

Senior Project Anthology



Class of 2021

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**Excerpt of *This Terrible Thing*
Ari Ray Agnew**

Another two or three weeks must have passed before Dacian found out the campus was officially asking him to cease all contact with Iris.

Iris and Dacian had broken up halfway through that first week when they weren't spending time with me. I hadn't realized, because what Dacian told me wasn't that she broke up with him, it was "Iris thinks she doesn't want to spend time together anymore." So I told him she'd come around because love always prevails and Dacian was impossible to forget or something and assumed she would come back. I would have. There had been times when I was uncertain about Dacian, sure, but I always chose him. Iris or Elizabeth, whichever she was, disagreed. Dacian didn't handle it so well. So Iris took the issue to campus officials. Dacian had been asked, by the school's security, not to approach her under any circumstances.

What hurt Dacian the most was clearly how insensitive Iris was to his feelings. He felt so deeply for her, and she was treating him as if that were a problem. It absolutely wrecked him. I spent plenty of sleepless nights after that, worrying about him. And a few comforting him. "You believe me." He said it very pointedly to me, one morning.

"Well." I was sitting at that crappy coffee table because he was moping and had decided to sprawl out on the floor. I had been drinking a cup of tea and forgot it when I sat down on the floor next to him to run my fingers through his hair and tell him that everything would be alright. "I *know* you. Believe you about what?"

"I mean, you know I love her." Dacian frowned at my ceiling. "You know what that means. That it's not just some passing notion, that it's real. And that she loves me." Then he

fixed me with bright eyes, like a searchlight. “*You* could talk to her.”

“That’s not a bad idea. But what should I say to her? Do you want me to tell her that you’re a vampire, and the reincarnation thing?”

He furrowed his brow. “I’m not sure. What do you think, my darling?”

“I think it’s very romantic that you’ve crossed oceans of time to find her.” “Don’t say that.” Dacian hopped up, with renewed conviction. “Just don’t say that. You can tell her whatever you feel will work. Just don’t say *that*.” He pulled me up from the hard metal chair and kissed me. “I don’t know what I’d do without you, darling, I really don’t. How I’ve lived without you all these years, I never know.”

I have to admit, telling Iris about him wasn’t really my goal. If she would just be reincarnated again, why bother? I figured Dacian could handle a girl being uninterested for twenty years or so. Better than watching her die prematurely. Besides, I was handling my rejections just fine. I figured I would just do it if it came up, but I wasn’t seeing Iris around as often now, so it wouldn’t.

As Dacian rose, he swayed a little.

“When’s the last time you drank?” I asked. He shrugged dejectedly, which was how he did most things around then. “Was it last week?” Before Dacian started taking off on his own to spend time with Iris or, apparently, by himself, I’d been able to decently monitor when he needed blood and when he got it to help make sure he took care of himself. The last few weeks had made that job difficult.

Dacian rolled his eyes up as he thought, then shook his head. It must have been cold that week, because I was wearing a turtleneck — I remember that, and with incredible clarity, pushing up

my sleeve. “Oh, you needn’t do that,” Dacian said, as I pulled the cuff over my elbow.

“You’ll feel better,” I said. “And you’ll think more clearly. I know how *I* get when I’m hungry.”

“You’re entirely too good to me, my darling.” Dacian crouched down and covered my wrist in his hand. I put my hand over his, and gently removed it. He smiled. “Alright, fine.”

Being bitten by a vampire feels a lot like having your blood drawn. The cold presence of the foreign fangs. It hurts worse when they aren’t fastened around a vein, but even then, you can still feel your blood scurrying out of you. There were a few times my blood clotted, and that hurt the worst. Dacian hated when that happened. A few times, I’d seen the face he made when I was watching him drink from someone else. Like the face you make when you bite into an apple and it doesn’t quite taste right. The hot blood makes Dacian’s mouth feel warm, and the wound makes your skin more sensitive so you feel the tongue and lips and teeth just as strong as the fangs and the injury. The first few times you’re bitten, it’s fairly painful, especially at the beginning of the process, but by the end of the bite each time there’s only the heat and the pleasure, so after going through it frequently and consistently, it doesn’t hurt much at all. When Dacian’s fangs pierced my skin, it stung for one sharp moment, and then everything became a swirling mess of melting, electric heat. For one moment my life was gone, and I was adrift in a hazy world. There was only me, my body frozen up, and Dacian kneeling beside me and I felt more sure of myself than I ever had before, and then in the next he swept me up in his arms and was up on the couch beside me and above me, and he dug his mouth into my neck and I screamed and surged and scrabbled at his back to pull him closer. I remember sobbing and shouting out his name as if he’d left me. I felt so sure he was there and so sure I was alone. My

body cracked and split open and I spilled out everywhere, and then Dacian pressed his mouth to me again and kissed me back together.

After, I felt so whole. Whenever I was around Dacian I felt complete. He kissed my slick temples and my torn lips and I tasted the salt of my sweat and my blood on him when I kissed him back. Oh, I loved him so much. He was my everything, there was nothing when he went away. I wanted to grab him and just keep screaming, and tell him that Iris didn't matter and Elizabeth would just come back later and that I was *alive* and I was here and I loved him. I wanted to kiss him and hold him and be held and to say "I love you, I love you, I love you" and I didn't even want to hear it back, I only wanted to tell him. I love you!

And didn't I love you better than any other woman? Then they did, then they could? Oh, my Dacian. When Beatrice told Benedick, "I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest," I love you fiercer than that. I loved you with so much of me, there was nothing left over, not for anything else. You didn't need to kill Claudio, I would have let you kill me. I can think of no sweeter way to die and oh, my dearest, all you had to do was ask. If you had only wished it I would have cracked like an egg in your hands. I would have run down your throat. Dacian, let me give myself to you, let me choose you every morning.

He ran his hand along my cheek, skimming it without touching it. I became the sea beneath him as the shadow of a bird traced over me. "Cere." He did not whisper but the words still felt intimate. "You will die. You are dying."

I said nothing. I kissed the tips of his fingers when they came to my lips.

"It is so beautiful." He pulled the fingers down gently, leaned forward, and gave me a chaste kiss. So soft, so cold. "Oh, you are so beautiful, so alive, my darling. And so you are dying."

He would never die and that was so beautiful too. I imagined living in a little corner of his heart forever, him weeping my name. “Lucere, Lucere,” he would cry, the heartbeat he did not have. “Come back to me, come back.”

I tried to tell him with my eyes. You can kill me, Dacian, you can take me. I’ll be yours, I’ll be always yours. Whether it is ten years or two thousand I will belong to you, every trace of me. You will think of me and know “she was mine.” No other woman could choose you so completely. Some might love you, no doubt they will, my Dacian is so easy to love. But I will press you to my neck and sob with ecstasy when you take from me. I will die for you and be born for you. You will make me as a spider does its web, I will become you as the sun becomes sugar. But I did not die, I only fell asleep in his arms.

An Excerpt of *Liya*
Hakima Alem

Wherever I go, whatever I'm doing, I carry the same few memories with me. Usually they're in the back of my head but other times they come to the tip of my tongue. I whisper them to myself. In bed they pop up and stay there until the late hours of the night when I want to sleep. The good ones are like a flavor of candy you once loved that isn't sold anymore. The bad ones are like the taste of something rancid that won't leave your mouth. After my first year in America I couldn't remember my birth family being sick or much of what we said to each other. I grew bitter towards the child I was, bitter that she was unable to recall what was most precious. Nothing was in order.

Our houses sat on top of a small ridge in the mountain overlooking what seemed like an ocean of green. The alleyways between the houses made up our village. My home was made of 4 cement walls, lightly coated in tarnished white paint. Chipped stone that formed the exterior walls around each home left the ground coated in greyish dust. Compared to the bright green of the palm trees and bushes that were scattered about and down in the valley everything seemed toneless. Wires about 4 feet long with clean clothing draped over them tethered our houses together, our roof was made of tin and came to a peak. Morning light would get in through a rusted slit and hit me in the eye and wake me. I slept with my family on a mat. It was on the floor and up against the wall to the right. On the left side we had our mitad where my mother crouched and cooked our injera. The griddle was larger than me and I was afraid of the open flame that snapped below it. What I remembered most was the wooden stool that sat across from it. Atop the stool was a large brass cross embellished with elaborate lattice work, smaller crosses of the

same material surrounding it. No two were alike and my father said the lines and grooves overlapping and disappearing represented eternal life. A painting of Jesus on a thin canvas hung over them. He was brown with a round head that tilted to one side. He stared at me and held up one finger as if he was about to speak.

Water always made my mother upset. It too got in through the roof, it flooded our home, it flooded the homes next to ours and it made my parents argue. Tesfa was one year old and he and my mother would sit on the floor together. She propped him up with one hand. He would wave his feet as if he could walk, which made my mother and father laugh. On cool days when mom and Tesfa were together, my father would take me hiking up the mountain that lived behind us. He would search for a walking stick long enough for him and one small enough for me. He would tell me about the hidden churches that had been carved into the side of the giant rock long ago and how one day I would be able to read the words left on the walls inside. My father had spent time as a school teacher, teaching children and adults how to read and write but he had to stop once he got sick. He was a quiet man who always wore his old grey suit, some of the buttons were missing and the pants were too short. He had the same large eyes that me and my brother had. He was always observing his family and predicting the great things we would do, whispering in my ear at dinner and making me laugh.

Our family made almost no money at that time. The baskets my mother wove were not making much at the market she traveled to every day. She would leave for long periods of time and always returned tired but with gifts in hand. She brought me beads that I strung together on plastic string and tied around my wrist. She brought my brother a tiny race car that she had bought from one of her friends' stalls. My mother made most of our family's decisions and my father followed suit.

I would sometimes accompany my mother and father to church. On the women's side of the church I would be lost in the sea of white dresses and shawls wrapped around women with cool hands and warm heads. My mother would lead me to our spot. She'd have her hands in front of her as if something would be placed in them, her eyes closed and her head pushed back just like all the other women around us. Her profile was regal and stern but when she looked down at me her smile was like a hug. They hummed the same prayer that the bishops I couldn't see recited at the front. Outside of the church the world was a sea of people draped in soft white cotton and above me were the undersides of colorful umbrellas used for processions. I would look at the monks who had their backs hunched over and bibles in their hands at all times. To my young eyes their shaky hands and long wooden canes meant they had to be older and smarter than time itself. Among the crowds of people my mother and I floated together. Our lives seemed effortless. We were all together, we were fed, and the sun rose and set each day.

My father came home coughing one day and soon after my mother and brother began coughing too. Soon I was the only one well enough to fetch water. I would say goodbye to them at dawn. The jug we used was made of black terracotta shaped like a gourd, a frayed rope hung from its handle.

One day, I dragged it outside, and the jug got caught on a small stone on the ground. I pulled harder then fell backwards. Facing away from the jug I bent my knees and reached my hands behind my back, wrapping the rope around the jug and then around me. I knew standing back up would be the hardest part. I fought the urge to fall backwards again and caressed the bottom of the jug behind me, my arms barely making it around. Empty the jug was far heavier than my brother. I began walking down the ridge, passing women and girls who were on their way to do

the same. By the time I reached the bottom the sun began to show itself. An hour later the sunlight became too hot so I tugged on the scarf I wore on my head hoping it would fall off. The scarf hung down my back and was stuck under the jug. I gave up. The only thing that hurt more than my feet was my neck. The weight of the jug seemed heavier when I arrived at the water pit but I was determined to fill it to the top.

I had enjoyed fetching water that day. My friend who lived several miles away arrived shortly after me. She was very small with light brown skin and had her hair cornrowed in the front and sprouting into a fro in the back. We played in the shallow water instead of bathing the way her mother had told her. I remember her laugh and the way she jumped into the water as soon as she saw it, no hesitation. I would stand there, looking down at the water until she called out to me or splashed me. Once she got in the other children there followed and the women who watched tried to scold us with one raised eyebrow. Later in life I felt guilty that I couldn't remember my friend's name.

I arrived home with a shooting pain in my neck. The jug had heated up in the sun and made my back sweat. When I finally sat it down water dripped on the ground and quenched the dry dirt outside my home. The air outside moved and cooled my body. The sun was setting, casting orange light over me and lighting up all the dirt that had been turned up into the air. My mother was lying down, sweat lingering on her forehead with her eyes shut. She was holding my brother in her arms while my father had his body on the ground and just his head on the mat. His limbs were long and where there had once been muscle was limp flesh. I looked down at my family laying in a pile. There were a couple of flies buzzing around, our jebena still on the ground from the last time my mother served our father coffee. I picked up one of our small glass cups, poured water inside and brought it close to my mother's face. I couldn't lift her head so I poked at her shoulder hoping she'd sit up. She flinched and opened her eyes. She looked at me

and smiled before moving a bit to make room for me. I held her chin and poured the water into her mouth. Her face was narrow and her cheekbones seemed higher than usual. She whispered to me even though my father looked fast asleep.

**An Excerpt of *A Gift for Nature*
Lagan Prashanti Ananda**

A Rain in Winter

It rains in winter now.

The climatic tears are too unrestrained for
seasonal propriety. The rain melts the snow
and freezes by midnight.

Yesterday, the landscape was powdered with snow
and was soft and clean to walk on. Today
mud splashes up with my steps.

The trees were wrapped in white
and shone blue in the moonlight. Today they are bare and
exposed. Nature wants to cover the landscape when
there is no greenery to hold it. This weeping is
unbecoming.

I want to reproach the rain
who washed down nature's blanket--who washed down
blankets of grace-made crystal snows,
and left it tarnished and exposed
to bear the winter without soft insulation.

But am not I

when smoke stings my face and eyes

forced to tears, and
not in control of how they

flow? Not in control to how

they stain the linen of my shirt

below?

So the climate too weeps its rain In

the suffocating smoke of pollution,

and undoes the harmony that it had

set below.

Eco-Reciprocity

Sitting in my school dining hall two weeks ago eating breakfast alone I noticed that the room was nearly white, with the early morning sunlight avalanching through the windows. Being out in public in the morning always gives me a sense of refinement. The quietness seems to give more space to the hall, and I feel that even my thoughts are calm and deliberate.

I was thinking about a manifesto I had read the night before which described how humans must live in relation to nature if we are to create a healthy Anthropocene. [An Ecomodernist Manifesto](#) was drafted in 2015 by a group of 19 scholars, economists, and scientists, including Linus Blomqvist, Director of Conservation at the Breakthrough Institute, Ruth Defries, Family Professor of Sustainable Development at Columbia University, and Erle Ellis, an environmental scientist at the University of Maryland. Its argument was that the best way to preserve the natural world was to focus on technological advancement that would make us less dependent on natural resources, agricultural intensification to use less natural lands, and most significantly, to decouple and remove ourselves from nature completely. Decoupling meant transitioning from rural communities to urban ones since, as they argue, "cities both drive and symbolize the decoupling of humanity from nature, performing far better than rural economies in providing efficiently for material needs while reducing environmental impacts." The manifesto went on to boldly argue that trying to harmonize with nature was ineffectual to its preservation as even indigenous societies had detrimental impacts on it, and that if humans were to try to harmonize with it at this time, we would effectively destroy the natural environment due to our population size.

While I was inspired and hopeful about many of the points made in the manifesto in regards to the innovative techniques we could advance to preserve nature and also to better living conditions for people, their argument against harmonizing with nature and decoupling from it managed to confound me. I have always held that the best place for humans was in the midst

of nature, experiencing the elements and observing the patterns of natural life. My strong sense of love for the natural world makes its preservation my ultimate goal, and it is this love that causes me to always want to be near it. For this manifesto to then argue that the best way to preserve nature was to be separated from it was unsettling.

I imagined what it would be like for me and others who are devoted to nature to leave it behind for its well-being. As New York city is the nearest city to my home in the Catskills, I naturally compared my experiences of urban and rural life between these two places. One particular October weekend I had to make the choice between hiking the fall mountains with my friend Diksha or visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art with my mother and sister. Diksha had been wanting to explore the forest in its fall colors for weeks, and the idea of being in the vibrant mountains with him was one of the best things I could think of. The last time we had been in nature on an autumn day we spent the entire afternoon in a state of dreamlike astonishment. Fueled by each other's appreciation for the natural world, we explored every pocket of the forest we could. We stood in particular spots to get the best angle to see spiderwebs sculpting the sunlight that hit them, and held up leaves to the sun as it fell through the trees so that their veins lit up in their transparent bodies. Like the blood in the veins of our hands, fresh water once ran through these venations in the maple leaves held up to the sun. The human body is not too different from trees.

This time I decided to go to the city; I felt that it was my duty towards my family. That morning I looked out of my window and beheld an inconveniently stunning day-- inconvenient only because I was planning on leaving it behind. From my bedroom I saw golden leaves stacked over each other against a shining blue sky. The drive down to the city was even more excruciating--from all sides of the road the autumn forest burned with a reddish-orange glow, and the sun looked extra yellow as it lightly ebbed through the foliage. Leaving this land for the city felt like a descension. Once in the city, its hectic environment sharpened my despair as I considered that I might have otherwise been in the mountains.

Though this experience in the city was less enjoyable than it usually is because I had to give up an enjoyable opportunity, it is still clear that, for me, living with nature surrounding me is paramount. Reflecting on the Ecomodernist Manifesto, I thought, "There must be a way we can live and be refreshed in nature without depleting it." The idea that people who love nature might have to live in cities to preserve it seemed unfair. I want everyone to experience spontaneous things that I have seen in nature, like white dandelion seeds sailing the breezes to make new batches of ray shaped flowers in following springs, or seeing rain fall on the forest while the sun is out, so that the rain looks gold as it drifts sideways in the wind.

While the manifesto provided well-wrought arguments as to why a harmonization with nature would prove ineffectual as it would still lead to land depletion, I have experienced in my own life a harmony with nature not based on physical interactions, but based on a love of the heart and appreciation. Due to my own relationship with nature and the relationship I have seen others have with it, I strongly feel that there is a possibility for harmonizing with it, despite the manifesto's well-wrought arguments against such. Where there is consideration between two beings, there is a possibility of harmony between them, and nature is already open to this harmonization. While many of our human interactions with nature have been harmful, this dynamic must not obfuscate the many positive ones people have had with the natural world, or the potential relationship we may now rebuild.

Excerpt from Senior Project
Hannah Applebaum

Before Ben and Lexi came, Robin went into town to the Korean market, where they sold flowers. She picked out the first thing that grabbed her attention: a bouquet of pussy willows wrapped in brown paper. They sat in the living room, which looked out into the backyard. Robin handed a branch of pussy willow to Lexi.

“Feel it. It’s so soft. It’s like Franklin.” Robin looked at Molly, who nodded her head in agreement. Lexi touched the silver tuft.

“That’s nice,” Ben said, “where are the flowers?”

Even though Robin had picked the pussy willows out only hours before, she felt as though it had taken her years to find them. “These *are* them.”

“I like them,” Lexi said.

“Ben,” Robin said, “who was softer, Franklin or Saul?”

“I don’t know.”

“Franklin,” Molly said.

“Feel it,” Robin said, shoving the branch toward Ben like a saber. “Go ahead. They’re so soft. Lexi felt one.” Ben took a branch from the bouquet and felt it with his fingers. “Are you feeling it? It’s soft, right?”

“Yeah. I feel it.”

“I don’t know if you are really. Lexi, it doesn’t look like Ben’s feeling it, right?” Lexi shook her head. “Is it soft for you, Ben?”

He twirled the branch between his fingers. “I can feel it, mom. It’s soft. Okay? I

know.” “Okay.”

“Where are you gonna go on your honeymoon?” Molly asked.

“We don’t know yet,” Ben said.

“Somewhere warm,” Lexi said.

“You should go somewhere where people don’t speak English,” Molly said. “Why?” Ben said.

“Why not,” Lexi said.

“You should go swimming with the dolphins,” Molly said.

“I think we’re too old for that,” Ben said.

“Oh,” Molly said.

“They’re not too old. I just watched something on that,” Robin said. “This documentary followed people with PTSD—*war victims*. The men—it was mostly men—*of all ages* were healed by the dolphins. It was so uplifting. I’d like to swim with the dolphins.” “You should,” Lexi said.

“We could all benefit from swimming with the dolphins,” Robin said.

“I’m good,” Ben said.

“You’re so serious,” Robin said.

“It’s not for everyone,” Lexi said.

Lexi played with a loose thread on her sleeve. Ben looked at the floor, focusing on a branch that had fallen out of the bouquet, avoiding eye contact with his mom. She was looking out the window.

“What’s wrong?” Molly asked.

“Nothing,” Robin said. Outside, a couple and their dog walked past the stone wall separating the Madrises property from the road. From where she sat, the wall looked lower than

usual. It was just below the couple's knees. Robin had always thought of the wall as being as high as someone's hip. "I think our wall needs some work," she said.

"What's wrong with it?" Molly asked.

"I can see too much. I don't need to see all these people and cars driving by." "Why does it matter? They're far away," Molly said.

On the day that Sam went missing, after hearing that Slone had seen him turn right on Bessel, Robin felt that she too had seen him driving in the wrong direction. She was in the kitchen, talking on the phone when he left—she would have been able to see his green Volvo moving past the stone wall. Lately, Robin had been contemplating whether or not she had actually seen him. She wasn't sure if she had made the memory up. If she had seen his car, she argued to herself, she would have done something about it.

"I feel exposed," she said. If the wall was higher, she wouldn't have to wonder anymore. "I get that," Lexi said.

"Yeah, I guess," Molly said.

Ben was still staring at the branch. Now Saul had it in his mouth, holding one end down with his paws, snapping it in half.

Robin said, "Ben, what do you think?"

"I asked for flowers and you brought me twigs," he said.

"What about the soft part?"

"I don't care about the soft part! What about tulips, hydrangeas, roses, lilies?" Robin stood up. "Molly," she said, "get that pussy willow away from Saul." "Okay."

"I have to get something. I'll be back. It's something you might want, Ben." This was not true—she went into the laundry room to get away from them. But now she had to quickly

find something.

Robin came back with a shirt. It was the only thing she could find. The shirt was Sam's, which Robin knew would usually upset Ben, but this one looked like his style. "Stop that," Robin said. Molly was cleaning under her nails with a broken end of the branch.

"It was already broken," Molly said.

"Look." Robin held the shirt out to Ben. "Brand new. You should wear it. For the dress rehearsal."

"No, I don't like it."

"What's not to like about it? It was your brother's. He liked it."

"It wasn't his shirt if the tags are still on. He never wore it."

"But he would have worn it."

"It has two breast pockets. I won't wear a shirt with two."

"I've never heard of that. What's wrong with the breast pockets?"

"It draws attention to—" Ben felt his chest for his breast pocket. "I only like one breast pocket."

"Okay," Robin said. She folded the shirt and placed it on the floor a few feet away from where she sat.

Ben got up from his chair. "Where are you going?" Robin asked.

"The bathroom."

"Use the one in the basement. The one up here isn't flushing."

Ben went to the basement. He sat down in a bean bag chair. It was the same bean bag chair he would spend hours sitting in when he was in high school. He felt bad for leaving Lexi up there without him, but if he had stayed he would have yelled at Robin. He wanted to do more

than yell. He wanted to pinch her. No matter what he said and how loud he said, it wouldn't get through to her. He wanted her to go swimming with the dolphins and never come back. He wanted her to be a dolphin; he would have an easier time forgiving her.

The shirt, the flowers, the dolphins, and the rock wall were trivial, but somehow together accumulated into something large. What he hadn't said or screamed at Robin turned in on him into a physical irritation and he slouched deeper into the bean bag. In college, his roommate, Andy Papacostas, had said that 'fighting with your parents was very high school.'

Ben adjusted his position in the bean bag. He could feel himself starting to think about his mom like he had when he was in high school. The Ben that sat in the bean bag chair for hours wrote angry letters to his mom. Bean bag Ben called his mother a bitch.

On his way out of the basement, he stopped at the door. He was remembering hanging out with Ian Andriello and Paul Lerner. They were playing Guitar Hero. He had locked the door to the basement so Sam couldn't hang out with them. Through the gap between the door and the floor, he could see Sam's heels. The whole time, he felt Sam's presence leaning against the door, listening to Ben and his friends, humming along with a song, laughing with them when someone made a joke.

Ben walked upstairs. Lexi was sitting on the couch now, with Robin and Molly. Robin sat in the middle. She was showing them photos from her wedding album.

"Actually, I'll take it," Ben said. He went to pick up the shirt. "The breast pockets are fine," he said.

Excerpt from Senior Project
Ella Baldwin

Eve scrambles around the room, finding a Sharpie on the bedside table. She hunkers down over the pizza box as the others watch. Sav reaches for cups and vodka. “I really only drink white rum,” Annie declares.

“Annie!” Sav says, trying to catch her in the lie. Eve shrugs.

“Do whatever you want.” Kate reaches for Annie’s cup and splits the contents between everyone else. Her expression is smooth and cold like slate. Sav has always wondered how she keeps herself cool like that, and what is going on beneath it. Kate’s a mystery. *Shit, Eve’s explaining the rules. Focus.* Eve has written superlatives on the pizza box, there’s a coin involved. Whatever the coin lands on, the girls must choose who best fits the superlative. If no consensus can be reached, or it lands on blank space... “Then you make one up,” she says.

