. Pig. Pig. It always seems to be on the lips of those around him, and soon it replaces the name the orphanage gave him. Pig is how he is known. Pig is how he knows himself. The other names fall away. There is only Pig, pig, pig.

Often he dreams of pigs, of being surrounded by a rising tide of pig-flesh, of a sea of backs, all linked together and moving as one sprawling, amorphous creature. Pig, pig, pig. The word loses all meaning and becomes just noise, a little grunt. The throb of blood. Pig, pig, pig. He allows himself to sink below the surface. Until there is nothing but flesh—the soft, red light of it, its slowness as blood moves through it. Suspended in flesh, webbed out in every direction, veined and marbled flesh.

Once they are old enough to work, boys are sent away from the orphanage. Some go to the country to be farmhands and stable boys, to milk cows and herd sheep. Others go to the city to serve as apprentices to tradesmen. The orphanmaster lines them up for assessment. He walks their ranks, inspecting each of them, moving their arms, prodding their haunches.

When his time comes, he is sent to the city to work as an apprentice to a baker. He sweeps up the flour on the floor and cleans the tables and washes the dishes. He carries the heavy trays of bread to and from the ovens. He lives in a small one room apartment above the bakery and wakes each morning well before the sun rises to start the ovens and prepare for the baker's arrival.

The baker is a small man with large forearms that are thick with sinew. He is gruff, short of tone, but not unkind. When he tells the baker his name is Pig, the baker only blinks and nods.

Under the baker's supervision, he learns to work the dough with his hands, to knead it, to fold it. It is a process he comes to enjoy—the firmness of it, but most of all the gentleness of it. The way the dough gives beneath his palms, fills the gaps between his fingers with its own soft presence. The silky flour sprinkled in, dusting his wrists and forearms, the front of his apron. He feels no rush in these moments of kneading, no urgency roiling in from the outside. The baker praises his technique, his patience, pats him on the shoulder and does not laugh when he flinches away.

He eats mostly the previous day's bread, whatever hadn't sold, but he also takes his meager earnings down the street to a restaurant run by a kind husband and wife. There he marvels at the simplest dishes—all infinitely more complex than acorns and pig's milk and made with much more care than the porridges and gruels of the orphanage. Pilafs and pastas. Creamy squash soup. Wild foraged mushrooms of the kinds he ate with the pigs, but now basted in butter and delicately sauteed so that their velvety taste unfolds in his mouth.

The husband and wife delight in his eagerness to try it all, to eat it all. Each time they bring him something new. The husband, who is the cook, rediscovers his love for creation in the kitchen. He departs from the menu, attempts new recipes and revitalizes old ones. He makes his mother's whole-roasted trout, stuffed with herbs and chopped nuts and serves it to the boy on a platter adorned with bushels of parsley and sprigs of thyme and rosemary and the boy eats it all, even the garnish. When he tells them his name is Pig, they laugh warmly and the husband slaps his shoulder.

Everytime he goes to the restaurant, he passes a butcher shop, its storefront window hung with the dismembered carcasses of animals. Legs, ribs, all of it glistening red and skinless—flesh exposed to air. Amongst it all sits a severed pig's head, mouth agape, eyes staring. He looks away every time he passes. He can't stand the sight of all those dismembered pieces hanging, separate from one another.

Sometimes, when there are no other patrons in the restaurant, the husband and wife invite him back to the kitchen. There the husband shows him simple cooking techniques, skills with the knife. How to prepare vegetables and herbs, the various cuts—juliennes and brunoise and chiffonades. He learns to chop carrots and dice onions. The husband takes these and makes a dish from them while his wife lights a candle, unfolds and smoothes a freshly laundered table cloth. Together, the three of them sit at one of the restaurant's tables and eat.

