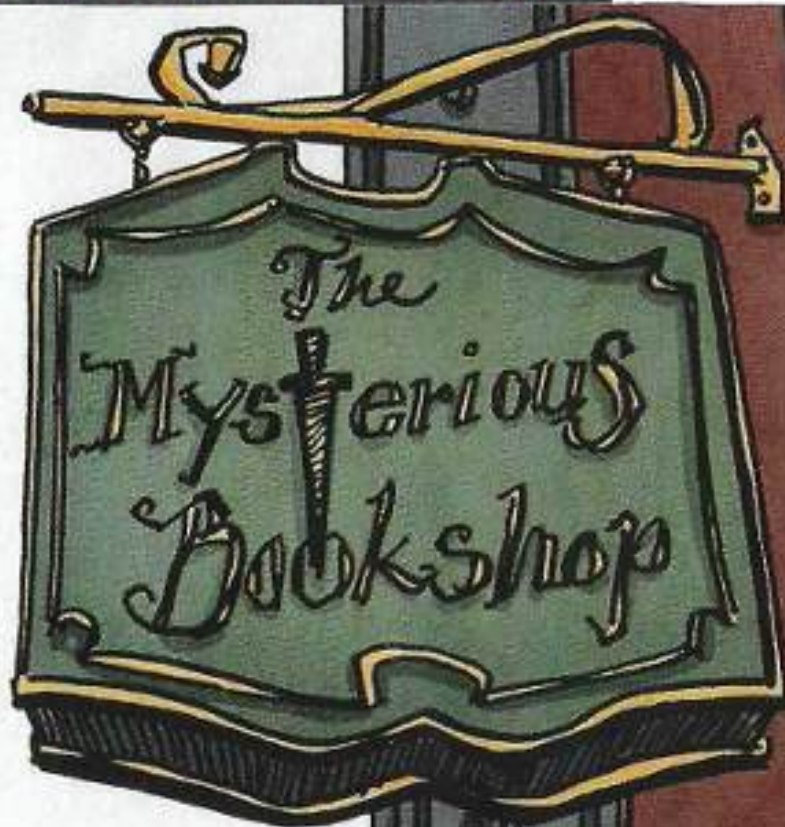


BOXES IN THE ATTIC



HE WAS OBSESSED WITH THE
HOLOCAUST AND WAS WRITING
A BOOK ABOUT IT

THE
MISSING
SLATE

ISSUE 21

SUMMER

2026

THE MISSING SLATE

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Introspection can be hard at the best of times, but we felt a lingering (or maybe festering?) thump in our collective throats at what the world was bursting to say.

from the Editorial

Through the Opening in My Mind - Anonymous

21 - THE TEAM



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EDITORIAL

When the external world feels grim, uncertain, and difficult, we find ourselves turning inward. This is what we envisioned when proposing the theme “Boxes in the Attic.” What happens when we unearth what has been blocked out, closed down, boxed off? Introspection can be hard at the best of times, but we felt a lingering (or maybe festering?) thump in our collective throats at what the world was bursting to say.

Perhaps, we would find some collective healing together.

The Missing Slate Magazine could not have predicted how profoundly this would hit into the consciousness of writers, artists, and everyone in between. With a record number of submissions, we cannot express how thankful we are for the vulnerability we were met with. In a nutshell: stories ranging in the broadest spectrum of topics from all over the world.

In this issue you will find poems asking what does it mean to sing with someone who hurts you? to memoirs exploring how we can learn from root vegetables.

We ask that while you read this issue, focus on the voice that has been hidden away and aching to be heard. We ask for compassion for yourself, our other readers, our artists, our writers, for the world. When we fall this far into ourselves, we must be kind to whatever we may find.

This issue could not have been made without our amazing editorial staff, who I must thank individually. Thank you, Jabeen, for your commitment to showing our world through as many lenses as possible, thank you, Saniya, for your steadfast commitment to your writers and their health, thank you, Rameen, for uplifting all those around you and the space of safety you create for everyone, and thank you, Jahan, for your unending kindness and compassion in approaching each issue. Of course, I must extend the largest of hugs to my co-parent, co-conspirator, Co-Editor in Chief, Nwa, who builds the foundation for this magazine so all thoughts and works have a place to live.

Our largest thank you goes to our contributors, who have pried themselves open through their work, who have shown us beauty during deeply human moments. Thank you to everyone who submitted, please know we dearly hope to see your work in the future. We couldn't be more astounded by the community that has embraced The Missing Slate Magazine, as we continue to age and shape the spaces around us.

Thank you to all the memories, laughter, crying, consoling, hurting, old and new wounds, and life that we have been able to turn into Issue 21: Boxes in the Attic. We hope you feel the sense of connection reading this issue that we felt publishing it – when you reach compassionately into the hard corners of yourself and let others carry the hardships with you.

From all over the globe, we are not alone.

May ease find you where it can,

Free occupied land,

and Nwa Rizvi

Kristia Vasiloff ^

**THE
MISSING
SLATE**

ISSUE PLANNER

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Cover Artist:

Mystery Bookshop

Carla Sarett

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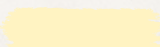
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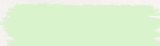
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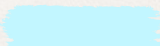
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Art



When in Doubt

Tirza Garcia Olivares

- for my purple rain

When in doubt, just know
how much I crave you:

Like melted chocolate via bain-marie,
like sprinkled cinnamon—the overtone of my cappuccino.
Like a midsummer night's dream and the dark forest all in between,
and the people who haven't been saints and acknowledge it,
and carpenters who would die for a piece of mahogany.

Like the cocooning suffocation in the metallic blue Honda
the family uses for road trips in the middle of June,
every time there's a heatwave, of course, and the fight
between a student and a teacher during a bland lecture
when even a wasp, uninvited, enters the room to witness.
Not like honey, but like caramel dense and overly sweet
without the latent bitterness underneath that first lick.
Like tejuino from a street vendor in Guadalajara
and the nieve de limón jumping in, with a saccharine
jericalla's slightly burnt top.

I'm not you and you'll never be me, but to me,
you're just like me, and, for the first time, it's not
scary. I crave you like the warmth and tint of rum
and the toasty parts of my Saturday morning croissant
from the coffee shop on Green Street.
And when in doubt, just know
it came to me meta-and-intra, not carried
by the wind but penetrated
via all those raindrops and melted hails
and those descending clouds.

When in doubt, just know
that to me you're worth more than all
the saffron in the world and, even if we
will never be, I have loved and I will love you no less.

Name in the Rice

Snehal Amembal

| a ladder
| rising into clouds
| steady in the wind
|

| first rung
| curiosity
| fear
|

| climbing
| slowly
| one rung
| another
|

| a song
| I did it my way
| my grandfather's voice
|

| click
| click
| click
| his typewriter
|

| the air warms
| dosa
| mustard seeds crack
| garlic chutney
| cooker whistling
|

| yellow curtains
| swaying
| my hiding place
|

| the last rung
| mango door
|

| I rise on tiptoe
| and ring
| the bell

Some memories sit quietly
in the attic of my mind.

I don't visit them often, but when I do, they appear exactly as I left them— folded carefully between
photographs and forgotten afternoons.

"Ambika," the priest said.

For a moment I didn't realise he was talking about me.

The name floated gently through the room,
like incense fumes,
before settling somewhere in my consciousness.

"Ambika."

My new name.

The name I was meant to take.

A plate of rice placed carefully in front of me.

"Trace it, for the sake of ritual."

I remember interrupting very politely.

"Panditji, may we skip this ritual?"

The room paused, but only for a moment.

"I am very fond of my current name."

And that was the end of Ambika.

Not a dramatic act. Just a quiet decision.

But looking back now, I sometimes wonder when that certainty first began. The answer, I think, lies
far away from that wedding mandap, in a small house in Bombay.

Our flat was tiny, but to me it contained an entire universe.

There was a swing in the doorway between the kitchen and the bedroom. I had desperately wanted
one after seeing swings in my friends' homes. Our house was far too small for such luxuries, but my
father somehow found the only place it could fit and installed it there.

From that swing I could push gently against the kitchen counter with my feet and glide back toward the bedroom, then forward again toward the kitchen.

The distance was small.

To me it felt enormous.

From that vantage point I watched life unfold.

My mother usually cooked in a soft cotton nighty while my grandmother stood beside her in a sari. Interestingly, she always wore light colours—peach, pink, grey, cream—shades that seemed almost impractical for the kitchen.

And yet she moved through the kitchen with effortless grace.

The moment I loved most was the tadka.

Garlic hitting hot oil in a small iron kadhai with two little handles on the sides. The crackle.

The smell filling the house within seconds.

Our flat was so small that clothes were often dried in the dining area. The aroma of garlic tadka would seep into the fabrics and linger there.

As an adult I imagine that might have been inconvenient.

But as a child I loved it.

That smell on my mother's clothes. On my grandmother's sari.

It meant they were nearby.

My childhood memories are filled with such fragments.

The cling-clink of my mother's glass bangles when she erased something I had written incorrectly in pencil.

The click-clack rhythm of my grandfather's typewriter.

The smell of sewing machine oil from my grandmother's sewing machine. The incense sticks she lit during the evening aarti at the small temple in our house. The pink flowers growing in abundance by the garden gate.

Even today, the smell of Camlin ink can transport me instantly back to my school desk. I remember my first sketch too.

A fox.

And I remember the maroon photo albums that once held all these memories before they were lost to the floods.

The photographs are gone now.

But the memories remain.

Papama—my grandmother—also entrusted me with a responsibility I took very seriously. Distributing the Toblerone after dinner.

It was a task that required fairness and vigilance. Every person had to receive exactly the same number of pieces. No more, no less.

Justice demanded it.

Of course, each triangular piece of chocolate carried a raised letter—T, O, B, L, E, R, O, N, E. I was always delighted when the letter N appeared.

Naturally, as the person responsible for distribution, I ensured that piece came to me. It seemed like a fair arrangement.

After all, I was doing the work.

Looking back now, I realise that the small house had been teaching me things long before I understood them—fairness, observation, listening, curiosity.

I would sit on that swing talking endlessly to my mother and grandmother while they cooked, telling them about my day, my small triumphs and grievances, while they spoke about theirs, their voices weaving quietly through the rhythm of cooking.

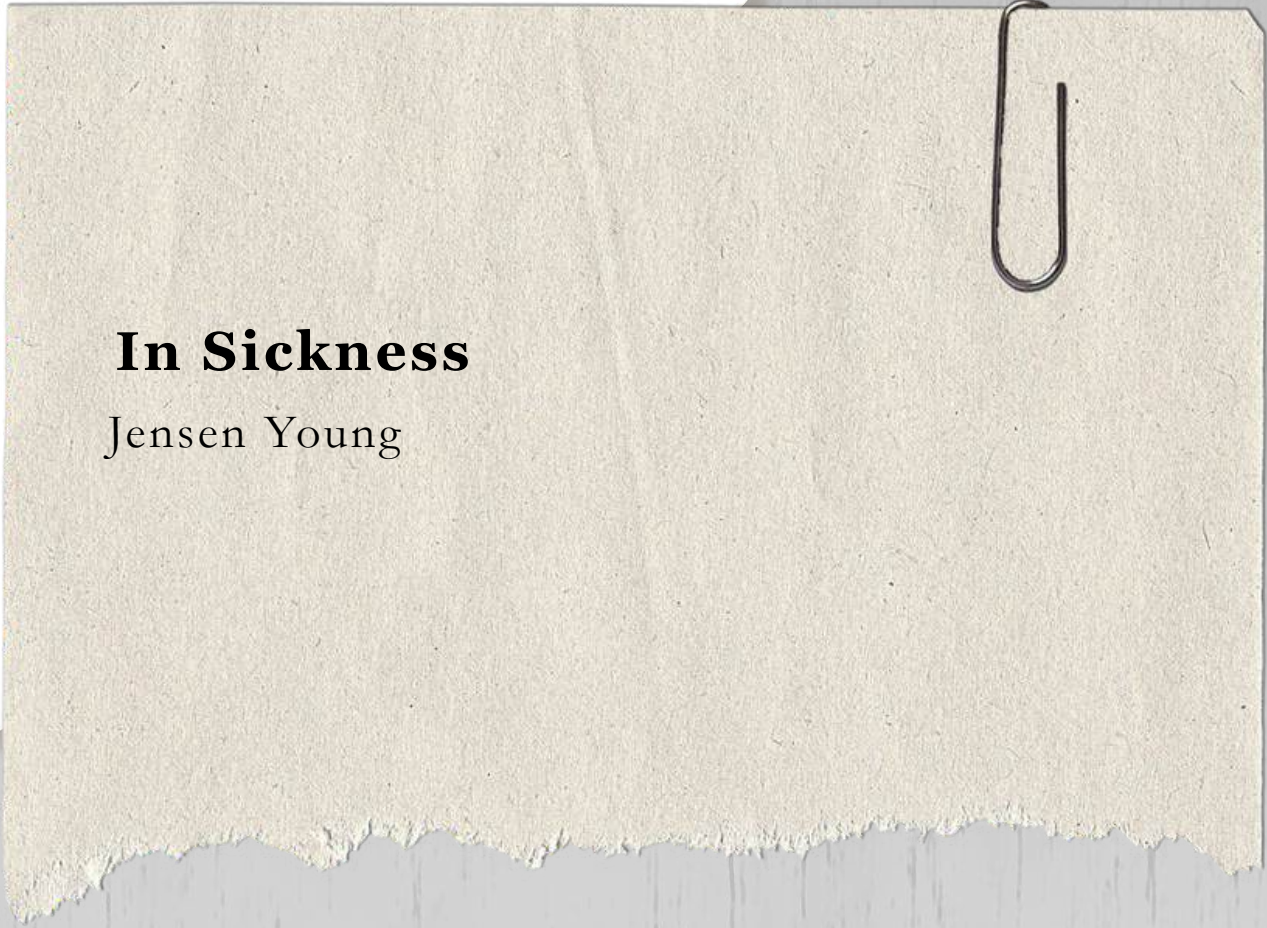
Without realising it, I was learning how to pay attention to the world.

Years later I would study psychology, and later still, in classrooms in Mumbai and London, I would learn that ideas could be questioned and examined—but perhaps the earliest lessons had already begun in that small kitchen.

When the priest suggested a new name for me at my wedding, I did what that little girl on the swing had always done. I listened, I thought about it, and then I politely said no, because somewhere between the smell of garlic tadka, the rhythm of my grandfather's typewriter, the careful distribution of Toblerone pieces, and that small swing that made a tiny house feel vast, I had already begun to understand who I was.

After all, I had been holding on to the N in my name for a very long time.

Perhaps that is what memory really is—opening a quiet attic box and discovering that the past was never packed away at all. It was simply waiting for us to return.



In Sickness

Jensen Young

Laney's parents hated her because she was gay. She'd been kicked out at eighteen and forced to couch surf before landing a second shift gig at a sheet metal factory, where she'd met her chronic girlfriend, Sarah. Sarah was her supervisor until the demotion, and then they were A-okay to date. That was the sort of life her parents had wanted for her.

Laney's mother was a zealot and her father was a spiteful, bigoted man who'd been raised in the Baptist tradition of near universal hatred. At sixteen, he'd taken her bedroom door away after walking in on her kissing the neighbors' daughter. He'd quit a good-paying job because a suspiciously flamboyant coworker was promoted over him. He hated Laney, he hated Anderson Cooper, and he even hated Freddie Mercury, and only listened to Queen in absolute privacy. So it was hard to swallow the fact that he was leading her sister down the aisle to her soon-to-be wife.

Laney's hands tightened around the bouquet of pink roses and peonies and tried to subtly cough away the rough wad of phlegm in her throat. Her feet hurt from the heels and her sides itched from the taffeta. In front of her, for ten rows of pews, stood her sister's guests, all respectful, some crying. The room had a dim glow of love and rosy stained glass as her sister walked down the aisle.



Sarah was standing placidly in the front row, head turned to watch Karen approach the altar, not paying Laney any attention.

Her father was serene, his touch of gray handsomely framing his face, Karen's arm clasped in his. The embrace between them was warm, calm. Karen had not been thrown out of the house at eighteen.

Laney realized she was biting her lip and released it. There was the tiniest hint of copper, and she hoped the blood would be indistinguishable from her lipstick.

She had not been an easy child and she knew that. She'd taken up smoking at fourteen because the freshmen who smoked were much cooler than her friends. She'd stolen money from her mother's wallet to buy bagged margarita slushies. She'd been arrested and driven home by the cops twice for shoplifting things she could have afforded anyway.

Meanwhile Karen was making the honor roll and joining more clubs than she had time for. She was invited on a school trip to play violin at Carnegie Hall, and she ran a 10K for charity, and she dated respectable boys who kept their hands to themselves and greeted her mother with flowers.

Laney dug her nails into the soft part of her hand.

Karen's life had been easier from the start. Their parents had enrolled Laney in Montessori kindergarten when she was five in the hopes of having Karen grandfathered in. Being a loud and assertive kid, Laney had gotten pretty comfortable, and enjoyed her pick of toys come play hour. Specifically the colorful, rolling Alphabet Dog.

Unfortunately, Karen managed to impress the principal by scoring as high as a first grader at just three years old, and was welcomed into the class halfway through the year.

She came into the room wide-eyed and timid, and clung to Laney compulsively. She was too scared to try and claim a toy for herself when play hour came, so she got down next to Laney and tried to play Alphabet Dog with her.

What ensued was a very one-sided tug of war and the confiscation of Alphabet Dog.

The toy was moved to the Teacher Only corner of the room, demarcated by red masking tape, and sat on the prohibited Supplies Shelf. After this, Karen slumped at her table, resigned to coloring, but Laney burned hot under the injustice.

She waited until the teacher was distracted by Play-Doh in a boy's



mouth, then crossed the tape line and grabbed the toy and dashed off to her cubby to stick it in her backpack. Karen spent all of the afternoon in disbelief when Laney plopped down on the rug of their shared room and began rolling Alphabet Dog along the floor. She'd gotten a spanking that night.

Laney's face flushed. The sweat in her scalp was beginning to mingle with the hairspray. Alphabet Dog had resurfaced weeks ago and Karen had mentioned off-handedly that it would look so cute in a nursery. Laney imagined a little Karen running around, winning science fairs and learning Morse Code.

Laney had been bullied for the rest of her school career; Karen managed to find a friend in every room. Laney had an outie and a consequent fear of bikinis, and her sister had the perfect beach body. Laney was the problem child and Karen always kissed their parents goodnight. Only one of their graduations had ended in a photo session.

Their parents had rushed to Karen's bedside after her breakdown, and ignored Laney's flu weeks earlier.

She pressed her heels together, trying to ground herself with the pressure. Her hands were sweating around the bouquet. 'Attention whore' was such a mean label, she reminded herself.

Once she'd been allowed visitors, Karen had asked to see her sister, so Laney begrudgingly woke up two hours early to visit her in the hospital. Karen was posted up in the bed, bile yellow with plastic-sheened skin. Laney was startled; she really hadn't thought Karen would look that bad.

She motioned Laney over as if her sister would go to the bookcase or minifridge instead, and, since the door was open, whispered that she wanted help dyeing her hair cherry red, like Laney's in middle school.

"I can't have bleach," she'd said, "so even just chalk would work."

"It won't stay if it's just chalk. Just wait until you're out and go see a hairdresser."

"I need it done now." Her stare was severe, weighted. "I need to see someone else in the mirror."

"You'll still be you. Just with red hair."

"I know you have hair chalk."

Laney had let out a short, mean laugh. So now her Pride accessories were shared property of the family? Great.

Sarah caught her eye from the front pew, grinning and nodding toward Karen. Laney weakly smiled back. Sarah was so dopey, and so emotional at these things. She'd probably be crying by the end of the night, her face pink and puffy with overwhelming feeling, like the day she threatened to skin the CFO alive if he didn't "get the hell away" from her station on his tour.

Following Karen's discharge, she'd insisted on meeting Sarah. She'd already known of her, but Laney refused every dinner invite she offered. Unfortunately, Karen emerged from her heroic stupor with a new strain of confidence, and finally demanded to meet her sister's long-time partner.

Sarah's reception at the Jackson house had been lukewarm. She was on her best behavior and wore a clean shirt for the occasion, but Laney's parents and Karen gazed at the cut on her arm for the entire evening. It was bandaged, but the dressing did need to be changed, and as dinner progressed, a ruddy brown stain grew on it.

Her father had tried to sound conversational asking about it.

Sarah nodded and demonstrated her excitement by tapping on the IPA bottle held to her lips. She swallowed quickly and wiped her mouth. "I found this great old bow and arrow set at an antique store, and I thought, what the hell, I should try archery!"

"I got her new arrows off Amazon," Laney had added quickly.

"They aren't as good. They're not the real McCoy. The antique ones are a little splintered down the shaft, and the fletching is sharp as all get out, but those babies fly."

Her mother had finally offered to go get clean gauze from the medicine cabinet, and when Sarah graciously accepted, Laney winced, knowing that once the bandage came off, her parents would smell the infection. It had gotten pretty pungent.

Naturally, what followed was the confession that neither Laney nor Sarah had health insurance, or savings for an out-of-pocket visit.

Her father had grimly told them to visit an urgent care, and mail him the bill.

After dinner her parents had pulled her aside and asked if there was any hope of promotion at the sheet metal plant, and if she really saw a future with Sarah. They started talking about dead ends and their friends' eligible son, and she'd huffed and stormed out to the driveway where Sarah was idling.

Laney lost Sarah's attention back to her sister, whose smile radiated even under the veil.

The aisle culminated in the altar, and the two domains were divided by a red-carpet threshold. Bella's matron of honor had crossed it first, then Laney as Karen's maid of honor, then Bella, arm-in-arm with her grandfather.

Laney had gotten all dolled up, but her mother had been trying to get her camera situated as she walked down the aisle. As far as her parents knew, she'd teleported from the dressing area to the front of the church.

Her mother's eyes lovingly trailed Karen, and it hurt.

Each year of Laney's life could be described as "another stupid phase." First, she was vegetarian.

Then vegan. Then woke for attention. For a minute, she claimed to have split personalities. She gave up most of her phases once they were no longer convenient or brought her the family's eyes and ears, but all throughout she was gay. She'd had "girlfriends" since third grade, and after every parent-teacher conference, her father would return fuming, shouting at her that she wasn't "fuckin' gay!" Her mother had stopped going because she didn't want to hear any of it.

After the final conference tirade, Laney had retreated to her room and pulled her legs to her chest, her gaze canvassing the cul-de-sac. You could choose to hate someone, she decided. Outside, Karen played in the street with the boy she openly "loved": a fellow ten-year-old.

Karen was close enough to the altar that the display of candles sparkled in their mother's diamond necklace. Laney had grown up enamored with it, and always hoped it would be passed onto her one day; she was the oldest, after all. But oldest did not mean most responsible. It didn't mean trustworthy.

Karen had decided to tell Laney last, after their Evangelical mother and Baptist father. It came months after being discharged and getting back on her feet, when she and Laney were going out for the evening. She waited until their orders arrived before sharing the good news: she had met someone! A woman. She tried to make it sound casual, but her throat was strained and her posture small, like Laney would hit her.

"Oh." She was genuinely at a loss for words. She swallowed. "And Mom and Dad?"

"They know."

"Oh." She tried to look less stunned by turning away and blinking. "And they were okay with it?"

There was a smile in her voice. "They were perfect."

The floor of the church wasn't completely even, and Laney found it difficult to keep steady in heels, even standing still. There was a weakness just above her kneecaps, a high-pressure vacancy right behind her eyes. Worried about puking at the sight of her sister, she turned her eyes to the altar. Bella stood in a slim ivory gown, her pretty hair expensively piled on top of her head, her eyes twinkling, her hands clasped as her bride approached.

Bella worked in finance and owned acreage in the country and Laney's parents had fallen head over heels for her. They'd even learned the word 'bisexual,' which, until then, they'd thought was medically impossible. That was what her father had told her in seventh grade.

When she met Bella for the first time, the business professional swept right up to her in a white pantsuit and shook her hand, complimenting her septum piercing and gauge earrings. "So many people think they look good with a septum piercing, but you—you actually pull it off." She'd sounded sincere.