“Sounds... tenuous,” Sav says.

“Sounds fun.” Kate smiles.

“I guess I’ll just do ginger ale,” Annie says. The other girls pretend they don’t hear her.

“I’ll go first,” Eve says, going to her pocket and pulling out a quarter.

(As though she pays for things with quarters—ha! She clearly planned ahead for this.)

“To show you how it’s done.” She flips it dramatically. *It’s actually a terrible toss, Sav thinks, but somehow it lands on a bit of text.*

MOST LIKELY TO DINE AND DASH

“Okay,” Eve says. “Kind of lame but I feel like I had to put that one in. Like to start us out. Whatever.” They all pick Eve. She smiles a little at the suggestion, and Sav knows that she must have written it for this exact response from the group. There’s always an ulterior motive to everything she does. Kate asks Eve if she dined and dashed because she couldn’t pay for the meal, and Sav almost snorts in her drink. *As though Eve has ever been unable to pay. You can smell the money on her, it’s like rotting flesh. Or Tata Harper moisturizer.*

“No, like, we did it for the rush.” Eve shrugs loosely. Sav wonders who the “we” is that she is referring to. Eve’s friend group has always been broad and undefined, full of acquaintances who are often mentioned in stories as background actors, none of them particularly daring enough to steal. *She always chooses people who make her look dangerous, Sav thinks. Like me, I’m safe. And boring.* “It was Taco Bell,” Eve says, “that’s a corporation that doesn’t need any more money. The toxic work culture, the labor—”

“—Wait,” Annie says. “Did you say Taco Bell?”

“Yeah,” Kate nods slowly. “You can’t dine and dash at Taco Bell, that’s not a thing.”

“Oh, um—”

“—Right, yeah, no, you can’t...” Annie says. She tilts her head. “How did you even manage that?”

“Exactly. It’s not a thing,” Kate says.

“No, it’s a thing—” Eve says tentatively.

“–Definitely not a thing–” Annie says.

“–Drink!” Sav says, desperate to squash the tension. Annie, emboldened by Eve’s embarrassment because *isn’t she always?*, leans in closer to the pizza box. “Okay, can I go?” she says, grabbing the quarter and tossing it boldly. It wasn’t a question. The coin lands squarely on

MOST LIKELY TO HOOK UP WITH SOMEONE HERE

Sav squirms around. *Finally!*

“Well,” Annie says. “I’m out of the running.”

“It’s a hypothetical, Annie, that’s the point,” Eve says, rolling her eyes. “We get it, you’re dating a man. You’re super straight.”

“Aren’t you?” Sav asks, turning the dreaded threat of heterosexuality back onto Eve. She knows exactly what she’s doing.

“Yeah, but I’m adventurous.”

“I think it’s Kate, honestly,” Annie says. “Because you’re such a good friend, I feel like you would be so attentive–”

“–It didn’t ask who would be the *best* hookup,” Eve laughs. “You’re sure you’re straight? Seems like you’ve thought about this.”

“Yes, I just don’t parade my sex life out in front of everyone,” Annie says. The words get stuck a little, and Sav can tell it’s painful for her to speak. As much as she’s been pissing her off tonight, Sav can tell that the mention of sex triggers a bristle on Annie’s body.

“I thought you and Dylan had a whole religious pact or whatever, my bad,” Eve throws her hands up. The thing about Eve is that while she’s not particularly vindictive,

her loyalty is comparable to a salad colander. Secrets tend to drip out.

“You would be attentive, Kate,” Sav says. “I’d hook up with you.” The bag of chips crackle for what seems an eternity, until Kate finally pulls a single chip out.

“You would?”

“Sure!” Sav says. “I can be *adventurous!* Contrary to popular belief.” “So we all agree?” Annie asks.

“I guess,” Kate says softly, munching.

“Drink!” Sav pushes the bottle towards Kate. Kate takes a gulp, and tosses the coin.

MOST LIKELY TO STRIP

“Like, professionally?” Sav asks eagerly.

“Eve,” Kate says. “Hands-down.”

“Um, I’m the one who did that hip-hop class,” Sav reminds the group. She does not include the part where she specifically bought large gold hoop earrings to wear to the class, only to get her hair tangled in them during a body roll. The other girls in the class had looked on in horror, as the instructor helped her take them out.

“I honestly think it’s me. Like, I’ve had the most experience—”

“—You want to be the most likely to be a hooker?” Annie scoffs.

“You think I’m a hooker?” Eve asks. *No, of course not,* Sav thinks. *It’s just that... well...* Sav genuinely can’t remember the last time Eve was with someone longer than three months. Her interest always seems to drop off around the six week mark. “You say potato, I say pot-ah-to,” Annie sighs.

“Stripping is an art form,” Sav hurriedly pulls a video up on her phone of a woman

dancing elegantly on a pole. Annie shrugs. “A feminist art form. I think it’s me.” “Why are you so hung up on this? Let Eve be the stripper, Jesus.”

“Because I’m trying to... feel better about myself. I want to feel good in my body, I want control like they have. And also, I want another drink.” Sav can’t believe she’s revealing so much tonight. She’s normally not like this, but *tonight feels different*, as though she may not get a chance again to speak.

“Are you drunk already?” Annie asks. “You know you can’t handle liquor.” “No. I just want to be a stripper and... I’m just gonna... drink.” She drinks. The sting of the vodka takes on a different meaning for her. There is a deep pit, beginning in her throat, that aches for something. She wishes her body could be a holy place for herself, beautiful and cherished enough to spin on a pole, creating endless shapes. She has all of the imagination, but none of the practice for this kind of self-love. Like a beginner, those muscles are weak. Vodka works for now.

She flips the coin, but it doesn’t land on a phrase, just empty space. “So I make one up?”

“Yup,” Eve burps.

“Most likely to...” she looks at Annie. “Sell their soul.”

Excerpt of *No Explanation Needed*
Niels Blumel

Shrike 1

Under the floorboards of a two story cottage, the Shrike and his apprentice prepared for their opening act. Admiring his dark hooded cloak in the reflection of an electric water kettle, the Shrike wondered if the feathered collar was menacing or kitsch. Never mind, the Shrike thought, he liked the synthetic raven feathers. Across the basement, next to the furnace, The Shrike's apprentice sat cross-legged, practicing his e's on a cardboard box. His e's were silly, the Shrike had told him. "Your t's are haunting but the e's look juvenile." A manifesto was in the works, so the Shrike had said, but for now they would paint the words, "YOURS TRULY THE SHRIKE" below their victims in red.

"Why don't I have a name?" the lackey asked.

"You do, we are the Shrike," the Shrike said.

"So I'm a Shrike?"

"No, you are not a Shrike. I am the Shrike."

"Then what am I? I think I need a name."

"After tonight, the public will think that the Shrike works alone, they must think this. Keep working on your e's."

The apprentice bought blue latex gloves. The Shrike had asked for black. Assuming black had been out of stock, the Shrike pushed his hands into the gloves. The glove stopped right at the bump on his wrist. Picking up the silver wire, the garrote he'd put together days before, the Shrike began to tighten the metal thread just below his glove as the helper spoke up again.

“The High School just changed their mascot's name. You hear about that? You probably did, they let us choose the name you know. First we all got to submit our own names, then the school had us vote on them. Then they cut out all of the names that were offensive or didn't make any sense and let us vote again. All of the choices sucked. Seahawks, Blackhawks, Warhawks, Nighthawks. The Thunderhawks won, can you believe that? What's a Thunderhawk? You know what I submitted? I put in the Shrike.”

Plunging across the room, the Shrike was ready for his apprentice to be the first casualty of the night.

“You did what,” he said, gripping the teenager by the neck.

Writhing with shock, the apprentice's brush struck the goth long hooded robe. The Shrike felt the crimson mark and thrust his assistant onto the concrete floor.

“You fool! You've ruined us, wrecked our chances before we could even begin. Maybe I was the fool for putting so much trust into you. The Shrike is finished, you've killed him. There can be no Shrike now, now that they can trace him back to your asinine submission.”

With muted steps, the Shrike made his way over to the workbench, scanning over the tools he'd gathered for later that night. The apprentice massaged his throat, watching the Shrike grip the hammer he'd stolen from home the week before.

“Hey there, boss, I, I was just kidding about,”

“Call me the Shrike,” the Shrike said, cutting his assistant off.

“Sorry. Shrike, listen, I could probably pull up the ballot, the one that we filled out months ago. Shrike look at me, listen to me, I didn't actually do that. I haven't told anybody about us, about the Shrike. My parents think I'm still working back at the store, they think I'm sleeping over at Steven's tonight. Please, Shrike, put it down, you need me, you can't do all this on your own.”

Pulling down his hood, the Shrike faced the pathetic, teary eyed child he'd erroneously taken under his wing. His apprentice was right, the Shrike did need him. The pulley system he'd designed required another two hands, if only the Shrike had four.

"We're not ready. Go home, tonight isn't right. You've caused me great disappointment. On Saturday, at 8:00, I expect you to be exactly where you are right now. The e's will be frightening, I will accept nothing less. Yes, tonight will not do, and I hope, for your sake, that you are ready on Saturday. We will see. We will see."

Shrike 2

It shouldn't be a woman. Maybe the second or third, but to start off with a woman would be cliché, the Shrike thought to himself. It has to be a man. Peering around the corner of an alleyway, the Shrike heard footsteps. The genderless steps made his heart race, until he realized that they were coming from behind him.

"Silence. Stop that," the Shrike whispered to his companion.

"Sorry Shrike, I can't help it," his apprentice responded. "It's my mom, she keeps on calling, the Mattson's told her I'm not staying at their house."

"Bitch," the Shrike muttered to himself.
If only she would come walking down the street, only for his apprentice's mother would he bend the rules.

"Turn it off," said the Shrike.

“I’m picking up, I’m sorry I’ve gotta answer this, she said she’s going to phone the police if I don’t pick up. We wouldn’t want that, right Shrike?”

“Dismissed. You are dismissed.”

“What?”

“This will not do. I can not have your mother getting in the way of things, not now, not tonight. Leave the bag, I can do this on my own.”

“But Shrike, this is a two man operation, you need me.”

“I see one man between the two of us. You are a boy, with a mother who calls. Now leave or be quiet, I think I may hear something.

Drunkenly, an unsuspecting Granadian stumbled down the sidewalk. The Shrike and his assistant froze. The man passed the alleyway, unaware of the two dubious figures lurking next to him. Crawling out from the shadows, the Shrike trailed the man briefly. As the Shrike subdued the man, tightening the garrote around his neck, a woman screamed.

“Stop it!” she yelled, running towards the two.

“This does not involve you, back away, or I will have no choice but to put you to death,” the Shrike yelled back.

The woman moved closer, reaching into her purse. Windows were beginning to light up, the apprentice hid behind a dumpster, staring at his phone screen which read, “Mom”. “Put him down. You let him down or I’ll shoot,” she said, pointing a fashionable handgun at the Shrike and his prey.

The Shrike was stunned. People didn’t carry guns in Granada or so he’d thought. Personally he’d always been against them. During the weekly peace vigil, held at the town green on Saturday mornings from 10:00 to 11:00, of which he attended, the Shrike regularly held a sign in protest of gun violence.

“I’m counting down to five. If you don’t let go of him, I’ll shoot,” she shouted. After three, the Shrike began to loosen his grip, but the woman did not stay true to her word and a sharp pop rang through the air before she reached one. The man in his arms groaned as the Shrike dropped him and ran into the alley. His apprentice was gone, he’d taken the duffle bag with him. Slinking through the dark, the Shrike heard sirens in the distance. When he reached the back entrance to the business he owned, the Shrike realized that he’d forgotten to introduce himself. To the public, the Shrike remained nameless.

Excerpt of *Your-My Body*
MJ Bond

The Bruising

It's still early. I push blackberries against the roof of my mouth, slowly. The sun barely gives shadow in the kitchen. I feel the light through sheer green curtains; a dry lick across my back. The berries turn to liquid on my tongue. The ripe sweetness moves through my throat and chest, and drips down into my stomach.

A friend overdosed and was in a coma for a week. Her face was bloated and pinkish, like a newborn, and was held up with a stiff white neck brace. Her hair was matted with sweat and hung heavy around her ears and cheeks. I was told to pray for her, to think of her kindly.

I filled the first thin needle an eighth of the way with testosterone, rubbed the outer side of my thigh, and slowly pushed in through my skin and into my muscle. I was drunk and didn't switch the syringe needle and injection needle. It left a small yellow and green bruise. Seven days after this, she overdosed, her body strapped to a hospital bed.

I was in New York. Faith swallowed the thousand-mile gap between us. She was alone when she overdosed — they tell me fentanyl.

Her family made the decision: the nurses pulled the cord. I got the call in the morning. I said, okay. I moved myself to the bathroom, my mind pushing outwards, beginning to melt on my skin. I filled the needle an eighth of the way and injected it into my thigh. I didn't cry for two

days, then I filled the needle an eighth of the way and stuck it into my body again. Another two days, again, and again. A month of doses in a week; an imitation.

Paul B. Preciado writes:

“From this moment on, all of you are dead. Amelia, Herve, Michel, Karen, Jackie, Teo, and You. Do I belong more to your world than I do to the world of the living? Isn't my politics yours; my house, my body, yours? Reincarnate yourselves in me, take over my body...”

An imitation

I told the first person about the death, after the doses of testosterone made me feel like I was seductively coked out. They asked if I needed anything, I said no. I waited for them to hang up first.

Months passed, two or so. In the kitchen, the morning light begins to reflect off the snow. It reaches lower branches of the trees, but it has yet to touch into the kitchen. When I inhale, I wrap another blackberry with my tongue. On the exhale, I press the fruit against the back of my teeth.

When the breath comes in, it moves through my mouth, to my esophagus, passes my tearing larynx, through my trachea, and then disperses into my lungs through two bronchi.

The thyroid is above the trachea; it's shaped like a butterfly. Butterflies are thought to be the most notable symbol for “ADC's,” or after-death communication. I read this on a website, where

the words “After Death Communications Confirms That Life and Love are Eternal” are displayed in a giant and nearly-illegible cursive font. After the butterfly, there’s the trachea, which looks like a straight pipe, then branches into the right and left bronchi.

When a trachea is inflamed, it does not grow in entirety; the exterior’s size remains. It is the inner tissue that moves inward and creates a moderate to extreme narrowing of the trachea. This makes it harder to take a deep breath. This also means you may have to chew your food a little more so that the swallowed substance is nearly liquidized.

Some common symptoms of tracheobronchitis are:

Severe cough, Sore throat, Fatigue, Shortness of breath, Wheezing, Cyanosis

Grief lives in my trachea. Time does not pass well. I breathe in counts of two and juice the blackberries in my mouth. I let them move through me, dewing the swelling with sweetness.

Inflammation is more likely to occur in the larynx, the ‘voice box.’ The larynx is above the thyroid; it is closer to the opening of the mouth. When it is swollen, it can be visible if you have access to hospital-fluorescent lighting and a decent camera. The inflammation turns the throat into a thin slit more than a circular hole, and it feels more constrictive. This case is more familiar.

My larynx is torn and growing; the vocal folds lengthening and thickening. This will eventually make my voice adopt a deeper tonality, after a period of synthetic croaks. My larynx is only centimeters above the swelling. When the juice moves through my vocal cords, I feel uneasy.

They are gaining a new texture, a scrape.

Testosterone causes ossification, or hardening of the cartilage, making the larynx less flexible. This can create problems: namely, a condition called “entrapped vocality” where the voice sounds permanently weak and hoarse.

I use three fingers as a tongue depressant and slide them deep into the middle of my throat. I tilt my head back, eyes closed, and gently prod around my throat. This is one way I tend to grieve. I want to feel the scrape; to know it still holds space. I am careful not to touch the butterfly.

My fingers are damp with saliva; I pull them apart slowly and watch the saliva become a small thread that falls back against my fingers. The wetness is tinted with mucus and a dark blue, I lick it off my fingers. I feel the scrape, I cannot hear the butterfly, and the swelling remains.

Testosterone: a synthetic hormone to be injected at .21 m/L every week. Viscosity like thick motor oil. Not quite opaque, yellow-tinted. Manipulates and re-defines the body. Increased sex drive, higher risk of addiction, increased hair, deepened voice; narrowed emotions.

Each time I pull the needle out of my thigh, I feel the swelling grow closer to the butterfly, closer to the scrape. I want to protect the swelling; I want it to rupture to a thunderclap.

Permanently

The other night, I fucked someone with my body and desire, now controlled by synthetics.

When they grabbed my throat, I think they wanted my tongue and I let them push harder against the

swelling. They told me to cum inside them — cum in me, cum in me, cum in me. Cum in you? One hand closing my throat, the other with a death grip on my thigh.

In the kitchen, I slip my boxers off and walk to the bathroom. My thigh is yellowish, and green in the middle; where their hand was. Cum in me.

The bruise is a prize for my drone attachments; for becoming half-mechanized, a reduction of being; for keeping the scrape unscathed with a quiet voice, for feeding the swelling with the cum still clotted on my molars.

Years, months, or days pass without acknowledgement of where the present has gone, where the body is shrinking and growing, attached and detached. It fluctuates, it's specific: the space between my jawline and collarbones is slouched and collapsing into the other; the space where my ribs round off, my sternum, aches against the compression. I want this to rupture, to snap.

I have become addicted to the injection process. I worship the growth, the swelling, the bruise of a new body. New and rendered, dose by dose, into a constant state of being.

Being: condition, state, circumstance; presence, fact of existing; that which physically exists, a person, a thing

Becoming: change from one state of existence to another; meet with, fall in with; arrive, approach, enter.

I allow the golden oil to become a new sense of linearity; to become *my body*, *yours*? The growth will never exhaust itself.

**Excerpt of *The Shadow Hoop*
Celia Buckley**

Caliper and the Magician

Caliper's father forgot to pick up the cake before the start of the party. It would be a white cake frosted pink, with raspberries lining the edges and *HAPPY BIRTHDAY CAL!!!* in red frosting on top. Laurie was planning on placing seven candles in the cake to mark seven years of Caliper's life. She'd been a miracle baby, born with underdeveloped lungs and small enough to fit in her father's hand. And though they watched her grow in a box until she was strong enough to be brought home, she is not a sickly child. In fact, Caliper is almost never sick and bears no trace of her early entrance into the world. She has withstood, tearlessly, scraped knees and papercuts and rugburns, even a hairline fracture in her ankle. She is a robust child who always lands on her two feet.

In the living room, the children wait in a semicircle on the rug, legs criss-crossed as they twitch and shift with excitement. They wonder what he will look like. Will he be wearing makeup like a clown? A clown, no, we hired a magician, Laurie clarifies.

It is Caliper's birthday but Mina is in the center of the semicircle putting on a show, doing cartwheels and backbends. Her mother Meg watches proudly from across the room while the other mothers' faces crinkle to hide their irritation, what a show-off—no, it's not the girl they're annoyed with, it's her mother for making her like that, letting her swallow up all the attention on someone else's day. Laurie, Caliper's mom, sits on the edge of her seat wearing a pinched smile until she sees one of Mina's feet, with those tiny red toenails, go sailing toward a boy's face.

She jumps up and says, "OK, that's enough! Let's all sit down, he's almost here."

The magician isn't often hired to work at birthday parties. He's had the sense that with every year and each new generation, magic is less sought after as the central event for childrens' birthday parties than, for example, iMAX movies and Wii games and laser tag and Frankensteinish labs where bear-shaped sacks come to life with a good amount of stuffing and money. The magician has tried rabbits and doves; he's procured roses for women in the park; he's made a murmuration of cards and pulled the right one from the flutter. He's never disappointed an audience, but he isn't satisfied.

"Do you know of any good traveling petting zoo companies for parties?" Caliper's mom had asked the magician.

"No," he said, "But I can make animals happen."

"Make them happen? What does that mean?"

"I'll make them happen."

The magician arrives with a snake wound around his neck. Or is it a snake? It is both snake and not-snake. Diaphanous; milky, almost: you can see its organs floating around with the pulse of the snake's slow shifting, the grey-pink impression of a mouse moving through the digestive tract. Slung over his arm is a bird cage holding a cockatiel, yellow-white with an orange spot on its head, fading in and out of view like the glow of an uncertain neon sign. And behind him, attached to a seemingly endless leash the magician wears around his wrist, is a mink. Its tail flicks around like a milky rope and as it hops along it becomes clear that the most solid parts of its body are its red eyes. And its pink nose, which trails along the floor, sniffing furiously.

Laurie's large smile stretches too wide when she opens the door for him, and then it fades into something else. Welcome! She says. He hardly speaks, just nods his head and makes soft

noises with his mouth only the animals seem to hear. Laurie swears she sees the furry one on the ground stamp its paw defiantly as though it doesn't want to be there.

Mostly mothers, the group of parents sit off to the side around the table of grown-up snacks and glasses of wine. They perk up when he walks into the living room, sweeping their arms over the circle of children and pressing their fingers to their lips to shush them. Meg thinks the magician looks like Johnny Depp. Then he turns to the side and he doesn't look like Johnny Depp. Then he looks like him again, just for a moment. He has a mustache, one that curls a bit at the ends. Hasn't anyone told him that's not the look for a children's birthday party? He looks like a porn star from the 70s and his pants are too tight. But she clacks her way over to him and offers him a paper cup of wine which he refuses politely with a swish of his hand and a soft smile. Olives? Cheesy crackers? We're ordering pizza, too. And then there's the cake of course. No, no, no.

The adults hardly notice the animals. It's like they can't see them. But they can, can't they? They're not invisible, just not totally completely there-there. The magician made them happen. The kids love them. Kids are less afraid of things than people think they are.

The magician doesn't say happy birthday, doesn't say anything. He just clears his throat and situates himself in front of the children who barely look at him. Their eyes are electric with awe, tracing the animals' every move. The mink rolls its eyes. The cockatiel seems to be blushing. And the snake has been staring at Caliper like it knows that it's Caliper's special day, like it knows her.

With the eyelet of his boot the magician swiftly opens the birdcage and the cockatiel shakes its wings and flutters out of the cage. She makes her way around the room and gives each child a kiss-peck on the forehead. Some of them laugh, others scream. The mothers talk among themselves and chuckle with amusement as they finish their cups of wine. The snake weaves

around the children and settles next to Caliper, who stiffens as the snake eases itself over her lap and loops around her shoulder. Laurie and the other mothers tense up, their eyes widen, but they relax when they hear Caliper giggle.

“He’s purring like a cat!” She shrieks.

The snake clings to her and shuts its grey eyes. Everyone’s attention has turned to the mink who seems to be having a staring contest with Mina. The mink sits squarely in front of Mina and flicks its tail. It sneezes and the eye contact is broken, or the mink has lost interest, and swivels its way back to the magician’s feet. Everybody claps.

A small pool of spilled wine has trickled down from the table. The mink laps it up and a shiver runs across the see-through hairs on its back. If you look closely, you can see the thin red stream of the wine winding through the mink’s esophagus where a whitish hairball shifts.

The cockatiel settles on the broken grandfather clock, its head tilted toward the table of mothers. Sweetie! Sweeeeetie! It repeats, after the mothers. It looks bashful up there with its reddish cheeks, its feathers limpid seafoam. The mothers shift between their conversation and intervening with the children. Charlie is picking his nose. No no no, do NOT wipe that on the rug!

Laurie keeps looking anxiously through the window, hoping to see the family’s red car among the silver and black.

“It’s just like, *where are you???* You know?” Laurie says, tapping her fingertips on her head to show how spacey her husband’s mind is.

“I get it. Before Roger left...” Meg starts, and Laurie can almost see the other moms’ eyes rolling in disbelief that Meg is talking about her husband *again*, especially right now. She goes on. “You never knew if he was listening. Everything I said seemed to slip from his mind in seconds. Seconds! I didn’t get it. Remember me? Remember your two kids? Hellllooooo?”

Laurie shakes her head. Her eyes are fixed on a space beyond the windows, and she says, “It’s the small things. It’s the small things, and then it’s the big things. Forgetting the parent teacher conference. Now the cake. He works too much, he works too much. He works so hard. But you know,” Laurie says, lifting her cup to her lips, “I can’t help but wonder about his boss. It’s like he’s at her every fucking beck and call. I get it—it’s his boss. But one second it’s a work thing, the next second she’s talking to him about her personal shit. That’s what I think anyway.”

The other moms are silent for a moment. One offers her hand on Laurie’s shoulder. Another pours her more wine.

“Men are so fucked,” Meg says.

And then they remember the animals.

“You know,” says Meg, pointing to the mink. “That one looks off to me. Emaciated or something.” She squints, noticing the bobbing light that seems to travel from the lamp across the room and through the mink.

“They’re pretty bizarre,” another mother admits.

“But also beautiful,” someone says.

Across the room, the magician turns slightly towards them, then quickly looks away.

