

SUNSPOT LITERARY JOURNAL

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CHANGING THE WORLD
THROUGH WORDS AND ART

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COVER: Blue house in the Sangre de Cristos / Bill Schulz

resurrection

Vincent A. Cellucci

AI Assisted Poem*

In life and in art one has to start anew every day.

— Louis Coupernus

one more song
 none more dance

one more drink
 none more glance

one more scream
 none more delight

one more float
 one more night

one more stance
 one more rant

one more grief
 one more belief

one more heartbeat
 one more birth

one more storm
 one more rebirth

one more boil
 one more pour

one more dash
 one more slather

one more rash
 one more shakedown

one more banner
 one more anthem

one more snowflake
 one more ember

one more compass
 one more drift

one more symphony
 one more echo

one more glacier
 one more spark

one more moth
 one more comet

one more catwalk
 one more chasm

one more twist
 one more turn

one more harbor
 one more sail

one more secret
 one more truth

one more maze
 one more path

one more crab
 one more trap

o chase

o pause

o eve

o sparkler

o swing

o slide

o gem

o dust

o recipe

o feast

o riddle

o answer

o canvas

o doodle

o kite

o beach

o oasis

o graffiti

o photo

o frame

o toast

o clink

one more martyr	one more velvet	
one more father	one more silk	
one more mother	one more allegiance	• harvest
one more daughter	one more rebellion	• seed
one more pain	one more map	• drag
one more aid	one more treasure	• current
one more wifi	one more crime	• oracle
one more wired	one more clue	• prophecy
one more crash	one more parade	• sky
one more splash	one more confetti	• twinkle
one more draft	one more mist	• tutu
one more book	one more fog	• pirouette
one more episode	one more waterfall	• castle
one more centerfold	one more brook	• dungeon
one more holy	one more sprinkle	• fairytale
one more ghost	one more ripple	• damnation
one more holy	one more stupidity	• nectar
one more ghost	one more revelation	• oil
one more trick	one more lair	• dragonfly
one more treat	one more lantern	• pond
one more bowl	one more lullaby	• blossom
one more spoon	one more headbang	• wilt
one more olive	one more drama	• prism
one more tune	one more climax	• spectrum
one more life	one more vow	• apocalypse
one more soul	one more voice	• resurrection
one more life	one more phoenix	• festival
one more soul	one more ashes	• trance
one more age	one more mirror	
one more growth	one more reflection	
one more paycheck	one more gust	
one more refund	one more scarf	

one more hug	one more talisman	
one more pinch	one more shaman	
one more tree	one more nebula	one more solstice
one more nest	one more enigma	one more junction
one more bird	one more reverie	one more retreat
one more bee	one more labyrinth	one more neighbor
one more bed	one more chronicle	one more steak
one more nap	one more illusion	one more potato
one more liver	one more vortex	one more anachronism
one more neck	one more mosaic	one more zeitgeist
one more lion	one more odyssey	one more ineffable
one more lamb	one more exile	one more elocution
one more ancient	one more eclipse	one more palimpsest
one more sand	one more sonnet	one more bible
one more screen	one more cairn	one more epiphany
one more dream	one more pyramid	one more serendipity
one more orgasm	one more paradigm	one more susurrus
one more fathom	one more anomaly	one more petrichor
one more mix	one more shenanigan	one more emergency
one more fix	one more cipher	one more cacophony
one more moon	one more theorem	one more phantasmagoria
one more sun	one more apostate	one more ephemera
one more monster	one more kaleidoscope	one more sonder
one more friend	one more satellite	one more hiraeth
one more drop	one more quasar	one more obfuscation
one more shot	one more glyph	one more perspicacity
one more lichen	one more silhouette	one more verisimilitude
one more sponge	one more scintilla	one more simulacrum
	one more dossier	
	one more nexus	
	one more inkling	
	one more pixel	

one more mushroom		
one more igloo	one more dopplgänger	
	one more nemesis	
one more window		
one more door	one more cathedral	
	one more microdose	
one more boat	one more panoply	agust
one more train	one more vibe	scarf
one more ceiling	one more exegesis	splendor
one more floor	one more filibuster	desolation
one more cloud	one more primo	vagabond
one more flower	one more hodgepodge	home
	one more premonition	solace
one more river	one more prima donna	torment
one more hour	one more syzygy	chariot
	one more otiose	plod
one more day	one more phobia	limbo
one more picnic	one more fetish	ascent
one more bath	one more apotheosis	comrade
one more shower	one more bathos	traitor
one more prayer	one more etymology	ivory
one more flail	one more oxymoron	ebony
	one more gossamer	vigil
one more eye	one more monolith	coma
one more ear	one more iniquity	lunacy
	one more den	sanity
one more nose	one more tincture	gamble
one more throat	one more spleen	stake
one more lip	one more anchor	titan
one more clit	one more buoy	dwarf
one more asshole	one more alloy	apogee
one more dick	one more vapor	nadir
one more perfume	one more caliginous	
one more flame	one more dawn	

one more smoke

one more fire

one more charge

one more stand

one more castle

one more tide

one more ocean

one more breeze

one more shackle

one more bond

one more poem

one more magic wand

one more sample

one more lens

one more rent

one more bill

one more coal

one more grill

one more horn

one more drum

one more meal

one more dessert

one more snuffle

one more sneeze

one more dragon

one more princess

one more frog

one more prince

one more portal

one more grave

one more elysium

one more abyss

one more vellum

one more quilt

one more monument

one more mural

one more umbra

one more halo

one more rapport

one more frost

one more alcove

one more stage

one more saga

one more epigram

one more cloister

one more bazaar

one more root

one more crumb

one more minaret

one more dome

one more harbinger

one more copycat

one more thistle

one more orchid

one more atlas

one more diary

one more dew

one more towel

one more nature

one more cradle

x siren

x samaritan

x mariner

x squall

x whale

x plankton

x fulcrum

x scale

x feather

x flock

x sinew

x vessel

x grovel

x grove

x basilisk

x dove

x gorgon

x swan

x hermit

x herald

x leviathan

x minnow

x dune

x dunce

x colossus

x pebble

one more mystery		
one more suspense	one more donation	
	one more memento	
one more gift		
one more ribbon	one more groom	
	one more veil	
one more freak	one more paragon	one more vineyard
one more flag	one more flaw	one more grape
one more tit	one more spire	one more ankle
one more tat	one more cavern	one more stickle
	one more driftwood	one more scribble
one more this	one more logjam	one more scribe
one more that		
	one more stillness	one more twilight
one more thumb	one more monsoon	one more noon
one more break	one more napkin	one more lacuna
	one more scroll	one more surfeit
one more sweater	one more genesis	one more simmer
one more dress	one more nothingness	one more hiss
one more suit	one more eon	one more resume
one more tie	one more instant	one more resignation
one more record	one more flood	one more valediction
one more spin	one more ark	one more greeting
	one more crescent	one more antediluvian
one more flight	one more city	one more cutting-edge
one more chute		
	one more levee	one more chthonic
one more mountain	one more spillway	one more ethereal
one more avalanche	one more politic	one more romance
	one more science	one more wasteland
one more rapid	one more religion	one more seraph
one more eddy	one more art	one more beast
one more apple	one more champion	one more wrench
one more orange	one more fable	one more plunger
	one more egress	
one more pill	one more manifest	
one more hit		

one more piss	one more certainty	
one more shit	one more whim	
one more risk	one more daffodil	
one more grift	one more urchin	
one more rule	one more countermeasure	«paper
one more exception	one more lodestar	«diploma
one more chance	one more tessellation	«tassel
one more time	one more boxsphere	«string
one more reason	one more eon	«unravel
one more rhyme	one more second	«mason
one more picture	one more skyscraper	«ozone
one more scripture	one more yurt	«amazon
one more throw	one more kiln	«rerun
one more catch	one more mire	«opening
one more push	one more vestige	«speakeasy
one more pull	one more upstart	«saloon
one more toy	one more caprice	«passport
one more timeout	one more creed	«currency
one more hero	one more elixir	«showboat
one more bully	one more toxin	«humdrum
one more cut	one more dino	«study
one more burn	one more dodo	«system
one more start	one more hoot	«lift
one more finish	one more holler	«shove
one more visit	one more split	«forbidden
one more exit	one more hair	«fruit
one more station	one more guest	«eden
one more atm	one more host	«nirvana
	one more sage	«iridescence
	one more fool	«corrosion
	one more scissors	
	one more rock	

one more climate	one more gambit	
one more planet	one more turnabout	
one more bridge	one more epistle	
one more sewer	one more sms	
one more country	one more seal	one heirloom
one more revolution	one more soot	one fugue
one more upside	one more diaper	one bivouac
one more down	one more wipe	one fortress
one more call	one more fever	one bow
one more law	one more abate	one stern
one more merry-go-round	one more shed	one pancake
one more rollercoaster	one more skin	one panacea
one more howl	one more fracture	one amaranth
one more meow	one more mend	one perennial
one more shadow	one more whistle	one aubade
one more syllable	one more wink	one serenade
one more mercy	one more vein	one banyan
one more shoulder	one more organ	one sapling
one more climb	one more tumble	one magnet
one more jump	one more bumble	one forcefield
one more laugh	one more trellis	one crater
one more tear	one more fritter	one magma
one more descent	one more zinger	one chrysalis
one more takeoff	one more quip	one metamorphosis
one more chicken	one more supper	one coven
one more egg	one more slipper	one cauldron
one more minute	one more rainforest	one cusp
one more tick	one more aborigine	one crest
	one more chimera	one effigy
	one more folklore	one icon
	one more root cellar	
	one more abditory	

one more bite		
one more retch	one more lyric	
	one more aria	
one more cough		
one more slurp	one more mirth	
	one more levity	
one more mission	one more nostalgia	one more meteor
one more holiday	one more longing	one more miss
one more heartbreak	one more sentinel	one more galaxy
one more wish	one more vanguard	one more universe
	one more dollar	one more vaccine
one more farm	one more dalliance	one more serum
one more family		
	one more epitome	one more clone
	one more antipode	one more hybrid
one more poll		
one more vote	one more bunk	one more mutation
	one more canopy	one more genome
one more teacher		
one more student	one more reflex	one more antibody
	one more instinct	one more antigen
one more child	one more barrel	one more fossil
one more choice	one more container	one more innovation
one more	one more nibble	one more algorithm
one more	one more melt	one more entanglement
	one more jam	one more hallelujah
one more breath	one more session	one more huzzah
one more death		
	one more canyon	
one more breath	one more gorge	
one more death		

* “resurrection” was conceived as a litany for an infinite poem to be training on and indefinitely extended by artificial intelligence large language models. In Sept. 2024, I cocreated 365 couplets (a year if you wrote one couplet daily—inspired by On Kawara’s “Today” series) out of GPT4, often only using one of the suggested end words and completing the couplet myself. I currently exhibit the year web version of *resurrection*, while testing other methods in search of infinity, hoping to next generate a decade. I’ve updated the layout to include the generated stanzas.