On Laney's birthday, Sarah had been in traffic court, so Bella and Karen had taken her out. They'd given her an imitation ruby nose stud, nickel free.

A month later, Bella put a fat diamond ring on Karen's finger just like Laney had feared. Karen wanted to involve her sister in the wedding planning process as much as possible, because hanging in the air was 'you're never ever going to get to do this yourself because your girlfriend is a loser.'

Laney had hoped the planning would at least be awkward and weird for both families so Karen could taste an inch of the mile she got, but everything flowed right along. Her father purchased a custom cake topper and a baby pink pocket square, despite his feelings about men who wore pink.

It was neatly folded in his breast pocket and being creaped upon by Karen's poofy veil. Her father was very careful not to step on its train, or the wide skirt of the dress—he glanced down at his feet every few seconds.

A footprint on his daughter's wedding dress—before they took pictures—would be a tragedy. No one wanted to remember a stain.

Heat settled on Laney, pressing her down, but her brain was cold.

The thing that finally tore it between Laney and her parents was her dabbling with the wrong crowd shortly after graduation. She'd only gone to a party, but it resulted in an immediate overdose, and when she came to a few days later, her parents gave her an ultimatum: live by their rules or get the hell out. 'Their rules' included no parties, no girlfriends, no gay-looking friends, and a strict eight PM curfew.

Of course, she left. With rules like that, they hadn't really wanted her to stay.

When Karen had lost her grip and took too many benzos, they'd given her all their love. They'd listened. They'd changed. Karen had actually managed to change them. Laney had spent her entire life shouting and they hadn't heard a word.

In the front row, her mother was crying and wiping her eyes with a tissue.

Her father and Karen reached the altar, stopping just before the threshold. He turned to her and lifted her veil. In her eyes shone gratitude, pure and uncoerced. He kissed her forehead and surreptitiously wiped his own eyes before taking his place in the front row.

Bella's breath hitched like she was holding back tears.

Laney couldn't listen to the ceremony. She had to tune it out with something. A bad thought, a mantra, a compulsive itch, a screw she couldn't back out—something loud, something painful to shade and blur the room.

Her mind grasped for facts or something like them, and then she remembered: her parents hated her because she was gay.

Karen crossed the red threshold, and everyone was very pleased.

Black Files

Grace Massey

My father's funeral, whiskey seeps
into the floorboards, in the sunroom
with no sun, my uncle finds me—
navy sailor dress, ruffled socks, bare legs
that his fingers seek.
My mother, looking for booze asks,
What the hell are you doing to my daughter?
and leaves. I was young enough
to feel flattered, not old enough
to push his hand away.

June evenings man-child uncle
flying model planes in a field of bees.
When he dies, he leaves me a poem
where balsa insects circle a dead hive.

The Monsters That Live Within

Sidrah Haque

On a calm Thursday morning, in the corner of a sleepy Islamabad suburb tucked near the Margallas, Rasheed Ullah was only half awake as he mechanically swept his jhaaru over the straggly grass beneath the ominous water tower.

He felt the sparse bristles snag on something stringy, emitting a strong odor. Cursing at what the stray dogs must have dragged in this time, he bent down for a closer look.

He saw the unmistakable hand of a day-old infant.

Rasheed Ullah was now fully awake, as he ran shouting for help.

The scuffed, beaten white police van made all the pot holes feel considerably worse. Inspector Asif pinched his temple, anything to get rid of the lingering edge of yesterday's migraine. The third this month. The new Assistant Superintendent, who had graduated from civil services training four months ago, the equivalent to diapers compared to his own service, was proving to be a difficult boss to maneuver. Just last week, he railed his men on the performance indices that were to come into place soon.

The vehicle shuttled through the rubble-infested Kurri Road, whose bordering buildings bore bare ribs, broken down in the latest anti-encroachment drive. The driver made a laborious U-turn, avoiding a congested spot flanked with CDA officials in neon vests, measuring and marking the construction that had crept into the six meter boundary of the main road.

The inspector cursed as they swerved, missing a bulldozer carrying the remains of a home., Onlookers watched morosely, paying little heed to the traffic.

The driver, Abbasi, took a shortcut. He was familiar with the area, a chacha's haveli in the village past a major mobile carrier's headquarters down the road. Abbasi drove through a stunted dirt road, past even more unauthorized construction by the locals, who had propped makeshift shops anywhere they could, selling shoes, paan, a dollar store choked with Chinese toys, a chai khokha. Asif muttered under his breath, annoyed.

No one believes the law would get them, until it does, and then the law is wrong.

The van groaned through a few more turns, quickly arriving at the wrought-iron gates of the Enclave

Society. Asif scoffed as he opened the door to get out, signaling to his men in the back. The van was parked confidently at the mouth of the gate, blocking flowing traffic. The police was here on business and they were making sure everyone knew it.

Inspector Asif fixed his belt and looked past the metal grille to the bungalows lining the flowered avenue. The place was brimming with freshly-painted homes, most belonging to bureaucrats, retired Army officials, senators. This was no place for a crime scene.

Or perhaps, it was a perfect one.

The Head Guard at the society gate approached nervously, giving a weak salute. Asif stretched a hand to him, patting his back with the other – he wanted to put everyone at ease. In his line of work, cases get solved quicker when everyone cooperated.

“Tell me everything”, Inspector Asif beckoned.

A few lanes away, Mrs. Chatta was stealthily peeking from the finials of her black gate. She glanced around in the cold daylight of the morning, watching the neighbors fill a car with uniformed children. She stepped out, pretending to check on the new rose beds the maali had implanted the other day, but in reality she was glancing at the water tower, just a street away, wondering what the police had found.

Mrs. Chatta worked hard for her position as neighborhood watchdog. She made it her business to know everything that went on in the streets that surrounded her home. It wasn't easy work. She kept track of newcomers, personally welcoming them into her neighborhood, with her phone number, a bag of fruit from her husbands' farm in Sargodha, and the self-assuredness that she was the person to call if you wanted to hire house staff, know where to get the freshest fruit, and find out which bahu was on the outs with her in-laws.

Mrs. Chatta had three children, all married and busy making something of their lives, and a retired husband who spent his entire days swimming laps at Islamabad Club. This gave Mrs. Chatta agency to invest herself completely in the lives of everyone outside her own family, with the aid of her cook, the primary gatherer of rumors, winds, and neighborhood speculation.

A few minutes later, Mrs. Chatta's loyal pet had informed her, spurring her immediately to action, calling her husband and then her bureaucrat son to pull strings to find out all they could.

This is how, on Monday morning, after Mrs. Chatta was done pretending to check the petunias, had conveniently gone for a stroll just as a Police van arrived at the water tower for their investigations.

Sadiqa's cheeks werewas turning ruby red, her pace swift, determined to make it to the daktaarni

before mid-day. Her temperamental baaji was doing night shifts nowadays and was especially volatile, now that another cook had run off after just two days. Sadiqa had tried explaining that no one yelled at their house help anymore to get things done, and men – be they full-time staff or husbands – wanted to live in quiet homes. For all the degrees darktaarni had, it was hard to get through to her. But Sadiqa was depending on an advance on her salary today. The new session for school had started, and she needed four sets of notebooks for her four school-going children. She was banking on the daktaarni feeling benevolent today, which she occasionally did.

Sadiqa was walking determinedly towards Street 11, glancing at the sidewalk that wrapped the green belt, near the looming water tower. A woman in a burka was sitting with a little girl, whose bleached hair was caked in sweat and dirt. Sadiqa grimaced thinking of her own four children in white uniforms washed with neel, and hair slicked neatly with oil, sent off to school this morning with her very own hands. Some women just didn't care like she did, she thought. She would've passed the duo, had her eyes missed the blood-soaked burka of the woman, who she now noticed, was heaving.

"Are you alright?" Sadiqa called out to the woman, in Punjabi.

"No, aapi, I'm in so much misery right now, where do I even begin?"

Her heaves dissolved into a full wail.

Sadiqa paused, and moved nearer.

She was a woman of some faults. Sadiqa possessed a sharp tongue that was greased with Punjabi cusswords that she easily slipped into conversation. She had a penchant for throwing things, at her children, her husband, once even at a baaji who refused to pay her a few days' worth of salary after firing her. She told white lies even when there was little need to, liking the sound of her own embellished tales. Another fault she had, was bouts of irrational measures of generosity, that made her feel benevolent, purposeful. Like the one that was now taking over.

"What happened?" Sadiqa halted in front of the woman, at full attention, wondering if a no-good husband had beaten her up.

"Aapi, I've come from 25 kilometers away. I had to change two buses and walk half an hour to get here, to a house that needed a young girl for work. I wanted to drop Zainab off, but they took one look at her and refused. They didn't even give me money for the journey back, just a glass of warm water and they shut the gate on our face. And just now, aapi, I've started to menstruate, and so heavily, I cannot tell you how much pain I'm in. Every month it's the same, the pain just kills me, I'm useless in bed for a whole week, I can't even get up to cook the meals. The hakeem's dumm doesn't work anymore. I went back to that same house, but they refused to let me use their bathroom. Maybe they thought I was going to rob them, but just look at me, I'm covered in blood from my waist-down, I don't know –"

The woman stopped to wail, but her tears poured hotly down her cheeks.

Sadiqa studied the woman's bloodied clothes and then the sad little girl clutching a small packet of unopened tea biscuits.

Her mind was made.

"Follow me – my house is a 5-minute walk outside the society. You can use my bathroom. I've got an extra pair of clothes I needed to give to someone. I guess they were meant for you."

The woman gawked, but somehow the words registered somewhere. She almost stumbled to reach for Sadiqa's hand, grasping them, kissing them in gratitude.

"Come on, come on, let's go", Sadiqa said softly, gesturing to the child to get up. The woman's reaction was an affirmation that this was, in fact, the right thing to do, pleasing her immensely.

As the two women, tagged by the bewildered child, crossed the wrought-iron gates that signaled the start of the housing society, they passed a chorus of laughter that suddenly erupted. The guards were busy telling jokes to one another, laughing coarsely, the way only men could. One of them peeked at the women passing by, his eyebrows raised at the sight of the burka drenched around the ankles in sickly blood, but he turned around to laugh at some other meaningless comment, unbeknownst to the tragedies of women, Sadiqa thought.

Inspector Asif's fingers rattled nervously over the broken glass sheet that covered the tattered table which was his desk. On one side, fat files, tags and annexures oozing out, took up the entire corner. On another, a grimy, yellowed Panasonic telephone whose wires were curled into knots, lay silent under his gaze.

He was sure they had found their culprit – but he needed answers to questions: mainly, how two and a half women could manage to bury a newborn without attracting attention. His mind railed around the physicality of it all – the digging, the implements, the timing.

He lit a Capstan cigarette, inhaling deeply to take the edge off.

The guards said Sadiqa was always punctual, entering the main gate to start her first house at 9 am. He inhaled again.

The phone rang.

"Hello? Is she there? Okay, I'm on my way."

Sadiqa was in hysterics, and her tongue had slipped to her pet Punjabi curses.

“I don’t know her – I keep telling you – I’ve worked here for two years, why would I want to help a woman bury a newborn and then walk her out under your stupid faces!”

“Save it for the police”, snarled one of the guards, who didn’t like being spoken to that way, from a woman of all people.

Mrs. Chatta huffed on her second successive loop around the green belt that ran laterally down the society’s main road, in hopes of glimpsing one of the maids being grilled for her involvement in the Society Newborn Scandal, as it was now dubbed.

The guards, standing at rare attention near the gate, were ablaze with the loud, insolent Sadiqa, central to the scandal. Last night, Rafi had divulged to Mrs. Chatta that a maid was set to be apprehended for questioning the following morning. He informed her silently, while potting the watery chicken karhai, causing Mrs. Chatta’s morning plans to change quite rapidly.

Just as Mrs. Chatta was about to take her third round, she heard a woman’s unmistakable screech, taking on three security guards.

A crowd of nearby drivers and chowkidaars was slowly forming, taking in the hostilities.

The same moment, a police van made its way towards the gate. Mrs. Chatta noticed a uniformed man brandishing a cane stick, and a belt wound tightly over his thick trunk, step out the door. Almost immediately a sickening calm descended amongst the guards and Sadiqa as everyone’s eyes fixed onto the police van.

Mrs. Chatta turned towards her house, knowing this was enough for the day. Now it was the law that would deal with the crooks.

Sadiqa spent one night in jail, questioned and humiliated by two fat, hectoring policewomen who patted her roughly on the back and chest.

“You’re wasting our time – just tell us who she was”, they kept pestering.

Sadiqa maintained that she was innocent.

“Come on – no one lets a complete stranger into their house nowadays. That too when you’re in the middle of work. You can’t fool us.”

By the second night, Sadiqa’s distraught husband, who worked as a cook at a prestigious English-medium school, was able to successfully plead to one of the faculty members, whose husband was in

the police force, to bail out his innocent wife.

It took a few hours, and a few thousand rupees, but Sadiqa was let go, the proof against her deemed insufficient. With no one to press further charges on the infanticide, the case was filed away, unsolved, added to a pile of others just like it.

Inspector Asif was already occupied by a string of burglaries in Blue Area.

A few days later, Mrs. Chatta sat in her white sarkari Mehran, and looked on with glee at the maids clambering into a line with their spouses. Enclave Society had adopted strict registration measures seemingly overnight, and now every house help coming from outside the compound walls would need to register their complete details, along with their spouses', to be able to set foot inside.

"About time", Mrs. Chatta nodded in approval. At last, something good was to come from the entire fiasco.

"See, I handled it", smirked Rafi, his hair slick with oil, his thin lips smiling under a freshly-shaped moustache.

His year-long lover, the nanny from two houses away, Nazia, grimaced. "But, how are you sure?" she hesitated.

Nazia was just seventeen, on her first tryst, in her first ever city away from the sheltered life back in her village in South Punjab. She was still a hormonal wreck.

"Trust me."

"Baji knows something is wrong, she's been asking so many questions. I don't know what to do."

"It's okay, we got rid of it. It's done. It won't happen again", he reached out and caressed her face.

"What if Sadiqa proves herself somehow?" Nazia balked.

"How would she?", Rafi replied in a slippery voice. "She's been fired by all three houses she worked at, no one hires a child-killer, alleged or not. She doesn't come here anymore. Don't worry. We'll be careful now".

His hand slid around Nazia's waist, as the full moon shone brightly across the conjoined rooftops that night.



Grown in the Grass of Your Grave

Susan M. Pendley

When I said I'd sleep on your couch,
we both knew that was a lie.
But my sweater slipped into the couch,
snuggled into the cushions,
sinking into the idea of us.

I think of my cute, new cropped knit top—
black with tiny, shiny buttons,
hiding in your couch
as you sat watching TV.
Found and folded, draped over the back,
touching you, watching with you
for those two weeks.

The time it took you to find it,
to talk about camping and biking,
to invite me to the studio
while you host your radio show.
To finally take that step,
the oh-so-close,
I love ya.
To finally have a plan in place
to meet at Billy Strings.

I didn't see that eternal clock,
the last time you'd sign off,
until I heard—
like any Houstonian tuning in—
the voice of your good friend.
Before he said the words,
I knew: no more shows,
no biking in the woods.
You had taken your last ride.

The news marched up my arms,
a wildfire devouring a swath
in the field where hope grows,
exposing that place where love waited.
Where does it go when you can't give it away?
Do I let it die beside your fresh grave
like a bird that fell from the sky?

Democracy

Megan Wildhood

She tiptoes in, the forms of people milling in front of her, tapping clickpens on clipboards, shuffling papers, waiting. Not late, exactly—the person she is here to see doesn't know she exists, she doesn't think, so wouldn't be expecting her—she joins the waiting. What scraps of sky that can be caught from the tops of the windows tinted almost to the hilt shine like chrome. The windows surround them. Should she sit? She does not see anyone sitting. The overstuffed chairs, probably selected to remain on trend, seem like they are bursting with anticipation to hold a human's weight, like they are stretching out towards anyone who recognizes recognize their value, their purpose. Is that why her face is often astonishingly puffy?

Not today, at least. Today, it is because she beelined for the marble dames' room promptly upon exiting her cab so she could sob in private. Finally complete with her diagnosis so she can at least procure meds, she is furious they aren't working yet: she is still afire with nerves after eight weeks of religious pill popping. Perhaps the nerves (or, let's be honest, the pill popping) are not unusual in this circumstance, though. Most of those waiting are infernally clicking pens, tapping clipboards, shuffling papers. She wills her eyes to focus. Some are even running through various facial expressions, practicing. Thinking. Understanding. Agreeing. Puzzling. Pitching.

Pitching.

Selling. Could she hate anything more? Maybe her mother. And yet, that is why she is here, waiting. Always waiting.

She trained to be a librarian to fight fake news and help people get real information, which can save lives, but librarians barely make it in life, according to Mama's Metrics. She didn't know until now that Mama had not at all planned for the future—maybe that's why she exists in the first place?—thus Mama's Metrics were not as rainproof as her childhood had deemed them. So now she, single, of course by choice, because of female solidarity (also, she now notes, a Metric), has herself and Mama to take care of. She resigned from her beloved job in the downstairs of the public library where she had designed playscapes and ran Minecraft meetups and made guitars out of tissue boxes and rubber bands for thirteen cadres of youth zero to eighteen when she learned Mama had stretched her days of independence farther than they should have gone with a snap ER visit and accompanying admission. Then another. Another. Eventually, the stamp of dementia.

A diagnosis that snap qualifies you for the old-people warehouse. At least in Daughter Metrics. But, even if insurance agrees, they don't have to pay for it. Especially if you don't have a policy for long-term care. Or one of any kind. Turns out, you can't just show up at said Warehouse, even with a full

and indexed library of personally cataloged Medical Metrics, to begin the higher level of care there was no way she could provide. Turns out, hand-written Metrics from a family, no matter how dutiful and meticulous and OCD and librariany (read: well-read), do not count as chart notes and hold no negotiating power even after a real doctor validates them with a diagnosis.

So she's here. As a dementia medication company rep of sorts. Some of those waiting, she just now notices, are not milling about. They are not sitting, but they are hovering by the sepiaed windows, faces poker, shoulders back, chest up, spine straight. Nailing all of Mama's Metrics. They're not nervous? Confident seems like an insufficient diagnosis; even she could don confidence with the best of them: she had walked out of the dames' room with no evidence of being on the razor's edge of a mental breakdown with the exception of a very puffy face, which she could assert with a wry smirk as, "oh, just the moon face of perimenopause" if she had to. Their lack of notes to shuffle through, clipboard to clutch, stand-in fidget toy to pummel... they were experienced. But why?

She certainly didn't plan to stay. Not any longer than necessary. Maybe she had stronger-than-warranted hope in this drug, the third one Mama's tried (eleventeenth by Mama's Metrics), but even if this one turned out to finally be The One, the Dementia-and-Affected community has been chasing for billions of dollars, and it wouldn't be worth diverting money away from continuing to neglect the country's 90,000 condemned bridges, warping otherwise much-needed legislation, and only God knew what else. So it was just until she could afford to get Mama out of her condo and into the Warehouse, which shouldn't be too long; even mediocre petitioners made bank. At least in the pharmaceutical industry. And the tech industry. And sugar. Ag. Plastics. Oil and gas—really, you don't have to be a librarian to figure out what's going on here.

But she could do this just until she survived this little life detour. The de-mentia de-tour. The tour D'Mentia. She settled. Didn't sit, but neutralized her face, lifted her chin, dared her shoulder blades to touch. Mostly, this just made her shoulders reach for the chrome sky. Would she try to be the first one in her rep's door to get it over with? Would she play it cool, study her paper stack, recite company metrics to herself, refamiliarize herself with facial expressions like the smile?

No time to think through a decision. House Representative Hyden's door rattles open. Everyone but the window gazers flinch. The window gazers all turn, not together, but it seems to her to be a calculated separateness, toward the exposed Congressman, then each to each other as if daring each other to go first. Go ahead, she imagines them saying in their minds: reveal your desperation. I don't need to worry about following anyone. I am a class of one.

"Let's have you, miss," Rep. Hyden says, either tired or already exasperated with the whole process despite it being the first day of session.

Her? Her heart wailing on her sternum nearly plunges her face first into the freshly updated vinyl flooring—the distressed look is so in right now. That's the only way she'd ever be fashionable, for sure.

Is she, Miss? She is the only one within Rep. Hyden's view. The others waiting, she imagines, all shoot

the glare of competitors at her, the glower Mama used to not even try to conceal when they were out for ice cream or shopping and the boys allowed themselves brief looks at her, no longer Mama: envy mixed with a wistful knowing that her time, though now, would also soon pass. She hadn't positioned herself here on purpose; there was no way to know which door would open first. Right? She hadn't been in this business long enough to know this particular Metric. In fact, she only knows one—her mind trick; probably why Menta hired her.

She blinks her eyes as she strides in ball-heel ball-heel to quiet the clacking of her mandatory Stilettos. Her eyes do not adjust quickly to the cave lighting of Rep. Hyden's office, so she apparently doesn't see him gesture toward the chair in front of his desk.

“Will you stand for your entire seven minutes?” His voice is quizzical, calm. Tells her everything she needs to know.

"I will only need three." She evens her weight between her feet.

The scant light in the room is on Rep. Hyden's face: his eyebrows rise, one corner of his mouth pokes into his cheek.

“I am here to ask you to introduce a bill that would amend the Constitution to ban professional lobbying.” Her hand does not shake, thank you meds, as she hands him the sample text she spent months revising.

He frowns as he slowly reaches for the paper. “But isn’t...” he trails off as he reads it. After a long pause, “I’m sure I don’t need to tell you how difficult it is to amend our Constitution.”

She nods sharply. “The last time was more than 30 years ago and, incidentally, it related to congressional salary. Only took three years from proposal to passage.”

He raises his eyes from the page. “You do know your stuff.” Another pause, awkward but expected. “I just don’t see how you people would make your money af—” he trails off again. Bingo.

"We both know it's not my money we're about to discuss."

Rep. Hyden smiled, pinched the edge of the sheet he was holding, and ran his fingers down it. “And it’s not mine, either.”

It's yours.



Soft Spots for Love

Azalia Aguilar

doorway in a dark alley off staples street
where tia spends evenings hiding herself
wonder why they laugh and speak in whispers
when they speak of her lovers
why she retreats to the kitchen and lets them

dad sends roses to mom years after she's left
his longing for her like the thorns she clips
sharp shears for my father, soft spots for her lovers
who steal from her wallet after she's asleep
shut the door softly so as not to wake her

backseat of pickup trucks off the coast
fogging up the windshield as tide chases us
further up the shore, i let them further up my shirt
because kisses is stay and i'm sorry
how you make safe, skin and stay and sweat and sorry

sit at the bar until dad is done with his set
slur of his last song your only signal
for how this night might end, whether he'll piss
himself or slam into a guardrail, the only thing
keeping you and him from drowning

The Dissertation

Lalit Wankhade

It was Saturday afternoon when one of his colleagues asked, “Will you drop me at the next square?”

He had purchased a nice car with a loan from the bank.

“Yeah, sure, get in,” Rohit nodded.

“Are you going straight to your apartment?” his colleague inquired.

He had taken a bank loan and bought a sprawling flat.

“No. I want to listen to a speech by a prominent IT professional on the way,” Rohit responded.

“Are you interested in software?” his colleague queried.

“No. Just to avoid boredom at home,” he replied.

After completing his post-graduation, Rohit joined as a faculty member at a college in Pune. His energy levels were always brimming. He was imbued with etiquette and manners and would grin at everyone’s glance.

One of his colleagues observed, “He picks up the phrase even from the muffled talk and pretends confidently that he knows the whole gamut.”

Another colleague commented, “Writing a research paper is more an art for him than reality.”

After the speech was over, Rohit wandered through the passage—organizers had erected stalls on both sides, and he stopped at a stall exhibiting product design software.

He asked a general question to the software-demonstrating girl, “What are the specific features of this software?”

“Here is a pamphlet, sir,” Prajakta started its demo.