Excerpts of *NOSTALGIA FOR GLACIERS*

Luke Burton

World-unraveling Ash Graces Extended Tongues

The sketch of power lines coallesing at the transformer reminded me of you
and that where I hold my head will one day be underwater.

I love you. I try and understand storm clouds. I trace their electric openings
with my finger on the car-window's canvas in the medium of breath.

This world is beyond repair. The gooey actual slops across my surfaces
like your emails sliding over each other in the fish-pail of the archive.

A sentence spoken in no language. The closest we come to eternity

is strontium-90's half-life. A spun-out concept constantly fleeing

itself in straight lines. I get it. I love you. It unravels the mind

& hand identically. The two of us hold looms to weave back the tide.

To assemble comprehension, think the last thought first.

This world is beyond repair. Transatlantic fiber optic cables

slip from the ocean and onto Nova Scotia's stone beaches.

The Trinity Test's echo is heard two towns over

where world-unraveling ash graces extended tongues.

Soft dry snow in July. A modicum of the body

swells past its container. Replicates

to the point where it ends everything.

Water, ice, and glass are things. I am the sound of their dancing. I love you. This

world is beyond repair.

Anarchic Sight Theory

Each Sunday I play pool with eyeballs for billiard balls
at the Other Place & envision what it might be like to be touched
by felt & fluorescence in alternation. The light of passing cars
filters occasionally through our pitchers of PBR. I know no metaphor
for sight, yet the beams protrude, pint shaped,
from the sockets of anonymous angels. Lines sharp as axe blades
gently part the trees, then brush away before the fall.
You ask where the terror is located—
Is it in the horse yet to be broken or the broken horse?

I'm embarrassed by my telos,
a stance of cue balls awaiting sticks. The future
perfect will be an ongoing breeze. I have no theory
for dream without waking. Falling from the lake onto the shore,
I wanted to know how you felt about the hurricane
hoarding air above the Atlantic, the one that shares a name
with your lover. Instead, I zipped my coat against the wind —
whose breath? A thin horse swept up from the South
and kicked my eyeballs back into their dark pockets.

Anthropo : scenic metadata : low altitude lustre : my palm :
rare earth metal menagerie : charger sparking in trailer park :
live feed : cirrus cloud streamers : over theory games : age of
antihistamines : uptake inhibitors : expanded cinema :
bitbanging : cerebellum bucks : sweet sovereign state of stevia :
hammer and meme memory : when I say emergency I mean :
everything outside : the minute orchestral avalanche

American Alienation Sonnet

I've got a 20th century cannon and the manifesto
to match it I moonlight as a self-sucking fire warden
congratulating himself on seeing the smoke
through the trees I'm at the baseball game
of now with a fat foam finger claiming
this is the avant-garde I'm building
weapon systems for the blind grips that vibrate
when the reticle touches a living object I'm lying
hungover on my apartment floor cracking up
for thinking *I am the anthropocene* out loud
to the television at the gas pump peddling
peach vape cartridges and video games
where I point and click to obliterate
pixels arranged into a portrait of my face

Nostalgia for Glaciers

I've never seen one,
but that doesn't stop me
from casting my stones.

The disruptors flew me to the north pole
to give a talk on "unethical ascetic etcetera"
in the arboreal tech-trahedron.

The applause was as thunderous
as an ice shelf crashing into the sea,
or at least i'd like to imagine.

When it came time for me to propose
a toast to the success of negative capability
in rebranding the image of extractive industry,

I held up my glass of glacier water
and noted how it glowed in the midnight sun, how there were
no words for what it's worth.

**Excerpt from *Burt [Air]*
Mariel Cupp**

It must have been March, late at night, the first time I heard their voice. An elusive and peculiar pitch, accented with the curvature of a New York dialect, brought me to pause between static. The station was 104.1, and the show was composed of callers, all granted thirty seconds or so to profess some truth, a free-for-all of complaints and anecdotes. One was an oral surgeon, frustrated that New York State didn't deem her fit to administer vaccines. *But you'd let me stick a needle in your mouth?* Another was a response to a recent shooting. The man calling in was all echoes, surrounded by the rumbling of an 18-wheeler's cabin. *I had a buddy tell me about how things are down in Atlanta.* A nervous chuckle, or maybe it was a grunt. Voice after voice, a quick thank you from the host, no we really need to go on to the next caller, this one's worried about insurance, they want you to admit you're a smoker for vaccine eligibility, but it'll only increase your premium, it's insidious, I don't trust it, my daughter said the opposite, a new topic, please go on, thank you but that's all our time for tonight. I had never heard the air used this way: for a communal shitstorm.

Then the show ended, and after a crackling moment of voicelessness, the slow Northern drawl emerged again. Despite the four years I have spent in the Northeast, I am never less charmed by the bending way people speak here. In Southern airwaves, the ones I grew up on, this voice would be more drawn together, the radio speakers sewing their words one right into the next then flipping up at the ends of sentences, the same overfamiliarity which allows strangers to assign one another pet-names. But this voice was all periods and pauses, no indulging fondness to it. In a deep tone that was clearer than all of the people from the telephones, they greeted me from Woodstock 104, WIOF-LP, licensed to Birds of a Father Media. It was now two o'clock in the

morning, on the dot, they continued, and the station would be ending its broadcast. Which they promptly did not do. Instead, at a painstakingly slow pace the voice recited the schedule of the coming week. Then there was the matter of sharing the station's Post Office address, and to whom tax-deductible donations should be made payable, and slots available for advertisement, and the state as well as charity funds that support the station. They explained the radius that the low power FM waves reached, every town which could be feasibly tuned in, and those which could not, due to the rivers and mountains stubbornly placed to block their signal. Each new matter on the docket came through the weary voice, exhausted by itself. It was as though the voice wanted badly to sleep, to finally shut down the waves, but was haunted by relentless agenda items that floated at random to their attention.

Then, the schedule for the morning, which slowed the voice further. *At 7:50 and thirty seconds in the morning, the voice of the founder of this station, and the love of my life, the late Randi Steele, will be heard reading the name of the station as well as the introduction for Democracy Now.*

I was consumed by pity, which was then crawled over by shame. I had misjudged this person as unprofessional, exhausted, lacking passion. But the passion had belonged to Randi, their life partner. A short search said she died in September of last year. This person was simply looking after the station now. The task must be exhausting.

After that first night of pity, the voice earned an allotted time slot in my nightly ritual. There were a number of evenings where I came to bed too late, and the air was already consumed by the low growl of an empty studio. But on the nights the voice joined me, it demanded empathetic

attention, and I turned up the volume. It became clear that the nervousness with which the host spoke was coincidental, as nearly every night it carried out the dutiful announcement in the same order, with only brief conversational tangents. The schedule again, then the long case for why to donate. Woodstock 104 is set up as a 501c3, hence the status as an LPFM. The FCC grants this Low Power license to nonprofits with a limited broadcast radius. The voice ritualistically mispronounced the Federal Communications Commission as *The Feder-all Communi-case-ee-on Commish-ee-on*. Then, how the week will look, and lastly, a reminder of what's missing, the love of their life, the soulmate.

Randi passed away during that first month of Autumn, punctuating a long summer - an awful time to lose the backbone of the station. I think of how she left a widow to stumble awkwardly through the particulars, night after night.

In my state of enamorment, I told another friend about the radio station. In these private gossips, I tend to disparage my beloved host. "What I adore is that the speaker is so bad at being on the radio," I told the friend, then instantly regretted my harshness. He asked if I've gone down the radio-outer-space rabbit hole. A cruel question, since he must have known that his asking was nothing short of a shove plunging me into research. I called him a day later. "Did you know the word radio is from the latin *radius*? Spoke of a wheel. Or a beam, like light." Did you know radio waves move closer to the speed of light than the speed of sound? Did you know the music we've broadcasted through radio waves has travelled through space and it floats there light years away? Do you know about the hypothetical life out there with their hypothetical transmitters, maybe listening to our songs from 1908?

I don't often listen to the radio when I drive. It's too difficult, on long stretches, to find a worthwhile station that stays in range. The last time I made the flat drive home from New York to North Carolina, I arrived at dusk. In the living room, my legs still weightless from twelve hours of lingering over the pedals, I sat across from my mother. She was eager to entertain me. Over beers she presented a website, dense with text, chronicling the history of an AM station from Roanoke, Virginia - her hometown. WROV history follows the longtime owners, Burt and Muriel Levine, and the many jockeys that gave the station its character. It's a highly organized page, with chronologically ordered chapters that detail happenings from 1946 (The Beginning) to 2004 (The Epilogue) and the many years in between. Then there's the Engineering page, information about the building, blueprints, musiccards, commercials, jingles, testaments from listeners, interviews, memories - seemingly endless information. Someone, or likely multiple someones, clearly labored over it.

WROV was dialed on 1240 AM - *Oh Lordy, 1240!* was the popular slogan - and its character began to take shape as an influential force of the Roanoke Valley in 1953. The website called these "The Burt Levine Years," this being when the Levine couple bought the station. Burt's wife Muriel was the daughter of a broadcasting executive. With the help of her family, and his knowledge of the accounts after having worked ad-copy for the station, they moved headquarters and began hiring a cast of lively disc jockeys who would define the sound of Roanoke for decades.

Throughout my visit home, we landed repeatedly on the endless content of wrovhistory.com for our entertainment. One morning over a puzzle and coffee, my mother was narrating the site to me. She eventually reached the year 1983 and extended the phone, asking that I carry on aloud.

This was the point in the archive when Burt's wife suffered a ruptured cerebral aneurysm, and my mother was too overcome by tears to continue reading. This due to the fact that Burt and Muriel Levine were, among other things, my mother's parents. Muriel's aneurysm, which occurred when my mother was a sophomore in high school, resulted in a coma that lasted eleven years before culminating in her death in October of 1994. Six months later, Burt passed away as well. His death was surely a result of medical complication, as he was seventy when he passed. But the matter of months always struck me as necessarily correlating. As a child, I came to the conclusion that he had been killed by grief.

Did you know that *noise* is another name for any unwanted interference with a radio signal? Much like a friend once explained to me an Anthropological idea: that *dirt* is only matter that we deem out of place. They demonstrated this by shaking my hand, then asking me to put my palm out. Into this palm they clipped their fingernails. The same nails I had just embraced while attached to their person. "It's not dirty. It's out of place." Did you know that when I turn to Woodstock 104 at night I try to remain as still as possible, fearful that the sounds of my turning will become disturbances?

Excerpt of *Please Stand Back*
Amelia Van Donsel

Skeet Shooting

Now that you've broken the clay, what's the point? The clay pigeon thrower spits its disks up into range, and Tiny Gomez stands there, poking them out one by one until they have all exploded. Red dust touches our eyes. Afterwards, his silence is so terrific, it beams itself into me. I say, "When I saw myself completed, there was one cloud over the city like a blimp over the pyramids. I don't know what violence is, anymore." His shotgun raises to nothing, then he says, "it's on the inside of your head, McCandless." And the bookie shakes his head, chews his cud and sucks his tongue; sun is in his semen. Rolling down his sleeve, the cuff's button floats above his wrist like a lemon in a surrealist painting. He is looking straight up, up at the trembling saucer which skates across our vision.

The South Pole

Creamy drifts had jostled us off course.

He squatted in the snow and fit
together our delicate drawings. At this angle of the year,
his damp moustache cast a shadow on the squares
of geography we had figured,
using a compass and sundial.

Mawson was from a small Massachusetts fishing family.

He spoke only German.

“Wo sind wir?” Through the wind,
his words were so messy it were as though
he had no mouth. I asked him, “What?”
Mawson just squinted at me through the midnight
sun and noisy condensation on his moustache.

He had never duped me before.

The men were restless—Earth’s gravitational force

was particularly felt, and some had been known to collapse
from magnetism. Once, we had come upon a small
reconnoitring party whose hands had turned inside out.

A sleddog was left in the mud with a tumor enlarged on her throat.

Our dogs were alive and wolfing down gizzards,
and one could imagine new landscapes
moving among their innards. My favorite, Yelena, was snapping at
wind sounds, her hindquarters quivering.

Aeneas, an oil-keeper, metered conditions while on skis.

As we’d been warned, unilateral cold softly dried
each man’s organic menagerie:

the company knew only of the expedition
to plant our flag and not how

to part the soft tissue of the snow.
One hand on the glacier, Mawson stood in all his fur,
and I caught myself making stone from his eyes
and the creases of the expanse, blinding and dumb.

My Imagined Close Friendship With Humphrey Bogart If He Hadn't Been an Alcoholic

It's my birthday, my first June in Los Angeles, and Bogie buys me a painting of a shot glass.
Did you catch my flick? he asks as I unwrap it. He means *The Big Sleep*. When I tell him
no, he sets his imagined fedora down on the couch and says, *Just a minute*.
I consider offering him a drink but don't.
It's dumb blinding out, but he goes and stands on my patio
anyway, smoking, his hair reflective as donut glaze.
Sometimes I think he only smokes for the look of it,
since working with him requires a certain style—
a crisp, white Napa Valley complemented by a meaty provolone.
Once, on set, Bogie pulled his gun on me for a laugh, and I socked him in the mouth.
A man's gotta know when he's being kidded. Back when he still had the money,
he'd pick up the check or take me out on his yacht and roll my cigs.
One time his hair fluttered off in that wind, but we never talked about it
or the other women. Then, over eggs and ham, Bogie pointed to some
weepy young dame in the paper, fox over her shoulder, a sultry red dress,
and cried, *Christ, I smashed my face with hers! I still can't get the lipstick off!*
I'll admit that I was jealous of his brashness, even though the press was all over him for it.
Bogie comes back inside in his suit and just stands there like a dark dinner chair;
he's tracked some dust onto the carpet. I offer my birthday cake, but he shakes his head,
and when he meets my gaze, his eyebrows pucker, the way they do for the camera:
My flick's a bunch of hooley, Harry. They've killed the talkies.

August Complex Fire

Until he coaxes
the breath, the
not beloved, away, I am
wanting, holding his blood in my arms.
And I read on

the venomous periphery of California, where
my father dies and dies, flattening
out his forehead until it is a
penny.

What does he weigh, East Bay
Hills, Globe Rock? His weight is smoke.
Copper coils around his house,
and the sleeve and beard are similar and frightened by
their own edges.

The blaze progresses
against him as though his living
were scratched into the heat
of his sweaters, casting only
their poor muslin shadows.

Midwinter Examination

When I meet the optometrist, it
is not the freckle
in my eye that concerns
her but what stands
in the middle of my house.

It's that, she says
while looking
through my head.
It's taking your good china
but cannot manage

stairs with all those saucers. She
prescribes pills so maybe it will
leave for some other, nicer
cornea.

As I drive home through snow,

each slash of wiper tearing
across my face parts
a violet wedge, which arrives
translucent as a baby's eyelids.

A small bird sings for miles

by Sophie Gregory

I've been here for days

have never left not even once

have fallen in love with nothing

more times

than I will try to count

I'm by-the-by

and inside-out

Prayer

It's the evening sky
you await
the geese
beneath or
within

You're just a prayer
fleeting
cherry blossom
with feelers tucked
deep

Everything
a rooted
ripple
rings
below
a
universe
wholly

Onesome.

What was contained in

openness
if not the flood?

What rose

grew
from fog
only to sink
below

the water?

When the sun

sees her

does she weep
for the river?

or do her tears simply want
like raindrops
to fall

coalesce

the budding blue?

A Stone in Water

A stone
rises from

juts a
punctus

in liquid
surface.

Quick lines
like eels

trail
through.

Water softens river
rock

softens
space.

And sound
spills simply

away
into stone.

Rain

Derived from Geological Survey Water Supply Paper 1535-G

rain is volcanic emanation, bone, air, local dust

rain is sodium, ocean electrolytes

is cloud nuclei, phosphorescent algae

is cation smoke, ozone incense, soils and suns and iron salts

rain is bacteria, geosmin tickling the nostrils

rain is clay – shrinking, swelling, moving in the dirt

is lightning, fatty acids

is industrial fuels, water-soluble chemicals

rain is deep cracks in a cliff, the space between sands, water in the dunes rain is

chlorinous air, a copper-coated zinc penny called heads

rain is a recycled pool, percolating nimbostratus

magnesium, potassium, bananas from a singular ancient tree

rain is cold, hot, and just right, an arid and a tropical country

rain is a colorless gas, uninhabited, empty, abandoned, it is

land and water, loam, sea, and puddle, it is leftover

rain and more rain to come, is major, is minor,

upside down ion icon, a mudflat flipped

with roots shooting out space, a sponge

it touches skin like an oxygen blessing

the rain is the atmosphere of everything

falling out of everything

fallen out of everything

shaken loose from its origins

nersed secret, anonymous so-and-so

the rain is an age-old song

4.21.2021 | 11:47 AM²

I can't remember whether I grew up in an English speaking home in Tuscany or an Italian speaking home in New York. Can you believe it? Not even that. You'd say it sounds far-fetched, but I've met some people my age who confuse that childhood's Maine with this childhood's Florida all the time. In any case, it has nothing to do with my story. And whatever you hear after I leave here, from your computer, I tell you already it has a fainter memory than I do when it comes to my own life. So, though I'm certain the computer cares a great deal whether I grew up in an Italian speaking house in America or an English speaking house in Italy, it cares about nothing important. That's because computers followed journalism's lead in looking for information that can be corroborated by two sources or more and get them past legal; whatever that means. It would be more relevant to my story, as it happens—and this both computers and interviewers tend to ignore—to talk about a family dinner.

When I was eight, my mother's brother Leo came to our house after returning from some sea merchant business on the other side of the world. Our dinner table was mahogany and had a brown to it that almost absorbed the candle light and in which I too was absorbed while my father prepared the food and my mother fixed the house up for the visit. I remember the oranges and reds of the candles dancing on the shiny surface and the way my body felt, swaying over my unmoving feet. Only when my mother placed the white hemstitch on the table, in the same queenly manner by which she had taught me how to make my own bed, I could leave and get dressed for dinner. I wore my white holiday dress. It had a small tomato stain which I noticed

² Excerpts from April, 21st-22nd are recordings of Olivette recorded by Witness on the day of the event and replayed by Witness in court.

turned orange by then, because the stain had been breathing for a while. A light orange, not unlike the inside of your teacups. I brushed my hair, which back then was a beaming black. (Apropos, it wasn't gradual, as I'd have you assume, that my hair learned the secret of reflecting all colors equally. It happened in an instant, to each hair, until it turned to the coiffure you see today.) I didn't know all that about color back then; I seem to be losing my grasp on it now too, as we speak. You look paler and I can't tell if it's blood draining from your face or mine that makes you look that way.

[Objection Overruled.]

Back then I remember all I could think of was the unchanging colors that I'm seeing and how I couldn't help but think that because my eyes are blue I see more colors than my dad does with his sad brown eyes.

During dinner Leo made us all laugh, then asked me about my school. "Your school," he said. As though I owned it. I answered something to the effect that it was boring, and Leo laughed and said *cazzo*, and over my mother's hushing he asked me, "What *do* you find interesting little Anna?" And I was very confident already so I stood up on the chair and over my mom's reprimands I said "I know all the colors in the world and I didn't learn any of them in school Zio Leo!" I was about to poke my tongue at him but my father, laughing, jerked me down to my seat before I could let it out of my mouth.

After dinner, Leo offered my parents some cocaine which he brought from Holland for factory workers up north because there was a shortage of coffee. My father told him they wanted to try it (he was an early reader and a fan of Freud), but mother pointed at me with her chin and rolled her eyes. So Zio Leo—on break from cocaine after a long time with it at sea—took me to the guest room to keep me busy while the two enjoyed their pep pills.

I sat on the floor and he sat on my study chair. The chair was small and he had to sit on the armrests like a gargoyle, shifting uncomfortably, which made me giggle the whole time he told me about his work.

But he knew how to keep me attentive. A few times he was about to say the word Pirate, to impress me I suspect, but regretted it last minute and only let the thought of it linger between us in the room. Then my parents turned the music louder on the Phonograph. Leo's head swayed from side to side and he raised his voice. He told me about color. How the farther he traveled the more colors he saw. He spoke of fish and birds that have colors that I could not at the time imagine; I closed my eyes trying to conjure these but even the spots of light that hide behind the eyelid all turned dull—Phosphenes, they're called—in comparison to Leo's superlatives and when I opened my eyes I only saw his bony knees through his dusty black pants and the music was scary to me and I realized that I couldn't understand what he meant when he said things like “different red” or “darker than purple,” so I lost interest.

[Court Adjourned. Lunch.]

4.21.2021 | 12:37 PM

Zio Leo had seen me yawn, or look at a cobweb, or he could read my mind, and he raised my chin so that my blue eyes met his blue eyes, and on the way there I caught a glimpse of his pursed lips and could tell by his jawbones that he was clenching his teeth, and I saw the dark purple circles that were under his eyes and weakened their blue.

When he finally got my eyes to fixate on his, or his to stop jittering suspiciously around the room, he said, with some urgency, that the bird he was talking about wears one of the most beautiful browns in the world, that even though it's just brown it has small specks of red and green, but that they can't even be called red or green because in the bird's feathers they just become a part of that brown and if I can lose interest even with the color of that particular bird then I, like my parents, will never find interest in anything else and will become a lonely old family with nothing on her mind but money or an undying bitterness about the emancipation of women. Cazzo. Then he tried again, with a softer voice and a looser jaw, to explain the color of the bird and I got a little scared because he seemed so frustrated with the fact I couldn't get it, or he give it.

Leo opened his suitcase and started showing me old shirts and sweaters and leather shoes and telling me to take ten percent of this brown and three percent of that yellow and, excitedly, that I can even take sixty-three percent of this red, and mix them all together. Then he closed the suitcase with all the clothes inside and he shook it and made a drumroll or machine gun noise with his tongue and knocked on the suitcase twice and asked if I'm ready, and I didn't know what I was preparing for; I had only the faintest memory of what they said in school about percentages of colors.

Leo balanced the heavy suitcase on his open palm, which was probably sticky with sweat, and caressed the brown leather in circles as if he were magically brewing something inside. I looked away from the hairy back of his hand and into his eyes. Beads of sweat slid down his temples and cheekbones and upper lip and into his mouth. He was agitated, as if whatever might come out of that trunk could not help but be satisfying and yet despairingly unsatisfactory at the same time. At some point—the brown leather and his palm must have been warm from all the rubbing by then—he asked me if I was ready. I nodded and my eyes were open so wide it stung and for a moment I thought I heard a flutter inside the case.

When he finally undid the straps again, he made a funny coo sound, trying to entice the bird. But it did not answer. He swung the suitcase open like a ringmaster, but the only things that ended up on top were a leather bound notebook and a short blade, which brought a momentary smile to Leo's lips. A smile that then contorted into a miserable disappointment radiating from his chin to his forehead.

I asked him what the blade was for and he said, correctly, that there was another war coming and that this time we're all in for it and that even if his bird could fly as far as Japan it won't be able to save itself and neither, incorrectly, will I. Then he picked up the notebook, penned something to the first page very quickly, and said that I better find something that interests me before we all die, that otherwise I definitely have no business in heaven and that even hell, with all its colors and good conversation, because it is eternal, might bore me and I'll make the foolish mistake of choosing life again when they offer it, as they most certainly would. "Life!" He laughed. "With its own eternities and boredoms like training wheels, but with appetites and desires too to keep us near sanity."

When I tell it this way I can almost remember being scared. If it weren't for the immovable memory of a pure, tired, sadness, I might have been misled to think that it was that night I was first visited by fear, which as a rule seldom frequents me.

Leo kept shifting in the small chair and I thought he'd keep shifting when he gets up and shifting when he walks and shifting when he climbs the boat and when he spreads his Dutch drugs and commodities on the other side of the world. And while I was thinking my thoughts he was preoccupied with his own and gradually each of us could forget that the other was there. Then I heard my mom's worst laughter—the one she would pick me out of bed with at night, to dance—coming from the other room and I asked him to tell me more about the bird because I thought it would comfort him. Leo was frowning at the door, then at me. A sad frown, like a child's. The eyebrows like sandbags over his eyes. Then he forced a smile. But the sadness wouldn't leave his pupils. And he said that the essence of brown was actually red. And I'm not sure if I was the one who asked him “what red, Zio Leo?” or if he said these very words himself to expedite some process inside of him, but when the question was brought into the room—it might still be there, waiting for an answer—he took the blade and slit his veins from his wrists up to his elbows, starting by cutting his right forearm, then immediately his left, though he only reached halfway up his left with the wavering right.

I didn't scream for a long while because it was the first time I saw such a plentiful red or because he was smiling and his last breath sounded like he was shushing me.

I hope I'm not boring you.

Excerpt of *Dementia: Footnotes of Time*
Zachary Hait

⁷³Jordan had done her best to inch further away, now leaning against the gantry, the safety of a workday looming, threatening to go awry by sheer proximity. Jordan tried again. "It doesn't feel like we're getting anywhere and I need to get out of here, I can't be late. Already lost this job once. Our conversation is running in circles. Can we please pause and pick back up tonight?"