Piazza / Bill Schulz

WeiBt du noch

Rainer Maria Rilke

Muzot, June 1924

WeiBt du noch: fallende Sterne, die
quer wie Pferde durch die Himmel sprangen
über plötzlich hingehalmte Strangen
unsrer Wunsche — hatten wit so viele? —
denn es sprangen Sterne, ungezahlt;
fast ein jeder Aufblick war vermahlt
mit dem raschen Wagnis ihrer Spiele,
und das Herz empfand sich als ein Ganzes
unter diesen Trummern ihres Glanzes
und war heil, als überstind es sie!

Do you remember

Rainer Maria Rilke

Translated from German by Wally Swist

Muzot, June 1924

Do you remember: falling stars?
how they leapt across the sky like horses
that suddenly fell apart among the hurdles
of our wishes—did we have so many?
Because countless stars sprung forth;
almost every glance was lost
to the rapid daring of their games,
and the heart felt itself to be complete
beneath these ruins of their magnificence
and was whole, as if it would exist beyond them!

Ausgesetzt auf den Bergen des Herzens

Rainer Maria Rilke

Irschenhausen, September 20, 1914

Ausgesetzt auf den Bergen des Herzens. Siehe, wie klein dort,
siehe: die letzte Ortschaft der Worte, und hoher,
aber wie klein auch, noch ein letztes
Gehoft von Fefuhl. Erkennst du's?
Ausgesetzt auf den Bergen des Herzens. Steingrund
unter den Händen. Hier blüht wohl
einiges auf; aus stummen Absturz
blüht ein unwissendes Kraut singend hervor.
Aber der Missenden? Ach, der zu wissen begann
und schweigt nun, Ausgesetzt auf den Bergen des Herzens.
Da geht wohl, heilen Bewußtseins,
manches umher, manches geischerte Bergtier,
wechselt und weilt. Und der große geborgene Vogel
kreist um der ipfel reine Verweigerung. — Aber
ungeborgen, hier auf den Bergen des Herzens . . .

Suspended on the mountains of the heart

Rainer Maria Rilke

Translated from German by Wally Swist

Irschenhausen, September 20, 1914

Suspended on the mountains of the heart. See, how small there,
see: the last place of words, and higher,
but however small too, one last thing
farmed by feeling. Do you recognize it?
Suspended on the mountains of the heart. Stone ground
under the hands. It's probably blooming
on some things here; from the mute thrust
the song of an unknown herb breaks forth.
But the one who knows? Oh, who began to know
and is now silent, exposed on the mountains of the heart.
That's fine, heal your consciousness,
move around, many mountain animals cast about,
change and stay. And the big rescued bird
revolves around the summit of pure denial. — But
unsheltered, here on the mountains of the heart . . .

Dad's Conversion

Bev Fesharaki

Bellowing "Amazing Grace"
off key, he held faith
in something outside
of him, not him, in him,
all him, beside me.

Grace that saved a wretch
selling bootleg whiskey in
a dry Kansas, watered down
and weak.
He drank the leftovers,

his bad boy reputation
out shining
the well-deep swell of his
rock-hard compassion,
cigarette in his hand,

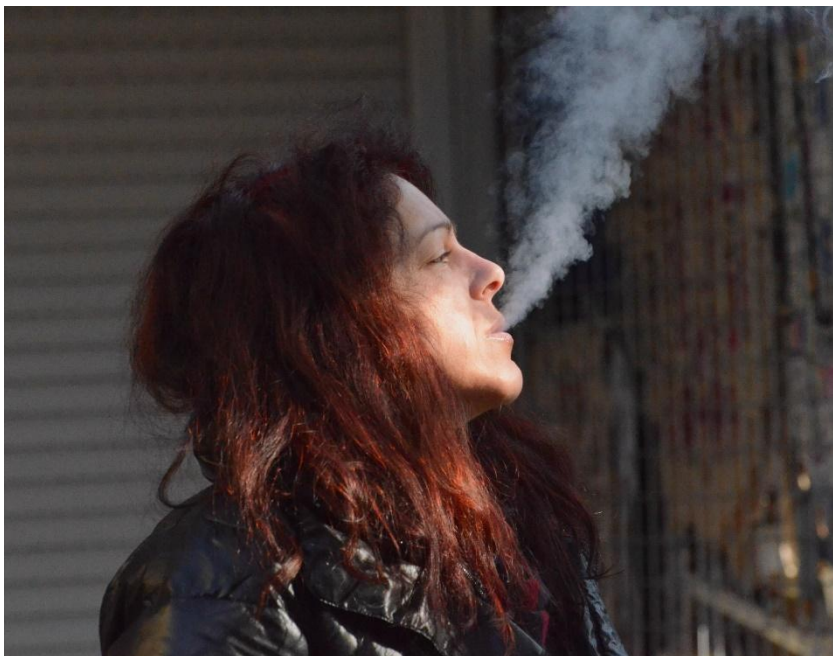
he threw it to the curb,
when he saw her—my mom.
Good-boy grin on his handsome face,
he charmed her.
Then I charmed him.

His step in sync with mine,
stepping small because I had to,
carefully hearing my softest cry.
How sweet the sound.

Once lost, never lost
he could always see me,
clear as shallow water
and now I see

how many dangers it took
how many chances, changes,

how much grace.



Morning—Budapest 2015 / William Lewis Winston



Adina In Contemplation—Budapest 2015 /
William Lewis Winston

Chocolate Oranges

Julia Oshiki

When my father told me you'd died, I felt the hole where my grief should be. Knowing you feels like trying to hold onto sand.

You were the youngest of five. Your parents decided that you wouldn't take lessons in English until you were older, that your world would be Japanese for as long as possible. But your siblings knew what it meant to be ridiculed for a tongue that curled the wrong way. And so you, their baby brother, were taught English in secret, so that you could know a better peace than they did.

Your father must have had a desperation to keep this piece of him—this piece of his family—alive, if only in his own home. He knew English but would only speak Japanese. Your son, my father, struggled to learn it when you came to visit your father. Seven years old, your son had taken Spanish lessons and spoke it decently well, English he spoke best, but Japanese was still shaky. When he stuttered out, “Ha-ji...Ha-ji-may...” Your father sighed, and said “Hola, Michael.” How many oceans of pain were in that sigh? Could he feel the fear that this thing would die with him? Even so, he refused to let English enter through his door. This, at least, will not be subsumed.

Am I living proof of that subsummation?

My father knows French and Spanish and Italian better than he knows Japanese. All I know of it is what I've learned from an app on my phone. How to get closer to you?

Recently I asked my dad to show me pictures of you and Grandma. All he could find was a photo of Grandma on the day of her first wedding, before she met you. My dad assured me there were more photos, he just wasn't sure where.

I feel more grief over your loss now than I did when you passed. I was fourteen, and all I really knew of you were your black dress shoes, the smell of gin mixed with Grandma's floral perfume, and the chocolate oranges you once gave me and my sister on Christmas. You were living in California when we went to visit you, so the nod to oranges must have felt appropriate. One generation after that defeated

sigh from your father, was this the culture you thought would be easier for us to accept and enjoy?

My dad says you would have been proud of him for his years of service with the Army. Is that true? He said you cried when he begged you to let him attend a military high school. That you made him sell his collection of history books on American wars, his most prized possession, in order to prove that his desire for the military was serious. How many times did your heart break as you watched him sink further into the thing that imprisoned you?

When you were seventeen, you and your family were forced to live in a racehorse stable in Arcadia. After the internment camps, you enlisted in the Air Corps when you heard your friends were getting drafted. You translated Japanese messages over the radio waves. Did you ever feel responsible? For their deaths? The allegiance you pledged was one made out of survival, of that I am certain.

So much of who you were has been chipped away in the name of survival. My dad says you are an American hero. I'll never know whether you would agree. What I do know is this: while serving under a congressman, you helped create the Japanese American Memorial in Washington D.C. Your name is on the federal paperwork that made it possible. The name of your internment camp is engraved on its granite walls. In the center of the memorial is a bronze sculpture of two cranes caught in barbed wire. Their backs are pressed together, necks curved and contorted. Their beaks pull at the wire, their wings flexed, poised for flight.

Now I Know You're a Liar

Vanessa Sylvester

My parents were not divorced yet. That was still a few years away, but we moved anyway. It was just two towns over, but that was hard, especially in the fifth grade. At least it wasn't the mid-year when I started at the new neighborhood school in a town that was also a few years from its separation. A separation of workers from work was coming when the last spool bounced off the thread mill conveyor belt.

I made neighborhood friends. It was a place where mostly multifamily houses huddled like girlfriends. Some were poor, working class, and occasionally middleclass. Parents worked at the Thread or Pratt Whitney. The kids fell together for kickball in the street, acorn fights, or finding change for the corner store to buy plastic soda bottles, soft giant SweeTarts, or other cheap candy.

The corner store was across from the school. The sign on the side said Friendly Variety, but everyone called it Paps. A mural with kids of all races playing baseball was painted above the playground. The school, however, was deeply, yet unconsciously segregated. The elementary school I had just come from was white as a sheet. But here, about half the kids were Puerto Rican, the other half White, and a few Black kids. My parents spoke highly of the newly established ESL program. So kids weren't thrown into classes with no English, set up to fail, just like their grandparents. That was great, but I had no Puerto Rican kids in my classes and even my new school was much bigger than my last one, I had a smaller class of mostly white kids.

There weren't necessarily popular girls in my class, just girls whose parents had their shit together enough to wear clean clothes, maybe they had lip gloss and always lunch money. At the start of each week, students had to march right up to the teacher's desk in front of the class to claim lunch tickets. Red for reduced lunch. White for free lunch. This taught us that there is a difference in poor. A kid might get free lunch because the single mom attends a community college or the dad was recently unemployed. Also, there were the really, poor kids. They were the unseen and unheard. That's how they liked it because no one would notice the little details that set them apart. The girls

whose parents had their shit together from my neighborhood brought me in and despite the move, it was a looking to be good year.

One of our classmates, Sherry, bought a sewing seamstress charm necklace to school, and it was nothing like we'd ever seen before. The charms represented miniature items in a sewing kit; a tiny spool of thread, a button, a thimble, safety pins, and a cameo of a girl's head that looked like Sherry's. It wasn't silver and it surely was not gold. It was brassy giving it an old-fashioned look. The best thing about this necklace was that the tiny, delicate scissors worked. They worked. During recess, when class wasn't full-on, or even when it was, Sherry let everyone sneak turns holding the necklace. To feel the miniature bits of domestic drudgery captivated us.