One day at the restaurant they bring him a filet mignon, crispy and brown on the outside, but when he cuts into it, there is a sudden redness. It bleeds onto the white plate. For a moment, he is too appalled to go on. The sight of those red folds of flesh staggers him and he reels beneath a miasma of memories. Pigs being gutted in the forest. Pig snouts stained red and buried in flesh. His stomach is a weak flutter inside him and he wants to put down the knife and fork, wants to stand up from the table and leave, but the husband and wife are leaning over him with eager faces, waiting for him to take the first bite. He closes his eyes and puts a piece into his mouth, and then it is filled with sensations. Iron tingling on his gums. The rich juices sluicing over his tongue. The flesh itself melting between his teeth. He has had meat before, gray and chewy and unrecognizable, but never like this. Never so close to its original

source. It is good. It is good. It is the best thing he has ever tasted.

He says as much and the husband and wife's eager faces break into smiles. They laugh and the husband bows, a genuine gratitude in his eyes. He eats the whole thing, reveling in each bite.

When he next passes the butcher shop, he cannot help himself. He veers toward the door, though he still averts his eyes from the staring pig head. Inside, there is a glass case filled with different cuts of meat, and above it hangs more—salamis and links of sausages. He is overwhelmed by it all, and asks the man at the counter what each is, how they could all be so different.

He wants to try them all, but he selects one, a steak with delicate white frills of fat rippling through the red. He watches the butcher carefully wrap it in brown paper, and tie it shut with twine. He carries it back to the little apartment above the bakery and cooks it in a pan on the stove.

He acquires books on butchery. They are filled with diagrams—hand-drawn pictures of animal silhouettes crisscrossed with dotted lines, divided into sections, into cuts. On one page, an exploded view. An animal pulled apart at the seams, scattered across the page. The bold letters above read ***PIG***. He looks down at his own limbs, his own torso. Imagines it in sections. Imagines dotted lines intersecting him and imagines being drawn out, space appearing between each part of him. The thought brands him with panic—to think of all that space, all the exposure, his own body a landscape to be passed through. He clutches at himself, pulls himself tightly together, makes himself as small and compact as he can.

He is in the restaurant's kitchen, practicing the techniques the husband taught him, mincing tarragon, when he slices his own finger. He feels the blade catch and at first it doesn't even hurt, but as he watches the flaps of skin peel apart, watches the blood well up and then run across the cutting board, he begins to feel a cottony faintness in his head.

The husband sees and comes from across the kitchen to help.

"Let me see," he says, prying open the affected hand. He pulls away from the man's touch, hugging the wound to his own chest, and feels a rush of panic that strangles the air from his throat. The kitchen around him seems to swirl and blur and everything falls away except for the old man with his outstretched hands. He retreats back on uncertain feet, sees the question, the hurt, in the man's face, but can not halt the panic hammering inside. He turns and flees, pushing past the wife as she reaches out to him, through the restaurant doors, past the butcher shop window with its leering red stains, all the way back to his little apartment above the bakery. Only then does he allow himself to look, his breath still ragged in his chest. The skin was now darkened at the edges, the blood rust brown in some places, bright red in others, iron on the tip of his tongue.

The pig dreams still come. Him swimming in a sea of pig, sinking beneath its pale-pink surface, into the red closeness below. Pig, pig, pig. A delicate latticework of hearts blinking, thumping in the red, sending blood to one another through the network of veins and arteries that hang like vinery all around. Beacons that flash in every direction, on and on into the distance.

He can't stop thinking about it. The meat. The delicate grains that run through it. The lines that map the cuts. An entire geography rippling beneath the surface. He thinks about it constantly, until one day he goes to the butcher shop and asks for an apprenticeship. The butcher apologizes and tells him that he has already taken on his own son as an apprentice, and that he cannot take on another. He mentions another butcher shop, in another part of the city, that he could try.

He visits the other shop, carrying the address written on a piece of brown paper. This new part of the city is dingier. There are more people on the street, not walking or shopping, but begging, standing at corners watching him. He finds the butcher shop and goes inside. There is a large man behind the counter, larger than him even. He looks at the meat in the case, the meat hanging from the ceiling, and he feels naked suddenly, exposed. He wants to retreat, to go back to his small apartment above the bakery, where everything is close and familiar. But the man behind the counter is already asking him what he wants. His face hangs in jowls and there is a sneer to his voice. "What do you want, boy?"

His words stumble out. "An apprenticeship."

"What? Speak up."