Kaede was still on the dirt shore, opting to stay put, a safe distance away. "No." The anger crept further upwards, constricting her voice. "I'm going to be thinking about this all day, it's going to ruin any attempt at productivity, and then I'm going to wait at home for you to show up in the middle of the night just in time to argue about continuing this conversation before you decide you're too tired, that everything is pointless, that you want to be left alone forever, you have to go to bed, that we'll continue this later." Kaede stopped and Jordan met her eyes. "We are continuing this now."

There was no escape. No back door, no panic room, no muck to sink into. Breathing tighter. Claustrophobia. "It's not my fault if you can't handle being separated from me. Your work is your responsibility, mine is mine. Please let me go."

"Sometimes I actually like spending time with my girlfriend. Fucking sue me. You realize if we don't spend any time together then we," Kaede violently motioned her hand back and forth between them, "aren't a thing."

homewrecker

Aequorea victoria

Part of Deleuze's program for "overturning Platonisms" is rejecting Bergson's residual Platonism! Orthodox Platonism would insist upon the strict unintelligibility of every flux. If Bergson accepts Plato's arguments that becoming is unintelligible, he insists that it is accessible to the non-intellectual faculty of intuition. Deleuze does not accede to the stark Platonic duality: if becoming is inaccessible to an intellect, it is inaccessible to an intellect in the thrall of the dogmatic image of thought. If we abandon the diktats of representational thought, we might discover a non-intellectual thought adequate to flux—one that only extends the insights of intuition. This non-intellectual thought is no more a negation of it than non-Euclidean geometry is a negation of Euclidean geometry. (Paetsch 221, Footnote 332)

We can start connecting some dots! These residual Platonisms are essences, Bergson arguing with Plato that if time has no sense of identity, $x \neq x$, then time cannot be engaged by the intellect, logic, or math, but only by means of his system of intuition. But it was on Plato's terms that the only possibilities were "fully able to be understood" essences and "totally unable to be understood" fluxes. We oppose this from the outset; time has a structure and can meaningfully be engaged without subjugating it to the realm of the spatial, which is to say time is not "fully able to be understood" insofar as we understand this phrasing to be referring to the precision of essentialism, but neither is time "totally unable to be understood" insofar as we understand this phrasing to be referring to Bergson's assertion that the intellect, logic, and math cannot engage time. The dogmatic image of thought is representationalism, the methodology employing essentialism, a presupposition of separated, determinate, static identities that asserts due to the already-erased time that external interactions (experiments, models) are themselves separable and determinate, able to provide a transparent look at "objective" (separated, determinate) reality. Thus we have been arguing, in motivation of our mathematical-physical engagement, and orienting ourselves into a move that Paetsch likens to an engagement of non-Euclidean geometry – we do not negate the validity or success of these spatial theories of time like Newton's and Einstein's, rather we seek to engage time not spatially but temporally, and this move requires us to abandon essentialism and representationalism.

Moments in our engagement will thus not be separated, determinate, static identities, rather the identity of a moment will be contingent on an internal relationship (Baradian apparatus), thus understood as an identity in process, from which we would say something akin to "moment x from the perspective of moment y ". We thus affirm that x has no inherent, determinate, static identity of $x = x$ always and in complete isolation from all relations, from all contexts, rather x has an identity that is (for example) situated from the point of view of y . From a different moment, let's say z , we would thus have moment x from the perspective of moment z . We understand that moment x from the perspective of y is different from moment x from the perspective of z , thus we are on our way to better understanding on a conceptual level what we want to mathematically encode such that we can engage time while affirming a lack of identity, $x \neq x$. This resonates with our example of the moment of Jordan and Kaede first meeting at the piano bar, a moment which held an identity of embarrassment from one moment (we can say x from the perspective of y) and the identity of ambivalence from another moment (we can say x from the perspective of z).

Maimon is important to Deleuze because he develops a logic of difference to support a genetic perspective. This perspective wed Spinozist immanence, Leibnizian differential dynamics, and Kantian critique—fearsome! The key to this perspective is that differential intensities enter into relations of reciprocal determination: “The differential elements unfold their ideal characteristic genetic potential whenever they enter into appropriate relationships of reciprocal syntheses” (Rölli 2016: 12). Maimon uses Leibniz’s differential calculus to model the genesis of experience from differential intensities: differential intensities (dx , dy) generate intensities ($\frac{dy}{dx}$), intensities generate qualities (neighborhoods), and qualities compose objects (surfaces). Except at the final level (that of objects), real difference predominates. There are only differences in kind: no identities, no differences by degree. No need to speak of a “self”, not even a local self: no global “identity” will unify these pulsating, infinitesimal, local neighborhoods. It is sheer perversity to subordinate bubbling infinitesimal neighborhoods to a placid global identity. Maimon’s turbulent domain precludes global identification. Consider a differential element dx . Why does it repel identity? In itself, it is unproductive. It impels nothing—and what impels nothing has no properties that can identify it or that can be identified with it. Yet it is not nothing: it becomes productive when it enters into a reciprocally-determining relation with another differential element dy (Maimon 2010: 21). Thus, “in relation to x , dx is completely undetermined, as dy is to y , but they are perfectly determinable in relation to one another. For this reason, a principle of determinability corresponds to the undetermined as such” (Deleuze 1994: 172). Interactions amongst differential elements are local and generative. Determination is not negation, even if difference is ubiquitous. “Absolutizing” difference is refusing to couple “negation” and “becoming”. Discarding “negation” is the price differential philosophy must pay to become genetic. One of Deleuze’s key insights is that negation only affirms the forms of identity. (Paetsch 82-83)

We gloss another point of view of this relational determination of something indeterminate outside of any context in order to build intuition. A moment, like dx , is undetermined, which is to say lacks an identity. This is good! This allows for the dynamic aspect that we want. Intuitively, if we want to know what a moment is in general, from some fixed universal perspective, the answer can be no more specific than “it depends”. A moment dx in a particular context, in a particular internal relationship, thus generates a sense of identity, the dynamic reciprocal determination of $\frac{dy}{dx}$. We can put this in the language of the virtual and the actual, where the virtual is dx and the actual is dy . The full depth of meaning we ascribe to an actual moment dy is through the way dy is informed, contextualized, constrained, in dynamic reciprocal determination with the virtual dx . Deleuze puts this in his own words,

The differential dx affirms the triadic logic of expression: “The symbol dx appears as simultaneously undetermined, determinable and determination. Three principles which together form a sufficient reason correspond to these three aspects: a principle of determinability corresponds to the undetermined as such (dx , dy); a principle of reciprocal determination corresponds to the really determinable ($\frac{dy}{dx}$); a principle of complete determination corresponds to the effectively determined (values of $\frac{dy}{dx}$)” (Deleuze 1994: 171). (Paetsch 83, Footnote 124)

The moment related to the morning after Jordan and Kaede went to the club we affirm is indeterminate in itself. Like our discussions about the moment of Jordan and Kaede first meeting, the identity of this morning-after-the-club moment is in unending becoming through time and thus lacks a determinate identity, $x \neq x$, outside of a particular perspective in time. Choosing the perspective of the moment itself, as in, understanding the moment of morning-after-the-club from the perspective of morning-after-the-club, we see how this moment is still always already in a relational, process-theoretic, reciprocal determination. We turn to the virtual and the actual. The virtual, the past, informs, contextualizes, constrains Jordan in the present such that she knows Kaede treats her like a living person, which is something Jordan is looking to avoid. Thus Jordan expects this and sneaks out of their apartment before Kaede awakens. This moment came to be in this way through how the virtual, the past, informed, contextualized, constrained the actual, the present. This novel actual in turn acts upon the virtual, the past includes this now-gone moment and the whole identity of the virtual changes with this new piece added in to the mix because, by means of engaging time through a temporal continuity and not a spatial continuity, every part retains the whole within it, each element interpenetrating every other element, and thus any new element added to the mix changes the whole.

We depart from Deleuze with respect to using differentials as our mathematical encoding, but we have included the present discussion as a helpful heuristic.

⁷⁷In order for structures to be built, they must have a ground. Jordan worked the levers up, down, swirling, dancing. The whole vehicle vibrated, hummed, punctuated by the abrupt arm movements that she was controlling. The first step was to make a cut. The insides were stuck, locked beneath a surface. It was their business to break barriers, exploiting the exposed. And here she was, their arm. Jordan jerked her arm, shifting the arm of the dredge. The smell of saline displaced the stagnant air of the control room as the water sprayed.

Land reclamation is haptic, not visual. Once a cut is made the loose sediment disperses, a noise of muck. Jordan couldn't see under the surface of the ocean. The dredge had become an extension of her own body. She scanned her arm's blades out in front of her. Jordan desired nothing more than to fade into the prestructured role of a dredge operator. Separated from all feelings. Machines aren't living, they aren't treated as living.

Thunk. The cabin shook. Jordan's arm found the next chunk of earth. Shifting more levers. The buzzing of the cutting, pulsing through the whole machinery, drowned out any footing of fixity. Kaede's previous presence had given what Jordan thought felt like a heartbeat, which she knew couldn't be right; she took it as another disrespectful slight, even if unintentional, of Kaede trying to convince her that she was alive. Jordan felt her not-heartbeat mimic the oscillating drone of the dredge. Entrainment. Returning to the stagnancy of the dead.

Her boss never went out on the dredge. This was grunt work, machine work. Hurt is easier to inflict when you don't have to see it. The feeling of the earth beneath her hiked up in resistance. Haptic, not visual. Levers. Pivot. Next line.

Jordan felt her mind mimic the oscillating drone of the dredge. Entrainment. Ripping up the floor through repetition. The conscious thoughts were embedding themselves as muscle-memory, movement of the body. Hurt is easier to inflict when you don't have to think about it. She loosened her grip on the lever, the dredge arm shifting from being her body to an object. Something she could touch. Something she could see. The trembling of the lever tickled. Was it scared too? Jordan took a step back, detaching herself from the machine more – who was she? Was her whole identity as simple as being the operator of this machine?

Jordan broke her fixating glare to look out towards the rest of the sea, briefly thinking of her father and the way he must have valued this place, remembered this place. She wanted to see blue again, maybe transparent enough to see the fish, the coral, the urchins, a family of different entities living together to construct their own home. Instead she saw the black wake of a corporation. And a rowboat inching its way to the arm. Jordan jumped back to the controls, twisted the key, turning it on.

Excerpt of *Basement Girls*
Skylar Hauge

In January, 2013 I was 13 years old. I could think of myself as Baby-New-Millennium forever because I don't think people will still be thinking things in the year 3000. There was the big story in the new reports about those girls who had been kept in that basement by that man for 12 years. Those teens had lived in the old millennium exclusively. There were stories about their pregnancies that would become movies about seeing the sky for the first time. There were stories about bodily things and ungodly things. Soon after was the Boston Marathon Bombing and I told my dad that The Basement Man deserved the death penalty more. I should have just said sooner. The Marathon Man didn't wake up everyday and decide to build a hell, he woke up one day too desperate to get to heaven. We assume. He was an American, merely inducted into another cult of expediency, and maybe only did it for the reasons my dad says, "only in America do these things happen." Because people are privileged enough to believe they deserve greatness. I'm not sure if I'm people yet. Being in a room with 70 virgins won't make you any less of a virgin. But I hated running anyway and proclaimed that I would rather just die often. I knew just enough of the world to assume being held in a basement, maintaining only that amount of clarity, for an indefinite and later-reported-on infinity, would be worse than being struck down by God while doing laps for my Health-Department-mandated ritual sacrifice. I had prayed for that.

When you look directly into a laser, you don't go blind right away. You wake up the next morning and wonder why it took you 12 years to break the trope that all stories begin with "I woke up." They teach you not to do that in middle school. They also teach you about lasers and Manifest Destiny and Flowers For Algernon. I wondered how those cautionary tales, the children who looked into lasers, had spent their last night of sight. It only matters because they didn't choose it: Like being born on Y2K, like living in a basement, like telling your father the truth. I'm not sure if I'm people yet. Did they spend it experimenting with drugs that make you smarter and then dumber? Did they spend it wondering if these 70 girls online are real virgins? Did they spend it learning braille or piano or hemming or applying for marathons or learning sign language? Did they spend it with mice? Never Forget. I know they won't.

Moms on the news cast the Marathon Man as a good kid who'd gotten into trouble, the way they cast their daughters as canaries who had surely only gotten pregnant in the dark. The way they cast their daughter in pageants. No one knows why caged birds sing, just that you must put a blanket over them at night to get them to stop.

I imagined the blankets they had in the basement were the foil ones for runners and the transient. I learned on the news that year, they could be used as tourniquets . I wonder if those girls had learned that too. I'm sorry for wondering. But The Basement Man had surely already been mad enough not to care about their heartbeats under his

floorboards. They were not both dead and alive to him. He opened his box every day for 12 years. He only lasted one month in prison. He killed himself by using a prison blanket as a tourniquet around his neck.

Later that year, more basement men were pulled from the woodwork and put on the news. Was it because the authorities had stopped searching for those other girls when the cases got cold in the dark? Had those girls stopped searching for salvation? In 2008 Obama ran on "Hope." I don't remember his slogan in 2012. Was it "Never Forget?"

My dad said the Marathon Man deserves to die more because he killed so many more people. He doesn't understand how many times one girl can die. It's at least 9. The end of suffering is always death but I'm on a runner's high that makes you smarter, then dumber, so I die and die again without realizing it.

The whole world is flooding like a basement. The pair of canaries on the ark just flew away because they smelled smoke. The Bible teaches you that "I woke up" belongs in the middle of the story. I only know how to pray by running in circles. If I was trying to save someone in a disaster right behind me I would only know how to take the long way around. Obama's slogan in 2012 was "Forward."

My house was built in the 1920's and the basement was sealed off. My dad liked to believe it was because moonshine bootleggers lived there. There was evidence but the

police had stopped looking. If I break into my basement I might find twinkies still edible from the last millennium. The Mayan calendar just ended. They knew there were too many Gods for the world to last forever. Maybe the world would be less deserving of the death penalty if it had gone out in a bang. I whimper in gym class. Twinkies were just discontinued. If I opened my basement, maybe there would be someone who used to be a 13-year-old girl down there. Maybe by the time I open my box she'd be dead. Maybe she would have escaped. I pray the "I woke up" belongs at the end of her story, even if that means it's in the middle of mine. Maybe she got into a nicer basement with 69 other virgins. Maybe she'd have folded her tin foil blanket into origami so it's all that was left, floating like an ark. But the basement would probably just be full of the kind of alcohol that used to make people go blind.

Excerpt of *Streaks*
Maximiano Janairo

Prologue

From above I-94 the cars seemed impossibly fast. The time it took for them to transform from dots on the horizon to roaring beasts seemed like no time at all. The oasis that Olivia sat in was a sturdy concrete structure, but still she imagined it shaking when the eighteen wheelers blew beneath it. She imagined the windows rattling and the edges of the bricks like handbills at the racetrack, shuddering and threatening to fly away in the driver's wake.

She turned from the window back to the hustling crowd moving up and down the high ceilinged corridor. They all had a certain glister to them, cultivated by hours of driving. Their backs and armpits were stained enough to look unmoored, but not enough to be distressed. One man led his family, wet and crinkled, from the eastern end of the oasis, scanning the signs frantically. For bathrooms? No, they had gone right past them. A restaurant, then, she realized, he must be looking for something for the kids. The Subway and Panda Express had not been sufficient so they had wandered out into the building's nave to search for something greasy and beloved.

"Where are the burgers?" the little boy cried, "Where are the buuuuurgerrrrrrrs-ah!?"

His father did not respond and passed Liv just as a semi rumbled beneath them all. She began writing down the things she noticed in the little family

- *Father, Brother, Sister*

- *Hungry, searching*

- *Where are the burgers?*

- *Where's Mom?*

This was enough for the moment, she thought, the caravan would have to pass by on the way back to their car and she would be able to conclude her note. Is it tragic? Comic? The burgers would decide. She put down her pen, sighed, and waited while her eyes lingered on the last bullet point.

“Where’s Mom?”

That’s a little on the nose, she thought and tried to scratch it out of existence.

Liv’s mother had not seen the cancer coming. She had planned her life intensely, beginning at age seven and lasting, in her mind, until one hundred and seven. Even in her youth she knew exactly what her life would be. She knew her teenage years would be dry and preparatory just as she knew her college ones would be immediate. She knew that she would adopt her children, two girls, from those awful nuns, and that their skin would be a different shade than her own. And she knew that she would sculpt, no matter what. This work was often called a ‘dream job’ by her more naive friends to which she would say, “it was never a dream, I’ve always been certain,”

She had sketched the layout of her studio eight years before she signed the lease and had pages of ideas and shapes long before she ever bought the clay. She was, as her husband would often say, prophetic. His pet name for her was ‘Clay-ssandra’, which she laughed at but

never corrected, enjoying the silly drama of the name.

Right up until the diagnosis she was following her own tracks to the glorious moment where she could live off of art alone. She met a curator at a party and had instinctively known that his gallery would fit her work. The man couldn't help but agree considering the decade-spanning plan she laid at his feet and he took an immediate liking to her. He was strange, like her sculptures, but delicate enough to see the emotion in her abstract shapes, seeing beyond the assured power of the artist. He was only in town for a week to visit a cousin, but he gave Liv's mother a business card and a promise that his dealer in New York would get in touch. She came home brilliantly drunk that night, going on and on about fate, while her husband and daughters watched, in love.

Four months later she was gone.

Just before she died, the dealer had gotten in touch, but when he heard the news he said that a lack of new work would certainly put an end to all negotiations. They were looking to the future, diversifying, blah blah blah, and he apologized for wasting her time. It was good that he hung up the phone before she could respond because she wouldn't have known what to do except scream. Anyway, the drugs and her failing organs had diminished her voice and extinguished every prophecy that remained. With her plans and body broken, she died frustrated.

Liv found solace in this near miss, eventually. She found a sort of peace when she learned to let go of her plans. It was not out of despair that she gave up her certainty but a cold determination to never be surprised again. She would fail, yes, but it would be expected. So, in her own way, she too began to prophecize.

She foresaw, for instance, that her final year of high school would be slack jawed and listless and that the teachers who cared for her would sit at long tables and have even longer conversations about their concern. She saw that any plans for college would have to be shelved

and traded in for an unending string of gig-economy jobs. She saw that her father would not be able to handle his grief and that she would have to carry him through until his life also, eventually, sputtered out. Dark certainties replaced her plans and she became sure again.

She was only ever surprised beneath the high ceilings of the oasis. Flash mobs, fights and celebrities all passed through the fluorescent hall and she had foreseen none of it. She would sit in the exact center of the oasis and be surprised for a few hours each day before work.

She checked her phone. Only fifteen minutes left until she had to start the half mile trek to The Taverna, the restaurant where, she was certain, two sinks full of dishes would be waiting. The cooks started their work three hours before she arrived and apparently none of them were capable of tending to their own mess.

Dishwashing was the latest and greatest gig she had secured. They paid her a fair amount more than any of her other ventures and in return she had sacrificed the health of the skin on her hands and the muscles in her neck.

Liv put her notebook, pen and water bottle back into her bag and readied herself to leave. She asked for a large, black coffee at the Starbucks just as the family passed her again, headed eastward back to the car. Liv smiled as she saw the boy prying his burger from its wrapper and guiding it gently to his face. Not a single drop of sauce landed on his shirt and not a single pickle fell to the floor. She pulled out her notebook again and wrote a new entry beneath the block of ink that used to ask, 'Where's Mom?'

- A comic ending.

**Excerpt of *So It Shall Be Done*
Sophia Kagan**

Nothing was notable about the southern end of Yansworth except for the old train station. It existed quietly in its own ruins, left behind like the rest of the district. Its hanging beams and metal remains could be heard creaking during hard winds. Commuters and local riffraff would wander by and gaze into it, losing themselves in wonderings about what it used to look like, what it used to sound like, and how many people had died there.

The crash happened fifteen years ago. One Thursday morning, the train tilted off the tracks, snapping the iron rails and pulling out its own bolts as it tore through the station house full of businessmen and schoolchildren, waiting for the 7:15 train to Rilleton. The train crashed over the railing, and while the leading cars caused minimal destruction, the cars that followed toppled onto the station's elevated platform. At impact, glass from the station café windows shattered onto the nearby benches. The people who weren't immediately flattened by the train fled down staircases or tried in vain to shield other commuters from the disaster. Some fell, staring at their reddened kneecaps in shock as their bodies became part of the rubble and the fire. Firefighters and ambulances sped in from neighboring towns, but the wreckage had already become ruins. The air was thick with the smell of blood and metal shavings.

The wrecked train looked like a metal monster sending up smoke trails as it died. Its back end lay on its side in dark puddles while the front cars remained upright underneath the platform, as though the monster had saved those lucky few who took their seats in its head. But the view through the hole in the front was dim, shadowed by the mash of broken bodies in dark suits. Everyone who witnessed the crash could hear the hisses from the broken pipes and the shifting of the rubble, but we stood there silently, gripping the iron fence, convinced that there was nothing to do but watch and listen.

As it happened the town had recently begun the construction of a new station which was ten minutes closer to the heart of town. And so, it was decided that the community would cut costs by paying to have only the bodies removed from the wreckage. The ruins themselves would remain. "A fortunate aspect to an unfortunate situation," the Mayor announced the next day, shaking a closed fist and looking into the camera with stern eyes during a local press conference. Soon the wrecked station became a tourist attraction, something to take photos of while you waited for a cab.

At times you could hear a distant piece of metal slide against another or a bolt fall during a windy orange dawn, but otherwise the station was largely ignored. Still, there were rumors kept alive by the conspiracy-minded barflies who claimed that a Russian spy had been on the train or that local teens had torn apart a piece of the railing, causing the accident. No one paid these stories any mind. The local bartenders would roll their eyes and open more bottles until the tall tales petered out. But recently, on a cool late spring morning, one of the barflies had a new story. He said that someone had seen a man, an unearthly figure, shrouded by a bluish haze of smoke, walking into the hole at the front of the train, dragging with him the body of a woman, her wrists tied together by a line of rope.

Hello?

Lean in closer. Can you hear

me? Good.

Stay there. I have something to show you.

| I |

Men of brass and iron march down the streets of Rünaveir. They knock on doors and stare through windows. Between guarded gates, the people of the bailey hide inside abandoned

farmhouses and darkened corners. If you're bold, you can peer out the window into the daylight; there you might see a stray body, a bored soldier, or a campfire's trail of smoke smothered quickly by distant, stomping feet.

Shining with reflected light, these men are stronger than any that Rünaveir has to offer. While the infantry storms the kingdom, Rünaveir's saviors hide in their training dorms within the noble lands or lay dead, stacked in piles on empty streets. What could be done with shreds of leather and rock?

The King sits in his castle, tapping his fingertips on the wooden trim of his throne, his cheek in his hand as he stares hollowly into the eyes of his second born. She stands with her chin down, her brown eyes dry as they strain to maintain eye-contact. She is tugging on her fingertips but is careful not to tap her feet or turn her hips. You must be strong in front of the King. Weakness is a sign of poverty. He waves his hand at the orderly and she is removed.

The plague crawls on its belly down the bridge, climbing over banisters and twisting into the stone walkways. The sun descends, casting a warm orange shroud over the kingdom and the people, lying prone in positions of surrender; raise their heads to look upward. A soldier sees his prisoners leave their position and shoves his foot between his closest captive's shoulder blades. He pricks the back of their neck with the tip of his rapier. A sick gritting sound of his teeth sliding against each other as he snarls out threats. He warns the citizens of his brutality as his rapier inserts itself into the shallow back of his victim's throat. He begins to smile but his joy is shaken when the ink grabs ahold of his ankles.

The ink scales its way along his calves and around his waist and the soldier feels his eyes dry and his tongue lie dead behind his teeth. His muscles stretch and strain to hold his

weight as the ink takes over his bloodstream. Black blood swims in thinning arteries towards a rotten heart. When he attempts to regain his composure, he is knocked down onto his knees. His teeth loose, his breath red, the soldier is forced to lie on the ground next to his prisoner, who has already been consumed by the ink.

Their occupation was futile. While some find the strength to run away, most of their infantry is left in the ruins of the Dunes. A horrible plague seeps through the sandstone streets of the lower bailey, and those who survive swear their loyalty to its power.

Adelpha idly thumbed the paper, letting its coarse surface smoothen her callus as she scanned the lines. Pressing her lips together, she wondered who this was written for, and why it was here, in the Dunes, where literacy was almost as rare as wealth. Had it flown into the barroom unnoticed? How had the parchment made its way to the lower bailey in the first place? Adelpha folded the page until it could fit inside her apron pocket and resumed sweeping the floor. She made a mental note to keep the page until she could find someone who can read it to her.

**Excerpt of *Pomegranate Seeds*
Grace Kasemeier**

Window panes drip with water and soft lamplight. He and I walked in the darkness, the streetlights seeping through the fog around us, above us crystalline star filled skies. He always looked struck by something. It left me unbalanced. I wish he could've been different. I wish I could've loved him, just to have been in love. Out of all the men, the moments, he was the only one that feels like it could've been. I loved walking in the night with no purpose but company.