Sherry was never so much in the spotlight. before the necklace, she was unheard, emblematic of a white person's mismatched, soft poverty. Before the necklace, she was invisible; not smart, pretty, mean, or stupid. Just invisible. There was agreement among the girls that Sherry would leave the necklace inside of her desk. We all had the same square desks with metal rectangular mouths and unobstructed openings allowing us to sneak our hands in and retrieve things, like the necklace. No one knew who had it at any given time. If you stuck your hand in, sometimes it would be there, to hold and put back. This went on for weeks.

Sherry's desk was next to mine, and they were all pushed together in some homage to whatever the optimal classroom design was on that year. I had it good because I didn't have to get up. I just reached in for the necklace, then put my hands back inside my desk to fidget with the charms. I felt them between my fingers and worked the scissors while listening to the teacher. I could absentmindedly barely cut the skin on my hand, moving each blade like a message.

Then the blade broke. It silently popped and slipped through my fingers into the dark of my desk. Girls had been cutting for weeks, but it was me. The tiny blade split off and I could feel it was unfixable.

It's not like the hinge came undone and maybe it could be put back together. No, it was the blade, the metal softened by overhandling, weakened. It was a clean break.

If I had fuck in my fifth-grade vocabulary that was what I would have thought, but I didn't. We must been in free time so not everyone was at their desks when I did the deed. There was the shuffling and mumm of classroom transition. Pictures of happy bullshit hung on the wall. I quickly transferred the ruptured thing and lone blade from my desk into Sherry's. I got up to choose the math station.

Inevitably, later that day, the disaster was discovered. I don't remember tears, but I'm sure there were. And the investigation was on. Because there was no accounting for who had it and when. The culprit wasn't obvious. I doubted Sherry knew who was the last to have it. But my desk was the closest. Krista's desk was on the other side of Sherry, but she had moved a week before the incident. I was the best choice. So it started.

Sherry asked me what happened. I didn't know.

The teacher asked me what happened. I didn't know.

The next day, the principal had me in his painted cinder-blocked office and told me that if I knew who had broken the blade and put it back, it was OK and we could all figure out how to replace it. I could start by telling the truth. I didn't know.

Then my mom got involved and asked me what happened. I didn't know.

The investigation was low-key. I didn't remember other kids asking about it, and Sherry was an outsider, she wasn't going to express outrage about it.

But then the principal asked me if I had broken it. No.

My mother asked me in the privacy of our apartment; did I break it? No.

And that was that. I stuck to my story. I had stood up under interrogations. Maybe everyone guessed that I had snapped the blade, but I was insulated in my unwavering lie. If it weren't Sherry's necklace, maybe, my peers would have been more suspecting. I probably felt guilty, but I remember most, a feeling of amazement, that I'd been gifted a life lesson. If there was no proof, I could get away with it. It was just my word and if they didn't believe me, they sure

couldn't challenge what I said. I could go on playing kickball, and keep myself ahead of being unheard and unseen.

The collective fifth-grade class memory moved on to the next thing, the necklace forgotten.

Almost. A few weeks later, Sherry was right up next to me smelling like clothes left in the washer to dry. We were in another class transition, to lunch, recess, or those tiresome station rotations. We were briefly alone. She was near me so quickly I didn't have time to wonder if she had planned a showdown, but nobody was around. Plus she didn't have the cache.

"It was you." Soft anemic voice. I said nothing.

"No. Come on," she said, without anger nor disappointment, "you broke it."

"No."

But I could tell she knew my "no" was bull. Did she feel my hand slip back into her desk to return to the broken necklace or was it a guess? That no longer mattered. She waited, politely, but I wasn't going to say any more. I was done. She was gone.



Betrothal / Elzbieta Zdunek

We Are All Having Fun Here

Meg Mullins

Editor's Prize

1.

We agree to meet in a Starbucks near the beach in Santa Monica. I expect it to feel different here, like a small, seaside village. But it's just more of Los Angeles. There is a cool breeze coming from the direction of the Pacific, but I can't see or smell the water. A battalion of homeless tents are pitched behind the CVS where my Lyft driver leaves me. I wander the carpeted aisles looking at the makeup, the sleep medicine, the coloring books. My fingers and toes feel numb. I stare at my reflection as I try on assorted sunglasses, flirting with the thought that these might be the last moments of my life.

I don't smell of piss and my skin is pale. These things protect me from being followed in the store, though I am clearly just killing time. I am, quite flagrantly, loitering. I think I could light a cigarette and extinguish it on the security guard's cap as long as I batted my eyelashes and giggled, showed my straight, white teeth, my delicate wrists and modest cleavage. I buy a pack of peanut M&Ms with my mother's AmEx card and wave my fingers at the security camera as I leave. Nobody seems to notice that I'm still wearing the pink mirrored sunglasses I took from the rack. I walk out of the store and down the block to the Starbucks.

With the price tag still hanging from my glasses, I order a black coffee and sit in the window. I am looking at the sidewalk, trying to guess which old man will be mine. I've seen his photograph but a picture is always a lie. Could be he used an image from ten years ago, or from a celebrity I'm too young to recognize. Could be that he won't show up. That he's not a he. Or that he just wants to watch me from a distance.

I drink my coffee slowly. Becca texts me to ask if I want to go to the feminist football party later. I laugh aloud at the phrase, but I don't have time to reply.

You, he says, laying a warm hand on my back between my shoulder blades, *are more adorable than I'd imagined.*

He slides his own coffee onto the bar beside me and sits down. He is tall. His Adam's apple is at my eye level. There are white hairs emerging from beneath his shirt collar.

I smile and he takes my hand and squeezes it. *I'm so glad you came. I hope you haven't been waiting long.*

All of the bluster has left my body. I am floating, unable to speak. I just keep smiling. Finally, I pull hard at my arm hair and wince with the pain. *Not long. Just people watching.*

I see you've gotten a coffee, or is it tea? I wanted to buy you one of their fun pink drinks. They always look so girlish and whimsical.

I prefer coffee, I say, sullen. It's a lie. Black coffee is a penance I pay for having taste buds that conform so precisely to Starbucks' market research. I actually fucking love their watermelon kiwi lemonade. But I hate that he has called it *fun*. And I hate that he—just like Starbucks—already knows what I'll like.

That's just fine. No problem at all. I see that he is desperate to seem agreeable, accommodating. He's not entirely ugly. His gray hairline is receding, and his eyebrows need trimming. His teeth are crooked and slightly yellow. But he's wearing a nice blue shirt and brown canvas pants. His fingernails are trimmed and clean. A delicate gold chain hangs around his neck and he has a pair of tortoise shell glasses poking out of his shirt pocket.

Is this far from your house?

Gosh, no. he says. *I'm a three-minute walk thataway.* He puts his thumb over his shoulder to gesture towards the ocean. *I come here almost every day for an afternoon pick-me-up. Working at home can get pretty lonely.*

He looks at me when he says this and blinks. I want to comfort him. Maybe lay my head on his shoulder and be his little girl?

What are you drinking? I look at the letters the barista formed on his cup: Stanley.

It's a decaf flat white. I'm trying to cut out caffeine past noon. But I'm still a terrible sleeper.

I nod. I already know this. I know because the first time he messaged me on the app it was two in the morning.

We have been texting for two weeks. I know about his last ex-wife who lives in Calabasas with the plastic surgeon who performed her breast augmentation. I know that he is a daytrader and has made and lost fortunes that would stun the average person. His tolerance for risk is undeniable. I know that he has arthritis in his knees and carpal tunnel in his wrist. I know he has never wanted children because he hates unnecessary noise and mess.

I also know that he joined *babyme* last summer but didn't message anyone until Christmastime. He has talked to a lot of girls on the platform, and met several for dates, but he is still searching. What he really wants is a reliable companion, but not a live-in. Ideally, he'd like a girl to wear a school uniform and arrive at his house in the middle of the afternoon with a backpack full of books. He'd like for her to be terrible at math and let him tutor her at his kitchen table. He wants her eyes to follow his pencil as he balances equations, calculates inverse and absolute numbers and slowly explains a factor tree. Afterwards, he would put some cookies on a plate and ...

Something in his fantasy resonates with me. I, too, need to have an excuse for a relationship with a man my father's age. I don't fetishize bald heads or liver spots. The idea of kissing him on the lips is a nonstarter. And yet, since the moment I read his text describing this fantasy, I've been thinking about sitting in his house and slowly revealing myself to him: my intelligence, my wit, my beauty. Let him encourage me, believe in me. The notion of a man my father's age seeing me, knowing me and then desperately wanting me—even if it is sexually—makes me ache.

I take a sip of my coffee. We stare out the window together, silently watching a man maneuver a baby stroller piled high with overstuffed plastic grocery bags across the street. His precious cargo. When he gets to the other side of the street, one wheel hits the curb too hard and the top bag falls and bursts open. A thousand small, plastic yogurt cups scatter across two lanes. Before he can collect them, the light changes and the traffic cuts through this rubbish, churning and flattening it.

Stanley shakes his head. *The things people do*, he says.

I have no idea if he's commenting on the man with the saved yogurt containers, the drivers who plow through them at full speed, or the two of us sitting here.

Tell me about those sunglasses, he smiles, trying to catch my eye, pull my attention away from the street and back to him. *I could buy you some pink ones if that's what you like, couldn't I?*

I've already forgotten about them. I reach up and pull them from the top of my head where they're perched. *They are pink. I stole them. From the CVS down the block.*

I see, he says, fingering the tag. *Why would you do that?*

I shrug. *Why do you like little girls?*

His mouth tightens. I see fear in his eyes. *You're over eighteen.*

That's not the point. A compulsion is usually without logic, isn't it? I take the glasses and break off each temple piece, the plastic snapping loudly.

He flinches slightly at the sound. *So it's not about the money. You just like the feeling it gives you?*

Bingo. Suddenly, I consider actually going home with him. I've shown him just a bit of my truest self. And he sees me. He is sitting there holding my gaze, maybe liking me even more than he imagined. Is this how it happens? Is this how it begins?

He takes a long sip of his coffee and then stands up. He places his hand on my back again, but it feels different this time. Tender.

I turn towards him, still sitting so that my face is nearly parallel to his waist. I look up, knowing that if he reached down at this moment, spread his hands beneath my armpits and lifted me off the stool, I would wrap my legs around his waist and let him carry me home like a worn-out toddler.

Hold me, I whisper quietly, but he doesn't hear me. He's clearing his throat.

I think it's time for me to go, Cleo. He nods his head. *This feels a bit more complicated than I'm equipped to handle.*

I laugh. His face grimaces slightly at my laughter. *This is a joke, right?*

He is silent.

Complicated? Wait, what? Don't you want me to go home with you? What about the tutoring?

He shoves his hands deep into his pockets. *I think you're ... wonderful. Really, I do.*

I cannot believe this is happening. My ears are ringing. I hadn't planned on being rejected—not by an old fucking man. My skin

is firm and glowing. My bosom is lifted. I am babyish and hungry, both. What more could he want?