Again he feels the pull of retreat, an opportunity slipping away. But he stays. "I want an apprenticeship."

The man looks him up and down. Sneers again. "You want to be a butcher's apprentice?" He seems amused. "What's your name, boy?"

"Pig," he tells the man and this elicits a burst of laughter.

"Pig? You're clever are you?" He laughs

more and there is something about the man's laugh that makes him take a step back. "Pig," the man mutters to himself. "Alright, if that's what you want to call yourself. Then I'll be Bull." He puts two thick hands on top of the meat case and leans forward. "You're in luck, Pig. I lost my apprentice recently, and I need someone to pick up the slack around here. You're a big boy. A little soft-looking, but big. I can find a use for you."

He goes back with an uneasy feeling in his gut and takes his leave of the baker, who gives him a curt nod and wishes him well. He gathers his meager belongings from the apartment above the bakery and carries them across the city to the butcher shop.

Bull laughs when he sees him standing at the entrance to the shop, his arms filled with a canvas bag containing all his things. "Did you think I'd be boarding you as well, boy?" He feels his face flush, to know how foolish he is. He longs even more to turn around and go back to the bakery and his little apartment, but it is too late for that. He is silent, looking at the floor. There is so little he understands about this world, so little that makes sense.

"You'll have to find your own lodgings," the man says. "Come back when you're ready to work."

He is cast back into the bustle of the street. Men appraise him with their eyes and others neglect to acknowledge him entirely, shouldering him aside as they hurry past. The air smells of smoke and grease and urine. He looks around, with no hint of where to find shelter and clutches his things tight against his chest.

He wanders the area for some time until, finally, he happens upon a small boarding house, where he uses some of the little money he has to rent a bed. There are twelve beds to a room, and the room he is shown to is shabby and crowded. Clotheslines are strung up between bed posts and hung with wet laundry, gray water pooling on the floor beneath. The air is hazy with the smell of cigarette smoke and unwashed bodies. He claims an open bed, shoving his belongings into the small footlocker at its base.

When he returns to the butcher shop, Bull puts him straight to work. He sweeps and mops the floor. He cleans the glass of the storefront and the meat case. He washes knives and breaks down the large meat grinder and cleans that too. All the while, Bull watches him, shouts directions at him, tells him to move faster, flogs him across the haunches with a leather strop whenever he lags. He sweats, he pants, he flees the bite of the strop. At the end of the day, once the shop has closed, he helps Bull take apart the meat case, packing whatever is left in wax paper and putting it in the ice box.

When he returns to the boarding house, exhausted and sore, the room is bustling and loud. He sits on the edge of his bed and slowly removes his boots—even this being a great effort—while all around him men laugh and shout over games of cards and bottles of brandy.

Later, he lays awake in his bed, tired all the way to his fingers, though he cannot seem to sleep. He thinks about the day over and over—Bull's face red and yelling, the leather strop ready and waiting. He thinks about how he traded his quiet duties at the bakery for this and already he is full of regret. All around him the darkened room is filled with sleeping bodies. He listens to the sound of their breathing. He thinks back to the orphanage, to the dormitories where he slept amongst the other boys. The comforting noise of all their breathing, fallen into sync with one another. The room gently swelling and then shrinking. And he thinks farther back, to his time with the pigs—laying in scratched-out depressions in the dirt under the open night, the reassuring shapes of sleeping animals all around him. He could reach out and touch them, feel their bulk rise and fall, their heart drum slow against their ribs.

The next day is no different. Bull herds him through the shop with his shouts and the strop. He mops the blood from the floor and feels dizzy and sways with the mop in his hands. Bull's face is in his, yelling, though he can't make out the words. He stumbles back and sits against the far wall and Bull doesn't give him a moment's rest before he is flogging him, yelling "Get up. Get up. Get to work." And so he finds his shakey feet and leans into the mop and continues.