“You know, in my dissertation work, I used some features that seem like incorporated here. For example, if you change a few dimensions on any part, it will change all dimensions of the product accordingly. I have coded an intelligent system to do this,” he said.

A kind of genius in him amazed her. As it was a hot day of Indian summer, he took out his handkerchief and wiped a lick of sweat racing down his neck.

He posed a scholarly comment: “If we had one Neem tree here, it could have reduced the temperature by around five degrees.”

While leaving, Rohit handed over his visiting card to her.

Prajakta peeked at a watch on the wall; it was nine in the morning, and she was taking sips at tea.

“Good morning,” she wished her best friend, Karuna, who was staying with her; woke and emerged from a bedroom.

“What’s the plan for today’s holiday?” Prajakta asked.

“Oh! Let’s meet yesterday’s genius,” Karuna teased.

“Who?” Prajakta exclaimed.

“That Neem-tree man!” Karuna giggled.

“Yeah, Rohit is intelligent. He’s a research guy, and I like such fellows,” Prajakta articulated.

Prajakta was eloquent in her praise for him, and she zoomed into nowhere for a while, radiating colors on her cheeks.

Prajakta was a computer graduate. She was pretty, with a round face, fair pecan-brown skin, and long jet-black hair. As her father was a military person, she did her schooling in a central school. She was disciplined and hardworking, like her father, and never ran behind schedule. She was pragmatic in her disposition, though loving to her dear ones. Her projects always received accolades from her company for being flawlessly completed ahead of time. For her tenacity and dedication, she was elevated to the position of project leader.

It was a sunny afternoon, and Prajakta wanted to complete her coding task by the evening. Karuna

arrived at her desk.

“What’s up? Congratulations!”

“For what?” Prajakta questioned, still buried in her computer screen.

“Why? You don’t want to go to the USA on your new assignment?” Karuna asked.

“Who said that?” Prajakta inquired.

“The entire staff, except you, know you will lead the team to the USA in a few weeks from now,” Karuna revealed.

Still focused on her work, Prajakta drawled, “Well, thank you for the information, but why me?”

“Because you’re such a good girl, and because you don’t look around, and that’s what they wanted,” Karuna pinched her cheek.

As she was leaving the desk, Karuna yelled, “Hey! Take the call. Your phone will fall off because of the vibrations.”

Prajakta was amused to receive the phone call at that odd time. She turned her head and picked up the phone. She felt it was a wrong number and let it vibrate. Suddenly, she thought: could it be him? And she searched for his card. It was Rohit’s call. She felt guilty for not taking up his call. Now she rang back.

“Good afternoon, sir,” she greeted him.

“Good afternoon. I’ve been thinking about our discussion that day. My dissertation offers ideas that could enhance the software. We can discuss it if you meet me,” he said.

“So grateful, sir. Definitely. When shall I come to your office?” she responded hurriedly.

“Can we have coffee at Cafe Noorani at 5:30 p.m. today? The cafe is near your office and on my way home.”

“Okay, I will come,” she concurred.

Prajakta reached Cafe Noorani earlier than him. She sat at a table and started scribbling on a piece of paper.

“Good evening,” Rohit greeted her as he sat. “Please, don’t call me ‘sir’,” he added.

“Okay. You’re great. I always like people pursuing research work. They do a great service to society and the nation,” she expressed her admiration for him.

“Yeah. I like research. Yeah.”

“You wanted to share some ideas. I’ll talk to my boss. He’ll be thrilled.”

“Yes, I said that, but later I thought that I must take permission from my advisor. So, let’s talk about that some other time.”

“Yeah. Sure.” Silence interrupted them as neither spoke for a while.

“This year, I wish to marry. Staying alone is enough for now. It distracts the mind from innovative thoughts. What do you think?” he commented.

“Very true. In fact, by now, you should have been married. However, see that the girl you marry must be supportive; in the sense that she should be a kind of researcher, like you, who can understand research parlance. Sometimes she can directly help with statistical things and paper writing. I always wished I could join any research lab. But we do the monotonous job of coding, and at a higher level, getting it done through a bunch of people.”

“You’re correct. Now, I think it’s the right time that you also should think of marrying. And why don’t you marry a researcher like me?”

He was gazing down at the floor. She observed his blushing face, which surprised her. He looked shy when he was staring down.

Not getting any inkling from the conversation but still getting some inkling, she stammered, “You want me to marry you?”

He, peering at the coffee in the cup, gained a burst of energy from nowhere and murmured, “Yeah.”

Both were staring down, sometimes at the coffee cup and sometimes elsewhere, for about ten minutes.

She got up in slow motion and whispered, “I must go now.”

He looked straight into her eyes and asked, “Shall I drop you?”

“My apartment is near. I’ll walk the distance,” she said.

She looked back once with a thin smile.

Prajakta returned to her apartment. Her face was perturbed, exhibiting a mingling of expressions—bemused.

Karuna read her mind and asked, “Rohit wants to marry you? Have you had any idea before?”

“I didn’t get the slightest trace of it. How should I know? But how do you know that?”

“Your rosy face is telling a story. Anyway, it’s good for you. You like him.”

“Well. I like him as a personality. The way he uses his intelligence and perseverance. I never thought of him from a marriage point of view. It’s a kind of enigma to me.”

“Well. Though it seems enigmatic, let’s see this as nature ordaining it for you.”

Saying “okay”, Prajakta smiled wistfully.

Soon they got married and Prajakta moved to his apartment, and every day, they were stepping out of home for the office early in the morning.

“You were outperforming. Now you’ll excel. We’re happy that you married a guy of your liking,” her boss, Lokhande, praised her.

“Yes sir, he’s intelligent, and I hope he can be of wonderful help to us.”

“Great, but how about your team’s planned visit to our American client? You may have to stay there for about a month. Are you going to leave behind your husband alone within weeks of your marriage?”

“Yes, sir, I’ll convince him how important my going to the USA is, though I’d also suffer from the pangs of our separation for a month. Let’s be professional rather than sentimental.”

It had been more than a month since they were married. Rohit often took her out to dinner. When they skimmed the restaurant’s menu Prajakta said that she liked Chicken Curry over Fish Curry and he said that both had a common taste. She ordered Tandoori Chicken as a snack, which he immediately concurred with. They were also in the park once. He started a discussion on how they would send their kids to an excellent school in the city. He insisted she should look after the education of their kids and that she’d even find time to teach them at home.

“Why am I alone? Or me at all? You’re more capable than I to look after their education. What’s the use of an immense scholar in you then?” she argued.

“Hmm,” he muttered.

A spell of silence prevailed for a while.

Breaking it, she asked, “You haven’t answered my concern?”

Avoiding her insistence, he said, “Let’s move now. It’s been more than an hour since we’ve been sitting here. Look at that tree with drooping branches and plenty of beautiful flowers. It’s not indigenous; it’s an imported variety. Isn’t it mesmerizing?”

One evening, they came home together.

“How was your day today?” Prajakta queried.

“As usual,” Rohit replied.

“What research work are you doing now?”

“Where do I find the time for it nowadays?” She had never seen him in such a crushed spirit before.

“Are you feeling well?” she asked with her forehead wrinkled.

“Yes. What are we eating for dinner today?” he mumbled while his head curled down.

“Our boss is curious; will you meet him?”

“Hmm,” he slanted his head a little.

“Are you okay?”

“Fine, we’ll talk about this tomorrow.”

As part of corporate culture, once a month, all employees from Prajakta’s office used to go to some place where they played, ate, and celebrated. This time, they planned an evening meeting in a nearby resort.

“Can you ask Rohit to come this evening to our celebration?” Lokhande requested her.

“Why don’t you call him, sir? You can surprise him if you call him to the party.”

“Yeah. That’s a great idea.”

Everyone reached the resort by 4:30 p.m. It was a vast place with meadow-like greenery, water fountains, an abundance of flowers, neatly cut and shaped trees, and a swimming pool—badminton, lawn tennis, and other indoor games. After eating some snacks and drinking tea or coffee, everyone took part in one or another game. Those who didn’t want to play were chit-chatting. It was 7:30 p.m. when people started returning to the food arena in smaller groups. Gradually, the party picked up, and by 8 p.m., people were assembling in a large oval-shaped dining hall. People were eating, making jokes with one another, laughing, and a few having serious business talks. Lokhande joined the coterie of superiors. It was the third time that Prajakta peeped at her watch.

“Don’t worry, he’ll come. At least before we leave,” Karuna teased her.

Finally, Rohit joined the celebrations at 8:30 p.m. Prajakta was meandering smoothly, taking Rohit over to different groups, letting him be everywhere for a while as her husband. She kept herself smiling. Soon, she took him to meet Lokhande.

With a cheerful smile, the boss warmly greeted him, asking, “How are you, young man?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“We heard a lot about you,” Lokhande initiated the conversation.

“Yeah. She keeps praising me now and then.”

“Well, coming straight to the point. Would you help us?”

“Yeah, definitely.”

Prajakta kept watching them talk and smiled intermittently.

“I mean, in our products.”

“Yeah, sure.”

By then, his curt talk irritated the boss, though he wanted to make an attempt at talking again.

“We wish to work on your idea. I wish... let’s collaborate.”

“Yeah, sure.”

Her boss, looking frowned, motioned for him to have dinner and left. Prajakta failed to smile now.

“Why were you so snooty with my boss? He respects you a lot. Why are you so frigid? You didn't say

any word to him properly,” she yelled.

“Your company developed an excellent practice of mingling, dining, and celebrating every month. It evolves a stronger bond among you all. I like this culture,” he spoke frostily.

“This is no answer to my question. You insulted our boss. He was eager to talk to you,” and she burst into tears.

Prajakta had been meticulously working on her packing as she didn’t know whether one month would be enough or they would extend it to two months. During these days, she focused on all requirements for her stay in America. She was busy packing and on phone calls with her parents, friends, and the folks coming with her. This was her seventh call in the last three days to Karuna.

“Hey, will you please buy some pads for me?”

“Why don’t you call Rohit? He’ll bring them in the evening while coming back from college.”

“Yeah, he can bring them, but you know, you better know what I need.”

“Okay, I will do it for you. Anyway, is he helping you pack your luggage?”

“Yeah. He wants to help me. But, you know, I have talked little to him since our party episode. He stays around me whenever at home. He wants to help me, but I said no.”

He left for college, and she was alone. She had no work to do except make a few phone calls, as she was almost ready to push through all her luggage in a cab the next morning. Feeling weary, Prajakta plopped down on the king-size bed. Soon, her phone rang.

“Have you taken the notarized documents I had given to you? You may or may not need them, but I wish you must keep these on behalf of the company,” Lokhande said.

“Oh, my God! I forgot. Thank you for reminding me, sir.”

“Okay. Be sure.”

She was confused: When did she bring them and where did she keep the papers? She rang Karuna.

“Do you remember the papers our boss had given to me?”

“Party day when you were upset. It seems Rohit kept those.”

“Okay.”

Immediately, Prajakta called him. This was the first time in the last couple of days that she called him during the day. Earlier, soon after their marriage, hardly a day passed when they didn't talk on the phone.

“Do you know about the documents my boss had given to me?”

“Yes. Yes. I kept those in the bottom drawer of my almirah, along with my certificates and other stuff.”

“Well. Thank you,” and she hastened to cut the call.

Prajakta felt sorry as she cut off the call—he was her husband by her choice. Her eyebrows slanted downward; cheeks turned a slight red and glanced uncomfortably.

She redialled to break the prolonged glowering silence, “How are you? I'm sorry that I haven't been good to you in the last few days. When will you come back?”

Rohit was delighted to see that the silence between them had faded away, “As I promised, soon, I'll be home.”

She put her phone aside and reached the almirah. She'd never opened his almirah so far. Nor had the need come up. She was still to acquaint herself with the culture of his apartment; it meant their apartment after she came in. She sighed with relief after she saw the papers. As she was pulling out the papers, something in a black cover gleamed. She was glad to see that it was his dissertation report. She had never been so elated before after she was married to him. She was intensely eager to see—to read through—and she started flipping rapidly through the pages. As she read through, her nostrils flared, lips thinned by being pressed together, and her eyes widened. She looked dismayed and disgruntled, as if she were reading a horrid book. It was in stark contrast to the claims made by him. There was no coding done in the genuine sense of coding and there was no expert system, like the one he hyped. There were only a bunch of formulas and results from calculation. Was he calling this an intelligent system? Why did he lie? Why did he stake so much claim on such paltry work? She felt agony because of it. She wanted to call Karuna, but she resisted. Whatever he was talking about was boastfulness.

Prajakta heard the ringing of the doorbell. Rohit was back from the office... earlier, as he had promised. She blurted out to herself—why not borrow a kind of pretence from him? She splashed some water on her face, wiped it with the edge of her kurta, and opened the door.

“Hi!” She grinned a broad smile.

“Have you finished packing?”

“Very well. I am done completely. I’ll brew a cup of tea for you, and I’ll get ready to go out,” and she gave him a wink.

He was euphoric to see her in such a cheerful mood. Then, they stepped out toward the shopping mall, as she wanted to buy a few cosmetic products. While moving from one place to another, they shared some chatter and were smiling at each other. Later, they went to a restaurant: a restaurant they often visited. Together, they enjoyed a candlelight dinner. They were happy that they once more ordered the dishes they both liked. It was a romantic encounter—resurrected.

Rohit checked his watch: the time required to reach her destination in the USA after landing of the flight had elapsed. He rang her. He rang the next day. He tried next week. He attempted next month.

Prajakta didn’t respond to any of his calls.



It's real old and missing some parts,
but I didn't know Granny even had a motorcycle

(Untitled Comic)

DL Shirey

Rutabagas of a Feather Flock Together

Maureen Neal

1. Beloit Girl is Bride in West (from Beloit Daily News, July 1944)

The marriage of Beverly Jo Fitzsimmons, 607 Minnequa Ave., Pueblo, Colorado, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. O.W. Fitzsimmons, 1059 Fourth St., Beloit, to S. Sgt. Thomas V. Neal, Jr., son of Dr. and Mrs. Thomas V. Neal, San Antonio, was solemnized at Trinity Lutheran Church in Pueblo Friday, July 7, at 4:30 p.m. The Rev. Paul Stephan officiated in the single ring ceremony and Miss Berenice Johnson of Beloit and Clair Vincent were attendants.

For the service the bride wore an aqua blue and white print with white accessories and a gardenia corsage. Following the ceremony a wedding dinner was served to the bridal party and several guests at the Whitman Hotel. The bride, a graduate of St. Mary's in Madison, is an X-ray technician at Corwin Hospital in Pueblo and will continue with her work there while the groom, a radio man with a bomber crew, goes out on active duty. He was attending Baylor University before going into the Air Corps.

2. From my mother's poetry notebook, Beloit High School c. 1942

What is love? 'Tis not hereafter,
Present mirth, hath present laughter:
 What's to come is still unsure.
In delay there lies no plenty,
Then come kiss me, sweet and twenty:
 Youth's a stuff will not endure.

— William Shakespeare

3. Wedding Day Photograph: Pueblo, Colorado, July 7, 1944

My father is lounging in an Adirondack chair, dressed in his Army Air Corps dress uniform. He has a very large Adam's apple and blondish hair and a long, thin nose. His left elbow is resting ever so casually in his lap, right arm wrapped around my mother's waist as she sits above him on the uphill wing of the chair. They are looking quite seriously at each other, not at the camera. My mother's beautiful black hair is scooped up in a tidy and slightly top-heavy bun, and yes, she is wearing a gardenia corsage.

When my mother called her parents in Wisconsin to tell them what she'd done, after she had already done it and there was no going back, her father did not offer his congratulations. Instead, he said You're a damn fool and hung up the phone.

4. I Like

I like red hair
And swing tunes
And poetry (quatrains in poetry)
And tiny new moons;

Blue eyes
With curly lashes;
The smell of a storm—
Lightning's flashes;

Flowers like hollyhocks
And candied phlox;
Dirty saddle shoes
With flashy socks;

Stars that puncture
The night like a penny;
Money—'specially when
I haven't any!

Pork chops 'n' dressing;
Frying onion's smell;
And the sound in winter
Of an old church bell;

No pastel colors—
But gaudy red;
Spicy apple butter on
Fresh baked bread;

Pleated skirts that
Twirl 'round my knees;
Glorious sunsets—
Tall pine trees;

High-sounding adjectives:
“Poignant” and “subtle”;
Fuzzy kittens and things
That cuddle;

Pithy phrases like
“Stars in my eyes”;
“Footlongs” with the “works”
And salty French fries;

I also like peace
And quiet and prayer—
Snow in my eyes;
Wind in my hair.

Beverly Jo Fitzsimmons (1941)

5. Lost—Ladies’ Black Drawstring Purse (from The La Veta [CO] Advertiser, Sept. 5-7, 1945)

Containing \$600 in Travelers’ Checks and approximately \$200 in cash. Lost in the vicinity of LaVeta Wednesday, Sept. 5. Finder please return to Advertiser Office. Liberal reward.

The above advertisement was placed in The Advertiser on Wednesday and an explanation of the facts brought a distinct tug to our heartstrings—maybe our readers will be affected the same way:

A newly-discharged soldier and his wife visited LaVeta this week on a recreational trip. They obtained a cottage at a local cottage camp and Wednesday morning decided to make a side trip to see the Sand Dunes in the Alamosa district. They packed their belongings and started early in the morning, but on reaching Alamosa found that the purse, mentioned in the ad above, was missing. A hurried review of their actions since leaving the LaVeta cabin established the fact that the purse had been left on the running board of the car in the packing-up operation and overlooked when they started the trip, and was lost somewhere between the cabin and Alamosa, probably near LaVeta. But here is some additional information that colors the story of the lost purse and money. The soldier was emaciated from a long illness, could have been recently discharged from a foreign prisoner of war camp—we didn’t ask. The couple were on their way to the soldier’s home in Texas, but stated that he expected to return to Colorado for a long rest in an effort to regain his health and strength. The lost money probably was the savings from his period of army service, plus his discharge pay, and was the stake he had expected to use while he was recuperating. We hope some honest person finds that purse and money intact and returns it to The Advertiser. We sure will ship it on to the boy and his young wife with all speed possible, because we know he needs it badly.

6. Diogenes Can Quit Searching (from The Pueblo [CO] Chieftain, Sept. 22, 1944)

Don't tell Tommy Neal, recently discharged soldier and now a reporter for the Durango Herald-Democrat, that there are few honest men.

Mr. and Mrs. Neal, en route to Durango last week, stopped in LaVeta. Later, after arriving in Walsenburg, Mrs. Neal discovered that her pocketbook containing \$800, Neal's Army savings, had been lost in LaVeta.

Without much hope they placed an ad in the LaVeta paper. The ad yielded prompt results. Charles Bruce, driver of a LaVeta milk route, found the purse and returned it.

7. Black and white photograph: Birmingham, Alabama, 24 Dec. 1937

My father is 15 years old, almost 16, and dressed in a tie and top coat, rubbing a snowball into his mother's face from a position slightly behind and above her. Snow, yes, you can hardly believe it. In Birmingham! Snow on the bushes by the front door, snow on the trees by the porch, snow on the ground, snow in his hands. She is wearing a church hat, a print dress, and an overcoat, and I don't know if she is happy or not. She is laughing but maybe it's more embarrassment than cheer, I can't tell which. She is trying to stave off the snowball in the face with one arm, but I am pretty sure she doesn't succeed.

Doc and Nana. Doc, whose pocket watch I stole from on top of the dresser at 339 13th St. in Durango, the one time they ever came to see us, when I was 8 or 9 and old enough to know better. Nana, who died of a heart attack while sitting on a bench outside a bank in downtown Birmingham, waiting for the bus to come.

8. Black and white photograph: Beloit, Wisconsin, c. 1946

Ora and Amelia, a.k.a. Mr. and Mrs. O.W. Fitzsimmons, standing in the sun in their Lutheran Sunday best: he is handsome, jaunty, in a snapped-down fedora and brown overcoat, trim and crisp and clean; Amelia, the grandmother I never knew, is wearing a street-length fur coat with collar, hat with flowers and veil, entirely practical black lace-up square-toed shoes. On the back, Amelia writes to my mother, by way of explanation,

I have my purse in my arm – looks kind of funny as if I had a big fur cuff. I don't look near 70 (do I). Or do I?

9. Durango, Colorado: January, 1946

My father writes, on the back of the photograph, Me and Fitz on the [Fort Lewis] Mesa, taken last fall. He is thin and dapper in a caramel-colored top coat buttoned up all the way and a striped tie and a beautifully crisp pair of trousers flapping in the wind. My mother is wearing a red dress and an open

and black heels, her eyes closed, a thin smile. The ground around them is dusty and dry, the path full of rocks and low-lying pinyon. There are dark storm clouds in the valley behind them.

10. A note from my father, July 1952

Dearest Fitz,

Good for you. Just got telegram from Irene and have written your dad and my folks and will drop a line to Arline first thing also. Sure am glad it was a girl. We are pretty lucky. You will have to write me and tell me all about it as soon as you feel up to it. Frankly, I don't know what a husband is supposed to write to his wife when she has just had a baby and he is 12 or 1400 miles away. But I am awfully glad and love you and know that you must be glad it is all over with. We will let you rest for a few years now while we get those two little ones to the point where they don't tear down the house. Wish I could be there with you today.

Love you Fitz xxxxx tommy

11. On Our Anniversary (florist's card sent with red roses, c. 1963)

Beverly,

**I know the last 18 years have been rough for you, at times,
because of me—but I want you to know that I love you very
much & I know that the next 18 will be happy ones for you.
At least, I will try to make them so—and they will be happy
ones for me as long as I am with you. If I had it to do over again,
I would pick you above everybody else.**

Happy anniversary, Tommy

12. Durango, Colorado, May 1970

When I answer the phone, no one says anything. I learn later that the held breath on the other end belonged to my father. He was trying to call my mother to tell her that he wants a divorce. This in spite of the weekend visit they just had in Topeka, Kansas, perhaps meant as a reparative tonic for their 26-year marriage, which had been at a low point for, say, at least the last three or four years. Could have been longer—much, much longer—depending on how you count the lost time, the empty spaces, the wrecked holidays, the thrown fork, the shouting and the sadness.

At any rate, when it's not my mother who answers the phone, my father breathes into it for a while, then hangs up. He calls again in five minutes, same result. And again ten minutes later, and yet again, until I am pretty sure that some psychotic killer looking for teenage girls to maim has got a bead on

me, because I am alone in the house and it's getting dark.

I call the police, who tell me to stop answering the phone until my parents—emphasis on the plural—are home. But I already know it's not likely that the two of them will be in this house at the same time ever again.

And they're not.

13. Wedding Day Photographs: Durango, Colorado, 24 January 1971

I actually have no idea how my mother came to know, let alone marry, Mike Darmour.

But funny thing: Here he is in a brown suit made of the shiny kind of material that was popular for special occasions in those days, and he's wearing spit-shined dress cowboy boots, a pink and gray-striped tie, gold cufflinks, a thick Masonic ring on the right hand, simple gold band on the left. I've never seen him without the moustache and sideburns or without the glasses, the kind that are supposed to go dark in the sunlight and lighten indoors, except that they never do get all the way clear inside the house, giving him a shady, cat-ate-the- canary sort of look. He's a bit on the short side, round and beefy, and hairy (despite his bald forehead) in a way my father never was.

In fact, he and my father are totally opposite numbers.

Mike is a La Plata County deputy sheriff and a truant officer at the high school, and it's just possible that he tracked me and my ski team friends Antonia and Mary Jo all the way to Purgatory Ski Area one day in the spring of our junior year. But that was before he married my mother.

What was she thinking?

She is marching down the aisle to the guillotine, apparently. Eyes straight ahead, shoulders back, aqua street-length dress with a pleated skirt twirling her knees. Cutting the cake afterward, she sends a so-there, fuck-you look primarily to my father, wherever he may be, but also to the whole world, head cocked slightly, eyes thin and challenging. Note: She would be absolutely appalled to hear me say that. But it's true.

In pictures of the reception, she and Mike are penned in, backed up against the wood-paneled wall, nothing to do for it now but eat the cake, swallow the champagne, and go forward with the grit and the grind of the day in their veins.