Maybe I'm just better off being lonely, he says. He takes his glasses from his shirt pocket and puts them on his face, looking immediately more attractive. How is this my life? Only now does it occur to me that I would have done anything for this man. I would have swallowed any disgust, put on any costume, licked the soles of his feet if he would have loved me. I am shaking with the terror of this truth. And I am livid at the impossibility of my luck. Am I not entitled to one old white man who values me at least enough to fuck me? Can the universe really be handing me another would-be father who will abandon me before we've even begun?

You have no idea, I say, *how fucking good I am at math. I'm so relieved I won't have to pretend to be stupid so that you can get off.*

Amused or sad, he smiles slightly and gives a little shrug. He doesn't say another word, just takes his coffee cup with him and walks slowly across the street. Effortlessly, he kicks a flattened yogurt container into the storm drain.

Waiting for another Lyft to take me back to Echo Park, I hold the broken sunglasses in my hand. I imagine pushing the temple pieces into my ears, wondering how much it hurts to puncture your own ear drums.

I call my mom but her secretary tells me that she's in a settlement meeting. I close my eyes and imagine the conference room, my mom's navy blue suit, her shoes kicked off under the table in a small act of rebellion. I text her a broken heart emoji, then erase it. I scroll through Instagram and get stuck on puppies running in their dreams.

The Lyft driver looks like he's twelve. I consider telling him about *babyme* so that he could stop sitting in LA traffic all day, but I realize it's not for everyone. In fact, maybe I now believe it's not for anyone.

He says he is studying the physics of sound at LA community college. His stereo plays electronic music while he delivers a spoken narrative of the best taco places on the east side. He's got one he likes for vegetarian, one for carnitas, one for atmosphere, one for guacamole.

I stare vacantly out the window and wonder what Stanley is doing right now.

Complicated, I say again to myself, shaking my head. I thought that figuring out what you wanted was the complicated part of this whole existence thing. I mean, the entirety of my life until this moment has been riddled with anxiety and fear because I don't know what the hell I want. Or who I am. Or how to be.

But once you've sorted it all out, down to the minutiae of what the girl should be wearing when you pretend to be her tutor, how the fuck is that complicated?

What he means is that *I'm* complicated.

The Lyft driver continues to rattle on about his Los Angeles culinary journey even though I've given him almost no indication that I'm listening or that I care. I imagine all the citizens of Los Angeles in their little boxes with wheels, speaking their truths in soliloquy. I almost begin to speak over him, to tell him just where I've been, what I've seen. An unplanned duet.

But I stay quiet. I smile and nod at his eyes reflected in the rearview mirror. He drops me off and I give him five stars on the app.

I stand on the sidewalk in front of my apartment building, sandwiched between two enormous succulents. Their leaves curl and bow with gravity-defying confidence. The sun is still shining even though it is 7pm.

Once again, I think of my mother's feet in her midtown Manhattan conference room. The dark Manhattan skyline blinking around her. I'd bet a thousand dollars she has not considered the angle of the sun or the local fauna a single time this year.

Before going to bed, I look at *babyme*. There are three more men who've sent me messages. I look at their profiles. A roguish-looking guy from San Diego who can't be more than forty wants a gamine to suck his toes. A fat, pink-faced corporate dairy farmer wants to spoil a girl with fine dining and fur coats. A retired military man is dying of cancer and wants a girl to dress up like Dorothy from the *Wizard of Oz*.

I dismiss all of their requests to chat. I don't know what I'm doing anymore.

Becca comes in drunk. *Hi, honey, I'm home*, she calls out in her soft, boozy voice. I'm staring at the broken sunglasses on my side table. Her keys drop to the floor and from my bed, I hear her fart and then burst into uncontrollable laughter.

I emerge from my bedroom wearing the fuzzy slippers my mom gave me for Christmas.

Hi there, I say, watching her struggle to open a jar of olives.

Oh, my God. Cleo. Did you hear me fart just now?

I nod. *Indeed, I did.*

We laugh together. The stupidity of bodies. Becca lays her head on my shoulder and hands me the olive jar. I open it and plop one into her mouth and then, even though I just brushed my teeth, into my own. She strokes my hair while she chews her olive and I can smell the liquor and cigarette smoke coming off her clothes.

Suddenly, I want all that. Normal fun. *Did you have a fun night?* I ask her.

Not really, she says. *I missed you. It was fundamentally an anti-feminist football party. False advertising. Where'd you go?*

I went to Santa Monica to see about a boy. A man. A baby-me man.

Her head shoots up and off of my shoulder. *Stop it! You didn't tell me. You're supposed to tell me! He didn't kill you?*

I twirl around. *Nope, he didn't kill me.*

Was he gross? Or kinda hot? Did he make you crawl around in a diaper?

I imagine Stanley laying me down on a beautiful rug in his sunny Santa Monica house and wrapping a diaper around my naked hips. His long, aching fingers quivering a bit as he struggles with the Velcro, worries about pulling it too tight for my comfort.

I actually would do that, I say and take another two olives from the jar.

Her eyebrows shoot up. *No! You would? Oh, my God. Never. Just the smell of a diaper brings me right back to my little brother's room. She feigns a gagging reflex. The worst.*

I smile, put my hand on her ass. *Maybe something California style would change your mind? Undyed, soft, organic cotton?*

Gross. Stop it. Do you know that a guy at the party actually put his wet finger in my ear? Like I didn't even know him. Wasn't even talking to him. That was just his introduction.

Creepy. But also to be expected. It's a college party, after all. Nobody has any sense.

She shrugs. *I'm too drunk to argue with you. But you're no better than any of us.*

Oh, I am very aware of that, I say. *So very aware.* Then, without any warning and not much effort, I, too, let out a long, boisterous fart.

Becca screams with hilarity. She chases me around the living room until we collapse together on the couch.

Finally, when we've caught our breath, she turns her face toward me and looks at my eyes. *He didn't hurt you, did he?*

I look up. The ceiling fan is twirling above us, its blades cutting through the air, making the hairs around her face sway. I know she must be talking about Stanley, but I'm thinking about my father.

I flex my bicep in front of her face. *I'm made out of steel, Becca.*

2.

When there are a million things to mourn every single day, a person gets tired. From the microplastics in our bloodstream, to the never-ending murder of black and brown citizens by police. And in between are the endless casualties of greed, misogyny and artificial intelligence.

Then there are the microstories. The ways in which individuals fail each other without even trying. Our small, daily injuries that pile up to create larger ones.

My parents, for instance, had a very ordinary one-night stand. They met in a literary-type bar where my mother would never have been except that her sister was reading at an open-mic night. From what she's told me, my father was still relatively unknown. Certainly, she had never heard of him. Aunt Marissa was aflutter by his presence, but my mother has never been a fangirl of anyone except Hillary Clinton.

Maybe my father's ego was challenged by the fact that my mother was the only person in that bar that didn't want his attention. Maybe my mother was seduced by the idea that her little sister would finally consider her cool if this bohemian writer took her to bed. Regardless, they shared a yellow cab to his apartment on Gramercy Park and he served her some kind of fancy bourbon and they fucked. In recent years, she's told me it was "perfunctory."

It was not great timing for my mom—she was on a partnership track at her law firm and a baby bump was not a welcome accessory. But by the time she realized she was actually pregnant, I guess it felt inevitable.

In birthday cards and over fancy dinners, she's told me that I saved her from a life of utter boredom. But being a single mother, even one with lots of money and privilege, can be isolating, stressful, thankless.

When she told my father she was pregnant, they had another couple of perfunctory couplings, but this was not a love story. Far from it. He was getting ready to tour with his second novel and, actually, my mom didn't really like him. He took himself quite seriously and laughed only at his own jokes.

He was in Prague when I was born. Marissa was so excited to call from the corridor of St. Luke's and tell him. By then he was even more of a big deal and she was still an aspiring writer, so it must have been a thrill to just dial him up, suddenly, somehow, family.

But I wasn't a boy and, according to Marissa, my father didn't hide his disappointment and at that moment her fandom disintegrated.

A baby girl, huh? He said to her from the middle of his weakly lit, wintry European afternoon. *That's going to be rough.*

Yeah, tell me about it.

In the first year, he brought over a box of the wrong-sized diapers, two blankets and half a dozen onesies. He had several boxes of fruit and nuts delivered and sent three or four checks that my mother never cashed. I'm not sure why. Her version of feminism seems to have less to do with equality or mutuality and a lot to do with being utterly independent.

The last photograph I have of us together is at the zoo just before his first National Book Award nomination. I've looked at it thousands of times. He must have handed the Polaroid camera to a stranger. He must have wanted this moment.

Or he wanted me to have that moment.

Why, I wonder, are there prizes for words on paper? But there will never be a cash prize and lifelong perks for the teacher who makes the alphabet mean something more than curves and dashes to thousands of children, or for the nurse who holds you when you know you're dying, or for the nun in the prison who lays her hands on a

violent criminal and prays for his peace, or for all of the women who manage to raise mostly kind people in a mostly unkind world.

There are prizes and status for people who tell stories and throw balls and win races. I've looked up the year he won, that year when I was three. There were five finalists, all men.

When he won it, he gave a speech about the destruction of the rain forests of the Amazon and its impact on the world's migratory bird population. I mean, I love trees and I love birds, but this is my point about the microstories. Even today, people quote that speech and hold him up as one of the twentieth century's literary stewards of the environment, but they are unaware that while he delivered that speech, his only child was likely being cared for by one of many women who would not ever be collecting any prize for their heroic effort. Meanwhile, he would cash his \$10,000 check without acknowledging the child, nor the duties he had shirked. And his publisher would print ever more pages of his books made from another forest's felled trees, undoubtedly crushing thousands of bird's nests.

By the time I noticed that I didn't know my father, my mother had made up her mind that it was good riddance. *Some fathers pretend they're in your life when they're actually fully checked out*, she'd tell me. *At least you know the truth of his character. From the beginning.* And then she would recall an anecdote about a colleague who had to do the math when someone asked how old his son was. *And they live in the same goddamned house, Cleo.*

When I was twelve, I wrote my father a letter and mailed it to the address in Los Angeles that my mom found through his agency. I told him the things I thought were important that he know about me: That I was double jointed in my hips and my thumbs, that my favorite breakfast was an everything bagel with lox and cream cheese, that my favorite book was still *A Bridge to Terabithia*, that I loved hip hop and classic rock and that I would like to get to know him.

Two months later, I received a postcard of a blue-eyed ground dove, a synopsis of the astounding news of its recent rediscovery typed in the upper lefthand corner. The bird was thought to be extinct until recently a single researcher spotted eleven individuals in the Brazilian Cerrado.

In the small blank space left for writing, my father's sloping letters thanked me for my letter and my interest in his work. He wished

me continued good health and good luck and then he signed his name, *Trevor*.