When he arrives back at the boarding house that night, he discovers the footlocker at his bed broken open and empty. What little he had is gone, all the money he had saved with it. He looks around the room, at the other men milling about, but they seem unconcerned with him. He curls up on his bed, as tightly as he can, and tries to think about nothing. He tries not to think about tomorrow or the next day or the next day. He tries not to think about the past. He tries to make his mind as empty and clean as he imagines a pig's mind to be—an otherwise dim room lit by only a single glowing thought at a time: food, warmth, sleep.

Bull has him start with chickens. Plucking

them clean. Scraping out the innards. Removing the head and neck and feet. Sometimes leaving them whole. Sometimes cutting them into quarters.

After chickens, he learns rabbits. Making a V-shaped cut along the back and pulling in opposing directions until the pelt peeled away, leaving the naked little torso. If he failed to do it in one smooth motion, he would feel the strop laid across his shoulders.

The pay is minimal. Soon he falls behind on his payments at the boarding house and one morning they tell him that the previous night was his last. He goes to the butcher shop knowing that he has nowhere to stay that night. He will ask Bull for an advance in his pay, he thinks, plead with him.

When Bull comes in, he has a pig carcass slung over his shoulder. He drops it on the cutting table. “Let’s see how you do with one of your own kind,” he says. The pig lays limp on the table, its flesh soft and pink. He feels the panic rising in him as Bull hands him the knife. He imagines dotted lines intersecting its body, like in the butcher’s manuals he used to study. Bull watches him, waits to see what he will do, where he will make the first cut. The knife is in his hand. The room around him is deteriorating, particles falling off at its edges. The knife shakes and he can hear Bull’s voice, somewhere at the edge of his awareness, hard, insistent, like a chisel. He thinks of his parents, of the pigs, of all the open bodies. Of light coming in and light coming out. Of the echo of his own blood in his head. Bull’s face fills his vision now, flushed red and yelling. He is backing up, retreating away from Bull, away from the table. Bull follows, his bulk crowding him, blocking every way out. He is still yelling, though the words are meaningless. Bull’s face is so close that he can see the little red veins in his eyes. He pushes the knife out in front of him, pushes it into Bull, and then Bull’s face is falling away, deteriorating like the rest of the room.

He sits on the floor, pressed into the corner of the room. The pig lays on the table and Bull lays on the floor beneath. He feels the emptiness all around him. Too big, too much. He has nowhere, he has nothing. Everything he has known is gone and he is left with this. The knife. The empty bodies.

He uses the knife to open Bull. When he’s made enough space, he crawls inside. The walls inside are close, a tight embrace on all sides. He pulls the slit closed to shut out the light. At first it is dark, but as his eyes adjust, he finds that there is a soft red light to it. It is calming, comforting. And comforting too is the dripping warmth. A warmth the same warm as his own warmth, so that soon he loses track of where he ends and the other begins. Things seem to expand but never lose their closeness. He is surrounded by an expansive redness, one that gives off its own light. Sound turns slow and thick in his ears. There is a distant thrumming that starts within him and answers itself everywhere. Gradually, he feels himself loosen, come undone at the seams. His body pulls away from itself, dissolving piece by piece. First his skin—the boundary between him and everything else—fades away. He feels his tendons loosen themselves from his bones, all the muscle and fat break free of its anchor. His eyes turn to jelly and melt into the light. His teeth work themselves loose from their beds and fall away. His bones soften and dissolve, dispersing all the weight they once carried. His mind goes to liquid and his heart slips loose from its harness and he is the red light, he is the sea of flesh, he is that sound that is not a sound but a feeling, a movement, that distant thrumming of blood that echoes, echoes, echoes,

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Between Friends

(a novel excerpt)

Tyler Sowa

The two boys at the head of the line, Christian can't help but notice, look an awful lot like Ben and him: one tall with a heated, air-ballooning chest; the other scrawny, shoulders curling inwards, making a cave of himself. The taller one leans his forearm against the black bricks beside the entrance, flirting with the bouncer who stands stiff as a pole obviously trying not to smile. Christian can't see the other boy's expression, but he appears to be merely watching his friend flirt.

Fuck that, Christian thinks, standing proudly. Too proudly. He can feel great godly strings pulling his body up. God, the alcoholic, only comes to him when the stuff's in his blood.