14. Rutabagas of a Feather Flock Together (Mother's Day card, c. 1980s)

My mother always tried to come see me, wherever I was living. These visits were only possible without my stepfather Mike, because he did not want to dig in someone else's garden, float through a slow or

summer's day with a picnic at the pond and a handful of crumbs to feed the ducks, drink while the casserole cooks, sleep with cats on a bed with a homemade quilt on it. So he would stay home, and my mother would come alone. When I lived in Gunnison and Grand Junction and Gateway, each time she rode the Greyhound bus from Durango to Cortez and over Lizard Head Pass to either Montrose or Grand Junction, and I would pick her up from there. I remember that when I had to put her back on the bus to go home, it always hurt my heart to see her standing in line all by herself and then waving goodbye from the bus window as it pulled away.

One year, she managed to come to Pagosa for two whole days in late September. She arrived on a spectacular Friday afternoon and the two of us went out to watch the high school football game, then headed home to my house on Lewis Street as the sun went down and the afternoon turned crisp and cool around the edges. She made us a little dinner—maybe chili cheese dogs and potato salad, something no one else liked but the two of us—and I made a fire in the wood stove. After dinner, we left the dishes in the sink and played African gin on the floor by the wood stove, never able to decide for sure whether a player should be able to pick up the whole discard pile or just the card on the top. Hoyle's *Rules of Games* says only the card on top, but we decided that we should be able to go whole hog on the entire pile, because then the game will last a lot longer, which means that we will have plenty of time to talk and talk and talk.

In the morning, we drive up Four Mile Road with the chainsaw and the two black dogs and sandwiches and home-made chocolate cookies and lemonade. We roll down the windows and throw our elbows out, breathing in the smell of a Saturday morning in September in the mountains—warm sun, willow and birch and aspen leaves down on the dirt road, hint of dampness in the woods. The sky is unbearably blue and clear through the aspen trees, which are at their peak, some red, some green, some orange, some a fantastic shade not of gold but of bright backlit yellow.

We gather a load of wood, but in a slow, leisurely way, cutting truck-length sections of aspen and spruce that have already fallen so close to the road that we can bump them into the side ditch and then into the truck and not have to roll them through a lot of underbrush. When we've got a full load, we eat our lunch on the tailgate of the truck and watch the dogs chase squirrels and camp robbers that hop and peck a little too close to the chocolate cookies. Then we head for home by way of Plumtaw Road, traveling at dustless, wakeless speed through the river of late afternoon light. My mother breathes in a big gulp of the crisp fall air and says, *Oh my, aren't we lucky. Aren't we just so lucky.*

15. December, 2018 (Grand Junction, Colorado)

It's been almost two years since my mother died, and today for the first time in a long time I open the back door to ice on the step, gray snow clouds thick and deep in the southwest, no leaves on the locust tree, a few inches of snow on the ground and on the roofs of the houses across the alley. The snow hangs on by its toenails to the bare branches of the tree, and it's beautiful. My mother used to say that when you see snow sticking to the branches like that it means it's going to hunker down and snow all day, which is a good sign, because I just hate it when it breaks up in late morning, say around 10 o'clock, and the blue sky comes out and it stops snowing and starts looking like an ordinary winter day.

On this particular morning, because it smells like snow and ice and a tiny whiff of pine smoke, I suddenly see myself again on that January morning, opening the back door to go get Addie Mae and slipping on the ice on the step, like in a slapstick *The Three Stooges* movie, both feet flying completely over my head, landing hard on my butt, not even capable of rolling over and getting up because the ice is so thick. I lie on my back, the snow falling into my mouth, and I think *OK, I have just broken my tailbone*. It's the worst possible time, because I have absolutely got to drive to Durango today. I slide on hands and knees to the grass, which is not as slick as the cement of the stoop, and then I manage to get one foot and then one knee inside the door, although Addie Mae is still skating around on all fours out on the sidewalk.

We take a look at the weather and realize Red Mountain is closed, Coal Bank and Molas are closed, Lizard Head is closed, Highway 141 to Gateway and Naturita and Slick Rock is a sheet of ice. Twelfth Street in Grand Junction is also a sheet of ice, for that matter, and nothing moves outside. I call my mother and get Deidre, who takes a long time to get her on the phone. I say I have fallen on the ice and the roads are terrible and I just can't come today, but I will come tomorrow. My mother says, *Oh honey, I don't want to worry about you out on the road today. You just come on when you can, and don't you worry one bit about it*. She takes the time to take a breath. And then she says, *I'll still be here tomorrow*.

We eat a grilled cheese sandwich and wait for the ice to clear so we can go out and shovel without falling down. At about two o'clock, I decide I need to venture out to True Value for some salt for the driveway and the sidewalk. For some reason, I take a long, long time to figure out what brand of de-icer is best, because I don't want to kill the grass or the trees, but on the other hand, I just have to be able to get out of town tomorrow. I buy my de-icer, drive gingerly down 12th, creep around the left turn onto Chipeta, begin a slow sideways slide down the driveway toward the garage. I come even with the back door, and Lyn is standing there crying with the phone in her hand.

It really does hit you like a punch in the gut.

I get into the garage and then cling with both hands to the workbench, with the pliers and the screwdrivers and the socket wrenches and the four kinds of hammers and the gas cans and the smell of dust and WD 40, and I see the little brown box of garden seeds my mother gave me one Christmas, with the packets of four o'clocks and carrots and Blue Lake green beans and a jar of her own dried hollyhock pods and the ZipLoc bag of homemade banana peel fertilizer.

But she is gone for good and she is not coming back.

I know this right away, except that I don't. You never do.

16. Parable of the Sower, c. 1988

It's spring, and my mother and I are sitting at the dining room table in my old house at 1404 White Ave. in Grand Junction, examining flats of tomatoes and carrots I started from seed that now need to be thinned so that what's left will be sturdy and garden-ready in a few more weeks. I know we have to pull out at least half the plants, but still, I hate to see them go, since I am so proud of myself for

having got them to come up at all. So I turn the thinning task over to my mother, who starts in on the tomatoes. *A farmer—hmm, that's you, Reen—went out to throw some seed in the ground, she says. And some fell on the rocky ground—here she pinches out three or four tomato seedlings—and some fell on, let's see, the thorny ground—here she takes out several more—and some got too close to the sidewalk and got burned up in the hot sun.* She hovers over the last few she wants to chuck and says, with two raised eyebrows, *and some fell on soil that needed but didn't have your mother's special homemade banana peel fertilizer to help them along.* We crack up laughing.

Oh, yeah, I say. Let all who have ears hear. Then we both take a shot at the carrots.

Notes on the new Rutabagas as I go.

OK, just a note while I am thinking about this project and what I am trying to do with it, just vaguely. I think I am trying to reconcile both images/parts of Web in my mind—the Web that is my dearest rutabaga companion and the Web I am learning about in her journals and her documents, who is a stranger to me and not at all the person in Rutabagas. I want to make this a multi-dimensional look at her and some of her stranger choices—in particular, getting married IN THE WAY SHE DID not just once, but twice. And also—this may be much too lengthy and unwieldy to handle, but for the moment so be it—the Web that shows up as ‘Fitz’ in her high school poetry notebook and yearbook. For some reason, she is terribly preoccupied, in the poetry notebook, with love that goes sour or that is in some way forbidden or unacceptable—and in my mind anyway, aimed at a male English teacher OR, more likely, her Latin teacher. These are poems way older than a high school student would think about, or experience, in other words.

And then I don't know how to break the bombshell, and probably I won't, because my sister has not revealed this secret for over 50 years, but the affairs with the neighbor across the street and with Bob Watson, and why she told us that Bob Watson died in the Animas River when the clippings say he died of a heart attack in his office while giving a patient a shot. And that Web was good friends with his wife and even has a letter in her clippings from that woman, and from Gypsy Callaway, who was somehow in on this (Sam was Jim Clark's partner). So for now I don't care how long this is. I just want to try to piece together and think about and reflect on the things I am learning, but in the long run I am doing this in order to reclaim Web, to find her again, the Web I knew and have loved all my life, even when I was a little, little kid. In photographs, I was always next to Web, my sister was always next to Dad. But I was never (that I can find) in a picture next to Dad.

So where am I going? I don't know. For now, I want to go back to bits and pieces that I have written and cannibalize them for this, noting always both in the insertion and the copying where I am taking something from and where I got it as well as where I am putting it. Then cut and delete and add in snippets of these letters, these musings, these poems, these notes in the yearbook, these Christmas newsletters—that is what I want to find, in addition to what I know is a big, big cache of Web's journals.

****Note:** I found it!!! And I also found the cache of Christmas letters, from 1954 to 2011, with some noticeable gaps in the 1960s and 70s.

I want to use her writing and my own memories and snippets of other artifacts and photographs. I know already there is no place for this as I envision it, but that should not keep me from making it, writing it, piecing it together.

I now know that I have not yet begun to deal with the sadness I feel for Web in those last years of her life, and really, how little I understood then about how hard her life had become. I really, really tried for what I felt NOT to manifest itself as pity, but some of these memories really are hard. And if Web were here with me, I would just hold her and hug her and hug her and tell her how sorry I am that I did not understand. But at some point, I feel I need to tell this story and I need to also tell my story, of how hard, how impossible, it was to take care of her in any way that would have helped. Today I feel nothing I did ever helped, in the last years, and in the very end I did not even come back to be with her though I know I should have. I feel so terrible about it that I can't even express it in words.

26 April

I suddenly have had an insight into how to go about this project, and it may be futile—more about that aspect later—and it is to gather together, as stand-alone separate pieces, with their own titles, themes, time periods, and so on all the things I have written about Web, possibly including some of her own letters or my letters to her, cards perhaps (that is where the rutabagas of a feather flock together came from), and in that way make it an honest statement that I am currently at work on a full-length memoir called the same. This memoir is a little different from other memoirs in that it is about both of us and our co-dependent bond. I just realized last week, by the way, that she and I are actually NOT the same person, even though I am beginning to look more like her and sound a lot like her I am sure, and have made choices in my life that mirror her own. But it was with the Mike piece that I realized, holy shit, we are not actually as alike as I always thought we were—we might be able to wear each other's shoes, but that does not mean I must walk in them forever. This project is my attempt to come to terms with our relationship, with who she was and with who I am.

In this overall view of the larger project, I have some very painful pieces—Revelation is one that is part of our story and it was a very difficult chapter. I have The Thing about Things, I have the present little Rutabagas, I have This Is a Fine Place We've Come To which I could include in a larger collection (people do this all the time). If I think of it this way, I can write and revise anything I want and then see how it fits into the larger collection. I can also include photographs, which in this case I think are incredible.

Think about how much time you put into writing and rewriting a piece you like—the hours of reading, re-reading, revising, fine-combing, and so on, and then think about what your objective is: publication somewhere, anywhere, and you don't care if they pay you or not or if they do, it's just a minuscule drop in the river of time you have put into a piece—if you were paid at all, which I was not for The Examined Life piece. So why do you want so much to have it accepted somewhere, anywhere? I think it's because you think that if it's accepted by somebody somewhere it means you are a good writer, that it's a validation that you are good at this. Anyway, if you were paid by the hour for what you put into a piece, they should pay you like \$2500 for a piece of writing. Instead, you are paid exactly zero.

P.S. Typing this and reading Web's account of declining eyesight makes me realize that I need to teach myself to type, because otherwise, when I lose my eyesight, I would also lose my ability to write. So that's something definite I need to learn to do.

3 May 2021

I don't know how I decided to do this, but I tackled two of the boxes from Web that were still in the garage, and sure enough, I found a ton of stuff—the Christmas letter files from 1954 to 2011, lots of photos, lots of cards, lots of recipes, some stuff that just broke my heart, like when she could not keep up with Christmas or birthday presents anymore (like sewing placemats and kitchen things) but wanted to give us something for Christmas, so she tried to make a list of everyone so she could write cheques to give them as their presents. I don't know why, but I just cried and cried over that and the pasted-on stickers from plants she had bought one year. I also found more of her friend Be's letters and the letter she wrote to all of us after Dad died and a letter (I'm not sure I have ever read it) to my brother, I think about the same thing.

It is now after 5 and I am hungry but need to go to the gym, except that I probably won't. I feel I have done a ton of stuff today, but should have gone to the gym right away so that I didn't get into the situation where I have had no exercise to speak of yet am exhausted and sad and sorry. I don't know if I can do this project after all. But I do need to clean out the garage and sheds and closets, and today I have made a start on that. But here's the thing: you can't just do this once; you have to do it every day so that someone is not left with this task after you die. You have SO MUCH STUFF you can't even imagine it, and you are the one who needs to sift and sort and throw away. After I have caught up with Web (the remaining boxes in here and upstairs, and everything whittled down to one memory box and the planned art work/collage, then I need to start on MY boxes of school stuff, files, papers.

Goal for the summer: get it out of here, pare it down to one filing cabinet and one memory box.

6 May

As always, I have a very hard time getting started on a project once I have stopped. I feel unsure of my purposes, or my intentions, or my ability to tell the story I want to tell, and it often takes several days and several warm-ups like this before I am ready to actually do the thing again, to start the writing again. In this case, I have/had a sense of this piece as a book-length thing with lots of individual stand-alone pieces, but this morning that does not seem like a good idea, insofar as I already have a "Rutabagas of a Feather" document, and it itself is made up of smaller pieces. So what do you do with that? You can't have one paragraph on a page (anymore)—there may have been a time when you could do that, but the high cost of publishing prohibits that kind of structure. Also prohibits the use of photographs, even though I would so love to use them. For now, what I need to do is use them to describe/reinforce my impressions (say, of Mike and Web's wedding).

One very concrete thing I could do today is sort/clean out my files on this and make a note about what's what and where it is (and back it up, possibly), so that I am starting out fresh in a way. Like the other day: I could not find the document I had just been working on (the new stuff) because I had to call it something different than "Rutabagas." AAACK!

So for the next time (whether today or whenever), (1) cleaning/organizing and (2) reading more of Web's musings files.

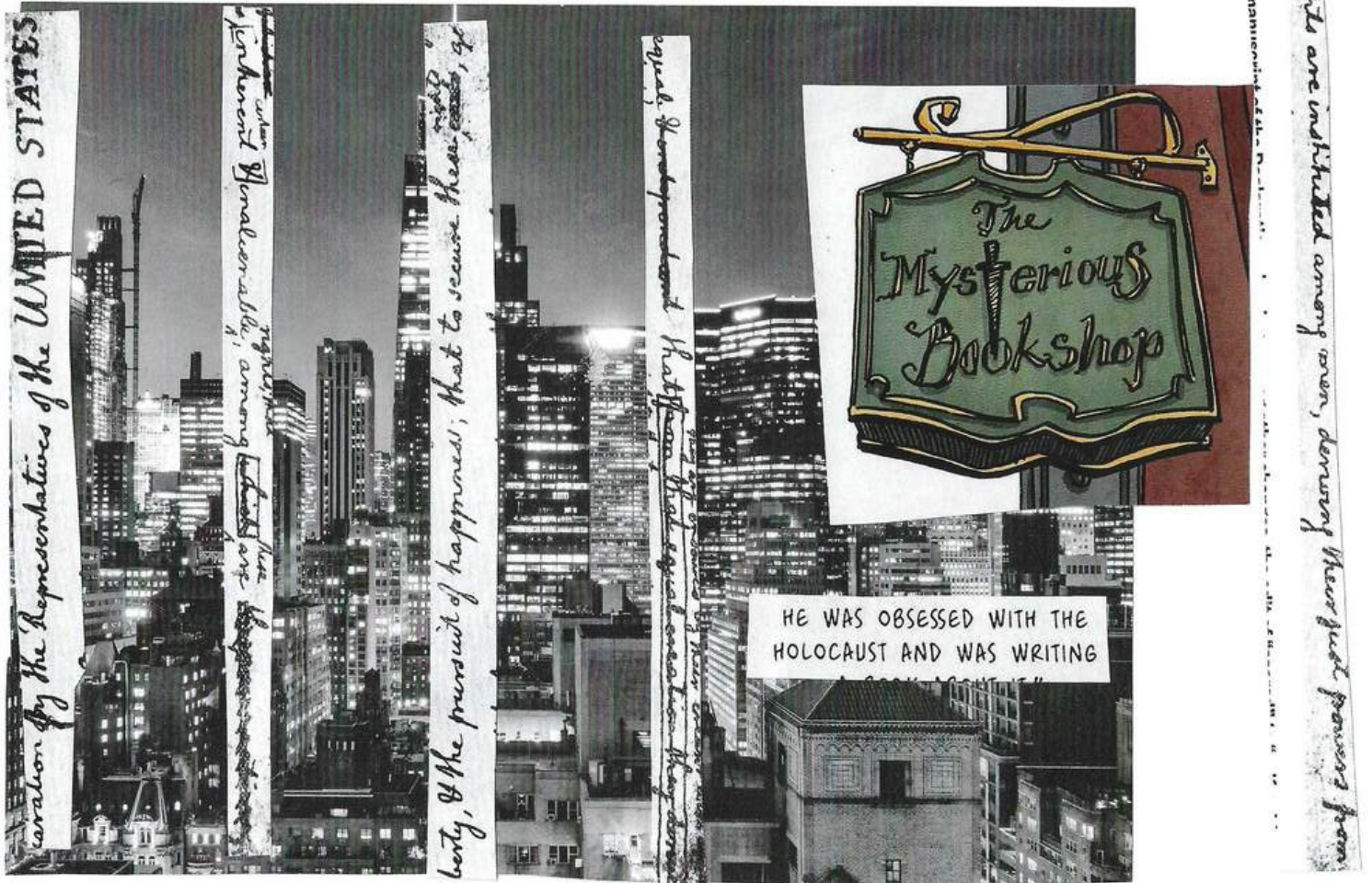
OK, so I have tried to find a starting place on cleaning up files and documents, and suddenly I realize this is a huge, monumental, prohibitively ginormous task to try to figure out how to put a BOOK together of Rutabagas-related essays. I think I have just got to ignore that question and forget that I am working on a book and instead work on each essay as if it were/is a stand-alone piece. Then go back and wrestle in the mud with the overall structure, contents, thing.

12 May

I think I wrote something in here about how and where to start (see above), but damn me if I can get any traction on this. I did (on May 8, I think) get files cleaned and sorted, but that does not help me go any farther down the writing road. I still have the shadow of unfinished cleaning business looming over me (the garage and sheds, the boxes in the upstairs closets, the computer files and folders and 'copy' folders, which I discovered do not contain the same files). GAACK.

Mystery Bookshop

Carla Sarett



Cover Artist

Carla Sarett

Sarett's latest poetry chapbook, *Any Excuse for a Party*, is out from Bainbridge Island Press. Her work has been nominated for the Pushcart, Best of Net, Best Microfiction and Best American Essays.

Carla serves as Contributing Editor for New Verse Review and earned a PhD from University of Pennsylvania. She is currently based in San Francisco.

More on her and her work can be found on her website:

<https://carlasarett.com/>

Storage Box

Carla Sarett

Amherst, Massachusetts. Boxes bore postmarks from Jewish neighborhoods in New York and Los Angeles, together with less likely packages from Saskatoon, Santa Fe, and Hermosa, Mexico. Volunteers in **scores of cities** mobilized in an all-out effort to save the physical legacy of Yiddish culture from imminent destruction. The response **was overwhelming**. **More than 50,000** volumes have been collected in little more than 12 months, and the number is increasing all the time. ¶ **"These aren't just books, they're lebedike nefoshes, living beings,"** observed an elderly Jewish man in Queens. **"They're our history, our art, the soul of the Jewish people."** The quantity of books collected has been striking. Subjects range from prose and poetry to folklore, **political theory, and popular science**. A turn of the century volume entitled *Vegetarian Cooking for Your Health* was a favorite among student catalogers at the Exchange. But scholars of Yiddish literature were equally enthused by a plethora of rare and out-of-print volumes, including original editions of *Spektor's Hoyz-fraynt* (1890s), Bundist brochures (ca. 1905), and a dealing with the Broder Linger of Galicia. ¶ The Exchange has announced plans to collect an additional 200,000 volumes over the next several years. With a full-scale collection effort underway, focus is now shifting to book distribution as well. The first published catalog is expected in the fall of 1981, with quarterly editions appearing thereafter. Consultants are working to computerize the Exchange's cataloging system in an effort to cope with the tremendous volume of books available that have not been offered for sale for fifty years or more. ¶ From the first issue of *The* midnight. "Uh, hello?" ¶ "Hi! I hate to bother you at this hour, but there're about 8,000 Yiddish books here. They'll probably be hauled off as garbage first thing in the morning and, well, it looks like it's

America 250

Go beyond

Greetings!

There Is No
Shortage of
Untold

THE OLD DEMON

a safe space

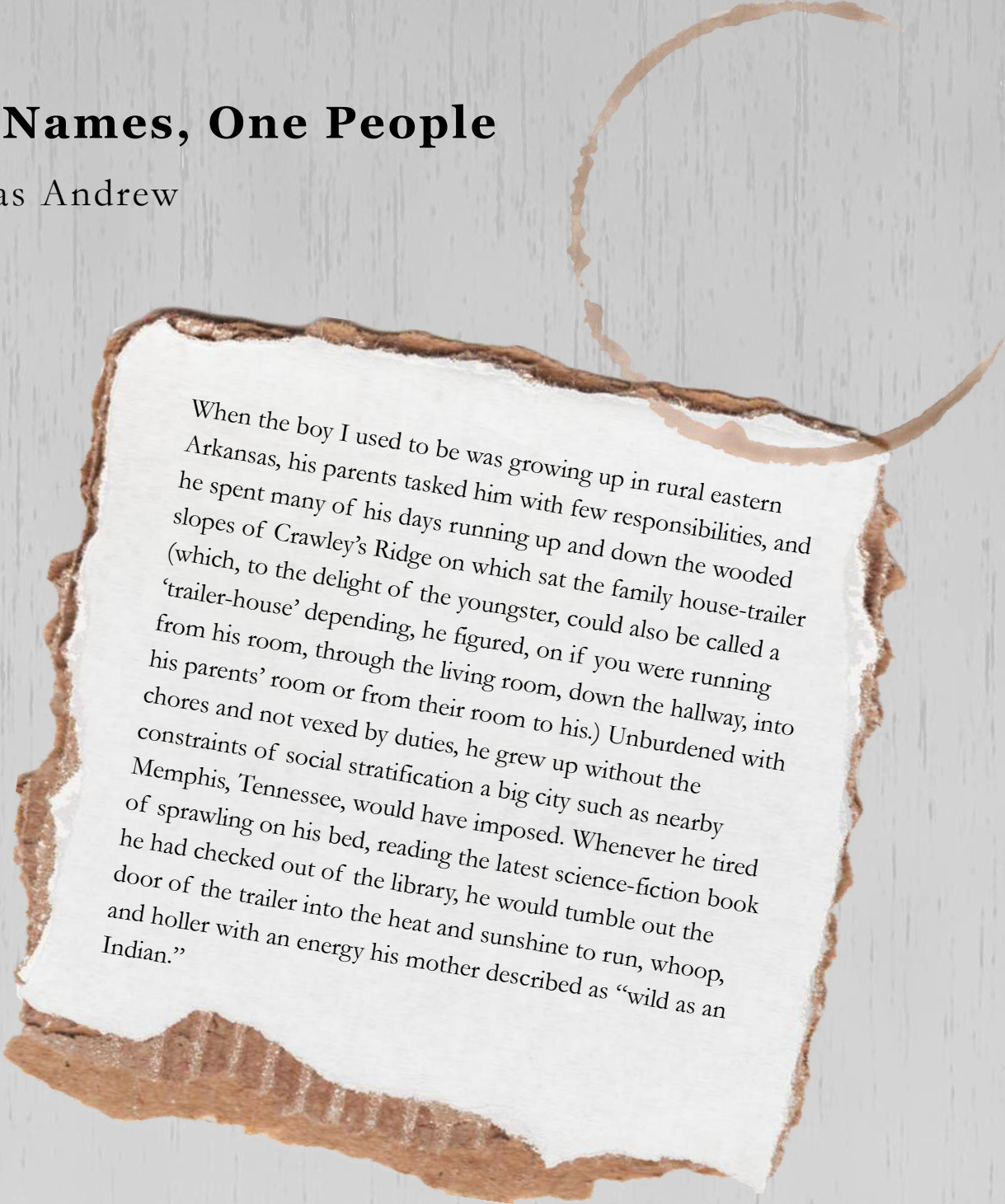
HEROES

the story of Yiddish culture continues to be erased, our history rewritten, our sensibility recast, our identity redefined. memory fades, the books we collected are all that remain. For that reason, the time has now come to tell this tale. It's the best way I know to identify what's missing from contemporary Jewish life—and to begin to reclaim what we've believe almost 45 years have passed since I took what I thought would be a two-year leave of absence from graduate school. Yiddish books. At the time, scholars estimated just 70,000 volumes could still be found; we collected that number in six months to recover 1.5 million. Over the years you helped us establish Yiddish collections at major libraries and place our titles on to recover 1.5 million. Over the years you helped us establish Yiddish collections at major libraries and place our titles on to recover 1.5 million. Over the years you helped us establish Yiddish collections at major libraries and place our titles on to recover 1.5 million. We revolutionized Yiddish-language learning with a new, state-of-the-art textbook. We filmed thousands of hours of over a hundred and produced podcasts, radio programs, an English-language magazine, and groundbreaking exhibitions. We launched Yidstock: The Festival of New Yiddish Music. And we introduced lively educational programs to bring Jewish history, literature, and culture to students of all ages. Along the way we also built our own "shtetl": two connected, architecturally distinctive buildings that are welcoming, sunny, and full of life. Thanks to you and other loyal supporters we did all this with a balanced budget and not a penny of debt. ¶ For now, what I want to say as I approach my retirement as president is *thank you!* You've helped the Yiddish Book Center survive, thrive, and keep Yiddish alive for more than four decades, and I'm confident you'll continue to stand by us in years ahead.