Probably there was an assistant—a young, underpaid, overqualified woman—who sorted and categorized his mail and my letter was simply misplaced into the wrong stack. Or maybe she was embarrassed to bring it to his attention since he has never acknowledged me in any press or interviews. She may have thought it was a prank. Regardless, I considered his reply a win and tacked up the postcard on my bulletin board.

When my mother saw it, she was livid.

What a total moron, she said, throwing the postcard into my trash can. *You are worth so much more than this, Cleo. Don't let him make you feel small. Come here.*

But, until she said it, I hadn't. The postcard made me feel important. I had seen his portrait in bookstore windows. I knew he was a person the world admired. So, it made sense to me that I could start by being a fan who received a personalized note and eventually become something more. I believed that I could eventually earn the title of daughter.

I let her hug me, but when she left and I heard her muffled voice on the phone with Aunt Marissa, I took the postcard out of my trash can and carefully placed it in my diary. I took my finger and traced all the letters of his words, letting their curves feel like small reassurances, promises of more to come.

3.

Three days a week I work in an independent bookstore in Los Feliz. From what I can tell, my father's books have an audience mainly with young men and middle-aged women. He still holds some appeal, I suppose, with the folks who are seduced by a masculine portrayal of a doomed American domesticity that can be fixed by better sex, or more forgiving women.

I am sitting behind the front desk reading my anthropology textbook when Stanley texts me.

Hi, Cleo. I hope you're not mad. I think I may have been rude.

I stare at my phone. Is this part of his fantasy? The courting dance he is choreographing from deep within his beach house? Or has he actually realized that he was rude to me?

I ignore it and help a customer find a collection of love poems as a wedding present for their cousin. I spend the rest of my shift shelving new inventory and fulfilling online orders. When I'm at home again, I look at my phone and I decide to reply.

I'm not mad. It seems like you haven't acknowledged to yourself that any arrangement you make will have to fulfill mutual needs. Not just yours.

Immediately, he replies. *That's fair. I suppose I never thought to ask about your needs. I just assumed they were financial.*

Looking around the modern two-bedroom apartment Becca and I share, the stainless-steel appliances, the soda stream on the counter, a bowl of organic fruit on the table, I wonder if I could actually say what I do need.

Without thinking too much, I try.

I type and send one line at a time.

I'd like instructions.

Specific and rigid.

I want to be carefully seen and held and admired.

As though you made me.

As though I'm yours.

I hold my breath. He does not reply. I throw myself onto the couch, bite the corner of one of the fuzzy pillows and scream.

Finally, I receive a text.

You will be.

And then another.

This is how.

You will take a shower and wash carefully behind your ears and between your legs. Comb your hair and let it dry.

No makeup. Put on a short-sleeved blouse with buttons, a modest skirt and sneakers. Pack your bag with a notebook, a ruler and two pencils. Do all of this slowly, being careful to do it correctly.

I won't be home until 7. I expect you to be waiting for me on the curb. 300 Georgina Avenue.

I drop the phone to the floor. My heart is racing and I don't know how I will do anything slowly or correctly ever again.

4.

What is a hole and how do you fill it? Do empty things exist? Or is everything filled? Everything that *is*, is filled. Even the empty spaces astrophysicists talk about are not actually empty. Black holes are composed of a ton of invisible molecules, molecules that make the mass of a black hole heavier than our sun. So, even though the hole in my life where my father should have been is just an idea, its gravity pulls at me, crippling me under its weight.

Obviously, it is an idea that I detest for political reasons. For moral reasons.

What does it even mean to be fathered? The patriarchy, in staking its claim of masculinity over every God-damned piece of the known world, has overlooked staking a claim in the formation of human psyches. We don't understand *fathering* as an action word. Beyond, of course, the act of insemination. To father a child is to contribute sperm for its creation. Boom. Ba-da-boom.

So, I should be fine. I am fine.

And yet, here I am in another Lyft traveling through the streets of Los Angeles, washed and dressed exactly as Stanley instructed, heading toward the sunset.

Right on cue, my mother calls.

I hesitate for a moment. Then I answer and when I hear her voice, I immediately begin to cry.

Cleo, she says. Cleo, honey, what's going on? I'm so sorry I missed your call.

I'm afraid to speak, afraid to even acknowledge to us both that I'm alive. Here and not here. Still her daughter, her baby and also very much alone.

Hi, is all I can say.

Is everything okay? How's school? Do you need money?

She believes so deeply in the power of money to fix all things.

No, Mom. I'm fine.

You don't sound fine, actually. Where are you?

I'm in a Lyft, Mom. I'm actually ... going on a date.

At this point, the woman driving my Lyft casts her eyes to the rearview mirror and turns down the reggae music. She's interested. I am a story in her day. Skinny white girl in school clothes going to a fancy street in Santa Monica for a date.

Oh, my mom says. That's exciting. Why do you sound so ... bereft?

I look out the window at the palm trees lining the sidewalk. Their overbearing insistence that we are all having fun here. *I think I'm homesick*, I say and it feels true. And so I cry a little more.

Really? Honey. You want to come home for a visit? I can get Sally to arrange your travel. How about a long weekend?

I see it all in my mind. The security line at LAX, the long flight with headphones and Handi Wipes, a taxi home from Lagoon. Carlos or Henry standing at the front door, their caps rimmed with gold. The apartment, clean and spacious and smelling of bread. My room just as I left it. The view of the Hudson.

I wipe a tear from my cheek. My armpits are sweating. I'm ruining my cleanliness.

No, it's all good. Thanks, Mom. I'll feel better soon.

Of course you will. It's normal to miss home. So, tell me about this boy—who is he?

I try to answer without lying. I don't want to lie. *He's into finance. Like complicated money stuff. He enjoys the beach. And he's a math tutor. I don't know, Mom. He's not really my type.*

Oh, but he sounds interesting, honey.

I can't disagree. So I say, *Yeah. He is.*

It's good for you to branch out a little bit. You know, not everyone has to be a hard-core anti-capitalist to be your type.

I laugh. *Right, I say. Good reminder, Mom.*

Are you being sarcastic right now? It's hard to tell without FaceTime.

Yes, I say. Yes it's sarcasm. And, yes, I'm ... ranching out.

Well, I'm so proud of you. I think that's what this time of life should be for you. Trying new things. Taking risks with your heart.

I picture Stanley wearing his carpal tunnel brace and his tortoiseshell glasses, unbuttoning my shirt, slicing through my skin with the metal ruler in my backpack, carefully taking my heart in his hand, throwing it gently in the air. Risking it.

It is not, I know, what my mother is picturing. But maybe it is close enough. Maybe it will do.

Thanks, Mom, I say. Can I call you later?

I have an early morning, honey. I'll be asleep by nine. But send me a text. Please tell me how the date with the finance nerd goes.

I hear the levity in her voice, the hopefulness. I know it should be enough. She is enough. I feel the imaginary arc of my heart as it falls back into Stanley's hand.

You got it, I say and hang up.

The driver looks at me again and without a word hands me a tissue.

I wipe at my eyes and my nose. *Thank you, I say.*

She smiles at me. *Girl, you've got to pull yourself together for this finance dude. I'm telling you. Find yourself a money man. That is the way. That is the only way.*

I nod and try to smile.

Soon enough, she pulls in against the curb in front of a large, stucco house covered in ivy. There's a circular driveway and a row of neatly trimmed hedges lining the curve of it.

Is this his house? For real? She undoes her seatbelt and turns around to face me, a stern look on her face.

I shrug. *Is this 300 Georgina?* I ask, scanning the facade for a number.

Well, God damn. He must be a real little rich boy. I hope he marries you.

Okay. Ha, I laugh. Sure. Thank you.

With my backpack slung over my arm, I watch her drive away. Because the sidewalks are all inset here, with deep green foliage on both sides, the curb is just a sliver of concrete. A whisper of the concrete jungle.

But I have always been a good student. So, with my palms sweating, I put my feet in the gutter and balance my butt on the narrow curb, ready.

5.

As evening falls, the light on Georgina Street has a magical quality. It's as though all the empty spaces are suddenly radiating a tender, pale pink.

Each pair of headlights that turns onto the street makes my spine straighten and as they cruise past, I relax a little into the warmth of the sidewalk. Until, finally, just before all of the light has gone, a pair of headlights pulls into the circular driveway behind me. I force myself to stay seated, staring only at my worn-in Converse sneakers.

I hear his every move. The chimes of his car reminding him to remove the keys, the closing of his car door, the crunch his foot falls make across the pea gravel. When I see his wingtips in my peripheral vision, I let my eyes travel up to his.

He is smiling. *Hello*, he says, as though this is all perfectly normal. *I hope you haven't been waiting long, Cleo. Come on in and we'll get started.*

I follow him wordlessly through the low gate that separates his driveway from the perfectly landscaped interior courtyard. There are sculptural trees covered in small lavender blossoms and symmetrical succulents flanking the porch, each lit with its own private beam of light. His front door is double-height and painted a glossy forest green. Inside, it smells slightly of cleaning products and chlorine. He lays his keys on a table near the door and places his briefcase beside it.

Come, come, he says. *Let's get to work.* I follow him with my backpack slung over my shoulder, clocking the refinement of the foyer and living room. In the kitchen, he pulls out a chair and waits for me to settle before he sits beside me.

His kitchen table has a view of the back yard, with its wide California porches and sparkling blue pool. I unload the spiral notebook, metal ruler and two pencils that I found in my desk drawer.

Stanley takes the materials from me and rests his forearms over them.

First of all, you've done such a beautiful job with the instructions I gave you. I love the shirt.

It's a thin, blue button-down purchased for me by my mother at Bergdorf Goodman when I was probably thirteen. I don't know why I still have it or why I brought it with me to LA, but when I saw it in my closet, I knew it was perfect.

He reaches out his hand and barely touches the collar. I feel a tingle in my chest, the warmth of his hand registers as a slight sensation near my neck. I wonder if he will touch me now, if the buttons he asked for are going to be undone right here at the table.

Thanks. It's ancient, I say.

He places his hand back over the notebook and I sigh, both relieved and devastated. My ears are ringing, my pulse erratic. It's like the adrenaline of the entire afternoon is settling beneath my ribcage.

How are you, Cleo? He asks. Any roses or thorns you'd like to share? His words are slow and intentional. The question is parental and teacherly in its clumsiness and in any other situation I would bark at him. This would not be charming. But I can't tell if he's playing his role right now, or if he's himself. I don't know if I'm playing a role or being myself.

Suddenly, I don't really want to pretend any more. The clothes are enough of a costume.

Stanley, I say, I'm not really in the mood for ice breakers. Or whatever this is.

He listens, waiting for a beat to see if I will say more. When I don't, he pushes the notebook aside. *That's okay for now. We can just be.*

He stands up and turns on the vintage looking radio beside the sink. It's playing some maudlin cello music and Stanley begins unloading the dishwasher.