"This line is just for hype," Ben declares, his head obscured in the surrounding cigarette smoke. It smells like the world is burning down around them. "They could let all of us inside if they wanted to. They do this to establish a consensus, so they know how many queers live around here."

Ben folds a stick of gum into his mouth and blows a bubble between himself and Christian. Ben's nonchalance could send the bubble soaring up and away, threatening to land in the most stylized hairdo. For the split second it takes up space between them, Christian can almost make out his own silhouette in the webby white orb. Then it pops.

"Relax," Ben says. "We're not in line for an exam."

"I am relaxed," Christian says, deflating. How is he not relaxed? He looks around for a mirror to see himself, but there isn't one, and the only windows on the face of the club have been painted matte black.

Tonight, Christian promised himself only to be a vessel for sensory experience. *To be present is to fully inhibit the body*, Ben had so often said. Christian knows how to do this only paradoxically, and it's to drink until he can no longer feel discomfort. Not that this strategy is specific to him. He's seen it all around him, his whole life. Look at these boys right here, some warbling and falling over themselves and it's only, what, nine-thirty? Or maybe that's just what Christian wants to see. He has no idea what he wants to see. He watches Ben chew. He could make cud look delicious.

Christian remembers the days when they were the same height, before he had to look up to find Ben's sterling eyes. He'd grown three inches one summer, and four the next, his body pumping up like a car jack. Christian, on the other hand, he can't

recall growing beyond freshman year of high school. He can still fit into the same clothes, and he knows this because he still owns them. He does have the better memory, but it's monetarily useless stuff he remembers—like the various disgusting flavors of Jelly Belly jelly beans they'd pick out before seeing dollar movies at the Avalon in Southeast Portland from age nine to whenever. Popcorn, over ripe pear, jalapeno. Some of them, they'd spit out and smear all over the sticky floors, attributing the stickiness to themselves. *Ohhh, that's right*, Ben will say, as if a memory has actually been conjured whenever Christian reminds him of something.

But at this moment, Christian has a two beer buzz, and doesn't want to care about anything other than relishing these last hours together before Ben moves away. A line is fine. If not in the same position, at least everyone has the same goal: simply to be admitted inside. And every minute they wait, they're still together.

Maybe I'll find myself a Rafeael to marry and stay forever, Ben had teased earlier. That was, of course, completely absurd. Ben couldn't touch a committed relationship with a ten-foot-dick. Christian is the *relationship guy*, Ben says, though it makes Christian's stomach turn each time he says it. *Relationship guy.*

"How do you pronounce it again?" Christian shouts, as though they are already inside, competing with the cheery squeal of a twink squad in booty shorts, some surely too drunk to be admitted into the club. An ankle cracks above a shivering stiletto.

Ben repeats the name of the French city, speaking from the back of his throat, tongue tapping the roof of his mouth at the end. Christian tries saying it back. How ignorant, trying to pronounce a word he doesn't know, that his mouth has never formed. The embarrassment swims parasitically through his blood, biting at him from beneath the skin.

"Girl, it sounds like you're saying *Ruin*," Ben chides him. "I'm talking about growth. Going somewhere else and becoming new. There will be no ruin of me." Then, just as quickly, shoulders rowing on either side of his head, knees bouncing, Ben's ready to dance, to flirt, to open himself up like a long coat for others to put their arms into for a few hours.

"Let's just dance a little. A tiny bit," Ben moans. He slips his fingers into Christian's, his skin surprisingly rough, probably from *the bench*. "Follow me," he adds.

One thing Christian looks forward to in Ben's absence is not worrying about how Ben has been going to the gym, how focused he's become on *results*, and how Christian's hasn't, really has never, gone to the gym. All those eyes staring, judging, assessing. Sweat stained like shadows on all the equipment. The world is so fucking loud with looks.

Christian's skin gets away from him. He grins huge as Ben does all the lifting, centering him in his view, stretching Christian's arms up and twirling him there on the sidewalk where the warm wind gently slaps his back. Lighter on his sneakers, he trusts Ben to guide him, to hold and carry him, to submit to whatever desires Ben might have. For a moment, their faces align, and they're both smiling as if both seeing the same thing in one another. As they dance, a boy behind them whistles, and it sounds like a dying bird. Ben laughs, which means the moment is over because he'll have to steal a look at the boy. Christian looks first.