Truth

Two Names, One People

Thomas Andrew
Green



When the boy I used to be was growing up in rural eastern Arkansas, his parents tasked him with few responsibilities, and he spent many of his days running up and down the wooded slopes of Crawley's Ridge on which sat the family house-trailer (which, to the delight of the youngster, could also be called a 'trailer-house' depending, he figured, on if you were running from his room, through the living room, down the hallway, into his parents' room or from their room to his.) Unburdened with chores and not vexed by duties, he grew up without the constraints of social stratification a big city such as nearby Memphis, Tennessee, would have imposed. Whenever he tired of sprawling on his bed, reading the latest science-fiction book he had checked out of the library, he would tumble out the door of the trailer into the heat and sunshine to run, whoop, and holler with an energy his mother described as "wild as an Indian."

Three hundred years¹ before the boy lived with his family in their trailer in the woods, the French Jesuit missionary Father Jacques Marquette and French-Canadian fur-trader Louis Jolliet passed down the Mississippi River basin, giving local geographic features proper French names because that was what Europeans thought they should all do. Before Marquette and

Jolliet arrived, the people who had already been living there for hundreds of generations referred to themselves as Ugakhpa (or Ogaxpa or whatever linguistic label you fancy) meaning the 'downstream people.' However, the neighboring Algonquian-speaking Illinois tribes much further to the north called them Akanses, meaning 'people of the south wind,' and since Marquette and Jolliet met the Illinois first, they named the land at the fork of the Mississippi and another, lesser water course the French-derivative Arkansas.² (The Anglicized spelling Arkansaw flickered in and out of vogue for a while, especially during the early 1960s, but it never took hold.)³

After a few years, that boy grew into me, and I graduated college, married, and moved from the fields and forests of Arkansas to the sands and cactuses of Arizona. I followed a long-held dream and applied to the University of Arizona's creative writing program, but young and ~~stupid-arrogant~~ full of myself—figuring I could write well enough and just needed something to write about—I switched programs from writing to Native American Studies. Back when I had first registered for classes, with tribal life surrounding me so blatantly, I had, on the spur of the moment, signed up for a beginning Papago language class as an elective. What could be more perfect? Here I stood, surrounded by saguaros and prickly pears and mesquite trees, where the scant rain waited hovering just out of reach overhead until the rainy season when the saturated air would burst with downpours every afternoon, flooding arroyos and streets, sweeping away any gringo Easterner foolish enough to try to drive across what anyone could clearly see was merely a trickle of water

In Tucson, on 13 July 2025, the news staff of CBS television network affiliate KOLD-TV (Channel 13), aired, with rain in the forecast, a segment called "Looking back at Historic Flooding in Southern Arizona." In October 1983, tropical Storm Octave dumped "five-to-nine inches of rain across Tucson, triggering the worst flood in city history."⁴ Eight-foot-deep flood waters, with "people ... sitting on their rooftops," caused \$64 million in damage with 13 deaths.

The "deadliest storm in the state's history",⁵ tropical storm Norma occurred on Labor Day of 1970, lasting from 4 September to 5 September, with 23 deaths, 14 of those in Tonto Creek with "many campers ... helplessly swept away by a nearly 5-foot wall of water."

As my studies produced better understanding of a group of people which had never concerned me before, the time came to stretch myself, to shuck off the carapace of white, middleclass, Euro-American, English-speaking capitalistic nearsightedness, and rise up on wings of Native words and alien grammar and share the change of worldview inherent in such a transformation.

And as if confirming what inflamed my soul, the Native Peoples of the area—whom smug, self-satisfied money-managers had for centuries labeled *Papago*, an epitaph taken from an Apache slur meaning 'bean-eater,' those Native People threw off the tatters of an identity forced on them by pale-faced strangers and declared themselves no long eaters of beans, but as they had designated themselves in their own language from the beginning of time, *O'odham*. The People. Tohono O'odham. The Desert People. Closely related to, but distinct from their northern cousins, *Akimel O'odham*, the River People. Not mere Apache-fearing eaters of beans, but humans being human beings.

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Selkie Sisters

Doley Henderson

In the black-and-white photograph that I find in Mum's drawer, Baby is already gone. It is 1953 and they wear silk, black-tie, and vacant looks. Mum and dad have dressed up to attend the St. Andrew's Ball in Montreal, even though it has been only three weeks since Baby died. Maybe they are tired of feeling numb. The obstetrician tells them that Baby could not survive this earthly world but that they still have us--three loving daughters. That doesn't seem to ease their pain.

I am only two and a half and already tired of being the baby--but now it will be forever. I want a new baby to hold and play with, to explain the world to. In the 1950s, research has not yet solved mother-baby incompatible rhesus-factors of their blood types. I am just a baby sister who wants her own baby sister.

"No more girls," CJ, my middle sister, tells Mum. "I want a brother."

Sometimes I pretend my sisters are not my real siblings and I am Cinderella. Time passes and we are busy carrying on, as post-war families do. It is important to be grateful. I hum aloud and dance but Shelley says that is frivolous. So, I hum and dance in my head. I am afraid to ask for a new baby now. Shelley says that Mum will not have any more; she is too old--over forty. I don't understand. Why doesn't Shelley notice that Mum is sad and far-away?

My head hurts. I hide in the hammock, study the clouds, and think about Aunty Viv saving me from drowning last summer. CJ pushed me into the lake and I saw a water creature. Shelley makes fun of me when I stare at the sky. Dad stands on the porch, shaking his head and comes to give me a hug. He looks tired. Shelley follows him back to the house, asking what a calamity is. CJ marches by and punches me in the arm, as usual. She wants to be the baby and has been angry with me since I arrived. I wish Baby had lived. These big sisters are the calamity.

More time passes and it is the 1960s. I am a teenager in hospital, heavily drugged after a spinal-fusion to keep my curving-torquing spine from crushing my lungs. My mind spins into space, as I lie on an ironing board called a Stryker frame.

I think about Baby. Mum told me a Celtic myth about a selkie who transformed from a seal to a human. I know Baby was the sea creature, Selkie-sister, who saved me from drowning before Aunty Viv plunged in to grab me. Selkie-sister flipped her emerald tail, back-and-forth, back-and-forth, waiting for me. When the time is right, Selkie-sister and I know that we will meet again in our underwater world.

I pout at the ceiling. It will take twelve months to recover from my spinal fusion. I will wear a plaster body-cast and lie immobile in a hospital bed at home for months. Then I will transition to a walking-

plaster body-cast, and then a leather body brace that will dig into my hips and armpits. My class will perform Romeo and Juliet without me because I am immobile at home for the whole first term. So, I read the play aloud to myself instead. I have to pause often to relax my arms from being rigid in the air holding the script.

Selkie-sister laughs, “Who needs Shakespeare anyway? There’s morphine!”

“Ha, ha.” I fake-laugh. Really, I am offended--body and soul--by the whole process. Why me? Why not CJ or Shelley? I know that is mean but I don’t care. Shelley has piano-legs, so that makes me feel better, little shit that I am. CJ calls me that. Little shit, not piano-legs.

Selkie-sister hums and raises her fist. “You’re a survivor.”

I calm down. Mum is the strong one. She breezes in with fresh grapes. I know she feels guilty for gifting me her twisted spine. Idiopathic scoliosis runs in families, mostly in women. Selkie-sister nods, blows me a kiss.

More years pass. It is the 1990s and I am a loving mother of three children, holding and playing and explaining. Then, in the 2000s, I become who I am meant to be. I gather the courage to leave my husband. The kids resign themselves to living in two different homes. Many of their friends are in the same situation; none of them is pleased but they adjust. Then I find and embrace adventure with my soulmate, Stewart.

We stare into the Class-V whitewater of the mighty Zambezi. Eight of us paddle hard, biceps screaming. Turgid waves toss our raft into the air and smash us back down. We shudder, raft and paddlers alike.

Our guide shouts, “Forward! Back! Hold! Down!” as we cascade over boulders and zip through canyons at lightning speed. We have no time to process, only react.

On rapid 7, Mother of Chance, I dig in with my paddle and grip hard. The adrenaline rush makes my heart pound. Immersed in whitewater, I grin and yell, “Wahoo!” My paddle disappears into the mighty swirl that pulls me in too. Through layers of roiling water, I plunge; through globs of ancient goo, I squish, and sink. My swift-water shoes graze ancient rock. I kick and thrash, let go, and bob to the surface. One gulp of air and I am thrust under again. Water fizzes up my nose and sloshes in my mouth. I somersault twice, my wet suit firmly zipped to my body, head to toe. Will the current hurl me downstream to crocodiles waiting to snap and crunch me?

Underwater, I see Selkie-sister in the distance, auburn hair streaming, emerald tail flipping back-and-forth. I tumble over and over, reach out to her through a haze of bubbles. I miss. Is this my ending, here and now? Selkie-sister beckons the support kayaker in Shona, “Mumununure, save her!” She pushes me to the surface and the support kayaker paddling behind all the rafts hauls me to her gunwale. I am meant to survive this earthly world.

More years slip by. It is the 2010s and I am a nerve-pained writer. From the deck of the local swimming pool, I stare into turquoise water. Pain strikes lumbar vertebrae 2 and 3, electrifies my right hip, groin, pelvis; scorches my right quad and hamstring. I need water- therapy and I hate this entrapped-nerve pain. Friends think it's a leftover from my multiple fractures after our motorcycle crash. I think it's my spine raging, and more importantly, doctors agree it's actually my scolio aging and continuing to curve. I am a candidate for a lower lumbar fusion but I politely decline--I've had enough surgeries.

By the time a sports medicine specialist diagnoses my condition, the nerve pain is well past the temporary timeline of three months. It is now permanent. Of course it is. Why should modern health-care cater to only me? We all wait months and years for medical attention, then a diagnosis, then surgery or specific therapy or both.

Slipping down the ladder, I immerse my tired torso, thrash about, trying to remember how to crawl. How does it work? I know that arms alternate somehow but I cannot stay afloat while struggling to coordinate my limbs. I breaststroke instead. It's just easier. When did I become such a saggy senior in such a baggy tank-suit?

Selkie-sister cries in Scots Gaelic, "Bi truen, be brave!"

The weeks roll by as I struggle Monday, Wednesdays, and Fridays to let my body go, trust the water, and glide. One day I will mirror this as I fight Class-V-whitewater on another continent. I dream of characters in speculative worlds as I plot my stories in my head to the steady rhythm of my strokes. I splash happily, my emerald tail flipping back-and-forth, back-and-forth. Weightless and pain-free, I perfect the double-sided crawl and solve my story-ending.

Then, I become a delirious Nana. It is the 2020s and I gaze at my brand-new grandson asleep in my arms. He hiccups and burps, smiles and squeaks. His tiny toes and fingers curl, his knees bend and his arms fly up, drop on his head, slide off, as he relives baby adventures. In his saline world for nine months, he flipped and nudged, somersaulted and treaded water. Then one day, he swam the birth canal, inhaled air for the first time.

I ask him about his journey. He is an old soul with a knowing smile. I am pain-free holding him and grinning behind my Covid-19 face-mask. His skin is silky-soft, dimpled, and so chewy I want to nibble its perfection. I am soaked in warm love. It pours from me in an endless flow over him and onto his mum--my daughter--lying serenely beside us. She smiles, kisses Baby; he slides into her arms.

In that soft glow, I slip underwater. I tell Selkie-sister that she is now a grand-aunt. I say that Baby survived because doctors have figured out how to treat incompatible blood-factors. He is sturdy and healthy; his mum is fine. Selkie-sister is happy for Baby but I know she is sad for herself and our mum. I tell her, "Bi truen, be brave!" We swim in our world, our emerald tails flipping back-and-forth, auburn tresses swirling over faces and shoulders. Then, we dive deeper.

But I am pulled back to the earthly world. A disease is spreading through Stewart's nervous system and dementia is creeping into his neurons. It takes months for a diagnosis and then finally we hear the term Parkinson's Disease. I know there is something worse attacking his body and one year later we hear the words Lewy Body Dementia. I care for Stewart at home, day in and day out, sleepless from waking many times in the night to help him on the toilet. He needs my help to understand what to do and why. Managing him without breaking down myself, I try to navigate the storm of our public healthcare system.

After months and months on waitlists, it is not clear what will happen next to Stewart-- which body part will falter and when, which specialist we can see and when. His tests and specialists' notes and hospital visits are recorded in three different online network clusters and it is not possible to coordinate them. A room in a local care-home magically frees up for him and we begin a new life in two separate abodes. He resides on the memory-care floor, staring into space from his chair while I stand in my living room looking through the window trying to decide on the next step. Kids in the schoolyard across the street run and tumble and spray laughter.

My family doctor tells me that my status is now a grey area, in-between a widow and a wife. Who am I, as we begin the long goodbye? Selkie-sister sings and rings in my head, "Bi truen, be brave!" But I need more; I need her to tell me what to do now, not just be brave but how to deal with all this. I sigh and turn back to my list of what to bring Stewart: diapers, peanuts, hand towels, tissues. I am relieved that he has Personal Support Workers around-the-clock and stronger medication so I can focus on my own wellness. Some days his shaking carries on for hours despite the meds, when he is anxious and trying to figure out what has happened to him and to us. This was not the plan for our seventies. Until now we had been fit and active, coping with minor medical bits, aside from motorcycle-crash fractures. Why has this descended upon us? Because shit happens, plain and simple, and we cannot control disease or dementia.

Stewart likes to tell me that these challenges are meant to test us. Well, I'm tired of the test. What's the point? I already know how to be patient and be *a* patient. I spend a day swearing at Stewart's dad in Heaven or wherever he went, for giving Stewart his shitty diseases. Then I calm down and say to myself that we cannot control these illnesses; we can only control how we react to them. Such a tidy, dismissive phrase. It's true of course and Stewart and I say it to each other all the time but it's not easy to accept. He still thinks he has done something terribly wrong in a previous life and this is payback and I still think life is just bullshit some days. Except when I am holding my two squishie grandkids who exude love and joy. When I hug them, I don't want to let go. But they remind me that they have important work to do. "Nana, we need to save our train. It came off the tracks." I understand completely.

Meanwhile, how will my selkie-sister save me now? She drifts by, swishing her tail back and forth and swinging her tresses over her gorgeous shoulders. She swirls and twirls, zips and dips. And disappears. I pause, breathing in and out, in and out. Hmmm. She is signalling that I already know the answer and her work is done. But? And then I see. Maybe she has already saved me. Of course. She has given me wisdom and strength over seven decades of adventure and survival. And she has given me a way to respond--carry on and do my best, as I always have. Allow myself to be angry at our diminished life.

And admit that I too need care and patience.

And when the time is right, I will tell my kids and grandkids, “Bi truen, be brave.” I will swim out to join my selkie-sister and we will swish our emerald tails back and forth.

Then, we will dive deeper.

planting my feet solidly, rolling off onto the balls of my feet, feeling the cold air against my skin. A faint rustling tells me to look left. A steady sound, like a breath, tells me to keep running.

In my periphery, something bounds on all fours: fast, right beside me. Something dark, cresting—something with claws and teeth—and soulless eyes. And it sees me. I don't dare stop running, but I'm no fool. I can't outrun it.

The creature cuts across my path, and I brace for impact because I can't outrun it anymore. Its dark eyes turn red, and in them, I see a human-shape, slumped over a wheel. I'd never checked to see if she were alive or dead those many years ago of the memory that I'd buried, but I see now. She lived. She lived to hunt me down.

Singing in the Car

Lisa Shulman



Driving home tonight, I remember
how you would sing in the old Rambler,
belting out showtunes, my sisters and I
squished in the back seat, giggling,
calling out requests. We knew
the words to your college drinking songs
long before we could drink
anything stronger than grape soda.

Knew them before we had words
to describe the heavy undertow of your step,
before fist-sized holes wailed in walls
and we rattled like seeds in dark corners,
before all my memories were tinted
a whisky-colored amber, bitter as gin.



Morbid Attraction

Penny Newcombe

It's the first day on the ward as a newly qualified nurse. The moment the card taps and the door opens, a young woman in room one is gasping for air. Kneeling beside her, you take her hand.

Several minutes pass before she calms, and a surge of pride rises within you. This, you tell yourself, is why you're here. To help.

You glance at the nurses passing by. They all ignore the patient. Their movements are sluggish, as though they're just as unwell as the people they're hired to care for. You will not become like them.

You'll stay healthy.

Reprimanded for being late to report, the charge nurse tells you not to assist patients before taking handover.

"She couldn't breathe," you explain, your words tumbling out.

"Her oxygen levels are fine," another nurse responds.

Seven patients are assigned to you. You fail to hide your jitters, but the other nurses don't notice. Like you, they are absorbed in their handover sheets, scribbling hurried notes. Excitement should fill you. After three years of intensive study, you're stepping into the footsteps of nursing legends like Florence Nightingale and Edith Cavell. The dream has finally come true.

Your first month blurs in a rush of tasks. Moving from one patient to the next. It's hard to understand why so many can't do the simplest things, like lift a fork or stand. You help them, encouraging their independence. Inspiring their health.

A woman in urinary retention requires your attention. Inserting your first catheter, you watch her pain subside as the bag fills with what she couldn't release, and you're filled with an addictive kind of pride.

You learn to move like you're underwater. Every task like a current fighting against you, the commode that won't fit through the door, the patient who sobs while you change her, the emergency bell that starts ringing the moment your hands are full. You are running a race where the finish line keeps moving. Like wearing magnets that attract everything, and somehow, you can't get it off and carry it home.

You stay behind, finishing notes long after your shift is over because if it isn't documented, it didn't happen. The senior nurses finish their shifts on time, but their patients never seem as happy as yours.

Three months in, you often don't manage to take breaks. When you finally eat, you notice the other nurses eating healthily, just like you. It's a surprise, considering how unwell they look.

You feel overwhelmed. Yet, you still help a geriatric patient to the toilet. She tells you the other nurses refuse to help her, insisting she must use a bedpan. You assure her that you'd never do that. Thirty minutes pass as you get her out of bed. Her body is stiff, but you tell her it's OK and to take as much time as she needs. You don't rush. You stay kind.

The call bell grows louder, calling for you. It's the patient in pain, wondering why you haven't come yet.

I wish she knew how much my leg hurts, the patient thinks.

A searing pain shoots up your left leg. You finish helping the elderly lady, trying to ignore it. It's just dehydration, you tell yourself, but the ache persists.

Another patient is calling for you. He's nauseous, asking why you haven't checked his blood pressure as promised.

If only she understood how I felt.

As you prepare the pain medication, dizziness rolls in, and it feels as though you might vomit. You steady yourself for less than a second, then carry on.

The other sisters don't ask you what is wrong. We nurses don't have time for that. The elderly lady on the toilet calls; she's finished and wants to be helped back to bed, but you're still dealing with the urgent matter of treating pain.

If she knew what it felt like to be stuck like this she wouldn't be so undignified.

Two years in, another nurse watches you stay late again. "I used to be you," she says. Not kindly. "Now I give twenty percent." She says it like she's describing a medical condition. "That's the only way you won't burn out."

You took the advice and have learned to prioritize, no longer working to prove you care. You're safer in emergencies, you always take your breaks, go home on time, and take it home with you less.

But patients are dissatisfied.

They wish you could understand their suffering, that you could feel their pain. Frustration mounts as you sense their urge growing stronger:

Feel how it feels. Have empathy.

Each day, the unspoken pleas of the patients stick to everything. The demand for understanding suffocates you. You feel it in the ache of your limbs, the dizziness that pulls at the edges of your vision when you stand too quickly. At first, you mistook it for caring too much. But as your compassion fatigues, it only gets worse.

Fifteen years as a nurse. Forty-two years old, and you can barely walk without feeling out of breath. You wish the patients and their families could understand how it feels to be you. Your legs swell, aching constantly. You can't keep up with the younger nurses, and their judgment makes your teeth feel heavy. They'll soon see what it's like.

Thirty years as a nurse. You've been admitted to hospital, you've fallen behind on your mortgage, and gone on statutory sick pay. Strong antibiotics drip through your veins while your legs weep yellow and green pus that smells like rotting onions. You've developed an embolism in your lung. High-flow oxygen burns your nose.

The doctors say it's because you've been immobile.

You wish they'd understood how much it hurts.

Your nurse isn't helpful. You've asked for pain relief, but she never came back. *If only she understood,* you think.