Come help me? He asks, holding out a stack of clean plates.

I get up and take the plates from him and place them into the cabinet that he's pointed to. We carry on this way, with him directing me where the cups and saucers go all the while I hear him occasionally humming along with the chamber music on the radio.

While he segregates the clean silverware into their slots, I lift myself onto the counter. He glances my way, maybe to reprimand me, but says nothing.

You know that Bach endured incredibly brutal losses? His parents, his wife, nearly a dozen children.

I nod, unmoved. *But he was also a bit of a prick, I say. Bullying kids, exacting punishments where none were needed. Some even say forcing himself on the other boys in his class. Sexually.*

Stanley shuts the dishwasher and moves close to me, leaning his hips against the counter and crossing his arms in front of his chest. He smiles proudly. *You know something about him, then?*

I went to prep school in Manhattan. Music history was an elective. That teacher loved to compare the barbaric conditions of past schools to the civilized ones of ours.

I can't help adding an eyeroll here.

Ah, yes, he says, the opposite of the fetishization of the past as somehow inherently different, more innocent, than the present. But just as false.

And then he closes his eyes and I realize he's listening to the deep ache of the cello as it crescendos.

There is beauty that can come from the brutality, he finally says, opening his eyes. *And that's as true today as it's ever been.* He lets his hand rest on my bare knee for just a moment.

It is dark outside now and I can see our reflection in the windows. It is a domestic scene as ordinary as any.

I'll do the math now, I say quietly and he raises his eyebrows.

Yes, of course, the math. But he doesn't move until the music reaches its conclusion and the applause from the live recording echoes in the kitchen.

I hop down off of the counter and take my seat again at the table. He turns off the radio and clears his throat.

Quadratic equations, is it? He says, reaching into his pocket for his glasses. *The nice thing about quadratics is that there is only one unknown. So it's really rather simple.*

I laugh. *One unknown,* I say, *can be anything but simple.*

Well, that's true. I like that you are forecasting. But let's just stay with simple for a moment. Okay? He smiles at me.

He doesn't know anything about me. He doesn't know why I'm really here. And I don't want him to. I smooth my hands on my skirt and try to stay in the moment. I am in his fantasy. I am a child needing instruction. I nod at him, agreeing.

I watch his hand move across the page, using my sharpened pencils to write out the formula at the top, going through its basic rules

as he does so. I nod, meeting his eyes when he asks for reassurance that I understand. Then, he solves some sample equations and writes several more for me to do.

He slides the paper toward me and sits back with his arms folded across his chest. It's been a good nine months since my last math class, but I have no difficulty squaring the problems he's given me and finding the solutions. I work quickly and set down the pencil when I'm finished.

Glancing at the paper, at my work, he beams at me. *I never wanted you to be anything other than what you are*, he says. *And you're right. You are fucking good at math.*

The obscenity is startling, like hearing a parent curse. It makes his words seem more deeply felt. Instantly, I feel lighter. Is it really so simple?

But, no. He is not my father and I remind myself that whatever he says is rooted in a quid pro quo.

He stands up abruptly and turns off the radio. *Come on*, he says, *I'll drive you home. It's getting late for a school night.*

I begin to collect my things to put back into my bag and he lays his hand on the ruler and the notebook. *Leave this*, he says, his voice firm but quiet, *for next time. And request a Lyft.*

I am confused, but I do as I'm told and follow him back through the house and out the front door. He has his car keys in his hand and he unlocks the doors and opens the passenger side for me. I start to object as I can see the progress of my Lyft driver on my phone, moving towards the house, just five minutes away.

Stanley puts his fingers to his lips and I slide into his sedan. He does not turn on the ignition, but looks at me and says, *Seatbelt, please.*

Again, I do as I'm told and reach behind me for the belt. *You follow directions so well, Cleo. It's no wonder that you're a star student.* He pauses. *And so very pretty, too.* He says this last part while turning his body towards mine, reaching his arm across the seat and placing his hand on top of mine, on top of the seat belt buckle.

He takes my hand in his and lifts it to his mouth, dragging my fingers across his slightly chapped, thin lips. Making a soft moaning noise, he pushes his tongue into my fingertips, licking at the edges of my nails.

I much prefer unloading the dishes, sitting at the table, solving the equations.

You should not always be so agreeable, he whispers. *Don't make it easy for me. You are better than this.*

But as he's saying it, he moves my slightly damp hand to his chest and leans across the console to kiss me. I can feel his heart pounding; I can smell the fetid dampness of his breath.

Half-improvising, half-instinct, I pull away. I stare at the glovebox, unable to speak.

He looks at me, confused in the dim light. Is this right or wrong? I don't know what I'm doing. I feel betrayed, even though I knew this was coming. I bite my lip to keep from crying.

The silence is mine to fill, but somehow I feel obligated to stay in his fantasy. Already, when given the choice of taking care of myself or him, I cannot let him down.

Stanley, I say, pressed up against the car door. *Mr. Stanley, my mom is almost here. I think I should go.*

Cleo, he says, catching his breath as though he's just been running a race. *Cleo. You're absolutely right. I'm sorry I got carried away. No hard feelings?* He takes another deep breath, rubs his forehead with his hands and stares at my pale thighs.

I shrug, modestly straightening my skirt that has ridden up to an almost obscene place.

No, I guess not, I say. *But here's my ride.*

Of course, of course. Unashamed, he watches me release the seat belt and lift my backpack from between my feet.

He follows me out of the car and onto the sidewalk. He opens the back door of the Lyft for me. I stand there, not sure if I should hug him or shake his hand or just bolt.

He reaches out to my collar again, as though he's fixing something that is askew. As though he will never let me not be perfect. In my sternum, I can feel the subtle vibration of his fingers caressing the material. I wonder how long this can go on.

As though reading my mind, he stops and says, *Incredible work today. I believe you can do just about anything.*

As he withdraws his hand, his thumbnail drags gently across the hidden skin beneath my jaw. He gives me a paternal pat on the shoulder and then turns away.

I watch him walk up the sidewalk, his hands in his pockets.

As the car pulls away from the curb, he turns and waves. I have no idea why I am filled with gratitude, but I lay my head back and close my eyes.

The Amazing Race

Gabe Jenkins

Rigel 2025 Finalist

Get the job. Get promoted.

Rent the house on Yaquina Beach. Stop at Aunt Ginny's on the way up, tell her that her pie tastes better than it did when you were a kid. Tell the girls the story of when you and your cousin lit fireworks at the cove and had to run from the cops. Laugh when Donna says, "I'm so glad we didn't have boys." Watch your daughters laugh, too.

Set up chairs on a patch of shoreline where no one will bother your little family.

Watch Meadow build sand castles, collect seashells to add as turrets and battlements and ornamentation, and wade shin-deep into the water. Yell: "Too far!" when her knees disappear.

Watch Heather play her own game, where she walks backwards in the wet sand, and after each step, crouches down and erases her footprints. Flash Donna a smile, like: *How did you and I create such a goofball?*

Envisioning the photo op, Donna asks the girls to hold each other by the hand and jump. Aim the camera. Capture them in mid-air, the ocean frozen behind them, the brutal Oregon sky making them silhouettes. Get the photos developed. Put them in a frame on your desk.

Work, then travel, and then repeat that cycle year after year. Raft the Grand Canyon when the girls are on spring break. Camp in the Canadian Rockies. Take the girls crabbing like your dad used to take you. Do all you can for your family.

Meadow is the outgoing one, always coming to you and Donna with fliers for afterschool programs. Sign her up for volleyball, marching band, and fencing, of all things. Help her research colleges before the school even has the University Fair. Tell her money is no object.

Point out on the way back from Heather's lacrosse tryouts that no one's going to pass to her if she hangs out on the sidelines. Ask her trepidatiously about boys. When she decides to go to the community college, don't let on that you're disappointed.

Go through life getting if not exactly what you want, then pretty close to it. Visit your parents twice a year as a matter of responsibility. Their deaths will be good and clean; dad of a major heart attack that is led up to by smaller heart-related episodes, and mom, two years later, of diabetes. Nothing too sudden, nothing too ugly, nothing demanding too much more than the twice a year visit. They will still be mom and dad when they die.

Both the girls are in college now. Fast, wasn't it?

Take Donna on the vacations you two dreamt about back in college. Take her to Spain. Realize the world is much bigger than you ever knew.

Meadow graduates and moves to Denver with her boyfriend.

Heather starts working at a bar in town. Make yourself clear at the dinner table. She needs to make a plan to finish college or else you will kick her out of the house. Ask her why she can't be more like her sister.

Hear her say: "I don't know what I want to do."

Say: "Pick something. Figure it out."

Stay up late arguing with Donna.

You get what you want and Heather moves out.

Meadow makes Assistant to the CFO at a sporting-goods company. She has a family. You see her every other Christmas.

Old age is just around the bend. You start to think about those moments in your life that weren't moments, but choices, yet they didn't feel like choices back then. Now, with time to reflect, they flicker through your mind with surprising clarity.

You remember the time Heather crashed out freshman year, and she called you, crying, from her dorm. Remember being distracted. You and Donna were supposed to go to the Louvre that morning. Remember telling your daughter to keep her head up and focus, and

not telling Donna about the call. She needed a break. Parents for twenty-three years—you both deserved a break.

You remember walking Meadow down the aisle. It was touch and go for a while there, because you just had knee surgery and they weren't sure if you'd be able to walk. But you pulled through—albeit, with a small limp, and you remember how the whole time Meadow was a half-step ahead of you, tugging on your arm, eagerly pulling herself towards her new life.

You remember the last time you hugged Mom standing up. Remember the last beer you had with Dad.

You look at the framed picture of the girls jumping at Yaquina Beach and swear it was just yesterday that you saw them every day.

Heather you rarely hear from. She landed in LA, of all places. Your hair's getting gray.

Meadow skips Christmas because there's a recall on ski boots and her company is facing lawsuits.

Donna starts to slow down before you, violating conventional wisdom that women live longer.

It's strange. Of all the memories, you keep returning to the smallest, fuzziest one of them all. You remember when Heather came into your bedroom on the night your mother died and just watched TV alongside you. You two never watched anything together unless it was in the living room with the whole family. It was an aberration, but not otherwise noteworthy.