He's tall, wearing a purple velour suit jacket, a tight white t-shirt exposing his naked navel, and acid washed ripped jeans. The holes in the denim are large enough for a raccoon, or some other street vermin, to hop right into. The jacket looks like a Crown Royal bag, the kind kids in high school used to hide their jars of weed inside. Weed hidden inside alcohol accessories. Everyone was so genius back then. The boy's posture is fully erect and his eyes are winced like tiny blades that can cut through anyone he looks at.

Not Christian; he's not going to be cut up tonight.

Though this boy really looks nothing like Ben, in his posture and air of confidence, he does seem to embody a similar clash of professional and unhinged roisterer that Ben has mastered as a teacher these past couple of years. Ben is the kind of person who can party until four in the morning and still show up to a class of forty thirteen-year-olds, with an impeccably scaffolded lesson plan ready to go. At least that's how he presents himself in retrospect. Christian goes to work hungover all the time, too, but he's a bar back. It's kind of expected of him, isn't it?

Crown Royal boy holds his chin high, his eyes downcast, even though he's shorter than Ben. *Real height*, Ben has said before, *is in the mind.* Christian often wonders if Ben only said this to make him feel better. Well, it did. Sometimes.

Ben hums some original tune, rippling from throat to tongue, continuing to twirl Christian, but now he's looking around, as if to say: *this could be you*. He's hardly here; aloof, charming Ben.

Is it the world turning, or is it Christian? For a minute, everything blurs into one unshapely form. Then Ben let's go. He turns his head and swallows Crown Royal boy with his eyes. Like a snake, Christian imagines the boy caught in Ben's throat; a twink

turned goiter. Except he could never see Ben ugly; instead, he'd dress up the goiter and turn it into fashion.

So he tries again, at retaining Ben's attention. "Rowen? Like that? Row on?"

"Who's he? Where's he rowing to?" Ben laughs. "Maybe you just say France. And if someone asks where, you can say somewhere in Normandy. You're allowed a certain amount of ignorance as a tourist anyway."

"Okay, Mr. Bonjour," Christian scowls. "I forgot how you already live there."

Ben continues to look around, searching for eye contact, Christian surmises, for a face to align with a particular story that might extend beyond the club tonight. He knows Ben will go off with someone else because he always does; still, he hopes maybe tonight will be about them. Of course, it *is* about Ben because he's the one leaving. No one celebrates the people who stay behind.

"It's *zha, zha, zhor,* not *jor.* You have to let the frequency vibrate through your teeth."

Christian has never been as good as Ben with language. Even so, he's wanted to be a writer since his senior year of high school. After spending a month in Boston at a private art's academy on scholarship, a foreign word in Christian's household, he'd found purpose. It buoyed him for a while. Kept him trying in his last year of high school, thinking he could become someone as brazen as Allen Ginsberg or as elusive, as enigmatic as Emily Dickinson. Maybe some compromise between the two. He'd show himself in his work in a way he never could on the surface of his skin, and people would praise him for it. A writer didn't need to surface to the skin, he thought. A writer could just point to the work. And the acknowledgement that he might have actually been good at something pressed him to get decent grades, where before the scholarship, he was near flunking; of flopping out like so many of the other men in his family. He wasn't like them. He knew he wasn't like them, he just had a hard time articulating how.

How pathetic, though, to be friends with your English teachers, knowing they were giving you letter D grades. He disliked the curriculum, perhaps only because it was required. He said he couldn't stand Holden Caulfield, claimed in class that he hadn't read the book even though he had; and Mrs. Davies said, with a smirk, *you know you're an awful lot like him?*

Now he's three and a half years a bar back at the Woodlawn Hotel, only a few streets over from here. He does like parts about the job, such as picking up stray bits of conversations and discerning the various ways people carry themselves through the world. His mother says hard work, no matter the work, is honorable, although he has never really believed her. No matter the work? Really? No one who says that means the kind of work he really wants to do: head hung high over his desk, making up stories for a living.