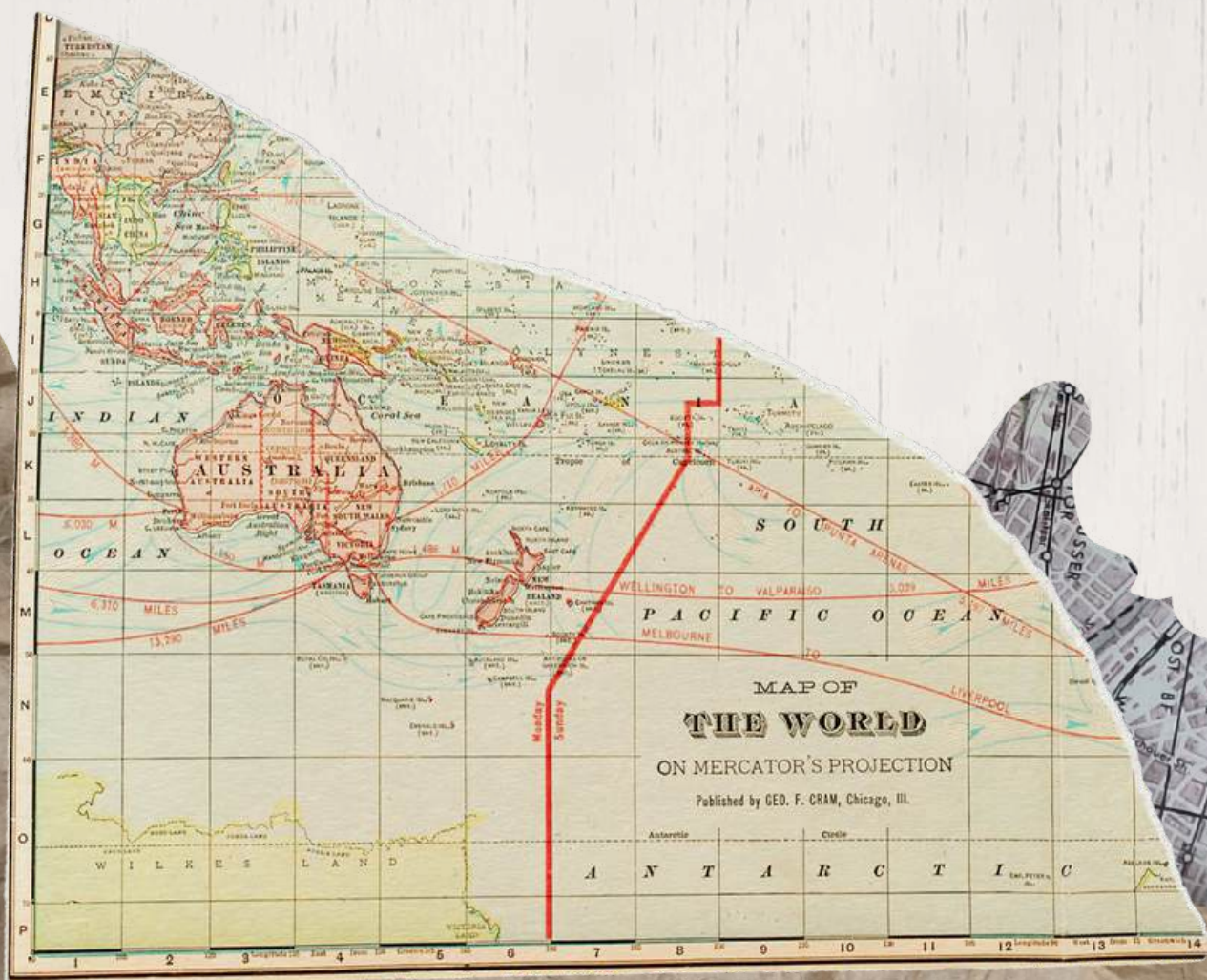
She'd never treat me like this if she knew.

House and Home

Fatima Hafsa

The familiar horn,
6.30 pm in Multan.
I push open the brown iron gate,
Abu brings the white Khyber
into the garage,
shaking his head in disbelief
at his 16 years old girl using this
big metal contraption like a swing.
Did I take his briefcase and lunchbox
or did he carry them himself?
The details elude me.
He hardly ever had other people do things for him.
I want to be a good *beti*.
Holding his things when he came home tired
gives me this feeling.
Multan was hot and dusty,
dirt gathers on my memory
like the *aandhi* that we always got
instead of rain.
How do I contain his scent
and his voice
and keep them safe
with intricate keys like the one for the locker
we kept in the store?
The steel *almari*
travelled with us from one city
to the other,
one house to the next
till it came here
lying spare in the back alley
of Ami's house.
It lost its purpose,
as did this *beti*
who couldn't save him
whilst saving hundreds of people before
and since.

Once, I knocked over
a full cup of
tea and it ran over the glass table top,
stained the carpet.
Everyone ran to cover
the liquid with tissues,
the white crumpled papers
slowly turning brown.





A Persian Affair

Ibtisam Tahir

Borrowed Heat

Penny Newcombe

Eve had never seen the world outside. Life inside the bunker was all she'd ever known: the fluorescent lights and aged grey walls, the same faces.

Her father brought her mother here when she was pregnant with Eve. His skill in nuclear and geothermic power was the reason they were selected. A talent he didn't successfully pass on to Eve before he died. Today, of all days, that was an issue.

Loading Day.

All members of the Hold were tested every year. Their knowledge of and resourcefulness to the bunker's systems were measured. It started with a practical test, then a questionnaire. The rooms were the groups. Eve's held only her now that her parents were gone. This was her first time doing it alone.

The losing room would lose its energy for the night. Few survived it. Eve didn't expect to pass this year. Not without her dad. Everyone knew it. She had never been smart enough. Dreamy Eve, her dad used to call her. Her fog-coloured eyes stared out of the small skylight at the endless black void—the only glimpse of the real world she would ever see.

The dining hall was a long, utilitarian space, filled with rows of thick, grey plastic tables. Eve collected her bowl of mush served as food, longing as always for meals she'd read about in books. At the far end of the hall, boxes were being passed out, each containing the test.

Families were gathered at the tables, sitting close, holding hands with red-rimmed eyes. Eve scanned the room. Her gaze softened when she saw the only baby, Milly, with her mum. Then she spotted Mrs. Andrews, who had hugged her tightly when her dad had died on the engineering assignment last year. Eve gave her a kind smile, which was returned. Then Eve's eyes landed on Callum. He was sitting at a table near the far wall, shovelling oats and vegetables into his mouth with that usual look of indifference. His expression was unreadable, as if everything in the hall were beneath him. She remembered when they were kids, how they'd spent hours running in the halls, pretending to be explorers in the real world before the Chill. But one day, without explanation, he had stopped talking to her. She hadn't fought it. She had simply mirrored him the moment he treated her like she was invisible. She must have been staring too long, because suddenly his amber eyes snagged on hers.

For a split second, their gazes locked. Her stomach flipped. She brushed her dusty blond fringe out of her eyes and quickly looked away, grabbing her box with the test from the counter.

It was the first time Eve had ever seen the infamous red letter, the one that marked her failure. Perhaps she should have shown some reaction. Shed a tear. Slammed her fist. Anything. But not even her hands shook.

She wasn't surprised. Compared to everyone else, she spent most of the test with her brain drifting into fictional stories. She really had to concentrate to come back to reality. Logic was not her thing. It made her a liability to The Hold.

That was it then; her room was losing heat tonight, and there was nothing she could do about it.

These were her final moments.

What a pointless nineteen years.

She opened *The Wind in the Willows*, letting the rivers and green meadows carry her to the world she would only ever dream of, and dived in fully.

...vivid on the morning sky; and still, as he looked, he lived; and still, as he lived, he wondered.

There was a knock at the door. Eve stood too fast. The book fell, its pages breaking free of the repurposed tape, scattering across the floor. The sight of her remaining lifeline torn apart stung more than the red letter.

The knock came again, louder. Who could it be? No one visited rooms. Discussions happened only in the halls.

She opened the door, relieved she wasn't holding anything else.

It was Callum.

His expression was tightly furious. His eyes landed on the red letter on her bedside table before he grabbed her shoulders. Eve bit her lip, trying not to react to the feel of his large hands. He pushed her back into the room and shut the door behind him.

"What are—" she felt suddenly hollow with the sear of his hands already gone, leaving only the ghost of his touch.

"I'm staying here tonight," he said, dragging a hand through his chestnut hair.

"I lost the test—you can't!"

Yeah. Me too.”

“...but only one room...”

“Looks like they changed the rules.”

His gaze glazed for a moment, then moved around the space, finally landing on the painting she had made of a boat drifting along a stream during what she imagined Spring looked like in the old world.

“Your room’s smaller than mine,” he said, flatly.

Callum was perched on the edge of her bed, stacking the loose pages of her book neatly. Eve stood in the far corner, unsure where she belonged now that he was here. She’d already questioned him on why they shut down two rooms this year, but his answers were all the same.

“I don’t know.” The delivery, more gruff and more irritable every time she asked.

She swallowed, finally changing the subject, as the truth of what was happening settled into something real. “When does the power go out?”

One of his eyebrows lifted. “You honestly think I remember that? I was ten.”

“You’ve been through this before?” she asked, genuinely shocked.

The book made a soft sound as he closed it, testing the spine, then set it beside himself on the bed. “You seriously didn’t know that’s how my parents died?”

The silence became heavy. Eve felt like she was choking.

She knew his parents had died, but hers wouldn’t tell her when or how. All she knew was that Callum had stopped being her friend, and she had never understood why. The image of him as a boy, freezing cold and between his parents’ corpses, flooded her mind.

Callum’s knee bounced, then stilled. “It doesn’t matter when,” he said. “You’ll... feel it when it happens.”

Eve stepped back toward the wall. It already felt cold as she leaned against it.

Callum moved like a man possessed. From his pockets came chemical hand warmers, a folded Mylar blanket that glittered under the fluorescent light, and a thermos bottle. Each item he placed on the bed with militant precision. Switches clicked; the little devices waking to life as he stuffed them under

the bedsheets.

Eve stood there, gawping, unsure where to look, what to do, or even where to put her hands.

Realisation dawned—he meant to get into her bed with her. He was here to share body heat.

“Do you have thicker duvets?”

She just stared at him, mouth dry.

“Eve, you need to focus. We’re going to need everything if we’re going to survive tonight.”

She snapped back to life, as though her dad had returned, telling her what to do. She pulled out everything they had and spread it across the bed. Fumbling slightly, Callum leaned over to help, and their fingers brushed. Eve froze. An electric current spiked through her arm, down her spine and right back up.

His amber eyes—that had always reminded her of a tiger’s—landed on hers, unflinching and not pulling away. Her pulse hammered up into her face. Kindly, and so unlike him, he chose not to notice.

Or he was simply unaffected.

They had each taken their showers separately. Eve had gone first. He had told her to, so she could get the warmth into her bones before the power went down. He went second while she dried her hair.

The air held the clinically harsh aroma of antiseptic soap.

She stayed ultra-focused on her tasks when he stepped out. His form blurred in her peripheral vision, muscles rippling as he dried.

Now that they were dressed in night clothes, they could look at each other again. Yet she still couldn’t.

His pyjamas were the standard grey ones issued by The Hold. She wore a soft white nightgown that had once belonged to her mother. She tugged at the hem, the fabric awkward against her legs. Why didn’t she own pyjamas like his?

She glanced at Callum. The breadth of his shoulders was impossible to miss with so little fabric. Blood rushed to her cheeks, a hollowing drop low in her stomach. He cleared his throat, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. His eyes landed on hers, then away again.

“Let’s climb in,” he said. “We don’t have much time left, I think.”

The room felt muffled with anticipation as the fluorescent lights dimmed, shadows stretching long across the walls. Their bed coats hung loosely from their shoulders, fluffy socks pulled up high.

“OK,” she whispered.

Callum pulled back the layered blankets and climbed in first.

There was a tink, tink sound as the continuous humming of the power went out. The temperature was dropping. Cold invaded the room, ghostly forces slithering through the ceiling, the walls, the floor.

“Eve,” Callum shouted.

Only then did she register how little light remained, how he was reduced to a smudged outline. She slid in beside him. He sealed the blankets around them in quick succession, trapping the heat from whatever he had done to them.

Their shoulders met. The backs of their hands touched and stayed.

“You’re shaking,” he murmured.

“You’re not.”

“I’m not cold yet.”

“Neither am I,” she whispered, her teeth chattering

“You’re scared?”

“Aren’t you?” She looked at him then, really looked, only seeing a grey outline while her eyes struggled to adjust. But he said nothing. She turned to the black ceiling, her nose already tingling pink.

The covers needed to turn into a sort of tent. The room was too cold for any bit of skin to touch it. Breathing felt heavy, the numbness was spreading. Eve’s feet, hands, ears, all the edges of her body. Every part of her yearned to burrow into the scorch of a man next to her. But she didn’t move. Neither did he. Their bodies were stiff, frozen in the positions they’d taken when they first got in. Only their shoulders and the backs of their hands touched, their index fingers brushing feather-light and somehow, slightly interlinked. Some kind of endless fluttering feedback loop sprout up wherever they touched.

She couldn’t tell how much time had passed. It felt like hours, though it was probably only minutes. The room felt smaller, like a place she had never been.

“Are you feeling it now?” he whispered.

She nodded, making the sheet ruffle.

“Can I... hold you to me?” he asked. She could hear the chatter in his teeth. She let herself do what she’d been craving in the silence, leaning into him, shuddering as if her body had been holding back its relief for too long. She felt it from him too.

He shifted carefully, one arm sliding around her shoulders, the other supporting her back. Comfort spread between them, like a heated blanket. She let herself melt into him. It still wasn’t enough. She wanted more. To entwine their legs, to tuck her feet against his but she held back. She felt him swallow; his neck pressed against the top of her head. His scent wrapped around her, a strange mix of Callum pheromones that made her want to taste them on his lips. What she imagined the wind tasted like. She didn’t remember him ever smelling as good as this.

She felt the cold along her arms despite being entirely under the covers. But she knew it could have been worse. If Callum hadn’t been here, she would have felt it in her core by now, and the night had only just begun.

The many warmers he had cracked and scattered through the bed helped fight the ever-pressing chill the room was giving off now that the power was gone. Her fingers twitched against his arm where she clung to him.

“You can come closer... if you need to,” he said.

Eve shifted her hips into the only gap left. She heard his fast intake of breath. She immediately pulled back a little, apologising. But his arms tightened around her, drawing her fully against him now. Her eyes closed at the miraculous feel of him, and she tangled her limbs in his.

“Thank you,” she said. All of him against her made her flush. It was a weird sensation, feeling cold and hot in equal measures. It was difficult to breathe under the covers. Steam from their exhales coated her face. She wanted to push her head out for just a second, to feel fresh air, to wipe her cheeks.

She pushed herself upwards.

“Eve, no—” Callum started.

But it was too late. The moment she lifted the sheet, the cold struck her face like metal. Callum sealed them back under the covers immediately. But the feel of the air above the duvet was enough to leave her face burning. It felt tight, raw, almost painful.

“Are you OK?” Callum asked, rubbing her cheeks with his large hands, forcing circulation back into them.

“I didn’t—it burns,” she whispered.

“Don’t lift the covers again.”

His hands stilled a moment longer than necessary on her cheeks before he pulled them away, tucking the blankets tighter around them. Their small cocoon dampened again with their breath.

Eve snuggled closer without thinking now, zero embarrassment. The realisation of what waited above the covers, especially knowing this was only the beginning of the cold, meant this was probably their last night alive.

Callum’s inhale was deep when her nose brushed his neck as she tucked her face in there. She didn’t think he could hold her any tighter yet was surprised when he did. She had never felt so cherished.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she said, done with the pretence.

“Me too,” he murmured, stroking his palms soothingly over her back, the sensation sending tingling zings everywhere.

“I can’t believe they did this to two rooms this year.”

“Yeah...” he replied, with a swallow.

Eve heard the deception in his voice, but the way his arms tightened made her close her eyes and enjoy the feeling of their bodies pressed together, her knee sliding between his.

It felt so nice that it was hard to believe they were living on an uninhabitable frozen planet in a room with no power. They were so close now. Eve could hear his heartbeat. “I missed you,” she said with a nervous whisper. “When you stopped talking to me... I know it’s been ten years, but you were my best friend.”

Callum said nothing.

“I didn’t know why you stopped talking to me. My mum and dad never told me anything. I didn’t understand that your mum and dad had... I didn’t know—” The tears came then, and he turned fully toward her.

“Hey, hey—”

He wiped the corners of her eyes with both thumbs.

“I’m angry that they tried to keep me safe from stuff like that. That’s why you stopped speaking to me, isn’t it? Because I didn’t show sympathy, for what you must have been through. I can’t— I should’ve—”

But she never finished the sentence.

Callum's lips were on hers. The softness of his mouth startled her, the pressure of it sending a strange ripple all the way down, and up like it had joined with her circulation. When his tongue touched lightly at the edge of her lips the sensation sent a sudden, spark through her, settling between her legs. It made her toes curl inside her socks. Though his tongue was rough, it felt nice when he brushed it against hers. He tasted like everything she didn't know she was missing.

She had never been kissed before. Not once in nineteen years. Not that others didn't try, Eve just kept herself to herself, wouldn't meet people's eyes and ran like a startled ferret when guys tried to talk to her.

While for Callum... it was probably nothing. The rumours about him had travelled through The Hold, he was known for messing around with many girls. Just not her. She assumed he hated her. The warmth suddenly faltered as Eve realized the truth. Hers was the only room he could come to if he wanted to survive the night. That was the only reason he was here. Not because of her but because he had no other choice. He needed her for survival.

She pulled away, the space between them growing colder by the second. His eyes searched hers, brows creased in confusion. He didn't know what had changed, but Eve couldn't hide the hurt anymore. She wasn't good at hiding her emotions.

"I..." he said, trying to understand her sudden withdrawal. "I...stopped talking to you because I didn't want you carrying that shit. I was ten. I didn't want to watch it... happen to you too. You're the only sun in this place." He swallowed. "I didn't want to dim it." She shook her head against the pillow.

"If I'd have known—"

"I liked that you didn't," he said, brushing his fingers through her hair, tucking it behind her ear. "I liked knowing you were still... you. Still pretending to sail." A humourless laugh escaped him as he remembered the games they had played. She always let him be captain.

"I wouldn't have been able to..." He trailed off unable to finish the sentence. He changed the subject. "When your mum died," he gulped, "I tried to reach you." A memory surfaced. Familiar hands pressing something into hers while she waited outside the infirmary for her father's screams to stop.

"That was you?" she whispered. "The chocolate?"

Callum's hands paused against her neck. "You didn't know?"

She shook her head. "I couldn't see properly. I thought maybe... but then I thought that it must have been impossible, that I had imagined it."

"We were thirteen," he said. "I thought you didn't want me near you. I thought I would just make it

worse for you.” He hesitated. “And last year, when your dad died... it was too late. The way you looked at me by then—”

“I thought you hated me,” she said. “I was looking at you the way you looked at me.” Callum let out a snort. Eve mirrored it, letting a laugh escape herself, at how idiotic they’d both been.

His fingers circled her cheeks, stroking tingles.

Their lips met again, exploring what felt nice. This time she pressed fully into him, drinking in the tiny noises he made in response, letting herself feel everything all at once, until she wasn’t sure where she began and he started.

There was no cold in any part of her now. He was gloriously warm, and perfect. If she could bottle up his taste and scent and save it for later she would. Eve pushed even harder against him desperate for more and felt his hardness. She pulled back a little then, and opened her eyes. He was already watching her.

“I’ve... never—” she started to say, needing him to understand her inexperience. She did want him, desperately, more than she’d ever wanted anything in her life, but she was afraid, of being disappointing.

“We’re not—” he murmured. “I wasn’t... I just... can’t help. Especially around you. But I’m not...” He rubbed the back of his neck, and Eve felt the flush radiating off him. “I’m not expecting it. I didn’t come here for that.”

“You’ve done it before?” She knew he had, and didn’t know why she needed to hear it from him, nor why she was pushing against him again. Pretending to herself it was just for shared heat—she was so perfect in her body temperature, in this moment to even think about how frozen her room actually was. How bad it would be if he wasn’t here.

His entire body was unrelaxed, unsure where to hold her. He answered her question with a nod, looking unusually guilty. “But never. Not anything like this... not anything that... mattered.”

“This was my first kiss... I’m sorry if I was bad—”

But he didn’t let her finish. His lips were on hers again, harder this time, as though he were branding himself on her—a mark she’d never be able to erase and would never want to. “You’re perfect,” he said breathlessly. “I’ve wanted you for so long... I never thought—” He swallowed. “If I’d known you’d felt the same way...”

“Me too,” Eve whispered, remembering when they’d been children and had their pirate wedding,

and he'd made her a ring out of his mum's hair band. She smiled.

"What's so funny?" Callum asked, tilting his head.

She told him.

"I remember. And I meant it," he murmured, pressing his lips to her forehead.

"Yeah, sure, I bet you meant it when you said I poo over I do!"

"I did not say that." He squeezed her ribs, making her giggle, it was her ticklish spot. "I told my mum and dad we were married," he went on.

"No, you didn't!"

"I absolutely did. I asked if you could come and live with us. Made a space for you under my desk."

Eve's eyes crinkled, only her toes felt cold but easily fixed under Callum's knees. "I think I said something similar to my mum and dad," she told him, trying to remember. "I'm sorry," she said, again, her memories taking her too far, "for not being what you needed back then. For copying your emotions instead of—I mean... I wasn't a very good wife."

"Well, you were a child bride..." He smirked, making her cheeks hurt from smiling so wide.

"But truly, it wasn't you."

"I can't even begin to imagine what it was like for you to lose both your parents at that age. It was tough enough for me as an adult, but Callum... you were so small, to go through that, to have them die next to you... and now The Hold doing it to you again. If we survive this, we need to demand to know why they did it—to shut the power from two rooms. It's... it's evil."

Callum went silent. Eve felt the warmth she was used to vanish. A sudden tension that ran along his arms. Gooseflesh appeared along his skin.

Eve felt like she had a very large ice shard lodged in her windpipe as she realised. "You... didn't fail the test... did you?"

Callum didn't answer. His grip loosened. Suddenly, he felt far away, though he was right beside her.

"You didn't," she whispered.

"Eve—"

"You knew I failed and you—"

“I tried to reason with them, tried to get them to let you stay with me in my room... but because we’re not married, they wouldn’t... I even asked what if we did that today but they wouldn’t budge.”

She felt like she was going to be sick, “It’s suicide! What have you done?”

“I wasn’t going to let you—“

“Let me? It was nothing to do with you. I was never going to pass, Callum. You know that. Everyone did, it was only a matter of time. You’re the smartest person in this place, you passed this test over and over even when you were just a boy. You’re the kind of person The Hold needs, not me.”

“None of that matters to me... you more than anyone should know that.”

There wasn’t anything left to say, and what was the point? They were in it now, with no escape.

“I wish you didn’t do that,” she barely whispered.

“Do you?”

She shook her head, eyes glistening. “I wish I did, though. Truly I do. I wish I wasn’t a coward. If you weren’t here I—”

“Shh.” He pulled her in again, and this time she went fully, with zero space or hesitation. Her leg over his, his hand at her back, pressing her into him like he could meld her there, where she belonged.

“We’re going to die, aren’t we?” she said, her voice cracking, unable to hide the tremble.

“That doesn’t matter now. Nothing else matters,” he told her, sounding and feeling like he meant every word.

Their breathing filled the space under the covers, humid and damp, nowhere for it to go. It should have been too much, and it would have been, with anyone else. Above ground, hollow moans and cracks echoed as the ice shifted, the vibrations almost musical, like the whale sounds she’d seen in the documentaries her dad had saved. She had never heard anything from outside the bunker before; the constant drone of electricity had always drowned out the world beyond. Now, for the first time, she was hearing it, alien, yet oddly peaceful, a muted lullaby from a world she had never been to despite living on.

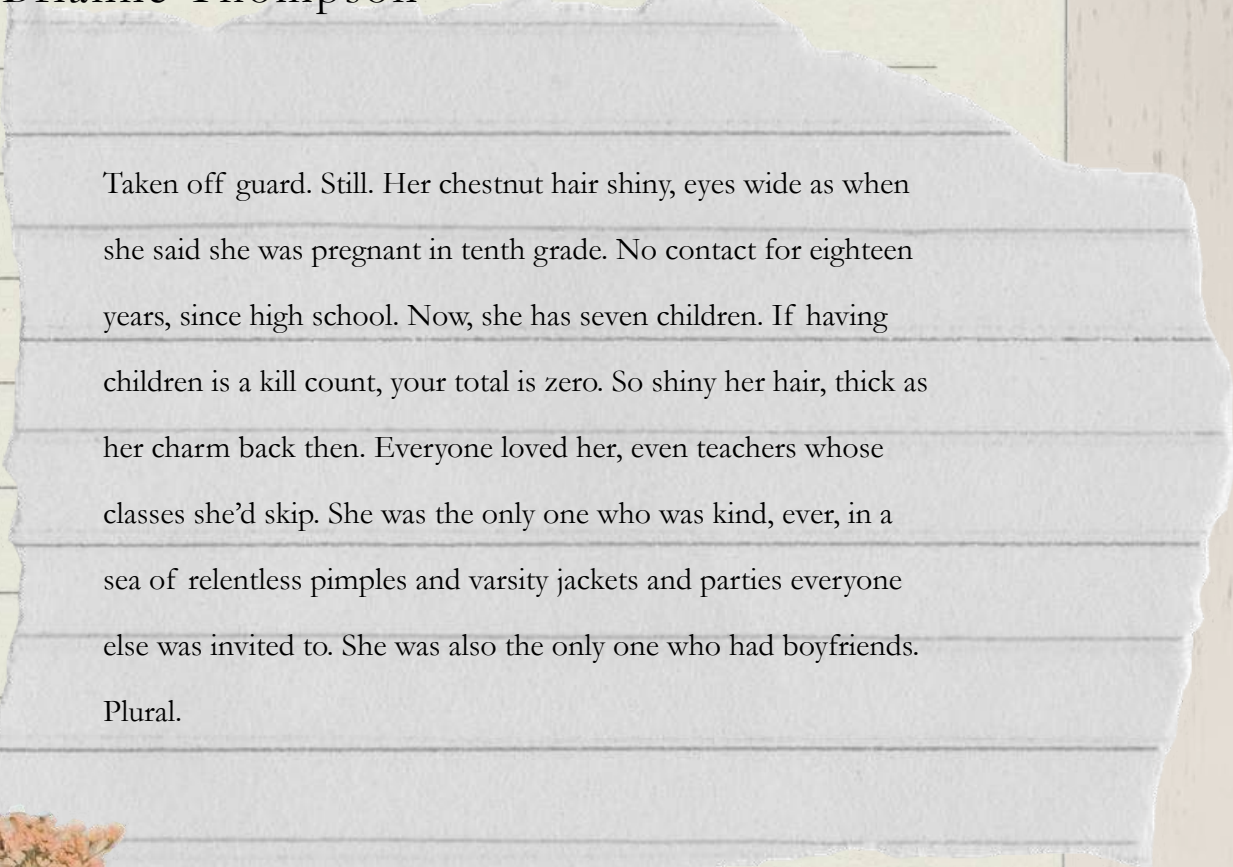
They kissed, deeply, both wondering why they had ever held back. He held her tighter, like he wasn’t going to let anything take her. The warmth they created together was almost metaphysical.