The last guy I'd been with would text me at two in the morning and I would run, be with him for less than an hour, and walk back to my dorm. I walked through the woods with the deer peering at me through the trees, dead silent. I wouldn't notice them until we were face to face. One time my bra was on my arm, soaked through from me trying to use it as a bathtub stopper. The night was warm but the water trickled from my bra down my arm to raise little hairs along its path. Shame and pain and obsession twisted with the water like cuffs along my arms. I got to my room and fell asleep instantly. I never fell asleep when he let me stay over.

This new man, who I only knew through playing our parts, walked me to my room after we'd been kissing. He didn't think about it, he just grabbed his coat and joined me in the November chill. I will always be in love with that moment.

The rest should have been easier.

My grandmother's voice commands, "*You put it into words. I give you visuals.*"

Part 1: Origins

The floor was cold. The tiles were smudged with silt. Bathrooms never really get clean. I told

him I liked him. It was a lie. I liked him a lot. The bile in my throat twisted and swirled until I swallowed. "See I told you, you would like it." He spread himself. A glutton in all parts of life. The light was too bright, too white. He stood behind me in the mirror. The light showed all of him. I looked down. For all his gluttony, he couldn't make *that* bigger.

The taste of bile haunted me for too long.

wipe

Mumma

I sit quietly in the back of the car, my back plastered to the seat. I close my eyes and try to melt into the scratchy grey cloth that held my lost M&M's. My mother wasn't overly cautious about what I stuck in my mouth. The M&M's would be a future me's treasure. The seatbelt scratched across my skin.

I used to pull at the seatbelt when I was even younger, squirming I would shout, "I'm stuck! I'm stuuuckkkk!"

It took me a while to realize that was the point.

This time I only say,

"Next time you run away, Mumma. You have to take me with you."

We pull into El Pollo Loco. I eat a small burrito and my mom eats a chicken platter. My dad waits at home. He was a vegetarian.

Can't write anymore.

I love you.

I thank you.

My mother.

My Friend.

My Mentor.

My guidance.

My light.

My Beginning.

My Continuing.

My end.

I copy and paste my grandmother's words about her mother.

My beginning. My continuing. My end.

My.

We hold each other's *my's* closer than my dad can understand.

My mother.

"My daughter."

"Mi hija."

"Mamá"

"Why does your Mom call you that? It sounds like she's calling you Mommy."

A shrug of my shoulders couldn't shake the weight.

We tip toe the line that would inverse our roles.

I can't write anymore.

My first word was "Agua." I made the g sound like a w, but I couldn't have been clearer. Not more than a couple months old, my mom enrolled me in swimming lessons.

I hadn't said "Agua" out loud yet.

Mamá, no necesitamos el lenguaje, ni las palabras, ni las bocas. Tu sabes.

Papí, no estoy segura que entiendas unos de los lenguajes de mi corazón.



How do you forgive someone for not understanding you when you speak?

I wrapped my arms around his leg dragging him into place. The dark paneled wood shifted to painted forests, a mural on my parent's bedroom walls. My small hands cling too tightly as the leg carried me from room to room. *I'm too old to do this.* He gently shook me off with the reasoning of the weight of the world.

I rolled Daddy into Dad when the world's eyes insisted I was no longer a child. I don't stumble on "Dad" like I stumble on "Grandma."

La madre de mi máma

Her soft-wrinkled skin and white blonde hair softly framed the brutal words falling from her lips. Fire. The sun sparked against the surface of the water and her words flowed in the absence of my mother, "Boys? Anyone special?" Words I hadn't spoken to my mother wanted to crawl out. Words about his bottomless eyes and caramel skin. Words about his wit and my skin crawling with the secret of his laugh. I looked to my grandmother's face, "No, not really." I smiled to press the words to the rough of my mouth and sank back into the pool. The blue tiles my grandmother's hands had placed around the rim winked at me conspiratorially. My grandmother continued to talk; squeezing me with words like her sunsoaked tangelo juice. I let my hands rise and fall in the sun's reflection. My grandmother's touch, distant.

"Alrededor de tu piel ato y desato la mía"-Miguel Hernandez

My grandmother's poetry about us knits into my skin,

Your hand in my hand.

My hand is completely encased by hers. Her fingers are wrapped so tightly around my own.

Your trust in my soul

Bitter words at the shift in our relationship. A vomit of unsaid words, "Of course I trusted you I was three!"

She's sitting on my couch. Three industrial sized trash bags are splayed behind us, proof of her mounting stubbornness. An exclamatory refusal to take care of herself in the simplest way. She refuses the impossible luxury of a suitcase. She looks at me with eyes so bright, galaxies of hurt and vindication reflect there,

"You have to tell me when I do something wrong. I'm cruel so I know who really loves me."
I meet her pleading eyes with refusal. I've seen the talons clench and I don't want to fight. Her words scratch and I numb myself in front of the t.v.

*Your spirit, and mine,
Could dance, dance for ever,
Without stopping once.*

The black and white photo of her from the newspaper sits between my fingers. Her bottle blonde hair flying behind her, a conqueror of herself. She's sitting astride a horse who does exactly as she tells her.

"This is my paradise."

"Alrededor de tu piel ato y desato la mía."

I rub my fingers across my mom's hand, kneading out the hauntings of past fractures. The three of us sit on the couch, frayed and uncomfortable. My mom groans when I stop to rest my fingers. My grandmother snores on my right. I pause the movie and she bolts up,

"No, don't stop for me. I was listening."

I let the movie play and my grandmother's snores instantly resume. I go back to massaging my mom's wrist.

Excerpt of *Hidden in a Snail Shell*
Zara Kornfeld

The ocean dances to its own music. In the shallows of the Caribbean, light sand sweeps delicately back and forth with the pulse of the waves above; small pebbles snap on impact with larger boulders, and the fish improvise their shimmering music to the sounds that surround them. On the small island of South Caicos, the ocean is king. Most of the working population are fishermen and those who are not, work in the three hotels which overlook the shimmering turquoise waters.

A Queen Conch carries a garden on its back, algae of all colors adorn the conch's shell as the large snail pushes through the sand and crumbled remains of the generations before him. One yellow damsel fish carefully and meticulously prunes the conch's algae garden, choosing which algae it does not care for to rip off and toss to the side. A long and grayish fish ducks inside the five pound conch shells's lip and curls up inside the crown of vibrant pink whorls adorning the top of the shell, safe from predators.

Above the conch, a boat's mechanical engine whirs. The damsel fish speeds away without hesitation, the roommate fish inside of the conch's shell is oblivious to the commotion, and the conch itself continues its slow plow through the light sand. From above, a man in a snorkel lays flat on his stomach next to his small boat. He spots his prey and bends his torso down, the weight of his legs pushing him closer to the sea floor, where just 20 feet below him sits, unbothered, the conch. The man grabs the conch with outstretched arms and shoots back up to his boat, holding his prize close to his chest, the hot air sticking to his face as he breaks the surface, tosses the conch aboard his small boat and returns to the water, diving once more for another conch.

A different man aboard the boat squints through the sun as he pulls out a small metal pick

with a flat rectangular end, just an inch wide. He picks up the conch from the boat floor and places it on his knee. Water pours out and with it comes the flat gray body of the disgruntled roommate fish. It's helpless body falls on the dirty white plastic boat floor and flops around in the spilled water. The fisherman leans over the conch and grabs the roommate fish from its middle to throw it back to the water, where it disappears rather quickly, looking for another conch it might occupy. The diver surfaces just then with another conch, this one smaller than the his first catch, but still substantial, perhaps only half a foot long, and rolls it over the deck before ducking under the cool water once more. The fisherman on the boat raises his metal pick and comes down on the conch shell near the top, once, twice, three times; each time cracking further into the shell until, from underneath the shell's outer lip, the fisherman delivers the brownish, slimy body of the conch, still living, it raises its probing eyes to stare at the fisherman before the man swiftly pulls out a pocket knife and drags it across the conch's body, and dismantles it. When he is done he throws the conch into a cooler filled with water next to him, and throws the knocked conch shell overboard. The fisherman picks up the next conch just as the diver resurfaces for his third time and places another conch on the boat deck.

This is life for many of those who live on the small island of South Caicos, and evidence of this can be seen clearly near the shores of mangrove forests, where piles of hundreds of knocked conchs twelve feet high sit like crowns in the shallows.

On the beaches of South Caicos, many of the shells lie fully intact save for the small rectangular patch where the conch had been knocked, their shiny peach colored lip sticking up from the sand. They are popular souvenirs in the Turks and Caicos Islands, and a local delicacy. The conch is battered and fried and served with lemon wedges at restaurants. I once asked a group of excitable 6th graders on South if they knew what kinds of food the people in France ate, attempting to help make a connection between themselves and the rest of the world. A small girl

with braided pig tails popped up and responded “Snails!” a look of disgust on her face was echoed from her classmates with a communal and lingering “Ew!”

“Guys!” I laughed “Did anyone eat conch for dinner last night?” There was an excited rumble as half of the hands in the class shot up and a burble of anecdotes regarding how their mother had prepared it filled the classroom. I laughed and raised my voice in attempt to regain control over the momentary chaos, “What do you think conch is?” silence fell onto the classroom. “Well, a conch is a snail too.” I’m sure they knew it was coming, had drawn their breath in just slightly to have enough air in their lungs to expel it in shrieks of disgust once I had said that one word, once I had revealed that the man behind the curtain was in fact not a man at all, or even a fish, but a slimy, slow moving, snail.

I took a conch shell home with me from South Caicos. I didn’t find it on the beach; a fisherman gave it to me. He came right outside the converted motel where myself and the rest of the school I was living with inhabited. The motel was just one story and quite long, with spaces designed to keep the air moving. A cement outdoor hallway connected the fifteen rooms, the outdoor eating area, and the single classroom which used to be a lobby. There was a small salt water pool out in front, overlooking the actual ocean under a cliff, where many students would go to take baths with biodegradable soap. The motel had gone out of business some years ago and had been taken up as a hot spot for drug smuggling sea planes to land until the School for Field Studies bought it up as a Caribbean Campus for their abroad program.

The fisherman settled himself down in front of the school with a wide smile on his round face, shining through his wiry beard. He did this every semester that new students came to the School for Field Studies on the island to show us how a conch was knocked, and every semester the reaction was always the same. He held the conch up to our greedy eyes, 30 phones pointed at the conch trying to catch the moment it would slip out of its shell and into the large man’s hand.

The fisherman did this everyday, and found our amazement at his mundane delightful.

The first one he knocked slumped wetly into his palm, and he held it up proudly as a trophy. I stood on my toes on top of a low concrete wall trying to catch a glimpse of the naked organism. The body of a Queen Conch is folded in on itself and wrinkled, two stalks with large, human looking eyes, on their ends stick out from the huddled mass. Some of the students shrieked in exaggerated disgust and the other half doubled over in nervous fits of laughter. The fisherman reached his thick fingers into some part of the conch that could only be expressly found by someone who was in the business of finding it, and pulled out a clear, thin tube. “Does anyone want the noodle?” He laughed heartily.

“What’s the noodle?” one voice from the crowd of students called out, all of us still craning our neck to understand what the small part of the conch which he held up was.

“This is the noodle!” he yelled and without hesitation popped the clear gelatinous piece of the snail straight into his mouth and without chewing, gulped it down. We shrieked and laughed again. He knocked ten more conchs while we watched, each time offering the noodle to a student who steeled themselves to try it. “What does it taste like?” ten other voices hungrily chanted each time a peer would take the noodle. “Kind of like a salty gummy bear” was the general consensus. I am still not entirely sure what the “noodle” actually is. I asked my teacher later. They had studied these conch for years and they simply shrugged. “There are a couple of things it could be. It’s a really popular thing to do, though; fishermen will take tourists out on the main island to find their own conch and they’ll knock it for them and take out the noodle. They call it an aphrodisiac if you eat it raw.”

The fisherman had packed up his conch in a cooler when all of them had been knocked, the dripping shells piled up on the cement wall he had worked on. “You gonna take those shells?” I had asked after he had already turned to leave.

“Huh?” he turned around and looked at the shells he had left and shrugged “Nah, you can have them if you want. Might want to wash them out first, though” he laughed from his stomach and walked away. I grabbed one of the shells enthusiastically before the rest of the pile was distributed to my other classmates who wanted one.

“Everyone needs to wash those out and leave them outside in the sun to dry!” Our program coordinator yelled nervously over the commotion of the aftermath of the knocking. “Please do not bring them back to your rooms- they’ll attract flies!” The shells were covered in a layer of algae which had hooked itself on to the sturdy and slow moving conch as a kind of moving substrate.

Excerpt of *Lady Disdain*
Hunter Lustberg

Her name was Elizabeth Hill, and her letter arrived in December. Sebastian remembered how it had smelled of rosewater and acetone. She was a distant relation of his wife, fallen on hard times, looking for work and lodging wherever such could be found. Diana had never heard the name before, but she had family all over the country, most of whom she'd never even met.

In January they picked her up at Pennsylvania Station. She had caught a train from her hometown of Rameses, way out west. They drove her back to their apartment. It was three stories up, a block south of Central Park, with windows that allowed in all the steel-cold light and unholy noise of the big city. She started work immediately.

Sebastian fell in love with her darting blue eyes and cascading black hair, but mostly with an all encompassing helplessness he both pitied and adored. When he saw her struggling to wipe away the dense Manhattan grime from the molding, his affection for the girl would boil over and she'd catch him staring down at her, smiling unrestrainedly. And how she would smile back! It was a small gesture, but enough to keep Sebastian assured that she loved him with the same wholehearted and clandestine passion he felt towards her. He thought of her all day long, stumbling through his curatorial work, incapable of seeing the most crude representation of the female figure without superimposing the perfect features of the woman he loved. Not his wife. The other one. He wanted to fill every gallery of the Brooklyn Museum with paintings and sculptures commissioned to immortalize her youthful beauty. Then at night as he fell asleep, though he held Diana in his arms, Elizabeth occupied his thoughts. He prayed silently to a god he hadn't spoken to since Catholic School, begging to see her in his dreams, pleading that he might play a role in hers.

In February, Sebastian and Diana made plans to go out for dinner and catch *A Woman of the Sea*. Diana caught a nasty cold and couldn't make it out, but told her husband to take Elizabeth instead. It was too late to make dinner, but they could still catch the movie. He hid his relation well, and was thankful his wife had made it so easy. He left immediately to give Elizabeth the news.

"Have you ever seen Chaplin on the big screen?" he asked.

"I've never been to the moving pictures Mr. Ward," she replied, "My poor little town didn't have a theater, and it was a long way through the mountains to the nearest city, so I haven't had the privilege. Oh, Mr. Ward I'm so very excited."

They walked to the theater on West 66th, leaving a half hour early so he could take her up a winding path through Central Park. When dusk fell, one could watch the lights of the city ignite, gold freckles on shadowed concrete, set against the plumb-blue sky. As they passed between the trees and protruding boulders, arms linked, all Sebastian's focus was on that small spot where their bodies met, where he could feel the tug of her arm through his coat sleeve. So intensely distracted, he failed to anticipate the unevenness of the path beneath him. Though he only stumbled slightly, his arm was locked with Elizabeth's, and the short downward tug was enough to make her lose her footing. She nearly fell flat, but came down at such an impossibly convenient angle as to land perfectly in Sebastian's arms. She was stunned and beautifully breathless, beaming up into her saviour's eyes. Holding her there, Sebastian was sure that half of Manhattan could hear his shameful heart beat. He placed his young maid back on her feet, and they walked the rest of the way in complete silence, listening to the sounds of distant traffic.

In the soft seats of the theater, Sebastian reached out and took her hand in his. Their fingers intertwined, and she held on so tight that he thought his hand might break. On the screen before them, two beautiful women pantomimed love in flickering greyscale. It was a story of

love and betrayal, of a woman leaving her fiancé, running away to the big city with the man her sister loved. Elizabeth was enraptured. All the walk home she talked about how magical it had been, and thanked Sebastian from the bottom of her heart.

In May, Diana made a trip up to Vermont to visit her mother. She made these trips often, given her mother's wavering health. Her condition had some long, scientific name Sebastian had learned and forgotten several times now. He had yet to meet his mother-in-law, though he was assured she was eager to visit as soon as her health would allow. Diana's mother was a pine tar heiress, possessed of a great deal of wealth, which she gave in generous portions to her daughter upon every visit as compensation for the trouble of travel and caretaking.

The night Diana left, Sebastian confessed his undying love for Elizabeth in an outpouring of starved affection. She was shocked at his confession, and shrunk into herself. She protested that Diana had cared for her well, that she could not betray her cousin. This only made Sebastian's heart soar even higher. In all his fantasies of this moment, he'd never imagined Elizabeth turning him down for Diana's sake. This pure and selfless act, especially in the face of obviously mutual love, reminded him that she was the most perfect woman he had ever met. He doubled down his efforts.

He took her out to the street and hailed a taxi. She followed along, speechless. They pulled up to the Brooklyn Museum, and Sebastian walked her to a side entrance, for which he had a key. Strolling through the administrative wing, he showed her his office. He told her how difficult his days had been, trying to work while her visage occupied every corner and crevice of his mind. Then he took her through the museum proper. It was dark and empty and filled with the most beautiful paintings. When they came to the statue gallery, standing amongst the naked marble, he turned to her and took her hands in his.

"You've made my job as curator quite impossible Elizabeth," his echos filled the

empty space. "How can I ever again see beauty in flat canvas and lifeless stone? I have seen living beauty in your eyes and face and flesh, to which no art can stand comparison."

She leapt into his arms. They kissed, and Sebastian felt as though he might turn to stone. Over the next two months, their romance continued in secret. Sebastian was devoured by mad passion, having to content himself with clandestine glances, incapable of holding the woman he loved. Instead he held his wife, and thought of the woman he loved, who slept in the next room over.

This agonizing life stretched on until one night, while Diana was out fetching supper, Elizabeth finally broke. She told Sebastian she could not continue on in this way. It was too painful. She begged him to run away with her, like the Woman of the Sea. He agreed, and that night they hatched their plan.

It wasn't until July that Diana went again to visit her mother, whose condition had taken a turn for the worse. Sebastian withdrew all the money in their bank account, and bought two tickets on a transcontinental railway car. He considered writing a note to let Diana, but as he went over it in his head he couldn't get the words right. *Dearest Diana*, he scrawled across the paper in his mind. He immediately scribbled it out, crumpled it up and envisioned another blank sheet. *Dear Diana*. What then? Should he apologize? He wasn't particularly sorry. He truly loved his wife and didn't want to hurt her, but she'd never understand how his heart yearned for Elizabeth. There were many things about him she didn't understand, and this irked him terribly. Now he was mad at her, wanted her to apologize. That wouldn't have sounded very good in a letter though.

Dear Diana, he thought, *Don't follow me*. There it was: short, simple, intentional. He wrote it down sloppily on the back of a piece of scrap paper from his home office, and left it on the bed they had shared for two years.

After he and Elizabeth left the apartment, a strange gust blew through, lifted the note off the bed and carried it out the window. Outside, it descended to the street where it became lodged in the awning of the apartment building next door. A nesting rock dove tore the note in two, carrying with it the *Dear Diana* , and dislodging the other half to again drift at the mercy of the wind.

Later that day, a young businessman walking down Seventh Avenue dropped his wallet, containing no small sum of money, onto the sidewalk. A short Bavarian man selling fried oysters out of a cart saw it flop its way out of his back pocket. The oyster-seller did not hesitate to abandon his post and the growing line of hungry pedestrians. He pushed through the foot traffic to retrieve the fallen wallet and return it to its owner, who was growing ever farther away, walking at his absurd city pace. The oyster-seller chased him two blocks and an avenue, constantly just out of shouting distance amidst the noise of traffic, until he was all but sure the man was purposefully running from him. As he stopped to catch his breath, a small shred of paper fluttered against his chest, pinioned there by a stubborn breeze. *Don't follow me* , it read. The oyster-seller looked up in disbelief, but the businessman was nowhere to be seen, lost in street smoke and the omnidirectional tides of humanity. He pocketed the wallet and returned to his cart.

Asteraceae (Excerpt)

Rachel Lyons

There was a timeline:

Jamal is born on the fifth of June, a Gemini, at a Methodist hospital in Minnesota. He is born into a family that is middle class and black.

He has an older sister named Kim. They attend a private school in the suburbs on scholarships—grade school, middle school and highschool.

At sixteen his parents separate and Kim runs away from home.

He graduates and goes to university in Washington, DC, taking classes to become a journalist.

While completing his degree he meets Cynthia, who very soon after graduating gives birth to his first child, a daughter. Needing a stable job he accepts a position with a marketing company.

Three years later, Jamal's second daughter is born.

Jamal travels to Montreal alone, for a business conference. He goes missing and is never heard from again. The year is 2008.

This was information I had collected from old news stories. Phillip supplemented the details of his death, since to the rest of the world Jamal's case was closed. The consensus was that he must have disappeared on purpose, not wanting to be a father nor a husband. Maybe he had killed himself. More likely he set up a new life for himself in Canada or elsewhere.

This was the framework. This was the scaffolding in which Jamal's spirit darted

about untethered. Phillip had handed it to me, and in a short time I found myself constructing its interior spaces. I began with an image, one of those darkened scrapbook photos:

Baby Jamal, wrapped up in a yellow blanket, his face wrinkled and perturbed, the melanin still developing deep within the skin. He is resting in Kim's lap, and she's got a gummy smile and pigtails. From the edge of the photo intrudes the large, hairy hand of Mr. -, there to provide needed support for the child's head.

I didn't mean to start at the very beginning and so exalt that time of innocence. But I had been dreaming of children. I had been fantasizing about motherhood, about how nice it would be to have a thing to live for—a little fleshy thing to hold and to nurse. A noisy, animal thing. So it was baby Jamal and his big sister that became my gateway into his life.

Most often the stories stayed immaterial, hidden away among the other thoughts which strayed throughout my mind. They remained porous and were penetrated by these other thoughts, mutating consistently and with vigor. Initially, when I still believed in my own volition, I had intended to write the stories, which I would then gift to Phillip. I thought if I could help fill in the gaps in his understanding of the man who was killed he wouldn't want to leave me, but I discovered quickly that this was impossible.

So Jamal's life was mine, and I kept it concealed. Jamal's death belonged to Phillip, and he had no reservations about sharing that burden.

On both sides of the river the crickets were loud. The birds were louder, and the squirrels made a lot of noise, too, leaping from branch to branch without any concern for concealment. Perhaps I still wasn't fully awake, because each time a new creature sounded its alarm I would flinch. There was a woodpecker in the distance, and I told Phillip to wait and be quiet so that we might spot its red crown somewhere among the gray tree trunks. There were a

lot of things I wanted to show Phillip. I pointed out the white wood asters that were growing abundantly. The rattlesnake-root as well. And the lavender turtleheads, which I pulled out of the earth to hand to him.

“Don’t they look like turtles’ heads?” I asked.

“Sure,” Phillip said, laughing. He held the stem for a moment then tossed it aside and kept walking.

They were autumn flowers. Early autumn. Most of the foliage was still green, interrupted here and there by patches of brown, yellow, red. With every breeze a yellow maple leaf would take flight. Sometimes a leaf would drop without the help of the wind, and then it would fall straight down, twirling all the way.

As we walked we sunk deeper into the earth—the stream stayed shallow but dirt walls rose up on each side revealing the erosion of a different time. Networks of tree roots snaked in and out of the banks, and we often had to climb over the trunks of trees which had fallen, forming bridges over the valley of mud. I followed Phillip’s lead. He showed me whether to duck or to scale, approaching it all with grace and confidence. He was beautiful. I wanted to weave him a sash of goldenrod—golden flowers for a golden man. I wanted to watch the water swirl around his boots forever.

“Maybe we can lay flowers over Jamal’s body,” he said suddenly.

“Yes,” I assured him. Golden flowers for Jamal, too. Golden flowers for Jamal and for Phillip.

Philip was the most beautiful man I had ever seen. His brow was long and heavy beneath his forehead. Below it, his eyes were wide and black. His nose, too, was wide and kind, and it melted into the shadow above his downturned lips. There was something about the gravity around his temples that made him look perpetually on the verge of violence, but this

threat was only an illusion.

I discovered him lying on my porch swing, his legs bent over the arm rest so that his kneecaps protruded at sharp angles. His kneecaps were the color of soil and his face, even in sleep, was heavy. I could feel the density of his bones with my eyes. And with my eyes I felt his arms, limp with sleep but full of life.

I didn't wake him. I let him sleep through the afternoon while I went about my day. Around three o'clock I walked onto the porch and found him standing at the banister, his back to the door. That was the first time I saw his back and his shoulder blades (like two plates of armor).

"I've never slept this late in my life," he said, as though embarrassed by that fact alone.

"What's your name?" I asked. This was the first question I asked him.