Ben has always been confident that Christian will make a name for himself, that people will one day see his words in the movies, he says; though it frightens Christian to think about his stories being made visible, available for anyone to see without scrutinizing the individual words that they are otherwise made of. The page always conceals something, and that's part of the allure. Movies are something else entirely: they play on whether you're watching or not. Then again, life does, too.

At the door, about a dozen people ahead, a knife sharp man in a suit wobbles side to side, cutting the boys in front, admonishing the bouncer. "You've got to be fucking kidding me, right? I have more money to spend than your bar knows what to do with!"

This is the same kind of man Christian also deals with at the hotel, brandishing a titanium credit card to get whatever he wants, and it usually works. Room upgrade? Sure, let's see what we can do! More complimentary brut? We're not supposed to, but just for you! The job is about abating conflict and fellating ego. Several times, he's watched the owner of the hotel fall out of his booth, drop his wine glass, and step over its shattered remains on his way tumbling out into the lobby without saying a word. If the man has ever suffered repercussions, they've remained silent. Not here though, and this is what Christian likes about real bars and nightclubs. Everyone is accountable to the same rules, the same grounds for dismissal.

The bouncer frowns at the man with money and thrusts a knobby finger in the direction of the other side of the street. The bouncer has a wide mustache that looks like a comb or a whale's baleen. The wobbling rich man throws his arms up, almost flinging them off, far away from his body. "I'll ensure this place gets terrible reviews!" he says, stomping away like a child.

"Do you think the bouncer is gay?" Ben asks, rubbing his chin. "Nevermind, I don't know why I'm asking."

"I feel like he isn't," Christian says, though he has no reason to think he isn't or shouldn't be. The bouncer seems unperturbed as he rests his eyes back on the boy up front, the one who looks like Ben. Ben has also said you just can't tell anymore.

Act first, ask forgiveness later. Otherwise, you'll likely only ever live in your fantasies.

"Well, he should be," Ben adds, threading his fingers back through Christian's, squeezing his hand as they continue to wait, as close as they'll be for a long time. "How's Isabel anyway?"

"She's fine," Christian says, dropping Ben's hand.

"You love that word."

Isabel is just a few blocks away at an art show in the Pearl District. Her friend Angela is showing a series of blurred landscapes, none of which Christian could make out when he first, or second, saw them. Isabel thought they were *gorgeous*. That's the word she used. Angela has eyelashes as thick and black as crow's wings, and she flapped them, beaming her teeth while Isabel looked at her work after she'd hung it last week, before the public could see it. Christian nodded along, not hearing another word Isabel said, too distracted by the fact that Angela has never once looked him in the eyes. Whenever she looked in his direction, her eyelashes flapped as if trying to sail away from her face. Bon voyage! It's hard to distinguish perceived hatred and self-loathing, but it doesn't matter. He's never liked Angela, whatever she thinks about him or sees in him.

He begins to wonder if Isabel can see him now, as if she has eyes all over Portland. He can envision her on every corner because they've been on every corner. It seems like they've been together forever. If forever is his adult life, it's kind of true. He shakes his head and looks across Broadway.

The recessed entryway of a closed bagel shop has become a micro studio for a homeless person. Chrisitan can just make out a body, shifting around beneath a sodden pile of blankets. Every night, Christian imagines, a cardboard fort is rebuilt. The irate man sent off by the bouncer flaps his arms like a broken bird and disappears around the side of another building, another bar. There are so many people in this city with nowhere to go, he thinks; nowhere but wherever they are. Wherever he is is never where he wants to be, an inconsolable problem it seems. But he has a life, a house, a place in which he can count on every day being more or less the same. A blessing and a curse.

"I should have worn something looser," Ben says, rubbing his palms against his permafrost nipples, fishing for attention. They poke out from beneath his shirt like tiny bones.

When Christian turns his head to see if the boy behind them is still staring, he sees that his head has also turned, looking at another boy further behind. They make a train, all looking further and further down the line. Until what? Where? The bright lights of downtown are back there beaming, some dancing as they flash.