This, she imagined, was what a sunrise felt like.



Laughter on the Wind

Brianne Thompson



Taken off guard. Still. Her chestnut hair shiny, eyes wide as when she said she was pregnant in tenth grade. No contact for eighteen years, since high school. Now, she has seven children. If having children is a kill count, your total is zero. So shiny her hair, thick as her charm back then. Everyone loved her, even teachers whose classes she'd skip. She was the only one who was kind, ever, in a sea of relentless pimples and varsity jackets and parties everyone else was invited to. She was also the only one who had boyfriends. Plural.



Read the coffee menu while your hands fumble a credit card. So wide, her blue eyes. Became best friends in eighth grade. First it was homework and notes passed. Then: makeup, glitter polish, burping contests, slumber parties, Eminem posters stolen from Walmart.



Camcorder sitcoms: *Sex in the City* but it was rural besties moving to the Big Apple. Best friends living in a NYC studio apartment. Her fake name was Dallas; she was at fashion school on a scholarship and we bought our first pair of Jimmy Choos.

In ninth grade she whispered to you with wide eyes so serious, explaining how he fingered her. Then later, when a different, older, he asked *is this ok* in the back of his car after prom, she thought he meant fingering but he did it to her and she didn't say no.

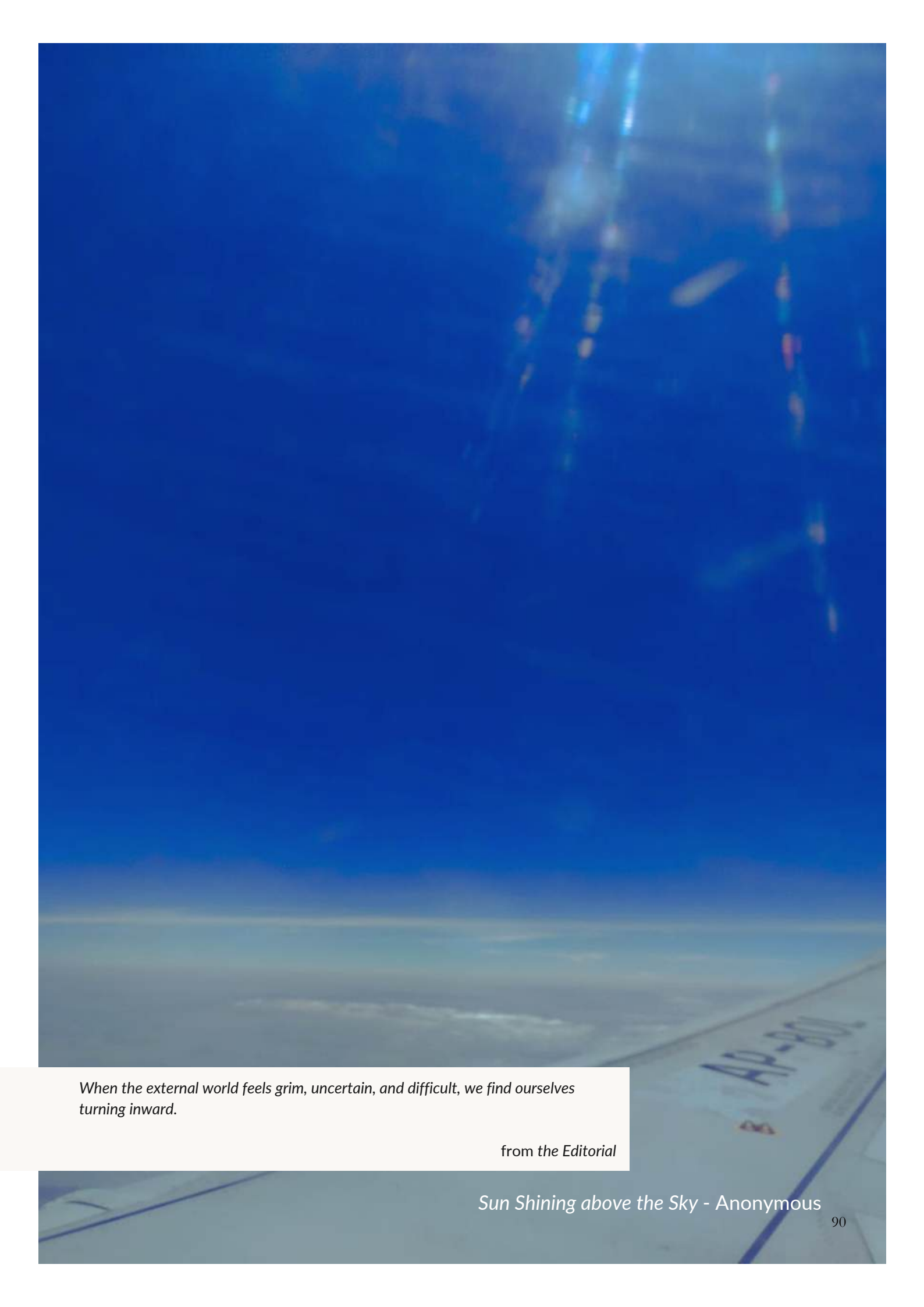
She shrugged. *I was just taken off guard.*

Held her secrets, made mixtapes, laughed in the windy fields behind school, banked the accumulating currency of a spiteful stepmother. Thought we shared something immutable, perfect if brief, before her first pregnancy. Then she only spoke of him, then only to him. The desert was hot and boring and escape was imperative. Off to college, to keep your kill count at zero, to have a career, become cosmopolitan etc etc. She stayed local, swelling her kill count to two after graduation.

Want to thank her, want to ask, in a hometown coffee shop decades after the fact. Her kindness got to the tender bits hidden from junior high, from lockers slammed in faces. Did she too feel fractals of love, recursive tenderness big enough for BFF love, romance, devotion, some sort of platonic ideal? Spirals tighten but never disappear.

When *you meant so much to-* slips from your mouth, she swats it out of the air, sipping house roast. *Oh we had our little phase* she says, hair shining.

Taken off guard. Could have dropped your tea if your stomach hadn't fallen out first. A fly, a dust mote. Nothing. No you. No spirals, only fleeting laughter on the wind.



When the external world feels grim, uncertain, and difficult, we find ourselves turning inward.

from the Editorial

Sun Shining above the Sky - Anonymous

Ultramarine

Ruchi Sneha



Blue had always been my favourite colour. I trailed my fingers over blue-ribboned stanchions guarding artworks hung on the walls. Rain had dampened my hair and the scar on my face itched because of the moisture. Visitors were leaving the halls, chittering like bats, their backpacks slung across their fronts. I inhaled the scent of polished wood and preservative chemicals. The eyes of the paintings followed me as I strolled towards the end of the exhibit, an envelope clutched in my hand.

They hung side by side: two life-size paintings framed in gold, protected by a glass case and a border of security tape.

“Hi boys,” I spoke into the silence.

The painting on the left was a dim, watercolour art of Yurei: his long, flowing hair splayed over his shoulders, sombre caramel eyes and the tiniest curve of his lip. He was smiling. In all the paintings, he was always smiling.

On the other hand, Giese, in his portrait, had a faraway look in his crystal blue eyes. His pierced ear peeked through ice-blond hair, and his mouth was slightly parted. He looked mesmerised.

Below the paintings was the name of the artist: *Sanyer Giese*.

I raised my hand to the glass and my fingers left a smudge on the pane. Someone would clean the display tomorrow and it would be like I had never been here.

The first time I met Giese, I was close to financial ruin. The exhibit was on the verge of shutting down, and I had nothing to give back to the investors. When my phone rang, I thought it was another investor and I almost ignored it, but the screen said: Sharon Dean.

She wasted no time. “Find anything for your exhibit?”

“If I had, I wouldn’t be in my living room drinking cheap beer.”

She chuckled. “I might have someone for you. Sending you his address now. Go see him.”

The address did not prepare me for the sheer size of the mansion I walked into. It was a colossal edifice, spread over several acres and polished to a pristine eggshell white. Sports cars lined the driveway, one in each primary colour. His PA met me at the gate and took me to a door in the basement.

I don’t know what I had expected, all those years ago, but I was surprised to find a thin, gangly man on the floor, eyes covered by sunglasses even in the dim light of his basement, a shock of white hair knotted and messy across his forehead. He sat on the floor with one arm draped over his knees, and the other holding a palette knife, stabbing it against the canvas, like he was trying to carve indents into it.

Even from a distance, he smelled strongly of whiskey.

Canvases surrounded him. Easel after easel of watercolour paintings and pencil sketches. They were all odd pieces too: half a face, someone’s hair, hands, twisted lips, a nose, an ear.

“Mr. Giese?” I asked. “I’m here to talk about your artwork. I own an exhibition in Manhattan, near SoHo. I would like to offer you a place there, for your paintings.”

At first, he didn’t reply. Had he not heard me? I opened my mouth to repeat myself, when he spoke.

“Fuck off,” he grumbled, releasing a foul stench of alcohol that hit me in the face. His words were slurred and the glass of yellow liquid beside him was clearly not his first drink of the day.

“Excuse me?”

“My art is not for the public,” he said, turning his head towards me. His sunglasses slipped to reveal the most beautiful eyes I had ever seen in my life: prismatic, vivid blue with splotches of white across them. Blind. He had to be at least partially blind.

I looked at the paintings with a newfound appreciation.

Perhaps it was cheap to elevate their status just because they had been painted by a disabled man, but my exhibit needed anything it could use and I wasn't above resorting to petty promotion tactics.

"If you change your mind," I said, tapping and placing a card on the floor in front of me, "give me a call."

I was losing hope. All recent conversations with artists had gone poorly. My exhibit needed a strong piece, something that created tides, not ripples. A moon, not a rock. Giese's artwork had the potential to cause a stir, but he hadn't contacted me. I was about to call Sharon and tell her that her idea had failed, when my phone rang.

It was Sawyer Giese, inviting me to a bar in Greenwich Village.

When I arrived, I realised I was overdressed. I had tied my hair up with a bow and worn a cashmere cardigan. The place was rowdy: throngs of college students chugging beers, loud rock music blasting through the speakers and arcade games blinking in the back.

Giese looked entirely out of place too, sitting alone by the bar in a neat, navy blue suit with sunglasses perched on his nose. Awash with pink disco lights. He was nursing a lowball glass, with his head resting on one hand. If he saw me approach, he didn't acknowledge me until I was sitting in front of him.

"Did you have time to rethink my proposition?" I asked.

"I can't display my art at your exhibit," he said, with an exaggerated drawl.

"Why not?"

"I'm too good for a small-time nobody's exhibit." He grinned, revealing a set of rugged, stained teeth. Before I could really start to take offence, he added, "And the paintings you saw are

worthless. I'm trying to create the painting. I keep failing.”

“What are you trying to paint?” I asked.

“Have a drink with me,” he said, instead of answering me.

I swallowed back my annoyance. I needed him, not the other way around. I ordered a drink. Then, two more. He talked a lot, often stumbling over his own words. He talked about everything in the world and nothing at the same time: sports, weather, Picasso, *Beowulf* and Kim Kardashian. The verbal waterfall gushed out of him with a speed that bordered on desperate – he talked like he was running out of time – and at times, I found my eyes glazing. I wondered if he had anyone else to speak with.

It became increasingly clear to me that he was stringing me along. This was his twisted idea of a date, or something even worse, and I asked for the check, citing how I needed to be home soon.

“Walk with me,” he said, paying for both of us before I could protest.

Giese took me on a walk down the winding road and I questioned myself for deciding to go on a walk with a strange man in the night. I couldn't justify saying yes. Something about him drew me in, despite how unpleasant the experience had been so far. Every instinct in my body said I should walk away, and yet, I found myself matching his pace. Streetlights lit up the road and cars whizzed past us. Rain had left glistening patches on the asphalt and a gentle breeze weaved through my hair. Giese walked with slow, deliberate steps, looking up and down, measuring each inch before he crossed it. He really was partially blind.

“It was a good night,” I said, finally, “but I do need to get home.”

“There.” He stopped by a tree. A wounded tree. Its bark was stripped in the middle, white skin peeping out of an ugly gash. It resembled the scar on my face and for a second, I thought he was making fun of me. But he wasn't looking at me, at all. His

sunglasses lowered, his vibrant blue eyes were fixed on the tree.

“What?” I asked, confused.

“This is where it happened,” he said.

Giese and Yurei met in high school and went to university together. They became best friends like ice melts in whiskey.

Giese was born into money; he was part of a fraternity and an incorrigible party animal all through university. He could afford to be. Late nights, drugs in the bathroom, long drives in fancy cars, he wanted it all. There was nothing he said no to.

And Yurei was his companion in everything he did. They were joined at the hip. If you wanted to find Yurei, all you had to do was look for Giese, and vice versa.

Giese didn't know much about Yurei. His best friend was an extremely private person. He never talked about his family, never left his dorm room unless it was with Giese, never even had a girlfriend.

Giese didn't dig too much into Yurei's life. He was happy with whatever Yurei extended to him. They were living in a bubble of shared hedonism in a time where everything felt eternal.

It wasn't like they never fought. About the smallest of things too.

“You're too careless, Sawyer,” Yurei would say. “People flock to you because you pay for them. You need to learn to be more careful.”

“People flock to me because I'm hot and extremely charming,” Giese would reply, making Yurei scoff.

Their first and only big fight happened in their final year.

They met at their usual haunt in Greenwich Village and Yurei

sat by the bar, nursing a whiskey sour. Giese knew something was up even before he reached him. Eyebags covered Yurei's face, his cheeks were pallid and sunken and his long hair was a mess around his shoulders.

"I'm dropping out," he said, and Giese felt like he'd been punched. "Going home. This is a goodbye."

"Why?" Giese demanded.

"My family needs me. I'm not you, Sawyer. I have to provide for them. I can't afford tuition anymore and I can't keep living off of you like this. This friendship has been a drug to me and I'm quitting now."

"I'll pay your tuition," Giese offered. "You don't have to stop being my friend."

"See?" Yurei smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "That's exactly why I can't be your friend."

"This doesn't have to be a goodbye!" Giese was on the verge of slamming his fist through the wall. Nothing Yurei said made sense to him. He couldn't comprehend why he didn't allow him to solve all his problems.

"This is your world, Sawyer," Yurei said. He sounded tired, as if he'd had this conversation in his mind many times before. "Not mine. My reality is far from it, and I can't live in this dream anymore."

"Stay." Giese was begging and he didn't care. "Stay. Have one last night out with me. Let's get drunk. I'll buy us a bottle, I'll buy us the whole fucking bar. Please. You can decide what you want in the morning, but please spend this night with me."

For a second, Yurei looked like he would say no. Then his gaze softened. "Of course, Sawyer. One last night out."

Giese didn't remember much of the accident, or even the

hospital. When he woke up, his vision was clouded. Everything was brighter, the world plunged into a vibrant palette of scattered lights that hurt his eyes. Nurses' faces loomed into his vision but he couldn't remember them, no matter how hard he tried. He couldn't remember anyone's face.

He heard the words, "Your friend didn't--"

And he started shouting. He didn't let them finish the sentence, never heard the words, but he didn't need to. Giese woke up with a hole in his heart, and he knew what shape the missing piece had.

His family settled the drunk driving fine. His dad bought him a new Lamborghini. Giese was back at university, the best artist in his whole class, the celebrated prodigy on his way to a great future, even with damaged eyes and a brain that no longer remembered anyone's face.

But he was never the same again. Every time he painted, he thought of Yurei. He couldn't remember his face, but he remembered individual features, scattered fragments of his visage.

The edge of his jaw. The line of his nose. The slant of his eyebrow. Giese painted everything he remembered. He compiled all these little pieces of Yurei into his paintings, trying to reanimate a man that was lost to him. His own Frankenstein's monster.

He kept falling short. Every painting was a ship made of the same parts, but it wasn't the same ship. No matter what he painted, the finished painting resulted in a collection of Yurei's features, but it wasn't Yurei. Giese didn't really realise when his grief became an obsession. He didn't realise when ten years passed. When his mansion became chock-full of paintings of a man that wasn't quite Yurei. He was so close to his masterpiece, one last tribute to his best friend, but he was always so far. He felt like he was going crazy.

That's when he met me.

Glittering, crystal tears lined his eyes as he finished talking about Yurei. He glanced at me, reaching out to touch the scar running across my face. I flinched from his warm touch, but he was unfazed, tracing the rough edges of my scar like he was memorising it.

“You’re beautiful,” he said. It wasn’t a compliment. “Worth painting.”

“Why don’t you?” I asked.

“I can’t paint anything until *the* painting is done. And I can’t finish it. I have nothing of Yurei’s, no pictures, not even the name of his mother. Yurei never let anyone click his pictures. I have no one to talk to. I never made friends in college. There’s no one in the world who seems to remember him, except me. Tell me,” he breathed out, “am I crazy?”

“A little.” I glanced at the tree, imagining a blue Lamborghini wrapped around it. Sparkling shards of glass scattered all over the road. Blood like paint splattered over the dashboard. A young college kid with his head against the wheel. Chilling. “I can help you find information on Yurei, *if* you agree to display your paintings. If we open the exhibit to the public, someone might recognise him and give us a tip.”

“I can’t share him with the world,” Giese said, quietly.

“Do you love your best friend, or do you love the idea that he is *your* best friend?”

He looked at me for the longest time. Then, he sighed. “Fine. Have your pound of flesh.”

The exhibit was a hit. Of course it was. Paintings created over ten years by a partially blind man, born out of an obsessive, half-drunken spiral. They weren’t the greatest pieces on Earth, in fact, skill-wise, some were even mediocre. The sentiment behind them, however, elevated them to the level of divine. It made Giese a god.

He refused to visit the exhibit, though. He refused to even collect a cheque. He said I could keep all of it, he had no use of money made through Yurei's name. The numbers we raked in spun my head, but to him, those numbers meant nothing.

After months of begging, he finally relented and visited the exhibit. He was using a cane. I was so delighted by his visit that it took me some time to realise he was limping.

"What happened?" I asked.

"The body is a feeble, mortal device. It can't contain all my genius."

I laughed. Arrogant as ever.

We walked around the exhibit together. He barely glanced at the paintings. If anything, he pointedly avoided them. When he did look at them, anger and annoyance flitted across his face. I'd never seen anyone look at their creations with as much hatred as him. Perhaps he hated their inadequacy, their inaccuracy. Or perhaps he hated the fact that these paintings had to exist in the first place.

We paused by one of his better works: a chiaroscuro sketch with delicate crosshatchings, where Yurei's eyes seemed alive, full of love and compassion. I knew nothing about the man, but having heard Giese talk about him over the last few months, I developed an image of a wise, kind man who lived by his principles. Someone I could respect.

"Wow," a voice said near us, catching our attention. Two girls were studying a painting of Yurei's hands. Giese had painted every ridge on his palm with care, highlights on his pink nails, a scar on his little finger. His skin was full of so many evocative colours – the slight red undertone, the browns of the folds of his fingers – that I felt like it would be warm to the touch. "I wish someone loved me like this. Enough to dedicate years to creating paintings of me. Isn't it incredible?"

I glanced at Giese but he had gone completely white, his face matching his hair. He exhaled softly, turned and limped away.

We stayed until closing time. Then, surrounded by silence and paintings of Yurei, sitting on the floor in the centre of the exhibit, I uncorked a bottle of Pinot Noir.

I took a sip of the pungent beverage and then passed the bottle to Giese.

“You’ve been awfully quiet,” I commented.

“Do you think I love him?” he asked.

What kind of a stupid question was that? “Duh.”

“We were friends. Not lovers. Right?” He didn’t wait for me to reply. “I’m confused. I don’t know if we were friends or if I was in love with him. I don’t know if I am in love now. It’s not love. It’s an obsession. Isn’t it?”

“It’s not an entirely unhealthy obsession. Your drinking, though. Now that’s a different story.” I tried to make light of the situation but he had a crazed look in his eyes. His eyebrows were scrunched, and his breaths shallow.

“I’m going crazy,” he said, softly. “I keep seeing him. I can’t remember his face, and it’s driving me crazy. The other day I saw someone with a smile just like his. I thought it was him. Could he still be around? Maybe I’ll walk by him one day and no longer recognise his face. I keep seeing him in strangers. He’s haunting me.”

He was speaking rapidly, and I found myself wrapping my arms around him. At first, he tensed. Then slowly he succumbed to my embrace and I held him as sobs racked his body.

He drank the whole bottle that night, and I didn’t stop him.

The tip line turned out to be a success. People from Giese’s university and old school recognised the man in the paintings. I started getting calls every day with jigsaw pieces of information about Yurei. About the time he stayed up all night with someone when they wanted to hurt themselves. How he finished

his assignments beforehand and let others copy. How he had the brightest smile. How no one knew anything about his family. How he was a ghost even in life; a man with no past, but a man with so much presence that he touched everyone he interacted with.

The more I knew about Yurei, the more I understood Giese's obsession.

Yurei was gone. All that was left of him were memories. A xerox of a xerox. I had a lot to piece together: enough to create mental images of Yurei, but not enough to render it into an actual painting.

None of it helped Giese. It was information he didn't care about. Others' opinion of Yurei was as worthless to him as his failed paintings.

Then, one day, a girl called and told me she had an old photo of Yurei.

"Don't show it to me," Giese said. "I won't be able to process it fully anyway."

"Okay." I held up the photo in front of me, its back to Giese's milky eyes. Yurei was with Giese in the photo. They were sitting on a bench in Central Park together, mouths wide open in laughter, washed in the golden light of a New York sunset. Yurei barely looked eighteen in that photo. Young. He was always going to be young, while Giese was more than ten years older now, worn around the face, weighed down, thin, fragile.

"How about this? You paint, and I'll guide you, tell you if you're getting it right?"

"You want to be my partner so bad," he teased, but his eyes were glowing. He was watching the photo hungrily, as if he was contemplating ripping it out of my hands to have one, just one glance at his best friend.

His willpower was strong, though. He brought out a new canvas

and a fresh set of brushes. A new beginning.

“So. Do I start with his eyes or his mouth?”

I thought about it. “His eyes.”

Several hospital trips later, the painting was finally complete. I had scolded Giese relentlessly for his drinking habit but this achievement deserved a celebration, so I let him have his Scotch on the rocks.

He swirled the ice in his glass, staring at the finished painting.