He told me his name was "Phillip" and turned to smile at me, an endearing smile, restrained enough to leave room for desire. Then he turned and grew fixated again with some point in the distance. I stared shamelessly at his profile but he didn't seem to mind. In fact, he acted as though it were natural for me to stare at him like that—like I was a painter and he was my model. And really I couldn't help staring since he was so beautiful. His face was fixed like stone and yet it was changing. Really, every day from the moment I met him his face was always changing. He was a shapeshifter made of gold, and I could never shake the feeling that if I blinked or looked away for too long, his expression would melt away into nothing.

Finally, after looking out for so long he turned to face me, leaning forward from his elbows. I could smell his earthy breath.

"Where can I get one of those?" he asked, gesturing to the mug in my hands. It was green tea, coincidentally Phillip's favorite.

“I’ll make you a cup,” I said.

“How about a pot?” he countered. So I made him a pot.

He didn’t mention Jamal that first day. There was no one but me and Phillip. For the first day and several days that followed, Jamal did not exist and it was just me and Phillip. I was introduced to Jamal on a rainy evening. He came while Phillip was still sleeping in the guest room, before he had become my lover. The two of us had spent all morning playing chess on the porch and most of the afternoon in the kitchen making a stew. The rain, which had been falling all day in a calm shower, began to pour down in heavy sheets that burst against the sides of the house. I was enamored with the storm and planted myself before a window where I could watch the vegetation thrash with the wind. Phillip, however, became agitated. While I was watching the storm he was pacing back and forth in the sitting room behind me, and I couldn’t help but look at him from time to time. I liked to watch the shape of his face transform as it passed again and again through a gradient of shadow cast by the yellow glow of the lamp in the corner. And over the yellow there were occasional flashes of razor-white lightning that reflected off his black skin. He began to look truly haunted.

“What’s bothering you?” I asked.

“What am I doing here?” he froze in the center of the room and looked around at the furniture as if every cushion had a pair of eyes. For a moment, I swear, he was entirely gone. For a moment I looked not at Phillip but at a husk.

“What do you mean, Phillip?” I asked, pulling him forward out of whatever depths he had travelled to. He rubbed the back of his head.

“I can’t believe he’s out there,” he began, “out there buried in the mud.”

He sat down in the armchair across from me and massaged his denim knees. “Who?” I asked.

Nothing.

“Who’s out there?” I asked again.

“Jamal,” he said. The name came out hard and perfect like a pearl.

Yes, golden flowers for Jamal, too. A ring of gold around his body. Blades of green grass and virgin’s bower. I lay down goldenrod, purple asters and Queen Anne’s lace. I find a wild orchid and lay it down. I place a flat stone over where I think his head might be. A heavy stone. I paint it with pokeberry juice and write his name. Jamal.

—*from flowergirls*—
By Oriana Mack

1.

The thing was curious beyond investigation.

You¹ have read about it in some book, the one your mother left lying on your bed one dustcolored afternoon. *A universal transition*, the book had called it, but you discarded the claim as something of a myth. What could be so integral to the ancestry of humankind, yet even your own mother could not describe it? And on that one day it was spoken aloud, when everyone was herded into the gymnasium. The shy shuffles, furtive eyes, the chewed cuticles. Even listening to the melody of the lecture, to imagine the thing really happening was an inconceivable harmony. It simply could not be.

But it comes to you, one moonless October evening. You feel a stickiness between your legs and so you retreat to the toilet. The cloth of your garment is soiled— scarlet streaks across what was once a soft pink pattern of stars.

When you had pored over those illustrations, the individuals gazing at vulvas through mirrors, the diagrams of flatbreasted children metamorphosing into fullbreasted adults— you had never felt more alienated from your own form, imagining the way it might turn on you.

In the sterile bathroom you now sit beside the body that bleeds, examining the stains it has produced. You prod the body and blood drips onto fingertips which you smear onto a thigh. You almost like the way it looks, the way the little hairs rise from the cherrycolored fluid, so you reach into the vessel and apply more until the entire thigh is red.

The shower runs and you allow the body to soak in it, rosewater streaming down the drain. The thing which has happened you would like to keep a secret, most of all from yourself. There is a bundle of cloth you once wore in the corner of the bathroom, a soft pink pattern of stars, which you now hide beneath your bed, bloodcrusted and crumpled. Over the next week, you will curate a collection. It is a banishing ritual.

¹ Elinor Rose Fallon— born January 31, 1996.

2.

You² have heard his walls are painted lavender. It is now the only color you will use to write. You settle into the page, sinking into the ink of his name.

Over, and over, and over again, it is written.

His name is a peach on a porcelain plate. It is mystical and ancient, immediate and clairvoyant. It is ripe with so much promise that there is agony.

It reminds you of a song, one that you heard him sing once. His voice is the fruit of your affection. The way each melody hangs from his lips like drooling honey; you long to bottle it in a mason jar, to massage it into your temples every evening before sleep.

Luckily, you have found his song archived while scavenging for him online. You loop the recording on repeat and your wrists become the rhythm, circling tirelessly to depict him. When the entire page becomes patterned with the letters of him, you cry. It is then that he becomes the most absent. You do not know why you have spent so long meditating on a name, recycling the word until it has become bloated and dissociated. It is fully disembodied now, a cacophony of shapes blotted across a thin sheet. You are furious with yourself; you have splintered the only piece of him that could be held in your hand. Salty tears evaporate into the air. His name is no longer there—it is a peach on a porcelain plate.

You fold the page and begin parsing it into scraps, lightly dusting your bedcover. Once it no longer remains, the meal is ready for consumption. You slip a shard of paper between soft pink lips. On your tongue, the thing dissolves into pulpy clumps, peachskin to be swallowed. One by one, you gulp down the slices, the dismembered letters, the lavender ink. The name is inside you now. It is yours entirely.

² Lily Ava Davari— born October 16th, 1996.

3.

You³ met Lily when you were eight. Back then, it was all colored crayons and fairy villages and scheming to move to Alaska together. The two of you think of other things these days, now that you are fourteen.

Together you bathe in the water that swirls with milky pastels. You have read somewhere that tangerine peels silken the skin; these float between your bodies like petals curling to lick the flesh. Today you are entrenched in the wonders of each other. When is your mother's birthday again? Remind me of the time you found a donut at the bottom of the lake. Should we change our middle names to be the same?

Your hair is damp and clings to your neck in thin strings. She squeezes a dime of shampoo into her palm and kneads it into your scalp, the scent of lavender bleeding into the air. When she speaks, her voice wraps around you like a warm cloak.

You can say it, Elinor. I know why you like the lavender kind.

Lily is always doing this, pushing you to unfurl your secrets. As if you both are children again, suited up in red coats and rosy cheeks. Huddled beside the playground, foreheads pressed together to protect all worries from drifting off with the wind. Here you have both whispered about all the things which splinter your hearts.

You have always admired the ways in which Lily is warm. She is like the colors of autumn, a worn-in sweater, a jazz chord fluttering out the window on a Sunday afternoon. Her throat is open and she is always speaking of the thoughts which filter through it. She is more generous and trusting than you ever will be.

I like it too, you know, she tells you. Ever since you told me about his bedroom, it's the only color I use to write.

³ Elinor, like frost on a cherry.

She rubs her fingers in heartshaped patterns along your hairline. She has put you at ease with this confession. It is strange how Lily packages these moments of connection, first by placing you in a box and then asking you why you are there before lifting the cover.

You sigh into the tub. To be in love is of echos and aches. You are grateful that Lily feels it, too. The two of you are always thinking in his direction, and your other friends are easily fatigued by these conversations. Together, you speak of his hair, his silvery voice, the way his eyes turn grey in the rain. You postulate his future and memorize his idiosyncrasies. He has brought the two of you closer than you have ever been, but you know all triangular love must one day reach an expiration. Though you will never speak this aloud, somewhere inside yourself you are certain that you will win out. Lily is somehow too gentle and feathered in kindness to outlast his attention-span. You believe he is only attracted to slices of the self, to those who never unveil themselves fully.

Lily plunges your head beneath the water, a creamy purple film bubbling to the surface. Sunken in the bathtub, you release your secret down the drain. You resurface obsessed with the idea of yourself as a mystery.

(...)

11.

When you⁴ are fourteen, there is still baby fat that hangs about your stomach. A protective layer of dough that will peek out from under creamcolored sweaters. You can squeeze it between your fingers when you forget how to be inside a body; a dull pinch always reminds you that you are never really as gone as you think you are.

When you are fourteen, there is still baby fat that is strung across the recesses of the mind like fairy lights. It is soft and dim and warm like fresh bread in your belly. This is the stuff that tingles when a boy blushes at you. It will show you a most vivid silhouette of your true love when you are asleep.

When you are fourteen, people do not approach you and squish your fat between their palms like they used to. Your cheeks no longer get purple as a turnip from all the kneading and pinching and rolling from those women who smell like almond lotion and smile too much like a penny.

Mostly, when you are fourteen, you are on your own to figure out how all of this will age. When a man comes, he will want to touch all of you and try the pinching and prodding and squeezing out for himself. It is a real honor to be touched when you are fourteen.

When you are fourteen, it is difficult to really know any of these things. Except, of course, how it feels. Which certainly will not be how you imagined it would feel since these days you are only used to the sensation of fumbling your own baby fat.

When you are fourteen, the things you cannot say will always be missing. Like how hollow it felt that first time you felt someone else inside you. Like there is a layer of baby fat over everything you could think, protecting the thoughts even from yourself. It is possible you may find the words much later after the curling of the years, but they still will have been missing when you were fourteen.

⁴ These are the things that are harder to say.

Excerpt of *Compendium*
Sara Manlowe

523. Serious birdwatchers appointed to king's court to divine future through flight patterns
482. Girl in village followed by angels/aliens, cobalt/lime green/fuchsia/white light/gold stars / Pied Piper constellation woman story who turns children into luminescent yellow-white foam, into stars who dance around her on frozen lake, red blue green stars bloom under skin, mysterious illness, main character sees woman's body is a constellation through telescope, nerves bursting like stars spreading/blooming under skin

§

For Mark Griffiths, Medieval Department, New College, Oxford, on October 16, 2019:

A central focus of the medieval poem *Pearl* is perfection; 'my precious pearl without a spot' (1.4.48), 'that gem so clean' (1.4.47) – the titular pearl is rarely mentioned without some corresponding description of its flawlessness. The language describing the Pearl-Maiden both echoes and elevates this divine perfection: 'Like glistening gold that one does shear, / So shone that gem on distant shore' (2.14.165-66). She is described in terms of jewels, and light. There is no human element that is not countered by its descriptor, 'faultless face' (2.15.169), for example. The reader's first image of her is 'a child...enshrined' (2.14.161), which carries less of life in it than it does a pale, frozen statue surrounded by beauty. The girl herself is almost incidental; she is only an extension of this dazzling radiance, a sun in the shape of a girl. Perfection, then, through the Pearl-Maiden, is equated to the lack of anything human. She is perfect because she resembles a flawless pearl; she is perfect because, as she is assumed to be the dreamer's dead daughter, she died before the world could mark her in any way; she is perfect because her humanity is dead. The Pearl-Maiden's divine perfection hinges upon her lack of resemblance to any real, living woman. Therefore, the perfect woman is made perfect by not being a woman.

It is largely her descriptors that make her a thing, and not a person: 'Then that girl, so quick to enthrall, / So smooth, so small, slender and straight / ...a precious pearl in pearls ornate' (2.16.189-93). 'Girl' is a human term, but any humanity conferred upon her is quickly robbed by the following line. Smooth, small, slender and straight could as easily apply to an inanimate object as a person. A pearl, in fact – as the line, 'a precious pearl in pearls ornate' equates the Pearl-Maiden to the inanimate objects she is wearing. She is an extension of her beautiful clothes. She is her appearance; there is no warmth to her, nothing living. That list of descriptors – smooth, small, straight, slender – 'is equally appropriate to the description of the jewel and of feminine beauty' (Kean, 13); thus, according to Kean, descriptors

that work equally well for inanimate objects are *appropriate* for describing beauty in women – that is the baseline, the expectation. Smooth, small, straight and slender are all visual terms: nothing moving in them, nothing breathing, nothing thinking. The Pearl-Maiden is ‘something more...truly a pearl by virtue of the jewel-box that holds her. On earth, this was the buried coffin’ (Boitani, 100). Boitani goes further to say that it is her surroundings that elevate the Pearl-Maiden into a pearl herself. This is the ultimate passivity: being defined solely by one’s surroundings. It is through this passivity that she is made ‘something more’; the ideal woman is an inverse equation, who becomes more the lesser she is. The buried coffin was her jewel box on earth, defining her, making her more. Death, as it drains life, is a perfecting influence.

Then there is the aspect of virginity, of being untouched, and therefore unblemished. On earth, the dreamer’s daughter died at only two years of age. The dreamer uses this fact to question the Pearl-Maiden’s elevation in heaven, but ‘the maiden counters by emphasizing the spotless state conferred on her at baptism which, unlike adults, she has not had time to mar; it is this conferred innocence that gives her a place of honor in heaven’ (Bhattacharji, 38). Life, here, is made negative, labelled ‘time to mar’ one’s spotless innocence. The more life one has lived, the farther they stray from that pristine condition gained through baptism. Life is a tainting influence; dying young renders one virtually flawless. The Pearl-Maiden is ‘the emblem of an individual soul who is saved by her own innocence and acquires the perfection and incorruptibility of a pearl’ (Boitani, 101). Her innocence saves her: innocence, here, can be defined as lack of knowledge, lack of experience, thus it is that lack, that emptiness, that once again elevates the Pearl-Maiden to perfection. She has done nothing, seen nothing, been nothing, and for that she is raised high. Death ensured she was nothing, not a person, and thus death ensured her perfection.

Therefore the ideal woman is dead: on earth, a corpse, and in heaven less a woman than a glowing statue. She is able to speak, as she cannot on earth, but even then her will is not her own. She is a vessel for God’s message. As God’s bride, she describes herself as ‘Purchased from earth’ (15.75.893): her perfection allows her to be used transactionally. Then, when the dreamer asks to see her city, he says, ‘Since you are glorious, without any gall, / To refuse my request you are not prone’ (16.77.915-16). Since she is so glorious – since she was able to die, untouched, on earth – she is not prone to refuse his request. Because she has become the perfect woman, the dreamer tells her she is unable to refuse him. The perfect woman is a beautiful object with no will of her own, so this is a perfectly reasonable assumption, and indeed she does end up giving him a glimpse of the city. Her objectification is so complete that throughout their conversation, the dreamer is able to ‘[insist] on her infancy...and his possessive love for her’ (Kean, 119). Even as God’s bride, even as someone who has

transcended humanity to become perfection itself, the dreamer still feels that he owns her; that, for all her divine perfection, she is still a woman, still an object, still someone a mortal man feels he has a right to own.

A corpse has no free-will; a corpse is an object. On earth, this is the most perfect a woman can become, for she is capable of being a vessel, moved and interpreted by others. It is in heaven, however, that a woman can achieve divine perfection, a perfect hollowing-out of personhood. Dying young is ideal; by dying young and knowing nothing, a woman wins the right to be purchased by God, to become a vessel for his message, to have nothing at all of her own self inside of her. A child enshrined, with faultless face, a precious pearl in pearls ornate; there is no warmth here, no breath, nothing remotely resembling a human being. In her divinity, the Pearl-Maiden is no longer human. Perhaps this is less about women than it is about divinity. Since her perfection stems from her inhumanity, one can infer that divinity is the opposite of humanity. One becomes closer to God by becoming beautiful, and empty. Yet the dreamer still feels he has a hold on her. He still feels that she has no right to refuse him his requests, nor does he hesitate when challenging her position in heaven. He listens to her explanations because she speaks with the messages of God, but he feels able to question her, to confront her, to doubt her, because as a perfect woman, she has become a glistening object. §

§

485. Monk/priest/monastery artist (your business is to paint the souls of men, not their bodies) dying in monastery and can't tell if already dead or not bc laying in dark room w arms folded over chest, eats relics to become holy, eats book of saints, pray horses up out of the ground (cleric-y loophole that means every prayer must be answered, prayer like directing symphony/army), possibly combine w saint roasting and eating dragon, I'm a saint and I'm eating what killed me, poss combined w 487/486, will ye ever eat my heart, darksome, weal

486. Angels crowded into church, her mind flooded with angels and split open, angelic possession, angels occupy spaces, your head becomes the cathedral and angels flood in, possibly combine w 485

§

I don't think this is honesty. Something happens when I write, some alchemy, that transmutes words into story. I'm trying to be honest, but I am telling a story. I think that I don't think in words to begin with.

And anyway I wouldn't write something that wasn't narratively sound, so any truth is story-truth. I'm a fantasy writer: everything I write is fantasy. Everything I see becomes fantasy. I am a walking lens, a sieve, and everything that passes through me becomes fantasy.

By definition I am lying right now, because this is a theatrical phrase, and I don't actually believe there

is a binary. I say these things *because I'm telling a story*, which is the truth.

My maths professor said, "They made the mistake of adding god into their equations," referring to some arithmetic school in the Middle Ages, using god to mean infinity, which means $2 + \text{god} = 3 + \text{god} = \text{anything} + \text{god}$, so numbers are still numbers but they function like words in the sense that two can actually equal three if you put it in the right story, the right story being in the context of god. That's what I mean when I say that I'm lying, and also what I mean when I say this is true. It's true because it's not false, but it's false because I don't think I think in words.

In elementary school – Burma and Sri Lanka – I didn't understand why I'd so often get in trouble for 'lying,' because I knew what I'd said was more interesting than the truth.

§

520. Incantation erases all sorrow, fed a golden liquid, whole orphanage on brink of void/abyss, as chosen sacrifices, unknowing contractees, main character indoctrinated, can feel no sorrow, a life without longing is more terrifying than death itself, blue and gold ribbons of angels (winding up to the sky)

§

When I was maybe thirteen I misstepped in a flooded river and got swept downstream and pinned under a branch.

At maybe fourteen, on a narrow road in the Himalayas, a truck nearly knocked my bike off the mountain and into the clouds beneath the peak.

That same year, on a beach with nothing to read, I purposefully walked into my own mind to pass the time, except I went too far, and on instinct did the only thing I could think of to bring myself back, which was to drag tweezers up and down my wrists. South India is too hot for long sleeves, so the best I could do was develop a habit of turning my arms inward when I walked. Still, it was months later before my parents noticed one evening as I was brushing my teeth. They both cried. My mom said, "People would think we're bad parents."

Would think. As in, from the outside this looked bad, but it actually wasn't, since it was me, and I did, after all, read disturbing comics and write horror stories, so this proclivity for tweezers was only a natural extension of their daughter's personality. It wasn't bad, because it was *me*. In a rainbow-walled hostel in Amsterdam, in the middle of the night, a grown man walked into our hostel room and sat on a bed facing my friend and me. I had taken off my contacts; I could only read the texts she sent me wondering what a middle-aged man was doing in a hostel room, that we were the only ones on the entire floor, that he was staring at us, that he had pulled some kind of rope or cord from his bag and was still staring in our direction. Our texts were viscerally short: since I was on the top bunk, I would

go for the head. Lexi, on the bottom bunk, would go for his groin. We only had to survive whatever he did to us until someone else got back to the dorm, and hope that the rope meant he didn't plan on killing us first.

If we'd been thinking clearly we might have locked ourselves in the bathroom, or screamed for someone at the front desk, but I still remember how it felt, that night, that the whole world had narrowed down to this rainbow-walled room, and nothing else existed, just me, and Lexi, and the man on the bed. I remember the epiphany that everything they teach girls growing up – clever tricks with serrated keys, hooked fingers around windpipes – is fantasy. Every woman's life is only borrowed from the men around her. Nineteen years I had been allowed to believe my life was mine, but my life was my body, and my body was a conglomerate of parts that made me convenient for this man on the hostel bed. The tension was somewhat broken when he used the cord to plug in his phone. Then he asked us where we were from, because apparently we had been staring, and he had been uncomfortable.

Obviously this was Amsterdam.

Obviously looking back, there were two of us, and one of him, and if we'd landed our hits to his groin and his eyes, he would have felt pain. My life could not possibly have been as out of my control as I perceived it then, but I am not there now, and if I can't believe my epiphanies then I can only believe in the purity of my fear.

On the mountain, in the river, I never *believed* I would die, but in that room I was certain I would. I didn't think of my parents, or the novels I hadn't written, or the short will I'd typed out on my phone a year earlier before getting on the back of a motorcycle with a reckless boy in Sicily. I thought about movies. Something about how I'd just become every girl in every horror movie, and how every horror movie was true, because the horror was true. The girl at the beginning who screams and trips and dies for someone else to solve and spur a story believes she *is* the story, and I had believed I was the story, the main character, but in fact I had been an opening act all along, a body for someone else to find, a sensational headline about two girls slaughtered in an Amsterdam hostel that would move other mothers to tell other daughters to carry pepper spray and hold their keys between their fingers, and how those girls believed that they, too, were main characters, when statistically some of them would end up just like me, *meat*, in a room with a staring man and a rope. And then something about how Lexi and I had known exactly how to react to this situation because we *had* seen it in so many movies – that these expressions of fear were learned expressions, straight out of millions of stories where two girls are followed by/approached by/dragged into a van by/trapped in a room by a man and there's no dramatic irony about it, both they and the audience know what's coming, and their reactions mirror the reactions of the numberless girls before them. The movies taught me how to feel fear: how fear

moves the body and the face, and gives you a script of what to say. I remember that I wondered whether maybe someone at the very beginning had written fear all wrong, and ever since then we've mimicked something further and further from true fear, and that maybe in this media-soaked age all our instincts are truly learned from the television. Maybe no one remembers how to be afraid anymore.

I also remember thinking that only attractive girls are killed in the movies. My murder would be a final confirmation that I was conventionally attractive. But it was a phone cord, in any case. Lexi and I still laugh about that night we thought we were going to be murdered.

Except of *The Language of Loss*
Liam Mayo

When Rys was young, a child growing up in the town around Glemwood, they had often gone with their grandfather living in the forests and the elds nearby. Their grandfather had told them in the walks they took together never to go to Glemwood Forest. Sometimes he said it was sacred ground. Sometimes he said the area was simply unsafe. Both reasons sent Rys straight to Glemwood Forest as soon as they were old enough to hike unattended. There they found a border between Glemwood Forest and the other, lesser, nameless forests around, a border marked by an aging wooden fence and enforced by a fear, erce and deep, of whatever lurked in the shadows on the other side. Time and again Rys tried to cross it; time and again they fell back, stepping back from the fence and deciding that they'd try another day. The closest they got to crossing was at a wooden pedestrian bridge, spanning a shallow ravine between Glemwood Forest and the world. They'd go often to the bridge, engaging in imaginary conversations with the shades of the other side, but even then, the closest they could come was halfway.

Then they died, and they found themself in Glemwood Forest, and the place held no more the allure of forbidden fruit.

Rys stopped walking, as the path they were on forked again. To the left, it led steep and jagged down a slope which led to the very same bridge. To the right it narrowed, going up a hill and down the other side and away. Rys took that path, slipping a little as they went, reaching a hand out to the trees to slow their descent. It did not slow them, for there were no trees in the forest, and their hand met nothing but air. They tried anyway, for on the bridge the Grim Reaper was waiting for them, and an appointment with him wasn't something to rush.

The first time Rys had met the Reaper, *this* Reaper, they had met on the same bridge. The Reaper then had looked as a Reaper of Death should look. His face was skeletal, as were his hands. He wore a black cloak that did not move in the wind, with a hood that came up and covered his bald skull. He had a full-sized scythe in his hands, with a curved silver blade sharp enough to cut moonlight. The Reaper was the stuff of nightmares, clad thus in black.

That was before. Now, Rys and the Reaper were on first name terms. Now, the figure on the bridge looked entirely different. He wore jeans, and a denim jacket, each slightly threadbare around the cuffs. He had curly red hair, and a curly beard, and his face was flesh, not bone. He had brown hiking boots on, and a grey turtleneck sweater beneath the jacket, and little silver studs in his ears. Nothing marked him as the physical incarnation of Death, nothing except the small silver scythe that hung on a

chain around his neck, on which a little silver scythe dangled beside rainbows and crowns and puppies. “Hi Randolph,” said Rys.

Randolph leaned over the side of the bridge, resting his elbows on the railing and his weight on his elbows. “Rys,” he said, in greeting.

Rys joined him on the bridge, and looked with Randolph out over the ravine. Below the bridge lay a rotting pile of gravestones, cluttering up the ravine and the river that ran through it. You would think to look at it that someone had taken the contents of a dumpster, picked out everything remotely useful or usable, and chucked the rest from a great height onto the treeless forest. Splintered chairs and broken bookcases, snapped bows and rusting knives, books and bags, stued animals and enough clothes to stock a small boutique lay scattered together, forgotten. They could tell stories, if you had time to listen, could tell of the lives and the moments that had ended and, in their nal moments, marked the objects below with the curse of remembrance. It could be enough to make you cry. “So,” said Randolph. “Hit by a car, then?”

“Yeah,” said Rys.

“Did it hurt?”