"You're going to have to find someone new to fish compliments from, you know," Christian says.

Ben scoffs. "You never compliment me. It's always catch and release with you anyway."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Ben drops his eyelids and purses his lips. "It means, what the hell am I supposed to do with a compliment from a *straight* boy?" He squeezes Christian's shoulder and kisses his cheek. "Or whatever you insist are. One of these days, you'll come prancing over to our side for good. Until then… well."

Christian ignores him. What's he supposed to do with that right now?

Isabel has said time and again, *I think you're in love with Ben,* but she doesn't understand. Her relationship with Angela is not a good comparison. She only uses Angela to climb the art world ladder anyway, he thinks. He'd never say this to her, though. Still, she stays with him. Still, he stays with her.

"Isn't catch and release your whole thing? I think you mean… what's the opposite?"

"Asphyxiation?" Ben laughs.

The line inches forward. An antler trophy mounted above the front door pokes proudly into the night sky. "It's going to be a whole new sea in France," says Ben.

Well, Christian thinks of himself at least as a kind of interlocutor. The word ally sounds like war. Ben's like a gay recruitment officer. And while he knows Ben thinks of him more fluidly than, say, his mother, something about the way he says *straight* still hurts him. He's never thought of himself as anything particularly… particular? Maybe that's the problem.

"What's the theme of this place again?" Christian asks, changing the subject. The stylistic clash of twinks with pumps and makeup, and the hunting blind it looks like they're entering into is confusing. "What's with the trophy? It makes this look like the kind of place you'd want to avoid."

Ben points up at the antlers. "Look closer," he says, and Christian sees the silicone rings fitted around a few of the tines. "Also, two things: don't, and you're going in there, too, so…"

"Yeah, but—"

Ben cuts him off with raised hands. "Not tonight. It's called Stag. Look around." He bites into his lip and sizes up the bouncer as they step closer. "Men only. We just need to get you another drink and you'll be your wiley, uncontained self." Then he points a finger gun at the center of Christian's chest.

“But tonight, I can’t chase after you, okay?”

“When do you chase after me?”

“Really?” Ben asks, leering at him, just an inch from his face, close enough to kiss. Then he pulls back and resumes looking around. Christian rolls his eyes. He isn’t going to get that drunk tonight, just drunk enough to enjoy himself. Though he hardly knows when it’s happening, enjoyment.

He imagines Isabel at the gallery. She’s holding a glass of wine against her chest, schmoozing gallerists she doesn’t respect, but has to know. She’s probably wearing the black halterneck dress and half-heels reserved for gallery openings, her hair tied up tight. She has a knotty, almost masculine back. From behind, she looks like someone’s boss. She can be so intimidating when she’s *on*. Whenever they go to openings together, she’ll first fashion show her whole closet to Christian before deciding, then abandon him in the gallery, saying it’s good for his writing to people watch, to converse with strangers. The only problem is that he doesn’t know how. What’s he supposed to say? That’s where God comes in, except then he doesn’t remember anything he observes because he’s drunk.

“IDs, please.” The bouncer holds out an empty palm. He shines a black light on their government-issued faces, and then their actual faces. Without his glasses, Christian thinks he looks like a child in his photo. He can’t even drive with that ID. It’s just for drinking. He’s embarrassed that he can’t drive, that he only attempted the test once when he was seventeen and failed. Isabel doesn’t drive either. When Ben leaves, Christian thinks, he’ll either need to finally get his license or else make friends with someone else who doesn’t mind taking him around on the kinds of errands that not even the person who needs to run them wants to do.

“Better hope you didn’t just give a blowjob,” Ben laughs, wiping his cheek. The bouncer’s lip curves ever so slightly upward, as if he’s just grazed a hook while swimming past.

“Alright,” the bouncer bellows in an even deeper register, opening the door for them to glide inside.

End of First Chapter Excerpt

TYLER SOWA is a fiction writer and poet originally from Portland, Oregon. He holds an MFA in Fiction from the University of Arizona. His work can be found in Electric Literature, Salt Hill, Gaze Journal, and elsewhere. He currently resides in Seattle, Washington with his partner.