It was brilliant. The work of a true genius. Perfection: it looked exactly like Yurei. He had captured everything from his delicate fingers to his deep, chocolate eyes, his gorgeous dark hair and his kind smile. The painting was brimming with life, Yurei's eyes lit with ardour, like any moment he would laugh out loud, step out of the painting and join us for a drink.

“Are you happy?” I asked. It was a silly question, but I cared immensely for the answer. It was important that Giese be happy. He had achieved something after ten years of chasing it.

It had to mean something.

“It's done,” he said, reverently. Divine light spilled out of his face. He was a god kneeling at the altar, a celestial beast turned into a devotee on his knees with his head bowed.

I imagined Giese through all these years. Downing glass after glass, splashing paints across the canvas, always chasing the man who had left him behind. Paintings filling up his house, each one more disappointing than the last. All the nights he spent, squinting in his basement. Spending every waking moment with his paintings, even taking them to bed. He deserved this moment. He deserved so much more.

He turned to me and his expression slowly shifted to a mask of confusion. “What now?”

I clinked my glass with his. “Now you’re free. You can paint whatever you want.”

He called me at midnight, just as I was about to drift off to sleep.

“My life is over,” he said, deadpan.

“Elaborate.”

“I tried to paint. Nothing. I’m dry.” He paused. “I have had one goal for a decade and it’s done now. I can’t imagine painting anything else. I don’t *want* anything else. I thought, if I could finish painting him, my grief would let go of my throat, but it’s still there. *He* is still there. I want to be with him.”

“I have an idea.” This was a man looking for hope, and for some reason, I thought I could give it to him. “Paint yourself.”

He had the audacity to snort. “I know I’m the most handsome man you’ve ever seen, but I’m not creating art for your bedroom.”

“No, idiot.” I huffed. “Paint a self-portrait. Make it as beautiful as him, and I’ll hang you beside him. Forever.”

“Forever?”

“And a day.”

He didn’t tell me about the diagnosis. His PA did. Perhaps, in his own way, he was trying to save me from the grief.

I had known from the start, hadn’t I? A man of his insane disposition simply had to be a source of grief. He had always been an open wound, and I must’ve known from our first meeting that he would bleed on me.

The first thing he ever told me was to fuck off. He had been warning me.

Like blue waves find the seashelled shore, I found him. He was the most beautiful man I knew. Infuriatingly self-obsessed and arrogant. A walking warning. A car crash waiting to happen again, and I just couldn't stay away.

He died miserably. If there was a thing more painful than his life, it was his death.

They said it was the alcohol, but I knew it wasn't.

It was Yurei. It had always been.

Giese's brilliant blue eyes stared at the distance. Even in the last painting he made, before he could no longer paint, the asshole didn't look at me. I knew what he was looking at. Yurei. Always Yurei.

They belonged together. Nothing more perfect than two dead men – best of friends, best of almost-lovers – hung up side by side. People pooled to see them in droves, marvelling at them.

I was finally starting to understand why Giese used to look at his paintings with so much hatred. I wanted to burn them down. To set fire to the exhibit. Ashes to dust.

Holding up the envelope in my hand, I read the name on the front. Yurei's sister. I had met her a few months after Giese's death. She was the only remaining family of Yurei's, and while she was angry at first – we had made her brother's death into a spectacle – she finally relented and accepted the percentage of the profits I offered to her. All things considered, that was the best place the money could go. I was sure Giese would have agreed.

I flipped the switch, plunging the exhibit – and the boys – into darkness. Tomorrow, there would be a queue to witness their love. But tonight, they could be alone in their grief.

Giese was mad. I never denied it. You had to be a little mad to love someone like that. Every day, I promised myself I would

learn from him. I would be careful. Not allow grief to consume me like that. I could do better. I could move on.

I locked up the exhibit behind me and opened my umbrella to shield myself from the pattering rain. I stepped out into the street and whistled softly to myself. Mail the cheque, go home, make dinner, watch some trash TV show, sleep, start another day. If I could keep doing it, again and again, I would be fine. Maybe I'd even wake up one day and not miss him.

A man bumped into me and I almost dropped my umbrella. He muttered an insincere apology and rushed past me. I didn't see anything of his face except his eyes. Bright, crystal blue eyes.

And just for a second, I froze.

Worship

Beau Maibaum

3am is usually when Aubree posts about her husband. I'm not sure how many people have noticed this – I haven't seen it in r/fundiesnarkuncensored, my favourite forum for hate-following fundamentalist evangelical influencers on Reddit, nor in r/heeleysnark, the more nice and much more dedicated base for the few of us who attached themselves to Aubree and Mark Heeley's careers as peddlers of Christ. Sure, I could have posted it in one of these subs myself, but something has held me back so far. It would be an easy success, screen-shotting the story of her with night dead eyes, cradling the newest (and loudest) addition to her family in her arms, mumbling a prayer about trusting the lord and about living his design, even if it's hard. Her caption reads: *got the night shift haha hubby's gotta sleep*

I imagine Aubree setting up her phone camera, position a soft light on the nursery's elegant night stand. She turns to the large, gold-set mirror and runs a brush through her chestnut hair. She was always self-conscious about not being a blonde. I've seen ancient pics of her with a horrible bleach job – she must have been seventeen or so. The baby screams with the shrill violence of a half slaughtered pig, but she knows it will continue to scream whether she takes a moment to apply chapstick or not. Aubree starts the recording, takes Frances Felicity out of her crib and turns towards the camera.

I pull my legs closer to my stomach in a feeble attempt to produce some more heat, tug in the various blankets and the opened sleeping bag around me. Everything is completely fine except my nose and my toes, which are so ice-cold that I am afraid they might become numb and fall off at any second. I will wake up in the morning as a sort of low-level monstrosity, stumbling around my mother's basement nose-less and toe-less. I open and close the app again in an attempt to refresh it, even though I know that's not really necessary, if anything new comes, it will be there whether I re-open the page or not. It's an old reflex. Aubree rarely posts just one thing alone, without any advertisement for her home school course or an endorsement of her husband's expensive program for men who are addicted to pornography.

At 4am, I check Instagram again. The story is gone.

I wake up in the late afternoon, unsure whether it is dark out, feeling my way to the light switch. My mother has sent me her usual *Gone to work! Love you!* text to which I react with my usual heart. Clothes are strewn around the room, and I'm too tired to find out which ones pass for clean, so I just sling a bathrobe around myself and work up the energy to go to the bathroom. While I sit on the edge of the stairs, I scroll through Aubree's recent posts to find the picture of her with a toddler on her hip, another one clinging to her leg which is clothed in a white prairie dress, her hair covered in a red crocheted scarf. She is heavily pregnant and defiantly staring into the lens of some professional

photographer who has placed her in a cornfield of all places. It is so cringe and so beautiful that my whole naked body tenses. I swipe again and the next picture is just her and Mark, in well-fitting jeans and a Carhartt jacket. His offensively white teeth glimmer in the late summer sun as I zoom in on them. I wonder if he has had work done. His hairline seems natural, which is a shame. I don't believe in cosmic justice because a man whose career mostly revolves around committing acts of stochastic terrorism against trans people does not deserve to look that good. At least not to *me*. I should find him abhorrent, my flesh should want to reject the pure idea of ever being with him. The last image in the series is a candid shot of her in her own bed with that serene "tired but fulfilled" look on her face, the new baby on her chest and the hashtags *homebirth* and *prolife*.

An hour or so later, maybe 3pm, I manage to add cornflakes and milk into a bowl. I hate how it feels good to actually move around and eat something, and I know that the effect of a shower would add to this list of astounding successes, but I'm not sure if I have it in me today. While eating, I open JobSlop and click *Apply* on two-dozen-or-so new listings. Somewhere in the dark pool beneath the app's shiny user interface, my CV is sent out. I imagine it flying across the world like an early-2000's animation of a plane, and then I see little hands grabbing the plane out of the pixelated sky and skimming the rows for the few career buzzwords AI likes to hear. So far, my little plane has never made it through the automatic scan. My finished bowl lands in the dishwasher before I remember that the machine is broken, so I take it out again along with my mother's breakfast knife and plate. Lukewarm water runs in the sink. I get six or seven rejection notifications before I half-haphazardly add some dish soap, which is already heavily diluted. I stare at the spoon, knife, bowl and plate, mixing with a little milk, green soap slime, rust particles and breadcrumbs and my vision blurs.

I lay on the couch when I hear my mom rummaging around in the entryway, taking off her hospital scrubs, throwing her purse in one corner and her shoes in the other. With a deep groan, she cuts through the living room, lifts up my legs, slouches down, and lets me plop my calves onto her lap. She taps them gently.

"My big girl."

I mumble a non-committal affirmative, then ask how the day was. My mom momentarily interrupts her tapping.

"Somehow not as shit as yesterday. Have you eaten anything? Want me to make something?"

"No, I'm okay."

She spies over to the sparsely illuminated kitchenette. "Did the dishes. Big day."

"I might even go out later."

She nods, pats my legs one last time before standing up again.

photographer who has placed her in a cornfield of all places. It is so cringe and so beautiful that my whole naked body tenses. I swipe again and the next picture is just her and Mark, in well-fitting jeans and a Carhartt jacket. His offensively white teeth glimmer in the late summer sun as I zoom in on them. I wonder if he has had work done. His hairline seems natural, which is a shame. I don't believe in cosmic justice because a man whose career mostly revolves around committing acts of stochastic terrorism against trans people does not deserve to look that good. At least not to *me*. I should find him abhorrent, my flesh should want to reject the pure idea of ever being with him. The last image in the series is a candid shot of her in her own bed with that serene "tired but fulfilled" look on her face, the new baby on her chest and the hashtags *homebirth* and *prolife*.

An hour or so later, maybe 3pm, I manage to add cornflakes and milk into a bowl. I hate how it feels good to actually move around and eat something, and I know that the effect of a shower would add to this list of astounding successes, but I'm not sure if I have it in me today. While eating, I open JobSlop and click *Apply* on two-dozen-or-so new listings. Somewhere in the dark pool beneath the app's shiny user interface, my CV is sent out. I imagine it flying across the world like an early-2000's animation of a plane, and then I see little hands grabbing the plane out of the pixelated sky and skimming the rows for the few career buzzwords AI likes to hear. So far, my little plane has never made it through the automatic scan. My finished bowl lands in the dishwasher before I remember that the machine is broken, so I take it out again along with my mother's breakfast knife and plate. Lukewarm water runs in the sink. I get six or seven rejection notifications before I half-haphazardly add some dish soap, which is already heavily diluted. I stare at the spoon, knife, bowl and plate, mixing with a little milk, green soap slime, rust particles and breadcrumbs and my vision blurs.

I lay on the couch when I hear my mom rummaging around in the entryway, taking off her hospital scrubs, throwing her purse in one corner and her shoes in the other. With a deep groan, she cuts through the living room, lifts up my legs, slouches down, and lets me plop my calves onto her lap. She taps them gently.

"My big girl."

I mumble a non-committal affirmative, then ask how the day was. My mom momentarily interrupts her tapping.

"Somehow not as shit as yesterday. Have you eaten anything? Want me to make something?"

"No, I'm okay."

She spies over to the sparsely illuminated kitchenette. "Did the dishes. Big day."

"I might even go out later."

She nods, pats my legs one last time before standing up again.

“I’ll believe that when I see it. Love you, champ. I’m hitting the hay.”

A kiss on my forehead, the familiar sound of her aching feet making their way upstairs, the smell of disinfectant and cigarette smoke lingering in the air she left behind. I roll to my side, unclench my jaw, remember that I’m still naked under the robe.

At 1am, I sit on the porch in the dark with one of Mark’s recent sermons playing through my shitty headphones. There’s delight in the occasional mistakes slipping through the cracks of the oh-so-professional sound recording – the one cough they did not edit out, the subtle microphone feedback, how the mic picks up next to nothing from the crowd. While he clearly addresses an audience in the thousands, it sounds like he is lecturing an empty room, using his big boy voice. Aubree must hear him practice through the walls of the nursery while she bathes and changes Frances, while she arranges John Henry’s artisanal toy cars and reads a bed-time story to Willow Grace. On her Insta, she always links to the various AI-written-and-illustrated children’s books in her online store, like *Terry Wants To Be A Fox* (a little boy thinks he is a fox and learns that he can’t be one) or *Amber Goes To The Market* (where a local farmer’s market is destroyed by evil urban activists).

I wonder if Aubree finds her husband’s voice as comforting as I do. There’s a strange vocal fry to it that does not fit the clean-cut mega church aesthetic, that adds an ounce of edge which Mark knows how to utilize. Right now, he is talking about one of his favourite topics: obedience. He calls it “the gift of obedience”, and he speaks with such gentleness about letting yourself fall into obedience to God, letting him take your hand and leading you to where you need to be. He speaks of how he will be with you even through the hard moments that such a path inevitably brings, even if it feels like the whole world is against you.

But you can do hard things, he says. And be assured that if you are struggling, *I want you here. I want you here so much and God wants you here as well. You can do hard things with God’s help, and yes, it is hard to raise a family today. It is hard to be a parent, right? (Something from the crowd here – reacting to his charm, a shudder on the audio layer) If you send your children to school, and you know how I feel about school – they bring all of these ideas home that you need to combat, and your loving home is turned into a battlefield.*

I skip back fifteen seconds to him saying *you can do hard things* and I skip back another fifteen to hear about the beauty of obedience again, the warmth and love of it, how he can bring himself close to the cusp of tears, as close as it is permissible for the kind of man he is. I can already imagine the Reddit comments about Mark’s sermon: *saying the quiet part out loud. bro thinks he’s goebbels. looks like they need donations again.*

But I don’t read them this time.

To fall asleep, I watch Aubree’s recent *get ready with me for church as a pastor’s wife* video and google the

beef tallow body cream she presents to the lens. A part of me wonders why she deleted that story yesterday night. It seemed pretty innocent, but Aubree has always been concerned with not stepping over some unclear line, not pushing too hard, not exiting the space of delusional marital euphoria that all of her posts are based in. Maybe she re-watched it once, twice, three times like I did and figured the circles under her eyes were concernedly dark, the light a little too harsh, her arms in the white night gown ghostly, the screaming child off-putting. The beef tallow body cream costs forty dollars. They offer a payment plan, five dollars a month. For a moment the thought of ordering it actually appears in my mind, and I imagine myself in the bathroom, slathering the thick fatty stuff all over my unshaven legs as a sort of ironic performance produced to make myself laugh, but I am still paying off the take-out I got for my mom three weeks ago. Aubree's video does not manage to make me forget how cold and moist the basement is, and I close Instagram for one last time tonight and replace it with my favourite old-school gay porn. For a very short moment, everything in me dissolves into luscious glittering slime, happy, happy, happy slime.

At 5am I let hot water boil my feet until they are raw and red like lobster's claws while my eyes fixate on the black mould creeping along the shower's tiling. It's been six years since Aubree's wedding where she twirled in her grandmother's lacy dress underneath dolphin ice sculptures, something that will forever stay burned into my retina since I saw it on Facebook and later again on Instagram. Her Facebook was small back then, quotidian, very millennial coded, with only her family, acquaintances, friends and people from school following her. The wedding announcement was definitely where her social media output started to turn into a different beast, but by that point I had momentarily, blissfully lost track of her, had started to build a career, moved away from that town. I consider trying to sleep again, but instead turn the heating on in the living room and put on headphones so as to not wake my mom. I scroll through the latest gossip on r/fundiesnarkuncensored, which involves a stay-at-home mother of eight preparing bone broth hot chocolate served inside sourdough bread bowls and being accused of stealing the recipe from another creator. Someone else has shared the late night story of Aubree to the expected number of upvotes. *Her eyes are so dead it's insane how is she 24*, the poster added. *I'm lowkey worried for her*, someone else adds, *like how sure are we she's really down with this Christian stuff?* I type out an answer: *get the being worried part, but she is 100% down. I've talked to someone who knew her in school and she had this whole conversion as a teenager though at least back then she managed to shut up about it*. I hit delete.

The whole "friend of a friend of a friend" never plays well. I once started drafting an "ask me anything"-type post about how I knew her in school, but I've never gone through with it even though it would pull record numbers on the forum. Maybe I don't want to put it out there because people would engage instantly. *How was she???* And do I say *she was wonderful?* I can scarcely do that. *She was really bright, you see it still in her videos sometimes, in such a weirdly life-affirming way, like she managed to be interested in anything and anyone, there was this period where she was super invested in bugs and made me buy a beetle breeding set with my mom's credit card. Or that time she drove us to this incredibly niche animal rights protest at an octopus farm, it was like a five hour drive, I thought it was insane and also kind of cute. She wanted an octopus tattoo so bad when she was 16 but her parents were these ultra-religious types who didn't sign the paper-slip*. People would know about this story, maybe; I think she mentioned it in a video somewhere that she did together

with her mother about how moms are supposed to protect their children from bad decisions.

Okay so she wasn't always a fundie? Like I thought her parents got her into it really young? I would type no, she had a bunch of fights with them about it, pretty much fighting constantly. She was basically an atheist, I mean she went to church for them but it's nothing like it is now. I forget that they are people who only started reading up on her last year when her follower count cracked one million. What happened??? they would ask, and again, do I say I happened? Do I say I waited for her after PE and we slipped out through the bushes behind the gym and sat on the running track and she made me a friendship bracelet with my initials and her initials and she wrapped it around my wrist and pulled my sleeve over it? We scarcely spoke of it I swear we never really touched we never even fucking kissed we just drove around and listened to Katy Perry and Limp Bizkit without understanding how insane our shared taste in music was and once we stayed out too late and instead of going home she fell asleep next to me on the couch just sorta leaning against my shoulder and she snored like a drunk sailor and I was sooo unable to sleep not from her snoring but just from being happy?

My imaginary audience holds their collective breath as my teeth grind against each other and I see the words materializing on the white screen. *I feel insane about this even after six years we went like that since we were 13 or so until that night she stayed at my place and yeah she just texted her mom but she was supposed to call her dad. But when she called him he always said no so I guess that night she just didn't do it, maybe because it was so close to the end of term and everyone sort of became looser in summer... and then we just went to school just the next day and she didn't show up. I asked around but she didn't have many friends and our principal was all dodgy about it, almost as if something embarrassing had happened, she told me just to let Aubree enjoy her early summer holiday and relax and have a good time. That was what everyone agreed on, that I just needed to chill, but my mom felt like something was off too, so we straight up drove to her parent's place (McMansion, for anyone wondering) and rung the bell and her mom immediately opened and basically told us to get the hell out of there. She said that Aubree had gone to a "wilderness education camp" for the summer and that she would be there for two months "until she was better" and she looked at me pretty pointedly. Luckily my own mom told her to fuck off before I could and that was the extent to our interaction with her family. Ofc we couldn't afford any vacation back then so I just spent a summer driving around trying to find that fucking camp but it must have been out of the county or even out of the state. Aubree changed high schools after that summer and the next thing I hear is that she's engaged.*

Maybe then someone would pull up a post from three years ago where on the last slide a younger Aubree is picture-framed in a white polo shirt with a name tag and a giant smile on her face. *Another one of those where my heavenly father helped me up after slipping*, the caption reads, and I impulsively scroll all the way down to find that post, fully aware of how insane, how obsessive, how stalker-y, how *unemployed* I am behaving, scrolling and scrolling through hundreds of videos of her in front of her AGA stove, her perfect backyard, her awkward line-dancing with Mark, hunting for that old post where when you zoomed in you could make out the red rims around her eyes, or could you? Or did I want red rims to be there? Did I want to think that her smile was a little too big, her pose a little too practiced? I want her to be secretly unhappy, I want her to be miserable, I want her misery to become a knife with which she carves herself out of that wretched cocoon, but she will never do it. She loves the cocoon. She's happy, I think, she's happy, she's so happy, and the old post is gone.

Girl Next Door

Megan Denese Mealor

Girl Next Door emerged like a prism every dawn from
a gable-front cottage inked into the mountainside. I
would watch her unfold her elastic olive limbs, waking
up fussy bones from their sugary snooze. Even from
my awkward bow window I could sense the essences
of lemongrass, lavender, and lime
seeping through her bamboo pajamas, wildflower
honey coasting from lived-in beige roots.

She had too many boyfriends to pinpoint their archetypes,
hotshot stallions strutting her down stooping halls, a prize
leopard: dark golden spots arrayed in rosettes.

Three or four tilted mornings a week,
she would appear on the purple-dyed front porch draped in
buttery layers and spicy stirrup leggings, slicked-back bun,
shearling-lined slides, bone broth thermos.
Heading to her recent Jaguar, painted Satin Rhodon Rose,
she swung her fluent arms like a reckless ballerina, a
stealthy slight twinkle blazing on her spotless face
as she lilted into those ladylike moments
still yet locked and unlockable to me.

Quantum Theory Says this is the Future

Sam Backlund-Clapp

Spotlight Pictures (?) presents a pitch for a screenplay or perhaps some type of live theater.

Title (working): I never wanted to be your...WEEKEND LOVER!

Act 1, scene 1

The way xx xxxxxx xx felt like sex. Sex in itself. But even before that, the way we were just talking, the way we communicated with each other, was also like sex. It was like sex but also attending a funeral but also grocery shopping in pleasant silence. X xxxxx xxx'x xxxxxx xxx xxxx xxx xxx xx xxx looking at me, face so close to mine X xxxxx xxx xxx xx xxx xxxxxxxx xxxxx. The way he was looking at me was also xxxx xxx. And then the actual xxx xxxx xxxx xxxxxxxx xx xxxxxxxxx, it felt transformative, it felt like being reborn.

Act 1, scene 2

On a set of concrete steps leading out of the kitchen, or the hallway maybe. Blood everywhere, and I had a beer but now it's gone. Maybe one of them took it, damage control. Blood everywhere and it's getting on the bag of frozen peas someone got out for me, wrapped in a towel now so grotesquely discolored I can't tell it's original shade. It's sopping. And it's dried down my face and my neck, pooled in parts of my clavicle too. Because she's in pre-med she's the only one around who could tell if it was broken. She said no, but they weren't convinced at first. They said right after it happened there was a second where they thought I might actually be dead, flat on my face and the red starting to pool. I don't even remember what it was she used, if she threw it or not, but it hit me hard. And when I woke up it wasn't even the pain that was the shock but the screaming. The screaming, and the horrible things she was saying, what she was calling me even though it's all true. But I'm on the steps now, unresponsive. Thousand-yard stare to nowhere as one of them shines a flashlight beside my eyes to check for a concussion. The two people I want to see the most aren't here, they went to go buy more cigarettes. They left me here, in this kitchen. The rest of them are arguing, they're angry. One of them wants to drive me to the ER. The rest are trying to be sensitive, because the wound is fresh again, but at least out East they say what they really mean. Did she know she'd be here? Fucking brought her to this party, did she know? I'm smacking mosquitoes, again. There's an empty tennis court over there. Everything is always the same. We're always living the same nights over and over.

Act 4, scene 7

Soft clinking of champagne flutes. My veil, with its colorful floral embroidery. Everyone is laughing and full and some of them are drunk, mostly to cope with the too many sex jokes. But we can't help it that we've always been so sexually charged. And she's up there, with the mic, telling the story. Or I guess just a story. The one about the ring, the week after I left, and how hard those years were after I

went to the South. It's warm, because it's always summer. And we're right on the river. I argued and argued in my youth about how I'd never do the country club wedding, but here we are. One thing he always knew how to do was feed my words right back to me till I choked.

Act -2, scene 2

Before any of this, before the big change. I used to write about how I respected him, but really I think I just didn't know how to wrap my head around the fact that I was just afraid. Once I started calling it what it was it felt like it was too late, like I'd missed the last metro home. Every night ending the same way, flat on my back and slightly in pain, extremely winded, completely numb. He found ways to evade my requests, my questions. He'd nod in the moment and forget thirty seconds later. Don't call me that, I'd say. Can you calm down a bit?, I'd say. Or, slower please. I'm too tired. I'm too hungover I'm on my period I saw a weird movie and now I'm not in the mood I'm too drunk. They were all just words, in one ear and then gone.

It doesn't matter anymore. I'm not scared of anything now and I'm not in love with anyone, and nothing can hurt me, at least not yet.

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Declaration by the Representatives of the UNITED STATES

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