Rys shrugged. “The roof was worse.” They tried not to think about their deaths, not when

they could help it, but they could not forget the way their bones crunched against the lawn. “I can imagine,” said Randolph. He changed the subject. “Don’t you look both ways before you cross the street?”

“Sometimes. Do you?”

“Of course.”

“Can a car even hurt you? You’re a Reaper.”

“It’s safety,” said Randolph, disgruntled. “You wear your seatbelt, you don’t swim too far from shore, and you look both ways before crossing the street.”

“I was just asking,” said Rys. There was so much they did not know about the world of Glemwood Forest, about Randolph’s world. They did not know if he was alive. They did not know if he could die. Somehow it always seemed impolite to ask, so they lived with their curiosity, and they tried, most of the time, not to think about it.

“Do you have your coin?” asked Randolph.

“Here,” said Rys. They dug into their pocket for their silver half-dollar. “Flip me.” The first time Rys and Randolph had met, on the same bridge three years ago, Randolph told them to challenge him in a game for their life. If Randolph won, Rys would go on to the afterlife, whatever that meant. If Rys

won, they got to cross the bridge, leave Glemwood Forest and return to the land of the living. That was all he offered them: one game, a simple set of rules, a single choice. They did not trust themselves to beat the Reaper in a game of skill, and they had read too many fairy tales to try their hand at cheating. They chose to rely on their luck, instead, poor as it often was. They had a silver half-dollar in their pocket, a memento from a fourth place finish at an Easter egg-and-spoon race. They gave the coin to Randolph and told him to flip. If it came up heads, they would pass on. If not ...

“Call it,” said Randolph, taking the coin.

“Tails.”

Randolph pushed the coin around in his palm, hand stretched out beyond the railing, whispering something that Rys could not quite hear. The coin always seemed to weigh him down, heavy as a lullaby. His face was grave and his movements slow, until the moment the coin flicked up and tumbled through the moonlight and came back down into a waiting hand, slapped thereafter onto a waiting arm.

Randolph took the covering hand away, coin balanced on a denim sleeve. It was showing tails.

“Great,” said Rys. “Wonderful.” They picked the coin from Randolph’s arm and pocketed it.

Excerpt of *Strawberry Ghosts*
Ella McGrail

There is a passage in the history of Portsmouth, at the close of the last century, to which I have never seen any allusion in print, that is, I think, worth preservation from being entirely forgotten; at least so far as it may be done in the columns of a newspaper. I refer to the time when in the months of May and June, 1797, the young ladies and young gentlemen went to Shapleigh's Island to receive vaccination for the small-pox. There are but few living, who, from personal recollection can recall the event, but others, of a later generation, still retain much that was related to them in former years, by those who were participants in it.
-Charles Brewster, Rambles about Portsmouth, 1869

Pox Party, 1797

At the start of our second week of quarantine, Amity Whit suggested we swim naked in the river. It was full moon and high summer, the air laden with the scent of beach roses and salt. We picked our way through the rocks and tangles of wild violets, giggling, shushing, and hiking our underskirts to avoid dragging them through the tide pools. We were Portsmouth's own troop of nymphs: bear shouldered and hair down, smiles winking wicked in the moonlight. "Oh we can't!" Gasp'd Anne Lewis as we came at last to the shoreline. The river stretched out before us, quick and black and speckled with islands, some larger and some smaller than the one on which we stood. On stormier nights we could hear the waves crashing a mile or so upstream, where the Piscataqua rushes to join the Atlantic's blue forever. We stood in mirthful knots, giggling still and casting glances at one another, trying to gauge who might have the nerve to go first. Amity gripped my arm and smiled at the sand, her gaul apparently exhausted from the initiation of this errand.

I looked out at the water. When I was little, my mother used to let me run around the yard in just my shift. The grass would tickle my ankles, and ants and beetles crawled up my legs. I'd

clamber on top of the chicken coop and build houses out of sticks and leaves among the poplar tree's roots, murmuring stories to myself about the little folk who might take up residency in them. At the end of the day I'd be scraped and sunburned, and mother would catch me up in her arms and call me her wild wolf cub.

I started to undo my laces. Amity let out a small gasp and immediately two dozen pairs of eyes were on me, full of shock and delight.

“Look at Lucy!”

“Is she really going to?”

I let my jump vest fall on the sand, quickly followed by my skirt, and walked to the edge of the water. The river nipped at my toes like a coconspirator, the curve of the shoreline a hungry-lipped grin. In one quick motion I pulled my shift over my head and tossed it to Amity, who caught it with a squeak. Without turning to see their reactions to my bare backside I stepped into the water, shivering, not from cold but from the delicious feel of the night air. With my clothes off the world seemed to take a step closer, the night wrapping around me like a second skin. I was a wolf again, but a cub no more.

A few more steps and I was waist-deep in the water, the current twining around my legs. I took a breath, and plunged beneath the surface.

I let myself linger underwater for a moment, working my arms to stay in place, but it was so pitch black that I began to think of sea monsters, so I found my footing on the pebbles and stood upright. The others had given up all pretense of secrecy and were yelling and jumping, a few even removing their jumps. Clemency Darling and Sara Foss left their shifts on the rocks and dashed into the water, squealing. About a dozen others, including Amity, came in with their

shifts but removed them once the water was high enough to cover their breasts. The rest fluttered about in the shallows, splashing each other and swirling their skirts in the water.

I laid on my back, relishing the feel of the river on my skin, my girlhood, my scalp. The water felt even better than the breeze on my unbound flesh. It was like swimming in a bath of liquid pearls, wonderfully cool and slick.

I felt something poke my side and whipped around, but it was only Amity, her eyes glittering just above the water's surface, chestnut hair floating in tendrils around her face. I dived after her and soon we were all in a game of water tag, shrieking and stumbling in a merry tangle. At last we tired ourselves out. I grabbed my shift from where Amity left it on the rocks and pulled it over my head, shivering now from the chill of the night. All the swimmers engaged in the difficult business of dressing wet bodies, shaking sand out of our jumps and helping one another with laces. As I tied Amity back into her skirt, she looked out across the water to the black outline of Portsmouth, punctuated here and there with a late-night lantern. "Lucy," she said, "how will we ever go back?"

Even if he'd managed to sleep through our shrieking, Dr. Jackson couldn't fail to notice the dark circles under our eyes or the salt crusted on our skin. He was a man who missed little, but as we'd discovered over the past weeks, he was also indulgent almost past the point of belief. The only reference he made to our late-night cavorting was a wink and a half-smile accompanying his usual, "Good morning, children," when he came to conduct our examinations. We lined up down the middle of the long room we slept in, and approached him one by one as he pressed the back of his hand to our foreheads, checked our inoculation sight, and asked us a series of questions. The ancient matron hired to mind us sat in a chair to his right, nodding

and calling each of us by the wrong name. There'd been no concern that she would notice our absence last night.

“Lucretia Turner,” Dr. Jackson greeted me when I reached the front of the line. “How are you this morning?”

“Very well sir, thank you.”

“Good, good.” He felt my forehead and rolled up my sleeve to examine the place where he'd injected me with smallpox.

Dr. Jackson had been bringing batches of Portsmouth folk to this island for several summers now, the result of almost ten years of pleading. At first the town didn't take kindly to the idea of having a plague installed purposefully into our arms, but the good doctor went door to door explaining that the dosage was too small to cause serious illness in most patients, and that we were far more likely to die from not taking the inoculation than we were from taking it. It was really Bessy Seward who changed everyone's mind. After her oldest daughter died of the pox while they were visiting family in Boston, Mrs. Seward came home and demanded that she and the rest of her children receive inoculations. They say Captain Seward fought her on it at first, but she was relentless, and finally he allowed the doctor to perform the procedure on Bessy and their youngest child. When both of them healed nicely he allowed the rest of the children to take it, and finally received it himself in the meeting house with all the town councilors present. After that a bill was approved to renovate the meager hospital on Shapleigh's Island, where the sick had been sent in past outbreaks, and Jackson set up an inoculation clinic that very summer.

He started by taking whole families out together, but that proved too hard for those who didn't have servants to mind their fields and business, so this time he took all the youngest children along with a few women to mind them in May, and then the youths in June, which is

how we'd found ourselves set loose on an island in early summer with only three adults as supervision.

“No body aches, fatigue, or soars?” Dr. Jackson asked me.

“No Sir,” I said.

“Ah, how unsurprising.”

My eyes darted to his face, but he only smiled kindly through his spectacles, as if he'd said nothing out of the ordinary, and made a note in his ledger. I curtsied and headed for the door, hoping the comment had been meaningless.

The island accommodations were cramped so we usually ate outside. I could see Clemency and Annie Short through the doorway, setting a pot of oats over a newly stoked fire, but then someone flew out of the adjacent room and pinned me to the wall with a hand clamped over my mouth. The hand was unnecessary. I knew my assailant, and a scream would've pleased him far too much. I bit hard on his ring finger.

“Ouch! Lucy,” Asher Davis pulled his hand away, but his puck-worthy grin only widened. “I missed you last night.”

Coda: The Bluebird in Grand Central Station



I saw a bluebird once. It was in a dream. In many ways I see it as the closest I could be to the bird. It moved, incredibly as they do, through pillars and noise around the pale blue ceiling of a station reeking of lo-mein. Grand Central station, as I'm sure you know it. Above it, the constellations of animals and heroes look on with indifference from the famous celestial map, stained with the faint touch of sodium, clay-blue and dappled with star shapes. The bluebird flew beneath the net of those fake stars, imagining, as I like to think, that it was

moving across galaxies, being rather pleased and not immediately considering it as the lavish ceiling that it is.

The bluebird dipped and rose around the marble shapes, knowing the depictions of stars very well from its time in the mountains, where they appeared far away and familiar. It had memorized the position of the north star from behind the bow of an ash tree, assuming eventually, that the stars were right next to its leaves. This certainly came to match its current predicament, in which it started to feel air bounce off the new ceiling, knowing a crash would be the only result. This, as many of us have seen, is very alarming for a bird—the concept of a ceiling, I mean. The bird may have thought it had reached the peak of the world, the very top, where it had been way-marked with small picturesque suns. It makes a great deal of sense, I figured, at least when we become confronted with the gargantuan puzzle of migration and flyways. I mean only that birds move a lot, much more than we could ever conceptualize. If we moved half as much, we may not be surprised arriving at some unknown end-place— an edge to the world. The swift may be the most well known example of this idea, spending months in the air without so much as touching the ground, and traveling as far as four million miles in its lifetime, sleeping, eating, mating, and drinking on the wing. I believe that is a distance which wraps around the surface of the earth several times— something like one hundred and sixty times, actually.

I couldn't say for sure how birds get around so well. It is sometimes said that most aves can detect the electromagnetic field and use it as a sort of stream. That they have GPS in their organs. I would often rather think of it as two lines which are either parallel or cross, appearing in their eyes like the “floaters” we sometimes see, or within the depth of their highly active trigeminal nerve, as is

often speculated upon. ‘Birds just know where to go’— but it is much more than that.

Any bird, take the bluebird here for example, a common passerine that moves around the Eastern United States, a relatively small range, requires one of the most adept eyes and brains of any other species on our planet. The bluebird, as is true with most ave species, has the pattern of the stars chemically engrained into the surface of its eyes, likely as exact as any celestial map we could ever produce with a camera. Their biology, in this case, uses a similar principle, so that it can take on the whole visible solar system as a sort of retina.

Its brain is small and dense. It is boarded on either side, by the ears, with trace iron so that the magnetic spectrum can be detected and used in the deduction of north by way of counterbalance— this is likely the result of a particular region of their brain referred to, somewhat mysteriously I might add, as cluster N. Cluster N might just be the conglomerate of all of these subtle variables conjoining at a point in the liquid padding of the brain. It can be imagined as a pool of innate statistics in a sac, points or grains which act as a lateral level, showing North. In other words, a highly reliable, and shockingly innate celestial map, compass, sextant, and radar; a map which can be smelt as well as it can be seen, and as pressure from the poles, felt.

I wonder what a bird ‘thinks’ of north. Not as ‘straight’ or ‘up’ like we might, but as a cellular composite— like the feeling of being thirsty, or as though it were using it to breath, speak, eat, and touch. More literally though, it is used to miraculously avoid the coriolis force, which effects everything else. It must do so in order to avoid being intercepted and thrown off course by the momentum and curvature of the earth as it rotates and moves through space. It must calculate

a truly straight line while considering these features. This is all to say that birds have, unlike any other species, adapted to navigate while considering our position in space, and the physical laws which dictate the world, all that moves on our planet, including the contents of the atmosphere and oceans outright. Birds do not defy physics, as is sometimes blurted out, or as I may be seeming to insinuate; instead they abide by it completely and with impressive dexterity. This would all be much more impressive if it weren't for another riveting fact, perhaps the most incredible, which is that birds can fly. How they came to fly, be it by arboreal theory or cursorial theory is as much of a mystery as the development of feathers— either tendrils made to insulate, or derivatives of aquatic scales— is the same mystery as the development of our own minds and thumbs which made the fake stars and ceiling above its head.

Imagine then, those things called dousing rods; birds might have those atop their corneas, or branded onto their cortex, which always allow them to be oriented to the stars. The world for them may be imagined as a world made of points, as if a painting by Seurat in his Pointillism School for which every dot could miraculously be zoomed in upon, named, identified, and immediately found— like a solar system that could be read. This is all rather ambitious and imaginary sounding, but is as close to the truth of birds as could be. They are celestial wayfarers, especially considering that the first thing any juvenile bird does is imprint onto the sun itself, educating itself to a life of sailing. The basic world is already quite magical when we consider what is most plainly occurring, and it can be seen anywhere.

There are so many similarities between us and birds, too. We are both derivative of a common ancestor, both vertebrates with creative vocal

organizations and complicated communities. We both create nests and use the stars to navigate around the globe. We trade, defend, show off, and mate in remarkably similar ways. I would hardly think to seek aliens out as there are countless species here which we can try to understand. What I mean is that there are already vocally linguistic flight creatures on this planet and they are wise in the way of the Milky Way. In some ways I am painting them as aliens themselves or, if you would rather, intricate and altruistic partners to us.

We can look back to our bluebird which continues to float in airtight lines about the faces of the zodiac and the inaugural star-map at the Station. The tips of its wings become razors under the fake sky; they grab onto the invisible air and glide, slowly creating arcs. You could easily imagine white lines being produced by its course, or at least, I did so. Its eyes filled with moisture, became blacker and began to appear liquid. Its heart moved the whole feathered body, I could see that, although it also gave an air of unfamiliar calmness. There it could be seen moving in half circles, working its way around the stone sky above it, the fake stars and sickly blue. It was something that could move with so much agility and bravery around the columns and marble shapes, an organism which embodies the pureness of a color, for which it is named. Below it, bustle occurs, and it was paid no mind. No one looked up to see it.

I will explain more the severity of the dream: I imagined the bluebird to go in and out of invisibility over the tundra of people below it, the white floor like the upturned white roots of coral in the dying sea. Suddenly in the room the sea became present, and it became the same as the air. The mind conjured the apparition of mist, but it was only the hum of lanterns and the droll rumblings of train activity bouncing about the tendrils of marble. Everything becomes a sound,

or should I say, sights and sounds become similar. The blue, faint pallor of the ceiling becomes a storm as it fills the bluebird's head with strange rattling sounds, akin to boiling water. North vanishes, Cluster N pulls to the black surface of stone, or at least, oddly, the stars stop vibrating and stand very still, causing total pandemonium.

The dream, I want to believe, gave me the slightest insight into the panic that bird had felt. What made it all the more beautiful and strange, was that there was the the imagine of thousands of grey shapes moving alongside and behind the bluebird, like blurry hawks, smudges from an eraser. It was south being embodied, sounding out the with the furious ring of clattering bells. Who could hear them? Could it see that grey against the grey station, or the blue sky behind the blue slab? How does a bluebird see blue? That we make in stark mimicry of it — or better, of the sky that we block out in its own image?

Excerpt of *Animals and People*
Nik Slackman

1.

“My Flora,

“This entire note exists against you. You are not the one this is for. This is not for you. It exists expressly in opposition to you. This is something that has everything to do with your demise. Because you are a different person than Larkyns, Flora, and I know what I can do to you with my words.

“It would be of no use to kill a strong man. But Harry Larkyns is not a strong man. I’ve written letters, none of which possess the power to do this.

“There is something strange about him, a ticking, a sort of unconscious ticking to him. Something about him simply ticks through his day, sweeping through you, and it is within my jurisdiction to kill this.

“Flora, the truth is you are dumb. The truth is your heart is rooted in a passivity, a quality like a cool breeze. You are something created from wrongness. I don’t know if you were born this way. It doesn’t matter how you were born, Flora. You are inextricable from your stupidity. It takes up space inside of you. I know you bear your stupidity like a child. I have watched you suffer over this limitation, struggle to move past it, despite its monstrous growth. Soon you caved into it, creating Florado, the boy, though he is hardly a boy. He’s hardly your son, and certainly not mine. He is a symptom of your stupidity. Your inability to contain it has caused him.

“I have tried to do everything I can to become an American. I have only ever made authentic decisions, and I have always followed them to their end.”

Chronicle: “After the shooting, Eadweard Muybridge was disarmed, and his demeanour was calm.

“The trial of the murder of Harry Larkyns by Muybridge was conducted with an all male jury, all but one of whom were married. His lawyer, Mr. W.W. Pendegast had attempted to defend him on grounds of insanity.

“Mr Pendegast’s closing statement for the defence was one of the most eloquent forensic efforts ever heard in the State. The peroration carried the audience away, and at the close they broke into a storm of applause. He had focused on the instant of the event, of what one could decide in such a case.

“The jury discarded entirely the theory of insanity, and meeting the case on the bare issue left, acquitted the defendant on the ground that he was justified in killing Harry Larkyns for seducing his wife. This was directly contrary to the charge of the Judge, but the jury did not mince the matter, or attempt to excuse the verdict. They said that if their verdict was not in accord with the law of the books, it is with the law of human nature; that, in short, under similar circumstances they would have done as Muybridge did, and they could not conscientiously punish him for doing what they would have done themselves.

“At the sound of the last momentous words a convulsive gasp escaped the prisoner's lips, and he sank forward from his chair. The mental and nervous tension that had sustained him for days of uncertain fate was removed in an instant; and he became as helpless as a new-born babe. Mr. Pendegast caught him in his arms and thus prevented his falling to the floor, but his body was limp as a wet cloth. His emotion became convulsive and frightful. His eyes were glassy, his jaws set and his face livid. The veins of his hands and forehead swelled out like whipcord. He moaned and wept convulsively, but uttered no word of pain or rejoicing. Such a

display of overpowering emotion has seldom, if ever, been witnessed in a Court of justice... He rocked to and fro in his chair. His face was absolutely horrifying in its contortions as convulsion succeeded convulsion... Pendegast begged Muybridge to control himself and thank the jurymen for their verdict. He arose to his feet, and tried to speak, but sank back in another convulsion. He was carried out of the room by Pendegast and laid on a lounge in the latter's office. He had no recollection of the incident afterward.”

3.

“Blood is blood and a fine is a fine, says the Kanun”

“Blood is never avenged.”

4.

There was a way she followed herself.

Or maybe it was a guest, one which moved her, forwarding her speech and step, controlling her... life? Fine. It would intricately encourage her: you could be the only son, *the merchant*.

Noone had judged her step-brother to die so carelessly, to leave her with the whole weight of the man.

5.

“These are the words said by Gjergj Kastioti to Leke Dukagjini on the occasion of an assembly of the land.

Leke Dukagjini did not want to accept this judgement. In order to convince Leka that “Blood sucks blood,” he decided to exchange two infants, as soon as they were born from two families and clans: one from a fine and wealthy family, and the other from a common and poor family. The noble infant was given to the poor mother and the poor infant, to the noble mother, and they were left thus until they attained the age of reason.

After the children had learned to walk, they began to go to the parks to play with other children. The child of the poor family, raised in the house of the wealthy, wallowed in the mud and was always dirty, no matter how often he was changed and cleaned by the members of his household. The child of the nobility, raised in the poor family, always was neat and clean, and when he played, he would hold a stick and pretend to be riding a horse.

Kastrioti and Leka continued to observe the behaviour of the two children. "Leke" said Kastrioti, "are you convinced now that blood sucks blood?" Leka watched well what was happening, but he did not change his mind, and he considered the matter of the children as a kind of game.

"Leka," Said Lastioti, "follow me; I want to lead you somewhere." And taking the two children by the hand, he started out on the road and went to the cemetery. Kastrioti had the graves of the ancestors of the two children opened, and from them he took two bones. Then Kastrioti pricked the fingers of the two boys until a few drops of blood were drawn out. He took the bone of the poor child's ancestor and brought the noble child's bloody finger to it, but it did not absorb the blood. Then he took the bone of the noble child's ancestor and brought the poor child's finger to it, but it did not absorb the blood."

6.

Most agreed suicide was less the word (only she called it that) than blunder. George's body showed traces of the river. Why? Everyone knew—why he hadn't was an unaccountable blind spot.

In order to maintain her standard of living, she would take his place, cozy into his compartment of the merchants.

The cat had died, too. She had contracted maggots in her mouth and anus (the doctor could not be sure which first) and was poisoned lest she be eaten from the inside out. Kate

buried her next to the corroded hole that was to be Lake Superior. She had considered the more traditional approach of bringing dead cats to the river Thames, but decided she was not a British cat. She was American in spirit, and was given a private burial for the life she ought to have lived.

Then Kate lived alone until her cousin returned.

7.

It was a soft arrival. His gaze was glazier, more confused, but his smile came from a natural calm. It looked off, like some elongated child had aped his manner, or as if he'd been switched out with another.

He was absolutely demented now, she could tell. She only resented that it had happened so far from her. She hadn't gotten to watch the moment the life dropped out from under him. Now she'd have to watch him sink.

8.

His wife's letters were about his office, carelessly as anyone else's. He did not care to hide these pleas, apologies, certificates penned in her rigid hand. Recent notes from Marey were vitriolic. Each violence held in the company of the others. Her cousin seemed unwilling to let these papers move him any particular way.

How wonderful, he spoke, sitting by the side of the river. All he needed was the water of his childhood. *What a marvelous thing, how wonderful it is!* He sat by the water for hours at a time, letting his patterned reflection come before a breeze blew it apart. Over and over, it would return to him as something luminous and new.

9.

The neighbor kids would taunt him (there were neighbor kids now.) Their favorite thing to do would be to leave a can on the stoop filled with springs, or "snakes" as they called

them. They would do this in fifteen minute intervals, giving him enough time to forget. After days of this, it permanently seared into his brain to stay away.

Sometimes they spoke to him from behind a large bush. They told him they were god. It seemed to comfort him, and she didn't really have the energy to intervene. 10.

He had begun to ask god to kill him.

“God, kill me.”

“Ed, it is not your time.”

“Please!” He would moan with a tinge of melodrama, eliciting odd laughter. “No, Eadweard. Now is not your time.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

Excerpt of *Before You Grow Fruit*
Stella Rose Schneeberg

Preface

Julie Susler Blum, my maternal aunt, passed away on December 29th, 2017, in her bedroom in Fairfield, Iowa. She moved there to start a family in a community deeply invested in Transcendental Meditation.

This project is an exploration of being present for her death. I put myself into the physical room where she died, and I stare into the petals of the flowers covering her deathbed, each a portal. I ask the questions I have had about her death that I had not before now been able to put into words. I grieve in a way that was before now not accessible to me, by using ecstatic states of consciousness to navigate through her death, cremation, and the planting of her as an apple tree.