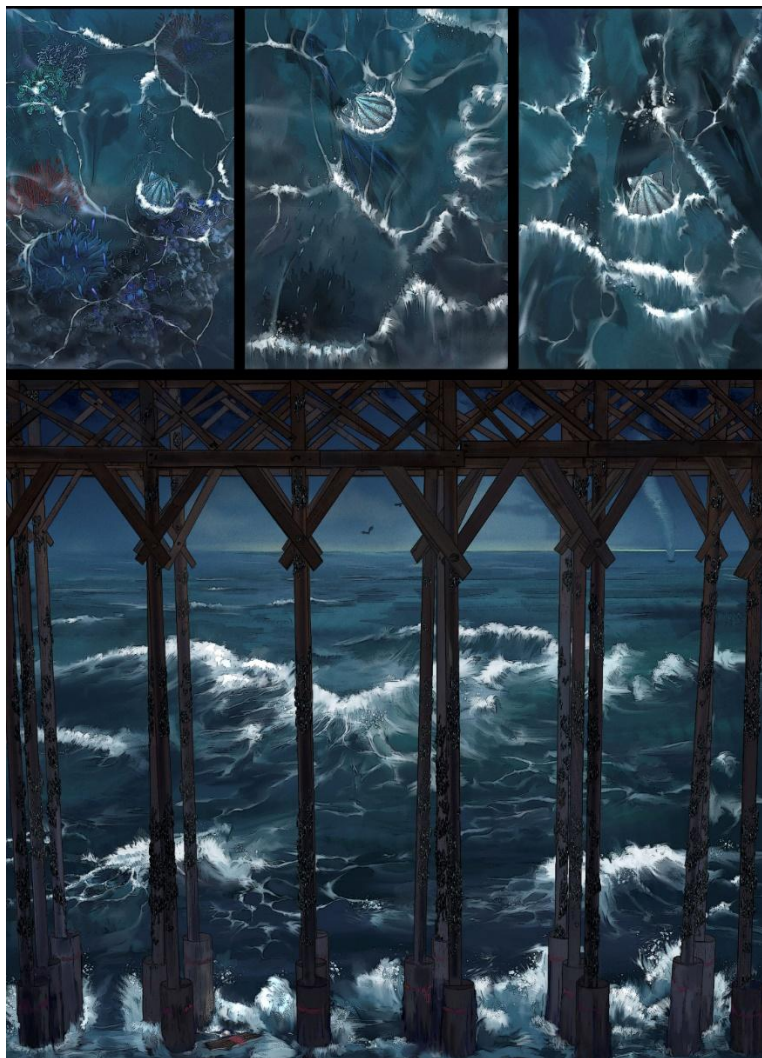
Realize now that she was trying to learn how she was supposed to act when you died someday.

You can't remember if she rested her head on your shoulder. You can't remember if you held her hand the first time she rode the bike without training wheels. You can't remember if it was you or her who hung up first when she called you that time in Paris. You're pretty sure the TV show was *The Amazing Race*.

Tide Peak

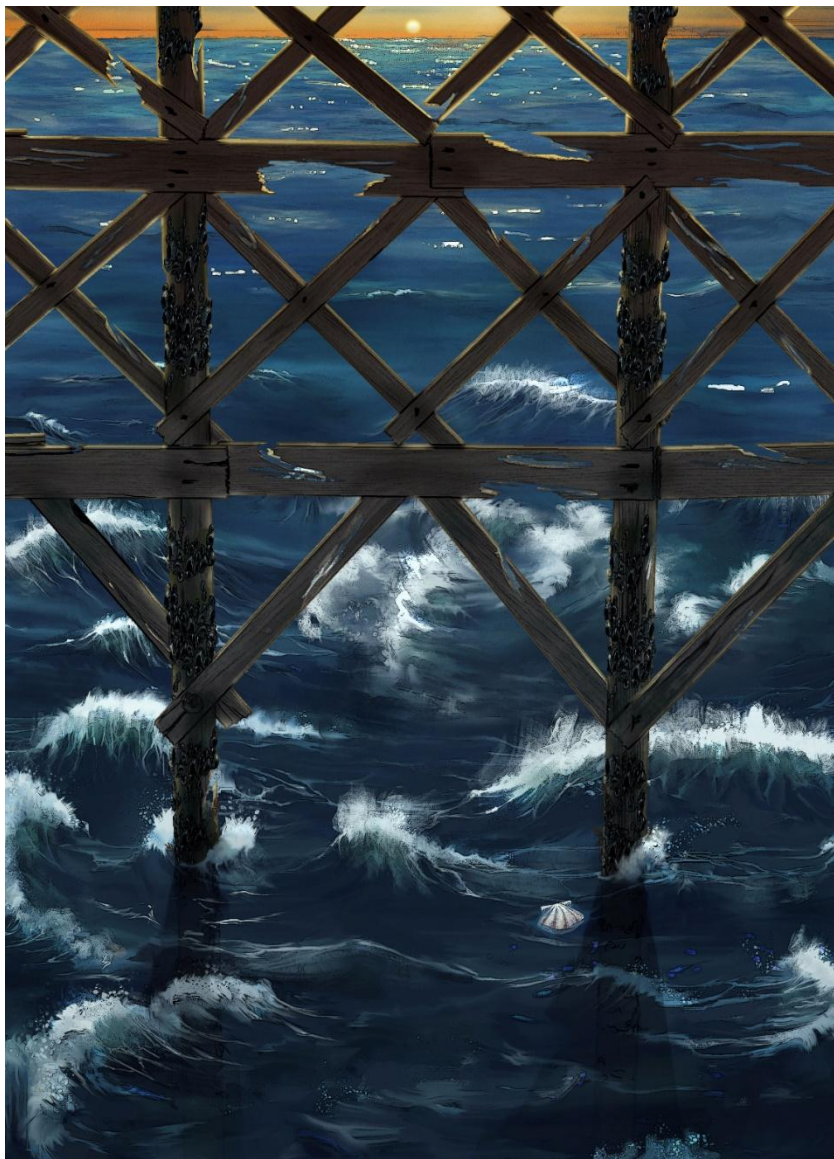
Elda Perez

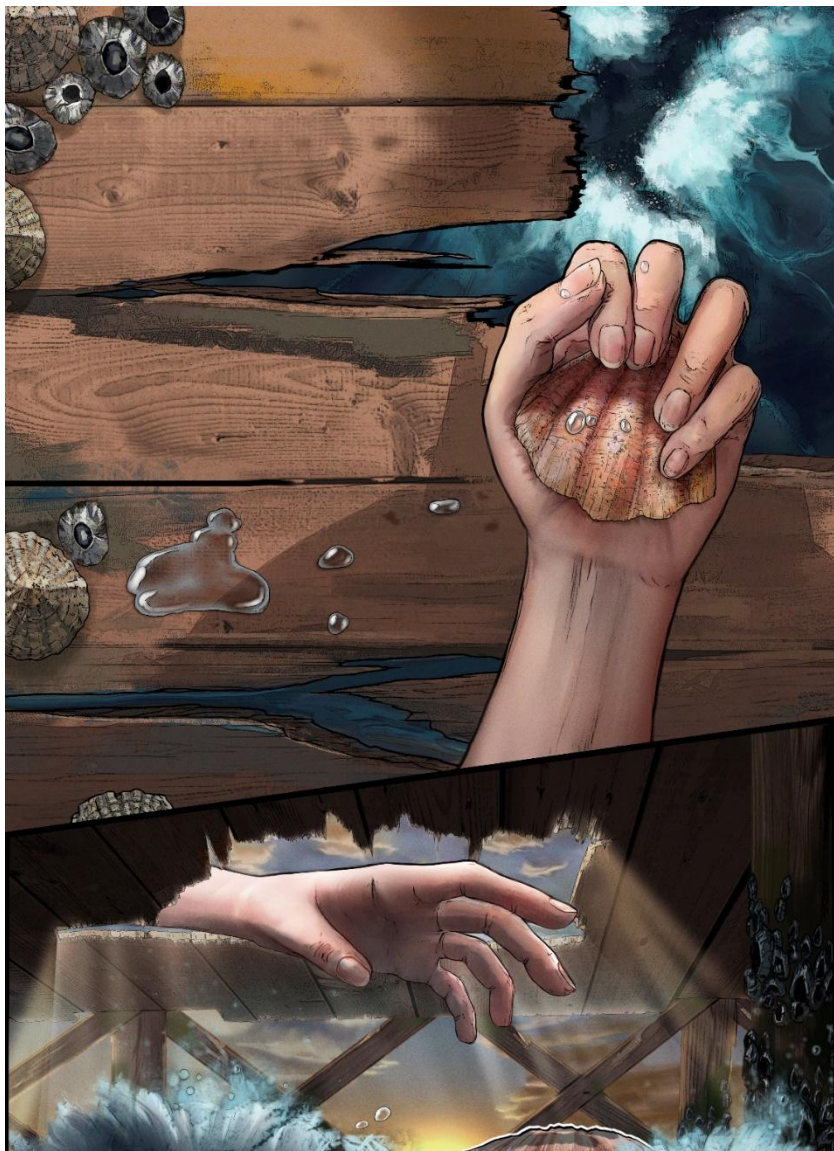
Rigel 2025 Best of Graphic Novel

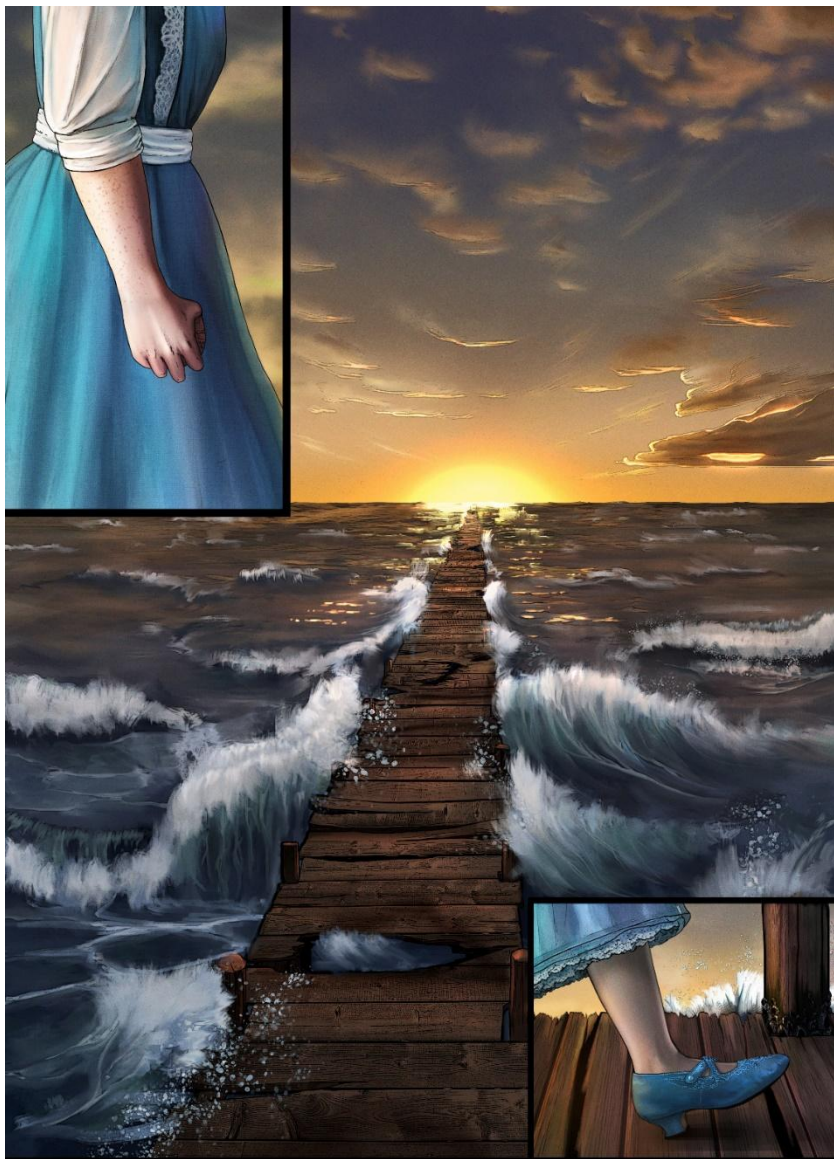












The Prodigal Daughter

Pam Martin-Lawrence

Rigel 2025 Winner

Author's note: Gillam's was the greengrocers on the corner of High Street though we always called it Gwilliams.