BEFORE YOU GROW FRUIT

Up on the deathbed

Come here you said my face turning to yours fingers still exploring a petal
come up on the deathbed your stone white face unmoving eyes lips closed
lungs not moving not doing their dance but still you spoke

Don't mind them you told me still as swamp water and you were right

I need not mind the flowers which parted as I climbed onto the queen sized deathbed
then closed again not around me but out from your face
the center of an endless circular symmetry

Sprawling out in all directions from your inflorescence stone grey sunflower head
bluish lips and purple eyelids withered disc florets long since developed their last seed
having absorbed enough excitement through lingering years emitted flowers around you
themselves fluorescing pixel patterns seen one by one through black lights of grief

If I ascended to meet you on the ceiling
of your bedroom you would show me with cold hands
turn my head down my world below mirrored in yours above
purposeful then was my gaining access to the bed
I need not mind those flowers whose pattern I was so integral to
my own memories reflected in your ceaseless petalled emissions

I waited but you did not speak again
still-water face tucked through a blanket of flowers
almost childlike endless mane of a costume lion
hair that was in life your gothic sunburst but really forever now
true horizon where train tracks meet

Pink roses to the left of me soft waxy petals

grasping with gentle urgency my fingers moving in search of a center

flowers within flowers until sand came pouring out

beige grains of beach emptying what had filled a sandal all over my dress

A faint seagull called as I moved to the next just a common daisy

when my thumb moved across its yellow middle it glowed

at first a night light but in seconds became the sun

so I set down the star nearly perfect hot sphere of plasma

Face of the red amaryllis revealed a still from the aughts

a boy in horn-rimmed glasses sparse adolescent beard and faded worn tee

your son full smile standing in the street smoke across the screen rising behind him

trail of it the smoke-tail of a train through boundless foreign hills

A ringing from the lily of the valley I held it up to my ear

each bell a telephone receiver

chiming til I moved to the orchid

its white petals become a wedding dress in my hands

Surrounded with the fruits of your sister's flower garden

I stare in through the petals finger each stamen and pistil for memories

feed upon the last traces hovering above you smoke swirls of your incense

I stare in through the last unshuttered windows of an abandoned amusement park

the decaying rides where Dorothy and the Lion found the Tinman in Queens

the field of red poppies turned to neon night club in *The Wiz*

I stare into the burnt out home from *A Chair for My Mother*

the charcoal and ashes become shading on the floral upholstery

of the big chair brought home to their new apartment

Frothed milk in the metal cup spills over becomes hydrangea head

of smaller mornings filled with steam swirls up to the ceiling

catch early pink sun become cherry blossoms raining down over the floor

deepen into red wall-to-wall of the guest bedroom in Decatur

sweet smell of pumpkin pie of midwestern daylight endless fallow farm fields

crimson silos white cars driving parallel past our minivan

Excerpt of *Strawberry Womb*
Eliza Watson

The first time I bled like a woman, I was twelve years old. A brown stain smeared the inside of my underwear, the smell of sweet metal and the color of old blood. I assumed that I had cut myself earlier when I was dangling from a tree; I had wrapped my legs tightly around a branch, skirt and hair both hanging upside down, laughing as all of the blood rushed to my head. The next morning, as my fingers inched their way into my underwear, a cold wetness painted my nails red like summer strawberries. Every year, when the berries were ripe, I would eat so many that my tongue turned crimson. I would eat them until my stomach hurt so badly that I was convinced a strawberry bush was growing inside of me. The red was coming from between my legs, below my navel. I told myself that maybe it was the strawberry plant growing outside of me. Maybe it had gotten too big, the roots tangled in my intestines, leaves winding up my ribs until it had nowhere else to grow.

When I told my sister about the strawberry plant she told me that we needed to take it out, that it was dying inside of me. I imagined planting the strawberry bush in the garden, that the small red fruits would bear little babies. When my sister was born, her face was as pink as the inside of my cheeks, my mother's insides having stained her red. I remembered the way my mother screamed, the way she spasmed in pain, how she squeezed my grandmother's hand until her bones popped.

“Do you think it will hurt?” I asked my sister.

“Maybe, but I think that's just what happens when you become a mother,” she said, “Maybe everything hurts.” She mentioned our grandmother's crooked back and our mother's swollen feet, how they both sighed when they sat, and how our mother cried at night.

There was already a persistent pain creeping up my thighs, an uncomfortable stabbing where my underwear met my belly. I could hear the ghosts laughing at me from behind the cupboards and felt the heat rise to my cheeks. *Maybe the strawberry plant will already be dead like them*, I thought. Part of me hoped it was.

My sister told me I had to lie down on the bed with my thighs spread apart, my dress hiked up past my navel, my underwear soaked red, a tiny spot of blood staining the sheets. When she told me I had to take my underwear off I refused, but she told me that's how women have babies. I shut my eyes and turned my head away as she peeled the fabric from my body, carefully and gently like how our grandmother did with the other women in the village.

Sometimes our grandmother would bring my sister and I along when she was working as a midwife, tasking us with holding the basin of water or dabbing cool cloths on the mother's neck. Her and my mother cared for many expecting mothers within the clearing. Sometimes, women would knock on our door, wrapping their cloak around themselves nervously, as they asked if my mother or grandmother was home.

Once, a girl around my age came to the door, her face gaunt and pale. She was barely thirteen. When my mother saw her standing at the door, she whisked my sister and I from the kitchen, sternly telling us to stay in our room. From the other side of the wall, we heard the scrape of a chair on the floor, the slam of a cabinet, and then hushed whisperings. My sister and I pressed our ears to the crack between the wall and door trying to hear what they were talking about. The only words we could make out were "father," "swollen," and "desperate." The girl's soft sobs broke the whispers and we heard the quick movements of our mother going to comfort her, "Shush, now. You will be okay."

"Okay. Now push," my sister said.

By the time my mother and grandmother came home, I was crying and screaming with my skirts bunched to my navel. My sister told them to come help, that I was having a baby, that a strawberry plant was stuck inside of me and needed to get out. They were both in shock at first, but then my mother laughed. She doubled over, clutching her stomach, a fit of giggles shaking her whole body. My grandmother sat down at the table, her eyes hidden behind her hands as she shook her head.

When my mother could finally talk again, she said “There is no strawberry plant stuck inside your womb. This just is what happens to all little girls when they grow up.” She helped wash the blood from my body and gave me a strip of cotton fabric to place inside my clean underwear. Then, she sat down with my sister and I and told us both all about menstruation. She went to her room, then returned a few moments later with a bracelet made of red stones. In the center of the bracelet, laid a single blue crystal, barely the size of my pinky nail. She slipped it around my wrist, fixing the clasp tightly before letting my arm drop to my knee. She told me that this will help me know when I am going to bleed, “Each stone is a day of the month and when the red stone comes, so does your bleeding. Your grandmother gave this to me when I was a girl,” she said. “But, I have no need for it anymore.”

In the cupboard, my mother and grandmother kept jars full of dried herbs, all labeled and dated from when they were picked. “Come,” she said to me, “You, stay put,” she said pointing to my sister. We left her sitting on the bed, her face contorted into a childish pout, arms crossed as her glare followed us from the room. In the kitchen, my mother rummaged through the cupboard, the clinking of jars echoing through the room like a song. My grandmother sat at the table, knitting, two needles in her hands.

My mother pulled out three jars, all filled with dried herbs, the leaves and roots of the plants faded brown and green. We sat at the table, the three of us, as my mother poured a small

amount of the herbs out onto the worn wood. “Yarrow, mugwort, and raspberry leaf,” she told me, pointing at each pile as she spoke.

“These are all herbs that are sacred to women,” my grandmother added, her needles pausing as she looked at me to speak.

My mother smiled, softly. “That includes you now,” she said. “Yarrow can help relieve pain, and can even be used to stop bleeding, both from wounds and menstruation. Mugwort will cause bleeding. If you find that your bleeding is late, it will help. If you don’t bleed,” she said, looking at me, “then you are with a child. Mugwort can change that, if needed. Raspberry leaf helps women with babies, keeps both of them healthy and relieves womb pain and nausea.”

Both my mother and grandmother showed me how to grind the herbs, steep them in hot water to make tea. They told me which herbs to mix with them, “Chamomile and lavender are both good for relaxation,” my mother said, and how often to drink them.

My grandmother also pulled out a collection of tinctures from the back of our medicine cabinet, the tiny amber bottles gathered in her arms like flowers. She told me, “These tinctures are more potent than tea, that I should take a stopper full of each a few days before the first day of bleeding.”

“You are getting older, iníon,” my mother said. “Soon, men will look at you differently. You will see. A hunger will take over their bodies and a longing will gleam in their eyes.” she told me. “Humans are nothing more than animals, as much as we try to deny it.”

I did not bleed for months afterwards, my bracelet left almost forgotten and untouched on my wrist. But still, every month, during the week of the full moon, I would drink yarrow tea and mugwort tincture with my mother. My grandmother would join us, although she did not bleed anymore. “Here,” my mother motioned to be, “sit beneath the night sky and feel the pull of the

full moon on your womb. Listen to your body's sighs."

"Our bodies' change with the moon," my grandmother would say. "Her phases are our own."

Sometimes my sister would want to join us, upset that she had to lay in bed while the rest of us were outside together. My mother allowed it, even though she was still young. My sister drank chamomile and dandelion root tea instead of yarrow, but she did not know the difference, she was just happy to be included. The four of us would sit, side by side, beneath the glow of the stars, our eyelashes casting spidery shadows on our cheeks. Usually, my grandmother would start to hum, a soft melody that carried in the wind, a Gaelic tune that she had learned from her grandmother.

"We are all daughters of the moon," my mother told us.

The next time I bled it was summer. It was hot and sticky; the air felt like liquid honey. I awoke in the middle of the night, the moon calling to me, a twisting knife plunged deep into my stomach. I pulled my skirts to my knees, blood spreading from between my legs, my underwear already stained. There, sitting within a puddle of blood, lay a single strawberry, red and ripe.

**Excerpt of *The Party's Cancelled*
John Watson**

Chapter 1

It had seemed to happen in the space of a breath. She had been doing the shopping for a party she was throwing at the end of the week. Jacqueline, the family baby-sitter who now did the cooking for her since her daughter was a teenager, never knew how to pick out good meat. Susanna didn't know how much longer the relationship with Jacqueline would last. "She's getting so down," Susanna thought to herself. She couldn't stand having sad people around her. There was no point. There is always a way out of an unhappy situation. She had even gone so far as to get Jacqueline a gym membership. When Susanna had given birth to her own daughter Sherry, she had suffered from post-partum depression. Exercise had helped her get through that time and if it had helped her, surely it should help Jacqueline, but Jacqueline hadn't seemed to take to it. Susanna had invested in helping her as much as she could: checking in to make sure she had done the exercises and even doing them with her sometimes – but exercise hadn't seemed to bring Jacqueline the same joy it had brought Susanna. "Oh well," she thought, "A few more months won't hurt and I can't let her go until I have someone new."

She decided not to tell Sherry until she let Jacqueline go. Sherry was quite sentimental about the staff and had wept for weeks after Susanna had switched cleaning women a few years back. Better to break it to her after the die had been cast. As Susanna entered the apartment she noticed that Jacqueline was in the walk-in closet in the vestibule. She realized the dry-cleaning must have come and Jacqueline would be switching her clothes to the wooden hangers from the flimsy wire ones that dry cleaners used and disposing of all that messy plastic and paper. Susanna therefore carried the meat to the kitchen herself and put it down on the counter.

Susanna then pulled out her computer to check her email. The charity she had been most involved with as of late was one devoted to preserving the architectural integrity of her neighborhood. It was simply and aptly named Preserving the Integrity of the Upper East Side. A friend had nominated her for the Board and she was excited for it. They had had their first full meeting the night before and she was interested in which committee they were going to put her on. The email was in her box. It was from Stan and Imelda. They both worked with her husband Martin:

Dear Susanna,

Due to the rising Covid crisis, we do not feel comfortable attending an in person fund raising event. As you know Stan had a pacemaker put in last year and I, myself, have never been of strong stock and get bronchitis almost every year. Therefore we will not be able to attend the party this Friday. We know you will understand. Hopefully, we will be able to get together in person later this year, perhaps we can grab dinner just the two of us.

Two emojis were inserted at the end. A winky face and a smiley face.

Could this woman be more juvenile? She signed it “Sincerely Imelda” and a bracketed (and Sam, of course).

So they weren't coming. Who cared? They both drank too much anyway, which made Imelda talk too much and Stan wander off and brood in the corner looking like he regretted every decision he had ever made in his life. She had only invited them because Martin said Stan was *important* at the Firm. Nothing had come in from the committee yet. She put away the meat and then went back over the seating chart. The party was an annual event she threw for Martin, his partners at the investment firm and all of their top clients. Martin told her – and she liked to believe him – that clients vied among themselves to be invited. Because it was her crowning social achievement of the year, she liked to make sure it went off without a hitch; she went over every detail multiple times. Let's see, she said to herself: “Roger can't sit next to Cathy, they

had an affair that broke off last year and supposedly are still not on speaking terms. Marvin got caught with his pants down, literally, two months ago and Phillip, when he drinks, brings up everything, no holes barred, so they can't be together. I suppose I could switch that. Damn. There's Cedric. Single at fifty. I suppose I could call up and ask if he is bringing a plus one. If he is not, then there is no chance of having pairs at the table and everything's off. Is it rude to call and ask if he's bringing a plus one? Well, she thought to herself, it's rude of him *not* to bring a plus one and screw up my seating arrangement, but all the same I'll call and find out one way or another.

Then, for the menu: it would have to be small. There was no point in serving large portions any more. The men were all on exercise regimes and had their phones out all the time, counting the calories and the exercise they would have to do to burn off what they ate, and the women were mostly old school anorexics and a few bulimics – not too many. She had learned long ago the many disadvantages of having bulimics to dinner. So the food should be good but little. Maybe the meat was a bad idea altogether. She had envisioned small kebabs but maybe shrimp would look better, lighter. She could just call and have some delivered tomorrow. She'd have to tell them to find a way to present the kebabs so they wouldn't look *too* little, too...*Long Island*. The presentation would be very important but the caterer could handle that.

She checked her email again. She couldn't understand why Ruth hadn't sent her her committee assignment yet. That was when it happened really. Two more emails. Different couples this time. Writing with the same excuse. By the time she finished reading them, a third. And then by the time she finished reading that one, a fourth. It was like a virus was attacking her computer. When she looked back on it, she was surprised her initial reaction had not been one of fear or trepidation but of pure infantile rage: How dare they? Who cancels at the last minute? She read the *New York Times* every morning and had been keeping up on Covid 19. There had

been multiple cases in the U.S., including in the City but it was nothing people relatively fit couldn't overcome. Beyond that, were we supposed to let fear govern our actions? My God! These people can't really be serious. Had there been only one or two, she might have thought they were going somewhere else, merely blowing the event off – or perhaps she had offended someone or said something at the last party – but no, *this* many. They all seriously seemed worried for their own health. Each one was more likely to suffer an embolism from the amount of hours they put in at the office than anything they could catch from socializing!

She went into the bathroom to wash her face and cool off. She looked at her face in the mirror and tried to remember the pod cast she had been listening to on meditation. And what it said about straightening out your thought process. What was it that it said? “Push out the chaos with the exhale and breathe in the simple truth.” The ‘simple truth,’ she thought, is that I am not going to have a party at the rate that these people are pulling out. She looked at herself again. She was getting red-faced. This always happened when she was stressed. Worse, her black roots were coming in underneath the blonde. She had intended to go to the salon the other night but Ruth had called to tell her she had been able to get her on the landmark committee and that the first meeting was that night, so she had had to cancel with Che. I have to do it soon though, she thought, I can't let it go on like this. The truth was there was only about a millimeter of dark root showing but she had been keeping it blonde for so long; most people she knew thought of her as a blonde and it had become a part of how she saw herself. Plus, that in between look just shouted “hot mess/ not in control.” First order of business was Che; next on the list was to call Cedric, see if he is bringing a plus one. No, just tell him to bring a plus one – at this point it is another body in the room so it doesn't look so abandoned!

She picked up the phone to call Che's salon only to get a busy signal. She tried four more times with the same result, finally getting through to a breathless, irritated assistant

who answered with a very uncharacteristic “What?” Susanna took a deep breath and spoke very slowly in a very modulated voice: “I’d like to make an appointment to see Che.”

“He’s not working after today,” the girl at the salon snapped. Susanna was taken aback.

“What do you mean he’s not working after today? It’s his salon, isn’t it? He can’t be fired from his own salon, can he?” Instantly her mind had raced to some sexual indiscretion. What could he possibly have said to someone that could have gotten him into this much trouble?

“No,” said the assistant, as if reading her mind, “he has not been fired. He is going on leave for his health. He is getting out of the city.”

“What?” she asked, perplexed.

“He is getting out of the city. He doesn’t want to get sick. Now, if you’ll excuse me, since we posted that announcement on our website, our phones have been ringing off the hook. I have to go. Good-Bye.” She hung up the phone abruptly.

“Has the world gone mad?” Elizabeth asked herself. She put down the phone in disbelief. Was there nothing left? What would go next? The supermarkets? The clothing stores? It was then that her daughter Sherry walked into the room. Sherry was more graceful than her mother. She had a slimmer frame and more delicate features, which she got from her father. Her long black hair went down her back. At seventeen, she had already begun scrupulously grooming, waxing her arms and legs and wearing her mother’s hand-me-downs, giving her the appearance of someone at least ten years senior.

“What are you doing home? I thought you had lacrosse?” Susanna asked. It was Wednesday, wasn’t it?

“Coach Nicole cancelled practice. She said she was pretty sure there wouldn’t be any more games this season and therefore she didn’t see any reason for us to keep practicing.”

“Why wouldn’t there be any more games?”

“Mom, haven’t you read the papers or seen the news? They are saying we are days away from shutting down the public schools. My friend Cynthia said there is a good chance Principal Herman will do the same.”

“Shut down the schools? For how long?” Sherry shrugged.

“Until the situation is under control, I guess. Whatever that looks like. I don’t know.”

“I didn’t even realize we were at the stage of a ‘situation’.” Suddenly, Susanna’s latent maternal instincts kicked in.

“How did you get home? They should have called me?”

“They sent you an email. Anyways, don’t worry about it. José was there to pick me up.” Their driver José had been with them for over a year. He was always very sweet to Sherry. He seemed to drive her around more than he did Susanna, but he drove all the members of the family around at one time or another, even Martin when he wasn’t away on business.

“Oh, well, if José was there, I suppose that’s fine.” She paused. There was an awkward silence that had begun to emerge at the beginning of Sherry’s teen years and had only grown wider with time.

“What are your plans for tonight?” Susanna asked, more indignantly than she intended.

“I have some homework to do,” Sherry responded, nonchalantly, “then I was going to go over and spend the night at Cynthia’s, if that’s ok?”

“Sure, of course.” Susanna responded. Again, the silence continued. Then Sherry turned and walked out without saying anything. I wonder if I offended her, Susanna thought. Oh well, who knows why teenagers hate their mothers? Half-heartedly, she began to wonder if

the reverse were true as well.

Cedric! Cedric! That's who she had meant to call. She picked up the phone and decided to try him at home first. The number rang an inordinate amount of times before his housekeeper, Loretta, finally picked up.

"Hello?" This was strange, Susanna thought. In her experience housekeepers rarely picked up the phone, and Loretta was exceedingly shy, so even less likely than most to take this step on her own.

"Loretta, it is Susanna Fein, I'm calling to talk to Cedric, is he there?" Loretta took a deep audible inhale.

"Oh, Miss Susanna, you have not heard?"

"Heard what?"

"Mr. Cedric, . . .he . . .he got the virus . . . he . . .in the hospital . . .very sick . . .very bad. I pray for him every night. I try to visit him but they not let me in his room but they let me see him through plastic. He can hardly breathe. He breathe like he is drowning."

(Loretta was crying at this point and it was harder than usual for Susanna to understand her.)

Miss Lydia called this morning to say they are going to put him on a machine that will breathe for him, but it means putting a tube into his throat. She is scared he would not want that but that is all they can do. Oh, Miss Susanna h, it is so awful!" Now, Loretta just broke down into sobs.

Susanna was stunned. She had known Cedric for ages, since Martin was just starting out at the firm. He couldn't really be sick with this – what was this? The flu, nothing more, really? Cedric had beaten prostate cancer several years ago and now this virus? No, a virus could not do this to Cedric, it could not be the end of him. She hung up on poor Loretta without even saying goodbye.

The weight of all of this was beginning to register with her. Martin was away in

Greece doing business of some sort or other. She thought she should maybe call him and tell him about Cedric and the increasing reality that they were not going to have the party this year.

Excerpt of *From CPR to Pole Dancing*
Lucy Wu

For the first time in four years, Beijing became, once again, my present and my future. A life that I could see being extended in this city, what with Covid-19 still looming in the air and possibilities of an “international” education wiped out of the picture. Beijing no longer filled my past as it used to: “the times I had fun in Beijing,” or “the friends that chose to stay here.” It was what inhabited my current time, my current state of mentality and my current life style. It wasn’t hard getting re-accustomed to the Beijing life, with Chinese freely at my disposal. It felt good even – to know exactly what you were hearing and sure of yourself in fast- paced conversations. It had been a long time since I ordered without pointing to a name on a menu, and here the natural confidence flowed in with being a citizen of this city.

It was a wondrous feeling, speaking with so much vigor behind the words. If someone looked at me in confusion during a conversation, I could be sure that it was the content rather than my pronunciation that was confusing, and that proved to be less of an embarrassment. I knew the ropes of this city, the delivery service, the taxis and the shopping malls that never closed on weekends. I was at ease, and even with zoom classes that happened around midnight, I was still glad to be home. I never imagined myself to be finishing 2020 around family, much less pole dancing.

It wasn’t a spur of the moment’s decision, as most of my decisions turned out to be. It was ruminated over, a desire that sparked its flame a while ago. Then it was still pornographic jokes about exotic pole dancing, about bills flying in night clubs and people grinding against the protruding phallic symbol. A friend and I chose a studio near city-center, a place called

“Skyline.” I thought that it was a fitting name, a dance that could be choreographed in the air. Would I be the juncture of earth and sky, splitting in the middle with my body as the horizon?

Little did I know that pole required so much stamina, strength, pain tolerance, flexibility, and a list that seemingly never ended. It was everything that I imagined and everything that I did not. From the minute I touched the pole, the magnetic pull that attached me to it radiated its energy. It became a sport, a hobby, an art, a relaxation, and most of all, a mode of living. Pole became an ideal in itself. Core strength, arm muscles, leg muscles never inhabited space in my brain, but now they were part of my daily vocabulary. I never thought that I’d be practicing horizontal and vertical splits, much less back-bending and foot-bending. The reserved ballet feet were something that I aspired to have now, the bruises fading in and out of my body in different shades of purple and blue became trademarks of my aspiration. Who would have thought that I’d be sticking a pole in the middle of my thighs, and furthermore, who would have that thought such an act would not immediately conjure a pornographic scene?

Instead what flooded through was beauty, in the way that Rilke would come to describe Rodin’s sculptures. The sheer force of the kinetic energy behind each move, the intensity and dedication in each of the transitions as well as the fragmented parts that pieced together to form a holistic choreographed dance. With seven months and counting, I could see the very first moves that I learned, now linked together with tricks that had me hanging upside down the pole. A palimpsest of sensuality, of force, of precision and naturally, of exoticism, had me happier than ever traversing this city that, once again, opened its arms to me.

And the second-best thing that came with pole, besides the perks of dancing in 20cm heels, were the friends that entered my life. A wall of mirrors that reflected women of all ages, it was laughter that reverberated around the studio and added even more color to its space. The

stigmatization of the pole didn't fade into 2020. I'd have gladly walked down the street in pole outfits and said that I was a pole dancer if there weren't still cat-calling and ogling gazes to be felt. I couldn't even walk down the streets in red stockings without being stared at, but I mean, one change at a time. To enter the studio and to shed your clothes felt like second nature, to have your body warming up to the pole became quotidian. Women who didn't judge women, men who didn't judge women, and men who didn't judge each other. The statue of liberty would have graced us with her smile if she saw us.

With this art at my side, it was what kept me going in Beijing. Even with the lack of my college friends, I found solace in this studio. It became my norm to go every other day, to partake in the laughter, the stretches and the pain. In a way it was what kept me sane among the pandemic mentality as well as everything that was happening around the world. The momentum that the pole gave swept me off my feet once again, and perhaps it was the excitement or the newness or the energy that it jolted out, or all three of them combined together, that I came to welcome this newly developed life in Beijing. It was no longer the acceptance of a "backup plan" mentality of not being able to return to the US, but instead it became what I longed for. Beijing was turning from the "departure point" and the "intermittent stay" to something semi permanent. A job and a salary that communicated themselves in Chinese didn't sound so unbelievable now; after all, we all had to make a living. At least for the foreseeable future, where traveling abroad for an education or a career were not the wisest of decisions, I thought that I could pave a way in this city. Perhaps chance played a role in this turn of events, that after three years of floating around various cities, I was back in this infantile state. An entire year into my unexpected return to my home town, I felt as if I had come around full circle. Now April 2021, I was dancing and eating with new friends, catching up with old ones, all the while with family by

my side. To call home a place once again – a place from which I had originally felt shunned because of all the online violence, the propaganda and the misinterpretation of abroad students – catalyzed this sense of belonging within me, where now I could once again valorize my choice to stay for a while.

Finding unfamiliarity in a place that nurtured me became what I longed for, stumbling upon and appreciating scenery that hadn't presented itself before. It was no longer the Seine that I imagined as I walked along the HuCheng River, but it was the actual beauty of the river in city center itself that shone in front of my eyes. Covid-19 robbed me of many experiences, but in a way, they came around in other fashions, loading me onto perhaps different trajectories and emotions. Perhaps as I hooked onto poles and strolled along in parks and gazed at the tulips, I realized that I no longer needed a substitute image in my mind to make up for what I *thought* I was missing out on. The day I left Paris for Beijing, going home had seemed to be capitulating. I was giving up my dream for the greater good, for the benefit of everyone at the sacrifice of my future. I never realized that my future would entail something so far removed from practicing CPR on mannequins or learning how to administer Narcan. Quite comic, I would say, to have transitioned from chest compressions to straddling a pole with my legs. A hobby immersed in sexual fantasies helped me to shape my very own fantasy – one of wholesomeness and of fulfillment that proved how ample, versatile and complex a self could be.