November *oh you're Deird's daughter, aren't you? I remember how you would stroke the rabbits we used to hang up out front when you were little course nobody wants fresh game anymore and you've just moved back home? your mum talks about you all the time you have no secrets we both know that means it's time to laugh and I arrange my face into dutiful daughter and pretend like my heart didn't feel like it dropped out through my arse because Jesus first day back and I've already forgotten what it's like to breathe freely hahaha yes clenched-jawed could I have three onions and a green pepper please* but it was only ever the pretty white ones

February *hello love* the careful awful sympathy slams me back into real life unready *just finished work? couldn't drop these in to your mum on your way home could you?* Since Christmas all she's fancied are pears those fat sweet red ones maybe Williams and Rosie gets them in especially for her *course I will* locked jaw tight and mosh pit rough and she looks up faded blue eyes shimmer before they skitter away *saw your Auntie June this morning* and we share a smirk one of *those smirks oh yeah how was she?* and it twists to bitter and the burn of it in my throat and I'm back to can't breathe my lungs full *you know same as always creaking doors eyes to heaven how your Uncle Duds puts up with it I'll never fathom*

May give me five minutes to close up and I'll walk with you your mum promised me meringues from Shaplands they were always my favorites huge crisp clouds resting on pillows of cream nestling inside their neat box tied up with pretty stripy string Nan would spend ten minutes working loose knots I begged her to cut but no it might come in useful they closed years ago but the carved teak doorframe remains sadly all I can offer is a slice of last night's bake Vickie sarnie

the scents of vanilla and sugar still mum's plucking fingers and soothe her into the sleep I've given up chasing

August *all yellow please she loved yellow best freesias and roses with scent and I wish there could be primroses* the sun is shining daffodils and daisy eyes but mum's eyes can't light up and mum's smile can't put the sun to shame and all I have are old cold memories *looks like it'll be a good day for it* but I don't want a good day for it I want thunder and lightning and rain to wash away tears and why couldn't you wait until you were old and I was old and *and don't you worry it'll be a good turnout and the usual all back to hers to drink the cabinet dry is it?* Flowers' fragrances fill my nose air fills my lungs and mum's last rasping gasp of sunshine-outshining laughter fills my soul

Almond Milk

Piper Cusmano

Geminga 2025 Finalist

My hand fits in yours
like a handful of almonds
in your child-like fingers—Sister.
I barely knew we were children
hiding behind closed doors.

Medusa

Sadbh Kellett

Geminga 2025 Finalist

Forgive me, it hurts—
I would know of all people,
But eyes want to look.

the room(s): UNGENESIS — II

trevor wheeler

Geminga 2025 Finalist

the dog & i
breathe

the dog & i
do not speak

the dog's mouth is a room
into which i place my head,
its tongue cool, soft, & wet



Cacteye / Peyton Fultz

Geminga 2025 Finalist

Lies and Omissions

Marino Bubba

Geminga 2025 Best of Fiction

They told us put a penny on the rail and the train will hop the tracks. They told us if it causes you to sin cut it off. They told me it was an accident but I know—with all we'd done together, with all you'd touched—that you had good reason to lay your arm across that rail and wait, and when I found a copper disk flattened on the tracks half a mile past where the train cut through you, I knew it wasn't just contrition you were chasing but honest-to-God carnage.



Hope for the Thickly Settled / Pamela Viggiani

Geminga 2025 Best of Art

After Divorce

Sandra Fees

Geminga 2025 Winner

On the garage shelf,
garden gloves curl
one toward the other
like blue nesting bowls.
Once, they cushioned
these hands, my two
featherless birds.

Contributors

Marino Bubba studied creative writing at Columbia University under Sam Lipsyte, where he was awarded the Surgam Award for literary merit. He was shortlisted for 2023 Plaza Flash Fiction Prize and was a semifinalist for Sunspot Lit's 2023 Geringa microfiction prize. He teaches history at a high school in Harlem.

Vincent A. Cellucci wrote *Absence Like Sun, An Easy Place / To Die*, and co-authored *~getting away with everything. Diamonds in Dystopia*, an interactive poetry web app, was performed at SXSW and anthologized in *Best American Experimental Writing 2018*. He works at the TU Delft Library and combines technology and poetry at Leiden University.

Piper Cusmano is a bilingual Italian-English content designer and creative writer based in Glasgow, UK. Piper has coauthored a sexual education manual, *Making of Love* (Rizzoli, 2020) and has been published in the academic literary journal *From Glasgow to Saturn* (poem *Flatmate ChitChat* x issue 52).

Sandra Fees' poems have won awards from the Iron Horse Literary Review PhotoFinish, Off Topic Publishing and the Ekphrastic Review, and been published in *SWIM*, *The Shore* and *Cutleaf Journal*, among others. *Wonderwork* (BlazeVOX Books, 2024) is her first full-length poetry collection. You can learn more at sandrafees.com.

Bev Fesharaki is a teacher and a poet. Her work has been published in numerous journals and anthologies and on the website of the Museum of Northwest Art. Bev lives and writes by the water in Mukilteo, Washington.

Peyton Fultz is an emerging, self-taught acrylic painter hailing from the DC area.

Gabe Jenkins was raised in Menlo Park, CA, educated in Eugene, OR, and now lives in Portland, OR.

Sadbh Kellett is an Irish author whose poetry and prose have been published in literary journals and anthologies throughout the UK and Ireland. Her first novel was shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction's Discoveries Award in 2022. Kellett is represented by Sabhbh Curran at Curtis Brown.

Pam Martin-Lawrence lives on a small island with emotional support plants, "book boyfriends," and a long-suffering partner. While writing her second novel, she writes poetry and short fiction for relaxation, some of which have appeared in *Passionfruit Review*, *Southern Gothic Creations*, *Macrame Lit*, *Flights*, *Micromance*, and *Bunker Squirrel*. Her novella, *The Tale of a Dragon*, was published by Alien Buddha Press in September 2024.

Meg Mullins is the author of three books published by Viking Penguin: *The Rug Merchant*, *Dear Strangers* and *This is How I'd Love You*. Her work has been translated into eleven languages and optioned for film. Her short fiction has appeared in numerous journals and been included in *The Best American Short Stories*. She earned her MFA in Fiction from Columbia University.

Julia Oshiki (they/them) is a creative nonfiction writer living in Portland, OR. They received their MFA in creative nonfiction from Colorado State University and are the winner of the Hallie Brown Ford award in creative writing. They enjoy writing about gender, sexuality, and romance media.

Elda Perez's submission is based on their childhood town, which had beaches all around. They had a close relationship with their best friend.

René Karl Wilhelm Johann Josef Maria Rilke (4 December 1875—29 December 1926), better known as **Rainer Maria Rilke**, was an Austrian poet and novelist. Rilke is appreciated as one of the most lyrical German-language poets. He wrote one novel in lyrical prose, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (*Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*), but mostly wrote verse, although he is also known for several collections of his voluminous correspondence. Rilke's work is often considered to be mystical, and his imagery often focuses on the challenge of being in communion with the ineffable. (Translator's Biographical Note)

Bill Schulz lives in Maine, not far from the farm where his ancestors settled in the late 1700s. He received a Master's in poetry from The University of New Hampshire in 1976, and a Master's in Theological Studies from The Franciscan School of Theology thirty years later. He is the author of *Dog or Wolf* (2022) and a book of poetry, *Another Psalm* (2024). He is founder and editor emeritus of *Hole In The Head Review* (holeintheheadreview.com).

Wally Swist's books include *Huang Po* and the *Dimensions of Love* (2012), selected by Yusef Komunyakaa for the Crab Orchard Open Poetry Competition, and *A Bird Who Seems to Know Me*, winner of the 2018 Ex Ophidia Poetry Prize. Recent essays, poems, and translations have appeared in *Asymptote* (Taiwan), *Chicago Quarterly*, *Commonweal*, *Comstock*, *Frontier Poetry*, and others. He will be featured in the Spring 2025 issue of *Ezra* to highlight his translations of Roberto Juarroz.

Vanessa Sylvester lives in Portland, Maine. Her work has been published in *White Crow*, *Animus*, *Words and Images*, *Drought*, *River Poets Journal*, *On the Rusk*, *The Island Reader*, *BlazeVOX*, *Dual Coast Magazine*, and the *Uconn Alumni Magazine*, among others.

Pamela Viggiani is a mixed-media artist and art educator living in Canandaigua, NY. A native of the Finger Lakes region, Pamela received a BS and MS from Nazareth College of Rochester and began teaching art in 1986. In retirement, Pamela continues to foster enthusiasm and creativity in her students through local after school art programs for children.

trevor wheeler (they/them) lives in Harlem with a coven of witches. They earned a BFA in Writing from Pratt Institute in 2020. Their work has previously been featured in *Catapult Magazine*.

William Lewis Winston lives in Oakland, California. His poems appear in *Margie*, *Ink Pot*, *Comstock Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Vita Brevis*, *Sunspot Lit*, and *Consequence*. His story “The Sound of Snow Not Falling” was published in *Litro* in 2023. He has looked through camera lenses and processed his own photographs since the age ten. Until his street photography in distant lands appeared in *Sunspot Lit*, he had kept those images to himself.

Elzbieta Zdunek is a writer and collage artist living in Berlin, Germany. Originally a photographer, her focus was never the photographed object, but rather its perception. This approach remains at the forefront in Zdunek’s collage work. Zdunek’s work explores the way we are perceived from the outside and how subjective interpretations of our words, choices, and behaviors can be. She has exhibited in Omnibus Gallery, Chromart Art Space, and the famous Berlin Kitkat Club. Zdunek’s artworks have been published in magazines such as *The Adroit Journal*, *The Maintenant Dada*, and *Door is a Jar*.

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